

Policy Brief No. 10. April 2018

Countering violent extremism: reflections from new research

Rahma Ramadhan

About This Brief

This Policy Brief draws from insights and perspectives of practitioners and researchers who have contributed to a new book, *Confronting Violent Extremism in Kenya: Debates, Ideas and Challenges*, recently published by CHRIPS. It highlights key issues emerging from the book and offers a set of recommendations for policy makers and scholars.

Countering violent extremism in Kenya: an overview

State responses to terrorist attacks and what is also referred to as violent extremism (VE) speak to the very complexity of the challenge that terrorism poses. Pathways leading to violent extremism are complex and multiple and the engagement in terror groups is not straightforward. Terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab exploit perceived historical, social and political grievances and draw on extreme interpretations of Islam to carefully craft propaganda. The reasons young people have cited behind their recruitment into terrorist groups like

Al-Shabaab include: marginalization, government repression and human rights violations in Coast and Northern Kenya, the presence of Kenyan military in Somalia; promises of employment opportunities by Al-Shabaab and the sense of belonging, social and peer support by the group amongst other reasons.

In order to deal with the terrorism problem, state measures have ranged from: legislative and policy, implementing socio-economic programmes to address perceived structural causes of violent extremism as well as counter terrorism measures using the military and intelligence. In all these, the question persists as to the extent to which these counter terrorism (CT) and prevention measures are consistent with national and international protections of human rights.

Regional nature of violent extremism

Prior to the formation of Al-Shabaab there was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine movement whose legacy may be said to have been reproduced in subsequent terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, Somalia-based Al-Harakat and Al-Ittihad as well as Al-Shabaab. The principles of these groups revolve around an eclectic blend of nationalist, religious and some marxist critiques of domestic and international politics. The Saudi Arabian centered strain of Islam referred to as Wahhabism which begun spreading into Kenya from the 1980s and more intensely in the 1990s has provided some Islamic ideologies in the country with the frameworks for radicalizing people.

Al-Shabaab draws from political and historical grievances on the failure of integration marginalization of Somalis and Muslims from the coastal and northeastern parts of Kenya to propagate their extremist ideologies through the language of religion and idioms of global Islamic resistance. Kenya's Military presence in Somalia is also a handy propaganda fodder for extremists in both countries who use it for recruitment narratives. Whereas Al-Shabaab lacks the capabilities of their affiliate group Al-Qaeda, however the group is likely to continue to pose serious political and security threats to the future of the region unless local grievances are adequately addressed. This has consequently made terrorism to be a regional security question and a foreign policy priority for governments in the East and Horn of Africa.

Legal and judicial responses to violent extremism

Legal responses are one of the major form of government responses in countering terrorism in the country. Proliferation of counter terrorism legislation since

2011 indicates a shift from reliance on the Penal Code to prosecute violent extremism and terrorism related crimes to enactment of Prevention of Terrorism Act, specifically focused on crimes related to violent acts driven by extremist ideologies.

In spite of the many allegations and cases of serious violations of human rights and incursions into the rule of law in responding to terrorism, the Kenyan state continues to be restrained in some cases by the constitution and also by public pressure. Jurisprudence from the courts have presented an array of opinions particularly in matters of bail and bond in relation to crimes of terror; habeas corpus applications and extradition of foreign suspects.

That restraining power of the law and public pressure has led to a continued revision in criminal law measures as well as policy approaches. In other words, the state counter-terrorism measures have avoided being lawless, even when they encroach into the rule of law.

The efficacy of the existing legal framework can be put to question in the protection of human rights, limits of counter terrorism measures as demarcated by the courts and the limits of security laws as a tool for preventing violent extremism and counter terrorism measures vis a vis the rule of law.

Women and violent extremism

Counter violent extremism measures have been largely focused on the culpability and vulnerability of the youth demographic particularly young men. Men have been said to be the most likely recruiters and perpetrators of acts of terror while women are viewed as victims. The composition of religious leaders, security actors, as well as non-state actors involved in both CT and CVE efforts are preponderantly male. However research now shows that women have taken an active role and they are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence. A case in point being the bombing of a police station in Mombasa by suspected female al-Shabaab members in 2016. Research also indicates there is an increase in women from the coastal and northern parts of Kenya who are actively recruiting people into extremist organisations by the use of popular online platforms. National and local strategies on countering violent extremism need to acknowledge the involvement of women in acts of terror as well as the gendered aspect of violent extremism and its impact on CT and CVE.

Online recruitment

Terrorist organisations have increasingly seized upon the opportunity afforded by the rapid emergence of new internet technologies as an avenue for recruiting individuals and mass dissemination of their ideologies. Online technologies are not the cause but rather serve as facilitators of radicalization.

Extremist organisations have carefully and strategically tailored their online strategies of recruitment so as to particularly lure young people through job offers and promises of academic scholarship opportunities. Technology users in search of religious information are likely to also find themselves lured by recruiters online. As is the trend with terrorist groups, the lure of romance and the motivation of revenge are also drivers with regard to the recruitment of women.

The online frontier in terms of recruitment may seem like the problem however political and socio-economic issues which are manifested offline are the real drivers to extremism.

Rehabilitation of returnees and extremists

According to the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, one of the priority areas of focus is 'Rehabilitation and Returnees' and it is further stated that the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) is mandated to coordinate the provisions of "counseling, critical reasoning tools and knowledge to shift their mind-sets and enable them to be peaceful and law-abiding citizens." Despite the mention of rehabilitation and returnees in the National Strategy and National Action Plan there is no clarity on who exactly is categorized as a "returnee" or "extremist" not just by the state but also the community. In addition, there is lack of framework expounding on the procedure of handling those that the state has labeled as "terrorists" and "violent extremists" especially after they have returned and what exactly the process of rehabilitation encompasses, the manners in which it is to be conducted and the entities, if any, that will work alongside NCTC. Policy ambiguity and deficiency has led to uncertainty among returnees as to whether this will proliferate their profiling by security actors once they leave Al Shabaab.

Recommendations

While studies in the book provide new knowledge, data and perspectives on the nature, magnitude and dimensions of violent extremism in Kenya, they also highlight policy and knowledge gaps which are summarized below.

1. Incompleteness of research and data

There is still limited knowledge on violent extremism and ways to counter it in Kenya and the region despite scholarly and policy demand for authoritative research and evidence for the same. Many gaps still remain in understanding of trends, nature and patterns of recruitment, ideological and religious drivers and motivations and on policy effectiveness.

There is still much more to be done by researchers and those working on policy to ensure that policy interventions and discourses are informed and guided by up to date data and knowledge.

2. Terrorism is not just a national problem but one that is implicated in the regional politics and conflicts as well as globalist ideologies of politicized Islamic teachings. That understanding is important in reviewing the fortunes and implications of Kenya's military engagement in Somalia as well as policies on how to rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-militants and returnees from Al Shabaab.
3. There is need to recognize that ideology is just one of the explanations for why young people join violent extremist movements and learn to

live with complexity of the challenge that violent extremism poses. There are no simple explanations on why young people join these groups. Each of the particular situations require their own contextual understanding.

That is not to say there no broad insights but rather to underscore the need for nuanced and localized interventions.

4. Gaps and shortcomings in engendering the scholarly and policy discourse on terrorism and violent extremism. There is now increased interest in the role and place of women in violent extremist movements globally and in Kenya.

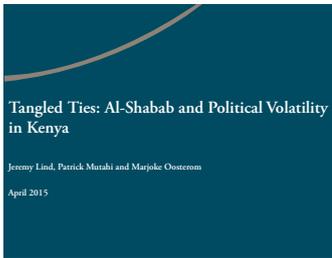
However, not enough is known with regard to how women get recruited into groups such as Al Shabaab and their roles in deterring recruitment into such groups.

5. There is need to critically study and critique the countering violent extremism discourse and programmes to ensure that they do not further stigmatize and penalize young people and whole communities. In addition, there is need to also ensure that this critique does not gloss over the uncomfortable and difficult issues underlying problem of terrorism.

Acknowledgements

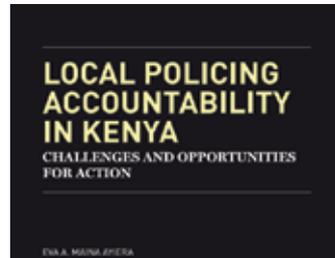
Rahma Ramadhan is a junior research fellow at the Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies. Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA) provided funding support for production of this policy brief. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of OSIEA

PUBLICATIONS



Tangled Ties: Al-Shabaab and Political Volatility in Kenya (CHRIPS & IDS Sussex, 2015).

This study argues Al-Shabaab remains one of the greatest threats to regional stability and security. Worsening violent insecurity in Kenya suggests that the more important impact of the group has been to simply unmask the country's deep, structural divisions.



Local Policing Accountability in Kenya: Challenges and Opportunities for Action (CHRIPS, 2015).

This study examines police accountability structures and needs at the local community level, where the scrutiny of oversight institutions, civil society organizations and the media is often low. It argues that the lack of confidence in the police as the key hindrances to local policing accountability.



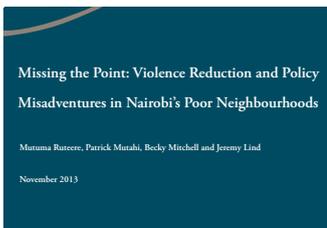
Effectiveness of Community-Led Security Mechanisms in Urban Eastern Africa: A Research Agenda (CHRIPS, 2015).

This study discusses the methodology for CHRIPS' three-year research project on community-led security initiatives in low income urban neighbourhoods in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.



Securing the Counties: Options for Security after Devolution in Kenya (CHRIPS, 2014).

This study argues that counties are central not only to development but also the implementation of security solutions. Considerable opportunities and capacities for improving security exist at the county level.



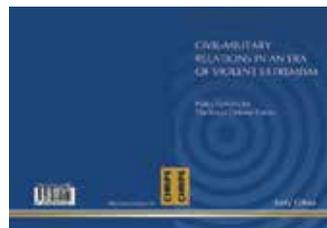
Missing the Point: Violence Reduction and Policy Misadventures in Nairobi's Poor Neighbourhoods (CHRIPS & IDS Sussex, 2014).

The study finds that the failure of the state to provide for basic needs in health, education and social care, as well as a lack of effective policing, has created an opening that criminal organizations and gangs have exploited.



Building a National Intelligence Service for a Democratic Society: Policy Options for Strengthening Accountability and Oversight (CHRIPS, 2016).

This study is a critical examination of the effectiveness of the accountability of the intelligence services in Kenya. In tandem with the central tenet of the constitution that all national security organs remain subordinate to civilian authority, the study argues that democratic accountability would ensure proper impetus for reforming the National Intelligence Services.



Civil-Military Relations in an Era of Violent Extremism: Policy Options for The Kenya Defence Forces (CHRIPS, 2016).

This study examines the civilian oversight structures over the Kenya Defence forces, in the context of military engagement in countering terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. The study argues that the threat of terrorism requires a multi-pronged approach in developing an effective national security strategy.



Where is the Money? Donor Funding for Conflict and Violence Prevention in Eastern Africa (CHRIPS, 2017)

This study demonstrates that donors have a variety of security and commercial interests in the region, and these are not always neatly separable from conflict and security priorities

About CHRIPS

The Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies (CHRIPS) is an independent think tank, research and policy development centre. CHRIPS invests in the generation and dissemination of knowledge that

facilitates the development of innovative and effective policy solutions to the pertinent security challenges in Africa. Through its work, CHRIPS seeks to advance rights and social justice.

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Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies

Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies | P.O Box 23748-00100, GPO Nairobi, Kenya

Tel: + 254 20 527 0577 | Email: info@chrips.or.ke | Web: www.chrips.or.ke



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