



## CONCEPT NOTE

### Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the COVID-19 Era

**SVNP East Africa Regional Conference – Nairobi - Kenya,  
Date: 7-8 December 2020**

#### 1. Introduction

As terrorism mutates in Africa, there is need for coordinated efforts at the level of research, policy and practice in order to formulate working regional interventions that put into consideration changing dynamics occasioned by corona virus disease 2019. The latter is rapidly creating an enabling environment for luring and targeting unsuspecting users into radicalization and violent extremism more aggressively owing to the increased level of exposure and time spent on social media platforms<sup>1</sup> in the context of lockdown measures in countries in East Africa. Research and policy direction as well as practical interventions should be re-oriented towards **Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)** pillars of support and set realistic goals that are going to reduce the impacts of terrorism in East Africa in the short term and counter other systemic and structural factors that are responsible for extremism in the long term.

#### 2. Brief Background Scope

While terrorism has been a scourge in Eastern African region with Somalia being the hardest hit, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are not strangers to terrorist attacks too as witnessed in the 1998 twin bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam and 2010 Kampala bombings respectively. Kenya has been the worst affected State in East Africa prompting the country to launch a military action in Somalia through *Operation Linda Nchi*<sup>2</sup> to flush out the al-Shabaab terrorists and hopefully reduce the impact of terrorism in Kenya. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Marone, F. and Magri, P. 2019. Digital Jihad. Online Communication and Violent Extremism. First edition: Ledizioni; Ispi Publications

<sup>2</sup> See Ogenga, 2012. Is Peace Journalism possible in the 'war' against terror in Somalia? How the Kenyan Daily Nation and the Standard Represented Operation Linda Nchi. *Conflict and Communication online* Vol 11 No 2.



operation seemed to have compounded the problem in East Africa as terrorists spread their wings across porous borders judging from the surging number of high-profile attacks like Westgate Mall attacks in 2013, Garissa University attacks in 2015, Dusit 2 Mall attacks in 2019 and other active terror threats and violent extremism concerns in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Even though there has not been such heavy attacks and active threats of terrorism in Rwanda, the country has been cautious to this security challenge considering that terrorism is not compounded within specific national boundaries. As rightly put by the Prime Minister of Rwanda during an INTERPOL African regional conference held in Kigali in February 2019, “to stop and prevent terrorism, there is an urgent need for strong cooperation. No single country can alone win this struggle. We need a much stronger regional and international cooperation”. In the same way, terrorism and violent extremism call for proper and coordinated research, policy and practical interventions<sup>3</sup> that seek to understand the ecology of both crimes in individual states in order to not only come up with coordinated response mechanisms, but also build resilience. The conference will explore critical issues under the following subthemes:

#### Subthemes:

1. Understanding Violent Extremism in East Africa – Issues, Drivers, Facts and Figures
2. Regional Mechanisms in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism : Strategies and Policies in Eastern Africa
3. Violent Extremism in the context of COVID-19: Issues, Impacts and Lessons
4. The Place of Technology in Violent Extremism in Africa: Promoting Or Countering?
5. The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism in Eastern Africa
6. Challenges in preventing/ countering terrorism and violent extremism in Africa
7. Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Africa
8. Strengthening Eastern Africa’s capacity for PCVE: Options for the Way Forward

### 3. Justification

Kenya seems to be affected more by terrorism, a reality that has elevated the country to the frontlines of combatting terrorism and strengthening the prevention and Countering violent extremism through ambitious action plans. However, since terrorism affects the entire East African community, it is prudent that for success to be achieved, countries should share knowledge, lessons and experiences through coordinated interventions. While Kenya and

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<sup>3</sup> Ogenga, F. 2016. Beyond Material Interventions: Rethinking the Role of Gender, Media and the Politics of Female Violent Extremism in Kenya. *Policy Brief No 9*. Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding. Wilson Center. Washington D.C; Ogenga, F. 2016. Philosophising Alternative Media and Society Approaches to Countering Female Violent Extremism in Kenya for Peace and Security. *Research Paper No. 5*. Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding. Wilson Center, Washington D.C; Ogenga, F. 2016. Embodying Youth De-radicalization in Kenya: Rethinking State Relations, Foreign Policy, and Mediatized Peacebuilding in the Context of “War on Terror” as a Newfound Democratic Principle. *Conference Paper*, The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding, Wilson Center, Washington D. C.

Uganda have national CVE strategy, Tanzania's strategy is anchored on community policing or *Nyumba Kumi*<sup>4</sup>

In Kenya, the National Counterterrorism Center is a multi-agency instrument primarily of security agencies built to strengthen coordination in counter terrorism. NCTC was established in law by the Security Law Amendment Act 2014<sup>5</sup> and was mandated to co-ordinate all efforts towards countering terrorism employing both material and non-material measures in counterterrorism and countering violent extremism. In the latter, and due to increasing cases of terrorism in the country including the emergence of domestic terrorism, it became apparent that the emphasis should be placed on preventive efforts towards countering extremism due to the potential that it can lower the pool of those sneaking into the apex of the radicalization pyramid to become active terrorist that would demand more combative and military action plan to contain.

In this context, a more comprehensive action plan was proposed by the NTCT and rolled out as a presidential directive in 2014 called National Counterterrorism Strategy that is currently fast-tracked as Rapid County Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (RCAP for PCVE) that is currently being implemented in all 47 Counties in Kenya. The action plan singled out nine pillars namely: Ideology, education, research, *online and internet*, psychosocial, national ethos, economic among others. So far, this ambitious action plan is yet to be measured in terms of success levels owing to the challenges it has so far faced in implementation. Key among these challenges is the lack of funding and resources. Even though the NCTC tried to play down the funding and resource challenge based on the idea of cascading and mainstreaming PCVE at the county level, resource constraints have slowed down if not prevented implementation of various pillars at the county level. It is important that lessons from Kenya are shared with counterparts in East Africa for coordinated responses in PCVE. This will support the realisation of the following

- I. Create stronger networks more effectively able to identify threats and respond to VE across the region.
- II. Cultivate a successfully working relation with at-risk individuals and groups through trust-based and long-term engagement in VE-affected communities.
- III. Build the capacity of local leaders, government officials, civil society, research institutions and informal networks to better understand and address VE in their respective communities.

## COVID-19 Reality & Online Engagements

The resilience of any terrorist organisation is not dependent on the number of trained members from the past but in its ability to continuously recruit, mobilise and animate both actual and would-be fighters, supporters and sympathisers.<sup>6</sup> When a collective of people come together,

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<sup>4</sup>Dang, L. 2019. Violent Extremism and Community Policing in Tanzania. Special Report. USIP, No 442, March 2019

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.counterterrorism.go.ke/>

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Houffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2008-05-03/myth-grass-roots-terrorism> quoted in Scofield, 2019. Online CVE Hub Pilot Concept.

they share specific perspectives and a unitary identity resulting in sub-cultures or a community also categorised as radical milieus.<sup>7</sup> Radical milieus are specific social environments whose culture, narratives, and symbols shape both individuals and groups.<sup>8</sup> The growth and expansion of the internet has created these sub-cultures and communities that view online space as an institution that can be exploited for user gratification. This institution has ensured its utility by social organisations including violent extremist organisations (VEO).<sup>9</sup> Vulnerabilities associated with the internet are ever-increasing with scholars cautioning the capacity for the institution to mould, rationalise and normalise behaviour that is radical and extreme.

The institution has sympathisers, moderates and other radical individuals searching for information that aligns to or supports particular views. The form of the social structure responsible for the observed in-group cohesion distinguishes general users from sympathisers and radical milieus.<sup>10</sup> Even with the vulnerabilities associated with online radicalisation and recruitment, the most significant debate has been the ability of the radical online milieu to produce a real-world terrorist.

Much of the debate has centred on questions of whether governments should intervene through censorship, monitoring and counter-propaganda programmes, or allow the free flow of traffic on the internet to support democratic values such as freedom of expression.<sup>11</sup> While discussing radicalisation and recruitment online, the “simple causation-based approach” has been largely dismissed, and an agreement has coalesced around a broad set of parameters that act as ingredients in the radicalisation process.<sup>12</sup> These include; grievance as sense of alienation or disenfranchisement that provides a cognitive opening, Ideology; as the extreme set of ideas that provides the individual with a new outlook and explanation for the world he or she sees around him, Mobilisation; as the process by which the individual slowly integrates into a community who are like-minded and create a self-reinforcing community, and Tipping points, which are the specific events that push individuals from rhetoric into action.

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<sup>7</sup> Avner Barnea, Challenging the “Lone Wolf” Phenomenon in an Era of Information Overload, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 31:2, (2018), Pp.217-234

<sup>8</sup> Maura Conway, From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence and development of an online radical milieu. *CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange*, 2 (4). (2012), pp. 12-22; Peter Waldmann, “The Radical Milieu: The Under- Investigated Relationship between Terrorists and Sympathetic Communities,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 2, no. 9 (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Martin A. Bouchard and Rebecca Nash, “Researching terrorism and counter terrorism through a network lens” in *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter Terrorism*, ed. Martin Bouchard (New York, Routledge, 2015); Maura Conway, “Reality Bites: Cyberterrorism and Terrorist ‘Use’ of the Internet,” *First Monday* vol. 7, no. 11 (Nov. 2002);

<sup>10</sup> Maura Conway, From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence and development of an online radical milieu. *CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange*, 2 (4). (2012), pp. 12-22; Benjamin Ducoi, “A radical sociability: in defence of an online/offline multidimensional approach to radicalization” in *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter Terrorism*, ed. Martin Bouchard (New York, Routledge, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> David Fidler, “Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-islamic-state-exploitation-internet>; Tinnes, Judith. "Bibliography: Terrorism and the Media (including the Internet) (Part 3)." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 5 (2016), Pp. 112-55.

<sup>12</sup> Kate Cox, William Marcellino, Jacopo Bellasio, Antonia Ward, Katerina Galai, Sofia Meranto, and Giacomo Persi Paoli, “Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development,” *UNDP, 2018*, [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Research-Report\\_final\\_3%20Oct.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Research-Report_final_3%20Oct.pdf)

There is enough evidence that the internet more so social media, is actively being used for radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism and those more vulnerable are the youth (including women<sup>13</sup>). Therefore, it is critical to examine ways in which social media can be used for preventing and countering violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where virtual communication and online engagements are surging. In view of the foregoing, the Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) is dedicating its maiden Regional Conference in Eastern Africa to interrogating national and regional mechanisms and action plans in East Africa and how research, policy and practice can be streamlined and coordinated considering ecological factors and changing global and regional dynamics occasioned by disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Expected outcomes

- ✓ Increased understanding and shared knowledge on preventive efforts of countering violent extremism in East Africa
- ✓ Reaching consensus on the best collaborative approaches in research, policy direction and practical interventions in East Africa
- ✓ Analyses of capacities and gaps of existing mechanisms, action plans, institutions and structures for countering and preventing violent extremism in East Africa
- ✓ Underscoring the potential role of technology (social media) in radicalisation and recruitment
- ✓ Exploring the use of social media platforms in preventing and countering violent extremism and digital peace building
- ✓ A plan of action for the SVNP annual conference.

### Methodology

The conference is scheduled to last for two (2) days. Day One will have the keynote address presented on the subject matter and followed by a panel discussion from variety of perspectives. During Day Two the various perspectives on CVE in the COVID era will be harmonized and a high-level policy dialogue used to develop policy and programmatic actions on the way forward in preventing and countering extreme violence and terrorism in Eastern Africa in the COVID era.

### Participants

The conference is expected to have about 25 participants comprising high-level representatives in the counterterrorism enterprise including the National Counterterrorism Center, Directorate of Criminal Investigation, National Crime Research Center, Scholars for Universities, Non-Governmental Organizations, Science and Technology Institutions, Diplomatic Community (Royal Dutch Embassy; Embassy of Japan; US Embassy), SVNP members among others

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<sup>13</sup>Ogenga, F. 2016. Beyond Material Interventions: Rethinking the Role of Gender, Media and the Politics of Female Violent Extremism in Kenya. *Policy Brief No 9*. Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding. Wilson Center. Washington D.C.; Ogenga, F. 2016. Philosophising Alternative Media and Society Approaches to Countering Female Violent Extremism in Kenya for Peace and Security. *Research Paper No. 5*. Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding. Wilson Center, Washington D.C.; Ogenga, F. 2016. Embodying Youth De-radicalization in Kenya: Rethinking State Relations, Foreign Policy, and Mediatized Peacebuilding in the Context of “War on Terror” as a Newfound Democratic Principle. *Conference Paper*, The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding, Wilson Center, Washington D. C.

## Venue and Date

Due to the COVID- 19 reality, the conference is designed to take place both face to face and online. The conference will take place at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Nairobi, Kenya from 7-8 December 2020.

## Logistics

The African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS) through the support of SVNPN shall be responsible for all logistics relating to the conference including travels, accommodation (for those outside Kenya), feeding and communication materials.

## About the Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNPN)

The SVNPN is a continent-wide network of African policy and research organizations that works with the Wilson Center's Africa Program to bring African knowledge and perspectives to U.S., African, and international policy on peacebuilding in Africa. Established in 2011 and supported by the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the project provides avenues for African researchers and practitioners to engage with and exchange analyses and perspectives with U.S., African, and international policymakers in order to develop the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches to achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

## About the African Technology Policy Studies (ATPS) Network

The ATPS is a trans-disciplinary network of researchers, policymakers, private sector actors, and the civil society actors promoting the generation, dissemination, use and mastery of Science, Technology and Innovations (STI) for African development, environmental sustainability and global inclusion. With its Secretariat based in Nairobi, Kenya, the ATPS operates through its National Chapters in 30 countries (27 in Africa and 3 in the Diaspora in Australia, United States of America, and United Kingdom). ATPS has its Chapters in all the SGCIs countries. The mission of the ATPS is to become the leading international Center of Excellence (CoE) and reference in science, technology and innovation systems research; training and capacity building; communication and sensitization; knowledge brokerage; policy advocacy and outreach in Africa. We aim to build Africa's capabilities in STI policy research, policymaking and implementation for sustainable development. Our core value proposition is in removing policy barriers that prevent the uptake of STI as well as use STI as a means for achieving sustainable development in Africa. Today, the ATPS has over 1,500 members and 3000 stakeholders in over 51 countries in 5 continents with institutional partnerships worldwide.