

Role of SUPKEM leadership in fighting against extremism and terrorism in Kenya

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ABSTRACT: The Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) was established in 1973 as an umbrella body to bring together all Muslims in Kenya with the intention of addressing the needs of the Muslim community in Kenya. It also acts as a link between the Kenyan government and its Muslim citizens. Extremism is one of the major threats to the East African region and Kenya in particular. The ideology of violent extremism is spread through different media and radicalizes individuals into terrorists who kill and cause devastation. The Muslim community in Kenya has a role to play in combating violent extremism and terrorism in the country because conversion to Islam has been linked to radicalization and violent extremism, particularly along Kenya's coast. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the role that SUPKEM leadership can play in the counterterrorism measures implemented in Kenya. Qualitative research was used to study the role that Muslim leaders in SUPKEM play in countering violent extremism and terrorism. Qualitative interviews with selected Islamic leaders provided rich data that helped to understand terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. The results showed that SUPKEM leadership is well-informed about the problem of terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. Islamic leadership can play a role through alternative narratives, religious dialogue, and more scholarly research to guide their believers against dangerous religious ideology.

Keywords: SUPKEM, extremism, terrorism

1 INTRODUCTION

Religious leaders have the strategic advantage of religious authority, as they are accorded respect by their followers and society in general. In both Islam and Christianity, religious leaders have legitimate authority and the right to direct others. They are therefore able to maintain sobriety among the believers, especially in the face of problems such as extremism and terrorism (Harris-Hogan *et al.* 2016). There is a complex relationship between religion and violent extremism. It is difficult to determine the direct causation of this relationship. In the past, violent extremism has happened without being directly linked to religion as the primary driver, while in other instances, religion has played a big role (Botha 2013). The Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) is a religious organization that was founded in 1973 with the goal of uniting all Muslims and meeting their needs. It also enables the communication between the government and the Muslim community. (Omari 2014). Terrorism is a threat to public safety as it is meant to cause death and immense bodily harm to civilians and noncombatants. It is also aimed at intimidating the public and coercing the government or international entities to desist from championing or performing their duties (Karlsrud 2017). Terrorism threatens societal existence because it is an illegal act against the

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laws of the land (Liht & Savage 2013). Since the 1998 terrorist attacks on the US Embassy, the East African region has been on the list of countries affected by terrorism. After the 1998 incident, in 2002, another attack targeting Paradise Hotel in the coastal town of Mombasa claimed the lives of 12 people and injured 80. The majority of the terrorist attacks in the region are perpetrated by al-Shabaab, which is part of the al-Qaeda network (Ali 2016). Globally, jihadist groups have continued to advance their agendas and insurgencies in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and other North African and Middle Eastern countries (Lemu 2016). Occasionally, they have successfully launched attacks against the United States, such as during the September 11, 2001, attacks. There have been attacks in Europe, with countries such as the UK and France being affected. The attacks are viewed in terms of global terrorism campaigns that are planned and implemented by terrorists and extremist groups. (Abdel-Fattah 2020).

There is a sustained effort by Kenya to counterterrorism from Somalia and within its borders. The government has a responsibility to offer national security, which is of interest to its citizens. Strict measures have been put in place to achieve the counterterrorism goals. This is because if the problem is left unattended, more lives are likely to be lost in future attacks. At the institutional level, the involvement of SUPKEM has been one of the ways to ensure that the war against terrorism and violent extremism is well-balanced (Badurdeen & Goldsmith 2018). A number of studies have been conducted to help counterterrorism in the Horn of Africa and Kenya. The implementation of counterterrorism actions in Kenya has been done in the past without proper involvement or legislation.

1.1 *Statement of problem*

The presence of violent extremism and terrorist activities can result in the loss of lives if something is not done. Peace and tranquility may become elusive within the Muslim community and the entire country. Kenya and other countries affected by terrorism have implemented counterterrorism measures aimed at preventing future attacks. For instance, the deployment of the military in Somalia was part of Kenya's strategy to combat terrorism and violent extremism (Demuyneck & Julie Coleman 2022). The country has also used other strategies such as active community engagement, multidisciplinary case management, and other measures that help to keep vulnerable groups or individuals on the right path. A myriad of approaches are therefore necessary to deal with the problem of terrorism. The research thus looks into how Islamic organizations and institutions in general, and SUPKEM in particular, have dealt with situations such as the one described above in the past and asks what they have done so far in response to what is happening now with the killings of innocent people, and why they haven't, given that they are Kenya's highest Muslim leadership organization.

2 METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to study the role of SUPKEM in countering terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. Qualitative approaches allowed the researcher to get attitudes and insights from the participants. The study identified SUPKEM leaders as an informed group that has a lot of knowledge about Islam. This group has an influence on young people who are the targets of radicalization into violent extremism and terrorism recruitment. Purposive sampling was used to identify leaders who possess relevant knowledge about terrorism and violent extremism. This ensured that the data collected from such participants was in-depth and captured the insights of the leaders. The approach also ensured that high-quality participants were included in the study. The researcher used publicly available directories to identify people regarded as community leaders and invited them to participate. Within the SUPKEM, there are scholars, youth leaders, imams, and other people who

perform the role of leaders. The selection of scholars was done in consultation with the SUPKEM leadership. The researcher was directed to find the most qualified person to participate in the study (Wilson 2017).

2.1 *Secondary data*

Secondary data in this study was obtained through a systematic search and review of the literature. To achieve this type of data, online databases were used. A combination of keywords was used to conduct searches on the major databases, and this led to the identification of articles that have been published about terrorism and extremism in Kenya and other parts of the world. This step led to the identification of important resources that were included in the literature review. This review of literature was also used to identify future resources, such as books, articles, and videos that can be used to train more on the project.

2.2 *Observation*

Observations were used to collect data from the selected Muslim clerics. The specific observation was made on sermons delivered by the Muslim leaders, who are also members of SUPKEM.

2.3 *Interviews*

Qualitative interviews were useful in collecting the opinions of the participants. This allowed the participants to go in-depth into discussions about the role of Muslim leaders in combating terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. The participants provided explanations regarding what people expect from the leaders and what they are likely to gain from the knowledge and experience of such leaders. Relevant interviews were crafted with the aim of collecting valid and reliable data from the participants. The researcher guided the interview to ensure that the respondents did not veer too far from the main topic.

The collected data from the interview was subjected to thematic analysis. There are five major themes and sub-themes about the role of leaders in fighting against terrorism and extremism that were identified during the study. This also made it possible to organize the final results properly based on the identified themes.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Terrorism is defined as an act intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or noncombatants to intimidate a population or coerce the state government or an international entity to cease or refrain from performing any acts or duties (Neria *et al.* 2006). In contemporary times, terrorism is a major risk to societal existence and, hence, illegal based on the laws of the United States. Terrorism is also considered a war crime under the laws of war when applied to target non-combatants, such as unprejudiced military personnel or civilians (United Nations 2008). The symbolism of terrorism can harness human fear to help achieve certain goals (Momanyi 2015).

The East African region has also had its share of terrorist attacks. The 1998 attack on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the foiled attack in Uganda confirmed the presence of international terrorism (in this case, Al-Qaeda) in the region (Woldemichael 2006). Accordingly, in 2002, Kenya witnessed a major attack on the Paradise Hotel along the Kenyan coast in the town of Mombasa. The attack killed 12 people and injured 80 people (Botha 2013). It is worth noting that the first successful terrorist attack in Kenyan history dates back to the Norfolk Bombing of 1980 (Kiruga 2013). The region's current terrorist threats emanate from Al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate that has local support from Al-Hijra

(Torbjörnsson & Jonsson 2016). Al-Hijra is a local terrorist group that mainly operates in Nairobi and Mombasa. The alleged first al-Shabaab attack occurred in Kampala in 2010 (Shuriye 2012). The group also attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in 2013; nonetheless, there was also a spate of attacks using hand grenades (Blanchard 2013) across the country. Some of these attacks have been a counterattack against Kenya's military intervention in Somalia in an attempt to restore peace.

Based on the interview with a SUPKEM officer, the first interviewer mentioned that Muslim leaders can play a role in promoting counter-narratives among their community members. "Alternative" or "counter narrative" refers to online or offline communication activities that directly or indirectly challenge extremist propaganda. This can be achieved in different ways, including face-to-face sermons, testimonials, blogs, chat rooms, and social media profiles (Avis 2016).

"We as Muslim clerics believe we can play a role in engaging the young people about the misinformation and propaganda that is conveyed to them by the extremists. We know the truth about Islam, and we can change our society through what we tell people about our faith."

Also, SUPKEM played a vital role in fighting against in the form of Religious dialogue, the second interviewer mentioned that Muslim leaders have a role to play in enhancing unity and trust among religious leaders. One of the strategies for countering terrorism and violent extremism is through engaging in religious dialogue. Muslim leaders can also establish good relations with other faith leaders, like Christian faith leaders, to help counter the negative perceptions and narratives about Muslim youths and terrorism.

"I believe that Muslim leaders should create awareness about terrorism in mosques because they have some authority and can speak directly to the youths who are at risk of radicalization".

Correspondingly, SUPKEM plays a vital role in fighting against extremism in the form of public meetings. In the third interview, we found that counterterrorism can also be achieved through public meetings. Religious leaders have a role to play in organizing and engaging community members through such gatherings (Abdel-Fattah 2020). Through public meetings, Muslim leaders can join other leaders in discussing the problems affecting their communities and try to engage other stakeholders, such as political leaders and security agencies. Challenges were also identified with regard to public meetings as avenues of countering terrorism and violent extremism. It emerged that there was low participation of young people in such meetings, though it was considered to be a good avenue for sharing ideology about Islam and creating awareness about radicalization among the youth.

Last, by giving the formation of inter-religious committees a vital role in fighting against terrorism, from the fourth interview, it emerged that forming inter-religious committees is one of the strategies that can help to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Religious leaders should take on leadership roles at local and national levels. Inter-religious committees should comprise Christians, Muslims, and other faith leaders. *"To address the problem of terrorism and violent extremism, we should love one another. Both Christian and Muslim leaders should hold regular meetings that can help to find solutions to the problem. Leaders should show a good example by attending committees and making the right decisions for the communities."*

4 CONCLUSIONS

SUPKEM's leadership is aware of the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in Kenya. The Muslim leaders at SUPKEM have a big role to play in counterterrorism measures in the

country because of the position they hold and the authority they have over their believers. With the knowledge they have about Islam and ideology, SUPKEM leaders should engage in alternative narratives that should counter the extremist ideology that is advanced by terrorist groups. Online spaces, where youths are likely to be exposed to propaganda about Islam, are great avenues through which religious leaders can enhance alternative narratives. Publishing literature is also a great move that can be used by SUPKEM leadership for counterterrorism. There is a need for more scholarly literature that young people should access to influence them in the right way instead of being left to read propaganda about Islam on the internet. SUPKEM leadership also has a role to play in creating programs where they can engage the community to create awareness about terrorism and violent extremism. Community programs should include victims of terrorism and vulnerable groups that are at risk of being radicalized by violent extremists. Islamic leaders should also be encouraged to promote interfaith dialogues in Kenya. Creating forums where Muslim and Christian leaders come together is a way of promoting unity within diverse communities. Through such dialogues, misconceptions about Islam and terrorism can be clarified, and believers can gain access to the right information to counterterrorism and violent extremism.

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