Counter Terrorism and Security Strategies along the Kenya-Somalia border

Executive summary

This policy brief analyses counterterrorism strategies along the Kenya-Somali border. Weak border infrastructure, porous borders, corruption, and uncontrolled borders pose a danger to the national security of Kenya. Somali based terror group al Shabab has crossed the porous border to radicalize and train locals, and to carry out attacks on Kenyan soil. Strong cross-border cooperation, border community engagement, anti-corruption efforts among border officials, and remote border area surveillance programs are some of the steps the Kenyan government can take to better secure the Kenya-Somali border.

Background

Terror attacks have been on Kenya's national security agenda for the past two decades. At the root of the insecurity is the collapse of Somalia in 1991. Since then, cross-border crime and illegal migration have threatened Kenya's security. After 2006, Somali based terror group al Shabab began crossing the porous Kenya-Somali border, recruiting locals for radicalization, training, and deployment to carry out attacks on Kenyan soil. Intensified deadly attacks provoked the Kenyan government on October 14, 2011, to send its troops into Somalia to reduce the insurgent's capability to conduct attacks in Kenya. At the same time, specialized security units supported by the Kenya Defence Force (KDF) were deployed along the border to prevent further incursions. These security forces and innocent civilians have increasingly become targeted by al Shabab. In July 2017, for example, al Shabab beheaded nine villagers in Lamu County, Kenya.

In recent years, al Shabab has lost significant territory and influence in Somalia. However, the group retains the possibility to wage asymmetric and hybrid warfare on multiple fronts. In October 2017, a bomb went off in Mogadishu, killing nearly 500 people. During the heydays of al Shabab attacks in Kenya, between 2013 and 2015, individuals travelled freely between Somalia and Kenya. The porous border between the two countries has been under extra scrutiny ever since, with politicians and practitioners calling for the construction of a border wall. In the case of the Somali-Kenya border, the rough terrain, the ethnic composition of the area, and the hostile weather have made border control very difficult and have exacerbated banditry, cattle rustling, and violence in the area.

Key Findings

The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) (2016) found that members of terrorist and transnational organized criminal groups, as well as "foreign terrorist fighters" (FTFs), target the gaps of weak border infrastructure and continue to exploit with impunity porous and uncontrolled borders.

The United Nations, through the Security Council, calls on States, in Resolution 2178 (2014), to prevent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups by effective border controls and controls on issuance of identity papers and travel documents, and through measures for preventing counterfeiting, forgery or fraudulent use of identity papers and travel documents.

Hidalgo (2015) argues that the presence of an entrenched system of nepotism, bribery, and tribal affiliation has led observers to conclude that, in practice, create a situation where the security forces decrease security more than increase it. Kenya's security services are acknowledged as the most corrupt institution in one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Hidalgo (2015) also posits that al Shabab is not the real problem, it is corruption, injustice, abuse, disillusionment, marginalization, and radicalization, which are the legacies of years of misguided policies in Kenya.

Hope (2018) found that there is a causal connection between police corruption and the continued security threat a country faces, especially in the field of terrorism. Corrupt police systems are a key factor in undermining prospects for long term peace within a society.

Sewall (2016) argues corruption creates openings for dangerous actors and also gives them a tool to infiltrate and influence the state itself, further weakening governance and expanding terrorist and criminal reach. Within corrupt societies, it is easier to forge or use fraudulent identity papers and travel documents. This undermines state effectiveness with regards to security.

Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom (2017) argue that Kenya's hard security measures derive from a social construction of Somalis as a threatening presence in the region. The Kenyan government does not guarantee equal citizen rights for all Kenyans, follow through on police reforms, and ensure accountability in state security apparatus, which are fundamental parts of a wider peacebuilding approach that could heal both state–society and citizen–society tensions and reduce the al Shabab threat.

Kumssa and Jones (2014) found that conflict in the border region of Kenya and Somalia is a major and complex security concern. In the aftermath of *Operation Linda Nchi*, thousands of Somali refugees fled to refugee camps in Kenya. In Northeastern Kenya, this has led to tensions. The causes and patterns of conflict in Dadaab camp, which houses thousands of Somali refugees, are complex and closely intertwined with ethnicity, environmental degradation, competition over scarce resources, and the influx of illicit arms from neighbouring countries, particularly Somalia.

Conclusion

The porous border between Kenya and Somalia is difficult to defend. Weak border security can be exploited by violent non-state actors. Strong cross-border cooperation and border community engagement is crucial in mitigating risks of cross-border attacks. This cooperation, and subsequent success in protecting the border, can be undermined by corruption. Both Somalia and Kenya experience high levels of corruption, which creates openings for dangerous actors and gives them a tool to infiltrate and influence the state itself. Additionally, efforts at securing the border region need to address equal citizenship rights for all Kenyans, police reforms, and accountability of security practices, which are fundamental parts of a wider peacebuilding approach that could heal regional state-society tensions.

Recommendations

The government of Kenya needs to:

1. Recognize the importance of securing borders and the need for cross-border cooperation that allows inter-agency and neighbouring border security agencies and border communities to collaborate with one another in a holistic way.

2. Enhance international border cooperation by exchanging ideas and best practices with other countries with regards to border protection.

3. Engage with and empower border communities as key contributors in border security and management.

4. Develop and establish comprehensive remote border area surveillance programs.

5. Develop and implement border-community policing programs in which the community is trained to play a crucial role in upholding border security.

6. Actively counter corruption among custom and border officials to prevent the falsification and use of fraudulent identity papers and travel documents to cross the border.

7. Comprehensively and cooperatively coordinate and integrate border service management strategies which are explicitly formulated in respective national border management strategies.

8. Guarantee equal citizenship rights for all Kenyans, follow through on police reforms, and ensure accountability in state security practices. These are fundamental parts of a wider peacebuilding approach that could heal both state–society and citizen–society tensions and reduce the al Shabab threat.

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