

Violent Extremism in Kenya

Risk and resilience

Key points

- Kenya continues to face violent extremism by radical militarist groups, especially in areas along the coast and in Nairobi.
- Drivers of violent extremism in Kenya are localized and depend on the socio-political landscape of the communities which serve as recruitment hubs.
- Key mechanisms determining resilience or increasing risk within communities are relationships between social groups, between government and communities, and between different generations.
- Countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes should be informed by local contexts and by the circular and comprehensive nature of how local drivers cause communities to become vulnerable or resilient to violent extremism.

Panelists

Ngala Chome, Lead Researcher

Patrick Miller, Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance

Sheikh Yusuf Maki, Imam, Nairobi Jeddah Mosque

Ramtu Abdallah, Urban Community Organizer

Abdullahi Boru, Amnesty International

Rashid Abdi, International Crisis Group
(Moderator)

Introduction

Kenya, along with the rest of the world, has struggled to craft a response to tackling violent extremism, especially since militarist groups have been quick to adjust their recruitment methods to adapt to such responses. Widespread narratives



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STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS AS THE KEY
TO REDUCING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KENYA



seem to suggest that violent extremism has international origins and is inherently a non-Kenyan problem. Yet one of al-Shabaab's leaders is from Kenya, Kenyan nationals have been recruited into the organization, and extremist attacks continue to take place throughout the country.

On 27 July 2016, the Rift Valley Forum and International Alert convened researchers and practitioners to discuss findings of a recent study examining risk factors that have either contributed to community resilience or increased their vulnerability to violent extremism in Kenya, particularly within six areas of Nairobi and Mombasa.¹

Background

Al-Shabaab has been one of the main violent extremist groups in East Africa for several years.

As early as 2010, the group's leaders harboured aspirations to establish a regional presence and recruit fighters from across countries in eastern Africa who had an understanding of their respective countries' vulnerabilities. Al-Shabaab also inspired the creation of several affiliated jihadist groups and autonomous networks, which have also organized attacks.

Patterns of recruitment have evolved in response to counterterrorist initiatives, including non-traditional methods such as recruitment and radicalization within the Kenyan prison system and extending recruitment to western Kenya and the Rift Valley. Nonetheless, extremist recruitment remains largely concentrated in Nairobi and Mombasa.

Hard military and security approaches have not successfully addressed the threat of violent extremism, and a new approach of countering violent extremism (CVE) has emerged as a response. CVE promotes preventive programming that aims to address drivers of violent extremism, which is a departure from reactive counterterrorist measures. While donors as well as the Kenyan National Counterterrorism Center have adopted CVE approaches, it remains contested. Firstly, multiple organizations have established CVE initiatives without coordinating their agendas to minimize programmatic overlap. Secondly, CVE approaches have widely attributed the root causes of extremism exclusively to structural factors, often not taking into account situational and contextual factors that appear significant in the recurrence of extremist patterns.

International Alert and the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance conducted a study that examined the social, economic and political factors affecting vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism. The study was conducted in two neighbourhoods in Nairobi (Pumwani and Eastleigh) and four neighbourhoods in Mombasa (Likoni, Old Town, Kisauni and Majengo), which have been recruitment zones for al-Shabaab for a number of years.

Ngala Chome, lead researcher on this study, concluded that contrary to prevailing narratives, people's social and political contexts are key drivers of community vulnerability and recruitment

into extremist groups. Chome and several other panellists agreed that the findings of this study can be incorporated into CVE programming.

Circularity of radicalization

Ngala Chome emphasized the complexity of violent extremism. It is not a linear process, but a circular one that can begin at any stage. Individuals who are recruited do not necessarily follow the trajectory of radicalization, followed by recruitment and taking up arms. In fact, several examples exist of individuals who join extremist groups before radicalization, and others who become radicalized after receiving training. Abdullahi Boru also mentioned that focusing on a single causality of radicalization overlooks the interventions that can be developed using a circular model.

Key resilience factors

Ngala Chome focused on three key resilience mechanisms at the local level: the nature of civic engagement (also referred to as inter-group relationships), government and community relations, and intergenerational relations. The research explored how these mechanisms interact with one other as well as with risk factors such as marginalization, youth unemployment, human rights abuses by security officials and the presence of malign influences. He observed that where communities were united in solving communal problems, there was also a cooperative civic-government relationship as well as healthy intergenerational relationships. This was noted with caution, as in areas where such resilience mechanisms existed, strong government security responses could nevertheless weaken them.

Social change

The study found that neighbourhoods vulnerable to extremist recruitment saw high levels of social change, for example following increased immigration. Many of these neighbourhoods also had increased inequality. The relatively higher wealth of newcomers was often perceived to be dispossessing locals by buying land, building houses and starting businesses. Chome maintained that, although social change did not directly result in higher levels of vulnerability and extremism,

al-Shabaab and other recruiters exploited such grievances for their benefit.

Intergenerational relations

Intergenerational relations were also impacted by social change, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods where local institutions struggle to provide for their young populations. Chome cited the Majengo Pumwani Mosque as an example. The elders of the mosque committee had made decisions regarding the use of land, which the youth perceived as them being deprived of economic opportunities by the older generation. This fueled intergenerational animosity, which eventually led to Ahmed Iman Ali taking over the mosque. Subsequent reports stated that the mosque had become recruitment grounds for al-Shabaab. Chome added that the community's inability to address the needs of its youth remained an integral factor in the neighbourhood's vulnerability.

Community ties across religions

Historically, Christian and Muslim populations have maintained positive relations in Majengo Pumwani due to ethnic ties. The Kikuyus, Luos and Luhyas of the community follow both Christian and Muslim faiths, and it is not uncommon to find both faiths being practiced within a single family. This bridge between religions, Chome explained, was a key resilience factor until it was weakened by the government's heavy-handed security response. Conversely, in Majengo, Mombasa, religious groups did not have the same level of interaction, which therefore made the community more susceptible to violence.

Sheikh Yusuf Maki, a local Imam, pointed out that a critical area that the study did not directly focus on is the role of religion. He highlighted religion's role both in building peace as well as in encouraging conflict in and between communities. Religious ideologies and values have the ability both to diffuse or escalate an already volatile situation.

The role of women

Joyce Wangari of the International Republican Institute asked a question about the recruitment

of women. Patrick Miller responded that half the focus group discussion participants were women, to which Chome added that extremist groups have increasingly focused on the recruitment of women in recent years. Abdullahi Boru emphasized the gendered effects of radicalization and referred to the rich history of women joining radical groups and being active recruiters themselves. He also noted the vulnerability of women when husbands and sons joined extremist groups. He maintained that programming must incorporate gender into their approach and acknowledge the role of women in CVE interventions.

Conclusion: Shifting narratives

Ngala Chome's research concluded that drivers for violent extremism are mostly localized, not international. Understanding local relationships—between communities and government, between groups within the community, and between younger and older generations—is therefore critical for effective and comprehensive CVE programming. Chome argued that the government, civil society organizations, the media and the general public should abandon the narrative of violent extremism as a non-Kenyan problem. Their narratives should instead reflect the increasing evidence that points to home-grown root causes and catalysts of extremism.

The report also called for a rethinking of CVE strategies. CVE programming should reflect the changing trends in how al-Shabaab is organizing itself, and respond to new recruitment patterns. Rashid Abdi reiterated that several CVE initiatives overlap and that donors should coordinate their efforts. He also advised practitioners to exercise caution in deploying CVE programmes on a local level. Such measures must be informed by local contexts and be designed to restore trust within communities, thereby strengthening social, ethnic, religious and intergenerational relationships, and fostering greater resilience to radicalization.

Ramtu Abdallah emphasized the inequality that exists between young community members and community leaders in urban settlements. He maintained that empowerment initiatives should be specifically directed towards these vulnerable youth populations in an effort to engage them in a broader dialogue on community development.

Youth leadership development, as Patrick Miller also noted, is fundamentally tied to promoting peace and human security, and has been a key

agenda item for the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance's programming.

Notes

¹ International Alert, 'We Don't Trust Anyone', September 2016. (<http://www.international-alert.org/publications/we-dont-trust-anyone>)



Credits

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