Opinion Black, Muslim and Unwelcome: Is Europe Facing a Somali 'Jihad Generation' Crisis?

Assailed by negative media stereotypes, racism, low academic achievement and social exclusion, the Somali community is one of Europe's most vilified migrant groups. That vulnerability makes them a perfect target for Islamist terror recruiters.

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- Meet the heartbroken Muslim mothers whose sons are fighting in Syria – and attacking Europe
- Somalia's deadliest attack ever: Death toll rises to over 300 in Mogadishu blasts

One Saturday evening in December 2015, Muhiddin Mire, 30, randomly slashed the throat of a stranger at Leytonstone tube station in East London, claiming it was "revenge" for Syria.

Days before, the British parliament had voted to join the air strikes against so-called Islamic State (IS) there. Shocked onlookers heard him shout: "This is for my Syrian brothers, I'm going to spill your blood."

Mire was a Somali-born British citizen whose family had arrived as refugees to Britain in the 1990s. He was a former Uber driver, who had a known history of mental health problems.

A year later another young man of Somali origins, and Norwegian national, Zakaria Bulhan, 19, randomly attacked strangers in London's Russell Square, killing an American tourist and injuring five others.

In August last year, Belgian soldiers shot dead a Belgian-Somali man,

after he attempted to attack them with a knife shouting, “Allah Akhbar”.

All three terrorists share a Somali connection. Of course these incidents are rare, and represent a small fraction of the population of young European Somalis.

Nonetheless, in recent years there has been a spate of attacks involving young Europeans of Somali origin, putting this community, who constitute one of the largest refugee Muslim communities in Europe, firmly in the spotlight.

For the past few years we have been researching this generation of young Somalis in Europe, many of whom have disengaged from the varied indigenous Islam of their parents’ generation, and began a distinct journey to diaspora Somali Islam, connecting the young Somali in Helsinki, Oslo and London.

We have also investigated why a small number of them – a so-called “generation jihad” – have adopted a far less tolerant and more radical Salafi form of Islam, entirely alien to their parents’ generation, and culture, and sometimes, functioning as a stepping stone to violence.

Somalis are some of Europe’s oldest and youngest African migrants. Following the outbreak of civil war in 1991, which triggered significant migration, the country was known as the world’s “most failed state,” though in recent years it has transited into a “fragile state.”

A Somali gunman stands guard at a road-side checkpoint near the capital Mogadishu. October 24, 2003 REUTERS

Now, Somali communities can be found crowded in urban pockets in cities like Oslo, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Leicester and Malmo. The UK is home to the oldest and largest Somali diaspora outside Africa.

Somalis are some of the UK’s oldest and newest migrants; a small population arrived in the 19th century from the British-Somaliland protectorate to work as seamen in port cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool and London’s Docklands; later they were joined by refugees from the civil war. In the UK, the 2011 census recorded just over 101,000 people of

Somalis living in the UK.

Note that this only records individuals actually born in Somalia. “Somali” is not given a separate ethnic checkbox in most censuses, as those British citizens of Turkish or Pakistani origins have as an option. Somalis in the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, generally come under the umbrella “Black African” category, which makes it difficult to estimate the numbers of European-born Somalis. But the truer figure of Somalis in the UK is believed to be close to 250,000.

Somalis are unusually mobile across national borders in Europe, and their intra-European mobility is particularly directed towards the UK. Thousands of people from Somalia have come to the UK from other EU member states as EU nationals from, for example, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. Estimates suggest 20,000 Somalis have arrived from the Netherlands alone. Studies show that between one third and a half of the entire Dutch Somali community has moved to the UK. Smaller numbers have come from Nordic countries, including 4,000 from Denmark.

Elsewhere in Europe, the history of Somali immigration is a more recent phenomenon. There were only 49 Somalis in Finland in 1990; today there are over 16,000, the largest non-white minority population in the country. In 1984 just 87 Somalis were registered in Norway, today the number is close to 30,000 – but again this only records first generation Somalis, the true figure is likely to be much higher.

Teresa Puja, a teacher, addresses a group of refugees during an Italian lesson at the Palazzo Condo, a hostel for refugees in Satriano, Italy. Feb. 16, 2016 Bloomberg

Across Scandinavia this picture is repeated: Sweden has 57,000 Somalis, the second highest population of Somalis in Europe. In Denmark, the population is at 18,000, and The Netherlands is home to 34,000 Somalis.

The majority of young Somalis came to Europe as children or were born there, though Somalis do continue arriving on Europe’s shores, most through the infamously dangerous migrant trail from Libya to Italy.

Since 9/11, there has been a fraught conversation in Europe around issues of “shared values,” citizenship and belonging around people of a Muslim background. The “war on terror” led to a binary divide in Europe between good vs bad migrant, and moderate vs radical Muslim.

And second-generation Somalis found themselves to be on the wrong sides of these binaries – in particular, second-generation Somalis.

In negotiating these binary divides, Somalis are not alone. Radicalization is a phenomenon that has affected all Muslim communities.

Key triggers include marginalization, stigmatization, lack of integration and poor school performance, and the pervasiveness of internet radicalization, especially propaganda videos on Facebook and YouTube.

An Islamist fighter poses with his weapon as he keeps the crowd at bay during an execution of a Somali, Ali Hussein, in Bulo Marer, Somalia. Dec.13, 2008 ASSOCIATED PRESS

But what does set Somalis apart is that their native country is home to al-Shabaab, arguably Africa’s most potent terrorist group. For the last few years a number of young ethnic Somalis have embraced jihad; some have returned to Europe; a number have died in fighting for al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Another experience that also sets Somalis apart from other Muslims in Europe is that they are a refugee community whose members are visibly Muslim and black, and already amongst the most vilified migrant communities in Europe.

From Norway, UK, Finland to the Netherlands a negative collective perception precedes Somalis. Somalis are framed as a troublesome group at the intersection of European fears over immigration and security, and young second-generation Somalis are coming of age in this atmosphere of fear and suspicion against them.

Somali lives in Europe are often already framed through a problematizing lens. As researchers we have encountered questions from journalists, politicians and social services such as, “What is it about Somalis?”

Somali refugees study the Quran at a school in the Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya. December 19, 2017\ BAZ RATNER/ REUTERS

European newspapers are peppered with negative collective stereotypes of Somalis. They are represented as “violent criminals,” “oppressed veil-clad women,” “benefit cheats” and “terrorists.”

It hasn’t helped that despite the relatively few incidents, jihadi extremists from the Somali community ‘win’ a high profile. The “Terror Twins“, two gifted young Somali girls born in Manchester whose brother joined ISIS in Syria and whom he secretly recruited to join, were the subject of intense media coverage and speculation.

To understand the specific triggers that have driven Europeans of Somali origin to terrorism, it’s worth examining some of the key features of their biographies. Here, we present two profiles, based on interviews we carried out.

Mohamed was 8 years old when he arrived as a refugee from Mogadishu to a housing project in north London. Enrolled at a public school, he was immediately the target of bullies, teased for his poor English, and got into fights. By the time he left for high school, he had toughened up and began to take on the bullies.

Soon enough he won “respect” by joining a gang. Tutored by older Somali youth he began to sell cannabis before moving on to harder drugs such as crack and cocaine. He began carrying a knife to defend himself – gang turf wars are not uncommon. One day in the autumn of 2013 he was attacked by rival gang and repeatedly stabbed.

When he came out of hospital he took his spot again, but began to change his tone and attitude. He became tired of the constant run-ins with police, guilty for causing his mother pain, and one day he met a friend, Ahmed, a Somali boy with a similar history who told him he had found a new path through Islam. Ahmed convinced Mohamed to attend a small Islamic prayer circle ran by a neighborhood imam. That imam was not connected to the local Somali-oriented mosque but was instead a Salafi preacher known to the UK security services.

Mohamed dropped his old life. He became an informal preacher on the streets of London. He stopped the occasional beer, cannabis joints and young women. He handed out leaflets chastising British and Western foreign policy in the Muslim world. He gradually became more restless and angry critical of his fellow Brits.

Mohammed's new identity was a form of protection against British society where he didn't feel accepted; he chose instead to assert his Islamic identity. He began to consider how he could help his fellow Muslims abroad. He wanted to study the Quran in Egypt, but he thought it preferable to go to Somalia or Syria, where he could freely practice his newfound hardline Islamic identity. But Mohamed has never left London; he is still here, working as an Islamic teacher.

Coffins of victims from a shipwreck off Sicily killing an estimated 300 Eritrean and Somali men, women and children at Lampedusa airport. October 5, 2013 REUTERS

Like Mohamed, Ibrahim, who is composite character based on several different interviews, also had challenges integrating. Ibrahim was born to Somali parents in the Netherlands who decided to move their family to Leicester in England at the age of 12. He struggled to fit in. He was Dutch and Somali, a confusing mix for local kids and he had to learn English.

During his teens he did not care much about his Muslim identity, but he became friends with other young Muslims and that piqued his interest. He started to attend a prayer group and became part of an online Islamist community. Soon enough he became involved with a radical group, and was monitored by the security services.

He traveled to Kenya, and then onto Somalia with several friends. His cover was his ambition to work as a humanitarian volunteer but his mission was to join al-Shabaab, which has close links with Al-Qaeda. Suddenly he disappeared; his parents made enquiries, and he eventually turned up in neighboring Kenya.

He failed to be recruited by al-Shabaab and returned to the UK, where he was questioned by the security services and released. He has now come to

regret his journey and is making efforts to get a job.

Are Somalis more prone than other immigrant Muslim groups towards radicalization? In many cases jihadi recruiters are aware of Somali youth's fragile sense of integration and tend to target this weak spot.

As recent arrivals to Europe, their stories are different to postcolonial Muslim migrants who arrived after 1945, or to Moroccans and Turks who came as Europe's "guest workers" in the 1970s.

Another complication for Somalis is that they are black – and have faced racism within and outside the Muslim community. Most mosques tend to be run by Muslims of Indian sub-continent or Middle Eastern background, but when Somalis began to arrive in large numbers in the 1990s, they faced a double block to integration and communal life.

A group of Muslim refugees pray at the Palazzo Condo, a hostel for refugees in Satriano, Italy. Feb. 15, 2016Bloomberg

The story of Somali radicalization is about failures at the heart of integration. Across Europe young Somalis struggle to become Dutch, Finnish or British.

Though ideology is important to some young Somalis who get radicalized, usually this is overstated – not least by the popular media – at the at the expense of harder questions about issues of unemployment, alienation and discrimination. Somalis remain largely cut-off from the labour market in many European countries. In particular, the lack of Somali women participating in the Labour market hampers their integration.

European states have responded with a plethora of security responses. In the Netherlands, Somalis have been deported back into the middle of a civil war and in the UK, those Somali-born nationals who have been involved in radical activities or who have been suspected of belonging to terror groups have been stripped of their British passports.

However, thesa security responses have done little to dissuade young Somalis becoming radicalized.

An anti-radicalization strategy without an integration strategy won't stop more young Europeans of Somali descent dying for jihad.

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