

Source disputes story prompting Trump's comments about Somalis in Minnesota

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Key source says story that prompted Trump tirade against Somalis

is erroneous

The writers of a City Journal story alleging a connection between Minnesota fraud and al-Shabab say they stand by their story.

[By Deena Winter](#)

The Minnesota Star Tribune

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Near the end of a two-hour meeting Dec. 2, President Donald Trump unleashed a xenophobic tirade against Somali immigrants, calling them "garbage" he does not want in the United States. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

In mid-November, a little-known conservative website published an explosive claim: Al-Shabab, an Islamic terrorist group active in Somalia, was being funded by millions of dollars stolen from Minnesota taxpayers.

The fallout was swift. Within days, President Donald Trump referred to Somalis as "garbage," federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement launched an intensive operation in the Twin Cities, and the administration announced a series of investigations into state programs.

But a core source for the article now calls the story "bullshit" and claims he was misquoted. Another person cited in the piece is distancing himself from the reporting. Meanwhile, current and former federal prosecutors have said there is no indication that defendants involved in Minnesota fraud cases sent money to terrorist groups. The City Journal writers say they stand by the story.

Retired Seattle detective Glenn Kerns – the only named person in the City Journal article who connects Minnesota Somali fraud with terrorism, a core premise of the story – said he

never traveled to Minnesota to investigate the connection, as the piece claims.

Kerns, 71, said he complained to the outlet soon after the story was published but got no response.

One of the two City Journal authors, reporter Ryan Thorpe, said he has “multiple call logs, text messages, and transcripts of our phone calls, among other materials” and that Kerns “was not misquoted.”

“Any public suggestion that we have falsified our reporting is false and easily disprovable,” Thorpe told the Minnesota Star Tribune in a text, although he declined to provide materials disproving Kerns’ assertions.

The outlet also said Kerns has not returned its calls since the Star Tribune inquired about the story.

Spotlight on Minnesota

The Nov. 19 [City Journal story](#), headlined “The Largest Funder of Al-Shabaab Is the Minnesota Taxpayer,” put Minnesota’s fraud scandal in the national spotlight.

After publishing the story, co-author and conservative activist Christopher Rufo urged Trump [on social media](#) to revoke temporary asylum for Somali refugees fleeing civil war. The president obliged, threatening to send Somalis “back to where they came from” and raging about Minnesota being “a hub of fraudulent money laundering activity.”

Since then, the federal government has loosed an array of pressure on the state:

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- Some [100 ICE agents have been deployed](#) to target Somali people, and [the Trump administration has claimed](#) hundreds of people have been arrested.
- [Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced an investigation](#) into whether Minnesota fraud proceeds were diverted to terrorist groups.
- The [Department of Housing and Urban Development announced an investigation](#) into whether federal housing programs have been defrauded.
- The [Department of Labor said it would review](#) the state’s unemployment insurance program.
- [Small Business Administration head Kelly Loeffler ordered an investigation](#) into whether another pandemic relief program, the Paycheck Protection Program, was defrauded by “the network of Somali organizations and executives” implicated in other fraud schemes.

Conflicting reports

Kerns initially told the Star Tribune he never talked to the City Journal. Then, after Thorpe provided the Star Tribune with a screenshot indicating they had a 36-minute conversation on Nov. 6, Kerns said he’d mistaken Thorpe for another reporter.

Aside from Kerns, the City Journal story cited “multiple law enforcement sources” saying

Minnesota fraud proceeds are a huge funder of al-Shabab, but offered no other evidence.

Kerns said he does think it's likely a cut of money sent to Somalia ends up in the hands of al-Shabab because that's what "sources" told him while he was investigating terrorism in Seattle. But he said he was unable to find additional evidence proving that.

"They went way too far on their poetic license to make it into a big story," he said.

Kerns said he gave Thorpe pointers about how to look into whether some of the money stolen from Minnesota government programs ended up going to al-Shabab.

"I was pointing him in the right direction to start digging. That was all," Kerns said in a text. He said he "never said half" of the quotes in the story.

Thorpe disputed that, saying he did an "on the record" interview with Kerns and has transcripts of phone calls. He did not provide the transcripts to the Star Tribune.

"I was clear and upfront with Mr. Kerns from the outset that I was writing about fraud as it relates to Minnesota and that was the focus of much of our conversation," Thorpe said in an email.

His story quoted Kerns saying, "I went down to [Minnesota] and pulled all of their records and ... all these Somalis sending out money are on DHS benefits. How does that make sense?"

The bracketed word — Minnesota — is the crux of the dispute. Kerns said he never said it.

As part of a decade-old Seattle investigation, Kerns looked at money that was sent from Seattle to Minnesota, but he said he never traveled to Minnesota or pulled any Minnesota records. He said he only called Minnesota officials to ask how they track money sent by

hawalas, which are used to move cash back and forth to Somalia since the East African country doesn't have a formal banking system.

Thorpe acknowledged that Kerns' original quote said he "went down to the state" and his editor changed it to "went down to [Minnesota]."

"Given the context of our conversation and that the question he was responding to was about Minnesota, a reasonable person would have understood 'went down to the state' to mean Minnesota," Thorpe said.

"If Mr. Kerns now thinks he meant something different, we're happy to hear from him directly, but he hasn't answered my calls."

Seattle story rehashed

Kerns did work on a federal terrorism task force in Seattle until he retired in 2015. He noted many of the allegations in the City Journal story were similar to those in a [2016 story by a Seattle TV station](#), KING5, about suitcases full of cash being flown to East Africa. Kerns was quoted in the story expressing concern that al-Shabab could take a cut of money sent to Somalia.

Two years after the Seattle story aired, a local report by [FOX 9 included Kerns](#) discussing his Seattle investigation for a similar story claiming money stolen from Minnesota's child-care assistance program was funding al-Shabab.

But Minnesota's Office of the Legislative Auditor, a nonpartisan watchdog agency, said the

reporting failed to provide evidence substantiating those claims.

While most of the scores of people charged in a string of federal fraud cases have been of East African descent, federal prosecutors in Minnesota have never said that fraud proceeds funded terrorism. Prosecutors said defendants in the Feeding Our Future case spent their fraud proceeds on luxury houses, cars, travel and property in places such as Kenya.

The City Journal story extensively quoted former interim U.S. attorney for Minnesota, Joe Thompson, who has taken a lead role in multiple federal fraud investigations over the past four years. But the City Journal authors did not interview Thompson; they quoted solely prior news releases and past news coverage.

When asked during a Dec. 18 news conference whether he's found any fraud proceeds funding terrorist groups in Somalia, Thompson said there's no indication the defendants were radicalized and sent money to such groups. He did acknowledge, however, that "some money may have gotten into the hands of al-Shabab."

That comment echoes the state legislative auditor's 2019 report, which said regulators and law enforcement were concerned that terrorist groups in countries such as Somalia could take some of the money that immigrants and refugees in the U.S. send to families and friends.

Thompson's former boss, former U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger, who led the nation's largest pandemic fraud prosecution, Feeding Our Future, has disputed the City Journal story's assertion that fraud proceeds funded terrorism.

Luger [told the Star Tribune](#) that the 70 defendants his office prosecuted in the Feeding Our Future case "were looking to get rich, not fund overseas terrorism."

Outside of Kerns, the City Journal story quoted "a second former official, who worked on the Minneapolis JTTF" (Joint Terrorism Task Force) who confirmed the "general structure" of the

story's claims.

The City Journal story also quoted former Minnesota fraud investigator Kayseh Magan, who worked for the state's Attorney General's Office from early 2020 to the end of 2022, citing a [column he wrote last year](#) about Somalis committing fraud.

After the City Journal story was published, Magan asked the outlet to clarify in the story that he was not interviewed, and they did.

Magan said he was so disgusted by the story that he wrote an [op-ed calling it "vulture journalism"](#) that undermines the hard work done to prosecute "the rampant fraud that has beset Minnesota's public programs."

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about the writer

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