



**PREVENTING AND COUNTERING  
VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA: A  
MAPPING REPORT**

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# Policy Brief

## Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia: A Mapping Report

This is part of a series of brief discussion papers on the topic of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) across the Horn of Africa. They reflect findings from research undertaken from 2018 to 2020 by LPI's Horn of Africa Regional Programme (HARP) focusing on the status of violent extremism, stakeholder perspectives and responses to it. The research involved a consideration of the literature, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders. Countries of focus were Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Somalia. The purpose of these studies is to broaden and enrich the understanding on violent extremism, by considering and reflecting on experiences and potential learning across different contexts. This specific issue describes and discusses the PCVE landscape in Somalia, drawing key findings and discussions from a study LPI commissioned between 2019 and 2020.

# Introduction

Somalia remains one of the most fragile and insecure states in the Horn of Africa due to ongoing conflict and recurring natural disasters. Decades of civil war, insecurity and political fragmentation have made it one of the poorest nations in the world.<sup>1</sup> Following numerous unsuccessful efforts by the government to restore peace and security, in 2017 the mandate for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was extended to bolster the federal government's fighting capacity against Al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups and improve regional security.<sup>2</sup> Al-Shabaab is designated as a terrorist organisation by the USA and a number of other countries, although there is a debate in the literature regarding its primary goals and the extent to which it can be considered a national, regional or global Jihadist group.<sup>3</sup> The Somali conflict can be viewed from three different levels—as part of a wider, global conflict (the war on terrorism, Al-Shabaab's affiliation with Al Qaeda and the involvement of foreign combatants in Somalia, from Afghanistan, Yemen and other conflict arenas), a regional conflict in the Horn of Africa with armies from Somalia's neighbours active in combat, and, third a national political struggle involving violence and reflecting complex clan dynamics and conflicts in different South Central Somali regions. These levels are interconnected and often mutually reinforcing, and despite the efforts of the FGS and AMISOM and indications of a reduction in the level of political violence of Al-Shabaab they still pose

a significant challenge to peace and state-building in the country.<sup>4</sup>

President Farmaajo has campaigned on ambitious promises of defeating al-Shabaab within two to three years, rebuilding the Somalia National Army (SNA) to replace AMISOM and bringing together the deeply fractured Somali state into a federal structure. While a number of improvements have been seen, particularly with regards to advancing the capacity of the SNA, progress to achieve this ambition has faced challenges. On the other hand, there has been a growing realisation of the need to adopt programming, strategies and responses that focus on PCVE initiatives that are community-owned and informed by evidence-based research and analysis to yield a more sustainable impact. With the stated aim of advancing its efforts towards preventing and countering violent extremism, the Federal Government of Somalia has developed several PCVE policies, with support from donors, most notably the National Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism adopted in September 2016. This defines violent extremism as “the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to further social, economic, or political objectives.” In addition, the Federal Government has initiated institutional coordination and collaboration efforts with Federal Member States with the ambition to address the spread of Al-

1. Somalia does not feature in the 2019 UNDP Human Development Index ranking, but in 2012, the Somalia factsheet from UNDP notes that if comparable data were available it would rank 165 out of 170 countries.
2. AMISOM Website. [https://amisom-au.org/wp-content/cache/page\\_enhanced/amisom-au.org/amisom-mandate/\\_index.html\\_gzip](https://amisom-au.org/wp-content/cache/page_enhanced/amisom-au.org/amisom-mandate/_index.html_gzip)
3. See - Karin Göldner-Ebenthal 2019. Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation: The case of al-Shabaab in Somalia. Case Study Report. Berlin: Berghof Foundation
4. For example, in 2018 ACLED reported 1,339 violent events associated with al Shabaab up to November, compared to 1,432 events in January through October 2017. <https://acleddata.com/2018/11/17/same-tune-new-key-al-shabaab-adapts-in-the-face-of-increased-military-pressure/>

Shabaab across the nation.

To better understand the PCVE landscape in Somalia, a study took place from December 2019 to August 2020. The study aimed at mapping the PCVE landscape, including relevant programmes and activities, understand stakeholder perceptions of PCVE, explore the driving factors contributing to sustaining Al-Shabaab and the appeal of its political violence, and analyse PCVE policy processes and their implementation in the country. The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing key informant interviews and a desk

review of secondary sources to gather data. Respondents were purposively selected to ensure information was broadly representative and covered opinions from women, youth, minority groups, internally displaced persons (IDPs), local authorities, security experts, community leaders, civil society organisations, religious leaders, representatives from federal, state and regional governments, the international community and reformed ex-Al- Shabaab members. The study was carried out in five towns: Kismayo, Baidoa, Mogadishu, Galkayo and Bossaso.

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# Drivers of Violent Extremism and Common Perceptions towards PCVE in Somalia

Numerous factors appear to have contributed to the appeal of Al-Shabaab emerging from the Islamic Courts Union, and why some members of the community in Somalia wish to join them. How these factors work together is also complex and not fully understood, with both Push and Pull factors playing a role. This makes it difficult to generalise from them across all areas, situations or people, however, key factors in many locations identify unemployment and poverty as key drivers. Similarly, weak government and corruption have been cited.<sup>5</sup> As noted by Saferworld in 2017 and 2019, supporting the findings from an earlier survey in 2013 by ORB International in Kismayo, residents reported that they appreciated the law and order and low crime rates that Al-Shabaab has brought, which are concerns of many Somalis.<sup>6</sup> Respondents in this research also identified in particular, anger emanating from real and perceived historical injustices, and the marginalisation, victimisation and killing of civilians in the fight against al-Shabaab. These grievances may be politicised and manipulated by leaders to paint a picture of victimisation of the locals, creating a favourable ground for groups like Al-Shabaab to instrumentalise their victimisation as a justification for extremist violence.<sup>7</sup>

The five cities sampled for the study have varying characteristics that may

increase the vulnerability of youth to join Al-Shabaab. Youth in Baidoa and Kismayo were reported to have one of the highest rates of youth involvement, both in the cities and the surrounding rural areas.<sup>8</sup> The two cities were battlegrounds between AMISOM forces and al-Shabaab, partly because of their territorial and geographical significance but also because of the opportunities to control illegal trade, the income from which are then used to finance Al-Shabaab operations.<sup>9</sup>

Bossaso and Galkayo, on the other hand, appear to have experienced lower rates of involvement. This supports the premise that economic factors alone are insufficient to explain recruitment rates, as there are many vulnerable, poor communities and IDPs in these areas. A desire to expel AMISOM and foreign forces from the country is also an additional push factor for some to join al-Shabaab. Young people in Puntland, detained for membership of al-Shabaab, told researchers they joined the group as a result of political and ideological factors rather than socio-economic, safety or security reasons.<sup>10</sup>

5. Hassan, M., 2012. Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of Al-Shabab And Somali Youth, CTC Sentinel, Vol 5. Issue 8, downloaded at <https://ctc.usma.edu/Wp-Content/Uploads/2012/08/Ctcsentinel-Vol5Iss84.Pdf> 27 October 2020
6. Accessing the Al-Shabaab Heartland. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160625201735/http://www.opinion.co.uk/article.php?s=accessing-the-al-shabaab-heartland> or see Saferworld's article by Larry Attlee in 2017 at <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/shouldnat-you-be-counteracting-violent-extremism> and J. Crouch (2018) 'Counter-terror and the logic of violence in Somalia's civil war Time for a new approach', Saferworld; see also <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/03/al-shabaab-amisom-extremism-afgoye/>
7. Available figures indicate that there have been approximately 4,000 civilian casualties as a result of Al-Shabaab attacks over the last decade, which include the targeting of people suspected of having links with the federal government; the using of civilians as human shields; and the increasing use of IEDs and suicide bombings in places where civilians gather. The most notable attacks include the Zoppe attack that claimed the lives of over 500 civilians and the recent Ex-Control Afgoye police checkpoint attacks that killed more than 80 civilians. See Political Violence Involving Al-Shabaab, <https://acleddata.com/2020/01/15/acledd-resources-al-shabaab-in-somalia-and-kenya/> & [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/14\\_October\\_2017\\_Mogadishu\\_bombings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/14_October_2017_Mogadishu_bombings). See also
8. Glazzard, A., Jespersen, S., Maguire, T. and Winterbotham, E. (2017). Islamist Violent Extremism: A New Form of Conflict or Business as Usual? Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 6(1), pp.13-32. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.503>.
9. Kambere, G. (2012). Financing Al Shabaab: the vital port of Kismayo. Global Ecco, 2(3).
10. Roland Marchal, The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in A Country at War Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahidin in Somalia. 2011:70.

# Al-Shabaab Recruitment Tactics and Strategies

The study found that Al-Shabaab, and other groups such as ISIS, employ a number of tactics to attract recruits. This includes creating a sense of belonging, through the restoration of lost hope, assisting individuals and communities in believing they may achieve their dreams of justice, and reviving feelings of social cohesion. Al-Shabaab regularly changes its recruitment techniques according to the situation and geographical context; and use various mediums, including propaganda videos and social media accounts, to communicate their messages directly to young people in a manner that resonates well with them, referring overtly to their needs and grievances. However, there are now attempts for these messages to be countered through the creation of youth-related opportunities. For example, various entrepreneurship and innovation hubs have been set up and annual thematic symposiums have been organised by youth in Baidoa, Garowe, Hargeisa, Kismayo and Mogadishu intending to inspire, empower and advocate for young people. Politicians also participate in these platforms to

show solidarity and narrow the gap between the government and the young people.

The use of religious sentiment and language such as toppling the 'puppet' government (controlled by the Americans or the West) or the 'infidel' government, as well as calling people to defend the country from foreign aggression, have been some of the strong rallying narratives and tactics used by al-Shabaab, with those who find these messages appealing viewing them as a liberator.<sup>11</sup> Some young people also have limited knowledge of the Quranic verses and the Prophet's sayings, or Hadiths, to which Al-Shabaab preachers refer. This means that they do not have an understanding of the broader theological context or alternative interpretation of texts. Youth respondents reportedly also join Al-Shabaab for fear of being victimised by them as well as a fear of reprisals for speaking out against them or rejecting them. This occurs even in areas with less Al-Shabaab presence, such as Galkayo, Bossaso, Galmudug State.

11. Muhsin Hassan. 'Understanding drivers of violent extremism: The case of Al-Shabaab and Somali youth'. CTC Sentinel 5, no. 8 (2012): 18-20. See also Inside an AS training camp, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enRVsBDz1oo>

# PCVE Programmes, Projects and Activities

There are a variety of different initiatives undertaken to resist Al-Shabaab in Somalia. For instance, in some cases, communities have created militias to keep them out of their territory.

However, this section focuses on the role of government and the approaches they have adopted with the support of the international community and the private sector.

## Operationalisation of the Somalia National Strategy and Action Plan for PCVE

The Comprehensive Approach to Security (CAS), endorsed by President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo in April 2019, lays out targeted interventions to be carried out by the international community and the United Nations (UN) on PCVE. This includes de-radicalisation programmes, civic education, rehabilitation and reintegration and strategic communication. Somalia's National Strategy and Action Plan, under Strand Four of the CAS, aims to address the drivers of violent extremism, the process of recruitment, as well as enhance community resilience.

The Office of the Prime Minister, through its PCVE Coordination Unit, is tasked with operationalising the PCVE strategy, including coordinating the task force (consisting of the Federal Government and the Federal Member States, civil society, women's group, families and youth leaders). To help achieve its goal, the Coordination Unit has so far conducted a series of discussions

with various stakeholders. Depending on the relationship between member states and the FSG, some respondents suggested that there may be improved cooperation and coordination among some line ministries and other relevant stakeholders including civil society groups (particularly youth and women), educational institutions, the business community, religious institutions and think tanks.

The development of a PCVE communication strategy aimed at improving communication across all government institutions including in the Federal Member States is seen as a positive outcome from these engagements. However, the policies are criticised for being too general and insufficiently targeted, while institutions dealing with preventing violent extremism - both government and local partners - lack the technical and institutional capacity to carry out their mandates.

## Government-led PCVE interventions

Aside from the broader CAS approaches, currently, there are two additional government-led approaches aimed at encouraging members of Al-Shabaab and ISIS to renounce their membership. The first is where high-value members of Al-Shabaab leave the organisation to receive protection from the government and face no consequences for their past behaviour, in exchange for leaving and bringing along their followers.<sup>12</sup> Some of these ex-members have also been given senior positions and integrated into the government security sector. The second approach involves disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), and rehabilitation programmes for ex-members of Al-Shabaab who have been assessed by Somali intelligence officials as posing a low-risk of return to violent extremism, proselytising or providing logistical support for al-Shabaab.

At the national level, an operational framework has been drafted, setting out the process for integrating disengaged Al-Shabaab combatants back into society. In this regard, the Serendi Project in Mogadishu, supporting the re-integration of low-risk combatants, is receiving multi-agency funding both locally and internationally and is a first of its kind in Somalia. The rehabilitation process comprises several stages: firstly, the 48-hour Reception phase; secondly a Screening phase where ex-combatants are disaggregated into high and low-risk groups; thirdly the Rehabilitation phase which prepares “low-risk” individuals for reintegration into their community; fourthly the Reinsertion phase in their chosen area; and finally the Reintegration phase where participants are referred to new or existing programmes implemented by various

agencies. The ultimate goal of this process is the complete economic, social and civic reintegration of former combatants into society. Rehabilitation facilities have been established in Mogadishu, Beledweyne, Baidoa and Kismayo. There have also been some efforts to cater for groups such as women combatants. For instance, there is a dedicated rehabilitation facility in Baidoa for disengaged female combatants and their dependents.

Al-Shabaab defectors re-join communities for varying reasons. While some are genuine and risk reprisals from Al-Shabaab fighters, others are thought to be gathering information to report back to Al-Shabaab, potentially harming the community. Such situations are challenging for both communities and government as well, complicating the work of involved agencies. Although the treatment of ex-combatants and returnees that used to be harsh in the past has now shown some improvement according to the research respondents, the study still revealed several issues that need to be addressed. For instance, reception and screening processes are very long, and the DDR aspects are not efficiently implemented. If defectors (and communities as well) are insufficiently prepared for their return or are simply released back into communities, and the process is not undertaken properly, they may be exposed to discrimination and rejection. This may further endanger their lives, forcing them to flee or risk being killed by Al-Shabaab in reprisal. Improvements to the process need to be made to ensure successful reintegration and avoid the risk of re-joining the group, such as the development of a comprehensive and consistent national framework, curriculum and programme for this process.

12. A more complex case occurred with Mukhtar Robow, a senior leader within Al-Shabaab who defected and was initially given special status, but he then declared an interest in pursuing a political career in 2018 as a candidate for the Presidency of South West State. However, he was blocked from participating by the federal government and detained.



## PCVE related Socio-economic Transformation initiatives

The Federal Government of Somalia has also engaged in numerous socio-economic transformation initiatives calling on the private sector join them. This public and private sector interaction appear to have increased trust between the business community and policymakers and various community-led empowerment initiatives being implemented aim to address the deep economic grievances Al-Shabaab/ISIS have capitalised on as part of their recruitment tactics.

Families and local communities also reportedly play a role in creating self-employment opportunities for their children to keep them from joining, by purchasing motorcycles, 'tuktuks', and taxis and sometimes providing funding for sustainable small businesses. Remittances from the Somali diaspora and also businesses established by returnees also attempt to contribute to reducing the likelihood of Somali youth joining Al-Shabaab by creating employment opportunities.

## Challenges to the effectiveness of PCVE interventions

The military approach to defeating Al-Shabaab has clearly not been successful, despite international efforts from the Federal Government, AMISOM and the USA (which has reportedly increased its drone attacks significantly (see Table below). There have been territorial gains in some areas but Al-Shabaab appears to be remarkably resilient overall and able to maintain itself. Data from The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Uppsala conflict data program also do not suggest any clear relationship between airstrikes and the number or impact of Al-Shabaab attacks.<sup>13</sup> In this light, it is

difficult to envisage a complete military defeat of Al-Shabaab in the near future, especially if AMISOM continues to scale down its presence and eventually withdraw, and in the absence of a united and strong Somalia Federal State. Al-Shabaab appears able to shift the areas where it exerts its influence (for instance moving into Northern areas in Puntland outside its more traditional areas of strength) while taking advantage of local grievances and tensions in relationships between the Federal Government and Federal Member States and clan dynamics.<sup>14</sup>

13. <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/520> and ACLED Data: <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

14. see IPSS's report, Somalia Conflict Insight, (2019). Vol. 1. <http://ipss-addis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Somalia-Conflict-Insight.pdf>. Williams, D.P. (2018). Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007-2017.

15. Drone Strikes in Somalia: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/somalia>

Table: US Airstrikes (including drone strikes) reported by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism<sup>15</sup>

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1	0	1	2	1	3	11	14	35	45	63

The PCVE programmes and projects being undertaken by the Federal Government and its partners so far, have also fallen short in achieving their purpose, according to respondent views. Firstly, they have been unable to fundamentally address the identified deep, structural root causes and drivers of violent extremism. In particular, there is insufficient focus on addressing the failures of the justice system and weak governance. This would appear to be a particularly critical shortcoming given that provision of justice by al-Shabaab is reportedly a feature of their appeal to some communities. The lack of economic opportunities for youth and the high prevalence of poverty are also important. While there are numerous efforts in this direction, nevertheless, according to the respondents of this study, the use of temporary and inconsistent youth employment projects as a means of curbing violent extremism is also in question, as their economic impact is perceived as dismal. This then does not undermine the appeal of permanent incentives from al-Shabaab.

At the implementation level, the minimal involvement of the Federal Member States and other segments of the affected community – such as women and youth-led organisations and other civil society groups – in the planning of PCVE policies, poses a question to the potential local relevance and effectiveness of policies. The question of their relevance is further exacerbated by a lack of coordination at all levels, resulting in overlapping activities creating duplication and sometimes a concentration of services in a sector or project area.

Furthermore, although organisations – both local and international – implement PCVE activities, most of them are limited in their scope to urban environments due to budget constraints, or they operate in limited geographic areas for the same financial reasons or due to insecurity. Thus, they have difficulties reaching some of the grassroots communities that are most vulnerable to Al-Shabaab influence.

Programmes and projects also often experience gaps in funding, limiting their effectiveness and affecting their sustainability. An example of this is seen in the usually small-scale nature of DDR interventions and programmes which are very reliant on the availability of donor funds.<sup>16</sup> Many of the PCVE programmes were also reported not to have strong monitoring and evaluation systems, making it hard to identify their impacts at the individual project or programme level, let alone at the higher systemic level. These challenges are exacerbated by the macro issues regarding pervasive poverty, social inequality, natural calamities and political fragility.

While it is clear from experience in the last ten years that the military effort is very unlikely to yield definitive success over Al-Shabaab or ISIS, there appear to be a number of ways that non-security PCVE measures could be improved in terms of their effectiveness and specificity. Nevertheless, the realisation that this is the case, also suggests that consideration should be given to other possible long-term avenues to resolve the lack of progress in bringing peace and security to Somalia. Increasingly there have

16. Demobilisation, Disarmament and Re-integration interventions and programs are small scale with limited funds, with a centre already closed in Kismayo and a focus exclusively on ex-combatants and al-Shabaab defectors and less on the armed clan militias or irregular groups.

been suggestions from observers that negotiations with Al-Shabaab should be explored.<sup>17</sup> In the past, this course of action would have been considered anathema as Al-Shabaab is designated a terrorist organisation. However, with a precedent set in Afghanistan where peace negotiations have been taking place with the Taliban, it would seem that this is an avenue that should at least be explored further. Despite open calls from senior government figures

suggesting negotiations, including the current President 'Farmaajo' who addressed Al-Shabaab soon after his election in 2017,<sup>18</sup> it is not necessarily clear whether Al-Shabaab would be open to them now, although in the past they have suggested there may be a possibility under certain conditions (such as when AMISOM leave the country and if Al-Shabaab members are given an amnesty).<sup>19</sup>

17. For instance listen to the ICG podcast discussion of this issue (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/horn-somali-politics-heat-again>) or as Professor D. Williams suggests in an article in the Conversation <https://theconversation.com/why-us-diplomatic-muscle-could-achieve-more-in-somalia-than-drone-strikes-146589> in September 2020, Or earlier – Jason Hartwig’s article in the War on the Rocks in 2019 <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/how-to-end-the-civil-war-in-somalia-negotiate-with-al-shabaab/>. Other similar articles can be found in VOA and Al Jazeera publications.
18. Karin Göldner-Ebenthal 2019. Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-) escalation: The case of al-Shabaab in Somalia. Case Study Report. Berlin: Berghof Foundation
19. See for instance A. Botha and M. Abdile (2019) Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations, chapter in M. Keating and M. Waldman (2019) War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab, Oxford Scholarship on line.

# Conclusion

Since 2011, the Somali government and its partners have invested considerable energy in trying to defeat Al-Shabaab militarily and have retaken control of some territories previously controlled by al-Shabaab. Yet, despite these efforts, Al-Shabaab has also demonstrated considerable resilience and been able to continue to operate and even launch attacks in other areas outside of their traditional areas of strength. Alongside these security-centred approaches, the government has also introduced a range of softer initiatives both at the policy level as well as practical PCVE programmes to try and undermine the appeal of groups like Al-Shabaab. However, there are numerous challenges and shortcomings in the implementation of these efforts. To improve their effectiveness, the Federal Government's PCVE programming needs to be better informed by evidence-based research and analysis in their design, considering root causes and push factors. More robust monitoring and evaluation of these interventions will provide insights into what works and what does not. In addition, while these improvements are underway, stakeholders should accept the reality that at the moment, Al-Shabaab is unlikely to be fully defeated in the near future, and thus there is an urgent need to explore and discuss the implications and possibilities of engaging in negotiations with them. Such a discussion will at least allow consideration of alternative pathways out of the current, apparently endless, military stalemate, even if those pathways are not taken or are discarded.

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