

YOUTH RADICALIZATION IN SOMALIA: Causes, Consequences and Potential Solutions

KEY POLICY MESSAGES:



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1. Radicalisation is undermining Somalia's peace, stability and development prospects. Religious extremism in the country has also become a security concern for the region and the world. Young, uneducated Somalis and their well-educated diaspora peers who grew up in affluence in the West have become foot soldiers and suicide bombers for Somalia's extremist insurgency Al-Shabaab. An intertwined array of internal and external factors have rendered Somali youth susceptible to Al-Shabaab's seductive ideologies and contributed to the rise of one of the world's most lethal insurgencies.
2. The emergence and evolution of Al-Shabaab was facilitated by the fracturing and dissolution of the Somali state and external interference. The group's resilience is reinforced by widespread injustices and political malfeasances perpetrated by national political leaders and local power brokers. Failure by mainstream Islamists to counter the Al-Shabaab narrative; widespread unemployment; the destructive policies of external actors; the presence and ineffectiveness of African Union (AU) forces; and complacency and tacit collaboration with the insurgency by critical segments of society – namely the business community – have all made Al-Shabaab a potent and powerful destabilising force.
3. This paper evaluates the causes, drivers and contributing factors of radicalisation in Somalia. It also assesses the strategies adopted thus far to deal with Al-Shabaab, as well as other feasible options to address the issue of radicalisation in Somalia. At present, over 20,000 UN-mandated forces with the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) are battling Al-Shabaab. US military forces are also engaged in aerial attacks and a Special Forces raids. Despite these combined efforts, Al-Shabaab endures, unleashing devastating terror acts, and is poised to remain as a potent force unless effective strategies are adopted.
4. The introduction of a national countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy represents a positive start, but further empirical research and analysis are required to establish how effective it can be over the short term. The federal government, working in conjunction with the regions, must implement the policies and practices outlined in the CVE strategy with immediate effect, starting with the reform of its rehabilitation centres and prisons. Proposed counter-terrorism strategies must be Somali-led and implemented in line with internationally accepted norms. The predominance of strategies developed by foreign entities or the establishment of parallel counter-terrorism mechanisms will compromise national sovereignty. To succeed, the federal government must strive to fulfil core state functions by replenishing mechanisms of governance throughout the country while also addressing deep-rooted grievances caused by political, socio-economic and legal injustices. In addition, the AMISOM exit strategy must be clearly set, and contingency plans must be put in place for a post-AMISOM era in Somalia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

History of Violence:

In 2006, the majority of Somalis had never heard of Al-Shabaab. However, by 2009, Al-Shabaab was a fully-fledged and functional insurgency controlling huge swathes of territory in south-central Somalia, collecting of millions of dollars in taxes.

Forces in Somalia:

Over 20,000 UN-mandated AMISOM forces are currently in Somalia battling with Al-Shabaab. International military assets have also been deployed to the country, including active US military forces

For over a quarter of a century, Somalia has been at the epicentre of violent conflicts. Tribal conflicts, resource related contests, wars waged by neighbouring states, failed international interventions and factional fighting have created a population tired of exploitation and ripe for radicalisation. In 2006, the majority of Somalis had never heard of Al-Shabaab, which operated in secret as a tiny wing within the Union of Islamic Courts, which was responsible for removing the warlords from Mogadishu. However, by 2009, Al-Shabaab was a fully-fledged and functional insurgency controlling huge swathes of territory in south-central Somalia, collecting hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes. In the decade since its emergence, Al-Shabaab has become one of the most violent and militarised extremist organisations in Africa. Over 20,000 UN-mandated AMISOM forces are currently in Somalia battling with Al-Shabaab. International military assets have also been deployed to the country, including active US military forces, mostly engaged in drone attacks and raids which have killed Al-Shabaab leaders, including the former “emir” (leader), Ahmed Godane.

Sustained AMISOM operations have removed the overt influence of Al-Shabaab from major urban centres, and US drone and commando attacks have deprived the group of its leaders, access to ports and reduced its ability for surprise assaults. Nonetheless, the group (whose name means The Youth in Arabic) is becoming ever more voracious. Every couple of months, small groups of 6-12 Al-Shabaab fighters engage in suicide missions, staging complex attacks on important facilities such as hotels, government compounds or AMISOM garrisons. The group has also staged deadly attacks in Kampala, Djibouti and repeatedly stormed multiple locations in Kenya. Many Western countries with significant Somali diaspora populations such as Britain, Canada and the US have classified Al-Shabaab as a serious national

security threat. Radicalised Somali and non-Somali youths in these countries have joined Al-Shabaab and, more recently, the so-called Islamic State, to participate in their campaigns of violence and some have repeatedly threatened Western countries and their interests.

Even though some commentators believe Al-Shabaab has become “the hunted” instead of “the hunter”, there is no question that the group’s operational capacity is relatively intact and that it retains a significant number of dedicated followers among Somalis, particularly the youth. The majority of Al-Shabaab fighters and suicide bombers, and of course its leaders, are Somalis. However, the group has access to a significant international network of financiers, sympathisers and affiliates. Al-Shabaab’s message of jihad against Somalis and external actors in Somalia has apparently struck a chord with a significant proportion of the country’s youth population. Given that 70 percent of Somalis are under 30 and half of the population is under 15, Al-Shabaab has a vast reservoir for potential recruiting. Interference by Somalia’s neighbours, widespread corruption by politicians, high unemployment, fractured and flawed state-building and external exploitation have rendered once promising Somalia a failed state and enabled the easy emergence of Al-Shabaab.

State failure alone cannot explain the root causes of radicalisation and violent extremism in Somalia. Both the internal and external factors that contributed to the rise and resilience of Al-Shabaab must be examined. Particular attention should be paid to the nature as well as the effect of Al-Shabaab’s ideology and its communications techniques. Similarly, the absence or ineffectiveness of strategies deployed by religious actors to provide a counter-narrative, gaps in governance in Somalia and the impact of external actors should all be closely scrutinised.

Youth Recruitment:

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Fear of Reprisal:

Some potential respondents stated that they feared reprisal from Al-Shabaab while others suspected the researchers were engaged in intelligence gathering. Others expressed frustration regarding the multiple and repeated surveys conducted by different organisations who never return to address the issues faced by communities.

This paper is informed by qualitative research in the form of interviews with key informants. In addition, desk research was conducted to complement the primary sources. In each of the seven major Somali cities, 10 key informant interviews and a single focus group discussion were conducted, producing a total data set comprising 70 individual interviews and seven focus group discussions. All respondents were asked to discuss the root causes of youth radicalisation in Somalia and suggest potential solutions.

Research was conducted in seven geographically relevant and diverse Somali cities: Baidoa, Beledweyne, Bosaso, Burco, Galkacyo, Kismayo and Mogadishu. Due to the nature of the youth radicalisation being studied, local communities across the seven locations were very sensitive about the research. Some potential respondents stated that

they feared reprisal from Al-Shabaab while others suspected the researchers were engaged in intelligence gathering. Some of the interviewees consulted also expressed frustration regarding the multiple and repeated surveys conducted by different organisations who never return to address the issues faced by communities. In order to overcome the reluctance to participate, the research team relied on the assistance of local partners to invite influential and credible spokespersons to communities to support the research activities. Prior to conducting the research, the team assured local authorities and target groups that the work would be being carried out by an independent researcher. In some locations, it was difficult to contact representatives of local authorities, as there were no functioning systems in place.

2. FINDINGS ON THE ROOT CAUSES OF RADICALISATION

2.1 Weak Governance and State Fragility

Weak governance and state fragility in Somalia are the primary causes of youth radicalisation. According to respondents, radicalisation is a direct consequence of the prolonged leadership gap in the country, particularly in regard to security, governance and the provision of justice. In contrast, Al-Shabaab’s success is seen by some as the result of its ability to establish effective security and justice systems in the territories it controls and put in place mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms among warring clans, resulting in a drastic reduction of clan-based armed conflicts. Al-Shabaab has also exported mobile courts to areas adjacent to government-controlled cities and towns to arbitrate in commercial and land disputes. Rather than this being the benevolent provision of services on the part of Al-Shabaab, getting closer to where the bulk of the citizenry lives enables Al-Shabaab to generate revenue.

2.2 Political Injustice

The prevalence of injustices dominated the focus group discussions. Respondents listed forms of injustice most prevalent in the country. They started with the political marginalisation of certain clans, describing the 4.5 formula as a humiliating form of power sharing that leaves out a whole set of clans while offering preferential treatment to others. Under-representation is another issue that fuels the sense of injustice. Some Islamic movements also feel under-represented, or entirely unrepresented, in power-sharing arrangements, because the political framework in Somalia is dominated by Western ideals of liberal democracy, which leaves minimal political space available to the political Islamists.

A Consequence:

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Leadership for Youth:

Al-Shabaab provides leadership opportunities for youth. Al-Shabaab's operations are led by young people who play key roles such as undertaking daring raids against AMISOM garrisons or storming government facilities or public spaces frequented by government personnel.

Respondents said that many young people feel politically excluded. The majority of government officials are from the older generation while over 70 per cent of the population is under 30 years of age. In contrast, Al-Shabaab provides leadership opportunities for youth. Al-Shabaab's operations are led by young people who play key roles such as undertaking daring raids against AMISOM garrisons or storming government facilities or public spaces frequented by government personnel. The respondents stated that foreigners provide coaching and training of a military and ideological nature to younger members of Al-Shabaab so they can become more effective in their operations and propaganda. This trend has begun to dwindle due to the division between the local and international fighters within Al-Shabaab and the subsequent suppression of the latter.

2.3 Socio-Economic Injustice

Respondents put forward many potential socio-economic reasons for radicalisation. For example, for successive transitional and non-transitional governments (and even in local governments), the looting of public resources is regarded as an open secret. Certain wealthy business people, with the endorsement of corrupt politicians, are controlling many productive sectors of the economy, and public lands have been distributed for private use. Respondents complained about major improprieties involving top government officials in league with foreign firms engaging in transactions that are secretive, lopsided, exploitative and compromise national sovereignty, often in critical sectors such as infrastructure and natural resources. This actual and perceived pillaging has induced resentment among the public and in particular the younger generation, many of whom remain jobless despite witnessing the rapid emergence of many wealthy people. The result is a relatively aggressive and violent attitude toward foreigners and public officials. The

respondents further mentioned that many youths are convinced politicians work to secure contracts solely to benefit themselves, their families, clans and political allies and do not care about young people, many of whom are deprived of the most basic necessities of life.

Some respondents also believe that foreign business interests are facilitated without any direct benefit for the general population. They asserted that people in power typically secure financial rewards or political backing. Many minority clans feel exploited and marginalised, as they are treated as second-class citizens and are often relegated to menial jobs. For instance, some of these clans face deep-rooted discrimination preventing them from intermarrying with other clans. Others do not have a say about how economic opportunities and political power in their localities are dispensed. These socio-economic inequalities have intensified Al-Shabaab's success in terms of recruitment among marginalised clans and communities, especially those in south-central Somalia. The group has not only been able to recruit among clans that have long been subjugated but also marginalised communities within the mainstream clans.

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Low Morale:

The Somali armed forces have low morale and started preying on the citizens they were recruited to protect. The Somali police force is ranked as the seventh most corrupt police force in the world, this at a time when Somalia is in dire need of reliable law enforcement.

Taking Advantage:

Al-Shabaab has taken advantage of the anger arising from this judicial vacuum and responded to the community's need for justice, specifically in the areas of land and property disputes; commercial disagreements and access to natural resources (particularly pasture and water).

2.4 Injustice in the Courts

Many respondents believe that injustices are inherent in the Somali court system. The system is supposed to be run by legal professionals. However, in many jurisdictions, judges and prosecutors are not selected on the basis of merit. Respondents complained about the bribes demanded by top judges and prosecutors in return for justice. It was suggested throughout the discussions that some suspects and guilty individuals are routinely released because they belong to an armed clan or have paid money while others are detained without due process and their release conditional on paying a bribe.

A further example given by respondents of corruption is land disputes, which are seen as commonly settled on the basis of who pays the most during legal proceedings. Respondents observed that there is no justice available in regional courts or even the federal high court, describing them as a "market place" where justice is for sale and the highest bidder obtains justice. If the victim is poor, then that person is subjected to repeated postponements of hearings and is eventually forced to give up.

Al-Shabaab has taken advantage of the anger arising from this judicial vacuum. The group has responded to the community's need for justice, specifically in the areas of land and property disputes; commercial disagreements and access to natural resources (particularly pasture and water); discrimination against unarmed clans; unlawful arrests, detention and extortion; and killings among the civilian population. At one point during the data collection process, a respondent mentioned that a judge in Mogadishu had advised him to seek justice for his case in Al-Shabaab courts. Overall, grievances generated by Somalia's flawed court system may have compelled many people to join Al-Shabaab.

2.5 The Presence of Foreign Troops

The notion that Somalia is in some way under occupation resonated with respondents in all seven cities. Experience from other settings supports the argument that there is a direct correlation between external intervention and intense radicalisation. The author Robert Pape explains that there were no insurgents using suicide terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia before the intervention of foreign troops in 2001, 2003 and 2006 respectively. Many respondents pointed to the intervention of neighbouring countries like Ethiopia and Kenya and expressed the view that Ethiopian troops as part of AMISOM may have augmented the insurgency. They also cited the notable salary disparity between the rates paid to soldiers serving with AMISOM and the Somali National Army: nine hundred dollars per month for the former and as little as one hundred dollars for the latter, which is sometimes not paid for months.

Consequently, the Somali armed forces have low morale and started preying on the citizens they were recruited to protect. The Somali police force is ranked as the seventh most corrupt police force in the world, this at a time when Somalia is in dire need of reliable law enforcement. Respondents also underlined the issue of mistreatment of ordinary civilians by AMISOM troops including indiscriminate shootings, armoured vehicles running over roadside traders and pedestrians and the alleged illegal selling of weapons to private individuals.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reforms:

Reform institutions to make them inclusive, accountable and transparent, so as to perform the core functions of the state. Such reforms would enable and encourage citizens to develop grassroots initiatives to promote peace, security and development.

Counter-terrorism:

Somalia's counter-terrorism strategy must be revisited to balance the protection of citizens against the preservation of human rights. Parallel counterterrorism strategies, implemented by foreign agencies in Somalia, may compromise national sovereignty.

1. The Somali federal government should reform the executive institutions to make them inclusive, accountable and transparent, so as to perform the core functions of the state while focusing on public service delivery and addressing the deep-rooted collective and individual grievances against government policies and practices, which are mainly attributable to prevailing political, social, economic and legal injustices across the country. Such reforms would enable and encourage citizens to develop grassroots initiatives to promote peace, security and development.
2. While AMISOM and its international partners have sacrificed human and financial resources to restore peace and security in Somalia, which is appreciated by the majority of Somalis, it has become obvious that AMISOM can never be a substitute for Somalia's defence forces. Therefore, there should be a clear and well thought out timeline for AMISOM's eventual exit strategy. In the meantime, AMISOM must respond to the allegations made against its soldiers by Somali citizens, as AMISOM abuses could easily serve to strengthen Al-Shabaab's argument that the mission is in Somalia to harm rather than help Somalis.
3. The fact that Somalia has developed a national CVE strategy is remarkable. For the time being it can serve as a useful guide for policy making but in-depth research and analysis is required on what measures will be effective in Somalia's context. It is extremely important that Somalia's federal government, in cooperation with federal member states, rapidly develops a national de-radicalisation curriculum. The curriculum should be based on universal values of tolerance and peace, demonstrate acceptance of disengaged combatants and vulnerable youth in Somalia and emphasise the role of women in peace and security.
4. Ten years have elapsed since the war against Al-Shabaab first began, and although some significant gains have been achieved, ruling out the possibility of the organisation presenting an existential threat to the country, the reality is that Al-Shabaab remains a force to be reckoned with. Therefore, recognising that it may not be possible to comprehensively defeat Al-Shabaab, it would be advisable to explore the potential of genuine negotiations to end the conflict.
5. Since one of the principal contributors to youth radicalisation is unemployment, there must be a robust campaign to develop youth-focused programming, starting with the establishment of vocational schools to provide technical training for youths who need skills to empower them to earn income and become an internal resource for the reconstruction and development of Somalia. This is also vital because the country urgently needs a skilled workforce, having suffered a protracted brain drain and generated few skilled workers over the past 27 years.
6. Somalia's counter-terrorism strategy must be revisited to balance the protection of citizens against the preservation of human rights. Parallel counterterrorism strategies, implemented by foreign agencies in Somalia, may compromise national sovereignty and, given cases of torture, execution and indefinite detention without due process, potentially breach international laws governing armed conflict.
7. Various national actors and international stakeholders have joined hands to defeat Al-Shabaab. They have mitigated the threat the group poses by killing senior leaders and recapturing strategic strongholds, making it hard for Al-Shabaab to radicalise as many youths as it did in the past. However, the reality is that Al-Shabaab remains a powerful force and as long as it controls territory in Somalia the group will be able to radicalise and recruit young Somalis. In the absence of root and branch reform, the federal government, along with its international partners, faces a clear choice, either wage all-out war against Al-Shabaab to recapture the remaining territories it controls, as the Sri Lankan government did with the Tamil Tigers, or explore genuine negotiations, as the UK did with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This author favours the latter proposition.

NOTES

About SIDRA

SIDRA is a registered independent Research and Policy Analysis Think Tank based in Garowe, Puntland, Somalia.

Our Vision

A Somalia in which social justice prevails and inclusive economic growth benefits all and improves the well being of all people.

Our Mission

A center of development and research that generates relevant and original knowledge for dynamic policy environment support, institutional capacity development and alliance.

1. Senior official at the Somali federal government, 15 February 2017, Mogadishu.
2. Al-Shabaab does not allow other agendas to undermine their dominance, hence their efforts to subdue inter- and intra-clan conflicts.
3. Raffaello Pantucci and A.R. Sayyid “Foreign Fighters in Somalia and al-Shabaab’s Internal Purge”, The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, Volume, 11 Issue: 22, December 2013.
4. A chief security official in Middle Shabelle region has warned people against seeking justice in Al-Shabaab strongholds. See: <http://www.jowhar.com/2017/07/13/taliyaha-nabadsugida-shdhexe-oo-u-digay-dadka-u-doonta-garsoorka-deegaanada-al-shabaab/>
5. Robert Pape, Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism (New York: Random House, 2016). See: <http://www.criminaljusticedegreesguide.com/features/10-most-corrupt-police-forces-in-the-world.html> .

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