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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
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Good morning Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and members of the Committee. I am pleased to be here today. Thank you for the opportunity to provide the FBI's perspective on the issue of threats from Somalia and their effect on the security of the United States. I will also discuss our assessment of why a number of individuals have left the United States to train or fight in Somalia, and how the FBI is working with our law enforcement and intelligence partners to respond to the threat.

Somalia Overview

Somalia continues to be wracked by instability and, despite efforts to bring some measure of peace and stability to that country, is still plagued by conflict among various competing factions. The rise of violent extremist Islamist elements-like the al-Shabaab militia, which has made significant gains in the aftermath of the Ethiopian invasion in late 2006-has made the security environment there even more unsettled. Al-Shabaab is one of the most significant forces on the ground in Somalia and has conducted a range of operations against a number of different targets inside the country. While the Ethiopian government withdrew all combat forces in mid-January, al-Shabaab has conducted follow-on attacks against African Union peacekeeping troops, as well as international aide workers. Al-Shabaab's use of tactics such as suicide bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, and murders only serves to burnish its reputation for violence.

Beyond the threat al-Shabaab poses in Somalia, its connections to other extremists in the region and beyond add to concern over its activities. Al-Shabaab has links to the al-Qa'ida in East Africa network—including individuals responsible for the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania—and maintains ties with al-Qa'ida leaders in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Al-Qa'ida's focus on Somalia is in part reflected in its propaganda: top al-Qa'ida advisor Ayman al-Zawahiri, for example, proclaimed in a February 2009 statement that gains made by al-Shabaab in Somalia were "a step on the path of victory of Islam." Such propaganda suggests al-Qa'ida leaders see Somalia as a potential recruiting, training, or staging ground for anti-U.S. or Western operations in the region, or even more disturbing, around the globe.

Dynamics in the United States

An estimated two million to three million Somalis live outside of Somalia or the Horn of Africa, and the ethnic Somali community in the United States is estimated to range from 150,000 to 200,000. However, high rates of illegal immigration, widespread identity and documentation fraud, and a cultural reluctance to share personal information with census takers has prevented an accurate count of the ethnic Somali population inside the United States. Ethnic Somalis began arriving in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the mid-1990s on the heels of a broader resettlement program and the area is now home to the single largest population of ethnic Somalis in the United States. Other cities with reported large concentrations of ethnic Somalis include Columbus, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; Washington, DC; San Diego, California; and Atlanta, Georgia.

Since late 2006, we have seen several individuals from the United States—many with ethnic ties to Somalia and some without such connections—travel to Somalia to train or fight on behalf of al-Shabaab. The number of individuals we believe have departed for Somalia is comparatively larger than the number of individuals who have left the United States for other conflict zones around the world over the past few years. And we have seen more individuals leave from the Minneapolis area than from any other part of the country.

In Minneapolis, we believe there has been an active and deliberate attempt to recruit individuals—all of whom are young men, some only in their late teens—to travel to Somalia to fight or train on behalf of al-Shabaab. We assess that for the majority of these individuals, the primary motivation for such travel was to defend their place of birth from the Ethiopian invasion, although an appeal was also made based on their shared Islamic identity. A range of socio-economic conditions—such as violent youth crime and gang subcultures, and tensions over cultural integration—may have also played some role in the recruitment process. We also note that several of the travelers from Minneapolis came from single-parent households, potentially making them more susceptible to recruitment from charismatic male authority figures.

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. The fact that one of the Minneapolis youths participated in a suicide attack in northern Somalia in late October 2008—which we believe is the first instance of a U.S. citizen participating in a suicide attack anywhere—has only added to concern over the possibility that individuals may engage in terrorist activity upon their return to the United States.

Comparison to the United Kingdom

Much has been written about the circumstances of many South Asians in the United Kingdom, and how a variety of factors has contributed to an environment in which hundreds of individuals became involved in extremist activity there and in South Asia. Among the factors having some impact on South Asian communities in the United Kingdom are social and cultural alienation, demographic patterns, underemployment or unemployment, youth and gang-related violence, the existence of active extremist recruitment and facilitation networks, and natural access to an active conflict zone based on family or ethnic connections.

For the overwhelming majority of immigrant Muslim-American communities inside the United States, this U.K. environment stands in sharp contrast. As recent public opinion polls—such as the May 2007 Pew Poll and recent Gallup Poll—have shown, Muslim-Americans are for the most part well-integrated, and they achieve statistically higher levels of economic and educational achievement than most other minority groups within the United States. While poll results show that grievances do exist for Muslim-Americans, the vast majority do not condone the use of violence to provide any redress.

Despite the events in Minneapolis and examples of U.S. persons from other parts of the country who have traveled to Somalia for training or fighting, we do not believe that Somali communities here face the same challenges as similar South Asian communities in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, some of the same factors that have contributed to the high level of extremist activity in the South Asian U.K. environment are evident in some Somali communities inside the United States, which indicates the need for heightened outreach and engagement in order to prevent these from manifesting into direct threats to the Homeland.

Outreach and Engagement

Since the 9/11 attacks, the FBI has developed an extensive outreach program to Muslim, South Asian, and Sikh communities to develop trust, address concerns, and dispel myths in those communities about the FBI and the U.S. Government. In the wake of developments in Minneapolis, the FBI initiated a pilot program focused on enhancing outreach and engagement activities with select field offices that were dealing with some aspect of the Somalia traveler issue. This program is still in the proof-of-concept phase, but is expected to provide multiple benefits for the FBI and the Somali communities within the purview of the select field offices.

Partnership with State and Local Government

The FBI has long partnered with state and local law enforcement. In the counterterrorism domain, that partnership has been sustained through more than 25 years of involvement in the Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) throughout the country. While the FBI is the lead federal agency for terrorism investigations inside the United States, we recognize the vast resources, experience, and insight our state and local law enforcement partners have

within the areas in which our field offices and satellite offices reside. One such example includes a partnership among our Minneapolis Field Office and local law enforcement, educators, and social service agency representatives to discuss issues of interest and concern regarding the Somali community there.

We are leveraging our relationships with state and local law enforcement in various field offices beyond the traditional JTTF structure to enhance our understanding or insight into the Somalia issue and its possible impact on the United States, including fostering new initiatives with units involved in traditional criminal or gang programs.

Intelligence Community Collaboration

The FBI continues to work with other members of the U.S. Intelligence Community to assess, evaluate, monitor, and—if required—disrupt, any potential threats based on activity related to extremism in Somalia. FBI analysts work closely with their counterparts at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) to evaluate events in Somalia and how they might affect the United States. Operationally, FBI agents work with a range of counterparts to develop programs to collect intelligence and disrupt any possible threats relating to individuals who have traveled to Somalia for extremist activity, or wish to travel in the future. Information regarding analysis and operations is shared routinely and continuously, and up to the highest levels of decisionmakers in various agencies.

Threat to the Homeland

On balance, we are concerned about the recruitment of individuals from the United States to Somalia and their involvement in training or fighting there. While there are likely a variety of motivations affecting such individuals, it remains unclear whether the allure of Somalia as an active conflict zone has diminished in the wake of Ethiopia's withdrawal—thereby removing a primary grievance based on nationalism—or whether it will continue to attract individuals from the West who see Somalia as a permissive environment given ongoing instability.

While al-Shabaab's foothold in Somalia remains tenuous, it has secured a number of gains in recent months, and its proclivity for extreme violence remains a hallmark. Most worrisome are links between al-Shabaab and al-Qa'ida associates in the region and elsewhere, and the degree to which Somalia will become another safehaven from which to train, recruit, and then deploy Westerners already there for attacks against their home countries is an open question. Currently, there are no clear indicators that this is occurring, but there are several gaps in our understanding of events there that preclude a more robust understanding of the nature and severity of the threat to the West or United States.

Conclusion

Today, the FBI continues to collect intelligence and assess any potential threats to the United States based on activity related to extremism in Somalia. We are working closely with our U.S. Intelligence Community and law enforcement counterparts to analyze the vulnerability of the United States to such an attack. We will build on these relationships as we continue efforts to stay ahead of the threats and protect our Homeland.

We thank the Committee for its continued support of the FBI and its national security mission. And we look forward to continuing to work with you to protect our nation and its citizens.