



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on February 26, 2015

Thousands of Somalis in Minnesota Spark Fears of al-Shabaab Terrorists

Thousands of Somali refugees have settled in Minnesota since the devastating civil war in their home country began in 1991. These Somalis fled their homeland to get away from the turmoil there and live in peace. However, an online video released on February 21 by a Somali-based terrorist group, al-Shabaab, that specifically named Minnesota's Mall of America as a potential target has made many Minnesotans nervous.



The video also named the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta, Canada, and London's Oxford Street as possible targets. Since al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the 2013 attack on the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in which 67 people were killed, the group's threats are not taken lightly. Federal law-enforcement officials told *CBS News* that they are investigating the video and that the Department of Homeland Security has notified local police in major U.S. cities, including New York and Chicago, about this potential threat.

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The day after the release of the video, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson told CNN that there is "no credible or specific evidence" indicating that a U.S. mall attack has been planned. However, Johnson warned Americans to take care. "If anyone is planning to go to the Mall of America today," Johnson said, "they've got to be particularly careful."

Al-Shabaab, which was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. government in 2008, is engaged in continual acts of terror in Somalia, and on February 20 claimed responsibility for suicide attacks at a hotel in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, that resulted in 25 deaths.

While there is little to indicate that al-Shabaab has a presence in Minnesota that poses a threat to public safety, the terrorist group has had some small success in recruiting from among those refugees. As far back as 2009 a report in *The New American* quoted an AP report stating that al-Shabaab terrorists:

have lured young American men — including as many as 20 from Minnesota — back to their homeland to join their jihad. At least three have died, including one who authorities believe is the first American suicide bomber. Three others have pleaded guilty in the U.S. to terror-related charges. Court proceedings and interviews with community members, attorneys and terror experts indicate the Somali-based terror group, al-Shabab [also spelled al-Shabaab], uses widespread recruitment tactics including a vast Web-based network.

The AP quoted Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism specialist at Georgetown University, who said:

Al-Shabab 10 years ago would be a two-bit, paramilitary group that no one would've cared about ... sitting in a basement somewhere stockpiling rocket-propelled grenades and bullets for AK-47s.... Now, we see them reaching into the United States.



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Al-Shabaab may have succeeded in luring a handful of Somali refugees to return home to join their terrorist operations, but there is nothing to indicate they have any stateside organization, or that the terrorist traffic has flowed in the opposite direction.

In a February 22 report, Peter Bergen, CNN's national security analyst, analyzed the potential threat, if any, that al-Shabaab presented to Americans. He expressed his opinion that the group has "scant abilities" to conduct terrorist operations outside of Somalia and neighboring Kenya.

Bergen noted what *The New American* reported back in 2009 — that al-Shabaab "succeeded in recruiting a number of Americans to fight in Somalia, most of whom are from Minnesota. Seven Somali-American men traveled from Minnesota to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab in late 2007."

Bergen concluded that the terrorism pipeline flowed only from the Minnesota ex-pats to Somalia, not back again:

Still, despite these developments, for the Americans who traveled to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab, it has typically been a one-way ticket. More than a dozen Americans have died while fighting for the terror group, according to a U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security report, while none of the Americans recruited by al-Shabaab is known to have subsequently planned or conducted a terrorist attack inside the United States, according to a survey of more than 250 jihadist terrorism cases since the 9/11 attacks conducted by New America.

A CNN report on February 21 cited a joint intelligence bulletin from the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI that stated there is no indication of an ongoing plot from al-Shabaab in the United States, an assessment attributed to two law-enforcement officials who have seen it.

The bulletin, which was sent to law-enforcement agencies across the country, urges vigilance against a lone wolf-type attack that the video might encourage.

The bulletin said that the assessment of intelligence experts was that there is no credible specific threat to malls in the United States.

Despite these assurances, a "perfect storm" of factors has made residents of the Twin Cities apprehensive. These include the fact that the video specifically mentioned the Mall of America, the fact that the threat was made by a Somalia-based terrorist group with a history of deadly violence, and the presence of a large community of Somali refugees in Minnesota.

A 2006 AP report cited statistics from Barbara Ronningen of the Minnesota State Demographic Center, who noted that in 2004, the total number of Somali refugees living in Minnesota was estimated to be 25,000, but (as of 2006) it could have been as high as 30,000. A 2011 Census Bureau estimate raised the number of people of Somali ancestry in the state to more than 32,000.

In response to the fears and to assuage them, a group of Somali Americans went to the Mall of America for lunch on February 24 as a display of confidence that the mall was safe and to make a public statement that they were opposed to the terrorists that have generated concerns about all Somalis.

WCCO-TV, the Minneapolis CBS affiliate, spoke with Jabril Afyare, the president of Somali Citizens Elite, who sat and ate at the mall while on his lunch break from IBM. "[The terrorists] cannot drive a wedge between the Somali-Americans and the brothers and sisters in our country," Afyare said. "This is our country."

WCCO reported that Afyare said that al-Shabaab is seeking to gain publicity by sowing mistrust between Minnesotans and local Somalis, as well as inside the Somali community itself. "I've been here



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30 years, and I couldn't just sit here idle and watch this," Afyare said. "This has to stop, and it's time we talk the talk and walk the walk."

"The majority, 99-100 percent of the Somali-Americans, are really peace-loving, civilized and part of this great country," Afyare continued.

Members of the Somali-American group said they came to stand against al-Shabaab and to stand up for their hometown mall.

By making a public display against terrorists who share their ethnic background, these Minnesota Somalis have set an example worthy of emulation. Their proactive technique to disassociate themselves from the terrorists who have damaged their good names might be successfully employed by other groups faced with the same problem.

Photo of attack on mall by al-Shabaab: AP Images

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