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## Linking the Narratives from Criminal Gangs to Violent Extremism Activity in Kisumu, Kakamega and Nakuru.

### About the Authors

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### Executive Summary

The understanding of the vulnerabilities that link the narratives pushing individuals into violent extremism (VE), is transforming and becoming nuanced. The discourse around the drivers, is more engaging for the vulnerable communities. The notion of; a “whole of community approach” as the best response to the VE threat in our counties, is adapting, and with it; changing in the messaging.

To complicate the situation even more, the practitioners often assume that the presence of contextual issues also known as resonance factors; as an automatic indicator of risk to violent extremism. While the presence of resonance factors provides an opportunity for risk exploitation by the Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO's), narratives make it easier for the exploitation to happen. Narratives influence engagement, creates interest to the alternatives provided and demands actions from the target population.

Without proper development of narratives that have a specific influence, resonance with the local issues, and in some cases an unquestionable obligation, then the vulnerabilities, or in this case, the drivers to violent extremism remain powerless. Such explain why not all vulnerable locations transition to VE and terrorism.

In essence, narratives should therefore be the central component in the discourse of drivers to VE and terrorism. This is because it makes it easy to package the drivers, brand them, disseminate them and even affect the medium of use during the process of sharing.

Questions then arise on: What narratives are available in the Counties where the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) activities are implemented? What can be done in scenarios where there is no clear-cut linkage between violent extremism and other pressing conflict issues? and; How to navigate programs that focus on other violent conflict but link up the gains to PCVE?

This County brief provides insights from a ten-county study funded by the Netherlands Embassy in Nairobi, and carried out by Scofield Associates. The study, conducted between June and December 2021, sought to understand the vulnerabilities that link the offline and online narratives that push individuals into VE. This is a brief from three counties of Kisumu, Kakamega and Nakuru.

The overall findings from the ten-county study developed a vulnerability targeting framework that has provided a categorization of the Counties based on the narratives developed, their resonance factors, the level of socialization in the VE spectra, and the possibility of specific medium use to encourage their uptake.

It makes the case that while the narratives are important in the processes leading to violent extremism and terrorism, the socialization levels to specific conflict determine their development, sharing and utility by the target populations in the three counties.

The findings from the three counties show the following:

1. The level of political violence relating to electoral and governance issues is higher in Nakuru and Kisumu, making it easier for the narratives to be specific to the resonance issues around gang activity rather than the specific VE rhetoric. This points to a lower level of socialization on VE and a higher one on political violence.
2. The narratives in Kakamega focus on migratory conversations that are shared via available medium, including Social Media. The County still feels that while there are vulnerabilities related to VE, they remain to be external. This explains why the immigration of conversations on VE results in emigration of individuals searching for dipper and richer information on the same. It also explains the ease of movement out, and no attacks in the County.
3. The risk of introducing narrative discussions related to VE in the process of PCVE is high. The process commenced with the development of the County Action Plans (CAPs), and new civil society engagement on the subject. Caution should be taken, to ensure that the well-intended activities do not expose the target population to the framing that fits VE discourses.
4. Finally, there are linkages between political and electoral violence including gang issues, to VE. The development and influence from narratives show these links. While the vulnerabilities to VE exist in the three counties, activities should be developed to focus on pressing needs, like gangs and possibility of electoral and political violence in the three Counties. Such responses will have a direct PCVE gain.

## Linking Narratives from Criminal Gangs and Violent Extremist Organisations in Kisumu, Kakamega and Nakuru.

By Muliru Yoni, Peterlinus Odote and Halkano Wario

As early as 2018, the residents of Kisumu complained to the national government of the rising criminal gang threat that was plaguing the County. In fact, one media outlet specifically mentioned that the County was at the edge of plunging into a gang war.<sup>1</sup> Kisumu, as a hot-spot County for political and specifically electoral violence, has often attracted a lot of response from the national government, local and international partners.

Kakamega County, in Kenya's Western Province, faces an array of issues due to the changing nature of peace and security in its landscape. Nakuru, on the other hand, sits squarely on the main highway leading to Western, Nyanza, and Northern Rift Valley regions. As a transit County with diverse travelers, such mobility can be a conduit through VE messaging that influence new networks to radicalize and recruit the youth.

A 2017 study that covered Kisumu and Kakamega mentioned VE as a minimal threat at the time, and if present; was an external threat to the region, one that would still depend on the common drivers of conflict in the area including poverty, need for money, among other things.<sup>2</sup> A recent study pointed out Nakuru as a new hot spot County for VE and terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

While there are no direct examples of violent extremist activity in the three Counties, there is a clear indication that current vulnerabilities, if shaped well, would make VE to thrive. Some of these would include the presence of gangs, ease engagement with other regions as transit points, and a pool of vulnerable youth.

Available research has proven the linkages between violent extremism and other political forms of violence.<sup>4</sup> A study by Anneli Botha, on individual involved in VE and terrorism, point to the centrality that the Western Counties play in the transfer and adoption of VE.<sup>5</sup>

The three counties have an intractable crime gang problem. The youth gangs terrorize residents in lower income neighborhoods of Nakuru and Naivasha towns in Nakuru County, Kondele, Nyalenda and Kalo- leni areas of Kisumu County; Mumias, Ingotse Kakamega, and Majengo in Kakamega County. These gangs are highly territorial and at times wage turf wars. The phenomenon of urban gangs appears to be caused by among other factors high youth unemployment, substance abuse and delinquency.

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1. Dalton Nyabundi, (March 2018). Kisumu residents ask Matiang'i to intervene as criminal gangs re-emerge. The Standard Online. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/m/article/2001274945/residents-petition-matiang-i-as-organised-crime-resurges-in-kisumu>, accessed November 2021.

2. Scofield Muliru. (February, 2017). The Threat of Violent Extremism in Western Kenya Report. Wasafiri Consulting.

3. Ngala Chome. (June, 2021). Kenya's New Violent Extremism Hotspots: An assessment of risk and vulnerability in Marsabit, the Rift Valley and Western Kenya. RUSI. <https://www.reinvent-kenya.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Kenyas-New-Violent-Extremism-Hotspots.pdf>

4. Jeremy, Lind, Patrick, Mutahi, and Marjoke Oosterom. (2015). Tangled Ties: Al-Shabaab and Political Volatility in Kenya. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies; CHRIPS, (2020). Conflict Assessment Report: Danida Peace, Security and Stability (PSS) Programme – Kenya 2016-2020.

5. Anneli, Botha. (2014a). Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization among Individuals Who Joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37 (11): 895–919.

Nakuru County is one of the counties which benefited from the development of rapid customized County Action Plans (CAPs) to Counter Violent Extremism by mid of 2019. Kisumu also has a CAP,<sup>7</sup> that confirms the presence of intolerance that leads to acts of terror in different forms.

Kakamega is a large County with a diverse religious and ethnic make-up. Until recently, a report by the Regional CVE Research Unit asserted that the interior of Kenya, including the larger Western Province, was considered immune to the threat of extremist radicalization and recruitment.<sup>6</sup> According to the Kakamega County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent extremism,<sup>8</sup> there is an appreciation of the growth of VE as an eminent threat.

This County brief provides findings from a study that sought to understand the process of narrative formation, spread, and linkages to VEO's in ten counties. The respondent selection was representative, with conscious efforts to include gender and diversity considerations. The respondents included 37 individuals from Nakuru, 24 individuals from Kisumu and 20 individuals from Kakamega.

Altogether, the fieldwork in the three Counties included 81 participants: representing fifty-one males and thirty female respondents. Religious demographic grouping included, eleven Muslims, sixty-nine Christians and one Hindu.

The method of data collection was purely qualitative, using a purposive sample and a snowballing technique, to target respondents that included individuals from the Maskanis (Bazes, Youth hangout), Returnees, those directly affected, mothers of those that traveled to Somalia, university students, religious leaders, and those who were formally incarcerated over VE related incidences.

The study also borrowed from a desktop review of existing research materials on narrative development and spread from the global space to the local communities in Kenya. The guiding questions that also serve as the summary of the findings from the respondents.

### **I. What are the messages available in the counties, and how are these messages assessed?**

VE messaging in Kisumu, Kakamega or Nakuru is not directly shared or openly linked. It is either referenced by attacks from other Counties, migration of individuals who are later found in VEO's, or social media news information. Other than referencing information on activities related to terrorism, there are indications of radicalization and recruitment happening in schools, common social spaces and gang associated areas within the Counties.

For Kisumu, the gangs that were previously associated with criminal activity and electoral violence, persist. Most of the respondents mention China Squad and Wamericano, as some of the biggest gang groups in the region.

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6. Scofield Muliru. (February, 2017). The Threat of Violent Extremism in Western Kenya Report. Wasafiri Consulting.

7. Kisumu County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent extremism, 2019.

8. Kakamega County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent extremism, 2019.

The conversations around narratives include a lot of linkage to political violence as an anchoring point of discussion. Like the connections in the 2017 vulnerability report,<sup>9</sup> political violence remains prevalent in Kisumu County. However, within the rhetoric, attributes showing vulnerabilities related to VE become visibly shared. As an example:

*While you support political engagements for right and against the wrong in your community, what is your benefit in the process. Political engagement in unjust space is not your responsibility as a Muslim. —*

Respondent Kisumu.

The narrative above shows that while there is an awareness of the local context, it includes a painting of whom the enemy is in the process, and a linking to a religious cover, as part of the narrative creation process. Regarding the grouping process, the narratives focus on exposing the limited gains, and the actions from the government that hurt the youth. For example:

*Kisumu kumekua kazi kwa vijana pesa kwa wazee. Mabadiliko yapatikana kwa dini na sio kwa makafiri walio na unafiki wa kunyanasa vijana. (Kisumu has become a place where work is given to the youth but the money to the old. Change can be found in the religion and not to the infidels whose role is to mistreat the youth.) —* Respondent Kisumu.

While the narrative above is limited in its religious cover, it provides similar targeting and vulnerabilities justifying the actions by the local youth. It also supports the argument that offering alternatives gains not currently witnessed, may resolve their challenges.

The respondents mentioned the ease of movement of the youth from one County to other Counties in the North or at the Coast of Kenya, searching for greener pastures (employment opportunities) or as a means of running away when being sought after by the law enforcement agencies. There is a close relationship to the local political issues in the County, linking a morphed approach to radicalization that provides a political association and a banding to the vulnerabilities in the local community. This then paints a picture that relates governance to VE.

While there is no specific evidence mentioning the direct link between criminality and VE in Kisumu, there are indications that VE and criminal gangs thrive on the same bandwidth, with shared vulnerabilities and actors.

Therefore, the level of socialization within Kisumu County, on VE, is relatively low. VE socialization affects the type of narratives formed, spread, and shared within the target population. As shown below, the narratives focus on gains for those participating, and with a limited religious cover.

*“Nipe kazi nipate ajira nitaachana na utundu naukosaji wa nidhamu, viuma baradi, risasi na visu tutatupa” (Give me employment to enable me to sustain myself then I will stop the stubborn criminal activities, I will throw away the bullets, daggers, and machetes.)*

— Respondent Kisumu.

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9. Scofield Muliru. (February, 2017). The Threat of Violent Extremism in Western Kenya Report. Wasafiri Consulting.

According to Elphas Were, Executive Director at KEYNET, Kakamega's high youth unemployment levels have also contributed to the County's high recruitment levels into Al-Shabaab as well as gang violence. A government official confirms that several bodies are often transported back to Kakamega for burial.

Those bodies are because of activities in Somalia or linked to actions from engagements with individuals in Somalia. Narratives from Kakamega County justify actions whose outcome, or the processes, have similarities to VE. One participant lamented:

*"The politicians have used us, and now we are on a revenge mission. After all, I have been used, and I have nothing to lose. Long live the forty-two brothers."*

— Respondent Kakamega.

Another narrative pointed out the desire for learning by the new member as they interact within a religious awakening. Specifically, the narrative pointed out that:

*Islam provides for opportunities for the youth, to engage and learn with a community. Reaching out to such communities strengthens your faith as a Muslim.*

— Respondent Kakamega.

Additionally, narratives focus on:

1. Narratives of travel and engaging with other brothers in the cause. Religious renaissance.
2. Narratives about access to opportunities and engage in a just causes.
3. Narratives that normalize crime and support to individuals/group gratification after involvement in violence.

It is important to note that Nakuru is nascent on the matters of VE and public knowledge, limited. However, the information from the key informants is relevant in monitoring VEO activities in the County. Most informants would easily deviate from the topic at hand to capture challenges faced with the rise in urban violence and growth of organized crime gangs. To them, VE is not a pressing need.

The informants who were youth but not in school, especially those engaging in small and medium enterprises in urban areas possess considerable amounts of information on VE but apparently, they are not aware that this information is important or valuable in monitoring VEO activities. This depicts the heightened levels of public awareness that could be buoyed by news reportage, social media discussions and informal talks on the subject.

## **II. What influences a decision to continue as an engagement or to seize the engagement?**

The respondents provided several stories showing the engagement from Kisumu and Kakamega being motivated by the escape from the Counties when their criminal activity gets targeted from Law enforcement. One such story includes that of a young couple from a slum in Maseno were engaged in VE with the wife.

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The wife was to travel with him and to get employment as a cook for the Mujahedeen. However, on arrival, the wife was forced to serve the sexual needs of all the fighters, making it a problem for the husband who was later killed while with Al-Shabaab. While the young man lost his life in battle, the community is yet to see the wife, and have no idea whether she is still alive.

Most of the informants from Nakuru identified their first encounter with extremist narrative after an attack in other areas of the country. Most of them related the attacks to an ideological narrative of jihadism propagated by Al-Shabaab. The informants cited getting the first encounter through mainstream media. Youth would then go online to search for more information on the matter. Word of mouth is very common in the area too, where people would gather to discuss the propagated narratives.

Most of the informants believe Nakuru is safe from the VEO's interventions and spread of VE narratives. They, however, cited a sense of vulnerability, especially among the youth, towards radicalization into Violent Extremists (VE). This, as alluded, is due to the rise in the levels of hopelessness due to poverty and high living costs. Some informants cited the promise of a good life and money as one of the narratives that attract young people to join the Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs).

### III. What and how are they linked to online platforms, if any?

The promotion of violence is a common theme in terrorism-related propaganda. The broad reach of content distributed via internet exponentially increases the audience. Further, the ability to directly distribute content via the internet diminishes the reliance on traditional channels of communication, such as news services, which may take steps to independently evaluate the credibility of the information provided.<sup>10</sup>

The use of social media to spread information is mentioned while relating to political violence. This goes to show the limited use of social media for narrative spread in the Counties. However, there is constant migration and movement of specific youths into other counties for opportunities, including violent extremism and terrorism. This constant migration is linked to a medium shared narrative below:

*Your call is to protect the Muslim Ummah through Hijra.*  
— Repeated narrative from Kisumu and Kakamega.

In Kakamega, the use of internet, has proven to be a highly dynamic means of communication, reaching an ever-increasing audience. One participant, in Kakamega, admitted to having received what he called a “misdirected Whats App message” into his inbox. The message had information about Somalia and activities for engagement.

However, the narrative sharing through social media has limited contextualization to the resonance factors in the County. Places like Mjini in Kakamega town and areas within Mumias are the central location for information sharing. Yet, there is limited local VE activity uptake with the County. Would lack of adequate local resonance factors be the reason such uptake is limited, and more youth opt to travel out to quench the VE thirst?

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10. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in collaboration with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, *The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, New York, 2012.

In Nakuru, virtual content is gaining traction. A few cite that the curiosity triggered by the mainstream media through news, pushes the youth to go online to get additional information or clarity, which exposes them to extremist sites and content. Broadcast and social media appear to be the main platforms for transmission of VE narratives, for those engaged. What is interesting is that, most of the respondents mention being targeted by VE recruiters, after visiting specific sites or specific groups.

#### **IV. How are the vulnerable individuals targeted or involved, and what influences them at an individual or even county level?**

The comparison between gangs and VE in the three counties push the boundaries of association. However, there are levels of organizational structure, group processes and the role of technology, that provide a convergence of gangs to violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>11</sup> For these Counties, the influence depends on the level of socialization to VE, and the linkage to criminal activities including gang related violence.

Most of the individuals from the criminal gangs in the two counties of Kisumu and Kakamega, are increasingly becoming radicalized; resulting to the use of VEO's as the escape route from the challenges they face at the local level. This explains the emigration of gang members who are later found within the Al-Shabaab fold.

It should also be noted that while there are mentions of individuals either moving into VEOs through the Coast or the Northeast of Kenya from the Counties of Kisumu and Kakamega, there is little mention of full gang relationships with VEOs at the organizational level.

Socialization, for this study, is the level of acculturation to the new norm that allows for dipper request and involvement demands to either prove loyalty or remain in the fold, as guided by a warped presentation of religion. The lower the socialization level, the lower the messaging demands and use of religious cover. Religious weaving of messaging in the narrative development process then reflects an increase in the socialization process. The higher the use of religious cover, the higher the socialization level within the given County.

In Kisumu and Kakamega, the religious cover is used minimally, indicating a lower socialization level to VE. For Nakuru, the respondents share narratives that use examples of attacks from other counties to present VE to their context. The knowledge of VE then remains limited to information replicated from other County experiences.

Overall, the narratives from criminal gang activities have common resonance factors to VEO's. Therefore, while the level of VE narrative socialization is lower in the three counties, the level of criminal narrative socialization is higher, making it easier for the local community participants to reference understanding of VE as similar to the conflict of gangs and other forms of political violence in their areas.

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11. Scott, Decker, & David, Pyrooz. (2012). Gangs, Terrorism, and Radicalization. *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4. Pp. 151-166. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.7>.



### **Conclusion:**

There is a common misconception about Islamic motivated forms of violent extremism (which is the focus of this study), that often explains radicalization using the drivers to violent extremism as the central vulnerabilities.

This study terms the local contextual issues as resonance factors, which represent the local and relatable challenges that can be exploited by the VEOs. The drivers therefore depend on a well explained local issue to influence behavior, encourage engagement and demand action.

The assumption that religion wraps the discourse of violent extremist ideology, and that the development, crafting and the spread of information, can only be conversed in the format of religious ideology is wrong. The narratives do not only serve a single separate purpose of linking to religious ideology strengthening.

This may be the reason for searching religious cover in vulnerability targeting narratives as a way of linking them to VE. The resonance factors start the narrative acceptance process before religious convergence to VE, and narrative need not have the religious cover for them to provide the linkage to VE. Therefore, the following is evident:

1. Narrative formation in the three Counties is related to the resonance factors, with little to no linkage to the religious cover. This is pronounced in Kisumu and in Nakuru, where the narratives expose the influence of criminal gangs based on the political needs and violence in the two Counties.
2. The level of VE socialization is lower in Kisumu and Nakuru, than in Kakamega. On the other hand, the level of criminal socialization is higher in Kisumu and Nakuru, indicating a higher level of criminality than in Kakamega County.
3. Other than the resonance factor related to specific narratives in each County, the information related to VE and terrorism is referenced as an external threat, and not from the local community. The internet therefore plays an important role in sharing narratives that influence behavior in the Counties.
4. The VE materiality in Kakamega and Nakuru introduces and informs a new norm for the vulnerable individuals to the violent extremist sphere.

### **Recommendations:**

The members of criminal gangs and violent extremist organizations have commonalities. These include, using violence as a common tool, the use of solidarity and elements of collective behavior that is operational in both groups. The narrative use is a representation of a form of “self-help,” or attempts to redress wrongs in their Counties.

The targeting of program activities would therefore mean that policies, including the CAPs, focus on ensuring they respond to the overall vulnerabilities that make it easier to shape the narratives that move individuals into violent extremism and terrorism.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the Netherlands Embassy in Kenya for their support for this study.

In Kisumu, a focus should be on the pressing challenge that is criminal and political gangs that is a vulnerability and a gap for programming. Quick gains for alternative narrative development and response would be better achieved through focusing and responding to criminal and political violence issues in Kisumu, rather than focusing on activities that specifically target the fenced ideals espoused in the five pillars shown in the Kisumu County Action Plan.

For Kakamega and Nakuru, the borrowed narrative materiality through internet sharing slowly increased the VE socialization levels. However, it does not mean that alternative narratives for these Counties should be those that correct religious misinformation, but those that echo the resonance factors to provide solutions. Even in these Counties, the contextual issues remain pressing and important to the respondents.

The narratives across the three counties do not require a radical relationship to VEO's to be dangerous. While the messages appears lacking in the characteristics of radicalization that leverage Al-Shabaab's personality, they are influential to the targeted and vulnerable groups. Across the counties, the marginalized individuals and vulnerable groups' potential for radicalization will continually increase with an increase in local factor narrative development, use, and spread. The focus should remain on the process of narrative development as it relates to the resonance factors and not the end game; that is radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism.

Finally, in the current context, it would be blinding for program activities to focus on avenues of PCVE without looking at the realities of elections and the risk of political violence in the three Counties. While VE and terrorism remains as a long-term threat, the short-term challenge is related to political violence and criminal gangs, which share the same risk in terms of narrative formulation and thrive on the same vulnerabilities as VE and terrorism.

The following areas are identified as vulnerable areas for violent extremism:

1. Kakamega: Mumias East specifically in Matungu and Shibale, Ingotse areas, Majengo in Kakamega.
2. Kisumu: Kisumu town, Car Wash, Kondele, Makaburini, Chemelil and Nyalenda, the slum on your way to Maseno next to KEMRI research institute.
3. Nakuru: Bondeni, Kaptembwo, Shabab, and other low-income estates in Nakuru. An additional focus can be put to the truck stop over locations of Mai Mahiu, Gilgil, Kikopey, Nakuru Pipeline, and Salгаа. This is due to the ease of movement of youth seeking opportunities through engagement with the transportation teams.