

# Should I stay or should I go? Security considerations for members leaving al-Shabaab in Somalia

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The Somali jihadi organization al-Shabaab, yet again featured in the news internationally when they attacked a business and hotel complex in Nairobi 15 January this year. This is not the first time the group carries out large-scale attacks outside the Somali borders. Other examples are the Garissa University College attack in 2015, the mass shooting at Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in 2013 and the Kampala attacks in 2010. However, the majority of the atrocities committed by al-Shabaab take place in South Central Somalia. The *Global Terrorism Index 2018* ranked Somalia as number 6 on its list of countries most impacted by terrorism in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Al-Shabaab was behind the deadliest terrorist attack in 2017 worldwide, when a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden truck, killing 587 people in Mogadishu. Although al-Shabaab has had several military setbacks the last few years, the group still poses a significant threat to security and stability in the region. As the name al-Shabaab ('the youth') indicates, young people predominate in the group. This means that thousands of individuals spend parts of their youth in al-Shabaab. The question then arises: how to best assist the ones who want to leave the group?

This policy brief looks at the Defector Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) in South Central Somalia and highlights the importance of thinking security at various levels when working with disengaging members from violent extreme groups in the midst of conflict.<sup>2</sup> Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes are normally implemented only after a peace agreement is in place. This does not apply in the case of South Central Somalia. Providing adequate security for those wanting to

leave al-Shabaab is a key element for success. The findings presented here, were mainly gathered through discussions and presentations made at a training held by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) for programme staff in the DRP in November 2017. During fieldtrips to South Central Somalia between 2013 and 2017, interviews and conversation were also conducted with staff members and partners involved in different stages of the programme as well as practitioners and stakeholders working to prevent and counter violent extremism in Somalia.

## **An exit route from al-Shabaab**

The reasons why people join al-Shabaab in the first place varies. For some, it is seen as a career opportunity and a way to support themselves and their families. Other motivations are grievances and revenge, religious convictions, increased status and power, seeking protection or adventure or a combination of several factors.<sup>3</sup> Some are recruited by force. As members of al-Shabaab, many experience disillusionment with the group, the leadership, the cause or the methods employed.<sup>4</sup> Others find the salary they receive in al-Shabaab inadequate or have family obligations making them wanting to return to civilian life.<sup>5</sup> Some seized the opportunity and disengaged after President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' Mohamed in April 2017, publicly announced a 60 days amnesty for al-Shabaab fighters willing to give themselves up.<sup>6</sup>

The Defector Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) in South Central Somalia has received some of the members who have left al-Shabaab. The programme operates under the auspices of the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Ministry

of Internal Security and represents one of the strategies to weaken al-Shabaab. The DRP has gone through several changes since its start up in 2012, and today it has nine rehabilitation centres in various locations in South Central Somalia supported or run by international organizations in cooperation with the Ministry.<sup>7</sup> The programme consists of five phases: *outreach, reception, screening, rehabilitation* and *reintegration*.<sup>8</sup> *Outreach* activities seek to spread information to individuals and communities about the programme, to encourage people to leave al-Shabaab. In the *reception* phase, the persons entering the programme are received by national or international forces. The National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA) is responsible for the *screening* phase, where these individuals are assessed as either 'low' or 'high' risk. The 'high-risk' cohort are taken to safe houses, or sentenced and imprisoned. Individuals in the 'low-risk' group, are transferred to *rehabilitation centres*; young persons under 18 years are placed in separate centres for minors. In the rehabilitation centres, the participants are offered basic education and different types of vocational and skills trainings. During the *reintegration* phase, programme participants move out of the centres for relocation to local communities. During the start-up of the programme, emphasis were mainly given to the rehabilitation process. However, in the recent years, efforts have been made to develop and improve the other four phases of the programme; such as implementing new screening mechanisms, upscaling the outreach activities and further develop the reintegration framework.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Security considerations when disengaging**

Leaving a violent extremist organization involves taking risks. People thinking of disengaging from such groups must give careful consideration to whether it feels safe to do so. Safety for one's own person in addition to family members, dependents and others tops the 'basic needs list' in an exit process. Al-Shabaab employs various means of discouraging their members from leaving, including threats and punishments. It has developed efficient mechanisms for keeping the organization together – for example, by establishing the '*Amniyat*', the al-Shabaab intelligence division and secret police, who are feared within and outside the organization. In some cases, persons trying to leave the organization have been killed, or the *Amniyat* has targeted their family members.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the threat posed by the group itself, al-Shabaab members fear potential persecution by national security

forces. A third threat is retaliation by local communities victimized by the actions and atrocities of al-Shabaab. Combined, these security challenges make it difficult for members of al-Shabaab to exit the organization.

In order for the DRP to provide a viable alternative to membership in al-Shabaab, persons considering exit need to know that their security will be ensured throughout all phases of the programme. Protection from threats and risks, access to safe transport to rehabilitation centres, and safekeeping of sensitive information are central in the programme's three first phases. It is also vital to ensure that programme participants are treated humanely and with respect, according to national and international human rights law.

### **Securing the rehabilitation centres**

The fourth phase of the programme for the low-risk group, is the rehabilitation process conducted in the rehabilitation centres. As the programme is intended to weaken al-Shabaab, the rehabilitation centres are potential targets, at risk of being attacked. It is therefore important to ensure that the premises are properly secured and the people there protected. A further challenge is infiltration by al-Shabaab. There have been incidents where active al-Shabaab fighters entered the programme, pretending to want to disengage. In some cases, it is challenging to determine who is a potential infiltrator and who is genuinely seeking exit from the group.<sup>11</sup> Safekeeping of information is therefore important to prevent sensitive information about the centres, the staff and participants staying there from falling into the wrong hands.

There are also security risks involved in bringing together, inside the same facilities, people who have been involved in a violent organization. People who have been trained in and have carried out violence are vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, aggressive and violent behaviour. Some are also victims of violence themselves. High priority must be given to psycho-social treatment, in order to decrease levels of unrest and violence within the centres. Moreover, the command and control structure of al-Shabaab sub-groups has in some incidents been brought into the programme. Detecting this early and having sufficient trained staff available to recognize and dismantle such group dynamics is essential.

During the time participants stay in the rehabilitation

centres they communicate with friends and family on the outside, including persons who are still active members of al-Shabaab. If former members feel safe and have positive experiences while in the centres, this message may be conveyed further, thereby increasing the chances of motivating others to enter the programme.

Not only the disengaging members from al-Shabaab face security challenges, local employees and key persons involved in the programme also put themselves at risk. For example, local staff at DRP rehabilitation centres, as well as their families are potential targets for al-Shabaab. Many staff members therefore try to keep their involvement in the programme hidden. As Botha and Abile (2014) point out, providing secure housing and transport to and from work for local staff working at the DRP centres could help to make them less vulnerable. Protection measures for family members of staff should also be taken into consideration. In addition, resource persons and organizations involved in the four other phases of the programme should be subjected to thorough assessment of risks, and necessary protection measures applied.

### **Potential risks during reintegration**

In the last phase of the programme, the reintegration process, security is also a major challenge. Due to al-Shabaab's modus operandi, it is hard to know whom to trust in a community. In many areas, al-Shabaab members are integrated elements of local society. In addition, there are areas that are still controlled by al-Shabaab where the organization has significant support from the local population. All these factors make thorough assessment of possible areas for relocating programme participants a challenging but highly important task. Careful consideration must be given to whether participants will be secure living with family, relatives or others in their networks. Some may have family members or friends who are still active members or supporters of al-Shabaab. In some cases, the best solution is to relocate individuals to a different area than the community of origin.

Some people and local communities are hesitant to receive former members of al-Shabaab. As a result, individuals may be stigmatized or isolated in the reintegration process if their background should become known. Some of those who decide to leave al-Shabaab do so quietly, without entering a programme, simply trying to settle into a new

environment anonymously. In order to be able to provide an attractive alternative to such 'self-reintegration', the programme therefore need to have a specific, detailed individual plan for each participant, to mitigate security risks in the reintegration phase. The safety of those who are relocated to a local community may in some cases hinge on the willingness of clan leaders, elders, religious leaders and other central figures to provide protection and support. Respected leaders in the communities are also in a position to initiate and employ traditional methods of conflict resolution and restorative justice processes, to prevent harmful or unwanted reactions from local communities. Establishing, improving and maintaining cooperation with such local resource persons is therefore a key component in the further development of the reintegration phase. Close involvement of local leaders as well as family members, mentors and, in some cases, local security forces may prevent individuals from returning to al-Shabaab or becoming involved in other violent or criminal activities and milieus.

### **Conclusions**

The case of the Defector and Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) in South Central Somalia has shown that the process of disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration for al-Shabaab members in the midst of the still-ongoing conflict present several security challenges. The context is complex, with high levels of insecurity and the modus operandi of al-Shabaab makes it difficult to protect disengaging members from risks and threats throughout the various phases of the programme. Infiltration and attacks by al-Shabaab, as well as reprisals from local communities are some of the risks encountered by the participants in the programme. Local programme staff and partners are equally at risk and in need of protection. Therefore, constant consideration and assessment of risks and security mitigations are required in order for the programme to achieve its goals. If al-Shabaab members do not feel it is safe to enter the programme, they may either decide to stay in the group, or try to exit on their own. These lessons learned from the DRP are applicable not only to South Central Somalia, but have wider relevance for similar programmes and contexts.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Institute for Economics & Peace (2018). *Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism*. IEP Report. Sydney, November 2018. Available at: <http://globalterrorismindex.org/>
- 2 This policy brief is based on the article: Gjelsvik, Ingvild. Magnæs (forthcoming 2019). *Disengaging from Violent Extremism: The Case of Al-Shabaab in Somalia*. Conflict Trends 2019:1).
- 3 Botha, Anneli & Abdile, Madhile (2014). *Radicalization and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia*. ISS Paper 266. September 2014. Available at: <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper266.pdf>.
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- 4 Botha, Anneli (2017). *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of former al-Shabaab fighters in Somalia*. RIMA Occasional Papers 5, no. 25, December 2017. Available at: <https://muslimsinafrika.wordpress.com/2017/12/04/rehabilitation-and-reintegration-of-former-al-shabaab-fighters-in-somalia-dr-anneli-botha/>
- 5 Khalil, James et al. (2019). *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia. Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab*. RUSI Whitehall Report 4-19. Available at: <https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/deradicalisation-and-disengagement-somalia-evidence-rehabilitation>.
- 6 BBC News (2017, 6 April). Al-Shabab fighters offered amnesty as new Somali president declares war. *BBC News World - Africa*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39513909>.
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- 7 Tervahartiala, Anna (2017, 21 December). From al-Shabaab back home, *Elm Magazine*. Available at: <http://www.elmmagazine.eu/articles/from-al-shabaab-back-home/>
- 8 Federal Republic of Somalia (2017). *National Programme Policies and Procedures*. Ministry of Internal Security, Defectors Rehabilitation Programme, 1 July 2017.
- 9 Khalil, James et al. (2019). *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia. Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab*. RUSI Whitehall Report 4-19. Available at: <https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/deradicalisation-and-disengagement-somalia-evidence-rehabilitation>.
- 10 Hansen, Stig. Jarle (2013). *Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The history and ideology of a militant islamist group 2005–2012*. London: Hurst.
- 11 According to the RUSI report (Khalil, James et al. 2019), the screening procedures has today improved through the development of a standardised screening tool in order to more adequately determine risk levels and eligibility criteria for rehabilitation in relation to at least one of the centres (p. 21).

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