

Helpdesk Research Report

Islamist radicalisation and terrorism in Tanzania

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Question

The extent and drivers of Islamist radicalisation and terrorism in Tanzania.

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1. Overview

Over the last decade, a growing number of attacks in Tanzania have targeted local Christian leaders, tourists and 'soft' targets such as bars and restaurants. This has raised the question of whether the country is becoming a target and a recruitment ground for regional terrorist networks such as Al Shabaab.

In this rapid review, the literature generally emphasises that while relations between Christian and Muslim groups are increasingly tense, there is evidence that Tanzania is not 'a battleground for conflicting civilisations' (Heilman & Kaiser 2002, p. 692). Many argue that while a number of identity groups (political, religious, ethnic) have served as the basis for political organisation and conflict at one point or another, no particular identity has crystallised as a major dividing line. Many issues such as class divisions and support for political parties cut across religious groups (Heilman & Kaiser 2002, p. 692; Haynes 2006, p. 494).

However, there is increasing evidence that Islamist mobilisation has become more prominent and challenges moderate and state-run Islamic associations. Even though, at the moment, still very few analyses are studying the spread and the mechanisms of radicalisation in Tanzania. The literature argues that Islamist groups, taking advantage of their religious legitimacy as provider of a 'real' and 'pure' Islam compared to Sufism, are instrumentalising domestic political and economic issues to promote their view

of a more politically engaged Islam (Haynes 2005, p. 1333; Becker 2006; Haynes 2006, p. 491). To do so, they are also building on the historical perception of discrimination against Muslims since the colonial era (Heilman & Kaiser 2002, p. 704; Bakari 2012). In the current context of growing disappointment towards political and economic liberalisation which has not brought the expected benefits to the population, this could create a dangerous situation (Haynes 2006; Bakari 2012). These tensions are particularly exacerbated in Zanzibar where Muslim discontent overlaps with frustrations over the status of the island. The shift towards Islamic fundamentalism is also supported by external actors, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as the most influential ideological sources of the radical branch of Islam Wahhabism. The number of scholarships to study in these countries as well as their funding of radical mosques and Islamic universities in Tanzania is thus increasing. Moreover, analysts have recently highlighted evidence showing the links between Tanzanian individuals and associations and regional terrorist groups (Glickam 2011; LeSage 2014). For example, the presence of training camps, indoctrination centres, the arrest of individuals coming from Somalia, and the connections between Islamist leaders in Tanzania, and Al Shabaab in Somalia and Al Hijra in Kenya, point towards this direction. This recent evidence supports suspicion of the increased involvement of Tanzania within these regional and global terrorist networks.

Finally, the literature is mostly gender blind. It does not differentiate between men and women as targets of radicalisation.

2. The drivers of Islamist radicalisation and terrorism

Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Tanzania

The Tanzanian population

Christian-Muslim relations in Tanzania have been facilitated by the composition of the Tanzanian population. The population of approximately 48 million people is divided between 35 per cent Christian, 45 per cent Muslim and around 20 per cent of traditional animists (LeSage 2014, p. 3).¹ Importantly, Muslims and Christians co-exist in all major Tanzanian cities with the exception of Zanzibar where 95 per cent of the population out of 750,000 people is Muslim, as well as the mainland Tanzanian coastline where the population is mostly Muslim.

Among Muslims, over 85 per cent belong to the Sunni Shafi sect based on Sufism, which includes most African Muslims. There are also some Sunni Shafi Arabs, particularly those from Yemen, and some Sunni Asians, while most Arabs of Oman origin belong to the Ibadhi sect (Bakari 2012, p. 8).

A brief religious history of Tanzania

Islam arrived in Tanzania from Arabia in the 13th^h century. Small settlements, the Swahili city-states, took root in the islands and along the coast before spreading inland along pre-colonial trade routes. This period coincided with Portuguese colonisation of the region in the 16-17th century. As Portuguese colonisation declined, Zanzibar became a major centre of the region after becoming the seat for an Omani Sultanate by the mid-1800s. While the Omani Sultanate did not pro-actively try to spread Islam in the mainland, it

¹ These are rough estimates as no reliable up-to-date figures exist (Bakari 2012, p. 7).

nevertheless developed among slaves and among some of the inland tribes following trade patterns (Vittori et al. 2009, pp. 1076-1077; Bakari 2012, p. 6; Mesaki 2011, p. 250; LeSage 2014, p. 3).

It was **European colonisation**, in particular led by the Germans, which enabled Islam to spread in the mainland. It followed colonial trade and the construction of railroads, and was facilitated by the Germans who initially employed Muslims as officials, police, soldiers, etc. (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1077; LeSage 2014, p. 3). Muslims were already literate and considered the 'civilised' and modern group in Tanzania at that time (Mesaki 2011, p. 251). However, while in the mainland Islam overlaid on top of existing tribal traditions, in the islands (Zanzibar, Lemu and Pemba) local Arab and Indian Muslims looked more to the Arabian Peninsula than to Africa. According to Vittori et al. (2009, p. 1077), they used Islam as a cultural barrier to cut themselves off from Africans. These frictions among Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds were also furthered by British colonisation that differentiated between Arabs, Swahilis, and Africans: Arabs were given the most senior posts, followed by Swahilis and finally Africans. This hierarchy was also reflected by the adoption of separate mosques for Swahilis and Africans (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1077). This early differentiation provides a historical background to understand the latter tension between Zanzibar and the mainland. Nevertheless, British colonisation of the whole of Tanzania in the early 20th century² disturbed these hierarchies. Indeed, the British system of local government caused a decrease in the growth of Islam as it favoured local chiefs rather than Muslim administrators (Mesaki 2011, p. 251).

In parallel, from the mid-19th century, the first Christian missionaries arrived in Tanzania. They strongly impacted on the country's social structures through the establishment of Christian schools with modern education standards, in comparison to the traditional Islamic schools (the *madrassas*). Education in these Christian schools was more suited for the modern nation state and its bureaucratic structures in the late 19th and early 20th century. As a result, a reversal of power relations occurred with Christians taking over Muslims' positions in the state bureaucracy. This led to a gradual decline in the socioeconomic status of Muslims (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1078). According to Mesaki (2011, pp. 252-253) 'By mid-1950s a more significant distinction in access to education in the territory has emerged between Christians and Muslims'; 'this inequitable access to education opportunities did not only result in social and class differentiation, but also creates a schism between Christians and Muslims whose effects continue to be felt today' (see also Bondakero 2004, p. 443).

The perception of this historical loss of power for the Muslim community still matters for contemporary Christian-Muslim relations. Heilam & Kaiser (2002, p. 704) thus argue that Islamic revival in Tanzania in the last decades is based on 'an Islamic-centric interpretation of history that maintains Muslims have been discriminated against by a Christian-dominated state since the colonial period'.

Divisions and struggles among Muslim groups

The great majority of the Muslim population in Tanzania is Sufi, one of the most tolerant orders of Islam, which means that Islamic fundamentalism is not an indigenous tradition in the country. Moreover, the persistent strength of traditional animism means that Islam tends to be adapted to fit local tradition with numerous cases of overlapping religious identities (Heiman & Kaiser 2002, p. 692; Becker 2006, p. 602). However, the Muslim population is increasingly being the target of fundamentalists who regard Sufism as a 'primitive' and 'degraded' form of Islam that should be 'purified' (Haynes 2006, p. 491).

² Great Britain had already colonised Zanzibar, and took over the entire territory from Germany after the defeat of the country in World War I.

While the older generation includes traditionalist Sufi Muslims, the younger generation tends to include more and more anti-Sufi Islamists. In an insightful article providing an in-depth analysis of the Southern Tanzanian country town Rwangwa, Becker (2006) shows the dynamics of conflict among Muslim groups. She highlights the ability of the Islamists to combine an ‘unchanging and consciously universalist message’ with very specific local concerns (Becker 2006, p. 583). Doing so, they manage to connect two previously distinct agendas: a religious reformist agenda and a potentially violent political agenda (Becker 2006, p. 584). She argues that while the Islamists had failed in 2006 to take over local politics, they had managed to establish a claim to primacy regarding religious scholarship and thereby weakened the claims of Sufi elders to religious legitimacy for their political position. This could open the ground for political radicalisation of the rural Muslim public (Becker 2006, p. 601). An important point made by Becker (2006, p. 602) is that these groups were challenging the notion that the state is the main purveyor of modernity and are starting to represent modernity to young people in rural areas – a dangerous shift in a context where young people are increasingly disenchanted with political and economic liberalisation.

More generally, Haynes (2005, p. 1333) argues that ‘there appear to be signs of a gradual hardening of indigenous Muslim identity in Tanzania, a development with political connotations’. Glickman (2011) also points to the increase in revivalist groups closely linked to conservative religious movements such as Wahhabism and Salafism.

Politics and religion in Tanzania

A particularity of Tanzania is that Christian and Muslim groups have co-existed and interacted peacefully in the post-colonial state as a result of the model of ‘**Ujamaa**’ (‘brotherhood’ in Swahili) imposed by the first President Julius Nyerere.³ The single party regime of Nyerere was strongly corporatist in the sense that it seek to integrate and control all interests groups, including the religious ones, within the state structure (LeSage 2014, p. 3; Vittori, Bremer, Vittori 2009, p. 1080). The Ujamaa ideology based on a combination of Marxism and the Bible also promoted tolerance to live communally and discouraged identity politics at the national level (Heilman & Kaiser 2002, p. 705). Hence, according to Basedau et al. (2013, p. 872), ‘This moderateness in Tanzanian politics may be traced back to the influential Ujamaa ideology present in the country, which has enabled a common national identity to be forged. In these circumstances, the discrimination Muslims felt was blamed on the state and not on other religious groups.’ An important inheritance from this period is thus a balanced distribution of senior political positions between Muslims and Christians together with the (unofficial) rotation of the Presidency between the two groups (Brent & Mshigeni 2004, p. 62; Haynes 2006, p. 495).

Ironically, a trigger of religious tensions was the transition to **multiparty elections** in 1992 that opened the political space for contestation. Because of its social rootedness, even though increasingly challenged, the ruling party Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) has managed to stay in power. However, political competition has started to appear along religious lines with the emergence of the Civic United Front (CUF) in Zanzibar in 1992 which includes mostly Muslim supporters. After violent demonstrations following the loss of the CUF in the 1995, 2000 and 2005 elections, a Government of National Unity to share power between the CCM and the CUF⁴ was created in 2010 in Zanzibar to avoid further violence (LeSage 2014, pp. 3-4). Hence, according to Haynes (2006, p. 494), ‘the general context of the emergence of Islamic-based political

³ The mainland called Tanganyika gained independence in December 1961. It merged with Zanzibar in 1963 to become Tanzania.

⁴ The agreement was that the CCM would retain power in Zanzibar under President Ali Mohamed Shein, but with CUF leader Seif Sharif Hamad as his first vice president.

opposition in the early 1990s should be seen in the context of the fracturing of the country's post-colonial one-party system and the tentative beginning of political pluralism.'

This change can be understood as a result of the traditional control of the government over religious groups which meant that the more conservative Islamist political voices in Tanzanian politics were previously marginalised (LeSage 2014, p. 7). Indeed, Nyerere created **official religious associations** to deal with educational, religious and social matters, as well as to play the intermediary between the state and its constituencies (LeSage 2014, p. 7). According to Haynes (2006, p. 492) the function for these associations was primarily to achieve political and religious control of Muslims regarded as potentially subversive. The still dominant Muslim state-sponsored organisation in Tanzania is BAKWATA (Baraza Kuu Waislamu Watanzania or Supreme Council of Muslims in Tanzania). This association was seen as an ally of the ruling regime, uninterested in spiritual matters and contributing to perpetuating non-democratic rule. As a result, the opening of the regime in the 1990s also enabled the apparition of fundamentalist challengers to BAKWATA (Haynes 2006, p. 492; LeSage 2014, p. 7).

Dissent from Muslim community leaders already started in the 1980s which led to the banishment of BALUKTA (Barazala Uendelezaji wa Koran Tanzania or the Council for the Promotion of the Koran in Tanzania) – a movement that organised protests against the government's plans to utilise Christian church networks as part of national health and education service delivery programmes. This outburst of resentment against the State also led to attacks on markets selling pork and alcohol, and the occupation of the offices of BAKWATA accused of corruption and of hindering the promotion of Islam in the country (Haynes 2006, p. 495). After 1992, other Islamic groups appeared such as Simba wa Mungu (God's Lion) led by Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda who became a key leader of Jumuiya ya Taasisi za Kiislam (the Community of Muslim Organizations). He was arrested by the government after inflammatory public speeches⁵ and the involvement of his supporters in the physical takeover of moderate mosques (LeSage 2014, p. 8).

The case of Zanzibar

Zanzibar is a sensitive case in Tanzania with a concentration of political and religious tensions exacerbated by the local community's perception of disenfranchisement in national politics. Zanzibar is the home base of the CUF opposition, as well as of many fundamentalist Islamist movements such as Imam Mejlis (Imam Society) and Daawa Islamiya (Islamic Call) (LeSage 2014, p. 8). According to LeSage (2014, p. 8), the Government of National Unity in 2010 between CCM and CUF has not improved the situation. Quite the opposite, the CUF is now 'seen as a supporter of the status quo by local nationalist leaders' which opens the way for more radical leaders (LeSage 2014, p. 8).

As mentioned in the section on the religious history of Tanzania, the specific history of Zanzibar within Tanzania created a situation more prone to frame politics according to racial and religious identity than in the mainland (Brent & Mshigeni 2004, p. 62). This was not helped by the process of the union of Zanzibar with Tanganyika which was not looked favourably upon by much of Zanzibar population. Indeed, at the independence of Zanzibar in 1963, the island was ruled by a Sultanate and an Arab government. This government was overthrown by a Ugandan immigrant John Okello, leading to the massacre and expulsion of an important part of the Arab population. A Zanzibar Revolutionary Council was then established composed of members of the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) representing African residents of Zanzibar. The ASP signed an act of union with Nyerere in 1964 that created modern Tanzania

⁵ He was accused of inciting attacks against foreigners and 'morally corrupt' Muslims (Haynes 2006, p. 496)

This sensitive historical background is now instrumentalised by radical Islamist movement to contest power and mobilise the youth in the islands (Brent & Mshigeni 2004, p. 62). One group in particular, UAMSHO (Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation), has taken advantage of this situation. Led by Sheikh Farid Hadi who calls for the full independence of Zanzibar, it has also been involved in multiple violent protests since 2012. As a result Sheikh Farid Hadi was arrested in 2012. UAMSHO is often blamed for attacks in Zanzibar such as throwing acid, arson and explosive attacks (LeSage 2014, p. 9). According to Glickman (2011), UNAMSHO is a particularly controversial case as it employs the language of human rights and good governance in its critique of the government, while accusing it of provoking the moral decline of the country. It has been classified as a fundamentalist group by the government of Tanzania but has been found to be non-violent by an inquiry carried out by the British, American and Danish embassies. These violent incidents and controversies show the recurrent clashes between Muslims and Tanzanian government forces in the Zanzibar islands (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1087).

Another earlier incident also reflects well the tension between Zanzibar and the mainland. In 1993, Zanzibar announced it was joining the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) of which the government of Tanzania is not a member; but was then forced by the government to withdraw its application (Mesaki 2011, p. 255)

The socio-economic drivers

Many analyses point to the socio-economic drivers of radicalisation. Economic liberalisation since the early 1990s benefited few Tanzanians, and some even felt worse off. According to Haynes (2006, p. 495) and Heilam & Kaiser (2002, p. 691), this placed severe strains on Tanzania's social cohesion. Bakari (2012, p. 13) and Mesaki (2011, p. 254) shows how the contrast between the new free market economy and the previous Ujamaa ideology and its welfare policies left many citizens dissatisfied. This partly explains how new Islamist groups were able to take advantage of this situation by providing refuge to people affected by emerging socio-economic problems. It is increasingly effective in a context characterised by high perceptions that Muslims do not benefit proportionally from Tanzanian development efforts and private-sector investment (Mesaki 2011, p. 254). Zanzibar, in particular, is vulnerable to this religious activism as it has not enjoyed the same rate of economic growth and social development as the mainland. Unemployment has also reached a rate of 85 per cent amongst the youth (Haynes 2006, p. 496; LeSage 2014, p. 8).

However, other authors carefully emphasise that socio-economic problems do not directly cause radicalisation because, if this was true, Tanzania – and many other countries – would have already been radicalised for a long time (Rosenau 2005, p. 4). These problems have to be understood in the larger context of Christian-Muslim relations and the attempts to politically instrumentalise these issues.

External drivers

In addition to the potential political and socio-economic drivers of radicalisation, several analyses also single out its external drivers resulting from the particular geographic location of the country and its ties to the Arabic world. Indeed, Tanzania is close to Islamist logistical hubs such as Yemen and the United Arab Emirates (LeSage 2014, p. 5). The Islamist groups challenging BAKWATA have been formed and are supported by people who have returned from years of study or work in countries with fundamentalist beliefs such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, or Malaysia. They returned to Tanzania with the aim to reform the traditional practice of Islam and 'mobilise Muslims' political awareness' (LeSage 2014, pp. 7-8). This ambition is also supported by the investments of Islamic charities from Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi

Arabia which has also increased the number of scholarships available (Haynes 2006, p. 497; Glickman 2011; LeSage 2014, pp. 7-8). According to Haynes (2006, p. 497), the influence of Saudi Arabia as the effective ideological source of today's radical Wahhabism, is apparently growing in Tanzania. Saudi Arabia is for example spending 1 million USD a year building new mosques, madrassas and Islamic centres in Tanzania. Glickman (2011) confirms this growing influence illustrated also by the foreign funding of universities in Zanzibar: two of Zanzibar's universities are Islamic and funded by Saudi Arabians and Kuwaitis.

3. The extent of Islamist radicalisation and terrorism

Islamist-associated attacks and risks

Attacks and all sorts of violent acts have started to become more common since the 1990s. As mentioned earlier, the first violent demonstrations and acts were led by BALUKTA and then by other Islamist groups challenging BAKWATA. For example, in 1998 the Service for Islamic Propagation rioted during prayers in Dar Es Salaam and shouted anti-Christian slogans which led to the arrest and shooting of protesters. In the late 1990s-beginning of the 2000s, the unrest continued promoted by Sheik Ponda Issa Ponda and his God's Lion. They were accused of attacks against moderate mosques in Dar Es Salaam and of a tourist bar in Zanzibar (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1086). Violence in Zanzibar has usually been high, in particular around election periods. For instance, nine bombings targeting local bars, tourist resorts and political headquarters followed the 2000 elections (Brent & Mshigeni 2004, p. 61).

The first major terrorist attack that took place in Tanzania was the al Qaeda attack on the US embassy in Dar Es Salaam on 7 August 1998 (in parallel with the attack on the US embassy in Nairobi) which killed 11 people. Although it was mainly led by foreign al Qaeda operatives, it did include one Tanzanian national from Zanzibar, Khalfan Khamis Mohamed. Moreover, the attack was also supported by Islamist charity groups operating in Tanzania (LeSage 2014, pp. 5-7). In late 2001, some demonstrations took place against US bombing of Afghanistan and in support of Bin Laden (Vittori et al. 2009, p. 1086).

More recently LeSage (2014, p. 6) listed the number of 'Islamist-associated attacks' and incidents in Tanzania from November 2011 until July 2014 which amount to 28 acts during a two and a half years period. These include the arrest of Tanzanian nationals suspected to trying to join Al Shabaab, the killing of policemen and priests, acid attacks, attacks on churches, attacks on shopping areas, restaurant and bars, etc. (LeSage 2014, p. 9) also highlights that the response of moderate Muslims and Christians to these attacks has remained balanced, even though in 2013, leaflets were distributed in Zanzibar calling for the mobilisation of Christians to retaliate against Muslims. He concludes that this 'raises the specter of religious vigilantism and the potential for isolated Islamist militant attacks to evolve into wider sectarian crisis.' Vittori et al. (2009, p. 1086) also warn that even if known incidents of Islamist extremism are relatively rare, this could also be due to government censorship and may not necessarily reflect reality and popular opinions.

Regarding further risks, LeSage (2014, p. 1) indicates that even though attacks are for the moment relatively unsophisticated and involve low casualties – with homemade explosives, handguns and acid – this could evolve quickly into 'something far more lethal and intractable' with more sophisticated capabilities and a rapidly increasing number of attacks. The example of the Kenyan path from minor violence to major terrorist threats is often taken as a point of comparison by scholars and analysts (Rosenau 2005, pp. 3-4; LeSage 2014, p. 1). The ultimate risk being that Tanzania would emerge as part of a 'wider, regional safe haven for militants linked to Al Shabaab' (LeSage 2014, p. 12).

External connections

The extent of Tanzanian Islamist groups' links with regional and global terrorist networks is still controversial. Whereas older analyses by Rosenau (2005) and Haynes (2006, p. 494) assert that Tanzania does not make an ideal ground for recruitment by these groups and is not part of a network of transnational Islamic extremism, LeSage (2014) offers a rather different analysis. He argues that rising violence in Tanzania is directly associated with al Qaeda and Al Shabaab (LeSage 2014, p. 5).

Le Sage (2014, p. 9) points to a range of evidence:

- The discoveries in October-November 2013 of terrorist training camps, weapon caches and indoctrination centres associated with regional militants that shows the interconnections with Al Shabaab and its Kenyan affiliate Al Hijra.
- The general efforts carried out by these regional and global groups to build an operational network in Tanzania through a well organised media campaign: social media, websites, an online magazine called Gaidi Mtaani published both in English and Swahili.
- In June 2012, a German national of Turkish origin, Emrah Erdogan, was arrested at Julius Nyerere International Airport in Dar Es Salaam upon his arrival from Kenya. This travel followed his departure from Somalia where he joined Al Shabaab. He was also wanted in connection with bomb attacks in Kenya.
- In July 2013, a British national, Hassan Ali Iqbal, was arrested in Tanzania as he attempted to transit overland to Malawi carrying with him multiple passports. He was wanted in the UK for his involvement in terrorist activities.
- Direct links exist between the Ansar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) in Tanzania, and Al Hijra and Al Shabaab, as well as to old Al Qaeda networks that conducted the 1998 US Embassy bombing. Glickman (2011) also adds that Islamist leaders such as Sheik Ponda Issa Ponda (God's Lion), are also reputed to have ties to Al Qaeda officials. LeSage (2014, p. 11) stresses that even though AMYC is the only publicly known affiliate of these regional terrorist groups, it is only 'the visible part of a loose network that includes hardline Islamist preachers, their radical mosques, Islamic social centres, and schools, likeminded businessmen who finance militant activities, and multiple, small cells of armed youth that cooperate with each other' – which makes 'understanding the structure and leadership extremely challenging'

Finally, the potential participation of the Tanzanian government to AMISOM⁶ in Somalia might make the country a more direct target for Al Shabaab which has mainly focused on East African countries contributing to AMISOM. Already now, the commitment announced by the Tanzanian government in July 2014 to train 1000 Somali National Army soldiers is making Tanzania more vulnerable to Al Shabaab's actions (LeSage 2014, p. 10).

⁶ The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is a peacekeeping mission mandated to support the Somali government in its fight against Al Shabaab and to train its security forces.

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