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To cite this article: Anne Speckhard & Ardian Shajkovci (2019): The Jihad in Kenya: Understanding Al-Shabaab Recruitment and Terrorist Activity inside Kenya—in Their Own Words, African Security

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2019.1587142

Published online: 08 Mar 2019.

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The Jihad in Kenya: Understanding Al-Shabaab Recruitment and Terrorist Activity inside Kenya—in Their Own Words

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ABSTRACT
Somalia has been a hotspot for terrorism and instability since the early 1990s. Al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, has been successful in carrying out a number of deadly attacks outside of Somalia and enticing non-Somali foreign fighters, Somali-Kenyan families included, to its ranks. Relying on primary research interviews with sixteen Kenyan al-Shabaab members and their family members, this article highlights psychological, physical, emotional, and financial rewards of joining the terrorist group. In addition to better understanding the trajectory of joining and abandoning the terrorist group, the findings suggest the need to consider using defector and insider voices to denounce violent extremist and terrorist groups.

KEYWORDS
Somalia; al-Shabaab; Kenya; counter-terrorism; counter-radicalization

Introduction
Al-Shabaab remains one of the most formidable and sophisticated transnational insurgent and terrorist groups in recent years. Al-Shabaab has managed to forge international links with other terrorist organizations, such as Boko Haram and ISIS, and attract non-Somaliland recruits to its ranks. It has successfully carried out a number of attacks in the neighboring countries of Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Djibouti and attract non-Somali recruits to its ranks. Despite the presence of African Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) forces, political measures that serve to mediate clan disputes, improve religious education, and provide essential services for communities, and institutionalization of consultative bodies for local governance arrangements that have made significant inroads against al-Shabaab’s ability to operate, the group still remains a serious threat both inside Somalia and to its neighboring countries in part due to their filling a vacuum of governance in some areas of the country.

This article concerns al-Shabaab activities inside Kenya and examines the ways in which the group has been able to successfully recruit and carry out attacks inside Kenya. It presents a discussion on a small sample (n = 16) of al-
Shabaab recruits who were interviewed after being caught, convicted, and imprisoned ($n = 9$) or having turned themselves in to the Kenyan authorities in various amnesty programs ($n = 7$). The guiding research questions include: What factors, at individual, family, or group levels, influence the decision to join al-Shabaab? What factors influence the decision to abandon al-Shabaab? What factors prevent individuals from abandoning al-Shabaab? How can the experiences of al-Shabaab insiders contribute to prevention efforts and the facilitation of disengagement processes for others who contemplate or are still involved with al-Shabaab or other violent extremist and terrorist organizations?

All sample participants were active in al-Shabaab, fourteen having successfully traveled to and trained in Somalia, one having been recruited by both ISIS and al-Shabaab while living outside Kenya and preparing to take part in a suicide operation, and one declining to actually join, who also reported on her family members inside the group (see Table 2 for the list of subjects by pseudonym with the various SES descriptors). In addition to a number of psychological, physical, and emotional costs of joining al-Shabaab, the findings also suggest financial and emotional rewards of joining.

**Background**

Following the fall of Somalia’s dictator Mohamed S. Barre in 1991, Somalia found itself in the throes of a devastating governmental breakdown and became a maelstrom of political struggle among warring clan, insurgent, and violent extremist groups. Following a failed attempt by the UN and Western powers to successfully carry out a peacekeeping mission in the early 1990s, warlords and other criminal elements managed to gain a strong foothold in the country. The environment turned even more challenging as clans struggled for protection, new radical Islamist groups emerged, and al-Qaeda members took refuge in the country. Al-Ittihad al Islamiyah (AIAI), a Somali Salafi organization known for its anti-Barre sentiments and nationalist fervor, rose to prominence around the same time, with many of its members later becoming notable leaders in al-Shabaab.

The emergence of a union of autonomous legal and political organizations, founded predominantly by the Muslim clerics of the Hawije subclan and clan, also known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), brought what some referred to as a “fragile sense of order” to Somalia. Backed by subclan and clan militias, they were set up throughout the country to adjudicate personal and legal matters according to shariah law. Arguably, they were effective in maintaining order and providing security. The group also enjoyed a significant level of support from al-Qaeda at the time.

The 2006 invasion of Mogadishu by the Ethiopian forces marked the end for the Islamic Courts Union, though leading to paradigmatic shifts in the political landscape. Much of the country remained in the hands of violent
extremist groups and ICU remnants, with the later calling itself “al-Shabaab” or the “youth.” The group used the Ethiopian invasion into Somalia to rally clan and additional support to its ranks. The vision of ethnic Somali unity and opposition to foreign intervention took center stage, which also served to later advance the jihadist agenda. In 2012, Ahmed Abdi Godane, then al-Shabaab leader, officially announced a merger with al-Qaeda, a move that helped him to further consolidate his power within the larger al-Shabaab organization. The merger was influenced by the reciprocated support and pledges of support between the two groups but also due to al-Shabaab’s significant territorial losses at the time.

Al-Shabaab terror attacks inside Kenya

The group continues to resist the UN-backed government in Somalia and carry out devastating cross-border attacks into Kenya. According to the Global Terrorism Database, between 2005 and 2017, al-Shabaab has orchestrated or carried out a total of 409 attacks (see Chart 1). These attacks have focused on the Kenyan capital Nairobi, as well as the northeastern cities of Mandera and Garissa, and Kenya’s tourist-filled beaches. In 2016 alone, al-Shabaab carried out 48 attacks, while being a suspect in many others. The 2019 Dusit D2 hotel attacks in Nairobi that led to 21 deaths; the 2015 massacre at Garissa University near Kenya-Somali border that led to 148 deaths; the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack that led to 67 deaths; the 2017 attack in the village of Jima in the south-coast Kenya, where al-Shabaab forces from neighboring Somalia beheaded nine civilians; and recent killings of two Kenyan teachers in Mandera county near the Somali border represent the most notable attacks carried out by the group inside Kenya. Al-Shabaab terror attacks inside Kenya have resulted in a decline in foreign investments, tourism, and confidence for the general population. Al-Shabaab has capita-

![Chart 1](image1.png)

lized on such attacks to show its strength to the vulnerable sectors of Kenyan society from which it draws recruits and also by placing the group in the limelight of international media. As a hub of international activity and the home of most international press covering the Horn of Africa, attacks in Nairobi, or wider Kenya, generally garner good press coverage.9

The fact that al-Shabaab targets Kenya for terrorist attacks could in part be explained by geographic proximity and Kenya’s porous northern border with Somalia’s south, where the group is currently located, but the explanations involve more than simply geography. In 2011, the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) entered Somalia in reaction to al-Shabaab attacks within Kenya, and they have continued to be active in the fight that has pushed al-Shabaab out of many of its strongholds. In response, al-Shabaab greatly increased the speed and frequency of its attacks inside Kenya.10 One of the features of al-Shabaab attacks inside Kenya, which we closely examine in this article, include making use of Kenyan citizens to support (e.g., through corruption, bribery, etc.) or take part in their activities.

Al-Shabaab recruitment and trends in Kenya

Kenya is home to an estimated 2.3 million ethnic Somalis.11 Nairobi’s Eastleigh, also known as “little Mogadishu,” has long served as an al-Shabaab recruitment center and a source of radical Somali preachers who supported the ICU. In Kenya, al-Shabaab formally linked itself with the Muslim Youth Center (MYC) located in the Majengo district of Nairobi. The MYC (renamed al-Hijra in 2012) supported al-Shabaab by funding, training, and recruiting youth for their cause, primarily through the Pumwani Riyadha Mosque Committee. After renaming themselves al-Hijra, the group declared in 2012 that they would raise “the flag of Tawheed (oneness of God) over Kenya and East Africa.12 Nairobi’s Eastleigh also housed a number of mosques from which the group drew substantial support, such as al-Hidaya, Abu Bakr al-Siddique, and Masjid al-Ahmar.

While initially predominately focused on recruiting among the members of Kenya’s Somali community, al-Shabaab has expanded its recruitment campaign to targeting Kenya’s non-Somali Muslims as well.13 Al-Shabaab recruitment in Kenya was present in Kenya well before Kenya’s incursion into Somalia in 2011, as evidenced in the recruitment of Kenyans in Isiolo, Garissa, and Eastleigh district in Nairobi, who joined Islamists in southern Somalia. In response to the Kenyan Defense Force (KDF) strategy that involved recruitment of Kenyan Somalis into its ranks, al-Shabaab shifted to recruiting from among Kenya’s Muslims, including new converts.14 Al-Shabaab’s recruitment before Kenya’s incursion focused around key mosques in coastal towns and the city of Nairobi. In the immediate aftermath of Kenya’s incursion into Somalia in 2011, relying on Kenya-based Islamist
militants, al-Shabaab launched a number of retaliatory attacks, mainly by Kenya’s Swahili-speaking Muslims. Some authors suggest that such retaliatory attacks had been carried out by al-Shabaab Kenyan foreign fighter returnees who had fled Somalia dissatisfied with the outcome of the fight against AMISOM and due to in-group disputes, including among those who were recruited and trained for Kenya’s Defense Forces (KDF) between the years of 2010 and 2010 but were rejected from permanent service.15

Terrorist and violent extremist groups’ survival is largely dependent on their ability to recruit members, sympathizers, and supporters. In addition to creating strong recruitment networks and motivating to join, terrorist and violent extremist groups also focus on removing obstacles to joining and participating to ensure their survival. For instance, the so-called Islamic State leadership in Iraq and Syria spent a significant amount of resources to attract and facilitate travel into the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. It also facilitated cell formations, including attacks, worldwide. Al-Shabaab is no different in this regard. Terrorist recruitment is a function of interactions between the goals and objectives of the group, its ideology, social support for both, and individual resonance to the group and its ideology, as well as individual vulnerabilities and motivations for joining.16 In the case of al-Shabaab recruitment in Kenya, the group has been adept at specifically targeting Kenyan youth, namely, by exploiting their socioeconomic, political, and cultural grievances, perceived and actually experienced, by many Kenyan youth.17 In 2016, the Kenyan State of National Security Annual Report to Parliament stated that al-Shabaab terrorist recruiters are targeting university and secondary school students, as well as in prisons, to breed terrorists ready for deployment.18 The same report highlighted that al-Shabaab, like ISIS, has also been adept at using social media to recruit, indoctrinate, gain sympathy, and stir interreligious animosity. In the report, it was noted: “The radicals have developed an elaborate propaganda network which includes use of electronic media (videos and CDs) and mass media and are more pronounced on social media to … justify their actions, intimidate moderate clerics and incite inter-religious animosity to derail the Governments deradicalization efforts.”19

While most terrorist recruitment involves an interplay between online and face-to-face recruitment, one cannot downplay the importance of social media for al-Shabaab’s recruitment efforts. Since 2007, at least twenty-two American foreign fighters from the Minneapolis/St. Paul were recruited at least in part, if not entirely, through Twitter, direct messages, and other social media communications into traveling to join the terrorist group by friends who had gone ahead of them.20 Other Somali diaspora members were similarly recruited from other states in the United States and Europe.21 Likewise, in this sample, one of the interviewees (discussed in the ensuing section) was recruited to activate herself as a suicide bomber on behalf of
militant jihad solely by Internet radicalization. Al-Shabaab spreads its terrorist ideology both through social media and in face-to-face encounters, including extremist preaching.

As discussed, in Kenya al-Shabaab recruitment targets Muslims, including new Muslim converts. Al-Shabaab has successfully promoted its ideology and recruited among disillusioned youth and communities in Mombasa, Garissa, Eldoret, and other Kenyan towns, more recently reaching into the Western parts of Kenya as well. In addition, areas along the coastal region (bordering Somalia in the north and Tanzania in the south) of Kenya have been hotbeds for al-Shabaab recruitment. Youth in the coastal regions are reported to be vulnerable to al-Shabaab recruitment due to the lack of educational opportunities, unemployment, and historic marginalization by successive governments of Kenya.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, beginning in May 2015, al-Shabaab soldiers often occupied Kenyan villages for hours to deliver sermons to their captive audiences, after which they left peacefully. These “wining hearts and minds” campaigns served to elicit and bolster public support in areas outside the reaches of Kenyan security forces and areas that have long been hampered by corruption. The majority of al-Shabaab recruits have been young men, including teen boys, although older, more educated men have also joined the group and served in key leadership positions. In recent years, young women have also been recruited into the group to travel to Somalia to become “jihadi” brides. Indeed, Kenyan security officials that we spoke to expressed deep concern over the recruitment of Kenyan females.

Research design and methodology

The present study involved in-depth psychosocial interviews of sixteen Kenyan al-Shabaab recruits and their family members interviewed between June and October 2018 in the Nairobi area and Mombasa, Kenya. Interviews took place both inside and outside a prison setting. The author worked with professionals at the Kenya’s National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) who were proficient in English and Swahili to ensure adequate translation and interpretation during the interviews. Often, two such professionals were present during the interviews. Translations and interpretations were also checked for accuracy during the counternarrative production phase (ICSVE-produced counternarratives). The research interviews lasted between one to two hours and included questions about participants’ lives before being involved in terrorism, their trajectories into and back out of terrorism, including about disengagement and deradicalization for those moving toward rehabilitation. The subjects were questioned about how they learned of and contacted the terrorist group, how they were recruited into it, and what were their motivations for joining. They were also asked to describe their training, role (omitting self-incriminating evidence not already
admitted to state authorities), and indoctrination experiences while inside the
group. The participants also discussed their experiences leaving the group
and in some cases, their experience trying to rehabilitate and reintegrate back
into society.

Author positionality and interviewing in a prison setting

Research involving interviews in a prison setting with individuals convicted
of, or charged with, terrorism-related offenses is necessary and crucial to
understanding the behaviors of those engaged in terrorism. As researchers,
we followed authoritative guidelines for ethical conduct in research involving
prisoners both during the pre-data-collection phase and during the research
process itself. For instance, we sought approval from Kenya’s National
Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) and respective prison officials to conduct
research and obtain access to prisoners throughout Kenya. Furthermore, the
participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were given
a chance to withdraw from the interview at any time and refuse to answer
any questions. In addition, prisoners willingly consented to participate in the
research. Evidence of informed consent was obtained and maintained con-
fidentially through the use of video recording. They were also informed that
their video might become the basis of a counternarrative video clip. All who
agreed to participate in the video interview asked that their faces be blurred
and their names changed. Participants were only interviewed after they
expressed their full understanding of the project and gave their video-
recorded informed consent.

While the record of their participation, both in a written or video
recording form, could potentially be subpoenaed and their identity revealed
(e.g., requested by authorities), coupled with the fact that the interviews
might have been audio or recorded by prison officials without our knowl-
dge, we considered such a decision as necessary to protect the integrity of
the research and the researchers. That said, we evaded discussions on any
potential illegal activities or pending or unprosecuted offenses, while also
informing the prisoners that we have moral and ethical obligation to report
information on potential pending [terrorist] activities directly affecting
public safety and security, including the safety of the prisoners themselves.
We informed prisoners not to share or discuss any incriminating evidence,
unless already known to the public or authorities and prison officials. We
also sought relatively private spaces to interview to make prisoners feel
more comfortable during the interview.25

We diligently worked to understand prisoner motivations to participate—
or refuse to participate—in our research. This was necessary to avoid poten-
tial attempts by both prison authorities and prisoners themselves to bias us as
researchers. For instance, we considered the potential that prisoners could
have been selected by government or prison officials to push a certain agenda. We also considered whether prisoners chose to participate believing they could retain or further strengthen their relationship with authorities or prison officials. While it was difficult to determine with utmost certainty prisoner motivation for participating in our research, as experienced field researchers, we judged prisoner motivation to participate as sincere and welcoming. Many openly expressed their desire to discuss their experiences inside al-Shabaab with someone outside the prison setting. Namely, they saw the interviews as an opportunity to affect positive social change by discussing their experiences inside al-Shabaab. Given the nature of our research project, some did so out of altruistic motivations and a desire to change and seek social reform. Moreover, prisoners’ decision to participate was further reinforced by virtue of us guaranteeing to treat their identities, or any potential discriminating evidence disclosed during the interview, as confidential.26

The interviews took place in the presence of Kenyan security and prison officials, yet all participants were asked to verify that they were speaking freely and had not been coerced in any way to participate in the study. Of the seventeen individuals approached by the researchers, one refused to be interviewed, citing fatigue due to health issues, and one declined to appear on video, citing his reservations about the project. The latter individual is a well-known jihadist, Jermaine Grant, who traveled from the UK to Kenya.27

**Literature review**

Primary research interviews with former al-Shabaab members and their family members form the basis of this article, though relevant research and theoretical foundations on the topic also informed the research and provided critical framework of analysis. For instance, as discussed further in the following, research on recruitment into al-Shabaab among Kenyan youth served to highlight social, economic, political, etc., factors (e.g., weak governance, political instability, economic hardship, etc.) as both influencing individuals to join al-Shabaab and presenting a unique opportunity for al-Shabaab to recruit and consolidate its network and power inside Kenya. Similarly, research from the field of criminology and disengagement from Islamist-linked terrorist organizations informed some of our research questions on disengagement models that often influence individuals to abandon violent extremist and terrorist organizations28 (see Table 1).

Research on radicalization among Kenyan youth and recruitment into the terrorist group al-Shabaab is scarce. In conducting focus group discussions with fifteen former al-Shabaab members, ages 19–27, in Nairobi’s Eastleigh district, as well as relying on an extensive literature review on al-Shabaab, Hassan found unemployment (e.g., finance and economic incentives), fear of victimization for not joining (e.g., those living in al-Shabaab-controlled areas),
dissatisfaction and anger over AMISOM bombings that lead to destruction, government safety and security policies (e.g., female and relative arrests at checkpoints), lack of education, reputation (e.g., expecting respect and fear from others for belonging to al-Shabaab), religion, and the promise of “paradise” as a reward for recruits who decide to die as martyrs, served to explain individual motivations for joining al-Shabaab. These views in part correspond with recent research from eastern Africa that suggest indiscriminate government actions against Somali and Muslim citizens and exclusion by the host country as a powerful motivation for joining al-Shabaab. Mass arrests and extrajudicial killings by the Kenyan government are often cited as reasons leading to increased tension and fueling support in some sectors of society for al-Shabaab, though the law enforcement and security professionals interviewed by the authors denied the institutionalization of such practices, blaming them on small police forces and citing them as extraordinary events prohibited by law.

Drawing from primary research interviews with ninety-five Kenyan and Somali Kenyans associated with al-Shabaab (e.g., returnees from Somalia and recruits) and forty-six relatives of individuals associated with al-Shabaab (e.g., when al-Shabaab members were incarcerated, killed, or disappeared), Botha found that the majority of the sample interviewed referenced religion and the influence of friends’ involvement in the group as motivating factors for joining. Contrary to some claims, the author also found little evidence of economic or financial incentives serving as motivating factors. Jerejian dismisses the utility of religion as a powerful motivating factor among Kenya’s youth. She contends that while it is important to consider the role
of religion in radicalizing Kenyan youth, one should not overlook the important influential role of socioeconomic factors and the role of government policies in galvanizing recruitment into al-Shabaab.32

Rink and Sharma found radicalization to be associated with “individual level psychological trauma, historically troubled social relations, and process-oriented factors, particularly religious identification and exposure to radical networks,” while no evidence was found to suggest a relationship between radicalization and economic or that political grievances played a role at a macro level.33 Some research suggests that security-based decisions that rely on vague definitions of violent extremism can lead to ambiguous policies and legal challenges and that uncertainty is problematic in addressing radicalization and violent extremism in the country. Some authors specifically focused on studying the dynamics of youth radicalization in Kenya, namely, how and why youth radicalize. Motivating factors in these studies were found to be locally driven and contextual, primarily emphasizing a mix of push and pull, individual, and situational factors. The key findings from the literature review are summarized in Table 2.34

Sociodemographics data

The sample was a convenience and not a representative sample of all Kenyans who join al-Shabaab. The sample included Kenyan Muslims, from both Somali and non-Somali ethnic groups, and Kenyan converts to Islam. While al-Shabaab is known to recruit far more males than females, this research sample consisted of twelve males and four females, meaning proportionally overrepresenting females. Al-Shabaab has an estimated 7,000–9,000 fighters in its ranks, which includes a significant number of Kenyans and other regional and foreign fighters.35 Although so far only nine women have been charged as being al-Shabaab members, aiding al-Shabaab, concealing information about al-Shabaab, and for conspiracy to commit terrorist acts in Kenya, Kenyan women’s roles inside al-Shabaab should not be underestimated: Research indicates their active role in forming al-Shabaab terrorist cells, providing information, and financing the terrorist group.36 This is informative given the recent trend in al-Shabaab recruiting inside Kenya that includes a heavy recruiting drive for females and could serve to inform female recruitment in Kenya as well as female treatment inside the terrorist group.

All of the sample participants were adults at the time of the interview. Their ages ranged from 20 to 41. The sample participants were for the most part married (n = 11), with one divorcee and one widow among the group. Most of the sample participants came from impoverished backgrounds and were dropouts from the primary school, with only two completing some high school and two completing some college or university-level education. Six in the sample were converts to Islam, while the rest grew up as Muslims (see Table 3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macrolevel Factors</th>
<th>Microlevel factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment and knowledge (e.g., effect on securing future employment; the low student numbers attending school and the high dropout rates, even before attaining an unacceptable and sustainable literacy level; high cost of education for low-income families; return on education investment low)</td>
<td>Youth characteristics, attitudes, and mind-set (e.g., new definitions of what constitutes youth, dismissing the traditional standard of 15–35 and including those as young as 12; questioning old and traditional definitions of youth; defining new characteristics of youth behavior; emphasis on awareness, curiosity, and apathy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (35 percent for male and female ages 15–35); failure to meet the employment needs of 800,000 ready to join the job market; unemployment more problematic for those in rural areas; unemployment leading to seeking employment with al-Shabaab and believing in real job prospects with al-Shabaab</td>
<td>Peer pressure and encouragement (e.g., invites from those already serving in the group; competition for elevated social status among youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali and Somali-Kenyan Marginalization and discrimination (e.g., denied access to employment; lack of educational and representation in politics; lack of ID cards needed to get access to banking, medical services, and voting registration; arbitrary detention, profiling, harassment, and extrajudicial killings; ethnic and religious discrimination, etc.)</td>
<td>• Psychological:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Individual level psychological trauma (e.g., experiencing life-altering negative events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Troubled social relations and lack of parental support at economic, social, psychological, and emotional levels (e.g., troubled relations with parents and friends; single-parent households with no adequate family structure; parental lack of involvement in a child’s life; encouragement to work as opposed to pursue education due to high educational costs, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of victimization (e.g., living in al-Shabaab-controlled areas)</td>
<td>• Religion (Potentially attributed to age difference):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A key radicalization factor (e.g., promise of “paradise”; religious identification as a function of exposure to radical networks and peers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not a key radicalizing factor (e.g., religion appealing to those affected and frustrated by status quo; religion not a causal factor; religion used to morally justify actions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction over AMISOM actions (e.g., by member countries that lead to destruction) Security-based decision that rely on vague definitions of what constitutes a violent extremist and violent extremism</td>
<td>• Dissatisfaction over AMISOM actions (e.g., by member countries that lead to destruction) Security-based decision that rely on vague definitions of what constitutes a violent extremist and violent extremism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment

Al-Shabaab focuses its recruitment effort activities mainly on young Muslims and new converts. The group offers training, employment, purpose, and a sense of significance to anyone aligning with its ideological and territorial goals. While one would expect that al-Shabaab would most successfully target among the Somali ethnic segment of the Kenyan society and Somali refugees living in Kenyan camps and illegally, that has not necessarily been the case. As seen in this sample, the terrorist group has successfully targeted Kenyans of all ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

The sample participants were recruited at quite young ages. Seven were recruited between the ages of 14 and 19, two between the ages of 20 and 25, and three between the ages 26 and 30. For those for whom we have these data, they had joined al-Shabaab between 2001 and 2012. The majority of the sample were recruited via personal face-to-face relationships. Two were recruited in their mosque by radical preachers and two via a hybrid of face-to-face and Internet/telephone contacts. These were for the most part indoctrinated into the militant jihadi ideology in their mosques and then reached out over the Internet and phone for contacts to facilitate their travel to the group.

One young female divorcee, who ultimately agreed to carry out a (thwarted) suicide mission, was recruited completely over the Internet, initially via Facebook, which led to subsequent invitations to al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIS WhatsApp groups, and was followed up by personal grooming carried out by an online terrorist recruiter. Two of the sample respondents claimed that they traveled to seek work, that in one case ultimately turned out to be a kidnap into a training camp with travel across the border, and the other a coercive funneling into the group (see Table 4).

All but one of the recruits, an older female widow, actually joined the terrorist group. Fourteen joined al-Shabaab by traveling there and living inside the group. One followed her online groomer and ultimately agreed
to carry out a suicide mission in India while on travel for work there. The older widow who declined to join also informed about her cousin who had joined al-Shabaab, who was her recruiter and ultimately died there. Interviewed Kenyan security authorities informed us that her husband is also believed to have joined the group and died fighting for al-Shabaab in Somalia.

**Individual vulnerabilities and motivations for joining al Shabaab**

There are many vulnerabilities and motivations for recruitment to terrorism that operate at the individual, family, and group levels. A combination of push, pull, and facilitating factors played a significant role in the case of our interviewed participant sample. For instance, family dysfunction and heartbreak played a role for many, as did facing discrimination and unemployment in the face of al-Shabaab’s offers of jobs and claims of living according to Islamic ideals. Many mentioned peer influence, charismatic leadership, ideological alignment, religious fervor, a quest for adventure, personal dignity and significance, as well as seeking repentance and an opportunity to renew oneself, falling in love, following one’s spouse, dreams of building an Islamic state, and of the next life in Paradise. The main categories of individual motivations and vulnerabilities for recruitment into al-Shabaab are broken down in the ensuing sections, although it is important to note that in all cases these vulnerabilities and motivations operating on the level of the individual were never unidimensional but instead were multifactorial with differing aspects playing important roles at different times along the recruitment trajectory.

**Anger over discrimination and security measures/seeking justice**

As al-Shabaab focuses its recruitment efforts on Muslims, it plays upon the real and perceived grievances that Kenyan Muslims experience. In some sectors of society, Muslim youth are reported to be angry over what they see as security harassment and arrests and even extrajudicial killings in their communities. For instance, Muslim leaders living in the Coastal areas complained that the Anti-Terrorism Prevention Unit (ATPU), a specialized Kenyan police unit, conducted systematic campaigns of harassment specifically targeting Muslims for alleged association with extremist groups. They

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment method</th>
<th>Internet only</th>
<th>Personal (face-to-face)</th>
<th>Hybrid (Internet &amp; face-to-face)</th>
<th>Face-to-face (Religious figure or a mosque)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4. Internet and face-to-face recruitment.
claimed their actions included the closure and raids of mosques and surveillance on mosques and madrasas. Similarly, the Interreligious Freedom report of 2013 cited some Muslim leaders stating that the Kenyan government was hostile toward Muslims in general and made things difficult for them. Whether these grievances are real or perceived, in the case of Kenyan Muslims who feel powerless or angry over them, al-Shabaab may seem to be offering actions to empower them.

Al-Shabaab, like al-Qaeda and ISIS, makes full use of the victim narrative in its recruitment strategies. Adept at blaming the government as the perpetrator of injustices and discrimination, the group is able to generate resonance in those who do not know how, or do not wish to, achieve justice and address their particular circumstances in a nonviolent manner. Al-Shabaab has been particularly successful in this regard in the coastal areas of Kenya, where the population is primarily Muslim, including Mombasa Island, Kwale, and Lamu Island. Al-Shabaab ideologues, like their ISIS and al-Qaeda counterparts, point to Muslim suffering all over the world to frame Kenyan Muslim suffering and then offer violent extremist actions in pursuit of an Islamic State as an answer. By offering jobs, prestige, significance, personal dignity, purpose, and hope beyond this life and in the afterlife and claiming that it is building a state run by Islamic ideals and law, al-Shabaab uses religion to play upon Kenyan Muslim grievances and lure individuals into the group.

An unknown percent of Muslims in Kenya feel that they are not treated fairly or that they do not belong in Kenya. Abu Layth was one of these: “I was disappointed with everything around me, I was born in Islam. My life was anti-establishment. I viewed the government as the enemy. People were surviving by selling illegal things. The government was always arresting and there were land issues. [Further] I was basically brought to Nairobi from Sudan by the British. After independence, I used to see I don’t belong to this place. I don’t have a place to call home. I couldn’t build a house. I ended up being anti-establishment.”

**Financial incentives/employment gains**

Until recent changes in the Kenyan government’s distribution of resources, schools were often out of reach for the impoverished, who had to pay school fees in order to attend. Those who drop out of school at a young age find it hard to get employment or are employed in low-level and low-paying jobs that can be frustrating to sustain. Personal issues of unemployment played a role in al-Shabaab recruitment in this sample, as five were totally unemployed when they joined the group, and two of these claimed to have joined al-Shabaab inadvertently by seeking employment when they were trapped into joining the group. Of those who were employed, many seemed
intelligent individuals who had been forced by their family’s economic situation to drop out of school prior to high school and become employed in low-paying and menial jobs. They joined al-Shabaab to enhance their earning capacity. Two of the participants in the sample had been involved in criminal activities prior to joining the terrorist group. One of them was a gang member who traveled to Somalia and joined al-Shabaab as means of evading further criminal involvement in the gang.

William, an al-Shabaab defector, stated, “I blame illiteracy and ignorance, and the second I blame poverty. Nothing else.” Otherwise, he views al-Shabaab as manipulating youth with the hope of enriching themselves somehow. “The root of any crime in any country is corruption,” stated Thomas. “If it was not corrupt, I could not go to Somalia. They are being promised money if they go,” he added. Musa, who joined in part out of religious fervor and indoctrination, also needed a job: “It’s very hard to get employed in my part of Nairobi. You had to come from one of the clans of the rich businessmen. [Furthermore] I was looking for a formal and regular source of income. As a young man with a widowed mother, the biggest motivation for me was to take care of my mother.”

Abu Abdulsamad, who joined at age 19 in 2005, stated that his friends convinced him to travel by boat to Somali in search of better crab catches to enhance their earnings. “When we got there, one said, ‘I didn’t want to tell you what we [are really doing.] There is a group called AS and we will join. It’s fighting for Islamic religion. When we join, we will get money.” Abu Abdulsamad was easily convinced to go along: “At that time, I was young. I wanted money to spend, so I joined with them.” Although after suffering in the group, he stated how he resented his friends tricking him.

It is not only young men who are lured by promises of jobs and money. Susanne, an impoverished widow whose husband had died fighting for the group and whose cousin who had also gone to Somalia, was heavily recruited by her cousin. She explained, “My cousin told me that when I get there, I will get money. I needed money. I had children.” Yet he encouraged her to abandon her children and come to marry another.

Despite joining for financial gain, many cited not getting paid or never taking their money when they left al-Shabaab. Abu Paul said, “I never got paid. They gave me nothing. I got a house to live in, food.” Describing the way the food allowance worked, he stated, “Depending on the size of the family [you] got money for food. [Being married with one child,] I got $200.”

William, a Catholic and convert to Islam who as a young man even enrolled to become a priest, stated that he traveled to al-Shabaab to get a better-paying job as an English teacher teaching 220 young kids in Kismayo. Realizing he could not cross over into Somalia as a Christian, William recalled, “I converted before I even crossed the border. I converted for the sake of the job, but later the religion entered deeply into my blood.” Thomas, who was also a Christian
and convert to Islam, joined for the adventure and paycheck: “The person who recruited me assured me of a good salary. He never told me the consequence of this job. To cross into Somalia, you have to be a Muslim. I had to take refuge in the Islamic religion.”

Naysi, who came from a poor family and dropped out of school in the sixth class, claimed he was tricked at age 18 into joining al-Shabaab by being offered a job in another city:

They came to where we lived in Ukunda and told us there were jobs. We went to Lakuni and slept. Then, at 2 a.m. we went in and got in a vehicle. In my soul, I was asking myself why are we being put into a car at night and where are we going to? It was tinted glass. We got there at night also. They didn’t want us to know where it was. They put masks on our heads when they picked us up at 2 a.m. We are told let’s go for a work, but no one tells you [that it’s for al-Shabaab].

Once at the training camp, which Naysi recalled may have been inside Somalia, he expressed his further disappointment in joining the group: “They were telling me to join al-Shabaab. I couldn’t stomach it. They said you will get money.” He added, “They trained us to carry bags of sand and run for 30 kilometers. They said there was work, but to know the work you must know the skills, then you will be able to get paid. Once done [with training,] you will live over there and never come back.” Naysi claimed that he had no idea to where he had been taken: “You don’t know your counterparts because your faces are being covered. There were around 30 guys. I couldn’t tell their ages. They were young fit guys, beautiful guys. I got there because of [economic] problems.”

Saleh was also tricked into going to Somalia, believing it was for work. After exiting from a gang and being unemployed, he offered his recollection of how he was recruited into the group: “During this period, I saw a bearded sheik who said there are jobs in Somalia—construction, building mosques. They didn’t talk about AS or ICU. They hid it and said it was only work, so I decided to go.” He described his journey into Somalia:

When the guys came for us in a G-coach bus, they picked us up and they drove through Tika town across the border into Somalia, where the guys came out of the bushes and took us. I thought it was security. This was 2001. There were sixty of us. We were taken to the camp where we found tents and the food was cooked already. We were given food and we ate and slept. The following day when we woke up we were lined up like a parade. Everyone was given an AK 47 and a long knife. We were told there is no construction job. You are here to fight for religion.

**Family dysfunction, shame, anger, finding redirection, and escape**

At the family level, six out of the sixteen had parents who had died during their upbringing, and twelve classified themselves as impoverished in their childhoods. Ten described growing up with family dysfunction, four had parents who divorced in their childhood, and two left home early to live in
boarding school or with strangers. Two had a father who had multiple wives, causing tensions in the family, and one was the product of an illicit affair. All of these issues left the individual less supported than others who were surrounded by healthy and loving families and who were raised in better economic conditions (see Table 5).

Abu Paul, who is the product of an illicit affair and traveled to join al-Shabaab in 2008 at age 14, blamed his father for joining: “My life was difficult being raised by my stepmother, and my father didn’t care for me.” He learned only after he escaped al-Shabaab that his father had secretly financed his travel to the group, perhaps to hide his affair: “He always said he’d love it if all his family could travel and go there, but I was the only one [he sent] there. So, in reality, he just dumped me there.”

Not all al-Shabaab recruits are from impoverished backgrounds. Abdirahim Abdullahi (the terrorist involved in the Garissa University attack) is an example of a young man who, having lived a comfortable life, being the son of a government administrator, and attending prestigious schools and universities, lived a well-integrated life until the point of being radicalized.

In many cases of successful al-Shabaab recruitment, the youths are reported to be from families in full support of the group. In some cases, siblings or whole families join. In a research study of youth radicalization along the Kenyan Coast, eleven percent of al-Shabab respondents indicated that their parents supported their decision to join the organization, and six percent of the respondents revealed that they joined with their families, while four percent revealed that their siblings were aware of their decisions to join the al-Shabaab. Abu Shaheed got into extremism after failing in school and becoming upset for living with his father, who had divorced his mother earlier in his life: “I couldn’t face mom after leaving the school,” he recalled. Instead of dropping out of boarding school at the age of 16 and going home to one or the other of his parents, Abu Shaheed ran away, not telling either parents, and ended up having to fend for himself in the Mombasa area. He stated, “My anger was at my Dad because he had money and never contributed to my upbringing.” Isolated and feeling that he needed to find a way to prove himself, Abu Shaheed found work and eventually succeeded in the fishing business. He also started making new friends:

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<th>Table 5. Vulnerabilities for recruitment.</th>
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<td><strong>Family of origin issues</strong></td>
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They were also Sunnis. They said, “Look you have a car, you have money, let’s fill it up and go to hear the speaker in Masjid Musa in Majengo.” The first lecture was about jihad. I never heard of this before. I’d been reading the passages and verses, but I never understood it this way. My thinking was jihad was something in the past. This lecture awoke something in me, encouraged me and gave me a new direction, a zeal. [After this] my friends would find me in the mosque in the front. I got there early before the others.

Abu Shaheed started following Sheik Rogo. “[My friends] they’d say let’s go to Somalia, but I had a lot of money. Business was good,” he recalled. His mother had warned him not to fool around with the many women hanging around him, so he was frightened of falling into sin and getting diseases. He moved into the mosque to keep himself “pure.” Living there, he fell deeper under the influence of the ideologues preaching in the mosque. After serving time in al-Shabaab as a fighter in Somalia, Abu Shaheed admitted that fighting provided him an outlet for his anger at his father. “I found a way to vent. [Fighting] made me happy. The blame lies with my father,” he stated in regard to having been turned into a killer. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have been there.” Indeed, it is important to consider the role of family dysfunction in fueling anger and a desire to escape into violent movements where one’s anger can take shape and be played out.

Peer and community influence

According to some studies, Kenyan youth radicalize due to peer pressure and community influence. A study by Botha in the Coastal region of Kenya (of ninety-five al-Shabaab-associated individuals) identified friends as the most active players in introducing them to al-Shabaab recruitment.41 Social networks were also considered trustworthy, where individuals trusted one another in a highly surveilled environment. Radicals recruited through networks need to come in contact with a gatekeeper.42 The gatekeeper is the person in contact with the al-Shabaab organization and has the ability to provide skills, training, and resources to carry out the terrorist act. Usual gatekeepers in this system represent friends, family members, imams, preachers, or madrasa teachers.

In this sample, peer and community influence played a large role. Half of the sample cited friends who had gone ahead to join al-Shabaab in Somalia as key influencers in their decision to join. Two women had spouses who were involved. A stranger on the Internet recruited one, with whom she fell in love. Two cited community member influence. Six were indoctrinated into the militant jihadi ideology in their local mosques before seeking a way to join the group. In most cases, the radical imams were careful not to directly be the facilitators but did facilitate contacts with those who arranged travel and brought recruits into al-Shabaab.
Twenty-three-year-old Abu Paul, who traveled to al-Shabaab in 2008 at age 14, stated, “The first time I heard of jihad was in the mosques, through the sheiks. They used to say Somalia is going through a jihad. The sheiks would start the travel in groups of two to three.” Due to his own failures and self-isolation from his parents, Abu Shaheed fell under the influence of a jihadi preacher. But it was also peer influence that moved him to go to Somalia: “So, a lot of my friends crossed over, until they were just two left out of our group.” He added, “They were just disappearing like birds. I no longer had friends. [There were] no messages. We just knew that they had gone. Then we would hear our friend made it. [The next would say] ‘I also will be leaving next week. That’s how we knew. [Eventually], we also sought a way to go.” Abu Shaheed explained that each small group found their own way to cross over: “The method of one wouldn’t be same that the others would use. Sometimes we would hear that the route [that worked] last time was now closed.”

Musa primarily joined to gain employment and take care of his widowed mother. He had also been ideologically indoctrinated to believe he should move to a country ruled by shariah. He also blamed peer pressure: “There was also pressure from friends, ‘let’s go.’” Being young and naïve, Musa and the two friends with whom he traveled did not expect that they would be forced to become fighters. Yet he wasn’t completely naïve: “For me, of course, you can’t go to Somalia to just sit and drink water, but I also know I was not taken there to be a fighter. I had convinced others to convert to Islam. I was going to be a Dawa preacher.”

Religious fervor, repentance, and new beginnings

Abu Layth told about how during the rule of the Islamic Courts and the beginning of al-Shabaab the group was openly recruiting and playing upon disillusioned minds with religious dreams: “I started inquiring around. I heard that they want to establish an Islamic government. I used to talk to guys over there. I used to call them over the phone. Their social media was with real names. Even al-Qaeda was operating on social media, with their real names. At first, I was reluctant [to join]. Some good friends went to Somalia. When they were leaving, we talked to them, ‘If we don’t meet in this world, the next.’ I was maybe 25.”

Abu Layth had failed in his first arranged marriage. He then ran off with a woman he described as his true love. That relationship failed as well. Feeling ashamed, he turned to his religion for a new beginning: “I went to the mosque and studied, repenting for my sins, following Islam. I decided to go to Saudi Arabia. I also went to Jeddah, and people were smoking weed 40 minutes from Medina. I had gone to follow my religion, but I wanted to be out of there.” From that point on, he decided to seek an Islamic life by traveling to Somalia and joining al-Shabaab. Looking back, Abu Layth
described how he was compliant as a child but that he finally reached a boiling point over suppressing his needs and desires: “I avoided conflict. It was not healthy at one point. I got angry and I started taking back to people.” It didn’t end there, as he further explained: “Then I ended up with other bad stuff, smoking weed and clubbing, playing women and stuff like that, spending my nights in the club. People would see me coming from the club and they were going to morning prayers. I knew I was deeply in sin. After that when I heard if you come [to join al-Shabaab in Somalia] your sins will be forgiven, I thought that was a short cut. But actually, it’s not like that. Repentance comes from your heart, from a turn inside.”

Aisha, who had gotten pregnant and dropped out of high school to marry, was devastated when she caught her husband in bed with her best friend. Leaving the baby with her mother, Aisha fled to the Gulf region, where she got a job as a domestic. Unfortunately, there she was lonely and turned to the Internet for friendship. She was also naïve about Islam, having converted in high school, and became impressed by the conservative Islamic practices of the Gulf. On Facebook, Aisha expressed admiration for a covered ISIS woman and was immediately invited into closed WhatsApp groups for ISIS and al-Shabaab and joined the same on Twitter. There she was heavily indoctrinated and ultimately met an Indian national, who, although married, expressed his desire to marry her. After a period of online communication, the two decided to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight jihad and “martyr” themselves or to be “martyred” elsewhere. Heartbroken and rejected, Aisha was taken in by him and began believing that fighting jihad and becoming a “martyr” was her true calling as a Muslim. She also was indoctrinated to hate. Interestingly, all of Aisha’s recruitment was online. She never met anyone from the WhatsApp groups or her recruiter/lover in person.

“I was in love with him,” Aisha explained. “He was married. I wanted to be married with him. What I liked, he also likes. He said we would go to Iraq and marry and fight together and go to jannah together. Sunni Muslims had beards. I really love a man with beard. We used to call them lions. It was a Sunnah [saying] of the Prophet. I was thinking we’ll go fight together, die together. At that time, when you want to be a mujahida [female warrior], you always dream to have a man beside you. You cannot be a lioness, unless you have a lion.” Indeed, Aisha seems to have been trying to heal her broken heart and loneliness as well as give vent to her anger by finding a new partner, pursuing jihad, and opting out of this life with him and moving together to the next, where she hoped things would be better.

The relationships that Aisha was drawing her nurture from were entirely online, on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, and were leading her to self-destruction. Even with her online lover, Aisha made it into a fantasy of going to Paradise: “I didn’t imagine being sexual with him. Only fighting big fights in which there is no possibility we can survive.” She also recalled how her
online community celebrated when Muslims managed to blow up unbelievers. “We were happy! On social media everyone was praying and saying, ‘Subhanallah!’ [Praise to Allah!] And when France or America attacked Syria, we praised that the U.S. missiles didn’t kill anyone.”

As Aisha got sucked into her online communities, she began to believe jihad was a necessary part of her faith: “It is just for religion, just for the faith. A lot of people are having that faith; I’m helping them.” Likewise, al-Shabaab, ISIS, and Boko Haram condemned as enemies and endorsed violence against all others outside of their strict faith community: “In the Koran, it says, I don’t remember exactly, ‘When you see them in their field, cut off their heads.’ We would say, ‘The kuffar is our enemy and jihad is our way,’” Aisha explained.

Despite being employed by a Shia woman, whom Aisha said she loved and who treated her well, Aisha was taught to hate Shia as well. “They used to call them pigs,” she stated. Aisha was also searching for a sense of dignity and personal significance. She recalled, “At that moment, I wanted to protect my people. I am a woman. A lot of people say women are not allowed to be leaders. Even in Islam we are the followers.” Regarding the image of the ISIS woman who had attracted her on Facebook, she noted, “She was independent. I wanted to help the men. I wanted to be recognized.” When asked if becoming a suicide bomber was a form of feminism or female empowerment for her, Aisha put it in terms of her religious beliefs, “[I thought] I will be completing my faith.”

Jermaine Grant, who came from the UK to join jihad in Kenya and Somalia explained, “Jihad for me is to strive for self, to make the religion of Islam victorious.” Citing his duty to what he believes is each individual’s duty to Islam [fard-al-ayn], he continued, “Every individual Muslim has to defend Islam. The religion of Islam is under attack, under threat by an enemy.” Jermaine Grant stated, “The strongest opinion lies with the jihad scholars,” reflecting many who follow the militant jihadi scholars’ view that those who incite for violence portray strength rather than judging Islamic scholarship in an academic manner.

Converts are often susceptible to militant jihadi recruiting by virtue of not knowing Islam well enough. They are also likely to have created some distance from their families by converting. Jeffrey, a young man who could not attend school past eighth grade due to poverty, converted to Islam in his teens due to most of his friends being Muslims. Later, at age 17, he met a recruiter while he was working: “I met him in Lamu. He was a fish trader bringing fish from Somalia to sell in Kenya. After a while my friend asked me, ‘How long will you live a kafir’s life? Why don’t you travel? We’ll go to Somalia together.’”

Saleh, who was orphaned and from a poor background, dropped out of school in the tenth grade and eventually joined a violent gang before getting
into al-Shabaab. When he became tired of the gang, he stated: “It’s very hard to leave a gang. You have to move very far away, where no one knows you. I moved to Mombasa.”

**Ideological alignment, charismatic leadership, and social networking**

The recruiters and ideologues for al-Shabaab make many claims to attract their recruits, offering salaries, adventure, personal dignity, spouses, an Islamic life, and belonging. They also claim that al-Shabaab is trying to create an Islamic state, that Western powers and democracies do not want it to come into being, and that Muslims have a duty to defend their fellow Muslims in Somalia. In our sample, most recalled meeting dedicated Muslims in al-Shabaab who appeared to be good people, as well as witnessing extreme brutality, trickery, deceit and un-Islamic behaviors. Most felt aligned, at least when first going to Somalia, with the ideas behind al-Shabaab. William, mentioned previously, who went to Somalia to be an English teacher, explained how he still sees it, despite having defected from and now renounced the group. He explained, “In the beginning, when al-Shabaab was founded, it really had a good motive, according to me. The good motive they claim they had was that they were delivering the nation from the hands of the warlords and militias who were killing the people. But after a certain time, they started doing terrible things, like attacking university students and attacking aid workers, and so on.”

Similar to other terrorist groups, al-Shabaab uses cult practices of social isolation and redefining of reality to provide a conducive environment for radicalization to violence. This takes place first by identifying personal problems and then encouraging blame toward others for one’s problems, along with a hatred of all those outside the group who are claimed to be responsible for these problems. This also involves convincing the new adherents that the group can bring a solution to their problems, so that they begin to align with and subordinate themselves to the group—believing the group will provide the appropriate answers to their problems. “The mouths of the radicalizers, they breathe honey when they come to you with a good promise,” Thomas stated. “After falling in their snares and crossing the border things are different. There is nothing like going to Paradise.”

All but one of the sixteen respondents in our sample were recruited in face-to-face interactions. That does not mean that online interactions and terrorist propaganda spread over the Internet, or even on mainstream media, did not also have an influence. On this matter, Musa reflected, “In 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union started, it was on al Jazeera and on BBC. I started hearing through news and radio.” He stressed that the news itself was appealing: “Of course that is what appealed to me, just hearing. And also in the village, people influenced me, imams and others asked what is the
message really from there? Then they would tell that the message is that the land has issues, the region had issues, but shariah will make it right.” Musa was also exposed to global terrorist propaganda, though at that time from al-Qaeda: “I was convinced through videos and the recruiters took advantage of my love for my religion. Back then, they wouldn’t go for guys who were trouble in society, smokers and drinkers. If you seem to be grounded in religion and love it, they took advantage. Through those videos they convinced me.” At that time, Musa stated, “I wasn’t big on the Internet and I was not on social media. There were no social media accounts. They would download from the Internet and made CDs and then they would put Abu Mansour from Somalia on the cover. They would be showing [jihad in] Chechnya, Sudan, etc.” He continued, “We would ask the sheiks, ‘Why do you show us this? Is it to travel to Chechnya or to Somalia?’” The sheiks explained that “the message was being spread as an awakening to the young men, a clarion call, to say that the country you are in is not under the Islamic flag. You are paying taxes to a government that is not Islamic, a kufur [unbelieving] government. You should go to the closest country that is complaint to the Islamic law.” Musa recalled, “I was desiring a certain way of life. I was unemployed. I wanted to get married. They were telling us that there would be pay. You can take care of yourself. I didn’t know the other side of it. It was a darker side that I couldn’t see. This was 2006 and I was 23.”

Joseph, who joined al-Shabaab at age 28, explained, “I was the driver of Abu Rogo here in Nairobi. He was my friend, I liked him very much. When he spoke about the religion [Islam], you started hating those Christians. I liked him. It you have a problem, any problem, you tell his son. He’ll sort it out.” Joseph recalled being taught about the “invaders—Americans, Israelis, Ethiopians—we have to fight them back. They have invaded a Muslim country and we have a duty. It’s a must. You have to go.” Joseph became convinced of the righteousness of the cause and learning to hate: “I felt like this is the right way, the right thing. I started hating my stepfather. I hated the people I grew up with because they didn’t follow Abu Rogo.”

Joseph’s recruiters also isolated him once he began to align with them and considered traveling to Somalia: “You are not supposed to tell anyone when you are going. You have to leave your phone. You have to stay quiet, until you reach Somalia. [They tell you] if you tell someone, [the security forces will] take you and you will never be seen again.” The group isolated him from his family while in Somalia as well: “By the time I reached there, after six months, the training, I started missing my family. I didn’t know anything about what was happening in Kenya. We were not allowed to make any phone calls.”

William, a teacher who joined the group, felt that al-Shabaab masterfully manipulates its recruits: “They are very intelligent and record what you like and what you hate. After recording what you hate most, they come behind you and hate the same things. They take your failures and show you how
your enemies are responsible.” He related how his recruiters got him to cross over into Somalia and began redefining his interactions with the Kenyan government—and all non-Muslims, for that matter: “They told me, ‘Look at how bad they are paying you. In al-Shabaab you will be paid better. This is mistreatment of a government that is not focused on shariah law.’ So [over-time] you become automatically an enemy of law that is not shariah and any government that doesn’t support the shariah law. You also become an enemy of non-Muslims and of democratic government. You even become an enemy of your own parents if they are not in the religion.”

While working as a teacher, William explained that he never participated in any war and that he just taught children, though he admitted that if there was an attack, he would have followed.

In the extreme, powerful indoctrination occurs through separating new recruits from their families through travel to Somalia, where intense shariah and grueling physical training further breaks down the individuals to the point of making their lives subordinate to the goals of the organization.

**Falling in love and seeking adventure**

Many of the young men cited being excited by the prospect of being weapons trained and becoming soldiers, as though joining al-Shabaab provided a route to achieving manhood. Some of the women cited love as a motivating factor. Abu Paul, who was 14 when he joined, recalled, “I was happy because I knew I was going to handle weapons and my life was going to change.” Abu Layth reflected on his naivete to join Shabaab: “Al-Shabaab doesn’t tell you anything [true]. You have your own notions in your head when you are going there from their videos and propaganda. You go there expecting a lot of stuff. I thought it was romantic, that I was meant for revolution, as it is in the movies. But life is different. Everything I thought I was going to accomplish, I didn’t accomplish anything. All the guys we used to plan, and they died. I think a lot of good stuff is left to the movies.”

Many of the men referenced feeling as though they were joining what they had seen in Hollywood movies. Abu Shaheed, who joined al-Shabaab in 2008 at age 17, stated, “I heard it was war. I wanted to see for myself. For me, it was like a movie of Vietnam, as I pictured it in my mind. I was fascinated by movies and what I used to see on my computer.” Abu Shaheed was referring to general movies and had not been exposed to al-Shabaab films: “I just wanted to fight. I wanted to go for reasons of pride, [to say] ‘I know how to use this weapon. I have used it. I have fought.’ I wanted to stand out. I didn’t even think about dying.” He also did not consider his victims: “I didn’t think about who I would kill and why. None of that was in my head.” Joseph, who joined at age 28, recalled how al-Shabaab membership was glamorized in his mind as well: “I felt like fighting. They said we will get weapons, training.”
Thomas, who joined at age 18, concurred: “I was just interested in holding firearms, in being a soldier. Most of the youth would like to be soldiers. I didn’t know it meant harm.”

Aisha, who was recruited online, recounted how she first was attracted by romantic images from ISIS and later fell in love with her recruiter: “My first liking of Islamic State posts came when there was a woman on Facebook posting pictures of an Islamic woman, dressed all in black stockings and gloves and nikab and she was holding an AK 47. On her glove I saw the flag of Islamic State. She was dressing good. I loved the way she was dressed. In Islam you are not to be seen.”

Aisha had fled problems at home and was heartbroken over her ex-husband’s infidelity. When she got indoctrinated into accepting to be a suicide bomber, she, like many others ICSVE researchers have interviewed, began to experience a euphoric state that is likely an endorphin-mediated response to considering taking one’s own life. However, Aisha, just like others, attributed such a condition to a mystical and religious ecstasy of being about to enter Paradise. In a sense, her brain began drugging itself as she got deeper into and more committed to the group.43

Women following their men

Asmina was from a poor family and had dropped out of school in the eighth grade due to financial difficulties. She began working odd jobs as a seamstress and did not get married until age 27 due to having to help support her family. When she married, Asmina was grateful to find a man who accepted her and was able to support her, although she did not know him well. “He was a Muslim, but converted,” she explained, and continued, “He was 40 something. We were married for two months together when he told me, ‘Let’s go to Somalia to go and work there. Life will be the same as here in Kenya.’ I tried refusing to go but my husband insisted. I talked to my mother, but my mother told me that because I was married, I had to listen to him.” Before marrying, Asmina had faced many financial challenges: “I had problems. I didn’t have a permanent job. I was happy that I got a man to marry me and have a helper, and I loved him.”

Revenge

In the Coast region of Kenya, reports have been made of recruitment to al-Shabaab of youth occurring in response to the killing of clergies/religious leaders whom they considered their mentors. Muslim activists report that twenty-one killings and disappearances of religious leaders or preachers have occurred between 2000 to 2014 due to violence in the region.44 The controversial Kenyan Muslim cleric Aboud Rogo, who strongly recruited for al-Shabaab, was among those killed.45 He was shot in broad daylight while driving down the street, resulting in youth loyal to
him suspecting it was the Kenyan authorities who had killed him. As a result, these youth attacked the Salvation Army Church, which was next to the mosque where Sheikh Rogo was preaching and that they saw as a symbol of the state. Some in this sample referenced the Kenyan troops invading Somalia and fighting al-Shabaab and the need for revenge inside Kenya as a result.

**Roles and experiences in the terrorist group**

Al-Shabaab members in this sample spent one to seven years in al-Shabaab. As for their roles and experiences in the group, the majority of the men were trained as fighters, and one of these was also ordered to become a suicide terrorist. One of the females was recruited by both al-Shabaab and ISIS and searched for how to travel to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS but did not actually travel to any of the groups, agreeing instead to carry out a (thwarted) suicide mission. One of the men became a jihadist preacher for al-Shabaab, and another was recruited to teach English to al-Shabaab youth. One of the male al-Shabaab cadres became a member of the hisbah, the Islamic police who enforced al-Shabaab’s strict Takfiri codes of conduct. Four rose to the leadership ranks and that of the emni, the intelligence arm of al-Shabaab—and were actually sent back to Kenya to conduct lethal attacks inside Kenya (thwarted attacks). Two of the emni members declined to admit they were part of the al-Shabaab intelligence, despite interview evidence suggesting so and Kenyan police confirming their suspicion of the same (see Table 6).

**Fear and isolation as techniques of control**

Similar to other terrorist groups, and cults for that matter, al-Shabaab was adept at isolating and separating its potential recruits from family members

**Table 6. Roles in the terrorist group.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in group</th>
<th>Suicide terrorist</th>
<th>Fighter</th>
<th>Preacher</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Emni/Intel</th>
<th>Hisbah/Police</th>
<th>Following spouses as a wife</th>
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<td>8</td>
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**Table 7. Training and experiences in the terrorist group.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrorist training &amp; experiences in the group</th>
<th>Shariah training</th>
<th>Physical training</th>
<th>Weapons training</th>
<th>Took part executions</th>
<th>Torturer</th>
<th>Suicide bomber</th>
<th>Propaganda video</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrorist experiences</th>
<th>Offered marriage</th>
<th>Sent to Kenya to attack</th>
<th>Imprisoned</th>
<th>Allowed to leave</th>
<th>Defected Foreign fighters</th>
<th>Witnessed/ Took part in executions</th>
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once they joined to cut down on defections and avoid detection. Many of the cadres had phones, but others said that their phones were taken, and they had no means to call home even if they wanted to. Abu Paul, who was 14 when he left for Somalia, recalled, “When I left Kenya, I had requested to hug and say good-bye, but my guide told me, ‘It’s not allowed. It will put us in trouble, those of us who are remaining behind.’”

Al-Shabaab is masterful at isolating its new recruits so that they fall entirely under its training and influence. Abu Layth mentioned how he was put in a big house and was isolated: “They put us in and locked the door, and they would come and bring the food.” They also create a sense of distrust of others: “When you go there, they tell you not to trust anyone. Don’t tell where you come from, your real name, where you are schooled.” Likewise, as Abu Layth highlighted, the group confers upon the new recruit a new identity to align with the group and its goals: “They give you another name.” Abu Layth recalled being trained with al-Shabaab propaganda videos: “In that house, they would come with a laptop and videos of their battles and their ideology. It made me want to go and fight and stuff like that.”

Joseph, who joined al-Shabaab at age 28, was taken to Mogadishu and put in a home with seventy others for three months of shariah training: “[There was] no communication, just eating and sleeping and lectures. The same lectures were about war and jihad, going to fight, to help Muslims all around the world.” The recruits took on new identities in the group as well: “[In the house] you are not allowed to tell anyone your name. [You are] told to pick a kunya.”

Naysi, who claimed he was tricked into a training and recruitment camp, recalled how the group took control of its young recruits as quickly as possible: “When we got to the camp, we were told, ‘If you run, you will be killed.’ They had guns.” Naysi described how each person’s identity was obscured as they were forced into serving the group: “We had masks that we wore day and night. They left very little slits for us to see.” Naysi explained that everyone was too intimidated to talk back: “I never asked any questions. I was shocked, scared.” In addition, the trainers isolated and separated the recruits from their families back home by cutting all contact and telling their new recruits that they would be rewarded with jobs, but they needed first to give up association with their families and give their whole allegiance to al-Shabaab for whom they would now be training. By obscuring identities, the group also created fear and isolation among their trainees, as Naysi explained: “We weren’t talking. I never had friends. You weren’t allowed to have friends. They would say, ‘What are you talking about amongst yourselves?’ I felt that there were spies monitoring us, pretending to be one of us. I never asked the others. Everyone slept alone.”

They also—in classic cult tactics—deprived them of sleep:47 “They didn’t let us sleep much. They used to engage in physical activity, and after doing that, your capabilities are noticed and then you are taken to Somalia.” Unsure
if he was taken to a training camp in Kenya or Somalia, Naysi noted, “During the exercises in the training, if you erred in any way, you are tied and flogged.” The new recruits’ movements were controlled in every way: “You are not allowed to walk around. No one had a mobile. We were taught physical training, and we were allowed to go to the mosque, chaperoned. You were not trusted. I didn’t like them because they were oppressive.”

**Shariah training and martyrdom ideology**

The male recruits were put into shariah training to learn al-Shabaab’s *takfiri* interpretation of Islam (see Table 7). Followers of Takfiri ideology see others who do not adhere to their interpretations and serve their mission, including other Muslims, as apostates who can and should be killed. Women, on the other hand, were taught in groups in their homes. According to the interviewees, al-Shabaab followed a set pattern of indoctrinating and training their recruits and were organized into a clear organizational structure with different parts carrying out different responsibilities. As Abu Paul explained, “The guys are so structured, it’s like a government. There was al-Kataib, which was their media arm. They would film things when we were attacking, film sermons and addresses from sheik, [and they] filmed punishments. They wouldn’t show foreign faces during the filming.” He also noted:

> [In shariah training,] one of the things we were taught [is] there are rules of engagement. We were told to kill [and that] the difference between a Muslim and a *kafir* is that these are people who don’t pray. Anyone who doesn’t pray, you are permitted to kill, but those who do, you are not permitted to kill. Those guys believe that the Somali national army are not Muslims [and that] they turned their back on Islam and that’s why they are fighting them. So, one of the things they used to say, quoting the Koran: fight them and Allah will punish them through your hands because they turn their backs on Islam.

Abu Shaheed explained that as a 17-year-old, he did not even really understand who his enemy was, or why but simply accepted what al-Shabaab taught him, stating, “When I got there, the first thing they started teaching us was that they are invaders, taking the land, imposing democracy and values like homosexuality. They taught, ‘They will take away our shariah.’” He recalled, “My understanding of Islam was still early. As many years as I had of studying jihad, I had accepted fully, [but even then] I didn’t know exactly what the fighting was for.” When it came to killings, Abu Shaheed admitted, “I don’t put so much thought into it. It was fighting one soldier to another, who pulls the trigger first.” Following blindly, he shared, “The only thought is simple, ‘He’s coming to impose his values on us. He wants to kill me, so I defend. If I don’t shoot him, he’ll kill me.”

William, who says he was not put in any formal shariah training, recalled being taught informally by al-Shabaab leaders: “As long as you have become
a Muslim now you are the inheritor rightful and standing in footsteps of the Prophet Muhammed, but any non-Muslim you see around is having an ill motive toward you, so the only thing to do is to fight that person.”

Abu Layth recalled: “The shariah teachers told us that if this religion wanted me to be slaughtered, we must give our necks for Islam, to be even ready to even do that. We have to be a bridge upon which Islam can cross. Through a lot of pain, ideology, with the benefits of going to Paradise. They taught us to see the world in black and white, either a friend—inside, and everyone else is your enemy.”

According to Joseph, all the lectures addressed and referenced the Prophet Mohamed and jihad. Then the new recruits were put through a grueling survival test and dedication to martyring themselves for the group: “Everyone was tested to see if you are ready to put on a vest and blow yourself up. Those who accepted are put on one side, those who refuse on another side.” However, Joseph explained that it was a fake setup: “They won’t send you. They just want to see if you fear. You were called one by one and they say, ‘This is your name from today. Are you going to blow yourself up, if you are needed? If you say no, you stay here, it’s three months, on and on like that.’” Joseph and his three friends had been told about this, so they knew to accept. Refusal, according to Joseph, meant to be “punished, to stay in the house, never go out, more prayer, lectures, eating, no phone calls.” As he further explained:

I said “yes, I’m ready.” They had a vest. “Take that one; just put it on,” they said. “We’ll come for you tomorrow.” They take the button and disable it. They go with the button, so nothing can happen. I slept in it. The way they put it on, you can’t take it off. I was afraid, but I knew it was just a training thing. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I just accepted. I decided myself to come. If anything happens it’s Allah’s will. I put it on and prayed that they won’t come the next day and blow us up. There were ten guys [in my group] who accepted. Those who refused the vest were told to dig some trenches. It was a punishment. They dug for a week.

Likewise, al-Shabaab teaches its recruits that serving the group will result in rewards in the afterlife, including the rewards of Islamic martyrdom if they are killed in battles. Abu Paul, a 14-year-old al-Shabaab recruit, spoke to such a recruiting tactic: “We were taught that if we are killed according to shariah we would go straight to jannah.”

Three of those interviewed were invited or forced to become suicide bombers, and two accepted. One of the men stated he was ordered into agreeing to a suicide mission and made a propaganda video before being sent on his mission. “There is a section in al-Shabaab called the Martyrs Brigade,” William explained. “There they tell you, ‘My friend, once you die, now you become shaheed [a martyr], and when you died shaheed you will enter the first Paradise according to Islam. You will go to the best one of seven, firdous,”
jannah al firdous, [the highest level of Paradise] where you will be awarded seventy-two houri [virgins]. This is what people will fight for.”

As a member of the al-Shabaab enni [intelligence], Thomas was responsible for smuggling arms and surveillance. He was evasive about his exact role but admitted witnessing the training of suicide bombers. “My colleagues, most were underage. They were being used. Some were given assignments to explode themselves. They go to a certain camp. It was [called] the Martyrs Brigade. I was there, and I saw how they were preparing everything. Those who go to do these things, already their minds have been destroyed.” He added, “They know it’s a good thing. There are bomb experts who prepare them.” Speaking of how these men were convinced to do it, he explained, “Even if you are mature, you can still be overpowered by a radicalizer. They can change your mind.” Not all the “volunteers” are mature, according to Thomas: “Yes, it happens that some parents come and surrender their children. It’s like a sacrifice. They are sure that their children will go to heaven, to be shaheeds [martyrs].”

Thomas describes the ritual upon departing for their missions: “It was just a farewell. [They told the suicider] ‘It is good to do this. Allah sees it as right. You are going to Paradise.’ There were no drugs. They made a film. It’s a long process before you are given an assignment to go. There is an investigation of the security and type of weapon you will use. You have to be coached on the tactics of how to penetrate there, the place you are to attack, how to penetrate, etc.” He recalled what happened after the operation was carried out: “He died. We celebrate. They have their way of celebrating. They are happy. Even if you are not happy it would be better to go along, so as not to be harmed.”

“I know some that went with a car laden with bombs, it was based on their faith,” Abu Paul stated. “What would happen is that these particular group members who decide to become shaheed [martyr], they are put in separate place where they are kept well, eat and pray. They are so close to Allah by the time they carry out the act they know that Allah is just waiting to receive them.” He explained that anytime a suicide mission took place, there was little time to celebrate, as a counterattack always occurred, yet the al-Shabaab cadres would gather to celebrate by shouting out, “Allah Akbar!, Allah Akbar!” The psychological effect on him was very strong: “Your adrenalin just picks up. You are so psyched. You feel there is no turning back. I thought about joining the shaheeds [martyrs], but the fact that you are a mujahed [holy warrior] is enough to show you are willing to be shaheed, the fact that you are there. I was very happy there.”

The fighters were willing to die after being heavily indoctrinated in the al-Shabaab martyrdom ideology. According to Joseph, “There were people who would just stand up [in battles] and let themselves by killed. You would go home and wonder, “Why? Why? I have to be killed! I have to be killed!”
Everyone wants to be killed. Al-Shabaab fighters fear to be injured, because if you injured you stay at home, no fighting.”

Musa, who had been sent back into Kenya to mount an attack, was surprised to learn that his role would be a suicide bomber. As a member of the al-Shabaab’s emni [intelligence], he knew he had no choice but to comply. “Some guys came to pick us up,” he recounted. “They had not put us through explosives training. We were supposed to learn the on/off switch. It was like touching death.” Musa and his team tried on the vests: “I remember having a very bad headache after because of the chemical explosives.”

Musa had not been prepared to engage in a suicide mission: “You don’t desire it, but at the same time you have to do it. It is painful.” He added, “Because you wouldn’t even go close to where the suicide jackets were kept as much as you are wanting to show bravery, your heart doesn’t want to go through with it. And if only one wire connects, it will explode.” When asked about his leader, Musa answered, “Khalid himself couldn’t do it but he said so many evils are being perpetrated against Muslims, in Bosnia, here in Kenya, in America, but he himself couldn’t do it. He took videos of us, a video you leave behind. You have to tell your relatives your last will and testament and to encourage young men and women.” Musa recalled calling his wife in Somaliland to share what he believed would be his last days on earth: “I called my wife and told her, ‘Chances are you won’t see me again.’ One of my children was one year old, and one was eighteen days old. She was crying and asked, ‘Why are you saying this? You are in Kenya!’ I said, ‘I have to stop talking because government might be tracking this number.’ Then I shot this video and spoke to my wife, ‘If you don’t see me again, I’m probably dead.’”

Musa recalled as they headed out to the attack: “We were going to attack the Parliament. I had never been there before, but Khalid showed a map and venue. We each had a [suicide] jacket and F-1 bomb and a Kalashnikov. We knew it was mission impossible. Parliament is impossible to breach but Khalid was under immense pressure. We tried to tell Khalid it was impossible. In Somalia, the Kenyan troops were closing in and back in Somali they believed this would put a stop to Kenyan troops. We argued with Khalid, but it changed nothing. We put on the vests.”

But they were at the time unknowingly thwarted in their mission: “When we got to the vehicle the tires were deflated. Now I know, probably the government did it. Our place was under surveillance. He added, “By the time they could fix the tires, it was 5 p.m. and everyone would be gone from the Parliament, so Khalid told us go back to the house saying, ‘Because you can’t [attack] today, we’ll move houses and do it another given time.’ I went to take a rest. I had a headache from the chemicals. At 1 a.m. I was arrested.”

Aisha, who was recruited solely over the Internet to become a suicide bomber, recalled being taught that jihad and “martyrdom” would lead to rewards in the next life: “In Paradise, there is eternal life. There is no need
of staying in this world. I am striving to go to Paradise. We were promised when we got to jannah [Paradise] we will have eternal life, all people will be the same age, we will drink milk and honey, everything will be good. So, we don’t want association with this world. We want the next world. If you kill or be killed, you go to Paradise. It was the shortest way.” Aisha was so taken in with this vision: “My goal was to die.” Regarding her online community, she stated, “The people I was around, all of them wanted martyrdom.”

William spoke cynically about these practices: “There are people who will give you money knowing very well, once you blow yourself up, you won’t enjoy this money, but because you are confused you will take the money and put in your pocket and then go blow yourself up. But Islam doesn’t allow you to suicide. Even our laws don’t allow you to suicide. It’s a crime.”

Those who were injured did not fare well, which also added to the desire to die as a martyr, rather than end up injured. According to Joseph, “Hundreds of them would get injured. We would visit them in a hall where they slept, being treated by al-Shabaab medics. They don’t know how to do treatment. A bullet, it will be left inside. No one wants to be injured.”

William, an educated young man who went to be an English teacher for al-Shabaab, stated, “Shariah training is when you study the religion deeply. There is nothing like that in al-Shabaab. The only training we received was physical and military.” Looking back, he explained, “I became a victim of the mistranslations.”

**Online training**

In the case of one of the female recruits, Aisha was recruited online with no face-to-face contact whatsoever. “We were in WhatsApp and Twitter,” she explained. She fell into an extremist group while living away from her family. “We used to love the ISIS pages where the leaders said things, taught people about this. There were five groups I was added to; all of them were supporters of Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab. I learned that the Islamic State has their own channel. They have videos that they bring into the social media. They told how to use the gun and how to clean it. How, if the enemy is coming, how you defend yourself. They were educating us on how to make a gun, how to make bombs.”

From this online training, Aisha stated, “I am confident I can use a Kalashnikov.” Aisha further recalled: “I would get 2,000 messages, but I was working. I didn’t have time to watch all the messages. I did that for almost a year. Then this man invited me. I knew him only from Internet, only on WhatsApp.” He talked her into agreeing to take on a “martyrdom” mission. Aisha’s suicide bombing mission, however, was thwarted. When arrested, she remembered how she had also been trained on operational
security: “You should not say who you know, you never met. It is your loss that they caught you. You have to deal with it alone, you alone.”

**Weapons and physical training experiences**

The men and boys cited the physical and weapons training experiences as grueling and brutal—experiences that quickly negated their romantic ideas of adventure and achieving manhood. Abu Paul recalled: “We went to soldiers training, the training process that turns you into a soldier. When we started the training, it was a bit hard for me. I never used to exercise, and I was the youngest one there.” He was 14 at the time. “With time I got the hang of it.” Similar to ISIS, al-Shabaab forced their recruits to endure difficulties in their physical training in order for their leaders to weed out the dedicated ones and to train them to persevere in hardship. In the words of Abu Paul:

> The food was good in the beginning, but with time they apportioned it and portions got smaller and smaller; they told us, ‘You have to be ready and survive on very little.’ With time we got used to smaller portions. It’s a training to stay without food. [We were given] a small plate for six people, only a flat of chapati between six people. Every time you’re hungry. They told us you have succeeded the challenge. We trained there for four months. It was a very, very harsh camp. It’s like a prison converted to a training camp. It was normal training military, different kind of weapons and physical training. We were starving. We lost half the weight we arrived with.

> “There it was hard to sleep,” Joseph continued, and further shared: “Mogadishu is a war zone. Every second you hear somebody firing: missiles firing every minute. It’s war, so you can’t sleep. Sleeping is only one hour. They wake you up. They beat you up. You have to be alert. You sleep with your shoes on. [There were] no baths, a shower only once a month, pray with shoes on and you don’t wash for prayers.”

> While ISIS routinely provided stimulants (Captagon) for their fighters, Joseph stated that al-Shabaab did not: “There were no drugs. Your brain has to work. You have to know the parade time. There is a parade even at 2 a.m. You have to run. Sleep during the day one hour, at night it’s running and lecture and walking 40 or 50 meters and back, for battles and not.”

> Abu Layth spoke about the difficulties of the physical training, describing them as brutally harsh: “We had to wake up at four, sometimes no sleep at all. It was for hardening. Sometimes when we got food, we had to spit it out. If you don’t, they beat you up. Sometimes, they let you eat. We got only three cups of water per day. They decided if you shower, wash your face, etc. Sometimes we showered only on Friday. They were messing up your mind. We wanted to run away, but they had driven us into the jungle and there was no running.”

> He added:
During the training they took something out from us—from not resting, not cleaning, mind racing all the time. By the end, we were not the same people. In training you were not eating, but after when they took us to a safe house, they feed you a lot of meat and food to gain weight. Then you go to the battle, to fight, and they find out who will really fight for this cause, and who is not serious. The ones that were not serious were taken away. If you don’t want to go and fight, [they say] you have another agenda, a spy.

**Battlefield experiences**

Experiences in the terrorist group were brutal, according to most. Eight of the men engaged in both physical and weapons training, and six regularly were involved in battles. Two admitted to taking part in executions, and another two admitted to torturing others. According to Jermaine Grant, al-Shabaab and other jihadi groups justify torture in this manner: “Abu Tasiri, he has a fatwa about torture. If you are more than fifty percent sure that the person you have arrested is working for the enemy, it’s permissible.” According to Joseph, many prisoners were beheaded at the time of capture, although some were put to work. He explained, “Prisoners cooked for our soldiers, washed for the soldiers, collected rubbish. Women were not taken to prison.” Regarding the summary executions of prisoners, he explained, “We just beheaded people, when we caught them.” He denied beheading anyone but witnessed many beheadings, including of women caught in battles.

Joseph recalled how the group normalized brutality: “After the training, your brain would accept everything. It was scary, then it became normal. After chopping off their head, the teacher said you must kick the head, pass it like a ball. It’s a normal thing you have to do it to reduce the fear in you.”

Thomas recalled witnessing extreme brutality as well: “I remember, one 4 p.m. It was approaching asr [afternoon prayers]. When we went to mosque, the commander gave the order to everyone to shut their businesses, but one person refused. He was shot. I knew this was wrong.”

According to Joseph, al-Shabaab cadres record their executions: “When they [behead, they] must make a video. They called out, ‘Allah Akbar!’ before they chopped off the head. Your crimes are read to you. ‘You did this. This is the punishment; do you have anything to say?’”

Nearly all of the men witnessed extreme brutality, including taking part in battles; living under bombardments; witnessing beheadings, torture, punishments, and executions of other types. Many referenced becoming psychologically numb after repeatedly being sent to fight and kill and witnessing the deaths and debilitating injuries of their fellow cadres in battle.

**Al Shabaab’s emni**

The *Emni* is al-Shabaab’s intelligence and security arm overseeing weapons transfers, security, undercover operations, and sleeper cells, among others,
into Kenya. Those who were recruited, or simply promoted into the al-Shabaab emni, underwent extra grueling tests of perseverance, commitment, and loyalty, and, in the case of Kenyans, were often sent back into Kenya to attack. Abu Layth described his indoctrination into the al-Shabaab emni: “They would pour water [on the floor] and we’d sleep on it. They’d beat us and torture you. After we took breakfast, we took [training in] martial arts, security and handling weapons. After that we were did sparring, fighting was to hit each other. You can’t choose the weight [of your opponent], so they chose a heavy person, or they have a knife and you are not armed. At night we’d go out and run in the fields and stuff like that.”

Thomas, an al-Shabaab fighter, openly admitted that he was sent back to Kenya to mount the Garissa attack: “[Al-Shabaab cadres] helped me cross back and gave me an assignment in Kenya. I was to gather intel for attacks. There was an attack in Garissa first January, whereby I participated in giving information.” Thomas justified the attack that killed 147 civilians on religious grounds: “In Garissa, most of their daughters or ladies had adopted the behavior of other religions, prostitution. [Al-Shabaab] felt the culture around and participated in destroying them. I celebrated after the attacks,” he admitted.

Musa also recalled when he was given an emni mission: “My wife was from Somaliland, and I told her to go back. I was taken to a house where I was instructed to cut my long hair and long beard and told I will be going on an assignment. ‘You will be going to Kenya.’ I asked, ‘Kenya? How can you send me there? I don’t have ID.’ They told me, ‘Don’t worry, we will take care of that. You just stay here for now.’”

“You are not really told what kind of assignment you will be doing.” Musa explained. “I bought a phone with dollars, a burner phone, that I was told to destroy after finding out about my assignment. I was given 5,000 U.S. dollars to take an apartment in Nairobi. Of course, there was a desire to run away with the money, but I couldn’t because the others were with me every step of the way and didn’t let me out of their sight.” Musa delivered the cash to another Kenyan who had been in Somalia and was told by him, specifically, “There is a mission that you will undertake. You will be told. You have to move houses like five times.” Musa’s mother was nearby in Nairobi. “I had the desire to go see her. It was one-way commuter service to go see her. I even asked permission, but they said, ’No you cannot do that. How is our mission related to family? Leave family issues out of this. Just stay put. They were afraid I could betray them,” he recalled.

“Several groups had come in from Mombasa, another group in Majengo, and we had our assignment finally,” Musa recalled. “We were told that suicide jackets and vests would be coming in. That caught me by surprise. I thought we were on a spying mission. We were all surprised, and none of us were expecting that.”
Women in al Shabaab

The al-Shabaab fighters would fight in units that would go out for days at a time battling with the Somali military and AMISOM forces. Those who were married kept their wives and children in Kismayo or Mogadishu. “We would go and defend and come back,” explained Abu Paul. “We would go for four days and come back home for two days. We lived in Kismayo. My wife was there, but our defense was in Mogadishu. We had a camp there.”

Regarding life in Kismayo, William, who was recruited to be an English teacher there, explained: Al-Shabaab is not a terror group in that area. It’s more of a type of communal group where all the men and women live together the same kind of life. When I arrived in that community, I didn’t go specifically to al-Shabaab. I was introduced to the whole community. There was nothing like recruitment,” he stated, although he converted before he arrived and began to take on the al-Shabaab religious views once there. He went on to explain, “As long as I was a Muslim and abided by the laws of Islam [as defined by al-Shabaab], I was living well. What was bad was the mistranslated Islam. I was a victim of this.”

The dress code in these communities was strict, with women wearing *niqab* and men wearing short pants and beards. Asmina explained that the women were taught, “When you get married your friends’ husband may see and want you, what will happen?” She continued, “There you had to wear *niqab*. I agreed because every woman in the camp, if they saw a man, they hurried and covered their faces.”

Marriage, widows, and remarriage

Females generally serve as wives in al-Shabaab, although some, such as the notorious Samantha Lewthwaite, also known as “The White Widow,” have roles as couriers of cash and messages, fundraisers, Internet recruiters, and ideologues for the group. One in our sample was recruited to both ISIS and al-Shabaab and was activated into the role of a suicide bomber. Most, however, do not engage in combat, although some of the men explained that their wives were trained to handle guns and defend their homes if necessary.

Asmina, a woman whose husband brought her into al-Shabaab, described the men she was surrounded by in Kismayo: “They were bearded and unkempt, not very smart, and they had guns. I was afraid, but I was with other women who knew to use the guns. They [the other women] had stayed for a long time. They didn’t teach me [to use a weapon]. They realized I was not interested. The camp can be attacked. That’s why there are always men at that camp to defend the women.” Women found it hard to escape. Asmina recalled, “I wasn’t confined in the camp and could go out and stroll. They knew that I didn’t know my way back to Kenya.”
All four of the female al-Shabaab women in this sample were recruited for marriage. In the case of the Internet-recruited suicide bomber, her recruiter was already married but proposed to marry her (a heartbroken divorcee) as well and “martyr” himself with her. Whether or not that was a sincere offer or a cynical manipulation taking advantage of her lonely state remains unclear. One of the women traveled from Kenya to Somalia to marry an al-Shabaab cadre, the other followed her husband in. One was believed by the Kenyan police to have already been married to an al-Shabaab cadre prior to being widowed. After he was killed fighting for the group, she was herself heavily recruited by the group to travel to Somalia to remarry.

Another woman, Suzanne, recalled, “My cousin told me about it and tried to get me to come. He told me, ‘Life is good,’ but when he went, he never came back. He told me, ‘There are so many husbands. You can get married there.’ He told me, ‘Cross over to Somalia. If it’s money, he said, if I agree to go, he will send my fare. He promised me when I get there, I will live a comfortable life in a nice house getting money and life will be good.” Her cousin encouraged her to abandon her 10-year-old and 4-year-old children. Suzanne recalled, “I said I’d go, if I could bring them.”

Joseph, an al-Shabaab cadre, described how the wives lived: “She was with me only one month. I fight for three months and then come home for one month. The women stay in the house in Kismayo. There was someone always taking care of them, a guy with food and a car, providing them with sugar, salt, and everything.” According to Joseph, the women did not go to shariah training like the men but received lessons in their homes as a group: “If we go [to battles,] there is a woman teacher, a Muslim who would bring the women together. She would tell them, ‘Don’t think about your husbands, because [if you do] you will keep them home. You have to give them courage to go and fight. Tell them to fight for Allah, and you will be rewarded. Don’t tell your husband to stay home.’”

As a result of that training, Joseph relayed that his wife “Was doing that a lot. After twenty days, when there was only ten days more to stay at home, she lectures me, ‘Don’t come back. You have to be killed. We will meet in Paradise.’ They are happy [when their husbands die] and tell us, ‘Don’t come home. If you go to the battle, struggle. Fight with all your efforts.’ She tells you, ‘Inshallah [God willing], you’ll be a shaheed [martyr].’ I would tell her, ‘Pray for me, that I don’t come home.’ In our faith we believe you get seventy virgins [if you are martyred], but jihad is really about self-struggle inside. A lot of the husbands were killed. The women were married off again. They will just cry two hours, and then say ‘I am happy, I’ll meet my husband in heaven.’” Concerning the Muslim practice of *iddah*, that is, waiting four months and ten days before marrying again, to establish if the women was impregnated before her husband died, Joseph stated, “They don’t have *iddah* in jihad.” Similarly, he explained
that normal Muslim burial rituals are also not observed, presumably because everyone who dies in jihad is considered martyred. “You are not washed. You’ll just be buried. It’s the same for the women,” he stated.

“When the husband is killed, they take it as normal and accept,” William explained. “It as if nothing bad has happened. These women who are satisfied with their husbands automatically accept another husband.”

Asmina described how her husband took her into Somalia. She believed they were going for work, but he joined al-Shabaab instead. Asmina recalled:

In Kismayo, we were taken to a camp where there were so many other people. We stayed for a week, then my husband left, and I was left with other women. After he left, I realized that my husband had joined al-Shabaab. My husband didn’t tell me anything. He just said, ‘I’m leaving.’ Then when he left the other wives started explaining what goes on, ‘If they come here, they will go and fight for three months then return. That’s how it is.’ He’d go for three months and then he would change places with other men. From 2010 to 2012 this went on. At the beginning of 2012, when my husband went [to fight], he never came back again. He went and got killed. The people that had gone with my husband came and told me that my husband had died. They started advising me to marry again. I refused.

Asmina explained how women in that camp had to be married: “I saw that when the husband died, the person that approached her, she was supposed to be a second wife to that man. His wife would approach to arrange it. In my case, I said, ‘I don’t want to be married to that man.’ She asked me, ‘Since you don’t want to get married what do you want?’ I didn’t answer. I just started thinking about how to escape. I knew that I could be forced because in that camp you can’t live there without a husband.”

Asmina, whose husband had not told her that he would be joining al-Shabaab and who became very reclusive after going to battles, was not particularly bereaved when he died. For some time, she had suspected that he was involved in extreme brutalities, including beheadings. “I felt bad, but then again I felt good because I could return home,” she explained. “If he was still alive, I couldn’t get back to Kenya again. He could stop me.” Regarding her plan to escape, she stated, “I knew that if they found out I knew I could be killed. I put my faith in Allah.”

Five of the men in the sample were offered marriage in the terrorist group. Joseph recalled how the foreign fighters were offered wives. Although, Naysi, one of the recruits who spent 13 months in training, explained, ‘You had to be in their good books and be part of them before they’d give you someone.”

Joseph had left his wife back in Kenya and found it impossible to bring her to join him, as she fell under security scrutiny. Joseph stated that the group told him to take a second wife: “They said it is ‘To be comfortable until your wife comes. Then you will have two.’ After training they got me a wife. I was told to go and see if you like her. There it is a poor community. If you want
a wife, you just pick one. If you want a Somali wife, you have to pick a woman from a poor community.”

In his case, he recounted, “She was an al-Shabaab follower, from Kismayo. She was happy. She wanted an al-Shabaab husband. There are women in line to marry al-Shabaab guys, and she was a follower. The day we went to go and pick her, they said, ‘Your wife is here, you go with her.’ Then we went to live in Kismayo.”

William recalled, “I witnessed very many women volunteering and coming to be married by al-Shabaab guys. These wives were accepted, and they lived the same [Islamic] life that was required.”

While the women were more sheltered from witnessing violence and extreme brutality, they also lived under bombardments, were bereaved of their men who were killed fighting for the group, and were often aware of the extreme brutality of the group. According to some of the interviewees, women who lost their husbands were not technically forced to remarry. However, remaining single is severely frowned upon; thus we were told that most remarried of their own accord. As Abu Paul put it, “Women can decide, yes, but it’s very strange for her to say no. So [there is] no real choice.”

“If a woman’s husband is killed,” Thomas explained, “In most cases it is not advisable to stay single. She needs a man.” Furthermore, he explained, “A young woman living without a man is seen as being in prostitution.”

William explained, “When you are in al-Shabaab, the expectation is to go to Paradise, not to invest earthly. Before a woman joins terrorism, she should know the meaning of terrorism. If you go there, from my experience, you will be forced to marry again, even if you don’t accept, and they won’t let you go. If she tries to leave, she will be arrested and killed. They will fear that you will reveal their secrets.”

**Rape, sex slavery, and seduction**

Some of the men complained that other al-Shabaab cadres seduced their wives while they were away fighting, but others denied that this happened. Some al-Shabaab cadres also told about sabayah, or female slaves being taken from captured territories and married off to al-Shabaab members. They also discussed rapes of female prisoners occurring during battles, but others strongly denied that either practice ever occurred. Joseph, an al-Shabaab fighter recalled, “Many, many women have been raped. A lot of them by soldiers, some say al-Shabaab, some say Ugandans, I don’t know. But if you were caught raping, your life will end.” William, who lived in Kismayo and observed the community over a period of seven years, denied that any al-Shabaab or local women were raped: “That is a lie, because these people are strict on the shariah law against fornication. Once you are interested in engaging in sexual activities with a woman you must follow the law. So,
there is no fornication or prostitution. They cut the hands of thieves. They do not violate the law. They punish with stoning for sexual activities. I saw this. If anyone is caught in fornication, if married, they are stoned to death, if unmarried, flogged 100 strokes.”

Others recalled more brutal aspects of behavior toward women: “The group took women as sabayah [captured slaves]. If we are short of women, they go and grab one or two. Al-Shabaab men cannot stay without women. It’s frustration. They know if you have a woman your brain will work properly. They just grab them. [But] they are treated well, so they don’t try to escape. They are given food and clothes. They took them from 13 years to 20 years old. My wife was 22.”

Joseph explained some of the reasons behind why women decide to stay with their husbands: “The girls don’t have any way to escape. They know their home and [if they try to escape] they will be taken to Mogadishu. Everyone fears that. They fear a lot and accept to be married to al-Shabaab.”

Thomas stated that some women voluntarily joined after their “brothers” in al-Shabaab radicalized them. But others are forced into marriage in areas where al-Shabaab takes over and approaches the parents to give their daughters for marriage. “When it comes to women whose parents surrender, it’s not voluntary,” Thomas explained.

On a similar note, Joseph stated: “They don’t follow Islam. It’s so bad. They can sleep around. Even in Somalia, you are in camp in the forest, but your wife is with another al-Shabaab. These guys in our community, they took their bad habits with them. ‘You husband is not here, it’s okay.’ Why are you in my home, while I am in the forest? The other women [in the community] if you come back, they tell you, ‘There were people coming [to your wife.] I hated al-Shabaab. There were things that were so bad.”

Asmina, a wife of an al-Shabaab fighter living in Kismayo, recalled the same experience. “When one bunch of men leaves, they come to their wives. She apparently avoided being raped but feared it all the same: “I just lived in the same tent when he left. I wasn’t comfortable. I thought someone would come.”

One of the interviewees, Joseph, said he had met Samantha Lewthwaite, the so-called White Widow in Somalia:

We met her in Kismayo. The day she came there was a drone that was brought down by al-Shabaab. I didn’t have a chance to talk to her. She had some bodyguards, and she left after she had a meeting. We only greeted each other with ‘Salaam Alaikum.’ She had lectures with our wives in Kismayo. I asked my wife about it. She told them the normal things, ‘Don’t regret if your husband is killed.’ She lectured in Mogadishu as well. She mostly visited there. When she was in Mogadishu, the emirs don’t stay long in one place. They move very quickly, so she left quickly. She was traveling with the emir Rogo. She was an emira. She was married to one of the emirs.
Foreign fighters

Kenyans in al-Shabaab are themselves considered as foreign fighters for the group. Of those interviewed, four of the men stated that they had interactions with other foreign fighters. Of these, one referenced seeing British-born Samantha Lewthwaite, and others spoke of interacting with young men who had traveled to join from the UK, Germany, Sudan, Egypt, Chad, Canada, and the United States, including the states of California, Minnesota, and Alabama. As Abu Paul explained: “All the countries, they were all there. We had Abu Mansoor Al Amriki and other Somali Americans from Minnesota, and white Americans. [The foreign fighters] were given local wives.

Abu Shaheed confirmed: “They would be from California, U.S., Canada, Chad. One was Abu Amriki. They had very good teaching skills. One was a former U.S. Marine, a sniper and good in mathematics. There was one [American] who was recently killed, who had issues with al-Shabaab.”

Asmina recalled women living in her camp in Kismayo. They were from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Uganda, and some blonde women as well.

“There were people who came from Europe who joined al-Shabaab,” William stated, but he could not identify them as they did not use real names. “We didn’t use real names. We weren’t allowed to know their names. They used false names, [kunyas]. Al Amriki, he was an American. I liked him. He was killed. He never got married there, although we suspected he had a wife in Morocco.”

The Kenyans who mixed with the other foreign fighters explained that due to their ability to speak English and understand some Arabic, they could more easily communicate with other foreign fighters from the West and Arabic-speaking nations. The Somali fighters “were separated [from the foreign fighters] because of language and culture,” Abu Shaheed explained, but “Kenyans could speak Swahili, Arabic, and English, so we were could handle the foreigners… . The [training] process was the same for the foreign jihadis [as the Kenyans] … they have to go through the investigation, basic training, etc. When they graduated, it would be eighty to ninety guys go together as a fighting unit and among them would be foreigners.”

Defectors

Four of the sample participants defected from the group and found a way to escape (while another three were allowed to leave perhaps to be sleepers, and four were sent back to attack). Of those who defected, the reasons given included disillusionment with the aims of al-Shabaab and viewing their practices as un-Islamic and overly brutal. Abu Paul, who joined out of religious zeal, no longer prays after returning from the group. He also condemns al-Shabaab as not practicing Islam in the correct manner. He stated: “They are Muslims, but not good. They judge you on face value and in a very dark manner. If they enter this room, they’d order us to lie down and they’d ask us to recite the
shahada [the Islamic declaration of faith], and if you can, then you are safe. If you don’t do it, it doesn’t mean you don’t have the desire to say it at some time, or you know it, but can’t say it. They already pass judgment on you without searching your internal soul. They will kill you.”

Asmina recalled witnessing violence, people being shot, beheaded etc.: “They didn’t force us to see. But because it’s in the camp… . It was not happening regularly at the camp, but when it happened, the mood was not a nice feeling because we saw it, another human being done like that.” She also explained that “When passing back husbands brought video on their phone and showed their wives. At first I didn’t know what I was viewing, but after I didn’t want to see it again.”

Abdulsamad, who had followed his friends into al-Shabaab, not really realizing what he was getting into until his friends admitted to him that they were not in Somali to catch more fish but to join al-Shabaab, quickly lost his enthusiasm. Describing what he was forced to do after he was assigned as a trainee in the al-Shabaab hisbah [Islamic police], he stated:

If we catch someone, we arrest them and put him in an al-Shabaab tank with water. They are pushed underwater, head downward, over and over again. I did this… . They] also cut the hands of a thief. When they arrested a thief, we would blow trumpets and when that was done people were supposed to come and watch. I felt very bad, I didn’t want to watch it, but I was forced. I didn’t want them to see that I was not watching. They might think I was not with them because even slaughtering a chicken I cannot do it. Watching a person being chopped really affected me.

Horrified by al-Shabaab’s brutality, Abdulsamad recalled: “After a period of two months, I realized they are not doing good things.” The final straw came for him when they arrested a man drinking alcohol. He recounted, “After arresting that man I was told to go to the toilet and give him my shit to eat.” This was repeated a number of times to Abdulsamad’s horror. “I had no choice. He ate it, and that’s what hurt me the most. That is not natural and right. They had him under a gun,” he said. He continued, “It was part of my training. After doing that, as part of training, then I can be given guns and start fully training. I decided to tell Fuad that I cannot stay here. I want to come back.” Initially, Abdulsamad stated:

I was happy with the teachings, but not the actions. I realized they are not doing what their teachings are saying, the only person who can judge is Allah. Some on their side could say they were justified, but according to me it was not right. Because to me, the actions, for example giving a person your shit to eat just because of wearing shorts, the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. Urinate in a cup to give it to drink, so he doesn’t repeat, it is not human. I saw this many time. The punishment depended on the person, eat that shit, drink the urine, pushups, or walk on stones as an animal. It depended on the punisher.
Joseph, who described the group as overly brutal, was also extremely angry when he had found out that al-Shabaab followers back home [Kenya] were seducing his wife, who had been thwarted by security from joining him. “There was a problem when I was in Somalia. The follows of Abu Rogo, they started seducing my wife. I called them up and asked, ‘Why did you do this?’ I was so angry. ‘I will come back,’ I told them, ‘I will come back. I’ll kill you. You are supposed to take care of my wife. Why did you seduce her? I will never stay in al-Shabaab, if this is what is happening. I will come back home.’” Regarding his wife, he explained, “She liked guns, and she married four different guys. They [al-Shabaab] tried to kill me. Before she was even married with these guys, they were lovers. Now she has four children, two of mine, two with others.”

Reflecting on al-Shabaab’s hypocrisy, Joseph stated “That is not Islamic” and pointed out that what was done in public differed from what was covered up. “In Somalia, when you’ve been caught in a corridor with a woman and you are not married to her, you’ll be slashed. Most of the fighters don’t have wives. Four guys have two have wives [each] and two don’t [have wives], so if you are in camp, they come to your home.” He added: “There are also gays there. A lot of days, in al-Shabaab, there are gays who are caught. So many bad things.” Discussing his confusion and disappointment both with al-Shabaab and the difficulties of returning home, he shared, “Some are good, some came willingly because of Allah and then they end up seeing strange things not allowed in Islam, so they decided to go home and ended up with the police and al-Shabaab following you. The community hates you, others condemn you for returning.”

Some left the group due to family and security concerns. Abu Paul described his mother becoming hysterical over him when she finally learned where he was and his father’s worry that she would go to the authorities and possibly cause problems for him, as he had paid his son’s way to go. Abu Paul came home as a result. William started doubting al-Shabaab’s religious justifications when an Egyptian scholar came to their group to preach and recruit for ISIS. The scholar preached that Christians share Prophets with Islam and so on. William, who had been taught to hate and kill Christians, felt confused, “So, I thought Christians had been granted a bad image and it was not the case.” While he began to doubt, he explained, “I could not disclose it publicly, because I had seen fellow denouncers. One denounced and was killed. Two tried to escape and were killed. They were beheaded very publicly. We could speak among ourselves only in the absence of authorities.” He also recalled how doubters began to quietly, among themselves, discuss the pressure to become martyrs: “These people say if you die fighting for the religion you miss nothing because there are seventy-two brides, beautiful virgins [awaiting the martyr in Paradise]. We applied African mentality. He is giving me money and bombs to go and kill myself, yet doesn’t he want these virgins and rush for them? Why is he behind giving me money to go and
kill myself? This African mentality helped me a lot, and I hurried to wash my hands, but not publicly.” He continued, “I don’t doubt that the houri are there, but they are not there for me to kill an innocent Christian.”

Leaving al-Shabaab was fraught with danger and difficulties. Joseph contacted security officials in Kenya, who assured him he would be granted amnesty. Joseph recalled how he was nearly caught when communicating online with the Kenyan security officials: “I was talking, and someone came and confronted me. ‘Why are you talking to this Kenyan? Do you want to go home?’ I punched him and pretended I was not,” he shared.

“There were some Tanzanians who tried to escape,” William explained. “They were beheaded in public.” As in most terrorist groups, those who want to leave are accused of being traitors: “They were accused of being spies, of being sent to monitor our movements and report to our enemies.” Trying to escape was punishable by death because leaving al-Shabaab was cast as leaving Islam. “I accepted that it was true, because of their misquoting of the scriptures,” William stated. “The law exists that once you become a Muslim and you renounce the religion, the law states you must be killed. Later, I understood that when you become a Muslim, the first thing you need to do is learn Arabic, so you can read the Quran and understand if it is a mistranslation being presented to you.”

Thomas also feared for his life in the group: “I saw someone being shot for not closing his shop. He was a Muslim and Somali. I am not in their tribe, and I am a convert. I knew these guys can do anything.”

Three of the men in the sample were offered marriage in the group and married. This made leaving the group more difficult, as some had wives who did not agree to defect and others escaped, leaving their wife and children behind, inside the group. “They offered me a wife at age 16. She was from Kenya’s south coast as well. We had one child. I was very happy but haven’t seen her since I left,” Abu Paul recalled about his difficult choice to leave the group without his family. “She wouldn’t come with me,” he stated.

Abu Layth, who did not defect but has slowly deradicalized and disengaged while serving out a life sentence, explained that he is now disillusioned with al-Shabaab’s callous disregard toward their own: “Once you are incapacitated, they don’t care.”

Another three were allowed to leave the terrorist group, though they appear to have been part of the al-Shabaab enmi and may have continued involvement in the group, plotting attacks inside Kenya. Four (enmi) were sent back to attack in Kenya. Of those who were in the enmi, it appeared that some of them were exhausted from fighting and relieved to be sent back to Kenya to carry out other duties, including possibly martyring themselves for the group.

William recalled how the group preached fellowship with Christians without really meaning it: “They told us that we should not object going back to our people
[in Kenya]. We should go as undercovers and camouflage with no hatred at all. ‘You will be used to carry out the attacks,’ they told us, to go as sleepers.”

Joseph, who defected and escaped from the group, now expresses his disillusionment with them: “When you reach there, you see that it is not what I came for. I regretted leaving my family, life, fighting without a good reason to fight.” As a young man in Kenya, Joseph had fallen under the influence of Abu Rogo, an extremist preacher. Now he resents it: “Those who are preaching here in Kenya that you have to go and fight. If it’s about going to jihad, even the teachers should go to al-Shabaab,” Joseph said, repeating a grievance that many defected and disillusioned terrorists have about their ideologues who incite for jihad—that they rarely themselves fight or send their sons to fight. 49 “Abu Rogo came to Somalia with his son,” Joseph explained. “But after training, he came back to Kenya. [But] If you [tried to] come back, they hung you.”

**Current legal status**

The current legal status of those interviewed varied. Three had been arrested and released and appeared to be working as police informants in exchange for their freedom. Three had enrolled in an amnesty program. Nine had been sentenced and were in prison. Of these, some were still in appeal processes, and one, Jermaine Grant, had been prosecuted (at the time of the interview) for visa issues rather than on terrorism-related charges, as it was easier to provide evidence for the former (see Table 8).

**Rehabilitation and reintegration programs**

At least five of the sample participants were not willing to openly denounce the group, with two clearly still believing in the group and ready to go back if they were released from prison and the other three unclear—denouncing many of its practices but still not clearly disassociating themselves completely from it. Ten of those interviewed openly denounced the group and its brutal and un-Islamic practices. Everyone interviewed feared retaliation from the group.

**Psychological costs**

All of those interviewed paid a high psychological price for their involvement in al-Shabaab. Those who fought in battles described suffering from extreme posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including becoming emotionally numb

**Table 8. Current legal status.**

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<th>Arrested &amp; released</th>
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to brutality and killing, something they described as the state of mind desired by the terrorist group. For instance, Abu Paul recalled, “I didn’t feel much [when I saw people killed]. I was already in that state of mind that they wanted me to be in. By that I mean being courageous, regardless of what I was seeing.” He went on describing how he felt watching amputations and other al-Shabaab punishments being meted out: “I didn’t feel anything. I came to my senses when I came back from Kenya. Now I become nauseated and dizzy when I see blood.”

Abu Layth described losing himself in the harsh military training and feeling al-Shabaab trainers played mind games until he totally submitted himself to them:

I was not myself, I was not scared. You reach a point. I got so tired. I just let go. I thought I am just going to follow what they are going to tell me… . When you train, you become like a robot. You don’t really think things through. Everyone is dying every day. You stop caring. The bombings, the killings, and the blood…. . Once there was a bomb, everything was killed. The trauma, when you are traumatized again and again, you no longer care. I didn’t care, and I was not scared. I was not even emotional.

Abu Layth recalled:

When I was going to Somalia, I had like this dream of making an Islamic State that is going to let me profess my religion freely and we could govern with our own laws and worship. But when I went to training, something was taken out of me. There is a movie, ‘Bourne Identity.’ You see what happens to that guy. He was taken. You cannot feel it happening to you, but it happens gradually. They make you so tired. They torture you. You can’t even say you are sick…. . No one is going to listen to you after they are done with you. Basically, you give up when you go there. You have certain expectations, but first thing you get there you are dealing with this trauma. You want to chat with your family, talk to others, chat on social media. All of this is cut. Before done with that, bombs are dropping. Then you are in training. You give up and lose a part of yourself.

William described how he was indoctrinated into hate: “There is an enmity that they inflate inside you, and once it is inflated in you it overpowers you. Then, you can be caused to hate something, anyone. [Then] the only thing I can do is kill.”

Some of the al-Shabaab fighters described becoming addicted to the adrenalin of fighting and the violence. Abu Shaheed explained, “I went there to fight. That was my work. It got to a point that if I don’t hear the sound of bullets, I get sick.” While ISIS routinely provided Captagon, a powerful stimulant to its fighters to keep them aggressive, courageous, and hyped-up in battles, al-Shabaab fighters denied taking any kind of stimulants. “I didn’t take anything,” Abu Shaheed claimed. “It was pure adrenalin. Even when there was no fighting, I’d go to the ocean. I’d go and fire my gun,” he stated. “I became addicted to fighting. I’m going to take a bullet. I’m going to meet my friends in jannah, if there is
something like that,” he explained his mind-set at the time, admitting that despite being addicted to fighting, he had his doubts over whether it would ultimately land him in Paradise. He now thinks he wasted his time in Somalia and complained, “I have a lot of injuries and mentally I’m in an [unhealthy] state. I just think of fighting. News that makes me happy is when someone dies.” Indeed, he admitted that, “When somebody dies, I get a high for a while. Then I suddenly feel bad. That is a struggle.”

Joseph, who was in al-Shabaab as a teen, recalled feeling sick after watching his first beheading and now suffering from sleep problems and nightmares: “I was very sick, I told my friend, ‘I don’t want to see this again. I can’t watch this.’ In a week, we beheaded 15 people. [After] you have to feel happy. You can’t complain. If you complain, you are in a very bad position. You will be taken to prison and told, ‘You have to cheer up and say Allah Akbar!’

Abu Paul described flashbacks: “The ideas, the bad pictures that would come to me during the day. I’d always think I’m dying.” He also suffered nightmares: “I had a lot of bad dreams, dreams that I’m shot and dreams that I’m fighting.” Like many trauma victims, his sleep is disturbed by these remembrances: “I wake up, no more sleep.”

Naysi also suffered from posttraumatic symptoms, stating, “When I got home, any slight movement or jolt and the images would be conjured up again. When you leave somewhere, you have a lot of thoughts.”

Abu Layth also suffers from nightmares and posttraumatic recall: “I have dreams of being chased by helicopters. At night, [I dream that a] brigade of drones is chasing me. I see those people who have died. I am fighting, and bullets are coming at me.”

Abu Shaheed suffers the same: “[I have] many bad dreams, about fighting.” Some suffer from survival guilt and don’t expect to live long lives. He stated that he suffers from guilt. “I have taken life and it belongs to Allah. I’m seeking forgiveness from Allah. I don’t see myself living that long.”

Many suffer regrets about losing out on their schooling and if imprisoned being separated from their families. William, who is serving a 15-year sentence after defecting from al-Shabaab, stated: “I would not want any other fellow human being to come and experience what I am experiencing now. I have missed a lot in life.” He further explained: “These events are coming to me because of my own self. Anyone would be cheated to follow in these footsteps. It’s a very big regret. I even regret to let not any other man to end up in such kinds of places. I have not gotten to see my parents again, but I do communicate home. I am informed my father passed away while I was in prison. I have not seen my brother and sisters.” William’s wife and children are now also lost to him as well, as she was a Somali living in a refugee camp that was disbanded. “She may have been married by another man,” he stated.
“What hurts me the most is thoughts about my late mother,” Musa explained, although he went partly with a desire to be employed, so he could take care of her: “I left her with a wound in her heart. She passed on. I didn’t even get to attend her funeral. I ran away from her. But even with the kind of things I did, she still got me a lawyer. I didn’t get to carry the remains of my mother and bury her. I really loved her, and she loved me back.”

Thomas talked about how hard prison is to endure and how much he wants to be enrolled in a prison rehabilitation program: “When you are locked alone in a room you need someone to guide you. I even tried to hang myself. I was so hurting with no one to understand me. The officers aren’t trained to handle a terrorist. We need a specialist on how to handle terrorists. If I become violent from stress, I was beaten. I almost died. I used to fight with the officers. I knew that our government believes that we cannot change.”

Of those who truly defected from the group, all feared that al-Shabaab cadres would come and force them back into serving the group or kill them. “Once a mujahed, you are always a mujahed wherever you are,” Abu Paul shared. Abdulsamad spoke along the similar lines: “Automatically they said, when you join this group, there is no leaving. When you just get there, you have already joined.” Abu Layth recalled being brought into the al-Shabaab emni with no choice of backing out: “Our commander told us, ‘You already know who I am and know my voice and face. Once you know us, you are part of us.’”

Most of those we interviewed expressed haunting fears of being hunted by al-Shabaab, including fears over extrajudicial killings, especially those suspected to be sleeper cells of al-Shabaab. Joseph, an al-Shabaab fighter who escaped back to Kenya, stated: “I was shot in a barber shop. Someone came and shot me. I was hiding, I don’t know if it was police or al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab would say, ‘Why did you come back? You are showing other people to come back. You are a murtad [an apostate]!’ [After that] I had to go very far away and stay with my brother for one and half years.”

Joseph doesn’t feel safe even now. He explained, “I know they follow me, but right now the police have contained al-Shabaab. Everyone is fearing me,” he explained the stigma. “If you were with al-Shabaab, in our community till now, they don’t talk to you. The family also doesn’t want to stay with you. You’ll bring problems in your home.” He also complained how obtaining employment is difficult: “People fear al-Shabaab [and their returnees]. It’s hard to get work if you come back home.”

William shared these concerns, knowing he will suffer stigma and not be able to be employed by the government. He worries about his future after prison and if he will be able to resume being a teacher: “The biggest issue is the kind of life I am going to lead after prison.” He also worries about being killed by al-Shabaab for leaving them: “When I am released these people are as connected as the government. They can punish me.”
Most parents were not radicalized, as their offspring had been, and were in fact very happy when their youths returned home. In some cases, the parents of their wayward sons corrected their misperceptions that they were not loved or had failed in some way before going to al-Shabaab and helped them to overcome their sense of shame. In Joseph’s case, unlike most of the others, his mother was as radicalized, or more so than he, having also fallen under Sheik Rogo’s influence. Joseph explained that his mother asked, “Why did you come? There are problems here in Kenya. Why come here? There is no work, no anything,” she said. “If you get another chance, go back.”

Abu Paul was allowed by al-Shabaab leaders to return home in a negotiated settlement between a group of sixty to seventy Kenyans who wanted to return after their leader was killed. “When we were in Somalia and wanted to come back, there was already a group that had been sent to do some [terrorist] work in Kenya. We were not part of that, but I knew, since I was a good soldier, I knew they [al-Shabaab] could contact me at any time. I was expecting it and I was very afraid about it.” He described becoming hyperaroused as a result. “You don’t sleep well at all. So jittery. A motorbike passing by, a dog barking, something is about to go down. It’s quite disturbing.” He continued, “I didn’t want to see any vehicle approaching me, [I had] high awareness. The biggest fear [I had, was] that I’d be picked up and also be shot.”

Naysi is so afraid of al-Shabaab that he lives a very constricted life as a result. “Right now, if I get a job offer, I can’t go. I can’t do anything. I am usually in a state of shock, hyperalert, whereby if I see a person, I think he’ll say, ‘There he is! There he is!’ I don’t go out a lot. I just go to the main town for a half hour,” he shared. Naysi’s fear is so strong he has not even shared his al-Shabaab experiences with his family members. He stated, “I haven’t told my wife. She is always surprised why I’m quiet. I told no one. I pray at home. I don’t go to mosque. It’s not easy. I’m grateful to be alive.”

**Amnesty and rehabilitation**

**Amnesty**

According to the Kenyan police and security officials interviewed for this research, hundreds of al-Shabaab cadres return under the radar. Some turn themselves in for amnesty and rehabilitation programs, but others live in constant fear. Naysi, who was tricked into the group, thinking he was getting a regular job when he was taken into a training camp, explained that once he escaped back into Kenya he had “no trouble with the police. They didn’t know where I’d gone. When I left home my family didn’t know where I was going. They thought it was for a job, and in Laconi we were told that jobs are elsewhere.” This perhaps explains a lot of the stigma that is reported to occur in the families of al-Shabaab members who do not speak about their son or daughter having left or returned home. Although Naysi, who was accepted
into a rehabilitation program, wondered why he should be in trouble with the law, asking “Is it a crime to run away from them?”

As described by the officials, the amnesty program in Kenya is problematic, as at the time it was introduced it did not clearly delineate between those returnees who denounced the group upon their return and those who had blood on their hands and might still be dangerous. Kenyan authorities run a rehabilitation program for those arrested and released and for those enrolled in amnesty programs, but police and security officials make clear that those with blood on their hands will be prosecuted. Most of the al-Shabaab returnees fear for their lives, that they can be killed by al-Shabaab or by the Kenyan authorities. “My belief was when you are back you are already a criminal. You never know what is going to happen next,” Abu Paul said.

He found solace after enrolling in the Kenyan amnesty program, adding, “[The posttraumatic symptoms] stopped after I surrendered to the government. I got a lot of peace within me. I had only the thought of AS coming after me, after I surrendered to the state. I must fear them to this day.” He continued, “I am very grateful to the government for enabling me to have some peace compared to a while back. These days I can sleep. That is what assisted me to come out—amnesty. I was really disturbed and didn’t have any peace.” When asked if he felt the Kenyan government was fair, Abu Paul said, “I never thought that the government would be this fair, after everything. The process I went through, it wasn’t a hard approach, fist and punches. It was through counsel and talking.”

“I am telling through my experience,’ Joseph stated. “Learn though me, amnesty is working. I am alive, and the [Kenyan] government is okay with me.” The road was not easy. “I was in prison for four months,” he admitted. “Amnesty, you are not just let go. They will keep you for interrogation, [asking] ‘Why did you come back?’ They were okay with me; I was speaking the truth, and I didn’t do anything.”

Joseph, an al-Shabaab cadre who defected and escaped from the group back into Kenya, contacted Kenyan security authorities over the Internet while still in Somalia. His handler, as others also recalled, asked him first to act as an informant or help somehow, but then assured him that he could have amnesty when he came out. “I didn’t know about the amnesty,” Joseph explained when he first made contact. “I just wanted help. I thought I have to talk to this guy, so I talked to him and said [online], ‘I want to come back home. Will you help me?’ The guy asked, ‘Why do you want to come back?’ I told him my story. He said, ‘I will give you a friend who will help you,’ ” he explained. The security official first tried to get Joseph to inform and help some hostages and sent Joseph money and a laptop inside Somalia to help him in that regard, but also assured him that when he made it back to Kenya, he would be safe. “I was about to die,” Joseph described his nine-day walk to the Kenyan border. While his arrival back into Kenya involved being
roughed up. Joseph recalled that once he was put in interrogation, “They helped me a lot.” Advising others, he said, “If you cooperate, our [Kenyan] President announced an amnesty. If you surrender now, you will get amnesty. If you stay, you will be caught and killed. I came at the right time.”

**Out-of- and in-prison rehabilitation programs**

Kenyan authorities run both an out-of-prison rehabilitation and reintegration program and an in-prison-based rehabilitation program and enroll those imprisoned under terrorism charges whom they deem ready for it. Two of those interviewed in prison were keen to be enrolled in the program, but the police said their stance on the group, unwillingness to fully confess, and their continued displays of violence in prison precluded them from being enrolled at present.

Many of the al-Shabaab fighters described losing their selves to the group as they submitted to it and became emotionally numbed to brutality and killing. Whether such individuals could be rehabilitated remains an important question.

Abu Layth, who became a part of the al-Shabaab’s *enmi* and was sent into Kenya to attack tourists, recalled going to the club Bella Vista: “There were some tourists in that club,” he stated, as they entered with a handgun and grenades. “I said, ‘Let me see if I can pass, and I passed, but as I was passing, he [fellow attacker] just threw the grenade. It hit the roof and came back. I knew it was not a good thing, I tried to dive but it hit my left side.” Abu Layth tried to run away but was too injured to escape: “I threw my three grenades and threw my gun into the sewer and then I blacked out.” He woke up in hospital. “I was for a week in hospital. I was the only victim. Then the police came. They called me by my kunya in Somali. I felt betrayed that they knew it.” Indeed, Abu Layth’s “brothers” in al-Shabaab had betrayed him, but his intended victims then rehumanized him: “I was for two months in hospital and this nurse, Esther, was a Catholic nun. She used to come. She told me, ‘I know you are a human.’ I had refused to eat. She would encourage me to eat. She would wash me, and she’d smile. I got affection. That was something that was missing for a very long time. When I got very sick in Somalia, no one cared. If you eat, it’s up to you. She took care of me, and I realized they are not bad people.” He explained: “If I had come to target people like this, I had done something bad. If I had arrested her, I wouldn’t have treated her well. Also, the doctor was very good. He was concerned about his patient. While everyone around me were saying, ‘He should die, cut his leg off, amputate,’ he said, ‘No I will treat him.’ They made me think twice. They brought back to my senses. They gave me back something I had lost.”

Those who joined al-Shabaab as young men, or even as child soldiers (under age 18), had a good part of their identities and habits formed by a violent mind-set. For them, the task is to find again the human, empathetic part that once existed inside, or if empathy was never developed in their characters, to now actually form it. Abu Shaheed, who admitted that he had
become addicted to fighting and was a brutal killer, recalled talking to his
mother while he was in al-Shabaab and her reminding him of his past upbring-
ing: “Each time, she said, ‘Please don’t kill anyone. We are not that type of
family.’” Yet her son had become a killing machine. In his case, it still remains
to be seen if he can recover that lost part of himself. The fact that he remained
attached to his mother is a good sign, and he can admit what he has become,
but perhaps not enough. “I called her many times. I loved her,” he explained.
He is so disturbed over his PTSD and his continued nightmares that he
admitted to wanting to find a cure: “I get dreams about fighting. It arouses
my curiosity to buy books that talk about dreams.” He also admits that he is
hungry for Islamic knowledge to correct what he learned from al-Shabaab: “I
would love that, to be taught by a scholar.”

For some, the road to rehabilitation began as they became disillusioned
with the group and decided to defect. Joseph, who had been indoctrinated
into hate as a young man and who despised anyone who deviated from Abu
Rogo’s jihadi teachings, stated, “Later I started realizing it was wrong. This is
not Islam, killing people.”

Abu Layth stated, “I have life imprisonment, but I’m grateful because I could be
in a worse situation. I was arrested and treated well. Some were arrested and
disappeared. At least my mother knows where I am.” He reflected: “I was given
a chance to repent and learn and appreciate diversity. Prison is not comfortable,
but I always tend to think I would have done a lot of terrible things by now, during
these seven years. I am finding peace with my God. I ask for forgiveness. I’ve hurt
a lot of people who should never have been hurt.”

Some of those returned also have had a spiritual crisis after serving in al-
Shabaab. Abu Paul, who joined out of Islamic zeal, feels angry about the
sheiks who convinced him about jihad and said he now no longer prays. Abu
Abdulsamad stated: “Because of those al-Shabaab rules, I was fed up. Even
the Koran doesn’t say you beat up a person because of drinking and smoking
and shorts. It was against the Koran what they were saying. I know that even
if you do anything wrong, an individual is not to punish you. It’s between
you and Allah, and He will judge you at the end of your life, not to be
punished by a human being.”

**Conclusion and recommendation**

This article probed social and psychological factors in the recruitment of
sixteen individuals into al-Shabaab in Somalia. In the case of those who joined,
we sought to understand their experiences, roles, and observations inside the
group and their pathways in disengaging from the group. A number of
vulnerabilities and motivations for recruitment to terrorism operating at the
individual, family, and group levels were identified, including long-term
repercussions of having joined. Disengagement and deradicalization factors and processes, when they occurred, were also explored.

In addressing Kenya’s existing CVE initiatives, some authors have stressed the need to strengthen our understanding of deradicalization processes of former combatants under government amnesty programs as well as to focus on preventative interventions that address “the dearth of socio-economic opportunities, discrimination resulting from marginalization, poor governance abetting the deteriorating state-citizen relationship, violation of human rights, and selective application of the rule of law [that contribute to collective grievances in Kenya’s coastal communities].” In this context, the in-depth interviews contained here provide equally invaluable pieces of information that could be used for prevention purposes. Likewise, the research project involves producing counternarrative videos of al-Shabaab defectors willing to denounce al-Shabaab. These counternarratives may also be useful for prevention and interventions. It is important to note that there are likely too many Kenyan al-Shabaab returnees to locate them all, and some will go under the radar to either deradicalize on their own or continue as a danger to society. Of those who believe that the government will treat them fairly and who are willing to confess and go through rehabilitation, a large percentage may manage to reintegrate—although as evidenced in these interviews, it is a tough path. Others may never be redeemed.

While there were many psychological, physical, and emotional costs of joining al-Shabaab, there were also psychological, financial, and emotional rewards of joining, in many cases short-lived. For instance, some of the young men tested their manhood, while some were looking for adventure, marriage, and employment and found it until the costs they paid became too high and they became disillusioned with the un-Islamic and brutal nature of al-Shabaab. Others, however, are still true believers, despite being caught and imprisoned. Jermaine Grant, for instance, described an ongoing belief that the jihadist must suffer for his beliefs and expect to spend time in prison. “There is no jihad without prison. Every jihadi must expect to be killed, wounded, or be put in prison. Muslims believe any hardship you go through, in the next life, you will be more comfortable. Allah is rewarding for all the hardship he undergoes… . Jihad is not a game. The mujahid must know death. He is going to be killed or will go to jail.”

In recent years, al-Shabaab has spread its influence and recruitment into neighboring countries. Moreover, in aligning itself with al-Qaeda, and to some extent with ISIS, al-Shabaab has widened its goals to establishing a global Caliphate and its enemies to all Westerners. Jermaine Grant explained the justification groups like al-Shabaab take to target innocents, even Muslims, anywhere in the West: “Osama bin Laden, Zawahiri, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, they all announced Western countries, Europe and U.S. [as enemies of Islam]. Those who continue to reside there they are in a war zone
and an attack can take place anytime, and it’s not a problem for mujahedeen. They don’t need to stop.”

Indeed, it is unlikely groups like al-Shabaab are anywhere near stopping. The issue is whether countries like Kenya, and others plagued by their recruitment drives, can adequately address the grievances, vulnerabilities, and motivations that youths have, to which al-Shabaab, at least in the first moments, appears to cater. Of those who have gone and returned, the question remains as to whether well-thought-out rehabilitation programs can be created that for the most part work in sorting out who can be rehabilitated and tailoring programs that help them to rehumanize and overcome the brutality and trauma they have undergone and in which they have taken part.

**Talking to terrorists—action-based research**

At the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), we conduct our research interviews with returned, defected, and incarcerated terrorist cadres for three purposes: to learn about their trajectories into and back out of terrorism, to learn their thoughts and experiences in the group, and to see if we can use that learning to produce creative programs and products to prevent and rehabilitate those attracted to terrorist groups. In this case, fifteen of those interviewed agreed to be video recorded and to have their video possibly made into a short counternarrative clip. Three such video clips have already been made and are subtitled in English, Somali, and Swahili and are being actively distributed on YouTube, Facebook, and in face-to-face interactions. These videos are “The Lioness and the Lion—Traveling to Jannah Together,” “Jihad Is Our Way,” and “Should I Join al-Shabaab?” The goal is to do the same with the rest of the video interviews.

Out of the 136 ISIS and 16 al-Shabaab video interviews we have conducted to date, we have created over 100 counternarrative video clips subtitled in the 25+ languages in which these groups recruit. We train teachers, law enforcement, prison officials, and counterterrorism and prevention workers on the use of these materials. The knowledge gained from studying these terrorists is used to equip professionals to make effective interventions. It is our hope that these tools will help break the terrorist brand.

**Turning away from al-Shabaab—advice from insiders**

We believe the words of these former al-Shabaab cadres denouncing al-Shabaab and advising others to avoid the group based on their own experiences inside terrorism are also useful in thinking about ways to use insider voices to denounce the terrorist group. For instance, Abdulsamad said: “I am always advising those small kids to go to school and to not do as I did. I want
to tell them if they decide to cross over, they won’t be able to come back. They will never see their families again, may be killed, and will be wanted by the government.” He added, “Being in Kenya you can be a good Muslim, but whatever they tell you to do in al-Shabaab is not good religion. Whatever they teach about Quran their actions are not what is in the Quran.”

Asmina advised: “If you try to run away, you can be killed. They will shoot you or behead you. You may never see your parents again, and you have no connection to home. There is nothing good in Somalia.”

Thomas reminded youths: “You cannot fight for a religion. Allah is mighty enough to fight for himself. When you are in trouble, you call on Allah. You must be mad that you think you fight for Allah.” He also advised, “Life is hard [in prison], being locked up 23 hours a day.”

Naysi warned: “Al-Shabaab is not a good organization. They are not good Muslims. They lied to me and oppressed me so much. If any other people go, there they will also get hurt.

Joseph advised young Kenyans: “There is always regret when you go to Somalia. Don’t go.”

Abu Shaheed warned: “Read and learn a lot. The more you learn, the more you can make a profound judgment.”

Aisha stated: “What I’d like to advise young girls is that jihad is not the only way to go to jannah. There a lot of ways to go to jannah. To respect your parents, that is the big way.” She added, “If I did what I was thinking at that time, if I would have gone into a crowd and blown myself up, and I would have gone to hell. They were lying.” She also warned: “In social media, these people they are saying things they are not sure of. If you are a Muslim, you have to study the Koran and know what it says. Some people twist the story. Don’t be tricked.”

Abu Paul, whose father financed his trip into Somalia, stated: “My advice is to parents, especially, don’t make decisions that will put your children in trouble.” He also advised women, “You get there, you are married, your husband dies, you are given to another one, after a few months, he dies, and you are passed to another.”

Abu Layth advised: “A lot of things should be left to the movies. You have only one life. You don’t get a second chance in life. In the movies you see a happy ending. I have life imprisonment.” He added: “Anywhere you go to fight jihad, you should know you are not going to come back, and you are not going to be allowed to call home. They take away your phones. If they suspect that you are a spy, they take you to court and sentence you to death and shoot you or behead you.”

William, who went to enhance his financial condition, advised: “Poverty is a very big problem. I cannot give a solution, but it’s a good way to entrap the people. As a person who has been trapped and joined them, I would strongly advise my fellows not to do so.”
Despite the mistakes committed by these men and women by joining a terrorist group, it is heartening that they can give such advice to warn others. The fact is that those who were indoctrinated into hate and served a heinous group, and even those who admit becoming addicted to violence and killing, can pass their experiences on to others as truly credible warnings not to join—given that they as insiders know that al-Shabaab is un-Islamic, dishonest, and overly brutal. The task now is to creatively use their words in counternarrative messaging to fight terrorist groups and ideologies, to warn others, and to prevent them from making the same mistake. This is one among many important ways and CVE tools to fight the appeal of violent extremist and terrorist groups like al-Shabaab.

Notes


15. As cited in David M. Anderson and Jacob McKnight, “Understanding al-Shabaab: Clan, Islam, and Insurgency in Kenya.”


19. Ibid.


26. Ibid.
27. Though recently sentenced in Kenya for his involvement with al-Shabaab, Jermaine Grant remains a strong supporter of al-Shabaab, al-qaeda, and other militant jihadi groups.
32. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
48. Interviews suggest that the majority of al-Shabaab recruits interviewed in our sample underwent the same training before being assigned a role.
53. See ICSVE YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUYk_1J1cJ4&list=PLqpy96DxqN-dK01K_FikteDoSxScG_OT0&index=76.
54. See ICSVE YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaPrzURtE7E&index=75&list=PLqpy96DxqN-dK01K_FikteDoSxScG_OT0.
55. See ICSVE YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlxCvLxOYUo&list=PLqpy96DxqN-dK01K_FikteDoSxScG_OT0&index=61.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.