

By Scott Stewart

On the afternoon of Sunday, May 30, an Aeromexico flight from Paris to Mexico City was forced to land in Montreal after authorities discovered that a man who was on the U.S. no-fly list was aboard. The aircraft was denied permission to enter U.S. airspace, and the aircraft was diverted to Trudeau International Airport in Montreal. The man, a Somali named Abdirahman Ali Gaall, was removed from the plane and arrested by Canadian authorities on an outstanding U.S. warrant. After a search of all the remaining passengers and their baggage, the flight was allowed to continue to its original destination.

Gaall reportedly has U.S. resident-alien status and is apparently married to an American or Canadian woman. Media reports also suggest that he is connected with the Somali jihadist group al Shabaab. Gaall was reportedly deported from Canada to the United States on June 1, and we are unsure of the precise charges brought against him by the U.S. government, but more information should be forthcoming once he has his detention hearing. From the facts at hand, however, it appears likely that he has been charged for his connection with al Shabaab, perhaps with a crime such as material support to a designated terrorist organization.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security issued a lookout to authorities in Texas, warning that another Somali purportedly linked to al Shabaab was believed to be in Mexico and was allegedly planning to attempt to cross the border into the United States. This lookout appears to be linked to a U.S. indictment in March charging another Somali man with running a large-scale smuggling ring bringing Somalis into the United States through Latin America.

Taken together, these incidents highlight the increased attention the U.S. government has given to al Shabaab and the concern that the Somali militant group could be planning to conduct attacks in the United States. Although many details pertaining to the Gaall case remain unknown at this time, these incidents involving Somalis, Mexico and possible militant connections — and the obvious U.S. concern — provide an opportunity to discuss the dynamics of Somali immigration as it relates to the U.S. border with Mexico, as well as the possibility that al Shabaab has decided to target the United States.

The Somali Diaspora

In any discussion of al Shabaab, it is very important to understand what is happening in Somalia — and more important, what is not happening there. Chaos has long reigned in the African country, chaos that became a full-blown humanitarian crisis in the early 1990s due to civil war. Somalia never fully recovered from that war, and has lacked a coherent government for decades now. While Somalia does have a government in name, known as the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), it controls little apart from a few neighborhoods and outposts in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. In this vacuum of authority, warlords and pirates have thrived, along with a variety of militant Islamist groups, such as the jihadist group al Shabaab.

The decades of fighting and strife have also resulted in the displacement of millions of Somalis. Many of these people have moved into camps set up by humanitarian organizations inside the country to help the huge number of internally displaced people, but large numbers of Somalis have also sought refuge in neighboring countries. In fact, the situation in Somalia is so bad that many Somalis have even sought refuge in Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world. Tens of thousands of Somalis have also been resettled abroad in places like the United States, Canada and Europe.

Unlike an earthquake, tsunami or other natural disaster, the man-made disaster in Somalia has continued for decades. As Somali refugees have been settled in places like the United States, they, like many other immigrants, frequently seek to have their relatives join them. Frequently, they are able to do this through legal means, but quite often, when the wait for legal immigration is deemed too long or an application is denied for some reason — such as the applicant's having served in a militia — illegal means are sought to bring friends and relatives into the country. This is by no means a pattern exclusive to Somali immigrants; it is also seen by other immigrant groups from Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. For example, Christians from Iraq, Egypt and Sudan are frequently smuggled into the United States through Latin America.

In years past, a significant portion of this illegal traffic passed through Canada, but in the post-9/11 world, Canada has tightened its immigration laws, making it more difficult to use Canada as an entry point into the United States. This has driven even more immigrant traffic to Latin America, which has long been a popular route for immigrants seeking to enter the United States illegally.

Indeed, we have seen an expansion of Somali alien-smuggling rings in Latin America in recent years, and according to documents filed in court, some of these groups have been associated with militant groups in Somalia. In an indictment filed in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas on March 3, 2010, a Somali named Ahmed Muhammed Dhakane was charged with operating a large-scale alien-smuggling ring out of Brazil responsible for smuggling several hundred Somalis and other East Africans into the United States. The indictment alleges that the persons Dhakane's organization smuggled included several people associated with al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI), a militant group linked to al Qaeda that was folded into the Supreme Islamic Courts Council (SICC) after the latter group's formation. After Ethiopian forces invaded Somalia and toppled the SICC in late 2006, many of the more hardcore SICC militants then joined with the SICC youth wing, al Shabaab, to continue their armed struggle. The more nationalist-minded SICC members formed their own militant organization, called Hizbul Islam, which at various times either cooperates or competes with al Shabaab. The U.S. government officially designated AIAI a terrorist group in September 2001. The March indictment also alleged that Dhakane was associated with al-Barakat, a Somalia-based company that is involved in the transfer of money to Somalia. The U.S. government claims that al-Barakat is involved in funding terrorist groups and has designated the company a terrorist entity. Diaspora Somalis transfer a great deal of legitimate money to family members back in Somalia through organizations such as al-Barakat because there is no official banking system in the country, and militant groups like al Shabaab use this flow of money as camouflage for their own financial transactions.

Many other alien smugglers besides Dhakane are involved in moving Somalis through Latin America. Most of these smugglers are motivated by profit, but some like Dhakane who have ties to militant groups might not be opposed to moving people involved with militant groups — especially if they also happen to make more money in the process. Other smugglers might unknowingly move militants. Moreover, a number of front businesses, charities and mosques in the region more closely tied to militant groups of various stripes are used to raise funds, recruit and facilitate the travel of operatives through the region. Some of these entities have very close ties to people and organizations inside the United States, and those ties are often used to facilitate the transfer of funds and the travel of people.

Determining Intentions

Clearly, there are many Somalis traveling into the United States without documentation. According to the U.S. government, some of these Somalis have ties to jihadist groups such as AIAI and al Shabaab, like Dhakane and Gaall, respectively. Given the number of warlords and militias active in Somalia and the endemic lack of employment inside the country, it is not at all uncommon for young men there to seek employment as members of a militia. For many Somalis who are driven by the need merely to survive, ideology is a mere luxury. This means that unlike the hardcore jihadists encountered in Saudi Arabia or even Pakistan, many of the men fighting in the various Somali militias do not necessarily ascribe to a particular ideology other than survival (though there are certainly many highly radicalized individuals, too).

The critical question, then, is one of intent. Are these Somalis with militant ties traveling to the United States in pursuit of a better life (one hardly need be an Islamist bent on attacking the West to want to escape from Somalia), or are they seeking to travel to the United States to carry out terrorist attacks?

The situation becomes even more complex in the case of someone like Gaall, who came to the United States, reportedly married an American woman, received resident-alien status, but then chose to leave the comfort and security of the United States to return to Somalia. Clearly, he was not a true asylum seeker who feared for his life in Somalia, or he would not have returned to the African country. While some people become homesick and return home, or are drawn back to Somalia for some altruistic purpose, such as working with a non-governmental organization to deliver food aid to starving countrymen— or to work with the Somali government or a foreign government with interests in Somalia — some Somalis travel back to support and fight with al Shabaab. Since most of the previously mentioned activities are not illegal in the United States, the criminal charges Gaall faces likely stem from contact with al Shabaab.

Having contact with al Shabaab does not necessarily mean that someone like Gaall would automatically return to the United States intending to conduct attacks there. It is possible that he considered Somalia a legitimate theater for jihad but did not consider civilians in the United States legitimate targets. There is a great deal of disagreement in jihadist circles regarding such issues, as witnessed by the infighting inside al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb over target selection. There are also militant groups, like Hamas and Hezbollah, who consider the United States as a place to recruit and raise funds rather than a battlefield for jihad. U.S. authorities

certainly would err on the side of caution regarding such people, and would charge them with any applicable criminal charges, such as material support of a terrorist group, rather than run the risk of missing an impending attack.

If it is determined that Gaall intended to conduct an attack inside the United States, the next question becomes whether he sought to conduct an attack of his own volition or was sent by al Shabaab or some other entity.

As we have previously discussed, we consider the current jihadist world to be composed of three different layers. These layers are the core al Qaeda group; the regional al Qaeda franchises (like al Shabaab); and grassroots jihadists — either individuals or small cells — inspired by al Qaeda and the regional franchises but who may have little if any actual connection to them. It will be important to determine what Gaall's relationship was with al Shabaab.

To this point, the leadership of al Shabaab has shown little interest in conducting attacks outside Somalia. While they have issued threats against Uganda, Burundi, Kenya and Ethiopia (which invaded Somalia and deposed the SICC), al Shabaab has yet to act on these threats (though AIAI did conduct a series of low-level bombing attacks in Ethiopia in 1996 and 1997 and al Shabaab has periodic border skirmishes with the Kenyan military). Somalis have also been involved with the al Qaeda core for many years, and al Shabaab has sworn allegiance to Osama bin Laden — the reason we consider them an al Qaeda regional franchise group.

That said, we have been watching al Shabaab closely this year to see if they follow in the footsteps of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and become a transnational terrorist group by launching attacks against the West rather than just a group with a national or regional focus. While some al Shabaab members, like American-born Omar Hammami — who sings jihadi rap songs about bringing America to its knees — have threatened the West, it remains unclear whether this is rhetoric or if the group truly intends to attack targets farther afield. So far, we have seen little indication that al Shabaab possesses such intent.

Due to this lack of demonstrated intent, our assessment at the present time is that al Shabaab has not yet made the leap to becoming transnational. That assessment could change in the near future, however, as details from the Gaall case come out during court proceedings — especially if it is shown that al Shabaab sent Gaall to the United States to conduct an attack.