

Kenya debates how to welcome home extremist fighters

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) By 4 p.m. each weekday at a parking lot in the Nairobi suburb of Eastleigh, the cars clear out.

Volunteers lay down straw mats on the tarmac, and young men and women trickle in—sitting on separate sides—to listen to the daily teaching of Salim Ndenda, a local Islamic leader.

Here in the bustling neighborhood, nicknamed Little Mogadishu for its large concentration of ethnic Somalis, Ndenda's daily message to more than 500 youths—who are often sent by their own families—is of singular importance. It is one that will help prevent young men from radicalizing or joining the ranks of al-Shabaab fighters.

“We have to do this to give the youth the right teachings,” Ndenda said. “Wrong teachings may mean they end up in Somalia with al-Shabaab.”

The topic of radicalization is a sensitive issue here, especially with the stigma that Somali-Kenyan communities serve as breeding and recruitment grounds for the extremist group. Few are willing to talk about it.

But after the Kenyan government decided to offer full amnesty in April to Kenyan al-Shabaab members who wanted to come back, residents here have been debating how to welcome their prodigal sons home.

The amnesty, offered soon after al-Shabaab militants massacred 148 students at Garissa University College in April, has faced stiff resistance from the public. Peter Karanja, head of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, said the move was a “betrayal to Kenyans.”

As of this summer, more than 200 men have returned to communities throughout the country, according to interior minister Joseph Nkaissery. Dozens have made their way to Eastleigh, Ndenda said.

The communities taking them in are happy to see their young men back, but also have concerns that it could be a chance for al-Shabaab to recruit more fighters. There is also wariness over accepting sons who were once part of an organization that has carried out more than 63 attacks against Kenya since 2013 and killed thousands in Somalia.

“These are people who have killed and fought in a war,” said Leila Ali, an Eastleigh shop owner. “The government needs to make it easy for the families to accept them.”

When the amnesty offer was first announced, government officials said they were taking into consideration the social, psychological, spiritual, and religious aspects of the recruits and their communities as part of the deradicalization process.

What does this mean, practically? Few in Eastleigh know. And there are concerns over the dearth of information about the reintegration procedure, even though they are obligated to take back the recruits.

Though they will welcome the men back, “we must not forget that they were part of a very dangerous group,” said Abdi Farah, a businessman.

Kenya’s government is hoping that the amnesty will destabilize al-Shabaab, though it is unclear how effective it has been. Once recruits join a terror group, warns Richard Tuta, a Kenyan homeland security expert, exiting is not easy because the terror organizations are in pursuit.

“So any counterterrorism strategy geared toward making members exit must give motivation and incentives,” he said.

For leaders like Karanja of the council of churches, the prospect of former members being welcomed back into Kenyan society does not make sense.

“Who is the government trying to protect?” he asked. “We believe that the government must take responsibility for atrocities committed to the people of Kenya through terrorism.”

Ndenda believes some of the returnees attend his late afternoon meetings, though they have yet to identify themselves. Once they surrender themselves to county commissions, some are handed over to local mosques. But otherwise, there do not appear to be specific programs set up for them.

Some residents have called for centers that would act as intermediaries between the men's surrendering and actually returning home, allowing for better monitoring.

"There are no good structures to implement the amnesty strategy and enable communities to embrace the exiting recruits," Tuta said. "If they are not accepted, they will become more lethal."

Others worry that with little to offer the returnees, such as jobs, it will be easy for them to fall back into the recruitment cycle. Kenya has a 40 percent unemployment rate, with 70 percent of the unemployed under the age of 35. USAID puts the youth unemployment rate in Eastleigh at 56 percent, though it is even higher in rural communities or communities living in northern frontier districts, where the majority of Somali Kenyans live.

"There are no incentives that could encourage more recruits to return home," said Hussein Kariuki, a Muslim leader in Eastleigh. "Those who have returned are still idle, as jobless as they left. These may discourage many from deserting."

But for those who are here, Ndenda is hoping that they will find solace in the mosque: "They are being rehabilitated in mosques by the sheikhs. They are being deradicalized through lectures."

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