Parallel Paths: The CVE Program and U.S. Foreign Policy in Somalia

By Dominique Diaggo-Cash and Nick Theis

Photo: Ridwan Adhami

For 15 years the United States military has pursued a war on terror halfway across the world. This unprecedented campaign, which former president George W. Bush called "the task that does not end,"(1) has led us into direct warfare in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. In support of this mission we find proxy wars and U.S.-backed insurgencies in even more places—and informants in our own communities.

In April 2015, Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman, aged 19, became one of what would be six Somali-American youth to be arrested by the FBI in Minnesota on charges of conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.(2) These arrests came about as a result of a 10-month investigation into the targeted recruitment of young Muslims by terrorist organizations such as ISIL.(3) This is familiar terrain for the FBI Counter-Terrorism division, as well as local law enforcement, which are increasingly involved in aiding domestic terrorism investigations. However, despite the length of the thorough investigation into the six, intelligence officials and their local law enforcement counterparts failed to uncover shadowy ISIL recruiters, sleeper cells, or radical propagandists lurking in the Minnesota neighborhoods and suburbs in which many Somali families have created community.

Lacking strong evidence of any capability to carry out acts of extremism, Yusuf's case has become indicative of many things. Muslims across the country have been targeted as a religious community under baseless suspicions. These conditions are being readily exploited and legitimated by programs such as the benign-sounding

Building Community Resilience, a recent public-private partnership based in Minneapolis, which promises to "bring together community-based organizations and local partners, including interfaith organizations, nonprofits and NGOs, and state, county, and local governments."

Building Community Resilience is part of a larger program developed by the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice. The program is nationally known as "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE). The program was launched in 2011 in Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis as a preventive counter-terrorism program.(4) According to the FBI, "one of the key strategies to Countering Violent Extremism is to reach out to communities to build trust and rapport."(5) To use the words of St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith, these programs promote engagement between community and law enforcement, and have the potential to prevent "isolated communities" of East African immigrants from becoming "breeding grounds for violent extremism and radicalization." This argument reinforces the racism inherent in these programs. By no standard of truth can the Somali people's experiences as survivors, as refugees, and as advocates for themselves be deemed as potential catalysts for violent militancy. Such assumptions can only be articulated in a climate ruled by extreme demagoguery and fear, and by no means should this give our government license to implement policies based on such a climate.

Last February, a delegation from Minnesota took part in a White House summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). It was there that the blueprints for the current programs were first presented. The plan called on policymakers and funders to manipulate the resources available to existing Somali-American community organizations and provide impressive sums of money to certain organizations that appeared to fit in with the program.

Twenty-six organizations endorsed a march through a Minneapolis neighborhood in support of the Somali community on February 20.

Photo: Meredith Aby-Keirstead

In Minneapolis, U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger oversaw the transfer of this grant money into the Building Community Resilience effort. According to Luger, his office held interviews and public information sessions with leaders from the Somali-American community to better suit these programs to their needs and to be responsive to their culture.

But not all members of the Somali community agree with the characterization of these meetings as "public". Burhan Mohumed, a young Somali community organizer from Minneapolis, says they were "behind-closed-door meetings," and that "the only people invited were nonprofits and leaders." When asked if these leaders represent the whole of the community's interests, Burhan disagreed: "They have a track record of not standing up for their people." Indeed, fifty Minnesota-based Muslim organizations condemn the Building Community Resilience and other programs related to CVE. For Burhan and others in the Somali community of the Twin Cities, these programs are counter-productive. "They create walls in the community," he says. The very idea that the programs provide funds to select organizations, rather than making funding for other needs available to all Somalis, is a divisive act in itself.

Several community organizations such as CAIR (the Council on American-Islamic Relations) and the ACLU have voiced concerns that CVE will also further stigmatize and marginalize the Somali community. When suspicion becomes policy, it casts a shadow on a vulnerable community, inhibiting independent or traditional means of addressing particular problems. CAIR-MN director Jaylani Hussein welcomes efforts to "empower youth to make the right decisions," but warns that "it needs to be a community-based, grassroots effort free of intelligence-gathering disguised as community outreach."(6) Many organizations and community members feel that this endeavor is the institutionalization of Islamophobia. With xenophobia, racism, and anti-Islam hatred being espoused by extremists within the nation, conditions are already ripe for distrust of Somalis in Minnesota who are a minority in a White majority population. Now exaggerated reports about nonexistent recruiters for terrorist organizations legitimize the fear that is generated through media, thereby granting immunity to experiments in law enforcement techniques such as this one.

While the FBI claims the CVE is not primarily purposed to provide intelligence on the community, CVE is often viewed as the newest installment of a long-standing FBI tradition of "mimicking community outreach to exploit it for intelligence purposes," according to former FBI agent Michael German. The FBI's 2009 "Special Community Outreach Team" (SCOT) program was ultimately canceled amid concerns that it was being used as an intelligence-gathering tool. Numerous cases of FBI field agents employing the tactics of entrapment and surveillance of Muslims across the United States only increase these concerns.(7)

That same year, the St. Paul Police Department was awarded a grant from the U.S. Justice Department for an outreach program whose stated purpose was to strengthen ties between law enforcement and the largely Somali Muslim population of the Twin Cities, but text of the grant proposal obtained through an FOIA request reveals the aim of "addressing terrorism utilizing the criminal justice system."(8)

At the same time the FBI was being upgraded to fight terrorism post-9/11, the entire military was also being restructured at the highest levels. A case in point is the establishment of AFRICOM, "a military command responsible for all U.S. military activity in Africa" in 2006, one year after the new National Security Branch (NSB) structure for the bureau was implemented.(9) AFRICOM, or United States Africa Command, was (so far) the final installment of the Department of Defense's "Unified Combatant Command," which has the entire planet divided into six geographical regions (South America, Europe, the Middle East, etc.) and three functional groups (such as Special Operations Command) to streamline global warfare.

Strong parallels exist between AFRICOM and the new National Security Branch (NSB) structure of the FBI. Both are designed to create stronger and more capable military agencies, as well as further incorporate each agency within the U.S. intelligence community in an effort to fight terrorism. The NSB states its mission as "integrating intelligence and operations to protect America,"(10) while AFRICOM offers a slightly more nuanced mission objective: "in concert with interagency and international partners [AFRICOM] builds defense capabilities, responds to crisis, and deters and defeats transnational threats in order to advance U.S. national interests."(11) In either case, U.S. interests, whether they are the security of the homeland or the security of natural resources halfway across the world, do not always align with the interests of ordinary U.S. citizens or the people of Africa.

A few of the many activists who demonstrate that refugees are welcome but Islamophobia is not in Minneapolis/St.Paul.
Photo: Meredith Aby-Keirstead

Right around the time the NSB was implemented, the FBI had eight priority program areas. Not surprisingly, number one was to "protect America from terrorist attack." Number five was to "protect civil rights." While the FBI does conduct legitimate civil rights work, to what extent is this area deprioritized or even completely dismissed in service of the counter-terrorism mission? Concerns for violations of civil rights mount as FBI officers employ illegal methods such as entrapment and warrantless wiretapping to implicate vulnerable youth or other individuals.(12)

If domestic agencies routinely kill, entrap, and spy on American citizens or immigrants with impunity for the sake of national security, how far will the military go to impose "security, stability, and prosperity" in Africa?(13) Given the abhorrent record of human programs under the purview of older regional command units, such as SOUTHCOM, there is good reason to be skeptical about the intentions of AFRICOM, just as skepticism about the CVE programs is founded on a history of FBI abuses of similar programs. Additionally, in light of abuses of community programs like the CVEs in U.S. cities, reports that AFRICOM "will have an unprecedented number of interagency civilians in leadership roles" are gravely concerning.(14)

While AFRICOM's missions of combating terrorism continue to bring U.S. military personnel into conflict in Somalia, our engagement in the nation and in the whole Horn of Africa is not a recent development. As part of U.S. Cold War strategy, Somalia was seen as critical to countering the spread of the Soviet Union's political influence. It was then that former Somali head of state Siad Barre gave the U.S. license to Somalia's military bases and access to ports on the Gulf of Aden. In return, the U.S. poured millions of dollars in military aid into the Somali government.(15) This arrangement gave the United States the strategic privilege of safe harbor in the Horn of Africa, while granting Barre economic clout, and brutal military rule, much of the latter directed against Somalis. As internal armed conflict engaged many groups in conflict with Barre's government, the U.S. began to pivot away from its support of Barre. During this period of failed insurrections and violent reprisals, militarism forced hundreds of thousands of Somalis to flee. In the diaspora, a large number settled in Minnesota (estimates range from 30,000 up) while Somalia became a failed state.

The control of shipping routes along Somalia's coastline and access to resources within the region remained the primary concern of outsiders. U.S. presence in Somalia persists today, most recently taking the form of drone strikes and special operations against ISIL affiliate Al-Shabaab. The results have brought a devastating toll in the civilian population and increased the spread of Al-Shabaab's cause, and possibly with it their method of retribution.

A military solution will not magically work in Somalia after decades of war. The persistence of the internal armed conflict in Somalia is the result of continued support for the violence from outsiders. For more than two decades, the West and neighboring East African nations alike have been able to profit from a conflict that would never be reaped from a stable, sovereign nation.

With the same logic of summary justice that the United States military uses to justify the occupation of foreign soil, its counterparts in the national intelligence community have been suspected of entrapping people with acts of terrorism as serious as bomb making, or as vague as material support, the latter being the plea accepted by Yusuf Abdurahman. These same intelligence officials today find threats to justify targeted spying.(16) Even as the people of Somalia have emigrated across the world to flee terrorism in their country, the war on terror pursues them. One is indeed forced to question the very motive of a war, with its national security implications, whose casualties have so often proven to be guilty of nothing more than their race, their nationality, their religion, or their beliefs.

Dominique Diaggo-Cash is an associate with the American Friends Service Committee Healing Justice program. As an independent writer, he focuses on resistance to oppression. Nick Theis is a member of Students for a Democratic Society, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, and an independent writer and researcher who writes about resistance to war.

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