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On the Menace of the Vanishing Somali Youth By Abukar Arman BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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Somalia has a new government that many consider to possess what it takes to spearhead sustainable peace and bring the lawlessness of the past two decades to an end. However, this article is not about that, or about the so-called Somali piracy.

This article is about mysteriously disappearing Somali boys ages 14-21. It's also about a well respected religious leader accused of leading a mosque that not only brainwashed the boys and young men into embracing violent extremism and suicidal nationalism, but facilitated and funded their travel to Somalia in association with Al Shabab - an entity enlisted in the US as a terrorist organization. And, of course, an entire community is set to pay the price.

The impetus

Late last summer, as the Somali community of Minneapolis was struggling to figure out the fate of at least a dozen Somali youth, meticulously coordinated deadly bombings shook up two cities in the peaceful northwestern region of Somalia (Somaliland) and the northeastern (Puntland). Shortly after, a controversial community activist laid the blame directly on Abubakar As-Saddique Islamic Center of Minneapolis. He accused the center of engaging in clandestine activities that recruited the suicide bombers who carried out the deadly operation. What ensued was a cacophony of accusations and counter-accusations.

Real or perceived, the allegations triggered legitimate security concerns, especially in light of the widely covered Mumbai terrorist attack. Both in the US and UK , the threat clarion was blown. Consequently, Somalis traveling to and from overseas are being thoroughly interrogated at their points of entry.

According to the CIA, Somalia as a war-ravaged state is a fertile breeding ground for terrorism. The 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia is believed to have inspired some Somali expatriates around the world to join the anti-occupation insurgency.

While they are refraining from saying it, the FBI is on an investigative trail extending from the scene of the crime in northern Somalia to Minneapolis. Agents have been showing up at mosques in Minnesota , Ohio, and Virginia. On the other hand, the FBI outreach team is tirelessly working on building bridges of understanding with the community. Likewise, the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the Department of Homeland Security has been reassuring Somali community leaders that they would be watchful of any law enforcement violations against their community.

Across the seas, the MI5 and other British law enforcement agencies are expressing the same concerns and have been following the same footsteps. And, according to travelers who went through the UK , Somalis are routinely subjected to more questioning scrutiny and one may say, harassment. Many of these travelers complained that they were coerced to answer religiously intimidating questions such as "Have you been into a mosque while you were traveling?" and "Who did you meet in the mosque?"

The Mystery

Every year over 300,000 children and adolescents turn up missing in the US and UK. Some are runaways who might or might never go back to their families; others might fall victims of one violent crime or another, but seldom do these daunting cases allude to some international conspiratorial or criminal activities.

Just a few weeks ago, in Reston, Virginia , a 14-year-old Somali American boy turned up missing. The news created hysteria among the Somali community. The knee-jerk conclusion was that the 'Minneapolis phenomenon' had made its way to Virginia. So, people rushed to the nearest international airports - Baltimore/Washington International and Dulles.

Amidst this frantic condition, a local organization - Somali American Community Association - took a more reasoned approach by sending an alert to every individual and organization in their database and mobilizing a neighborhood wide search. Within 24 hours of their door-to-door "have you seen the boy in this picture" campaign, the troubled juvenile was found hiding in his friend's family home.

The Backlash

The Somali community of Minneapolis feels it's being prosecuted in the court of public opinion. They believe the reputation of one of their respected religious leaders - Sheikh Abdirahman Sheikh Omar - is being smeared.

Sheikh Abdirahman, as he is known, is the imam of Abubakar Mosque. An imam is the

highest cleric of a given mosque. And though Sheikh Abdirahman is in the center of this whole controversy, his version or that of the mosque is seldom sought by the media.

Interested in his perspective regarding the vanishing youth phenomenon and any backlash against his person, the mosque, and the Minneapolis Somali community, I called the imam for an interview. He called back an hour or so later, ready to speak.

The imam opened up: "The fact of the matter is that the Somali community in Minneapolis is made of primarily refugees who settled here in recent years. And as an uprooted society coming from a war-torn country, Somalis, especially the youth, have been facing numerous challenges. They are at-Risk of being attracted to truancy, delinquency, and gangster life," said Sheikh Abdirahman.

The problem is exacerbated as some families are led by single parents, or parents who are not literate in their own native language. Many of these parents face difficulties in becoming functional in this new society. This is coupled with the incrementally diminishing role of the extended family which provided a social safety net that not only sustained family cohesion, but helped retain their Islamic values. So, as a result of the current condition, parents and children grew apart - both in terms of culture and values. There are some mothers who were abandoned by all their children, in some case five or six children. This is an anomaly both within the Islamic context and in Somali culture. "Of course, we, like any community, have all types of people. We have a number of our youth graduating from colleges and universities who are becoming productive citizens, and we have close to 3,000 in the juvenile justice system and the prisons (out of an estimated 70,000) and 9 Somali-on-Somali murders," said Sheikh Abdirahman.

It was these daunting realities that compelled some concerned leaders to galvanize the entire community to pull its resources and build institutions such as mosques and schools in order to help save these at-risk youth and build their character which should be based on the best aspect of their two worlds. Therefore, the role of Abubakar Islamic Center mosque is the same as any other mosque, which is to operate as a house of God and provide a spiritual ground where people can "worship The Creator, so He may strengthen their piety and spiritual purification."

As to whether or not the allegations that the mosque has been engaging in some criminal activities that include brainwashing children into becoming suicide bombers and providing resources and contacts necessary to join Al Shabab in Somalia, he said these are "unsubstantiated...politically motivated rumors that unfortunately started within our community. Our mosque is far from being such an evil institution that would promote or engage in such activities," added Sheikh Abdirahman.

"I am an educator. I have been working for the Minneapolis public schools for 10 years. I teach math and science. I am not in the business of corrupting minds and hearts or leading the same young minds that I am committed to save to their annihilation in this life and the hereafter," said the sheikh whose picture has been paraded around in the pages of many media outlets, especially in the US and UK. Sheikh Abdirahman is currently a PhD student at the Graduate Theological Foundation.

There are a number young men and women who, before graduating from universities in

the Twin Cities, have studied Quran and developed good character in the mosque. The mosque, according to Sheikh Abdirahman, encourages the young to embrace their religion and adopt all the good values in their newfound community. "We emphasize the importance of promoting that which is good: peace, justice, and good neighborliness and to prevent that which is evil and harmful to the individual and the society" said the Sheikh.

There is a glaring deficiency in this...everything is overblown out of proportion without having credible evidence to substantiate a transnational threat. Many wonder if this is the hysteria of global war on terror - still kicking. Whatever the case may be, the last thing that all concerned parties want is, as one Somali community member put it, "to create another one of those all too familiar scenarios where the devil is repeatedly painted on the wall, until he shows up in person."

In the spirit of preventing such a scenario, Abubakar Mosque, together with the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-Minneapolis,) has hosted a community wide open house in which the director of the FBI is among the invitees.

The Media

The prevalent feeling among the Somali community of Minneapolis is that the media, local and beyond, have not been fair with them. "Media is a weapon of mass destruction, so to speak. Media, by and large, had a field day at our expense. Our collective reputation has been tarnished. Personally, though I never committed any crime any where, I regularly find my picture appearing in stories that incriminate me with innuendoes," said Sheikh Abdirahman, describing a situation familiar to this author.

As a result of lazy reporting and relying entirely on a single source, "I was denied to go to Hajj before boarding my flight. And, to me, that was the worst punishment that any one could inflict on me - denying me to worship God, The Creator".

When it comes to mistrusting the media, Sheikh Abdirahman is not an isolated voice. More and more of the Minneapolis Somali community feel that the media is more interested in amplifying all the negatives and ignoring their positive contributions.

Especially in these uncertain, politically volatile times, media cannot loose its sense of objective skepticism.

In his speech on Feb 23 at the Council on Foreign Relations, the FBI Director Robert Mueller compared his agency's work to that of scientists and astronomers in a lookout for planets outside our solar system. "The universe of crime and terrorism stretches out infinitely before us, and we, too, are working to find what we believe to be out there, but cannot always see". Needless to say, in such endeavor, assumptions shape opinions more than facts.


Meanwhile, the mosque continues to receive hate e-mails and phone calls and assumptions continue to divide the community at large. And banks, in reaction to the sensationalized news, have started in cities such as Columbus, Ohio, to reject doing business with Somali-owned money remittance services, even as they observe the federal compliance guidelines.

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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Abukar Arman, is a freelance writer whose articles and analyses have appeared in the pages of various media groups and think tanks. Click [here](#) to contact Abukar Arman.

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