Phase 5: Case Studies of Violent Extremism Disengagement in Nigeria and Somalia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The final component of RESOLVE's Community-based Armed Groups (CBAGs) research initiative is a set of case studies on pathways for disengagement from violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Much like CBAGs, exiting from VEOs and reintegrating into the local community is typically a fraught experience, full of stigma and mistrust. Yet, more attention has been paid to developing structured programs to help members seeking to leave VEOs. Policymakers and practitioners typically turn to structured programs, sometimes referred to as Violent Extremism Disengagement and Reconciliation (VEDR) programs, to provide a safe and accessible pathway out of violence, with psychosocial support to enable rehabilitation and re-integration. The findings and lessons learned from former extremists participating in these programs can provide an illustrative model for similar disengagement initiatives for the members of CBAGs, increasing the options available for Engagement, Management, and Transformation (EMT) interventions.

RESOLVE commissioned two case studies to examine the trajectories of former VEO members in East and West Africa. In *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits into Boko Haram*, authors James Khalil, MaryAnne Iwara and Martine Zeuthen conducted research at Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), a program established in 2016 by the Nigerian state to provide an off-ramp for members of Boko Haram[1] and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) deemed 'low risk' by military intelligence. Located at Mallam Sidi on the outskirts of Gombe, the OPSC program houses cohorts of around six hundred people at a time, and provides tailored service such as basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, and various other activities. The research team interviewed thirteen OPSC 'clients' (as they are referred to by the program) who had been forcibly recruited into Boko Haram, and were purposively selected to capture variance in their former roles within the group. The team focused on how they entered the organization, the conditions they experienced in camps and settlements, their exits from the group, their subsequent experiences in state hands, and their perspectives about future reintegration.

In *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, authors Sif Heide-Ottosen, Yahye Abdi, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, James Khalil, & Martine Zeuthen applied the *Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism* to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. The ABC Model provided a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories as they relate to an individual's sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism, offering a platform to explore a broad range of factors that drive attitudinal and behavioral change over time[2]. The team employed a life history approach to their

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1 Also referred to, more formally, as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, JAS.*

2 James Khalil, John Horgan & Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, Is. 3 (2022).

interviews with thirteen former members of al-Shabaab, to gather granular insights from their experiences to inform the design of interventions to prevent further recruitment and facilitate disengagements from the group.

Taken together, these studies deliver granular insights about how and why VEO members participate in these groups, starting from their recruitment and including key decision points about their level of engagement throughout, as well as their experiences in VEDR programs. Their journeys provide an initial set of lessons learned for future programs seeking to facilitate disengagement and reconciliation.

Findings

A key finding across both case studies was the extent to which the personal journeys of former VEO members varied. Their experiences spanned a broad spectrum, from how they became involved in these organizations, to their experiences within their respective groups, and their modes of disengagement. Together, they illustrate the diverse motivations and mechanisms of VEO participation, while also helping to fill in specific gaps on disengagement from Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. Finally, the findings offer insights into the different programs available for former VEO members.

In both Nigeria and Somalia, the research team found that there was a broad spectrum of motivations and mechanisms for VEO recruitment. This finding is particularly notable in the case of Nigeria, where all the respondents reported being coercively recruited into Boko Haram, but in different ways. For example, one respondent reported being forced to join by a relative who held him at gunpoint, while others reported being captured during raids of their towns or villages. Once in the group, they took on a variety of military and civilian roles, with a great deal of fluidity between them, and lived in camps and settlements with dramatically different living conditions, including the availability of basic supplies and extent of religious instruction.

This case contrasts with the experiences of those in Somalia, where at least some respondents chose to join al-Shabaab, although again for a variety of reasons. Some respondents claimed to have been at least partly motivated to enlist by support for the group's ideology and aims, while others desired protection against other armed actors, the desire for revenge, or financial incentives. The researchers found that in-person social networks also play a key role on the pathway into al-Shabaab, notably through connections with relatives and friends, and that territorial control effectively caused some to become absorbed into the group. Notably, the study also found that some only became sympathetic to al-Shabaab's ideology after they joined, highlighting the extent to which training and socialization can generate a sense of purpose and belonging.

When it came to exiting the groups, both case studies found that leaving posed a serious risk to members. For those who had been forced to join Boko Haram, fear presented a key obstacle to disengagement. Many identified state-sponsored communications campaigns via radio, leaflet drops from planes, and personal phone calls as highly influential in motivating and facilitating their exits from Boko Haram. While

their routes out of the group were as varied as their ways in, they typically fled in groups of between five and twenty people, often accompanied by their wives and children, with two recounting that their exit parties numbered over a hundred. Most accounts involved nighttime escapes, and long journeys to facilities where they could surrender to security forces.

In the case of al-Shabaab, respondents reported facing similar difficulties in exiting the group. Many took months or even years to leave, often under the threat of death. Prior arrangements for safe passage with security forces before disengagement, typically facilitated by members of the family or wider clan, were instrumental to their exits. However, the research also revealed a few instances where al-Shabaab permitted individuals to leave freely on medical and compassionate grounds.

Another key difference in the Somalia case study was the importance of attitudinal change prior to departure. Unlike the respondents in the Nigeria case study, some of the Somalia respondents joined willingly, and others became sympathetic to the group's ideology after joining. However, most respondents asserted that they were 'very strongly opposed to al-Shabaab' at the point of their departure, highlighting how prior attitude changes often provoke disengagement. These opinions were influenced by the group's poor treatment of the local community, including instances of extortion, physical punishments, and killings.

Finally, the case study in Nigeria offered critical insights into the experiences of forced recruits in disengagement program. The initial processing point for those who have left Boko Haram, Giwa Barracks, came up as a weak point in the state-sponsored pathway for many respondents. Some reported being detained there for up to five years, and one respondent reported that the conditions were extremely poor, including issues of overcrowding, sleeping on a concrete floor, and periods of up to two months without a shower. This reputation of Giwa Barracks, further tarnished by allegations of human rights abuses and false confessions, is likely to disincentivize disengagement[3]. Further, the study's findings suggest that the screening criteria used at Giwa to determine eligibility for OPSC is overly exclusive, such that nearly all participants were forced recruits. While further research would be needed to validate this finding, such a threshold would disqualify individuals who were initially driven to join by adventure, status, economic incentives, or peer pressure, individuals who do not necessarily represent a threat to public safety and may not have been sufficiently involved in the group to warrant referral to the judicial system. Taken together, these shortcomings highlight important barriers to disengagement, even for forced recruits actively seeking opportunities to leave Boko Haram.

Conclusion

The two VEDR case studies in the CBAGs initiative provide insight into the key factors that influence disengagement for VEO members in East and West Africa, providing a framework for similar programs geared toward CBAGs. The findings from both illustrate the highly varied nature of pathways into and

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3   While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the validity of these claims, the reputation is well-known and likely to influence the attitudes and behaviors of those seeking to disengage from Boko Haram.

out of violence, but they also reveal common factors, such as the importance of social networks and territorial control. The case of al-Shabaab highlights further how the sympathies of members toward group ideologies and objectives can change in response to their experiences, and how these changes may precede disengagement. The case of Boko Haram underscores how difficult exiting a VEO can be even for those who have been forcibly recruited, and offers further lessons on the obstacles that they face from state-supported programs.

While there are key differences between VEOs and CBAGs, there are also many overlaps between them, including the challenges and stigma that can exist for disengagement. Some interventions seek to formalize CBAGs into legitimate security and justice providers, or incorporate them into hybrid security arrangements negotiated with the state, but this is not appropriate in all cases. An approach centered on disengagement and reconciliation provides an alternative route for those seeking to reintegrate into their communities without violence.

This set of research concludes the RESOLVE Network's initiative to map, understand, and provide recommendations for engaging, managing, and transforming CBAGs in sub-Saharan Africa. Future research initiatives will seek to connect these findings to further study on mechanisms for disengagement and local peacebuilding initiatives, focusing on community level conflict dynamics and pathways toward peace and security.

RESEARCH REPORTS

Khalil, James, MaryAnne Iwara, & Martine Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram*. Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2022. https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.2.

Heide-Ottosen, Sif, Yahye Abdi, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, James Khalil, & Martine Zeuthen, *Journeys through Extremism: The Experiences of Former Members of Al-Shabaab*. Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2022. https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.3.

RESOLVE
N E T W O R K

JOURNEYS THROUGH EXTREMISM

The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram

James Khalil, MaryAnne Iwara
and Martine Zeuthen

ABOUT THE REPORT

This study provides exploratory research with forced recruits into Boko Haram, focusing on how they entered the organization, the conditions they experienced in camps and settlements, their exits from the group, their subsequent experiences in state hands, and their perspectives about future reintegration. These themes are particularly pertinent at the time of writing (spring 2022) given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our research was undertaken at Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), which was established in 2016 by the Nigerian state to provide an off-ramp for members of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) deemed to be 'low risk' by military intelligence. We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC 'clients' (as they are referred to by the program) who were purposively selected to achieve variance in their former roles in Boko Haram.

ACRONYMS

CJTF   Civilian Joint Task Force

DDR   Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

DRR   Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

ICG   International Crisis Group

IDP   Internally Displaced Person

IOM   International Organization for Migration

IS   Islamic State

ISS   Institute for Security Studies

ISWAP   Islamic State West Africa Province

JAS   *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*

JIC   Joint Investigating Center

M&E   Monitoring & Evaluation

OPSC   Operation Safe Corridor

PCVE   Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism

USAID   United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction & key findings

This study provides exploratory research with forced recruits into Boko Haram (more formally referred to as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, JAS)*, focusing on how they entered the organization, the conditions they experienced in camps and settlements, their exits from the group, their subsequent experiences in state hands, and their perspectives about future reintegration. These themes are particularly pertinent at the time of writing (spring 2022) given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our research was undertaken at Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), which was established in 2016 by the Nigerian state to provide an off-ramp for members of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) deemed to be 'low risk' by military intelligence. Located at Mallam Sidi on the outskirts of Gombe, the OPSC program houses cohorts of around six hundred clients at any point in time. The services offered are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, and various other activities. However, OPSC certainly is not without controversy, with critics highlighting alleged human rights abuses (primarily at Giwa Barracks where individuals are screened for eligibility, rather than within the Mallam Sidi facility itself), extensive delays in the process, and various other concerns.

We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC 'clients' (as they are referred to by the program) who were purposively selected to achieve variance in their former roles in Boko Haram. Our respondents were male, with their ages ranging from twenty to thirty-four (six were minors at the time of their initial involvement in Boko Haram). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing us to delve into topics of particular interest while also ensuring we covered all core themes. We also conducted interviews with key stakeholders and observed clients participating in psychosocial, vocational, and drug awareness training while receiving a tour of the OPSC facility. Our principal findings include:

- **Key Finding #1: Despite being coercively recruited by Boko Haram, our respondents were forced into involvement through notably different means.**

While our respondents were all forced into involvement with Boko Haram (with one exception), this research revealed the extent to which these journeys varied. For instance, one respondent claimed that his Almajiri teacher escorted his entire class into the bush for involuntary incorporation into the group.[1] Another observed that his uncle tried to persuade him to enlist several times before eventually forcing him to join the group at gunpoint. Others reported that they were essentially captured during Boko Haram raids of their towns and villages, or that they were forced to join when the group seized control of their community. Many claimed that those who attempted to resist this forceable recruitment were killed.

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1   Almajiri schools offer Islamic education for teenagers in Northern Nigeria.

- **Key Finding #2:** Boko Haram assigned our respondents to a wide variety of roles in their camps and settlements, with degrees of fluidity in these posts.

Our respondents included a military commander, members of the military police, foot soldiers, and individuals in a variety of civilian roles (medical officer, trader, tailor, butcher, and handyman). There were relatively high degrees of fluidity between these roles, with certain military respondents also performing civilian tasks on the side. Conversely, some of those in civilian roles were at least occasionally also forced to act as foot soldiers, with one respondent reporting that in his location it was compulsory for all members to actively participate in battle if required.

- **Key Finding #3:** Boko Haram camps and settlements differ dramatically, both in terms of their conditions and in relation to the rules and regulations imposed by the group.

While many respondents reported shortages of food, water, fuel, and medicine in their camps and settlements, others claimed that these remained in plentiful supply (frequently through the plunder of nearby settlements). The extent of ideological training provided by Boko Haram also varied substantially between contexts, with our respondents reporting that their religious guidance lasted anywhere between two weeks and six months. The group's policies and preferences regarding marriage and family life also varied between locations, with certain respondents claiming that the group compelled members to get married, and others asserting that they played no role in such matters.

- **Key Finding #4:** State-sponsored communications campaigns via radio, leaflet drops from planes, and personal phone calls were highly influential in motivating and facilitating the exit of many of our respondents from Boko Haram.

Most respondents claimed to have been aware of rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities available to former members of Boko Haram through radio messaging, leaflets dropped from planes, and (to a lesser extent) phone calls with family members or former members of the group. Some of these respondents accessed these means of communication in secret, as they were formally banned in many camps and settlements. These messaging campaigns highlighted 'success stories' of prior community reintegration after involvement in Boko Haram, and in certain cases suggested suitable routes and locations where members could surrender.

- **Key Finding #5:** The accounts of how individuals were able to leave Boko Haram also varied substantially.

Our respondents typically fled in relatively small groups of between five and twenty people, often accompanied by their wives and children, with two claiming that their exit parties numbered over a hundred. Most accounts involved nighttime escapes, and long journeys to facilities where they could surrender to security forces. Two respondents reported travelling to neighboring Cameroon to surrender, as this presented the most viable route through which to avoid Boko Haram. One claimed that his uncle arranged

for his safe passage with the military, with members of the OPSC team claiming that this occurred relatively often. Another respondent claimed that his escape party was recaptured by Boko Haram, but that they were able to bribe their captors to allow their continued passage.

- **Key Finding #6:** Unsurprisingly, fear represented a key obstacle to disengagement from Boko Haram, with attempts to escape being punishable by death.

Various respondents reported that it took them several years to leave Boko Haram because of the fear that they would be caught and punished, with others providing examples of those who had been put to death for such acts. While less common, other respondents asserted that disengagement was also inhibited by a fear of repercussions by the military and/or the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

- **Key Finding #7:** Giwa Barracks represents a critical weak link in the state-sponsored exit pathway from Boko Haram, undoubtedly disincentivizing many from disengagement.

Disengaged members of Boko Haram are processed and screened at Giwa Barracks, with those deemed to be low-risk then transferred to OPSC. However, the barracks is notorious for human rights abuses, and for extracting false confessions through violence. While our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, there is little doubt that this reputation alone continues to disincentivize disengagement from Boko Haram. Our respondents also reported having been detained at the barracks for up to five years, which undoubtedly also inhibits further disengagements.

- **Key Finding #8:** The screening criteria to determine eligibility for OPSC has seemingly narrowed to the extent that it now excludes individuals who should certainly qualify for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Previous research by USAID revealed that only around 50 percent of prior OPSC clients had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with the remainder motivated by ideology, status, adventure, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on.[2] By contrast, the OPSC management team reported that the current cohort *only* includes individuals who had been forced into involvement, with just one obvious exception. *If* this is correct, this apparent narrowing of eligibility criteria is highly problematic given that it is essentially inconceivable that all those who are now ineligible for OPSC represent a current threat to public safety and/or were sufficiently involved in violence to warrant being referred to the judicial system.

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2   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR) in Northeast Nigeria* (USAID, 2020), 25.

Continued gaps in our knowledge

This research was designed to collect information about personal journeys through Boko Haram. While it provides important insights into the state-sponsored off-ramp from this organization, it was certainly not intended to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the various stages of this process, nor the government's role in their implementation. In particular, there remains scant information about the communications campaigns designed to motivate and facilitate exits from this group, as well as the reception and screening phases that precede OPSC. It is also important to recognize that OPSC represents a single node in a far broader network through which former members of Boko Haram and ISWAP are either returned to their communities or transferred to prisons, depending on the nature of their involvement with these groups. Although the prison-based rehabilitation program has been suitably documented,[3] very little is known about the processing of 'high risk' individuals at a military base in Kainji, Niger State, the Sulhul initiative to facilitate defections of entire units through their commanders, and the recently established IDP camps in Borno State in which many individuals formerly associated with these groups are believed to reside. There is also scant information about the pathways of women through Boko Haram and ISWAP, reflecting the usual gender biases in this field.[4] These represent clear knowledge gaps for donors seeking to support and strengthen these processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research was originally designed as a pilot study to map personal trajectories out of 'Boko Haram' (more formally referred to as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, JAS*) in relation to attitudinal and behavioral changes, drawing on interviews with current clients of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC).[5] However, once at the Mallam Sidi facility where OPSC is implemented, the management team reported that the current cohort (unlike previous ones) only included individuals who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with just one obvious exception. As such, our respondents had been hostile to the group from the outset, resulting in effectively no attitudinal change to measure. This being the case, we adapted the study to conduct exploratory research with this group, focusing on the following key themes:

- Joining Boko Haram

- Roles within the group

- Life under the group

- Leaving the group

- The road to reintegration

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3   This program is described in Atta Barkindo & Shane Bryans, "De-Radicalising Prisoners in Nigeria: Developing a Basic Prison Based De-Radicalisation Programme," *Journal of Deradicalization* 7, (2016), 1–25.

4   Although, see, for instance, International Crisis Group, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency* (ICG, 2016); Hilary Matfess, *Women, and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London: Zed Books, 2017); and Temitope B. Oriola, "'Unwilling Cocoons': Boko Haram's War Against Women," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, Is. 2 (2017): 99–121.

5   This would have relied on the approach outlined in James Khalil, John Horgan & Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, Is. 3 (2022).

Regarding the first four of these themes, this research provides originality through relating personal stories covering a broad range of topics, many of which remain substantially underexplored or are essentially neglected by the literature. On the final theme, it offers up-to-date information (as of spring 2022) about the rapidly evolving OPSC program, drawing from our rarely-granted access to this facility and its clients. Placing our findings in context, Boko Haram has experienced major reversals over recent years, having lost its leader and much of its fighting force (as discussed in the subsequent section). These events have also contributed to mass disengagements from the group,[6] which the current federal and state systems (including OPSC) do not have the capacity to absorb. With such issues in mind, this study is designed to enhance our understanding of personal journeys into and out of violent extremism, with the objective of delivering actionable recommendations relating to disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Following on from this introductory section, we discuss the conflict in northeast Nigeria (Section 2) before outlining our research methodology (Section 3). We then deliver the main research findings (Section 4), with these sequentially covering the five core themes identified above. This is followed by a final discussion and our actionable policy recommendations (Section 5).

2. THE CONTEXT

The rise of Boko Haram

Founded by Mohammed Yusuf in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri in Borno State, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (JAS, more popularly known as 'Boko Haram')[7] was a mass movement long before it turned to violence. While comprised predominantly of individuals from the locally dominant Kanuri ethnic group, the group represents 'a complex organization and a melting pot for a range of identities.'[8] In terms of ideology, it advocates a strict interpretation of Sharia Law, and the rejection of democracy and 'Western' education and influence. As observed by Boko Haram's subsequent leader, Abubakar Shekau:

> This is the area by which education is a source of destruction for our children, our friends, our daughters, and our brothers. This source of destruction is inscribed in the white man's philosophy of writing and the faith of its implementation. Followers of western education have usurped our hearts with a philosophy and method of thinking that is contrary to the demands of Allah.[9]

In November 2008, Borno State launched an anti-banditry program known as Operation Flush II, which Yusuf interpreted as a measure against Boko Haram.[10] In response, in June of the following year he delivered his notorious 'Open Letter to the Federal Government of Nigeria', in which he highlighted supposed

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6   International Crisis Group, *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's Northeast* (ICG, 2022), 6.

7   The formal title translates to 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad.'

8   Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "The Boko Haram Paradox: Ethnicity, Religion and Historical Memory in Pursuit of a Caliphate," in *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa*, ed. James J. Hentz & Hussein Solomon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 54.

9   Quoted in Pieri & Zenn, "The Boko Haram Paradox", 47.

10   Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of An African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 132.

patterns of anti-Muslim violence, and called for an uprising.[11] On July 29, the security forces stormed Yusuf's compound and killed him, alleging that he had been trying to escape in the process.[12]

Having long encouraged Yusuf to follow a more hardline approach, Shekau assumed control of the movement. Between 2009 and its peak in early 2015, Boko Haram expanded its influence across much of northeastern Nigeria and parts of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, to ultimately control an area the size of Belgium.[13] Its attacks have primarily focused on soft targets, including markets, schools, healthcare centers, mosques, churches, police stations, and so on. It is also notorious for the abduction of women and children (with the case of Chibok achieving international notoriety), forced conscription, and child marriages. In March 2015, Shekau pledged loyalty to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), rebranding the organization as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[14] However, in an apparent attempt to distance itself from Boko Haram's extensive violence under Shekau, IS then announced that ISWAP was formally under the control of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (believed by many to be Yusuf's son) the following year.[15] This action prompted Abubakar Shekau to establish a breakaway faction under the group's original name.

ISWAP expanded its power and influence after the split, with some commentators partly attributing this to its greater capacity to deliver governance to local populations. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) claimed in 2019 that 'it has cultivated a level of support among local civilians that Boko Haram never enjoyed and has turned neglected communities in the area and islands in Lake Chad into a source of economic support.'[16] While ISWAP had an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 members at that point, Boko Haram had only 1,500 to 2,000.[17] Also commenting in 2019, Jacob Zenn reported that 'Boko Haram under Shekau's leadership is now a marginalized faction within the insurgency with its base areas relegated mostly to Sambisa Forest, whereas ISWAP is predominant around northern Borno State, in parts of Yobe State, and in southeastern Niger and on the islands of Lake Chad.'[18] Following years of confrontation, ISWAP caught and killed Shekau in Borno State's Sambisa Forest in May 2021. The ICG reports that when ISWAP 'offered him a path to surrender, he detonated a suicide vest, killing himself and wounding ISWAP fighters.'[19]

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11   Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 133-4.

12   Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 138.

13   Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno: Experiences of Footsoldiers and Civilians in Boko Haram 'Caliphate'", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56, no. 4 (2018), 646; & Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 228.

14   Pieri & Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno," 645-647; Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 271-272; & Jason Warner & Stephanie Lizzo, "The 'Boko Haram Disaggregation Problem' and Comparative Profiles of Factional Violence: Challenges, Impacts, and Solutions in the Study of Africa's Deadliest Terrorist Group(s)," *Terrorism & Political Violence*: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2020.1860950

15   Warner & Lizzo, "The 'Boko Haram Disaggregation Problem'"; and Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 276–7.

16   International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province* (ICG, 2019), 25.

17   International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge*, i.

18   Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Factional Feuds: Internal Extremism and External Interventions," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, Is. 3 (2021), 21.

19   International Crisis Group, *After Shekau*, 4.

The state response

The state response to Boko Haram is often characterized as being reliant on excessive and counterproductive force, beginning with the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf. One of the most infamous examples of state brutality occurred in April 2013, when the military allegedly killed over 200 civilians during the 'Baga massacre.'[20] In May 2013, then President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in the worst hit states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, with this lasting until November 2014 when the House of Representatives refused to grant any further extensions. As reported by Alexander Thurston:

> On the ground, the state of emergency translated into mass arrests of young men, especially in May and June 2013. Some raids resulted in deaths on the spot. The security forces took hundreds of other men to two military prisons, Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, and Sector Alpha in Damaturu, a site also known as "Guantanamo." . . . In these prisons, suspected Boko Haram members were often tortured, sometimes to death. Other detainees died of starvation or disease.[21]

The year 2013 also witnessed the emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which are community-based armed groups to which the state still essentially 'outsources' much of its military response.[22] Corresponding with Boko Haram's peak of territorial control in January 2015, Jonathan deployed an intensive military response in the lead-up to national elections.

In 2016 the Nigerian state established OPSC, providing an off-ramp for those wishing to exit Boko Haram and ISWAP. While we discuss this program in more detail below (see Section 4), it is worth briefly introducing its key components for the purposes of the current discussion. Members of these groups who surrender to local security forces are transported to Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri for assessment (with others reportedly transferred to parallel state-run programs). Those deemed to be low-risk are then transferred in 'batches' of several hundred to OPSC at Mallam Sidi camp, located on the outskirts of Gombe. The services offered at Mallam Sidi are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, and various other activities. While OPSC is federally administered, it is the states (supported by various international agencies) that assume responsibility for the subsequent reintegration of clients. As considered in greater detail below (again, see Section 4), this off-ramp is certainly not without controversy, with critics highlighting alleged human rights abuses (particularly at Giwa), extensive delays in the process, and various other concerns.

While the OPSC team frames its intervention in terms of Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR), programs of this nature are often viewed through reference to the Disarmament, Demobilization
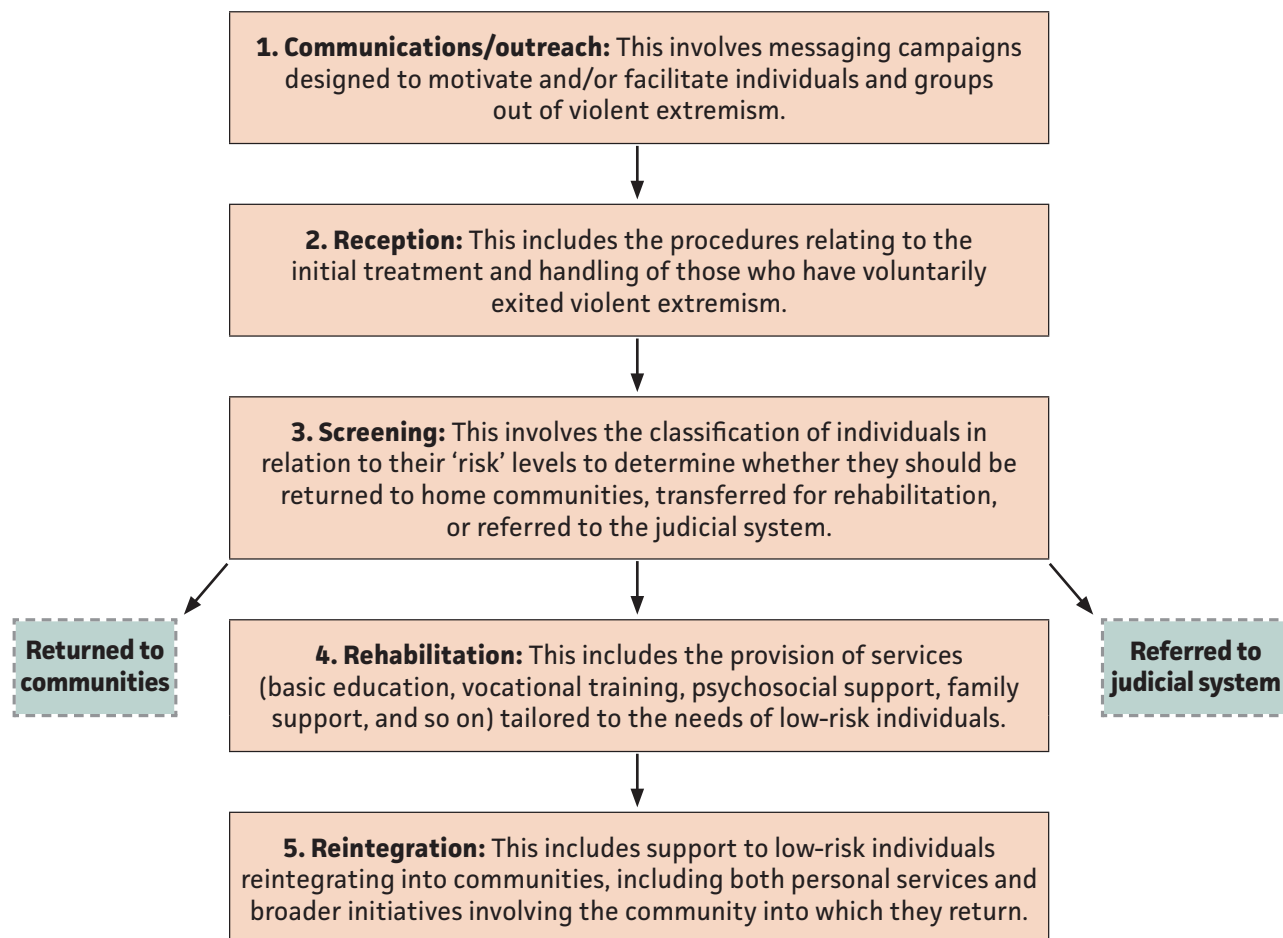
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20   Olabanji Akinola, "The Elusive Quest for Peace: Boko Haram and the Hollowness of Nigeria's Counter-insurgency Strategy and Weak Security Architecture," in *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa*, ed. James J. Hentz & Hussein Solomon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 136; and Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 200.

21   Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 204.

22   Idayat Hassan & Zacharias P. Pieri, "The Rise and Risks of Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force: Implications for Post-Conflict Recovery in North-eastern Nigeria," in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency,* ed. Jacob Zenn (Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, 2018), 74-86; and Thurston *Boko Haram*, 207–224.

Figure 1. Stages of Disengagement, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming

1. Communications/outreach: This involves messaging campaigns designed to motivate and/or facilitate individuals and groups out of violent extremism.

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2. Reception: This includes the procedures relating to the initial treatment and handling of those who have voluntarily exited violent extremism.

↓

3. Screening: This involves the classification of individuals in relation to their 'risk' levels to determine whether they should be returned to home communities, transferred for rehabilitation, or referred to the judicial system.

Returned to communities

4. Rehabilitation: This includes the provision of services (basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family support, and so on) tailored to the needs of low-risk individuals.

Referred to judicial system

↓

5. Reintegration: This includes support to low-risk individuals reintegrating into communities, including both personal services and broader initiatives involving the community into which they return.

and Reintegration (DDR) lens.[23] The DDR framework was originally designed for contexts in which sustained peace agreements had been achieved, but its scope gradually expanded to also include environments of ongoing conflict, such as Nigeria.[24] The OPSC team also draws insight from programs designed to rehabilitate violent extremists in correctional settings, with a key stakeholder interviewed for this research (S1) even observing that the services offered at Mallam Sidi were modelled on those provided by the Nigerian prison program. Yet, while it is important to draw certain 'lessons learned' from external interventions such as these, it is also necessary to acknowledge limits in the extent to which they represent the most pertinent of frameworks. In particular, it is worth noting that DDR and prison-based programs offer little or no guidance on how to design outreach campaigns to encourage exits from groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, or the reception of individuals once they have disengaged. With such issues in mind, we adopt the five-stage model presented in Figure 1 to help frame the discussions throughout this paper. This draws heavily from Somalia's 'National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants',[25] and is intended specifically for contexts of active insurgency.

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23   For instance, see USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*.

24   Robert Muggah & Chris O'Donnell, "Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015), 1–12.

25   As described 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).

3. METHODOLOGY

As already observed, this research was originally designed as a pilot study to map personal trajectories out of Boko Haram in relation to attitudinal and behavioral changes, drawing on interviews with current OPSC clients. However, once at the Mallam Sidi facility where OPSC is implemented, the management team reported that the current cohort of clients (unlike previous ones) only included individuals who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with just one obvious exception. In practice, this meant that our respondents had been extremely hostile to Boko Haram from the outset, resulting in effectively no attitudinal change to measure. As such, we adapted the study to conduct exploratory research with this group, focusing on the following key themes:

- Joining Boko Haram

- Roles within the group

- Life under the group

- Leaving the group

- The road to reintegration

We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC clients in March 2022 (we label these C1 to C13 throughout the remainder of this report), whose approximate timelines prior to their arrival at Mallam Sidi are mapped in Figure 2. These interviewees were male, with their ages ranging from twenty to thirty-four (six were minors at the time of their initial involvement in Boko Haram). With support from the OPSC team, we purposively selected respondents to achieve variance in relation to their former roles within Boko Haram (as described in Section 4).[26] Our Research Assistant translated twelve of the interviews between English and Hausa, with an OPSC translator assisting in the remaining case with translation from Kanuri. The instrument (which was redesigned on the first day following the issues described above) was semi-structured, allowing us to delve into areas of specific interest while also covering the key themes. We collected extensive notes during the interviews, rather than record them, to help provide a comfortable environment in which the respondents were forthright and open. We also conducted interviews with four key stakeholders (we label these S1 to S4), and the OPSC team provided us with a tour of the facilities, which allowed us to observe clients participating in vocational training and drug awareness training.

Regarding research ethics, we introduced ourselves to the respondents prior to the interviews, and presented the purposes of the study (see Appendix A). We also clarified that the process was entirely voluntary, and that they were free to skip particular questions or even to conclude the interview early for any reason. We asked the respondents to provide verbal consent prior to the interview, explaining that this involved accepting our use of information they offered in anonymized form. Throughout the interviews we attempted to avoid questions that could retraumatize the respondents, particularly given they had

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26   The OPSC management team maintains case files that include such information, but we were not granted access to these during the research.

Figure 2. Respondent Timelines (Approximate)

With Boko Haram | Resident at Giwa Barracks
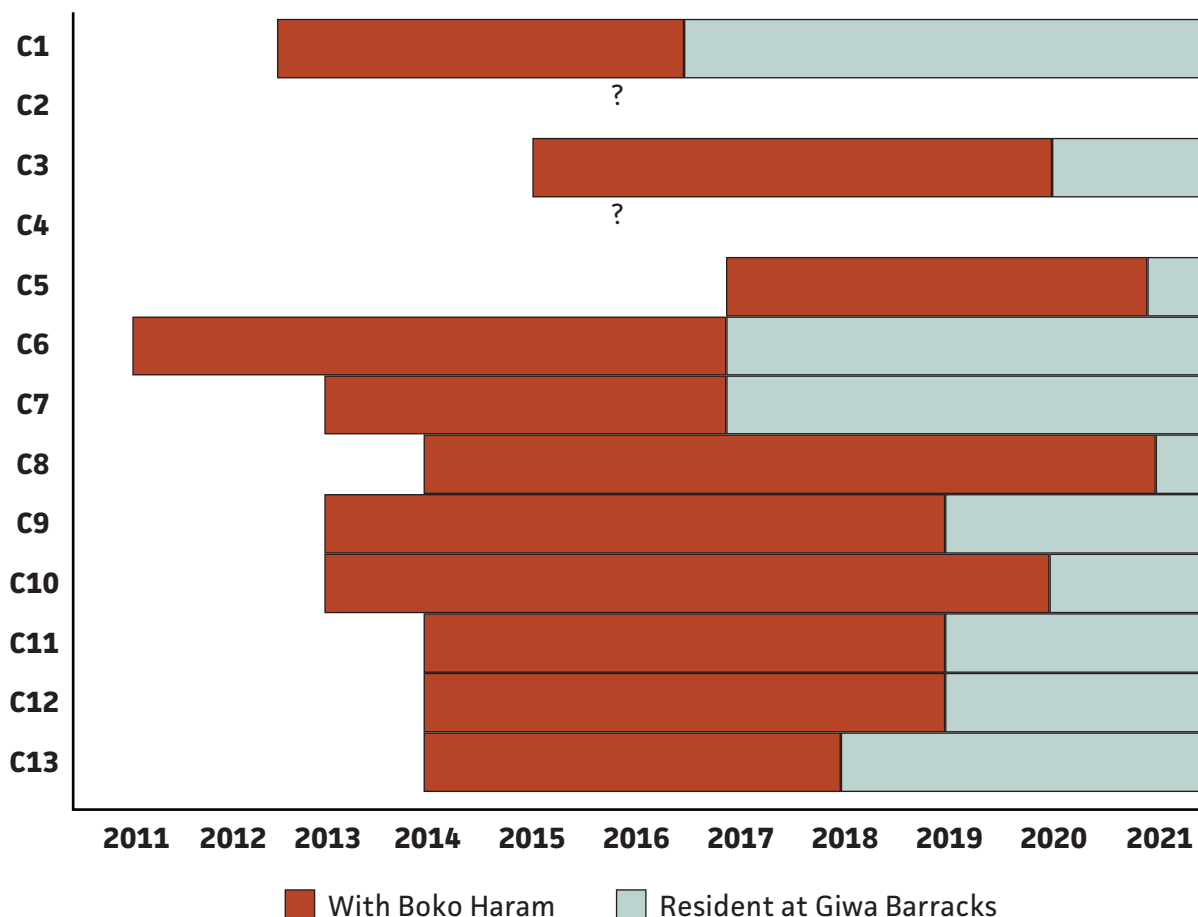
been forced into participation by Boko Haram. While everyone involved had been fully vaccinated against Covid-19, precautions were taken to avoid close personal contact at all times. Of course, it is important to consider the limitations associated with our methods, and to comment on the extent to which these may influence the findings. We identify these as follows:

- **Resource constraints:** The findings we present below are based on the personal experiences and opinions of a limited number of respondents. This research was resourced as a pilot study, and as such it was not possible to draw from a bigger sample of clients or stakeholders. We also lacked access to the extensive program documents undoubtedly generated by the various agencies involved with OPSC and the wider off-ramp from Boko Haram (as represented in Figure 1).

- **Non-contemporary information:** Given that the conflict in Nigeria continues to evolve rapidly, and the average date when our respondents left Boko Haram was 2018 or 2019 (to the extent that this can be reliably ascertained), it is important to acknowledge that some information provided during the interviews may reflect conditions that no longer exist. For instance, this may relate to Boko Haram recruitment methods, conditions within their camps and settlements, their

policies and preferences relating to family matters, and so on. It may also relate to conditions and treatment in the facilities through which clients passed prior to their arrival at Mallam Sidi.

- **Potential data reliability issues:** Respondents may provide misleading or even false information for a variety of reasons, including to be viewed favorably by others (widely referred to as social desirability bias), because they are ill-informed, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, or because their memories are flawed.[27] Regarding our research more specifically, certain respondents may have downplayed the nature of their involvement with Boko Haram to avoid potential punishment by the state. Unlike many other forms of social science research, it was not possible to 'triangulate' the personal information generated through these interviews with data from other sources. As already observed, we attempted to mitigate such issues through providing reassurances about the nature of the research before the interviews began, as well as through asking validation questions where applicable.

- **The possible influence of OPSC staff:** With the research team reliant on OPSC staff for the identification of suitable respondents, it is also plausible that the latter intentionally selected clients they felt would be more likely to portray the program or other facilities *en route* to Mallam Sidi in a positive light. Members of the OPSC team were also present throughout much of the interviews, and this may also have influenced the responses provided by certain clients. On this basis, we relied heavily on secondary sources regarding findings relating to reception, screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration (representing stages 2 to 5 of our model in Figure 1).

4. FINDINGS

In this section we present the core research findings regarding how our respondents entered Boko Haram, their roles within the organization, the conditions that they experienced in camps and settlements, their disengagement from the group, and their trajectories through the stages of our model presented as Figure 1.

Joining Boko Haram

It is increasingly recognized that involvement in ideologically justified violence can be driven by the confluence of many different political, social, economic, psychological, and other 'variables', with these varying between locations and over time. Recent research on this subject has emphasized the notion of equifinality, which is the principle that given end-states (in this case involvement in this violence) may be driven by different factors or combinations of factors.[28] Yet, the debate in Nigeria tends to revolve more narrowly around a limited number of factors. It is clear that Boko Haram's interpretation of Islam plays a critical role for many, with Mercy Corps observing that 'religion was a thread that ran through many

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

28   See, for instance, Khalil et al, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model".

stories of youth choosing to join.'[29] The authors of this report elaborate that 'many recruits spoke about wanting to become more devout, or being drawn to a promise of paradise.'[30] Indeed, among the respondents interviewed for this study, one individual (C13) from Gamboru in Borno State claimed to have been initially convinced by the message that his involvement would ensure his place in heaven. Importantly, while certain accounts downplay the relevance of ideology on the basis that certain members only have a rudimentary understanding of the Boko Haram belief system, Lorne Dawson correctly observes that the sincerity and strength of an individual's commitment to their chosen ideology matters far more than the depth of their comprehension.[31]

Certain accounts also emphasize the extent to which state repression, political exclusion, and inadequate service provisions have contributed to sympathy for Boko Haram.[32] For instance, drawing on interviews with members of both Boko Haram and ISWAP, Chitra Nagarajan highlights that these respondents reported that 'many community leaders are seen as corrupt, biased, ineffective, self-interested, politicized, and linked to (corrupt) politicians.'[33] However, this stance is contested, with USAID drawing on interviews with former OPSC clients to conclude that 'frustrations with the government did not appear to play a prominent role influencing individuals to join, with zero graduates identifying it as a reason why they joined.'[34] Economic incentives are also often identified as a driver, with Mercy Corps highlighting the role of loans provided by Boko Haram to new recruits.[35] Research also focuses on the extent to which psychosocial factors such as status, belonging and identity often drive involvement.[36] For instance, Nagarajan maintains that 'a number of respondents spoke of how they felt comfort and belonging as they were introduced to the group.'[37] The importance of personal contacts is also routinely observed, for instance, with Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett highlighting that 'Boko Haram relies on social networks and peer-group influence to drive recruitment.'[38]

Of course, debates about the relative importance of such factors are somewhat tangential to this particular study, given our almost exclusive focus on those who were forced into involvement (see Section 3). This method is also routinely identified in the literature, for instance, with Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett reporting that 'there are widespread reports of intimidation to coerce membership,' and that 'many children become associated with Boko Haram due to direct or indirect physical coercion.'[39] Reporting in

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29 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigeria Youth* (Mercy Corps, 2016), 14.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Lorne Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflections on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part 1)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2021), 5–6.

32 Mercy Corps *Motivations and Empty Promises*.

33 Chitra Nagarajan, *We Were Changing the World: Radicalization and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria*, USAID (2018), 14.

34 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 6–7.

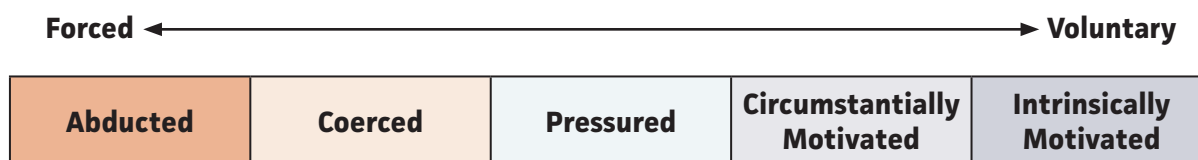35 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 13.

36 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 25.

37 Nagarajan, *We Were Changing the World*, 18.

38 Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair & Chad Hazlett, "Beset on all Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in Northeast Nigeria," in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, ed. Siobhan O'Neill & Kato van Broeckhoven (United Nations University, n.d.), 184.

39 Matfess et al, "Beset on all Sides," 182

Figure 3. Spectrum from Forced to Voluntary Involvement

Forced ⟵————————————————————⟶ Voluntary

Abducted	Coerced	Pressured	Circumstantially Motivated	Intrinsically Motivated

2020, Amnesty International also claims that Boko Haram had become more reliant on this method over time.[40] Importantly, while this phenomenon is often mistakenly interpreted in black-and-white terms (for instance, in UNDP's highly influential *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report),[41] the reality is that it is more accurately portrayed as representing a spectrum, with Mercy Corps explaining that 'the paths that youth take to joining Boko Haram defy neat categories of "voluntary" and "forced." '[42] These authors elaborate on this point through reference to a five-point scale, reproduced above as Figure 3. While the lack of definitions prevents us from firmly classifying our respondents according to this system, the majority would almost certainly have fallen within the 'abducted' category.

Two respondents claimed that their involvement with Boko Haram began when the group seized control of their local communities. One of these individuals (C4) from Hong in Adamawa State maintained that the organization forced all youths from the community to enlist. Many others reported that they were essentially captured by Boko Haram during raids of their communities of residence. For instance, one respondent (C1) from near Maiduguri claimed that he was abducted with about fifteen other students at his school. Boko Haram had attacked a CJTF post on the edge of his community, with the combatants then shifting attention to his school, largely because of its proximity. Another respondent from Ngala (C9) claimed that the group abducted him and five friends who happened to be visiting town. The respondents consistently reported that they were forced to comply with Boko Haram demands, with several (C1, C3, and C8) adding that at least some who resisted were killed in the process.

One respondent from Bama (C5) reported that he received Islamic education for six years at an Almajiri school when the teacher (who happened to be his uncle) escorted the class to the bush for involuntary incorporation into Boko Haram. He claimed that his parents were unaware that this would occur, and that there had been no obvious prior indications. Another respondent from Ngala (C11) maintained that his uncle tried to persuade him to enlist several times before eventually forcing him to join the group at gunpoint. His uncle was a Boko Haram foot soldier, and he died in combat in 2018. While many of the respondents were presumably selected by Boko Haram simply as 'fighting aged males', this was not universally the case. For instance, one respondent (C7) reported that the group abducted him specifically to become a butcher in their territory, having seen him grilling meat in Kumche.

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40   Amnesty International, *We Dried our Tears* (Amnesty International, 2020), 24.

41   For instance, United Nations Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2017), 5.

42   Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 11.

Roles within Boko Haram

Shifting our attention to the respondents' roles within Boko Haram, it is worth first reiterating that we make no claims about representativeness, due to both the selection processes and small sample size (as previously described in Section 3). Indeed, it seems likely that the positions occupied by our respondents (shown in Table 1) *may not* accurately reflect those of the broader membership *if* we assume that forced recruits are generally placed in lower value roles. That said, it is worth observing that certain respondents did achieve positions of authority, including the individual who was escorted into Boko Haram territory by his Almajiri teacher (C5). Having first received weapons training, he was assigned to a security detail before being tasked with defusing mines. Operating as an occasional foot soldier, he displayed particular bravery by refusing to retreat during battle, with this act being rewarded with promotion to military commander with thirty subordinates. Among the thirteen individuals consulted for this study, this respondent was the only one who also fought with ISWAP after the groups split.

Two respondents (C9 and C12) were assigned to the military police (*Hisbah*), having initially operated as foot soldiers, and with one claiming that his promotion was based on trust. As discussed in more detail shortly, the *Hisbah* is responsible for enforcing Boko Haram's strict Islamic code and maintaining public law and order.[43] Two other respondents were tasked with personal security roles, with one of these (C2) responsible for protecting the family of a local commander. He reported that this commander had first encountered him after Boko Haram seized control of his community in Adamawa State, and that he required him to convert from Christianity to Islam (changing his 'infidel' name in the process). The second individual (C4) asserted that he was initially attached to a medical unit, where he was responsible for dressing wounds. He was sent on operations while in this role but remained behind the lines to assist those injured in battle. He was eventually tasked with ensuring the personal security of the Chief Medical Director, with this promotion reportedly based on the perception that he was trustworthy and hardworking.

Among those in civilian positions, one respondent from Bama (C3) reported that he was provided with a sewing machine and assigned the role of tailor, with this reflecting his livelihood prior to being abducted. A respondent from Damboa (C6) claimed to have been used as a handyman, with his varied roles ranging from auto-mechanics to crushing millet. Another respondent from Bama (C8) reported that he worked as a trader, with this again reflecting his prior livelihood. Within Boko Haram he managed a kiosk selling items such as food and clothing, with his supplies coming from the central market in the settlement. He was not the only trader interviewed during the research, with another one (C11) claiming that he asked to be transferred into that role to avoid the violence he previously experienced as a foot soldier. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, he reported being allowed to remain a trader despite pressure from Boko Haram to return to his initial position.

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43 Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno," 662.

Table 1. Roles Assigned to Respondents within Boko Haram[44]

Involvement (Highest 'Value' Role)	#
Military commander	1
Military police	2
Personal Security	2
Foot soldier	3
Medical Officer	1
Trader	1
Tailor	1
Butcher	1
Handyman	1
TOTAL	**13**

It is worth highlighting the extent of fluidity in relation to roles, with certain military respondents performing civilian tasks on the side, including a former member of the military police (C9) who also operated as a food trader to generate income. Indeed, he reported that Boko Haram provided him with seed funding to start this business, and that he was allowed to buy goods from nearby markets that were not under the control of the group. The other respondent in the military police (C12) similarly claimed that he was engaged in farming, with some of his produce sold on the market in the settlement. Conversely, some of those in civilian roles were at least occasionally also forced to act as foot soldiers, with this including one of the traders (C8) and the butcher (C7). Indeed, the latter reported that in his location it was compulsory for all members to actively participate in battle if required, regardless of their role.

Life under Boko Haram

While certain respondents (C2 and C7) claimed to have spent some time in towns and villages under Boko Haram control, most were exclusively based remotely in camps and settlements. The size and composition of the locations in which they resided varied substantially, with a respondent from Ngala (C9) claiming that he and 2,000 other soldiers occupied a settlement that had previously been abandoned. By contrast, a respondent from Goza (C12) asserted that there were no solid structures in his camp, which housed around 500 military and civilian members of Boko Haram. While single men were assigned to tents, those who were married were allowed to reside in zinc huts with their families. The trader (C8) claimed that there were roughly 1,000 civilians in his settlement, with many more soldiers in surrounding camps (he was unable to provide an estimate). He added that the settlement had been captured by Boko Haram from prior occupants, and that it was fifteen kilometers from the nearest town. A foot soldier from Ngala (C11) claimed that there were around 1,000 other military members located in his camp, and that there had previously also been civilians, but that they had escaped.

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44   We determine highest 'value' roles loosely in relation to each respondent's proximity to violence, and the extent to which they maintain agency over outcomes.

The respondents consistently reported that Boko Haram did not provide a salary, in notable contrast to groups such as IS and al-Shabaab.[45] However, the respondent from Hong in Adamawa State (C4) claimed that he could request money from his superiors as required, and that these were generally granted if justified. For instance, he claimed that on one occasion he received 40,000 Naira (around 100 USD) to repair damages to his house. While the broader subject of Boko Haram's financing is beyond the scope of this study,[46] various respondents highlighted the extent to which their resources were gained through pillage, although the procedures for dividing this loot varied substantially between locations. For instance, a former member of the military police (C9) claimed that plunder was split into three parts, with the senior commander receiving one of these, and the raid leader and foot soldiers distributing the remainder. Another former member of the military police (C12) maintained that in his settlement civilians received half of the bounty, with the remainder being shared between those involved in the raid. By contrast, a former foot soldier (C11) claimed that the local commander simply split the loot as he saw fit.

Amnesty International reports that the rate of pillage has increased over recent years, with this reflecting increased shortages in Boko Haram camps and settlements.[47] Our research lends weight to this thesis, with several respondents highlighting key supply issues towards the later stages of their involvement with the group. For instance, the trader (C8) claims that while conditions were generally satisfactory during his involvement, he observed severe shortages of food, fuel, and medicine prior to his departure in 2020 or 2021. A former member of the military police (C12) who fled around 2019 made similar assertions about food, fuel, and water. A former foot soldier (C11) likewise maintained that while water was in plentiful supply from a nearby lake, food, fuel, and medicine were scarce by the time of his departure in 2019. To be clear, this was not a universal trend, with the other former member of the military police (C9) claiming that there were no shortages at the time of his exit during the same year, with local land being fertile and other supplies often bought from nearby settlements.

The amount of ideological training provided to the respondents also varied substantially, ranging from two weeks (C10) to six months (C9). Much of this training involved condemning state corruption and explaining how heaven awaits those who kill 'infidels' (which often amounted to anyone outside of Boko Haram). The group also attempted to impose its social control through more direct means, administering punishments such as flogging for a failure to attend prayers, listening to music, using drugs (as reported by C9 and C11), and other crimes. Punishments were also inflicted on those who violated Boko Haram regulations regarding the means of communication (also see Box 1). Various respondents (C4, C5, C6, C7, C11, and C12) claimed that phones (or sim cards more specifically) were banned in their camps and settlements, although with most (C6, C7, C9, and C11) adding that some residents retained them in secret. Access to radio was more varied, with certain interviewees claiming no restrictions (C1, C7), and others stating that their usage was regulated or banned entirely (C4, C8, C11, and C12). Two respondents

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45   Haid Haid, *Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria: Efforts Priorities and Challenges* (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018), 11; & Khalil et al, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, 16.

46   On this topic, see for instance, Omar Mahmoud, "Local, Global, or In Between: Boko Haram's Messaging, Strategy, membership, and Support Networks," in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency,* ed. Jacob Zenn (Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, 2018), 87–114.

47   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears," 7, 28–29.

(C4 and C7) also maintained that the penalty for possession of state-produced leaflets dropped by plane was death, while others reported that Boko Haram simply warned them to disregard their message.

Boko Haram's policies and preferences regarding marriage and family life also varied substantially between locations. This subject has already received considerable attention in the literature,[48] for instance, with ICG reporting that 'Boko Haram used women and girls as rewards to fighters, a significant enticement since raising the resources for marriage is not easy.'[49] By contrast, one of the former medical officers in our sample (C4) claimed that Boko Haram forced him to marry a woman who had also been abducted. A former member of the military police (C9) similarly claimed that they compelled single people to wed 'to avoid fornication', and that they funded their marriage ceremonies. He added that men were allowed to choose their brides, with many selecting multiple wives. Indeed, one of the former foot soldiers (C10) claimed to have had nine wives, with this totaling only four at any one time in accordance with Sharia Law. Yet, other respondents (C11 and C12) claimed that Boko Haram played absolutely no role in family matters, and that they also did not finance marriage ceremonies. One of these (C12) elaborated on a typical traditional process within a Boko Haram settlement, in which he first spoke to the younger brother of his future wife, before providing a dowry to her father. While some respondents (C4 and C10) reported that Boko Haram had abducted their future wives, the design of this research did not allow us to meaningfully explore marriage from a female perspective.[50]

Leaving Boko Haram

Many studies focusing on exits from violent extremism rely on the binary distinction between 'push' and 'pull' factors. For instance, Mary Beth Altier and her colleagues treat the former as including unmet expectations, disillusionment with the strategy or actions of the organization in question, disillusionment with personnel, difficulties with the clandestine lifestyle, an inability to 'cope' with violence, loss of faith in the ideology, and 'burnout.'[51] In the latter category they include competing loyalties, employment or educational demands or opportunities, family demands and desires, positive interactions with 'moderates', financial incentives, and amnesties. By contrast, James Khalil and his colleagues divide many of these same drivers into the categories of structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors.[52] Drawing on interviews with former members of Boko Haram and community actors throughout the Lake Chad Basin, Fonteh Akum and his colleagues more specifically emphasize the extent to which disengagement is motivated by disillusionment with the organization, misalignment between personal objectives and those of the group, and the lack of consistency between Boko Haram messaging and their internal practices.[53]

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48   See, for instance, Matfess, *Women, and the War on Boko Haram*.

49   ICG, *Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, 8.

50   While essentially beyond the scope of this report (see Section 1), marriage has been considered from a female perspective elsewhere. See, for instance, Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears"; & Matfess et al, "Beset on all Sides," 196.

51   Mary Beth Altier, Christian Thoroughgood & John Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology and Criminology," *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 51, no. 5 (2014).

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

53   Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy & Malik Samuel, *Managing the Journey out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin* (Institute for Security Studies, 2021).

Without overlooking that our respondents never wanted to become involved with Boko Haram in the first place, it is worth observing that several (C5, C6, C7, C10, and C11) emphasized how they were repulsed by the violence perpetrated by the group, and the extent to which this reinforced their desire to exit. For instance, one former foot soldier (C10) stated that 'they killed people like animals', with reference to specific attacks on a mosque and marketplace. Such matters were particularly personal for the handyman (C6) and the trader (C8), who respectively reported that Boko Haram had killed a friend and a brother who had tried to escape. The respondent tasked with providing security for the Chief Medical Director (C4) also emphasized how he was motivated by the risks to his personal safety, poor living conditions (especially the lack of food), inadequate treatment by his commanders, and because he missed his family. The butcher (C7) claimed that he was partly motivated by the 'tribal' nature of Boko Haram, adding that he felt discriminated against as a Hausa. Critically, eight of the thirteen respondents (C1, C3, C4, C6, C7, C8, C9, and C11) were also explicit that they had been partly motivated to disengage by the provisions offered by OPSC (see Box 1).

Of course, accounts of disengagement must also consider obstacles to these journeys,[54] with many reports focusing on the pervasive fear of Boko Haram responses to such efforts. For instance, Mercy Corps observes that 'most former members we interviewed described a harrowing process of escaping the group, either fleeing during the chaos of battle or slipping out at night,' adding that 'many worried they would be killed in the process, and spoke soberly of companions who tried unsuccessfully to escape.'[55] Drawing on interviews with minors, Hilary Matfess and her colleagues similarly report that:

> Would-be defectors or escapees were threatened with death nearly constantly, according to multiple children interviewed; some even reported witnessing the insurgents kill those who had been caught during an attempt to flee. . . . A number of children formerly associated with Boko Haram, even now that they've left the group and are living in IDP camps, expressed fear that Boko Haram would find them.[56]

This was certainly supported by our research, with the trader (C8) claiming that his brother was killed by Boko Haram for trying to escape shortly after they were abducted together. The medical officer (C1) similarly reported that his first attempt to flee with six others was thwarted largely because they were unfamiliar with the bush, with the ringleader executed as punishment. While less common, certain respondents (C6 and C10) maintained that disengagement was also inhibited by a fear of repercussions by the security forces or CJTF (although this was contested by C8 and C11).

Our respondents typically fled their camps and settlements in relatively small groups of between five and twenty people, with two (C4 and C7) claiming that their exit parties numbered over a hundred. One of the foot soldiers (C10) maintained that he began planning his escape around 2015 (having joined Boko Haram in 2013), and that he only achieved exit five years later. Two of his wives also based in the settlement had threatened to leave him if they remained much longer. While with Boko Haram, he retained

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

55 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 16.

56 Matfess et al "Beset on all Sides," 192.

Box 1. Spreading information about OPSC

Those tasked with supporting OPSC must ensure that current members of Boko Haram and ISWAP are aware of the rehabilitation provisions provided through this program, and how it offers a potential avenue towards their eventual community reintegration (with this outreach element corresponding to Stage 1 of Figure 1). Among the thirteen study respondents, five (C1, C6, C8, C9, and C11) claimed that they had heard about these provisions through radio messages,[a] with two of these (C8 and C11) elaborating that the campaign involved former members recounting their personal stories, including the benefits they received via OPSC. Nine respondents reported that they had heard about these provisions through leaflets dropped from planes (C1, C3, C4, C6, C7, C8, C9, C11, and C12), with two (C7 and C11) observing that they displayed pictures of former members of the group. One of these respondents (C11) alleged that the images were not updated between 2015 and 2019, and was critical of this fact.

While certain respondents claimed that phones (or at least sim cards) were banned in their camps and settlements (as also discussed in the main text), others (C6 and C10) maintained that this provided a key avenue through which family members based outside of Boko Haram control helped motivate or facilitate their disengagement. OPSC also exploited this means of communication through their voluntary 'ambassadors' initiative, which involves encouraging certain former clients to reach out to current members via phone (C5, C11, S1). The study respondents generally deemed other sources of information to be less relevant, including television and word-of-mouth.

a   On this issue, also see International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (2021),* 4; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation,* 28.

phone communications with a family member who identified a place where he could surrender in Maity. He fled with nineteen other individuals, including women and children, of which fifteen were recaptured during the escape. One of those who successfully achieved exit was sufficiently young for the authorities to release him directly back to the community, where he was subsequently killed by Boko Haram. By contrast, the trader (C8) left his settlement with nine others at midnight, before waiting until daybreak to surrender to the military at Pulka. He claimed that he knew where to surrender as he had heard on the radio of locations that had already been liberated (see Box 1).

A former member of the military police (C9) claimed that he was among a large group that arranged for a forward party of around twenty people to surrender in Cameroon. From there, the Cameroonian military (despite having a reputation as being ruthless) contacted their Nigerian counterparts to collect them, with the remaining party also escaping roughly eight months later. The tailor (C3) stated that his escape party of eight people was actually caught by Boko Haram, but that he bribed their captors for passage with 40,000 Naira (with this money having been earnt tailoring on the side). The handyman (C6) claimed he had heard about the provisions provided by OPSC through the radio and leaflets, and that he had confirmed the validity of these claims through a phone call with an uncle. This uncle then arranged for his safe passage with the military when he exited with two friends in 2017. Although this was the only instance of safe passage being reported during our research, OPSC staff (S1) claimed that

such arrangements were relatively common. Two respondents (C5 and C11) recounted the influence of an OPSC 'ambassador' (again, see Box 1), who helped motivate both to exit by phone. In one case (C5), this individual then ferried fifteen escapees from Cameroon on a motorbike, carrying three at a time. Two others highlighted the importance of knowing the local terrain, with one (C1) escaping with a foot soldier who was familiar with the bush, and the other (C4) relying on local famers.

The road to reintegration

Many individuals who escape from Boko Haram are transferred to Giwa Barracks for screening by the Joint Investigation Center (JIC), which is comprised of military intelligence personnel.[57] Despite often disengaging from the group in relatively large groups, they are individually screened into one of the following three categories (also see Figure 1):[58]

- **Innocent:** These individuals are allowed to return to the community or IDP camps.

- **Low-risk:** Those in this category are transferred to OPSC for rehabilitation.

- **High-risk:** These individuals are referred to the judicial system through Kainji Barracks.

This process is regularly criticized for its lack of transparency, with USAID observing that 'there is still little visibility into the details of the screening,' and Amnesty International reporting that that the process remains 'opaque.'[59] Indeed, even key stakeholders (S1 and S2) directly involved in running OPSC claimed they knew little about the process. While this lack of transparency limits our ability to draw firm conclusions about screening, the issues we encountered through the sampling for this research are certainly suggestive of major problems, as we return to in the subsequent section.

These concerns aside, our respondents (C4, C8, C10, C11, and C12) reported relatively short processing times between their initial surrender and arrival at Giwa Barracks, with this typically lasting less than one week. However, this contrasted dramatically with the time they spent at Giwa, with detentions at these barracks lasting up to five years (C7). To be clear, some of these individuals voluntarily acted as informants while at the barracks (C1, C5, and C10), with this seemingly extending their residency. Nevertheless, while we acknowledge that screening can be a time-consuming process, these extensive delays undoubtedly represent an important disincentive to disengagement. More importantly, although our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, Giwa Barracks is also notorious for human rights abuses. Although several of our respondents claimed that the conditions were adequate, we cannot discount the hypothesis that these responses may have reflected the presence of OPSC team members during our interviews. Indeed, it is perhaps revealing that the only respondent who was openly

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57   Certain sources suggest that screening also occurs prior to Giwa Barracks, including Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears", 38.

58   Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 19; Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," 38-39; International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram,* 6; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 11–12.

59   Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," 38, 59; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism: Nigeria Case Study* (Institute for Integrated Transitions & United Nations University, 2018), 21; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 8, 11.

critical of the barracks expressed his views when these team members temporarily left the room. He reported overcrowded conditions, sleeping on a concrete floor (often without a mat), and periods of up to two months without a shower.[60]

Switching our attention to OPSC, while the clients spoke positively about the services and conditions at Mallam Sidi, we must again be cautious with the information provided given the presence of staff during the interviews. It is also worth reiterating that this research was not designed as a formal evaluation (as discussed in Section 3), and so our ability to draw firm conclusions are constrained by our lack of access to the extensive documentation that such programs invariably generate. The services provided at OPSC are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychological and psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, civic education, drug awareness training, art therapy, and recreational activities. Considering these in turn, Amnesty reports that:

> Several aspects of Safe Corridor have had a meaningful impact. Many men and boys, particularly those who grew up in Boko Haram-controlled areas, arrive with limited or no formal education; some are illiterate. Several boys and younger men told Amnesty International they learned the ABCs, counting, and spelling at Safe Corridor, along with basic grammar, during weekly adult education classes.[61]

It is notable that several of our respondents claimed that they intended to continue with their 'Western' education after leaving OPSC (C4, C8, C9, and C12). The vocational training includes hairdressing, carpentry, laundry services, leatherwork (shoe making), tailoring, welding, weaving, and farming, with the latter being compulsory.[62] Drawing on interviews with over one hundred program graduates, USAID reports that 70 percent claimed that they were earning a living through the training provided by OPSC.[63] Several of our respondents also claimed that once back in their communities they intended to generate income through their newly acquired skills (C4, C5, C7, C8, C9, and C11). It is worth also noting that while Amnesty stressed the physical dangers associated with training to produce soap and related products,[64] this option is no longer offered. Moving on to the psychosocial support, Amnesty also claims that:

> Several men and boys formerly detained at Safe Corridor mentioned a positive impact of the psychosocial programs. Encouragingly, every person interviewed by Amnesty International said most sessions were one on one, with an interpreter as needed, and that soldiers and military intelligence respected privacy and confidentiality – remaining outside the room where psychosocial professionals and detainees spoke.[65]

Helping to prepare for the subsequent reintegration of beneficiaries, OPSC facilitates visits by family members, community and religious leaders, government officials, and CJTF representatives. Unfortunately,

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60   We have not referenced the respondent in the main text due to his apparent desire for discretion.
61   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 62.
62   Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.
63   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 5.
64   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 66.
65   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 62.

these provisions were largely curtailed on health grounds during the Covid-19 pandemic (C8, S1), particularly for families. Regarding the ideological training at the facility, Audu Bukarti and Rachel Bryson report that resident imams 'focus on Islamic textual authorities that relate to forbidding violence and enjoining peaceful and harmonious co-existence.'[66] Of course, the relevance of such efforts is somewhat open to question for clients who never subscribed to the Boko Haram system of beliefs in the first place. This is not to suggest that they are entirely redundant, but rather that they are more pertinent for individuals who joined voluntarily (those located towards the right of Figure 3), and particularly those who were ideologically motivated.

As already observed, the responsibility for reintegration falls on the individual states, with support from agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In practice, this often results in graduates spending additional time at 'transit centers', including Shokari in Borno State, which was opened for this specific purpose in September 2020.[67] This compounds delays already experienced during the screening (at Giwa) and rehabilitation (at Mallam Sidi) phases.[68] A lack of prior planning certainly also contributed to problems with reintegration during the early years of OPSC, with ICG reporting that:

> In Safe Corridor's early days, the process of reintegration was messy. When the first batches of graduates were released from the program, the Borno state government had to improvise, setting up graduates at the Umaru Shehu rehabilitation camp in Maiduguri. . . . In some cases, graduates encountered public hostility when they arrived. In one famous episode, authorities tried to bring a large group of graduates originally from Gwoza local government area to a Maiduguri displaced persons' camp and then to their homes, but in both places residents protested, forcing authorities to send the graduates again to Umaru Shehu, until they could be relocated again.[69]

However, USAID reports that this experience 'led to improvements in community preparation and sensitization activities.'[70] In particular, the USAID authors observe that OPSC and Borno state representatives 'have taken to television to raise awareness about OSC [OPSC] and advocate for community acceptance with radio shows like Dandal Kura,' and that the former have 'hosted dialogues with community leaders in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa to discuss reintegration and reconciliation.'[71] Yet, the extent to which communities support reintegration remains subject to considerable debate, with the evidence somewhat contradictory. Commenting in 2018, Vanda Felbab-Brown asserted that:

> Community members from areas where Boko Haram has operated, and some journalists openly say that they do not want to accept back either Boko Haram members or those who lived under Boko Haram rule. The consistency of rejection of those associated with Boko Haram in any way and the

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66   Audu Bulama Bukarti & Rachel Bryson, *Dealing with Boko Haram Defects in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons from Nigeria* (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2019), 18.

67   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 11.

68   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 60; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 18.

69   International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram*, 10.

70   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 45.

71   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 45.

extreme distrust of returnees appears in many surveys and focus group studies. A typical view is that those who lived under Boko Haram rule, even if they had been abducted by the group, must have been brainwashed.[72]

More recently, while observing that many clients 'are welcomed back into their communities,' ICG also highlights broad opposition 'to the idea that any former Boko Haram recruit should benefit from government forgiveness and donor support.'[73] By contrast, USAID paints a more positive picture, reporting that:

> Only 21% of community members strongly agreed that DDRR [demobilization, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation] beneficiaries are dangerous and should not be accepted [back into the community], while 37% strongly agreed that DDRR beneficiaries are victims. In addition, 59% of community members believe their fellow community members have mostly or fully accepted DDRR beneficiaries. … [Furthermore] over 75% of community members completely or somewhat agree that DDRR beneficiaries are sincerely seeking forgiveness.[74]

Our respondents consistently claimed that they expected to be welcomed back 'with open arms', with several adding that this was because their communities understood that they had been abducted (C3), or because their time spent rehabilitating at OPSC offers the necessary reassurances that they pose no risk (C8). Of course, we cannot reject the possibility that, in at least certain cases, such responses may have been designed to help prevent further delays in the process by providing reassurances to the OPSC team members in attendance.

5. DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

Research that draws from interviews with former members of groups such as Boko Haram often downplays or even entirely neglects the extent to which personal experiences vary. Even though our respondents were all coercively recruited by the group (with one exception), they were forced into involvement through notably different means. This variance was also apparent in relation to the roles performed by these individuals within Boko Haram, including in relation to their involvement in violence. Striking differences were also apparent regarding the conditions experienced within the various camps and settlements, the rules and regulations imposed in these locations, and how our respondents were able to escape. These pronounced differences underscore the need to ensure that communication campaigns designed to promote exit from Boko Haram (represented by Stage 1 of Figure 1) should be tailored to local contexts. They also underline why the services provided through programs such as OPSC (Stage 4) must be tailored to reflect the particular social, economic, psychological, and other needs of each indi-

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72   Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment," 10.

73   International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram*, 9–12.

74   USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 6.

vidual client. While the package of services offered at Mallam Sidi is comprehensive, the management team should continue to explore additional options, particularly given the rapidly evolving nature of this programmatic field.

Considering the off-ramp from Boko Haram more broadly, we can conclude with some certainty that Giwa Barracks represents a critical weak link. Despite some apparent improvements in conditions at the barracks over time, human rights abuses remain widely reported in the literature. For instance, Amnesty International makes allegations about physical violence, insufficient food and water, inhumane sanitation, and extreme heat at Giwa, with these frequently resulting in the death of detainees.[75] Fonteh Akum and his colleagues from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) also observe that:

> Former detainees told the ISS that they spent between three months and four years in the barracks in very poor conditions that included overcrowding; lack of hygiene, a proper bed or ventilation; and a hostile reception from members of the JIC. These conditions fuel the spread of rumors, including that those who surrendered would be condemned to death.[76]

Of course, our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, particularly given the presence of OPSC staff during the interviews. Indeed, it is perhaps revealing that the one respondent who was openly critical of Giwa expressed his views when these team members temporarily left the room. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this reputation alone continues to disincentivize disengagements from Boko Haram, with this compounded by the extensive delays in the screening processes. Former detainees themselves have effectively also drawn such conclusions, with Amnesty reporting that 'many former child detainees said that, after their experience, they would not counsel others to come out from the bush.'[77] Akum and his colleagues also reported that 'some ex-associates told the ISS that at the JIC facility, they gave up hope of freedom and regretted surrendering.'[78]

While the lack of transparency limits our ability to draw firm conclusions about the screening process through which eligibility for OPSC is determined, we certainly agree with ICG's argument that individuals who did no more than continue to remain in locations that happened to come under Boko Haram control should be categorized as 'innocent.'[79] As previously discussed, this classification would allow them to return to their communities (or often IDP camps if these communities have been destroyed or remain in Boko Haram hands). However, this was not applicable to any of the respondents in our sample, with all effectively falling under the direct command of Boko Haram, including those in civilian roles. That said, we also believe that several of our interviewees should potentially still have been categorized as innocent based on their assertions that they had not been ideologically motivated, and as they had never directly contributed to violence. By instead treating them as 'low-risk', the authorities raise the numbers who pass through OPSC and increase the extent to which it provides a bottleneck in the broader off-ramp

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75   Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," & International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram.*

76   Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.

77   Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 8.

78   Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.

79   International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram.*

from Boko Haram. Of course, this is particularly problematic in the current context of mass disengagement from the group.

More concretely, it is hard to avoid concluding that the methods applied to distinguish between 'low' and 'high-risk' individuals are flawed. As previously observed, the OPSC team maintained that the most recent cohort of beneficiaries only included those who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with only one clear exception. *If* this information is correct, it means that those originally driven by adventure, status, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on, were ineligible for Mallam Sidi. This is problematic as it is essentially inconceivable that all such individuals represent a current threat to public safety, and/or that their involvement in violence was sufficient to warrant referral to the judicial system. By way of comparison, former members of al-Shabaab are eligible for rehabilitation at equivalent facilities in Somalia if they (a) have voluntarily disengaged, (b) have denounced the group's ideology, and (c) are not seen to pose a future risk to public safety.[80] We suggest that this represents a far more robust and defensible means through which to determine eligibility as it correctly emphasizes the current attitudes of the individuals in question, rather than their historical motives for involvement.

Policy recommendations

In presenting our policy recommendations, it is worth reiterating that the issues considered in this report are particularly pertinent at the present time given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which the federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our key recommendations are as follows:

» **Communication campaigns that aim to promote exit from Boko Haram and ISWAP should appeal to varied motives and should be tailored to local contexts in terms of both their message and media.** Even those who are forced into involvement often leave such groups for a variety of reasons, and those tasked with designing communications campaigns should attempt to appeal to multiple of these motives simultaneously. For instance, these may include a desire for enhanced security outside of a conflict context, improved living conditions, the prospects of reuniting with family, community reintegration, opportunities to earn a living through newly acquired vocational skills, and so on. With conditions and regulations varying substantially between Boko Haram camps and settlements, they should also ensure that both the messages and the means of communication (radio, leaflets, phone, and so on) are appropriate to local contexts.

» **The issues associated with Giwa Barracks must be resolved as a matter of priority.** While our research was not designed to validate or discredit claims of human rights abuses at this facility, there is little doubt that this reputation alone (alongside the notorious delays in processing individuals through the center) continues to disincentivize many still in Boko Haram

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80   Khalil et al, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, 2.

camps and settlements from disengaging. The relevant authorities should ensure that human rights abuses have entirely ceased across all facilities, while also promoting greater transparency in the process to provide reassurance that this has occurred. Given the extent of the reputational issues, they should also consider identifying alternative facilities at which disengaged members of Boko Haram and ISWAP can be processed.

» **The screening processes should be made transparent and the eligibility criteria for OPSC should be relaxed.** As reported by the OPSC management team, the recent batch of program beneficiaries included only those who were forced into involvement with Boko Haram, with only one obvious exception. *If* this information is correct, it means that those originally driven by adventure, status, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on, were ineligible for OPSC. This is problematic as it is essentially inconceivable that all such individuals represent a current threat to public safety, and/or that their involvement in violence was sufficient to warrant being referred to the judicial system. This excessively high threshold also almost certainly disincentivizes many who remain in the bush from disengaging.

» **While the rehabilitation services offered at OPSC are comprehensive and are seemingly suitably tailored to individual needs, the management team should continue to explore additional options.** As observed, current services include basic education, vocational training, psychological and psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, civic education, drug awareness training, art therapy, and recreational activities. As with many similar programs in other locations (including those in prison settings), the OPSC team should continue to explore novel means to pursue rehabilitation through additional intervention types. Critically, they should also ensure that the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes are sufficiently robust to help guarantee that each individual component is optimally designed to contribute to the broader objectives of the program.

» **The relevant authorities should continue to 'upscale' their disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration programming to help ensure that those who disengage from Boko Haram and ISWAP return to their communities in a timely manner.** This is necessary not only on moral grounds, but also because continued delays in the processing disincentivize many who remain in the bush from disengaging. In practice, this upscaling is likely to involve enhancing the capacity of existing facilities, as well as increasing the number of facilities used for such processes. It will also involve substantial efforts to build the technical capacity of the increased numbers of staff required for these interventions. It may also involve a greater emphasis on community-based models of rehabilitation that do not involve extended residency at facilities tailored for this purpose.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview introduction

The following information was provided to each respondent prior to interviews:

We are conducting independent research to try and improve our understanding of how and why people like yourself join and leave Boko Haram. We hope to turn the research findings into a report, with the idea that it can help improve programs that aim to counter Boko Haram and similar organizations by encouraging people to leave these groups.

We are interested to hear more about your story, as an interesting and relevant example of a journey out of Boko Haram. I want to clarify that absolutely no personal details will appear in the report. These personal details are not important to telling your story.

However, please be aware that if you provide us with information of immediate national security concerns (e.g., about an imminent attack), we will be required to report that. Please also be aware that members of the OPSC team will be present throughout the interview, and there is chance that they may share information that you provide.

This process is entirely voluntary. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we can move on. Similarly, you are free to stop the interview at any point if you do not wish to proceed.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Do you agree to take part in this discussion?

Appendix B: Respondent list

	Location of Origin	Highest 'Value' Role in Boko Haram	Period Active with Boko Haram (Approximate)
C1	Maiduguri, Borno State	Medical Officer	2013–2016 (3 years)
C2	Uba, Adamawa State	Personal Security	?
C3	Bama, Borno State	Tailor	2015–2020 (5 years)
C4	Mangali, Adamawa State	Personal Security	?
C5	Bama, Borno State	Commander	2017–2021 (4 years)
C6	Damboa, Borno State	Handyman	2011–2017 (6 years)
C7	Bama, Borno State	Butcher	2013–2017 (4 years)
C8	Bama, Borno State	Trader	2014–2021 (7 years)
C9	Ngala, Borno State	Military Police	2013–2019 (6 years)
C10	Undisclosed	Foot soldier	2013–2020 (7 years)
C11	Ngala, Borno State	Foot soldier	2014–2019 (5 years)
C12	Goza, Borno State	Military Police	2014–2019 (5 years)
C13	Ngala, Borno State	Foot soldier	2014–2018 (4 years)

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RESOLVE / NETWORK

JOURNEYS THROUGH EXTREMISM

The Experiences of Former Members in Al-Shabaab

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ABOUT THE REPORT

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

ACRONYMS

AMISOM   African Union Mission in Somalia

FGS   Federal Government of Somalia

ICU   Islamic Courts Union

IDP   Internally Displaced Person

ICG   International Crisis Group

MHPSS   Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

NISA   National Intelligence and Security Agency

PCVE   Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

SNA   Somali National Army

TFG   Transitional Federal Government

VEO   Violent Extremist Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This research applied the *Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism* to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism.[1] We selected al-Shabaab as a case study partly because it remains the deadliest violent extremist organization (VEO) in Africa. As the research team had been involved in rehabilitation work with former members of the group, we also chose it for relative ease of access to respondents. Adopting a life history approach, we interviewed thirteen former members of al-Shabaab, including those from its intelligence agency (the *Amniyat*), military wing (the *Jabhat*), and police force (the *Hizbah*), as well as drivers, teachers, and others in support roles. Our objective was to deliver granular information about their trajectories to inform the design of interventions to prevent further involvement and to motivate and facilitate disengagements from the organization. Based on our findings, our policy recommendations relate to the communications campaigns designed to incentivize exits from al-Shabaab, rehabilitation services provided for those who have already disengaged, and the relevance of territorial control as a critical determinant of entrance into and exit from the organization.

Key findings

We summarize our key findings as follows:

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

It is increasingly recognized that individuals become involved in and leave violent extremism for a broad range of reasons, and our research lends weight to this thesis. Four of our respondents claimed to have been at least partly motivated to enlist by their support for al-Shabaab's ideology and aims. Other notable drivers included protection against other armed actors, the desire for revenge, financial incentives, and forced recruitment. Regarding exits from al-Shabaab, most of our respondents claimed that they became increasingly hostile to the group over time, with these negative opinions primarily driven by its harsh treatment of local populations. Three also reported being punished by al-Shabaab (either for alleged involvement in khat smuggling or for taking leave without approval), and this also caused their opinions of the group to decline. While less prominent, our respondents also flagged the relevance of poor living conditions with al-Shabaab, fear of injury and death, and the inadequacy of the salary provided by the group.

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

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

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

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

While largely neglected by the terrorism studies literature, our findings underscore the importance of territorial control as a key determinant of sympathy for and participation in al-Shabaab. Two of our respondents reported being essentially absorbed into the group through regular interactions with members in areas under its control, with the organization effectively acting as the default employer in their regions. Three others explicitly observed that they enlisted only once al-Shabaab had seized control of their community. Regarding exits from the group, one respondent reported that he was arrested by the security forces after his home community was recaptured.

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

Three individuals within our sample became sympathetic or more sympathetic towards al-Shabaab only *after* joining the organization, highlighting the extent to which its training and broader socialization processes can generate a sense of purpose and belonging. This pattern goes essentially unrecognized in the Somalia literature (although not in that relating to other cases, particularly in the Global North), where most accounts simply assume that sympathies precede involvement.

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

Several of our respondents observed that they established safe passage with the security forces prior to their exit, often facilitated by members of their family or wider clan. For instance, one reported that his mother-in-law established the necessary connections to facilitate his transfer to the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Another claimed that his parents contacted clan elders, who reached out to members of their kinship group in the military. Such avenues are less available to individuals from families with fewer connections, and those from less influential clans with more limited access to the security system.

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

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

1. INTRODUCTION

This research applied the *Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism* to map personal journeys in and out of al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. The ABC Model provides a framework through which to analyze individual trajectories in relation to sympathy for and actual involvement in violent extremism.[2] The study was designed to deliver key insights to policymakers and practitioners through revealing the extent to which these journeys vary between respondents. Adopting a life history approach, we conducted interviews with thirteen ex-members of the group, including those from its intelligence agency (the *Amniyat*), military wing (the *Jabhat*), and police force (the *Hizbah*), as well as drivers, teachers, and others in support roles. The ABC Model was also designed as a platform through which to explore drivers of attitudinal and behavioral change, offering a granular understanding of the processes of joining and leaving the group. Following on from this introductory section, we consider the Somali conflict (Section 2) and the ABC Model (Section 3), before elaborating on our research methods (Section 4). We then deliver the main findings from this study (Section 5), presenting the trajectories of eight of the most revealing and informative respondents. This is followed by a final discussion and our policy recommendations (Section 6).

2. THE SOMALI CONFLICT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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6   Menkhaus, "The Crisis in Somalia."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1. Al-Shabaab Timeline

2004
- Transitional Federal Government (TFG) established in Kenya, Abdullahi Yusuf named President
- Islamic Courts Union (ICU) formed in Mogadishu, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed proclaimed leader

2005
- Al-Shabaab established as the militia wing of ICU

2006
- ICU control Mogadishu and advance across south and central Somalia
- TFG re-enter Mogadishu with Ethiopian support

2007
- Al-Shabaab emerged as an independent group and Ahmed Godane becomes Emir/leader
- Heavy fighting between TFG and Ethiopians versus al-Shabaab
- Deployment of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)

2008
- Al-Shabaab capture considerable territory, full control of Lower Shabelle, Kismayo and Barawe

2009
- Former leader of the ICU Shariff Sheikh Ahmed elected President of the TFG
- Ethiopians pull out of Somalia and AMISOM take over as main force

2010
- Rift in al-Shabaab primarily between factions supportive of Godane and Mukhtar 'Robow'
- Robow pulls his troops from Mogadishu

2011
- AMISOM and TFG launch major offensives and begin retaking territory
- UN declares famine in Somalia
- Al-Shabaab pull out of Mogadishu
- Kenya sends troops to fight in southern Somalia

2012
- Al-Shabaab pledges allegiance to al-Qaeda
- Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) formed, with Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as President
- Somali troops and AMISOM retake key towns, including Afgoye, Baidoa, and Kismayo

2013
- Senior leader of al Shabaab, Ibrahim al-Afghani, killed as a result of factional fighting

2014
- Godane killed by US airstrike, Ahmed Diriye becomes leader of al-Shabaab
- FGS and AMISOM retake key towns in Lower Shabelle

2017
- Al-Shabaab attacks Zoobe junction in Mogadishu (deadliest terrorist attack in African history)

2018
- Somali National Army (SNA) and AMISOM begins Operation Badbaydo in Lower Shabelle

2019
- Deadly attacks signal al-Shabaab resurgence and resilience

2022
- Al-Shabaab continues operating as proto-state and retains ability to carry out complex attacks

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

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

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14   Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 76.

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

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

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

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

3. THE ABC MODEL

Pathways to violence

Having now considered al-Shabaab and the context within which it operates, our attention can turn to personal trajectories in and out of the group. At the heart of the ABC Model lies the prominent disconnect between sympathy for ideologically justified violence (attitudes) and direct involvement in its creation (behaviors), as shown schematically in Figure 2.[21] Individuals further to the right of the "attitudes" axis are more sympathetic to this violence, whereas those more towards the left are increasingly opposed to such acts. As described in greater detail in the next section, we place "high-value" members

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

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

18   Ibid., 86–87

19   Ibid.

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

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

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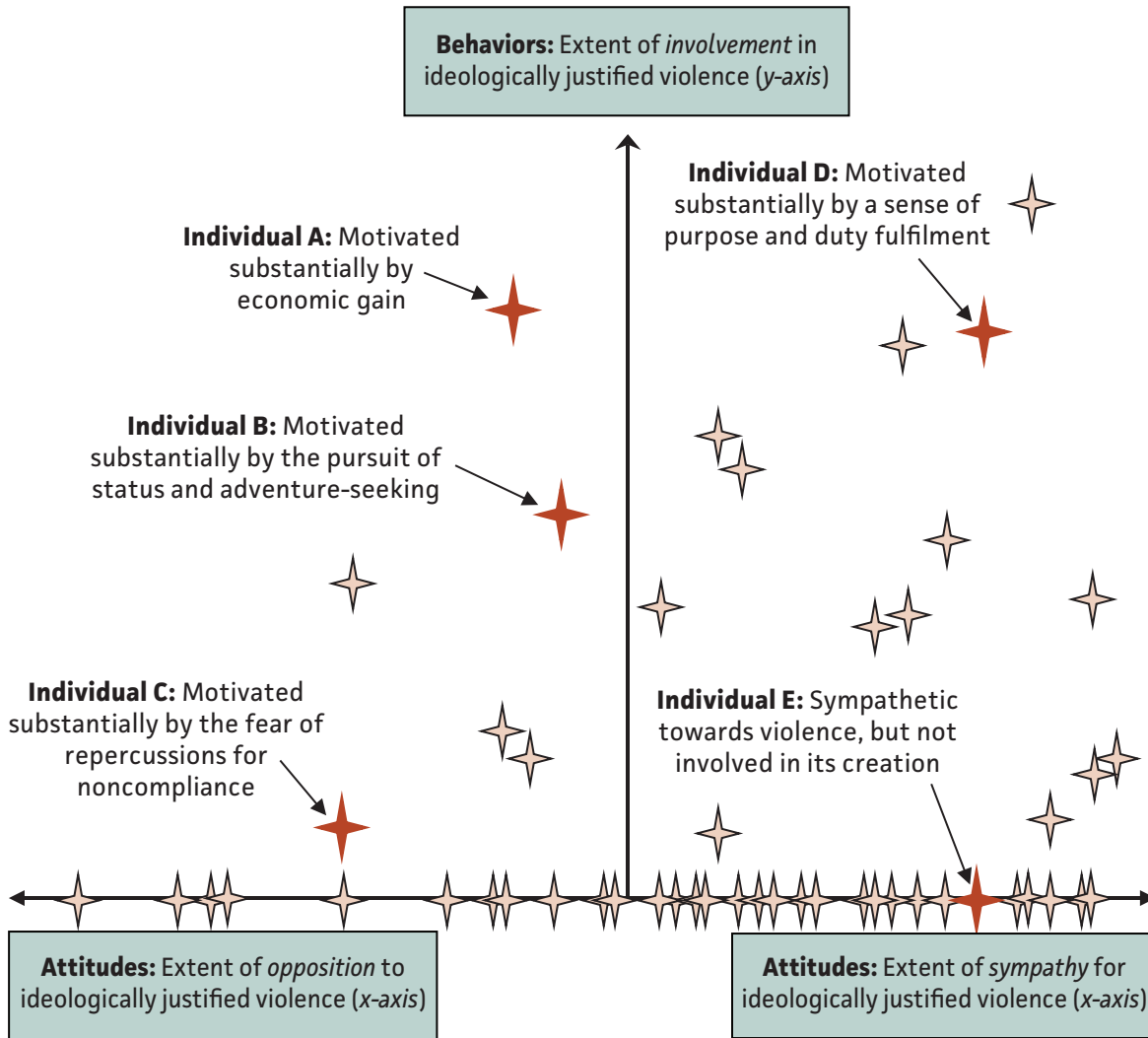
(*Jabhat* commanders, *Amniyat* operatives, and so on) further up the "behaviors" scale than rank-and-file adherents, who in turn are located above those in support roles (drivers, cooks, teachers, and so on). In general, individuals who sympathize with this violence are more likely to participate in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

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

Q1: What drives sympathy for this violence?

Q2: What drives participation in this violence?

Table 1. Common Drivers of Ideologically Justified Violence

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

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

Leaving violence behind

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

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

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

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

Table 2. Common Drivers of Deradicalization and Disengagement

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

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

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

Q3: What drives reductions in sympathy for this violence?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Very strongly sympathized with al-Shabaab

- Strongly sympathized with al-Shabaab

- Somewhat sympathized with al-Shabaab

- Neither sympathized nor opposed al-Shabaab

- Somewhat opposed al-Shabaab

- Strongly opposed al-Shabaab

- Very strongly opposed al-Shabaab

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

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

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

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

Figure 3. Behaviors Scale

	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	
3		Foot soldier	Junior police officer	High responsibility
2				Medium responsibility
1	In training / inactive			Low responsibility

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

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

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

5. FINDINGS

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

Abdi Noor (R1)

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

Yet, shortly after this promotion Abdi Noor began to become aware of al-Shabaab's abusive treatment of the local communities under their control. Based on his knowledge of the Koran, he identified many of their actions as un-Islamic, and he began to consider leaving the group. As he explained:
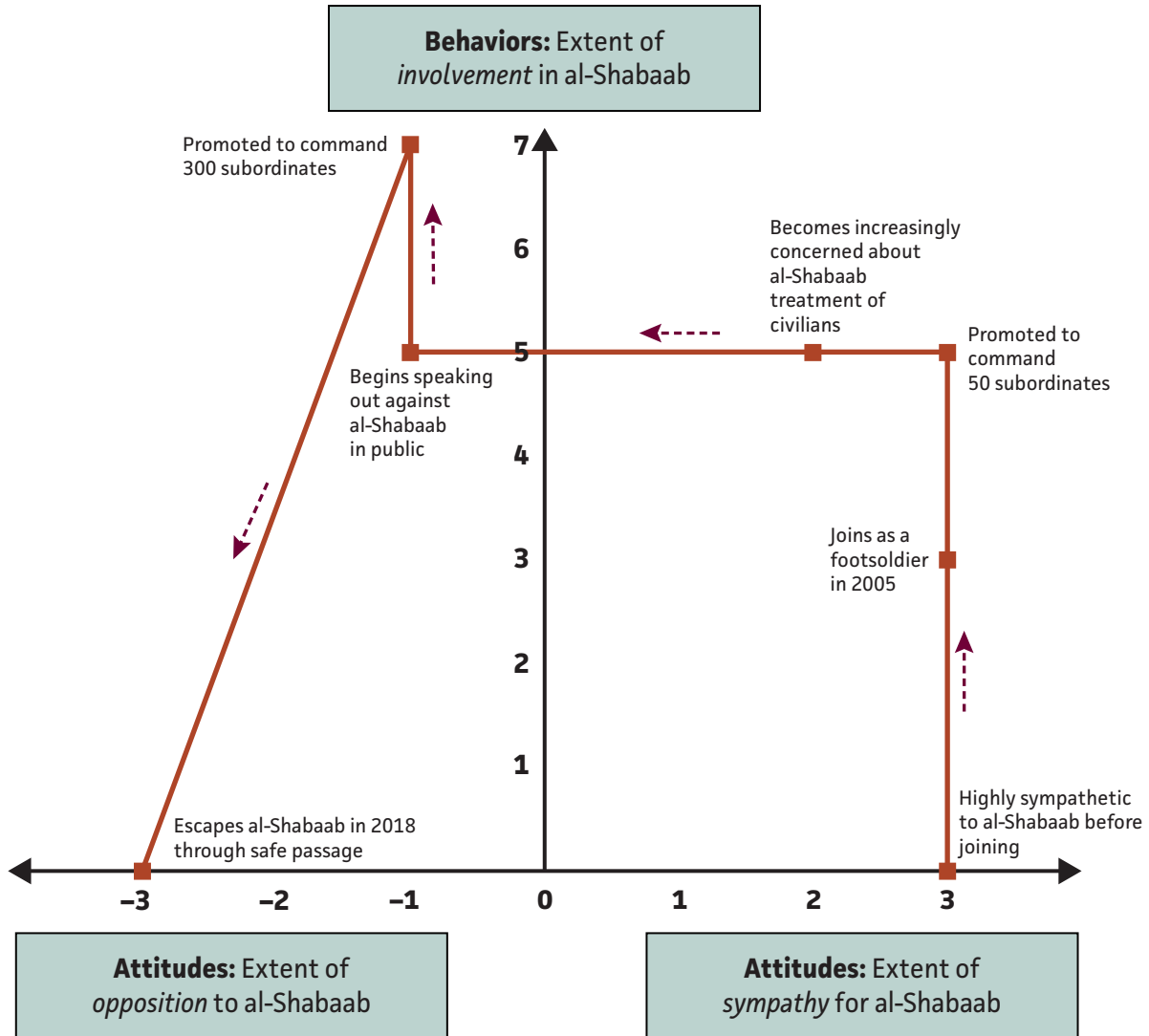
> I began thinking about leaving in 2009 [a total of nine years before his eventual exit]. The main reason I joined was to defend my religion, but the whole group became a militia and extortionate thieves. I was experiencing this, they are killing people illegally, I had seen all of this.[39]

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

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39   Interview with R1, 11 June 2022.

Figure 4. Abdi Noor's Trajectory

Behaviors: Extent of *involvement* in al-Shabaab

Promoted to command
300 subordinates

Becomes increasingly
concerned about
al-Shabaab
treatment of
civilians

Begins speaking
out against
al-Shabaab
in public

Promoted to
command
50 subordinates

Joins as a
footsoldier
in 2005

Highly sympathetic
to al-Shabaab before
joining

Escapes al-Shabaab in 2018
through safe passage

Attitudes: Extent of *opposition* to al-Shabaab

Attitudes: Extent of *sympathy* for al-Shabaab

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

Feisal (R2)

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

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

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

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

Figure 5. Feisal's Trajectory
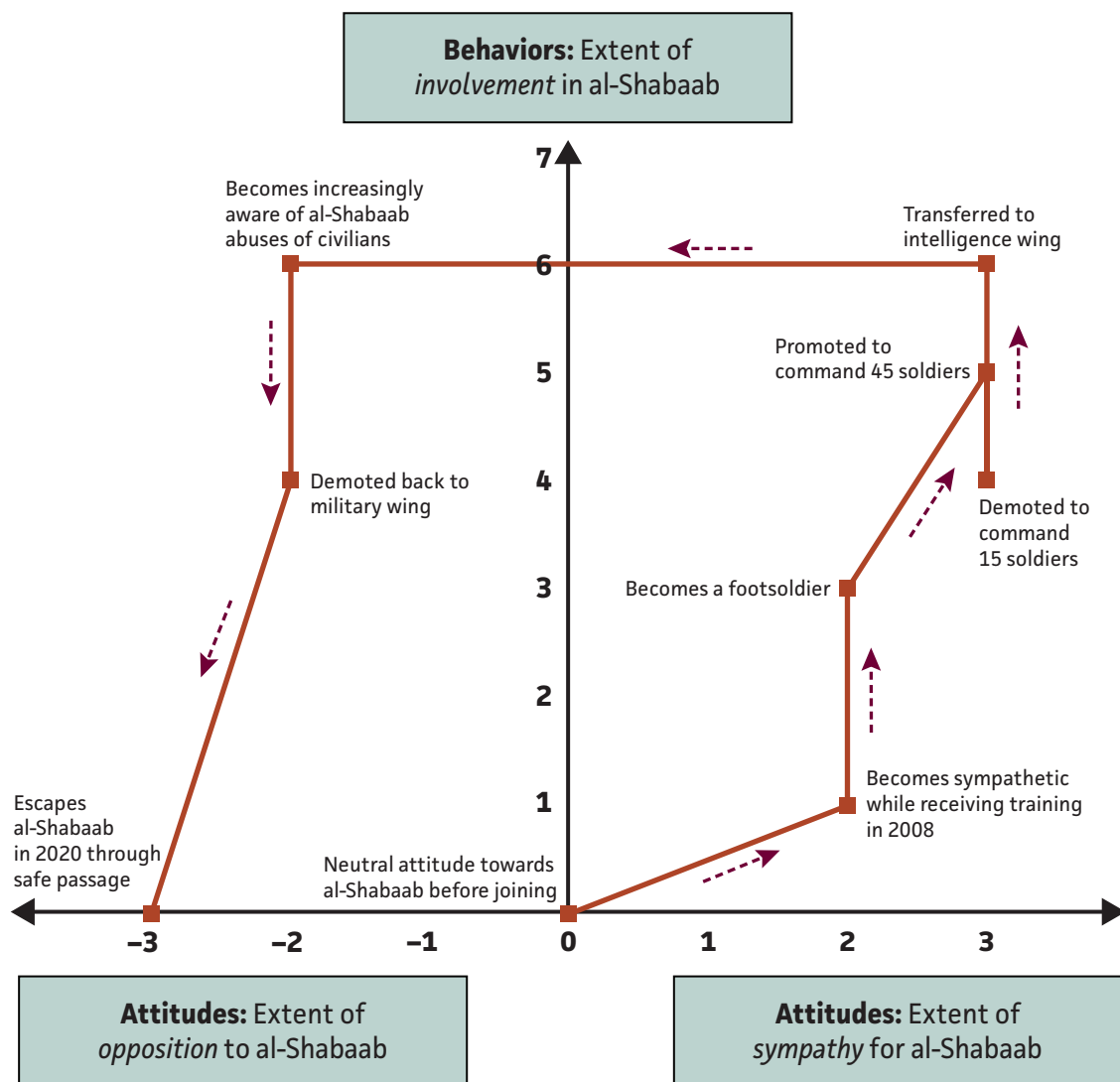
abuse of the population. After colleagues noticed a change in his attitude, he was demoted to foot solider once again in 2020. It was at this juncture that he began to consider leaving the organization. When government forces began retaking parts of Lower Shabelle, he was instructed to transport al-Shabaab vehicles to a secure location. Feisal obliged but was accused of stealing secret documents located in one of these vehicles by other members and this contributed to his growing hostility towards the group. Meanwhile, his family had also been pressuring him to leave the organization for several months. In 2021 Feisal seized an opportunity to escape during the night, which he described as follows:

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

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

Yusuf (R3)

Yusuf was sympathetic to al-Shabaab before joining (see Figure 6) and he wanted to help defend his country from Ethiopian "enemies" and the TFG (see Section 2). A friend convinced him to enlist, and took him to Afgoye in Lower Shabelle, where al-Shabaab ran an enrollment facility. Yusuf then received five months of military training, after which he reported feeling even greater sympathy for the group and was convinced that they would eventually control Somalia in its entirety. In 2006 he joined the *Jabhat* as a foot solider in Beledweyne, and soon after he witnessed al-Shabaab execute two women who had been accused of spying. The women rejected the accusations against them, but their pleas to the judge were unsuccessful. Alongside other incidents of harsh treatment of the local community, this caused Yusuf's support for the organization to dramatically decline. Reinforcing this trend, al-Shabaab also accused him of smuggling khat (it was unclear whether this was justified) and placed him under arrest.
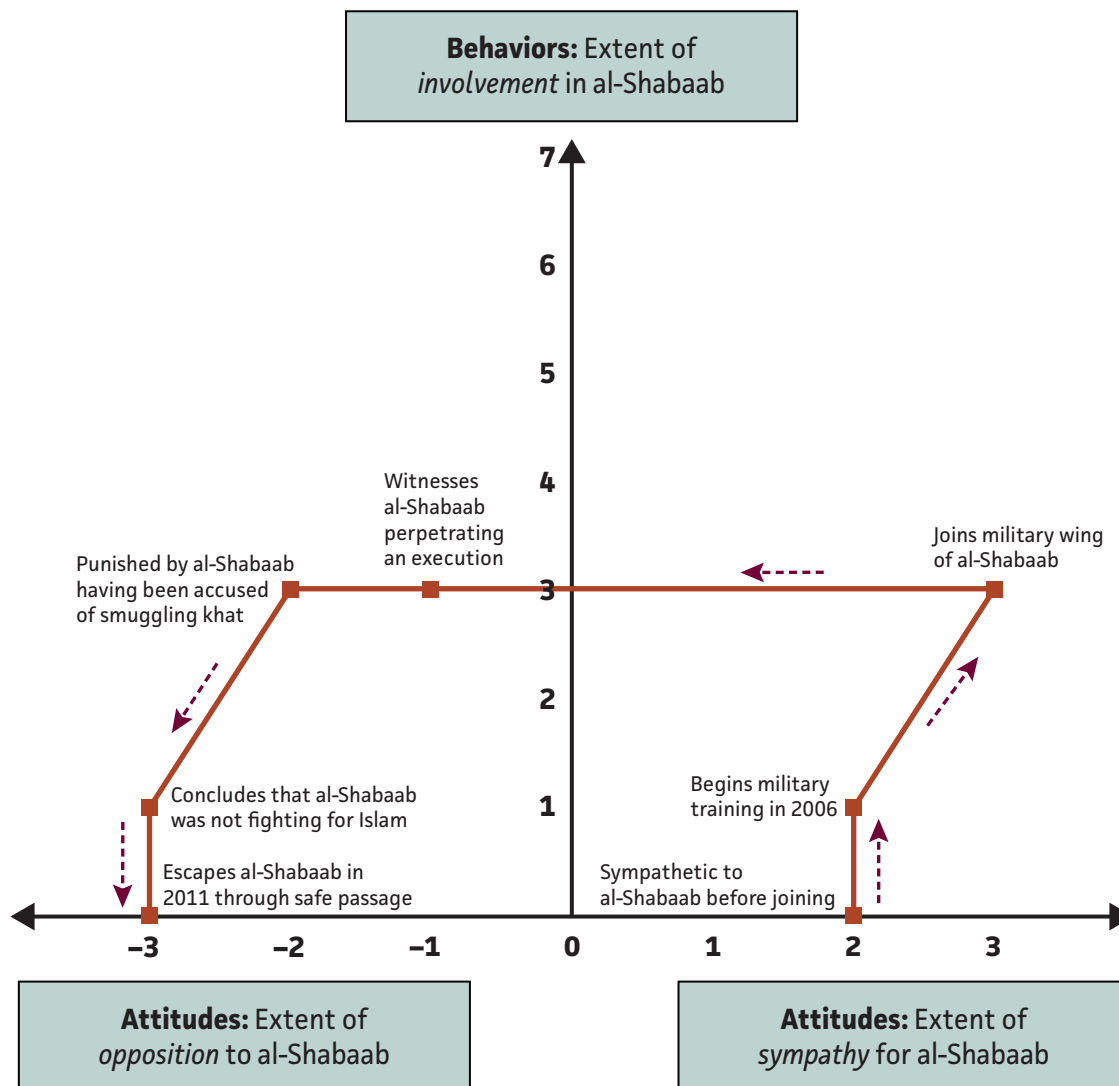
In 2011 Yusuf was transferred to Mogadishu to help defend al-Shabaab strongholds in the northern part of the city. He was injured in battle, resulting in his hospitalization for a prolonged period, and this experience convinced him that al-Shabaab had little interest in his wellbeing. In particular, he was aggrieved about having his phones confiscated to prevent him from contacting his family. In his words:

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

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41   Interview with R2, 12 June 2022.

Figure 6. Yusuf's Trajectory

Behaviors: Extent of *involvement* in al-Shabaab

7
6
5
4 — Witnesses al-Shabaab perpetrating an execution

Punished by al-Shabaab having been accused of smuggling khat

Joins military wing of al-Shabaab

3
2

Concludes that al-Shabaab was not fighting for Islam

Begins military training in 2006

1

Escapes al-Shabaab in 2011 through safe passage

Sympathetic to al-Shabaab before joining

–3   –2   –1   0   1   2   3

Attitudes: Extent of *opposition* to al-Shabaab

Attitudes: Extent of *sympathy* for al-Shabaab

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

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

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42   Interview with R3, 13 June 2022.

Sadiq (R4)

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

Figure 7. Sadiq's Trajectory
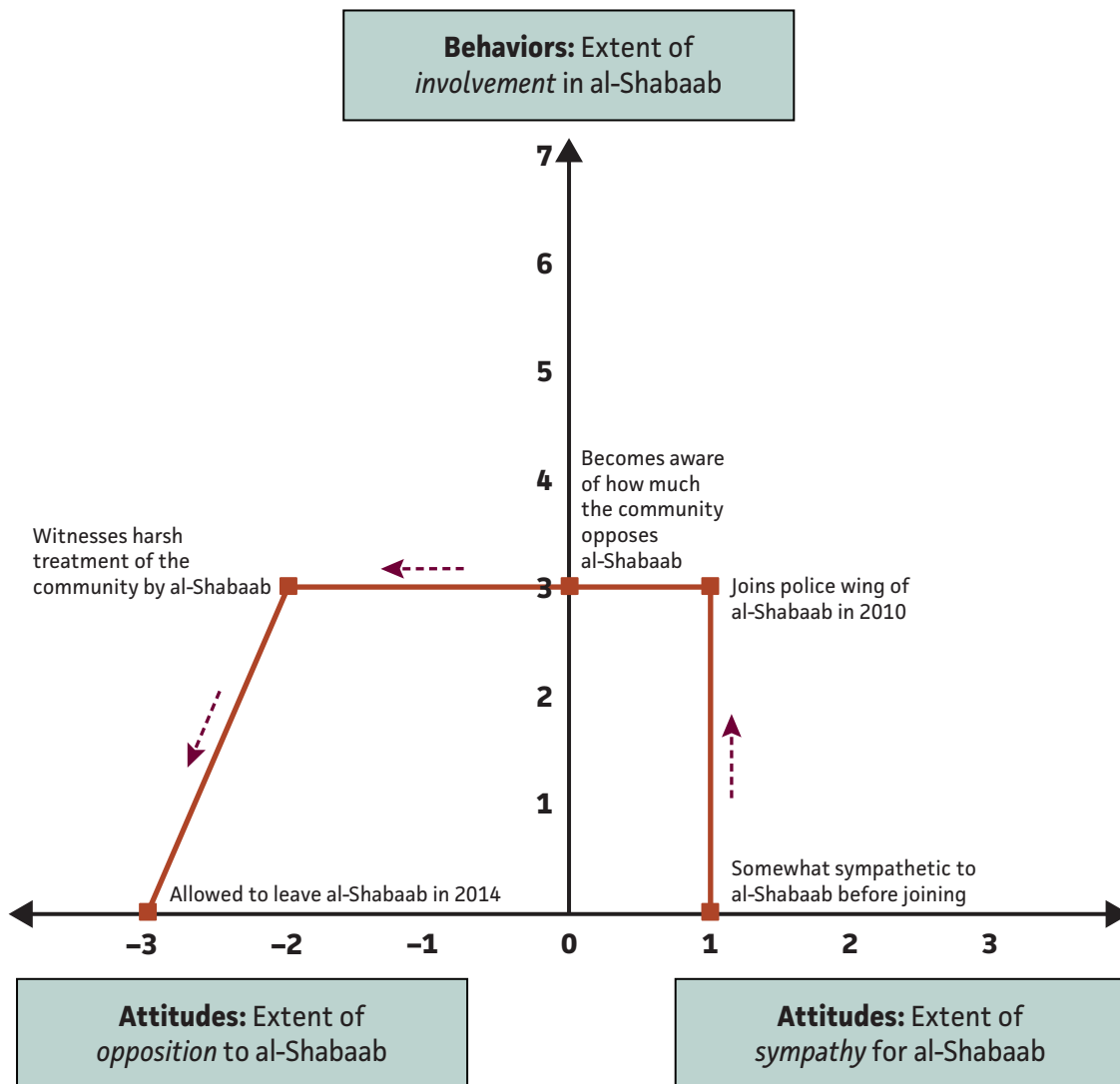
43   Interview with R4, 13 June 2022.

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

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

Jabir (R5)

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

I didn't have any big reason to join al-Shabaab, I just followed my peers, all people of my age were joining the group at that time. Maybe it was ignorance because I did not know anything about the group. My main reason was not ideology.[45]
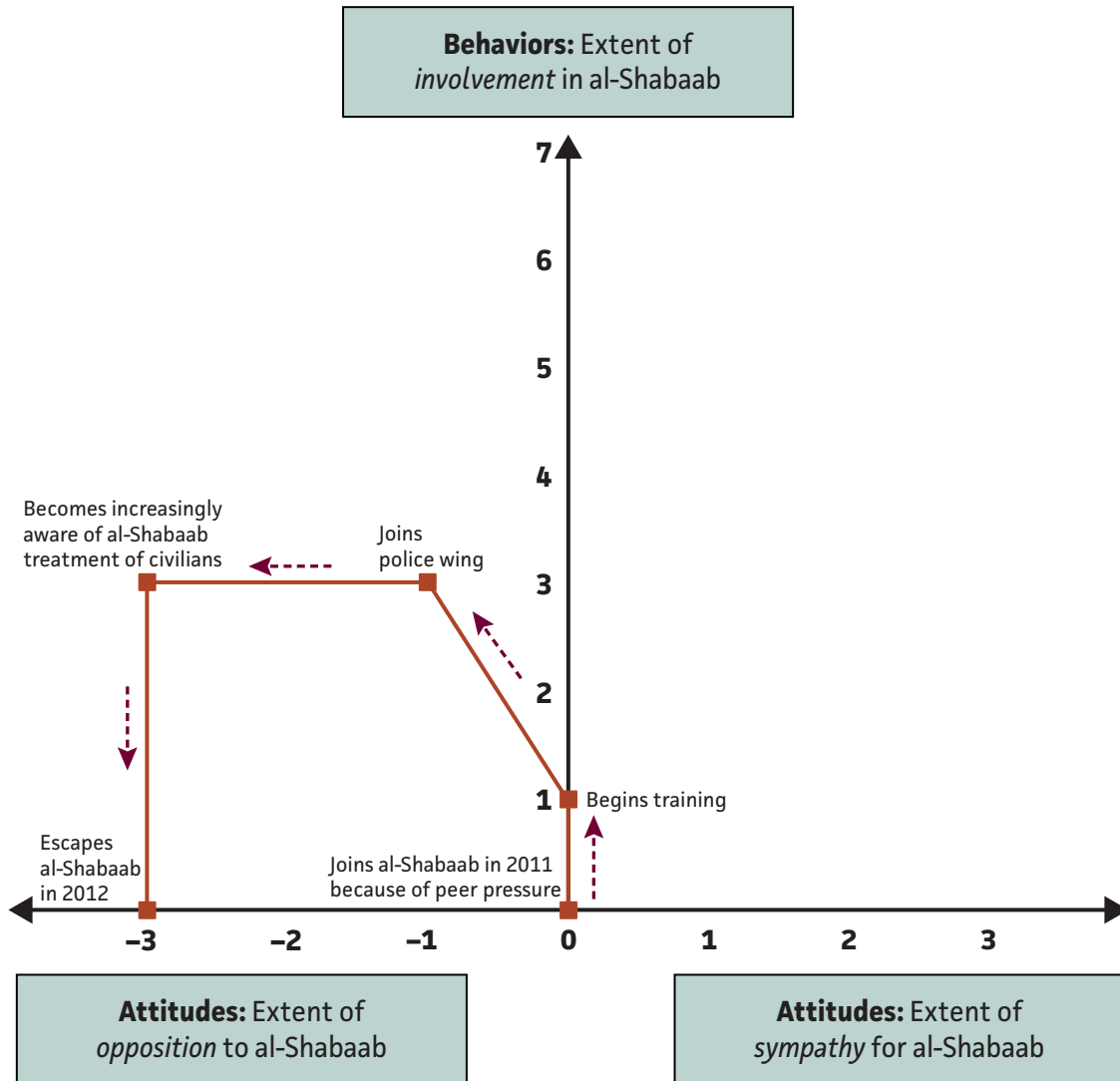
Jabir received three months of military training, during which time his attitude towards the group remained essentially unchanged. He was subsequently posted to the southern port city of Kismayo as a member of the *Hizbah*. He soon became disillusioned with al-Shabaab after witnessing its treatment of civilians, including in the form of severe punishments and killings. Jabir also felt dissatisfied with the living conditions provided by the organization, as well as their inadequate healthcare. His family also began pressuring him to leave, at which point he began to plan his escape. Unfortunately for him, it was at this point that the organization relocated him to Lower Shabelle, where he was unfamiliar with the local terrain. Unlike various other cases considered through this research (R1, R2, R3, and R8), Jabir did not arrange safe passage with security forces prior to his exit from al-Shabaab. Instead, with his lack of local knowledge, he simply boarded a bus headed towards Mogadishu. This was a remarkable step given that attempts to leave al-Shabaab may be punishable by death (as discussed in Section 6). With no personal contacts in the capital, Jabir handed himself over to security forces upon arrival.

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44   Ibid.

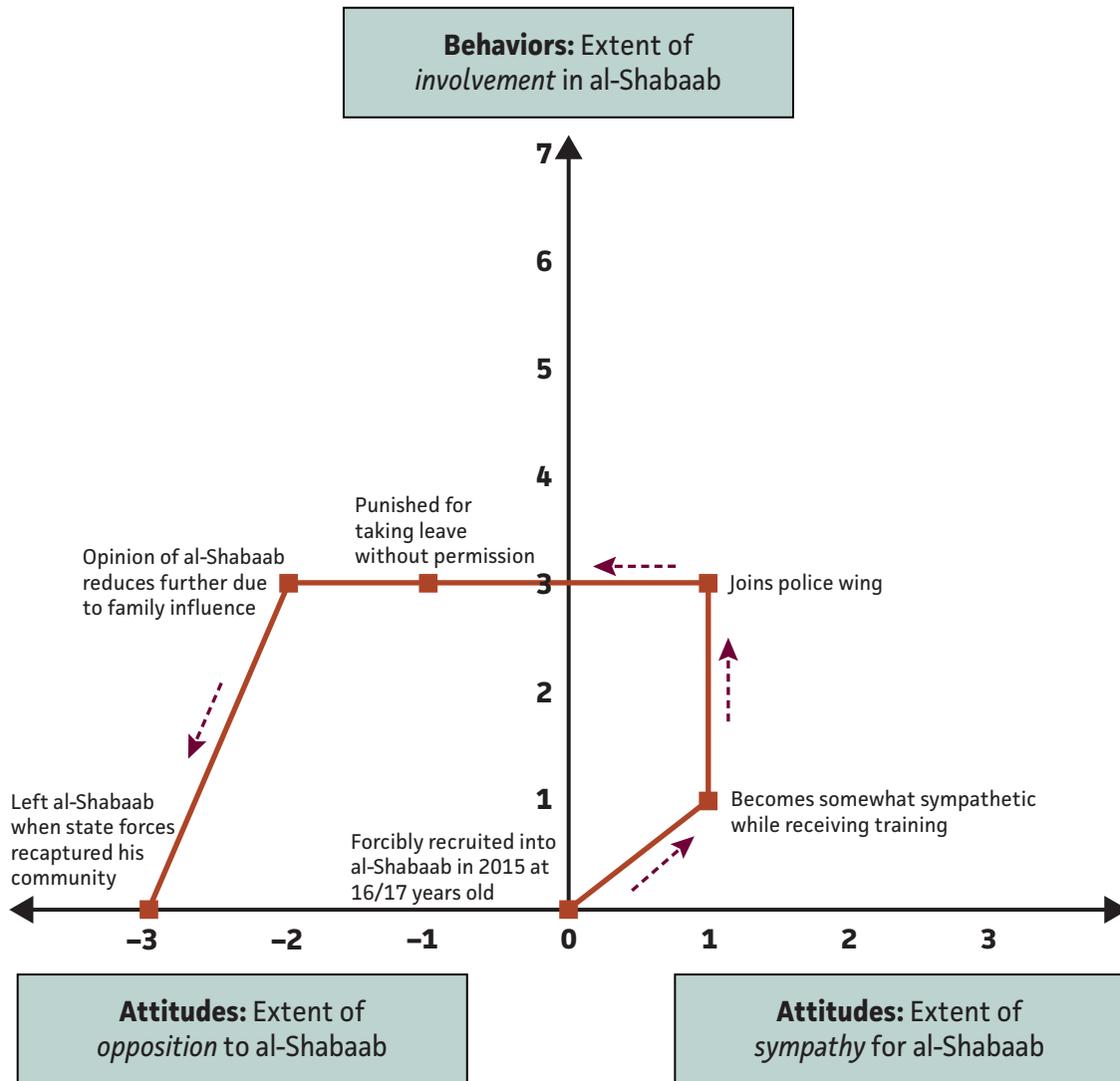45   Interview with R5, 13 June 2022.

Figure 8. Jabir's Trajectory

Behaviors: Extent of *involvement* in al-Shabaab

Becomes increasingly aware of al-Shabaab treatment of civilians

Joins police wing

Begins training

Escapes al-Shabaab in 2012

Joins al-Shabaab in 2011 because of peer pressure

Attitudes: Extent of *opposition* to al-Shabaab

Attitudes: Extent of *sympathy* for al-Shabaab

Mukhtar (R6)

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

Figure 9. Mukhtar's Trajectory

Behaviors: Extent of *involvement* in al-Shabaab

Opinion of al-Shabaab reduces further due to family influence

Punished for taking leave without permission

Joins police wing

Becomes somewhat sympathetic while receiving training

Left al-Shabaab when state forces recaptured his community

Forcibly recruited into al-Shabaab in 2015 at 16/17 years old

Attitudes: Extent of *opposition* to al-Shabaab

Attitudes: Extent of *sympathy* for al-Shabaab

family to disengage. His subsequent exit from the group occurred when government forces reclaimed his home community. Mukhtar described the events as follows:

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

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46   Interview with R6, 14 June 2022.

Mohamud (R7)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless, he requested medical leave, and this was granted as his condition required specialist treatment in Mogadishu. A member of NISA, his brother helped convince him that he would receive state protection if he surrendered to security forces. Mohamud was unique among our respondents in being the only one who held a neutral view of al-Shabaab at the time of his departure—the remainder asserted that they were strongly opposed to the group at that point in time.
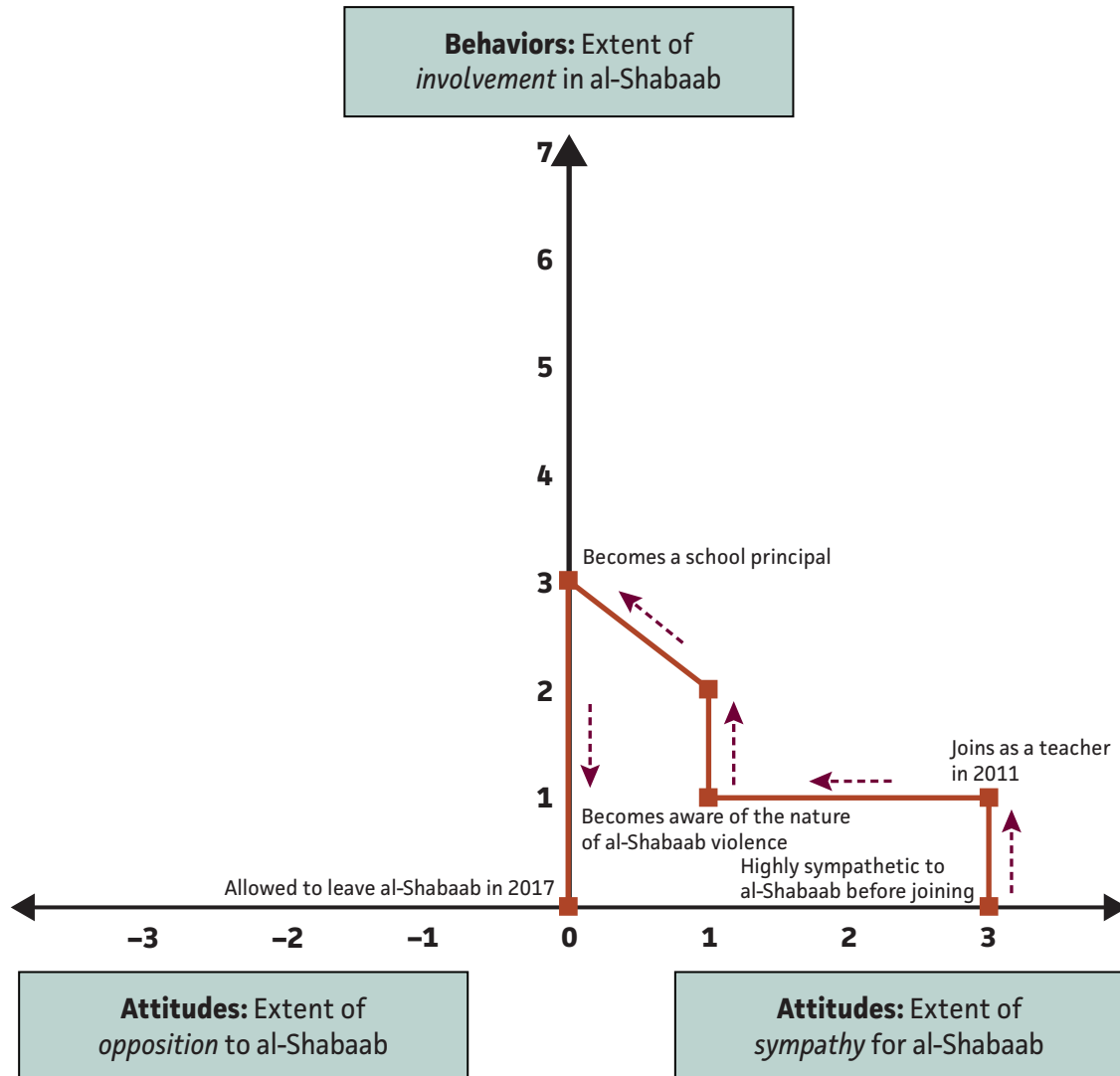
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47   Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.
48   Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.
49   Interview with R7, 11 June 2022.

Figure 10. Mohamud's Trajectory

Ahmed (R8)

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

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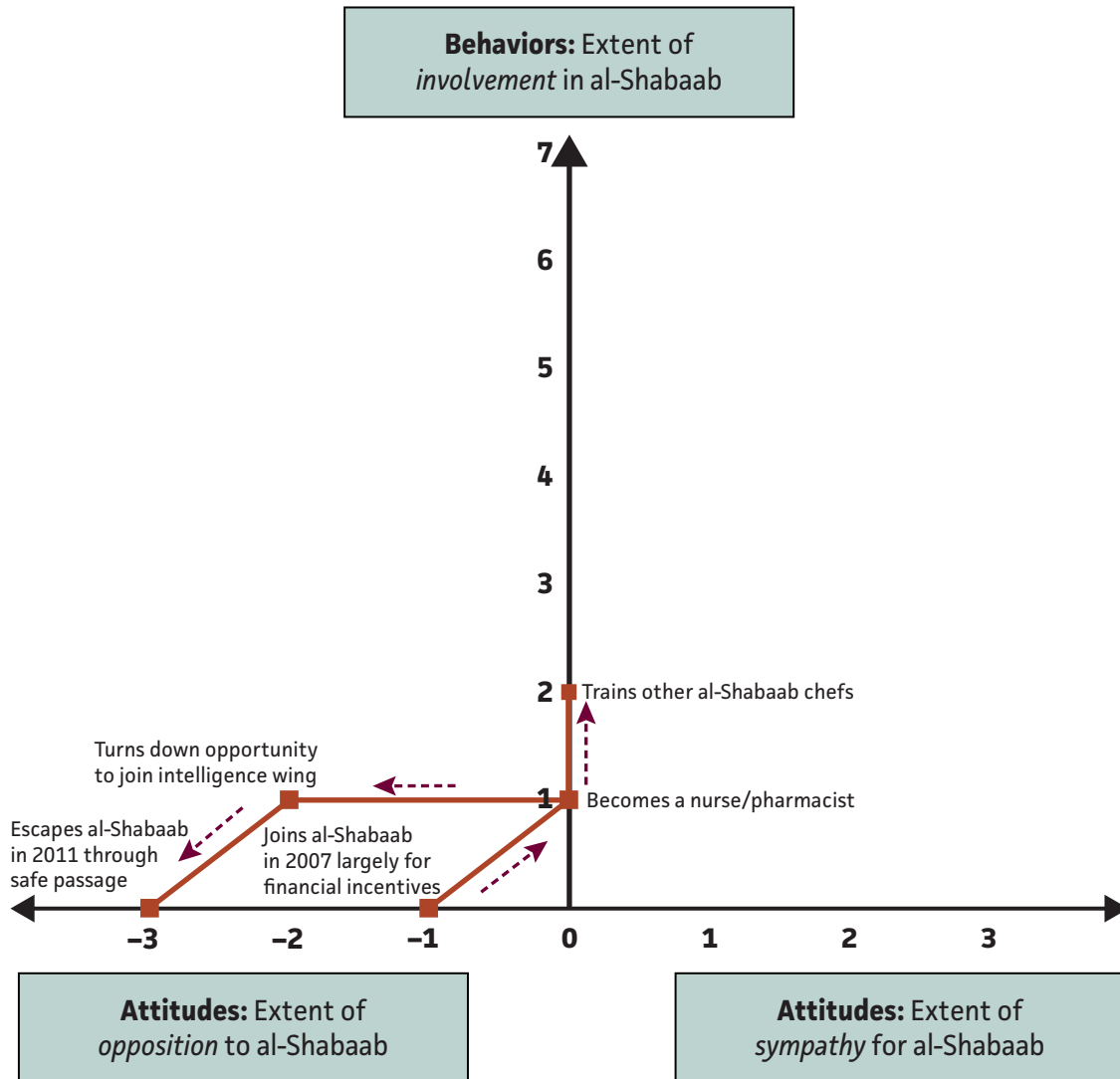
Two years later, Ahmed changed roles to become an in-house nurse for members of al-Shabaab requiring medical assistance. He claimed that he never fully felt part of the organization, and that his attitude during most of his involvement was essentially neutral (again, see Figure 11). Nevertheless, despite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

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Distinguishing between attitudes and behaviors

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

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

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

Drivers of involvement in al-Shabaab

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

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

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

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

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

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

Drivers of disengagement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Policy recommendations

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

» **Communications campaigns that aim to promote exit from al-Shabaab should appeal to varied motives and should be tailored to local contexts.** With the drivers of involvement and disengagement from the group varying substantially between individuals, those tasked with designing communications campaigns to motivate and facilitate the latter should appeal to multiple drivers simultaneously. For instance, these may include a desire for enhanced security outside of a conflict context, improved living conditions, prospects of reuniting with family, opportunities to earn a living through newly acquired vocational skills, and the availability of rehabilitation programs designed to facilitate these aims. Campaigns should also include geographically specific guidance on how to disengage, including key information on where to surrender and other such practical matters.

» **Programs designed to encourage and facilitate exit from al-Shabaab should leverage the family and wider clan networks.** This research helped demonstrate the importance of family and clan members in motivating and facilitating exits from al-Shabaab, and programs that attempt to contribute to this objective should aim to leverage these personal networks. This could be done, for example, by bringing clan elders, women, and youth leaders from locations that are prone to al-Shabaab recruitment to a secure location in Mogadishu to inform them about rehabilitation and reintegration programming. These individuals can then act as focal points for information in their communities, with others reaching out to them if their family members seek to disengage from al-Shabaab.

» **Programs that aim to rehabilitate and reintegrate former members of al-Shabaab should be tailored to the needs of each beneficiary.** Because the drivers of involvement and exit from al-Shabaab vary substantially between individuals, as well as the psychosocial, educational, and other requirements of each beneficiary, those tasked with rehabilitating and reintegrating former members of the group must ensure that their programs are sufficiently

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

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

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

» **Policymakers must recognize the importance of territorial control as a key determinant of sympathy for and involvement in al-Shabaab.** This research highlighted the extent to which territorial control plays a critical role in both recruitment into al-Shabaab, and (perhaps to a lesser extent) subsequent exits from the organization. In doing so, it underscores the need for proportionate military efforts to reclaim territory, as part of a holistic response that also includes PCVE programming. These findings also highlight the need for adequate coordination between PCVE, stabilization, and transitional justice programs in newly "liberated" territory, and for reconciliation initiatives that account for the blurred line between perpetrators and victims of violence.

» **Donors should explore opportunities to apply the ABC Model in other locations to inform policymaking and programming.** This research has shown that the model can be applied to map personal trajectories in and out of al-Shabaab. In doing so, it revealed certain patterns that are not widely acknowledged in the Somalia literature, including how some members become sympathetic to al-Shabaab only after joining the organization, the importance of safe passage arrangements, and the fact that certain individuals are freely allowed to leave the group. With this in mind, we suggest that policymakers are likely to develop a more granular understanding of how and why individuals join and leave other violent extremist groups by repeating this mapping exercise in other geographical locations. Beyond the existing study, we also recommend the application of the ABC Model to other cohorts of former members of al-Shabaab, including women and those incarcerated on terrorism charges.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Bibliography

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Appendix B: Timeline Template
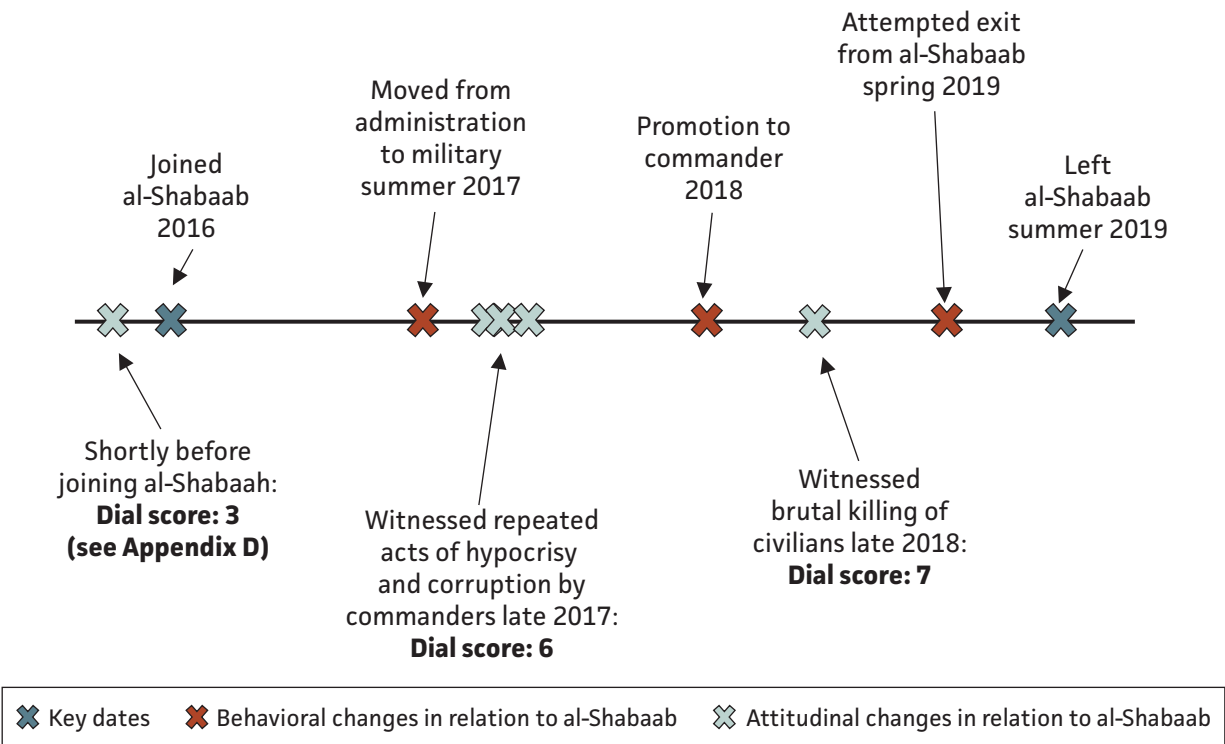
Appendix C: Research guide

A: Introduction

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

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

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

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

Do you agree to take part in this discussion?

B: Demographic questions

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

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

C: Life history

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

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

Step 3: Ask them <u>why</u> they joined al-Shabaab (open question).

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

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

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

- Unit/role/task changes within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were)
- Changes in where they were located with al-Shabaab (clarify where they were based)

- Promotions within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were, and if they had subordinates)

- Demotions within al-Shabaab (clarify what these were for)

- Punishments by al-Shabaab (clarify what these were for)

- Unsuccessful attempted exits from al-Shabaab (ask them to elaborate on these)

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

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

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

- Because the living conditions with al-Shabaab were poor (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

  » Ask them to describe what the particular issues were, e.g., food, sleeping, etc.

- Because of fear for life or health (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

- Because of treatment by superiors (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

  » Clarify what was wrong with the treatment

- Because of family pressure to leave (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

- Because the money provided by al-Shabaab was not enough (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

- Because of perception of contributing to the suffering of others (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

- Because their interpretation of Islam was wrong (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

- Because of the amnesty/opportunities at centers like Serendi (**'a lot', 'a little', 'not at all'**)

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

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

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

Step 12: Say that there are many different reasons why <u>attitudes</u> may change once within al-Shabaab, <u>either positively or negatively,</u> and you are going to mention a few of these to see if they apply to the respondent.
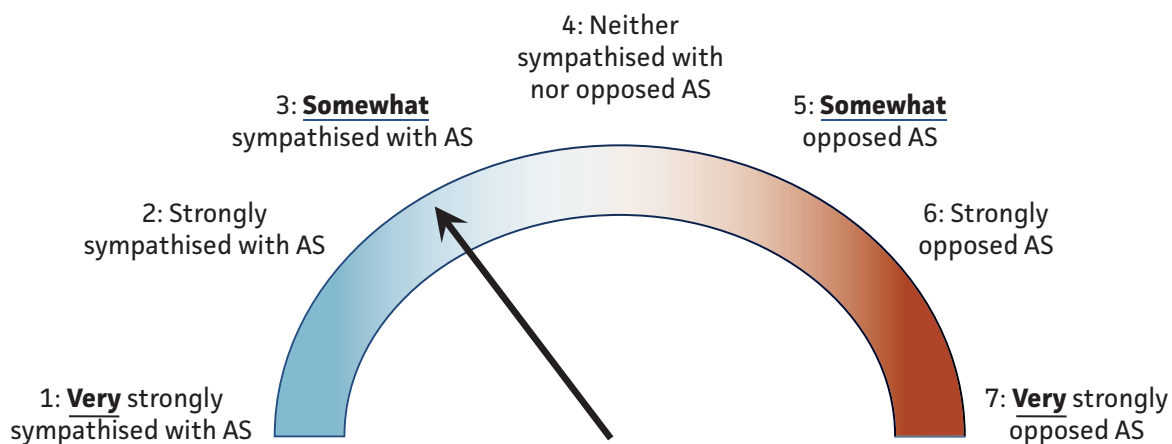
- The nature of their recruitment into al-Shabaab
- A better understanding of al-Shabaab ideology or objectives (e.g., through training provided by al-Shabaab)
- The nature of al-Shabaab rules, or change in these (clarify which rules in particular)
- How they were treated by superiors, or changes in this (clarify the nature of this treatment)
- Other behaviors of superiors or leaders (clarifying what these behaviors were)
- Factional fighting within al-Shabaab
- Particular al-Shabaab acts of violence or broader changes in how al-Shabaab applied violence
- Their personal involvement in violence (clarify what this was)
- Broader political, social, or economic conditions outside al-Shabaab, e.g., election of a new President

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

D: Wrap up

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

Appendix D: The attitudes 'dial'

4: Neither
sympathised with
nor opposed AS

3: **Somewhat**
sympathised with AS

5: **Somewhat**
opposed AS

2: Strongly
sympathised with AS

6: Strongly
opposed AS

1: **Very** strongly
sympathised with AS

7: **Very** strongly
opposed AS

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