

# Journeys Through Extremism:

The Experiences of  
Former Members of  
Al-Shabaab

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

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. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism. We selected al-Shabaab as a case study partly because it remains the deadliest violent extremist organization (VEO) in Africa. As the research team had been involved in rehabilitation work with former members of the group, we also chose it for relative ease of access to respondents. Adopting a life history approach, we interviewed thirteen former members of al-Shabaab. Our core objective was to deliver granular insights about their personal journeys to inform the design of interventions to prevent further involvement and to facilitate disengagements from the group.

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the RESOLVE Network, acknowledged partners contributing to the production of this publication, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or any entity of the U.S. government.*

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# ACRONYMS

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ICG	International Crisis Group
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NISA	National Intelligence and Security Agency
PCVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
SNA	Somali National Army
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

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. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism.<sup>1</sup> We selected al-Shabaab as a case study partly because it remains the deadliest violent extremist organization (VEO) in Africa. As the research team had been involved in rehabilitation work with former members of the group, we also chose it for relative ease of access to respondents. Adopting a life history approach, we 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. Our objective was 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. Based on our findings, our policy recommendations relate to the communications campaigns designed to incentivize exits from al-Shabaab, rehabilitation services provided for those who have already disengaged, and the relevance of territorial control as a critical determinant of entrance into and exit from the organization.

## Key Findings

We summarize our key findings as follows:

- **Key Finding #1: Individuals join and leave al-Shabaab for many different reasons.**

It is increasingly recognized that individuals become involved in and leave violent extremism for a broad range of reasons, and our research lends weight to this thesis. Four of our 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. Regarding exits from al-Shabaab, most of our respondents claimed that they became increasingly hostile to the group over time, with these negative opinions primarily driven by its harsh treatment of local populations. Three also reported being punished by al-Shabaab (either for alleged involvement in khat smuggling or for taking leave without approval), and this also caused their opinions of the group to decline. While less prominent, our respondents also flagged the relevance of poor living conditions with al-Shabaab, fear of injury and death, and the inadequacy of the salary provided by the group.

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1 James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2022).

- **Key Finding #2: In-person (rather than virtual) social networks play a key role in entrance and exit from al-Shabaab.**

Many of our respondents reported that relatives, friends, and other personal connections played a critical role in their journeys into al-Shabaab, both motivating and facilitating this involvement. For instance, one respondent reported that his sheikh and peer group members convinced him to join, whereas another pointed to the importance of his clan acquaintances. Social networks were also of key importance in exits from the organization—three of our interviewees noted that they had been encouraged or pressured to disengage by members of their immediate families.

- **Key Finding #3: Territorial control provides a key determinant of entrance and exit from al-Shabaab.**

While largely neglected by the terrorism studies literature, our findings underscore the importance of territorial control as a key determinant of sympathy for and participation in al-Shabaab. Two of our 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 others explicitly observed that they enlisted only once al-Shabaab had seized control of their community. Regarding exits from the group, one respondent reported that he was arrested by the security forces after his home community was recaptured.

- **Key Finding #4: Certain members become sympathetic to al-Shabaab's ideology and aims only *after* joining the organization.**

Three individuals within our sample 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. This pattern goes essentially unrecognized in the Somalia literature (although not in that relating to other cases, particularly in the Global North), where most accounts simply assume that sympathies precede involvement.

- **Key Finding #5: Arrangements of safe passage with the security forces provide a key avenue for members of al-Shabaab to disengage.**

Several of our 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. For instance, one reported that his mother-in-law established the necessary connections to facilitate his transfer to the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Another claimed that his parents contacted clan elders, who reached out to members of their kinship group in the military. 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.

- **Key Finding #6: While al-Shabaab severely punishes most of those who attempt to escape, certain individuals are allowed to leave freely.**

Many of our respondents took months or even years to leave al-Shabaab, with such exits potentially punishable by death. Yet, our sample also included two respondents who were permitted to leave the group on medical and compassionate grounds, a pattern that also goes underreported in the Somali literature. As neither of these cases had been assigned to the intelligence or military wings of al-Shabaab, we can speculate that those more deeply involved may not have been allowed to exit in this manner.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> The study was designed to deliver key insights to policymakers and practitioners through revealing the extent to which these journeys vary between respondents. Adopting a life history approach, we conducted interviews with thirteen ex-members of the group, 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. 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. Following on from this introductory section, we consider the Somali conflict (Section 2) and the ABC Model (Section 3), before elaborating on our research methods (Section 4). We then deliver the main findings from this study (Section 5), presenting the trajectories of eight of the most revealing and informative respondents. This is followed by a final discussion and our policy recommendations (Section 6).

## 2. THE SOMALI CONFLICT

While the origins of al-Shabaab are contested in scholarly literature, it is broadly recognized that the group rose to prominence as a faction of the military wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU emerged as a coalition of Sharia courts in 2004, generating widespread public support as it restored law and order in Mogadishu following decades of infighting between clan-based factional leaders and their militias.<sup>3</sup> This stood in stark contrast to the poor record of other administrations that had ruled Somalia since the fall of the central government in 1991, including the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which was formed in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi.<sup>4</sup> The ICU subsequently expanded across most of South-Central Somalia, and was enthusiastically received by many local populations.<sup>5</sup> It became the strongest political and military force in Somalia, feeding a widespread sense of inevitability about Islamist

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2 Khalil et al, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model."

3 Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security* 31, no. 3 (Winter 2006/07): 74–106.

4 Ken Menkhaus, "The Crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in Five Acts," *African Affairs* 106, no. 424 (2007): 357–390.

5 Michael Skjelderup, Mukhtar Ainashe, and Ahmed Mohamed Abdulle "Qare," "Militant Islamism and Local Clan Dynamics in Somalia: The Expansion of the Islamic Courts Union in Lower Jubba province," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (2020): 553–571.

ascendance across the rest of the country.<sup>6</sup> Yet, a TFG counter offensive in Mogadishu led to the ICU's rapid collapse in 2006. This was supported by Ethiopian forces, with this "invasion" playing a prominent role in fueling the subsequent rise of al-Shabaab.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as observed by Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph:

From the moment the Islamists lost Mogadishu, al-Shabaab's priorities changed. The group held fast to its goal of creating a strict Islamic state. But in terms of fund-raising recruitment, and publicity, al-Shabaab stressed a new top objective: driving out the Ethiopians. It did not take a genius to recognize that an appeal to Somalis' nationalism could hit home in ways that appeals to their religion might not.<sup>8</sup>

Mohammed Ibrahim Shire similarly notes that at this point al-Shabaab branded itself "as a staunch nationalist-jihadist group fighting a Somali struggle to expel Ethiopian forces from Somalia."<sup>9</sup> He adds that "being able to draw on deep-rooted antipathy to Ethiopia and reveling in public approval, the group engaged in internal mobilization, increasing their ranks with thousands of local and diaspora nationalist volunteers."<sup>10</sup>

However, al-Shabaab experienced a major rift in its leadership from 2010, with key disagreements revolving around its application of force against the civilians, and its distribution of power. These disputes, alongside military pressure from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), contributed to key losses of territory from 2010. While controlling one third of Mogadishu, al-Shabaab opted to withdraw from the city in August 2011. Despite these reversals, al-Shabaab established formal ties to al-Qaeda in 2012, greatly strengthening its global appeal. This linkage also seemingly enhanced its ability to carry out attacks in other parts of East Africa, pressuring regional governments to withdraw their troops from Somalia.<sup>11</sup> In Somalia, al-Shabaab recognizes clans as the "building blocks of power," and endeavors to maintain their political and material support.<sup>12</sup> Many of these clans hedge their bets, with some strategically allying themselves to the group for its military clout and its protection against stronger adversaries. As observed by the International Crisis Group, al-Shabaab "plays on the political inferiority complexes of clans, offering support to those squeezed between larger rivals; the Murosade and Duduble-Habar Gedir, both of which provided numerous fighters, are examples in Mogadishu and central regions."<sup>13</sup> This dynamic is also described by Stig Jarle Hansen as follows:

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6 Menkhaus, "The Crisis in Somalia."

7 Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005–2012* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013); and Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "From Al-Itihaad to Al-Shabaab: How the Ethiopian Intervention and the 'War on Terror' Exacerbated the Conflict in Somalia," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 11 (2018): 2033–2052.

8 Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 48.

9 Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, "Dialogue and Negotiation with Al-Shabaab," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17531055.2020.1863099>.

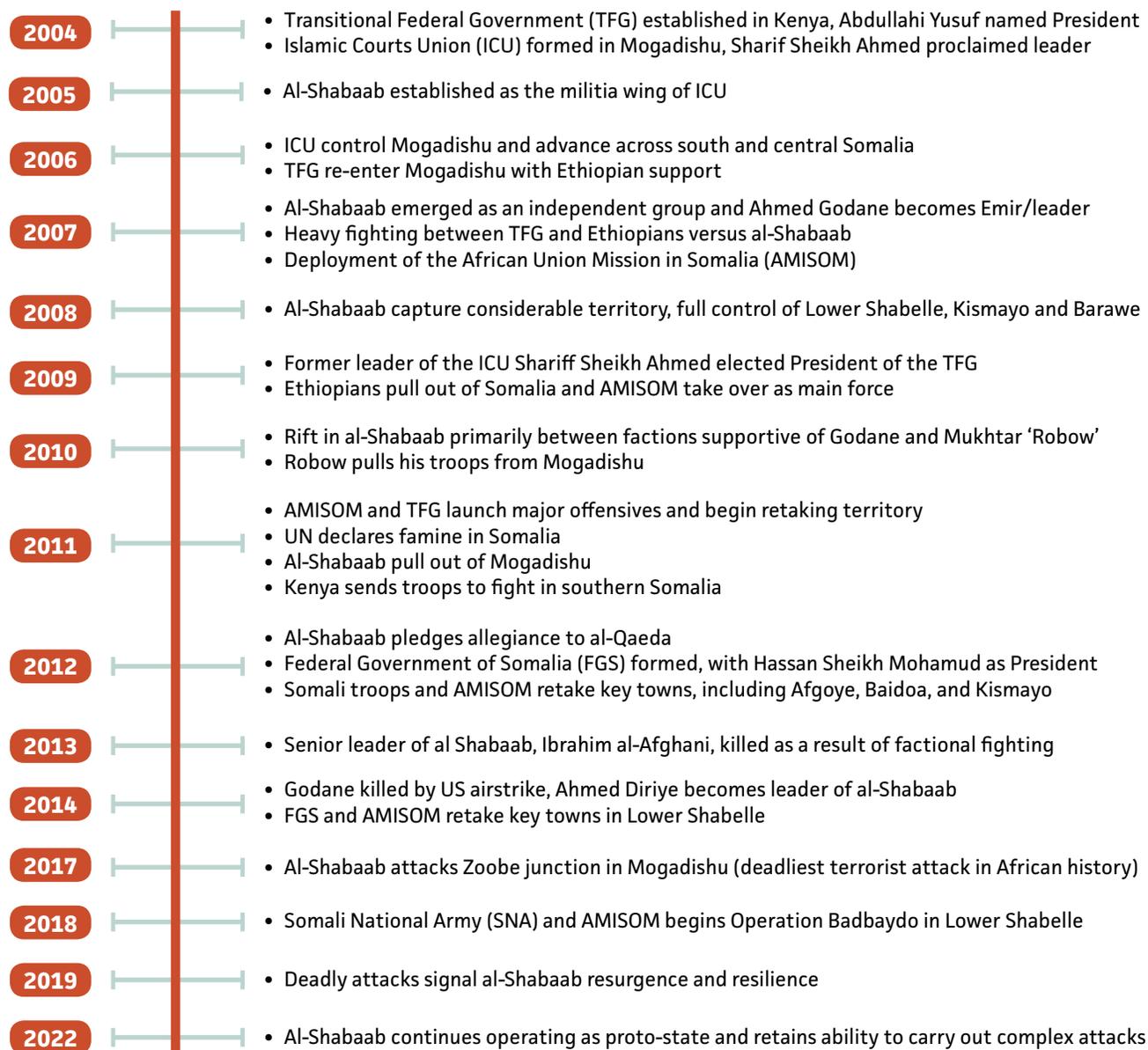
10 Shire, "Dialogue and Negotiation with Al-Shabaab."

11 International Crisis Group, *Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa* (ICG, 2018).

12 Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

13 International Crisis Group, *Somalia – Al-Shabaab: It will be a Long War* (ICG, 2014), 14.

**Figure 1. Al-Shabaab Timeline**



As al-Shabaab expanded, it became embroiled in clan conflicts around Somalia, at times involuntary, at times deliberately. In Kismayo, for example, Marehan fighters attempted to join al-Shabaab in order to offset the dominance of the Ogadeen clan around Kismayo. Al-Shabaab now had to deal with the clan-based realities of Somali politics, and at times chose to play the clan games, supporting one sub-clan against others at the local level.<sup>14</sup>

In areas under its control, al-Shabaab maintains law and order, regulates the economy, and provides social services.<sup>15</sup> Its command and control are relatively decentralized, with local units retaining relative

<sup>14</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Bohumil Doboš, "Shapeshifter of Somalia: Evolution of the Political Territoriality of Al-Shabaab," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 937–957.

autonomy at the operational level.<sup>16</sup> Each region has an appointed Governor (*Waali*) that oversees all the civil service and revenue administration in areas controlled by the organization, and each location is provided a police force (the *Hizbah*).<sup>17</sup> Members of the *Hizbah* (including three respondents featured later in this report) are responsible for enforcing al-Shabaab’s strict Islamic code and maintaining public law and order. As observed by Maruf and Joseph:

Hizbah members had two primary tasks: to keep public order and to enforce the strict Islamic code.... It was Hizbah officers who ordered people into mosques for mandatory prayer.... They arrested women for not wearing *hijab* or, in some areas, a burka, and forced haircuts on men whose hair was deemed to be overly long. Smoking cigarettes, playing Western music, and chewing the mild drug khat—the last a very common habit in Somalia—were crimes for which Hizbah officers stayed on personal watch.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Shabaab’s military wing (the *Jabhat*) is comprised of geographical formations (‘brigades’) affiliated with local political units. The *Jabhat*’s primary task is to seize and maintain territory, fighting on the frontlines against the Somali government and African Union troops. Each division, typically consisting of three hundred soldiers, has their own commanders and bases.<sup>19</sup> The intelligence wing (the *Amniyat*) is responsible for special operations, including suicide bombings, assassination attempts, and attacks on the centers of government power. It is also tasked with collecting intelligence and identifying state collaborators within the organization.<sup>20</sup> Al-Shabaab also relies on the services of many members in support roles, including drivers, teachers, and cooks.

### 3. THE ABC MODEL

#### Pathways to Violence

Having now considered al-Shabaab and the context within which it operates, our attention can turn to personal trajectories in and out of 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), as shown schematically in Figure 2.<sup>21</sup> Individuals further to the right of the “attitudes” axis are more sympathetic to this violence, whereas those more towards the left are increasingly opposed to such acts. As described in greater detail in the next section, we place “high-value” members

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16 Matt Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab. A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* (Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2014); and Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

17 Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

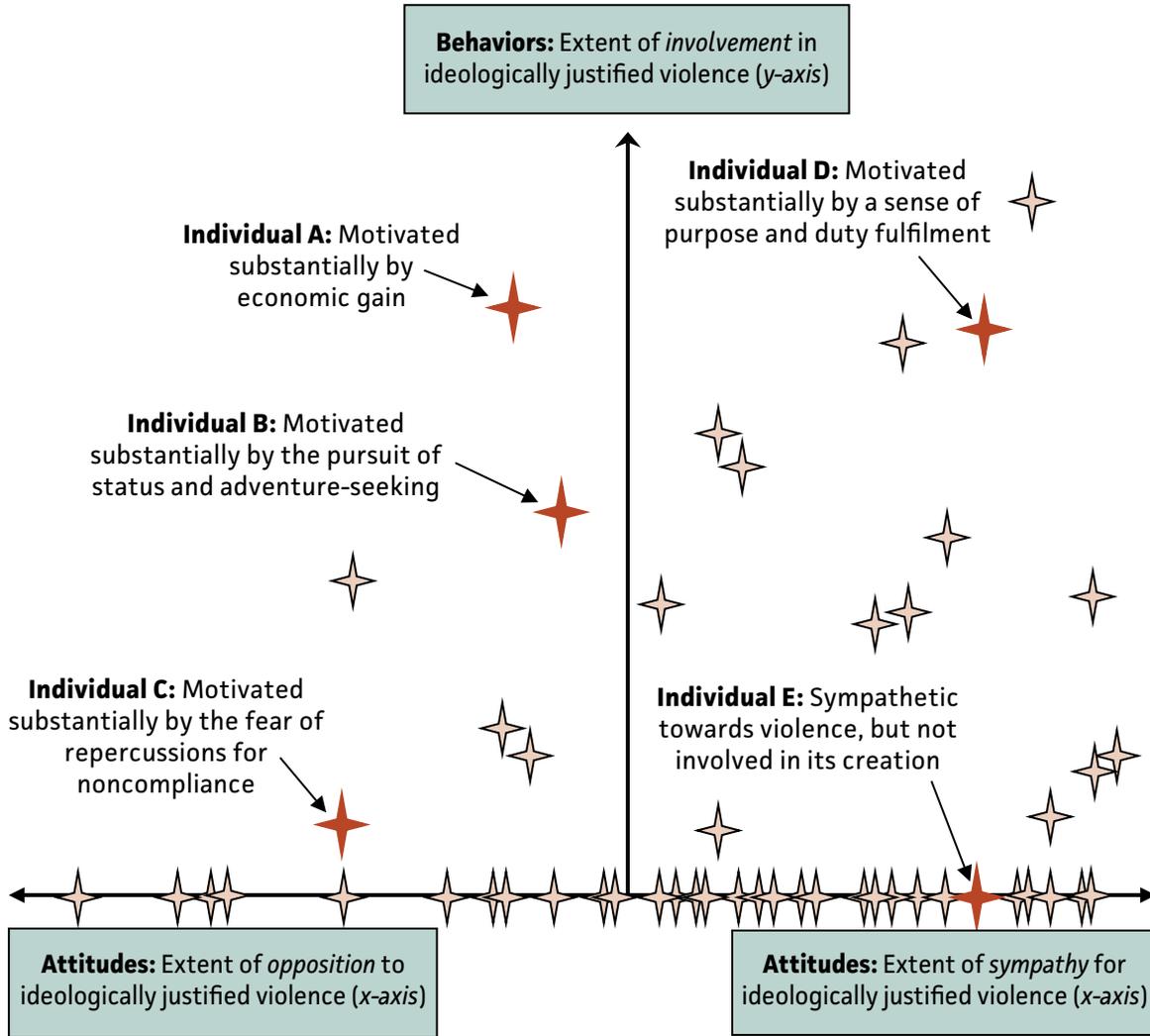
18 *Ibid.*, 86–87

19 *Ibid.*

20 Zakarie Ahmed nor Kheyre, “The Evolution of the Al-Shabaab Jihadist Intelligence Structure,” *Intelligence & National Security*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02684527.2022.2095599>.

21 Khalil et al., “The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model.”

**Figure 2.** The (Partial) Disconnect between Attitudes and Behaviors



(*Jabhat* commanders, *Amniyat* operatives, and so on) further up the “behaviors” scale than rank-and-file adherents, who in turn are located above those in support roles (drivers, cooks, teachers, and so on). In general, individuals who sympathize with this violence are more likely to participate in its creation, as represented by the greater numbers above the x-axis located toward the right of the Figure 2 (including Individual D). Nevertheless, the critical point of the diagram is that sympathizers are often uninvolved in creating this violence (Individual E), and conversely those who do contribute to its production are not necessarily supportive of its ideology and aims. Instead, the latter are frequently driven by status, adventure, economic incentives, security motives, and so on (Individuals A, B, and C).

A key corollary of this prominent disconnect between attitudes and behaviors is that it is generally insufficient to ask generic questions such as “what drives this violence?” Instead, in any given location two core lines of enquiry are required:

- Q1:** What drives sympathy for this violence?
- Q2:** What drives participation in this violence?

**Table 1.** Common Drivers of Ideologically Justified Violence

<b>Structural motivators</b>	This first category of drivers is comprised of contextual factors, including state repression, political exclusion, social discrimination, corruption, economic deprivation, inequality, and so on. Depending on the ideology and aims of the perpetrators in question, it may also include external state interventions into the affairs of other nations, an absence of Sharia law, the presence of migrant communities deemed harmful to existing cultures, and other structural factors.
<b>Individual incentives</b>	This second category is composed of economic, security, and psychosocial rewards that are contingent on the individuals in question contributing to violence. These include material rewards, security, status, a sense of identity, purpose, belonging, self-esteem, adventure, duty fulfilment, vengeance, salvation, and so on.
<b>Enabling factors</b>	This third category is distinct from the previous two through being comprised of factors that channel, facilitate or predispose sympathy for violence or involvement in its creation, rather than motivate them <i>per se</i> . These often include peers, family members, mentors, and other online and offline contacts. In terms of settings, they can include locations over which the groups involved in the creation of this violence exert influence or control, detention facilities that house radical agents, and certain online forums. At a personal level, they can include cognitive rigidity, self-control issues, sensation-seeking, and other psychological factors.

Pursuing answers to these questions, the ABC Model distinguishes between structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors. The lists presented in Table 1 (slightly adapted from those in the original ABC article) are not intended to be exhaustive, but instead offer a sample of the most commonly identified drivers from the literature on terrorism and insurgency at a global level.<sup>22</sup> Many or most of these factors are also identified in studies that specifically consider the case of al-Shabaab.<sup>23</sup>

## Leaving Violence Behind

Switching our attention to journeys out of violence, it is helpful to distinguish between the dual concepts of disengagement and deradicalization. The former is generally interpreted in behavioral terms, often in relation to individuals exiting organizations involved in violence. For instance, focusing on *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), Fernando Reinares asserts that “disengagement is considered to have occurred when an individual ceased belonging to the terrorist organization and no longer felt subject to the discipline imposed on militants.”<sup>24</sup> However, this interpretation is problematic in contexts where the notion of “belonging to” is ambiguous, particularly if the groups in question lack formal procedures for membership. With this in mind, it is preferable to treat disengagement simply in terms of a voluntary end to involvement

22 See, for instance, Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (USAID, 2009); and Jerrold M. Post, Keven G. Ruby, and Eric D. Shaw, “The Radical Group in Context 1: An Integrated Framework for the Analysis of Group Risk for Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25 (2002): 73–100.

23 See, for instance, James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo, and Nick Wood, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme with Former Members of al-Shabaab* (UK: Royal United Services Institute, 2019); Christian Taylor, Tanner Semmelrock, and Alexandra McDermott, “The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting al-Shabaab,” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 13 (2019): 1–13; and United Nations Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2017).

24 Fernando Reinares, “Exit from Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement and Deradicalization Among Members of ETA,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 5 (2011): 781.

**Table 2.** Common Drivers of Deradicalization and Disengagement

<b>Structural motivators</b>	In the contexts of exits from violence, these contextual factors often relate to the groups responsible for such acts, including disillusionment with their ideology, objectives, strategy, tactics, or personnel. They can also include broader structural changes, including in relation to decreased state repression, increased political openness, enhanced community sympathy for reintegration, and so on.
<b>Individual incentives</b>	This second category is again comprised of incentives that are contingent on personal behaviors, which in this case involves ending participation in violence. Depending on the context, these rewards may include greater personal safety, improved living conditions, enhanced financial prospects, improved relationships with those outside the group (spouse, children, and so on), the fulfilment of familial obligations to exit, and so on.
<b>Enabling factors</b>	This third category is again distinguished from the previous two by being comprised of factors that facilitate or channel movements on the ABC figures presented thought this article, rather than motivate them <i>per se</i> . In the context of disengagement and deradicalization, these can include the influence of ‘moderate’ religious leaders, family members or other connections able to facilitate exit. In terms of contexts, they can include prison environments that enable inner reflection, a loss of territorial control by the organizations responsible for this violence, communities supportive of reintegration, and so on.

in ideologically justified violence (represented by returns to the x-axis of Figure 2). By contrast, the concept of deradicalization is widely interpreted in relation to positive attitudinal change (shown as movements to the left of Figure 2).<sup>25</sup> As observed by Sarah Marsden, while disengagement “encompasses behavioral change related to the move away from political violence,” deradicalization is “generally understood as attitudinal and ideological change leading to a reduction in the commitment to militancy.”<sup>26</sup>

As with sympathy for violence and involvement in its creation, the broader point is again that research into this theme requires at least two core research questions, paralleling those presented above:

**Q3:** What drives reductions in sympathy for this violence?

**Q4:** What drives a voluntary end to participation in this violence?

Of course, the first of these corresponds to the notion of deradicalization, whereas the second relates to disengagement. Seeking answers to these additional questions, the ABC Model again distinguishes between structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors.<sup>27</sup> Table 2 provides a sample of drivers commonly identified in the terrorism and insurgency literature.<sup>28</sup> Again, many or perhaps most of these are also identified in studies that specifically consider the case of al-Shabaab.<sup>29</sup>

25 To be clear, this is not a consensus understanding, with some instead asserting that deradicalization can refer to *both* attitudinal and behavioral change. See, for instance, Hamed El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.

26 Sarah Marsden, *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalization and Desistance* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2017), 8.

27 These have been slightly modified from the original ABC article.

28 See, for instance, Mary Beth Altier, Christian Thoroughgood and John Horgan, “Turning away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology and Criminology,” *Journal of Peace Studies* 51, no. 5 (2014): 647–661.

29 See, for instance, Khalil et al., “Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia”; and Taylor et al., “The Cost of Defection.”

Of course, we must also consider factors that inhibit the dual processes of deradicalization and disengagement. These obstacles are often psychosocial in nature, with Tore Bjørgo noting that far right groups in Scandinavia, for instance, provide “community, a substitute ‘family’, identity, security against external threats and enemies, excitement, and adventure.”<sup>30</sup> He adds that “even if a person has completely lost faith in the group’s ideology and politics, ties of friendship and loyalty may for some individuals constitute more than sufficient reasons for staying with the group.”<sup>31</sup> As discussed in Section 6, threats of retaliation against those attempting to disengage represent another common inhibitor. For instance, Michael Jonsson highlights that in Colombia “there was intense fear of execution inside FARC if someone attempted to defect but was caught.”<sup>32</sup> To be clear, this is not a universal pattern—former members of the Provisional IRA attested to the fact that individuals could freely exit the group if they so desired, provided they did so in a manner that did not compromise security.<sup>33</sup>

## 4. METHODOLOGY

It is worth briefly recalling that the core purpose of this study was to apply the ABC Model to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab. Through this mapping exercise our intention was to help assess and capture the extent of variance in these personal journeys in Somalia, while also providing a platform to explore the diverse factors that help explain attitudinal and behavioral change. This research involved in-depth interviews with thirteen male, former members of al-Shabaab, relying on personal networks established through our professional work in Somalia.<sup>34</sup> It is worth highlighting that while such access is relatively common in many post-conflict scenarios, it is rare in contexts such as Somalia where hostilities are ongoing. As previously observed, our sample included former members of the group’s intelligence agency (the *Amniyat*), military wing (the *Jabhat*), and police force (the *Hizbah*), as well as al-Shabaab drivers, teachers, and others in support roles. To achieve the above objectives, we purposively sampled according to the following criteria:

- Respondents with diverse personal trajectories;
- Respondents who were driven to join or leave the group by varied factors; and
- Respondents we believed would be open and forthright about their personal experiences.

The research was conducted by the lead author of this report, with translation and sampling assistance provided by our local researchers. The interviews adopted a life history approach, through which we mapped a timeline of the attitudes and behaviors of each respondent (see Appendix B). This approach

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30 Tore Bjørgo, “Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups on the Extreme Right,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, eds. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), 40.

31 Bjørgo, “Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups on the Extreme Right,” 40.

32 Michael Jonsson, *A Farewell to Arms: Motivational Change and Divergence Inside FARC-EP 2002–2010* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2014), 251.

33 Khalil et al, “The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model,” 441.

34 We were unable to access female respondents through our existing networks, and we strongly recommend that this study should be repeated (with suitable adaptations to the behaviors scale of the ABC diagrams) with female former members of al-Shabaab (also see Section 6 on this issue).

was developed in close collaboration with our local researchers and built on our shared experiences of interviewing respondents in Somalia and elsewhere. The use of a timeline helped respondents reflect on their experiences, assisting us to delve deeper into their prior experiences. The team also collected extensive notes during the interviews, rather than record them, providing an environment in which the respondents were more likely to be forthright and open.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the quotes in the subsequent section are paraphrased, rather than reported verbatim. The research guide (presented in Appendix C) relied heavily on the ABC Model's distinction between structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors (as discussed in the previous section), as well as insights from the limited number of studies that rely on interviews with former members of al-Shabaab.<sup>36</sup>

The interviews were held in a secure location in Mogadishu and the thirteen respondents used a side entrance to help ensure their anonymity. Regarding research ethics, we introduced ourselves to the respondents and presented the aims of the study at the outset (again, see Appendix C). We also clarified that the process was entirely voluntary, and that they were free to skip questions or even to conclude the interview early for whatever reason. We asked the respondents to provide verbal consent prior to the interview, explaining that this involved accepting our use of the information they provided in anonymized form. All interviews were conducted in Somali, with English translations provided by the local researcher in real-time.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the interviews we attempted to avoid questions that could retraumatize the respondents. To identify movements on the attitudinal axis of the ABC diagrams, the guide included closed questions relating to sympathy for al-Shabaab. The respondents were asked to select from among the following Likert scale options at key points during their trajectories (see Appendix D):

- Very strongly sympathized with al-Shabaab
- Strongly sympathized with al-Shabaab
- Somewhat sympathized with al-Shabaab
- Neither sympathized nor opposed al-Shabaab
- Somewhat opposed al-Shabaab
- Strongly opposed al-Shabaab
- Very strongly opposed al-Shabaab

Movements on the “behaviors” axis were determined by recording the nature of the respondents’ involvement over time, and subsequently scaling their participation as in Figure 3. This scale reflects our professional judgement about the relative importance of roles within al-Shabaab in relation to their ability to influence outcomes and their proximity to physical violence. For instance, because *Amniyat* members were responsible for “high-value” tasks such as suicide bombings, assassination attempts, and

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35 Prior experiences revealed that many former members of al-Shabaab become suspicious when researchers suggest recording interviews.

36 For instance, Khalil et al., “Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia”; and Taylor et al., “The Cost of Defection”; and UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*.

37 The interview format was somewhat distinct from in many other contexts given Somalia’s strong tradition of storytelling. The responses to certain questions took up to ten minutes, with the lead researcher unable to help steer the conversation as interruptions may have been viewed as disruptive or discourteous. As such, these interviews often take a conversational tone.

**Figure 3. Behaviors Scale**

	<b>Intelligence (Amniyat)</b>	<b>Military (Jabhat)</b>	<b>Police (Hizbah)</b>	<b>Supporting Roles</b>	
<b>7</b>	Senior operative	Commanding 250+ subordinates			
<b>6</b>	Junior operative	Commanding 51 to 250 subordinates			
<b>5</b>		Commanding 21 to 50 subordinates			
<b>4</b>		Commanding up to 20 subordinates			Senior police officer
<b>3</b>		Foot soldier			Junior police officer
<b>2</b>				Medium responsibility	
<b>1</b>	In training / inactive			Low responsibility	

so on, we assessed their role to approximately equate to senior *Jabhat* commanders, scoring six or seven on the behaviors scale. By contrast, members of the *Hizbah* score three or four on the scale, reflecting their relative distance from physical violence, while also acknowledging their influence over events at the community level.

Of course, it is also important to consider the limitations associated with our approach, and to reflect on the extent to which these may have influenced our findings. First, because some of our respondents left al-Shabaab as early as 2011, it is important to acknowledge that certain accounts may reflect earlier conditions in an ever-evolving conflict. For this reason, notable changes in the approaches adopted by al-Shabaab, as well as those relating to the wider context, are highlighted at the relevant junctures throughout the remainder of the report. It is also necessary to flag possible issues with data reliability—respondents could potentially provide misleading or even false information to be viewed favorably by others, as their memories are flawed, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, and so on.<sup>38</sup> As noted previously, we attempted to mitigate such issues through providing reassurances about the nature of the research and anonymity before the interviews began, as well as through asking validation questions where applicable. Finally, it is worth noting that our sample was certainly not broadly representative of ex-members of al-Shabaab, and so readers are advised not to draw inferences beyond our respondents. As previously discussed, this is not problematic for the purposes of this study given that our primary objective was to demonstrate variance in relation to trajectories and drivers.

38 James Khalil, “A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019).

## 5. FINDINGS

This section presents the core findings of this research, considering the trajectories of eight of our thirteen respondents in turn (relying on pseudonyms in all cases). In keeping with our core objectives (as presented in Section 1), these individuals were selected to best demonstrate variance in terms of personal trajectories, as well as to highlight the importance of different driving factors. We present the respondents in order of their highest score on the behaviors scale (as described in the previous section). We deliberately omit information about our respondents that risks revealing their identities, including their clan affiliation and specific locations of residence.

### Abdi Noor (R1)

Abdi Noor was highly sympathetic to al-Shabaab at the time of his initial engagement in 2005 (see Figure 4), claiming that he joined because he perceived it to be a religious obligation. He had been excelling in his Koranic studies, under an influential sheikh. During this period, many sheikhs were involved in administering ICU-established Sharia courts and teaching in associated mosques. However, clan-based factional leaders began targeting these sheikhs in an attempt to curb the influence of the courts (see Section 2). Abdi Noor maintained that these attacks were a key driver of his sympathy for al-Shabaab, the military wing of the ICU. His sheikh and members of his peer group played a pivotal role in convincing him to enlist in the organization. He received military training in Lower Shabelle, and three months later he became a foot soldier in the *Jabhat*. He was subsequently transferred to a series of frontline locations to fight the TFG and Ethiopian forces. In 2008, he was tasked with commanding a platoon of fifty soldiers, and while in this post he became acquainted with key leaders of al-Shabaab, including Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was the emir at that time.

Yet, shortly after this promotion Abdi Noor began to become aware of al-Shabaab's abusive treatment of the local communities under their control. Based on his knowledge of the Koran, he identified many of their actions as un-Islamic, and he began to consider leaving the group. As he explained:

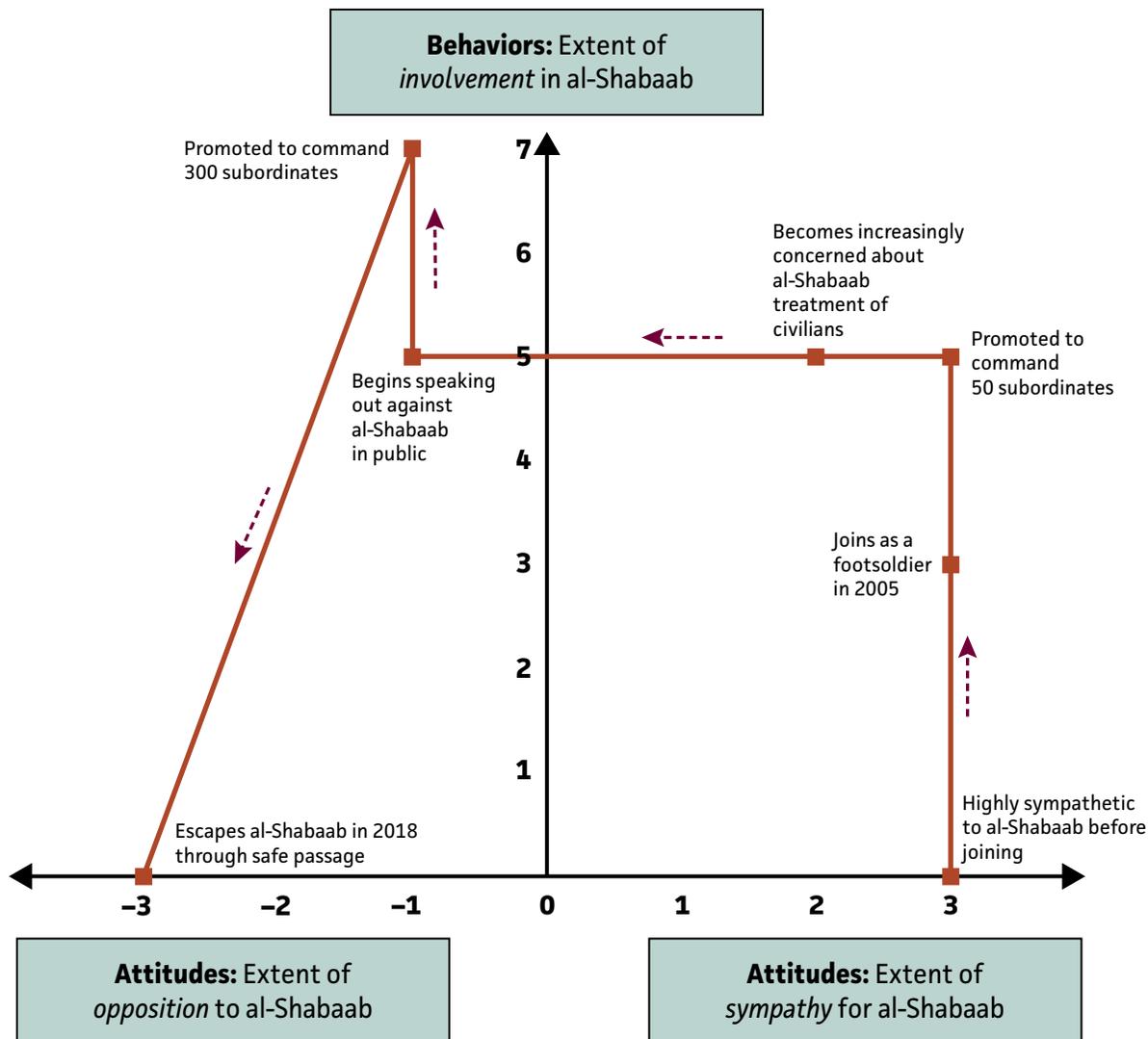
I began thinking about leaving in 2009 [a total of nine years before his eventual exit]. The main reason I joined was to defend my religion, but the whole group became a militia and extortionate thieves. I was experiencing this, they are killing people illegally, I had seen all of this.<sup>39</sup>

In 2014, Abdi Noor began speaking out against al-Shabaab's violence at a local mosque. While the *Amniyat* closely monitored these activities, he was effectively protected from punishment by his personal ties to the leadership. Indeed, in 2015 he was promoted again to command three hundred soldiers, despite his actions. At this point, Abdi Noor began actively exploring avenues to disengage by contacting clan elders in Mogadishu, only to discover that they were aligned with the group. His own plans to escape were also disrupted by al-Shabaab transferring him to a new location, where he was less familiar with

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with R1, 11 June 2022.

**Figure 4. Abdi Noor's Trajectory**



the terrain. It was around this time that Abdi Noor's contacts among the core leadership started to doubt his commitment. While on leave from active duty, he was informed that another member had taken over his command. Members of the *Amniyat* were sent to arrest him in March 2018, and several individuals lost their lives in the fighting that ensued (he provided few details about this incident). The FGS became aware of this event and offered him safe passage out of the organization, which he duly accepted.

## Feisal (R2)

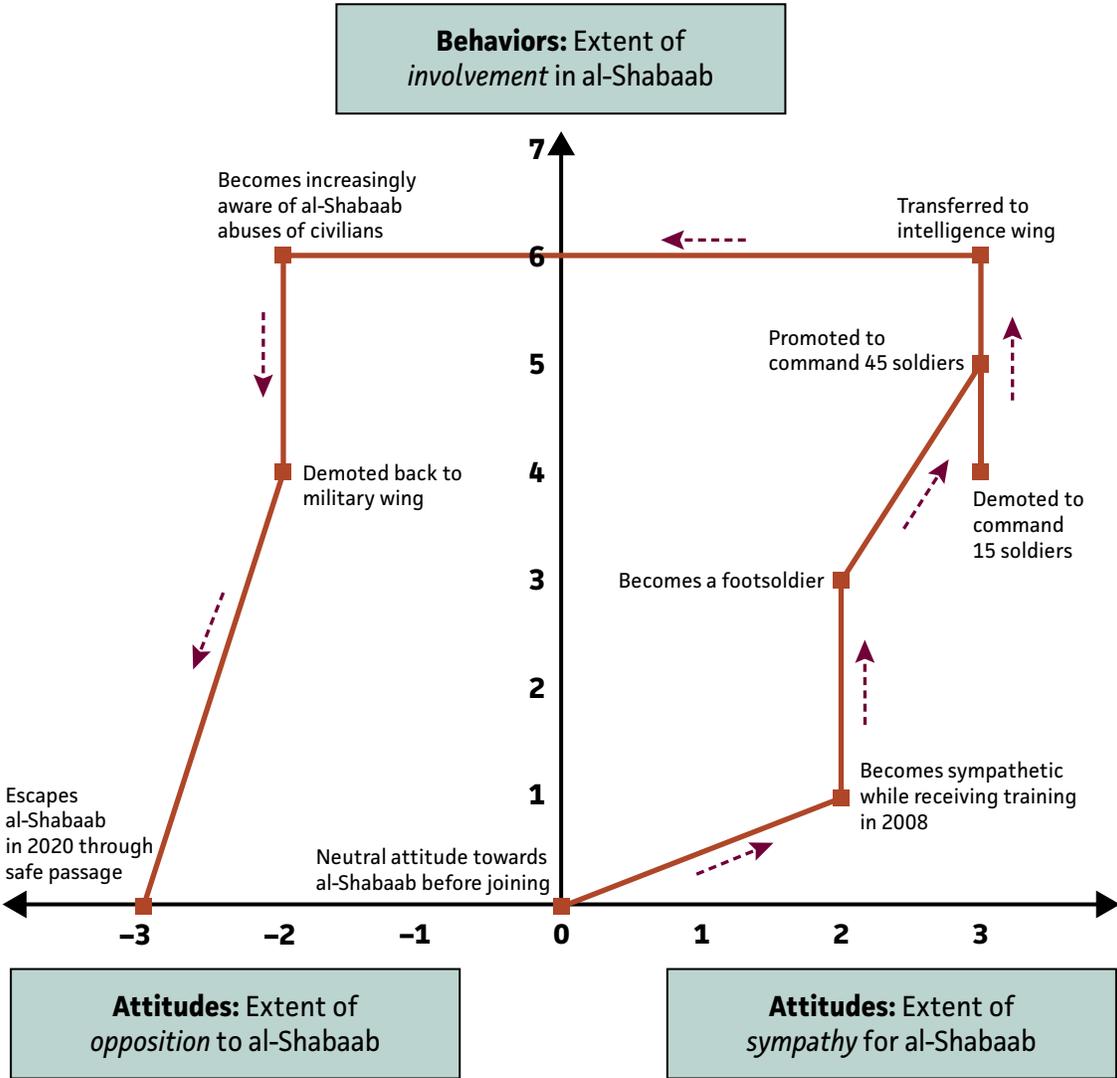
In 2007, Feisal and his mother had been displaced from their home in the Bay region by the ongoing drought, and they were living in an IDP settlement in Lower Shabelle. Feisal's mother earned a meager income selling basic goods, although much of this was extorted by the settlement gatekeepers and their clan militia.<sup>40</sup> Al-Shabaab seized Lower Shabelle in 2008, and Feisal enlisted shortly after they took the

<sup>40</sup> "Gatekeepers" have established themselves as representatives of displacement-affected communities and as managers of humanitarian aid in much of Somalia, providing these communities with security in exchange for a proportion of their aid.

district containing the camp. Certain clan acquaintances were already members of the organization, and they convinced him to join and facilitated his entry. At that moment, Feisal held a neutral perspective of al-Shabaab (see Figure 5), and his motivation for joining was largely revenge against the settlement gatekeeper and the militia. He received three months of military training, during which time he was praised by senior members of al-Shabaab, and this provided him with a sense of purpose and belonging. He joined as a *Jabhat* foot soldier, and in 2009 he was promoted to command a unit of thirty in an al-Shabaab stronghold in Middle Juba. He continued to become more supportive of the group, taking pride in his work, and enjoying the camaraderie in his unit. In 2011, Feisal was promoted once again to command forty-five soldiers, and he was moved to Mogadishu.

One year later, Feisal was relocated to his region of origin, and demoted to command only fifteen soldiers. As with other respondents, he reported that such events were common within al-Shabaab, providing the group with a means to test the loyalty of mid-ranking officers. In 2015, Feisal was transferred to the *Amniyat*, where he contributed to assassinations and reported to the al-Shabaab core leadership. He reported witnessing the inner workings of the organization while in this role and was horrified by their

**Figure 5.** Feisal’s Trajectory



abuse of the population. After colleagues noticed a change in his attitude, he was demoted to foot soldier once again in 2020. It was at this juncture that he began to consider leaving the organization. When government forces began retaking parts of Lower Shabelle, he was instructed to transport al-Shabaab vehicles to a secure location. Feisal obliged but was accused of stealing secret documents located in one of these vehicles by other members and this contributed to his growing hostility towards the group. Meanwhile, his family had also been pressuring him to leave the organization for several months. In 2021 Feisal seized an opportunity to escape during the night, which he described as follows:

Each night a member of *Jabhat* must protect the camp. I went on the first shift, then after, I pretended to sleep while others were keeping watch. When I suspected that they were not watching, I slowly took my gun and went to a remote area. I could not enter any towns, as I knew there would be people there collaborating with al-Shabaab.<sup>41</sup>

Feisal's parents contacted clan elders, who reached out to members of their kinship group in the military to arrange safe passage. They met at an agreed location, and Feisal subsequently joined the national rehabilitation program.

## Yusuf (R3)

Yusuf was sympathetic to al-Shabaab before joining (see Figure 6) and he wanted to help defend his country from Ethiopian “enemies” and the TFG (see Section 2). A friend convinced him to enlist, and took him to Afgoye in Lower Shabelle, where al-Shabaab ran an enrollment facility. Yusuf then received five months of military training, after which he reported feeling even greater sympathy for the group and was convinced that they would eventually control Somalia in its entirety. In 2006 he joined the *Jabhat* as a foot soldier in Beledweyne, and soon after he witnessed al-Shabaab execute two women who had been accused of spying. The women rejected the accusations against them, but their pleas to the judge were unsuccessful. Alongside other incidents of harsh treatment of the local community, this caused Yusuf's support for the organization to dramatically decline. Reinforcing this trend, al-Shabaab also accused him of smuggling khat (it was unclear whether this was justified) and placed him under arrest.

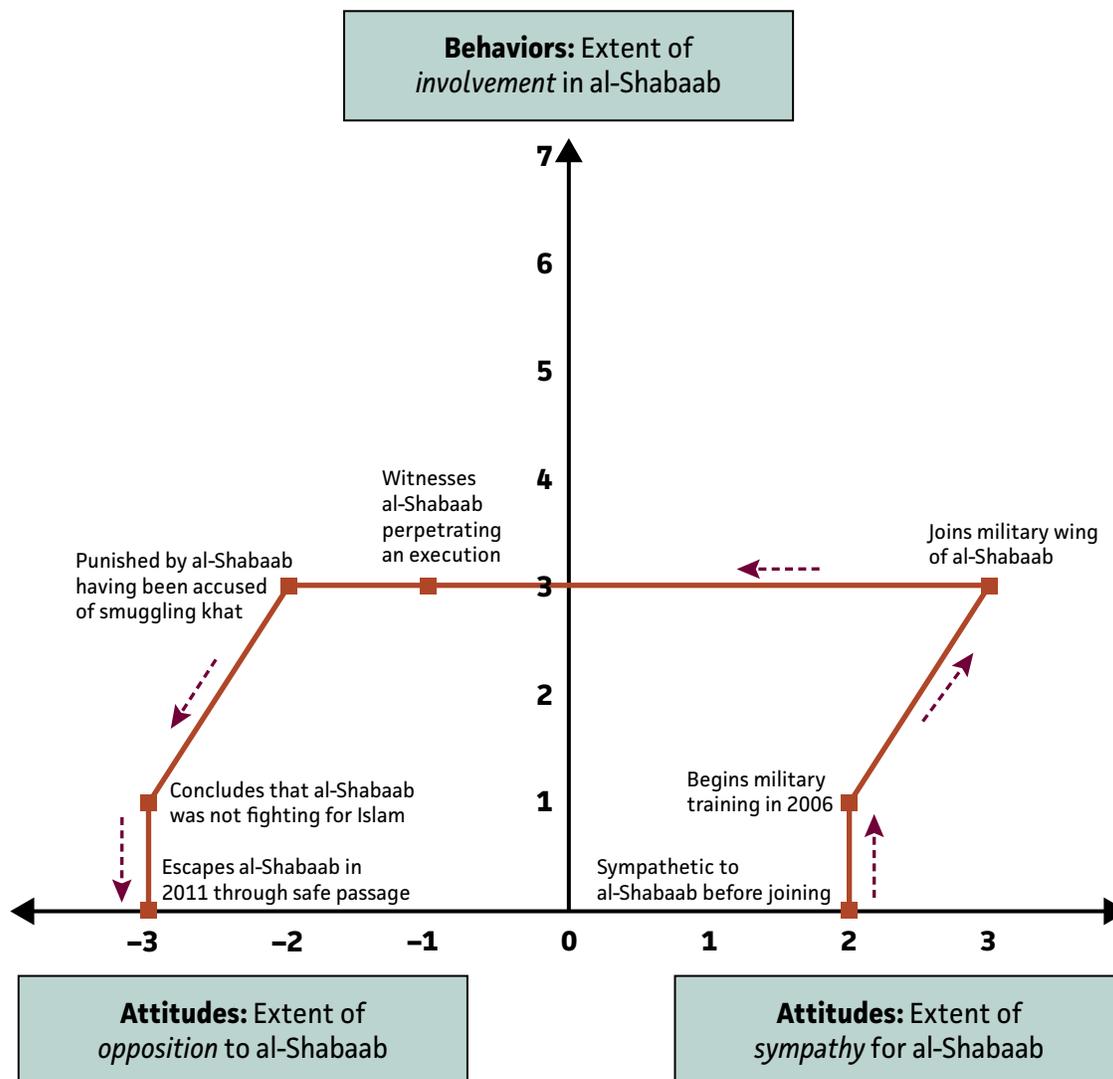
In 2011 Yusuf was transferred to Mogadishu to help defend al-Shabaab strongholds in the northern part of the city. He was injured in battle, resulting in his hospitalization for a prolonged period, and this experience convinced him that al-Shabaab had little interest in his wellbeing. In particular, he was aggrieved about having his phones confiscated to prevent him from contacting his family. In his words:

When I was injured, the group threw me in the hospital. They didn't care for me, they didn't give me any contact, and they took my phones. The group did not want me to contact my family. Even when people died in the group, they did not inform their families. If the family knows [about a member

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41 Interview with R2, 12 June 2022.

**Figure 6.** Yusuf's Trajectory



being injured], they will come and be involved in his treatment, and al-Shabaab is afraid he will leak secrets. At that time, I felt that the purpose we are fighting was not Islam, and that they [al-Shabaab leaders] are fighting for their own interests. When I got injured, they showed me they did not need me.<sup>42</sup>

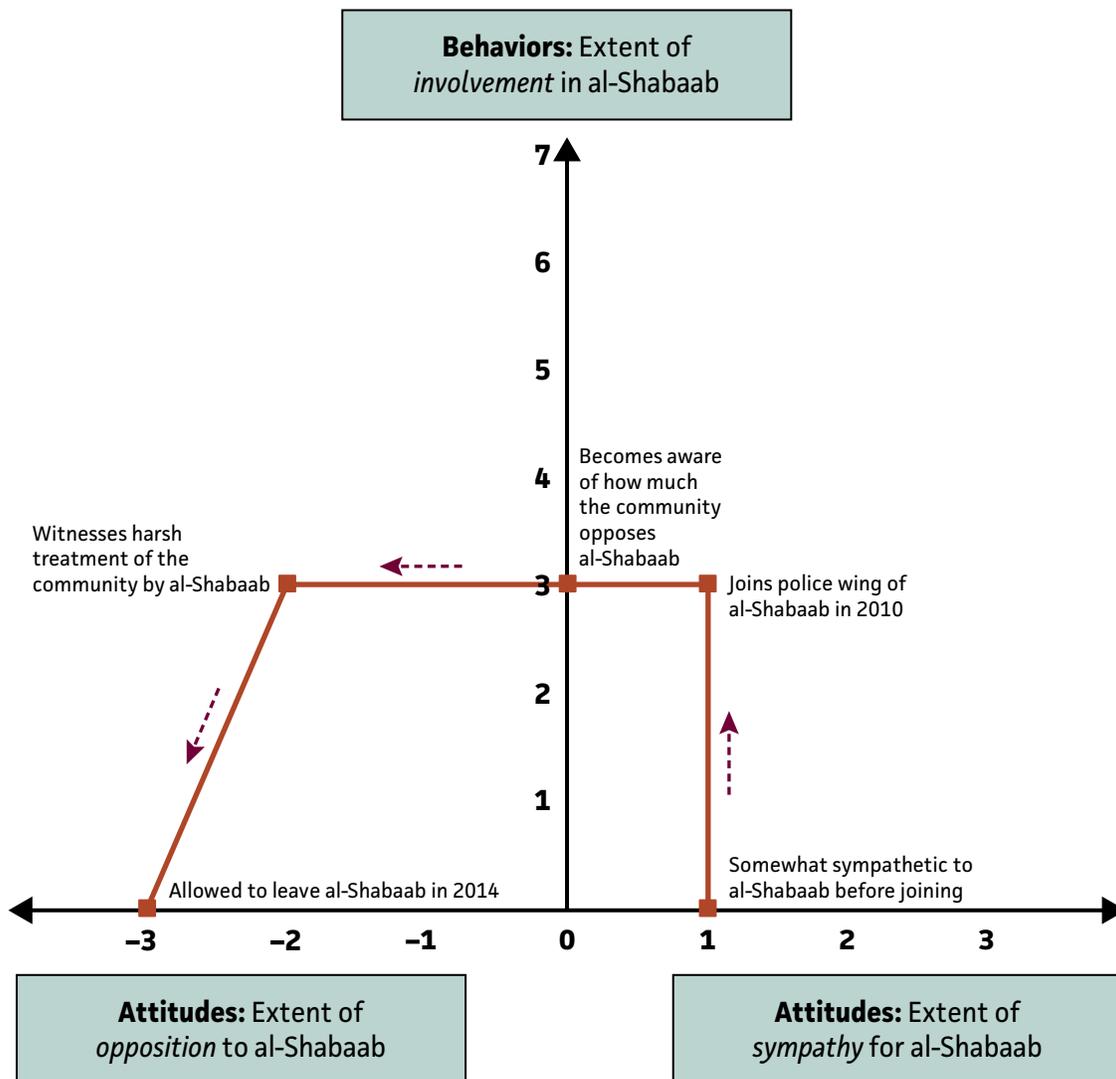
It is worth clarifying that this occurred during a period when al-Shabaab was suffering heavy losses, and it is safe to assume that their resources were stretched. In any case, Yusuf eventually convinced a nurse to contact his mother, who helped transfer him to another hospital in a government-controlled part of Mogadishu. He returned to Lower Shabelle after recovering, but then felt that it was unsafe to remain given al-Shabaab's reputation for punishing deserters. His mother then contacted an uncle in the Somali National Army (SNA) to facilitate his safe passage back to Mogadishu.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with R3, 13 June 2022.

## Sadiq (R4)

Prior to his involvement in al-Shabaab, Sadiq reported that his hometown in Barawe was insecure and that many of the residents were exploited by clan-based factional leaders and their militias. He explained that these groups used to hijack vehicles from members of the local community, and that on one occasion they stole from his store. This changed once al-Shabaab seized control of the district in 2008, and this contributed to Sadiq feeling “somewhat sympathetic” to the group prior to enlisting (see Figure 7). Yet, he was also partly motivated to join for protection from al-Shabaab itself, maintaining that “as a young person who was living in that area at that time, it was not easy to walk freely if you are not involved with the group.”<sup>43</sup> Sadiq already had several friends and acquaintances in the group, and he described his gradual inclusion as follows:

**Figure 7.** Sadiq’s Trajectory



43 Interview with R4, 13 June 2022.

The group was controlling Barawe at that time, so it was very easy to join the group, and interact with them. I remember I used to go to their places and locations, we knew the people in the group, and slowly I began to feel like I am with them. Without knowing I was joining the group, I was with them. Some of the members convinced and talked to me, and advised me to join the group.<sup>44</sup>

Sadiq was eventually given a role within the *Hizbah* in his hometown and received a small and irregular salary. However, his sympathy for the group began to decline as he became increasingly aware that many in his local community opposed the group. His role involved enforcing al-Shabaab's social rules (as described in Section 2), and he experienced hostility from neighbors as a result, and even close friends turned against him. This was compounded when al-Shabaab accused him of assisting a khat trafficking ring in 2013 (it was unclear whether this was justified), placing him in custody for one month. Unusually, Sadiq was allowed to leave al-Shabaab in 2014 as his wife had recently passed away, arguing to the organization that he needed to dedicate more time to parental care. His initial request was denied, but this changed after his clan elders intervened. Nevertheless, he reported being monitored by al-Shabaab from this point onwards, which caused him to become even more hostile to the group. He remained in his hometown for two more years before his district was retaken by government forces.

## Jabir (R5)

Jabir joined al-Shabaab in 2011 after the group seized control of his home district, claiming that he “neither sympathized nor opposed” the group at that time (see Figure 8). As he explained:

I didn't have any big reason to join al-Shabaab, I just followed my peers, all people of my age were joining the group at that time. Maybe it was ignorance because I did not know anything about the group. My main reason was not ideology.<sup>45</sup>

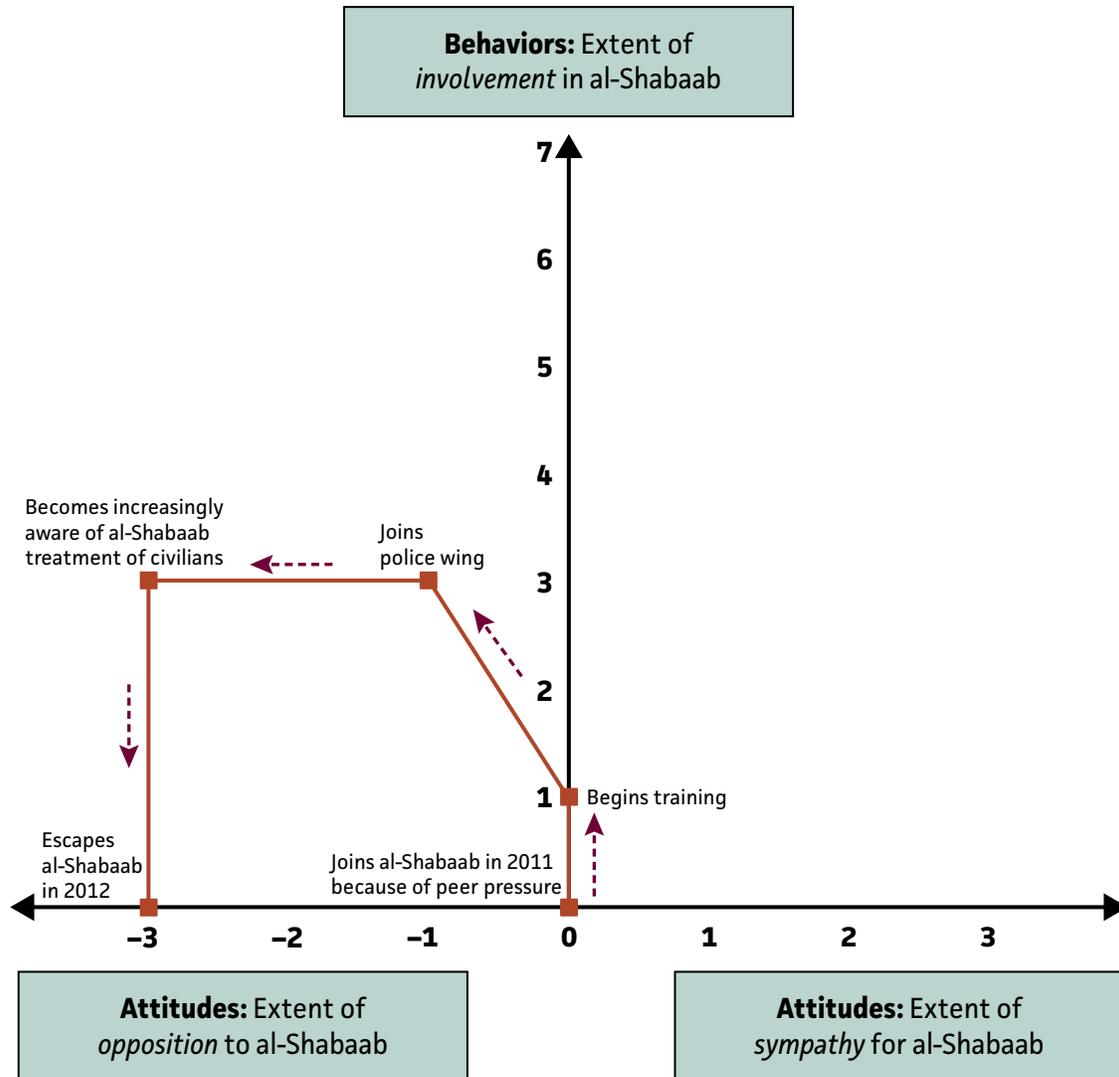
Jabir received three months of military training, during which time his attitude towards the group remained essentially unchanged. He was subsequently posted to the southern port city of Kismayo as a member of the *Hizbah*. He soon became disillusioned with al-Shabaab after witnessing its treatment of civilians, including in the form of severe punishments and killings. Jabir also felt dissatisfied with the living conditions provided by the organization, as well as their inadequate healthcare. His family also began pressuring him to leave, at which point he began to plan his escape. Unfortunately for him, it was at this point that the organization relocated him to Lower Shabelle, where he was unfamiliar with the local terrain. Unlike various other cases considered through this research (R1, R2, R3, and R8), Jabir did not arrange safe passage with security forces prior to his exit from al-Shabaab. Instead, with his lack of local knowledge, he simply boarded a bus headed towards Mogadishu. This was a remarkable step given that attempts to leave al-Shabaab may be punishable by death (as discussed in Section 6). With no personal contacts in the capital, Jabir handed himself over to security forces upon arrival.

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44 Ibid.

45 Interview with R5, 13 June 2022.

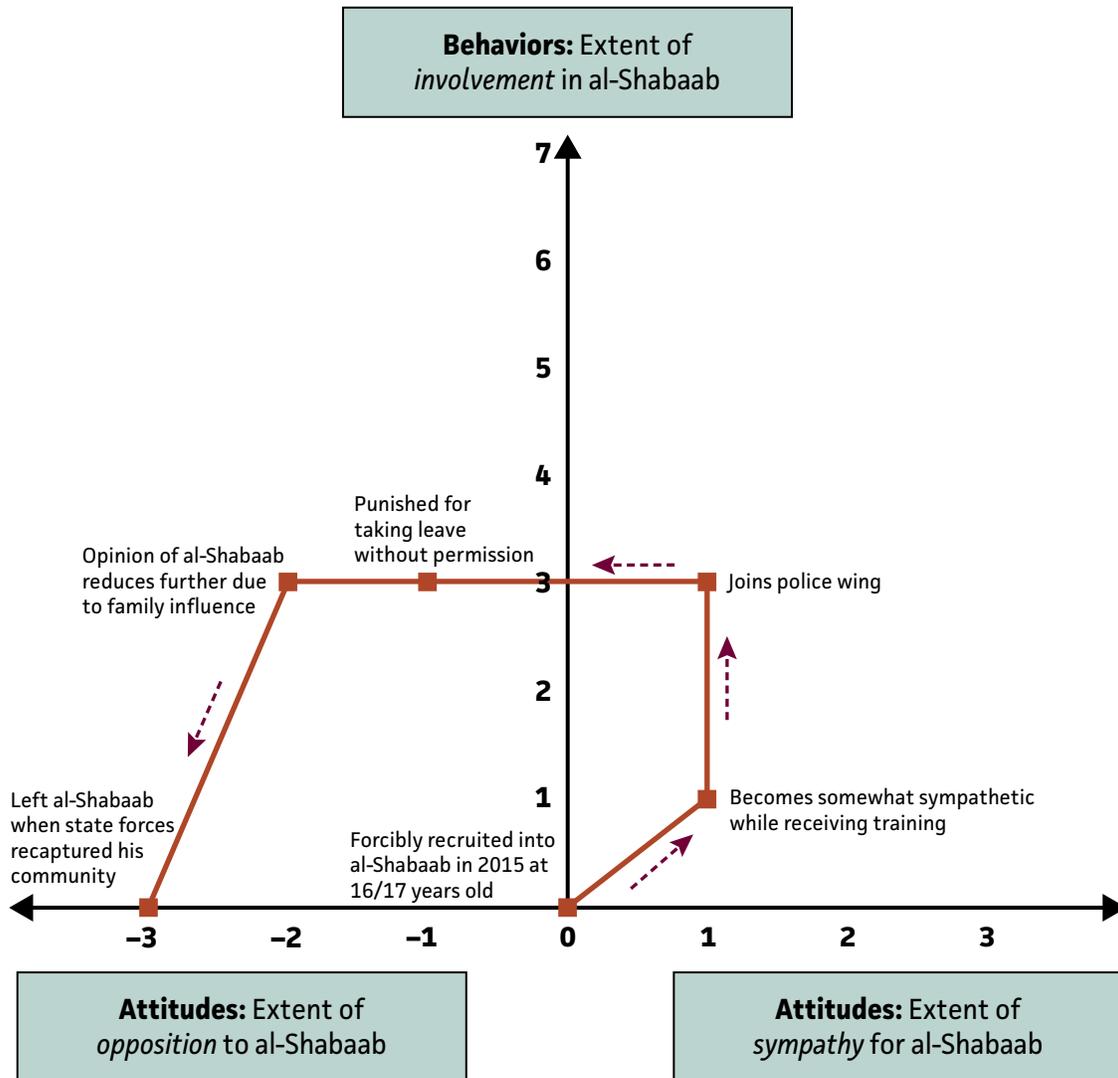
**Figure 8.** Jabir’s Trajectory



## Mukhtar (R6)

Mukhtar is unique among our sample in being the only respondent forcibly recruited by al-Shabaab, with this occurring in 2015 when he was sixteen or seventeen years old. He was sitting outside a store with five friends, when an al-Shabaab patrol group took them by force. They were transported to a village in Middle Shabelle by truck, where they were joined by hundreds of other forced recruits for military training (see Figure 9). Mukhtar’s parents attempted to rescue him, but they were denied access by the group. Despite this experience, he reported that the training made him somewhat sympathetic to al-Shabaab, as it taught him about their ideology and aims. Mukhtar was originally posted as a member of the *Hizbah* in his region of origin. Soon after, he requested personal leave to visit his family (he was unclear about dates through the remainder of the interview) and proceeded to travel despite the denial of his request. He was punished for this transgression upon his return—the organization seized his weapon and no longer allowed him to patrol alone. Mukhtar began to oppose al-Shabaab as a result, with this compounded

**Figure 9.** Mukhtar’s Trajectory



by his increasing awareness of their mistreatment of the local community and growing pressure from his family to disengage. His subsequent exit from the group occurred when government forces reclaimed his home community. Mukhtar described the events as follows:

When the government captured the town, everyone deserted the group and left the area. At that time, I went back to my parents’ house. The government forces came looking for members of al-Shabaab, they captured me and others. There is a place in the town where they gathered those associated with the group. Then they transferred us to the NISA [National Intelligence and Security Agency] . . . and after that, I was transferred to the rehabilitation centre.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Interview with R6, 14 June 2022.

## Mohamud (R7)

Mohamud was a teacher in Lower Shabelle when he enlisted in 2011 (see Figure 10), with this region under al-Shabaab control at that time. As with Sadiq (R4), he described the process as being somewhat gradual, as follows:

I was a teacher living in a location under al-Shabaab control, they had state-like institutions, such as an education sector. They were responsible for the teachers, and slowly we realized that we were taking their orders. Sometimes they transferred you to another location, and I felt we were trapped in the system. It was better to be part of the group. It was not forced into joining, but then I also could not reject them.<sup>47</sup>

Once within the group, Mohamud continued working as a teacher in secular education (as opposed to religious education) in locations across Lower Shabelle, and in 2016 he became a school principal. Because al-Shabaab's provisions of secular education are largely overlooked in relevant literature, it is worth noting his observation that:

Formal education is so highly valued by al-Shabaab. They have many who can educate in Islamic studies, but there is a scarcity of people who teach formal education. If someone is well educated, they move them into the Ministry of Education, even if they are in the military.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, Mohamud's sympathies for al-Shabaab began declining shortly after he enlisted, largely because his family had informed him about their treatment of civilian populations in other locations. He also fell seriously ill after his promotion and was unable to work for around six months. He offered the following reflections on his predicament at that point:

Most people faced many challenges and if they tried to escape, al-Shabaab tried to capture them. I was afraid to leave earlier, they would hang me, and come after me. I felt afraid of both sides, the government and al-Shabaab. The government thinks that those associated with al-Shabaab will not be clean, and I was deeply afraid of this perception. I was also afraid that al-Shabaab may hang me if I leave them.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, he requested medical leave, and this was granted as his condition required specialist treatment in Mogadishu. A member of NISA, his brother helped convince him that he would receive state protection if he surrendered to security forces. Mohamud was unique among our respondents in being the only one who held a neutral view of al-Shabaab at the time of his departure—the remainder asserted that they were strongly opposed to the group at that point in time.

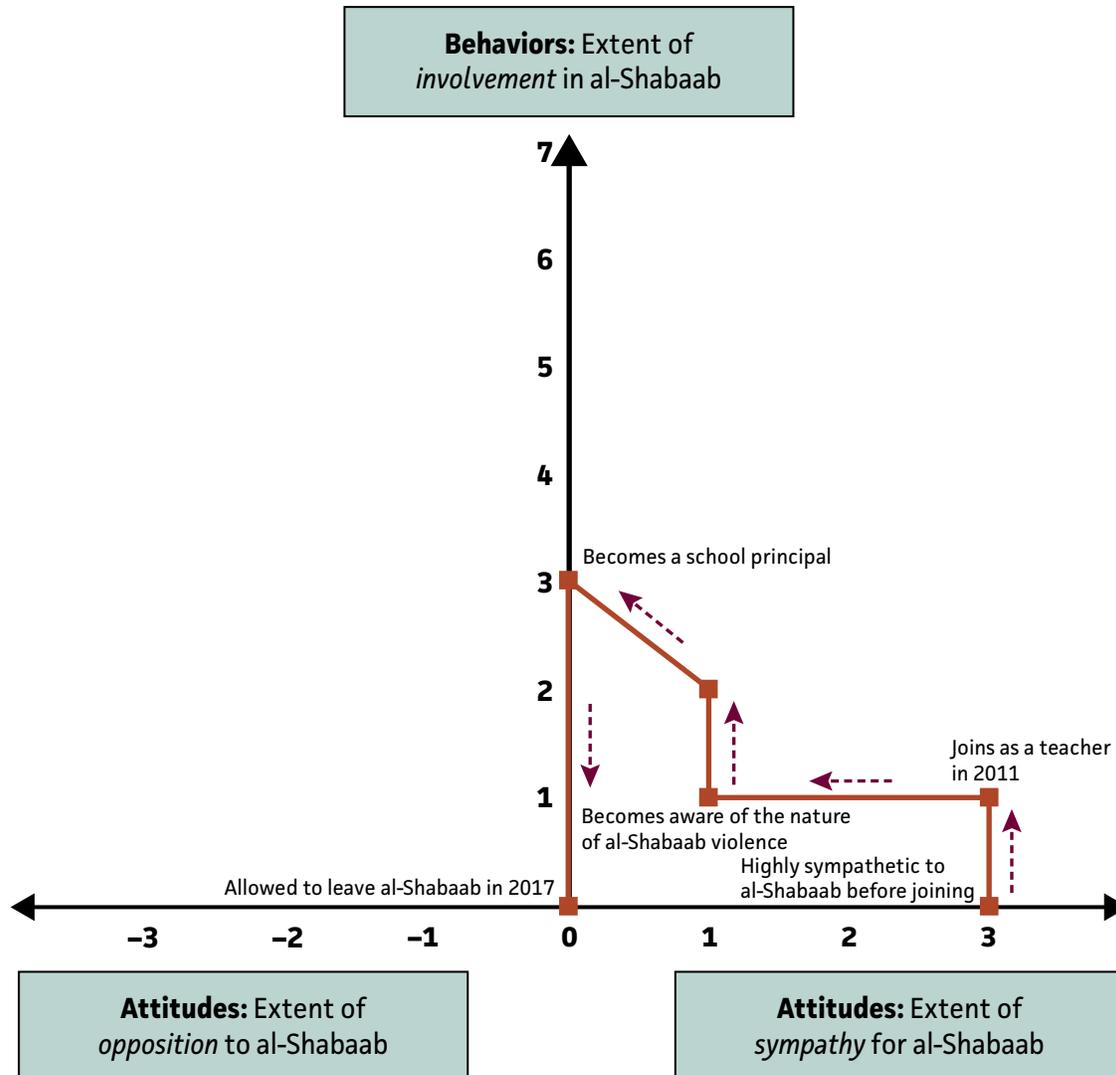
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47 Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.

48 Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.

49 Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.

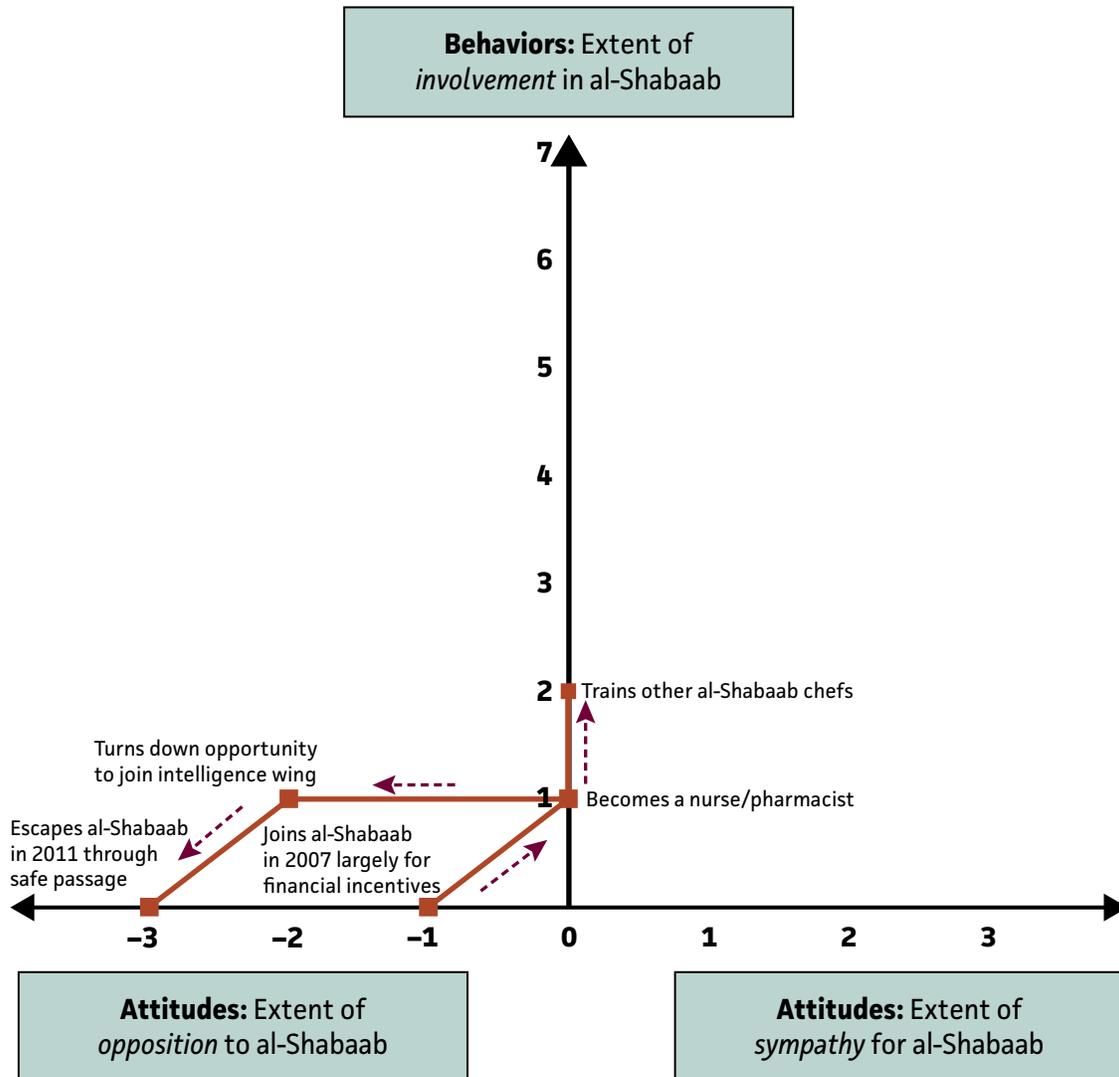
**Figure 10.** Mohamud’s Trajectory



## Ahmed (R8)

Ahmed was the only respondent from our sample who claimed to have been opposed to al-Shabaab (albeit only “somewhat”) prior to his involvement in the organization (see Figure 11). While working as a pharmacy assistant, a member of the group asked to borrow a small amount of money. A few weeks later, this same individual returned the money to Ahmed and asked him to enlist. Believing that he would receive a salary, he replied that he was not willing to play an active role in combat, but that he would assist in supporting roles. Ahmed was also unique among our respondents for being the only one primarily motivated by money, which he maintained that he needed to buy medicine. Ahmed’s recruitment was gradual (as was the case with Sadiq and Mohamud), and during the first two months he largely participated only in evening events organized by the group. In early 2007 he was given a permanent role and relocated to Mogadishu to cook for fighters on the frontline. He operated in secret locations across the capital and the food was distributed through safehouses. His role also involved buying groceries in the market, and subsequently teaching other members how to cook.

**Figure 11.** Ahmed's Trajectory



Two years later, Ahmed changed roles to become an in-house nurse for members of al-Shabaab requiring medical assistance. He claimed that he never fully felt part of the organization, and that his attitude during most of his involvement was essentially neutral (again, see Figure 11). Nevertheless, despite having never been directly involved in violence, he had gained the trust of al-Shabaab, and in 2010 they proposed that he join the *Amniyat*. This prompted him to reflect on his involvement with the organization, and he soon became disillusioned with their actions. He subsequently contacted relatives who knew members of the security forces who could arrange safe passage in Mogadishu. After staying in the capital for one month, he was taken to the NISA screening center, and subsequently transferred for rehabilitation. Al-Shabaab later attacked his home, which unsurprisingly enforced and furthered his opposition the organization.

## 6. DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Distinguishing between Attitudes and Behaviors

The accounts presented in the previous section reinforce the importance of the critical disconnect between attitudes and behaviors at the heart of the ABC Model (as discussed in Section 3). While some respondents reported being sympathetic to the organization at the point of entry (R1, R3, and R7), others claimed to be neutral (R2, R5, and R6), or even somewhat unsupportive (R8) at that moment. Interestingly, some became sympathetic (R2 and R6) or more sympathetic (R3) only *after* enlisting, highlighting the importance of al-Shabaab's training and broader socialization processes in generating a sense of purpose and belonging. This pattern goes largely unrecognized in the literature on al-Shabaab, where most accounts assume that sympathies precede involvement. Yet, it is widely acknowledged beyond Somalia—for instance, Randy Borum observes that:

Ideological commitment may lead to group affiliation, but social or group affiliations may also lead to ideological commitments. In some cases, the strength of personal conviction and commitment to the cause may precede a person's willingness to take subversive action. For others, engaging in subversive actions strengthens their personal conviction and commitment to the cause.<sup>50</sup>

Other respondents reported that they remained unsympathetic to al-Shabaab throughout their involvement (R5 and R8), strengthening the case that not all former members of the group require deradicalizing per se. The disconnect between attitudes and behaviors is also revealed by Abdu Noor (R1), whose peak involvement occurred only after he had ceased sympathizing with the group. Of course, this relates to the fact that members often fear leaving al-Shabaab as this action is potentially punishable by death (as discussed shortly).

### Drivers of Involvement in al-Shabaab

At a more granular level, this mapping exercise also offered a platform to explore the broad range of factors that drive attitudinal and behavioral change. Four of the respondents featured in the previous section (R1, R3, R4, and R7) claimed to have been at least partly motivated to enlist by their support for the ideology and objectives of al-Shabaab. These individuals joined the group when it was at the height of its power, controlling large areas of territory in southern Somalia, and providing popular (albeit harsh) public order after decades of instability. Two other respondents (R2 and R4) reported enlisting largely because of al-Shabaab's ability to provide protection against other armed actors. As previously discussed (see Section 2), this was of particular importance in locations such as Lower Shabelle where the group provided a counterweight against powerful clan militias. Other notable drivers included a desire for revenge (R2), financial incentives (R8), and forced recruitment (R6). Of course, with this study designed

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<sup>50</sup> Randy Borum, "Assessing Risk for Terrorism Involvement," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, no. 2 (2015): 67–8.

to help reveal variance in such motives (see Section 4), we make no claims about the relative importance of these drivers among the broader al-Shabaab membership. Indeed, it seems that both coercion and financial incentives may have become more prominent after many of our respondents had already joined the organization.<sup>51</sup>

Transitioning to enabling factors, friends and other personal connections provide common facilitators of entry into al-Shabaab (as noted by R1, R2, R3, R4 and R7). For instance, Abid Noor's (R1) reported that his sheikh and peer group members played a pivotal role in convincing him to join. Feisal (R2) similarly pointed to the importance of clan acquaintances in persuading him to join and enabling his enlistment. While the importance of such networks is widely recognized in the literature, less attention is paid to the role of territorial control as a key determinant of involvement (particularly in the *terrorism studies* literature). Of particular relevance, Stathis Kalyvas identifies seven mechanisms through which this control can provoke or encourage individuals to collaborate with nonstate actors such as al-Shabaab:<sup>52</sup>

- It helps these groups apply coercive force effectively;
- It shields the population from competing claims of sovereignty;
- It produces “mechanical ascription” (where joining appears ‘a natural course of action’);
- It signals that the group is credible;
- It helps groups provide goods and services (winning “hearts and minds”);
- It facilitates monitoring of the population; and
- It creates a self-reinforcing dynamic (with sympathizers relocating to the region).

While it was beyond the scope of our research to consider these seven mechanisms in any detail, our interviews lent weight to the importance of some. For instance, two of our respondents (R4 and R7) reported being essentially “absorbed” into al-Shabaab through their regular interactions with existing members in areas under the group's control, with the organization also effectively acting as the default employer in their home communities. Three others (R2, R4, and R5) also explicitly observed that they only enlisted once al-Shabaab had seized control of their community.

## Drivers of Disengagement

Although perhaps somewhat less pronounced than with enlistment into al-Shabaab, this study also revealed the extent to which the drivers of disengagement vary. With the sole exception of Mohamud (R7), our respondents asserted that they were “very strongly opposed to al-Shabaab” at the point of their departure, highlighting how prior attitudinal changes often provoke disengagement. These opinions were primarily driven by the group's treatment of the local community, including in the form of

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51 On this issue, see Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 105–106; Khalil et al., “Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia,” 13–15; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 153; and United Nations Security Council, *Panel of Experts on Somalia: Monitoring Report* (UNSC, 2021), 31.

52 Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 124–132.

extortion, physical punishments, and killings (as observed by R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R6). Perhaps most notably, Yusuf (R3) reported witnessing the execution of two women who al-Shabaab accused of spying, and whose appeals to the judge were unsuccessful. Three of our respondents also reported having been punished by al-Shabaab, either for taking leave without approval (R6), or because the organization accused them of involvement in smuggling khat (R3 and R4). In all three cases, this also significantly contributed to their increasingly negative attitudes of the group. Yusuf (R3) was also aggrieved about al-Shabaab's apparent disinterest in his wellbeing after becoming injured while helping to defend Mogadishu. While less prominent, our respondents also highlighted the importance of poor living conditions within al-Shabaab (R2, R3, R4, R5, and R7), fear of injury and death (R1, R3, R4, R5, R7, and R8), and the inadequacy of the salary provided by the organization (R2 and R4).

This research also helped reveal the importance of social networks in motivating and facilitating exits from al-Shabaab. For instance, several of our respondents (R2, R5, and R7) reported that they were encouraged or pressured to leave the group by members of their immediate family. This corresponds to research previously conducted at the Serendi rehabilitation center, where one former member reported that his family promised to identify him a wife as a reward for disengaging (a service also frequently provided by al-Shabaab), and another claimed that his parents had threatened to disown him if he remained with the group.<sup>53</sup> Families and clan networks were also often essential for establishing safe passage with the security forces (R2, R3, and R8), a critical avenue out of the group that receives insufficient attention in the literature. Mohammed Ibrahim Shire is one of the few researchers who have previously observed this phenomenon, noting that from among his sample of interviewees, "most rank-and-file defectors identified that their defections were facilitated by family members (mostly mothers), and those in government (mostly uncles and cousins), who put them in touch with their respective clan elder to act as a guarantor."<sup>54</sup> Yet, such avenues are less available to those from families with fewer connections, and those from less influential clans and subclans. This is particularly important insofar as al-Shabaab often maintains strongholds in areas which are inhabited by socially and politically weaker clans. While only applicable to one of our featured respondents (R6), it is worth also acknowledging the role of territorial control in relation to disengagement from the group. Specifically, Mukhtar reported that he was arrested by state forces after his home community of Afgoye was recaptured.

Of course, it is also important to consider factors that inhibit deradicalization and disengagement (as previously discussed in Section 3). The most prominent of these in the case of Somalia is undoubtedly the fear of being caught leaving al-Shabaab, with this act often being punishable by death.<sup>55</sup> A former member of the *Jabhat* interviewed at the Serendi center claimed to have reported his desire to leave to a commander, and to have been consequently blindfolded and beaten.<sup>56</sup> Two respondents from our sample (R1 and R5) also reported that al-Shabaab hinders exits from the group by transferring members

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53 Khalil et al., "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia," 16.

54 Shire, "Dialogue and Negotiation with Al-Shabaab."

55 Parallel research with former member of Boko Haram revealed the same pattern, as reported in James Khalil, MaryAnne Iwara, and Martine Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits into Boko Haram* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022).

56 Khalil et al., *Journeys through Extremism* 17.

between locations, resulting in them lacking the necessary social networks and knowledge of the terrain to escape. It is for these reasons that several of our respondents reported spending months or years preparing to escape. That said, our sample also included respondents who were permitted to leave the group on medical (R7) and compassionate (R4) grounds. While the disengagement literature acknowledges individuals permitted to disengage in cases such as Northern Ireland,<sup>57</sup> or to “go inactive” in places such as Indonesia,<sup>58</sup> this phenomenon is not widely recognized in the case of Somalia. Because both of these individuals only scored a maximum of three on our behavior scale, we can speculate that those more deeply involved may not have been allowed to exit in this manner.

## Policy Recommendations

With the above findings in mind, our key recommendations are as follows:

- **Communications campaigns that aim to promote exit from al-Shabaab should appeal to varied motives and should be tailored to local contexts.** With the drivers of involvement and disengagement from the group varying substantially between individuals, those tasked with designing communications campaigns to motivate and facilitate the latter should appeal to multiple drivers simultaneously. For instance, these may include a desire for enhanced security outside of a conflict context, improved living conditions, prospects of reuniting with family, opportunities to earn a living through newly acquired vocational skills, and the availability of rehabilitation programs designed to facilitate these aims. Campaigns should also include geographically specific guidance on how to disengage, including key information on where to surrender and other such practical matters.
- **Programs designed to encourage and facilitate exit from al-Shabaab should leverage the family and wider clan networks.** This research helped demonstrate the importance of family and clan members in motivating and facilitating exits from al-Shabaab, and programs that attempt to contribute to this objective should aim to leverage these personal networks. This could be done, for example, by bringing clan elders, women, and youth leaders from locations that are prone to al-Shabaab recruitment to a secure location in Mogadishu to inform them about rehabilitation and reintegration programming. These individuals can then act as focal points for information in their communities, with others reaching out to them if their family members seek to disengage from al-Shabaab.
- **Programs that aim to rehabilitate and reintegrate former members of al-Shabaab should be tailored to the needs of each beneficiary.** Because the drivers of involvement and exit from al-Shabaab vary substantially between individuals, as well as the psychosocial, educational, and other requirements of each beneficiary, those tasked with rehabilitating and reintegrating

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57 Khalil et al., “The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model,” 441.

58 Michael Kenney and Julie Chernov Hwang, “Should I Stay or Should I Go: Understanding how British and Indonesian Extremists Disengage and Why they Don’t,” *Political Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2021).

former members of the group must ensure that their programs are sufficiently tailored to personal needs. For instance, individuals who enlisted largely on ideological grounds, or who remain at least somewhat sympathetic to al-Shabaab’s objectives after their departure from the group, are most likely to require religious guidance. By contrast, those motivated primarily by material gain may benefit more from vocational training. Of course, provisions of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) should also be adapted to the personal needs of each beneficiary.

- **Policymakers must recognize the importance of territorial control as a key determinant of sympathy for and involvement in al-Shabaab.** This research highlighted the extent to which territorial control plays a critical role in both recruitment into al-Shabaab, and (perhaps to a lesser extent) subsequent exits from the organization. In doing so, it underscores the need for proportionate military efforts to reclaim territory, as part of a holistic response that also includes PCVE programming. These findings also highlight the need for adequate coordination between PCVE, stabilization, and transitional justice programs in newly “liberated” territory, and for reconciliation initiatives that account for the blurred line between perpetrators and victims of violence.
- **Donors should explore opportunities to apply the ABC Model in other locations to inform policymaking and programming.** This research has shown that the model can be applied to map personal trajectories in and out of al-Shabaab. In doing so, it revealed certain patterns that are not widely acknowledged in the Somalia literature, including how some members become sympathetic to al-Shabaab only *after* joining the organization, the importance of safe passage arrangements, and the fact that certain individuals are freely allowed to leave the group. With this in mind, we suggest that policymakers are likely to develop a more granular understanding of how and why individuals join and leave other violent extremist groups by repeating this mapping exercise in other geographical locations. Beyond the existing study, we also recommend the application of the ABC Model to other cohorts of former members of al-Shabaab, including women and those incarcerated on terrorism charges.

# APPENDIXES

## Appendix A: Bibliography

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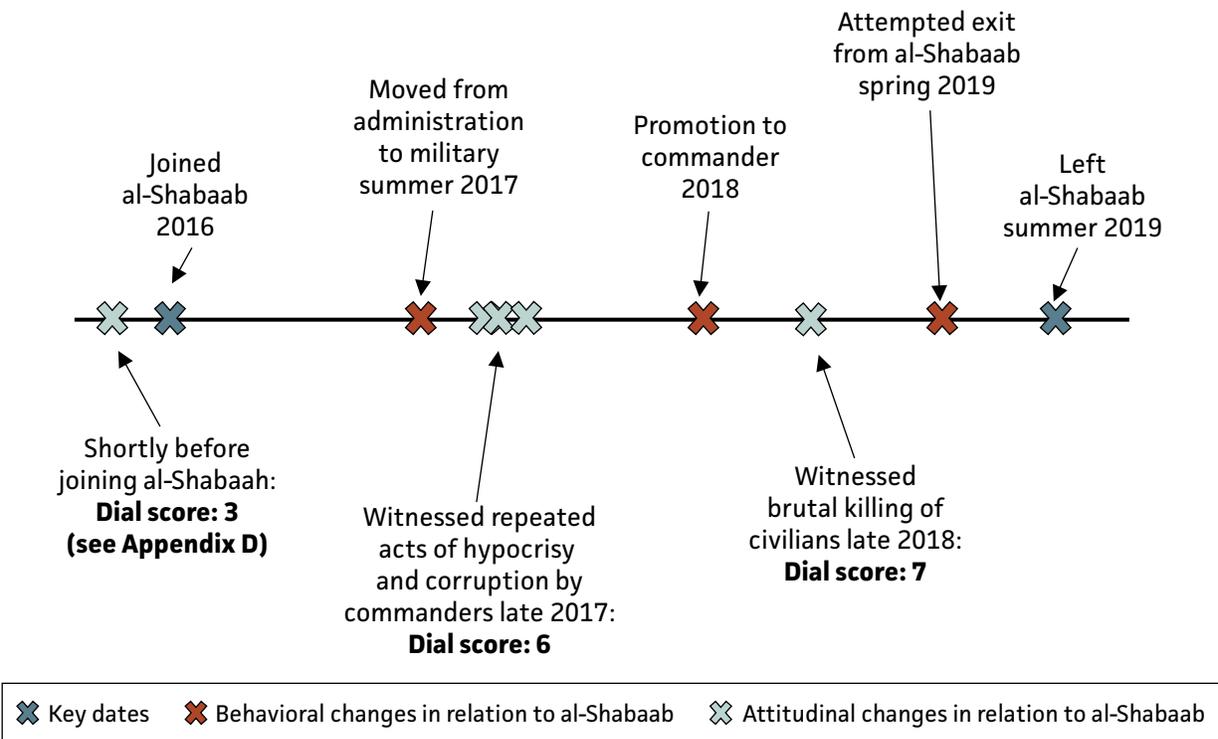
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## Appendix B: Timeline Template



# Appendix C: Research Guide

## A: Introduction

My name is [pseudonym] and this is [insert Local Researcher pseudonym]. We are conducting independent research to try and improve our understanding of how and why people like yourself join and leave al-Shabaab. We hope to turn the research findings into a report, with the idea that it can help improve programs that aim to counter al-Shabaab and similar organizations by encouraging people to leave these groups.

We are interested to hear more about your life story, as an interesting and relevant example of a journey out of al-Shabaab. I want to clarify that absolutely no personal details through which you may be identified will appear in the report. These personal details are not important to telling your story. This process is entirely voluntary. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we can move on. Similarly, you are free to stop the interview at any point if you do not wish to proceed. The process should take between 1 and 2 hours.

As I believe you discussed with [insert Local Researcher pseudonym], we will compensate you for your transport costs at the end of the discussion. The biggest risk we can identify to you taking part of this research is being identified by NISA at the checkpoint. In this case, please present a photo of your rehabilitation certificate or your identification, and if necessary. If you do have any issues, please contact [insert Local Researcher pseudonym].

Are there any other concerns you would like to discuss with us before we begin? Do you have any questions before we start? If you have any more questions after we complete this process, please feel free to contact me through [insert Local Researcher pseudonym].

Do you agree to take part in this discussion?

## B: Demographic Questions

I would like to start with a few questions to help us understand about your background.

1. Where are you originally from? Which district and region?
2. Where did you live immediately before you got involved in al-Shabaab? Which district and region?
3. Where do you live now? Which district and region?
4. How old are you?
5. Did you complete any education (religious or secular) before you joined al-Shabaab? What level?
6. Did you have an income before you joined al-Shabaab? What did you do?
7. What is your clan?
8. Who did you live with before you joined al-Shabaab? Are you married? How many times have you been married? If so, did you get married before you were involved with al-Shabaab, during your involvement, or after (or both in case of more than one marriage)?
9. Do you have children? How many? Did you have these before, during or after becoming involved with al-Shabaab (or all)?

## C: Life History

**Step 1:** Draw a line on a big piece of paper and explain that the purpose of this is to map key dates during their journeys. Mark an 'x' towards the left for the point when they joined al-Shabaab, and another 'x' towards the right for when they left al-Shabaab. Ask them the dates for these two events, and record these dates above the marks (see Appendix C).

**Step 2:** Ask them how they joined al-Shabaab, and what role others (family members, peers, recruiters, etc.) played in that process.

**Step 3:** Ask them why they joined al-Shabaab (open question).

**Step 4:** Say that there are many different reasons why people join al-Shabaab, and you are going to mention a few of these to see if they apply to the respondent. Say that you only need very brief answers, and that all they have to say is 'a lot', 'a little' or 'not at all'.

- It provided status or power ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- It provided adventure or excitement ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- It provided a sense of belonging ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- It provided an opportunity for revenge ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
  - Clarify against whom
- Because of an expected salary from al-Shabaab ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
  - Clarify how much they expected to get
- Because of pressure or force from someone I know ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Because of pressure or force from al-Shabaab ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Because of expectation that al-Shabaab could provide protection ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
  - Clarify from whom
- Because of a religious duty to become involved ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Because of a perception that al-Shabaab was creating a better society ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')

**Step 5:** Ask them about key dates relating to behaviors once they were within al-Shabaab and add these on the line with additional 'x' marks (using a different color from previously) and record dates (approximated as necessary), e.g.:

- Unit/role/task changes within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were)
- Changes in where they were located with al-Shabaab (clarify where they were based)
- Promotions within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were, and if they had subordinates)

- Demotions within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were for)
- Punishments by al-Shabaab (clarify what these were for)
- Unsuccessful attempted exits from al-Shabaab (ask them to elaborate on these)

**Step 6:** Ask them how they left al-Shabaab, and what role others (family members, other members of al-Shabaab, etc.) played in that process. Ask if they left voluntarily or if they were captured (**skip to Step 10 if captured**). Ask if they had arranged safe passage (i.e., if the security forces were expecting them) before they left, and how that was arranged.

**Step 7:** Ask them why they left al-Shabaab (open question), and how long they had been thinking of leaving.

**Step 8:** Say that there are many different reasons why people leave al-Shabaab, and you are going to mention a few of these to see if they apply to the respondent. Say that you only need very brief answers, and that all they have to say is ‘a lot’, ‘a little’ or ‘not at all’.

- Because the living conditions with al-Shabaab were poor (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
  - Ask them to describe what the particular issues were, e.g., food, sleeping, etc.
- Because of fear for life or health (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
- Because of treatment by superiors (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
  - Clarify what was wrong with the treatment
- Because of family pressure to leave (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
- Because the money provided by al-Shabaab was not enough (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
- Because of perception of contributing to the suffering of others (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
- Because their interpretation of Islam was wrong (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)
- Because of the amnesty/opportunities at centers like Serendi (**‘a lot’, ‘a little’, ‘not at all’**)

**Step 9:** Ask them what the most difficult thing was about leaving al-Shabaab, and why they did not leave earlier. Ask them if they were afraid to leave because of al-Shabaab, the state security forces, or anyone else. Ask if it was difficult to leave because of personal commitments to others in al-Shabaab, e.g., wives, friends.

**Step 10:** Introduce the 7-point dial covering attitudes (see Appendix D), and ask them to reflect back on how they felt about al-Shabaab shortly before they joined the group. Add a new ‘x’ to the timeline to the left of the one representing when the respondent joined al-Shabaab (using a third color), and record their dial score at this point.

**Step 11:** Ask them if their opinion of al-Shabaab changed once they were in the group, either positively or negatively. Ask why their opinions changed (open question).

**Step 12:** Say that there are many different reasons why attitudes may change once within al-Shabaab, either positively or negatively, and you are going to mention a few of these to see if they apply to the respondent.

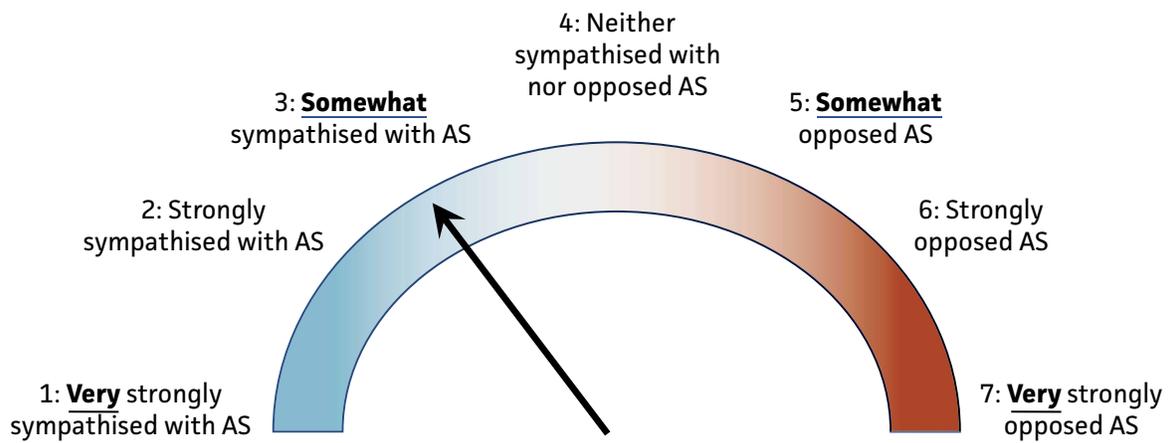
- The nature of their recruitment into al-Shabaab
- A better understanding of al-Shabaab ideology or objectives (e.g., through training provided by al-Shabaab)
- The nature of al-Shabaab rules, or change in these (clarify which rules in particular)
- How they were treated by superiors, or changes in this (clarify the nature of this treatment)
- Other behaviors of superiors or leaders (clarifying what these behaviors were)
- Factional fighting within al-Shabaab
- Particular al-Shabaab acts of violence or broader changes in how al-Shabaab applied violence
- Their personal involvement in violence (clarify what this was)
- Broader political, social, or economic conditions outside al-Shabaab, e.g., election of a new President

**Step 13:** For each of the attitudinal changes identified through the previous step, (a) locate them on the timeline in relation to the events marked in Steps 1 and 5 (e.g., asking “did this change in attitude occur before or after you were promoted”) with additional ‘x’ marks (using the third color), (b) record the dates (approximated as necessary, and noting that these may be sudden or gradual), and (c) record their attitude using the dial. As necessary, clarify what their attitudes were in any gaps.

## D: Wrap Up

Thank you very much for taking part in this research. I really appreciated the time that you took out of your day to help me, and the information that you provided. As I said at the beginning, we hope to turn the research findings into a report, with the idea that it can help improve programs that aim to counter al-Shabaab and similar organizations. Would you mind if we followed-up with you briefly by phone if we have any more questions or clarifications? Do you have anything you would like to add, or any questions for me about this research or the process?

## Appendix D: The Attitudes 'Dial'





## About the Authors

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**Martine Zeuthen:** Martine is a senior researcher specializing in extremism and radicalisation, PCVE, program management and research methodology, who advises on PCVE and disengagement programs in the Horn of Africa and MENA regions. She is a Danish anthropologist, and is studying for a doctorate in Crime and Security Studies at University College London.

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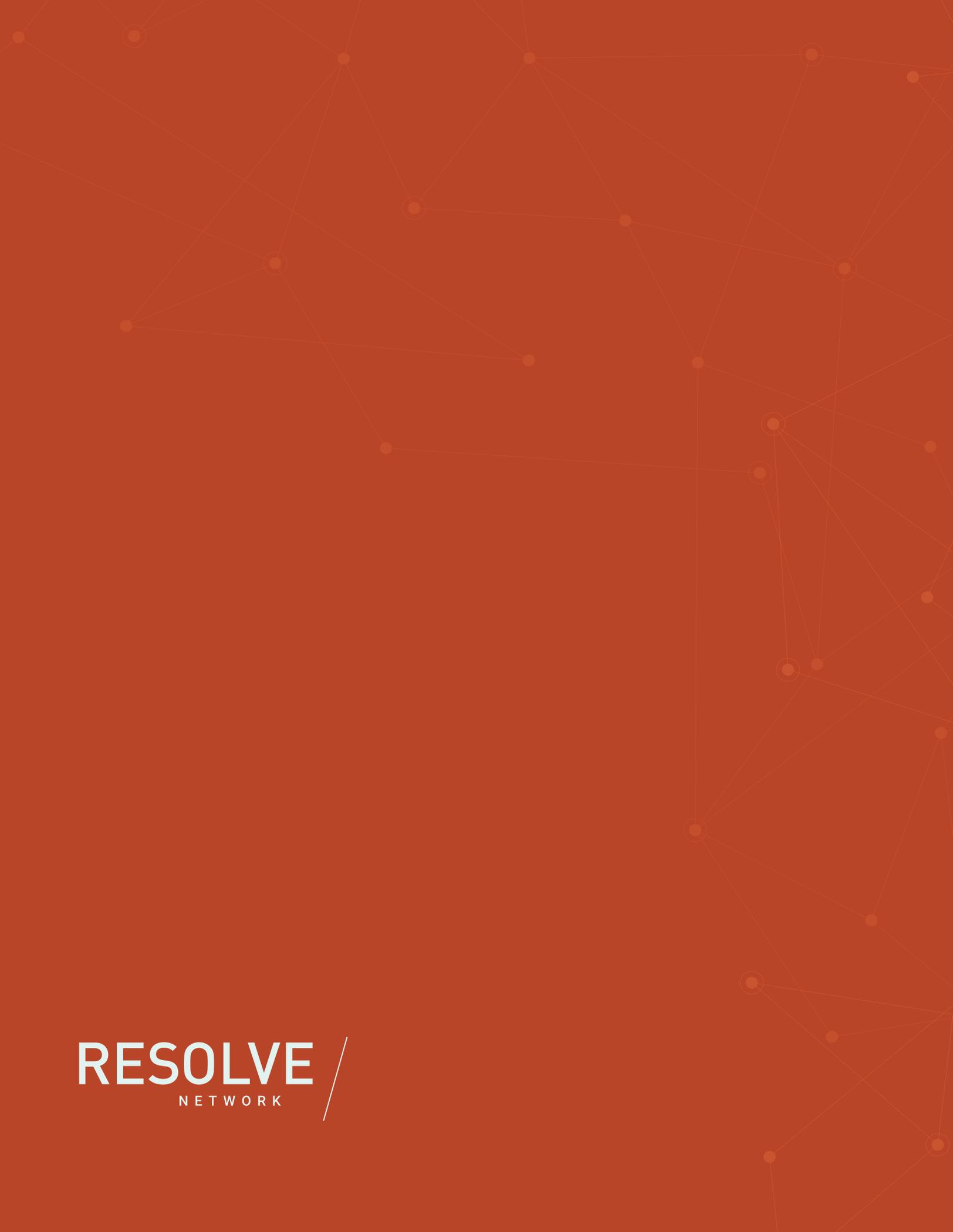


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