

THE WESTGATE MALL ATTACK IN NAIROBI, KENYA AND AFRICA'S EVOLVING COUNTER-TERRORISM LANDSCAPE: LESSONS FOR MODERN SECURITY GOVERNANCE

NWAKALOR, Ejike Christian
Department of History and International Studies
University of Calabar
Calabar
uncleuwakalor76@yahoo.com
+2348036447504

Abstract

The 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi marked a critical turning point in Africa's counter-terrorism trajectory, revealing the evolving nature of terrorist violence and the profound governance challenges confronting African states. This paper examines the Westgate attack as a case study in modern security governance, situating it within broader regional and comparative contexts, including Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency and counter-terrorism responses across East and West Africa. Using qualitative analysis and secondary sources, the paper argues that the failure at Westgate was not merely operational but fundamentally institutional, rooted in fragmented command structures, ineffective intelligence governance, weak regional coordination, and over-reliance on militarised responses. The study further demonstrates that contemporary terrorism in Africa increasingly targets civilian spaces, exploits governance gaps, and operates across national borders, rendering traditional state-centric security models inadequate. By drawing cross-regional comparisons and examining alternative interventions such as community-based security initiatives and regional joint task forces, the paper highlights the necessity of integrated, accountable, and preventive security governance frameworks. It concludes that sustainable counter-terrorism in Africa depends on addressing underlying governance deficits, strengthening institutional coordination, balancing security with human rights, and embedding counter-terrorism within broader development and regional cooperation strategies.

Keywords: *Westgate Mall attack, Counter-terrorism Governance, Security sector reform, Urban terrorism, Regional security cooperation*

Introduction

Terrorist attacks have emerged as a major global concern, attracting widespread attention due to their devastating human, social, and economic impacts. The origins of modern terrorism can be traced as far back as the French Revolution (1789–1799), when violence was systematically

employed to intimidate and coerce political opponents. However, contemporary terrorism is distinguished by the presence of transnational networks, sophisticated technologies, and the capacity to inflict mass casualties. Globally, one of the most significant examples of modern terrorism occurred on September 11, 2001, in the United States. The coordinated attacks by al-Qaeda resulted in nearly 3,000 fatalities and substantial infrastructural destruction. The event triggered a global “war on terror” and prompted extensive reforms in international security policies.¹

The 21 September 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, orchestrated by the Somalia-based militant group al-Shabaab, resulted in at least 67 fatalities and hundreds of injuries, marking one of the deadliest terrorist incidents in Kenya’s post-independence history.² Beyond the immediate human toll, the attack demonstrated a qualitative evolution in terrorist tactics in East Africa. Unlike earlier attacks characterised by bombings or targeted assassinations, Westgate represented a complex, coordinated, and prolonged urban siege, bearing resemblance to the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India.³ This operational sophistication revealed al-Shabaab’s growing transnational learning capacity and its ability to exploit institutional weaknesses within state security systems.

The attack occurred within a broader African security environment defined by fragile governance structures, porous borders, socio-economic marginalisation, and persistent regional conflicts. In East Africa, Kenya’s 2011 military intervention in Somalia under Operation Linda

¹Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 67–69.

²Adele Botha and Mohamed Abdile, “Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Kenya,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 10, no. 1 (2019): 24.

³David Kilcullen, “The City as a System: Future Conflict and Urban Resilience,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2012): 19.

Nchi and its subsequent role in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) significantly altered the country's threat profile.⁴ Al-Shabaab explicitly framed the Westgate attack as retaliation for Kenya's external military engagement, illustrating how counter-terrorism interventions beyond national borders can generate internal security vulnerabilities.⁵ Similar dynamics have been observed across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, where militant groups adapt their strategies in response to state-led security campaigns.⁶

From a governance and institutional perspective, the Westgate attack exposed critical deficiencies in Kenya's counter-terrorism architecture. Despite credible intelligence warnings that reportedly identified Westgate Mall as a potential target, preventive measures were inadequately implemented, revealing a disconnect between intelligence generation and operational decision-making.⁷ The response to the attack was marred by delayed deployment, poor coordination between police and military units, incompatible communication systems, and jurisdictional conflicts, all of which prolonged the siege and increased casualties. These shortcomings also underscore the limitations of reactive and heavily militarised counter-terrorism approaches that neglect institutional coherence and crisis governance.

At the international level, the Westgate attack triggered an outpouring of diplomatic support and security assistance from global and regional actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United Nations, and regional bodies such as the

⁴Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 130.

⁵Frank Shyhundu, Isaac N. Nyadera, and Benson Agwanda, "The Experience of Terrorism in Kenya: Vulnerabilities and Strengths," *African Journal on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2021): 129.

⁶Colin P. Clarke, "Trends in Terrorism: What's on the Horizon in 2024?" *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2024, www.fpri.org, 21.

⁷Edward Mogire and Kennedy Mkutu Agade, "Counter-terrorism in Kenya," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29, no. 4 (2011): 475.

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This support ranged from intelligence sharing and forensic assistance to capacity-building and countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives.⁸ While such interventions strengthened Kenya's operational capabilities, they also raised important concerns regarding sovereignty, accountability, human rights, and the sustainability of externally driven security reforms.

Importantly, the Westgate incident highlights the growing recognition that effective counter-terrorism extends beyond military force and intelligence operations. Scholars like Andrew Silke have increasingly emphasised the importance of security governance frameworks that integrate inter-agency coordination, community engagement, socio-economic inclusion, and legal oversight.⁹ The failure to address structural drivers of radicalisation, such as youth unemployment, political exclusion, and perceived state repression, risks perpetuating cycles of violence and undermining long-term security objectives.

This paper situates the Westgate Mall attack within Africa's evolving counter-terrorism landscape, using it as a critical case for examining modern security governance. Rather than treating the attack as an isolated Kenyan tragedy, the paper adopts a broader analytical lens, linking Westgate to continental and global trends in urban terrorism, crisis management failures, and post-attack security reforms. It argues that Westgate represents both a governance failure and a learning opportunity - one that underscores the urgent need for adaptive, accountable, and integrated

⁸J. Campbell, "Global Counterterrorism Cooperation: The Case of Al-Shabaab and the Westgate Attack," *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (2020): 57.

⁹Andrew Silke, "The London Bombings and the Evolution of Counterterrorism," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2018): 98.

counter-terrorism strategies capable of responding to the changing nature of terrorist threats in Africa.

This paper adopts the Crisis Management Theory as its theoretical framework. This theory provides a critical lens for understanding how organisations and governments respond to sudden, disruptive, and often unexpected events. It was extensively developed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007, whose work emphasised the centrality of stakeholders' perceptions during a crisis and how these perceptions shape both response strategies and recovery efforts.¹⁰ Crisis Management Theory is structured around three main phases: the pre-crisis phase, the crisis response phase, and the post-crisis phase. The pre-crisis phase focuses on prevention and preparation, whereby organisations identify potential risks, develop mitigation strategies, and establish communication channels. This phase typically involves activities such as risk assessment, staff training, and crisis simulations. The crisis response phase occurs during the event itself, with effective communication serving as a critical tool for managing stakeholder perceptions and guiding efforts to mitigate the impact. The post-crisis phase emphasises recovery and organisational learning, involving a thorough analysis of the response, identification of weaknesses, and implementation of measures to prevent recurrence. Coombs' framework further underscores the importance of maintaining transparent, empathetic, and responsible relationships with stakeholders throughout all phases of crisis management.¹¹

The Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, offers a compelling case study for applying Crisis Management Theory. The attack, widely regarded as retaliation for Kenya's military

¹⁰W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 18.

¹¹Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 20.

operations in Somalia under Operation Linda Nchi (2011–2012), exposed significant gaps in crisis preparedness and response.¹² Although intelligence and warnings indicated potential threats from al-Shabaab, preventive measures proved insufficient, underscoring the necessity for rigorous risk assessment and proactive pre-crisis planning.¹³ During the attack, the Kenyan security forces' response was widely criticised for being fragmented and slow, with reports of friendly fire, looting by personnel, and poor inter-agency coordination. Crisis communication was particularly ineffective, resulting in widespread public confusion and panic.

In the aftermath, the Kenyan government concentrated on recovery and organisational learning. Investigations were conducted, and security protocols were revised to strengthen preparedness for future crises. Additionally, the attack catalysed greater international collaboration in counter-terrorism efforts.¹⁴ Thus, the Westgate Mall incident demonstrates the practical relevance of Crisis Management Theory in highlighting the importance of pre-crisis planning, coordinated response, and post-crisis learning in mitigating the effects of catastrophic events.

Contextualising the Westgate Mall Attack within Africa's Counter-Terrorism Evolution

The Westgate Mall attack must be situated within the broader historical evolution of terrorism and counter-terrorism in Africa, where militant violence has shifted from localised insurgencies to transnational, urban-centred operations. During the Cold War era and its immediate aftermath, African terrorism was largely embedded in ethno-regional conflicts and civil wars, often confined to rural spaces or border regions. By the early twenty-first century, however, the continent experienced a transformation in both the scale and nature of terrorist activity, driven by

¹²Botha and Abdile, "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Kenya," 24.

¹³Botha and Abdile, "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Kenya," 24–25.

¹⁴Campbell, "Global Counterterrorism Cooperation," 56–58.

globalisation, technological diffusion, and the proliferation of transnational jihadist networks.¹⁵

The Westgate attack exemplifies this transition, marking a move toward highly symbolic, media-driven violence aimed at urban civilian populations.

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, Africa has increasingly been viewed as both a frontline and a rear base in the global war on terror, especially in regions characterised by weak governance and limited state presence.¹⁶ In East Africa, the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam signalled al-Qaeda's early penetration of the region. They exposed structural vulnerabilities within national security institutions.¹⁷ These attacks laid the groundwork for subsequent militant operations, including those later undertaken by al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab's emergence and operational maturation reflect the broader transformation of militant groups on the continent. Originally a local Islamist faction within Somalia's protracted civil conflict, the group gradually evolved into a transnational jihadist organisation aligned with al-Qaeda, capable of projecting violence beyond Somalia's borders.¹⁸ The Westgate Mall attack represented a strategic escalation in this trajectory, demonstrating the group's capacity to conduct complex urban assaults designed to undermine state authority, query foreign policy decisions, and attract global attention. By selecting a high-end commercial centre frequented by expatriates and

¹⁵Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 59; Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, 130.

¹⁶Alice Hills, "Trojan Horses? USAID, Counter-Terrorism and Africa's Police," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2006): 629.

¹⁷Princeton N. Lyman and James S. Morrison, "The Terrorist Threat in Africa," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2004): 75–76.

¹⁸Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, 131.

Kenyans alike, al-Shabaab deliberately internationalised the attack's emblematic meaning, positioning Kenya's internal security crisis within a global account of jihadist violence.

From a counter-terrorism perspective, Westgate exposed the limitations of Africa's predominantly reactive and militarised security responses. Many African states, including Kenya, have historically prioritised force-based approaches, emphasising military deployments, expanded surveillance, and emergency legislation in response to terrorist threats.¹⁹ While such measures may disrupt immediate threats, they often fail to address underlying governance deficits, institutional fragmentation, and socio-political grievances that facilitate radicalisation. The Westgate siege illustrated that fragmented command structures, weak inter-agency coordination, and unclear civilian–military boundaries can undermine operational effectiveness during complex emergencies.²⁰

Moreover, the attack highlighted the growing centrality of urban spaces in Africa's terrorism landscape. Rapid urbanisation across the continent has produced densely populated cities characterised by socio-economic inequality, infrastructural strain, and informal security arrangements. These conditions create both opportunities and vulnerabilities for militant actors seeking high-impact targets.²¹ Nairobi's status as a regional diplomatic hub and commercial centre amplified the global resonance of the Westgate attack, reinforcing concerns that African cities were becoming critical nodes in transnational terrorism networks. Similar patterns have since

¹⁹Peter Kagwanja, "Counter-Terrorism in the Horn of Africa: New Security Frontiers, Old Strategies," *African Security Review* 15, no. 3 (2006): 84–85.

²⁰Awino Okech, "The Westgate Mall Siege: Reassessing Kenya's Security Architecture," African Studies Association, November 2013, <https://africanstudies.org/asa-news/56th-annual-meeting-special-issue/the-westgate-mall-siege-reassessing-kenya-s-security-infrastructure/>.

²¹Robert Muggah, "Is Urban Terrorism the New Normal? Probably," World Economic Forum, January 17, 2016, <http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/is-urban-terrorism-is-the-new-normal-probably>.

emerged in attacks on hotels, restaurants, and business districts in cities such as Ouagadougou, Bamako, Mogadishu, and Nairobi itself, underscoring a continental shift toward urban terrorism.²²

The Westgate incident also contributed to a reconfiguration of counter-terrorism governance in Africa by accelerating external involvement in domestic security affairs. Following the attack, Kenya deepened security cooperation with Western partners, expanded intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and increased defence and internal security spending. While these reforms enhanced tactical capabilities, critics argue that they reinforced dependency on external actors and risked securitising governance at the expense of civil liberties and democratic accountability.²³ In this sense, Westgate reflects a broader continental dilemma: balancing the urgency of counter-terrorism with the imperative of sustainable and rights-based security governance.

Ultimately, the Westgate Mall attack occupies a critical place in Africa's counter-terrorism evolution because it crystallised multiple converging trends: the globalisation of militant tactics, the urbanisation of terrorist violence, the internationalisation of security responses, and the growing recognition of governance failures as security threats. Understanding Westgate within this wider historical and structural context is essential for drawing meaningful lessons about the future of counter-terrorism in Africa. It demonstrates that modern security governance must move beyond ad hoc responses to embrace integrated, preventive, and institutionally coherent strategies that address both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism.

²²W. P. S. Sidhu, "Cities Become Battlefields of Terrorism as the World Continues to Urbanise," Brookings India, 2015, www.brookings.edu, 57.

²³Alex de Waal, *Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (Shama Books, 2004), 99; Hills, "Trojan Horses?" 633.

The Westgate Mall Attack as a Governance Failure: Intelligence, Coordination, and Crisis Response

The Westgate Mall attack stands as a critical illustration of how terrorism succeeds not solely through militant capacity but through failures of security governance. While al-Shabaab demonstrated operational sophistication, the scale and duration of the attack were amplified by systemic weaknesses in intelligence utilisation, inter-agency coordination, and crisis response mechanisms. These failures underscore a broader pattern in African counter-terrorism, in which institutional fragmentation and politicisation undermine the effectiveness of security operations.²⁴

One of the most significant governance lapses exposed by the Westgate attack was the disconnect between intelligence collection and operational decision-making. Multiple credible intelligence reports, reportedly generated by Kenya's National Intelligence Service (NIS), warned of an imminent al-Shabaab attack and specifically identified Westgate Mall as a potential target.²⁵ Despite the specificity of these warnings, preventive security measures, such as reinforced patrols, access control, and coordinated contingency planning, were either absent or insufficient. This failure reflects a deeper structural problem in which intelligence agencies operate in silos, with limited mechanisms for translating threat assessments into actionable policy and operational readiness.

The politicisation of intelligence and security institutions further compounded this challenge. Scholars argue that Kenya's intelligence apparatus has historically been entangled in

²⁴Mogire and Agade, "Counter-terrorism in Kenya," 473.

²⁵Harry Misiko, "How Kenya Made Itself Vulnerable to Terror," Washington Post, June 17, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/06/17/how-kenya-made-itself-vulnerable-to-terror>.

domestic political calculations, diverting attention from emerging non-state security threats.²⁶ As a result, early warning systems, while technically capable, lacked the institutional authority and inter-agency trust required to trigger decisive preventive action. This pattern is not unique to Kenya; across Africa, intelligence failures often stem less from information scarcity than from governance deficits that inhibit timely response.²⁷

Operational coordination during the Westgate siege further revealed structural weaknesses in crisis governance. The response involved multiple security actors, including the Kenya Police Service, the General Service Unit (GSU), and the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF). However, the absence of a unified command structure led to confusion, delayed deployment, and, in some instances, deadly friendly-fire incidents.²⁸ Incompatible communication systems and unclear jurisdictional authority between civilian and military forces undermined situational awareness and tactical coherence, allowing the siege to persist far longer than necessary.

The militarisation of the response also raised concerns about the appropriateness of force deployment in civilian crisis scenarios. While military involvement is often justified in large-scale terrorist incidents, the Westgate operation demonstrated how inadequate civilian-military integration can exacerbate chaos rather than restore order. The use of heavy weaponry in a densely populated commercial space reportedly contributed to structural damage and complicated rescue efforts.²⁹ These outcomes highlight the importance of specialised urban counter-terrorism units

²⁶Mogire and Agade, “Counter-terrorism in Kenya,” 474.

²⁷Hills, “Trojan Horses?” 642.

²⁸Botha and Abdile, “Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Kenya,” 43–44.

²⁹Tristan McConnell, “More Westgate Mall Attack Details Emerge — and They’re Not Comforting,” *GlobalPost*, 2013, www.pri.org, 1.

trained in hostage rescue, crisis negotiation, and civilian protection—capacities that remain underdeveloped in many African states.

Crisis communication represented another dimension of governance failure. During the siege, contradictory official statements regarding the number of attackers, the status of hostages, and the progress of operations circulated widely, fuelling public confusion and anxiety.³⁰ Social media platforms, while instrumental in enabling civilians to seek help and share information, also became channels for misinformation and operational compromise. The inability of authorities to manage information flows effectively underscores the growing importance of strategic communication in modern counter-terrorism governance.

The post-attack phase further revealed governance challenges related to accountability and institutional learning. Allegations of looting by security personnel during the siege, later corroborated by CCTV footage, undermined public trust and raised questions about discipline and oversight within the security forces.³¹ While official investigations were launched, the limited transparency surrounding their outcomes reinforced perceptions of impunity. In counter-terrorism contexts, such accountability deficits risk alienating communities whose cooperation is essential for intelligence gathering and early warning.

Collectively, these failures demonstrate that the Westgate Mall attack was not merely a tactical security lapse but a profound governance breakdown. The incident exposed how fragmented authority, weak institutional coordination, politicised intelligence, and poor crisis

³⁰Theodore Simon, Adam Goldberg, and Bruria Adini, “Social Media in the Westgate Mall Attack: The Role of Twitter in Crisis Communication,” *Computers in Human Behaviour* 52 (2014): 650.

³¹Associated Press, “Kenyan Troops Accused of Looting Westgate Mall as Store Owners Return,” *The Guardian*, 2013, www.theguardian.com.

communication can transform a terrorist assault into a prolonged national trauma. From a broader African perspective, Westgate illustrates the urgent need to reconceptualise counter-terrorism as a governance challenge rather than a purely military problem. Effective responses require integrated command structures, clear civilian oversight, institutional accountability, and the seamless translation of intelligence into preventive action. Without these elements, counter-terrorism efforts risk remaining reactive, costly, and ultimately ineffective.

International Responses and the Externalisation of Counter-Terrorism Governance in Africa

The Westgate Mall attack triggered an immediate and expansive international response that illustrates the growing externalisation of counter-terrorism governance in Africa. Within hours of the assault, global and regional actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United Nations, Israel, and regional organisations such as the IGAD, expressed solidarity with Kenya and offered varying forms of operational, intelligence, and diplomatic support.³² While these responses were crucial in stabilising the immediate crisis and enhancing Kenya's counter-terrorism capacity, they also reinforced longer-term patterns of dependency on external security assistance, reshaping African security governance since the early 2000s.

Western governments played a particularly prominent role in the post-Westgate security environment. The United States and the United Kingdom intensified intelligence-sharing arrangements with Kenyan authorities. They expanded training programmes for elite security

³²United Nations, "Secretary-General's Remarks on the Attack in Nairobi," September 22, 2013, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2013-09-22/secretary-generals-remarks-attack-nairobi>.

units, including counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) training and urban counter-terrorism operations.³³ These initiatives were embedded within broader counter-terrorism architectures such as the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative (EACTI) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), which position Kenya as a strategic hub in regional counter-terrorism operations. Although such partnerships enhanced Kenya's tactical capabilities, critics argue that they prioritised short-term security objectives over institutional reform and democratic oversight.³⁴

The European Union and United Nations similarly framed their engagement around capacity-building and normative governance reforms. EU statements following the attack emphasised support for Kenya's security institutions while also stressing the importance of human rights compliance and the rule of law.³⁵ The United Nations Security Council condemned the attack and reaffirmed the need for international cooperation in combating terrorism, linking counter-terrorism to broader peacebuilding and development agendas. However, the translation of these normative commitments into practice remained uneven, particularly as Kenyan authorities expanded surveillance powers and conducted aggressive security operations in the aftermath of the Westgate attack.

Israel's involvement in the response to the attack highlights the transnational circulation of counter-terrorism expertise. Israeli security specialists reportedly assisted Kenyan forces during and after the siege, reflecting Israel's global reputation in urban counter-terrorism and hostage

³³United States Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Kenya," <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/kenya/>.

³⁴Hills, "Trojan Horses?" 633.

³⁵Miguel M. Gil, *An Adequate and Balanced Response to the Nairobi Mall Terrorist Attack* (European Parliament, 2013), www.europarl.europa.eu.

rescue operations.³⁶ This form of bilateral security assistance underscores how African states increasingly draw on external models of counter-terrorism, often adopting tactics developed in radically different political and social contexts. While such transfers can improve operational efficiency, they risk overlooking local dynamics and exacerbating tensions between security forces and civilian populations.

At the regional level, IGAD and the African Union framed the Westgate attack as a collective security challenge requiring coordinated responses across national borders. Calls for enhanced intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and harmonised counter-terrorism legislation reflected growing recognition that militant groups such as al-Shabaab exploit regional mobility and governance gaps.³⁷ Nevertheless, limited resources, political rivalries, and uneven state capacity constrained the effectiveness of these regional initiatives, reinforcing reliance on external actors.

The expansion of international counter-terrorism engagement following the Westgate attack also had significant implications for civil liberties and governance in Kenya. Post-attack security measures included mass arrests, expanded surveillance, and the targeting of specific ethnic and religious communities, particularly Somali and Muslim populations.³⁸ Human rights organisations warned that such practices risked alienating communities whose cooperation is essential for intelligence gathering and early warning, thereby undermining long-term counter-

³⁶Reuters, “Israel Backs Kenya as Deadly Westgate Mall Standoff Nears End,” <https://forward.com/fast-forward/184426/israel-backs-kenya-as-deadly-westgate-mall-standoff/>.

³⁷Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, 135.

³⁸Sammy Ndonga, “One Person Was Killed as Police Raided Mombasa Mosques,” *Capital News*, 2014, www.capitalfm.co.ke.

terrorism objectives.³⁹ This tension between security imperatives and rights-based governance remains a defining challenge in Africa's counter-terrorism landscape.

More broadly, the Westgate case illustrates how international counter-terrorism assistance can reshape domestic governance priorities. Increased security funding and external support often strengthen coercive institutions, such as the military and intelligence services, while sidelining civilian oversight mechanisms and social interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of extremism.⁴⁰ As a result, counter-terrorism governance becomes increasingly securitised, with policy responses framed primarily through the lens of threat containment rather than prevention and resilience.

In this sense, the international response to Westgate reflects a paradox at the heart of Africa's counter-terrorism evolution. External assistance has undeniably enhanced operational capacity and regional cooperation, yet it has also entrenched patterns of dependency and militarisation that complicate efforts to build accountable and sustainable security institutions. The lessons of Westgate therefore extend beyond tactical cooperation to raise fundamental questions about ownership, legitimacy, and the balance between external support and domestic governance in Africa's fight against terrorism.

Lessons from the Westgate Mall Attack for Modern Security Governance in Africa

The Westgate Mall attack of September 2013 represents a watershed moment in Africa's contemporary security history, not simply because of its brutality or international visibility, but

³⁹Fiona de Londras, "Counter-Terrorist Detention and International Human Rights Law," *Modern Law Review* 77, no. 6 (2014): 1051.

⁴⁰Mogire and Agade, "Counter-terrorism in Kenya," 475.

because it revealed the evolving nature of terrorism and the profound governance challenges confronting African states. The attack underscored a shift from territorially confined insurgency to transnational, urban-based terrorism that deliberately targets civilian spaces to maximise psychological impact, symbolic resonance, and political pressure. In this sense, Westgate must be understood not as an isolated Kenyan tragedy but as a case study with far-reaching implications for security governance across Africa and other regions confronting asymmetric threats.

One of the most consequential lessons of the Westgate attack lies in its exposure of the vulnerability of urban civilian infrastructure. The deliberate targeting of a commercial shopping mall signified a tactical adaptation by al-Shabaab, demonstrating an acute understanding of media dynamics, global consumer culture, and the symbolic power of attacking everyday spaces associated with normalcy and economic vitality. This pattern has since been replicated across Africa, from attacks on hotels and restaurants in Ouagadougou and Bamako to assaults on markets, transport hubs, and places of worship in Nigeria. Boko Haram's attacks on shopping areas in Abuja and crowded markets in Maiduguri illustrate a comparable strategic logic: terrorism as spectacle, designed to undermine public confidence in the state's capacity to provide basic security.⁴¹

These developments challenge conventional security doctrines that prioritise the defence of state institutions, borders, and military installations. Modern terrorism thrives in the spaces between governance and everyday life, exploiting gaps in urban policing, private-sector security regulation, emergency response systems, and intelligence coordination. The Westgate attack thus highlights the need for a reconceptualisation of security governance that integrates urban planning,

⁴¹Freedom Onuoha, "Boko Haram and the Evolving Salafi Jihadist Threat in Nigeria," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (African Studies Centre, 2014), 158–159.

private-public security partnerships, civilian preparedness, and crisis management capabilities. Without such integration, African cities, many of which are experiencing rapid, unregulated urbanisation, remain structurally exposed to similar attacks.

Equally significant is the lesson Westgate offers regarding intelligence governance. Evidence indicates that Kenyan authorities possessed credible intelligence warnings before the attack, including information identifying Westgate Mall as a potential target. The failure was not one of intelligence scarcity but of institutional translation: threat assessments were not effectively converted into preventive action. This phenomenon is mirrored in Nigeria's counter-terrorism experience, where warnings preceding major Boko Haram attacks, most notably the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls' abduction, were inadequately acted upon due to bureaucratic inertia, fragmented command structures, and political interference.⁴² These parallels reveal a recurring governance deficit across African security systems, where intelligence agencies operate in silos, lack operational authority, or are subordinated to political considerations.

The implication is that counter-terrorism effectiveness depends less on expanding surveillance capacity than on reforming institutional pathways through which intelligence informs policy, deployment, and contingency planning. Without clear protocols linking intelligence assessments to operational decisions, early warning systems lose strategic value. The Westgate case thus reinforces the argument that intelligence reform must be embedded within broader governance reforms that emphasise accountability, inter-agency trust, and professional autonomy. The operational response to the Westgate siege further exposed the dangers of a fragmented security architecture. The involvement of multiple Kenyan security agencies, including police

⁴²Onuoha, "Boko Haram," 160.

units and the military, without a unified command structure resulted in confusion, delays, and operational inefficiencies. Friendly-fire incidents and contradictory public communications compounded the crisis, allowing the siege to persist longer than necessary and amplifying public anxiety. This failure resonates strongly with Nigeria's counter-insurgency experience against Boko Haram, where coordination challenges between the military, police, intelligence services, and civilian authorities have repeatedly undermined operational effectiveness, particularly in the early years of the insurgency.⁴³

This suggests that effective counter-terrorism governance requires institutionalised multi-agency coordination rather than ad hoc collaboration during crises. States that have demonstrated improvements, such as Kenya's more coordinated response to the 2019 DusitD2 attack, did so after revising command protocols, clarifying jurisdictional authority, and improving interoperability among security agencies. Similarly, Nigeria's gradual adoption of joint task force structures and regional coordination mechanisms reflects a belated recognition of this lesson, though implementation remains uneven.

Beyond national governance, the Westgate attack highlights the inherently regional nature of contemporary terrorism. Al-Shabaab explicitly framed the attack as retaliation for Kenya's military intervention in Somalia, illustrating how regional security engagements can generate domestic blowback. This dynamic is directly comparable to Nigeria's experience in the Lake Chad Basin, where cross-border mobility, porous frontiers, and uneven governance across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have shaped Boko Haram's evolution. The emergence of the

⁴³International Crisis Group, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?* Africa Briefing No. 120 (May 4, 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>.

Multinational Joint Task Force represents an acknowledgement that terrorism cannot be effectively countered within rigid national boundaries.⁴⁴

While regional initiatives have produced measurable gains, such as reductions in Boko Haram's territorial control and lethality, their sustainability remains fragile. Political instability, funding constraints, and shifting alliances have repeatedly undermined regional cohesion, as evidenced by periodic withdrawals and disagreements within multinational security frameworks. The Westgate case thus reinforces the lesson that regional counter-terrorism mechanisms must be institutionalised, adequately resourced, and politically insulated to function effectively over the long term.

Another critical dimension illuminated by Westgate is the relationship between counter-terrorism and community trust. Post-attack security operations in Kenya disproportionately targeted Somali and Muslim communities, reinforcing perceptions of collective punishment and ethnic profiling. Similar patterns have emerged in Nigeria, where heavy-handed military operations in the northeast have generated civilian grievances and, in some cases, facilitated Boko Haram recruitment.⁴⁵ These experiences underscore the paradox of militarised counter-terrorism—while force may degrade insurgent capacity in the short term, it can undermine long-term security by alienating populations whose cooperation is essential for intelligence and early warning.

In response to this challenge, Nigeria's experience with the Civilian Joint Task Force offers a partial model for community-centred security governance. By integrating local actors into security

⁴⁴Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020), 2.

⁴⁵Amnesty International, "Kenya: Brutality by Police in the Name of Counter-Terrorism," Amnesty International, 2015, www.amnesty.org.

efforts, the CJTF improved intelligence flows and enhanced state legitimacy at the grassroots level, though it also raised concerns about vigilantism and accountability. The broader lesson, reinforced by Westgate, is that sustainable counter-terrorism governance must prioritise population-centric approaches that balance security enforcement with social inclusion, local participation, and respect for civil liberties.

The Westgate attack also demonstrated the growing importance of information and narrative governance. Al-Shabaab's real-time use of social media during the siege illustrated how terrorist groups exploit digital platforms to control narratives, intimidate audiences, and project power beyond the physical site of violence. Boko Haram's global notoriety following the Chibok abductions similarly illustrates how media amplification can transform localised violence into international crises. In both cases, state responses were hampered by inconsistent messaging, delayed information release, and attempts to control media coverage, which often eroded public trust.⁴⁶

Modern security governance must therefore integrate strategic communication as a core counter-terrorism function. Effective responses require transparent, timely, and credible public communication that counters extremist narratives while safeguarding freedom of expression. Failure to manage the information domain allows terrorist groups to dominate the psychological battlefield even when their operational capacity is constrained. Legal and institutional frameworks constitute another area where the implications of Westgate resonate widely. In the aftermath of the attack, Kenya expanded its counter-terrorism legislation, granting security agencies broader surveillance and detention powers. Nigeria has followed a similar trajectory, relying on emergency

⁴⁶Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media," *Social Science & Public Policy* 54, no. 2 (2017): 139.

laws and military tribunals to prosecute terrorism-related offences. While such measures may enhance short-term capacity, they raise serious concerns regarding due process, judicial oversight, and human rights. Empirical evidence suggests that abuses committed under the guise of counter-terrorism often undermine legitimacy and fuel radicalisation, particularly in contexts of weak institutions.⁴⁷

Finally, the Westgate case underscores the ambivalent role of international assistance in Africa's counter-terrorism landscape. External actors have provided critical intelligence, training, and logistical support to Kenya, Nigeria and other African countries. While targeted technical assistance, such as Britain's Operation Turus in Nigeria, can add value, excessive reliance on external partners risks entrenching militarised responses while sidelining governance reform, accountability, and local ownership. Experiences from the Sahel, particularly the limitations of foreign-led military operations such as Operation Barkhane, further illustrate that external intervention cannot substitute for domestic governance capacity.

Taken together, the Westgate Mall attack and its broader African parallels reveal that terrorism flourishes where governance is fragmented, exclusionary, and reactive. Effective counter-terrorism in Africa, therefore, requires a paradigm shift from force-centric responses toward integrated security governance that emphasises intelligence reform, institutional coordination, regional cooperation, community engagement, strategic communication, and legal accountability. The cross-analysis with Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency reinforces the conclusion that terrorism is not merely a security problem but a governance crisis. Without

⁴⁷Fiona de Londras, *Counter-Terrorist Detention and International Human Rights Law* (Routledge, 2014), 39.

addressing the structural conditions that allow extremist violence to emerge and adapt, African states risk repeating the cycle of reactive militarisation and recurring insecurity.

Conclusion

The Westgate Mall attack stands as a defining episode in Africa's contemporary security history, encapsulating the transformation of terrorism from a territorially anchored insurgency into a transnational, urban-oriented, and media-savvy phenomenon that thrives on governance weaknesses rather than battlefield superiority. As this study has demonstrated, the attack cannot be understood merely as a failure of Kenyan security forces or as an isolated act of al-Shabaab violence. Rather, it represents a convergence of institutional fragmentation, intelligence governance deficits, regional security entanglements, and the limitations of militarised counter-terrorism approaches, all of which continue to shape Africa's security landscape.

The Westgate Mall attack thus offers a powerful lens through which to understand Africa's evolving counter-terrorism challenge as fundamentally a governance crisis. Terrorism thrives where institutions are fragmented, communities are marginalised, and security responses are reactive rather than preventive. A scenario similar to Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency and other regional cases demonstrates that effective counter-terrorism requires a holistic governance framework that integrates intelligence reform, inter-agency coordination, regional cooperation, community engagement, strategic communication, legal accountability, and socio-economic inclusion. Without such an integrated approach, African states risk perpetuating cycles of violence in which each attack exposes the same structural weaknesses under increasingly complex and transnational forms of threat.

In conclusion, the enduring lesson of Westgate is that modern security governance must move beyond the illusion of purely military solutions. Counter-terrorism must be reconceptualised as a long-term governance project aimed at building resilient institutions, inclusive societies, and cooperative regional security architectures. Only by addressing the underlying governance conditions that enable terrorism to emerge and adapt can African states hope to achieve durable security and democratic stability in an increasingly volatile global environment.

Bibliography

- Amnesty International. "Kenya: Brutality by Police in the Name of Counter-Terrorism." Amnesty International, 2015. www.amnesty.org.
- Associated Press. "Kenyan Troops Accused of Looting Westgate Mall as Store Owners Return." The Guardian, 2013. www.theguardian.com.
- Awan, Imran. "Cyber-Extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media." *Social Science & Public Policy* 54, no. 2 (2017): 138–149. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0>.

- Bøås, Morten, and Kevin C. Dunn. *Politics of Origin in Africa: Autochthony, Citizenship and Conflict*. London: Zed Books, 2013.
- Botha, Adele, and Mohamed Abdile. "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Kenya." *Journal of Terrorism Research* 10, no. 1 (2019): 24–45. <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1481>.
- Campbell, J. "Global Counterterrorism Cooperation: The Case of Al-Shabaab and the Westgate Attack." *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (2020): 56–74.
- Chau, Donovan. *Global Security Watch — Kenya*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2010.
- Clarke, Colin P. "Trends in Terrorism: What's on the Horizon in 2024?" Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2024. www.fpri.org.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- de Londras, Fiona. "Counter-Terrorist Detention and International Human Rights Law." *Modern Law Review* 77, no. 6 (2014): 1051–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.12101>.
- de Londras, Fiona. *Counter-Terrorist Detention and International Human Rights Law*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- de Waal, Alex. *Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa*. Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2004.
- Gil, Miguel M. *An Adequate and Balanced Response to the Nairobi Mall Terrorist Attack*. Brussels: European Parliament, 2013. www.europarl.europa.eu.
- Hills, Alice. "Trojan Horses? USAID, Counter-Terrorism and Africa's Police." *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2006): 629–643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600780080>.
- Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- International Crisis Group. *Boko Haram on the Back Foot? Africa Briefing No. 120*. Brussels: Crisis Group, May 4, 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>.
- International Crisis Group. *Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform. Africa Report No. 237*. Brussels: Crisis Group, June 6, 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/nigeria/237-nigeria-challenge-military-reform>.
- Kagwanja, Peter. "Counter-Terrorism in the Horn of Africa: New Security Frontiers, Old Strategies." *African Security Review* 15, no. 3 (2006): 72–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2006.9627606>.
- Kilcullen, David. "The City as a System: Future Conflict and Urban Resilience." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2012): 19–39.
- Lind, Jennifer, and Jessica Howell. "Counter-Terrorism and the Politics of Aid: Kenya." *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, no. 3 (2010): 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678801003751372>.
- Lowenthal, Mark M. *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*. 7th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017.

- Lyman, Princeton N., and James S. Morrison. "The Terrorist Threat in Africa." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2004): 75–86.
- McConnell, Tristan. "More Westgate Mall Attack Details Emerge — and They're Not Comforting." *GlobalPost*, 2013. www.pri.org.
- Misiko, Harry. "How Kenya Made Itself Vulnerable to Terror." *Washington Post*, June 17, 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/06/17/how-kenya-made-itself-vulnerable-to-terror>.
- Mogire, Edward, and Kennedy Mkutu Agade. "Counter-terrorism in Kenya." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29, no. 4 (2011): 473–491.
- Muggah, Robert. "Is Urban Terrorism the New Normal? Probably." *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2016. <http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/is-urban-terrorism-is-the-new-normal-probably>.
- Ndonga, Sammy. "One Person Was Killed as Police Raided Mombasa Mosques." *Capital News*, 2014. www.capitalfm.co.ke.
- Okech, Awino. "The Westgate Mall Siege: Reassessing Kenya's Security Architecture." *African Studies Association*, November 2013. <https://africanstudies.org/asa-news/56th-annual-meeting-special-issue/the-westgate-mall-siege-reassessing-kenya-s-security-infrastructure/>.
- Onuoha, Freedom. "Boko Haram and the Evolving Salafi Jihadist Threat in Nigeria." In *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 158–190. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014.
- Reuters. "Israel Backs Kenya as Deadly Westgate Mall Standoff Nears End." <https://forward.com/fast-forward/184426/israel-backs-kenya-as-deadly-westgate-mall-standoff/>.
- Shyhundu, Frank, Isaac N. Nyadera, and Benson Agwanda. "The Experience of Terrorism in Kenya: Vulnerabilities and Strengths." *African Journal on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2021): 127–144.
- Sidhu, W. P. S. "Cities Become Battlefields of Terrorism as the World Continues to Urbanise." *Brookings India*, 2015. www.brookings.edu.
- Silke, Andrew. "The London Bombings and the Evolution of Counterterrorism." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2018): 98–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117750792>.
- Simon, Theodore, Adam Goldberg, and Bruria Adini. "Social Media in the Westgate Mall Attack: The Role of Twitter in Crisis Communication." *Computers in Human Behaviour* 52 (2014): 644–652. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.09.010>.
- United Nations. "Secretary-General's Remarks on the Attack in Nairobi." September 22, 2013. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2013-09-22/secretary-generals-remarks-attack-nairobi>.
- United Nations Security Council. Statement on the Terrorist Attack in Nairobi, Kenya. United Nations, 2013. www.un.org.

United States Department of State. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Kenya."
<https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/kenya/>.

Williams, Paul D. *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Zenn, Jacob. *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020.