

The Root Causes of Terrorism in Uganda: A Sociological Analysis of History and Current Perspectives



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ABSTRACT

Uganda has experienced recurrent forms of political violence, insurgency and terrorism across different historical periods. This article examines the root causes of terrorism in Uganda from a sociological perspective, treating violent mobilisation as a process produced by interacting structural, relational and interpretive conditions rather than by any single cause. This research used a qualitative design in Kampala, Mayuge and Kasese districts and drew on interviews and group discussions with 54 information-rich participants selected purposively and through snowball sampling. The thematic analysis identified four closely connected domains: socioeconomic motivations, political grievances, ideology, and identity. Poverty and unemployment were described as indirect conditions that can heighten relative deprivation, exclusion and recruitment vulnerability; political injustice and institutional distrust weakened confidence in peaceful redress; identity-based needs for belonging and significance strengthened attachment to groups; and ideological narratives provided frameworks that legitimised violence and defined targets. The findings support an integrated sociological pathway in which structural strain may become grievance, grievance may be collectivised through identity, and ideology may frame violence as legitimate or necessary. The article recommends locally grounded prevention that combines inclusive socioeconomic opportunity, credible grievance redress, rights-respecting security practice, community trust, reintegration support and evidence-led monitoring of vulnerability.

Keywords: terrorism; violent extremism; relative deprivation; identity; ideology; political grievance; Uganda.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Terrorism and violent extremism are related but analytically distinct concepts. Violent extremism is commonly used as a broader umbrella for beliefs, mobilisation and conduct that support or use violence to advance ideological, religious or political goals, while terrorism is more narrowly concerned with the deliberate use or threat of violence to intimidate audiences and advance political or social objectives (Bak et al., 2019; Kydd & Walter, 2006). This distinction matters because a sociological explanation must account not only for violent acts, but also for the social processes through which grievances, identities, relationships and ideological commitments are formed before violence occurs.

Uganda provides a historically important setting for such analysis. Political violence has taken different forms across the colonial and post-independence periods. The Idi Amin period, for example, is widely analysed in relation to state terror and organised coercion (Kannyo, 2000). Later, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in northern Uganda combined coercive recruitment, religious claims, armed rebellion and sustained violence, while the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) developed within the Uganda-Democratic Republic of Congo borderland and drew on a mixture of ideological, political, social and borderland dynamics (Dolnik & Butime, 2017; Nsobya & Brigaglia, 2020; Scorgie-Porter, 2015). More recent regional militant networks have further connected Uganda's security environment to wider East, Central and Southern African jihadist ecosystems (Githing'u & Hamming, 2021).

Existing research cautions against reducing participation in terrorism to poverty, religion, personality or ideology alone. Pathway approaches instead emphasise that involvement develops through combinations of personal circumstances, group relationships, social identities, opportunities, grievances and exposure to legitimising narratives (Horgan, 2008; Vergani et al., 2020; Wolfowicz et al., 2021). Evidence from Kenya and Uganda similarly shows that economic, educational and political circumstances interact with socialisation, identity and interpersonal networks rather than operating as isolated causes (Botha, 2015). A sociological analysis is therefore especially useful because it connects individual meanings and choices to institutions, inequality, group membership, social recognition and collective narratives.

1.2 Research Problem

Uganda's security environment has been shaped by armed conflict, insurgency, terrorism and contentious state-society relations. The effects extend beyond direct casualties: terrorism and counterterrorism can alter public trust, community relations, political participation, perceptions of state legitimacy and everyday understandings of security. Uganda has consequently combined military, intelligence, law-enforcement, legal and community-oriented responses to violent extremism. Yet security-centred responses are most effective at disrupting immediate threats; by themselves, they do not explain or necessarily transform the social conditions under which recruitment and radicalisation become possible. Uganda-specific work on prevention has similarly noted the political and institutional complexity of preventing violent extremism and the importance of context-sensitive approaches (Romaniuk & Durner, 2018).

The analytical problem addressed in this article is therefore not the absence of counterterrorism measures, but the incomplete understanding of the social mechanisms that precede or sustain mobilisation. Socioeconomic strain may be interpreted as unfair deprivation; exclusion may weaken attachment to legitimate institutions; experiences of humiliation or blocked participation may

become collective grievances; and groups may offer belonging, status, explanation and a moral language through which violence is justified. These mechanisms can reinforce one another. Treating one variable as the root cause risks obscuring the cumulative pathways through which vulnerability is socially produced.

This gap is particularly important in Uganda, where the histories of the LRA and ADF demonstrate that recruitment and mobilisation have been embedded in distinct regional, political and social contexts. Scorgie-Porter (2015), for example, shows that ADF recruitment cannot be explained by Islamist ideology alone because disenfranchisement, ex-combatant networks and unresolved socioeconomic and political grievances in the Rwenzori borderlands also mattered. This article builds on this insight by examining how socioeconomic motivations, political grievances, identity and ideology are described together by participants with institutional, community and lived experience.

1.3 Research Claim and Objectives

This article advances the claim that terrorism in Uganda cannot be adequately explained by poverty, political grievance, identity or ideology in isolation. Rather, it is socially produced through interactions among structural conditions, subjective interpretations and group processes. Socioeconomic and political conditions can generate strain and perceived injustice; identity processes shape belonging and boundaries between groups; and ideological narratives interpret grievances, identify adversaries, legitimise violence and orient action.

The article therefore sought to: (1) analyse how socioeconomic conditions and political grievances may create structural and institutional environments that increase vulnerability to terrorist recruitment and mobilisation; (2) examine how identity formation, social exclusion, group belonging and ideological socialisation shape pathways into violent extremism; and (3) develop an integrated sociological explanation of how these dimensions interact and what that interaction implies for prevention and counterterrorism in Uganda.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Root Causes as Interacting Pathways

The literature on terrorism has progressively moved away from single-cause explanations. Horgan (2008) argues that searching for a stable terrorist profile is less useful than examining pathways into, though, and out of terrorist involvement. Moghaddam's (2005) staircase metaphor similarly conceptualises violent extremism as an escalating process in which perceived injustice, restricted options, displacement of aggression and moral engagement with violence can accumulate across stages. Systematic evidence reinforces this multidimensional view: Vergani et al. (2020) classify drivers into push, pull and personal domains, while Wolfowicz et al. (2021) identify numerous risk and protective correlates whose effects differ across radical attitudes, intentions and behaviours. Clemmow et al. (2023) likewise model vulnerability as a network of mutually reinforcing factors rather than a latent single root cause.

These approaches are particularly compatible with sociology because they focus on relationships between individual interpretation and social structure. Structural disadvantage may be widespread, yet only some individuals become involved in terrorism. The key analytical question is therefore how disadvantages are interpreted, shared, narrated and linked to groups that make violent action meaningful. This article treats socioeconomic conditions and political grievances as possible sources of strain, identity as a mechanism of belonging and boundary formation, and ideology as a meaning system capable of legitimising action.

2.2 Socioeconomic Conditions and Relative Deprivation

Poverty is frequently invoked as a root cause of terrorism, but empirical research does not support a simple linear relationship. Krueger and Maleckova (2003) found little basis for the assumption that terrorists are necessarily poor or uneducated, while Piazza (2006) showed that poverty and poor development alone are weak explanations compared with political and social cleavages. Public-opinion evidence from the Boko Haram context nevertheless shows that citizens often identify unemployment, poverty and economic problems alongside political and ideological factors as important drivers (Adelaja et al., 2018). The implication is not that economic hardship is irrelevant, but that its effects are mediated by comparison, opportunity, identity and political interpretation.

Relative deprivation theory bridges objective conditions and subjective grievance. Gurr (1970) conceptualised political violence partly in terms of perceived discrepancies between what people believe they are entitled to and what they can obtain. Applied to terrorism, the theory predicts that blocked mobility, unequal access to opportunities or perceived exclusion may be more politically consequential than absolute poverty. Social exclusion can also threaten recognition and the sense that one matters to others; Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2021) show how marginalisation and perceived insignificance can be linked to violence in young people, while Treistman (2024) demonstrates an association between social exclusion and the justification of terrorism. These findings support an interpretation in which economic strain becomes dangerous when it is experienced as unjust, humiliating, group-based or politically meaningful.

2.3 Political Grievances, Governance and Repression

Political grievances concern perceived injustice in the relationship between citizens and institutions. They may arise from corruption, exclusion from political participation, unequal treatment, delayed justice, restrictions on civil freedoms, or abusive security practices. Charkawi et al. (2021) demonstrate that perceptions of injustice, when connected to social identity, are associated with support for violent extremism. Piazza (2017) further shows that different forms of state repression can have distinct relationships with domestic terrorism, cautioning against the assumption that coercion necessarily suppresses political violence without social costs.

For prevention, the central sociological issue is legitimacy. Institutions are more than enforcement mechanisms: they communicate who is recognised, whose grievances are heard and whether rules are applied fairly. When peaceful channels for redress are perceived as blocked, extremist organisations can frame violence as resistance or corrective justice. In Uganda, Romaniuk and Durner (2018) show that preventing violent extremism is politically embedded and cannot be separated from local governance, state-society relations and the institutional context in which programmes operate. Thus, rights-respecting security, credible grievance redress and accountable institutions are not peripheral to counterterrorism; they can affect the narratives through which recruitment is justified.

2.4 Identity, Belonging, Ideology and Group Dynamics

Identity-based processes help explain how diffuse dissatisfaction becomes collective commitment. Kruglanski et al. (2014) emphasise the quest for personal significance: individuals who experience humiliation, loss or insignificance may become receptive to networks that offer purpose, recognition and a valued social role. Carvalho and Sacks (2024) similarly model radicalisation through identity-based organisations that coordinate participation and can become more exclusive and extreme over time. These perspectives align with sociological accounts of solidarity because they show how membership, shared ritual, norms, and group boundaries can transform isolated individuals into committed collectivities.

Ideology is not necessarily the first motivation for joining a violent group, but it can become the framework through which grievances and identities are organised. Carson and Turner (2024) show that ideology is associated with differences in terrorist intentions and outcomes, while Kydd and Walter (2006) conceptualise terrorism as strategic communication directed at wider audiences as well as immediate victims. Group narratives can therefore identify enemies, define legitimate targets, interpret losses as collective injustice and transform retaliation into moral duty. Social relationships further sustain commitment after recruitment. Wahlstrom and Tornberg (2021), although examining right-wing political violence, show how group dynamics, discursive opportunities, and coordination can turn ideological communities into settings for political violence.

2.5 Uganda-Specific Evidence and Research Gap

Uganda-specific scholarship strongly supports contextual rather than monocausal explanations. Botha (2015), drawing on interviews linked to the ADF and LRA as well as militant organisations in Kenya, emphasises political socialisation and the interaction of personal histories with economic, educational and political circumstances. Scorgie-Porter (2015) identifies the role of borderland marginalisation, disenfranchised youth and ex-combatant recruitment networks in the ADF, while Nsobyia and Brigaglia (2020) provide a political history that situates the ADF within Uganda's evolving political and religious landscape. Dolnik and Butime (2017) similarly trace the LRA as a historically evolving insurgency rather than a phenomenon reducible to a single religious explanation.

The literature therefore establishes many relevant factors but leaves an analytical need to show how participants in different Ugandan institutional and community settings understand these factors together. This article contributes by organising participant accounts around four domains - socioeconomic motivation, political grievance, identity and ideology - and by analysing their interaction through relative deprivation and social solidarity. Its contribution is interpretive rather than predictive: it seeks to explain how conditions can form pathways into violent mobilisation, not to claim that the identified conditions inevitably produce terrorism.

2.6 Integrated Theoretical Framework: Relative Deprivation and Social Solidarity

Two sociological perspectives organise the analysis. First, relative deprivation theory explains how inequality, blocked opportunity and political exclusion become grievances when individuals compare actual conditions with expected or deserved outcomes (Gurr, 1970). The theory helps distinguish absolute hardship from perceived injustice: a person may experience deprivation not only because resources are scarce, but because the distribution of opportunity, recognition or political voice is understood as unfair.

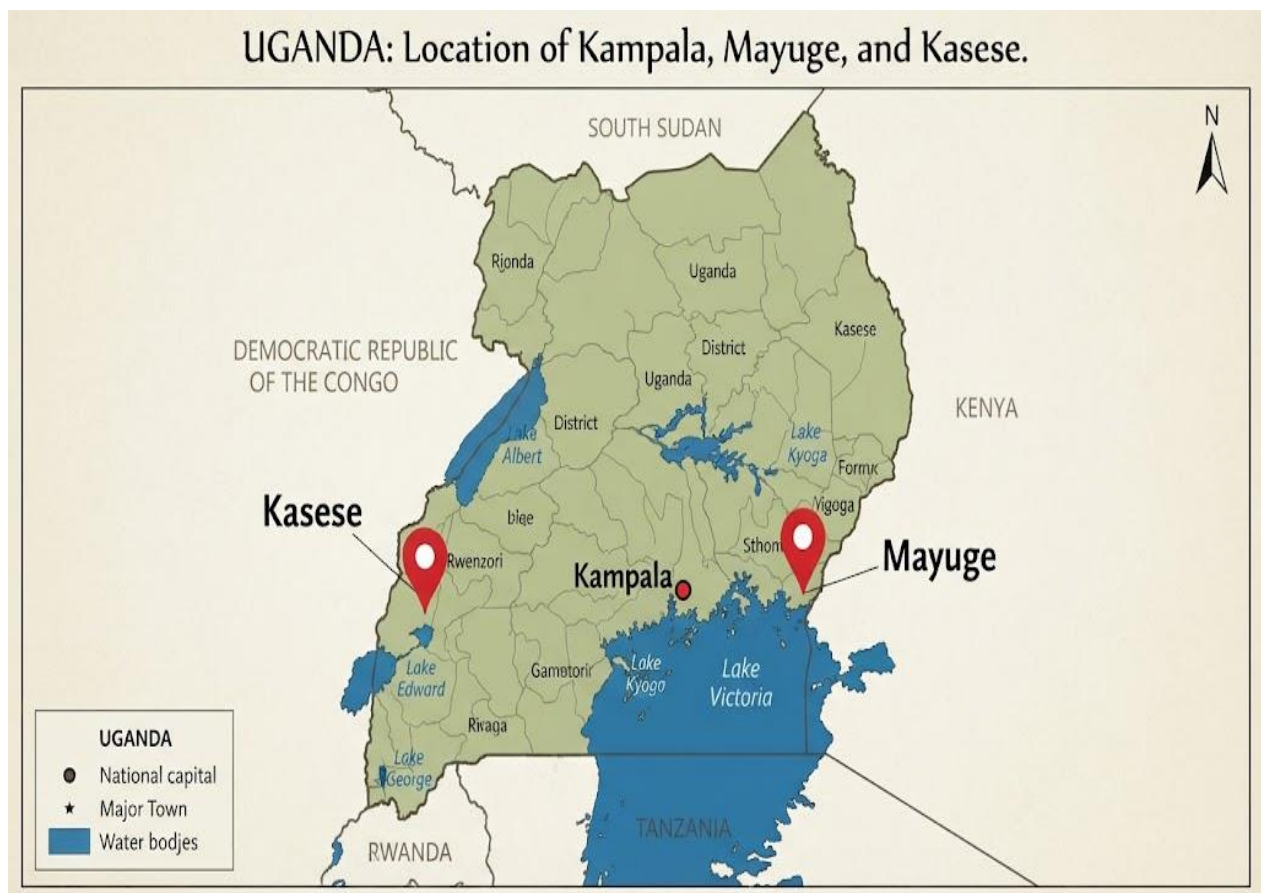
Second, social solidarity theory draws attention to the bonds, norms and collective identities that hold groups together. Durkheim's account of solidarity emphasises the social ties through which individuals become integrated into moral communities (Durkheim, 1984 [1893]). Applied cautiously to violent extremism, the concept helps explain why a group can provide belonging, shared rules and loyalty even when its internal solidarity is exclusionary toward outsiders. Such solidarity can transform personal grievance into collective grievance by defining who belongs, who is blamed and what obligations members owe one another.

3. Methods

The multi-site design was intended to avoid treating the national capital as representative of the entire country. Kampala offers access to national policy and security institutions, while Mayuge and Kasese bring community, rural and borderland perspectives into the analysis. Figure 1 shows the three study districts within Uganda.

Figure 3.1

Study locations in Uganda: Kampala, Mayuge and Kasese.



3.2 Research Design

A qualitative design based on interviews and group discussions was used. Purposive sampling was used to select the three districts, relevant institutions and participant categories with direct knowledge or experience of terrorism, violent extremism, counterterrorism, reintegration or community responses. Snowball sampling complemented this approach by facilitating access to returnees, formerly recruited individuals, victims and other participants whose experiences were sensitive or difficult to reach through formal institutional channels. Recruitment continued until the study team judged that additional engagement was no longer generating substantively new thematic insights.

3.3 Population and Sample

3.3.1. Population

The research employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 54 information-rich participants from Kampala, Mayuge and Kasese districts. Purposive sampling was used to select the study locations, relevant institutions and organisations, participant categories, and individuals with direct knowledge or experience of terrorism and counterterrorism in Uganda. Snowball sampling complemented this process by facilitating access to returnees, formerly recruited individuals, victims and other participants whose experiences were sensitive or who were difficult to identify through formal institutional channels. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached and additional interviews no longer generated substantively new insights. The targeted participant categories included policymakers, security-agency personnel, National Focal Point officials, Financial Intelligence Authority officers, civil-society and non-governmental organisation officials, community leaders, religious and cultural leaders, academics, reporters, terrorism survivors, returnees, and formerly recruited individuals who had undergone reintegration.

3.3.2. Sample

The final sample comprised 54 participants. Thirty were primary participants who took part in district-based focus group discussions: 10 security practitioners in Kampala, 10 in Mayuge and 10 in Kasese. The remaining 24 were secondary participants, comprising 12 in-depth interview participants and 12 key informants. The key informants represented policy, security, counterterrorism, civil-society, academic, religious, cultural, media and lived-experience perspectives. This structure enabled the research to combine institutional, professional, community and lived-experience accounts while maintaining a clear link between participant type, study location and the qualitative evidence reported in the findings. The three district FGDs accounted for 30 of the study's primary participants.

Table 3.1

Composition of Focus Group Discussions by Study District (n = 30)

FGD code	Study district	Participants	Number of discussants
FGD_1	Kampala	Security practitioners	10
FGD_2	Mayuge	Security practitioners	10
FGD_3	Kasese	Security practitioners	10
Total			30

Table**2.2***Key Informants and In-depth Interview Participants (n = 24)*

Code	Role/category	Research location	Data source	n
KII_1	Policymaker	Kampala	Key informant interview	1
KII_2	Security-agency officer			1
KII_3	National Focal Point official			1
KII_4	Financial Intelligence Authority officer			1
KII_5	Civil-society/NGO official			1
KII_6	Academic			1
KII_7	Religious leader	Mayuge		1
KII_8	Cultural leader	Kasese		1
KII_9	Terrorism survivor			1
KII_10	Reporter/media practitioner	Kampala		1
KII_11	Returnee	Mayuge		1
KII_12	Formerly recruited/reintegrated participant	Kasese		1
IDI_1-IDI_12	In-depth interview participants with individual/lived-experience perspectives	Kampala, Mayuge and Kasese	In-depth interviews	12
Secondary-participant subtotal				24
Overall study sample (including 30 FGD)				54

3.3.3 Demographic Context Across Participants

The sample included 34 male and 20 female participants. Forty-one participants were aged 30-50 years, 21 held university degrees, 43 were recorded as literate, and 32 were married. The experience profile was also substantial: more than half of the participants reported over 15 years of terrorism-, security-, policy-, or community-related experience, while another sizeable group had 11-15 years of relevant experience. These characteristics provide useful context for understanding the social and professional positions from which participants interpreted terrorism.

Comparison across age, experience, gender, education and marital status must, however, be interpreted within the structure of the retained dataset. The de-identified thematic tables do not consistently link individual quotations or codes to these demographic attributes. It would therefore not be methodologically defensible to claim, for example, that men emphasized economic grievances more than women, that younger participants prioritized ideology, or that married participants differed from unmarried participants.

What can be compared reliably is the source and context of the evidence. The findings therefore identify each KII by code and role and each FGD by district and total number of discussants. Similar themes across interviews and FGDs are interpreted as convergence across data sources rather than as demographic subgroup effects. This approach preserves the qualitative character of the study and avoids statistical claims that are not supported by respondent-linked coding data.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through three focus group discussions, 12 in-depth interviews and 12 key informant interviews to document current and historical experiences. One FGD was conducted in each study district, comprising 10 security practitioners in Kampala, 10 in Mayuge and 10 in Kasese. In-depth interview and KII guides explored participants' experiences and perceptions of terrorism,

including socioeconomic conditions, political grievances, ideological influence, identity formation, recruitment, radicalisation, disengagement, reintegration and the effectiveness of counterterrorism interventions. Questions were translated into Luganda, Lusoga and Lukonzo where necessary to facilitate meaningful participation across the three study districts.

The questions were designed to explain not only why individuals became involved in terrorism but also how structural conditions, social relationships, identities, and ideological narratives interacted throughout the radicalisation process. Ethical approval was obtained from Makerere University Research Ethics Committee (REC), together with permission from the relevant institutions and local authorities. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, potential risks, voluntary nature, and their right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Informed consent was obtained before data collection, while anonymity was protected through participant codes and the removal of identifying information. Interviews were conducted privately using a trauma-sensitive approach, and participants were not required to disclose operational information or recount experiences likely to cause psychological, legal, or physical harm.

3.5 Thematic Analysis and Attribution of Participant Voices

The material was organised thematically around recurring patterns in the interview and group-discussion data. The final analytical tables grouped coded excerpts under the major themes of ideology and identity, socioeconomic motivations and political grievances. Percentages reported in the tables refer to the relative distribution of coded excerpts within the displayed material; they do not represent the percentage of participants who endorsed a theme and should not be interpreted as population estimates.

For qualitative transparency, the findings retain every source label recorded in the analytical tables. Quotations are therefore identified as either Interview or Group discussion, and the narrative states which source type produced each cited voice. For reporting and anonymity, key informants were coded KII_1-KII_12 and identified by role, while focus groups were coded FGD_1 (Kampala), FGD_2 (Mayuge), and FGD_3 (Kasese). In-depth interview participants were coded IDI_1-IDI_12. These codes link verbatim evidence to its source below without disclosing personal identities.

The analytical tables do not attach each quotation to a participant code, interview date, or specific district, and they do not provide quote-level information indicating whether a statement was cross-checked against an audio recording or field note. Accordingly, no more specific attribution is made. The study locations are reported at study level, and the absence of quote-level metadata is acknowledged as a limitation.

3.6. Ethical Safeguards

Ethical approval was obtained from the Makerere University Research Ethics Committee, together with permission from relevant institutions and local authorities. Participants were informed about the study purpose, possible risks, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. We obtained informed consent before data collection. Anonymity was protected by removing identifying information, and interviews were conducted privately using a trauma-sensitive approach. Participants were not required to disclose operational information or recount experiences likely to expose them to psychological, legal or physical harm. Participant names are withheld to protect confidentiality. KII_1-KII_12 are used consistently in the findings together with the participant role; FGD sources are reported by FGD code, district and total number of discussants.

4. Findings

4.1 Ideology and Identity as Sociological Drivers of Terrorism

The interview and group-discussion findings connected ideology and identity to recruitment, commitment, belonging, justification of violence and target selection. Ideology was described as a system of meaning through which grievances and strategic objectives were interpreted, while identity supplied belonging, significance and boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Table 4.1 reproduces the verbatim excerpts and source labels available in the findings table.

Table 4.1

Ideology and Identity as Sociological Drivers of Terrorism

Theme	Representative verbatim excerpt	Source	Interpretation
Ideological legitimization and strategic purpose	"...ideology is the core framework, not a peripheral cause...explaining fundamental reasons why terrorists fight and get justified into terror attacks..."	KII_6 - Academic (Kampala)	Frames ideology as a central mechanism for interpreting and justifying terrorist action.
Ideological legitimization and strategic purpose	"...the purpose of the attacks themselves is not merely the immediate violence, but rather to achieve long-term strategic objectives and part of those objectives is creation of fear, panic, provocation, and gaining advantage..."	KII_1 - Policymaker (Kampala)	Emphasises strategic objectives that extend beyond the immediate violent act.
Belonging, identity and personal significance	"...the ideology refers to a way to find a sense of belonging, purpose, and 'brotherhood' rather than an intellectual pursuit."	KII_11 - Returnee (Mayuge)	Shows how belonging and social attachment may reinforce extremist commitment.
Social exclusion and marginalisation	"...there are a lot of things which people in government and security do neglect, and that is social exclusion and marginalization.... these have motivated acts of terrorism while creating a sense of grievance, alienation, and a loss of fundamental psychological needs..."	FGD_2 - Mayuge (10 discussants)	The Mayuge group linked exclusion and marginalisation with grievance and vulnerability to recruitment.
Shared identity and "us-versus-them" boundaries	"Within those terrorist organizations, there is a shared ideological narrative that legitimizes their actions...The group defines an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic, which can lead to the justification of violence against perceived 'outsiders'..."	FGD_3 - Kasese (10 discussants)	The Kasese group described collective identity as strengthening internal solidarity while constructing outsiders as threats.

Theme	Representative verbatim excerpt	Source	Interpretation
Propaganda and gradual indoctrination	"...I think, I was lured more by direct engagement and propaganda which strengthened my commitment to the cause..."	KII_12 - Formerly recruited/reintegrated participant (Kasese)	Illustrates gradual recruitment and commitment through interpersonal engagement and propaganda.
Exclusion, identity and vulnerability	"...my experience at National Focal Point is that deprivation of psychological needs, perceived injustices, humiliation, vulnerability, search for identity and belonging and many others come to combine and amount to social exclusion and marginalization which leads people into terrorism."	KII_3 - National Focal Point official (Kampala)	Shows that multiple social and psychological vulnerabilities were understood as interacting rather than operating separately.
Strategic target selection and publicity	"As it is in other life spheres, even terrorist organizations make a cost-benefit analysis when selecting targets. The primary factors guiding their decisions are summarized by models such as the 'TRACK' framework...or the earlier 'EVIL DONE'..."	KII_2 - Security-agency officer (Kampala)	Presents target selection as calculated, strategic and sensitive to symbolic and operational value.
Ideology and target legitimacy	"Our group ideology defines the moral framework and determines which targets are considered legitimate...For us, we often chose targets for their symbolic value and the ability to generate media attention and widespread fear..."	IDI_1 - Lived-experience interview participant	Links ideological framing to judgments about legitimate targets and the intended publicity of attacks.

Note. KII quotations are identified by respondent code and role. FGD quotations are identified by district and the total number of discussants in that session.

Across the source-coded evidence, ideological legitimization, belonging, social exclusion, propaganda and strategic target selection emerged as mutually reinforcing processes. KII_6 described ideology as a core framework for justifying action, while KII_1 emphasised the long-term strategic objectives of attacks. The Mayuge and Kasese FGDs similarly connected exclusion, shared identity and "us-versus-them" boundaries with vulnerability to recruitment and the justification of violence.

Identity operated through group membership, personal significance and the construction of boundaries between insiders and outsiders. KII_11 associated extremist involvement with belonging, purpose and brotherhood, while KII_12 described direct engagement and propaganda as strengthening commitment. KII_3 further linked perceived injustice, humiliation, vulnerability and the search for belonging to social exclusion and marginalisation. Taken together, the evidence shows that ideology supplied narratives and moral justification while collective identity created solidarity and emotional commitment.

4.2. Socioeconomic Motivations Behind Terrorism

The socioeconomic findings centred on poverty and material deprivation, lack of opportunity and relative deprivation, and wider economic grievances. Participants did not consistently describe poverty as an automatic cause of terrorism. Instead, they described economic conditions as creating desperation, perceived injustice, vulnerability and openings that extremist groups may exploit. Table 4.2 reproduces the available voices and source labels.

Table 4.2

Thematic analysis of socioeconomic motivations

Theme	Representative verbatim excerpt	Source	Interpretation
Poverty and material deprivation	"I think poverty is a state of lacking sufficient financial resources and material possessions which are required in maintaining a minimum, socially acceptable standard of living."	KII_5 - Civil-society/NGO official (Kampala)	Defines poverty in terms of inability to meet materially and socially acceptable living standards.
Poverty as an indirect driver	"...the relationship between poverty and terror attacks remains indirect and complex because poverty has no straight link to terrorism but it contributes on marginalization and creation of an environment that allows extremist groups to recruit and operate..."	KII_6 - Academic (Kampala)	Treats poverty as an enabling condition that interacts with marginalisation and grievance rather than as a direct cause.
Lack of opportunity and relative deprivation	"...lack of opportunity contributes to terrorism by fostering perceptions of deprivation and injustice...when you look at very well what transpired in the twin bombing in Lugogo and Kabalagala in 2010, you realize that these incidents were masterminded by different layers of youths who were educated but jobless..."	KII_10 - Reporter/media practitioner (Kampala)	Links unemployment and blocked mobility with relative deprivation and recruitment vulnerability.
Lack of opportunity and alternative pathways	"...the lack of opportunity is the major cause of feelings of relative deprivation, vulnerability of youths to be recruited, justification of violence and extremism, alternative pathways and many others..."	KII_7 - Religious leader (Mayuge)	Highlights lack of opportunity as a social condition that may increase youth vulnerability to extremist mobilisation.
Economic grievances and mobilisation	"...the fight to survival and economic grievances are motivating terrorism by generating anger and resentment toward the government, making individuals susceptible to recruitment, and creating an environment where violent groups can gain popular support and operational capacity..."	KII_4 - Financial Intelligence Authority officer (Kampala)	Connects economic grievance to resentment, recruitment susceptibility and operational support for violent groups.
Economic grievances and institutional trust	"...economic grievances sit behind many terrorist attacks while fuelling grievances and anger, undermining the legitimacy of government, increasing recruitment susceptibility, targeting and mobilization."	KII_9 - Terrorism survivor (Kasese)	Shows how economic grievances may acquire political meaning and weaken institutional trust.

The socioeconomic evidence clustered around three closely related conditions: poverty and material deprivation, lack of opportunity and relative deprivation, and wider economic grievances. KII_5 described poverty in terms of insufficient resources for an acceptable standard of living, while KII_6 stressed that poverty had an indirect and complex relationship with terrorism. The evidence therefore points to poverty as a contextual vulnerability that becomes more significant when combined with marginalisation, desperation and perceived injustice.

Lack of opportunity was particularly associated with unemployed or economically constrained youth. KII_10 linked unemployment and the frustrated expectations of educated young people to vulnerability, while KII_7 emphasised relative deprivation and the absence of alternative pathways. KII_4 and KII_9 further connected economic grievances with anger, declining trust in government, recruitment susceptibility and mobilisation. The findings therefore suggest that socioeconomic conditions created enabling environments within which extremist groups could frame recruitment as a pathway to income, recognition, belonging or social advancement.

4.3. Political Grievances and Terrorism

Participants identified perceived injustice, poor governance and corruption, human rights violations, and political disenfranchisement as the principal political grievances associated with terrorism. These themes concerned the relationship between citizens and institutions: whether justice is accessible, whether public authority is regarded as fair, and whether nonviolent channels for participation and redress are viewed as credible. Table 3.3 presents the voices available in the source table.

Theme	Representative verbatim excerpt	Source	Interpretation
Perceived injustice	"I think it's high time the government and the judiciary in particular address the issue of delayed justice...people will always find it when it is not given to them."	FGD_1 - Kampala (10 discussants)	The Kampala group connected delayed or inaccessible justice with grievance and resort to alternative forms of redress.
Perceived injustice	"Perceived injustice is a central and powerful motivator for individuals to engage in terrorism, acting as a 'push factor' that can lead to radicalization...such mentality is what informed LRA and ADF."	KII_8 - Cultural leader (Kasese)	Frames perceived injustice as a grievance that may be collectivised and used to justify radicalisation or retaliation.
Poor governance and corruption	"Poor governance, including corruption, political exclusion, and human rights violations, creates an environment ripe for the emergence of terrorist acts by fuelling grievances, eroding state legitimacy, and leaving a power vacuum that extremist groups do exploit."	KII_1 - Policymaker (Kampala)	Links governance failures with grievance formation, declining legitimacy and opportunities for extremist mobilisation.
Poor governance and corruption	"When governments are perceived as corrupt or only serving the interests of a few, it generates widespread anger, frustration, and a strong sense of injustice among marginalized populations..."	FGD_2 - Mayuge (10 discussants)	The Mayuge group associated corruption and unequal treatment with frustration and declining confidence in peaceful channels.

Theme	Representative verbatim excerpt	Source	Interpretation
Human rights violations	"Besides my legal background...human rights violations motivate terrorism by creating legitimate grievances that extremist groups exploit for recruitment and justification of violence..."	KII_5 - Civil-society/NGO official (Kampala)	Shows how rights violations may generate grievances that extremist organisations can exploit during recruitment.
Restrictions on fundamental freedoms	"Although Uganda has tried to deal with certain grievances, the repression of fundamental freedoms like expression, association, or assembly creates a fertile ground for terrorism...perceived oppression, discrimination, and inequality...generate intense anger and frustration..."	KII_10 - Reporter/media practitioner (Kampala)	Connects restrictions on civic freedoms with perceptions of oppression, discrimination and institutional distrust.
Political disenfranchisement	"...political disenfranchisement motivates acts of terrorism by fostering collective grievances, a sense of injustice, and the belief that violence is the only effective means to achieve political change..."	KII_7 - Religious leader (Mayuge)	Highlights political exclusion and disempowerment as conditions that may make violent alternatives appear meaningful.
Blocked peaceful participation	"Absence of socio-economic opportunities, marginalization, and poor governance can lead to deep-seated feelings of injustice and disempowerment. When people feel they have no voice in the system and that existing channels for peaceful dissent are blocked, they may conclude that violent action is justified..."	KII_8 - Cultural leader (Kasese)	Shows how blocked participation can intensify grievance when combined with socioeconomic and governance concerns.

The political evidence centred on perceived injustice, poor governance and corruption, human rights violations and political disenfranchisement. The Kampala FGD linked delayed justice with grievance, while KII_8 described perceived injustice as a potential push factor in radicalisation. KII_1 connected poor governance and corruption with declining state legitimacy, and the Mayuge FGD similarly associated perceived corruption and unequal treatment with anger and frustration.

Human rights violations and restrictions on expression, association and assembly were also described as grievances that extremist organisations could exploit. KII_5 highlighted the recruitment value of rights-related grievances, while KII_10 linked restrictions on fundamental freedoms to perceived oppression and institutional distrust. KII_7 and KII_8 further connected political exclusion, blocked peaceful participation, and disempowerment with the perception that violent action might provide an alternative route to recognition or change. Collectively, the findings show that political grievances were socially connected to declining institutional trust, exclusion, perceived unfairness and the absence of credible mechanisms for addressing grievances.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Ideology and Identity

Ideology and identity emerged as mutually reinforcing sociological drivers of terrorism. Ideology was not understood merely as a set of abstract political or religious beliefs. Instead, it operated as a framework through which individuals interpreted grievances, identified enemies, justified violence, and attached strategic meaning to terrorist action. The findings indicate that terrorist attacks are not undertaken only for their immediate physical consequences. They are also intended to communicate political messages, generate fear, provoke state responses, attract publicity, and demonstrate the capacity of extremist organisations. In this sense, ideology transforms violence into a symbolic and communicative act.

The finding that ideology creates purpose and reward suggests that extremist narratives provide individuals with explanations for their personal and collective difficulties. Ideology reorganises these experiences into a coherent narrative in which individuals view themselves as members of an oppressed group engaged in a legitimate struggle. This interpretation is consistent with Carson and Turner (2024:93), who established that terrorist attacks are often intended to generate widespread fear, weaken the population's sense of security, provoke excessive state responses, and demonstrate the government's inability to protect its citizens. Terrorism therefore becomes both an act of violence and a struggle over social meaning, public perception, and political legitimacy.

Attacks near the Central Police Station (CPS) at City Square and Jubilee Insurance near Parliament illustrate this symbolic dimension. The importance of such attacks lies not only in the physical damage they cause but also in the meaning attached to their targets. By attacking locations associated with policing, state authority, and national political institutions, perpetrators communicate defiance and attempt to portray the state as vulnerable. Such attacks are therefore directed at both the immediate target and the wider social audience. Their sociological function is to destabilise public confidence, challenge state authority, and reshape collective perceptions of security.

Table 4.1 further indicates that revenge is embedded within ideological interpretations of conflict. Participants associated terrorism with retaliation against perceived political, military, or judicial actions. The authors' examples concerning Uganda's military involvement in Somalia, the attempted attack on General Katumba Wamala, and the killing of Joan Kagezi demonstrate how acts of counterterrorism, prosecution, or military intervention may be interpreted by extremist groups as offences requiring vengeance. Ogbuagu, Olufemi, and Matthew (2025:17) similarly identify vengeance and retribution as important motivations behind terrorist attacks. Sociologically, revenge transforms individual or organisational losses into collective grievances. Through group narratives, an attack against one member may be reframed as an attack against the entire group, thereby creating a moral obligation to retaliate.

The findings also show that ideology amplifies the communicative power of terrorism through narrative framing and publicity. Terrorist organisations seek media visibility because publicity allows their actions to reach audiences beyond the immediate scene of violence. Public attention can communicate strength to supporters and financiers, spread fear among civilians, and provoke political reactions. Hellén et al. (2020:7032) similarly explain that terrorist attacks may be designed as media events through which organisations publicise their activities, disseminate their messages, and destabilise the public's sense of safety. The important sociological point is that terrorism depends partly on social interpretation. An attack gains wider significance when it is reported, discussed, feared, and incorporated into collective memory.

Ideology also influenced target selection. As reflected in Table 4.1, participants described target selection as a calculated process involving symbolic value, accessibility, potential publicity, operational capability, and the expected psychological effect. The TRACK and EVIL DONE frameworks illustrate the strategic considerations used in selecting targets. Clemmow et al. (2023:466) similarly indicate that terrorist targets may be selected for their capacity to generate media attention, widespread fear, and symbolic impact. Attacks against civilians and other soft targets are particularly effective in producing social insecurity because they communicate that ordinary spaces and routine activities are no longer safe. The consequences therefore extend beyond direct casualties to include disruption of social trust, public mobility, economic activity, and everyday interaction.

Identity was equally central to the findings in Table 4.1. Participants associated involvement in terrorism with the search for belonging, purpose, recognition, and personal significance. Individuals experiencing alienation, isolation, or identity crises may become attracted to groups that offer clear membership, shared beliefs, social support, and a sense of collective importance. Holbrook and Horgan (2019:12) similarly establish that the desire for belonging and collective identity can draw individuals into extremist organisations. From the perspective of social solidarity, terrorist groups may create strong internal bonds among members by developing shared norms, values, rituals, loyalties, and definitions of outsiders. However, the solidarity created within extremist groups is exclusionary. It strengthens internal cohesion while constructing sharp boundaries between “us” and “them.” Members may come to view outsiders as enemies, threats, or morally inferior groups against whom violence is justified. Identity therefore does not simply describe who individuals believe they are; it also defines whom they consider legitimate members of the moral community. Once outsiders are dehumanised or blamed for the group’s suffering, violence can be presented as necessary for protecting the group or restoring justice.

The finding on identity crisis should not be interpreted to mean that all individuals experiencing uncertainty or alienation become terrorists. Rather, identity crises create social and psychological vulnerabilities that extremist organisations may exploit. Romadhon (2025:8) similarly explains that individuals disconnected from their cultural or religious heritage may be drawn to groups that offer an unambiguous sense of community, belonging, and meaning. Extremist groups matter because they replace uncertainty with certainty, isolation with membership, and perceived insignificance with a heroic social role.

Group dynamics further deepen commitment after recruitment. As shown in Table 4.1, friendship, devotion, cultism, group polarisation, gradual radicalisation, competition, and martyrdom were identified as mechanisms that sustain involvement. Wahlström and Törnberg (2021:766) observe that friendships and loyalty to comrades become powerful once individuals join radical groups. This means that continued involvement may eventually depend less on the original ideological or economic motivation and more on emotional attachment to the group. Members may fear betraying friends, losing social status, or becoming isolated again. Terrorism is therefore sustained through social relationships as much as through ideology.

Overall, Table 4.1 demonstrates that ideology and identity operate together. Ideology explains the struggle, identifies the enemy, and legitimises violence, while identity creates belonging, solidarity, and emotional commitment. This interaction helps explain why some individuals initially recruited through friendship, adventure, or personal frustration may later develop strong ideological commitment.

5.2 Socioeconomic Motivations

Table 4.2 shows that poverty, lack of opportunity, social exclusion, and economic grievances formed the principal socioeconomic motivations associated with terrorism. Nevertheless, the findings do not establish a simple causal relationship in which poverty automatically produces terrorism. Instead, poverty operates indirectly through relative deprivation, structural inequality, marginalisation, blocked mobility, and vulnerability to recruitment.

The finding that poverty is a secondary rather than a direct cause is sociologically important. Many poor individuals do not participate in terrorism, while some terrorists come from relatively educated or economically stable backgrounds. What appears to matter is not only absolute deprivation but also how individuals interpret their position relative to others. Mama, Aluko, and Oumar (2022:55) similarly argue that there is no consistently strong relationship between absolute poverty and an individual's decision to become a terrorist. However, inequality may generate collective grievances and perceptions of injustice that contribute to domestic terrorism.

Relative deprivation theory provides a useful explanation for this finding. Individuals may feel dissatisfied when they believe they have fewer opportunities, resources, or forms of recognition than people they compare themselves to. The issue is therefore not simply what individuals have, but the difference between what they possess and what they believe they deserve. Where education raises expectations, but employment and social mobility remain limited, frustration may become especially intense. Extremist groups may exploit this gap by attributing the individual's disadvantage to government neglect, political discrimination, religious exclusion, or economic injustice.

The lack of opportunity identified in Table 4.2 was expressed through unemployment, informal employment, insufficient capital, limited mobility, and the absence of alternative pathways. Participants referred particularly to educated but unemployed youths associated with the 2010 Lugogo and Kabalagala bombings. The sociological importance of this finding lies in the contradiction between educational achievement and limited socioeconomic advancement. Education may produce expectations of employment, respect, and upward mobility. When these expectations are repeatedly frustrated, individuals may develop resentment toward institutions perceived as responsible for distributing opportunities.

Adelaja, Labo, and Penar (2018:39) similarly associate lack of opportunity with feelings of relative deprivation, vulnerability to recruitment, and justification of violent extremism. However, unemployment should not be treated as an automatic pathway into terrorism. Its effect depends on how unemployment interacts with exclusion, identity, peer networks, ideological exposure, and perceptions of injustice. Extremist organisations may convert economic dissatisfaction into political anger by presenting violence as a form of resistance, empowerment, or social restoration.

Social exclusion and marginalisation further connect socioeconomic conditions to identity. As shown in Table 4.2, participants reported that exclusion threatens fundamental needs for belonging, control, self-esteem, and personal significance. Treistman (2024:707) similarly argues that social exclusion generates grievance, alienation, and loss of psychological needs, making individuals more susceptible to extremist groups offering identity, purpose, and social support. The findings therefore show that socioeconomic deprivation is not solely material. It also affects how individuals are recognised, respected, and included within society.

Economic grievances can also undermine the legitimacy of the state. Where poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and inequality are perceived as consequences of corruption or discriminatory resource distribution, economic hardship acquires political meaning. Individuals may stop viewing their circumstances as personal misfortune and instead see them as evidence of systematic injustice.

Kandissounon (2023:22) similarly observes that economic hardship can create or intensify pre-existing grievances against the state.

Extremist groups benefit from these conditions because they can offer financial support, social status, employment-like roles, protection, or access to networks. Recruitment may therefore offer both material and symbolic rewards. It may offer income, but it may also provide recognition, purpose, identity, and the perception of participating in a meaningful struggle. This explains why economic and ideological motivations cannot be separated completely. Economic vulnerability may create receptiveness, while ideology interprets the vulnerability and directs it toward a particular target.

Overall, Table 4.2 suggests that socioeconomic motivations operate through a cumulative process. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality create material strain; relative deprivation converts that strain into perceived injustice; social exclusion weakens belonging; and extremist organisations provide alternative identities, narratives, and opportunities. Socioeconomic conditions therefore establish a context of vulnerability, but group relationships and ideological framing influence whether that vulnerability develops into terrorism.

5.3 Political Grievances

Table 4.3 identifies perceived injustice, poor governance, human rights violations, and political disenfranchisement as the major political grievances associated with terrorism. These findings show that terrorism may emerge where individuals or groups lose confidence in formal institutions and perceive violence as an alternative means of obtaining recognition, justice, or political change. Perceived injustice was associated with delayed justice, marginalisation, discrimination, victimisation, and revenge. The sociological importance of perceived injustice lies in its capacity to transform individual dissatisfaction into collective grievance. When people believe that members of their group are repeatedly treated unfairly, personal experiences become interpreted as evidence of wider structural oppression. Extremist organisations may then frame these experiences as part of an “us versus them” struggle. Charkawi, Dunn, and Bliuc (2021:178) similarly demonstrate that perceptions of injustice can increase vulnerability to radicalisation and support for violent extremism.

The example of delayed justice presented in Table 4.3 illustrates how weak or inaccessible institutions may encourage informal and violent forms of redress. When courts, administrative institutions, or political processes are perceived as ineffective, individuals may believe that peaceful methods cannot resolve their grievances. Terrorism may then be framed as a form of self-defence, retaliation, or corrective justice. The critical issue is not whether every grievance is objectively valid, but whether individuals and groups perceive it as legitimate and socially shared.

Poor governance intensifies these perceptions by weakening state legitimacy. Participants associated poor governance with corruption, political exclusion, human rights violations, unequal distribution of distribution, and institutional instability. When governments are viewed as serving only politically or economically privileged groups, marginalised populations may develop anger and distrust. Okolo and Ejime (2018:66) similarly explain that corrupt governance creates the perception that one group benefits at the expense of others, thereby reinforcing “us versus them” divisions.

From a sociological standpoint, state legitimacy depends not only on the state’s capacity to enforce laws but also on the population’s belief that institutions are fair, accountable, and responsive. Where this belief declines, state authority may increasingly be viewed as coercive rather than legitimate. Extremist groups can exploit this legitimacy gap by presenting themselves as defenders of excluded communities or alternatives to ineffective institutions. Poor governance therefore creates both grievances and political opportunities for extremist organisations.

Human rights violations were also identified as major catalysts of terrorism. Table 4.3 shows that restrictions on expression, association, assembly, and other fundamental freedoms may create feelings of oppression, discrimination, and institutional distrust. Okoye and Adejoh (2025:13) similarly associate perceived oppression and inequality with anger, frustration, and domestic extremism. Such violations may strengthen extremist narratives by providing observable examples through which groups portray the state as unjust or hostile.

Counterterrorism measures may become counterproductive when they are perceived as indiscriminate, abusive, or targeted against communities. Although coercive measures may disrupt immediate threats, they may also deepen alienation if innocent individuals experience harassment, arbitrary detention, discrimination, or collective punishment. Extremist groups can use such experiences as recruitment material, presenting violence as a justified response to state repression.

Sitepu and Kemba (2025:28) similarly argue that extremist organisations exploit grievances and disenfranchisement by presenting radical ideologies as legitimate responses to state abuses. They may offer individuals a sense of empowerment, belonging, and purpose that they perceive as absent from mainstream institutions. Human rights violations therefore do more than create anger; they also provide ideological evidence that extremist recruiters can use to validate their claims.

Political disenfranchisement represents the broader outcome of exclusion from meaningful political participation. As presented in Table 4.3, individuals who believe they have no voice in the political system may conclude that conventional participation is ineffective. Feelings of disempowerment intensify where elections, institutions, and channels of public expression are viewed as unfair or inaccessible. Terrorism may then be perceived as an extreme but available method of gaining attention or forcing political change.

Kakuba et al. (2021:83) similarly link marginalisation, poor governance, and lack of socioeconomic opportunity with feelings of injustice and disempowerment. When peaceful dissent appears blocked, individuals may view violence as a legitimate response to inequality. The findings therefore suggest that political grievances become especially dangerous when they combine with socioeconomic exclusion and identity-based narratives. Political dissatisfaction alone may not produce terrorism, but it may become radicalising when groups experience exclusion, develop strong collective identities, and encounter ideologies that define violence as necessary.

Overall, Table 4.3 demonstrates that political grievances weaken the social relationship between citizens and institutions. Perceived injustice creates resentment, poor governance erodes legitimacy, human rights violations provide recruitment narratives, and political disenfranchisement reduces confidence in peaceful change. These processes create conditions in which extremist groups can portray terrorism as resistance, retaliation, or an alternative form of political participation.

The findings in Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 imply that the roots of terrorism in Uganda are relational and cumulative. Socioeconomic inequalities and political grievances create frustration and perceived deprivation; identity processes transform those experiences into collective belonging; and ideology defines enemies, legitimises violence, and directs action. Terrorism should therefore not be understood as the isolated behaviour of inherently deviant individuals. It is socially produced through the interaction of structural inequality, institutional exclusion, group solidarity, and systems of meaning.

5. Conclusions

The paper's central claim that terrorism in Uganda is socially produced through the interaction of structural conditions, political grievances, identity processes, and ideological narratives was adequately supported by the findings. Evidence from the interviews and group discussions showed that poverty and unemployment did not lead directly to terrorism but created conditions of relative deprivation, exclusion, and vulnerability; political injustice, weak governance, and human rights violations weakened trust in institutions; identity-based needs for belonging and significance increased susceptibility to group influence; and ideology converted these grievances into narratives that justified violence, defined enemies, and guided recruitment and target selection. The results, therefore, support the argument that terrorism cannot be explained by any single factor, but by the cumulative relationship between social structure, institutional experience, group identity, and meaning-making. The study's novelty lies in presenting these factors not as isolated causes but as an interconnected sociological pathway in which deprivation generates grievance, identity creates solidarity, and ideology legitimises action. For practice, this implies that counterterrorism in Uganda should move beyond predominantly military and legal responses and adopt integrated prevention strategies that strengthen institutional justice, expand inclusive socioeconomic opportunities, address marginalisation, rebuild community trust, support disengagement and reintegration, and interrupt ideological recruitment before grievances are transformed into violence.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, there is need for governments and other sectors in countering terrorism to Realtime the social economic contractors of each region and come up with empowerment programs for economic transformation that are inclusive and not based on political, religious or party affiliations, programs like SACCOS, EMYOOGA, PDM, YLP and others have but been lowly popularized and tend to benefit a few individuals that have certain connections. These are feed interventions that are not well popularized.

There is a high rate of unemployment among youths. Unemployment packages should be tailored to youths who have capital and collateral to set up associations that provide such credit, such as saccos or village groups.

An intentional program to inculcate patriotism should be rolled out in all schools to strengthen commitment to society and ensure equality before the law. Other countries have national service that is paid for over two years and can generate capital while fostering greater nationalism/patriotism. These can address identity and ideological issues.

Political grievances must be addressed through credible institutions, greater empowerment across all sectors, adversarial competition, job creation, fair electoral practices, and the resolution of human rights concerns. These civil factors intrusively address the root causes of terrorism that radicalize individuals who end up in terrorism.

Limitations

Methodologically, this article was conducted as a sociological analysis, relying heavily on qualitative tools such as in-depth interviews, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). Respondents, including security personnel, local leaders, and affected community members, exhibit response bias. They may conceal sensitive political views, exaggerate state repression, or minimize localized complicity for fear of surveillance or legal repercussions. Second, because the study traces a historical trajectory (from past insurgencies like the Lord's Resistance Army and the Allied Democratic Forces to contemporary urban threats).

In terms of scope and unit of analysis, while terrorism and violent extremism affect Uganda nationally, the study's scope was constrained to specific hotspots (e.g., the Kampala Metropolitan area, the Rwenzori sub-region, or Eastern Uganda). Consequently, findings derived from urban radicalization dynamics or specific borderland communities cannot be universally generalized to all regions of Uganda, given the country's diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic landscape.

DECLARATION

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest of any form regarding this work, and is, thus, their original work done independently.

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