Why Mpeketoni matters: al-Shabaab and violence in Kenya

By David M. Anderson

Executive summary

The massacre at Mpeketoni in June 2014 signalled a new departure for al-Shabaab in its violent attacks on the Kenyan state. Justifying the attack as retaliation for the extrajudicial killings of Muslim leaders and the general oppression of Muslims, and as an act of war, al-Shabaab demonstrated a keen awareness of the sensitive political position of Kenya's Muslim population. Having been founded in a nationalist context in Somalia, al-Shabaab appears now to be reinventing itself in the context of Kenya's troubled domestic politics. Claims that the Mpeketoni violence was based on local politics only underline the success of al-Shabaab's "reinvention". The Kenyan state has done little to win support amongst its own Muslim population for its current invasion of southern Somalia. Its efforts to contain al-Hijra, an al-Shabaab franchise now operating in Kenya, has involved heavy-handed policing, most recently in Operation Usalama Watch, and has seen the killing and "disappearance" of more than 20 Muslim leaders. Kenya's government now needs to rebuild trust with Muslim communities in its north-eastern border areas, and elsewhere, and to seek a consensus against radicalisation. This should involve a reconsideration of policing methods, the creation of opportunities for political dialogue with Muslim leaders, and a more sensitive, culturally appropriate and equitable approach to Muslim communities in general.

What happened at Mpeketoni?

On June 15th 2014, the prosperous rural village of Mpeketoni, in Lamu County, was the scene of a bloody massacre. Arriving in vehicles commandeered on the main road between Witu and Lamu Town, armed men went amongst the dwellings of Mpeketoni, putting many buildings and vehicles to the torch. The gang chanted Islamic slogans, and selected non-Muslim victims as they began killing. The attackers moved about Mpeketoni for some three hours, before departing on foot through the bush. They left nearly 50 villagers dead.

Harakat al-Shabaab mujahideen speedily claimed responsibility, their statement giving three justifications:

> (a) the Kenyan government's brutal oppression of Muslims in Kenya through coercion, intimidation and extrajudicial killings of Muslim scholars, particularly in Mombasa, and the violation of Muslim honour and sanctity;

> (b) the Kenyan military's continued invasion and occupation of Muslim lands and the massacre of innocent Muslims in Somalia; and
> (c) the town raided by the mujahideen was originally a Muslim town before it was invaded and occupied by Christian settlers.
> (Abdullahi Boru Halakhe, 2014: 3–4)

Al-Shabaab is at war with Kenya. To it, Mpeketoni was a legitimate target. The victims were not Muslim, and none were local Bajuni people: those killed were Kikuyu from the far-distant highlands of central Kenya, members of families that had come to Mpeketoni in the early 1970s, taking up land on a government settlement scheme. Mostly Christian, they were in every respect "outsiders" in this coastal district. Mpeketoni is an industrious haven of relative wealth in the midst of a poor, underdeveloped district.

Tensions between outsiders and locals were heightened in the 2013 local elections. Candidates representing the outsiders at Mpeketoni did well, supported by a well-financed campaign. Local Bajuni feared that their interest might be sacrificed to the entrepreneurial skills of these outsiders, especially as the district is undergoing a speculative land boom – driven by plans to develop Lamu as a vast commercial port, and to construct a new railway along a "transport corridor" extending across northern Kenya (Government of Kenya, 2013).

All of this seems to make sense of Mpeketoni as a soft target for al-Shabaab. But then, to everyone's surprise, Kenya's president, Uhuru Kenyatta, declared that the attack had nothing to do with al-Shabaab, but was instead a product of "local politics" (Musamba, 2014). It was not clear whether this referred to rivalry between national parties; to local squabbles around electoral politics; to rumours of local land-grabbing and speculation; or to the activities of the Mombasa Republican Council, a political group that has been advocating coastal secession. In Kenya's toxic politics, any one might be plausible, but the involvement of al-Shabaab in the attack seems undeniable, even if other factors may also have played a part.

Kenyatta's verdict on what happened at Mpeketoni contains a grain of truth: local politics were involved in the massacre. But his analysis of what this means was entirely mistaken. Local politics was involved not to the exclusion of al-Shabaab, but quite simply because al-Shabaab is learning how to turn Kenya's toxic politics to its own very dangerous and violent advantage.

Al-Hijra: al-Shabaab's Kenyan franchise

In January 2012, a video released by al-Kata'ib Foundation introduced Sheikh Ahmed Iman Ali as the head of al-Hijra. Asking Kenyan Muslims to recognise their oppression and join the jihadi movement, Iman Ali urged Muslims everywhere to "raise your sword against the enemy that is closest to you". The role of al-Hijra was first highlighted by the UN, focusing on its role in recruiting fighters in Kenya (United Nations, 2012, 2013). Since 2012, al-Shabaab communications have targeted Kenyans, with videos in Swahili featuring Kenyan mujahideen and audio messages addressing the Kenyan *Ummah*.

Al-Hijra is widely believed to be associated with the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), and especially Nairobi's Pumwani Riyadha mosque (UN, 2013). Since al-Shabaab's Kampala bombings of 2010, Kenya's security forces have identified the imams and younger activists linked with the MYC as dangerous fundamentalists, targeting the Riyadha mosque as a base of al-Shabaab recruitment and fund-raising (Anzalone, 2012). The slum area of Majengo, and Gikomba market, both close to Nairobi's Eastleigh district, are centres of al-Hijra's recruitment activities (Nzes, 2014: 24–25).

Al-Hijra is the instrumental creation of al-Shabaab – a means to take the war to Kenya – but the foundations of radicalism were laid down over many years in the alienation, disaffection and dissent of Kenya's Muslim community. Since at least the early 1990s, radicalisation has been a problem, one that Kenya's security forces have been slow to take seriously (Botha, 2013). While Muslim politicians have been incorporated within Kenya's main political coalitions over the past decade, there is little evidence that Islamic politics is understood or accommodated in Nairobi (Thordsen, 2009). According to Deacon and Lynch (2013), Kenya's politics is fiercely dominated by a Christian ethos, taking on a stridently evangelical tone that is hostile to Muslims.

Extrajudicial killings

Since 2012, al-Hijra has been subjected to a ruthless onslaught with numerous "catch and release" raids on mosques, along with unexplained killings and many "disappearances" of prominent Muslim activists. It is widely alleged that the Anti-Terrorist Police Unit (ATPU) is behind these actions, perhaps supported by external agencies. The UN (2013) has confirmed that the U.S. government has sponsored the "Al-Shabaab/East Africa Al-Qaida Disruption Initiative", to support East African security services in combating terrorism, but the UN diplomatically stops short of making any accusation.

The deaths and disappearances began in April 2012, with the abductions of two radical preachers. Then Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohammed was gunned down. A preacher at Mombasa's controversial Masjid Musa mosque, Rogo was subjected to a UN Security Council travel ban and asset freeze, having been accused of being the "ideological leader" of al-Hijra (UN, 2013). No one has claimed responsibility for Rogo's murder. In the days following his death, there were riots and street protests in Mombasa. Rogo's alleged successor, Ibrahim Ismail, was killed along with three of his associates in June 2013. Then, in April 2014, Sheikh Abubakar Shariff, also known as "Makaburi", a prominent radical preacher at Masjid Musa mosque, was sprayed with bullets from an automatic weapon (Nzes, 2014: 25).

Al-Shabaab first responded by assassinating four clerics accused of giving information to local and international security agencies. Then, just five days before Mpeketoni, Sheikh Mohammed Idriss was shot through the chest. As chairman of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya, and a leading campaigner against radicalisation and jihadist teachings, Idriss was struggling against radical Muslims at the Sakina mosque in Mombasa.

The "decapitation" of al-Hijra has alienated moderate as well as radical Muslim opinion: general distrust makes it harder for the Kenyan state to build a consensus against radicalisation. According to one leading Muslim spokesman, the death of each cleric in suspicious circumstances furthers radicalisation: "It's gone beyond the money a recruit might earn. They are now doing it in the belief that they are being harassed, killed, and the only way is to fight back" (quoted in IRIN, 2014: 2).

The unexplained assassinations of more than 21 clerics and youth leaders are now documented. The killings have generated a climate of fear amongst Muslim leaders of all shades of opinion; regardless of who may be responsible, it seems this is precisely the intention (MUHURI and Open Society Justice Initiative, 2013; Botha, 2013).

Operation Usalama Watch

Operation Usalama Watch, launched on April 2nd 2014, began with the round-up and arrest of 650 Somalis in Nairobi's Eastleigh district. At the peak, more than 6,000 security personnel were deployed, detaining and interrogating over 4,000 Muslim "suspects". Usalama Watch demonstrated the resolve of the security forces, but played into the hands of al-Shabaab by appearing to scapegoat ethnic Somalis and alienating Muslims (Bruzzone, 2014).

Many of the arrests were conducted after dark, the suspects removed to Kasarani stadium or to local police stations for interrogation. Suspects were roughed-up and routinely beaten. Security officers looted, stealing mobile phones, laptops, watches, jewellery and other personal items from their suspects. Suspects were asked to produce identification documents, leading to widespread abuses, with bribes being sought to authenticate the papers. According to the testimonies of complainants, anyone could obtain release from custody simply by paying a bribe, thus totally undermining the security intentions of the operation. The Independent Police Oversight Authority (IPOA) (2014) confirms that investigations are now under way into mistreatment and bribery connected with the operation.

Usalama Watch had been launched amid a flurry of public condemnation of the disloyalty of Kenya's Somali population in the local press. Political statements condoned the methods of the security forces against all Somalis – regardless of their actions. The most vitriolic piece, written by the managing editor at Nation Media Group, made a call to arms: "every little, two-bit Somali has a big dream to blow us up, knock down our buildings and slaughter our children . . . We are at war. Let's start shooting" (quoted in Bruzzone, 2014).

"Local politics" in the borderlands

Mpeketoni shows us that al-Shabaab recognise how effectively they can exploit local politics by harnessing it to their own cause. In this poor region, the riches promised by Lamu's development herald a brighter future, but local people do not trust the state to deliver this fairly and equitably. There are many Muslim communities who share this sense of disaffection. With the Kenyan state behaving aggressively towards and seeming to victimise Muslims, such communities are soft targets for al-Shabaab. Contrary to President Kenyatta's protestations, the killings at Mpeketoni therefore have everything to do with al-Shabaab, displaying the new capacity of the movement to link its message to local Kenyan politics and to act opportunistically. Al-Shabaab is reinventing itself to appeal directly to Kenyan Muslims (Bryden, 2014).

Mpeketoni also signals a larger problem for Kenya's security forces in controlling the vast north-eastern borderlands. This is a natural and easy home for al-Shabaab, where there is considerable disaffection with the Kenyan state amongst the local population, swelled by large numbers of Somali refugees. For part of 2013, the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) lost control of the town of Mandera, and al-Shabaab controlled some two-thirds of rural Garissa County (Hidalgo, 2014). The violence at Mpeketoni has to be seen in this rural, borderlands context. In these remote regions, the writ of the Kenyan state has barely run for many years past, and it is here, rather than in Nairobi or Mombasa, that they will find al-Shabaab's resilience and opportunism most challenging. And it is in the "local politics" of the borderlands that al-Hijra might ultimately thrive and grow.

Recommendations

Kenya needs calm, placatory, well-informed and dispassionate government. Muslim leaders at the coast, and community leaders in the north-east, need to be reconciled with the state and its goals; they need to be embraced and brought inside the state. Kenya's current 'securocratic' government, in which heavy-handed policing and military actions are justified in an atmosphere where xenophobia against Somalis and Muslims is being fostered, cannot achieve the political compromises that are needed to build these alliances. Moderate Muslims have been rapidly alienated by the actions of the government in recent months, with round-ups of "suspects" in Operation Usalama Watch and the random harassment and beatings that went with them marking the watershed moment. Since then, several further 'crackdowns' have made matters worse, without improving the security situation in any respect. In short, Kenya is losing its war in Kenya, not in southern Somalia. By invading southern Somalia, it has opened the door to the regionalisation of al-Shabaab. This will undermine Kenya's security for years to come, and potentially the security of the rest of East Africa as well.

For its part, al-Shabaab is reinventing itself to appeal to the Kenyan *Ummah*, and doing so through its franchise al-Hijra. By abusing and further alienating its own Muslim citizens, and by using ethnic profiling to target Somalis in specific security operations, the state is simply playing into al-Shabaab's hands.

Four steps should be taken, though none of them is easy to achieve:

1. Clearer signs of Muslim inclusion in national politics surrounding security policy need to be demonstrated through national leadership. This could be achieved through building national dialogue, involving Muslim leaders, and ensuring that this is publicised and promoted. Security operations should not be launched "against" specific communities, and greater efforts must be made to generate a national and inclusive consensus. This requires identifying Muslims leaders and promoting them.

2. At community level, a greater effort must be made to invest in the coastal and north-eastern regions, where perhaps as many as 75% of Kenya's Muslims reside. This should be addressed urgently, especially in those areas that are likely to be affected by Kenya's current development plans relating to the second transport corridor. Local community leaders need reassurance that their concerns will be addressed and local interests protected.

3. A large element of the problem arises from basic policing and the behaviour of lower–level government officers, as was evident in Operation Usalama Watch. Complaints about this operation should be fully and competently investigated, with those officers of the state who committed crimes prosecuted. This will send an important signal to Muslim communities.

4. Hate speech against Somalis in the media has been ignored. Kenya has laws that permit the prosecution of individuals, publishers or broadcasters responsible for such statements. The office of the Chief Justice should ensure that hate speech of this kind is halted, through consultation with media editors and proprietors, and, if necessary, through appropriate prosecutions.

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◼ THE AUTHOR

David M. Anderson is Professor of African History at the University of Warwick, having previously been Director of African Studies at the University of Oxford, and at SOAS London. He has published widely on the politics and history of eastern Africa, specialising in issues of security and violence. His recent authored and edited books include *Histories of the Hanged* (2005), *The Khat Controversy* (2007), *The Routledge Handbook of African Politics* (2013) and *Politics and Violence in Eastern Africa, 1940–1990* (2014).

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