Reaching behind Frontlines:

Promoting Exit from al-Shabaab through Communications Campaigns

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This research was conducted in the context of a Somali state offensive in the Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug that generated more territorial gains from al-Shabaab than any other military campaign since the mid-2010s. Such conditions provide fertile ground for disengagement from the insurgents, with many ex-members enrolled into the National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants. A core element of this program is its communications pillar, which seeks to promote disengagement through a variety of channels, including radio, television, social media, phone conversations, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. This research aims to inform these campaigns, drawing from interviews conducted in May 2023 with former members of al-Shabaab at the Serendi center in Mogadishu.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACRONYMS

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DRP	Defectors Rehabilitation Program
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
KII	Key Informant Interview
NISA	National Intelligence and Security Agency
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
SNA	Somali National Army
SNTV	Somali National Television
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
VOA	Voice of America

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was conducted in the context of a Somali state offensive in the Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug that generated more territorial gains from al-Shabaab than any other military campaign since the mid-2010s.[1] Such conditions provide fertile ground for disengagement from the insurgents, with many ex-members enrolled into the National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (often referred to simply as the National Program).[2] A core element of this program is its communications pillar, which seeks to promote exits from al-Shabaab through a variety of channels, including radio, television, social media, phone conversations, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. These campaigns are mainly designed to further encourage individuals already inclined to leave the group, rather than to deradicalize ideologues. This study aims to inform these campaigns by collecting information about the communications channels that members of al-Shabaab typically access, and which "types" of communication most often influence their decisions to exit the organization. Our team conducted interviews with sixteen former members of al-Shabaab at the Serendi center in Mogadishu, where rehabilitation services are offered through the National Program. While this report focuses specifically on communications, our parallel "Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab" study provides more nuanced accounts of individual journeys away from the insurgents in the context of the ongoing offensive.[3]

As is generally the case regarding research into P/CVE communications campaigns, the findings from this study come with substantial caveats. While these are described in detail in Sections 3 and 5 of this report, it is worth briefly highlighting that our ability to draw firm

1   International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive Against Al-Shabaab* (ICG, 2023), 1.

2   The National 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: Challenges and Recommendations* (UK: Royal United Services Institute, 2023).

3   James Khalil, Yahye Abdi, Sif Heide-Ottosen, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, and Martine Zeuthen, *The Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab: Disengagement During the Offensive in Somalia* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2023), https://doi.org/10.37805/lpbi2023.1.

conclusions about the influence of particular campaigns was limited by the scarcity of information about the communications ecology. In addition, while family members and other personal acquaintances often remain in contact with al-Shabaab members, our ability to draw conclusions about the impact of campaigns channelled through these intermediaries was constrained by a lack of information about their communications habits. Such issues aside, our key findings were as follows:

1. Communications heavily influenced our respondents to exit al-Shabaab. Given the scarcity of empirical data revealing the effectiveness of P/CVE communications campaigns generally, perhaps the most notable finding from this research was that all respondents claimed that communications helped encourage their exit from al-Shabaab, with only one exception. In total, our sixteen respondents identified an average of almost three communications (i.e., radio broadcasts discussing the amnesty for defectors, phone conversations with family members, and so on) that influenced their decision to defect from al-Shabaab.

2. Communications with family members via phone conversations played a pivotal role in influencing disengagement. Echoing findings from earlier research at Serendi,[4] this study also revealed the extent to which family members often play a pivotal role in influencing defections via phone conversations. While access to "traditional" mobile phones was highly regulated by al-Shabaab (and smartphones largely prohibited), the majority of our respondents still found opportunities to discuss disengagement with their family members.

3. Political leaders also played a key role in influencing disengagement through radio broadcasts. This study also revealed the importance of radio broadcasts featuring political leaders discussing the amnesty for former members of al-Shabaab and the wider National Program, with Presidents Farmajo and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as the most influential. This contradicts the prevailing opinion among communications experts that state actors often lack credibility.

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4   Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

4. Former members of al-Shabaab also played a key role in influencing exit, both via radio broadcasts and through direct contact with current members. Our research also revealed the influence of former members of al-Shabaab (often simply referred to as "formers"). Communications from formers included them recounting their own "success stories" of exit on the radio, as well as private phone conversations with existing members to encourage disengagement. Of course, we should not overlook the practical and ethical issues associated with communications through formers, including how such campaigns can potentially expose them to an increased risk of being targeted by their past colleagues.[5]

5. Aside from radio and phone conversations, other communications channels were less influential. A combination of restrictions imposed by al-Shabaab and technical constraints severely restricted access to television and social media, limiting the extent to which communications via these channels directly influenced our respondents. Face-to-face communications with members of the community were also limited by al-Shabaab regulations, and those that did occur tended to cover benign topics due to issues of mutual distrust. Despite being a mainstay of similar campaigns elsewhere,[6] only one of our respondents claimed to have witnessed leaflets designed to encourage disengagement from the insurgents, but this had no influence on his decision to defect.

6. The National Program hotline appears to have a limited direct impact on al-Shabaab members (although we cannot rule out indirect impact). The National Program hotline provides anonymous guidance on how to defect and surrender. While many communications campaigns are designed to raise awareness of this service,[7] only one of our respondents claimed to have knowledge of its existence while still with al-Shabaab, and he refrained from calling it due to suspicions about its veracity. Broader data from Serendi also reveals that only a small percentage of residents rely on this service to help facilitate their escape.[8] However, the hotline is also

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5   Marina Tapley and Gordon Clubb, *The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism* (ICCT Policy Brief, 2019), https://doi.org/10.19165/2019.2.04.

6   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, 23.

7   KII1, KII2, KII3.

8   KII4.

designed to inform government officials, security personnel involved in the defection process, and families of al-Shabaab members seeking information on their behalf, etc. While our research found no direct impact of the hotline on defectors, the extent to which it indirectly influenced defections through these social connections remains unclear and is worthy of further research.

7. **The common distinction between counter and alternative narratives poorly reflects the content of communications designed to encourage and/or facilitate exits from al-Shabaab.** Many P/CVE practitioners view communications campaigns through a binary distinction between counter and alternative narratives. While the former are reactive and confrontational responses to the narratives of violent extremists, the latter are those that promote the contrasting values of their state or international adversaries. However, this binary distinction actually *excludes* the vast majority of communication content used by campaigns to promote disengagements in Somalia. We conclude this report with an alternative classification system designed to inform future communication campaigns through differentiating between their intended aims.

INTRODUCTION

This research was conducted in the context of a Somali state offensive that delivered more territorial gains from al-Shabaab than any other military campaign since the mid-2010s.[9] While the initial stage of this offensive focused on the Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug, the subsequent phase (which began shortly before the completion of this report) is expected to also expand into southern regions.[10] As described in our parallel "Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab" study,[11] such circumstances provide fertile ground for disengagement, with many former members of the organization absorbed into the National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants (often referred to simply as the National Program).[12] This program offers rehabilitation services to former members classified as "low risk," including basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, and so on. A core element of the National Program is its communications pillar, which seeks to promote exits from al-Shabaab through various channels, including radio, television, social media, phone conversations, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. Placing such efforts in context, it is worth highlighting the extensive scepticism about the effectiveness of PCVE communications campaigns in general, with many thematic experts questioning the extent to which they genuinely influence their intended audiences.[13]

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9   International Crisis Group, *Sustaining Gains*, 1.

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

11   Khalil *et al*., *The Off-Ramp from al-Shabaab*.

12   The National Program is described in Khalil *et al*., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement*; and Zeuthen, *National Program*.

13   On Somalia, see, for instance, Mary Harper, "Is Anybody Listening?: Al-Shabaab's Communications," in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab,* eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (London; Hurst & Company, 2018); and Mary Harper, *Everything you have Told me is True* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 204–5. On this subject more broadly, see, for instance, Cristina Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Cristina Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No. 1 (2015); Sarah L. Carthy, Colm B. Doody, Katie Cox, Denis O'Hora and Kiran M. Sarma, *Counter-Narratives for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation: A Systematic Review of Targeted Interventions* (Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2020), http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1106; Kate Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies: A Review of the Evidence* (Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, 2016); Matt Freear and Andrew Glazzard, "Preventive Communication: Emerging Lessons from Participative Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya," *RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020); Andrew Glazzard, *Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism* (International Centre for Counterterrorism, 2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2017.1.08; and Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram, and Joe Whittaker, *Countering Terrorist Narratives* (European Parliament, 2017), 8.

It is worth noting from the outset that National Program campaigns primarily (but not exclusively) aim to encourage individuals already inclined to leave al-Shabaab, rather than deradicalize the ideologues within their ranks. Many of the former only remain with the insurgents because they fear being caught and punished (potentially with death) for attempting to escape.[14] This research was designed to help inform these campaigns by collecting information about the access that members have to various channels (radio, television, social media, etc.), and which communication "types" most frequently influence their decisions to disengage. Our study team conducted interviews with sixteen former members of al-Shabaab at the Serendi center in Mogadishu. Our sample included individuals who had operated in the

> **Box 1.** Terminological Note
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> 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."

group's intelligence wing (the *Amniyat*) and military (the *Jabhat*), as well as those in support roles. To help situate the information that we collected from these respondents, we also conducted a literature review, and interviewed country experts with knowledge of the National Program and the associated communications ecology. While this report focuses narrowly on the subject of communications, our parallel "Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab" study offers a more nuanced account of individual journeys away from the insurgents.[15]

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14 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; and Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

15 Khalil *et al., The Off-Ramp from al-Shabaab*.

Figure 1. Map of Somalia
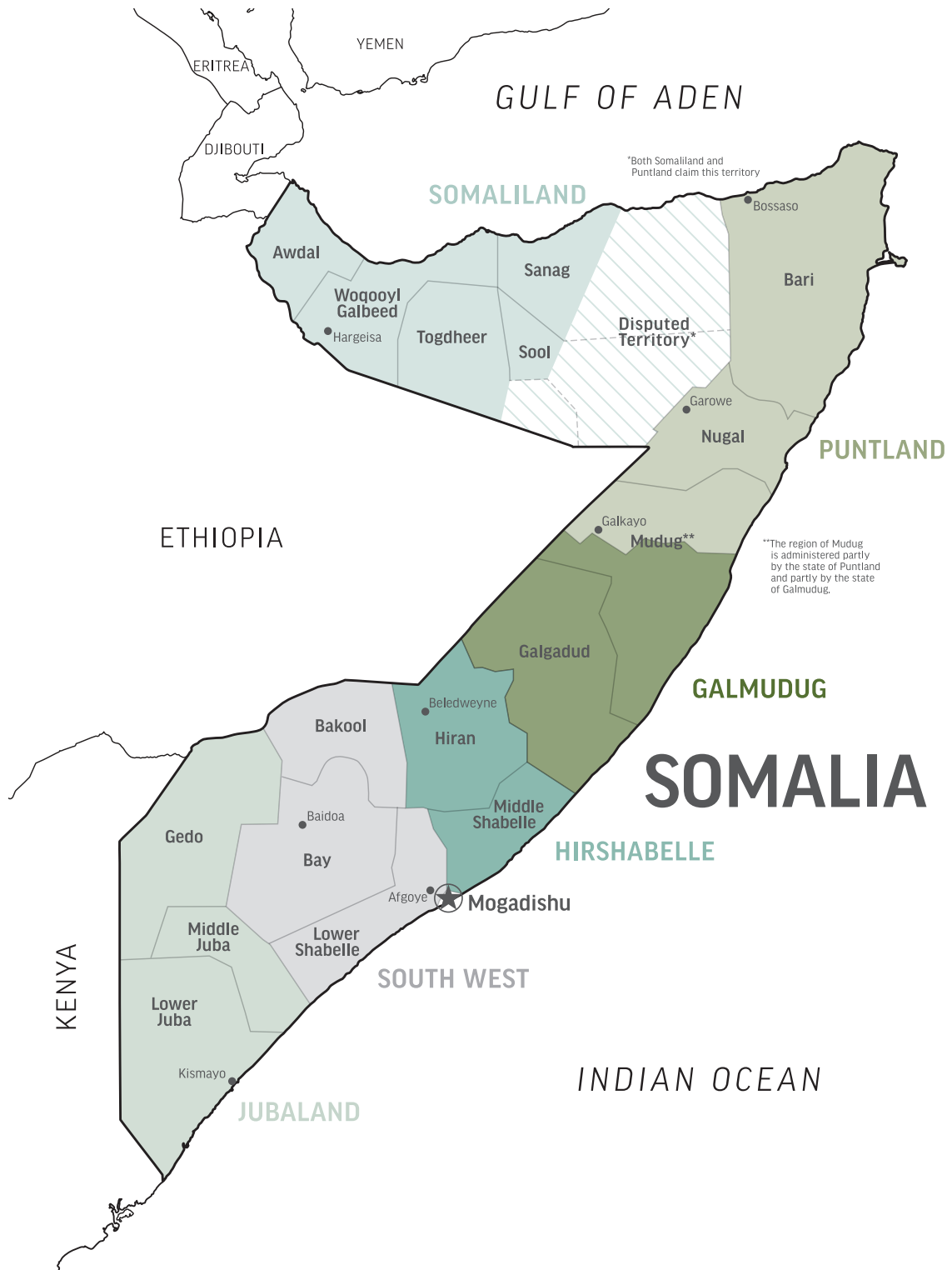
The boundaries shown on any maps in this report are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance.

As is generally the case regarding research into P/CVE communications campaigns, the findings from this study come with substantial caveats (described primarily in Sections 3 and 5 of this report). For instance, our inability to access individuals who remain with al-Shabaab (for obvious security reasons) means that our sampling effectively selected on the dependent variable, i.e., only those who have defected.[16] With family members and other associates commonly playing a pivotal role through phone conversations, our ability to deliver firm conclusions was also limited by a lack of knowledge about the communications habits of these key intermediaries. For example, while our data indicates that dramas and soap operas had no *direct* effect on our respondents, it is certainly plausible that they may have *indirectly* influenced their decisions to disengage through these social contacts. Our ability to draw firm conclusions was also constrained by the scarcity of information about the wider communications ecology. For example, while none of our respondents reported being influenced by leaflets designed to promote exit from al-Shabaab, it is unclear whether this occurred because this method was largely ineffective, or if it is simply that relatively few flyers have recently been distributed. With such issues in mind, we present our findings as relating specifically to our sample of respondents, rather than al-Shabaab defectors more broadly.

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16 This methodological issue is discussed in detail in 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.

BACKGROUND

This section provides context for the remainder of the report by exploring the five communications dimensions under consideration: audience, channel, form, messenger, and content. Before doing so, it also offers a brief introduction to al-Shabaab, explaining the conditions under which some members choose to defect.

A Brief History of al-Shabaab

While the origins of al-Shabaab are contested in the scholarly literature, it is broadly agreed that the group rose to prominence as a faction of the military wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU emerged as a coalition of Sharia courts in 2004, generating widespread public support as it restored law and order in Mogadishu, following decades of infighting between clan-based leaders and their militias.[17] The ICU subsequently expanded across large parts of South-Central Somalia, and was enthusiastically received by many local populations.[18] However, a counteroffensive by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2006 in Mogadishu led to the ICU's rapid collapse. This campaign was supported by Ethiopian forces, with this "invasion" playing a key role in fueling the subsequent rise of al-Shabaab. Indeed, as observed by Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph:

> From the moment the Islamists lost Mogadishu, al-Shabaab's priorities changed. The group held fast to its goal of creating a strict Islamic state. But in terms of fund-raising, recruitment, and publicity, al-Shabaab stressed a new top objective: driving out the Ethi-

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

18 Michael Skjelderup, Mukhtar Ainashe, and Ahmed Mohamed Abdulle "Qare," "Militant Islamism and Local Clan Dynamics in Somalia: The Expansion of the Islamic Courts Union in Lower Jubba province," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (2020): 553–571, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1789929.

opians. It did not take a genius to recognize that an appeal to Somalis' nationalism could hit home in ways that appeals to their religion might not.[19]

Al-Shabaab experienced a major rift in its leadership from 2010, with key disagreements revolving around its application of force against civilians, and its distribution of power. These disputes, alongside military pressure from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), contributed to key territorial losses during subsequent years. Despite these reversals, al-Shabaab established formal ties to al-Qaeda in 2012, greatly strengthening its global appeal and foreign funding base. While al-Shabaab's strength has fluctuated substantially since this period, it has retained extensive territorial control of many regions of Somalia, with strongholds in the Federal Member States of Jubaland, South West, Hirshabelle, and Galmudug. In these areas, al-Shabaab maintains law and order, regulates the economy, and provides (limited) social services. It recognizes clans as the basic "building blocks of power," and endeavors to maintain their political and material support. As observed by the International Crisis Group (ICG), the group "plays on the political inferiority complexes of clans, offering support to those squeezed between larger rivals."[20]

Nevertheless, major clans in Hirshabelle and Galmudug began rebelling against al-Shabaab in 2022, in response to the insurgents' excessive demands for "tax" and recruits (as described in more detail in our "Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab" study).[21] 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 group.[22] 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). This led to the "liberation" of many towns and villages in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, with the ICG maintaining that "the operation has yielded the most comprehensive territorial gains since the mid-2010s."[23] Although it is too early to comment on the second phase of this offensive, which began in

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

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

21 Khalil et al., *The Off-Ramp from al-Shabaab*.

22 Ibid., 4.

23 Ibid., 1.

summer 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.[24]

Regarding why certain individuals decide to leave al-Shabaab, research has revealed a broad range of motives, including a desire to disassociate from the abuses committed by the insurgents, familial pressure, the inadequacy of the salary, poor living conditions within the group, and so on.[25] With regard to *how* they disengage, most former members report arranging safe passage with the relevant state agencies prior to their escape, with this often facilitated by their families or wider clans.[26] The context of the state offensive (at least its first phase) provided fertile ground for disengagement, with our "Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab" research revealing a modest increase in the rate of defection in Hir-shabelle and Galmudug.[27] We identified four mechanisms through which the offensive influenced this rate: (a) it enhanced the motivation for exit through increasing fears for personal safety, (b) the chaos associated with armed confrontations created opportunities to flee, (c) it 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. However, many obstacles to exit remain, including a lack of information about the rehabilitation services available to defectors, and practical information about how to escape from al-Shabaab. These communication themes form the subject of this report.

The "Dimensions" of Communication

Switching our attention more directly to communications, one of the earliest and most influential models, developed by Harold D. Lasswell in 1940 to understand mass media, proposed that any communication is a process of "Who, said what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?"[28] In other words, communications take place in five dimensions: channel, source, message/content, receiver/audience, and effect. Other influential

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

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

26   Ibid.

27   Khalil et al., *The Off-Ramp from al-Shabaab.*

28   Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in *The Communication of Ideas,* ed. Lyman Bryson (New York: Harper, 1948).

models, such as Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver's transmission model, propose refinements or additions, often drawing on disciplines such as information science, to add dimensions such as "noise" and "feedback."[29] However, these mid-twentieth-century models have been criticized for their simplicity, neglecting the complexity of social communication, and the ways in which meaning is generated by the source or constructed by the audience.[30] Alternative theories of communication focus on form and meaning rather than process, and situate acts of communication in their social context.[31] Drawing from such sources, this study distinguishes between the following five dimensions of communications; audience, channel, form, messenger, and content.

Audience (al-Shabaab members, their family members, and so on)

The first communication dimension is audience, which in the context of efforts to promote defections from al-Shabaab, includes members of the group themselves, as well as intermediaries such as family members, clan networks, peers, and other associates. Of course, al-Shabaab's membership is not homogenous in nature, with it being helpful to distinguish between members in relation to their role, rank, and location of operation. As discussed in Section 4, those outside of the Jabhat, those of higher rank, and those based in less remote locations, were generally able to access a broader range of communications. Members of al-Shabaab can also be placed on a continuum in relation to their sympathy for the organization's ideology and aims. As already noted, a substantial proportion are already inclined to disengage, and only remain involved as they fear being punished for attempting to escape.[32] Many National Program campaigns (although not all) are designed to help encourage such individuals to disengage, rather than deradicalize ideologues within the ranks.

Channel (radio, television, social media, newspapers, and so on)

The second communications dimension is channel, with this including radio, television, "traditional" mobile phones (i.e., excluding smartphones), social media, newspapers, leaflets, and face-to-face conversations. We treat the internet (and devices through which it

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29 Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

30 See, for example, Joel P. Bowman, and Andrew S. Targowski, "Modelling the Communication Process: The Map is not the Territory," *Journal of Business Communication* 24, no. 4 (1987), 21–34.

31 James W. Carey, and G. Stuart Adam, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

32 Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys through Extremism*, and Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

Table 1. Respondent Profiles

	Location of Origin	Dates with al-Shabaab	Location of Operations with al-Shabaab	Role (Highest Level)
R1	?	2019 to 2021	Mogadishu & Middle Juba	Intelligence operative
R2	Galgadud	2015 to 2022	Galgadud	Intelligence operative
R3	Galgadud	2016 to 2023	Galgadud & Middle Shabelle	Military police
R4	Middle Shabelle	2018 to 2023	Middle Shabelle	Foot soldier
R5	Bay	2015 to 2023 (?)	Middle Shabelle	Military commander
R6	Middle Shabelle	2020 to 2022	Middle Shabelle	Tax collector
R7	Middle Shabelle	2020 to 2022	Mudug & Middle Shabelle	Military commander
R8	Hiran	2017 (?) to 2022	Hiran	Driver
R9	Middle Shabelle	?	Lower Shabelle	Foot soldier
R10	Lower Shabelle	2013 to 2022	Lower Shabelle	Administration
R11	Gedo	2015 to 2023	Lower Shabelle	Tax collector
R12	Lower Shabelle	2016 to 2023	Various	Commander's guard
R13	Lower Shabelle	2012 to 2023	Middle Juba	Military commander
R14	Gedo	2022 to 2023	Mudug	Foot soldier
R15	Bay	2022 to 2023	Middle Shabelle	Foot soldier
R16	Gedo	2021 (?) to 2022	Bay & Hiran	Military commander

can be accessed, including smartphones) as a broader platform that encompasses various of these channels, rather than an additional example on this list. As detailed in Section 4, our respondents had limited access to many of these channels while with al-Shabaab, with the radios and "traditional" mobile phones representing a partial exception. While this substantially limited the degree to which communications through other channels *directly* influenced our respondents, the extent of their *indirect* influence via family members, clan affiliates, peers, and other associates remains less clear (a subject we return to below).

Form (speeches, dramas, social media posts, discussions, and so on)

The third communications dimension is form, which consists of news bulletins, speeches, dramas, soap operas, social media posts, visual images, poems, personal discussions, and so on. Of course, the second and third dimensions are closely related, with the form being constrained by the channel (for instance, visual forms are not available through the radio). Regarding form, this report principally focuses on radio broadcasts and phone discussions with family members and other contacts, reflecting the extent to which our respondents could only consistently access radio and "traditional" mobile phones while with al-Shabaab.

Messenger (family members, clan elders, political leaders, and so on)

The fourth communications dimension is messenger, with this including family members, clan elders, political figures, religious leaders, former members of al-Shabaab (referred to simply as "formers"), and so on. Communications experts often focus on the credibility of these sources, with many identifying a trust deficit for state actors in particular.[33] For instance, as explained by Matt Freear and Andrew Glazzard:

> Since Aristotle, communications theorists have known that who is speaking is sometimes just as important as what is being said. Practitioners of counternarrative, in particular, tend to be honest about the limitations of government communications, which may often be perceived by target audiences as compromised from the beginning—especially when they are seen as promoting what is primarily a state security agenda.[34]

Although contentious, many experts also highlight the influence of formers, including Kurt Braddock who observes that "given their previous experiences, they may be perceived as more credible and trustworthy."[35] Indeed, our team previously revealed that formers play a pivotal role in encouraging and facilitating defections from Boko Haram in Nigeria.[36]

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33 Kurt Braddock, *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Lilah Elsayed, Talal Faris, and Sara Zeiger, *Undermining Violent Extremists Narratives in the Middle East, and North Africa* (Hedayah, 2017), 21–2.

34 Freear and Glazzard, "Preventive Communication," 3.

35 Braddock, *Weaponized Words*, 99.

36 Khalil, Iwara, and Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism*, 23.

Content (narratives, messages, and so on)

The final communications dimension is content, with debates within the P/CVE field often revolving around the binary distinction between counter and alternative narratives. The former are generally interpreted as reactive and confrontational responses to the narratives of violent extremists.[37] For instance, they may involve undermining the assertions of religious authority made by such groups, or emphasizing the extent to which they harm the communities they claim to represent. By contrast, alternative narratives are generally understood as those that promote the contrasting values of their state or international adversaries.[38] Yet, this binary distinction actually excludes *the majority* of communications used to promote defections in Somalia. For instance, it neglects content about personal incentives for those who leave al-Shabaab ("carrots"), such as the opportunity to benefit from amnesty, and the services provided through the National Program, as well as the threats of punishment for those who fail to voluntarily disengage ("sticks"). It also neglects practical guidance on how to disengage and surrender to the security forces. We return to this subject in Section 5, where we offer an alternative classification system that better reflects the subject at hand.

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37   Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013); and Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism through Media*, 7–8.

38   Ibid.

METHODOLOGY

Our research relied on the following overarching questions:

- To what communications channels do members of al-Shabaab have access?
- What is the nature of communications in terms of form, messenger, and content?
- What communications have the greatest influence over decisions to defect?

To provide answers to these questions, in May 2023 we conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen former members of al-Shabaab at the Serendi rehabilitation center in Mogadishu. This facility offers services to adult male former members deemed to be "low risk," forming a central component of the wider National Program. Four members of our research team previously worked at the center (as described in the About the Authors section), and our access was contingent on this prior involvement. While all our respondents left al-Shabaab between 2021 and 2023 (see Table 1), we achieved variance by purposively sampling according to the following criteria:[39]

- Respondents based in diverse locations while with al-Shabaab;
- Respondents with diverse roles in al-Shabaab; and
- Respondents who had/had not been ideologically motivated.

This delivered a sample that included individuals who had operated in al-Shabaab's intelligence wing (the *Amniyat*),[40] and military (the *Jabhat*), as well as those in a variety of support roles (see Table 1). We assigned code numbers (from R1 to R16) to our respondents to retain their anonymity. The interviews were conducted by our Lead and Secondary Researchers, with translations provided by our Research Assistants.[41] The research instru-

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39   We decided against attempting to generate a representative sample from the existing cohort of Serendi residents due to practical issues associated with achieving this 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.

40   It is worth noting that those who operated in the *Amniyat* are eligible for Serendi, as with any other former member, provided that they have been identified as "low risk" through the screening process. This is discussed in more detail in Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

41   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 discourteous. As such, these interviews often take a highly conversational tone.

ment was semi-structured (see Annex 1), and we collected extensive notes throughout the interviews.[42] Regarding research ethics, we first introduced ourselves to the respondents, and then presented the objectives of the study. We also clarified that the interview process was entirely voluntary, and that they were free to skip questions, or even to conclude the interview early at any point. We then asked each respondent to provide verbal consent, explaining that this involved accepting our use of the information they provide in anonymized form. To help situate the information we collected from these respondents, we also conducted a literature review, and interviewed five professionals with a detailed knowledge of the National Program and/or the associated communications ecology (we identify these as KII1 to KII5 through this report).

Before proceeding, it is necessary to consider the limitations of our approach, and to reflect upon the extent to which these may have influenced our findings. As already indicated, our ability to draw firm conclusions about the impact of particular communications is limited by our lack of knowledge about the communications habits of family members and other communications intermediaries, as well as the wider communications ecology (we cover these topics in more detail in Section 5). It is also important to highlight potential issues with data reliability. Put simply, certain respondents may have provided misleading or false information to be viewed favorably by others, as their memories are flawed, to avoid perceived negative repercussions associated with divulging information, and so on.[43] As already noted, we attempted to mitigate such issues by providing reassurances about the nature of the research and the conditions of anonymity prior to each interview. Where possible, we also added validation questions to help confirm information that each respondent provided earlier in their interview. This aside, is also worth observing that the respondents had nothing to gain in terms of concrete benefits (material incentives, access to more rehabilitation services, and so on) from offering 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 particular respondents) that occur as a result of our limited sample size, and the fact that it is not representative of al-Shabaab defectors. To elaborate on the latter, our sample excluded former members who were ineligible for Ser-

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42 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.

43 Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists."

endi because they were captured (i.e., rather than having surrendered), or because they were not classified as "low risk."[44] It also excludes minors and females, who are transferred to other facilities.[45] Our inability to access individuals who remain with al-Shabaab, for the obvious security reasons, also means that our sampling strategy effectively selected on the dependent variable.[46] This limits the extent to which we can draw findings about the influence of radio broadcasts featuring Somali presidents, for instance, as we cannot say for certain if our sample was more (or potentially less) likely to have heard these, as compared to members who are still with al-Shabaab. For these varied reasons, we present our findings as relating specifically to our sample of respondents, rather than to al-Shabaab defectors or members more broadly.

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44   On the subject of eligibility, see Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement*; and Zeuthen, *National Program*.
45   The National Program also includes facilities for women, but we were unable to access them.
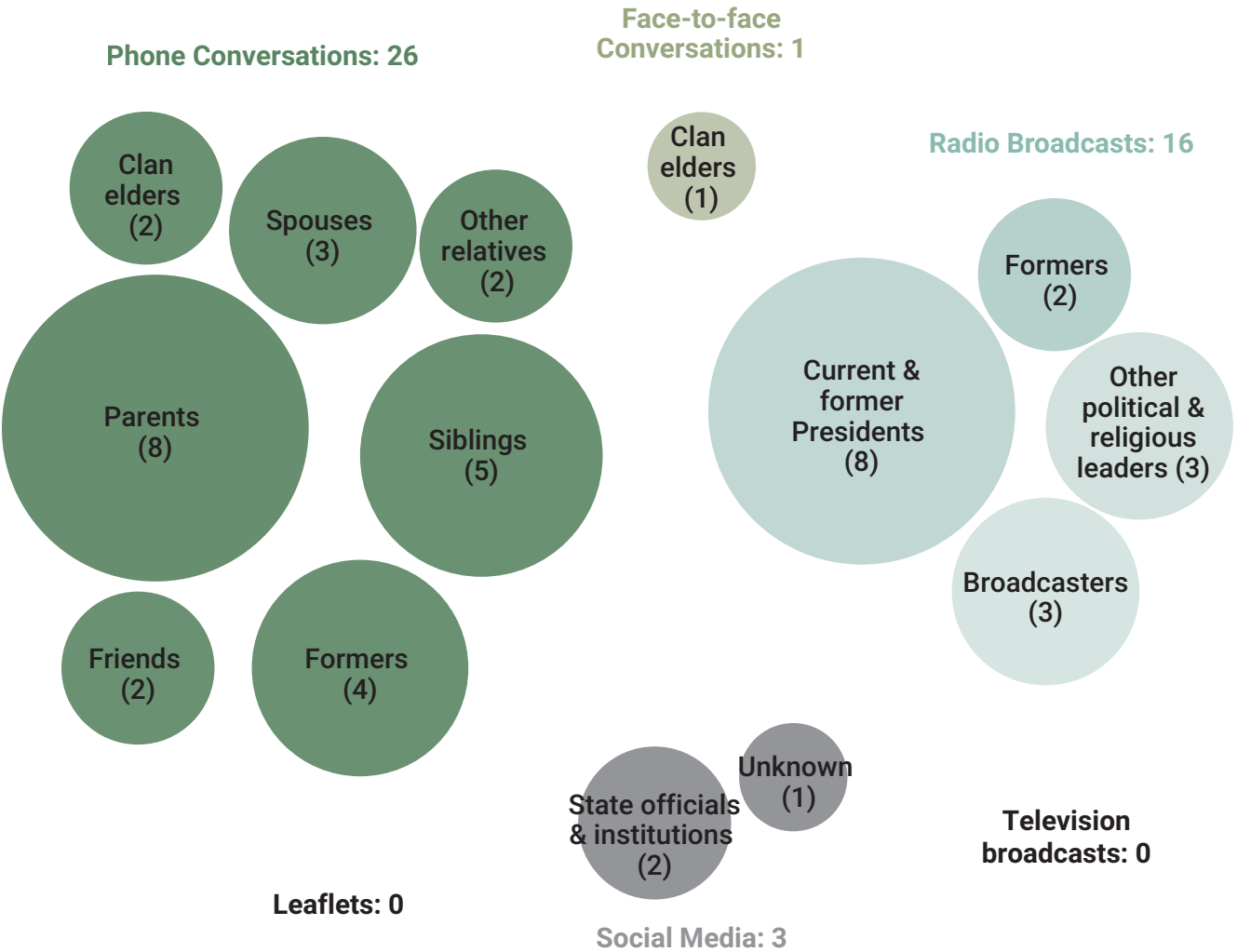46   This methodological issue is discussed in Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists."

FINDINGS

This section provides descriptive answers to the three overarching research questions at the heart of this study. In the interest of maintaining anonymity, we refer to respondents by their code numbers, and we omit information that may potentially be used to identify them, such as their areas of origin, and the precise locations where they operated while with al-Shabaab. This section sequentially considers six communications channels (radio, "traditional" phones, television, social media, leaflets, and face-to-face conversations), with these having been selected *a priori*, based on previous research on this theme at Serendi.[47] It is worth noting at the outset that radio and "traditional" phones were by far the most relevant channels, with this explaining why this section focuses predominantly on these means of communication. This is revealed in Figure 2, with the size of the circles (and the figures in brackets) reflecting the number of communications that helped influence our respondents to defect. For instance, only one respondent reported being influenced by face-to-face conversations with clan elders, as compared to eight who were swayed by content from current and former presidents on the radio.

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47   Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

Figure 2. Communications that Influenced Decisions to Defect by Channel and Messenger

Phone Conversations: 26

Clan elders (2)

Spouses (3)

Other relatives (2)

Parents (8)

Siblings (5)

Friends (2)

Formers (4)

Face-to-face Conversations: 1

Clan elders (1)

Radio Broadcasts: 16

Formers (2)

Current & former Presidents (8)

Other political & religious leaders (3)

Broadcasters (3)

State officials & institutions (2)

Unknown (1)

Leaflets: 0

Social Media: 3

Television broadcasts: 0

Radio Broadcasts

Access

Focusing first on radio communications, while our interviews demonstrated that al-Shabaab imposed restrictions on access, this varied substantially between units, locations, and over time. For instance, two former military commanders, respectively based in Middle Juba (R13), and Mudug and Middle Shabelle (R7), claimed that members of

their units were only allowed to listen to stations run by al-Shabaab (such as al-Andalus), or those sympathetic to the group (such as al-Furqan). By contrast, another member of the *Jabhat* (R16) based in Bay and Hiran maintained that members were also allowed to listen to BBC Somalia, but not stations affiliated with the state. Three other members of the military (R9, R12 and R15) claimed that they were permitted to access the news on any station, and that the only restriction was a prohibition on listening to music. Yet another *Jabhat* member (R5) in Middle Shabelle asserted that while the organization periodically limited access to certain channels and content, these limitations were intended as guidelines, rather than strictly enforced rules. In any case, the regulations were not consistently followed, with some members continuing to access the channels and content of their choosing discretely (as reported by R8 and R9), risking potentially severe punishment in the process. Similarly diverse patterns were apparent in al-Shabaab's non-military units.

It is important to also observe that most of our respondents reported that al-Shabaab imposed no restric-

Box 2. Considering Radio and Personal Connections— Abdinasir's story (R3)

Abdinasir (a pseudonym) was a member of al-Shabaab's police and military police between 2016 and 2023, operating from various parts of Galgadud and Middle Shabelle. Although he had once been an ideologue, he gradually came to despise the order imposed by the insurgents. During the course of his duties, he was ordered to kill a civilian who had violated al-Shabaab regulations. After refusing, he was incarcerated for fifteen days, and it was at this point that he decided to escape. The Somali president (it was unclear which one) provided considerable motivation through discussing amnesty opportunities for defectors on the radio, and he was already aware of the services offered at Serendi, as his brother was a former resident. His mother and siblings also encouraged him to leave—the former often cried on their calls as she feared for his safety.

Box 3. Considering Radio and Clan Elders—Liban's Story (R10)

Liban (a pseudonym) was from Lower Shabelle, and he joined al-Shabaab around 2013. He initially enlisted in their police wing (the Hizbah), before being transferred to their administrative unit, where he was tasked with liaising between al-Shabaab and the local community. While he was initially sympathetic to the insurgents, he came to increasingly oppose how they taxed even the poorest members of society. He requested permission to leave the organization during the latter stages of his membership, but this was denied by his supervisor. He was motivated by the prospect of amnesty, as described on the radio by Presidents Farmajo and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. He was also encouraged to leave by his clan elders, with whom he had spoken in the community. Eventually, he went to visit one of his wives in Afgoye, from where he arranged safe passage and surrendered to the Somali National Army (SNA).

tions on access to radio for members while on leave. Al Shabaab members are granted holiday allowances that can enable visits to their families (if based in locations under the control of the insurgents), rest and recuperation, and so on. These allowances vary between units, locations, over time, and in relation to marital status. For instance, a member of the *Jabhat* in Middle Shabelle (R4) asserted that he was automatically entitled to three months of leave every year as a married soldier, whereas those who remained single had to receive permission from their senior commanders. By contrast, a commander based in Middle Juba (R13) claimed that he received three months of holiday after every five months of active duty. Others were less fortunate, with another officer (R7) claiming that he had only been granted ten days during his entire two years with the insurgents. Holiday periods aside, four individuals (R3, R5, R9, and R14) also highlighted how al-Shabaab tightened access to radio once the state offensive began, presumably to limit their awareness of territorial losses. Two of these even claimed that their units completely banned radio from that time. In an indication of the paranoia often experienced in the group, one respondent

(R14) elaborated that this was because they feared that their speakers may contain hidden cameras planted by their adversaries.

Of course, access to the radio relates not only to the regulations imposed by al-Shabaab, but also technical constraints, including access to networks and electricity. For instance, various respondents claimed that there was inadequate or no coverage for BBC and VOA (R1, R4, and R13) or short-wave stations (R8, R13, R15, and R16) in locations where they operated. Such patterns obviously relate to how remotely each respondent was based, with others observing that they could access Radio Jowhar (R6) and Radio Shabelle (R9) due to their proximity to urban areas. It also depended on the extent to which al-Shabaab allowed radio stations to continue operating in particular localities, as the group previously destroyed broadcasting masts and towers, and reportedly forced certain stations to cease broadcasting through threats of violence.[48] By contrast, access to electricity provided less of a constraint, with various respondents (R3, R9, R10, and R14) highlighting that they were adequately supplied with batteries or solar panels. However, this was not universally the case, with one respondent in Middle Juba (R1) noting that access was limited by the sporadic supply of electricity in his district.

Format

In terms of communication format, many of our respondents (R1, R3, R5, R8, R14, and R16) observed that members often listened to Koranic recitals, news, and other broadcasts on stations run by al-Shabaab or affiliated with the insurgents. Of course, this partly reflects the restrictions often imposed by al-Shabaab on other channels, which give certain members few other options. Some respondents (R1, R3, R9, R12, and R15) also reported that they did not listen to music in accordance with local regulations. Among our respondents who were able to access BBC, VOA, and other stations, several (R9, R10, R12, R14, and R15) reported that members often listened to the news or other feature programs. Of key relevance to this study, these frequently included information from political and religious leaders about the amnesty offer available to former members, as well as more in-depth reports on the experiences of those who had already disengaged (as discussed shortly). Notably, only one of our respondents (R1) claimed to have heard dramas or soap operas

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48   KII3.

on the radio depicting al-Shabaab in a negative light, despite this being a central pillar of P/CVE campaigns elsewhere.[49]

Messengers

Regarding messengers, many respondents (R2, R3, R6, R8, R9, R10, R11, and R14) reported hearing current President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and former President Mohamed Abdullahi (widely known as "Farmajo"), discussing the offer of amnesty and the wider National Program. One respondent (R5) reported hearing similar content from Mukhtar Robow, a former deputy leader of al-Shabaab who is Somalia's Minister of Religious Affairs at the time of writing. Another (R2) heard these same themes discussed by the Nairobi-based Sheikh Umal, who once supported the insurgents but now explains the illegitimacy of their cause through reference to Islamic texts. Of course, many journalists and other broadcasters also play a key role in publicizing disengagement pathways from al-Shabaab. While the names of these were often unknown to the respondents, one notable exception was Harun Maruf (as specifically named by R8 and R12) who hosts a popular talk show on VOA. Former members of al-Shabaab provide one final category of messenger worthy of attention, with these "formers" talking about their successful reintegration on VOA (R2) and SNA radio (R1).

Content

In terms of communication content, our respondents (R1, R2, and R5) reported that sources such as Robow, Umal, and the SNA's "Armed Voices" program delivered counter narratives (as described in Section 2). For instance, these focused on how the insurgents misinterpret the Koran, the extent to which they harm local communities, and how al-Shabaab commanders reportedly do not send their own children to battle. All of the messengers discussed above also described personal benefits associated with leaving the insurgents, including the rehabilitation and reintegration services offered through the National Program, opportunities to reunite with families, and so on. In a limited number of cases, discussions of such "carrots" were also accompanied by the "stick" of possible punishment for those failing to surrender. For instance, a tax collector in Middle Shabelle (R6) reported that President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's radio broadcasts incorporate this penance motif. Finally, beyond focusing on why individuals should leave al-Shabaab, cer-

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49   Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism through Media*.

tain radio communications also offered practical guidance on how to defect and surrender to state forces. For instance, such content was reportedly included by Harun Maruf and the SNA in their respective programs.

Influence

Beyond merely being heard by respondents, our data clearly revealed that radio broadcasts also played a key role in influencing their decisions to escape from al-Shabaab. Indeed, only four respondents (R4, R7, R13, and R16) claimed that radio communications had no direct influence on their disengagement, with the remaining twelve collectively reporting sixteen radio communications of relevance (see Figure 2). This influence was perhaps most pronounced with R2, who claimed to have been heavily influenced by a president (it was unclear which one) describing the amnesty and the wider National Program on the BBC, a VOA broadcast about the reintegration of former al-Shabaab members, and counter narratives provided by Sheikh Umal. Similarly, R8 claimed to have been influenced by Harun Maruf discussing the issue of rehabilitation, and a broadcast on Resala FM about formers who had reintegrated into society. More broadly, our data revealed that successive Somali presidents were the most influential category of radio messengers among our respondents (again, see Figure 2), followed by other political and religious leaders (including Robow and Umal), journalist and broadcasters (including Maruf), and formers. The nature of the highly conversational interviews made it difficult to ascertain which communication content (i.e., counter narratives, "carrots," "sticks," or practical guidance) was most influential in motivating decisions to defect (we return to this topic in Section 5).

Phone Conversations

Access

The majority of our respondents reported not having access to smartphones while with al-Shabaab, with the only exceptions being one respondent (R6) who claimed that these were allowed in *Hizbah* units in his locality, and another (R13) who asserted that military commanders were also entitled to such devices. As with access to radio, our respondents claimed that al-Shabaab restrictions on "traditional" phones varied notably between locations, units, ranks, and over time. Many of those based outside of the *Jabhat* claimed to have had unlimited access to their devices, including two intelligence operatives (R1 and R2) and

Box 4. The Outlier—Said's Story (R7)

Said (a pseudonym) was unique among our sample as being the only respondent to claim that no communications had contributed to his decision to defect. He used to earn a living through trading charcoal, and he demanded compensation from al-Shabaab when the group burnt a substantial proportion of his stock in 2020. The local commander provided him with $200 (United States dollars) in compensation, and encouraged him to earn a living by becoming a member. He claimed that this was his only motive for joining the group, and that he never sympathized with their ideology or aims. He was promoted several times once within the ranks, and eventually commanded a unit of one hundred soldiers in Mudug. One of his solider was severely injured during a battle with the SNA in 2022, and his commander ordered him to kill this individual due to the lack of available medical support. He refused, and instead shot his commander, who was in the process of drawing his own weapon to deal with this insubordination. He also shot two of the commander's security guards, before fleeing with one of his own soldiers. He claimed that he had never previously thought about leaving al-Shabaab.

a tax collector (R6). By contrast, foot soldiers were generally only allowed their 'traditional' phones during limited periods, which provided them with the opportunity to transfer their salaries from al-Shabaab as mobile money, and to have conversations with their families. At one end of the spectrum, some of our respondents claimed that this window lasted for as little as ten minutes (R2) or two hours (R5) per month. Others reported having access to their devices between 08:00 and 15:00 every Thursday and Friday (R13 and R16), or even the entire time while not on operations (R9). While most respondents were allowed to call from their personal phones, one from Mudug (R14) even claimed that members of his unit relied on a common device.

Several other patterns are worthy of mention regarding "traditional" mobile phones. Two respondents (R1 and R12) claimed that their devices were confiscated during their training periods. Reflecting the pattern previously described regarding radios, four others (R11, R12,

R13, and R14) also asserted that they had free access to their phones while on leave from al-Shabaab. Of particular relevance in the context of the ongoing state offensive, two respondents also maintained that al-Shabaab tightened restrictions during times of threat. For instance, one of the foot soldiers claiming to have had access on Thursday and Fridays (R13) reported that during periods of fighting they were restricted to only thirty minutes of phone usage per day, or that they were even entirely banned from making calls. The respondent based in Mudug (R14) also reported that members of his unit had previously been allowed to access their own phones on weekends, but this entitlement was cut by commanders who feared that their signals may be located by drones. In terms of technological limitations, our respondents consistently reported no issues with charging their devices, although three (R3, R9, and R13) reported that coverage was sometimes a problem in remote areas.

Form & Messenger

In the absence of smartphones, communications through "traditional" phones were restricted to calls and SMS messages. While several respondents (R1, R10, R11, R12, R13, and R15) claimed that they were allowed to contact whomever they wanted, the foot soldier based

Box 5. The Influence of the National Program Hotline

The National Program hotline is designed to offer anonymous guidance on how to defect and surrender to the security forces. While many National Program campaigns aim to raise awareness of this service, only one of our respondents (R1) claimed to have had knowledge of its existence while still with al-Shabaab, and he refrained from calling it due to suspicions about its veracity. The wider Serendi data also reveals that only a small percentage of residents rely on this service to facilitate their escape.[1] However, it is worth clarifying that the hotline was also designed to inform government officials, security personnel, families of al-Shabaab members seeking information on their behalf, and so on, and the extent to which it is used by these groups remains unclear.

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1 KII4.

in Mudug (R14) asserted that members of his unit were only permitted to call their parents. Another respondent (R3) added that al-Shabaab explicitly prohibited contact with anyone with access to the government, at least in his locality. In any case, most respondents primarily or exclusively called members of their immediate family when granted the opportunity, including parents, siblings, and wives. Smaller numbers also contacted friends (R15), clan elders (R11), and formers who had already escaped from al-Shabaab (R9, R13, R14, and R15).

Content

Perhaps unsurprisingly, certain respondents (R5 and R15) also reported that al-Shabaab prohibited them from discussing operational details and other sensitive matters. Others added that there were few opportunities to discuss such issues in any case, as calls could only be taken in common areas (R14 and R15), or within listening distance of their commanders (R5 and R10). Nevertheless, a substantial majority of our respondents reported finding ways to discuss the prospects of disengagement with members of their immediate family and others. Several explicitly added that their families provided them with additional motivation to escape from al-Shabaab (as discussed shortly). While less common, some of our respondents also reported how their contacts provided practical guidance on how to disengage from al-Shabaab and surrender to the security forces. For instance, a foot soldier in Lower Shabelle (R9) claimed that his siblings provided him with such information, having obtained it from relatives in the SNA and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). He also received guidance from former colleagues who had defected from al-Shabaab. The commander's guard (R12) likewise reported receiving direction from an uncle in the Somali special forces.[50]

Influence

As with radio communications, it is also clear that phone conversations had a substantial influence on decisions to disengage from al-Shabaab. Indeed, fourteen of our sixteen respondents claimed to have been partly driven to leave by conversations held on the

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50 While not specifically considered in this study, family members and wider clan networks also regularly play a pivotal role in facilitating safe passage with the security forces. See, for instance, Heide-Ottosen et al., *Journeys through Extremism*; and Khalil et al., *The Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab.*

phone (R7 and R10 were the exceptions). As demonstrated in Figure 2, the most common influencers were parents. For instance, a member of the military police (R3) observed that he had been highly motivated by his mother's pleas for him to exit the group, as she was worried about his personal safety. A foot soldier in Middle Shabelle (R4) similarly reported how his parents effectively "ordered" him to leave al-Shabaab to fulfil his responsibilities at home, including tending to the animals. Other respondents were heavily influenced by their siblings, spouses, and other close relatives. Of course, we should not overlook that certain family members maintain sympathy for al-Shabaab (as was the case with relatives of R5 and R7), with some even encouraging members to continue their involvement with the group. One final category of messenger worth specific attention is formers, with several of our respondents noting how this group provided reassurances about the National Program from their own personal experiences.

Social Media

Although access to social media was considerably less common than radio or phones, it also varied substantially between locations, units, and ranks. For instance, an intelligence operative (R1) claimed that he had accessed the internet with no restrictions while in Mogadishu, but that only "big people" from al-Shabaab were granted permission in Middle Juba. A driver (R8) similarly maintained that only commanders and those involved in al-Shabaab's media operations were allowed access in Hiran. Yet, certain members also found ways to overcome such restrictions, despite the threat of punishment. This included a foot soldier in Middle Shabelle (R15) who occasionally visited a village near his base, where he would borrow a smartphone from members of the community. Of perhaps even greater relevance, two *Jabhat* members (R5 and R9) reported that they had free access to the internet while on leave. Al-Shabaab's restrictions aside, many of our respondents also highlighted how coverage issues prevented their access. This included a member of the military police (R3) who claimed that in Middle Shabelle and Galmudug the internet was only available in coastal regions. Three of our respondents (R1, R2 and R3) alleged that such issues were partly caused by al-Shabaab threatening internet providers into withdrawing coverage.

In terms of the messengers that our respondents accessed via social media, the intelligence operative in Mogadishu (R1) followed the Speaker of the SNA Military Court on Facebook, who posted content about defectors receiving amnesty and the National Program hotline. A military commander based in Middle Shabelle (R5) found information on Facebook (he was unsure which account) about former colleagues who had successfully defected from al-Shabaab, providing him with reassurances that he could perhaps do the same.[51] Two further respondents (R6 and R9) reported also having witnessed social media posts about the disengagement process, but they were unable to recall any significant details. In any case, only three of our respondents (R1, R5, and R6) claimed that social media content had any real influence on their decisions to defect, which is substantially lower than the equivalent number for radio broadcasts and phone conversations (see Figure 2). However, what remains unclear is the extent to which social media influenced our respondents *indirectly*, by motivating or informing their family members and other communications intermediaries (we return to this issue in Section 5).

Television Broadcasts

Access to television was even less common than to social media, again due to a combination of al-Shabaab restrictions and coverage issues. Only three of our respondents reported accessing this source while still with the group, including during their leave periods. The commander's guard (R12) claimed to have seen televisions in an *Amniyat* base (the location of this was unclear), where the residents watched jihadist propaganda and music videos.[52] The intelligence operative based in Mogadishu (R1) reported seeing a drama on Somali National Television (SNTV) with storylines about al-Shabaab abuses and escapes from the organization, although he added that he was "not interested" in this production. Finally, the member of the military police (R3) claimed that he saw reports about former members of al-Shabaab on Gungar TV, but he added that this did not influence his perceptions as he remained heavily motivated by their ideology at that time. In sum, none of our respondents claimed that television broadcasts had any direct influence on their decisions to defect, as compared to twelve for radio broadcasts, fourteen for phone

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51 Another commander interviewed for our parallel "Off-Ramp" research claimed that NISA made him record a video about his escape from al-Shabaab, which they then uploaded to the internet. See Khalil et al., *The Off-Ramp from Al-Shabaab*.

52 It remained unclear why al-Shabaab permitted music videos in this base, when they routinely prohibited them via the radio (as described earlier).

conversations, and three for social media content (see Figure 2). However, as with social media, what remains unclear is the extent to which television broadcasts influenced our respondents *indirectly*, by motivating or informing their families and other intermediaries.

Leaflets

Despite being a mainstay of similar campaigns elsewhere,[53] leaflets designed to encourage exit from al-Shabaab were even less common. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which the many national and international agencies involved in relevant campaigns actually rely on leaflets (see Section 5), the only respondent to have witnessed these firsthand was the commander's guard (R12), while operating in Toora Toorow in Lower Shabelle. According to his recollections, the leaflets he saw were predominantly yellow, contained text in both Somali and Arabic, and featured a vehicle. He also reported that al-Shabaab made multiple arrests over these, claiming that they had been distributed by "spies" (suggesting that they were not dropped from the air as is often the case). Local al-Shabaab leaders tasked the *Amniyat* with collecting and burning these documents. Three of our other respondents (R11, R13, and R14) claimed to have heard about leaflets dropped elsewhere (with one specifying Dhobley in Gedo region), but without having personally witnessed them. As with television shows, none of our respondents claimed that leaflets had any direct influence on their decisions to defect. Again, what remains unclear is if leaflet campaigns influenced our respondents *indirectly*, by motivating or informing their families or other intermediaries.

Face-to-Face Conversations

Communications with members of the local community were also limited, both by regulations imposed by al-Shabaab and mutual mistrust. Three individuals from our sample emphasized the extent to which contact with the local population was integral to their particular roles, including a military commander (R5), a tax collector (R6), and an administrator (R10). The remainder generally focused on how such communications were discouraged or even prohibited by the insurgents. In particular, several of our respondents observed

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53   See, for instance, Khalil, Iwara, and Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism*, 23.

that they were not allowed to talk to community members about politics or operational matters (R4, R7, and R15), and that those violating such restrictions faced imprisonment or transfer to other locations (R2, R3, R13, and R14). The commander's guard (R12) also emphasized how restrictions were tightened during periods of combat. Yet, as with the other channels discussed above, certain members were willing to break the rules. This included a foot soldier based in Lower Shabelle (R9) who received food and other supplies from community members. Even more daringly, a military commander in Bay and Hiran (R16) asked locals to identify government-controlled villages to enable his defection.

Many of our respondents also emphasized the extent to which communications with members of the community were inhibited by trust issues. Although several (R8, R9, R11, and R14) claimed that they were largely free to interact with locals while on leave from al-Shabab, this rarely translated into open dialogue due to concerns that these individuals may transmit the content of their conversations back to the organization. By way of elaboration, a foot soldier from Middle Shabelle (R9) added that most community members from his home location were at least somewhat sympathetic to the insurgents. An intelligence operative (R1) added that he deliberately avoided engaging with community members in Middle Juba as that may have increased the chances of them being able to identify him at a later date. These trust issues were mutual, with several of our respondents (R4, R5, and R11) observing that many local people also avoided engaging with members of al-Shabaab. The net result was that the conversations that did occur were often limited to relatively benign topics. A notable exception was described by the al-Shabaab administrator (R10), who recalled having face-to-face conversations with clan elders in his community who influenced his decision to defect (see Figure 2).

DISCUSSION & CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the above findings, this final section further explores the extent to which communications campaigns influenced our respondents to disengage. It also critiques the commonly applied P/CVE distinction between counter and alternative narratives, before presenting an alternative classification system that better reflects the content of communications in this context.

Research Limitations

Before elaborating further on our findings, it is important to consider three factors that constrain our ability to draw firm conclusions. First, for the obvious security reasons, our study selects on the dependent variable due to our inability to access individuals who remained with al-Shabaab.[54] This limits the extent to which we can draw concrete findings about the influence of radio broadcasts featuring Somali presidents, for instance, as we cannot say for certain if our sample was more (or potentially less) likely to have heard these, as compared to members who are still with al-Shabaab. Second, our ability to draw firm conclusions is also limited by our lack of knowledge about the communications habits of family members and other communications intermediaries. For instance, while we can observe that dramas and soap operas had no *direct* effect on our respondents, it is plausible that they may have influenced them *indirectly* through these social contacts. Finally, our ability to draw conclusions was also constrained by the scarcity of information about the wider communications ecology. Considering leaflets as an example, it is unclear whether none of our respondents reported being influenced by these as this method was largely ineffective, or simply because few agencies have recently distributed them. Such issues arise due to a lack of transparency and communication between the many national and

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54   This methodological issue is discussed in greater detail in Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists."

international agencies involved in such campaigns.[55] With such issues in mind, we present our findings as relating specifically to our sample of respondents, rather than al-Shabaab defectors more broadly.

The Influence of Communications

Given the scarcity of robust data demonstrating the effectiveness of P/CVE communications, the most notable finding from this study was that all our respondents claimed that communications helped encourage or facilitate their exits from al-Shabaab, with only one exception (R7). Of course, it is worth reiterating that National Program campaigns mainly (but not exclusively) aim to encourage individuals already inclined to leave al-Shabaab, rather than deradicalize ideologues in their ranks. Echoing findings from earlier research at Serendi,[56] this study revealed in particular the extent to which family members often play a key role in motivating disengagement through phone conversations. It also showed the importance of radio broadcasts featuring political leaders, with Presidents Farmajo and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as the most influential. This contradicts a prevailing opinion among communications experts that state actors frequently lack influence due to credibility issues (see Section 2). Our research also revealed the importance of formers, who achieved influence both through recounting their 'success stories' of disengagement and reintegration on the radio, and by convincing members to disengage directly through private phone conversations. Other communications messengers and channels were of far less relevance to our sample.

Communications Content

This research also demonstrated that the "content" dimension of communications remains poorly conceptualized, at least in relation to disengagement. In particular, we found that the commonly applied distinction between counter and alternative narratives was of little relevance to the subject at hand. As discussed in Section 2, while the former are reactive and confrontational responses to the narratives of violent extremists, the latter are consid-

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55   KII3.

56   Khalil et al., *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*.

ered to be those that promote the contrasting values of their state or international adversaries.[57] Yet, despite the inherent appeal of this binary distinction, it actually *excludes* most messages used within campaigns to promote disengagements from al-Shabaab. In particular, it omits communications about personal incentives to entice exits from al-Shabaab ("carrots"), such as opportunities to benefit from the state amnesty, and the services offered through the National Program, as well as threats of punishment for those failing to voluntarily disengage ("sticks"). It also neglects communications designed to provide practical guidance on how to disengage from al-Shabaab and surrender to the security forces. Furthermore, none of our respondents reported witnessing content corresponding to the concept of alternative narratives, as interpreted above. As such, based on the communications identified in Figure 2, we propose an alternative categorization system in Table 2 that classifies communications in relation to their aims. We present this system to inform the design of future campaigns, and as a framework for analyzing their effectiveness.

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57   Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes*; and Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism through Media*, 7–8.

Table 2. An Expanded Classification System of Communications Content

Aims	Examples
Discredit the objectives or approach of al–Shabaab (counter narratives)	• The "Armed Voices" program discussing how al-Shabaab misinterprets the Koran and how they hurt the Somali families they claim to represent (R1). • Mukhtar Robow asserting that al-Shabaab commanders do not send their own children into battle (R5). • Members of Parliament posting that al-Shabaab do not follow true Islam and that they are responsible for killing youth (R6).
Promote the values of actors opposed to al–Shabaab (alternative narratives)	*No examples were identified. Depending on context, these communications may revolve around notions such as citizenship, human rights, tolerance, inclusion, etc.*
Motivate exit through personal incentives & disincentives	• An unnamed government official highlighting the amnesty for defectors (R1). • A VOA feature program presenting "success stories" about former al-Shabaab members who had reintegrated into society (R2). • The sisters of a respondent convincing him that he would be better able to care for his family outside of al-Shabaab (R5). • President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud highlighting not only that al-Shabaab defectors may be eligible for amnesty, but also that those who are captured will be punished (R6).
Provide practical guidance on exit & surrendering	• An unnamed government official raising awareness of the hotline designed to provide guidance on defecting and surrendering to security forces (R1). • The "Armed Voices" program on SNA radio providing practical advice on surrendering to security forces (R1). • Harun Maruf discussing how to leave al-Shabaab on his 'Galka Barista' program (R8). • An uncle of one respondent giving him instructions on where to surrender and how to travel there (R12).

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

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

→ **Continue to rely on communications through radio and phone conversations:** While practitioners should continue to assess the comparative importance of other channels, particular given the rapidly evolving nature of communications technology, efforts to reach current al-Shabaab members should continue to revolve primarily around radio and phone conversations. Despite the fact that al-Shabaab restricts access to these channels (e.g., limiting the radio broadcasts that member can access, and restricting the usage of phones), our respondents reported that these remain by far the most accessible. In part, this is because many members discreetly break these restrictions, and they are in any case substantially relaxed while members are on leave. Only a minority of our respondents reported issues of coverage for radio broadcasts and phone conversations, with access to electricity being even less of an issue.

→ **Continue to leverage political leaders and families as key messengers:** Those responsible for campaigns should also continue to rely on political leaders and al-Shabaab family members as key communicators. As noted, the former (particularly Presidents Farmajo and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud) helped influence half of our respondents to disengage by raising awareness of the National Program through radio broadcasts. Even more notably, family members helped encourage and facilitate thirteen of our sixteen respondents to exit through phone conversations. Those tasked with designing communications campaigns should continue to treat the latter as key intermediaries by informing them about the provisions available to defectors through the National Program, as well as how members should disengage and surrender.

→ **Continue to explore the possibility of communications through formers:** Our research also revealed the importance of formers, who achieved influence both

through recounting their "success stories" of disengagement and reintegration on the radio, and by convincing members to disengage directly through private phone conversations. Of course, we should not overlook the practical and ethical issues associated with communications through formers, including how such efforts have the potential to expose them to an increased risk of being targeted by their past colleagues.

→ **Adopt the revised classification system of communications content:** Although widely applied by P/CVE practitioners, the distinction between counter and alternative narratives excludes most messages used in campaigns to promote disengagements from al-Shabaab. We suggest that those responsible for communications should adopt our alterative classification system to help frame the design of their campaigns, and as a framework through which to analyze their effectiveness. Aside from incorporating efforts to discredit the objectives and approach of al-Shabaab, our system includes communications designed to motivate disengagement through personal incentives (e.g., offers of amnesty and rehabilitation) and disincentives (e.g., the threat of punishment for those failing to surrender). It also incorporates content designed to explain *how* members of al-Shabaab should disengage and surrender, including through safe passage.

→ **Increase information flows from former al-Shabaab members to campaign designers:** While those tasked with designing campaigns reported having some access to former members of al-Shabaab in the National Program, donors and government officials should strengthen this connection as a matter of priority. For instance, this may involve allowing these designers to pre-test their planned campaigns through focus group discussions with current residents of Serendi and other facilities. It may also involve allowing designers to insert questions about communications into the instruments used to collect data from recent defectors, with this then helping them to identify which of their campaigns have the most influence.

→ **Conduct additional research with family members:** Given the extent to which campaigns to promote disengagement rely on family members as intermediaries, we also strongly recommend the need for additional research with parents, siblings, spouses, and other family members. As with this study, such research

should focus on their access to channels, the nature of communications on these channels, and which communication "types" most often influence them to encourage the exit of al-Shabaab members. Such research could also be used to validate the emphasis currently placed on the hotline, and to inform decisions about how to raise awareness of this service. The relevant stakeholders should also consider funding research to better understand communications that influenced the disengagement of minors, female al-Shabaab members, and others not specifically considered by this study.

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ANNEX 1: 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?

2. When did you join al-Shabaab?

3. What was your role with al-Shabaab? Did this change over time? Please elaborate.

4. Where were you based with al-Shabaab? Did this change over time? Please elaborate.

5. Did you get annual leave or holiday from al-Shabaab? How often? How much?

6. When did you leave al-Shabaab?

7. How did you leave al-Shabaab?

8. Why did you leave al-Shabaab?

9. Were you ever sympathetic to the ideology and objectives of al-Shabaab?

Radio

10. Did you listen to the radio while you were with al-Shabaab? How often? When? What stations? What did you listen to (news, music, sports, Koran, anything else)?

11. Did al-Shabaab restrict what you could listen to? In what ways? Did these restrictions change over time or between locations? Why?

12. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

13. Were there other things that restricted your ability to listen to the radio, e.g., in relation to coverage, electricity, etc.?

14. Was it easier to access the radio when you were on leave from al-Shabaab?

Phones

15. Did you have access to phones while you were with al-Shabaab? How often? When? Who did you usually speak to? Were these simple or smart phones? Were you able to access the internet through your phone?

16. Did al-Shabaab impose any restrictions on phone usage, e.g., how often you could use them, when you could use them, who you could communicate with, what you could talk about, etc.? Did these restrictions change over time or between locations? Why?

17. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

18. Were there other things that restricted your ability to use phones, e.g., in relation to coverage, electricity, etc.?

19. Was it easier to use your phone when you were on leave from al-Shabaab?

Internet

20. Did you have access to the internet when you were with al-Shabaab? How often? What devices did you use? What sort of websites or social media did you normally use? Did you communicate with anyone via the internet? Who?

21. Did al-Shabaab impose any restrictions on internet usage, e.g., how often you could use it, when you could use it, who you could communicate with, what websites you could use, etc.? Did these restrictions change over time or between locations? Why?

22. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

23. Were there other things that restricted your ability to listen to internet, e.g., a lack of coverage or electricity?

24. Was it easier to access the internet when you were on leave from al-Shabaab?

Leaflets

25. What about leaflets dropped from planes, helicopters, or drones, or that were distributed in some other way? How often did you see these? Where? Can you describe them?

26. What would happen if a commander saw someone with a leaflet? Did this change over time? Why?

27. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

Local Communities

28. Was there a local community near to where you were based with al-Shabaab? Did you talk to many people from the local community? Why/why not? What did you talk about? How often?

29. Did al-Shabaab impose any restrictions on your communications with local communities, e.g., who you could talk to, what you could talk to them about, etc.? Did these restrictions change over time or between locations? Why?

30. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

31. Where you able to communicate with the local community when you were on leave from al-Shabaab? What did you discuss?

Other Sources

32. Aside from the ones we have already discussed, did you have access to any other sources of information about the outside world while with al-Shabaab? Did you gain information from television, newspapers and magazines, posters, and so on? What source? How often did you access it?

33. Did al-Shabaab impose any restrictions on the use of this source? Please elaborate.

34. Did you or others ever break these restrictions secretly? What would happen if someone was caught breaking these restrictions?

35. Were there other things that restricted your ability to use this source?

36. Did you have better access to this source when you were on leave from al-Shabaab?

Influence of Communications

37. Did you know about Serendi or the broader amnesty program ('forgiveness program') before you left al-Shabaab? How did you hear about it? What had you heard?

38. Did you ever hear anything on the radio that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to leave al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication)? Did you ever hear any of the following on the radio: (a) the president or other political or religious leaders encouraging you to leave, (b) stories about former members who had left and reintegrated into the community, (c) plays/dramas/poetry/songs on the radio that focused on leaving al-Shabaab.

39. Did you ever have any conversations with someone on the phone that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to think about leaving al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication)? Who? Did they offer practical advice on how to leave? Where did they get that information from?

40. Did you ever see anything on the internet or TV that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to think about leaving al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication)? Was this a news source, an official website, a social media post, a show (e.g., Gungar), etc.?

41. Did you ever communicate with anyone on the internet that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to think about leaving al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication)? Who?

42. Did you ever have any conversations with local community members that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to think about leaving al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication)? Who?

43. Did you ever come across any other source that made you think about leaving al-Shabaab or that encouraged you to think about leaving al-Shabaab (if yes, complete the table at the bottom of this instrument for this communication). For instance, these

may include leaflets, posters, the news (where did the see/hear the news), magazines or newspapers, etc.

The Hotline

44. When you left al-Shabaab, did you know where to surrender, and who to surrender to? How did you know that?

45. Were you aware that there was a hotline for members of al-Shabaab to call for advice on leaving the group? How did you learn about the helpline?

46. Did you ever call the hotline? Why/why not?

47. What information you received or exchange through the hotline?

Complete box for each communication identified as making respondent think about leaving al-Shabaab, or encouraging them to leave.	
Channel	Which channel (including specific TV, radio stations, etc.) was this communication on?
Form	What form did the communication take?
Messenger	Who was the messenger? Did the respondent trust this messenger?
Content	What was the content of the communication? Was it a narrative or message? Did it focus on why and/or how to surrender? Did it prompt the respondent to do something, e.g., call a phoneline?
Perceptions	What did the respondent think of the communication? Did it help encourage or facilitate their exit from al-Shabaab?

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