Somali Refugees in Kenya: The Case of the Dadaab Camp

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of a meeting and questions and answers session held at Chatham House on 8 May 2014 that focused on the case of Somali refugees in the Dadaab Camp in Kenya.

The Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya is home to approximately 400,000 people, making it the largest refugee camp in the world. Located 100 kilometres from the long and porous border between Kenya and Somalia, its primarily Somali population is viewed as a source of insecurity by some Kenyan authorities. The Kenyan government has ascribed responsibility for al-Shabaab attacks in the country to its Somali residents, leading to violent crackdowns in the camp and thousands of detentions in Nairobi. The treatment of Somali refugees in Kenya remains at the forefront of the debate on security immigration and the Kenyan state’s relationship with its Somali population.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information, including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topic, please visit www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa.

Ben Rawlence

The speaker began by stating that the Kenyan authorities have employed some heavy-handed tactics in response to the recent upsurge in violence in Kenya. Recent pipe bomb attacks in Eastleigh, Nairobi have been blamed on Somalis. The Kenyan police have been very cagey; they have no evidence to support the pervasive feeling that the attacks. They have a big job on their hands to explain the basis for assuming that Somalis are responsible.

The collective punishment method that has been employed by the Kenyan authorities is neither legal nor appropriate. The speaker stated that there are blurred lines between what constitutes legal and illegal refugees. The government in Nairobi has ordered all refugees to return to the Dadaab Camp; this is the same camp that the government has labelled a ‘nursery for terror’.

The current situation, the speaker claimed, remains confusing. What is happening does not add up in terms of cause and effect. He questioned whether the Kenyan government has an alternative agenda, perhaps in terms of the politics of ethnic divisions. It is possible that Kenya is attempting to elicit support from Western governments for its war on terror as a means to hiding its own inept governance. There is a growing vilification of Somalis and refugees in Kenya. This can be seen as the closing of a circle that began in 2007 called the Jubaland Initiative, which sought to create a buffer zone inside southern Somalia in the hope of encouraging refugees to return there. This attempt failed and the 2011 invasion can be seen as a long-term plan to combat the failure of the Jubaland Initiative.

There have been around 85 al-Shabaab attacks in Kenya since October 2011. The Kenyan government should have been working with the refugees. There is very little evidence to suggest that the Dadaab Camp is indeed the ‘nursery for terror’ that Kenya claims that it is. Since the Westgate attack in Nairobi, only two people have been arrested (both of whom were handed in by the people of the Dadaab Camp themselves). The camp is one of the most monitored areas on the planet. There is an organized police presence in the camp and a great deal of cooperation and intelligence-sharing. Since January 2014, Dadaab has been relatively calm.
The speaker said that the Dadaab Camp is not an engine for radicalization; rather, it is an engine of moderation. Poverty and displacement do not automatically lead to radicalization. There is a growing need for more anthropological research on the topic. An entire generation has grown up in peace; it is not scarred by war. A meeting of cultures also takes place in the camp as a result of the different countries that are represented there. The majority of those currently living in the camp are conservative and rural people from southern Somalia. They are typically very peaceful people, and the community policing that is prevalent in Dadaab has been successful.

In terms of population, Dadaab is the second largest city in southern Somalia with around 400,000 people living there. Most are young and many are well-educated, having being educated in the Kenyan system. The speaker claimed that the Kenyan authorities should be training these Somalis to be doctors and engineers, thus creating a Somali middle class friendly to its East African neighbour. Furthermore, the West should be doing the same. This would go a long way towards improving relations.

The speaker stated that there is a lot of pressure in Kenya for Somalis to return to their homes. The Dadaab Camp requires 8,000 tonnes of food aid each and every month. It takes a great deal of money and effort to sustain the camp. Some residents do want to return home but find it impossible due to inept bureaucracies. The UN says that it is not yet safe for them to return to Somalia. However, there needs to be a balance of risk; the refugees should be free to make up their own mind. The speaker said that refugees are more likely to return to their homes when they are better off economically. As such, the Kenyan authorities should be empowering these refugees as opposed to trying to squeeze them out. Furthermore, the possibility of being resettled is a key impetus in the refugees' decision to remain where they are. However, the Kenyans only resettle around 100 per year; this is another contradiction in Kenya's policy.

The speaker stated that the international community must do more to assist. Refugee camps are not ideal but the alternatives must also be analysed. Not all of the refugees can stay in Kenya. However, there is the possibility that some could stay and others could return. This is a conversation that is worth having. The informal economy in Dadaab turns over around $25–30 million every year. This amounts to 25 per cent of Kenya's North Eastern Province's revenues. As a result, the Dadaab Camp is a significant part of the region's economy.

**Summary of questions and answers**

**Questions**

The Kenyan authorities seem to be generalizing all Somali’s as terrorists. The security issue is a business.

**Ben Rawlence**

Any political economy analysis of the region must consider the revenues generated by bribery, drug trafficking and the ivory trade, and their relationship to the office of the president. A lot of questions exist in this respect. As long as the government does not crackdown on corruption then it is not serious about tackling it. Some Western governments are concerned with how President Uhuru Kenyatta is running the country. Furthermore, Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit is hopeless but it is the only game in town.

**Questions**

Is the Somali government aware of all the deportations that are happening?
The current situation certainly has echoes of the past; 20 years ago it was Ethiopia that was in Somalia’s position. Is the international community buying into Kenya’s narrative? Are contributions from the United Nations Refugee Agency being affected by the ‘hotbed of terror’ narrative?

**Ben Rawlence**

Somalia’s government is under pressure. It claims to be happy that its people are returning but there is some doubt whether this is true.

There is a need to be sceptical of both Kenya’s and Ethiopia’s plans. There is a chance of irredentism. They may want to keep their finger in the pie, like Rwanda in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

**Questions**

What is the future of the Kenya Defence Forces in Somalia? Rumours persist that they want out.

There is a terror threat; if it is not from Dadaab then where is it from? Is it from home-grown Islamists?

**Ben Rawlence**

More political and economic analysis is needed on this issue. The Kenyans claim to be in charge but al-Shabaab remains everywhere. The Kenyans do not have the level of control that they claim.

A lot of the radicalism that is currently being seen in Mombasa is very local. Al-Shabaab is also present in Nairobi. Many al-Shabaab suspects are Kenyan nationals. Terrorism is a wider, urban East African problem.

**Questions**

How can NGOs be more creative in its dealings with the Dadaab Camp?

If the return of these refugees does happen, what will be the implications for regional security?

**Ben Rawlence**

Once the Tripartite Agreement was signed, most NGOs sensed a new stream of funding and lobbied the UN for resources. When the refugees choose to return then NGOs should step in and assist them. However, in the meantime, NGOs should concentrate their efforts on fundraising for the people of Dadaab. Budgets are being slashed; this is bad news for the camp’s residents.

In terms of regional security, it will depend on how the refugees return. If the Kenyan government adopts a heavy-handed approach then some refugees may become radicalized and join al-Shabaab. If the return is orderly, and if people are allowed to decide where they return to and receive education, training and resources then the transition would probably be a lot smoother. As such, the implications for regional security will depend on how the Kenyan authorities approach it.