

What Makes A Kid From The U.S. Join ISIS?

Contributed by [Leora Falk](#)

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First Al-Shabab, then ISIS, came recruiting in the Twin Cities, tearing families apart. Is there any way to understand how a good kid on track to go to college ends up in Syria working for ISIS?

NPR's All Things Considered: For Somalis In Minneapolis, Jihadi Recruiting Is A Recurring Nightmare

By Dina Temple-Raston

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Bihi's nephew was a Minneapolis teenager named Burhan Hassan, who joined a handful of young men from the Twin Cities and traveled to Somalia to join a terrorist group there called al-Shabab. Hassan died there several years ago. Between 2006 and 2011, some 27 Somali-Americans from the community disappeared to fight in Somalia.

That's important to what's going on now because officials believe that prior connection to jihad is one reason why ISIS has been so successful at recruiting in Minnesota today.

Since the end of 2013, law enforcement officials say, eleven men and one woman with ties to the Twin Cities have traveled to Syria. Another dozen or so either have tried to travel there before authorities intercepted them, or are believed to be preparing to go. What's more, officials say, the ISIS travelers are young: 15 and 16-year-olds are signing up.

Parents in the community are frightened. They have experienced this before, and there is a sinking feeling among parents that they'll be losing their children again.

"They are more afraid now than ever before because ISIS is something worse than anything we have ever seen," said Bihi.

Officials believe ISIS is taking advantage of the recruiting infrastructure al-Shabab developed almost a decade ago.

Back then, the departures came three or four friends at a time. They would suddenly vanish. Eventually parents would get text messages from their sons saying they had gone to Somalia to fight in the civil war.

Bihi's nephew, Burhan Hassan, left with a handful of other young men on election night 2008. Bihi and Hassan's mother thought he hadn't come home because he was out celebrating the election of America's first black president; instead he was boarding a plane to Africa.

Authorities never captured a mastermind in those al-Shabab cases. Instead, they managed to arrest someone they believed was a midlevel player — a local janitor who had connections to al-Shabab. He was convicted of, among other things, helping recruit the young men and financing their trips.

In the latest recruitment cases, law enforcement officials believe that a page has been torn from al-Shabab's playbook, and that there is someone — or a group of people — on the ground in Minnesota recruiting for ISIS.

Bihi says nothing else makes sense.

"I do not believe that a kid gets up in the morning — a normal kid — and decides not to go to school, but decides to open a Google and Google al-Shabab or ISIS, and to self-radicalize," he said. "There has to be

someone helping them on the ground. These kids don't know how to make plans to travel, they don't have money, but somehow they are managing to leave anyway. Someone must be helping them."

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One of the wrenching themes to come out of this week's conference on countering violent extremism conference just how difficult recruiting and radicalization is for the families.

I met Abdullahi Yusuf's parents in Brandl's law offices last week. Sidik Yusuf is tall and thin. He's a driver in the Twin Cities. His wife Sarah wears a hijab and twists a tissue while she talks. They seemed shocked at finding themselves in law offices talking about a son who was arrested on terrorism charges. He had never been in trouble before.

"Abdullahi is my son," Sidik Yusuf says. "Now is 18 years and a half almost started 18. He come to this country when he was three years old and finished his education until the 12th grade."

He talked about how good Abdullahi was at math, how he played football on the high school team. How worried he became when his tall, skinny son was tackled.

"He doesn't have much muscles," he explained.

Sidik Yusuf didn't want to talk directly about his son's case, but said his family wasn't the only family dealing with young men stolen by ISIS.

"I think any parent can understand — who have a child or raised a child — knows what's the value of the children," Sidik Yusuf said. "Of course it is heartbreaking. That's the thing anybody can understand."