

Global Affairs Commentary

Close Call in Kenya

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The daring attacks last week on Israeli interests in Kenya sent shock waves throughout the East African region. The United States was obviously also deeply perturbed. Three East African leaders were immediately summoned to Washington for discussions with President George W Bush. Two, Kenya's President Daniel Arap Moi and Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zennawi, accepted the invitation. A third, Djibouti's President Omar Guelleh, declined the invitation to join Moi and Zennawi at the White House on the pretext that he had to be in his country to celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Djibouti, an Arab League member state, is strategically situated on the crossroads between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. More than 95% of its population is Muslim and it is inhabited by ethnic Afar and the not-so-distantly related Somalis—an ethnic group that has unfortunately come under increasing scrutiny and suspicion for fomenting trouble in the region. Indeed, ethnic Somalis make up a large and restive minority in both Ethiopia and Kenya as well.

Talks centered on the Mombasa attacks and the U.S.-led war against terrorism. And Bush himself is scheduled to visit Kenya next January for the official inauguration of the new U.S. Embassy in Nairobi.

The Kenyan authorities and Western intelligence agencies discount any direct connection between al Qaeda and those detained—six Pakistanis and four Somalis. But there is a great deal of controversy surrounding the Mombasa attacks. Questions are raised, however, about

how militant Islamists managed to destroy an Israeli-owned resort, Paradise Beach, and attempted to shoot down an Israeli airliner in the Kenyan port of Mombasa, the country's second-largest city.

Kenya appears to be especially prone to such attacks. The country, East Africa's economic powerhouse, is now widely seen as a soft target. This is the third time that such major terrorist attacks have taken place on Kenyan soil. Kenya has a Muslim minority of about 20% of the population of 32 million. Kenya's Muslims are geographically concentrated on the East African country's Indian Ocean coastline, where a 500-century-old Arab-African hybrid Swahili culture thrives. However, nomadic ethnic Somalis inhabit the northeastern arid areas of Kenya, and these Kenyan nationals are also thoroughly Islamized.

Nevertheless, it appears that neither community was directly involved in the attacks on the Paradise Beach resort in Mombasa and the Arika airliner. None of the four Somalis detained by the Kenyan authorities appear to be Kenyan nationals—they are all from Somalia proper and hold Somali passports issued in the Somali capital Mogadishu.

Kenya has, since the collapse of the state of Somalia in 1991, played host to hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees, who quite naturally have intermingled and intermarried with their kith and kin in Kenya. The Somalis have found safe haven in Kenya, but the Kenyan authorities have become increasingly concerned about the security risk inherent in the Somali

presence—a large and dynamic ethnic and religious minority.

The Mombasa incident was reminiscent of the August 1998 bombing of the United States embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es-Salam, Tanzania. More than 200 people were killed in the Nairobi bombing, most of them, it has to be said, Kenyans. But as early as November 1979, militant Islamists blew up the Norfolk Hotel in Kenya, ostensibly in retaliation for the Kenyan government permitting the Israeli military to use Kenya as a base for rescuing passengers aboard a hijacked Israeli plane in Entebbe airport, in neighboring Uganda.

The militant Islamists who carried out the Mombasa attacks used surface-to-air missile launchers to shoot down an Israeli Arika airliner, which took off from Mombasa airport for Tel Aviv with 261 passengers aboard the Boeing 757. Soon after the attacks an Islamist website on the Internet asserted that al Qaeda claimed responsibility, but obviously the assertion cannot be independently verified.

What is certain is that the surface-to-air missile (SAM) seeker system used in Kenya was very similar to that used against a U.S. warplane in Saudi Arabia in June. They are shoulder-launched and heat-seeking missiles. Kenyan and Western intelligence also concur that the SAM seeker system used was Strela-2, a rather antiquated system that was originally developed in the former Soviet Union in the 1960s.

Israel's national carrier, El-Al, uses infrared system that tampers with the less sophisticated types of SAM seeker systems, making them less accurate. The optimum altitude for the Strela-2 is 250 meters. Apparently, those who launched the Strela-2 against the Arika airliner in Kenya were rather hasty, as the SAM seeker system was launched immediately after take-off when the Israeli plane was only 150 meters off the ground.

About a year ago, Hussein Aidid—son of the warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid who in 1993 masterminded America's most disastrous firefight loss since the Vietnam War—warned that militant Islamist Pakistani proselytizers were active in Mogadishu and other Somali cities and that they have strong links to Al-Itihad Al-Islami, founded in the late 1980s and until recently dismissed as a spent force. Aidid heads the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council (SRRC)—set up as a rival administration to the Somali Transitional National Government (TNG)—and has accused the TNG of harboring militant Islamist sympathizers. Hussein Aidid is a former U.S. marine, and whatever his political agenda, he does know a thing or two about military matters.

The U.S. authorities have identified Al-Itihad Al-Islami as having a hand in the Mombasa attacks. The organization had also incurred the wrath of the Ethiopian authorities as it emerged that it had been active among Ethiopia's own ethnic Somali minority concentrated in the south-

eastern region of Ethiopia. Two years ago, Ethiopian troops crossed over the border into the adjacent southern Somali Geddo region in order to pursue Al-Itihad Al-Islami forces. The militant Islamist organization is also believed to have military bases in El-Wak, at the crossroads of the Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Somali borders, and in Ras Kamboni, near the Kenyan border in the far south of Somalia.

The Kenyan authorities have clamped down hard on the large ethnic Somali community in the Nairobi suburb of Eastleigh where an estimated 500,000 Somalis reside. Most have been living in the country for generations, and Eastleigh has emerged as a prosperous and vitally important economic district of the Kenyan capital city. The Kenyan authorities have banned all flights to Somalia for security considerations. Until last week, there had been at least four daily flights between Nairobi's Wilson Airport and the Somali capital Mogadishu, and three other daily flights from Nairobi to other Somali cities. The Kenyan connection is vital for Somali economic survival, and Kenya itself benefits tremendously from such lucrative trade links. What remains to be seen is whether there is irrefutable evidence of collaboration between Al-Itihad Al-Islami and al Qaeda in East Africa.

(Gamal Nkrumah writes for Al-Ahram Weekly (online at weekly.ahram.org.eg) where this first appeared.)