

JOURNEYS THROUGH EXTREMISM

The Experiences of Former Members of al-Shabaab

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of findings from the second in a set of case studies on disengagement from violent extremist organizations (VEOs) conducted as part of the RESOLVE Network's Community-Based Armed Groups (CBAGs) Research Initiative. This research applied the Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa, which remains the deadliest VEO in Africa. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism. The ABC Model was also designed as a platform through which to explore drivers of attitudinal and behavioral change, offering a granular understanding of the processes of joining and leaving the group. At the heart of the ABC Model lies the prominent disconnect between sympathy for ideologically justified violence (attitudes) and direct involvement in its creation (behaviors).

Adopting a life history approach, the researchers interviewed thirteen former members of al-Shabaab, including those from its intelligence agency (the Amniyat), military wing (the Jabhat), and police force (the Hizbah), as well as drivers, teachers, and others in support roles. To identify movements on the attitudinal axis of the ABC diagrams, the interview guide included closed questions relating to sympathy for al-Shabaab. The respondents were asked to select from Likert scale options at key points during their trajectories. Movements on the "behaviors" axis were determined by recording the nature of the respondents' involvement over time, and subsequently scaling their participation. The objective was to apply the ABC Model to deliver granular information about their trajectories to inform the design of interventions to prevent further involvement and to motivate and facilitate disengagements from the organization. To learn more about the research methodology and detailed findings, please refer to the RESOLVE Research Report by Sif Heide-Ottosen, Yahye Abdi, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, James Khalil, and Martine Zeuthen: [Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab](#) (2022).

Key Findings



Individuals join al-Shabaab for many different reasons. Some respondents claimed to have been at least partly motivated to enlist by their support for al-Shabaab's ideology and aims. Other notable drivers included protection against other armed actors, the desire for revenge, financial incentives, and forced recruitment.



Individuals also leave al-Shabaab for many different reasons. Most respondents claimed that they became increasingly hostile to the group over time, with negative opinions primarily driven by its harsh treatment of local populations, but also because the respondents were, themselves, punished by al-Shabaab. Less prominently, respondents flagged poor living conditions, fear of injury and death, and inadequate salaries provided by the group.



In-person (rather than virtual) social networks play a key role in entrance and exit from al-Shabaab. Many respondents reported that relatives, friends, and other personal connections played a critical role in their journeys into al-Shabaab. Social networks were also of key importance in exits from the organization—three interviewees noted that they had been encouraged or pressured to disengage by members of their immediate families.



Territorial control provides a key determinant of entrance and exit from al-Shabaab. Two respondents reported being essentially absorbed into the group through regular interactions with members in areas under its control, with the organization effectively acting as the default employer in their regions. Three explicitly observed that they enlisted only once al-Shabaab had seized control of their community. One respondent reported that he was arrested by the security forces after his home community was recaptured.



Certain members become sympathetic to al-Shabaab's ideology and aims only after joining the organization. Three individuals became sympathetic or more sympathetic towards al-Shabaab only after joining the organization, highlighting the extent to which its training and broader socialization processes can generate a sense of purpose and belonging.



Arrangements of safe passage with the security forces provide a key avenue for members of al-Shabaab to disengage. Several respondents observed that they established safe passage with the security forces prior to their exit, often facilitated by members of their family or wider clan. Such avenues are less available to individuals from families with fewer connections, and those from less influential clans with more limited access to the security system.



While al-Shabaab severely punishes most of those who attempt to escape, certain individuals are allowed to leave freely. Many respondents took months or even years to leave al-Shabaab, with such exits potentially punishable by death. Yet, two respondents in the sample were permitted to leave the group on medical and compassionate grounds, neither of which were assigned to the intelligence or military wings.

MOVING FORWARD

- ▶ **Communications campaigns** that aim to promote exit from al-Shabaab should appeal to varied motives and should be tailored to local contexts.
- ▶ **Programs** designed to encourage and facilitate exit from al-Shabaab should leverage the family and wider clan networks.
- ▶ **Programs** that aim to rehabilitate and reintegrate former members of al-Shabaab should be tailored to the needs of each beneficiary.
- ▶ **Policymakers** must recognize the importance of territorial control as a key determinant of sympathy for and involvement in al-Shabaab.
- ▶ **Donors** should explore opportunities to apply the ABC Model in other locations to inform policymaking and programming.

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