

HSPI Commentary Series

HAMMAMI THE JIHADIST POP STAR BRIDGING WORLDS: FROM MOBILE TO MOGADISHU

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Clad in army fatigues, holding an AK-47, and armed with a flawless command of American English, Omar Hammami appears on YouTube to describe an anticipated Al Shabaab murder of Ethiopian soldiers in Somalia. In another video, “Al Amriki” (“The American,” Hammami’s nom de guerre), runs in slow motion with a group of jihadists in his wake. Jihadist rap plays in the background.



An indictment unsealed Thursday names Hammami as part of a massive FBI US-Somali terrorism case. The operation also includes the arrests and indictments of 14 individuals on charges of providing support to the Somali terrorist group Al Shabaab. These developments highlight the growing trend of radicalized individuals seeking to fight abroad in jihadist conflict theaters, to support those who do, or to receive training to carry out the murder of innocents in their host countries. Groups like Al Shabaab are aware that the West provides pools of potentially lucrative foreign financing and that many recruits carry the coveted American passport—a document that provides opportunities to strike at western cities with relative ease.

Although much attention falls on the communities from which these individuals come and the overseas destinations where they look to fight, relatively little lands on the key figures that bridge the gap between modern society and the jihadist world. In this chasm Hammami treads, virtually unchallenged. US citizen, key Al Shabaab figure, and innovative jihadist recruiter, Hammami would have only been the stuff of twisted imagination ten years ago. Now, he is a jihadist pop star—detached from reality, but extremely influential.

Born and raised in Alabama to a southern, Christian mother and a Syrian, Muslim father, Hammami enjoyed a typical American upbringing. He read *Tom Sawyer*, learned to hunt deer, and dated one of the most sought after girls in his high school. The contradictions between his mother's and father's values and cultures fostered a deep internal conflict, however. Hammami turned to Islam and embarked upon a path of radicalization that took him to Canada, Egypt, and eventually Somalia, where he joined Al Shabaab.

Hammami represents a dangerous new style of foreign fighter recruitment that threatens to transform more Americans into jihadists. His message resonates with communities struggling to find their place in society. He weaves the politics of local struggles in Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere into a global narrative that facilitates the radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. He preys on the cultural confusion and religious, historical, and political naivety of his targets. To at risk individuals who are angry and lost, his jihadist experience is a source of legitimacy, his extremist convictions a moral foundation, and his cultural knowledge a potent weapon to appeal to disaffected youth in a way few others can.

Recruitment is disingenuous in more practical ways, as well. Although the "training" recruits receive solidifies their radical views and willingness to act, it (thankfully) does not always equip them with any advanced skills. Recently, the case of Al Qaeda operative Adnan Shukrijumah and failed bomber Najibullah Zazi illustrates how aspiring fighters may self-enlist or be recruited to commit acts of terrorism abroad, but then are turned around to conduct attacks on their western nations of origins. Jihadists view these attacks as more valuable because they have greater impact and do not compromise operational security.

In the video where he leads fighters into battle, Hammami appears seated, reading from the Quran in both Arabic and English. Then, he offers up a lecture and makes appeals for material support in much the same way other modern celebrities raise money for recovery efforts in Haiti or poverty alleviation in Africa. For those who may share violent, radical beliefs but are reticent to act (and of these there are many), Hammami is the kind of pop star who makes jihad cool and accessible.

Killing and capturing jihadists are direct and effective, but more work must be done to push back on the narrative and to expose the bankrupt ideology that Hammami and his ilk preach. In this, everyone can play a role, from national security services to local community leaders, civic organizations, and individuals. The antidote is to de-globalize, de-glamorize, and de-legitimize.

De-globalize: Individuals like Hammami seek to create one single, victimized transnational identity group so they can rally new foreign fighters to the defense of this group. A few years ago, Shabaab in Somalia was fighting a local struggle, but today they have successfully anchored into Al Qaeda and the global jihadist narrative. The new reality is that in Somalia,

Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, jihadists exploit endemic problems such as resource shortages, lack of government authority, weak institutions, and traditional religious, tribal, and ethnic cleavages in order to engage in the systematic murder of civilians who disagree with their world view.

The appropriate response is to think global, act local. It is necessary to understand the larger dynamics of how these groups operate while simultaneously addressing real needs on the ground, village by village.

De-glamorize: Hammami's image depends on his continued portrayal as a Hollywood action hero; let's provide the documentary. Each time he puts out a recruitment ad, we should respond with a video that shows the truth. Individual citizens can complain to YouTube and other organizations regarding the content they host. Hammami may try to act like a pop star, but in reality he is a thug and murderer who ruins people's lives through his words and his deeds. His innocent victims include women and children. This is the reality that must be explained.

De-legitimize: Hammami and his fellow bridge figures (notably Anwar Al Aulaqi, Abdullah Al Faisal, Eric Breininger) have no true credibility. The US should lead an effort to bundle together on the internet the words and actions of disillusioned foreign fighters; the stories of victims; the testimonies of those who recant jihad; and the writings of countless religious scholars who have issued fatwas against Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Also, compare Hammami to the words and actions of positive leaders—whether those working with youth in local communities across the United States, or working overseas to constructively solve the myriad problems that afflict the weakest nations of the world.



also potentially his greatest weakness, if exploited properly.

In a video titled “Festival for the Children of the Martyrs,” Hammami sits with the young children of suicide/homicide bombers, to whom he has given toy guns. His purpose is to indoctrinate the next generation to glorify terrorism. The disturbing video represents both the great danger Hammami poses, but

For now, Al Shabaab's attempt to market Hammami as a jihadist pop star has been a success. Other bridge figures will surely follow, and will likely only come to the public's attention after they have successfully signed up more fighters to the jihadist cause. The battle space lies

beyond the physical jihadist conflict zones. It is in the chat rooms, on YouTube, and in the minds of individuals struggling to form their beliefs and find their place in society. It is time to de-globalize, de-glamorize, and de-legitimize Omar Hammami and his fellow travelers, to expose them for what they really are.

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