

Explaining the differences in al-Shabaab expansion into Ethiopia and Kenya

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, Somalia has been a hotspot for terrorism, conflict and instability. In recent years, the predominant perpetrator of violence in Somalia has been the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group al-Shabaab. While the group's initial focus was primarily domestic, in the past few years it has expanded its presence into neighbouring countries. Kenya is by far the worst affected by the expansion of al-Shabaab, while Ethiopia is arguably the least affected. Considering the fact that al-Shabaab enjoys an equally antagonistic relationship with both states, this situation is surprising. This briefing outlines a few key factors for explaining the disparities in al-Shabaab presence between Kenya and Ethiopia – such as marginalization, selective state repression, ethnic- and clan dynamics and the competency of the security sector. Moreover, the briefing argues that recent changes in Ethiopian policy may increase the threat posed by jihadist groups like al-Shabaab in the future.

Kenya has experienced a large number of terrorist attacks since the 1980s, perpetrated by organisations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab. Kenya has long been considered a permissive environment for terrorist operations and sanctuary, but in the past decade the country has experienced a surge in the number of Kenyan nationals radicalised and recruited into radical Islamic movements such as al-Shabaab. While terrorist attacks in Kenya have been frequent since 1992 there has been a dramatic increase in terrorist attacks since 2011, when al-Shabaab began expanding its operations beyond the Somalia border. Notable recent attacks include the infamous Westgate Mall attack – in which 67 people were gunned down during a three-day siege at a Nairobi shopping mall – as well as the attack at Garissa University in 2015 which left almost 150 people dead. A vast majority of the attacks since 2010 have been planned and carried out by al-Shabaab and its Kenyan sympathisers.

Across Kenya's northern border lies *Ethiopia*, a country with many similarities to Kenya, but which has not experienced nearly as much religiously motivated terrorism. Reports of Ethiopian individuals being radicalised, or joining movements such as al-Shabaab, are few and far in between. In fact, 'only' 13 attacks were recorded in the period 2011-2014 and of those, four have been credibly linked to Islamic groups.¹ Al-Shabaab has thus not managed

¹ There is reason to view these numbers with some caution, as large parts of Ethiopia (i.e. Ogaden) remain practically closed to the outside world. Statistics on terrorism in Ethiopia are therefore likely to underestimate the prevalence of such attacks.

to gain a foothold in Ethiopia, despite that country arguably being its main adversary, in opposition to which it was formed.

Many of the factors that have been identified as contributors to al-Shabaab's expansion into Kenya are prevalent also in Ethiopia, making the discrepancy in al-Shabaab presence and Islamic radicalisation rather puzzling. Both countries have a long border with Somalia that is difficult to control. Moreover, they share factors such as a large Somali minority; substantial contributions to the African Union force² currently combating al-Shabaab in Somalia; prevalence of orthodox strands of Islam, including Salafism; and a relatively short distance to the Arabian Peninsula, from which many of the radical ideas influencing al-Shabaab stem. Part of the explanation may lie in the fact that the security sector in Ethiopia is far more capable than Kenya's. However, it is unlikely that a strong security sector is the only explanation, as insurgency groups such as The Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front have been able to operate within Ethiopia for more than four decades.

Explanatory factors

This section highlights some of the key factors that can likely explain al-Shabaab's successful expansion into Kenya, and its failure to do the same in Ethiopia.

² The African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM

- ***Marginalisation of Muslims***

Part of the reason for al-Shabaab's increased presence in Kenya, and its inability to do the same in Ethiopia, may lie in the relationship between the state and its Muslim inhabitants. Historically, the Muslim populations of both Kenya and Ethiopia have been marginalised, and have at times been either expressly or practically classified as second-class citizens. However, since the mid-1970s the trajectories concerning marginalisation have differed considerably. While the relative status of Ethiopian Muslims has improved in terms of religious rights and relative economic and political standing, Kenyan Muslims find themselves stuck in a status quo characterised by economic and political exclusion.

Two regime changes since the beginning of the 1970s have aided in improving the relative situation of Ethiopian Muslims. Reforms such as recognition of Islam as an official religion and its followers as official citizens have contributed to increased integration of Muslims into the Ethiopian nation. The traditionally strong hegemony of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was previously in symbiosis with the state, has also been broken. This has left room for other religious expressions in the public space. As a result of these reforms, Ethiopian Muslims now enjoy unprecedented levels of religious freedom and political integration, despite still living under an authoritarian regime. In Kenya, although formally enjoying equal rights, Muslims are not experiencing the same positive trajectory, despite the democratisation process that Kenya has undergone since the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, the relative standing of Ethiopian Muslims as compared to the majority Christian population, is showing a positive trajectory over time, while Kenyan Muslims are stagnant in a state of marginalisation. Using the past as a reference for expectations may therefore have lead Kenyan Muslims to develop more severe grievances than Ethiopian Muslims have.

Moreover, marginalisation along religious lines appears to be hitting Kenyan Muslims harder than their Ethiopian counterparts also presently. For instance, Ethiopian Muslims appear to be better off than Christians in terms of income, while Muslims in Kenya are considerably weaker than Kenyan Christians in financial terms. Furthermore, educational inequality between faith groups is greater in Kenya than in Ethiopia, and Muslims are coming off worst. Furthermore, in Kenya – where religion, ethnicity and

territory tend to coincide – there are large developmental disparities between regions mainly inhabited by Christians and the traditionally Islamic areas.

There is also a clear difference in the political standing of Muslims in Ethiopia and Kenya. Although Kenyans in absolute terms have greater opportunities to participate in the political process, Kenyan Muslims are noticeably more politically marginalised than Kenyan Christians. There are strong perceptions among Kenyan Muslims that they are under-represented in political positions and in state bureaucracy. The current Ethiopian political system, in place since the 1991, can be described as an authoritarian ethnic federalism in which power is more decentralised and the individual states have more self-determination than ever before. Even if the central state still exerts a large degree of control over local governments, the decentralisation has provided opportunities for minorities, including those of the Islamic faith, to increase their political representation. In contrast, previous regimes have been dominated by the Amhara ethnic group with its strong ties to the Orthodox Church. Political participation in present-day Ethiopia is predominantly determined by party loyalty rather than by religious and ethnic affiliation. As such, Muslims in Ethiopia are well represented at central level and in the federal states in which they have a significant presence.

Although the political and economic situation for most Muslims in Ethiopia is likely to be worse than for Kenyan Muslims in absolute terms, inequality between religious groups in Kenya is high and Muslims are clearly at a disadvantage. The past 40 years have brought significant improvements to the lives of Muslims in Ethiopia, while their Kenyan counterparts are seemingly stuck on the margins. This relative deprivation is likely to make the al-Shabaab narrative, which frames the state as anti-Islamic, more successful. This in turn increases the level of local support for the al-Shabaab cause, making Kenya a more favourable environment than Ethiopia for operations and for recruitment.

- ***State repression***

The Kenyan state's violent and indiscriminate counter-terrorism methods are claimed by many to be exceptionally counter-productive and likely to create more militants than they neutralise. An interviewee in Nairobi described

*Usalama Watch*³ – a 2014 Kenyan anti-terror operation which was reportedly ridden with human rights abuses – as “a magnificent recruitment tool for al-Shabaab”. With the Global War on Terror, indiscriminate state repression has hit Muslim areas and targeted Muslims of different ethnicities in Kenya on a regular basis. Arbitrary arrests; extrajudicial killings of Muslim clerics and suspected jihadists; torture; unlawful detentions; and physical abuse at the hands of the state, have repeatedly been reported by organisations such as Human Rights Watch. Because these forms of violent repression unequally target the Muslim population, they open the way for a narrative that frames these events as part of a calculated war on Muslims. This narrative is widely used in recruitment efforts by groups such as al-Shabaab, whose propaganda frequently urges Kenyan Muslims to deviate from the regular political process in their efforts to achieve change by instead “hitting back” with violence. State repression framed in this way may create an environment where individual Muslims experience a sense of urgency, prompting them to join in the jihadist struggle as a way to protect themselves from the pointed sticks of the Kenyan state.

Although levels of state repression in general may be higher in Ethiopia, there is seemingly less discrimination involved regarding who is targeted. That is, the level of one-sided violence perpetrated by the Kenyan state affects Muslims more than other Kenyans, while Ethiopian state repression targets challengers and critics of the regime, regardless of religious affiliation. This has been apparent during the widespread protests which have been going on in Ethiopia since late 2015, where the heavy-handed tactics used by the security forces have targeted Christians and Muslims alike. Potential narratives that attempt to frame the repression as part of a Christian war on Islam are therefore less fruitful. Furthermore, as Ethiopia is more decentralised in terms of the security sector, the agents of repression – such as local and regional security forces – are religiously diverse, which also serves to muffle extremist narratives. Unlike Ethiopia, Kenya’s ethnic groups are rather religiously homogeneous. Islamic ethnic groups seem to be among the most marginalised and repressed. Religious framing of grievances can therefore gain more support in Kenya than in Ethiopia.

³ For further reading on *Usalama Watch* and al-Shabaab operations in Kenya, see: Jonsson and Torbjörnsson. 2016. *Containment or Contagion? Countering al-Shabaab Efforts to Sow Discord in Kenya*. FOI Memo 5742, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

• *Clan, ethnicity and religion*

Clan dynamics may also play a role as a determinant of successful al-Shabaab expansion into predominantly Muslim areas in neighbouring countries. For instance, the tense relationship between the Kenyan state and the Somali Marehan clan has most likely enabled al-Shabaab to operate in the borderlands between Kenya and Somalia. If the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) were viewed in a more favourable light among the dominant clans in north-eastern Kenya and southern Somalia, the risk of surprise attacks on the KDF or police would probably decrease considerably. Al-Shabaab can scarcely operate in large numbers without the knowledge of the local clans. Furthermore, one expert on Ethiopia claims that the relationship between al-Shabaab and the Ogaden clan in Ethiopia is crucial for the jihadi group’s inability to recruit from, and operate in, the Somali areas of Ethiopia. Thus, a strained rapport between those two actors may be part of the reason why al-Shabaab has been unable to gain supporters in eastern Ethiopia.

Convergence of ethnicity and religious beliefs may strengthen ties within a community, but also creates more pronounced in-groups and out-groups, which in turn may increase the risk and severity of conflict if competitive elements are added. Moreover, it seemingly has a more practical effect, since ethnicity in many places is closely tied to territory. This union between ethnicity and space means that ethnicities which are religiously plural may also be more likely to be religiously intermixed in space. In Ethiopia, ethnicity does not determine religion to the same extent as it does in Kenya. For instance, the largest Ethiopian ethnic group – the Oromo – are comprised of almost equal proportions of Muslims and Christians. This means that discrimination against the Oromo and underdevelopment of the Oromo heartland is unlikely to cause religiously framed grievances. In Kenya – where religion, ethnicity and space are closely linked – religious anti-state narratives may be more effective.

Predictions for the Future

In Kenya, it is apparent that the state strategies employed to combat radicalisation and terrorism are missing their targets. The favouring of hard methods, combined with the inefficiency, incompetency and brutality of the country’s security forces, are powerful drivers of recruitment for al-Shabaab. In order to combat the root causes of Kenyans joining the jihadi struggle and facilitating a substantial



al-Shabaab presence, trust must be built between the state and its Muslim citizens.

Kenya is making an effort to slow down and ultimately reverse the negative trend. Alongside harsh counter-terrorism methods, the state has taken a few, albeit small, steps to develop a softer repertoire of countering violent extremism. This includes (reportedly unsuccessful) amnesties for al-Shabaab fighters and a range of local initiatives. Moreover, devolution of power to the counties began in 2010, which leaves more responsibility for local development and policing in the hands of the county governors. Although it is too early to fully evaluate the effects of the devolution, it clearly has the potential to decrease tensions between the elites in Nairobi and Kenyan Muslims. Even if much work remains, these initiatives indicate that Kenyan policy towards its jihadi problem may be changing in a positive way.

As outlined above, Islamic extremists have likely had limited success in Ethiopia because Ethiopian Muslims are not equally singled out by state repression and discrimination and because grievances are more likely to be framed as ethnic. However, in the past few years, there have been troubling signs that this may be in the process of changing. The Ethiopian state is exerting an increasing amount of power over central Islamic organisations and schools, and conservative Islamic congregations are under an increasing level of surveillance. So far, these policies have created a limited amount of resentment, as the government is simultaneously favouring the forms of Islam that it considers moderate. This may possibly serve as a 'divide and rule' strategy that drives a wedge between different Muslim communities, increasing the risk of intra-religious conflict. Unless this shift in state-Muslim relations is reversed, there is a risk that Ethiopia may meet a similar fate as its southern neighbour.

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