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### **Reasons for joining and staying in al-Shabaab in Somalia**

In an attempt to determine whether there is a difference between rank-and-file and al-Shabaab members in leadership positions in Somalia, interviews were conducted with 52 rank-and-file members in the Baidoa rehabilitation centre and prison, and 17 members in leadership positions in 2017 as part of a project for FinnChurch Aid (FCA). In this short analysis the two groups will be referred to as “members” and “leaders” respectively. This approach is different to the majority of studies into violent extremist organisations, such as al-Shabaab that focus on the perspective of the collective. This study rather hoped to reflect on the individual and the relationship he or she has to the organisation based on the person’s position in the organisation. It is through understanding the organisation from an individual perspective that potential openings for disengagement become visible. Limiting the organisation’s ability to recruit new members will not only prevent new members from joining al-Shabaab, it will also serve as the best approach for reaching out to existing members. The two samples expressed various reasons for joining and staying in al-Shabaab.

In addition to the reasons for joining al-Shabaab, the majority of leaders cited religious reasons (52%), followed by personal reasons (28%). In contrast to leaders, the majority of ordinary members indicated that they joined the organisation for themselves (63%), followed by religious reasons (15%). From the onset, it appeared that leaders were driven by an ideology or higher sense of purpose. This assessment was also supported when respondents were asked to assess the level of association with al-Shabaab: they were asked to rate their sense of belonging at the time of joining and again while being a member of the organisation. Whereas the sense of belonging decreased amongst ordinary members between these two periods, it increased amongst leaders. Providing further context, respondents were also asked to identify the emotion associated with their decision to join al-Shabaab. Whereas leaders specifically identified hate (43%) and anger (40%) as the two most prominent emotions, members recalled fear (35%) and hope (29%).

Establishing against who and what these emotions were directed, respondents were asked to assess their level of frustration as an emotion that refer to negative experiences associated with joining al-Shabaab. In other words, frustration is the most common emotional response to opposition arising

from perceived resistance to the fulfilment of an individual's aspirations that is likely to escalate when not met. Therefore, it is the most natural and easiest to apply and assess multiple reasons for joining, against whom it was directed and if something specifically happened that influenced their decision to join al-Shabaab. Answering the first question, 47% of leaders interviewed expressed extreme levels of frustration that corresponded with strong emotions such as anger and hate. Resembling leaders interviewed, 23% of members questioned expressed extreme levels of frustration, whereas 15% identified hate and 13% referred to anger as the driving emotions associated with joining al-Shabaab. Frustration was predominately directed against the United States (US) military intervention seeing that 75% of leaders felt severe frustration at the US intervention, 50% against the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) followed by 56% who rated their frustration against neighbouring countries as 'major'. Additionally, the majority (71%) of leaders interviewed believed that al-Shabaab served the best interests of Muslims/Somalis, justifying their decision to join al-Shabaab. Most leaders joined in response to a combination of countermeasures as 27% specifically identified AMISOM intervention, another 27% referred to actions from the Somali government and 21% recalled the Ethiopian intervention. Ordinary members interviewed were motivated by Ethiopian intervention (31%) and Somali government action (24%). The data therefore suggest that the decision to join al-Shabaab was mainly driven by international involvement in Somalia.

Following the series of questions discussed above, the potential reasons for joining the organisations were individually broken down in which respondents were asked to recall whether these individual reasons played a role (did not play a role, was a strong factor). Considering that 15% of members and 11% of leaders interviewed joined al-Shabaab for the employment opportunities the organisation presented, it is important to specifically reflect on whether being employed by al-Shabaab played a role in their decision to join the organisation. In this follow-up question, 75% of leaders, but only 47% of members agreed that being employed was a factor, while the remaining 25% of the leadership sample even strongly agreed that being employed by al-Shabaab was an incentive. In contrast, 37% of members did not agree that being employed by al-Shabaab was an attractive incentive. Being an employee or being part of the organisation for its financial gain opens the possibility of offering better employment opportunities to encourage disengagement. However, when respondents were asked if they were paid, the majority (84%) of members indicated that they were not paid, while 31% of the leadership sample were not paid.

According to the leaders interviewed, al-Shabaab paid between US\$50 and US\$800, although payments had not been made regularly. Despite not being paid regularly, 25% of the leaders interviewed indicated that the financial benefit had a major impact on their decision to stay in al-Shabaab and for an additional 50%, it had a moderate impact. In contrast, according to 2% of the member sample, being paid had a substantial impact, followed by 9% for whom it had a major influence on their decision to stay in al-Shabaab. Being paid or rather not being paid was insignificant for 42% of members and 12% among leaders, followed by 26% of members and 13% of leaders for whom being paid was a minor factor in their decision to stay in al-Shabaab.

In conclusion, two very distinct samples provided very different perspectives to why individuals joined and whether a financial incentive played a role in their decision to stay in al-Shabaab. For both samples, religion and defending Islam against foreign interference that manifested in the involvement of the US and Western countries, as well as neighbouring countries through AMISOM (particularly Ethiopia and Kenya) were central to their decision to join the organisation. Al-Shabaab therefore managed to capitalise on the hate and anger amongst leaders and fear within members. Especially

among the leaders interviewed, the responses point to al-Shabaab as serving the interests of Muslims against a Christian “crusader” agenda. Within this nationalistic framework employment and financial gain featured very low within both samples, although higher among leadership than members.

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