

A View from the CT Foxhole: Rosalind Nyawira, Former Director, National Counter Terrorism Centre – Kenya

By Kristina Hummel and Samuel Bowles

Rosalind Nyawira is a legal and security expert with over 20 years of experience in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. She is a specialist in international terrorism, and most recently has been engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). She has excelled in counterterrorism theory and practice.

She was the Director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre for the last three years, a multi-agency body charged by law with the role of coordinating CT efforts in all of government and bilateral and multilateral efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism. She also guides policy and legal framework on P/CVE, undertakes research to identify vulnerabilities, liaises with international players in identifying knowledge gaps and providing tailor-made solutions, exchanges with foreign partners on good CT practices and represents Kenya in international CT fora.

She has wide experience formulating the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, generating training programs and offering training for government officers and the private sector on the threat of terrorism, and guiding law and policy on terrorism matters. She holds a doctorate in law from the University of South Africa with a bias toward international human rights and humanitarian law. She is an adjunct lecturer at the National Defence University, Kenya, and is also an advocate of the High Court of Kenya. She is widely published in the field of law and terrorism.

Editor's Note: This interview was conducted just before Dr. Nyawira left her position as director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre.

CTC: Tell us about the work of the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC). What is the Centre's mandate and mission, and how does NCTC complement the efforts of other parts of the Kenyan government focused on national security?

Nyawira: The Centre was set up 20 years ago, first by a cabinet policy, but later by an Act of parliament in 2014. It coordinates government agencies to detect, deter, and disrupt terrorist activities. The mandate includes building capacity for both the public and private sector—for them to understand the technicalities of the threat of terrorism and how to deal with it. We also carry out strategies to deradicalize those who are already radicalized and to disengage them from the violent extremism ideology. A lot of work is done is with the communities.

The Centre implements the National Strategy to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism, which brings together state, non-state

actors, and communities to help them understand how terrorism manifests, why citizens get recruited, why they move to combat theaters and then come back and carry out attacks. It works also to remove stigma, especially among the families of people that have gone to terrorist theaters. The Strategy aims to build resilience within communities for them to know what to do, where to report, what to watch out for, and ensure that they're able to dissuade their kin from joining violent extremism.

The Centre is made up of agencies from all of government that deal with terrorism in various capacities. Some are investigative while some are operational. They advise the Centre on the tactical elements of the threat of terrorism, while the Centre itself does strategic analysis. The Centre advises government on policy and legal recommendations, but the information itself comes from all other agencies. The Centre is neither investigative nor operational. The role is advisory while dealing with other government agencies and coordinative when dealing with communities.

CTC: Does that include advising the military?

Nyawira: Yes, they are represented at the Centre.

CTC: Tragically, Kenya has had many years of experience confronting terrorism threats, from al-Qa`ida's bombings of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998 to al-Shabaab's attacks on the Westgate shopping mall attack in September 2013, Garissa University in April 2015, and the Dusit D2 hotel in January 2019, among others. Looking back on those attacks today, how would you describe the evolution of the terrorism threat that Kenya has faced, particularly over the last decade? How would you describe the evolution of Kenya's counterterrorism efforts against it?

Nyawira: The ideology that we have been confronting was alien to Kenya. It was brought in by al-Qa`ida, because Kenya had attractive targets that would earn al-Qa`ida publicity. Kenyan communities are predominantly very peaceful and interact well, and co-exist peacefully regardless of their religious inclination. As al-Qa`ida was gaining roots globally, they trained their eyes on East Africa. Remember, Usama bin Ladin once lived in Sudan, and he got interested in eastern Africa. So, the 1998 attacks were the first real terrorist attack that Kenya experienced. These attacks ushered in al-Qa`ida, and particularly a group dedicated to East Africa that called themselves [the] al-Qa`ida-East Africa cell. The 1998 attack was foreign planned and foreign executed. Around the same time, Somalia's government had collapsed; some of the perpetrators escaped to Somalia, and some were arrested and are still serving jail time.

Subsequently, the ideology spread, and as radicalization increased, locals got involved and took part in planning subsequent

attacks. Fast forward, more and more locals got recruited, went for training in Somalia, and came back to carry out attacks. And so naturally, because of the attacks, the first response was counterterrorism—to deal with the perpetrators. But eventually, the need to insulate the population led to the adoption of a preventive strategy. We realized sections of communities were being radicalized; some were more vulnerable than others. We had to study and understand why, and we found that we had to neutralize the foreign ideology that was being perpetuated.

The attacks would later involve foreigners and Kenyans. That is why insulating and immunizing communities and also addressing those who are already on the radicalization pathway to bring them back to the mainstream became paramount considerations.

CTC: Speaking of Somalia and moving to present day, al-Shabaab in Somalia is al-Qa`ida's largest and wealthiest affiliate.¹ The Islamic State's affiliate in Somalia, though smaller, is formidable, particularly given the Al-Karrar office is also located there.² When you look at the threat landscape, broadly speaking, that Kenya is facing and even the region more generally, what concerns you the most? What groups are you most concerned about?

Nyawira: Our biggest concern is still al-Shabaab. Having been active for almost two decades, al-Shabaab has established its own operational infrastructure, and so dealing with it is not necessarily that easy. It requires a variety of tactics to deal with them. They still pose the biggest threat to Kenya as far as the threat of terrorism is concerned. Of course, we do have concern over other growing groups. We call them Daesh. We don't call them Islamic State because they are neither Islamic nor are they a state, but we take cognizance of the upcoming nodes calling themselves Daesh affiliates in Africa and ensure that they do not set [up] base in Kenya. We are glad that Kenya has not been affected by these Daesh affiliates.

CTC: Following a U.S. airstrike against Islamic State militants in Somalia in late May, there was news reporting that the target of the strike, the leader of Islamic State-Somalia, Abdulqadir Mumin, had quietly become "the worldwide leader" of the Islamic State.³ None of that is confirmed. This is just reporting. But with Kenya's shared border with Somalia, can you talk about what you made of that news, about this reported shift in the leadership to Somalia, if it's true? Mumin's status is not clear, but if he was killed, what impact do you think that would have on the threat that Kenya and the region face from Islamic State-Somalia?

Nyawira: Like you said, it is still not clear if Mumin became the head of Daesh, but he has been the head of this small branch in Somalia. This group has really not grown much because of the operations against them and also, interestingly, because of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab will not let Daesh affiliates take a share of what they consider their turf. But one notable thing about these terrorist organizations is that their leadership is very fungible. When the leader is taken out, another one comes up. So, if indeed Mumin became the leader, it is yet to be seen what the effect will be of that, and if he died, we would believe that someone else would take it up. Maybe not someone strong, although we really don't

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think even Mumin was strong. We think it's just that he is the oldest figure there and one that is publicly known. And so, it would be natural for him to get a lot of mention. But I must emphasize that this group has really not registered much growth in that region. It would be interesting to know why Daesh core would want to shift the leadership to a group that does not seem to grow, even in terms of resources or personnel. For the longest time, they have just stagnated. They make a few signature attacks, and then they disappear. And of course, any time they have tried to establish themselves, al-Shabaab pursues them. So, it is something we will have to assess as we get more information.

CTC: Speaking more broadly, analysts have described a geographic shift of the center of power for the Islamic State to Africa. What is your assessment?

Nyawira: Daesh and al-Qa`ida are different even in terms of their adherence to ideology. Al-Qa`ida had more ideologues: people that had some strategy, people that had a vision, and people that believed in this cause. Daesh is an opportunist group. Daesh identifies a criminal group that already exists and lends them their brand in exchange for publicity. Where there's already an existing conflict and a ready militia, then it is easy for Daesh to just adopt them. Some of the groups in Africa claiming to be Daesh affiliates are just criminals; they don't even have the kind of ideology associated with terrorism. They just take up the brand, and Daesh is happy with this symbiotic relationship. So, we opine that it is the same old criminals that fight over resources—some of them are seeking secession—that just adopt a brand. And as long as they use the *modus operandi* of terrorists, which is gruesome killing, then they are admitted as terrorists.

Some of these criminal groups in Africa would still kill people for political courses, even without the brand of Daesh, but with Daesh, they get more publicity. And Daesh also takes glory in that. And because Daesh is supposed to be feared, these groups taking on that brand allows them to be perceived as more than just criminal groups.

CTC: As you know, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, ATMIS, will conclude at the end of this year, with the phased withdrawal of forces—which includes Kenyan troops—well underway.⁴ Recent news reporting, however, has indicated that a new A.U.-led mission, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia, will begin operating there in January 2025.⁵ From your perspective, what impact will a new A.U. mission in Somalia have on the threats emanating from



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that country? How do you anticipate the threat picture might change for Kenya come January?

Nyawira: It is good that they're taking over when ATMIS is leaving so that we do not have a gap. But how the threat manifests will depend on their strategy and the success of their strategy. We will have to wait and assess any success because the enemy they'll be dealing with also has a way of adjusting—adjusting to security deployments, adjusting to strategies. The good thing is that, at least when there's another mission taking over, there isn't a vacuum; any vacuum would give terrorists more space to operate. Hopefully, with a good strategy, they can hold ground and be successful. We all hope that it will work well.

CTC: Let's talk about partnerships. Kenya's NCTC has a number of partnerships with entities in the private and public sectors as well as internationally. Chief among the latter, of course, is the United States. Can you describe NCTC's partnership with U.S. counterparts?

Nyawira: Yes, we have great partnerships because our approach involves all of society. We need everyone—state and non-state, public and private—all rallying together. Part of what we do with those partnerships is to build capacity for both public and private sector actors. We also ride on what those other institutions are doing to empower people. For example, if it is an institution that already has an audience, especially that is already interacting with the youth, then we take advantage and go enlighten the youth about violent extremism and what to watch out for and how to stay safe from the predators, especially online. We rely on their infrastructure as a force multiplier.

We don't do counterterrorism—we do prevention and countering violent extremism—so we work closely with USAID in strengthening communities, in doing research to understand the vulnerabilities and effectiveness of the response mechanisms. We also work a lot with civil societies that are supported by the U.S. government because they usually earn the trust of the

communities. Thus, seemingly, they have more believability, and therefore, we take advantage of that. We rely on their infrastructure to access communities. Ours is a very friendly approach: to let the communities know that they can trust us to empower them and, in turn, make them feel free to share information with us. So, we have partnerships with USAID and also other organizations that USAID is supporting. We have also received great support from USAID in reviewing our strategy to counter violent extremism, to make it more conducive to the morphing threat of terrorism.

CTC: What makes for a good CT partner from the perspective of Kenya's NCTC?

Nyawira: We are looking for partners that are willing to co-create and co-implement. We know the problems within communities from all the information we get from them, and so we're looking for partners that don't necessarily bring solutions but are able to work together with us and create and implement programs together. We have learned that we have to go to the local level and understand the local context for us to address this threat. We have to understand how communities are affected by the threat, how they react to it and that vulnerabilities are different from community to community. So, we look for partnerships that we can journey together on this.

CTC: Do you see any difference in approaches to counterterrorism from a Western perspective versus the perspective of African nations? What is a blind spot in Western understanding or approaches? What could those countries do better?

Nyawira: Let me answer your question by going back to where we started. As a country, we did not have many partnerships when we started engaging with the threat of terrorism because by then, al-Qa`ida terrorism was really a new phenomenon. We didn't even have a lot of people to benchmark with. But we have come to appreciate that what works for us is *localized* solutions to the *localized* problems. We realize that generic solutions will not work for all of us. So, when we look at the other people's practices, we consider them good practice. But when it comes to implementation, we have to go back and ask ourselves, 'Does this work for this community? How will this community perceive this intervention through the lenses of their traditions, their culture, the problems they're facing?' Templates from other theaters that should not be superimposed on different contexts, because this will make the work ineffective. This is true even with ourselves when we seek to partner with other African countries that are starting to interact with this threat.

We feel a moral obligation to help others come up with proper strategies and start with prevention because that is where everyone should start. But when we share with them, we remind them, 'We are only telling you what we see from our Kenyan context. You take what works for you, but you also have to generate solutions from your own communities and contexts.' Perceptions, cultures, and vulnerabilities are different, and even for us within this country, they are different from one county to another. Even the national strategy has been cascaded to the counties through action plans that differ from county to county. The action plans derive from the major concepts in the strategy, but they adopt the contexts within the counties, which differ from county to county.

CTC: In February, during the Global Counterterrorism Forum, you commented about the alarming intersection between climate change and terrorism.⁶ What does that nexus look like for Kenya in particular? How do you assess the intersection of those threats today and in the future? How can it be combated?

Nyawira: We are all grappling with the issue of climate change. We have seen prolonged droughts that were not occurring previously, which sometimes have the capability of causing conflict, especially over resources, within communities. We assess that violent extremists would want to take advantage of fractures within communities to recruit and radicalize—for example, claiming that ‘other communities are taking advantage of you because of resources.’ From our experience, conflict and terrorism are just two sides of the same coin. You’ll find that where there’s already an existing conflict, terrorism is likely to thrive, and the reverse is also true.

What we are investing in right now is to do research to find out whether communities that are negatively affected by climate change are more vulnerable to violent extremism. At this stage, we are collaborating with others in the research so that our interventions are evidence-based. But we can already see that where there is a negative climate change, then you are likely to have more conflict. When resources become very scarce, conflict increases, and then it is very easy to have a group that wants to defend its resources or even existing terrorist groups take advantage of that conflict. But at this point, we are investing a lot in research to understand exactly how that is likely to play out.

CTC: What is the CT best practice you feel has been the most effective or valuable and could serve as a lesson learned for other countries in the region? What has worked well for Kenya and why?

Nyawira: One of the things we are really proud of is that when we adopted the preventative approach, we came up with a strategy that devolves to the local level through the County Action Plans. These county action plans are implemented by a secretariat. This secretariat is actually made up of a cross-section of ground actors. They include civil society, community-based organizations, the media, educators, religious leaders, private sector, community leaders, and security actors who sit together in what we call the County Engagement Forum and discuss issues of violent extremism, how they manifest in the county, and propose solutions. NCTC only coordinates this and ensures that this conversation does not stop. It also advises communities on the level and the morphology of the threat of violent extremism conducive for terrorism. The Centre operates in an advisory capacity to strengthen communities, but really, this whole effort is driven by the communities. For me, this community ownership is a very big success.

Today, most of our community members, including children, are aware of violent extremism. We have tools like the Child Safety and Security Against Violent Extremism, which empowers educators to introduce the topic to school-going children so that they can understand even at their psychomotor level. Our good practices include bringing all of society together, community ownership, localized solutions to localized problems, deradicalizing those on the path of radicalization, and of course, observing human rights. That has really worked for our communities.

CTC: In April, Kenya’s NCTC launched a public portal with tools for countering violent extremism in communities—what you described as a way to empower “individuals and communities to identify and discredit violent extremist ideologies, facilitating public dialogue on the threat of violent extremism.”⁷ What are the goals for this initiative? How do you measure the efficacy of this effort and other CVE campaigns like it?

Nyawira: This portal’s purpose is to educate. It is a repository of resources on the threat of violent extremism and on the changes to the threat that people need to understand, such as exploitation of technology by terrorists. It’s also a way of highlighting global good practices so that others can learn from them. It is a means of engaging other actors that deal with violent extremism besides state actors—for example, civil society and showcase the good work that they are doing.

But most importantly, it’s a way of engaging our populations. We have an interactive section for people to give their views. It’s a very good way of measuring sentiment. We measure the level of success by the interactiveness and engagement, and that way we can detect a red alert amongst populations in certain areas—what’s troubling them, what is their opinion about what we are doing, the effectiveness of our responses, et cetera. This engagement and being able to collect sentiment that is very important. Sometimes, the work we do is hard to measure, but I would say that we have a way of engaging communities and trying to figure out what is working. We insist that the work that we do and the work that all the players in countering violent extremism do must make our society safer. We expect that violent extremism is going to manifest itself in different ways, and the role of the Centre is to determine this morphology.

For Africa, we believe that we have a responsibility to help each other not to be overwhelmed by this threat. If we had known what we know now when we started engaging with this threat, perhaps we would have saved more lives and resources. But now that we know, we want others to avoid the pitfalls and what can easily be a long, arduous journey, and just to let them know prevention is the starting point. Insulating communities and empowering them is paramount in stemming radicalization. **CTC**

Citations

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