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The Interplay Between Socio-Economic Vulnerability and Local Security: Insights From Terrorist Returnees in Kwale County, Kenya (2011–2021)

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Abstract
The purpose of this article was to explore the interrelationship between the socio-economic vulnerability of terrorist returnees and local security in Kwale County, Kenya, from 2011 to 2021, guided by the Frustration-Aggression Theory, which associates unmet socio-economic needs with renewed tendencies toward violence. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating phenomenological and descriptive survey designs to capture both experiential and statistical insights. The target population included terrorist returnees, community members, and security personnel, selected through a multistage sampling strategy involving cluster, proportionate stratified, purposive, and snowball techniques. Data were gathered using questionnaires and interview guides. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including regression analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that high unemployment and mistrust significantly contribute to the exclusion and frustration of returnees, predisposing them to criminal behaviour. The study recommends enhancing livelihood programs, implementing policy and legal reforms, ensuring sustainable funding for reintegration efforts, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to address the root causes of insecurity.

Keywords: Socio-economic vulnerability; Terrorist returnees; Local security; Frustration-Aggression Theory; Reintegration; Unemployment; Kwale County

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Introduction

The return of terrorist fighters to their homeland country holds latent security threats, given their experiences in the conflict zones, (Malet & Hayes, 2018). Characterized with military skills, youthful age, coupled with elaborate network with terrorist groups that they were associating could pose threats to security especially when faced to livelihood challenges. As such, the returnees remain a risk as they can relapse to commit terrorist acts or promote violence, provide guidance and operational expertise, raise funds, and/or serve as recruiters to radicalize or engage in other criminal activities that could affect the security.

The United Nations Security Council (2018) reported that approximately 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from more than 110 nations have travelled to combat zones, predominantly Iraq and Syria. By 2021, roughly 15–20% have repatriated to their countries of origin (UNODC, 2021). Ran (2017) believes that 30%, or 1200-1300 foreign combatants, have returned from Syria to Europe. Holmer & Shutni (2017) report that over 100 Bosnians, 117 Kosovans, and eighty-six Macedonians from the cohort that came to Iraq and Syria as foreign fighters since 2012 have returned to their respective countries by 2016.

The African Union, (2022) on the other hand observed that many Africans who had been mobilised and deployed to Afghanistan and participated in the guerrilla war against the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), returned to their countries when the Soviet troops left in 1989 where they founded terrorist networks or cells which gave rise to organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The AU (2022) notes that in Libya over 3,000 foreign fighters in ISIS-affiliated local groups exploited the fragile political situation to establish a strong foothold. Relatedly, Holmer & Shutni (2017) had observed, at least eight hundred of the more than six thousand Tunisian nationals categorized as foreign fighters had returned home. The outlined figure of returning terrorist is evidence that in many parts of the world, terrorist enrol to offer services in foreign countries, but they end up returning to their countries for various reasons. Their exact numbers or rate of return, remains unclear given the secrecy that surrounds their return.

The returnees many of whom have received combat training, been indoctrinated with radical ideologies, and operated within transnational terrorist networks could pose multifaceted threats that transcend traditional law enforcement responses, (Holmer & Shutni, 2017). Their existence in societies raises concerns regarding the potential for renewed violence and the prospect of serving as a conduit for youth radicalisation, which might have extensive repercussions for the nation.

The challenge posed by terrorist returnees is further compounded by the varied backgrounds and motivations that led individuals to join terrorist organizations in the first place (OSCE, 2018). A growing body of research has highlighted the interaction of ideological, religious, social, and economic factors. These may be context-specific, necessitating a review of the prevalent conditions of returnees from country to country to effectively create rehabilitation and integration programs that mitigate potential hazards. The OSCE (2018) emphasises that numerous recruits undergo identity problems, possess

inadequate education, or originate from marginalised and dysfunctional familial backgrounds. These seem to be socio-culturally aligned, further emphasising the necessity for a context-specific strategy. Renard (2017), conversely, sees politically and economically marginalised youth in metropolitan areas as susceptible to radical recruitment. Some individuals are motivated by social networks, the prospect of monetary rewards, or the appeal of exploration (Holmer & Shunti, 2017).

Consequently, foreign combatants constitute a diverse cohort, influenced by varying psychological characteristics and life experiences, posing significant security threats. Consequently, although some individuals may become disenchanted with extremist ideologies and pursue reintegration, others persist in their radical convictions, rendering their reintegration unpredictable and precarious. The potential threats posed by returnee terrorists to security are frequently neglected, as efforts primarily focus on preventing and countering terrorism through the development and execution of long-term strategies aimed at enhancing capacity and providing technical assistance across legislative, policy, institutional, and strategic dimensions (UNODC, 2022). Although these strategies are crucial for countering terrorism, they frequently fall short in raising societal awareness and addressing the needs of returnee terrorists, thereby constraining their integration opportunities and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the communities to which they return.

Further, the demographic and experiential diversity among returnees complicates security assessments and policy interventions. Scherrer (2018) contends that foreign fighters are far from a homogenous; women, for instance, frequently occupy auxiliary positions in propaganda dissemination, coordination, or recruitment. However, they too can pose serious security risks, particularly through ideological propagation or facilitating domestic radicalization. In addition, a substantial number of the terrorist returnees are psychologically and emotionally traumatized. According to Belrose et.al, (2018)., the persistence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in former combatants was correlated with being more aggressive and suffering emotional dysregulation, both of which may cause criminal behaviour and predisposition to re-radicalization. These psychological scars may remain unaddressed if not strategically targeted hence making it even more difficult to rehabilitate or successfully monitor the returning individuals fully exposing the nations to the security threats.

Reintegration is a complex and delicate matter with the return of terrorists, since they carry with them recollections related to their recruitment, radicalisation, and experiences from foreign war zones. According to ((OSCE, 2018), returning to the same environment that fostered their radicalisation, characterised by poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and discriminatory stigmatisation, may reignite their extremist views, thereby jeopardising societal security. In this regard, such conditions do not only impede reintegration but can also repeat the sense of alienation and resentment. At the same time, security agencies may still be grounded in traditional approaches therefore, therefore leaning towards applying excessive force, random arrests, and social profiling of terrorist returnees, thereby further undermining trust among the returning citizens, communities, and the state (Juma & Githigaro, 2020).

Extreme counterterrorism actions can also negatively impact legitimacy of state authority and keep marginalizing individuals and groups in a circle of violence (Omeje & Githigaro, 2012; Bytyqi & Mullins, 2019). This is further compounded by poor organization of psychosocial support; economic empowerment plans or community reintegration programs which have added to mistrust.

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In Kenya, the terrorist returnee phenomenon has had significant local implications. According to the Government of Kenya (2020), returnees have been implicated in targeted killings of religious leaders, local administrators, and community elders, whom they accuse of collaborating with security agencies. These incidents not only destabilize local governance structures but also contribute to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, thus undermining security. While Kenyan academic and policy circles have acknowledged the challenges of radicalization and returnee reintegration, much of the existing literature has focused on community-based approaches and perceptions of reintegration. Although these studies provide valuable insights into local dynamics and prevention strategies, they often overlook the broader implications of returnees on security.

Recognizing that terrorism is not localized, Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) (2018) noted that whether operating independently or as a part of a group, there is a risk that FTFs can commit terrorist acts or promote violence, provide guidance and operational expertise, raise funds, and/or serve as recruiters to radicalize and more broadly encourage others to violence in their Nation States. There is a conspicuous absence of empirical research examining how terrorist returnees in Kwale County, Kenya may influence security in the region. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the spatial and operational patterns of returnees or to the role of gender, trauma, and economic reintegration in shaping their trajectories post-return.

Importantly, not all returnees pose an imminent threat. Some may become critical assets in counter-radicalization efforts, providing insider knowledge of recruitment methods, extremist networks, and operational tactics. As Holmer and Shanti (2017) argue, reformed returnees can serve as credible messengers in community outreach and de-radicalization programs.

Despite ongoing national and regional efforts to counter violent extremism, Kwale County continues to face persistent security challenges associated with terrorist returnees who have re-entered local communities after participating in foreign or domestic extremist activities. Many of these returnees experience socio-economic vulnerability, characterized by unemployment, social marginalization, poverty, and limited access to reintegration opportunities. Such conditions create a fertile environment for recidivism, radicalization, and recruitment into violent networks, undermining both community stability and state security efforts.

Currently, Kenya's counterterrorism strategy emphasizes surveillance and law enforcement with limited attention having been paid to the socio-economic dimensions influencing the behavior, and security impact of terrorist returnees. These vulnerabilities have reportedly contributed to rising insecurity, community mistrust, and weakened social cohesion. However, empirical evidence remains scarce on how socio-economic deprivation interacts with security outcomes at the local level.

Literature Review

Terrorist returnees are frustrated due to poor socio-economic conditions that lead to the absence of opportunity or relative deprivation, which function as push factors for leaving the country (Taspinar, 2009). When they return, they face the same socio-economic realities and are predisposed to criminal activities (OSCE, 2018). This may be a trigger to recidivism. When doing a comparative analysis of the information on Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Dawson (2021) found that in Europe, most studies revealed that the foreign fighters were made up of underrepresented lower levels of the socioeconomic strata in a society.

A study conducted by Bhatia and Ghanem (2017) indicates that unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area significantly contributed to the recruitment of individuals by al-Qaeda and ISIS extremist groups. Using Gallup World Poll data on eight countries in the Arab region, the researcher determined that individuals who are secondary level of education and unemployed or underemployed are more predisposed to supporting violent extremism.

In another research in Asia, by Verwimp (2016), on Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the Socio-Economic Environment They Encountered at Home indicated that high unemployment rates facilitated the recruitment of a large numbers of suicide terrorists by the Palestinian terror groups due to their higher education and mature age and experience. The lack of employment is cited as a pull factor that draws the returnees to enlist as foreign fighters. When they return, if not provided with employment, there is a high possibility of engaging in criminality to meet their needs, which is a threat to security. Unlike the current study, these studies fall short of investigating the nexus of this unemployment with terrorist returnees when they return and their implication on security.

Most Dutch fighters were from middle and low-income levels and originated from low/lower middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. Another study conducted by Basit (2014) on Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria found that those from Central Asian Republics joined due to social and economic grievances and felt discriminated against and marginalized. These studies indicate that returnees come from lower income levels with financial constraints and hence are influenced to be recruited as foreign terrorist to meet their economic needs. When returning to the same environment, the returnees remain vulnerable to the same risk factors if not well integrated by engaging in criminal behaviour to meet their needs, hence a threat to security.

Besides, a study by Agnew (2023) applies General Strain Theory and the concept of relative deprivation to explain why individuals, including foreign fighters, are drawn into terrorist networks. The study finds that socio-economic factors such as unemployment, limited social mobility, and feelings of marginalization significantly contribute to radicalization. These conditions create psychological strain and a sense of being left behind, which can push individuals particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds to join extremist groups in search of purpose, identity, or economic opportunity. The frustration experienced by terrorist returnees often stems from the same socio-economic exclusions that initially drove them to leave, reinforcing the need for targeted reintegration support.

Dawson (2021) cites that most of the fighters had lower levels of educational attainment. According to Renard (2017), there are few studies that investigated the socio-background of returnees prior to them joining terrorist organizations. He cites research conducted by "Observatoire du Nord des droits de l'Homme" in Morocco, which established that three-quarters of foreign fighters were from deprived strata who lived in medium-sized cities like Casablanca and Tangier. These areas have historically been disenfranchised, suffering from high rates of illiteracy and school dropouts who are recruited into violent extremist activities and transnational terrorist networks. High illiteracy and school dropout make the individuals disadvantaged in many ways, including a lack of critical and analytic skills, making them vulnerable to Persuasion by criminal groups. As a result, they are easily recruited as foreign fighters due to relative deprivation. When they return, they settle in the same environment, increasing their risk of engaging in criminality and, hence, a threat to security. Despite the elaborate study on the education level of returnees, the study was limited

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in exploring the correlation between education level and criminality, which this study aims to establish.

The Security Council resolution 14282/2020 raised concerns about the increased number of terrorist returnees from North-West Syria who are moving back into Libya. The council observed that the terrorist groups were taking advantage of marginalized groups, poor socio-economic environment, social instability, porous borders, and lack of security to recruit them (SC/14282, 2020). The lure of a better life persuades vulnerable groups to engage in criminal activities, including organized crime, that support or are linked to terrorist networks as a source of income. Despite this concern from the Global Security Council, there has been little reflection on the socioeconomic status of the terrorist returnees and how this impacts security. This is a concern that this study seeks to address.

Leposo (2024) concentrated on male terrorist returnees involved in Kenya's 2015 amnesty program. This study revealed that the reintegration process was considerably hindered by insufficient psychosocial support and inadequate legal frameworks, despite initial facilitation from economic assistance through the provision of starter kits and business capital, which temporarily mitigated challenges. The analysis reveals that these shortcomings, along with enduring social stigma, negatively impact long-term reintegration efforts and create security risks.

According to research conducted by Malet and Hayes (2022), the economic vulnerabilities that terrorist returnee faces are exposed because when legal methods of survival are inefficient, most may be forced to conduct illegal activities to earn income. This case represents a lack of properly devised support system, and the negative perception of a terrorist returnee exert a tremendous toll on their ability to find stable jobs, places to live, and integrate into society again. The absence of sustainable source of income sources stands out as a key driver in terrorist returnees' choices, often pushing them toward risky or illegal activities not due to ideological belief, but as a means of coping with economic hardship. Such results reiterate the need to establish broad-based, contextualized reintegration models that take into consideration the economic and social aspects of the rehabilitation process of the terrorist returnees.

Furthermore, research by Juma and Githigaro (2021) indicates that the negative branding of terrorists significantly hinders the effective reintegration of terrorist returnees into society. The repeated negative labelling of the returnees as criminals or deviants causes them to internalize their stigmatized identities, which, in the end, can shape their behaviours to the negative predictions. This stigmatization poses significant reintegration obstacles, in terms of access to employment, housing and social support, thus heightening the risk of social marginalization and possible re-offending.

The literature reveals that although the effects of socio-economic conditions (poverty, unemployment, low educational levels, and marginalization, etc.) has been widely noted as a major determinant in the recruitment of the foreign terrorist fighters, there exists a gap in understanding how these factors influence security once they returned to their countries of origin. Although literature has pointed out on the socio-economic backgrounds of the terrorist returnees, especially in Europe, Middle East, and North Africa, there have been little enquiries on the direct relationship between post-return socio economic deprivation and involvement in crime and extremist behaviour. This is particularly evident in African contexts, such as Kenya, where returnees often face unemployment, limited access to educational opportunities, and a lack of support programs. Although there are signs that the challenges may increase involvement in illicit or crime, the extent at which the socio-

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economic issues are empirically linked to the aspect of security has been found to be limited. This paper aims at filling this gap by understanding how the socio-economic realities faced by terrorist returnees in Kenya impact their potential to adopt the activities that can have negative implications on security.

Theoretical Framework

The study examined the impact of terrorist returnees on security. It utilised Military Theory and specifically investigated these individuals' political, economic, social, and psychological aspects. In addition, the study employed the Frustration-Aggression theory to gain insight into the threats posed by these returning terrorists and to develop strategies for reducing the risks, ultimately safeguarding security.

The Theory of Frustration and Aggression

The Frustration Aggression theory proposed by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, Orval Mowrer and Robert Sears in 1939 and later by Neal Miller in 1941 and Leonard Berkowitz in 1969 that helps understand the behaviour of the returnees of terrorists. It postulates that aggression results from a frustrating stimulus or event that stops an individual from attaining his goal and its associated reinforcement quality. When external factors block our goal, it creates frustration, leading to an aggressive drive that can cause aggressive behaviour. This aggression is sometimes not directed toward a legitimate target because it can lead to the risk of punishment and displaced to a less dangerous target. This theory predicts that frustration happens when the expected reward is delayed, reduced, or removed.

This theory was relevant to this study; terrorist returnees, before joining terrorist organizations, are frustrated due to social strains, and can quickly be recruited and enlisted as foreign fighters, which becomes a form of displacement. Foreign fighters have an unfulfilled need to define themselves, and terrorist organizations can lure them into their activities. They seek revenge as an outlet for their frustration, whereas identity seekers need to join a group, status seekers need recognition, and thrill seekers need to get an adventure. As a result, frustration may eventually lead to acts of violence and terrorism. Their actions aim to fulfil the specific needs of the deprived by domestic or international bodies, which may result in frustration.

The foreign fighters are again frustrated and return due to unfulfilled needs or push/pull factors in the conflict areas. When they return, they are again frustrated by the same conditions they left behind. Their frustrations can also be caused by their unrealized expectations back home and non-acceptance, or they may be considered threats by their community compared to before leaving their country. Their socialization when engaging in terrorist activities as foreign fighters fostered hostility, which was reinforced by the terrorist groups, and over time, frustration may become more intense, enhancing aggressive retaliation. This can make the terrorist returnees reconstruct and are prompted to commit criminal acts driven by military skills acquired while acting as foreign fighters.

Subsequently, these frustration forces lead to an aggressive drive, forcing them to engage in terrorism or crime-related activities to meet their needs. Their activities are now more aggravated due to the militaristic training and terrorist activities they engaged in as foreign fighters. The Frustration Aggression Theory, therefore, helped understand why terrorist returnees engage in criminal acts and the interventions the relevant stakeholders can put in place. Such an understanding has been appropriate and thin at best. However, it may be

the key to helping eradicate the threat of terrorist returnees on security from not only Kenyan society but the world at large.

Conceptual Framework

The socio-economic state of these terrorist returnees and how deprivation, unemployment, or marginalization can push them to engage in criminal activities are also discussed in the framework.

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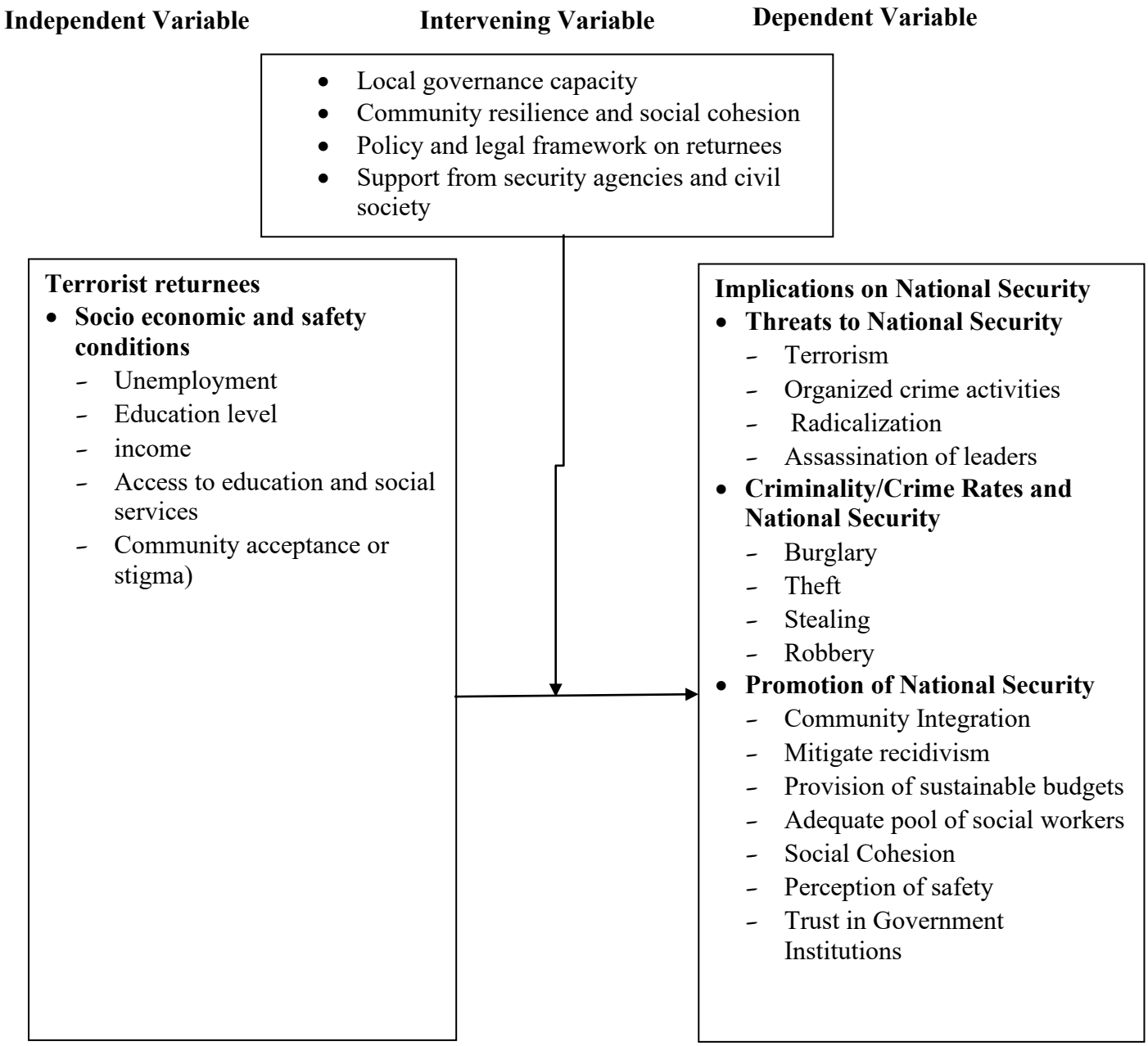

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design that integrated phenomenological and descriptive survey approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the security implications of terrorist returnees in Kwale County, Kenya. The phenomenological approach facilitated an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of terrorist returnees and key community stakeholders including religious leaders, administrators, and security personnel thereby revealing the complex realities surrounding the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Complementing this, the descriptive survey design enabled the systematic collection of quantitative data from police officers and community members to identify trends, behaviours, and patterns influencing security dynamics (Creswell et al., 2018). Together, these methods

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provided a holistic view of the issue by combining observation and interviews as primary data collection tools (Stake, 1995).

The research was conducted across four sub-counties of Kwale Msambweni, Matuga, Kinango, and Lunga Lunga which were selected due to their high concentration of terrorist returnees, a matter highlighted in the Government of Kenya (2020) report as a key security concern. The target population consisted of terrorist returnees, police officers, government administrators, intelligence personnel, representatives from the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), civil society groups, NGOs, and religious and community leaders actively engaged in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives.

A sample size of 385 community members and 62 police officers was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula to ensure statistical validity.

The sample size for police officers 62 police officers is as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 1: Police Personnel Sample Size

S/No	Personnel	Number	Sample size (10%)
1	County Commander	1	**1**
2	Gazette Police Officers	8	**1**
3	Members of Inspectorate	38	**4**
4	Other Ranks	571	**57**
	Total	618	**62**

Source: Field Data 2025

To capture varied perspectives, the study applied multiple sampling techniques: snowball sampling to locate hidden terrorist returnees; cluster sampling to organize data collection across sub-counties; stratified random sampling to select police officers across different ranks; simple random sampling for community participants; and purposive sampling for key informants such as religious leaders, administrators, and counterterrorism experts. This multi-technique approach ensured broad and balanced representation across the study population.

Data collection utilized structured questionnaires (both open- and closed-ended), semi-structured interview guides, and document reviews of relevant policy papers, security reports, and official government documents. Field interviews and household surveys were conducted alongside secondary document analysis, with deliberate measures taken to maintain participant comfort, trust, and confidentiality.

Data analysis integrated both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data were examined through thematic and content analysis, employing both inductive and deductive coding to identify recurring themes such as radicalization, mistrust, and fear until thematic saturation was reached. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize respondent characteristics and inferential statistics to assess relationships between independent and dependent variables. This integrated analytical framework provided a robust and comprehensive interpretation of the study findings.

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Research Data Analysis and Presentation

The study investigated the impact of the socioeconomic conditions on the ability of people and their communities to obtain resources and achieve financial stability. Specifically, it focused on the socioeconomic difficulties faced by terrorist returnees. All these factors characterize the existence of underlying issues in the community preventing the successful reintegration of the returnees and their opportunity to receive the required resources and assistance. Socio-economic challenges encountered by terrorist returnees are essential in reducing security risks, fostering community resilience, and advancing broader efforts to prevent returnees threats they still face when terrorist returnees return, (Horgan, 2008).

The social-economic issues facing terrorist returnees also pose serious security implication because they may result in recidivism, influencing others to join extremism or participating in criminal activities. Economic hardships, unemployment, and social marginalization may also push returnees toward organized crime or re-engagement with terrorist networks, heightening security risks, (UNODC, (2018). The study sought to determine the Socioeconomic challenges the terrorism returnees face when they return home. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Kwale Residents and Police Officers: Response to socioeconomic challenges

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unemployment	169	49.9
Low literacy/education	19	5.6
Limited access to public services	56	16.5
Socio-inequity or marginalization	74	21.8
Low Income	150	44.2
Mistrust	151	44.5

Source: Field Data 2025

Kwale Residents and Police Officers indicated that unemployment, at 49.9%, was the major socio-economic challenge that faced terrorist returnees, followed by mistrust at 44.5%, Poverty at 22.1%, social inequality/marginalization at 21.8%, limited access to public services at 16.5%, and low illiteracy/education at 5.6%, as shown in Table 2 above.

Unemployment

Unemployment emerged as the most critical socio-economic challenge affecting terrorist returnees, cited by nearly half (49.9%) of respondents from both the public and security sectors. The inability to secure stable employment or access economic opportunities fuels frustration, alienation, and resentment, consistent with the Frustration-Aggression Theory, which links unmet goals to deviant or aggressive behaviour. Joblessness among returnees contributes to financial deprivation, social exclusion, and stigmatization, deepening their vulnerability to criminality or re-radicalization.

Lack of income and social support often drives returnees toward illegal activities or re-engagement with extremist groups that exploit economic grievances by offering financial incentives and a sense of belonging. Studies (e.g., Verwimp, 2016; Agnew, 2023; Malet & Hayes, 2022) affirm that unemployment fosters insecurity and increases the likelihood of recidivism. Moreover, economically marginalized returnees with combat experience pose direct security risks, as they may channel their skills into organized crime or violence.

From a security standpoint, persistent unemployment perpetuates radicalization cycles and undermines reintegration. Addressing this requires targeted economic empowerment, vocational training, and livelihood programs to mitigate frustration, enhance inclusion, and prevent relapse into extremist or criminal networks.
One terrorist returnee interviewed stated:

> In my locality it is hard to get employment opportunities which were the same challenges that influenced me to enlist as a foreign fighter. Additionally, I when I came back, I had the community who alienated me once they established am a terrorist returnee and hence, I could not get employment to meet my economic needs (Terrorist Returnee No.4).

The terrorist returnee highlights their inability to secure employment upon returning, which is not just a present challenge but one that he faced prior to enlisting as a foreign fighter. The quote connects the difficulties experienced before joining a terrorist group with those encountered after returning. The ongoing lack of job opportunities, both prior to and following their involvement in foreign fighting, presents a persistent challenge increases their susceptibility to recidivism, organized crime, and re-engagement with terrorist networks (Malet & Hayes 2022). This indicates that economic insecurity played a crucial role in both their radicalization and the challenges faced during reintegration due to social exclusion.

The Frustration Theory justifies this finding since the it shows that terrorist returnee may face challenges leading to desperation trying to satisfy their basic economic needs. Lack of a stable source of income causes frustration, social alienation, and the feeling of hopelessness which predisposes the terrorist returnees to attain economic stability by engaging in illegal activities. Such a cycle of economic struggling and marginalisation has the potential to catalyse radicalisation in susceptible groups, destabilising causing insecurity, (Omelicheva & Webb, 2021). This conforms with the Frustration-Aggression Theory, and enhanced by other researchers, including Agnew (2023), Malet and Hayes (2022), and Omelicheva and Webb (2021), who state that socio-economic frustrations may result in emotional dissatisfaction and maladaptive tendencies. The quote by the terrorist returnee indicates the lack of jobs further increase their vulnerability. On the security front, failure to address the economic reintegration of the terrorist returnees is not only a derailing factor but also poses a security challenge.

Low Income

Unemployment emerged as the most critical socio-economic challenge affecting terrorist returnees, cited by nearly half (49.9%) of respondents from both the public and security sectors. The inability to secure stable employment or access economic opportunities fuels frustration, alienation, and resentment, consistent with the Frustration-Aggression Theory, which links unmet goals to deviant or aggressive behaviour. Joblessness among returnees contributes to financial deprivation, social exclusion, and stigmatization, deepening their vulnerability to criminality or re-radicalization.

Lack of income and social support often drives returnees toward illegal activities or re-engagement with extremist groups that exploit economic grievances by offering financial incentives and a sense of belonging. Studies (e.g., Verwimp, 2016; Agnew, 2023; Malet & Hayes, 2022) affirm that unemployment fosters insecurity and increases the likelihood of

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From a security standpoint, persistent unemployment perpetuates radicalization cycles and undermines reintegration. Addressing this requires targeted economic empowerment, vocational training, and livelihood programs to mitigate frustration, enhance inclusion, and prevent relapse into extremist or criminal networks.

This findings from the quantitative study were supported by the quotes below from the qualitative study; a terrorist returnee interviewed stated:

> When I came back into the country, I became a hawker living hand to mouth which dint sustain my personal and family economic needs. The low income forced me to reestablish links with former friends who are part of a criminal groups engaging stealing and burglary which helped supplement my income (Terrorist Returnee No.1).

Upon returning home, terrorist returnees often face severe socio-economic hardship, with many resorting to low-income or unstable jobs that barely meet basic needs. This financial strain, as explained by the Frustration-Aggression Theory, fuels frustration and can drive individuals toward illegal activities such as theft and burglary when legitimate livelihoods are unavailable. The absence of structured reintegration support, combined with stigma and social rejection, exacerbates this vulnerability, undermining both personal recovery and community security.

Findings indicate that 44.2% of respondents identified low income as a key barrier to reintegration. Many returnees struggle to secure employment due to stigma, lack of skills, or criminal records, leading to recidivism and renewed involvement with criminal or extremist networks. Economic desperation—rather than ideology—often pushes returnees to re-engage in high-risk or antisocial behaviour.

Studies (Horgan, 2008; Malet & Hayes, 2022; Liem & Weggemans, 2018) confirm that economic pressure and marginalization heighten the risk of re-radicalization and insecurity. Without economic, psychosocial, and community-based reintegration programs, returnees remain susceptible to criminal influence, threatening both local and national security. Sustainable livelihoods, social inclusion, and targeted economic empowerment are therefore critical to preventing recidivism and ensuring stable reintegration.

Mistrust

Mistrust is another major issue highlighted by 44.5 % of the respondents facing terrorist returnees, indicating a lack of confidence or faith in institutions, government, or fellow citizens on terrorist returnees which highlights a significant social reintegration challenge. Mistrust may stem from fear of relapsing into extremism, concerns about hidden radical beliefs, or uncertainty about whether returnees have genuinely abandoned extremist ideologies (see Horgan, 2008). In relation to this view a terrorist returnee interviewed stated:

> When I came back, I faced societal stigmatization due to their association with terrorism, especially from family members who were not happy with their involvement in extremism activities. This stigma resulted in isolation, strained family relationships, and a lack of community support. This mistrust also compounded the community's willingness to offer me employment or

> opportunities to engage in social activities that can improve my socio-economic status (Terrorist Returnee Number 7).

Terrorist returnees often face deep stigmatization and mistrust from families and communities, leading to social isolation and strained relationships. This exclusion deprives them of vital social support systems necessary for reintegration, fostering frustration and alienation. The lack of trust, while sometimes rooted in genuine security concerns, creates divisions that undermine social cohesion and can increase insecurity (Gjørv, 2019; IOM, 2024). When returnees are rejected or denied access to community services, they may become frustrated and resort to crime or re-radicalization as coping mechanisms (Barrett, 2017; Koehler, 2017).

The situation aligns with the Frustration-Aggression Theory, suggesting that unmet social and emotional needs can trigger aggression, violence, or renewed extremist tendencies. Combined with militaristic traits such as aggression and fear (Vego, 2011), this heightens local and national security risks.

While some scholars (Singer & Bishop, 2020) caution that misplaced trust can also create vulnerabilities, moderate trust-building and social reintegration remain essential to prevent cycles of exclusion and extremism. Ultimately, community and family support are critical for successful reintegration, as prolonged stigma and alienation can perpetuate insecurity and the marginalization of already vulnerable individuals (Putnam, 2000).

A terrorist returnee interviewed stated:

> In my community, very few people are willing to offer help. Even within my own family, there are members who refuse to associate with me or direct me to opportunities that could help address my financial struggles. As a result, I turned to criminal behaviour to meet my needs, feeling that no one cares about how I can support myself (Terrorist returnee No.8).

The quote underscores the deep social isolation and alienation terrorist returnees experience, often beginning within their own families and extending into the wider community. Family rejection—a critical barrier to reintegration—deprives returnees of emotional and material support, intensifying frustration, hopelessness, and economic hardship. According to the Frustration-Aggression Theory, such conditions heighten the risk of criminal behaviour as individuals seek illegitimate means to cope with unmet needs (UNODC, 2017; McKee, 2023).

Stigmatization and negative labelling further marginalize returnees, leading some to internalize deviant identities and resort to illicit activities for survival (Juma & Githigaro, 2021; Borum, 2021). This social exclusion fosters feelings of anger, resentment, and injustice, increasing vulnerability to radicalization or violent crime (OSCE, 2018; RAN, 2017). Discrimination in employment, housing, and social services (Amnesty, 2021) compounds this marginalization, while strained family relations can damage identity, self-esteem, and psychological well-being (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2020).

Overall, the lack of familial and community acceptance not only obstructs reintegration but also fuels cycles of alienation and insecurity. When returnees remain marginalized and unsupported, they are more likely to engage in criminal or extremist behaviour, posing persistent risks to both social stability and national security.

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Limited access to public services

Limited access to public services, although mentioned by perceived by 16.5 % of respondents, still represents a significant concern. It is indicative of a substantial barrier to successful reintegration, even if it is not seen as the primary issue by most respondents. For terrorist returnees, these public services are vital in helping them rebuild their lives. Without access to services like mental health support, job training, education, or healthcare, returnees may struggle to address both their physical and psychological needs, which are crucial in ensuring terrorist returnees do not engage in criminal activities. (See. UNODC, 2017). Lack of access to housing or shelter significantly increases the risk of criminal behaviour among terrorist returnees. When returnees face homelessness or live in precarious housing conditions, they often struggle to meet basic needs, which can lead them to engage in petty crime or illegal survival strategies, (Francke et.al, 2023). Moreover, lack of housing enhances social exclusion and uncertainty which might complicate the ability of terrorist's returnees to reintegrate int the society. The lack of a housing is more likely to influence the terrorist returnees to strengthen the desire to vent their anger and make them not disengage from previous ideologies or behaviours, (Jacobs and Gottlieb, 2020).

Meanwhile, such vulnerabilities can be taken advantage by organized criminal networks. Terrorist returnees who are homeless or marginalized are potential prey for being recruited into illicit activities, weapons-related smuggling, drug trafficking, or cybercrime. Criminal gangs might appreciate their experience in warfare, contacts that they have in other countries, or attitude to risk, when they were neglected and not welcomed by the society. In the absence of strong reintegration frameworks, returnees may turn to these networks not just for income, but for a renewed sense of identity, protection, and belonging. This eventually can influence terrorist returnees to engage in criminal activities to get out of poverty and sustain their basic needs causing negative implication on security. This finding aligns with Mehra & Thorley, (2022) where he found out the absence of robust reintegration frameworks for terrorist returnees can lead to their involvement in criminal activities to escape poverty and meet basic needs, posing significant security risks that may have negative implications.

One Government Officer interviewed stated:

> When we are tasked with integrating the terrorist returnees by finding access to essential services like where to stay or enrolling them to vocational institutions, most institutions or the community don't accept them forcing us to provide those services for them like self-employment opportunities (Government Administrator No, 2).

The foregoing quote illustrates the complex practical and structural challenges encountered by reintegration officers and state actors working with terrorist returnees. Societal stigma, institutional rejection, and community resistance severely hinder reintegration, pushing returnees toward social exclusion and alienation. Many are denied access to housing, education, or vocational training, often due to community fear and mistrust, which deepens feelings of abandonment, anger, and despair.

Studies (Stillman et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2001) show that social exclusion reduces a person's sense of purpose, increasing vulnerability to depression, aggression, and criminal behaviour—a pattern consistent with the Frustration-Aggression Theory. Returnees excluded from state resources and family networks face poverty, unemployment, and marginalization,

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making them susceptible to recruitment by organized crime groups that exploit their desperation by offering income, belonging, and identity (Weisburd et al., 2020).

While ad hoc solutions like self-employment and livelihood programs exist, they are often underfunded and unsustainable, leaving returnees economically insecure. This systemic neglect heightens risks of recidivism, criminality, and re-radicalization (Mehra & Thorley, 2022).

Scholars such as Agnew (2023) and Horgan (2008) affirm that socio-economic deprivation and exclusion foster maladaptive and criminal behaviour. Without effective reintegration structures, battle-hardened and ideologically exposed returnees (Hoffman, 2020; RAN, 2017) may revert to violence or crime, posing serious threats to community safety and national security.

Conclusion

The study revealed that socio-economic challenges significantly hinder the reintegration of terrorist returnees in Kwale County and increase the risk of recidivism and criminality. Findings from community members and police officers showed that unemployment (49.9%) was the most critical problem, followed by mistrust (44.5%), low income (44.2%), poverty (22.1%), social marginalization (21.8%), limited access to services (16.5%), and low literacy (5.6%). These issues reflect deep-rooted social and structural inequalities that obstruct reintegration and foster conditions conducive to insecurity.

The study emphasized that mistrust is a major barrier, as communities often fear that returnees may relapse into extremism, leading to stigmatization, family rejection, and exclusion from social and economic life. Such alienation fuels frustration and can push returnees toward criminal behaviour, consistent with the Frustration-Aggression Theory, which links unmet socio-economic needs to deviant coping mechanisms.

Similarly, social marginalization emerged as a key deterrent to reintegration. Many returnees face discrimination, unemployment, and broken family ties, which intensify their sense of isolation and increase the likelihood of re-engaging in extremist or criminal activities. This cycle of poverty, exclusion, and mistrust undermines social cohesion and public safety, posing a persistent threat to community stability and security in Kwale County.

The study found that persistent socio-economic hardships such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion generate frustration that can push returnees back into extremist or criminal activities. While law enforcement efforts such as arrests, border control, intelligence operations, and patrols have been implemented, these measures address only the symptoms rather than the root causes of radicalization. Arrests offer temporary control but do not facilitate rehabilitation, and the lack of clear policies, adequate resources, and community trust weakens reintegration initiatives. Moreover, social stigma and marginalization continue to heighten the risk of reoffending, ultimately undermining community security and long-term stability.

Recommendations

Building on the to the conclusions made from this study, the following recommendations are recommended based on the research objectives to tackle and manage risks that are posed by terrorist.

First, there is need to develop County level economic empowerment projects such as vocational skills training and self-employment assistance to the terrorist returnees and youth,

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to help address poverty related drivers that can mitigate criminal behaviour or radicalization and lower risk of recidivism.

Second, there is need to enhance integration programs support with long-term consistent government funding, fostering inter-agency collaboration, and supporting community programs that encourage family involvement, peer support, and public outreach to increase for more effective and inclusive reintegration.

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