Factors Influencing Disengagement from Violent Extremism A Case of Majengo-Pumwani Slum, Nairobi-Kenya

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Abstract: **In Majengo-Pumwani slum in Nairobi City County, Kenya, many youths who had joined Al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia have quietly sneaked back into the community thus presenting a security risk to the rest of the society. Therefore, this study investigated the factors for disengagement and rehabilitation from violent extremism in Majengo-Pumwani slum.**

The study used mixed method research design involving interviews, focus groups and survey. The study used Krejcie-Morgan sample table to calculate the optimum sample size giving a confidence level of 90% with an acceptable margin of 5% error. Quantitative data was coded, entered and analyzed by means of both inferential and descriptive statistics using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data.

Data collection instruments used in this study are questionnaires from 195 participants, key informant interview guides from 3 participants and focus group discussions with 17 participants. Based on this calculation, a total of 217 respondents participated in this study (n=217).

The main finding showed that the desire by extremist individuals to begin normal lives away from violence would make them shun and disengage from terrorism thus catalyzing their rehabilitation. Thus, a structured framework is necessary for rehabilitating Al-Shabaab extremists in Majengo Pumwani slum.

The study advocates for practical policy interventions for the disengagement and rehabilitation of returnees. These policy interventions should include providing education and skills development to the returnees, community involvement in their rehabilitation as well as having well established legal and institutional measures for conducive disengagement process.

Key Words: **Violent extremism, Disengagement, Rehabilitation, Terrorism**

I. INTRODUCTION

The scale of terrorist attacks continues to be on the rise globally. Over the last decade alone, 24000 people have died worldwide from terror attacks (Ritchie et al., 2019). During the data collection period of this study, there were 10,900 terrorist attacks around the world, which killed more than 26,400 people, including 8,075 perpetrators and 18,488 victims (START, 2017). During the same period, the number of terrorist attacks in Kenya increase by 49% with a total increase in deaths of about 75% (START, 2017).

In Kenya, there have been several attacks since the bombing of the American Embassy in 1998 (McKinley Jr, 1998). Some of the most notable of these attacks are the 14 Riverside Drive attack which occurred on January 15th 2019 (Kahongeh, 2020), the Kikambala bombings, the Westgate attack and the Garissa University attack in which 148 students were massacred in April 2015 (Al-Jazeera, 2019). These attacks have mostly targeted places public places such as hotels, bars and shopping. They have also occasioned travel advisories against Kenya in some instances further devastating Kenya's economy.

The above statistics on terrorist attacks raises a question as to whether kinetic operations against Al-Shabaab is an effective counter-terrorism strategy? The answer to this question si that without complementary non-coercive methods such as rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists, Kenya cannot effectively prevent returnees from radicalizing vulnerable individuals in the community or conducting further terror attacks in the country. The risk posed by returnees is that they may carry out attacks due to their experiences in the battlefield and the motivation to revenge (Banks, 2016). For example, ISIS which is one of the largest and most lethal terror group has recruits from nearly 126 countries (UN-CTED, 2018) out of which at least 5600 from 33 countries have returned to their home countries (Barrett, 2017). Upon their return, there have been increased involvement of these returnees in terror attacks (UN-CTED, 2018).

It is on account of these considerations that on 14th April 2015, the Government of Kenya announced an amnesty offer by extending leniency to those who had joined Al-Shabaab terrorism but were willing to return home and offer themselves for rehabilitation (Ombati, 2015). The aim of the amnesty declaration was to help reclaim the hearts of the young Kenyans who had expressed willingness to leave Al-Shabaab and return to lead a law-abiding life.

So far, the government's call for amnesty for returnees from Somalia has recorded at least 1500 individuals who have returned from Al-Shabaab battlefront and surrendered for

rehabilitation by the National Counter Terrorism Centre (Downie, 2018). But the number of those returning under the radar of the authorities is assumed to be far much more than those reported by officials if anecdotal reports that close to 500 hundred youth have crossed to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab terrorists from just one county out of the 47 counties (Kazungu & Mwakimako, 2016) is to be taken into account. To this extent alone, it possible that the number of returnees in Kenya is far much higher than the official figures.

Majengo-Pumwani slum is one of the slums in Nairobi that have long been considered the epicentre of radicalization and violent extremism in Kenya. The slum incubated one of the earliest terror networks in the country known as the Muslim Youth Council (MYC) ((Gisesa, 2014)). The MYC at its registration was known as Pumwani Youth Centre. It was formed with the main objective of alleviating slum poverty, illiteracy and unemployment among the youth in the area (Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, 2011). However, the group transformed into a terrorist organization by taking over the local Riyadha Mosque through one of its radical clerics by the name Iman Ali. Later in 2014, the followers of Iman Ali organized a deadly terror attack in Gikomba Market (Kamau, 2021) within the neighbourhood killing 10 people (BBC News, 2014).

Since then, several youths from this slum have crossed the Kenyan border to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab terrorists while others continue to be radicalized and recruited within the slum. These individuals are part of about 500 Kenyans who had been recruited into terrorism due to poverty and unemployment (Kenya National Assembly, 2013). However, some of these youth have expressed their willingness to come back from Somalia and renounce terrorist violence but owing to the mistrust with the law enforcement authorities, these youths are unable to fully exploit the opportunities to disengage from violent extremism.

The declaration by the government of an amnesty offer as a measure to counter youth radicalization into terrorism thus became the watershed in this study. To find opportunities for encouraging exit and reintegration of Kenyan youth who have joined terrorism, this study examines factors influencing disengagement from violent extremism using the case of Majengo-Pumwani Slum in the city of Nairobi County as a case study.

II. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the social identity theory. Social identity theory posits that a portion of one's self-concept is determined by the considerations of how important and relevant the individual places himself in the eyes of the group to which the individual belongs (Abrams et al., 1990; Ellemers & Scheepers, 2019). Individuals not only possess personal identity but also consider themselves as members of a group in which their whole concept of selfhood is defined. Therefore, their actions and behaviours are to a large extent influenced by social groupings such as race, ethnicity, kinship, or even religious identities.

According to Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel et al., 2001), individuals' do not see themselves as distinct beings with unique characters that defines them exclusively as individuals, but as part of certain defined social boundaries (Acar et al., 2021; Tajfel et al., 2001). This creates what is known as the in-group (to which individual identifies) and the out-group 'others'. It is common therefore to find people identifying themselves as lawyers, blacks, or Kenyans. Such self-definitions would affect how they behave, talk and treat 'others'. This "us-versus-them" identity helps in maintaining individual's self-worth and esteem. It also contributes to improving individuals' confidence in existing cognitions by providing consensus to the way they perceive their identities (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Løvlien, 2021).

In terms of disengagement from violent extremism, social identity factors such as structural, organization and personal elements may motivate exit from terrorism (Jørgensen, 2022). These factors exist at either macro, meso and micro level of group processes (Doosje et al., 2016; Lafaye, 2022). As such, the decision to leave one's role is usually triggered by dissatisfaction and non-fulfilment with one's current position in relation to particular identity (Enstedt, 2021; Hunter, 2022). As a result, the person moves from disillusionment to searching for alternative roles and finally to adopting a new identity as an ex-member of a terrorist group.

However, for one to leave terrorism and assume the new identity, a dichotomy of push and pull factors (Altier et al., 2017; Cherney et al., 2021) interplays in the decision-making process by exerting internal and external pressures thus altering one's outlook and finally influencing his/her disengagement from terrorist grouping (Corner & Gill, 2020). A case in point is in Egypt where the authorities encouraged members of the Islamic Group Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya to disengage from violence by introducing ideological reforms without dismantling the organisation's leadership (Seifert, 2010). This approach attracted the members of Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya to adopt new lives without exiting the group through exerting external pressure while introducing internal reforms within the group. Comparatively, Malaysia's rehabilitation model adopted a community-based approach which entrenches initiatives for pulling away individuals from terrorism by providing financial support to family for those who renounced terrorist violence (Kamaruddin et al., 2017). The objective of this initiative is to incentivize the disengaged extremists to begin life afresh and to effectively integrate into the community. Malaysia's approach to rehabilitation and reintegration has been successful given that beneficiaries are exposed to equal treatment just like other community members (Kamaruddin et al., 2017).

Social identity theory has been used to explain these internal and external factors such as disillusionment, betrayal and ideological differences that may trigger negative group dynamics thus contributing to desistance (Kocsis, 2017).

Other factors including ascription to new social relationships fear, trauma e.g., a friend getting shot or burnout also drives disengagement from violent extremism (Altier et al., 2017; McCauley, 2020). A typical example of this phenomenon is the case where the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service successfully disengaged and rehabilitated 40% of the identified 77 individuals who joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq (Eser Davolio et al., 2019; Merz, 2016). Using social identity theory, the Swiss authorities designed a rehabilitation and disengagement program known as the EXIT program (Barrelle, 2010). The program contemplates a five-phased approach to disengagement from right wing extremism. The first phase involves motivation by an external contact whereby persons outside the group triggers an individual to doubt his/her continued existence in the extremist grouping prompting the disengagement process. At this stage, the individual relies heavily on the yet to be formed new social affiliation for assurance of life outside violence (Barrelle, 2014). To facilitate the process, the government provides public assistance to enable them to begin new life in the settlement stage. Once settled, the disengaged right-wing extremists are provided with State support under the EXIT program and an opportunity to reflect on life without violence thereby eventually stabilizing to new normal of family, and community living.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study made use of descriptive research design. Research design is the arrangement of conditions for collection of data and its analysis so that it brings out the purpose of the research (Maxwell, 2020). In this research, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Quantitative method is based on numerical data which describes reality in numbers while the qualitative method gives information in narrative format (Strijker et al., 2020). The researchers chose the mixed method approach as it gives the ability to answer questions relating to the complex nature of violent extremism phenomenon from the respondents' perspectives while at the same time evaluating measurable variables from statistical data that can be used to support or refute theoretical claims (Bennett & Braumoeller, 2022).

The target population was 500 youths aged between 18-35 years within Pumwani-Majengo slum in Nairobi City County and who are possessing similar observable characteristics (Hennink et al., 2020) on violent extremism subject. To obtain the correct sample size, the researcher used Krejcie and Morgan (Krejcie & Morgan, 2016; Sim et al., 2022) formula $s= X^2 NP(1-P) \div d^2 (N-1)+ X^2 P (1-P)$ where, 's' is the required sample size; X^2 is the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841); N is the population size; P is the proportion of the population that corresponds to the problem under study, assumed to be .50 for maximum sample size; and d is the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion, or significance level (.05). Based on this calculation, a total number of 217 participants were enlisted for this study. n=217.

The study employed non-probability sampling technique also known as judgmental sampling to draw the sample (Raifman et al., 2022). The researcher used this sampling technique since targeted respondents for this study were difficult to reach due to the stigma surrounding the subject of terrorism thereby making it difficult to obtain evidence of their experiences about violent extremism in Majengo-Pumwani slum. For the Survey, 190 respondents were selected while 10 respondents chosen for Key Informant Interviews through purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criterion for the key informants was that the interviewees must be from well-known counter-violent extremism policy experts who have interacted with violent extremist offenders in Majengo-Pumwani slum. The researchers also used snowball sampling method identify 17 Focus Group participants to get accurate information in instances where the target respondents were difficult to access due to their closed nature (Taherdoost, 2022).

Table 1: Study's sample size

Data collection method	Data collection tool	Total
Questionnaire Survey	Questionnaire	190
Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion guide	17
Key informant Interviews	Key Informant Guide	10
TOTAL		217

Source: Researcher, 2022

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-demographic data

The established of socio-demographic profiles of this study was critical in laying the foundation for a representative sample that comprised of all the segments of the population relevant to this research. As was presented in the literature, the descriptive nature of this study demanded a mix of those who had the social, religious, and cultural awareness of the subject of violent extremism in Majengo-Pumwani slum areas making the results shown below relevant to the study objectives.

Out of all the respondents, 59.6% were female while 40.4% were male. This may be attributed to the fact that the study was conducted during day where most females were available at the time of the survey while many men had gone out of the study area to eke a living. As is customary in many African societies and communities living in Majengo Pumwani slums, women are usually left at home to take care of the family while men go out to work and bring food.

Table 2: Breakdown of socio-demographic data

| Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	84	40.4
Female	125	59.6

Source: Researcher, 2022

Majority 53% of the participants were of Christian faith while 47% were Muslims. Majengo Pumwani slum is one of the earliest settlements for demobilized Muslim soldiers (Van Metre, 2016) from Kenyan coast and also home to other immigrants from other parts of the country as well as from Somalia, making it a cosmopolitan mix of different ethnicities and religions.

Figure 1: Respondent distribution by religious affiliation
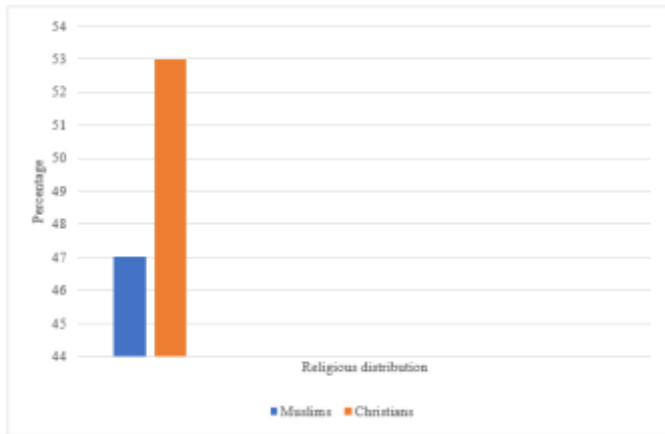
A. *Motivating factors for leaving Al-Shabaab.*

Figure 2: Factors motivating individuals to leave terrorism
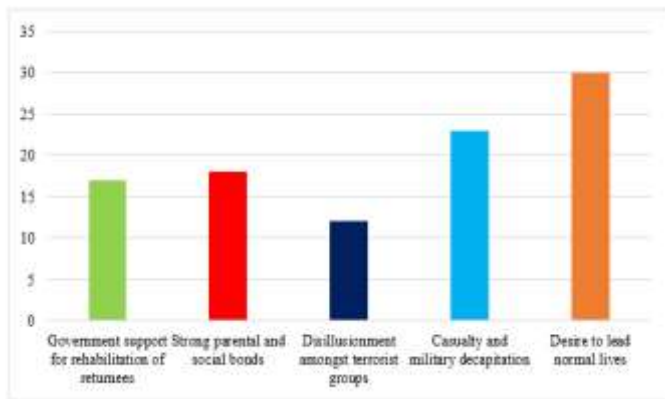
17% of the participants said that Government support for reintegration is the main reason why individuals chose to leave violent extremism. Since the time Kenya's took active role in eliminating Al-Shabaab by sending troops to Somalia as part of the African Mission In Somalia (AMISOM) (Reuben et al., 2022), there have been many youth who have expressed willingness to return from Somalia's battlefront. As such, the government initiated proactive and sustained efforts in areas affected by violent extremism such as Majengo-Pumwani slum by offering counter-narratives as well as preventive initiatives against terrorist radicalization and recruitment. This initiative contributed significantly to the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts of the youth who disengaged from the Al-Shabaab ranks both in Somalia and those radicalized locally. In fact, the respondents whom the researchers spoke to exhibited good awareness of government schemes at taming radicalization through rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives in the slum, an indicator of the positive impact of the government efforts.

On the other hand, 18% of the respondents claimed that close ties between youth who had joined terrorism and their parents and wider social networks would make them leave terrorism. This result shows the important of close social networks such as family members, the community, schools, and peer platforms in influencing individual behaviour. Majengo-Pumwani slum is generally a closed society, with houses spaced within steps away from the next. Therefore, it is possible that the cohesive nature of social circles plays a prominent in dissuading individuals from untoward behaviour. To this end, the perception of being considered outcast and the desire to belong to this close-knit society cannot be underrated.

Nonetheless, 12% of the participants said that the decision to disengage from terrorism is influenced by the disillusionment within the terrorist groups. This result shows that individuals have expectations and desires when they join militancy groupings such as Al-Shabaab, but once they join, they are forced to subsidize their desires and expectations to the larger aspiration of the group. Another reason for the disillusionment by the youth within Al-Shabaab may be attributed to the challenges of teenage life and the difficulties in transitioning to adulthood that often drives the youth to act without second thinking or questioning what their leaders tell them to do (McCauley, 1989). Other researchers (Bjørgo, 2008; Froukje Demant et al., 2008) have also identified factors such as disappointment with group goals, leadership, violence and methods used by the group as contributors to push individuals away from terrorism.

On the other hand, (23%) of the participants claimed that they would leave because of the heavy casualties caused by the military operations in Somalia. The Kenya Defence Forces have been very aggressive in pursuing Al-Shabaab militants across the border in Somalia under the auspices of African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). As such, many of the youth who had joined terrorism have sought to have an exit out for fear for their lives. As the sustained military onslaught continues, the youth from Majengo-Pumwani areas have made attempts to reach out to the government either as captives or as victims so that they can be rehabilitated. This could be the reason why the respondents in this study responded affirming that the impact of military campaign has contributed to the disengagement of the youth in the slum from terrorism.

Of all the participants in this study, majority (30%) believed that the desire by extremist youths to begin normal lives away from violence would make them shun and disengage from terrorism. The allure to the world outside terrorism is critical to individual disengagement from violent extremism (F Demant et al., n.d.; Harris et al., 2017; Reiter et al., 2021) in which case the alternative to violence becomes prominent for his/her decision-making.

B. Interventions to encourage exit

Figure 3: Social interventions for encouraging exit from violent extremism
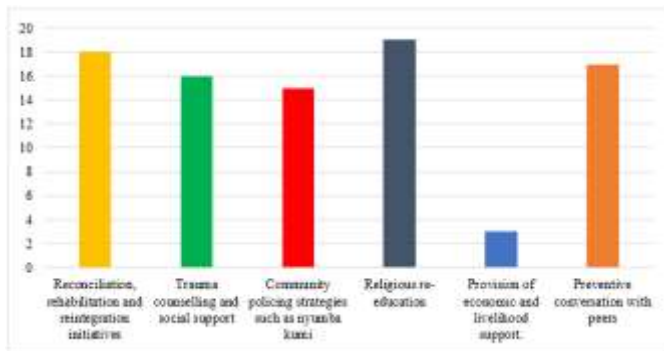
18% of the participants submitted that reconciliation, rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives were the most important for encouraging exit from violent extremism. This could be attributed to the government's effort at encouraging amnesty for the youth who are remorseful and wishes to surrender from terrorism. Also, the results indicate that the people of Majengo-Pumwani slum view the youth who joined terrorism only as wayward teens who still do not know how to make proper life choices hence. Thus, the community appears to be willing to forgive them for making the wrong choice of joining terrorism. In this sense, reconciliation both at familial level as well as within the community is considered highly in efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate them back to the community. This is similar to the case in Sierra Leone where social support provided to ex-combatants through reconciliation with the local communities proved valuable in the disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants (Solomon & Ginifer, 2008).

On the other hand, close to it is 17% of the participants in this study believed that preventive conversation with peers is the best approach to disengagement from violent extremism. This result demonstrates that there is still hope in shaping the future of the youth who joined terrorism in Majengo Pumwani through peer-to-peer conversations. Conversation at a peer can easily influence the youth who joined Al-Shabaab to draw parallels on personal experiences between themselves and their counterparts who are considered progressive law-abiding members of the community.

19% of the participants opined that religious re-education is instrumental in influencing the youth to disengage from violent extremism. The strength of religious ideology in AlShabaab's recruitment narrative is undoubtably strong in Majengo Pumwani area where the terrorist organization established its earliest presence in Kenya in one of the mosque (Chome, 2020). This result therefore shows that the easiest way to counter the extremist ideology and reverse the process of radicalisation is through religious teachings that denounces violence and encourages obedience to the rule of law. It has also ruled out the radical narrative that terrorism is a religious duty as part of jihad. Hence, the result indicates the effect of counter-narrative about radical teachings thus significantly

influencing many individuals who joined Al-Shabaab to lose faith in the terrorist ideology and return to civilian life.

Additionally, 16% of the participants submitted that social support through post-trauma counselling has greatly influenced disengagement from violent extremism. In their view, terrorism is caused by a psychological decease that can be cured through therapy. The participants thus hold the opinion that the Al-shabaab returnees will need adequate counselling and coping mechanisms to withdraw from terrorism and for proper rehabilitation from violent extremism.

The role of community structures in influencing disengagement was depicted by the results of the 15% of the participants in this study who submitted that community policing also known locally as *Nyumba Kumi* policing provided the best incentive towards disengagement. This finding clearly endorses the government's approach to work closely with community structures in countering violent extremism. The positive attribute of this approach allays the initial fears of aggression, extra-judicial killings and lack of participation in security discourse that has long been attributed to counter-terrorism in Kenya (Papale, 2021).

Only 3% of the participants believed that availability of livelihood opportunities would be conducive to influence disengagement from violent extremism. It can be argued that the community in Majengo-Pumwani slum is not ready to reward violent extremists as this may encourage many youths who do not have income in the area to join terrorism in the expectation of later reward when they exit. This finding also show that the difficulty in offering livelihood opportunities for disengaged youths would be in designing a tailor-made financial package that would be dissuasive enough to encourage exit from terrorism for each individual who joined Al-Shabaab.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This research's main objective sought to answer the question as what the conducive factors are for catalysing the disengagement from violent extremism which objective was prompted by the current problem in Kenya with regards to terrorism. The approach for this research is premised on the fact that kinetic operations as the only counter-terrorism strategy by itself cannot win the war against terrorism. Therefore, this study focused on non-coercive measures for combating terrorism through the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of disengaged violent extremists.

The research is based on social identity as the main theoretical model. The study focused on Majengo-Pumwani area which is a known harbour for terrorists and a fertile ground for recruitment of youth (Gisesa, 2014). Many youths from this area had fled to join Al-Shabaab in Somalia with a recent on January 2020 indicating that a 22-year old man who had fled from Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia surrendered to the

Police after arriving in Majengo-Pumwani slum, claiming to be a returnee (Ombati, 2020).

The study found that the desire by extremist individuals to begin normal lives away from violence is a critical trigger that would make these individuals shun terrorism and disengage from violent extremism. This desire is largely catalised by close ties between extremists and their parents and wider social networks who offers fond longings and thus trigger the urge to leave terrorism. Close social networks such as the family unit and other relationships within the community such as schools and peer platforms are thus critical in influencing individual behaviour thereby triggering disengagement from violent extremism. The research also established that sustained government efforts through counter-narratives and preventive programs catalyses disengagement from violent extremism.

Recommendations

In terms of policy recommendations, the research recommends that rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees must be participatory involving key community stakeholders structured at both the local and national levels with clear allocation of roles and responsibilities for both state and non-state actors, private sector, community members and families. Further, the implementation of a rehabilitation and reintegration program should seek to dispel misconception about rewarding of returnees for their crimes and create legitimate but realistic expectations for the beneficiaries. The process should also be managed in a manner that promotes good governance which in any case is one of the grievances that drives youth into radicalization and violent extremism.

For practice, the research recommends continuous monitoring of the rehabilitated individual to ensure that the signs of re-offending are noticed early enough to minimize the risk of recidivism from those who did not successfully disengage from terrorism. This is also important in measuring impact of the interventions and effectiveness of the rehabilitation and reintegration program. To achieve this, the study recommends the creation of an official legal body to be able to handle the returnees' individual needs as well as the needs of the community. This body must have fair representation of all stakeholders and interest groups and be able to work within an established legal framework that will guide its operations.

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