

## THE 'OFF-RAMP' FROM AL-SHABAAB: DISENGAGEMENT DURING THE OFFENSIVE IN SOMALIA

This fact sheet presents findings from the RESOLVE Network research report, "[\*The 'Off-Ramp' from al-Shabaab: Disengagement During the Offensive in Somalia\*](#)," by James Khalil, Yahye Abdi, Sif Heide-Ottosen, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, and Martine Zeuthen. Al-Shabaab has been evicted – at least temporarily – from scores of towns and villages in the central Somali Federal Member States of Hirshabelle and Galmudug since summer 2022. While this began as an 'organic' uprising led by clan militias (the *Ma'awisley*) against the insurgent's excessive demands for 'taxation' and recruits, it soon transformed into a major state offensive.

Within this context, in May 2023 the authors conducted interviews with former members of al-Shabaab who had been based in these locations to explore how and why they left the organization, with a particular focus on the extent to which their decisions to disengage were influenced by the offensive, and how their clans helped motivate and facilitate exit.

For more, see: Khalil, James and Yahye Abdi, Sif Heide-Ottosen, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor, and Martine Zeuthen. [\*The 'Off-Ramp' from al-Shabaab: Disengagement During the Offensive in Somalia\*](#). RESOLVE Network, 2023.

### KEY FINDINGS

01 ➤

**The rate of defections from al-Shabaab increased to at least a modest extent in Hirshabelle and Galmudug during the offensive.** This reinforces the need to ensure that facilities and other resources are in place to manage defectors as the second phase of the offensive continues.

02 ➤

**Research respondents expressed a broad consensus that the offensive played a key role in motivating and enabling disengagement from al-Shabaab.** Focus centered on four broad mechanisms through which the offensive exerted important influence: respondents increasingly feared for their lives due to the escalation of conflict; the chaos of battles and attacks created more opportunities to flee from the insurgents; the offensive stretched al-Shabaab's resources thereby creating openings in their systems designed to prevent desertions; and more members found themselves in proximity to state forces to which they could surrender.

03 ➤

**Clan networks also played a key role in motivating and facilitating defections from al-Shabaab.** Several respondents reported having been driven to escape from al-Shabaab partly to avoid having to confront fellow clan members in the *Ma'awisley*. Many also noted that their clans played a proactive role in facilitating their escape from the group, in particular through helping to arrange safe passage with the state security forces.

04 ➤

**Important inhibitors of disengagement remain, including the fear of being punished by al-Shabaab or mistreated by the *Ma'awisley* and/or the state security forces, as well as inadequate social connections to facilitate escape.** A key obstacle to disengagement from al-Shabaab is the fear of being punished by the organization (potentially by death) if caught trying to escape, underlining the need for the National Program to help ensure the safety of its beneficiaries to the extent possible

# POLICY CONSIDERATIONS



## **Continue to pursue the offensive against al-Shabaab to drive defections:**

Although we have not yet seen defections *en masse* from al-Shabaab, it is sufficiently clear that the first phase of the offensive increased the disengagement rate in Hirshabelle and Galmudug to at least a modest extent.



## **Prioritize the need to 'hold' recaptured territory to drive more defections:**

Many individuals and communities are seemingly playing 'wait and see' before fully rejecting al-Shabaab. To increase defection rates, state forces must demonstrate that they can hold recaptured territory over the longer term.



## **Concentrate awareness raising about the National Program in priority areas for recapture:**

The communications pillar of National Program delivers information through the radio, phones, television, social media, leaflets, and other channels. To increase defection rates, those responsible for these campaigns raising awareness of the amnesty and services should concentrate their efforts in areas prioritized for recapture.



## **Leverage the family and wider clan networks to help increase defection rates:**

The National Program should continue to leverage these key intermediaries through outreach campaigns designed to enhance their 'buy-in' to this intervention, while also recognizing that certain al-Shabaab members lack social connections able to help facilitate their escape.



## **Ensure accountability for human rights abuses committed by state forces and *Ma'awisley*:**

The state forces and *Ma'awisley* responsible for committing human right abuses must be held accountable to reduce the extent to which such acts inhibit defections from al-Shabaab. The National Program should also offer training to these forces on the procedures for processing and handling defectors.



## **Prepare for the prospect of mass exits from al-Shabaab:**

Relevant stakeholders should explore possibilities for opening additional facilities in locations that are accessible from current and likely future centers of conflict. Given limitations in the scalability of the existing National Defectors Program, it is worth also considering the feasibility of a community-based approach to rehabilitation and reintegration for individuals at the lowest level of risk.

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