

Existential Threat? Why Prevailing Notions of Security are Illusory

Meru, Kenya - TERRORISM JOINS THE TRADITIONAL QUARTET OF WAR, FAMINE, PESTILENCE, AND DEATH

Developments of the past two decades have elevated security concerns within every domain. Issues ranging from data to employment to identity now invoke the need for protection in some manner or form. Hot viruses and Biblical climatic events lie in wait. It is as if the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have dismounted, mutated, and insinuated themselves into everyday life. Our collective sense of angst has spiked since terrorism joined the traditional quartet of war, famine, pestilence, and death.

The demand for protection has never been so high. The rapid pace of global change in general feeds the post-truth perception that we inhabit a planet of unprecedented threat. In a world where we are constantly under attack from something real, imagined, or invisible, sowing terror has become the underdog's weapon of choice. Safety has become a commodity and the bazaar has responded with gadgets and elixirs to keep uncertainty at bay. And for decades, Western governments and their military technologies have dominated the marketplace.

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There are compelling reasons — like the combination of capacity, donor funds, and diplomatic capital — that explain why the United States in particular has dominated responses across security-related fields. We can add science, and a dose of Christian morality and secular ethics into the mix. All of these factors have made 'security' a ubiquitous but tricky word. This is why some governments are still trying to figure out the practical impact of the Donald Trump government for their nations and regions.

East African policy makers do not have that problem. Kenya is a case in point. Because it is a primary theatre in the Long War Against Terrorism, the national

government's many shortcomings are routinely overlooked. The new administration in Washington is likely to reinforce the prevailing *status quo* even if it negates the substantial investment in promoting democratic governance that preceded it.

The buzz in Washington indicates that Peter Pham of the well-respected Atlantic Council will be appointed Undersecretary of State for Africa. Although progressive by the standard of Trump appointees, he is hawkish on security issues, and in sync with currently influential proponents of the boots-on-the-ground school.

But there are voices challenging the sustainability of this relationship. For years, conservative and military critics abroad have been questioning the foundations of the LWOT, asking why those in charge of its unsuccessful execution on the ground are not held to account. Their liberal counterparts have interrogated the waste of trillions of dollars and the political capital squandered along the way.

Yet the architects of LWOT policies continue to enjoy immunity. We can therefore expect support for the military sector to continue for now, *albeit* with some major strategic modifications. One forward thinking military analyst, John Robb, recently tweeted that 'US counter-terrorism policy has been on autopilot for over a decade.' Donald Trump's policies, including investing in obsolete conventional and nuclear weapon systems, is actually a step backward.

Unfortunately, Trump's budget for militarisation comes with a corresponding reduction in American funding for developmental and humanitarian assistance.

In a [letter](#) sent to Congress, a group of 121 three-star and four-star generals wrote to Congress that, 'Many of the crises our nation faces do not have military solutions alone,' adding that 'the military needs strong civilian partners in the battle against the drivers of extremism.' When questioned on the cuts, Trump security spokesman Sebastian Gorka replied, 'If poverty was the problem, half of India would be terrorists.'

MILITARY FUNDING GREASES THE WHEELS OF THE MULTINATIONAL CONVOY

The extended drought ravaging the East African region provides the backdrop for the new American president's promise to eradicate Islamist extremism. Double

the numbers affected by the 2011 famine are at risk. The US provides one-third of the emergency assistance demanded by such natural disasters across the world.

Documenting problems of waste, top-down approaches, counter-productive projects, and dependency has catalysed improvements in the design and delivery of external assistance. The same cannot be said for the counterterrorism industry: The US State Department counted [348 terrorist attacks worldwide](#) in 2001, compared with [11,774 attacks](#) in 2015.

For years, African governments have bought into the political narrative supporting the retaliatory responses adopted by the likes of Bush and Blair. Military funding used to grease the wheels of the multinational convoy is usually diverted from other developmental initiatives. Choices, as a former American undersecretary of state declared, have consequences.

For example: USAid's Secure Project in Lamu was assisting some of the area's most marginalised inhabitants to understand and utilise Kenya's new land laws to protect their communal lands. The project was abruptly suspended and Lamu found itself instead hosting a contingent of marines and drone operators at Camp Simba. The presence of the best army in the world, however, did not deter subsequent actions such as the series of bloody raids across the Lamu mainland in 2014.

The attacks were used to promote Al Shabaab videos and messages about the Christian usurpation of local lands. The high quality production and on-target messages about land and social justice generated by the jihadi propaganda machine should not be underestimated. Even if Shabaab is eradicated, the influence of their social message will endure, and can seed new episodes of violent resistance long after the current generation of combatants is gone.

Kenya is already paying a high price in the form of terrorist taxes like the shift of the Uganda oil pipeline to the Central Corridor route, several years of dead tourism on the Coast, and the ineffective if not misconceived military misadventure in Somali.

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A decade of COIN has seen Al Shabaab, like the mythical Anteus, remain firmly rooted in the ground while becoming more elusive as the demoralising attacks on the Kenya Defence Forces in the Baure, El Adde, and Kulbiyow bases demonstrate. The KDF suffered significant casualties in all these raids while the vigour of Al Shabaab to carry out missions is undiminished.

Such LWOT-related costs should serve as a recurring reminder that currently prevailing notions of security, however strongly imprinted on our psyches and burnt into our brains through years of mainstream media and government-sourced reports, are illusory.

The now common use of the term, existential threat, is a rather ironic example of the conundrum. I personally do not know who introduced 'existential' to the lexicon of security; in most of the contexts in which it is used the meme appears to connote a zero-sum threat to material existence. For Trump advisor Steve Bannon, it fits his polarising vision of the world of Judaeo-Christian capitalism at war articulated [at a Vatican conference in 2014](#).

Citing existential threats as the reason for combating Islamic terrorism makes it necessary that we clarify the current use or misuse of the term.

The original concept dates back to the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who said that individuals must take responsible for imparting meaning to their existence. The search for existential authenticity allows us to live with sincerity and a passion for life. Kierkegaard saw modernity as a threat to these qualities. After two world wars, a new generation of European intellectuals adopted his concern over the increasingly mechanical quality of material existence.

Writers like Camus and Sartre identified the term existentialism with an enduring quest for meaning. This requires that the individual define one's being in terms of their essential humanistic values, and not submit to the labels and definitions imposed by society. Finding one's inner identity was an antidote to the sense of dread that comes with living in a confused, disoriented, and apparently meaningless and absurd world.

Much existential thought focused on being entrapped by the absurdity of the contemporary world. The resulting angst is born out of the perpetual danger of having everything meaningful break down. The philosophers proposed an escape: We are defined by our actions. The praxis associated with this existentialism was

one of the behind-the-scenes drivers of the anti-war movement and environmental activism that gathered speed during the 1960s.

The validity of an idea is confirmed when it comes back in different forms. The practice of Islam now helps fill the gap for Muslim and converts who feel trapped by monolithic economic and political forces. This is why variations on the secular existentialism of the mid-20th century are discernible in the accounts of self-confessed jihadis who survived to write about their conversion to Islamist extremism.

THE ONLY PHILOSOPHIC PROBLEM IS SUICIDE

This line of thinking influenced the essay by Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the author observed that in the absurd world we now inhabit, 'There is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.' The angst and existential dread permeating the post-Christian capitalism Islamic world made it easier for the theologians of jihad to weaponise suicide bombing as a way out, with the added incentive of martyrdom.

Nuclear warfare, climate change, the very real possibility of a global pandemic are existential threats. Poverty in the form of 17 million people facing starvation is an existential threat. Religious violence with its long historical pedigree is not.

CAN IGAD AND KENYA SUCCEED WHERE GOLIATH HAS FAILED?

The writing on the wall is now in boldface. The fiscal impact and human suffering incurred by the region's real crises now demand that influential actors and thinkers across the greater Horn region look within for solutions.

Writing in the *Sunday Nation* of March 12, [Peter Kagwanja](#) notes that world powers have always cultivated and utilised soft power to justify their foreign interventions; colonialism and its aftermath are proof of how Africa has fared poorly in the battle of ideas. These observations reinforce his call for a new breed of policy think tanks mandated with the 'extraordinary task of decolonising the policy space where decisions affecting Africa are negotiated and made.'

The revisionary political trends disrupting business as usual in Western democracies indicate the time is ripe to act on Kagwanja's challenge. The failure of hard power to counter violent extremism points to redefining what security

means in the regional context as a good place to start. The process is actually underway on the regional level.

In another *Sunday Nation* article, Kagwanja describes the formulation by Igad of a regional initiative to counter violent extremism (CVE) in its different forms. The Igad project is reviewing conventional securitisation policies with a view to formulating long-term strategies specific to the security needs of this region. Actions already underway include the development of CEWARN, the regional conflict early warning system that serves the same objective through its activities on the ground.

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CEWARN is a practical tool for conflict prevention based on local information networks that collect and document relevant information and data on cross-border and related pastoral conflicts. It combines the accumulation of big data with a unique combination of national, regional, civil society, and grassroots relationships. Operationalisation over the past decade focused on testing its methods in three cross-border clusters across the region. The success of the predictive algorithm developed over this period sets the stage for its rollout on a larger scale, and for its application to other problems such as the spread of Ebola, circulation of small arms, and counterterrorism.

Although still a work in progress, adoption of the CEWARN model by other regional organizations like Ecowas attests to the efficacy of CEWARN's methodology. A book documenting the vision, methods, and evolution of the CEWARN system since its inception in 2002 will provide a robust picture of the progress achieved so far. In the meantime, this writer can affirm that CEWARN is a positive presence in the areas where it works, and that the replication of the early warning model across the continent will enhance the scope of African Union operations.

Administratively, the AU has a long way to go. This does not contradict the value of its human resources and knowledge of the region's problems. Subsequent developments in Libya showed the arguments made by Secretary General Jean Ping to involve the African Union as a mediator to be correct. More recently, the

AU's negotiation of the succession impasse in the Gambia contrasts favourably with the messy outcome resulting from the UK's quasi-diplomatic intervention in Sierra Leone a decade earlier.

The directionality of developments in this domain reinforces Kagwanja's thesis across a number of important policy domains. It is now reasonable to expect that a combination of regional co-operation, economic integration, and the bottom-up dynamics now gathering momentum will over the long run counteract the sources of the region's endemic insecurity. Resilience conditioned by years of low-intensity conflict and uncertainty is indicative of local communities' ability to stay the course.

By the same measure, we can anticipate that national governments will continue to be the weak link as the continent's age of capital gathers momentum.

In his 1981 book on *The Emergence of African Capitalism*, John Illife posited that the solution for most the continent's problems lies in the rise of a truly indigenous and creative capitalist class. Although we can see signs of this emergence in the private sector in the likes of Alex Dangote and Mohammed Ibrahim, the influence of rent-based accumulation will dominate for the time being. The region's unexploited oil reserves, strategic minerals, and the large tracts of land coveted by foreign agribusiness investors will continue to encourage elites to place their interests above the public good while they and their clients on the ground compete to claim their share of the spoils.

Kenya is a significant test case of this emergence due to its status as the region's most advanced exemplar of indigenous capitalism. It is also a crucible of internal and external conflicts. The violent forces incubating in post-state Somalia also gave rise to Africa's most dynamic example of trans-border economic synergy. Kenya straddles both.

THE REAL POLITICS OF THE HORN OF AFRICA

The operations of the new regional political marketplace paralleling the state-brokered capitalism of the Kenya model is the subject of Alex De Waal's 2016 book, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*. De Waal's regional case studies illuminate how political entrepreneurs operating in the new transactional space sustain many of the violent struggles for socioeconomic resources complicating conventional securitisation policies.

In an earlier discussion paper, De Waal addresses the 'notoriously difficult' task of assessing class forces in Somalia's predominantly pastoralist economy. He analyses how what appear to be clan and factional driven struggles to control resources camouflage the class-based factors operating underneath. Siad Barre's government elites could not penetrate the livestock export economy that was generating 80% of the country's revenue. Instead, they usurped control of the agrarian economy of southern Somalia.

The commercial class dominated by livestock traders managed to reassert control of the livestock trade networks extending deep into the hinterland. Their co-operation with the weak new state institutions in Somaliland and Puntland accounts for the relative stability of the northern region.

De Waal observed that the failure to consolidate similar control in southern Somalia and the exports passing through Kismayu's port would result in the region's livestock exports passing through Kenya. This assessment, made in 1996, came to pass.

The disenfranchisement of agro-pastoralists, herders, and peasant farmers in Juba and Shebelle river regions was exacerbated by the competing warlords' efforts to take over where Barre left off. Sorting out the economic disruptions and land ownership in the country's most productive region, according to De Waal, is a basic prerequisite for establishing any effective national government. This prediction also proved true.

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The AK-47 was invented as an anti-capitalist weapon. But together with Sharia law, it reinforced formal principles regulating mercantile capitalism in Somalia. Local business communities supported the Islamic courts, which operated as a court of appeal for Somali customary law. Case studies of African rebel movements attest to how the practical task of governing typically moderates the extremism of insurgents. In any event, radicals controlled only three of the 16 Islamic courts in the capital and this was beginning to happen before the defeat of the ICU saw Al Shabaab grow from a militia with less than 50 men under arms in

2005 to a regional vehicle combining Somali nationalism with international jihadi extremism.

History repeated itself. In the 1996 paper, De Waal advised, 'It is worthwhile to study its approach to the land question in the riverine areas it formerly controlled.' Several consultants who spent time there before the KDF invasion of 2013 personally reported to me that the southern areas under their control had stabilised under Al Shabaab, and that administration of local affairs was efficient, peaceful, and equitable.

KDF EMPOWERS SHABAAB'S JIHADI FACTION

The 2013 occupation empowered Al Shabaab's international jihadi faction at the expense of the nationalist faction, and encouraged militant recruits from Kenya's Al Hijra chapter to carry out their attacks in Nairobi, Lamu, and Garissa.

The renewed international interest in land and extractive resources is now transforming the Horn of Africa into the world's latest theatre in the Great Game. The contest between state-based forces and agents of De Waal's political marketplace in this scramble will influence how the current phase of capital penetration and infrastructural investment plays out.

Over time, the region's states will either harness its natural and human resources for the benefit of its people, or they will lapse into a collection of ethnically divided regimes with pockets of semi-stateless territory where local compradors and political warlords cut deals with the masters of international capital.

The provision of security as a public good lies at the centre of the equation, but where will it come from? In the case of Kenya, only 3% of the 2,998 respondents participating in the recent National Constitutional Socioeconomic Audit approved the state's handling of security issues.

Sustained commitment to implementing the country's new Constitution will reduce the nation's internal frictions. The current template for dealing with Al Shabaab is a trickier proposition.

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Impunity, corruption at the top, and the poor morale among the rank and file has undermined the KDF's mission to isolate Al Shabaab. Other practical examples of Kenyan-Somali co-operation serve as a counterpoint to the failures of state and international interventions.

Kenya's uniquely symbiotic relationship with Somalia inscribes a basically positive trajectory when not zigzagging between episodic violence and tit-for-tat security operations. Conflict has contributed to the convergence of Kenya's capitalist economy and the creative problem solving of Somali entrepreneurs. The rise of Eastleigh in Nairobi as a prototype of transnational commerce is very much a Kenya-Somali hybrid phenomenon that Neil Carrier documents in his recently published book, *Eastleigh, Nairobi's Global Economic Hub*.

Even nomadic capital seeks out the protection provided by a functional state from marauding militias and angst-driven religious zealots. A lot of the investment capital generated by the Somali diaspora ends up in Kenya. The spread of peace infrastructure on the ground, co-operation among state administrators working in border zones, and spontaneous community policing including interventions like the selfless actions of ethnic Somalis in Mandera to protect their Christian countrymen represent a strategic alternative to the increasingly meaningless cycle of violence.

In the final chapter of his book, De Waal concludes that the 'greatest dangers facing the Horn region are mineral rents and counterterrorism funding, followed closely by any form of international security co-operation (including peacekeeping) that increases the size and opacity of military budgets.'

Regional rivalries have hampered Igad's prospects for effective collective action in the past. In an interview appearing in the CEWARN Compendium mentioned above, a former director, Dr Martin Kimani, connects the points made by Illife, Kagwanja, and DeWaal in his nuanced overview of the organisation's peace-building mission:

We are moving into a period of more intensified conflict. But that does mean more intensified violence. Let's make it clear that in fact the Horn, given its contradictions, is far more peaceful than might be the case. In fact, the people of the Horn by and large are far more patient, far more flexible than many other people on the planet in light of the challenges we have here. The Igad region is

actually at a very important moment in which countries and governments must decide how exactly are we going to handle having much more economic activity in our territory because there is going to be a gap between that and the time when all the people in the countries are included in that prosperity. Dealing with that gap requires intensified peace building, inclusion, and awareness that, since some people will be left behind, we need to keep the peace with each other.

Igad's peace infrastructure, CVE policies, and early warning mechanism are adaptive homegrown initiatives designed to contain the multiple sources of violent extremism and the circulation of modern weapons abetting them. The rapid response protocol now under development recognises that properly calibrated use of force will always have a role. There will be blood.

Kenya and its neighbours, despite the mistakes and bungling characterising its anti-terrorism efforts up to now, are better off reconceptualising how to domesticate the range of threats to public security than following the lead of those calling the shots from abroad.