



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.

Religion plays a big role in al Shabab's radicalization and recruitment. The group's Islamist rhetoric targets youth from Kenya's Muslim community (predominately of Somali ethnic group) focusing more on north eastern and coastal regions, and suburbs of Nairobi, particularly Eastleigh (ISS, 2014). Religious figures such as Mosque Imams and Sheikhs, contribute to 34 per cent of the radicalization and recruitment of naïve Muslim youth (ISS, 2014). However, al Shabab has intensified its recruitment of non-Somali Muslims and newly converted Muslims from Bajun (20 per cent), Kikuyu (10 per cent), Luhya (7 per cent), Luo (7 per cent), and Mijikenda (7 per cent) (ISS, 2014).

Historical marginalization, especially of north eastern and coastal regions of Kenya, contributes to radicalization and recruitment of youth from such regions. The regions are not only less developed than the rest of the country, but are also the two regions that have been traditionally Muslim.

Real or perceived marginalization among the population in these regions is exploited by al shabab extremists (Jerejian, 2017; ISS, 2014).

Lack of education also emerges as a predisposing factor to al Shabab radicalization and recruitment especially in the abovementioned marginalized regions in Kenya (ISS, 2014). The study finds that only 47 per cent of Kenyan al shabab respondents attended primary school, 45 per cent secondary school and 8 per cent tertiary or university. Of the respondents who went to colleges or universities, 12 opted for Islamic Studies, four studied electrical engineering, three studied information technology, while two studied commerce and business administration.

Motivational accounts reveal that the majority of al Shabab respondents (87 per cent) refer to religion, or the need to respond to a threat to their religious identity, as their motive for joining the organization. A further six per cent combine religion with

economic reasons, while only four per cent of al shabab respondents exclusively cite economic reasons. The four per cent of al Shabab respondents thought that by joining the group, membership would become a career. Youth unemployment in Kenya, exploited by al Shabab extremists, stands at (Villa-Vicencio et al., 2016).

Counter-terrorism measures:

The study ISS (2014) reveals that, 65 per cent of respondents identify the Kenya's government's counterterrorism measures as the single most important factor that drove respondents to join al Shabab, 65 per cent specifically referred to the government's counterterrorism strategy. They cite 'assassination of Muslim leaders' or the 'extra-judicial killing of Muslims' and harassment of Muslims as a result of the government's counterterrorism campaigns as evidenced by *Usalama* Watch operation around April 04-10, 2014, when Kenyan authorities arrested 4,005 Somali individuals.

Conclusion

The threat of radicalized Kenyan youth is real but it can be checked by bolstering 'hard' approaches with 'soft' approaches which focus on root causes and aim to reverse trends in violent extremism and terrorism. Such approaches not only take into consideration factors which predispose the youth to groups such as al Shabab, but also analyze patterns and processes of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism.

Recommendations

To achieve counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism goals, the following soft approaches should be explored by respective stakeholders:

1. The **Government of Kenya's counter-terrorism strategies** should avoid ethnic or religious profiling, and observe human rights of suspects to avoid feeding into the 'victimhood' narrative exploited by extremists to radicalize and recruit.
2. The **national and county governments** should invest equitably in socio-economic development, and increase the resource pool for the youth enterprise, to address the issue of marginalization, and extend economic opportunities to the youth.
3. The **National Police Service** should adopt a proactive community policing approach, which promotes better relations and trust between communities and the security agencies, for reliable cooperation on developments as regards radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist groups. This approach should also seek to monitor the movement of Kenyan youth, to and from Somalia, through a trusted community mechanism.
4. **Families under Nyumba Kumi Initiative** should be supported in their vigilance against radicalization within themselves and offer crucial security information, voluntarily. The initiative should be expanded and intensified across the country, especially in new al Shabab target regions such as central and western Kenya.
5. The **Government of Kenya should** consider granting amnesty to the 'reformable' sections of the Kenyan youth trapped in violent extremism in Somalia. This should be accompanied by comprehensive disengagement, de-radicalization and reintegration (DDR) programs for the returnees.
6. Since religion ranks high among predisposing factors, the **Government of Kenya, Muslim religious and political leaders, inter-faith groups, and mosque leadership**, should invest in counter-narratives and ideological push-backs to counter religious extremism. Counter-messaging campaigns can be done in cyber spaces (Digital Disruption), and in learning institutions and sessions, and mass media (Extreme Dialogue).
7. The **leadership of mosques** across the country should deny space to radical preaching and preachers.
8. **CVE education** should be mainstreamed in the syllabus to reduce vulnerability to radicalization into violent extremism, among school goers and their peers.

Sources

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