

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING RELIGIOUS AND VIOLENT EXTRIMISM IN KENYA

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### **Abstract**

*Religious extremism has been an issue of concern to global peace in the recent past. Various countries have set up strategies to deal with this issue .Kenya on its part has been grappling with religious and violent extremism through establishment of a number of measures to curb terrorism. Despite the various efforts, religious extremism has been an elusive issue even with massive investment in dealing with this vice*

### **Introduction**

There have been attempts by various scholars to define the meaning of radicalization; terrorism or violent extremism. However, there is no universally accepted definition for these terms (Fink, 2014). This is despite the disparate extensive studies that have been conducted in this field a fact that implicitly, points to a conflict of both conventional and non conventional strategies that are employed to curb religious and violent extremism globally. Violent Extremism ‘is sometimes used inaccurately as a semantic alternative to the term \_terrorism’, which also lacks a standard definition. Defining Violent extremism ‘is context specific often based on subjective views with divergent views on whether acts of violence undertaken without an ideological backing and/or inspiration can be qualified as violent extremism, whether such acts of violence are only perpetrated by non-state actors and the question of who between the perceived victim and the

perpetrator should label an act of violence as violent extremism ‘amongst other issues (Habiba, 2018).

According to Habiba (2018), the evolving and growing threat of violent extremist groups in the East and Horn of African region has seen the emergence of a wide range of security, political and development responses to the threats posed, under the banner of Countering Violent Extremism – A soft approach version of Counter-Terrorism. The importance and relevance of Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) at this time cannot be overstressed as violent extremism poses a great threat to both human and national security, creating a complex web of security concerns in addition to the already existing‘ runaway crimes such as robbery, criminal gangs amongst others which tend to be mutually reinforcing.

The appealing factor and expectation of CVE is that, if correctly led by the government and/or civil societies, its net effect is to build confidence with the local grassroots communities they so target in such interventions (Buchanan-Clarke, 2016). Of note however, a purview of the available literature on CVE in Kenya reveals a widespread stance of distrust and resentment towards the government, operating through the security forces. It remains essential to improve and strengthen the relationship between the government and the grassroots communities if the effectiveness of the CVE interventions and/or initiatives are to be felt/actualized (Al Jazeera, 2011).

The general agreement‘ is that the CVE interventions and efforts in Kenya have taken a downhill and focused target of the Kenyan Muslims, which in effect, has only led to further unintended consequences backtracking the CVE endeavors in the country (Buchanan-Clarke 2016). The main VE threat to Kenya largely remains the Somali-based

Al-Shabaab (Habiba, 2018), which at home level has effectively undermined the operational capacity and capability of the Somali Federal Government to control and govern Somalia (Buzan & Waeber 2008). It is also the case that Al-Shabaab has a history of executing extremely bold military attacks against government and armed forces personnel (Cilliers, 2015). This had led the Kenya government to execute border patrol and migration screening when Operational Linda Nchi was seen as not sufficient enough, an approach.

However, Al-Shabaab is not the only threat Kenya is facing on violent extremism (Botha, 2015). Separatist organization Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), has advocated for the city of Mombasa's secession from Kenya. Police have accused the group of planning various attacks in the coast region. Tragic events in Nairobi, Mombasa, Mpeketoni, Mandera, Garissa, and beyond over the past twenty years have highlighted that it is very difficult to stop radicalized individuals armed with resources and determination from carrying out acts of violence against civilian and government targets (Botha, 2015).

The diverse pathways that individuals may follow to join violent extremist organizations in Kenya pose considerable challenges to the design and implementation of CVE programming. Additional research on locally specific recruitment methods would serve to inform the design and implementation of more nuanced CVE initiatives, which may currently overemphasize interventions to address structural push factors while failing to address some of the more practical reasons why individuals may join Al-Shabaab or other armed groups. This analytical study aims to break down the approach the government agencies in Kenya use to tackle CVE and help these agencies employ the best approaches, as well as serve as voice for communities most affected by violent extremism.

In the past, counterterrorism officials and experts showed some awareness of the importance of measures to prevent terrorism, and they deployed a limited range of strategies and tactics in this regard. An example is the process of police reform and the shift to more community-oriented approaches in Kenya. Analysts previously defined —counterterrorism broadly to include —psychological, communicational and educational initiatives but generally argued that governments paid little attention to addressing terrorist propaganda and to the communicative aspects of counterterrorism itself. Importantly over this period of 2015-2017, CVE has gone from a rhetorical commitment to an increasingly prominent subfield of counterterrorism policy and practice (Frazer, 2015).

## **STRATEGIES TO COUNTER RELIGIOUS EXTRIMISM**

### **EMPLOYING TOP-DOWN APPROACH**

The ‘\_Top-Down’ approach is mainly implemented by the government and/or international/intergovernmental bodies through the relevant agencies as a public diplomacy tool cushioning on the traditional counter-terrorism tools and methods. The approach leans more on policy formulation, review and improvement, and forming of strategic partnerships to make more effective the government(s)’s position and performance on CVE. This approach is therefore less popular with the communities at grassroots level and often viewed as —ceremonial, —out-of-touch with reality on the ground and —hypocritical of trying to solve —problems they are guilty of creating themselves. Civil society organizations trying to find space and engage with this approach are often handled with suspicion and a ‘\_gate-keeping mentality’ hence do not find enough room to effectively perform (Finn, 2016).

This approach has often been criticized for being a too selective boardroom engagement on a community level problem, hence out of sync with the targeted context(s). This is often in line with the criticisms leveled against the government(s) on their counterterrorism methods that are in violation of fundamental human rights, high levels of corruption, unemployment and marginalization of certain communities based on religion, tribe of region. These, are seen to form the foundation of the Push factors to radicalization leading to terrorism. Through the approach therefore, the government is viewed as the enemy doing damage control through a public relations exercise (Habiba,2018).

On the other hand, however, the ‘\_Top-Down‘ approach herewith is the main means of advancing policy review and improvement towards effective and more-results oriented CVE policy and practice in Kenya. Without such advancements, it would be impossible to even operate and navigate in the CVE policy and practice field. The approach is further advancing itself, waking up to the reality of the need to collaborate more openly and in a predictable manner with the communities at grassroots level.

### **Bottom-Up- CVE Approach to curbing violent extremism**

This approach is oriented towards community level action, driven by local civil society organizations and community based organizations. Initiatives under this approach revolve around a group of people considered ‘to be vulnerable‘ and/or ‘\_at-risk‘ of joining violent extremist groups and those perceived to be active participants in their attacks (planning and commission of). Stronger focus on individual-aimed interventions is also seen under this approach (Finn, 2016).

Given the fast pace of change and the many uncertainties in countering violent extremism and the security environment as a whole in Kenya at the national and county levels respectively, forward-looking community-based approach is essential and appreciated (Atta-Assamoah, 2015). This is with preparation for a variety of possible threats and ready to take advantage of opportunities, both, which may appear in different, forms than in the past and which will call for creative responses. With long traditions of risk assessment, on one hand, and risk mitigation/management on the other hand, being brought together to produce fresh insights on the Kenyan CVE and security environment (Crenshaw, 1981), specific tools and methods of community engagement can be employed to discern trends and alternative futures. The other significant concern in Bottom-Up CVE Approach is with regards to the spread of Internet access per population, with the nature of participation on the internet and participation in online discussions via social media being the new political activism. The process of turning political activism to political violence is an active one, and not a passive one hence the power of social media has meant the CVE practitioners are now producers as opposed to simply the audience, which means that to effectively counter violent extremism in Kenya the CVE Bottom-Up stakeholders have had to embrace taking a pro-active role in our interactions on the Internet (USIP, 2014).

The use and strategic importance of social media and the internet in radicalization is mainly based on the ability to have constraint-free and easy communication with anonymity .It is imperative to establish effective cyber legislations that can help in nabbing the people using unanimous accounts to lure our youths to violent extremism via the social media.

The bottom-up approach enjoys much currency in terms of preference in public debates due to the privilege of community reach and understanding that the involved civil society organizations and

community-based organizations have. The approach is inclined towards first meeting the individual and community needs/interests first, and the national/global interests second and for that, many times comes at loggerheads with the governments agencies pushing the parallel top-down CVE agenda(s). For this reason, too, the methods used under this approach are distinct but intense, applicable to a particular context at a time and may not be duplicated successfully to another context using history by analogy; not to overlook the fact that many methods under this approach have and are still duplicated in other contexts with questionable levels of success

The critics of this approach however hold that this approach is overcrowded with duplication of efforts and overlapping interests, and not properly defined as to what exactly is CVE in practice, and what isn't, hence the credibility of the CVE works using this approach is lessened, and highly doubted. Each involved organization is seen to promote its methods just to maintain credibility and relevance in the field, as leverage for further funding support for works(s) whose impact(s) cannot be objectively measured and evaluated. This is mainly because the approach itself in general, focusing on 'vulnerable' and 'potentials' cannot prove how many 'vulnerable' or 'potentials' did not become extremists as a result of the intervention(s); they might have just been fine without it. The Bottom-up approach is often criticized not to be really CVE in the strict sense, but more of community development work, while its supporters claim the legitimacy of the community development work as P/CVE is relevant to the universally recognized push and pull factors to violent extremism leading to terrorism (Finn, 2016).

Another key takeaway is the lack of consensus on the foundational premises and concepts regarded as Bottom-Up P/CVE and related practice, which essentially shifted the direction of the ethical question from 'does CVE

## **Addressing Historical injustices and Marginalization**

Historical injustices reflect the capacity of violent extremism to recruit, through perception of collective punishment, grievances, personal humiliation and victimization (USAID, 2011). Events of State-led mass Killings proliferate the Kenya History; cases of mass killings such as Wagalla Massacre and Shifta war in the Northern region of Kenya are evident of harsh state responses. Until today, the tactics of the security operations employ oppressive postcolonial strategies, which are considered the source of insecurity in the country (Assamoah, 2015).

Although the introduction of the Kenyan constitution 2010, redress processes and institutions such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, (NCIC), National Land Commission and devolution process, Truth commission and reconciliation processes, marginalization and historical injustices remains unresolved.

In the coastal region for instance deep-seated resentment to perceived unjust land grabbing from locals still remains a great issue. The nature of the issue enlightens much of the inter-ethnic animosity and communal conflicts in various parts of the country. Both regions have also expressed concerns of being treated as second-class citizens, which reveals institutionalized discriminations that excludes them from political and socio-economic processes (Assamoah, 2015).

## **Employing Political Interventions**

Al-Shabaab uses the diverse and fragile politics of Kenya to recruit (Osamba 2015: 15). Tensions between Muslim Somali, Swahili communities and non-Muslim ethnic groups in the North-East and the Coast have created motivations for groups such as the Al-Shabaab to target Kenya in an attempt to liberate the oppressed (Glazzard & Jespersen & Maguire 2015: 11).



Kenya's politics is dominated by a Christian ethos, which leads to hostility towards Muslims, thus Al-Shabaab's —enemies (Anderson 2014: 2).

Kenyan Muslims make up 11% of the population of Kenya (International Crisis Group 2014: 6). About 65% of Kenya's Muslim population is between the ages of 18 and 35. 30% of the Muslim population is of Somalian origins, yet were born in Kenya (Botha 2013: 2). There is an absence of Muslim representation in public service as well as at the level of decision-making (International Crisis Group 2014: 7). Kenyan Muslims are regarded by their fellow Kenyans as being foreigners, which leads to exclusion from political sphere. The Islamic Party of Kenya was banned in the 1990s and as such Muslim groups feel they do not have a voice in the state (Glazzard & Jespersen & Maguire 2015: 11).

Even though the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) was created to be the representation for the Muslim community, the community perceives this council as being too closely associated with the central government and have made claims that this council does not have the Muslim community's interests at heart (Glazzard & Jespersen & Maguire 2015: 15). Kenya's fractured and discrimination political system alienates communities and thus fuels citizens to join extremist groups who can be the voice they need (Glazzard & Jespersen & Maguire 2015: 10).

In Kenya, most Muslim communities are from marginalized regions compared to other regions (Botha 2013: 14). To extremist groups, the grievances of the local people from the coast have been politically, economically and culturally undermined, thus they aim to liberate it (Glazzard & Jespersen & Maguire 2015: 11). A video released by the Al-Shabaab pleaded with the Muslim youth of Kenya to recognize their oppression and to join their movement (Anderson 2014: 2). The government's exclusionary politics can lead to the youth seeking alternative

means such as violent extremist groups in an attempt to feel inclusion and to be able to have a voice.

## **Conclusion**

As we also focus on new research, analysis and policy making to reflect the realities of today, Kenya's counter violent extremism process is making positive strides in handling the current challenges. Ultimately, the success of curbing religious extremism will rely on promoting the agency of each and every member of society and a process of continual engagement between parties. Action by the state and county governments will be critical, though approaches should also come from the bottom up and involve a myriad of actors, each with clearly demarcated roles in defeating the proximate and structural causes of violent extremism while laying the foundations for building and maintaining peace

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