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Al-Shabaab and Kenya: the Somali Factor A Precarious State of Affairs

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On April 2, 2015, al-Shabaab carried out a major attack on Garissa University College, Kenya, killing nearly 150 people—almost entirely students [1]. In response to this attack, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta immediately called for the training of 10,000 new police officers and “urged Kenyans abroad to help attract tourists back [to Kenya]” after countries began issuing travel advisories that cautioned visiting the region [2]. Predictably, al-Shabaab’s deadliest attack inside of Kenya since its September 2013 assault on the Westgate Mall—killing 67—has dredged up the fraught question: “Is [Kenya’s] nation’s security strong enough?”[3]

At this point, we might stop for a second to consider whether the “strength” of Kenya’s national security is truly in need of bolstering, or if it is already one laden with extreme might—perhaps too much so. In fact, any serious analyses of political violence require us to move beyond the immediacy of events and dig through the social-historical contexts under which these events may have found their roots. It doesn’t take much effort to acknowledge that an assault on a University that kills nearly 150 people is a tragic and unjustifiable event, but we must not stop there—as most news outlets do. Appeals for emotional outrage, hollow tropes of “they hate us for our freedom,” and pointless/bellicose statements declaring “We will keep hitting them until their spine is completely broken... and we will relish that moment” have no place in a serious sociological analysis, past or present [4]. Rather, we should recognize that insights on the causes

of current political violence can be gained by looking at past and current policies that may have enflamed a particular situation.

Taking a brief look at the recent history of Kenyan policies towards Somalis—both internally and across-borders—we encounter some grim revelations. The October 2011 decision by the Kenyan government to invade Southern Somalia (Operation *Linda Nchi*: “Protect the Country”) was a critical juncture in the relationship between Kenya and al-Shabaab, as thousands of Kenyan security forces romped through Somalia. In fact, al-Shabaab immediately declared that they planned to seek revenge for the Kenyan incursion. This was made explicit in aftermath of the Westgate Mall assault, where al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane released a statement saying “The attack at Westgate Mall was to torment the Kenyan leaders who’ve impulsively invaded [Somalia]. It was also a retribution against the Western states that supported the Kenyan invasion and are spilling the blood of innocent Muslims in order to pave the way for their mineral companies... So make your choice today and withdraw all your forces [or] an abundance of blood will be spilt in your country” [5]. Somali blood was also spilled at the hands of Kenyan forces in the months following their invasion, confirmed by a ‘Human Rights Watch’ report released in 2013 showing that Kenya had indiscriminately bombed and shelled the population they were sent to protect [6].

In addition to these external factors, the treatment of Somalis within Kenya has been equally troublesome. The Kenyan government has been described as its “own worst enemy,” where it has cast a wide net on countless ethnic Somalis as potential al-Shabaab suspects to be rounded up and interrogated [7]. Moreover, it has recently come to light that Kenya’s Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU)—under direct command of Kenya’s National Security Council—is potentially responsible for nearly 500 extrajudicial executions, operating under the general pretext of: “If the law cannot work, there’s another option... eliminate [them]” [8]. This “elimination” strategy is believed to be directly supported by the West, as they provide the operational intelligence while the Kenyan forces carry out the kinetic operation.

Al-Shabaab has not only carried out numerous attacks in Kenya since the Post-October 2011 “Operation,” but they have had great luck with finding sympathies within Kenyan borders as well, for many of the reasons mentioned above. Like many social problems, it certainly becomes more difficult to ameliorate a conflict after you’ve continually taken steps to exacerbate the issue—giving greater fuel for grievance formation and a calcification of “us vs. the enemy” mentality. We only need to take a cursory examination of the recent verbal exchanges between the Kenyan president and al-Shabaab to understand the severity of issue at hand. Continuing the bombastic rhetoric, President Kenyatta declared that he plans to persist “unbowed” with the scorched-earth policy against al-Shabaab, looking to respond in the “severest way possible” against those he deems responsible. Coinciding with that, we saw al-Shabaab release a statement declaring that “Kenyan cities will run red with blood” until Somalia is “liberated from Kenyan occupation” [9].

To fully explore the current conflict between al-Shabaab, Somalia, Kenya, and all of its neighboring states requires much greater length and a different forum of discussion. However, there are a few thoughts and observations that should strike all those concerned with the situation. First, heavy-handed response by the state security apparatus’ rarely serve to quell

violent and disenfranchised armed opposition. To expect al-shabaab to simply dissipate by means of state-sponsored extrajudicial executions and shelling of the civilian populations near which they are potentially operating is a failure on both humanitarian and moral levels. This must be acknowledged as an independent fact, regardless of the nature of violence doled out by al-Shabaab. This applies not only to the Kenyan security forces, but all other security forces involved in the conflagration as well (In particular, Ethiopia and the United States.) Furthermore, as we have seen through countless other recent conflicts in the “global war on terror,” military-interventionist policies are likely to promote hostilities not only within the country being occupied, but potentially the diaspora of that region as well. Viewing all Somali’s as potential suspects is an objectionable violation of the very principles that these countries claim to be fighting for in a “war against terrorism.” Lastly, at the very least, citizens around the globe should continue to be highly skeptical of their governments when a foreign incursion is suggested as a cure-all for “fighting terrorism.” As we’ve seen all too often, it is not just those engaged in the immediate conflict but also those shopping at the markets or attending University that pay the price.

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