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3.3. Deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: October 2025

This profile refers to men, having deserted or defected from Al-Shabaab, as well as to boys who had been actively involved in the group, especially as fighters.

For the situation of women and girls having left Al-Shabaab, see 3.13.4. Women and girls who have left Al-Shabaab.

In the context of leaving Al-Shabaab, the following terminology is used:

Deserter: a man leaving Al-Shabaab without Al-Shabaab's permission.

Defector: a man who has left Al-Shabaab without Al-Shabaab's permission and then has reported to the Somali authorities.

The analysis below is based on the following EUAA COI reports: Country Focus 2025, 1.1.1.; Targeting 2021, 1.2.; AS Deserters, 1.1., 1.2.1., 1.2.3., 1.2.4., 2.1.1., 2.1.3., 2.1.4., 2.2.4., 2.3.2.; Country Guidance should not be referred to as a source of COI.

Several factors influence the decision to leave Al-Shabaab. Control over territory affects escape options, as liberated areas offer more chances to desert. Social networks, especially clans, play a crucial role in facilitating safe disengagement, often more than the government programs. While formal defection processes exist, most leave informally due to fear or lack of awareness. The government is actively encouraging defection from Al-Shabaab, however in the absence of an amnesty law, presidential declarations have become the main tool for granting amnesty.

Government authorities distinguish between '**high-value**' and '**low-value**' defectors. '**High-value**' defectors are Al-Shabaab commanders or clan elders and warlords, who can make many of their followers also leave. '**Low-value**' defectors are further sorted out into '**high-risk**' defectors and '**low-risk**' defectors.

‘**High risk**’ defectors are those who are considered commanders of some sort and had been engaged in the making of explosives, or who had killed someone. ‘**Low risk**’ defectors are generally considered those ‘foot soldiers, porters, mechanics and the like’, who reportedly received amnesty from prosecution. Those who had fundraised, preached jihad, or provided logistical support could be classified as either **low-risk** or **high-risk** defectors.

Step 1: Do the reported acts amount to persecution?

Criminal prosecution in itself does not amount to persecution. ‘High-risk’ defectors are often sentenced to death and execution. Death penalty and execution amounts to persecution. The arrest and detention of children allegedly associated with Al-Shabaab by the **authorities** in South-Central Somalia and in Puntland is a recurring measure. Coercive treatment and in some cases use of torture have been reported, with children being prosecuted as adults, notably in Puntland and with sentences ranging from some years to life imprisonment.

Other acts to which deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab could be exposed by **Al-Shabaab** are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution. More specifically, Al-Shabaab punishes defection potentially by death. In the past, a number of disengaged fighters have received death threats, even in rehabilitation centres. Family members are also targeted - wives have been executed, threatened, or forced into ‘wife inheritance’, and relatives may be extorted for compensation.

The severity and/or repetitiveness of other acts that deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab could be subjected to and whether they occur as an accumulation of various measures, should be also considered. More specifically, **communities** often stigmatise former Al-Shabaab members, seeing them as security risks, leading to social isolation and challenges regarding finding work and making a living. Children might face displacement, separation from families, and marginalisation, often ending up in IDP camps or on the streets. Being a child is to be taken into account in the assessment on whether an act reaches the threshold of persecution.

Step 2: What is the level of risk of persecution?

In **South-Central Somalia, a well-founded fear of persecution by the group would in general be substantiated** in the case of deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab. Leaving Al-Shabaab is generally not accepted, desertion is seen as an infringement of the jihadist ideology and the group would seek to punish deserters it can reach in order to provide a ‘shocking example’ for others who might be considering desertion.

In **Puntland**, Al-Shabaab has lower operational capacity with stronger presence in the northern parts (see map). Therefore, the home area of the applicant should be taken into account as a risk-impacting circumstance.

In **Somaliland**, Al-Shabaab has very limited operational capacity and therefore, **a well-founded fear of persecution by the group** for deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab in **Somaliland would in general not be substantiated**.

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.

Additionally, well-founded fear of persecution by the **government** may be substantiated, particularly for ‘high-risk’ defectors, in **South-Central Somalia** and **Puntland**.

There is no information about the treatment of deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab by the government or the community in **Somaliland**.

Step 3: Is there a ground for persecution?

Where well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated for an applicant under this profile, this is highly likely to be for reasons of **religion** and/or **political opinion**, as desertion and defection is seen by Al-Shabaab as an infringement of the jihadist ideology. Political opinion may also be the nexus in case of persecution by the government.



Exclusion considerations are relevant to this profile, as deserters and defectors from Al-Shabaab may have been involved in excludable acts. See 7. Exclusion.

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