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“The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and
that Community’s Response”

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First, I want to say thank you to Chairman King and Members of the Committee for allowing me to speak on behalf of the Muslim Somali American community today. I also want to thank the Somali American community for helping us, the families of the missing children, to stand up against the radicalization of our youth. And lastly, I want to thank the people of the state of Minnesota for helping the Somali American community to grow and flourish in the state of Minnesota.

Many Somali American families fled from a burning civil war to the refugee camps in neighboring Kenya where killings, gang rape, starvation and civilian mass murdering was common. They waited in those camps for years and years to be rescued by the international community.

Many of them, including my sister and her son, Burhan Hassan, were fortunate to have made it safely to the shores of the United States of America. These lucky families were very good at adapting to life in the US. They have found not only peace and safety, but many other valuable opportunities such as employment and free first class education for their children. They also found the ability to build their own communities and start their own businesses, such as Somali malls, community organizations, as well as their own mosques to freely practice their faith.

Burhan Hassan, my nephew, started to adapt to life in the United States so quickly that he picked up the language and became an A student as soon as he started in school. Burhan was very happy with his life here in a new country. Since we are Muslim, my Sister enrolled my nephew to the local mosque, Abubakr As-Sadique (formerly known as the Shafici mosque) in the Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, where he learned his religion well. We were very pleased with his achievements, especially as many of his peers were not doing well. The reason for this was that

there are not that many resources for the youth in the community, except for the local mosques.

The community has contributed millions of dollars from their meager resources to enlarge and expand the Abubakr center so it could do more youth services since there were not other useful and productive alternative youth resources for the Somali American community. We in the Somali-American Muslim community hold mosque Imams and leaders in high regard, and trust them blindly with everything, including our children, since they are the leaders of our faith- a faith of peace, a faith that stands for submission to God. We the families in the Somali American community sought a refuge for our children in the Abubakr center from the bad influences that lead to bad choices on the streets of our neighborhoods. We never thought we could be hurt by the very institution that we trusted with our children. When we realized that our children were recruited and lured away from us into the burning country that we had fled from while they were in their infancy, we would never have thought that possibly to have existed.

This youth had never grown up in Somalia or knew Somali, nor were they ever discuss Somali or American politics. Their passion was sports, education and electronic gadgets. They all were from single mom households and all of the recruited young men belonged to one center. That is Abubakr As Saddique. It is a very important that the cost to travel Somalia from Minneapolis is over \$3000 – none of the youth worked.

All those brain washed and recruited young men - some of whom were killed - were smart, bright future “embodiments of the community.” They were not only very loved ones but most of them were “the men” of their single mom households. For example the case of Mohamed Hassan. He was in the University of Minnesota. He was the caretaker of the 90 yr old grandmother who raised him, fled with him so he could survive and have a future. Before the radicals brain washed and lured him back into the Somali inferno, he was taking care of his aging grandmother. He would administer her a dozen medications and take her to her doctor’s appointment. Between classes at the University, he would come home and feed his grandmother. So was the case for Jamal Bana, another smart student that was taking care of his siblings, mom and his bed-ridden dad.

Another kid was the only driver of the family car that after the radicals took him to Somalia, nobody else in the family could drive the car to get groceries, pick the younger ones from school or dugsi. Or when the car was cited to be moved for street snow removal, none in the family could save the first car and the only one from being towed and taken forever.

Burhan Hassan came to US at the age of four from the refugee camps and never saw Somalia too. He was highly achieving Roosevelt High school senior who was dreaming to go to Harvard to become a doctor or a lawyer just like many of you. Burhan Hassan had never saw or met his dad because his dad was killed while he was a few months old.

Looking back, my sister and I realized (along with the other mothers) that these young men had been behaving very strangely within the last three or four months before they went missing, spending most of their time at the mosque, even sleeping overnight and during the weekends there. They appeared pensive and spent hours alone thinking to themselves, and wouldn’t leave the mosque. We would never have guessed that our kids had been brainwashed already and recruited

to fight for al-Shabaab in a jihadist war which was killing other innocent Muslim Somalis thousands of miles away.

On November 4, 2008, everybody in our community was engaged with the election results. When my sister started to call me several times during the evening to notify me that Burhan had not come home, I dismissed her and told her he was probably getting the vote out somewhere, or probably somewhere in the mosque. My sister awoke with her motherly instinct at around 2 am, and searched his room, to find his laptop, important clothing and locked-up passport all gone. She summoned the whole family the next morning, and went to the local police station. We made phone calls to the local hospitals, friends, family members, and we found nothing. My sister met two other families in the local police station, and one of the other family members had an itinerary that one of the kids had left for his uncle to see, so the families then decided to go to the airport to see if they could find someone to help stop the kids in Europe. Nothing was possible, and we were frustrated. We went to the mosque and failed to get answers. We were given promises that the imams would come and meet with the families, and do everything they could to help find out what happened to "their sons," but that never happened. We kept waiting for the imams to meet with us and give us an explanation of what happened to our kids, since they were the ones who raised our kids.

In the meantime, we immediately approached the local law enforcement, mainly the FBI, and told them that our kids were missing and that we had an itinerary that showed that they were going to Somalia, and strongly pleaded with them to urgently try to stop our children from reaching Somalia and find out what happened to them.

After a week of waiting without a word from mosque leadership except promises to help, suddenly we saw them on Somali TV blaming us, the anxious families, for lying about the mosque, and said we intended to destroy the mosque. They said there were no young men missing from the mosques, and asked the community to urgently stop us from doing harm to the Muslim community. The Imam Sheikh Abdirahman Omar also went on Somali TV and said on behalf of the mosque leadership that the only young men they see who are likely to disappear are ex-gang members and drug addicts, that they had tried and failed to rehabilitate during the summertime. Those he was referring to are our children!

We in the families were at that time in a state of shock that words cannot express. We were in a state of confusion and fear, trying to locate our young men, not only locally but internationally. We were awaiting help from the mosque leadership, but we heard something that was unimaginable - a feeling which was even worse than when the kids disappeared. Suddenly, in a matter of days, the mosque leadership transformed us from victims of radicalization into pariahs of the community. We were on the defensive, with these single-mothers (with cultural and language barriers) who were extremely vulnerable to all kinds of issues, having just lost not only their children but their link to society, the only men in their households who could take care of them.

Burhan would periodically call his mother from Somalia. He would ask how she was and maybe ask for some money for glasses or other small needs. She would ask him how he was and try to get him to explain why he was there, but he would respond very cryptically. My sister became concerned that Burhan was being monitored.

The last time that Burhan called was about two weeks before he was shot and killed. He told my sister that he was sick. On June 5, 2009 my sister got a phone call from another “recruit” who told my sister that “Little Bashir” was shot in the head and killed and that he had helped bury Burhan somewhere in the Hodan District of Mogadishu.

The mosque leadership continued to disseminate a strong message that there were no children missing, rather than we the families were tools and being used by infidels to try and destroy the mosque. As a result of this, the families united and started Saturday meetings that included outreaching to other community members that also had missing children. We learned from the mosque leadership’s tactics used to defame us that the community was the targeted audience, and we framed our outreach strategy to educate the community about the realities of what was happening to us. An intense outreach from both the mosque leadership and the family members started to unfold in the Somali American community, where we were trying to convince the community that our children were taken, that we weren’t trying to destroy our own mosques (that we built), and that nobody can destroy a mosque. At the same time, the mosque leadership was sending the message to the families that had not yet spoken out, that:

- if they speak up about their missing loved ones will end up in Guantanamo because nobody cares about Muslims;
- they have a better chance of getting their children back into the country if they remain silent;
- if they speak up, they will be morally responsible for having killed all the Muslims and destroyed all the mosques.

With that going on, we the families (on top of the emotional pain of missing our children), had to spend day and night outreaching to the community to convince them of the facts and the reality that we faced. We had to warn other families to pay attention with what was going on with their own children, and dared to continue to stand up for all the single mothers (which comprises a large portion of our community). With all those efforts which continued for months and years, we were alone in our efforts.

In the meantime, the mosque leadership was always in the mode of “double-speak,” claiming to the larger community in English that they were victims of our efforts to find our “fake” missing children and creating open house events in the mosque where big organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) would stand beside the mosque leaders and support them blindly, without having ever met with the families of the missing Somali youths (even though we had requested several times to meet with CAIR, but never did as we were left without a response).

On the other hand, in Somali language, the mosque leaders (led by the imam) would threaten and intimidate us, calling us all sorts of names during Friday’s sermons just because we had spoken publicly about the missing Somali kids and had refused to remain quiet.

For several months, as we (the families of the missing youth) pursued a constant outreach to the Somali American Muslim community to convince them that our children were really missing, we

had finally gained some momentum in our efforts. As a result, the community sympathized with us and we were getting more information as to what had happened to our children. Just as we continued to make progress in laying out the realities to our community, powerful organizations such as CAIR stepped into our community and stifled whatever progress we had made by trying to tell our Somali American community not to cooperate with law enforcement. CAIR held meetings for some members of the community and told them not to talk to the FBI, which was a slap in the face for the Somali American Muslim mothers who were knocking on doors day and night with pictures of their missing children and asking for the community to talk to law enforcement about what they know of the missing kids. It was a slap in the face for community activists who had invested time and personal resources to educate the community about forging a good relationship with law enforcement in order to stop the radicalization and recruitment of our children. We held three different demonstrations against CAIR, in order to get them to leave us alone so we can solve our community's problems, since we don't know CAIR and they don't speak for us. We wanted to stop them from dividing our community by stepping into issues that don't belong to them.

Our outreach efforts, after a grueling two years, have won us the hearts and minds of the Somali American community to commit to stopping the radicalization efforts of the few extremists and radicals in our community. In these efforts, we have identified the Somali American youth's challenges and aspirations which have never been addressed, by identifying and engaging the vulnerable youth. In terms of the challenges, 85% of the Somali American youth who are vulnerable do not have viable employment and are not engaged in productive social programs. In the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, alone, we have the highest number of youth per density of land in the state of Minnesota, and no tangible resources for the youth. As a matter of fact, hundreds of millions of dollars of charitable tax credited funds are being invested in rehabilitating the neighborhood, but it is not having any positive impact on the community.

In conclusion, it is important for me to state the fact that 99.9% of Muslim Somali Americans are good citizens who are very grateful for the opportunities they have and are very busy in chasing their American dream. It is also important to mention the fact that they abhor al-Shabaab and terrorism as much as any other American does. However, the challenge is that the community is lacking strong and true leaders that translate the real voices of the average members of the community. The only visible voices we hear are voices that are propped up by certain organizations (such as CAIR), and those organizations continue to deny the real facts and voices of the communities by claiming that no problem exists, though we continue to face problems such as the radicalization of our vulnerable youth, a growing trend of human trafficking and increasing youth violence. We regret the silencing and intimidation faced by leaders and activists who dare to speak out on the real challenges that keep our youth and community vulnerable to radicalization. Burying our heads in the sand will not make this problem go away.