The terrorist attack on 14 Riverside Drive in January 2019 revealed Nyeri is emerging as a new frontier of Al-Shabaab recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism. As the case of has shown, those recruited and radicalized become part of Al-Shabaab’s Kenyan Mujahideen who become its foot soldiers and suicide bombers in attacks. Al-Shabaab is playing on conflicts and grievances within impoverished Muslim communities to penetrate and gain influence, thus enabling it to recruit and radicalize the youth. This calls for measures to strengthen the resilience of local communities, especially the Muslim Community, to radicalization by undertaking poverty alleviation and youth empowerment interventions. There are hard lessons that come from the involvement of Nyeri youths in terrorist activities such as the 14 Riverside attack. One of these is the need for evidence-based response to radicalization to clearly identify the reasons why Al-Shabaab is making inroads into Kenya. The proliferation of gangs in Nyeri is providing fertile grounds for radicalization to violent extremism. It is important not only to defeat these gangs but also eliminate them ideologically. Further, an intelligence-led approach to radicalization is needed to identify and destroy Al-Shabaab’s sleeper cells. Nyeri also faces the real risk of radicalization in prisons. New interventions and measures are needed to prevent and counter radicalization in prisons. This may include setting up systems to monitor and discuss developments in prisons and to undertake targeted interventions for different groups in prison including adult male and female offenders, and juvenile male and female offenders. Ultimately, the County and national Governments should pursue innovative approaches to the resettlement process for convicted terrorist to prevent recidivism and promote sustainable reintegration.

- Intervene in and resolve conflicts involving factions within the Muslim Community in Nyeri to prevent Al-Shabaab from exploiting tensions and grievances to entrench its influence, recruit and radicalize to violent extremism.

- Adopt concrete intervention measures to strengthen the resilience of local communities, especially the Muslim Community, to radicalization by undertaking poverty alleviation and youth empowerment interventions.

- On the gangs as fertile grounds for radicalization to violent extremism, focus attention on criminal gangs as potential allies of Al-Shabaab’s recruitment and radicalization and adopt measures aimed at not just defeating these gangs but also eliminating them ideologically.

- An intelligence-led approach to radicalization is needed to identify and destroy Al-Shabaab’s sleeper cells.

- Use the lessons of the 14 Riverside Drive in Nairobi terrorist and undertake a baseline survey of the reasons for the involvement of Nyeri youth in the attack to guide evidence-based response to radicalization.

- Take an intelligent-led approach to radicalization to identify and destroy Al-Shabaab’s active and sleeper cells in Nyeri County.
On the risk of radicalization in prisons, adopt new interventions and measures to prevent and counter radicalization in prisons by setting up systems to monitor and discuss developments in prisons; undertake targeted interventions for different groups in prison including adult male and female offenders, and juvenile male and female offenders; and pursue innovative approaches to the resettlement process for convicted terrorist to prevent recidivism and promote sustainable reintegration.
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MAP OF NYERI COUNTY, KENYA
THE AL-SHABAAB’S FOOTPRINTS IN AFRICA (AFIA) RESEARCH PROJECT

About the AFIA Project: Evidently, Al-Shabaab Al-Qaeda’s most powerful ally and Africa’s deadliest Islamic militant group, which poses a growing threat to the Horn of Africa and beyond. It is in this context that the Africa Policy Institute (API) initiated the Al-Shabaab’s Footprint in Africa Research Project (AFIA) whose aim is to track down the expanding footprint of militant group in the countries of the Horn of Africa. It specifically focuses on how local dynamics within African countries and regions have enabled it to recruit and radicalize the youth to violent extremism and terror. The project is designed to generate evidence-based research to underpin policy responses and action to radicalization and terrorism by the al-Qaeda affiliated militant group based in Somalia.
Al-shabaab’s footprint in Kenya: Nyeri County

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AL-SHABAAB’S FOOTPRINT IN KENYA, NYERI COUNTY

Recent events reveal Nyeri as a County at risk of increasing radicalization and terrorism. The threat of radicalization and violent extremism in the county came into the limelight in the wake of Al-Shabaab attack on the 14 Riverside Drive in Nairobi on January 15, 2019. One of the masterminds of the attack was Ali Salim Gichunge (alias Farouk), who was raised in Nyeri and Isiolo. Four factors explain why Al-Shabaab is making serious inroads into Nyeri.

A growing number of Nyeri residents working in the epicenters of terrorism inside Somalia and spillover counties in Northern Northern and at the coast is constantly exposed to the risk of terrorist attacks and radicalization. Nyeri proximity is only 140 kilometers to Isiolo, lying firmly in the larger vortex of Al-Shabaab’s theater of operation in Somalia and Northern Kenya. The county has perhaps the largest and fastest growing population of upcountry Muslims consisting of earlier generations and new cohorts of converts to Islam, which Al-Shabaab is dexterously using to radicalize. Finally, Nyeri has its own criminal groups, which can potentially be tapped by Al-Shabaab and other extremists as fertile grounds for recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism. Efforts to detect and destroy Al-Shabaab cells and to drain the swamp of radicalization, violent extremism and criminal violence calls for innovative and nuanced measures. This

Al-Shabaab Attacks on Nyeri Workers

Maintain a comprehensive tally of Nyeri residents working in Somalia and the spillover counties of terrorism, including Mandera, Wajir, Garissa, Lamu and Tana River in order to prepare for likely attacks and detect and deter radicalization.

Nyeri residents were in the eye of stormy and shocking Al-Shabaab attacks on non-Muslim upcountry people in Northern Kenya from 2014. On December 2, 2014, the militia’s gunmen attacked and killed 36 quarry workers in Koromey, Mandera county. Some 18 of the 36 victims hailed from Chaka, Kiganjo in Nyeri County.1 This was followed closely by a second al-Shabaab attack in Soko Mbuzi Village near Mandera Town on 2 July 2015, in which 14 upcountry Kenyans were killed, six among them from Chaka, Nyeri County.2

And on October 25 2016, 12 more Kenyans were killed in fresh al-Shabaab attacks on quarry workers in a Mandera hotel. Two of these were a man and his nephew from Nyaribo village, Nyeri. The County had the lion’s share of the senseless killings of upcountry Kenyans by Al-shabaab, which reached 26 deaths out of a total of 52 quarry workers killed by the Somali militia in the 2014-2016 interlude. The Nyeri county government responded by enhancing its counter-terrorism measures to prevent further loss of their kin in future.

Grievances Galore: Riding on Muslim Discontent in Nyeri

Al-shabaab’s radicalization and terrorism in Nyeri are riding on the presence of a relatively large Muslim community comprising of old

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and new converts to Islam. The Majengo Slums have the largest concentration of Muslims in Nyeri County, although mosques, Islamic schools and centers are found across the county. Its agents are also introducing and exploiting schisms within Nyeri’s Muslim community to make inroads into and radicalize the community. In June 2001, Nyeri was the scene of a titanic clash between two rival Muslim groups. The Government found Sheikh Adam Saidi Hamisi, the imam of Majengo Mosque, guilty of incitement and jailed him for one year. Sheikh Hamisi, made utterances, which led to the destruction of graves belonging to older members of the Muslim community on March 8, 2001.

The prosecution told the court that Sheikh Hamisi ordered worshippers to demolish graves which were above the ground at a local cemetery. The affected individuals, who are also Muslims, went to court. Reports indicated growing tension between Muslims born and brought up in Nyeri and those who came to the town recently. The incident opens debate on the conflict between Muslim adherents and radicals, different schools of thoughts, and practices. In a crackdown on suspects of terrorism by Kenyan security agencies in 2017, Mohamed Abbas Mwai (69), a Nyeri resident and a former official of Riyadh Mosque and trustee in Majengo was among the four Riyadh Mosque officials who mysteriously went missing. Similar to the other officials, Abbas was abducted by people believed to be security officers, who waylaid him, kicked him, before handcuffing and pushing him into a waiting Subaru. Other officials abducted during this time included Dr Abdalla Waititu (Kagundo) and Abdul Karuri (Nairobi). The forced disappearances and execution of terror suspects were highly condemned by the Muslim community who viewed the acts as torture, cruelty, and abuse of human rights against their leaders. The common grievances form fertile grounds for increased violence and radicalization.

In August 2016, Muslims living in Majengo, Nyeri Town expressed concern over alleged discrimination by the government during the issuance of identification cards in the area. According to Sheikh Uleid Majid, immigration officers subjected members of the Muslim faith to unfair vetting processes to ascertain their nationality before they were issued with ID cards. They lamented that gaining ID cards had become a big challenge, a problem they needed addressed. Interventions aimed at addressing grievances and resolving conflicts involving factions within the Muslim Community in Nyeri are central to prevent Al-Shabaab from exploiting tensions and grievances to entrench its influence, recruit and radicalize to violent extremism.

Footprint of Al-Shabaab Radicalization

Strengthening the resilience of local communities, especially the Muslim Community, is key to reducing the risk of recruitment and radicalization of young people to violent extremism. The discovery of grenades and other items provided the earliest

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signs of Al-Shabaab footprints in Nyeri, which was in the epicenter of armed struggle against the British in the 1950s. In May 2013, police at Kieni East district in Nyeri County detonated a colonial grenade found at Kabaru Forest. The Nyeri police boss, Kirunya Limbitu, said the 16mm grenade found by a forest guard out on patrol, later detonated. There was no explicit connection between the two bombs and Al-Shabaab terrorism. However, on December 16, 2013, bomb experts from the Kenya Police successfully detonated two 60 millimeters bombs found by a farmer in his farm at Gikoye Village in Othaya, Nyeri, who immediately informed the police.

From 2015, when Kenya’s security forces pushed Al-Shabaab out of Nairobi and major Kenyan cities, the group turned to radicalizing upcountry areas. It shifted focus from Somali and Swahili/Arab traditional zones to recruiting and radicalizing residents of counties such as Nyeri owing to the presence of large enclaves of Muslims, poor populations and proximity to Northern Kenya and Somali as the epicenters of terrorism in the Horn of Africa.

In penetrating these areas, Al-Shabaab has tapped into local grievances especially against county and national governments. In May 2015, a 22-year old man was arrested in Nyeri county after threatening publicly to join al-Shabaab for failing to pass the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) recruitment exercise. According to the officer in charge, Lt-Col Paul Aruasa, the man was heard inquiring about the recruitment centres of al-Shabaab and portrayed actual intent in joining the group. The man claimed that he was denied the opportunity to progress during the recruitment process after meeting all the qualifications.

Intelligence reports also indicated a growing problem of radicalization in the county, requiring intensified response by counter-terrorism forces. In May 2018, anti-terrorism police arrested three al Shabaab suspects

in Nyeri County. At the same time, the government launched a 24-hour surveillance on several strategic locations and routes in the county. Three terror suspects who were also linked to armed robbery were arrested in Othaya, suggestive of an overlap between crime and terrorism.\(^8\) Two of the suspects were found with communication gadgets and items associated with al-Shabaab terrorists. In Majengo slum, military intelligence officers also arrested the third man, who had been on the radar of the security forces after earlier sneaking into the country from Somalia.

Al-Shabaab agents have also been involved in a campaign of terror and intimidation. In June 2018, students of the Kenya Medical Training College (KMTC) Nyeri Campus fled hostels following reports of a planned terror attack at the institution. Students and staff also reported suspicious individuals warning them of likely upcoming attacks.\(^9\) Similar threats had been sent to the Nyeri County Referral Hospital, which neighbours the college.

*The 14 Riverside Drive Attack*

Nyeri was again in the limelight in the wake of terrorist attack on the 14 Riverside Drive in Nairobi on January 15, 2019. One of the gunmen in the Al-Shabaab attack that left 21 people dead, over 30 injured and 700 others evacuated from the site was Ali Salim Gichunge (alias Farouk), who was raised in Nyeri and Isiolo. In many ways, the Gichunge story exposes breakdown of families and social order in the context of poverty and youth disillusionment as a driver of radicalization. As the son of Ali Gichunge, a sergeant in the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) that has been fighting Al-Shabaab inside Somalia since October 2011, he was born and bred in a strict Muslim family in Isiolo. Here, Gichunge sat for his KCSE exams at Isiolo Barracks High School in 2011, but his ambitions of become an engineer were dashed after he failed to attain grades that allow him to join university. Gichunge’s life started tipping after his mother, Sakina Mariam Gichunge, separated with his father in 2010. For a while, he lived with his Mother in Isiolo doing menial jobs such as selling miraa (khat) in the estates, signifying the disillusionment of the youth. He later went to live with his maternal grandparents at Nyeri’s Majengo slums, home to some of the poorest people in Nyeri county.\(^10\) As a youth in Majengo in Nyeri, Gichunge was tapped by the Al-Shabaab and put on the path to radicalization. In 2015 he went to Mombasa where he planned to study and teach Islamic religion at a mosque in Majengo area of Mombasa. He was most likely radicalised in Mombasa while studying at a Mombasa mosque where he was also a part-time madrassa teacher.

In the wake of 14 Riverside Drive terrorist attack, several people were arrested in Nyeri suspected of being connection to the attack. The Anti-Terror Police Unit suspected that those arrested “had links with other suspects in the attack.”\(^11\) The incident raised concerns on the possibility of ongoing recruitment and radicalization to violent Extremism in rural Kenya.

But al-Shabaab is increasingly focusing on women, revealing the gender face of radicalization. One such recruits with linkages to in Nyeri is Violet Kemunto Omwoyo (alias Khadija alias Wanjiru), who is believed to be the wife of Ali Salim Gichunge and one

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of the masterminds of the Riverside attack in Nairobi. A graduate of public relations and journalism, Masinde Muliro University (2014), Kemunto is not the typical poor youth. She reveals Al-Shabaab’s recent converts as highly educated or skilled young people with university degrees. Both the country and national government need to take to heart the lessons of the 14 Riverside Drive and undertake a baseline survey of the reasons for the involvement of Nyeri youth in the attack to underpin evidence-based response to the threat of radicalization.

Hunt for Al-Shabaab Sleeper Cells

An intelligent-led approach to radicalization is central to identifying and destroying both active and sleeper cells of violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. In January 2019, Nyeri County Commissioner, Fredrick Shisia, stated that police have been monitoring at least four Al-Shabaab sleeper cells in Nyeri County since 2018. He added that Nyeri, Naromoru, Karatina and Othaya towns have been under surveillance. According to the security boss, it was not a surprise that the Dusit D2 suspect came from Nyeri County. “We are aware of the claims and we are doing something about it. But it would not be a surprise that the suspect came from Nyeri. Currently, we have four areas that are being monitored as hideouts for radicalized youths,” he said.12 But the jury is still out as to whether some of the returning quarry workers from Mandera were being radicalized. After all, there is no mechanism in place to screen and monitor the returnees.

Threat of Radicalization in Prisons

Prisons, it is said, are the least governed regions of criminality.13 Literature indicates that prison and probation systems worldwide are rapidly becoming more involved in radicalization leading to violent extremism.14 The prison environment is increasingly becoming a potential breeding ground for radicalization as “places of vulnerability that harbour identity seekers, protection seekers and rebels in greater concentrations than any other environment.”15 As a result, prisons have helped incubate nearly every militant movement in the modern era.16

Prisons are zones of recruitment of other

prisoners; providing support to extremist groups from prison and from extremist groups outside prison. They are also known to give extremists the time they need to prepare for ideologically inspired illegal acts after release. Prisoners also become more radicalized because of grievances, frustrations or anger related to being in prison.

In the light of this, as the number of Al-Shabaab suspects detained in Nyeri prisons escalate, the issue of radicalization in prisons become a great concern. Prisons can become—and perhaps already are—fertile grounds for Islamism in Nyeri. In this regard, new interventions and measures are needed to prevent and counter radicalization in prisons by setting up systems to monitor and discuss developments in prisons.

Interventions should be targeted for different groups in prison including adult male and female offenders, and juvenile male and female offenders; and pursue innovative approaches to the resettlement process for convicted terrorist to prevent recidivism and promote sustainable reintegration.

Criminal Gangs as Fertile Grounds for Radicalization

The growing spectre of armed criminal gangs in Nyeri as elsewhere in Kenya is providing potential grounds for radicalization and terrorism. Literature point to criminal gangs as potential fertile grounds for radicalization to violent extremism. In this case, it is important to focus attention on criminal gangs as potential allies of Al-Shabaab’s recruitment and radicalization. The aim of the measures taken to deal with criminal gangs should be just to defeat these gangs but also to eliminate them, including ideologically. Two criminal groups have been identified in Nyeri: Mungiki and Gaza Gang.

Mungiki’s Ghost: The Mungiki sect emerged in the 1980s based on Kikuyu culture and traditional religion as an ideal case of the ‘devoted actor’ theory. Inspired by the 1950s Mau Mau armed struggle against the British colonial rule, the Mungiki emerged as a
pristine social movement against the excesses of the KANU-era oppression but increasingly degenerated into an criminal group in from the late 1990s associated with extortion, murder and political violence. At its heyday, Mungiki had deep roots in Nyeri. In the Gathaithi massacre in Nyeri April 2009, one of the group’s popular clashes with locals, 29 people were killed.

In the face state oppression, Mungiki leadership took cover in radical Islam. In 2002, its top Mungiki leaders converted to Islam at Sakina Mosque in Mombasa, the them capital of Islamic extremism. Mungiki’s chairman Maina Njenga became Mohammed while the group’s spokesman, Ndura Waruinge, became Ibrahim, as four other top leaders also converted to Islam. Mungiki took on a stridently violent turn, attracting an equally violent crackdown from the government.

Mungiki may have been defeated in the Government crackdowns in the 2006-2007 moment, but there is no evidence it was eliminated. In 2018, it was reported that the organization is re-emerging, recruiting young students in the Central region with over 90 people recently arrested in relation to the issue. However, neither Mungiki nor Al-Shabaab has publicly acknowledged any official connection. But both Mungiki and Al-Shabaab extremist groups share the character and spirit of devoted actors, raising concerns about possible shared motivation to extreme sacrifice and identity fusion between Mungiki and the jihadist group especially involving new converts to Islam. This calls for ideological approaches to ensure that the outlawed sect does not provide a fertile ground for radicalization of its members to extremism. Mungiki stresses on the rights of a social class that feels deeply underprivileged and marginalized in a rapidly globalizing world, and it is interpreted as ‘we are the public’. Understanding the perceived grievances of Mungiki sect members is a necessary step towards ideological victory against the organization.

20 Peter Kagwanja (2003).
The Gaza Gang: The spread of gangs such as the Gaza sect is intensifying criminality and creating a fertile ground for radicalization by Islamic extremists in the Mount Kenya region. On Jul 26, 2018, two unknown gangsters shot and killed the Chief of Kamakwa location in Nyeri, Peter Kimiti Nyuguto, at his home in Gitathi-ini village of Nyeri Town Constituency as insecurity increased in Nyeri and its environs. Earlier on, the assistant Chief of Gakawa sub location in Nyeri, Martin Githinji Mureithi, was also shot dead by unknown assailant at his home on April 7, 2016 due to his staunch stand on the fight against insecurity and illicit brews. Five suspects were later arrested in connection with the murder.21

In October 2018, two hardcore criminals, John Githinji and Joseph Kangethe, who were being sought for the murder of an assistant chief Nyuguto surrendered to the police. The two were presented to the police by the lobby groups Muslim for Human Rights (Muhuri) and Infoaction after fears they would be gunned down. There were speculations that

John Githinji and Joseph Kangethe were members of a criminal gang known as Gaza sect operating in Nairobi and Mount Kenya region. The Gaza gang became public in September 2018, when it was reported that it was rapidly spreading from its hub in Nairobi to other counties. Believed to draw its inspiration from Jamaica’s neighborhood of Portmore, the Gaza gang established its initial bases in the high density areas of Kayole and Dandora, Nairobi. During a shootout in May 2018, police eliminated one of the alleged masterminds of Gaza gang, Clera Njoki, who hailed from Murang’a county, which neighbors Nyeri to the East.

Conclusion

This preliminary study has shown that Nyeri is emerging as a new frontier of Al-Shabaab recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism. As the case of the 14 Riverdrive Attack in January 2019 has shown, those recruited and radicalized become part of Al-Shabaab’s Kenyan Mujahideen who become its foot soldiers and suicide bombers in attacks. Al-Shabaab is playing on conflicts and grievances within impoverished Muslim

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communities to penetrate and gain influence, thus enabling it to recruit and radicalize the youth.

This calls for measures to strengthen the resilience of local communities, especially the Muslim Community, to radicalization by undertaking poverty alleviation and youth empowerment interventions. There are hard lessons that come from the involvement of Nyeri youths in terrorist activities such as the 14 Riverside attack. One of these is the need for evidence-based response to radicalization to clearly identify the reasons why Al-Shabaab is making inroads into Kenya. The proliferation of gangs in Nyeri is providing fertile grounds for radicalization to violent extremism. It is important not only to defeat these gangs but also eliminate them ideologically. Further, an intelligence-led approach to radicalization is needed to identify and destroy Al-Shabaab’s sleeper cells. Nyeri also faces the real risk of radicalization in prisons. New interventions and measures are needed to prevent and counter radicalization in prisons. This may include setting up systems to monitor and discuss developments in prisons and to undertake targeted interventions for different groups in prison including adult male and female offenders, and juvenile male and female offenders. Ultimately, the County and national Governments should pursue innovative approaches to the resettlement process for convicted terrorist to prevent recidivism and promote sustainable reintegration.
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AL-SHABAAB’S FOOTPRINT IN KENYA: NYERI COUNTY

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