Beyond the Battlefield:
Advancing a National Strategy for Sustainable Community Reintegration

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Executive Summary

Somalia stands at a decisive moment in its efforts to achieve sustainable integration of former combatants. Under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's second-term administration, the Federal Government has intensified the campaign against Al-Shabaab on two fronts: military operations across central regions and the systematic targeting of the group's financial infrastructure. Yet the ideological front shaping community attitudes, building resilience, and ensuring the long-term social acceptance of defectors remains underdeveloped. As a result, the reintegration of low-risk defectors has become a critical vulnerability in Somalia's broader stabilisation strategy.

The evidence demonstrates that many low-risk defectors face persistent stigma, limited economic opportunities, and uneven acceptance across communities. In several cases, resentment has arisen due to rehabilitation programmes providing vocational training and benefits unavailable to local youth. These dynamics undermine social cohesion and weaken reintegration outcomes. At the national level, the Government lacks a coherent long-term strategy for sustainable integration and remains dependent on short-term, donor-funded projects that are not aligned with federal or federal member state priorities. The security apparatus has likewise not articulated a unified policy, operational framework, or strategic vision to guide reintegration.

This report examines the governance, societal, and institutional drivers shaping reintegration outcomes and provides practical recommendations for government, NGOs, international partners, and local actors. Somalia's experience shows that national ownership alone is insufficient without the active participation of communities who ultimately absorb former combatants. Similarly, relying solely on community mechanisms—customary law, clan elders, religious leaders, and youth networks cannot deliver sustainable outcomes without national and international coordination, oversight, and resources.

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Key Findings

1. **Reintegration is the weakest pillar of the National Programme.**
   Rehabilitation (screening, detention, counselling) has advanced;
   reintegration (community acceptance, livelihoods, long-term monitoring)
   has not. This gap erodes stabilisation gains.

2. **Absence of a coherent national reintegration strategy produces
   fragmentation.**

   FMS, districts, donors and implementing NGOs run uncoordinated pilots,
   creating geographic and procedural incoherence that Al-Shabaab exploits.

3. **Al-Shabaab's strategic pivot targets governance and legitimacy, not
   only force.**

   The group increasingly uses clan politics, negotiated amnesties and local
   service provision to re-embed socially and politically at local level.

4. **Socioeconomic marginalisation fuels recruitment and recidivism.**
   Lack of predictable livelihoods, high youth unemployment and perceived
   unfair distribution of benefits make former combatants—and non-
   combatant youth—vulnerable to insurgent incentives.

5. **Communities are willing but under-resourced partners.**

   Community leaders favour gradual reintegration but lack security
   guarantees, information, and predictable economic support to manage
   returns safely.

6. **Short-term donor cycles and projectisation undercut sustainability.**
   When funding ends, most promising pilots collapse; there is no mechanism
   to scale or nationalise successful local models.

7. **Weak integration with SSR and justice processes undermines trust.**
   Reintegration divorced from local security guarantees, accountability
   mechanisms and local dispute resolution breeds mistrust and political
   contestation.

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Priority Policy Recommendations

1. **Adopt an Emergency National Reintegration Roadmap (12 months)**
   Establish minimum national standards, clarify FGS–FMS roles, and create a small Reintegration Secretariat with a rapid-disbursement fund to stabilise the system and coordinate pilots.

2. **Launch Community Readiness Pilots in Four Priority Districts**
   Implement structured community consultations, security guarantees, livelihood grants and public-works schemes to demonstrate safe, locally owned reintegration models in rural and urban settings.

3. **Enact a National Reintegration Framework with Legal Force**
   Convert the roadmap into binding policy: define reintegration pathways, formalise community roles, regulate screening and protection, and synchronise reintegration with SSR and district-level security plans.

4. **Establish a National Reintegration Fund with Blended Finance**
   Pool FGS and FMS budget allocations, donor contributions and diaspora investment to finance sustainable livelihoods, community compacts, monitoring and rapid-response needs.

5. **Institutionalise Community Integration Compacts (CICs)**
   Create formal agreements between communities, FMS and the state to manage expectations, provide security guarantees, structure reconciliation, and ensure equitable local development benefits.

6. **Scale Market-Aligned Livelihood Opportunities for Returnees and Host Youth**
   Replace short training courses with employment schemes linked to private-sector partnerships, SME start-ups, agro-value chains, wage subsidies and community-benefit projects to reduce resentment and recidivism.

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Background

Strategic Trajectory of Somalia's National Programme

Somalia's National Programme has developed gradually in response to shifting security dynamics, evolving governance arrangements and fluctuating international engagement. Its origins lie in the early 2010s, when military operations by the Federal Government and AMISOM forced Al-Shabaab from major urban centres, generating the first substantial wave of voluntary defections. In the absence of a formal framework, government responses during this period were improvised, security-led and focused on short-term containment rather than long-term reintegration. These early measures lacked consistency and offered little beyond temporary holding arrangements, reflecting limited state capacity and the primacy of military imperatives.

Between 2015 and 2017, the Government began formalising its approach, supported by donor funding and international technical assistance. Rehabilitation centres such as Serendi introduced structured psychosocial support, religious counselling and vocational training, marking the transition towards a more coherent disengagement and rehabilitation system. Nonetheless, reintegration remained underdeveloped, as programmes were largely disconnected from labour market realities and operated without meaningful consultation with host communities. The absence of a national strategy, combined with overlapping institutional mandates, hindered the Programme's capacity to scale or to build legitimacy beyond major urban hubs.

From 2018 onwards, the Programme became increasingly institutionalised. Eligibility procedures improved, risk assessments became more standardised, and rehabilitation facilities expanded. These developments reflected an emerging recognition that reintegration required not only technical interventions but broader societal engagement. Yet progress remained limited by fragmented governance between the Federal Government and federal member states, short-

term donor funding, and the continued separation between formal reintegration planning and local customary mechanisms. Many ex-combatants who completed rehabilitation continued to face stigma, distrust and economic exclusion, particularly in communities where youth unemployment and perceptions of unfair benefit distribution were acute.

The period between 2021 and 2023 highlighted these structural weaknesses. Political turbulence and institutional fragmentation slowed policy development, while donor-driven programming cycles restricted the emergence of a long-term national vision. Reintegration pathways remained inconsistent, under-resourced and insufficiently attuned to the cultural, economic and security contexts shaping community responses. As a result, reintegration outcomes were uneven and difficult to sustain.

By 2024–2025, the security environment had shifted decisively. The renewed offensive under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's second term, combined with intensified operations against Al-Shabaab's financial networks, produced a rise in disengagements at a time when the reintegration system was ill-equipped to manage increased caseloads. The subsequent resurgence of Al-Shabaab in several regions underscored the vulnerabilities created by fragmented governance, overstretched security institutions and the persistent absence of a coherent national reintegration strategy. These developments have reaffirmed that while Somalia has made tangible progress in establishing rehabilitation infrastructure and standardised screening processes, reintegration continues to represent the most fragile pillar of the National Programme. Its challenges—ranging from limited national ownership and dependence on donor-led projects to weak community acceptance and insufficient economic integration—pose significant risks to stabilisation gains and provide openings for insurgent exploitation.

The evolution of the National Programme therefore illustrates a consistent pattern: technical aspects of rehabilitation have advanced, but the social, economic and political dimensions of reintegration have not kept pace. Unless reintegration

is strengthened through sustained national leadership and meaningful community participation, Somalia risks perpetuating cycles of disengagement, marginalisation and insecurity that undermine both state authority and local resilience.

Understanding the Urgency

The urgency of strengthening reintegration in Somalia is underscored by Al-Shabaab's recent strategic pivot, which has enabled the group to re-embed itself within communities at a moment when government control remains fragile and uneven. While the insurgency has long relied on coercion and shadow governance, 2025 has seen a more deliberate and adaptive shift: Al-Shabaab is recalibrating its tactics towards community engagement, leveraging local grievances, exploiting clan politics and offering conditional amnesty to local militias, including the Macawisley fighters who previously mobilised against them. By courting clan elders, repositioning itself as a mediator in local disputes and loosening its economic grip to appear less extractive, the group is seeking to reconstitute its legitimacy in areas where state authority is weak or contested. These developments reveal that Al-Shabaab is not merely regrouping militarily; it is realigning socially and politically to reclaim influence at the community level.

This pattern heightens the strategic stakes for reintegration. The evidence demonstrates that when former combatants return to communities without social acceptance, livelihood opportunities or credible pathways to reintegration, they are more susceptible to predation, coercion or re-recruitment. Communities themselves—already burdened by insecurity, economic scarcity and inter-clan tensions—become vulnerable to Al-Shabaab's overtures when they perceive the state as distant, predatory or incapable of providing basic services and dispute resolution. In this context, reintegration is not a peripheral activity; it is a decisive arena in which the contest for legitimacy between the state and Al-Shabaab is being waged.

Under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's second-term administration, the Federal Government has intensified military operations and targeted the financial

networks that underpin Al-Shabaab's capacity. These measures are necessary, but they cannot offset insurgent gains if the societal and ideological fronts remain neglected. The reintegration of low-risk defectors is particularly significant: it signals whether the state can offer credible alternatives to violence, demonstrate a capacity to reconcile with former adversaries, and reassure communities that defection does not simply shift insecurity back into civilian life. Without such assurances, the state's kinetic gains risk being transient, and communities may turn to Al-Shabaab's parallel governance structures as a more predictable—if coercive—form of order.

For these reasons, this report argues that Somalia must adopt a hybrid model of national and community ownership to counter the insurgency's evolving strategy. While the support of international partners remains essential in providing technical expertise, financial resources and capacity-building, reintegration policy must be nationally led and grounded in grassroots realities rather than shaped by externally driven, short-term project cycles. Policymakers should prioritise reintegration pathways that embed community participation, reflect local customs and governance practices, and are situated within a coherent national strategy that articulates long-term objectives. National ownership provides the authority, institutional backbone and coordination capacity required for sustainable scale, while community ownership ensures legitimacy, trust and cultural resonance. When aligned, these two forms of ownership can not only undercut Al-Shabaab's community-facing tactics but also reduce the appeal of insurgent governance, strengthen local resilience, and convert military and financial pressure into durable political and societal gains.

Somalia is now in a narrow window in which policy choices will significantly influence long-term stability. A timely shift towards coordinated, locally grounded and nationally directed reintegration is essential to prevent Al-Shabaab from further entrenching itself within communities and to ensure that military gains translate into sustainable political and societal outcomes.

Security officials meet clan elders in Tardo to strengthen anti-terror cooperation.

(Source: SONNA – Somali National News Agency, 2025)

Fragmented Governance and the Absence of a National Strategy

The Policy Vacuum: Absence of a National Reintegration Strategy

Despite more than a decade of programming under Somalia's National Programme, reintegration remains constrained by a profound policy vacuum. There is still no unified, government-owned national strategy to guide FMS, international partners, and community stakeholders in the long-term social and economic reintegration of disengaged combatants. While revisions to the National Programme in 2016 and 2019 provided a conceptual framework for rehabilitation, they stopped short of articulating an operational reintegration strategy with clear objectives, standards, and sequencing. Reintegration thus continues to be approached as a short-term, donor-funded extension of rehabilitation rather than a core element of state-building and stabilisation.

This gap is clearly reflected in the uneven development of the Programme's pillars. Rehabilitation services particularly at Serendi, Baidoa, and Kismayo have benefited from consistent international support, structured programming, and security-institution engagement. [1] In contrast, the reintegration pillar remains chronically under-resourced, inconsistently prioritised, and largely detached from broader political, economic, and governance reforms. Although more than 2,000 defectors have passed through rehabilitation centres, "reintegration continues to lag significantly behind other pillars and lacks formalised systems for livelihood support, community engagement, or post-exit monitoring." [2]

Donor dependency exacerbates this fragmentation. International actors such as IOM, UNSOM, and various INGO consortia run parallel reintegration and

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[1] James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo and Nick Wood, Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab, RUSI Whitehall Report 4-18 (London: Royal United Services Institute, January 2019),
[2] *Ibid*

stabilisation projects, yet in the absence of a national strategy these interventions operate as isolated pilots rather than components of a coherent national architecture.[3] The African Development Bank's SRECYAR project, which supported more than 1,600 at-risk youth and ex-combatants, concluded that a lack of national strategic direction limited its impact and sustainability, preventing the institutionalisation of reintegration within Somali governance structures.[4] This finding echoes earlier analyses from Brookings, which highlighted the "projectisation" of DDR in Somalia, noting that initiatives frequently collapse once external funding ends.[5] The absence of a national strategy also weakens screening, risk assessment, and community preparation. Low-risk defectors often enter communities that are neither informed nor engaged in the reintegration process, resulting in persistent stigma, mistrust, and fears of infiltration. [6] Such perceptions directly reflect the Programme's failure to establish a predictable, transparent, community-centred reintegration framework.

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[3] International Organization for Migration. Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Eligibility Conditions and Practices. Geneva: IOM Publications, 2021.

[4] African Development Bank, SRECYAR Project Completion Report: Supporting Recovery and Reintegration of Youth at Risk (Abidjan: African Development Bank, 2023).

[5] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "DDR — A Bridge Not Too Far: A Field Report from Somalia," Brookings Institution, 2015.

[6] European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), COI Report: Somalia — Defection, Desertion, Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (Brussels: EUAA, 2023).

ATMIS reiterates its commitment to supporting Somalia's Defectors Rehabilitation Programme.

(Source: ATMIS, 2023)

How Governance Gaps Enable Al-Shabaab's Community Influence

The absence of a coherent, nationally articulated strategy for the reintegration of disengaged combatants has created a significant governance vacuum across Somalia—one that Al-Shabaab has been quick to exploit. While the National Programme outlines the broad principles of screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration, it does not provide a unified national strategy capable of guiding Federal Member States (FMS), district authorities, and community stakeholders in a coordinated manner. As a result, reintegration remains fragmented, inconsistently implemented, and largely detached from the local governance structures that shape community acceptance. This strategic void has effectively ceded political and social space to Al-Shabaab, enabling the group to entrench itself as an alternative source of authority where the state is either absent or incoherent.

In areas where state presence is weak—particularly rural districts of Middle Shabelle, Galmudug, Lower Shabelle and parts of Jubaland—Al-Shabaab exploits the lack of state-led reintegration and reconciliation mechanisms by positioning itself as a more predictable governance actor. War on the Rocks analysis highlights that the group's recent resurgence is not driven solely by military advantage, but by its ability to "govern, negotiate, and embed itself within community structures" more effectively than the federal government.[7] The group has strategically offered negotiated amnesties to Macawisley militias, co-opted clan elders into dispute resolution forums, and recalibrated its local governance practices to appear less intrusive.[8] In the absence of a national strategy linking ex-combatant reintegration to community reconciliation and livelihood support, these actions allow Al-Shabaab to outmanoeuvre the state at the very local levels where reintegration should be anchored.

The governance gaps also weaken the integration of low-risk ex-combatants, who often return to communities that have received little or no preparation for their reintegration. Without national guidelines mandating community consultations, awareness campaigns, or restorative justice processes, reintegration becomes a disjointed experience that fuels mistrust. Respondents in community-based studies consistently express strong support for reintegration in principle but emphasise the need for gradual, community-led processes that build trust and enable monitoring of returnees.[9] The absence of national direction prevents such practices from becoming standardised, leaving reintegration vulnerable to politicisation, inconsistent implementation across regions, and the spread of rumours that Al-Shabaab readily exploits.

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[7] Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "Flailing State: The Resurgence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia," War on the Rocks, June 2025

[8] Ashley Jackson et al., The "Off-Ramp" from al-Shabaab: Disengagement During the Ongoing Offensive in Somalia (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2023).

[9] United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia. Countering Al-Shabaab Propaganda and Recruitment Mechanisms in South Central Somalia. Nairobi: United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, 2023.

Moreover, Al-Shabaab's propaganda machine capitalises on the lack of state-led integration by framing disengagement as illegitimate and reintegration programmes as foreign-imposed. The group pairs religious rhetoric with narratives of nationalism, portraying the government as corrupt, externally dependent, and indifferent to local grievances. [10] Its messaging resonates in communities where reintegration programmes are seen as externally funded, short-term, or disconnected from local needs. In effect, the absence of a national strategy for reintegration does not merely weaken the state's ability to absorb former combatants—it strengthens Al-Shabaab's ideological and political appeal by enabling it to fill governance and legitimacy gaps with its own narratives, incentives, and parallel justice systems.

Dozens of clan fighters surrender to Al-Shabaab in central Somalia.

(Source: Shabelle Media Network, 2025)

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[10] Felbab-Brown, Vanda. "The Hard, Hot, Dusty Road to Accountability, Reconciliation, and Peace in Somalia." Brookings Institution, 2018

Local Reality and the Reintegration Challenge

Community Vulnerability and the Absence of a National Reintegration Framework

Communities across Somalia are increasingly exposed to destabilisation, in part because the government still lacks a comprehensive, long-term reintegration framework to support ex-combatants. Domestic and international actors continue to operate reintegration programmes — for example, IOM supported over 1,000 low-risk individuals in 2023 across multiple states — but these remain project-based and weakly embedded in national governance systems.[11] Without a strategic, state-led policy, local populations are left to absorb returnees without formal structures for reconciliation, social support, or economic opportunity.

Al-Shabaab has exploited this strategic void with considerable sophistication. The War on the Rocks analysis shows that the group has recalibrated its political strategy, increasingly positioning itself as a provider of local governance, conflict mediation and social order. [12] In communities lacking state guidance on reintegration, Al-Shabaab's narratives—framing disengaged combatants as untrustworthy, government programmes as foreign-imposed, and federal institutions as corrupt—resonate more powerfully. The insurgency's ability to blend coercion with accommodation reinforces its credibility: by offering conditional amnesties to local militias, leveraging clan elders, and softening its governance posture in targeted areas, it fills the legitimacy vacuum that an absent national reintegration strategy leaves unaddressed. [13]

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[11] James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo and Nick Wood, Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab, RUSI Whitehall Report 4-18 (London: Royal United Services Institute, January 2019),
[12] Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "Flailing State: The Resurgence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia," War on the Rocks, June 2025
[13] Ashley Jackson et al., The "Off-Ramp" from al-Shabaab: Disengagement During the Ongoing Offensive in Somalia (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2023).

Research from South Central Somalia confirms that communities feel unprotected and unsupported when attempting to resist Al-Shabaab influence, in part because the state has not invested in community security, civic empowerment or counternarrative initiatives linked to reintegration.[14] Respondents consistently expressed that while they oppose Al-Shabaab, they lack structured avenues, political backing or safety guarantees to challenge its presence.[15] A national reintegration framework—integrating social messaging, community policing, transitional justice and economic inclusion—could strengthen local resilience, yet these elements remain largely absent due to the short-term, fragmented nature of donor-driven initiatives.

ACCEPT Rehabilitation Centre, Dhusamareeb, Galmudug.
Source: ACCEPT International, 2025

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[14] United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia. Countering Al-Shabaab Propaganda and Recruitment Mechanisms in South Central Somalia. Nairobi: United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, 2023.
[15] *Ibid.*

Socioeconomic Marginalisation Driven by Reintegration Gaps and Al-Shabaab's Exploitation

The absence of a coherent national reintegration strategy has produced considerable socioeconomic marginalisation in communities expected to absorb disengaged combatants, creating conditions that Al-Shabaab increasingly exploits. Despite over a decade of international investment in transitional centres, vocational training schemes and rehabilitation programming, reintegration support remains fragmented, short-term and unevenly distributed across Federal Member States.[16] These gaps are particularly acute for low-risk defectors, who—after initial rehabilitation—often return to localities with limited employment prospects, weak social acceptance, and no predictable state-supported pathways to long-term integration.

Economic precarity is a central driver of marginalisation. Research indicates that lack of income-generating opportunities remains one of the strongest predictors of both recruitment and re-recruitment into Al-Shabaab.[17] Youth, in particular, face unemployment rates exceeding 67 percent in several regions, a trend that has worsened with recurrent drought cycles, fluctuating commodity prices and the contraction of local markets following ATMIS drawdown.[18] Al-Shabaab systematically capitalises on these conditions: it promises regular pay, offers loans to struggling families, and provides economic incentives to young men otherwise excluded from the formal or informal labour economy.[19] In areas where the state's reintegration presence is minimal or entirely absent, these incentives become especially persuasive.

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[16] European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), COI Report: Somalia — Defection, Desertion, Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (Brussels: EUAA, 2023)
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] African Development Bank, SRECYAR Project Completion Report: Supporting Recovery and Reintegration of Youth at Risk (Abidjan: African Development Bank, 2023).
[19] James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo and Nick Wood, Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab, RUSI Whitehall Report 4-18 (London: Royal United Services Institute, January 2019),

Social marginalisation compounds these vulnerabilities. Many communities express a willingness to reintegrate former combatants but feel ill-equipped to do so in the absence of state guidance, protection or reconciliation structures.[20] Community members frequently report fear of retaliation from Al-Shabaab if they collaborate with government programmes, while at the same time facing resentment toward defectors who receive vocational training or assistance that unemployed civilians do not.[21] Without a national strategy that standardises community engagement, clarifies amnesty provisions, and ensures equitable access to livelihoods, reintegration risks deepening local grievances rather than alleviating them.

Al-Shabaab actively exploits this governance vacuum. Recent studies note that the group has intensified its community-centred approach since 2023, engaging clan elders, easing taxation in some areas, and reframing itself as a provider of social order.[22] In several districts, the movement has offered conditional amnesties to local militias, including the Macawisley, couched in economic assurances and local power-sharing arrangements.[23] Such strategies allow Al-Shabaab to portray itself as more reliable than the state in delivering livelihoods and protection, particularly in rural constituencies where national reintegration initiatives have limited reach.

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[20] *Ibid.*
[21] European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), COI Report: Somalia — Defection, Desertion, Disengagement from Al-Shabaab (Brussels: EUAA, 2023).
[22] Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell, "Flailing State: The Resurgence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia," War on the Rocks, June 2025.
[23] *Ibid.*

Galmudug: Care counselling, mental and psychological support, and vocational training initiatives.

(Source: ACCEPT International, 2025)

Towards Sustainable Integration and National Resilience

If Somalia were to implement the recommendations set out in this report, the country could transition from fragmented reintegration initiatives to a unified national system capable of advancing long-term peace and stability. A coherent national strategy—co-designed with Federal Member States, community representatives and international partners—would ensure predictable pathways for ex-combatants, anchored in local legitimacy and supported by state institutions. Communities would be equipped with the tools, resources and political backing needed to welcome disengaged individuals safely and confidently, reducing stigma, strengthening social cohesion, and undermining Al-Shabaab's capacity to exploit grievances.

Reintegration centres would no longer operate as isolated, donor-dependent facilities but as integrated components of Somalia's governance and development ecosystem. Former combatants would have access to meaningful economic opportunities through nationally coordinated livelihood schemes, private-sector partnerships and locally relevant training, reducing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that insurgents have long used to their advantage. Customary authorities, women's groups and youth leaders would play structured roles in reconciliation, building a culture of community-driven accountability and restorative justice. Over time, these processes would reinforce trust between the state and its citizens, fostering a shared commitment to peace. Under this vision, Al-Shabaab's influence would gradually diminish—not only through military containment but through the erosion of the social and economic conditions that sustain its appeal. A resilient Somali state would emerge, capable of governing inclusively, protecting its population, and providing a credible alternative to extremist governance.