



API Research Note

Issue No. 11, April 2016

Africa's new Middle Class as a Force of Radicalization

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The rapid growth of the middle class in the developing world is widely seen as one of the most promising demographic developments in the 21st century. In emerging markets in China, India and increasingly in Africa, millions have been lifted out of poverty and boosted the middle class now driving markets through its capacity to consume and its historic role as an agent of change. However, the middle class has a darker side to it. In several developing countries, middle class individuals are agents of radicalization, everywhere tolerating, supporting, or engaging in radical politics, including terrorism. Policy makers and analysts, steeped in the conventional wisdom in liberal theory that touts the middle class as the custodian of liberal values, have ignored or discounted this darker side. With the recent shift away from military approaches to counter terrorism, policy makers are inferring a causal link between poverty, development and the rise of violent extremism especially in weak states. They are proffering development and market solutions—creation of jobs and reduction of inequalities—as effective antidotes to the exponential spread of extremism. Grievances and disaffection relating to economic and social marginalization, inequalities and poverty have, undoubtedly created fertile grounds for violent extremism to thrive, but policy makers need to focus attention on the role of the middle-class in radicalizing, planning and executing terrorist activities across the world.

In February last year the CNN Security Analyst, Peter Bergen, wrote a provocatively titled article, “Jihadi John': The bourgeois terrorist”. This thrust to the fore the role of the wealthy middle class in the escalation of terrorism globally. Two decades ago, Samuel Huntington popularized the escalating threat to global security posed by international

terrorism as a “clash of civilizations.” The preponderance of middle class as an agent of terrorism highlights a “class rebellion” that policy makers can no longer close their eyes to.

For a decade now world leaders and top security organs believed that acts of terrorism were perpetuated and conducted by uncivilized, uneducated and impoverished individuals. For instance after the 9/11 attack in US, the then President George W. Bush was quoted saying, “We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror.” His wife Laura Bush emphasized the same point saying, “A lasting victory in the war against terror depends on educating the world’s children.”

This unqualified perception and argument by most of these leaders has been demystified by the profiles of most of the terrorist who have conducted acts of violence. Thus this begs the question. What is driving the middle class in Africa and worldwide to join terror groups and to become the driving force of violent extremism? Related to this, what solution (s) are needed to counter the rise of well-to-do educated individuals from joining terror groups?

Various observations have been made on the profiles of some of these extremist. For instance in East Africa, one of the terrorist who attacked Garissa University College in Northern Kenya and massacred 148 people, majority of them students, was Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, a law degree graduate from University of Nairobi.

In Nigeria, Abubakar Muhammad Shekau, the leaders of Boko Haram, is said to be an intellectual and theologian who studied under a renowned traditional cleric. He is the leader and the mastermind in the April 2014 kidnapping of more than 200 girls from a school in chibok –Nigeria, and has a head bounty of \$ 7 million.

In Somalia, Abdullahi Yare heads the media for al-Shabaab, a terror group that has claimed responsibility for many suicide attacks inside Somalia and the Greater Horn of Africa region where it has targeted Somali Government officials and perceived allies of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia and African Union peacekeepers.

Umar Abdulmuttalab (“underwear bomber”), who tried to set off a bomb on a U.S. passenger jet flying over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, is the son of one of the richest men in Africa and attended the University College London, which routinely rates among the best universities in the world.

Beyond the Africa continent, we have other notable educated and wealthy extremists who have provided a “role model” to other middle-class terrorists in Africa.

This profile of affluent individuals involved in violent extremism is universal ring to it. The Egyptian, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who served as al-Qaeda’s chief strategist and bin Laden’s deputy and is now the al-Qaeda leader, is a trained surgeon. Orlando Bosch, who was charged with the inflight bombing of a Cubana Airlines flight in 1976 that killed 73 persons, practiced as a pediatrician.

Yasir Arafat, the founder and leader of the Palestinian extremist group, al-Fatah, and later Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and President of the Palestinian Authority, was a graduate of Cairo’s Fouad the First University (now Cairo University) who was later employed by the Kuwaiti Public Works Department as an engineer when he founded al-Fatah.

Also a study of 250 Palestine militants and their associates who were involved in the Palestinian cause in the 1990's by one of the United Nations relief worker in the West Bank and Gaza strip, Nasra Hassan, exposed the new discourse of the increasingly well-off middle class in acts of terror. His findings were that none of the militants were uneducated, desperately poor, simple minded, or depressed.

Actually many were middle class and despite some were fugitives, they held paying jobs. Two were sons of millionaires.

This notwithstanding, another research by sociologist Diego Gambetta and Political scientist Steffen Hertog, revealed that close to 44 percent of the 404 militant men belonging to violent Islamist groups had trained in engineering.

Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who plotted the kidnapping and beheading of Wall Street Journal reporter, Daniel Pearl in 2002, attended an exclusive, expensive and private school before been admitted to the world renowned London School of Economics (LSE), where he studied applied mathematics statistical theory, economics, and social psychological.

Omar Khan Sharif who, with a fellow British Muslim, Asif Hanif, staged a suicide bomb attack on a Tel Aviv seaside bar in 2003, also studied mathematics at a similarly prestigious British university—King's College, London.

In the same vein, the then-27 year old Abdullah Ahmed Ali, who was one of the planners of the abortive bombings that targeted the U.S. and Canadian passenger airliners departing from London's Heathrow Airport in August 2006, was a husband and father of a two-year-old son and a holder of a bachelor of science degree in computer systems engineering from a respectable British university.

The eight masterminds of the Glasgow's International Airport attack in June 2007 were perfectly well-heeled middle-class individuals. Six of them were either trained doctors or medical students, the seventh was employed as a technician in a hospital laboratory and the eighth suspect had a doctorate in design and technology.

Similarly, one of the suicide bombers in the July 2005 attack in Britain, Shahzad Tanweer, was a son of a prominent businessman and a graduate of Leeds Metropolitan University where he obtained a degree in sports science. Tanweer's partner, Mohammad Siddique Khan, had a degree in business studies from the same university and worked as a community worker.

These trends of prosperous middle class terrorist is increasing particularly in Africa. Previously, only the leaders of terrorist groups were notably educated. This trend is changing. Many foot soldiers in terrorist groups are also well-off and educated individuals.

Affluent and well educated women are also joining violent extremist movements either as 'Jihadi brides' or as terrorists themselves. In April 2015, the Kenyan authorities arrested a 19-year-old Tanzanian woman, Ummul Khayr Sadir, a medical student at the Khartoum-based International University of Africa, alongside her two 19-year-old Kenyan companions, Khadijah Abubakar Abdulkadir and Maryam Said Aboud, both students at local universities.

The three university girls were arrested in El Wak town on the Kenya-Somali border as they headed for Syria via Somalia and Turkey to become *jihad-al-nikahs*.

In May 2015, two 20-year-old girls who had disappeared from their home in Nairobi's South C Estate, Salwa Abdalla and Twafiqah Dahir, shocked their relatives when they sent messages back home saying they were in Syria.

The name of Samantha Lewthwaite, popularly known as "White Widow", has been linked to many attacks in East Africa. She is said to have been one of the masterminds of the series of deadly Mpeketoni Attacks in Lamu County at the Kenyan coast in June 16, 2014. Lewthwaite, who never completed her Politics and religious studies degree at the school of oriental and Africa studies, University of London, has also been linked to the Westgate shopping mall attack that killed 67 in Kenya in September 2013.

Clearly, the extremists are opportunistically exploiting genuine grievances to radicalize and recruit the youth to extremism. They promise to provide at-risk youth a sense of dignity, purpose, obligation, and belonging. The internet is an attraction to the youth, too. Extremists are thriving on today's globalized, technologically savvy and interconnected world. They use online sites propagating messages and images claiming that Western countries and "disbelievers" are "killing and oppressing those of Islamic religion". Their content draws in viewers with graphic imagery, emotional mantras, and references to religious themes to persuade targets that they must protect Muslims around the world.

The involvement of the middle class in violent extremism require specialized policy responses and solutions that go beyond the new vogue of market/development solutions. The educated middle-class has turned terrorism into an intellectual enterprise requiring well-thought out strategies and counter-measures. For instance, it is important not only to study and understand the strategies and narratives of violent extremists, but also to scale up counter-narratives to neutralize these narratives that extremists use to radicalize the youth and recruit them to their movements.

Coupled with this, it is imperative to drain the swamps of terrorism by dealing with the deep seated grievances that terrorists use to peddle falsehood. It is necessary to prove that Muslims can succeed in modern world to debunk the false narratives that devout Muslim youth cannot make it in the modern world. Building the resilience of communities affected by terrorism is also key. In doing so, security approaches need to be sensitive to human rights grievances of communities, which can also provide fonder to the cannons of extremists. This also calls for innovative and human-rights compliant programs to rehabilitate the youths and individuals who have been radicalized. To be sure, the use of hard power (military force) is inevitable where extremists are heavily armed, including having nascent naval and air wings to back their armies.

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