



Online Workshop "Transnational Jihadism and Collective Security in East Africa" (26 January 2021)

Workshop Report

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Over the past decade militant Islamism has become a substantial security threat in East Africa. Following the advent of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, jihadist groups and networks have emerged in Kenya, Tanzania, and, most recently, in northern Mozambique. Who are the relevant militant Islamist actors? To what extent can the rise of jihadism be attributed to pre-existing ethnic/religious tensions? How can further escalations of jihadist violence be avoided? What could regional responses look like? These questions were discussed at the online expert “Transnational Jihadism and Collective Security” jointly hosted by the Institute for Development and Peace (INEP), and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Kenya Office on 26 January 2021.

The diffusion of jihadist activity along the “Swahili coast”

In the mid-2000s, jihadist political entrepreneurs first emerged in Kenya where the Muslim Youth Centre started to recruit fighters for Al-Shabaab. While Kenya did not witness the formation of a domestic jihadist insurgent group, the country has been targeted by Jeysh Ayman, a Kenyan-focussed Al-Shabaab unit. Since its establishment in 2013, this group has been carrying out several major attacks including the 2014 Mpeketoni killings and the assault on a U.S military base in Manda Bay, Lamu County, in January 2020.

In neighbouring Tanzania, jihadist activity has been less intense so far. However, substantial networks linked to Al-Shabaab and Kenyan jihadists did develop, at least on the Tanzanian mainland. In the early 2010s, for example, the Tanga-based Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre sent Tanzanian students to Kenya to be indoctrinated by local Al-Shabaab recruiters like Aboud Rogo. In the wake of increasing crackdowns on Kenya’s jihadist milieu, recruitment and violence then shifted southwards. Most importantly, Tanzanian nationals have been actively involved in the jihadist insurgency plaguing Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado Province since October 2017. Indeed, the insurgents’ attack on the border village of Kitaya in October 2020 indicates that Tanzania is highly vulnerable to a spillover of the Mozambican conflict.

Drivers of radicalisation and violence

Taken together, the workshop’s presentations and discussions underlined that the dynamics driving jihadist radicalisation and violence in the Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique are multi-faceted and complex. Apart from the important impact of Somali jihadism, the following enabling factors were identified:

1. The regional spread of puritanical Salafist and Quranist thought which started in the 1970s and, at least in the case of Salafism, has been spurred by Saudi and Sudanese religious outreach programmes
2. The salience of collective grievances stemming from the perceived political and socio-economic marginalisation of Muslims in Christian-dominated societies
3. The presence of illicit business opportunities, e.g. drug trafficking or the timber trade in southern Tanzania/northern Mozambique, allowing jihadist groups to maintain their activities and recruit new members

At the same time, the workshop also revealed, that there exist local trajectories of non- and de-radicalisation. For instance, it was highlighted that in Zanzibar, jihadist activity has been largely absent even though the Jumuiya Uamsho na Mihadhara ya Kiislaam (Organisation for Islamic Awareness and Propagation), a Salafi-dominated lobby group advocating Zanzibari independence, has been frequently labelled as “jihadist”, “militant Islamist”, or “violent

extremist”. It was also pointed out that in recent years, the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre appears to have followed a path of moderation as its leader Sheikh Salim Barahiyan started to publicly speak out against jihadist violence.

The need for an integrated, regionally coordinated response

Overall, workshop participants widely agreed that the containment of the jihadist threat requires a regionally coordinated effort that goes beyond military measures and matches the flexibility demonstrated by the jihadist groups and networks operating along the coast. So far, an effective exchange of information between the affected states has not occurred. As they are underfunded and understaffed, regional organisations like the African Union and the East African Community have been unable to address this problem. Against this background, the creation of an institutionalized, regular high-level forum of national intelligence officers was one of the policy recommendations presented at the workshop. Further, several participants emphasised the need for individual governments to reach out and cooperate with Muslim communities and civil society organisations rather than cracking down on legitimate forms of Islamic dissent.