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Review article

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FOREIGN FIGHTERS OF AL-SHABAAB: SOMALI-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN MINNESOTA CASE STUDY

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to contribute to the vast literature regarding the topic of foreignfighters, specifically in reference to Somali youth residing in the U.S. state of Minnesota whohave joined the Al-Shaabab terrorist group. The research is carried out by tracing andanalyzing theory regarding the processes of radicalization, and then applying it to theSomali-American communityemploying the method of content analysis. The choice of this method stemmed from the need to understand and explain a certain behavior or pattern, relating in this specific case to the inner and deeper motivations that led a certain community to be more vulnerable to the influence of jihad. The research question of this research raises concern regarding the most relevant factors that may have influenced some members of the Somali American community in Minnesota to approach the world of jihad and the al-Shabaab group specifically. The research also examines what were the recruitment techniques used by members of that group in order to have a greater grasp on the Somali youth. Therefore, through the study of the current debate amongscholars regarding the push and pull factors that cause an individual to take up the life of aforeign fighter, this paper seeks to shed light on which ones best apply to the particularity ofthe example of the Somali community in Minnesota. As in fact a diaspora community, thischaracteristic is of fundamental importance for understanding the dynamics by whichnationals embark on the activities of extremist groups far from one's home country. Theconclusions that can be drawn from this research regarding factors thathave a greater impact

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on the radicalization process of American youth of Somali origin andthe ability of the Al-Shabaab group to take full advantage of the particular condition of thatcommunity in the recruitment process. Indeed, what emerges from this analysis is the level ofinfluence of those identity-nationalist and identity-religious elements, as well as the economicand social factors that characterized the two waves of radicalization and recruitment of Somali-American youth of Minnesota examined in this research, referring to the period between 2007 and 2009.

Keywords: Somali-American community, Minnesota, Radicalization, Foreign fighters, Youth.

INTRODUCTION

In light of the fact that Minnesota has produced a high number of foreign fighters oriented towards various terrorist organizations, including mainly ISIS, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the choice of Somali-American youth in Minnesota to join the Al-Shabaab group, covering the time framework from 2007 to 2009. Although East Africa has been the main pool of foreign fighters for Al-Shabaab, in the short period analyzed from the Minneapolis city area alone, at least 20 young boys left for Somalia to join the jihad (Harrington and Thompson 2021).

In light of the fact that the Somali-American community in Minnesota has produced more foreign fighters than any other state in the United States, therefore,the purpose of this paper is to analyze what were the main reasons. Why this trend in this specific community? What are the vulnerabilities that have led Somali-American youth to radicalization and how is recruitment conducted in the Minnesota community? After briefly introducing the phenomenon of foreign fighters and different theoretical models of the radicalization process, the main factors that influenced Somali American youth between 2007 and 2009, in the so-called two waves, will be analyzed.

FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON AND THE PROCESS OF RADICALIZATION

The addressed phenomenon is of relevant interest as, since recent years, the insurgency ofviolent non-state actors started to rely more and more on the inclusion of the so-called foreignfighters. There is still a lot of discussion and disagreement on the legal and universally accepted definition of this phenomenon. However, for the purpose of this

paper, the definition proposed by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights seems the most suitable and even the most widely accepted one:

"A foreign fighter is an individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-State armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion, and/or kinship" (UNODC/TPB 2019, 11).

The formulation of this definition has been constructed following and on the basis of the first appearance of the Foreign Terrorist Fighter terminology, in the Resolution 2170 of the Security Council of the United Nations in 2014 (UNSC, S/RES/2170). This particular year could be considered, of course, not the birth of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, but rather the pivotal moment when it began to be perceived as a threat by the international community and governments in particular. Indeed, the reference in the Resolution was geared toward the escalation of violence that was taking place in Iraq and Syria and the increased flow of fighters from the West to these territories in conflict. Above all, the concern revolved around the willingness of repatriation from the volunteers, which was mostly worrying Western governments about a possible 'blowback' against them (Malet 2015, 1).

In any case, the use *per se* of foreign fighters is certainly not new; it became more defined as a phenomenon at the time of the establishment of the Westphalian international system of sovereign statehood, and thus the emergence of nation states. For instance, the United States were the first to make it illegal for their nationals to join foreign military forces, punishing it with the loss of citizenship under the Neutrality Act of 1794 (Malet 2013, 36). The example was followed by many other countries. Medieval Europe, to say, has always seen the use of multinational forces in combat, or trivially the use of mercenaries, which differ significantly from the actual meaning of foreign fighters. A good example to clarify this differentiation can be traced back to the Spanish Civil War, which involved many transnational forces. Indeed, unlike the mercenaries who fought as labor and thus for money, the recruitment of forces in this confrontation was based primarily on ideological affinities. Similarly, the Arab mobilization of volunteers in the anti-Soviet jihadist movement directed against the Soviet Red Army occupation can be considered another good exemplification (Malet 2013). Hence the difference relies on the motivation that moves them to get engaged in an armed conflict in another country.

There is no fixed pattern of reasons why an individual decides to leave his or her country and join the struggle in a foreign country. The

characteristic of voluntariness is not to be underestimated, but there are also a number of external factors that facilitate this choice. What academics have found are a numerous set of push and pull factors that contribute to a radicalization process in an individual and thus to a conscious choice to make this decision.

Especially young people are more vulnerable to get influenced and radicalized, and above all are more likely to be recruited by terrorist groups. The youth represent an important source for terroristorganizations, and due to certain individual and contextual factors, they are more easily involved in violent extremism. The range of motivations varies widely, from pursuit of a group identity, ideological affinity with that group, to a sense of social, cultural and political exclusion. There are also economic reasons: poverty and unemployment play a role, as does the quest for fame, glory and respect, for what seems like a heroic and exciting adventure. In addition, there are the influences derived from the circle of family and friends or from the community one attends in general, which may be that of a religious leader. Scholars didn't find a universal method of radicalization, but rather a variety of push, pull and individual factors that influence a person and can lead this person to violent extremism. In fact, radicalization does not necessarily mean being a terrorist, but inversely it can be said that there is no violent extremism without radicalization.

In general, radicalization is defined as a process whereby an individual gradually moves toward the implementation of violent acts based on extremist views (Hardy 2018). Several authors have proposed models of radicalization that both resemble and differ in certain respects. Among these, for example, most relevant to the case study seem to be the NYPD Model and Sageman's model. The former elaborates four stages in which an individual goes from the state of pre-radicalization, to self-identification with specifically the Salafist current of the Islamic religion, entering afterwards a stage of indoctrination in which one adopts jihadist ideology, finally entering the stage ofjihadization and acceptance to join an extremist militant activity (King and Taylor 2011). On the other hand, Sageman's 'Four Prongs'represent an interweaving of three cognitive and one situational factor. The first stage is a sense of moral outrage caused by a particular event, consequently the development of a specific worldview that then resonates with personal experiences of moral violation. Finally, this cognitive process leads to interaction with a network of like-minded people (King and Taylor 2011). Moreover,Wiktorowicz's theory, which is not directly referred to in terms of radicalization, presents four processes that can lead a person to join an Islamic extremist group. According to

the author, there is an initial cognitive opening as a consequence of a personal crisis that,secondarily, results in a religious quest (Wiktorowicz 2004,7). Third, the individual aligns his or her worldview with the Islamist worldview, then entering the stage of socialization and adherence to members of the movement by adopting a group identity that differs from the mainstream society. More elaborate is the Moghaddam's"Staircase to Terrorism", whereby through six stages an individual undertakes a process that leads him or her to final radicalization, association with a terrorist group, and the willingness to make an extreme gesture such as aterrorist act (Christmann 2012, 17). Throughout the journey, there is a feeling of discontent at the societal level, whereby an individual perceives himself to be deprived of certain possibilities in relation to an outside group, who secondarily become potential targets of his own frustration as perpetrators. In this context of impatience and disappointment, the moral justification for terrorism comes into play. The latter two models leave room for an extremist organization to play an active role in the process of radicalization and ultimately recruitment (King and Taylor 2011). Indeed, the process of recruitment by external facilitators can be directed at radicalized individuals as much as at individuals who are not necessarily radicalized (Borum 2011).

Hence, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is a complex mechanism demonstrated by the fact that it is difficult to come up with a common definition. This applies to the radicalization process as well, for which there are several valid models.

CASE STUDY: SOMALI-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN MINNESOTA

Context

According to the data provided by the Minnesota Compass, out of a population of 5,563,378, a total of 78,846 people are of Somali origin, including Somali immigrants and Somali-Americans (Minnesota Compass 2022). This exemplifies the largest Somali diaspora outside of East Africa. The first wave of immigration originated from the hardships generated by famine and warfare in the early 1990s. Since the beginning of the Somali civil war, more than a million Somalis have left the country, precisely the U.S. began issuing visas to Somali refugees around 1992. Soon the largest community of Somalis in the Somali diaspora emerged in Minnesota, the majority of which live in the Twin Cities metropolitan

area. Despite this, over the years, it has always been difficult to determine exactly how many people were living in the territory given a certain reticence and fear of presenting themselves to the census and taking part in any governmental initiative, due to the political background from which they were escaping. According to the Security Debrief blog, Cedar-Riverside, also known as Little Mogadishu, is the first landing point for Somali migrants and refugees, who set their goal on moving to other areas of Minnesota, given its reputation as a very impoverished neighborhood with a high crime rate and few job opportunities. In this neighborhood in Minneapolis, the Riverside Plaza is the most iconic landmark, a public housing complex which, according to data dating back to 2013, is populated by more than 10,000 people, compared to the 4,000 for whom there would be room (Hienz 2019). Minnesota, and precisely the Twin Cities, at that time offered economic and social resources and had a quite well-developed system of reception of refugees since the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Hill 2017). In spite of this, with the following waves and the increase of refugees, many governmental and non-governmental institutions began to be overwhelmed and show difficulties in providing proper support and services to youth and families (Hienz 2019). As with any immigration story, arriving in a context so different from one's origin and from a society so different from one's own has created not a few discomfort factors for this community. In analyzing the following critical points, it also emerges what may have been the main footholds for initiating a process of radicalization and recruitment in this specific context.

Radicalization: a complex set od push and pull factors

The vulnerability of young Somali-Americans stems from a multiplicity of factors. What the academy refers to as push and pull factors are a variety of situations that favor bringing a person closer to the radicalization process. In Somali-American youth, there are several aspects that should be taken into consideration. For those who have just arrived in the US for example, the lack oflinguistic skills limits the labor opportunity and results in economic and social immobility. This state of social downgrading is considered, for example, in the model we saw isMoghaddam's theory as one of the social factors that characterize the ground floor of the "Staircase to Terrorism". Despite this, scholars have not identified poverty and unemployment as the main push factors of involvement in terrorism, though they still represent a risk factor of approaching radicalization (Weine et al. 2009). In addition, there is a

sense of deep bewilderment in finding oneself catapulted into a Western culture and society. Even more difficult it proves to be for those Somali-Americans born to immigrants who struggle with a profound identity crisis, which bounces them between their roots and the family context and the everyday life around them, in the country in which they are born and raised, the United States. This is the prime example of the identity crisis that Wiktorowicz, for example, tells us about in the cognitive opening phase (Wiktorowicz 2004). Not to be forgotten are those referred to as Generation 1.5, that is, young people who were born in Somalia and came to the United States after a vicissitude of dramatic events, including life in refugee camps (Weine et al. 2009). In the developmental stage, these children have been exposed to war, atrocities, violence and forced migration that exerted an impact on their psychological well-being and their ability to adapt in a new society. In addition, the experience of these traumatic events may be indirectly passed on by young parents who have suffered torture and sexual abuse, who sometimes struggle in exercising that leadership role to reorient their children in their identity crisis. Even more common is the case that the parents are totally absent, whilst 70 percent of them are single parents (Weine et al. 2009). The result of this soul-searching leads Somali youth to approach and create groups in which they can feel better integrated and supported. That often represents an open window for someone else to influence this process of self-discovery.

Typical of Somali society is the division into clans, which makes that sense of belonging to a group even more exclusive and sought after. For example, the most prevalent group in the Somali ancient tradition are the Darod, Dir, Hawiye and Isaaq, which are in turn divided into other sub-clans (Venugopalan 2017, 2). Therefore, in the American context, not only do these divisions by affiliation remain, but more importantly they manifest themselves in the form of another phenomenon, which is that of criminal gangs. Somali youth approach these gangs in their desperate attempt to find acceptance and fraternity in a group that combines their belonging to two such different contexts, Somalia and America. Gangs reflect more of Western life, US social structure and identity, but not in the observance of its laws, and therefore pose a major threat to internal security. Gangs like the 'Somali Hot Boyz' and 'Madhibaan with Attitude' represent a kind of insurance and support for young boys who are socially isolated from the rest of society (Yuen 2009). Not only that, gangs also provide security and protection, albeit illegal, that young people without trust in institutions and government apparatuses seek. Moreover, these groups have been identified as key players in recruitment, as reported by

Waheid Siraach, a sergeant with the Metro Transit Police (Maruf 2015). Other groups of young people searching for themselves may move toward religious groups, developing a more rigid and narrow view of their faith, which is also often exploited by recruiters.

The religion professed by the Somali community is Islam, historically oriented toward the Sufi current. Nevertheless, the country's political and social instability and the deteriorationof its clan structures have allowed the infiltration of other Islamic currents, such as Sunni Wahhabism. The spread of a narrower interpretation of Islam, as Salafism, a branch of Sunni Islam, has made its way into Somali society ravaged by violence and conflict. Nowadays, Sunnism is the predominant creed in the Somali community in Minnesota. It is likely that this is mostly derived from the inability of religious leaders to pass on their religious literature interpretation as a result of the civil war (Southers and Hienz 2015). Religious centers are among the first nongovernmental associations to provide aid and welcome to migrants and refugees, and especially the presence of mosques in a predominantly Protestant and Catholic community has grown exponentially with the influx of new waves of migration, precisely in order to accommodate the Somali community. The discussion revolves around how much these places of worship have played a role in recruiting and bringing young Somalis closer to jihad. As evidence of this, the largest mosque in the Twin Cities area, Abu-Bakr al Saddique Islamic Center, has been recognized by most as a focal point for recruiting young boys. Especially with regard to the first wave of foreign fighters, most of the 20 boys who left for Somalia between 2007 and 2008 were regulars at this mosque (Aziza 2016). Unlike this first wave, however, the fighters in the following wave did not have strong religious backgrounds, but rather came to it as a result of the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. The ideological-nationalistic factor play an even greater role perhaps in this particular case. The complexity of the political and social situation in the country of origin of these young boys lead them to always have one eye on what is happening in the motherland. It is no coincidence that Al-Shaabab terrorist group began its recruitment process around 2006.

Recruitment process: joining Al-Shabaab

The invasion of Somalia by the historic enemy depicted in Ethiopia has been a catalytic event. As a result of Al-Shabaab and ICU[1]takeover of Mogadishu, the neighbor country as well as the US,

1 The Islamic Court Union was at first a social-religious movement formed by local Islamic

feared a spillover of jihadi violence. The Transnational Government of Somalia, established after the collapse of the Siad Barre regime, requested international aid, which led to the intervention of the United States and the African Union. Many experts have traced the radicalization and transformation of Al-Shaabab into a full-fledged insurgency group to this event. At this sensitive moment, this terrorist group was the most in need of men to support its resistance, and thus it started to rely on the involvement of foreign fighters (Klobucista, Masters, and Sergie 2019). The interference of a foreign country invoked those nationalistic sentiments that had a strong hold on young Somali-Americans, and the involvement of the country that was hosting them but which had not turned out to be all in all the so-called 'American dream', animated the spirits even more (Jenkins 2011). Al-Shabaab soon reached the Somali diaspora, promoting nationalistic and anti-American sentiments, using the image of a traitorous America and a devastated country that needed their help to regain balance and stability (Aziza 2016). The complex set of the previously mentioned push and pull factors, together with this development in the Somalian context, have given extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab the opportunity to manipulate the vulnerability of the youth Somali-American community (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Ahmed 2018). This can be contextualized, for example, in the indoctrination phase of the NYPD model, whereby religiosity is politicized asa result of an event. Thus, the purpose becomes communal rather than individualistic, given that individuals were joining the jihad to support and save brothers and sisters. The process of recruitment is something that can be carried out both online and offline, in a face-to-face interaction. Recruiters thus insinuated themselves into or facilitated the process of radicalization of youth. Investigations have traced the role of the first recruiters, targeting the Somali community in Minnesota, to a European Al-Shabaab fighter, suggesting a bottom-up process of recruitment, as outlined by Sageman (Weine et al. 2009). But it is also true that top-down approaches to recruitment have emerged as well, and thus the former fighters resulted to be the most incisive. Thus, Al-Shabaab's technique has resulted in a mix of face-to-face or otherwise direct albeit online interactions with former foreign fighters, but also through successful use of online propaganda. Especially first-wave fighters have been instrumental in the recruitment process, maintaining an open communication channel with the Minnesota community through *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and other social

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courts which eventually converged in 2000 in the ICU organization. In the context of a political vacuum in 2004the ICU become a militia force which maintained the control of southern Somalia until the Ethiopian invasion of 2006 (Abbink 2009).

media (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Ahmed 2018). Zakaria Maruf, for example, is one of the best-known names, and many of the boys who left for Somalia can be linked to him. He first played a recruiting role in the field in 2007, attending the aforementioned Abubakar As-Saddique Islamic Center Mosque, and then continued to maintain contact with people he met in Minnesota once he moved to southern Somalia to fight (Hienz 2019). The messages and propaganda reaching Somali-American youth were mainly directed at glorifying and heroizing Somali jihad, showing it as an exciting adventure in which one can even have fun. In doing so, they offered themselves to solve that identity crisis, thus providing an escape route for those lost boys, giving them a purpose and a sense of belonging to a group that welcomes and accepts them. Even more incisive in this purpose is the role of American-born recruiters, such as Troy Kastigar, who have turned their backs on their homeland and invite Somali-Americans to do the same, to abandon that very difficult life in the United States to engage in the liberation of their land from the aggressor (Aziza 2016).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the example proposed here reiterates that there are numerous factors in diaspora communities that can lead to involvement of nationals in the activities of extremist groups far from their home country. In the specific case of the Somali community in Minnesota, economic, but especially social factors have played quite a significant role. Social exclusion was found to be one of the main starting points toward the radicalization process, along with religious and nationalistic involvement. The latter aspect is what the terrorist group Al-Shabaab have been better able to exploit in order to recruit foreign fighters under the name of an Islamic-nationalist identity.

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