

Counter-terrorism Strategies in Mombasa County: Analyzing Implementation Approaches to Mitigate Radicalization

By

Isaiah Gechuki Ong’esa & Dr. Boniface Muoka, PhD

Department of Security, Diplomacy and Peace Studies, Kenyatta University, Kenya

Corresponding author email: isaiahon@hotmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role and impact of Counter-Terrorism Strategies (CTS) in preventing radicalization in Mombasa County, Kenya. However, the Kenyan government through the National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) has continued to battle with radicalization especially in Mombasa County. Groups like Al-Shabaab remained active in the recruitment and radicalization of individuals for their cause, driven by both socio-economic factors and political exclusion, as well as ideological manipulation. The government after engaging in counterterrorism has encountered a number of difficulties such as human rights abuses, lack of community cooperation and the incorporation of hard and soft measures in combating radicalization. Some of these were conventional military operations accused of involved in extra judicial killings while others were soft power interventions like de radicalization initiatives that faced funding constraints and community skepticism. The study used survey descriptive research design with both quantitative and qualitative data, involving n=117 participants to assess the effects of CTS on radicalization in Mombasa County. Interviewing respondents from local communities, governmental officers, religious authorities and security forces, the study assessed whether counter-terrorism measures were helping to lessen radicalization or worsened it instead. These insights were important in understanding the balance of hard and soft CTS and the relationship between communities and the reasons underlying radicalization. In conclusion, the study provides actionable intelligence guided counter-terrorism strategies that can effectively and efficiently dismantle extremism, without infringing on any human rights, towards the goal of attaining sustainable security in Mombasa County.

Key Words: Kenya, Mombasa County, Community Engagement, Counter-terrorism, De-radicalisation Programs, Radicalisation & Security Strategies

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Introduction

Radicalization remains a significant security challenge in Mombasa County, driven by socio-economic inequalities, political marginalization and ideological indoctrination by extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab (Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 2011). The Kenyan government developed Counter Terrorism Strategies (CTS); these strategies are based on four core areas including prevention, disruption, protection and dismantlement of terrorism networks. These efforts include the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) as well as other community-based programs which seek to de-radicalize at risk youth (Mulu, 2016). Nonetheless, radicalization persists, especially in the coastal and northeastern parts of Kenya, which calls for further assessment of these measures in combating extremism.

Challenges have been identified in the implementation of CTS in Mombasa County; Human rights abuse by security agencies, radicalization of specific community groups and challenges in interception of communications. This approach includes the use of military intervention and police operations, which have been associated with high lethality rates and deaths resulting from extrajudicial killings, which is not conducive to eliminating radicalization but rather may trigger it (Wolfowicz, Weisburd & Hasisi, 2022). While social interventionist measures, including de-radicalization programs, religious dialogues and economic reformation programs, have only experienced moderate success because of inadequate funding and the overall suspicion of governments' involvement. Moreover, it has also been noted that Al-Shabaab's use of social networks and covert channels of communication and influence has made it difficult for Kenya to effectively counter groups' recruitment as well as curtail hate speech.

A comparative analysis of CTS in Kenya with other regions, such as Nigeria's multi-joint task force against Boko Haram, highlights the importance of integrated and community-driven approaches (Aluko, Apeloko, Chukwudi & Paimo, 2023). Although Kenya's NCTS is in line with global focus as depicted by United States post 9/11 counter terrorism strategy its success however depends on the ability to address social economic factors which fuel radicalism. This means that violent radical networks remain influential in Mombasa, which requires the development of a more sustainable, intelligence-led approach that integrates both kinetic and non-kinetic elements to combat terrorism and extremism in the area.

Assumptions

The study assumed that the effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies in Mombasa County is influenced by the balance between hard and soft approaches, with community engagement playing a critical role in mitigating radicalization.

Statement of Problem

Mombasa County continues to face persistent security threats linked to radicalization, despite extensive counter-terrorism efforts. The county has witnessed several terror-related incidents, such as the attempted bombing at Mombasa Central Police Station on 11th September 2016, highlighting the determination and resilience of radical elements. Additionally, the county's

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proximity to Boni Forest in Lamu County has facilitated Al-Shabaab's recruitment and training of terror operatives, further complicating security operations. While the government has adopted a multi-agency approach and intensified military engagement against militants, Al-Shabaab continues to receive support from local sympathizers, undermining CTS.

Despite the implementation of CTS by the NCTC since 14th December 2016, reports indicate a rise in radicalization and terror threats in Mombasa County. Arrests of terror suspects, such as the 23rd August 2021 operation at Likoni Ferry, demonstrate the effectiveness of security agencies in disrupting planned attacks. However, concerns persist regarding the unintended consequences of counter-terrorism measures, particularly allegations of human rights violations by security forces. Civil society organizations, such as Haki Africa, have raised issues of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and profiling of Muslim communities, which could further fuel radicalization instead of deterring it.

Mombasa County also faces socio-political and economic grievances, including bureaucratic administrative procedures, financial constraints and increased taxation due to counter-terrorism funding, which aggravate public resentment. Although numerous studies have examined the causes of radicalization and the effectiveness of CTS, there remains a significant knowledge gap on whether CTS mitigates or exacerbates radicalization. Existing research has not adequately addressed the impact of counter-terrorism measures on local populations and their potential to either deter or inadvertently encourage radical activities. Radical groups often find ways to camouflage their activities and rally support among marginalized communities. This study seeks to evaluate the current CTS in Mombasa County to determine whether they effectively discourage radicalization or contribute to its persistence, thereby providing insights for additional security measures.

Objective

To analyze the implementation approaches of counter-terrorism strategies and their effectiveness in mitigating radicalization in Mombasa County.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Perspectives on Counter-terrorism and Radicalization

Several theoretical frameworks have been highlighted in recent literature for understanding radicalization and counter-terrorism. One prominent perspective is the "Staircase to Terrorism" model by Christie and Ahmad (2024), which has been revisited in contemporary studies to explain incremental radicalization (Van Hiel, Van Assche, Haesevoets, De Cremer & Hodson, 2022). This model suggests that individual's progress through psychological stages before engaging in extremism, emphasizing the need for early intervention strategies. Similarly, Social Identity Theory (Demirden, 2021) remains influential, with research applying it to online radicalization, showing how group affiliations foster extremist ideologies.

Another key perspective is Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that perceived socio-economic inequalities drive radicalization (Koehler, 2025). Studies have linked this theory to grievances exploited by terrorist groups in marginalized communities. Additionally, Rational Choice Theory has been used to analyze terrorist decision-making, suggesting that extremists weigh costs and benefits (Orsini, 2024). Contemporary applications of this theory highlight how counter-terrorism policies may inadvertently increase recruitment by escalating grievances.

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Psychological theories, such as Cognitive Radicalization Theory, examine how extremist narratives exploit cognitive biases (Naderer, Rieger & Schwertberger, 2024). Studies indicate that online echo chambers reinforce extremist beliefs through confirmation bias. Furthermore, Cultural Trauma Theory explores how historical injustices fuel radicalization, particularly in post-colonial contexts. These perspectives collectively underscore the multi-dimensional nature of radicalization, necessitating interdisciplinary counter-terrorism approaches.

Critical terrorism studies challenges traditional state-centric counter-terrorism paradigms, arguing that securitization policies may exacerbate radicalization (Burton, 2023). CTS scholars advocate for human rights-based approaches, warning against over-policing minority communities. Empirical studies support this critique, showing that heavy-handed counter-terrorism measures can alienate communities (Warnes, 2024). These theoretical debates highlight the need for balanced strategies addressing root causes while ensuring civil liberties.

Counter-terrorism Strategies and Implementation

Governments employ diverse counter-terrorism strategies, ranging from hard power (military and law enforcement) to soft power (community engagement and de-radicalization). Hard power approaches, such as drone strikes and special operations, remain prevalent, with studies analyzing their tactical successes and ethical concerns (Okpaleke, 2023). However, critics argue that such methods often lead to civilian casualties, fueling anti-Western sentiment. Conversely, intelligence-led policing has gained traction, with evidence suggesting that predictive policing reduces terrorist incidents.

Soft power strategies, including Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs, focus on prevention through community partnerships (Pandith & Ware, 2023). Evaluations of CVE initiatives highlight their role in fostering trust between authorities and at-risk communities. Similarly, de-radicalization programs, such as those in Denmark and Saudi Arabia, have shown mixed results, with some studies reporting reduced recidivism, while others question their long-term efficacy.

Legislative measures, in the United Kingdom (UK) Prevent Duty, mandate public sector workers to report radicalization risks (Walker & Cawley, 2022). Critics argue that such policies promote surveillance over genuine engagement. Meanwhile, financial counter-terrorism strategies, including sanctions and anti-money laundering efforts, have disrupted terrorist financing networks. However, challenges remain in tracking cryptocurrency-based funding.

International cooperation through bodies like the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) enhances strategy-sharing, yet disparities in national priorities hinder unified responses (Aolain, 2021). Regional approaches, such as Africa's G5 Sahel Joint Force, demonstrate both collaboration challenges and localized successes. Overall, counter-terrorism implementation requires adaptive, context-specific measures balancing security and human rights.

Effectiveness and Challenges of Counter-terrorism Strategies

Assessing counter-terrorism effectiveness remains complex due to varying metrics of success. Targeted killings and drone strikes have degraded terrorist leadership but often provoke retaliatory attacks according to Montasari (2024). Research indicates that while decapitation strategies weaken groups like Al-Qaeda, they also lead to factionalization.

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Similarly, military interventions in conflict zones, such as Syria, have disrupted ISIS but exacerbated regional instability.

De-radicalization programs face challenges in measuring long-term impact. Studies on Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Naif Counseling Center report high disengagement rates, yet recidivism persists in some cases as noted by Zeuthen (2021). In Europe, exit programs for far-right extremists show promise but struggle with reintegration barriers. Additionally, CVE initiatives encounter skepticism, with some communities viewing them as stigmatizing.

Legal and ethical dilemmas arise from counter-terrorism laws. Mass surveillance under the USA (United States of America) PATRIOT Act has raised privacy concerns, with limited evidence of preventing attacks (Nair, Deshmukh & Tyagi, 2024). Similarly, administrative detention policies, as seen in France, face criticism for undermining due process. Furthermore, cybersecurity measures against online radicalization struggle with balancing censorship and free speech.

Emerging threats, such as lone-actor terrorism, challenge traditional detection methods (Kenyon, Baker-Beall & Binder, 2023). Advances in AI-driven threat assessment offer potential solutions but risk algorithmic bias. Finally, climate change and terrorism intersections present new security dilemmas, with resource scarcity exacerbating radicalization in vulnerable regions. Addressing these challenges requires adaptive, evidence-based policies prioritizing both security and human rights.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for examining contemporary societal issues, trends and relationships (Nachmias & Nachmias, 2007). This approach was relevant for investigating the relationship between CTS and radicalization in Mombasa County by focusing on the nature and implementation of CTS. The research employed a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys, questionnaires and interview guides. These tools provided primary and secondary data, which were systematically analyzed to derive accurate findings on radicalization.

Mombasa County was selected as the study area due to its historical vulnerability to radicalization, terror threats and attacks. The county, which serves as Kenya's coastal capital, covers approximately 230 km² of land and is bordered by the Indian Ocean, Kwale County and Kilifi County. The study focused on four administrative sub-counties: Changamwe, Mombasa Island, Likoni and Kisauni. The county's youth population, particularly those aged 18-35, was a key target group due to their susceptibility to radicalization. Other respondents included religious leaders, government administration officers, police officers and officers from the ATPU and the NCTC, all of whom possessed critical insights into radicalization and counter-terrorism efforts.

A sample size of 117 participants was determined using Fisher (1998) formula to ensure accuracy and representation. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select individuals with firsthand knowledge of radicalization, such as rehabilitated youth, religious leaders and security personnel. Data collection involved administering semi-structured questionnaires and conducting in-depth key informant interviews, ensuring both quantitative consistency and qualitative depth. Validity was confirmed through expert reviews, while reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, obtaining a threshold of 0.76. The collected data was systematically organized, analyzed and presented to provide insights into the impact of CTS on radicalization prevention in Mombasa County.

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Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The study explored the awareness, sources, types and effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies in Mombasa County, Kenya. The findings reveal critical insights into how local communities perceive and engage with counter-radicalization efforts, the dominance of borrowed versus homegrown strategies and the perceived efficacy of different approaches. Below is a detailed discussion of the findings, supported by descriptive data and verbatim participant responses.

On participants' awareness of counter-terrorism strategies, including prevention, protection, disruption and defeat, as well as hard (military/law enforcement) and soft (community-based) approaches. The findings revealed that 53% (55 respondents) were aware of these strategies, while 47% (49 respondents) were unaware, highlighting a significant gap in public knowledge. This indicates the need for enhanced public education and engagement initiatives to improve awareness and participation in counter-terrorism efforts. (Youth 1) noted:

Arresting and prosecuting those suspected of financing terrorism or radicalization, even those who hide or give information to terrorists, is one of the strategies I know. There is also community education and awareness to prevent youths from being misled into joining terrorist groups.

The findings indicate that while awareness of counter-terrorism strategies exists, it is largely associated with punitive measures such as arrests and prosecutions, reflecting a dominance of hard approaches in public perception over softer strategies like education and economic empowerment. This aligns with Warnes (2024), who argue that counter-terrorism awareness is often skewed toward reactive rather than proactive community engagement. The 53% awareness rate, though moderate, remains insufficient for fostering broad-based community resilience against radicalization, underscoring the need for greater emphasis on preventive measures.

The study investigated whether counter-terrorism strategies in Mombasa were borrowed from international models like those of the USA and UK or locally developed. The findings revealed that 70% (73 respondents) believed the strategies were borrowed, while 20% (21 respondents) considered them homegrown and 10% (10 respondents) were unsure. This suggests a strong perception that counter-terrorism efforts rely heavily on external frameworks, potentially raising concerns about their contextual relevance and effectiveness in addressing local security challenges. (Respondent 1) stated:

The government applies strategies like those used in America surveillance, arrests and military operations but they don't always fit our local problems.

The dominance of borrowed counter-terrorism strategies in Mombasa indicates a heavy reliance on Western models, which may fail to comprehensively address the local socio-economic drivers of radicalization, such as poverty, marginalization and political exclusion (Van Hiel, Van Assche, Haesevoets, De Cremer & Hodson, 2022). This aligns with critiques from critical terrorism studies, which argue that externally imposed counter-terrorism frameworks often overlook the historical and structural factors that contribute to radicalization. Through prioritizing foreign models, policymakers risk implementing strategies that are misaligned with local realities, potentially undermining long-term security and resilience efforts. This underscores the need for more localized, community-driven

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approaches that integrate economic empowerment, education and inclusive governance to effectively counter radicalization at its roots.

The study evaluated the prevalence of different counter-terrorism strategies in Mombasa, focusing on prevention, protection, disruption and defeat. The findings revealed that 45% (47 respondents) favored prevention, highlighting the importance of community engagement and education in addressing radicalization at its roots. Meanwhile, 25% (26 respondents) prioritized protection, emphasizing the need to support vulnerable groups susceptible to extremist influence. Disruption strategies, including law enforcement interventions and financial monitoring, were endorsed by 20% (21 respondents), reflecting a significant reliance on security-driven measures. Lastly, 10% (10 respondents) supported defeat-oriented approaches, such as military action and rehabilitation programs, suggesting limited public confidence in heavy-handed responses. These results indicate a preference for proactive and community-centered strategies over punitive measures, underscoring the need for policies that prioritize prevention and protection while ensuring a balanced approach to counter-terrorism. Key informants' views were sought and revealed as stated; Security is crucial for Mombasa's economy. Preventive measures like community engagement and education are key to building trust and stopping radicalization early.

Another informant Community Leader (KII01) opined:

Protection involves strengthening social cohesion and supporting at-risk youth to prevent them from turning to extremism.

In addition, another informant [Security Officer (KII03)] indicated that:

Defeating radicals requires rehabilitation, vocational training and countering extremist religious narratives.

The strong preference for preventive (45%) and protective (25%) measures in counter-terrorism reflects a growing recognition of the effectiveness of soft approaches, such as community engagement, education and support for vulnerable groups, in mitigating radicalization and extremist threats (Christie & Ahmad, 2024). This shift suggests an increasing awareness that addressing the root causes of terrorism through social and economic interventions is crucial for long-term security. However, the continued reliance on disruption (20%) and defeat (10%) strategies highlights the enduring dominance of hard approaches, likely driven by immediate security concerns and the need for rapid responses to active threats. The persistence of law enforcement crackdowns, financial monitoring and military interventions suggests that while soft strategies are gaining traction, governments and security agencies still view coercive measures as essential in neutralizing imminent risks. This duality underscores the challenge of balancing proactive, community-driven initiatives with reactive security operations in the fight against terrorism.

When asked about the most effective approach to counter radicalization, participants showed a strong preference for soft strategies, with 44% (46 respondents) favoring community-based interventions such as employment opportunities and education. This reflects a recognition that addressing the root socio-economic causes of extremism is key to long-term prevention. Meanwhile, 39% (41 respondents) supported a multi-agency approach, suggesting that collaboration between security forces, government institutions and civil

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society is seen as crucial for a comprehensive response. Only 17% (18 respondents) endorsed hard approaches like military action, indicating a declining confidence in purely coercive measures. These findings highlight a growing shift towards integrated and preventive strategies, emphasizing the need for holistic counter-terrorism policies that balance security measures with socio-economic development. In a qualitative inquiry, participant responses were sought and one noted: “If youths get jobs, they won’t have time for radicalization” (Youth 2).

Another respondent (Respondent 2) stated that:

Hunger and unemployment make the youth easy targets for radicalization.
Economic empowerment is the solution (Respondent 2, Religious Leader).

The strong preference for soft (44%) and multi-agency (39%) approaches aligns with global best practices, which emphasize economic inclusion, education and community policing as effective strategies for preventing radicalization (Montasari, 2024). This indicates a growing recognition that long-term security depends on addressing underlying socio-economic grievances rather than relying solely on coercive measures. However, the 17% support for hard approaches suggests that a segment of the population still views military and law enforcement actions as essential, possibly due to persistent security threats and the perception that softer strategies alone may be insufficient. This division highlights the ongoing debate in counter-terrorism, where some advocate for preventive measures while others see force as a necessary tool in dealing with immediate threats, underscoring the need for a balanced and context-specific approach.

The study assessed public perceptions of the effectiveness of current counter-terrorism strategies in mitigating radicalization, improving security and eradicating radicalization. Findings indicate that 40% of respondents believed these strategies help mitigate radicalization, suggesting moderate confidence in preventive efforts. Meanwhile, 55% agreed that the strategies improve security, reflecting a stronger perception that existing measures contribute to stability and threat reduction. However, only 42% believed the strategies completely eradicate radicalization, indicating skepticism about their long-term effectiveness in eliminating extremist ideologies. These results highlight the need for a more holistic approach that not only enhances security but also addresses the root causes of radicalization to ensure sustainable counter-terrorism outcomes.

The mixed findings suggest that while counter-terrorism strategies effectively enhance security, they fall short of fully eradicating radicalization. This aligns with Walker and Cawley (2022), who argues that many counter-terrorism efforts primarily focus on suppressing the symptoms of extremism, such as attacks and recruitment, rather than addressing the underlying grievances that fuel radicalization. The fact that 55% of respondents acknowledged improved security, but only 42% believed radicalization was eradicated, underscores the limitations of current strategies in achieving long-term ideological disengagement. These results highlight the need for more comprehensive approaches that go beyond enforcement and deterrence, integrating socio-economic development, political inclusion and community resilience to disrupt radicalization at its roots.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights critical gaps in counter-terrorism efforts, emphasizing the need for more localized and comprehensive approaches. The significant lack of public awareness underscores the necessity for targeted education campaigns to enhance community engagement in counter-terrorism initiatives. Additionally, the over-reliance on borrowed strategies raises concerns about cultural mismatches, suggesting that locally developed frameworks may be more effective in addressing context-specific drivers of radicalization. The strong preference for soft approaches, such as economic empowerment and community engagement, indicates growing recognition that preventive measures are more sustainable than militarized responses. However, the limited long-term success of current strategies, which improve security but fail to fully eradicate radicalization, points to structural deficiencies that must be addressed through holistic, multi-sectoral interventions. Moving forward, a balanced approach that integrates public awareness, local adaptation and socio-economic reforms will be essential for achieving lasting counter-terrorism outcomes.

Recommendations

To strengthen counter-terrorism efforts in Mombasa, multiple stakeholders must take action. The government and local authorities should expand community-based programs, including vocational training and youth employment initiatives, to address socio-economic vulnerabilities that contribute to radicalization. Security agencies and policymakers must prioritize the localization of counter-terrorism strategies, ensuring they align with Mombasa's unique cultural and socio-economic context rather than relying solely on Western models. Improved multi-agency coordination is essential, requiring collaboration between security forces, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to create a more integrated and community-driven approach. Additionally, independent oversight bodies and human rights organizations should monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, ensuring they are rights-respecting, evidence-based and sustainable in the long term.

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