Al-Shabaab: Domestic Terrorist Recruitment and Finance Networks

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Executive Summary

This report is the first of its kind to encompass the breadth of al-Shabaab’s operations within the United States and their links to groups in Somalia. It examines al-Shabaab’s recruitment and financing networks that operated in the United States from 2007 to 2014. The report is divided into two sections, one detailing al-Shabaab’s domestic recruitment, vetting, and facilitation processes in the Minneapolis, Minnesota area. The second examines al-Shabaab’s domestic finance networks which explores individual cell’s operational methods for collecting and sending funds abroad. Perhaps the most interesting finding are the linkages among various groups that became apparent by studying the recruitment and financial networks together.

Our research was able to document the Minneapolis recruitment process and al-Shabaab’s American financing network. From a recruitment perspective, the study examines the community recruitment and radicalization approaches, vetting processes, and travel facilitation methods used to integrate young men into the organization and transit them as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to Somalia. The second section details the six known financial cells operating in different parts of the United States. It presents an overview of cell membership, outlines the cell’s operational methods for communicating, fundraising, and transferring of funds to al-Shabaab. Importantly, the study identifies the nexus where cells overlapped. The report’s scope focuses on the al-Shabaab networks operating within the United States and their links abroad and does not discuss individuals that were inspired by al-Shabaab and operated on their behalf without a formal connection to a domestic cell.

This study is based on open source information of the Minneapolis recruitment cell and six cells responsible for fundraising and other activities in the Somali diaspora community. The majority of data is from late 2007 through mid-2010 during which time all groups, identified by the researchers, were operational. Cell composition or membership is derived from those charged as conspirators in the related court documents as well as known accomplices mentioned in other court records. Their specific roles are assigned based on the researcher’s’ knowledge of the structure of illicit cells corroborated by information and activity indicators. In total, one recruitment cell was reviewed which consisted of 27 directly identified individuals, and six financial cells were reviewed consisting of 32 directly identified individuals, and eight others with unknown identities.

The report identifies a nexus between the recruitment and finance networks and their international linkages. Not surprisingly, both the recruitment and finance networks operating within the United States contributed resources and people to the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) that were directly involved in carrying out deadly terrorist attacks abroad. Additionally, an examination of the FTO’s recruitment and finance networks indicates a clear inclusion preference based on ethno-national ties. Consequently, areas with large populations of Somali immigrants within the United States such as San Diego and Minneapolis were key recruitment and finance hubs. This report concludes that al-Shabaab’s success was in part due to its ability to tap into local communities with ethno-nationalist ties to Somalia but also connections in the United States. Understanding these types of ties and their effects on local communities is an important factor in successfully combating future violent extremist groups who may use ethnic
and nationalist ties to obtain resources and recruits from within the United States including al-Shabaab.

**Background: al-Shabaab**

Following the ouster of Somali dictator Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia experienced the disintegration of central authority and the emergence of rival factions. Out of the chaos, local *shari'a* courts emerged to impose governance. These courts managed to establish working local governments and hired local militias to enforce their laws. In 2000, the Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin (*hereafter* al-Shabaab) or “The Youth” emerged and joined the courts. Al-Shabaab was rooted in a former Somali Islamist organization known as al *Itihaad al Islamiya* (AIAI), that had emerged in 1980s as a Wahhabi affiliated group targeting Barre. In 2004, several *shari'a* courts united under Sheikh Ahmed to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). In 2006, the ICU launched an insurgency against the country’s warlords and by June succeeded in capturing Somalia’s capital Mogadishu. In spite of early success, Ethiopian military intervention, in support of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and backed by the US, resulted in the defeat of the ICU in December 2006.\(^1\) In defeat, the ICU splintered into several smaller factions retreating to southern Somalia.\(^2\) In 2007, al-Shabaab which had continued an insurgency against the TFG took on an American presence in the personality of Omar Hammami, who joined the group in 2006.\(^3\) In February 2008, the US government designated al-Shabaab a foreign terrorist organization but this did not eradicate al-Shabaab’s continued recruitment of foreign fighters including Americans. The American presence became increasingly clear after three Americans committed suicide attacks against Ethiopian troops in 2009 and 2011.\(^4\) In 2010, the group coordinated its first international attack targeting a cafe in Kampala, Uganda during the World Cup. Its professed message was an end to international military occupation in Somalia. In February 2012, Amin al-Zawahiri endorsed al-Shabaab’s *bay’a* to al-Qaeda, something Osama Bin Laden had viewed of little practical value.\(^5\)

Shortly after this announcement, al-Shabaab targeted Kenya, for its military activity in Somalia by launching an online propaganda campaign in English and Swahili.\(^6\) In 2013, it attacked the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya.\(^7\) In spite of some evidence of decline since 2015, the group continues to coordinate attacks in Somalia, attacking a hotel in Mogadishu in June 2016. On January 27, 2017, al-Shabaab claimed credit for a suicide bomber attack on a Kenyan military base in southern Somalia. While the casualties remain unconfirmed, this attack as well

\(^1\) [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/02/al-shabab-history_n_6992704.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/02/al-shabab-history_n_6992704.html)
\(^7\) [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/04/westgate-mall-attacks-kenya](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/04/westgate-mall-attacks-kenya)
as others recently conducted in Mogadishu indicate that the terrorist organization retains its intent and capability to be a destabilizing force in East Africa and elsewhere. Al-Shabaab’s continued recruitment efforts in the United States and its connections to the Somali diaspora remain targets for US counterterrorism efforts.

Section 1: al-Shabaab Recruitment Network

Introduction

"Minneapolis has been a focus of counterterrorism work since more than two dozen Minnesotans first either joined or tried to join Al-Shabab nearly 10 years ago, and has remained in the spotlight with a recent spate of cases related to ISIL."8

Al-Shabaab’s recruitment of Americans is unique in its structure and process but not in its approach. This report provides details on an al-Shabaab recruitment cell operating in the Minneapolis, Minnesota area. The network responsible for recruiting the majority of Americans into al-Shabaab was not organized by al-Shabaab or its leadership but instead was a self-generating self-funded cell led by an American citizen of Somali descent living in Minneapolis. The Minneapolis area is home to a large Somali population that had been granted asylum after escaping the Somali Civil War in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, it proved to be a center of the American recruitment operations. Between September 2007 and October 2009, at least nineteen Somalis were directly recruited at the Abubaker-As Saddique Islamic Center in Minneapolis.9 The majority of the American-Somali recruits were persuaded to join on the basis of nationalism but also were exposed to a radical interpretation of Islam. The network was largely based on peer recruitment, which was consistent with Marc Sageman's study in which he found that over 75% of the mujahedin “had pre existing social bonds to members already involved in the global jihad or decided to join the jihad as a group with friends or relatives.”10 The recruitment process largely worked in three stages – recruitment, vetting and indoctrination, and facilitation.

The three stage recruitment process is followed by a number of violent non-state actors, including al Qaeda and ISIL. The recruitment tactics and methods used by violent non-state actors depends on the level of sophistication and maturity of the particular group. The Minneapolis cell is one of the larger operational recruitment cells to have existed within the United States, however, its methods were unsophisticated. It relied on communal ties to identify local Somali men. Those identified had face-to-face meetings to further explore their beliefs and acceptance of a violent jihadi ideology. The goal was not to incite homegrown terrorism but instead to encourage young men who were responsive to the ideology to travel abroad to join al-Shabaab in the conflict zone. Finally, in the facilitation stage the domestic recruitment cell provided monetary resources, information, and safe houses abroad to aid the young Somali men in successfully reaching the conflict zone.

10 Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks, 112-113
**Stage 1: Recruitment**

More than half of the identified individuals who successfully travelled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab were recruited through a singular network based in Minneapolis. The leader of the Minneapolis network, Mahamud Said Omar, a US citizen since 1993, worked as a janitor at the Abubakar-As Siddique Islamic Center located in south Minneapolis. He used the Islamic Center as a recruitment center, approaching young men whom he knew from the community. If the individual seemed receptive, they were encouraged to attend meetings. This very personal recruitment process limited the numbers of individuals who might be reached but also created a relatively secure environment in which to operate.

Starting around September 2007, Mahamud Omar was aided in his recruitment by Ahmed Ali Omar and Khalid Mohamed Abshir. This group remained the core cell until 2009. The Ethiopian intervention was a catalyst to recruitment efforts. The primary theme used by Omar was one of nationalism and responsibility to their homeland in which Ethiopian soldiers were “raping women, looting mosques, and killing civilians,” that the FTFs would be fighting against. The group leaders engaged the young men in discussions about their beliefs regarding the justified use of violence in defense of Somalia and their religious views.

Once someone expressed interest, the radicalization and vetting processes began in the Center under Mahamud Omar’s tutelage. Indoctrination sessions included lectures which focused on violent jihad and other fundamentalist *salafi* views interpreted from the Koran. The young men also spent nights in the Islamic Center with Omar to form a sense of community. The group which likely numbered less than a dozen also was provided speeches by Anwar Al-Awlaki on an iPod in order to listen to amongst themselves. A third part in the recruitment and radicalization process was online conference calls with al-Shabaab fighters. During these calls American recruits were able to directly speak to fighters in Somalia who told about the organization and its activities. There is, however, no evidence that these processes were sequential but instead appeared to be concurrent.

In 2010, al-Shabaab significantly increased the dissemination online material to attract new recruits and raise awareness of the organization. Similar to online material produced by other groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Shabaab’s videos contained images of members firing weapons and engaging in combat and performing martial arts training. The material was recorded in both Arabic and English indicating a desire to target multiple markets. Notwithstanding al-Shabaab’s renewed recruitment efforts, over 75% of the individuals identified in this study had attempted to or successfully joined al-Shabaab prior to 2010. In light of this finding, it is reasonable to argue that neither al-Shabaab’s online propaganda nor the formalized relationship with al-Qaeda has inspired more Somali Americans to join the organization. Instead, the factors most responsible for the surge of Somali recruits to al-Shabaab were an appeal to Somali nationalism and religion among a community with historical ties to the

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conflict zone. Furthermore, face-to-face recruitment with an effective recruiter who also facilitated radicalization was essential.

**Stage 2: Vetting and Indoctrination**

Omar and his co-conspirators indoctrinated the first wave of recruits over the course of one year. The largest group totaled eleven recruits, which travelled to Somalia between December 4, 2007 and November 4, 2008. The remaining recruits travelled in two more waves in 2009, and 2012, respectively. The vetting process for the entirety of the Minneapolis recruits was personalized, and like the recruitment and radicalization processes was done through face-to-face contact. During the vetting stage the prospective recruits were welcomed into the group then questioned about their beliefs and ideological commitment to fighting in Somalia. Those who the leadership felt were receptive to radical concepts were selected to move forward in the indoctrination process. Indoctrination took place through communal activities that involved exposure to radical ideas and materials. Unlike more advanced non-state actor groups such as the Peshmerga or ISIS, the American recruitment cell for al-Shabaab operated with very little operational security in the vetting stage; however, the face-to-face process engaged few people and involved relatively trusted sources. Also, without direct connections to al-Shabaab, prosecuting individuals for material support for a terrorist organization was more difficult. Still operational security was lax. For example, Ahmed Ali Omar, the group’s second-in-command, was quite “talkative” and spreading information about the group to too many individuals. This might be interpreted as exposing the recruitment group to unneeded attention or that vetting processes were being ignored. Furthermore, the recruitment process demonstrated limited interest in recruiting individuals with specialized skills or training, instead the recruiters focused on providing personnel, some even as young as seventeen. The focus on numbers rather than skills reflects the lack of direct connection between the recruiters and the organization.

**Stage 3: Facilitation**

The Mahamud Said Omar network used several means to facilitate travel, including providing financial support and contacts. Since the majority of recruits lacked the resources to travel, several illegal fundraising schemes were developed. Posing as a charity raising funds to support Somali orphans, the group members went door-to-door to solicit donations that helped pay for airfare and other expenses. Additionally, the group had aid from Saynab Hussein and Ahmed Hussein Mahamud who raised money that was then wired to the American Somali fighters when they arrived in the conflict zone. Omar’s mosque participated in fundraising in which American supporters of al-Shabaab held teleconferences with Shabaab fighters who encouraged them to donate money to the cause. The money raised was given to the recruits for airfare.

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16 http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/ongoing/somali_timeline/
20 United States District Court District of Minnesota Criminal No. 13-222
In addition to funding the travel, Omar’s cells also provided the recruits with direct travel assistance and contact information. Recruits were also instructed to use the hidden destination airline ticket process to conceal their travel. They purchased two-way tickets to a false destination that had a connecting flight to Somalia, and then purchased a ticket to Somalia after arriving at their first destination. Popular transit sites for the group included Egypt, Kenya, Netherlands, and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, 30% of the group that successfully entered Somalia took a connecting flight through Amsterdam, Netherlands. Some of the recruits were driven to the airport by Omar or other members of the conspiracy, and at that point would be handed money for the trip. Others sought to further obfuscate their intentions of becoming a FTF. In 2009, three recruits, who believed they were being investigated, drove from Minneapolis to the Tijuana, Mexico international airport to avoid being detected by authorities.

Figure 1 shows the known starting points and routes taken by the al-Shabaab recruits that successfully traveled into Somalia. With the exception of five individuals, Jehad Serwan Mostafa, Daniel Maldonado, Omar Hammami, Liban Haji Mohamed, and Ruben L. Shumpert, the entirety of the identified group of foreign fighters that successfully entered Somalia began their journey in Minneapolis.

Travel Routes

![Travel Routes](image)

Figure 1

Just as most of the American recruits were unable to fund their own trip, they also lacked reliable al-Shabaab contacts within Somalia. However, the group’s recruiters managed to facilitate a safe house through Khalid Mohamed Abshir’s uncle Said Fidhin, a known al-Shabaab fighter. Upon arrival at Mogadishu’s international airport, recruits would call Said Fidhin. Fidhin was known to have close ties to a Somali taxi driver known only as “Uncle Barre,” who provided

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23 Ibid.
transportation for the recruits from the airport to the safe house. The safe house was located in the town of Marka, approximately a 1.5 hour drive south of Mogadishu. The safehouse was operated by al-Shabaab, and served as a transit center for recruits heading to training camps in the south. The safehouse in Marka was operated by a Canadian woman, Fadumo Mahamed, who went by “Hooyo” and is known to have resided in London, England for some time. Upon arrival, the recruits were told to give up their personal documents including passports and driver’s licenses. Next, the recruits were given calling cards with the explicit purpose of calling friends and family to raise money to buy a weapon if they did not have the resources to pay for one. Muhamud Said Omar was known to have raised money specifically for the purchase of AK-47 assault rifles for the recruits whom he facilitated travel for.

After a short stopover at the safehouse, the new recruits were brought to a training camp. Although the exact location of Al-Shabaab’s training camps is unknown, it is believed that some camps existed in the Middle Juba province near the city of Saakow approximately 155 miles east of Marka, Somalia. While at the camps the recruits underwent religious training consisting of listening to religious lectures, notably by Anwar Al-Awlaki. Additionally, they received arms training from well-known terrorists including Omar Hammami and Saleh Nabhan, a Saudi responsible for the 2002 bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya. During training, members were selected for various functions including manual labor positions which included setting up new training camps, suicide bombing missions, and the remaining recruits became foot soldiers under the command of al-Shabaab leaders.

Conclusions

While al-Shabaab’s American recruitment network operated at a basic level and adapted certain effective methods. The recruiters had a rather simplistic recruitment strategy, difficult to assess operational security, and an inefficient funding method. Notwithstanding, it should not be underestimated. Recruiters focused on a defined geographic recruiting area that offered access to a population that exhibited strong religious and nationalistic feelings. The relatively insular community enhanced the recruiters operational security similar to that provided in some militant Muslim enclaves in Europe. The recruiters’ knowledge of the community and ability to reach out to recruits face-to-face reduced risks at least in Minneapolis from where 67.6% of the individuals in the study came. Not surprisingly the recruiters concentrated on young men with whom they could leverage both nationalism and a “religious duty” message. In spite of in-fighting among Somali clans, clan and national loyalties proved to be a positive recruitment environment. A few salient points emerged from this research. First, foreign terrorist fighters were influential in al-Shabaab’s Shura Council and major proponents of its bay’a to al-Qaeda, a process that started in 2006 but was formally recognized until February 2012 after Osama Bin Laden’s death. Second, discussions with current fighter and other online sources such as Awlaki’s online sermons appear to be effective indoctrination tools; however, face-to-face interactions were certainly needed to complement other online English materials.

24 http://media.ca8.uscourts.gov/opndir/15/05/132195P.pdf
25 Ibid.
As of 2015, more Americans had successfully joined al-Shabaab than any other terrorist group.\textsuperscript{27} However, to date there have been no homegrown attacks perpetrated by Somalis claiming allegiance to al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{28} Notwithstanding, the vast majority of the FTFs that joined Al-Shabaab from the United States were of Somali descent and seem likely to return to their communities. A concern is the emergence of an at-risk insular community, such as Molenbeek, that supports a cadre of radicals. Figure 2 provides a percentage breakdown of identified Somali recruits by state of residency and thus provides a starting point for risk-based analysis on potential returnees.

This study confirmed more recent research that identifies contact with radicalized individuals is an effective recruitment method.\textsuperscript{29} While US perpetrated violence seems remote it should not be ruled out if foreign terrorist fighters return home in larger numbers. Therefore, policy makers should focus a combination of counterterrorism activities that seek prevention as well as intervention. It is important to share information about those who have joined al-Shabaab in order to track their whereabouts. On the preventative side, countering violent extremism (CVE) programs within diaspora communities should continue. Focusing programs on at-risk youth that may be lured by extremist propaganda with a narrative focusing on nationalism, religion, and even adventurism is important.

Perhaps the most lasting lesson of this section is that al-Shabaab’s recruitment was largely ineffective outside a Somali-based community as opposed to ISIS’ recruitment message which inspires a much broader population and thus has been more effective in garnering American’s interests. Without a recruiter who was inside the domestic communities and had direct ties to the conflict zone, al-Shabaab would not have been as successful in inspiring American foreign fighters. However, if the network’s methodology were to be hijacked by a group with a broader message and its efforts tailored to specific groups, the potential for radicalizing foreign fighters would undoubtedly increase.

\textsuperscript{27}https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_WhatDataTellUsAboutForeignFighters_AnalyticalBrief_Sept2015.pdf
\textsuperscript{28} https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=shabaab&sa.x=26&sa.y=6&sa=Search
\textsuperscript{29} Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Canada, the UK, and the US, National Institute of Justice, Arlington VA July 28-30, 2015.
Section 2: al-Shabaab Finance Network

Introduction

As previously discussed, Minneapolis served as a hub for al-Shabaab recruitment in the United States; however, the group’s financial network was more complex and generated $46,508 of confirmed funds between 2008 and 2012. Six interconnected US-based cells, identified by their leaders, directly funded al-Shabaab during this time period. This study represents one of the first public depictions of these cells, their operators and the network spanned at least six US states or territories (i.e., California, District of Columbia, Minnesota, Missouri, Virginia, Washington) and six foreign countries (i.e., Canada, Guyana, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and the United Arab Emirates). While the funds are insignificant when compared to other groups’ fund raising, the network’s breadth, its varied fund raising schemes represented by its nodes and edges provides a robust understanding of al-Shabaab’s ability to reach the domestic Somali population. Furthermore, the funds reported only represent those identified by publicly accessible records. It is reasonable to assume actual total is significantly higher. Third as with the recruitment network, the network was able to operate effectively for a number of years and its possible resurrection, in some form, or the adaptation of the lessons learned by other groups should not be ruled out.

Of the six total cells, two operated in both San Diego (i.e., Moalin and Nima cells) and Minneapolis (i.e., Ali and Saynab cells) and an additional cell was active in St. Louis (i.e., Yusuf cell). These five cells were dismantled by law enforcement. The sixth cell (i.e., Jama cell) was active in Virginia, Washington, and the Netherlands. The Jama Cell operated from February 2011 to January 2013, a period distinct from the other cells and one which indicates that the fund raising practices transcend specific time periods (See Figure 3 which provides an operational timeline for the cells). Furthermore, the Jama Cell was apparently directed by al-Shabaab whereas the others operated more independently. Hence, one might assume yet-to-be-identified cells may still be operational and more closely linked to al-Shabaab. Second, the complexity of the network exposes the broad linkages among extremist elements in the Somali diaspora that may be future sources of radicalization and other threatening activities.

Funds generated by these cells mostly supported al-Shabaab operations in Somalia and would-be American FTFs traveling to the conflict zone. A closer examination of the information surrounding these cells raises questions regarding the legal threshold for when radical behavior becomes criminal and connected philosophies surrounding privacy and the freedom of speech and religion. From the information analyzed, there is no indication of an intent to carry out domestic terrorist attacks. While this is positive for the time period studied, the lack of indicators of violent mobilization should not be regarded as permanent. The possibility that al-Qaeda or ISIL might exploit similar small networks to entice domestic attacks is not unthinkable. The ISIS inspired attack by a Somali at The Ohio State University in Fall 2016 and recruitment of American Somalis to join the caliphate is indicative of that group’s penetration into the US Somali population.

Appendix A: Money Transfers from U.S. Based Cells to al-Shabaab Associates
Operational Timeline

Moalin Cell

The Moalin Cell based out of San Diego, California was operational from December 2007 until October 2010 and was comprised of nine members. The cell’s leader, Basaaly Saeed Moalin, coordinated several different fundraising efforts in the United States and raised an estimated $11,000 for al-Shabaab’s operations. Based on their Somali clan affiliation and probably facilitated by Farah Shidane, Moalin had a direct connection with Aden Hashi Ayro, an al-Shabaab commander.31

The group operated in a relatively streamlined fashion. After a request for funds was made by Ayro, Moalin would reach out to two members of the group whose main role was fundraising. The first was Ahmed Nasir Taalil Mohamud (aka “Nasir”). Nasir was a cab driver who solicited funds from fellow cab drivers that were believed to be of Somali origin in the Orange County area.32 The second contact was Mohamed Mohamed Mohamud, the Imam of the Masjid Al-Ansar Mosque located in San Diego which was frequented by San Diego’s Somali population. Telephone conversations revealed that Mohamud collected money at the Mosque, and even had a trusted group of supporters that donated regularly.33 After a substantial amount was raised, the group contacted Issah Doreh, an employee of a money transmitting business who funneled the funds to al-Shabaab under a pre-established alias.34

On May 1, 2008 Ayrow and several other al-Shabaab members were killed by a US airstrike that targeted a safehouse in Dhusamareeb, Somalia. Following Ayro’s death, Moalin wanted to continue to fund the FTO but lacked contacts in Somalia. In June 2008, he turned to Mohamed Abdi Yusuf, a resident of St. Louis, who had contacts within al-Shabaab explaining that his cell was looking to continue financing al-Shabaab fighters. Records show that soon after, Moalin established contact with al-Shabaab’s commander known as Mahad Karate through an individual known only as “Kay,” and the fundraising efforts resumed.35 Believing their conversations were

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31 Basaaly Moalin v. S.D. Cal. Doc. 260
32 https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-sdca/legacy/2015/04/30/cas14-0131-SomaliTerrorismSent2.pdf
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
being recorded and possibly led to Ayro’s death, the cell increased their operational security by introducing code such as “paper” for money and “Hassan” referring to Yusuf during phone conversations.\textsuperscript{36} However, the cell quickly migrated to teleconferences and online chat rooms for their conversations with al-Shabaab. Through a contact with an unknown Canadian contact, Moalin and Nasir joined a teleconference with al-Shabaab commander Mukhtar Robow who also had contact with some of the other cells in the network.

In total, the Moalin Cell was known to have made contact with three al-Shabaab commanders, and three additional associates linked directly to the FTO. They maintained contact with the leader of the St. Louis based cell and used common solicitation methods and integrated new technologies to improve operational security.

\textit{Yusuf Cell}

The Yusuf Cell, based out of St. Louis, Missouri, started operations in January 2008 shortly after the Moalin cell and was disrupted in November 2010. It was comprised of five key members and led by Mohamed Abdi Yusuf. The cell raised approximately $21,000 for al-Shabaab using the same methods as the Moalin Cell. Yusuf not only cooperated with Moalin but had connections in Minneapolis. The linkages among cells indicate an integrated al-Shabaab support network operating in the US which also probably facilitated their disruption.

Yusuf began fundraising operations after he made contact with Basaaly Saeed Moalin in June 2008. Subsequently, he branched out. Seeking his own connections with al-Shabaab he engaged a childhood acquaintance named Duane Mohamed Diriye, who was directly linked to al-Shabaab. He also connected with Sheikh Saaid, a supposed al-Shabaab leader. The cell collected funds through various methods with a primary method focusing on Yusuf soliciting “donations” from his fellow taxi drivers. Although it is unclear whether the “donations” from the taxi network were voluntary or coerced, the former is assumed or else someone in the network probably would have approached authorities. Thus, the taxi network was a relatively secure system for raising nearly untraceable cash. Second, the Yusuf cell also collected funds from the Somali communities in the St. Louis area. Regarding connections with other cells, Yusuf also is known to have travelled to meet another unidentified associate at Karmel Square in Minneapolis, Minnesota to collect the money. The extent of the relationship is not known.

Yusuf transferred the funds to Somalia via multiple \textit{hawala} services. Using the alias of a women from North Carolina, Yusuf transferred funds using a \textit{hawala} service.\textsuperscript{37} He also enlisted the assistance of Abdi Mahdi Hussein, who worked at the Qaran Financial Express \textit{hawala} service, to transfer funds also under an alias. Third, further establishing the linkage to the Moalin Cell, Yusuf and Moalin established a shared Bank of America account to which Yusuf added funds that were withdrawn by Moalin and sent to Somalia via a third \textit{hawala} service.

The Yusuf Cell shared similarities in its collection and transfer, and international contacts with the Moalin Cell. Notwithstanding, the Yusuf Cell retained an independent operational capability

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid
\end{itemize}
to fundraise for approximately eight months longer than the Moalin Cell following Aden Hashi Ayro’s death which also indicates diversified ties into al-Shabaab.

**Nima Cell**

The Nima Cell was based out of San Diego, California and was operational from December 2008 until November 2010. Nima Ali Yusuf (aka “Nima”) was the cell’s sole member. As a fundraiser, she transferred approximately $1,250 to al-Shabaab through contacts she made with members of the Minneapolis recruitment cell. Additionally, she raised funds for and facilitated the travel of foreign terrorist fighters to Somalia. Like the Yusuf Cell, it also had contacts with sympathizers in Minneapolis but used social media to make connections. As a result, the Nima Cell may be considered an example of a virtual cell linked tangentially to the Minneapolis cell. Furthermore, it crossed the divide between financial and recruitment. As with the Maolin and Yusuf Cells, it is evident that a network of autonomous yet connected cells and individuals all with connections to al-Shabaab in Somalia existed.

Nima originally made contact with Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (aka “Miski”), a member of the Minneapolis recruitment network, through social media. As their relationship grew, they spoke with each other by phone and Miski introduced her to the other members of the cell.

While Nima utilized the Minneapolis connections to transfer funds to al-Shabaab, the Nima Cell’s role was expanded to include facilitating the travel of foreign terrorist fighters. Miski was part of a group of young Somali men who were persuaded to join al-Shabaab as foreign fighters. They were recruited from their local community and radicalized over time through contact with a former foreign fighter known as Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax. In October 2009 four members of the group including Miski travelled to San Diego as part of a plan to fly to Somalia through Mexico to join al-Shabaab. Upon arrival in San Diego, they contacted Nima who offered operational assistance.

The group successfully reached the conflict zone and Nima remained in contact with them. Nima raised money and began sending payments to the foreign fighters through a *hawala*. Furthermore, she is known to have had direct contact with Mukhtar Robow, the al-Shabaab recruiter with whom Moalin had contact. Robow reportedly used the service Paltalk.com to host weekly forums with followers in Somali diasporas. Nima participated in these forums and used the contacts to raise funds.

The Nima Cell is the only cell to have had only one member operating domestically, and is only one of two cells in the network to have been fundraising specifically for foreign fighters. Additionally, Nima’s initial connection to “Miski” was never publicly established and is interesting because of the large geographic distance between the two individuals. It is likely that Nima obtained “Miski’s” contact information through a member of the Somali community in San Diego and proceeded to contact him via social media. This approach is interesting because it is

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the first indication of using social media to, in essence, create a virtual cell. Furthermore, it demonstrates how extensive the Somali community’s reach is.

**Ali Cell**

The Ali Cell was based out of Minneapolis and operated between December 2008 and July 2009. It was headed by both Aminah Farah Ali and Hawo Mohamed Hassan, who raised approximately $8,608 for al-Shabaab. The Ali Cell had extensive contacts in the Minneapolis area as well as the broader online Somali community.

The cell used two methods to solicit donations. The first was a teleconference set up on Paltalk.com. Through a chat room called “Al-Dawa”, an estimated twenty individuals regularly participated in the teleconferences with some donating on a monthly basis. While the majority of individuals called in from the Minnesota area, other calls originated from Toronto, British Colombia, Guyana, Tennessee, San Diego, Missouri, and Nebraska. It is believed that the money pledged was transferred to an account controlled by Ali and Hassan and was later sent to members of al-Shabaab through one of several hawala services in the Minneapolis area. In February 2009, seeking to counter a backlash from anti-al-Shabaab groups in the community, their fundraising rhetoric took on a less radical tone by trying to disconnect the operations from jihad. During a conference call Hassan stated, “It [jihad] is being covered up and concealed with something called tribalism in order to confuse the public and to mislead them from their real objective.”

Her point was that the true intentions of the fundraising efforts needed to be masked in case individuals within the Somali community were not comfortable with their violent ideology and as a result would refuse to donate or possibly inform authorities. This call showed the cell’s awareness to instill operational security due to the Somali community’s shift in tone regarding al-Shabaab’s activities.

The Ali Cell also used door-to-door solicitation to collect funds. From recorded conversations, it is evident that the cell had multiple girls who would travel in groups to regularly fundraise in neighborhoods in Minnesota. The Ali Cell had the most extensive communal outreach of the fundraising networks, with contacts not only in several states within the US but also in different countries. Second, like the other cells, the Ali Cell had contact with multiple members of al-Shabaab’s leadership. Furthermore, the connections with al-Shabaab permeated the cell as four of its known associates had close ties to the leadership circle, and the cell’s engagement not only with the community but online gave it a truly international influence.

**Saynab Cell**

The Saynab Cell also was based in Minneapolis and was operational over roughly the same timeframe, December 2008 until June 2009. The leader of the cell, Saynab Abdirashid Hussein (aka “Saynab”) began fundraising after being contacted via social media by a foreign fighter named Ahmed Ali Omar. Omar connected Saynab with “Miski,” the same person with whom Nima had communicated. While the total amount is unclear, records indicate that Saynab along with

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41 Ibid.
42 Amina Ali v. US D.C. Minnesota Doc. 236
43 Saynab Abdirashid Hussein v. US D.C. Minnesota Doc. 20
her associates raised at least $1,300. While the funds are not significant, the Saynab Cell apparently was well connected to the al-Shabaab recruitment network and foreign terrorist fighters in Somalia.

Similar to the Ali Cell, the Saynab Cell raised funds through door-to-door solicitation conducted by women introduced to the cell by” Miski.” Funds were regularly solicited from their predominantly Somali community under the guise of supporting orphans and the poor in Somalia. As discussed previously, the funds raised by Saynab helped Mahamud Said Omar facilitate recruitment and travel to join al-Shabaab.

Apart from her domestic activities, Saynab was in constant communication with an individual known only as Kamal. Kamal lived in a safehouse in Marka, Somalia with Ahmed Omar and other foreign fighters. Kamal instructed Saynab on how to transfer funds through a hawala service.

The Saynab Cell had a relatively small number of members, but its direct links to the recruitment network as well as its connections to foreign fighters is interesting. While all the fundraising cells had connections into various parts of al-Shabaab, this cell and the Nima cell were more closely tied to foreign terrorist fighters. Moreover, these cells shared a contact through “Miski” who obviously had a role of gatekeeper to al-Shabaab’s foreign fighter operations.

**Jama Cell**

The Jama Cell is unique in that it operated outside of the time frame of the other cells, was part of a transcontinental and multinational network and operated relatively recently – February 2011 until January 2013. The cell’s leaders were Muna Osman Jama and Hinda Osman Dhirane who operated out of Virginia and Washington State, respectively. It is estimated that the group raised upwards of $4,650 for al-Shabaab.

The cell reflected the growing popularity of using internet connections conducting its fundraising solely through online chat rooms held on Paltalk.com. In addition to the large online chats, the Jama Cell was also part of the “Group of Fifteen,” a smaller inner circle of committed al-Shabaab supporters whose main objective was to provide a monthly income stream to pay organizational expenses and fund specific military operations. Its connectivity to operations in Somalia seem to exceed those of the other cells analyzed.

After raising a certain amount of funds, the cell used two separate internationally-based financiers to send the money through a hawala service. The first was Fardowsa Jama Mohamed located in Nairobi, Kenya and the second, Barira Hassan Abdullahi in Hargeisa, Somalia who also operated a safehouse designated for al-Shabaab fighters. Abdullahi was tasked with collecting foreign donations and then transferring them to al-Shabaab’s leadership. The collection and delivery of funds was coordinated to match timelines for specific al-Shabaab’s

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44 Saynab Abdirashid Hussein v. US D.C. Minnesota Doc. 26
45 US v. Jama Case No. 1:14-cr-230-AJT
military operations as well as meeting ongoing expenses such as rent payments on safehouses, the purchase of vehicles, an x-ray machine, and other requested equipment.

The Jama Cell was the only fundraising cell to have solely relied on online teleconferences to raise funds. This approach allowed it to reach a broader population. More importantly, it was directly connected to the al-Shabaab leadership as part of the “Group of Fifteen.” Prior to the Jama Cell, financial cells worked autonomously with limited direction from al-Shabaab. Considering its timeline of operation, this suggests a new and different operational capability. Did al-Shabaab’s leadership assume a more direct interest in fundraising efforts in the US? And as importantly, what are the implications of an al-Shabaab directed operation in the US? From available open sources, we are unable to answer these questions at this time.

**Recruitment and Financing Nexus**

The domestic recruitment and finance network cells supporting al-Shabaab were extensive and interconnected. Looking at the two functions concurrently offers a more robust understanding of the complexity of al-Shabaab’s linkages between fundraising, facilitating travel to the conflict zone, and supporting al-Shabaab’s Somali operations. Appendix A shows the network’s nexus points for every known actor in this study.

The entire domestic recruitment and financial networks identified in this study were composed of individuals with ethnic ties to Somalia. Although there have been cases in which individuals without such ties sought to join al-Shabaab (i.e., Omar Hammami), such efforts were not facilitated by the networks studied here. Minnesota’s Twin Cities area (Minneapolis and St. Paul), home to the largest US Somali diaspora, emerges as the focal point for the recruitment cell and three of the financial cells. Another large Somali diaspora is located in San Diego, where two additional financial cells operated. Al-Shabaab obviously focuses on these areas to tap into tribal, ethnic, and religious grievances through a network of recruiters, gatekeepers, and handlers.

As previously mentioned, the recruitment specific data was gathered in Minneapolis. Here recruitment relied extensively on family and friends’ connections, an effective recruitment model that was recently re-confirmed by research on the Paris 2015 attacks. However, both Mahamud Omar and Nima used conference calls and videoconferencing to engage potential recruits with current al-Shabaab fighter another successful mobilization method.

The financial cells predominantly appeared to be independent franchises, however, they shared similar fundraising methods, target audiences, and had periodic contact with each other and the recruitment networks. Operationally, five of the six cells specifically solicited funds from their local Somali community, not surprisingly using the same techniques.

The Ali and Saynab Cells solicited funds by going door-to-door under the auspices that the funds were meant for Somali orphans. A study by the National Center of Excellence for Risk and

Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events found that a significant number of the Somali community in Minnesota were not supportive of al-Shabaab but were concerned about the situation in Somalia. Thus, they were susceptible to philanthropic efforts perpetrated under the guise of charitable contributions.\textsuperscript{48} Deceit was not needed in all cases. The Moalin Cell solicited donations from trusted individuals who were aware that their donations directly funded al-Shabaab. Hence, there is, at least, latent support for al-Shabaab in some sectors of the community. There is no information on whether the contributors from taxi networks used by Ahmed Nasir Taalil Mohamud from the Moalin Cell and Mohamed Abdi Yusuf from the Yusuf Cell had any knowledge of the true destination of the funds. While the use of the funds may not have been explicit, it is also unclear whether this would have had a negative, positive, or any impact on giving.

The fundraising methods did demonstrate maturation as well as an apparent growing influence of al-Shabaab commanders on US operations. The Moalin Cell migrated to more secure communications after the interactions led to the death of an in-country leader but the Ali and Jama cells saw online fundraising as essential. Approaching the problem differently, the Ali and Jama cells used Paltalk.com to engage members of the Somali community in online fundraising. Online fundraising increased security but also reached new audiences which was important to meet the demands from the al-Shabaab leadership. A third point that deserve consideration and additional research is whether the Jama cell, unlike the others, lacked sufficient contacts in the community to effectively raise funds through face-to-face contacts. The lack of such contacts might be another indication of tepid regard for al-Shabaab in the Somali community.

A significant finding of the study was the use of the \textit{hawala} remittance system. Virtually untrackable and based on trust and friendships, the system proved effective in getting funds to al-Shabaab. Furthermore, the use of the system further substantiates the direct ties with al-Shabaab or their trusted representatives. The transfers ranged from deposits of $50 to as much as $2,500 in a single transaction. Additionally, members in the Moalin and Yusuf cell worked at a \textit{hawala} center. Between each of the cells a total of 72 known transactions were completed through several \textit{hawala} services totaling $46,508. Moreover, the reported numbers are certainly much lower than the actual amounts raised and transferred because of a lack of publicly available records.

Perhaps the most interesting finding are the linkages among various groups that became apparent by studying the recruitment and financial networks together. The ties within the financial network, between the financial and recruitment networks, and the role of al-Shabaab facilitators represent a more tightly connected organization than previously thought. These linkages provide insight into a domestic network but also the extent of al-Shabaab’s gatekeeper network that was active in the US. For example, both Saeed Basaaly Moalin and Nima Ali Yusuf from the Nima Cell were in contact with Mukhtar Robow. Robow, a deputy leader and spokesperson for al-Shabaab, conducted several attacks and publicly called on foreign fighters from Somali diaspora’s to join al-Shabaab. Moalin and Amina Farah Ali from the Ali Cell were both in contact with Mahad Karate, another commander within al-Shabaab. Nima and Saynab

\textsuperscript{48} Southers, Errol, and Justin Heinz. \textit{Foreign Fighters: Terrorist Recruitment and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programs in Minneapolis-St. Paul.} Rep. National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE) at the University of Southern California
Abdirashid Hussein from the Saynab Cell personally knew Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan “Miski,” who emerges of a recruitment facilitator. Also interesting is that “Miski” handled both of the female cells which not only fundraised but also supported FTFs. Last, Nima Ali Yusuf lived and worked in San Diego, approximately two miles away from the Masjid Al-Ansar Mosque, where the Moalin Cell solicited funds. Hence, it is possible that the individual networks may have known more about one another than was evident in the research. More critically, it is evident that the al-Shabaab leadership played a variety of roles and provided varying amounts of direction and support to the operations taking place in these communities.

The al-Shabaab recruitment and financial network is undoubtedly much larger than detailed in this report. Many unknown individuals who supported al-Shabaab but were never charged remain unidentified. It also is very likely that actors within the network were more interconnected than has publicly been disclosed. The use of teleconferences and internet chat rooms expanded al-Shabaab’s reach five to ten years ago and may remain an instrument for engaging Somali communities throughout the United States that would otherwise not have been involved. This study maps the al-Shabaab network primarily between 2007 and 2010 but the presence of the Jama Cell should serve as a cautionary message that the networks may not be completely compromised and that others, unknown, may exist.

The concern of radicalization among the Somali community remains apparent. To combat the recruitment from key areas in the Minneapolis area several CVE programs were established. Recent funding given to a Minneapolis CVE program by DHS was tied to the city’s 9th Ward, which encompasses the Powderhorn District and Midtown Phillips District where Roosevelt High School and the Abubakar As-Sadique Islamic Center are located and reflects the continued significance of this area.49 Interestingly, San Diego was identified by DHS as a potential focus for CVE programs, however no known programs have been funded to date.50

Appendix A: Recruit Finance Network Structural Chart