



MN Guard, Somali leaders join forces to attract recruits

Article by: Mila Koumpilova

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The Minnesota National Guard did not want to lose Mohamed Mohamud.

The high school senior was eager to enlist, but his mother, a refugee of Somalia's brutal civil war, balked. Where Mohamud saw new experiences and money for college, his family saw danger. So the Guard took the unusual step of sending a longtime Muslim member to Mohamud's home to address his family's fears and secure their blessing.

Somali-Americans have enlisted in the Guard and U.S. military for years, but by all accounts, the numbers have remained low. As in Mohamud's case, recruiters come up against concerns about balancing service and the Muslim faith, the anxiety of refugees who fled armed conflict — and, some acknowledge, their own lack of awareness of the growing community.

But recently, Somali community leaders and Guard recruiters have both made overtures. The Guard networked with a Somali youth group and turned up at a community celebration. Some Somalis are touting the opportunities of military service — both for young recruits and a community that doesn't want to be defined by the recent departures of youths to join radical Islamist militants.

They say young people and even their more skeptical parents are listening.

"The world is becoming smaller, and the Somali community is getting bigger here," said Yusuf Ali, a Somali community leader. "We need to be more engaged. We need to be stakeholders in this state."

Surprisingly warm welcome

This August, Master Sgt. Kyle Mack of the Minnesota Air National Guard helped set up a display at the Somali Independence Day celebration on Lake Street: a tent and a Humvee with a Somali flag draped over the hood at the organizers' request, to show solidarity. This was the Guard's first appearance at the 14-year-old event, and Mack braced for a chilly reception.

But the Humvee was a hit with parents and children, who posed for photos in the driver's seat. More than 50 people signed up for a tour of the local Air Guard base. About 35 filled out cards to signal interest in considering service.



Mohamed Mohamud prepared for basic training, which starts this spring. The prospect, he said, has made him more determined than ever to graduate from South St. Paul High School.

David Joles • david.joles@startribune.com,



On Saturday at the Cedar Street Armory in St. Paul, Mohamed Mohamud, a member of the Minnesota Army National Guard, participated in a training drill.

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A Somali police officer told Lt. Col. Angela Steward-Randle, the Guard's director of diversity, "You don't usually see the military this well-received at Somali events."

The U.S. armed forces do not track the national origin of members, but anecdotally, Somali-American recruits remain relatively rare. The Minnesota Air Guard's 1,200 members at its Minneapolis base do not include any Somalis, though a man who attended the Independence Day event has applied.

Last year, the Guard asked Yaser Ishtaiwi, a 22-year Guard member who grew up in the Middle East, to mediate with Mohamud's family. Ishtaiwi sat down with the teen, his mother and an older sister in their St. Paul living room.

The young man, then a senior at Central High School, would lose his focus and never graduate if he enlisted, the women argued. He would be whisked off to full-time service, and they wouldn't see him for years. Unable to practice his faith, he'd drift away from Islam.

Ishtaiwi countered by pointing to his own experience: He went to college with the Guard's financial support. A full-time engineer, he trains with the Guard two days a month. He has remained a devout Muslim.

As a new immigrant, Ishtaiwi once clung to the Twin Cities expat Palestinian community and shunned risk-taking: "You stick to your routine without exploring. Joining the Guard, I was able to crawl out of that isolation."

A new view of military

Community leaders say Somalis have not joined in large numbers for a tangle of reasons. Youths and families don't always know about the college funding and career training or the part-time service in the Guard. Mohamed Mohamud, the head of the Somali American Parent Association, says parents — survivors of civil war in which many saw the military as an oppressive force — often quash interest in enlisting.

"What they say to me is, 'We ran away from the killing, and you want to send our kids to be killed?'" he said.

Somali-Americans are especially fearful their children might fight against fellow Muslims — and harm Muslim civilians in the process. They know less about other roles recruits might play, such as responding to natural disasters, says Ahmed Samatar, professor of international studies at Macalester College.

"The Guard needs to be more proactive and more sophisticated in reaching out to the community," Samatar said.

Nationally, since the start of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the military has worked to recruit more Muslims for their language skills and cultural know-how. Former President George W. Bush opened a fast track to citizenship for legal residents who join the armed forces. By recent estimates, about 8,000 do each year.

Master Sgt. Timothy Allen, a veteran recruiter with the U.S. Marines in Minnesota, says the Marines' Bloomington recruiting station got a boost during the early 2000s when a Somali recruiter worked there. Over the years, the station has seen three to five Somali Americans join an annual crop of as many as 90 recruits. Allen says the ASVAB, the test all branches administer, trips up many inner-city students.

Mohamud passed the test, but last spring brought setbacks. He ended his senior year short on credits. As his cousin left for Air Force training, he headed to summer school, his own 10-week basic training on hold.

Demoralized, he thought about scrapping the Guard idea. But, say Guard leaders, they stuck with him and he persevered, showing up for monthly drills in preparation for basic training. Now, the soft-spoken Mohamud offers pointers on perfect marching form to newer recruits.



Fresh recruits: The Minnesota Army National Guard held a training drill for recruits at the Cedar Street Armory in St. Paul on Saturday.

David Joles • david.joles@startribune.com,

At South St. Paul High School this fall, Mohamud says the prospect of training slated for spring has made him more determined to graduate. One recent Saturday, Mohamud's mother woke him early to make sure he made it to his drill.

Getting the word out

Some community leaders predict more young Somalis are poised to enlist. They point to the growing number of Somali police officers, who have bucked a legacy of mistrusting law enforcement.

Ali, the Somali community leader, became interested in the Guard as he watched his son struggle during his high school senior year. He imagined the teen coming out of Guard training with a new focus and discipline. Then, he pictured photos he had seen of Guard members responding to flooding on the Mississippi River — only featuring Somali Americans, “a beautiful public relations initiative for the community.”

Ali recently met with Guard Chaplain Buddy Winn and offered his help raising community awareness.

The Somali American Parent Association will include an hour on military service in new parent training in January. The Somali youth group Ka Joog, which invited the Guard to the Independence Day event, plans to kick off its eighth-anniversary celebration with recognition of Somalis who have enlisted.

“This is our home, and protecting our home from all evils of life is our No. 1 goal,” said Ka Joog's Mohamed Farah, who sees service in the U.S. military as an antidote to radical recruitment by the likes of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Somali veterans like Minneapolis entrepreneur Gandi Mohamed are pitching in, too. When Somali parents ask him for the key to his success, he points to his four years in the Air Force in the early 2000s. During his time on base in San Antonio, he got a bachelor's degree in accounting and management. His deployment with a civil engineering squadron in Oman was difficult and isolating, but it also gave him a head start on his career and a can-do attitude.

The Guard has welcomed the interest. Mack, the recruiting office supervisor in the 133rd Airlift Wing of the Air Guard, recently e-mailed Ka Joog to repeat an earlier offer: Let Air Guard members volunteer in the Somali community, say, by building a playground. Guard recruiters see the outreach to the Somali community as part of a wider effort to make membership more diverse.

Miski Abdulle tried hard to dissuade her son Mohamed Yusuf from enlisting in the Marines in 2009.

“I was so afraid for him, being an immigrant kid who is Muslim,” Abdulle explained.

Today, Abdulle tells proudly of her son's service. A winner of a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, he was a radio operator aboard a naval ship that took him across the Middle East and East Asia.

Recently, a neighbor who had questioned his decision to enlist asked Yusuf to persuade her son to join. Yusuf reflected. “There are serious sacrifices you have to make,” he told his mother. “For me it worked, but it's not for everyone.”

Mila Koumpilova • 612-673-4781