

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Online/social media as a pathway towards violent extremism in East Africa

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## Question

*How is online/social media used as a pathway towards violent extremism in East Africa?*

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## 1. Overview

There is a large and growing body of both academic and grey literature that discusses the use of online and social media by violent extremist organisations.<sup>1</sup> Findings consistently highlight the increasingly sophisticated manner and diverse ways in which these organisations are exploiting increasing access to the Internet. However, discussions of the role played by online and social media in pathways towards violent extremism are more limited, focused primarily on individual case studies drawn predominantly from the global north. Much less attention has been placed on these processes in East Africa.<sup>2</sup>

It is commonly held that pathways towards violent extremism in East Africa are multiple, complex, context-specific, with religious, ideological, political, economic and historical dimensions. Pathways

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<sup>1</sup> Social media is understood to include websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Social media is characterised by highly malleable, user-created content. Web services such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are examples of social media websites.

<sup>2</sup> In this report East Africa is understood to include the countries of Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mayotte, Mozambique, Reunion, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

typically involve gradual exposure to, and socialisation towards, extreme behaviour and increasing legitimisation of the use of violence to achieve political ends. However, despite a history of extremism in East Africa, relatively little empirical research has been done to determine why and how individuals join violent extremist groups such as Al Shabaab. Pathways defy easy analysis and understanding of the phenomenon remains incomplete. It also **remains unclear to what extent the Internet and, more specifically, social media facilitate pathways towards violent extremism.**

In recent years, it has become clear that those who advocate the use of violence have identified the Internet, particularly online/social media, as an instrument for radicalisation and recruitment. Understanding not merely the content that is available online, but the ways in which this content is used in the process of radicalisation is central to policy makers and researchers. At the individual level, susceptibility to powerful messaging, narratives and imagery via social media networks and person-to-person channels is significant in the context of violent extremism.

Online/social media facilitates the search for information and subsequently the immersion into online extremist environments. While grey literature suggests this creates the possibility of becoming involved in extremist groups or movements (online and/or offline), academic literature has articulated mixed views on the role the Internet plays in the process of radicalisation.

Key findings include:

- The Internet can play a role in the radicalisation process.
- There are few examples of individuals radicalising entirely online, but there are signs that this could increase over time.
- There is less evidence of the internet's role in recruitment to terrorist networks or the use of violence – offline socialisation remains of pivotal importance.
- Groups such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State<sup>3</sup> (IS) and Al-Shabaab have sophisticated online presences, comprising of online media organisations, mother sites feeding content to others, and a large number of other websites and forums maintained by the wider network.
- Extremists are making more use of social media, and its importance is likely to grow. It is especially important in allowing women to play a larger role in networks.
- Extremists use the internet for operational purposes, including communication and the coordination of attacks.

Discussions of gender in the literature are relatively limited, confined to discussions of the role online and social media can play in facilitating the engagement of women with extremist narratives.

## 2. Online/social media and its use by violent extremists

### *Internet use in Africa*

The Internet has transformed the way we communicate, dramatically reducing the cost of communication; it has enabled access to knowledge and organised it in a way that makes it more searchable. It has also made it easier to find people and create networks among like-minded individuals,

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as Daesh, ISIL, or ISIS

across great distances and beyond national borders, and it has lowered the threshold for engaging in 'risky' or 'embarrassing' behaviour because users can interact anonymously (ISD, 2011).

While internet penetration rates for Africa are below the global average (28.6 per cent versus 46.4 per cent in 2015<sup>4</sup>) it is clear that increasing numbers are able to access information online in a variety of ways. Continent-wide studies suggest that when Africans go online, predominantly with their mobile phones, they spend much of their time on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on) (Essoungo, 2010). Although social media use is on the rise, texting and FM radio broadcasts remain the predominant modes of communication in East Africa (ICPTS, 2015).

### ***Internet use by extremist groups***

While there are clear economic and social benefits associated with expanding internet access, some have sought to exploit the increasing omnipresence of internet access to facilitate violent extremism. According to Awan (2010), the Internet has surpassed all other media forms in becoming the principle arena for terrorist media activity. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have value-added for a group's ability to communicate, organise, recruit and train potential violent extremists (Weimann, 2006). Weimann (2012) describes how recent technological advances have changed terrorist online communication from one-directional to bi-directional with interactive capabilities like chat-rooms, online social networking sites, and video-sharing sites.

According to Jones (2013), the rise of the Internet and social media has fundamentally changed terrorist activities. Individuals like Anwar al-Awlaki (now deceased), Adam Gadahn, and Shaykh Abdallah Ibrahim al-Faisal have utilised YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, internet chat rooms, and other forums to distribute propaganda, recruit new supporters, and seek financial aid. More recently IS has developed a sophisticated and effective communication strategy that uses online media tools to disseminate its propaganda (Liang, 2015). It has populated social media platforms and has attracted a global network of supporters that articulate, magnify and circulate its violent extremist messages worldwide. Similarly, Al Shabaab's Twitter feed has been highly graphic in its content and blatant in the promotion of terrorism as a legitimate practice.

The Internet has become a prominent feature of modern radicalisation processes, particularly among those under 35 years old (Conway & McInerney, 2008; Hearne & Laiq, 2010). However, it remains unclear to what extent the Internet and, more specifically, social media influences pathways towards (violent) extremism. Empirical studies have identified the importance of YouTube and similar video-sharing websites in increasing access to Jihadi material (Boubaker, 2011; Conway & McInerney, 2008). The Internet can facilitate network formation and thus enhances the platforms available for radicalisation (TTSRL, 2008). Online imagery, jihadi chat rooms, and religious television channels from the Gulf are important components in these modern processes of radicalisation (Boubaker, 2011).

There is some evidence to show that jihadists are now adopting a proactive online and social media policy to distribute propaganda, provide information and encourage radicalisation. ISD (2011) has identified evidence of the active use of Facebook and YouTube for the purposes of distribution of jihadist films urging for jihadists' to:

- 'Invade' social network sites such as Facebook by setting up groups with radical views and to seek to gather users with the 'right' attitude;

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

- 'Invade' file-sharing sites like YouTube by placing various clips with extreme content;
- Infiltrate popular Islamist websites, spreading extremist content on the discussion forums in order to attempt to convert them into militant sites.

### ***Benefits of the internet for extremist groups***

Social media applications have lower technical and financial barriers to entry, and reach wider constituencies than dedicated websites. ISD (2011) asserts that Facebook offers a new type of mass interpersonal persuasion and YouTube motivates individuals to contribute by uploading videos or commenting on others. These forums also have the added bonus of making users harder to identify; with their real IP addresses uncompromised, as they are not required to fill in verifiable personal details. According to Ishengoma (2013) and UNODC (2012) online and social media can be used by violent extremists in developing countries for the following purposes:

- **Information exchange:** violent extremists use online and social media to communicate with a worldwide audience.
- **Recruiting and training:** the internet has become a crucial instrument in the hands of terrorists to spread their messages and recruit new supporters.
- **Planning attacks:** online and social media may be used to plan an attack due to its secure communication and fast message channelling.
- **Fundraising:** the groups are able to conduct fundraising through wire transfer using email addresses.
- **Cyber-attacks:** cyber-attack refers to the use of computer networking tools to attack other computer networks or national communications systems like government operations, transportation, and energy.
- **Propaganda:** online and social media have proven particularly useful in the dissemination of propaganda, delivering ideological clarifications, explanations or campaigns of terrorist actions.

### ***Extremist internet use in East Africa***

Terrorist organisations active in East Africa include groups such as Harakhat Al-Shabaab/Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb/AQIM. Groups such as IS and Boko Haram have also become increasingly transnational, seeking to recruit fighters and solicit funds globally.

While the presence of violent extremist groups active in East Africa on the Internet is obvious (see for example Al-Shabaab's twitter feed), there are many unanswered questions that may need to be examined (Betram and Ellison, 2014): are the terrorist website publishers within East Africa resident in the region? What is the preferred web-publishing technology for terrorist web publishers in East Africa? What is the geographic distribution of terrorist groups publishing in East Africa? Who are the target audiences for the terrorist publishers of East Africa?

Although to date there have been limited specific studies investigating Sub-Saharan African terrorist groups' use of the Internet, Somalia's Al-Shabaab's use of Twitter and Facebook has drawn large amounts of analysis from both media and policy circles (Pearlman, 2012). Academic studies such as Kahn et al (2004) have shown how common and easily accessible terrorist websites and content have become. However, despite the internet having become central to many people's lives globally, many studies appear to have given terrorist use of the internet only limited attention.

### 3. Pathways toward violent extremism

It is commonly held that pathways towards violent extremism in East Africa are multiple, complex, context-specific, with religious, ideological, political, economic and historical dimensions (McCauley and Mosalenko, 2009; Hellsten, 2016; ICG, 2012). Radicalisation has, however, been traced to a common set of pathways that translate real or perceived grievances into increasingly extreme ideas and readiness to participate in political action beyond the status quo. According to Start (2010), radicalisation is a dynamic process that varies for each individual, but shares some underlying commonalities that can be explored. The pathway to violence is typically a graduated one, on both an individual and a collective level (ARTIS, 2009).

Wiktorowicz (2014) has identified four interrelated stages of the radicalisation process: i) cognitive opening, whereby individuals who are conditioned by both internal and external factors (such as economic and social circumstances), become receptive to new ideas; ii) religious-search, whereby individuals seek religious understanding of particular issues; iii) frame alignment, where the new ideas, that are often radical in nature, become meaningful to them, and iv) socialisation during which individuals internalise radical ideas that enable them to join extremist groups. McCauley and Mosalenko (2009) identify the following sociological and psychodynamic pathways:

#### Individual-level factors

- **Personal grievance:** This factor emphasises revenge for real or perceived harm inflicted upon oneself by an outside party.
- **Group grievance:** Similar dynamics to those that are primed by personal grievances; but in this case, the subject perceives harm inflicted on a group that they belong to or have sympathy for.
- **Slippery slope:** Gradual radicalisation through activities that incrementally limit the individual's social circle, narrow their mind-set, and in some cases desensitise them to violence.
- **Love:** Several violent extremist organisations, especially at their origin, owe their structure to a tight-knit group of friends who share religious, economic, social, and sexual bonds.
- **Risk and status:** High-risk behaviour, if successful, offers a pathway to status insofar as it becomes re-construed as bravery and commitment to the cause.
- **Unfreezing:** Loss of social connection can open an individual to new ideas and a new identity that may include political radicalisation.

#### Group-level factors

- **Polarisation:** Discussion, interaction, and experience within a radical group can result in an aggregate increase in commitment to the cause, and in some cases can contribute to the formation of divergent conceptions of the group's purpose and preferred tactics.
- **Isolation:** This reinforces the influence of radical thinking by allowing serious and/or persuasive members of the group to disproportionately define the agenda.
- **Competition:** Groups can become radicalised in relation to other groups as they compete for legitimacy and prestige with the general populace.

## Mass radicalisation

- **Jujitsu politics:** Also called ‘the logic of political violence’, political jiu-jitsu is a form of asymmetrical political warfare in which radical groups act to provoke governments to crack down on the populace at large and produce domestic blowback that legitimates further violent action.
- **Hatred:** In protracted conflicts the enemy is increasingly seen as less human to such a degree that the notion of common humanity does not readily trigger natural inhibitions against violence.
- **Martyrdom:** This implies that the person in question is willing to die, or has died, for a cause.

## Role of the Internet in pathways towards violent extremism

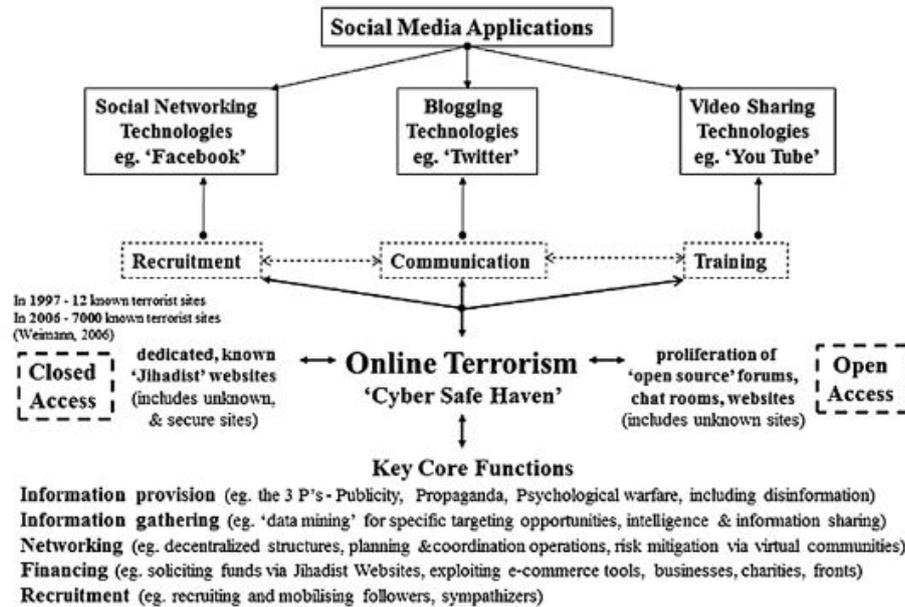
The Internet, both globally and in East Africa plays an important role in intensifying and accelerating radicalisation. It can provide the user with the information they are looking for to confirm their beliefs, such as videos and images, for example, which reinforce a particular world view and can be powerful catalysts in the radicalisation process. It also creates an online community that allows individuals to find like-minded people where they otherwise would not be able to do so offline. In doing so, it normalises atypical views and behaviours, such as extreme ideological views or the use of violence to solve problems and address grievances (ISD, 2011: 3).

A range of online activities have been identified as relevant and beneficial to extremist organisations. There are three aspects of online and social media that make it particularly useful as an instrument for radicalisation and recruitment. According to Neumann et al. (2009: 11), the Internet:

- Illustrates and reinforces ideological messages and/or narratives. Potential recruits can gain near-instantaneous access to visually powerful video and imagery which appear to substantiate the extremists’ political claims.
- Makes it easier to join and integrate into more formal organisations. It provides a comparatively risk-free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach beyond an isolated core group of conspirators.
- Creates a new social environment in which particular views and behaviour are normalised. Surrounded by other radicals, the internet becomes a virtual ‘echo chamber’ in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support.

It is suggested that social media facilitates pathways to extremism rather than acting as a driving force. Cohen (2009) asserts that violent extremists actively target social media users among vulnerable populations in impoverished regions in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and the poorly integrated communities in Western Europe. The argument that the Internet is an ‘echo chamber’ for extremist views appears frequently in academic reports and media commentary. The US Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee notes that the Internet has ‘become a virtual “echo chamber” – acting as a radicalisation accelerant’ (Edwards and Gribbon, 2013: 45)

Figure 1: Conceptual radicalisation pathways used by terrorists



Source: Kahder (2016)

Nonetheless, there is no consensus on the question of whether changes in the use and possibilities of the internet have caused the internet to become a central explanatory factor in the process of (violent) radicalisation. There is **limited empirical evidence confirming the relationship between exposure to extremist messages and attitudes that are supportive of violent extremism**, particularly in East Africa (Conway, 2012). The assumption that the internet plays an important role in the process of (violent) radicalisation is mostly based on secondary sources and anecdotal evidence, with no empirical studies to back this up or to measure the strength of a possible influence.

## The pivotal importance of real world social relationships

According to the Dutch General Intelligence and Information Office (AIVD) (2006), the Internet can be seen as the catalyst of contemporary violent Jihad and one of the principal instigators of bottom-up processes of violent radicalisation and 'Jihadisation'. However, self-radicalisation and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world is still an anomaly. The Internet can facilitate, intensify and accelerate the process of radicalisation. Open forums and chat rooms can act as an engine of transformation because they can help validate existing ideas and facilitate support from likeminded people. At the individual level, susceptibility to powerful messaging, narratives and imagery via social media networks and person-to-person channels has been highlighted as being particularly significant in the context of violent extremism. Extremists can amplify their message in real time and with global reach. Reports on the process of radicalisation have shown that, in general, extremist content online does not recruit and radicalise in a vacuum; rather it tends to complement offline efforts to radicalise and it enhances the ability of recruiters and self-identified radicals to accelerate the process to extremism.

In the majority of case studies, offline contacts and influences tend to complement the Internet. According to Neumann and Stevens (2009), self-radicalisation and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world rarely happens. The reason for the absence of self-radicalisation and self-recruitment online is that real-world social relationships continue to be pivotal. Experts conclude

that the internet can support and facilitate, but never completely replace, direct human contact and the ties of friendship and kinship through which intense personal loyalties form.

According to ISD (2011) much of the jihadist web presence was about 'preaching to the choir'. While the internet provides a convenient platform for activists to renew their commitment and reach out to like-minded individuals elsewhere, it is largely ineffective when it comes to drawing in new recruits.

## 4. Pathways toward violent extremism in East Africa

The growth of Islamic extremism in East Africa appears to be linked to the poor socio-economic conditions of countries in the region where Islamist groups, deliberately leveraging socioeconomic grievances, penetrate East African societies (Kimunguyi, 2012). Possible drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism are varied and complex and unique in each country within the region and with each individual. The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy comments that; adverse political and economic circumstances, religious and ethnic discrimination, heavy-handed counter-terrorism operations, and perceptions about international injustices are the 'push factors' that cause radicalisation in East Africa (UN, 2012).

There are various factors which have increased the region's susceptibility to radicalisation. Decades of conflict have left the area vulnerable to cross-border instability, while socioeconomic marginalisation adds fuel to radicalisation processes. Radicalisation challenges emanating from Somalia should be of special concern to the wider region. Somalia's instability and conflict has had a direct impact on neighbouring countries and paved the way for vulnerabilities that the terrorist group Al-Shabaab is exploiting, particularly among youth (ICPTS, 2015). Factors that are seen to have influenced pathways to violent extremism include (Amble and Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014; Bertram and Ellison, 2014; Botha and Abdile, 2014):

- **Historical antagonisms and the role of authoritarianism:** Islamic radicalisation in East Africa must be placed with a historical context of resistance from the periphery to the central authority of the state.
- **Political climate:** The political context of various East African countries has provided opportunities for radical Islamist elements to organise and promote their doctrines.
- **Socio-economic factors:** While the straight-forward link between poverty and radicalisation has been broadly discredited, evidence indicates that radical Islamists have been able to exploit economic marginalisation, high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services to attract followers.
- **Marginalisation of young people:** In various countries within East Africa, young people across the political spectrum have reported feeling politically disenfranchised from government and neglected and 'deceived' by political leaders.
- **International events, funding and the role of migrants:** International issues that relate to the Islamic world resonate in the region, though experts caution that these have a far lesser degree of influence than local political and economic issues (Alao, 2013).
- **Decline of traditional Islamic organisations.**

- **Inter-religious rivalries:** This has been a contributing factor to the radicalisation of some Muslim groups, for example, Ethiopia's (predominantly Christian) invasion of Somalia (predominantly Muslim) between 2006 and 2009.
- **Government responses to violent attacks:** The Kenyan government, for example, has been criticised for increasing the risks of radicalisation through its counter-terrorism strategy and the treatment of groups such as Somalis and Muslims as separate and threatening.

The media strategies of violent extremists in the region seek to develop self-recruitment models through the Internet that enable the creation of virtual communities for education, mutual introductions, communication and the planning of mutual activities (IPSTC 2015). As Conway (2012) asserts, social media facilitates the search for information and immersion into online extremist settings. This creates the dangerous possibility of becoming involved in extremist groups or movements, both online and/or offline.

Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. (2012), Jones (2013) and Menkhaus (2014) have all Research highlights **Al-Shabaab's** use of social media to both disseminate propaganda and information, and to radicalise individuals within East Africa. Menkhaus (2014) notes their effective use of internet chat rooms, websites, and YouTube videos to recruit and fundraise internationally. Meleagrou-Hitchens et al (2012) comment that Al-Shabaab has become adept at producing material that provides its followers with an alternative to mainstream media. Relying heavily on digital video and Twitter, the group projects an image of itself as an effective and united force carrying out the will of God through the implementation of Shariah and fighting the enemies of Islam. Twitter has allowed the group to do much of this in real time, offering supporters instant interpretations of events and rebuttals of critiques, for example during the attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall in 2013. The targeting of Al-Shabaab's social media activity at users outside of East Africa is also of interest.

## Kenyan Somali Islamist radicalisation

Somalia's growing Islamist radicalism is considered to be spilling over into Kenya where a large number of Somalis are resident. Al-Shabaab has built a cross-border presence and a clandestine support network among Muslim populations in the north east, Nairobi and on the coast, and is trying to radicalise and recruit youth from these communities, often capitalising on longstanding grievances against the central state (ICG, 2012). Factors that have been identified as of importance include: a troubled history; government misrule and neglect; lack of citizenship and rights; Islamism and radicalisation and counter-terrorism operations.

The ICG do not attribute particular significance to the internet or social media in facilitating radicalisation in this area, though it may play a role in disseminating an anti-Kenyan Islamist narrative, which, in turn, may find fertile ground amongst Somali residents of Kenya.

Amble and Meleagrou-Hitchens (2014) comment that Al-Shabaab has had varying degrees of success in its regional recruitment efforts, actively escalating these in recent years. They note that the group has had success in countries such as Kenya but has struggled in Somaliland. The strategies and tactic Al-Shabaab employ for successful recruitment vary depending on geographical location, as do motivations to join.

## **Kenyan Muslims**

Kenyan Muslims have been marginalised within the Kenyan state and feel like they are treated as second-rate citizens (Anderson & McKnight, 2014: 20; Botha, 2013: 19). Many young Muslims increasingly believe that the discrimination they face is part of the wider systematic discrimination against Muslims in the world (Mwakimako & Willis, 2014: 13; Botha, 2013: 16). Distrust of the government is widespread among Muslims, making it harder to tackle radicalisation (Anderson & McKnight, 2014, p. 20; Anderson, 2014, p. 2). The lack of investigations into violence that is seemingly orchestrated by the state exacerbates this (Anderson & McKnight, 2014: 20).

As well as recruiting members of Kenya's Somali diaspora, the last three years have also seen Al-Shabaab recruit indigenous Kenyan Muslims not only to carry out attacks in their own country, but also to join Al-Shabaab in its fight against African Union and Somali government forces in Somalia (Amble and Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014: 524). Based on interviews with six Kenyan Muslims, two claimed they had joined for purely ideological purposes, having been taken in and indoctrinated by Al-Shabaab's recruitment network in Kenya, three joined for mainly financial reasons, while one was kidnapped and forced against his will (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014). Two of those interviewed claimed that their decision to join the group was based on their adherence to a global ideology based on fighting jihad to protect the ummah (global Muslim community) from the Western-led war on Islam. These individuals had been introduced to the ideology by a number of popular Kenyan preachers who were part of an Al-Shabaab support network based in Kenya (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2014).

Kenyan recruitment to Al-Shabaab is not only attributed to the spread of global jihadist ideology, but also to group's ability to provide large financial incentives to new members.

## **Clan based recruitment in Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland**

Instability in Somalia and the relevance of clan politics has contributed to conflict and an inability of leaders to build an inclusive Somali state. Al-Shabaab has managed to gain a foothold in the various clans. Many Al-Shabaab recruits from Somalia have been drawn to the group as a result of clan affiliation or other regional factors, including the 2006 invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia, which inflamed longstanding clan-based rivalries. Botha and Abdile (2014) highlight how Al-Shabaab uses clan and family networks to recruit informers who are usually close relatives, friends and family members of targeted individuals. They also identify poverty and the prospect of financial gain as drivers of radicalisation. In this context, real world relationships appear to be of paramount importance.

## **Tanzanian Islamist radicalisation**

There is evidence of increasing Islamist mobilisation in Tanzania, however, few analyses study the spread and/or mechanisms of radicalisation in the country. The literature argues that Islamist groups are exploiting domestic political and economic issues to promote their view of a more politically engaged Islam (Haynes, 2005: 1333; Becker, 2006; Haynes, 2006: 491). Violent extremists are also seeking to nurture growing dissatisfaction regarding political and economic liberalisation (Haynes 2006; Bakari 2012).

The discoveries in October-November 2013 of terrorist training camps, weapon caches and indoctrination centres associated with regional militants illustrates the connections with Al Shabaab and its Kenyan affiliate Al Hijra (Lopez-Lucia, 2015). The general efforts of these regional and global groups to build an

operational network in Tanzania involve a well organised media campaign: social media, websites, and an online magazine called Gaidi Mtaani published both in English and Swahili (Le Sage, 2014).

## 5. Youth radicalisation

East Africa's burgeoning youth population is increasingly defining the region's security environment. Population growth has made East Africa one of the youngest regions in the world and is projected to continue. Although violent extremists in East Africa adhere to diverse ideologies, the strategies that they employ to enlist youth into their ranks are often similar. Radical organisations understand and prey upon a combination of political realities, socio-economic factors, and individual characteristics that render youth in East Africa vulnerable to recruitment (ACSS, 2012).

The root cause of youth radicalisation in Eastern Africa stems from the region's economic, social, and political conditions. Ineffective decentralisation of development plans and governance issues form the backbone of this situation, with an infrastructure of social networks or religious and political groups delivering services and support to communities in the absence of government. This is particularly the case in environments with extremely high levels of prolonged and severe intra and inter-state conflicts. Such conflicts lead to instability, poverty, unemployment and political isolation that make the youth vulnerable to radicalisation (Botha and Abdile, 2014; Hellsten, 2016).

According to Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, 2013), unemployment, poverty and political marginalisation have contributed to the radicalisation of youth in Eastern Africa. IRIN (2013) indicates that an estimated 75 per cent of youth who have completed school have no jobs. This, coupled with rising political disenchantment, has led to serious challenges. Such issues breed radicalisation as youth seek avenues through which to express discontent. Violence can become a lucrative enterprise for unemployed youth, which contributes to its perpetuation (Sharamo, 2014: 9). Radicalisation among Muslim youth is also attributed to the deepening influence of Wahhabism<sup>5</sup> and Wahhabi organisations that provide basic needs alongside an extremist agenda (Lind et al., 2015:19; Botha, 2013:16, 18). The role of the media in transmitting information in this difficult environment and the adversarial politicking in the public domain offer nothing more than aggravated frustration for young people in the region.

Cell phones and, to a lesser extent, internet access – even in rural areas – have revolutionised the ways in which East African youth communicate and stay informed. Information and communication technology is shaping youth culture and the methods used by young people to consume music, film, and art.

In the absence of employment possibilities and in an environment of pervasive cynicism, youth are drawn into and can be recruited by extremist or terrorist organisations such as Al-Shabaab within Eastern Africa. This trend has been observed in the region, in particular in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan. The reason most young people radicalise is almost never based purely on ideology but more often on social considerations (desires, beliefs, perceived opportunities, and perceived constraints) (Pauewls et al, 2014).

High levels of illiteracy may also be a contributor to youth radicalisation and extremism. Arrest records indicate that recruits are drawn from disadvantaged populations and that poverty, lack of education and

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<sup>5</sup> An orientation of Salafism that informs much of the core theological outlook of jihadi groups such as Al Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. It took root in Kenya in the 1990s through the work of 'Saudi-funded charitable organisations such as al-Haramain and the Young Muslim Association, who laid a foundational network of madrassas [Islamic religious schools] and orphanages in northern Kenya and the Coast' (Lind et al., 2015: 19).

indoctrination may bolster terrorism. Illiteracy leaves young people more susceptible to the messaging and narratives of extremist groups as they lack the means to verify or challenge such ideas. Violent extremist groups have been strategic in exploiting these vulnerabilities through effective recruitment and use of social media and other online platforms in order to lull potential members into their hands (UN, 2015; Botha and Abdile, 2014). Such groups can manipulate information and exploit the political and ideological idealism of the youth through the effective use of propaganda. Considering that youth are the biggest consumers of social media, videos with soundtracks and messaging in their own language are utilised to engage them. However, such tools can also be used to contest the extremists in the same cyberspace (Hellsten, 2016).

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