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3.12.2. Child recruitment by Al-Shabaab

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: October 2025

This profile refers to children fearing recruitment by Al-Shabaab. For an overview of other actors recruiting children, see 3.12.1. Violence against children.

The analysis below is based on the following EUAA COI reports: Country Focus 2025, 1.1., 1.2., 1.10.1.(b); Security 2025, 1.2.2.; Targeting 2021, 1.1.; Country Guidance should not be referred to as a source of COI.

Over the last years, thousands of children (basically between 11 and 17 years old) have been recruited by all sides, but the majority of them were recruited by Al-Shabaab. Children form most of the new recruits of Al-Shabaab, as the group targets predominantly boys and young men. Girls are subjected to forced marriages and sexual slavery (see 3.11.4. Child marriage and forced marriage).

Step 1: Do the reported acts amount to persecution?

Child recruitment is of such severe nature that it amounts to persecution, including when recruitment is not induced by coercion. According to UNICEF, around 500 children were recruited by Al-Shabaab between January and September 2023. In 2022, over 900 children were recruited and 663 abducted by Al-Shabaab, primarily in Bay, Bakool, Hiraan, Middle Juba, and Lower Shabelle, according to the UN Secretary-General's report on Children and Armed Conflict. The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia confirms that these patterns of child recruitment and abduction have continued unchanged through September 2023 to August 2024. Al-Shabaab was reported to recruit children for combatant roles (fighters, suicide bombers, or guards) and non-combatant roles (transportation of weapons, supplies, or communication, conceal explosives or personnel, informants or spies, religious indoctrination, sexual exploitation and forced marriages in the case of girls etc.).

Step 2: What is the level of risk of persecution?

The individual assessment of whether there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account **risk-impacting circumstances**, such as:

- **Gender**: Child recruitment for combatant roles would be more relevant for boys, while girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and forced marriage (see 3.11.4.

Child marriage and forced marriage).

- **Age**: Al-Shabaab usually recruits children from 12 years old, while also recruitment of children aged nine or younger was reported. Being an adolescent or of 'fighting age', from age 15 or 16, may put the person at risk of recruitment as an active fighter or a suicide bomber.

- **Home area and the control or influence of Al-Shabaab**: Recruitment is more easily facilitated in areas where Al-Shabaab has established control over a substantial period of time, mostly in South-Central Somalia areas (in Middle and Lower Shabelle, Middle and Lower Jubba, Bay, Bakool, Hirshabelle and Galmudug). IDPs residing in the outer districts of Mogadishu, where Al-Shabaab has strong influence, are frequently recruited by the group. In areas outside the group's direct control, such as Puntland, the risk of recruitment will be generally lower. In Somaliland, in general the risk would not be substantiated. Recruitment outside Al-Shabaab's control areas frequently involves aspects of coercion.

- **Clan affiliation and clan positioning towards Al-Shabaab**: Minority groups (e.g. Rahanweyn, Somali Bantu/Jareer, other groups from the Benadir coast) are discriminated against and forced into foot soldier roles and often seen as disposable used in high-risk operations like suicide attacks. Clans opposing Al-Shabaab may face increased recruitment pressure. Children belonging to marginalised ethnic minorities and those living in Al-Shabaab's territory are particularly vulnerable.

- **Socio-economic situation of the family**: low socio-economic background families are coerced due to economic desperation or inability to resist pressure. For example, women who are unable to pay taxes to Al-Shabaab are in some cases forced to hand over their children to the group.

- **Family status**: Orphans and single-parent children are more vulnerable due to lack of protection or guidance and would be more easily manipulated and socialised into Al-Shabaab ideology.

Step 3: Is there a ground for persecution?

Where well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated, the individual circumstances of the child need to be taken into account to determine whether a nexus to a reason for persecution can be substantiated. For example, in case of recruitment of minors of specific clans perceived to be opposing Al-Shabaab, persecution may be for reasons of **political opinion**. Alternatively, recruitment of children from minority groups may be for reasons of **race/nationality**.

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