

The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab

Christian Taylor

Warzone Initiatives, Redding; School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax
christian@warzone.cc

Tanner Semmelrock

School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax
tanner.semmelrock@gmail.com

Alexandra McDermott

School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax
alexandra.riehle@gmail.com

Vol. 13/2019

The IJCV

provides a forum for scientific exchange and public dissemination of up-to-date scientific knowledge on conflict and violence. The IJCV is independent, peer reviewed, open access, and included in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) as well as other relevant databases (e.g., SCOPUS, EBSCO, ProQuest, DNB).

The topics on which we concentrate—conflict and violence—have always been central to various disciplines. Consequently, the journal encompasses contributions from a wide range of disciplines, including criminology, economics, education, ethnology, history, political science, psychology, social anthropology, sociology, the study of religions, and urban studies.

All articles are gathered in yearly volumes, identified by a DOI with article-wise pagination.

For more information please visit www.ijcv.org

Suggested Citation:

APA: Taylor, C., Semmelrock, T., McDermott, A. (2019). The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 13, 1-13. doi: 10.4119/UNIBI/ijcv.657

Harvard: Taylor, Christian, Semmelrock, Tanner, McDermott, Alexandra. 2019. The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab, 2019. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 13: 1-13. doi: 10.4119/UNIBI/ijcv.657



The Cost of Defection: The Consequences of Quitting Al-Shabaab

Christian Taylor

Warzone Initiatives, Redding; School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax

Tanner Semmelrock

School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax

Alexandra McDermott

School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax

Abstract:

This study investigates defections from the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. Thirty-two disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants were interviewed about their motivations, grievances, needs, and challenges in relation to the recruitment, defection, and post-defection phases. This paper focuses on post-defection challenges, where we found the primary concern to be lack of personal security. Without adequate security, disengaged combatants are vulnerable to being hunted and killed by Al-Shabaab. This significant threat discourages further mass and individual defections. We also found that disengaged combatants joined and defected out of religious zeal, to fight for what they believed to be a holy Islamic cause. This same zeal led them to defect, as they came to believe Al-Shabaab was not obeying the true Islamic faith. Indiscriminate killing by Al-Shabaab disenchanting its religiously pious members, creating an opportunity to encourage mass and individual defections. However, if disengaged combatants are not protected from retribution, defection will lose its appeal.

Keywords: defection; ex-combatant; Al-Shabaab; violent extremism; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)

Acknowledgement:

We would like to thank Warzone Initiatives for funding our field research, Dr. Douglas Irvin-Erickson and the Genocide Prevention Program's Writing and Research Working Group, Solutions for Humanity and the Baidoa Ministry of DDR for facilitating meetings and research in Somalia, and Dr. Patricia Maulden for commenting on a draft.

On Saturday, October 14, 2017, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) detonated in Mogadishu, Somalia, killing over 350 people (Burke 2017). This was the largest such attack in Somalia's conflict-ridden history. Although Al-Shabaab did not claim responsibility, they are likely to have carried out the attack (Burke 2017), demonstrating the reach and impact the armed group still has. Despite concerted efforts by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Somali National Army (SNA), African Union Mission

in Somalia (AMISOM), and international partners such as the United States and British governments and militaries, Al-Shabaab still maintains territorial control, governance capabilities, funding streams, and operational capacity as it demonstrated in that incident. Military force has not succeeded in eliminating it. In fact, the "Saturday attack" was a direct result of Al-Shabaab escalation in response to increased military actions against them, having vowed in early 2017 "to increase its attacks after both the Trump adminis-

tration and Somalia's recently elected president announced fresh military efforts against the group" (Burke 2017). Al-Shabaab cannot be eradicated by military force. Alternative means must be sought, studied, and implemented to end this civil conflict. Understanding, promoting, and supporting individual defection from Al-Shabaab is a viable process to sustainably reduce the insurgency.

Defection is touted as a leading alternative to degrade Al-Shabaab by the FGS (Shaban 2017), the US government (Trofimov 2018), and international organizations such as AMISOM, United Nations, and International Organization of Migration (IOM) (AMISOM 2017). Policy, programs, and resources are directed towards supporting defection, rehabilitation, and reintegration of disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants. At the time of writing there were Disarmament, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) centers in Baidoa, Kismayo, Mogadishu, and Beledweyne, all under the umbrella of the Somali National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengagement Combatants. Although there are no confirmed figures, Somali government officials estimate two thousand disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants have gone through some form of DRR program in Somalia (Febab-Brown 2018, 14).

In this article we use the term DRR as a substitute for the internationally recognizable term Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). The ministry overseeing the Baidoa center is titled the Bay Ministry for Disarmament, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR). We suspect the term rehabilitation is used instead of demobilization because the program is aimed at rehabilitating individual disengaged combatants of Al-Shabaab rather than a mass group demobilization agenda.

This study explores why individuals join and defect from Al-Shabaab and what challenges they face post-defection. Understanding Al-Shabaab member profiles, motivations, grievances, challenges, and more, is crucial for developing strategies to promote sustainable defection. Sustainability is imperative: life must be better for those who leave Al-Shabaab than for those who remain. As of now this is not the case for those at the Baidoa center. In July of 2017 we interviewed thirty-two disengaged combatants of Al-

Shabaab living at the DRR center in the government-controlled town of Baidoa in the Bay region of Somalia. Directly outside of Baidoa is Al-Shabaab controlled territory, and Al-Shabaab has undercover operators inside the town. The DRR center was located on a cordoned-off street along with the AMISOM base (after the research was conducted, the center was relocated), and had AMISOM personnel guarding the fortified compound. If the disengaged combatants remained in the center they were safe from Al-Shabaab, but if they left to visit family, reintegrate back into their home community, or start a business, their personal security became vulnerable.

The DRR center, run in coordination by the Bay Ministry for DRR and IOM, operates a four-month rehabilitation and training program consisting of religious and ideological re-education, trauma counseling, and technical training in electrical work, masonry, carpentry, and mechanics. Completing the rehabilitation program entitles recipients to receive a \$1,500 grant toward materials to start a business. The existence, design, and implementation of this DRR program is commendable. The program is implemented at the state level (South West), with limited economic and operational support from the federal government.

In *Inside Rebellion* Weinstein describes the challenges insurgents face: "Rebel groups face a series of challenges in civil war that threaten the organizational structures they have built and may necessitate changing strategies in response. These challenges include the need to recover from battlefield losses, manage success, respond to changing endowments, and react to new government counterinsurgency strategies" (2006, 295). As Al-Shabaab members face increasing risk to life, the less invested members will opt out of the insurgency (8–9). It is in the interest of Al-Shabaab to do whatever necessary to dissuade members from defecting, including hunting down and killing defectors as a deterrent. As Kalyvas points out, violence is used by Al-Shabaab as a "communicative function with a clear deterrent dimension" (2006, 26). The primary goal of Al-Shabaab violence against defectors is to create fear in its members to deter defection (29).

Based on our research, we believe defection is a viable mechanism to sustainably degrade Al-Shabaab—

if the FGS and its supporters can provide security and opportunity to defectors. Amongst Al-Shabaab combatants, “disillusionment is rife ... with many of the rank and file deeply dissatisfied with the harsh reality and associated traumas of combat” (Horgan 2018).

1 Definitions and Literature Review

For the purposes of this paper, the term *disengaged combatant* will be the umbrella term used to refer to individuals who have left Al-Shabaab. Not all of the disengaged combatants in our study had been fighters; the functions included driver and tax collector. We chose to use the term *disengaged combatant* because it is the term used by interviewees to self-identify and the term used by the Somali Ministry for DRR overseeing the program. Another important term for this research is *defector*. To qualify as a *defector* for this research, the individual must have left Al-Shabaab on their own accord to join a rival group or seek government protection, and willingly share information or experience. The disengaged combatants in our study had chosen to leave Al-Shabaab and participate in the DRR process. Traditional definitions of defection are often limited to interstate politics. In the context of the non-state actor Al-Shabaab, disengaged combatants had not defected from one state to another. Instead, they had left a non-state actor but stayed in their home country of Somalia. Additionally, in the classical interstate sense a defector must hold a significant role in the organization they defect from and have valuable information to share. In our research we also include low-level members as defectors if they chose to leave and were willing to provide information to the FGS. In intrastate conflict, even low-level members possess critical strategic information. Additionally, due to the generally smaller size of insurgent forces, each individual defector is meaningful compared to large state militaries in interstate conflict. In order to promote more defection from Al-Shabaab, it is imperative to understand the motives of those who have already left.

There are two primary types of literature on Al-Shabaab defection, scholarly articles and news articles. This literature review analyzes both fields, as well as general defection theory.

There is a limited number of scholarly articles addressing Al-Shabaab defection. Botha and Abdile focused on the recruitment of Al-Shabaab combatants in “Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia” (2014), for which they interviewed eighty-eight ex-combatants, seven of them off the record. While their research primarily focused on recruitment and the reasons interviewees stayed with Al-Shabaab, the researchers collected one data point on defection. Had the subjects had any regrets since joining Al-Shabaab? 33 percent regretted joining Al-Shabaab while 42 percent regretted joining and getting caught by AMISOM or the Somali authorities. Botha also wrote on Al-Shabaab recruitment and radicalization in Kenya in “Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization among Individuals Who Joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya” (2014) and on political radicalization of youth into Al-Shabaab focused on individual drivers in “Factors Facilitating Radicalization in Kenya and Somalia” (2016, 71–84). Hassan detailed the driving factors of radicalization of Somali youth in “Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of al-Shabab and Somali Youth” (2012, 18), using empirical data gathered through focus groups with ex-members of Al-Shabaab in Nairobi, Kenya. Hassan found that identity and feelings of neglect were the primary factors driving these Somali youth to join Al-Shabaab (20).

In contrast to the little that has been written on Al-Shabaab defectors, there is a plethora of sources on individual defectors from non-state armed groups in other civil war contexts. The key literature on defection from extremist groups includes: Barrelle’s “Pro-integration: Disengagement from and Life after Extremism” (2015) examining individual defection and reintegration of extremists in a Western context; Chernov Hwang’s “The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists: Understanding the Pathways” (2017); on the disengagement process and psychology of the deradicalization of individuals; Neil Ferguson’s, “Disengaging from Terrorism: A Northern Irish Experience” (2016) exploring push and pull factors encouraging and discouraging disengagement from extremist groups; John Horgan’s, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (2009) on the psychology of terrorism

specifically pertaining to defection; and Fernando Reinares's, "Exit from Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement Deradicalization Among Members of ETA" (2011) parsing the nuances between deradicalization (attitudinal change) and disengagement (behavioral change). Much of this literature on individual defectors from extremist groups focuses on the mindset of the individual, processes of psychological change, and variables that lead the individual toward disengagement. While this literature is imperative to understanding the individual motivation and evolution, it does not speak to the physical security challenges faced by disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants.

While there is limited empirical data specifically on Al-Shabaab defection, there are numerous news articles on the subject, primarily interviews with defectors and coverage of mass defections. *The Observer* reported two hundred individuals defecting to AMISOM to escape the violence (Observer 2012). A CNN article covers individuals defecting from Al-Shabaab to join the Islamic State's expansion into the Horn of Africa (Kriel and Duggan 2015). According to a *Wall Street Journal* article published on October 27, 2016, a few hundred Al-Shabaab defectors defected to Islamic State (Vogt 2016). Mass defection has been reported by multiple sources. Most notably, *The Star* reported that more than seven hundred Al-Shabaab recruits had defected and returned to Kenya after realizing they had been given empty promises during recruitment (Mohamed 2015). Some had been forcibly recruited and left as soon as they had an opportunity to do so, while a few left because of injuries suffered in combat. There are also reports that defection numbers have been inflated by the FGS and Somali security forces to boost morale, generate local and international support, and sow dissent within Al-Shabaab (Bacon 2018). While there has been a significant proportion of defectors among the disengaged combatants in the four official DRR centers in Somalia, we believe there has likely been some exaggeration by the FGS and Somali security forces.

In both scholarly and news articles, there is limited empirical data on Al-Shabaab defection. The heavy reliance on news articles is limiting as it does not provide a theoretical exploration of the issue. A scientific

study investigating the specific reasons for Al-Shabaab defection and empirical data profiling disengaged combatants before, during, and after their time in Al-Shabaab will therefore fill a major gap in the literature.

Another important area of research is defection theories. Theorizing defection through a structural lens allows researchers to discover key insights into issues of internal dissent, organizational structure, and tactics. The following theories from this perspective give valuable insights.

Bjørge and Horgan theorize how push and pull factors lead to defection (2008). Their work is important as they specifically address defection from terrorist organizations. Push factors are negative stimuli that discourage a member from continuing with the organization. This may result from tensions in the group, increased violence, or a loss of personal faith. Our empirical study of Al-Shabaab disengaged combatants affirms this as a significant factor in their choice to defect. Participants in our study repeatedly spoke about their disappointment with Al-Shabaab leadership, strategic tactics of indiscriminate killing of Muslims, and being forced to kill family and clan members. This led to a loss of faith in Al-Shabaab as an Islamic authority. Conversely, pull factors distract the member and "pull" them in a different direction. Pull factors often include a change in family structure, new goals, or growing older (Bjørge and Horgan 2008). To a lesser degree, pull factors were apparent in our study. Some participants wanted to make a better living, provide for their family, and pursue a different lifestyle.

Bjørge and Horgan define three types of defector. The first, which they call "dropouts," leave the group but stay true to its ideology. Dropouts do not publicly attack their former group. The second type, "renegades," abandon the group and its ideology but avoid publicly attacking the original group. The third type, "traitors," leave the group and its ideology and publicly attack the group by joining the government or another non-state armed group (Bjørge and Horgan 2008). How a group responds to a defector largely depends on which type of defection is involved. The most dangerous type of defector is the traitor, who provokes an extremely negative response and is often

pursued and threatened with physical violence. We would classify the participants in our study as traitors, with most bordering on renegade. While a few participants avidly opposed Al-Shabaab and expressed desire for revenge, many appeared to be reluctant participants in helping the FGS, SNA, and AMISOM combat the insurgency. Most participants just wanted a safe and prosperous life and did not appear thirsty for revenge against Al-Shabaab.

Popovic introduces another interesting theory about defection (2014). His paper examining state sponsorship of rebel groups addresses concepts on organizational structure and defection. Popovic argues that defection is most likely when an organization is decentralized because such organizations “have weak central leadership that is unable to control, monitor, or punish its rank and file” (Popovic 2014, iii). External shocks such as conflict with another group or a natural disaster can also produce defections.

In interstate defection, protocols such as asylum and witness protection exist to protect the individual from reprisals by their former group. In an intrastate conflict such as Somalia, the lack of asylum, a weak central government, and insurgent territorial control create an insecure environment for defectors. Because disengaged combatants were members of a designated terrorist organization, international asylum is highly unlikely to be granted. In the context of an ongoing civil war and fragile state, the weak central government does not have the resources or capacity to put disengaged combatants into witness protection programs. The combination of limitations means that intrastate defection in a fragile state is extremely dangerous as mechanisms to protect defectors from reprisals are lacking.

Throughout our search of relevant literature we found significant research gaps in relation to Al-Shabaab defection. This study seeks to address those gaps.

2 Limitations

Field research in Somalia is subject to limitations concerning security, access, and language. The primary obstacle is personal security risk for researchers. Kidnapping for ransom by Somali pirates and Al-Shabaab is a prevailing threat, while Al-Shabaab’s regular at-

tacks on businesses and government facilities frequented by foreigners pose a security challenge. Foreigners working for political, business, humanitarian, and research organizations are valuable targets who must be housed in guarded compounds and have personal security guards accompany them when outside. These security challenges heavily limit freedom of movement to conduct research. Meetings and schedules must be coordinated discreetly and remain flexible to respond to changes in the security situation on the ground. This leads to repeatedly rescheduled meetings and lost research days if the security situation is unsafe. Additionally, movement is restricted, inefficient, and expensive throughout Somalia. Although the FGS, SNA, and AMISOM have liberated most of Somalia’s major cities from Al-Shabaab control, control elsewhere is disputed or held by Al-Shabaab. Overland travel requires a substantial military convoy, creating a country of city islands accessible only by air. Domestic commercial flights are much more regular and consistent than five years ago, but securing a seat still requires strategic planning and luck. The most insecure areas are only accessible by United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which has a limited schedule and significant cost. The security risk required a hired security team for the researchers, a significant expense. In the interests of security and economy, we created a two-week timeline for the interviews, and we conducted interviews only at the Baidoa DRR center. If disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants at other centers had been included in our study, the findings might have differed. We do believe, however, that we interviewed a representative sample of low-level disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants.

Another major limitation is access to subjects and population. To collect data on multiple disengaged combatants, researchers need access to large groups willing to participate. We found such a group at the DRR center in Baidoa, housing approximately two hundred disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants. The Baidoa center’s residents are deemed a “low-risk” security threat by the National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengagement Combatants and thus authorized for a reintegration process. The population of this study is therefore not representative of Al-Shabaab as a whole, but a sub-group of

“low-risk” defectors. We interviewed thirty-two disengaged combatants at the center. Population size is a limitation because it is infeasible to interview a large population of disengaged combatants in Somalia outside of a DRR center.

While disengaged combatants at the DRR center in Baidoa generally consented to participate, but some refused. A few did not want to take part in our research at all, while some did participate but did not want to answer all of our questions. The reasons for refusal—which may have impacted the findings—include simply not wanting to answer questions, preferring to spend their time in other ways, having already questioning at the time of defection and upon intake into the DRR center, psychological trauma reliving experiences in Al-Shabaab, and possibly ongoing sympathies for Al-Shabaab. The findings that may be impacted by this include: motive for joining, reason for defection, and current views of Al-Shabaab. Two interviewees answered some of the questions in a manner that led us to suspect ongoing sympathies for Al-Shabaab, suggesting that those with ongoing sympathies did not completely avoid participation.

Language was also a limitation. Baidoa is the center of a Somali dialect not spoken in most of the country, called Maay Maay. All of the individuals interviewed spoke Maay Maay. We hired a translator who lived in Baidoa and was fluent in Maay Maay, Standard Somali, and English. Our researchers do not speak Standard Somali or Maay Maay and were thus dependent on translation for the interviews.

Lastly, the study was limited with regard to gender and age. The population we had access to were all males over the age of eighteen. Disengaged combatants under the age of eighteen are sent to a different rehabilitation center and there is currently no center in Somalia for disengaged female Al-Shabaab combatants.

3 Methodology

Because access to disengaged combatants in Somalia is extremely limited by security concerns, we used purposive sampling where the researcher chooses a specific population based on a unique reason. In this case the unique reason was the need for a population of disengaged combatants located in a secure environ-

ment. We believe that the population of disengaged combatants selected is typical of the average experience of low-level disengaged combatants from Al-Shabaab.

We found that a constructivist approach would yield the best results. Given the security risks of conducting field research, data collection via interviews yields a large volume of data within a short period of time. We were interested in how the interviewees understood their experience rather than an ethnographic method analyzing how subjects interact and create meaning. The interviews therefore created space for subjects to share their experience and thoughts, and to direct the conversation. Interviewees were asked a list of predetermined quantitative and qualitative questions with the option for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Some interviewees refused to answer certain questions, while in cases where the interviewee imposed time constraints certain questions had to be omitted.

Formal (written) approval from the Bay Ministry for Disarmament, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration was granted for access to the Baidoa center to conduct the study. Interviews were conducted at the center over the course of five days. Center staff (Somalis) recruited participants throughout the week at settings including meals, classroom time, and free time. It was made clear that the study was voluntary. Interviews were conducted in a private interview room; participants were given a consent form in Standard Somali, which was read to them in Maay Maay. Disengaged combatants are vulnerable to retaliation by Al-Shabaab, which assumes they are collaborating with the FGS. In order to avoid physical documents linking the defectors to our study, we used audio recorded verbal rather than written consent. Interviewees were then asked to consent to audio recording of the interview. Where the participant declined, recording was stopped after the consent process and the interview proceeded without it. The audio recordings are stored on two encrypted external hard drives kept by the researchers. The data is password protected and only the researchers have access. Only the researchers had access to individually identifiable information on age and clan, which was destroyed once the study was complete. Refreshments worth approximately \$3 were

provided during each interview, which lasted between thirty minutes and one hour.

It is also important to note that the interviewees may have provided false or misleading information for reasons including: flawed memories, fear of threats for divulging vital information, exaggerating or diminishing their role in violence, exaggeration of coercion in their recruitment. Nevertheless we believe the interviewees provided largely accurate and truthful information. The identity protection we ensured through our consent process, helped minimize the threat to interviewees, who were very forthcoming in sharing information that would endanger them should it become known by Al-Shabaab. We were not interested in the disengaged combatants' role in violence, so that line of questioning was not pursued; this put interviewees at ease. Another aspect suggesting that interviewees were honest is that 84 percent admitted joining Al-Shabaab voluntarily. An interviewee who was attempting to retroactively appear as a victim would emphasize coercion in their recruitment process.

4 Summary of Data

The data set comprises thirty-two interviews with disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants conducted at the Baidoa DRR Center in July 2017 by the director of research, Christian Taylor.

4.1 Recruitment

The clan breakdown was 17 percent Jirron (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 14 percent Elay (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 10 percent Hadame (Rahanweyn), 10 percent Huber (Rahanweyn), 7 percent Geledle (Rahanweyn), 7 percent Eyle (Rahanweyn), 7 percent Leisan (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Harin (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Ma'allin Wayne (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Haraw (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Garwle (Mirifle-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Garre (Digil-Rahanweyn), 3 percent Geledle (Rahanweyn), 3 percent Yantar (Rahanweyn), 3 percent Hadame (Rahanweyn), 3 percent Yantar (Rahanweyn) (clan classification UNHCR Somalia 2004). All of the interviewees were part of the overarching Rahanweyn clan, which is one of four major clans in Somalia (Darood, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn). While the Darood, Hawiye, and Dir are pri-

marily nomadic-pastoralists and are considered the noble clans, the Rahanweyn are agro-pastoralists living in southern Somalia near the Juba and Shabelle rivers where the most fertile land in Somalia is found (Gundel 2009, 11). Al-Shabaab's core territorial stronghold is in this area of Jubaland. Baidoa, where the interviews took place, is the capital of Bay region, the historic home of the Rahanweyn clan and current Al-Shabaab stronghold. We believe Rahanweyn members of Al-Shabaab defected to their own clan region because of geographic proximity or in hopes of better treatment from their clan in the DRR process. This would explain the high numbers of Rahanweyn defectors in the Baidoa center. Although we do not have clan data for disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants at other DRR centers in Somalia, we suspect there would be a broader mix of clan identities there.

The noble clans speak Af-Maxaa-tiri, which has become the official language of Somalia and is known as Standard Somali. The Rahanweyn speak Af-Maay-tiri, better known as Maay Maay (Gundel 2009, 11). All of the interviews were conducted in Maay Maay as this is the primary language of the disengaged combatants interviewed.

The average age when joining Al-Shabaab was eighteen years, with a range from fourteen to twenty-nine. The average age at interview was twenty-four (range eighteen to thirty-five). The average duration of the recruitment process was three and a half months. 66 percent of interviewees were recruited or forced to join Al-Shabaab by someone they knew. Of those, 50 percent of the interviewees joined Al-Shabaab by themselves and 50 percent joined with others. 84 percent of interviewees joined voluntarily, while 12 percent were forced to join Al-Shabaab. During the recruitment process 63 percent of the interviewees said they were not promised anything by Al-Shabaab. 33 percent were promised a salary if they joined. 46 percent said that they joined for religious reasons while 21 percent said they joined for financial reasons and 19 percent joined out of a desire for violence. Lastly, 59 percent said they had hope for their future and 65 percent said they felt safe before joining.

4.2 Membership

The average duration of membership of Al-Shabaab was 4.83 years (range one month to ten years). Thirteen interviewees declined to state their reason for staying in the organization; of those who did respond, the most common was religion. One said he stayed in Al-Shabaab because he believed he would go to paradise if he was killed. Other reasons disengaged combatants mentioned included various economic motivations, nationalist reasons, and becoming accustomed to the Al-Shabaab lifestyle. Regardless of the reason for staying in the organization, 91 percent said they felt a sense of brotherhood. Most did not have any fears while a member. Those who did primarily reported being afraid of different types of violence, specifically drone strikes. One particularly interesting response was the interviewee was most afraid of making problems for his fellow Somalis.

Reported functions in Al-Shabaab broke down as follows: 53 percent combatants, 14 percent officers/Al-Shabaab police, 11 percent drivers, 11 percent tax collectors, 3 percent assassin, 3 percent cameraman, 3 percent livestock herder, and 3 percent still in training. Salaries varied greatly, often dependent on role. The average was \$58/month, the range \$0 to \$250. The members paid the most were assassins and organizational leaders, while those making the least were those still in training and drivers. Assassins are paid 250 USD per successful target.

4.3 Defection

There were many similarities in the manner and motivation of the defections, with a few fascinating outliers. The average amount of time spent considering defection was 6.3 months with the longest being 48 months and the shortest an impromptu decision with no time allotted for consideration. 52 percent snuck away from Al-Shabaab while 34 percent failed to return from leave (members receive one month leave for every seven months of service). 70 percent had received death threats from Al-Shabaab after defecting, while 30 percent have not. 22 percent said they discarded their SIM card or mobile phone to prevent Al-Shabaab delivering threats and we suspect others did the same resulting.

39 percent defected because of differences over Islamic ideology that developed after the interviewee joined the Al-Shabaab and experienced its ideology firsthand. One recurring theme was that Al-Shabaab commanders were on a “wrong religious path”. 29 percent defected because of indiscriminate killings. Interviewees reported being ordered by Al-Shabaab commanders to kill Muslims and civilians for no reason. 16 percent defected for familial reasons – to keep them their family safe, to provide for them, or on their advice. 13 percent defected for financial reasons, feeling they were not paid enough. 6 percent defected because of infighting. One interviewee had been recruited by Ibrahim Haji Jama (alias Ibrahim al Afghani), a member of the Shura Council and founding member of Al-Shabaab. Afghani was his commander during his seven years as a member. Afghani was killed on June 20, 2013, by forces loyal to the Al-Shabaab emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane (Horadam and Sorhaindo 2011, updated 2013). The interviewee defected because of this internal fratricide. 6 percent defected because they wanted a lifestyle change and were tired of soldiering. The following reasons were each cited by one interviewee: wasting time, leave cut short, Al-Shabaab diminished, harsh living conditions, injuries from conflict, amnesty offer by Somali President, never wanted to be there to begin with, fear of FGS coalition, spontaneous, and being forced to kill relatives.

All thirty-two interviewees saw themselves as good Muslims. When asked if their Islamic ideology had changed since defecting from Al-Shabaab, 78 percent answered yes and 22 percent answered no. The latter breaks down as 10 percent left for practical reasons (financial and amnesty offer), 6 percent left for no reason (“just decided to”), and 6 percent left because of indiscriminate killing. When asked directly if they still agreed with Al-Shabaab ideology, 92 percent answered no, 4 percent answered “to some extent”, and 4 percent refused to answer (the same interviewee who “just decided to” defect for no reason). 79 percent did not think Islam was under threat while 21 percent did (two-thirds of whom thought Islam was under threat from Al-Shabaab).

24 percent had no regrets about leaving, while 21 percent regretted their lack of freedom of movement

due to the threat from Al-Shabaab, 12 percent regretted having lost time and opportunities, 12 percent regretted the stigmatization now attached to them by Somali society, 12 percent regretted joining Al-Shabaab in the first place, 6 percent regretted the injuries they incurred, 6 percent regretted killing innocents, one (3 percent) regretted defecting and wished he was still in Al-Shabaab, one regretted fighting for nothing, and 3 percent regretted his inability to take revenge on Al-Shabaab.

4.4 Wrap-Up

Half of the interviewees had recommendations on how best to combat Al-Shabaab. The most common response involved violence against Al-Shabaab or capacity building and better training for the government. Other respondents recommended increased use of technology, dialogue, and rehabilitation.

5 Findings

In this study, we found defection to be an unsafe option for Al-Shabaab combatants. The lack of security for disengaged combatants has made them fearful for their lives and is possibly discouraging more defectors.

The disengaged combatants interviewed in our study live in the DRR center in the government-controlled town of Baidoa. Al-Shabaab controls the territory directly outside the town and a covert presence within it. The DRR center is located on a secure street along with the AMISOM base, and has AMISOM personnel guarding the fortified compound. If the disengaged combatants remain in the center, they are safe. But if they leave the compound their personal security is at risk.

The DRR program run at the center is admirable (although we did not conduct a review or evaluation). The primary, consensus concern of the interviewees was that despite security at the center, the rehabilitation program, and the grant available upon completion of the program, they lacked personal security outside of the center. . 70 percent of the disengaged combatants have received death threats from Al-Shabaab, and many described themselves as “hunted”. At the end of each interview, we gave the interviewee an opportunity to share anything else they wanted to.

Four returned the question to the interviewer: “What should I do now?” Interviewees said that as soon as they left the center they would be killed: they knew of Al-Shabaab spies in Baidoa waiting for them to leave the protection of the center to kill them.

As described in the literature review, intrastate defection poses challenges that interstate defection does not. Interstate defection is a relocation program. An individual is defecting from one state to another and receives asylum and protection in the recipient state. In exchange for cooperation and intelligence, the recipient country provides for and protects the defector. This asylum geographically removes the defector from the threat of the state they defected from. In intrastate defection there is no foreign asylum. A Somali Al-Shabaab defector remains in Somalia after defection. Additionally, there is no immigration option for a disengaged Al-Shabaab combatant. No state will knowingly allow a former member of Al-Shabaab to immigrate to their state. Also, it is typical for economically developed states to employ witness protection, while the FGS and Somali state governments are ill-equipped to provide basic services, let alone put disengaged combatants in witness protection. And lastly, even if the Somali government could afford witness protection, changing identity is extremely challenging in the interconnected clan-based society of Somalia.

The clan structure is also informative in understanding the mobilization and defection challenges faced by Rahanweyn disengaged combatants. In Somalia, and specifically in South Central Somalia, the traditional clan judicial system called *xeer* came to play a significant role in the course of the two-decade civil war. In *xeer*, clan elders make judgments on cases within their own clan and between members of different clans. The Rahanweyn are a minority clan to the noble clans of Darood, Hawiye, and Dir. As a result, they do not enjoy the cross-clan *xeer* agreements that the noble clans have and thus are politically and structurally marginalized (Gundel 2009, 23). Consequently, youth from the Rahanweyn clan supply most of the low-level combatants of Al-Shabaab. The Baidoa DRR Center estimates that 90 percent of the low-level Al-Shabaab members are from the Bay, Bakool, and Lower Juba regions and are predominantly Maay Maay speakers from the Rahanweyn

clan. Al-Shabaab exploits the clan-based conflict to recruit young, marginalized, impressionable men to their cause. Yet, as the low-level Rahanweyn Al-Shabaab combatants come to understand the extremist ideology of Al-Shabaab, they reject it. 71 percent defected due to religious reasons or disagreement over killing practices, exhibiting a disagreement of principle with Al-Shabaab ideology. We believe that most of our interviewees did not adhere to the extremist views of Al-Shabaab when they joined the organization. 70 percent of the 47 percent who joined for religious reasons had a poor understanding of Al-Shabaab's religious views.

Disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants took an enormous risk in defecting. Their lives are now threatened and they are hunted by the very group the FGS and the international community encouraged them to defect from. It is the duty of the FGS and the international community to create conditions to address the personal security of disengaged combatants. And it is imperative to do so to encourage more defectors.

6 Recommendations

On the basis of our findings, we would like to make a few recommendations regarding personal security and increasing rates of defection. These are divergent to the status quo – and as such not without drawbacks or challenges – because we believe this immense challenge requires an atypical solution.

The first recommendation addresses the lack of personal security for disengaged combatants. One approach to address is to create a safe haven inside Somalia. A secure territory would need to be negotiated with the FGS, the host federal state, and the regional government(s). Economic support and security incentives would need to be provided to the host state and region by the FGS and international donors. Security could be provided by AMISOM and/or SNA. A single, secure region would be the optimal solution. With 90 percent of low-level Al-Shabaab combatants hailing from the Bay, Bakool, and Lower Juba regions, it would be ideal for the safe haven(s) to be located in those areas. In addition to providing safety for disengaged combatants, a safe haven would also protect local civilians. Reintegration programs would need to be emphasized to address the concerns of the local resi-

dents. Disengaged combatants need security and safety from Al-Shabaab attacks to restart their social and economical lives. One potential drawback to this approach is separation from family and clan. Close proximity to family in can help immensely with the rehabilitation and reintegration process (although some families want nothing to do with their former Al-Shabaab family member). Nevertheless, disengaged combatants need a secure location first and foremost. It is imperative to protect them and their families from Al-Shabaab reprisals. To help with the familial disconnect, stipends could be given to disengaged combatants to visit their families covertly. Locating the safe haven in Bay, Bakool, or Lower Juba would address some of the proximity issues.

Another way to address personal security is to integrate disengaged combatants into the SNA, giving them the institutional protection of the army. Although taking part in SNA combat operations against Al-Shabaab is dangerous, it is less dangerous than being hunted by Al-Shabaab without the protection of the SNA. As SNA is tasked with combatting Al-Shabaab, disengaged combatants from Al-Shabaab could provide useful operational information. Lastly, serving in the SNA would provide a consistent income, helping them reestablish their lives economically. Some disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants have been integrated into the security forces in other areas of Somalia, but we have yet to see studies on the impact. Also, it is important to note that SNA commanders and political leaders may be opposed to this approach as they distrust disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants. Additionally, significant issues in the SNA need to be addressed in order to make this a viable option. First, the troops are poorly armed, trained, and paid, generating reluctance (Camacho and Abukar 2017). The SNA requires a significant commitment of resources to build and retain an adequate force with the ability to provide security and combat insurgencies such as Al-Shabaab. Secondly, the SNA is made up of clan-based militias whose first allegiance is to their clan and regional identity. In order to make the SNA a cohesive fighting force, a national Somali identity needs to surmount the clan identity (Camacho and Abukar 2017, 7). Despite the problems the SNA continues to struggle with, integrating disen-

gaged Al-Shabaab combatants into the SNA could benefit both sides. Another benefit would be the option of disengaged combatants integrating into SNA forces operating in their home region and sharing their clan identity. This would place them geographically in their home region with fellow clan and family members, making rehabilitation and reintegration more effective. With many clan militias now integrated into the SNA, this affords clans the best opportunity to provide security guarantees to disengaged combatants. Nonetheless, the IOM Director of the DRR Center in Baidoa made it clear that IOM is not in support of this option. They believe that returning these young men to combat situations would be psychologically detrimental to their rehabilitation and reintegration process.

Our second recommendation concerns encouraging more defections. A significant number of interviewees said they joined Al-Shabaab for religious reasons. They believed Al-Shabaab represented the “right path” for devout followers of Allah. These same devout young Muslims defected from Al-Shabaab because they came to see Al-Shabaab as un-Islamic and therefore felt a moral imperative to defect. They retained their Islamic faith after defection. One key to discouraging recruitment and promoting defection is to communicate and demonstrate the un-Islamic nature of Al-Shabaab and present pious devotees with greater Islamic opportunities in Somali society. We would challenge the notion that “Islam-bashing” encourages defection. Instead of depicting Islam as an inherently violent religion, narratives exposing Al-Shabaab as un-Islamic and demonstrating true Islam will promote defection. One major challenge is the question who gets to determine what is and is not Islamic? Is it the community of international donors, the FGS, Somali Imams, or others? Whatever the answer, Al-Shabaab recruits, members, and defectors embody an Islamic piety and there is an opportunity and a need to engage in the arena of ideas that is driving young men to join such insurgencies. The program would do well to focus on the young men of the Rahanweyn clan, as this is the group Al-Shabaab is recruiting low-level combatants and thus where a program promoting an alternative Islamic ideology is needed to reduce recruitment.

7 Implications

One recurring theme was the lack of personal security for disengaged combatants after defection. 70 percent of interviewees had been threatened by Al-Shabaab since they defected, and some had seen their family threatened as well. Several who had not been threatened had changed their telephone number or thrown away their old mobile phone. We believe they would have been threatened otherwise. Although the disengaged combatants are secure within the DRR center, there is no plan for long term security once they leave. It is likely they will be hunted and killed by Al-Shabaab.

Although the DRR center provides economic and educational incentives for finishing the program, including technical training and a small loan to start a business, several participants mentioned concerns that they would be unable to take advantage of this type of assistance because of the lack of personal safety outside the center. The implications of this will affect nearly every area of their future. It will be difficult for the disengaged combatants to reunite with their families without risking their own and their family’s lives. Starting a business will also be difficult because it will be hard to stay in one area or establish a physical presence. Additionally, the tribal structure of Somali society makes it difficult to hide or relocate without people realizing who you are based on clan relations.

Another implication of the lack of personal security is that defection may become less common. 91 percent of interviewees mentioned a feeling of brotherhood with their fellow combatants when they were members of Al-Shabaab, and many were still in contact with friends who were still members. One interviewee mentioned that he was discouraging his Al-Shabaab friends from defecting because the center had not lived up to his expectations. If defection proves to be fatal, defections will dwindle. Those who are interested in undermining Al-Shabaab through defection will need to consider the lack of security for disengaged combatants as a significant factor.

8 Future Research

Two topics discussed briefly in this paper require deeper exploration and research: the impact of drone strikes on Al-Shabaab and an Islamic counternarrative

to Al-Shabaab. Six disengaged combatants specifically mentioned their fear of drone strikes while in Al-Shabaab. The US government employed drone strikes as an increasingly prominent tool in the “war on terror” (Klaidman 2012). Since 2002, the United States has launched 4,788 drone strikes against Al-Qaeda and their affiliates, including Al-Shabaab (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2018). The US counterinsurgency strategy began to utilize drone strikes after the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks with the objective of taking the fight to the enemy. With an increase of reliance of drone strikes as a counterinsurgency mechanism, an in-depth study on the impacts and unintended consequences is warranted. Are drone strikes degrading or helping grow insurgencies? Are civilian deaths due to drone strikes creating fertile ground for recruiting and local insurgency support? Drone warfare is viewed as keeping the US safe. But does it? This assumption needs to be studied and scrutinized, also to determine if drone strikes are an effective means to degrade an insurgency like Al-Shabaab.

The other topic that deserves further study is the recommendation we made for an Islamic counternarrative to Al-Shabaab ideology. Based on our data, we see a common thread of religious piety running through decisions to join Al-Shabaab, decisions to defect, and on into post-defection life. There is a clear opportunity to diminish Al-Shabaab through a culturally strategic initiative requires a comprehensively fleshed out intervention.

References

- AMISOM. 2017. Somalia Sets Priorities for Defector Rehabilitation. December 1. <http://amisom-au.org/2017/12/somalia-sets-priorities-for-defector-rehabilitation/>
- Bacon, Tricia. 2018. Strategic Progress Remains Elusive in America’s Expanded Air Campaign Against Al-Shabaab. War on the Rocks website, March 5. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/strategic-progress-remains-elusive-americas-expanded-air-campaign-al-shabaab/>
- Barrelle, Kate. 2015. Pro-Integration: Disengagement from and Life after Extremism. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 7 (2): 129–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2014.988165>
- Bjørge, Tore, and John Horgan. 2008. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*. New York: Routledge.
- Botha, Anneli. 2016. Factors Facilitating Radicalization in Kenya and Somalia. In *Expanding Research on Countering Violent Extremism*, ed. Sara Zeiger, 71–84. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah and Edith Cowan University.
- Botha, Anneli. 2014. Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization among Individuals Who Joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37 (11): 895–919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.952511>
- Botha, Anneli, and Mahdi Abdile. 2014. *Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia*, ISS Research Paper 266. N. p.: Institute for Security Studies and Finn Church Aid. <https://issafrica.org/research/papers/radicalisation-and-al-shabaab-recruitment-in-somalia>
- Burke, Jason. 2017. Mogadishu Bombing: al-Shabaab behind Deadly Blast, Officials Say. *Guardian*, October 16. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/mogadishu-bombing-al-shabaab-behind-deadly-blast-officials-say>
- Camacho, Paul R., and Ibrahim Mohamed Abukar. 2017. *Somalia’s Security: The Reconstruction of the Somali National Army*. Mogadishu, Somalia: Center for Policy Analysis and Research. <http://www.cfpar.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Reconstruction-of-the-Somali-National-Army-Briefing-Report-4.pdf>
- Chernov Hwang, Julie. 2017. The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists: Understanding the Pathways. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29 (2): 277–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1034855>
- Drone Warfare. Accessed May 1, 2018. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war>.
- Febab-Brown, Vanda. 2018. *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism – Somalia Case Study*. N. p.: United Nations University. [transitions.org/resources/publications/major-publications-briefings/the-limits-of-punishment-transitional-justice-and-violent-extremism/4-lop-somalia-case-study.pdf/view](https://www.un.org/resources/publications/major-publications-briefings/the-limits-of-punishment-transitional-justice-and-violent-extremism/4-lop-somalia-case-study.pdf/view)
- Ferguson, Neil. 2016. Disengaging from Terrorism: A Northern Irish Experience. *Journal of Deradicalization* 6 (1): 1–23.
- Gundel, Joakim. December 2009. *Clans in Somalia: Report on a Lecture by Joakim Gundel, COI Workshop Vienna, 15 May 2009* (Revised Edition). Vienna: Austrian Red Cross. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b29f5e82.pdf>
- Hassan, Muhsin. 2012. Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of Al-Shabab and Somali Youth. *CTC Sentinel* 5 (8): 18–20.
- Horadam, Nathaniel, and Jared Sorhaindo. 2011 (updated 2013). Profile: Ibrahim Haji Jama Mead (Ibrahim al Afghani). Critical Threats website. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/profile-ibrahim-haji-jama-mead-ibrahim-al-afghani>
- Horgan, John. 2009. *Walking Away From Terrorism*, Kindle edition. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Horgan, John. 2018. When Terrorists Defect. CNN, May 3. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/03/opinions/somalia-lost-boys-opinion-horgan/index.html>
- Kalyvas, Stathis. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Klaidman, Daniel. 2012. Drones: The Silent Killers. *Newsweek*, May 28. <http://www.newsweek.com/drones-silent-killers-64909>.

- Kriel, Robyn and Brianna Duggan. 2015. Al-Shabaab Faction Pledges Allegiance to ISIS. *CNN*, October 23. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/22/africa/al-shabaab-faction-isis/index.html>
- Mohamed, Adow. 2015. 700 Al Shabaab Recruits Return to Kenya – IOM. *Star* (Kenya), October 21, <http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2015/10/21/700-al-shabaab-recruits-return-to-kenya-iomc1227648>, accessed February 14, 2018.
- Observer. 2012. 200 al-Shabab Defect – AMISOM. *Observer* (Uganda), September 23. <http://www.observer.ug/news-headlines/21143-200-al-shabab-defect-amisom>.
- Popovic, Milos. 2014. Fragile Proxies: The Politics of Control and Defection in State Sponsorship of Rebel Organizations, Ph.D. diss., Central European University. http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2015/popovic_milos.pdf
- Reinares, Fernando. 2011. Exit From Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement and Deradicalization among Members of ETA. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 (5): 780–803. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.613307>
- Shaban, Abdur Rahman. 2017. Al-Shabaab Combat: U.S. Backs Defections as Means to Degrade Group. *Africa News*, August 17. <http://www.africanews.com/2017/08/17/al-shabaab-combat-us-backs-defections-as-means-to-degrade-group/>
- Trofimov, Yaroslav. 2018. In Somalia – or Afghanistan – Can Insurgent Defections Change a War’s Course? *Wall Street Journal*, February 8. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-somaliaor-afghanistancan-insurgent-defections-change-a-wars-course-1518085802>
- UNHCR Somalia. 2004. Genealogical Table of Somali Clans. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1413573/bsvec1_unhcr2000.pdf
- Vogt, Heidi. 2016. Islamic State in Africa Tries to Lure Members From Al-Shabaab. *Wall Street Journal*, October 26. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/african-terror-franchise-now-has-competition-from-islamic-state-1477474200>
- Weinstein, Jeremy. 2006. *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.