



Islamic Radicalization in Kenya

By William R. Patterson

In September 2013, an attack carried out by the al Qaeda–affiliated terrorist group al-Shabaab on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, drew renewed attention to the extremist threat facing that country. At least four attackers left more than 65 people dead after a multiday rampage. All four of the known assailants were Somalis who had been living in the Nairobi suburb

of Eastleigh, known for its large Somali ex-patriot population. Four other Somalis have been charged with helping to plan the operation, two of whom had Kenyan citizenship and identification cards.¹ This attack was only the latest in a string of terrorist incidents stretching back to the late 1990s. It should serve as a stark reminder to the United States that terrorism remains a significant

threat to its national interests in Kenya specifically and in the Horn of Africa more generally.

The first major terrorist attack to hit Kenya occurred at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi on August 7, 1998. This attack was carried out with a truck bomb, killing 214 people and injuring more than 5,000. On November 22, 2002, another set of attacks included the detonation of a truck bomb at an Israeli-owned resort and the launching of missiles at an Israeli-chartered aircraft leaving the airport in Mombasa. Sixteen Israelis and Kenyans were killed in the blast at the hotel, though no one was killed in the attack on

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the plane. Al Qaeda was responsible for each of these attacks.²

Since those early attacks, the government of Kenya has become an important strategic partner in the U.S. Government's counterterrorism efforts in the broader Horn of Africa region. In October 2011, the Kenyan Defense Forces launched an offensive against al-Shabaab called Operation *Linda Nchi* (OLN)—Swahili for “protect the nation”—in Somalia. While OLN enjoyed the approval of most Kenyans, it also prompted criticism from Kenyan Muslim communities.

In 2012, Kenya passed a tough antiterrorism bill called the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2012. Though the passage of this bill was not as controversial as some earlier iterations, it still elicited criticism from Kenyan human rights and Muslim groups. In addition, riots blaming the Kenyan police for the extrajudicial killing of al-Shabaab-linked Muslim Youth Center (MYC) cleric Aboud Rogo³ and the growing activity of the MYC are indicative of increased Islamic radicalism in Kenya. This presents a substantial risk of terrorism against the Kenyan government, Western targets in Kenya, and neighboring countries in the region.

This article explores the development of radicalization in Kenya in recent decades and the sociocultural and political factors that have undergirded it. Additionally, it highlights four general factors influencing the rising threat of Islamic radicalism in Kenya: institutional weaknesses; increasingly acute grievances by the Muslim minority; the establishment of Wahhabi and other extremist forms of Islam in Kenya, along with attendant jihadi ideology and propaganda; and Kenya's foreign and military policy, particularly as it pertains to Somalia.

Islam in Kenya

Approximately 4.3 million Muslims comprise a little more than 10 percent of the overall Kenyan population and about 30 percent of the coastal population.⁴ Large concentrations of Kenyan Muslims live in Coast Province, North East Province, and the capital city of Nairobi, particularly in the neighbor-

hood of Eastleigh. Ethnically, Kenya's Muslims are primarily Swahili or Somali, although there are also sizable Arab and Asian (predominantly Indian and Pakistani) groups.⁵

In addition to ethnic divisions among Kenya's Muslims, there are also key differences in the types of Islam practiced. Scholar Bjørn Møller writes that the Kenyan Muslim community can be categorized as follows:

- a majority of indigenous Kenyan Muslims belong to Sufi orders, especially in rural areas
- reformists, more conservative Islamists, are another primary grouping, mainly in the cities and among Arabs
- a small sect called the Ahmadiya, which was responsible for the first translation of the Koran into Kiswahili, probably numbers no more than a few thousand
- mainstream Sunni Muslims, mainly among Asians
- a small number of Shi'ites, also mainly among Asians.⁶

Muslims settled on Pate Island (part of the Lamu archipelago in Coast Province) as early as the 8th century. This presence grew considerably during the 12th century as trade increased in the Indian Ocean in general and along the coast of East Africa in particular. The earliest Muslim settlers came primarily from what are now Oman, Yemen, and Iran, establishing communities along the Somali coast, Lamu, Mombasa, Zanzibar, and other coastal areas of East Africa.

As these settlers intermarried with each other and with local people, Swahili culture evolved over time. Islam became the core of Swahili culture, but the culture was also influenced by many traditional aspects of indigenous African religious beliefs.⁷ Lamu and Mombasa became the primary areas of Islamic learning and scholarship in Kenya.⁸ Swahili culture and Islam remained largely confined to the coastal areas where trade flourished, though Islam eventually established a foothold in the capital city of Nairobi as well.⁹ Among some of the settlers, particularly in Lamu, were *sayyids*, descendants of the Prophet Mohammad.¹⁰ Traditionally granted great

authority within the Muslim community, that authority came to be challenged during the 20th century and remains an area of contention between different Muslim groups today.

During the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the territories that make up Kenya today were colonized by the British Empire. The interior of the country was chartered to the Imperial British East Africa Company in 1888, became a formal protectorate in 1895, and a colony in 1920. The Muslim coastal area remained a protectorate but was administered in the same fashion as was the colony, meaning there was little practical difference.¹¹

Administratively, the British categorized people as either native or nonnative, providing different privileges to each, with nonnative receiving preferential treatment. Swahilis did not fit easily into either of those categories. As Jeremy Prestholdt points out, “most occupied the awkward position of having neither a recognized African ‘tribal’ identity nor the higher legal status of Non-Native. By the end of the colonial era, this nebulous position contributed to perceptions of Swahilis as neither completely African nor, by extension, Kenyan.”¹² The legacy of that division remains today as many contemporary Kenyans continue to see Muslims more as foreigners than as true Kenyans.

Another colonial practice that served to split Muslims from the larger society was the introduction and special treatment of Christianity. Abdalla Bujra explains that Christianity came to predominate in Kenya, and Western culture generally developed preeminence through the school system and through examples set by colonial officials and British settlers. Kenya's Muslims became culturally isolated as the Christian Church and Western educational system became established in the rest of the country.¹³ Not only was Christianity privileged, but Islam was also denigrated. Bujra notes that “through Church activities and education, and later through the colonial education and media, both Church, Colonial Administration, and the European settler communities propagated very strong anti-Arab and

anti-Islamic misinformation and propaganda. Hence Swahili/Arab political influences essentially came to a halt in [Kenya].¹⁴ This political disenfranchisement has never been remedied and remains a major grievance of Kenya's Muslims to this day.

The political disenfranchisement of Kenya's Muslims continued after Kenya's independence in 1963. The Kenyan African National Union (KANU) immediately came to power and instituted one-party rule. KANU, strongly linked to Christian ethnic groups, was perceived as benefiting those groups disproportionately while largely ignoring problems specific to Muslims.¹⁵ Due to their marginalization in the political process and consequential lack of influence in Kenyan politics, dissent grew among Muslims. Immediately upon Kenyan independence, the Mwambao United Front movement emerged in Kenya's coastal communities calling for the autonomy of the coastal strip of Kenya. This was seen by some Kenyan Muslims as the only way to achieve a political system that honored their religious beliefs.¹⁶ Today the Mombasa Republican Council has taken up this cause and has attracted significant support.

Other Swahilis attempted to use the more traditional political route by establishing the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in 1992. However, explicitly religious parties are illegal in Kenya, and the IPK was denied formal political participation. The IPK complained that all existent Kenyan political parties are, if not in name at least in fact, Christian oriented and led by Christians.¹⁷ The rejection of the IPK as a legitimate political party has been perceived by many Muslims as another form of political alienation and as a deliberate suppression of Muslims' ability to express their views through the political process.

In addition, many of Kenya's Muslims perceived themselves as being excluded from employment opportunities available to other Kenyans. This was especially the case as Kenyans from the interior of the country began to buy property along the coast during the burgeoning tourist industry. Seeing little opportunity

for themselves in Kenya, many Muslims traveled abroad to the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, for work. Authors Esha Faki Mwinyihaji and Frederick O. Wanyama note that:

The employment sector was seen as closed to many Muslims. As a result of the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s, many young Muslims went to work as expatriates in Saudi Arabia where the remuneration was good with the minimal education they had. For almost two decades Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf served as a safe haven for some Kenyan Muslims to work and progress economically.¹⁸

One of the impacts of greater exposure to the Middle East—and Saudi Arabia in particular—was the introduction of stricter interpretations of Islam by Kenyan Muslims returning home. This provoked a conflict between older Swahili interpretations of Islam that incorporated elements of indigenous African religions and practices imported from the Middle East. This schism was also generated by Kenyan students who completed their studies in the Middle East. In so doing, they adopted stricter religious practices, which they brought back with them to their communities.¹⁹ According to Kai Kresse:

Proficient in Arabic, the graduates returned with university degrees and the reformist doctrines of their respective host institutions, which were more radical and combative in tone and content. They applied these ideas to the East African context in their teachings and public speeches, thus radicalizing reformist discourse and polarizing Islamic debate more and more.²⁰

An individual named Sheikh Muhammed Khasim was especially influential along the Swahili coast.²¹ Khasim was most active during the 1960s and 1970s and argued that traditional Swahili Islam included impermissible *bid'a* (innovation in religious matters) and *shirk* (violating the principle of the unity of God) due to the influences of indigenous religions.²² He sought to purify Kenyan Islam and to eliminate the power of the

sayyid (also called *masharifu*), whose power base remained centered in Lamu. Kresse explains that the conflict between Khasim and the *masharifu*

centered on the social and religious status of the masharifu, the descendants of Prophet Muhammad. In popular perception the masharifu, as holy persons with special blessings, fulfilled an important religious function of mediating between Muslim commoners and God, via the Prophet Muhammad, to whom they were said to be especially close. But Sheikh Muhammed Khasim insisted, with reference to the Qur'an, that they did not have any such special powers and, furthermore, it was up to each individual to establish a direct contact to God through special prayers (dua), independently.²³

Khasim distributed his teachings through pamphlets and educational books. This served to threaten the authority of the *masharifu* and represented an opening salvo in the dispute between Islam as traditionally practiced in Kenya and stricter interpretations of Islam more recently imported from the Middle East.

An illustrative case study of this rift is provided by Susan Beckerleg in her anthropological work in the coastal city of Watamu. A reformist movement called Halali Sunna took root there, which stood in opposition to the traditional *masharifu*. The adherents of this movement followed a stricter form of Islam and criticized the power of the *masharifu* as well as the indigenous elements that had long been established in their form of Islam. They also stressed participation in traditional Islamic observances such as prayer and the duty to imitate the life of Mohammed. The men grew their beards and wore traditional Islamic garb and the women also dressed more conservatively than did the typical Muslim women of Watamu. This sect was highly influenced by the conservative Tabligh Islamic movement, which originated in India in the early 20th century and which reached Watamu in 1990 by way of migrants.²⁴ The adherents of this movement were also evangelical and worked vigorously to spread their ideas.²⁵

Much of the local impetus for this reversion to a more conservative form of Islam sprang from social changes being imposed on the community by outside pressures. As Watamu became a popular tourist destination for Westerners, the young people of Watamu became increasingly exposed to the use of alcohol and drugs; immodest dress at the beach, especially by women; and other behaviors that contradicted traditional Islamic precepts and rules of behavior. The adoption of a stricter interpretation of Islam was one way to push back against these disorienting cultural and social changes.²⁶ This phenomenon was not limited to Watamu and was in fact occurring in Muslim communities in popular tourist destinations throughout coastal Kenya in particular.

This push for the adoption of a more conservative “pure” form of Islam, as opposed to the more traditional form of Islam influenced by indigenous African religion, created a space for the development of radicalization in Kenya. The reform movement can in retrospect be seen as a first step toward a more radicalized and militant form of Islam establishing roots in the country. The rift created between traditional and reform Islam became more adversarial over time, especially as outside actors, most prominently from the Middle East and South Asia, began to increasingly influence the movement. Kresse writes that:

Differences in practice and understanding of Islam, which were once tolerated, turned to spark off strong animosities, and the intellectual center of reformist ideology shifted from an internal to an external position, as a multitude of Islamic groups from around the world have sought to increase their influence and support.²⁷

The trend toward radicalization catalyzed by the reform movement soon combined with other forces and only grew stronger during the 1990s and 2000s.



Smoke rises above Westgate Mall in Nairobi, September 23, 2013 (Anne Knight/Wikipedia)

Forces of Radicalization

There are four main factors that have served to intensify the country’s vulnerability to radicalization and terrorism: structural and institutional factors, grievances, foreign and military policy, and jihadist ideology.

Structural and Institutional Factors.

There are several structural and institutional factors that make Kenya vulnerable to radicalization:

- the relatively advanced economy and infrastructure allows for freedom of movement and an abundance of targets
- weak governance in key areas such as security, criminal justice system, and rule of law impede effective action against terrorist groups²⁸
- geographical proximity to unstable states, particularly Somalia, in conjunction with porous borders.²⁹

Economy and Infrastructure. It seems counterintuitive that a relatively robust economy and infrastructural system—compared to neighboring countries—would make Kenya vulnerable. But as Raymond Muhula puts it, “Kenya’s attractiveness to terrorists is exacerbated by the fact that it also boasts the best infrastructural facilities

in the region. It is far easier to operate a cell in Kenya than in any of the Horn countries.”³⁰ Radical and terrorist groups require resources to thrive. Infrastructure and some degree of economic stability allow for ease of travel, faster communications, and access to resources.

In terms of communications, Mwinyihaji and Wanyama point to the Internet as being particularly important:

Rapid internet diffusion has led to a mushrooming of cyber-cafes charging users less than a dollar per hour. These units have become crucial sites of Kenyan Muslims’ engagement with the global Muslim ummah, enhancing their knowledge of Islam through cyber-literacy, and networking within and between (cyber)-communities with shared interests.³¹

Such communication is much more difficult to achieve in a failed state such as Somalia.

The infrastructure also offers enticing targets for terrorist groups. Airports, hotels, resorts, restaurants, and nightclubs, as well as government buildings such as the U.S. Embassy, are easily accessible to terrorists. Furthermore, tourists themselves are possible targets

either while they are in the country or during their transit to and from, as the 2002 attacks on the Israeli hotel and charter plane demonstrate.

Weak Governance. Weak governance, especially in critical areas such as criminal justice, border security, and the provision of essential services, also increases Kenya's vulnerability to radicalism and terror. Widespread corruption, unguarded borders, and ineffective security and police organizations allow terrorist organizations freedom of movement, the establishment of safe havens, and the ability to coordinate logistical needs.³²

A weak criminal justice system can also result in impunity for terrorists. When suspects are caught, they are frequently able to evade justice through bribery or as a result of sheer incompetence in the system. This weakness not only allows terror suspects to unjustly go free but also fosters police abuses due to their inability to use the legal system successfully.

Geography. Kenya's close proximity to unstable states (Somalia, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia), along with its inability to protect its borders, are other risk factors. This is especially true of Somalia and even more so in the aftermath of Operation *Linda Nchi*. The al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia sends adherents back and forth across the border.³³ Additionally, Kenya's proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and the Middle East more broadly has allowed for the steady penetration of jihadist ideologies as travel between Kenya and these areas is relatively easy.

Grievances. Kenyan Muslims have several grievances, many of which have their roots in colonial history. The structural and institutional vulnerabilities discussed above exacerbate these grievances:

- lack of representation in politics
- discrimination and lack of economic, educational, and other opportunities
- heavy-handedness and human rights abuses by the police and antiterrorism legislation and tactics.

Political Representation. Since Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963, the country's Muslims have been politically

marginalized. For most of this period the KANU held power in a one-party system. However, even after Kenyan politics became more democratic, the interests of the Muslim minority have been largely ignored in political circles.

The government established an official Muslim organization—the Supreme Council of Muslims of Kenya (SUPKEM)—in 1973. It was the only organization authorized to represent all of Kenya's Muslims, and SUPKEM leaders were closely allied with the political establishment.³⁴ Being a tool of the government, however, many Muslims viewed it more as a way to control them than to meet their unique interests. The organization was not seen as useful for expressing any political ideas, opinions, or needs that were not already acceptable to the government.

The situation has marginally improved since the end of one-party rule. There are now several national-level Muslim entities with some degree of independent political influence. These include, among others, the National Muslim Leaders Forum, Majlis Ulamaa Kenya, Kenya Council of Imams and Ulamaas, and Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya.³⁵ These are primarily interest groups and councils, however, and do not wield any direct power or authority. While they give the Muslim community an outlet to express itself, they have not led to sufficient representation within government itself or to remedies for the unique problems and interests of Kenya's Muslim communities.

Without political power, Muslims have not been able to advocate successfully for the needs of their communities and have largely been left behind in terms of economic and educational opportunities. Lacking a legitimate political path to address grievances, some Muslims turn to religious extremism to affect change. A report prepared by the United Nations Monitoring Group responsible for East Africa noted that:

During a 13 September 2010 lecture, addressing [Muslim Youth Center, an offshoot of al-Shabaab] combatants and other Swahili-speaking fighters in Somalia,

*Abmad Iman dissuaded Kenyan Muslims from engaging in national politics, urging them instead to “Chinja” (cut), “Chonga” (peel) and “Fiyeka” (slash) the throats of the [Kenyan] infidels and “to hit back and cause blasts [in Kenya]” similar to the Kampala bombings.*³⁶

Alienation from legitimate political institutions may continue to increase the appeal of violent attacks.

Discrimination and Lack of Opportunity. Lack of opportunity, in some cases as the result of discriminatory policies, contributes to widely held grievances in coastal Muslim communities. Fathima Badurdeen argues:

*The root cause of youth radicalization in Coast stems from the region's desperate economic, social, and political conditions. Ineffective decentralization of development plans and governance issues since independence form the backbone of this situation, which is taken advantage of by an infrastructure of social networks or religious and political groups that provide communities with what the government does not and are in some instances extremist.*³⁷

Unemployment is rife in the Muslim population. North East Province, Nairobi, and Coast Province, all three with high Muslim populations, had the highest levels of unemployment in the country as of 2005–2006,³⁸ as well as the highest rates of youth unemployment in 2008.³⁹ Furthermore, economic development in the tourism industry, particularly in Coast Province, has generally advanced without input from the local Muslim population and has also largely excluded them from its benefits. Fatima Azmiya Badurdeen writes, “The government's attitude toward and plans for the coastal communities have led citizens in Coast to feel that their resources are being used for the benefit of others.”⁴⁰ She provides the example of a port development project in Lamu. Locals believed that the project was being forced on them and complained that they have had little input regarding decisionmaking. This lack of local representation is typical of the types of interactions that have led to high levels of resentment.

Disparities in educational opportunities have also been a problem, and with less access to government-run schools, many Muslim families have turned to madrassas and to foreign education. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), since the late 1970s Kenya's madrassas have been dominated by wealthy Wahhabi charities and foundations. Madrassas at the primary and secondary level have been prevalent throughout urban areas for decades and have frequently focused on teaching Arabic and Wahhabi theology. In fact, religious inculcation rather than an employable education has often been the primary aim of these institutions. The brightest of the students would then be granted scholarships to Wahhabi-oriented universities in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or other Middle Eastern countries.⁴¹

Finally, many Kenyan Muslims also say they are discriminated against by the government overall. They complain of being treated as foreigners, about the inability to get documents such as IDs and passports, and harassment of citizens from Arab countries coming to Kenya.⁴² This has been particularly difficult since the strict enforcement of passport regulations implemented in 2001. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States pressured the Kenyan government to more scrupulously examine the passports of citizens of Asian or Arab descent. In response, the government has required that to obtain a new passport or renew a previously held one, citizens of Asian or Arab ancestry, including Swahilis, must present their grandfather's birth certificate—a requirement that few Kenyans of any group can comply with. Many Kenyan Muslims consider the enforcement of these restrictive passport laws to be openly discriminatory against them “at the behest of the United States.”⁴³ As seen below, many grievances held by Kenyan Muslims stem from such counterterrorism efforts.

Counterterrorism and Human Rights Abuses. The bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in 1998, the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon in 2001, and the attacks against an Israeli-owned hotel and charter plane

in Mombasa in 2002 brought terrorism to the forefront in Kenya. The United States pressured the government to enact various legislation and policies to fight terrorism in Kenya to prevent the country's use as a base for al Qaeda or other radical groups. However, some of these efforts have had the unintended consequence of further radicalizing elements of the population. Since the terrorist attacks in 2002, some Kenyan Muslims have complained of being unfairly targeted and of being the victims of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrest and torture during interrogations.⁴⁴

Muslim human rights groups operating in Kenya document government abuse. Al-Amin Kimathi, chair of the Muslim Human Rights Forum, claimed in media accounts that at least seven Muslims, most with alleged ties to al-Shabaab, disappeared in 2013. He also surmised that inefficiencies within the criminal justice system had hampered legal investigations and caused security officers to act outside of the law. According to Kimathi, “They [police] reach a point where they get frustrated by the law and the court process and they have realized that the only way to deal with these people is to ‘disappear’ them.”⁴⁵

Additionally, various legislative initiatives, particularly the Suppression of Terrorism Bill first introduced in 2002, have been viewed by many Kenyan Muslims as specifically targeting them. The bill was drafted with little or no input from the Muslim community, and it was criticized for having an overly broad definition of terrorism, extensive police powers to detain people, and providing the minister for internal security with the power to label any group as a terrorist organization. The most controversial aspect, however, was the power granted to police to arrest any person “who, in a public place wears an item of clothing . . . in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse suspicion that he is a member or supporter of a declared terrorist organization.”⁴⁶ Muslims feared that this would allow members of their community to be targeted merely because of their appearance. Due to these complaints, the bill was withdrawn. It

was reintroduced in 2006, only to be defeated again.

In October 2012, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was passed. This law prescribes stiff punishments for people engaged in terrorist attacks, planning, recruiting, or other activities. It also allows terrorism suspects to be extradited to other countries for prosecution. Most of the issues that Muslims objected to in earlier versions of the bill have been ameliorated through amendments and this version garnered some support in the Muslim community.⁴⁷ Other Muslims continue to complain about the bill, however, again arguing that it is aimed at them.⁴⁸

It is important to view these legislative initiatives and alleged human rights abuses in the context of social separation that has historically existed between Muslims and the government. Jeremy Prestholdt points out that “counterterrorism has alienated Muslim communities who for nearly three decades have voiced feelings of economic and political marginalization.”⁴⁹ These counterterrorism actions, or the perceptions that they have created, have had the unintended consequence of exacerbating preexisting grievances and social cleavages. They have deepened an attitude of mistrust and have possibly had the opposite of their desired effect by further radicalizing aggrieved segments of the population. The International Crisis Group argues that while the threat posed by groups such as al-Shabaab is real, overreaction and human rights abuses by police and other security actors may be counterproductive. The group warns that “reckless police action has become a deepening concern and could radicalize Kenyan Somalis, as well as Muslims in general. Kenya urgently needs to reform its internal security services; what is presently on display is an incoherent system that weakens national security.”⁵⁰

Kenya has taken several steps to strengthen terrorism legislation, investigate terrorist organizations operating in Kenya, and arrest suspected terrorist operatives. These steps are crucial to inhibiting the ability of terrorist groups to operate there. They may backfire, however, if they are viewed as targeting the entire Muslim

community or as relying on draconian tactics contrary to human rights. The unintended second-order effects of these efforts may be to increase radicalization and receptivity to the messages being propagated by terrorist groups. Closer engagement between government representatives and Muslim leaders over pending legislation, even-handed application of the law, and thorough investigations of alleged human rights violations may ameliorate some of these effects.

Jihadist Ideology. Jihadist organizations in Kenya use a variety of ideological tools and radical Islamic teachings to galvanize the Muslim population there toward violence. The grievances, cultural ties, and influx of jihadist philosophy through the increase of madrassas in Kenya have served to legitimate and spread radical ideology. Ethnic heritage is also an important factor. A report prepared for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point notes that “Many residents of Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu [all in Coast Province] hold stronger ties with the Arabian Peninsula than with Kenya’s own interior.”⁵¹ Raymond Muhula also argues that ethnic ties make some of Kenya’s Muslims particularly receptive to jihadist ideology emanating from the Middle East and other parts of the world.⁵²

As noted earlier, over the past several decades there has been a reformist movement that has sought to “purify” Islam of the indigenous elements that it has accrued from traditional African religious practices. This movement led to the establishment of a more conservative—and eventually radical—form of Islam in Kenya. Radical jihadist ideology has been increasingly disseminated through mosques, madrassas, and community development initiatives⁵³ as well as through the radical publication *Al-Misbah*, which is published by the MYC and *The Weekly Muslim News Update*. Both of these publications have used Koranic teachings to foment jihad and have criticized the Kenyan government over a variety of issues including economic disparities and discrimination, arbitrary arrests, and Kenya’s military relationship with the United States.⁵⁴

Foreign and Military Policies.

Kenyan foreign and military policies anger many Kenyan Muslims and serve as a powerful ideological tool for radicalization. They complain that the government’s relationships with the United States and Israel are too close and that Kenya’s multiple military interventions in Somalia targeted Muslims at the behest of the United States. The Islamic Liberation Army of the People of Kenya, for example, used Kenya’s close ties with the United States and Israel as justification for the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in 1998. After the attack they released the following statement:

*The Americans humiliate our people, they occupy the Arabian peninsula, they extract our riches, they impose a blockade and, besides, they support the Jews of Israel, our worse [sic] enemies, who occupy the Al-Aqsa mosque. . . . The attack was justified because the government of Kenya recognized that the Americans had used the country’s territory to fight against its Moslem neighbors, in particular Somalia. Besides, Kenya cooperated with Israel. In this country one finds the most anti-Islamic Jewish centers in all East Africa. It is from Kenya that the Americans supported the separatist war in Southern Sudan, pursued by John Garang’s fighters.*⁵⁵

Intervention in Somalia has been a particularly strong catalyst for radicalism among some Muslims in Kenya. In 2006, for example, the Kenyan government allowed the United States to use its territory to support Ethiopian military operations against Somalia. The government also cooperated with U.S. efforts to track al Qaeda operatives among the resultant refugees, and Kenyan security forces arrested at least 150 people from various countries. At least 90 of those arrested were later sent to Somalia and Ethiopia. The government denied that any of the deported refugees were Kenyan citizens, but Raila Odinga, an opposition candidate for the presidency, released the names of 19 Kenyan Muslims who he claimed were deported. This incident inflamed tensions with the Muslim community in Kenya and aroused their deep-seated distrust toward the

government and heightened their sense of victimization.⁵⁶

More recently, Operation *Linda Nchi* has led to protests and outright violence in Kenya. In October 2011, the Kenyan Defense Forces joined Somali, Ethiopian, and French troops in an operation to drive al Qaeda–affiliate al-Shabaab from Somalia. That intervention led to a backlash of attacks in Kenya itself. More than 20 attacks linked to al-Shabaab have been conducted in Kenya since the operation began. Most of these attacks have targeted nightclubs, bars, and churches.⁵⁷ The ICG warned at the time that:

*Views within the ethnic Somali and wider Muslim community regarding the war are mixed but predominately critical. . . . The notion that the war is popular within the Muslim community is wishful thinking, and has the potential to exacerbate already worrying radicalization in the country is very real.*⁵⁸

This turned out to be prescient.

Several historical and current factors have recently combined to increase the potential of terrorist activity in Kenya. Structural and institutional weaknesses, historical grievances, the influx of radical ideology, and military intervention in Somalia have galvanized extremists and increased the likelihood of terrorist acts in Kenya. Kenyan counterterrorism efforts will continue, but attention should be paid to their unintended second-order effects, as well as the historical and social context of these activities, so that negative effects can be ameliorated.

Islam is on a track of increasing radicalization in the country and groups linked to al Qaeda and al-Shabaab pose a significant and growing threat to Kenya and to Western persons and interests in that country. Recognition of the threat and its underlying causes is necessary for redressing those causes and reducing the threat level posed by radical Islamic groups. JFQ

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