



The Threat of Kenyan Al Shabab Recruits and Returnees: Emphasizing the Soft Approach to Managing 'Home-Grown Terror'

Executive Summary

This brief explores the question of radicalization, recruitment, and involvement of Kenyan youth in al Shabab's terror. It examines motivations behind these trends and pathways to recruitment of Kenyan youth by foreign terrorist groups. To stop home-grown terror, Kenya should roll out a comprehensive Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy which includes expanding access to education for formerly marginalized regions, establishing an effective community policing architecture, offering amnesty for Kenyans recruited into al Shabab, accompanying the amnesty with DDR programs, monitoring the movement of Kenyan youth to and from Somalia, promoting social cohesion and inter-faith relations, and mainstreaming CVE education in schools and institutions of higher learning.

Introduction

On November 28, 2002, a Mombasa hotel was bombed by suspected al Qaida operatives. It emerged, a Kenyan national, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, who was linked to al Qaida, was involved in the attack (ISS, 2014). The phenomenon of terrorist groups recruiting Kenyan youths against their homeland is not new. By 2015, 58 Kenyan university students had already joined terror groups in Somalia, Libya, and Syria according to the Interior Ministry.

In April 2018, 13 youths – mainly from coastal areas of Kilifi and Lamu – were rescued by Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) from al Shabab bases in Mdoa and Bula Haji, Somalia. The youth are part of more than 1,100 who have been rescued by KDF from the terrorist group. On January 15, 2019, al Shabab attack on DusitD2 in Nairobi involved two Kenyan attackers. It is, therefore, imperative to delve into the foundations and pathways for the Kenyan youth joining al Shabab, to help uproot home-grown terror.

Key Findings

Peer Influence: According to a study by the Institute for Security Studies, *Radicalisation in Kenya Recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council*, friends or peers are the most active role players in introducing al Shabab to peers, and eventually recruiting them.

Search for identity and belonging is a significant factor explaining why Kenyan youth join al Shabab. In fact, the sense of belonging grows by 32 per cent after joining al Shabab (ISS, 2014). Baker, Mitchell, and Tindall (2007) argue that this quest for identity pushes the vulnerable to seek causes which can be religiously or culturally justified. At this point, religious extremism preys on them.