Political Violence in 21st Century Kenya: A Case Study of Non-State Terrorism

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Abstract

Political violence is a growing global security concern. Terrorism is a type of political violence that is perpetrated either by a state or non-state actor. Political violence literature often frames terrorism as either domestic or international. However, influenced in part by post-9/11 U.S.-led global war on terror, the same literature has tended to focus more on non-state terrorism than state terrorism. But even more, non-state terrorism literature on Kenya has primarily been focused on international non-state terrorism than domestic non-state terrorism with implications for human security in the country. This case study explores non-state terrorism in Kenya and aims to contribute to knowledge on the same. The case study employs a mixed methods research design involving juxtaposition of descriptive statistical analysis of terrorism data on Kenya extracted from Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and qualitative content analysis of 39 scholarly publications on terrorism in Kenya sourced using Google Scholar. The case study accomplishes at least three things: (1) It identifies trends and patterns in domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya, (2) it identifies perpetrators of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya, and (3) identifies drivers and enablers of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya. This article documents the case study findings and recommendations for future research.

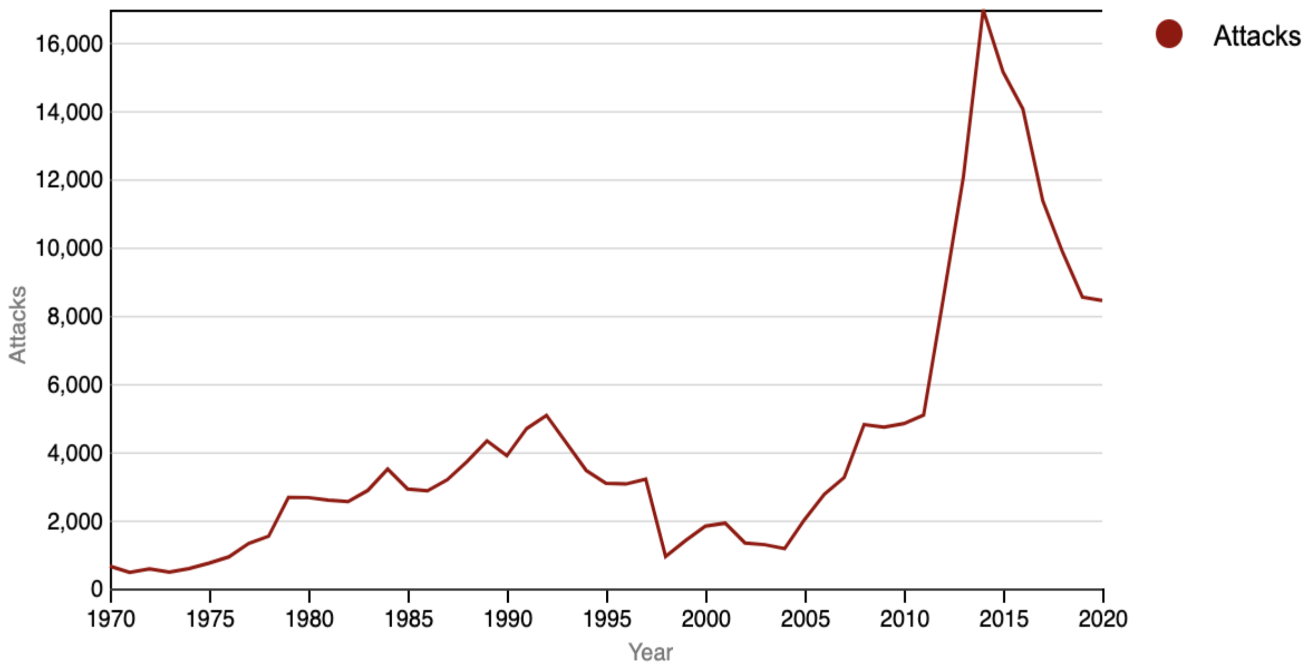
Keywords: Political violence, terrorism, domestic terrorism, international terrorism, non-state terrorism, extremism, Kenya

1. Introduction

Political violence including violent extremism and terrorism is a growing global security concern. Writing in the foreword of a recent United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report entitled *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, Achim Steiner – the UNDP Administrator – points out that, "Insecurity arising from extremism has led to the highest levels of population displacement – both Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) and refugees since the Second World War; a large proportion of that displacement is taking place in Africa" (UNDP, 2023, p. 7). Moreover, analysis of global terrorist attack data establish that terrorism has been on the rise at least since 1970 as shown in figure 1.

The purpose of this case study is two-fold. First, the case study seeks to identify and document trends and patterns in Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data on terrorism in Kenya. Second, the case study aims to identify and document drivers and enablers of non-state terrorism that are referenced in scholarly publications on terrorism in Kenya. Kenya was purposely selected as the study area for at least two reasons: (1) Kenya's status as an anchor state within the context of U.S. led global antiterrorism and counter-terrorism efforts (Prestholdt, 2011), and (2) the country's long history (Sharamo & Mohamed, 2020; Shinn, 2007) with political violence including, but not limited to, the *Mau Mau* uprising, Shifta war, infamous 1998 Al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, 2007/2008 Post-Election Violence (PEV), 2013 Al-Shabaab terrorist attack on Westgate Mall, and 2015 Al-Shabaab terrorist attack on Garissa University (Blanchard, 2013; Kamau, 2021; Kanyinga, 2009; Kanogo, 1987; Mogire & Agade, 2011; Ogot & Ochieng', 1995; Simon, 2015). The case study employed a mixed methods case study research design and was guided by two broad questions as follows. What are the trends and patterns in GTD data on terrorism in Kenya for the period 2000-2019? What are the drivers and enablers of terrorism referenced in scholarly publications on

Figure 1: Global trend in terrorist attacks, 1970-2020



Source: Global Terrorism Database

Note: This figure shows that terrorism has been on rise globally since 1970. The figure also establishes that the greatest increase in terrorist attacks happened in the 21st Century.

terrorism in Kenya published between 2000 and 2021?

This article is organized into six sections as follows. First, this brief introduction section has provided the purpose and scope of the case study. Second, a literature review section that, among other things, situates the case study within existing literature and provides a working definition of terrorism. Third, a methods section, which describes the research design and methods employed in the case study. Fourth, a findings section, which details results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Fifth, a discussion section where the case study findings are discussed in detail. Finally, the article ends with a conclusion section, which also offers recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of terrorism

Terrorism, like security (Asaka, 2022), is a contested concept (Schmid, 2021a; Otiso, 2009). Political violence scholars have debated the definition of terrorism for years but are yet to come to an agreement on a single universally accepted definition (Martin, 2016). This is the case, in part, because different entities have over time defined terrorism differently. Moreover, as Gus points out, "another complication is that most definitions focus on political violence perpetrated by dissident groups, even though many governments have practiced terrorism as both domestic and foreign policy" (Martin, 2016, p. 27). A few examples would suffice here. First, while acknowledging that terrorism can be "committed by whomever" (United Nations General Assembly, 2006, p. 1), the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (UNGCTS) nevertheless frames terrorism as a primarily non-state actor driven problem. Second, Kenya's Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 3 of 2012 (as amended by State Law (Miscellaneous Amendment) Act, 2019) – the law that governs counter-terrorism efforts in the country – frames terrorism as an act committed by a person (i.e., a non-state actor) (Government of Kenya, 2012; Government of Kenya, 2019). This despite the reality of terror associated with state operatives in the country (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 2015; Kivoi,

2020; Missing Voices, 2022; Mogire & Agade, 2011; Nyadera, Wandwkha, & Agwanda, 2021; Zarkov, 2020). As some scholars have correctly noted, such a state-centered understanding of terrorism presents a significant conceptual flaw with far reaching implications for counter-terrorism policy and practice (Breidlid, 2021; Kamau, 2021; Oando & Achieng', 2021).

Considering the foregoing discussion, this article adopts the definition developed by Gus Martin who defines terrorism as “a premeditated and unlawful act in which groups or agents of some principle engage in a threatened or actual use of force or violence against human or property targets with the intention of purposeful intimidation of governments or people to affect policy or behavior, with an underlying political objective” (Martin, 2016, p. 30). This definition is specific enough to make it possible to distinguish between an ordinary crime and terrorism, while broad enough to account for both state and non-state terrorism. Gus further distinguishes between terrorism and extremism by noting that “Extremism is a radical expression of one’s political values” (Martin, 2016, p. 4), and serves as “a precursor to terrorism – it is an overarching belief system that is used by terrorists to justify their violent behavior” (Martin, 2016, p. 24).

2.2. Types of terrorism

Political violence literature groups terrorism into at least two major types based on actors: State terrorism (sometimes also called “regime terrorism” (Schmid, 2021a, p. 17)), and non-state terrorism (sometimes also called “dissident terrorism” (Martin, 2016, p. 31)). Furthermore, terrorism literature makes a distinction between domestic and international terrorism. The former is associated with local terrorist actors with no known links to foreign terrorist organizations while the latter is perpetrated by foreign terrorist actors and/or their local affiliates (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). For instance, in the Kenyan context, the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi qualifies as international terrorism while the 1975 OTC bus blast is an example of domestic terrorism. In addition to actors, terrorism literature also identifies several sub-types of terrorism based on factors such as ideology, weapons used, targeted sector, and mode of operation among others (Martin, 2016; Schmid, 2021a). Schimd provides a shortlist of common types of terrorism including “Single-issue terrorism, lone wolf/actor terrorism, vigilante terrorism, separatist (ethno-nationalist) terrorism, left-wing terrorism, right-wing terrorism, religious terrorism, cyber-terrorism, Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) terrorism, and state (or regime) terrorism” among others (Schmid, 2021a, p. 17).

2.3. Causes and drivers of terrorism

There is no unanimity, among political violence scholars, on the cause(s) of terrorism. For instance, Gus concedes that terrorism has multiple causes and goes on to group existing theories of terrorism into three broad categories: (1) “political violence as the fruit of injustice” (under this you find explanations based on structural theory, deprivation theories – relative and absolute, psychology, and criminology), (2) “political violence as strategic choice” (i.e., the idea of one wo/man’s terrorist being another’s freedom fighter), and (3) “moral justifications for political violence” (i.e., terrorism as a morally just cause) (Martin, 2016, p. 48).

Political violence literature outlines several causes, drivers and enablers of violent extremism and terrorism. For instance, Schädel and Giessmann note that, “violent extremism and terrorism [...] *is* the result of structural drivers (e.g., repression, inequality, poor governance, violations of human rights, discrimination, unemployment, and foreign interventions), individual motivations (e.g., a sense of purpose, victimization, belonging, identity, acceptance, status, expected rewards, material enticements) and enabling factors (e.g., presence of radical mentors, access to radical communities and ideologies, access to weapons, lack of state presence, absence of family support)” (Schädel & Giessmann, 2021, p. 92). Schmid provides that, “One important cause of non-state terrorism is a desire to exact revenge for some perceived or real injustice that has not been adequately addressed by the existing political system” (Schmid, 2021b, p. 1122). A recent related global study of causes of terrorism that have been referenced in texts (including academic journals, public media, and other non-academic publications) found that terrorism has been attributed to one or more

of the following factors:

> Globalization; rapid modernization; Western alliances with Middle Eastern dictatorships; foreign intervention and/or occupation; unjust world order; failed or weak states; lack of freedom and democracy; oppression and repression; illegitimate or corrupt governments; violation of basic human rights; growing racial or social inequality; ethnic or religious discrimination; ethnic diversity; social polarization; feelings of injustice; extremist ideology; mental illness; radicalization in prisons or refugee camps; alienation; grievances; political discontent; frustration about absolute or relative deprivation (e.g., poverty); unemployment; youth bulge; ideological radicalization; desire for revenge, retribution, punishment; desire to (re-)gain sense of significance; desire to dramatize injustices and create impetus for reform; Alienation from, and discrimination in, host country; rage in response to humiliation; feelings of powerlessness and deprivation; feelings of marginalization and exclusion; disillusionment over impossibility of bringing about change by other means; bitter hopelessness and desperation, with terrorism being weapon of last resort; ideological radicalization to extremist ideology; desire for national self-determination; instrument to accelerate "history"; tool to reinstate, reinforce supremacy of own group; no other choice (weapon of the weak); absence of alternative channels of influence; to obtain access to mass media (propaganda of the deed); to unblock blocked society (no democratic change possible); to press for solution in unresolved conflict; tactic of provocation to trigger repression that will bring new recruits; easy availability of targets and weapons in open democratic societies; shortcomings in preventive measures; weak border/perimeter controls allowing access to targets; mimetic urge to do likewise (contagion); outcome of a learning process; fanaticism; religious duty rewarded by place in paradise; defense of the community (Ummah); defense of the prophet; divine command. (Schmid, 2021a, pp. 35-36)

The foregoing discussion establishes terrorism as a complex phenomenon with multiple causes, drivers, and enablers, and that is amenable to context. Terrorism has been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., critical and non-critical), contexts of analysis (e.g., spatial and temporal), scale of analysis (e.g., small *n* and large *N* studies), and levels of analysis (e.g., individual, group, society, sub-national, national, international, regional, transnational, and global) (Cannon & Pkalya, 2019; Haynes, 2005; Lind, Mutahi, & Oosterom, 2017; Mogire & Agade, 2011; Simon, 2015). However, writing in 2009, Ignacio Sanchez and Luis de la Calle cautioned that "we know more about international terrorism than we do about domestic terrorism" (Sánchez-Cuenca & de la Calle, 2009, p. 32). Moreover, as correctly noted by Ajide and Alimi, "Concerning policy relevance, it seems plausible that understanding the key drivers of terrorism could enable more effective counterterrorism measures than grounding such decisions on baseless criteria" (Ajide & Alimi, 2021, p. 344). Taking cue from them, this case study sets out to (hopefully) contribute to knowledge on domestic and international terrorism in Kenya.

2.4 Political violence and terrorism in Kenya

Political violence in Kenya dates back, at least, to the pre-independence period. For instance, during the British colonial era, *Mau Mau* freedom fighters and other natives took on the British colonists who ruled pre-independent Kenya from around late 1800s to early 1960s (Kanogo, 1987; Ogot & Ochieng', 1995). The Colony of Kenya ultimately gave way to the Dominion of Kenya in 1963, which in turn gave way to the Republic of Kenya in 1964 (Ogot & Ochieng', 1995). Post-independence, political violence in Kenya has taken on a variety of forms including but not limited to secessionist conflict (e.g., Shifta war), armed resistance (e.g., Sabaot Lands Defence Forces), coup d'état (e.g., 1982 coup), post-election violence (e.g., 2007/2008 PEV), international terrorism (e.g., 2002 Paradise hotel bombing), and domestic terrorism (e.g., 1975 OTC bus blast).

Because of the long history of political violence (including terrorism) in Kenya, there is an extensive and growing body of literature on the same (Kamau, 2021; Krause & Otenyo, 2005; Mogire & Agade, 2011; Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016; Oando & Achieng', 2021; Otenyo, 2004; Otiso, 2009; Prestholdt, 2011; Sharamo & Mohamed, 2020). With regards to terrorism specifically, the existing literature has focused on a variety of aspects including, but not limited to, the causes and/or drivers of terrorism (Cannon & Pkalya, 2019; Chacha, 2004; Otenyo, 2004; Otiso, 2009), impacts of terrorism (Akanyisi, 2016; Blanchard, 2013; Ide, 2017), public perception of terrorism (Krause & Otenyo, 2005), radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups (Badurdeen, 2021; Mkutu & Opondo, 2021), terrorism-related legislation (Kamau, 2006), counterterrorism practices (Breidlid, 2021; Kamau, 2021; Mwangi, 2019; Lind,

Mutahi, & Oosterom, 2017; Mogire & Agade, 2011; Njuguna, 2018; Oando & Achieng', 2021; Prestholdt, 2011; Rosand, Millar, & Ipe, 2009), and, to a lesser degree, terrorism actors (Buluma, 2014). However, of particular interest to the current study is the knowledge that existing literature on terrorism in Kenya predominantly associates terrorism with Islamic fundamentalism (Haynes, 2005; Ide, 2017; Otenyo, 2004; Shinn, 2007). Moreover, the same literature overwhelmingly conceptualizes terrorism as a non-state actor problem thereby reinforcing a state-centric understanding of terrorism, which dominates much of the mainstream academic discourse on the subject as well as public policy debates on the same.

As noted in the previous section, critical terrorism studies literature provides that terrorism can be perpetrated by a state and/or non-state actor. Therefore, a perspective that discounts the actual or potential role of either actor in terrorism in any context cannot provide a nuanced understanding of the terrorism problem in that context or anywhere else. For instance, because of predominant focus on Islamic fundamentalism related terrorism and a state-centered understanding of terrorism among terrorism scholars studying Kenya, existing terrorism literature on the country is predominantly focused on international non-state terrorism (Otenyo, 2004). In other words, at best, there is a dearth of literature on domestic non-state terrorism that is specifically focused on the Kenyan context (Bellinger & Kattelman, 2021). It is within this niche area that this case study hopes to contribute to knowledge. The case study specifically aims to contribute to knowledge on both domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya. In the next section, I present the research methods used in the case study.

3. Methods

This study is based on a case study research design and employs mixed methods. Baxter offers a succinct and useful definition of case study as “the study of a single instance or small number of instances of a phenomenon in order to explore in-depth nuances of the phenomenon and the contextual influences on and explanations of that phenomenon” (Baxter, 2010, p. 81). While Creswell argues that “there is more insight to be gained from the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research than either form by itself. Their combined use provides an expanded understanding of research problems” (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). On one hand, this case study relies on descriptive statistical analysis to identify trends and patterns in GTD data on terrorism in Kenya. On the other hand, the case study relies on qualitative content analysis to identify and document drivers and enablers of terrorism that are referenced in scholarly publications on terrorism in Kenya.

3.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

Alan and Finlay note that the “main purpose of descriptive statistics is to explore the data and to reduce them to simpler and more understandable terms without distorting or losing much of the available information” (Agresti & Finlay, 1997, p. 4). This case study relies on terrorism data sourced from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) in 2020. The GTD is an open-source database, which provides information on domestic and international terrorist attacks around the world since 1970 (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2021). At the time of data collection, the database only contained data for the period from 1970 to 2019. The GTD web platform’s advanced search function was deployed to find relevant data. Because of the study’s focus on 21st Century Kenya, the search timeframe was limited to 2000-2019 and incident location set to Kenya to retrieve only Kenya-specific data. The resultant data was then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for descriptive statistical analysis (Agresti & Finlay, 1997). Data analysis was conducted with the aid of Excel. I specifically used Excel to compute totals and percentages and visualize trends in the data. Results of the statistical analysis are presented in the first portion of the findings section.

3.2. Qualitative content analysis

As Hsieh and Shannon point out, qualitative content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Documents were sourced from the Internet using Google Scholar search tool. Document

search was conducted in 2021 using two sets of search phrases: ‘drivers of terrorism’ AND ‘Kenya,’ and ‘enablers of terrorism’ AND ‘Kenya’. The searches were limited to the period between 2000 and 2021. And both searches also excluded patents and citations. The searches were conducted sequentially, and in turns, with the second happening only after the first has been completed. In the end, both searches returned a combined total of 112 documents. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the search results by each search operation.

Table 1: Summary of search results

Search operation	*Search results (Number of documents)*
“Drivers of terrorism” AND “Kenya”	98
“Enablers of terrorism” AND “Kenya”	14

Source: Compiled by author

With the searches completed and documents gathered, an initial review of the 112 documents was conducted to ascertain their relevance to the study. Initial review was also crucial for avoiding duplication. The initial review process involved perusing through the documents and looking out for: Year of publication (i.e., document must have been published between 2000 and 2021), subject matter (i.e., content of the document must be relevant to the study topic), type of publication (i.e., inclusion in the study is limited to scholarly publications only), and geographical scope (i.e., geographical scope of the document must be aligned with that of the case study). A total of 39 documents met the initial review criteria and were selected for further analysis. The selected documents were then grouped into three categories to facilitate final phase of the qualitative content analysis. The three categories were: Journal articles, book chapters, and theses/dissertations. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of documents analyzed in each category.

Table 2: Number of documents analyzed by type

Type	*Quantity*
Journal articles	12
Book chapters	6
Theses/Dissertations	21
Total	*39*

Source: Compiled by author

After sorting the selected documents into relevant groups, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on each document. Qualitative content analysis specifically involved analytical reading, manual coding, and analytic memo writing (Saldaña, 2016). In qualitative analysis, coding is the process by which a qualitative researcher organizes gathered qualitative data into “chunks or segments before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). It involves the use of codes, which in qualitative research refers to words or phrases “that symbolically assign summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Codes can either emerge from data, be pre-determined by the qualitative researcher, or result from a combination of both (Creswell, 2009). In this study, I relied on both predetermined codes (also known as *a priori* codes) and codes that emerged from the data during the manual coding process particularly *in vivo* codes. Saldaña defines an *in vivo* code as “a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). The findings of qualitative content analysis are detailed in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1. Trends in domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya, 2000-2019

This sub-section presents trend analysis results pertaining to quantitative aspect of the study.

1. Total number of perpetrators by perpetrator category

Perpetrators listed in the GTD fall into three categories namely: those that are clearly identifiable (recorded by

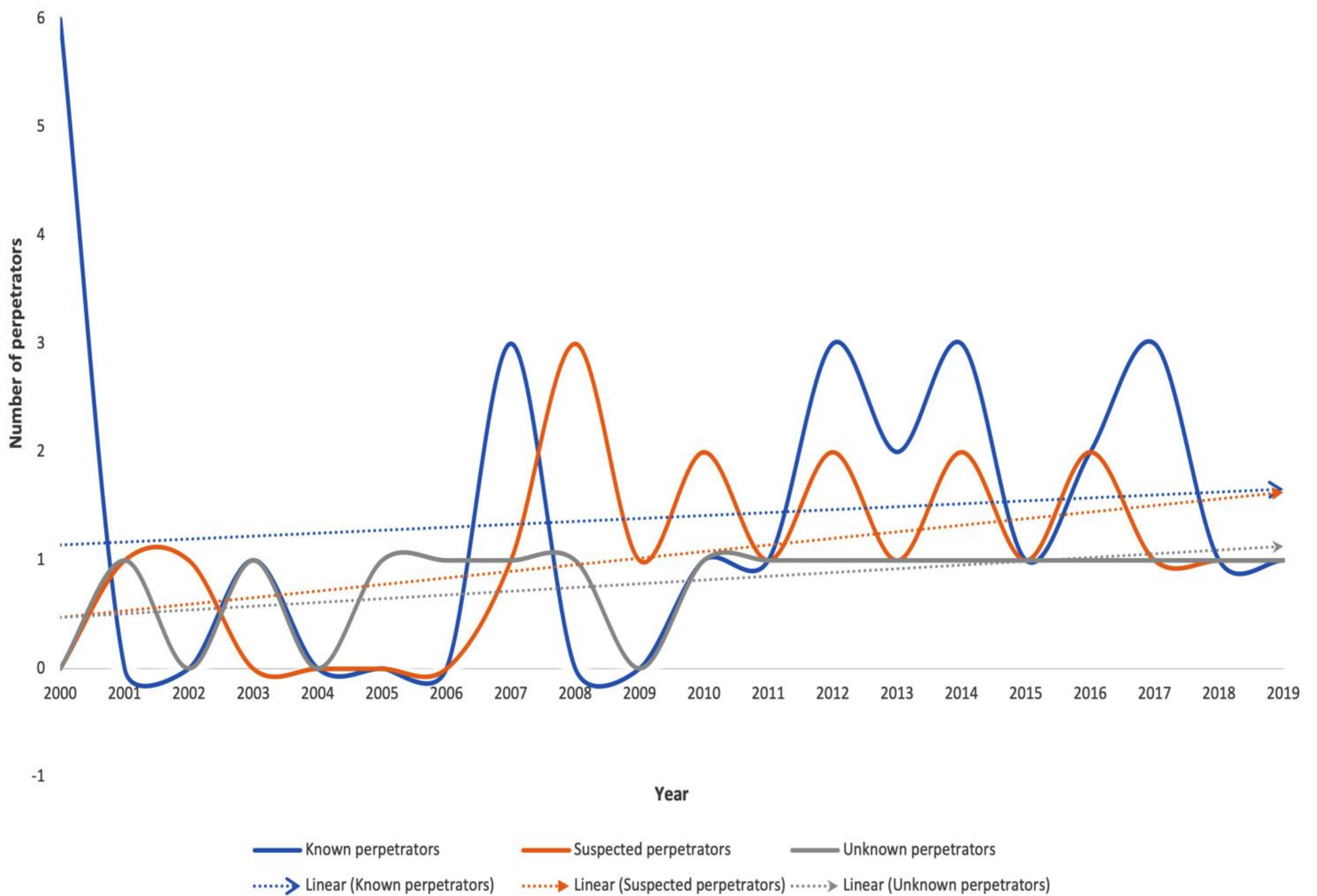
name in the database), those that cannot be clearly identified but are suspected to be one of the clearly identifiable perpetrators (recorded as suspected in the database), and those whose identity is completely hidden (recorded as unknown in the database). For purposes of analysis, these three perpetrator categories are hereafter referred to simply as 'known', 'suspected', and 'unknown'. However, since the focus of the quantitative component of the study is on non-state terrorism, perpetrators in the 'unknown' category are included in this and subsequent analysis for context purposes only. There were thirty-eight perpetrator records spread across the three perpetrator categories for the period under study (Figure 2). Table 3 shows a breakdown of the number of perpetrators by perpetrator category.

Table 3: Number of perpetrators by perpetrator category

Perpetrator category	*Recorded number*
Known	14
Suspected	8
Unknown	16

2. Change in number of perpetrators by perpetrator category over time

Figure 2: Number of perpetrators over time



3. Perpetrators of international non-state terrorism

Table 4: Perpetrators of international non-state terrorism in Kenya, 2000-2019

Perpetrator category	*Identified perpetrator*
Known	Al-Shabaab, Jabha East Africa, and Oromo Liberation Front
Suspected	Al-Shabaab (suspected), Oromo Liberation Front (suspected), and Al Qaeda (suspected)

4. Perpetrators of domestic non-state terrorism

Table 5: Perpetrators of domestic non-state terrorism in Kenya, 2000-2019

Perpetrator category	*Identified perpetrator*
Known	Sabaot Land Defense Force, Pokot Extremists, Mombasa Republican Council, Merille militia, Mungiki sect, Sungu Sungu, and Borana bandits.
Suspected	Sabaot Land Defense Force (suspected), Mombasa Republican Council (suspected), Merille militia (suspected), and Mungiki sect (suspected)
Indeterminate	Bandits, Militia members, Muslim extremists, Tribesmen, and Youths (suspected).

5. Number of non-state terrorism incidents

Figure 3: Number of terrorism incidents by perpetrator category

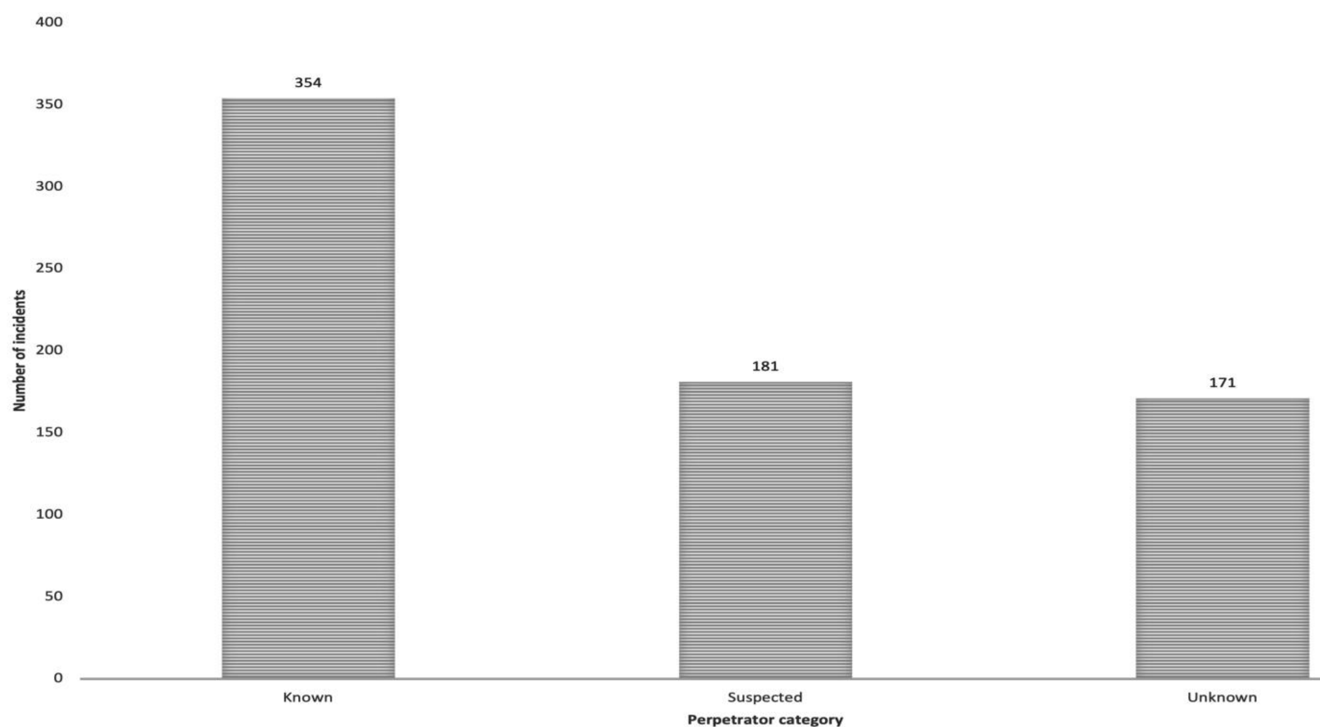
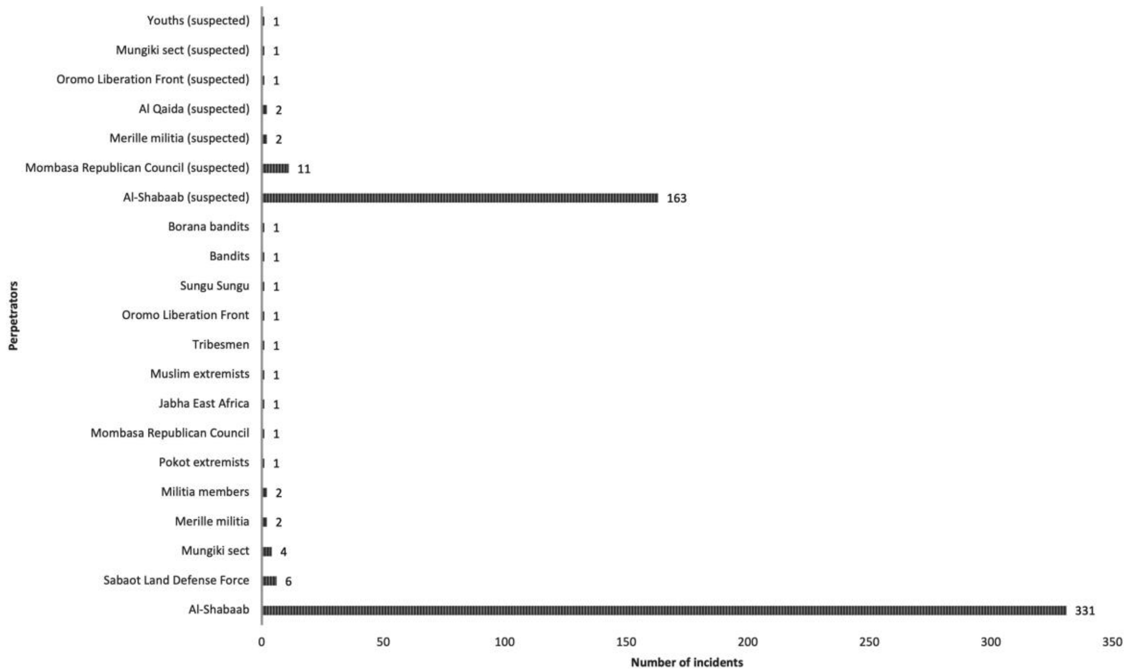
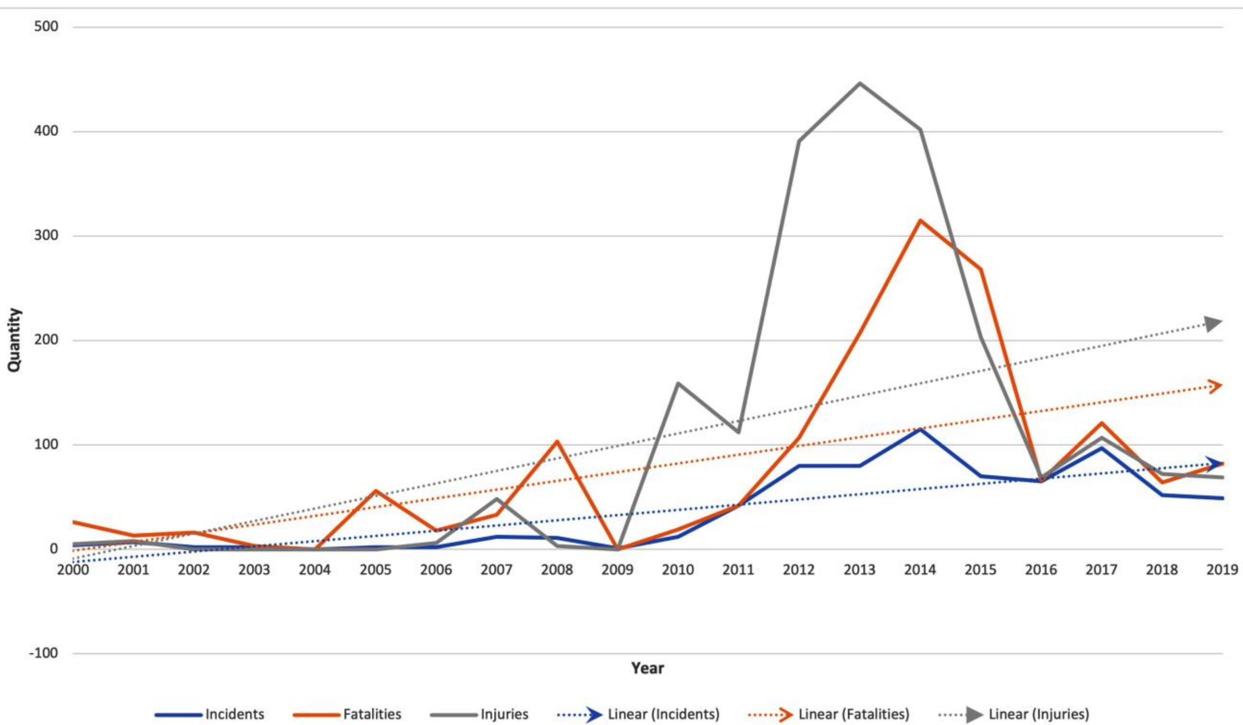


Figure 4: Number of incidents by individual perpetrator



6. Number of non-state terrorism related incidents, injuries, and fatalities over time

Figure 5: Number of incidents, fatalities, and injuries over time



7. Domestic and international non-state terrorism attack targets

A total of twenty-one attack targets – including three attack targets recorded as 'unknown' – were identified. However, for consistency, the three 'unknown' attack targets are excluded from the current study. Thus, only eighteen attack targets form part of the current study. The eighteen attack targets include: 'Government (general)', 'private citizens and property', 'police', 'non-governmental organization (NGO)', 'business', 'military', 'religious figures/institution', 'transportation', 'airports and aircrafts', 'utilities', 'educational institutions', 'telecommunication', 'food and water supply', 'government (diplomatic)', 'tourists', 'maritime', terrorist/non-state militia', and 'journalists and media'. Tables 6 and 7 maps out attack targets by perpetrator category and type of non-state terrorism respectively.

Table 6: Domestic and international non-state terrorism attack targets by perpetrator category

Perpetrator category	*Attack target*	
Known	⇒ Government (general) ⇒ Private citizens & property ⇒ Police ⇒ NGO ⇒ Business ⇒ Military ⇒ Religious figures/institution	⇒ Airports and aircraft ⇒ Utilities ⇒ Educational institution ⇒ Telecommunication ⇒ Food and water supply ⇒ Maritime ⇒ Transportation
Suspected	◊ Police ◊ NGO ◊ Military ◊ Business ◊ Private citizens & property ◊ Religious figures/institution ◊ Telecommunication	◊ Transportation ◊ Government (general) ◊ Government (diplomatic) ◊ Tourists ◊ Airports ◊ Aircraft
Unknown	▪ Government (general) ▪ Government (diplomatic) ▪ Private citizens & property ▪ Educational institution ▪ Religious figures/institution ▪ Terrorists/non-state militia ▪ Telecommunication ▪ Police	▪ Transportation ▪ Journalists & media ▪ NGO ▪ Business ▪ Military ▪ Airports and aircraft

Source: Compiled by author

Note: This table documents attack targets by perpetrator category. The table reveals a striking similarity in attack targets between the 'known', 'suspected', and 'unknown' perpetrator categories.

Table 7: Domestic and international non-state terrorism attack targets in Kenya, 2000-2019

Type of non-state terrorism	*Attack target*
Domestic	Religious figures/institution, private citizens & property, business, police, military, religious figures/institution, maritime, transportation, and government (general)
International	Government (general), private citizens & property, police, NGO, business, military, religious figures/institution, transportation, airports, aircraft, utilities, educational institution, telecommunication, food and water supply, government (diplomatic), and tourists

Mapping of attack targets by perpetrator category and/or type of non-state terrorism is insightful in and of itself. However, for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics between perpetrators and attack targets, an analysis of the number of perpetrators exploiting each attack target is necessary. Figure 6 shows the number of individual perpetrators exploiting each of the eighteen identified attack targets.

Figure 6: Number of perpetrators exploiting identified attack targets

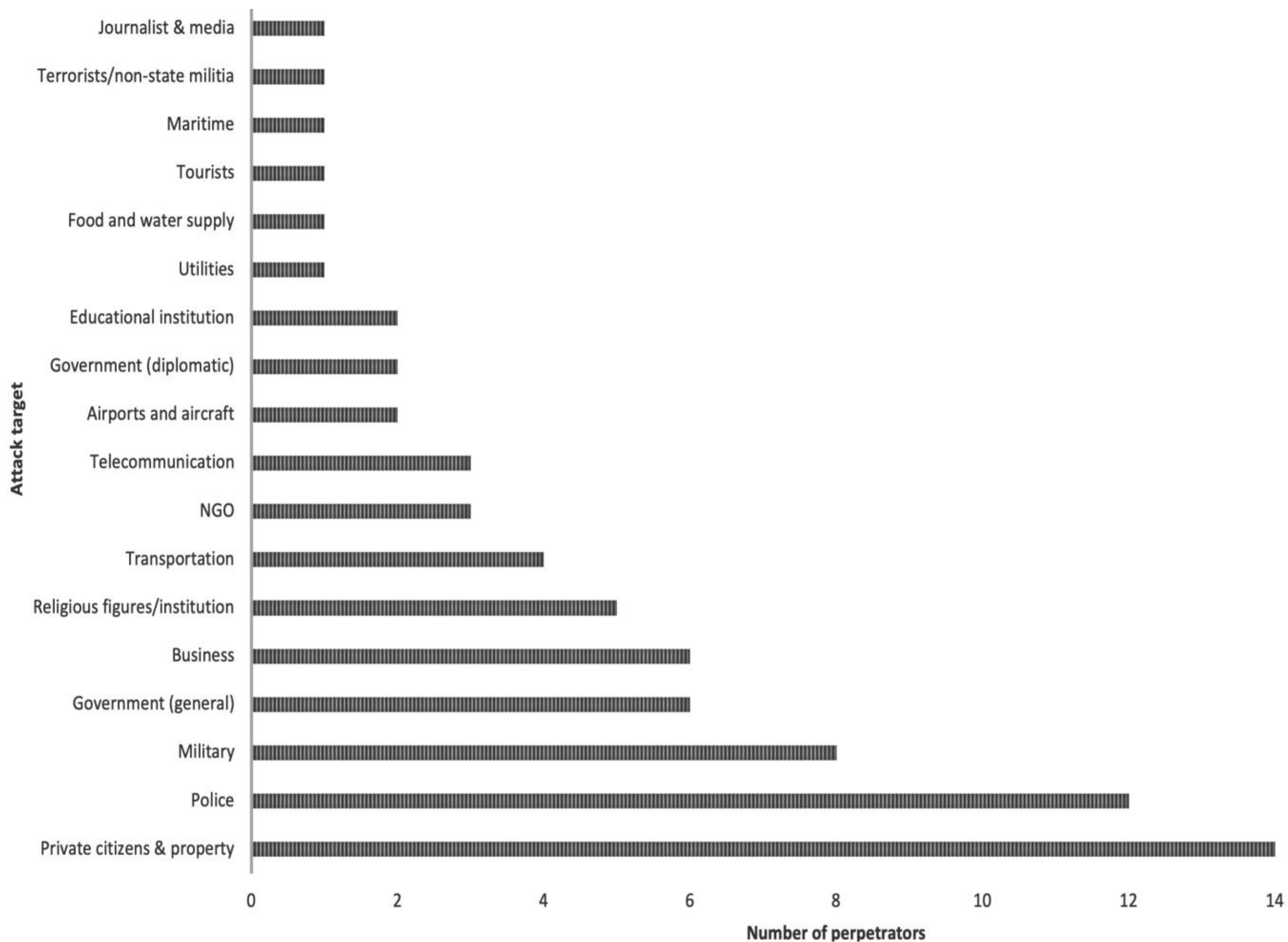
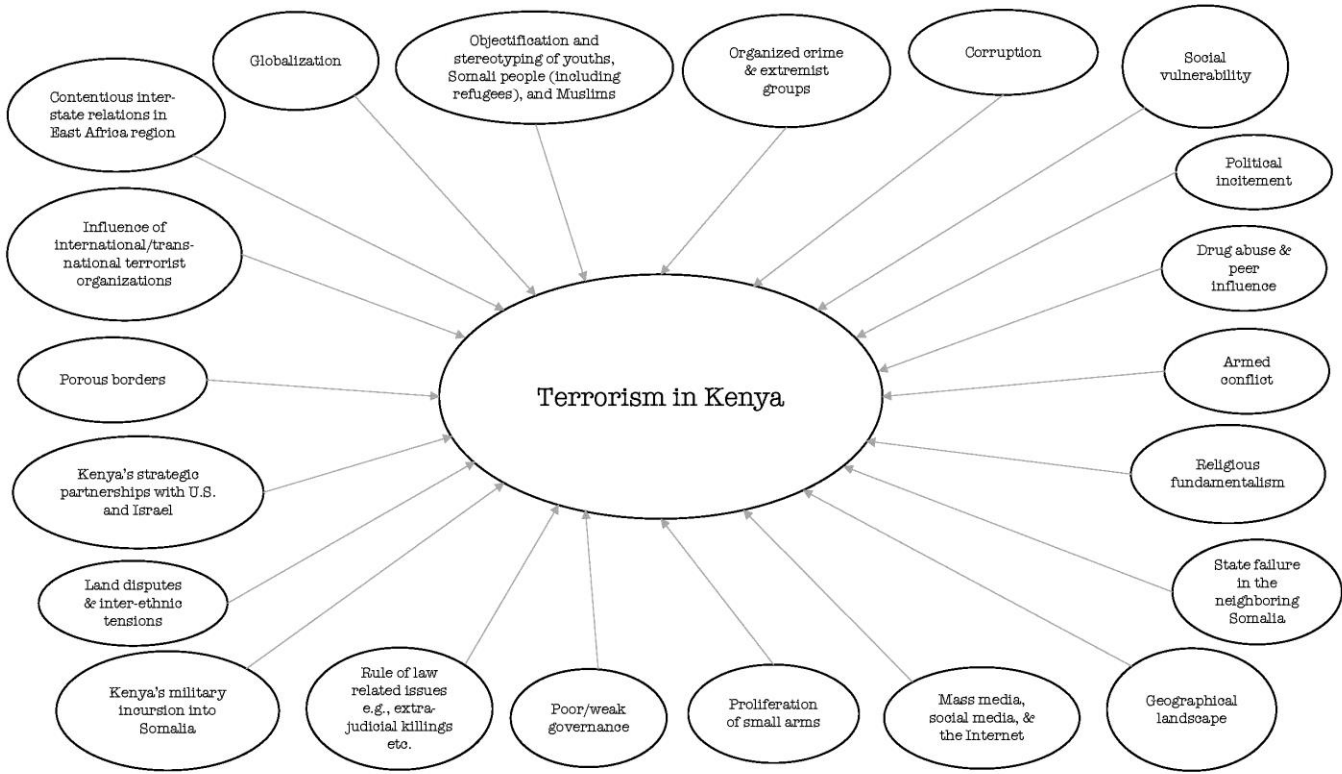


Figure 7: Drivers and enablers of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya



Source: Compiled by author

Note: This figure shows the identified drivers and enablers of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya. Some of the factors have been put together in one text box due to space limitation. Causal analysis is outside the scope of the current case study. Therefore, arrows do not depict or imply causation.

4.2. Drivers and enablers of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya

This subsection details findings of qualitative content analysis aspect of the case study. Figure 7 summarizes identified drivers and enablers of domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya.

5. Discussion

As with much of the rest of the world, terrorism is a defining feature of 21st Century Kenya. The case study has established that, except for 2004, the country experienced at least one terrorism incident every year for the period under study. The case study has also established that Kenya experiences both international and domestic non-state terrorism. For instance, during the period under study, international non-state terrorism in the country was primarily committed by Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab also accounted for 94% of all terrorism incidents attributed to perpetrators in the 'known' perpetrator category consisting of non-state actors. The foregoing lends credence to the case study's qualitative content analysis finding that KDF's foray into Somalia and continued presence in the country are significant drivers of international non-state terrorism in Kenya.

On the other hand, domestic non-state terrorism, while comparatively less significant at least in terms of its relative contribution to terrorism incidents and associated fatalities and injuries, accounts for the highest number of identified perpetrators. In other words, there were more perpetrators of domestic non-state terrorism than perpetrators of international non-state terrorism as shown in tables 4 and 5, but the latter accounted for more terrorism incidents than the former as clearly

captured in figure 4. Considering that qualitative content analysis identified organized crime and extremist groups as both a driver and enabler of terrorism in Kenya, the significance of domestic non-state terrorism in the country cannot be downplayed as it feeds into international non-state terrorism making the latter worse, complex, and difficult to tackle.

An important aspect of this case study involved identifying trends in domestic and international non-state terrorism attack targets. In this regard, the case study establishes that 'private citizens and property' is the top target for non-state terrorists in Kenya. While this finding simply corroborates existing knowledge on terrorism attack targets, it is nevertheless significant considering the vulnerability of ordinary Kenyans to other sources of human insecurity including poverty, disease, natural hazards, poor governance, police brutality, and illiteracy among others. Therefore, efforts aimed at countering terrorism in the country should leverage on existing knowledge and good practice to prioritize protection and cushioning of private citizens and their properties against deleterious effects of domestic and international non-state terrorism.

Still on terrorism trends, a curious descriptive statistical analysis finding that 'unknown' perpetrator category accounts for about a quarter of the total recorded terrorism incidents in the period under study raises at least one major question as follows. Why would a terrorist group with such high success rate in terms of associated terrorism incidents choose to remain anonymous when the common trend among most terrorist groups is to publicly claim successful attacks? Because, if 'unknown' were a single perpetrator it would account for more terrorism incidents than any other identified perpetrator except Al-Shabaab. I provide at least three possible explanations of this phenomenon as follows.

First, Al-Shabaab could be employing a multipronged strategy that, among other things, involves claiming certain attacks while ignoring (or not claiming) others to avoid being known and getting decimated. In other words, it is possible that 'unknown' is simply Al-Shabaab masquerading as something else especially considering the glaring similarity in attack targets between perpetrators in the 'known', 'suspected' and 'unknown' perpetrator categories (Refer to table 5). As Cannon and Pkalya point out, "Al-Shabaab's goal is to surprise, subvert and most importantly survive" (Cannon & Pkalya, 2019, p. 840). Therefore, in its quest to survive, Al-Shabaab could be relying on all sorts of strategies including staging successful attacks and laying no claim to them. These incidents then get recorded as 'unknown' in the GTD as when in fact 'unknown' and Al-Shabaab are possibly one and the same thing.

Second, it is possible that there exists a higher power (i.e., above Al-Shabaab on the international terrorist groups' pecking order), which for whatever reason does not wish to be identified yet. Hence, it is operating clandestinely. The success of 'unknown' in launching attacks aimed at various targets that are significantly consistent with Al-Shabaab's attack targets only add credence to the notion that 'unknown' could be a higher power possibly headquartered outside Kenya. The number of terrorism incidents associated with 'unknown' reveal that 'unknown' has considerable capacity and/or ability to successfully stage attacks on Kenyan soil even though 'unknown' may or may not necessarily be based in the country as is common practice with most amorphous international terrorist cells such as Al Qaeda.

Third, considering that terrorist groups do cooperate with each other and that such cooperation does take many different forms (Moghadam, 2017; Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016), 'unknown' could also simply be in a sort of cooperation agreement with Al-Shabaab, which allows it to operate in Al-Shabaab's area of influence (i.e., Eastern Africa including Kenya) but not take credit publicly for any success. A case in point is Al-Hijra, which Morumbasi and Amuhaya identify as one of the terrorist groups that employ this kind of tactic (Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016). They note in part that, "the Al-Shabaab in Kenya has succeeded in establishing strong ties with the Al-Hijra terrorist group, which has kept its operations secret. Despite being suspected to have taken part in the Westgate Mall attack in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, the group has desisted from taking responsibility of attacks publicly. This introduces yet another complex dimension of the group where it remains underground while avoiding publicity" (Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016, p. 270). Whatever the

case may be, it is not in doubt that 'unknown' is a significant actor that deserves further scrutiny to unravel its real identity and *modus operandi*.

Finally, in the remainder of this section, I will discuss a select number of identified drivers and enablers of non-state terrorism in Kenya that are detailed in figure 7. The selection and ordering of the factors should not be construed as imputing any value judgement on them or those that were not selected for discussion. The enablers and drivers are as follows.

i) Kenya's strategic partnerships

Kenya's strategic partnership(s) – particularly with the United States and Israel – in countering trans/international terrorism has/have been cited by Al Qaeda and its affiliates as the main reason for attacks on Kenya (Kamau, 2021). In other words, terrorist attacks target U.S. and/or Israeli interests in Kenya with devastating impacts on Kenya and Kenyans (Haynes, 2005; Kamau, 2021; Mogire & Agade, 2011). For example, the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi killed/injured more Kenyans than Americans even though the attack was primarily targeting U.S. interests including Embassy, diplomats, and citizens.

ii) Kenya's military incursion into Somalia

Kenya's military incursion into Somalia in 2011 is yet another driver of international non-state terrorism in the country. Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) military offensive dubbed 'Operation Linda Nchi' has been cited by Al Shabab as a key reason for its direct attacks on Kenya, Kenyans, and Kenya's strategic interests across East Africa. Al Shabab is a Somalia-based Al Qaeda affiliate, which operates across the East African sub-region specifically in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia (Anderson & McKnight, 2014; Buluma, 2014; Kamau, 2021).

iii) Continued presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia

Related to the second point, continued presence of Kenya's military in Somalia is another driver of mainly Al-Shabaab terrorism in Kenya. Whereas Operation Linda Nchi officially ended in 2012 after seven months of military combat pitting Kenyan forces and their allies in Somalia (i.e., Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, Raskamboni Front/Movement, Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, and Jubaland/Azania) on one side and Al-Shabaab on the other, Kenya's military did not leave Somalia. Instead, Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) joined the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) – an active United Nations Security Council approved peacekeeping force operating under aegis of the African Union – alongside other troop contributing countries including, but not limited to, two immediate neighbors of Kenya namely Ethiopia and Uganda. Al-Shabaab views Kenya's participation in AMISOM as a continuation of the 2011 military incursion and has attributed its continued attacks on the country to this very fact. As Botha points out, "In the case of Kenya, the presence of its defense force in Somalia as part of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) increased the likelihood of attacks in Kenya" (Botha, 2021, p. 846). In the past, the group has stated that it will "stop at nothing to avenge the death of (their) Muslim brothers" until and unless the Kenyan government "cease its operations" – likely referring to the Kenyan army's participation in the African Union's mission in Somalia against the group" (Samuel, 2021, p. 168).

iv) Kenya's heavy-handed counterterrorism practices

Kenya's heavy-handed counterterrorism practice and its associated rule of law related issues (e.g., state perpetrated human rights abuses including torture, extra-judicial killing, and forced disappearance) both drive and enables terrorism in the country. Heavy-handed counterterrorism practice contributes to anger among profiled demographic, which in turn drives radicalization and the urge to get revenge. As an enabler of terrorism, Kenya's heavy-handed counterterrorism practice leads, on one hand, to stereotyping of the country's security officers (i.e., military and police) as "punishment machines" by locals who in turn become reluctant to engage in information sharing for fear of falling victim to torture, extra-judicial killing and forced disappearance (Njuguna, 2018, p. 67), and on the other hand, profiling and stereotyping of Somali people (including refugees), Muslims, and youths – especially young men – as terrorists or problematic demographic has

similar effect and possibly worse. Sharing of information between locals and security agencies is integral to countering terrorism. Thus, Kenya's heavy-handed counterterrorism practice is effectively counterproductive and contributes to stigmatization and radicalization both of which are also drivers and enablers of terrorism (Kamau, 2021).

v) Poor governance

Poor governance, or "administrative ineptitude" as Otenyo calls it, is yet another enabler of non-state terrorism in Kenya (Otenyo, 2004, p. 76). Poor governance enables non-state terrorism by creating conditions that are favorable for its emergence and/or spread. As such, poor governance is linked to other enablers/drivers such as corruption, weak security intelligence, state failure/collapse, and social vulnerability (including poverty, socio-political and economic marginalization), among others.

vi) Weak security intelligence and planning

Another related enabler of terrorism is weak security intelligence and planning. Weak security intelligence and planning stands in the way of early detection and prevention of attacks. This, in part, explains the relative ease with which Pokot bandits and Al-Shabaab among other identified perpetrators have been able to successfully stage their attacks in various parts of the country including several Al-Shabaab associated attacks in the country's capital – Nairobi – and at a public university in Garissa town among others.

vii) Favorable geographical landscape

Favorable geographical landscape also enables non-state terrorism in Kenya. For example, the vast, expansive, arid, and sparsely populated northeastern part of Kenya, which shares an international border with Somalia is difficult terrain for government security officers but provides a perfect conduit for Al-Shabaab operatives to gain access into the country. Another case in point is Boni forest, which is located on the southeastern part of the country near the Kenya-Somalia border. In the recent past, Boni forest has endured several military incursions dubbed "Operation *Linda* Boni Forest" and aimed at driving out Al-Shabaab terrorists believed to be hiding in the forest (Kamau, 2021, p. 14).

viii) Porous borders

Kenya's porous borders enable terrorism by providing a conduit through which terrorists and weapons are smuggled into the country. For example, Al-Shabaab terrorists are known to exploit the porous border between Kenya and Somalia to move between the two countries with relative ease (Cengiz, 2021). Porous borders – especially the border region between Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia – also contribute to proliferation of small arms (Asaka, 2020; Daher et al., 2018), which is yet another important enabler of terrorism identified in the literature.

ix) Proliferation of small arms

Proliferation of small arms enables terrorism in Kenya by making arms and ammunitions easily accessible to bandits and extremists who in turn use the same to terrorize people. For instance, the continued terroristic activities of extremist groups such as the Pokot extremists that terrorize villages in the northwestern region of Kenya has been attributed, in part, to the proliferation of small arms facilitated by Kenya's porous border with South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia (Asaka, 2020). Thus, proliferation of small arms feeds into violent extremist group dynamics reinforcing the practice of violent extremism in the process.

x) Corruption

As noted in the previous discussion on poor governance, corruption is yet another factor that enables terrorism in Kenya. Corruption coupled with what Morumbasi and Amuhaya refer to as a "lack of nationalism or patriotism" (Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016, p. 272) translates to disregard for the rule of law by a section of citizens and leaders and provides a weak point that terrorist can and have been known to exploit (Cannon & Pkalya, 2019; Mkutu & Opondo, 2021). For instance, corruption facilitates "movements of arms from one region to another and also movement of people across borders even without travel documents" (Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016, p. 272). As is the case with most drivers and enablers of non-

state terrorism, corruption works in concert with other factors such as porous borders to enable non-state terrorism as these two excerpts reveal.

> The porous border between Kenya and Somalia allows Al-Shabaab to target Kenya. In one incident in 2014, two Al-Shabaab affiliated guards bribed Kenyan border guards and transferred 50kgs of ammunition from Kenya to Somalia. (Cengiz, 2021, p. 513)

> The proliferation of small illicit arms and the increasingly porous nature of national borders, institutional weaknesses especially on the guarding of entry control points coupled with endemic corruption have enabled terrorist elements to execute their acts with little hindrance. (Akanyisi, 2016, p. 32)

xi) Internet and mass media

The Internet and mass media including social media "are major structural factors that facilitate terrorism" (Schmid, 2021a, p. 19). A 2005 study of public perception of terrorism in Kenya found, in part, that media reports of terroristic activities reinforce/intensify both feelings of fear and revenge (Krause & Otenyo, 2005). Terrorist groups are increasingly relying on the Internet and social media to spread/broadcast their messages and/or activities and recruit new members among other things. Like most terrorist groups today, Al-Shabaab has been known to exploit communication and networking opportunities presented by the Internet and social media to its advantage as the following excerpt confirms.

> From the beginning, Al-Shabaab has used the Internet and social media (Twitter in particular), as an integral part of its operations. As a result of the use of these platforms, the group created a recruiting network and disseminated videos online, getting recruits as far as the United Kingdom (UK) and the US [...]. The new media was exploited by this group for propaganda purposes, using the English language to appeal to the Somali diaspora in the US and the UK. It also produced a magazine, *Gaidi Mtaani* (Street Terrorist) in Kiswahili, to attract Somalis, especially in East Africa [...]. YouTube is also widely used by Al-Shabaab to publicize videos. Its media production group, Al-Kataib, employs professional production values to produce quality jihadist videos. Some of Al-Shabaab's YouTube posts are videos of interviews with American, British, and other foreign fighters discussing why they decided to join the group and seeking to glorify their experience. Many of the videos target the youth, who usually find such undertakings interesting. [...] Al-Shabaab also uses Twitter to influence the public opinion in the countries of governments that may be opposed to its operations by demonstrating that it is the better devil while the AU, Federal Government, the US, Ethiopia, and Kenya Defense Forces are the violent oppressors. (Mutanda, 2017, pp. 30-31)

xii) Organized crime

Organized crime is both an enabler and driver of non-state terrorism in Kenya. For example, organized crime facilitates the movement of terrorists and illicit firearms and ammunitions across the country's porous borders and inside the country itself in effect enabling/driving terrorism. In the Kenyan context, organized crime itself is driven by a host of factors including culpability on the part of the country's police and financial institutions as the following excerpt shows.

> For instance, after the February 2019 Dusit D2 Hotel attack, financial institutions and the police were accused by the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) as enablers of terrorism, as a typology of organized of organized crime. Security pundits have further associated organized crime in Kenya with weak or dysfunctional institutions, permeable borders and weak policing systems... (Abdullah, 2020, p. 19)

xiii) State failure in Somalia

The failure/collapse of the Somalia state in the early 1990s created a conducive environment for Al-Shabaab to emerge and thrive (Mutanda, 2017). State failure/collapse means that a state is incapacitated and its government – if at all any is in existence – cannot perform essential functions such as protecting its citizens and borders. This in turn creates room for non-state actors including undesirable ones like extremist groups to emerge and flex their muscles as the following excerpt confirms.

> …failed states by their very nature are both attractive to and likely to serve as viable sanctuaries for non-state actors such as terrorists and warlords among others. (Kyalo, 2017, Chapter 2)

xiv) Armed conflict

Armed conflict (in particular, civil war) reduces state capacity significantly and often produces a refugee crisis, which terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab have long been suspected of exploiting either to recruit members and/or camouflage themselves. Armed

conflict is arguably the single most important contributor to state failure/collapse in the East African sub-region. The failure/collapse of Somalia state can be traced to the ongoing Somali civil war, which began in the early 1990s and has morphed considerably over time. And as noted earlier, Somalia's collapse/failure contributed significantly to the emergence of Al-Shabaab terrorist group, which is the main perpetrator of terrorism in Kenya today.

xv) Contentious inter-state relations in the Eastern African region

Still at the regional level, contentious inter-state relations among East African states enables non-state terrorism in the sub-region and, by extension, Kenya. As the following excerpt notes, deficient sub-regional security cooperation – occasioned by contentious relations between some countries in the subregion – stands in the way of effectively dealing with the growing problem of violent extremism and terrorism.

> Another significant challenge in eastern Africa is overcoming the serious intra-regional rivalries which have circumscribed the potential for effective sub-regional security cooperation. Although the contentious state of relations between certain countries in eastern Africa does complicate sub-regional counterterrorism cooperation, it is precisely because those underlying tensions and conflicts are some of the main drivers of terrorism in eastern Africa that it is essential to stimulate efforts at the regional and sub-regional level. (Rosand, Millar, & Ipe, 2009, p. 97)

xiv) Social vulnerability

Social vulnerability attributable to poverty, unemployment, conflict, historical socio-political and economic marginalization, and resultant inequality among others has also been identified as a major enabler of terrorism particularly with regards to recruitment of new members (Badurdeen, 2021; Bellinger & Kattelman, 2021; Mkutu & Opondo, 2021; Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016). For example, Morumbasi and Amuhaya note that poverty makes it easy for terrorist groups to recruit new members by enticing them with promises of better economic prospects for themselves and their family members (Morumbasi & Amuhaya, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This case study has identified trends and patterns in GTD data on Kenya for the period 2000-2019. While much of the existing literature on terrorism in Kenya is focused on international terrorism associated with Islamic fundamentalism as noted in the literature review section of this article, the case study has established that Kenya experiences both domestic and international forms of non-state terrorism. This article has documented perpetrators of both forms of non-state terrorism in Kenya for the period under study. In this regard, the article contributes to knowledge on terrorism in Kenya at least by: (1) distinguishing between domestic and international non-state terrorism in Kenya – a distinction that is seldom recognized in the existing literature, and (2) identifying perpetrators of domestic non-state terrorism in Kenya based on GTD data thereby setting the stage for future inquiry including but not limited to research into the motivation(s) and operation(s) of such perpetrators on which currently there is a dearth of knowledge at best. Moreover, the case study found that, during the period under study, non-state terrorism was a significant threat to human security in Kenya with Al Shabaab accounting for the greatest number of attacks, injuries, and fatalities. This finding is consistent with existing knowledge on the subject.

Finally, the article has also documented drivers and enablers of non-state terrorism in Kenya that are referenced in scholarly publications published between 2000 and 2021. Of particular note is that, among the identified drivers is climate change – one of the greatest global security concerns of the 21st Century. With Kenya (and the larger East African region) being significantly vulnerable to climate change (Asaka & Oluoko-Odingo, 2022), and climate change already negatively impacting known drivers and enablers of non-state terrorism such as social vulnerability (Asaka, 2021; Bourekba, 2021; Stuart, 2019), it is crucial to have a context-specific knowledge of how the climate-terrorism nexus plays out in Kenya for better policy and practice. Therefore, future research in this specific area should focus on: (1) understanding the interplay between climate change and terrorism in Kenya, and (2) how best to leverage on existing knowledge to aid in fast-tracking climate action in the country.

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