

# Defence and Security

Thursday, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021

## Disrupting malignant terror cells in northern Kenya's gendered context

*Terror cells in northern Kenya remain malignant and mutative despite intensified counter-violent extremism efforts by Kenya security agencies. Follow our Senior Research Fellow for Defence and Security Pillar, Dr. John Mwangi, as he briefs us on the emerging gendered context of the cells in relation to the ever changing face of terrorism in Kenya.*

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### Abstract

This paper engages with several practical options to counter malignant terrorist cells in northern Kenya. It particularly focuses on the unpredictability and the decentralization of terrorist networks that are increasingly gendered. Key issues include the emerging combatant roles of female operatives and the obstinacy of the northern Kenya cell. Recommendations include community cooperation, surveillance and capacity building for security agencies.



Photo credit: BBC

## Background

There is justification for increased surveillance on terrorist malignant cells in northern Kenya. This argument is influenced in part by the March 2021 arrest of a suspected Kenyan woman, Galmo Mohamed Galgallo, aged 23 years, at Sololo-Makutano roadblock with hand grenades, tear gas and ammunition hidden in her handbag.

Galgallo was travelling from Moyale to Marsabit, northern Kenya, in a public service vehicle. The case is currently under investigation. The incident points to the need for increased surveillance as a way to map out future trends and enhance counter-terrorism measures.

While Galgallo's arrest could have been a routine operation by security agencies, it points to the unpredictability of terrorism operations.

The case triggers several scenarios relevant to counter-terrorism. First is the decentralization of terror networks in Kenya; second is the case of lone wolf terrorism; third is the invisibility of female operatives in their supportive roles of violent extremism and; fourth, the strategic role of women as possible combatants. These scenarios inform the ongoing discussion on the gendered context of the northern Kenya terror cell.

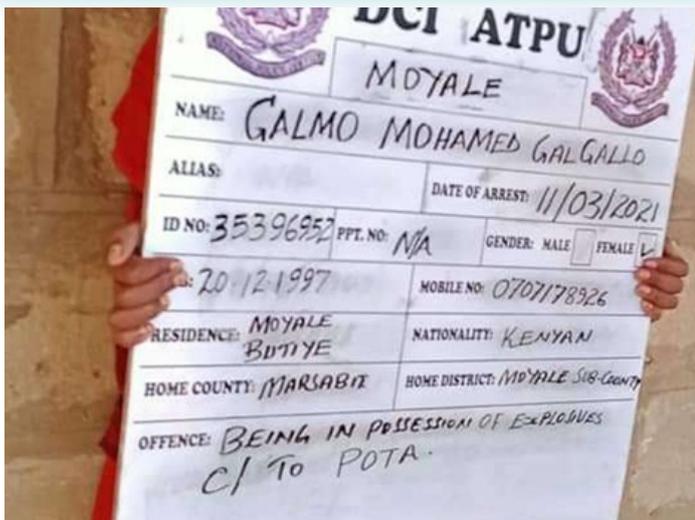


Photo Credit: Daily Advent



Photo Credit: News Moto

## Key Issues

The following issues remain key in relation to discussions surrounding the gendered dynamics of terrorism in northern Kenya.

### Role reversal for women terror operatives as possible combatants

The role of women as possible combatants in Kenya's terrorism theater is emerging as lucrative to terrorist networks. Previously, their roles in violent extremism in Kenya have been confined to emotional support such as 'jihadi brides' and intelligence gathering.

Nevertheless, the Galgallo incident points to the possibility of women being recruited for active combatant roles thus challenging the patriarchal lens of terrorism in Kenya. The likely reason for this shift is that women are generally perceived to be peaceful and harmless thus less likely to attract extensive scrutiny from security agencies. Moreover, they are generally subjected to less intensive security measures in comparison to men.

The recovery of grenades and explosives from Galgallo portends the possibility of women operatives taking up key combat duties such as suicide bombings, which have been predominantly male oriented in Kenya.



Photo Credit: The Nairobi Star

### The dying narrative on tight terrorist camouflage

The choice of a public service vehicle and an ordinary handbag as mobility tools to ferry the explosives and other ammunition is a disruption of the concealment theory on terrorist operations.

It is an indication of the changing face of the conception that terrorists adopt tight camouflage and highly safeguard their options before they are executed. It further reflects the impact of COVID 19 measures, especially curfews, on terrorist mobility in Kenya.

The operatives are taking advantage of the heavy human traffic before the curfew starts to move their arsenals closer to their targets with little regard to security measures. The ease with which female operatives can function without camouflage makes them suitable choice for attack planning and execution.

### The malignant northern Kenya terror cell

There are indications that the northern Kenya terror cell remains alive despite several counter-terror efforts. The cell's network could be linked to the February 21 incident in which the Police recovered two hand grenades, one AK-47 rifle and 128 rounds of ammunition in Isiolo county and the February 2018 in Merti, Isiolo, in which a cache of arms including 36 grenades and five automatic rifles were recovered.

It reawakens the thesis of the ungovernable northern Kenya and the inability of the state to fully exercise effective control over its territory, evidenced by the free flow of arms, ammunitions and explosives across the country.

This in addition speaks to the wider challenge of border porosity that makes it possible for terror-linked individuals and materials such as explosives to be trafficked across the borders. The involvement of female operatives in possible combat roles advances an evolving dimension that further complicates the available options for security agencies in dealing with the malignancy.



Photo Credit: The Times of Israel

### Decentralization of terror networks

Discourses on the widespread nature of terrorist planning and modus operandi of terrorist cells abound. The cells are largely decentralized and are in many instances formed with singular interventions. It is possible that Galgallo was part of an attack network and took on a planning role possibly en-route to connect with an execution cell.

Her involvement in this incident illustrates the continued existence of a large pool of radicalized individuals across the country, of either gender, from which the terror cells recruit and deploy at will. Disrupting such networks can be problematic given that some cells are formed for specific attacks.

### Conclusion

The growing active roles of women in existing terror cells across Kenya is a manifestation of the ever changing face of terrorism in Kenya. This has an implication on threat projection and counter-terrorism interventions.

## Recommendations

### 1. Community cooperation

Owing to the unpredictable and changing nature of terrorism, the co-delivery of security would need the support of the community. This should involve active cooperation with community actors to detect and analyze the threats posed by violent extremism. Platforms such as *Nyumba Kumi* and community policing are relevant to drive this agenda. These could in turn support the pre-emption of the unpredictable lone wolf terrorism. Community cooperation could benefit more from efforts to reduce trust and legitimacy challenges associated with security agencies.

### 2. Intensified surveillance

Efforts at disrupting terror cells need to involve periodic intelligence updates about the general location of the operatives from as way to pre-empt terrorism attacks. The information can

be useful for threat analysis, attacks forecasting and disruption.

### 3. Tighter border controls

Tightening border controls is relevant as part of disrupting the mobility of malignant cells. Even though the cells are generally decentralized, they require mobility for a variety of reasons including planning and execution of attacks.

### 4. Capacity building for security agencies

There is need for relevant security agencies such as members of the national police service to receive periodic and tailored training to reflect the changing nature of terrorist organizations. This training would need to reflect in particular the gendered contexts of violent extremism.

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