



**Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security**

***“FROM AL-SHABAAB TO AL-NUSRA: HOW
WESTERNERS JOINING TERROR GROUPS
OVERSEAS AFFECTS THE HOMELAND”***

A Statement by

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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 this committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the impact of Western members of certain terrorist organizations on the homeland security of the United States. Recent allegations that young Americans participated in the deadly four-day siege at the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya – an attack against a “soft” civilian target and an attack for which Somalia-based terrorist organization al Shabaab claims responsibility – have highlighted several critical questions with homeland security implications. Why are U.S. citizens and other Westerners traveling overseas to affiliate with terrorist groups and receive terrorist training? What training or support are those Westerners receiving? What is the likelihood they will return to launch attacks on American soil?

Westerners’ Affiliations and Inspirations

It is a fact that U.S. citizens, especially individuals associated with particular diaspora communities within the United States such as Somali-Americans in Minnesota, can be vulnerable to radicalization and willing to travel overseas for terrorist training and activities. For example, the 2006 military operations of U.S.-supported Ethiopian forces in Somalia may have inspired Somali refugees and others to join the fight against Ethiopia and Somalia’s Western-backed Transitional Federal Government. In fact, Americans appear to have begun traveling to Somalia to fight alongside al Shabaab in 2007; between 2007 and 2010, roughly 20-40 Americans joined al Shabaab, “making the United States a primary exporter of Western fighters”¹ to the group.

In addition, because al Shabaab has traditionally been a hybrid movement with some elements focused on the conflict within Somalia and some elements focused on al-Qaeda’s anti-Western vision, other foreign fighters – from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere in Africa – may have joined al Shabaab because of its international aims. It appears that al Shabaab recruits Americans and other Westerners for specialized missions, including propaganda, recruitment, and suicide missions. Although not much is known about al Shabaab’s training camps, the group’s knowledge of

¹ Seth T. Jones, Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, October 3, 2013, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT400/RAND_CT400.pdf.

firearms, target surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence-gathering abilities alludes to the skills and capabilities that Americans and other Westerners may be learning.

Of course, many Somali-Americans travel to Somalia for legitimate reasons, from visiting family and friends to conducting business. It is near-impossible for U.S. Government agencies to track the activities of all Somali-Americans once they are in-country, and there are very real privacy implications for even attempting to do so. That said, in 2009, a senior FBI official told lawmakers, “While there are no current indicators that any of the individuals who traveled to Somalia have been selected, trained, or tasked by al Shabaab or other extremists to conduct attacks inside the United States, we remain concerned about this possibility and that it might be exploited in the future if other U.S. persons travel to Somalia for similar purposes.”² More recently, White House national security adviser for strategic communications Ben Rhodes stated that administration officials “monitor very carefully and have for some time been concerned about efforts by al Shabaab to recruit Americans or U.S. persons to come to Somalia.”³

While the numbers of Westerners joining forces with al Shabaab are relatively small, some 5,500 foreign fighters have allegedly traveled to Syria in recent years, including roughly 600 Westerners, to join rebel forces against the Assad regime. There is growing concern that many of these fighters are joining al Qaeda-affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, considering that Syria may be becoming “the predominant jihadist battlefield in the world... The concern going forward from a threat perspective is there are individuals traveling to Syria, becoming further radicalized, becoming trained and then returning as part of really a global jihadist movement to Western Europe and, potentially, to the United States.”⁴

As with al Shabaab, al Nusra appears to be using foreign fighters for propaganda. In addition, foreigners may be acquiring skills in combat, bomb-making, and counterintelligence. Al Nusra, in general, has proven capabilities in assassinations, suicide attacks, and improvised explosive devices, to include car bombs.

Homeland Security Implications

For terrorist groups like al Shabaab and al Nusra, striking the United States at home requires that they have both the motivation and the capability to do so. Whether either group currently has the motivation to attack the U.S. homeland directly is a difficult question.

For example, al Shabaab has long been composed of a combination of local Somali fighters, who have relatively few designs beyond Somalia’s borders, and a smaller

² Philip Mudd, Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, March 11, 2009, <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/031109Mudd.pdf?attempt=2>

³ Ben Rhodes, Remarks to the Press, September 23, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/23/gaggle-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-ny>.

⁴ Matthew Olsen, Remarks at Aspen Security Forum, July 18, 2013, <http://aspensecurityforum.org/2013-video>.

number of foreign fighters with international aims. Factionalism within al Shabaab has traditionally kept the group from fully uniting behind an international agenda, and the vast majority of al Shabaab's attacks have occurred within Somalia.

However, there is evidence that in recent months Ahmed Abdi Godane, one of the Shabaab leaders with the strongest ties to al Qaeda and its international agenda, has eliminated many of his rivals and consolidated his control over much of the group. If Godane as truly solidified his place as the central Shabaab leader, it may signal a new willingness to launch international attacks, potentially in the West.⁵

However, also important to consider is the motivation of the individual al Shabaab members, who would be called upon to carry out an attack within the United States. These would almost certainly have to be U.S. citizens or Westerners, given the ability to "blend" (e.g., English-language skills, cultural familiarity) and perhaps more importantly, Western passports that would enable entry with minimal suspicion.

There have, in the past, been doubts about the willingness of al Shabaab's U.S. members to return home to launch attacks. Many U.S. citizens who originally went to Somalia appear to have been motivated primarily by nationalism and adventurism, rather than a desire to participate in international jihad. Furthermore, there is a sizable Somali population in the United States, which includes the families of many of these young men. It may be that U.S. members of al Shabaab are loath to participate in an attack that might bring direct or indirect harm to the U.S. Somali community.

However, there is the possibility that these individual motivations are shifting. If it is true that Americans participated in the Westgate attack, it may indicate a greater willingness on the part of al Shabaab's American members to participate in international operations, even those that may target Westerners or Western interests specifically.

Regarding al Nusra, it is important to note that despite this group's 2012 emergence on the world stage, al Nusra has in fact existed for many years. With cells established in the Levant after terrorists fled Afghanistan in 2001, this group's original primary mission was to facilitate the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. Al Nusra's infrastructure received a boost after the Syrian revolution began in 2011, and today's the group is one of the most effective rebel fighting forces in Syria. In April 2013, leader Abu Muhammed al-Julani pledged the group's allegiance to al Qaeda, which presumably means that al Nusra supports al Qaeda's vision of global jihad. That said, its focus remains predominantly on internal Syrian dynamics, and U.S. concerns are growing about its ability to destabilize the country and, by extension, the region.

If events (e.g., the ascendancy of Godane within al Shabaab, possible destabilization in Syria and a more regional or global focus for al Nusra) motivate the groups' leadership and American members to embrace the idea of Western targets, this is cause for concern.

⁵ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Al-Shabab leader's ambitions appear to be as complex as his personality", *Washington Post*, September 25, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-09-25/world/42373211_1_mall-attack-militia-al-shabab.

However, motivation is not enough. There is also the question of whether they have the capability to launch an attack in the United States.

As my colleague Richard Downie of the CSIS Africa Program pointed out in his testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, the types of attacks al Shabaab has launched in the past have not required much capability. Al Shabaab is not likely to launch a complex bomb attack against the United States or attempt to bring down an airliner. As demonstrated by the Westgate incident, al Shabaab prefers “Mumbai-style” attacks, in which multiple gunmen are used to strike soft targets like shopping malls.

The question is: could al Shabaab or al Nusra carry out such an attack in the United States, and if so, what would they need to be successful?

First, a group would likely need several American or Western members to carry out such an attack. These individuals could more easily enter the United States without attracting attention and more readily navigate U.S. society without notice. While many of the estimated 20-40 Americans who have reportedly joined al Shabaab may have already been killed, al Shabaab likely still has some U.S. or Western members, who could participate in such an attack. The number of American members of al Nusra is also small, with estimates at 10-20.

Second, attackers would need proper training. As demonstrated by Westgate, al Shabaab already possesses the knowledge and training in firearms, communications, and tactics to make a relatively simple Mumbai-style attack deadly. The same is likely true for al Nusra, given that group’s demonstrated ability to conduct combat operations and bomb attacks.

Third, the group would need to be able to insert members into the United States. American members with U.S. passports and visa waiver holders from other Western nations would allow them to enter the homeland without attracting the same level of attention or scrutiny that others might. However, this is likely the riskiest part of the process and holds the greatest likelihood of interception for overseas terror organizations.
*

Fourth, the attackers would need access to weapons. Given the relative availability of firearms and ammunition in the United States, it is doubtful terror organization members, especially U.S. citizens, would have much trouble acquiring the needed weapons.

Finally, attackers would need a soft target, such as shopping malls, theaters, concerts, sporting events, or transportation systems. They could certainly learn lessons from recent non-terrorist attacks against U.S. soft targets, such as the 2011 parking lot shooting in Tucson, the 2012 Aurora theater incident, and the various school shootings from the 1999 Columbine massacre to the 2007 Virginia Tech rampage to last year’s tragedy in Sandy Hook. Other soft target attacks, including the London and Tokyo subway attacks, the Beslan hostage crisis in Russia, and countless others have demonstrated time and again the vulnerability of soft targets. Terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda, have

continued to express interest in striking such soft targets; a recent news article noted that the opening words of a document found on the body of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, al Qaeda's top East Africa operative and architect of the 1998 embassy attacks in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, when he was killed two years ago were: "Our objectives are to strike London with low-cost operations that would cause a heavy blow amongst the hierarchy and Jewish communities, using attacks similar to the tactics used by our brothers in Mumbai."⁶ Among targets identified were Eton College, the five-star Dorchester and Ritz hotels, and the Jewish neighborhood of Golders Green in north London. There is clearly no shortage of soft targets.

Conclusion

Information and intelligence are imperfect. The United States and its allies and partners spend considerable resources – financial and human – in an effort to prevent and deter terrorist incidents. But the nation cannot know the name and location of every individual who intends to do harm. The nation cannot harden every soft target. Because of the nation's principles and values, which allow for privacy, freedom of movement, and other individual rights and privileges, and because we face very adaptable adversaries who seek to exploit these principles and values, we cannot prevent every terrorist attack.

That said, the United States can certainly improve its current mechanisms and systems in ways that can increase our ability to prevent, deter, or mitigate such attacks without compromising the nation's principles and values. Recruitment of diaspora members, who are vulnerable to radicalization, often occurs in person at the local level or via the Internet. Campaigns to counter these recruitment efforts can come from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, religious groups, and every level of government from federal to state to local. In addition, information-sharing and coordination of efforts can be vastly improved, in terms of authorities and abilities to collaborate across levels of government, relations necessary to facilitate that cooperation, and the technical means by which to do so. For example, the Boston police chief reportedly complained about the spectrum availability and communications interoperability in the immediate aftermath of the Boston bombing earlier this year. Finally, of course, intelligence-sharing with friendly foreign nations can also be improved. Our knowledge of al Shabaab and al Nusra leadership, their intentions, and their capabilities is limited, and expanded efforts to leverage other nations' intelligence assets and to share terrorist-related intelligence will be key to addressing these potential threats before they can reach the U.S. homeland.

⁶ Paul Cruickshank, Tim Lister, and Nic Robertson, "Evidence suggests that Al-Shabaab is shifting focus to 'soft' targets," September 26, 2013, www.cnn.com/2013/09/26/world/london-bombing-plot-qaeda/index.html.