



Countering violent extremism: The Horn of Africa

by José Luengo-Cabrera and Annelies Pauwels

The Horn of Africa has gained notoriety as a breeding ground for violent extremism. Although the rise of al-Shabaab and the recurrent terrorist attacks in Somalia and Kenya have dominated news headlines and international counterterrorist efforts, other countries in the region have been (and continue to be) affected by extreme forms of violence. From the rise of a violent armed opposition in Djibouti to the harsh repression and incarceration of political dissidents in Ethiopia or the ongoing clashes between government forces and rebel factions in Darfur and South Sudan, conditions in the Horn remain conducive to different forms of radicalisation.

Widespread poverty, forced displacement, food insecurity and political marginalisation are the oft-cited sources of grievance which groups like al-Shabaab, the Lord's Resistance Army or the Sudan Liberation Movement – Abdel Wahid al-Nur (SLM-AW) – exploit for recruitment purposes. Given the limited results of counter-terrorism (CT) campaigns based on militarised law enforcement methods, international efforts are increasingly focused on adopting an approach which seeks to dissuade at-risk groups and individuals from joining violent armed movements – terrorist or otherwise.

Countering violent extremism (CVE) has thus emerged as an internationally-funded set of grass-

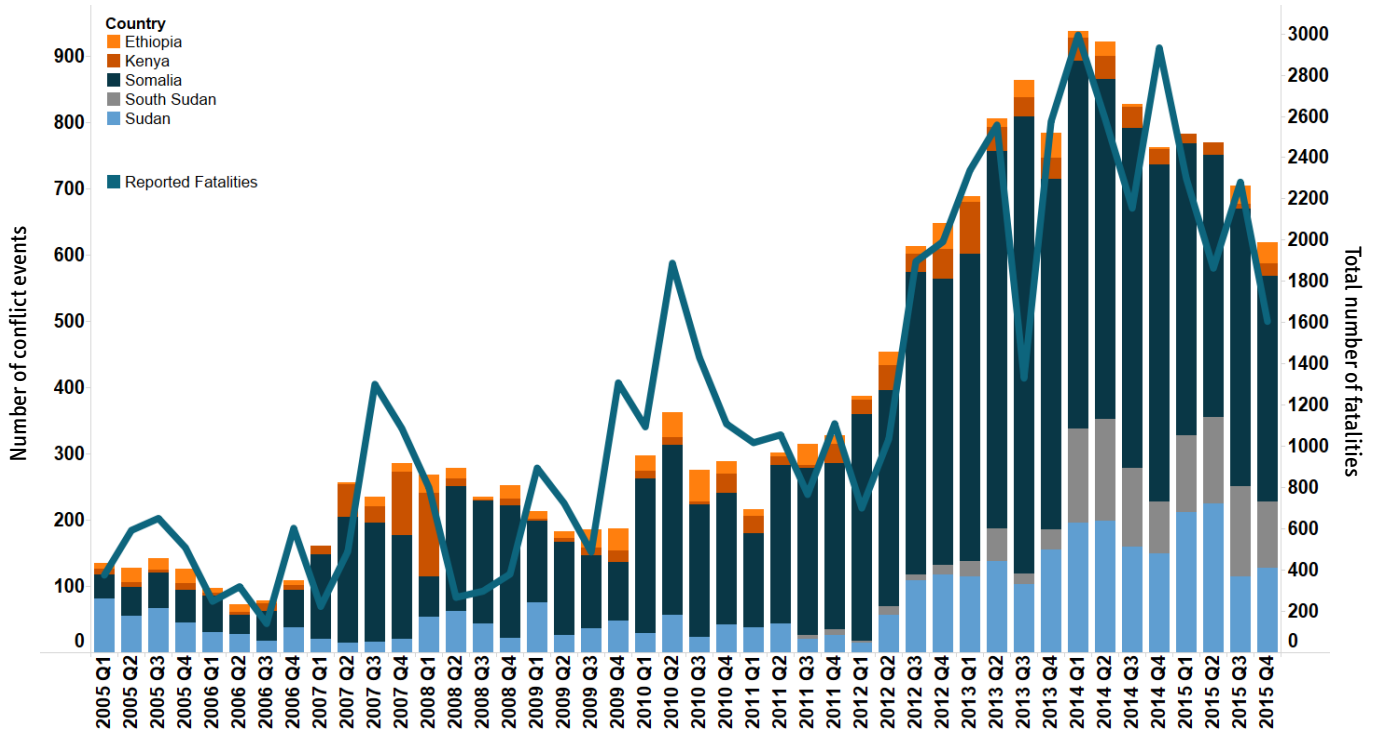
roots initiatives to address the problem of extremist violence in a preventive (as opposed to reactive) manner. But although progress has been made, CVE in the Horn remains a fledging and largely underfunded practice. It also continues to be regionally fragmented and is mostly implemented in an *ad hoc* manner. Due to the multiplicity of instruments required to address the complex web of interrelated drivers of radicalisation, CVE remains a tall order. Engaged international partners would benefit from fundamentally re-thinking their programmatic approach by making it more evidence-based, regionally coordinated and mindful of idiosyncratic local dynamics.

CT: the record

At a time when terrorist attacks and casualties have increased globally, a greater variety of extremist groups have emerged and come to control wider territorial swathes, with a rising number of 'foreign fighters' travelling from afar to join them. As a result, the heavy-handed and almost exclusively militarised approaches to combatting terrorism across Africa has been put into question, most notably as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continue to carry out attacks, with the vast majority of casualties attributed to the Nigerian and Somali jihadist groups.



Conflict events and reported fatalities



Source: ACLED (2016). Note: selected regional countries of the Greater Horn of Africa

Since the 1990s, in particular following the 1998 al-Qaeda bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the Horn of Africa has been one of the main theatres of international CT efforts. Despite some positive results (notably the expulsion of al-Shabaab from Mogadishu and Kismayo), the overwhelmingly military measures have recurrently triggered terrorist backlashes – such as the July 2010 suicide bombings in Kampala or the 2013 attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, for example. In addition, al-Shabaab has also been carrying out retaliatory attacks against the African Union’s peace support operation (AMISOM) or the Kenyan and Ugandan armed forces – who have been leading the regional CT campaign against the al-Qaeda affiliate.

Meanwhile, the Kenyan and Ugandan governments have become the targets of widespread public condemnation for violating civil liberties and human rights – and similar criticism has been directed against the governments in Sudan and Ethiopia. State authorities have been accused by human rights advocacy groups of using anti-terrorism legislation to crack down on political opponents, human rights defenders and dissidents. In Kenya, national security forces have been implicated in acts of torture, unlawful killings and the disappearance of terrorist suspects, principally of Somali origin. Police units have also been involved in the unlawful detention and harassment

of journalists, human rights activists and international aid workers.

Criticism has also extended to several operations carried out in response to terrorist attacks. The November 2012 raid in the Suq Mugdi market in Garissa and Operation ‘Usalama Watch’ in the Nairobi neighbourhood of Eastleigh and in Mombasa in April 2014 indiscriminately targeted entire communities (mostly composed of ethnic Somalis) rather than focusing on suspected individuals. In response, al-Shabaab has launched and claimed revenge attacks targeting civilians – most notably the April 2015 armed assault at Garissa University, in which 148 students were killed. Following the January 2016 al-Shabaab attack on an AMISOM base hosting Kenyan troops in the Gedo region of Somalia, the US has intensified airstrikes against training camps in south-central Somalia, raising the spectre of further retaliation.

The overall lack of transparency and overtly militarised CT operations, combined with inadequate and inconclusive investigations into human rights violations by government forces, has had a number of damaging consequences. In Kenya, for example, this has led to higher levels of societal prejudice against Muslims and ethnic Somalis, increasing social alienation and fostering radicalisation among targeted communities. In Ethiopia, government forces continue to suppress

demonstrations of ethnic Oromos with the arbitrary arrest of individuals accused of belonging to the Oromo Liberation Front – a banned opposition movement that the ruling party has labelled as a terrorist organisation.

CVE: the drivers

As a result of all this, national and international policymakers have shifted their attention towards more human security-centred approaches to combating terrorism. Within the Horn area, a number of CVE programmes now focus on the preventive dimension of violent extremism. Such programmes have principally been led and financed by donor governments – the UK, Denmark, the US – or intergovernmental organisations – UN, EU, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa (IGAD) or the East African Community (EAC) – that rely on the experience and expertise of international and local practitioners or civil society organisations (CSOs) for their implementation.

The UK's Department for International Development (DFID), for instance, set up its Sustainable Employment and Economic Development (SEED) programme in Somalia in 2011. The four-year initiative was a mainstream livelihood programme with a CVE sub-objective. Generally, instead of running specific CVE initiatives, DFID has aimed at understanding the CVE relevance of new development programmes. In particular, it often establishes whether programmes serve dual objectives (i.e. CVE and development) and whether they need to abide by the principle of 'do no harm'. This approach, aimed at mitigating the risk of antagonising specific communities, was then extended to SEED II, which adjusted its focus onto reducing conflict proneness and fostering stability in and around Mogadishu, notably through job-creation initiatives.

Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has adopted a policy which acknowledges the essential role of development in addressing grievances that drive violent extremism. Also in 2011, USAID's Kenya Transition Initiative (KTI) was extended to include a CVE component with a focus on the infamous Nairobi neighbourhood of Eastleigh (KTI-E). The programme worked with local enablers engaged in youth activities – particularly livelihood training and counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder. KTI-E operated through small grants that funded activities such as public debates on issues related to extremism, inter-faith dialogue and cultural events.

Following the path laid out by the UK and US governments, the European Commission launched a pilot CVE project in 2014 centred on Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. The three-year regional programme is part of the Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE) initiative, with a €2 million budget funded by the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). The programme aims at understanding the drivers of violent extremism, principally through evidence-based analysis – so as to develop best practices that could increase the impact of targeted interventions. With activities ranging from training law-enforcement officers on how to partner with CSOs to providing guidance to women's organisations in Puntland and Somaliland on how to engage with security providers or identifying at-risk youth in Kenya, this STRIVE pilot project is a venture that seeks to come up with recommendations to improve programme efficacy.

But such recommendations are bound to be imperfect (or even misleading) as long as progress on the evaluative side of programming is lagging. With USAID taking the lead in assessing its CVE projects in East Africa, independent evaluators under the auspices of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) have laid out some of the conceptual and operational hindrances to valuing CVE programmes. Indeed, lack of clarity over the nature and extent of CVE programmes has made it difficult to establish benchmarks and indicators for success. Given the difficulties in determining the scope of a CVE programme evaluation – or even attributing causality where the desired outcome is a non-event (i.e. number of individuals *not* being radicalised) – questions have been raised over their reliability and applicability across regions.

Assessing CVE

CVE programming has been criticised for not being sufficiently context-specific and for designing interventions based on anecdotal observation. Following a 2014 external review of KTI-E, for instance, it emerged that there was a need for a more systematic identification of at-risk population cohorts, particularly as many groups that were arguably eligible for inclusion in the programme did not end up participating.

The SEED initiative, for example, would have benefitted from a more thorough screening of target groups that could be classified as being at-risk – i.e. looking beyond the lack of employment opportunities or low sources of income. Indeed, the DFID project targeted youth cohorts exclusively



on the basis of 'livelihood vulnerabilities', as opposed to a wider assessment of the drivers of violent extremism. Tellingly, following KTI-E's external evaluation, an important realisation shed light on the alleged confusion with regards to the selection of target groups: programme inclusion was largely delimited to those supporting violence as opposed to those directly involved in it.

As hindrances to implementation and evaluation continue to surface, CVE programmes continue to fall short of preventing at-risk individuals from falling into the hands of violent militias or terrorist organisations. It has to be said, however, that budgetary allocations for monitoring and evaluation procedures are estimated to be around 10%, a seemingly insufficient amount for external evaluators to carry out exhaustive assessments. Moreover, such evaluations remain largely unavailable to the public, making it difficult to carry out cross-programme comparisons and highlight best practices. With an average shelf-life of three years and budgets that remain meagre when compared with those allocated for CT operations, it comes as no surprise that the 'lessons learnt' from CVE programmes remain largely inconclusive. This has raised the issue of standardised methods and how to go about measuring the impact of CVE projects.

From diagnosis to prognosis

CVE remains a conflict prevention subset that acknowledges that the drivers of violent extremism are linked to the political and socio-economic conditions that fall within the realm of development work. But CVE has been a mixed experience thus far. Unintended consequences during community-level interventions have prompted a policy review leading to a stronger focus on the prognosis dimension of programmes. This would require a more granular (ex-ante) mapping of groups susceptible to recruitment but also a greater focus on comprehending the individual-level (material and psychological) incentives for radicalisation.

A revamped approach would therefore have to rely more systematically on prevention foresight. This means going beyond the simple identification of root causes and more towards assessing the likelihood of groups or individuals to engage in violent extremism. The Kenyan government's Strengthening Community Resilience against Extremism (SCORE) programme in Kilifi County, for example, offers an encouraging approach to prevention through its 'community tension monitoring' mechanism, aimed at identifying predictable signs of radicalisation.

CVE initiatives tend to have a bigger impact when donor agencies, government authorities (at all levels) and CSOs are equal stakeholders. CSOs, in coordination with international NGOs, tend to be anchored in local communities and are therefore most apt at identifying and assisting at-risk groups. But donor agencies often fail to address the limited institutional and operational capacity of local CSO staff when hiring them for CVE projects. The USAID-led Somali Youth Livelihoods Programme (SYLP), for example, was hindered by low instructor quality and a lack of grant management skills, which were addressed only after the project was launched. This has set a precedent for the way forward in addressing the manifold constraints arising from poor coordination and funding.

Coordination and resources

Following the ministerial statements at the White House summit held in February 2015, Horn experts agreed to establish a regional CVE hub under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa. This initiative, however, still lacks stakeholder coordination, and the provision of donors' support is based on their respective CVE policies rather than on an agreed regional strategy that is contextualised to fit country-specific risks. Although IGAD has taken the lead in attempting to coordinate all CVE-related projects in the region, international partners continue to implement their programmes largely in an *ad hoc* manner, essentially adding to the geographical imbalance and regional fragmentation of CVE projects.

Since its establishment in 2011, the Horn of Africa Working Group of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) has been periodically interacting with experts, officials and community-based CSOs in the region in an effort to foster local resilience as a means to prevent and counter violent extremism. It is clear, however, that without greater financial resources, a fundamental overhaul of evaluation practices and a greater capacity to implement and coordinate (especially beyond Kenya and Somalia) region-wide initiatives that involve local CSOs, results will continue to fall short of expectations. If and when more evidence-based 'lessons learnt' in this regional process come to light, it may offer valuable indications for countering violent extremism also elsewhere across the African continent.

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