



Inside Kenya's war on terror: the case of Lamu

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**I. Lamu becomes a victim:
"They wanted to start a civil
war"**

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This Saferworld article takes readers on an in-depth journey into Lamu County on Kenya's coast: tourist paradise, investment hub, flashpoint of ethnic and religious tensions over land, jobs and representation, and battleground in Kenya's internationally-backed war on terror with al-Shabaab. Through the words of local people, it tells the story of how violence ignited in Lamu in 2014, how this violence was kindled, and what needs to be done to put the fire out.

Arguing that counter-terror and countering violent extremism efforts have not solved Lamu's problems, it calls for fresh thinking to overcome the conflict risks that lie ahead. Terror attacks and the response to them in Lamu are revealing of broader dynamics in Kenya, and hold important lessons for the way the US, UK and others engage with terrorism and conflict.

Lamu's story reflects lessons from our global work to research and explore constructive alternatives to counter-terrorism approaches. This research is based on a series of focus group discussions and interviews with officials, journalists, community members, businessmen, politicians, religious leaders and activists in Lamu.

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Header photo: Thomas Wheeler/Saferworld



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On the evening of 15 June 2014, a large group of armed men commandeered several vehicles and entered the town of Mpeketoni – a town on the mainland in the Kenyan coastal county of Lamu. They started burning buildings and chanting Islamist slogans. They selected only male non-Muslims for killing, leaving 47 dead by the end of the night. As one woman from Mpeketoni recalls:

It was around 9pm. I was with my son. We heard gunshots. We could see the bright lights. First we thought it was just gangsters and police. But then they selected and took people from the hotel nearby and I heard them shouting “get out, get out”. I heard one person say “what is your name?” A man replied “Paul”. Then the man said “let's show people what they do to our men in Somalia.” He screamed. Then he was killed. Their intention was to create fear. [1]



The following night, attacks occurred in a nearby village, killing 15 people. Another village was attacked on 23 June 2014. On 5 July, similar attacks by large groups of armed men were launched in Hindi and Gamba (in neighbouring Tana County) – both urban centres mainly populated by Kikuyus – Kenya's dominant ethnic group, who are largely viewed as outsiders by Lamu locals. Then on 19 July a bus on the road between Malindi and Lamu was attacked, killing 30 passengers. In only one month, Lamu and nearby areas had witnessed over 100 killings. [2] Many of the victims were Kikuyus, though non-Kikuyu Christian men were also killed, including people from ethnic groups indigenous to the coast – and no witness saw the attackers question their victims about ethnicity. [3]

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attacks, explaining that they were revenge for the Kenyan government's actions in Somalia. But local tensions also loomed large in its propaganda celebrating the attacks, which included a video entitled 'Reclaiming Muslim lands under Kenyan Occupation', released in Swahili and English. This included footage of radical Kenyan Imams from the coast preaching about land in Mpeketoni stolen by 'disbelievers'. [4] A sign placed on the road after the Hindi attacks criticised Kenya's leader and mainstream political opposition, stating: 'Muslims, it's your land. Your land is being taken away. Wake up and fight.' [5]

The message illustrated al-Shabaab's emerging strategy – to entrench divisions and mobilise support over localised issues – which it applied in several parts of Kenya over the following year. It targeted teachers and civil servants in a bus attack in Mandera County in November 2014, then killed 36 Christian workers at a quarry in December. Again at Garissa University in April 2015 it identified and killed 147 people – primarily non-Muslims.

As terrorism expert Tom Parker has explained, groups who carry out terror attacks are typically attempting a kind of 'political jujitsu':

By crafting attacks designed to provoke a draconian state response, terrorists hope to exploit the resultant societal polarisation to attract new recruits. [6]

As we will see, in Lamu as elsewhere in Kenya, al-Shabaab was picking targets and making statements to inflame grievances and polarisation that already existed, drawing them into its struggle.

Al-Shabaab was so adept in situating its violence on Lamu's faultlines of identity, land and politics, that whether the group was even behind the attacks was hotly contested. Government officials initially blamed the attack on criminals and bandits, but Kenya's President then offered a more incendiary explanation in a televised address to the nation:

The attack in Lamu was well planned, orchestrated and politically motivated ethnic violence against a Kenyan community, with the intention of profiling and evicting them for political reasons. This, therefore, was not an al-Shabaab terrorist attack... Evidence indicates that local political networks were involved in the planning and execution of the heinous attacks. [7]

The Governor of Lamu, Issa Timamy, was arrested for allegedly being complicit in the attacks, though the case was thrown out of court for lack of evidence. Police also briefly blamed a secessionist group, the Muslim Republican Council (MRC), for the second wave of attacks in July. However, Kenyan military and intelligence agencies later concluded that the attacks were, after all, the work of al-Shabaab. [8]

It is clear that al-Shabaab was involved in the attacks. Witnesses stated that the majority of the attackers were Somali men and the police later identified a Kenyan convert to Islam as the local al-Shabaab leader who organised the Hindi and Gamba attacks. [9] Yet the precise nature of local involvement is more obscure. For example, a businesswoman resident in Mpeketoni told us that "in other attacks in following days it was obvious locals were involved because [the attackers] called people by names".

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In Witu, the same person told us, a group of settlers who were leading a court case over a land dispute "were specifically targeted – and they had been threatened with serious consequences for their legal challenge before." [10]

A local journalist investigating the attack also notes that "in the Hindi attacks a specific Kikuyu landowner was targeted. His wife told me that when the terrorists came they said "Hey, [name], we've told you that you've occupied our land and we warned you about this - now it is your last day." [11]

In focus groups we heard not only that some of the attackers knew the area well, but also that many spoke Kiswahili. Others we spoke to asserted that while local 'indigenous' people may not have joined in the attacks, they do in some cases support the group, in both moral and material terms. As we heard from one focus group:

A woman living next to Boni forest... would go to cook and fetch water for al-Shabaab... When they came to arrest her she took off and never returned to date.

Others went further, pointing their finger directly at local politicians seeking to chase Kikuyu voters away from the area. But this was not the only view. Some local people see the attacks as orchestrated entirely by the central government to justify military occupation of Lamu, with one focus group participant stating that "the attacks have nothing to do with us – it is the government creating the stories so that the land is properly taken." [12]

Others shared this view. A focus group participant in Lamu said that: "I suspect the government and big people are involved. It's not small people like us involved in the attacks – they were well organised, well equipped and well financed." [13] Others are simply

suspicious, concluding only that “there’s a hidden agenda”. [14]

It is impossible to come to any firm conclusion. It appears that the attacks were carried out by a Kenyan branch of al-Shabaab named Jaysh Ayman. The attackers may have included not only foreign and Somali fighters but also local recruits, with some of the latter actively taking the opportunity to pursue local vendettas. The identities of the attackers may have differed between attacks. And some attacks may have been localised copy-cat attacks, independent of al-Shabaab control. Whatever the reality, in the words of one study:

[The] attacks on Mpeketoni, and in the area around it, apparently represent an alarming intersection of different strands of violence, and different drivers of conflict. To seek an absolutely exclusive categorisation of the violence – as solely al-Shabaab or as ‘MRC’, or as the work of national politicians – is probably mistaken. [15]

The inconclusive debate over the attacks raises other issues. First, it reminds us that what people believe in conflict situations can easily become more important than the truth. Here, perceptions and fears of who the enemy is are likely to shape future behaviour and the potential for violence. Second, this means that categorising the violence – as ‘political’, ‘local’, or ‘terrorist’ – and apportioning blame for it ‘can itself be a technique of power’ – serving to manipulate public perceptions and shape future events. [16] Third, the extent of local involvement matters: it reflects the capacity of al-Shabaab to mobilise local support, with important implications for future conflict risks in Lamu.

Moreover, the fact that the attacks did not result in a show of unity across the country, but instead exposed divisions at the highest political levels and within society, suggests that al-Shabaab was at least partly effective in its strategy to divide people. As one Christian who lost her brother in the attacks argued, “let the Muslims tell us why they are attacking us Christians”. [17] Another responds that “tribalism has now come to Lamu even more. It used to be peaceful”. [18] A politician sums it up well:

They wanted to start a civil war – that was their plan ... The words about historical injustice are al-Shabaab propaganda – al-Shabaab do not care about land or tribe, they just want to exploit grievances. [19]

Footnotes

1. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016
2. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17531055.2015.1082254>, p 548
3. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/15/insult-injury/2014-lamu-and-tana-river-attacks-and-kenyas-abusive-response>
4. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17531055.2015.1082254>, p 548
5. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/tangled-ties-al-shabaab-and-political-volatility-in-kenya>, p 21
6. <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/it%E2%80%99s-trap-provoking-overreaction-terrorism-101>, p 38
7. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Uhuru-blames-massacre-on-tribalism--hate-politics/-/1056/2352306/-/wyy1laz/-/index.html>
8. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/15/insult-injury/2014-lamu-and-tana-river-attacks-and-kenyas-abusive-response>
9. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/15/insult-injury/2014-lamu-and-tana-river-attacks-and-kenyas-abusive-response>
10. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016
11. Key Informant Interview with journalist, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016
12. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016
13. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016
14. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016
15. http://www.lam.sciencespobordeaux.fr/sites/lam/files/note4_observatoire.pdf, p 21
16. http://www.lam.sciencespobordeaux.fr/sites/lam/files/note4_observatoire.pdf, p 21
17. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016
18. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016
19. Key Informant Interview with politician, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

Header photo: Jimmy Kamude/IRIN



II. Tinderbox of grievances: inequality and politics in Lamu

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Lamu Island lies just under 100 kilometres from the border with Somalia. Lamu town, the administrative centre of Lamu County, is a UNESCO world heritage site made up of winding alleys, bustling shopping streets, mosques of varied sizes, and distinctive buildings that speak to the town's historical role as a major centre of trade in the Indian Ocean. The island's beaches – and the more than 65 islands making up its archipelago – have long attracted tourists. Alongside fishing and farming, they remain a major source of livelihood for its inhabitants.

As with the other five coastal counties of Kenya, Lamu scores low on development indicators. After the north-eastern region, also bordering Somalia and generally marginalised from development processes since independence, the coastal area of Kenya has the highest rate of poverty in the country. Its economy and broader socio-economic development is, nonetheless, undergoing a substantial upheaval with the construction of a US\$ 5 billion 32-berth port, which will act as the gateway into East Africa's largest proposed infrastructure project, the Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopian Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor.

LAPSSET was conceived to create a second transport corridor through Kenya's north-eastern region – providing a new highway, railway track and oil pipeline to both South Sudan and newly discovered oil in northern Kenya. As well as a port, Lamu has been promised a new international airport, an oil refinery and a resort city. [20] Coal and wind power stations are also under development, as are plans to drill for gas. While the rest of LAPSSET's infrastructure still remains largely on paper, Chinese contractors have made significant progress on developing a port that could revive Lamu's former prominence as a maritime trading centre.

People in the county generally welcome LAPSSET, but it has implications for one of the most explosive issues in this area: land. "The whole issue started with land. When LAPSSET began new people came to Lamu and occupied land, and the locals feel threatened." [21]

In the 1970s, then-President Jomo Kenyatta allocated parcels of public land to 'up-country' settlers – from his own Kikuyu ethnic group. Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Kikuyus, have been in economic and political ascendance since independence. They were awarded title deeds to land that historically belonged to 'indigenous' communities – including the Mijikenda, Bajuni, Sanye, Boni and Swahili. [22]

Over decades, growing numbers of Kikuyus and other up-country 'outsiders' have moved to the area, buying up land and altering the county's demographics. The bulk of Lamu County's population is now in the mainland's farming areas, away from its traditional centre, Lamu Island, and in mainland towns such as Mpeketoni which have large populations of 'non-indigenous' people. Lamu is now the only county in Kenya where nearly 50 per cent of the population is 'non-indigenous'. [23]

As one local official explains, the problem is that "local people don't have the title deeds, they don't even know about it, they don't know how to get it or what it is. These small people suffer when big people come from Nairobi with the titles." [24] Aside from sometimes

pushing people off the land they have farmed for generations, those with title deeds have control of assets meaning that they can, for example, take out loans.

Even though all Kenyan citizens are entitled to the same rights, including over property, these perceived inequities in land ownership and tenure have deepened notions of a difference between 'outsiders', 'settlers' or 'up-country people' and 'indigenous', 'local' or 'coastal' people in the area.

Critically, these identity divides extend beyond ethnicity and into religion: not all coastal people are Muslim, and not all newly-arrived settlers are Christians from up-country – indeed, some move from other parts of the coast – but the division between 'indigenous' and 'outsider' is all too easily presented and described as a Muslim-Christian one. [25]

Huge land speculation by investors – who are often non-local, politically-connected Nairobi-based elites and referred to as land grabbers – has driven the value of land up, especially in areas of close proximity to the Port. As one woman stressed, "now everyone thinks if you can get a piece of that land then you will be set for life!" [26] Another Kikuyu landowner explains that:

Upcoming projects have increased the value of my land, due mostly to speculators. I have 10 acres, and now with values so high I can sell just one-quarter and easily make money, but the locals they can't sell as they don't have the titles. [27]

Some people stress that the issue is not about ethnicity or religion: "We have no issue with immigrants – the problem is land issues and title deeds. Some have them and some do not. This discrimination is the problem." [28]

A local priest informed us that, by focusing on ethnicity and religion, people are missing the point:

In Lamu there are only two groups of people: the rich tycoons from Mombasa and Nairobi and the poor local communities. The tycoons are using the poor local people to wage violence in order to grab land. [29]

The LAPPSET project also risks fueling other forms of economic disparity. [30] While the government has sought to provide training to local youths so that they can benefit from broader development in the area, some still say that "better educated people from up-country get the jobs in the big projects and in the hotels." [31]



Photo: Alcibiades Sanchez

The rest of Kenya's coast shares Lamu's tensions over inter-group inequality. Unlike other areas of the coast, however, Lamu was largely unaffected by the inter-ethnic violence that exploded following a contested election at the end of 2007. Yet such political violence remains a risk.

Following the violence, a new constitution was adopted in 2010 that set in motion Kenya's devolution process. In Lamu, this led to the creation of a County Assembly, with ten elected and ten nominated members, and the post of governor. These new structures sit alongside the county commissioner (a presidential appointee) and his administration. The county also has representatives in the legislature: a senator, two MPs plus one women's representative (also an MP).

With devolution, as with land, as one government official explained, “there have been winners and losers”. [32] Elections for parliamentary seats have always been highly charged, but the same is now true of races for the local assembly and governor’s post. The fault lines in these political competitions have again largely been ethnic, religious and outsider/insider.

As one local businessman notes, “migrants are important as they vote as a bloc, which impacts on elections.” [33] Many of those we interviewed noted the common narrative among Lamu’s ‘indigenous’ people: first the Kikuyu arrived, then they took the land, then they took the jobs, and then they took the political posts. The Kikuyu and other settlers, one interviewee told us, “want it all”: by virtue of constituency boundaries, solidarity and block voting across the settler population, “they” now have the position of deputy-governor, one of the county’s two MPs, and a disproportionate share of seats in the County Assembly. [34]

Ethnicity has assumed this political importance partly because of real differences in living standards between groups. However, as elsewhere in the country, Lamu’s politicians foment ethnic division by connecting local issues to the identity of their support base. This gets votes, but undermines the promotion of a binding Kenyan identity and citizenship. In the words of a Kikuyu businesswoman:

The locals believe the national government is favouring the Christians ... in political rallies, [opposition politicians] incite against the strangers. They say ‘these strangers will go and we’ll get our land back’. The politicians highlight the differences between us. [35]

A county government official told us the same story:

Politicians take [tribalism] to higher levels, they tell people what they want to hear and exploit their feelings of marginalisation and ideas of injustice. [36]

In many ways, these dynamics are typical of Kenya. But while Lamu has escaped the electoral violence seen in other parts of the country, it has not escaped from terrorism and the cycles of violence unleashed by al-Shabaab. Lamu’s structures of grievance and division proved highly combustible when al-Shabaab brought its incendiary violence to bear in 2014. The challenge is that these strands of conflict are now knotted together. As we will see, Lamu’s issues have been interwoven into Kenya’s wider war on terror. This has brought some big problems, and made local divisions even harder to grasp and deal with.

Footnotes

20. <http://www.lapsset.go.ke/>

21. Key Informant Interview with official, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

22. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/How-squatters-became-land-owners-in-Lamu/1056-2366012-117m6so/index.html>

23. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/unpacking-the-anatomy-of-the-mpeketoni-attacks-in-kenya>, p2

24. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

25. http://www.lam.sciencespobordeaux.fr/sites/lam/files/note4_observatoire.pdf, p 20

26. Key Informant Interview with journalist, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

27. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016

28. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

29. Key Informant Interview with religious leader, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016

30. The compensation scheme for people living on land directly affected by the project’s construction has been messy and contested at points, but in the end largely deemed by people we spoke to as fair. The same cannot be said for fishermen, who still feel that they have not been compensated for the potential loss of their livelihoods.

31. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

32. Key Informant Interview with county government officials, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

33. Key Informant Interview with businessman, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

34. Key Informant Interview with group of religious leaders, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016

35. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016

36. Key Informant Interview with county government officials, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

Header photo: Thomas Wheeler/Saferworld



III. Kenya's war on terror

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Lamu is, in one way, where Kenya's current conflict with al-Shabaab really started: it was the centre of a series of events that triggered Kenya's full-scale military invasion of Somalia. In September 2011, a British couple on a sailing holiday were kidnapped from a hotel near Lamu Island by al-Shabaab. Three weeks later, a French woman was taken by the group from a different hotel. Although Kenya's intervention in Somalia was planned well in advance, these and other kidnappings along Kenya's border with Somalia proved to be the trigger for the launch of Operation Linda Nchi ('protect the country') by Kenya's Defence Forces (KDF) in October 2011.

While the Kenyan Government had previously supported militias fighting in Somalia against al-Shabaab, Linda Nchi was a full-scale military intervention aimed at creating a buffer zone along Kenya's border, prising al-Shabaab from its control of the economically important Somali port city of Kismayo, and, ultimately, at eradicating the group. Lamu has felt the blowback from this intervention, witnessing the complex entanglement of multiple conflict drivers and a heavy-handed security response from the state.

The intervention was partly about protecting the investments and development in Lamu that were a critical piece of the LAPPSET project. As Anderson and Mcknight argue, 'After many decades of neglect and disregard, Kenya is now pursuing the economic integration of its northern region, and the security of southern Somalia is a critical element in this.' [37]

Kismayo port was captured after a year of fighting, and the intervention, integrated into the African Union's Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2012, significantly reduced the territory al-Shabaab held. However, it also had a number of shortcomings and counter-productive effects – as profiled in our 2016 report 'Barbed wire on our heads'. While Somalia's story rumbles on, the military confrontation with al-Shabaab intensified on another front – increasingly to be played out inside Kenya.

Al-Shabaab – using locally recruited Kenyans – launched attacks in Kenya within the first week of the intervention. It had formed a Kenyan franchise, named al-Hijra (previously the Muslim Youth Centre). Likewise, as already noted, another al-Shabaab-affiliated faction in Kenya, Jaysh Ayman was involved in a number of attacks in Lamu.

Al-Hijra turned its attention to attacks within the country and creating propaganda in Swahili directed at Kenyan Muslims, including non-Somalis, playing on 'the many disadvantages faced by Muslims, and on their history of political alienation and exclusion in Kenya, seeking to harness their long-standing disaffection and dissent.' [38] This was delivered through recordings, DVDs, and well-produced magazines. As another study notes,

The magazine Gaidi Mtaani as well as videos such as 'Mujahideen Moments' feature Swahili-speaking Kenyan militants who emphasise themes such as the humiliation suffered by Muslims in Kenya, Christian 'occupation' of coastal land, revenge for the killing of prominent preachers, and the liberating potential of violence. [39]

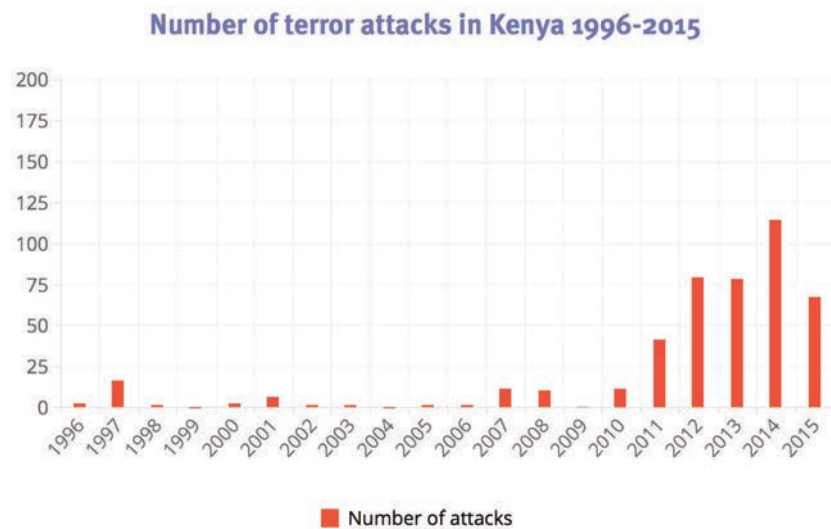
By 2012 it was clear that Kenya's problem with al-Shabaab was not only an external issue, but

also a 'home-grown' one. [40]

While al-Shabaab and some local allies existed and were active in Kenya well before the invasion, they came to play a more prominent role in the next chapter of the country's domestic war on terror. [41] Al-Shabaab evolved:

Leaner and less restricted, al-Shabaab no longer contests a full-scale war of attrition against a better-supplied enemy in Somalia [...]. An insurgent al-Shabaab now exploits divisions among the peoples of the borderlands, targeting Christians and non-Muslims, while radicalising and mobilising Kenya's Islamic youth. Freed of their responsibility to govern [in Somalia], al-Shabaab have become 'spoilers.' [42]

As is customary with 'wars on terror', Kenya's has not been going well. Over 1,000 Kenyans have been killed in terror attacks between 2008 and 2016, [43] making Kenya one of the 20 countries most affected by such attacks. [44] Attitudes towards terrorism and the way to deal with it have changed as attacks have continued. In 2011, 82 per cent of Kenyans held a favourable opinion of their government's handling of the threat posed by al-Shabaab. By 2014, this declined sharply, with '51 per cent of Kenyans indicating that their government is doing 'very badly' or 'fairly badly' in the fight against violent extremism.' [45] Although it was 'ostensibly launched to enhance domestic security' in fact 'Al-Shabaab attacks have worsened since the Operation Linda Nchi invasion in 2011.' [46] The number of attacks shot upwards in 2012 and 2013, as this chart shows: [47]



Source: Global Terrorism Database

In September 2013, al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate mall in Nairobi, detonating explosives and going on a horrific killing spree that took 67 lives, making it the most devastating attack up until that point. The immediate security response from the government was confused and blighted by poor coordination between different security branches. In this sense:

The horrors of the civilian deaths at Westgate, and the seeming incompetence of their security forces... made the Kenyan public come to terms with the fact that they really were at war. [48]

Following years of propaganda aimed at Kenyans, in May 2014 an al-Shabaab media release declared that its struggle had turned fully to Kenya. [49]

Kenya's Anti-Terrorist Police Unit (ATPU) has led the government's response at home to al-Shabaab. It is alleged that the unit is responsible for extra-judicial killings and the disappearance of suspected militants as well as Islamic activists in Kenya. [50] For example, security forces are suspected of involvement in the killing of Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohamed, an extremist preacher in Mombasa who originated from Lamu and who was linked to al-Hijra. His death provoked riots at Kenya's coast.

Indeed, killings of suspected supporters of al-Shabaab and its Kenyan branches became most concentrated in Kenya's coastal towns and cities. One human rights organisation estimated that at least 21 Muslim clerics were killed by security agencies between April 2012 and July

2014. [51] Militants have also been accused of killing moderate preachers and Imams seeking to counter radical ideology in tit-for-tat attacks. [52] By the end of 2014, 'this cycle of murders and counter-murders, demonstrations and harsh policing, had generated a climate of widespread suspicion and tension at the coast.' [53]

Following a wave of attacks on churches and buses in 2014, the Kenyan government launched operation Usalama Watch ('peace watch') in April of that year. Over 6,000 police and other security services rounded up people from the Somali-populated Eastleigh neighbourhood in Nairobi. The government stated that over 4,000 people were arrested within the first week. [54]

The Kenyan Government justified the operation as a counter-terror measure to identify and remove 'foreigners' from the country. Yet according to one researcher:

[The] arrests appeared random and unregulated, and were accompanied by the mistreatment and abuse of suspects, the stealing of their personal property, and widespread bribery and corruption in the checking of their documentation. The ethnic targeting of Somalis and the victimisation of Muslims were two dominant aspects of the operation. [55]

The operation was strongly criticised by Somali and Muslim leaders. While seeking to demonstrate its resolve in the face of insecurity, the operation arguably only further alienated Kenya's Somalis and Muslims. At best, this has undermined prospects for cooperation between communities and the security forces. At worst, the Kenyan Government's securitised response has played directly into al-Shabaab's strategy (jujitsu again). Indeed, it was quick to release a Swahili video in May 2014 presenting Operation Usalama Watch's victimisation of Kenya's Muslims. As one study concludes:

The behaviour of the Kenyan Government, and especially its security forces, towards the country's Muslim population, in both the past and the present, provides fertile ground in which al-Shabaab, and now Al-Hijra, can sow the seeds of further dissent and disaffection. By continuing to alienate and victimize the Muslim population, the Kenyan Government is making matters worse, their actions only likely to prolong and deepen the struggle that lies ahead. There are no better recruiting agents for al-Shabaab than the poorly trained, ill-disciplined, and corrupt soldiers and police who carried out Operation Usalama Watch. [56]

Operation Usalama Watch was all the more jarring against the backdrop of historic marginalisation and unequal citizenship rights of Kenya's Somali populations, and the sense of injustice this has engendered. [57] Somalis have long had a contested and bitter relationship with the Kenyan state and its security apparatus, dating back to colonial times, and in contemporary Kenya Somalis often feel like a marginalised community whose citizenship is under question. [58]

51 per cent of Somali-Kenyans believe that their ethnic group are often or always treated unfairly by the government – more than twice the rate of any other ethnic group in Kenya. [59] Non-Somali Muslims too, especially at the coast, have also historically felt marginalised from a predominantly Christian country in what is seen as 'a Christian state, its political culture infused with Christian language and imagery' and its politics increasingly influenced by Pentecostalism. [60] Moreover, drawing on narratives of marginalisation from the centre, the majority-Muslim coastal region of Kenya has also witnessed the rise of calls for greater levels of devolution or, more radically, full secession from the rest of the country. [61]

The deepening polarisation in Kenya following terror attacks and security responses was not helped by condemnation and open xenophobia towards Somalis in the Kenyan media. One prominent paper declared that:

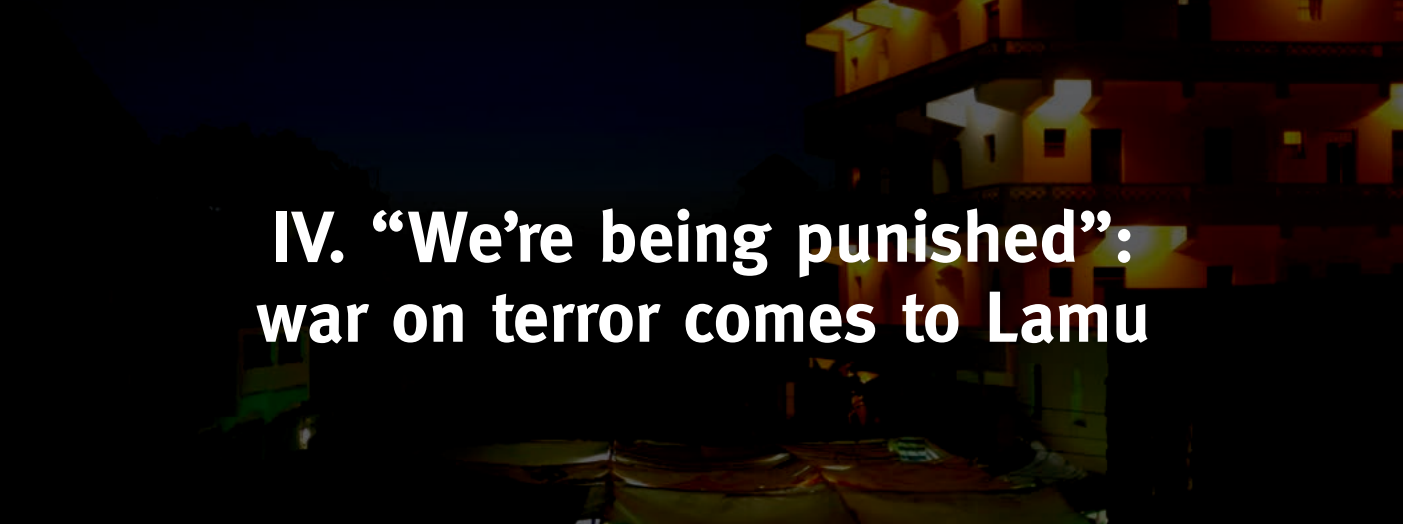
Every little, two-bit Somali has a big dream to blow us up, knock down our buildings and slaughter our children... We are at war. Let's start shooting. [62]

That many in the Kenyan public supported the operation and shared this suspicion of Somalis and Muslims illustrates the extent of divisions within Kenyan society. [63] These divides do, however, cut both ways: Somali-Kenyans are also three to four times more likely than other Kenyans to dislike having a neighbour of a different ethnicity or religion. [64] These divisions and dynamics are an important backdrop to understanding what happened in Lamu following the attacks.

Footnotes

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Header photo: Jimmy Kamude/IRIN



IV. “We’re being punished”: war on terror comes to Lamu

**Inside Kenya’s war on terror:
the case of Lamu**

**I. Lamu becomes a victim:
“They wanted to start a civil
war”**

**II. Tinderbox of grievances:
inequality and politics in Lamu**

III. Kenya’s war on terror

**IV. “We’re being punished”:
war on terror comes to Lamu**

**V. Countering violent
extremism: not yet a peace
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**VI. Foreign friends: lending a
hand?**

**Epilogue: building peace in
Lamu**

Our story now turns to how, after the 2014 attacks, Lamu became the location of intense counter-terrorism efforts, alongside efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE), supported and egged on by an international community preoccupied with Islamic radicalisation.

According to one investigation, the immediate government security response to the Lamu attacks in June and July 2014 was very slow. Police and other security agencies faced criticism for arriving on the scene of the attacks hours late, despite being posted nearby, and for being ill-prepared, with insufficient coordination and equipment. [65] Most damagingly, an official investigation later found that police had prior intelligence about the Mpeketoni attack. [66]

Nonetheless, the months following the attacks saw a significant beefing up of security in Lamu. Kenya’s Defence Forces (KDF) were deployed in greater numbers, with other security agencies “using all means to flush out assailants”. [67] Parliament had not approved this as required by the constitution, making it a politically controversial approach.

In Lamu feelings about this show of force remain mixed. Officials argue that:

We have done a lot of work to ensure that the area is safe ... People feel safer because of the security forces. For example, now they can sell their fish because the roads are safe. They also appreciate it because of tourism. [68]

In a mixed focus group, people stated that the presence of the KDF and other security forces had brought calm to the area: “we feel safe and cushioned”. [69] Interviewees involved in the tourist industry and other professions were especially supportive.

Others saw the security response as an inconvenience. A ban on night-fishing was harmful for fishermen, as too was the need for complex fishing permission sign-offs from the Kenyan navy. A curfew also meant that weddings, traditionally held at night, could not be carried out. Protests went on for days before this was scrapped. The requirement to carry identification and pass through security checkpoints also caused frustration.

A significant number of people we spoke to raised graver concerns. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Kenyan Human Rights Commission (KHRC) report into the period following the attacks states that:

[The] Kenyan Government conducted abusive operations in Tana River and Lamu counties in the aftermath of the attacks, during which security forces targeted Muslim and ethnic Somali men and boys for beatings, arrest, theft of property, and detention. [70]

Security forces arbitrarily arrested people off the road, from their houses and inside mosques, often in large groups. In Witu Town, 30 young men were arrested at once. Some men were held for weeks without charge. According to the rights groups:

Forces targeted Muslims, witnesses said, going from house-to-house searching for weapons and al-Shabaab suspects. The forces beat residents and accused them of either being al-Shabaab

members or aiding in the Mpeketoni and Witu attacks. [71]

Numerous stories of arbitrary arrests by the security services in subsequent months and years emerged in our conversations in Lamu. For example, one focus group participant stated that “the security officers should protect us. Instead they arrest our men and sons without genuine reasons”. [72]

Importantly, identity-based inequality is seen as connected to the provision of security and how safe people feel. For example, one civil society activist asserted that “the immigrant communities feel safe with KDF surrounding them.” [73] A woman from Mpeketoni agreed: “For us, there is more peace of mind with the security forces here.” But she also suggested that there is a logic to this: “We Christians feel safer because we are the target.” [74]

At the same time, these dynamics of insecurity cut both ways. Although local Muslims tend not to fear al-Shabaab, because it has largely not targeted Muslims, [75] they do face another threat: as a Muslim NGO worker put it, “We don’t feel secure in Kenya’s security system.” [76] “People feel harassed for who they are”, [77] another local resident explained.



Muslim women raised a similar concern: “we are subjected to checking especially when travelling – it is shameful the kind of checking done”. [78] Christian women felt they did not have to undergo the same checks. A Christian woman living in Lamu explained:

Muslims feel bad because at the checkpoints some security officers are still very discriminatory. When it comes to me they hardly check, but when it is Muslims they search them very thoroughly. I feel so bad because I feel they are being humiliated, and when I get on the bus I know that [the Muslims] think that I have been favoured. [79]

Part of the problem is that most security officers are perceived to be Christian and from up-country – less by design perhaps than as a reflection of the make-up of Kenya’s security forces. According to several of those interviewed, the problem is that they are not trained to avoid stereotyping Muslims as terror suspects. One woman stated that: “it even happened with me recently, a security officer was joking that because I was a Muslim I was a terrorist. It was just a joke but I still felt branded.” [80]

Another altogether darker issue has been allegations of extra-judicial killings of young men. As one civil society activist alleges, “people just disappear and the government does not share any information, they just say it is a security issue and sensitive. The KDF, and others, are ‘disappearing people’”. [81] Several focus group respondents stressed that many families have lost young men at the hands of KDF, “they are picked up and never come back”. [82] Another states that “people feel discriminated against by the security organs: sometimes people just go, and the police don’t tell you where they are”. [83] According to one interviewee, disappearances of young men, allegedly at the hands of the security services, were more frequent in the months after the Mpeketoni attacks, but have since become less common. [84]

Officials counter that the accusations are exaggerated and politicised: “when the security forces are carrying out their duties and responsibilities the people don’t like it. For example, when someone is being interrogated, they don’t like it.” [85] However, in-depth reports have alleged that the security forces are unaccountable. For example, the HRW and KHRC report:

... found that none of the victims of security abuses during the operations in Tana River and Lamu counties reported the abuses to authorities. When asked why they had not reported the abuse, they gave a number of explanations: some said they were threatened by security officers or they were ordered out of the office and threatened with arrest when they tried to voice concerns about the abuse. Others said that they did not report the abuses because they do not believe they can obtain justice for abuses at the hands of the government. [86]

Some respondents see ulterior, more cynical reasons behind the government's heavy-handed security response. A politician claims he was arrested – and held for several days without trial – due to his political aspirations and his dealings in land. [87] One civil society group believes they were targeted for challenging the government's investment and development plans in Lamu:

Our organisation was accused by the [Police Directorate of Criminal Investigations] of sponsoring al-Shabaab, and we were interrogated, but we know it is because of our opposition to the coal power station. [88]

Several people told us that poor security provision was economically motivated: "The land grabbers have a lot of influence – they use KDF to detain community landowners". Others state that "the KDF are also getting land – they have a base in Hindi but they are going to make money from it, the KDF see this as a business opportunity". [89] Another interviewee agreed: "someone somewhere is making money off this. They have destroyed [Boni forest] and are doing logging business there." [90] Overall, many local people believe that "the KDF and government have come to Lamu to take up our land but not security". [91]

As with the debate over who exactly was involved in the summer 2014 attacks, the truth about security force behaviour is hard to pin down. But perceptions matter a great deal. If al-Shabaab's propaganda about an occupation of Lamu by 'outsiders' starts ringing true, this could spell big trouble for the county. As one Muslim participant in a focus group discussion stressed, "this feels like a punishment for us. We want security and we want security services, but we shouldn't have to feel like we're under suspicion." [92] In the words of a politician, "the Kenyan government are not trying to achieve security through being smart, they are doing it through force - and this is making things worse." [93]

Many people simply feel helplessly caught between the security forces and al-Shabaab. On the one hand, in the words of a civil society activist, "al-Shabaab threatens anyone who engages with the security agencies." [94] On the other, as a local politician said, "people are scared to talk out about abuses by the government. They are also scared of al-Shabaab. So they just stay quiet." [95] A journalist told us the same story:

People are scared about al-Shabaab sympathisers being among us - so we are careful on what we say [...] Both al-Shabaab and the security forces are the reasons for not writing stories on these issues – but the security forces are worse. [96]

That local people see the security forces as a threat is a problem for the government. As one Muslim woman put it:

The reality is that people have some sympathy for al-Shabaab and fear the KDF. Even for me, if I had to pick between the two, I would run to al-Shabaab. [97]

Statements like these make clear that Kenya's security services have much further to go in winning the confidence of many of Lamu's people. Speaking of Kenya's improved response to terrorism, the Interior Ministry stated in November 2016 that "Community policing ... has also played a big role in several parts of the country. There is a lot of communication between the security agencies and community coordinators". This, it is claimed, helps get information on terror groups. [98]

There was little evidence of such communication between the security agencies and communities in Lamu, and a lack of forums for engagement. As one NGO worker focusing on CVE notes on engagement with the security services, "Forget the KDF, I can't even get a meeting with the police." [99]

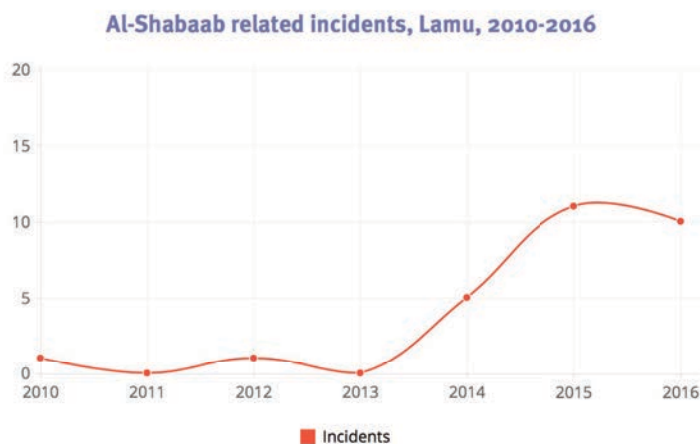
Another person working with community groups agrees, stating simply that "security

providers and users do not communicate.” [100] Whether such community forums with security forces would be useful – and be used by people without fear of al-Shabaab reprisals – is open to question. But the need to transform a situation marked by division and distrust is clear.

Meanwhile, Lamu is still affected by insecurity. In January 2016, people protested in Mpeketoni over the security situation. [101] In 2015, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) tracked 11 incidents in the Lamu region involving al-Shabaab, ranging from attacks on security services to attacks on buses and schools. In 2016, there were ten more. For example, an official in the Education Ministry explained how al-Shabaab went to a school in Lamu East, looking for Christian teachers. When they did not find any, they threatened Muslim ones for not doing enough for Islam. Five schools are closed as teachers don't want to go there now. [102]

While there have been no attacks on the scale of those seen in the summer of 2014, and the security situation has improved – thankfully for those whose livelihoods are linked to the tourism sector – there is no doubt that al-Shabaab still poses a real threat, and may be boosted by the reaction to poor and discriminatory security provision.

Al-Shabaab related incidents, Lamu, 2010-2016



(Source: ACLED)

Footnotes

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69. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

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72. Mixed focus group discussion, Lamu Town, 30 November 2016

73. Key Informant Interview with civil society activist, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

74. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, Lamu Town, 1 December 2016

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79. Key Informant Interview with businesswoman, 1 December 2016

80. Key Informant Interview with journalist, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

81. Key Informant Interview with civil society activist, Lamu Town, 29 November 2016

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Header photo: Thomas Wheeler/Saferworld



V. Countering violent extremism: not yet a peace strategy

**Inside Kenya's war on terror:
the case of Lamu**

**I. Lamu becomes a victim:
"They wanted to start a civil
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**VI. Foreign friends: lending a
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**Epilogue: building peace in
Lamu**

The government has continued to flex its security muscle in Lamu. In July 2016, 700 additional security personnel were deployed in the county. [103] However, this is not the only approach the government has taken. In September 2016, the Kenyan government launched its long-awaited National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism. President Kenyatta announced that the new strategy:

... will add prevention and counter radicalisation to the more traditional security approaches to fight the vice ... Together, in coordinated fashion, we must as a people drain the swamp of violent extremism and deny it room to radicalise Kenyans. [104]

Some government departments appear to be working on CVE in Lamu. For example, an Education Ministry official noted training for teachers on peace education and the risks of extremism, as well as support for peace clubs in schools.

Only time will tell how the government's new strategy impacts on the situation in Lamu. One staff member at an NGO working on CVE is already concerned that the strategy may simply end up "on the shelves". [105] Other civil society actors working on these issues clearly wished that opportunities to work constructively with government on the problems had been quicker to emerge: "the only thing the national government brought us after the attacks was a curfew and more security." [106]

Others took a more positive view. The county commissioner's office has supported engagement with youth through football tournaments, engaged them in committees and worked with groups such as the Kenyan Muslim Alliance and the Muslim Youth Alliance on events and projects. It is also developing a county-level CVE strategy which builds on the national plan.

Several local NGOs are working on CVE across Lamu. Most projects focus on building resilience of communities, countering extremist messages, engaging with young people and dealing with broader inter-community grievances. Some believe their work on alternative livelihoods has been useful, while others feel that their work in schools has had a measurable impact on changing attitudes. [107]

CVE efforts tend to focus on stopping individuals becoming tangled up in violent groups. But in Lamu, the scale of the challenge and the priorities seemed far from clear. We heard a range of opinions about the extent of support for and recruitment into al-Shabaab from Lamu. Most people think rates of recruitment are higher in other coastal areas, especially Mombasa. However, one government official affirmed "we have youth who have been radicalised." Another agreed – but again in slightly vague terms that further illustrate the trust gap between authorities and the Muslim community:

We have been told some young people have left, but we don't have that much information. The community does not provide much information because the Muslims won't report on one another. [108]

Regarding the links between local religious ideology and violence, one religious leader attempted to reassure us that “No Imam or preacher in Lamu has ever taken an extreme view.” [109] An obvious counter-example is Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohamed, tied to al-Hijra and killed in Mombasa, who was from Lamu and whose sermons used to proclaim “Tutawapiga na tutawatoa Lamu” (“we will beat them and remove them from Lamu”). [110] At the same time, one NGO worker suggested that the tone of sermons used to be more political, [111] while another observed:

Lamu is not a major recruitment centre for al-Shabaab. We have lost a few boys here and there. We might have a few hard-core Islamists. And a lot of hard-line preachers were trained in Lamu, but they went on to radicalise in other places.” [112]

This uncertainty about the scale of the problem was matched by the difficulty pinning down the most significant causes. In interviews and focus group discussions, people from across Lamu advanced a number of different reasons why people, especially young men, might be drawn to al-Shabaab:

- **Economic issues:** “Many young men don’t complete their education or have opportunities”, one businessman explained, so “the money offered by al-Shabaab is tempting”. [113] Studies by Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and Life and Peace Institute (LPI) question this, as does the fact that some recruits have come from relatively affluent coastal families.
- **Politics:** “The political system means that people are isolated and ignored. People take an opportunity to be heard and retaliate”. [114] ISS research endorses this as important: only four per cent of al-Shabaab members in a survey said they have trust in the political process to bring change; 99 per cent agreed with the statement that the ‘government only looks after and protects the interests of the few.’ [115]
- **Security force behaviour:** “People get executed [by security forces] and this makes the young blood boil, they want to get revenge”. [116] Such statements are in line with studies indicating that al-Shabaab recruits see security forces as abusive towards Muslims and join as a reaction to the government’s counter-terror strategy. [117]
- **Socio-economic injustice:** “People study hard, they have the qualifications, and they still can’t get jobs because of corruption.” [118] Meanwhile, al-Shabaab is telling local young people: “you have no land, your father has no land - but the Kikuyu do!” [119] This connects our story back to the deep divisions configured around the acquisition of land and investment as demographic and economic change spread their uneven impacts on the people of Lamu. Studies by ISS and the Journal of East African Studies have drawn the same conclusion: that ethnic and religious difference overlaid with inequality has created fertile ground for violent rebellion.
- **The need to believe in something:** al-Shabaab’s religious messaging, spread through networks, social media and DVDs, “presents an ideology that can be very attractive to people who are frustrated”. [120] ISS suggests that 87 per cent of al-Shabaab members join primarily for religious reasons. [121] The draw seems to be its ‘framework for making sense of, and articulating their grievances.’ [122]
- **Individual factors:** These included drug-use, troubled families, and ‘boys who want to be Rambo’. [123] Such explanations chime with a study on radicalisation in Eastleigh, Nairobi that ‘demonstrated that radicalisation is most strongly predicted by psychological determinants, above all historically troubled social relations, and process-oriented factors, particularly high levels of religiosity and exposure to radical networks.’

Looking back on this list, it fits the many studies which argue that a range of factors combine to lead individuals to join violent groups, who of course ‘take recruits from where they can best be found’. [124] Despite the large volumes of analysis that have been done, those working in NGOs delivering CVE projects were open about the challenges they faced in knowing where to focus their efforts. One was still trying to understand the context and test out different approaches, though was sceptical about some of the mainstream ones, such as dialogue with youth: “What is the end of dialogue? People talk about their issues, but so what?” [125]

Others were also open about the fact that they may not be engaging with the right people. [126] This was not helped by the fact that the security situation in Lamu had closed the space for open discussion: “People don’t have real conversations about violent extremism because they’re scared of al-Shabaab and the KDF. No-one knows who the informers are.” [127]

In this sense, CVE efforts seem to be hindered by the idea that the ‘extremists’ represent a completely illegitimate perspective that simply requires changing. This way of seeing the situation risks obscuring the reality: that Lamu is a conflict situation in which big issues to do with politics, land, jobs, equality and human rights need to be fixed.

As with ambiguity over what causes it, many interviewed struggled to define clearly what violent extremism is in the first place. For example, one agreed that “violent extremism is hard to define - I suppose it is that some youth are drawn to the idea of Jihad?” [128]

This is revealing of the extent to which CVE is an imposed framework that is failing to connect with the big challenges in Lamu as people see them. As LPI has pointed out, in Kenya, there is:

No intuitively equivalent term for ‘violent extremism’ in Kiswahili or Somali, and when asked to provide their own understanding of it, respondents tended to define the term based on the most pressing causes of insecurity in their communities. [129]

The implications of this are that:

CVE initiatives run the risk of defining violent extremism without input from, or in contrast to, how affected communities conceptualise the term. Subsequently, initiatives may fail to address local communities’ most pressing security concerns. [130]

At its worst, then, CVE could be ignoring local priorities in favour of international ones, and relying on problematic assumptions about the problems to be addressed rather than developing a more grounded analysis and agenda. Those conceptualising conflict as violent extremism are struggling to counteract what they see as an evil ideology contaminating misguided individuals. Because of this, the issues people in Lamu see as central – unequal access to jobs, land and politics – have become peripheral and obscure rather than clear and central to an overall problem-solving strategy.

This is why Lind et al see existing counter-radicalisation approaches as “fundamentally flawed”: they ‘treat’ radicalisation in isolation of “more systematic reforms in the state’s treatment of Somalis and Muslims.” The problem is that this:

Conveniently ignores the root causes of radicalisation, including institutionalised discrimination of Kenya’s Somalis and Muslims and marginalisation in the development of Muslim-majority counties in north-eastern and coastal areas of Kenya.

For this reason, they argue, “counter-radicalisation efforts are destined to fail in the absence of a wider reform effort to address these drivers”. [131]

This matters greatly for Lamu: if local grievances over identity, land and politics continue to provide fertile ground for al-Shabaab, the group may continue to use violence to polarise and divide, making constructive solutions that promote unity and equality less and less likely. Thus it is vital that grievances and the sense of identity-based exclusion are recognised as fundamental priorities in Lamu, and indeed across Kenya. Ultimately, the state and society need to demonstrate to marginal communities that they are able and willing to recognise and address grievances, rather than allowing violent movements to claim this role.

A real danger at present is that the opposite will transpire: legitimate grievances will become conflated with ‘extremist’ views – justifying inaction, entrenching the status quo and locking in a future of deepening marginalisation and intensifying violence.

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Header photo: Thomas Wheeler/Saferworld



VI. Foreign friends: lending a hand?

Inside Kenya's war on terror: the case of Lamu

I. Lamu becomes a victim: "They wanted to start a civil war"

II. Tinderbox of grievances: inequality and politics in Lamu

III. Kenya's war on terror

IV. "We're being punished": war on terror comes to Lamu

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Epilogue: building peace in Lamu

Just as Lamu's al-Shabaab conflict reflects broader issues within Kenya, it is also connected to international dynamics. The county neighbours Somalia, and the situation is linked to the Kenyan government's intervention there. Everything we heard about addressing Kenyan grievances goes double for Somalia, where the focus on fighting terrorism [132] has led the international community to neglect public grievances and participation in short-sighted ways.

Unfortunately, anger about international strategy in Somalia will play a role in feeding violence in Kenyan counties such as Lamu against both Kenyan and Western targets for the foreseeable future. As one local politician argues, "It's not our issue – it is the issue of the Kenyan government, of the USA, of the UK, and their fight in Somalia. We are just here." [133]

While the Kenyan government's intervention in Somalia was reportedly resisted at first by its international partners, they have since proved ready to lend it significant political, financial and security support. [134] While often voicing concerns, Western countries have also been consistent supporters of Kenya's domestic counter-terrorism efforts. Indeed, as recently as November 2016, the US Ambassador announced the delivery of a further US\$ 14 million for counter-terrorism cooperation. Speaking from Lamu Island, the ambassador told journalists:

I have also enjoyed the security in Lamu. This brings out the efforts that the Kenyan government is really working hard on matters security [sic]. We shall continue partnering with the government in ensuring Lamu and the whole nation is well secured. [135]

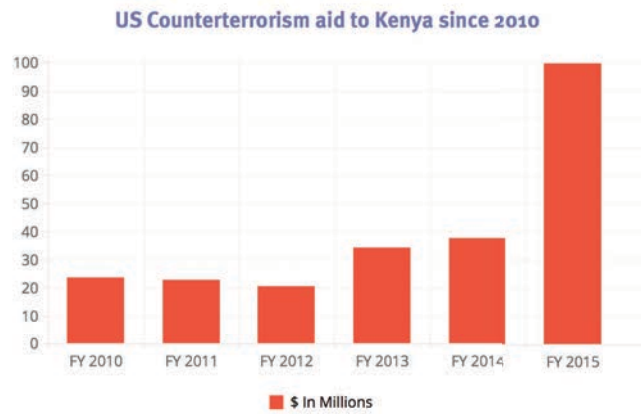
Then, in January 2017, the US Government approved the sale of US\$418 million of aircraft and arms to Kenya for use against al-Shabaab.

Lamu has long been an important site of Kenya-US security cooperation. After 2001, a number of US military operations in Somalia were coordinated from Lamu. [136] The US military also delivered humanitarian and development projects within Lamu, for example building wells in hard-to-reach villages. As one observer recalled:

most of their efforts have met with the approval of target populations, since the US military brings critical services to areas neglected by the central and provincial governments. At the same time, local communities are suspicious of the American presence because many presume that less altruistic motives – intelligence gathering, for instance – lie behind the aid. [137]

The US since appears to have stopped active operations in Lamu.

Nonetheless, Kenya has received increasing US military assistance for its operations in Somalia, including on the border. In 2015, total US military aid to Kenya was US\$100 million – up from US\$38 million in 2014. [138] The US has provided training to maritime forces in Lamu specifically since 2009. [139] Kenya has also remained among the top five recipients of US State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance, averaging at US\$8 million annually, which has been spent on building police capacity and other areas of the security sector. [140]



[Source: Security Assistance Monitor]

When then-President Obama visited Kenya in 2015, he stated that “On security, the United States and Kenya are already strong partners ... and today we reaffirm that we stand united in the face of terrorism.” [141] Despite the boost in funding to the Kenyan military that year, the president seemed to acknowledge the challenges being created by Kenya’s heavy-handed security response to terrorism, encouraging the Kenyan Government not to persecute or alienate minority groups in its efforts to crack down on terrorism: “We need to make sure the approaches taken in rooting out potential terrorist threats don’t create more problems than they solve”. [142]



Photo: U.S. Embassy Nairobi

Even though US efforts do focus on improving the rule of law framework for countering terror in countries like Kenya, [143] including the issue of accountability, [144] this still struck us as strange: on the one hand the US expresses concern at the highest level about Kenya’s counter-productive security approach to countering terror; then on the other, it ramps up the kind of assistance that at best reinforces these approaches, and at worst adds to the perverse incentive not to solve the problem.

At the same time, since 2012, the US has also provided support for CVE efforts at the coast. This included the Kenya Transition Initiative (KTI), a pilot initiative providing small grants to local organisations and networks engaged on the push and pull factors for recruitment. The KTI aimed at “creating communication channels for discussion of sensitive topics, empowering local youth through reinforcing community leadership and positive identity formation, and bolstering links between youth and skill-building opportunities.” [145] As one report notes, ‘the initiative was launched in Eastleigh and its environs and, in 2012, expanded to the coastal regions of Lamu, Kilifi, Kwale, Malindi and Mombasa – all Muslim majority areas.’ [146]

Following the KTI’s end in 2014, US\$ 5 million has been allocated for a new project entitled Strengthening Community Resilience against Extremism (SCORE). This involves 15 civil society partners at the coast, including several in Lamu, and will support local civil society and communities to address the drivers of extremism. [147]

Other international actors have also supported CVE efforts at the coast. In 2015 the UK launched a project to improve employment prospects for youth in Mombasa. [148] The

European Union, too, supports a regional project to understand drivers of radicalisation and help youth address relevant problems at community level. [149]

Taking stock of this support, on the positive side, many of the CVE efforts we saw did appear to be quite flexible to context: the NGOs we spoke to seemed to have a lot of room to design their programmes and engage on local conflict issues. In addition, as noted, local people clearly do appreciate projects that address concerns in marginalised areas. [150]

At the same time, the lack of clarity we found in some CVE projects about the need to confront the big conflict drivers in Lamu also raises important questions. Can the international focus on CVE possibly succeed if heavy-handed security force behaviour remains the norm? Wouldn't a stronger international focus on development in marginalised communities and human rights be much more effective than CVE? While counter-terror assistance is ever welcome, in December 2016 the government cancelled a US-backed civic education fund – but one illustration of how CVE is displacing rather than advancing rights and development issues as a centrepiece of international aid and diplomatic strategy in Kenya. If political tensions turn once again to violence in Kenya in 2017, as many fear, this loss of focus could prove a costly mistake.

Another key question for the US, UK and others is whether they have thought through what their economic investments could mean for conflict in Lamu. Jockeying for position with Chinese and Middle Eastern investors, the US is reportedly “very excited about LAPPSET” and “want[s] the American package to be considered”. [151]

With continued strife in South Sudan, low oil prices and an unfavourable international financing environment, it is not clear how fast the LAPPSET project will progress. Some fear that if it does, and local people lack relevant skills, “LAPPSET jobs will go to outsiders, then they will feel marginalised. When someone comes with a radical option, they will be interested in this.” [152]

Al-Shabaab draws on international factors in its propaganda, seeking to encourage recruits to see themselves as part of a global insurrection. [153] For this reason alone, international investors would be wise to be sensitive to the risks of clumsy investment in Lamu – which could be seen as depriving local people of land, jobs and rights, triggering further resentment and violence. If so, the solution lies in careful community engagement to understand the concerns that new projects could trigger, as a basis for investment strategies that redress potential issues in advance.

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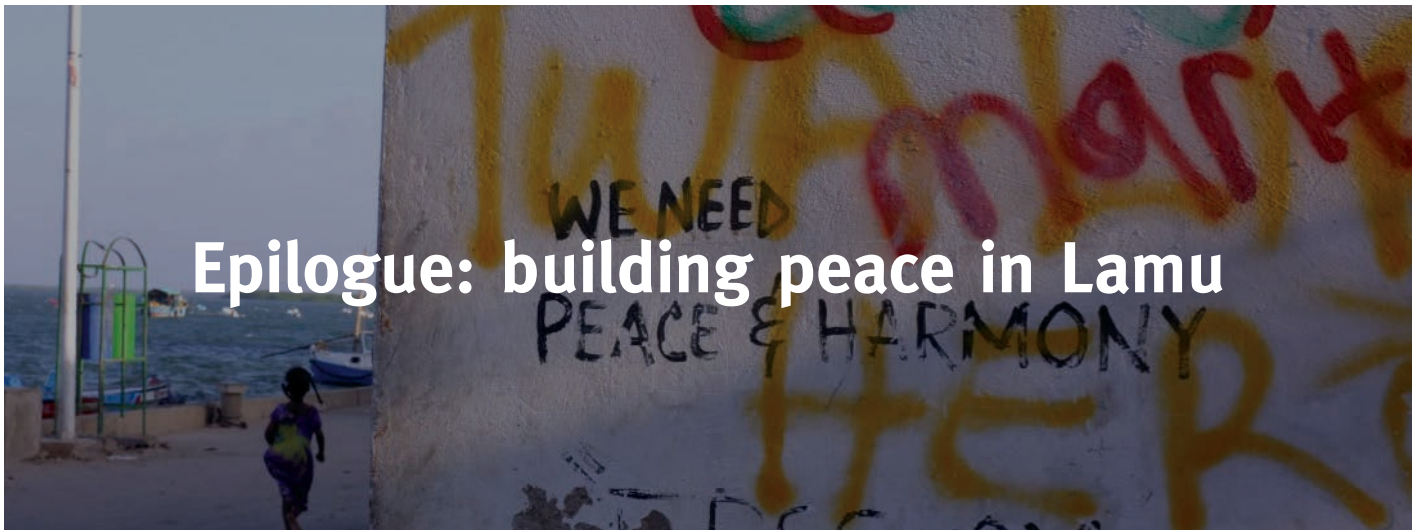
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Header photo: UK in Kenya



Epilogue: building peace in Lamu

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In Kenya there is an emerging official narrative of a war on terror being won. [154] Al-Shabaab is on the back foot in Somalia. Kenya has not seen further attacks on the scale of Westgate, Garissa or Mpeketoni. But no one believes that the threat of al-Shabaab has evaporated. When we asked people in Lamu whether they thought another large-scale attack targeting Christians and non-indigenous people would succeed in further dividing the area, or even manage to garner more support for the group, views were mixed.

On the positive side, there was a near-uniform acceptance that Lamu still has significant resilience to division. People often pointed to the response to the Mpeketoni attacks, with one person arguing that "everyone in Lamu Town felt bad for the victims of Mpeketoni. Some Kikuyus came here and we welcomed them." [155]

Others stressed that although the land disputes and politicisation of ethnicity had deepened divisions, it was important not to overlook the bonds that did exist. As one elderly woman from the Mpeketoni area argued, "We have stayed with Kikuyu since when they came. We used to nurse their children as they go farming". [156]

Others also pointed out that:

People won't get behind al-Shabaab or openly support it because firstly they blame the group for the problems they face now, including bringing the security restrictions, and secondly because we are well educated in Islam. [157]

Indeed, the depth of Islamic belief and teaching in the area was seen as antithetical to al-Shabaab's ability to garner support.

Furthermore, people pointed to the hard work being done by numerous local civil society groups, and especially faith groups, in trying to improve community cohesion through dialogues and fora that bring people together. As a businesswoman from Mpeketoni suggested, "inter-faith dialogue helped a lot because for example Christians were told about how terrorism is not part of Islam. It also helps heal divides." [158]

A religious leader in a focus group discussion pointed out that the:

attack in Mpeketoni immediately divided people by religion and tribe. However, we [a group of imams and preachers] formed an inter-faith forum and led a public demonstration, we closed the whole road. The whole community came, the media came, and on the second day the national government came. [159]

However, it is questionable whether bottom-up peacebuilding activities have managed to reach beyond those in society who are already open to participation. As we heard in one focus group:

Community leaders have sat together and united our networks, but at the youth level, those beyond our networks, they are not being united. This includes the most sensitive group, the

young marginalised men. [160]

Overall, progress has been made, but no one is under any illusions about the persistence of divisions:

There has not been enough bringing people together to understand it's not Muslims or Christians. So another attack would still really divide people. [161]

There are other issues that civil society leaders feel are beyond their control. As a businessman points out, "the government needs to do its security work but ensure they do not victimise people". [162] While the government – and its international partners – recognise the problems embedded within Kenya's security sector, especially related to abuse of power, discrimination, and the lack of accountability, reform has been slow and uneven. Civil society has many insights that could help shape the government's peace strategy – on both security and other matters. But people feel disappointed by the tendency to avoid consultation on sensitive security matters, and the consequent failure to enable engagement. [163]

Lamu's structural problems also remain largely unaddressed. Whatever development initiatives come to Lamu – whether a port, other infrastructure or tourist investment – new jobs and economic opportunities will mean more migration, tension and grievances. [164] The remedy? Time and again we were told of the need to invest in education for 'local' people.

One issue raised even more frequently than education or jobs was the need for the government to ensure that everyone has title deeds. As one woman involved in peacebuilding efforts explained:

We can talk about cohesion and living together but indigenous people will still feel bad without the title deed, they will say 'we can't get a loan, we can't send our children to school.' [165]

The issue sits at the centre of identity-based conflict in the region. In the words of a politician: "If we had equal land rights and were treated equally then who would be able to incite one group against another? Their propaganda would not work." [166] There has been some work by both the national and county government to resolve the issue of title deed ownership, with customary community ownership of land recognised in Kenya's new constitution, and some deeds being issued to local people. Nonetheless, many locals still lack the skills and the stamina to attain land titles, and meanwhile the interests at play in Kenya's land politics remain entrenched – linked to actors in Nairobi with considerably more power than the 'small people' who are most at risk from further violence, whether at the hands of al-Shabaab or the security services.

Unfortunately, the temptation remains for politicians to gain support by taking disputes over land, jobs or services, and mobilising 'their' constituencies against 'the others'. In Lamu, devolution appears merely to have brought such national dynamics closer to the local level.

With elections due this year in August 2017, religious leaders in Lamu are worried about election-related violence between identity groups: "We're on a time bomb and it could explode at any time." [167] Even local officials share these concerns, predicting that, "as we move towards elections, more violence can be expected". [168]

Yet, despite the deep fissures and vulnerabilities that exist in Lamu, al-Shabaab may yet be unable to mobilise significant levels of support from its people. As one study explains:

Kenyan Muslims are not united, and nor is the coast. Race and ethnicity, as well as religious differences, divide these potential communities.... This cannot become a popular mass movement. [169]

So worries about large-scale recruitment and rebellion may well be overblown. However, they also miss the point. As one politician and businessman suggested:

As long as there are grievances here al-Shabaab will be able to continue. So it won't get to a civil war, but also we won't have a solution. [170]

The West's current obsession with CVE marks, in some ways, progress from the overly

securitised war on terror. But as Kenya demonstrates, it has by no means replaced securitised thinking, and countries such as the United States have made this clear through putting their money and diplomatic support behind Kenya's military-security approach in both Kenya and Somalia. Nevertheless, even with CVE, which is in theory open to addressing causal factors and community perspectives, outside actors risk getting it wrong in contexts like Kenya.

In the best case scenario, this leads to the misallocation of resources and attention. In the worst, it could fuel an escalation of violence and a divisive response. There is no reason for forward strategy to be unclear though. First, Lamu needs a peace strategy rather than a range of counter-terror crackdowns and CVE projects. Such a strategy can easily be developed by listening to voices like those we spoke to with a view to identifying the issues that could lead to conflict (rather than merely looking for 'push and pull factors' that could lead to recruitment). Second, as a general rule, the most sensitive issues are typically the most pertinent to progress.

The priorities that came through most clearly from our research in Lamu were as follows. Firstly, Lamu deserves a changed approach to security provision that treats all groups equally and respects rights and due process even when dealing with violent individuals. Secondly, there needs to be quicker progress on providing equal access to land titles, jobs, education and political representation for all people in Lamu. Third, dialogue and bridge building will remain important, but dialogue does need to feel meaningful: it is up to Kenya's government – encouraged by its international friends – to demonstrate that it is listening to local people and acting decisively to address their concerns.

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