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**Hearing before the Senate Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs Committee**

**Violent Islamist Extremism: Al-Shabaab
Recruitment in America**



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Introduction

Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today to share the National Counterterrorism Center (“NCTC’s”) perspective on the radicalization of Somali youth in America. I appreciate the opportunity to appear alongside my colleague Phil Mudd. I will be discussing the widely reported disappearances of young Somali-Americans from the US; why we believe these individuals were vulnerable to extremist influences; the role of the Internet in radicalization; and what NCTC is doing about this phenomenon with its partners in Federal, State, and local government.

Overview of Somalia

Somalia has a history of turmoil and instability dating back to the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, which resulted in a descent into factional fighting and anarchy, especially in Southern Somalia. Following multiple failed attempts to bring stability in 2006, a loose coalition of clerics, local leaders, and militias known as the Council of Islamic Courts took power in much of Southern Somalia. In December 2006 and January 2007, the Somali Transitional Federal Government joined with Ethiopian forces and routed the Islamic Court militias in a two-week war. Since the end of 2006, al-Shabaab—the militant wing of the Council of Islamic Courts—has led a collection of disparate clan militias in a violent insurgency, using guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics against the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and the Ethiopian presence in the country.

Al-Shabaab uses intimidation and violence to undermine the Somali government and kills activists who have been working to bring peace through political dialogue and reconciliation. The group has claimed responsibility for several high-profile bombings and shootings in Mogadishu targeting Ethiopian troops and Somali government officials. It has been responsible for assassinating civil society figures, government officials, and journalists. Al-Shabaab fighters or assailants who have claimed allegiance to the group have also conducted violent attacks and targeted assassinations against international aid workers and nongovernmental aid organizations.

Overview of the Somali-American Diaspora

Somali refugees began arriving in the US in significant numbers in 1992, following US intervention in Somalia’s humanitarian crisis and clan warfare. The Somali-

American population is distributed in small clusters throughout the US, with the heaviest concentrations in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; and San Diego, California. Estimates of the size of the Somali-American population range from 70,000 to 200,000 due mostly to the length of time since the 2000 census but also secondary migration, illegal immigration, and births and deaths, which taken together make it difficult to determine the exact size of the diaspora within the US today.

Compared to most Muslim immigrants to the US, many Somalis—seeking refuge from a war-torn country—received less language and cultural training and education prior to migration. Despite the efforts of Federal, State and local government and non-governmental organizations to facilitate their settlement into American communities, their relative linguistic isolation and the sudden adjustment to American society many refugees faced has reinforced, in some areas, their greater insularity compared to other, more integrated Muslim immigrant communities, and has aggravated the challenges of assimilation for their children.

According to data from the most recent census, the Somali-American population suffers the highest unemployment rate among East African diaspora communities in the United States, and experience significantly high poverty rates and the lowest rate of college graduation. These data also suggest that Somali-Americans are far more likely to be linguistically isolated than other East African immigrants.

Somali-American Youth Disappearances

In the last few years, a number of Somali-American young men have traveled to Somalia, possibly to train and fight with al-Shabaab. One of these travelers—Minneapolis-resident Shirwa Ahmed—perpetrated a suicide bombing late last October. Ahmed's **travel overseas** to fight and his association with a **foreign terrorist organization** has reinforced our reluctance to categorize such activity simply as "homegrown extremism." However, we are concerned that if Somali-American youth can be motivated to engage in such activities overseas, Ahmed's fellow travelers could return to the US and engage in terrorist activities here. I want to emphasize that we do not have credible reporting to indicate that US persons who have traveled to Somalia are planning to execute attacks in the US, but we cannot rule out that potential given the indoctrination and training they might have received in East Africa.

The exact number of young Somali-American men who traveled to Somalia to support al-Shabaab or other Somali factions is unclear, and it is possible that others remain undetected. Since 2006, a number of US citizens who are Muslim converts have also traveled to Somalia, possibly to train in extremist training camps.

Radicalization among Somali-Americans

I also want to emphasize that we do not believe that we are witnessing any form of community-wide radicalization among Somali-Americans. Many Somali-Americans came to the US to get away from the type of anarchy, chaos, and heartbreak that violence breeds. The overwhelming majority of Somali-Americans are or want to be contributing members of American society, trying to raise their families here and desperately wishing for stability in their ancestral homeland.

We have assessed that characteristics common to a number of Muslim -American communities appeared to have helped mitigate the potential threat of radicalization in the US, including faith in the American political system, access to resources to defend civil rights and civil liberties, interaction with non-Muslims, and a greater focus on domestic issues than international events. We do not believe that these factors have changed for the overall Muslim-American community; however, these mitigating factors are not as apparent in the Somali-American community, largely because of their relatively recent arrival in the US.

So, what causes the radicalization of a small but significant number of Somali-American youth? The answer is complex—it is the result of a number of factors, as I mentioned previously—that come together occasionally when dynamic, influential leaders gain access to despondent, disenfranchised young men. Sophisticated extremist recruiters target vulnerable individuals who lack structure and definition in their lives, by offering what parents and outsiders often view as a seemingly innocuous alternative to more common violent subcultures associated with gangs and criminality. These recruiters subject individuals to religiously inspired indoctrination to move them toward violent extremism. They target vulnerable young men—many of them refugees who came here as small children or who are children of immigrants—torn between their parents’ traditional ethnic, tribal, and clan identities and the new cultures and traditions offered by American society. Caught between two worlds, and lacking structure and definition in their lives at home, **some** youth become susceptible to the draw of gangs and criminality, and in some cases religious or nationalistic extremism. The new group identities that these leaders provide to their followers can expose them to forces that may move them toward violent extremism against people and institutions they have learned to regard as enemies.

Among Somali-Americans, the refugee experience of fleeing a war-torn country, combined with perceived discrimination, marginalization, and frustrated expectations, as well as local criminal, familial, and clan dynamics may heighten the susceptibility of some members of these communities to criminal or extremist influences.

The crisis in the Horn of Africa, which included the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia, has attracted the rapt attention of Somali diaspora communities and heightened their nationalistic sentiments. Extremist recruiters play upon these nationalistic sentiments to rally elements of the diaspora with well-produced videos of heroic Somalis engaged in combat against historic rivals, tactics that enhance their fundraising and recruitment efforts. These themes of heroism and becoming part of something larger resonate especially among adventure-seeking young men.

The Somali-American youth who have traveled abroad to join and fight for al-Shabaab were likely exposed to al-Shabaab's extremist ideology in the United States, most likely through sustained interaction with extremists—in person and via the Internet—and exposure to jihadist literature and videos circulated on the Internet.

Role of the Internet in Radicalizing Somali Youth

The easy availability of extremist media on the Internet provides a repertoire of tools and themes that extremist recruiters can use to appeal to youthful notions of battles, heroics, shame, and obligation, but this is seldom enough to cause an individual to become radical. Al-Shabaab's official website regularly provides links to al-Qa`ida's al-Sahab media that endorse violent jihad in Somalia. Measuring the impact al-Qa`ida propaganda has had in motivating Somali-Americans to fight in Somalia is imprecise at best, nor can we reliably weight the individual effects of clan, ethnic identity, anti-Ethiopian sentiment, or jihadist ideology that influenced recent travelers to Somalia.

Al-Qa`ida's senior leadership in recent months has praised al-Shabaab and depicted Somalia as a local manifestation of a broader conflict between the West and Islam, a stimulus that could reinforce the commitment of individuals already predisposed to embracing violence. We note the possibility, however, that potential ethnic Somali recruits would prefer to join a group that is focused on Somali-centric issues rather than signing up for the global Jihad and joining an al-Qa`ida affiliate.

Readers of jihadist websites are mostly Muslims who may sympathize with but are unaffiliated with al-Qa`ida or al-Shabaab. Thus, such sites draw little attention from the mainstream Muslim population, which markedly limits the reach and effect of jihadist propaganda. Nonetheless, recent statements on Somalia by al-Qa`ida leaders and al-Qa`ida affiliates in East Africa reveal an emphasis on communicating to international and notably English-speaking audiences. Al-Qa`ida's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri, appeared in a video posted online in February that featured the most extensive public commentary on Somalia yet given by such a senior al-Qa`ida leader. Zawahiri condemned Somalia's internationally recognized government, endorsed the expulsion of African Union peacekeepers from Somalia,

and praised al-Shabaab's successes. The video was released with English subtitles, a clear indication that al-Qa`ida was targeting its message to an international audience. Further, East African-based Al-Qa`ida figure Saleh Nabhan in a video posted online in August declared that training camps in Somalia and elsewhere were open and called for Muslims everywhere to assist the Somali jihad. The video was distributed on behalf of al-Shabaab and also had English subtitles.

NCTC's Coordinating Role

NCTC's analytic cadre is examining the issue of Somali-American radicalization in the US. Their analysis is informed by strong collaborative relationships they maintain with analytic counterparts throughout the Intelligence Community and our international partners. Over the past two years, NCTC, in contact with the ODNI Civil Liberties and Privacy Office, has dramatically increased its programs to study Islamic radicalization and counter-radicalization as well as al-Qa`ida's media programs and potential means of effectively countering extremist messaging. The transnational influences affecting the Somali-American diaspora necessitates analysis that extends beyond Somalia and the United States, to other nations with Somali diasporas, particularly Canada and the United Kingdom.

To coordinate Federal, State, and local engagement efforts within Somali-American communities, the NCTC Global Engagement Group chairs the Somali Community Outreach Forum. This working group includes representatives from the FBI Community Relations Unit; the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties; the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis; the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service; Immigration and Customs Enforcement; the Department of Justice Civil Rights and National Security Divisions; and the Department of the Treasury. This working group provides a forum to coordinate community outreach meetings in Columbus, Ohio and Minneapolis, Minnesota and other venues, and serves as a central point for collaboration that is designed to increase the effectiveness and coordination of activities, while respecting the civil liberties and privacy rights of US Persons.

One important initiative I would like to mention is the ongoing expansion to Minneapolis and Columbus of roundtable discussions sponsored by the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties as an outgrowth of their engagement efforts with Arab, Muslim, Sikh, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans. These discussions bring together a network of US Government officials and community members from the non-profit, religious, and Somali-American communities. Equally important, FBI outreach offices have been engaged in discussions with their Somali-American contacts throughout the United States and are planning future efforts to expand into other areas. Furthermore, the Ohio Department of Public Safety has compiled a brochure on Somali culture that aims at informing state and local officials about

cultural sensitivity issues within the Somali-American community, and plans are underway to translate the document into the Somali language.

NCTC's Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning has convened an East Africa Senior Working Group to discuss engagement options in East Africa that are feeding the growth of al-Shabaab. This interagency effort is critical to a holistic approach to the problem of radicalization of Somali-Americans at home and Somalis abroad by using actions as well as our words. We will not solve the domestic Islamic radicalization problem unless we also address the crisis in the Horn of Africa that recruiters exploit to rally Somali diaspora communities worldwide.

Creation of Best Practices

Providing coordinated lessons learned regarding cultural sensitivities and other issues that Somali-American communities deem important will enhance the engagement efforts of Federal, State, and local officials nationwide. NCTC last year produced a "best practices primer" for state and local law enforcement officials that addresses cultural sensitivity issues and lessons learned in government outreach to American Muslim communities. This year we plan to create another primer that catalogues "best practices" in outreach to Somali-American communities, which will incorporate the feedback and expertise of Federal, State, and local organizations involved in areas heavily populated by Somali-Americans.

Today I have been able to give you our appreciation of a nascent problem for Homeland Security and report what NCTC and its partners are doing about it. I will be happy to enlarge upon anything that may have been left unclear.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.