Bombings in Uganda raise further concern for security and counterterrorist measures in neighbouring Kenya

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Posted by AD Brown



Al-Shabaab child soldier © raxanreeb.com

Sunday, 11 July, as people watched the World Cup finals, twin blasts shook the Ugandan capital city Kampala, killing 74 people. This recent attack on civilians has been blamed on Al-Shabaab, a radical Islamist group increasingly at the center of a worsening security situation playing out in the East and Horn of Africa region.

The Al-Shabaab "insurgency" has been predominantly linked with nearby Somalia, where they have weakened the authority of the Mogadishu-based Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Al-Shabaab's open identification with Al-Qaeda has been particularly worrying to Kenya, neighbouring countries and American efforts in the fight against terrorism. As recently as January 2010, Al-Shabaab threatened to attack Kenya and Western interests in the region. Recent bombings in Uganda will no doubt only raise further concerns.

The Obama Administration continues, like its predecessor, to provide diplomatic and military support to the Somali TFG, even though this has not proved effective in stabilizing Somalia. In fact, the United States has stepped up its counterterrorism operations in Somalia, authorizing its Special Forces to carry out pre-emptive strikes on Al-Shabaab targets. Besides military operations, the United States is pursuing "soft" measures which include funding youth employment programs at the Kenyan coast where it claims youth are most vulnerable to recruitment into terrorism. The US government looks to Kenya for cooperation in its counter-terrorism operations but this poses dilemmas for Kenya.

Dilemmas in US-Kenya counterterrorism cooperation

The Kenyan government is particularly distressed about what it claims is Al-Shabaab's growing

role in illegal arms proliferation in the region. Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki recently requested visiting US Vice

President Joe Biden to urge his government to push for the transformation of the African Union Mission in Somalia

(AMISOM) into a fully-fledged United Nations (UN)-administered force. While this is unlikely, the United States still expects Kenya's continued cooperation in its counterterrorism initiatives in Somalia.

This situation is complicated even more by the steady stream of diplomatic rhetoric coming from the Obama Administration's over what it perceives as the uneven pace of democratic reforms in Kenya. In response, some senior members of the Kenyan government have taken to openly criticizing the Obama Administration and its Kenya policy for what they perceive as an ambiguous policy. In assessing this dilemma, one analyst argues that "[the US] would be in a better position to demand counterterrorism cooperation [from Kenya] if it dropped the aggressive posture on democratic reforms, and would be in a better position to demand democratic reforms if it dropped the demand that Kenya go along with our counterterrorism programs."

The implications of US-Kenya counterterrorism cooperation for human rights and civil society



Map of Kenya and neighbouring states. Click to enlarge.

With the recent bombings in Uganda, it remains to be seen how US and Kenyan counterterrorist forces will respond within Kenya. However, on previous occasions the history of US-Kenya counterterrorism cooperation has been marred by serious human rights violations committed by both countries. In the absence of a public renunciation of excessive counterterrorism tactics, such as extraordinary renditions and the unfair profiling of entire communities, it is likely that this history will be replayed in US-Kenya counterterrorism cooperation in the foreseeable future.

For some time now however, Kenya's dreaded Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) has shown more respect for rights of terrorism suspects. In the past year, there have been fewer reports of the brutalization of terrorism suspects or the illegal profiling of Muslims and Somalis. Despite that, Kenyan human rights groups appear to have abandoned their campaign to pressurize the Kenyan government to prioritize counterterrorism policing oversight mechanisms in the ongoing police reforms process. Furthermore, it has been predominantly Muslim groups, and in particular the Muslim Human Rights Forum, and to a lesser extent the Kenyan Human Rights Commission that have monitored the renditions and kept this issue in the political spotlight. However most civil society organizations in Kenya have been silent on the effects of counter-terrorism operations on Muslim communities and organizations, seeing terrorism and counter-terrorism as a matter for Muslim organizations. This not only reinforces the stigmatization of Muslim communities as somehow inevitably associated with terrorism by default of their religion, but also reflects a narrow view of civil society that excludes particular groups and communities.

The voice of human rights groups and most civil society organisations continues to be inaudible in the debate on regional security. In fact, human rights groups-government dialogue on security issues in Kenya continues to be a polarizing affair as the former tends to focus on security only when it reacts to reports of human rights violations. On its part, the government tends to view the idea of security as falling exclusively in its domain. Perhaps human rights groups and civil society organisations can take a more proactive stance in regional peace and security discourses by building more expertise in the fields. They need also to consider balancing the use of their moral power with a more practical understanding of the idea of *realpolitik* in international relations.

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