



Vates Special Report: Al-Shabaab Attack on Manda Bay, Camp Simba Base Camp, Kenya

Analysis and Regional Implications
Jan 2020 | Updated Mar 2022

Executive Summary

On January 5, 2020, al-Shabaab militants attacked the Manda Bay Kenya Defence Force (KDF) base at Magagoni, Lamu County, killing U.S. Army Specialist Henry Mayfield Jr. and contractors Dustin Harrison and one other unnamed contractor. Two additional U.S. Department of Defense personnel were wounded. The assault demonstrated al-Shabaab's operational capability to strike hardened military targets and highlighted critical security vulnerabilities at forward operating locations.



Figure 1 Aerial view of Manda Bay Airfield after Jan 05, 2020, attack; Source KDF

Key findings from the analysis include:

- Al-Shabaab breached the base perimeter at approximately 0500 hrs utilising small arms, PKM rifles, and RPGs, destroying six contractor-operated aircraft including suspected Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, representing tens of millions of dollars in losses.
- The U.S. Department of Defense investigation identified contributing factors including inadequate force protection focus, poor threat understanding, security force preparation deficiencies, and a climate of complacency.
- Al-Shabaab Emir Sheikh Abu Ubeydah (a.k.a. Diriye, Ahmad Omar) personally addressed the twelve-member attack team prior to the operation, indicating the strategic importance placed on targeting U.S. assets.
- AFRICOM confirmed that Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud (a.k.a. Bashir Qorgab), the al-Shabaab commander linked to the attack, was killed alongside his wife in a precision airstrike in Saakow, Middle Juba on February 22, 2020.
- The attack prompted AFRICOM to lobby for redeployment of U.S. troops to Somalia, with commanders assessing al-Shabaab as "bigger, stronger and bolder" following the December 2020 drawdown.

The report provides critical insights for security professionals, government agencies, and organisations operating in the Horn of Africa region regarding al-Shabaab's evolving capabilities and persistent threat to Western interests.

Attack Details

At approximately 0500 hrs on January 5, 2020, al-Shabaab fighters attacked the Manda Bay KDF base, also known as Camp Simba, which hosts U.S. personnel and assets as part of Operation Octave Shield. The operation undertakes activities in Somalia and the Horn of Africa against al-Qaida affiliated groups and involves ISR capabilities.

The attackers breached the base perimeter and entered the airstrip utilising small arms fire and indirect fire, including AK and PKM rifles and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs). Six contractor-operated civilian aircraft, both fixed wing and rotary, were damaged or destroyed. Al-Shabaab media released photos indicating damage to aircraft on the airfield.

eld, and reporting indicates that at least two of the aircraft destroyed may have been utilised as Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms.



Figure 2 Al-Kataib drone footage of damage to Manda Bay Base airfield following al-Shabaab attack; Al Kataib

The Government of Kenya reported that five attackers were killed during the attack. On January 7, AFRICOM announced that the East Africa Response Force (EARF) deployed to secure the airfield and augment security, with forces from 101st Airborne confirmed as part of the response on January 14. Reports indicate approximately 50 additional U.S. troops were subsequently deployed to Manda Bay base.

Al-Kataib Propaganda Analysis

On January 31, 2021, al-Kataib released "The Blessed Manda Bay Raid," a 55-minute violent extremist propaganda video. The video featured al-Shabaab's Emir Sheikh Abu Ubeydah a.k.a. Diriye addressing a group of twelve fighters in a forested area, revealing the target of their mission. This represents the second time Diriye has appeared in al-Kataib media addressing fighters before a high-profile attack on a U.S. target, following the September 30, 2019 Ballidogle base video.

The video utilised al-Shabaab drone footage of the attack, showing plumes of black smoke over the airfield with aircraft and trucks on fire. This appears to be the first time al-Kataib has utilised drone footage in its propaganda, highlighting the group's understanding that such imagery can be extremely powerful propaganda tool.

Identified Attackers

Five fighters were identified by al-Shabaab as killed during the operation:

- **Moulana Faruq Moulana (a.k.a. Ahmed Al-Muhajir):** Operation commander, Yemeni descent (Mazrui ethnicity), born 1995 in Majengo, Mombasa
- **Abdiwali Muhammad Ibrahim (a.k.a. Moalim Omar Al-Ansari):** Deputy commander and imam, from Bay/Bakool, Somalia
- **Abubakar Al-Muhajir (a.k.a. Peter Ndamu Kushaha):** Born 1991, Tanzania, 2015 convert who travelled to Somalia in 2016
- **Ali Mohamed Ali (a.k.a. Qudama Al-Muhajir):** From Ethiopia, Burji ethnicity, raised and educated in Nairobi
- **Adan Iman Yusuf (a.k.a. Abdikarim Al-Ansari):** From Bay/Bakool, Somalia

The multi-national composition of the team—including Kenyan, Tanzanian, Ethiopian, and Somali members—demonstrates al-Shabaab's continued ability to recruit fighters from across East Africa.

U.S. Response and Investigation Findings

On March 10, 2022, the U.S. Department of Defense released findings from AFRICOM's investigation and an independent review. The review concluded there was "no single point of failure" but identified contributing factors including:



Figure 10 Attack Commander thanking Ansari brothers; al-Kataib



Figure 8 Deputy attack commander celebrating Muhajireen and Ansari; al-Kataib

- Inadequate force protection focus
- Inadequate understanding of the threat
- Inadequate security force preparation
- Problems with mission command

The independent review determined that certain personnel at Manda Bay and senior officers at higher headquarters were negligent in performing duties. However, it concluded that individuals identified as negligent were not the direct cause of losses but rather made the airfield more vulnerable. The investigations also made a point of highlighting the involvement and valour of Kenya Defence Forces for responding quickly and working with U.S. forces, including through the counterattack, the provision of Kenyan close air support (CAS) and the medevac support to a wounded soldier.¹

Targeted Response

AFRICOM confirmed that Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud (a.k.a. Bashir Qorgab), the al-Shabaab leader linked to the Manda Bay attack, was believed to be killed in an airstrike on a compound in Saakow, Middle Juba on February 22, 2020. Bashir Qorgab was described as in charge of planning and directing terrorist operations in Kenya's border region, including the attack on Manda Bay. AFRICOM Commander Gen. Townsend said, "this strike demonstrates that we will continue to relentlessly pursue those responsible for Manda Bay and those wishing to do harm to Americans and our African partners". Qorgab led al-Shabaab's Ministry of Defence, a Jabha (army) brigade, and played a key role in external operations. He was believed to have been a key commander for Kenya operations and had been a member of al-Shabaab's executive council since 2008, subject to a US \$5 million reward. Given the extensive planning involved in the attack on Manda Bay Base, it is plausible he may have directed other high-profile attacks on Kenya's border, and his removal by the U.S. was likely a significant blow to al-Shabaab's leadership, although it was unlikely to significantly reduce al-Shabaab's capacity to conduct its lower level cross-border attacks into Kenya.



Figure 3 Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud a.k.a. Bashir Qorgab.
Source: Rewards for Justice

Assessment

The attack on Manda Bay base indicates a high level of planning and coordination that likely involved a specially trained al-Shabaab unit, planned for months in advance. The presence of Emir Diriye ahead of the attack is a strong indication of its major importance to al-Shabaab's strategic objectives.

Al-Shabaab leadership continues to assess U.S. activities in Somalia as a major threat to the organisation. The group has demonstrated willingness to invest in high-profile attacks against hardened Western targets, even where prospects of tactical success are limited, given the symbolic and propaganda value of such operations.

During his March 2022 testimony to the U.S. Senate Armed Forces Committee, AFRICOM Commander Gen. Townsend stated that al-Shabaab "remains the greatest threat to U.S. persons and interests in the region as well as the homeland." He advised that the current arrangement of U.S. troops "commuting" to Somalia is not working and has recommended redeployment, citing that al-Shabaab has grown "bigger, stronger and bolder."

We assess that al-Shabaab retains similar capabilities as displayed at Manda Bay and the 14 Riverside attack (January 2019) to execute high-profile attacks in Kenya, including its capital. U.S. personnel, assets, and interests remain high on al-Shabaab's attack prioritisation, and further attempts against hardened targets should be anticipated. **End**

¹ The AFRICOM investigation stated that a combined force of KDF, Kenyan Navy and Kenyan Ranger Regiment arrived at the airfield before 0700hrs after hearing of the attack, and on their own accord conducted an assault against al-Shabaab positions. A KDF helicopter undertook three separate "gun runs," which was identified as the likely trigger for al-Shabaab to begin to withdraw from the airfield. The AFRICOM investigation said, "The importance of the Kenyan Forces cannot be overstated. The KDF/KNAV assets changed the tide of the combat action." There was a strong emphasis for the U.S. to continue to work closely with Kenya to fight against al-Shabaab and terrorist organisations.