

Inside Kenya's war on terror: breaking the cycle of violence in Garissa

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The name of Garissa county in Kenya was heard all over the world after al-Shabaab shot dead 148 people – 142 of them students – at Garissa University College in April 2015. But the story of the mounting violence leading up to that horrific attack, of how and why it happened, and of how local communities, leaders and the government came together in the aftermath to improve the security situation, is less well known.

But when you ask around, it quickly becomes clear that Garissa is a place where divisions and dangers persist – connected to its historic marginalisation, local and national political rivalries in Kenya, and the ebb and flow of conflict in neighbouring Somalia. Since the attack, the security situation has improved in Garissa county, yet this may offer no more than a short window for action to solve the challenges and divisions that matter to local people – before other forces and agendas reassert their grip.

This article by Saferworld tells Garissa's story as we heard it from people living there. Because Garissa stepped back from the brink of terror-induced polarisation and division, it is in some ways a positive story with global policy implications.



A woman is stricken with grief after the Garissa University College attack. The shockwaves led local communities to come together in rejecting further violence. Photo: Stringer/AP/REX/Shutterstock

Our research in Garissa contributes to our global work to research and explore peacebuilding responses to terrorism and migration.

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Header photo: Mural at Garissa University College. Photo: © Garissa University College



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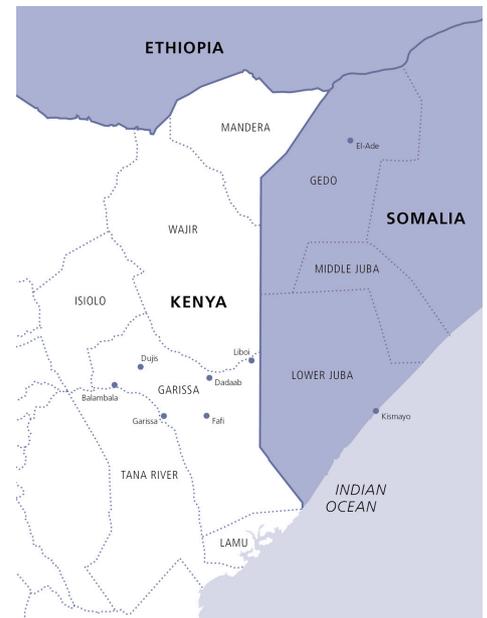
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We were unsure whether to bother noting down the claim of one local resident that ‘In 2010, Interpol voted Garissa as the safest town in east and central Africa’ [1] – but this turns out to have been the case. [2] Although the jihadist rebel movement al-Shabaab controlled the territory across the Somali border from Garissa from 2008, Kenya was not a target for attack. [3]

However, events were unfolding that would dramatically alter Garissa’s future. In 2010 Kenya put troops on the Somalia border, and there were sporadic attacks and retaliations between Shabaab and the Kenyan police and the military. Violence began to worsen in 2011: in February, a Somali sheikh was assassinated in Garissa, while another scholar was gunned down in Dadaab refugee complex. In March, Shabaab militants fired at a Kenyan General Service Unit (paramilitary police) water tank in the border town of Liboi. [4] In response, GSU officers entered Somalia and killed a dozen suspected Shabaab militants. Shabaab then mounted two revenge attacks on Kenyan police in Liboi in quick succession.



Later that year came the trigger for more intense conflict in Garissa. Two refugees and two Spanish doctors were kidnapped from the Dadaab refugee camp complex in Garissa county in Kenya’s North-Eastern Province on 13 October 2011. Three days later the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) entered Somalia to join the war against al-Shabaab. Somalia was at rock bottom, following two war-torn decades, and Kenya had already been running below-the-radar operations to combat Shabaab for some time. But its wholesale move into Somalia was also a catalyst for the violence to come in Garissa.

Shabaab moved fast to hit back in Garissa. Later that October, a vehicle in a convoy carrying members of a Kenyan paramilitary unit hit a mine planted by Shabaab seven kilometres from Garissa town. Four people were injured. The following week, on 5 November 2011, two grenades were hurled at the East African Pentecostal Church in Garissa town. Among the two victims was an eight year-old girl.

Within a month there were four more attacks. Two more grenades claimed three lives and injured a further 27 people at a Holiday Inn and a shop in Garissa. In Bulla-Garay, near Mandera town, a roadside bomb killed a Kenyan soldier and wounded four others on patrol. In Dadaab, a mine targeting a UN convoy killed a police officer and injured three others, and within two weeks a UNHCR official and a refugee leader were gunned down at the camp.

In January 2012, Shabaab stormed a remote police camp in Gerille, near the border, killing seven people and kidnapping three. Another police officer died in an attack on a police station in Hulugho, Garissa, three months later.

As these attacks on security personnel, businesses and churches mounted, additional security measures were put in place. A security backlash and an escalation of the situation were perhaps inevitable. In mid-November 2011 police reportedly killed eighteen suspected Shabaab members and made dozens of arrests in two separate raids in the Iftin area of Garissa town. Then in December, Kenyan police responded to two attacks on security officials in Dadaab by brutally beating scores of refugees and sexually assaulting several women in Dadaab. [5] In January 2012, witnesses accused the army and police of abusing Somali refugees in an Agence France-Presse report.

Although 2015 was Garissa's deadliest year in the last two decades, 2012 witnessed the highest overall number of incidents. By now there were nearly five incidents in the county each month, and a new threshold of bloodshed was reached with the 'twin church attacks' of 1 July 2012. At the Catholic Cathedral, the attackers were successfully shut out, but using weapons seized from a murdered police officer (as well as a bomb according to some accounts) Shabaab killed 17 people in the African Inland Church (AIC) in Garissa town, injuring 60 others. Police arrested 80 people in response, and more police were deployed to the county.

If the violence and the security response were increasingly threatening to turn Garissa into a front in the war that was playing out just across the county's eastern border in Somalia, events from late September 2012 took it to the very brink. Iftin in Garissa town was again the epicentre for regular eruptions of tit-for-tat violence over the following months.

Shabaab targeted the police with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), grenades and arson attacks, and the police responded with indiscriminate attacks on local ethnic Somalis. On 1 October, police officers reportedly beat dozens of villagers, including women and children, following a grenade attack. [6] One witness reported hearing an officer saying: "We shall make sure we have killed all of you terrorists before you kill us". [7] On 19 October, after an explosion in Garissa town, Human Rights Watch reported that police officers carried out a night-long operation in which they beat or shot at least 40 local residents and destroyed property. [8]

Then, on 19 November 2012, three KDF soldiers, all members of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), were gunned down while changing a tyre in Garissa town, and the attackers made off with the soldiers' guns. This triggered a rampage by the military, who shot several people including uniformed police, beat many others, and proceeded to burn the Suq Mugdi market in Garissa town. Women and children were among the casualties, and soldiers also shot at students inside a local school. [9]



'The moment indifference became impossible': Garissa market on 20 Nov 2012 after the KDF retaliated for al-Shabaab's murder of three soldiers'

At this point, a widening circle of local religious leaders, officials and others realised that the escalating violence was going to affect all communities in Garissa, and would devastate many lives if it went unchallenged. But even so, deadly attacks continued month by month – targeting police posts, soldiers, restaurants, hotels and aid workers. Alongside these, arrests, beatings and tighter security controls became commonplace. As Saleh Sheikh explained to the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2014:

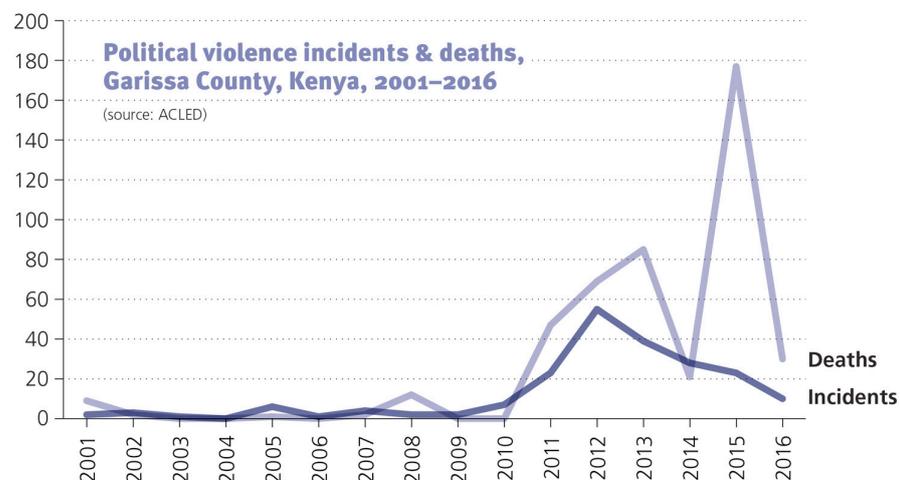
“Every time a terror incident happens in northern Kenya, the towns are deserted fearing violent retaliation and collective punishment from security forces. Security forces arrest everyone on the street without discrimination”. [10]

Elsewhere in Kenya, the Westgate mall attack of 2013 had shocked the nation. Attacks on non-Muslim workers and professionals in Mandera county in late 2014 threatened social service provision in Garissa: many health workers and teachers simply refused to work in Kenya’s north-east.

This was the prelude to the Garissa University attack on 2 April 2015, when gunmen stormed the Garissa University College, killing 148 students, soldiers and police officers, and injuring 79 others. This attack marked a turning point. By now, not only Kenya but the world was stunned by the scale and cruelty of violence in Garissa. The sense of shock helped create the political openness to attempt a different approach.



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There have been more attacks in Garissa since then, and violence continues over the contentious issues of water, land and pasture for grazing. But interviews and focus groups convey the widely shared view that Shabaab-related violence has now diminished and security has markedly improved. [11] The progress is tangible, but it is important to ask whether Garissa’s wounds will continue to heal thanks to effective first aid – or whether they warrant more long-term treatment.

This article asks what caused this escalating wave of violence, what it meant to its perpetrators and to local people, how it was dealt with, and whether the problem is solved. But to tell this story, we first need to know more about Garissa – its history, its underlying challenges and divisions, and its connections to neighbouring counties and the problems of Somalia.

Footnotes

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Header photo: A woman is stricken with grief after the Garissa University College attack. The shockwaves led local communities to come together in rejecting further violence. Photo: Stringer/AP/REX/Shutterstock



II. Marginalisation and division in Garissa

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Garissa is a borderland. It is hard to understand the peculiar risks it faces without understanding its history. It is both peripheral and significant within Kenya, a contested terrain in which intense rivalries play out between local people and across its boundaries.

Before independence from British rule, Garissa was not formally within Kenya: it was part of the Northern Frontier District (NFD). In 1925 the British carved the NFD out of Jubaland – the rest of which now lies across an international border in Somalia.

Historically, ethnic Somalis have been the dominant population in Garissa. In the run-up to Kenya’s independence, many believed they would be free to unite with a greater Somalia. When Kenya decided to fold the NFD into Kenya, an armed struggle ensued. ‘Shifta’ is a Somali term meaning bandit, and – partly to undermine the struggle – the secessionist conflict became known in Kenya as the Shifta War.

The creation of ‘protected villages’ by counter-insurgency units, and the killing of many Somalis along with their livestock, traumatised and changed Garissa. Even after the Shifta War formally ended in 1967, unrest persisted for decades. Some Somali leaders remained in prison till the late 1970s, and emergency rule in the then North Eastern Province remained in place until 1991. [12]

Somalia may be a different country now, but of Garissa county’s people 70 percent are still (Kenyan) Somali. The county also hosts hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees. A knock-on effect of the tense security environment and the high refugee population is that many people in Garissa find that “getting an ID is almost impossible”. [13] Security concerns led the government to close the Garissa regional passport office in September 2014. For most Kenyans, proof of your parents’ nationality is required, but local Somalis complain that they are required to produce proof of their grandparents’ identity too. As ISS have noted, this is a significant reason why Kenyan Muslims feel discriminated against. [14]

This issue matters a great deal. Even for those who have ID, checkpoints and random searches make moving freely a challenge. Without proof of identity, there is no chance of a job as a teacher, a policeman, a soldier or a civil servant, and it is difficult to access government services. As a group of young people explained to us, “There is a general marginalisation from the national government on issuing IDs, education and health programmes”. [15]

Indeed, Garissa is officially one of Kenya’s ‘most marginalised’ counties. [16] A paved road links Nairobi to Garissa town, but the road north to Wajir is untarmacked and patchy. On the unpaved, poorly signed roads trailing east, one could easily stumble unawares across the border into Somalia. Health services and schools are inadequate, especially in rural areas. And “youth unemployment is common in both refugees and the host community,” as a peace worker explained. [17]

Much of the economy is based around cattle, and there is little water to go around. This means that conflict often revolves around disputes over water and land for pasture.

Although Garissa remains poor, when outside investment and development has reached Garissa, there have been tensions. East Africa's largest proposed infrastructure project, the Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopian Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, passes through Garissa. As land along the route has become more valuable, it has become a bone of contention.

The arrival of new people with modern customs and dress has also jarred with local culture. "Hizi nguo mnavalia hapa mtavalia kaburini" was a phrase recalled by one local religious leader. It means: "the tight fitting [western] clothes you are wearing now, you will wear in your graves". [18]

While such hate is hard to comprehend, some of the anger felt by Kenyan Muslims is rooted in a very tangible history of marginalisation. A Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission appointed by former President Kibaki in 2007 noted that: it is harder for Muslims to get passports and IDs; most Muslim areas are deprived of public and private investment; Muslims are under-represented in senior public service roles; and the Anti-Terror Police Unit and other security actors often violate the law in their treatment of Muslims. [19]

The remedies proposed by this Commission were, however, largely ignored. Thus it is hardly surprising that (with some notable exceptions), "few, if any, Muslim community leaders easily align themselves with the government". Another challenge for Kenya's Muslims is that the 'Christian ethos' of Kenya's politics "has taken on a pentecostal and stridently evangelical tone which at best excludes Muslims and at worst is openly hostile to them". [22]

Aside from being marginalised, Kenya's Muslims are also divided amongst themselves. Wahhabism has grown increasingly influential in Kenya in recent decades. Garissa town had five Wahhabi madrassas by the early 1990s. [23] The Wahhabist critique of secular political order set its adherents at odds with an older generation of Kenyan Muslims who were closer to the political establishment. [24]

Garissa and its people may be marginalised in many ways, but ethnic Somalis in fact dominate its power structures. These days, top Kenyan Somali leaders are prominent figures in national politics. Garissa Member of Parliament Aden Duale is a majority leader in the National Assembly of Kenya for the ruling Jubilee coalition.

Garissa became a county under the new Kenyan constitution of 2010. In 2013, a county government was elected and funds were devolved – a move which was widely welcomed by communities in the county. The process has not gone smoothly though: the fight for power at county level can be intense; and relations between elected county governments and presidentially appointed county commissioners have sometimes been acrimonious, and have hindered the provision of security. There are also significant public concerns about how county funds are being spent – for example, a deal to lease unneeded ambulances at enormous cost in Garissa county led to a national outcry. [25]

The county's fraught politics are intertwined with the complex Somali clan structures that extend across into Somalia and upward into Ethiopia.

When the Somali state collapsed in 1991, its people naturally needed something to rely on for protection and survival. This strengthened the bonds of kinship that both tie Somali people together and tear them apart. Affiliations stretch up from immediate family ties to membership of great clan groups. Within the four big Somali clans, there are many levels of sub-clan – links that run all the way back down to the family level.

Within the Darood clan, the Ogaden are a significant sub-clan. On the Somalia side of the border, Ogaden influence pervades the transborder area from the coast and the economically important port of Kismayo right up through Jubaland. On the Kenya side, the Ogaden are dominant from the coast, throughout Garissa county, and north into Wajir.

Although the Ogaden dominate Garissa, as a religious leader explained: "This county has clan dominated conflicts in all areas". [26] Ogaden sub-clans in the County are intensely competitive with each other. This competition determines the distribution of resources and political affiliations, as well as who is in conflict with who.

Each sub-clan has its sphere of influence: Abudwaq dominate Garissa township and Fafi;

Abdalla have primacy in the southern part of the county; and the areas around Dadaab, Lagdeera and Balambala fall to the Auliyahan. Although there are also minority clans, these three Ogaden sub-clans control Garissa county, and their members compete to extend their influence. For example, between Garissa township and Lagdeera lies Dujis, an area that is therefore contested between the Auliyahan and the Abudwaq sub-clans.

Aside from tensions over territory, these three groups are in intense competition over the control of constituencies and political posts. The Abudwaq have more influence within the national government, but the Auliyahan are making up for this at the county level. The Abdalla (despite close ties to the Abudwaq) tend to ally with whichever group offers better terms.

There are also conflicts across county boundaries. With water and grazing land in short supply, pastoralists bring cattle across the Garissa-Tana River county boundary, involving local Somalis in fights against the Pokomo farmers to protect their resources. Another dispute relates to the claim that Wajir county is expanding into Garissa – a political dispute that is also bound up with clan dynamics. Somalis from Lagdera in Garissa have long been at loggerheads with Borana from Isiolo county over access to water and pasture.

Garissa is also a county where tensions play out between 'locals' and 'outsiders'. Such tensions include resentment about the impacts of new investments and customs on local traditions and property.

But the most important trans-border issue affecting Garissa's recent past, and potentially its future, is how it links to events in Somalia, and Kenya's role there. As we know, the violence in Garissa has been widely publicised – but violence inside Somalia has been hard to report and poorly understood in the outside world.



Suspected members of al-Shabaab under guard in Kismayo shortly after its recapture by Kenyan, Somali and Ras Kamboni forces, October 2012. Photo: UN Photo/Amnisom/Stuart Price

Although the Kenyan military officially entered Somalia in 2011, many local people talked to us about its earlier alleged engagement. A report based on Wikileaks diplomatic cables alleges that in 2009, as Shabaab grew in strength near the Kenyan border, Kenya began mobilising and training a force of 4,000 Somalis. Most were from Somalia, but many came from Garissa as well as nearby Isiolo, Marsabit, Mandera and Wajir counties. [27] They were deployed in a low-profile initiative to combat Shabaab within Somalia, reportedly at the request of the transitional Somali Government and the commander of the Ras Kamboni militia – former Islamist Commander and Islamic Courts Union Governor of Lower Juba region Ahmed Madobe. [28]

The initiative was opposed by local religious leaders and many Kenyan MPs – including the powerful Garissa town MP Aden Duale. [29] We even heard that one local politician retrieved young members of his clan from the Manyani paramilitary training camp. However, as one participant in a focus group discussion said: “The young men who were left are not accounted for to date”. [30] Many locals remain bitter about this.

Little is known about what happened to many of these young people. Some, lacking combat experience, are presumed to have died fighting, others escaped and returned or disappeared – perhaps fearing official recrimination as deserters or as suspected Shabaab infiltrators. Others may have defected to al-Shabaab. [31]

Nor is it clear why these young men were not incorporated into the Kenyan security forces at an official level. According to the Sunday Nation:

A retired director of military intelligence said: “These young men became quickly disappointed when the promises that were made to them did not come through. Instead of fighting, they quickly dissolved into their clans with their weapons”. [32]

What is clear is that Kenya felt threatened by and was already engaged in conflict with Shabaab before the official invasion in October 2011. Thus Kenya’s conflict with al-Shabaab had already drawn in hundreds of Garissa’s young people by the time attacks in Garissa began to mount. [33]

When Kenyan forces officially entered Somalia in 2011, a number of interests were at stake. Firstly, Kenya wanted security on its borders and to suppress a movement that was actively recruiting Kenyan followers. As Shabaab grew in Somalia, it expelled humanitarian agencies in the midst of a devastating famine. This drove hundreds of thousands of refugees into Garissa’s Dadaab complex, which had quadrupled in size in just six years to accommodate nearly half a million refugees. [34]



Somalis arriving at the Dadaab refugee camp in 2008. Photo: IRIN/Allan Gichigi

A second Kenyan objective was to assert military influence in a context where other regional powers were already getting involved. A third was capturing the port of Kismayo and cutting off Shabaab’s income from the port (estimated at \$25 million per year). [35] However, Kismayo lay 300km into Somalia from the Kenyan border. Kenya could not hope to reach it without local support so it worked closely with Madobe’s Ras Kamboni and the Ogaden clansmen of the area in a bloody campaign that eventually routed Shabaab from Kismayo in 2012. In fact, Kenyan forces in Somalia still work closely and share bases with Ras Kamboni to date.

More broadly, given the oil exploration in the disputed maritime waters between Kenya and Somalia, and the need to secure the region surrounding the LAPSSET corridor, the invasion was also economically motivated. [36] Of course, as it turned out, Kenyan intervention failed to prevent Shabaab from taxing goods that passed through Kismayo, [37] and the backlash dramatically destabilised northern and coastal counties like Garissa.



Kenyan African Union troops advance on Shabaab near Kismayo, 30 September 2012. Photo: UN Photo/Stuart Price

The inexplicable and cruel violence taking place in Garissa was visible to many Kenyans and international observers, but many Somalis on both sides of the border would also have been aware of less visible but nonetheless indiscriminate and brutal violence within Somalia. Here, Shabaab was responsible for considerable violence, but at the same time, Kenyan forces were implicated in abuses that needlessly exacerbated grievances and opposition. Within a month of the Kenyan intervention, Human Rights Watch criticised Kenyan forces for two attacks on civilians: bombing and machine-gunning civilians at an IDP camp near Jilib, killing five people and injuring 31 children; and killing four elderly Kenyan fishermen. [38] The following month Kenyan forces allegedly bombed and machine gunned civilians in the village of Hosingow, southern Somalia, killing eleven civilians including seven children. [39] These attacks were part of a pattern in which “Kenyan air and naval forces... indiscriminately bombed and shelled populated areas, killing and wounding civilians and livestock”. [40] From 2012, Kenyan forces became part of the African Union (AU) forces in Somalia, who were also implicated in abuses. For example, in 2014, according to the Human Rights Watch: “AU troops and allied militias were responsible for indiscriminate attacks, sexual violence, and arbitrary arrests and detention”. [41]

Kenya’s Somali intervention also affected clan dynamics in a way that reverberated into Garissa. Apart from wanting to control Jubaland, Kenya wanted a buffer zone in Gedo to the north – another area within Somalia bordering Kenya. But Gedo is dominated by the Marehan, a Somali sub-clan whose influence is also important in Mandera – a Kenyan county north of Garissa.

Gedo’s Marehan clansmen were opposed to Kenya establishing a buffer zone in their area of influence, and to the wider expansion of Ogaden influence that Kenya’s military alliance with the Ras Kamboni militia brought. These cleavages underpinned the bloody El-Ade attack [42] on Kenyan forces in Gedo, Somalia. Nonetheless, fighting Kenyan and Ras Kamboni forces in Somalia was hard for Shabaab. Garissa, by contrast, was a softer target that could enable those angered by these developments to gain publicity and sow divisions within Kenya.



A Kenyan AMISOM soldier in Kismayo, shortly after its capture from al-Shabaab, October 2012. Photo: UN Photo/Stuart Price

A crackdown against terror attacks in Kenya also created a climate of fear for Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees. According to one estimate, at least 21 Muslim clerics were killed by security agencies between April 2012 and July 2014, [43] with militants also accused of killing moderate preachers and Imams for countering radical ideology. [44] From 2012-14, police were reportedly demanding that ethnic Somalis pay ever higher bribes ever more frequently to avoid arrest. [45]

Then, in April 2014, the Kenyan government launched operation Usalama Watch ('Security Watch') – which was presented as a counter-terror measure to remove 'foreigners' from the country. Over 6,000 police and other security services rounded up people from Somali-dominated urban districts such as Eastleigh and South C districts in Nairobi. According to the government, over 4,000 people were arrested within the first week. [46] The operation ethnically targeted Somalis and victimised Muslims with random arrests, beatings, theft of property and widespread extortion. [47] In April and May 2014, 'Kenya deported 359 Somalis, including registered refugees, to Mogadishu'. [48]

Usalama Watch undoubtedly alienated Kenya's Somalis and Muslims, and was deeply felt in Garissa. Amid widespread condemnation by religious and political leaders, local MP Aden Duale threatened to withdraw his support from the ruling coalition in protest. Meanwhile, evidence of torture and extra-judicial killing of terror suspects continued to mount. [49]

The attacks on Garissa that began in 2011 took aim at a county that had suffered the harsh suppression of secessionist ambitions – a place with a history of marginalisation, that remained the site of intense political contestation between local sub-clans and which lay just across the border from the bloody war against al-Shabaab in Somalia. Both this war and domestic counter-terror measures created a context in which al-Shabaab could and would call on all Kenyan Muslims – including those in Garissa – to take arms against the Kenyan government. So how did local people interpret and react to these developments?

Footnotes

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17. Peace worker interview, Garissa town, January 2017

18. Religious leader interview, Garissa town, January 2017
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Header photo: A fighter from the Ras Kamboni Brigade, who fought with Kenyan forces to capture Kismayo, Somalia, from al-Shabaab in October 2012. Photo UN Photo/Stuart Price



III. “This is about all of us” – local perceptions of violence

Inside Kenyas war on terror: breaking the cycle of violence in Garissa

I. Attacks in Garissa: towards the precipice

II. Marginalisation and division in Garissa

III. “This is about all of us” – local perceptions of violence

IV. Rebuilding trust and unity

V. CVE job done – or a peacebuilding moment to grasp?

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Shabaab’s attacks in Garissa followed a pattern familiar from elsewhere in Kenya. Aimed at businesses, churches, hotels, security forces and the university, they targeted non-Somali outsiders, who were chosen for reasons local people could identify with. In some cases, such as the killing of a prison guard near the Safari hotel, it is not clear whether an attack was the work of Shabaab or just a settling of local scores.

The Somali community believe the targeting of churches was connected to issues between Muslims and Christians. According to a local Catholic priest, the way Christians dressed and held loud prayer services late at night may have been part of the reason why the two churches were attacked in July 2012. Municipal authorities had also allocated land for churches, and this had created resentment among Muslims (who have to buy the land for mosques to be built). Local women linked religious tensions to resentment over the killing of Muslim clerics and the unfair treatment of Muslims. [50] Against this backdrop, they explained that “fake thinking” had spread among some communities who believed that “if you kill as a terrorist you will be rewarded by God”. [51]

Likewise, hotels may have been targeted because they are owned by Kikuyus (members of Kenya’s dominant ethnic group, who are considered ‘outsiders’ in Garissa), or because the way they operate is considered ‘haram’ (forbidden by Islamic Law). For example, the sale of alcohol at Kwa Chege hotel in Garissa had annoyed some community members prior to the armed attack that left six people dead and a further ten injured in April 2013.

As in the case of Lamu, [52] Shabaab’s strategy and targeting set out to create polarisation by playing on local grievances. One aim appears to have been to provoke a backlash on the population that might reverse the integration of the Somali North East into Kenya. If Shabaab could aggravate the enmity between Muslims and the security forces, this might win it enough support to destabilise Kenya – an effective counter-punch to Kenya’s operations in Somalia.

At the same time, Shabaab’s statements about the violence in Kenya repeatedly frame it as a response to both the treatment of Kenyan Somalis and Kenya’s intervention and actions in Somalia. In April 2012, the first edition of Shabaab’s magazine Gaidi Mtaani (‘Terrorist on the street’), published in English and Swahili in Kenya, set out to counter the KDF Operation Linda Nchi (‘Protect the Country’) by dubbing its own efforts Linda Uislamu (‘Protect Islam’). [53]

On 18 May 2014, Kenyan planes began airstrikes on what it claimed were Shabaab militants in Jilib, Middle Juba. [54] Shabaab sources claimed that civilians had been killed. [55] Four days later, Shabaab ideologue Sheikh Fuaad Mohamed Khalaf ‘Shongole’ urged all Muslims in Kenya to “take up arms and fight the Kenyan Government” because it had “killed your children both inside Somalia and inside Kenya”. [56]

During the university attack, the gunmen demanded that the October 2011 invasion and occupation of parts of Somalia by the KDF must end. [57] One of the gunmen was described as a law graduate and son of a local government security official. A statement by Shabaab two days after the attack said the attackers wanted to “avenge the deaths of thousands of

Muslims killed at the hands of the Kenyan security forces.” It spoke of Kenyan security forces’ “unspeakable atrocities against the Muslims of East Africa,” and warned that they would “stop at nothing... until your government ceases its oppression and until all Muslim lands are liberated from Kenyan occupation”. [58]

As a member of the County Assembly said, “The attacks came about after the KDF went to Somalia”. [59] Indeed, a very wide cross section of those Saferworld spoke to in Garissa took it at face value that the attacks in Garissa were motivated by revenge for the presence and conduct of the KDF in Somalia – speaking, for example, of alleged atrocities perpetrated by soldiers, including rape and the killing of children. [60]

At the same time, Shabaab was making the effort to connect its struggle specifically to conditions in Garissa. According to one interviewee, Gamadhare (an alias of Shabaab commander Mohamed Mohamud Ali, who had roots in Garissa), criticised a local imam for siding with the Kenyan authorities against Shabaab by saying that “you support guys who have refused to give us IDs and build our roads”.

Some locals saw attacks on security actors as an expression of local resentment over being targeted by security forces. A local peace worker said: “Security agencies came in and arrested any innocent people and suspects and never returned them back,” [61] so many people were initially indifferent when the police were targeted. Others said: “Some join to revenge against government torture on terror suspects”. [62] Other locals explained that corruption was the flipside of this torture problem: “Returnees or terror suspects have to offer bribes if they are arrested – or they can be tortured”. [63]

Others still linked the attacks not only to the disappearance of arrested youth and extra-judicial killing, [64] but also to the fate of youth recruited to fight Shabaab in Somalia, as this focus group member pointed out: [65]

“People are bitter – their sons were taken to go and fight in Somalia and never returned back – so an attack on Kenyan soil makes a good feeling”. [66]

Such findings echo those of the Institute for Security Studies, who found in interviews with Shabaab recruits in Kenya that roughly two-thirds saw themselves as motivated by security force abuses, including “collective punishment” and “extra-judicial killings of Muslims”. [67]

Both Shabaab and Kenyan forces played a role in the escalation of violence before the Kenyan invasion in October 2011, and the violence increased on both sides after that point. At the same time, Shabaab’s vision of creating a caliphate in Muslim-dominated areas of East Africa contravenes the territorial integrity of many countries in the region including Kenya. So it seems likely that Kenya would have faced Shabaab attacks at some point even if the KDF had not entered Somalia.

Either way, it is obvious that Shabaab’s strategy for fighting back and sowing division in Kenya partly succeeded. Even in 2011, it was estimated that Shabaab counted between 200 and 500 Kenyans within its ranks. [68] Likewise, its operations in Garissa drew on a considerable amount of local involvement and support. According to Anderson and McKnight, “a Kenya National Intelligence Service report, leaked in October 2013, acknowledged that al-Shabaab controlled some two-thirds of Garissa county”. [69] Four of five people arrested for involvement two days after the university attack were Kenyan Somalis. [70] One was a security guard at the university. Although one of the attackers was Tanzanian, many locals affirm that they must have been hosted by the local community. Indeed, a local Christian leader recalled being told, “if you hear an attack has happened in this town, know that the local Somali community leaders are aware. The attackers are actually housed by the local community”. [71]

At the same time, it isn’t clear how widespread local support really was. Another aspect of the local reaction, at least to early attacks in Garissa, was indifference: “There was initial sympathy for the violent attacks as they targeted ‘haram’ lodges and pubs”. [72] At first, many local Somalis didn’t see the attacks as their problem: the churches and hotels were not places of concern to them, and they resented those who frequented them, considering them as outsiders who didn’t follow local customs.

However, indifference to these attacks was far from the whole story. Some of Garissa’s

leaders and communities reacted against the violence from the beginning, with compassion for the victims and solidarity across identity divides. For example, local sheikhs played a role in protecting local churches. [73] Because of this, the government became more inclined to listen to them later on. “Muslim communities and their leaders engaged the local community of other faiths,” as a peace worker explained. Many people we spoke to told us about both “community dialogues” and “joint prayers between Muslims and Christians”. [76]

The effectiveness of terror attacks hinges on their ability to cut through indifference. As the attacks mounted, all local people felt the backlash. In a wider context of Kenya’s increasingly forceful counter-terror operations, security was beefed up in Garissa. Arrests, beatings and torture of local people became a routine occurrence, and resentment began to grow. So although “initially the attacks were targeted to the Christians” according to a senior security agent, “the effects of the attacks were severe on the local communities”. [77] Another way in which the violence was adding to local divisions was that “the Muslim community accused the Christians of not talking against too much security in Garissa and discriminatory arrest of local youths”. [78]



A Kenyan police commander discusses policing practices with a young man in Lamu County – another hotspot in Kenya’s war with al-Shabaab. Photo: Margot Kiser

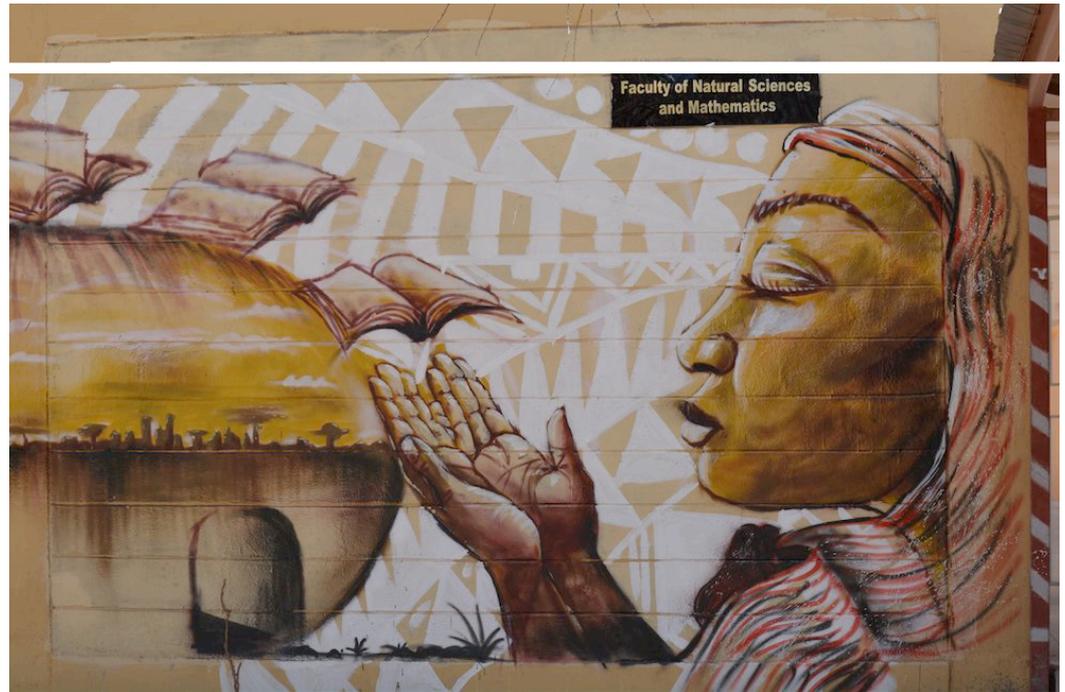
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People identified November 2012 as the first turning point. Following the killing of three of its men, the army reacted by burning the market in Garissa town and shooting local residents. This was a moment when indifference became untenable.

People identified November 2012 as the first turning point. Following the killing of three of its men, the army reacted by burning the market in Garissa town and shooting local residents. This was a moment when indifference became untenable. We were told how “anyone who looked like a Somali or a Muslim” was taken into custody, young or old. At this point, local religious leaders felt impelled to impress upon their communities that “this is about all of us”. Political leaders from the local to the national level came together to discuss the problem. There was a lot of inter-faith dialogue. What was unusual, at this point, was the strength of voices calling on communities to reject the escalating logic of tit-for-tat violence – rather than succumb to it.

Although there were already ongoing efforts to promote unity and reject violence, the violence continued to mount until the shocking Garissa University college attack of 2015.

When local people were asked for the full story of the university attack, they painted a familiar scene. The University was again a faultline in local tensions. The recent creation of the university had displaced Garissa Technical Training College to a new site. This had generated conflict over the now valuable surrounding land, leading to a large amount of fighting and killing in the area. [79] Because the university lies close to the route of the LAPSSET transport corridor, some believe the university attack was in part an attempt to drive people off the increasingly valuable land. Another issue was the culture clash: the university's students were from all over Kenya. They dressed and behaved differently to locals. Many local girls were unhappy that young cosmopolitan female students were luring away local Muslim boys.



Mural at Garissa University College. Photo: © Garissa University College

So, many local people had wanted to close both the university college and the technical college. As in Lamu, Shabaab attacked to avenge Kenyan actions in Somalia, but did so in a way that tapped into local divisions. Gamadhare, the Shabaab commander who ordered the attacks, was formerly the principal of the Madrasa Najah School in Garissa, [80] and was apparently motivated by localised grievances. In addition, some of the attackers were of local origin. Likewise, many local people asserted that even if the attackers were not local, local people must have known about this attack in advance and sheltered the perpetrators. Yet this context of localised grievance and a degree of local support stood in stark contrast to the predominant reaction to the University college attack.

Footnotes

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Header photo: A Kenyan soldier examines the Shabaab flag painted on Kismaayo airport, shortly after the town's recapture, October 2012. Photo: AU-Un inst. / Stuart Price / AMISOM Public Information



IV. Rebuilding trust and unity

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It has been observed in other contexts that terror tactics tend to provoke public revulsion that can be self-defeating as long as the response is not disproportionately brutal and indiscriminate. [81] This self-defeating tendency was certainly present in Garissa. People described how the university attack was a wake-up call for everybody. When local Muslims saw the innocent victims of the attack they came together to reject al-Shabaab. As one local woman put it: “it pained us to see that children had been killed. This is not in Islam teachings”.

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In the immediate aftermath, there was a wave of shared grief and horror that ran across communities. Many Muslims donated blood and sheltered victims. Under the leadership of local sheikhs, they also organised dialogue forums that enabled them to come together as a community.

In this case therefore, Shabaab’s strategy backfired. Local Muslims hadn’t seen the attacks on local hotels, churches, police and the military as their problem. But when the university attack occurred, it affirmed the realisation that many had made when the KDF burnt Garissa town’s market. Local leaders and sheikhs liaised with the government and campaigned throughout the county calling for an end to the violence. They told communities that “killing innocent people is not allowed by the Koran”, and on the BBC and local stations they condemned the killings.

When a local sheikh was denounced by Shabaab commander Gamadhere for siding with the Kenyan authorities, instead of being intimidated, he lashed back: “Why don’t you develop where you are in Somalia?” The story of what happened next illustrates well the role of public trust and unity in protecting Garissa – as well as the policing challenges to be overcome.

Shabaab soon began to threaten the sheikh’s life. He was told by phone to expect visitors and to open the door when they came – but when he asked for police help, he was told they had no transport to come to his aid. It was the local chief who mobilised a crowd of people to chase the assassins away. When the police arrived the next morning, an angry crowd chased them away, saying: “Did you come to pick up a corpse?”



Former Garissa madrassa teacher turned Shabaab commander Mohamed Mohamud 'Gamadhare' in Mogadishu, 2011. Photo: Reuters

The Sheikh's story highlights an aspect of Garissa's resilience: solidarity around rejection of violence. At the same time, it reveals the holes in local security provision that need to be fixed. The university college attack exposed these holes for the world to see. Some locals recall posters warning of a possible attack [83], and the Technical College in Garissa was even closed as a precaution on the day the university was attacked. Indeed, a high-profile warning had been made in advance about an attack on a Kenyan university, [84] but despite this only two security guards were on duty. [85] In the weeks after the attack, Kenya's Minister of Interior admitted: "There was intelligence that this place was going to be attacked". [86] In an indication of how fraught relations between national and county authorities were undermining security, he went on to point the finger at the then Garissa County Commissioner, who he said "received this information and did not act on it". [87]

It is widely believed among locals that "corruption made the security agencies allow elements of al-Shabaab into Garissa town", and that police were given money not to prevent the university attack. [88] Although Saferworld couldn't confirm this, the security force response to the unfolding atrocity was undeniably slow and shambolic. [89] The killings dragged on for 15 hours, and the Daily Nation described in damning terms how officers of the Recce Company of the General Service Unit had taken 11 hours to reach the scene from Nairobi after the alarm was first sounded. [90] With the world watching, these failures could not be concealed or brushed aside.

Popular revulsion at the attacks and recognition of the shortcomings of the security response triggered a remarkable and successful change in approach. Security provision was restructured. Within a month of the university attack, [91] acting on the recommendation of north-eastern leaders, [92] the president appointed a new regional coordinator for the north-east region, with authority over the county commissioners, county security and intelligence committees, local chiefs and responsibility for security and peace initiatives in the region.

As an Ogaden Somali who had had a role in ending the 'Shifta' War, Mohamud Saleh commanded respect not only on paper but because of who he was and his track record. As a member of the County Assembly put it: "The coming of the new regional coordination was a serious relief to the terror attacks". [93]

Many people spoke about his positive role in healing relations between the government, security agencies and communities in a non-partisan way. According to a county government official:

"Saleh opened the communication between the community and security. He has given out his cell phone number to the public. If any suspect is seen in the community, then he is called

directly. That's how he has been able to pre-empt many of the attacks in Garissa town and its environs. [94]

Others credited him with unblocking obstacles in command structures and restoring relations between national and county government structures. [95]

One factor was that he transcended clan divisions and cut through institutional corruption - he would be equally tough about poor performance regardless of whom he dealt with. "Before it was a case of bribery and taking the money from suspects, but after the regional coordinator was appointed, suspects were arrested". [96]

Another factor was the signal sent by his clampdown on indiscriminate arrests of young people. If Saleh's capital was trust, he invested it in community-driven security approaches. Kenya has a community policing system called 'Nyumba Kumi' - meaning 'ten households' - under which clusters of households are supposed to report suspicious behaviour. In many parts of Kenya, the public has good reason not to trust the Nyumba Kumi model. However, in Garissa, trust in Saleh enabled people to trust in Nyumba Kumi.

Rather than work primarily through highly militarised police units or the army, Saleh's model was to work through the Administration Police (AP), who were closer to communities. He introduced Nyumba Kumi structures in local communities for informing on suspicious developments. At the same time, he set up a direct line for the public to reach his office, to ensure nothing important got stuck at the wrong level because of corruption or inefficiency. When action was needed he could call upon either a Quick Response Unit in the AP or a Rapid Response Unit in the Kenya Police. With this setup, he could obtain quick, reliable information, then act on reports and challenge inaction at lower levels.

Under the new system, we were told, if an attack occurred, rather than rushing there and rounding up, beating and torturing people, authorities call a barasa (public forum) to identify underlying issues.

The new system includes better training and surveillance equipment, [97] and is clearly not 'soft' in its pursuit of would-be attackers: it includes the profiling of mosques and the investigation of young males who have disappeared. It appears that Somalis and Muslims in general are still subject to more checks, and security checks on other groups are not suitably thorough. The violence has left wounds that will never heal: "We don't know where our sons went", cried one tearful group of women.

Nonetheless, the new system's primary success has been replacing a forceful approach with one that is based on trust and accountability that builds relationships with local communities to gain intelligence. [98] With this system in place, the police told us that "close collaboration of the community and security agencies has greatly improved." [99] Importantly, we also heard this from nearly everyone we spoke to, including local youth.

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the new system's primary success has been replacing a forceful approach with one that is based on trust and accountability that builds relationships with local communities to gain intelligence.[...] The apparent success of the changed approach to security provision in Garissa is important because it illustrates what is possible when there is a break from the 'hard security' model for reacting to terror attacks.

Attacks in Garissa have indeed dropped dramatically, even though some still occur. Shabaab cells have been shut down, caches of guns and grenades have been discovered, [100] and a planned attack on a KDF base was foiled. Progress on security has a ripple effect and as one NGO worker said: "with confidence in security growing, there are less KDF roadblocks and presence". [101]

Although there are other ways of interpreting the new developments in Garissa - for example, the killing of Mohamed Mohamud Ali ('Gamadhare') in mid-2016 [102] appears also to have diminished Shabaab momentum in Garissa - almost all of those we spoke to attributed improved security in Garissa to Nyumba Kumi and the approach taken under

Saleh. This was echoed in a young people's focus group discussion:

"Nyumba kumi initiative is very effective in Garissa and has drastically reduced criminal and violent attacks, and improved relations between communities and security agencies". [103]

The apparent success of the changed approach to security provision in Garissa is important because it illustrates what is possible when there is a break from the 'hard security' model for reacting to terror attacks. In many places, governments are supporting 'Countering Violent Extremism' (CVE) initiatives to dissuade people from siding with violent groups, but these efforts often sit alongside –and are rendered ineffective by – implacably repressive methods for attacking the problem. No one should idealise the Garissa story or claim the problem is lastingly solved, but the story shows what is possible when authorities make a meaningful attempt not to fight dirty, and to build momentum instead by regaining public trust.

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Header photo: Mural at Garissa University College. Photo: © Garissa University College



V. CVE job done – or a peacebuilding moment to grasp?

Inside Kenyas war on terror: breaking the cycle of violence in Garissa

I. Attacks in Garissa: towards the precipice

II. Marginalisation and division in Garissa

III. “This is about all of us” – local perceptions of violence

IV. Rebuilding trust and unity

V. CVE job done – or a peacebuilding moment to grasp?

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Garissa has made undeniable progress. But as one local peace worker explained “Countering violent extremism is short term but peacebuilding is needed for the long term”. [104] This is by no means ‘CVE job done’. All the structural challenges faced by Garissa before the attacks still remain challenges now. If the window of opportunity for addressing them and building a more durable peace is not quickly grasped, attacks could return and the local solidarity in rejecting Shabaab’s violence could evaporate.

The first challenge is that Shabaab continues to attempt to dislodge Somalia’s internationally backed government, and establish Islamist rule over Somali territory. It retains the capacity to launch bloody attacks in many areas of Somalia. Kenya thus remains embroiled in a Somali conflict that is far from over, and as ongoing attacks in Garissa show, [105] Kenya will remain a battleground in that conflict until it is resolved.

The KDF thus remains in Kismayo, and the clan divisions connected to this remain. In 2017, attacks continued in Kenya’s north-east. Not only has there been a steady trickle of Shabaab attacks in Garissa, [106] but notably also in Mandera County, [107] to the north. This may be partly because local Kenyan Somalis of the Marehan clan remain angry that the Kenyan-Ogaden alliance within Somalia has diminished Marehan influence.

Mandera’s challenges are highly relevant to Garissa’s future. Violent conflict between Somali sub-clans broke out there in 2014 when a deadlock between Garre and Degodia sub-clans over constituency and county boundaries led to scores of deaths and the displacement of over 18,000 households. In subsequent months, those who had lost out to their rivals allegedly began colluding with Shabaab. Later in 2014, attacks on a bus and a quarry followed, killing 64 up-country Christians and professionals. [108] Local teachers and health workers deserted the county in the aftermath. As we have seen, Garissa may have built solidarity against al-Shabaab, but this could prove brittle. [109]

In 2017, Garissa’s dominant and minority sub-clans remain locked in intense rivalries – at loggerheads over land, water, and seats in national and county government. [110] They need to find a political accommodation in which each gets a satisfactory share of power in the 2017 elections, and they need to manage their divisions on other issues. Local politicians have used violence as a tool in previous elections. Some have been recorded in recent months exploiting divisions and threatening rival groups to appeal to their supporters. [111] One of the campaigning messages has been to denounce Kenya’s military involvement in Somalia as self-seeking. [112]

As in Mandera, local leaders and groups who lose out could turn to Shabaab, whose strategy of fomenting division and polarisation could regain ground. As is well-known, “al-Shabaab exploits clan divisions to gain recruits ... by taking the part of lesser sub-clans”. [113]

The same arguments apply when it comes to inter-religious distrust. There has been progress on this – but this does not mean divisions can’t return. Interviewees suggested that better knowledge about the tenets of Islam could make it harder for Shabaab to convince disaffected people to turn to violent methods.

More broadly, many Somalis and Muslims still feel like second-class citizens in Kenya. To make progress on the integration of Somalis and Muslims, the long term marginalisation of Garissa has to be rapidly addressed – including tackling such issues as unemployment, weak infrastructure, and poor service provision. Yet further attacks on health and education staff could again put Garissa’s weak social service provision into reverse gear, illustrating the urgency of building peace on the back of recent security improvements. If local people are right that big financial rewards are offered to potential attackers, [114] then decent livelihoods are also part of the solution to the problem.

When it comes to security, despite the improvements, still there are concerns. For one thing, the police presence in Garissa remains very thin: in a sparsely populated area, all posts with less than 40 officers have been closed. [115]

More importantly, in spite of Saleh’s achievements, the allegation by Mandera’s deputy governor that security agencies were involved in the deaths of five Mandera county residents whose bodies were discovered in July 2017 starkly illustrates the security and trust deficits that remain in Kenya’s North East. [116]

Furthermore, as an NGO worker put it: “The police have upped their game, but some corruption still exists”. [117] Local young women told us that they still fear and distrust the police. Young people we interviewed told us how they had been harassed by police. Shakedowns remain common during checks on ID. We heard from one respondent how police demanded payment for return of a confiscated passport, and from another how despite showing his school ID he had been shaken down for 500 Kenyan Shillings on the way back from Dadaab to Garissa town for not producing his birth certificate. [118]

In another case we heard about the random detention of a Muslim clergyman and local chief who had been actively campaigning against al-Shabaab but who were nonetheless automatically suspected of involvement with the group, based purely on their identity. Despite the production of witnesses to vouch for their innocence, the chief was only released after payment of a bribe. This underlines the overall sense (that was also found in Lamu) that ordinary people, especially Muslims, remain under suspicion and not free to go about their business.

This is closely connected to how Garissa is affected by Kenya’s issues with Somali refugees and the huge Dadaab refugee complex. Authorities are in the process of vetting refugees in Garissa county, and asserting the distinction between them and Kenyan Somalis. While Somalia remains deeply fragile, huge numbers of refugees will remain inside Kenya, and their relation with authorities may well remain deeply troubled. If so, this can add to the climate of fear and suspicion for both refugees and Kenyan Somalis, and feed new cycles of violence and revenge.

And although a window opened up recently during voter registration for local people to obtain IDs, many locals still cannot establish their legitimate identity as Kenyan citizens. This makes it harder to rent property, access services or get a job, and may make joining a violent movement more tempting to some.

Corruption in security institutions also creates other risks. As one interviewee told us: “Corruption has allowed easy entry of al-Shabaab operatives and their weapons through bribery at security roadblocks”. [119] Such corruption will remain entrenched given that it is reinforced by Garissa’s position in the borderlands of a thriving war economy: it is common knowledge among locals that Garissa remains ‘a smuggling town of black market goods’, [120] and as in Kismayo, trafficking means revenue for Shabaab. [121]

While such challenges persist, progress on security and peacebuilding in Garissa will remain tentative and fragile. For those ready to recognise the need to build peace so that Garissa’s problems will not return, the contours of a strategy to build a durable peace in Garissa should be relatively clear.

Firstly, in Somalia, AMISOM’s efforts to create secure conditions for the new federal states need to provide better security for the Somali people. Accountability for abuses is a critical priority to stop the creation of fresh grievances that can easily spill into Kenya. Ultimately, the military effort needs to be complemented and eventually replaced by a political strategy to achieve reconciliation among any groups willing to renounce violence and move forward. And

building the confidence of Somali people means investing in services, inclusive governance structures, and cross-clan, bottom-up dialogue and reconciliation processes. Success in fostering a just peace in Somalia along these lines is the key to freeing Kenya and Garissa from their terror problems.

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Secondly, in Garissa, the government should safeguard the progress of recent times by institutionalising the changes introduced by a respected local security leader. Tackling corruption and inefficiency while ending arbitrary arrests and beatings and creating channels of communication and accountability with communities has achieved clear results.

Third, now is the time to move rapidly on infrastructure, job creation, health and education services, to demonstrate to all residents of Garissa – both Somalis and others, Muslims and non-Muslims – that they have the same rights and life chances as other Kenyans.

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And lastly, but far from least, structures to ensure dialogue and constructive mediation of disputes and power struggles between Somali clans and sub-clans, and with other identity groups within Garissa and across county borders, need to be in place and functioning. [122] These need not be formal or official structures if informal systems are adequate to the task – the crucial thing is that they work so that local conflicts do not spill into the kinds of violence seen recently in Mandera to the north.

Such a strategy for Garissa will be much easier to put in place if Kenya's international friends understand the importance of peacebuilding – a strategy to address the grievances and relationships that could lead to further conflict – in Garissa. This means having the vision to look beyond immediate reinforcement of Kenyan military and security capacities in Somalia and Kenya – to which the EU and US have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars in the past decade. [123] It also means building on the new approach taken in Garissa, and making continuous efforts to challenge counter-productive tactics.

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A narrow focus on undermining the ideology of Shabaab and targeting its potential recruits will not get the job done. The real priority is to get behind new governance and security approaches to Kenya's marginalised communities that can deliver a better deal for them. This is the only way to settle the long-standing identity-based cleavages that pose real risks to Kenya's future stability.

International actors also need to recognise that the task is much broader than either stopping terror through lawful and proportionate military and law enforcement efforts or focusing on the 'push and pull factors' that may lead individuals to join Shabaab or aligned movements (the standard preoccupation of CVE strategies and programmes). The vital task is to encourage and support a more direct focus on the drivers of conflict that could lead to further rounds of violence in Garissa. A narrow focus on undermining the ideology of Shabaab and targeting its potential recruits will not get the job done. The real priority is to get behind new governance and security approaches to Kenya's marginalised communities

that can deliver a better deal for them. This is the only way to settle the long-standing identity-based cleavages that pose real risks to Kenya's future stability.

Footnotes

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Header photo: Young men play football on the beach in Kismayo, 2016. Photo: Saferworld/Cultural Video Production