

Kenya: More Local than Global

Abstract The Kenyan case compares the operations and supporters of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) in Kenya and affiliated or sympathetic groups such as Al-Hijra—with two contemporary groups (the armed wing of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) and the Mungiki) as well as a historical group (the Mau Mau movement). Islamist violent extremism in Kenya cannot be understood without taking into account the dynamics in neighbouring Somalia, where Al Shabaab has been conducting an Islamist insurgency for several years. However, there are similarities in the aims, motivations and behaviour of Islamist and non-Islamist conflict groups, and the factors behind these similarities are mostly specific to Kenya.

Keywords Al Shabaab · Mombasa Republican Council · Mau Mau Identity · Marginalisation

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT AND THE MAIN GROUPS

This case study considers the Salafi-jihadist groups Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) and its Kenyan affiliates on the one hand and, on the other, three non-Islamist violent groups active in Kenya both past and present: the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), Mungiki and Mau Mau movement. In general, conflict in Kenya associated with

Islamist violent extremist groups has been more similar than different from conflict associated with non-Islamist violent extremist groups in terms of these groups' objectives, drivers and tactics.

Al Shabaab and Al-Hijra

The distinctiveness of Islamist violent extremist groups in their interactions with conflict in Kenya cannot be understood without taking into account dynamics in neighbouring Somalia, where Al Shabaab has been conducting an Islamist insurgency since 2006. These dynamics have strongly influenced the aims, recruitment strategies and tactics of both Islamist violent extremist and other armed groups in Kenya, and must be carefully considered when assessing the similarities and differences between these groups.

Al Shabaab emerged as the most militant faction of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006–2007, and gradually spread into north-east Kenya from the late 2000s, building upon insurgency and governance structures designed to create an Islamist state in the chaos left by the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s (Hansen 2013). In Kenya, domestic Islamist extremism also has a well-established recent history, dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, with strong cross-border connections to Al Shabaab, the ICU and its predecessor al Ittihad al Islamiya. In 2012, the Muslim Youth Centre officially became affiliated with Al Shabaab. Also known as Al-Hijra, the Muslim Youth Centre was formally founded in 2008 as a community organisation in Nairobi's Majengo slum. This reinforced its role as a recruiter to conflict in Somalia and signified its growing involvement in small-scale attacks within Kenya. Yet beyond this, in Kenya in general, indigenous, formalised Islamist violent extremist groups have been less common and less directly engaged in conflict than in Somalia (Oded 2000; Anzalone 2012; ICG 2012, 2014; Nzes 2014).

The MRC, Mungiki and Mau Mau Movement

The MRC officially formed in 1999 as a multi-religious separatist movement in Kenya's Coast Province. It has campaigned since 2008 for the Coast's secession from Kenya, with a militant wing emerging ahead of the 2013 general election (Oded 2013; Botha 2014). Half a century earlier, the Mau Mau movement of the 1950s emerged in colonial Kenya

as a militant splinter from more moderate Kikuyu elites and Kenyan anti-colonial nationalists operating against the central state and Kikuyu “loyalists” (Anderson 2005; Branch 2009). Following independence, a legacy of unresolved issues from the Kikuyu civil war between Mau Mau peasant fighters and loyalist elites endured, the former feeling that the latter had benefited to a greater extent from the independence settlement. Since its emergence in the late 1980s, Mungiki has framed its purpose as defending the rights of disadvantaged Kikuyu against other ethnic groups and central government elites (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2003; Rasmussen 2010; Oloo 2010).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE GROUPS

While all of the groups under consideration emerged for different reasons, they share certain aspects in common in terms of their aims, objectives and narrative framing. The aims in Kenya of the leaders of Al Shabaab and its affiliates, while not entirely clear or explicit, appear in some respects to be influenced by a regional Salafi-jihadist agenda. This agenda has become more apparent after Kenya’s military role began in Somalia in 2011 and after former Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane’s 2013 internal purge of Somali nationalist-orientated leaders. Previously, Al Shabaab operations in Kenya’s north-east and coast regions had primarily appeared to be positioned as a means to the end of supporting the group’s fight for a caliphate in Somalia. Since 2011, these operations have assumed a further aim, forming part of a broader jihadist project of “liberating” surrounding Muslim lands from non-Muslim “occupation” and avenging historical injustices (Botha 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015).

Such aims, infused as they are with religious ideology, appear to be those guiding Al Shabaab leaders such as Sheikh Ahmad Iman Ali (who since 2012 has led the group’s battalion of Kenyan fighters in Somalia). The same approach appears to guide Al Shabaab’s affiliate Al-Hijra, though due to the latter’s highly clandestine nature its aims are difficult to determine (Anzalone 2012; Botha 2013; Nzes 2014).¹ Given this lack of clarity, it is difficult to establish whether these groups’ religiously focused pronouncements are committed objectives or simply framing devices for recruitment. Either way, the religious component is significant, and religious ideology has not featured nearly as prominently in the planning or rhetoric of the leaders of the MRC, Mau Mau or Mungiki.

However, in other ways there are similarities between Islamist and non-Islamist conflict actors in Kenya. Indeed, in addition to the religiously focused ideological element, the aims of Al Shabaab and its affiliates appear to be linked to traditional power projection and the goals of gaining and holding territory, pushing an enemy army out of one's sphere of influence (in this case Kenya's army out of southern Somalia), ensuring the movement's survival by any means, and defending local communities that the movements claim to stand for (Muslims and Somalis) from state oppression. Notably, the non-Islamist conflict groups of Kenya's past and present also shared these latter two goals (Kanogo 1987; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2003).

Of particular relevance, Al Shabaab's articulated aim of carving out an area of north-east Kenya to free it from the corruption and perceived injustices inflicted by the Kenyan state chimes closely with the MRC's secessionist aims. A key difference, however, is that the MRC's autonomous end-goal is secular and founded on localised coastal identity, whereas Al Shabaab and Al-Hijra's is theocratic and based on Muslim identity. This has also influenced Al Shabaab and its affiliates' recruitment practices, which encompass more ethnic groups than the other groups examined—and greater invocation of violent jihad alongside local grievances as a means to motivate followers (Oded 2013; Botha 2014).

RECRUITMENT AND MOTIVATION

The prominence of protecting Islam and redressing Muslim grievances espoused in Salafi-jihadist terms in Al Shabaab's recruiting narratives is unique among conflict actors in Kenya. In particular, a small number of radical Kenyan clerics propagating such messages have been the primary recruiting channel since the mid-2000s for mobilising Kenyans to travel and fight in Somalia. What remains unclear, however, is whether followers are attracted more by this ideological rhetoric or are attracted on identity grounds by the duty to defend fellow Muslims (ICG 2012; Botha 2014, 2015).

Although not to the same level as in the recruiting narratives of Al Shabaab and affiliates, religious ideology has also infused Mau Mau and Mungiki's aims. Yet this has occurred mainly due to the extent to which religion is bound up with local Kikuyu (Christian) culture and traditions of community solidarity (Furedi 1989; Anderson 2005; Oloo 2010). Similarly, for some of the MRC's leaders and followers, Islam has been

more a marker of a marginalised coastal identity than a guiding ideology in and of itself, with both leaders and followers having Christian and traditional religious backgrounds too. Meanwhile, in contrast to the MRC, Al Shabaab's members are generally conservative in their views of Muslim exclusivity and more prone to viewing their religion as being at threat from the Kenyan government (Botha 2014, 2015). Indeed, research into Al Shabaab and the MRC (Botha 2014, 2015) found that while the latter is religiously diverse but ethnically narrow, the former is exclusively Muslim but comprises many different tribes. 87% of Al Shabaab members identified religion as their reason for joining the group, and 97% considered their religion to be under threat—suggesting that religious identity can be both a powerful attraction and motivator. But Botha's study of the MRC suggests that ethnicity may be equally powerful, depending on the situation and the cause.

However, beyond religious ideology, there are other drivers of Al Shabaab and its affiliates' recruitment practices at individual, communal and structural levels that are consistent with those that have encouraged participation in the MRC, Mungiki and Mau Mau. Indeed, across Kenya, organised crime and violence perpetrated to achieve political, social and economic goals have flourished and become normalised in a vacuum of permissibility since the late colonial era due to a failure of governance. This has been further fed by the politicisation of a range of community grievances due to the fractured nature of Kenyan politics along ethnic and religious lines, corruption and other systemic facilitators (Ndungu 2010; Oloo 2010; Kenya Transitional Justice Network 2013).² These grievances have included land-use rights; repressive and discriminatory state policies and actions; a lack of opportunities for youth; and ethnic or religious hostility towards a politically and economically dominant group (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; ICG 2012; Rift Valley Institute 2013; Botha 2014; Thompson 2015). These grievances, rather than ideology, may be more influential with many Kenyan followers of Al Shabaab and its affiliates (Botha 2014, 2015).

The profile of Al Shabaab and its affiliates' followers reflect these wide-ranging drivers. Somalis and Muslims from the north-east, Nairobi's slums and the coast have traditionally constituted the majority of recruits to these groups. Yet, in recent years, an increasing proportion has also come from a more diverse range of ethnic groups. This is suggestive of the influence of broader push factors within these three areas. This, in turn, has allowed Al Shabaab and its affiliates to draw

participants from across broader areas of Kenya than the more localised MRC (drawing from coastal groups), Mau Mau (attracting recruits from the central highlands and Rift Valley Kikuyu) and Mungiki (recruiting mainly from the Rift Valley and Nairobi Kikuyu) (Botha 2014).

In terms of foreign fighters, while over a thousand are believed to have fought with Al Shabaab in Somalia since the mid-2000s (in declining numbers since 2012), mainly from the Somali diaspora, far fewer are thought to have fought within Kenya (Ford 2010; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. 2012; Pantucci 2013; Hansen 2014). Here, it is Somalis from Somalia that represent the dominant “foreign” element in Kenya, but this is not unprecedented: this has been the case since before the Shifta War (1963–1967), a secessionist conflict in northern Kenya. This less international profile is in part due to the greater intensity of conflict in Somalia than Kenya—the latter attracting fewer fighters. Yet it may also reflect the fact that Al Shabaab’s propaganda has primarily purposefully focused on local Kenyan grievances and inter-communal tensions (Anzalone 2012; Botha 2013; Anderson and McKnight 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015). This reflects the exploitation of local grievances to mobilise groups to violence which has been a tradition in Kenya since before independence. The Mau Mau and Mungiki are cases in point, drawing on a patchwork of micro-level tensions in their recruitment strategies (Furedi 1989; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Branch 2009; Oloo 2010).

TACTICS AND METHODS

Shifting conflict dynamics in Somalia has shaped Al Shabaab’s operations in Kenya more than those of any other group. Indeed, Kenya’s 2011 incursion into Somalia and battlefield successes by AMISOM forces appear to have played a large part in hastening a shift within Al Shabaab’s leadership from a predominantly Somali nationalist to a more internationalist jihadist orientation. They have also hastened the group’s expansion into Kenya to relieve the growing military pressure on the group at home in Somalia. This has had significant implications in terms of the tactics and operations used by the group on its new battlefield (Bruton and Williams 2014; Bryden 2014; Menkhaus 2014; Hansen 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015).

Most significantly, in its embrace of decentralised guerrilla warfare and cellular terrorism in Kenya (unlike its more bureaucratic military operations in Somalia), Al Shabaab and its affiliates have come more closely

to resemble Mau Mau and Mungiki's loose structures and roving independent bands. This reflects the different security and conflict dynamics present in Somalia relative to those in operation in Kenya—and the adaptation required of Al Shabaab to these diverse conditions (Kanogo 1987; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Rasmussen 2010; Marchal 2011; Hansen 2013; Nzes 2014; Lia 2015).

Meanwhile, every group in this study has engaged significantly in organised crime. Since its expansion into Kenya, Al Shabaab has depended on exploitation of criminal activities in the country, from protection rackets in Eastleigh, an ethnic Somali-majority neighbourhood in Nairobi, to the taxation of smuggled contraband in the north-east (Vilkko 2011; Keatinge 2014; Maguire and Haenlein 2015). Similarly, many Mau Mau fighters either passed through or were recruited from organised crime groups in Nairobi. Mungiki too has effectively acted as an organised crime group in a number of respects, exploiting similar protection rackets in Nairobi's slums to those run by Al Shabaab in Somalia.³ The MRC, for its part, is believed to be linked to the rampant criminal trafficking of contraband in and around Mombasa (Anderson 2005; Branch 2009; Rasmussen 2012; Kisiangani 2012).

The human impact of each of these conflict actors is also broadly comparable in most cases. Former Al Shabaab leader Godane's greater acceptance of the "takfiri" ethos of Salafi-jihadist groups that legitimises the killing of other Muslims caused large numbers of civilian and security-force casualties in Somalia (around 4000 killed and 4000 wounded since 2007). Yet within Kenya, Al Shabaab's increasing attacks since 2008 have accounted for a lower total of 500 deaths and 1000 wounded by one estimate, with the group increasingly seeking to avoid Muslim casualties and instead predominantly targeting Christians to further stoke religious and ethnic tensions (Bryden 2014; Pate et al. 2015). Casualties at the hands of Mau Mau from 1952–1956 and Mungiki in the 2007–2008 elections violence have also been much higher than Al Shabaab's (Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005; Branch 2009; Oloo 2010). The exception is the MRC whose militant wing attacks—mainly on security forces—have been far less frequent or fatal. Its leadership contends that it remains a non-violent movement (Kisiangani 2012).

Similarities also extend to the tactics employed in the conduct of conflict by the groups under consideration. With the exception of the planning and scale of financing required for Al Shabaab's 2013 Westgate mall attack, most attacks by Al Shabaab and its affiliates in Kenya have

been similar to those conducted by non-Islamist actors in their use of small arms, grenades and small IEDs. Additionally, while Al Shabaab's use of suicide terrorism has grown increasingly commonplace since 2006 in Somalia, no successful suicide attack has yet taken place in Kenya in the same period, reflecting either a conscious choice of different tactics or a tighter security environment (Marchal 2011; Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism 2015). Journalistic sources, however, suggests the latter, reporting that attempted suicide attacks orchestrated by Al Shabaab may have increased since 2014 (Avraham 2015; Bluwstein 2015; Odula et al. 2015).

CONCLUSION

Ideologically, there are clear differences between Salafi-jihadist leaders of Al Shabaab on the one hand and the aims of MRC, Mungiki and the Mau Mau movement on the other. Nevertheless, Islamist violent extremist leaders also seek traditional power objectives like control of territory. Moreover, in Kenya at least, this has not manifested in especially unique behaviour, such as significant "foreign fighter" contingents or use of suicide attacks. Historically, Mungiki and Mau Mau have indeed been more violent than Al Shabaab within Kenya.

These differences have not resulted in dissimilar recruitment narratives or motivations for followers to join. In fact, the plethora of non-religious motives for Kenyans joining Al Shabaab and its affiliates, and the instability created by the ideological gap between followers and leaders is comparable to the fragmented, heterogeneous nature of Mau Mau and Mungiki. Motives and ambitions for the MRC have generally been more homogenous. Islamist violent extremist groups in Kenya have certainly been able to recruit from a wider geographic and ethnic profile than non-Islamist violent extremist groups, but this probably reflects grievances more associated with Muslim identity rather than ideology.

Beyond a small hard core of ideologues, there may therefore be room for negotiation, disengagement and rehabilitation of both more pragmatic leaders and followers not so wedded to global jihadism as an aim itself. But, far more must be done to create the environment of trust and engagement on key issues of grievance—such as Muslim/Somali discrimination, marginalisation, land-use rights, and inter-communal tensions—before the Kenyan ranks of these Islamist violent extremist groups can

be reduced and other Kenyans dissuaded from taking their place. Thus, while interventions must take into account dynamics in Somalia in terms of Al Shabaab's leadership and fortunes there, separate measures specific to Kenya will be needed irrespectively. Even if Al Shabaab is militarily defeated as a fully fledged insurgency in south-central Somalia, in terms of mitigating Islamist violent extremist conflict in Kenya, such a victory may be "irrelevant to Kenya's ability to make a political settlement with its Somali and wider Muslim communities at home" (Anderson and McKnight 2015). Overall, the need is to create an environment of trust and engagement on key issues of grievance to tackle the recruitment base of violent Islamist groups.⁴

NOTES

1. The important point that local Kenyan Islamist extremist leaders may not have a fully articulated set of aims and strategy for achieving them through violence, but rather may be engaging expressive violence was made in conversation with DfID and FCO experts in Nairobi: Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya, Old Admiralty Building-Nairobi, 29 September 2015.
2. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop, 29 Sep 2015.
3. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop, 29 Sep 2015.
4. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop, 29 Sep 2015.

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