

# COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KENYA

Occasional Paper 21

JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION IN AFRICA





# COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KENYA

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This research was a collaboration between Georgetown University in Washington DC and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Cape Town, in consultation with the Life & Peace Institute (LPI).

Published by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in consultation with the Life & Peace Institute.

105 Hatfield Street  
Gardens, 8001  
Cape Town, South Africa

[www.ijr.org.za](http://www.ijr.org.za)

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First published 2016

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ISBN: 978-1-928332-13-8

Designed and typeset by COMPRESS.dsl

### **Disclaimer**

*Respondent views captured in this report do not necessarily reflect those held by Georgetown University, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, or the Life & Peace Institute. Further, it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate specific allegations made by respondents against either state or non-state entities. While efforts were made to capture the testimonies of interview subjects in their first language, inaccuracies may still have been inadvertently captured in the process of translation and transcription.*

## Preface

The eyes of the world are on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the enduring Al-Qaeda-and Taliban-related conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with insufficient concern on the growing manifestation of extremism and terrorist attacks in Africa.

This report is the culmination of a three-month pilot study which took place in Kenya between June and August 2016. Our research sought to gain a snapshot of local perceptions of violent extremism, most notably al-Shabaab and their affiliates, and current government and CSO initiatives to address this challenge.

I add my personal gratitude and appreciation to Georgetown University in Washington DC for their support and funding of the project, the cooperation of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Cape Town, the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) in Uppsala and their office in Nairobi, where Jody Henderson and the research team provided excellent professional and collegial support.

Popular narratives seen in the international media surrounding violent extremism in Africa often lack nuance and draw on frames of reference regularly used to analyse conflict in the Middle East. The crucial lesson from this research concerns the importance of nuance and the distinctiveness of particular manifestations of extremism. Every extremist movement feeds off particular security fault lines, specific causes of popular discontent, changing political situations and the inevitable weaknesses that characterise discontent and extreme forms of resistance, as well as the distinctive religious milieu within which it operates. To misread these realities often contributes to the deepening of extremist positions.

Working closely with the Life & Peace Institute in Kenya, this report sought to give preference to local voices that, to date, are under-represented in extremism research. Authors and practitioners from the continent are uniquely placed to understand the context-specific, historical and social mileaus within which extremism prospers. The consideration of more African voices may further assist policy-makers and political leaders to find ways of improving peace and security on the continent, other than through the simple promotion of militarism and related security strategies.

The primary field based-researchers and authors of this report were Alex Humphrey and Stephen Buchanan-Clarke, supported by the staff of LPI as indicated in the Acknowledgements that follow. We are particularly grateful to them for their collegiality, friendship, experience and assistance. Without the support of LPI's staff from Nairobi office, this Report could not have been finalised.

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*Photo: Kaisu Raasakka*

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the six local field researchers in Nairobi who mobilised and conducted focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Thank you also to Mohammed Hamisi of ACT! (Act Change Transform), who provided invaluable assistance in conducting fieldwork in Mombasa.

A special thanks to the LPI Nairobi office team and Demessie Fantaye from LPI's regional programme for valuable guidance in the development of research methodologies, in conducting fieldwork and enriching the final product of this research.

Georgetown University and the Swedish Mission Council provided financial support which made the research possible.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

<b>AMISOM</b>	African Union Mission in Somalia
<b>ATPU</b>	Anti-Terrorism Police Unit
<b>CI</b>	Counter-Insurgency
<b>CT</b>	Counter-Terrorism
<b>CVE</b>	Countering Violent Extremism
<b>FGDs</b>	Focus Group Discussions
<b>IJR</b>	Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
<b>KDF</b>	Kenya Defence Forces
<b>LPI</b>	Life & Peace Institute
<b>VE</b>	Violent Extremism

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Painting on a wall at Garissa University College following the 2 April 2015 attack.



## Executive Summary

The emergence of various armed ‘extremist’ groups in the Greater Horn of Africa, particularly al-Shabaab and its affiliates, has elicited a range of political, security, and developmental responses.<sup>1</sup> Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), a developmental approach to counter-terrorism that seeks to address the social and political ‘root causes’ of violent extremism, has gained particular prominence in Kenya. This report considers current academic and policy-based discourse around CVE within the larger context of human security. Findings presented below show community perceptions of violent extremism based on extensive consultations in four sizeable Muslim-majority urban communities in Kenya: Eastleigh and Majengo in Nairobi, Majengo in Mombasa, and Garissa. Communities in these locations have been targeted both for recruitment by armed extremist groups like al-Shabaab and for CVE programming by the Kenyan government and local and international civil society.

The results of this study underscore considerable discrepancies between dominant narratives around violent extremism present in policy and academic arenas, and the lived experiences of those in communities affected by violent extremism and targeted by government and civil society organisations for CVE interventions. Notably, violent extremism was cited as just one among several perceived sources of insecurity. Others included criminal gangs, oppressive security forces, poverty and unemployment. These come together to create a complex web of drivers of insecurity which often tend to be mutually reinforcing. This suggests that a purely CVE-driven response to insecurity may obfuscate persistent structural or socio-economic issues to which violent extremism may be incidental or secondary.

It is broadly accepted that government-sponsored and/or civil society-led CVE initiatives can only be effective if they build confidence with the local communities that they target. However, interviewees expressed widespread distrust and resentment towards government and security forces. Improving relationships between vulnerable communities and the state by strengthening trust and communication is of paramount importance to ensuring the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing violent extremism. Additionally, to date, CVE initiatives have almost exclusively targeted Kenyan Muslims. This may have had the unintended consequence of contributing to the profiling and scapegoating of Muslim Kenyans, while obscuring the non-ideological factors that contribute to violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Shabaab was given prominence in this report as the group is responsible for the majority of incidents labelled as terrorist in the Horn of Africa over the last decade and carried out several large-scale attacks in Kenya in recent years. However, East Africa and the Horn have a history of indigenous movements and violent extremist organisations that espouse radical religious narratives. These include, for example, the Sudan-based Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ), the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) in Somalia. The region has also seen attacks by outside international VE organisations such as the 1998 US embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi by Egyptian Islamic Jihad (a forerunner of al-Qaeda), and the attempted assassination of Husni Mubarak in Addis Ababa by the Egyptian organisation Gama’at al-Islamiyya.

While definitions of violent extremism employed in academia and policy discussions usually emphasise the phenomenon's political, religious or ideological character, community-based definitions are more likely to reflect individuals' localised and lived experiences of insecurity and violence. This lack of definitional consensus between affected communities and international stakeholders, including donor states/agencies and security analysts, holds a number of significant implications that transcend semantics. Not least is the danger that definitions of violent extremism promulgated in international policy and donor arenas may lack local relevance. The discrepancy also calls into question the validity of many of the reductionist narratives and ideological assumptions that often dominate media and public discourse surrounding violent extremism.

Findings suggest there is no single pathway to violent extremism, and the involvement or engagement in violent extremist organisations should be understood as a complex psychosocial process. Groups like al-Shabaab clearly exploit perceived historical, social and political grievances and draw on extreme interpretations of Islam to craft propaganda narratives. However, understanding what makes an individual susceptible to recruitment and radicalisation towards violence should take into account his or her social environment. Structural marginalisation, the breakdown of family and community structures, the proliferation of criminal gangs, youth unemployment and corruption, human rights abuses, individual and collective trauma, among other factors, merge in different ways to create environments conducive to the spread of extreme ideologies, especially among vulnerable youth.<sup>2</sup> This occurs via one-on-one contact between a recruiter and an individual but is increasingly occurring over social media platforms.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that the role of perceived personal rewards in the recruitment process (including, among others, social status, financial gain, personal empowerment, and a sense of glory) is under-represented in discussions around violent extremism in Kenya. Moreover, for those who have experienced harassment or extortion at the hands of local criminal gangs or police, joining an extremist group may be seen as an avenue for revenge. Others may be duped into joining groups like al-Shabaab by recruiters' promises of employment or study opportunities abroad, while individuals who have criminal pasts may see recruitment as a means of escaping law enforcement.

The diverse pathways that individuals may follow to join violent extremist organisations in Kenya pose considerable challenges to the design and implementation of CVE programming. Additional research on locally specific recruitment methods would serve to inform the design and implementation of more nuanced CVE initiatives, which may currently overemphasise interventions to address structural 'push' factors while failing to address some of the more practical reasons individuals may join al-Shabaab or other armed groups.

This analytical study aims to amplify voices from communities most affected by violent extremism. The authors hope that the evidence-based findings that follow are adequately considered to ensure that local perceptions of violent extremism play a more central role in academic and policy debates around violent extremism and CVE in the future.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

### ***Local Definitions of Violent Extremism***

- 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. For example, respondents from communities in Majengo (Nairobi) and Majengo (Mombasa), areas characterised by high levels of crime, included local street gangs

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<sup>2</sup> The 2010 Kenyan Constitution defines 'Youth' as 'the collectivity of all individuals in the Republic who (a) have attained the age of eighteen years; but (b) have not attained the age of thirty-five years'.

in their definitions of ‘violent extremism,’ while respondents in Eastleigh and Garissa more readily identified violent extremism with al-Shabaab.

#### *Perceptions of Insecurity*

- Only in Garissa did respondents refer to the groups dominantly labelled as violent extremist (in particular al-Shabaab) as the leading source of insecurity in their community.
- Respondents from communities in Nairobi and Mombasa unanimously identified local street gangs and Kenyan security forces as their primary sources of concern. Respondents reported low levels of trust in the police and made accusations of harassment, corruption, forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings.
- Perceptions of insecurity differed by age and gender. For example, women respondents were more likely to cite local gangs as their primary security concern, while youth more often emphasised police harassment.
- Somali Kenyan respondents, who reported being afraid to report crimes committed against them to the police for fear that their identification documents would be confiscated as a result, felt particularly vulnerable to local criminal gangs.

#### *Perceptions of the Drivers of Violent Extremism*

- The factors driving violent extremism identified by respondents varied by region. However, specific contributing factors that arose in discussions were cross-cutting, including poverty, unemployment and economic marginalisation.
- Alleged police profiling, harassment and extortion were also commonly identified as acts of violent extremism, especially among youth respondents. They identified resulting resentment and fear towards government security forces, coupled with poor employment opportunities, as giving some the sense of hopelessness, driving them to join al-Shabaab and other armed extremist actors.
- In addition to structural ‘push’ factors, respondents also assented that many join al-Shabaab for their own practical reasons – for example, as an escape route from Kenyan security forces, as a means of making quick financial gains, or as a means of obtaining revenge against an enemy.
- Extremist religious messaging was identified as a potential driver of violent extremism in Mombasa but did not feature prominently in other research locales. Furthermore, respondents noted that structural factors, marginalisation and police harassment are instrumental in making individuals receptive to such messaging. In Mombasa, respondents identified specific mosques and preachers who are known for preaching extreme interpretations of Islam, and the availability of sermons on Internet forums or on CDs in local marketplaces.

#### *Perceptions of al-Shabaab’s Recruitment Tactics*

- Respondents reported a range of recruitment tactics used by al-Shabaab. Again, in Mombasa, respondents were more likely to cite exposure to religious messaging through sermons and Internet forums as a primary method of recruitment than in other research locations.
- Respondents in the Nairobi neighbourhoods of Eastleigh and Majengo identified a number of recruitment schemes used by al-Shabaab. Examples include the promise of a job or scholarship to study abroad, a fake marriage proposal, or the promise to help resolve a dispute an individual may have with another.
- Respondents widely cited large cash incentives as a primary method used by al-Shabaab recruiters and explained that these recruiters would specifically target the unemployed or those already involved in criminal activity.

## Nairobi City Centre



*Photo: Kaisu Raasakka*

## Introduction

Since 2011, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has garnered increasing attention within government and civil society circles in Kenya. Today, Kenya is home to countless CVE initiatives that seek to reverse the spread of armed extremist groups, most notably al-Shabaab.

Between June and August 2016, researchers from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) and Georgetown University documented local perceptions of violent extremism in urban Kenya. Majengo and Eastleigh in Nairobi, Garissa Township, and Majengo in Mombasa were chosen as research locations: each have been affected by violent extremism and been sites of subsequent CVE initiatives. Based on consultations with over 200 focus group discussants and 30 key informants, this report explores four main research themes:

- Local understandings of violent extremism;
- Perceptions of insecurity;
- Local drivers of violent extremism; and
- Dynamics of recruitment by groups like al-Shabaab.

## CVE Context Analysis

Africa's Greater Horn is an area characterised by rich cultural and religious diversity within and between multiple communities. However, marred by low levels of human security and growing economic inequality, the region has emerged as a hotspot for violent extremist activity.<sup>3</sup> Although not the only armed extremist actor in the region, the group al-Shabaab, meaning 'the Youth' in Arabic, has been responsible for the majority of terrorist incidents in the Greater Horn area over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> While al-Shabaab emerged in Somalia in 2005 as an insurgent movement with national aims, it has since evolved into a transnational actor, carrying out attacks in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

The region's geopolitical landscape is defined by longstanding intra-state and cross-border ethnic and religious tensions, in part due to the arbitrary boundary-making processes of European colonial administrations and subsequent political inter-positioning by Cold War

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3 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2015) *Background Report: Al-Shabaab Attack on Garissa University in Kenya*. Available at: [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTBackgroundReport\\_alShabaabGarissaU\\_April2015.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTBackgroundReport_alShabaabGarissaU_April2015.pdf).

4 East Africa and the Horn have a history of indigenous movements and VE organisations that espouse radical religious narratives. These include the Sudan-based Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ), the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) in Somalia. The region has also seen attacks by outside international VE organisations such as the 1998 US embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi by Egyptian Islamic Jihad (a forerunner of al-Qaeda), and the attempted assassination of Husni Mubarak in Addis Ababa by the Egyptian organisation Gama'at al-Islamiyya.

powers. Today, the Greater Horn is home to seven of the continent's twenty active secessionist movements.<sup>5</sup> Exploiting persistent ethnic and religious tensions, al-Shabaab has successfully expanded its popularity and support base, and in doing so has garnered foreign financial support and fighters.

Kenya shares a 700-kilometre border with Somalia and has been particularly affected by the spread of al-Shabaab. In 2011, responding to the abduction of foreign tourists from various Kenyan coastal resorts, as well as aid workers from the Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya launched Operation Linda Nchi, a joint military operation in which 3 000 members of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) partnered with the Somali Armed Forces to conduct 'coordinated pre-emptive action' against al-Shabaab in southern Somalia.<sup>6</sup> Operation Linda Nchi came to an end in May 2012, but Kenyan troops remain in Somalia, contributing to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), a regional peace support mission composed of 22 000 troops from six African countries.<sup>7</sup> Since the launch of Operation Linda Nchi, the number of attacks by al-Shabaab in Kenya has increased year by year. In 2011, 32 attacks were recorded; this figure increased to 84 in 2014. Al-Shabaab's deadliest assaults in Kenya to date have been the 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, where 67 people were killed, and the 2015 massacre at Garissa University College, in which 148 people died.<sup>8</sup>

Amidst growing concerns over al-Shabaab recruitment within its borders, the Kenyan state has responded with a number of domestic security initiatives that have produced mixed results. Operation Usalama Watch, for example, conducted in April 2014, officially purported to 'flush out al-Shabaab adherents and aliens and search for weapons, improvised explosive devices, explosives and other arms so as to detect, disrupt and deter terrorism and other organised activities.'<sup>9</sup> The security operation led to the mass arrest, deportation or relocation of primarily Somali refugees in various urban centres in Kenya and drew the ire of international human rights groups, which cited allegations of widespread arbitrary arrests, profiling, harassment, extortion and extrajudicial killings.<sup>10</sup> The resultant fear and resentment of security forces among affected Kenyan communities have subsequently undermined intelligence-gathering initiatives and may have played into the hands of al-Shabaab recruiters.

Responses to the threats posed by violent extremism in the form of al-Shabaab have invariably been dominated by counter-insurgency (CI) and counter-terrorism (CT) tactics. Such strategies mostly involve military/police actions against groups identified as violent extremist. Over time, and as the Kenyan experience exemplifies, CI and CT methods often prove to be ineffective or counterproductive – for a multitude of reasons. State agencies are often implicated in gross violations of basic human rights, leading to the erosion of the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> More substantively, CI/CT approaches often discount or ignore local specificities and can exacerbate grievances that may contribute to increasing levels of recruitment into violent extremist groups.

This has led to increased recognition of the need for nuanced and holistic conflict-sensitive security strategies that address the root causes of violent extremism, and balance security and developmental challenges. The Kenyan government has formulated a National CVE

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5 'The Separatist Map of Africa: Interactive.' *The Guardian*, published 6 September 2012. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2012/sep/06/africa-map-separatist-movements-interactive>.

6 'Kenya says making gains against al-Shabaab.' *Al Jazeera*, published 19 October 2011. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/10/2011101942627768243.html>.

7 The troop-contributing countries to AMISOM are Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Uganda.

8 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2016) 'Global Terrorism Database.' Available at: <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

9 Independent Policing Oversight Authority Report, 14 July 2014.

10 Human Rights Watch (2016) 'Deaths and Disappearances.' Published 19 July 2016. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/deaths-and-disappearances/abuses-counterterrorism-operations-nairobi-and>.

11 International Commission of Jurists (2016) 'Global Security and the Rule of Law.' Available at: <http://www.icj.org/themes/global-security-rule-of-law/>.

Residents in Garissa observe following the detonation of an Improvised Explosive Device that killed a suspected al-Shabaab member.



Policy,<sup>12</sup> drawing on the growing field of CVE, which is a developmental approach to security. It seeks to design and implement targeted initiatives that address the socio-economic, political and cultural ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that drive violent extremism.<sup>13</sup> While still plagued by definitional ambiguities and the absence of any comprehensive operational framework of best practices, CVE has gained prominence in Kenya, with several international and local non-governmental organisations implementing projects throughout the country. Many international state and non-state donors have embraced CVE, especially following the 2015 White House Summit on CVE; local CVE initiatives enjoy significant ongoing financial support.<sup>14</sup>

### *CVE Terminology and Practice*

There exists no universally accepted definition of violent extremism. The field has evolved with input from a range of actors including development practitioners, scholars, security sector experts and government institutions who conceptualise and theorise the term differently, often for different reasons. Some definitions emphasise a group’s ideological or religious objectives as foundations for violent extremism, while others place more focus on the particular tactics employed by a group, such as the intentional and random targeting of civilians.<sup>15</sup> Jason-Leigh Striegher argues that definitions of violent extremism often conflate radicalisation, terrorism, and extremism, each of which should be understood as distinct, contextually relative and ever-evolving concepts.<sup>16</sup> Neither the United Nations nor the European Union has adopted an official definition of violent extremism, despite both supporting and advocating for CVE programming.<sup>17</sup> Most definitions do not specify whether violent extremist activities are only carried out by non-state actors or whether violent extremism by definition must have an ideological component as opposed to being simply criminal or purposeless. This lack of definitional consensus often stems from a scarcity of empirical evidence on the assumed root causes and drivers of violent extremism.<sup>18</sup> These

12 Government of Kenya and UNDP (2015) *Strengthen Community’s Capacity Against Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kenya*. Project Document. Available at: [https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/KEN/\(Kenya%20rev%20270115\)%20Kenya%20Counter%20Terrorism%20project%20Document%20FINAL.pdf](https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/KEN/(Kenya%20rev%20270115)%20Kenya%20Counter%20Terrorism%20project%20Document%20FINAL.pdf).

13 USAID (2011) *The Development Responses to Violent Extremism and Insurgency*. USAID Policy. Published September 2011. Available at: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI\\_Policy\\_Final.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf).

14 The United Nations has articulated its approach to CVE in the first pillar of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which is to be implemented by the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Taskforce (CTITF). In 2011, the White House convened a three-day summit on Countering Violent Extremism, attended by President Obama and foreign ministers to discuss concrete steps the United States and its partners can take to develop community-orientated approaches to ‘counter hateful extremist ideologies that radicalise, recruit or incite to violence.’ Similarly, the European Union has defined its vision for CVE through the EU Strategy on Prevention of Radicalisation and Recruitment. See: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy> and <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%209956%202014%>.

15 The Global Centre for Cooperative Security (GCCS) defines VE as ‘advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives’, while the Australian National Counter-Terrorism Committee makes specific reference to ‘acts of terrorism’ in their definition: ‘a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature. This may include acts of terrorism.’ See: [http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Does-CVE-Work\\_2015.pdf](http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Does-CVE-Work_2015.pdf).

16 Striegher, J.L. (2015) ‘Violent Extremism: An Examination of a Definitional Dilemma.’ *Proceedings of the 8th Australian Security and Intelligence Conference*, 30 November–2 December, 2015 (pp. 75–86), Edith Cowan University Joondalup Campus, Perth, Western Australia. Available at: <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1046&context=asi>.

17 See the United Nations (2016) UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Available at: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy/>. See also the European Union Strategy on Prevention and of Radicalisation and Recruitment. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/index_en.htm).

18 The Australian National Counter-Terrorism Committee Framework defines violent extremism as ‘a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature. This may include acts of terrorism.’ Available at: <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Media-and-publications/Publications/Documents/national-counter-terrorism-plan-2012.pdf>.

ambiguities make it difficult to determine if a particular organisation should be defined as ‘violent extremist’ as opposed to more conventional classifiers. Furthermore, as Allan et al state “‘extremism’ is a relative concept and thus inevitably means different things to different people.”<sup>19</sup>

CVE<sup>20</sup> is also conventionally interpreted to be more comprehensive and contextualised than traditional CI/CT approaches. CVE seeks to address the structural drivers (including push and pull factors) that fuel grievances and may entice individuals to support violent extremist groups.<sup>21</sup> The breadth and comprehensiveness of CVE is based on addressing the structural factors that create an environment conducive for violent extremist activities, as well as engaging a broader range of actors, including civil society and religious leaders/institutions. CVE methodology also incorporates an important preventive or pre-emptive component that tries to identify vulnerable individuals and groups that exhibit early or potential indicators of ‘radicalisation’, and attempts to reverse this through counter-messaging and re-education. To date, CVE initiatives in Kenya have almost exclusively focused on Muslim communities. For example, CVE programming was piloted as part of USAID’s 2011–2014 Kenya Transition Initiative (KTI). 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.<sup>22</sup>

### Nyumba Kumi Initiative

In 2015, the Kenyan Government launched the Nyumba Kumi Initiative as part of a national community policing strategy. Nyumba Kumi is a cluster-based integrated security strategy that seeks to ‘[anchor] community policing at the household level’ by identifying one community leader per ten households to monitor local security threats and report regularly to the police service.<sup>23</sup>

### Methodology, Scope and Limitations

The study’s research design and methodology were developed in consultation with LPI project managers and staff members. In-country fieldwork was conducted from June to August 2016 in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Garissa, which were chosen as primary research locations. While they have all experienced attacks and recruitment by extremist armed groups, in particular al-Shabaab, each location has its own distinct historical, social, and

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- 19 Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jespersen, S., Reddy-Tumu, S. and Winterbotham, E. (2015) *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypothesis and Literature Review*. Published 16 October 2015. Royal United Services Institute, London. Available at: <http://www.gsdr.org/document-library/drivers-of-violent-extremism-hypotheses-and-literature-review/>.
- 20 The following could be taken as a working definition of CVE which defines it as actions/programmes, ‘to deny terrorism new recruits by reducing sympathy and support for violent extremism ... targeted counter-recruitment interventions for at risk communities in priority countries and ... build resilience against violent extremist narratives. It also builds the capacity of partner nations and civil society organisations to counter violent extremism.’ United States Government Accounting Office (2015) *Combating Terrorism: State Should Evaluate Its Countering Violent Extremism Program and Set Time Frames for Evaluating Recommendations*. GAO-15-684.
- 21 Brett, J., Eriksen, K.B., Sorensen, A.K.R. and Aps, T.C. (2015) *Lessons Learnt from Danish and Other International Efforts on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Developmental Contexts*. DANIDA.
- 22 Integrity for USAID Kenya (2014) *Qualitative Study on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programming under the Kenya Transition Initiative (KTI)*. Available at: <https://www.integrityglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/KTI-End-of-Programme-Qualitative-Study-R.pdf>.
- 23 Ombati, C. (2013) ‘State tightens community policing through “Nyumba Kumi” initiative’, Published on 8 October 2013. Available at: <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000095139/state-tightens-community-policing-through-nyumba-kumi-initiative>

cultural dynamics. The selection of these research locations allowed comparisons to be made as to how the dynamics of violent extremism have developed in different urban contexts in Kenya.

The research used a mixed-method approach, drawing on key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as quantitative data from Afrobarometer, the Global Terrorism Database, and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Twelve KIIs and three FGDs took place in each research locale and the respondents included men and women, and female and male youth from different socio-economic backgrounds. Religious leaders, community elders and state officials were also included. Efforts were made to ensure that each group was as representative and as inclusive as possible, while reflecting the religious and ethnic demographics of the wider population from which respondents were drawn.

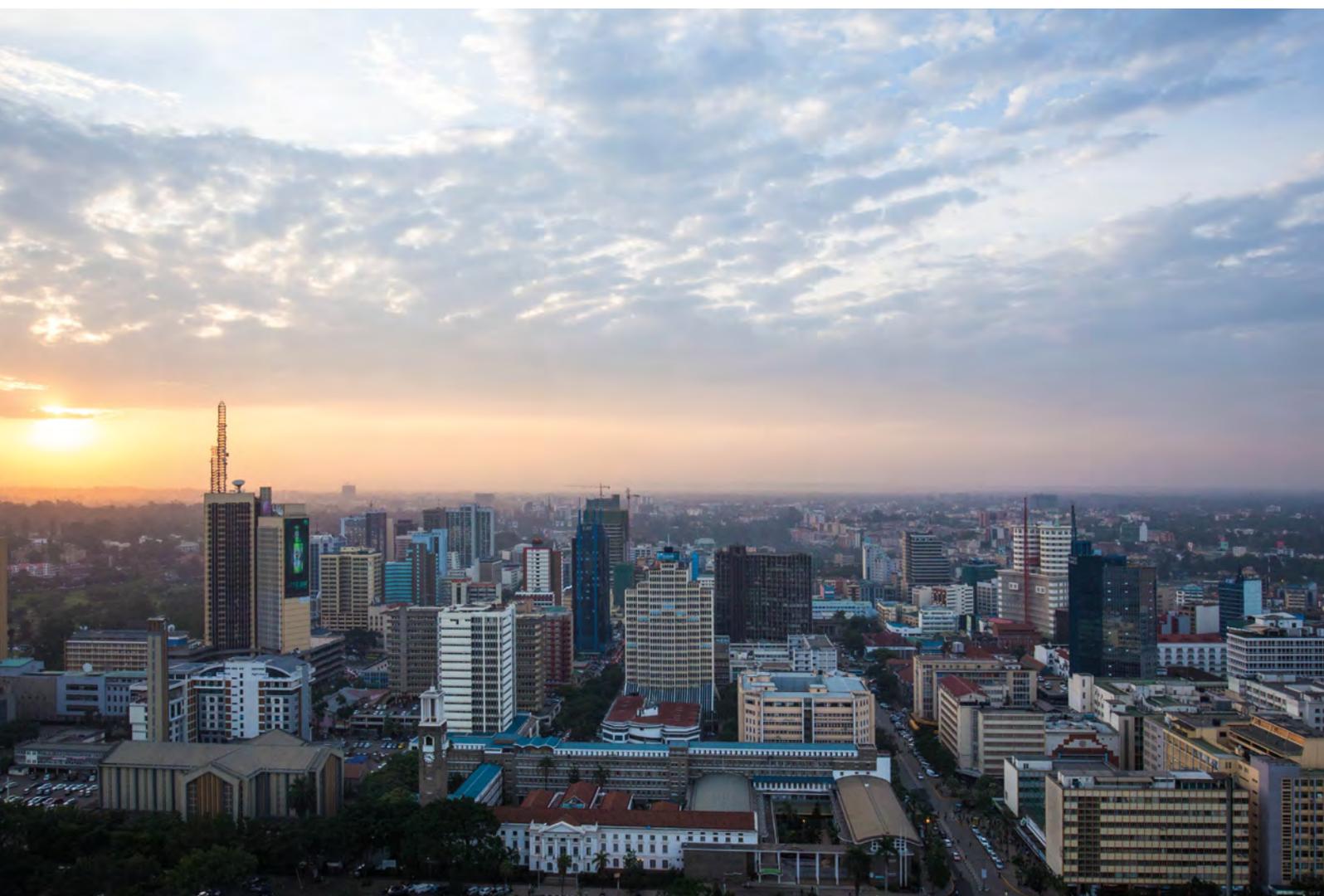
There are a number of limitations within which the research findings should be interpreted and assessed. First, this study was cross-sectional in nature and captured respondents' perceptions of violent extremism at a specific time (June–August 2016). Public perceptions and actual occurrences of violent extremism can change quickly. For example, a single attack that generates considerable media attention may have a marked effect on a respondent's perceptions of security. Second, the data was captured in urban settlements in Nairobi, Garissa and Mombasa, and care should be taken not to generalise these findings to the whole country or region. Even within a single city, there can be distinct differences in perceptions of violent extremism depending on the neighbourhood – as was the case in Eastleigh and Majengo in Nairobi. Third, because al-Shabaab, and violent extremist activity in general, garner considerable media attention, it is often difficult to determine if a respondent is providing knowledge of something they know to be true or if they are simply reproducing popular narratives. Fourth, although care was taken wherever possible to conduct interviews and FGDs in respondents' preferred languages, violent extremism as a field contains ambiguous terminology, and certain nuances were inevitably lost in translation. Fifth, violent extremism is a sensitive subject, especially in communities that may already feel vulnerable. Hence, respondents may have omitted certain details in their responses. This may also have had an effect on the data captured and any subsequent analysis.

Nevertheless, we hope that the range of issues and CVE themes discussed in this report will help to enrich both academic and programmatic approaches by presenting alternative views on what, in the eyes of the targeted communities, constitutes violent extremism and how it relates to a general sense of insecurity and deep-rooted socio-economic and political issues. A more informed CVE discourse should help lead to more effective, sensitive, and context-based policies with a positive impact on the local communities vulnerable to violent extremism.

## Violent Extremism: A Snapshot of Local Understandings

Violent extremism remains poorly defined even in the western political and academic establishments where it was originally coined. Most definitions identify violent extremism as an act carried out by a non-state actor for ideological, religious, or political motives. However, there is no intuitively equivalent term in Kenya's widely spoken Kiswahili or Somali languages and it is difficult to translate the term in a way that separates violent extremism from other forms of political or criminal violence. Our research found that, while violent extremism was familiar to some respondents, no clear and common understanding existed within and between the communities interviewed; rather, definitions were more likely to reflect communities' immediate security concerns regardless of the actor involved or their motive for violence.

## Nairobi Skyline



*Photo: Stuart Price for Make It Kenya*

Kibera, Nairobi



Photo: Kaisu Raasakka

### Local Definitions of Violent Extremism

Respondents provided unexpected answers when asked if they were familiar with and could define violent extremism; these were often distant from conceptions common to government and non-governmental sectors. In all four research locations, al-Shabaab was usually quickly cited as an example of a 'violent extremist' actor. However, many respondents did not distinguish al-Shabaab from various other actors cited as examples of groups practising violent extremist acts. In Garissa, for example, respondents included violence perpetrated as a result of conflict between sub-clans in their definitions of violent extremism. In Mombasa, women respondents did not differentiate between local gangs and international violent extremist groups. Included in their list of examples were al-Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as well as *Wakali kwanza*, *Mawaiyo*, Crazy Boys, 40 Brothers, *Wakali Wao*, and the Youth Thugs – all local street gangs with no particular ideological motives. Similarly, in Majengo, Nairobi, respondents cited the gangs Super Power, *Mungiki* and *Hapana Tambua Takataka* as examples of violent extremists. Respondents attributed this categorisation to the fear these groups instilled in their community and their use of violence, such as assassinations, assault and kidnappings to achieve their goals. In Eastleigh, some respondents differentiated between violent extremist actors and local gangs not by ideology, as is common in civil society and academic circles, but by the weapons they use. Respondents explained that while al-Shabaab uses guns and explosives, local street gangs more often rely on knives and machetes.

Respondents in all research locales described the regular disappearance of community members, primarily young men, as a primary manifestation of al-Shabaab activity in their communities. Notably, many respondents explained that in some cases it is unclear whether missing youth have been recruited by al-Shabaab or killed by government security forces. In Garissa especially, respondents suggested that members of the Kenyan security forces are responsible for perpetrating acts of violent extremism based on their alleged roles in extrajudicial killings, torture, and the disappearances of Garissa youth in security crackdowns following the Garissa University College attack.<sup>24</sup>

Respondents' failure to distinguish between violence perpetrated by criminal gangs, the state, and al-Shabaab, underscores the idea that local communities define violent extremism in relation to their immediate security concerns and experiences of insecurity. It may also indicate that respondents do not generally perceive al-Shabaab's actions to be driven by ideology or religion. Several respondents in Garissa, for example, were explicit in stating that al-Shabaab's actions are simply criminal and that their use of religious messaging is incidental. However, it is likely that some Muslim respondents may have directly experienced profiling and stigmatisation as 'extremists' or 'al-Shabaab supporters', or at the very least been aware of instances of such in the media. Thus, respondents' often explicit repudiation of the notion that al-Shabaab's actions are in any way linked to religion may have been, in part, a defensive reaction made to distance their own ethnic/religious community from the group.

This illustrates the contrast in how violent extremism and al-Shabaab are often understood and discussed by communities on the one hand, and by analysts, the news media, and policy-makers – who often give primacy to ideology and motive – on the other. This discrepancy has direct implications for the field of CVE: 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.

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24 Relations between communities and security services in Garissa have been documented as poor, and allegations of KDF and police abuses in Garissa are widespread. A recent report by Human Rights Watch states that 'security officers from various units raided homes and compounds, business premises and schools to arrest individuals and conduct searches, sometimes in the middle of the night.' See Human Rights Watch (2016) 'Deaths and Disappearances', supra note 10.

### *Local Perceptions of Insecurity*

*'The police are thieves. If you get arrested, they take everything you own and they will not return your belongings without payment.'*

*Respondent in Majengo, Nairobi*

Violent extremism must be conceptualised within Kenya's wider security environment, and as but one among a variety of possible security concerns in communities. Violent extremist actors including al-Shabaab were generally not cited as the primary source of insecurity among consulted communities, except in Garissa. Rather, respondents identified local criminal gangs and government security forces as more significant sources of insecurity. In fact, several respondents expressed frustration over the fact that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international donors seem solely concerned with addressing processes of radicalisation and recruitment by al-Shabaab, whereas violent criminal gangs and endemic poverty pose significantly greater threats to peace and security in their communities. This suggests that focused CVE initiatives should be just one of a range of peace-building methodologies used to address conflict and insecurity in Kenya.<sup>25</sup> At the very least, CVE initiatives and efforts to conceptualise the growth and nature of violent extremism in Kenya must emphasise local dynamics of insecurity, acknowledging that such factors may be either explicitly or indirectly linked to the operation of groups like al-Shabaab.

#### *The Role of the Security Sector*

Respondents in all research locations described police harassment, corruption and extortion as common occurrences, and alleged cases of forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings by security forces. Several respondents from Majengo, Nairobi, for example, spoke of how police 'frequently confiscate residents' identification documents and personal belongings and demand payment for their return'.<sup>26</sup> Respondents explained that such incidents have resulted in a deep sense of distrust and resentment towards the police and security forces in the communities consulted.

In Afrobarometer's most recent survey,<sup>27</sup> the police were considered the least trusted government institution in Kenya, with only 36% of respondents indicating that they trust the police 'a lot' or 'somewhat'. This was well below the continental average (51%), and Kenya's police force ranks 31st in terms of trust out of the 36 African states surveyed. Furthermore, almost three quarters (74%) of Kenyan citizens perceived 'all' or 'most' police to be corrupt. In a 2016 interview, Kenya's Foreign Minister Amina Mohamed reiterated the Kenyan government's commitment to addressing corruption, stating, 'It's acknowledged by the government that we have a problem and we are addressing that problem,' and in 2015 President Uhuru Kenyatta stated that 'corruption is a standing threat to [Kenya's] national security'.<sup>28</sup>

Youth respondents were especially critical of the police, and multiple respondents alleged that they and their peers consistently experience profiling and are targeted by security forces on their way to the mosque. Youth in Eastleigh alleged that police regularly stop them, demanding bribes, and frequently jail Eastleigh residents until their family members or friends can pay for their release. In all research locales, respondents widely perceived

25 USAID (2012) *East Africa Regional Conflict and Instability Assessment Report*. Available at: <http://conflict.care2share.wikispaces.net/file/view/USAID+East+Africa+Conflict+Assessment+March2012.pdf>.

26 Interview, 16 June, Nairobi.

27 Buchanan-Clarke, S. & Lekalake, R. (2016) *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Public Opinion from the Sahel, Lake Chad, and the Horn*. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 32. Published June 2016.

28 'Kenyan Foreign Minister on Corruption Claims.' Interview with Foreign Minister Amina Mohamed. *Al Jazeera*. Published 11 October 2016.

police officers to be engaged in various criminal enterprises. In Eastleigh, youth respondents explained that police harassment has forced many unemployed youths to congregate outside that community in an effort to escape targeting by security forces.

*'When the police suspect you [of being affiliated with al-Shabaab] they gun you down in front of your family. Later police spokesmen claim that the suspect died in an exchange of fire.'*

*Respondent in Eastleigh*

Distrust towards the police in communities consulted is likely exacerbated by alleged forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings. Several respondents in all research communities alleged that the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) was responsible for forced disappearances of youth.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, respondents in Majengo (Nairobi) expressed a deep sense of resentment that despite community members having lodged complaints of human rights abuses with the Kenyan government, no formal investigations have been undertaken, and the Kenyan government has officially denied accusations of widespread human rights abuses.<sup>30</sup>

Respondents in Eastleigh viewed the ethnic profiling of Somali Kenyans as a major cause of insecurity. The majority of those who live in Eastleigh are of Somali descent – both Somali Kenyans and Somali nationals, many of whom are refugees. Operation Usalama Watch and the ongoing blanket targeting of ethnic Somalis were described to have severely damaged trust between community members and the police.<sup>31</sup> Respondents claimed that gangs in the area actively target Somalis and Somali Kenyans, as they know they are reluctant to seek assistance from police and other security officials. Respondents of Somali descent in Eastleigh expressed frustration at not being treated the same way as Kenyans of other ethnicities, and conveyed a sense of estrangement and marginalisation from wider Kenyan society.

### ***Street Gangs and Other Forms of Criminality***

Local street gangs and lone actors who engage in robbery, rape and other violent crime were also described as leading sources of insecurity in all research locales. In Majengo, Nairobi, respondents described poor responses by the government to crime in their communities, explaining that police outposts are located far from the centre of Majengo and officers rarely patrol the area. Respondents in Eastleigh described widespread gangsterism, robberies, and petty crime, and outlined a relationship between these criminal acts, police corruption and violent extremism in their community. They explained, for example, that al-Shabaab targets individuals who are members of local gangs for recruitment, stating that this occurs for two reasons: first, gang members are generally already alienated from their communities and have proven they are willing to commit crime for money; second, al-Shabaab is alleged to have existing links with street gangs in Eastleigh, which may help to facilitate recruitment.<sup>32</sup>

Violent extremism and al-Shabaab more specifically were not identified as a leading cause of insecurity in Nairobi or Mombasa. Nonetheless, it did feature as an ongoing

29 Extrajudicial killings in Nairobi and north-eastern Kenya have additionally been documented by various human rights organisations, including most recently Human Rights Watch. See: Human Rights Watch (2016) 'Deaths and Disappearances', supra note 10.

30 In early October 2016, Kenyan Cabinet Secretary for the Interior Joseph Nkaissery described these allegations as 'unsubstantiated'. He said, 'The government is aware there is a conspiracy to undermine the excellent work of the police'. For more information, see <http://allafrica.com/stories/201610050896.html>.

31 Amnesty International (2014) 'Kenya: Somalis Scapegoated in Counter-Terror Crackdown.' Published 27 May 2014. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2014/05/kenya-somalis-scapegoated-counter-terror-crackdown/>.

32 Nordic Africa Institute (2016) *Radicalisation and Terrorist Recruitment Among Kenya's Youth*. Policy Paper No. 1. Available at: <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:906144/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

Man assembles remains of burnt stall at an open-air market in Garissa



*Photo: Billy Mutai*

concern for many respondents, and was understood to drive some of the security crackdowns experienced in places like Eastleigh. Women in Majengo (Nairobi) were the only group to identify violent extremist actors as a primary source of insecurity, and held the perception that al-Shabaab's recruitment of youth has increased in recent years.

Together, the security concerns described by respondents across research locations indicate a common web of mutually influencing and/or reinforcing factors that impact peace and stability. For example, the widespread perception that police regularly engage in corruption, extortion and extra-judicial killings discourages citizens from reporting crimes or providing information on potential violent extremist activity. This has helped local gangs to thrive, as they target specific communities knowing they face little risk of being reported to the police.

### *The Case of Garissa*

Unlike respondents in other research locations, individuals in Garissa were likely to cite violent extremism as a primary source of insecurity. This may be a consequence of al-Shabaab's devastating 2 April 2015 attack on Garissa University College, in which 148 people were killed and another 79 injured.<sup>33</sup> Respondents spoke of the traumatic effect this event has had on their community, and the increased levels of fear and distrust felt among their peers. A future attack of similar or greater magnitude remains an unnerving prospect to many Garissa respondents, especially in light of numerous recent reports of interrupted or failed plots by al-Shabaab to target the town again. Respondents in Garissa expressed particular concern that al-Shabaab may seek revenge for the June 2016 killing of senior al-Shabaab commander and Garissa native, Mohamed Kuno.<sup>34</sup>

Another consequence of the al-Shabaab threat in Garissa has been a widespread decline in service delivery. Respondents stated that, in the year since the university attack, non-Somali teachers, doctors and construction workers have vacated the town, citing mounting security concerns. Their departure has left schools and hospitals desperately understaffed and infrastructure crumbling. Moreover, private investment, particularly in the region's all-important agricultural sector, is seen to have declined, resulting in increased levels of unemployment. One woman stated that Garissa residents feel as if they have been 'forgotten by the rest of Kenya', and many respondents felt that Garissa is being marginalised by the Kenyan state, due to its growing reputation as a 'hotspot' for violent extremism.

Furthermore, respondents spoke of an increase in police harassment and 'disappearances' since the Garissa University College attack. These allegations are given further credence by a recent Human Rights Watch report documenting several instances of human rights abuses during a security crackdown following the attack.<sup>35</sup> Respondents also cited a widespread feeling of distrust towards security forces, especially the police, due to their alleged frequent engagement in practices of corruption and extortion. In particular, respondents alleged that police arbitrarily confiscate individuals' identification cards and other personal documents, which affects their ability to secure formal employment or travel freely past checkpoints.

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33 'Kenya Attack: 147 Dead in Garissa University Assault.' *BBC*, published 3 April 2015.

34 Kuno was a Kenyan Somali and was a headmaster at a madrasa in Garissa, Kenya, until 2007, at which point he crossed into Somalia and joined the Islamic Courts Union. He later joined Hizbul Islam which merged with al-Shabaab in 2010. He was renowned as a hardliner ideologist and is alleged to have been involved in several attacks on Kenyan soil. The Kenyan government identified him as the mastermind behind the Garissa University College attack. Kuno was killed in an attack by AMISOM forces in June 2016.

35 Human Rights Watch (2016) 'Deaths and Disappearances', supra note 10.

### Devolution

In 2013, following the re-organisation of Kenya's national administration, the country was divided into 47 counties, each headed by a county commissioner. This devolution of government was envisioned in the 2010 Constitution of Kenya as a means of improving local governance, and reducing marginalisation and the risk of conflict between communities.

Respondents in Garissa were unique in identifying land disputes and political struggles, particularly between members of various Somali Ogaden sub-clans, as a primary source of insecurity in their community. Garissa is largely divided by sub-clan, and land conflicts often take on clan dimensions. The main conflicting sub-clans in the region are the *Abdallah*, *Abudwak* and *Auliyahan*. Clan-based political conflicts, especially following the devolution of power in Kenya to the county level, commonly pit communities against one another. Such conflicts have intensified since members of the *Abdallah* and *Auliyahan* sub-clans formed an alliance and successfully ousted various *Abudwak* leaders from local positions of power. Respondents expressed concern that clan-based sources of insecurity would likely intensify in the context of Kenya's national elections in 2017.

### Recent Improvements to Garissa's Security Environment

Despite the concerns expressed by Garissa residents, several respondents cited a marked improvement to the area's security environment in recent months. This was largely attributed to efforts by the Kenyan government to reassign local (primarily ethnic Somali) officials to senior positions in Garissa's security and government bodies in 2015, following al-Shabaab's attack at Garissa University College. Respondents felt that local appointees have a better knowledge of the region than their predecessors, are more likely to employ locally appropriate and sensitive security strategies, and have made significant efforts to be accessible to Garissa residents. Respondents asserted that the 'localisation' of administration and security officials has effectively contributed to building trust between communities and security officials, encouraged information sharing, and strengthened local resistance to radicalisation and recruitment. Further research should be undertaken to validate the efficacy of these policies and whether they can be replicated across regions.

## Multi-Layered Factors Influencing Violent Extremism

Factors influencing the emergence and spread of violent extremism in Kenya are exceedingly diverse, vary by community and location, and are constantly evolving. The ability of violent extremist groups to gain recruits depends on the alignment of various structural, socio-cultural and individual 'push' and 'pull' factors, suggesting that joining a violent extremist group like al-Shabaab is a complex psychosocial process.

Structural 'push' factors can be broadly considered as the structural and socio-political conditions which favour the rise and spread of armed extremist groups, and those sometimes used by these groups to create propaganda narratives. 'Pull' factors have a more direct

Rebuilt Open-air Market in Garissa



*Photo: Billy Mutai*

influence on the individual and are associated with the personal rewards an individual may gain through membership in an extremist group, including among others, social status, financial gain, personal empowerment or a sense of glory.<sup>36</sup>

A 2015 literature and hypothesis review of over 150 journal articles on the drivers of violent extremism by Allan et al. conceptualise these factors according to three analytical levels: *situational factors* work at the macro level (i.e. a large number of people, such as a country or an entire community); *socio-cultural factors* operate at the meso level (smaller communities or identity groups); and *individual factors* function at the micro level.<sup>37</sup>

Findings from our study suggest that ‘pull factors’ at the meso and micro levels are the most significant contributors to al-Shabaab recruitment in Kenya, as individuals most often join the group in pursuit of a variety of personal agendas and for personal rewards. According to respondents, these may include:

- As a means to seek revenge on an enemy;
- As a result of a romanticised vision of conflict and sense of adventure;
- As a means of escaping law enforcement;
- For financial reward; or
- As a means of resisting perceived marginalisation by the Kenyan state.

It is also important to note that many may join al-Shabaab as a result of various coercive tactics and false promises employed by local recruiters. In this context, situational and socio-cultural ‘push’ factors, such as government corruption, marginalisation of specific ethnic groups, or human rights violations, are used as propaganda tools to legitimise extremist narratives.

John Horgan<sup>38</sup> suggests that asking someone, ‘*Why did you become involved [in a violent extremist organization]?*’ elicits very different answers from ‘*How did you become involved?*’. The former ‘why’ question will often lead to accounts of external ‘push’ factors being discussed and these accounts tend to be more strongly influenced by ‘the propaganda of and ideological control of the group’, whereas the ‘how’ question can lead to answers containing more helpful accounts of radicalisation by focusing on the ‘pull’ factors – those positive factors that lured the individual in. Horgan’s analysis has significant implications for CVE and development initiatives that seek to combat violent extremism. It suggests that, while addressing structural ‘push’ factors, such as economic and social marginalisation, is important as a means of reducing al-Shabaab’s ability to create effective propaganda narratives, more effort should be placed on understanding the specific pathways that lead individuals to joining the group. Interventions should in turn seek to understand and address these pathways and their interaction.

While some of the key ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors identified by respondents were cross-cutting in all four research areas; others were discussed in particular communities alone. The context in which cross-cutting factors were framed, and the degrees of emphasis they were assigned by respondents, often varied across communities and also according to respondents’ demographics. Indeed, youth respondents regularly emphasised the importance of age and generation in understanding the dynamics of violent extremism.

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36 USAID (2011) The Developmental Responses to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy. USAID Policy. September 2011. Available: [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pdacs400.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacs400.pdf).

37 Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jespersen, S., Reddy-Tumu, S. and Winterbotham, E. (2015) *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypothesis and Literature Review*. Published 16 October 2015. Royal United Services Institute, London. Available at: <http://www.gsdrc.org/document-library/drivers-of-violent-extremism-hypotheses-and-literature-review/>.

38 Horgan, J. (2008) ‘From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalisation into Terrorism.’ *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618(1). Pg. 87.

Eastleigh, Nariobi



*Photo: Billy Mutai*

### *Structural/Macro-Level Factors*

Respondents identified a number of sources of support for al-Shabaab that operate at the situational or macro level, commonly referred to as ‘push’ factors.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Perceived Economic and Social Marginalisation*

*‘When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.’*

*Respondent in Majengo, Mombasa*

Unemployment and poverty, often framed by respondents as economic marginalisation by the state, were assigned significant importance in all four research communities. Respondents explained that unemployment disproportionately affects youth, leaving them in a state of desperation that makes them vulnerable to promises of significant cash rewards by al-Shabaab recruiters. These findings are perhaps unsurprising, as unemployment is a major challenge in Kenya. Approximately 800 000 young Kenyans enter the labour market every year, and youth unemployment is estimated to be as high as 35%, compared with the overall national unemployment rate of 17.5%. Indeed, 80% of unemployed Kenyans are below the age of 35.<sup>40</sup>

Respondents from Mombasa, especially men, often framed economic underdevelopment in their region as a historical grievance against the state.<sup>41</sup> Perceived economic marginalisation was often linked to social marginalisation. Muslim respondents, and especially those of Somali descent, spoke of how difficult it is for them to obtain official documentation, such as identity cards and passports, explaining that this generates a considerable amount of resentment towards the government, as they are unable to apply for formal employment and feel alienated in their own country as a result.

In Garissa, respondents perceived poverty, idleness and unemployment to have increased significantly since the rise of al-Shabaab activity in the region, and in the context of subsequent related insecurity. According to youth respondents, support for al-Shabaab in Garissa is in part a function of the community’s economic desperation. Youth respondents spoke of a sense of alienation from the rest of Kenya, exacerbated by grinding poverty and a lack of opportunities. Several older men and women respondents in Garissa, on the other hand, ascribed less importance to economic factors as drivers of al-Shabaab support. They observed that affluent and well-educated youth often joined al-Shabaab, and insisted that Garissa youth were aware that al-Shabaab membership is not a likely path to riches.

*‘It is like there are two constitutions – a constitution for Somali Kenyans and a constitution for other Kenyans.’*

*Respondent in Eastleigh*

In Eastleigh, Somali Kenyan respondents cited a sense of alienation among their peers as an important driver of al-Shabaab support. They emphasised the difficulty of obtaining national identification cards, birth certificates and passports, without which they are unable to find formal employment or move freely. Many respondents in Eastleigh shared the belief that their

39 USAID (2011) *The Development Responses to Violent Extremism and Insurgency*. Available at: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI\\_Policy\\_Final.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf).

40 World Bank (2016) ‘Kenya: Unemployment by Country.’ Available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/kenya>.

41 This perception of political and economic discrimination is the same advanced by the Mombasa Republican Council, which seeks to secede from the Kenyan state – tracing its claims back to 1895 and 1963 agreements transferring a ten-mile strip of land along the coast to the Government of Kenya from Zanzibar.

community is not well represented in local or national politics and that entrenched nepotism ensures that government positions are often granted based on clan or family affiliation. This sense of alienation may drive some individuals to be influenced by al-Shabaab propaganda.

It is important to note that there is limited evidence supporting a correlation between socio-economic factors and radicalisation. Simply put, while large numbers of people suffer from poverty, relatively few join extremist organisations.<sup>42</sup> Thus, while the factors described by respondents may not sufficiently explain radicalisation and the rise of al-Shabaab in Kenya, they do perhaps contribute to creating the conditions in which the group can thrive, and may help al-Shabaab craft effective propaganda narratives that appeal to disenfranchised populations.

#### ***Harassment, Extortion and Extrajudicial Killings by Security Forces***

Respondents expressed the view that police persistently engage in harassment, extortion and corruption, and described cases of extrajudicial killings by Kenyan security forces. Respondents indicated that such alleged abuses by security forces further contribute to local support for al-Shabaab. Negative perceptions of the police were particularly acute among Muslim youth and those of Somali descent, due to the widespread perception that police profile them on the basis of their religion and ethnicity. Respondents in Majengo, Nairobi, for example, explained that police regularly pick up individuals for questioning and deliberately drop them off late at night, far away from their homes. Respondents in Garissa alleged widespread beatings and arbitrary detention of local residents by members of the security forces in the aftermath of al-Shabaab's 2015 attack on Garissa University College.

*'The KDF doesn't respect our community. They are guilty of gross misconduct and human rights abuses. They are raping innocent girls. There are many families who want revenge.'*

*Respondent in Garissa*

According to respondents in all four research areas, this sense of injustice and desire for revenge is a significant driver of individuals' decisions to join or otherwise support al-Shabaab. Some respondents purported that al-Shabaab agents exploit this anger by promising potential recruits the opportunity to avenge the deaths and 'disappearances' of friends and family members. In this sense, police brutality works both as a push factor which helps to legitimise extremist propaganda narratives, and as a pull factor, where promise of revenge may draw in the individual. Levels of resentment towards the police are so high among residents of Majengo, Nairobi, that respondents described their reluctance to go to the police to resolve any form of dispute, as to do so is seen as a betrayal of one's community.

Respondents' assertions of human rights abuses are supported by several civil society and academic reports documenting crimes by Kenyan security forces, including a 2014 Amnesty International report outlining hundreds of gross human rights violations by police during Operation Usalama Watch in Eastleigh and Majengo, Nairobi.<sup>43</sup> A recent study by the University of Edinburgh and the Danish Institute Against Torture found police responsible for as much as 25% of all violence in certain low-income neighbourhoods in Nairobi.<sup>44</sup>

42 Choi, S.W. (2014) 'Economic Growth and Terrorism: Domestic, International, and Suicide.' *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 4. Available at: <http://oep.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/11/05/oep.gpu036.abstract>.

43 Amnesty International (2014) 'Kenya: Somalis Scapegoated in Counter-Terror Crackdown,' supra note 31.

44 'Most Dangerous Gangs in Nairobi Named.' *Daily Nation*, published 8 February 2016. Available at: <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Most-dangerous-gangs-in-Nairobi-named/1056-3089534-cac2n0/index.html>.

### *Meso and Micro-Level Factors*

Allan et al., in their multi-factorial analysis of the 'drivers of extremism' identify a number of 'pull' factors which operate at the meso and micro levels.<sup>45</sup> These factors suggest radicalisation is a social process, in which, as Crenshaw argues, identity is crucial in legitimising, motivating and sustaining support for violent extremist organisations.<sup>46</sup> However, respondents in all research communities also reported instances of coercion used by al Shabaab to recruit members.

#### *Religious Messaging*

Respondents in Mombasa were more likely to emphasise the role of religious messaging as a driver of violent extremism than those in Nairobi or Garissa. This messaging can work by offering the individual a sense of empowerment, duty and potential reward. Respondents stated that there are mosques, madrassas and specific imams who openly preach extreme interpretations of Islam, and who describe the conflict in Somalia as a 'holy war' of which it is the duty of all Muslims to support. However, respondents were also generally prompt to state that al-Shabaab's use of religion is opportunistic and its interpretations of Islamic texts erroneous. Conversely, and as mentioned above, respondents' desire to distance their religion/ethnicity from association with al-Shabaab may in part be a result of increased profiling of Muslim Kenyans as supporters of al-Shabaab and sympathetic to extremism. This possibility makes it difficult to obtain a clear understanding of the role that extremist religious discourse plays in recruitment processes.

#### *Eroding Family Structures*

Both men and women in Majengo, Mombasa, identified poor parenting and the breakdown of traditional family structures as drivers of violent extremism. Women respondents said parents in their communities were often unaware of their children's whereabouts for days at a time. Male respondents further described an increase in drug and alcohol abuse among families, as well as the adverse effect of absentee fathers and child-headed families on young people. Respondents explained that the perceived breakdown of familial institutions has left youth susceptible to al-Shabaab recruitment. In the absence of familial support networks, youth may seek a sense of belonging and identity by supporting or joining extremist armed groups like al-Shabaab.

#### *Financial Compensation*

In all research locations, respondents indicated that the allure of significant financial compensation serves as a significant source of support for al-Shabaab. Respondents further explained that families of those affiliated with the armed group often receive free or discounted services at various Kenyan establishments, such as hospitals and car washes, that are aligned with al-Shabaab. Respondents suggested that this elevated status enjoyed by the families affiliated with al-Shabaab motivates some parents to encourage their own children to join the group.

#### *Quest for Status and Sense of Belonging*

In all research communities, and in Garissa in particular, respondents asserted that personal quests for status and recognition motivate some individuals to join al-Shabaab. Youth in Garissa, for example, explained that al-Shabaab recruiters often promise young men financial scholarships to enroll in madrassas in Somalia where they are told that they will rapidly obtain the coveted title of sheikh. In such circumstances, individuals initially join

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45 Allan et al. (2015) *Drivers of Violent Extremism*, supra note 37.

46 Crenshaw, M. (2008) 'The Causes of Terrorism,' *Comparative Politics* 13(4): 379–399. Available at: <http://courses.kvasaheim.com/hist319a/docs/Crenshaw%201981.pdf>.

the organisation for practical purposes, but over the course of their religious education in Somalia become radicalised.

Respondents in Majengo and Eastleigh, Nairobi, further explained that some individuals join al-Shabaab simply in search of a thrill or sense of belonging, and as the result of a romanticised view of being a part of a ‘revolutionary’ organisation. Women respondents asserted that many youth join simply for the excitement and status associated with owning a weapon and being part of an armed movement. Youth in Eastleigh, for example, said that individuals from the community who had left to fight for al-Shabaab in Somalia send photographs of themselves bearing arms, which serve to glorify the war in Somalia and encourage their peers to join.

### *Revenge and Escape Routes*

Respondents explained that youth who are wanted by police for criminal acts may resort to joining al-Shabaab as a means of escaping law enforcement. Respondents further emphasised that al-Shabaab actively targets individuals from criminal gangs for recruitment, as they may already be sought by law enforcement and estranged from their community.

Several respondents identified the desire to exact revenge for KDF activities in Somalia as an instrumental factor in violent extremist narratives. Al-Shabaab, for example, in their efforts to recruit Kenyan Muslims, have woven political and economic grievances against the state into a wider narrative of Muslim persecution.<sup>47</sup> Following the Westgate Mall attack, tweets from al-Shabaab’s media wing clearly showed how grievance and revenge are used in their counter-narratives against the state, such as: ‘[al-Shabaab] has on numerous occasions warned the Kenyan government that failure to remove its forces from Somalia would have severe consequences,’ and ‘The Kenyan government, however, turned a deaf ear to our repeated warnings and continued to massacre innocent Muslims in Somalia #Westgate’.<sup>48</sup>

### *Coercion*

Some respondents explained that al-Shabaab often coerces individuals into joining the group against their will. Coercive recruitment happens either subtly, often based on financial incentives or threats, or far more explicitly. In Majengo, Mombasa, for example, respondents explained that al-Shabaab often kidnaps new members, or may threaten to kill an individual or members of his or her family unless he or she joins the group. Respondents reported that pervasive distrust of Kenyan security officials, and particularly the fear of being implicated as al-Shabaab members, often dissuades individuals from reporting coercive recruitment attempts to police or other government authorities.

## Context-Tailored Recruitment Strategies

While al-Shabaab’s power and influence has waxed and waned over the years, the organisation has proven tremendously adaptable since its emergence over a decade ago. This is in no small part due to its ability to replenish its ranks with new recruits. The findings of this study show that recruitment strategies used by al-Shabaab are both varied and contextually specific. As outlined above, findings suggest that al-Shabaab draws on a variety of historical, religious, social and economic grievances to craft its propaganda. To understand processes of recruitment, it is also important to examine the dynamics of how individuals are recruited and what specific ‘pull’ factors inform this process. For example, recruiters may

47 International Alert (2016) ‘We Don’t Trust Anymore: Strengthening Relations as the Key to Reducing Violent Extremism in Kenya.’ Published September 2016.

48 Anzalone, C. (2013) ‘Al-Shabaab’s Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of its Battlefield Setbacks.’ *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 6(3). Available at: [http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/162852/ichaptersection\\_singledocument/3ce8cc2c-922c-4cd6-b2c4-7ca692e9ffb0/en/Article%203.pdf](http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/162852/ichaptersection_singledocument/3ce8cc2c-922c-4cd6-b2c4-7ca692e9ffb0/en/Article%203.pdf).

exploit religion and ethnic fault lines as a means of stirring up resentment among potential recruits, either on a person-to-person basis or using social media; it may, however, be the promise of employment that ultimately leads an individual to join a specific movement. Moreover, al-Shabaab may simply coerce individuals into joining through threats or by force.

The key elements of al-Shabaab's recruitment strategy can be broken down into four overlapping categories:

- Promises of a better, more rewarding life;
- The exploitation of corruption in state and society;
- The incitement of religious or ethnic sentiments and feelings of marginalisation; and
- Coercion.

Like other aspects of the group's operations, al-Shabaab's recruitment strategies have evolved over time. For example, in the last few years, al-Shabaab's media wing, the al-Kataib Media Foundation, has increased its output and improved the quality of its video productions. Kenneth Menkhaus writes that this has been a crucial adaptation by al-Shabaab to ensure its own competitiveness in the 'global jihadi' marketplace. This is demonstrated in al-Kataib's release of a high-quality video taken by al-Shabaab fighters on the front lines of some of their more recent attacks.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to note the difficulty associated with distinguishing between radicalisation and recruitment. For instance, while online internet forums preaching al-Shabaab religious propaganda may 'radicalise' individuals to the extent that they agree to, or internalise the group's worldview, this does not necessarily mean they have been 'recruited'. This highlights the difficulty in delineating the accountability of individuals who show support, advocate, or perpetrate acts of violence for violent extremist actors like al-Shabaab.

### *The Role of Extreme Religious Messaging*

The role of religious discourse as a means of recruitment was mentioned more frequently in Mombasa and Garissa than in Nairobi. Respondents cited the role of person-to-person recruitment by prominent religious figures, mosques and madrassas that preach extreme interpretations of Islam, the widespread circulation of CDs containing the sermons of extremist preachers, and the prevalence of internet cafes where youth spend their time on forums where extreme interpretations of Islam are expounded. Youth respondents especially emphasised that this includes the circulation of graphic images on social media platforms that invoke emotional responses, portraying the mistreatment of Muslims in Kenya, Gaza, and Iraq, along with calls to mobilise in defence of the global Islamic community (*ummah*). Respondents reported that CDs containing recordings of extremist preachers, such as the late Kenyan Muslim cleric Aboud Rogo,<sup>50</sup> encouraging youth to join and take up arms to defend Islam in Somalia, are readily available in marketplaces around Nairobi and Mombasa. However, several respondents said that those who were motivated to join al-Shabaab for religious or ideological reasons were more likely to be 'new converts' to Islam, and not from Muslim families who may have a deeper knowledge of the religion. If true, it may suggest that extreme religious messaging may be successfully appealing to more complex psychosocial needs of the individual rather than being a driver of radicalisation, itself.

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49 Menkhaus, K. (2015) 'Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword.' *Journal of World Affairs* 2. Available at: <https://www.brown.edu/initiatives/journal-world-affairs/sites/brown.edu/initiatives/journal-world-affairs/files/private/articles/Menkhaus.pdf>.

50 Aboud Rogo was a popular Kenyan Muslim cleric who was known for preaching Islamic extremism in mosques along the coast. He was accused of arranging funding for al-Shabaab and is rumoured by many to have been assassinated by government security forces in 2012. The assassination triggered widespread riots in Mombasa.

In Garissa, some influential religious leaders who command significant followings within the community have been involved in providing support to al-Shabaab and in person-to-person recruitment. Before his departure to Somalia, top al-Shabaab commander, Mohamed Kuno<sup>51</sup> (alias Gamadere), was a popular madrassa teacher. Exploiting his influential status in the community, Kuno recruited numerous youth from Garissa madrassas to fight for al-Shabaab. Interestingly, a number of youth respondents in Garissa held the view that al-Shabaab's goals in Somalia were broadly legitimate and expressed a desire to return to the days of the Islamic Courts Union when Somalia was peaceful and stable. However, they were strongly critical of al-Shabaab's violent tactics, especially the targeting of innocent civilians.

Except in Garissa, respondents indicated that the open preaching of extreme interpretations of Islam is rare and mostly restricted to particular mosques and madrassas on the coast. Such establishments have been under increasing scrutiny in the last five years. Widespread support for, or even the discussion of, al-Shabaab ideology within communities, is unlikely, as individuals fear being associated with the group. Rather, respondents indicated that these discussions have been driven underground and take place in private or through online forums and social media platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp where anonymity is easier to guarantee. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine if an individual recruited by al-Shabaab through, for example, an extremist network has been ideologically 'radicalised' or is simply joining for more practical reasons, such as financial gain.

### *False Promises and Coercive Misguidance*

As mentioned above, while much emphasis is placed on the role of ideology in radicalisation and CVE literature, findings suggest that false promises and coercive misguidance are more likely to be reported as primary recruitment tactics used by violent extremist actors across research locations. Respondents reported a range of schemes used by al-Shabaab recruiters. These include, for example, the promise of job opportunities in different countries, local sports teams being told they will be able to tour abroad, students being promised false study opportunities, and girls being promised large dowries and attractive marriage opportunities in neighbouring counties. Furthermore, coercion was seen to play a large role in recruitment, as well as the use of kidnapping and threats common to al-Shabaab.

*'Some are forced to join. They are told fight for your religion or you will be killed.'*

*Respondent in Majengo, Nairobi*

In Majengo, Nairobi, for example, respondents spoke of how al-Shabaab recruiters frequently attracted youth by promises of financial compensation, fame and recognition in Somalia. They also ascribed a generational dimension to al-Shabaab's recruitment strategies, and described how certain local elders whose position commands a level of respect, act as 'brokers' who play key roles in identifying vulnerable youth, and even negotiating new recruits' compensation with al-Shabaab. In Eastleigh, youth respondents described a case in which an individual was told he was being recruited to play basketball in the United Arab Emirates, and another where a local football team was told they would be touring Sudan. In both cases, the unsuspecting were transported to Somalia by deceptive recruiters.

In Garissa, respondents reported that al-Shabaab recruiters use financial compensation, false promises, and misinformation to lure potential recruits. This includes offers up to USD 1 500 to the families of recruits. It was also widely perceived across research locations that recruitment relies on a complex network of stakeholders, among them individuals from government and security institutions.

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51 See supra note 34.

Outside Garissa



*'Women whose children are members of al-Shabaab are used to recruit other women. Women also implore their husbands to be "real men" and join like other men are doing. In essence, the women work to radicalise the men and youth. They encourage them to harden and join. They are used as entry points in the family unit.'*

*Female respondent in Majengo, Mombasa*

### **The Role of Women in Recruitment**

The role of women in recruitment processes is evolving and warrants further research. Interestingly, findings suggest that women are often more willing than men to speak openly in FGDs about sensitive issues surrounding security. This may in part be due to men generally feeling warier of security institutions or other unforeseen factors. A number of respondents reported that al-Shabaab is increasingly targeting women for recruitment. This trend has been similarly observed in other violent extremist groups, such as Boko Haram and ISIL.<sup>52</sup> Al-Shabaab's increasing recruitment of women may be a result of the group's recognition that women are able to move more freely in Kenya and are less likely to be profiled and targeted by security forces than their male counterparts. Respondents in Garissa suggested that women are increasingly targeted for recruitment due to their influence in the private sphere and their ability to aid in the further recruitment of their own sons or husbands. Respondents also reported that young girls are recruited to be wives of al-Shabaab fighters, often through the promise of large dowries and prestigious marriages.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that, in Kenya, there is no universal indicator of support for, or participation, in violent extremism. Rather, recruitment and/or radicalisation is a non-linear process arising from a combination of factors that shape an individual's trajectory. Consequently, efforts to effectively address violent extremism must take into account the psychosocial needs of vulnerable communities and individuals, and be multi-sectored in order to encompass these diverse paths to violent extremist membership.

Moreover, this study illustrates the considerable discrepancies between dominant narratives around radicalisation and extremism and the lived experiences of individuals in communities affected by violence. Bridging this gap by bringing to the fore security concerns present in communities most affected by violent extremism – whether these concerns are the result of violent extremist groups, the Kenyan state, or a range of other actors – is paramount for the ultimate success of CVE programmes. In Kenya, as in other countries that have experienced violent extremism, the government must acknowledge that the way in which it treats affected communities, as well as recognition of community perceptions of its actions, profoundly influences its ability to ultimately reduce the threat of violent extremism and foster a peaceful society.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, ongoing commitment to security sector reform is critical, as is support for initiatives that facilitate government–community dialogue and the building of trust.

A major challenge to the field of CVE is that current initiatives are almost exclusively implemented in Muslim-majority communities. This can create the impression that Kenyan Muslims bear sole responsibility for violent extremist acts within the country, without consideration of wider contributing factors. Similarly, the exclusive targeting of Muslim

52 Campbell, J (2015) Women and the Boko-Haram Insurgency. Council of Foreign Relations. Published 11 August 2015.

53 IPI (2016) 'How Close is "Whole of Society" Movement Against Violent Extremism?' Published 16 September 2016.

communities by CVE initiatives may serve to ascribe misleading religious dimensions to violent extremism – dimensions that in this research have not emerged as strongly as the dominant discourse places them. This may result in the continued social stigmatisation and profiling of Muslims in the region, which in turn may fuel violent extremist groups' recruitment efforts in Muslim communities.

The research team recognises that, whilst many of the findings and recommendations in this report have already been identified by peacebuilding and CVE practitioners and academics, it nevertheless contributes to further the evidence base that reorientating CVE within broader, more inclusive peacebuilding and human security frameworks will help to mitigate some of these potential challenges to the field and improve the efficacy of government and donor-led CVE initiatives. This would require the following:

- Working within and adapting the framework of local conflict mitigation mechanisms and practices;
- Increased consideration of the psychosocial needs of vulnerable communities;
- Increasing emphasis on 'do no harm' and conflict-sensitive practices; and
- Focusing on (re)building trust between communities and the government through the strengthening of an inclusive and rights-based governance system and public space.

These informed initiatives would contribute to reducing the threat of violent extremism, and to a more sustainable and peaceful cohesive society at large.

## Institutional Biographies

The **Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)** was launched in 2000 in the wake of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The aim was to ensure that lessons learnt from South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy were taken into account as the nation continued to struggle with efforts to transform its society. Through its Justice and Reconciliation in Africa Programme, the IJR helps to build fair, democratic and inclusive societies across the continent through carefully selected engagements and interventions. The IJR currently works with inter-governmental organisations, governments and civil society actors in the Horn of Africa, Great Lakes Region and Southern Africa. Through collaboration, exchange, and policy innovation, the programme seeks to build partnerships that support critical research, policy analysis, capacity-building in post-conflict situations, and community-led reconciliation processes.

The **Life & Peace Institute (LPI)** is an international and ecumenical centre with its head office in Uppsala, Sweden, that supports and promotes nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation through a combination of research and action that entails the strengthening of existing local capacities and enhancing the preconditions for building peace ([www.life-peace.org](http://www.life-peace.org)). LPI brings a range of participatory approaches and methodologies that have proven to be effective tools for creating space for dialogue and action across Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan in the Horn of Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi in the Great Lakes Region. Through its Addis-based Horn of Africa Regional programme, LPI is also able to link the local peacebuilding initiatives and structures in its country programmes with policy debates taking place at regional level.



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The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) is an independent, non-governmental organisation, which was established in 2000 in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with the aim of ensuring that the lessons of South Africa's successful transition to democracy remain fundamental principles central to government and society as the country moves forward. Today, the IJR works to build fair, democratic and inclusive societies across Africa after conflict.

