

# THE THREAT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN TANZANIA

By Dr. Alexander Noyes

Tanzania is often viewed as a stable country in a region plagued by civil wars and coups d'état. Yet its proximity to Somalia and a rise in violent extremist incidents over the past five years—both on mainland Tanzania and the semi-autonomous island region of Zanzibar—have recently stirred [fears](#) that the country could become a new frontier of radicalization and terrorism in East Africa. Are such fears warranted?

## Background

Tanzania is a [low-income](#) country in East Africa with a population of 50 million. While reports vary, the [population](#) of Tanzania, which comprises over 120 ethnic groups, is [estimated](#) to be roughly 61 percent Christian, 35 percent Muslim, with the remaining population animist or other religions. There are no domestic polls covering religious affiliation. While Tanzania moved to multiparty democracy in 1992, the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM, Party of the Revolution) remained in power, winning elections in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015. As a result, the CCM is currently the [longest](#) ruling party in sub-Saharan Africa.

Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous federal entity within Tanzania, is made up of a series of islands located off the east coast, with most of the population of 1.3 million mainly on the islands of Pemba and Unguja. The population, which is [believed](#) to be 96 percent Muslim, comprises mainland Africans, Arabs, and mixed ethnic groups. Zanzibari elections, with a history of closely contested polls and violence since the shift to multiparty politics, have been much more competitive than those on the mainland.

## Uptick in Violent Extremist Attacks

While Tanzania has experienced relatively few terrorist attacks, incidents have peaked during times of political uncertainty on both the mainland and Zanzibar. [According](#) to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism's (START) Global Terrorism Database, 42 terrorism incidents have occurred in Tanzania during the past 15 years. Over the same period, Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia experienced 3,091, 2,193, and 450 incidents, respectively. Starting in 2013 in Tanzania, in the midst of the [constitutional review process](#) and in the run-up to the 2015 elections, attacks spiked, reaching a high of 13 in 2015. After the 2015 elections, the country (both mainland and Zanzibar) saw a sharp decrease, with only three reported attacks in 2016. (See Table 1.)



President John Pombe Magufuli at a rally in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, October 23, 2015. Magufuli has banned all opposition rallies until 2020, when the next election is due and approved a tough new cybercrime law under which some Tanzanians have been charged with insulting him in WhatsApp chats. (Source: AP Photo/Khalif Said, File)

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IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

Zanzibar has a long [history](#) of religious and political tensions. Akin to the mainland, starting in 2013 incidents increased, reaching a high of four in 2014 and 2015. After a controversial [annulment](#) of the 2015 election and the opposition's boycott of the 2016 rerun, one attack was reported in 2016.

Attacks have allegedly been carried out by a variety of militant actors and groups, including Muslim Renewal, the Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation (UAMSHO), and Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, although attribution remains unclear in many incidents. The incidents [include](#) a series of bombings of restaurants and bars popular with foreigners, killings of Catholic priests and moderate Muslim leaders, burning of churches, storming of radio stations, and attacks using acid and grenades. In 2016, a [report](#) alleged that several militants in an unknown cave location in Tanzania had proclaimed their allegiance to the Islamic State. In addition, the government has also unearthed a number of foreign fighters and indoctrination camps in Tanzania, and border officials in the region have interdicted a handful of Tanzanians attempting to join the al Shabaab extremist group based in Somalia.

Distinctions between political violence and terrorism are blurry in Tanzania because the CCM government has historically been quick to label their political opponents and any instance of violence as terrorism-related. The government has also [inflated](#) local groups' connections to transnational groups for political purposes. Also, because the Tanzanian government actively controls information and reporting on terrorist activity, especially under the [increasingly](#) authoritarian-leaning rule of current president John Magufuli, some incidents may not be reported.

## Domestic versus Transnational Drivers?

Local groups' ties to regional and international extremist groups exist and appear to be a growing threat in Tanzania. That said, interviews the author conducted last month in Tanzania and Zanzibar, along with an examination of the incidents of violent extremism, reveal that the drivers appear to be largely domestic, especially in Zanzibar. As noted in Table 1, terrorist attacks spiked around the 2015 elections, with incidents sharply declining afterwards, when plans for constitutional change were shelved. This suggests that domestic political concerns were driving the attacks, especially in Zanzibar, where the UAMSHO group called for independence and became increasingly [active](#) during the constitutional reform process in the run-up to the 2015 elections.

Seif Sharif Hamad, the former first vice president in Zanzibar and current leader of the Zanzibari opposition, told the author: "So far we don't have a direct link with these regions' [East Africa, the Middle East] radicalism, but if you frustrate these young people, you make it easier for these forces to persuade people to join their forces there." When questioned about local groups' involvement with regional and international networks, Lawrence Masha, the Tanzanian minister of home affairs from 2008 to 2010, rejected the idea: "That's not happening. It's local politics."

## Conclusion

While overall levels of terrorist attacks remain relatively low in Tanzania, conditions appear to be ripe for the emergence of larger scale violent extremism in Tanzania, especially in Zanzibar. The existing literature on the drivers of violent extremism globally identifies a number of "push" and "pull" factors that are expected to contribute to the radicalization process across different contexts. [According](#) to Robinson and Kelly, push factors, which focus on structural issues, help explain how "particular

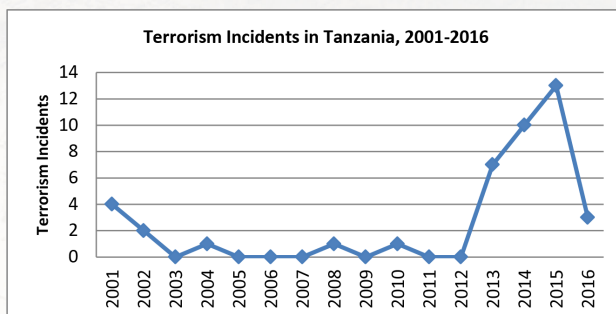


Table 1 Terrorism Incidents in Tanzania, 2001–2016. (Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2017). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.)

political, economic, and social systems create opportunities for violent extremist groups to gain traction.” These include curtailment of political rights, poverty, and male unemployment, which are all particularly relevant to the Tanzanian context. Pull factors, which focus on why people are attracted to join violent extremist groups, include “various aspects of personal beliefs and aspirations, extremist group messaging tactics, and content of extremist narratives.”

Both factors are present in Tanzania. The Tanzanian government has cracked down on militant groups, particularly UAMSHO in Zanzibar. The leader of the group, along with 19 others, is currently facing [terrorism](#) charges. But deploying overly securitized responses to the threat might fuel, rather than defuse, the situation. The experiences of other African countries, namely Kenya and Nigeria, are instructive in this regard. Both countries’ repressive reactions to an emerging violent extremist threat proved to be [counterproductive](#), serving as fodder for potential recruits and [exacerbating](#) religious and ethnic grievances. To avoid a similar experience in Tanzania, domestic and external actors might focus instead on less securitized and more comprehensive rule-of-law and governance approaches that promote dialogue and seek to improve domestic political and socioeconomic conditions in Tanzania.

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