

A NEW THREAT: RADICALIZED SOMALI-AMERICAN YOUTH

Janette Yarwood

The Problem

The past several years have seen heightened concerns about Somali-American youth from across the diaspora being recruited by the foreign group al-Shabaab. The recruits pose an especially dangerous threat to US national security because they hold American passports and thus enjoy more freedom of travel and civil liberties than non-citizens.

A number of Somali-American youth have engaged in terrorist attacks abroad, as revealed through Department of Justice documents. Since 2007 at least 20 American young men, all but one of Somali descent, secretly left their homes across the United States to join training camps in Somalia operated by al-Shabaab, a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) (US House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security 2011). Many of them ultimately fought with al-Shabaab against Ethiopian forces, African Union troops, and the internationally supported Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

On October 29, 2008, 27-year-old Shirwa Ahmed of Minneapolis took part in one of five simultaneous suicide attacks on targets in northern Somalia. Ahmed drove an explosive-laden truck into an office of the Puntland Intelligence Service in Bossasso, Puntland. Other targets included a second Puntland Intelligence Service office in Bossasso, the Presidential Palace, the United Nations (UN) Development Program office, and the Ethiopian Trade Mission in Hargeisa. In 2009, a Somali-American from Seattle was one of two suicide bombers who drove vehicles with UN logos into the African Union force headquarters in Mogadishu, killing at least 21 peacekeepers (Escobedo 2009). In 2010, there were also reports that a Somali-American died on the streets of Mogadishu following a battle with pro-government forces.

The situation was repeated in many Somali communities in the West, as youth left their homes in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Three suspects accused of having ties to al-Shabaab are currently in an Australian prison awaiting sentencing for allegedly planning an attack on an Australian military base (*ABC News* 2011). While much attention has been paid to Somali diaspora youth radicalization in Western countries, al-Shabaab has stepped up its campaign in East Africa. In March 2012, at least 6 people were killed and more than 60 were injured in

The only way to understand what is driving youth disaffection and isolation from both the Somali community and the broader American society is to engage with the youth themselves.

an attack at a busy bus station in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. Four men suspected of belonging to al-Shabaab were detained in Yemen near a site of an explosion that killed two. In addition, members of al-Shabaab attacked an Ethiopian base in Somalia in March 2012. There were dozens of casualties. Because of continued instability in Somalia, there is a large diaspora population, and at least one million Somali's reside outside of Somalia. This diaspora is concentrated throughout Africa, the Gulf States, Western Europe, and North America. Has al-Shabaab attempted to recruit from other Somali diaspora communities across sub-Saharan Africa?

A handful of Somalis from the United States have taken high-visibility propaganda and operational roles in al-Shabaab. They are being deployed strategically to raise the terrorist organization's profile and recruit others, especially from English speaking countries, said Anders Falk, a former Assistant US attorney who prosecuted suspected al-Shabaab supporters in Minnesota.

Since the first reports of Somali-American involvement in Somalia, there has been concern that this violent extremism would lead to attacks



Credit: Film Director Fathia Abie

in the United States. This threat became more tangible with the arrest in Oregon of Somali-American teenager Mohamed Osman Mohamud, who attempted to detonate a bomb at a holiday tree lighting ceremony in Portland in November 2010. Although the suspect had been in contact with a terrorist recruiter from the Middle East, he did not appear to be connected with Somali extremist organizations.

These high-profile cases make clear that some sectors of the Somali-American youth population have become radicalized. The important question is, Why have these youth left their homes in the United States (or other Western countries) to join a civil war their parents struggled to escape?

From Somalia to America

Somalia has been plagued by clan-based war since 1978, but the situation deteriorated on a massive scale after rebels ousted President Siyad Barre's regime in 1991. This ouster resulted in factional fighting, and no central government has controlled the country since then despite several attempts to establish a unified central government. The TFG was formed in 2004. In 2006, a coalition known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) formed rival administration to the TGF and took power in southern Somalia, including major cities and Mogadishu. In late 2006 and early 2007, the TGF joined with Ethiopian forces in an effort to regain control of most of the southern region. The ICU separated into smaller groups after it was removed from power in 2006. One group, Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin, commonly known as al-Shabaab (The Youth), represented a militant youth movement within the ICU. Since 2006, al-Shabaab has continued its violent insurgency in southern

and central Somalia. The group has exerted temporary and, at times, sustained control over strategic locations in southern and central Somalia by recruiting, at times forcibly, regional sub-clans and their militias, using guerrilla asymmetrical warfare and terrorist tactics against the TFG and its allies, African Union peacekeepers, and non-governmental aid organizations. On February 29, 2008, the US government designated al-Shabaab an FTO.

Following the outbreak of the civil war, many of Somalia's residents left the country as refugees in search of asylum. The Somali-American population is distributed in small clusters throughout the United States, with the heaviest concentrations in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Columbus, Seattle, and San Diego. According to the latest report from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, almost one in three people in the United States with Somali ancestry now live in Minnesota. Many Somalis in Minnesota live in low-income housing in impoverished communities, especially the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, also known as "Little Mogadishu," which is east of downtown Minneapolis. Most, but not all, of the young men recruited to fight for al-Shabaab lived in or around the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, which is geographically isolated from the rest of the city and crime-ridden with drugs, gangs, and drive-by shootings. It is believed that the initial wave of recruits in 2007 was motivated by the Ethiopian army's intervention in Somalia, which many viewed as an invasion. However, recruitment continues, and al-Shabaab and Somalia have returned to the international spotlight as governments across the region and the West attempt to intervene in Somali

conflicts. Will this lead to a new wave of radicalization among Somali diaspora youth?

Combating Youth Radicalization

The US government has responded to these challenges with strategies to identify and disrupt such attacks. In 2010, the White House included combating homegrown extremism in the national security strategy and endorsed empowering local communities as one element of an approach to countering this type of radicalization. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has developed a community outreach engagement effort to build trust and open a dialogue with specific communities. According to testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security, the primary purpose of the FBI's Community Outreach Program is to enhance public trust and confidence in the FBI by fostering relationships with various communities so that community members are more likely to report a crime, return a phone call, or respond positively to being approached by an FBI Special Agent.

During a recent trip to Minneapolis, I had the opportunity to engage with various members of the Somali-American community. A man in his 50s reacted to the youth who went back to Somalia by commenting, "It was unbelievable; we were shocked. How could someone go back to a country we fled, to go and do harm." This sentiment was repeated by several people with whom I spoke in Minneapolis. Amina, a shopkeeper at a local Somali market, explained, "Parents used to tell their children not to be too American because we were afraid of the drugs

and gangs. We just didn't know; we don't know what to do now." Abdi, a 20-year-old college student told me, "Young people have no business going over there to fight. The way to help Somalia is to make something of yourself." Finally, Omar, a recent college graduate told me, "A lot of Somali guys my age are in jail." These comments and preliminary research in Minneapolis signal that law enforcement officials should not rely solely on outreach to community elders, who are often disconnected from younger generations. While it is important to develop trusting relationships with Somali-American communities, parents and religious leaders often have no idea about the issues confronting youth. Ultimately, engaging with the youth themselves is the only way to understand what is driving their disaffection and isolation from the Somali community and the broader American society.

The problem of youth disaffection and radicalization requires in-depth social science research based on inter-

views, focus groups, and first-hand engagement with Somali-American youth and other members of the Somali community. This research could provide insights on the current conditions affecting Somali diaspora communities, including information related to identity formation, youth concerns, disconnects, or conflicts with elders. Targeted counter-radicalization programs could be developed in partnership with local community leaders based on such insights.

Somalia continues to present fertile ground for the cultivation of extremists, and the risks to American society will only grow if increasing numbers of Somali-Americans are among those being radicalized.

Dr. Yarwood is a research staff member at IDA. A cultural anthropologist, her research focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, social identity formation, social movements, new social media, and youth populations. Dr. Yarwood holds a doctorate in anthropology from the City University of New York.

Sources:

- ABC News. 2011. "3 Sentenced in Terror Plot on Australian Army Base," December 15. Accessed March 9, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/m/story?id=15167522&sid=76>.
- BBC News. 2012a. "Kenya Blames al-Shabab for Deadly Nairobi Grenade Attack," March 11. Accessed March 11, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17326086>.
- BBC News. 2012b. "Somalia Islamists al-Shabab Ambush Ethiopia Troops," March 10. Accessed March 11, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17324635>.
- Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs. 2009. "Terror Charges Unsealed in Minneapolis Against Eight Men." November 23. Accessed November 30, 2011. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/November/09-nsd-1267.html>.
- Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs. 2010. "Fourteen Charged with Providing Material Support to Somalia-Based Terrorist Organization Al-Shabaab," August 5. Accessed November 30, 2011. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/August/10-ag-898.html>.
- Escobedo, Tricia. 2009. "Suicide Bomber in Somalia Lived in U.S." *CNN World Online*, September 23. Accessed November 30, 2011. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/09/23/somalia.bombing.american/index.html?iref=nextin>.
- US House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, 2011. "Hearing on Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and Threat to the Homeland." July 27. Accessed March 14, 2012. <http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/al-shabaab-recruitment-and-radicalization-within-muslim-american-community-and-threat>.