The Strategic Importance of Kenya in the Fight Against Terrorism in the Horn of Africa -- Evaluating Counterrorism Measures in Kenya

Conny Sidi Kazungu
Graduate Research Fellow
Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy
University of Tennessee

March 2018

The Strategic Importance Of Kenya In The Fight Against Terrorism In The Horn Of Africa--Evaluating Counterterrorism Measures In Kenya

Conny Sidi Kazungu
Graduate Research Fellow
Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy
University of Tennessee

Introduction

Since independence in 1963, Kenya has arguably been the most stable country in the Horn of Africa. Kenya's stability and the government's promotion of foreign investment and trade made it attractive to many western nations. During the Cold War, Kenya appeared to be both an ally of the West (and of the Anglo-American coalition in particular). It was also a possible launching site for a rapid deployment force in the event of an incursion in the Persian Gulf by the Soviet Union or others communist allies.[1] More recently, Kenya has welcomed refugees from the politically troubled neighboring countries of the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. It was thus surprising when Kenya experienced her first terrorist attack in the late 1990s, and today, Kenya is at the frontline of terrorism.

On August 7, 1998, two Al Qaeda terrorists hit the American embassy in Nairobi and two hundred people were killed (including forty-four American personnel in the embassy building), and over 5,000 people were injured and wounded.[2] Four years later, on November 22, 2002, Al Qaeda terrorists struck the Paradise Hotel, an Israeli-owned facility north of Mombasa, killing sixteen Israeli and Kenyan citizens. It was not until the 9/11 attacks in New York that a connection was made by the United States government, linking terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa to those in the West.   While the majority of the attacks targeted western countries-primarily the US and other key allies like Israel, more recently we observe retaliatory attacks aimed directly at the Kenya government for its involvement in combating terrorism in the region. As a result of these terrorist attacks, Kenya and other countries in the Horn of Africa have received military support and intelligence from the US and the United Nations to prevent violent extremism and counter-terrorism.[3]   Several development programs and projects now contain security dimensions mainly orchestrated by Pentagon strategists partnering with the State Department and international aid agencies like USAID and AFRICOM.[4]

---

[1] Widner, Jennifer A (1992), 'Kenya's Slow Progress toward Multiparty Politics', *Current History*, pp. 214-218:217

[2] Carson, Johnnie (2005), 'Kenya: The Struggle against Terrorism, in Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa' (Robert L. Rotberg (editor), (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press), pg. 180

[3] Miles, W. (2012). Deploying Development to Counter Terrorism: Post-9/11 Transformation of U.S. Foreign Aid to Africa. *African Studies Review, 55*(3), 27-60. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/stable/43904847

[4] Prestholdt, J. (2011). Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism. *Africa Today, 57*(4), 3-27. doi:10.2979/africatoday.57.4.3

More recently, in September 2013, a premiere mall in Nairobi was attacked and a siege lasting 80 hours resulted in 67 deaths.[5] This was the first major attack against the Kenya government by the Al Shabaab terrorist group, a faction of Al Qaeda. It was also retaliation for Kenya's involvement in the US sponsored counterterrorist activities in north-eastern Kenya and Somalia. Detailed investigations after the attack reported the involvement of members of a neighborhood watch from a nearby area and volunteers from the public protecting civilians during the attack. Poorly paid, untrained armed members of the armed forces and security officers, combined with delayed responses and general inability in efficiently fighting the attackers, led to the prolonged massacre.[6]

In April 2015, Al Shabaab militants again attacked mostly students at the Garissa University College in the north-eastern part of the country resulting in 147 deaths. Investigations indicated the entire university had just two guards. Furthermore, during the attacks, an officer was killed in friendly fire further enhanced the lack of expertise of the armed and security forces in the region in regards to counter-terrorism.[7] Further terrorist attacks have occurred in the Lamu region, Coast province, and other East African countries as well. In the Lamu region, the socio-economic impact on the local communities is severe. One such example is several schools in the Boni National Reserve which have been closed for the last three years as the Al-Shabaab group recruiting locals, attacks police stations, schools and government buildings, creating relative instability in the region.[8]

Kenya has been inadvertently immersed into the 'global war on terror' with the US as the lead player, receiving policy directives aimed at engaging countries in Africa in combating terrorist activities in the region.[9] Today we observe the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) with the support of the US government present in Somalia, fighting against extremist factions of Al Qaeda including the Al Shabaab and Jaysh Al-Ayman groups respectively. A few questions arise, first, how did Kenya end up a victim of terrorism? Second, how can we further understand her strategic geographic importance and support her in the international fight against violent extremism and terrorism in the Horn of Africa? Third, how effective are the existing counterterrorism measures in the country?

Radicalization in the Region

Kenya has always had a seemingly volatile relationship with her north-eastern neighbors of Somalia and Ethiopia. These complex relationships stem from post-colonial irredentist claims

[5] The Guardian US Edition October 4, 2013

[6] Ibid

[7] BBC UK April 3, 2015

[8] Ibid

[9] Carmody, P. (2005). Transforming Globalization and Security: Africa and America Post-9/11. *Africa Today, 52*(1), 97-120. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/stable/4187846

Berschinski, Robert G. 2007. Africom's Dilemma: The "Global War on Terrorism," "Capacity Building," Humanitarianism, and the Future of U.S. Security Policy in Africa. Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

in the region.[10] Irredentism –the desire of a nation-state to incorporate territory inhabited by people of the same nation but under the suzerainty of a different government only increased the tense Kenya-Somali and Kenya-Ethiopia relations over the years.

In the case of Somalia, there were previous attempts to incorporate two-fifths of the land in the north-eastern region of Kenya into Somalia. Further, the Somali people inhabiting the northern part of Kenya have often fought to be treated fairly as Kenyans, while the Somali government still has clauses in its constitution claiming the region as part of a greater Somalia. However, Kenya always hailed triumphantly and after the Shifta war that started at independence in 1963 to 1967 and a peace treaty that followed maintaining relative peace between the two countries. Until the mid-1990s the existing tensions remained as such-latent peace, pressure, but much of that has now changed. Today we observe an escalation from pressure to the radicalization and recruitment of youth, men, and women to join extremist groups such as Al Qaeda in the region. This radicalization is not only limited to the north-eastern part of the country, but to the coastal province as well.

To fully comprehend the development of extremism in the region, it is essential to understand the territorial disputes rooted in the colonial and post-colonial experience of Kenya. Since the undercurrents of what seems to be a sudden radicalization of the region stem from the pre-colonial boundaries set around the Horn of Africa. During the Scramble for Africa, European countries divided Africa along Eurocentric geographic lines, paying little regard to each country's national ethnic, religious and economic abilities. In fact, scholars have cited these perplexing lines of demarcation as strategic for the European colonialists as they were not intended for Africans.[11]

The post-independence era was marked with several territorial disputes and border wars along the Horn of Africa, as countries aimed to restore what they firmly believed to be their rightful territories. For instance, Somalia had several border disputes with her eastern Ethiopian and her southeastern Kenyan neighbors respectively. Somalia has long claimed the northern border of Kenya as her fair territory, and this clause remains active within her constitution.

Moreover, constant dissent and instability of the Somali government has resulted in more extremist factions in Somalia and beyond than previously known in history. These extreme factions encourage anti-western sentiments, forced recruitment of youth, women, and children into radical Islam and attack any regional allies of West-including Kenya. To further complicate the situation, there is a significant identity crisis by Somalis in the north-eastern region of Kenya. This identity crisis has resulted in the marginalization of the minority Somali population who are considered neither Somali nor Kenyan. Many Somali-Kenyans face extreme marginalization and racism in Kenya.

Several complaints by Somali-Kenyans including the denial of national identity cards based on ancestral origin. Further denial of employment opportunities based on discrimination

---

[10] Kromm, D. (1967). Irredentism in Africa: The Somali-Kenya Boundary Dispute. *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science (1903), 70*(3), 359-365. doi:10.2307/3627482
[11] Ibid

due to their background, and the recent escalation of terrorist attacks in the region, have all resulted in a population of disgruntled, often poverty-stricken and marginalized Kenyans, who then find resolve and purpose in joining extremist groups.[12] A recent interview by youth in the North Eastern region explained that poverty, identity crisis, and marginalization leads many young men and women to the arms of extremist factions within the area.[13] Therefore, the pre-existing tension, anti-western sentiments, alignment with radical factions from arts of the middle-east latent peace in the region, combined with the irredentist claims, identity crisis, and poverty has resulted to some of the extremist activities we observe today in the Horn of Africa.

The Horn of Africa: A Context

The greater Horn of Africa thrusts itself toward Yemen, the heart of Arabia and the Persian/Arab Gulf. This complex region of northeastern Africa that extends from the peaks of Kilimanjaro to the depression of Djibouti and from the deserts of Chad to the Red Sea and on southward, past Cape Guardafui, to the barren coastline of Punt, has roughly 149 million people, more than half of whom are Muslims.[14]

For geostrategic purposes, in an error of terror, Yemen belongs to this greater Horn of Africa area, adding another 20 million people, who are virtually all Muslims. The area is not necessarily cohesive physically, except for the unifying Rift Valley which extends from the Sudan and Djibouti south through Ethiopia and into Kenya. In the global battles for freedom and democracy and against terrorism these seven states - Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen - astride the Red Sea, the Gulf of Eden and the Indian Ocean share a paucity of resources and unfulfilled desires for rapid economic advancement.[15] The region is also bound together by its recent history as a target due to its geographical proximity to the homeland of Osama bin Laden. Further, long and continuing interrelationships of illicit trade, religion, and centuries of Muslim-Christian accommodation and antagonism, renowned resistance against former western colonizers, abject poverty, poor governance, and underdevelopment, all created a complex web providing a tasty menu for potential terrorists.[16]

Kenya's stagnating economy, its continued struggle with the high level of corruption, and the marginalization of its large coastal Islamic community continues to make it one of the principal recruiting grounds for local terrorist sympathizers and supporters. The presence of a large number of foreign diplomatic missions, a major United Nations complex, and a wide range of western-owned businesses continue to provide Kenyan and international terrorists with a variety of reasonably accessible soft but high-value targets.[17]

---

[12] Prestholdt, J. (2011). Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism. *Africa Today, 57*(4), 3-27. doi:10.2979/africatoday.57.4.3

[13] BBC UK April 3, 2015

[14] Rotberg, Robert I (2005), 'The Horn of Africa and Yemen—Diminishing the Threat of Terrorism' in Battling terrorism in the Horn of Africa, op cit, p. 1

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

Counterterrorism Measures

Continual support from the US and its allies to Kenya on counterterrorism measures should not only involve strategic development directives but enhance aid related incentives.[18] Kenya needs all the support it can get to maintain stability in the region which in turn benefits the US and other western countries. The country's political and economic dynamics have a direct effect on the US counterterrorism measures and agenda in the region. Further, recurring attacks in the area have an immediate impact on development, which cannot occur with heightened insecurity. Threats of strikes discourage tourism, trade, and investment, and has a direct effect on local communities and infrastructure.

There are also more general concerns about the effectiveness of these counterterrorism programs. First, there is increased social and political tensions in the region due to discriminatory and marginalization counterterrorism practices by the Kenyan and US government.[19] In particular, Kenyan –Muslims of lower socio-economic backgrounds are targeted as terrorists and face social stigma. This puts into question the effectiveness of fighting terrorism without unjust discrimination.

Second, the neglected regions of the country are still battling potential attacks from extremist groups, especially the Lamu and other coastal areas that have faced severe economic instability due to fear and harassment from the Jaysh Al-Ayman group. These communities, mainly young children and women, face threats of forced recruitment and radicalization on a daily basis.[20]

Third, recurring travel advisories on Kenya from the US Department of State severely deters investors, negatively impacts tourism which is a significant source of revenue to the Kenyan economy.

Lastly, President Trump's recent remarks about the geographic insignificance of the Southern hemisphere remain perplexing with significant policy implications given the strategic importance of several countries along the Horn of Africa. The current Trump administration has not passed comment on the situation in Kenya and existing foreign policy, for the most part, remains akin to the previous Obama administration. The long-term significance of Kenya cannot be ignored, and many western governments are recognizing the geographic importance of countries along the Horn of Africa. Djibouti has been identified as geographically strategic in fighting terror in the Middle-East. Many western army bases including that of France and the US have set camp in the small country.

The Kenyan lesson is simple, Somalia's contiguity with Kenya and the recent ban on Somali travel by the US as a counterterrorism measure may have dire consequences. First, by isolating countries in this region, the US is inadvertently putting pressure on Kenya and

---

[18] Prestholdt, J. (2011). Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism. *Africa Today, 57*(4), 3-27. doi:10.2979/africatoday.57.4.3
[19] Ibid
[20] USA Today February 2, 2018

her neighbors to be a pillar of stability amidst a significant rise in tension. Second, there is an increased voluntary and involuntary radicalization of vulnerable youth, women, and children in the region. Third, increased poverty, marginalization, and human rights abuses by the extremist factions in the area will eventually take a toll on the economy of the country and general instability in the region. Therefore, Kenya requires support politically, economically, and militarily if the US strives to maintain its strategic importance, as well balance and peace in the region.