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Al-Shabaab's mall threats meant to capitalize on ISIS 'momentum'

West Edmonton Mall among shopping centres mentioned in video

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In the latest iteration of a sinister trend, a jihadist group released a YouTube video this weekend threatening carnage in the West.

This time, however, it wasn't the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) but rather the Somali extremist group al-Shabaab, which encouraged sympathizers to attack shopping centres.

While security agencies are taking the threat seriously, the video is the work of an organization that has fallen off the global radar since 2013 and is taking a page from other, more prominent jihadist groups, says Katherine Zimmerman, a research fellow and senior al-Qaeda analyst at the American Enterprise Institute.

"I think a lot of people have forgotten that there's an al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia," says Zimmerman.

She says that for the last year or so, the narrative in Western media has been that al-Shabaab "is on its heels, that [the Western and African Union militaries have] dealt significant blows to the group — which we have — and it's on a negative trend line right now."

"What a successful attack in the United States could do is push [al-Shabaab] to the forefront again in terms of recruitment, in terms of visibility," says Zimmerman.

On the weekend, al-Shabaab posted a nearly 77-minute video exalting its 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in which gunmen killed about 60 people.

In the clip, a masked man with an English accent encourages "Muslim brothers to target the disbelievers wherever they are," listing a number of shopping centres that could be attacked in

the West, including Oxford Street in London, the Mall of America in Minneapolis and West Edmonton Mall here in Canada.

Zimmerman says the mention of Minneapolis and Edmonton is not accidental – both cities have large Somali populations.

In response to the video, officials at West Edmonton Mall said they had tightened security.

Canada's public safety minister, Steven Blaney, said the country's "national security and law enforcement agencies are continually monitoring for threats against Canada and its citizens and will take the appropriate actions to ensure the safety of Albertans and all Canadians."

Recruitment vehicles

Zimmerman says the video is "meant to capitalize on the momentum that is coming out of the Iraq and Syria conflict."

Military analysts say a series of threats and videotaped beheadings released by ISIS in the last half year has been effective in recruiting foreign fighters.

Formed in 2006, al-Shabaab aims to establish a government based on sharia law in what it refers to as "Greater Somalia," which includes parts of neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia.

For nearly a decade, the group has been at war with the Somali government as well as the African Union Mission in Somalia (ANISOM), which includes soldiers from countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia.

Al-Shabaab had military successes around the turn of the last decade and at one point even controlled a large part of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, but in recent years, it has suffered losses of both personnel and territory.

The group formalized its ties to al-Qaeda in 2010, but there is debate about whether al-Shabaab shares the worldwide ambitions of its parent organization.

According to *The Counterterrorism Guide*, published by the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, **al-Shabaab** "is not centralized or monolithic in its agenda or goals. Its rank-and-file members come from disparate clans, and the group is susceptible to clan politics, internal divisions and shifting alliances.

"Most of its fighters are predominantly interested in the nationalistic battle against the [Somali government] and not supportive of global jihad."

History of Western plots

While the group garnered international headlines with the 2013 attack on the Kenyan mall, it was not a sign of global aspirations, says John Mueller, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

"They explicitly said this is because Kenya has been attacking us in Somalia. It wasn't like they were trying to take over the world — they were just trying to lash back at the Kenyans," says Mueller.

Even so, "al-Shabaab does have a history of some plots in the West," Christian Leuprecht, a security expert affiliated with the Royal Military College and Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., told CBC News.

The best known was a mass-shooting plot on the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney, which was thwarted by Australian security agencies in 2009.

A man linked to al-Shabaab also tried to kill Kurt Westergaard, the cartoonist who drew the caricature of Mohammed in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, at his home in Aarhus, Denmark in 2010.

Leuprecht notes that the Western plots have all been foiled thus far, but there "is certainly some reason for concern here."

Zimmerman notes that prior to being killed by U.S. air strikes last September, al-Shabaab's top commander, Ahmed Abdi Godane, had been purging the group of fighters who only had nationalist visions "and didn't believe in the global jihadist fight."

His death may have set the group back operationally, but that doesn't necessarily mean a change in ideology, she says.

Even if the group were to focus its efforts on establishing a Greater Somalia, Western attacks could have benefits.

"These groups have figured out that even a small-scale attack in the West that can be tracked back to them is a significant boost to their presence."