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News and announcements

Deradicalization in Somalia : traditional authorities and counterinsurgency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a need for Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes to emphasize the social dimensions of reintegration and to develop more context sensitive DDR programmes that put greater emphasis on local ownership.

In order to make DDR suitable to dealing with armed Islamist groups, such as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, traditional authorities and other societal actors have taken up important roles in deradicalization work.

Due to insufficient governance by national and international actors where reintegration of Islamist armed movements takes place, local elites, community leaders and traditional authorities play significant roles as local power brokers.

Traditionnal authorities have important opinion-shaping roles and influence the willingness of clan networks and communities to support reintegration of former al-Shabaab combatants and non-combatants.

International organizations cannot control the deradicalization narratives among local non-state actors. Traditional authorities do not simply amplify international organization's peacebuilding narratives.

Societal support, networks and kinship relations are paramount for reintegration of former combatants.

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Cover photo: a Ugandan soldier with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) runs past a Somali woman on his way to his fighting vehicle on 25 May 2012, near the centre of Afgoye town to the west of the Somali capital Mogadishu.

Deradicalization has become a stabilization priority in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). This has been especially true for Somalia¹. The UN has started to embed deradicalization in its repertoire of tools. The UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) incorporated it into the field of Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration² (DDR). In several other countries, the UN as well as non-UN actors conduct DDR with varying levels of deradicalization. Some argue that a process of convergence is underway between the counterinsurgency and DDR conceptual and practical fields³.

In Somalia, traditional authorities play necessary roles in the stabilization effort in as far as they have leverage in weakening support for al-Shabaab in rural communities. There is an international expectation that sheikhs, imams and elders act as intermediaries and multiply contacts with communities living under the control of al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, or other armed groups⁴. This is especially so given the context-specific conditions of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Somalia that entail severe state absence, semi-territorial control⁵ on the part of the insurgents, and protracted community-level conflicts. What happens in cases where traditional authorities become involved in deradicalization practices? What follows is my analysis of the interactions between Somali traditional authorities and international interveners⁶.

Traditional authorities shape perceptions and narratives at the community level about the "progress" and benefits of stabilization efforts. Their opinion-shaping role is especially important given that stabilization objectives can be quite opaque. By supporting or contesting interventions linked to the external presence in Somalia, they influence the willingness of particular clan networks and communities to support deradicalization and reintegration of former al-Shabaab

combatants and non-combatants. My analysis shows that traditional authorities mediate between foreigner's expectations and local sensibilities, but such roles cannot be premeditated.

Counterinsurgency and DDR

Stabilization interventions in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa today are intertwined with logics and techniques akin to counterinsurgency⁷. This often involves governance structures and networks that seek to prevent and counter violent extremism. These forms of interventionism aim to impose a distinctive type of rule in order to help manage and suppress instability and its effects⁸.

The DDR policy field is reconfiguring its tools, policies and practices to address the diversity of armed actors in contemporary conflicts, and especially armed Islamist movements. On occasion, the UN includes deradicalization components into its DDR programming⁹. DDR has come to stretch across a continuum from a strictly minimalist focus on improving security in the short term, towards a maximalist understanding as a wide package of practices that initiate a process leading to sustainable development. DDR is no longer a strictly post-conflict activity but takes place during periods of ongoing violence. Its programming is highly flexible and context-specific. Several states affected by the actions of armed Islamist movements have called for DDR programmes to include reintegration specifically adapted for former members of armed Islamist movements.

Counterinsurgency often relies on bolstering the autonomy of local power elites or counterinsurgent forces¹⁰. Various kind of actors receive support and funding

from international stabilization and counterterrorism actors in return for their buy-in and persuasion of local communities to cooperate. The reliance by counterinsurgency strategies on a selective mix of coercive and consensual methods has been a well-known phenomenon, going back to the colonial term pacification¹¹. The underpinning aim of pacification is social control and rendering locals more insurgent resistant. However, the engagement of traditional authorities in deradicalization does not predictably deliver on stabilization priorities. The mediating role of traditional authorities gives rise to adaptive, complex, contingent forms of governance. This context-based analysis of traditional authorities in Somalia is case specific, yet the findings echo a historically well-known challenge facing counterinsurgency-society interactions.

DDR in Somalia

In Somalia, various approaches to DDR have been tested in the post-conflict settings of Somaliland and Puntland in the 1990s. UNSOM and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), with support from other UN agencies and key donors, have significantly widened the scope of DDR programmes and made them "deradicalization-like"¹². UNSOM's Office for the Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) supported the Federal Government of Somalia's (FGS) development of the national programme for the treatment and handling of disengaged combatants and youth at risk in 2012 (hereafter referred to as national programme). Four facilities were initially established with the purpose to reintegrate into the community "low-risk" al-Shabaab ex-combatants. The national programme pillars are: outreach; reception; screening; rehabilitation; reinsertion and

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reintegration. The national programme mechanisms were available only to those individuals deemed to be "low-risk" by the FGS's National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). That is, individuals who voluntarily defected from the organization, who denounced al-Shabaab's ideology, and who were not deemed to pose a future risk to public safety. UNSOM also supported and monitored a pilot prison-based rehabilitation programme for high-risk prisoners in Baidoa.

Deradicalization and its value for our understanding of communal conflicts or governance challenges in post-conflict settings is hotly debated¹³. Broadly speaking it refers to the process by which you try to have individuals leave groups designated as "violent extremists" or "terrorists" and change their "radical" mindset¹⁴. Deradicalization is a fast developing field: various models, assessment criteria and methods are being adopted and tested¹⁵. One of the most significant deradicalization measures in Somalia has been the national intelligence and security agency's model of directly enrolling defectors into its rank. This practice has been shrouded in secrecy and led to resentment amongst average Somalis. They understand the NISA to be an infiltrated body since some highly ranked al-Shabaab members were given government jobs, therefore simultaneously attaining social positions closed to most Somalis whilst escaping harsh punishments¹⁶. Traditional authorities were envisaged to encourage defections and facilitate reintegration. Such activities, it is hoped, will weaken the civilian support base for Islamist armed groups, thereby re-centering the authority of the state and its coercive

apparatus. The FGS selected what they considered suitable imams and elders and relied on them for strategic outreach to communities and for inside information about trigger factors of al-Shabaab recruitment. Traditional authorities took up roles in the national programme mainly in outreach, reinsertion, and reintegration. Some imams are working on rehabilitation.

The international support for the FGS national programme has drawn deradicalization into DDR programming, and spurred adjustments and new forms of collaboration across the stabilization actors. These illustrate concrete examples of the merger between stabilization and counter-insurgency practices.

Traditional authorities' deradicalization roles in Somalia

Several societal actors have become increasingly integrated into Somalia's burgeoning deradicalization efforts. In-depth analysis of traditional authorities is warranted, because historically they held high levels of local authority and legitimacy in dispute settlement and similar roles that resemble those now connected to "deradicalization" in Somalia. More recently some of them have taken on official deradicalization roles, but their ability to accept or refuse such roles and

also shape what it involves is deeply rooted in history.

Many traditional authorities were open to cooperating with stabilization actors. They were incentivised to gain connections with government circles and transnational statebuilding networks, because for their communities this presents political and economic opportunities as well as novel forms of social recognition. At the same time, the powers bestowed upon traditional authorities are locally sourced, informal and highly flexible. Traditional authorities know full well what is at risk when cooperating with stabilization and national actors. Weakened local legitimacy means an erosion of the particular non-state form of networked power that traditional authorities depend on.

AMISOM and government representatives requested of traditional authorities to denounce al-Shabaab. Those elders and sheikhs that have publicly denounced the group put themselves, their immediate family and clan at serious risk. This level of total cooperation with the stabilization actors entailed having to move the family to an AMISOM protected location and relying on counterinsurgency forces for personal safety. This is the high price they paid for cooperation. As part of the rehabilitation pillar of the national programme, religious leaders usually became involved in religious education and counselling. Some of them developed a critical stance on the national programme based on inside knowledge about NISA's or government ministries involvement in deradicalization. NISA incorporated, threatened and bribed traditional authorities for information useful



Djiboutian soldiers destroy an al-Shabaab flag after the town of Bula Burde was liberated by AMISOM forces on March 16th 2014.



"Traditional authorities with new-found deradicalization roles simultaneously were pro-deradicalization and moved against other normative objectives of the stabilization agenda, such as democratization templates including gender equality and minority representation."

to their extrajudicial operations, targeting al-Shabaab, other non-state armed groups, or political opponents¹⁷. Those that were critical subsequently found themselves in delicate positions. Incorporated into official deradicalization roles, they were presumably useful to "correcting" Islamic beliefs among defectors. At the same time, they attempted to mediate across a range of moderate and conservative Islamic backgrounds from the perspective of remaining true to their set of beliefs.

Some religious leaders mobilized so-called traditional (in their view legitimate) interpretations of scriptures and the collective influence of Islam in Somalia. In this respect, they lent support to stabilization efforts. They became visible proponents, which made them unwanted among pro-al-Shabaab communities. However, this support does not extend very far. It does not necessarily carry over into other issue areas. Traditional authorities with new-found deradicalization roles simultaneously were pro-deradicalization and moved against other normative objectives of the stabilization agenda, such as democratization templates including gender equality and minority representation.

In their roles as intermediaries, traditional authorities sometimes took on influential roles and identities within government or among external interveners. They "sided with stabilization", and their mobility became dependent on AMISOM security escorts and close working relations with local security forces. In the eyes of local communities residing in rural and al-Shabaab-controlled areas, they lost some of their legitimacy. The fortune of those traditional authorities henceforth depended on their interactions with stabilization actors, and with the local political elites that slowly established regional and district rule.

Their deradicalization role can be understood as a position from which they counteracted what they viewed as illegitimate aspects of Islamic armed insurgency, at the same time as they stabilized their local rule. Hence, it was not surprising that some elders were perceived with increasing suspicion by their constituencies. No matter how influential on deradicalization issues, a traditional leader will be seen as co-opted and politicized if he loses his power or influence over local agendas. A coopted, corrupt or weak elder will become detached from community interests, and oriented towards external agendas.

Some traditional authorities adopted a more "conservative" position and were reluctant to accept any offers of cooperation with deradicalization initiatives and funding. On other occasions, traditional authorities explicitly or implicitly supported al-Shabaab structures over government-supportive traditional authorities and stabilization actors. These traditional authorities understand their protective roles as one of avoiding the worst of reprisal attacks for collaborating with outsiders. There were also traditional authorities who refused al-Shabaab rule, but not out of conviction that the best course of action is counterinsurgency. Rather, they estimated that this self-protection, with a commitment to bear arms, was the best available way to protect their way of life.

Conclusion

Traditional authorities have at their disposal various consensual means of turning community perceptions in favour of stabilization. Stabilization actors seek to use or recruit them in their counterinsurgency

campaign. However, in their new-found roles of deradicalization intermediaries they unsettle and challenge some underlying assumptions of stabilization thinking. Their own identities and security practices are significantly transformed. These highly adaptive behaviors and their effects on stabilization are underrated.

Traditional authorities do not predictably extend a form of social control that renders communities immune to insurgency. Rather, traditional authorities maintain social structures because they must mediate between different rules and sources of power, authority and legitimacy. Traditional authorities must keep an eye on their local sources of authority, and as closely as possible regulate local deradicalization dynamics. Traditional authorities that are perceived to be coopted by international actors become weakened and lose the quality that presumably made them a candidate of pacification at the outset. The way this unfolds tends to preserve social hierarchies and historical inequalities.

¹ Gelot, Linnéa & Hansen, Stig Jarle (2019). "They are from within us: CVE brokerage in south-central Somalia", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(6): 563-582 ; Gelot, Linnéa (2020). "Deradicalization as Soft Counter-insurgency: Distorted Interactions Between Somali Traditional Authorities and Intervening Organisations", *Journal of Intervention & Statebuilding*, 14(2): 253-270.

² Özerdem, Alpaslan (2012). "A Re-Conceptualisation of Ex-Combatant Reintegration : "Social Reintegration" Approach", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 12(1): 51-73 ; Berdal, Mats & Ucko, David (2013). "Introduction to the DDR Forum: Rethinking the Reintegration of Former Combatants", *International Peacekeeping*, 20(3): 316-320 ; Kaplan, Oliver & Nussio, Enzo (2015). "Community counts: The social re-integration of ex-combatants in Colombia", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35(2): 132-153 ; Clubb, Gordon & Tapley, Marina (2018). "Conceptualising de-radicalisation and former combatant re-integration in Nigeria", *Third World Quarterly* 39(1): 2053-2068.

³ Gelot & Hansen (2019). Op. cit. ; Zaalberg, Thijs (2012). "Peacekeeping and the Slippery Slope to Counterinsurgency", In Rich, Paul B & Duyvesteyn Isabelle, *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, New York: Routledge.

⁴ On the dynamism embedded in traditional authorities and clan structures in Somalia, see Höhne, Markus (2006). "Traditional authorities in Northern Somalia: Transformation of positions and powers", *Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers*, no 82 ; Gaas, Mohamed (2018). "Primordialism vs instrumentalism in Somali society: is an alternative needed? ", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 36(4): 464-483.

⁵ On territorial control of the Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, see Hansen, Stig (2019). *Horn, Sahel and Rift : Fault-lines of the African Jihad*, London : Hurst Publishers.

⁶ Traditional authorities interactions with stabilization actors distort and challenge familiar dichotomies such as internal/external, local/global, informal/formal, see Gelot (2020), Op. cit. On the concept of hybridity, see Moe, Louise W (2011). "Hybrid and 'Everyday' Political Ordering: Constructing and Contesting Legitimacy in Somaliland ", *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 43(63): 143-177; Millar, Gearoid (2014). "Disaggregating hybridity: Why hybrid institutions do not produce predictable experiences of peace", *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(4): 501-514; Richards, Rebecca (2015). "Bringing the Outside In: Somaliland, Statebuilding and Dual Hybridity". *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:1: 4-25.

⁷ Moe, Louise W (2018). "Counter-insurgency in the Somali territories: the "grey zone" between peace and pacification", *International Affairs* 94(2): 319-341, p. 329; Charbonneau, Bruno (2019). "Intervention as counter-insurgency politics", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19:3: 309-314; Gelot, Linnéa & Sandor, Adam (2019). "African security and global militarism", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19:6: 521-542.

⁸ Charbonneau, Bruno (2019). Op. cit., p. 310.

⁹ See the recently published revised Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) ; Piémont, Daniel (2015). "The Role of Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration in Countering Violent Extremism", *SSR 2.0 Brief*, 3: 1-10.

¹⁰ Goodhand, Jonathan & Hakimi, Aziz (2014). *Counterinsurgency, local militias and statebuilding in Afghanistan*, United States Institute for Peace ; Souleimanov, Emil A, & Huseyn, Aliyev (2016). "Evaluating the efficiency of indigenous forces in counterinsurgency: Lessons from Chechnya and Dagestan", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 27(3), 392-416 ; Ucko, David (2013). "Beyond Clear-Hold-Build : Rethinking Local-Level Counterinsurgency after Afghanistan", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 34(3): 526-551.

¹¹ Maurois, André (1931). *Marshall Lyautey* (1st ed). John Lane, p. 63 ; Kienschierf, Markus (2016). "Beyond Militarization and Repression: Liberal Social Control as Pacification", *Critical Sociology* 42(7-8): 1179-1194. There are other concepts referring to similar forms of counter-insurgency conduct, but I have chosen to focus on pacification.

¹² Felbab-Brown, Vanda (2015). "A Bridge Not Too Far: A Field Report from Somalia", In James Cockayne, & Siobhan O'Neil (eds), *UN DDR in an era of violent extremism : is it fit for purpose ?*, Chapter 5. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research.

¹³ Marchal, Roland & Zekeria, Ould Ahmed Salem (2018). "La 'radicalisation' aide-t-elle à mieux penser?", *Politique africaine*, 149: 5-20.

¹⁴ Hansen, Stig J & Lid, Stian (eds) (2020). *Routledge Handbook of Deradicalization*, Chapter 1, London : Routledge.

¹⁵ Hansen & Lid (2020). Op. cit. ; Khalil, James & Zeuthen, Martine (2016). *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction. A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation*, London : Royal United Services Institute.

¹⁶ Gelot & Hansen (2019). Op. cit., p. 569.

¹⁷ Ingiriis, Mohamed H (2020). "Predatory Politics and Personalization of Power : The Abuses and Misuses of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in Somalia". *African Affairs*, 119(475): 251-274.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

→ Marie-Eve Desrosiers

will join the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa on July 1st.

She published with Philippe Lagassé "[Analyzing the political pressures of COVID-19 will help us understand what a post-pandemic world might look like](#)" in *Policy Options*.

→ Yvan Conoir

conducted an interview with Professor Francis Akindès of the University of Bouaké in *Alternatives Humanitaires* to understand the response to COVID-19 in Ivory Coast. This interview is [available online](#).

→ Marina Sharpe

published an article entitled "[The Free Movement of Persons within the African Union and Refugee Protection](#)" in the online journal *RefLaw*.



Mogadishu fishing port, Xamar Weyne District, March 16th 2013.

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