

**Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman  
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee  
“Violent Islamist Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America.”  
March 11, 2009  
Washington, DC**

**AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

**Good morning. Today’s hearing – “Violent Islamist Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America” – falls on an auspicious date – the fifth anniversary of the Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people and wounded another 1,800.**

**The Madrid train bombings were a turning point in Islamist terrorism, from a centrally-controlled movement to one that also began to act through autonomous cells that may or may not have links to al-Qaeda leadership – expanding the reach of violent Islamist ideology and making terrorism that much harder to detect and prevent.**

**We have seen al-Qaeda franchise itself around the world, whether in the now defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operating in North Africa, or al-Shabaab fighting and training terrorists in Somalia.**

**Today we are seeing an evolution of Islamist terrorism as organizations like al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, al-Shabaab, expand their recruiting base to diaspora populations around the world, including those living here in the United States.**

**Over the past two years, al-Shabaab has radicalized and recruited young Somali men away from their homes in Minneapolis to return to Somalia for training and fighting.**

**Perhaps as many as 20 Somali-American teenagers and young men have vanished from their homes in Minneapolis and turned up in Somalia.**

**And the number could be much higher, since many Somali parents now living in Minnesota – who fled to the United States so their children could escape the violence of that war-torn nation – are afraid to go to the authorities for fear their sons will be branded as terrorists and never allowed to return to the United States.**

**Through our Committee work on this issue, we know that the Internet alone is usually not enough to recruit an individual to an Islamist terrorist organization.**

**There has to be someone doing the recruiting, and in the case of these young Somali men, paying for their return trips to Somalia.**

**Our hearing today will look for answers to that critical question.**

**We will also ask: “What can we expect next?” Does al-Shabaab train these young men and send them back to the United States to execute terrorist attacks here?**

**We know for sure of Shirwa Ahmed, 27, a naturalized Somali-American who went to Somalia in 2007 and became a suicide bomber, joining with a terrorist team that last October exploded five car bombs in two Somali cities, killing at least 30 people, including U.N. aid workers.**

**The FBI identified his remains through DNA testing and returned them to his parents for burial.**

**We know that videos readily available on the Internet play a critical role in introducing recruits like Shirwa to violent Islamist ideology.**

**And we know those videos –some produced by al-Shabaab – are being watched in the Somali community in Minneapolis.**

**Or take the more recent case of Burhan Hassan, whose cousin is testifying on our second panel today, as an illustration of the threat we face.**

**In November of last year, on Election Day, Hassan, a 17-year-old “A” student at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis – who had planned to become a doctor or a lawyer – suddenly left home with five of his friends – without a word to his parents or relatives – and began a strange trip from Minneapolis to Somalia.**

**The young men split up, with some flying to Boston and some to Chicago.**

**From those destinations, they flew to Amsterdam, where they boarded a plane for Nairobi. From there they caught a flight to the Kenyan port of Malindi on the Indian Ocean. There they boarded boats that took them to the Somali port of Kismayo, which is under the control of Al Shabaab.**

**None of these young men had the \$2,000 that this trip cost – Hassan was unemployed – or the skills to arrange for the visas, complicated travel connections and the local support they would have needed to line up along the route.**

**Someone recruited them, radicalized them and then sent them out to terrorist training camps.**

**Hassan and his friends have called their parents to let them know they are in Somalia but the conversations have always been brief and the young men would not say who paid for their trips or helped plan them.**

**Many of the missing young men attended services and youth outreach programs at the Abubakar As-Saddique mosque, in Minneapolis.**

**The Imam there has denied any involvement in terrorism and said his mosque has never been used as a platform for jihadist lectures, sermons or recruitment.**

**But as the anguished parents have said, someone must have recruited them. These young men raised in America – many who haven't seen their homeland since they were toddlers – didn't just wake up one day and decide to return to Somalia as terrorists.**

**Besides the personal tragedy for these families, these mysterious journeys to that backward, lawless land pose a national security threat to America's homeland.**

**Many of these young men are travelling on United States' passports. And since we don't know the identities of all of them, they could return to the U.S. at any time – fully radicalized and trained in the tactics of terror – to launch attacks here – bringing to our cities the suicide bombings and car bombings we have so far escaped.**

**Beyond the questions of who is doing this recruiting and why, we need to know if we are witnessing the further evolution of Islamist terror right here on our shores.**

**We will explore these questions with our two panels today made up of law enforcement and intelligence professionals, an expert on Somalia and the history of Al Shabaab, and two panelists who will give us an up-close and intimate look at Minnesota's Somali community:**

- Abdirahman Mukhtar, a youth program manager at the Brian Coyle Center – the epicenter of Somali youth and community activities in Minneapolis – and a schoolmate of suicide bomber, Shirwa Ahmed;**
- and Osman Ahmed, a cousin of Burhan Hassan.**

**As the attack in Madrid showed, the threat from al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist organizations around the world continues to evolve. We must continue to stay ahead of that threat – particularly when it may threaten our homeland security. Senator Collins.**