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By Alexander Noyes

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Alexander Noyes is an Adjunct Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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Somali refugees herd their goats at the Ifo refugee camp outside Dadaab, eastern Kenya, 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the Somali border. (Source: AP Photo/Jerome Delay, File)



Nuseiba Mohammed Haji stands in the dock at the Kenya Milimani Law Courts, in Nairobi, Tuesday, May 10, 2016. The wife of a Kenyan medic police accused of plotting a biological attack has been extradited to Kenya from Uganda. Police allege Nuseiba Mohammed Haji, a medical student in Uganda and wife of medical intern Mohammed Ali Abdi, is an accomplice in a foiled plan to launch an anthrax attack in Kenya late April by a cell of extremist medics.

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Background

Dadaab was [established](#) in 1992 to house 90,000 refugees from neighboring Somalia, which was then in the midst of a civil war. Over the past two decades, Dadaab's population more than tripled; today, it is the third largest settlement in Kenya. The United Nations (UN) estimates the population of Dadaab at 330,000, but [many](#) believe the population is closer to half a million. Most of its population hails from Somalia, but the camp is also home to refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, Congo, and Uganda. The camp, which is overseen by the UN and the Kenyan government, is [replete](#) with all the hallmarks of a city—among them a market economy and systems of governance, including municipal elections. There are 52 schools and 11 police stations [in Dadaab](#). Many refugees have lived in the sprawling camp their [entire](#) lives. In the wake of al-Shabaab's Westgate mall attack in 2013 and the massacre in Garissa in 2015, which together left hundreds dead, Kenya alleged that there was a connection between the attacks and the camp. Over the past few years, the government of Kenya has frequently threatened to shut down Dadaab, but has thus far not followed through.

## Closure Plans and Pushback

Earlier this month, Joseph Nkaissery, Kenya's interior minister, [announced](#) the government's latest plans to close the camp: "For reasons of pressing national security that speak to the safety of Kenyans in a context of terrorist and criminal activities, the government of the Republic of Kenya has commenced the exercise of closing Dadaab refugee complex . . . The refugees will be repatriated to their countries of origin or to third-party countries for resettlement." Backing up the announcement, the government [dissolved](#) its Department of Refugee Affairs; contributed \$10 million to the effort; and said the first group of refugees would leave in November, with the camp fully closed by next May. In explaining its rationale for closing the camp, the Kenyan government said that al-Shabaab used the refugee camp to smuggle weapons and again alleged a direct connection between previous al-Shabaab attacks and Dadaab. As Mwenda Njoka, the spokesperson for the Interior Ministry, [said](#), "I will tell you for a fact . . . the people who carried out the terror attacks at Westgate, several of them were traced either through phone calls or through various contacts—intelligence—to refugee camps in Dadaab."

International condemnation for the plan was swift. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [warned](#) of "devastating consequences" for Kenya's refugees if the government followed through on the closure. UNHCR [called](#) on Kenya to "reconsider its decision and to avoid taking any action that might be at odds with its international obligations towards people needing sanctuary from danger and persecution." The United States also condemned the decision, [saying](#), "We strongly urge the Government of Kenya to maintain its longstanding leadership role in protecting and sheltering victims of violence and trauma, consistent with its international obligations. We call on Kenya to uphold these international



obligations and not forcibly repatriate refugees." Somalia expressed its strong opposition, [noting](#) its "grave reservation" to the plan.

## Conclusion

There is no question that al-Shabaab remains an acute threat to Kenya and the region. That said, despite several incidents in 2011 and 2012 in Dadaab that were [linked](#) to al-Shabaab, some researchers have criticized the government for not providing much convincing [evidence](#) for its allegations that Dadaab was connected to the Westgate and Garissa attacks. For example, Gerry Simpson of Human Rights Watch denies any connection: "There's not a single shred of evidence that any registered Somali refugees in Kenya have [been](#) behind any attacks in Kenya." Ben Rawlence, who wrote a [book](#) on Dadaab, asserts that Kenya has "relentlessly scapegoated refugees for terrorism, undeterred by the lack of any evidence linking the camps to attacks." Moreover, it remains an open question exactly where all of Kenya's refugees would go. Somalia remains in the midst of an active conflict with al-Shabaab, and Kenya's neighbors are unlikely to agree to such a large influx of refugees.

Worse, Kenya's decision to close Dadaab may in fact do the opposite of what the plan is purported to accomplish. Akin to Kenya's previous [heavy-handed](#) and misguided counterterrorism policies, the closure of Dadaab might fuel recruitment for al-Shabaab. As highlighted in the April 16, 2015, [edition](#) of Africa Watch, research by Anneli Botha of the Institute for Security Studies [revealed](#) that the "single most important factor that drove respondents to join al-Shabaab, according to 65% of respondents, was government's counterterrorism strategy." Therefore, as [noted](#) by Somalia's ministry of Foreign Affairs, the decision to close Dadaab is likely to "make the threat of terrorism worse, not better, given the volatile situation this sudden decision and the proposed subsequent actions will cause." Instead of hastily closing Dadaab, Kenya should be encouraged to rethink its counterterrorism policies with an eye toward gaining the trust of the ethnic Somali community, rather than further alienating them. Also, international actors could increase funding for refugee efforts in Kenya. This may ultimately be Kenya's goal in threatening closure, for last year, only 38.9 percent of UNHCR's funding request for Kenya was actually allocated.

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## ISIS: Giving al-Shabaab a Run for Its Members

The primary suspect in the latest plot, Mohammed Ali Abdi, was a medical intern at Wote Hospital, located approximately halfway between Nairobi and Mombasa. Kenyan authorities have asserted that Ali and at least [two others](#), including his wife, who had been based in Uganda, are members of an ISIS-affiliated network of "[extremist medics](#)" with access to anthrax. This network has [reportedly](#) recruited Kenyan youths and facilitated their movement to [Libya and Syria](#). Further ISIS expansion in East Africa would represent a significant departure from the traditional terrorist threat in Kenya, which has been from the Somali group al-Shabaab. Moreover, ISIS appears to be attracting members previously loyal to al-Shabaab, heralding yet another [fracture](#) in the Somali jihadi group.

One source [reports](#) that defectors from al-Shabaab to ISIS are mainly younger members who are dissatisfied with the status quo, namely the financial reward offered by al-Shabaab to its members, which has dropped because of the costs of its current operations. ISIS may also be more effective than al-Shabaab in the use of modern technology to disseminate propaganda and appeal to new members. Other sources [suggest](#) that al-Shabaab's current leadership is harsh on its members, alienating foreign fighters who might otherwise be amenable to a more moderate leadership style.

## WMD: Sophisticated Tactics

WMDs have not traditionally posed a major threat in Africa, even in countries like Kenya with a relatively advanced scientific infrastructure. The planned use of anthrax, therefore, represents a noteworthy aspect of this foiled terrorist plot. Terrorists in Africa have most often been associated with poor, marginalized populations with limited access to education and resources. They have relied on suicide bombers and crude IEDs to make their mark. Had the alleged anthrax plan succeeded, it would have been the first use by terrorists of a biological agent in Africa. [Experts doubt](#), however, that Ali and his colleagues could have successfully weaponized their supply to conduct widespread attacks, which would require sophisticated expertise and equipment.



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## Wisely Preparing for Disaster

Kenya is not a source of weaponized chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) materials, nor is it a state interested in obtaining WMDs. It is, however, located in a volatile region where it could serve as a transit hub for chemical and biological materials, given the large volume of legitimate trade that passes through the port of Mombasa. The GOK recognizes that the proliferation of terrorism in the region, coupled with its porous borders, inadequately secured scientific infrastructure, and underdeveloped interdiction capabilities, constitutes a recipe for disaster. National laboratories and universities are sources of dangerous materials and technical experts who, if recruited as terrorists, could threaten Kenya's national security. It is reassuring, therefore, that the GOK is [working with partners](#) such as the United States to train its first and secondary responders to effectively contain a WMD attack and mitigate its damage. A recent mass-casualty [exercise](#) outside Mombasa also focused on interagency coordination and the roles played by private agencies in such an attack.

It is also heartening to see that the GOK has taken steps to improve its own capacity to respond to terrorist attacks. The National Disaster Operations Centre (NDOC), which has traditionally focused on droughts, floods, landslides, and epidemics, has in recent years expanded its planning to include [human-induced disasters](#), such as terrorist events. The National Disaster Management Unit (NDMU), an interagency organization [established](#) more recently in response to the increase in terrorism in the region, is focused on preparation and inter-ministerial coordination and communication. Between operational-level training and major institutional-level reform, Kenya is giving priority to disaster response, planning, and preparation for the next terrorist attack.

## Looking Ahead

The recent arrests illustrate two concerning developments on the terrorist scene in Kenya: the rise of ISIS and the desired use of biological weapons. While the timing suggests they may be related, each will need to be handled in a different way. The GOK's recent reforms in its disaster-response community demonstrate it is bracing for such attacks and is committed to an effective response.

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