

## Religious Radicalism in East Africa- A Unique Problem

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**Abstract:** Religious radicalism, fanaticism, and extremism are a global phenomenon and a unique problem in East Africa today. Most if not all religious groups express one of the above elements in one way or another. Religious groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko haram, Al-shabaab mostly sprout from devout followers of religion in the name of fighting regimes in power that they believe are not seriously observing religious teachings of Islam. Terror attacks have happened in Europe, America, Asia and other parts of the world. Radicalized individuals and groups use extremist teachings from scripture in support of their ideology to perpetuate violent attacks, to inflict pain and fear on innocent people or perceived or real enemies. Hypothetically violent extremisms and terrorism is driven by hate, religious and political vendetta, social and economic trends as displayed in this paper. The main focus of this paper is on Al-shabaab. Its origin, trends in radicalization, organizations perceived to support its activities are discussed. East Africa has been an Island of peace for a long time, until the emergent of the religious terror group in Somali before it spread to the whole of East Africa. It is a real thorn in the flesh.

**Keywords:** Religious radicalism, fanaticism, extremism, East Africa, Islam.

### INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

Radical Islamic groups in the world include but not limited to Al-Qaida, ISIS, Muslim Brotherhood, Boko Haram, and Al-shabaab. These groups espouse extreme teachings and ideologies that target to cause pain and kill their perceived and real enemies. These groups are also organized militarily with sophisticated weapons. Besides religious practice, they are politically motivated and fight sitting regimes in power with a common aim to establish an Islamdom or Islamic states based on fully implementation of sharia. They have become destructive both to humanity and property causing fear and mayhem a long their trails. They are dreadful in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tanzania Uganda where they have carried out attacks. Radicalism and extremisms are familiar terms both in politics and religion. The usage might differ according to how they are defined by schools of thought, individuals and groups. The following explanations have been adopted for this work.

### Religious Extremism

Druckman [1], Stein [2], Defines Extremism as complex phenomenon, although it's complexity is often hard to see. Most simply, it can be defined as activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary. In conflict settings it manifests as a severe form of conflict engagement. However, the labeling of activities, people,

and groups as "extremist", and the defining of what is "ordinary" in any setting is always a subjective and political matter.

Extreme acts are more likely to be employed by marginalized people and groups who view more normative forms of conflict engagement as blocked for them or biased, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. At times where reason and dialogue has failed, people have resorted to physical confrontation so as to be heard.

### Religious Radicalism

The term "radical" [3] is derived from the Latin word *radix* which means root, it refers to groups, both Political and religious that resort to revolutionary means to bring change in the society. However, the term is more used in politics than in religious cycles. Historically, Radicalism began in the United Kingdom with political support for a "radical reform" of the electoral system. Some radicals became republicans like in France i.e. the far left in the nineteenth Century as opposed to the right-wing in 1871-1940. With time the term came to denote a progressive liberal Ideology<sup>4</sup>. Radicalism and extremism is the mother of terrorism.

Michael [1] says; "terrorism means to impose one's own interpretations of religious teachings, socio-cultural, and politico-economic values and norms through violence in the society". He further clarifies;

“Very briefly terrorism means the physical and mental process of terrifying individual and certain groups of society through the element of violence”. Terror gangs utilizes every opportunity whether religious, political or Socio-cultural Context to cause mayhem.

Griffith [ 5 ], argues that Terrorism is ineluctably political in aims and motives, violent or, equally important, threatens violence, designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target, conducted by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia), and perpetrated by a sub-national group or non-state entity. These work sought to discuss radicalism and violent extremism with main focus on Al-shabaab.

### **Al Shabaab in Somalia and East Africa**

Abdulkadir [2] analyses the genesis of Al Shabaab militia group from the 1990s. He has argued that the Somalia Central government collapsed in 1991. This opened the country to clan conflict which shuttered the country’s unity and democracy. Al Shabaab is one of those non-state actors that invaded state leadership vacuum. It took control of parts of Puntland and Southern Somalia. It evolved into a formidable army recruiting within East Africa and in America and even Europe.

Al Shabaab is an established Islamist group espousing Wahhabism ideology with an aim to establish an Islamic state in Somalia based on strict Sharia law. Somalia is 90% Islam. Religion has been used to rally support for solidarity purposes during post-colonial era by Sayyid Muhammad Abdallah Hassan [3]. Most clans came together for a common purpose; to gain independence. However, this dream of a united Somalia was short lived when Siad Barre took over. 1969-1991 was Siad Barre’s regime. He alienated and marginalized certain clans and groups, inequality was wide spread, and poor infrastructure leading to his overthrow [4]. These wanting socio-economic conditions led to emergence of Islamic groups wide agonizing anarchy, insecurity, poverty, rampant violence and cold blood deaths. Islamic factions emerged to try and offer alternative government to restore law and order through enforcing Islamic law [5].

Indeed by 2006, Islamic groups under the union of Islamic Courts (ICU) brought some peace, security and unity in Somalia but it was short lived. Ethiopia, supported by United States invaded ICU areas of jurisdiction paving way for Al Shabaab which overpowered ICU. Henceforth, Al Shabaab dismantled ICU and engaged Ethiopia militarily. Ethiopia eventually withdrew from Somalia in 2008. Al Shabaab embarked on implementing strict wahhab ideologies, mass killings and stoning of adulterers to death, and other penalties of Sharia. Those Somalis who had supported it

began to criticize due to strict interpretation and application of Sharia. This is because most Somalis are Sunnis with Sufi preference. They found strict use of Sharia difficult to follow.

The wahhab laws forbid women to half veil, to engage in commercial activities, go out in public without a male relative escorting her, they force unmarried women to marry, Music and dancing, sports and mixing of genders strictly forbidden. They use amputation and kill those who break the law, flog offenders publicly. What was clan centered conflicts in Somalia now revolves around religious group affiliation.

The other agony is the shuttering of traditional mechanism of settling disputes and creating peace. This was done through customary law *Xeer*, negotiations *shir*, and payment of blood money *diya*. Al Shabaab also undermined and alienated clan loyalty and respect for elders, a strong ethical value among Somalis [6].

In the Horn of Africa’s they have also eroded peace in the region. They support Ethiopia’s Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an ethnic Somali group. They too support Eritrea in their military expeditions in the region, have carried out bombings in Kenya, Uganda as part of their Islamic duty to attack their perceived enemies [7].

### **Serious attacks in East Africa**

This is a summary of violent radical attacks on the Kenyans as compiled by Africa Briefing N°85 Nairobi/Brussels, 25 January 2012, 2014. These attacks are analyzed to understand the new tactics by the attackers in East Africa: 1963-1968. Secession attempts in the Northern Frontier District (NFD) by Muslim Somalis. This led to *Shifita* war and *Waggalla* massacre in 1984.

1970s- Recruitment of Muslim youths to *Salaafi* Islam

7/8/1998- al-Qaeda attack US embassy in Nairobi-213 killed

1990s- al Qaeda radical group fight to establish an Islamic government in Somalia creates a network to raise funds in Kenya

2006/7- Islamic Courts Union (ICU) by Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys and Hassan Turki led domestic jihadist in Kenya-terrorist Attacks. Center stage was Riyadhha Mosque Pumwani Eastleigh- Nairobi  
2008- Muslim youth Center (MYC) formed at Riyadhha Mosques to express Muslim Youth Grievances. MYC radicalized and recruited youths in militancy.

MYC Organized fundraising, training and other logistical support for al-Shaabab to fight in Somalia. Youths were taught jihadist literature and

speeches. Recruitment targeted Somalis, Muslims and any other for pay.

1/10/2011-Marie Dedie – a French woman kidnapped and taken to Somalia

14/10/2011- KDF- enter Somalia

30/9/12- several attacks on churches, innocent peoples, hotels in Nairobi, Mombasa, Garrisa everywhere. Al-Qaeda related group, al Shaabab claimed responsibilities. The features that dominate and are cross cutting in all the above definitions are:

- That terrorist acts are carried out by both state non state actors and that violence is the strategy employed by these actors to achieve their goal.
- That violence is mostly carried out on innocent non-combat individuals to create an environment of fear and constant insecurity.
- That the targets of the violence are not necessarily the victims but the victims are used to pass the message to the targets.
- It is carried out as a response or resistance to either real, claimed or perceived injustices by a state or authority.
- That it is also carried out to pass forcefully certain ideological beliefs of religious, political or economic principles which may not get sympathy from the public under normal circumstance.

That the definitions indicate that terrorism is a tactic employed as a means to an end. It is a weapon any disgruntled group or individuals would use to achieve their agenda and register an identity or a call to be heard. Terrorist seem to have utilized these mechanism to register their grievances against the Kenya Government or any other purported enemy groups. Terror groups have also found a rich ground for their activities; radicalized youths who are idle and without employment, porous borders between Kenya and Somalia, poor interreligious discussions, historical injustices upon Muslims by political regimes and weak security operations by the Kenyan government, among others. As if this is not enough, the question that still begs our mind is why Kenya?

### **Contemporary trends of Radicalization and extremism by Al-Shabaab**

Unlike in other countries, radical and extreme activities by Al-Shabaab have been intense and with new approaches and methods. Terrorism has been evolving daily to counter any government efforts to curb them. The utilization of Christians, charity organizations, Mosques and Muslim preachers has baffled many.

### **Christian youths have also been a target for radicalization in Kenya**

It has been thought that radicalized youths are Muslims but Christian youths have also been recruited,

and trained to cause havoc. It is true that some radicalized Kenyan Muslim youth have been ascribing to the activities of terrorist organizations. They are mainly said to be part of the foreign recruits of Al-Qaeda group and its affiliate Al-Shabab group in Somalia. Some of the radicalized Kenyan youth have been for instance linked to the 1998 US embassy attack in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and the 2002 attacks on Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa.

Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, a Kenyan national, for instance is said to have been the recognized leader of al-Qaeda's East African cell and has been together with other foreigners linked to the Kenyan 1998 US embassy attack. Fahid Mohammed Ally Msalam, another Kenyan national has also been linked to the twin attacks of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania [6].

There is a common view by majority of the analysts of the subject, that there is continued exercise of recruiting and radicalizing some of the Kenyan youth in to the terrorist organizations, *for instance* it has also become clear that Kenya has a domestic radicalization problem of its own. Kenyan nationals have conducted a number of recent terrorist attacks in Kenya, with many of them receiving military training from Al-Shabab in neighboring Somalia. The recruits are both Christians and Muslims lured because of money and as sympathizers. Radicalization activities in the country are suspected to be facilitated by clerics in the mosques in North Eastern and Coastal regions who eventually recruit Muslims and now Christians for militancy.

Elgiva Bwire Oliacha, a recent Kenyan Muslim convert, was arrested in connection with the two October 2011 blasts and was sentenced to life in prison after having pleaded guilty to all charges [7]. Going by the adopted name Mohamed Seif, Oliacha reportedly smiled at cameras, stated that he harboured no regrets, and indicated that he would not appeal his sentence.

On 20 September 2012, Abdimajid Yasin Mohamed, alias Hussein, was sentenced to 59 years in prison. He was charged alongside Abdi Adan alias Salman Abdi, who denies the allegations and whose case is still pending. Yasin was ordered to undergo psychiatric examination after he pleaded guilty upon arrest on 14 September 2012, doctors found him fit to stand trial. The two suspects arrested in Eastleigh with bombs, grenades and a cache of weapons that included six suicide bombs, 12 grenades, four AK 47 rifles and 480 bullets recovered from them as police thwarted a major terror plot in Nairobi [8].

Police arrested a suspect, Thabit Jamaldin Yahya, in connection with an attack at Mombasa Bella Vista bar in May 2012. He is still in remand. On 29 September 2012, police arrested over 60 people with

possession of bomb making materials. The arrested were on board a bus from Garissa to Nairobi when police discovered the materials. They all disowned the luggage with material [9].

At the urging of Al-Shabaab, an increasing number of terrorist attacks in Kenya have been carried out by local Kenyans, many of whom are recent converts to Islam. Estimates in 2012 placed the figure of Kenyan fighters at around 10% of Al-Shabaab's total forces [10].

Referred to as the Kenyan *Mujahideen* by Al-Shabaab's core members, the converts are typically young and overzealous, poverty making them easier targets for the outfit's recruitment activities. Because the Kenyan insurgents have a different profile from the Somali and Arab militants that allows them to blend in with the general population of Kenya, they are also often harder to track. Reports suggest that Al-Shabaab is attempting to build an even more multi-ethnic generation of fighters in the larger region.

One such recent convert who helped mastermind the Kampala bombings but now cooperates with the Kenyan police believes that in doing so, the group is essentially trying to use local Kenyans to do its "dirty work" for it while its core members escape unscathed. According to diplomats, Muslim areas in coastal Kenya and Tanzania, such as Mombasa and Zanzibar, are also especially vulnerable for recruitment [11].

### **Religious organizations recruiting for terrorists**

The bombing on the Norfolk Hotel on New Year's Eve was in 1980. In that attack, a bomb flattened the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi, killing 20 people and injuring 80. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by an Arab group that said it was seeking retaliation for Kenya's allowing Israeli troops to refuel in Nairobi during the raid on Entebbe Airport in Uganda four years earlier to rescue hostages from a hijacked aircraft.

According to reports about that incident, international security agencies in conjunction with the Kenya Police had a prime suspect within hours. He was identified as 34-year-old Qaddura Mohammed Abdel al-Hamid of Morocco, and he was said to have checked into the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi in the last week of 1980. Al-Hamid was found to have paid for his room up until New Year's Day, but slipped away on the afternoon of 31 December. He had boarded a plane for Saudi Arabia by the time the guests at the Norfolk assembled for a New Year's Eve dinner. Most of the Organizations in the very beginning were from outside Kenya [12].

Gradually, Mobile Training camps have been opened in several parts of the country and are believed to continually exist and involved in the recruitment of

youth in to terrorist cells. Although the Somalia based Al-Shabab group may be as fronted by Anneli Botha the major player in the current attacks and recruitment of the Kenyan youth, the members of other terrorist organizations, most notably al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya and al-Takfir w'al Hijra, are similarly said to have established sanctuaries along the Kenyan coastal strip and within Kenya's North Eastern Province in the 1990s. Terrorist units is for instance said to have established bases in Lamu and Ras Kamboni, along the Kenyan-Somali border, in 1996. Although these units became inactive immediately after the 1998 bombings, their impact will continue to be felt in the country [13].

The Somalia based militant and the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Shabab movement have built a cross-border presence and an underground support network in the Muslim populated regions such as the North Eastern, Nairobi and on the Coast regions.

The North Eastern Provincial security intelligence committee (PSIC) in relation to the 2012 continued insecurity in Garissa county views that "the security situation in North eastern has deteriorated due to the influx of refugees from Somalia into Dadaab Refugee camp who have in turn sneaked to integrate with people living in Garissa, engaging in all sorts of illegal activities" (Kenya National Assembly Report, 2012). The masterminds of terrorism have been: Iran's Ruhollah Khomeini [8], Sudan's Hassan Al- Turabi [9], and Saudi Arabia's Osama bin Laden [10].

Some of the terrorist groups in the world are; Al-Qaeda (Global network), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), Al-Islam, *Boko haram* (Nigeria), Taliban (Afghanistan), Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Al shabaab meaning the youngsters is a Somalia based cell of the militant Islamist group that is responsible for many bombings and mass killings in Kenya. Hamas, Hizbollah, Shia groups in Palestine.

According to Amnesty International's report [11] "From Life without Peace to Peace without Life: The treatment of Somali refugees and asylum-seekers In Kenya" the al-Qaida linked Al-Shabab Islamist group could be part of the refugees hosted in the Dadaab camps exacerbating the security condition of the refugees and the larger host communities [14].

### **Confronting Al-Shabaab radicalism and extremism**

East Africa specifically Kenya and Somalia are bleeding from the atrocities of extremism tendencies and this turmoil has to stop. There have been attempts to create peace through Military intervention by AMISOM. Some have succeeded others have failed. Multi-dimensional approach is recommended to counter the effects Al-Shabaab activities.

### **Inter religious Dialogue**

If dialogue [15] at all levels is harnessed, there could be peace. In Kenyan society, both urban and rural (especially at the grassroots level) families live together in the same households with intra-faith and interfaith differences at work, as they celebrate the diverse religious festivals together for example during Christmas or *Ramadhan*, share in the joys at birth and sadness during death and as they share resources together. Throughout all these they interact and discuss various issues and problems in their community. They dialogue with one another at informal stages. They collaborate and cooperate to attend to human needs. Historically, there are areas that Muslims and Christians have walked together: for peace and peaceful coexistence, Religious rights and peace, and politics. However, this research realizes that there are areas that require inter-Religious cooperation to attend to appropriately in this research. Thus Kenyan politics and radicalism pandemic, cut across the religious divide. These are practical contextual issues but with global significance. Dialogue at National and intellectual levels seems to be for the elites whose discussions and agenda does not disseminate down to the majority of the people affected according to Denffer [16]. However, it can give room for positive engagement in tackling extremisms.

### **Participation of Political and religious leaders in peace making:**

Terror activities have always taken a religious angle in Kenya. Little can be achieved without involving both political and religious leadership in the Country. Perpetrators of these heinous acts are part of the society, some are our sons, or people we interact and dine with. They are known by the communities and even visitors in their midst are also known. Kenyan Muslims leadership ought to be doing better to help the government deal with radicalization, lack of it is or lukewormness is an indicator of support of terror. The locals who disappear and appear after having been trained in Somalia, those trained in the Mosques or in forests are no longer secrets. They should be revealed for the better of the whole community.

### **Decentralize leadership structures in Islam**

Mosques and other Muslim groups, Sunnis, Shiites, Sufi and sects and organizations for the youths seem to operate without a central authority. One that can monitor, advise, and discipline errant persons and groups. Muslims need a voice that can articulate issues and whose primary function is to provide spiritual guidance, and when necessary, make binding pronouncement (fatwa). Perhaps the chief Qadi ought to be at the top of things though this is not coming out forcefully for whatever unknown reasons. Other recommendations are: to reinforce programs to de-radicalize affected youths, Provide jobs, Ban foreign NGOs with hidden agenda, Separate religion and state politics, Government to solve Land emotive issues in

Kenya and the Government of Kenya to ensure Equal distribution of resources among all communities radicalize the youth.

### **Tame radical preachers and foreign organizations.**

The Muslim radical preachers who have been executed by unknown forces among them, Abd Rogo were accused of fanning hatred and recruitment of youths into terror gangs. Besides other topics they preach “wars being fought against Muslims abroad in (Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq) are part of a global campaign against Islam. Public debates or what is commonly known as *Mihadhara* has brought enormous suffering among Christians and Muslims and by extension to other faith groups in most parts of Kenya. The most affected areas are Nairobi, North Eastern and Mombasa. The main problem is not just public debates in themselves but the manner in which they are carried out: intentions, methods and strategies. The methods which are never well organized by both parties, are polemical in nature hence induce violence, hatred, suspicion and poor relations between Muslims and Christians. Subsequently, at any level, whether national, regional and at grassroots, dialogue is problematic. This debacle in dialogue is well manifested in outreach missions by Christians and Islamic *Da'wah* by Muslims, infamously called *Mihadhara*. Various methods are used; public debates, mass media (print and telecast), material benefits among others. For the first time Muslim leadership in 2015 came up strongly to condemn irate radical preachers. The government has also put stringent mechanism to be followed for one to go public to share or teach religion. One must get permission from the police and give notification to that effect and disclose the sponsors.

### **De-radicalize youths**

It has been thought that radicalized youths are Muslims but Christian youths have also been recruited, and trained to cause havoc. It is true that some radicalized Kenyan Muslim youth have been ascribing to the activities of terrorist organizations. They are mainly said to be part of the foreign recruits of Al-Qaeda group and its affiliate Al-Shabab group in Somalia. Some of the radicalized Kenyan youth have been for instance linked to the 1998 US embassy attack in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and the 2002 attacks on Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa.

Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, a Kenyan national, for instance is said to have been the recognized leader of al-Qaeda's East African cell and has been together with other foreigners linked to the Kenyan 1998 US embassy attack. The Kenya government has strategized to recruit more youths in the national youth service (NYS), provide employment opportunities and implement education policy of free education to all. This has been working to keep idle youth busy in some meaningful financial activities. Those affected by drugs are being recruited into

rehabilitation centers at the Coast and other Counties across the Country.

## CONCLUSION

There are two ways that can be used to explain the effects of terrorism activities on Christians in Kenya; that politically motivated attacks targeted Kenyans specifically those who supported the government seen by Muslim Somalis as Christian while those fundamentalist attacks targeted Christians who are defined by some sections of Muslims as nonbelievers. In this case terrorism enables groups that are disgruntled and have no access to power to make their wishes known and agendas felt. No doubt terrorism in Kenya targets Christians with a high degree of devastating passion. A case in point is where attacks were selective in terms of who to attack, and where to attack. The use of Islam by attackers makes it appear like a religious war between Christians and Muslims which is far from the truth. There are political, historical, and global pointers to terror attacks in Kenya than what meets the eye. Targeting the government and Christians is meant to fuel violence to high intensity and responses. The way forward demands a concerted effort of all affected parties to address grievances discussed herein.

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