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## Al-Shabaab Now Designated as a Terrorist Organization in Australia

Al-Shabaab, the Somalian Islamicist group, has been designated as a terrorist organization in Australia. This brings Australia into line with the US's similar designation (February 2008).

Five Australian men were arrested in early August 2009 and charged with terrorism-related offences. It will be alleged that they had some connection with Al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab is loosely linked with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda (in terms of wanting a medieval caliph to run the region, this time the Horn of Africa) and it can also be compared with Afghanistan's Taliban (in that it wants the implementation of strict Koranic law and order). In domestic Somali terms, it is linked with the Islamic Courts Union, which runs part of Somalia.

Al-Shabaab (Arabic for "youth") is a group based in Somalia. Somalia has had no effective government since 1991 and into the power vacuum has flowed all manner of warlords and criminals. Al-Shabaab is simply one of the groups that has emerged.

The US's interest in Al-Shabaab increased in October 2008. Prior to that date, the US thought of Islamic terrorism as an imported problem (such as the Saudi Arabian hijackers involved with "9/11", September 11 2001). But in October 2008 Shirwa Ahmed, the first known American suicide bomber, blew himself up in Somalia. This encouraged the FBI to pay even greater attention to the risk of terrorism emerging from the Somali refugee community in the US.

The FBI found that a few troubled, alienated young men, either born in the US or who had arrived in the US as children, were being recruited to fight in Somalia. They were looking for a cause greater than themselves into which to put their idealistic energy and give them a sense of adventure.

So far, there has evidently been no Al-Shabaab attack within the US (the FBI is monitoring the risk of US-based individuals providing material support for terrorists operating in the Horn of Africa).

Their parents or guardians don't share that same sense of enthusiasm. They risked their lives getting out of that troubled country and have no desire to return. They just want to settle down in their new country. They can't understand what motivates these teenagers/ young adults.

Somalia's Islamicists believe that Somalia's status as a "failed state" is due to its deviance away from strict Islam, and that the chaos is God's punishment for the failure to follow His commands as found in the Koran. There has been an Islamic revival in the Horn of Africa as some people support a strict interpretation of the Koran. In a sense, the most vicious of the Islamicist groups – the Islamic Courts Union – is a bit like the Taliban in Afghanistan before 2001. They promise order based on strict justice. After year of chaos, the ordinary people just welcome some sense of stability. They may be brutal but they seem to be honest and effective.

The US has monitored Islamicist developments in the Horn of Africa for well over a decade. In 1998 Al-Qaeda attacked US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing more than 200 people. These attacks were part of Osama bin Laden's opening salvo against the US. The outgoing Clinton Administration warned the incoming Bush Administration about the Osama bin Laden risk – but Bush ignored that advice (until 9/11 eight months later).

The violence in Islamicist Somalia could spill over the border into Kenya. Kenya (a largely Christian nation) is a US ally in that part of Africa and so the US is also worried that it could be destabilized by Somali violence. The border between Kenya and Somalia has restive Muslims.

This cross-border land is Al-Shabaab territory. Al-Shabaab violence is not just a Somali problem – it involves the rest of the Horn of Africa. And now potentially there is an Australian link.

The bottom line – assuming that the Australian August arrests lead to convictions – is that Australia not only has to pay attention to terrorists operating in south-east Asia (such as those responsible for killing Australians in Indonesia) but also to monitor the risk of Australians providing material support for people with a Horn of Africa Islamicist agenda.

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