

Containment or Contagion? Countering al Shabaab Efforts to Sow Discord in Kenya

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Since the al Shabaab attacks on the Westgate Mall in 2013 and the massacre at a university in Garissa in 2015, attempts by the terrorist group to expand operations and recruitment in Kenya have been a growing source of concern. The Kenyan state has taken several measures to counter violent extremism, including giving muslim-dominated regions increasing autonomy and issuing an amnesty for Kenyan al Shabaab returnees in 2015. Even so, broad and heavy-handed police sweeps, forced disappearances and killings of radical clerics have been exploited by al Shabaab in radicalisation and recruitment efforts. This carries the risk of polarizing inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations in Kenya and could threaten the future stability of the country.

A decade after its emergence, al Shabaab is, according to prominent analyst Matthew Bryden, “on the threshold of becoming a genuinely transnational organization”. While the terrorist threat posed by al Shabaab outside Somalia has been felt in the entire region – the group has conducted terrorist attacks in Uganda, Djibouti and Ethiopia – it has been most acute in Kenya. Besides the Westgate and Garissa attacks, in which more than 200 people were killed, there have been several ruthless attacks in Kenya’s northeastern provinces, along the coast and in the capital, Nairobi. In its bid to sow discord, al Shabaab has undermined policies intended to benefit Kenya’s Muslim minority.

The terrorist threat in Kenya

In 2011 Kenya decided to intervene militarily in Somalia to aid the Somali government in fighting al Shabaab and contain the terrorism problem.¹ However, the initial effect was contagion, with increasing terrorist attacks from al Shabaab inside Kenya. In total, more than 400 people have been killed by al Shabaab in Kenya since 2011.

Islamist terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Kenya. In 1998, the American embassy in Nairobi was targeted in a devastating bombing by al Qaeda. In 2002, terrorists attempted to shoot down a passenger jet carrying Israeli tourists using surface-to-air missiles, which was followed by a suicide bombing against a hotel near Mombasa. Whilst these attacks were mainly organised from abroad, homegrown radicalisation has since gradually become a growing source of concern. In part, this development has been facilitated by the tense relations between the Kenyan

¹ Kenya maintains a military presence in Somalia but has since 2012 been incorporated in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which was established in 2007 and initially existed in parallel to the bilateral Kenyan intervention 2011-2012.



state and its Somali minority, primarily residing in Kenya’s north eastern provinces. In 1963 the North Eastern Provinces demanded secession, sparking a war with the Kenyan state which lasted until 1967. A state of emergency nevertheless remained in place until 1991, during which the security forces conducted a series of gruesome atrocities against the Muslim population, including two large-scale



massacres in 1980 and 1984. The predominantly Swahili speaking Muslims of the coastal region does not enjoy a much better relationship with the Kenyan state, and secession sentiments have been prevalent for quite some time. To date, the Muslim-dominated north east and coastal regions remain politically and economically marginalized.

The strategic logic behind the al Shabaab attacks is three-fold. Firstly, al Shabaab has repeatedly claimed that these attacks are *retribution* for Kenya's military intervention and continued participation in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).² Equally importantly, al Shabaab seeks to *sow discord* between the Somali minority and the majority population in Kenya, provoking the state to overreact, with increased radicalisation as a result. Lastly, it is believed that the growing ascendancy of Daesh on the global jihadi scene is pressuring al Shabaab to show its *continued relevance and strength*, and perhaps to copy parts of its playbook.

Underpinning the threat posed by al Shabaab in Kenya is a longstanding network, which has facilitated radicalisation and recruitment to al Shabaab and its local affiliate, *al Hijra*. Recruitment to these organisations has often been carried out surprisingly overtly. Between 2011 and 2014, an estimated 1,000 people from Kenya and Tanzania – mainly Kenyans – travelled to Somalia to receive training and battle experience with al Shabaab. Al Hijra became officially affiliated with al Shabaab in January 2012, when its leader was appointed responsible for al Shabaab operations in Kenya. The appointment was a sign of al Shabaab's growing regional aspirations, as it entailed acceptance of non-Somali members, specifically Swahili-speaking Muslims. Al Hijra's predecessor, the Muslim Youth Center, had for years been recruiting among the youth in Nairobi and elsewhere, posing as a social organisation working against the marginalisation of Muslims.

The Kenyan Counterterrorism Response

Al Shabaab's chosen method of operation in Kenya has been to enable a small group of sympathisers to carry out attacks in order to provoke state countermeasures in the hope that they will be perceived as unfairly targeting all Muslims. This is intended to facilitate further radicalisation and expanding the base from which recruitment to its cause can be made. Even though this strategy is quite evident, it

² Kenya's long-term commitment to AMISOM is currently being debated in Nairobi although it is unclear to what extent the attacks by al Shabaab has had on influencing the debate about a possible withdrawal.

nonetheless remains challenging to counteract. Particularly because the Kenyan security forces have been predictable in playing in to its adversary's narrative, hitting hard on the Muslim population.

Following the Westgate attacks, the Kenyan authorities initiated *Operation Usalama Watch*, which was allegedly riddled with human rights abuses. The round-up operation mainly targeted Somalis and Kenyan Somalis in Nairobi and Mombasa, and generated almost 4000 arrests. It has been heavily criticised for involving arbitrary arrests based on ethnicity, as well as excessive use of force. Alongside this, there have been allegations of a "dirty war" being waged against suspected al Shabaab supporters. Several suspected terrorists have been murdered in unresolved killings – including of Aboud Rogo, one of the ideological leaders of al Hijra. Disappearances are allegedly widespread. Leading human rights NGOs have accused the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit responsible for series of extrajudicial executions, disappearances and ill-treatment since 2007. However, close observers of Kenya asserts that the security forces are sometimes blamed for abuses in which it has no hand. The Chair of the Muslim Human Rights Forum in Kenya also defended the police force in 2013, arguing that inefficiencies in the criminal justice system sometimes caused a minority of police to act outside the law.

There is a common perception that it is the Somali minority, rather than suspected terrorist cells, that have been the target of law enforcement sweeps. This carries the risk of antagonising youths who already feel maltreated by the state. Predictably, al Shabaab has sought to capitalise on the alleged abuses by state agents in its propaganda. According to some analysts, *Operation Usalama Watch* has served as a "wonderful recruitment tool" for al Shabaab. Along the Kenyan coast there are individual centres of recruitment, where scores of young men have gone missing to later report having joined al Shabaab. In a survey of Kenyan al Shabaab members by the Institute of Security Studies, 87% of respondents claimed that they joined the organisation due to "religious" motives. Notably, 97% of the respondents also perceived that their religion was under threat, with 49% citing the Kenyan government as the main enemy. These numbers correspond with the narrative that Islam is under attack by the West, including by the Kenyan government, which is seen as an agent of the West. As with other Islamist terrorist groups, there also seems to be a generational divide regarding views on al Shabaab, as 71% of recruits reported joining with friends, whereas only 11% informed



their parents prior to enlisting. These findings coincide with reports of young people joining al Shabaab in small groups and informing their families only upon arrival in Somalia, knowing that they would otherwise object.

The Kenyan authorities have experienced significant difficulty to prevent terrorist recruitment and attacks while respecting human rights and avoiding alienating the Muslim minority. The government recently announced its intention of closing down Dadaab – one of the world's largest refugee camps, housing an estimated 350 000 Somali refugees, a third of whom were born in Kenya – by November 2016. Whilst Kenyan authorities are understandably frustrated by security issues they perceive as emanating from the camp, closing it abruptly could easily bolster al Shabaab, as uprooted refugees would scatter into southern Somalia or disperse to other parts of Kenya.

The Kenyan state has seemingly improved its capacity to identify assailants and stop attacks before they take place. For instance, in the beginning of May 2016, the Kenyan police chief announced that security forces had foiled a planned large-scale attack “akin to the Westgate Mall attack”. Five individuals, three of whom are medical students, are suspected of having planned to use anthrax to conduct a biological attack within Kenya. Furthermore, close observers claim that Kenyan security forces have improved their methods and level of professionalism when conducting operations. For instance, the Garissa University attack was reportedly handled with better preparation and greater restraint than the response to the Westgate Mall attacks. There are also tentative signs of improved collaboration between different police agencies as well as between police, the military and intelligence service.

The Kenyan counterterrorism response has involved a significant military component. Kenyan security forces are, since last fall, undertaking an operation to rid Boni Forest – a vast forested area in the borderlands between Kenya and Somalia – of al Shabaab fighters who are said to have made it their base. According to the Kenyan authorities, the operation has been successful, generating 36 arrests in its first nine months and forcing remaining fighters to flee into Somalia. The operation has nevertheless been surrounded with controversy, resulting in displacements and civilian casualties.

Recognising that an iron fist response *per se* will be insufficient in turning the tide, the Kenyan state has also sought complementary solutions, with varying degrees of success.

Following the Garissa attacks in 2015, the Kenyan state announced an amnesty for Kenyan al Shabaab returnees. However, many believe that mistrust of the Kenyan security services will undermine the success of this offer. To date, it is difficult to obtain data on how many ex-combatants have de facto taken advantage of the amnesty. More promising perhaps is an ongoing effort to devolve more power to Kenya's north-eastern counties of Mandera, Garissa and Wajir. This process has not been free of friction. The International Crisis Group has described it as undermined by “dominant clans monopolizing power and growing corruption”. Predictably, al Shabaab has sought to exploit these local conflicts and there have been claims of aggrieved communities colluding with al-Shabaab. On balance, however, the benefits of increasing regional autonomy has outweighed the problems it has generated. With the appointment of a local security coordinator with Somali roots, and initial signs that the revamped local police force is making headway against al Shabaab cells, there are also hopes that security will again improve. Lastly, there are a host of smaller counter violent extremism efforts³ underway in Kenya. Whilst commendable, these have to compete against a smooth and efficient media operation currently run by al Shabaab.

Containment or Contagion? – The Road Ahead

As al Shabaab has proven to be notably resilient, adapting to the presence of international forces inside Somalia, as well as maintaining and even increasing its operational tempo in southern Somalia, the threat to Kenya posed by the terrorist group will likely remain for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the pressure on Kenyan authorities may even increase. This was painfully demonstrated by the attack on the Kenyan Defence Forces in El Adde forward operating base in Jubaland in January 2016, in which more than 100 soldiers were killed. Following the attack, the Kenyan state has sought to mend its poor relationship with the Somali Marehan clan, which is strong in southern parts of Somalia and along the Kenyan border, hoping that this will generate advance warnings of imminent al Shabaab attacks in the area.

Inside Kenya, the long-term consequences of the law enforcement responses remain to be seen. Over the past year, the number and scale of terrorist attacks have decreased, while a handful of terrorist plots interrupted by law enforcement agencies has come to public knowledge. Furthermore, some of the most visible and fiery “agents of

³ Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a concept which includes efforts to prevent violent extremists from radicalizing, recruiting or inspiring groups or individuals to commit acts of violence.



radicalisation” have been removed. That said, the murder of Rogo and other radical preachers and the raid on his former mosque in Mombasa are likely to serve as lightning rods to individuals already on the verge of radicalisation. Hence, whilst the number of attacks inside Kenya has decreased over the past year, the longer-term trajectory of radicalisation in Kenya remains an open question. Recruitment may simply have become more covert, rather than ending or even decreasing.

To conclude, the expansion of al Shabaab inside Kenya is not solely a spill-over effect, nor can it be viewed only as a result of Kenyan policy on Somalia. The rise of radical Islamism and attacks in its name, is partly a domestic problem with roots in long-standing grievances among the Muslim population in Kenya. Heavy-handed tactics have seemingly been effective in destroying the radicalisation networks, but may also have exacerbated the root causes by further alienating Muslims from the Kenyan government. The coming months may be pivotal for Kenyan stability, as closing the Dadaab camp carries great risks of further radicalisation and more attacks at the hands of al Shabaab. In the longer term, exploiting the under-utilised potential for welcoming dissenting al Shabaab defectors and broadcasting their stories as a counter-narrative, may also prove more effective at defeating the terrorism threat than a purely kinetic

response could ever be. Ultimately, defeating the brand of *Salafi* terrorism that al Shabaab represents hinges more on defeating the ideas that underpin it than the individuals persuaded by them. Highlighting the harsh realities of life inside al Shabaab by broadcasting the voices of dissenting defectors could offer a humane, yet very effective, way of undercutting its recruitment in the long term. This has proven to be an effective strategy against other terrorist groups and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of dissent, conflict and maltreatment of combatants inside al Shabaab. Even so, efforts to encourage reintegration of ex-combatants from al Shabaab and to elaborate an effective counter-narrative are currently fledgling and underexploited.

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