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The Terrorist Threat from Al Shabaab

Seth G. Jones

RAND Office of External Affairs

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Seth G. Jones¹
The RAND Corporation

The Terrorist Threat from Al Shabaab²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives**

October 3, 2013

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, “Al-Shabaab: How Great a Threat?” This is a timely hearing because of the recent attacks in East Africa, the movement of some Americans to Somalia to fight with the al-Qa’ida linked group al Shabaab (the Youth), and the accessibility in the United States of al Shabaab propaganda on social media sites. This testimony is divided into three sections. The first briefly examines the threat from al Shabaab. The second section discusses U.S. counterterrorism steps. And the third offers a brief conclusion, reiterating the importance of countering the ideology of al Qa’ida and its allies.

Assessing the Threat from al Shabaab

The al Shabaab terrorist attack at Westgate Mall in Kenya and its follow-up attacks are a stark reminder that the Somalia-based group remains lethal. Despite recently being pushed out of Mogadishu, the Somali capital, and Kismayu, a key logistical hub for the group, Shabaab presents a significant terrorism threat in the region, including to U.S. embassies and its citizens in East Africa. Al Shabaab, whose leaders publicly pledged allegiance to al Qa’ida in February 2012, has been on the radar screen of U.S. counterterrorism officials for several years. As early as 2009, al Shabaab operatives began courting al Qa’ida, issuing recordings with such titles as “At Your Service Osama.”

Al Shabaab seeks to overthrow the Somali government and establish an Islamic emirate with an extreme version of sharia (Islamic law). Its leaders support al Qa’ida’s ideology of re-establishing a caliphate, though they are focused on East Africa.³ Al Shabaab has

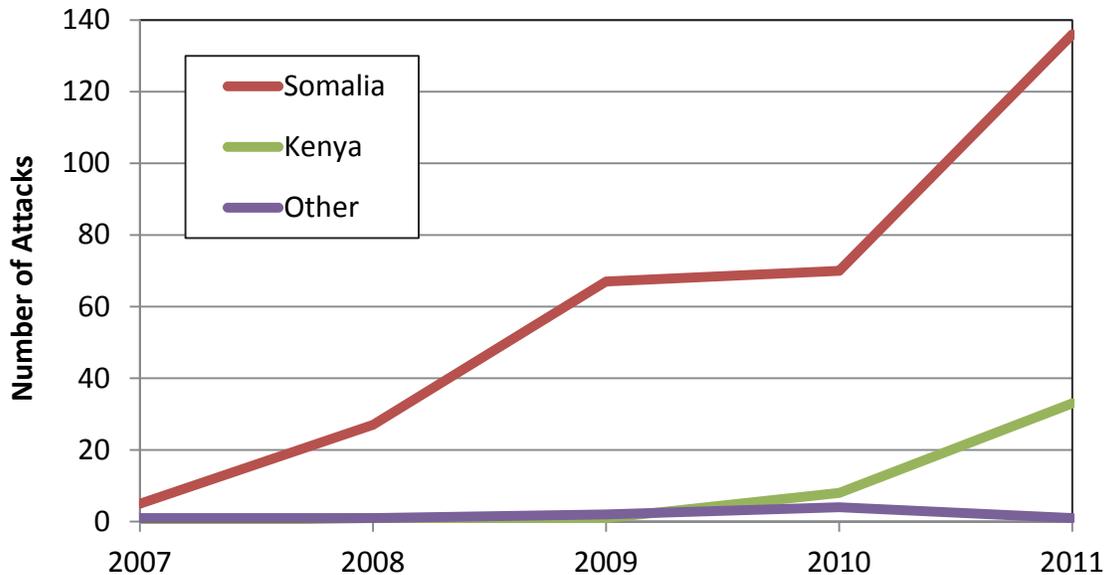
¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT400.html>.

³ See, for example, Al Shabaab, Final Statement of the Conference of Islamic State Scholars in Somalia, December 3, 2011.

concentrated its attacks on the Somali government and neighboring states that are conducting military operations against al Shabaab, especially Kenya and Ethiopia. Since 2007, 85 percent of al Shabaab's attacks have taken place in Somalia, with another 12 percent in Kenya, as highlighted in Figure 1.⁴

Figure 1: Al Shabaab Attacks, 2007-2011⁵



At the moment, al Shabaab does not appear to be plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland. But there are several reasons why America should still be concerned about al Shabaab. First, al Shabaab possesses a competent external operations capability to strike targets outside of Somalia. The Westgate Mall attack was well-planned and well-executed, and involved sophisticated intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of the target. These skills could be used for other types of attacks directly targeting the United States and its citizens.

Second, al Shabaab officials, including leader Ahmed Abdi al-Mohamed, have expressed an interest in striking U.S. and other foreign targets in East Africa, according to U.S. and Western government officials. They have also planned to kidnap Americans and other foreigners in the region, as well as plotted attacks against malls, supermarkets, embassies, and other locations frequented by Westerners. After all, al Shabaab leaders consider the United States an enemy

⁴ The data is from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), accessed on September 27, 2013.

⁵ Thanks to Nathan Chandler for help with the figure. The data is from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), accessed on September 27, 2013.

and its citizens as “kuffar,” or apostates.⁶ As one al Shabaab document noted, it is halal (lawful) to kill and rob non-Muslims: “The French and the English are to be treated equally: Their blood and their money are halal wherever they may be. No Muslim in any part of the world may cooperate with them in any way ... It leads to apostasy and expulsion from Islam.” The document then added: “Ethiopians, Kenyans, Ugandans and Burundians are just like the English and the French because they have invaded the Islamic country of Somalia and launched war on Islam and Muslims.”⁷

Third, and perhaps most concerning, Americans from cities like Phoenix and Minneapolis have traveled to Somalia over the past several years to fight with al Shabaab. Between 2007 and 2010, more than 40 Americans joined al Shabaab, making the United States a primary exporter of Western fighters to the al Qa’ida-affiliated group.⁸ Al Shabaab has made an active and deliberate attempt to recruit young American men both in person and on the Internet. Shabaab recruitment in Somali-American communities began around the 2006 invasion of Somalia, a predominantly Muslim country, by Ethiopia, which has a large Christian population and is Somalia’s historic enemy. Some of the initial recruiters had participated in earlier rounds of fighting in Somalia and returned to the United States as veterans with tantalizing war stories.⁹ In addition to Minneapolis and Phoenix, al Shabaab recruiters have attempted to attract individuals in other American cities like Boston, Seattle, Washington, San Diego, Columbus, and Lewiston, ME. Many of these Americans transited through the U.S.-Mexican border, though others flew out of the United States legally by airplane.

The experience of these Americans has been mixed. Some found Somalia an inhospitable environment and went elsewhere. Others became enmeshed in internal rivalries. The American operative Omar Shafik Hammami, for instance, was killed in an ambush in early September 2013 by his former extremist allies. The son of a Southern Baptist mother and a Syrian Muslim father, Hammami was raised in Daphne, Alabama and later embraced Salafism before moving to Somalia in 2006 to fight for al Shabaab. And still others died in the fighting. One of the first Americans to become a suicide attacker, Shirwa Ahmed, joined al Shabaab and blew himself up in Somalia in October 2008. Another recruit, 22-year-old Abidsalan Hussein Ali from Minneapolis, agreed to be a suicide bomber and attacked African Union troops on October 29, 2011.

⁶ Al Shabaab, *The Experience of Our Brothers in Somalia*, undated.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸ Committee on Homeland Security, *Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland* (Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, July 27, 2011), p. 2.

⁹ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011), pp. 12-14.

In response to the movement of Americans to Somalia, the FBI spearheaded a nationwide counterterrorism effort to identify and arrest al Shabaab militants. With the help of local law enforcement and the Somali-American community, the FBI has arrested numerous individuals in the United States, such as Zachary Adam Chesser, for their involvement with al Shabaab. In May 2013, for example, Omer Abdi Mohamed was sentenced to 144 months in federal prison; Abdifatah Yusuf Isse, Salah Osman Ahmed, and Ahmed Hussein Mahamud were each sentenced to 36 months in federal prison; and Mahamud Said Omar was sentenced to 20 years in prison for involvement with al Shabaab.¹⁰

Americans need a sober understanding of the group. Al Shabaab does not appear to be plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland, and it has suffered a series of military defeats at the hands of Somali, Kenyan, and other African forces. But as the Westgate Mall attack shows, al Shabaab has the capability to conduct high-profile attacks in the region. The United States should be on high alert in East Africa.

U.S. Counterterrorism Actions

Based on an examination of counterterrorism efforts against al Qa'ida's since its establishment in 1988, the United States can take two steps to help weaken al Shabaab in East Africa.¹¹ The first is implementing a light footprint strategy that focuses on covert intelligence, law enforcement, clandestine Special Operations Forces, and diplomatic efforts to support the Somali government and its neighboring allies – especially Kenya and Ethiopia – in their efforts to counter al Shabaab and its financial and logistical support networks. A light footprint strategy means refraining from deploying conventional U.S. forces to Somalia. In cases such as Somalia, where terrorists do not pose an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland, the United States should support local governments and allies who take the lead. The U.S. goal should be to support local civilian and security agencies capable of undermining al Qa'ida's ideology and capabilities.

The second step is to aggressively undermine al Shabaab's – and al Qa'ida's – extremist ideology. For al Shabaab leaders, the struggle to overthrow the Somali government and establish an extreme version of sharia is just as much an ideological as a military struggle. As one al Shabaab document summarized, the group has a media arm that “produces and distributes the jihadist movies of the movement as well as meetings and speeches for the leaders and spreading

¹⁰ U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Minnesota, Four More Men Sentenced for Providing Material Support to Terrorists, May 14, 2013.

¹¹ Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qa'ida Since 9/11* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

them across the World Wide Web with cooperation with the brothers in the Media Front.”¹² This explains why the turbaned al Shabaab gunmen that infiltrated the Westgate Mall arrived with a set of religious trivia questions. As terrified civilians hid in toilet stalls, behind mannequins, in ventilation shafts, and underneath food court tables, the assailants began a high-stakes game of twenty questions to separate Muslims from those they considered infidels. They asked captives to recite specific Quranic verses and to name relatives of the Prophet Muhammad, killing those who failed to provide the correct answers.¹³

Unfortunately, U.S. efforts against al Shabaab – and al Qa’ida more broadly – have been disjointed. In 1999, the State Department disbanded the U.S. Information Agency, which played a prominent role in countering Soviet ideology during the Cold War. Today, no U.S. government agency has the lead role for countering the ideology of al Qa’ida and its broader movement.¹⁴ The State Department has the lead for public diplomacy, but has not developed a comprehensive inter-agency strategy to counter al Qa’ida’s ideology. The CIA is involved in some clandestine activity, but most senior officials do not view undermining al Qa’ida’s ideology as its core mission. The Department of Defense is also involved in some efforts, but they are dispersed among U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, and other organizations. Ultimately, it is the President and the National Security Staff’s responsibility to appoint a lead agency and hold it responsible. An effective campaign has to be done carefully, however, and led by credible Muslims.

One of the most important battlefields against al Shabaab is on the Internet. After all, the struggle against al Qa’ida and its allies – including al Shabaab – is, in part, a struggle of ideas. Over the past decade, radicalization has become much less formal. The rise of the Internet and social media has fundamentally changed terrorist activities. Individuals like Anwar al-Awlaki (now deceased), Adam Gadahn, and Shaykh Abdallah Ibrahim al-Faisal have utilized YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Internet chat rooms, and other forums to distribute propaganda, recruit new supporters, and seek financial aid. Some, like Awlaki before his death, were successful in motivating individuals to conduct terrorist attacks. Others, like Gadahn, largely failed. As one al Qa’ida communiqué blithely noted in 2011, “In today’s world, there’s a place for the underground mujahideen who support the religion of Allah, men and women and youths in their cities and villages, and from their homes, and with their individual creativity and what is possible for them,

¹² Al Shabaab, *The Experience of Our Brothers in Somalia*, undated.

¹³ Rukmini Callimachi, “Terrorists Used New Tactic to Spare Some Muslims,” *Associated Press*, September 29, 2013.

¹⁴ The United States also has the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent federal agency that oversees all U.S. civilian international media. But its effectiveness has been highly debated. Broadcasters within the BBG network include the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa), Radio Free Asia, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and TV Marti).

as long as they are parallel with the general plans of the mujahideen ... the arena of electronic warfare.”¹⁵

A Battle of Hearts and Minds

In the end, the struggle against al Shabaab and the broader al Qa’ida movement will be decades, not months or years. Much like the Cold War against Marxism-Leninism, it is also predominantly an ideological struggle. When Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981, he substantially increased overt and covert efforts to combat the Soviet Union’s ideology. In early 1982, for example, White House staffers drafted National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 32, which Reagan signed into law on May 20, 1982. It authorized broad-ranging information and other activities to “reverse” the expansion of Soviet control across the globe.¹⁶ “Democracy triumphed in the cold war,” Reagan wrote in the final chapter of his memoirs, “because it was a battle of values – between one system that gave preeminence to the state and another that gave preeminence to the individual and freedom.”¹⁷

While there are obvious differences between America’s Cold War campaign against Marxism-Leninism and today’s struggle against al Qa’ida and other extremist groups, both involve ideological components. Al Qa’ida leaders are acutely aware of the importance of ideas. Al Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri remarked in a 2005 letter to al Qa’ida in Iraq leader Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi: “I say to you: that we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.”¹⁸

Since the struggle against al Qa’ida and its allies – including al Shabaab – is partly an ideological one, it is high time for the United States to put sufficient resources into undermining al Qa’ida’s extremist ideology.

¹⁵ As-Sahab Media, “You Are Held Responsible Only for Thyself – Part Two,” June 2011.

¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

¹⁷ The White House, U.S. National Security Decision Directive Number 32, May 20, 1982.

¹⁸ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, July 9, 2005. Released by the Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point.