RADICALISATION
AND TERRORIST RECRUITMENT
AMONG KENYA'S YOUTH

The Nordic Africa Institute

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With little chance of getting any education or jobs, young slum dwellers in Kenya are easy prey for terrorist recruiters from al-Shabaab and ISIS. Politicians must therefore address the social development of poor neighbourhoods and specifically target the youth. Equally important in order to prevent further radicalisation, this policy note argues, is the fight against corruption.

by Sirkku Hellsten

The radicalisation of youths and their recruitment for violent and illegal activities is not new to Kenya. Criminal gangs, ethnic sects and local militias have been undertaking such recruitment for years. Politicians have used the youth, particularly during elections, to buy votes; intimidate the opposition; create disturbances, fear, and instability; and even to mount violent attacks on opponents and their supporters. In the disputed 2007 elections, such practices led to widespread violence across the country. However, in recent years, youth radicalisation has become even more threatening on account of the increased terrorist activities in the region.

No more downplaying the threat
Terrorism in Kenya has resulted in not only the loss of lives, personal suffering and pain, but also in growing instability and a heightened sense of insecurity. The latter has harmed the country's economy, particularly the tourism sector, and there is widespread doubt about the government's will and ability to deal with the situation. The country's biggest and best-known international hotels are now so heavily guarded and protected that entering them feels more like visiting a prison. Security measures have also increased in public buildings, universities and shopping malls. Newly opened Westgate Mall, which experienced a terror attack in 2013, has entry checks comparable to those at international airports.

Earlier, the government downplayed the threat within the country's borders, and claimed Kenya to be an innocent victim of the (Somali) terrorist war against the West. However, now Al-Shabaab has stated that following Kenyan military involvement in Somalia October 2011, it will target all those who voted for the government that sent in the troops. Moreover, some recent attacks were planned and executed by young Kenyan nationals. Thus, government can no longer claim that terrorist attacks in Kenya are unrelated to the country's policies, foreign and domestic.

Various reasons for joining
The major refugee camps in Kenya, such as Dadaab or Kakuma, have traditionally been recruiting grounds for terrorists. Now recruitment is much more widespread, due to the increasing criminal and terrorist activities in the region. Civil society organisations, among others, are concerned that youths are being openly targeted by extremist organisations and are very susceptible to their offers. Regardless of their religious affiliation or ethnic background, boys and young men living in the slums are often approached by al-Shabaab or ISIS recruiters. Youngsters with little hope of education and good jobs are particularly easy prey. Similarly, in the country's border regions, recruitment is reportedly active. However, recruits have also included girls, children from wealthy families and university students, as was the case in the Garissa terror incident of 2015.

Radicalisation is a complex phenomenon and studies show that the reasons for joining extremist organisations vary between social groups. Some youths living in poor neighbourhoods are attracted by the promise of money and material reward, others believe in the jihadist ideology, some have lost faith in dysfunctional politics, others look for adventure and for a clear set of

rules and norms to follow, and yet others join because of peer – even family – pressure. The organisations are very adept at targeting these different youth groups with different promises and messages. Terrorist organisations have also been successful in recruiting youths in the West and elsewhere. However, this task is easier in places where poverty, inequality, ethnic and religious tension, political marginalisation and insecurity already prevail.

Kenya: security, corruption and terrorism

According to observers familiar with the situation, nowadays recruitment is open. Sometimes police and security staff involvement in, or connivance at, such activities is alleged, usually in return for bribes and other 'benefits.' Similarly, Kenyan immigration officials at border posts are said to illegally admit foreigners from Somalia, Ethiopia and elsewhere in return for small fees. The fact that there is a direct link between insecurity and corruption has been publicly acknowledged as the greatest obstacle in the fight against terrorism. It has been reported that crooked officials have admitted more than 100,000 foreigners into the country, many of them criminals, and some found with highly explosive bomb-making material even after passing through several police roadblocks.

The Kenyan military has accused the police and

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immigration service of corruption, but there have also been allegations that soldiers are involved in the wide-scale illegal sugar and charcoal business, allegedly even collaborating with Somali militants and thus providing Al-Shabaab with revenue.

Kenya, seen as a key ally in the War on Terror by the US and UK, has received international help, especially after the Westgate attack. As mentioned, security has been beefed up, often inconveniencing the innocent, but the Kenyan military and police often fail to work together effectively, and there have been lapses in the use of intelligence to prevent attacks.

AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia) prepares to advance on a town in Somalia held by the al-Qaeda affiliated group al-Shabaab. The Kenyan military involvement in Somalia began October 2011. Al-Shabaab has stated that they will target all those who voted for the Kenyan government that sent troops to Somalia.

Terror attacks in Kenya | From 1998 until today

THE WAVE OF TERROR attacks could be said to have started with the twin bombings of the United States Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in AUGUST 1998. After that Kenya has been regularly by terror acts: SEPTEMBER 2013 Al-Shabaab militants struck the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67 people; JUNE 2014 at least 48 people died after Islamist militants attacked hotels and a police station in Mpeketoni on the coast, near the island resort of Lamu. In NOVEMBER 2014 Al-Shabaab targeted a bus full of teachers in Mandera County, executing 28 non-Muslims. In DECEMBER 2014 the same terror group killed 36 non-Muslim quarry workers near the north Kenyan town of Mandera. In APRIL 2015 the organization carried out a massacre at Garissa University College in north-east Kenya, killing 148 people, most of them young Christian students. There have been many other terror attacks in Kenya during the recent years but all have not reached the international news headlines.

One of the most recent attack on civilians happened in DECEMBER 2015. It was against a bus on its way from Nairobi to Mandera. In JANUARY 2016 there was an assault on Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) military base at El Adde, in Somalia, causing more than 60 deaths. It appears that in the recent attacks also ISIS has been involved in one way or another. There is a ruthless competition on terror and recruitment between Al-Shabaab and ISIS. This makes the security situation even more volatile.

Insecurity can hardly be averted when national security institutions are deeply implicated in corruption. There is no end in sight for the trafficking taking place in drugs, weapons, animal trophies, ivory and persons, including terrorists. On the other hand, the more coercive the security measures taken against citizens are, the more exclusion and extremism spread.

From anti-terrorism to state terrorism?

Finding the balance between national security and combating terrorism is difficult even in mature democracies. In countries with less clearly entrenched governance systems, it is a serious challenge. In Kenya, security agents and human rights organisations such as the Kenya National Commission of Human Rights are at loggerheads over the measures taken to improve state security. Critics claim that citizens' rights and the civil space are under assault and that the government is mistaken in 'fighting terror with terror.' Human rights organisations also accuse the government and security forces of random arrests, disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings of young Muslim men, especially in the northern and coastal parts where the ethnic Somali and Muslim population is greatest.
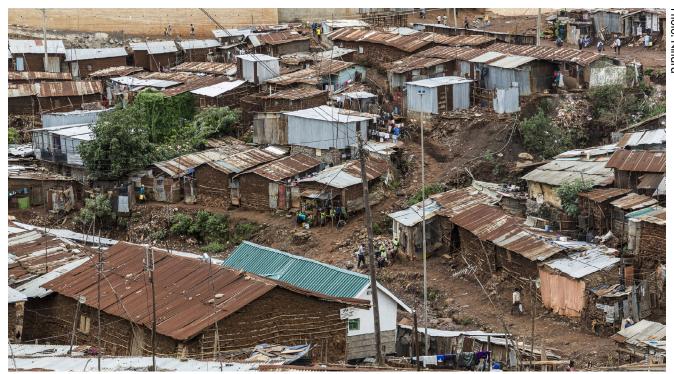
Security forces, for their part, accuse the human rights organisations of 'protecting terror suspects and terrorists' in the country. For human rights advocates and civil society organisations this represents a dangerous return to the days of 'state terrorism' when security agents were used to get rid of the political opposition and to intimidate those who challenged government policies.

Fuels tension and threatens security

In an ethnically divided country like Kenya, where there has been discrimination against Muslims, Arabs and ethnic Somalis, issues of ethnicity, religion, access to power, lack of social justice and protection as well as violation of human rights easily become entangled in a manner that fuels tensions and threatens security. At the same time, the failure to build a united nation with shared values and goals; competition for power; impunity and corruption; lack of participation by marginalised groups; unequal distribution of resources and land add to people's discontent. This social fragmentation and constant aggressive competition for power between ethnic communities is causing people, particularly youth, to view ruthless rivalry as a legitimate tool. They are also seeking a clear, alternative set of normative principles. In this environment, it is easy to turn individuals against their fellow compatriots, as the increasingly 'successful' recruitment of Kenyans by terrorist organisations sadly shows.

Attacks by al-Shabaab, especially those which target non-Muslims, have already increased religious tensions in Kenya. Security initiatives in Muslim- and Somali-

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dominated areas such as Eastleigh, Nairobi, and coastal areas have led to more prejudice against ethnic Somalis and Muslims, whether they be Kenyan citizens or refugees or migrants. The more alienated these groups feel in Kenya, the greater the likelihood that some of their members will sympathise with extremist organisations. The situation has become even more confused as 'terrorism' has become a political football, with blame for its existence being traded between government and opposition. Finally, despite the strong security measures taken, the state's inability to coordinate its security forces and share intelligence among them further hampers Kenya in its fight against terrorism.

First ISIS attack in Kenya

Meanwhile, ISIS has come on the scene. Police Chief Boinett told a press conference in December 2015 that al-Shabaab and ISIS are competing to spread the international jihadist agenda and, in the long run, the entry of the well-financed and brutal ISIS into the region could herald more and better-coordinated attacks in Kenya. The most recent incident involving civilians was in December 2015, when a bus en route from Nairobi to Mandera, northeastern Kenya, was attacked. In this case, the incident made news headlines because it failed: the Muslims on board protected their Christian fellow passengers. After the attack, Boinnet attributed it to al-Shabaab militants who had defected to ISIS.

This was the first public admission in Kenya that ISIS is active in the country.

Youth of all social groups are vulnerable

As long as Kenyan domestic politics remain divisive, corruption prevails and inequality and lack of political voice continue, the youth of all ethnic groups will be vulnerable and susceptible to believing the promises made by recruiters. The youth have learned not to believe the promises made by politicians to their supporters during the elections, and promptly ignored thereafter.

Thus, we may only have seen the beginning of terror acts in Kenya, unless the actors find ways to cooperate in order to prevent the threats.

State terrorism plays into the hands of extremists. Anti-terrorist measures must not overrule human and citizens' rights.

Five recommendations to policy-makers

1 Corruption breeds insecurity

More serious anti-corruption efforts are needed across the board. As long as corruption remains rampant, there will be no end to the insecurity in the country and wider region. The international community should focus more seriously on regional anti-corruption efforts and move from rhetoric to serious action. Training in anti-corruption and good governance, collaborative efforts, zero-tolerance for corruption by the international community and business, and strengthening institutional and professional ethics and the citizens' oversight role are needed. The focus needs to be not just on legislative or institutional structures but also on comprehensive change to the culture of impunity and to the attitudes of the youth, the next generation of leaders.

2 Equal society is the best prevention

There is a need to change the focus from a formal, aggressive and militarised 'war against terror' to prevention and to enhancing political and economic inclusion. Particular attention should be paid to increased social justice and inclusion, with equal chances for education and employment. Although it is easier said than done, there is an urgent need to build a more unified national political culture and to work across ethnic divisions on shared interests. Development partners can help by supporting wider participation, the work of civil society and the capacity of political parties. This means promotion of a working multiparty democracy that offers people real political alternatives, not just a multiplicity of political parties. Kenyan politics lack content, and the parties any serious political agenda, values and ideals. Without these alternatives, extremist ideologies will easily find supporters. More attention should also be paid to the role of religion – and related conflicts – in the region.

3 Work across political party boundaries

Kenyan politicians have to admit the level and extent of the threat, and start working together across political parties and alliances, instead of blaming each other and deepening ethnic divisions in the country. This practice only discourages political participation by ordinary citizens and weakens democracy. While al-Shabaab 'fights for Somalia' in order to make it to an Islamic theocratic state, many Kenyan youths of different ethnic backgrounds are joining its ranks. Now there is also ISIS to offer a more global jihadist agenda. The vulnerability of the youth to recruitment is a clear sign that people are discontent with the governance of the country and feel powerless to bring about change.

4 Better opportunities for the youth

Much more attention has to be paid to the youth by increasing opportunities for education, employment and political participation. The youth need to be able to engage productively in a politics that builds unity, is based on common values and holds out the real prospect of change by democratic means if the extremist ideologies are to be starved of new recruits. Youth leadership exchange programmes should be promoted by international partners as well as regionally. Self-evidently more support is needed for the organisations working in the slums and informal settlements on education, youth activities, vocational training as well employment.

5 Avoid state terrorism

State terrorism is no better that other terrorism. Anti-terrorist security measures need to be balanced by equal protection of human and citizens' rights. Too strong security measures by the state simply plays into the hands of extremists by radicalising the youth and targeted populations.

FURTHER READING

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NAI POLICY NOTES is a series of short briefs on policy issues relevant to Africa today, intended for policy and decision makers in aid agencies, ministries of foreign affairs, development organisations, NGOs and the media. They aim to inform public debate and to generate input into the sphere of policymaking.

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