Center on Global
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Countering Violent Extremism Among Kenyan Muslim Youth
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The Emergence of Violent Extremism Among Kenya's Muslim Youth

Kenya is a multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural society that is predominantly African in character. The Muslim community—roughly 30 percent of the Kenyan population—is drawn from the whole spectrum of Kenyan society. Like the rest of Kenyan society, the Muslim community's population is young: 65 percent are currently between 18 and 35 years old.

Within Kenya's Muslim population, perhaps 30 percent are of Somali heritage, and another 10 percent are found in the Borana region near Ethiopia. The remainder constitutes Muslim minorities within Christian-majority settlements. The Somalis are found in the northeastern region bordering Somalia and in Nairobi, where a significant Somali population, mostly immigrants from Somalia, have settled in Eastleigh. Currently, the Somali Muslim population is moving within Kenya toward the southern and western borders with Tanzania and Uganda. Another 30 percent of the Muslim population can be found in the coastal region, an area considered by some local scholars to be the "umbilical cord" of Islamic faith within the country and in the entire East and Central African region, tying the contemporary population back to a historically Islamic heritage. For decades, the traditional Islamic centers along the coast have produced Muslim scholars who were instrumental in spreading Islam to interior Kenya and other

parts of eastern Africa. Most Muslims in the region subscribe to the Shafi'i[1] ideology within the Sunni sect of Islam. However, later immigration from South Asia and scholarships awarded to young Muslim Kenyans to study in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries have introduced new forms of Islamic practices.

Islamic revivalism is occurring in many forms throughout the world. Although many majority-Muslim countries in other parts of the world are witnessing protracted and violent forms of resurgence, the Muslim community in Kenya has largely been characterized by gradual but peaceful attempts to participate in mainstream political processes. This dynamic has recently changed. Since the terrorist attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in August 1998, Kenya has experienced a number of terrorist incidents attributable to violent Islamist extremists. Some of the major terrorism incidences include the bombing of a tourist hotel in Mombasa and the attempted downing of an airplane, grenade attacks on police,[2] and an explosion in a bus terminus in Nairobi.[3] Security agencies are reported to have foiled several terrorist attacks by impounding weapons and explosive materials in the hands of suspected terrorists. In addition, Kenyans have been linked to terrorist activities, including attacks during the World Cup final in Kampala, Uganda, in July 2010.

These incidents have led to suggestions either that Kenya has become a source of homegrown violent extremists or it is increasingly becoming

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a haven for violent extremists. The instability in Somalia and the emergence of al-Shabaab as a major promoter of violent extremism is a source of great concern to the entire East and Horn of Africa subregion. Notably, many Kenyan youth, particularly those of Somali or Afro-Arab-Swahili origin and those drawn from urban informal settlements such as Nairobi's Majengo,[4] have been linked to al-Shabaab activities. Indeed, new converts to Islam and even some Kenyan high school students have been targeted for recruitment. A recent report of the UN expert panel on Somalia suggests that Kenyan fighters in Somalia not only have increased in numbers but also hold key positions within the ranks of al-Shabaab insurgents. The report also signals a new and alarming trend in which extremist groups are mentored and inspired by al-Shabaab, a case in point being the Muslim Youth Centre in Nairobi.[5]

Studies have identified various drivers of violent extremism. In Kenya, factors that drive youth to radicalization include religious, socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors. Socioeconomic drivers of radicalization in Kenya include perceived social exclusion and marginalization, frustrated expectations and relative deprivation, and unmet social and economic needs. Political drivers have led Muslim youth to engage in violent extremism as well, for instance, violation of human rights such as arbitrary arrests for being suspected as aliens and prohibitive conditions when seeking identity cards or passports. Cultural drivers have also led some youth to join violent extremist groups. Like many other Muslims in different parts of the world, Kenyan Muslim youth have been led to believe that the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine and political instability in the Arab world is part of a broader war against Islam.

Another factor is the active promotion of violent extremism through religious and other educational institutions. For the last two decades, Kenya has witnessed rapid growth and spread of the *wahhabi* strain of Islam after a large number of young people traveled to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states for religious training. Since then, salafi missionaries have penetrated Muslim communities in Kenya, particularly in urban villages and marginalized rural areas. Poverty, hopelessness, and lack of opportunities among Muslim youth have allowed the salafist movement to carve out strategically targeted niches in the provision of social services, economic empowerment, distribution of bursaries to needy Muslim students, and access to start-up capital for small-scale businesses. They have increasingly offered local governance structures in "ungoverned spaces," creating significant exposure and support for radical interpretations of Islamic teachings.

The salafist movement is largely decentralized yet unified by common capabilities: infiltrating existing insurgencies throughout the Islamic world, hijacking parochial goals, and radicalizing local populations. This has been a strategy used in Kenya by young Saudi-trained scholars who have taken over mosques, madrassahs, and welfare societies. These strategies have succeeded in rendering Sufis, who for a long time dominated Islamic religious affairs on the east coast of Africa, increasingly impotent in the governance and welfare of Muslim communities. Their path to influence has been eased by Western policies over the last decade: After the dual terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, many international Muslim charities were blacklisted and their operations suspended. Funding and support for traditional authorities was greatly hampered, creating an opportunity for other patrons to step in, and new patronage structures to emerge.

The banning of Al-Haramain and five other Saudi/Gulf state-sponsored charity organizations in Kenya led to a change of tactics

by people considered to be direct beneficiaries of these foundations, the majority of whom are Saudi-trained scholars and imams. This group developed new mechanisms for accessing funds and controlling the Kenyan Muslim community's socioeconomic and political infrastructure by establishing new bodies and associations and taking over those that already existed. The leadership of these organizations occupied a vacuum that was created by disorganized Sufis and moderate Muslim scholars accused of mismanagement of Muslim community–based organizations and "compromised by the state." These associations, in addition to providing social services for Muslims, are also providing direct support to religious institutions (mosques and madrassahs). Organizations and individuals perceived to be competitors are stigmatized through elaborate propaganda machinery. Some use the pulpit and other religious infrastructure to incite unsuspecting Muslims against their opponents and even seek to infiltrate and undermine moderate organizations. Much of this work is made possible by Middle Eastern financial patronage. Many imams and preachers in the coastal region of Kenya and from further afield in East Africa travel regularly to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to collect funds and maintain patronage networks.

Against this background, a number of study circles appear to be flourishing on an ad hoc basis. Many mosques in Kenya have a number of extremist agents whose sole responsibilities are to identify regular visitors to the mosque and approach them to join their classes. This is where new recruits undergo indoctrination. Apart from ad hoc classes, lectures are also organized and different scholars who subscribe to their salafist ideology are invited as guest speakers. Through this strategy, extremists have established cells in institutions of higher learning, particularly universities, and have also penetrated professional bodies and online discussion. Purely religious online discussions

are currently on the increase in Kenya and other countries of East Africa.

Building a Bridge Between Muslim Youth and Civic Life

One of the reasons that salafi preachers and missionaries have found success in Kenya is because of the disconnect between Muslim youth and the state and the broader absence of civic participation among young Muslim communities in the region. A key factor in this regard is the weakness of existing Muslim political mobilization in the country. The major political groups that are focused on the Muslim community, such as the National Union of Kenya Muslims (NUKEM), Young Muslim Association (YMA), Islamic Foundation, Muslim Education and Welfare Association (MEWA), Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF), and the umbrella body, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), tend to adopt an exclusivist Islamic identity. They have also suffered from poor management and leadership.

In response to these perceived deficiencies, a group of young activists formed the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA) in November 2003. KMYA was established to address the unique issues confronting young Muslims such as leadership, weak organization, radicalization, and extremism; low levels of civic awareness and participation; self-exclusion and marginalization; and issues around identity and citizenship. Other concerns are deliberate misinterpretation of concepts such as democracy, gender equity/equality, human rights, freedom of expression, and jihad by some Muslim scholars.

KMYA was established on the platform of addressing the particular needs of the Muslim youth in Kenya. KMYA incorporates 153 youth-led community-based organizations,

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student movements, and young imams and madrassah teachers (*ustadhs*). Since its inception, KMYA has piloted and tested a number of projects such as capacity-building programs for Muslim youth leaders, establishment of grassroots leadership structures, creation of a twice-monthly newspaper (*The New Dawn*), and civic education programming on democracy, human rights, and participatory governance. It has repeatedly challenged extremist narratives through targeted use of media and facilitated organization and establishment of moderate Muslim scholarship networks. One of the issues that has negatively contributed to the challenges confronting the young Muslim population is the deliberate misinterpretation of classical Islamic teachings by extremist Muslim scholars and imams. KMYA therefore developed and implemented a number of programs in partnership with the U.S. Department of State, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

KMYA's counterradicalization programs are aimed at connecting young marginalized Muslims to civil society and the government of Kenya's security agencies and line ministries, to improve participation of young Muslims in all spheres of development and to demystify the dependency on traditional religious structures that isolate and marginalize them from broader civic life. Programming in this area has fallen into three baskets.

Peace and Security for Development Program

The Peace and Security for Development program is implemented on the Kenyan coast. The main goal of the project is to promote a pervasive culture of peace, security, and development in the coastal region. Through this program, KMYA challenges Islamic extremists' narratives and encourages young people to work with Kenyan government security agencies, including the police and provincial administration, and participate in democratic processes. KMYA has introduced learning circles, in which youth congregate to discuss issues affecting them while guided by moderate Muslim scholars, government representatives, and KMYA-supported change agents. Other strategies applied in the implementation of the program include leadership boot camps, open dialogue forums, public *barazas* ("town hall" meetings), and security-sector stakeholders' forums. The program also raises awareness of how the new Kenyan constitution provides opportunities to address perceived or real historical injustices on the coast. In addition, moderate Muslim scholars are mobilized to respond to religious concepts deliberately misinterpreted by extremists to suit their agenda.

Connecting Young People and Government

The Connecting Young People and Government program, which has so far been rolled out in northeastern Nairobi and coastal regions, seeks to empower Muslim youth through the formation of learning circles meant to promote moderate views of Islam and challenge extremist rhetoric and deter recruitment for jihad. The learning circles utilize the pyramid concept of recruiting or winning minds among peers. The opinion leaders, mostly youth trained during earlier sessions, are each tasked to influence and deliver 10 peers to be developed as moderate voices of Islam. Each recruit would then be tasked to reach out to another 5–10 peers. These circles are used to channel information on government youth empowerment programs such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund and Constituency Development Fund and to monitor the utilization of devolved funds.

A related project involves the creation of a Muslim Youth Parliament. Through the

parliament, Muslim youth are able to articulate real and perceived disadvantages stifling Muslim youth empowerment, involvement, and contribution toward development. Additionally, they acquire skills for engaging constructively and assertively with public servants at local, regional, and national levels. This will enable a sober, constructive, and persistent push to encourage the government to tackle the perceived marginalization of Kenyan Muslim youth, which has contributed to the resentment and animosity toward authority in the Muslim community both in the northeastern and coastal regions of Kenya. The aim is, in time, to address the underlying social, political, and economic issues that create an environment that is conducive for radicalization to flourish.

Bridging the Gap in Eastleigh

The gap between government and Muslim youth is particularly large in the area of security. As in other countries in East Africa, the security institutions in Kenya are generally weak and corrupt and lack clear and developed strategies for citizen engagement. Security agencies continue to apply traditional "hard" strategies such as surveillance, intelligence gathering, and the use of informants at the expense of community policing. In the context of the heightened security mandated by the raised terrorist threat in East Africa, engagement between the police and the Muslim community, particularly the youth, is particularly important.

Against that background, KMYA has been working to inform, educate, motivate, support, coordinate, and develop engagement between security agencies and the Muslim youth in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighborhood. This has included organizing joint discussion forums among the youth leadership, Kenya Police and Administration Police, Office of the President (Provincial Administration), government line ministries, Nairobi City Council, private sector

actors, and community Leaders. KMYA has held public-forum open discussions at the ward and subward levels to engage youth on issues of governance and citizenship, including democracy, constitution reform, other post–election violence reforms, and voting. Through these processes, KMYA works to raise awareness of nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution and support youth in identifying, documenting, and reporting issues of concern to the relevant government and nongovernmental entities.

Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Ahead

Despite many challenges that KMYA faced in the early stages of its counterradicalization programs' development and implementation, it has succeeded by and large in building confidence within and among the Muslim community, the government of Kenya, and other security stakeholders. KMYA took a risk by pioneering open discussions and dialogue forums that led to direct confrontation with extremist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir,[6] and salafist and jihadist groups.

This confrontation has occurred through a number of channels: the use of *The New Dawn* to demystify religious concepts misinterpreted by extremists to suit their agenda; the creation of a web-based Bulk SMS Broadcast System for dissemination of urgent and short messages; the Muslim Youth Parliament; the use of an early-warning mechanism, in which young people voluntarily monitor activities and speeches in mosques and other religious forums and share information within the KMYA network; and the provision of professional and technical support to moderate Muslim scholars.

Yet, many challenges remain for these kinds of efforts to counter violent extremism in Kenya.

- **The pervasive culture of suspicion.** Many

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members of the Muslim community are still suspicious of concepts promoted by Western countries such as democracy and human rights. Consequently, many Muslims still are not comfortable with donor funding from Western countries. They have a feeling that any partnership with Western powers is meant to dilute or compromise their Islamic faith. Moreover, understanding democracy and human rights is still a challenge for many in Kenya because most of the youth remain skeptical about whether these are legitimate norms and values. They have not yet internalized the ethos of human rights, democracy, and participatory governance. Kenyan Muslim youth are particularly skeptical about the "global war on terrorism." Their arguments are reinforced sometimes by perceived double standards in Western dealings with the Muslim world. Extremist groups have recorded great success in drawing attention to these concerns as a basis for resistance to Western-backed norms and activities.

- **Poor information flow and communication infrastructure.** Although KMYA has established a twice-monthly newspaper to help bridge the information gap between the grassroots and national level, the organization is unable to print and distribute adequate copies required to meet the demand all over the country. The organization's dedicated website and Facebook page meant for mass information dissemination is not properly utilized due to ongoing cost barriers to participation and administration. Many youth at the grassroots level also do not have access to or the skills to use the Internet, especially given high rates of illiteracy.

- **Cross-generational conflict.** Activities within the Muslim community have traditionally been initiated by or with the blessings of the elders. Since the KMYA project is youth driven, it has been treated with some measure of suspicion by the major Muslim establishments and organizations, particularly those headed by Muslims of Somali origin and Afro-Arab-Swahili origin.

- **Inadequate funds.** Counterradicalization programs cannot achieve success in just a few months. Long-term project funding is needed to allow effective planning, training, and mobilization. There is also room for significant regional expansion of this mode of thinking, through support for cross-border interaction and the building of regional networks to counter regional and international networks established by extremists.

KMYA successes offer clear policy insights and hope for the future. Over the last eight years, KMYA has developed a national Muslim youth network that has made significant achievements in building resilience to violent extremism. Through a number of programmatic interventions, it has established a reliable Muslim youth network that has liberated young people from dependency on an Islamic traditional funding system that has been abused by extremist networks and bridged the gap between the discourses in these communities and civic participation. This offers significant hope for programming not only in Kenya, but also in the region more broadly.

Yet, violent extremists in the region have a significant advantage over moderate Muslim scholars: they have established extensive regional networks that provide resources and organizational skills to sustain their operations. Expansionist by nature, the extremist has been successful in intimidating, marginalizing, and silencing moderate Muslim voices. Moderate Muslim scholars and activists can point to nothing analogous. There remain many

significant challenges to effective cooperation among the states in the region on issues of community engagement and even more for civil society actors from around the region to network and develop shared practices, materials, and strategies.

In order to reverse the gains made by violent extremist networks, there is an urgent need to establish regional support mechanisms for moderate voices of Islam. This could involve the regional expansion of the kinds of strategies and projects that KMYA has been developing for the last eight years. The first step may involve in-country and intercountry network building, followed by a regional initiative that could benefit from the support and guidance of subregional and regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, its Capacity-Building Programme Against Terrrorism, and the African Union. Host governments will play a critical role in this process because they have had a complex relationship with civil society actors, especially Muslim actors, in recent years.

The aims of such a program must be to:

- give communities the skills and resources to understand and actively address intolerant or extremist messages and discourage violent extremism;
- support people who may be vulnerable to extremist views due to personal experiences of disengagement and marginalization;
- educate groups and individuals about the avenues available to participate positively in political debate; and

take charge of messaging: develop elaborate strategies that include effective use of shared materials, information and communication technologies, and online pages to provide leadership in debates at the local, national, and subregional level, guided by moderate Muslim scholars.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

Notes

[1] Shafi'i is one of the four schools of religious law, within the Sunni branch of Islam. The Shafi'i School of Islamic Law is named after Imam ash-Shafi'i. The other three schools of Islamic law are Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali.

[2] On 3 December 2010, a police officer was killed after explosives were thrown into the vehicle by suspected extremist in Nairobi's Eastleigh suburb.

[3] On 20 December 2010, three people were killed and 39 injured when a bomb exploded at a bus station in Nairobi. Al-Shabaab was blamed for carrying out the attack targeting Ugandans traveling home for Christmas holidays.

[4] Majengo is an old informal settlement in the Nairobi eastlands. The majority of its inhabitants are detribalized members of the Muslim community. It recently attracted the spotlight after it was reported that a large number of young Kenyans who have joined al-Shabaab in Somalia came from the village.

[5] UN Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1916 (2010)," S/2011/433, 18 July 2011, pp. 140-149, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/433.

[6] Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) is an international pan-Islamic political organization whose goal is to unify all Muslim countries as an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law (sharia) under the leadership of a khalif.