

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	986
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	EUAA
Titel:	Somalia: Defection, desertion and disengagement from Al-Shabaab
Udgivet:	2. februar 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	20. februar 2023

Somalia:

Defection, desertion and disengagement from Al-Shabaab



Manuscript completed in February 2023

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

PDF ISBN 978-92-9400-797-1 doi: 10.2847/821510 BZ-03-22-161-EN-N

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Aerial view of a typical homestead on the outskirts of the southern Somali port city of Kismayo,
04 October 2012

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by the COI Sector of the EUAA. The following departments and organisations have reviewed the report, together with EUAA:

- Germany, Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), Country Analysis
- Belgium, Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, CEDOCA – Documentation and Research Center
- Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EUAA.





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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EUAA COI Report Methodology (2019). The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither the EUAA, nor any person acting on its behalf, may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The drafting of this report was finalised on 9 December 2022. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the Introduction.



Glossary and abbreviations

Term	Definition
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ATMIS	African Transition Mission in Somalia
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CRD	Centre for Research and Dialogue
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration. The process through which members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life
DDRR	Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation
DRP	Defectors' Rehabilitation Programme
FCA	Finn Church Aid
JISA	Juba Intelligence and State Agency
NISA	National Security Intelligence Agency
SNA	Somali National Army
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia





Term	Definition
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
Zakat	An obligatory tax, one of the five Pillars of Islam. Muslims are required to give 2.5% of their qualifying wealth each year to help the needy.



Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant context information in view of the assessment of applications for international protection, including refugee status and subsidiary protection.

The report provides background information and whenever available data about deserting and defecting pathways out of Al-Shabaab militant group. After distinguishing between the formal and the informal options, the report engages with the main challenges and consequences associated with them. Men, women, and children's profiles, as well as forms of engagement with the group, are discussed as key determinants of potentially available pathways. Complementing this overview, which is based on research findings limited in scope and representativeness, the report relies on a pool of expert interviews which help shed some light on the unreported and underreported aspects of the issues at stake.

Methodology

The reference period is from 1 July 2021 to 30 November 2022. The information gathered is a result of desk research and oral source interviews and input until 18 November 2022. Some limited additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 9 December 2022.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)¹ and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).²

Defining the terms of reference

The terms of reference of this report are based on the information needs identified by EUAA's target users, and build on internal and external consultations with experts, with EUAA COI Specialist Network members, and the relevant most recent literature on the topic. Terms of reference for this report can be found in [Annex II](#).

Terminology

In the Somali context, the relevant literature and sources make use of various (technical) terms when describing the issues/phenomena that fall within the scope of this study. The following meanings have been used by EUAA in this report, and take into account commonalities across the relevant sources:

- *Deserting*: usually men voluntarily leaving Al-Shabaab without reporting to the Somali authorities;
- *Defecting*: usually men voluntarily leaving Al-Shabaab and then reporting to the Somali authorities;

¹ EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

² EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)





- *Disengaging*: to stop being actively involved in Al-Shabaab. The term is in use for men, but also for women and children associated with Al-Shabaab;
- *Leaving*: the act of leaving the group or Al-Shabaab's territory without implying previous active involvement;
- *Formal pathways*: the formal pathway to exit Al-Shabaab and to reintegrate entails contact with the Somali authorities at one stage or another and implies going through government-held processes (including rehabilitation);
- *Informal pathways*: the informal pathway to exit Al-Shabaab and to reintegrate takes place without the involvement of Somali government authorities and without their knowledge.

Collecting information

The information gathered results from two main sets of sources: extensive desk research using predominantly public, specialised paper-based, and electronic sources until 18 November 2022; interviews with oral sources conducted by EUAA for the purposes of the report between August and November 2022.

All sources used are referenced in the [Bibliography](#). Wherever information could not be found within the timeframes for drafting this report after carefully consulting a range of sources, this is stated in the report.

Research challenges

The present study has encountered a number of research challenges, including: the sensitivity of the issues at stake, scarce information and reporting on the topics addressed by the terms of reference, and difficulty to extend research findings of the quoted studies beyond the scope of their respective samples. Finally, the report often lacks concrete data and information on reported incidents and events affecting the various profiles (men, women, and children). This is due to the sensitivity of the topic and the lack of reporting presence in the country, especially about events taking place in remote areas. This impacts in particular some of the sections illustrating the consequences of disengaging from Al-Shabaab.

Regarding sensitivity, the report has been affected in various ways. It has been extremely challenging to engage with oral sources and have them collaborate on the project. Those who in the end agreed and were willing to do so preferred to remain anonymous for security reasons.

In terms of available studies, most research on this topic focuses on the main towns/rehabilitation centres in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Kismayo. Statistical information or clear representative samples available for the rest of Somalia and based on which possible country-wide findings can be drawn are not existent. Additionally, the available studies only partially address the *formal pathways* (see [Terminology](#) and the remainder of this report). Information on *informal pathways* is scarce. As a result, fragments of information had to be collected across various sources, including oral ones, in order to be able to piece together a clearer and more complete picture. For this same reason corroboration of information has been provided to the extent possible and reflects these research limitations.



Moreover, due to the nature of the conflict, and the fact that Al-Shabaab controls large swathes of territory in most of South-Central Somalia, reporting of incidents affecting civilians disengaging or who have disengaged from the group is very scarce and at times anecdotal. This can be because in those areas free media reporting is severely impaired or limited.

Quality control

To ensure that the authors respected the EASO COI Report Methodology and the [Terms of Reference](#) were comprehensively addressed, a review was carried out by COI specialists from the countries and organisations listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section. All comments made by the reviewers were taken into consideration and almost all of them were implemented in the final draft of this report, which was finalised on 9 December 2022. EUAA also performed the final quality review and editing of the text.

Sources

In accordance with EASO COI methodology, a range of different published documentary sources have been consulted on relevant topics for this report. These include: academic publications, think tank reports, and specialised sources covering Somalia; COI reports by governments; information from civil society and NGOs; reports produced by various bodies of the United Nations; and Somali and regionally-based media.

In addition to using publicly available documentary sources, seven oral sources (experts and officials) were contacted for this report. Oral sources were selected based on their demonstrated expertise in Somalia, publications, and relevant field research/presence. Those interviewed are described in detail in the text and the bibliography in Annex I.

Structure and use of the report

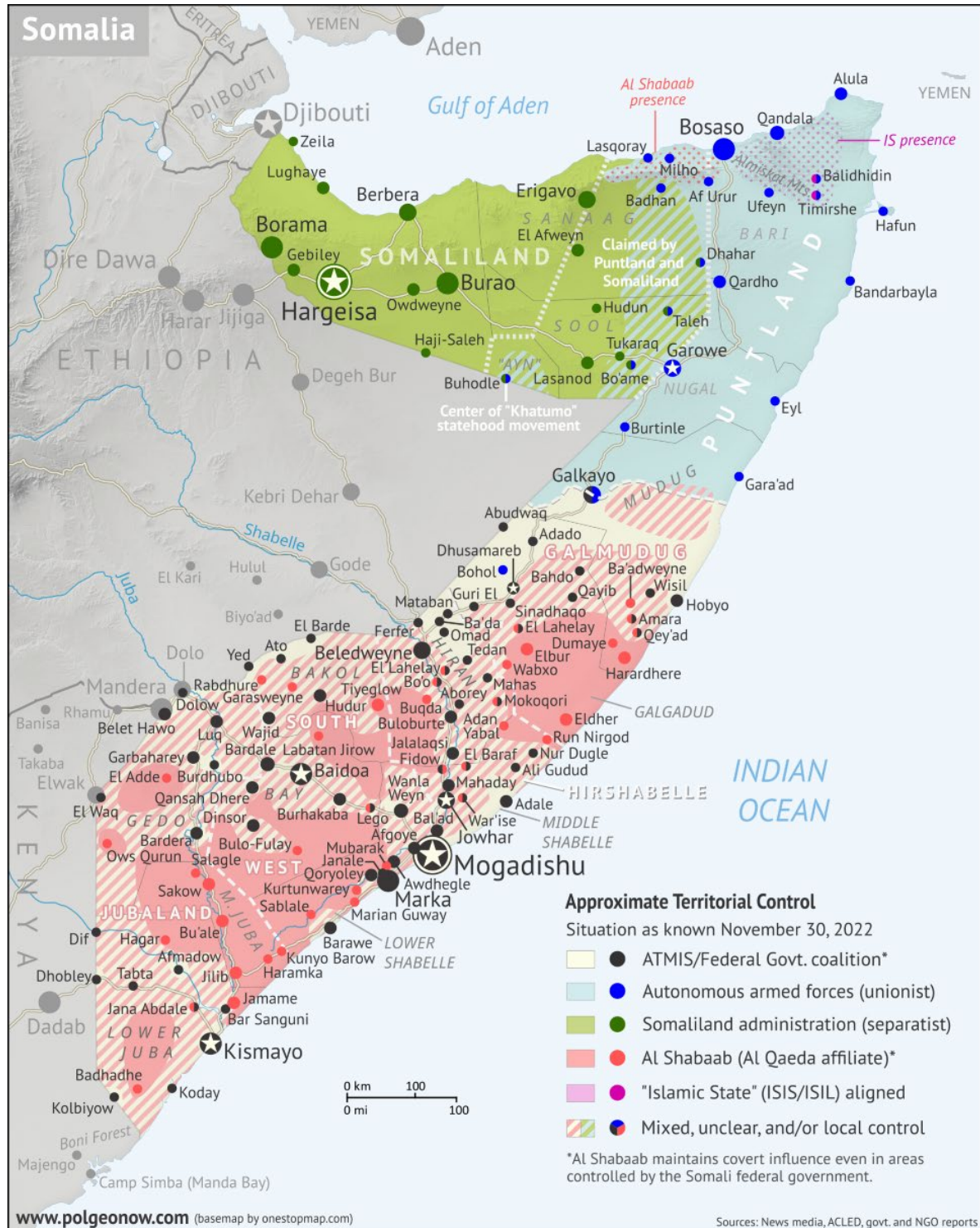
The report is divided into a general introductory part, which approaches disengagement from Al-Shabaab distinguishing between formal and the informal pathways, and three chapters dealing with profiles (men, women, and children) and respective sub-profiles.

In the general introduction, the report provides an overview of disengagement pathways, and addresses the current legal and policy framework in force for Al-Shabaab deserters and defectors. It then goes on to describe the National Programme for the Treatment and the Handling of Disengaged Combatants, as well as, within it, the Defector Rehabilitation Programme. Finally, it provides an overview of the rehabilitation centres currently in use in Somalia.

The three chapters that follow focus on the situation of men, women, and children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, on disengagement options (formal or informal), and the consequences associated with them, including treatment by state authorities, family/clan networks, and Al-Shabaab.



Map



Map 1. Somalia - Approximate Territorial Control, 30 November 2022, [Political Geography Now](https://www.polgeonow.com).³

Please note: The depictions on this map do not imply any opinion whatsoever on the part of EUAA concerning legal status or effective control over any country, territory, city, or area. Every effort is made to ensure this map is free of errors, but there is no guarantee that the map or its features are either spatially or temporally accurate or fit for a particular use. This map is provided without any warranty of any kind whatsoever, either expressed or implied.

³ Polgeonow, Somalia Approximate Territorial Control, as of 30 November 2022, n.a., non-public source



1. Overview and State policy

1.1. Formal and informal pathways to disengage from Al-Shabaab

Sources indicate that it is difficult to know how many Somalis have left or been formerly associated with Al Shabaab due to underreporting, and difficulties researching and documenting the issue.⁴

Sources indicate that Somalis ‘disengage’ from Al Shabaab through both formal pathways and through informal pathways.⁵ A Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab indicated that the process of disengaging or just leaving the Al-Shabaab group can go the formal or the informal pathway depending on what is available to the people concerned. The formal pathway entails contact with the Somali authorities at one stage or another and implies going through government-held processes. The informal pathway takes place without the involvement of Somali government authorities and without their knowledge. The same expert explained that it would not be possible to attribute numbers or just order of magnitude to those going through the informal process.⁶

Another Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, also interviewed for this report, stated that the number of those going through the formal pathway is very small compared to the potential number of people formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, about which any indication is lacking.⁷ Very little is known about this given the strong limitations that curtail field research in Somalia, as the Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab put it, including the impossibility to venture outside major government-controlled towns.⁸ As a result, very limited qualitative – as opposed to quantitative - research is available, and it focuses only on the formal pathways in these three locations: Kismayo, Baidoa and Mogadishu.⁹ These locations are the sole formal venues available for rehabilitation for men and women.¹⁰ Apart from that, there are no figures, statistics, or clear representative samples available for the rest of Somalia and based on which possible country-wide findings can be drawn.¹¹

Along similar lines, an international organisation official based in Somalia maintained that ‘quite a number of people’ decide to desert from Al-Shabaab informally, without reporting to the local authorities. However, the expert added, it would be extremely hard to ascertain the

⁴ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, interview, 10 November 2022; Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022; International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

⁵ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022; Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁶ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁸ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

¹⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹¹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022





size of this group, given the fact that it is highly ‘localised’ and scattered throughout the territory. In particular, the expert indicated, many Al-Shabaab fighters simply do not know about the amnesty proclamations or the rehabilitation centres, or just ‘fear of being in the hands of the government’.¹² Stern and Peterson, in a research article published in 2022, corroborated this point when indicating that ‘not everyone who leaves al-Shabaab announces themselves to the government and goes through a formal process’, many reintegrate informally, ‘under the radar’, by ‘slipping back’ to their own communities and without benefitting from the ‘National Programme for the Treatment and the Handling of Disengaged Combatants’ (for further details see section [1.2.2 National Programme for the Treatment and the Handling of Disengaged Combatants and the Defector Rehabilitation Programme, including screening procedures](#)).¹³

Still on this point, another Somalia expert, on rehabilitation and reintegration, confirmed the absolute lack of robust data on informal disengagement. The expert reported anecdotally that on the backdrop of the autumn-2022 anti-Al-Shabaab offensive in Hiraan, Galgaduud, and Middle Shabelle, only four official defections had been recorded. However, the expert believed that ‘group defection’ might be taking place with numbers of ex Al-Shabaab fighters joining local militias or the Somali National Army (SNA). In general, however, the expert explained that leaving Al-Shabaab is extremely dangerous and difficult, and that while informal defection does exist it is often overinflated in the debate.¹⁴

The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in their report from October 2022, have recorded reports from media affiliated with the Federal Government of Somalia and the Somali security forces, indicating that in the period October 2021 – 28 August 2022 ‘more than 600 Al-Shabaab operatives have been neutralised or defected’,¹⁵ with only 29 actual defections, including one leader defection.¹⁶

Against this backdrop, the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab indicated that for every defecting man there are also potentially 3-4 wives leaving Al-Shabaab territory.¹⁷

As to children, a child protection consultant based in Somalia, indicated that while authorities in collaboration with protection partners try to ensure that children go through a formal reintegration process, there are also cases of informal or self-reintegration.¹⁸

Deserting, defecting, or disengaging

The Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab explained that the distinction between ‘desertion’ and ‘defection’ is not useful in the Somali context. ‘Defection’ as a term used to describe men voluntarily leaving the group and then reporting to the authorities does not adequately describe situations for women’s and children’s

¹² International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹³ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 24

¹⁴ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹⁵ UN Security Council, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754, 10 October 2022, [url](#), para. 90

¹⁶ UN Security Council, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754, 10 October 2022, [url](#), Annex 10, pp. 56-58

¹⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 23 September 2022

¹⁸ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022



disengagement, or just leaving, or disassociating from the group.¹⁹ The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab is of the same opinion when stating that women do not really ‘desert’ the group, as if they were active combatants, ‘they just leave’.²⁰ For further details on this point see 2 Profiles and sub-profiles. Regarding men, Taylor et al. (2019), provided this definition of (men) ‘defection’: ‘the individual must have left Al-Shabaab on their own accord to join a rival group or seek government protection, and willingly share information or experience’.²¹

For an overview of the different options and pathways men, women, and children associated with Al-Shabaab might take, see following sections.

1.2. Government policy/programmes and amnesty proclamations

1.2.1. Current policy and amnesty proclamations

Various past Somali governments have offered amnesty to Al-Shabaab members defecting from the group.²²

In Somalia, an amnesty policy was issued for the first time during the last period of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s first presidency (2012-2017). However, it lacked clarity for potential defectors or deserters in terms of how to defect or surrender and with what consequences.²³ Similarly, Human Rights Watch reported that this policy (from June 2016) was vague, and that it failed to clarify its linkage with the disengaged combatants programme as well as the scope of application of the amnesty with regards to potential reasons for exclusion from the amnesty. The policy indicated that war crimes, crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, crimes of sexual violence, and gross violations of human rights and humanitarian law as crimes were not to be included in the scope of application of the amnesty, but it failed to define these crimes, and to expressly indicate that responsibility for these crimes as a criteria for exclusion from the amnesty.²⁴ The Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration stated that an amnesty policy document, in its draft form, still lies with the government as of 10 November 2022.²⁵

Felbab-Brown (2018), an American scholar and Somalia specialist, corroborated this point when stating that ‘Somalia has not clarified the laws surrounding the use of amnesty declarations and defectors programs’ and that an amnesty law remains unfinished.²⁶

¹⁹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

²⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²¹ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²² HRW, “It’s like we are always in a prison” - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 18

²³ Toros, H. and Harley, S., Negotiations with Al-Shabaab - Lessons learned and future prospects, 2018, p. 441

²⁴ HRW, “It’s like we are always in a prison” - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), pp. 18-19, footnote no. 36

²⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, IFIT, May 2018, [url](#), p. 11





‘In the absence of an amnesty law, ad hoc presidential declarations have become the main tool for granting amnesty’, a practice that started with president Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed in the early 2000s and continued with following Somali presidents:²⁷

- In August 2011, by President Sharif Sheikh Ahmad;²⁸
- In September 2014, 45-day amnesty window offered by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, followed by new amnesty offers in January and September 2015;²⁹
- In April 2017, 60-day amnesty window offered by President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo.³⁰
- After Farmaajo in 2017, there have not been other amnesty declarations. The current Somali President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has called for a ‘total war’ on Al-Shabaab.³¹

Khalil et al. commented that ‘such declarations are unclear in terms of scope’, that they are only verbally communicated by the Office of the President, and fail to be ‘precisely defined within Somali policy and legal frameworks’. Moreover, their informal character is ‘problematic’, because they lack details about eligibility criteria and entitlements associated with the defector programme, raising false expectations in the beneficiaries, such as continued education and post-rehabilitation employment.³² Furthermore, Felbab-Brown also noted that entering a Defector Rehabilitation Programme for ‘low-risk defectors’ is not limited to responding (in time) to an amnesty window.³³ For details about the Defectors’ Rehabilitation Programme see section [1.2.4](#) below.

1.2.2. National Programme for the Treatment and the Handling of Disengaged Combatants and the Defector Rehabilitation Programme, including screening procedures

The Federal Government of Somalia developed the National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants in Somalia in 2012,³⁴ which then was ‘endorsed’ in 2013.³⁵ Felbab-Brown referred to this programme in more comprehensive terms as the ‘National Program for the Handling and Treatment of Ex-Combatants and Youth at Risk’, which is meant to handle low-risk and high-risk defectors and detainees. The author reported that basically defectors are sorted out into two programmes:

²⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 11

²⁸ Reuters, Somalia offers rebels amnesty, 9 August 2011, [url](#)

²⁹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 12

³⁰ NPR, Somali president offered jihadi group amnesty option for 60 days, 9 April 2017, [url](#); see also Toros, H. and Harley, S., Negotiations with Al-Shabaab - Lessons learned and future prospects, 2018, p. 441

³¹ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

³² Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), p. 17

³³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 13

³⁴ UNSOM, Voices of Al-Shabaab, Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

³⁵ HRW, ‘It’s like we are always in a prison’ - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 19



- one for **high-value** defectors ‘who individually negotiate their leniency terms with the Somalia government, a form of co-optation deal’;³⁶ for more details see section [2.1.3\(a\) High-value defectors](#);
- one for **low-value** individuals, which further sorts them into: **high-risk defectors** and **low-risk defectors**.³⁷ For more details see section [1.2.3 Registration and screening of high and low-risk profiles](#).

A Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, who was interviewed for the purposes of this report, confirmed that the programme still runs this way.³⁸

As of 2015, three male rehabilitation centres had already been established,³⁹ while, at the end of 2017, no rehabilitation facility for low-risk women defectors existed. The female rehabilitation programme was piloted in 2019-2020,⁴⁰ and rehabilitation centres for women were set up in the course of 2020.⁴¹ The inaugural women’s section of the Baidoa rehabilitation centre had been already closed earlier.⁴² Regarding children, as of March 2017 there were six UNICEF-supported child rehabilitation centres run by NGOs across Somalia.⁴³ For details on centres and facilities as of November 2022 see section [1.2.3 Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity](#).

1.2.3. Registration and screening of high and low-risk profiles

Upon defection or leaving of the group, disengaged combatants, children, as well as women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, who opt for the formal pathway, are received by the authorities, either at the outpost or in the city centres. Upon reception people are also registered. Their screening takes place after this first step.⁴⁴

There are different standard operating procedures (SOP), for men, women, and children, based on which the screening is carried out.⁴⁵ The *de facto* main objective of SOPs for men and women is to assess defectors’ and women’s past role within Al-Shabaab. With regard to children, the main goal is to assess their level of radicalisation.⁴⁶ SOPs set a 72-hour time limit for the assessment of defectors.⁴⁷

³⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

³⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

³⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁹ UNSOM, Voices of Al-Shabaab, Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁴¹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

⁴² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

⁴³ HRW, “It’s like we are always in a prison” - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 25

⁴⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁴⁵ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁴⁶ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

⁴⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022; Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 16





Screening of men

Stern, a South African researcher specialised in women's role in Al-Shabaab, indicated that defection trajectories might differ: defectors might hand themselves in directly to the National Security Intelligence Agency (NISA), and could be 'be facilitated in this by family members', or present themselves to the Somali National Army (SNA), Somalia Police Force (SPF) or African Union's AMISOM troops [now ATMIS], and then be transferred to NISA.⁴⁸ The author reported that defectors are either way transferred to NISA: 'NISA go on to screen defectors as either "high risk" or "low risk", using a screening tool designed for purpose'.⁴⁹ After screening, 'those classified as "low risk" can receive amnesty from prosecution and be sent to rehabilitation facilities, while those deemed "high risk" are referred for prosecution by military courts and possible imprisonment'.⁵⁰

As Felbab-Brown put it:

- **high-risk defectors** 'face military courts where there is a high chance they will be issued the death penalty'.⁵¹ High-risk profiles are generally considered 'those believed to be *amirs* (i.e., commanders of some sort), who had engaged in the making of explosives, or who had killed someone'.⁵² Additionally the author indicated that 'those who had fundraised, preached *jihad*, or provided logistical support could be classified as either low-risk or high-risk'.⁵³ For more details see section [2.1.3\(b\)](#);
- **low-risk defectors** are those who are sent to 'DDR-like [Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration] facilities'.⁵⁴ The Defectors' Rehabilitation Programme for low-risk defectors is a component of the overall National Programme for the Handling and Treatment of Ex-Combatants.⁵⁵ In a BBC article on former Al Shabaab fighters, Somalia specialist Mary Harper listed the following profiles as low-risk: 'foot soldiers, porters, mechanics and the like'.⁵⁶ For more details see section [2.1.3\(c\) Low-risk defectors](#).

In May 2018 Felbab-Brown stated that 'while there has been some nominal formalisation of the sorting criteria for distinguishing high- and low-risk defectors in recent years, the process is still handled exclusively by Somali federal and state intelligence authorities, or sometimes

⁴⁸ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 9. Dr Orly Maya Stern is a researcher, consultant and human rights lawyer from South Africa. She is an expert on international law, gender, human rights and security, particularly in countries affected by conflict and instability. Recently she has conducted various research projects with focus on women's role in Al-Shabaab.

⁴⁹ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 9

⁵⁰ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 9; see also Felbab-Brown, Vanda, *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), pp. 4, 17, 19

⁵¹ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 13

⁵² Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁵³ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁴ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 13

⁵⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁵⁶ Harper, M., *Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck*, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)



AMISOM [today ATMIS]'. The author indicated that either NISA or subordinate state versions of it, such as Juba Intelligence and State Agency (JISA), 'decide, who is high-risk and who is low-risk through interrogation of captured or defecting al Shabaab affiliates'.⁵⁷

According to the same author, new SOPs for the assessment of men's risk profile were adopted – although still in draft form – in July 2017. Their stated goal was to evaluate 'the likelihood that disengaged al Shabab combatants will engage in any of the following activities: (a) direct participation in violent extremist activity; (b) training and/or recruitment of civilians; (c) the provision of operational, organisational, or logistical support to al Shabaab; (d) and the radicalisation of civilians'. In practice, however, according to Felbab-Brown SOP questions 'are heavily based on past behaviour and activities with al Shabaab'. The author reported that the 'SOP assess 19 risk factors [including] individual's personal history, [...] motivations and context, [...] previous engagement with Al-Shabaab, [...] training and capacity', and individual's current views, including on religion and democracy. 'Other information gained during the interviews is included in the overall judgements'.⁵⁸

The Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration interviewed for this report maintained that still in November 2022 the screening criteria, which remain unclear, focus more on defectors' past role rather than prospective behaviour. At the same time, the expert suggested that the screening process still lacks transparency, is often highly politicised, and leads to questionable outcomes.⁵⁹

Felbab-Brown stated that before 2017 [and the adoption of the new – back then – SOP] 'the criteria for being considered low-risk versus high-risk lacked consistency and explicit definitions', and that this often resulted in arbitrary decisions. Basically low-risk versus high-risk assessments 'were mostly based on the individual's role in Al-Shabaab'.⁶⁰

Screening of women

Women defecting from Al-Shabaab and following a more formal pathway are "received" in inconsistent ways 'across cases and locations'. As Stern and Peterson noted (2022) 'the reception phase pertains to the moment defectors hand themselves over, or are "received", by one of the "receiving forces", including the SNA, NISA, the police or AMISOM'.⁶¹ They describe the situation at the beginning of 2022 as follows:

'Different processes are evident in different areas. Sometimes, when women first leave al-Shabaab and arrive in a new location, they make contact or are referred to either the SNA, police or NISA, who register them and collect basic information from them. Sometimes, women go straight into the communities, and community elders or clan leaders contact the DRP, police or NISA, to

⁵⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁵⁸ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 16

⁵⁹ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

⁶⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁶¹ Stern, O. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, 2022, p. 17





inform them that these women are living there. In other places, regardless of the point of initial contact, women are first registered with the CID [Criminal Investigation Department], before being handed over to NISA for registration and screening. In Kismayo, when a woman arrives in the community, her relatives contact the local district commissioners to inform them of her arrival, before she is transferred to security actors. In Baidoa, many former al-Shabaab women move to IDP camps. [...] In Adado (Galmudug), CSOs working in the camps refer women to the FMS-level Ministry of Women. [...] in Galmudug once registered, women are returned to the community with a guarantor'.⁶²

Reportedly all women coming from Al-Shabaab controlled territory and reporting to the authorities are 'registered'. Based on this first registration it is decided who will be screened – for some type of association with the group – and who will just be registered because of 'merely living in al-Shabaab territory'.⁶³ In most places, during screening, women stay with their communities after having been signed over to 'guarantors'. In other places, such as Baidoa and Kismayo women are reportedly 'held in NISA "safehouses" while being screened'.⁶⁴

The Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab said that the programme for women is not a 'defectors' programme, but rather a programme meant to assist vulnerable women, including victims of rape by Al-Shabaab members.⁶⁵

The government and NISA developed a screening tool and SOP for women in the period following the start of the women's rehabilitation programme in spring 2020 (see section [1.2.4 The Defectors' Rehabilitation Programme](#) for further details). To this end NISA screeners were trained on how to screen women, and female screeners were also onboarded to the project (although they are not always available in all locations).⁶⁶

In their study on assistance to women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Stern and Peterson reported that NISA officers stated that only women actively engaged with Al-Shabaab are screened, while 'wives and other non-participant women are not screened'.⁶⁷ The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab indicated that women's SOPs are very similar to men's SOPs, with some differences such as questions about women's marital status, and type of role played within the group (among others as wife, cook, cleaner).⁶⁸ Stern

⁶² Stern, O. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, 2022, p. 17

⁶³ Stern, O. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, 2022, p. 18

⁶⁴ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 18

⁶⁵ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁶⁶ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁶⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 18

⁶⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022



and Peterson also indicated that up until early 2022, ‘no women have been screened as “high-risk”’, as reported by NISA.⁶⁹

Once women have been screened, they are referred to rehabilitation centres. At this stage a vulnerability assessment is carried out to determine women’s priority in accessing the programme upon availability of places.⁷⁰ In practice, not all registered and screened women go through rehabilitation unless they have additional vulnerabilities, as per an expert interview conducted for the purposes of this report.⁷¹ Corroborating this, Sarfati and Donnelly, two researchers working at the International Peace Institute (IPI), reported in 2022 that when rehabilitation in women’s facilities is not available, NISA ‘may make alternative arrangements with a guarantor’, ‘typically a relative or clan elder’.⁷²

Before the development of the women’s programme in 2020, the screening tool used for women was the same as for men.⁷³ Stern indicated that during that time, the screening of women was ‘more inconsistent, with less of a clear established pathway’. The expert reported that while some women were screened by NISA, most of them were just sent back to their communities to reintegrate.⁷⁴ Corroborating this point, Felbab-Brown indicated that at that time, if deemed to be low-risk by NISA, or by AMISOM, women were released to their communities, if nearby, or to areas where they were encountered. As a result, they tended to re-join their communities or become internally displaced.⁷⁵

Screening of children

Children also go through screening, which is carried out by NISA.⁷⁶ Reportedly this task, is performed ‘in a softer form [compared to adult screening] not to make children afraid’.⁷⁷

The screening aims to establish whether the child under scrutiny has ‘effectively disengaged’ from Al-Shabaab: this is done to prevent other children who are not formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, from taking advantage of the programme and its services. Additionally, by way of asking basic questions, the screening is meant to differentiate between children with different levels of indoctrination and active participation in the group. Children may be screened as either ‘low-risk’ or ‘high-risk’:

- Children who could be deemed as ‘low-risk’ by NISA: children who disapprove of Al-Shabaab activities and ideology;
- Children who could be deemed as ‘high-risk’ by NISA: children who still believe that siding with Al-Shabaab means siding ‘with the right side’, or whose parents are still with the

⁶⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 18

⁷⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

⁷¹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁷² Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 7

⁷³ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 34

⁷⁴ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 33

⁷⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

⁷⁶ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

⁷⁷ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022





group, or who could potentially engage in some sort of terrorist activity (such as spying, suicide bombing), or who could harm the local community, or even go back to Al-Shabaab.⁷⁸

The child protection consultant underlined that the government's classification of 'low-risk' and 'high-risk' children in the screening process is not an official one. The same source remarked that classifications are not to be seen as endorsed by any protection partner.⁷⁹

An international child protection specialist based in Somalia, interviewed for the purposes of this report, maintained that NISA's screening process assesses the extent of their embeddedness in the radical ideology of the group. In general terms, the international specialist reported that younger children are more often assessed as 'low-risk' than older ones. The screening is conducted in the presence of a trained government social worker.⁸⁰ For more details see section [2.3.3 Formal pathways and consequences, including Al-Shabaab targeting](#).

1.2.4. The Defectors' Rehabilitation Programme

According to UNSOM, the purpose of the Defectors' Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) is 'to provide support to Low Risk Al-Shabaab disengaged combatants attempting to reintegrate back into the community'.⁸¹ Stern indicated that the 'defector's programme has been created as a means with which to entice al-Shabaab members out of the group, in the hopes of ultimately degrading the group, as a way to promote peace'.⁸²

As reported by Human Rights Watch in 2018, although 'the national programme stipulates that former combatants who are captured or detained also qualify for the program, the working consensus is that only former combatants who surrender to the government qualify and enter the screening process'.⁸³

Low-risk male defectors access the DRP as an alternative to going to court. As Felbab-Brown put it, 'since in the judicial process, al Shabaab affiliates incur a very substantial risk of being sentenced to death, most low-risk defectors choose to go to the DDR-like centres'. The source indicated that due to this situation, the degree to which their decision to enter rehabilitation centres is voluntary is open to question. However, the author added, while they join the DRP 'with the implicit understanding that they will not be prosecuted after completing the program for past association with al Shabaab' they do not seem 'to receive explicit and legally-binding guarantees against future prosecution'.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

⁷⁹ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

⁸⁰ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

⁸¹ UNSOM, *Voices of Al-Shabaab, Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center*, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

⁸² Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 9

⁸³ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 19

⁸⁴ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 18



The DRP programme consists of five phases: outreach, reception, screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration.⁸⁵

1.2.5. Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity

In the period May 2021 – 23 August 2022, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General, in his reports on the situation in Somalia, referred to five operational rehabilitation centres for low-risk former Al-Shabaab fighters (male and female),⁸⁶ located in Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Baidoa.⁸⁷ Three centres are for men (Mogadishu, Baidoa, Kismayo), while two centres are for women (Baidoa and Kismayo),⁸⁸ all of them currently run by IOM as an implementing partner.⁸⁹

According to Hansen et al. (2019), the original proposal was to set up four centres, one in Baidoa, one in Mogadishu, one in Beled Weyne and one in Kismayo.⁹⁰ The centre in Beled Weyne (Hiil Walaal), was apparently operational in 2016,⁹¹ and still in 2017⁹² and 2019,⁹³ but this is no longer the case due to lack of funds.⁹⁴

The Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab maintained that these centres are extremely costly, posing serious sustainability problems, while at the same time there is little evidence that they are effective at degrading Al-Shabaab. Discussions are on-going about a possible revised approach.⁹⁵ The programme is currently funded by United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, among other minor international donors.⁹⁶

Based on the latest UN Special Representative of the Secretary General reports, in the period 8 May 2021 – 23 August 2022, the five operational rehabilitation centres for low-risk former Al-Shabaab fighters hosted in average more than 500 people, with the following breakdown per period:

⁸⁵ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 15-21; Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Gjelsvik, I. M., Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia, NUPI, 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁶ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2021/723, 10 August 2021, [url](#), para. 66; UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2021/944, 11 November 2021, [url](#), para. 66; UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/101, 8 February 2022, [url](#), para. 69; UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/392, 13 May 2022, [url](#), para. 75; UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/665, 1 September 2022, [url](#), para. 70

⁸⁷ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/101, 8 February 2022, [url](#), para. 69

⁸⁸ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/665, 1 September 2022, [url](#), para. 70

⁸⁹ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

⁹⁰ Hansen, S. J. et al., Countering violent extremism in Somalia and Kenya: Actors and approaches, April 2019, [url](#), p. 26

⁹¹ UNSOM, Voices of Al-Shabaab, Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

⁹² Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁹³ Hansen, S. J. et al., Countering violent extremism in Somalia and Kenya: Actors and approaches, April 2019, [url](#), p. 26

⁹⁴ International organisation official based in Somalia (II), Online interview, 31 August 2022

⁹⁵ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

⁹⁶ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022





- As of 24 June (reporting period 8 May – 31 July 2021): 355 male and 170 female beneficiaries, while 157 men and 102 women had graduated from the centres in 2021;⁹⁷
- By the end of October 2021 (reporting period 1 August – 4 November 2021): 317 male and 223 female beneficiaries;⁹⁸
- As of 2 December 2021 (reporting period 6 November 2021 – 31 January 2022): a total of 337 men and 223 women beneficiaries were enrolled in the centres in Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayo;⁹⁹
- As of 14 April 2022 (reporting period 1 February – 6 May 2022): a total of 296 male and 219 female beneficiaries;¹⁰⁰
- As of 28 July 2022 (reporting period 7 May – 23 August 2022), there were 304 men in Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayo and 184 women in Kismayo and Baidoa attending the centres.¹⁰¹

In the period 2012 - December 2017, according to Somali government officials quoted by Felbab-Brown in 2018, 'some 2 000 Al-Shabaab combatants and people associated with Al-Shabaab had gone through various DDR programmes for low-risk defectors'.¹⁰² According to another UN DDR expert quoted in a 2022 International Peace Institute report, until July 2021 around 3 000 people were estimated to have gone through the programmes, including 600 women.¹⁰³ Based on UNSG's latest report, in the period 1 January - 28 July 2022, '187 men and 186 women have been rehabilitated and reintegrated within host communities'.¹⁰⁴

Below is an overview of the main characteristics and details available on rehabilitation centres in Somalia (for men, women, and children), as of November 2022:

(a) The Serendi Rehabilitation Centre (Mogadishu)

- Facility-type: residential;¹⁰⁵ 'the Serendi centre [...] is a closed, full-board facility for former associates of Al-Shabaab deemed "low risk" by national security forces'.¹⁰⁶
- Capacity: about 200¹⁰⁷
- Average length of stay: on average between 6 and 9 months, up to a maximum of 12 months according to an expert interview;¹⁰⁸ as per an IOM report (2021) 'participants reside in the centre for approximately one year before re-entering the community'¹⁰⁹, in line with

⁹⁷ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2021/723, 10 August 2021, [url](#), para. 66

⁹⁸ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2021/944, 11 November 2021, [url](#), para. 66

⁹⁹ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/101, 8 February 2022, [url](#), para. 69

¹⁰⁰ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/392, 13 May 2022, [url](#), para. 75

¹⁰¹ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, S/2022/665, 1 September 2022, [url](#), para. 70

¹⁰² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 14, and footnote no. 34, p. 38

¹⁰³ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰⁴ UNSG, Situation in Somalia, 1 September 2022, [url](#), para. 70

¹⁰⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹⁰⁶ IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁰⁷ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹⁰⁸ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹⁰⁹ IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 19



what was indicated by Felbab-Brown already in 2018.¹¹⁰ The same author also reported that ‘exit is tailored toward release after six months, since the education package is designed around a six-month program. However, beneficiaries can submit an exit application at any time, with an expected minimum stay of between three and four months.’ An exit committee – consisting of NISA intelligence officials, officials of the Defectors’ Rehabilitation Program, and Serendi Centre Management representatives - is tasked with assessing the application. ‘The approval of exit is based on several conditions, including medical approval and NISA certification that the reinsertion area is safe’.¹¹¹

- Implementing partner (non-state organisations that runs the centre): IOM as of July 2022 (it was Adam Smith International until then);¹¹²
- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: unlimited;¹¹³

In 2022, based on an expert interview, the Serendi rehabilitation centre is largely hosting, along with various other clan affiliates, Digil clan members, with an uptick of Marehan clan members towards the end of the year.¹¹⁴

(b) The Baidoa Rehabilitation Centre

- Facility-type: non-residential;¹¹⁵ ‘the centre in Baidoa, Somalia, is semi-open and provides participants with passes, subject to government approval, to spend evenings and weekends with their families. This format encourages a gradual transition from rehabilitation to reintegration’.¹¹⁶
- Capacity: about 150;¹¹⁷
- Average length of stay: 3 months, according to Felbab-Brown (2018);¹¹⁸ an exit committee, comprising representatives of the rehabilitation centre, the Somali government, and the implementing partners is tasked with processing beneficiaries’ exit from the programme;¹¹⁹
- Implementing partner: IOM;¹²⁰
- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: limited;¹²¹

¹¹⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 21

¹¹¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 21

¹¹² International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹¹³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), pp. 20-21

¹¹⁴ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹¹⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹¹⁶ IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹¹⁷ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹¹⁸ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹¹⁹ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹²⁰ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹²¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20





In terms of clan composition, in 2019, Taylor et al. reported that according to the Baidoa DRR center, about 90 percent of the low-level Al-Shabaab members residing there were from the Bay, Bakool, and Lower Juba regions and were ‘predominantly Maay Maay speakers from the Rahanweyn’, a marginalised clan compared to other noble clans.¹²² According to an expert interviewed for this report, in 2022, the Baidoa rehabilitation centre was largely hosting Mirifle and notably Hadama clan members, along with various other clan affiliates.¹²³ For further details see the EUAA report on Targeted profiles 2021, 4. Minorities and non-minority clans.¹²⁴

(c) The Kismayo Rehabilitation Centre

- Facility-type: non-residential;¹²⁵
- Capacity: about 150;¹²⁶
- Average length of stay: 3 months, according to Felbab-Brown (2018);¹²⁷ an exit committee, comprising representatives of the rehabilitation centre, the Somali government, and the implementing partners is tasked with processing beneficiaries’ exit from the programme;¹²⁸
- Implementing partner: IOM;¹²⁹
- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: limited;¹³⁰

(d) ‘Reception centres’ in Galmudug

While there are no rehabilitation centres in Galmudug, men who have been screened can stay in dedicated ‘reception centres’ while they await transfer to rehabilitation.¹³¹

(e) Female community-based rehabilitation in Mogadishu¹³²

- Opening: the programme was piloted in 2019 and 2020; it targeted 50 beneficiaries in 2019 and 40 in 2020;¹³³
- Facility-type: non-residential;¹³⁴
- Capacity: currently closed due to lack of funding; as of 2022 information from an interviewed source, women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab residing in Mogadishu do not have access to any form of rehabilitation programme;¹³⁵

¹²² Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

¹²³ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹²⁴ EUAA, Somalia – Targeted profiles, Country of Origin Information Report, September 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹²⁶ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹²⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹²⁸ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹²⁹ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹³⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹³¹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 17

¹³² Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹³³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹³⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹³⁵ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 23 September 2022



- Average length of stay: n.a.;
- Implementing partner: n.a.;
- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: n.a.;

(f) The Female Rehabilitation Centre in Baidoa

- Opening: March 2020;¹³⁶
- Regime: non-residential (day centre), three days a week,¹³⁷ although a few residential rooms are available for 'protection cases' [women who are in need of shelter or additional protection].¹³⁸ Most women keep living in their communities where they take care of their numerous dependants (between 6 and 8 in average). The centre also offers a day care for children under five.¹³⁹ IOM reported that many disengaged women were heads of household and hence the centre adopted a daily schedule which enabled women to take part in the rehabilitation program while still taking care of families. The centre provided 'child-friendly amenities, including a playground', and 'offer[ed] supervised care for children under five'.¹⁴⁰
- Capacity: the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab states that the capacity of the centre is 100 places;¹⁴¹ IOM indicated that 'the centre can attend 100 women in daytime programmes and provides residential accommodation for up to 25 women and children for those who cannot safely reside elsewhere'.¹⁴²
- Average length of stay: it varies, from approximately six months to one year,¹⁴³ as also reported by the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, who added that 'most women leave within 6-8 months';¹⁴⁴
- Implementing partner: IOM;¹⁴⁵
- Allowances (career-focused component of the programme): beneficiaries are given an initial allowance of 100 USD (during their first two weeks in the programme), and a final 750 USD grant as start-up for their businesses (once they have completed the

¹³⁶ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹³⁷ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 7; Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 19-20

¹³⁸ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹³⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹⁴⁰ IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 4; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁴¹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 23 September 2022

¹⁴² IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴³ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20

¹⁴⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁴⁵ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19





programme);¹⁴⁶ additionally they are given a 90 USD transport allowance (tied to class attendance);¹⁴⁷

- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: no information found.

(g) The Female Rehabilitation Centre in Kismayo

- Opening: June 2020;¹⁴⁸
- Facility-type: non-residential (day centre), three days a week,¹⁴⁹ although a few residential rooms are available for protection cases;¹⁵⁰ most women keep living in their communities where they take care of their numerous dependants (between 6 and 8 in average); the centre also offers a day care for children under five;¹⁵¹ corroborating this IOM reported that many disengaged women were heads of household and hence the centre adopted a daily schedule which enabled women to take part in the rehabilitation program while still taking care of families. The centre provided ‘child-friendly amenities, including a playground’, and ‘offer[ed] supervised care for children under five’.¹⁵²
- Capacity: the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab states that the capacity of the centre is of 100 places;¹⁵³ Stern and Paterson report that around 120 beneficiaries were enrolled in this centre at the time of their research (beginning of 2022);¹⁵⁴
- Average length of stay: it varies, from approximately six months to one year,¹⁵⁵ as also reported by the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, who added that ‘most women leave within 6-8 months’;¹⁵⁶
- Implementing partner: IOM;¹⁵⁷
- Allowances (career-focused component of the programme): beneficiaries are given an initial allowance of 100 USD (during their first two weeks in the programme), and a final

¹⁴⁶ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁴⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁴⁸ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹⁴⁹ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 7; Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 19-20

¹⁵⁰ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹⁵¹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹⁵² IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 4; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁵³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 23 September 2022

¹⁵⁴ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19

¹⁵⁵ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20

¹⁵⁶ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁵⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19



750 USD grant as start-up for their businesses (once they have completed the programme);¹⁵⁸ additionally they are given a 90 USD transport allowance (tied to class attendance);¹⁵⁹

- Access for NISA and other Somali security officials: no information found;

(h) Female reintegration in other regions

In other parts of Somalia, where no rehabilitation facilities for women are available, there might be different scenarios following their registration or screening:

- In Galmudug: ‘women are sent to their communities, using relatives as guarantors’. Guarantors are male family members or clan elders. Women share their mobile phone number with NISA, on which they can always be reached, and must report when requested.¹⁶⁰
- In Hirshabelle: based on an expert interview, as of November 2022 no structured support existed in this area for women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab.¹⁶¹

(i) Reintegration centres for children

Throughout the country there are several centres, but they do not solely address children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab.¹⁶² A child protection consultant based in Somalia, reports that there are at least 6 reintegration centres distributed across the country.¹⁶³ Some of the disengaged children referred to the Somali authorities in Southwest region can be brought to Mogadishu to benefit from reintegration services.¹⁶⁴

The international child protection specialist based in Somalia indicated that these centres can provide services on average for about 100-150 children at the same time, while those in Mogadishu can cater for 200 children. In November 2022 they hosted about 100 children each centre, on average. The child protection consultant based in Somalia stated that no precise indication of the reception capacity of these centres nor of the enrolment rate of their respective programmes are available, but that they can vary depending on needs and local demand.¹⁶⁵

Local reintegration centres and programmes are run by both local NGOs and government entities in different locations of the country.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁸ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁵⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁶⁰ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20

¹⁶¹ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

¹⁶² International organisation official based in Somalia (II), Online interview, 31 August 2022

¹⁶³ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

¹⁶⁴ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

¹⁶⁵ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

¹⁶⁶ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022





2. Profiles and sub-profiles

2.1. Men

2.1.1. Disengagement factors and consequences

Pondering disengagement and its consequences

Various sources report that leaving Al-Shabaab is difficult and dangerous. Al-Shabaab members can take months or even years to disengage from the group, also for fear of being punished by death if they decide to do so.¹⁶⁷

In a research report from November 2022, which focuses on the experiences of former Al-Shabaab members,¹⁶⁸ lead author Heide-Ottosen, Director of Research, Analysis and Learning for USAID's Transition Initiatives for Stabilization-Saddex in Somalia, together with her research team, indicated that for 'many of [their] respondents [it] took months or even years to leave al-Shabaab, with such exits potentially punishable by death'.¹⁶⁹ One of their main research findings was that 'while al-Shabaab severely punishes most of those who attempt to escape, certain individuals are allowed to leave freely',¹⁷⁰ with this last comment referring to members allegedly less deeply involved 'who were permitted to leave the group on medical and compassionate grounds'.¹⁷¹

Bacon, the director of the Policy Anti-Terrorism Hub at American University, in a 2022 report, indicated that 'it is difficult to leave al-Shabaab and extremely dangerous to try to defect'. Hence some members 'stay in the organisation because of the costs and risks associated with seeking to leave'. The same author also noted that 'numbers quitting the organisation are currently low'.¹⁷² Furthermore, the author reported that members of the organisation 'fear the wrath of the organisation', especially the *Amniyat* (the intelligence unit), which is charged with, among others, eliminating defectors.¹⁷³

In line with Heide-Ottosen's and Bacon's findings mentioned above, Khalil et al., in their report on Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia (2019), indicated that for many of their

¹⁶⁷ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 3; Bacon, T., *Inside the minds of Somalia's ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab*, March 2022, [url](#), pp. 80, 94; Khalil, J. et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, January 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁶⁸ The report applied the Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab

¹⁶⁹ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷⁰ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁷¹ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷² Bacon, T., *Inside the minds of Somalia's ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab*, March 2022, [url](#), p. 94

¹⁷³ Bacon, T., *Inside the minds of Somalia's ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab*, March 2022, [url](#), p. 80



interviewees it took ‘many months or even years to find an opportunity to disengage’, for fear of retaliation, given the fact that disengagement is potentially punishable by death.¹⁷⁴ In a similar study on the consequences of quitting Al-Shabaab (2019), which is based on 32 interviews conducted with disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants from the Baidoa rehabilitation centre, Taylor et al. indicated that ‘the average amount of time spent considering defection was 6.3 months with the longest being 48 months and the shortest an impromptu decision with no time allotted for consideration’.¹⁷⁵ In the same study the authors indicated that ‘the average duration of membership of Al-Shabaab was 4.83 years (range one month to ten years)’.¹⁷⁶

Still Taylor et al. (2019) found that defection is an ‘unsafe option for Al-Shabaab combatants’ and that ‘the lack of security has made them fearful for their lives and is possibly discouraging more defectors’. Additionally, in the case of intrastate defection, such as in the case of low-risk Al-Shabaab ex-combatants, the authors indicate that changing identity would be extremely challenging given the interconnected clan-based society of Somalia.¹⁷⁷

Richard Barret conducted another similar study in 2018, based on over 130 interviews with, ex-Al-Shabaab combatants at various locations and rehabilitation centres.¹⁷⁸ The 2018 study included current and former leaders as well as foot soldiers.¹⁷⁹ About foot soldiers, the author reported that the ‘process of leaving is often drawn out, both in terms of making the final decision to leave and in finding the opportunity and summoning the courage to do so’.¹⁸⁰ Gjelsvik (2019) was of the same opinion when stating that ‘people thinking of disengaging from such groups must give careful consideration to whether it feels safe to do so’.¹⁸¹

Territorial control

For information on Al-Shabaab territorial control and the contested areas with the government of Somalia see [Map. 1 Somalia Approximate Territorial Control](#) of this report, the [EUAA Somalia Security Situation Report](#) - September 2021, and the EUAA Somalia Security Situation Report – February 2023.

According to Heide-Ottosen et al. (2022), while territorial control is a ‘key determinant of sympathy for and participation in al-Shabaab’, it is as well for exiting from the group.¹⁸² Khalil et al. also make the same point in a previous study (2019) when they indicate that the level of influence and control of a certain area impacts directly on disengagement options.¹⁸³ Still on

¹⁷⁴ Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁷⁵ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-8

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁷ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷⁸ Barret, R., Why They Fight and Why They Quit: An Analysis of Interviews with Current and Former Al-Shabaab Fighters, 2018, p. 320

¹⁷⁹ Barret, R., Why They Fight and Why They Quit: An Analysis of Interviews with Current and Former Al-Shabaab Fighters, 2018, pp. 319-327

¹⁸⁰ Barret, R., Why They Fight and Why They Quit: An Analysis of Interviews with Current and Former Al-Shabaab Fighters, 2018, p. 324

¹⁸¹ Gjelsvik, I. M., Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁸² Heide-Ottosen, S., et al., Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab, 2022, [url](#), pp. 2, 29

¹⁸³ Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18





this point, various interviewed sources indicate that newly liberated territories open up disengagement opportunities.¹⁸⁴

Perceptions of authorities' treatment

Harper, in a BBC News article published in 2020, reported about the fear not just of being targeted by Al-Shabaab, but also of the treatment defectors might expect from the Somali authorities, 'as senior militants tell recruits that defectors will be tortured with electric shocks by the Somali security services'.¹⁸⁵ An international organisation official interviewed for this report, as already mentioned, also touched upon the 'fear of being in the hands of the government'.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, UNSOM's research respondents, in a report published in 2016, reported about their fear of being traced and then killed by government forces upon release from the rehabilitation centres.¹⁸⁷ Hansen et al. (2018) reported about an ex-Al-Shabaab member who 'hesitated to surrender for a long period because he feared that he would be tortured or shot depending on who, at what point in time, got a hold of him'.¹⁸⁸

Within this context Felbab-Brown reported about the challenges posed by the lack of predictability of the screening process 'for low-level al Shabaab affiliates considering defection'. Uncertainty about their eligibility for amnesty and the outcome of the screening process exposes them to the risk of being deemed as high-risk, hence impacting on their decisions.¹⁸⁹

For further details on the screening process see section [1.2.3 Registration and screening of high and low-risk profiles](#).

Knowledge of the Defectors' Programme

The international organisation official based in Somalia stated that many Al-Shabaab members do not know about the amnesty proclamations or the rehabilitation centres.¹⁹⁰ Harper reported that 'most do not know there are government amnesty or rehabilitation centres where they will be "re-educated" and integrated back into society'.¹⁹¹ In contrast, Khalil et al., drawing from interviews with Serendi residents (2015 and 2017),¹⁹² found that 'more than two-thirds of respondents claimed that amnesty proclamations by successive Somali presidents substantially motivated their decision to exit'.¹⁹³ In particular, they found that most of their

¹⁸⁴ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022; Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

¹⁸⁵ Harper, M., Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹⁸⁷ UNSOM, Voices of Al-Shabaab, Understanding former combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center, 2016, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁸⁸ Hansen, S. J. and Gelot, L., Anatomy of Counter-Jihad: Community Perspectives on Rehabilitation and Reconciliation, 2018, p. 384

¹⁸⁹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁹⁰ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

¹⁹¹ Harper, M., Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹² Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁹³ Khalil, J. et al., Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia, January 2019, [url](#), p. 17



respondents agreed that radio and mobile phones were their main source of information, and that through these channels they were driven out of the organisation, either after ‘having been encouraged by their families’, or after having heard of amnesty proclamations. However, not one of them, reportedly, had been induced to disengage from the group thanks to a leaflet campaign.¹⁹⁴

Other factors influencing defection

Heide-Ottosen’s November 2022 research report on former Al-Shabaab members found that family, clan, and other social networks play a crucial role in exiting from Al-Shabaab.¹⁹⁵ The thirteen respondents¹⁹⁶ of the study were at times encouraged or pressured by their family to disengage, while on several occasions their family or clan members secured their safe passage with the security forces.¹⁹⁷ It is reportedly because of this that Al-Shabaab tries to hinder exits from the group ‘by transferring members between locations, resulting in them lacking the necessary social networks and knowledge of the terrain to escape’.¹⁹⁸ In another report from March 2022, Bacon indicated that clan elders have also been a means for defection and that ‘indeed defection through one’s clan is more prevalent than defection through the Somali government’.¹⁹⁹

Khalil et al. (2019) discussed the main enabling factors for defection uncovered by their study.²⁰⁰ Based on the interviews conducted with two samples of Serendi residents (27 and 38 respondents respectively),²⁰¹ they reported the following key determinants of disengagement were found: (a) the level of control or influence exercised by Al-Shabaab over specific territories and whether potential defectors’ community of belonging or home location falls under it or not (Territorial control already mentioned above); (b) the role defectors’ family members might play to ease the process; (c) the role played by media and communication to enable dissemination of information about rehabilitation centres or amnesty proclamations.²⁰²

2.1.2. Informal pathways and consequences, including Al-Shabaab targeting

(a) Leaving Al-Shabaab territory, relocation and self-integration

Sources indicate that Al-Shabaab’s extent of territorial control in combination with a person’s places of origin are crucial aspects affecting disengagement: Stern noted that ‘while some

¹⁹⁴ Khalil, J. et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, January 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁹⁵ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁶ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁹⁷ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁸ Heide-Ottosen, S. et al., *Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, Resolve Network, 2022, [url](#), pp. 27-28

¹⁹⁹ Bacon, T., *Inside the minds of Somalia’s ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab*, March 2022, [url](#), p. 94

²⁰⁰ Khalil, J. et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18

²⁰¹ Khalil, J. et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, January 2019, [url](#), p. 13

²⁰² Khalil, J. et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18





men are able to serve al-Shabaab in their home towns, most men serve the group from locations away from home'.²⁰³ Bacon noted that 'the group does not allow people living in its territory to readily leave'.²⁰⁴ Similarly, the Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration stated that leaving the group is 'extremely dangerous'.²⁰⁵

Against this backdrop, Harper reports that 'first there was the escape, then the long, lonely march out of al-Shabab territory'. The author reported about one of her interviewees stating that 'he will never return to his home village - he will spend the rest of life trying to melt into the big city of Mogadishu. Otherwise al-Shabab will find and execute him'.²⁰⁶ Gjelsvik reported in 2019 that 'some of those who decide to leave al-Shabaab do so quietly, without entering a programme, simply trying to settle into a new environment anonymously'.²⁰⁷

For further details on territoriality and other factors affecting disengagement see section [2.1.1 Disengagement factors and consequences](#).

(b) Family/clan-based re-integration

Felbab-Brown reported that reintegration processes also take place through customary justice and *xeer* councils independently of the formal processes. Sometimes these processes are also part of the 'reinsertion/reintegration phase of the formal low-risk defectors program, such as in the Baidoa centre programming'.²⁰⁸

However, the same author reported that 'customary *xeer* system comes with several difficulties for men accused of association with al Shabaab'. Stronger and resourceful clans are the dominant or the only clans represented in the councils of elders, and they often discriminate against other clans and sub-clans. Moreover, the determinations of the *xeer* councils 'cannot be appealed or challenged'.²⁰⁹

Regarding community reintegration, Sarfati and Donnelly reported in 2022 that this also depends on past connection with Al-Shabaab: 'while some community members were their victims, others were their supporters'. At times Al-Shabaab had managed to create links with certain communities. As a result, this can reduce the stigma faced by former combatants.²¹⁰

²⁰³ Stern, O. M., *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 25

²⁰⁴ Bacon, T., *Inside the minds of Somalia's ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab*, March 2022, [url](#), p. 94

²⁰⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²⁰⁶ Harper, M., *Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck*, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷ Gjelsvik, I. M., *Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁸ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 23

²⁰⁹ Felbab-Brown, V., *The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study*, May 2018, [url](#), p. 23

²¹⁰ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., *Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation*, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 10



Further details and publicly available reporting on specific cases of Al-Shabaab targeting could not be found within time constraints. For more information see section on [Research challenges](#).

2.1.3. Formal pathways and consequences for disengagement from Al-Shabaab

An overview of the formal pathways has been discussed in section [1.2.2](#), with focus on the National Programme for the Handling and the Treatment of Disengaged Combatants. More details about this formal pathway and consequences for disengagement are provided below per profile and sub-profile ([2.1.3](#), [2.2](#), [2.3](#)).

(a) High-value defectors

Felbab-Brown reported that the high-value defectors programme was introduced in Somalia in 2015 by Somalia's national security advisor and the director general of the National Intelligence and Security Agency. The programme fails to establish a systematic way of assessing which persons qualify as high-value defectors. According to the same author the common understanding and practice is that these are Al-Shabaab commanders, or at times clan elders and warlords, that have associated themselves with the group, and who can make many of their followers (in the tens) also leave.²¹¹ The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab reported that the high-value defector programme is still running as of September 2022.²¹²

As put by Felbab-Brown 'potential high-value defectors negotiate their co-optation deals with the government prior to defection on an individual basis'. The terms of these deals are not public, and it is difficult to ascertain what kind of guarantees are offered against the possibility of future prosecution.²¹³ The Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration reports that these deals are very ad-hoc and fully controlled by the government.²¹⁴

Reportedly, in the period 2015 to 2017, some 20 individuals have struck such deals with the Somali authorities.²¹⁵ Notable cases where those of:

- Muktar Robow (at least initially, before being put under house arrest), former spokesman of Al-Shabaab and the group's deputy leader;²¹⁶

²¹¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 13

²¹² Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²¹³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁴ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²¹⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), pp. 13-14

²¹⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 14





- Ahmed Madobe,²¹⁷ the current president of Jubbaland federal member state of Somalia;²¹⁸

The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab stated that ‘many Somalis resent these types of deals which contribute to perpetuate impunity in the country, and ‘reward’ ex-Al-Shabaab members’.²¹⁹

(b) High-risk defectors

After screening - see section [1.2.3](#) – those deemed as high-risk defectors by the government are sent to prison and then to military courts. According to the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, this path lacks transparency and it is secretly managed by government authorities and NISA officials.²²⁰ On this same point Felbab-Brown reported that military courts pathways and outcomes have little visibility and transparency. Their practice and ‘laws are widely seen as not providing basic rights to the accused, although these are enshrined in international human rights law and the Somali Provisional Constitution’.²²¹

Government officials interviewed by Felbab-Brown (2018) ‘maintain that regular civilian courts do not have the capacity to prosecute al Shabaab detainees and high-risk defectors because of a lack of laws on terrorism, a lack of secure facilities, and because civilian judges are afraid of al Shabaab retaliation’.²²²

In general, Felbab-Brown indicated that high-risk defectors face a high likelihood of being sentenced to death and executed, being rehabilitation not an option for them.²²³ According to the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, chances to face death, harsh, and less harsh sentences (in terms of length), including the possibility to bypass them altogether, would depend on clan affiliation and belonging. Those belonging to clans with higher influence might be able to serve shorter sentences or escape the system all-together.²²⁴ On this same point Felbab-Brown indicated that it is not apparent ‘whether some high-risk individuals are held in detention for a long time without trial or after trial, or whether they are released through bribery or informal means [...]. Nevertheless, corruption is widely suspected.’²²⁵ The Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration corroborated this point when stating that high-risk defectors’ treatment may also depend on their capacity to

²¹⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 15

²¹⁸ Horn Diplomat, Somalia: Jubaland state parliament extends president Madobe’s mandate from 4 to 5 years, 21 August 2022, [url](#)

²¹⁹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²²⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²²¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17

²²² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17

²²³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17

²²⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²²⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17



‘negotiate’ with the authorities, which is in turn determined by the level and strength of clan protection they can mobilise.²²⁶

The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab stated that, occasionally, government authorities make public announcements about sentenced defectors and then hold public executions, but ‘most of the times nobody gets to know who these high-risk defectors are, how they are treated, and how they end up’. The expert believed that at times they are executed without public knowledge.²²⁷ According to another expert interview, government’s treatment towards high-risk defectors – as well as towards captured Al-Shabaab militants – is increasingly harsh, with more frequent public executions.²²⁸

While most high-risk defectors are reportedly sentenced to death, the Baidoa prison/military court had adopted a different approach, according to Felbab-Brown’s research from 2018. This court sentenced a number of Al-Shabaab members to prison. Stern corroborated this point when stating that high-risk former al-Shabaab were serving, in 2019, sentences in a prison facility in Baidoa and were also ‘taking part in a rehabilitation programme run by Finn Church Aid (FCA) and CRD (Centre for Research and Dialogue)’.²²⁹ Such an approach has been fostered by the international community. At the end of the prison sentence, ‘when the high-risk prisoners are about to be released, it is expected that the family will collect them at the prison and that they will be monitored for at least six months.’²³⁰

Towards expanding civilian courts capacity, UN and other international partners have built a special secure court and prison complex in Mogadishu.²³¹ However, the same source reported about ‘al Shabaab holding a court within the central prison in Mogadishu and executing a prisoner’.²³²

Further details and publicly available reporting on specific cases of death sentences and executions carried out by state or non-state actors could not be found within time constraints. For more information see section on [Research challenges](#).

For more details about prison facilities and prison conditions in Somalia see the [EUAA Somalia report on Actors](#), section 2.4.5.

(c) Low-risk defectors

If defectors are classified as low-risk, they can volunteer to be placed in one of three small-scale DDR-like facilities for adults [five, including women’s facilities, see for details section 1.2.3 Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity], or special facilities for children (see also

²²⁶ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²²⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²²⁸ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²²⁹ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 7

²³⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17

²³¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 18

²³² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 17





section [2.3 Children](#)), which constitute an alternative to going to court.²³³ For average length of stay in the rehabilitation facilities as of November 2022, see section [1.2.5 Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity](#).

Taylor et al. (2019) found that '70 percent of the disengaged combatants [had] received death threats from Al-Shabaab, and many described themselves as "hunted"'.²³⁴ Some of their interviewees reported also about their fear to be killed upon exiting the rehabilitation centre and knowing about spies waiting for them to leave the centre.²³⁵

Against this backdrop, as Gjelsvik put it, given the fact that the rehabilitation programme is meant to weaken Al-Shabaab, 'the rehabilitation centres are potential targets, at risk of being attacked'.²³⁶ Harper indicated that the threats against inmates of the rehabilitation centres are 'so serious', that when she visited the Serendi rehabilitation centre, 'there were 80 guards for 84 defectors'.²³⁷ At the same time, an international organisation official based in Somalia, reported that the level of security and surveillance in the rehabilitation centres is quite high and that in the prior 12 months (at the time of the interview, September 2022) there have been no cases of attacks against the centres claimed by Al-Shabaab. The same expert also maintained that the group does not seem to overly focus on low level ex-combatants.²³⁸

Another major challenge faced by the rehabilitation centres is infiltration by al-Shabaab. In 2019, Gjelsvik stated that 'there have been incidents where active al-Shabaab fighters entered the programme, pretending to want to disengage. In some cases, it is challenging to determine who is a potential infiltrator and who is genuinely seeking exit from the group'.²³⁹ NISA officers interviewed by Felbab-Brown 'stress that their screening process does not guarantee the weeding out of al Shabaab infiltrators' from the rehabilitation centres.²⁴⁰ Harper reported in 2020 about 'active members of al-Shabab [who] slip through the net and send messages to the group from within the [Serendi] camp'.²⁴¹

After rehabilitation

After going through the different stages/pillars of the rehabilitation programme beneficiaries often end up working for the security sector or join militias, reported Felbab-Brown in 2018.²⁴²

²³³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 18

²³⁴ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²³⁵ Taylor, C. et al., The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²³⁶ Gjelsvik, I. M., Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²³⁷ Harper, M., Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

²³⁸ International organisation official based in Somalia (I), Online interview, 12 September 2022

²³⁹ Gjelsvik, I. M., Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁴⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20

²⁴¹ Harper, M., Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁴² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 19



On this point a Somali security expert reported on social media in November 2022 that this practice is still pervasive in Mogadishu while it poses serious security issues.²⁴³

On a different note, Gjelsvik reported that ‘careful consideration must be given to whether participants will be secure living with family, relatives or others in their networks’. Some low-risk ex-combatants may have family members or friends who are still engaged with or supportive of al-Shabaab. In certain cases, ‘the best solution is to relocate individuals to a different area than the community of origin’.²⁴⁴ For instance, at the Serendi rehabilitation facility, ‘if, after 12 months, an individual does not have a family and community to go to, or the area to which he would return is insecure, he can apply for a longer stay at the facility’.²⁴⁵

Community-based reintegration

Sarfati and Donnelly reported that ‘when possible’ low-risk beneficiaries are ‘referred to local civil society organisations for community-based reintegration support’.²⁴⁶ Felbab-Brown reported that ‘Somali NGOs play an important role in facilitating the formal program for low-level defectors as well as informal defection’. ‘More fundamentally’, these NGOs ease ‘community reconciliation’, which is crucial to enabling ‘acceptance and effectiveness of amnesty and defectors programs’. The author noted for instance that the implementing partner at the Baidoa rehabilitation centre had hired the NGO Soyden on various occasions to facilitate the reinsertion of low-level defectors. Pursuing such goals, Soyden organises various activities ‘by engaging elders, women’s groups, and business representatives to mediate conflict and reconciliation with clans, such as over resources or grievances, and to accept back defectors’.²⁴⁷

However, as reported by Sarfati and Donnelly, community reintegration is often challenged by ‘social divisions and socioeconomic hardships’ that can in turn ‘be exacerbated by the reintegration process’. The author maintained that it would be essential to ensure that communities also benefit from the reintegration of disengaged combatants and that impunity, in the eyes of the local people, does not seem to be rewarded.²⁴⁸

Stigma

Discussing protection dilemmas in various contexts, including in Somalia, Sarfati and Donnelly found in 2022 that ‘men and boys tend to be immediately viewed as security threats when

²⁴³ M.Mubarak, [Twitter], posted on 17 November 2022(a), [url](#); M.Mubarak, [Twitter], posted on 17 November 2022(b), [url](#). Mohamed Mubarak is a political and security analyst based in Mogadishu. He is the founder of anti-corruption NGO Marqaati (Marqaati.org) and previously of the Hiraal Institute.

²⁴⁴ Gjelsvik, I. M., Should I stay or should I go?: Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia, 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁴⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 21

²⁴⁶ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 7

²⁴⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 24

²⁴⁸ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 11





they are associated with “terrorists””.²⁴⁹ Harper reported in 2020 about defectors that have been rejected by family members or the community of belonging.²⁵⁰

Within this context, Nagai, an international expert on de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration, reported in 2021 about perception gaps between disengaged combatants and community members in Somalia.²⁵¹ The author conducted interviews in 2016 and 2019 with, among others, disengaged combatants from Baidoa and Mogadishu rehabilitation programmes as well as community members.²⁵² The author registered that most ex-combatants interviewees ‘had enormous confidence and an expectation that they would be accepted’ by their respective communities.²⁵³ Community members instead associated Al-Shabaab ex-combatants to negative sentiments, such as “trouble” and “fear”,²⁵⁴ as well as feelings of opposition and wariness of them.²⁵⁵ When discussing potential successful reintegration, interviewees essentially regarded disengaged combatants ‘as risks’, for potentially re-joining Al-Shabaab or for potentially inviting attacks from Al-Shabaab.²⁵⁶

At the same time the author registered that many interviewees ‘felt able to accept ex-combatants if they met certain conditions’. These conditions ranged from ‘the acquisition of skills to the making of a guarantee to their families that they would behave normally’.²⁵⁷ Reportedly, ex-combatants trustworthiness depended on various criteria such as ‘the presence or absence of skills, voluntarism, physical appearance, employment, participation in and contribution to the community, and a minimum time from disengagement, such as five years’.²⁵⁸

According to the same author sustainable employment and income were other issues undermining effective reintegration in Somalia.²⁵⁹

²⁴⁹ Sarfati A. and Donnelly P., Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation, IPI, January 2022, [url](#), p. 12

²⁵⁰ Harper, M., Life after al-Shabab: Driving a school bus instead of an armed pickup truck, BBC News, 23 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), pp. 19-24

²⁵² Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²⁵³ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 13

²⁵⁴ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 15

²⁵⁵ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁵⁶ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁷ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁵⁸ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 17

²⁵⁹ Nagai, Y., Reintegration of Al-Shabaab’s Defectors in Somalia: An Examination of Conditions for Successful Reintegration, 2021, [url](#), p. 24



2.1.4. Consequences for defectors/deserters' family members

Bacon stated that, based on her interviews with experts, practitioners, and officials, individuals attempting to leave al-Shabaab also put their family members at risk.²⁶⁰ In a 2020 report based on several interviews conducted with key informants - 23 Al-Shabaab defectors, focus group discussions with wives of former Al-Shabaab militants and low risk al-Shabaab defectors, as well as 12 one-to-one interviews with Al-Shabaab wives²⁶¹ - Stern noted that defection is not only dangerous for defectors themselves but also for their family members, notably their wives.²⁶²

The author reported about cases of wives being executed or held back by Al-Shabaab when their husbands defected from the group. Furthermore, the author elaborated on the 'wives of defectors' deciding to leave Al-Shabaab territory in order to feel more secure and then facing the risks usually associated with (urban) displacement.²⁶³ While feeling fearful of retribution after their men defected, women may also receive threats from or can be regularly questioned by the group.²⁶⁴

Against this backdrop, the Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration indicated that defectors' wives and family members, notably parents, are subject to retaliation by the group. The expert reported that in cases where defectors have left the group with military equipment, family members are also asked to compensate in kind, often with livestock. Towards mitigating these risks, family members of defectors who are residing at the Serendi Rehabilitation Centre are often also relocated to Mogadishu.²⁶⁵

Stern reported also about 'wife inheritance' in case of death or defection.²⁶⁶ While the practice of Somali wife inheritance foresees that a widow can be married to her husband's male relative, for Al-Shabaab *any* man in the group can inherit the wife of a killed member. The same author added that 'in a further distortion of this practice', wives are also inherited when their husband defects from the group.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁰ Bacon, T., Inside the minds of Somalia's ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab, March 2022, [url](#), p. 94

²⁶¹ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 6; Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 7

²⁶² Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 31

²⁶³ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 31

²⁶⁴ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, pp. 31-32

²⁶⁵ Somalia expert on rehabilitation and reintegration, Telephone interview, 10 November 2022

²⁶⁶ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 35

²⁶⁷ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 19; Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 24





2.2. Women

2.2.1. Options for leaving

(a) Members, wives, supporters, or victims

The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in its report from October 2022, indicated that interviewed female defectors from Bay and Bakool region maintain that ‘women are generally relegated to support roles’ and ‘contribute to Al-Shabaab’s governance system by serving as *zakat* collectors, madrasa teachers and preachers, and security guards in prisons’. Additionally, women may also support the group’s activities ‘by serving as cooks and cleaners for Al-Shabaab fighters, storing weapons and operating as spies.’²⁶⁸

According to Stern and Peterson, women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab can be grouped as follows:

- **Members.** There are women ‘actively involved with the group’ as ‘spies, recruiters, fundraisers and trainers’. They are rarely active as combatants, but are sometimes engaged ‘as suicide bombers and assassins.’ The majority are married to al-Shabaab men, and many of these women are ‘ideologically supportive of al-Shabaab, its goals and its methods’.
- **Wives.** The majority of women formerly associated with al-Shabaab are ‘linked to the group through marriage’. These women married Al-Shabaab members or their respective husbands joined the group after their marriage. Some of these women are ‘supportive of their husband’s involvement and of the group’s ideology’, while others are ‘against it’.²⁶⁹

An expert interviewed for this report stated that most women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab regard themselves as *just* wives, and among these only very few reported having been active within the group. Girls instead state more often to have been actively involved in the group’s activities.²⁷⁰

In a previous study from 2019, Stern also engaged in a discussion about women’s role in the militant group. Within this context the author distinguished between:

- **Members:** women who are actually recruits or combatants, or who actively support the group –militarily or otherwise;
- **Associated women:** women who are in other ways associated with the group, as wives, abducted women or those coerced into involvement;
- **Women living in Al-Shabaab-**, who have lived in Al-Shabaab-occupied territory – and possibly (but not necessarily) have exhibited some level of support or acceptance of the group.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ UN Security Council, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754, 10 October 2022, [url](#), para. 29

²⁶⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 12;

²⁷⁰ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

²⁷¹ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 6



However, Stern indicated that the level of support and membership of women varies ‘along a continuum’ from non-participation ‘with a complete disapproval of the group on the one end, full membership and participation on the other, and gradations of support in between’.²⁷²

Within this context, according to questioned former al-Shabaab members, it remains debatable what full ‘membership’ entails and how it is distinct from mere assistance to the group.²⁷³ The Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab corroborates this point in two interviews conducted for the purpose of this report, when stating that such distinctions are extremely hard to make and to disentangle, being the various profiles and cases extremely interwoven.²⁷⁴

Still on the distinction between wives and members, Stern’s previous research from 2020 revealed as well that ‘while most female members seem to be married to al-Shabaab men, it appears that most wives do not actively participate in the group – over and above being supportive wives to their husbands’.²⁷⁵ Furthermore, Stern’s study from 2019 showed that among the women actively participating in the group most did so ‘from their homes – from cities, towns and villages, in both al-Shabaab-occupied and unoccupied territory’.²⁷⁶ They tend to keep ‘their support quiet, making it hard to know which women [are] involved’,²⁷⁷ either because, as stated elsewhere, operating from home or because hidden by full face veils.²⁷⁸ In contrast to men members of the group, women generally do not move away from their families and communities.²⁷⁹

(b) Territorial control and ‘leaving’ options

The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab explained that a crucial variable determining women’s leaving options is whether the area where they live has been reclaimed by government forces or not (see more details below).²⁸⁰ Another expert corroborates this point when stating that disengagement options actually available to women depend on their location and the actor controlling or contesting the given area: ‘territorial control creates the options available to you’.²⁸¹

Leaving or disengaging from Al-Shabaab is also difficult to ascertain and categorise, while viable options differ according to local or personal circumstances.²⁸² Based on Stern’s research from 2019, leaving Al-Shabaab meant for the interviewees at times ‘stopping carrying out tasks in support of the group’,²⁸³ at times leaving al-Shabaab territory, or leaving their al-

²⁷² Stern, O. M., *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, June 2020, pp. 28-29

²⁷³ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 15

²⁷⁴ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 13 September and 28 September 2022

²⁷⁵ Stern, O. M., *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 29; see also Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, pp. 6, 25

²⁷⁶ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 17

²⁷⁷ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 15

²⁷⁸ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 12, 37

²⁷⁹ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, pp. 15, 21

²⁸⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²⁸¹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

²⁸² Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022; Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

²⁸³ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 31





Shabaab husbands.²⁸⁴ Sometimes it meant leaving Al-Shabaab in groups – as part of group deals or as part of clan defections.²⁸⁵ Elsewhere in the same study the author spoke about women who stop their support and continue to lead the life they have always apparently led,²⁸⁶ or who move from one place to another.²⁸⁷

The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab noted that, in general, once they have left the group, going back to Al-Shabaab territory is not an option for women, who would ‘most probably face execution as traitors’.²⁸⁸

2.2.2. Informal pathways and consequences for disengaging

Stern and Peterson, in a 2022 report on women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, indicated that not everybody who leaves Al-Shabaab, including women, announces it to the government forces and goes through a formal process. Those women opting for an informal pathway might do so in different ways: they might return and live amongst their clan, they might move to IDP camps in new cities, or in some cases, marry government officials or soldiers.²⁸⁹

Women who are not brought to or do not report themselves to the authorities, and hence do not go through formal rehabilitation programmes, do not have access to the same services and assistance as their counterparts in the formal pathway. Moreover, they are not formally cleared by the government, and, consequently, are at risk of being arrested. For further details about women’s clearance see section below [2.2.3 Formal pathways and consequences](#).²⁹⁰

(a) Remaining ‘home’

The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab maintained that women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab can remain ‘home’ after disengaging, or just ‘leaving’ the group, where their home area now falls under the government control area or has been reclaimed back.²⁹¹ Similarly, women not playing any particular role within Al-Shabaab might be able to leave the group and remain where they are ‘as long as they can stand the danger’.²⁹²

Stern’s 2020 research on the wives of Al-Shabaab indicated that in general ‘the ways communities treat al-Shabaab wives depends largely on how those communities feel about al-Shabaab’. The author also observed that ‘attitudes to al-Shabaab wives differ in al-Shabaab

²⁸⁴ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 30

²⁸⁵ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 33

²⁸⁶ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 31

²⁸⁷ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 32

²⁸⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²⁸⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 24

²⁹⁰ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 24

²⁹¹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²⁹² Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022



and government-held areas, with wives enjoying better treatment – and even some status – in al-Shabaab territory.²⁹³

Furthermore, as already mentioned above, Stern noted in 2019 that among the women actively supporting Al-Shabaab, many did so ‘secretly’ from their homes, without the knowledge of their communities and neighbours. For this reason, women leaving Al-Shabaab were able to reintegrate back into their communities more easily than men.²⁹⁴

(b) Leaving Al-Shabaab territory, going back to local communities, or relocating

The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in its report from October 2022, indicated that women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab mentioned ‘the protection of their children from recruitment’ and ‘the fact that they had lost their husbands in Al-Shabaab operations’ as key factors motivating their defection.²⁹⁵ In her report on the Wives of Al-Shabaab (2020) Stern reported that women leaving their husbands and Al-Shabaab territory may do so for a number of different reasons, such as ideology, needs for services, safety, husbands’ defection or death, or separation.²⁹⁶

Stern and Peterson (2022) noted that upon leaving Al-Shabaab territory, women with different type of association to the group are perceived to pose different level of ‘risk’ for society and are in turn exposed to different levels of ‘risk’, such as security and vulnerability issues or lack of support.²⁹⁷ The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab explained that the consequences associated with leaving Al-Shabaab (territory) depend on women’s role or situation within the group prior to that.²⁹⁸ For instance:

- **Al-Shabaab wives.** Al-Shabaab wives who want to disengage or just leave the group need to leave Al-Shabaab territory while their respective husbands want them back or try to chase them down.²⁹⁹
- **Mothers of ‘Al-Shabaab’ children.** Al-Shabaab wives who want to disengage or just leave the group need to leave Al-Shabaab territory while they take their children with them. Taking children out of the group has serious security implications because Al-Shabaab wants these children back as an important source for recruitment.³⁰⁰ ‘This is when ‘threatening comes’.³⁰¹
- **Al-Shabaab widows.** Al-Shabaab wives can remain under Al-Shabaab if they want to, even after their husband’s death. But if they want to avoid wife inheritance and refuse to get

²⁹³ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, p. 29

²⁹⁴ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 8

²⁹⁵ UN Security Council, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754, 10 October 2022, [url](#), para. 30

²⁹⁶ Stern, O. M., Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, June 2020, pp. 32-37

²⁹⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 12, 14

²⁹⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

²⁹⁹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁰ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022; Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰¹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022





married again (and again) ‘they put themselves in a life/death situation’. Hence, ‘they need to leave Al-Shabaab territory to save their life’.³⁰²

- **Al-Shabaab defectors’ wives.** They might decide to leave Al-Shabaab territory in order to feel more secure and avoid retribution from the group. See on this section 2.1.4. Consequences for defectors/deserters’ family members.³⁰³
- **Business women.** They often work in money-laundering activities for Al-Shabaab. If they refuse to collaborate or to further work for them, they also ‘put themselves in a life/death situation and they must leave in order to save their life’.³⁰⁴
- **Teachers, fundraisers, recruiters.** The moment they refuse to play the same role they must leave Al-Shabaab territory.³⁰⁵
- **Women whose family members have joined security forces.** Family members of women living in Al-Shabaab controlled area might put them in a dangerous situation if they join security forces or armed militias opposing Al-Shabaab.³⁰⁶

In the cases described above, where women decide to leave the group, they are exposed to retaliation and threatening from the group in reason of the role/function they used to play/have within the group.³⁰⁷

However, as mentioned in section 1.2.1 Current policy and amnesty proclamations, Bacon (2022) noted that ‘the group does not allow people living in its territory to readily leave’.³⁰⁸ Stern (2019) reported that if women are to leave Al-Shabaab territory or move from one place to another in order to disengage from the group, their pathways can differ greatly depending on the destination of their relocation. Reportedly, in big cities like Mogadishu they could relocate ‘basically unnoticed,’ while in smaller cities such as Baidoa this was less the case.³⁰⁹

The IOM-funded project on women’s formal rehabilitation - see section below [2.2.3](#) for further details - included a very first estimation, carried out by local women’s organisations, of potential beneficiaries across three locations (Kismayo, Baidoa and Mogadishu).³¹⁰ Based on these estimates, women who were potentially eligible for rehabilitation were estimated at the time between 2 000 and 2 500 people.³¹¹ On this same point, IOM reported that ‘as a result of a [2019] household survey administered by women’s organizations, the project identified over 2,600 women living in Baidoa, Kismayo and Mogadishu, who had escaped, defected or been rescued from Al-Shabaab’.³¹²

³⁰² Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁵ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁶ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁰⁸ Bacon, T., Inside the minds of Somalia’s ascendant insurgents: an identity, mind, emotions and perceptions analysis of al-Shabaab, March 2022, [url](#), p. 94

³⁰⁹ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 32

³¹⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³¹¹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³¹² IOM, Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation, Transitional Rehabilitation, December 2021, [url](#), p. 4



The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab maintained that most women disengaging informally from the militant group find their way to these three cities. However, the same expert added that ever since the project has been formalised, in 2021, no statistics have been collected.³¹³ Moreover, as the Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab stressed, many of these women do not know about the rehabilitation programme, with the exception of some in Kismayo and Baidoa areas.³¹⁴

Treatment after leaving

In their 2022 study Stern and Paterson discussed women's need after leaving al-Shabaab territory. They indicated that many women head to cities and towns in government-held areas and many of them do not reveal their past association with Al-Shabaab as this might cause 'mistrust, stigma or even arrest'.³¹⁵ In a previous report from 2020, Stern indicated that, apart from the difficulties of the journey, the ease of integration depends very much on the places women move to, and the level of family or clan connection/support they can rely upon.³¹⁶ Again the author noted that in their new location women face a number of challenges, such as: poverty, stigma and mistrust from within the hosting community (including IDP camps) or the family circle, sexual exploitation, and fear of Al-Shabaab (also within IDP camps).³¹⁷

In the same study from 2022 Stern and Peterson quoted a research conducted by Albany Associates (2021) on communities' perceptions about women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab. This study found that communities in Jubbaland, South-West State, and Hirshabelle 'would be open to female defectors returning to their communities, as they viewed them as being vulnerable' and not actively involved in Al-Shabaab activities. The same study also found a view held by Hirshabelle and South-West communities that 'only "their own" women should be welcomed'.³¹⁸ Elaborating on this point, the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab explains that women's clan status, and hence the level of protection they can access, depends on their own clan affiliation (the clan from which they originally come from) and that of their husband's. Children always belong to their father's clan. Women who seek protection after having left Al-Shabaab and who have children are usually welcomed by their husbands' clan, or at least their children are so.³¹⁹

In terms of housing and securing livelihoods, Stern and Paterson (2022) noted that while some women can live with family or clan members, most need to find other housing solutions, with many 'moving into rooms', often in IDPs camps. Sometimes they are excluded from receiving assistance there, due to discrimination or the fact that they separated from their own

³¹³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 23 September 2022

³¹⁴ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

³¹⁵ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 13

³¹⁶ Stern, O. M., *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, June 2020, pp. 32-37

³¹⁷ Stern, O. M., *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, June 2020, pp. 38-39

³¹⁸ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 22

³¹⁹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022





communities.³²⁰ Already in 2019 Stern noted that some of the women ‘leaving’ Al-Shabaab, alone or with their children, struggle to find housing or to secure livelihoods.³²¹

Stern and Paterson (2022) noted that some women face specific security problems from Al-Shabaab husbands, from whom they have escaped with their children, or from other members of the group. ‘This is particularly the case when women flee with children, whom the group wishes to recruit’,³²² as also the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab corroborated.³²³ Stern noted already in 2019 that some women risk being targeted by the group.³²⁴

Stigma

Regarding stigma, Stern and Peterson (2022) noted that in many communities women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab actually face significant stigma:³²⁵ ‘where women’s backgrounds are known, some are stigmatised and discriminated against – with some even rejected by their families due to their affiliation with the group’.³²⁶ This is particularly the case when women have left their husbands in the group, and they are believed to be spying or carrying out activities on behalf of the group. Community attitudes towards these women would be particularly negative when they have married al-Shabaab fighters outside of their own clans, and they have had children with them.³²⁷ However, according to the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab the level of stigma rarely reaches the point of outright expulsion.³²⁸ Women might be looked at very suspiciously, and community members might refuse to engage with them, but usually this is not enough to ‘kick you out’.³²⁹

In a previous report (2019) Stern noted that women might also be welcomed back by their respective communities, depending on the women’s own attitude, the place at hand, and the women’s relationship with Al-Shabaab.³³⁰ Women whose participation in the group remained concealed would not experience stigma. The same would apply to women relocating to cities or other places, provided that their past role with the group remains unknown.³³¹

This notwithstanding, Felbab-Brown (2018) reported about ‘several instances of community retaliation against women considered to be “al Shabaab wives”’ in various parts of Somalia,

³²⁰ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 13

³²¹ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 36

³²² Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 14

³²³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³²⁴ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 36

³²⁵ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 22

³²⁶ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 13

³²⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20

³²⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³²⁹ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³³⁰ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 36

³³¹ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, pp. 36-37



including in Kismayo and Baidoa.³³² Local authorities and community members wanted to expel them or stigmatised them out of fear and suspiciousness (for them being spies).³³³ Felbab-Brown noted that women labelled as wives of Al-Shabaab fighters are seen by their families and communities as disgraced, and unable to be married off again.³³⁴ The same author added that ‘women are highly vulnerable to community ostracism, retaliation, and expulsion, which can have severe implications for their safety and security and that of their children.’ This is particularly true for ‘those from minority clans or who are internally displaced’.³³⁵

Women from minority clans

Felbab-Brown (2018) further elaborated on women and children from minority clans/groups and formerly associated with Al-Shabaab. First the author indicated that the ‘xeer system under-privileges women’ in general and then went on elaborating on women coming from ‘a subordinate minority clan, such as the Bantu’ [actually a minority group, see [EUAA Somalia Report on Targeted Profiles 2021](#)] or who are displaced and do not have access to clan protection. The author stated that these women are ‘unlikely to receive any justice or to be able to (re)integrate into the local community’. She added that ‘such women can easily end up without any protection and resources’.³³⁶ As also stated above by the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Somali women have a dual clan status.³³⁷ Because of this they can face discrimination as women and as members of a minority clan, ‘even only by marriage’. ‘Since many minority clans ally with al Shabaab precisely because of their subjugated status, women who have a connection to those clans are highly vulnerable’.³³⁸

Political scientists Besteman and Van Lehman (2018), focussed on the situation of the Somali Bantu of the Juba River Valley (Jubbaland). Their research showed that ‘Al-Shabaab differentiates in its application and enforcement of religious, governance and economic rules between Somali Bantus and Somalis from the major clans by extorting a greater percentage of harvests, remittances and “religious-adherence” fines from Somali Bantus than from other Somalis’.³³⁹ Within this context, 97.5 % of respondents of their face-to-face survey (41 respondents in total), reported that in their villages Al-Shabaab members ‘commit rape through the forced “marriage” of Somali Bantu girls’ and that the average age at which this happen ranges from ‘9 to 17 years old, with a mean age of 13 years’.³⁴⁰ Against this backdrop, all respondents reported that ‘Somali Bantus cannot “move freely between Al-Shabaab-held

³³² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

³³³ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

³³⁴ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 11

³³⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 23

³³⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 24

³³⁷ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022; Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 24

³³⁸ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 24

³³⁹ Besteman, C. and Van Lehman, D., Somalia’s Southern War, The Fight Over Land and Labour, 2018, p. 300

³⁴⁰ Besteman, C. and Van Lehman, D., Somalia’s Southern War, The Fight Over Land and Labour, 2018, p. 305





areas and government-controlled areas” while 90% reported that despite their wish to leave the Jubba Valley, ‘they are too afraid to do so’.³⁴¹ Leaving the territory and then being caught returning to Al-Shabaab controlled areas could be highly costly. According to the respondents, Somali Bantu may face execution (39%), imprisonment and interrogation (41%), and removal to unknown or fighting area (20%).³⁴²

(c) Marrying government soldiers

Stern and Peterson reported that some women, who desert and integrate informally, marry government soldiers or officials.³⁴³ In a different study, Stern further stated that women who divorce Al-Shabaab men have to marry for safety, and this can happen with government soldiers.³⁴⁴

No further information regarding this sub-topic could be found within the time limits of the research. For more details see section on [Research challenges](#).

2.2.3. Formal pathways and consequences

The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in its report from October 2022, indicated that the presence of rehabilitation programmes for (female) defectors and the support of families or relatives in government-controlled territories were important pull factors determining defection.³⁴⁵

Stern and Paterson (2022) reported that women’s formal rehabilitation was piloted in 2019 and 2020 in three locations in Somalia (Kismayo, Baidoa and Mogadishu) where IOM-funded projects were implemented by local partners. The pilot project was addressed to 50 beneficiaries in each location.³⁴⁶ Following this pilot phase two centres for the rehabilitation of women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab were opened in 2020, one in Kismayo and one in Baidoa, with IOM as the key implementing partner.³⁴⁷ For more details see section [1.2.5 Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity](#).

Most beneficiaries of these rehabilitation programmes in Baidoa and Kismayo reside in their community and they travel to the centre during the day, three days a week.³⁴⁸ The authors also added that ‘the need for the programme is higher’ than the actual reception capacity ‘with more women arriving in these towns each day who need assistance’.³⁴⁹ They also indicated

³⁴¹ Besteman, C. and Van Lehman, D., *Somalia’s Southern War, The Fight Over Land and Labour*, 2018, p. 306

³⁴² Besteman, C. and Van Lehman, D., *Somalia’s Southern War, The Fight Over Land and Labour*, 2018, p. 306

³⁴³ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 24

³⁴⁴ Stern, O. M., *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab*, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 32

³⁴⁵ UN Security Council, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754*, 10 October 2022, [url](#), para. 30

³⁴⁶ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁴⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 24

³⁴⁸ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 19-20

³⁴⁹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., *Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming*, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 19



that centre staff reported ‘not having heard of any cases of women returning to al-Shabaab’ among those who have accessed the rehabilitation programmes.³⁵⁰

Following the screening, in Kismayo (Jubbaland) and Baidoa (South-West) the NISA ‘sends a list of beneficiaries to the centres’. There are waiting lists, and if no places are available, then women are registered and live in the community while waiting for their turn. They are not ‘cleared’ by the government until they have completed the rehabilitation programme.³⁵¹

After participating in the women’s programme, women receive a ‘non-criminal certificate from the CID [Criminal Investigation Department], with which they can obtain other documents’.³⁵² However, the possession of the CID clearance does not prevent women from being ‘raided’ at times by government security forces, because there is no national database for women having gone through rehabilitation.³⁵³ In such instances, women might need the intervention of clan elders or other members, or of the rehabilitation programme officers in order to be released.³⁵⁴

Prior to the setting up of the rehabilitation centres in Kismayo and Baidoa, based on an IOM scoping study mentioned by Stern (2019), Baidoa was the sole place where ‘a process seemed to be in place for female defectors’. This process followed the same procedure as for men: first the women reached out to their family members or clan elders in order to negotiate their return. Then they were taken to the local police station, then CID and then NISA for the screening. Once interviewed, they were released into the custody of a guarantor, while NISA monitored them and required them to report regularly.³⁵⁵

Treatment while in rehabilitation or by the hosting community

Stern and Peterson (2022) reported that ‘there is evidence to suggest that women who participate in rehabilitation programming are better received [by communities] than those who defect informally’.³⁵⁶ CSOs, both in Baidoa and Kismayo, through events and initiatives have also promoted the relationship between formerly associated Al-Shabaab women and the local communities to ease their welcoming and make women feel more comfortable.³⁵⁷

Women who go through rehabilitation are still potentially exposed to Al-Shabaab threats and retribution, depending on their past role and their personal circumstances (see sections [2.2.2 Informal pathways and consequences for disengaging](#), including AS targeting (a), (b), and (c) above). The Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab mentioned various grounds: because these women have left the group with their children, or ran away from their

³⁵⁰ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 20

³⁵¹ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, pp. 19-20

³⁵² Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 14

³⁵³ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁵⁴ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁵⁵ Stern, O. M., The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab, Adam Smith International, September 2019, p. 32

³⁵⁶ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 23

³⁵⁷ Stern, O. M. and Peterson, C., Assisting women formerly associated with al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming, Adam Smith International, 2022, p. 23





husbands, or because of their previous role or level of strategic information they had access to. This level of risk ‘tends to diminish over time’ from the moment they had left the group.³⁵⁸ The Somali expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab stated that ‘we hear less about women’s targeting because they are less involved in the activities of the group’.³⁵⁹

2.2.4. Consequences for women’s family members

According to the Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab women often leave the group because of their children, in order to secure them a better life. These children are often claimed back by the group who wants to recruit them. In such circumstances, other family members might face retaliation or threatening from the group, and be asked to join the group in the place of these women. Family members may still pretend not to know where their relative is or try to engage clan mechanisms in order to resolve the dispute with Al-Shabaab.³⁶⁰

2.3. Children

The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, in its report from October 2022, indicated that in the period January to March 2022, Al-Shabaab remained the main perpetrator of child recruitment incidents (177 cases, 78.9 %) and child abduction incidents (192 cases out of 194 verified), which are closely associated with recruitment.³⁶¹

The international child protection specialist based in Somalia indicated that as per the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children in Armed Conflict, about 1 000 children are recruited yearly by armed forces or groups in Somalia. Of these about 70-80 % are recruited by Al-Shabaab. Children associated with Al-Shabaab may play different roles: there are those actively engaged in combat roles, and those used as helpers, spies, cooks, washers, logistics assistants, among other roles.³⁶²

A child protection consultant based in Somalia, indicated that, according to estimates available to the source, the number of children (below the age of 18) associated with Al-Shabaab ranges between 1 500 and 2 000 yearly. The same expert stated that children are lured into the group in many ways, especially through indoctrination and the prospects of benefits. Those living under Al-Shabaab controlled areas are more easily recruited into the group, when they are not forced to be part of it. Often clan structures and elders are charged with recruitment on behalf of Al-Shabaab. The group also carries out recruitment activities outside its control areas, by reaching out to children and trying to have them join the group through deceit and misinformation.³⁶³

³⁵⁸ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁵⁹ Somalia expert on persons formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 28 September 2022

³⁶⁰ Somalia expert on disengagement from Al-Shabaab, Online interview, 29 September 2022

³⁶¹ UN Security Council, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia, S/2022/754, 10 October 2022, [url](#), para. 127

³⁶² Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁶³ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022



2.3.1. Disengagement options

Children may disengage or just leave Al-Shabaab through the formal or the informal pathways. According to the child protection consultant based in Somalia, most children who are identified either by government or by child protection actors opt for or are channelled through the formal pathways.³⁶⁴ According to the international child protection specialist based in Somalia the number of those referred to the authorities are a ‘tiny drop in the ocean’.³⁶⁵

2.3.2. Informal pathways and consequences, including Al-Shabaab targeting

(a) Leaving territory and/or going back ‘home’

According to the international child protection specialist based in Somalia many children disengage from Al-Shabaab informally. Little is known about informal pathways in government control areas, while basically nothing is known about areas that fall under Al-Shabaab control and influence: ‘entire areas of the country are no-go zones’. Many of these children, when they do not manage to reunite with their family or community of belonging, may end up being street children.³⁶⁶ Children going the informal pathway do not have access to the services offered by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and other protection partners.³⁶⁷

Other times, despite having been identified by protection partners, children go back to their parents and stay with them without taking part in any formal reintegration process.³⁶⁸ In many of these cases, children who have already re-joined their families ‘do not necessarily want to take part in the programme’ as the international child protection specialist put it.³⁶⁹ In such cases children remain vulnerable to Al-Shabaab appeals, calls and threats. And the group is able to trace them and track them down.³⁷⁰

Children wishing to disengage from the group might decide to escape whenever they are presented a good opportunity: at night for instance, whenever the level of control from the group lessens, or in case of newly liberated areas, whenever it is easier to seek refuge and reach security or government forces.³⁷¹

In some cases, disengaged children tend to return to their family and community of belonging, but this option is not always viable. Al-Shabaab tends to break the link between a child and its family or community. Recruited children are usually taken away from their place of origin, maybe to a training camp or facility in another region, some hundred kilometres away. This poses serious challenges to the possibility of being reunified with their family. With reintegration outside of the clan of belonging rarely viable, many of these children end up in IDP camps or as street children. Other times children themselves prefer not to re-join their

³⁶⁴ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁶⁵ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁶⁶ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁶⁷ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁶⁸ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁶⁹ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁷⁰ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁷¹ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022





family for various reasons: they might be ashamed about their past participation in the Al-Shabaab group, they might fear their family's reaction, or they might come from areas that are still under Al-Shabaab control.³⁷² See section [2.3.3\(b\)](#) for further details.

2.3.3. Formal pathways and consequences, including Al-Shabaab targeting

The international child protection specialist indicated that in the first 9 months of 2022, among those disengaging from the group (formally and informally), about 220 children were channelled through the formal referral mechanism.³⁷³

According to the National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants in Somalia, children in government's custody should be transferred over to UNICEF within 72 hours,³⁷⁴ irrespective of whether they have 'escaped, been captured, or having been otherwise separated from armed groups, or [are] in government custody' as per the "SOPs on reception and handover".³⁷⁵

The child protection consultant based in Somalia, reported that children can disengage from Al-Shabaab or just leave the group in different ways while reporting or being referred to the Somali authorities. Without providing details on the prevalence of each, the source mentioned:

- Disengagement via **community mechanisms** triggered and enacted by child protection actors (local and international NGOs). Practitioners liaise with community members/elders and through them reach out to children currently enrolled in madrasas, or training camps, or already fighting and actively contributing to the group. Where children are far away, in Al-Shabaab controlled areas, a viable strategy is to wait for them to be back with their community or family of belonging during breaks, and then take initiative during such opportunity windows.
- Children may **voluntarily report** themselves to the Somali authorities, such as NISA, Police, and SNA. This may happen when: (a) children walk away from the group while taking serious risks until they reach a security outpost or Somali authorities; (b) newly liberated territory creates the opportunity for escape; (c) they manage to reach out to Somali security forces and are eased in the process. In all three cases UNICEF or other protection partners should be informed immediately in order to ensure the hand-over process to civilian actors.
- Other times children are **captured** during raids and fights and then referred to the Somali authorities. UNICEF or other protection partners should be informed immediately in order to ensure the hand-over process to civilian actors.³⁷⁶

³⁷² International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁷³ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁷⁴ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 19

³⁷⁵ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 20

³⁷⁶ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022



The international child protection specialist based in Somalia refers to the redirecting procedure above as a formal referral mechanism that channels disengaged children from state and non-state actors to protection actors, in line with the SOPs for the reception and hand-over of children separated from armed groups, signed by the Government in 2014.³⁷⁷ There are child protection focal points at the level of the Ministry of Defence, SNA (including focal points distributed across the army's outposts) and NISA. After identification, children are screened by NISA and then referred to protection partners.³⁷⁸

Human Rights Watch reported in 2018 that 'in south-central Somalia NISA is clearly in charge of screening and interrogations of children', however 'the implementation of the SOPs is inconsistent', with key actors at times unwilling to implement them. As a result, children are sometimes left in limbo in intelligence facilities, prison or in adult rehabilitation camps for long periods.³⁷⁹

(a) Reintegration programme

After screening, the formal pathway out of the group is called 'reintegration' rather than 'rehabilitation,' and this is 'also to avoid stigma', as the child protection consultant based in Somalia put it.³⁸⁰ The reintegration programme at the various centres (see section [1.2.3\(g\)](#) for further details) has following features:

- The reintegration programme comprises education and vocational training.³⁸¹ It is an 8–9-month skills programme that ends with a graduation ceremony. There are also a number of activities that are open to other children in general.³⁸²
- Both boys and girls can access the programme, ideally in equal numbers. Most girls, who often have experienced forced marriage or sexual violence while with Al-Shabaab, are often not identified after separation or sent directly to reunite with their families.³⁸³ Overall, girls currently make up between 20 and 30 % of children benefitting from reintegration programmes.³⁸⁴
- Reintegration programs aim to cater to the needs of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups (CAAFAG) as well as other vulnerable children. On average, about 70 % of the children benefitting from the reintegration programme are CAAFAG. Most of them are associated with Al-Shabaab, while there are also children formerly associated with national or regional security forces, and clan militias. The rest are other vulnerable children, including those who are likely to be recruited or radicalised. Their participation in the programme is meant so to prevent such occurrences.³⁸⁵

³⁷⁷ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022; HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 20

³⁷⁸ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁷⁹ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 21

³⁸⁰ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁸¹ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁸² International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁸³ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁸⁴ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁸⁵ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022





- The reintegration package aims to provide the same services to all children, including counselling and psycho-social support and socio-economic reintegration activities. However, based on the assessments made by NISA and qualified social workers from reintegration partners, children may need different levels of support.³⁸⁶ Regarding children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, the child protection consultant further explained:
 - a. **Children deemed as ‘low-risk’ by NISA (and other vulnerable children at risk of recruitment):** ideally, these children would attend the programme from their parents, or guarantor’s place, or from their foster care; however, depending on the situation and assessments made, those children may go through an interim care centre at the beginning;
 - b. **Children deemed as ‘higher-risk’ by NISA:** these children are hosted in a residential facility (interim care centre) where they can stay three, six, or even nine months depending on assessments made by social workers. During this period, and as long as in need of an emergency response, they receive counselling and psycho-social support, and they also participate in the CAAFAG reintegration programme. Afterwards they are reintegrated back into the community: they can stay with their parents, relatives or in foster care, while they keep attending education and vocational training.³⁸⁷

The international child protection specialist indicated that interim care centres usually cater a maximum of 20-30 children at one time.³⁸⁸

Upon completion of the reintegration/re-education process children are granted a start-up allowance.³⁸⁹

Felbab-Brown indicated in 2018 that children reintegration facilities were established and managed by Somali NGOs, while they were funded by UNICEF.³⁹⁰ The author described the work of these NGOs back then in these terms:

‘At the rehabilitation facilities, the Somali implementing partners provide medical and psychosocial support, as well as literacy, life skills, and vocational training (e.g. repairing cell phones, masonry or electrical work). Children are released to their families after a stay in the facility, if security conditions allow. Since many children come from al Shabaab controlled areas where their extended families still reside, a large number are not able to return home.’³⁹¹

About these centres, Felbab-Brown also mentioned the following issues:

- Somali authorities’ willingness to apply international human rights standards (including the definition of child), which has improved over the years;

³⁸⁶ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁸⁷ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁸⁸ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁸⁹ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁹⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 26

³⁹¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22



- controversy with sub-federal state authorities about age considerations and determination for children (under 18 or 15);
- 'difficulties with the transfer of minors associated with militancy' to UNICEF;³⁹²

Treatment during and after 'reintegration'

The child protection consultant based in Somalia reported that during the initial phase, right after disengagement, children are subject to forms of intimidation by Al-Shabaab.³⁹³

According to the international child protection specialist there have been few monitored cases of children being 'chased' or 'targeted' by Al-Shabaab after having left the group. However, the expert added that 'known cases are just a few' and that the risk of reprisals – if the children are identified by Al-Shabaab – remains very high. Detention also remains a risk for many of them.³⁹⁴ See section below [2.3.3.\(b\) Detention and sentencing](#).

The child protection consultant based in Somalia indicated that over time such instances - targeting, chasing, reprisals - tend to fade away and stated that such instances would be 'very unlikely after one year away from the group'.³⁹⁵ The same expert also indicated that the 'government does not go after' the children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab who have gone through reintegration.³⁹⁶

The hosting community usually 'does not show outright resentment or poses any particular risk for these children', but in some cases it might be more difficult for them to find employment.³⁹⁷ Protection partners work with community as a whole to facilitate socio-economic integration of children and sometimes with the assistance of 'guarantors' to facilitate access to employment.³⁹⁸

(b) Detention and sentencing by state forces

At times children who have reported to an army base, or who have been captured on occasion of military operations against Al-Shabaab, or who are handed over to the police in other contexts, are put in detention because they are considered being a 'threat' by the security forces: either because they are associated with the militant group, or the security forces are just 'suspicious' about them. This was the case for instance with 195 children in 2021, mentioned as an example by the international child protection specialist.³⁹⁹ Another example is provided in the report of the UNSG on Children and Armed Conflict in Somalia, which covers the period 1 October 2019 – 30 September 2021, which stated that about 415 children (411 boys, 4 girls), 'aged between 11 and 17 years, were detained by federal and

³⁹² Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

³⁹³ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁹⁴ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁹⁵ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁹⁶ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁹⁷ Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022

³⁹⁸ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

³⁹⁹ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022





regional government security forces for their alleged association with armed groups' in general.⁴⁰⁰

Human Rights Watch reported already in 2018 that in south-central Somalia, above all in Mogadishu, and in Puntland, the arrest and detention of children allegedly associated with Al-Shabaab by the authorities is a recurring measure, while their process is at times abusive.⁴⁰¹ 'Children are on occasion mistreated by authorities upon apprehension',⁴⁰² and once in government custody, they are screened, including for age, and interrogated 'within intelligence facilities'.⁴⁰³ Within this context, coercive treatment and occasional use of torture has been documented by Human Rights Watch as well as UN bodies.⁴⁰⁴ In 2018, Human Rights Watch found that in Mogadishu and in Puntland 'children have been held with adults for prolonged periods in pre-charge detention in intelligence facilities', at times for months, while international standards set a 24 hours limit within which children should be brought before a competent authority.⁴⁰⁵ In the same report, Human Rights Watch registered that the practice of holding children for lengthy periods was justified by the need to "extract information".⁴⁰⁶ Within this context the use of children as informants by NISA has reportedly stopped in 2014 but similar allegations also refer to later periods (2016).⁴⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch reported in 2018 that across Somalia, notably Mogadishu and Puntland, 'intelligence officials and military prosecutors prosecute children for Al-Shabab-related crimes in military courts, typically as adults', with sentences ranging from some years to life imprisonment.⁴⁰⁸

Regarding the situation in Puntland, the international child protection specialist based in Somalia reports that there are still a number of children kept in detention in Puntland, on grounds of their association with Al-Shabaab, while some of them have been sentenced to death or to life sentences through military prosecution and courts.⁴⁰⁹ This is to be attributed to the existent anti-terrorist legislation in Puntland which defines children as those under fifteen.⁴¹⁰ Felbab-Brown reported in 2018 about 96 children that in March 2016 'were accused of participating in an al Shabaab terrorist attack', and who were arrested and placed in adult prisons. After UN mediation, those under 15 years of age were handed over to UNICEF, while those over 15 remained in prison and 'were sentenced to very heavy penalties of

⁴⁰⁰ UNSG, Children and armed conflict in Somalia, S/2022/397, 16 May 2022, [url](#), para. 35

⁴⁰¹ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 22

⁴⁰² HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 23

⁴⁰³ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 25

⁴⁰⁴ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), pp. 26-27, 28-29

⁴⁰⁵ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 29

⁴⁰⁶ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), p. 30

⁴⁰⁷ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), pp. 33-35

⁴⁰⁸ HRW, "It's like we are always in a prison" - Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia, February 2018, [url](#), pp. 36-37

⁴⁰⁹ International child protection specialist based in Somalia, Online interview, 5 October 2022

⁴¹⁰ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22



imprisonment for 20 years and in some cases the death penalty'.⁴¹¹ Further information on implementation of these sentences could not be found among the sources consulted within time constraints.

2.3.4. Consequences for deserters/defectors' family members

According to the child protection consultant based in Somalia, parents of children who have formally disengaged from the group might be questioned or threatened by Al-Shabaab in an attempt to get the children back.⁴¹²

No further information regarding this sub-topic could be found within the time limits of the research. For more details see section on [Research challenges](#).

⁴¹¹ Felbab-Brown, V., The Limits of Punishment, Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism, Somali Case Study, May 2018, [url](#), p. 22

⁴¹² Child protection consultant based in Somalia, Online interview, 3 October 2022





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Annex II: Terms of Reference

1. General description of the profile(s) and latest trends/data on deserting and defecting
 - 1.1. Deserting or defecting from Al-Shabaab, differences and options
 - 1.2. Government policy/programmes and amnesty proclamations
 - 1.2.1. Current policy and amnesty proclamations
 - 1.2.2. Overview of the National Programme for the Treatment and the Handling of Disengaged Combatants, and the Defector Rehabilitation Programme
 - 1.2.3. Overview of rehabilitation centres and capacity
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 - 2.1.2.1. Family/clan-based re-integration
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 - 2.1.3.1. High-value defectors
 - 2.1.3.2. High-risk defectors
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 - 2.1.4. Associated consequences for deserters/defectors' family members
 - 2.2. Women
 - 2.2.1. Deserting or defecting options
 - 2.2.2. Informal pathways and consequences, including AS targeting
 - 2.2.2.1. Remaining 'home' and consequences/treatment
 - 2.2.2.2. Leaving territory, going back to local communities, relocating and consequences/treatment
 - 2.2.2.3. Marrying government soldiers
 - 2.2.3. Formal pathways and consequences, including AS targeting
 - 2.2.3.1. Defecting, NISA screening, rehabilitation centres
 - 2.2.4. Consequences for deserters/defectors' family members
 - 2.3. Children
 - 2.3.1. Deserting or defecting options
 - 2.3.2. Informal pathways and consequences, including AS targeting
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