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**UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS,
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

*The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the
Economic and Social Council of the United Nations*

Separation of Religion or Belief and State

American Identified as Bomber in Attack on African Union in Somalia

By JOSH KRON

MOGADISHU, Somalia — The voice in the recording sounds unmistakably familiar — the tenor, the colloquialisms — a boy who grew up in America.

The recording was a suicide message, posted online on Sunday by an Islamist militia aligned with Al Qaeda. The voice was said to be that of Abdisalan Hussein Ali, 22, who was born in Somalia but spent his formative years in Minneapolis.

His life appeared to have come full circle here on Saturday, when he is said to have blown himself up in an [attack on African Union troops in Mogadishu](#). He would be the third American known to become a suicide bomber for Somalia's [Shabab](#) rebels.

The [Shabab](#) said that Mr. Ali was one of two suicide bombers in the attack, which the militant group said killed scores of [peacekeepers](#). The African Union has confirmed that it suffered casualties, but has not disclosed the number.

But as the [Shabab](#) have lost power and support in Somalia in recent months, the battle has turned into a war of words as much as weapons, and the claim of an American suicide bomber packs a powerful punch.

Omar Jamal, a Somali diplomat at the United Nations, said that Mr. Ali was one of the bombers. Mr. Ali's friends and family listened to the recording. Mr. Jamal said, "and they all say that it is him."

A spokesman for the American Embassy in Nairobi said the United States had "seen reports" that one of the bombers was an American citizen, and was investigating them.

Mr. Ali was known by the F.B.I. to be one of an estimated 30 Americans who have joined the [Shabab](#), at least 20 of whom came from the Somali community in Minneapolis.

He had been an ambitious pre-med student at the University of Minnesota, hoping for an internship at the Mayo Clinic, before he disappeared in 2008. The audio recording, in which the speaker exhorts Westerners to join the fight, appears to reflect those qualities.

“Don’t just sit around, you know, and be, you know, a couch potato and just like, just chill all day,” the [voice on the recording says](#). “Today jihad is what is most important. It’s not important that you become a doctor, or some sort of engineer.”

For Mr. Ali, life began in war and seems to have ended that way. He was only a few months old when his family fled the strife in Somalia in a makeshift boat, landing first at a Kenyan refugee camp, his mother told [The New York Times](#) in a [2009 interview](#). The family, with 12 children, arrived in Seattle in 2000 and then moved to Minneapolis.

Minneapolis has embraced generations of refugees from around the world, and Mr. Ali’s high school, Thomas Alva Edison High in northeast Minneapolis, calls itself an “[International World School](#),” offering open houses to prospective students in Spanish; [Hmong](#), which is spoken in Southeast Asia; and Somali.

During high school, he sold sneakers out of his locker to make money to help support his family. He lifted weights, and his friends called him “Bullethead.” He was elected president of the school’s Somali Student Association, and he later became a caseworker at a prestigious law firm. At the University of Minnesota, he majored in chemistry and held a part-time job as a security guard at the management school there.

“He was a highly motivated kid,” said a fellow student, an upperclassman who became his mentor. “He wanted to change lives.”

Why and when he turned to Islamic militancy is unclear.

A friend of Mr. Ali’s, who attended middle school and then college with him, said they were part of a tight-knit group of Somali-Americans who grew up together and would talk about Somalia and debate politics.

“There was a desire in all of us, that our parents always talk about, the great Somalia,” the friend said, who did not want to be identified for fear of being questioned by the F.B.I. Mr. Ali was not her first Somali friend to join the Shabab, she said, nor the first to die as a member of the group.

She described Mr. Ali as “very outgoing.”

“We used to call him a womanizer,” she said. “He was always in with the ladies. But then all that changed.”

In Arabic class, he started sitting in the back, not talking to anyone. “But then again, you’re not going to look at him and say his personality changed, he’s going to get radical and leave the country,” she said. “In college that’s when you find out who you are, so I didn’t think much of it then.”

One night in 2008, he was wrongly accused of robbing a Subway sandwich shop on campus. Friends said the experience left a mark on him long after the charges were dropped.

In November 2008, he disappeared, along with two other Somali-Americans. “For an unknown reason the family thinks that” Mr. Ali “may have got on a plane and went somewhere,” a Minneapolis Police Department missing persons report says.

The Shabab, which controlled most of southern Somalia by the end of last year but have since lost ground, have posted [videos on YouTube](#) aimed at encouraging young Somali-Americans to come here. Many have heeded the call.

In October 2008, Shirwa Ahmed, also from Minneapolis, blew himself up in one of a string of Shabab attacks in northern Somalia. In May of this year, Farah Mohamed Beledi, 27, of St. Paul, tried to attack a government checkpoint in Mogadishu but was killed by African Union troops before he could detonate his explosives.

Another American, from Washington State, was reported to have been part of a suicide squad that attacked an African Union base in Mogadishu in 2009, killing more than 15 peacekeepers, but his identity has not been confirmed. And this month, [two Somali-American women from Minnesota](#) were convicted of aiding the Shabab.

However, many Somali-Americans have returned, not to fight, but to help rebuild the country, including the current prime minister and his predecessor.

Speaking of Saturday’s suicide attack, the weak American-backed transitional government expressed sorrow over what it said was not just a loss of life, but of a vital human resource.

“It’s tragic, because we were hoping for this young man to come back and take part in the rebuilding of the country,” said Suldan A. Farahsed, a government spokesman. “We needed young people like that.”

Mr. Ali kept in touch with his old life back in the United States by telephone and Facebook. His [Facebook page](#) shows him wearing a skullcap and wielding a baseball bat.

The friend says that Mr. Ali and a mutual friend last exchanged Facebook messages three weeks ago, but that the mutual friend stopped contacting Mr. Ali because “he said things that made her uncomfortable.”

Two years ago, he told a friend in Minneapolis that he would never attack the United States.

“Why would I do that?” the friend recalled Mr. Ali saying. “My mom could be walking down the street.”

Andrea Elliott contributed reporting from New York.

REFLECTIONS

The Tandem Project

The First Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Surely one of the best hopes for humankind is to embrace a culture in which religions and other beliefs accept one another, in which wars and violence are not tolerated in the name of an exclusive right to truth, in which children are raised to solve conflicts with mediation, compassion and understanding.

There is an increase in dialogue today between religions and other beliefs to embrace diversity, but few persons, less than one percent of any population, ever participate. This is a challenge. The value of such dialogues is proportionate to the level of participation. For civil society increased participation would create opportunities for education on inclusive and genuine approaches to human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

In 1968 the United Nations deferred passage of a legally-binding convention on religious intolerance saying it was too complicated and sensitive. Instead, they adopted a non-binding declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief. While very worthwhile, the declaration does not carry the force and commitment of a legally-binding international human rights convention on freedom of religion or belief.

Religions and other beliefs historically have been used to justify wars and settle disputes. This is more dangerous today as the possible use of nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction increases. Governments need to consider whether religions and other beliefs trump human rights or human rights trump religions and other beliefs or neither trumps the other. Can international human rights law help to stop the advance and use of such weapons in the face of this historic truth?

- **QUESTION:** Weapons of mass destruction as history teaches are often legitimized for national security and justified by cultural, ethnic, religious or political ideology. The U.N. Review Conference on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and studies on biological and cyber weapons demonstrate advances in science and technology is being used to increase their potential for mass destruction. The question is whether an International Convention on Human Rights and Freedom of Religion or Belief, elevated and supported equally by the U.N. Human Rights Council and U.N. Security Council, would help offset the risk of weapons of mass destruction. Recognition of the need for synergy to balance rights and security is a foundation for solving this issue.

“I am become death, the destroyer of worlds”

- Robert Oppenheimer, quote from the Bhagavad Gita after exploding the first atomic bomb, Trinity 1945.

The Tandem Project believes until a core legally-binding human rights Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief is adopted international human rights law will be incomplete. It may be time to begin to consider reinstating the 1968 Working Group to bring all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief under one banner, a core international human rights legally-binding treaty.

The Tandem Project a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 1986 to build understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity of religion or belief, and to prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference material and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights- Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion – and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.