

Case 60: Ohio Returnee from Syria

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Ever since 9/11, there has been concern about Americans who go abroad to train with terrorist groups and then return to the United States to commit mayhem. For the most part, this concern has been overwrought: few have returned and even fewer have launched terrorist acts, facts that hold for Western Europe as well.¹ Among the cases in this book, there have been three in which Americans might have returned but were arrested overseas before they could do so (Cases 6, 7, 24), and only two where those trained abroad actually did return—only to fail miserably at their mission (Cases 28, 34; see also Case 5).

Concerns about potential returnees escalated in 2011 with the onset of a chaotic civil war in Syria in which foreign adventurers variously joined groups fighting to depose Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, and then even more so in 2014 with the rise of ISIS, an especially vicious group that actively recruits foreign fighters.

Thus far, however, only one American since 2011 has actually gone to the Middle East, received training, and then returned while apparently harboring thoughts about committing terrorism in the United States.

He is a Somali-American citizen, aged 23 at the time of his arrest, from Columbus, Ohio. Although under watch by the FBI because of some inflammatory and provocative Facebook postings, he bought a one-way air ticket to Greece in April 2014, abandoned the flight in Turkey during a layover, and made his way to Syria to join his much-admired older brother in the ranks of al-Nusra, a rebel group affiliated with al-Qaeda that was at the time fighting against ISIS as well as against the Syrian regime.² A few days after his brother was killed in action in early June, he returned to the United States.

Before, during, and after the trip, he was in communication with two friends who say he told them that, urged by a cleric in al-Nusra, he was planning to commit terrorism in the United States by attacking a military facility and perhaps a prison and also by killing three or four American soldiers at a military base in Texas execution style. He may have been seeking to recruit at least one of the friends to participate in the effort.³

Interviewed by the FBI upon his return, he told them he had not gone to Syria, but had remained in Turkey during the two months he was in the Middle East. In September 2014, he called attention to himself by teaching two other men

¹ Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Policy Paper 34, November 2014; see also Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists* (New York: Crown, 2016), pp. 258-61. For a broad consideration, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review*, February 2013.

² Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), ch. 6.

³ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, Indictment, United State District Court, Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, April 16, 2015, 8.

how to fire a semi-automatic pistol at a local shooting range.⁴ The owner of the gun range found this suspicious and notified the authorities.⁵ In November, he skipped out of a restaurant without paying his bill of \$15.33 and was charged with misdemeanor theft. When he failed to appear for sentencing in February 2015, he was arrested, then released, and then re-arrested by the FBI and charged with providing support for terrorism while being held on \$2.5 million bail.⁶ The theft charge, none too surprisingly, was dropped.⁷

At around this time, his two friends either “came forward,” as Maria Chabali puts it, or were enticed to do so by the FBI as they investigated further. Together with evidence gathered in searches of his home and Facebook postings, the friends provided information from his online and face-to-face communications with them that allowed federal prosecutors to escalate and give greater depth to the charges in April 2015.

He did make one unexplained trip to Texas for a few weeks in early 2015.⁸ However, as Chabali notes, “he was never found to have any weapons or specific plans aside from those he had talked about with his friends.”

⁴ Kathy Lynn Gray, “Documents reveal details about Columbus man accused of helping terrorists,” *dispatch.com*, April 21, 2015.

⁵ Ted Hart, “Terror Suspect Visited Local Gun Range,” *nbc4i.com*, April 22, 2015.

⁶ John Fuddy, “\$2.5 million bail sought for Columbus terrorism suspect; court appearance today,” *dispatch.com*, February 25, 2015.

⁷ Gray, “Documents reveal details about Columbus man.”

⁸ Fuddy, “\$2.5 million bail sought for Columbus terrorism suspect,”

Case 60: Ohio Returnee from Syria

Maria Chabali

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1. Overview

In April of 2015, a 23-year-old resident of Columbus, Ohio, Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, was charged with offering material support to a designated terrorist group. He was a naturalized citizen of the United States who had emigrated from Somalia with his family as a toddler. After his older brother had traveled to Syria to fight for the al-Nusra front, Mohamud became interested and followed, and the two communicated online frequently to plan the trip. Once there, he received training from al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist organization, from April to June of 2014, and upon his return, he aspired, as urged by a cleric in that organization, to commit acts of terrorism in the United States. More specifically, he wanted to attack anyone in uniform, including police officers, and to kill soldiers at a military base in Texas execution style. Mohamud was arrested before going through with his plans, or even obtaining weapons, and has been incarcerated since then, failing to work out a plea deal. The case is significant because it is the “first publicly-acknowledged case of an American going to Syria for jihadist training and returning home to commit terrorism.”¹

2. Nature of the adversary

Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud was a 23-year-old resident of Columbus, Ohio.² He was born in Somalia, but had been naturalized as an American citizen.³ His family moved to Columbus in 1998, and he had only lived in Somalia as a baby.⁴ There is no evidence that Mohamud was much of a practicing Muslim. He graduated from Whitehall Yearling high school.⁵ After that, he worked in a warehouse and had a few other jobs.⁶ He had been arrested once before for a minor theft charge.⁷

His lawyer, Sam Shamansky, claimed he wasn't violent, had no criminal record (aside from the minor theft charge), and “knew more about basketball than bombs.”⁸ He said that Mohamud has been “respectful, helpful, and engaged.”⁹ He had a brother, Abdifatah Aden, fighting for al-Nusra in

¹ Ryan Mauro, “Ohio Arrest Shows Threat to U.S. From Al-Qaeda in Syria,” *Clarion Project*, April 19, 2015.

² “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists,” United States Department of Justice, April 16, 2015.

³ Tracy Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’: Lawyer,” *NBC News*, April 17, 2015.

⁴ Scott Shane, “Ohio Man Trained in Syria Is Charged With Planning Terrorism in U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2015.

⁵ Kathy Lynn Gray, “Columbus Man Indicted on Terrorism Charges by Federal Grand Jury,” *Columbus Dispatch*, April 16, 2015.

⁶ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁷ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁸ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

⁹ Gray, “Columbus Man Indicted on Terrorism Charges by Federal Grand Jury.”

Syria and another brother, Abdiqani Aden, who was also arrested for making a gun-like gesture to a prison guard.¹⁰ Mohamud's lawyer claims that he comes from a great family and also has a sister who attends Columbus State Community College.¹¹ The family had fled Somalia during the country's civil war.¹² Mohamud had friends, some of whom he had told about some of his plans and some from a basketball team he played on.

Mohamud became a naturalized citizen of the U.S. on February 18, 2014, and he applied for a passport a week later.¹³ The FBI questioned him on February 20, 2014 where he lied about his identity and claimed to be his older brother, Aden, who was fighting in Syria with al-Nusra.¹⁴ The FBI challenged his claim and he then admitted his true identity.¹⁵ Yet, just six weeks later, he was allowed to travel abroad where he managed to get to Syria and trained with al-Nusrah, a terrorist organization, from April to June of 2014.¹⁶ After his brother was killed, he returned with instructions to perform terrorist attacks in the U.S. Mohamud was free to travel and train others for eight months before he was arrested at his home in Ohio and never got to go through with his plans.¹⁷

3. Motivation

A large part of Muhamud's motivation seems to have come from his older brother, Aden. Family ties are important in a lot of terrorism cases and Aden definitely influenced his younger brother. In September of 2013, they began talking online about plans to travel to Syria and for Muhamud to financially support Aden.¹⁸ In a conversation with his brother he expressed his desire to "join you in the high ranks as a Mujahid."¹⁹ He also told his brother that shooting a rifle would bring him "closer to Jannah," which is Arabic for "heaven" or "paradise," so it seems that some type of religious motivation was also at play.²⁰ Records of their online communication, "shows their motivations were not frustration with U.S. foreign policy or personal trials. They were inspired by a glorification of those who die in violent jihad and a belief that such 'martyrs' are guaranteed entry into heaven."²¹ They were motivated by a desire to leave this world as fighters and be welcomed into paradise in the afterlife.

¹⁰ Connor, "Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a 'Normal Kid'."

¹¹ Connor, "Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a 'Normal Kid'."

¹² Connor, "Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a 'Normal Kid'."

¹³ Patrick Poole, "Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI Two Days After Becoming Naturalized U.S. Citizen," *Counter-Jihad Report*, April 21, 2015.

¹⁴ Poole, "Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI."

¹⁵ Poole, "Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI."

¹⁶ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, Indictment, United State District Court, Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, April 16, 2015, p. 5.

¹⁷ Poole, "Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI."

¹⁸ Kevin Landers, "Columbus Man Pleads Not Guilty to Plotting Military Base Attack," *WBNS-10TV Columbus, Ohio*, April, 17, 2015.

¹⁹ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 2.

²⁰ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 2.

²¹ Ryan Mauro, "Ohio Arrest Shows Threat."

4. Goals

Aside from being influenced by his older brother and being inspired by religious motivations, Mohamud came back with some very specific goals. One was to kill Americans, specifically targeting military ones: “armed forces, police officers, or any uniformed individuals.”²² Earlier, he had told his brother that he wanted to join him in the high ranks as a Mujahid, which is a violent jihadist.²³ And he had told a friend that he was going to perform violent acts, join a group overseas, and kill any U.S. allies on the battlefield.²⁴ After his brother’s death, he expressed happiness and a hope that he would be next and join Aden soon.²⁵

After receiving training in Syria and after his brother’s death, he says that a cleric in the group told him to return to the U.S. and perform acts of terrorism.²⁶ His first plan was to attack a military facility with his backup plan being to attack a prison.²⁷ Even more specifically he wanted to attack three or four American soldiers at a military base in Texas.²⁸

5. Plans for violence

Before going abroad, Mohamud shared a lot with two friends who later informed the FBI of what he had told them. Mohamud told one that his brother had gone to Syria to fight and how proud he was of him. He also talked about he himself going overseas to kill Americans on the battlefield and perform violent acts. He said that he would go to Istanbul where he would obtain a visa, take cars to the border, and that “they” would smuggle him into Syria. He said that he wanted to buy an iPad that he could sell in Turkey and that the money would either go to his brother or to buy a gun, a wife, or training. He compared different extremist groups in Syria and was looking for a group that was good at fighting and would teach him Arabic.²⁹

Mohamud used social media, specifically Facebook, to express himself before he traveled to Syria. On March 6, 2013, he posted, “The Sabaha were knights by day and monks at night how will we ever reach there [sic] height while we are in a devastating fright. So oh Syria fight! We will never lose to these pagan alawyits.” On March 10, 2013, Mohamud changed his cover photo to a “silhouette of lined armed fighters with a man in the middle holding...the Black Flag.” This flag is a symbol of ISIL and other terrorist groups to “symbolize offensive war for the establishment of a Caliphate.” On December 17, 2013, he posted an alarming photo to his profile. It is described as, “an artist rendering of a soldier holding a Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle with bipod and scope, what appears to be the ISIL emblem in the bottom right-hand

²² Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

²³ Landers, “Columbus Man Pleads Not Guilty to Plotting Military Base Attack.”

²⁴ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 3.

²⁵ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 8.

²⁶ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 8.

²⁷ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

²⁸ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

²⁹ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, pp. 3, 8.

corner, and text across the top of the image that states, “Among the believers are men who have been true to their covenant with Allah.”³⁰

A lot of Mohamud’s plans were made through online correspondence with his brother, and he was apparently following his older brother there after learning that the extremist groups with the best fighters were there.³¹ In February 2014, the brothers had online communication about how Mohamud could send money to Abdifatah. At the beginning of the month, he messaged his brother saying, “let me know how I can send u money plzzzzz.”³² On February 20, 2014, Aden told Mohamud to call someone who had promised him \$1,000.³³ Sometime between this date and February 26, Mohamud collected the money and Abdifatah wanted him to send the money through an unidentified third party.³⁴ About a month later, Mohamud wanted to send the money, but Abdifatah told him that a bank account would “get ur hands dirty.”³⁵ On April 6, they discussed using an international money service called MoneyGram.³⁶

Later in April, Mohamud used his new U.S. passport to buy a ticket to Greece, but purposely missed his flight to Athens during his layover in Turkey and instead, traveled to Syria as he had arranged in advance.³⁷ Once abroad, he continued his correspondence with friends back home, sending pictures and videos. Included were images of landmarks and videos of himself in Turkey as well as in Syria showing a gun holstered on his hip, while another showed the house where he was staying which had white with a black flag hanging.³⁸ Mohamud also communicated with another friend after arriving in Syria, a “peer and associate” who was living in the U.S.³⁹ Mohamud sent him a video wearing a turban in a sandy area, carrying an AK-47 and mentioning that he had it.⁴⁰

He sent his brother the name of his hotel in Istanbul and he was told to call someone named Nedal who would pick him up the next day in Reyhanli, Turkey, a city that borders Turkey and Syria. In mid-April 2014, someone named Nidal (presumably the same person as Nedal), communicated with another individual named Adnan about transporting Mohamud to Reyhanli. Adnan told Nidal to pick up someone by the name of “Abd-al-Rahman” from the same hotel where Mohamud was staying. A day later Nidal told Adnan that “Abdulrahman is with me” and that they were traveling together to Antioch, a city in southern Turkey about 27 miles from Reyhanli. On April 25, 2014, Nidal told Adnan that Mohamud had entrusted him with \$1,000 for “his

³⁰ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 6.

³¹ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

³² *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 4.

³³ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 4.

³⁴ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 4.

³⁵ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 4.

³⁶ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 4.

³⁷ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

³⁸ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. pp. 6-7.

³⁹ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 7.

⁴⁰ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 7.

brother, Abd-al-Fattah.” Adnan agreed to help with the money transfer and Nidal told him that Mohamud was part of the al-Nusra front at this point. In response to this, Adnan said, “Good, may God facilitate his path,” and Nidal replied saying, “Amen, oh God. He wanted to go to ISIS.”⁴¹

Mohamud’s brother, Aden, was killed during the war in Syria around June 3, 2014, as he fought for the al Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra.⁴² On June 4, 2014, a few pictures were posted to Aden’s Facebook page. In the first, he is reading a book, and in the second, he looks to be dead and his head is bandaged.⁴³ The photo is accompanied by a caption that implies that he was killed in Syria, and he is referred to as “Abu Hasan.”⁴⁴

Shortly after his brother’s death, Mohamud returned to the U.S. He had been in Syria for about two months. Upon his return, Mohamud told his friends that he had received training in Syria “from a group in various areas, including shooting weapons, breaking into houses, explosives, and hand-to-hand combat” and that he had attended a “military-type training camp” where he was trained physically and guarded the camp at night. All evidence of Mohamud’s training comes from his statements. He also says that a cleric in al-Nusra instructed him to carry out acts of terrorism in the United States which seems to be the reason why he returned to the U.S. Mohamud said that he wanted to “target armed forces, police officers, or any uniformed individuals” and that he would attack a military facility with a prison as his back-up plan. He also told a friend that he wanted to kill American soldiers execution style at a military base in Texas, and the friend he felt that Mohamud was trying to get him to join in on his plans.⁴⁵

He trained with a shooting group in Columbus, Ohio, and then rented a shooting lane where he tried to teach other shooters how to use a semi-automatic pistol. And he was free to travel the U.S. and to train others for eight months before he was arrested at his home in Ohio.⁴⁶ He was never found to have any weapons or specific plans aside from those he had talked about with his friends.

Mohamud was indicted on several counts. The first is knowingly attempting to “provide support and resources...including property, currency, services, and personnel, including himself, knowing or intending that such material support and resources were to be used in preparation for, or in carrying out...conspiracy to kill, kidnap, maim, or injure individuals outside of the United States.”⁴⁷ He was also charged with knowingly “providing material support to a designated terrorist organization.”⁴⁸ Finally, he was charged with a “false statement involving international terrorism” for claiming to the FBI in the Southern District of Ohio that when he was abroad, he did not leave

⁴¹ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, pp. 4-5.

⁴² Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

⁴³ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 7.

⁴⁴ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁶ Poole, “Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI.”

⁴⁷ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*, p. 10.

Istanbul, Turkey.⁴⁹ Mohamud has been incarcerated and was working on a plea deal with prosecutors, but “no agreement was reached and the federal indictment resulted.”⁵⁰

6. Role of informants

In June 2014, Mohamud returned to the U.S. bragging about his training to two friends who later reported their conversations to the FBI.⁵¹ One had known Mohamud for about three years, is a United States resident, and is also Muslim.⁵² Before going abroad, Mohamud told him about his brother, his desire to go abroad and fight, and some of his plans for violence. Once abroad, Mohamud continued his correspondence, sending him pictures and videos of himself containing signs that he was up to no good. He sent images of himself holding a gun and in front of a house with a black flag that is an ISIS symbol.⁵³ Once in Syria, he communicated with the other friend and sent him pictures and videos as well.

These friends of Mohamud’s only came forward after his arrest. They could have helped a lot more had they alerted the FBI or authorities earlier so that Mohamud would never have been approved to travel abroad. It has not been said what has become of the informants since the trial ended.

7. Connections

Mohamud was connected to the terrorist group al-Nusra through his brother who was fighting for them in Syria. He had told his brother of his desire to “join you in the high ranks as a Mujahid” which is a violent jihadist.⁵⁴ He also told his brother how proud he was of him “to be a simple soldier” and that shooting a rifle would bring him “closer to Jannah”—Jannah is Arabic for “heaven” or “paradise.”⁵⁵

As noted, Mohamud traveled to Syria in April of 2014 to fight with foreign terrorists and was trained by the al-Nusra front to shoot weapons, break into homes, use explosives, and be in hand-to-hand combat.⁵⁶ The “Al-Nusra front” or “Jabhat al-Nusra” was deemed a Foreign Terrorist Organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act by the U.S. Department of State.⁵⁷ Along with ISIS and al-Nusra, it is possible that the training camp was also affiliated with the Khorasan group, “Qaeda operatives dispatched from Pakistan to Syria with the goal of plotting against

⁴⁹ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 11.

⁵⁰ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁵¹ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

⁵² *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 3.

⁵³ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 7.

⁵⁴ Landers, “Columbus Man Pleads Not Guilty to Plotting Military Base Attack.”

⁵⁵ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 2.

⁵⁶ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁵⁷ *United States vs. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud*. p. 5.

Western targets.”⁵⁸ However, officials from the Justice department have not been able to confirm this.⁵⁹

Mohamud also stated that he was told by a cleric to come back to the U.S. and perform an act of terrorism.⁶⁰ His statement of this is the only evidence that he was instructed.

8. Relation to the Muslim community

According to the director of the Masjid Ibn Tamiyah Islamic Center, Ahmed Ahmed, Muhamed did not attend mosque, but played against the center’s basketball team. Mohamud and his brother followed Islamic Radicalism, and the cleric who instructed him to return to the U.S. and perform acts of terrorism was a radical Muslim.⁶¹ However, there aren’t any sources that explicitly talk about Mohamud’s relationship to the Muslim community or if he could have been seen as a practicing Muslim at any point in his life.

9. Depiction by the authorities

As noted, Mohamud was questioned by the FBI just days after becoming a naturalized citizen. In this interview, they found him to be lying about his identity. Yet, just days later, he applied for a passport and was permitted to travel to Syria. FBI agent Stephen Flowers said, “When challenged about his truthfulness, he admitted his true identity” as if that made him less suspect.⁶²

After Mohamud’s arrest, Flowers said, “Organizing weapons training is consistent with individuals who previously obtained training from...training camps to, upon return to their homeland, seek to recruit a group of young male adults in order to lead them to be like-minded jihadist believers prepared to fight.”⁶³ This statement suggests that the fact that Mohamud brought groups together to the shooting range to teach them to shoot should have been a red flag. It seems that the authorities are trying to cover up the fact that they were at fault in letting this case escalate and were trying to act as if Mohamud was never a suspect at all.

10. Coverage by the media

Major news sources seemed to highlight how shocking it was that Mohamud did this. For example, NBC News made sure to include that his lawyer, Sam Shamansky, stated that he was “a normal 23-year-old kid with no criminal record or violent tendencies, who knew more about basketball than bombs” and emphasized that Mohamud, “from Somalia, comes here, loses a brother in a war in Syria that has nothing to do with the United States.” He tries hard to make the public have sympathy for Mohamud, yet ignores the fact

⁵⁸ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁵⁹ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁶⁰ “Columbus, Ohio Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Terrorists.”

⁶¹ Mauro, “Ohio Arrest Shows Threat to U.S. From Al-Qaeda in Syria.”

⁶² Poole, “Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI.”

⁶³ Poole, “Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI.”

that his brother encouraged him to join al-Nusra and that Mohamud had ideas about committing acts of terror in the United States. Shamansky says that the indictment was “designed to scare people” and that Mohamud never had weapons and there was no evidence that he would really attack. Shamansky talked about Mohamud’s “lovely” family, his sister who attended Columbus State Community College, and stressed how tragic it has been for them to already have lost one son. The NBC article also talked to the director of the mosque that he played basketball against who said how shocking it was.⁶⁴

On the other hand, news sources that aren’t as well known highlight the severity of the case. The Counter-Jihad Report goes a very different direction from the major networks and blames the FBI for handling the case very sloppily. They point out that Mohamud was questioned days after becoming a naturalized citizen and was found to be lying about his identity. Yet, he was permitted to obtain a passport just days later, travel to Syria, and then return to the U.S. with plans of terror. Upon return, he was “allowed to roam freely within the U.S. and train others in handling firearms.”⁶⁵

The Clarion Project, another less-known source that works to challenge extremism, focuses on the tangible threat from al-Nusra in the U.S. Their article says that the “cleric’s involvement is an important detail because it threatens to unravel the Obama Administration’s façade that Al-Nusra isn’t a direct threat to America. It also indicates the group is putting an increased emphasis on hitting us at home.”⁶⁶ This article emphasizes the tangible threat that is al-Nusra and says that it is an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Therefore, because we are at war with al-Qaeda, we are also at war with al-Nusra.

11. Policing costs

FBI agents make roughly \$120,000 if they have been an agent for at least a few years.⁶⁷ This is roughly \$330 per day and it sounds like Mohamud was questioned by two agents a few days after he was naturalized, making that questioning cost the FBI about \$660. He was then investigated and indicted by the FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Force which would probably take at least five people to do and maybe a month of investigation before arrest, bringing the cost up to about \$50,000. It is unclear whether or not informants were paid in this case. That brings the policing costs of this case to just over \$50,000.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet played a huge role in this case as it was Mohamud’s main form of connecting with his brother in Syria. They discussed plans for him to travel abroad, how Mohamud could send him money, and their religious purposes. Mohamud also used social media, specifically Facebook, to express himself before he ever traveled to Syria. He made alarming postings about terrorist groups fighting and violence, even including a picture of ISIS’s

⁶⁴ Connor, “Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a ‘Normal Kid’.”

⁶⁵ Poole, “Ohio Terror Suspect Was Caught Lying to FBI.”

⁶⁶ Mauro, “Ohio Arrest Shows Threat.”

⁶⁷ David Hathaway, “How Much Does an FBI Agent Make?” *LewRockwell.com*. March 23, 2015.

symbolic black flag. This along with other pictures accompanied by provoking captions were posted frequently.

It is clear that the internet performed many important functions in this case. It allowed him to communicate with his brother who was abroad and gave him a direct link to a terrorist organization. His use of social media also revealed a lot about his connection to the terrorist group and was evidence of his allegiance to violence.

13. Are we safer?

Mohamud is one of about 200 Americans that the FBI has tracked going to Syria since fighting started there in 2011.⁶⁸ While he had talked about his plans, there was no evidence that he had done anything more than discuss the attack. However, if he had received the training that he claimed he had, it seems he would be capable of going through with the attack with the proper weaponry. Somali-Americans are the largest group of Americans who have been charged with attempting to travel to Syria to fight.⁶⁹ Mohamud seems to be the first American with specific directions to return from Syria and perform attacks inside the U.S.⁷⁰ FBI agent Angela L. Byers said Mohamud's case is a "tangible reminder of the threats we face each day."⁷¹ While he may be off the streets, there are likely still others who went to Syria for the same purpose and plan to return and commit terrorist atrocities. U.S. Representative Mike McCaul who is on the Committee of Homeland Security stated that the "charges highlight the threat posed by Americans joining extremists overseas then returning home."⁷²

Karen Greenberg of Fordham Law School's Center on National Security highlights the impact of "an influential often older person or figure in pushing the radicalization along—extending what might otherwise be a lone-wolf narrative to a slightly larger circle."⁷³ This observation was exhibited with the Tsarnaev brothers in the Boston Marathon bombing and should give the FBI cause to investigate family members of terrorism suspects because there is a chance they are being influenced. While we may be safer from Mohamud, it is likely that he is one of many and that someone else may take his place or try to plan to do something similar.

14. Conclusions

Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud's case is significant because it is the "first publicly-acknowledged case of an American going to Syria for jihadist training and returning home to commit terrorism."⁷⁴ It seems that Mohamud could have been stopped early on before his travels to Syria if the FBI hadn't

⁶⁸ Shane, "Ohio Man Trained in Syria Is Charged With Planning Terrorism in U.S."

⁶⁹ Shane, "Ohio Man Trained in Syria Is Charged With Planning Terrorism in U.S."

⁷⁰ Shane, "Ohio Man Trained in Syria Is Charged With Planning Terrorism in U.S."

⁷¹ Gray, "Columbus Man Indicted on Terrorism Charges by Federal Grand Jury."

⁷² Andrew Welsh-Huggins, "Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud: Ohio Man Accused in Plot to Attack US Military Base, Prison," WCPO, April 17, 2015.

⁷³ Connor, "Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, Ohio Terror Suspect, a 'Normal Kid'."

⁷⁴ Mauro, "Ohio Arrest Shows Threat."

brushed off the fact that he lied. There has been a lot of research on the importance of family ties in cases of terrorism and this is a prime example of one. Mohamud's lawyer and some in the media try to paint his family as someone the public will sympathize with since they have emigrated to this country, lost a son, and his sister is getting an education. However, Mohamud traveled to Syria to train with a terrorist group and returned intending to terrorize the U.S. It is also important to highlight al-Nusra as many have not heard of this group and do not realize its affiliation with al-Qaeda. It is a threat to the United States and may have more plans to send people over with instructions to perform acts of terrorism.