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From the Midwest to Mogadishu

By *THE EDITORS*

Photo: Mohamed Sheikh Nor/Associated Press Armed Shabaab fighters patrolled a market in Mogadishu, Somalia, June 2009.

Updated, July 14, 6:15 p.m. | Bill Durodié of Chatham House in London talks about how minority groups in Britain became militant radicals and how the U.S. is different from Europe.

Updated, July 14, 11:05 a.m. | Guido Steinberg, an expert in Islamist terrorism in Berlin, offers advice for the U.S. from experience in Germany.

Updated, July 14, 9:40 a.m. | Federal officials [unsealed an indictment in Minneapolis on Monday](#) charging two young Somali-Americans with providing material support for terrorism. It is the first public step in a federal investigation of more than 20 Americans who are believed to have joined a militant Islamist group in Somalia.

An [article in The Times](#) by Andrea Elliott on Sunday examined the case of more than 20 young Somali-Americans who are now the focus of a major domestic terrorism investigation.

Most of the men are refugees who left Minnesota, which has one of the largest Somali communities in the United States, and are suspected of joining [Al Shabaab](#), a militant Islamist group in Somalia. One of the men blew himself up in a suicide attack in Somalia in October.

We asked some experts what dynamics in the Somali community might make it more possible to lure these young men to that group. While “homegrown” jihadism has caused alarm in Britain and other European countries, does the United States face challenges of its own? Can the government detect and prevent such movements from gaining footholds here?

[Ken Menkhaus](#), political scientist

[Bruce Hoffman](#), professor of security studies

[Zainab Hassan](#), The Minneapolis Foundation

[Steven Simon](#), co-author, “The Next Attack”

[Thomas Sanderson](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies

[Guido Steinberg](#), German Institute for International and Security Affairs

[Bill Durodié](#), Chatham House in London

Not a Case of Global Jihadism

***Ken Menkhaus** a professor of political science at Davidson College, N.C., and*

specializes in the Horn of Africa. He is the author of numerous articles and monographs on Somalia, including “Somalia: State Collapse and the Threat of Terrorism.”

Why have Somali-Americans apparently been more susceptible to recruitment into a jihadist militia in their family’s country of origin than other immigrant groups? Much has to do with events in Somalia.

First, recruitment of Somali-Americans into the Shabaab is very recent, correlated with politics in Somalia since 2006, not with Al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror. The agenda which appears to have initially inspired Somali recruits into joining Shabaab was primarily about Somalia, not global jihadism.

For many Somalis, Al Shabaab was an entirely justifiable liberation movement against Ethiopian occupation, not a terrorist group.

Second, it is important to recall that the Shabaab was not designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government until March 2008, by which time many of the Somali-Americans in question had already been recruited into the movement. For many Somalis, Shabaab was an entirely justifiable liberation movement against Ethiopian occupation, not a terrorist group.

In addition, the recruitment of Somali-Americans into Shabaab is a reflection of the “diasporization” of Somalia. Roughly one million Somalis, about 15 percent of the total population, now live abroad. The diaspora plays a leading role in every aspect of Somali life. Most leaders of the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia hold citizenship abroad, as do many of the top Islamist opposition figures, business people and civic leaders.

Somalis in that country now complain that the current violence is a “war of the diaspora” over which they exercise little control. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that some Somalis holding passports abroad are turning up as Shabaab members.

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What Local Authorities Should Know

***Bruce Hoffman** is a professor of security studies at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service and a Senior Fellow at the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center.*

The case of the Somali-American youths is alarming for at least two, key reasons. First, is the surprising international reach of the Shabaab, a hitherto inconsequential, local Somali militia — a bit player at best — that has now become a major security concern because of its successful radicalization and recruitment of American citizens and residents.

Second, Al Shabaab’s emergence from relative obscurity to its new-found prominence

presents the first concrete evidence of a sustained process of radicalization and recruitment having occurred and gone largely undetected in the U.S.

Detection requires bottom-up information from local law enforcement as well as top-down, intelligence-driven guidance from federal authorities.

Even if the direct relationship between Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda is arguable, it nonetheless reveals that the U.S. continues to face a terrorist threat from a variety of jihadi adversaries — including Al Qaeda and now the Al Shabaab — that is as operationally durable as it is elusive and evolutionary in character.

In terms of effectively countering this threat, this development underscores again that protecting and securing the U.S. homeland from terrorism ultimately depends on state, local and law enforcement officers who are both the first and last lines of defense.

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Somalia's Troubles, Exported

Zainab Hassan is a program officer for The Minneapolis Foundation. Originally from Somalia, she is active in the Somali community and advocates for social and environmental justice, human and civil rights and immigrant rights especially on women's issues.

The Somali community in Minneapolis has been struggling with the issues surrounding the missing Somali youths from Minneapolis who have returned to Somalia within the past two years.

These families escaped from brutal civil war and resettled in the United States to find safe environments for their children and lead normal lives. Indeed, it is disheartening to see young men who could have ample opportunities to pursue a bright and productive future throw their lives away.

As long as the Somali civil war continues, it will affect the Somali diaspora and its youth, as well as the world through threats like piracy and Al Shabaab.

Several factors might have caused these young men to go back: lack of cultural identity and belonging; the involvement and atrocities committed by Ethiopian forces in Somalia during the time of their disappearance; and a desire to help solve the problems in their country of origin.

While they worry, most in the Somali community in Minneapolis do not believe that these young men pose a threat to the United States if they return. First, they have family members, relatives and friends here, and would not want to harm them. Second, the U.S. has resettled them as refugees when none of the Muslim countries accepted them. These men, and the community as a whole, are grateful for what the U.S. has done for them. Third, they consider Minneapolis their home.

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Give Them a Voice

Steven Simon is an adjunct senior fellow in Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and the co-author of “The Age of Sacred Terror” and “The Next Attack.”

Young people don't need a lot of persuasion to fight for what they see as a noble cause in distant lands, even when their governments are not involved. Indeed, in the last century passion for a cause has led many Americans to join wars in which the U.S. was not a combatant. That a few Somali-Americans have embraced the duty — and the thrill — of combat in defense of their homeland merely conforms to a long multicultural tradition. In this case, however, it pits them against the thrust of U.S. policy and opens the door to violence against their own government.

It is essential to remember that the suicide attack was not against Americans, either here or in Somalia.

The radicalized Somalis who embarked on this fateful trip displayed a variety of profiles, including strivers and slackers, misfits and conformists, religious zealots and once-a-year worshipers. Resentment, pursuit of the cool, a need to transcend the banality of everyday life in slums; all of these impulses probably played a part. But without a mobilizing ideology, the opportunity to act out these impulses and a *svengali*, to crystallize these impulses and transform them into action, there would have been no Minnesotan suicide bomber.

Nonetheless, the emergence of a suicide bomber from the margins of the large, mainstream and achievement-oriented ranks of American Muslims was to be anticipated. A 2007 Pew survey noted that 26 percent of U.S. Muslims between 18 and 29 years old believe that suicide bombing in defense of Muslim interests is often/sometimes justified (15 percent) or rarely justified (11 percent). These are striking numbers, though not quite as bad as in Britain, France or Spain, probably because Muslims are generally better integrated into American society than they are in most European countries.

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Assessing the Domestic Threat

Thomas Sanderson, deputy director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, specializes in researching terrorism threats and counterterrorism approaches.

The case of the Somali-American young men who traveled to, fought in, and died in Somalia does present a serious, potential threat to the U.S. The young men's primary motivations are to defend Somalia from Christian-dominated Ethiopian “infidels” in one front of a perceived global campaign against Islam.

While that purpose may appear disconnected from America, that Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia was backed by the U.S. and these men fought on behalf of the Qaeda-linked

Somali group known as Al Shabaab is cause for concern.

There are no urban “mini safe havens” in the U.S. as in Europe, where police fear to patrol.

Many bridges must be crossed before such an outcome; intent and capability cannot be assumed. But with American passports and their combat training, these young men present appealing recruits for Al Qaeda. That they appear to have deliberately departed for Somalia separately demonstrates an awareness of operational security. Networking with foreign fighters from other countries in Somalia only adds to this concern.

American intelligence and law enforcement officials fear that these Somali-Americans — or like-minded members of the Somali diaspora — could come to view the U.S. as a legitimate target. This case may surprise many because Muslim communities in the United States have been far less prone to radicalism than those in Europe. They have met with greater socio-economic and political success here, and their religious traditions are respected. And there are no urban “mini safe havens” in America as in Europe, where police fear to patrol and therefore miss opportunities for outreach and gathering of street-level knowledge.

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An International Problem

Guido Steinberg is an expert in Islamist terrorism and the Middle East at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin.

The radicalization of young Somali migrants in the United States is part of a broader trend toward internationalization of jihadists in South Asia, the Middle East and Europe in recent years. While Al Qaeda in 2001 was still primarily an Arab organization, the jihadist movement in 2009 has become truly global. One of its main drivers seems to be Western intervention in Muslim countries.

The U.S. should rethink its intervention policies in the Muslim world — and its allies should avoid getting involved.

The events in Minnesota show that the reasons for the radicalization of young Somalis, Turks, Kurds, Arabs and Pakistanis in Western countries are multifold. Domestic issues like failed integration policies and poor living conditions of individual Muslims certainly matter. But most important, U.S. foreign policy is crucial to understanding the spread of Al Qaeda worldwide. Indeed, for young Somalis, the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 seems to have been a major motivation to join the movement. For non-Somalis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are more important.

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Understanding Radicalization

Bill Durodié, an associate fellow at Chatham House in London, coordinates the Homeland Defense program for the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore.

Twenty years ago, young radicals in Britain were political and secular. Today, those of concern to the authorities are driven more by culture and religion. We need to understand this shift if we are to address radicalization successfully. How did British youths of Pakistani descent go from calling themselves “Asian,” or even “black,” a generation ago, to “Muslim” today?

The growing emphasis on security over freedom in the U.S. could lead to a new generation of disconnected youths in search of something more to life than just safety.

Unlike the U.S., Europe struggled to integrate minority communities after World War II. Tarnished by imperialism and lacking a universalist outlook, like that expressed through the “American Dream,” immigrant groups in Britain were discriminated against, and marginalized, through the social and economic policies of successive administrations.

While the first generation sought to keep a low profile, their children grew up to fight racism, rejecting their elders and adopting the secular outlook of the left. Fearing this, governments sought to foster religious and community leaders with a view toward depoliticizing their opponents.

These leaders espoused more traditional and conservative ideas and as long as they encouraged cultural identity, they became conduits for financial largess. It became easier to obtain government money to build a mosque than to coordinate a challenge against inner-city poverty.

Then, with the failure and collapse of the left, domestically and internationally, at the end of the Cold War, a generation of militants, now well-versed in the language of identity and victimhood, began organizing itself. In the case of Europe, and Britain specifically, it is not what attracts a few to extreme outlooks that we ought to be focusing on, but rather our failure to inspire and integrate bright and energetic individuals.

In contrast to Europe, America’s sense of optimistic opportunity has acted as a bulwark to these trends. But the growing emphasis on security over freedom in the U.S. could lead to a new generation of disconnected youths in search of something more to life than just safety. If you want to know what not to do, look to Europe’s past.