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Violent extremism in South Africa

Assessing the current threat

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Transnational extremist groups are expanding their networks across the globe. South Africa has been linked to al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, with 60–100 South Africans estimated to have joined the group. The country also has a history of violent extremism stemming from domestic grievances that remain prevalent. Based on interviews with 40 stakeholders, this brief examines the threat that violent extremism poses to South Africa and the government's response to this challenge.

Recommendations

- Government and civil society should endeavour to better understand the nature of violent extremism, the threat it poses and the ways in which it may evolve, to ensure adequate responses are developed.
- The state and civil society should emphasise anti-corruption policies.
- The up-skilling of intelligence and security personnel needs to be prioritised in order to deal with the evolving nature of the threats.
- Government and civil society should find effective ways of fostering greater social cohesion and inclusivity.
- Youth must be encouraged to constructively engage with the government and broader society regarding the challenges they face. Education is key.
- Government should increase engagement and cooperation with foreign states on the question of violent extremism.
- Government and communities should continue to work together to address radicalisation and recruitment.
- Government and the media should work towards responsible public communication on issues around violent extremism.

Recent years have shown the threat of violent extremism to be increasingly fluid in nature, and this development has challenged states to review their approach to the issue. While South Africa has not experienced a terrorist attack in over a decade, it is not immune to the global challenges posed by violent extremism.

In the years following the 9/11 attacks in the United States (US), several allegations have emerged linking South Africa to international extremist organisations, along with incidents suggesting that South Africa has served as an operational base for individuals connected to extremist groups abroad. In addition, terror alerts issued by the US Diplomatic Mission to South Africa over the last two years have caused concern over potential attacks in the country. In 2014 the reach of international extremism became evident when reports emerged of South Africans travelling to the Middle East to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

South Africa has also faced local extremist threats, with the last known plot thwarted in 2012 when a far-right group planned an attack on the African National Congress' National Conference in Manguang.[1] Collectively, these events have raised a number of questions around violent extremism in South Africa and the state's capacity to respond. While the threats previously posed by domestic extremist groups have diminished, new concerns have emerged relating to international extremist groups.

This policy brief provides an overview of South Africa's post-apartheid experience of violent extremism and assesses the threat that violent extremism currently poses to the country. It also provides a brief overview of government responses to the challenge and highlights emerging concerns for violent extremism in South Africa.

This policy brief examines preventing violent extremism as it relates to South Africa as an actor in the global community. This is one of a series of three focusing on violent extremism and South Africa.

Methodology

This study used publicly available documentation and qualitative, semi-structured interviews to explore the threat of violent extremism in South Africa. Court documents, research on extremist groups in South Africa and media reports were studied. Forty interviews were conducted in September and October 2016.

The study used a purposive sampling approach, selecting respondents on the basis of their familiarity with the topics of extremism, security, and South African politics and society. Respondents included government officials, civil society members, security analysts, academics, members of the diplomatic corps and community leaders.

Among the government officials interviewed were members of the various security and intelligence agencies tasked with national security at different operational levels, including the State Security Agency, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and units within the South African Police Service (SAPS). Officials from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation were also interviewed. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, interviewees were offered the option of remaining anonymous.

Terminology

Violent extremism and terrorism are problematic concepts without universally accepted definitions. For the purposes of this brief, violent extremism is understood as 'a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature and may include acts of terrorism'.[2]

With regard to terrorism, there are three common elements generally agreed upon that will define terrorism as used in this brief. These are: 1) the use or threat of violence, 2) directed at civilian or government targets, 3) for the purpose of intimidation or coercion for political, religious or ideological ends.[3] The intent behind the perpetration of an act and the methods employed are key to determining whether an act is terrorist or criminal in nature.[4]

Historical context of violent extremism in SA

The far right

South Africa has an extensive and complex history of far-right extremism, dating back to the 1970s. Far-right groups in the country have traditionally been based on Afrikaner nationalism, with many aimed at establishing an independent Afrikaner nation state, built on the notion of a shared language and religion, and a common Afrikaner history.[5] Crucial to the ideology of the far right is their shared Calvinist religion, often mixed with elements of prophecy and notions of a divine right to a 'Boer' Republic.[6] Throughout the apartheid era, various far-right groups carried out bomb attacks targeting black communities, liberal politicians and multiracial institutions.[7] Such attacks continued into South Africa's democratic era post-1994.

South Africa's most prominent far-right group is the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). In the early 1980s members of the AWB were convicted of terrorism after terrorist plots had been uncovered.[8] In the build-up to the 1994 elections the group carried out multiple attacks aimed at destabilising the country and disrupting its first multiracial elections – most notably, with a series of bombings on the eve of the elections that killed 20 people.[9]

Despite their failure to achieve their goals over the past two decades, members of the far right continue to hold secessionist sentiments or notions of reinstating white rule. Between 1994 and 2002 far-right groups were involved in various isolated incidents, including the bombing of a mosque and attempts to steal weapons and military equipment.[10] The largest attack carried out during this time was the so-called 'Worcester bombing' in 1996 where members of the Boere Aanvalstroepe, a far-right offshoot of the AWB, detonated two bombs, killing a woman and three children and injuring 67 people.[11]

> South Africa has an extensive and complex history of far-right extremism, dating back to the 1970s

In 2002 the far right resurfaced when the so-called Boeremag detonated eight bombs in Soweto, Johannesburg, seven of which destroyed railway lines while the eighth destroyed part of a mosque.[12] Twenty-three suspects were charged with treason and acts of terrorism, sabotage and the possession of explosives and firearms.[13] In total, 3 000 kg of explosives were seized in the arrests.[14]

In the marathon Boeremag trial it was revealed that the group had planned to assassinate South African icon Nelson Mandela in a roadside bombing.[15] In the chaos that would presumably have ensued following Mandela's death, the group planned to seize power through a military coup.[16] Its plan to prompt a race war was based on the prophecies of an Anglo-Boer War era seer, Siener van Rensburg, who envisioned a future war between white and black in South Africa and prophesised the return of white rule following the war.[17] This ideological foundation played an important role

in recruiting followers and forming the belief that they would indeed be able to seize control of the state. At the time, the Boeremag came to be seen as a primary threat to the survival of South Africa's democracy.[18]

People Against Gangsterism and Drugs

People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) formed in 1995 as a popular movement promoting the empowerment of communities in opposition to the high levels of violent crime and drug usage in the Western Cape. Frustrated with the government's inability to deal with these issues, the group initially staged peaceful demonstrations aimed at pressuring the government to respond more firmly to its concerns.[19]

> Pagad carried out about 472 attacks involving shootings, petrol and pipe bombs, and grenades

Towards the end of 1996 Pagad's approach moved towards vigilantism and its rhetoric became increasingly militant. A turning point was reached when Pagad publically murdered Hard Livings gang leader Rashaad Staggie in a mass march on his house.[20] Analysts attributed this militant change to the growing influence of the fundamentalist group Qibla.[21] Qibla was a trained militant group formed in the 1980s that was inspired by the Iranian Revolution[22] and sought to implement a similar system of Islamic rule in South Africa.[23] Analysts believe that members associated with Qibla pushed Pagad's founders out of the organisation, leading to splits and a struggle for control of the group.[24]

Between 1996 and 1998 Pagad's activities became more violent as its militant arm, the G-Force, carried out attacks on restaurants, shopping centres, gay nightclubs and the investigative units and judges involved in cases dealing with Pagad members. The unit reportedly received military-style training and functioned on the basis of cells.[25] The influence of Qibla also brought about changes in the focus of the group.

Towards 1999 and 2000 Pagad's attacks increasingly targeted public spaces and symbols representative of US interests – as seen in the bombing of the Planet Hollywood restaurant – rather than drug dealers and gangsters. Its radical views also led to confrontations with members of the Muslim community who criticised its views and militant rhetoric, resulting in members of Pagad allegedly carrying out attacks on various Muslim community leaders.[26]

From December 1999 several Pagad members were sentenced on charges of murder, attempted murder, illegal possession of firearms and theft, with Pagad's national coordinator, Abdus-Salaam Ebrahim, sentenced to five years in jail for public violence. Between 1996 and 2000 Pagad's G-Force had carried out an estimated 472 attacks involving shootings, petrol and pipe bombs, and grenades.[27] After a raid on a G-Force cell in November 2000, in which the group was caught in possession of explosives, the bomb attacks stopped.[28]

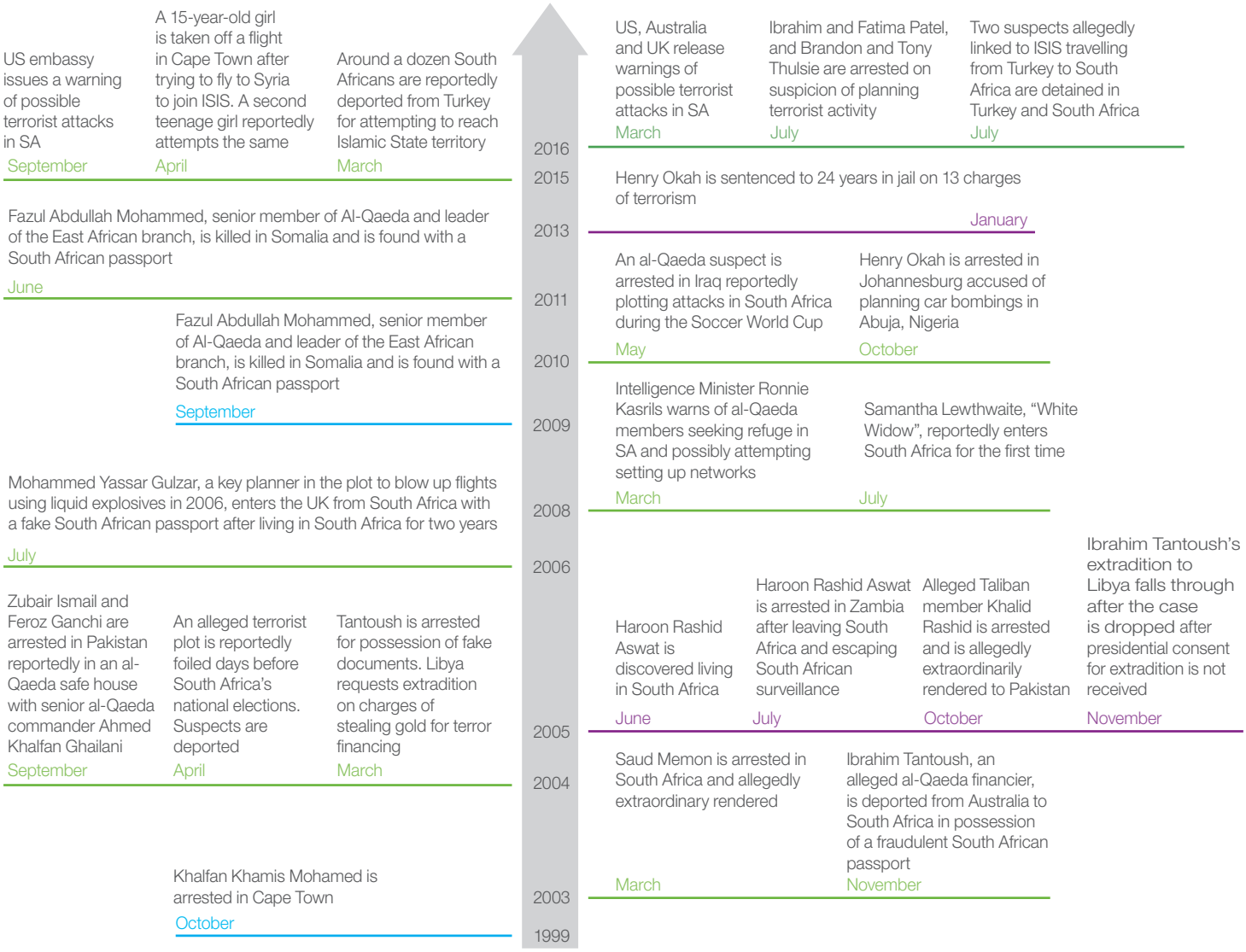
Experiences with international extremist organisations

Evidence on South Africa's experiences with international extremist organisations largely relates to individuals associated with these extremist groups using the country to hide out, plan operations and potentially source funding. For example, there have been instances where individuals with links to al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab have been found in hiding in South Africa, leading to claims that the country has been used as a safe haven for extremists and their activities.[29] Such evidence is, however, limited and difficult to verify, and can therefore not be held as an indication of larger trends or patterns. Selected cases of note are discussed below.

Henry Okah, the alleged leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), lived periodically in South Africa from 2003 and reportedly coordinated attacks in Nigeria and smuggling operations from South Africa.[30] In 2010 Okah was arrested in Johannesburg, a day after two car bombings in Abuja – which he was found to have orchestrated – had killed 12 people.[31] In 2013 he was convicted in South Africa on 13 terrorism-related charges for his role in the Abuja and Warri bombings.[32]

The success of the Okah trial was significant in demonstrating South Africa's commitment to the suppression of terrorism and its ability to honour its obligations under international law.[33]

Figure 1: Chronology of events related to international extremist groups in SA



Source: Institute for Security Studies

A further case of interest is that of the so-called 'White Widow', Samantha Lewthwaite. Lewthwaite is wanted by Interpol and Kenyan authorities[34] for her links to al-Qaeda and her alleged role in planning an attack in Mombasa in 2012. Between 2008 and 2010 Lewthwaite lived and worked in South Africa using a false South African passport. She first entered South Africa in July 2008 and was deported less than a year later, only to return three months later under a false identity.[35] With fake documents and an assumed identity, Lewthwaite reportedly signed at least four rental leases in the Johannesburg suburbs and secured loans from various South African banks.[36] A convicted fraudster admitted to securing the fake documents for Lewthwaite and her two children with the help of corrupt Home Affairs officials for an amount of R20 000.[37]

Similarly, in October 1999 police arrested Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, a Tanzanian wanted for his role in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, in Cape Town.[38] Before the attack Mohamed

had obtained a visitor's visa from the South African High Commission in Dar es Salaam and, once in South Africa, applied for asylum and refugee status under a false name.[39] He lived and worked in Cape Town for a year before being discovered by an agent of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation.

There have been various instances where fraudulent South African passports have been found in the possession of al-Qaeda members.[40] When Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, leader of al-Qaeda's East African branch, was killed in Somalia in 2011, he was found carrying a South African passport.[41] This raises questions regarding the collusion of government officials in the production and dissemination of these documents.

The large number of illegal migrants in South Africa highlights the challenges around effective border control and raises questions around the ability of security forces to identify and track extremists potentially operating in the country. In 2005 it was discovered that Haroon Rashid Aswat, a British citizen wanted in the US for alleged links to al-Qaeda, was living in South Africa.[42] During discussions between the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, initially over his rendition, South African authorities reportedly lost track of Aswat,[43] who was later arrested after trying to enter Zambia from Zimbabwe.[44]

> There have been various allegations around South Africans financing terrorism, although none have proven conclusive

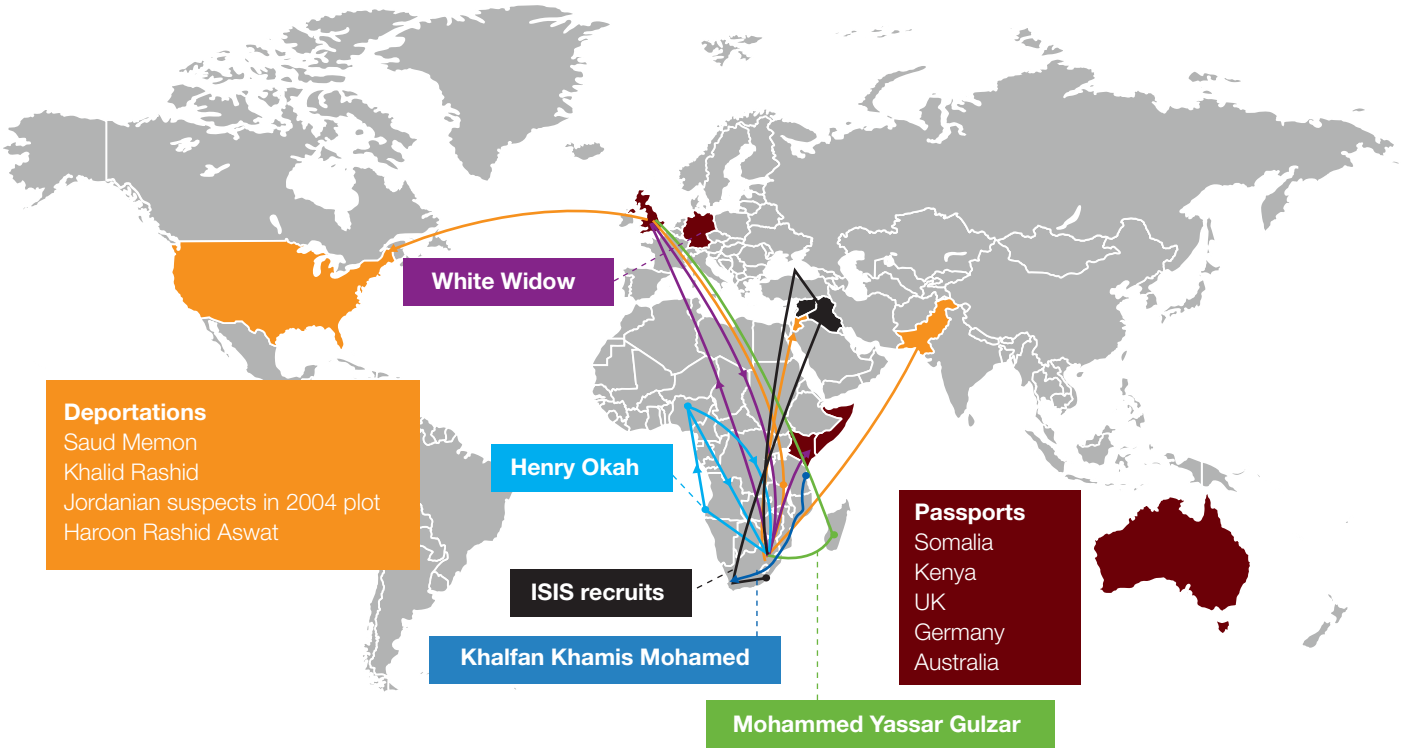
The issue of porous borders and ungoverned areas in the broader Southern African region also raises concerns,[45] with speculation ranging from alleged al-Qaeda training camps in northern Mozambique[46] and allegations of cells operating in Namibia[47] and Botswana[48] to terrorist financing involving gemstones in Madagascar.[49] Although the authenticity of such claims are difficult to establish and beyond the scope of this brief, they highlight the broader regional context of porous borders and diminished state capacity in which South Africa finds itself and which may facilitate extremist activity.

Similarly, there have been various allegations around South Africans financing terrorism, although none have proven conclusive. However, as seen in the cases of Lewthwaite and Aswat,[50] suspects may hide among local communities that unwittingly support them. Along with this, there have been claims to suggest that charitable donations from unsuspecting groups and individuals may sometimes be funnelled to extremist groups abroad.[51]

In 2004 then national police commissioner Jackie Selebi told the Parliamentary Committee on Safety and Security that authorities had arrested and deported several suspects allegedly linked to al-Qaeda days before elections in South Africa, and claimed that they had held 'evil intentions' against the country.[52] Then safety and security minister Charles Nqakula confirmed that these operations existed and would have disrupted elections.[53]

GLOBALLY, GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION IS A MOTIVATING FACTOR BEHIND RADICALISATION

Figure 2: Transnational nature of violent extremism



Source: Institute for Security Studies

Factors contributing to vulnerability

Several factors may contribute to a state's vulnerability to extremist attacks, as a target for the purposes of radicalisation and recruitment or as an operational base for extremists. These may include political and socio-economic challenges within a society, the marginalisation of minority groups and factors related to ideology or geopolitics.[54] Weaknesses in governance,[55] security[56] and intelligence structures[57] may also play a role.

Globally, government corruption is recognised as a motivating factor behind radicalisation, and is increasingly used by extremist groups to foment dissent against the state and mistrust of government.[58] Generally this narrative is built around calling into question the legitimacy of the government or political system and consequently advocating for an upheaval of the political system.[59] This can particularly be seen as a motivating factor in the actions of the far right.

Within the South African context, corruption is also an enabling factor that allows for extremist activity in terms of planning operations. Corruption compromises security, for example through aiding extremists' entry into the country and undermining the capability of the security forces to address threats. It could further aid in the transfer of funds to extremist groups.

The politicisation of key roles in South Africa's security cluster is of specific concern. Political appointments often result in inadequate leadership, which has a compromising effect on security agencies.[60] The impact of such appointments could also lead to morale breaking down within institutions and skills levels dropping when the necessary leadership and initiative are not provided.[61]

Ungoverned areas are generally regarded as safe havens for violent extremists. However, entirely ungoverned areas are not necessarily ideal for planning and coordination purposes. For such activities, infrastructure and resources such as transportation, communications networks and financial institutions are crucial. South Africa's established infrastructure, coupled with an overstretched police service, may make the country an attractive option for the planning of operations or for those seeking a hideout that provides the necessary resources and allows them to maintain a low profile.[62]

Findings: assessing the current threat

In assessing the threat of violent extremism to South Africa, two points are considered: the possibility of South Africa becoming a target for extremist attacks, and the threat of activities related to violent extremism, including radicalisation, training, recruitment and the use of the country as a base for the planning of extremist activities. The threat contains a domestic component stemming from local grievances, as noted with Pagad and the Boeremag, and an international component linked to the agendas of global extremist organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The far right

Far-right groups have been vocal in their dissatisfaction with the government and the state of post-1994 South Africa. The ideologies of groups such as the Kommandokorps are still strongly fuelled by racism and espouse principles of racial segregation hostile to transformation and coexistence.[63] Such groups have turned inwards and mobilised around common grievances as a result of what they perceive to be political and economic alienation. A seized Boeremag document outlined the high levels of crime post-1994, affirmative action policies and rising white unemployment as issues around which it could attract popular support.[64]

Respondents argued that while far-right groups are unlikely to gain support from the majority of Afrikaners, the issues noted by the group continue to affect segments of the Afrikaner community, many of whom feel politically alienated and marginalised. Respondents, however, regarded the threat emanating from the far right as low. Among the reasons for this is that since the dismantling of the Boeremag and the death of AWB leader Eugene Terre'blanche, the far right is considered to be in disarray.[65] Although there is evidence of attempts at organising and training taking place among individual groups,[66] support for the far right is seen as minimal and diffused among many smaller groups with little coordination and no central leadership.

Further, what set the Boeremag apart from other far-right groups was that some of its members were serving officers in the post-apartheid SANDF, which provided it with access to resources and operational planning capabilities.[67] This is no longer the case, as respondents agreed that South Africa's police and military structures have been significantly transformed. The majority of respondents agreed that the only potential threat from the far right was a 'lone wolf' attack. Such an incident would undoubtedly enflame racial tensions, but would be unlikely to endanger state security.

Pagad

The release of Pagad members from prison in recent years has raised questions around whether the group will return to the strategies it used during the 1990s. The structural issues that led to the rise of Pagad, such as high levels of crime, corruption and the failure of the government to effectively deal with gang violence on the Cape Flats, remain prevalent.

> While the possibility exists, the threat to South Africa in terms of an ISIS attack is considered low

Although the group is reorganising, the consensus among respondents was that Pagad does not pose a major security threat.[68] Respondents argued that, now aware of the repercussions of violent tactics, Pagad members appeared to be acting more cautiously in terms of both rhetoric and strategy, especially since former convicts are kept under surveillance after being released.[69] This analysis was confirmed by a leaked 2009 intelligence briefing assessing the risk posed by Pagad, which revealed that state security agencies continue to monitor the group.[70] Although the report indicated that the group still resorts to intimidation to deter drug peddlers, Pagad has become more cooperative with police and thus far has not resorted to the kind of violence seen in the late 1990s.[71]

Respondents also argued that Pagad had operated in a very different context during its prime.[72] South Africa's new constitutional dispensation means that incitement and hate speech are far less tolerable than they may have been during the early post-apartheid era. Recognising the changing landscape, the group appears to be attempting to make gains using other avenues. These include partnerships with political parties sympathetic to its cause and engaging relevant government organs, such as the Department of Justice

and Constitutional Development, for assistance.[73] The group's activities may, nonetheless, lead to low-level violence,[74] in terms of confrontations[75] between the group and gangs in the Western Cape, where Pagad's activities are largely concentrated.

International extremist groups

The most prominent concerns currently centre on threats posed by international extremist groups such as ISIS. The incidents reported above indicate the reasons for concern over their role in South Africa. Furthermore, in 2014 reports emerged of South Africans traveling to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS.[76] Respondents estimated that 60 to 100 South Africans had left to join the group and that more than half had since returned.[77] These events have led to fears of radicalisation, recruitment and potential attacks within the country.

Findings indicate that, while the possibility exists, the threat to South Africa in terms of an attack is considered low. Respondents pointed to various reasons for this, primarily around the question of intent. Many contended that South Africa's foreign policy choices made it a less likely target given its history of non-intervention and its support for various liberation movements globally. Analysts argue that extremism is often linked to certain foreign policy decisions.[78] The US' invasion of Iraq is one example of this. South Africa's lack of interventionist policies may mean that extremist groups do not consider the country a target. As illustrated by al-Shabaab's attacks on Kenya, groups often target foreign states on the basis of retaliation.[79]

The case of the so-called 'Thulsie twins' is a rare instance of alleged plans to target structures on South African soil. In July 2016 South Africa's Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation arrested brothers Brandon-Lee and Tony-Lee Thulsie, who are South African citizens, on charges related to terrorism. It is alleged that after failed attempts to travel to Syria to join ISIS, the pair began planning attacks on US and Jewish targets in South Africa.[80] The case is ongoing.

Respondents argued that domestic factors found to play a role in other states are not prevalent in South Africa. In contrast with patterns observed in Europe, Muslims in South Africa are not viewed as an immigrant community but rather as part of South Africa's diverse make-up, with a long and enduring history in the country.[81] Further, those recruited by ISIS emerged from stable socio-economic backgrounds. Factors that are now commonly associated with radicalisation, such as marginalisation, political and religious suppression or relative deprivation, thus did not appear to play a role in this context. Respondents explained further that political inclusion meant that outlets for grievances were found within political or civic structures, thus preventing extreme mobilisation.[82]

The general consensus among both civil society and government respondents was that ISIS and its violent ideology have found scant support or sympathy within the South African Muslim community. This is attributed to the predominantly moderate Islamic tradition in South Africa.

ISIS IS NOT WIDELY SUPPORTED IN SA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Although pockets of conservatism exist, these are not generally linked to militancy.[83] Respondents pointed out that South Africa's Muslim authorities were vocal in their condemnation of ISIS and that the group had not managed to exert influence in mainstream Muslim organisations.[84]

In assessing what motivated individuals to join ISIS, respondents pointed to a sense of solidarity with the suffering of Muslims in countries such as Palestine, Iraq and Syria. This played a large role when considering the helplessness normally experienced in terms of 'a sense of global injustice'[85] and the carnage playing out abroad. ISIS ostensibly offers individuals the opportunity to effect change on the ground. Along with these social underpinnings, skewed religious imperatives may also have played a strong role.[86] Findings further indicated that a sense of idealism around the romanticised idea of a utopian Islamic state, coupled with adventurism, was often a driving force specifically among young recruits.[87]

Respondents pointed out that although there have been reports of South Africans fighting for ISIS,[88] not all recruits join the group as fighters. ISIS's online recruitment campaign is largely focused on its 'governance' and building a caliphate for all Muslims.[89] Findings suggest that many South Africans who joined ISIS did so in order to live in a state that they regarded as truly Islamic and governed by ISIS' interpretation of Shariah law.[90]

> South Africa's lack of interventionist policies may mean that extremist groups do not consider the country a target

Regarding the concern raised over individuals who have returned from ISIS and whether their return was aimed at recruiting other South Africans or possibly coordinating attacks in the country, findings suggested that those who returned did so as a result of being disillusioned with ISIS and the harsh reality of life in ISIS territory. Respondents pointed out that many returnees were women and children not engaged in active combat.

Security and law enforcement officials, along with other members of the government, confirmed that returnees were extensively debriefed and remain under surveillance. Respondents also stated that the cases were isolated and that a downward trend was now evident.[91] This is likely in the context of ISIS's weakening state due to military defeats and territorial losses over the course of 2016. It is worth considering that those who returned (within a short period of time) may have served as a deterrent to other South Africans contemplating joining the group. There are, however, new concerns around those who may be forced to return in the event that ISIS collapses. The dynamics around such individuals may be vastly different to willing returnees, especially if they have been involved in the group as combatants, exposed to widespread violence.

A minority of respondents expressed the belief that there was a significant risk of South Africa being attacked by international extremist groups. As is the case with far-right extremism, most respondents agreed that the possibility of lone-wolf attacks was of greater concern. The changing nature of extremist groups, however, means that this could change. For instance, while ISIS has shown relatively little interest in South Africa until now, as the group comes under strain – and as it becomes more difficult to perpetrate attacks in the US or Europe – it may seek to launch attacks on new targets to maintain relevance. Considering South Africa's abundance of foreign interests and its position as Africa's most industrialised economy, it may be considered an attractive target.

A minority of respondents also claimed that there were links between foreign nationals in South Africa and al-Shabaab, although little evidence was presented to substantiate such claims. A respondent who believed the threat of violent extremism to be high stated that evidence had been presented to prosecuting authorities in South Africa but that no action had been taken due to 'a lack of properly trained prosecutors to handle cases of this magnitude'.[92] Experts, however, contend that this is inaccurate and point to the Okah case in explaining the capacity and capability of prosecuting authorities to deal with cases of terrorism.[93]

A minority of respondents stated that militant indoctrination was taking place within close-knit communities and mosques.[94] However, no verifiable reports exist to substantiate such claims. Conversely, the various bodies representing Muslim theologians in South Africa have issued directives to Islamic institutions across the country to responsibly engage communities on issues of fundamentalism. These bodies have also been advised to review the language used in mosques to prevent the misinterpretation of religious tenets and warned against the usage of potentially extreme rhetoric.[95]

Respondents noted that in the South African context, radicalisation had largely taken place in online forums. They indicated that a small number of ISIS recruiters were attempting to recruit in South Africa, but that there was no evidence to suggest that such efforts were large-scale or being coordinated within religious institutions.

Government responses to date

Despite occasional claims by foreign governments and the media of government complacency over the threat of violent extremism, there is evidence that various departments and agencies have policies and strategies in place aimed at addressing the threat. A number of departments have been active on the issue and have been working with other departments on addressing the threat.

Up to now, government officials have not necessarily sought to discredit claims relating to the threat of violent extremism, but rather have stressed that the threat is lower than claimed.[96] Misconceptions around whether the government is dealing with the threat have at times stemmed from a lack of government communication on the issue.

Findings indicate that there is ongoing cooperation between South Africa and other governments in addressing threats, including the sharing of intelligence. However, respondents largely expressed the view that cooperation could be improved. There is evidence that, where tangible information has come to light, the government has taken measures to curb extremist activity. It displayed this capability in the arrests of suspected recruits such as the Thulsie brothers in 2016, which also indicated that investigations into possible threats are being carried out.

The South African government has also shown appreciation for the fact that not all returnees may have been engaged in combatant roles, and that many returnees were women and children. Here it has not employed automatic responses that would lead to arrests or prosecution. In the light of concerns around the threat that ISIS returnees may pose, respondents reported that the government has nonetheless maintained surveillance of the returnees.

Respondents explained that the government had adopted a measured approach and endeavoured to involve communities rather than alienate them. This is possibly as a result of the South African government's recognition of the failures of other governments in this regard, with the preferred approach being one of 'persuasion rather than prosecution'.[97]

The state has thus sought to hand over a measure of responsibility to communities. In meetings with community representatives, State Security Minister David Mahlobo explained that because recruits were primarily motivated by religious or ideological factors, communities were best placed to counter radical narratives.[98] The government also exhibited an awareness that community leaders may have greater influence over communities and an understanding of how they function.[99]

MANY SA'S WHO JOINED ISIS WANTED TO LIVE IN AN ISLAMIC STATE OSTENSIBLY GOVERNED BY SHARIAH LAW

An important consequence of this approach is that the government has fostered greater cooperation and inclusivity by involving communities in its strategies. Also commendable is the fact that the government's approach has been mindful of human rights considerations, and it has avoided both the stigmatisation of groups and the use of heavy-handed tactics in dealing with suspects, which have been shown to exacerbate the challenge of violent extremism in many instances.

Emerging areas of concern

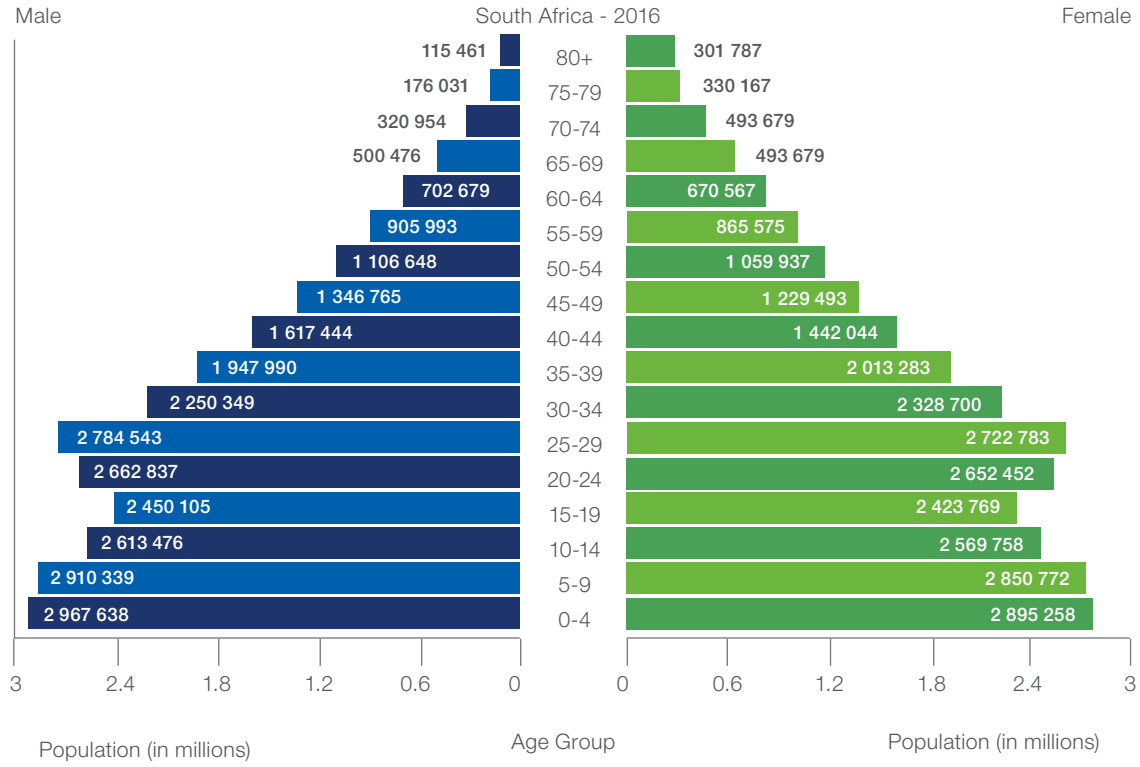
Youth issues

Internationally, evidence indicates that young people are a specific vulnerable group requiring attention in relation to radicalisation and recruitment.[100] South Africa has recently witnessed youth discontent that should be taken into account in the context of this discussion. This discontent has largely been fuelled by high levels of inequality and unemployment. There are also increasing perceptions of marginalisation resulting from a lack of economic transformation, which has left youth feeling betrayed by the promise of a democratic South Africa that has not lived up to expectations.[101] These issues are aggravated by a large youth population that is largely poorly educated, unskilled and unemployed.[102]

Although these factors may not necessarily result in violent extremism in the form that presents now in the global context, respondents agree that they have the potential to manifest in violence of some form, as is evident in the increasing number of violent protests throughout South Africa.[103] Questions have been raised around whether some of the violence seen in the student protests could constitute extremism.[104]

The premeditated nature of some of the violence, as seen in the preparation of petrol bombs, raises the question as to whether these incidents indicate the intention and active effort by individuals or groups to incite fear as a tactic to achieve political ends. Further, violent rhetoric and threats directed at certain race groups raise questions around deeper underlying issues at the core of the student protests. There are also concerns that radical groups or elements may seek to take advantage of legitimate grievances to forward their agendas, as is often the case with extremist groups.

Figure 3: Age demographics in SA, indicative of youth bulge



Source: Stats SA, 2016

Social cohesion

South Africa's democratic, post-apartheid era has seen increased cohesion between communities and a transformation in social relations across racial, cultural and linguistic lines. Despite this progress, marked divisions remain and relations appear more strained during times of political or economic uncertainty. Strong racial, tribal and socioeconomic divisions are still evident, leading to questions around identity and disturbances in terms of societal cohesion. Research indicates that a breakdown in societal cohesion may contribute to the enabling factors surrounding violent extremism.[107]

> Evidence indicates that young people are a specific vulnerable group requiring attention in relation to radicalisation and recruitment

Respondents to this study raised concerns over various fringe groups in South Africa and their potential to sow social discord. They contended that extremist rhetoric employed by such groups was not always recognised as such. The Mazibuye African Forum was noted as being one such group. Premised on the notion that South Africa belongs exclusively to indigenous populations, the group espouses strong anti-Indian sentiments.[108] Although there is no evidence to suggest that such groups are organising in a strategic or militant fashion, there is concern that they may incite large-scale violence through their militant rhetoric.

Impact on communities

The global war on terror and the media narratives emerging from this period have heavily influenced perceptions around extremism globally, South Africa included. As in other parts of the world, violent extremism has proven to be a divisive force, leading to the 'othering' of communities.

Although not on the same scale seen in Europe or the US, some signs of strain are worth noting. In 2016 tensions in a Pretoria suburb ran high around the building of a mosque in a former exclusively white neighbourhood.[109] Many opposed to the project voiced concerns around Shariah law taking over the suburb and went as far as to say that ISIS was not welcome in the area. While some dismissed the furore as racism (a phenomenon not uncommon in South Africa), questions were raised as to whether Islamophobia was in fact on the rise.[110]

Weak reporting in the media has contributed to this challenge. For example, the *Daily Maverick* published a piece in 2013 containing a number of serious allegations around violent extremism in South Africa. The piece alleged, despite a lack of evidence, that South Africans were making financial contributions to al-Qaeda and had established training camps within the country, ostensibly to train fighters for al-Qaeda. The story contained various factual inaccuracies and the *Daily Maverick*

RADICAL GROUPS MAY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF LEGITIMATE GRIEVANCES TO FORWARD THEIR AGENDAS

proceeded to retract the story and issued a public apology to individuals named in the piece.[111] The after-effects of these allegations remained, however, with the story being consistently repeated in the years since. A respondent to this study gave an account detailing severe harassment experienced as a result of these allegations.[112]

South Africa is not immune to the threat of violent extremism

Equally concerning is the tendency to draw links between extremism and foreign nationals in South Africa, without evidence to substantiate such notions. This is especially worrying in light of South Africa's recent history of xenophobia and the potential repercussions that such allegations may have.

Conclusion

Although South Africa has not experienced an attack in many years, it is clear that it is not immune to the threat of violent extremism. The South African case is unique and illustrative of the complexities surrounding the threat of violent extremism. Factors driving radicalisation and extremist activity vary from group to group and thus indicate the need for nuanced responses.

While Pagad and far-right groups have been spurred on by ideology, structural issues, marginalisation and social conditions, the South Africans who have travelled to ISIS were not marginalised members of society, nor did they suffer from relative deprivation. This is why emerging threats from non-traditional actors need to be considered.

While the issue should be taken seriously and monitored, other issues may take priority over violent extremism. South Africa's high crime rate is one such issue. Many respondents to this study cited greater concern over the other forms of violence seen in South Africa, such as xenophobia, unabated gang violence on the Cape Flats, the violent nature of farm attacks and violent protests across the country.

South Africa should, however, not become complacent. The changing nature of extremist groups should particularly be monitored. With the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria and the increasing difficulty of perpetrating attacks in Europe or the US, ISIS may look to expand its range of operations. This may make countries such as South Africa more attractive options with relatively high-value targets, such as various Western interests and symbols representative of capitalism or 'Western imperialism', that may be easier to target than heavily protected European countries or the US.

There is, however, little indication that this is currently the case and the threat of violent extremism in South Africa is still considered to be low. The conditions that have been shown to lead to extremism in other countries are prevalent in South Africa. The availability of weapons and explosives means that the threat posed by international extremist groups is largely a question of intent, which was previously found to be lacking. Although the threat appears to be minimal, the far-reaching ramifications of a potential attack mean that it should be considered seriously and carefully monitored.

Recommendations

Understand the threat of violent extremism

Considering the evolutionary nature of violent extremism and the threat that it increasingly poses globally, efforts need to be made by both the government and civil society should try to better understand the complexities around the issue. This could be facilitated by investing in research.

Strengthen government's response capacities

In light of the evolution of extremist threats and the fact that South Africa has not experienced a terrorist attack in many years, the country's ability to respond is untested. To avoid being caught off-guard, capacity needs to be developed in terms of intelligence capabilities, strengthening the knowledge of officials on the drivers of violent extremism, and strengthening skills and readiness to handle actual incidents.

Address corruption

Corruption, along with related organised crime, needs to be recognised for its role in facilitating extremist activities and should be addressed accordingly. The Department of Home Affairs, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, the National Prosecuting Authority and the SAPS need to work towards more effective anti-corruption measures, with a strong emphasis on the implementation of policies.

Foster inclusivity and social cohesion

Extremist groups often turn to violence to achieve their aims when they are unable to work through established political institutions. Political inclusivity is possible through the development of and support for democratic institutions that allow for grievances to be addressed peacefully. Institutions must be responsive to the concerns of citizens and the government must be accountable to the people.

Engage the youth

Given the concerns currently relating to youth in South Africa, the country needs to do what it can to ensure that this group does not become a focus of recruitment and radicalisation. Youth must be encouraged to move towards constructive and responsible engagement with the government and broader society. Equally, the government and civil society must be responsive and willing to engage on youth concerns. Education is key in ensuring the development of young people and harnessing their potential and providing them with prospects for the future. Education is not limited to institutions and needs to take place within the home and community as well.

Strengthen international engagement and cooperation

Maintaining good relations and enhancing cooperation with other states and foreign security agencies should be prioritised, especially considering the transnational nature of violent extremism. This includes playing a role in the global discussion on addressing the threat and promoting the use of measured responses in line with the rule of law and human rights.

Work with communities

The government and communities should continue to work together to address challenges around radicalisation and recruitment. Dialogue between communities should be promoted as a way to increase awareness and foster greater understanding and social cohesion. Community leaders should use their platforms to promote constructive messages as a way to counter extremist rhetoric that may be affecting South Africans, particularly the youth.

Government communication

While secrecy is understood to be necessary in ongoing investigations for sensitive matters, more public communications are needed to foster trust and alleviate fears. By its very nature, terrorism intends to heighten fear, which more transparency may serve to alleviate. If the psychological effects of terrorism are not addressed through alleviating fears, efforts to ensure physical security are undermined.

Encourage responsible media coverage

On the part of the media, greater responsibility should be exercised, as sensationalist reporting can exaggerate threats, foster fear and encourage harmful discrimination. Responsible reporting is necessary to provide accurate information.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EXTREMIST GROUPS SHOULD PARTICULARLY BE MONITORED

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