

## Overcoming Reintegration Barriers for Former Al-Shabaab Members in Somalia

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The disengagement and reintegration of al-Shabaab militants—an al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group that has waged an insurgency in Somalia since 2006—is a highly complex process, shaped by individual motivations, security risks, and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. This research brief examines key pathways to defection from the group, the role of clan and community networks, and the structural challenges of social reinsertion. By assessing existing efforts, security dynamics, and policy gaps, it provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen group exit strategies, community reintegration efforts, and long-term stability.<sup>2</sup>

### Pathways to Disengagement and Reintegration

Disengagement from al-Shabaab follows distinct yet complex pathways: exposure to civilian casualties often serves as a critical breaking point, particularly when violence directly impacts defectors' own clans or communities. Many interviewees also pointed to the disconnect between the group's stated religious principles and its actual practices, particularly the killing of innocent Muslims, clan members, and the extortion of vulnerable populations through "taxation."

*"I realized we had been wrong all along, and the community was not like what we had been told to believe about them."*

Defectors' roles within al-Shabaab significantly shape their exit strategies. Combatants face higher security risks but often have clearer surrender routes through military channels. In contrast, supporting members may find physical escape easier but struggle with vetting barriers and proving disengagement. Both categories of al-Shabaab members, if appropriately leveraged, can provide insights into the inner workings of the organization, allowing for the optimization of other security efforts.

Most defectors follow either formal or informal pathways, with formal routes—such as government screening, placement in rehabilitation centers, and structured reintegration programs—tend to prove more sustainable. Informal pathways without institutional backing, often facilitated by clan elders, provide alternative reintegration avenues but vary in effectiveness.

Strong family, clan, and community-based support networks play a decisive role in facilitating successful group exits. They are important intermediaries, often reaching out to members still in the group and negotiating safe surrender and rehabilitation placements.

*"My uncle arranged my surrender, ensuring I wasn't arrested on arrival. I knew if I was caught, I would be executed on the spot."*

They also provide safe housing and basic necessities while mediating reintegration with the community upon arrival. Clan structures, in particular, function as organized, sophisticated support, sponsorship and advocacy mechanisms, often complementing or substituting state-led efforts.

The success of disengagement and reintegration varies by region and depends on multiple factors: the availability and easy accessibility of amnesty programs, economic assistance during transition, protection from retaliation, and community acceptance. While many defectors face severe challenges—including security threats, resource shortages, and initial distrust—data suggests that formal rehabilitation centers offering comprehensive and consistent support (skills training, religious counseling, and economic assistance) significantly improve long-term reintegration outcomes.

### Security Dynamics

The security landscape for former al-Shabaab members is shaped by persistent threats and inconsistent protection mechanisms. Defectors face ongoing risks from the group, including death threats, surveillance, and targeted reprisals. As such, there is a limited opportunity to leverage recent defectors' insider knowledge to optimize other security efforts and eliminate these immediate threats to both the defectors and their communities.

Protection typically relies on the aforementioned mix of formal and informal mechanisms. While institutional and security force protections provide structure, community-based networks often determine whether a defector can safely reintegrate in the first place.

Many defectors fear arrest, harassment, or extrajudicial reprisals, making them hesitant to engage with government forces. Building trust between defectors and security institutions remains a significant challenge—one where family and clan networks, along with improved information channels, can help bridge the gap.

At the same time, defectors encounter deep mistrust from local communities, which often suspect defectors of being spies or potential security risks, particularly in areas that experience ongoing al-Shabaab activity. As a result, defectors must carefully navigate their movements and communications in their everyday lives.

These tensions escalate during security incidents, when defectors tend to face heightened scrutiny, arrests, or surveillance. Sustainable reintegration must balance security needs with rehabilitation, leveraging certification, local leader endorsements, and ongoing monitoring to reduce recidivism.

<sup>1</sup>The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U. S. Government.

<sup>2</sup>This brief draws on a three-year (2021–2024) Corioli Institute study, featuring 16 life histories, 179 key informant interviews, and 15 focus groups in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Kismayo. It analyzes defection, disengagement, and reintegration across diverse contexts.

## Socio-Economic Reintegration

The social reintegration of former al-Shabaab members heavily depends on community acceptance, which partly hinges on the public approval of clan elders. Those with strong clan backing typically experience smoother transitions, while those without such support face greater social and security challenges. Taking institutional pathways can further enhance the credibility of a former al-Shabaab member's intentions to reintegrate. However, public perception remains a major obstacle, even after formal rehabilitation.

***"Every time there was an attack nearby, people would look at me differently. It was like I never really left al-Shabaab in their eyes."***

Economic reintegration is another critical pillar of long-term community-level stability. Many defectors lack formal education and marketable skills, making employment a significant challenge. Rehabilitation programs offer vocational training and business support, though results are inconsistent. While some transition successfully into new livelihoods, many struggle with unemployment and financial precarity. Reliable work is essential, not only to generate income but also to contribute to the social integration of the individual.

***"First, I completed the program. Then, with my clan's help, I opened a small shop. People started seeing me as a businessman, not a former fighter."***

The reintegration framework must balance formal institutional support with community-based structures under a locally informed approach. While government-run centers provide training, success can depend on religious leaders, community figures, and clan networks. Moreover, reducing stigma benefits from both the formal certification of the rehabilitation process and community endorsement achieved through effective advocacy.

## Program and Policy Design

As another aspect, effective reintegration of former al-Shabaab members requires strong coordination among government agencies, security forces, and international partners. While Somalia's government leads reintegration efforts, international support remains limited and unstructured, leaving security forces and intelligence agencies to manage intake without consistent technical or financial backing. This lack of coordination represents a missed opportunity, as reintegration programs elsewhere have benefited from structured rather than isolated partnerships with UN agencies, NGOs, and unilateral and multilateral donors. Expanding these collaborations could enhance multiple domains.

## Cost Effectiveness of Reintegration Programs

Government-run centers carry the highest per-capita costs, covering housing, food, and administrative expenses. In contrast, clan-based reintegration reduces direct expenses by relying on family and community assistance. While this community-driven model optimizes

resources, it also leads to uneven reintegration outcomes, particularly for defectors without strong clan ties.

***"My clan elder took everything on his shoulders and finally connected me to the local authority."***

A cost-benefit analysis shows that investing in community-based reintegration support in addition to formal rehabilitation mechanisms is more cost-effective than security-only approaches. Military operations, long-term detention, and surveillance demand significant resources, whereas successful social and economic reintegration lowers security costs by reducing recidivism and disrupting common cycles of violence and revenge. However, Somalia's reintegration frameworks remain underfunded and lack structured support.

Funding inconsistencies and the aforementioned donor fragmentation pose risks to program sustainability. Aligning reintegration with existing economic initiatives—such as sustainable agriculture and fishing, small business development, and public-private partnerships—could reduce costs while expanding economic opportunities for former members of al-Shabaab, their families, and their communities. Additionally, robust impact assessments are needed to evaluate returns on investment, tracking employment rates, recidivism reduction, and community acceptance—bolstered by locally defined success indicators—to ensure efficient resource allocation.

## Conclusion

The reintegration of former al-Shabaab members is a complex yet essential process for Somalia's long-term stability. This research brief has outlined the key pathways to disengagement, safety and security risks, socio-economic reintegration barriers, and policy gaps that shape the success or failure of these efforts. While clan networks, economic opportunities, and trust-building with security institutions play critical roles, a lack of information, persistent legal uncertainties, funding constraints, and inconsistent policy and program coordination undermine sustainability.

Investing in improved information dissemination on program offers, structured defector debriefing and rehabilitation, community acceptance mechanisms, and economic reintegration is not only a security imperative but also a cost-effective strategy that reduces security threats, preventing re-radicalization and re-engagement in illicit economies. A coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is essential to addressing the gaps in policy, funding, and long-term monitoring.

The following pages detail the key challenges and comprehensive recommendations necessary to strengthen disengagement strategies and support a reintegration framework that fosters security and long-term social stability in communities where former al-Shabaab members are received and pursue peaceful livelihoods.

# Barriers to Effective Reintegration

Pathways to  
Disengagement

Security  
Dynamics

Socio-Economic  
Reintegration

Program &  
Policy Design

Cost-  
Effectiveness

- 1. Persistent Security Threats & Defection Risks** – Many defectors face multiple failed attempts before successfully disengaging from al Shabaab, and the risk of reprisals against them and their families remains high.
- 2. Legal & Policy Uncertainty** – The absence of clear amnesty provisions and inconsistent legal protections create fear of arrest or retaliation, deterring defections and limiting program enrollment.
- 3. Gender-Specific Challenges** – Female defectors face heightened risks during the disengagement process, including security threats, stigma, and family responsibilities that complicate their reintegration pathways.
- 4. Fragmented Coordination Among Key Actors** – Weak collaboration between state-led reintegration programs, clan-based reconciliation efforts, and security forces reduces the overall effectiveness of reintegration initiatives.
- 5. Social Stigma & Community Mistrust** – Deep-seated suspicion toward defectors, coupled with inconsistent clan protection, limits community acceptance and increases the risk of social exclusion or re-radicalization.
- 6. Economic Reintegration Barriers** – Limited market-driven vocational training, weak private sector engagement, and lack of post-program economic support leave defectors vulnerable to unemployment and re-recruitment.
- 7. Unequal Clan Support** – Defectors without strong clan ties often face exclusion, reducing their access to essential social protection networks and increasing their vulnerability to radicalization or criminal activity.
- 8. Limited Access to Secure Housing and Livelihoods** – Many defectors struggle to access safe housing and sustainable employment, leaving them at high risk of economic hardship and social isolation.
- 9. Weak Monitoring & Evaluation Systems** – The lack of consistent tracking mechanisms for reintegration outcomes, including recidivism, employment, and social acceptance, hinders adaptive learning and program improvement.
- 10. Limited International & Regional Engagement** – Weak collaboration with international organizations results in missed opportunities for technical expertise, funding, and long-term sustainability of reintegration programs.
- 11. Funding Gaps & Weak Donor Coordination** – Heavy reliance on government resources, with minimal sustained donor engagement, threatens the financial viability and scalability of programs.
- 12. Gaps in Economic Reintegration and Long-Term Support** – While vocational training is provided, limited post-program monitoring and a lack of economic opportunities leave many defectors vulnerable to unemployment and re-recruitment, reducing overall program effectiveness.



# Strategic Recommendations

## Pathways to Disengagement

- **Integrated Systems:** Enhanced coordination between state and clan systems to create more effective pathways to disengagement for all participants.
- **Security and Infrastructure:** Expand purpose-built rehabilitation facilities with family units, while strengthening institutional transparency and specialized security force training for family-centered protective environments.
- **Strategic Communications:** Amplify successful reintegration narratives across digital platforms (WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok) to encourage disengagement.



## Security Dynamics

- **Secure Transit Pathways:** Integrate clan networks and security agencies to create secure transit pathways with verified documentation for defector reintegration.
- **Security-Community Integration Mechanisms:** Establish joint security-clan committees to coordinate defector vetting, monitoring, and protection, integrating traditional clan authority with formal security protocols.
- **Gender-Specific Considerations:** Design gender-sensitive reintegration programs that address women defectors' distinct security needs and family responsibilities.



## Socio-Economic Reintegration

- **Community-Based Reintegration:** Establish clan-led committees that combine traditional mediation with public awareness campaigns, leveraging successful cases to build trust and reduce defector stigma.
- **Climate-Adaptive Economic Resilience:** Equip defectors with sustainable livelihoods through training and private sector partnerships in climate security and resource management.
- **Evidence-Based Social Cohesion:** Leverage religious leaders, elders, and mediators to foster reconciliation and trust. Integrate behavioral and social cohesion metrics to track outcomes.



## Program and Policy Considerations

- **Strengthened Cooperation:** Enhance multilateral and regional coordination to streamline cross-border defection management and support reintegration efforts.
- **Legal Framework for Reintegration:** Establish a transparent system for amnesty, rehabilitation, and transitional justice with safeguards for supporters and a standardized vetting process.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Approaches:** Ensure comprehensive reintegration by leveraging multi-sector expertise to provide a holistic framework for transition and sustainable group exit.



## Cost Effectiveness and Sustainability

- **Tiered Reintegration for Cost Efficiency:** Prioritize state support for high-risk defectors while guiding low-risk individuals through community-led programs to reduce costs.
- **Sustainable Reintegration Funding:** Align donor support with national development, leveraging private sector jobs and public-private partnerships.
- **Impact-Driven Monitoring:** Track recidivism, employment, and community acceptance to ensure cost-effective, security-aligned reintegration.

