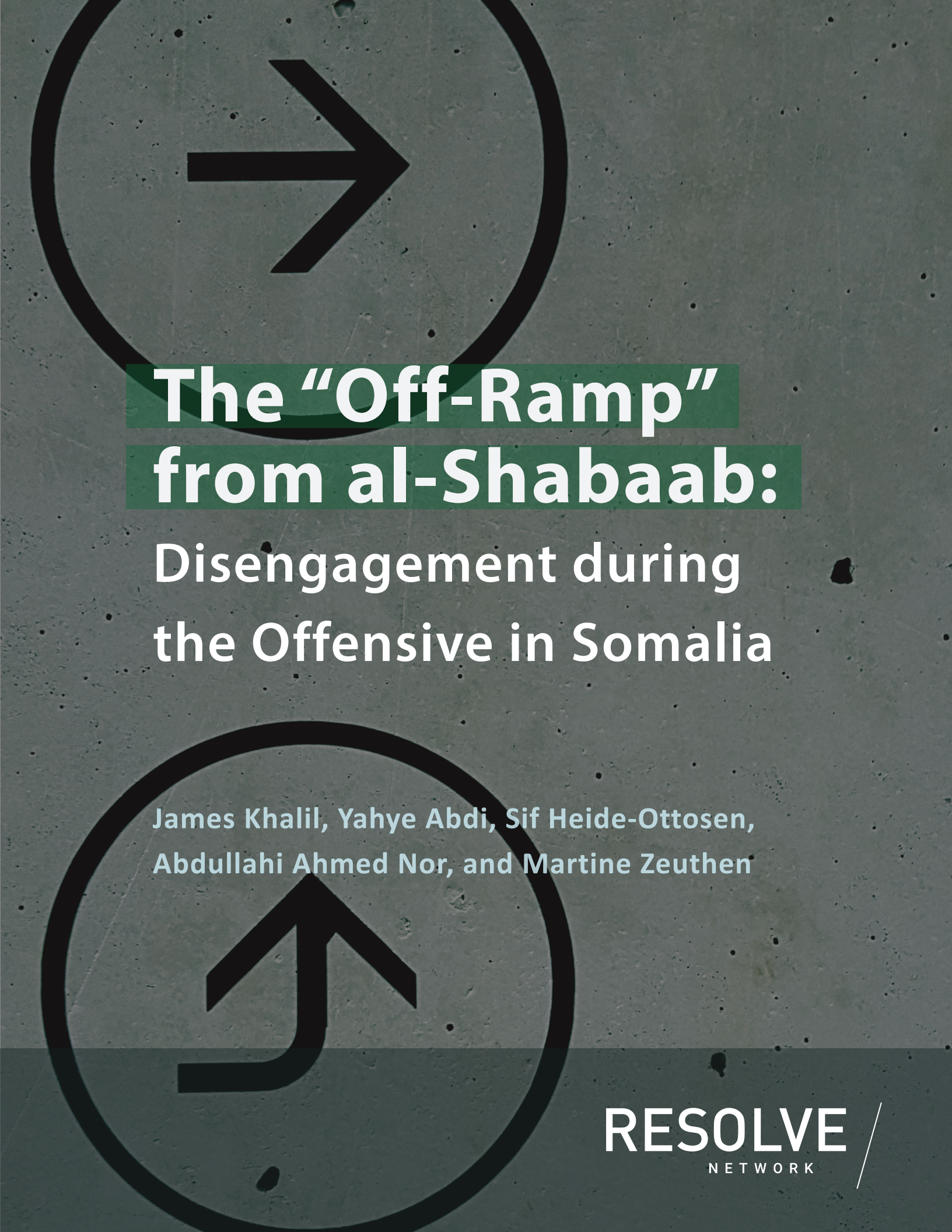

The "Off-Ramp" from al-Shabaab:

Disengagement during the Offensive in Somalia

James Khalil, Yahye Abdi, Sif Heide-Ottosen, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, and Martine Zeuthen

RESOLVE NETWORK

RESOLVE Network Research Report

Local Approaches to Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa Series

First published December 2023

The RESOLVE Network
Housed at the United States Institute of Peace
2301 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC

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https://doi.org/10.37805/lpbi2023.1

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This publication and the research supporting it were produced with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Africa Bureau. No compensation was paid by USAID to any foreign government department or entities for the production of this research.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Al-Shabaab has been evicted—at least temporarily—from scores of towns and villages in the central Somali Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug since summer 2022. While this began as an "organic" uprising led by clan militias (the Ma'awisley) against the insurgent's excessive demands for "taxation" and recruits, it soon transformed into a major state offensive. Within this context, in May 2023 our team conducted interviews with former members of al-Shabaab who had been based in these locations to explore how and why they left the organization, with a particular focus on the extent to which their decisions to disengage were influenced by the offensive, and how their clans helped motivate and facilitate exit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Federal Government of Somalia's Defectors Rehabilitation Program (DRP) and IOM for granting us access to the Serendi center, and the center staff for facilitating the research. We are also very grateful to the thematic and country experts who helped us better understand the context in which the recent defections from al-Shabaab have occurred. Most of all, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the Serendi residents who allowed us to draw from their personal experiences.

RESOLVE would like to thank the reviewers of this report, colleagues at the U.S. Institute of Peace who supported the research process and travel, Dr. Alastair Reed for his support for this larger research initiative, and members of the RESOLVE Network Secretariat who contributed to this report's development, including senior program officer Kateira Aryaeinejad and program officer Rachel Sullivan. Finally, RESOLVE would like to thank the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Africa Bureau for its generous and longstanding support for this report and RESOLVE's research initiative on Learning from Local Peacebuilding Approaches in sub-Saharan Africa.

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ACRONYMS

AS	Al-Shabaab
ATMIS	African Transition Mission in Somalia
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
DRP	Defectors Rehabilitation Program
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Forces
ICG	International Crisis Group
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoIS	Ministry of Internal Security
NISA	National Intelligence and Security Agency
SNA	Somali National Army
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Al-Shabaab has been evicted—at least temporarily—from scores of towns and villages in the central Somali Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug since summer 2022. While this began as an "organic" uprising led by clan militias (the Ma'awisley) against the insurgent's excessive demands for "taxation" and recruits, it soon transformed into a major state offensive. Within this context, in May 2023 our team conducted interviews with former members of al-Shabaab who had been based in these locations to explore how and why they left the group, with a particular focus on the extent to which their clans helped motivate or facilitate exit. We conducted these interviews at the Serendi center, which is managed by the Defectors Rehabilitation Program (DRP), which sits in the Ministry of Internal Security (MoIS). This center provides rehabilitation services to former members of the group classified as "low risk," and forms a key component of the broader National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (often simply referred to as the National Program).[1] Our sample included respondents who had operated in al-Shabaab's military wing (the Jabhat), and police force (the Hizbah), as well as drivers and tax collectors. To help situate information collected from these respondents, we also conducted a literature review, and interviewed eight thematic and country specialists with a particular knowledge of the offensive. Our key findings are listed below.

1. The rate of defections from al-Shabaab increased to at least a modest extent in Hirshabelle and Galmudug during the offensive.

The total numbers of defections from al-Shabaab during the state offensive will remain elusive, not least because it is impossible to know how many simply leave and return to their communities "informally" (i.e., without passing through the National Program), and how many others "flip" to the Ma'awisley or state forces. Nevertheless, while we have certainly not witnessed defections en masse, our research revealed that the disengagement

1 The program is described in detail in 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); and Martine Zeuthen, *The National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants in Somalia: Challenges and Recommendations* (UK: Royal United Services Institute, 2023).

rate in Hirshabelle and Galmudug increased to at least a modest extent. This is contrary to a perception among many country experts that the rate did not increase during this time,[2] and it reinforces the need to ensure that facilities and other resources are in place to manage defectors as the second phase of the offensive continues.

2. There was a broad consensus among our respondents that the offensive played a key role in enabling their disengagement. The respondents focused on four broad mechanisms through which the offensive exerted important influence. First, it increased the extent to which members were motivated to escape by fear for their lives, with several of our respondents citing the influence of airstrikes in particular. Second, the chaos associated with attacks and battles also created opportunities to flee. Third, the offensive stretched al-Shabaab's resources and created openings in their systems designed to prevent desertions. Finally, as the state increased its territorial control, many potential defectors found themselves in closer proximity to units to which they could surrender. This reinforces the argument that territorial control provides a key determinant of exit from groups such as al-Shabaab,[3] strengthening the case for the continuation and expansion of the state offensive.

3. Clan networks also played a key role in motivating and facilitating defections from al-Shabaab. Somali clans are patrilineal kinship units that play a pivotal role in the organization of society, culture, and politics. Several of our respondents reported having been driven to escape from al-Shabaab partly to avoid having to confront fellow clan members in the ***Ma'awisley***. Many also noted that their clans played a proactive role in facilitating their escape from the group, in particular through helping to arrange safe passage with the state security forces. One of our respondents also recalled how various members of his extended clan network lent him money to escape from

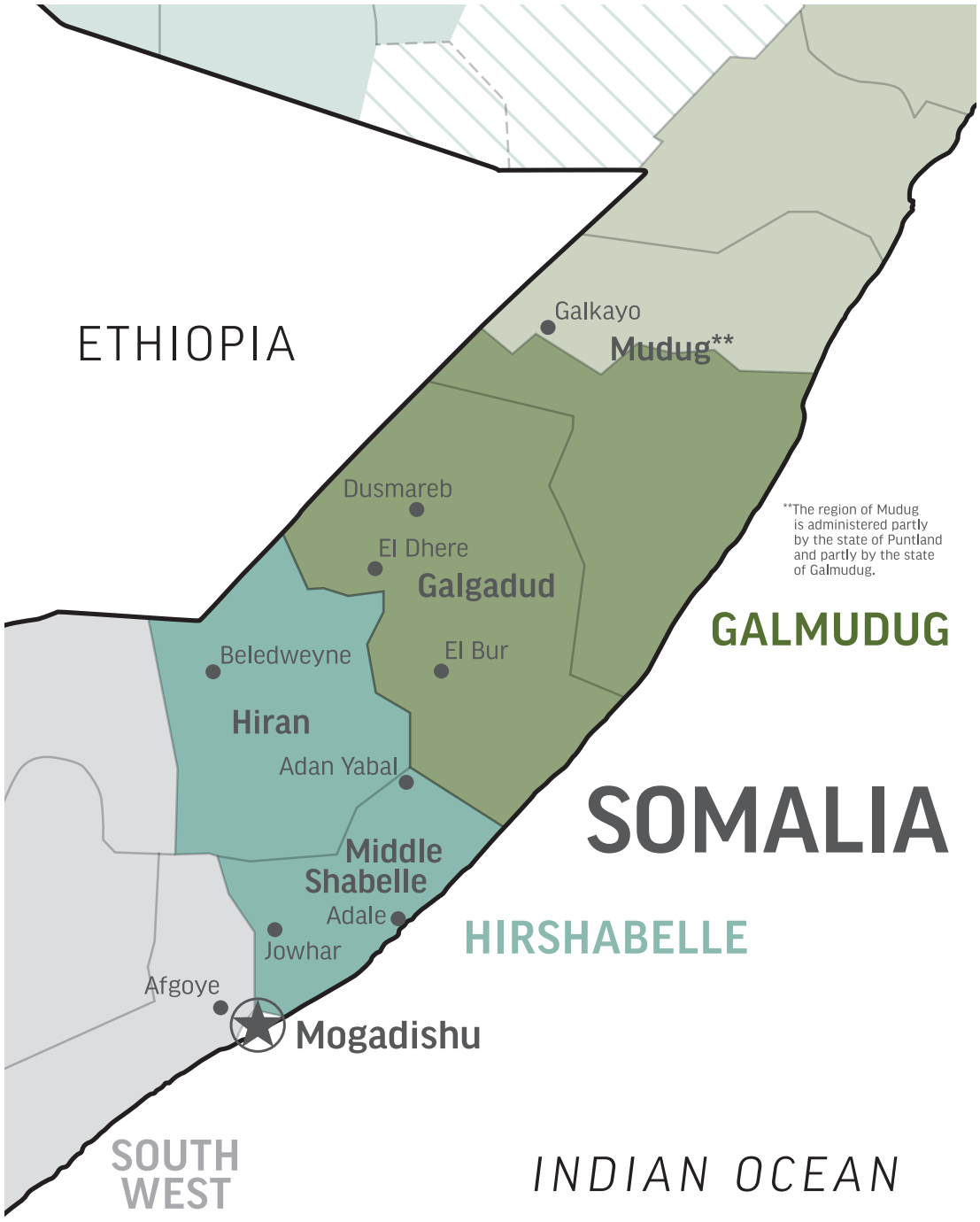
2 KII1 and KII7.

3 On this subject, also see, for instance, Sif Heide-Ottosen, Yahye Abdi, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, James Khalil, and Martine Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.3.

al-Shabaab. This underlines the need to continue leveraging these relationships through outreach to clan elders, helping to ensure their "buy-in" to the National Program.

4. Important inhibitors of disengagement remain, including the fear of being punished by al-Shabaab or (to a lesser extent) mistreated by the Ma'awisley and/or the state security forces, as well as (for certain individuals) inadequate social connections to facilitate escape. A key obstacle to disengagement from al-Shabaab is the fear of being punished by the organization (potentially by death) if caught trying to escape, underlining the need for the National Program to help ensure the safety of its beneficiaries to the extent possible. Although our respondents generally reported having been well treated by the state and (in the relevant cases) ***Ma'awisley*** after disengaging, a fear of abuse at the hands of these actors also inhibits exit to a certain degree. While it is difficult to generalize about the actual extent of the problem, this underscores the need to ensure that state and ***Ma'awisley*** forces that commit human right abuses must be held accountable. A third key obstacle seems to be that some within al-Shabaab lack the necessary social networks with connections to the state to assist with their escape. This applies particularly to those from less influential clans, and those based in areas still largely controlled by the insurgents. The state should prioritize strengthening ties to such communities and reassure them that they are acting in their interests.

Figure 1. Map of Hirshabelle and Galmudug States, Somalia



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INTRODUCTION

Al-Shabaab has been evicted—at least temporarily—from scores of towns and villages in the central Somali Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug since summer 2022. These events began in early 2022 when major local clans began rebelling against al-Shabaab in response to their excessive demands for "taxation" and recruits, at a time when series of failed rainy seasons led to pronounced hardships.[4] In Hiran, tensions escalated further when the group killed a Hawadle elder, "reportedly for having participated in government elections."[5] The uprising was led by clan militias popularly known as the ***Ma'awisley***, named after the sarong (the ***ma'awis***) that they often wear. While such "organic" rebellions against al-Shabaab have been common in Somalia's recent history, this particular one coincided with the reinstatement of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in May 2022, in his second term as Somalia's president. President Mohamud initially struck a somewhat conciliatory tone, emphasizing the need to negotiate with the insurgents.[6] Yet, this changed after al-Shabaab attacked the Hayat hotel in central Mogadishu in August, killing around twenty people. President Mohamud seized his opportunity by declaring a "total war" against the insurgents, and deployed the Somali National Army (SNA) to Hirshabelle and Galmudug. While ATMIS (the African Transition Mission in Somalia), the US, UK, EU, Turkey, Ethiopia, and other international actors have supported this state offensive,[7] a key feature distinguishing it from previous campaigns is that it is Somali led. Although it is too early to comment on the second phase of this offensive, which began in the summer of 2023 (shortly before the completion of this report), it is worth briefly observing that it witnessed early reversals, with al-Shabaab actually reclaiming territory in Galmudug.[8]

4 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive Against Al-Shabaab* (ICG, 2023).

5 Ibid., 3.

6 Ibid., 4.

7 Samira Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures," *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (2022), 31–32; Stig Jarle Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 1 (2023), 20; International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 5–6; and Paul Williams and Afyare Elmi, *Security Sector Reform in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Heritage Institute, 2023).

8 Daisy Muibu, *Challenges that Lay Ahead of Somalia's Second Phase of the Offensive* (Soufan Centre, 2023).

Within this context, in May 2023 our team conducted interviews with former members of al-Shabaab who had been based in Hirshabelle (which is comprised of the Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions) and Galmudug (composed of the Galgadud region and most of Mudug region), and who defected during the first phase of the offensive. Our core focus was on exploring how and why they disengaged, with a particular emphasis on the impact of the offensive and the extent to which their clans helped motivate or facilitate exit. We conducted these interviews at the Serendi center, which is managed by the Defectors Rehabilitation Program (DRP), which sits in the Ministry of Internal Security (MoIS). This center provides rehabilitation services to former members of the group classified as "low risk," and forms a key component of the broader National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (often simply referred to as the National Program).[9] Our sample included respondents who had operated in al-Shabaab's military wing (the ***Jabhat***), and police force (the ***Hizbah***), as well as drivers and tax collectors (see Annex 4). As with our 2022 ***Journeys through Extremism*** research,[10] we relied on our ABC Model (as described in Section 3) to map their pathways out of al-Shabaab.[11] To help situate information we collected from these respondents, we also conducted a literature review, and interviewed eight thematic and country specialists with particular knowledge of the offensive.

Placing this study in broader context, it is worth highlighting that while research on violent extremism still focuses primarily on how and why individuals become involved in such acts, recent years have witnessed an increased emphasis on the process of disengagement. For instance, John Horgan explores in-depth case studies of exits from this violence in a variety of countries in his ***Walking Away from Terrorism***.[12] Considering disengagements from ***Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*** (ETA), Fernando Reinares stresses the importance of disillusionment with the group leadership, personal motives, and broader political and social changes.[13] Meanwhile, in her account of exit from ***Jemaah Islamiyah*** in Indonesia, Julie

9 Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*; and Zeuthen, *The National Program*.

10 Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys Through Extremism*, 2022.

11 James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2019), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793.

12 John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009).

13 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), https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.613307.

Chernov Hwang also highlights the role of social networks.[14] To help structure research on this theme, many scholars rely on the binary distinction between "push" and "pull" factors. Mary Beth Altier and her colleagues treat the former as including unmet expectations, a loss of faith in the ideology of the group, disillusionment with their strategy, actions or personnel, difficulties with the clandestine lifestyle, and "burnout."[15] In the latter category they incorporate competing loyalties, employment or educational opportunities, the demands of families, positive interactions with "moderates," financial incentives, and amnesties. The research presented in this paper offers originality by considering how and why members leave al-Shabaab, while mapping their personal trajectories out of the organization using the ABC Model.

Box 1. Terminological Note

In the context of armed conflict, the term "defector" generally implies that an individual has switched sides between belligerent parties. By contrast, in Somalia this word is applied in a broader sense to refer to any former member of al-Shabaab, including those who now maintain no preference for or allegiance to any armed actor. We apply this term (and related concepts such as "defect" and "defection") in this report in accordance with this latter interpretation, making it essentially interchangeable with the phrase "disengaged member of al-Shabaab."

14 Julie Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2018).

15 Mary Beth Altier, Christian Thoroughgood & John Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology and Criminology," *Journal of Peace Studies* 51, no. 5 (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022343314535946.

THE STATE OFFENSIVE IN CONTEXT

The Relationship between al-Shabaab and Clans

Somali clans are patrilineal kinship units that play a pivotal role in the organisation of society, culture, and politics. While al-Shabaab initially sought to marginalize the clan system, it soon adapted its approach as a matter of expedience. As succinctly explained by the Hiraal Institute:

> The Al-Shabaab leadership was initially interested in forging an egalitarian organization that would transform Somali society by sidelining traditional clan leaders. However, the group quickly realised that clan loyalty ran deep; rather than reforming clan society, clan politics transformed the group. From 2009, after facing stiff resistance from clan militias in Hiran and Galgadud regions, AS started taking pledges of allegiance from clan elders. The process was initially meant as a pacification and rapport-building exercise, but ended up being an integral part of the administration and recruitment strategy of the group.[16]

Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph also observe that Ahmed Abdi Godane, one of al-Shabaab's early emirs, was "smart enough to recognize that clans were the basic building blocks of power in Somalia," and so the insurgents began working "to win and maintain their material, financial, and political support."[17] The clans in question also often gain from this cooperation, and Ken Menkhaus highlights that "a common tactic on the part of aggrieved or weaker clans is to turn to al-Shabaab to strengthen their position against a more dominant clan."[18]

16 Hiraal Institute, *Taming the Clans: Al-Shabaab's Clan Politics* (2018), 1.

17 Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 84.

18 Ken Menkhaus, *Somalia Borderlands Conflict Mapping/Analysis* (Danish Demining Group, 2015), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2589109, 28.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) similarly observes how the insurgents "play on the political inferiority complexes of clans, offering support to those squeezed between larger rivals."[19] The dynamics vary substantially between locations, depending on the extent of competition over territory and economic resources, the relative political and military clout of each clan, their personal relations to al-Shabaab, and other factors.[20] Of particular relevance to this study, in the case of Hiran and its capital city of Beledweyne, al-Shabaab has historically aligned with "a collection of marginalised clans, Gaalja'al, Jajale, Sheikhal and Jareer, against the politically, though not numerically dominant, Hawadle."[21] In Galmudug, Stig Jarle Hansen similarly reports that in 2009 and 2010:

> The fighting deteriorated into mere clan clashes, in which the Murosade, on the side of al-Shabaab, fought traditional enemies in the Hawadle clan. The front lines roughly followed the clan borders, with the largest al-Shabaab bases roughly corresponding to the largest Murosade clan-controlled city in the area.[22]

However, al-Shabaab not only operates as a belligerent actor, but also often helps mediate between rival clans in areas under its control.[23] Various commentators have also emphasized the extent to which the insurgents gain support through their ability to administer justice, despite the brutal nature of its delivery.[24] Al-Shabaab is also heavily involved in regulating local economies, through which it finances its campaign. As noted by the UN Monitoring Group, for instance, it "taxes trade, livestock, and agricultural production through a series of checkpoints throughout central and southern Somalia, enforcing compliance through the threat of violence."[25] Mary Harper adds that "people report having to pay a wide variety of levies, including a house tax, tax on any remittances they receive, a share of their harvests, and a ransom for releasing forced conscripts."[26] Perhaps unsurprisingly, these taxes often

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

20 Tricia Bacon, *Inside the Minds of Somalia's Ascendent Insurgents: An Identity, Mind, Emotions and Perceptions Analysis of Al-Shabaab* (Washington D.C.: Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2022), 18–21.

21 Ibid., 14

22 Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005–2012* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 95.

23 Expanding Access to Justice, *Negotiating Injustice: Mapping the Dynamics of the Lower Shabelle Hybrid Order* (2020), 34.

24 Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 84; and Mary Harper, *Everything you have Told me is True* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 106; Mohamed Mubarak and Ashley Jackson, *Playing the Long Game: Exploring the Relationship between Al-Shabaab and Civilians in Areas Beyond State Control* (London: ODI, 2023).

25 United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 1 November 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolution 751 (1992) Concerning Somalia Addressed to the President of the Security Council* (UNSC, 2019), 11.

26 Harper, *Everything You Have Told Me*, 111.

generate considerable resentment at the community level, which at least on occasion triggers revolt.[27] Focusing on the Mudug region, for instance, the Hiraal Institute observes that:

> Refusal to pay taxes is the most common form of rebellion that has resulted in clans being punished by AS. In Mudug, AS briefly waged war against the Saleban/Habergedir in late 2016/early 2017, with the ***Fursan*** (special police) and the ***Jabhat*** (military wing) fighting the clan and bringing in reinforcements from other regions—all this because the clan had refused to pay the ***zakat***. Dumaye village was completely burnt down, and hundreds of livestock were shot and slaughtered by AS. The clan lost about thirty men and AS lost eight men, with thirteen wounded.[28]

Resentment against al-Shabaab is often also compounded by their demands for recruits (a topic also discussed in Section 4). As observed by Harper:

> Nomads have occasionally risen up against the group in the Middle Shabelle, Galgadud, and Mudug regions after it tried to seize some of their precious livestock and forcibly recruit their children. At least twelve people were killed in the region of Hiran in March 2018 after heavily armed members of al-Shabaab ordered nomads to provide a percentage of their livestock as ***zakat***. They refused to give up their animals, took up their weapons and fought back against al-Shabaab.[29]

As observed by Harun Maruf, such uprisings against al-Shabaab tend to fail in the absence of support from the state,[30] and they generally conclude with the belligerent parties negotiating settlements. The ICG notes that, "several sub-clans in central Somalia have resisted the militants previously, but later cut deals with them to forge a form of coexistence, finding the cost of fighting al-Shabaab too high."[31]

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27 Omar Mahmood, *Somalia's Offensive against al-Shabaab*, International Crisis Group Podcast, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalias-offensive-against-al-shabaab

28 Hiraal Institute, *Taming the Clans*, 4.

29 Harper, *Everything you have Told me*, 115-6.

30 Harun Maruf, "A View from the CT Foxhole," *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (2022), 14.

31 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 2.

The State Offensive

Against this backdrop, in 2019 al-Shabaab began demanding young male recruits from the Salebaan sub-clan of the Habergedir. The latter is based in central parts of Galgadud, and has strong roots in Sufism. The Salebaan refused to comply with this order, citing fears that the militants would inculcate its youth with their Salafi-jihadi worldview.[32] This led to spiralling violence between the two parties. The insurgents eventually assaulted the town of Bahdo in June 2022, and lost around seventy of their fighters to the clan's militia in the process. At roughly the same time, the Hawadle sub-clan also began rebelling against al-Shabaab's rule in eastern parts of Hiran, liberating villages in the districts of Mataban and Mahas. According to Omar Mahmood, the insurgents had taken control of the location relatively recently, undermining the economy by displacing the administration and prohibiting local businesses.[33] The ICG adds that al-Shabaab's checkpoints between Beledweyne, the capital city of Hirshabelle, and Galgadud effectively "choked off" the region.[34] Tensions escalated further when the group killed a Hawadle elder, "reportedly for having participated in government elections'"[35] Samira Gaid adds that many who subsequently took up arms against al-Shabaab "were farmers angered at the militant group's extortive practices as drought conditions worsened in the country."[36]

This "organic" uprising coincided with the reinstatement of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in May 2022, in his second term as Somalia's president. As previously observed, President Mohamud initially struck a somewhat conciliatory tone, emphasizing the need to negotiate with the insurgents. However, this changed after al-Shabaab attacked the Hayat hotel in August in central Mogadishu, killing around twenty people. Seizing his opportunity, Mohamud declared a "total war" against the organization, and deployed the SNA to Hirshabelle and Galmudug. This led to the "liberation" of many more towns and villages, with the ICG maintaining that "the operation has yielded the most comprehensive territorial gains since the mid-2010s."[37] This included locations of strategic importance, such as Adan Yabal in Middle Shabelle, which had been under al-Shabaab's control for most of the past fifteen

32 Ibid., 3.
33 Mahmood, *Somalia's Offensive against al-Shabaab.*
34 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 3.
35 Ibid., 3.
36 Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive," 31.
37 Ibid., 1.

years.[38] While ATMIS (the African Transition Mission in Somalia), the US, UK, EU, Turkey, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and other international actors supported the offensive, a key feature that distinguishes this campaign from previous ones is that it is Somali-led.

Instead of attempting to hold territory, in many locations al-Shabaab responded by withdrawing its forces, as it has often done in the past.[39] The insurgents also left a trail of destruction in their wake, with Gaid reporting that the organization "carried out reprisals, including the indiscriminate killings of civilians, the poisoning of wells, and the torching of homes and vehicles transporting humanitarian aid."[40] Al-Shabaab was also accused of destroying a communications center in Galmudug, preventing local populations from accessing remittances sent to them through their phones.[41] Yet, the group subsequently adopted a more conciliatory approach, which led to a negotiated settlement with the Salebaan in December 2022,[42] and with certain Hawadle sub-clans shortly thereafter.[43] This aside, despite the early successes of the offensive in terms of its ability to recapture territory, questions remain about its longer-term implications. In particular, various experts have emphasized the need to further secure this reclaimed territory to help reassure communities that they will not be punished if al-Shabaab subsequently returns.[44] Indeed, although it is too early to comment on the second phase of the offensive, which began in summer 2023 (shortly prior to the completion of this report), it is worth briefly observing that it witnessed early reversals, with al-Shabaab actually reclaiming territory in Galmudug.[45] In any case, this study focuses more narrowly on the subject of disengagement during the first phase of the offensive.

38 Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive," 32.

39 Ibid.; Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," 22; and Maruf, "A View from the CT Foxhole," 14.

40 Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive," 31. Also see International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains*, 4.

41 Maruf, "A View from the CT Foxhole," 15.

42 Ibid., 8; and Mubarak and Jackson, *Playing the Long Game* (2023), 18–19.

43 Hiraal Institute, *Governance without Presence: The Somali Government's Liberation Struggles* (2023), 6; and Mubarak and Jackson, *Playing the Long Game*, 18–19.

44 Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," 21; International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains;* Maruf, "A View from the CT Foxhole," 14; and Williams and Elmi, *Security Sector Reform in Somalia,* 7.

45 Hiraal Institute, *Strategic Missteps and Tactical Failures: Reassessing the Government's Counterinsurgency Operations in Central Somalia* (2023); Muibu, *Challenges that Lay Ahead.*

METHODOLOGY

As previously discussed, the core purpose of this study was to explore how and why individuals from Hirshabelle and Galmudug left al-Shabaab during the first phase of the offensive, with a particular focus on the extent to which their clans helped motivate or facilitate exit. To achieve this objective, in May 2023 we conducted in-depth interviews with seventeen adult former members of al-Shabaab at the Serendi center in Mogadishu. This facility offers rehabilitation and reintegration services to former members deemed to be "low risk," forming a central component of the wider National Program. All five members of our research team formerly worked at the center (as described in the About the Authors section), and our access was contingent on this past involvement. At the time our research began, Serendi housed seventy-five individuals from the regions of interest—including fifty-eight from Middle Shabelle, ten from Hiran, six from Galgadud, and one from Mudug. This figure would likely have been higher had the National Program not stopped receiving new residents during the first months of the year due to funding issues during a transition between international donors. To explore variance in journeys away from al-Shabaab, we sampled purposively among these residents according to the following criteria:[46]

- Respondents from diverse locations across the four regions;
- Respondents from diverse clans and sub-clans; and,
- Respondents with diverse roles within al-Shabaab.

This delivered a sample that included individuals who had operated within al-Shabaab's military wing (the ***Jabhat***), and police force (the ***Hizbah***), as well as drivers and tax collectors (summary profiles of our respondents are provided in Annex 4). We assigned pseudonyms and code numbers (ranging from R1 to R17) to our respondents to retain their anonymity. Our lead and secondary researchers conducted the interviews, and our two research

46 We decided against attempting to generate a representative sample from residents from Hirshabelle and Galmudug within the existing Serendi cohort due to practical issues in such a context, and because the rapidly evolving composition of the center population would in any case render its representative nature outdated within a short period of time.

assistants provided translations.[47] The research instrument was semi-structured (see Annex 2), and we collected extensive notes during the interviews.[48] Regarding research ethics, we first introduced ourselves to each of the respondents and presented the aims of the study. We also clarified that the process was entirely voluntary, and that they were free to skip questions or even to conclude the interview at any point (only one chose to do this). We then asked the respondents to provide verbal consent, explaining that this involved accepting our use of the information they provide in anonymized form. As previously noted, to help situate information that we collected from these respondents, we also conducted a literature review, and interviewed eight thematic and country specialists with a particular knowledge of the offensive (we label these KII1 to KII8 through the remainder of this report).

While this study primarily aimed to explore individual journeys out of al-Shabaab, we also considered individual trajectories into the group to help us contextualize these exits. As with our Journeys through Extremism research from 2022,[49] we mapped these pathways using the ABC Model.[50] At the heart of this model lies the prominent disconnect between sympathy for ideologically justified violence (i.e., attitudes) and involvement in its creation (i.e., behaviors), as shown schematically in Figure 2. Individuals located higher up this diagram are more heavily involved in the production of ideologically justified violence. While those further to the right of the attitudinal axis are more sympathetic to this violence, those further to the left are increasingly opposed to such acts. The key point of Figure 2 is that many sympathizers remain uninvolved in violence (e.g., Individual E), whereas those who do contribute to its production are not necessarily supportive of its ideology and objectives (e.g., Individuals A, B, and C). The latter are instead often driven by status, adventure, economic incentives, security motives, and so on. The ABC Model is also explicitly dynamic, recognizing that attitudes and behaviors often evolve over time.

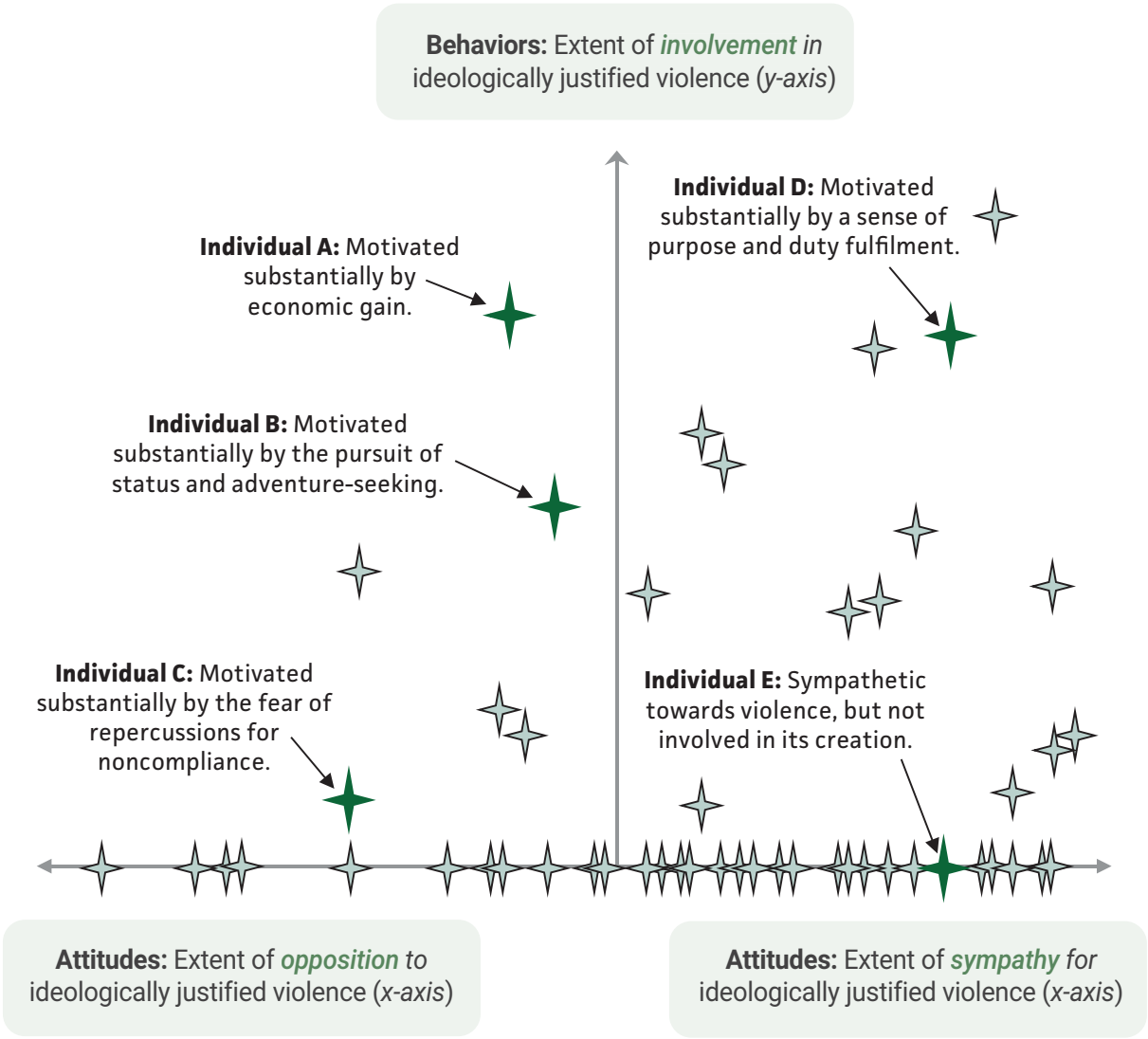
47 The interview format in Somalia tends to be somewhat distinct from that in many other contexts given the strong tradition of storytelling. Responses to certain questions can take up to ten minutes, with the translators largely unable to help steer the conversation as interruptions may be viewed as disruptive or discourteous. As such, these interviews often take a highly conversational tone.

48 We chose not to record the interviews as prior experiences revealed that many former members of al-Shabaab become suspicious when this is suggested by researchers.

49 Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys Through Extremism*.

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

Figure 2 The (Partial) Disconnect between Attitudes and Behaviors[51]



We adopted a life history approach during the interviews, through which we mapped the key events of each respondent on a timeline (see Annex 1). These included changes in role, promotions, demotions, instances of being punished by al-Shabaab, attempts to exit the group, and so on. Movements on the behavioral axis of the ABC diagrams were determined through reference to the scale presented in Figure 3. This scale reflects our professional judgement about the comparative importance of roles in al-Shabaab, with higher scores indicating a greater ability to influence outcomes and/or closer proximity to violence. For

51 Figure 2 is adapted from a version in Khalil et al., "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model.

instance, as members of the ***Amniyat*** were responsible for "high-value" tasks such as assassination attempts, suicide bombings, and so on, we assess their role to equate to senior ***Jabhat*** commanders, scoring six or seven on the scale. By contrast, members of the ***Hizbah*** score either three or four, reflecting their comparative distance from actual violence, but also acknowledging their influence at the community level. Those in support roles must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, drivers often score comparatively higher as they are placed in positions of responsibility, and as their role requires knowledge of certain operational matters.

Figure 3 Behaviors Scale[52]

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

52 This figure has been slightly modified from a prior version in Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys Through Extremism*.

To identify movements on the attitudinal axis of the ABC diagrams, the instrument included a series of closed questions relating to sympathy for or opposition to al-Shabaab. The respondents were asked to select from among the following options at key points during their journeys (see Annex 2):

- 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.

Of course, it is also important to consider the limitations associated with our approach, and to reflect upon the extent to which these may have influenced our findings. As is always the case with research of this nature, it is important to highlight potential issues of data reliability. Put simply, certain respondents may have provided misleading or false information to be viewed favorably by others, because their memories may be flawed, to avoid perceived negative repercussions associated with divulging information, and so on.[53] Indeed, one respondent (R11) provided information that appeared questionable, and for this reason we excluded his account from the subsequent analysis. As previously observed, we attempted to mitigate such issues through providing reassurances about the nature of the research and the conditions of anonymity prior to interviewing. Where possible, we also inserted validation questions to help confirm information that the respondents provided earlier in their interviews. It is also worth noting that the respondents had nothing to gain in terms of personal benefits (e.g., material incentives, access to more rehabilitation services, and so on) from providing false or misleading information, or from participating in the interviews more generally.

It is also important to note the limitations to generalizability (i.e., the extent to which we can infer conclusions beyond our respondents) that occur as a result of our limited sample size

53 James Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385182.

and the fact that it is not representative. To elaborate on the latter, our sample excluded former members of al-Shabaab who disengaged from the organization and returned to their communities "informally" (i.e., not passing through the National Program), and those who voluntarily or involuntarily "flipped" to the ***Ma'awisley*** or the state security forces. It also excluded individuals who were not eligible for Serendi, either as they had been captured (rather than having surrendered), or as they were deemed to represent a "high risk" threat to the Somali state. Finally, due to the Serendi center serving adult males exclusively, our sample also excluded both minors and female former members of al-Shabaab.[54] Research with these varied groups would likely reveal patterns of disengagement distinct from those presented in the subsequent section. Of course, while the nature of our sample does prevent us from drawing broader conclusions, the findings presented in the subsequent sections should remain of key importance to policymakers and practitioners precisely because they relate to "types" of al-Shabaab members who may be encouraged to leave al-Shabaab through the National Program.

54 The National Program also includes facilities for women but we were unable to access these.

FINDINGS

This section presents the core findings of this study, elaborating on the journeys out of al-Shabaab of eleven of our seventeen respondents.[55] To maintain anonymity, we have applied pseudonyms in the cases presented below, and we have omitted details that risked revealing the identity of respondents, such as their sub-sub-clan names, their villages of origin, and so on. As previously described, our key findings relate to the extent to which the offensive was instrumental in motivating or facilitating many defections, and the pivotal role of clan affiliations.

Hassan (R1)

Hassan is from Beledweyne in the Hiran region, and he joined al-Shabaab in 2016. He completed secondary education, and earned a living through farming prior to his involvement in the group. His enlistment occurred at a time when al-Shabaab controlled his area of residence and maintained considerable influence over his local community, partially through their religious schools. Hassan maintained that he joined the group voluntarily, and that he "strongly sympathized" with their ideology at that time. He also asserted that most of his clan, the Hawadle, opposed his involvement, but that those in the vicinity also recognized the practical realities of living under al-Shabaab control. Once within the organization, Hassan operated as a driver for the ***Hizbah***. His unit relocated to the Bay region soon after he joined, and he remained there for two years, before being transferred to El Bur district in Galgadud. Throughout his involvement, he was never disciplined by al-Shabaab, although his commanders forced him to work excessive hours under threat of punishment. He was entitled to periodic leave, which he used to visit his home community.

55 We excluded the remaining six cases on the basis that their pathways were somewhat similar to the cases presented in this section (R2, R7, R14, and R16), because they spent key periods outside of the four regions of interest to this study (R15), or because some of the information they offered seemed questionable (R11).

Hassan claimed that he began to consider leaving al-Shabaab at the beginning of the *Ma'awisley* uprising in 2022. At this point, he claimed to have "very strongly opposed" the ideology and objectives of the group, emphasizing their poor treatment of the community and members of his own clan in particular. He also opposed how the insurgents punished many of their own members, leading some to defect. However, he was afraid to disengage because he had seen other members punished for such efforts. He eventually escaped in December 2022, by simply not returning from his community following leave. When his commander ordered him to report for duty, he claimed that the SNA had prevented this by closing key roads. He then communicated his situation to members of his clan and community, who facilitated a visit from the local *Ma'awisley*. This clan militia then escorted him to a base jointly operated by the SNA and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in Beledweyne, from where he was then flown to Mogadishu for rehabilitation. When asked about the importance of the offensive in relation to his escape, Hassan observed that he "fell through the cracks" of al-Shabaab's systems designed to prevent disengagement because the group was overwhelmed at the time.

Omar (R3)

Omar is from El Dhere district in the Galgadud region. He joined al-Shabaab in 2018 around the age of thirty-one. He had previously earned a living as a fisherman, operating between his home district and Mogadishu. He claimed to have been motivated to join the insurgents by their promise of a salary and protection. He also asserted that the organization was primarily comprised of individuals from the Murosade clan in his location of origin, and that these members often use their insurgent identity to "mistreat" those from his own clan, the Abgal. After receiving training, Omar was assigned the role of tax collector, enabling him to apply the business skills he had developed as a fisherman. While he "strongly opposed" al-Shabaab prior to his enlistment, he "somewhat sympathized" with the group during his early involvement because they provided his salary. He also claimed that members of his clan were not treated differently once within the organization.

Omar listed a variety of reasons for wanting to leave al-Shabaab, including a rejection of their ideology, familial pressure, fear for his safety, the inadequacy of his salary, guilt about

contributing to violence, and the desire to avoid confronting his own clan. Prior to escaping in September 2022, he moved one of his families (he had two wives at that time) away from the organization's territory in El Dhere, and provided warning to the other. He then drove his motorbike roughly 200 km to the town of Adale in Middle Shabelle, which was then under government control. From there, his family arranged his safe passage with the SNA. He was then transferred to Mogadishu, where he remained in SNA custody for eighteen days before being transferred to NISA to determine his eligibility for Serendi. When asked about the importance of the offensive in relation to his disengagement, Omar maintained that the expanding state control provided him with reassurances about his prospects for escape. Nevertheless, he remained concerned about the possibility of being captured and punished by al-Shabaab, and what they may do to his families. Omar was not afraid of how he would be received by the state because he had heard the president's proclamations of amnesty on the radio (see our "Reaching behind Frontlines" report),[56] and had been reassured by clan associates.

Liban (R4)

Liban is from Adan Yabal district in Middle Shabelle, and he joined al-Shabaab in 2020 at the age of twenty-five when the district was under full control of the militant group. He had been working in construction and farming, and prior to that had only received a Quranic education. His main motive for joining the organization was to avoid harassment by its ***Hizbah***, who had once arrested him and pressured him to enlist in their madrassa. One of his relatives helped him join the group's ***Jabhat***, advising him that this would ensure that provocations from the ***Hizbah*** ceased. Liban claimed that his clan, the Abgal, opposed his decision to join but they were also powerless to prevent him. After receiving training in Gedo, he remained with the ***Jabhat*** throughout his time with al-Shabaab, where he was based outside of Adan Yabal and Masjid Ali Gadud at different times. The organization had planned for his promotion, for which he would receive additional training, but he escaped

56 James Khalil, Yahye Abdi, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, Andrew Glazzard, and Martine Zeuthen, *Reaching behind Frontlines: Promoting Exit from Al-Shabaab through Communications Campaigns* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2023), https://doi.org/10.37805/lpbi2023.2.

before this occurred. Unlike many of the other respondents for this study (including R8, R9, R10, R12, and R13), Liban was never punished by the group for misdemeanours.

When asked why he left al-Shabaab, Liban primarily focused on grievances against his superiors. For instance, he recalled asking a commander for money to relocate his family from Adan Yabal to help ensure their safety as the offensive progressed towards their location, but the funding was denied (although it was later granted by those in higher command). When prompted further, he provided several additional reasons for his decision to escape, including a rejection of the al-Shabaab ideology, familial pressure, poor living conditions, fear for his personal safety, discrimination within the group, guilt about contributing to violence, and the desire to avoid confronting his own clan. He was among seven members who had planned to escape in 2021, but this plot was abandoned due to suspicions that two individuals from this group may have informed on the rest. The offensive placed considerable pressure on al-Shabaab, and he increasingly felt that if he did not escape, he would end up being killed by the SNA. Masjid Ali Gadud fell to state forces in October 2022,[57] and Adan Yabal followed in early December.[58] Liban escaped in December 2022, during the chaos of an airstrike and subsequent battle in his location. His unit had been ordered to surrender their mobile phones to help ensure that their signals could not be picked up by drones, and so he used one from a nearby villager to call his father. His father and the wider clan then arranged safe passage and he surrendered to the SNA in Adan Yabal.

Jibril (R5)

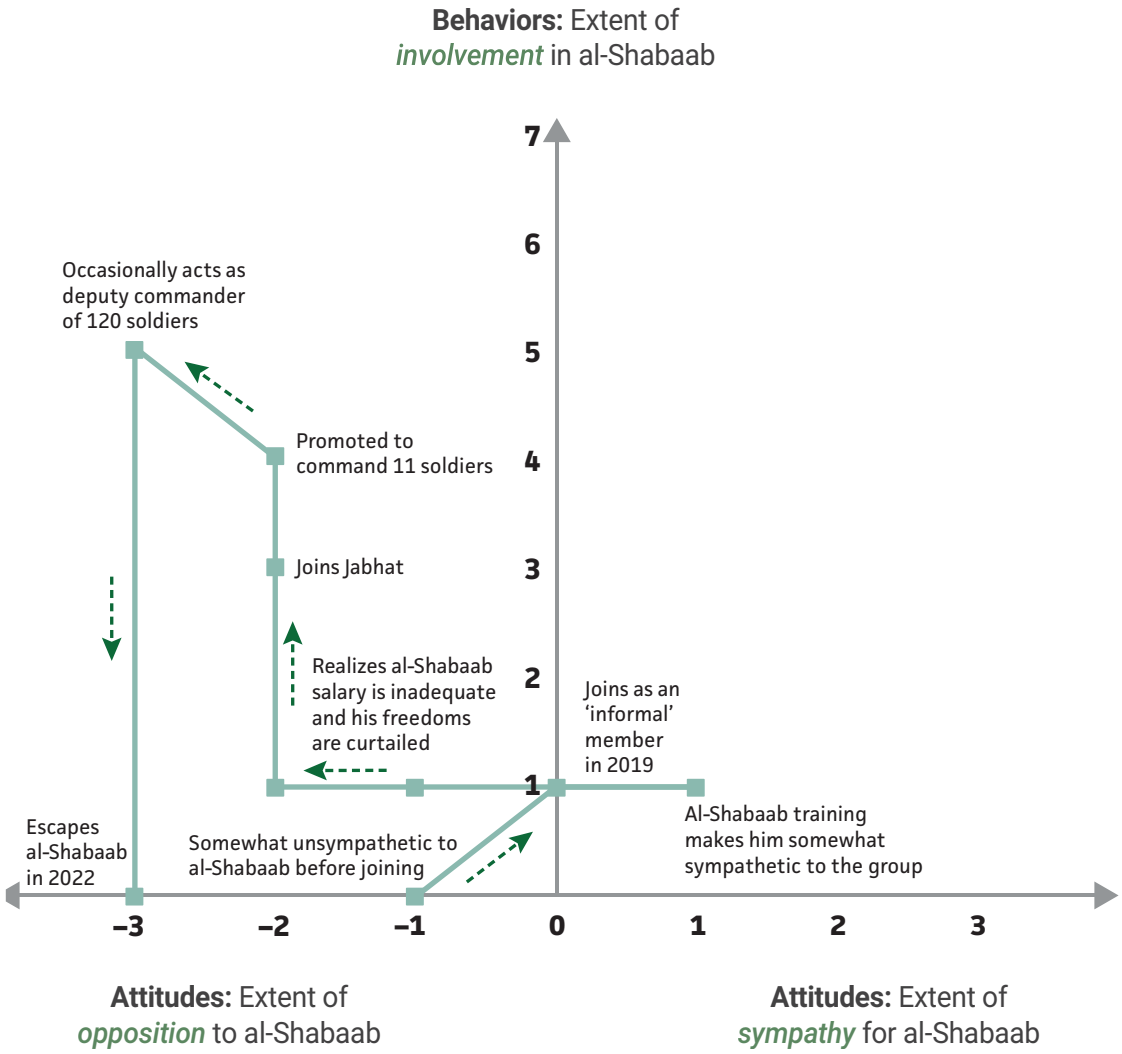
Jibril is also from Adan Yabal district in Middle Shabelle, and he enlisted in al-Shabaab in 2019 at the age of thirty-six. Following the withdrawal of the SNA and Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) forces, al-Shabaab seized control of his area of residence in 2017, pressuring community members to enlist. The group had largely been comprised of individuals from Bay and Bakool, and he recalled having difficulties understanding their dialect. Local Abgal leaders informed al-Shabaab that they did not accept their presence, and the insurgents agreed to leave on the condition that the community took responsibility for security in their name. Through this agreement, Jibril reluctantly became an "informal" member of al-Shabaab for two months and then received training from the group in Mudug.

57 International Crisis Group, *Crisiswatch Somalia Digest* (October 2022).

58 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 6; and Gaid "The 2022 Somali Offensive," 32.

This guidance influenced him to become "somewhat sympathetic" to al-Shabaab's ideology (see Figure 4). After returning from four months of leave, al-Shabaab informed Jibril that he would be stationed elsewhere in the district. He refused to agree to this move on the grounds that he needed to remain close to his family, and so al-Shabaab imprisoned him for five months. He was released only once his family had helped reach a settlement, but with the condition that he choose between joining the *Jabhat* or permanently leaving the area. Jibril selected the former so that he could remain in close contact with his family. He eventually became a commander with eleven subordinates, and periodically acted as a deputy commander of 120 soldiers.

Figure 4. Jibril's Trajectory

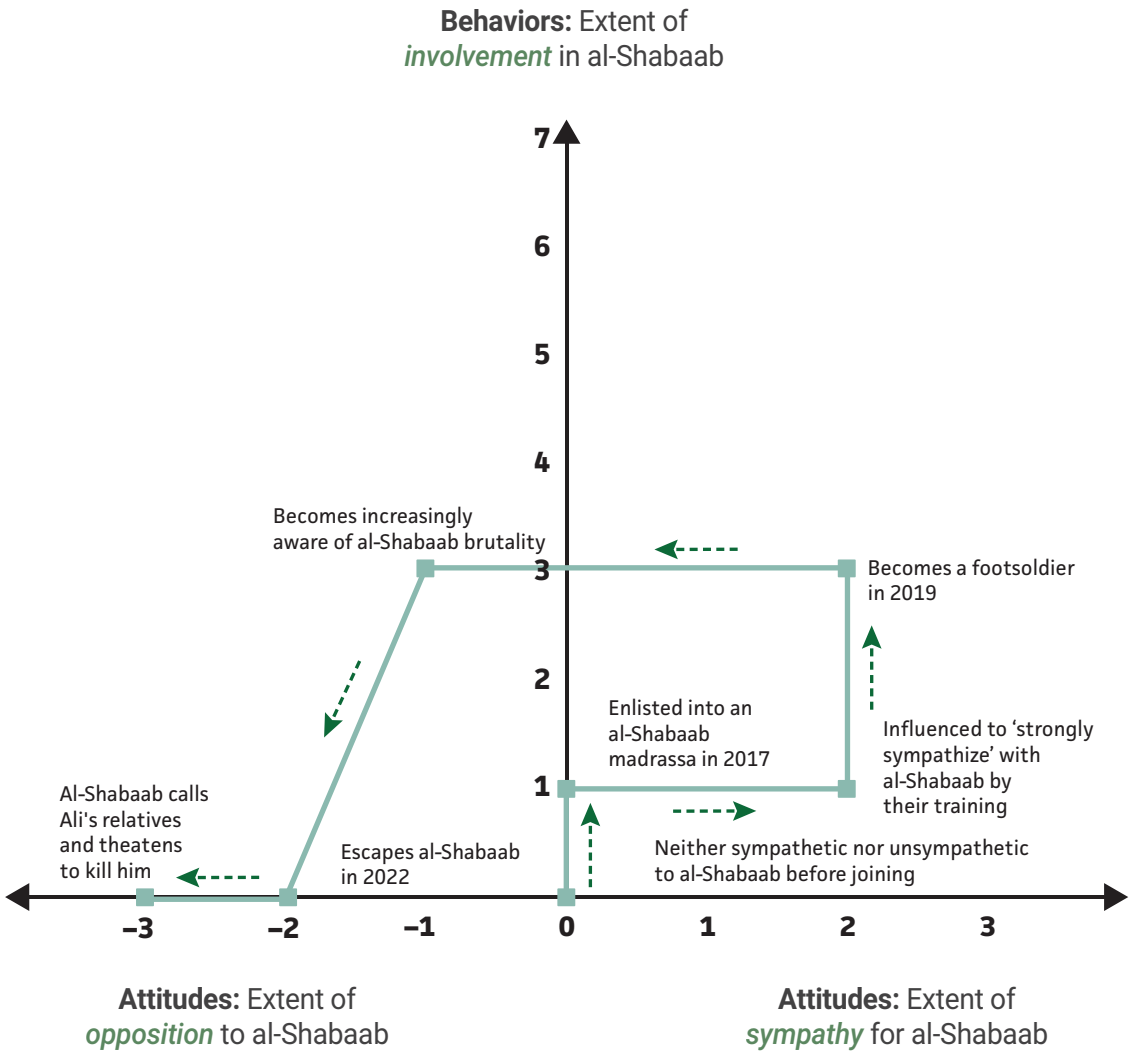


When asked why he decided to leave al-Shabaab, Jibril highlighted that he had not wanted to enlist in the first place, and emphasized how their salary was inadequate for the needs of his family (he claimed to have been paid between thirty and seventy USD per month). As with other respondents, he also emphasized additional motives for exit, including a rejection of the al-Shabaab ideology, familial pressure, poor living conditions, fear for his personal safety, guilt about contributing to violence, and the desire to avoid confronting his own clan. Prior to his eventual exit, he twice contacted relatives in the SNA to arrange safe passage, but he did not proceed with this plan to escape. However, as the SNA neared his location in October 2022, he again reached out to these relatives to arrange his surrender to clan members in the SNA. With al-Shabaab still controlling the area, Jibril reported that he feared for his own safety and that of his family. He was placed in a SNA facility near Jowhar for around two months before being transferred to the SNA headquarters in Mogadishu for a similar period. He was then moved to a NISA facility for around six weeks of screening before being placed at the Serendi center.

Ali (R6)

Ali is from the Adale district in Middle Shabelle, and he joined al-Shabaab around 2017 at the age of sixteen. Al-Shabaab forced Ali's Abgal clan to "volunteer" ten youths for placement in their local madrassa, and he was among this cohort. The group provided these individuals with a certificate of completion after two years, and then allowed them to select between continuing with their religious education under the organization for a further three years or joining another branch. Ali observed that some other members of his cohort escaped to Mogadishu at this point, but that they were forced to return after al-Shabaab "punished" their parents. He also claimed that he "strongly sympathized" with the organization at this time (see Figure 5), as their religious training had convinced him of the legitimacy of their cause. Ali decided to join the military wing and operated as a foot soldier from many different bases (he claimed over one hundred) across Middle Shabelle between 2019 and his exit in January 2023. Somewhat unusually for a member of the ***Jabhat***, he claimed that al-Shabaab did not provide him with military training.

Figure 5. Ali's Trajectory



Ali's loyalty to al-Shabaab waned during his involvement, with this attitudinal change driven by the organization's policy of taxing even families with few resources and their killing of civilians. He was also heavily influenced by the knowledge that his unit burnt down a village inhabited by the Jareerweyne, a marginalized ethnic group. He made tentative plans to escape to Mogadishu in late 2021, but was discouraged by relatives who reported that someone who had already followed this path ended up in state prison. Nevertheless, as the SNA reclaimed a village near where he was based during the 2022 offensive, he fled al-Shabaab and rented a motorbike to travel to this location to surrender. He contacted his brother, who facilitated safe passage to the SNA. Unlike certain other respondents (for

instance, R4, R8, and R9), his exit occurred during a period of relative calm between battles. He remained with the SNA in Runirgod for three days before being transferred to their base in Masjid Ali Gadud, and then on to their headquarters in Mogadishu. He was then passed to NISA for two-months of screening before being sent to Serendi.

Said (R8)

Said is from the Adan Yabal district in Middle Shabelle and he joined al-Shabaab in 2018 at around thirty-one years of age. He did not receive any formal education in his youth, nor did he complete religious schooling. Al-Shabaab contacted elders from his Abgal clan and demanded that they nominate someone to collect taxes from their community. His elders asked him to take this position as he was believed to be intelligent, and he accepted. He remained in this role for one year before being transferred to the ***Hizbah***, as there was a shortage of local al-Shabaab police at that time. After three years he was transferred to the ***Jabhat***, where he remained a foot soldier for a further year. He considered these to be internal transfers, rather than promotions. Al-Shabaab provided him with training in math during his time as a tax collector and basic weapons instruction during his time with the ***Hizbah***, before giving him full military training under the ***Jabhat***. While he had previously been entitled to leave every six months, he claimed that this was cancelled during his time with the military due to the pressure of the state offensive. He reported one incident of being punished by al-Shabaab when he fired his weapon into the air in celebration at his uncle's wedding. The group imprisoned him for twenty-five days, and confiscated his weapon for a slightly longer period.

Said claimed that he had wanted to leave al-Shabaab since around 2020, but the opportunity did not present itself. When asked about his motives for exit, he emphasized his rejection of the al-Shabaab ideology ("they misused the Quran and the Hadith"), how he was mistreated by commanders, familial pressure, the inadequacy of his salary, his guilt about contributing to violence, and the desire to avoid fighting his own clan. Regarding his eventual exit in 2022, he recalled that his unit was called to defend a base that had been subject to airstrikes. Seizing his opportunity, he took his weapon and called a clan member in the local administration who directed him to the local ***Ma'awisley***. During his escape, Said encountered another member of the ***Jabhat***, and both individuals initially claimed to each other that they were

going on leave. Once beyond this initial fabrication they agreed to continue their journey together, with al-Shabaab apparently in pursuit (they received phone calls from the group claiming they were being chased). After seven hours of travel, they eventually arrived at a rendezvous with the ***Ma'awisley***, who welcomed them as clan members. Said was held by the ***Ma'awisley*** and SNA in Adale for twenty days, where he was interviewed by "a foreigner" operating with the latter. Before eventually being transferred to NISA in Mogadishu, he was required to return to the locations where he had operated with al-Shabaab for two months to provide the ***Ma'awisley*** with local knowledge.[59]

Ismael (R9)

Ismael was originally from the Bay region, but he was based in Jowhar in Middle Shabelle prior to joining al-Shabaab around 2013. He had only received religious education in his youth and had been teaching the Quran prior to his involvement. A friend suggested that he could earn more money by enlisting in al-Shabaab and so he joined voluntarily. He is a member of the Rahanweyn clan and key members of this group opposed his decision on the basis that the insurgents abuse communities. Al-Shabaab provided Ismael with six months of training, after which he claimed to "strongly sympathize" with the organization (see Figure 6). He joined the ***Hizbah*** for one year before being transferred to the ***Jabhat***, where he was eventually promoted to command thirty subordinates. He was punished only once during his time with al-Shabaab, for damaging a walkie-talkie. He was sentenced to thirty days of prison time for negligence but served only fifteen days. He also recalled an occasion when his unit fled from Somali special forces and drones. While his immediate superiors intended to punish this act of supposed cowardice, those in higher command overruled their decision.

Ismael's support for al-Shabaab started to wane when he became aware of the extent of their abuses. He recalled a specific incident when a family friend was accused of being a spy, and how he was unable to influence the group's decision to punish this individual. When asked why he eventually decided to leave al-Shabaab, Ismael focused on the poor living

59 While Said was the only respondent from the current sample who reported having been utilized in this manner, previous research at Serendi has revealed that it is not totally uncommon for Somali security forces to require defectors to support their efforts. See Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

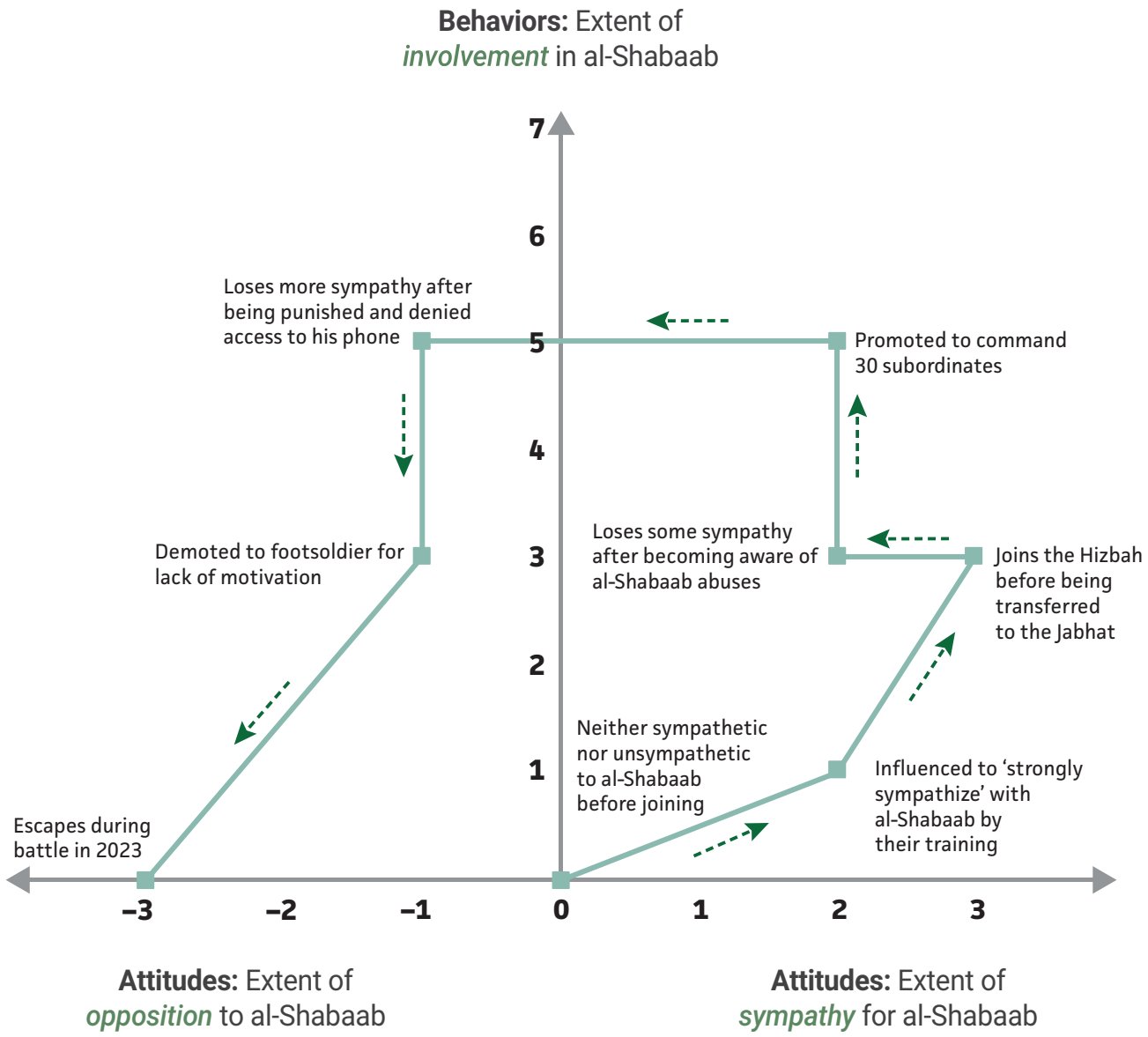
conditions within the group, and how he did not want to participate in fighting. He was also aggrieved by the fact that the group would not allow him special dispensation to access his phone beyond the usual period of one hour (see our "Reaching behind Frontlines" report on this issue)[60] at a time when his father became ill. As such, he was unable to determine the severity of his father's condition. He claimed that these issues, combined with his punishment for damaging the walkie-talkie, had a clear impact on his motivation, and that he was demoted back to foot soldier as a result. His first attempt to leave al-Shabaab took place in 2021, and it involve him contacting a relative in the SNA while based in Basra in Lower Shabelle. The group became suspicious and arrested him, but he was soon returned to active duty when they found no direct evidence of guilt.

The beginning of the offensive brought substantial fighting between al-Shabaab and Somali special forces in his area of operations, with the latter also relying on airstrikes. He fled during one of these incidents, leaving his phone so that drones could not detect his movements. He then borrowed another phone from a local civilian and called his family, who in turn communicated with a relative in the SNA. Ismael reported his location to the SNA, from where they collected him and transported him to their base in Masjid Ali Gadud. He was then transferred to SNA headquarters in Mogadishu before being passed to NISA for four months of screening. NISA recorded him discussing the story of his departure from al-Shabaab, and this was broadcast on the internet (again, see the "Reaching behind Frontlines" report on this topic).[61] Although given no choice in this matter, he reported being happy to oblige. When asked about the importance of the offensive to his escape from al-Shabaab, he emphasised how it overstretched the group to the extent that they could no longer keep him under surveillance. He also highlighted how his clan supported his decision to defect, which provided him with additional motivation to leave.

60 Khalil et al., *Reaching Behind Frontlines*.

61 Ibid.

Figure 6. Ismael's Trajectory

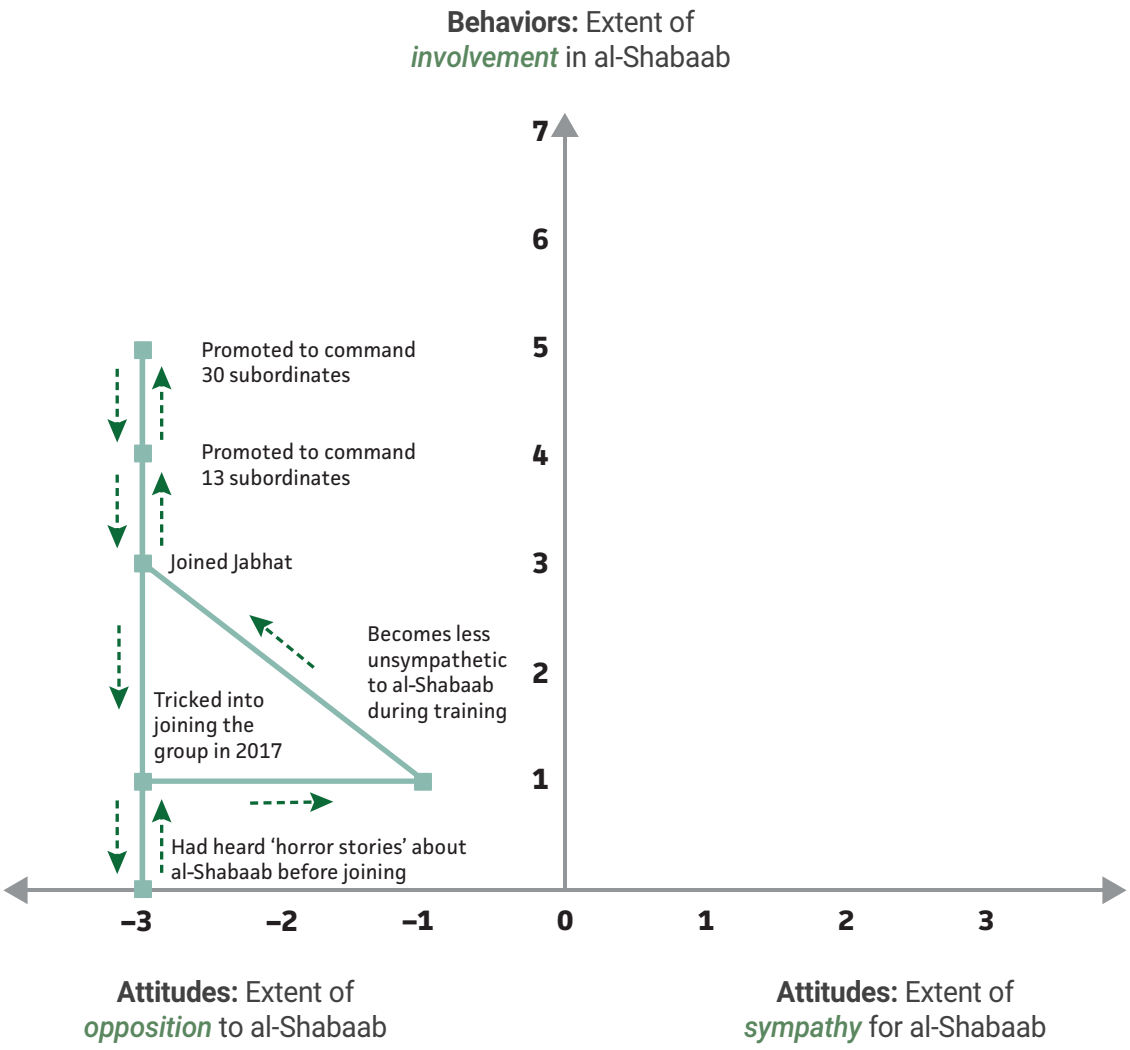


Abdinasir (R10)

Abdinasir was based in the Somali region of Ethiopia, where he had completed religious school and formal education up to ninth grade. While he had previously tutored children for $20 (United States dollars) per month, he was unemployed at the time he became involved with al-Shabaab. He knew little about the group at that point, having only heard "horror stories" that included the group slitting throats. One of his relatives (whom Abdinasir later found out was an al-Shabaab commander) enticed him and eight other youths to travel to

Mogadishu with the offer of work in 2018 and provided them with transportation. Still thinking that employment was on offer, the group was then transferred to Jilib (one of al-Shabaab's key base areas) in Middle Jubba region. His relative did not appear as promised when they reached their destination, and the group was instead taken to an al-Shabaab base where they were welcomed by the insurgents. After receiving four months of training, Abdinasir became somewhat less opposed to the group (see Figure 7), as he believed that they would provide him with a free phone once his training was complete. He then became a *Jabhat* foot soldier, before being promoted to command thirteen subordinates, and then to head a unit of thirty. During his time with the insurgents, he operated from Lower Jubba, Middle Jubba, Bakool, Bay, Hiran, and Mudug.

Figure 7. Abdinasir's Trajectory



Having not wanted to be involved in the first place, Abdinasir and two other Ethiopians decided that they would attempt to escape in 2021, armed with a cover story that they were traveling on leave. He observed that the group places checkpoints on all major routes that members may use to defect, and that every time a member passes through one of these they contact one of their superiors to verify their reasons for travel. Against these odds, the group was captured by al-Shabaab and imprisoned for two weeks. Al-Shabaab conducted a major operation into bordering towns in Ethiopia in July 2022,[62] and this invasion resulted in heavy losses for the insurgents. As the organization planned to repeat this attack, and Abdinasir would likely have been required to participate, he redoubled his efforts to escape. He convinced an al-Shabaab nurse that he required medical leave and was granted six weeks in Jilib. He then called a former colleague who happened to be resident in the Serendi center at that time, and this individual advised him to travel to Barawe in Lower Shabelle to surrender. This former colleague also facilitated his safe passage and Abdinasir surrendered to the SNA at this location. He was then flown to Mogadishu and transferred to NISA for six months of screening. While Abdinasir's family and clan were supportive of his exit, they played no active role in facilitating this process in part due to their distance.

Mohammed (R12)

Mohammed is from the Harardhere district in Mudug region, and he joined al-Shabaab in 2020 at over forty years of age, which is highly unusual. He received no formal education in his youth (although he can read and write), and he earned a living with livestock prior to joining the group. Al-Shabaab seized control of his home area in 2012. According to Mohammed, the group was dominated by the Murosade clan at the local level, and in 2020 they demanded that other clans provide members, including the Abgal clan to which he belongs. After his elders requested "volunteers," Mohammed stepped forward "to save his clan." He operated as a tax collector during his time with al-Shabaab and he was never promoted or provided with training. He claimed to have been "somewhat opposed" to the insurgents during his first year of involvement, but subsequently became "very strongly opposed" after discovering that "their beliefs and actions are different."

62 Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive," 21; and International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 4.

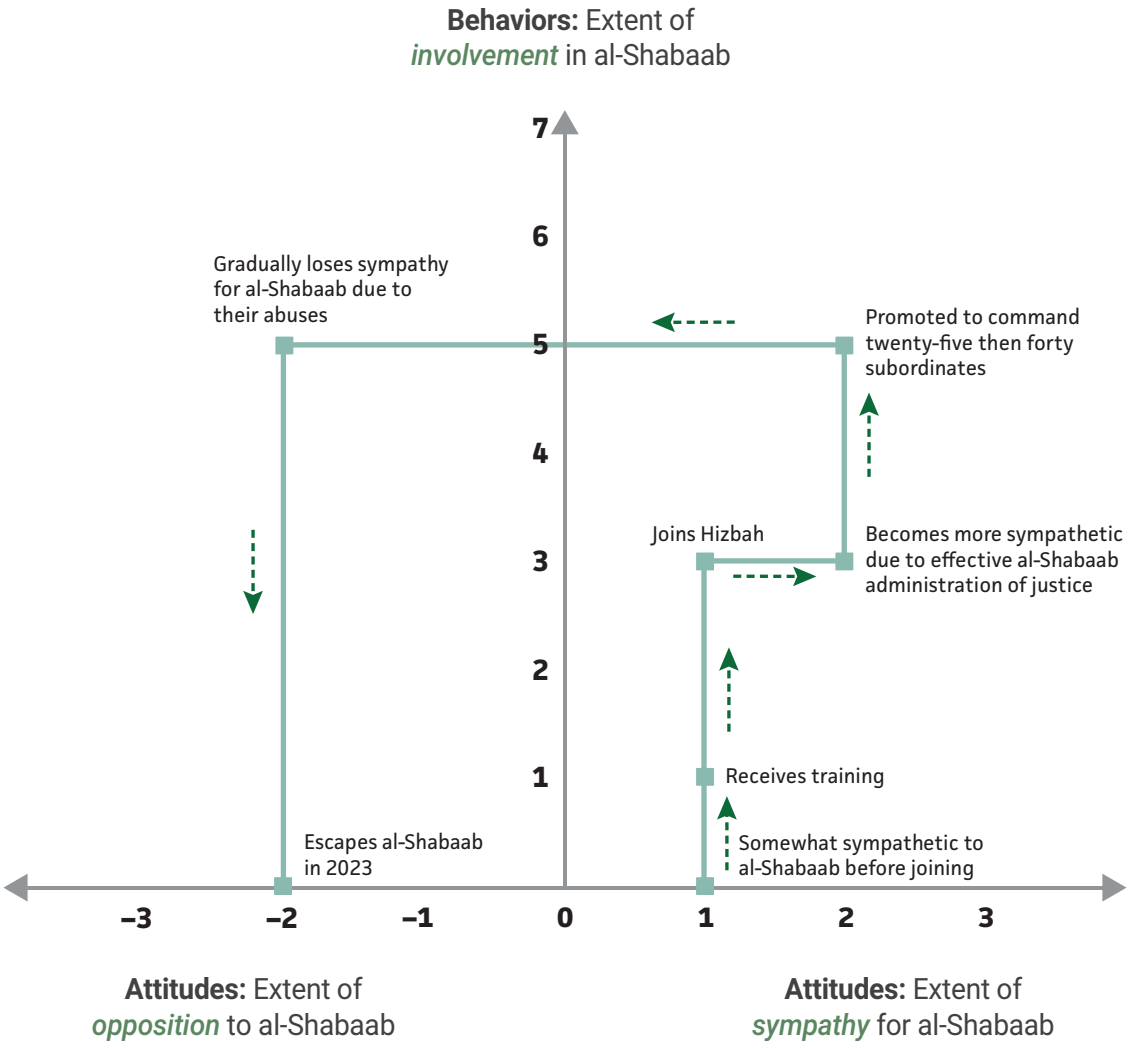
State forces recaptured much of Harardhere in January 2023 with varying degrees of support from local clans.[63] Mohammed was imprisoned for one month during the offensive for refusing to help the insurgents defend the district, and he was only released once he agreed to take up arms. Shortly after, the group granted him seven days to relocate his two families to a more secure location. He took them to the vicinity of El Dhere in Galgadud region, from where he contacted a family member in the ***Ma'awisley*** to arrange his exit from al-Shabaab. Mohammed then met this family member and accompanied him to Mogadishu, as he happened to be travelling there that same day. Once in the capital, Mohammed contacted another family member from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police, who instructed him to rest one night before surrendering the following morning. He remained with CID for twenty-three days, before being transferred to the Serendi center. As with many other of our respondents, Mohammed claimed that the offensive was of critical importance to his ability to escape from al-Shabaab. He also maintained that he had seen many former al-Shabaab members in the hands of the security forces in El Dhere, including three individuals that he knew personally.

Ahmed (R13)

Ahmed is from the Buloburde district in Hiran, and he joined al-Shabaab in 2013 at over forty years of age (as mentioned before, this is highly unusual). He had completed secondary education and owned a small business prior to his involvement with the organization. Ahmed joined voluntarily at a time when many people were enlisting because al-Shabaab had seized control of their area. After four months of training Ahmed was assigned to the ***Hizbah***. He was promoted to command twenty-five subordinates after two years and forty by 2017. While he had already "somewhat sympathized" with al-Shabaab before enlisting (see Figure 8), his early experiences of the group's ability to administer justice strengthened this support. In particular, he stressed how their dispute resolution mechanisms generated "ten years of peace" between two particular clans following hostilities. In 2021, he spent four nights in an al-Shabaab prison for interfering in another police commander's business while outside of his jurisdiction.

63 Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 20; and International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 6.

Figure 8. Ahmed's Trajectory



When asked why he chose to leave al-Shabaab, Ahmed mainly attributed his decision to the group's tendency to tax local communities to excess, and because they destroyed several vehicles belonging to his clan, the Hawadle. He tried to convince them that such actions were against their religion, but his words went unheard. This caused him to gradually lose sympathy for al-Shabaab to the extent that he "strongly opposed" the group by the end of his involvement. Buloburde district experienced heavy fighting during September and October 2022 and al-Shabaab lost substantial territory during this time.[64] Shortly after, Ahmed requested leave and remained in his home village for six months, claiming that his mother was ill. His commander eventually demanded that he return, but Ahmed instead

64 European Union Agency for Asylum, *Somalia Security Situation* (2023), 121–2.

chose to escape in the direction of Mogadishu. His passage involved borrowing money from various members of his extended family to pay for motorbike rides over stretches of the journey. He then called a family member from Afgoye, who arranged for his surrender to NISA. As with many other respondents, Ahmed claimed that the offensive was essential to his exit, in particular because the group now lacked a presence in key transit locations. He also noted that the insurgents would have previously always verified travelers' reasons for passing through their checkpoints, but that the offensive had created gaps in their system.

Osman (R17)

Osman is from El Dhere district in the Galgadud region. He joined al-Shabaab in 2020 at twenty-nine. He received no formal schooling in his youth, and prior to his involvement in the group he earned a living through livestock. Al-Shabaab visited his area of residence and demanded that his clan, the Abgal, assign someone to collect "zakat" from the group during Ramadan and Eid. His elders reluctantly suggested that he should take the role and he felt obliged to accept. Although Osman remained free to continue his own work during the rest of the year, his movement was now restricted due to his association with the group (preventing him from being a "free person"). Al-Shabaab provided him with no training and they never punished him for any misdemeanours during his involvement.

State forces captured strategic parts of El Dhere in January 2023, including the town from which the district derives its name.[65] As the SNA approached Osman's area of residence, he was concerned that he would be arrested by state forces, and that al-Shabaab would force him to fight. He chose instead to defect by calling a distant relative who happened to work as a guard at the Serendi center and whose phone number had been provided by other clan members. Osman borrowed money from the guard to pay for travel to Mogadishu, and stayed at his house for one night on arrival. The following day the guard brought Osman to Serendi, from where he was transferred to CID for fifteen days before being returned to the center. When asked about the relevance of the offensive to his escape, Osman highlighted how there are now more gaps in al-Shabaab's system of checkpoints and how they also now have fewer resources to pursue those who do manage to flee. He maintained that these factors had a substantial impact on the defection rate.

65 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains,* 6.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Following our findings, this final core section aims to draw broad conclusions about defection rates, and the reasons and methods members from the Hirshabelle and Galmudug left al-Shabaab. In keeping with the main focus on this study, we pay particular attention to the role of the offensive and clan affiliations in motivating and enabling exits from the organization.

Defection Rates

The total numbers of defections from al-Shabaab during the state offensive will remain elusive, not least because it is impossible to know how many leave and return to their communities "informally" (i.e., without passing through the National Program), and how many others "flip" to the ***Ma'awisley*** or state forces. While the key informants we interviewed for this study estimate that anywhere between fifty and eighty percent of defections occur via these alternative pathways,[66] our Serendi respondents generally believed that these figures were substantially lower. Nevertheless, while we have certainly not yet witnessed defections ***en masse***, it is sufficiently clear that the offensive increased the exit rate in Hirshabelle and Galmudug to at least a modest extent—contrary to a common perception among many country experts.[67] There was a consensus about this among the Serendi residents to whom we specifically asked this question (R3, R4, R5, R6, R9, R12, R14, and R17), and the vast majority added that they personally knew of others who escaped during this time. Data from Serendi also supports this claim as the center housed seventy-five

66 KII5 and KII6.
67 KII1 and KII7.

residents from Hirshabelle and Galmudug when our research began in mid-May 2023.[68] By comparison, this figure typically fluctuated between ten and twenty-five between 2015 and 2021.[69] It is worth also recalling that the May 2023 figure would likely have been higher had the National Program not stopped receiving new residents during the first months of the year due to funding issues during a transition between international donors.

Figure 9: Serendi Residents from the Four Regions (May 2023)

State	Region	Serendi Residents
Hirshabelle	Middle Shabelle	58
	Hiran	10
Galmudug	Galgadud	6
	Mudug	1
Total		**75**

Breaking these figures down geographically, fifty-eight of these seventy-five Serendi residents were from Middle Shabelle (see Figure 9). Despite the intensity of the conflict in Hiran, there were only ten residents from this region, which may be partly due to greater numbers from this area reintegrating informally. If correct, this would seemingly be attributable to local politicians not fully "buying-in" to the National Program.[70] That said, there are also ongoing conversations at the time of writing about the prospect of reopening an additional rehabilitation center in Hiran's capital city of Beledweyne, which closed in 2016 or 2017. Only six Serendi residents were from Galgadud, and one from Mudug. These reduced numbers presumably reflected the lower intensity of fighting in these two regions, particularly the latter. The numbers are probably also explained by the presence of an additional rehabilitation center in Dusmareb, despite its substantially smaller capacity compared to Serendi.[71]

68 Additional al-Shabaab defectors arrived during our research, but we were unable to collect information on their home locations. To help interpret these figures, it is worth mentioning that while al-Shabaab transfers many of its *Jabhat* members away from their locations of origin, a substantial proportion remain in their home regions. By contrast, our data suggests that the vast majority of non-military members also remain in their areas of origin while with al-Shabaab. This is demonstrated in Annex 4 and the equivalent table from Khalil et al., *Reaching behind Frontlines*.

69 KII8.

70 KII4.

71 Ibid.

Why and How Members Leave

Why They Leave

The reasons ***why*** our respondents chose to disengage from al-Shabaab were varied and they broadly corresponded to prior research on this topic.[72] It is important to remember that many did not want to be involved in the first place, but had instead joined due to varying degrees of pressure and coercion from the group. Among the most prominent reasons for wanting to leave was a desire to disassociate from the abuses committed by al-Shabaab, with Ali's (R6) emphasis on how his unit burnt down a village inhabited by the Jareerweyne offering a particularly stark example. When asked what motivated his disengagement, Ahmed (R13) focused on how the group destroyed several vehicles belonging to his clan. Various respondents were also partly driven to leave by the negative impact of al-Shabaab's taxation policies on local communities, focusing particularly on families with limited resources. Some also highlighted personal grievances against the group, including Ismael (R9), who had been prevented from finding out the extent of his father's illness by a commander who stuck rigidly to al-Shabaab's local policy on accessing phones. Others emphasized how they did not want to be involved in combat, particularly against their own clans. While somewhat less prominent, certain respondents also pointed to reasons such as familial pressure, the inadequacy of the salary provided by the insurgents, and poor living conditions within the group.

How They Leave

Accounts of ***how*** our respondents exited al-Shabaab also varied substantially. Several (R1, R10, R13, and R14) recounted how they seized the opportunity to escape while on leave from the organization. This included Ahmed (R13), who kept postponing his return to the ***Jabhat*** on the grounds that he needed to care for his mother before he eventually fled to Mogadishu. It also included Hassan (R1), who alleged to his commanders that he was unable to return to duty because the SNA had seized key roads. Other respondents (R4, R8, and R9) maintained that they escaped while their units were under attack, taking advantage of the ensuing chaos. This included Liban (R4), who fled in December 2022,

72 See, for instance, Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys through Extremism*; and Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

following an airstrike and subsequent battle. It also included Ismael (R9), who escaped in February 2023 during a confrontation with Somali special forces. However, most simply seized the opportunity to defect during the course of their regular routines with the group. Corresponding to findings from our 2022 ***Journeys through Extremism*** research,[73] the vast majority of our respondents reported making safe passage arrangements prior to their escape. This included nine individuals who organized their surrender to the SNA, and smaller numbers did the same through the ***Ma'awisley***, NISA, CID, and a local administrator. While most surrendered in the vicinity of where they had been operating with al-Shabaab, others first travelled to Afgoye (R13 and R15), or Mogadishu (R2, R14, R16, and R17), before handing themselves in.

The Role of the Offensive

There was a broad consensus among our respondents that the offensive played a pivotal role in motivating and enabling their disengagement. Several added that they had been searching for an opportunity to leave al-Shabaab for some time, but this only became possible once the offensive began. The respondents focused on four broad mechanisms through which the offensive exerted influence, with the first of these being that it increased their desire to escape by enhancing the threat to personal safety. Certain respondents (R6 and two individuals from our "Reaching behind Frontlines" study)[74] focused in particular on their fear of airstrikes. Secondly, the chaos associated with attacks and battles also created opportunities to flee (R4, R8, and R9) as discussed. Thirdly, the state offensive also stretched al-Shabaab's resources, creating openings in their existing systems designed to prevent desertions. Specifically, our respondents asserted that their checkpoints (R13 and R17) and broader systems of internal surveillance (R7 and R9) failed to function to the same extent as a result of the offensive. Finally, as the state increased its territorial control, potential defectors often found themselves in closer proximity to units to which they could surrender. Indeed, several respondents (R3, R6, and R8) reported doing so in locations that had only recently been liberated. This reinforces the argument that territorial control provides a key determinant of exit from al-Shabaab, as discussed at length in our ***Journeys through Extremism*** report.[75]

73 Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys through Extremism*.

74 Khalil et al., *Reaching behind Frontlines*.

75 Heide-Ottosen et al,. *Journeys through Extremism*. On the importance of territorial control more broadly, see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The Role of Clan Affiliations

As the offensive relied heavily upon the ***Ma'awisley*** (see Section 2), it is perhaps unsurprising that clans also played a prominent role in helping to motivate and facilitate defections from al-Shabaab. Several respondents (R1, R3, R4, R5, R7, and R8) reported having been driven to disengage partly to avoid having to confront fellow clan members who had taken up arms against the insurgents. Indeed, there is evidence of this particular pattern for certain members of the Hawadle clan dating back to the beginning of the offensive.[76] Many of our respondents (R1, R2, R4, R13, and R17) also highlighted that their clans played a proactive role in facilitating their escape, in particular through helping to arrange safe passage (as previously discussed). This includes Hassan (R1), who highlighted how his clan, the Hawadle, placed him in direct communication with the ***Ma'awisley***. It also includes Osman (R17), who noted how members of his clan, the Abgal, provided him with the contact details for the Serendi security guard who arranged his surrender to the CID. Meanwhile, Ahmed (R13) observed that the various individuals who lent him money to travel away from al-Shabaab were all clan members. Despite the obvious importance of such affiliations, it is worth adding that a minority of our respondents (R6 and R10) also claimed that their clan played absolutely no role in their exits.

Continued Obstacles to Exit

While the offensive has certainly helped increase the rate of exit from al-Shabaab, important obstacles to disengagement remain. When asked what was most difficult about leaving the organization, several of our respondents (R1, R2, R5, and R16) highlighted how they feared that the group would punish them or their families. As previously discussed in our ***Journeys through Extremism*** report, attempts to escape can be punishable by death.[77] Our respondents (R6, R7, R9, R12, R13, R14, and R16) generally reported having been well treated by the state and (in relevant cases) the ***Ma'awisley*** after their exit. Nevertheless, it is also important to reflect on how the fear of mistreatment by these groups can also inhibit disengagement (R6). While it is difficult to generalize the extent of the problem, cases have certainly been recorded of these forces (primarily the ***Ma'awisley***) abusing individuals associated with the insurgents.[78] Another key obstacle appeared to be that many al-Shabaab members lack

76 KII1.

77 Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys through Extremism*.

78 See, for instance, Hiiraan Online, "Gov Jeyte warns Ma'awisley Fighters not to Target al-Shabaab Wives," https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2022/Nov/188530/gov_jeyte_warns_ma_awiisley_fighters_not_to_target_al_shabaab_wives_children.aspx.

suitable personal connections to assist with their escape. It is worth reiterating that the overwhelming majority of our respondents reported arranging safe passage prior to their exit, invariably facilitated by members of their family or clan network. Questions then arise about the options available to those from families with limited social connections, those from less influential clans, and those from clans that remain affiliated with al-Shabaab.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

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

- **Continue to pursue the offensive against al-Shabaab to drive defections:** Although we have not yet seen defections en masse from al-Shabaab, it is sufficiently clear that the first phase of the offensive increased the disengagement rate in Hirshabelle and Galmudug to at least a modest extent. This is because a) members were motivated to escape as they feared for their personal safety; b) the chaos associated with the increased violence created opportunities to flee; c) the offensive stretched al-Shabaab's resources and created gaps in their systems designed to prevent exit; and d) many members found themselves in closer proximity to units to which they could surrender as the state increased its territorial control.

- **Prioritize the need to "hold" recaptured territory to drive more defections:** Many individuals and communities are seemingly playing "wait and see" before fully rejecting al-Shabaab. To increase defection rates and help ensure that populations commit to the state more broadly, state forces must demonstrate that they can hold recaptured territory over the longer term so that residents no longer fear repercussions if the insurgents return. Of course, the state must also attempt to address the grievances held by many communities in these locations, and convince them that they represent their best interests. As previously observed by the ICG, depending on context the necessary measures will include reconciliation initiatives, local political reform, improved delivery of basic services, and other such measures.[79]

- **Concentrate awareness raising about the National Program in priority areas for recapture:** The National Program seeks to raise awareness about the amnesty and services provided to many former members of al-Shabaab via

79 International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains*.

its communications pillar, which delivers information through the radio, phones, television, social media, leaflets, and other channels (as described in our "Reaching behind Frontlines" report).[80] To increase defection rates, those responsible for these campaigns should concentrate their efforts in areas prioritized for recapture by state forces, helping ensure that the communities in these locations are adequately informed about the services offered by the National Program. These communications campaigns should also offer practical guidance on how to escape from al-Shabaab and how to surrender to state security forces.

→ **Leverage the family and wider clan networks to help increase defection rates:** This research clearly demonstrated the extent to which families and wider clan networks play a key role in motivating and facilitating exits from al-Shabaab, in particular through helping arrange safe passage. The National Program should continue to leverage these key intermediaries through outreach campaigns designed to enhance their "buy-in" to this intervention (again, see our "Reaching behind Frontlines" report).[81] However, it is important to also recognize that certain al-Shabaab members lack social connections able to help facilitate their escape. This applies in particular to those with limited ties to the state, those from less influential clans, those from clans that remain affiliated with al-Shabaab, and those based in areas that have remained under insurgent control for extended periods. In such cases, it may be necessary to explore alternative avenues through which to reach such individuals, with the use of former members being one possible option.[82]

→ **Ensure accountability for human rights abuses committed by state forces and *Ma'awisley*:** The state forces and Ma'awisley responsible for committing human right abuses must be held accountable, not only on ethical grounds, but also to reduce the extent to which such acts inhibit defections from al-Shabaab. While it is difficult to generalize about the extent of the problem, cases have been recorded of these forces (primarily the Ma'awisley) abusing those they associate with al-Shabaab, and this helps explain why some members fear surrendering. Judicial matters aside,

80 Khalil et al., *Reaching Behind Frontlines*.

81 Ibid.

82 Of course, we should not overlook the practical and ethical issues associated with outreach through "formers," including the risk of exposing them to an increased threat of being targeted by al-Shabaab.

the National Program should also help prevent such abuses by offering training to these forces on the procedures for processing and handling defectors.

→ **Prepare for the prospect of mass exits from al-Shabaab:** As the offensive continues, relevant stakeholders should explore possibilities for opening additional facilities in locations that are accessible from the current and likely future centers of conflict. Given the limitations in the scalability of the National Program in its current form, they should also consider the feasibility of a community-based approach to reintegration for individuals at the lowest level of risk. One option may be to incorporate an additional category in the screening process, to distinguish between high, low, and very-low risk former members of al-Shabaab (replicating the approach used in Nigeria).[83] While those in the middle category would be eligible for rehabilitation at facilities such as Serendi, those deemed to be very-low risk could be provided with services and supervision in the community. This would help ensure that the capacity of Serendi and the other rehabilitation centers are not overwhelmed.

83 James Khalil, MaryAnne Iwara, and Martine Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits into Boko Haram* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.2.

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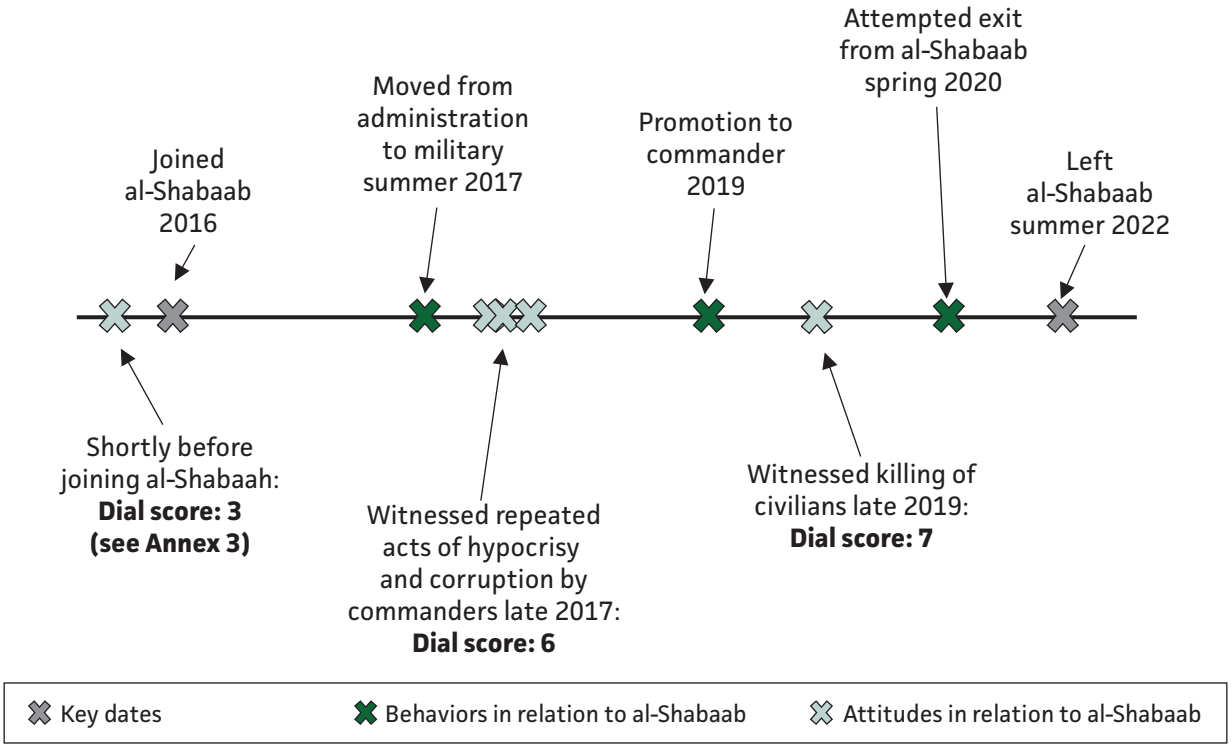
ANNEX 1: TIMELINE TEMPLATE



ANNEX 2: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Demographic Questions

I would like to start with a few questions to help us understand 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. Which districts and regions where you based in while with al-Shabaab?
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 to earn money?
7. What is your clan and sub-clan?
8. Are you married? How many times have you been married?
9. Do you have children? How many?

Life History

Step 1: Draw a line on a 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 below the marks (see Annex 1).

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

Step 3: Ask them why they joined al-Shabaab.

Step 4: Ask them what their clan/community thought of them joining. Ask them if many other members of their clan were joining al-Shabaab when they joined.

Step 5: Ask them about key dates relating to behaviours once they were within al-Shabaab and add these on the line with additional 'x' marks 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, clan members, other members of al-Shabaab, etc.) played in that process. Ask if they left voluntarily or if they were captured **(skip to Step 14 if captured).** Ask if they had arranged safe passage before they left, and how that was arranged (including if their clan was involved). Also ask if their clans hindered their exit in any way.

Step 7: Ask them whether the current offensive in Hirshabelle and Galmudug made it harder or easier for them to leave al-Shabaab, or if it made no difference. Ask them to elaborate on their response.

Step 8: Ask them why they left al-Shabaab (open question), and how long they had been thinking of leaving.

Step 9: 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 they were treated differently because of their clan ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- 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 al-Shabaab treated their clan badly ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
    - » Clarify in what way.
- Because they did not want to fight their own clan ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Because they disagreed with al-Shabaab's interpretation of Islam ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Because of the amnesty/opportunities at centers like Serendi ('a lot', 'a little', 'not at all')
- Ask if there were any other reasons we have not considered.

Step 10: 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, their clan, or anyone else. Ask if it was difficult to leave because of personal commitments to others in al-Shabaab, e.g., wives, friends. Ask them why they chose the 'formal' route of the National Program.

Step 11: Ask them whether or not their clan has been supportive of people like them who have recently left al-Shabaab. Ask them to elaborate on their response. Ask if their clan pressured them in any way, either to leave or stay with al-Shabaab.

Step 12: Introduce the 7-point dial covering attitudes (see Annex 3), 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, and record their dial score at this point.

Step 13: 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 14: 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 aims (e.g., through training provided by al-Shabaab)
- The nature of al-Shabaab rules and regulations
- The relationship between al-Shabaab and clans
- Active military confrontations with your clan
- How they were treated by superiors
- Other behaviours of superiors or leaders (clarifying what these behaviours were)
- Factional fighting within al-Shabaab
- Acts of violence perpetrated by al-Shabaab
- Al-Shabaab's gaining or losing of territory
- Broader political, social, or economic conditions outside al-Shabaab

Step 15: For each of the attitudinal changes identified through the previous step, (a) locate them on the timeline with additional 'x' marks, (b) record the dates (approximated as necessary, and noting that attitudinal change may be sudden or gradual), and (c) record their attitude using the dial. As necessary, clarify what their attitudes where in any gaps on the timeline.

Step 16: Ask them when they arrived at Serendi, marking this date with an 'x' on the timeline. Ask them the dates for this event, and record the date below the marks.

Step 17: Ask them if they were aware of Serendi and the broader National Program before they left al-Shabaab. Ask them when they first became aware of Serendi and the broader program?

Step 18: Ask how they arrived at Serendi, starting from the moment they ended up in state or ATMIS hands. Ask which agencies were involved (NISA, SNA, SPF, ATMIS, etc.). Ask if *Ma'awisley*, liaison officers, or community or clan representatives were involved in the process. Ask how they were treated during this process.

Step 19: Ask how they were treated at Serendi, and what they thought of the center staff, and the services offered there.

Step 20: Ask them to think about any events or occurrences that may have changed their attitudes towards AS since they left the group, e.g.:

- Their treatment by Ma'awisley (if applicable)
- Their treatment by SNA or other agencies (clarify what exactly caused their attitude change)
- Their experiences/treatment at Serendi (clarify what exactly caused their attitude change)

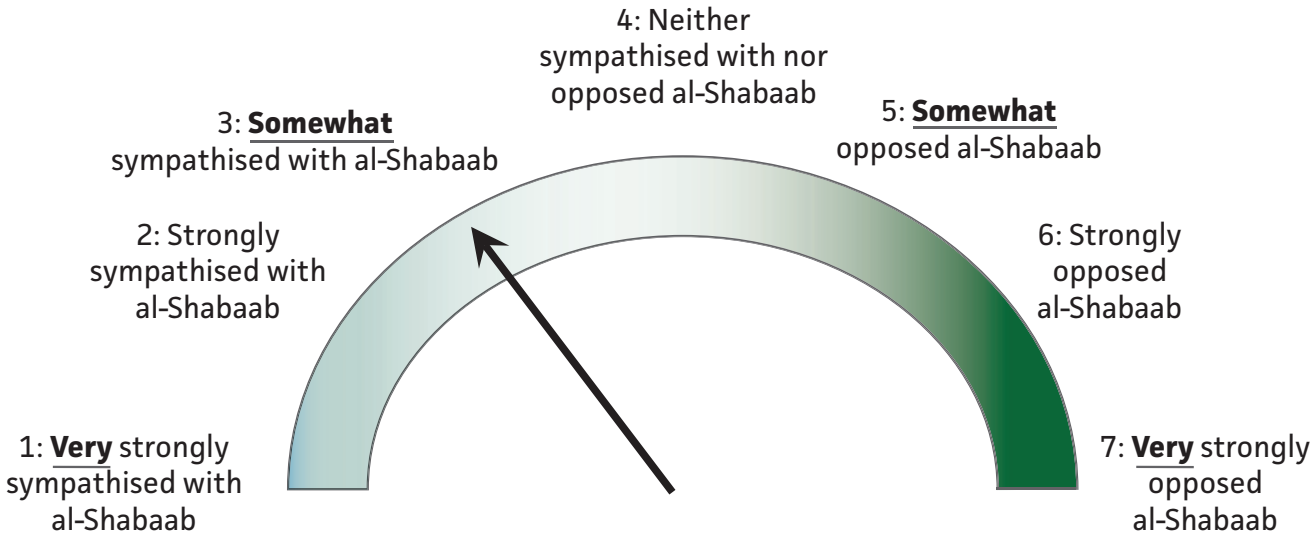
Step 21: For each of the attitudinal changes identified through the previous step, (a) locate them on the timeline, (b) record the dates (approximated as necessary, and noting that changes in attitudes may be sudden or gradual), and (c) record their attitude using the dial. As necessary, clarify what their attitudes where in any gaps on the timeline.

Encouraging Others to Leave

Step 22: Ask them if they know other people who left al-Shabaab since the start of the offensive. Ask if these individuals went through the National Program, or left 'informally.' Ask if they know of others who were trying to leave, but had not been able to do so. Ask them to explain why they were unable. Ask them if this related to clan dynamics in any way.

Step 24: Ask them what they think should be done to increase the rate of disengagement in their region.

ANNEX 3: THE ATTITUDES "DIAL"



ANNEX 4: RESPONDENT PROFILES

	Location of Origin	Dates with al-Shabaab	Location of Operations with al-Shabaab	Clan	Role (Highest Level)
R1	Beledweyne, Hiran	2016 to 2022	Bay; El Buur district, Galgadud	Hawadle	Driver
R2	Mahas district, Hiran	2017/8 to 2022	Hiran, Mudug, Galgadud, Middle Shabelle	Hawadle	Driver
R3	El Dhere district, Galgadud	2018 to 2022	El Dhere district, Galgadud	Abgal	Tax collector
R4	Adan Yabal district, Middle Shabelle	2020 to 2022	Adan Yabal & Adale districts, Middle Shabelle	Abgal	Jabhat foot soldier
R5	Adan Yabal district, Middle Shabelle	2019 to 2022	Adan Yabal district, Middle Shabelle	Abgal	Jabhat commander
R6	Adale district, Middle Shabelle	2017 to 2022	Various locations in Middle Shabelle	Abgal	Jabhat foot soldier
R7	Jowhar district, Middle Shabelle	2018 to 2022	Hiran, Middle Shabelle, Galgadud	Abgal	Jabhat foot soldier
R8	Adan Yabal district, Middle Shabelle	2018 to 2022	Various locations in Middle Shabelle	Abgal	Jabhat foot soldier
R9	South Central Somalia	2013 (?) to 2023	Various locations in Lower and Middle Shabelle	Rahanweyn	Jabhat commander
R10	?	2018 to 2023	Six regions including Hiran and Mudug	Dir	Jabhat commander
R11	El Dhere district, Galgadud	2009 to 2019	Various locations in Middle Shabelle	Abgal	Jabhat commander
R12	Harardhere district, Mudug	2020 to 2023	Harardhere district, Mudug	Abgal	Tax collector
R13	Buloburde district, Hiran	2013 to 2023	Buloburde district, Hiran	Hawadle	Hizbah commander
R14	Buloburde district, Hiran	2021 to 2023	Hiran	Gugundabe	Hizbah officer
R15	Dusmareb district, Galgadud	2022 to 2022	Middle Jubba	Duduble	Pre-training
R16	El Dhere district, Galgadud	2018 to 2023	El Dhere district, Galgadud	Abgal	Tax collector
R17	El Dhere district, Galgadud	2020 to 2022	El Dhere district, Galgadud	Abgal	Tax collector

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RESOLVE would like to thank the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for its generous support for this report and RESOLVE's Learning from Local Peacebuilding Approaches Research Initiative.

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