

Image: kenyayote.com



Terrorism helps Kenya fight coronavirus

(but there are connected challenges which also need to be considered)

I am a Brit who has lived and worked in Kenya for more than two decades, first arriving in 1998, a few months after the devastating bombing of the US embassy by Al-Qaeda. As luck would have it, Al-Shabaab - the Al-Qaeda spin-off, based in Somalia – had me at their mercy fifteen years later, when they carried out their 2013 assault on Nairobi’s Westgate Mall. I had a narrow escape which left me shocked, but otherwise unscathed.

After living through Westgate, I was traumatized to hear of the next major terrorist attack - again by Al Shabaab, this time in the remote town of Garissa (located towards the Somali border) – killing 148 staff and students at the local university. Then a more recent (2018) attack by the same militants on the luxury Ducit D2 Hotel in Nairobi, brought back horribly vivid memories from Westgate, because of its oh, so similar modus operandi: a handful of attackers, somewhat amateurish in approach, but determined in resolve, arrive by car with guns and grenades at the ready, then proceed to march through the front door, shooting indiscriminately and killing remorselessly. After Westgate I met one survivor who did not speak for a year due to the trauma caused by the terrorists, and I can myself, attest to the fact that it is a terrifying, almost unimaginable experience.

So, what has all this to do with Coronavirus? The two sound totally disconnected. Not really. There have been four major terrorist assaults on Kenyan soil, over the past twenty years or so, but there have also been quite a number of smaller skirmishes in between, sometimes in Kenya, at other times in Somalia, and on occasions with tragic loss of life. All this adds up to the fact that Kenya has become unusually accustomed to being attacked in this way: surprise assaults on public buildings and institutions. With troops in Somalia it has become, to some degree, an anticipated and somewhat kneejerk outcome ... an eye for an eye, one could say.

Thus the accumulated feeling, built up over twenty-plus years is one of resignation to the inevitable - with the predominant threat now from across the Somali border - which in turn has produced a climate of fear amongst the population, that to go to a shopping mall or a major hotel might be courting with disaster. This is a fear reserved for the middle and upper classes, because they are the ones who are wealthy enough to visit these places, along with a large contingent of Eurasian expats and residents: the most prominent target for Al-Shabaab. The vast majority of poor people in Kenya are to an extent immune from such things; they reside in the slums and can't afford glitzy malls or high-priced hotels; they live, shop and eat locally. The exception to this rule is the people who fall into the cracks between rich and poor: those that live in the slums but work in those domains which serve the people from the moneyed class. Paradoxically they are also the ones most at risk, because they inhabit the potential target zones for eight or ten hours each day.

To combat this fear factor - particularly since Westgate - there has been a mushrooming of security services for the places where the poor work and the rich shop and play. A veritable army of frontline troops - male and female - has been trained by a variety of (local and international) private security services, then scattered to the winds, to staff the entrance gates and front doors of every conceivable business or institution available. Shops, banks, hospitals, restaurants, bars, government buildings and well-known utilities. No premises are immune from this invasion. Their work involves checking cars at the entrance gate - all five doors, glovebox, and even a mirror scan underneath - followed by metal-detector scan of body and bags at the front door.

Of course, all this would do very little to thwart a focused onslaught from a disciplined Al-Shabaab unit, but it looks good - and feels good - for both consumers and workers. And on the positive side, it does employ a mountain of poor people in a country where the majority are unemployed, or very much underemployed. In his nation where there is no safety net for the jobless you learn to survive: a basic wage for a risky job is par for the course. Thus, while almost all other industries are struggling to stay afloat, paradoxically these coronavirus times are boom times for the security industry in Kenya!

A few select places have been kitted out to stop a serious terrorist attack, mostly in Nairobi, the capital. Westgate (after the event) now resembles a jail, with intimidating metal fencing, sniffer dogs and airport-style detectors in place, but that's akin to closing the rodeo gate after the bull has bounded off without its rider; terrorists seldom return to the same place: surprise is their most potent weapon. A few other high-profile hotels that specialize in high-profile guests (such as Pope Francis or President Obama) have installed formidable barriers to make them largely terrorist proof and impenetrable. But then the question becomes: *'Do we really want to live in a community where the shops and hotels resemble high security jails? Doesn't that in some ways say to the world at large that our evil-minded adversaries have won the day?'* Probably.



Image: newsummedup.com

The upshot of all this both soft, and hard-core security, is that Kenya has a mass of peoplepower, put in place initially to ward off terrorism, which can now be diverted to counter the coronavirus. Cheap, smartly dressed police-style labour, is already there, all that is needed are a couple of items to augment the metal detector - a sanitizer bottle and a thermometer gun - then hey presto, we have a system in situ to counter both assault by Al-Shabaab and/or spread of infection from Covid-19. And in fact, this force of foot-soldiers is much better equipped to frustrate corona than to prevent terrorism; a bit like dealing with chronic disorder compared to acute pain: 99% of the people and facilities in place could never hope to stop a serious attack from determined terrorists, but they can do an excellent job of checking temperatures and sanitizing hands, both extremely important factors in our fight against COVID-19.

But although the end scenario - perhaps more by chance than good management - holds an advantage to combat corona, there are of course underlying concerns about why the ever-blossoming security industry has had cause to flourish in this way (apart from the well-intentioned motives of the incumbent government to provide employment for its nation's youth ... which is most probably NOT a valid assumption).

No, the explanation for this exponential growth in locally based security lies in comparing Kenya with European nations. Visitors coming from Europe are amazed at the wall-to-wall presence of security in Kenya. I cannot myself remember having to run a metal detector when entering my local Sainsburys or Waitrose in London, but that is what happens universally in Kenya. This simple fact that you need (low-level) security everywhere is a bold indicator – adorned with flashing lights and ringing bells - that the more covert (high-level) systems in place, to prevent and control violent crime and terrorism, are not nearly as good as they should be.

Another aspect that needs to be considered by the relevant Kenyan authorities and private security firms contracted to provide the services, is whether this change of focus for the multitude of security guards across the country - from preventing terrorism to reducing coronavirus - could mean that the local security personnel in place *'takes his or her eye of the ball'* , facilitating perhaps even more devastating attacks by Al-Shabaab and other like-minded groups. One could imagine that even now plans are being laid by those hell bent on disruptive deeds, to take advantage of the *'shock doctrine'* (as it is coined) to hit targets (people and/or places) at their most vulnerable.

In summary, Kenya can think itself lucky to be in a fortunate situation, having people already employed in every nook and cranny of the country, who are able to provide a frontline prevention measure against coronavirus. But despite that, the people most concerned with such things, should not lose sight of the plain fact that the broader and longer-term challenge of controlling terrorism needs to be carefully considered and addressed, within the same, continuing spectrum.

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