

Seven years in, slimmer majority of Kenyans see military action in Somalia as necessary

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 241 | David Jacobs and Thomas Isbell

Summary

In October 2011, after years of conflict with extremist groups on its eastern and northeastern borders, Kenya sent about 2,000 Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) troops into Somalia. Close on the heels of high-profile kidnappings and deaths of foreign tourists and aid workers, Operation "Protect the Nation" was launched with public fanfare and vague pronouncements about ridding Somalia of al Shabaab, creating a buffer zone against extremists, and protecting Kenya's longer-term development plans (Downie, 2011; Branch, 2011; Zenko, 2011).

Seven years later, Operation "Protect the Nation" continues with no clear end in sight. While campaigning for a second term, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta made it clear that as long as an extremist threat is perceived to exist in Somalia, the mission will continue. Media reports have estimated that at least 1,000 Kenyan soldiers have died in action since the incursion began, and the military complement in Somalia has grown to 4,000 (Achuka, 2018).

In the meantime, the operation has been tainted by allegations that senior Kenyan military officers and politicians are profiting from illicit trade in Somalia, using the conflict with al Shabaab as a reason for maintaining a heavy military presence in the region (Global Conflict Tracker, 2018; Rawlence, 2015).

On the home front, Kenya has continued to suffer al Shahaab-inspired attacks, responsible for most of the country's fatalities from political violence (Carboni, Roudabeh, & Clionadh, 2017), although some observers say the threat has been reduced (Hansen, 2018). Public opinion has been sharply divided regarding the government's performance in fighting terrorism (Lekalake & Buchanan-Clarke, 2016). In the past, its domestic anti-terrorist crackdowns targeting the Somali Kenyan community have drawn particular criticism for violent and stigmatizing tactics that may actually contribute to radicalization (Buchanan-Clarke & Lekalake, 2015).

In light of these developments, we use 2016 Afrobarometer survey data to examine the attitudes of Kenyans toward KDF engagement in Somalia. We find that a majority of Kenyans see the KDF operation as necessary, although this majority decreased between 2014 and 2016. At the same time, fully half of Kenyans support KDF withdrawal from Somalia – a paradoxical finding that may suggest the population's mixed feelings about the operation.

Support for KDF involvement in Somalia is somewhat stronger among better-educated and wealthier Kenyans, as well as among citizens who fear and/or have experienced extremist violence. It is weakest in the North Eastern area, which shares a border with Somalia.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015,

and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

For its Round 7 survey in Kenya, the national Afrobarometer team, led by the Institute for Development Studies, interviewed 1,599 adult Kenyans in September and October 2016. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

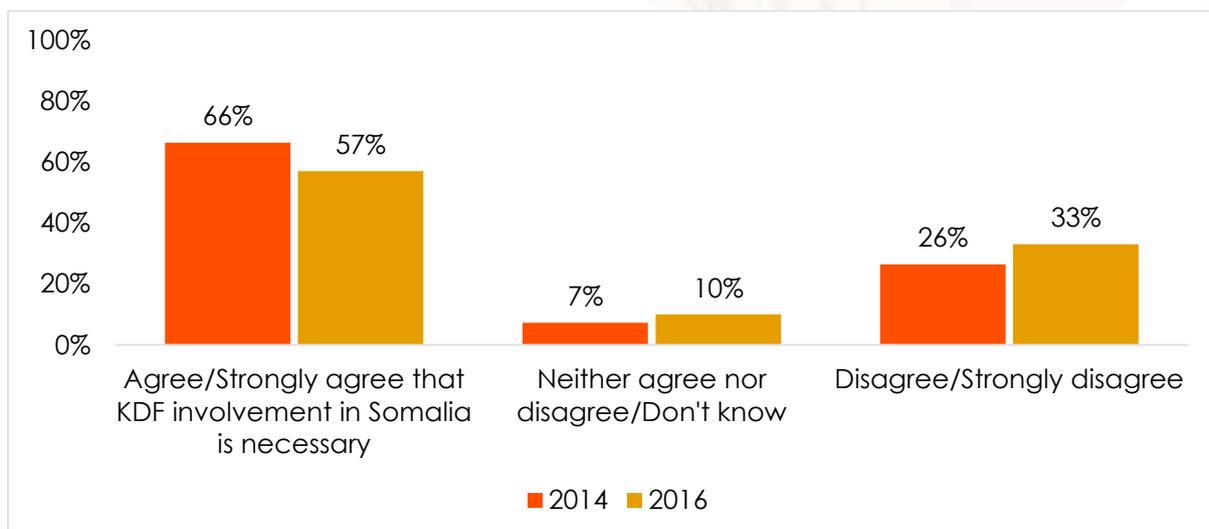
Key findings

- A majority (57%) of Kenyans see the involvement of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) in Somalia as necessary, but this support has declined from 66% in 2014. At the same time, half (50%) of Kenyans say the KDF should withdraw from Somalia.
- The best-educated and wealthiest Kenyans are more likely to be supportive of the KDF's involvement in Somalia than their less-educated and less-wealthy counterparts.
- Kenyans who say they have experienced or feared extremist violence are somewhat more supportive of the KDF's involvement in Somalia (62%) and more opposed to a KDF withdrawal than their compatriots who say they have neither experienced nor feared such violence.
- The North Eastern area is the only part of Kenya where majorities oppose KDF involvement in Somalia and favour withdrawal. Residents of the North Eastern area also are more likely than other Kenyans to have experienced or feared extremist violence and to hold less favourable views of the armed forces.

Continue or withdraw?

A majority (57%) of Kenyans "agree" or "strongly agree" that KDF involvement in Somalia is necessary despite terrorist problems it may cause. This marks a drop from 2014, when 66% said KDF involvement was necessary. One-third (33%) of respondents "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the idea that the KDF operation is necessary, up from 26% in 2014 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Is KDF involvement in Somalia necessary? | Kenya | 2014-2016

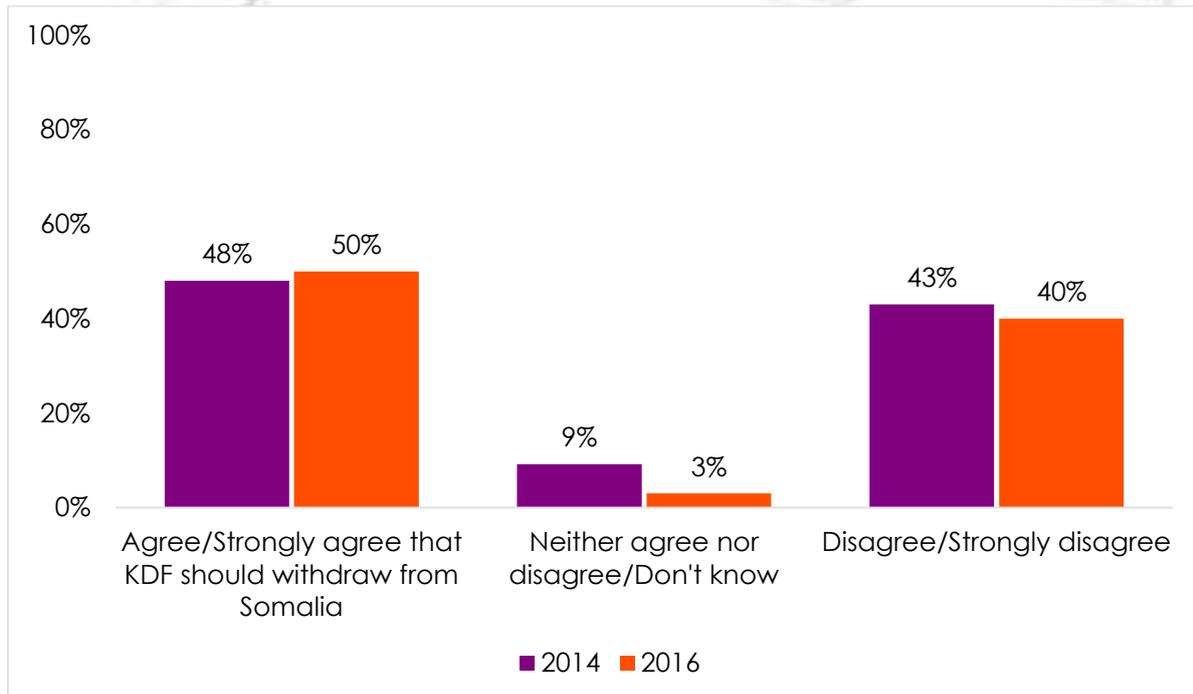


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The involvement of Kenya Defence Forces or KDF in Somalia is necessary in spite of the terrorist problems resulting from it.

At the same time, half (50%) of Kenyans say the KDF should in fact withdraw from Somalia, while 40% oppose withdrawal (Figure 2). These views are not significantly different from those recorded in 2014.

Overlap between the two scenarios – KDF involvement as necessary, KDF withdrawal as desirable – suggests mixed feelings among some Kenyans about Operation “Protect the Nation.”

Figure 2: KDF should withdraw from Somalia | Kenya | 2016



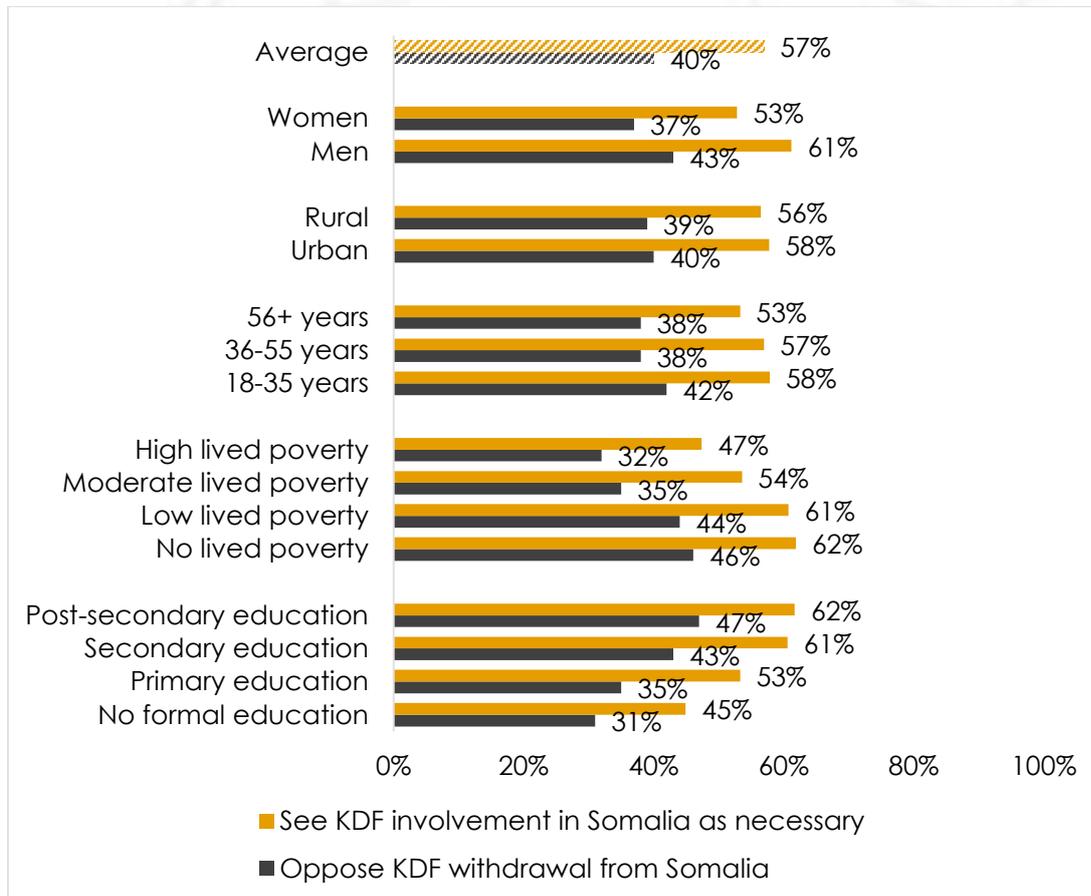
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The Kenya Defence Forces should pull out of Somalia.

Across key socio-demographic groups, women, seniors, and the poorest respondents¹ are somewhat less likely to see KDF involvement as necessary than are men, younger respondents, and wealthier respondents (Figure 3). Support for KDF engagement increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 45% among those with no formal schooling to 62% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

This pattern is repeated when it comes to the question of withdrawal: The same demographic groups that are most likely to see KDF involvement as necessary are most likely to oppose KDF withdrawal. But opposition to withdrawal is consistently weaker than support for involvement, i.e. across the board, a substantial number of respondents see KDF involvement as necessary while not being opposed to KDF withdrawal – perhaps reflecting a kind of wishful thinking about the operation.

¹ Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Figure 3: See KDF involvement in Somalia as necessary and oppose withdrawal | by socio-demographic group | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say?

- The involvement of Kenya Defence Forces or KDF in Somalia is necessary in spite of the terrorist problems resulting from it. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")
- The Kenya Defence Force should pull out of Somalia. (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

Grouping respondents by geographic area,² we see that North Eastern – the area bordering Somalia – stands out as the only area where those who say KDF involvement in Somalia is necessary are in the minority (30%, vs. 58% who disagree). Support for KDF involvement is particularly strong in the Central (70%) and Eastern (65%) areas.

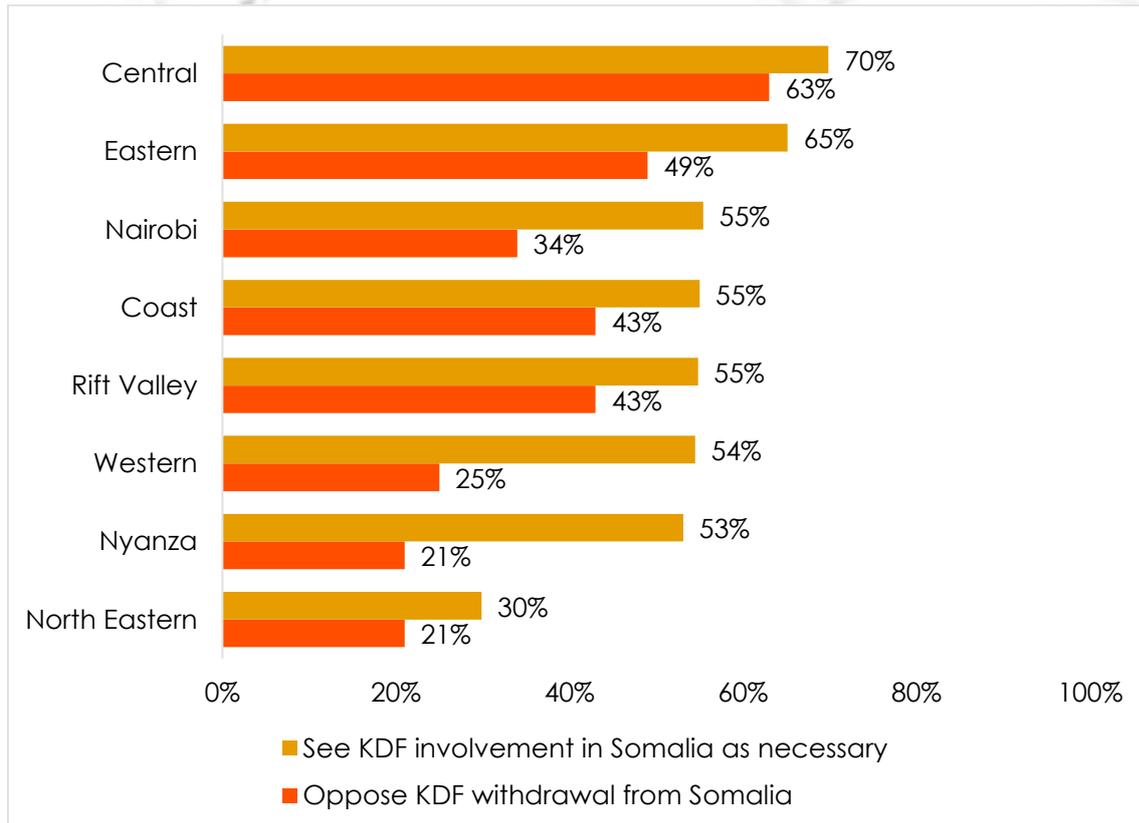
Again, a similar pattern prevails when it comes to support for withdrawal of the KDF from Somalia: Areas where more respondents see KDF involvement as necessary are more likely to

² For ease of reporting, this dispatch groups Kenya's counties into informal regions, as follows: Coast (Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta counties), North Eastern (Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties), Central (Nyandarwa, Nyeri, Kirinyaga, Murang'a, and Kiambu counties), Eastern (Marsabit, Isiolo, Meru, Tharaka-Nithi, Embu, Kitui, Machakos, and Makueri counties), Western (Kakamega, Vihiga, Bungoma, and Busia counties), Rift Valley (Turkana, West Pokot, Samburu, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Nandi, Baringo, Laikipia, Nakuru, Narok, Kajiado, Kericho, and Bomet counties), Nyanza (Siaya, Kisumu, Homa Bay, Migori, and Nyamira counties), and Nairobi (Nairobi County).

oppose withdrawal, but their views on the necessity of KDF involvement are considerably stronger than their opposition to withdrawal (Figure 4).

It is noteworthy is residents in the Nyanza and Western areas, where majorities see KDF involvement as necessary, are about as unlikely as North Eastern residents to oppose withdrawal.

Figure 4: See KDF involvement in Somalia as necessary and oppose withdrawal | by geographic area | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say?

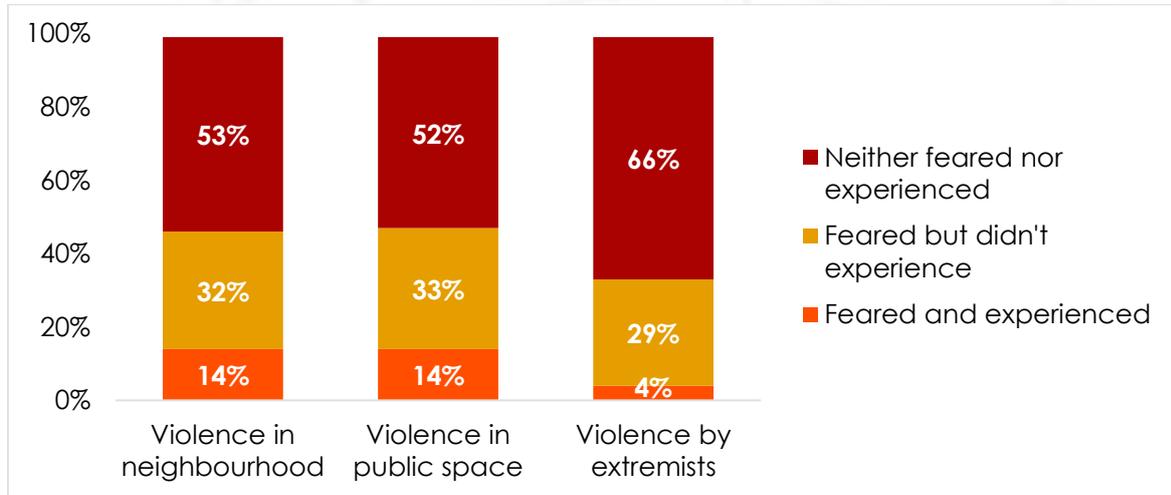
- The involvement of Kenya Defence Forces or KDF in Somalia is necessary in spite of the terrorist problems resulting from it. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")
- The Kenya Defence Force should pull out of Somalia. (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

Are attitudes toward KDF involvement informed by fear of extremism?

Given different views across socio-demographic groups and geographic areas, it is worth examining whether these attitudes are informed by fear of violent extremism. Are citizens who see KDF involvement as necessary and oppose withdrawal more fearful of violent extremism than those who oppose Operation "Protect the Nation"??

Substantial minorities of Kenyans say they either experienced violence or feared (without experiencing) violence during the previous two years (Figure 5). One in seven respondents (14%) say they experienced violence in the neighbourhood, in addition to one in three (32%) who say they feared such violence. About the same proportions say they experienced or feared violence in public spaces. Somewhat fewer say they experienced (4%) or feared (29%) an armed attack by political or religious extremists.

Figure 5: Fear and experience of violence | Kenya | 2016

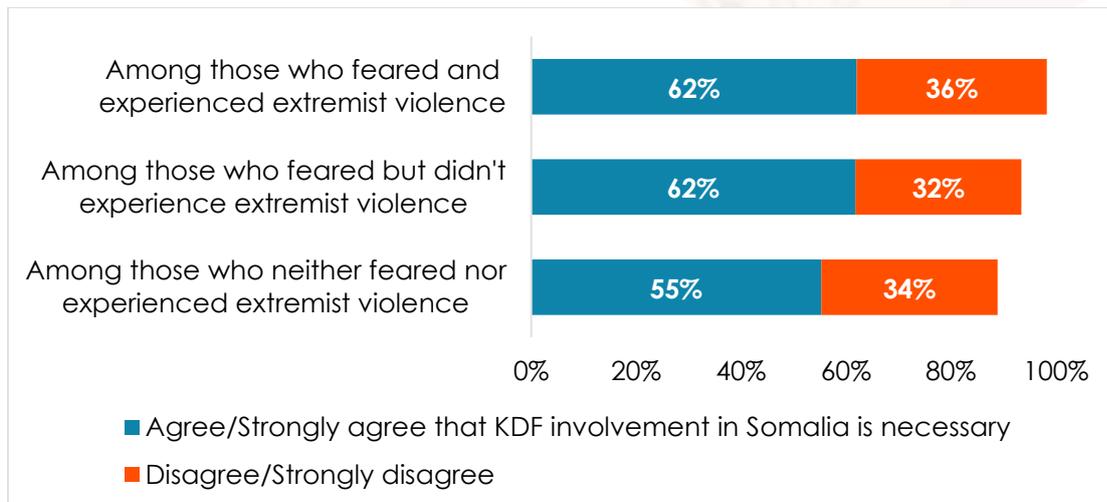


Respondents were asked: *In any society, people will sometimes disagree with one another. These disagreements occasionally escalate into physical violence. Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?*

- Violence among people in your neighbourhood or village?
- Violence breaking out within a crowd of people in a public place, like in a market or at a sporting event?
- An armed attack by political or religious extremists?

If fear or experience of extremist violence were a factor in views on Operation “Protect the Nation,” we would expect higher levels of support for KDF involvement in Somalia among respondents who have experienced or feared extremist violence. As shown in Figure 6, 62% of those who have experienced and/or feared extremist violence consider KDF involvement necessary – 7 percentage points more than among those who have neither feared nor experienced such violence (55%).

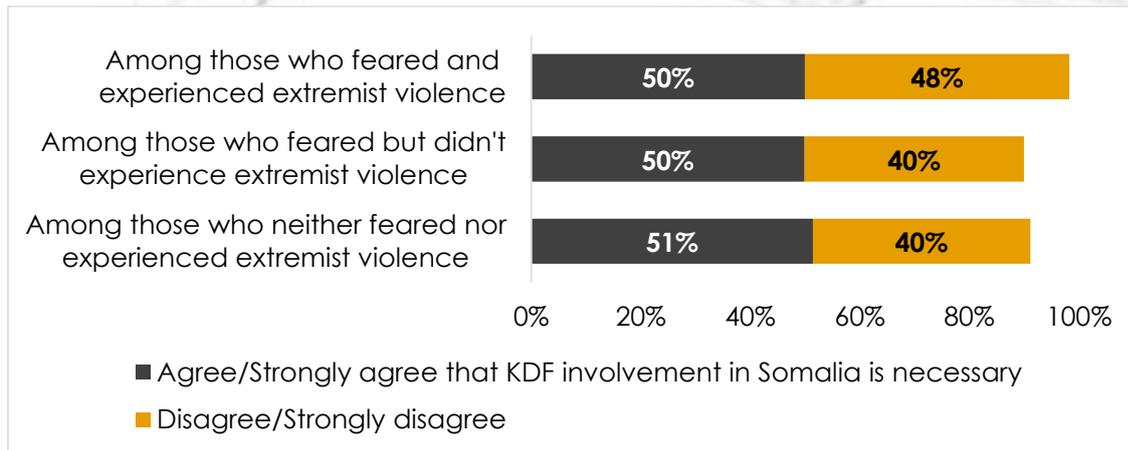
Figure 6: KDF involvement in Somalia necessary | by fear and experience of extremist violence | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The involvement of Kenya Defence Forces or KDF in Somalia is necessary in spite of the terrorist problems resulting from it.*

But regardless of whether or not they had experienced or feared extremist violence, about half of respondents say the KDF should withdraw from Somalia (Figure 7). Respondents who had experienced violence by extremist groups are more likely to oppose a withdrawal (48%) than those who had feared (but not experienced) or had neither feared nor experienced such violence (40%).

Figure 7: KDF should withdraw from Somalia | by fear of extremist violence | Kenya | 2016



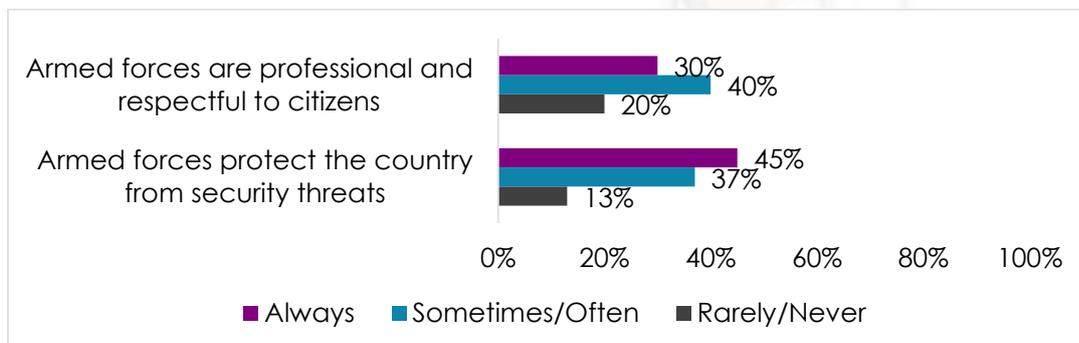
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The Kenya Defence Forces should pull out of Somalia.

Do perceptions of the armed forces inform how Kenyans perceive KDF involvement?

Rather than understanding Kenyans' attitudes toward KDF involvement in Somalia as primarily a security-driven concern, it is plausible that general attitudes toward the military might play a role, too. Overall, only three out of 10 Kenyans (30%) believe that the armed forces are "always" professional and respectful toward citizens. The largest proportion (40%) say KDF soldiers "sometimes" or "often" meet this standard, while two in 10 (20%) assert that they are "rarely" or "never" professional and respectful (Figure 8).

As for the military's role in protecting the country from external and internal security threats, almost half (45%) of Kenyans say the KDF "always" fulfills this task, while 37% say it does so "sometimes" or "often" and 13% say it "rarely" or "never" accomplishes this objective.

Figure 8: Perceptions of the armed forces | Kenya | 2016

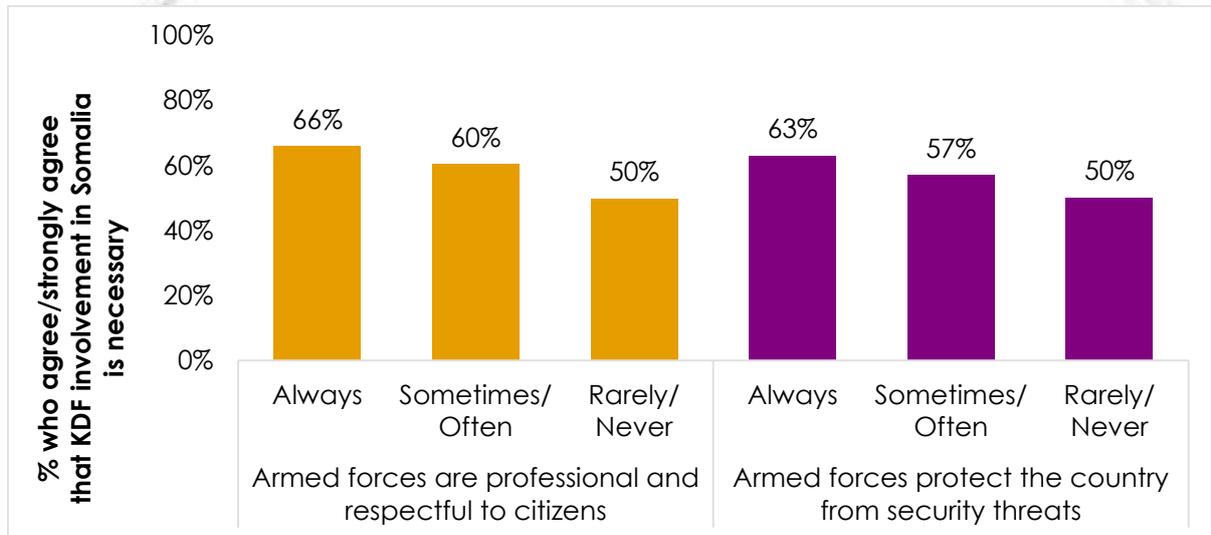


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country:
 - Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?
 - Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?

Generally, Kenyans who hold a positive view of the KDF's behaviour and ability to protect the country are more likely to consider KDF involvement in Somalia necessary (Figure 9). For example, two-thirds (66%) of respondents who think the KDF "always" acts professionally and respectfully say that KDF involvement in Somalia is necessary, compared to only half (50%) of those who see the KDF as rarely/never acting with professionalism and respect.

Similarly, respondents who think the KDF "always" protects the country from external and internal security threats are less likely to favour withdrawing from Somalia than those who see the armed forces as unsuccessful in its mission (Figure 10).

Figure 9: KDF involvement in Somalia necessary | by perception of the armed forces
 | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The involvement of Kenya Defence Forces or KDF in Somalia is necessary in spite of the terrorist problems resulting from it.

Figure 10: KDF should withdraw from Somalia | by perception of the armed forces
 | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The Kenya Defence Forces should pull out of Somalia.

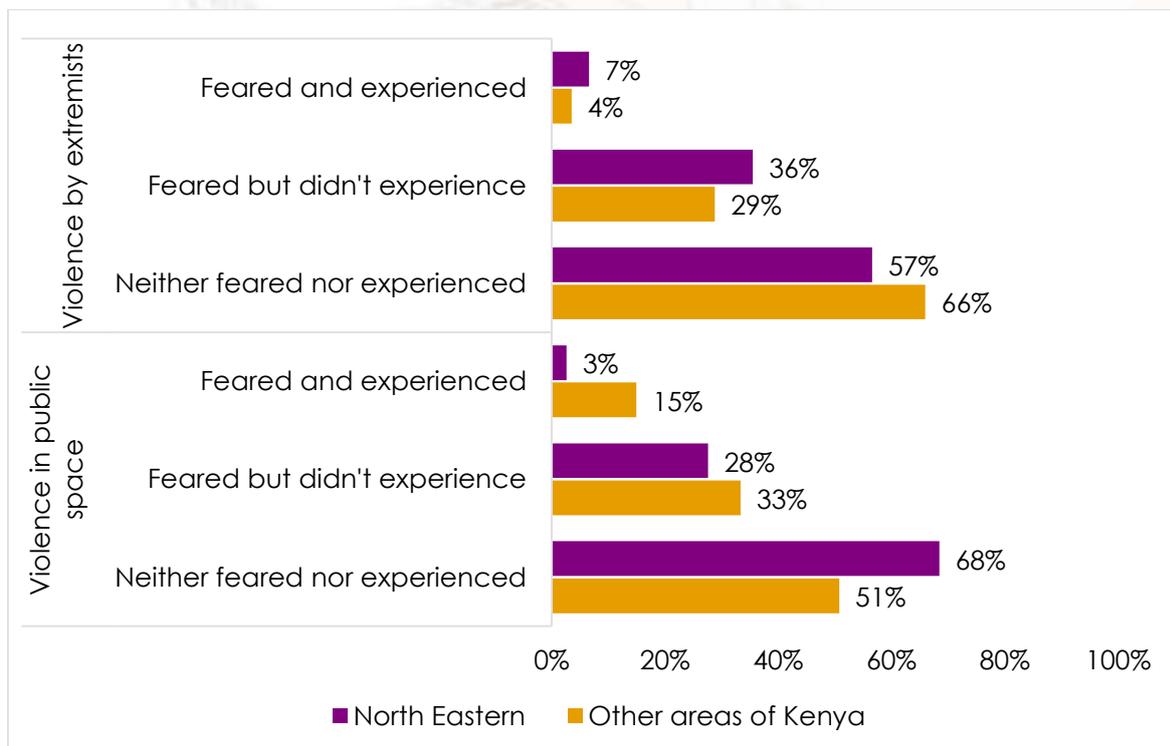
Attitudes in the North Eastern area

We have seen that Kenyans' experiences with violence and perceptions of the military, as well as education and economic status, may contribute to attitudes toward the involvement of the KDF in Somalia, though more sophisticated analyses would be needed to confirm the existence and strength of these relationships.

But perhaps the most striking differences in views on KDF involvement in Somalia concern the North Eastern area – the only part of Kenya where majorities oppose involvement and support withdrawal. One possible explanation for these differences might be proximity to Somalia, as the area shares a border with the country to the east. However, we note that Nyanza – the area farthest west and farthest from the Somalia border – shows the same level of support for withdrawal from Somalia as the North Eastern area. Moreover, it would also be plausible to think that proximity to Somalia might make North Eastern residents more supportive of KDF involvement as they are most immediately impacted by extremism and violence spilling over the border. Another possible explanation might be the fact that 96% of North Eastern residents identify their ethnic group as Somali.

Interestingly, North Eastern residents are more likely than other Kenyans to say they experienced extremist violence (7% vs. 4%) and feared (without experiencing) such violence (36% vs 29%). This is true for extremist violence, while regarding violence in public spaces, fear levels are lower in the North Eastern area than in the rest of Kenya (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Fear and experience of violence | North Eastern vs. other areas of Kenya | Kenya | 2016

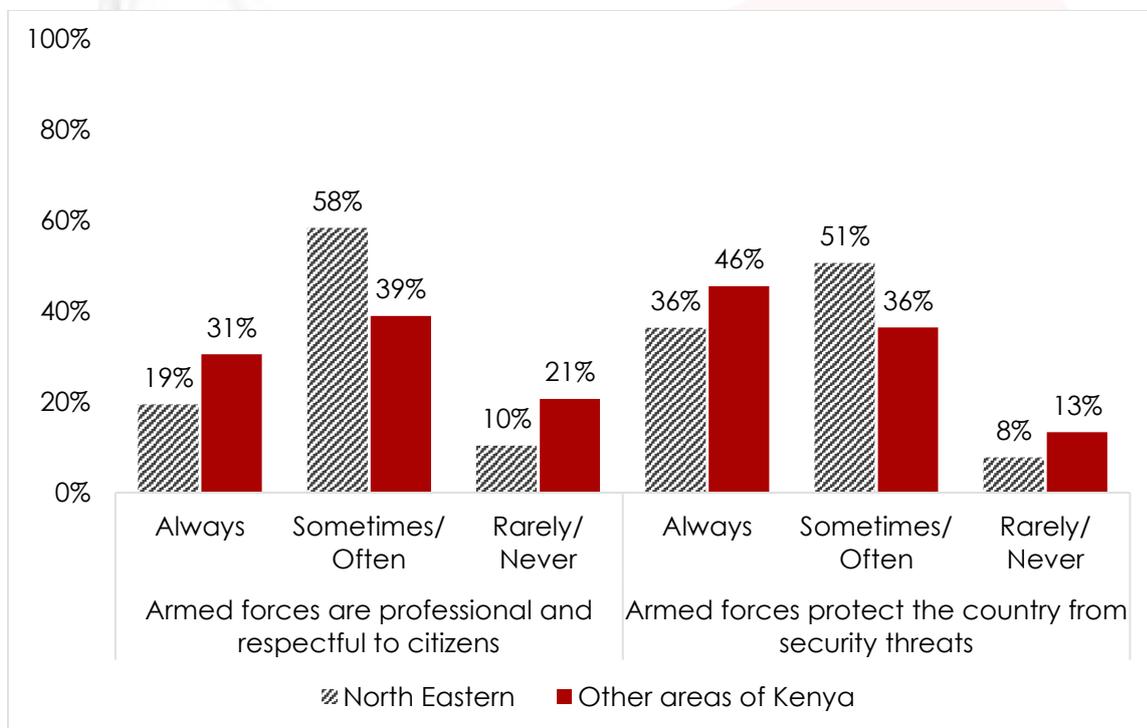


Respondents were asked: *In any society, people will sometimes disagree with one another. These disagreements occasionally escalate into physical violence. Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?*

- Violence breaking out within a crowd of people in a public place, like in a market or at a sporting event?
- An armed attack by political or religious extremists?

Due to their proximity to Somalia, respondents in the North Eastern area might also be expected to have very different experiences with the armed forces than their counterparts in other parts of the country, who may have more abstract perceptions of and confidence in the military. As Figure 12 below displays, respondents residing in the North Eastern area are quite at variance with the rest of Kenya in their perceptions of the KDF. Only 19% of North Eastern residents say the armed forces are always professional and respectful – 12 percentage points fewer than residents of other areas, on average. Similarly, only 36% of North Eastern respondents say the KDF “always” protects the country from security threats, compared to the average of 46% across other areas. On the other hand, North Eastern residents are more likely than other Kenyans to say the military “often” or “sometimes” acts professionally and protects the country.

Figure 12: Perceptions of the armed forces | North Eastern vs. other areas of Kenya | Kenya | 2016



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country:*
 -Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?
 -Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?

Conclusion

On the whole, the Kenyan population does not seem to exhibit the “wave of public support” that was claimed for the KDF incursion at its launching (Downie, 2011). While a majority of Kenyans support KDF involvement in Kenya, half feel that the KDF should in fact be withdrawn.

Support for military engagement is highest amongst Kenyans who have higher levels of education and who experience little or no poverty, while support for the withdrawal of the KDF comes most often from Kenyans with lower levels of education and higher levels of poverty. In addition, citizens who say they have experienced or feared violence from extremist groups are more likely to support KDF engagement.

The North Eastern area, whose ethnic makeup is overwhelmingly Somali, differs strikingly from the rest of Kenya in opposing KDF involvement – particularly remarkable given that North Eastern, bordering Somalia, is the area most directly exposed to the potential of extremist violence. These findings are consistent with evidence (Buchanan-Clarke & Lekalake, 2015) that Somali Kenyans have in the past been considerably more likely to feel victimized and to be critical of the government's efforts against extremist violence than other Kenyans.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's
online data analysis facility at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 241 | 5 October 2018