



Book review: John Mwangi Githigaro, *Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya: Community, State, and Security Perspectives*¹²

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In the post-9/11 period, security threats posed by violent extremism (VE) and terrorism have been growing globally. In the meantime, however, developing counterterrorism strategies and making efforts to prevent radicalisation have also gained traction. The 9/11 attacks in the United States (US) were followed by the spread of terrorist attacks also in Africa. Though the continent was “scarcely a generator of jihadi violence at the dawn of the 21st century” (Bacon and Warner, 2021, p. 76), today it has become the global epicentre of jihadist violence and terrorism. The securitisation of weak and failed states as responsible for terrorist threats all over the world laid the ground for international operations with multifaceted approaches. Accordingly, African governments have started to address domestic radicalisation and terrorism by utilising governmental responses with hard power and military priorities.

African security and the political stability of African states have always been a key priority for the international community not only because important maritime trade routes along coastal countries are connecting various regions in the global economy, but also since economic and social insecurity, political instability, the spread of violent extremism, and youth radicalisation have significant implications for global peace and security. The Horn of Africa has long been struggling with economic, political, and social challenges associated with complex ethnic and tribal tensions. The instability of the broader region in the Gulf of Aden has serious consequences for regional as well as international security. Kenya is among the relatively most stable countries in terms of governance and economic productivity not only in East-Africa and the Horn of Africa, but in the continent too. Violent extremism and terrorism, however, pose significant risks to the country’s social, economic and political stability: “Kenya has since the late 1990s struggled with terrorism threats” (Githigaro, 2024, p. 7). Al-Shabaab, a terrorist organisation is Somalia, and its affiliates in Kenya (see Githigaro, 2024, p. 108) have since the mid-2000s been constituting some of the most significant security concerns to the region, including Kenya. Therefore, a particular concern should be devoted to examining the security threats, possible countermeasures, and regional security dynamics

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in East-Africa.

In his book ‘Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya: Community, State, and Security Perspectives,’ John Mwangi Githigaro (2024) interrogates the dynamics between radicalisation, violent extremism, terrorism, and potential countermeasures in Kenya, critically examining their relations through a multi-theoretical perspective supported by precise definitional background. The author assembled a diverse group of stakeholders from Nairobi and Mombasa, two hotspots for VE and terrorist recruitment in Kenya, who certainly deliver valuable interdisciplinary perspectives to the topic. With an extensive secondary and primary research methods, including interviews, focus group discussions and observations, the book puts an emphasis to examine how different stakeholders such as security actors, society organisations, academics, and community members present the threats of radicalisation, extremism, terrorism, and the associated effects of countermeasures.

Since the early 2000s, academic literature on conflict resolution and peace operations has suggested to develop new, community-based approaches that focus more on the potential roles of local communities in building capacities for long-term peace (Colletta and Muggah, 2009; Özerdem, 2012). For disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, the United Nations (UN) Department of Peacebuilding Operation (2010) acknowledged the need to revise past conflict resolution practice and integrate the community approach. Moreover, the UN Development Programme (2012), recognising the key role of communities in conflict resolution, drew attention to the contributions that affected families, traditional leaders, religious authorities, women and young people can make. Though community-based approaches put a greater emphasis on reintegration processes and community-level reconciliation and decision-making compared to past experiences in conflict resolution (Verkoren et al., 2010), their practical efficacy, at least in the 2010s, has yet to be fully attested. The community-based perspective based upon soft power priorities was, however, an inevitable response to the increased awareness about strengthening and reforming the traditional views on radicalisation and the associated countermeasures focusing on hard power initiatives such as military intervention, intelligence, surveillance and punitive strategies (Githigaro, 2024, p. 3). The book applies such a community-oriented perspective as a relatively new approach to the scholarly debate on countering terrorism and VE. Accordingly, strengthening community resilience as an indispensable pillar of counterterrorism strategies and an alternative to past research agendas only focusing on individual pathways to radicalisation and traditional counterterrorism responses (Githigaro, 2024) is at the heart of this work. By contextualising the roles that communities may take in a broader counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation strategy, and adopting a community-based approach, this book challenges existing literature on conflict resolution and terrorism focusing primarily on state- and individual level analysis and offer a roadmap to study local communities’ contributions to effectively countering radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

With presenting detailed definitional, methodological, theoretical considerations, in

the Introduction, the author contextualises the topic by discussing some aspects of the global counterterrorism agenda after the 9/11 attacks as well as the concept of community resilience in the US and the United Kingdom (UK). Additionally, it is highlighted to what extent historical inequalities, racism, religious and ideological narratives predispose predominantly young Muslims to radicalisation globally and especially in Kenya, where homegrown radicalisation has since the mid-2000s been on the rise. Relatedly, it is also shown, and further detailed in Chapter 1, how Kenya's intervention in Somalia in 2011, porous borders for terrorist militias, corruption, weak governance, diplomatic relations with the West, economic inequalities, religious indoctrination, and the crisis of national identity all generate conducive environment in Kenya for terrorist activity (Githigaro, 2024).

In Chapter 1, Kenya's historical experiences with terrorism in the pre- and post-9/11 periods is detailed, though sometimes it may be found to be arranged thematically rather than strictly chronologically. The author illustrates changing dynamics in terms of the targets and committing organisations of terrorist attacks. While early experiences with terrorism in Kenya dates to the 1970s and 1980, terrorism, according to the author, had not been presented as a significant security threat until the late 1990s when the bombing attacks against the US embassy in Nairobi in 1998 led to the complete revision of existing approaches to counterterrorism in the country. The book therefore thoroughly reviews anti-terror legislation and institutionalisation processes throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

In 2011, Kenya under Operation Linda Nchi intervened in Somalia to respond the incursion of Al-Shabaab militias into Kenyan territory (Githigaro, 2024). The intervention reportedly led to Kenya's Westgate shopping mall siege in Nairobi in 2013 committed by local militants associated with Al-Shabaab. The subsequent securitisation of ethnic Somali identity as well as Islam, operations such as Usalama Watch initiated in 2014 and targeting predominantly Somali citizens, and the stereotyping of refugees as enemies provided further grounds for recruitment amongst disillusioned youth. The complex social dynamics associated with the operation and its implications for radicalisation processes in Kenya are thus also well-examined.

Chapter 2 presents security officials' practical experiences and insights about how to address potential challenges associated with radicalisation. The author investigates radicalisation as a process and how extreme political ideals, faith and indoctrination contribute to that process. It is also analysed to what extent Kenyan involvement in Somalia in 2011 and refugee camps in Kenya have contributed to radicalisation, and thus potentially generated security threats. Additionally, it is also examined how online technologies are utilised and facilitate recruitment and the spread of radical ideologies to persuade users to join violent extremist groups. By addressing potential challenges mentioned above and revealing social marginalisation and counterproductive state responses as additional pillars of radicalisation, based on vast amount of quantitative data, the author provides recommendations on how to best develop effective counter-radicalisation strategies in Kenya, adding further values to the book in the policymaking domain.

In Chapter 3 and 4, the author provides insights into local perspectives toward radicalisation, extremism, and community-oriented strategies in dealing with them. Amongst such strategies are the Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) campaign, the Likoni Community Development Program (LICODEP), and the *Nyumba Kumi* community policing platform, to mention a few. Through the lenses of various state and nonstate actors from Nairobi and Mombasa Counties, it is presented, on the one hand, how communities have been engaged in preventing radicalisation and countering violent extremism (CVE) in the past, and on the other, how local approaches have the immense potential to become alternatives to state-centric strategies.

The community-based perspective dates to Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism of 2016 (Githigaro, 2024) which advocated community engagement as part of CVE and counterterrorism strategies. The role of nonstate actors and communities in preventing individuals to be radicalised and recruited into terrorist groups has since then fully acknowledged. In tackling complex and emerging threats, the book, through grounded fieldwork in Eastleigh and Majengo in Nairobi County and Likoni in Mombasa County, examines community dialogues, responsible parenting, community-based counternarratives in the civil and religious spheres, preemptive strategies to marginalisation, economic empowerment, and their potential contributions to crime prevention and community resilience. With regard to community policing, trust deficits between state authorities and communities as elemental to effective CVE strategies are also addressed. The author devotes a particular concern to investigate how improved state-community relations and confidence-building mechanisms may result in better information sharing, collective problem-solving and early-warning mechanisms. The author found counternarratives particularly valuable in the Coastal part of Kenya and their potential in deconstructing misleading ideologies is stressed and well-illustrated. Even some practical, participatory models such as drama and creative arts as alternatives or complementary techniques to ongoing initiatives are discussed. Since *madaris* religious schools might have been used as entry points to youth radicalisation according to the data collected in Mombasa County, their role in reducing risks of radicalisation was also scrutinised in the local context.

While community-based initiatives and community-state partnerships are key to effective CVE strategies, they are, however, not without shortcomings. Personal safety and confidentiality concerns are just a few amongst the serious human rights violations that threaten those who join community policing efforts and cooperate with the police and other state authorities. The author dedicates Chapter 4 to examining existing dilemmas in CVE and how past experiences with extrajudicial killings, disappearances and human rights violations by the authorities had led to trust deficits and negative perceptions about the police. Since police authorities could have never been fully trusted according to data presented in the book, national government structures have become more important to local citizens in communication and cooperation. As a result of the police being easily compromised in the past, fearing from reprisals by terrorist groups and being labelled as "traitors" or "spoilers" for information sharing, individuals have



also become hesitant to engage directly with the police (Githigaro, 2024, p. 97). Adopting the securitisation theory developed by Buzan and Waever (2009), the author details how historically linking Islam and Muslim citizens by the state with VE and terrorist activities since Kenya's independence in 1963 as a narrative has been utilised to the securitisation of the Somali identity and to justify counterterrorism interventions against Somali citizens.⁴ Moreover, it is also illustrated how all this paved the way for intercommunity social distances and trust deficits between the state and local communities (Githigaro, 2024, p. 101).

The book demonstrates how Kenya's counterterrorism strategy has historically shifted from hard power to soft power realities and helps to achieve synergies between the academic work and policymaking. It definitely contributes to the progressive debate in both fields by investigating the potential explanations for radicalisation and VE in an African context, presenting the evolution of counterterrorism interventions in Kenya, and revealing how different stakeholders perceive their social implications. It further reflects to the changing global security landscape by recognising the essential contribution of multiple actors in the security domain such as nonstate actors, individuals and communities. It provides practical insights to policymakers that seek to end insecurity and promote inclusive governance in Kenya. This academically well-grounded book is timely and relevant which makes a worthwhile contribution to the academic and policy debate, especially in times of the changing Somalian security landscape stemming from the transition from the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) to the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). This book's real value lies, amongst others, in acknowledging the crucial role of communities in tackling complex social phenomena such as radicalisation and VE.

This book is primarily for scholars and policymakers, but anyone interested in violent extremism and terrorism in Africa will greatly profit from reading this book. It provides a comprehensive and well-grounded analysis on the subject and offers sound explanations for radicalisation pathways. It presents the multiple pillars of counterterrorism strategies developed in Kenya, how they fit in the 'Global War on Terror' agenda and how they are being shaped by regional and global dynamics.

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⁴ The securitization theory has been also applied in other contexts where the referent objects of the securitization process were also the traditionally defined "community" and its individuals (see Besenyó, 2019).

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