



DIMENSIONS OF TERRORISM IN THE EAST AFRICAN REGION

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For so many years, Africa has been kept out of international deliberations about terrorist threats, especially the sub-Saharan regions. Back to the 1980s and 1990s when terrorist groups targeted North African countries, the activity of such terrorist groups was principally carried out inside the range of their countries, while they were reported to be off the borders of their countries just spasmodically. Although a group like the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has emerged in Uganda since 1986, the Ugandan authorities have for long years classified this group as an opposition rebel group carrying out "irrational" acts. For instance, the targeting of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 was a great irony to what the sub-Saharan regions were used to be like; incidents have always confirmed that these regions have not seen the growth of terrorist groups based on religious interpretations across these countries, albeit internal and regional conflicts. Sadly enough, ethnicity coupled with political and economic crises has been the driving force behind conflicts rife in Africa, especially since the mid-1980s.

Following the aftermath of the 9/11 Attacks, Africa was then included and pieced together into the maps of international counterterrorism. Literature abounds in articles and reports that bring to focus the vulnerability and fragility suffered by many African countries. Sorrowfully, the African governments are rendered helpless to control the entire territory of each, which galvanized terrorist groups take advantage of large swaths of Africa and use them as safe havens for their elements.

In this sense of gritty reality, the East African Region, or the Great Horn of Africa as termed by the American Administration, has emerged as a major hot spot for attracting terrorist groups; many incidents have snowballed into the region, which has become fraught with terrorism. Given the demise of Osama bin Laden, founder of Al-Qaeda in Sudan, staying there for several years, and the bombing of the American embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in August 1998, the Al-

Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum was struck by the United States cruise missiles as the wrath of the US Administration was aroused by the bombings of the two US embassies. Sadly enough, the US missile strikes brought about a tragic medical disaster, and the economic sanctions imposed by the US administration prevented Sudan from importing medicines needed to treat malaria, tuberculosis and other serious diseases. It was about the 9/11 Attacks when Africa became part of the global war on terrorism led by the United States of America, which in turn established a set of initiatives to counter terrorism across Africa. The developments experienced by several countries in the East African Region and the Horn of Africa Region, after 2001 in particular, contributed to strengthening the American vision of the whole gamut of the region as a major hot spot for terrorist threats. Well, this has been so onerous given the political stalemate which the region has been locked in and the uneasy deadlock of the Somali crisis; the continued collapse of the whole government and the unending difficulties to reach an agreement between the North and South in Sudan.

Notwithstanding about two decades into the 9/11 Attacks have passed, which paved the way for the US to interfere overbearingly to counter terrorism in East Africa, with the African countries being more into adopting many policies to confront terrorist groups thereabouts, these terrorist groups still pose a major threat to security and stability to the countries of the region, while some other countries do experience more dangerous developments in terms of operations, tactics and ideologies. This sobering reality raises many valid questions about the factors contributory to the spread of terrorist groups in the East African Region after 2001: How did the goals and tactics of terrorist groups develop during these years? What are the results of national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism in the region? What are the difficulties that hinder and impede the efforts given the unending threats posed by these groups?

Factors of the Spread of Terrorist Groups in East Africa

Terrorist groups in East Africa mushroomed in such an environment rife with crises and conflicts that afflict most of the countries of the region. In a similar vein, past grievances and injustices suffered by Muslim minorities and denominations in some countries of the region created a favorable environment that encouraged sympathy and recruitment for terrorist groups, as some local groups sought to expand their conflict with national governments through affiliation to terrorist groups in such a fashion as to bring their small-scale conflict to a broader and large-scale issue. In contrast, with the complication of terrorism over recent years, government strategies to counter terrorism have pushed terrorist groups to develop new tactics and escalate their threats.

Despite the growth of terrorist groups in the region, led by the LRA, which was established in 1986 and carried out many brutal terrorist acts throughout its history, the Young Mujahideen Movement remains in Somalia, being the main terrorist group in the region that has worked for more than a decade to adapt and renew its activity, despite the various efforts made by the various parties to eliminate it. The Young Mujahideen Movement has grown in light of the Somali crisis and the collapse of the Government. Given such a favorable environment, the Young Mujahideen Movement emerged and became notorious after the Ethiopian interference in Somalia at the end of 2006. It represented the military arm of the Islamic Courts Union. However, it defected from the Union after refusing to join the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia that has been engaged in negotiations with Ethiopia.

The Movement goals and tactics since 2006 have developed: from resisting the Ethiopian presence in Somalia, whereby its operations were successfully carried out to ease out Ethiopian forces of Somalia in January 2009, to pursuing its operations to target the Somali caretaker government, at the time, and to confronting the African forces (AMISOM) that was formed to protect the institutions of the Government that started its mandate in 2007. The Movement by that time had snowballed into a serious threat to the Somali government and the neighboring countries involved in Somalia and participation in the African forces there. The terrorist Movement operations as well as the confrontations with the African forces, as well as the lack of food security and drought, caused mass exodus and stampede, forcing a large number of Somali citizens to seek asylum, whereby Somalia was ranked fifth among the top countries in the world with highest numbers of refugees in 2018, and displacing nearly a million Somalis in 2017.

The Movement operations spread beyond the Somali borders, infiltrating into neighboring countries, and it carried out painful qualitative operations within these countries since 2010. Among these countries are Uganda and Kenya, but the latter experienced the largest impact of the Movement terrorist operations outside Somalia. It appears that this issue is not due to the Kenyan military interference in Somalia, and the Movement desire to influence Kenyan public opinion through its repeated attacks on Kenyan targets to force the Kenyan forces, which came out for the first time to interfere in Somali territory since October 2011, to withdraw from Somalia territory. However, it should be noted that Kenya is a major ally of the West, specifically the US

and its unique relations with Israel. Being targeted represents the realization of the goals of Al-Qaeda, which has become a local affiliation since 2012. The Organization targets American and Western interests anywhere in the world. American and Israeli interests were one of the aims of the Organization during 1998 and 2002, as the Organization bombed the American embassy in Nairobi in 1998, and its operations targeted an Israeli hotel and two planes in Mombasa in 2002. Kenya is also one of the most active countries in East Africa in counter-terrorism measures where the police and army worked in tandem to adopt strict policies towards terrorism suspects. For example, a local human rights organization in Mombasa documented 80 cases of killings and disappearances on the Kenyan coast between 2012 and 2016.

In terms of tactics, Al-Shabaab Movement took advantage of the problems faced by Muslim minorities in a number of East African countries, gaining new spaces within these countries and recruiting their citizens and relying on the local sleeper cells. For instance, one of these sleeper cells carried out a terrorist attack against a hotel compound in Nairobi last January, killing 14 people. The Movement has moved to new areas of operation, establishing ties with hardliners in southern Tanzania since 2016. A group calling itself "youth" has emerged in northern Mozambique and has carried out a number of terrorist operations since 2017.

Counterterrorism Challenges in East Africa

In light of the threats posed by the massive growth of terrorist groups, especially the Mujahideen Youth Movement in East Africa, many national, regional and international parties have adopted strategies to reduce such threats. The African Union has built military forces to protect the institutions of the Somali government since 2007. However, these forces expanded the tasks entrusted to them in 2014 to include countering terrorism, as these forces managed to inflict heavy losses on Al-Shabaab Movement, hence it lost control over large areas of the territory that was once under its control. These developments just happened in 2011 after the Movement managed to control large areas in central and southern Somalia, and almost controlled the capital, Mogadishu.

Since the 9/11 Attacks, 2011, the United States has shifted towards adopting a set of strategies to counter terrorism in the region. It launched a US-Led East Africa

Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACTI) and established the Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa, which became the American base in Djibouti since 2002. Washington classified the Movement as a terrorist group given its resistance to the Ethiopian interference in Somalia at the end of 2006, and used a series of operations against the Movement leaders. These operations led to the killing of the Movement most famous leaders; yet, the Movement reactions to the American strikes were much fiercer. For instance, the terrorist attack carried out by the Movement in a hotel in Nairobi last January was in response to the repeated air strikes that targeted the strongholds of the Movement in 2018.

On the national level, many countries of the region have adopted policies to counter terrorism; however, national and international policies have not contributed to reducing the threats posed by terrorist groups. Furthermore, most of the counterterrorism policies focused on the military and security domains and the overuse of force, bringing about a spate of violations of human rights and extrajudicial killings, increasing sympathy for those suspected of involvement in terrorism cases, and recruitment to terrorist groups.

In a similar vein, reports reveal the unending suffering of many ethnic and religious groups in the East African Region from past grievances and injustices related to political and economic marginalization and exclusion, and rampant corruption, which provides a favorable environment for the growth of terrorist groups and increases the opportunities of these groups to achieve their goals in the region, especially amid the increasingly growing external interferences. As a matter of fact, Africa has metamorphosed into a backyard of issues and crises in the Middle East, where the ripple effect of counterterrorism in the region is transferred to Africa, targeting ISIL elements after a spate of ongoing defeats ISIL has been experiencing in Iraq and Syria.

Given this complexity, the capabilities of the governments are not up to the conditions they experience in many countries of the East African Region in terms of their roles and responsibilities for countering terrorism in the region, with the supremacy of the American and Western opinion of terrorism, while the African governments are involved in a security infrastructure funded by the West to expand their capabilities in the areas of police, military, and surveillance services. Although targeting the US interests in East Africa marked the beginning of when terrorist threats sneaked into the

region, the region was not a hot spot of terrorism growth in the past. Over the course of time, terrorist groups have recently started to develop their capabilities, where Al-Shabaab Movement still represents a local branch of Al-Qaeda (except for one of its factions that joined ISIL). With the world busy countering Daesh, the Organization meanwhile was more engaged in developing its capabilities in Africa.

Given these day-to-day realities, it is now imperative that African national policies look meticulously for holistic strategies to counter terrorism; such strategy should be solidly based on a crystal-clear understanding of the nature of the ethnic groups that make up their communities, and hence should include solutions to the past horrendous grievances that happened to these groups, with the engagement of local leaders, senior notables and famous figures while in the process of formulating and implementing such solutions, whereby they can include cultural, social, economic and political dimensions in addition to the security and military dimensions.

It is worth mentioning that the regional cooperation between the countries of the African Eastern Region represents an important field for countering terrorism and reducing its impact. Likewise, the African countries have gained greater expertise in regional cooperation in various fields; however, counterterrorism requires cooperation between the political bodies of the African countries, while overcoming and clamping down on regional crises and rivalries. This also necessitates the promotion of closer cooperation in border security issues, exchange of information, and cracking down on organized crime.