Newsweek

Who Is Al-Shabab?

Somali terrorist group's first deadly strike abroad puts it on the radar screen.

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A young boy leads a procession of Al-Shabab fighters in Mogadishu in January.

Al-Shabab, a militant Islamist group from Somalia, claimed its first act of terrorism on foreign soil Sunday, killing scores of people in a spate of bombings across the Ugandan capital, Kampala. But who is this group? And does it have influence in the U.S.?

Somalia is widely seen as a failed state. It has had no real government for decades. The current administration, under President Sharif Ahmed, controls little of the country— even its grasp on the capital, Mogadishu, is tenuous.

NEWSWEEK's Lennox Samuels was in the country in the 1990s, reporting on the bloody civil war for *The Dallas Morning News.* He says he watched a power bloc begin to rise from Somalia's Sharia court system in the mid-1990s. As dictator Mohamed Siad Barre fell, a group called the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) rose to power. In the wake of the American mission that led to the infamous "Black Hawk down" incident, says Samuels, the ICU grew to control much of the country.

The ICU was initially popular with Somalis fed up with corrupt and murderous warlords, and who craved law and order in a country that had become lawless. But the Sharia-driven alliance became more militant, fundamentalist, and intolerant. It gradually lost territory under military pressure from a Western-backed Transitional Federal Government and the Ethiopian Army, and eventually fractured. One of the factions that emerged from it was Al-Shabab, which means "the youth."

The 2006 invasion of the country was supported by America, and that was followed by the arrival of African Union peacekeeping troops. Al-Shabab, by then an armed wing of the ICU, was forced out of the capital. Current president Ahmed, a former ICU leader, was sworn in as head of a U.N.-sponsored interim government afterward. But the then-leader of Al-Shabab, Muktar Ali Robow, known also as Abu Mansoor, was among those who refused to recognize the government and vowed to fight it. Al-Shabab has launched regular attacks ever since, killing thousands.

Its stated aim is to overthrow the government and impose its strict version of Islam. It has also, according to Jon Lee Anderson in *The New Yorker*, "declared war on the U.N. and on Western non-governmental organizations," and killed 42 relief workers in 2008 and 2009. It considers Ethiopia, the 2006 invader, and Uganda and Burundi, which sent in troops as part of the African Union force, as enemies.

Little is known about the group's current hierarchy. It is said that the leader is now Sheik Moktar Abu Zubeyr, who has released recordings on behalf of Al-Shabab. It is also rumored that the leadership has attended training camps for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, or received training from Qaeda leaders visiting Somalia. Al-Shabab has claimed overt affiliation with Al Qaeda since 2007, and is on a State Department list of terrorist organizations.

The Washington Post reported that Al-Shabab sometimes snatches its recruits, often very young, and forces them to fight. It "has taken over both of Mogadishu's stadiums," the paper reports, "to train recruits, most of whom are younger than 17." Its members are said to number in the thousands, and can be identified by red-and-white scarves. In regions it controls, there have been reports of women stoned to death for adultery, and amputations for thieves, according to the BBC.

Before the Ugandan bombings, Al-Shabab had described watching the World Cup as "a satanic act." The *Post* says that at least five people in Somalia had been killed for watching the tournament or playing soccer, and many others have been imprisoned or tortured in recent weeks.

Today a man claiming to be the group's spokesperson, Sheik Ali Mohamud Rage, took responsibility for the Uganda attacks on behalf of Al-Shabab, according to the Associated Press. "We warned Uganda not to deploy troops to Somalia; they ignored us," he said. "We warned them to stop massacring our people, and they ignored that. The explosions in Kampala were only a minor message to them ... We will target them everywhere if Uganda does not withdraw from our land."

It is not the only foray Al-Shabab has made beyond Somalia's borders. Early last year counterterrorism officials and the FBI began probing links between Al-Shabab and the U.S. They found strong evidence that the group was recruiting among Somali communities in cities across America. As many as 20 Somali-American men between the ages of 17 and 27, NEWSWEEK reported at the time, left their homes in Minneapolis under suspicious circumstances between 2007 and 2009, possibly to fight in Somalia. Officials feared that other recruits had stayed to commit acts of terrorism on U.S. soil, or that men might return even more prepared to kill for Al-Shabab's extreme version of Islam.

Counterterror agents, contacted for this story, said Al-Shabab continues to be a concern, especially now that it has shown a willingness to attack outside Somalia. The U.S. has targeted the group's militants before—Adan Hashi Ayro, a prominent leader, was killed in a rocket attack in 2008. Still, says one FBI agent, "they're what keeps me up at night."