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**Before**

**The Committee on Homeland Security**

**Hearing: “From al-Shabaab to al-Nusra: How Westerners Joining Terror Groups  
Overseas Affects the Homeland,”  
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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished Members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to testify today.

Al Shabaab is a violent extremist group in Somalia that has successfully demonstrated its ability to recruit Americans and citizens of other Western countries. The State Department designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in February 2008. While it has primarily focused on its agenda in Somalia, two developments in the past month, namely the group’s deadly terrorist attack on an upscale shopping mall in Kenya, and the death in Somalia of American jihadist Omar Hammami, have highlighted the transnational threats posed by Al Shabaab. These events have prompted a number of questions, not least of which are: “What role are American recruits playing in Al Shabaab?” and “Could American recruits conduct or facilitate similar attacks in the United States?”

Many details of the Nairobi mall attack remain unclear, and investigations are ongoing regarding the identity of those who planned and led the attack.<sup>1</sup> Eyewitness accounts reported by the press and initial remarks by Kenyan officials suggested that British and/or U.S. citizens may have participated in the attack, although more recent Kenyan government statements have identified only East African nationals among the attackers.

U.S. policymakers have been concerned for years with Al Shabaab recruitment abroad for two main reasons. First, such recruitment has led to the participation of U.S. citizens in Al Shabaab terrorist activities overseas. Second, and salient to today’s hearing, the group has recruited

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<sup>1</sup> CRS Report 43245, *In Brief: The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya*.

Americans or individuals carrying passports from countries in the Visa Waiver Program, including countries in Europe, who might potentially seek to target the United States.

At this point, while some in Al Shabaab may aspire to conduct terrorist attacks outside Africa, the group's capability and intent to strike targets inside the United States have not been demonstrated. However, the Westgate mall terrorist attack is another sobering demonstration of Al Shabaab's intent, and ability, to strike targets beyond Somalia's borders, at least in the neighboring region. The attack may also provide inspiration for would-be jihadists on how small arms can be used against soft targets with maximum effect. Even if U.S. citizens were not involved in the Westgate attack, perhaps the most important fact for the consideration of this committee remains that Al Shabaab has successfully recruited U.S. citizens and deployed them in terrorist operations. In this testimony, I provide some background on Al Shabaab and briefly discuss the role of foreign fighters within its ranks and its efforts to recruit from abroad.

## Background

Al Qaeda and affiliated groups like Al Shabaab have had a presence in East Africa for almost 20 years, although the extent of their operations there has varied over time.<sup>2</sup> The region's porous borders, proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, weak law enforcement and judicial institutions, and pervasive corruption have combined with almost 20 years of state collapse in Somalia to provide an enabling environment for violent extremist groups.

Al Shabaab, more formally known as *Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidin* ("Mujahidin Youth Movement"), emerged about a decade ago amid a proliferation of Islamist and clan-based militias that flourished in the absence of central authority in Somalia. Loosely affiliated with a network of local Islamic courts, Al Shabaab, unlike the clan militias, drew members from across clans, ascribing to a broader irredentist and religiously driven vision of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia under an Islamist caliphate.<sup>3</sup> Several of Al Shabaab's leaders had reportedly trained and fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and known Al Qaeda operatives in the region were associated with the group.

Al Shabaab grew in prominence in 2006, when hardliners within the Islamic courts called for jihad against neighboring Ethiopia. Ethiopia, reportedly supported by the United States, had backed a group of Mogadishu warlords, purportedly to capture suspected Al Qaeda operatives and counter the growing Islamist presence in the Somali capital. When Ethiopia intervened directly in December of that year, deploying its own forces to Mogadishu to defeat the courts' militias, Al Shabaab played upon historic anti-Ethiopian sentiment in the country to fuel an increasingly complex insurgency.<sup>4</sup> Some analysts argue that Al Shabaab and other hardliners benefited directly from the U.S.-backed Ethiopian intervention that removed their rivals and gave credence to Al Shabaab's anti-foreign rhetoric.

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<sup>2</sup> For further background, see CRS Report R41473, *Countering Terrorism in East Africa: the U.S. Response*, November 3, 2010, by Lauren Ploch.

<sup>3</sup> The courts' leaders varied in their ideological approaches, which reflected diverse views on political Islam, clan identity, and Somali nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Roland Marchal, "A Tentative Assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab," *Journal of East African Studies*, November 2009.

U.S. air strikes in early 2007 against suspected Al Qaeda operatives fighting among the insurgents were incorporated into Al Shabaab's narrative that Islam in predominantly Muslim Somalia was under attack by the West and its proxy African "Crusader" forces. Al Qaeda messaging supported this narrative—in January 2007, Ayman al Zawahiri broadcast a call for jihadists to support Somali efforts to attack Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> When African Union (AU) troops from predominantly Christian Uganda and Burundi joined the fight against Al Shabaab later that year, under a U.N. mandate and with substantial U.S. and European support, Al Shabaab repeated its charge that these forces were surrogates for an American anti-Islamic agenda.

Al Shabaab has repeatedly used this narrative against Kenya, which launched its own military offensive against Al Shabaab in October 2011 with the stated aim of defending itself against terrorist threats and incursions. Kenya joined the AU force, known as AMISOM (the AU Mission in Somalia) in 2012. Alleged abuses by AU forces and civilian casualties purportedly resulting from U.S. and/or Kenyan air strikes have been exploited by Al Shabaab. For example, in claiming responsibility for the September 2013 attack on the Westgate mall, the group charged that the Kenyan military had "massacred" innocent civilians in southern Somalia during its operations.<sup>6</sup> It used a similar justification for its deadly July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda.

### **Al Shabaab Ties to Al Qaeda**

Al Shabaab, as it exists today, appears to be a hybrid—it is both a locally focused Islamist insurgent group and a transnational terrorist affiliate of Al Qaeda.<sup>7</sup> U.N. experts have referred to it as "a sprawling coalition of jihadists, business interests and clan militias." The group announced its formal merger with Al Qaeda in February 2012, although Al Shabaab did not adopt the Al Qaeda name.<sup>8</sup> Like several other "AQ affiliates," Al Shabaab appears to operate largely independently. According to the U.S. State Department, it maintains ties with other extremist groups in the region, like Nigeria's Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda affiliated groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), although such links have reportedly been institutional (i.e., communications, training and weapons linkages) rather than operational.<sup>9</sup>

Public statements from Al Shabaab leaders suggested for years an aspiration to be part of the Al Qaeda franchise. In 2008, after a U.S. missile strike killed Al Shabaab leader Aden Hashi Ayro,

<sup>5</sup> OSC, "Al-Zawahiri Urges Somalis, Muslims To Fight Ethiopian Forces," FEA20070105069027, January 5, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> OSC Report AFL2013092380722161, "Somalia, Kenya—Al Shabaab Vocal in Claiming Responsibility for Nairobi Attack," September 23, 2013. According to the State Department, Kenya has successfully disrupted several large-scale terrorist threats, but more than three dozen small-scale terrorist incidents were reported in Kenya in 2012. State Department, "Kenya," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, May 30, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The term "Islamist" here refers to those who advance a formal political role for Islam, through the implementation of Islamic law, political mobilization through a religious party, or the creation of a religious system of governance.

<sup>8</sup> U.N. Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1853 (2008)*, S/2010/91, March 10, 2010. The media wing of Al Qaeda Senior Leadership in Pakistan released a joint video message from Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane and Al Qaeda leader Zawahiri on February 9, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The U.S. capture in 2011 of a Somali, Ahmed Warsame, has been referred to by U.S. law enforcement as an intelligence watershed on the linkages between Al Shabaab and AQAP. For U.S. government reference to institutional links see, e.g., the description of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau on the State Department's Rewards for Justice website, and see also U.N. Security Council, *Somalia report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 2060 (2012)*, S/2013/413, July 12, 2013.

the group's leadership made multiple pronouncements of their commitment to the global jihad movement, and subsequently announced a revenge campaign against U.S. and Western targets in Somalia.<sup>10</sup> In August 2008, a top commander, Mukhtar Robow, publicly acknowledged the group's growing ties to Al Qaeda, saying, "We are now negotiating to unite as one. We will take our orders from Sheik Osama Bin Laden because we are his students."<sup>11</sup> He also threatened, for the first time on record, Al Shabaab attacks against targets outside Somalia, warning, "once we end the holy war in Somalia, we will take it to any government that participated in the fighting against Somalia or gave assistance to those attacking us." At that time, some U.S. officials, while recognizing linkages between the groups, publicly dismissed the idea that Al Shabaab was following orders from Al Qaeda.

Other public expressions of allegiance followed, and in September 2009, Al Shabaab released a video expressing greetings to Osama Bin Laden, in which Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane spoke of awaiting guidance from the AQ leader.<sup>12</sup> Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to Al Shabaab as a "junior partner" to Al Qaeda in early 2010.<sup>13</sup> In June 2011, after the United States reportedly directed its first drone strikes against targets in Somalia, President Obama's then-counterterrorism advisor John Brennan declared AQAP the "most operationally active affiliate" in the Al Qaeda network, but warned that "from the territory it controls in Somalia, Al Shabaab continues to call for strikes against the United States."<sup>14</sup> In its 2011 National Counterterrorism Strategy, released that same month, the Administration warned, "influenced by its Al Qaeda elements, Al Shabaab...could—motivated to advance its insurgency or to further its al Qaeda agenda or both—strike outside Somalia in East Africa, as it did in Uganda, as well as outside the region." Unidentified U.S. military officials expressed concern at that time that some within the group were collaborating more closely with Al Qaeda to strike targets abroad, and indicated that the targets of the June drone strikes had "direct ties" to AQAP's Anwar al Awlaki.<sup>15</sup> Press reports suggested that the strikes sought to disrupt a plan to conduct attacks in the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

The practical effect of Al Shabaab's 2012 merger with Al Qaeda is unclear. Some experts argue that it is largely symbolic, given that the group appears to remain self-sufficient and continues to follow a largely Somalia-focused agenda. They see the Westgate mall attack in Kenya as part of

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<sup>10</sup> OSC, "Somalia's Mujahidin Youth Movement Spokesman Discusses Progress of Jihad," GMP20080527873001, May 8, 2008; and OSC, "Somalia: MYM Commander Shaykh Al-Zubayr Sends Message to Global Jihad Leaders," AFP20080603410001, June 1, 2008. Foreign fighter Omar Hammami (Abu Mansour al-Amriki) also expressed Al Shabaab's commitment to global jihad in January 2008, OSC, "'Abu-Mansur al-Amriki' Condemns 'Courts,' Praises MYM Views, Bin Ladin," GMP20080213106001, February 7, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Sanders, "Conditions May Be Ripe for Al Qaeda to Gain in Somalia," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> OSC, "Somalia: Mujahidin Youth Movement Issues 'O Usama, Here We Are' Video," AFP20090922410001, September 20, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Remarks during a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing, March 25, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> The White House, Remarks of John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, on Ensuring al-Qa'ida's Demise—As Prepared for Delivery, June 29, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Greg Jaffe and Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Drone Targets Two Leaders of Somali Group Allied with Al-Qaeda, Official Says," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2011 and Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Expands Its Drone War Into Somalia," *New York Times*, July 1, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Karen DeYoung, "CIA Idles Drone Flights from Base in Pakistan," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2011.

that effort.<sup>17</sup> Others argue that the Westgate attack bears the hallmarks of new guidelines reportedly released by Al Qaeda leadership, instructing affiliated groups to use hostages to attract maximum publicity, and may signal a strategic shift toward a more global focus by Al Shabaab leadership.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Recruitment and Training of Foreign Fighters in Somalia**

The typical Al Shabaab foot soldier is Somali, and is more likely to have joined the group for economic reasons, or to defend clan interests, than based on extremist beliefs.<sup>19</sup> But the group also continues to draw support from roughly 300 “foreign fighters,” according to U.N. reporting.<sup>20</sup> (The U.N. estimate does not include individuals of Somali descent—if they were included in the count, the figure would almost certainly be higher.) These fighters are reportedly predominantly from Kenya, Sudan and Yemen, but also from South Asia, as well as from Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

U.S. Africa Command officials suggest that these foreign fighters “remain the greatest threat to Western interests regionally and internationally.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, two Sudanese, Mohamed Makawi Ibrahim Mohamed and Abdelbasit Alhaj Alhassan Haj Hamad, who were involved in the January 2008 murder of a U.S. diplomat in Khartoum, are believed to be among the group’s ranks.<sup>22</sup> Several foreign fighters have reportedly been targeted in U.S. military strikes in Somalia, including Bilal al Berjawi, a Lebanese-born British citizen who was reportedly wounded in a June 2011 drone strike and killed in a second strike, in January 2012. Another is Mohammed Sakr, a British citizen of Egyptian descent killed in a February 2012 strike. The UK government revoked their passports in 2010.

Al Shabaab is not the first extremist group to attract foreigners to Somalia to join its ranks, but it may be the most successful. Somalia offered a permissive environment for Al Qaeda operatives like Harun Fazul and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, co-conspirators in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, to train recruits. But Somalia also poses organizational and logistical challenges for foreign operatives and fighters. Reports suggest, for example, that AQ operatives found Somalis’ clan identities and suspicion of foreigners, as well as the unreliability of local “allies,” to be impediments to their operations in the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> The country’s widespread

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Kulish, Mark Mazzetti, and Eric Schmitt, “Kenya Mall Carnage Shows Shabaab Resilience,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, “Al Shabaab Breaks New Ground with Complex Nairobi Attack,” CNN, September 23, 2013. See also Ayman al Zawahiri, *General Guidelines for Jihad*, As-Sahab Media, September 2013.

<sup>19</sup> U.N. Information Service, Press Briefing by Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia Nicholas Kay in Geneva, September 24, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> U.N. Security Council, S/2013/413, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> General David M. Rodriguez, Written Responses to Advance Policy Questions for the Nominee for Commander, U.S. Africa Command, Senate Armed Services Committee, February 13, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> These two individuals, who were convicted of the crime in 2009 and subsequently escaped a Sudanese prison, have been listed by the United States as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

<sup>23</sup> The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point’s Harmony Project, *Al-Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, 2006.

banditry, poor roads, weak financial services, and other logistical challenges created additional costs for Al Qaeda as it tried to move personnel and resources through the area for training.<sup>24</sup>

Al Shabaab appears to have found ways to work around many of these challenges, due in large part to its continued ability, despite notable military setbacks in the past two years, to control significant territory in southern and central Somalia.<sup>25</sup> According to a recent report by the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia, Al Shabaab has at least 20 training camps, including a suicide training school near the port city of Barawe, an Al Shabaab stronghold that was the target of a raid by Navy Seals on October 5.<sup>26</sup> These training sites move frequently, but their continued existence demonstrates that Al Shabaab still enjoys some freedom of movement and territorial control in parts of the country.<sup>27</sup>

### *Recruitment in the United States and Among the Somali-American Community*

Al Shabaab has conducted recruitment and fundraising within the Somali diaspora community in the United States, drawing considerable attention from U.S. law enforcement officials. Several Somali-Americans have been prosecuted for terrorist financing, and U.S. citizens (many, but not all, of Somali origin) have been indicted on suspicion of traveling to train and fight with Al Shabaab. Others have been prosecuted for efforts to recruit or provide financial support to the group. Estimates vary on the number of U.S. citizens who may have joined Al Shabaab in Somalia, but more than twenty young men from Minnesota, which hosts the largest concentration of Somali-Americans, are believed to have gone to fight in Somalia, and at least four Somali-Americans have been implicated in suicide bombings there.<sup>28</sup>

Al Shabaab has used both real and virtual social networks to recruit. The group has proven adept at strategic communications, using the Internet to emphasize its commitment to global jihad, and to pledge fealty to Al Qaeda, which serves both its fundraising and recruitment goals. In addition to using domestic media sources to reach Somalis, the group maintains multiple websites and a Twitter feed (@HSMPress and variations, which are periodically shut down), with videos and statements posted online in Somali, Arabic, and English, to reach an international audience. Al Shabaab also uses Internet chatrooms to solicit contributions and recruits. Its foreign-born members often play a key role in its propaganda—a British national, for example, is believed to manage its Twitter account.

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<sup>24</sup> Coastal Kenya, on the other hand, with its porous borders, relative stability, and basic infrastructure, including banks, provided what some consider a “weak state” environment that proved to be a conducive setting for Al Qaeda activities, and provided easier access to high-profile Western targets.

<sup>25</sup> Since 2006, Al Shabaab has co-opted clan leaders in south-central Somalia and manipulated local revenue streams, earning possibly as much as \$15 million a month from illegal charcoal exports through Barawe port, south of Mogadishu.

<sup>26</sup> The camps are located primarily in Lower Shabelle region, as well as in Bay, Hiran, and Galgadud.

<sup>27</sup> According to the U.N. Monitoring Group, tasked by the Security Council to report on violations of international sanctions and security threats in Somalia, Al Shabaab remains in control of Middle Juba, most of Hiran, Bay and Bakol regions, and parts of Galgudud, and Lower Shabelle regions. U.N. Security Council, S/2013/413, op.cit.

<sup>28</sup> “Somalis Still Leaving U.S. to Join Terror Group,” *Military Times*, September 26, 2013, and Jamie Dettmer, “Al-Shabab’s Jihadi Recruitment Drive in Minnesota,” *The Daily Beast*, September 24, 2013.

Among the most infamous of Al Shabaab's foreign fighters was a Syrian-American from Alabama, Omar Hammami, also known as Abu Mansour al Amriki, who appeared in propaganda videos and used social media for recruitment. Hammami, for whom the State Department had issued a \$5 million bounty under its Rewards for Justice program, was killed in early September 2013, reportedly by former allies within Al Shabaab.<sup>29</sup> Another non-Somali-American, Jihad Serwan Mostafa, from San Diego is also on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists List, with a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture. Mostafa, who like Hammami has helped to produce Al Shabaab propaganda, has served as a trainer and a leader of foreign fighters, according to the State Department.

Several Americans who were reportedly radicalized in the United States have been reported to have died fighting in Somalia, although authorities have not confirmed information concerning their deaths in all cases.<sup>30</sup> They include:

- Shirwa Ahmed, a naturalized Somali immigrant who in October 2008 became the first known American suicide bomber, participating in coordinated attacks against both domestic and foreign targets, including a U.N. compound, in the northern Somali cities of Hargeisa and Bosaso. Ahmed was reportedly radicalized while living in the Minneapolis area, leaving for Somalia in late 2007.
- Omar Mohamud, a Somali-American from Seattle who may have been one of two suicide bombers who drove two stolen U.N. vehicles into an AMISOM peacekeeping base at the Mogadishu airport in September 2009.
- Farah Mohamad Beledi, a Somali-American ex-convict from St. Paul who was shot and killed while attempting a suicide bombing against a Somali military checkpoint outside Mogadishu in May 2011.
- Abdisalan Hussein Ali, a Somali-American who may have conducted a suicide bombing against AMISOM in October 2011. Ali, a pre-med student at the University of Minnesota before he disappeared in 2008, was identified in an Al Shabaab audio tape calling for jihad in the United States, Canada, and Europe.
- Dahir Gure, a Somali-American who was reportedly among the group of young men who traveled from Minneapolis to Somalia in 2007.
- Mohamoud Ali Hassan, a Somali-American engineering student at the University of Minnesota who was reportedly among the second group of young men who traveled from Minneapolis to Somalia, in 2008, and was killed in 2009.
- Abdirashid Ali Omar, a Somali-American who was reportedly among the second group of young men who traveled from Minneapolis to Somalia, in 2008.
- Jamal Bana, a Somali-American engineering student at a Minneapolis community college who left for Somalia in 2008 and reportedly died in Mogadishu in 2009.
- Burhan Hassan, a Somali-American high school student who traveled from Minneapolis to Somalia in 2008 and was reportedly killed in 2009.
- Troy Kastigar, aka "Abdirahman," an American convert to Islam with a criminal record who left Minneapolis for Somalia in 2008 and reportedly died in 2009.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Hammami see e.g., USA v. Omar Hammami; Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times*, January 31, 2010 and articles by J.M. Berger in *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Yuen, "Minnesota Men Who Joined 'Jihad' in Somalia," Minnesota Public Radio, October 1, 2012.

- Ruben Shumpert, a Muslim convert and ex-convict from Seattle who fled federal gun and counterfeit currency charges in 2006, traveling to Somalia, where he declared in a phone call to an FBI agent that he and his associates “would destroy everything the United States stood for.”<sup>31</sup> He was killed in 2008, reportedly in a U.S. missile strike.

Three of the Somali-Americans listed above are part of a broader FBI investigation, Operation Rhino, into the pipeline through which Somali youth have traveled from the Minneapolis area to join Al Shabaab. Other individuals who are thought to have gone include Ahmed Ali Omar, Khalid Mohamud Abshir, Zakaria Maruf, Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, Mustafa Ali Salat, Abdikadir Ali Abdi, Abdiweli Yassin Isse, and Cabdullaahi Ahmed Faarax.<sup>32</sup> At least two additional Minneapolis residents may have left for Somalia in 2012: Mohamed Osman and Omar Ali Farah. Kamal Said Hassan, Abdifatah Isse, and Salah Osman Ahmed, who returned to the United States after fighting in Somalia, have been convicted in U.S. courts of terrorism offenses and are now serving sentences.<sup>33</sup> Prior to his arrest, Ahmed had found work as a security guard upon returning to Minneapolis.

Other Americans who have reportedly sought to join Al Shabaab have been arrested while preparing to travel or en route to Somalia, including:

- Craig Baxam, a former U.S. soldier from Laurel, MD
- Mohamed Alessa and Carlos Almonte, New Jersey residents
- Shaker Masri, a Chicago resident
- Zachary Adam Chesser, a Fairfax, VA resident

Another individual, Brooklyn resident Betim Kaziu, who reportedly sought to kill U.S. troops abroad made efforts to travel to Somalia and Afghanistan, among other war zones. He was ultimately arrested in Kosovo.

Al Shabaab’s foreign recruits have reportedly held a range of political and religious beliefs. Many of the Somali-Americans who have been prosecuted to date for joining or providing support for Al Shabaab were reportedly radicalized based on a patriotic agenda of defending their ancestral homeland against foreign invaders and local allies (i.e., the Somali government and its security forces). Several of the non-Somali-Americans listed above, including Chesser, Masri, Alessa and Almonte, appear to have sought more generally to become involved in violent jihad, and were reportedly inspired by the sermons of AQAP cleric al Awlaki, a U.S. citizen who was linked to a number of U.S.-focused jihadist plots before his death in a U.S. counterterrorism operation in Yemen in September 2011. Another American killed in that attack, the Saudi-born Samir Khan, who published the AQAP magazine *Inspire* and its predecessor *Jihad Recollections*, may have influenced Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a Somali-American who attempted to detonate what he believed to be a vehicle bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon in 2010. While Mohamud did not appear to have ties to Al Shabaab, his actions have further contributed to concerns that Somali-Americans or others recruited by Al Shabaab might attempt to strike targets in the United States.

<sup>31</sup> “Seattle Case Raises Questions About War on Terror, CNN, September 18, 2006

<sup>32</sup> *United States v. Ahmed Ali Omar et ano.*, Third Superseding Indictment in the U.S. District Court of Minnesota.

<sup>33</sup> *United States v. Abdifatah Yusuf Isse and Salah Osman Ahmed* and *United States v. Kamal Said Hassan* in the U.S. District Court of Minnesota.



CRS analyst Jerome Bjelopera, who has written on plots by American violent jihadists both in the United States and abroad, estimates that there have been 71 plots or attacks in the United States since September 11, 2001.<sup>34</sup> He notes a significant uptick in plots beginning in 2009, which he suggests may reflect a trend in jihadist terrorist activity away from schemes directed by core members of significant terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda. Most of the individuals involved in these plots did not have operational ties to terrorist groups. These plots suggest, as he posits, that some Americans, particularly first and second-generation Muslim American immigrants and native-born Americans who converted to Islam, are susceptible to violent jihadist ideologies.

While the threat posed by Al Shabaab to domestic and foreign targets in Somalia and the broader East Africa region is clear, the group's efforts to recruit foreigners raises additional concerns. In hosting training camps and providing recruits with battlefield experience and training in terrorist tradecraft such as bomb making skills, Al Shabaab is able to impart skills that could be used in attacks either in the region or abroad. It is also able to provide organizational support for the planning and coordination of large-scale strikes that a homegrown violent jihadist might be otherwise unable to manage. Citizens or legal permanent residents of the United States, or citizens of countries in the Visa Waiver Program, who have been recruited by Al Shabaab are a particular concern for U.S. border security.<sup>35</sup> Further, U.S. citizens who have fought with Al Shabaab might inspire radicalization among family members or acquaintances, and attacks of the type implemented last month in Nairobi, using small arms to maximum effect, might draw the attention of so-called "self-starters" or other would-be terrorists in the United States.

### *Outlook for Al Shabaab*

Some observers argue that Al Shabaab has been greatly weakened by AMISOM gains in the past two years. However, U.N. experts suggest that avoiding direct military confrontation has allowed Al Shabaab to "preserve the core of its fighting force and resources," with some 5,000 fighters who remain "arguably intact in terms of operational readiness, chain of command, discipline and communication capabilities."<sup>36</sup> Since what it termed a "strategic withdrawal" from Mogadishu in August 2011, the group has conducted almost-daily guerilla-style attacks on government, civilian, AMISOM, and other foreign targets, in both urban and rural areas.<sup>37</sup> Notable attacks against foreign targets in 2013 include a June attack against the U.N. compound in Mogadishu, in which 22 people were killed, and a July attack on the Turkish diplomatic residence there. Al Shabaab conducts assassinations and attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) of various types, mortars, grenades, and automatic weapons, causing hundreds of civilian casualties.<sup>38</sup> U.N. reporting on Al Shabaab attacks indicates a surge in the group's use of grenades and IEDs and suggests evidence that the group has exported technical knowledge for the manufacture of suicide vests and IEDs to Kenya and Uganda. Complex attacks, in which

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<sup>34</sup> CRS Report R41416, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat*, by Jerome P. Bjelopera.

<sup>35</sup> Of particular concern are Al Shabaab recruits from the United Kingdom, Sweden, and other European countries in the Visa Waiver Program. Canadian citizens also do not require a nonimmigrant visa.

<sup>36</sup> U.N. Security Council, S/2013/413, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> See Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Shabab's Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of its Battlefield Setbacks," *CTC Sentinel*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, March 27, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> For an overview of Al Shabaab attacks in Somalia in 2012-2013, see Navanti Group, "Somalia's Al-Shabaab: Down But Not Out," Homeland Security Policy Institute Issue Brief 22, August 27, 2013.

explosives or suicide bombers are used to breach a perimeter and are then followed by gunmen to produce maximum casualties, have become a hallmark of the group.

The former head of the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia, Matt Bryden, suggests that the Westgate attack represents a dangerous new stage for Al Shabaab: “My assessment has always been that the day Al Shabaab lets go of the ‘Cult of the Suicide Bomber,’ we will be in a world of trouble. It’s far more complicated to procure the parts for an explosive vest, as well as to find people willing to be martyrs. I always worried that if you just get guys riding in with AK-47s and grenades, they could do incredible damage.”<sup>39</sup>

Reports of infighting within Al Shabaab’s senior ranks have been the subject of considerable speculation.<sup>40</sup> Within the broader Al Shabaab insurgency is an extremist faction, led by Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane (aka “Abu Zubeyr”), which appears to aspire to pose a global threat. Some analysts suggest the Westgate attack in Nairobi may be an expression of Godane’s consolidation of power, after having neutralized his rivals within the movement.<sup>41</sup> Godane has reportedly created a parallel clandestine terrorist organization, the *Amniyat*, within the larger Al Shabaab movement that, according to U.N. experts, has been responsible for a majority of recent suicide bombings and targeted killings in recent years. By U.N. accounts, the Amniyat is structured to function underground, unlike Al Shabaab’s military apparatus, which appears vulnerable to political divisions and regional military offensives.

The Amniyat bears close watch, as do foreign fighters who have trained and fought with Al Shabaab—some foreigners have reportedly deserted the group in recent years, either because of disillusion with its military losses or because of internal dissent. Reports suggest some may have travelled to Yemen to join AQAP,<sup>42</sup> while others, including those linked to regional Al Shabaab affiliates like Al Hijra in Kenya, seek to shift their focus from Somalia to fighting for Al Qaeda and killing U.S. citizens in the region of East Africa.<sup>43</sup> The U.S. counterterrorism operation on October 5 in Barawe, Somalia, which reportedly targeted, unsuccessfully, a Somali-Kenyan Mohamed Abdikadir Mohamed, aka “Ikrima,” may be indicative of the level of U.S. concern regarding Al Shabaab’s Kenyan plots. Ikrima has been identified as a senior Al Shabaab operative responsible for recruiting foreign fighters and directing attacks in Kenya, including, possibly, the attack on the Westgate mall. A Kenyan intelligence report referenced by CNN suggests that Ikrima, who has also been linked to AQAP and Al Hijra, may have been planning a complex attack against Kenyan government and U.N. targets in Nairobi.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “At Westgate, al-Qaida Group Figures Out That Less is More, With Dangerous Consequences,” Associated Press, October 5, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> See CRS Report 43245, *In Brief: The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya*, for more information.

<sup>41</sup> Godane is blamed for the deaths of several high profile Al Shabaab figures in recent months, including senior commanders, as well as Omar Hammami.

<sup>42</sup> “Al Shabaab on Verge of Defeat, Analysts Say,” Sabahionline.com, February 27, 2012. The Sabahi website is sponsored by U.S. Africa Command.

<sup>43</sup> Treasury Department, “Treasury Targets Regional Actors Fueling Violence and Instability in Somalia,” July 5, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, “U.S. Target in Somalia: An Inside Story on an Al-Shabaab Commander,” CNN October 7, 2013.

In summary, Al Shabaab presents U.S. policymakers with a paradox: the group has demonstrated its intent and capacity to wage a violent war on Somalis and other targets in East Africa. It has also shown its ability to recruit Americans. Its ties to groups that have conducted terrorist attacks against the United States, namely Al Qaeda and AQAP, and the reported presence of foreign fighters in Somalia with the intent to strike targets beyond the African continent, raise the group's profile among foreign terrorist organizations watched by the U.S. intelligence community. The challenge for policymakers, however, is calibrating the appropriate response—determining how, either through regional partners or directly, the United States can most effectively prevent the group from growing stronger or focusing on attacking the United States without playing into their narrative and further fueling radicalization.