

Hill hearing again targets radicalized Muslims

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The third in a controversial series of congressional hearings on the "radicalization" of American Muslims showcased on Wednesday (July 27) a militant Somali group that some experts say poses a serious risk to the United States.

Al-Shabab has recruited more than 40 Americans and 20 Canadians, said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee.

"Not al-Qaida, nor any of its other affiliates, have come close to drawing so many Muslim Americans and Westerners to jihad," said King. Committee Democrats, as they have previously, said King's hearings unfairly single out the religious group, and called on him to hold no more. Civil rights groups and Muslim leaders have also criticized the hearings.

"Before these hearings began, I requested that their focus be broadened to include a look at the real and present threat of domestic violent extremism," said Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., the committee's top Democrat.

Thompson also questioned the danger posed by al-Shabab, which landed on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations in February 2008.

"Al-Shabab does not appear to present any danger to this homeland," Thompson said, citing vigorous law enforcement efforts to track the group.

Other committee Democrats used recent events to protest the hearings' focus on Muslims.//

Several mentioned the anti-Muslim gunman's bloody rampage in Norway Friday to argue that extremists come from a variety of backgrounds.

Another held up a front-page newspaper story about the victims of the famine in Somalia, and asked if it might not be more constructive to focus on that tragedy.

Wednesday's hearing inspired far less emotion than the two previous ones held by King. The first, in March, on the radicalization of American Muslims in general, prompted heated debates and headlines weeks before it happened. Protestors lined the corridors outside the hearing room.

The second hearing, in June, on the radicalization of Muslims in the nation's prisons, was less dramatic -- and less well-attended.

On Wednesday, mild-mannered witnesses from law enforcement detailed court cases against al-Shabab, and endorsed programs that help immigrant Muslims assimilate into American communities. Both Democrats and Republicans applauded such initiatives.

St. Paul (Minn.) Police Chief Tom Smith spoke extensively on sports and other programs that have strengthened ties between police officers in his city and young, disaffected Somali Americans who might otherwise fall prey to al-Shabab recruiters.

"We have built strong relationships with a community once isolated," he said.//

Minnesota has been a focal point for al-Shabab sympathizers.

Earlier this month, an al-Shabab member pleaded guilty to recruiting Muslims at a Minneapolis mosque, King noted. And one Minnesotan recruited by the group, Shirwa Ahmed, became what King called "the first confirmed American suicide bomber in our history" in an attack in Somalia in 2008.

Other witnesses discussed the ties between al-Shabab and al-Qaida, and advised that the potential is real for al-Shabab, which has taken responsibility for killings in Somalia of government officials and civilians, to strike on American soil.

William Anders Folk, a former federal prosecutor who handled al-Shabab cases in the Minneapolis area, said that groups of men affiliated with al-Shabab have left Minneapolis in recent years, and that once overseas, they become difficult to track.

Folk compared al-Shabab to al-Qaida, reminding committee members that before the 9/11 attacks, many American intelligence officials underestimated Osama bin Laden's capabilities.

"Groups which are aspirational today could be operational tomorrow," Folk said.

Committee Democrats focused less on potential threats and more on efforts to give vulnerable young Americans -- no matter their faith, race or ethnicity -- the will to resist those who would recruit them to violence against their country.

At Wednesday's and previous hearings, some experts have argued that helping immigrant communities assimilate is the best way to keep the United States safe, said Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-La., arguing against future hearings on Muslim Americans.

"I get it. I get it. I get it. I get it," Richmond told King.

King vowed to press on, and also rejected any "moral equivalency" between the Norwegian killer and the subjects of his hearings.

"There is only one group that has killed 3,000 Americans," King said, referring to 9/11.