

Countering Al-Shabaab Propaganda and Recruitment Mechanisms in South Central Somalia

Farsight Africa Research (FAR) conducted a study on Countering Al-Shabaab Propaganda and Recruitment Mechanisms in South Central Somalia. FAR had been contracted by UNSOM which commissioned this study to support and inform the United Nations, the FGS and the international community in the development of programs and campaigns in partnership with local communities. Such programs would strengthen community resilience and build the capabilities of communities and Community Service Organizations (CSOs) against Al-Shabaab.

The main objectives that guided this qualitative study were:

- To hear from the people of South Central Somalia about best practices for combatting Al-Shabaab in their communities.
- To understand the challenges communities face in their fight against Al-Shabaab.
- To identify what support the international community and Somali government can provide to communities in their efforts to address violent extremism and develop prevention strategies.

Additional objectives were:

- To identify how different demographic groups (parents and teachers; civil society representatives and professionals; religious leaders; and youth) envision their role in combatting Al-Shabaab.
- To gain a broad understanding of how Al-Shabaab has affected the lives of Somalis on a day-to-day basis.
- To assess respondents' attitude toward the rehabilitation of disengaged combatants.

Study Methodology

The data for this study was collected through focus groups and one-on-one interviews in Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayo. Respondents included parents and teachers due to their influence on youth; professionals and members of civil society because of their role in peace and security matters; religious leaders due to their widespread influence and distinctive perspective on Al-Shabaab's religious rhetoric; and youth, who are the main target for Al-Shabaab recruitment.

Summary of Study Findings

In this study, participants expressed a strongly negative view toward Al-Shabaab and its effects on their communities and the country as a whole. They saw the group as deeply entrenched, and found the current state of community resistance to be virtually non-existent. However, respondents were able to envision what role they and their communities might play in future efforts to counter Al-Shabaab, and to articulate the support and conditions necessary for such efforts.

Al-Shabaab operations Al-Shabaab targets youth, women and children (15 years and below) for recruitment because they are more susceptible to their propaganda and are easy messengers for carrying out attacks. Their main means of communication to their target audience includes interpersonal interactions (in person and over mobile phone), social media, radio and international television. Some recruiting occurs at mosques, *madrasas* and other public gatherings.

Al-Shabaab entices their target audience with promises of lucrative lifestyles, better pay and better life after death. They misinterpret scripture and persuade people that they are fighting for their religion. Al-Shabaab also appeals to Somali nationalism. They seek to strengthen their legitimacy by

highlighting the 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. The group's narrative of foreign and "infidel" occupation has continued to represent a powerful rallying cry to mobilise Somalis against the Somali government and foreign troops. Al-Shabaab receives support from businesspeople, politicians, diaspora members and private telecommunication companies. However, much of this support is offered out of fear of repercussions. Some communities have recognised the brutal nature of their operations, and support for the group has been gradually waning.