

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA 2020

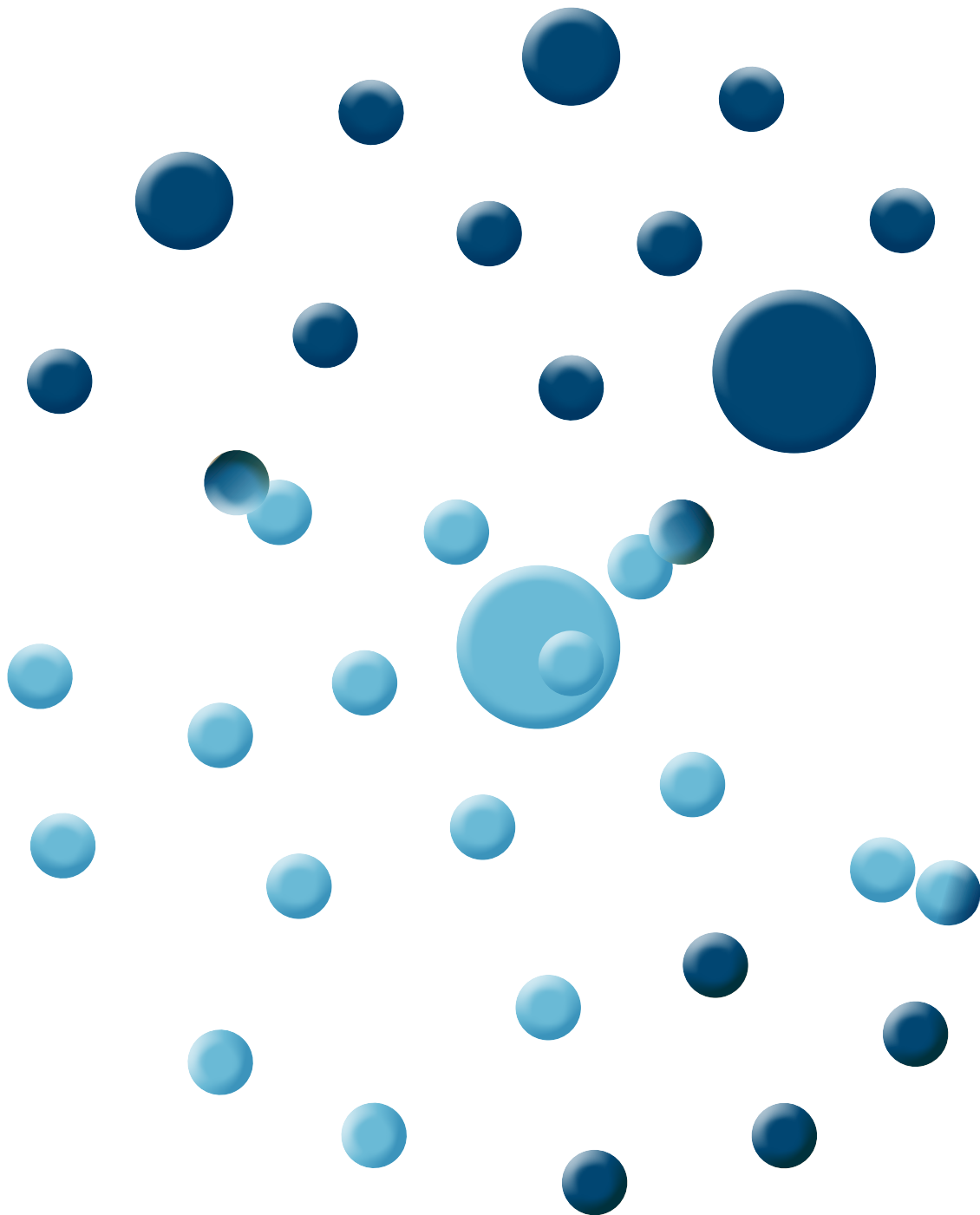
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES



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This series of reports use ideological or ideologically motivated extremism to refer to forms that are religiously, politically, and/or nationalistically inspired. Recognizing that typologies of extremism are fluid and lacking a global standard definition, we have elected to use this larger catch-all term to cover groups ranging from nationalist radical right actors to religiously-based fundamentalists. This includes racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE), as well as religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE).

Whenever possible, we eschew umbrella terms and refer directly to the extremist or violent extremist organization by name and, where discernible, the specific ideology advanced by the group.

We also refer to the radical right as a catch-all for hateful or violent far-right extremists and organizations when no specific organizational affiliation is noted.

Across these reports, we refer to Daesh instead of ISIS, ISIL, or IS.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) claimed upwards of 65,000 lives across Africa during 2020.¹ During the pandemic crisis, “extremists have been able to exploit deteriorating security, social, and economic circumstances to gain further support for their ideologies.”² Drawing on over 100 interviews across East Africa, including the Horn, this report illustrates the varied impact of COVID-19 on terrorism and violent extremist activity and narratives in the first year of the pandemic in the region.³

In the East and Horn of Africa region, Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) changed and adjusted their narratives to varying degrees, weaponizing the pandemic while seeking to radicalize and recruit new members. Individual VEOs directly incorporated the pandemic into their messaging, often indicting public health measures for being discriminatory against Muslims. Others espoused apocalyptic or insular anti-Western and Chinese conspiracy theories. In addition, eugenics theories emerged, purporting that the virus or vaccines were designed to eliminate entire groups. When local groups did not adjust their narratives to fit the local or regional context, this trend was carried across borders from other VEOs into the neighboring countries.

VEOs, especially Al-Shabaab, successfully escalated their use of digital communication platforms amid a shift to less in-person contact during the pandemic restrictions. Interviewees noted significant changes in radicalization and recruitment patterns online in the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Republic of Kenya, and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. This mainly included observed growth of various groups’ online presence in these countries to intensify their recruitment and radicalization efforts. In the United Republic of Tanzania, the Republic of Uganda, and the State of Eritrea, there was little evidence to suggest an increase in VEOs’ online presence, and recruitment and radicalization campaigns.

The pandemic impacted VE activity differently across the region. Somalia recorded a decrease in terrorist attacks between January and December 2020, but conflict in the country remained widespread. Kenya and Ethiopia experienced an increase in terrorist attacks in 2020 compared with the year prior. In Tanzania, transborder terrorist attacks from the Republic of Mozambique Daesh affiliate, IS- Mozambique, were recorded. Uganda noted no terrorist attacks in 2020, potentially because of hard border closures, which may have prevented acts by the DRC-based Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). While Ethiopia and Eritrea recorded no terrorist attacks between January and December 2020,

¹ COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (2020). Total Confirmed Deaths due to COVID-19: Jan 22, 2020 – Dec 31, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-covid-deaths-region> (accessed 24 November 2021).

² Burchill, Extremism in the time of COVID-19, 7

³ The countries covered in this report are Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda.

the civil conflict with the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) came into full form in the latter half of the year.

An interesting and unique regional development on the ground that separated Al-Shabaab from the rest of the regional VEOs was the group's active efforts to demonstrate its competency and resourcefulness by utilizing the dire health situation caused by the pandemic in their favor. The group repeatedly shared messages against governmental and foreign assistance efforts to provide necessary medical resources for citizens while propagandizing their own public health efforts in Somalia.⁴ Al-Shabaab reportedly furnished public health education on COVID-19 and developed a quarantine center in the country.⁵ The research did not observe this trend in other countries (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea).

⁴ C. Hockey and M. Jones, (2020), 'The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19', Combating Terrorism Center, 13 (6), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-limits-of-shabaab-care-militant-governance-amid-covid-19/> (Accessed 14 January 2022).

⁵ Ibid.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Renewed preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts that take into account the current context of the East and Horn of Africa that has changed during the pandemic along with a direct response to credible regional terrorist threats are needed. The pandemic has dominated headlines, captured government focus, and allowed VEOs in the region to expand their narrative reach. The window of opportunity for extremist groups opened by the pandemic must be narrowed. To accomplish these broader suggestions in response to the new and emerging threats, the researchers propose the following:

1

Governments should work with civil society organizations (CSOs) and religious actors to develop strategic communications campaigns to openly discuss and inoculate against violent extremist (VE) narratives. Novel digital literacy efforts that draw on successful counter misinformation and disinformation campaigns can provide new inspiration for helping new generations of digital natives in the East and Horn of Africa.

2

Governments should continue strengthening and expanding on their work with The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and where possible initiate further efforts with cross-existing border and regional cooperation bodies to expand joint work between regional countries in the shared fight against terrorism. Existing offline and online security bodies should commit to more intensified tracking of changes in regional VEO activities. In this context, joint P/CVE efforts should also ensure regional support and coordination to prevent radicalization and recruitment to ease the security burden of neighboring countries.

3

Cross-cutting P/CVE analysis should be included in sectoral programs responding to the effects of COVID-19, including health, education, and livelihoods. Governmental pandemic responses ought to account for social grievances and inequalities that have allowed terrorism and VE to thrive under COVID-19 conditions.

4

Governments should take a more proactive approach by allocating more resources to localized P/CVE efforts. Particular support should be given to additional primary research at community and provincial levels to examine the nuances of the online and digital threat environment.





This report analyzes VE organizational reactions and narrative responses to COVID-19 in the East and Horn of Africa from the earliest stages of the pandemic in the region in 2020 until the end of the year. The researchers first conducted a literature review of COVID-19 data, conflict, and broader VE trends in the six countries studied: Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Eritrea. The next phase included the collection of the primary data – the bulk of which was acquired through key informant interviews (KIIs) with different categories of participants – government officials, civil society representatives, security service members, academics, community, private sector leaders, and journalists.

A total of 30 interviews with female participants and 83 with male participants were conducted via a mixture of face-to-face, phone, and written (text or email) based interviews and written responses. Table 1 below summarizes the number of respondents reached across the countries. As the table shows, the number of participants in Tanzania was significantly higher when compared to other countries. The numbers of participants in Eritrea were slightly fewer due to difficulties in conducting research and receiving responses from participants in this country. In general, there were also more male participants than females. This is most clear for Eritrea, where no women participated in this study. However, it is noteworthy that the overall responsiveness for this country was also the lowest. The gender bias perhaps reflects our broader observation that there are more male than female participants in counter-terrorism and P/CVE related interventions and research, at least when considering the East and Horn of Africa region. An analysis of primary materials shared by VEOs on popular online platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, was also incorporated in this study and was compared against the interview data.

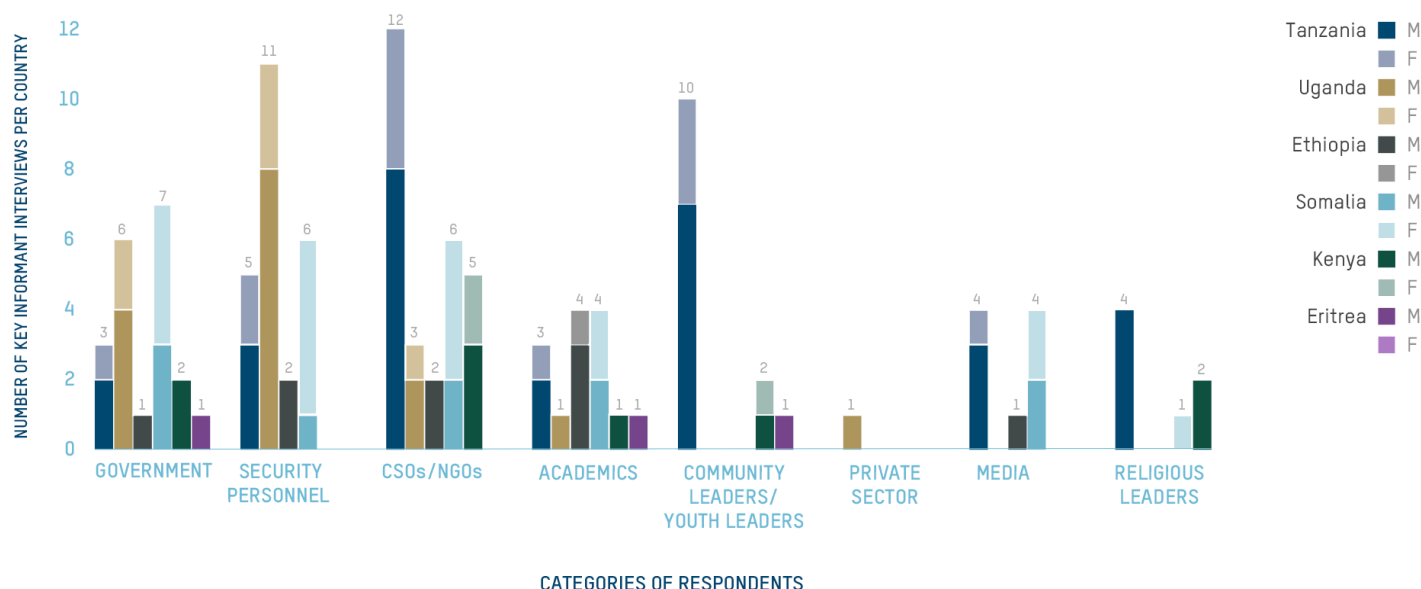


TABLE 1 List of Key Informants

The secondary data comprised limited social media monitoring and analysis. The information tracked included broader changes in the content narratives in an aim to understand the behavior of VEOs in exploiting grievances online through utilizing content such as memes, GIFs, videos, hashtags, and other similar tools – all of which are circulated by VE actors and relevant social media accounts on the internet to spread COVID-19 related misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. Where appropriate and possible, the team analyzed the level of public engagement with the narratives by looking at share and reach numbers, and the number of reactions and trends (positive/negative/neutral) of comments. Secondary inquiry of this nature also gathered relevant information from reputable news sources. The study also drew on databases such as Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).



NARRATIVES



In 2020, VEOs adapted differently to COVID-19 circumstances across the countries of focus. Individual groups directly incorporated the pandemic into their messaging, many of whom concentrated on insinuating that public health measures were discriminatory against Muslims. Others espoused apocalyptic or insular anti-Western and Chinese conspiracy theories. Eugenics theories also emerged, purporting that the virus or vaccines were designed to eliminate entire groups of people. When local groups including Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Daesh, and Al-Qaeda, did not adjust their narratives to fit the local or regional context, this trend was carried across borders from other extremist groups.

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab was the most active VEO in developing, adjusting, and disseminating narratives tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in a speech at the end of April 2020, an Al-Shabaab spokesperson suggested that foreign forces in Somalia may have intentionally spread the virus. He also pushed his congregation to “be cautious of medical assistance from non-Muslims.”⁶ Interviewees from the study noted that in Somalia, Al-Shabaab used the pandemic to spread various narratives linked to the pandemic, including that:

- COVID-19 has only affected the enemies of Islam;
- The virus is on the rise because of the “increase of human sins” and rampant “evil” in the world today, including homosexuality and other vices;
- Mosques are safe from COVID-19 transmission while Western occupied areas and Halane – an area in Mogadishu that houses foreign dignitaries and humanitarian agencies – are full of the virus;
- The coronavirus is spread by foreigners/crusaders who invaded Somalia; and
- The virus transmission is caused by the presence of forces from Christian majority nations.

In Kenya, Al-Shabaab has harnessed fear and discontent towards COVID-19 measures to reinforce civilian perceptions of corruption, inaction, and weakness in the government. The group has sought to advance ideological narratives of the subjugation of Muslims in East Africa by supposedly Christian governments. Through its online propaganda, Al-Shabaab has seized upon public health measures such as the closure of places of worship and partial lockdowns of Nairobi’s Eastleigh district and Mombasa’s Old Town as examples of the targeting of Muslim communities (see Image A). Not only has Al-Shabaab’s operational capacity expanded rather than contracted during the pandemic, but its efforts to propagate divisive and radicalizing narratives online have mainly gone unchecked.⁷

According to government and civil society interviewees from Kenya, the most prominent extremist-linked narrative claimed that the pandemic is a divine punishment from God (Allah), meted out against nonbelievers across the world for their “evil deeds against Muslims and jihadists.”⁸

VEOs in Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea have seemingly not localized their narratives to weaponize COVID-19. However, regional narratives did penetrate the boundaries of these countries, leading to increased tensions. Extremists and terrorists in Northern Mozambique continued to advance their calls for a state-led by Islamic laws and principles, including during the time of an attack on a Tanzanian village by members of Daesh-affiliated IS-Mozambique (IS-M). As one interviewee from the region recounted:

“I have not heard any COVID-19 narratives that are aimed at Tanzania in particular, but I have heard general narratives targeting all the Muslims in the world. The most common narrative I have heard is that lockdowns are aimed at denying Muslims the right to pray in their mosque.”⁹

With increased online exposure during the pandemic, communities will likely see more generalized rhetoric deployed by regional VEOs. Indeed, the African affiliates of Daesh and Al-Qaeda have tailored narratives to their local audiences, including those that related to COVID-19 such as the claim that the pandemic is God’s wrath against the West.¹⁰ Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau has likened COVID-19 measures put in place by the Nigerian

⁶ C. Hockey and M. Jones, [2020], ‘The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19’, *Combating Terrorism Center*, 13 [6].

⁷ BD. Pkalya, “Kenyan Stakeholders Call for Implementation of Local Action Plans to Stem Youth Radicalisation and Extremism,” *Strong Cities Network* [website], <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/kenyan-stakeholders-call-for-implementation-of-local-action-plans-to-stem-youth-radicalisation-and-extremism/>, [accessed on 05 October 2021].

⁸ Sh. Ramadhan Haula, [2020], *COVID-19 Pandemic and Al Shabab’s Operations*, Nairobi, Kenya, BRAVE Insight; “Al-Shabaab establishes parallel COVID-19 center in Somalia,” *Garowe Online*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/al-shabaab-establishes-parallel-covid-19-center-in-somalia>

⁹ Key Informant Interview with a Regional Respondent in Mtwara, Tanzania, August 2021.

¹⁰ J. Meek, [2020], “Terrorists spin COVID-19 as God’s “smallest soldier” attacking the West,” *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563>, [accessed 16 October 2021].

government, namely social distancing and lockdowns, to a war on Muslims.¹¹ Many of these claims are reiterated by Al-Shabaab, the predominant East African VEO, which continues to spread narratives incorrectly framing COVID-19 as being a plague from God (Allah) that only affects the nonbelievers and that it is only an American, European and Chinese problem – not an African problem.¹² Scattershot public health guidance has allowed VEOs to promote traditional as well as their own religious interpretations of illnesses, urging Muslims to follow spiritual guidance and health advice from historic Islamic texts to treat the virus.¹³

Certain prominent narratives that emerged during the pandemic have also evolved into metanarratives, many of which have multiple interpretations. Some of these narratives have been reported in one country, while others have spread across the region. This speaks to the interconnected nature of East Africa and Horn, along with attempts by VEOs to gain footholds in new countries. For cultural, linguistic, and political reasons, what speaks to residents of one country often has salience to neighbors.

“COVID-19 AS DIVINE PUNISHMENT FOR SIN”

The most prominent narrative spread by VEOs in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea reasoned that COVID-19 is a manifestation of divine anger or punishment for nonbelievers from God (Allah). Al-Shabaab directly promoted this messaging in Somalia and neighboring countries, suggesting that those infected with COVID-19 were sinners and not devout Muslims.¹⁴ Notably, this narrative emerged as COVID-19 infections in Europe and America were higher than the reported numbers in Africa. This familiar narrative was also present in Uganda, particularly within ethnic Lugbara cosmology, where unexplainable suffering is often viewed as a divine curse.¹⁵

¹¹ J. Campbell, “Boko Haram’s Shekau Labels Anti-COVID-19 Measures an Attack on Islam in Nigeria,” *Council on Foreign Relations* [website], <https://www.cfr.org/blog/boko-harams-shekau-labels-anti-covid-19-measures-attack-islam-nigeria>, (accessed 18 October 2021); E. Columbo and M. Harris, “Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Centre for Strategic and International Studies* [website] <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa> (accessed 12 May 2021).

¹² R. Haula, *COVID -19 Pandemic and Al Shabab’s Operations, Nairobi, Kenya, BRAVE Insight, 2020; Impact of COVID-19 ON P/P/CVE: Setting the Research Agenda*, IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020; “Coronavirus: See wetin ISIS, Boko Haram and oda jihadist leaders dey tok about Covid-19,” *BBC News Pidgin*, 24 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-52782460> (accessed 10 November 2021).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Boko Haram and oda jihadist leaders dey tok about Covid-19,” *BBC News Pidgin*, 24 May 2020.

¹⁵ L. Storer, J. Osuta, D. Anguala, “Do COVID-19 conspiracy theories challenge public health delivery,” *LSE Blog*, 21 April 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2020/04/21/conspiracy-theories-curses-in-uganda-wuhan-origins-covid-19-health-policy/> (accessed 1 January 2020).

“THE PANDEMIC AS A SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE”

An unusual extremist narrative that has surfaced and circulated in Uganda is founded on the belief that the spread of the COVID-19 virus is a sign of the apocalypse. This was noted during one of the interviews with a religious layperson in this country. The participant mentioned that a group of the population in Uganda – especially fervent religious followers – have refused to be vaccinated, believing that the pandemic and the vaccines are being used to implant the biblical mark of the beast.¹⁶ This religious symbol allegedly prophesized in the Christian Book of Revelations has become associated in apocalyptic narratives on social media with an end to the world and that all the vaccinated will die within two years.¹⁷ Analysis from Arua, Uganda, mirrors this sentiment: explaining “others explain the Covid-19 infection as a ‘sign of end of the world’, an indication of Jesus’ second coming, or a test of faith.”¹⁸

“RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION”

A religious narrative spread across the region that seemed to gain popularity over time dictated that COVID-19 was either designed or manipulated to deny Muslims the right to worship. When COVID-19 started becoming rampant in Africa, the governments imposed social distancing measures, including public gathering restrictions. Correspondingly, these resulted in a decrease in movements and gatherings, especially in churches and mosques. As one interviewee in Tanzania put it, “the most common narrative I have heard is that lock down is aimed at denying Muslims the right to pray in their Mosque.”¹⁹ VEOs in Somalia and Kenya, for instance, took this as an opportunity to depict Muslims as being refused their right to pray five times a day.²⁰ VEOs, including Hizb ut Tahrir called out perceived hypocrisy from the government in Kenya allowing bars and restaurants to operate while madrasas were closed.²¹

¹⁶ Key Informant Interview with Religious Laypersons, Uganda, August 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ L. Storer, J. Osuta, D. Anguala, “Do COVID-19 conspiracy theories challenge public health delivery,” LSE Blog, 21 April 2020.

¹⁹ Key Informant Interview, Mtwara region, Tanzania, August 2021.

²⁰ C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19.”

²¹ “Closure of Madrasas in Kenya: State Discrimination Against Islam and Muslims,” *Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir in Kenya*, October 12 2020. (Link redacted).

MONITOR

National

Education

Insight

World

Panic as Chinese national self-quarantines in Arua hotel

Thursday, March 12, 2020 — updated on July 19, 2020

Image B: A Ugandan publication illustrating mainstream anti-foreigner and anti-Chinese sentiments elicited by the pandemic.

“COVID-19 AS A FOREIGN INVADER”

A notable regional narrative spread by VEOs was the claim that COVID-19 – or the introduction of the vaccine – was manufactured in Western countries to eliminate black people.²² These narratives, tinged with racialized anti-Chinese sentiment (see Image B), contented that the virus originated in China as punishment for actions against Uighurs, or simply situated the problem as a Chinese one: a “Chinese sickness.”²³ Both VEOs and other online misinformers shared this narrative to advance the idea that COVID-19 was a manufactured weapon of mass destruction. In Kenya, for example, country-level researchers analyzed forwarded videos via Facebook and WhatsApp containing vaccine misinformation. In Somalia, the narrative most used by Al-Shabaab was incorporated into their broader anti-Western narrative, blaming the spread of COVID-19 on foreigners, or “crusader forces,” who have “invaded” Somalia.²⁴

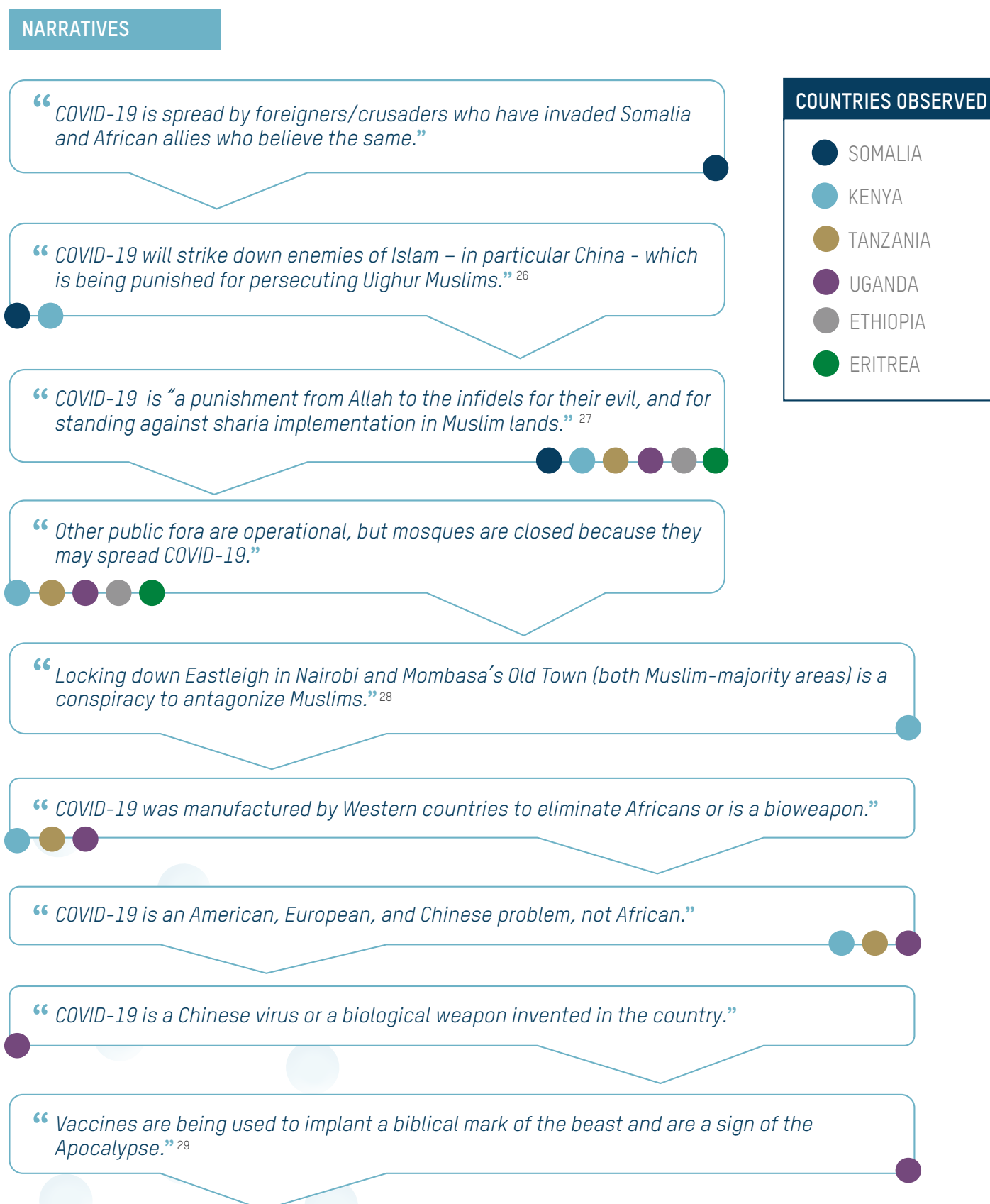
²² Key Informant Interview with a Security Official, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 2021; C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19.”

²³ “Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia,” *BBC*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52103799> (accessed 5 October 2021); “Panic as Chinese National Quarantines in Arua Hotel,” *Monitor*, 19 July 2020, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Fear-Chinese-national-self-quarantine-Arua-hotel/688334-5488116-fn4vp0z/index.html> (Accessed 16 January 2022); L. Storer, J. Osuta, D. Anguala, “Do COVID-19 conspiracy theories challenge public health delivery,” *LSE Blog*, 21 April 2020.

²⁴ “Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia,” *BBC News*, 2 April 2020.

Below is a summary of such narratives as captured by the team of researchers.

Table 2: Dominant COVID-19 Narratives Spread During the Pandemic²⁵



²⁵ Pieterse, T., Landman, C., (2021) “Religious views on the origin and meaning of COVID-2019,” *HTS Theological Studies*, 77(3). http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222021000300008; R. Haula, (2020), *COVID-19 Pandemic and Al Shabab’s Operations*; L. Storer, J. Osuta, D. Anguala, “Do COVID-19 conspiracy theories challenge public health delivery,” *LSE Blog*, 21 April 2020; C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19”; Additional data collected through key informant interviews in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Tanzania, July-August, 2021.

²⁶ Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia,” *BBC*, 2 April 2020.

²⁷ Sh. Ramadhan Haula, (2020), *COVID-19 Pandemic and Al Shabab’s Operations*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ L. Storer, J. Osuta, D. Anguala, “Do COVID-19 conspiracy theories challenge public health delivery,” *LSE Blog*, 21 April 2020

COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

As expected, VEOs accelerated their digital communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a heavy reliance on popular social media platforms observed in most countries in the East and Horn of Africa. In Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, the most common online channels governmental and civil society actors interviewed by in-country researchers saw used by VEOs were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Notably, the use of more traditional blogs, websites, and radio continued. In-person religious sermons served as a secondary avenue of communication.³⁰ Meanwhile, during an interview with a representative from the Ministry of Somalia, the participant noted that VEOs targeting Somalia use a hybrid approach of new and old media, including magazines and radio.³¹ In general, the data collected through primary and secondary sources does not point to a significant change in the use of social media and online communications channels for their purposes. Rather there seems to be an observed adaptation of many VEOs to leverage a larger, more captive online audience during the pandemic through popular social media platforms.

Several interviews conducted with personnel from Kenya confirmed that VEOs and individual actors incorporated the pandemic into already existing narratives and

Coronavirus Fight has Produced Another Virus of Corruption Creating Covid-19 Millionaires

October 5, 2020

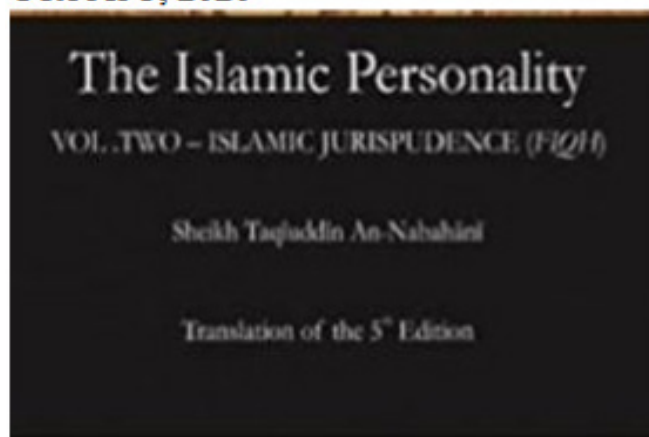


Image C: A propaganda piece from Hizb ut Tahrir in Kenya offering its ideology as a means to combat perceived corruption during COVID-19.

³⁰ Key Informant Interview with Religious Layperson, Uganda, August 2021; C. Hockey and M. Jones, (2020), "The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19."

³¹ Key Informant Interview with Somalia Ministry Representative, 2021.

intensified the creation and dissemination of online propaganda (see Image C). Such campaigns undoubtedly aimed to reach neighboring countries and perhaps global audiences. For instance, multiple respondents from Kenya said they had seen narratives on social media from VEOs operating in Somalia, namely Al-Shabaab, as well as from extremist groups further afield, including Daesh, Boko Haram, Hizb ut Tahrir and their affiliates (such as Image C, above).³²



Image D: A cover of “Gaidi Mtaani,” the Al-Shabaab magazine.

Likewise, in Ethiopia, interviewees affirmed that VEOs such as Daesh and Al-Shabaab continued to use social media accounts to target citizens, often drawing on anti-establishment themes such as depicting Islam as “being unjustly treated in Ethiopia and not [as] equally seen like Christianity”.³³ Country level interviews in Ethiopia alluded to Al-Shabaab and Daesh trying to establish new, adaptive messaging through social media to build a follower base in Ethiopia and recruit members.³⁴ Another Government Official from Ethiopia reported monitoring a social media post from a VEO stating that “Ethiopia is a Christian Island which has a prejudice [sic] for Muslims if you want to change this, join us and let’s finish it.”³⁵

In Tanzania, social media, including Twitter,³⁶ YouTube,³⁷ and Telegram, were used by VEOs in Mozambique to publicize a cross-border attack.³⁸ The ease of access to these types of images and information shared by VEOs is becoming increasingly apparent. At-home restrictions have surely led to increased exposure to harmful VEO narratives. As one respondent from Tanzania explained:

“In April 2020, all schools were closed due to COVID-19, and most schools decided to use social media to teach their students. This allowed many students to be online for many hours. I am not sure if all the time our children use social media to study, but I am afraid they may have accessed other sites that may be used by violent extremists. Our children are susceptible to using online media for teaching; who knows how extremists may decide to exploit this opportunity here in Tanzania.”³⁹

In Somalia, country researchers found that a hybrid media approach taken by Al-Shabaab allowed the VEO to communicate across disparate demographics and geographies in the country. They affirmed that Al-Shabaab employed new media

³² Key Informant Interviews with Personnel from Kenya, 2021; “Coronavirus Fight has Produced Another Virus of Corruption Creating Covid-19 Millionaires,” *Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir in Kenya*, October 5 2020. (Link redacted).

³³ Key Informant Interviews with an Ethiopian Elders Association Member and an Anonymous Broadcast Journalist, August 2021.

³⁴ Key Informant Interview with an Anonymous Broadcast Journalist, August 2021.

³⁵ Key Informant Interview with a Ethiopian Government Official, August 2021.

³⁶ R. O’Farrell, “Attack was quickly claimed by IS,” *Twitter* [website], 2020, <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1316844501353328640>, (accessed 13 July 2021).

³⁷ “Tamko la Alshabab; Alshabab waelezea sababu za kuja Tanzania na kuvamia kijiji cha Kitaya,” *Jutta TV Online* [YouTube video], link redacted (accessed 13 July 2021).

³⁸ Obulutsa, G. “Militants from Mozambique staged deadly attack in Tanzania, police say,” 23 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tanzania-security-mozambique-idUSKBN2781PB>, (accessed 17 November 2021).

³⁹ Key Informant Interview with a Tanzanian CSO respondent, August 2021.

(primarily digital video and Twitter) while also distributing a magazine titled *Gaidi Mtaani*, meaning “street terrorist,” as its preferred medium of communication outside Somalia (see Image D).⁴⁰ For communications inside Somalia, the group uses radio (mainly Radio Andalus), and other low-tech mediums such as mosque sermons and local text messages. In one notable mosque sermon given in May 2020, Al-Shabaab asserted that only those who are “weak in faith” would not be able to use prayer and charity (zakat) to protect themselves from COVID-19.⁴¹

Analysis by country researchers in Somalia, based on interviews with government and civil society officials, noted that pandemic restrictions seemed to hinder efforts to combat misinformation and radicalization.⁴²



Image E: Ideologically motivated extremist messaging on COVID-19.

Anecdotally, before the pandemic, if young people came across fake news or were in an online gaming situation where extremist rhetoric was explicit, they might discuss it at school or in coffee shops with their friends and teachers. In the wake of the pandemic lockdowns, these types of in-person discussions were no longer possible. During lockdowns in cities and among the diaspora community outside of Somalia, time spent online surged as in many places (although this trend does not extend to areas controlled by Al-Shabaab where social media usage is restricted). Respondents from the youth groups, CSOs, media houses, and government all agreed social life moved largely online during the pandemic. A member of the government confirmed this in a statement:

“[For] Youth in Somalia, daily meetings and gatherings with other young people take place almost exclusively via digital learning activities and the Youth forums. Somalia diaspora and the local youth social media users are highly connected. YouTube has connected viewers and the other platforms and social media are countless. They meet virtually with their (class)-mates on Zoom or Teams and socialize on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.”⁴³

In Eritrea, Kils noted the use of social media by VEOs as non-existent due to stringent government measures restricting the use of social media in the country. A respondent from within the Eritrean government stated, “the Eritrean government has imposed strict control...of its citizens and would take harsh measures if its citizens failed to adhere [to] what the government has ordered...regarding the use of social media.”⁴⁴ This approach has been a longstanding practice by the Eritrean government even before the pandemic, thereby undermining the utility of social media usage by VEOs.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Note: Analysis synthesized for Somalia was aggregated at the country level. Interviewees included representatives from government, security services, media, and CSOs; Image source: The Middle East Media Research Institute, n.d., (Link redacted).

⁴¹ C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19.”

⁴² Note: Analysis synthesized for Somalia was aggregated at the country level; Image source: “Shabaab Spokesman Suggests Foreign Forces Intentionally Spread Coronavirus in Somalia,” SITE Intelligence Group Enterprise, 28 April 2021, (site redacted).

⁴³ Key Informant Interview with a Somali member of Ministry of Internal Security, July 2021

⁴⁴ Key Informant Interview with an Eritrean Government Official, August 2021

⁴⁵ “10 Most Censored Countries,” *Committee to Protect Journalists* [website], <https://cpj.org/reports/2019/09/10-most-censored-eritrea-north-korea-turkmenistan-journalist/>, (accessed 19 September 2021).

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION TACTICS

Misinformation and disinformation on social media are not new phenomena, but the pandemic has generally accelerated the volume of misinformation circulating. Like elsewhere in the world, misinformation in the region during 2020 often traded on conspiracies as to the virus's origin and transmission patterns (for example, see Image E above).⁴⁶ Misinformation campaigns by VEOs exploited grievances related to the pandemic, such as movement restrictions and access to public health systems.⁴⁷ Secondary data demonstrates that Kenya and Somalia were the two countries most affected by this form of misinformation and disinformation. Several KII respondents from Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia believed the most common misinformation from VEOs circulating in their countries originated from Al-Shabaab, Daesh, and Al-Qaeda.⁴⁸ Most interviewees maintained that circulation had started since the inception of COVID-19 and has continued to date. For instance, a respondent from Tanzanian security services stated:

"One of our daily tasks is to track all messages that have been posted online with regards to terrorist[s]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we observed a shift of messages exploiting COVID-19 vulnerabilities. Common misinformation from Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda that we observed included COVID-19 is a punishment from God to kill the West, [that] COVID 19 is a man-made disease aimed at Africans, [and that] COVID-19 denies Muslims the right to pray in the mosques etc. However, these messages were not meant for Tanzania."⁴⁹

Similarly, a respondent from the Somali Federal Government reasserted the role of Al-Shabaab in misinformation campaigns as a recruitment tactic in the following statement:

"Al-Shabaab in Somalia gained new opportunities for recruitment, specifically the youth, through misinformation about the facts of COVID-19. Notably, Al-Shabaab labeled the virus as being caused by the presence of forces from Christian majority nation and mostly affects the enemies of Islam."⁵⁰

Limited online social media monitoring carried out for this report confirmed these trends and captured common misinformation circulating in social media through messages, memes, GIFs, and cartoons. (See Image F) Interestingly, other reports have confirmed the role of misinformation present in the civil conflict – obfuscating, for example, refugee movements, the arrest of UN staff, and confiscation of vehicles in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.⁵¹

⁴⁶ The Center for Informed Democracy & Social - Cybersecurity (IDeas) of Carnegie Mellon University has produced a list of stories containing inaccurate or misleading information on COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.cmu.edu/ideas-social-cybersecurity/research/coronavirus.html> (accessed 4 October 2021).

⁴⁷ Coronavirus: See wetin ISIS, Boko Haram and oda jihadist leaders dey tok about Covid-19," *BBC News Pidgin*.

⁴⁸ Key Informant Interviews include those with a Broadcast Journalist and Elder Representative in Ethiopia, a Somali Federal Government Representative, a Tanzanian Security Officer, and Uganda People's Defense Force representatives, August-September 2021.

⁴⁹ Key Informant Interview with a Tanzanian Security Officer, August 2021.

⁵⁰ Key Informant Interview with a Somali Federal Government Official, July 2021.

⁵¹ "Extortion, bio-warfare and terrorism: Extremists are exploiting the pandemic," United Nation Report [website].

PUBLIC SERVICES

This section examines the role played by VEOs in the provision of public social services and health information to the public. Collected data indicate that only in Somalia were public services provisioned by VEOs. Country-level analysts believe that that governments elsewhere in the region acted as the primary providers of public health measures during the pandemic: imposing lockdowns (Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya), curfews (Uganda and Kenya), and social distancing regulations, such as advice to work from home and to avoid crowds.⁵²

Country level analysis provided by local researchers reported that Al-Shabaab in Somalia provided various forms of public services during the pandemic, corroborating findings from the secondary data. In particular, the researcher noted that due to the challenges the Somali government faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this lead to the inevitable uneven distribution of resources. Somalia continues to recover from decades of civil war and lacks infrastructure development and public services, which provided the opportunity for Al-Shabaab to try and assert legitimacy and competence in managing the crisis to gain popular support from the local population. These

Al-Shabaab establishes parallel COVID-19 center in Somalia



Image G: Headline from a Somalia-based media organization relaying a public health press conference by Al-Shabaab fighters.

⁵² H. Ritchie, et al. "COVID-19: Stringency Index." 2022. Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.

circumstances were explained by one Somali CSO leader in an interview who stated that “the Somali government was only able to provide COVID-19 health services to the areas that it had under control, but the other areas controlled by Al-Shabaab were left unattended.”⁵³ Al-Shabaab also gave out public health advice in May 2020 and “a few days later, a special committee [supposedly with doctors and scientists] was formed by Al-Shabaab to manage the response to COVID-19 in territories under the group’s control.”⁵⁴ Local officials in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Somalia were instructed to provide adequate assistance to the committee’s members.⁵⁵

In an effort to publicize these activities, Al-Shabaab issued a public statement that the “Coronavirus Prevention and Treatment Committee” had established an isolation facility within its stronghold of Jilib in the region of Middle Juba.⁵⁶ This center was dedicated to treating those with COVID-19 symptoms and even included vehicles to transport patients using the center’s “round-the-clock hotline.”⁵⁷ News sources also picked up on this report and relayed that Al-Shabaab had set up at least one COVID-19 treatment center (see Image G).⁵⁸ Capitalizing on the spotlight that it has received in this regard, Al-Shabaab took the opportunity to issue a communique for intensified efforts for what they called a jihad in East Africa and urged caution for Muslims against the spread of diseases like COVID-19 and HIV by Western militaries.⁵⁹

⁵³ Key Informant Interview with a Somali Civil Society Organization Representative, July 2021.

⁵⁴ C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Al-Shabaab sets up coronavirus treatment centre in Somalia,” *Al Jazeera* [website], <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/14/al-shabab-sets-up-coronavirus-treatment-centre-in-somalia>, (accessed 18 October 2021).

⁵⁸ “Somalia’s Islamist group al Shabaab says sets up COVID-19 treatment centre,” *Reuters*, 12 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-somalia-idUSKBN2332C> (accessed 2 November 2021); Image source: “Al-Shabaab establishes parallel COVID-19 center in Somalia,” *Garowe Online*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/al-shabaab-establishes-parallel-covid-19-center-in-somalia>

⁵⁹ “Snapshot: How Extremist Groups are Responding to Covid-19,” *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* [website], <https://institute.global/policy/snapshot-how-extremist-groups-are-responding-covid-19-9-april-2020>, (accessed 30 August 2021).

RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

There were a variety of approaches that VEOs employed in their radicalization and recruitment efforts during the pandemic. A trend across the spectrum is the rapid digitization across these efforts, leading to a sentiment among experts that the pandemic restrictions have created a fertile atmosphere for extremism to spread more easily online.⁶⁰ Interview respondents in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia reported VEOs having an increased presence on social media, while respondents in Tanzania and Uganda did not discern a meaningful shift, except for in Eritrea.⁶¹ Those interviewed further indicated that pandemic restrictions have increasingly pushed young people towards significant social media usage. This exposes them to potentially harmful content more frequently, underscoring the need for digital literacy and effective, digitally savvy PVE programming.

Respondents from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya reported an intensification of online recruitment and radicalization as observed in many other parts of the world.⁶² This shift naturally reflected limitations on in-person interactions due to COVID-19 restrictions and the increased exposure of young people who spent more time online and became increasingly isolated due to these restrictions. Interviews with youth and CSOs from Kenya and Somalia expressed concern over a lack of digital literacy and “the potential echo chamber for radical views in many online communities.”⁶³ For example, Al-Shabaab has expanded its online operational capacity during the pandemic – diversifying from print and radio communication. Its efforts to propagate divisive and radicalizing narratives online have mainly gone unchecked in Kenya.⁶⁴ At the same time, a lack of monitoring and control of social media in Somalia has led to Al-Shabaab adapting to rely more heavily on new media to communicate with and recruit young people while also directly benefitting from the increased screen time availed by young Somalis as a result of lockdown restrictions.⁶⁵ Analysis from the country researcher from Somalia clearly illustrates that Al-Shabaab has successfully adapted to meet the changing circumstances of COVID-19 by shifting efforts from more direct in-person recruitment to social media.

While interviews in Kenya, Uganda, and Somalia revealed a shift in radicalization and recruitment patterns, respondents reached in Tanzania did not perceive any meaningful change in these patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one CSO leader in Tanzania put it:

“I don’t think recruitment patterns have changed in the face of COVID-19; the patterns have continued to be the social media and websites. However, most information regarding terrorism incidences and recruitment is largely hidden

⁶⁰ Key Informant Interviews with Ethiopian Federal Police Representative and Somalia Ministry of Information & Technology Representative, July–August 2021.

⁶¹ Country-level Key Informant Interviews, July–August 2021.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interview, Employee of Somalia Ministry of Information & Technology, July–August 2021.

⁶⁴ D. Pkalya, “Kenyan Stakeholders Call for Implementation of Local Action Plans to Stem Youth Radicalisation and Extremism.”

⁶⁵ W. Avis, “The COVID-19 pandemic and response on violent extremist recruitment and radicalization,” *K4D helpdesk*, 4 May 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/808_COVID19%20and_Violent_Extremism.pdf (accessed 12 November 2021).

from the public so at times it is not very easy to understand if there has been any significant change in recruitment pattern.”⁶⁶

Tanzanian security service members did not report observing or identifying specialized recruitment efforts online, although on-the-ground (offline), radicalization has taken place in and around Mtwara, Tanga, and Arusha on the border with Mozambique.⁶⁷ Given the often-clandestine nature of online recruitment and radicalization by VEOs, this lack of monitoring does not preclude online recruitment activities.

In Uganda, while recruitment and radicalization likely continued during the pandemic, the methods remained largely the same even as activities themselves became more seldom. A government official in Uganda confirmed this by stating that the pandemic has dramatically curtailed the recruitment and movement of recruits but not the operational capacity of VEOs.⁶⁸ Lockdown measures, including border closures, social distancing, and restrictions on gatherings have also reduced physical recruitment opportunities. Online recruitment activities likely continued during the period studied, but law enforcement agencies could not ascertain the magnitude.⁶⁹

Exploration and understanding of radicalization and recruitment trends in Eritrea posed a challenge for this study (which relied chiefly on KIIs) due to limited publicly accessible information about governmental P/CVE and CT efforts.⁷⁰ The Eritrean government affirmed in a statement given to the United Nations General Assembly that there have not been any terrorist threats in the country during the pandemic.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Key Informant Interview with a Tanzanian CSO leader, August 2021.

⁶⁷ Key Informant Interview with Tanzania Security Forces Officer, August 2021.

⁶⁸ Key Informant Interview with Ugandan government official, July 2021.

⁶⁹ Key Informant Interview with Ugandan government official, July 2021.

⁷⁰ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Eritrea,” *U.S. Department of State: Bureau on Counterterrorism*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/eritrea/>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

⁷¹ A. Georgio, [2020], “A statement at the United General Assembly under Agenda Item 144: ‘Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism’ [statement], *United Nations Repository* [online] https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/75/pdfs/statements/int_terrorism/03mtg_eritrea.pdf, (accessed 05 October 2021).

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) have played an uneven role in the region. For example, FTFs from Somalia associated with Al-Shabaab developed targeted recruitment and radicalization efforts in Kenya and Ethiopia during the pandemic through online platforms. Meanwhile, in Tanzania, FTFs took direct action during the first wave of the pandemic. Terrorist organizations staged attacks from neighboring Mozambique into southern Tanzania, notably across the Mtwara and Ruvuma regions. On multiple occasions, the Daesh-linked extremist group IS-M used social media to communicate their message and publicize their attacks in Tanzania.⁷² In October 2020, IS-M claimed responsibility for cross-border attacks on the Kitaya village in Nanyumbu district, Mtwara region. A video clip circulated via social media shows the perpetrators speaking in Kiswahili and tearing up one of the late President Magufuli's election posters while claiming they had come to Tanzania to remove the President.⁷³ Such spillover from Mozambique can be expected to continue in the year ahead.

There were no clear FTF incidents in Uganda during 2020. Likewise, Eritrea noted no terrorist incidents of any kind, to mention nothing of FTF activities. The border restrictions imposed following the pandemic generally made it difficult for FTFs to operate in countries outside their main bases of operation.⁷⁴ However, sanctioned cross-border military actions continued: from Eritrean governmental forces deployed in Ethiopia to Ugandan support for AMISOM in Somalia.

⁷² For example, "Tamko la Alshabab; Alshabab waelezea sababu za kuja Tanzania na kuvamia kijiji cha Kitaya," *Jutta TV Online*.

⁷³ G. Obulutsa, "Militants from Mozambique staged deadly attack in Tanzania, police say."

⁷⁴ R. Ramadhan and L. Ouma, "COVID-19 and Countering Violent Extremism Measures in Kenya," *Center for Human Rights and Policy Studies* [online report], <https://www.P/CVE-kenya.org/P/CVE-library>, [accessed 18 October 2021].

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

During 2020, underlying tensions in Ethiopia culminated in a civil conflict between the internationally recognized government and multiple Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs). The war is a complicated one with roots in ethnic identity and political power succession, generally standing outside the scope of VE.⁷⁵ The primary combatants, led by the former ruling party of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), were designated by the internationally recognized government as terrorist organizations in May 2021 but were not categorized as such in 2020.⁷⁶ Regardless, since becoming a hot conflict on 3 November 2020, the war in the Tigray region claimed scores of lives in the final months of the year, including many civilians killed in mass extrajudicial massacres.⁷⁷ COVID-19 clearly did not directly lead to the conflict, yet the pandemic contributed to instability by impacting the health, social, and economic wellbeing of residents.⁷⁸

Beyond the civil war, at least two terrorist attacks were reported in Ethiopia during 2020, compared with none in the year prior.⁷⁹ Individuals interviewed for the report believed that the greatest VE threats stemmed from Al-Shabaab in neighboring Somalia.⁸⁰ Government officials held that, "although Al-Shabaab has made many attempts to launch an attack on Ethiopia, they have been [largely] unsuccessful and abortive through the efforts of the National Intelligence Security Services (NISS)."⁸¹ Al-Shabaab is believed to have planned attacks in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, the state of South Wollo, which is home to a substantial Muslim community, and at Addis Ababa hotels.⁸²

Government and security officials interviewed held that Eritrea faces no significant threats from VE or terrorism, "with the exception of the TPLF."⁸³ No terrorist incidents were noted in 2020, yet subsequently, in May 2021, the TPLF was designated a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian government (after the 2020 reporting period).⁸⁴ However, large-scale migration from the Tigray civil war and COVID-19 pandemic "challenged border security measures."⁸⁵

⁷⁵ S. Wilkins, "What Tigray Portends: The Future of Peace and Security in Africa," War on the Rocks [website], <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/what-tigray-portends-the-future-of-peace-and-security-in-africa/>, (accessed 18 October 2021)

⁷⁶ Agence France Presse, "Ethiopia Designates Tigray's Former Ruling Party as Terrorists," *Barron's*, 6 May 2021, <https://www.barrons.com/news/ethiopia-designates-tigray-s-former-ruling-party-as-terrorists-01620298213>.

⁷⁷ S. Marks and D. Walsh, "From Shelled Ethiopian City, Doctors Tally Deaths and Plead for Help," *New York Times*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-civilian-casualties.html> (accessed 16 November 2021).

⁷⁸ "How conflict has made COVID-19 a neglected epidemic in Ethiopia," *The Conversation*, 21 September 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-conflict-has-made-covid-19-a-neglected-epidemic-in-ethiopia-167499> (accessed 16 November 2021).

⁷⁹ "Over 90 civilians killed in series of terrorists' attacks in Ethiopia," *Business Standard* [website], https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/over-90-civilians-killed-in-series-of-terrorists-attacks-in-ethiopia-120122400055_1.html, (accessed 29 July 2021); "34 killed in terror attack on bus in Ethiopia," *The Times of India* [website], <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/34-killed-in-terror-attack-on-bus-in-ethiopia/articleshow/79380932.cms> (accessed 29 July 2021); "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Ethiopia," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau on Counterterrorism* [website], <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/ethiopia/>, (accessed 5 October 2021).

⁸⁰ Key Informant Interview with an instructor at Addis Ababa University, 2021; Key Informant Interview with an Employee of Ethiopian Federal Police, 2021.

⁸¹ Key Informant Interview with an Ethiopian Government Official in Security Sector, 2021.

⁸² S. Gebre, "Ethiopia Arrests al-Shabaab and ISIS Suspects Planning Attacks," *Bloomberg*, 14 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-14/ethiopia-arrests-al-shabaab-and-isis-suspects-planning-attacks?fbclid=IwAR3GpV2tUDyluMpAucPMFE0YodX8tA0d4uppFAfVqJoT-9Cox7pamMyWty0>, (accessed 10 October 2021).

⁸³ Key Informant Interview with a Lecturer at Asmara University, 2021.

⁸⁴ "Ethiopia to designate TPLF, OLF-Shene as 'terror' groups," *Al Jazeera*, 1 May 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/1/ethiopia-to-designate-tplf-olf-shene-as-terror-groups> (accessed 16 January 2022).

⁸⁵ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Eritrea," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau on Counterterrorism*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/eritrea/>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

Concerns over TPLF actions in Eritrea stem from historical animosity during TPLF rule of Ethiopia, as well as engagements by Eritrea in northeast Ethiopia.⁸⁶ The latter has led to accusations of massacres by Eritrean troops.⁸⁷ Insight into the VE context in Eritrea is limited mainly due to, according to the US Department of State, “a broader lack of transparency.”⁸⁸

KENYA

During the pandemic, Kenya experienced an increased rate of terrorist and VE incidents. Between January and December 2020, there were 69 attacks, nearly double the 34 incidents reported in 2019. In 2020, 122 people were killed following such attacks, compared to 83 reported in 2019.⁸⁹ VEOs, mainly Al-Shabaab, launched aggressive attacks in the counties of Wajir, Garissa, and Mandera while the government prioritized measures to fight the pandemic. Notable VE activity in 2020 includes:

- Attacks across four counties: 29 in Mandera, 23 in Garissa, 9 in Lamu and 8 in Wajir.⁹⁰
- 122 people were killed, and a further 42 people were injured: 19 civilians, 18 security officials, and 5 Al-Shabaab militants.⁹¹
- 71 people were arrested for terror-related offenses, mainly in Nairobi.⁹²
- It is reported that refugee camps in Dadaab have become a recruitment ground for terrorists due to unemployment, anti-government sentiments stoked by pandemic restrictions and weaponized by Al-Shabaab propaganda, and a lack of education.⁹³

Al-Shabaab also used the pandemic to campaign and promote negative perceptions of the government. Field researchers for this report noted that the government’s lockdown measures were re-framed in videos from the VEO as attempts to antagonize Muslims and impoverish them by locking down the Mombasa port and Eastleigh economic center of Nairobi. Accordingly, Al-Shabab called upon all Muslims to defy government orders and stand against the establishment.

⁸⁶ “Ethiopia PM Ahmed Abiy admits Eritrea forces in Tigray,” *BBC News*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56497168> (accessed 16 January 2022).

⁸⁷ “Ethiopia: Eritrean troops’ massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity,” *Amnesty International*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/>

⁸⁸ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Eritrea,” U.S Department of State: Bureau on Counterterrorism.

⁸⁹ “Trends of Violent Extremist Attacks and Arrests in Kenya,” (2021) *Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies*, Report No. 4, <https://www.chrips.or.ke/publications/research-reports/trends-of-violent-extremist-attacks-and-arrests-in-kenya-january-december-2020/> (accessed 18 October 2021).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ R. Mohamed, A. Shajkovci, A. McDowell-Smith, & M. Ahmed, “Youth, Violent Extremist Recruitment, and COVID-19 in Kenya,” *GTSC: Homeland Security Today* [website], <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/youth-violent-extremist-recruitment-and-covid-19-in-kenya/>, [accessed 18 October 2021].

SOMALIA

While official COVID-19 figures in Somalia remained very low during 2020, secondary impacts on day-to-day lives and livelihoods in the conflict-affected country have been dire.⁹⁴ Government and security actors interviewed for this report felt that humanitarian actors, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and the AMISOM peacekeeping mission were negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions hindering joint operations and institutional capacity building.⁹⁵

Meanwhile, the main VEO, Al-Shabaab, remained a consistent threat and accounted for a majority of the 2,200 armed conflict events and 2,981 fatalities logged in 2020.⁹⁶ The group continued contending that the main problem in Somalia were the nonbelievers, Christians, and foreigners present in the country. Al-Shabaab spokespersons suggested that COVID-19 was intentionally spread by foreign forces and criticized public health measures from the government, especially the closure of mosques (see Image H).



Image H: Press release from Al-Shabaab illustrating its response to COVID-19 in 2020.

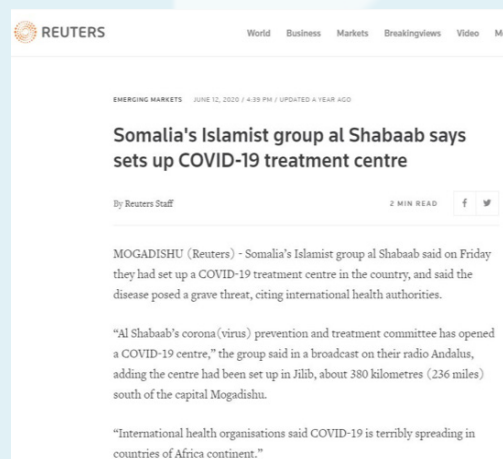


Image I: Reuters article indicating Al-Shabaab providing service delivery in the context of COVID-19⁹⁷

Somalia continues to recover from decades of civil war and lacks infrastructure development and public services, which provided the opportunity for Al-Shabaab to try and assert legitimacy and competence in managing the crisis to gain popular support from the local population. These circumstances were explained by one Somali CSO leader in an interview who stated that “the Somali government was only able to provide COVID-19 health services

⁹⁴ Braam, D.H., Srinivasan, S., Church, L. et al. “Lockdowns, lives and livelihoods: the impact of COVID-19 and public health responses to conflict affected populations – a remote qualitative study in Baidoa and Mogadishu, Somalia,” *Conflict and Health* 15, 47 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-021-00382-5>

⁹⁵ Interviews with members of the Ministry of Internal Security, Ministry of Defense, and Somali National Army, 2021; Image source: “Shabaab Appoints Committee to Monitor COVID-19 Pandemic in its Controlled Territories,” *SITE Intelligence Group Enterprise*, 13 May 2020. [Site redacted].

⁹⁶ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for Somalia, 1 January to 31 December 2020, <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

⁹⁷ “Somalia’s Islamist group Al-Shabaab says sets up COVID-19 treatment centre,” *Reuters*.

to the areas that it had under control, but the other areas controlled by Al-Shabaab were left unattended.”⁹⁸ Al-Shabaab also gave out public health advice in May 2020 and “a few days later, a special committee [supposedly with doctors and scientists] was formed by Al-Shabaab to manage the response to COVID-19 in territories under the group’s control.”⁹⁹ Local officials in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas of Somalia were instructed to provide adequate assistance to the committee’s members, while the group also reportedly set up a COVID-19 isolation center (see Image I).¹⁰⁰

According to interviews with government representatives, misinformation from Al-Shabaab directly targeted younger audiences with ethnonationalist narratives while casting COVID-19 as a virus spread by enemies of Islam.¹⁰¹ The group disseminated such messages through increased use of digital video outreach on social media, alongside the continued publication of its “Gaidi Mtaani” magazine, local radio stations such as “Radio Andulus” and direct text message appeals. While there is limited evidence of a clear correlation between the pandemic and incidence rates of VE, country level analysis indicated the long-term impact of COVID-19 would bolster Al-Shabaab recruitment efforts, weaken efforts to prevent radicalization, and negatively impact security outside the capital.

Further notable events identified as VE activity in 2020 include:

- In April 2020, Al-Shabaab committed an attack against African Union Mission to Somalia troops, killing four.¹⁰²
- In April 2020, at least seven Somali National Army soldiers were killed when their vehicle hit a landmine placed by Al-Shabaab in the Shabelle region.¹⁰³
- On 17 August 2020, a terrorist attack executed by Al-Shabaab took place at the Elite Hotel in the capital Mogadishu, reportedly killing at least 16 people and leaving many others injured.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Key Informant Interview with a Somali Civil Society Organization Representative, July 2021.

⁹⁹ C. Hockey and M. Jones, “The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Key Informant Interview with an Employee of Ministry of Internal Security, 2021.

¹⁰² “Somalia: AMISOM troops targeted in militant attack in Balcad district (Middle Shabelle region) April 8, 2020” *GardaWorld*, <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/330606/somalia-amisom-troops-targeted-in-militant-attack-in-balcad-district-middle-shabelle-region-april-8>, (accessed 18 October 2021).

¹⁰³ S. West, Al-Shabaab Threatens COVID-19 Interventions in Somalia.

¹⁰⁴ “Somalia: UN condemns ‘brazen’ terrorist attack on beachside hotel,” United Nation News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070342> (accessed on 05 October 2021).

TANZANIA

Tanzania experienced at least two attacks and 16 instances of non-state violence against civilians in 2020.¹⁰⁵ The Islamic State of Mozambique (IS-M), based in Northern Mozambique, also carried out two attacks in border villages in this period.¹⁰⁶ The most notable attack was carried out in Kitaya village in Mtwara. Security officials interviewed for this report felt that the attack was an instance of conflict spillover across the border; The same official believed that border security might have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 response measures, potentially allowing for the attack to take place.¹⁰⁷ Other incidents linked to terrorism and VE occurred in various regions termed as VE hotspots, including Tanga, Mtwara, Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, Zanzibar, and the Coast Region (especially in Kibiti).¹⁰⁸ However, officials interviewed for this report did not suggest a drastic change in terrorism and VE incidents compared to previous years. Most participants noted many violent extremist groups are found in the neighboring countries surrounding Tanzania and have not had major impacts in Tanzania:

“In Tanzania, it is very hard to know who exactly terrorists are and even their leaders, many that we hear and know of are simply suspects that are in jail and their cases are ongoing so it’s hard to tell really. UAMSHO [The Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation, nicknamed The Awakening] one of the groups here in Zanzibar that was considered terrorist has not been proved guilt[y]. Recently their leaders who were detained have been released from jail”.¹⁰⁹

While the pandemic does not appear to have significantly reshaped the terrorist and VE landscape in Tanzania, it is essential to note that Tanzanian officials interviewed expressed great concern as to the continuing rise in the number of terrorist and VE-related incidents in the neighboring countries of Mozambique, Somalia, and Kenya.¹¹⁰ COVID-19 linked narratives from extremist and terrorist groups operating in neighboring countries, especially Kenya, were noticed in Tanzania by the interview participants in this study. These narratives from neighboring countries include that:

1. The narrative that COVID-19 is a divine punishment from God;
2. The conviction that responses to the virus constitute a war against Muslims by governments; and
3. The belief that governments are unable to care for their citizens while highlighting the provision of social and health services by VEOs to show the legitimacy of extremist groups.

Such misinformation and disinformation from VEOs in other countries may take root locally in the mid-to-long term if appropriate P/CVE measures and attempts at inoculation are not made.

¹⁰⁵ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for Tanzania, 1 January to 31 December 2020, <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

¹⁰⁶ G. Obulutsa, “Militants from Mozambique staged deadly attack in Tanzania, police say.”

¹⁰⁷ Key Informant Interview with a Tanzanian governmental security official, August 2021.

¹⁰⁸ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Tanzania,” U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism [website], <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/tanzania/>, (accessed 5 October 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Key Informant Interview with Anonymous Respondent, Zanzibar, Tanzania, August 2021.

¹¹⁰ Key Informant Interviews, Tanzania Security Forces Official and Security Officer, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 2021.

¹¹¹ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Uganda,” U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/uganda/>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

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There was a reduction in VE and terrorism incidences in Uganda during the strict COVID-19 restrictions in 2020. While not documented in this 2020 report, there was also an increase in such cases in 2021 when measures were relaxed. This correlation fits with adaptations by VE actors' mobilization and recruitment mechanisms – namely shifting to online platforms – to train fighters for future deployment.

Uganda did not record any terrorism-related incidents in 2020,¹¹¹ yet the country experienced violent attacks primarily related to electoral and political strife. Over 134 armed conflict events, including 65 battles and 116 reported fatalities, took place in the lead up to Election Day in January 2021, and the months prior.¹¹² This included incidents in the regions of Kampala, Central and Busoga.¹¹³ Apart from these, country-level analysis in Uganda noted both internal and cross border VE and terrorism activities and threats. The cross-border threats come from mainly DRC, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Sudan.¹¹⁴ The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an anti-Kampala rebel group that pledged allegiance to Daesh in 2019 and which is based in DRC, continued to plan attacks in the country but did not execute any in 2020. This may have resulted from border closures due as part of COVID-19 prevention efforts.¹¹⁵

Due to COVID-19 movement restrictions, VEOs have recruited new members through social media and other online forums in Uganda. Interviewees from civil society and government also expressed concern over widespread online and offline disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. By spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda about the virus, VEOs seek to sow mistrust in authorities and vaccination efforts.

Other VE-related incidents in Uganda during the period of this study include cases of violent attacks and confrontations continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, on 6 March 2020, a group of approximately 200 people attacked an army detachment in the Zombo district. Three soldiers and five attackers died, and several others were arrested.¹¹⁶ According to the Internal Security Organization and Uganda People's Defense Forces spokesperson, the attackers were a mixture of people from the Democratic Republic of Congo and local communities whose primary motive was to acquire guns.¹¹⁷

Notwithstanding these experiences of organized violence, it is crucial to note that Uganda still ranks as the country with second-lowest with terrorist attacks in the Global Terrorism Index since 2010.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Uganda," U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/uganda/> (accessed 1 January 2022).

¹¹² Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for Uganda, 1 January to 31 December 2020, <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>, (accessed 1 January 2022).

¹¹³ L. Taylor, "They came in plainclothes with guns: 'Abducted' by Uganda's army," *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/3/they-came-in-plainclothes-with-guns-abducted-by-ugandas-army> (accessed 13 November 2021).

¹¹⁴ Note: Country level reporting for Uganda was based on interviews with Uganda People's Defence Forces representatives, including from the Counter Terrorism Division and law enforcement representatives.

¹¹⁵ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Uganda," U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/uganda/> (accessed 1 January 2022).

¹¹⁶ "Six die when armed men attack army unit in northwestern Uganda," *Xinhua*, 6 March 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/06/c_138850710.htm (accessed 13 November 2021).

¹¹⁷ K. Kazibwe, "Army says former fighters organized attack on Zombo detach," *Nile Post*, 10 March 2020, <https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/03/10/army-says-former-fighters-organized-attack-on-zombo-detach/> (accessed 13 November 2021).

¹¹⁸ The Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, Australia, Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020.

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