



**TALO Center for Governance and  
Public Policy Studies**

*Promoting better policies through evidence based policy Research*

# **The Drivers of Youth Recruitment to Terrorism**



## About Contributors

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We advocate sound public policies that would make Somalia more developed with more inclusive and efficient public institutions.

## **Executive Summary**

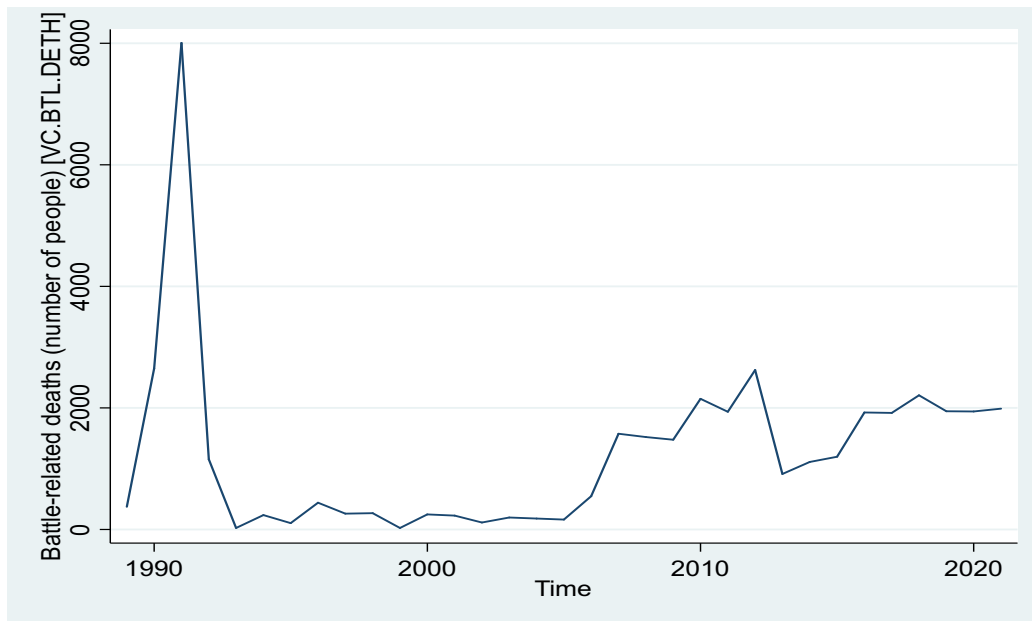
Somalia has been experiencing tremendous population growth due to its high fertility rate. As a result, it is considered a "youthful resource" country. Youth counts for the lion's share of the total population. A recent population estimation survey conducted in 2014 by the Ministry of Planning and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFP) stated that over 70 percent of the country's population falls under the age of thirty (United Nations Population Fund, 2014).

Additionally, the country's labor force participation rate is for youth, and it is estimated at 66 percent of the total population. However, the youth in Somalia get limited economic opportunities and job creation programs in the labor market. As a consequence, the youth expose themselves to dangerous activities to generate income to satisfy their needs. Some immigrate to Europe by engaging in a very risky journey by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and others become drug addicts and join criminal gangs. Most treacherously, some of them become sources of recruitment for terrorist groups. To understand this issue, this brief report examines the drivers of youth recruitment to terrorism and proposes policy recommendations.

## The Drivers of Youth Recruitment to Terrorism


Security and a peaceful environment are necessary for every society to achieve growth and prosperity. Unfortunately, many societies including the Somali people endured a long-term internal armed conflict that wreaked havoc on the economy by destroying the physical and human capital of their country. Figure 1 shows the number of people that have lost their lives due to internal armed conflicts in the country.

**Figure 1: Battle-Related Deaths**



*\*Source: World Develop Indicators of World Bank*

The war badly affected the youth -the majority of the population- as they lived in constant fear and faced a gross violation of their rights and many of them are forced to flee their homes to live in IDP camps or refugee camps in neighboring countries. According to country statistics, youth represent more than 60% of the Somali population and many contend that countries with large youth cohorts are highly unstable and more prone to domestic armed conflict. The Somali youth didn't involve in armed conflicts only as victims of war but also as perpetrators since a large number of youth combatants actively participated in Somalia's multifaceted civil war. Somali



youth are vulnerable to recruitment and use by non-state armed groups especially AL-SHABAB - meaning the youth in the Arabic language- which is an Al-Qaida-affiliated terrorist group that seeks to topple the Somali Government. This policy brief examines the three major drivers of Somali youth to join terrorist groups and participate in armed conflicts which are youth radicalization, poverty, and youth unemployment, and the lack of public education

### **Youth Radicalization and Terrorism**

Radicalization which makes individuals believe or support extreme views is one of the factors that lead the youth to join terrorist groups and commit heinous crimes. Radicalization is motivated by many factors but distorted religious belief represents the root cause of the problem. Terrorist groups misinterpret religion to spread hate and promote violence and they often target children and the youth in their radicalization campaigns. Young people are radicalized through direct contact with terrorist groups or through family members or friends. Therefore, children and youth are at greater risk of being radicalized especially those who are experiencing challenges in their life.

Terrorists in Somalia use various means of radicalization that enable them to recruit many children and teenagers. Internet is one of the main tools that is widely used by terrorist organizations that allows them to recruit both the youth who live in the country and foreign fighters from different parts of the globe including the U.S. and Western Europe. The terrorists also utilize local radios that broadcast their extremist ideologies, especially in the areas under their control. Furthermore, Al-SHABAB developed a complete education curriculum for primary schools that is different from the national curriculum and they forced the administration of private schools to adopt their curriculum. Al SHABAB's direct fights, assassinations, explosions as well as suicide attacks are mostly carried out by Somali children and youth who are all victims of radicalization and extreme religious ideologies.

## **The Role of Poverty and Unemployment in Youth Recruitment to Terrorism**

Most Somali youths are from poverty-affected families and USAID Somalia states that two out of three youths live in poverty with food insecurity. Destitute youth are unable to meet their basic needs including food, shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare services, etc. Male youth are most in danger of being recruited into terrorist groups as many of them may join such groups for a better living. For example, many defectors from the terrorist group confirmed that their poor economic conditions forced them to join the Al-SHABAB. Moreover, young people in rural areas controlled by terrorist groups are the most vulnerable ones. The majority of rural residents face extreme poverty and most of them are pastoralists and farmers who are negatively affected by recurring droughts and locust outbreaks. Somali pastoralists lost their livestock due to the rain failure and raising global temperature while the droughts led to crop failure and a decline in agricultural production across the country. Somali youth especially those in the south and central Somalia join the terrorist group and other militia for survival as this enables them to meet their basic needs such as feeding themselves as well as their family members.

On the other hand, the high youth unemployment rate and the low youth labor force participation rate in the country are considered to be one of the main factors that contributed to youth participation in armed clashes and terrorist acts that wreaked havoc on the economy by destroying the physical and human capital of the nation. Somalia has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world according to the latest country reports show that around 34.74 percent of youth are unemployed. Several studies argue that youth unemployment is a threat to the Social, Economic, and Political stability of nations (Urdal, 2006), in this regard, there's a negative correlation between youth unemployment and political stability in Somalia.

**Figure 2: Youth Male Unemployment**

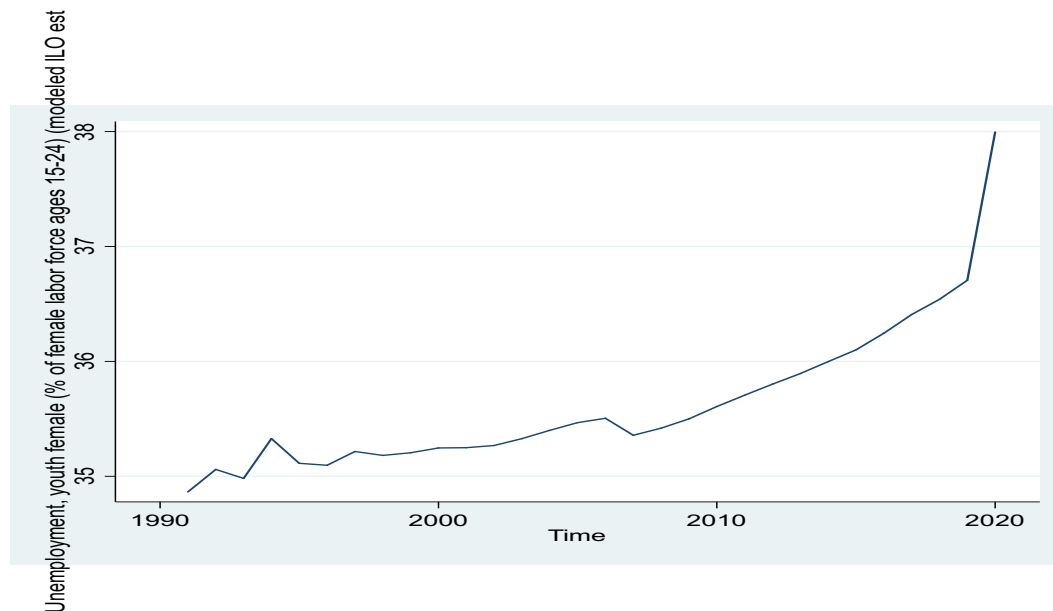


Figure 2 displays the trends in youth male unemployment in Somalia and it shows that the youth male unemployment rate has been increasing since the 1990s and currently the rate of youth male unemployment is the highest one.

### **Lack of Public Education and Youth Recruitment for Terrorism**

Since the civil war outbreak in 1991, the public education sector of Somalia has collapsed which resulted in a devastating impact on the country. The internal conflict deprived many Somali children and youth of their basic rights including their access to primary education as many of them today are out of school. “More than three million children in Somalia are out of school. In many areas across the country, parents are not able to fund their children’s education. In addition to poverty, long distances to school, safety concerns, social norms favoring boys’ education, and lack of teachers, particularly female teachers, and the low availability of sanitation facilities, stop parents from enrolling children, particularly girls, in school”. (UNICEF, 2020). The country's education sector is almost entirely privatized and many poor families are unable to send their children to school because they can't afford the school tuition fee, the cost of text books, and other educational expenses. Furthermore, in many parts of the country, there are no formal schools to attend and the children in such areas have only access to informal education.

It is noteworthy to mention that there are some government and donor efforts to provide free and quality education across Somalia. However, public schools are very limited and their quality is very poor. According to a USAID study in 2021 more than half of the Somali youth are illiterate; two out of three have no formal education and out-of-school youth are dropouts or those who completed school but are unemployed. The terrorist groups target the illiterate youth in their radicalization efforts as they have established Madrasas where children are taught extreme religious beliefs and ideologies. Moreover, there are not many private schools in the terrorist-controlled areas, and the few schools that still operate face many challenges including adopting the curriculum developed by AL-SHABAB.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- ❖ De-radicalization programs are necessary to combat terrorism and violent extremism. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in collaboration with Federal Member States (FMS) should launch a nationwide concerted effort to deploy moderate religious scholars who refute and correct the misinterpretation of the Islamic religion by terrorist organizations. The state should also closely monitor individuals, groups, or any institution that promotes extremist ideologies and spread hate and religious intolerance.
- ❖ Creating economic opportunities is essential to alleviate poverty and tackle the youth unemployment problem. The Government and International Donors have to invest in labor-intensive industries such as agriculture that will create jobs and increase the incomes of poor families.
- ❖ The government should expand public education services and facilities in urban and rural areas to increase the access of youth and children to free education. Moreover, free school meals and conditional cash transfer programs that give money to poor families if they keep their children in school would reduce school dropouts. Furthermore, the government should develop an employment strategy that offers formal jobs for graduates from public schools. Finally, the state should provide adults and nomads with a non-formal education that gives them basic knowledge and enables them to work in the informal sector of the economy.

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