

How an American Teen Becomes a Suicide Bomber for ISIS

Which city is America's biggest hotbed for terrorists? If you're thinking New York or Los Angeles, you'd be mistaken. Think middle America.

Dozens of young men and women have left Minneapolis-Saint Paul in recent years to join Islamic terrorist groups overseas.

Most of these U.S. passport holders hail from the Twin Cities' large Somali Muslim community.

Some have been suicide bombers. Others star in propaganda videos.

Destination: Islamic State

Their exodus from the Twin Cities began in 2007, with a call to jihad in Somalia, courtesy of the al Qaeda-linked group, al-Shabaab.

Today, their destination is the Islamic State.

"Since July of 2012, we haven't had any kids leave to go join al-Shabaab, but we have had several leave now to go join ISIS," Bob Fletcher, with the Center for Somalia History Studies, told *CBN News*.

"And the reason is that ISIS controls land, they control cities," he explained. "They are in a position to be able to recruit differently than al-Shabaab."

"Al-Shabaab, all they have to promise is 'Come join us in the jungles while we ambush and plot our terrorist attacks.' But what ISIS is selling now is the opportunity to build something, to build a new society, and that is very, very exciting for a lot of kids," Fletcher said.

At least 12 Twin Cities residents have traveled to Syria to join terrorist groups in recent years. All were Somalis except Douglas McCain, an African-American convert killed fighting alongside ISIS last summer.

One Somali-American ISIS recruit even worked at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport before joining the Islamic State.

"The recruiters get a hold of these young people, they mentor them, they assess them, they identify them," Abdirizak Bihi, with the Minneapolis-based Somali Advocacy Center, told *CBN News*.

Unlikely Recruits

Bihi's teenage nephew fell prey to terrorist recruiters and was killed in Somalia in 2008.

"Nobody would believe that a Somali-American kid who grew up here, had nothing to do with Somalia, no culture, or anything, or language, would be brainwashed, radicalized, by the same people, by some of the people we trusted so much, and return him to hellfire in Somalia," Bihi told *CBN News*.

Bihi has received threats for speaking out against the radicalization of his Somali Muslim community.

He said he's fighting an uphill battle here as unemployed young people respond to the message of jihad.

"We are trying with everything we can, but our challenges are plenty because we don't have the resources to work with. It is zero," Bihi said.

The Twin Cities is home to the largest Somali population in North America. Many of the more than 100,000 Somali residents came as part of a taxpayer-funded refugee resettlement program run by the U.S. government.

Assimilation has been a major problem. A large number live in neighborhoods like "Little Mogadishu."

War-torn Somalia has had no functioning central government for nearly 25 years and has become a hotbed for radical Islam.

Somali community activist Omar Jamal left behind that chaos only to confront a similar menace in the Twin Cities.

Recruiters Having Chilling Success

He says terror recruiters are having success beyond just the high school dropout types.

"The idea has always been that ISIS and even al-Shabaab targets those kids. But we later came to find out that even an 'A' student in universities and colleges are also vulnerable to this powerful propaganda machine," Jamal said. "And it has been very successful—kids are responding to it."

According to Jamal, radical Islamic ideology is a powerful recruitment tool for ISIS—and the Islamic State's success breeds attraction.

"ISIS thus far has succeeded in putting up an image where they are righting the wrongs and respecting the Muslim world—that they're bringing respect back," Jamal told *CBN News*. "And it's working for them."