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## St. Paul's first female Somali police officer has critics and fans



Kadra Mohamed hands out police badge stickers at a community event attended by Somali families. Mohamed is a community liaison officer in St. Paul, Minn., the first Somali woman on the city's police force. (John M. Glionna / Los Angeles Times)

By JOHN M. GLIONNA

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reporting from ST. PAUL, Minn. — Kadra Mohamed walks into an old haunt, the Grocery and Meat Market on the city's north side, where as a girl she shopped with her mother.

She breathes in the heady smell of Somali spices, halal meat and the bread she has loved since growing up in a nearby public housing project.

Two girls in silky *abaya* gowns rush to embrace her, their mother standing back shyly. The market's owner, Abdi Mohamed, steps from behind his shelves.

“Kadra, it's you,” he says in the lilting Somali language. He asks about her mother, then pauses. “It's good to see you in uniform.”

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At 22, Mohamed is a newly minted cop on the beat, a community liaison officer making a courtesy call to a merchant, a time-tested neighborhood policing method. Still, this visit — and each one she makes in this immigrant bastion — breaks new ground.

In March, the St. Paul Police Department hired Mohamed, its first female Somali officer, a move designed to improve the sometimes tense relations with 80,000 Somali Americans in the Twin Cities — more than half of them in St. Paul — the nation's largest Somali community.

Each time she wears her crisp blue police uniform with its thick black leather belt and handcuffs, the 5-foot-1 Mohamed also dons her *hijab*, the traditional head scarf worn in public by many Muslim women.

Her presence has divided this Midwestern city of 290,000 residents. One blogger called her hiring a politically correct and potentially perilous gesture. By allowing her to wear a *hijab*, he wrote, the department “has placed her life on the line in more ways than one.”

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Some officers complain she is breaking a long-standing uniform code.

The department modified the *hijab* with metal snaps that allow the head scarf to come off in a scuffle. But Mohamed makes no excuses. Once an aspiring lawyer, she shifted her goal to police work because of her desire to help her community.

“I’m a target for those with concerns about safety,” she says. “I’m a short, black, Muslim female. Of course I stand out.”

But criticism has also come from the Somali American community. Older Somalis say she’s breaking a cultural creed: wearing pants and short-sleeve shirts and working closely among men in public. After Mohamed passes her police exams, she will apply for a job as a sworn officer. That means she’ll carry a gun.

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Mohamed’s hiring comes at a crucial time for the Somali community. The rise of such Somali street gangs as the St. Pistol Boys and Somali Outlaws has followed news reports that Somali American youths here have been recruited to join extremist forces in Somalia, Syria and Iraq.

Some say the tension between Somalis and the city is as high as it’s been since 2001.

“And here comes Kadra Mohamed, who has defied logic for whites and Somali alike,” local activist Omar Jamal said. “She’s a mystery to both cultures.”

Mohamed was born in a refugee camp in Kenya in 1991, not long after her parents fled Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital, and its nearly daily bombings and strife. Her father, Hassan, was Ethiopian, and he and her Somali mother, Zamzam, were joined by an arranged marriage.

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“Love takes time,” Mohamed said. “Their relationship started off cordially, then a friendship developed before they grew into loving one another. They got lucky.”

The family eventually relocated to the Twin Cities, an area with more than 60,000 Hmong residents and a reputation for welcoming immigrants. The couple had four more children — two boys and two girls.

Her father, an immigration case worker, died when she was 12, and Mohamed grew up fast.

While at St. Cloud State University, she decided to start wearing her *hijab* — and quickly learned about racism in provincial Minnesota. Strangers told her to “take the towel off your head.” An older woman drove up to her in a parking lot and ordered, “Go back to your terror state.”

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Last year, St. Paul police disciplined two officers after pictures surfaced online of them wearing Muslim women’s clothing — one in blackface makeup — to a Halloween party. Both publicly apologized.

As a community liaison officer, Mohamed is often called upon to translate, but most of her duties are to show a friendly face in public housing projects. Often she rides with partner Tom Lee, 24, who works in the Hmong community.

Civil rights activists have applauded St. Paul’s move to join Washington, D.C., police as the only two departments nationwide to allow female officers to wear a *hijab*. They dismiss claims that the scarves will make them targets.

“That’s similar to the argument made by white policemen in the 1950s against working with a black officer, because they didn’t want to be targeted by a bigot,” said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the nonprofit Council on American-Islamic Relations. “It didn’t make sense then and it doesn’t make sense now.”

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St. Paul Police Assistant Chief Todd Axtell said all rules, even uniform codes, were made to be changed. “In the early 1970s, you had to be at least 5-foot-8 to become a St. Paul police officer,” Axtell said, who is 5 feet, 7 inches tall. “If that rule hadn’t been changed, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Later, walking to a community cookout at a housing complex, Mohamed runs into a high school classmate, Nada Mohamed, also wearing a *hijab*. The friend is proud of Kadra, but says women her grandmother’s age don’t agree.

“They think she’s crazy,” she says. “They don’t think a Muslim woman should be a police officer, no matter if she wears a *hijab* or not.”

Mohamed walks away smiling, a gap between her two front teeth giving her a girlish look.

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She’s still set on being hired as a sworn officer, even if her mother insists she won’t let a gun in the house. “I tell her, ‘Mom, you’ve been through a civil war. How can you be afraid of guns?’”

One day, Mohamed says, she might be working as a gang unit officer or helping the department identify political extremists in her community. One thing she’s not afraid of is arresting a Somali man, an unimaginable scenario for many in the male-dominated culture.

“I’ll speak to him in our language — Somali to Somali,” she says. “I’ll explain that this is my job.

“He broke the law. And there are steps that must be taken.”

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John M. Glionna is a former national reporter for the Los Angeles Times, based in Las Vegas. He covered a large swath of the American West, writing about everything from people to politics. He has also served as the Seoul bureau chief on the newspaper’s foreign desk, where he covered the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent death of North Korean strongman Kim Jong Il. He has also written extensively about California. He teaches a journalism course at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Glionna left The Times in 2015.

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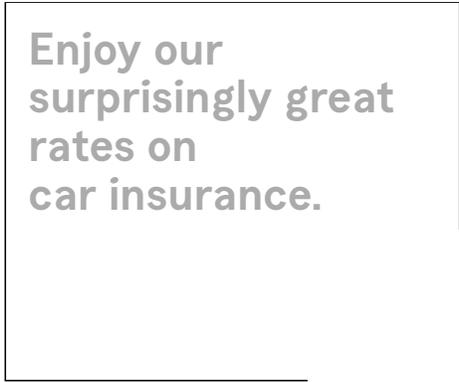
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