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Guns and Conservation: Protecting Wildlife *and* Ensuring “Peace and Security” in Northern Kenya

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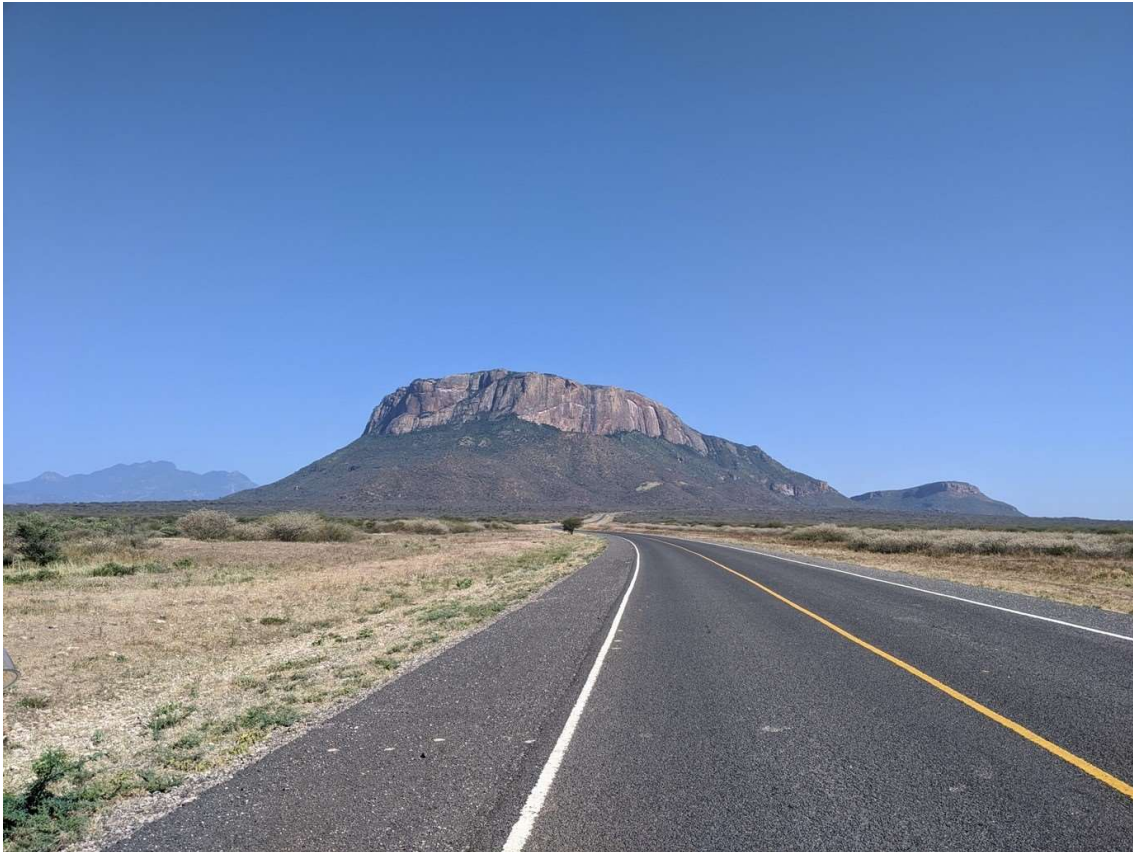
Abstract: By mapping the circulation of firearms in northern Kenya, this paper aims to show the different ways armed conservation practices are more than a means to protect wildlife. Conservation is a means to achieve “peace and security,” too. Rangers fill the law enforcement vacuum that the government leaves open: locally, when protecting British Army training grounds; regionally, when addressing cattle raiding and road banditry; and even globally when patrolling activities are financed through the US Antiterrorism Assistance. At the same time, physical insecurity has increased because of the significant mobilization of firearms by civilians. Even though guns are but one element in conservation politics, following their circulation allows me to bring these different places and times into one analytical lens.

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Introduction

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) play an important role in wildlife poaching, commercial cattle raiding, and wider conflict in northern Kenya. In the Samburu-Laikipia region, for example, most registered dead elephants were killed by bullets (Vira and Ewing 2014, 60). And pointing at the mass of circulating illegal guns, I was told, “a gun is but a

phone call away”¹: an impressive 530,000 to 680,000 civilian households possess firearms (Wepundi et al. 2012, 47). Cattle raiding has, with help of firearms, transformed since the 1980s from a small-scale cultural practice into commercialised raiding—a means of resource accumulation or a commercial enterprise, escalating physical insecurity (Sharamo 2014; Ltipalei, Kivuva, and Jonyo 2018; Osamba 2000; 2001; African Union and Small Arms Survey 2019; Marmone 2017).



**Figure 1. Moyale highway running through Kalama conservancy,
view of Mt. Ololokwe**

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Firearms equally play an important role in addressing all these issues. Armed conservation practices explicitly address regional instability, going beyond direct conservation. The Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT),² for example, states that they—collaborating with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS),³ Kenya Police and local government authorities—“support a community-led approach to *securing* the north Kenya landscape” through a community policing model (Northern Rangelands Trust n.d., my emphasis). Moreover, they also stress that their multi-ethnic mobile ranger teams are “wildlife guardians, peace-keepers, Police support and conservationists all rolled into one” (Northern

¹ Interview Ward Administrator March 2020.

² An umbrella organization supporting the establishment and management of community conservancies.

³ The Kenyan Wildlife Service is the state agency managing Kenya’s national parks, reserves, and sanctuaries. The Wildlife Conservation and Management Act of 2013, following up the 1989 Act, re-establishes this state entity.

Rangelands Trust n.d.)—merging so-called civilian and military identities. According to US officials involved in the Antiterrorism Assistance programme, the KWS presence is also an important leverage contributing to “rural stability” (Maguire 2018, 72).

By mapping the circulation of firearms in northern Kenya, this paper aims to show the different ways armed conservation practices are more than a means to protect wildlife. Conservation is a means to achieve “peace and security,” too. This is the case locally, when protecting British Army training grounds; regionally, when addressing cattle raiding and road banditry; and even globally, when patrolling activities are financed through the US Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) programme. Firearms are but one element in conservation politics and following their circulation allows me to bring these different places and times into one analytical lens. Before going into the empirical examples, I first outline how conservation links to conflict and shortly sketch the biography of firearms in northern Kenya.

Conservation and conflict

Northern Kenya exemplifies an area where wildlife conservation entangles with wider conflict dynamics. Small arms and ammunition are easily available, with in-country circulation and influx from neighbouring countries (Mkutu and Wandera 2013). Violent incidences are often historically rooted in inter-communal tensions, linked to land and resource distribution, and can be influenced by elite political interests and criminal gangs (Bond and Mkutu 2017). Violence also correlates with conservation and the proliferation of conservancies. Data from the ACLED⁴ shows that 57% of all fatalities resulting from 5082 conflict incidences⁵—reported between 15 January 1997 and 5 May 2016—occurred since 2007 when the last wave of commercial poaching began; and a majority of the conflict incidences took place “in the provinces surrounding Kenya’s main elephant rangelands” (Maguire 2018, 67f).

Conservation—often based on tourism for financial income—is a main economic sector in Kenya (MTW 2020, 47), also outside national park boundaries, where 65-70% of wildlife resides (Ogutu et al. 2016, 2). In these areas, private individuals and groups turned their land into “conservancies”—now covering eleven per cent of Kenya’s landmass (KWCA 2017). Community conservancies, for example, quickly increased in number under the umbrella of the NRT—the first ones established in 1995 and increasing from 19 in 2012 to 39 conservancies in 2019. Community conservancies now play a critical role in the politics of security provision in north Kenya, often beyond wildlife conservation alone.

A short history of firearms

The illegal and legal guns that circulate throughout the region have a complex history, originating from around the globe. Most are AK47s and G3 rifles. Frequently, circulating

⁴ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

⁵ This includes “incidents of political, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, environmental and criminal violence at the hands of state and non-state actors” (Maguire 2018, 68f).

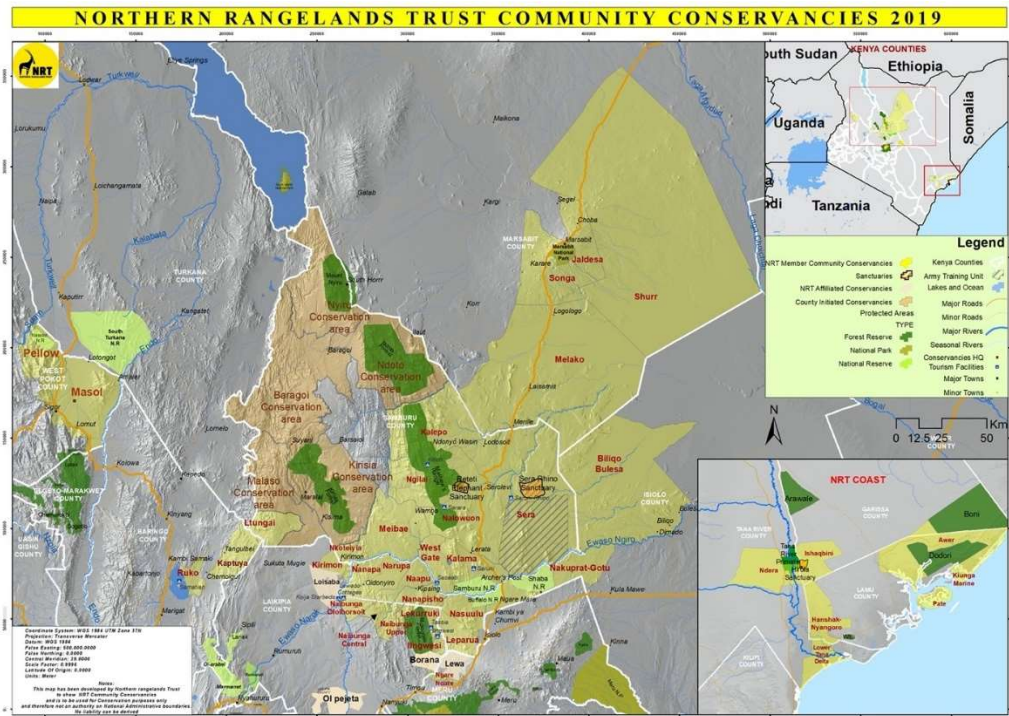
guns are Cold War remnants, bought up by private investors—“merchants of death”—and sold to state and non-state actors in precarious ways (Wood and Peleman 2000; Grant 2012; Phythian 2000; Schroeder and Lamb 2006). Many of those arms still circulate today. They are sold and bought between individuals and border communities, or stolen from other people during livestock raids (Small Arms Survey et al. 2014).

Firearms overtook other weaponry from the late nineteenth century onwards. They were, for example, traded between the Abyssinia empire, Sudan and the Turkana. Another influx came from the coast via Swahili and Arab traders (Collins 2006, 106f; Small Arms Survey et al. 2014; Mburu 2001, 153). From 1979, following Uganda’s Idi Amin’s fall, a severe cattle disease, and a two-year drought, firearms were increasingly mobilised in cattle raids and military attacks. For example, G3 rifles and MK-4 weapons were acquired by the Karimojong (Uganda), Pokot, and Turkana from ex-president Idi Amin’s fleeing soldiers in Uganda and the abandoned Moroto Barracks (Osamba 2000, 22; Small Arms Survey et al. 2014, 3).

Current circulation of guns

Currently, the AK-47 is the most commonly referred to firearm owned by civilians, transported and traded by road on persons, animals or in cargo; government vehicles also function as means of transport, passing by individuals, traders, or from community to community (Wepundi et al. 2012, 58). Government stockpiles and British Army Training Camps (BATUK) likely also function as sources of arms and ammunition (Wepundi et al. 2012, 57, 49). An AK-47 goes for up to 800 USD in 2012 (Small Arms Survey et al. 2014) and people report that “one camel for an AK-47, and three camels for a G3 rifle” in 2019 (Omondi Gumba and Chepe Turi 2019)—a camel costing around 70,000 shillings or 700 USD in early 2020.⁶ Sometimes guns are already circulating within Kenya, while others are trafficked from neighbouring countries.

⁶ Fieldnotes, March 2020.



Map 1. NRT Community Conservancies 2019 (NRT 2019)

The “arms triangle”

The national roads—coming from Mandera near Somalia and Moyale bordering Ethiopia—converging in a T-section in Isiolo are also referred to as the “arms triangle” where main smuggling routes from Somalia and Ethiopia converge (Mkutu and Wandera 2013). Somalia is the main source of arms—through Mandera and El Wak towns—but weapons also come from Ethiopia and Uganda, and from South Sudan (Mkutu and Wandera 2013; Wepundi et al. 2012; Bolton 2019)⁷ through armed unpaid soldiers and rebel fighters after the 2018 peace agreement, for example (Omondi Gumba and Chepe Turi 2019).

Today the journey from Isiolo up north to Moyale takes you over a tarmacked highway. It was upgraded from a dirt road as part of Kenya’s Vision 2030—the country’s “long-term development blueprint” (Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat n.d.)—and the Great North Road, which runs from Cape Town to Cairo. The highway is supposed to integrate the “remote” North with the rest of Kenya and connect Kenya with Ethiopia (Kochore 2016). The highway carries you through a vast and beautiful landscape consisting of semi-arid lands, mostly enclosed in community conservancies (see map). People and the police call on rangers of the various community conservancies, as well as the mobile ranger teams to address road banditry and cattle raids.⁸ Though the upgrade makes road banditry more difficult, robberies related to livestock theft persist along the road close to Marsabit (Chepe Turi 2020).

⁷ Interview Commander of Police Samburu, March 2020.

⁸ Fieldnotes February-March 2020.

Poaching

Individuals and organised crime groups mobilise ammunition and firearms for illegalised hunting—either for their own consumption or the illicit international wildlife market. During the peak in poaching from 2007-2014, particularly high prices could be obtained for elephant tusks (USD 1,000-2,000/kg) and rhino horns (USD 40,000-70,000/kg)—“placing it [the illegal trade in rhino horn] among the ranks of the trade in guns, drugs, and people” (Massé, Lunstrum, and Holterman 2018, 204; Al Jazeera 2013).

Firearms circulated and mobilised need ammunition, too. “Ammunition produced by the former Royal Ordnance Factories facility at Radway Green in the UK [...] has reportedly been found” in enclosed conservancies with a rhino population in Kenya. Security officers posited that the ammunition—manufactured for the British Armed Forces—had been picked up from the BATUK training grounds (Carlson, Wright, and Dönges 2015, 19; see also Wepundi et al. 2012, 49).

State arms in the conservation sector

Firearms are mobilised in conservation practices to address cattle raids and poachers and for other security jobs. Generally, if a security incidence occurs, people first call upon the community rangers, and only then the KWS or police.⁹ Rangers are provided with guns through the Kenyan Police after they’ve enrolled as National Police Reservists (NPR) and trained in law enforcement at the KWS academy. Community rangers are additionally or only trained in weapons handling by the private security firm “51 Degrees” (Mkutu and Wandera 2013; Northern Rangelands Trust n.d.)¹⁰ and sometimes the police.¹¹ Additionally, some rangers carry firearms through a special agreement with the police that allow NPR-rangers to lend their gun to non-NPRs,¹² who often already trained in firearm use.¹³

Apart from community rangers and KWS officers, guns are mobilised through the NRT by their mobile, multi-ethnic rapid response ranger teams—the “9”-teams. The “9”-teams are linked to a 24-hour operations room in Lewa—a private conservancy in Meru county (see map)—and are specially trained in “weapons handling and combat operations” by 51 Degrees. These rangers also deploy more modern and higher calibre rifles than other rangers (Maguire 2018, 73; see Buzora 2016; Northern Rangelands Trust 2019). Just like illegal guns are but a phone call away, legal guns, too, are but a phone call away.

Addressing poachers

Armed rangers in the various private, public, and communal conservation areas respond to alerts about poachers. The numbers of poached animals declined drastically in northern

⁹ Fieldnotes February-March 2020, the police confirmed the importance of community rangers in addressing security incidents such as livestock theft.

¹⁰ Interview warden of Nanapa community conservancy, February 2020; Interviews various community rangers February-March 2020.

¹¹ Interview Commander of Police Samburu, March 2020.

¹² Interview former warden of Meibae community conservancy, March 2020.

¹³ Interview warden of Nanapa community conservancy, February 2020.

Kenya since 2012 to only a handful (Northern Rangelands Trust 2019, 62). For example, two out of seventeen dead elephants were killed for ivory in Ngilai conservancy in 2019.¹⁴ Just like responding to other security issues, community rangers collaborate with the KWS and the "9"-teams in addressing poaching.¹⁵ Though poaching declined, combatting wildlife crime remains a central component in channelling funding to conservation. For example, the Community Policing Initiative of the NRT—implemented with the European Union in Kenya, which donated 402million Ksh for infrastructural equipment —aims to "combat wildlife crime" (Jebet 2019). This is true for "security"—beyond direct biodiversity conservation—as well, for example when conservation is linked to terrorism.

Beyond conservation: addressing local, national and global security threats

The police, who are deployed elsewhere than their area of origin, have lower socio-cultural leverage than the community rangers, who work close to home. That is why many people indicate that they will call the rangers first when an incident happens—even just so one can speak their mother tongue. In cases of cattle rustling, the rangers can mediate with elders and/or *morans*¹⁶ of their own community to resolve the livestock theft and help return the animals to their owners. The number of cattle raids dropped according to the head of Samburu's tourism department, from an average of 300 to ten cases per month,¹⁷ while the County Police Commander put the monthly amount at five.¹⁸

Guns mobilised to address cattle raids or road banditry might have disastrous consequences if the case is not handled well. For example, in the beginning of 2019, Samburu *morans* stole many goats from Borana pastoralists and brought them to Kalama. The police responded right away—without Kalama community rangers—and moved straight from their headquarters in Wamba to the *manyatta*¹⁹ where the goats had been moved to. The *morans* saw the police coming and what followed was an exchange of fire; four policemen and two elders died on the spot, I was told.²⁰ From 1996, automatic rifles changed cattle raids and armed conflict in north Samburu; the number of human deaths and cattle stolen rose significantly, by a few hundreds and thousands respectively (Marmone 2017, 172).

By responding to cattle raids, armed and non-armed rangers fill "a vacuum of law enforcement and security provision" that is created by the limited presence of the Kenyan Police in the area. Conservancies fill this vacuum by developing broader than only frontline anti-poaching functions that are aimed at achieving wider stability (Maguire 2018, 74) and human security, as well as development in the area. Apart from addressing livestock theft, guns and rangers are mobilized in protecting BATUK training camps and transporting camels from the market to the buyer, among other jobs.

¹⁴ Interview manager of Ngilai community conservancy, February 2020.

¹⁵ Interviews February-March 2020.

¹⁶ Warriors, age-set before becoming junior elders.

¹⁷ Interview Chief Officer Tourism and Marketing Samburu County, March 2020.

¹⁸ Interview Commander of Police Samburu, March 2020.

¹⁹ A (temporary) village.

²⁰ Interview warden of Kalama community conservancy, February 2020.

Armed rangers from Kalama conservancy are hired by BATUK as security guards, for example.²¹ Every time the BATUK go for training—around 9 times a year—they hire rangers from Kalama. Three to five rangers are sent rotationally so everyone has a chance to do the job.²² Additional to their salary, rangers earn 1,300-1,500 KES per weekday and 3,000 KES on a weekend day.²³ They provide security to the two BATUK camps and prevent theft of soldiers’ phones, laptops, and bags.²⁴ The rangers on duty also ensure that the community adjacent the training field stay safe and their livestock does not wander around when an exercise is going on.²⁵

“Securing” camels is another part-time job that rangers take up, and for which guns are mobilised in the area. When we were driving on the A2 highway and saw impressive Ololokwe mountain getting smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror—not far from Archer’s Post—we had to slow down the car. On the horizon numerous camels were crossing the road. Accompanying the nineteen camels were four people—two community rangers, armed and in uniform, and two civilians. The four were on their way to Isiolo, to the camel’s new owner, and had already been on the road for two days. They needed to ensure the safe arrival of the camels in Isiolo. The more camels, the more financially beneficial to the rangers, who get paid around 1,000 KES per camel to transport them by foot. The rangers would hand the camels over to other rangers from Archers onward and take the matatu back home.²⁶

Conservation in northern Kenya intertwines with global security issues such as terrorism as well. Previously, al-Shabaab terrorism was unfairly linked to the increased poaching of elephants and the illegal ivory trade, calling ivory “the white gold of jihad” and labelling poachers terrorists (Maguire and Haenlein 2015; Duffy 2016; see Elephant Action League 2016). In this narrative, ivory is a major source of funding for al-Shabaab’s activities. Even though the rhetoric is flawed—al-Shabaab has other known prominent sources of funding and the illegal ivory trade other main facilitators (Maguire and Haenlein 2015) –, it builds on existing “anxieties about global security threats ... and the War on Terror” and might “allow them [conservation NGOs] to tap into the greater resources available for security and anti-terrorism initiatives (as compared with environmental/biodiversity conservation)” (Duffy 2016, 244). In Kenya, we find several examples where conservation and anti-poaching are either financed through counterterrorism projects or explicitly linked to global security.

As part of the US ATA program, the Border Police Unit (BPU) received a drone training in April-May 2019. The drones now form an integral part of the BPU’s activities. According to the ATA, those activities include—next to counterterrorism—anti-poaching operations and the “detection, identification, and arrest of ... poachers ...” (USA Department of State n.d., 57). Contrarily, the BPU does not explicitly mention anti-poaching as part of their

²¹ Interview rangers February 2020; Interview warden of Kalama community conservancy, August 2020.

²² Interview warden of Kalama community conservancy, August 2020; Interview assistant warden and senior ranger Kalama community conservancy, August 2020.

²³ 1,000 KES translated roughly to 10 USD in 2020.

²⁴ Interview warden of Kalama community conservancy, August 2020.

²⁵ Interview assistant warden and senior ranger Kalama community conservancy, August 2020.

²⁶ Interview community ranger, March 2020.

mission (see APS n.d.). The KWS were additionally jointly trained with the BPU, and other units in rural border patrol since 2011 through the US ATA (Thomas Maguire 2018, 71f). Furthermore, the EU commissioned a study on the wildlife-security nexus, taking NRT conservancies in northern Kenya as a case study. The report underlines the importance of conservation for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy. They state that “wildlife and security are essential components of sustainable development,” and fulfil objective 3.3 of the EU Action Plan by improving “the knowledge base on links between wildlife trafficking and other forms of organized crime and financing for militias or terrorist groups” (EC and DEVCO 2019, 15). This indicates how anxieties about links between wildlife conservation and broader security issues impact funding channels.

Conclusion

Mapping how illegal and legal guns circulate in northern Kenya across borders and sectors in historical light is important. This case shows how guns are mobilized in the conservation sector to address a whole range of broader security issues that go beyond direct wildlife conservation. Conservation, here, is also a means to achieve “peace and security.” Especially by addressing cattle raids, but also several other security jobs, rangers fill the law enforcement vacuum the government leaves open; while physical insecurity has increased because of the significant mobilization of firearms by civilians. This wide-ranging mandate allows conservation actors, like the NRT and KWS, to wield broader sources of funding. However, as conservation becomes a form of privatised security, this also raises more questions about accountability and transparency (see Small 2006). To what extent can private actors, such as NGOs and conservancies, provide “public goods” such as “peace and security”? Where lies accountability in cases of misconduct?

Furthermore, looking at the different spaces and times guns have been mobilized, we detangle “the gun” or “violence” from “sticking” (cf. Ahmed 2004) to certain actors—pastoralists specifically—and avoid reproducing old cultural stereotypes. Historically, pastoralists of northern Kenya were marginalised by powerful actors, especially the colonial but also post-colonial state. British settlers and western anthropologists advanced a racist narrative stereotyping pastoralists as a “war-like” people whose livelihoods are but a primitive mode of production (Osamba 2000, 15ff). Colonial policies aimed at “controlling” pastoralist movement and strengthening colonial power were supported by such narratives (Osamba 2000, 15ff; see also Sobania 2002). Under post-colonial regimes marginalisation has continued (Sharamo 2014, 4ff), exemplified by people referring to northern Kenya as the frontier, “Kenya B” or not part of Kenya at all²⁷—which Vision 2030 aims to tackle. This short paper, then, contributes to “unsettle” those “old notions of the nature and direction of violence” and challenges “assumptions that the disadvantaged are more violent than the powerful; and that modernity is increasingly less violent” (Walby 2012, 95).

²⁷ Fieldnotes February-March, 2020.

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