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POLICY BRIEF

Al-Shabaab Rented Violence in Northeastern Kenya

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Background

Kenya grapples with the terrorism menace, that has been constantly mutating in form and substance. In the context of the Northeastern region of Kenya, the terror attacks have not only been focusing on the civilians, but also on the security officials. In the year 2020, there were thirty-two attacks that specifically targeted the security personnel in the counties of Wajir, Mandera and Garissa (CHRIPS Observatory). Garissa and Mandera counties had the highest share of the attacks at sixteen and thirteen, respectively.

Such attacks have also taken the form of the use of arson, where private property is involved. The destruction of private property has borrowed largely from similar occurrences in Somalia. A documented story of a hotel attack in Somalia, narrates how the Al-Shabaab accompanied by the community elders, stormed the business property with monetary demands, threats and to an extent robbery (Werner, 2017). This is like the destruction of private property including telephone masts in the region.

Contextualizing Rented Violence:

Gangs and militias tend to prey on the community for rent. In a report to the United Nations Development Program, scholars identify a pattern of parasitic dependence on local communities by the gangs. The gangs marketize violence to make gains from it (Ngunyi & Katumanga, 2014). One of the means the benefit occurs, is where the local communities end up embracing the gangs because of the 'security services' they provide. The symbiotic relationship between the gangs and the community creates the sort of complexity that clouds the elimination of such gangs. In some instances, an implicit agreement between the gangs and the local community manifests (Ngunyi & Katumanga, 2014).

In the context of Al-Shabaab in Northeastern Kenya, there have been reports of rapprochement between the local communities and the terror group. The area county commissioner in one instance decried the local communities' embrace of the terrorists. The commissioner also added that though the terrorists may originate from Somalia, they had key planners within the local community (Sharamo, & Turi, 2021). It is therefore evident that there could be an existing relationship that is beneficial to the local community and utilized by Al-Shabaab.

Governance Gap and the Al-Shabaab Role:

The counties of Wajir, Mandera and Garissa are located quite far from Nairobi, and have been historically considered as marginalized. Ngunyi and Katumanga allude that the further away from the center a region is, both in geographical and economic contexts, the higher the probability of privatized violence (Ngunyi & Katumanga, 2014).

The Mandera county governor has been vocal on how Al-Shabaab controls a greater territory in the county. The terror group has led to the closure of more than a hundred schools, control certain roads and other crucial infrastructure (Yusuf, 2021). These sentiments were outrightly denied by the national government. Such discord between the two levels of government indicates a governance challenge that may have been manipulated by Al-Shabaab.

As earlier indicated in this brief, Al-Shabaab has constantly targeted inflicted a lot of casualties to the security officials in the Northeastern region. Drawing from the extent of influence that Al-Shabaab has in the area, it would be logical to conclude that the attacks are geared towards expunging the government from the region or rather limiting the aggressive governance by the government in the region. Scholars document that the local community in the region see Al-Shabaab as a “regional service provider” which further affirms a hybrid parasitic and symbiotic relationship (Collins, 2020).

The success of the Al-Shabaab in gaining both territory and revenue is hinged on government absence. The zone – Northeastern – is placed at considerable risk for the security agencies and it is evident from some of the successful Al-Shabaab operations that the attacks have been greatly localized and aimed at distracting the government efforts to respond to the terror group.

The Mandera community has also opted to creating a local vigilante to fight Al-Shabaab, with minimal success (Sharamo, & Turi, 2021). The option to getting a local vigilante could be evidence of the less trust in the security product from the government as a mandate and resulting in security being viewed as a gang-controlled service.

The areas under Al-Shabaab control have also been identified as lucrative for illicit trade. Bula Hawa, that is at the border of Kenya and Somalia has been a prominent space for the illegal trade (Sharamo, & Turi, 2021). The town has less Somalia or

Kenyan government presence, creating a vacuum that would be ideal for the rented violent practices. The end, thus would justify the means for Al-Shabaab, since preventing government presence by concentrating attacks on its security agencies gives an opportunity for the perpetuation of its services, either by choice or through coercion.

Conclusions:

Al-Shabaab has established its modalities for rented violence by pushing for limited dependence on national government with limited county government presence within the Northeastern region. The Northeastern region, historically famous for irredentism and detached from the national center has remained a desirable new home for the Al-Shabaab. The attacks directed on the security agencies is evidence to the poor relationship between the local community and the national government. It will not be strategic for the two level of governments to provide different assessments of the terror group, since that would further dampen the public confidence in the two levels of government.

The government will continually be victim to the terror attacks and like in the case of the Manda Bay attack, where Al-Shabaab claimed to be fighting to reclaim land that had been forcefully taken away from the local community, the terror group will predate on the local conflicts to attain its interests, gaining territory and a source of revenue for its sustenance (Collins, 2020).

There are dangerous possibilities resulting in the growth of local vigilantes that will may assume the same 'services' as Al-Shabaab. These groups may become allies to Al-Shabaab or compete for the benefits in such a space. The efforts by the government to deploy most of its security agencies is not being sufficient. As Moalin notes from the Mogadishu hotel bombing incident, "you can't demand an end to protection money if you can't guarantee security as a government" (Werner, 2017). Is the Kenyan government ready and willing to guarantee security in the most remote parts of the Northeastern region?

Recommended Intervention:

The government needs to deploy different approaches that are largely locally driven to restore the public confidence. An intervention that does place the government as an actor with a symbiotic relationship between the local communities and itself will

dethrone the position that the vigilantes and the Al-Shabaab terror groups will occupy.

The government acting as a unilateral player will expose it to the terror attacks while abstaining from the region gives space for the growth of marketized violence. Bringing the security agencies together with the local communities creates a collegiate system where crucial things like information can be shared and will stamp out the prolonged fear of the hard stance of the government.

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