

# Understanding Security Threats in East Africa

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*Believing that security interests in Africa will be of increasing concern, IDA is developing staff capacity to help Defense Department sponsors address emerging issues on the continent. This article is drawn from independent research conducted by two IDA scholars specializing in study of security environments in the region.*

## Introduction

In recent years, ethnic strife among pastoralist populations in East Africa has escalated. Additionally, given their location in arid ecological zones – cut off from central government administration – pastoral communities are increasingly used by rebel groups to smuggle arms in the region. The combined effect is that these marginalized and largely ignored pastoralists have become an important, though under-appreciated social force threatening national as well as regional security.

Throughout Africa, pastoral people and pastoralism as an economic activity have received scant attention from policymakers and development-oriented NGOs.<sup>1</sup> Whether marginalized for political gain or adversely affected by externally imposed development policies, the result for pastoralists has been the emergence of conflict, fundamentalism, and ethnocentricity. Rarely have African governments developed policies that enhance the pastoral way of life as a viable economic activity. More frequently, regional public policies are designed to dismantle pastoralism and incorporate its adherents into sedentary society.

Assessments of potential security issues related to pastoralist groups in the Horn of Africa are scarce. In existing literature, two views prevail. First is the widespread perception that pastoral populations are resistant to change and modernity, unable to move beyond traditional herding practices.

The second view looks at the problem of underdevelopment in pastoralist communities in terms of inappropriate public policies enacted over many years.

## East African Pastoralists

In Kenya for example, pastoralist groups are characterized by poverty, conflict over resources, movements across unsecured

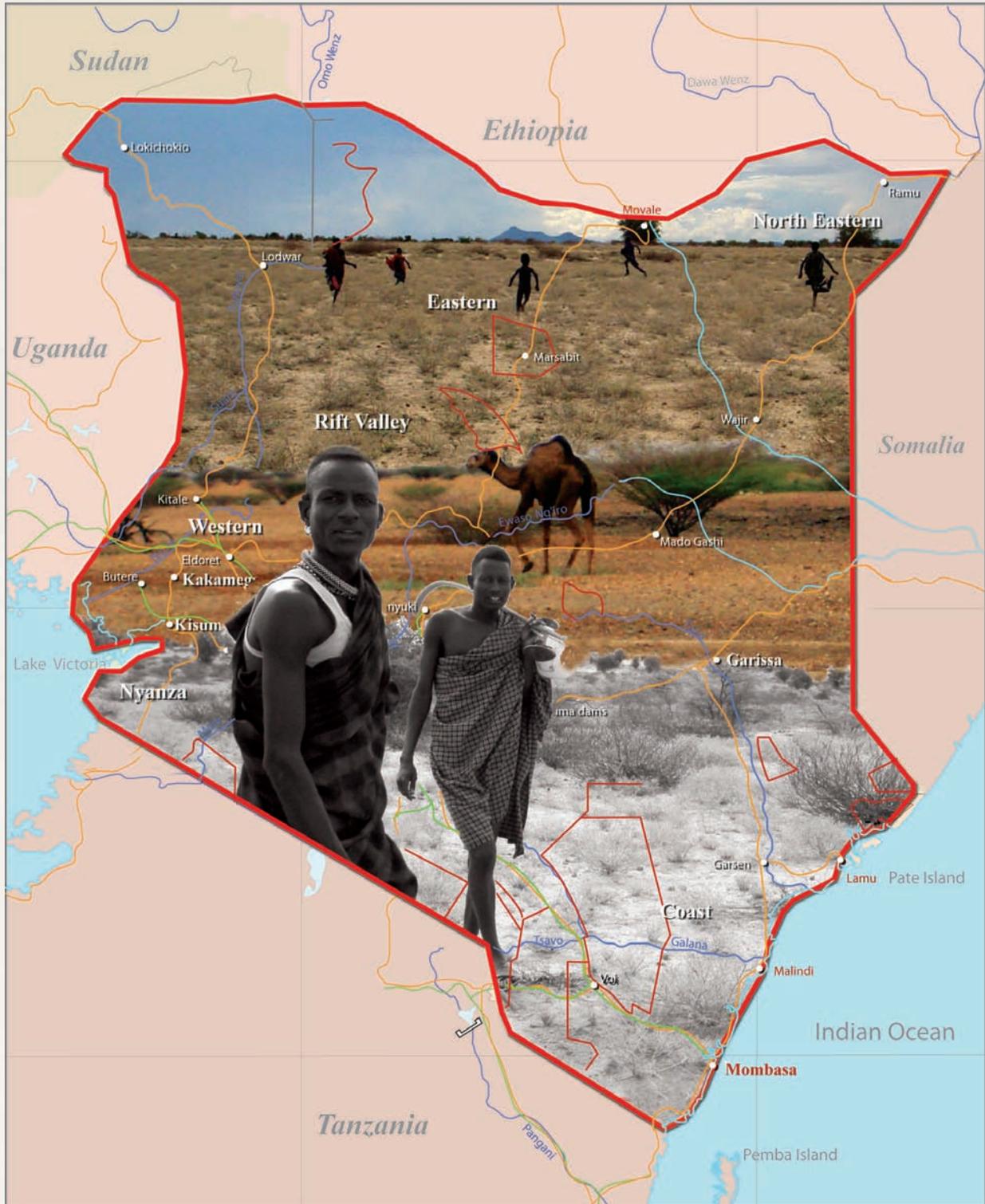
### Characteristics of Pastoralist Populations

- **Territorial Perceptions**
  - They do not recognize international territorial boundaries, focusing instead on the need to find lands anywhere suitable for pasture.
- **Attitudes toward Deviance**
  - Possess a strong belief that all cattle belong to them; hence, their practice of cattle raiding.
- **Group-State Relations**
  - Regional governments consider them to be “backward,” having refused to develop.
- **Indigenous Governance & Law Enforcement**
  - Their self-organized governing structure is parochial, predicated on the accumulation of group beliefs and practices, which they enforce themselves.
- **Indigenous Economics**
  - Operate according to a bartering economy, placing a higher value on the number of livestock possessed than they do hard currency. This makes livestock herding essential to survival and directly determines social hierarchy, where size of a household herd reflects the family's social status.
- **Seasonal Movement**
  - They form satellite and base camps, using the former during the dry season as they search for green pastures and the latter during the wet season when families group together in encampments.

<sup>1</sup> See Galaty, 1981, Bennett, 1988, Rigby, 1985.

borders, and ethnic tensions. Religious and ideological elements sympathizing with Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists have made matters worse. There is a general atmosphere

of fear and insecurity among the population, and governments are helpless in dealing with the menace. National governments have been ineffective at confronting these problems



because of dwindling state resources and inadequate security forces.

Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and Somalia are examples of states contending with the problem of pastoralists engaged in illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons that often supply rebel groups. The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 created a power vacuum that triggered warlords of various persuasions to pick up arms, adding to regional insecurity. Other examples include activities of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) in Southern Sudan, and those of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda. Banditry and cattle raiding – not commonly viewed as a national security threat – have been responsible for the impoverishment and economic insecurity in nomadic communities. Such conditions have made the relatively more lucrative international gun trade alluring to the pastoralists.

### **Dealing with Arms Trafficking**

Strategies implemented by East African states to limit arms trafficking by pastoralists should consider non-kinetic actions and efforts to establish the rule of law. Non-kinetic actions include investing in development of pastoral communities' well-being across a multitude

of areas, building their trust in the state and engendering their appreciation of the benefits it brings. Rule of law operations could begin by establishing an official presence in pastoralist areas with the consistent demonstration that law-breaking will be met with commensurate force. Kinetic operations such as raids and frontal attacks on caravans should be considered only as a selected supplement to these other actions, lest the state risk antagonizing the entire pastoralist population, pushing them into even closer alignment with irregular forces. Currently, pastoralists' relations with the rebel groups are primarily economic. The state does not want to alter circumstances to a point where the pastoralists come to rely on rebel groups for both economic sustenance and security.

To deal effectively with this problem, East African countries must not only strengthen themselves internally but also coordinate the distribution of information and combinations of resources with regional and other partners. Such a dual approach could help limit internal as well as regional instability.