TERRITORIALITY AS A METHOD FOR UNDERSTANDING ARMED GROUPS IN KENYA & STRENGTHENING POLICY RESPONSES

This fact sheet presents findings from the RESOLVE Network Policy Note "*Territoriality as a Method for Understanding Armed Groups in Kenya and Strengthening Policy Responses*." In this Policy Note, Clifford Collins Omondi Okwany examines the concept of territoriality, which refers to the degree to which government and security agents are able to monopolize political, social, and security control of spaces. Both community-based armed groups (CBAGs) and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are most likely to thrive in Kenya under conditions of *semi-territoriality*, where state authority sometimes shifts fluidly from strong to weak depending on capacity or interest. VEOs and CBAGs differ conceptually in the Kenyan context. While most analysis applies a "hard power" lens, explaining the nature of these groups through their strength and control, this policy note demonstrates the fluidity of territoriality in explaining how VEOs and CBAGs operate in Kenya.

For more, see: Okwany, Clifford Collins Omondi. *Territoriality as a Method for Understanding Armed Groups in Kenya and Strengthening Policy Responses*. RESOLVE Network, 2023.

KEY POINTS

Territoriality and regional coordination: Territoriality is a conscious act of asserting control of a space, physically or psychologically. The absence of territoriality explains the resilience of both VEOs and CBAGs across the Kenyan and Ugandan borders. The fluid nature of territoriality is a key element that enables the survival of VEOs and CBAGs. The VEOs and CBAGs in Kenya gain strength through their cross-border activities. Thus, regional cooperation is limited when it comes to fighting VEOs such as al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa.

Kenya's counter violent extremism policy: Kenya has made progress in constitutional reforms on security, and the counties have adapted to territoriality challenges by creating Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) action plans at the subnational administrative level. However, the Kenyan government's CVE policies rest on hard-power strategies. The policing strategy is adopted from the colonial administration applying territoriality—a monopoly of control to govern. Moreover, mistrust of the police and corruption impede the CVE operationalization progress, while groups such as SLDF and al-Shabaab enjoy relative freedom due to community- or clan-based support, and they can apply their authority, becoming de facto security providers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect human rights in community-focused security reform.

Post-election violence of 2007–2008 and the Kenyan constitution of 2010 marked an important stage of the security-policy reform agenda and paved the way for a new blueprint to fight armed groups and extremists through regionalized security strategies, engaging the police and the community at the county level. These reforms are vital to an understanding of VEO networks and how CBAGs operate in the context of semi-territoriality.

The protection of human rights is crucial in promoting CVE work, countering CBAGs, and evaluating the police. Civil society and human rights organizations should suggest policy and/or legal police reforms, and they can facilitate local contact between the police and the community and improve the image of the soft power of the police. They can also facilitate dialogue between communities and police, countering the psychological aspect of semi-territoriality, developing police–citizenry trust and expanding understandings of human rights.

Map gender roles and norms in VEOs through community-oriented strategies.

Violent extremism is deeply rooted in social dynamics—countering it requires action and engagement from all social segments, such as family units, clans, and the government, with a particular focus on gender norms and roles. Mapping these dynamics would help governments strengthen territoriality and counter semi-territoriality with nuance.

Acknowledge the impact and role of pastoralist clans.

Some communities, such as the pastoralists in northeastern Kenya, strongly believe in clan structures, in contrast to the formal state governance structure. For successful policy implementation, local actors and national and county governments must acknowledge the impact and the role of pastoralist clans and family systems in the fight against VEOs and CBAGs.

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