

## Category 2: Networked Travelers

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The majority of known American travelers did not make the journey alone. Instead, they formed groups of individuals who worked with others to plan and execute their eventual departure. For many American travelers, their best chance to reach jihadist-held territory was to build strength in numbers. Due to the role of interpersonal relationships in facilitating their travel, this report refers to these travelers as “networked travelers.”

In many cases, networks are essential. What is less apparent, however, is how they matter, and which types of networks are likely to facilitate travel. To this end, this section presents several stories of various types of networked travelers, with a focus on their motivations and how they used social connections to travel to Syria and Iraq. Given that many of these individuals were part of a more extensive web of supporters who may not have been charged publicly with criminal activities, details of their radicalization may not be available. Wherever possible, the authors attempted to augment information through interviews with family members, friends, and lawyers prosecuting or representing those in that circle.

In this study’s review of networked travelers, three types of networks frequently appear: community-based clusters, friend groups, and families. In the American context, the last two types of networks are more frequent. They comprise specific families or tight-knit friend groups that travel alongside one another or support the jihadist cause in a variety of ways (planning attacks, financing, etc.). Less common are clusters, which are made up of multiple family and friend groups within a specific community, that all participate in jihadist activity. This section highlights cases within each sub-category of networked travelers, including an extensive description of one of the only known clusters of the American jihadist scene.

### Clusters

#### *The Minnesota Cluster*

From 2013 until the end of 2017, at least seven residents of the Minnesota Twin Cities area traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight. Concurrently, at least ten residents attempted to travel but were unsuccessful. This rate of jihadist mobilization makes the state of Minnesota, and the Twin Cities more specifically, among the highest producers of jihadist travelers to Syria and Iraq in the U.S.

The Minnesotan contingent in Syria and Iraq is well-documented. The court cases against the ten unsuccessful travelers revealed a wealth of information regarding other Twin Cities residents who successfully traveled. A U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee report found that more than one-quarter of successful and unsuccessful U.S. travelers came from Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> During a 2015 press conference, then-U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger, responsible for prosecuting the majority of Minnesota’s IS-related cases, was more direct in his assessment: “We have a terror recruiting problem in Minnesota.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the Syria and Iraq-related mobilizations from Minnesota were not without precedent. Nor are they the largest mobilization of Minnesotans. From 2007 to 2013, at least 23 young men from the Twin Cities participated in a different conflict—the civil war in Somalia.<sup>3</sup> After Ethiopian forces invaded Somalia in 2006, many young men from the Twin Cities, most of whom were Somali immigrants to the U.S. or second-generation Somali-Americans, traveled to Somalia to fight.<sup>4</sup> All of them joined the jihadist group *al-Shabaab*.<sup>5</sup>

When the Syrian conflict flared up in the early 2010s, another wave of young men from Minnesota traveled to Syria and Iraq. The travelers from Minnesota in both waves were mostly Somali-American, with some exceptions. More importantly, however, there are networked

links between the mobilizations. The majority of the seven travelers to Syria and Iraq had, at the time of their travel, connections to at least one other traveler or attempted traveler. Some had links to the first wave of Minnesotan travelers to Somalia.

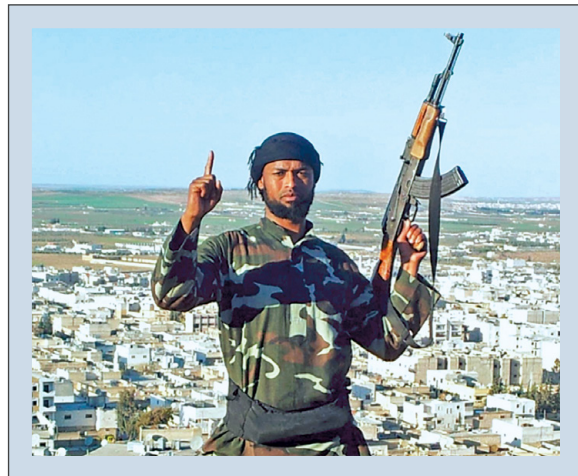
These connections were formed by a conglomerate of the first two types of social networks—friendship and kinship. When the first Minnesotans arrived in Syria, they attempted to recruit their friends and family from back home in the Twin Cities to join them. Then—U.S. Attorney Luger described this recruiting strategy as a “peer-to-peer, brother-to-brother” approach, noting that “the person radicalizing your son, your brother, your friend, may not be a stranger. It may be their best friend right here in town.”<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate how deep and networked many of these connections were, critical examples include the first three individuals with roots in Minnesota to travel to Syria and Iraq: Abdifatah Ahmed (aka Abdirahmaan Muhumed), Hanad Abdullahi Mohallim, and Douglas McCain. By many accounts, Ahmed was the first Twin Cities resident to arrive in Syria and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Ahmed left Minnesota for London in 2013. The individuals who communicated with him while he was in London claim his decision to travel to Syria in the winter of 2013 was seemingly instantaneous. One day, he was broke, despondent, and constantly chewing *khaat* (a plant-based stimulant popular in the Horn of Africa), the next day there were rumors in Minneapolis that he had joined a jihadist group in Syria.<sup>8</sup>

In January 2014, it was clear that Ahmed joined a jihadist group in Syria. He posted two photos on his Facebook page of him standing under a black flag, with a Quran in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. These photos were posted with the caption, “I give up this worldly life for allah and to save the ummah if that makes terrorist I am happy with it.”<sup>9</sup> He told a friend from Minnesota, who later became a confidential human source for the FBI, that “Islam is not just praying u know ... Someone who get kill for the sake of Allah can ask allah to for give up to 70 of his family.”<sup>10</sup>

One month later, he contacted another old friend from Minnesota via Facebook. Douglas McCain, a graduate of Robbinsdale Cooper High School in New Hope, Minnesota, converted to Islam in 2004.<sup>11</sup> McCain went to the same high school as Troy Kastigar, another Muslim convert from Minnesota who was killed fighting for *al-Shabaab* in Somalia in 2009. The two were also roommates for a brief period.<sup>12</sup> McCain later moved to San Diego, California, where he was residing at the time of his departure from the U.S. While not Somali-American, McCain had deep ties to the Somali community, and was employed in a Somali restaurant in San Diego at the time of his departure.<sup>13</sup>

In March 2014, McCain contacted Ahmed via Facebook private message and gave him his contact information.



*Pictures from Abdifatah Ahmed's Facebook account depicting him in Syria, 2014. Pictures obtained from Minnesota Public Radio.*



Left: Douglas McCain (Facebook). Right: McCain's U.S. passport, recovered by militants in Syria after his death.

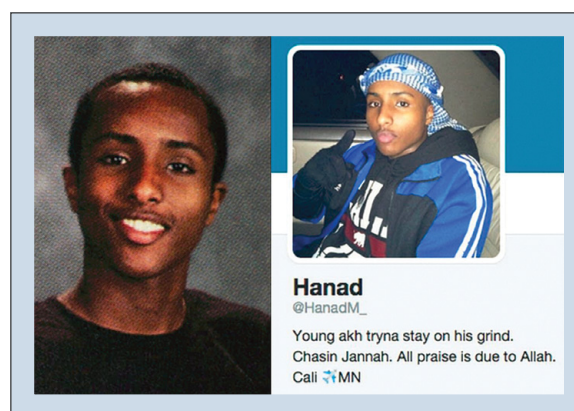
He also told Ahmed: "In sha Allah i need to hala at u I am flying out to Turkey."<sup>14</sup> Ahmed scolded McCain, telling him not to discuss jihadist travel on Facebook and instructed him to turn off the location services on his phone.<sup>15</sup> On March 9, McCain traveled from San Diego to Istanbul. On the same day, Minnesota resident Hanad Mohallim departed from Minneapolis to Istanbul. The FBI later discovered that McCain and Mohallim's tickets were both fraudulently paid for with the same credit card, which belonged to McCain's brother's girlfriend.<sup>16</sup>

Hanad Mohallim was 18 years old at the time of his departure. He had recently switched between several Minneapolis-area high schools due to academic difficulties.<sup>17</sup> On the day of his departure, he told his family that he was going out for a job interview.<sup>18</sup> His mother, who noticed a significant change in Mohallim's religious beliefs prior to travel, realized that Mohallim was attempting to travel. Daringly, she went to Turkey to try to find Mohallim and bring him back to Minnesota.<sup>19</sup> In Turkey, she spoke with Mohallim several times, but to no avail. She later recounted to federal investigators that Hanad was working as a border guard for a jihadist group and had no intentions of returning to the U.S.<sup>20</sup>

When federal investigators interviewed Mohallim's mother, they uncovered critical information regarding her son's connections. First, Mohallim's mother immediately recognized a picture of McCain, who she referred to as "Duale" and "Doug."<sup>21</sup> McCain used "Duale" as his

name on Facebook and in other social media accounts.<sup>22</sup> She also commented that Mohallim met McCain through her nephews, who lived in Edmonton, Canada. According to Mohallim's mother, Hanad Mohallim's travel to visit these cousins in 2013 sparked his interest in jihad.<sup>23</sup>

Across the border, Canadian authorities also identified three of Mohallim's cousins in Edmonton as jihadist travelers. Brothers Hamse and Hersi Karie, and their cousin Mahad Hirsi, all left Edmonton in October 2013 and were believed to be in Syria.<sup>24</sup> The Karie brothers are U.S. permanent residents and previously lived in San Diego and Minnesota. Several members of the Karie family knew McCain personally.<sup>25</sup>



Hanad Mohallim's high school yearbook picture (L) and Twitter account (R). Pictures obtained from Minnesota Public Radio.



On March 10, 2014, one day after McCain embarked on his travel, a third Karie brother arrived in San Diego and contacted McCain. McCain replied that he “wasn’t in [San] Diego” and that he “went to go hala at yo brothers.”<sup>26</sup> This was a reference to Hamse and Hersi Karie, who were already in Syria. One month later, McCain messaged the third Karie brother from Turkey, informing him that he had arrived. The brother responded, “where is the little [expletive],” referencing Hanad Mohallim, his cousin.<sup>27</sup> McCain told the brother that he and Hanad Mohallim had connected with Hamse Karie, Hersi Karie, and Mahad Hirsi, and were on route to Syria.<sup>28</sup>

Upon arrival in Syria, all five travelers—Abdifatah Ahmed, Douglas McCain, Hanad Mohallim, Hamse Karie, and Hersi Karie—remained in contact with friends in Minnesota and San Diego. They were also active on social media. The pictures, videos, and statuses posted by Ahmed, McCain, and Mohallim on their social media accounts had particular credence in the Twin Cities, where young men in their friend and family circles gained a new-found inspiration for traveling to Syria and Iraq to join IS.

By the end of 2014, all five travelers were reported dead within weeks of one another. Douglas McCain became the first American to be reported by the U.S. government as killed in Syria and Iraq.<sup>29</sup> He died in a battle between IS and the FSA in late August 2014. Abdifatah Ahmed died in Syria during the same period.<sup>30</sup> In late 2014, Hanad Mohallim, Hamse and Hersi Karie, and Mahad Hirsi were killed during the battle of Kobani.<sup>31</sup>

By that time, however, this first group of travelers had laid the groundwork for others to attempt to travel to Syria and Iraq. Prior to his death, Hanad Mohallim was in contact with his best friend from Minnesota, Abdullahi Yusuf. Yusuf reached out to Mohallim shortly before the latter departed from Minneapolis and exchanged several phone calls and text messages during the course of Mohallim’s time in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

Yusuf contacted Mohallim when he was in the planning stages of his own travel to Syria to join IS. Defaulting again to the “strength in numbers” approach, Yusuf

found a fellow traveler, Abdi Nur, to join him on his journey to Syria. Nur and Yusuf both attended the Dar al-Farooq Youth and Family Center, an Islamic community center in Minnesota.<sup>33</sup> They met each other through a mutual friend, Guled Omar, who was the “ringleader” for several other Minnesota travelers in their attempts to travel to Syria.<sup>34</sup>

Before their travel, Nur and Yusuf operated in lockstep to prepare themselves for the journey and ensure that they would not be detected. They went on a shopping trip to Macy’s to buy gear and clothing. They purchased plane tickets to Istanbul, scheduled for back-to-back days in May 2014.<sup>35</sup> Then, both men made fateful trips to attain expedited U.S. passports at a local issuing office in Minneapolis.

Abdi Nur went to the Minneapolis Passport Agency first, on April 24, 2014. He listed his intended travel destination as Australia, and the application interview proceeded normally. Eventually, the agent approved his passport application.<sup>36</sup> Four days later, Abdullahi Yusuf went to the passport agency. He listed his destination as Turkey. By all measures, Yusuf botched the interview. He gave conflicting accounts about his purpose of travel to Turkey, could not remember specific details about his travel plans, and was visibly nervous, lowering his voice and avoiding eye contact with the agent.<sup>37</sup> The interview raised enough suspicion for the passport agent to inform their supervisor, who then tipped off the FBI.<sup>38</sup>

The passport agency also approved Yusuf’s application, but the FBI closely monitored his activity. Yusuf raised additional concern when he used his new passport to open a checking account, with which he purchased his ticket to Istanbul.<sup>39</sup> On the day of Yusuf’s planned departure, Nur also drove Yusuf to the train station, where he would take a train to Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport.<sup>40</sup> On May 28, 2014, federal agents apprehended Yusuf as he attempted to board his flight.<sup>41</sup>

Nur, whose efforts to attain a passport and travel ticket did not elicit the same level of suspicion, successfully boarded his flight from the same airport the next day. A day after he traveled, a member of Nur’s family alerted federal agents. They disclosed chat records with Abdi

Nur on the messaging application Kik. In these chats, Nur claimed that he had “gone to the brothers” and that “everybody dies but I want the best death ... take care of hooyo [mother] for me inshallah.”<sup>42</sup>

After arriving in Syria, Nur reached out to other Minnesotan travelers for advice and guidance. He was a long-time Facebook friend of Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, more commonly known as “Mujahid Miski.”<sup>43</sup> Hassan left Minnesota for Somalia during the peak of the first wave of recruitment in 2009, and joined *al-Shabaab* at the age of 18. He established an extensive social media presence under the “Mujahid Miski” label, and used his accounts to promote *al-Shabaab*, and later IS.<sup>44</sup> He was linked to several jihadists in the U.S., including Elton Simpson, the perpetrator of the 2015 attack in Garland, Texas, and Nicholas Rovinski, who planned several assassinations.<sup>45</sup>

In an early August 2014 conversation, Hassan asked Nur how many “brothers from mpl [Minneapolis]” traveled to the battlefields in Syria.<sup>46</sup> Nur replied that besides him, three had successfully entered Syria—potentially referring to Abdifatah Ahmed, Douglas McCain, and Hanad Mohallim—and “others” were planning to travel.<sup>47</sup> Hassan gave Nur some sage advice, from one Minnesotan traveler to another. After asking Nur if he knew “Duale” (Douglas McCain), Hassan informed him:

try to all connect and make one of you guys *mas'uul* [a Somali term referring to a guardian, or someone that is responsible for others' affairs] ... being connected in jihad make you stronger and you can all help each other by fulfilling the duties that allah swt put over you ... like us in Somalia the brothers from mpl are well-connected so try to do the same ... It is something we have learned after 6 years in Jihad.<sup>48</sup>

It is unclear whether Nur knew Ahmed, McCain, and Mohallim personally prior to his travel. However, heeding Hassan's advice, Nur continued to encourage and assist other travelers from Minnesota.

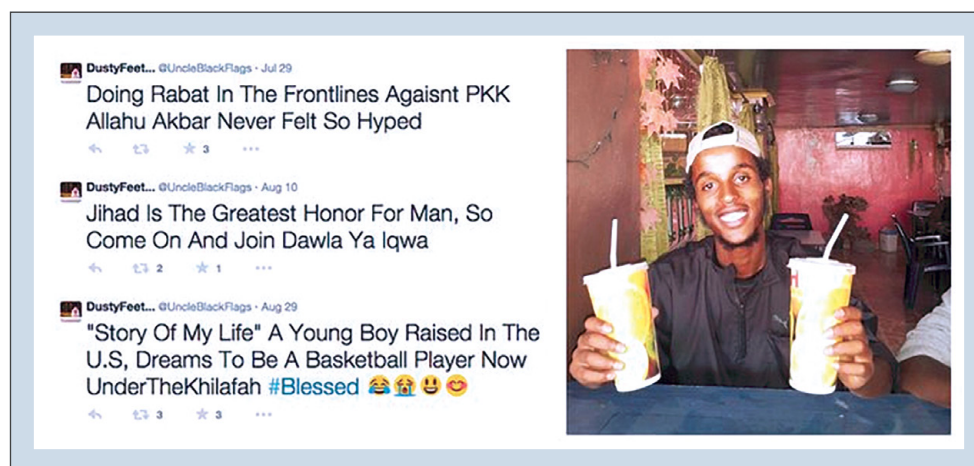
In addition to Abdullahi Yusuf, nine other men from Minnesota who knew Abdi Nur personally attempted to travel to join IS. Two of them (Yusuf Jama and Mohamed

Roble), successfully reached Syria, while the remainder (Zacharia Abdurahman, Hamza Ahmed, Abdirahman Daud, Adnan Farah, Mohamed Farah, Hanad Musse, and Guled Omar) were unsuccessful. Another Twin Cities resident, Abdirizak Warsame, provided financial and logistical support to the others. Before Nur's departure, this group, in varying combinations, held meetings with each other regarding travel to Syria at the Dar al-Farooq center and several Somali restaurants in the Twin Cities area.

One of the successful travelers, Mohamed Roble, was Nur's nephew.<sup>49</sup> He applied for a passport in late August 2014, weeks after Nur's conversation with Miski, and days after Douglas McCain's death. Roble used a settlement check from a previous personal injury suit to finance his travel, once the funds became available to him on his 18th birthday.<sup>50</sup> Learning from Abdullahi Yusuf's mistakes, Roble's passport application listed his destination as China rather than Turkey.<sup>51</sup> He did not travel from Minneapolis to China alone—he left the Twin Cities with his mother (Nur's sister).<sup>52</sup> Once he arrived in China, he planned an excursion to Istanbul in December 2014. He absconded to Syria during this trip to Istanbul.<sup>53</sup> His friends in Minnesota identified him in early 2015 photographs depicting him fighting for IS in Syria.<sup>54</sup>

Other rumors about Roble's and Nur's activities in Syria also reached a network of their friends in Minnesota. In March 2015, Guled Omar told a confidential human source in Minnesota that Roble had brought a significant portion of his settlement money with him to Syria. Using these funds, he reportedly bought Nur and another Somali fighter named Khattab al-Somali new cars and paid for two of Khattab's marriages.<sup>55</sup>

One leading source of information for those who remained in Minnesota was Abdi Nur's social media presence. Using the Twitter handle “DustyFeet,” referring to a quote from the Prophet Muhammad, he posted frontline pictures and updates from the battlefields of Syria, depicting himself as an average kid from Minnesota who found his destiny in jihad.<sup>56</sup> He also interacted with several of his friends in Minnesota. Some



Tweets from Abdi Nur's "DustyFeet" account (L) and his Facebook picture (R). Pictures obtained from the New York Times.

of them were concerned about his disappearance, and others sought to join him.<sup>57</sup>

Directly after Nur traveled to Syria in late May, three other Minneapolitans started planning their course of action. Yusuf Jama, Guled Omar, and an individual who later became a confidential human source planned to travel via car to San Diego, California, and onwards to Istanbul by plane in late May.<sup>58</sup> However, Omar's family caught wind of the plot, and prevented the men from departing.<sup>59</sup> Undeterred, Yusuf Jama booked a labyrinthian itinerary of plane tickets to test whether he could go to Syria. He "test ran" traveling on June 1, 2014, embarking on a same-day, round-trip journey between Minneapolis and Chicago.<sup>60</sup> After ensuring that he was not on the no-fly list, he boarded a June 9 flight to Istanbul from John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.<sup>61</sup>

Yusuf Jama called a family member on June 25, 2014. He would not specify his whereabouts, but told them that he was out of the country. Investigators later uncovered that Jama and Abdi Nur called their families from the same number.<sup>62</sup> Jama may have been the individual who Mohamed Roble and Guled Omar referred to as "Khattab al-Somali." Evidence also suggests that another co-conspirator, Abdirizak Warsame, contacted one of the Karie brothers to help smuggle Jama into Syria.<sup>63</sup>

In November 2014, five young Minneapolitans attempted to travel to Syria. Their efforts, which failed, demonstrate that they were familiar with the routes taken by Yusuf Jama. Zacharia Abdurahman, Hamza Ahmed, Mohamed Farah, and Hanad Musse planned to take a bus from Minnesota to New York, where they would board flights to Istanbul.<sup>64</sup> Another route they considered was traveling to San Diego, crossing the border into Mexico, and then proceeding to Istanbul.<sup>65</sup> This was the same planned route as the first, failed attempt taken by Yusuf Jama and Guled Omar in late May 2014. Reportedly, Omar was so convinced of the San Diego option that he declined to travel with the other four men to New York City. Instead, he attempted to board a flight from Minneapolis to San Diego by himself on November 6, 2014.<sup>66</sup>

When all five men arrived at their respective ports of departure, authorities intercepted them and prevented them from traveling. Guled Omar was asked by federal agents at the Minneapolis airport why he brought his passport for a domestic flight and why he had no baggage, before summarily being prevented from boarding his plane.<sup>67</sup> This was not Omar's first time being stopped at the airport. In 2012, he was interviewed by the FBI while attempting to travel to Nairobi, Kenya. His older brother, Ahmed Ali Omar, had already joined *al-Shabaab*

in Somalia, and investigators were concerned that Guled was planning to join him.<sup>68</sup>

The remaining four (Abdurrahman, Ahmed, Mohamed Farah, and Musse) were apprehended by federal agents at JFK and gave differing and vague accounts of their travel purposes.<sup>69</sup> More concerning, while their flights had all been booked within 30 minutes of one another, their itineraries and return flights from Istanbul did not align, alerting federal agents that they may not have intended to return to the U.S.<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, all five failed travelers were released and allowed to return to Minneapolis, albeit under strict surveillance. A confidential human source recorded conversations and uncovered that all five men, and two others (Abdirahman Daud and Adnan Farah), were attempting to obtain fake U.S. passports in order to travel to Syria undetected.<sup>71</sup> They also learned that several of the men were in contact with Abdi Nur (and prior to his death, Hanad Mohallim) about how to travel successfully.<sup>72</sup>

Evidence collected by the source details that Guled Omar was still advocating for the fake passports option. The source told Omar that he had a contact in San Diego who could procure forged documents. The other defendants collected photographs of themselves and money to support this venture.<sup>73</sup> However, Omar, the *de facto* leader of the group, was concerned that several of his co-conspirators who failed during the NYC attempt in November 2014 would endanger the odds of success.<sup>74</sup> Omar delayed his own trip to Syria, because he did not want to travel with Mohamed Farah, Zacharia Abdurahman, or Hanad Musse.<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, the group of willing participants for the San Diego plan reduced to Mohamed Farah and Abdirahman Daud. Mohamed's brother Adnan intended to travel to San Diego, but his mother confiscated and hid his passport to prevent him from leaving.<sup>76</sup> The two men, and the confidential human source, traveled to San Diego on April 17, 2015.<sup>77</sup>

Days later, several of the co-conspirators were arrested during an FBI operation. Mohamed Farah and Daud were detained in San Diego. Concurrently, Adnan

Farah, Abdurrahman, Musse, and Omar were taken into custody in Minneapolis.<sup>78</sup> In December 2015, federal law enforcement arrested Abdirizak Warsame, and in February of the following year, Hamza Ahmed became the ninth individual arrested as part of the wider investigation.<sup>79</sup>

The resulting criminal proceedings against these attempted travelers produced a bevy of information about the networks responsible for recruitment to IS in the Twin Cities. The investigation uncovered several successful travelers, multiple attempted travelers, and a handful of others who provided financial support or services to IS. The investigation resulted in six members of the cluster pleading guilty and three convictions by trial, and heralded innovative approaches to how the U.S. government responds to recruitment cases.<sup>80</sup> Abdullahi Yusuf, one of the first attempted travelers, currently takes part in a program aimed towards rehabilitating jihadists. He was granted supervised, conditional release in November 2017.<sup>81</sup> The others are serving sentences ranging from two-and-a-half to 35 years in federal prison.<sup>82</sup>

In Syria and Iraq, most of the major players in this mobilization died. In addition to Ahmed, McCain, the Karie brothers, and Hanad Mohallim, Yusuf Jama's brother informed Guled Omar that Yusuf had been killed in battle in Syria in March 2015.<sup>83</sup> Abdi Nur is presumed dead.<sup>84</sup> The status of his nephew, Mohamed Roble, remains unclear.

Besides this cluster, there are two other cases of travelers from Minnesota's Twin Cities. Details about potential connections to the previous co-conspirators are not publicly available. In August 2014, 20-year-old Yusra Ismail stole a passport from an unnamed individual, and told the person that she was traveling to a wedding in Africa. She later messaged her family, claiming that she had traveled to Syria to join IS.<sup>85</sup> Eighteen-year-old Abdelhamid al-Madioum bought a plane ticket from Morocco to Istanbul while on family vacation. After his family returned to the U.S., they received a call from Abdelhamid saying that he was working at an IS-controlled hospital in the Iraqi city of Mosul.<sup>86</sup> Ismail's and al-Madioum's current whereabouts are unknown.



## Families

### The Kodaimati Family

Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati was born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1991.<sup>87</sup> Ten years later, he emigrated with his family to the U.S. By the age of 17, he became a naturalized citizen. Kodaimati lived in a variety of places in the U.S., including Charlotte, North Carolina, and San Diego, California.<sup>88</sup>

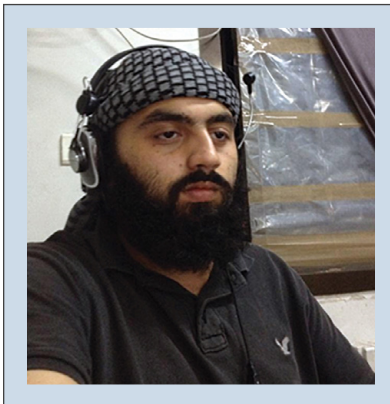
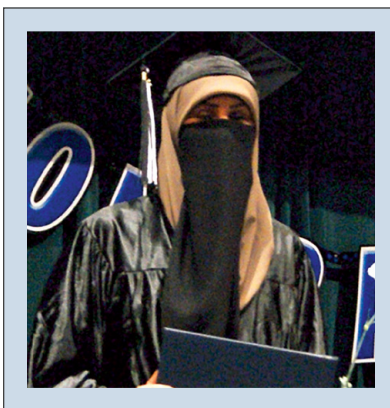
In December 2012, Kodaimati and his family left San Diego to return to their native country. When they arrived in Istanbul bound for Syria, they were detained by Turkish officials for lacking proper documentation.<sup>89</sup> The Kodaimati family spent 35 days in a Turkish jail awaiting judgment.<sup>90</sup>

They were jailed in the same prison block as an Austrian IS supporter named Mohamed Mahmoud (aka Abu Usama al-Gharib).<sup>91</sup> Mahmoud is a well-known figure in European jihadist networks. He previously spent four years in an Austrian prison for his role in creating German-language versions of jihadist propaganda material and threatening suicide attacks. He also played a formative role in the foundation of the Salafi militant organization *Millatu Ibrahim*.<sup>92</sup> In March 2013, he was arrested in the Turkish province of Hatay. Like the Kodaimatis, Mahmoud had improper documentation—in this case a fake Libyan passport.<sup>93</sup> During their time in jail, Mahmoud acted as a translator between the Turkish prison officials and the Kodaimatis.<sup>94</sup>

After Mahmoud was released in 2014, he traveled to Syria, where he would become a high ranking IS official and a prominent face in the group's propaganda.<sup>95</sup> Kodaimati and his family were released from jail sometime in 2013. According to Kodaimati's account, the Turkish police escorted them to the "U.S. consulate in Ankara, Turkey," but they were refused admission.<sup>96</sup> Turkey then deported the entire Kodaimati clan to Syria.<sup>97</sup>

Kodaimati, his younger brother Rahmo, and his father, also named Mohamad, returned to their family home in Aleppo. At the time, the town was a fault line area, split between Assadist forces, assorted rebel groups, and jihadist formations. Their home was in Kafr Hamra, a suburb of Aleppo controlled by jihadist organizations.<sup>98</sup> After returning to Syria, Kodaimati took a variety of roles in jihadist groups—first in JN, then IS.

According to U.S. officials, he was a "media person" for JN, in charge of providing online updates of their operations. Specifically, he worked for the "Sharia Authority," the wing of the group responsible for establishing proper Islamic governance and enforcing the justice system in the area of Hanano.<sup>99</sup> On his Facebook page, Kodaimati posted several media releases from JN's Sharia Authority.<sup>100</sup> As IS and JN became increasingly at odds with each other, however, Kodaimati acted as a mediator between the two terrorist organizations.<sup>101</sup> He obtained this position after he contacted his former jail mate Mohamed Mahmoud, who was already an important figure in IS.



*Top: Yusra Ismail at her high school graduation. Image obtained from Minnesota Public Radio. Middle: Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati. Bottom: Individual later identified as Mohamed Mahmoud (L) and Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati (R)*



By his own admission, Kodaimati also participated in fighting, telling one friend, “We went out and participated in a raid, and we struck [with] the ammunition which we possess ... waiting to be resupplied, so that we may go out [again].”<sup>102</sup> According to charging documents, he “admitted that he participated in a diversionary attack on a Syrian political prison in coordination with al-Nusra.”<sup>103</sup>

He was not the only one in his family to participate in combat. His father Mohamad, also a U.S. citizen, was injured by shrapnel from a rocket attack. In April 2014, Kodaimati told a friend on Facebook that his father was “on the battlefield ... his work [has to do] with snipers.”<sup>104</sup> The next month, Kodaimati referenced his younger brother, known only by the nickname “Rahmo,” and said that he was actively participating in combat as well.<sup>105</sup> Pictures posted on Facebook also depict Kodaimati’s brother and father engaging in combat alongside him.<sup>106</sup>

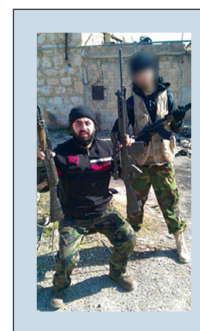
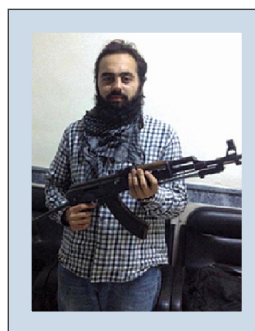
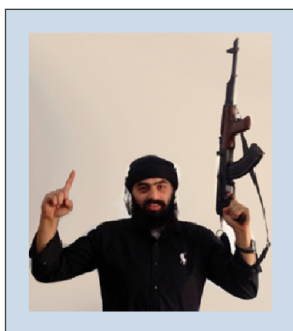
For his part, Kodaimati states any actions he took in Syria were a matter of survival. He describes his decision as motivated by the unrelenting conflict environment: “if you were male and were clean-shaven, and had good hygiene, you could be accused of being an infidel and killed. If you tried to blend in by sporting a beard then maybe you would be left alone and could pass through checkpoints. Beards became very popular as you can imagine.”<sup>107</sup> In previously unpublished letter written to the trial judge before sentencing, Kodaimati claims: “I am not a terrorist, do not like violence and whatever I did while in Turkey and Syria was necessary for survival.

My family is living in a war zone where they are being bombed by barrel bombs. It is a desperate situation.”<sup>108</sup> He states he tried to find more honest work, and briefly traveled back to Turkey to become a driver for Médecins Sans Frontières.<sup>109</sup>

In March 2015, Kodaimati attempted to travel back to the U.S. He bought a plane ticket for a March 5 flight from Istanbul to San Diego, via Charlotte. However, he was not allowed to board the flight—likely because he had been placed on the no-fly list—and was told to report to the U.S. Embassy in Ankara.<sup>110</sup> On March 10 and 11, 2015, Kodaimati made false statements during two interviews with FBI and Diplomatic Security Service special agents at the embassy.<sup>111</sup> At the conclusion of these conversations, the agents told Kodaimati that he was free to go.

Approximately two weeks later, Kodaimati boarded a flight from Istanbul to Charlotte. Immediately following re-entry into the U.S., federal agents stopped him and further interviewed him, but again he was permitted to continue onwards.<sup>112</sup> Kodaimati drove cross-country to his hometown of San Diego on March 29, 2015. One month later, he was arrested for making false statements to the FBI.<sup>113</sup>

Kodaimati lied about knowing members of IS, his involvement with JN, and his involvement in combat operations. In October 2015, he pleaded guilty to one count of making false statements in an international terrorism case.<sup>114</sup> He was sentenced to 96 months in prison the following year.<sup>115</sup> The current statuses of his brother and father, presumably still in Syria, are unknown.



*Kodaimati in Syria. Some images reportedly depict Kodaimati’s father and brother.*

### The Ali Family

Recently unsealed court documents and a series of interviews with a returned American traveler revealed two brothers from an upper-middle-class Dallas suburb who left together to join IS. The documents came from the trial of the two boys' parents, who misled the FBI regarding their children's whereabouts. Arman and Omar Ali left Cairo, Egypt, where they claimed they were studying, to go to Syria in November 2014.<sup>116</sup> Federal law enforcement claims that their parents, Mohommad and Sumaiya Ali, "communicated regularly with [Arman and Omar] regarding their whereabouts and desire to fight for ISIS."<sup>117</sup>

The elder brother, Arman, attended the University of Texas at Austin from 2008 to 2011, but according to the university, did not graduate.<sup>118</sup> His classmates at UT-Austin claim that sometime during his second year on campus, he began to espouse radical viewpoints.<sup>119</sup> After the start of the Tahrir Square protests in 2011, Arman eventually left Austin for Egypt, where records show he enrolled at the American University in Cairo.<sup>120</sup> It is unclear what pushed his younger brother, Omar, into joining him in Egypt.

An individual who knew both Ali brothers confirmed, however, that they did not radicalize solely amongst themselves. While they lived in Plano, they attended a semi-regular Quran study group at a local mosque.<sup>121</sup> The coordinator of the study group was John Georgelas, a young American convert to Islam from Greek Orthodox Christianity. The local imam allowed Georgelas to run the study group, where the Ali brothers became eager students.<sup>122</sup>

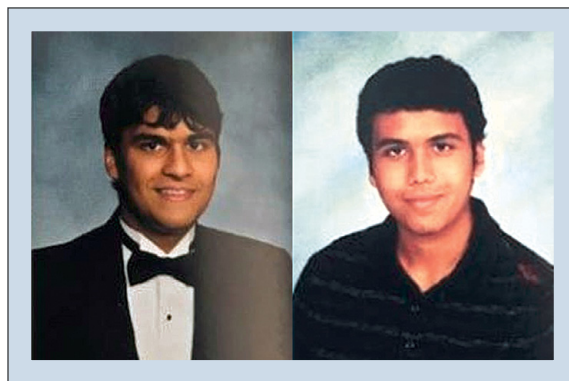
Georgelas, also known as Yahya al-Bahrumi, later became a pioneer of the American jihadist mobilization to Syria and Iraq.<sup>123</sup> Georgelas, a lifelong Texas resident, converted

to Islam while studying religion at Blinn College, and moved to study Arabic in Damascus months after 9/11. In Damascus, he gained a deep understanding of the classical Arabic language and religious texts.<sup>124</sup> After marrying his then-wife, Tania, the family moved multiple times between Damascus, London, California, and Plano, Texas.<sup>125</sup>

During the 2000s, Georgelas was an active participant in the online jihadisphere. A data technician by day, Georgelas offered tech support to a variety of jihadist web forums. In 2006, he was arrested for attempting to hack the website of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and sentenced to 34 months in

prison.<sup>126</sup> After his release, he remained in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, and it was during this time that he ran the Quran study group.

It is unknown whether the Alis were in contact with Georgelas after their 2011 departures to Egypt, although coincidentally, Georgelas also left Dallas for Cairo around the same time.<sup>127</sup> In August 2013, John and Tania Georgelas



*Yearbook pictures of Arman (L) and Omar (R) Ali. Pictures obtained from Dallas Morning News.*

traveled from Egypt to Syria with their children in tow. After a few months, Tania and the children developed serious illnesses. They escaped Syria and returned to the U.S.<sup>128</sup> Thereafter, John Georgelas became a senior ideological figure and propagandist within IS, potentially the highest-ranking American to have participated in a jihadist group. Georgelas served in the media office, and was reportedly crucial to the production of several IS products, including its radio service, *al-Bayan Radio*.<sup>129</sup> He appeared briefly in a June 2017 video released by IS' al-Hayat Media Center.<sup>130</sup>

More than one year after the Georgelases, both Arman and Omar Ali traveled from Cairo to Syria.<sup>131</sup> Prior to their departure in November 2014, they discussed their plans with their parents. In February 2014, Sumaiya Ali told Omar to "do what you need to do," to which Omar

responded, “Ok then going to Syria it is.”<sup>132</sup> A month before their departure, Arman Ali emailed his father a video of an IS military parade in Libya and discussed other Americans who traveled to join IS.<sup>133</sup>

As soon as the brothers entered Syria, conversations with their parents took on a different tone. In March 2015, Arman Ali emailed his father:

... things are heating up here, and I can’t guarantee me or O[mar] will be there in 2 months. Don’t tell [mom] or anyone else this, I’ve been to the hospital everyday with brothers from my group. Close friends have died, too many injured. Me and O[mar] r perfectly fine right now, but soon we may not be.<sup>134</sup>

Two months later, federal investigators interviewed Mohommad and Sumaiya Ali. Both parents claimed that their sons were still in Cairo, and that their sons were “peaceful,” “liked to study,” and were not affiliated with terrorist groups.<sup>135</sup> In May 2017, two years following this interview, federal prosecutors charged both parents with making false statements in an international terrorism case.<sup>136</sup> In September 2017, both parents pleaded guilty. According to the terms of a sentencing agreement, they will serve 36 and 18 months of probation, respectively.<sup>137</sup>

This case highlights a critical dilemma facing travelers’ families. They have the option to turn in their family members to federal authorities, which could subject them to decades-long prison sentences. Alternatively, they can try to take justice into their own hands to prevent family members from traveling (like Asher Abid Khan’s parents) or lie to protect them (like the Ali brothers’ parents). While families can be instrumental in fostering radicalization or facilitating travel, they can also serve as critical early warning systems to notify appropriate authorities.<sup>138</sup> However, as it stands today, there are few good choices for those who want to intervene to prevent their family members from traveling.<sup>139</sup>

## Friends

The concept of a networked terrorist group formed by small, close circles of friends remains an important conceptualization of how radicalization and mobilization

occur in the West.<sup>140</sup> According to this formulation, initially postulated in the years following 9/11, the majority of jihadists were not radicalized via a top-down process, but as the result of small friendship groups that progressively convinced them to support jihadist organizations.<sup>141</sup> Certainly, this formulation should not be used as a sweeping motive to explain the radicalization of all Western jihadists. In its original terms, however, it can be useful in analyzing specific cases on their merits.

In the dataset, several cases appear to fit this description of jihadist mobilization. In some cases, not enough is known about their radicalization process to assume that it occurred solely in a friend-group setting. However, in each of these cases, Americans were progressively encouraged to travel, and eventually facilitated their travel, through a small group of friends. The size of the group may range, from two friends to several. They also sometimes involve “friends-of-friends” or online contacts. Throughout these cases, however, friendship groups help facilitate an American’s travel to join a jihadist organization in Syria and Iraq.

### *Sixto Ramiro Garcia and Asher Abid Khan*

A combination of online and offline connections assisted two young Texans in planning their travel. In January 2014, 20-year-old Asher Abid Khan sent a Facebook friend request to one of his friends from his mosque back home in South Texas.<sup>142</sup> At the time, Khan was living with a relative in Australia. The recipient was Sixto Ramiro Garcia (aka Abdullah Ali) a Mexican-American convert to Islam. Khan and Garcia were reportedly close friends before Khan’s departure to Australia, and the two used to watch extremist videos together when they both lived in Texas.

After Garcia accepted the friend request, Khan sent him a message stating that he was interested in traveling to Iraq to join IS.<sup>143</sup> The two Texans then triangulated a plan to join the organization—one from Texas and the other from Australia.

A week later, Khan sent another friend request, this time to Mohamed Zuhbi, a well-known Australian IS

supporter and alleged facilitator. Khan messaged Zuhbi: “I’d like to join ISIS, can you help?”<sup>144</sup> The conversation progressed, with Khan expressing his willingness to “die as a *shahid* [martyr].” During the conversation, Zuhbi systematically walked Khan through the process of traveling to join IS. He told Khan to take a flight to Istanbul and proceed via bus to the Turkish-Syrian border town of Antakya.<sup>145</sup> From there, IS smugglers could meet Khan and escort him across the border.

A week after his conversation with Zuhbi, Khan relayed the information to Sixto Ramiro Garcia on Facebook and offered to print his Turkish visa out for him. The three-way transfer of information from Zuhbi to Khan, and Khan to Garcia, also continued. Khan asked Zuhbi a host of questions, including what kind of sim card to buy in Turkey to contact Zuhbi, which plane ticket Garcia should buy, and whether he should trim his beard before travel to avoid suspicion.<sup>146</sup>

On February 23, 2014, Garcia traveled from McAllen, Texas, his hometown, to Houston.<sup>147</sup> From there, he boarded his flight to London, en route to Istanbul. Garcia was nervous about the plan. Before his departure, he texted Khan: “If I could, I would destroy all the butterflies in my stomach.”<sup>148</sup> Khan attempted to reassure his friend: “lol, bro, chill and have fun. This is an experience so enjoy and learn from it.” Khan reminded Garcia about their cover. “You’re a tourist and tourists are never nervous, they’re curious.”<sup>149</sup>

Khan also departed from Syria on February 23. He left his relatives’ house in Australia with tickets to Istanbul via Malaysia. However, Khan did not complete the journey. When he arrived in Kuala Lumpur, his Australian relatives tipped off his parents, who attempted a last-minute effort to prevent their son from joining IS.<sup>150</sup> Khan received a message from his parents claiming that his mother had been hospitalized. This was not true, but the ploy convinced Khan to abandon his plans and return home to Texas.<sup>151</sup>

Garcia, meanwhile, continued on his journey. On February 24, Khan informed Garcia that he was returning home to Houston to be with his family. Garcia was incensed by his friend’s change of heart. “Dude, you can’t

pull [expletive] like that. I didn’t come with all that much cash. I have no connections. I’ve got no clue, WTF.”<sup>152</sup>

Seemingly feeling indebted to Garcia for encouraging his travel without following through on his own, Khan connected Garcia with Zuhbi and asked for help getting Garcia through the border into Syria. Garcia and Zuhbi exchanged a series of messages. “Please pick me up. I’m in the bus station [at] Antakya. Call me ... I tried calling your number but I think I’m missing some things. There’s guys asking me if I’m [trying] to go to Syria.”<sup>153</sup> Zuhbi responded, “Go to a hotel. Hotel Antakya is preferred.” Finally, after some back and forth, the two men agreed to meet at a local mall. “Ok, I am wearing white glasses on top of my black hat, blue sweater white Jordan’s and black pants, a very shirt under my sweater.”<sup>154</sup>

Three days after Garcia arrived in Turkey, he crossed the border into jihadist-controlled territory. He told Khan he had “been delivered :)”<sup>155</sup> Over the course of the next few months, Khan and Garcia continued their online communications. Garcia provided him with a play-by-play of his experiences, claiming he was in a boot camp and had an “ak” (AK-47) that he had fired. He also stated he was involved in battles, a “lil bit.”<sup>156</sup> From February to August 2014, Garcia was part of a jihadist group not affiliated with IS. He sent Khan pictures from Syria, including an AK-47: “that’s my baby ... you can have one too if you like.”<sup>157</sup>

Finally, in August, Garcia messaged Khan, noting that he had finally joined IS.<sup>158</sup> This was the last conversation that Garcia and Khan ever had on Facebook. At its conclusion, Khan told Garcia to “make sure they [e.g., IS] are doing everything according to Islam, not killing innocent ppl and all that.”<sup>159</sup>

Shortly following Garcia’s arrival in Syria, his concerned family members contacted the FBI, and a formal investigation commenced.<sup>160</sup> The Bureau obtained a search warrant for Garcia’s social media accounts, which led them to uncover his connections with Khan. This scrutiny intensified when Khan filed another visa request to travel to Australia in October 2014. Investigators were concerned that he intended on following through with his plans to go to Syria.<sup>161</sup>



On December 25, 2014, Garcia's family received a message from his Facebook account. An unknown IS member informed them their loved one was dead.<sup>162</sup> Khan was arrested five months later. He recently pleaded guilty to providing material support to IS.<sup>163</sup>

### **Brian Dempsey and Terry Ingram**

In May 2015, federal investigators filed a criminal complaint alleging that Brian Arthur Dempsey, Sr., a 43-year-old resident of Sacramento, California, had made false statements to federal authorities in an international terrorism case.<sup>164</sup> Dempsey's case is an anomaly in multiple regards. First, Dempsey is one of the oldest travelers in the dataset, one of two individuals over the age of 40. He lived in the Sacramento area until July 2013, when he initially went to Syria. Moreover, Dempsey was a sworn California peace officer until 2012. He served as a youth counselor for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations for over a decade.<sup>165</sup> At some point prior to his travel to Syria and Iraq, likely between 2011 and 2013, he converted to Islam.<sup>166</sup>

The complaint alleges that Dempsey and another individual, referred to as "Person A," conspired to travel to Syria in July 2013 to "participate in combat."<sup>167</sup> Dempsey only stayed in Syria for a month and a half, before attempting to return to the U.S. via Rome, Italy.<sup>168</sup> Unfortunately for Dempsey, he had already been added to the U.S. no-fly list. As a result, FBI agents stopped and questioned him at the airport.

During the August 22, 2013, interview, Dempsey lied to the FBI about his time in Syria, most of which he spent in the border town of Azaz. He told special agents that he traveled to Syria with Person A to "help refugees" and that he asked his brother to call the State Department to ensure that entering Syria was legal.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, he claimed not to know any members of terrorist organizations, and that no one in Azaz was fighting the Syrian regime.<sup>170</sup> According to Dempsey's story, they had no opportunities to help refugees; the only thing he and Person A did in Azaz was "hang out."<sup>171</sup>

After this interview, Dempsey canceled his return to the U.S. and remained in Italy. Internal law enforcement

documents show that Dempsey was on an official list of foreign fighters compiled by the Italian government.<sup>172</sup> In January 2014, U.S. law enforcement interviewed Dempsey again in Rome. During this interview, he made multiple statements that disputed claims he made during the airport encounter. Dempsey admitted that he had traveled to fight, and also that he had contacted members of several jihadist organizations in Azaz, including IS, JN, and *Ahrar al-Sham*. He also claimed to have engaged in combat on at least two occasions during his stay in Syria.<sup>173</sup>

U.S. authorities were planning to resolve the charges against Dempsey in exchange for cooperation, but in October 2014, Dempsey absconded from Italy.<sup>174</sup> Subsequently, law enforcement filed criminal charges against Dempsey for making false statements.<sup>175</sup> Dempsey, meanwhile, traveled to Germany, and then onwards to the United Kingdom (UK). His exact itinerary remains unclear, but in January 2017, he was arrested in the UK. Extradition proceedings are pending.<sup>176</sup>

After Dempsey's departure from Syria in August 2013, Person A stayed in Syria. A source with knowledge of the investigation confirmed to the authors that Person A refers to Terry Ingram, another Sacramento resident and convert to Islam.<sup>177</sup> Ingram's whereabouts are unknown, but the source also remarked that Ingram was far more "radical" than Dempsey, and likely joined either IS or JN after Dempsey's departure.<sup>178</sup>

Ingram took an unusual path towards jihadism. In the early 1990s, a group called the Juris Christian Assembly (JCA) formed in Stanislaus County, California. The group's name was somewhat of a red herring. Its main purpose was to protest tax laws and it ascribed to what can now be generally termed as a "sovereign citizen" ideology.<sup>179</sup> In short, Juris Christian Assembly's members believed that they were not subject to state taxes, because they were "free Christian Israelite Citizen[s], not resident[s] of the forum state, the corporation referred to as 'the State of California.'"<sup>180</sup>

As members of the group refused to pay taxes, they accumulated hundreds of thousands of dollars of back taxes, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) placed liens on

their holdings.<sup>181</sup> In response, the group's leader and several members, including Terry Ingram, conspired to defraud the government by filing fraudulent warrants for IRS officials and intimidating government employees.<sup>182</sup> In January 1994, group members assaulted and threatened to kill the Stanislaus County recorder.<sup>183</sup>

Ingram participated in the JCA plot by filing false warrants to an IRS center in Fresno, in the amounts of \$12,550.48 and \$1,238.94. Two other members also went to his place of employment, a local car dealership, and demanded that Ingram's wage levies be removed while posing as federal government employees.<sup>184</sup> In June 1995, Ingram and several others were indicted on several fraud counts, as well as the attack on the county recorder. Ingram was found guilty and was eventually released from prison in 1999.<sup>185</sup>

Given the lack of publicly available evidence about these cases, it is especially hard to determine how a former correctional officer and a former "sovereign citizen" who both converted to Islam met one another, and decided to travel to Syria to fight. Dempsey's eventual extradition and prosecution in the U.S. may bring more details to light. However, these cases are reminders that the social connections that influence travelers are not always straightforward or conventional.

### **Networked Travelers: Why "Strength in Numbers" Matters**

As noted previously, dozens of academic studies found that previous face-to-face interactions with fellow travelers are a strong determinant of mobilization. In some cases, these connections and social bonds extend beyond the decision to travel. Some studies point to the effect of small group interactions on their members' progressive adaptation of radical viewpoints.<sup>186</sup> This thesis is difficult to prove conclusively. Radicalization is a complex process. What holds true in one individual's case may not hold in another. Like other travelers, the motivations of networked travelers vary, from those who originally went for familial reasons to others enticed by a greater jihadist narrative that depicted life in a utopian Islamic society.

The majority of travelers in our sample established close connections to other American travelers, and supporters of jihadist groups more broadly, prior to their travel. Some reached out to individuals online who self-identified as facilitators or smugglers into jihadist controlled territory. They plugged into a well-worn network of jihadists who provided step-by-step directions on how to fool customs officials, which hotels to stay in, and who to call once they reached the Syrian and Iraqi borders. They augmented that knowledge and connections with their offline relationships, leaning on deep social connections to plan and execute their international travel. In many cases, it is not clear that these individuals would have successfully traveled to Syria and Iraq without the help of these real-world connections.

However, some individuals learn the difficult lesson that connecting to other jihadist sympathizers is insufficient for successful travel. Strikingly, the same networks (friends, families, and social groups) served as roadblocks in some cases. If certain friends or family members uncovered a would-be traveler's plans, their travel attempts unraveled. Asher Abid Khan, for example, made all the contacts necessary to smuggle his friend, Sixto Ramiro Garcia, into Syria. But, when his parents discovered his plans, they prevented him from making the journey himself.

Including more people in a travel plot can backfire. During their final attempt to secure fake passports and travel to San Diego, the Minneapolis attempted travelers grew increasingly paranoid. Several cluster members pulled out of the group because they didn't trust members who made previous, unsuccessful travel attempts. Guled Omar eventually became so frustrated with some of his co-conspirators that he told another group member, "I don't want to travel anywhere with them ... I feel like if I go anywhere with them it's a failure."<sup>187</sup> The feeling was not limited to one member—Zacharia Abdurahman pulled out of the plan days later, fearing that the number of people involved increased the likelihood that law enforcement would interdict the plot.<sup>188</sup> Ironically, both Abdurahman and

Omar confided their distrust of other group members to the FBI's confidential human source.

External interventions or internal rifts between group members provide law enforcement a window to disrupt travel facilitation networks. Oftentimes, law enforcement was notified by concerned family members or friends. Sometimes, attempted interventions happened too late, occurring after the individual already traveled. However, when there was a network behind that individual, input from family members and friends helped law enforcement identify other travelers and attempted travelers. Moreover, law enforcement frequently used confidential human sources to infiltrate small group plots to facilitate travel. Prosecutors in the Minnesota cluster cases owed a significant degree of their success to evidence attained from confidential sources.

Nevertheless, building social contacts allow travelers to generate a "Hydra effect." Law enforcement may apprehend a few travelers, but several more will slip through the cracks and reach their destination. In general, deep-seated connections lower the probability that external forces will intercept travelers. For instance, Mohommad and Sumaiya Ali were willing to mislead the FBI, facing up to eight years in prison, rather than tell investigators that their sons had traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS.

Moreover, connections make it easier for group members to share technical and logistical information about how to travel. Mohamed Roble drew on the successes and failures of Abdi Nur and Abdullahi Yusuf's respective attempts to travel, taking a route that would not immediately alert authorities. In several of the aforementioned cases, including Garcia, McCain, Nur, Mohallim, and Jama, travelers relied on pre-established social connections to contact smugglers and facilitators who could help escort them across the border into Syria and Iraq.

Another valuable lesson from networked travelers is that successful travel often has a serendipitous element. Abdi Nur and Abdullahi Yusuf were similar in many ways: both were young Somali-Americans from Minnesota who wanted to travel to IS, pursued the same course of

action, received their passports within the same week, and traveled one day apart from each other. More importantly, Yusuf had a stronger link to the network than Nur, as Hanad Mohallim was his best friend. However, Yusuf botched his passport application interview, and Nur did not. A senior law enforcement official involved in the investigation later recalled that without the suspicions raised during the interview, Yusuf might never have been apprehended.<sup>189</sup>

The one known exception to the norm of American traveler networks is the Minnesota cluster. Unlike its counterparts, which usually involve isolated groups of two or three members, the Minnesota cluster transcended several friendship and family groups and included at least 15 people directly. The 2007–2013 recruitment wave to Somalia entailed that the new generation of jihadist recruits had access to organized formations of jihadist travelers, with experience, knowledge, and skills that could be used in future recruitment. It is no coincidence that upon arrival to Syria, Abdi Nur reached out to Somalia-based Minneapolisite Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan for guidance. Several other co-defendants had family and friendship connections to *al-Shabaab* members. Drawing from this structure, and the charismatic personalities it produced, the Minnesota travelers formed tight-knit kinship and friendship groups to facilitate their travel.

These clusters are less frequent in the U.S. context than in other settings. Nevertheless, the majority of successful American travelers had some form of network behind them. These webs were based on social connections with friends, family members, and community groups, and were used to facilitate travel. Beyond those factors, networks vary from case to case. Some involved external contacts (e.g. Mohamed Zuhbi); many used digital communications technologies to augment existing personal contacts. Networks vary in size, but the majority comprised of small groups of two, three, or four people. Despite the diversity of network types, these findings are in line with much of the current research on the role of personal connections.<sup>190</sup>