

“Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America”

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Introduction

Senator Lieberman, committee chairman, and Senator Collins, ranking member, I thank you both for the opportunity to share my assessment of recruitment efforts by shabaab among the Somali diaspora in America.

I speak to you today in my capacity as an academic researcher who has followed political developments in Somalia since the mid-1980s. I hope to place the question before us in context by providing you with a brief assessment of

- the current crisis in Somalia;
- the source and nature of radicalization, anti-Americanism, and violent extremism inside Somalia;
- the central role of the diaspora in Somali affairs;
- the threat posed by shabaab recruitment of Somali Americans; and
- factors which may shape Somali diaspora response toward attention from US law enforcement.

As a point of clarification, there are a number of different armed hardline Islamist movements in Somalia besides shabaab; they recently created an umbrella movement called Hisb al Islamiyya, or Islamic Party. Shabaab is, however, the largest and most important of these groups, and for purposes of simplicity this testimony refers only to shabaab.

The Somali Context and the Current Crisis

Somalia has been beset by one of the longest and most destructive crises in the post Cold War era. The estimated nine million people of Somalia, almost all of whom are Muslims, have endured nineteen years of complete state collapse, periods of civil war, chronic insecurity, lawlessness and warlordism, massive displacement, the destruction of major cities, disruption of already fragile livelihoods, and recurring humanitarian crises,

including the 1991-92 famine in which 250,000 people died. An estimated one million Somalis are today refugees scattered across the globe. This has been an exceptionally traumatic period for the Somali nation as a whole and for the many families that have been uprooted by the crisis.

For years, Somalia was impervious to both national and external efforts to promote reconciliation and a revived central government, including the ambitious and failed UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in 1993-94. Warlords and other spoilers blocked efforts to promote state-revival, and successfully exploited clan divisions and tensions to poison reconciliation initiatives. Even so, communities forged informal systems of governance at the local level. Many of these local systems of governance relied on clan-based sharia courts, which provided improved law and order. In addition to the sharia courts, Islamic charities, sometimes with generous funding from sources in the Gulf states, came to play an important role as the only source of essential social services in the country. These sharia courts and the Islamic charities earned a great deal of “performance legitimacy” in the eyes of many Somalis, and, along with a number of other factors, gradually helped to create a sense that some form of Islamic governance was the solution to Somalia’s crisis. Indeed, one of the long-term trends in Somalia is the ascendance of political Islam, and I would argue that for the most part this need not be viewed as a problem for or a threat to the United States.

Economically, the post-UNOSOM period saw parts of the country experience recovery and growth fueled primarily by remittances from the diaspora. Remittances were critical sources of income to meet the basic needs of extended families, but also became a vital source of investment capital in Somalia’s fast-growing business sector. As the private sector grew, the business community became an increasingly important group in Somali politics. Many of the leading Somali business figures were based in Dubai, where some forged partnerships with Gulf Arab businessmen.

In 2006, Somalia’s long nightmare of state collapse appeared to be over, when a loose coalition of Islamists and local sharia courts in Mogadishu (eventually known as the Islamic Courts Union, or ICU) defeated a coalition of US-backed militia leaders. This coalition included both moderate and hardline elements. One militia wing was especially important in the ICU victory. It was known as the shabaab, (“youth” in Arabic) and was a well-trained, well-armed, committed group of about 400 militia answering to a commander, Adan Hashi ‘Ayro, who had served as a mujahadiin fighter in Afghanistan. ‘Ayro in turn answered to a leading hardline political figure in the ICU, Hassan Dahir Aweys, one of only a few Somalis designated as a terror suspect by the US government for his past leadership role in the group Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAI).

From June to December 2006, the ICU expanded their control to most of south-central Somalia, and provided levels of public order and governance that Somalis had not seen in a generation. Most Somalis, from all clans and across all political persuasions, were very enthusiastic about the ICU’s success, and most businesspeople threw their support behind the ICU as well. Tens of thousands of diaspora members flew back to Somalia, some just to visit, others to offer their services to the ICU. For many, the impulse to support and

join the ICU was driven as much by a sense of renewed nationalist pride than by a commitment to political Islam of any sort. The ICU saw the diaspora as a valuable source of fund-raising and technical expertise and actively courts Somalis abroad. In fact, some of the top figures in the ICU were themselves diaspora members with citizenship in Canada, Sweden, and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Islamist hardliners in the ICU coalition succeeded in marginalizing moderate elements of the movement and began pushing the ICU into radical policies. Two policies were of special concern – first, their blithe dismissal of US requests to identify and expel a small number of foreign Al Qai'da figures the US believed was in hiding in Mogadishu, and second, their repeated provocations of neighboring Ethiopia, against which they declared jihad. The hardliners in the ICU seemed intent on provoking a war with Ethiopia. This doomed what might otherwise have been an legitimate Islamist solution to the long-running Somali crisis, and instead ushered in a period of extraordinary violence.

In December 2006, Ethiopia launched a major military offensive and routed the ICU. The ICU leadership disbanded the organization and fled the country; surviving shabaab fighters dissolved into the countryside. Ethiopian forces occupied the capital Mogadishu without a shot. Though the Ethiopian offensive was not, as has sometimes been falsely portrayed, an instance of the US subcontracting the war of terror to a regional ally (Ethiopia pursued its own interests and would have acted with or without US approval), the US did provide diplomatic, intelligence, and possibly other support to the Ethiopian government in this operation, and even launched an aerial attack on a Somali convoy that the US military believed was carrying high value foreign al Qa'ida operatives. This reinforced a universally held belief among Somalis that the Ethiopian military occupation was a US-conceived and US-backed operation. Rightly or wrongly, the US was subsequently held responsible for the devastation which ensued.

Ethiopian-Somali relations have historically been rancorous; the two countries fought a bloody war in 1977-78 and Somalia has never recognized its border with Ethiopia. This animosity is mainly over the status of Somali-inhabited eastern Ethiopia, but it has a much longer history, and has a religious dimension as well, as the Ethiopian government is dominated by Christian highlanders, while Somalia is an Islamic society. The Ethiopian military occupation of Mogadishu was thus incendiary from both a Somali nationalist and an Islamist perspective. Hopes to replace the Ethiopian forces with a less provocative African Union mission failed; only 2,000 of the expected 8,000 African Union forces (AMISOM) eventually were deployed. So Ethiopia stayed.

Within weeks, a “complex insurgency” of clan militias and regrouped shabaab force began attacking the Ethiopian forces and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a weak Somali government widely perceived at the time to be a puppet of Ethiopia. The insurgency and counter-insurgency that ensued over the next two years devastated the capital. Heavy-handed counter-insurgency tactics by the TFG and Ethiopian forces led to the displacement of 700,000 residents out of a city of 1.3 million; parts of the capital were rendered a ghost town. Businesses were destroyed, and abuses of the local

population were serious and widespread. Within a year, Somalia became the site of the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Today, 3.2 million of the population – about half of the total population of south-central Somalia – is currently in need of emergency aid. But an explosion of criminal and political violence in the country made it almost impossible for aid agencies to access those in need. In 2008, one third of all humanitarian casualties worldwide occurred in Somalia, making it the most dangerous place on Earth for aid workers. As of March 2009, only very limited food relief operations are possible.

In sum, the extraordinary levels of political violence, displacement, destruction, and humanitarian need associated with the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia was the exact opposite of what the US and others hoped would be produced by the occupation. In some respects it exceeded worst case scenarios imagined when the Ethiopia forces first entered the capital. And while radical Islamist sentiments and organization certainly existed in Somalia prior to December 2006, the Ethiopian occupation inadvertently fueled a dramatic rise in radicalism and violent extremism in the country and among the diaspora.

Radicalization, Anti-Americanism, Violent Extremism, and Shabaab

The enormous human costs of the two year Ethiopian military occupation of south Somalia produced rage among Somalis both at home and abroad. Many if not most Somalis were “radically angry” – that is, predisposed emotionally toward extreme interpretations of events and extreme proposed responses – without those sentiments necessarily be linked to a radical ideology. Though some Somalis were willing to concede that the hardliners in the ICU bore some responsibility for the calamity, the dominant Somali view was that Ethiopia and the US were to blame. US policies both during and after the Ethiopian offensive were seen as silent on the extraordinary human costs, and Somalis took the silence to imply consent. As a result, fierce levels of anti-Americanism took root among many Somalis at home and abroad. Even Somalis with close links to the US and many of those with US citizenship were scathing in their criticism of the US. In some quarters, conspiracy theories thrived. Some Somalis believed the US was punishing Somalia for the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” disaster in which 18 US soldiers died in Mogadishu, or were convinced that the US was simply unwilling to countenance any form of Islamic governance. Others came to view the harsh Ethiopian occupation as part of a Western campaign against the Islamic world, linking the occupation to the US military occupation of Iraq, which was deeply unpopular in Somali circles.

What emerged in Somalia, and in the Somali diaspora, was a complex cocktail of nationalist, Islamist, anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-foreigner sentiments. This cocktail was an ideal recipe for shabaab, which emerged as main source of armed resistance to the Ethiopian occupation, shabaab. Shabaab was able to conflate its jihadist rhetoric with Somali nationalism and anti-Ethiopianism to win both passive and active support from many Somalis, including those who were personally appalled at the movement's extremist interpretations of Islam or its assassinations of civic leaders. And once shabaab broke away from the old ICU leadership and in 2007 announced itself

as the leader of the armed struggle against Ethiopian occupation and the TFG, it had little political competition inside southern Somalia.

The result was that most Somalis, even those who opposed shabaab's radical Islamist ideology, believed that shabaab's use of armed resistance to the Ethiopian occupation was entirely justified, and tended to view the group first and foremost as a liberation movement. To the extent that it was a "jihad" it was understood as a defensive jihad, a variation on what Western scholars would call "just war."

This mixed set of motives and ideologies came to define shabaab as well. Its leaders appear to have divergent views on issues ranging from Islamist ideology to tactics. Some are by all accounts committed ideologues; others appear to be primarily power-seekers, hoping to parlay their positions in shabaab to bargain for a share of power. The motivations of the young fighters in shabaab's rank and file are even more varied. While some are committed jihadists, many of the young men who flocked to fight in the name of shabaab were by no means hard-line Islamist ideologues. Some fought to drive out the Ethiopians and topple the TFG; others came under heavy pressure from shabaab recruiters to join; still others were simply gunmen looking for paid employment and eager to serve on the winning side.

Shabaab has enjoyed considerable success in Somalia, and by mid-2008 controlled all of the territory from the Kenyan border to the outskirts of Mogadishu. It also has localized strongholds inside Mogadishu. It is without question the strongest militia force in southern Somalia. Most of its fighters are young men – in some instances boys – equipped with semi-automatic weapons. It has used mortars extensively to attack Ethiopian and TFG compounds as well. It has used political assassination and the threat of assassination against Somalis in the TFG and others suspected of collaborating with the US or Ethiopia. But shabaab has also introduced new military technologies into Somalia, especially the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). It has also introduced the use of suicide bombers, a tactic unheard of in the past. Suicide is taboo in Somali culture, and its introduction into the country by shabaab has come as a shock to Somalis.

Importantly, shabaab generally did not directly target the US in its operations in 2007 and the first part of 2008, focusing its violence against the TFG, Ethiopian occupying forces, and Somali "collaborators." It was not designated a terrorist organization until March 2008. This meant that Somali-Americans could provide financial support to the shabaab or even join the cause without having reason to believe they were in violation of US anti-terrorism laws.

The decision by the US Department of States to designate shabaab a terrorist group at that particular moment in the Somali drama, when diplomatic efforts to bring the ICU into talks with the TFG appeared to be gaining momentum, is a topic worth exploring at another time. While shabaab was without question a very worrisome, undesirable, violent movement with at least some links to al Qa'ida (a topic discussed below), it had not directly targeted the US, and was focused entirely on a national, not international

struggle. At a time when US policy in other parts of the world appeared to be taking a nuanced and pragmatic approach toward engagement with radical Islamist insurgencies and movements (the Mahdi army in Iraq, portions of the Taliban in Afghanistan), the designation of shabaab as a terrorist organization seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. When in May of 2008 the US launched a tomahawk missile attack on a safe house in a remote town of central Somalia and killed the shabaab leader Aden Hashi 'Ayro, the shabaab announced that from that point it would target all US, Western, and UN personnel and interests, as well as Somalis working for the US or the UN, and any countries in the region collaborating with the US. Fears that the shabaab would make good on its pledge to widen its war into the broader region were realized when in late October 2008 shabaab executed five synchronized suicide bombing attacks against local government, Ethiopian, and UN compounds in the northern Somali polities of Puntland and Somaliland. This demonstrated a reach into areas beyond shabaab's core territory in the south of the country, an ability to recruit and indoctrinate suicide bombers, and a logistical capacity to pull off a sophisticated terrorist attack. Many feared that the October bombings were the first in a series of shabaab attacks beyond southern Somalia, and that the next attacks would hit soft targets in Kenya, Ethiopia, or Djibouti.

Al Qa'ida in Somalia

The principal reason for US concern about shabaab is not that it is a violent, extremist armed insurgency which employs tactics that could legitimately be described as "terrorist" in nature. The Horn of Africa is unfortunately home to dozens of unsavory and extremely violent armed movements matching this description, as well as several governments which sponsor paramilitaries using terror tactics on their own populations or against rival governments in the region. Shabaab stands out because of its ties to al Qa'ida. Shabaab spokesperson Sheikh Robow (aka Abu Mansur) publicly and defiantly underscored this link to al Qa'ida in 2008, and top al Qa'ida figures have made global appeals to help shabaab in a jihad against Ethiopia. Shabaab is believed to secure some financial support from al Qa'ida, and hosts an unknown number of al Qa'ida advisors in the areas it controls in southern Somalia. It also is alleged to receive funds and weapon from Eritrea, which – despite being an avowedly secular government that represses any manifestation of political Islam in its own borders -- is using shabaab in a proxy war against Ethiopia.

That shabaab has links to al Qa'ida is not in question. What is more difficult to assess is the extent and significance of those links. Here it is worth briefly reviewing the history of al Qaida in Somalia.

In the early to mid-1990s, at a time when Osama bin Laden was based in neighboring Sudan, an East African Al Qaida (EAAQ) cell was established in Nairobi Kenya, with the objective of forging ties to the Somali Islamist movement Al Itihad al Islamiyya (AIAI) then operating in Somalia and in Somali-inhabited eastern Ethiopia. This EAAQ mission into Somali-inhabited territory was a failure; Somalia proved to be a difficult, non-permissive environment for foreign operatives, and Somalis were hostile to Al Qa'ida's call for jihad against the West. The EAAQ cell, which was composed mainly of non-

natives of the Horn of Africa, instead found Kenya a more conducive base of operations, and from there planned and executed the terrorist bombings of US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998. Neither Somalis nor Somalia played a role in those attacks.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the subsequent US-led offensive to remove the Taliban from power and prevent Al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base, Somalia gained attention as a possible site for al Qaeda to regroup. Somalia was viewed by the US government as “ungoverned space” easily exploited by terrorists. The US government specifically identified a small number of “high value” EAAQ operatives some of whom were responsible for the 1998 embassy bombings, and argued it had hard evidence that those figures – including the Comoran Fazul Mohammed -- were coming and going from Mogadishu. The group that the EAAQ cell was relying on for protection in Mogadishu was believed to be Somali jihadists linked to Hassan Dahir Aweys and the militia which later became known as shabaab.

This was a watershed moment, because up until 2002 Somalis were a surprisingly poor source of recruitment into al Qaeda. AIAI relations with al Qaeda were actually quite poor. And despite a profile that ought to have made the country a ripe source of recruits, Somalia never generated anything near the kind of involvement in al Qaeda that occurred in the North African states of Morocco and Algeria, or in neighboring Yemen. There are several possible explanations for this. First, Somalis of all ideological persuasions were focused almost entirely on their own national problem, and were less attracted to the call for global jihad represented by al Qaeda. Second, to the extent that al Qaeda was seen as an Arab agenda, it was less attractive to most Somalis, whose relations with the Arab world are complex and not entirely amiable. Finally, for the diaspora, any involvement in al Qaeda also carried huge risks to the entire Somali community and the remittances on which the home country depended (a point explored below).

Nonetheless, the rise of a small group of Somali jihadists working closely with the EAAQ was a genuine cause for concern. US security agencies responded by forging links with local militias leaders to monitor and apprehend al Qaeda operatives and their Somali supporters. Those partnerships were generally unsuccessful, as the militia leaders had little reach into neighborhoods where al Qaeda and were deeply unpopular with Somalis, viewed as “warlords” who were responsible for much of the lawlessness in the capital. When in 2006 the ICU soundly defeated these warlords, it was seen as an embarrassment to the US and a setback in its counter-terrorism policies inside Somalia.

The US government had other counter-terrorist concerns in Somalia. The vibrant Somali remittance (hawala) companies which arose in the 1990s were suspected of being used (knowingly or unwittingly) by al Qaeda to move funds surreptitiously, and in a few instances were also suspected of having al Qaeda business partners. The assets of the largest Somali remittance company, al-Barakat, were frozen in late 2001 by the US Treasury department. The US was also concerned about the use of Somalia as a transshipment site for men, money, and materiel into Kenya by al Qaeda.

What has always been unclear is the extent of al Qa'ida support to and interest in shabaab. Despite the inflammatory rhetoric from al Qa'ida – the calls for global jihad against Ethiopia and its portrayal of Somalis as embattled Muslims oppressed and occupied by a Christian regime – the actual level of al Qa'ida engagement in Somalia has, to date, been fairly modest. Rhetoric has not been matched by resources. At least for the moment, al Qa'ida seems to be dabbling in Somalia, using a modest level of resources to leverage a maximum amount of discomfort and insecurity for the US and its ally Ethiopia. Compared to a number of other theaters of operation in the world, al Qa'ida has not demonstrated an intent to make Somalia a major priority. There is, for instance, no evidence at all that shabaab-held territory is being planned or used as a major safe haven for al Qa'ida leaders long the lines of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas. The main security threat from al Qa'ida in the region continues to be the prospect of terrorist attacks on soft Western targets in Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, or Somaliland. To launch those attacks, exploitation of Somali territory and operatives would be useful but not essential for al Qa'ida.

The biggest new development with regard to terrorist threats in the region is this – for almost two decades, the only jihadist terrorist threat in the Horn of Africa came from outsiders in the East Africa Al-Qa'ida cell. Now, the shabaab amounts to the first serious “home-grown” terrorist threat targeting US interests in the region. This has the potential to be quite dangerous, but only if shabaab itself can thrive. That, I argue below, is now in question.

Recent Changes in Somalia: Declining Fortunes for Shabaab?

Shabaab is today the strongest militia in south-central Somalia, controls the greatest stretch of territory, and enjoys better flows of foreign financial support than its rivals, there are signs that the movement is in trouble, and indications that shabaab may have hit its high-water mark of power in late 2008. Several major changes have altered the environment in Somalia in ways that work against shabaab and that offer some hope for an improved political situation in Somalia.

First, in December 2008 Ethiopia completed withdrawal of its forces from Somalia. This deprives shabaab of its principal nemesis and rallying point. Second, the deeply unpopular TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf resigned under pressure in December 2008, depriving shabaab of yet another source of popular resistance. Third, a peace accord, known as the Djibouti Agreement, was signed in late 2008 between a moderate wing of the TFG and moderates in the opposition movement, known as the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS). This has produced an expanded unity parliament and the selection of a new government, led by President Sheikh Sharif, a former moderate leader of the ICU. Collectively, these dramatic changes have deprived shabaab of much of its *raison d'être*. It can no longer pose as the main source of resistance to Ethiopian occupation and its puppet government; shabaab must now explain what it is for, and its social and governance policies in area its controls are deeply unpopular with most Somalis. Shabaab and other hardline Islamist groups in the Hisb al Islamiyya reject the new TFG and have continued to fight against it, but are meeting with active resistance

from clan-based militias allied to the new government. Shabaab gets little public support for calls to fight and kill fellow Somalis, especially since the new government is composed of moderate Islamists who promise to implement sharia law. While the new government of Sheikh Sharif is weak and imperfect, and unsatisfying to different Somali constituencies on a variety of levels, it appears to have the backing of a broad array of civic leaders, business leaders, cleric, and most of the diaspora, all of whom share a collective weariness of war. Moreover, shabaab is now seen by a growing number of Somalis as a tool of foreign extremists who are not interested in Somalia's well-being but who are playing out their external agenda at Somalia's expense. All this, one hopes, is bad news for shabaab, and is likely to make it harder for it to win local support.

Recent trends in Somalia are likely to make it harder for shabaab to recruit abroad. While it is too soon to tell, there are indications that shabaab is quickly losing its appeal to Somalis. If so, the concern about Somali-Americans being recruited into shabaab may become less urgent. In that case, the residual concern will be Somali-Americans who have already been recruited into shabaab and who may return to the US. That is a scenario I consider in more detail below.

The role of the Somali diaspora in Somalia

An estimated one million Somalis have fled the country since the late 1980s and today can be found in almost every country in the world, usually as legal immigrants or refugees, but sometimes as illegal immigrants who have been smuggled into countries. They are concentrated in Europe, Canada, the United States, the Gulf States, Kenya, Australia, and increasingly Malaysia and China. Another a quarter million Somalis are now living in overcrowded refugee camps Dabaab Kenya and another 300,000 estimated to live in Yemen. About 150,000 Somalis are believed to live in the United States, with Minneapolis and Columbus, Ohio serving as two of the largest concentrations of Somali communities.

The principal role that the diaspora has played over the past 20 years has been as an economic lifeline to Somalia. Remittances are by far and away the most important source of income in Somalia. It is estimated that about one billion dollars is remitted each year by the diaspora; this dwarfs the country's earnings from its main export, livestock (averaging about \$100 million per year). It is fair to say that without remittances, Somalia's already horrific levels of poverty and malnutrition would plummet into catastrophic levels of need. The diaspora keeps much of Somalia – especially households in urban areas -- alive.

As a corollary, the Somali diaspora is under enormous pressure to remit as much money as it can to extended families members back home. The ethical obligation to assist the extended family is absolute; a diaspora member who rejects this obligation would be renounced by his or her clan. Extended families in Somalia tend to act as single corporate units, allowing the family to diversity economic activities as a way of managing risk. The diaspora member is a major part of that household survival strategy. The advent of cheap telephone and email services has only served to increase the pressure

that diaspora members are under to send cash, even to relatives who are irresponsible with the money. It is not an easy position for the diaspora to be in. Adding to the tensions are the fact that first generation Somali-Americans often feel less obliged to assist relatives they have never met in a country they have never seen.

The diaspora has always been a prime target of political and social groupings for fund-raising. Factions, clans, Islamist movements, civic organizations, and others all call on diaspora to contribute money to a common pool. Some of this money is used for good causes, like community projects. In other cases, the fund-raising can support militias or even extremist groups like shabaab. Somalis in the diaspora are not coerced to contribute as is the case with some other diasporas in North America

The diaspora is also increasingly the main source of investment funds for business ventures in Somalia, and the main repository of skilled and educated professionals. While many diaspora members are poor and poorly educated, as a group the diaspora are a privileged class.

Not surprisingly, Somali political, business, and civic life is increasingly dominated by the diaspora. An estimated 70% of the new TFG cabinet, for instance, holds citizenship abroad, and the new Prime Minister himself is a Canadian Somali who has resided for years in Virginia. Most of the Islamists who formed the leadership of the ICU came from abroad as well, and many of the families of Somali political and economic leaders reside abroad. While most of the diaspora contributions to Somalia are positive, and in some instances heroic – such as the physicians who give up lucrative positions abroad to return and work in dangerous conditions for a few hundred dollars a month – there are others whose involvement is destructive and divisive. For instance, evidence suggests that some of the financial backers of the Somali pirate groups plaguing shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden are diaspora members.

In sum, Somalia has become a “diasporized nation.” Many Somalis with citizenship abroad return to Somalia often to visit family, check on business investments, manage non-profits, or pursue political ambitions. Even Somalis who live year-round in Somalia must secure residency rights or passports from another country just so they can travel abroad, where the Somali passport is not recognized. Having a foreign travel document or residency rights is an essential risk management strategy, an “exit option” in the event of deteriorating security.

All this makes it increasingly difficult to draw meaningful distinctions between the Somalis and the Somali diaspora, or to identify the point at which a Somali who has lived his or her entire life outside Somalia becomes, in effect, a “foreigner” in Somalia.

These observations remind us first that virtually every Somali enterprise - whether the shareholder group of the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Mogadishu, or the new TFG administration, or a women’s self-help group, or shabaab – is likely to have a significant diaspora component. Second, extensive travel to Somalia and financial and other interactions by Somali-Americans with their home country should not constitute a risk-

risk profile. Third, it suggests that political, social, and ideological trends and tensions inside Somalia are likely to parallel trends and divisions within the Somali diaspora as well.

The Threat Posed by Shabaab Recruitment of the Diaspora.

The Minneapolis case, in which a dozen or more Somali youth have gone missing – with some phoning to relatives from Somalia, and one, Shirwa Ahmed, known to have been a suicide bomber in the October 28 bombing in Hargeisa Somaliland – has raised concerns in US law enforcement. This concern is not entirely new; in December 2006, when the ICU was defeated by the Ethiopian military, a number of ICU fighters were found to have been holding European or North American passports. Then as known the concern was that some of these diaspora members could have acquired terrorist training, especially in explosives, and an ideological commitment to execute acts of terrorism back in their host country.

To determine the extent of the threat posed by diaspora trained and indoctrinated by shabaab, we must begin by asking a basic question – why would shabaab either actively recruit diaspora members, or agree to accept them as volunteers? What can a diaspora recruit into shabaab do that a local militia fighter cannot? Why would shabaab or its supporters be willing to run the risk of increased exposure to US law enforcement and intelligence by recruiting within the American-Somali community? The answer to this question sheds light on the threat assessment that US law enforcement, and this committee, are seeking to make.

First, it is clear that the diaspora are not of much value as rank and file militia for the shabaab or any other fighting force in Somalia. Somalia is already saturated with experienced teenage gunmen and has no need to import more. In fact, evidence from the ICU in 2006 suggests that Somali diaspora and as well as foreign fighters were as much a liability as an asset to the ICU. They were unfamiliar with the countryside, often spoke the Somali language poorly, were more likely to become sick, and required a fair amount of oversight.

But the diaspora are useful to shabaab and other armed groups in Somalia in other ways. Their familiarity with computers and the internet is a valuable communication skill. Their familiarity with the English language is helpful for translation. And, to come to the point of our hearing, a young diaspora recruit is, upon arrival in Somalia, entirely cut off socially and therefore in theory easier to isolate, indoctrinate, and control for the purpose of executing suicide bombings. Were this not the case, it would be much less risky and less expensive for shabaab to simply recruit locals. From this perspective, a young diaspora member who heeds the call by a recruiter to “join the cause” of fighting to protect his nation and religion is not so much a terrorist as a pawn, exploited by the real terrorists, those who are unwilling themselves to die for their cause but who are happy to manipulate a vulnerable and isolated youth to blow himself up. What little evidence is available suggests that shabaab uses a combination of incentives (payment to recruits and

their families), indoctrination, close control, and threats of retribution against the recruit's family members to induce them to follow through on a suicide bombing.

In my assessment, a Somali diaspora member groomed to be a suicide bomber is of most utility to shabaab for an operation inside Somalia or in the region of the Horn of Africa. The reason for this is that these recruits would need "handlers" both to help them navigate through unfamiliar situations and to ensure that they go through with the attack. I am much less convinced that shabaab would be willing to risk sending a trained and indoctrinated diaspora member back to the US as a "sleeper" for a future terrorist attack in the US. The risks to shabaab would be enormous. They would not be in a position to manage and control their recruit, who, upon return home, would be exposed to information and debates on Somali affairs that could lead him to question the cause. To protect himself and his family, the recruit could instead turn to US law authorities and provide damaging information on shabaab and its network. And even if shabaab managed to send totally committed recruits back to the US, a shabaab-directed terrorist attack inside the US would almost certainly have disastrous consequences for shabaab, not only in terms of the US response, but from Somali society as well. Recall that remittances from the diaspora are the economic lifeline of Somalia. Anything that jeopardizes the status of Somalis living abroad imperils the entire country, and shabaab would face enormous pressure from within the Somali community.

In sum, my sense is that the threat of an American of Somali descent joining shabaab and then returning as a sleeper in the US is quite low. The threat still requires careful law enforcement attention, but should not be overblown. But there is one exception to this assessment. I would argue that a Somali-American who joins shabaab and who has then proceeded to Pakistan or Afghanistan and who becomes an Al-Qa'ida operative is of much greater concern. The reasoning for this is straightforward. Shabaab's agenda is still essentially a nationalist one, while al Qa'ida's is global. Al Qa'ida would not weigh the costs of a terrorist attack in the US on the Somali economy and the Somali diaspora, whereas shabaab would. A Somali-American acting through the ideological prism of al Qa'ida would be more willing to serve as a sleeper than would a shabaab member.

Somali diaspora and US law enforcement

I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on the Somali experience with and response to law enforcement authorities. The case of the missing Minneapolis youth and their recruitment into shabaab is producing a much greater level of law enforcement attention to and engagement with the Somali-American community. Relations between American law enforcement agencies and the Somali-American community will be improved if a few points are kept in mind:

- Somalis have a long and unhappy experience with the state and the police back in their country of origin. The state under Siyad Barre in the 1970s and 1980s was a highly repressive, abusive government; state security forces were instruments of that repression; and the law was a tool used against anyone seen as an "enemy of the state." Security forces in some countries hosting Somali refugees were also very predatory. As a result, not all Somalis view the state, law enforcement, and

the law as a source of protection and order; some view law enforcement with fear, as something to avoid. Behavior which appears to be evasive or untruthful can often be traced back to this generic fear of law enforcement, and should not be misinterpreted. Sustained police programs to socialize Somali-American communities and reshape their perception of the state and the law are essential if this is to be overcome. They need to appreciate the difference between “rule of law” and “rule by law” and feel confident the US law enforcement system reflects the former, not the latter.

- Most Somalis living in the US are here legally, but some are not. They either came on false pretenses or were smuggled in. There may also be some Somalis engaged in untaxed economic transactions or other illegal activities. This means that some Somali households are likely to be nervous about any attention from law enforcement not because of links to terrorism, but because of the risk that US law enforcement will in the process uncover other “irregularities” putting the community’s interests at risk.
- Somalis have a strong tradition of customary law to handle most disputes and crimes. This “blood payment” or diya system is based on the principle of collective rather than individual culpability, and compensatory rather than punitive justice. This tradition, which remains alive in Somali communities in the US today, co-exists poorly with the US legal system. It makes Somali communities reluctant to see fellow Somalis tried in our courts. And a criminal charge against a single Somali tends to be viewed as a charge against the entire community.
- All communities have their “dominant narratives” and Somalis are no exception. Their dominant narrative is a story of victimization and persecution of the Somali people both at home and abroad. It is very easy for some in the Somali American community to interpret current US law enforcement attention to the question of shabaab recruitment as yet another instance of witch-hunting and persecution, reflecting a combination of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-African sentiments. Some flatly deny there is a problem with shabaab recruitment at all. The only way to produce better cooperation with this community is through routinized communication that both builds trust with local law enforcement and which gives Somalis a clearer sense not only of their legal and social obligations as citizens but also of their legal rights. The Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Civil Rights AND Civil Liberties has outreach programs designed to do just this.
- The US government needs to provide much clearer guidelines to Somalis about what constitutes legal or illegal behavior with regard to political engagement in their country of origin. If not, we run the risk of criminalizing routine diaspora engagement in Somalia. The fact that shabaab was not designated a terrorist organization before March 2008 but then was so designated is an example of the legal confusion facing Somalis. Something that was legal in February 2008 is now aiding and abetting terrorism in March. As you know, this is a question of relevance to many other immigrant communities in the US whose country of origin is embroiled in war or whose charities have come under suspicion of serving as terrorist fronts. The US government cannot ask its citizens to abide by the law if the laws themselves are too opaque to be understood.

- Finally, it goes without saying that the main responsibility for policing Somali youth to ensure they do not become members of criminal gangs of terrorist groups falls squarely on the shoulders of Somali parents and community leaders, as it does for every other section of American society. There is not enough time or space here to explain the many special challenges Somali households face in their new life in the United States, but their challenges are considerable. To the extent that Somali communities need additional outside support to provide for a safe and controlled environment for their children to grow up, we should try to provide it. Most importantly, we need to ensure that first-generation Somali-Americans are growing up with a strong sense of being American citizens with all the rights and responsibilities that that entails. A Somali diaspora population that feels it belongs neither here nor in Somalia will be much more susceptible to radical movements promising their own sense of identity and belonging.

I hope these brief observations are of help as you exercise oversight on a topic with both important implications for both national security and civil liberties. Like many US citizens, I was greatly moved by President Obama's promise in his inaugural speech: "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our founding fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man -- a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience sake." I am confident that we can address the security concerns raised by Somali American recruitment into shabaab without violating the civil rights of those individuals and their community.