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# 1.1.2. Recruitment of men, women and children by other actors

The SNA has a considerable budget. Defence spending in Somalia in 2024 was close to 25 % of the overall federal budget of 1.1 billion USD.90 This means that the SNA has a considerable potential for recruitment. According to Zakia Hussen, while exact numbers are difficult to get, it is likely that currently, the SNA consists of some 22 000 soldiers.91 Thus it is probably over twice the size Al-Shabaab at the moment.92 Over the last two years, the Federal Government of Somalia launched new recruitment drives, seeking new recruits to join the national armed forces. It is, however, unclear how many have really been recruited.93 There are risks related to large numbers of recruits being integrated into the SNA within a short period of time. They concern their adequate training.94 Recruitment by the SNA in recent years was also motivated by the fact that the military campaigns against Al-Shabaab in central Somalia from mid-2022 onward and recent fighting in Middle Shabelle, not far from Mogadishu, have produced considerable casualties.95 The SNA typically recruits young Somalis (men, but also women) between 18 and 22 years. Applicants should have completed their secondary school education. Candidates must be physically and mentally fit.96 In recent years, thousands of recruits were sent abroad, e.g. to Eritrea and Uganda, for military training.97 The Somali government also recruits for Special Forces, including the US-trained Danab brigade that has attracted recruits from across the country.98

Officially, recruitment into the Somali army and the other security forces in Somalia is voluntary. The government cannot legally recruit under aged persons, although with no formal system of birth certification it may be difficult to determine exact age.99 Yet, according to UNOCHA, children ‘aged between 11 and 17 years were identified as being most at risk of forced recruitment. There are also reports of clan elders who ordered to recruit a certain number of children from their communities to fight alongside the Somalia National Army’.100 Moreover, in the context of the large-scale military campaign against Al-Shabaab in central Somalia starting in mid-2022, clan-based militias fought alongside the SNA, while relying on under-age persons. 101 As indicated by the US Department of Labor, in the course of 2023, ‘despite a government order barring the recruitment of children into state armed groups, members of the federal armed forces, security services, regional forces, and police in Galmudug, Jubaland, and Puntland continued to recruit children into their ranks’.102 The United Nations reported that the SNA recruited some 121 children between 2019 and 2022.103 There were also reports that, in 2021 and 2022, parents of new recruits complained that recruitment had happened under false

pretences. ‘Some of the parents stated that their sons had been told that they were being recruited for training in Qatar, but that they were then transported to Eritrea to join Eritrean troops in fighting in Tigray (Ethiopia).’104 It also happens that some young men did not disclose to their parents that they were joining the SNA. The recruits are also not always aware where they will be trained.105 Generally, the forces are relatively attractive especially to Somali youth, since they provide young people with a regular salary, against the backdrop of widespread youth unemployment.106

Recruitment mainly focuses on Mogadishu and surroundings. While calls for recruitment by the government are public and directed potentially, to all citizens of Somalia, the assessment and registration happens in Mogadishu. This is why mostly people from southern Somalia join the SNA. They hail from different patrilineal descent groups including Hawiye, Darood, Dir and others.107 Yet, there are also recruitment strategies ongoing e.g. in northeast Somalia, in Puntland. The government in Garowe complained in March 2025 that the government in Mogadishu was ‘covertly recruiting the youth from Puntland as soldiers who will be later deployed in the frontlines in order to fight against Al-Shabab militants.’108 In early April 2025, in the wake of fighting between the SNA and Al-Shabaab around Bal’ad town some 40 kilometres north of Mogadishu, Baidoa Online reported about ‘Forced Recruitment Amid Manpower Shortages’. An SNA senior military officer ‘ordered families in the Middle Shabelle region to provide recruits for the fight against Al-Shabaab, warning of severe consequences for noncompliance.’109

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

Information on the repercussions for refusal to be recruited to Somali state forces was scarce. According to Zakia Hussen, recruitment into the Somali security forces (SNA, also police and NISA) is largely voluntary. Only in exceptional cases, as documented above, some force is exercised. Thus, ‘refusing recruitment is a very marginal problem’ when it comes to SNA, Somali police or other official security forces in Somalia, at least in recent years.110 Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this report.

### ○ (b) Repercussions for desertion

According to Zakia Hussen, desertion from the SNA happens mainly in the face of potentially deadly military operations. In the offensive against Al-Shabaab in central Somalia that had started in mid-2022, which is still ongoing, both Al-Shabaab and SNA suffered considerable losses. The losses of respected SNA officers around Awsweyne (Galgadud region) in August 2023 had a negative impact on the moral of the soldiers. This increased the risk of desertion. However, desertion of ordinary soldiers does not lead to persecution by the army. In cases in which soldiers have deserted, they typically take their gun along. Their salaries are terminated, and the ex-soldiers then live among their extended family. Yet, officers refusing orders or leaving the battlefield are typically brought before military court. Note that due to the conditions of the lifting of the arms embargo in Somalia, all government owned weapons have been tagged with individualised ID number, thus should these guns be brought to the black market they can and will be traced.111 Further and corroborating information on the repercussions for desertion could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this report.

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