Three Strategies in Deterring al Shabab Terrorism in The Horn of Africa

Executive Summary

This policy brief proposes three strategies to deter terrorism in the Horn of Africa: punishment, denial, and delegitimization. Al Shabab's modus operandi will be discussed, and three theoretical strategies to effectively target the group will be introduced. Delegitimizing al Shabab's indiscriminate killing of Muslims and misuse of Islamic texts, exploiting internal leadership fissures, preventing blanket condemnations, and human rights violations in counter terrorism strategies are some of the steps counter-terrorism practitioners can take to deter al Shabab terrorism in the Horn of Africa.

Background

Some of the more serious threats to peace and security in the Horn of Africa are caused by al Shabab terrorism. Al Shabab, or "the Youth," is al Qaida's formal affiliate in the Horn of Africa. Established in the late 1990s, the Somali-based terror group seeks to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state in the country that it hopes will ultimately expand to cover the whole Horn of Africa (Counter Extremism Project [CEP], 2018).

Al Shabab has conducted major terror attacks in the Horn of Africa, including the bombing of a rugby club and sports bar in Kampala, Uganda, in 2010, killing 74 people. In Kenya, the attacks on Westgate mall in Nairobi, killing 67, and Garissa University, killing 148 people, are worth mentioning. The October 14, 2017 Mogadishu bombing, killing at least 300 people, is the largest terror incident that has occurred in the Horn of Africa. Al Shabab has not officially claimed responsibility for this attack, but it bears all the hallmarks of al Shabab.

Al Shabab's organizational structure appears flexible, with multiple cells, units, and divisions, but Moll and Livermore (2010) argue that al Shabab has a clear hierarchical leadership structure. Generally, al Shabab is headed by a supreme central commander, an 'emir', and an executive Shura council of 10 members who oversee the regional commanders. This context is important to describe a key characteristic of the group: it is not monolithic and is prone to internal fissures over strategy and tactics. Reports highlighted increased leadership conflicts over tactics, clan interests, affiliations with al Qaida, and policies toward international aid agencies (CEP, 2018).

Al Shabab has several sources of income. Domestically, the group took part in the charcoal and sugar trade, and in 2013 it started with taxation. According to the United Nations, al Shabab has earned around USD100 million per year through taxation alone (United

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Nations Security Council, 2011). Additionally, al Shabab reportedly received funding from governments of Eritrea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar, and Yemen, the majority of which have denied these claims (Felter, Masters, & Sergie, 2018).

Al Shabab's recruitment takes place primarily within Somalia and Kenya. In Somalia, recruiters offer impoverished children and young adults housing, salaries, clothing, and food (CEP, 2018). In Kenya, personal accounts reveal that recruiters use psychological manipulation to increase enrolment in the terror group. Such manipulation might be made easier by the Kenyan Government's strict counter terrorism measures and perceived victimization of Somali and Somali-Kenyan population. An example hereof is *Operation Usalama Watch* in 2013 which targeted illegal immigrants after several bombings in Eastleigh, a predominantly Somali neighborhood of Nairobi.

Al Shabab's targets are both 'soft' (not or little guarded) and 'hard' (heavily guarded). Attacks on civilian targets, as well as attacks on military convoys or bases are common. When al Shabab lost control of the Urban centres of Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Barawe, its tactics shifted to asymmetrical warfare with greater reliance on suicide bombs, hit-and-run attacks, grenade attacks, and assassinations. The former leader of al Shabab, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed in a United States drone strike in 2014, largely suppressed internal opposition,

allowing him to drive al Shabab towards more indiscriminate modes of violence similar to al Qaida (CEP, 2018). Indiscriminate forms of violence, like the October 2017 Mogadishu bombing, can cause internal fissures in al Shabab over the use of indiscriminate use of violence. Osama Bin Laden himself warned al Shabab in a letter for its poor organization, management, and brutality. From letters captured at his arrest in 2011 it is clear that Bin Laden regarded al Shabab with dismay, bordering on contempt.

Currently, al Shabab controls more territory than at any point in history even as the Somali government insists that the group faces imminent defeat and collapse (CEP, 2018). "Even in areas they hold, the central government and federated states struggle to administer territory, provide basic services, and overcome a decades-long legacy of corruption and mismanagement of state institutions," says James C. Swan, a former United States special representative for Somalia. "These weaknesses create openings that al Shabab continues to exploit."

Key findings

Colin S. Gray (2000) defines deterrence as "a condition wherein a deterree – the object of deterrent menaces – chooses not to behave in ways in which he would otherwise have chosen to behave, because he believes that the consequences would be intolerable" (p. 256). Glen Snyder (1961) divided deterrence in two categories: punishment

and denial. "Deterrence by punishment relies on threatening to harm something an adversary values (Wilner, 2011, p.14)." "Denial manipulates an adversary's behavioral calculus by preventing the desired effects of an attack (Wilner, 2011, p. 21)." Punishment can be state-based (indirect), targeting financiers, safe havens, and suppliers, or individual based (direct), targeting those engaged in acts of terrorism through targeted sanctions and killings, capture, and loss of public image. The first form of punishment tries to press active or passive state-supporters of terrorism to disallow terrorists to raise money and enjoy sanctuary on their territory (Byman, 2005/2006). The latter tries to influence individual motivations through punishment such as targeted killings. This might not only degrade an organization's coercive capability, but also reduce individual motivation to become part of a hunted organization (Byman, 2006). As Roberts (2007) suggests, the leaders of Islamist organizations are inspired by martyrdom but not their own.

Alex S. Wilner (2011) divides denial strategies into defensive denial and denial through mitigation. Defensive denial can rest on structural defences, such as the hardening of soft targets to limit the physical effects of attacks. In addition, defensive denial can rest on behavioral aspects, such as introducing uncertainty in terrorist planning (Wilner, 2011). Denial through mitigation tries to deny the consequences terrorists desire. By demonstrating that acts

do not have the desired effects, for example through adequate first aid or long-term social, political, and economic misfortune, we can highlight the futility of terrorism (Wilner, 2011). Freedman (2006) argues that denying long-term socio-political effects, doubts can arise within terrorist, questioning the effectiveness of their approach.

Next to punishment and denial, Wilner (2011) adds another category to deterrence: delegitimization. "The objective is to reduce the challenger's probability of achieving his goals by attacking the legitimacy of the beliefs that inform his behavior" (Wilner, 2011, p. 26). Lewis (2004) argues that Islamic validation for modern terrorism is based on a selective interpretation of religious texts. Seeing that the Qur'an forbids suicide and indiscriminate killing, it is difficult from a terrorist perspective to legitimize their actions in the name of Islam (Lewis, 2004). Waterman (2008) argues that leading Islamic scholars argued that al Qaida's actions were illegitimate and unholy, forcing Bin Laden to spend half his airtime defending its legitimacy.

Finally, mutually reinforcing deterrence strategies need to be adopted in order to be effective (Morgan, 2005).

Conclusion

Deterrence can be done through three mutually reinforcing strategies: punishment, denial, and delegitimization. Punishment can be state-based or individual-based and involve force, sanctions, or embargos. Denial can be strategic defensive denial, involving the hardening of soft targets and the introduction of uncertainty in terrorist planning. Denial through mitigation involves denying the consequences terrorists desire by demonstrating that their acts do not have the desired effects or that their efforts are futile and that they will never achieve their goal. Deterrence through delegitimization aims to reduce the challenger's probability of achieving his goals by attacking the legitimacy of the beliefs that inform his behavior, recruitment, and modus operandi.

Recommendations

Counter terrorism strategies should:

Punish:

- Target and sanction governments that provide funding and training for al Shabab, or allow fighters, recruiters, and funders sanctuary.

- Conduct targeted killings against top leadership positions to exploit leadership fissures.

- Impose sanctions, embargos, and travel restrictions on individual members and funders of terrorism.

- Actively punish those involved in the illegal sugar and charcoal trade, for example through destruction or apprehension of transportation vehicles on road and at sea.

Defensively deny:

- Strategically provide enhanced security for symbolic targets whose destruction might positively influence the target population for recruitment. Foreign intervention troops are met with great resentment in Somalia. When al Shabab destroys African Union Mission in

Somalia (AMISOM) bases or kills its forces, this is generally perceived in positive terms. Counter terrorism strategies should pro-actively deny these consequences.

Deny through mitigation:

- Counter recruitment by laying bare internal fissures and failures, and demonstrating that the end goal of a Greater Somalia under Sharia law will never happen.

Delegitimize:

- Counter recruitment by delegitimizing al Shabab's actions with religious texts and ideological pushback spearheaded by religious leaders, former terrorists, and other key stakeholders. See for example 'Breaking the ISIS Brand' from the International Centre

for the Study of Violent Extremism, and HORN Institute's Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) program.

- Create and/or intensify internal leadership fissures over indiscriminate killings of Muslims.

- Deprive potential recruits of the motivations related to inhumane treatment and lack of economic prospects. Prevent blanket condemnations of entire communities that are vulnerable to recruitment. In addition, prevent human rights violations in counter terrorism efforts.

- Deprive potential recruitment messages of their salience by adequately managing state institutions, preventing corruption, and providing basic social services.

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