

Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia

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Summary

Effective counter-radicalisation strategies should be based on an empirical understanding of why people join terrorist organisations. Researchers interviewed former al-Shabaab fighters and identified a complex array of reasons for why they joined the organisation. Interviewers developed a profile of typical al-Shabaab recruits and identified factors facilitating their recruitment, including religious identity, socio-economic circumstances (education, unemployment), political circumstances and the need for a collective identity and a sense of belonging. The reasons for al-Shabaab's rise are discussed and recommendations are made to the Somali government, countries in the region and international organisations and donors on how to counter radicalisation and recruitment to al-Shabaab.

THIS STUDY IS BASED on the belief that counter-radicalisation strategies should be informed by a better understanding of why people join terrorist organisations. This understanding should be based on empirical evidence and not guesswork or analysis of completely different organisations in other countries or regions. Although such studies contribute to a better understanding of radicalisation, counter-radicalisation strategies should be tailored to address specific issues that explain why a particular type of person joins a particular organisation in a specific locality or country. A single factor, such as poverty, can rarely be blamed for radicalisation.

Counter-radicalisation measures have proved to be ineffective and even counterproductive if they are not based on a clear understanding of what causes individuals to be susceptible to violent extremism.

There is no shortage of publications on the root causes of terrorism. However, most concentrate on the broad circumstances that motivate people to commit acts of terrorism and are therefore not always applicable. While acknowledging the influence of external factors, this study intends to explain radicalisation from the perspective of individual, self-professed members of al-Shabaab. It will explain radicalisation

in terms of the broad political socialisation process rather than from the perspective of a single root cause, or conditions conducive to terrorism that, although useful, are too broad. Because socialisation is a life-long process, the study considers a range of socialisation agents that affect the radicalisation process.

In order to gain insight into the radicalisation and recruitment processes that al-Shabaab recruits in Somalia go through, the Institute for Security Studies and Finn Church Aid collaborated to conduct this study. Southlink Consultants Ltd were commissioned to conduct fieldwork

for the study from 14 to 28 April 2014 in Mogadishu, Somalia.¹ Using local contacts, researchers were able to identify former fighters in a number of sites in the Mogadishu area, including internally displaced persons' camps that are known to house many former al-Shabaab fighters.² A total of 88 respondents were interviewed, while another seven interviewees, including two former members of Amniyat (al-Shabaab's intelligence service), agreed to be interviewed off the record. Despite numerous challenges,³ the team achieved the fieldwork's objective of generating empirical data about the radicalisation and recruitment process used by al-Shabaab.

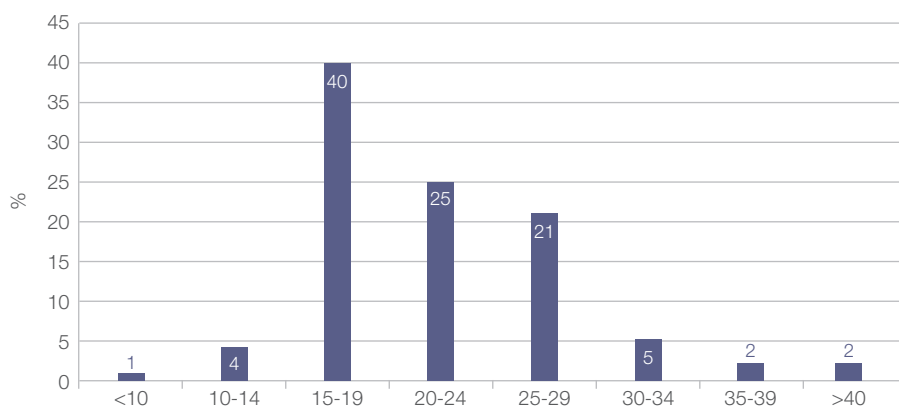
Profile of interviewees

In keeping with its name, which means 'The Youth', al-Shabaab targets adolescents and young adults: only 9% of interviewees joined after their 30th birthdays (Figure 1).

develop the ability to think ideologically,⁵ i.e. to politically identify with subgroups in society, which is a crucial step in establishing their political 'selves'.⁶ During this period they also form 'worldview beliefs' that influence how they perceive, interpret, and respond to their social and interpersonal environments.⁷

Because they are not used to the realities of political and socio-economic participation, young people are more idealistic and reform minded, and are therefore impatient with the compromising methods of their elders and are therefore easily drawn into unconventional political behaviour.⁸ Instead of accommodation or manipulation (the favourite political tactics of the older generation), young people favour confrontation. Because they are particularly susceptible to influences during their mid-to-late teens, it is not surprising that it is during this period that

Figure 1: Age at which interviewees joined al-Shabaab



It is important to note that during the period between puberty (ages 12–17) and early adulthood (18–22) people are at their most impressionable and most open to outside influence, because they are both becoming increasingly aware of the social and political world around them and simultaneously establishing their own identities and political 'selves'.⁴

Individuals form their identities between the ages of 12 and 16, when they

they are often radicalised and recruited. Generally young people are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation for two primary reasons: their impatience with the status quo and their desire to change the political system – if necessary, through the use of violence.

Among the sample group, 34% grew up without a father, while 16% grew up without a mother. What is particularly telling is the age at which interviewees

88

THE NUMBER OF FORMER
AL-SHABAAB FIGHTERS WHO
WERE INTERVIEWED

7

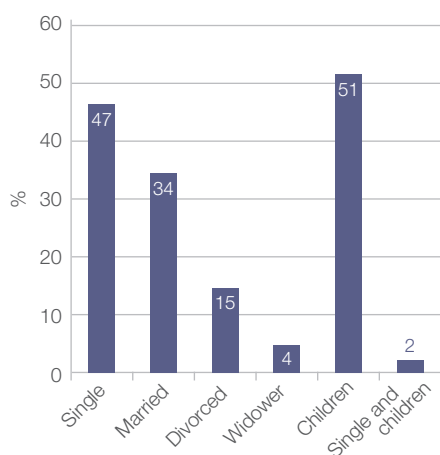
THE NUMBER OF OTHERS
INTERVIEWED OFF
THE RECORD

lost their fathers or mothers: 23% lost their fathers and 8% their mothers when they were younger than five, 68% lost their fathers and 69% their mother between the ages of 16 and 18, while 9% lost their fathers and 23% lost their mothers between 19 and 20.

Most interviewees who lost a parent or both parents did so between early adolescence and early adulthood, at a time when individuals are particularly vulnerable to losses of this magnitude. At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of interviewees had a father (66%) and mother (84%) present in their lives.

In terms of whether marital status and having children of their own at the time of joining al-Shabaab had any impact on their recruitment, the majority of interviewees were single (Figure 2).

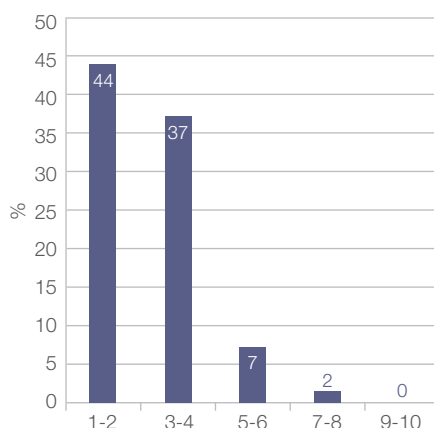
Figure 2: Interviewees' marital and parental status



Although the majority were single, however, marriage and having children did not prevent interviewees from joining al-Shabaab. The relatively fewer married recruits should be interpreted together with interviewees' age at the time of their recruitment, remembering that al-Shabaab tends to attract younger individuals.

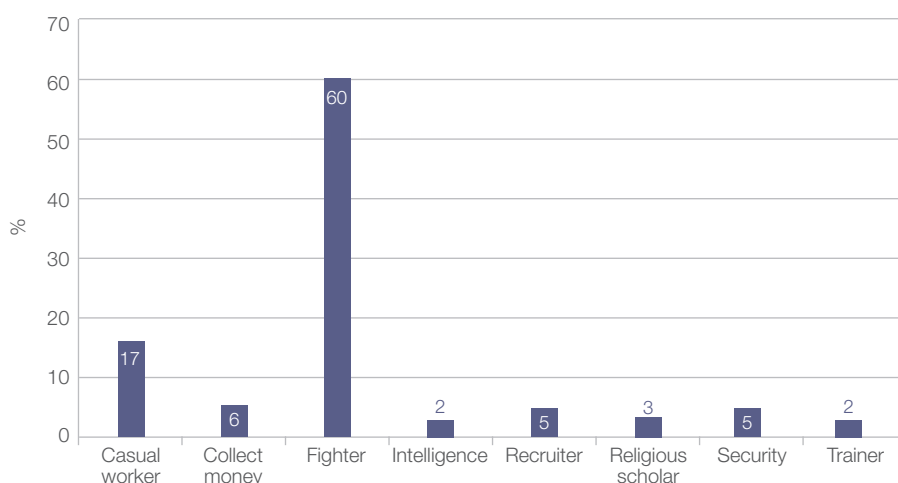
It can be expected that an individual's position in the organisation will have a direct impact on the way in which questions will be answered in interviews. The majority of interviewees (60%) categorised themselves as 'fighters' (see Figure 4), thus representing the grassroots levels of the organisation (Figure 3). The figures given in Figure 3 indicate how interviewees ranked their position in al-Shabaab structures. Note that it is possible that members of middle management and the higher echelons of the organisation would be more committed to al-Shabaab and its ideals, which could form the basis of a future study.

Figure 3: Interviewees' position in al-Shabaab



Note: Rating on a scale of 1–10, where 1 indicates 'lowest ranked' and 10 indicates 'highest ranked'.

Figure 4: Interviewees' roles in al-Shabaab



Radicalisation and recruitment

Although a number of definitions of radicalisation are available, Gurr defines the concept as:

A process in which the group has been mobilized in pursuit of a social or political objective but has failed to make enough progress toward the objective to satisfy all activists. Some become disillusioned and discouraged, while others intensify their efforts, lose patience with conventional means of political action, and look for tactics that will have greater impact. This is the kind of situation in which modelling or 'imitative' behaviour occurs. Impatience and frustration provide an expressive motivation (anger) and rationalistic grounds (dramatic episodes of violence elsewhere) that make it likely that some activists will decide to experiment with terror tactics. The choice is made, and justified, as a means to the original ends of radical reform, group autonomy, or whatever. And the dynamics of the process are such that the terrorists believe that they enjoy the support of some larger community in revolt.⁹

The duration and process of radicalisation differ from person to person, although it is commonly accepted that the process occurs gradually over a period of time. Conscious decisions to, for example, join a terrorist organisation or use violence for political ends are not made suddenly, but entail a gradual process that includes a multitude of occurrences, experiences, perceptions and role players.

Having contact and listen to others with different opinions are important facilitators preventing radicalisation, because discussions with people with different opinions force people to constantly rethink and refine their own positions. On the other hand, sharing one's opinions with people who hold similar viewpoints will reinforce one's position, identify common problems and provoke collective action.¹⁰ This form of isolation leads to 'groupthink', which can be described as an irrational style of thinking that causes group members to make poor decisions.¹¹ With this in mind, only 9% of interviewees

indicated that they would remain friends with those they did not agree with, while a further 60% indicated that they would not listen to friends' advice. Interviewees who indicated that they would listen to others (40%) referred to elders, parents, religious leaders, community members and friends.

When asked how long the period was between being introduced to and joining the organisation, a large proportion (48%) indicated a short period of between one and 30 days (Figure 5). This should be interpreted in terms of the primary reasons why interviewees joined al-Shabaab (Figure 7), i.e. religion and the economic benefits al-Shabaab offered.

The short period between being introduced to and joining al-Shabaab might reflect an emotional and poorly thought through decision in which interviewees experienced two central emotions: anger and fear (Figure 6).

Anger is probably one of the most common and powerful emotions associated with political violence and terrorism. This emotion normally occurs in response to a particular circumstance or event in an attempt to regain control and/or remove the reason for anger, and is directed at those considered to be causing it.¹² According to Huddy et al.,¹³ anger is intensified when the responsible party is perceived to be unjust and illegitimate. Anger seldom enables the person to reasonably evaluate the information surrounding its cause. Consequently,

Figure 5: Period between being introduced to and joining al-Shabaab

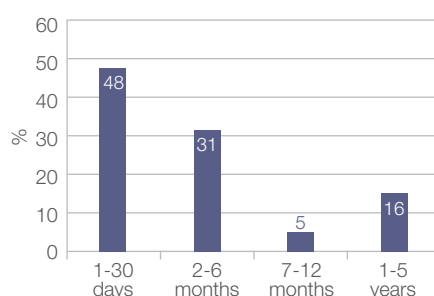
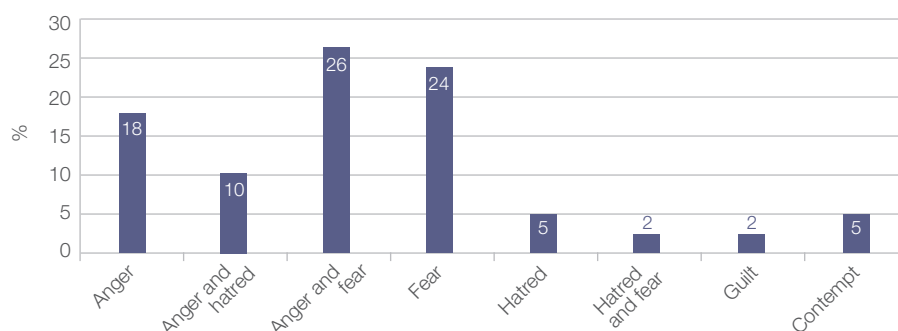


Figure 6: Emotion associated with joining al-Shabaab



9%

THE PERCENTAGE OF INTERVIEWEES WHO INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD REMAIN FRIENDS WITH THOSE THEY DO NOT AGREE WITH

affected individuals are often unable to recognise additional threats that might contribute to unnecessary risk taking. They tend to resort to stereotyping, making them vulnerable to individuals attempting to convince them to respond,¹⁴ leading to *hatred* and the desire for *vengeance*.

The level of frustration interviewees experienced was a relatively minor contributing factor: the majority (56%) of interviewees rated their levels of frustration at between 1 and 4 on a scale of 1–10 (with 1 indicating ‘not frustrated’ and 10 ‘highly frustrated’). Forty-two per cent referred to frustration levels of between 5 and 7, while only 2% rated their frustration levels between 8 and 10. The fact that the majority did not recall high frustration levels suggests that they either wanted to minimise their commitment to and involvement with al-Shabaab or were not driven to accept the cause it represented by frustration alone.

Circumstances facilitating interviewees’ recruitment to al-Shabaab

Radicalisation involves both external and internal factors. External factors can be subdivided into domestic and international circumstances, as presented in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.¹⁵ Internal or personal interpretations of the external environment are influenced by psychological factors that refer directly to political socialisation.

The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy identifies ‘conductive conditions’ to terrorism. These ‘push factors’ or enabling circumstances include political circumstances, including poor governance, political exclusion, lack of civil liberties and human rights abuses; economic circumstances; sociological circumstances, e.g. religious and ethnic discrimination; counter-terrorism operations and their impact; and perceived injustice and international circumstances. Although a basic understanding of these conditions provides an insight into radicalisation, without pressure from domestic and personal circumstances individuals might support the ideas of extremists (non-violent extremism) without becoming actively involved in acts of terrorism (violent extremism). Secondly, not all people faced with the same set of circumstances will become radicalised, while not all of those who are radicalised will join a terrorist organisation or commit acts of violence and terrorism.

Despite these circumstances, it is still the individual who decides to join a terrorist organisation or is drawn to the ideals and activities of extremist organisations. Ultimately one realises that human behaviour is extremely complex and that the key to radicalisation is the individual’s response to the circumstances described above. Interviewees identified the reasons why they joined al-Shabaab (Figure 7).

It is clear from Figure 7 that religious and economic factors were central to explaining why interviewees joined al-Shabaab. These factors, together with the political circumstances in which the decision to join the organisation was made, are discussed below.

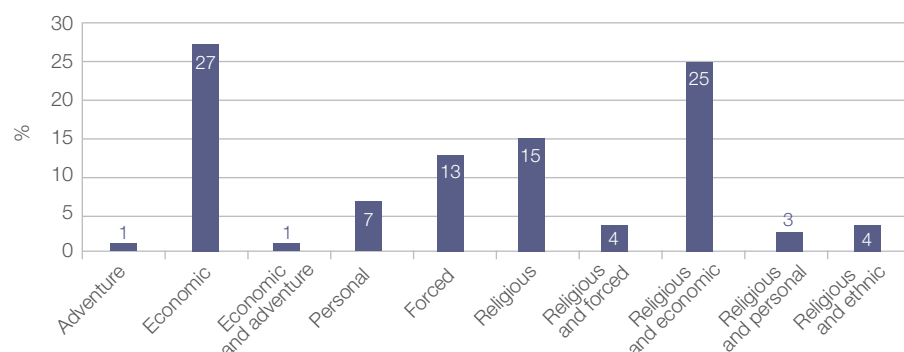
Mohamud (not his real name) was barely 14 years old when he joined al-Shabaab. He was a schoolboy in Marka, and when the three-month long holidays approached in 2009, he was advised by friends to join the organisation. ‘When you join, they give you a mobile phone and every month you get \$50’, he said. ‘This is what pushes a lot of my friends to join.’

Religious identity

As explained in the discussion of the role of the family in radicalisation (see ‘Political circumstances’, below), political socialisation also include the development of a social identity as ‘part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from one’s knowledge of his or her membership in a social group or groups together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’.¹⁶ This gives rise to a collective identity that Abádi-Nagy defines as ‘the set of culture traits, social traits, values, beliefs, myths, symbols, images that go into the collective’s self-definition’.¹⁷ Simon and Klandermans explain the importance of collective identity in an individual’s psychological makeup, stating that it:

- Confirms the individual’s membership of a particular group in society
- Provides distinctive characteristics to identify others who are not members of this group
- Ensures respect from those sharing the individual’s position in society
- Leads to a sense of self-respect or self-esteem by providing understanding

Figure 7: Interviewees’ reasons for joining al-Shabaab



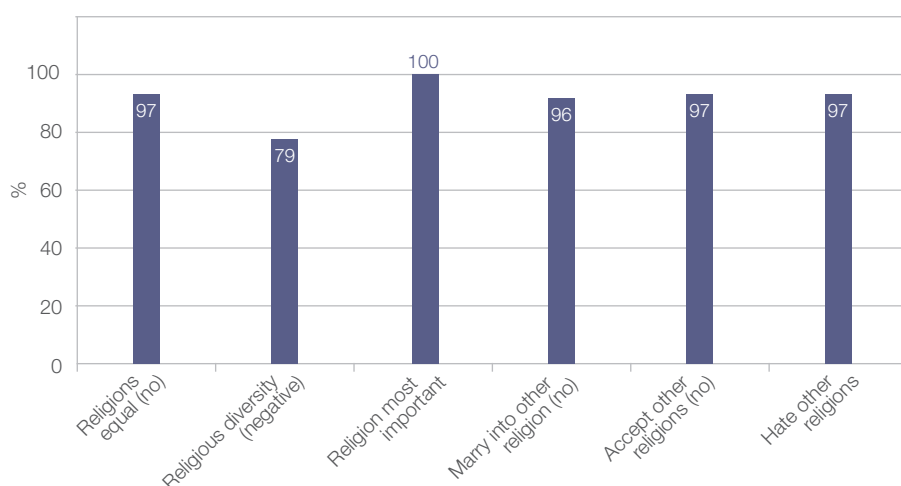
of or meaning to the social world the individual is part of

- Provides a sense of solidarity with others and reminds the individual that he/she is not alone¹⁸

In light of the above, it is significant that all the interviewees grew up in areas where Muslims were in the majority and that they had a very negative perception of religious diversity and acceptance of other religions (Figure 8).

In addition to the general motivation that they perceived Islam to be under threat, interviewees referred to the limited role of a religious figure in the recruitment process: only 4% of them were encouraged to join al-Shabaab by a religious figure. Despite this, the single largest group (27%) were introduced to al-Shabaab at a mosque, implying the involvement of other individuals who used the space and opportunity for recruitment purposes.

Figure 8: Interviewees' religious perceptions



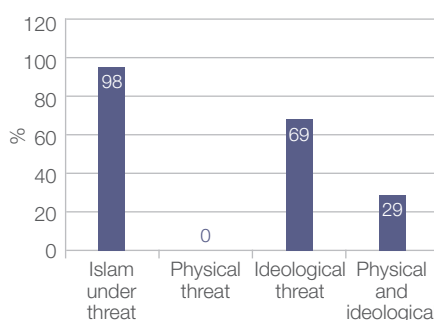
According to one interviewee, 'preachers delivered sermons for hours about destiny and the sweetness of the holy war. They distributed leaflets on Islam, showed video recordings from other jihadist in the world and how AMISOM [the African Union Mission in Somalia] or the Christian crusaders invaded our beloved country and were converting our children to Christianity.'

Interviewees also came from a large number of ethnic groups or, in the Somali context, clans.

This confirms not only al-Shabaab's strong religious motivations, but links directly to interviewees' perception that their religion (Islam) was under threat, which was the belief of a highly significant 98% of interviewees (Figure 9). This threat was often associated with non-Muslim countries.

Ahmadey Kusow, a Somali-Bantu, joined the al-Shabaab voluntarily and became a loyal member of the group. He is one of hundreds of young men belonging to the Somali-Bantu and minority clans who have freely joined the militant group because they feel they have been marginalised since the collapse of the Somali state. They say recruitment to al-Shabaab as an opportunity to take revenge and empower themselves against majority tribes who grabbed their farming areas and (to some extent) property.

Figure 9: Interviewees' perception that Islam is under threat



98%

THE PERCENTAGE OF INTERVIEWEES WHO PERCEIVED ISLAM TO BE UNDER THREAT

In addition to local Somali nationals, al-Shabaab also attracts Somali nationals living abroad, other foreign fighters and nationals from neighbouring countries to join the organisation.

Abu Aisha came from the United States and joined al-Shabaab after being recruited through the Internet. He fought for three years, but became discouraged by the way in which jihad was conducted. He was among a handful of Somali-Americans who had drifted to al-Shabaab over the years. A number of recruitment agents and support networks have been uncovered in the United States that approach potential targets through mosques, the Internet and community contacts. The English-language skills and social disconnect of Somali-Americans may be assets to al-Shabaab. Due to both the trauma experienced by recruits' parents when fleeing Somalia's long period of anarchy, and cultural and economic problems they encountered when attempting to integrate into US society, some angry teens have become fertile targets for al-Shabaab recruitment.

Socio-economic circumstances

Interviewees were asked to identify their most important reasons for joining al-Shabaab. While the majority referred to religion (see above), 25% combined religion with economic reasons, while a further 1% referred to economic reasons and the desire for adventure. These interviewees thought that al-Shabaab membership would become a career, which casts doubt on their ideological commitment to the organisation's aims. One can possibly conclude, therefore, that if most interviewees had been given access to other employment opportunities, they would not have joined al-Shabaab.

Education

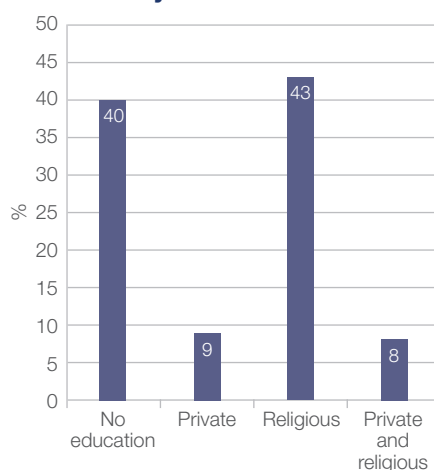
Education is identified as crucial to preparing young people to obtain employment. Education can also counter later radicalisation, because better-

educated people tend to participate in conventional politics, for various reasons:

- They feel that they can influence the political process more than less-educated people because they can articulate their opinions better
- They are more aware of the impact of government on their lives
- They generally have opinions on a wider range of political topics. They are also more likely to engage in political discussions with a wide range of people, while the less educated are more likely to avoid such discussions
- Educated people are more likely to have confidence in the political process and be an active member of a legitimate political organisation¹⁹

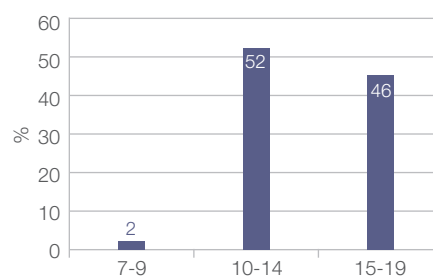
The unfortunate reality in Somalia is that the formal education system came to a standstill when the Somali state collapsed in 1991, leaving an entire generation uneducated: 40% of interviewees received no education, while the remaining 60% received only limited education (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Education received by interviewees



The majority of interviewees who received a religious education or attended a madrassa recalled the level of focus on the Qur'an. Of those who received some form of education, the majority left school between the ages of 10 and 14 (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Interviewees' school-leaving age



Interviewees also identified education and employment as two central components of attempts to find a solution to Somalia's problems, together with peace, stability, reconciliation, etc. (Without these latter attributes, education and sustainable development will remain an illusive dream.)

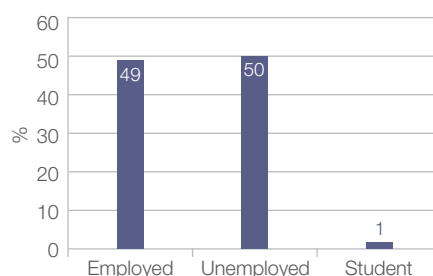
Higher levels of education also decrease individuals' propensity to engage in civil strife.²⁰ Ultimately, the solution to radicalisation is not education as such, but the quality and type of education provided. Students need to learn from other disciplines, such as the social sciences, history and philosophy, that can equip them to be open to other opinions, to argue intelligently, and to understand domestic and international realities.

Unemployment

Lack of education adversely affects employment opportunities. Self-employment is an option when formal employment opportunities are limited, but lack of education is a limiting factor here too. In a study conducted in Uganda, Tushambomwe-Kazooba showed that the majority of new business owners were not properly trained, leading to poor business planning and management decisions.²¹ In an attempt to assess the potential role unemployment plays in radicalisation, interviewees' employment levels are summarised in Figure 12.

All those who were employed had low-income jobs, largely because they

Figure 12: Interviewees' employment status



did not have the education needed to obtain better jobs. It was therefore not surprising that interviewees who defined adverse economic circumstances as a recruitment factor saw al-Shabaab as a potential employer, claiming that they were paid between \$150 and \$500 per month.

Amina (not her real name), a widow, was brought up in Burhakaba. Her parents were staunch Muslim farmers and herders. In 2004 she married a farmer from her clan and had two children. In 2009 her husband was approached by several young men who claimed to represent al-Shabaab. He was told to join and fight for his people, community and religion against their external enemies and infidels. 'We will protect you and once you join we will pay you \$300 per month', they told him. Amina feared for her husband's life when they threatened him later. She and her husband later yielded to the coercion and decided to join the group. They were paid \$300 for the first few months, but later were informed that they would not be paid and had to work hard and fight for the sake of Islam if they wanted to go to heaven. Amina cooked, washed clothes and collected firewood in the presence of guards, while her husband first inspected roads before becoming a fundraiser working in nearby villages. He later became a

fighter and was killed in 2011. Amina reported that she still bore the scars from severely beatings she suffered when she tried to escape. Eventually she pretended that her mother was ill and fled into the bush when the guards were praying as she was being escorted to see her mother. 'I was later rescued by herders who assisted me with a change of clothing before I ended up in Mogadishu', she told the interviewer.

Political circumstances

As discussed above, prior political experiences are an important indicator of the extent to which people trust politicians and the political system. This starts at the family level in that children growing up in families where politics is discussed or where parents are interested in politics are more likely to see the value of participating in the political process. This extends to peer groups, in which the level of political discussion will mirror group members' sense of political efficacy. Finally, actual events will impact on individuals' political socialisation and contribute to their political perceptions and values.

The *family* serves as a child's first introduction to the political culture of his/her country. Despite Somalia's violent past, only 17% of interviewees indicated that their parents discussed politics in their presence while they were growing up. Asked if they agreed with their parents' political opinions, only 7% answered in the affirmative. This limited political interaction between parent and child reflects a generation gap, and could be extended to the possibility that the ideology al-Shabaab represents is not historically embedded in Somalia and that parents fear any form of political discussion with their children. This was reflected in the fact that only 5% of interviewees indicated that a parent was aware of their decision to join al-Shabaab.

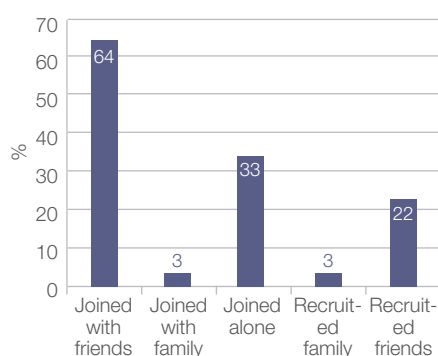
\$150 —
\$500
PER MONTH
AMOUNT INTERVIEWEES
WERE PAID BY AL-SHABAAB

Only 3% specifically informed a parent of their joining the organisation, while 3% informed another sibling. To put these figures in context: 57% of interviewees informed another person. It is therefore improbable that family members agree with al-Shabaab's ideology or even accept it as the norm. Parents of interviewees clearly played a lesser role in transferring their political orientations to their children through the socialisation process. Instead, peers played a greater role in interviewees' political socialisation, which will be discussed below.

In addition to the relatively limited involvement of their parents in interviewees' recruitment by al-Shabaab, siblings played the smallest role, introducing only 2% of interviewees to the organisation. Secondly, only 3% of interviewees indicated that they had joined with family members, while 3% recruited family members to al-Shabaab. The reality is that if the family is unable to transfer its political orientations to its younger members, other socialisation agents are likely to be more influential.

The role of *friends* in interviewees' decision to join the organisation was unmistakable: friends introduced 30% of interviewees to al-Shabaab, while 22% of interviewees stated that they had recruited other friends. Friends were also the largest group (42%) that interviewees informed of their decision to join the organisation. This is because the family's influence wanes at 13 or 14 years of age (note that 40% of

Figure 13: Influence of friends and family on interviewees



interviewees joined al-Shabaab between the ages of 15 and 19; see Figure 1).

This is also the period when the individual begins to take a more active interest and participates in specifically political affairs.²²

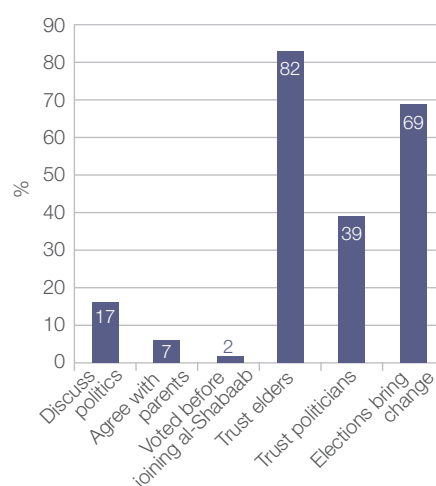
The fact that the majority of interviewees joined with friends testifies to peer pressure, but it also affects how interpersonal relationships should be interpreted. The strength of peer groups is based on two key pillars: the emotional link between the individual and the peer group, and the access the individual has to the group, and vice versa.

Abdi (not his real name) is 24 years old and was born and brought up in Baidoa, but is currently living in Mogadishu. He was 20 years old and was idle, just like many Somali youth who are desperate for the ever-illusory source of a livelihood. Abdi was approached by a friend who was already an al-Shabaab member. Initially shocked, having been engaged in social activities that al-Shabaab did not permit, Abdi rejected the idea, but later joined the group after being persuaded by his friend. After joining, he was instructed to abandon his lifestyle of smoking and chewing *miraa*, which he found difficult, earning him several punishments. He escaped several times, but was caught and returned to the al-Shabaab camp. To retain him, the camp elders supported his habits and bought him cigarettes and *miraa*. He became an informer and a link with local farmers, from who he used to collect \$50 a month. Abdi finally left al-Shabaab when the group reneged on its promise to pay him \$250 a month. He ran away and relocated to Kismayu before travelling to Mogadishu. Almost a year since leaving the group, Abdi still lives in fear that once one joins al-Shabaab, it is very hard to walk away from it.

Interviewees' experience of politics

In Somalia, an entire generation grew up without the experience of an effective political system, despite various attempts to consolidate political power following the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991.²³

Figure 14: Interviewees' political experiences and perceptions



When asked whether they trusted politicians and the political system, 39% of interviewees indicated that they trusted politicians (Figure 14). In contrast, 82% trusted clan elders, while a further 69% trusted the political process to bring about change, despite the fact that only 2% had participated in the election process before joining al-Shabaab.

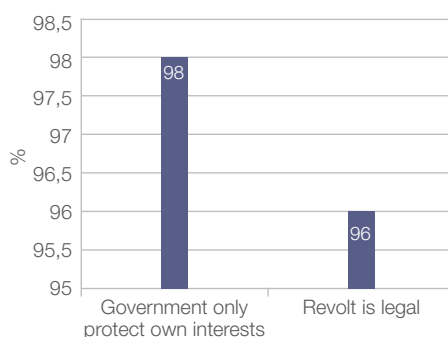
Interviewees' trust in elders is a positive finding that the Federal Government could build on. However, 18% of interviewees believed that elders were only looking after their own personal interests and that of close family members.

When asked whether they thought that elections would bring about change, 37% of interviewees did not consider elections to be 'free and fair', while a further 55% did not consider elections to be 'free and fair' and believed that they

were not able to register a political party that represented their ideas.

Despite positive perceptions that elections can bring change, the vast majority of interviewees agreed with the statement that 'government only looks after and protects the interests of a few'. When asked whether 'opposing the government is legal and just', only 4% did not agree with this statement (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Interviewees' views on the government



From interviewees' answers, it is clear that politicians and the government face a serious legitimacy crisis. In other words, if the government wants to present a meaningful option to unconventional political participation, it needs to meet people's expectations. Most interviewees referred to the government's duty to provide safety and protect people's rights, while a few also included the responsibility to govern (in terms of their perceptions of what this meant).

Collective identity and a sense of belonging

A sense of collective identity can be easily politicised if the majority of the in-group share their feelings of injustice or inequality and thus turn 'my grievances' into 'our grievances'. The next step is to identify the 'other' or out-group that can be blamed for these grievances, leading to its stereotyping. Consequently, when the individual is faced with particular

situations, collective identity might become more prominent:

- When individuals are increasingly unable to provide for themselves and/or their families
- When they are confused by social and political chaos around them
- When they feel threatened by another group

In an attempt to address these circumstances, individuals will turn to an ideological movement to provide them with an identity or will enhance their identification with a religious, ethnic or political group. In Somalia al-Shabaab presents Islam as the single overarching factor that binds all the different clans together and provides a solution to years of social and political upheaval. That being said, it should be stressed that although religion serves as a nation-building factor, al-Shabaab does not represent Islam as such, but rather a particular interpretation of Islam as a solution to Somalia's problems.

Collective identity manifests in the way in which individuals categorise people in terms of concepts such as 'us', 'we' or 'ours' when referring to the in-group, versus 'they', 'them' or 'theirs' in terms of the out-group or 'enemy'. In Somalia, even among interviewees who stated that they were forced to join the organisation, al-Shabaab managed to establish itself at the centre of its members' terms of reference. Fifty-eight per cent of interviewees grouped al-Shabaab and being Muslim in the same category ('us') and saw al-Shabaab as the defender of Islam against other religions (with specific reference to Christians) and other countries ('them'). It was also unsurprising to note that no interviewee referred to a Somali national identity or 'Somalis' (Figures 16 and 17).

82%

THE PERCENTAGE OF
INTERVIEWEES WHO TRUSTED
CLAN LEADERS

Figure 16: Interviewees' perceptions of 'us'

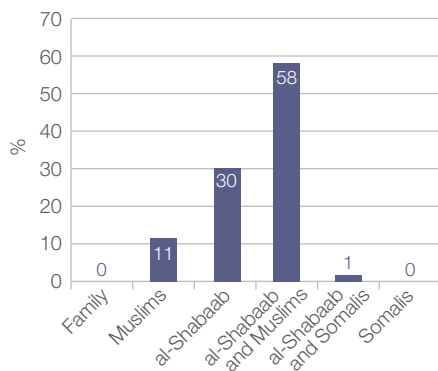
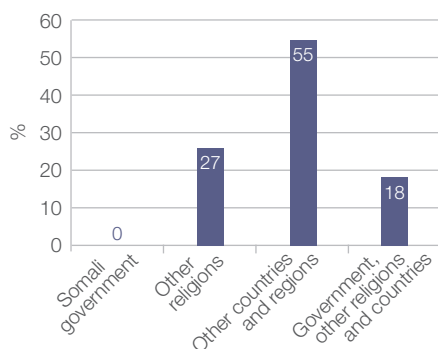
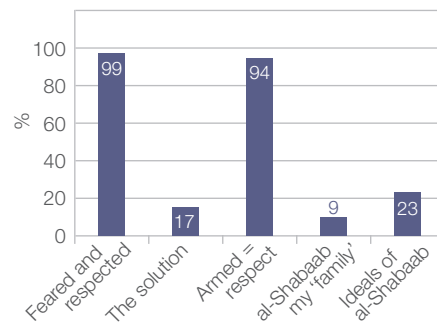


Figure 17: Interviewees' perceptions of 'them'



In addition to the reason why interviewees joined al-Shabaab, it was equally important to assess their perceptions of the organisation (summarised in Figure 18). It is clear that only a small percentage of interviewees were completely integrated into the organisation or truly believed in al-Shabaab and what it represents (23%) or regarded al-Shabaab as being the solution to Somalia's problems (17%). Instead, the majority of interviewees were drawn to al-Shabaab because it is feared and respected (99%), and the fact that when they as individuals are armed they are respected (94%). To place this in perspective, it is important to remember that the overwhelming majority of interviewees were foot soldiers, not commanders, who joined because of the economic opportunities al-Shabaab potentially provided.

Figure 18: Interviewees' perceptions of al-Shabaab

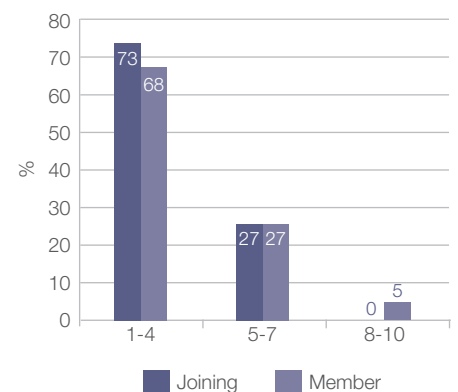


However, all the interviewees who joined al-Shabaab for only economic reasons referred to the organisation's religious ideals and being Muslim and/or al-Shabaab members as 'us' and other religions and countries as 'them' (Figures 16 and 17).

Asking interviewees to rate their sense of belonging when they joined and as members of al-Shabaab showed interesting results. Over time the sense of belonging increased slightly for some interviewees, although a large majority indicated a very low sense of belonging in both scenarios (see Figure 19). What made these results interesting is that 30% of interviewees when asked to identify 'us' referred to al-Shabaab, whereas the majority (58%) referred to being Muslim and being members of al-Shabaab. These results measure the extent to which the individual identifies with the group and thus measures solidarity within the group. This will have an impact on socialisation and group identification, which Janis describes as 'a set of preconscious and unconscious attitudes which incline each member to apperceive the group as an extension of himself and impel him to remain in direct contact with the other members and to adhere to the group's standards'.²⁴ The apparent discrepancy between the responses discussed above could be explained by the fact that the majority

of interviewees were low-ranked al-Shabaab members motivated by the promise of financial gain, while the small percentage that rated a sense of belonging higher had presumably been socialised as committed members of the organisation.

Figure 19: Interviewees' sense of belonging in al-Shabaab



Note: Rating on a scale of 1–10, where 1 indicates 'least' and 10 indicates 'most'.

This sense of belonging was also emphasised when interviewees were asked to define 'us'. The role of religion combined with al-Shabaab membership confirms that the interest of the collective – based on religion – serves as the most important component of members' identities. For the majority of interviewees these two are seamlessly interwoven. In this regard, self-categorisation theory predicts that 'people are more inclined to behave in terms of their group membership because their common identity as a group is more salient' when they are under threat. Consequently, any threat to the in-group will be interpreted as a threat to the individual.²⁵ Some interviewees indicated that their sense of belonging slightly increased the longer they were members of al-Shabaab. This confirms that over time the identity of the organisation becomes the identity of the individual, as suggested by Post²⁶ and supported by Taylor and Louis,²⁷ and that belonging to a terrorist organisation such

as al-Shabaab can result in a collective identity where individual identities are replaced by a sense of being part of something bigger.

The level of indoctrination the individual has been exposed to also influences the extent to which he/she internalises the relevant social and cultural values of that group through socialisation, leading to 'collective conditioning' as a form of indoctrination. When an individual reaches this state in his/her social identity, he/she will start to think in terms of the collective and completely identify with the group.²⁸

Catalysts for joining al-Shabaab

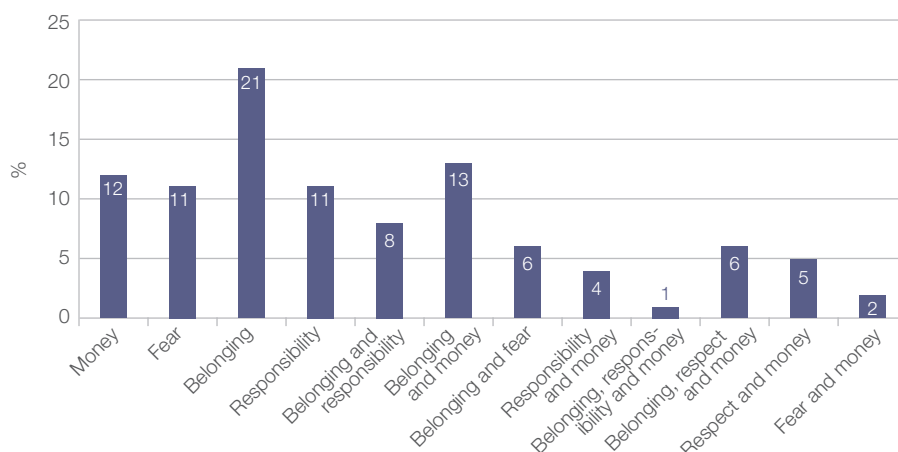
While radicalisation can occur over a long period of time, affecting not just individuals, but entire populations, often a single event or catalyst finally completes the radicalisation process. Such a catalyst is seen as relevant to a particular situation and can occur on the micro or macro levels, or possibly cover both. Whatever the case, it is traditionally an extreme or volatile event. When asked to indicate what finally 'pushed' them to join al-Shabaab, the majority of interviewees (39%) referred to economical reasons specifically or in combination with other circumstances, while 20% referred to the persecution of Muslims in places such

as Iraq and Palestine, the presence of 'infidels' in Somalia, and the protection of Islam. A further 11% indicated that they were forced to join al-Shabaab or did so out of fear.

Joining an organisation is the first step; a more important issue is why members stay. Figure 20 summarises interviewees' most predominant reasons for staying in al-Shabaab. Although economic circumstances were a prominent reason for joining the organisation, Figure 20 indicates that a sense of belonging and responsibility were the main reasons why interviewees stayed in al-Shabaab.

In a follow-up question, interviewees were asked if they had any regrets about their links with al-Shabaab, as presented in Figure 21. The majority of interviewees (42%) indicated that their greatest regret was joining al-Shabaab and getting caught by AMISOM and the Somali authorities. Together with the 19% who indicated that their greatest regret was getting caught and another 5% who regretted not having recruited more people to al-Shabaab, this indicates that interviewees were more socialised into the organisation than at first seemed apparent. The 33% of interviewees whose greatest regret was joining al-Shabaab joined for personal reasons while not committing themselves to its ideals.

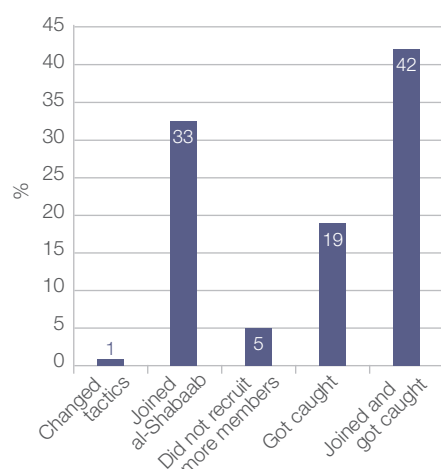
Figure 20: Why interviewees stayed in al-Shabaab



21%

THE PERCENTAGE OF INTERVIEWEES WHO STAYED IN AL-SHABAAB BECAUSE THEY FELT THEY BELONGED

Figure 21: Interviewees' sources of regret regarding their joining of al-Shabaab



Possible reasons for al-Shabaab's success

Over the course of seven years al-Shabaab has transformed itself from a rag-tag militia attempting to overthrow the Western-backed government and force the withdrawal of African Union peacekeepers to a fully fledged army that was able to conquer, control and administer most of southern and central Somalia for a lengthy period. Even after it withdrew from Mogadishu and several other regions, al-Shabaab continued to wage an aggressive war in key locations.

It was able to do this for several reasons. Firstly, unlike the Somali government and the international community assisting it,

Today al-Shabaab has the capability to gather accurate intelligence, plan attacks, and operationalise such plans in both Somalia and the wider region. The planning and execution of the Kampala restaurant bombing, the daylight attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi and the siege of the UN compound in Mogadishu demonstrates such capabilities, which the Somali government seems to lack.

Secondly, al-Shabaab uses coercion, intimidation, bribery and outright murder to collect information, forcing many people to cooperate from fear of being killed. According to one former Amniyat operative, such cooperation has been vital in al-Shabaab's ability to collect crucial information and identify targets. According to this informant, al-Shabaab is coercing many senior staff of the largest telecommunication companies in Somalia to provide information such as phone numbers, email addresses, and the residential and business addresses of individuals and groups under al-Shabaab surveillance.

Targeted individuals are Somali government officials, parliamentarians, UN staff members, the donor community, local and international organisations, local staff working for these organisations and their families, and businesspeople who have business ties with these entities. Refusing to cooperate or exposing those

government officials, gather information on agencies and donors funding these agencies, and track scheduled visits by foreign partners and donors.

Thirdly, according to these sources, al-Shabaab uses clan and family networks to recruit informers who are usually close relatives, friends and family members of targeted individuals. According to the former Amniyat operative, information on UN agencies, foreign embassies, donors and international organisations are collected by targeting their staff or close family and friends of a particular staff member.

Fourthly, al-Shabaab uses unsophisticated tracking and surveillance techniques to monitor and access targets. The clan system plays a major role in this process. Family members, close clan members and friends are used to issue threats or facilitate collaboration. Tracking and surveillance are mostly done via phones. Through these techniques a personal profile of the targeted individual is built up covering things like his/her daily routine, the layout of the target's home, their security arrangements, whether they are armed, etc.

Fifthly, foreigners and especially Kenyans play a leading role in al-Shabaab intelligence operations and planning. Informants claimed that most foot soldiers and middle commanders on the battlefield are Somalis, but almost all intelligence analysts, middle and senior managers are better educated, more experienced and well-connected foreigners. Corrupt security officials and sympathetic businesspeople and individuals are used to pay for logistics and provide access to restricted areas.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has examined the vulnerability of young people to being recruited by al-Shabaab; the radicalisation process;

Al-Shabaab has invested heavily in its intelligence-gathering capabilities

al-Shabaab has invested heavily in its intelligence-gathering capabilities. The establishment of its intelligence service unit, Amniyat, some years ago may have looked like a shift in the organisation's tactics, but interviews with former al-Shabaab fighters indicated a deliberate strategic attempt to modernise the organisation's operations and planning.

seeking such information could put those who are forced to supply this information and their families at risk. According to another source, al-Shabaab has infiltrated approximately 150 of its agents into the Somali intelligence services, police, army and other government agencies. This allows the organisation to monitor the movements of senior

and radicalised al-Shabaab members' perceptions of government, religious identity and external role players. The Somali government and its security forces, governments in the region (especially that of Kenya), and donors and international agencies can develop specific, tailored strategies to address the factors behind radicalisation as identified in this study.

Recommendations to the Somali government and security forces

Instability in Somalia was initially motivated by clan politics and the inability of leaders to build an inclusive Somali state. Al-Shabaab has managed to gain a foothold in the various clans, while areas recovered from al-Shabaab

to different ideas to counter 'group think' and later possible radicalisation.

Somalia still has a long way to go to effectively govern the areas it controls. While governance and providing essential services are crucial to securing popular trust and support, none of this will be possible without security. The following is recommended to the Somali security forces:

1. *Intelligence-led operations.* From the above analysis, it is clear that al-Shabaab's strength rests on its intelligence-gathering capabilities, while the Somali security forces and AMISOM lack such capabilities. Intelligence is the core of any counter-insurgency programme: without proactive intelligence those

The Somali government needs to establish partnerships with clan leaders and urgently initiate a nation-building strategy

control once again show signs of falling back into the devastating reality of clan-based politics. For Somalia to recover, the Somali government needs to establish partnerships with clan leaders and urgently initiate a nation-building strategy. In this regard it is important to recognise that those interviewed for the present study said they trusted clan elders more than politicians. An inclusive strategy that recognises the importance of Somali's clan system should therefore be developed.

Education and skills are key components of securing employment, which in turn can break the cycle in which joining al-Shabaab and similar organisations is the only viable option individuals have to provide for themselves and their families. Being at school also provides an opportunity to introduce young people

conducting counter-insurgency operations are literally blind. The security forces should both develop intelligence assets among the public and use technology in the form of ground radar and sensors, aerial reconnaissance (through unmanned aerial vehicles) and the interception of communications. Without proper intelligence-gathering capabilities, security forces often resort to force to obtain information from civilians. With good intelligence, operations can be directed at those behind the insurgency, without targeting civilians or those not involved in the insurgency.

2. *Counter-intelligence.* The other side of intelligence gathering is counter-intelligence, i.e. the capacity to prevent al-Shabaab from infiltrating the government and its security



EDUCATION CAN PLAY A
KEY PART IN COUNTERING
RADICALISATION

forces. The vetting of new and existing members of the security forces should be the first step, followed by the investigation of potential security risks. In light of al-Shabaab's intelligence-gathering capabilities, government security forces urgently need training on personal, physical and information security.

3. *Building trust through 'winning hearts and minds' while enhancing control.* Since popular support is considered to be a force enhancer, winning back popular support is considered a central component of any effective counter-insurgency strategy, i.e. 'winning hearts and minds'. The most effective way to counter al-Shabaab is to show ordinary people that the government offers a better life than the one they experienced under al-Shabaab's control. The problem is that people are being convinced by actions, not words, i.e. how the government and government representatives (especially the military and police) conduct themselves. The smallest incident in which the security forces are seen to abuse their power can break down trust. Avoiding such incidents calls for enormous discipline and a sense of responsibility that does not always come naturally to security force members after years of instability.

4. *Coordination and cooperation between security agencies.* Competition and rivalry within and among government security agencies hamper their cooperation and coordination, threatening the government's ability to address threats to security. Personal differences between colleagues in security services and intelligence agencies often make them unwilling to share information. Trust or its lack has the same effect. Another challenge is the perception that information belongs to

a particular person or office, leading to the inability to see the bigger picture, which requires information to be shared. Another problem is resources allocation. Not being equally resourced will affect how these agencies view and work with one another during joint operations. In summary, rivalry and poor working relationships among security agencies will continue to affect the quality of cooperation for as long as the mandate of each agency is not defined by law and training and remuneration schemes differ among the agencies making up the security apparatus.

5. *Transferring authority from the military to the police.* Understandably, the military initially takes the lead in defeating al-Shabaab, but successful counter-insurgency operations require authority to be transferred to a civilian government and the police as soon as possible. This is easier said than done in a country that needs to rebuild the most basic of its institutions following decades of instability. Although the military is often associated with counter-insurgency operations, the police are better equipped to deal with insurgents in an urban setting (supported by the military) and in 'liberated' areas generally.

Successful counter-insurgency operations require authority to be transferred to a civilian government and the police as soon as possible

Trained to interact with the public and solve crimes, the police are in a better position to isolate insurgents through cooperating with the public – keeping in mind that the abuse of power and the use of force will harm the overall objective of counter-insurgency activities. Although the overall objective of such activities is to

return the situation to 'normal' so that the police can take lead, the military can and where necessary should be called in as a force enhancer and/or to support the police. These situations might include the following:

- Assisting in the arrest of suspects expected to resist arrest, especially if they are well armed
- Supporting the police in search operations
- Providing logistical support
- Controlling crowds during urban unrest
- Securing and protecting key facilities
- Providing advice to the police

For this to be successful political will is needed to both enable the police and equip them with the necessary resources to carry out their functions properly.

6. *Minimal use of force.* Because injury and death among the civilian population hurt the overall objective of counter-insurgency operations, which is to win the hearts and minds of the public, force should be used with great care, particularly in urban settings, and only insurgents/terrorists should be targeted. In other words, both the

military and police need to respond appropriately to the actual and not the perceived threat they face.

7. *Rule of law.* The overall objective of counter-insurgency operations is to re-establish the rule of law so as to allow society to function properly. To achieve this the following should occur as soon as possible:

- Security operations need to move from combat operations to law enforcement as soon as possible
- When police take control insurgents should be categorised as 'criminals' and not 'soldiers'. In this way al-Shabaab will lose its remaining legitimacy
- The capacity of the police, judiciary and penal facilities to provide people with justice should be enhanced, since this is a core element of securing lasting peace
- Accurate record should be kept of all actions taken against insurgents and all offences committed by insurgents. These records can be used in later court proceedings
- show them that the police are there for them and with them
- A police presence will not only improve public security, but will secure support for the government through their law-enforcement actions
- If they are in daily contact with the public, the police will be able to collect information on al-Shabaab fighters attempting to merge with the public
- If the police build trust among the public and present themselves as part of the public, security will follow
- The police should protect all citizens irrespective of the clan to which they belong

It is clear that strategies based on mass arrests and racial profiling are counterproductive

The unfortunate reality in countries confronted by insurgencies is that the police are often one of the most poorly managed state organisations and are insufficiently equipped, poorly trained, deeply politicised and chronically corrupt. It is therefore essential that measures be taken to enhance the capacity of the police in Somalia to carry out the following key functions:

- The police should have the power to arrest criminals and investigate criminal offences. It is therefore essential that assistance addresses these functions
- The police should be visible day and night as the most noticeable 'face' of government:
- Police stations should be established around the country, including in volatile areas. However, the police officers staffing these stations should not stay behind their walls, but should interact with the public and

Recommendations to the region, especially Kenya

Many interviewees referred to the presence of Kenyan nationals in al-Shabaab's higher echelons. This confirms earlier assessments that al-Shabaab has successfully presented itself as a jihadist organisation beyond the borders of Somalia and that it is not exclusively staffed by Somalis. It is therefore essential that security agencies in Kenya and other countries of the region move away from the perception that only Somalis and Somali-Kenyans are involved with al-Shabaab.

It is also clear that strategies based on mass arrests, racial profiling, etc. are counterproductive. Additionally, police- and intelligence-led criminal justice responses to terrorism are more effective than an arbitrary and hard-handed response. While Kenya's security forces (the police and military) have experienced constant attacks since the



THE POLICE SHOULD PROTECT ALL CITIZENS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE CLAN TO WHICH THEY BELONG

country's intervention in Somalia, the consequences of blind retaliation are severe. Fighting an often-unidentifiable enemy who uses the anonymity of the masses to hide among, strike and then disappear is extremely frustrating.

Careful background checks should be conducted when recruiting new staff

However, lashing out against the collective is not only ineffective, but is also counterproductive, because there is a real danger that non-radicalised members of affected communities might feel the need to defend themselves against the 'other', thus 'driving' individuals to extremism.

It is, however, not only the government and its security forces that treat people on the fringes of society as the 'enemy', but also the broader Kenyan community, which is driven by a well-established perception that al-Shabaab only consists of Somali nationals or those who are visibly Muslim. In light of this, nation-building programmes need to be implemented in Kenya as a matter of urgency. For more information on radicalisation in Kenya please see ISS Paper 265.

Recommendations to donors and external organisations

Donors and external organisations should:

1. Develop a regular screening policy for their local staff
2. Assess staff vulnerabilities in order to reduce risks, because threats could come from within the organisation:
 - As highlighted in this study, although most risks posed by al-Shabaab and other extremist groups are generally external, significant risks

could emanate internally from staff willingly collaborating with these groups or being coerced to do so

- Careful background checks should be conducted when recruiting new staff

- Vulnerability assessments should be carried out with great care, because they could alienate some staff or be seen as discriminatory

3. Develop a strategy for assisting staff who are vulnerable to al-Shabaab coercion and threats. For example, if a staff member lives in a known al-Shabaab stronghold, encourage and assist them to relocate to safer areas. International organisations with large number of local staff could consider establishing secure guest houses for local staff. (Most international organisations and donors do not usually pay much attention to local staff, but this is a major vulnerability that is worth investing in.)
4. Consider using the concept of clan security when hiring local staff. If a staff member is considered to be vulnerable, he/she could be asked to bring his/her clan elder or an influential clan or family member who would be responsible for the staff member's future actions
5. Play a vital and active role in addressing vulnerabilities identified in this study. For example, donors could help to address the shortfalls highlighted in this study, such as:
 - Education and skills development
 - Employment opportunities for youth
 - The insecurity and vulnerabilities affecting ordinary Somalis

- Support the development and implementation of reintegration and counter-radicalisation strategies
- Support an inclusive nation-building process, e.g. create opportunities for national dialogue initiatives that bring clan leaders together at the national and regional levels to debate, make recommendations and agree on critical matters affecting the country

In addition to establishing diplomatic relations with Somalia, both the international community and regional actors are offering training and other capacity-building initiatives in the country. Due to the magnitude of Somalia's needs, these actors should:

- Assess what is really needed and develop a list of priorities based on these realities 'on the ground'
- Coordinate efforts, most notably through regional actors such as the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development and the Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation
- Ensure that people are trained in the right skill sets, while respecting the overall objective, i.e. that of establishing a responsible government and security apparatus that have the interests of all Somali citizens at heart

Notes

- 1 This study is based on research for author Anneli Botha's doctoral thesis in the Department of Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State entitled 'Radicalisation to commit terrorism from a political socialisation perspective in Kenya and Uganda'. The thesis focused on al-Shabaab and Kenya's Mombasa Republican Council, as well as the Allied Democratic Forces and Lord's Resistance Army in Kenya.
- 2 Initially, the data collection exercise targeted a sample of 80–100 former fighters who were captured on the battlefield and were housed in the Sarendi Rehabilitation Centre in Mogadishu, a Federal Government facility. A second potential source of interviewees included government prisons in Mogadishu

that host recently captured al-Shabaab fighters. However, due to the restructuring of the Sarendi Centre and the departure of key personnel, access to both the centre and prisons was not possible, so other methods of locating former al-Shabaab combatants were used.

- 3 The first challenge was the prevailing insecurity in Mogadishu. This general problem was exacerbated by the nature of the fieldwork – targeting former al-Shabaab fighters. Locating and interviewing such people proved to be one of the most dangerous undertakings in Mogadishu due to al-Shabaab's highly sophisticated and efficient structure and operations. The second challenge related to ensuring that interviewees safely reached the place where the interviews took place and returned home afterwards, while there was always the threat that interviewees could be targeted for revealing information about al-Shabaab to its enemies. The third challenge consisted of logistical constraints and securing interview sites – no hotel or restaurant would allow former al-Shabaab fighters to be interviewed on their premises. Also, data collectors faced security threats such as the possibility of being followed and traced to their hotel, ambushed, or kidnapped. Also, on occasion sections of roads in Mogadishu were blocked for security reasons. The use of alternative ways of locating interviewees when initial plans did not work reduced the impact of the challenges on the overall results.
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