

Testimony of Richard W. Stanek
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To the Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives

From al-Shabaab to al-Nusra:

How Westerners Joining Terror Groups Overseas Affect the Homeland

October 9, 2013

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I am Rich Stanek, Sheriff of Hennepin County in Minnesota, and I also serve as the current President of the Major County Sheriffs' Association.

In the aftermath of the mass shooting at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, I have been asked to testify today about the potential threat to our homeland posed by al-Shabaab, a foreign terrorist organization as designated by the U.S. Government in 2008. Additionally, I've been asked to provide testimony on the current preparedness posture of local law enforcement.

Hennepin County is home to the largest Somali population in the United States. For the record, the vast majority of our Somali residents are law abiding, valuable members of our community. The tragedy in Nairobi has hit close to home. In fact, a Somali-American member of my staff lost a cousin in the mall attack.

Since 2007, it is believed that several dozen young men have left Minnesota for Somalia to fight in the "holy war" and/or support the al-Shabaab movement, which has ties to al-Qaida. A mix of nationalism, religious extremism, under-employment and economic conditions motivated these young men to join the fighting.

These recruitment efforts are well organized, professional, and are intended to compel young men to abandon their lives in Minnesota or other parts of the U.S. and join the Jihad. In this video, the Twin Cities metro area is highlighted, and young men from Hennepin County are showcased.

We know some of these young men do not return. At least seven young men from the Minneapolis area have been confirmed dead by family members or authorities. Of these seven, three are confirmed suicide bombers, two are believed to have been executed, and the rest are believed to have been killed during battles or executed for trying to leave al-Shabaab.

As recently as July and September of 2012, open source information reveals that several young men from the Minneapolis area, including 21-year-old Omar Farah, have traveled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. This indicates that travel to Somalia has not stopped.

We also believe that after spending time abroad, some of these young men return to Minnesota, assimilate back into the community and attempt to radicalize others in the Twin Cities. These Al-Shabaab trained operatives pose a significant threat to our community by preying on vulnerable individuals for material or direct support, or by carrying out an attack in the United States.

We know the issue of fraudulent travel documents goes hand-in-hand with their travels abroad. This includes: visas, passports, and travel paperwork. With this degree of fraudulent activity, it is very hard to determine if someone has left the country or if they have in-fact returned to the country. If someone has been radicalized and they have fraudulent paperwork letting them back into the US, this is a gateway for future problems.

Somali individuals are leaving Minnesota and illegally crossing the US/Canadian border – typically through North Dakota. It is believed that travel arrangements for some of these individuals are being made within the Minneapolis area, in camouflaged store fronts, insulated from outsiders and difficult for law enforcement to infiltrate. The individuals seek passage into Canada for several reasons, including better social welfare programs and facilitating travel to other countries with greater ease.

It is also worth pointing out the fact that these individuals do not get to Somalia on their own. Travelers receive assistance with travel arrangements, funding and other logistics. In Minnesota, there were federal indictments of individuals providing financial and material support to terrorist organizations- this was the largest terrorist investigation in the country since September 11, 2001. These individuals may not ever leave the U.S. themselves; however, they are still providing financing and other support to al-Shabaab.

We still have an uphill battle to stop recruitment and win over the community at large. The al-Shabaab terrorist network is seen as “heroic” to some in the local Somali community. As stated in this committee’s Majority investigative report on July 27, 2011, a Saudi cleric who denounced al-Shabaab and other Somali combatants inside a Minneapolis Islamic Center was allegedly assaulted by an angry mob for his comments. A recording of this assault was immediately posted on overseas- based jihadi chatrooms.

Mr. Chair, Members, to get to the crux of the issue, local law enforcement must work in close partnership with Federal partner agencies, and a large part of this effort is information sharing. Since September 11, 2001, great progress has been made in this area, but I believe we can do more. Specifically, local law enforcement does not always receive information in a timely manner from our Federal partner agencies. Without

timely access to potentially key information, local law enforcement's ability to protect the public's safety can be compromised.

Looking toward potential solutions, there has been an on-going effort to update the Memorandum of Understanding regarding the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTF's). Discussion is underway to utilize, across the country, an existing model that will more fully inform Chief Law Enforcement Officers of the JTTF's actions within their respective area of responsibility. Currently, depending on the field office, their level of engagement with local law enforcement is handled differently.

We would also like to see the security clearances maintained of JTTF task force officers, even after they are rotated back to their home agency. This would allow local law enforcement to use them as force multipliers. This makes sense, given the investment that goes into the security clearance process and their experience while participating in the JTTF.

Additionally, local law enforcement needs greater access to federal classified information systems. It is not enough to provide clearance levels without access to the database. This will allow us to connect the dots in real-time between local law enforcement sensitive information and classified data.

The protection of soft targets has to be a major concern in the U.S. With the recent events overseas and the hundreds of malls and schools in our communities, we need to be more vigilant than ever. In Hennepin County we have members assigned to the JTTF to work with our Federal partners and we have a Homeland Security Unit that specializes in working with our private sector partners such as the Mall of America, American Security, and others. By working with our private sector partners, we have a better *"boots on the ground"* proactive approach to Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) which is critical to preventing attacks. Law Enforcement needs to be able to share certain data on Suspicious Activity Reporting with the private sector so they know what to look for and can report back to local law enforcement.

Clearly, we need to combine resources and work together to protect the homeland. We need to strengthen our sources of information to help on short, mid and long-term investigations aimed at disrupting these networks. There is a lot of work left to do.

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, this is a complex issue, I appreciate that you are holding this hearing today and we in local law enforcement look forward to continuing our work with you on this important issue.