

AL-SHABAAB'S EXPLOITATION OF EXTENSIVE DISPLACEMENTS IN SOMALIA: The Correlation Between Displacement and Radicalization

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- ♦ What is the connection between displacements and radicalization?
- ♦ How does al-Shabaab utilize displaced people?
- ♦ In what ways may al-Shabaab be empowered by Somali IDP camps?

INTRODUCTION

Somalia, over the years, has suffered from prolonged civil conflict and terrorist activities. It has been witnessing repeated clan disputes over different issues, including control and ownership of open terrain, grazing land, agricultural land, as well as water wells and reservoirs. Besides each other, the clans have also clashed with the al-Shabaab terrorist organization. So has the Somali government. Al-Shabaab employs suicide bombings, assassinations, and assaults against clans they cannot rule, as well as government officials and institutions. The Somali government has been conducting operations against al-Shabaab, aiming to reclaim significant territories from the group's control. However, al-Shabaab continues to maintain a presence in certain areas by leveraging local dynamics and support from various sources.

Alongside the insecurity – instigated by clan-based militias and terrorism – the country is susceptible to climate change, resulting in extended and recurrent

droughts and catastrophic floods that have devastated properties and agricultural yields. For instance, in May 2024, during the Gu' (spring) season, over 268,000 people were affected by the Shabeelle River flooding. At least 38,700 people were displaced and suffered the loss of farms, houses, and other properties.¹

Insecurity and climate change are primary drivers of displacement. By the end of 2024, Somalia's internally displaced population had climbed to 4 million individuals residing in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) throughout the country. They depend on local and international relief organizations for assistance; yet, their livelihoods remain precarious, the aid provided is corrupt and mishandled, and a significant number of the people are unemployed. The displaced are accompanied by international migrants who enter Somalia's open borders. Somalia has emerged as a

1 "Somalia 2024 Gu' (April–June) Season Floods: Bi-Weekly Situation Report No. 3", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), May 30, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/somalia/somalia-2024-gu-april-june-season-floods-bi-weekly-situation-report-no-3-30-may-2024>, (Accessed: March 11, 2025).

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transit hub for displaced individuals from Ethiopia en route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Similar to internally displaced people, these irregular migrants live in precarious, dangerous situations that leave them open to exploitation. Internally displaced people (IDPs) and irregular migrants have been susceptible to exploitation by al-Shabaab, hence augmenting the group's power and influence. The initial question to pose is, what is the correlation between mass displacement and radicalization?

DISPLACEMENT AND THE RADICALIZATION

Terrorism can have numerous motivations, encompassing economic, psychological, and social hierarchical issues such as discrimination and political or ideological influences. **The proliferation of terrorism has not only augmented the prevalence of politicized or influenced radical beliefs, but also contributed to the spread of extremist ideologies.** Participation in terrorism may stem from a cost-benefit calculation or may arise from a position of vulnerability. Numerous experts contend that engaging in terrorism is not a spontaneous or simplistic choice, but rather the culmination of sustained engagement, repetition, and socialization.² The marginalized part of society, especially the displaced, is more vulnerable to extremist beliefs since they are more economically and educationally disadvantaged than the rest of the population. For instance, terrorist organizations in the Sahel region exploit displaced individuals by recruiting them, employing them as suicide bombers, and diverting humanitarian assistance.³ As observed, areas with significant populations of displaced individuals – like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and the Sahel region – often experience persistent terrorism.

Terrorism causes displacement and displaced people are prone to misinformation, which terrorists exploit. This engenders a detrimental circle. The rising population of displaced individuals increases terrorist recruitment, as these individuals are inexpensive and susceptible to enticements such as financial incentives. The displaced lack sufficient food, medicine, education, and access to economic prospects. Their destitution has rendered them inexpensive and readily employed. Economically challenged young males residing in displacement camps are more prone to engage in terrorism,⁴ resulting in a rise in the number of terrorists during periods of economic adversity. Moreover, the IDPs encounter societal prejudice and numerous human rights violations. These sentiments of injustice have prompted many to resort to terrorism.⁵ Not only are internally displaced individuals susceptible to terrorist exploitation, but migrants, especially undocumented, are also victimized and exploited due to their linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. The exploitation of the displaced population in Somalia by al-Shabaab demands scrutiny.

AL-SHABAAB'S EXPLOITATION OF DISPLACED INDIVIDUALS

Al-Shabaab, like many other terrorist organizations around the world, profits off the displacement of Somalis. The population of displaced individuals in Somalia has risen during the previous five years, coinciding with an escalation in the power and assaults of al-Shabaab. The correlation between escalating displacement and the burgeoning influence of al-Shabaab is indisputable and has been downplayed, despite the multitude of contributing circumstances to their growth. Before examining how al-Shabaab capitalizes on displaced individuals, the overarching circumstances of displacement in Somalia can be first addressed.

2 Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza, "Internally Displaced Populations and Suicide Terrorism", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol: 60, Number: 6, (2014), p. 1008.

3 "Violent Extremism in the Sahel", Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, October 23, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>, (Accessed: March 9, 2025).

4 Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol: 52, Number: 2, (2008), p. 436.

5 James Igoe Walsh and James A. Piazza, "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol: 43, Number: 5, (2010), p. 551.

Some 4,029,186 displaced individuals reside in 3,822 displacement camps across Somali cities. The majority of the camps are in major urban areas, compelling some of them to traverse long distances. The displaced individuals undertaking the arduous journey arrive at the camps lacking adequate food, water, shelter, and sanitation. This shortage has led to certain displaced individuals becoming homeless. Conversely, 85% of camps for displaced individuals are informal and purpose-built, occasionally leading to evictions.

Al-Shabaab's exploitation of displaced individuals can be analyzed through several interconnected factors. It capitalizes on the vulnerabilities of displaced individuals through coercion and strategic maneuvers. Occasionally, they offer refuge, sustenance, and hydration to secure the allegiance of these individuals. Furthermore, al-Shabaab sometimes persuades displaced individuals to offer them jobs to escape their impoverished circumstances, affirming that they will not be assigned to hazardous assignments such as suicide bombings. However, the reality is different. When these individuals are hired, their remuneration is minimal, and subsequently, they are transferred to locations for training. For individuals with basic religious education, affiliation with al-Shabaab has not enhanced their religious comprehension. Numerous individuals have not received instruction on prayer, although they have been trained on how to shoot. This demonstrates that al-Shabaab is not solely motivated by a distinct ideology.

Conversely, alongside the strategy of extortion, al-Shabaab uses coercion to abduct displaced individuals. While displaced people are moving to big cities, al-Shabab infiltrates them, robs their possessions, and traffics the people, including boys and young men, before they arrive in larger cities. Furthermore, individuals frequently disappear from displacement camps, predominantly children and adolescents. Families search for them on social media for several days before ultimately ceasing their efforts. Although other groups were also engaging in the kidnapping of displaced people, al-Shabaab was the predominant perpetrator. According to a 2024 Human Trafficking in Persons

report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in Somalia, al-Shabaab abducted over 1,000 young boys and more than 100 young girls annually in 2021 and 2022, predominantly from displaced populations.⁶

In addition, al-Shabaab utilizes internally displaced individuals to cultivate social capital. Internally displaced individuals serve as a convenient channel that is between profit-driven enterprises and philanthropic organizations and al-Shabaab. IDPs captured by al-Shabaab are compelled to divulge information regarding well-off people and institutions, as they possess knowledge of families and clans residing in various regions. This facilitates al-Shabaab in augmenting its revenue through tax collecting.

Al-Shabaab not only recruits locally displaced individuals but also takes advantage of foreign migrants, especially those who cross the unregulated borders. A multitude of irregular migrants traverse the border on foot, while others utilize buses, owing to the open boundary between Somalia and Ethiopia. The absence of prompt systematic registration and oversight fosters an atmosphere where these migrants are vulnerable to exploitation by local actors and al-Shabab militants. Upon arrival, many of these migrants experience precarious living conditions, lacking registration, financial resources, and community assistance.

In certain cases, they become victims of human trafficking networks operating in the regions, while in others, they are deliberately coerced or deceived into joining armed groups. Due to its sophisticated recruitment strategies, al-Shabab exploits these migrants, providing them with ideological indoctrination and military training. One instance of this pattern was demonstrated when a young man, apprehended on suspicion of being an al-Shabab member, testified before the Banadir court.⁷ He asserted that he was de-

6 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, December 11, 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>, (Accessed: March 9, 2025).

7 Risaala TV, "Itoobiyaan Iyo As Isku Milmay: Rag kasoo jeeda Oromo & Amhara oo lagu qabtay iyagoo u dagaalamaya...", YouTube, December 1, 2024, <https://youtu.be/lrjsngEPwd8>, (Accessed: March 9, 2025).

ceived by an individual who told him to offer a job opportunity. He anticipated the work to be ordinary, but he discovered that he was handed over to al-Shabaab. The man exposed him to three separate training sessions, in which he was radicalized and trained for combat. He additionally indicated that 150 Oromos attended the initial training program.

The substantial size of this group in a single session indicates a meticulously organized and thorough recruitment initiative, as well as the existence of similar groups previously trained. It raises concerns about the continued abuse of foreigners. The case highlights the recruitment networks that transcend Somalia's borders. If al-Shabaab successfully recruits a significant number of Oromos, it is quite probable that other foreign individuals, especially Eritrean, Syrian, and Sudanese migrants, are similarly susceptible to recruitment.

IDP CAMPS EMPOWER AL-SHABAAB

In Somalia, it is believed that over 4 million internally displaced individuals reside in more than 3,000 camps. Nearly, 84% of the IDP camps are informal and situated on privately held land. The personnel overseeing the IDP camps comprise individuals both experienced and inexperienced in the profession. Not all open IDP camps are authentic. Some of the camps were referred to as “kaam bariis,” which literally means “rice camps.” This term is used to refer to fraudulent or unofficial camps set up for financial gain rather than authentic humanitarian needs. They were built to attract humanitarian aid but were not built for actual displaced people. This indicates that the majority of the people residing in these camps cannot be considered legitimate IDPs. Consequently, both the owner of the camp and the individual residing are players. One professes to be assisting, while the other pretends to be in need. No tracking system differentiates between camps built for necessity and those established for rice.

The concerns about poor governance, lack of accountability, and the spread of camps are strengthening al-Shabaab's strongholds. Al-Shabaab has used the presence of both authentic and artificial IDP camps to conceal themselves among the large-scale population. The predominant demographic in the Somali IDP camps consists of children, the elderly, and young adults. Vulnerable individuals, including women, old people, children, and those with special needs, are captured on video when the journalists visit the camps. However, the fact is that adult men reside in the camps, the majority of whom depart in the morning and return at night. People who have committed offenses conceal themselves in these camps due to the absence of investigation and awareness. Not only do they use these camps as a hiding place, but they also reap the benefits of the humanitarian aid they receive. There is a lack of oversight in the camps, an absence of precise enumeration, no criminal inquiry, and no documentation.

CONCLUSION

There are a lot of unregistered displaced people and irregular migrants in Somalia. The camps are very poor, and different groups have set them up for different reasons. This has made them useful for al-Shabaab as a source of military strength, different kinds of donations, social capital, and a place to hide. Al-Shabaab's power and rise are being aided by the fact that there are no rules about people's movements, registration procedures aren't working well, and camps for displaced people aren't being managed well. This is making government operations against the group pricier and could lead to chaos. Al-Shabaab is displacing individuals and exploiting them. It displaces individuals to obscure their presence among people, generate terror, put people in a helpless state, and thus facilitate their exploitation.

