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To cite this article: Hassan Juma Ndzovu (2018) Kenya's Jihadi Clerics: Formulation of a “Liberation Theology” and the Challenge to Secular Power, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 38:3, 360-371, DOI: [10.1080/13602004.2018.1523359](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2018.1523359)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2018.1523359>



Published online: 25 Sep 2018.



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## Kenya's Jihadi Clerics: Formulation of a “Liberation Theology” and the Challenge to Secular Power

HASSAN JUMA NDZOVU\*

### *Abstract*

*The political reforms of 1990s in Kenya provided extremist Muslim activists the prospect to articulate a political vision that runs counter to the secular principle of plural co-existence. The liberalization of the political space led to the democratization of religious decree-issuing process, thereby undermining the credibility of “moderate” Muslim leaders in interpreting Islamic texts. The paper’s central argument is that the articulation of jihadi ideology is a deliberate recourse by sections of Muslims in Kenya to formulate their political discourse in religious terms. This trend has granted the country’s Muslims the choice to pick between Islamic and secular ideologies with the former being espoused by the jihadists. Through their activities and sermons, the jihadists have criticized the idea of a secular state by issuing fatwas that completely disregard religious mutual co-existence. This study traces the intellectual genesis and the ultimate growth of the jihadi ideology in the country to a prominent Muslim cleric Sheikh Abdulaziz Rimo whose efforts ushered in a new way of addressing political issues amongst Kenyan Muslims. It is concluded that this scenario draws impetus from the jihadists’ framing of the Muslims’ grievances along religious lines and thereby apply religion to “solve” political problems.*

**Keywords:** *Jihadi; Muslims; secular; Kenya; clerics; Salafi; apostate*

### **Introduction**

The introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s that ushered freedom of expression has contributed to the emergence of Islam as political ideology in Kenya. The repealing of Section 2 (a) of the Independence Constitution in 1992 became a landmark in Muslim activists’ presence in the country’s public, which could be attributed to several factors, but importantly to political liberalization.

The liberalized atmosphere reorganized the settings for partaking in public debate, which impacted all interest groups, including Muslims. Constitutional and institutional reform expedited the appearance of numerous Muslim organizations, some with clear political stance, and also Islamic FM radio stations in Nairobi, Garissa and Mombasa to articulate issues affecting the Muslim community.<sup>1</sup> At this crucial moment of democratic freedom, it inspired the appearance of a group of Muslim clerics advocating for Islam as an alternative political ideology supposedly relevant to the minority Muslims in the country. Apart from the democratization process influencing the political realm,

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it also “democratized” the religious decree-issuing practice, providing Muslims the prospect of soliciting guidance from any cleric they please. This development undermined the integrity of the “traditionalist” oriented (Sufi) clerics and government sponsored institutional interpretation of Islamic doctrine through the Kadhi (government Islamic courts) office. Among the Muslim clerics engaged in independent interpretation of religious texts, there are also sections of Salafi who espouse violent jihad as a political tool.

This article, therefore, seeks to examine the contemporary phenomena of violent jihadi ideology as a deliberate recourse by certain Muslim clerics in Kenya to formulate their political discourse in religious terms. This is demonstrated by tracing the intellectual genesis and the ultimate growth of the jihadi ideology in the country to a prominent Muslim cleric, Sheikh Abdulaziz Rimo (1949–2015), whose effort ushered a new way of addressing political issues amongst Kenyan Muslims. Like other Islamists, the jihadists employ a “holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means”.<sup>2</sup> And since the jihadi groups rely on Islam to formulate a certain political discourse, the proponents of jihadi ideology always fall back to the faith to selectively identify essentials that are significant to their cause, turning them into ideological precepts that are sacredly supported. Due to this nature of the jihadi movement, actions undertaken by jihadist clerics are considered by their supporters as religious duties. More so, to the Kenyan jihadists, the existing political system and structure is considered wrong since it violates Islamic principles, and it is also repressive because non-Muslims occupy what the jihadi clerics consider to be “Muslim territory”. The outlined remedy to these circumstances, therefore, is to go back to the “true” Islam as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad and the period of the caliphate.

To the jihadi groups, the means to achieve the objective of establishing an Islamic state and ruling the entire world requires the application of violent methods as a tool of political struggle.<sup>3</sup> It is this usage and deliberate emphasis of intolerant and exclusivist messages allegedly derived from the Islamic sources by the jihadi clerics that lead us to assert that there is a conscious recourse by sections of Kenyan Muslims to employ religion to address political grievances. In this article, the expression “jihadi clerics/groups/movement” would mean an advocator or supporter of a movement that favors re-ordering of government and society in accordance to Islamic principles, and embraces violent jihad as a tool to realize this goal. Thus, the article conceptualizes jihadi movement in the form of violent groups, and individual Muslim clerics who reject secularism, democracy and the nation-state, which is distinct from the “jihad” doctrine. There are adequate numbers of secular educated Muslims who have been attracted to the message of the jihadi preachers in the country as evident in recent times. What gives strength to the ideas of the jihadi clerics to encourage certain Muslims to turn against their “secular success” and seek the path of martyr is puzzling analysts in Kenya. Through their sermons they are able to inspire and persuade a segment of disenfranchised Muslims seeking to live up to a meaningful “cause” during their life on earth. Thus, there is no noble cause than that of dying fighting “oppressive” non-Muslim regime.

Gradually, the jihadi clerics turned to be an important link in conveying the message of martyrdom to their supporters in the country. Perhaps, by design their preaching became useful to the al-Shabaab movement in Somalia in quest of reinforcing its ranks with supporters, sympathizers, and fighters from the Kenya's Muslim community. The sermons of the jihadi clerics, which included issuing *fatwas* (legal opinions) against legitimate authority, praising attacks on churches as an appropriate response to supposed oppression of Muslims, and open defiance of the accepted norms of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, signaled a deepening presence of violent jihadis in the Kenyan

society. This scenario demonstrates tension “between the realities of secular power and the idealism of those who claim religious authority”.<sup>4</sup> John Hunwick describes secular power as that “one not dictated by a religious or other ideology”, though willing to “accept and operate within the general culture of a religion”.<sup>5</sup> Here, we may add that a secular power is presumed to be tolerant and accommodating to people of different religious persuasions and ideologies. On the other hand, religious authority is that one, which dictates people’s “lives in accordance with an interpretation of what the holders of such authority claim to be divine authority, which overrides authority established by ‘secular, powers’”.<sup>6</sup> The description of religious authority by Hunwick fits the jihadi’s view, which as presented in Kenya, it endeavors in fighting against the secular power. Therefore, apart from exploring the intellectual root of the jihadi ideology in Kenya, the paper also demonstrates how subsequent jihadi clerics advocated for “Islamic” cause through castigating the idea of Kenya’s secular state, destruction of church institutions and killing of Christians together with the “apostate” Muslim clerics. Evident in this paper is effort by the jihadi clerics to formulate a liberation theology that appeals to the disenfranchised sections of the Muslim population in Kenya.

### **Sheikh Abdulaziz Rimo: The Forbearer of Jihadi Ideology in Kenya**

Although there are no in-depth studies on jihadi movement in Kenya, the jihadi phenomenon emerged out of the initiative of Islamic reformist teachers and groups in the region in the 1980s. Arguably, a genealogy of jihadi ideas in Kenya could be linked to the emergence of the expansive Salafi community also popularly known as Wahhabis. The term “salafi”, signify a group of Muslims who subscribe to the “purest” form of Islam supposedly passed down by the companions (*salaf*) of Prophet Muhammad. According to the Salafis, the companions were able to learn Islam directly from the Prophet, thereby commanding the correct understanding of the religion. Subsequent generations of Muslims have been accused of religious innovations after the demise of the earliest Muslim community, leading to the emergence of reformist movements demanding for the purification of the faith in accordance to strict observance of the Quran, the *sunna* (tradition) of the Prophet, and the consensus of the companions. This implied all Muslims’ conduct and practices should be legitimized by these three religious sources.<sup>7</sup> Among the Salafis there are different shades including the jihadi faction, which maintain the usage of violent jihad in realizing the establishment of an Islamic state and the rule of God on earth.

Although, it is difficult to verify, it seems that the appearance of jihadi ideology among sections of Kenyan Muslims could be attributed to various sources. First is the appearance of the Salafist under the canopy of a community of believers known as Ansari Sunnah (the protectors of the tradition of Muhammad). Since the appearance of the Ansari Sunnah community, there have emerged individuals with extreme religious views among the Kenyan Muslims. Second is the increasing number of Muslims studying in the Middle East particularly Saudi Arabia, thereby exposing them to Wahhabi inclination (Saudi form of Salafism). “It was the policy of the Saudi state to support its form of Salafism, and which they assisted in exporting abroad as part of the state’s foreign policy”, Quinton Wiktorowicz observed.<sup>8</sup> Third is the war in Somalia spearheaded by the al-Shabaab, which brought together Muslims from Somalia, Kenya and other nationalities in a conflict zone where they practiced violent jihad in contemporary context. The conflict in Somalia provided greater opportunity for exposure to the Kenya jihadists, which made them feel part of the global Islamic movement. Despite the outlined

factors above, certainly, the evolution of jihadi thoughts in Kenya could be traced to Sheikh Rimo who is regarded as “the first religious scholar (*mwanachuoni*) who initiated *da'wah* (propagation) on *tawhid* (God's unity) and jihadi ideas in the coastal region”.<sup>9</sup> It was in 1972 when Rimo obtained eight years scholarship from the Saudi Arabian embassy to study at the Islamic University of Medina. Upon completion of his studies, Rimo returned to Kenya and embarked on *da'wah*, which he referred to as *jihad*, amongst the local Digo Muslim community of South-coast Kenya.<sup>10</sup>

In his preaching he sought to centralize the observation of “proper” Islam amongst the local Muslims, insisting on the need to subscribe to the Prophetic traditions as a source of guidance. In the process Rimo taught against religious innovations, forms of syncretism and dependence on the old traditional *ulama* (Islamic scholars) for direction. Like other African students, the reformist imprint of the Madina University's scholars like Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Baaz (1910–1999) and Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-AlBani (1914–1999) left an indelible mark upon Rimo.<sup>11</sup> During his educational sojourn, the Madina phase was crucial for Rimo in terms of initiating him to the Wahhabi-Salafi teachings that expounded on the pure monotheism discourse to which he had been exposed as a student of Sheikh Abdullah Saleh Farsy (1912–1982). The period created an opportunity for Rimo to interact with reformist ideas that shaped him into a Salafi sheikh as evident in his sermons.<sup>12</sup> Rimo's sermons exhibited acceptance for literal interpretation of the primary sources of Islam, despising the usage of reason on the sources. In both words and actions the Sheikh denounced (*takfir*) Muslims who in his interpretation had allegedly deviated from the “true” faith. As an activist-reformist teacher in the mid 1980s, criticizing the pluralist mixture of Islamic and indigenous Digo cultural practices that characterized the local community, Rimo sought to emphasize on practices that were in accord with Islam “as understood in the more exclusivist terms of conservative scholars”.<sup>13</sup> But, for the Digo Muslims, questions of adherence to texts, details of *shari'ah* and points of doctrine “were perhaps less meaningful”.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Rimo's scriptural and literalist Islam alienated popular practices and supposedly tolerant Islam of the local Muslims. He criticized all popular practices among Digo Muslims that were in his view incompatible with Islam thereby emphasizing on strict adherence on *tawhid*.<sup>15</sup>

Sheikh Rimo's jihad did not only focus on calling for reforms touching on the moral and spiritual character of the local Muslims, but in his mosque sermons, he also occasionally veered into political matters where he gave textual evidence on Islamic governance. His opposition to the state in the early 1990s was also curiously expressed in Islamic terms. He expounded on the role of government in Islam and using the example of Prophet Muhammad demonstrated on the qualities of leadership in society. Joining the pro-reform campaigns of the 1990s, Rimo also became one of the fiery critics of then President, Daniel Arap Moi's leadership (1978–2002). Due to his political stance Sheikh Rimo found himself in constant collision with the state, leading to his six years imprisonment for allegedly criticizing the state during Friday prayers, a criminal offense of sedition. The critical and articulate Rimo was supposedly to have called upon his audience to reject the application of secular laws, which was tantamount to obeying or worshipping other than God, and thus apostasy. While adopting this position, he enjoined Muslims to support the unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya, believing it will usher the rule of the law of God to the Muslims of Kenya.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly, his *da'wah/jihad* had also a clear goal of championing for the application of the Islamic law in the entire “Muslim-land” in the country. Like other critics, Rimo wanted political reforms initiated through constitutional means, but this does not suggest that he did not support replacing the existing political structure with an Islamic political model. In the Sheikh's understanding, by organizing

society along a secular constitution the government had in his estimation wronged. Following such a state was in his view tantamount to disobeying Allah. Conversely, in affirming obedience to Allah, one had the duty to disobey such a government.<sup>17</sup>

Later in his life, may be due to lack of mass followers and resistance from the local religious leaders, Rimo withdrew from direct involvement in society. With a few students he moved to a secluded area, citing the example of the Prophet who undertook the *hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Medina. The Ansari Sunnah community that Rimo initiated was urged to sever ties with institutions that represented the “infidel” state. This led to the Ansari Sunnah members relinquishing formal employment, discontinuation from various “secular” educational institutions, refusal to participate in national elections, destruction of documents of citizenship such as national identity cards, passports, and academic certificates.<sup>18</sup> In building this supposedly ideal-model community, the Ansari Sunnah, Rimo was concretizing the ideological shift that he strongly believed in. The creation of the Ansari Sunnah community was to protect its members from the wider society perceived as “un-Islamic”, and who could also be used in future as a model for the propagation of the “purist” brand of Islam among the wider community. Migration from societies deemed irreligious has been noted as a foundational strategy of puritanical Salafi groups that seek to strengthen an in-group sense of unity and to guard their community from the wider society.<sup>19</sup> Arguably, the Ansari Sunnah’s contour is comparable to Boko Haram’s initial phase, which had a main reformist teacher and a batch of “followers who crystallized into an activist community” of believers.<sup>20</sup>

Sheikh Rimo’s teaching of presumably “pure” Islam attracted students from both the local area and other parts of the coastal region, including later critical clerics like Sheikh About Rogo (d. 2012) and Sheikh Samir Khan (d. 2012).<sup>21</sup> Despite belonging to the Digo ethnic group, a community on the periphery of traditional Islamic scholarship in Kenya, his *da’wah* was, nevertheless, able to attract students from even areas that are associated with long tenure of traditional Islamic learning in the country. Undoubtedly, Rimo was the intellectual predecessor to the subsequent group of jihadi clerics in Kenya. Although the Sheikh did not engage in armed struggle against the state, his discourse contributed toward possible future confrontation. With the appearance of al-Shabaab and other jihadi groups in Kenya, Rimo had already laid the ground that was favorable for advancing jihadi ideology. As one of Rimo’s student, Sheikh Rogo took the mantle to advocate violent jihad in establishing an Islamic state. Rogo was vocal on his unwavering desire to institute an Islamic state at any cost, including using violence if necessary.

### **Castigating State, Church and “Apostate” Muslim Clerics to Advance the “Islamic” Cause**

In the footsteps of Sheikh Rimo, and using Islam as their political ideology, the jihadi clerics lost no opportunity to express abhorrence for their critics and those they considered infidels and apostates. Their provocative sermons and statements were directed against the state, Christians and anti-jihadi Muslim clerics whom they accused of apostasy for allegedly supporting government’s efforts in the war on religious radicalization.<sup>22</sup> Apart from preaching against the state and exhorting Muslims to participate in violent jihad, the sermons of the prominent jihadi clerics focused on defining and justifying violent jihadi activities in “Muslim” areas they considered “occupied” by non-Muslims.<sup>23</sup> As one of the prominent jihadi clerics after Rimo, Sheikh Rogo declared support and validation for the various attacks against Christians in Garissa in July 2012. The town of Garissa is situated in the Northeastern region, which is predominantly inhabited by

Muslims of Somali origin. Without hesitation the sheikh depicted the attacks as justified retribution by the supposedly marginalized Kenyan Muslims. In this sermon, the cleric preached intolerance and exclusivist message that he conveyed to his audience. While praising the killing of the seventeen Christian worshippers, Rogo added that the homicide was significant to control the alleged forced conversion of Muslims to Christianity, and continued desecration of "Muslim land". The cleric declared that the Christian churches have a hidden agenda to undermine Islam, and their existence amongst the Muslims is a great threat to the community, which needs to be addressed. The presence of churches in "Muslim territory" portrayed a despicable form of Islam disappearance, which obligated the "pious" Muslims to confront, a view supported by other jihadi sheikhs.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the jihadi clerics called upon their followers not to sympathize with the killing of non-Muslims, describing the incident as a glorious event and acceptable "jihad" against infidels.<sup>25</sup> They reiterated that any Muslim accused of killing infidels, should be defended by the community from being arrested by the *kafir* (read government).<sup>26</sup>

The jihadi clerics' call for support of the al-shabaab movement in Somalia is calculated as it is part of the global jihad's objective of restoring Islam's past glory, which would only be attained by liberating all Muslim territories from the "oppression" of non-Muslim occupiers.<sup>27</sup> Arguably, it is expected that by successfully establishing a caliphate state in Somalia, similar project could be replicated in Kenya in the areas predominantly inhabited by Muslims. In a kind of Islamic liberation theology, one of the jihadi clerics appealed to the Muslims in the country:

Our country, Kenya, is now openly waging war against Islam and the Quran, and the Muslims are constantly being oppressed. Whoever decides to sit back and stay here will remain in a state of humiliation and fear ... Muslims will never succeed without taking up arms ... If we really want to follow Islam, then the solution is for Muslims to rise up, take up arms and head to the nearest front where jihad has been established ... Therefore, he who wants to follow the religion correctly has to make hijra and go to Somalia ... Let the youth go somewhere where they can implement the rule of the Quran, perhaps Allah will bring them back [to Kenya] and enable the rule of the Quran to be established here [Kenya]. And there is no doubt that it will be established here [Kenya].<sup>28</sup>

Undoubtedly, the jihadi clerics are urging their supporters to use force as a necessary means to remove the chains of oppression thereby guaranteeing the establishment of God's rule to predominate on earth. According to them "Islam shall stand by the sword", without which the religion would not prevail.<sup>29</sup> The view implied that it is only through the sword that Islam would be able to reign and create peace. While Islam promises non-Muslims treatment as People of the Book, in the sermons of the jihadi clerics in the country, the place of the other religion elicited lack of commitment to rights and personal freedoms. Though Muslims can be delighted with the historical toleration of Jews and Christians under Islamic authority, the jihadi clerics agitated for their physical extermination.<sup>30</sup> The clerics draw from isolated incidents of discrimination and vilification of non-Muslims in the past Islamic history as evidence to call for violent jihad against them now.

Though earlier in 1991, some of the jihadi clerics had offered themselves for elective positions through the unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya, indicating their willingness to participate in competitive politics, they later lost interest in the country's political system. They encouraged Muslims to aspire for the creation of a global Muslim state



(the caliphate) than partake in the country's politics. In their sermons, they made proclamations that Muslims should avoid indulging in the country's secular politics because it constrained their agitation for a global caliphate.<sup>31</sup> All jihadists have nostalgia for the disappeared normative past, which Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) confirms by positing that “If Islam is again to play the role of the leader of the mankind, then it is necessary that the Muslim community be restored to its original form.”<sup>32</sup> The reference point of the jihadists is the Muhammad's Medina model and the caliphate of the four “rightly guided” caliphs. Thus, the contemporary restoration of the caliphate represents the beginning of the process oriented toward the realization of a global religious and political unity that would congregate all Muslims into a single global entity. Hence for the jihadists, this goal starts with the establishment of Islamic state(s) within the boundaries of the country. The creation of the *dar-al-Islam* (the realm of Islam) is considered an important religious obligation by the jihadi movement as it guarantees administration of society in accordance to the *shari'ah*. Consequently, their dislike for secular politics saw them calling Muslims to boycott elections and urging them to ensure that the assassination of key government officials is executed.<sup>33</sup>

The jihadi clerics' support for violence as a political approach to attain the aspirations of Islamizing the state and society, finds legitimacy in the *shari'ah*, as an essential source of authority.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence, the jihadists' political discourse manifested in fervently advocating for “an Islamic state” is overwhelmingly characterized by “religious and dogmatic propaganda”.<sup>35</sup> Apart from encouraging Muslims from disengaging in the country's politics, jihadi clerics also daunted them from seeking employment in government, and those who refused to heed this “guidance” were branded as apostates. According to them it is *haram* (forbidden) to work for an un-Islamic state, thereby regarded all Muslim government officials to have denounced Islam, demanding them to pronounce the *kalima* (declaration of faith) again in order to re-convert to Islam.<sup>36</sup> This method of declaring apostasy of opponents was popular and perfected by Azariqah, a Kharijite sect, in early Islamic history. The Azariqah branded other Muslims who did not subscribe to their worldview as unbelievers whose execution was not viewed as an act of sin. Today, contemporary jihadi clerics, including the ones in Kenya employ the apostasy claim for both political and religious reasons to hold those Muslims who do not share their position as apostates. Muslims who support secular democracy and willing to work within the system are classified as apostates by the jihadi clerics, recommending the death punishment against them. As an instrument of intimidation against other Muslims in Kenya, apostasy was denounced by some of the earliest and contemporary *ulama* (Islamic scholars) such as Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) and Rashid al-Ghannushi (b. 1941) of Tunisia.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from chastising the country's political leadership and government authority in their controversial mosque sermons, the jihadi clerics also enrage mainstream Muslim clerics and the Kadhi,<sup>38</sup> reproaching them of “cowardice, apostasy and corruption for appeasing non-Muslim political leaders”.<sup>39</sup> In Kenya, one of the jurisdictions of the Kadhis (judges in the Islamic courts) in their courts is to preside over marriages in accordance with Islamic traditions, but in agreement with the Kenyan constitution that disallow marrying of persons below the age of eighteen.<sup>40</sup> This constitutional provision of discarding the marriage of a girl below the age of eighteen has strongly been castigated by the jihadi clerics who in their view to repudiate Muhammad's marriage to the “young” Aisha, is a gesture that can only be done with a non-Muslim and non-Islamic institution. This brings into fore the position of the jihadists on the rights of women in society. While contributing on the debate of whether the Kadhi courts should be reformed to allow



Muslim women kadhi in the courts, some of the jihadi clerics strongly condemned the proposal arguing that it is unacceptable for women to hold leadership position according to Islamic tradition, a view rejected by other *ulamaa* in the country.<sup>41</sup>

Muslims' standpoint on the issue of women's rights in Kenya is divergent. Progressive Muslims in the country have shown signs to be leaning toward revering individual's freedoms and rights thereby incorporating them within their program and structure. A section of Muslim clerics have constantly indicated their support for women's right, and sustaining any changes that may improve their personal status.<sup>42</sup> Their efforts are reinforced by the Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), which affirms their support and commitment for gender equality between sexes in education and holding public offices. Consequently, due to differences in interpreting doctrinal issues, the jihadi clerics repeatedly disparaged other *ulamaa* for not being "good" Muslims.<sup>43</sup> As a result they do not relate well with other credible Muslim clerics in the country who on their part hold mosque lectures and press release to correct the jihadis' alleged distortions and misinterpretations of Islam. Due to their discriminating and provoking sermons that called for violence against the state and non-Muslims, the state purportedly initiated a campaign of systematically eliminating the radical jihadi clerics, which began with the killing of Sheikh Rogo.

### **Recourse to Religious Discourse: The Ideology of the Dispossessed**

Following the assassination of Sheikh Rogo in 2012, other jihadi clerics led by Sheikh Abubakr Shariff Ahmed (Makaburi) allegedly called for burning and destruction of "churches and murder of police officers" together with that of "certain Muslim leaders".<sup>44</sup> The statements by the jihadi clerics point to a deliberate incitement and exhortation to commit murder of a group of people and destruction of property of a specific community. Police sources confirmed that leaflets were circulated among the pro-jihadi mosques in Mombasa urging Muslims to mobilize and embark on jihadi warfare.<sup>45</sup> The stern statement directed at the police, the church (read also Christians) and the anti-jihadi Muslim clerics was based on the conspiracy theories tying competing Muslim clerics and government agents (read also Christian) to the tribulations of Kenya's jihadi clerics since the terror attack of 2001. According to the supporters of the jihadi movement, the state through the assistance of the anti-jihadi Muslim clerics had harassed their sheikhs for decades on charges of terrorism without evidence.<sup>46</sup>

During the three-day violence, following Rogo's murder, perpetrated by the supporters of the jihadi movement in the country, it acquired a sectarian dimension that witnessed the burning and destruction of a Salvation Army, Jesus Celebration, Pentecostal Assemblies of God and Neno Evangelism churches in Mombasa.<sup>47</sup> Undoubtedly, the destruction of churches had a calculated agenda of provoking Christians against Muslims. Evidently, the strategy was to inspire religious antagonism and animosity thereby destabilizing the country. Apart from attacking any symbol of government and Christianity, liquor stores were also targeted during the protests indicating the perpetrators' intolerance and displeasure of anything they considered "un-Islamic".<sup>48</sup> Similar attacks targeting churches and Christian civilians were also witnessed following the deployment of the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) into Somalia in 2011, and they included, the Westgate mall in 2013<sup>49</sup>; Mpeketoni in June 2014<sup>50</sup>; Mandera Bus and Quarry killings in November 2014 and December 2014 respectively<sup>51</sup>; and the Garissa University College bloodshed in 2015.<sup>52</sup> With these and other attacks it indicated the acceptance

of the message of the jihadists among sections of the Kenyan Muslim population as a tool of liberation.

Meanwhile, both Muslim and Christian religious leaders condemned the various acts of violence attributed to the jihadi factions as they sought to reconcile their groups following attacks on churches and Christians. Aware of the negative repercussion such attacks would have on the name of Islam, an official of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslim (SUPKEM), Mombasa, unequivocally criticized the violence asserting that “the burning of churches and causing conflict is against the faith [Islam], those responsible must be arrested”.<sup>53</sup> Without doubt, a section of Muslim leaders are conscious that the activities of the jihadists in the country were stoking religious unrest thereby insisting on their arrest. Such comments from Muslim leaders depicted divergent view-points on the jihadi phenomenon, and acts of violence, particularly on places of worship. This criticism demonstrates the continued debate as to who has the authority to speak for Islam in Kenya; a contest between Muslims perceived as “moderate” and “radical”. It is an indication that there are groups of Kenyan Muslims who vehemently deplore jihadists’ form of Islam, which mainly espouses violence in addition to its adherents considering other Muslims as “unbelievers”. Such division is as a result of doctrinal variations “between those who follow Sufi practices and those who have been variously called ‘reformist’, ‘wahabbi’ or ‘salafist’”.<sup>54</sup> Although the “moderate” Muslim leaders did well to restate that the attacks should not be misconceived as religious war between Christians and Muslims, the fact that most of the victims of the violence were non-Muslims, while those who attacked them were Muslims, threatened to produce a Christian–Muslim confrontation in the country.

Since the 1930s, the development of Islam in Kenya could be described as one that is “traditional”, particularistic and local form of Islam as represented by the Sufi.<sup>55</sup> It is this category of conservatives-traditionalists, who follow the prescription of a religious establishment passed from their forefathers, which comprises the largest group of Kenyan Muslims. For several years this type of Islam that is regarded as peaceful and moderate has been observed in Kenya.<sup>56</sup> Arguably, this demonstrates why many Muslims in Kenya did not approve attacks against Christians and their places of worship in the country, considering the incidents as acts of violence that they denounced. However, this does not imply complete absence of supporters of jihadi groups’ violent activities on presumed enemies. The present development points to the salafiyya brand of Islam, which as represented by the jihadi clerics, espouses a “religio-political” ideology that encourages outright intolerance and violence against the state, anti-jihadi Muslim clerics and non-Muslims through its rallying call for jihad. This presumed rigid form of Islam has succeeded in finding readily available supporters in the rising unemployment among sections of Muslims that leads to poor economic conditions.<sup>57</sup> It is among the desperate sections of the society that the jihadi groups are able to contract individuals willing to participate in their activities of violence and disruption. In some of the sermons of the jihadi clerics, they persistently reminded Muslims that they are not “good Muslims” if they continue living “in a state where *shari’ah* is not the law of the land”. To devout Muslims, *shari’ah* is the acceptable standard by which a society is measured and judged to be Islamic. Failure to attain this aspiration, the jihadi clerics recommended to the Muslim minorities in Kenya two options: “to fight and topple the state (hence the calls for the assassination of the political leadership and Muslims working for the government) or like the prophet Muhammad, they should emigrate elsewhere”.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, the emergence of jihadi ideas in Kenya could be traced to clerics who have been trained both locally and internationally, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, in the early 1980s. Some of these clerics were able to receive financial support from their counterparts in the Middle East region through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) purporting to be promoting social causes.<sup>59</sup> Instead, such funds were used to propagate jihadi ideology in the guise of initiating reforms in Islam. Since the time of Sheikh al-Amin al-Mazrui (1891–1947), the agenda for reform in the country was focused on unacceptable and acceptable practices in Islam, a struggle that has for centuries “characterized Islamic reform throughout the world”.<sup>60</sup> A number of earliest reformist clerics in Kenya exposed to Wahhabi movement ideology during their training have been influential in encouraging attacks on saint worship and other Sufi “innovations”. But over a period of time, in the last decade, the jihadi factions in the country are striving to present a unified political force by strongly expressing anti-secular, anti-church and anti-government political positions. The tone of the sermons of jihadi clerics was violent in nature as they turned increasingly political and directed against the state. The jihadi initiative as a loose political force came at a time the country is experiencing religious radicalization, ethnic polarization and call for secession by the Mombasa Republican Council with poor human rights records, weak political institutions and economic marginalization escalating. Increasing communications with the rest of the Muslim world implies the waves of “reform” championed by jihadi clerics will continue to be evident in Kenya, and to some extent affect the country's Muslims.

The Arab spring political upheavals that brought Islamist leadership to power in North Africa, and the struggle of Boko Haram in Nigeria, will encourage such groups in the country to advocate for social equality, justice, application of *shari'ah*, and even ambitiously, to secede in order to be able to establish an Islamic form of government. Sections of Muslims in Kenya, lacking access to educational opportunities and facing unemployment are likely to challenge the political leadership for a share of social equity and economic benefits. If this situation is not addressed, the jihadi clerics could capitalize on the dissatisfaction and use the desperate Muslims for their intolerant and exclusivist agenda. The jihadi's main opponents will continue to be the state, members of other religions and “moderate” Muslim clerics who accept to work with the government authorities. However, despite this possibility, jihadi elements among the Muslim population will be confronted by the government that does not tolerate political opposition in form of religious activism, which could instigate Christian–Muslim rivalries. Despite the emerging threat of jihadi groups in the country, they are still a minority among Kenyan Muslims. More so, the issue of ethnicity among the various groups of the Muslim population, such as the long-established division between Arab and African Muslims, creates a stumbling block that the jihadists will find it intricate to overcome. However, the jihadis' drive for renewal and social justice is prone to gradually appeal to the youth, especially when it is regarded as “the ideology of the dispossessed”.<sup>61</sup>

## NOTES

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