

# EXTERNAL TRIGGERS AND THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN KENYA 1990-2014

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the external dynamics that resulted in the proliferation of arms into Kenya in general and Northern Kenya in specific. The article has two major arguments. First, during the cold war, there was an arms race in the region because of its strategic position. This resulted in the two super powers, USA and USSR to arm specific countries that were considered to be friendly to them. Once cold war ended, these arms were flooded in the market as they no longer were controlled by the superpowers. Eventually, they got into the arms of civilians exacerbated already existence conflict. The study finds and concludes that political instability in Somalia made Kenyan Somalis able to obtain guns by volunteering to join the fight for the Ogaden in Ethiopia, and then slipped back into Kenya. In some cases, renegade Somali soldiers did the same. In Ethiopia and Eritria, The rivalry between the countries led to arms race between the two nations, where each country is involved in massive acquisition of arms. Meanwhile, The Turkana exploited the ethnic rivalry between their foremost enemy in Uganda-the Dodoth and their Ugandan cousins, the Jie to get arms supplies from the latter.

**Key Words:** external triggers, escalation of conflict, Northern Kenya, 1990-2014

## INTRODUCTION

After 1990, there were serious external dynamics that took place in the Horn of Africa (HOA) which have had direct influence in the escalation of conflict in Northern Kenya. These external dynamics indirectly resulted in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons into the arms of pastoralists in northern Kenya aiding in the transformation of traditional conflict into all-out warfare in pastoralist regions.

This article discusses the external dynamics that resulted in the proliferation of arms into Kenya in general and Northern Kenya in specific. The article has two major arguments. First, during the cold war, there was an arms race in the region because of its strategic position. This resulted in the two super powers, USA and USSR to arm specific countries that were considered to be friendly to them. Once cold war ended, these arms were flooded in the market as they no longer were controlled by the superpowers. Eventually, they got into the arms of civilians exacerbated already existence conflict.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Cold and Post-Cold War Politics in the HOA**

The Horn of Africa is one of the most complex and conflicted regions of the world. For over a century, the Horn has been a theatre for strategic power struggles and the Cold War confrontation when each of the principal countries of the Horn of Africa switched sides at crucial junctures (Michael, 1998). Cold War was generally driven by material interests or ideological controversy and the Horn of Africa as a strategic location was turned into a pawn during the Cold War (Mohamed, 2009). Its strategic location which is directly at the southern end of the Red Sea, across the Arabian Peninsula, and thus located close to major oil-lines constituted a prime spot for the United States and Soviet Union and their allies to project power, control politics, and provide advanced military support to their Middle East and Persian Gulf allies (Lefebvre, 1991). Aware of this strategic location, United States embarked on increasing its presence in the region, which among others was necessitated by the need to support and stabilize pro-Western governments, control of the sea route, and ensure the economic security of the West thereby restraining the possibility of a Soviet Union's attempt at influencing post-colonial societies into joining the communist camp.

USA began to increase its presence through the control of the Mediterranean Sea route, Suez Canal channel further restraining the possibility of a Soviet blockade of oil lanes mainly located in Sudan. Additionally, the United States intended to keep the Red Sea and Indian Ocean open for international trade as well as for Israeli shipping. The control of the strategic ports in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean were critical for both super powers, mainly the Kismayu, Berbera, Boossaso in Somalia, Masswa in Ethiopia and port Sudan in Sudan. Their strategic influence of these ports enabled them to control the political activities in the Horn of Africa (Schwab, 1978).

The United States' increasing interest of shielding and protecting third world countries of socialist influence prompted it to provide financial and military support to Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. To further prevent any Soviet enlargement on the Horn, the United States tried unsuccessfully to cooperate with the Somalia as well. The Soviet Union, however, succeeded in procuring the support of Somalia through advanced shipment of military hardware pending the signing of full military aid agreement in 1963.

These developments marked the beginning of the significant presence of the two former super powers' in the Horn of Africa. The Soviet Union's foothold in Somalia was strengthened following the overthrow of Siad Barre's government, who thereafter established what he called scientific socialism (Birnbaum, 2002; Mohamed, 2009). Through sheer blackmail, both Somalia and Ethiopian governments being anxious to benefit from this international political situation, threatened their newly found allies to change sides in case of inadequate support. While the United States was aware of these schemes, the Soviet Union fell into the trap and went a heard to sign a Friendship and Cooperation agreement with Somalia in 1974, thereby making Somalia as one of the most heavily militarized countries in the continent (Parsons, 1995). Through this Friendship and Cooperation agreement, Somalia received heavy arsenal from the Soviet Union.

The United States' alignment to Ethiopia changed when conflict erupted between Ethiopia and Eritrea. United States' advised Ethiopia's leadership against using an untrained peasant militia in Eritrea. In a subsequent slaughter of Eritreans, Ethiopia was rendered by the United States ineligible for military aid when it was listed as among the human rights violators. However, United States' suspension of military aid to Ethiopia occurred not only when the country was running out of essential military hardware, but was also facing Eritrean and Somali insurgents. To overcome the twin problems, Ethiopia turned to the Soviet Union for military aid. The Soviet Union's recognition of the benefits of allying with Ethiopia brokered a \$1 billion arms deal and signed a treaty of friendship with Ethiopia, while simultaneously continuing their presence in Somalia.

### **Political Instability in Somalia**

Somalia has had less than ten years of relative peace since independence in 1960. Conflicts in the country arose following the assassination of its second president in 1969. This occasioned power struggle among competing political forces. The ensuing leadership and political vacuum was exploited by the military, who through a coupe installed its military chief-Siad Barre- as the country's new president. The new president established governing council called the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), to steer the country until new elections of a civilian president. However, the council failed to organize elections and instead embarked on the arrest and torture of members of the fallen regime, banned all political parties and movements, abolished the National Assembly and suspended the national constitution. These developments strengthened the public belief that Barre's led military masterminded the assassination of the country's second president.

Political instability in Somalia especially under Siad Barre led to the militarization of civilian population through a number of mechanisms. Marginalization of established military institutions and military officers was one of the mechanisms that led to the militarization of the civilian population in Somalia and beyond. The Supreme Revolutionary Council of Somalia under Barre doubted the allegiance of some of the then existing military officers, most of whom it perceived to be supportive of the former political establishment. The Council through intensive purge systematically weeded out what it considered the undesirable elements from the military. Some of the fleeing or purged military officials left with substantial quantities of weapons that fell into the hands of already existing armed groups in the country. Some of the purged military personnel later headed the various rebel groups thereby recruiting and arming civilians to fight Barre's government. Further, some of the purged officers also went a head and established their own militia groups and combined forces with others in their effort to oust the government of Siad Barre.

Lack of an effective disarmament program meant that most of these weapons remained with civilian population long after Barre's failed destabilization project. Further, the government hosted clan leaders who were also potential power seekers, and were thus ready to mobilize members of their clans to be trained by the government and then used to fight forces opposed to the government. Groups that were armed by the government later became fully fledged militia groups who later turned against the very government that armed them. Other members of the civilian populations, who were recruited, deserted with arms upon receiving military training.

The disintegration and indiscipline in the ranks of rebel movements was also a mechanism through which the militarization of the civilian populations has occurred. Many armed political movements experience schism within their organizations. This situation resulted in splits, massive recruitment of new fighters, who are usually civilians. For instance, the quarrel between Hussein Aideed and Ali Mahdi led to the split of Somali National Alliance. Such factional groupings appealed to members of their respective clans for political support and recruitment. This occasioned the proliferation of clan-based political movements with armed militia wings. The disintegration and subsequent indiscipline in these militia movements saw the systematic mobilization and arming of civilian populations resulting in high number of arms in civilian hands.

Many Kenyan Somalis were able to obtain guns by volunteering to join the fight for the Ogaden in Ethiopia, and then slipped back into Kenya. In some cases, renegade Somali soldiers did the same. The establishment of Daadab Refugee camp in Northern Kenya to offer sanctuary to Somalis escaping from the conflict in their country also fueled the availability of arms in the region. Although majority of the refugees were ordinary citizens afflicted by protracted wars in their country, a significant number of the refugees comprised of the former soldiers of the ousted Siad Bare's government with others coming from the numerous armed groups that emerged after the fall of the military government under Siad Bare. A number of these refugees could not be

easily accommodated in the camps while in possession of arms, thus prompting the sale of weapons cheaply to the locals. Pastoralists in Northern Kenya were the immediate beneficiary of these arms, making Northern Kenya saturated with automatic guns from the Kenyan Somalis. Pastoralists replaced their spears with guns. At the height of the conflict in unconfirmed estimates for the volume of arms entering Kenya from Somalia ranged as high as 5,000 automatic rifles per month, with recovered weapons reportedly showing Chinese, U.S., and Bulgarian markings (Muggah & Breman, 2001)

### **Ethiopia-Eritrea Rivalry**

Apart from the conflicts in Somalia, the rivalry between Ethiopia and Eritrea also contributed to the militarization of civilians in the region. This rivalry is traceable to late 1990s. The regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea were the product of alliance between rebel movements to overthrow the dictatorial regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Ethiopia was partitioned by a mutual consent of the new rebel governments. Bilateral relations were normal between the two countries until border war broke out in 1998. It is after this period that the warring neighbours sought alliance with Sudan and perhaps other neighbours to destabilize each other. Eritrea urged the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) to accelerate armed action against Ethiopia. In return, Ethiopia played an active role in the creation of Eritrean Jihad Movement (EJM) and Eritrean Forces Alliance (ENFA) to weaken Eritrea (Assefa, 1998). The two countries have continued to fight proxy wars through providing military and other forms of support to various warring groups.

The Ethiopian government has provided broad and vital support to the Transitional Federation Government of Somalia (TFG) and friendly Somali clans, including material, training and troops even before it invaded it in late 2006. While the amount of support that Ethiopia has provided to date is difficult to verify, successive U.N. reports have pointed to substantial support from Addis Ababa to the TFG and authorities in Puntland and Somaliland. The UN Monitoring Group (2005) reported that Eritrea had supported and armed groups in Somalia fighting the TFG. The Monitoring Group's report in 2010 also report that Eritrea was providing significant and sustained political, financial and material support, including arms, ammunition and training, to armed opposition groups in Somalia since at least 2007. Eritrea's involvement the report noted was an attempt to counter Ethiopian influence in Somalia, especially because it perceives the TFG as a proxy for the Ethiopian Government.

Ethiopian-Eritrean rivalry was most demonstrated in the year 2006 when two military cargo shipments from Eritrea meant for Islamic Courts Unions (ICU) was delivered through Mogadishu airport. This prompted Ethiopia to invade Somalia and within a relatively short period drove ICU leadership into exile. Ethiopia then installed the first FTG, but which also faced a barrage of opposition groups supported by the Eritrean government. The two countries to date still wage proxy wars in Somalia. While Ethiopia supports the government of Somalia under

the auspices of the African Union, Eritrea has been accused of supporting Islamic insurgents in Somalia including Al-Shabaab.

The rivalry between Ethiopia and Eritrea has led to arms race between the two nations, where each country is involved in massive acquisition of arms. Eritrea for instance, purchased weapons from Belarus, Bulgaria and France between 2006 and 2009 worth over 15 million pounds, majority of which being small arms and light weapons. In the same period, Ethiopia purchased weapons from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary and France worth over 25 million pounds. Although these purchases are done in readiness for war between the two nations, some of these weapons are diverted and used to fuel wars in Somalia. While not training their guns at each other, the two countries find themselves supporting proxy wars in the horn of Africa, with Somalia being a particular concern. The danger of the unregulated arms supply to Somalia and other militia groups in the Horn of Africa is that other than fuelling protracted conflicts in Somalia, there is an escalation of arms availability and access to other areas including Pastoralist of Northern Kenya.

### **Instability in Uganda**

An ideological paradox has been played out in Uganda under its most enduring presidents: Milton Obote, Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni. In the First Republic under Obote, the country flirted with socialism at home while remaining basically part of the Western camp. In the so-called 'Second Republic' under Idi Amin, the country flirted with the Soviet Union in foreign policy, while trying to Africanise capitalism. Under Museveni, capitalism at home and pro-Westernism in foreign policy converged.

The rivalry between Obote and Amin further provided channels through which arms reached civilian populations (Holger, 1977). The author observes that at the height of their disagreements, Obote and Amin both resorted to ethnic manipulation in their effort to shore up their support in the armed forces', as well as in their attempt to control the entire country. For instance, Obote created a number of armed organizations in an attempt to rival the regular army, namely the Special Force and the General Service Unit (GSU), and appointed his cousin Akena Adoko as the overall command (Irin 2006).

The Special Force and the GSU were largely dominated by individuals from Obote's own district of Lango, and were favoured in terms of arms, equipment and budgetary allowance. This drew the fury of the regular police and army. This behaviour drew an equal reaction from Amin, who mobilized his own ethnic affiliates from West Nile to counter balance the inflated numbers of Langi and Acholi in the army. The disbandment of the Obote's forces- following his ouster in 1971- without appropriate disarmament program meant that most of the soldiers left the barracks with arms, most of which were sold to the civilian population while others used for criminal activities by the former soldiers. The fact that soldiers lacked a common command structure



further implied that monitoring their activities and enforcing appropriate discipline became a bit cumbersome. The result of this was the flooding of civilian population with illegal firearms.

The dramatic and unexpected fall of Amin's government in 1979, led to soldiers at Moroto and Kotido Barracks flee leaving behind huge stoke piles of firearms unprotected. It is estimated that 15,000 guns and approximately two million rounds of ammunition were stolen (Human Rights Watch Report, 1999). These barracks were situated in the larger Karamoja cluster, not far away from the Kenyan border. The development allowed Dodoth, Karamojong and Jie morans to loot arms from the barracks. To bolster their front against the National Resistance Army (NRA) led by Museveni, which had been waging a guerrilla war against Obote's government, Okello recruited hundreds of Dodoth and Kramojong morans into the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). When the NRA defeated them in 1986, the Dodoth and Karimojong fled with all their arms back to Karamoja. Faced by an insurgency from the Lord's Resistance Army, the government of Uganda under Yoweri Museveni has often enlisted the services of Dodoth and Karamajong morans to help it fight the insurgency. Most of these morans end up deserting and retreating into the civilian population with their government issued guns (Sipri 2004 and 2005). The Karamoja raiders crossed to Kenya to take cattle from Turkana and Pokot. The killed Karamoja raiders left behind their powerful guns to the Turkana and Pokot Morans.

### **Conflicts in the Sudan**

The administration perceives the 60-year-old regime in Khartoum as among the most heinous in the world. It accuses it of sponsoring terrorist groups in at least a dozen countries, housing would-be assassins, human rights violations, denial of food aid to starving people, and complicity toward an active slave trade within its borders. Moreover, Khartoum has imposed strict Islamic laws over the people in the non-Muslim south.

The complex factors that divide the people of the Sudan (north and south) have given rise to two prolonged wars during most of the second half of this century. The first war (1955-1972) ended in a negotiated settlement. The next phase of the civil war, started in 1983, and is primarily between the radical Arab-Islamic northern government in Khartoum and southern rebels (SPLA - Sudan People's Liberation Army) who are primarily Christian and animist Africans. Many, including some American officials, had hoped that the United States could be part of a new negotiated agreement to bring the war to a less divisive end.

Conflict in Sudan is traceable to the 1956 following the decision by non-Arab Sudanese challenge on the domination of control economic and political by Sudanese of Arab origin. The conflict pitting the Muslim North and Christian South led SPLA remained the longest conflict in Africa (1956-1972 and 1983-2006) causing more than two million deaths and much suffering to the Sudanese people. The SPLA rebels received arms from sympathetic governments like Uganda. They also raided government armories and purchased weapons from disgruntled government soldiers. Unfortunately rebel movements do not have mechanisms for tracking and

monitoring how arms are used, so many can end up in wrong hands. Political instability in Sudan was also an important source of arms for the Turkana community (UNDP 2002). Most of the Sudanese refugees are in Kakuma in Turkana and most of them came to Kenya while armed.

### **Impact of External Triggers on Pastoralists in Northern Kenya**

Traditionally, raiders were also advised against targeting non-combatants such as children, women, the elderly and the frail. Raiders found to have attacked such persons would be rebuked publicly and excluded from future community raids. All these ensured that raids were conducted within the acceptable bounds. The timings of traditional cattle raiding were guided by elders. This was meant to largely control cattle pests and diseases and reduce fatalities during the raids. Elders were aware of times of the year when livestock pests and disease outbreaks were prevalent, which enabled them to advise the community when and when not to conduct the raids. Raiding infested livestock and driving them to the community could lead to disease and pest outbreaks in the community herd leading to unnecessary loss of livestock. Raiders also needed to use the right routes that were safe in terms of terrain, free of predators as well as those that raiders could easily escape through in case of heavy attacks from the enemy community. But even more important was the raids were to be conducted when pastoral resources—pasture and water—were plentiful.

Therefore, one of the reasons why conflict is escalating in Northern Kenya is the proliferation of small and light weapons as an effect of the upheavals experienced in neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa. Transformation of the conflict from a traditionally sanctioned practice to an all-out criminal activity can be attributed to the increased prevalence of so-called ‘Small Arms and Light Weapons’ (SALW) in the area. Pastoral communities in northern Kenya provide an excellent market for fire arms. Where they traditionally relied on bows, arrows, spears, pangas and rungas for protection and warfare they now resort to assault rifles such as the AK-47 and the G-3 rifles which are relatively cheap due to high availability. The availability of SALW has scaled up the number of fatalities and indiscriminate killings among the Nilotic Pastoralists of Northern Kenya.

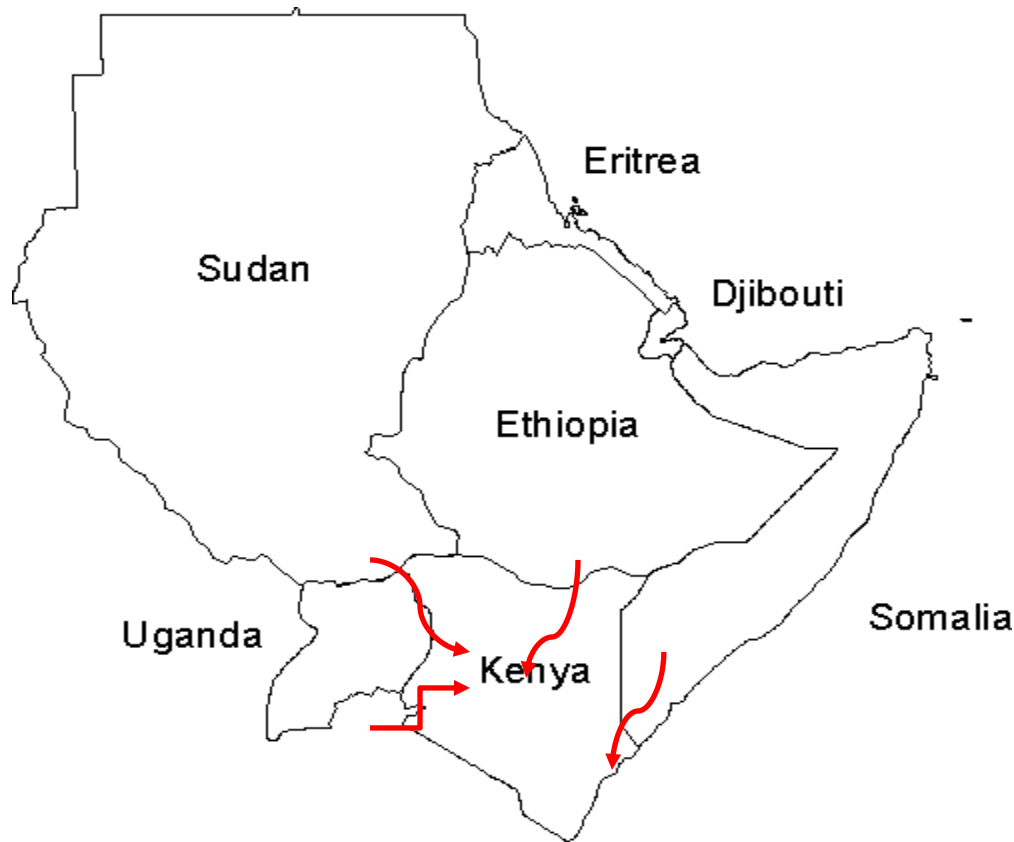
### **Arms Flow into Northern Kenya**

Baven (2008), and Boutwell (1999) argue that several factors account for this flow of small arms. Un-manned Porous borders; pastoralists groups across the common borders; conflicts in the Horn of Africa; and, middlemen and brokers. The unstable states in the Horn of Africa are one of the principal sources of small arms and light weapons to Northern Kenya before 1990. Kenya stands at the crossroads between the conflict areas of South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Ethiopia.

It is also important to note that while the proliferation of small arms is generally associated with conflict and post-conflict situations. The long and porous nature of Kenya’s borders and the



relative ease of concealing small arms make it difficult to control the movement of weapons into Northern Kenya. Moreover, the agencies responsible for border control are underfunded and ineffective. The map below is an illustration of small arms inflow into Northern Kenya.



**Figure 1: Inflow of SALW into Northern Kenya**

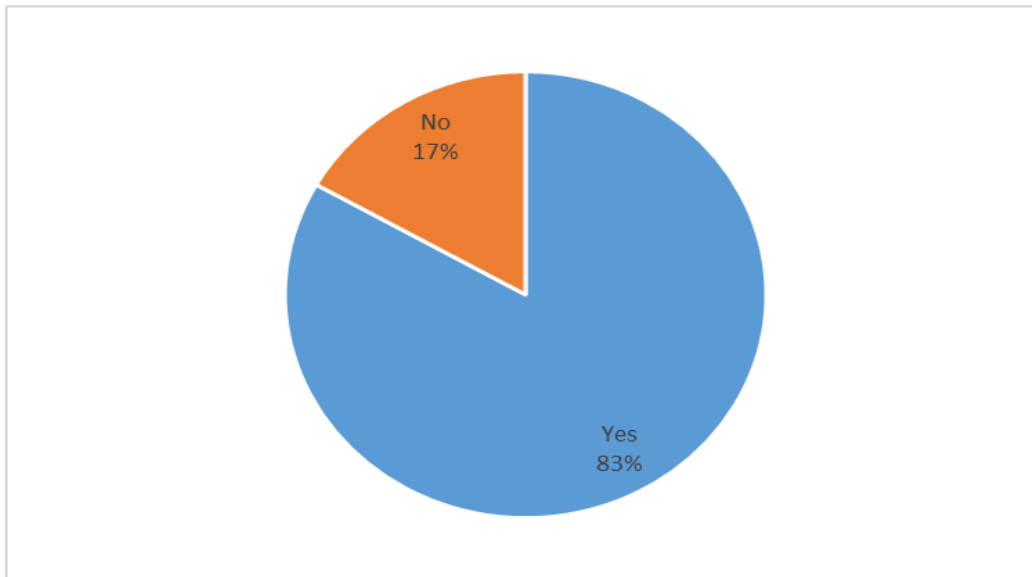
The map shows the routes and the flow of small arms to Kenya and specifically to the Northern Kenya. South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Somalia are the main sources of small arms and light weapons to the region. The movement of arms to the region is a very gradual process taking several years before guns reach their intended destination, this is because these guns are illegal and could only be sold through a black market or commercial brokers.

In general small arms entry to Northern Kenya was from the western side, mainly from Uganda and Sudan. On the Ugandan side of the border the Karamojong is a pastoralist group that acquired guns in the 1970s, mainly from the unstable political regimes in Uganda. After the collapse of Amin's regime in Uganda, the Karamojong received a lot of guns which were turned against the Turkana and the Pokot of Kenya. They restricted the access of guns to their neighbours, meaning the proliferation of small arms was minimal from the Uganda side since the Karamojong never sold their guns.

There had been alliance formation between and amongst the pastoralist groups, mainly prior to the collapse of the Somalia state in early 1990s. These alliances kept on shifting according to pasture and water needs as well as protecting strategy for survival. The Samburu for example kept shifting their alliances between and amongst the Turkana, Borana, Somali and the Pokots. The alliances were crafted according to the intensity of threat, seasonal migratory routes, and availability of pasture and water. These alliances regulated conflict in the region, where the Samburu survival before acquisition of guns was through these alliances

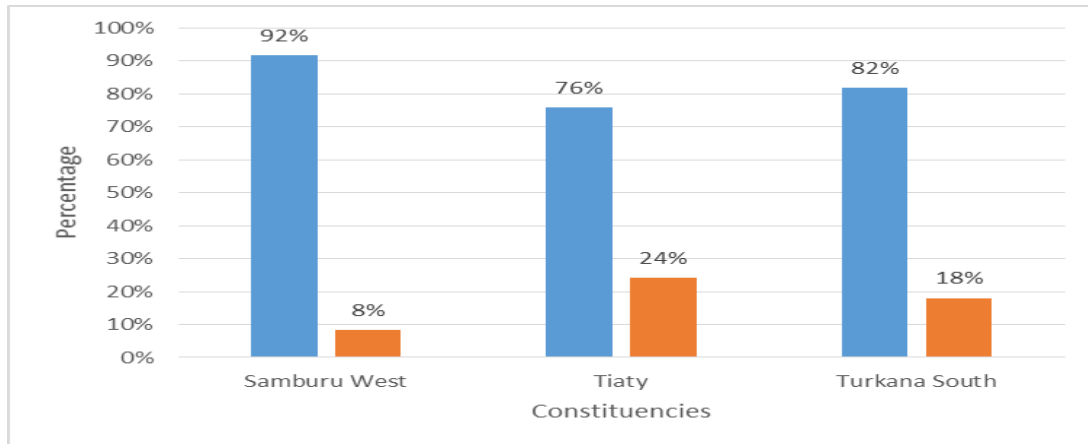
## DISCUSSION

The survey that was done in Turkana South, Samburu West and Tiaty asked respondents if there has been an increase in indiscriminate killings of women, children and the elderly. The findings are shown in the figure below. Majority of the respondents (83%) were in agreement that yes indeed there has an increase in increase in indiscriminate killings of women, children and the elderly.



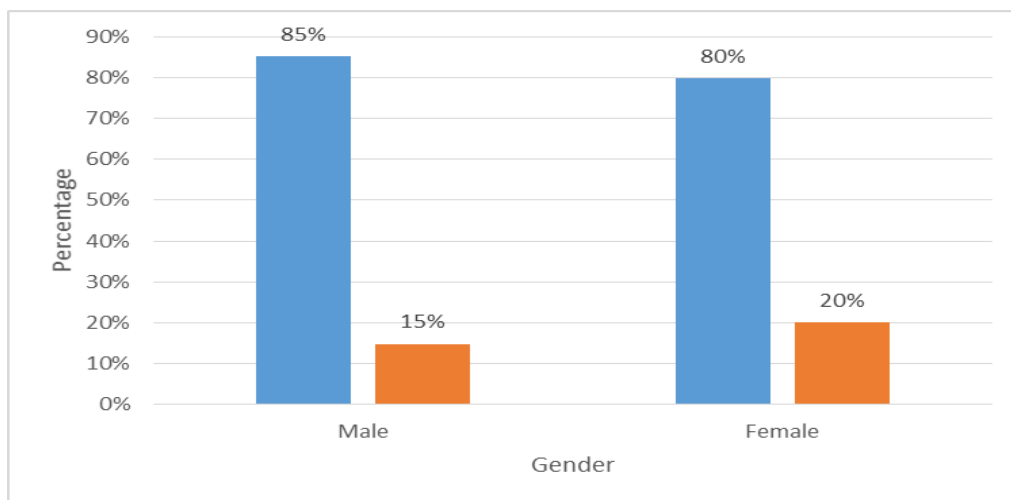
**Figure 2: Indiscriminate Killings**

The disappearance of hand-to-hand and face-to-face fighting significantly reduced the possibility of targeting particular categories of people and avoiding others. This resulted in an extensive transformation of conflict and violence in Northern Kenya. With external dynamics in the region and internal dynamics within Kenya, one far reaching consequences happened in Northern Kenya, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. This section shows the trends in proliferation of arms to Northern Kenya since 1964.



**Figure 3: Analysis by Constituency and Increase in Indiscriminate Killings**

The survey further conducted a cross tabulation on constituency name and if there has been an increase in indiscriminate killings of women, children and elderly. This was to identify if the case of increased indiscriminate killings was the same in all the three constituencies. From the findings in the figure 4, all the three constituencies reported an increase in indiscriminate killings. Samburu West had the highest level of 92% followed by Turkana South (82%) and lastly Tiaty (76%).



**Figure 4: Analysis by Gender and Increase in Indiscriminate Killings**

The analysis by gender also revealed that both male and female reported an increase in increased killings during the attacks in the regions. From the figure below, 85% of male and 80% of female reported that there was an increase in indiscriminate killings during the conflicts.

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of increasing interest of shielding and protecting third world countries of socialist by the USA marked the beginning of the significant presence of the two former super powers' in the Horn of Africa. USA began to increase its presence through the control of the Mediterranean Sea route, Suez Canal channel further restraining the possibility of a Soviet blockade of oil lanes mainly located in Sudan. Its increasing interest of shielding and protecting third world countries of socialist influence prompted it to provide financial and military support to Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

Political instability in Somalia made Kenyan Somalis able to obtain guns by volunteering to join the fight for the Ogaden in Ethiopia, and then slipped back into Kenya. In some cases, renegade Somali soldiers did the same. In Ethiopia and Eritria, The rivalry between the countries led to arms race between the two nations, where each country is involved in massive acquisition of arms. Meanwhile, The Turkana exploited the ethnic rivalry between their foremost enemy in Uganda-the Dodoth and their Ugandan cousins, the Jie to get arms supplies from the latter.

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