The Escalation of U.S. Airstrikes in Somalia and the Role of Perceived Threats to the U.S. Homeland

By David Sterman

In 2025, the United States substantially increased the pace of its airstrikes in Somalia. At the same time, it increasingly cited not just regional security rationales for the increased pace of strikes but also rationales rooted in an assessed potential threat to the U.S. homeland from Somalia—in particular from the Islamic State-Somalia's recruitment of foreign fighters. This article examines the increased pace of strikes, the rationales that have been cited to explain the increase, and what existing evidence reveals about the potential threat to the U.S. homeland. It also underscores the need for greater clarity from the U.S. government regarding its assessment of the extent of such a threat.

The United States is currently waging a stepped-up air campaign against jihadi groups in Somalia. According to information released by United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), between February 1, when the Trump administration conducted the first strike in Somalia of 2025, and June 10, the United States conducted 38 strikes against the Islamic State in Somalia and al-Shabaab. Additional strikes after June 10 have also been conducted.[a] The rationales surrounding the increase in strikes relate to concerns about regional security (including the threat to Somalia's federal government), but also exhibit an increasingly prominent discussion of the potential threat to the U.S. homeland. Both rationales are driven in part by the perceived role that foreign fighters play in the Islamic State in Somalia.

To shed light on the escalation of the U.S. airstrike campaign in Somalia and the role of homeland security rationales in motivating the increase in strikes, this article proceeds in five parts. First, it provides an account of the escalation in strikes this year. Second, it examines the rationales behind this increase, looking at the distinct roles of homeland security and regional security rationales. Third, it considers the specific though fragmentary reporting on the role of foreign fighters. Fourth, it examines what can be gleaned about the homeland security threat from a review of cases of Americans seeking to join jihadi groups in Somalia since the fall of the Islamic State's capital in Syria in 2017. Finally, it concludes with a short discussion of the importance of greater clarity regarding the government's assessment of the threat to the homeland from Somalia—and the disaggregation of homeland security from regional security rationales in analyzing the escalated use of air strikes.

A Stepped-Up U.S. Air Campaign in Somalia

When President Trump took office for his second term, it was far from clear how his administration would approach the issue of U.S. counterterrorism operations in Somalia.[1] At the end of his first term, Trump had ordered the withdrawal of U.S. advisory forces from Somalia—a position that former members of his administration linked to a view that key U.S. interests were not at risk in the country.[2] Debate over the extent of U.S. commitment in Somalia has continued into the second Trump administration.[3]

Then, on February 1, AFRICOM conducted its first strike in Somalia of 2025, targeting Islamic State-Somalia in a series of caves southeast of Bossaso, a major port city in the semi-autonomous Puntland state of Somalia.[4] In the aftermath of that strike, it was still not clear whether it was a one-off operation or the beginning of a larger escalation. Mohamed Mubarak, the head of Puntland's security coordination office, told the BBC, "We don't know if the Americans will conduct more than one airstrike."[5] Matt Bryden, a longtime analyst of the situation in Somalia, likewise told the BBC, "The strike does not mean that the US government is going to step up its military engagement in Somalia."[6] A *Washington Post* profile later that month on the rise of the Islamic State in Somalia and the semi-autonomous Somali state of Puntland's military campaign against it cited an anonymous AFRICOM official as saying that Puntland counterterrorism operations were not receiving support from AFRICOM. The piece stated, "Beyond the strike, the Trump

a The strike tallies examined here are based upon AFRICOM's declared strikes, drawing from the following sources: author correspondence, AFRICOM Public Affairs, May and June 2025, and Peter Bergen, Melissa Salyk-Virk, and David Sterman, "America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Somalia," New America, accessed July 2, 2025. As the analysis here relies on AFRICOM's own declared count of strikes, strikes are defined using the command's definition, which can include the use of multiple munitions. The one exception is that for ease of reference, ground raids are counted as a single strike. AFRICOM does not count ground operations as strikes. The only ground operation in the data analyzed here (covering 2021 through June 10, 2025) is the January 25, 2023, raid that killed Bilal al-Sudani. It is worth noting that there is a question as to whether some strikes that AFRICOM has counted as single strikes might be better understood as having been multiple strikes hitting distinct targets rather than a single strike using multiple munitions. On this question, see the discussion of reporting around the February 1, 2025, strike in Caleb Weiss, "Trump Admin Ups the Tempo of Airstrikes against Jihadist Groups in Somalia," FDD's Long War Journal, March 30, 2025.

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administration has not detailed its plans for Somalia. Africom said it was unable to comment on future policy."[7]

It has since become clear that there has been a significant escalation in strikes. By June 10, 2025, AFRICOM had conducted 38 strikes in Somalia—almost four times the number that it conducted in all of 2024, and more than it had conducted in any year during the Biden administration.[8] The increase should be examined as two distinct sets of strikes: those against the Islamic State in Somalia and those against al-Shabaab.

U.S. Strikes Against Islamic State-Somalia

First, the United States has substantially escalated its operations against the Islamic State in Somalia, moving from a position of targeting senior leaders to a posture of supporting a large counterterrorism operation by Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland state.

Of the 38 strikes AFRICOM conducted through June 10, 22 targeted the Islamic State in Somalia. In 2024, the United States conducted only one strike targeting Islamic State-Somalia.[9] Moreover, U.S. strikes against Islamic State-Somalia appear to have gone beyond the targeting of senior leaders.

AFRICOM issued six press releases regarding strikes targeting Islamic State-Somalia that labeled the seven strikes they covered as collective self-defense strikes, a category that is meant to focus on disrupting threats to U.S. or partner forces rather than offensively striking high-value targets or generalized enemy formations.[10] The other 15 strikes against Islamic State-Somalia may have targeted senior leaders (as appears to have been the case with the February 1, 2025, strike), involved offensive targeting of the group's forces beyond its senior leadership, or even been collective self-defense strikes that were not labeled as such.

In contrast, the United States declared only two strikes or operations against Islamic State-Somalia during the Biden administration, and both targeted senior Islamic State-Somalia leaders. Neither operation was framed as collective self-defense. The first occurred on January 25, 2023, when the United States conducted a ground raid in northern Somalia, targeting and killing Bilal al-Sudani, who the United States described as "an ISIS leader in Somalia and a key facilitator for ISIS's global network"[11] (more on al-Sudani below). The other occurred on May 31, 2024, when the United States conducted a strike "targeting ISIS militants ... in a remote area in the vicinity of Dhaardaar, approximately 81 km southeast of Bosaso, Somalia."[12] This strike was widely reported as having targeted Abdulqadir Mumin, an Islamic State-Somalia leader who also holds a senior role in the Islamic State's global architecture and who was even rumored to be the new overall Islamic State leader.[13]

U.S. Strikes Against al-Shabaab

AFRICOM conducted 16 strikes against al-Shabaab in 2025 through June 10. This constitutes an increase from the nine strikes that AFRICOM declared conducting against al-Shabaab in 2024.[14] In 2023, the United States declared 18 strikes against al-Shabaab.[15] Since the cut-off for the data examined in this article, the United States has already surpassed the number of strikes conducted against al-Shabaab in 2023 despite there being still several months left in the year.

However, the number of strikes against al-Shabaab so far in 2025 increased less sharply than those against the Islamic State. In addition, at least during the first months of this year, U.S. strikes against al-Shabaab did not appear to be deadlier than previous strikes.

Assessing the U.S. CT campaign in Somalia based on the death tolls from U.S. strikes is difficult because independent reporting on the toll of strikes is minimal to non-existent in many cases. Moreover, AFRICOM, which was already inconsistently reporting assessed death tolls in its press releases, stopped providing death toll assessments in response to queries as a matter of policy at some point in April or May 2025, telling reporters that "we are temporarily refraining from publishing casualty estimates while the new administration finalizes its policy."[16]

However, one can analyze AFRICOM's assessed death tolls for its early strikes. Of the 16 strikes against al-Shabaab declared by AFRICOM in the time period examined here, New America received information on initial death toll assessments for eight. The average initial AFRICOM assessed death toll for these strikes was about 1.4 militants per strike.[17] This is a lower government-assessed deaths per strike average for strikes targeting al-Shabaab than in 2023 (about 6.1 militants per strike) or 2024 (about 4.2 militants per strike).[18] These numbers suggest that at least in the first months of 2025, U.S. strikes against al-Shabaab did not see a shift to major offensive strikes on massed al-Shabaab forces of the kind that killed tens or even in one case more than 100 militants during the escalation of strikes in the first Trump administration.[19] However, that may have changed.

Regional and Homeland Security Rationales

When the United States initiated its war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014, its decision-making was influenced by a range of rationales, including the group's direct threat to regional security and the perception of a potential threat to the U.S. homeland if the group's capabilities were allowed to grow.[20] As the United States steps up its strikes against the Islamic State in Somalia (and against al-Shabaab), a similar mix of rationales focused on the regional security threat and a potential threat to the homeland appears to be influencing decision-making.

The United States has long viewed al-Shabaab primarily through the lens of its threat to regional security. For example, the intelligence community's 2010 Worldwide Threat Assessment assessed "most Al-Shabaab and East Africa-based al-Qa'ida members will remain focused on regional objectives in the near-term," and the 2012 version assessed that "most al-Shabaab members in 2012 will remain focused on battling AMISOM, TFG, and Ethiopian/Kenyan-backed forces in Somalia."[21] Michael Vickers, who served in senior government roles between 2007 and 2015 and oversaw key raids in Somalia, wrote in his memoir, "Al-Shabaab was mostly a regional threat, so it received far less of my attention than AQAP and al-Qai'da in Syria."[22]

In 2016, when AFRICOM began issuing press releases on its website regarding strikes, the press releases emphasized regional security.[23] For example, a press release for a September 26, 2016, strike stated, "The U.S. remains committed to our partners in eliminating terrorism and advancing security in the region. Violent extremists endanger the safety and stability of the Somali people; countering these threats remains in our common interests," but did not include a reference to the U.S. homeland.[24]

The United States' stepped-up strikes against al-Shabaab in 2025 are likely driven by conditions on the battlefield and an

Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 1 conducts routine flight operations from the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility on February 1, 2025, the date U.S. Africa Command stated it had conducted airstrikes against Islamic State-Somalia. (U.S. Navy)

increased perception of a regional security threat. In 2025, al-Shabaab mounted an offensive that at the least reversed some of the Somali government's gains in prior offensives and, according to at least some analysts, may pose a threat to Mogadishu itself, the Somali government's seat of power.[25] Notably, other non-U.S. partners of the Somali government also stepped up their activity in response to the offensive.[26]

In addition, the assertion that al-Shabaab has developed ties over the past couple years with Yemen's Houthi rebels further contributes to the regional security rationale for strikes.[27] During his testimony on AFRICOM's 2025 Posture Statement, General Michael Langley, AFRICOM's commander, stated, "Al-Shabaab is especially a heightened terrorist threat, namely because they're colluding with the Houthis across from Yemen."[28]

While historically regional security has been the main concern regarding jihadi groups in Somalia, in recent years, concerns about a potential threat to the U.S. homeland have grown in prominence. In 2019, the Philippines arrested a Kenyan national who received training from al-Shabaab and who the United States later charged and convicted of plotting a 9/11-like attack that would have involved crashing a hijacked plane into a building.[29] In the wake of news of the arrest, then-Commander of AFRICOM General Stephen J. Townsend testified to Congress in 2020 that "Shabab is a very real threat to Somalia, the region, the international community and even the U.S. homeland," although the Defense Intelligence Agency still assessed that al-Shabaab posed a low threat to the homeland.[30]

The emergence of the Islamic State in Somalia likewise contributed to a growing perception of a homeland threat. Islamic State-Somalia posed a far lesser threat to regional security in territorial terms than al-Shabaab.[31] Initially, the Islamic State did not even acknowledge those who had declared an Islamic State group in Somalia under Mumin's leadership as an official province, but when it officially recognized them, it did so in a December 2017 video promoting attacks in the West.[32] While its ability to pose a territorial threat was limited, Islamic State-Somalia's connection to global Islamic State networks and the role of foreign fighters in its ranks amplified concern about threats beyond Somalia.[33] These connections not only bolstered concern about potential attacks on the U.S. homeland but also the ways Islamic State-Somalia could pose a regional security threat without threatening Somalia's control of territory by providing financial and other support to other parts of the Islamic State's network.[34]

Concern about the presence of foreign fighters in Somalia and the potential for attacks against the U.S. homeland is not entirely new nor a product solely of the Islamic State's mobilization. In the aftermath of the 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, the FBI began paying close attention to a flow of foreigners to Somalia, including Americans.[35] This mobilization, and the networks it

revealed, did raise concern among American policymakers, but these concerns were primarily in the realm of the potential for a larger, future threat rather than a perception of an existing direct threat. As Philip Mudd, then Associate Executive Assistant Director of the FBI's National Security Branch, testified in 2009, "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."[36]

In addition, the earliest U.S. counterterrorism operations and strikes in Somalia sought to eliminate al-Qa`ida's East African hub. This network hub was made up mainly of the local remnants of the 1998 East Africa Embassy Bombing network. One figure tied to the network hub—Saleh Nabhan, a Kenyan—was killed in a helicopter raid in September 2009.[37] After his death, American officials noted his reported connection to the training of foreign militants, including Americans.[38] In 2011, Fazul Harun, a figure within the network who hailed originally from the Comoros Islands, was not killed by a U.S. strike but by Somali forces at a checkpoint.[39] He reportedly had documents on him suggesting he may have been planning an attack in the United Kingdom and was considering using British foreign fighters who had traveled to Somalia to carry out the attack.[40] Just the previous year, the travel of U.K. residents to Somalia led Britain's then-head of MI5 to state, "I am concerned that it's only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab."[41]

As noted, U.S. intelligence assessments from this period still viewed jihadis in Somalia as primarily a regional threat, but they also revealed broader concerns. For example, in 2010, the intelligence community assessed: "East Africa-based al-Qa'ida leaders or al Shabaab may elect to redirect to the Homeland some of the Westerners, including North Americans, now training and fighting in Somalia."[42] In 2012, the intelligence community assessed that "members of the group—particularly a foreign fighter cadre that includes US passport holders—may also have aspirations to attack inside the United States; however, we lack insight into concrete operational plans outside the Horn of Africa."[43]

This year, 2025, appears to mark a shift in the United States' perception or at least its presentation of the threat to the homeland from Somalia. In 2025, AFRICOM adopted language in its press releases regarding strikes in Somalia that raises the specter of a potential threat to the U.S. homeland. With the exception of the first strike on February 1, 2025,[b] and one strike against vessels in Somali territorial waters that were allegedly carrying "advanced conventional weapons" to al-Shabaab, every press release announcing a strike in Somalia during the period examined in this article included a variation of the following lines: "Degrading ISIS and other terrorist organizations' ability to plot and conduct attacks that threaten the U.S. homeland, our partners, and civilians remains central to U.S. Africa Command's mission" or "Degrading al Shabaab and other terrorist organizations' ability to plot and conduct attacks that threaten the U.S. homeland, our partners, and civilians remains central to U.S. Africa Command's mission."

In 2024, AFRICOM only referred to threats to the homeland in one of its 10 press releases regarding strikes in Somalia, the press release for the strike that reportedly targeted Abdulqadir Mumin, who plays a senior role in the Islamic State's global activity and is even rumored by some to be the Islamic State's latest "caliph."[44]

In his April 2025 statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Michael E. Langley, AFRICOM's commander, made five references to the threat that jihadi groups in Africa might pose to the "homeland."[45] He emphasized, "We are acutely aware that if ISIS and al-Qaeda groups continue their expansion, they will pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland."[46] He also specifically referenced the aforementioned "9/11 style terror attack on the U.S."[47] Langley's phrasing suggests that U.S. efforts are still—to some extent—preventive with the main threat lying in the future if action is not taken to prevent Islamic State-Somalia and al-Shabaab's growth.

The question of foreign fighter recruitment played an important role in General Langley's discussion of such expansion and its relation to a threat to the homeland. His 2025 AFRICOM Posture Statement directly connected Islamic State-Somalia's foreign fighter recruitment to concerns about potential threats to the homeland, stating, "For now, ISIS and al-Qaeda groups are focused on local interests, but they continue to expand and recruit fighters from around the world to position themselves to attack the Homeland. The dangerous capabilities of these groups, if not addressed, will continue to threaten U.S. interests."[48]

Historically, foreign fighter recruitment has played a similar role in perceptions of threats to the homeland and their mobilization to support the use of force based in preventive logic. When President Obama announced his decision to expand the counter-Islamic State war into Syria and beyond initially limited objectives in Iraq, a key part of his argument that "if left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States" was that "our Intelligence Community believes that thousands of foreigners -- including Europeans and some Americans -- have joined them in Syria and Iraq. Trained and battle-hardened, these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks."[49] General Langley's testimony on Somalia closely resembles this phrasing.

Foreign Fighter Dynamics

Reporting on the number and role of foreign fighters in the Islamic State in Somalia's structure is fragmentary and incomplete. However, numerous reports suggest they play an important role. In February 2025, *The Washington Post* wrote, "according to U.S. Africa Command (Africom), and local officials estimate there are as many as 1,000 militants under its command," adding that "large numbers of foreign fighters have flowed into Somalia, establishing a formidable force that now threatens Western targets."[50] More recently, a U.S. defense official estimated that Islamic State-Somalia's force had grown from around 500 fighters to 1,600 with about 60 percent being foreign fighters.[51]

b While the initial press release for the February 1, 2025, strike did not include such a reference, a later update announcing that the strike had killed a senior Islamic State-Somalia operative did. See "Update: U.S. Forces Strike on ISIS-Somalia," U.S. Africa Command, February 11, 2025. There is also one declared strike in 2025 that was not reported via a press release and thus is not applicable to this analysis of the language used in press releases. "2025 Airstrikes," United States Africa Command, n.d.; "U.S. Forces Strike ISIS-Somalia," U.S. Africa Command, February 16, 2025; "Federal Government of Somalia Engages al Shabaab with Support from U.S. Forces," U.S. Africa Command, February 22, 2025; "U.S. Forces Conduct Strike Targeting al Shabaab," U.S. Africa Command, April 18, 2025.

Insight into the alleged role of foreign fighters in Islamic State-Somalia is provided by fragmentary reports regarding those killed and imprisoned as part of Puntland's counterterrorism operations.[52] *The Washington Post* noted that Puntland's prisons held numerous foreigners accused of joining Islamic State-Somalia, including a group of six Moroccans one of whom told the *Post*, "We trained with Kalashnikovs, in a group of around 30 people — Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Somalis and two Palestinians."[53] Likewise, in February 2025, Voice of America reported that Puntland authorities claimed dozens of the some 200 Islamic State-Somalia fighters they had killed were foreigners.[54]

In addition, some of Islamic State-Somalia's senior figures, who have been targeted or killed by U.S. strikes in recent years, are foreign fighters, Somalis who have spent significant time outside of Somalia, and/or those who have allegedly played roles in the recruitment of foreign fighters. For example, Ahmed Maeleninine, who was reportedly killed in the February 1, 2025, strike, was born in Oman, according to Puntland officials.[55] The U.S. press release on his death did not mention his nationality, but did emphasize his role as a "key ISIS recruiter."[56] Likewise, Bilal al-Sudani, who was killed in a U.S. ground raid in 2023, was a Sudanese man, sanctioned in 2012 for activity dating back to 2007 where he would act as a "facilitator for the entry of foreign fighters and extremists into Somalia" including a 2010 case where he "facilitated the travel of extremists from Chad to Somalia."[57] When he was killed, the United States emphasized his role in enabling "ISIS's expansion and activities across Africa and beyond the continent, in particular by providing funding to sustain the operational capabilities of ISIS elements around the world" including in Afghanistan via support for the Islamic State-Khorasan branch.[58] Abdulqadir Mumin, who was the target of the May 31, 2024, strike in Somalia, was born in Puntland, but spent time in Sweden and the United Kingdom, where some reports speculated he crossed paths with militants and may have been involved in a recruitment and radicalization network, before returning to Somalia.[59]

Al-Shabaab also historically sought to recruit and benefit from foreign fighters, including those from Europe and the United States, sparking somewhat similar concerns (albeit concerns generally discussed with more circumspection) about potential homeland attacks. It is worth noting that the Islamic State's recruitment of foreign fighters can be seen in part as a continuation of activity under al-Shabaab. Until 2015, the Islamic State in Somalia's key members were still mainly associated with al-Shabaab. For example, when the United States sanctioned al-Sudani in 2012, it described his activity as being "on behalf of al-Shabaab."[60] However, al-Shabaab's efforts to take advantage of foreign fighter recruitment stumbled in the 2010s for a variety of reasons, including in-fighting, law enforcement and military pressure, and the rising prominence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and other groups/locations as preferred destinations for and influence upon foreign fighters.[61] Today, it is the perceived growth in the Islamic State's foreign fighter cadre rather than foreigners fighting with al-Shabaab that has dominated discussion of the extent of the threat to the U.S. homeland from Somalia.

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Aspiring and Actual American Foreign Fighters and Somalia

When AFRICOM announced that senior Islamic State-Somalia figure Ahmed Maeleninine had been killed in its February 1, 2025, strike, it alleged that one of his roles was as an "external operations leader responsible for the deployment of jihadists into the United States and across Europe."[62] This is a significant allegation about potential direct threats to the United States, but AFRICOM has not provided further details on the nature of the alleged U.S. nexus.

There have been reports of alleged Islamic State-Somalia links to terrorism cases in Europe—specifically in Sweden in 2024 and in Italy in 2018.[63] Of the case in Italy, a United Nations Panel of Experts on Somalia report stated that the arrested individual, Omar Moshin Ibrahim, had entered Italy in 2016, received training in Libya prior to his entry, and "during his time in Italy, he maintained communication with ISIL affiliates in Somalia and Kenya."[64] However, the report also stated that "intercepted communications" suggested that the actual plot he was arrested for "was not directly tasked by ISIL operatives outside the country" and "was rudimentary and had little chance of success."[65]

A review of cases of Americans (and others present in the United States) accused of jihadi terrorism-related criminal activity since the fall of the Islamic State's capital of Raqqa in October 2017 provides seven cases of Americans who have either traveled or sought to or aided travel to Somalia.[66] What it does not seem to provide is any case of an individual who received training from Islamic State-Somalia being deployed back to the United States. Further, all but one case involved failed attempts to travel to Somalia.

On February 27, 2025, the United States arrested Abdisatar Ahmed Hassan, a 22-year-old Minnesota resident and ethnic Somali born in Kenya, charging him with attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization in relation to two unsuccessful attempts "to travel from Minnesota to Somalia to join ISIS."[67] Beyond his attempted travel, the complaint alleges that he posted a video praising the deadly January 1, 2025, attack in New Orleans, which was seemingly inspired by the Islamic State.[68] The criminal complaint in the case alleges that Hassan consumed a range of Islamic State-Somalia and al-Shabaab propaganda online and interacted with a Facebook account named the Manjaniq Media Center, which per the complaint describes itself as "a media organization that nurtures the righteous youth of the Islamic Caliphate" and whose posts encourage "Somali-speaking individuals to travel and fight on behalf of ISIS."[69] Hassan appears to have been on law enforcement's radar screen before both of his attempts to join Islamic State-Somalia, both of which were closely monitored, due in part to his activity online.[70]

About four months earlier, in October 2024, the United States arrested Michael Sam Teekaye, Jr., a 21-year-old Maryland resident, alleging that he had attempted to travel to join the Islamic State in Somalia, and had told an undercover officer that he "was in contact with a Somali ISIS fighter regarding his plans to travel to Somalia

to join ISIS" and that his "'plan B' was to carry out an attack in the United States against people who support Israel."[71] However, it is worth noting that in addition to being monitored by an undercover officer, Teekaye had a reported history of mental health issues including a diagnosis of schizophrenia and two hospitalizations.[72]

The year before Teekaye's arrest, in December 2023, the United States charged Karrem Nasr, a 23-year-old U.S. citizen, with allegedly trying to join al-Shabaab.[73] The individual who Nasr believed to be an al-Shabaab facilitator helping him plan his trip from Egypt, where he was living, to Kenya (where he was arrested) and onto Somalia, was in fact an informant.[74] Nasr pled guilty in January 2025.[75]

In 2019, the United States charged three men, all Kenyan-born men holding U.S. citizenship and connected by family ties, with attempting to travel (or supporting members of the group's travel) to Somalia to join the Islamic State.[76] The case involved monitoring of social media activity and the use of undercover officers dating back years.[77] All three men were convicted and sentenced for their involvement.[78]

The only case involving an individual who succeeded in joining Islamic State-Somalia is also the oldest case. In January 2018, the United States filed a criminal complaint alleging that Harafa Hussein Abdi, a U.S. citizen, left the United States in 2015 (prior to the fall of the Islamic State's capital in Raqqa), traveled to Somalia, and received training from an Islamic State group affiliated with the aforementioned Mumin in Puntland.[79] Notably, while with the Islamic State in Somalia, Abdi promoted travel to join the group via social media and appeared in Islamic State propaganda, according to the complaint.[80] The United States also alleged that Abdi distributed a rap whose lyrics praised violence inside the United States before a dispute led him to leave the group, leading to his arrest in East Africa.[81] Yet, the case does not provide clear evidence that the group managed to train recruits and send them back to the United States. The case appears to be evidence of, as another article examining the Islamic State-Somalia global threat has put it, "the potential danger Islamic State-Somalia poses in encouraging terror plots abroad."[82] Now, more than a half a decade after Abdi was arrested and charged, caution is merited when citing his case to assess the state of that potential threat today given the seeming paucity of similar cases and the possibility that the conditions that made his journey possible may have changed.

The cases examined above do provide reason to pay attention to Islamic State-Somalia and the involvement of Americans or other foreign fighters in its activity. There does appear to be continuing interest among some Americans in joining jihadi groups (including Islamic State-Somalia) in Somalia. At least some of those who have considered fighting in Somalia have also allegedly expressed support for attacks inside the United States,[83] and there does appear to have been an effort on the part of Islamic State-Somalia to reach out and encourage travel.

However, the cases that have been charged so far in the United States do not suggest an imminent threat. While it is possible that there are individuals who have not been charged, the known cases do not show a developed capability or effort to send fighters back to the United States to conduct attacks. Moreover, the cases suggest that Americans who seek to join Somali jihadi groups face challenges in avoiding detection.

Conclusion

In 2025, the United States has substantially escalated its strikes in Somalia and embarked on a new campaign aimed at the Islamic State in Somalia. This escalation has been justified in part by references to the threat posed by foreign fighters in the Islamic State-Somalia's ranks along with an increase in references to a potential threat to the U.S. homeland. While there is reason to believe that the potential threat to the homeland from Somalia may have grown in recent years, the American public and policymakers would benefit from greater clarity on the basis for any such assessment. CTC

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