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CONGRESS
MEMBER OF THE CROSS CULTURAL ROUNTABLE ON SECURITY
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“Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Canadian
Somali Community and that Community’s Response”**

I want to take this opportunity to thank Chairman King and the distinguished members of this committee for inviting me to provide testimony to this committee.

My name is Ahmed Hussien and I am the national president of the Canadian Somali Congress. It is a national advocacy organization that advocates on issues of importance to the 200,000 strong Canadian Somali community. The Canadian Somali Congress works to foster a Canada where Canadian Somalis, as part of the fabric of that country, live in and contribute fully into Canadian Society with the eventual goal of full integration. I am a Canadian Muslim who is proud of his faith and heritage. I believe that the Canadian and American values of democracy, liberty, rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities do not contradict the tenets of my faith. It is a fact lost on many that Muslims, including Canadian Somalis, can best practice their faith in societies such as Canada and the United States that guarantee the rights of individuals including freedom of worship. The civil rights of our community members must obviously be protected but it is equally important to disseminate these integration- friendly messages in order to contribute to a process where our community emphasizes the defense and attachment to the countries of Canada and the United States.

I come from a community that is a relatively new community to Canada. After fleeing a civil war that gripped Somalia in the late 1990s, the Canadian Somali community is now undergoing the growing pains of integration into the larger Canadian mainstream

society. The statistics associated with this community bear this out. The median family income of the Canadian Somali community is six times less than the median family income of mainstream Canadians and three times less than other visible minorities. 68% of this community is between 1 to 14 years of age and 84% are 30 years of age or younger. In major cities such as Toronto and Ottawa, the unemployment rate of Canadian Somalis is close to 40%, much lower than the Canadian unemployment rate of around 7%. Due to poverty, dislocation and family separation as a result of the journey of escape from Somalia’s civil war, many young males in our community have dropped out high school. The segment of the youth who are industrious, law abiding and succeed in school easily graduate but have tremendous difficulties accessing jobs and professions. This is due to the fact that there is a shortage of professionals in our community who can mentor these young people and ease their way into their chosen jobs and professions. The best example that I can use to illustrate this point is to relate the story of Abdinasir, a young Canadian Somali who played by the rules, stayed out of trouble and graduated with a degree in accounting. I ran into him in 2007 and asked him if he had found a job as an accountant. He replied that he has a menial job working in a coffee shop because he couldn’t find a Somali accountant anywhere who could mentor

him. This is despite the fact that he could work under any accountant but his horizons were limited with the notion that he could only work under a Somali man. After this encounter, I realized that thousands of young Canadian Somalis were graduating from colleges and universities but ending up being unemployed or working at menial jobs. The response of the majority of these young people is to persevere and keep working hard to improve their socio-economic status. A minority of them become alienated and fall victim to a narrative that turns them against Canada and the United States, the very countries that have sustained them and also gave refuge to their parents as they fled the brutal civil war in Somalia. This dangerous and constant anti-western narrative is fed to them by radicals in our community who do not hesitate to use these vulnerable youth as gun fodder in their desire to establish a base for the Al Qaeda terrorist group in Somalia. We have made many efforts to counter this development. One initiative that we took was to partner with the Canadian Jewish Congress to launch the Canadian Somali Jewish Mentorship Project. This national project aims to place hundreds of young Canadian

Somalis in jobs and professions that match their educational experience and help to steer them away from alienation and extremism. This is the first national project in Canada between the Jewish community and a large Muslim community.

Early in 2011, Canadian national security officials confirmed the disappearances of dozens of young Canadian Somali males who had travelled to Somalia to fight for the Al Shabaab, a terrorist group that is officially allied with Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Three of these individuals have died in Somalia fighting for this group. Lately, the recruiters have turned their attention to the facilitation of young Canadian Somali women into joining Al Shabaab. Whether this is an attempt to stay one step ahead of law enforcement scrutiny is not clear. These figures point to the fact that the scale of Canada's problem with Al-Shabaab radicalization and recruitment is comparable to that experienced by the United States and countries in Europe, which also have sizable populations of ethnic Somalis. Al-Shabab, which means The Youth in Arabic, has been using a mix of terrorism and insurgency to impose Taliban-like rule of terror in Somalia, which has been without an effective government for more than two decades. The group's tactics — suicide bombings, roadside bombs, political assassinations and a pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden — have landed the group on international terrorist lists, including Canada's. Using an Internet propaganda campaign, Al-Shabab has attracted hundreds of foreigners, among them Canadians, who have flocked to Somalia to join what they claim is a global jihad against the West. It is very disturbing to us as Canadian citizens to see the children of those who fled the civil war in Somalia return to a country they barely know and contribute to its misery. There is an additional concern that these individuals would come back to threaten and harm Canada, the very country that has given us peace, security and opportunity. Those who are recruited to make the journey to Somalia in order to fight for the Al Shabaab are transformed by the experience and often turn into recruiters themselves. The radicalization and recruitment of American Somalis into a life of international jihad in 2006 to 2009 mirrors the pattern that was to emerge in Canada from 2009 to the present time. Although the Internet is the main tool for the transmission of messaging that leads to radicalization, you still need facilitators who pay and arrange for the transportation of these recruits half way across the world. It is in this area that

Canadian media reports have shown a clear connection between the radicals operating in the Minneapolis American Somali community and those radicals living in Canada that are responsible for the radicalization and recruitment of Canadian Somalis. The strategy of Canadian officials as they confront this phenomenon in my community has been to view this serious matter only through the prism of law enforcement. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of our efforts have been dedicated to the prevention of a major terrorist attack. There has not been a parallel attempt to counter the toxic anti-western narrative that creates a culture of victimhood in the minds of members of our community. It is only members of the Canadian Somali community and members of the larger Canadian Muslim community that can credibly confront and eradicate this narrative from our community's midst. Equally important, the leaders of this effort in the community are those that emphasize integration and the adherence to and respect for American and Canadian values and not those that promote separation, extremism and victimology. The role of the Canadian and American governments should be to encourage and strengthen the former while shunning and denouncing the latter.

Mr. Ahmed Hussen is a community activist, law graduate, and an analyst on issues of security and governance in East Africa. He is the National President of the Canadian Somali Congress (www.canadiansomalicongress.com). He can be reached at (canadiansomalicongress@gmail.com)