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# 1.1.1. Recruitment of men, women, and children by Al-Shabaab

According to Zakia Hussen, former Deputy Police Commissioner General, who was interviewed for this report, Al-Shabaab recruitment works differently in different areas, depending on the level of control the group exercises in a place and what it needs at a given moment in time.16 The group recruits female and male persons, from majority and minority groups and it recruits fighters and suicide bombers, as well as informants and those offering logistic support or aiding otherwise.17 According to Prof. Roland Marchal, senior fellow at Sciences Po in Paris, it also recruits online, through propaganda videos, targeting audiences in Somalia but also in neighbouring countries from Ethiopia to Tanzania.18

In the past it was reported that Al-Shabaab recruited many children, sometimes from the age of nine onward, many of them by force. In early 2017, the UN Secretary-General 'estimated that more than half of al-Shabaab's fighters may be children'. A Somali taskforce recorded the recruitment of 4 213 children — almost all boys — into al-Shabaab between 1 April 2010, and 31 July 2016.'19 Additionally it was reported that girls and women were forced to work as sex slaves for Al-Shabaab or marry Al-Shabaab fighters.20 The UN panel of experts for Somalia found in 2024 that 'Al-Shabaab remains the perpetrator with the highest recorded number of incidents of recruitment and use of children, abduction and forced marriage.'21 The practice of recruiting children from a young age (12 or even younger) is ongoing.22 There are also sources that emphasise that voluntary recruitment is more significant than forced recruitment in recent years. This concerns particularly areas which are long-term under Al-Shabaab control.23 The German Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF, 2024) emphasised that 'voluntary and forced recruitment often go hand in hand.'24 In rural areas in southern Somalia, especially in the Middle and Lower Shabelle regions, Middle and Lower Jubba, Bay and Bakool, where Al Shabaab exercises control since 2007, people became accustomed to Al-Shabaab's ideology; youngsters have been socialised into it.25 Zakia Hussen stated that 'recruitment in those areas is easy for the group.' Young people from around 12 onward join the group, receive training and are used as fighters or suicide bombers from age 15 or 16.26 In some cases, individuals who are coming from other areas but are sharing the groups ideological orientation, join voluntarily.27 UNICEF members were interviewed by the BAMF during a fact-finding mission in December 2023. They mentioned that around 500 children were recruited by Al-Shabaab between January and September 2023.28 The US Department of State (USDOS) reported in April 2024 that Al-

Shabaab forcibly recruited children to participate directly in hostilities, including suicide attacks.[29] The Bertelsmann Foundation found in March 2024 that Al-Shabaab was coercing local communities and elders to hand over young recruits.[30] Recruits (forced or not) of the group are usually between the age of 11 and 25. Yet, two sources mention that even children aged nine or younger are recruited.[31] Such young children are more likely to be targeted for recruitment into indoctrination camps to be later transferred to training camps as early teens.[32]

Several factors are influencing recruitment by Al-Shabaab, which can be understood as a spectrum from voluntary membership to forced recruitment.[33] The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs found in June 2023 that 'the distinction between "voluntary" and "forced" membership of al-Shabab was not obvious.' Recruitment frequently results from a mixture of factors like economic and social discontent that can be fuelled and/or exploited by Al-Shabaab, religious indoctrination and/or zeal, grievances against the government, the international community or other clans, and fear of repercussions from Al-Shabaab.[34]

One factor for joining Al-Shabaab is grievances. There are many Rahanweyn, Somali Bantu/Jareer and members of smaller minority groups from the Benadir coast (between Mogadishu and Kismayo), in Al-Shabaab today.[35] Zakia Hussen gave the opinion that long-standing feelings of being marginalised facilitated their membership in Al-Shabaab. Rahanweyn are not a minority group but have long been treated as second-class citizens in Somalia. They have 'suffered tremendously' at the hands of Hawiye and Darood clan-militias in the 1990s and are still underprivileged compared to the dominant clans. Jareer and other minorities are discriminated until today (see chapter 1.4 Minorities).[36] However, according to Somalia expert Markus Hoehne, Rahanweyn or Somali Bantu/Jareer are rarely to be found in leadership positions within Al-Shabaab but rather exclusively employed as foot soldiers, hinting at discrimination within the group.[37] A second factor is that in areas which are in the hands of Al-Shabaab for many years, the group controls the local society as a whole.[38] Paa Kwesi Wolseley Prah, lecturer at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, found recently that Al-Shabaab 'has enforced its interpretation of Sharia law through the use of courts and other judicial bodies, and it has punished those who violate its rules with harsh penalties, including amputations, floggings, and executions. By enforcing its strict interpretation of Islamic law, Al-Shabaab has been able to present itself as a legitimate Islamic authority in the areas under its control.'[39] In these areas, joining Al-Shabaab is 'normal'. Al-Shabaab can demand support from local families whose members often do not know any other authority than Al-Shabaab.[40] Former Deputy Police Commissioner General Zakia Hussen reported that, in some places, when the government forces were approaching, the male Al-Shabaab members retreated. Women and children were left behind. The latter were so indoctrinated that they refused to engage with soldiers or policemen. Only after a while, they realised that the government officials were not all 'kufar' (unbelievers), as Al-Shabaab officials had been telling the locals over years.[41] A third recruitment factor is Al-Shabaab's strategy to get involved as mediator in local conflicts between patrilineal descent groups. Once mediation succeeded, Al-Shabaab demands young people to join them.[42] A fourth factor is (military) pressure and threats. This entails forced recruitment on the spot, also as a form of retaliation during operations against opponents.[43] In other cases, especially in Galgadud

and parts of Mudug region, in the wake of the stalled military offensive of the government there, supported by local *Macawisley* militias, Al-Shabaab attacked and threatened locals and demanded their return to the group's 'over-lordship'.[44] Fearing reprisals, many actually reverted back to Al-Shabaab in the course of 2023 and as 'compensation' offered fighters to join Al-Shabaab.[45]

Further recruitment factors, complementing those mentioned above, include Al-Shabaab also offering payment and family support. Payment for rank and file in Al-Shabaab is 200-300 USD/month, which is similar to what low-rank SNA soldiers or policemen would get (including their food allowances).[46] Suicide bombers reportedly get offered larger amounts of money. Also in Kenya, e.g. among Somalis in Eastleigh, the Somali-dominated neighbourhood of Nairobi, Al-Shabaab recruits by using a mixture of financially attractive offers and religious indoctrination.[47] Often also relatives recruit other relatives.[48] Furthermore, social mobility (in the form of promotions) and the prospect to get an Al-Shabaab arranged marriage attract some people to the group. BAMF found in 2024 that '[t]he prospect of marriage in particular is a pull factor for women and men alike. Marriage can provide women with social advancement and security, while men find recognition in the group and hope to start a family through marriage.'[49] Foreign fighters are also attracted by the prospect of marrying Somali women.[50] Al-Shabaab recruitment also is influenced by current Somali and regional politics. Williams (2024) reported that recently, Al-Shabaab started a huge recruitment campaign 'drawing on Somali anger at the memorandum of understanding (MOU) concluded between Ethiopia and Somaliland on 1 January 2024.'[51] Williams adds that while 'true strength [of Al-Shabaab] remains unknown, the militants have consistently replenished their losses through forcible recruitment and cutting deals with clans.'[52]

Recruitment in Mogadishu became more complicated for Al-Shabaab, according to Police General Zakia Hussen. Previously, the group recruited in Koranic schools in the Somali capital. Yet, according to the source, over the last few years, many young people in Mogadishu have been more interested in money and worldly success than in joining the potentially deadly struggle of Al-Shabaab for ideological reasons.[53] In the capital city, Al-Shabaab focuses on recruiting persons with social influence, including university teachers, school teachers, elders and medical professionals.[54] Also IDPs residing in the outer districts of Mogadishu, where Al-Shabaab has a very substantial influence, are frequently recruited by Al-Shabaab. IDPs serve not so much as fighters or suicide bombers but as informants, spies, and/or persons who can offer hiding places for weapons, ammunition, or explosives. They may receive a moderate remuneration, but many also collaborate because they are scared.[55]

Still according to Zakia Hussen, across south-central Somalia, elders or professionals are also targets of Al-Shabaab recruitment. These persons offer access to society and also have skills that are in demand, especially medical professionals. Al-Shabaab offers them considerable incentives to join clandestinely.[56] Prof. Roland Marchal mentioned that Al-Shabaab also recruits actively Ethiopians, Kenyans and Tanzanians holding grudges against the political system in their respective country of origin.[57] Diaspora Somalis are often viewed with suspicion by Al-

Shabaab. The group is weary of being infiltrated by those who have connections abroad and may work with foreign governments fighting terrorism in Somalia. Financial support from the diaspora, however, is welcome.58

Information on the recruitment process and Al Shabaab training was scarce amongst the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this report. BAMF found in 2024 that 'the training of minors includes one and a half years of religious training at a Quran school and two years of military training. The latter is to be carried out from the age of 14 to 15. Younger members would remain in the Quran school for longer.'59 Orphans are of particular interest for Al-Shabaab, since they have few social ties and can thus be socialised into the group as loyal members.60 Two sources reported that women are actively participating in Al-Shabaab. They are combatants, spies, recruiters, fundraisers, (future) wives, cooks, tailors, cleaners, religious preachers, nurses, they store weapons, hide assassins and/or weapons after attacks, and are helping with money laundering. 61Women are also 'assisting in planning terror-related activities.'62 They also play a role for recruitment and 'brainwashing' of potential or new recruits.63 Also the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia found in its 2024 report that 'women [in Al-Shabaab] can become perpetrators of grave violations against children and conflict-related sexual violence when they use their social influence to exploit girls and boys to support the group or facilitate forced marriages.'64 On rare occasions, female suicide bombers are used. They are typically conducting more devastating attacks given there is less suspicion by security forces against women entering government offices or public places.65 Women in Al-Shabaab controlled areas also actively contribute to the group maintenance by giving birth to many children and raising them in accordance with Al-Shabaab ideology.66

### ☐ (a) Repercussions for refusing to be recruited

Information on repercussions for refusal to be recruited was scarce amongst the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this report. Older sources, from 2018, state that refusing to join Al-Shabaab or hand over recruits could result in attacks by the group on local communities.67 Those rejecting Al-Shabaab had to flee the areas in which the group exercised control.68 For more details, see chapter 2.2.2 of the EUAA COI report on Somalia: Defection, Desertion and Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (February 2023).69

## ☐ (b) Repercussions for deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab

Khalil and Zeuthen found, based on a recent study, that not all members of Al Shabaab remain committed to the group's ideology and objectives. Yet, defection is potentially punishable by death. Khalil and Zeuthen added that many former Al Shabaab members waited months or even years for suitable opportunities to exit.70 BAMF found during its recent fact finding mission that '[d]esertions occur rarely, but are generally possible, especially in the context of religious training. According to the same organisation, the monitoring of recruits is rather weak during the initial training period.'71 Former Deputy Police Commissioner General Zakia Hussen indicated that ordinary rank and file can defect. Yet, defection mostly concerns those who have been forcibly recruited in areas that are not under long-term Al-Shabaab control. She gave the view that those who grew up with Al-Shabaab rarely defect. If persons defect from areas under Al-Shabaab control, the group can use the access to their (extended) family to keep those who distanced themselves from the group in check. These persons are sometimes used as 'double agents' by Al-Shabaab. They defect, get potentially re-educated and integrated e.g. in the Somali police force and particularly in the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), and continue providing Al-Shabaab with information.72 Police General Zakia Hussen mentioned that the current defector programs of the Somali government are not well organised.73 In some cases, Al-Shabaab defectors managed to exit through arrangements with the relevant security agencies, typically assisted by relatives including elders.74 Individuals with little social relations outside Al-Shabaab and those from less powerful clans face challenges exiting through prearranged ties to the authorities. Also, the security after defection is not always guaranteed by the state authorities.75

Prof. Roland Marchal indicated that people defecting from Al-Shabaab tend to go to an area where nobody knows them. Al-Shabaab has its clandestine information networks in many places. But defectors are also at risk of being ostracised by the local society in places where they seek to hide.76 People are suspicious about ex-Al-Shabaab members. Moreover, NISA is interested in defectors and goes after them. This can create serious problems for defectors. Many defectors try to seek refuge outside of Somalia.77 Social attitudes toward Al-Shabaab defectors vary across communities. In some cases, former Al-Shabaab members are socially isolated and face challenges regarding finding work and making a living. National defectors programmes offering basic education, vocational training, and other advantages to ex-Al-Shabaab members are sometimes perceived as rewarding violent insurgency. Communities that previously suffered severely from Al-Shabaab brutality are less likely to welcome defectors.78 The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia found in 2024 that many women leaving Al-Shabaab

‘are highly vulnerable to stigma and live in extreme poverty due to exclusion from communities and resources. […] Many choose to live in isolation for fear of stigma.’ Rehabilitation centres for women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab have been closed.79 Two sources reported to BAMF that deserters, notably high-ranking members of Al-Shabaab and important persons like elders or other community leaders would be traced and hunted by the group. Within this context ‘deserters with relevant knowledge of the group's organisation or logistics are also systematically tracked’ in case of desertion.80 For more background see the EUAA COI report on Somalia: Defection, Desertion and Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (February 2023).81

Motivations to desert Al-Shabaab range from worries about personal safety to the wish to reunite with family members, to disillusionment about the brutal force applied by Al-Shabaab against local communities.82 Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen (2023), who studied reasons why women from Kenya would leave Al-Shabaab emphasised also that some women grew disappointed about the hard working conditions, racial hierarchisation (with women of Somali ethnicity being treated better than those of non-Somali ethnicity) and abuse by Al-Shabaab men.83 In recent years, prospects of state amnesty also eased desertion to some degree. Particularly persons who have been forcibly recruited during Al-Shabaab campaigns in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, are likely to try to leave Al-Shabaab.84 If a former Al-Shabaab member actually tries to profit from official rehabilitation programs, his/her defection is followed by screening which is considered as problematic in several regards. Screeners can be biased, e.g. toward their own relatives.85 Former Deputy Police Commissioner General Zakia Hussen mentioned that sometimes persons who get through the screening only pretend to have left Al-Shabaab but try to infiltrate the security agencies by signing up especially for the SNA or NISA after having been vetted.86 Khalil and Zeuthen (2023) found that the screening process is problematic due to the subjective interpretation of the screening criteria, inadequate intelligence, and the biases of screeners, who might treat relatives more favourably than others.87 Khalil and Zeuthen (2023) reported that ‘the National Defectors Programme cannot guarantee security for individuals who disengage, with al-Shabaab often continuing to threaten its former members long after their exit.’88 For more information on the consequences for leaving Al-Shabaab as well as on formal and informal disengagement pathways, see the EUAA COI report on Somalia: Defection, Desertion and Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (February 2023).89

- 16

  Zakia Hussen, Telephone interview, 25 March 2025. Zakia Hussen is Former Deputy Police Commissioner General based in Mogadishu

- 17

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  Counter Extremism Project, Al-Shabaab, 2024, url, p. 4; Roland Marchal, Telephone interview, 26 March 2025. Roland Marchal is a Senior Fellow at the Centre de Recherches Internationales at Sciences Po, in Paris, since 1997, with a specialisation in Somali politics and conflict dynamics. He is also the co-founder of the research programme, the East Africa Observatory

- 19

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- 24

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- 32

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- 36

  Zakia Hussen, Telephone interview, 25 March 2025

- 37

  Hoehne, M. V., Telephone interview, 9 March 2025. Markus Hoehne is a lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Göttingen (Germany), specialized on Somalia, fluent in Somali language, and with many years of experience in conflict-research

- 38

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- 39

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- 41

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- 42

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- 53

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- 54

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- 55

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- 56

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- 72

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- 73

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- 75

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