

POLITICS

New documents revisit questions about Rep. Ilhan Omar's marriage history

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New investigative documents released by a state agency have given fresh life to lingering questions about the marital history of Rep. Ilhan Omar and whether she once married a man — possibly her own brother — to skirt immigration laws.

Omar has denied the allegations in the past, dismissing them as “baseless rumors” first raised in an online Somali politics forum and championed by conservative bloggers during her 2016 campaign for the Minnesota House. But she said little then or since about Ahmed Nur Said Elmi, the former husband who swept into her life in 2009 before a 2011 separation.

The questions surfaced again this month in a state probe of campaign finance violations showing that Omar filed federal taxes in 2014 and 2015 with her current husband, Ahmed Hirsi, while she was still legally married to but separated from Elmi.

Although she has legally corrected the discrepancy, she has declined to say anything about how or why it happened.

The new documents also detail the Omar campaign's efforts to keep the story of her marriage to Elmi out of the press, arguing that detailed coverage would legitimize the accusations and invade her privacy.

Since the recent findings of the campaign finance board that discovered Omar had improperly used campaign money to pay a lawyer to fix her tax filings, the Star Tribune searched public records — including available databases, the marriage and divorce filing, business licenses, university records and other documents — and could find little publicly available information about Elmi. The search of records could neither conclusively confirm nor rebut the allegation that he is Omar's sibling.

Sent a list of questions and a request to talk to her siblings and father, Omar declined to do so. Hirsi did not reply to multiple calls, texts and e-mails. Social media posts indicate Elmi is in Africa. He did not respond to multiple e-mails.

Omar's reticence is consistent with near total silence she has maintained for three years amid questions raised through public records picked over by conservative opinion journalists intent on proving that she committed immigration fraud. Those attacks, she once tweeted, are the provenance of “fake journalists on bigoted blogs.”

Omar spokesman Jeremy Slevin issued a statement Friday asserting that the questions about her personal life are illegitimate:

“Since before she was elected to office, Ilhan has been the subject of conspiracy theories and false accusations about her personal life. Emboldened by a president who openly treats immigrants, refugees and Muslims as invaders, these attacks often stem from the presumption that Ilhan — like others who share those identities — is somehow illegitimate or not fully American.

“Ilhan has shared more than most public officials ever do about the details of her personal life — even when it is personally painful,” he continued. “Whether by colluding with right-wing outlets to go after Muslim elected officials or hounding family members, legitimate media outlets have a responsibility not to fan the flames of hate. Continuing to do so is not only demeaning to Ilhan, but to her entire family.”



ERIN SCHAFF, NEW YORK TIMES

Rep. Ilhan Omar and her husband, Ahmed Hirsi, with their children in January. Omar's spokesman said questions about her personal life are illegitimate.



AARON LAVINE

1997: Omar, still a teenager, serves in the Somali National Army. She files federal taxes in Minneapolis after wedding Somali husband with her family and spending four years in a refugee camp in Kenya.

2002: Omar, now 19, marries Ahmed Hirsi, 22, in their “faith tradition” in Minnesota, but they don't legally marry.

2008: Omar and Hirsi, now the parents of two children, reach an “impasse in our life together” and divorce in their faith tradition.

2009: Omar, at 26, marries Ahmed Nur Said Elmi, 23, whom she identifies only as a “British citizen.” School records show he attended high school in St. Paul and studied art at North Dakota State University.

2011: Omar and Elmi end their relationship and divorce in their faith tradition, but do not legally divorce until 2017.

2012: Omar and Hirsi reconcile and have a third child together.

The questions have nevertheless persisted as a political threat over the years while the former war refugee from Somalia made history being elected to the Minnesota House and then winning a seat in Congress.

Her ascent as the nation's first Somali-American lawmaker has won her global praise and given her an international platform to champion human rights, criticize Israel, and challenge the Trump administration's immigration policies — positions that have drawn further ire and scrutiny from conservative critics.

Omar's widely condemned statements about the influence of Israel and Jewish money in American politics have only upped the stakes for her critics, who are also often passionate defenders of the Israeli government.

Throughout it all, Omar's public persona has been informed by her biography as a refugee overcoming racial and cultural barriers. Yet she has insisted on silence on some key details.

"It's really strange, right, to prove a negative," she told the Star Tribune in an interview in October, before she was elected to Congress. As for Elmi, she said, "If someone was asking me, do I have a brother by that name, I don't. If someone was asking ... are there court documents that are false ... there is no truth to that."

Beyond denying the provocative allegation that Elmi is her brother, Omar has shed little light on her married life, which began in 2002, when she wed Hirsi in their Muslim faith tradition.

The Star Tribune has sought to authenticate some of the most egregious allegations, using public records and available social media posts, which make up the bulk of the case against her.

Some of the original social media accounts linking Elmi to Omar after their split in 2011 appear to have been removed, and documents verifying the family relationships of refugees from war-torn countries with limited government record-keeping are notoriously hard to obtain, even by U.S. immigration authorities.

Omar declined to make her tax and immigration records available for this report.

What is known is that Omar, at the age of 19, sought a legal marriage license with Hirsi in Minnesota. Though they had three children together, they would not legally marry until January, 2018, after she had been in the Minnesota Legislature for a year and had dissolved the marriage in 2017 with Elmi.

After reaching what Omar called "an impasse in our life together," she and Hirsi split for a period in 2008. They had two children at the time.

In February 2009, public records show that Omar legally married Elmi, who she has identified as a "British citizen."

The relationship was brief. Omar said it ended in 2011, when she reconciled with Hirsi.

She gave birth to their third child the following June. She identified Hirsi as the father.

While Omar said she and Elmi had divorced in 2011 "in our faith tradition," they would not legally divorce until December, 2017 — a month before she got legally married to Hirsi.

Imam Makram El-Amin of Masjid An-Nur in Minneapolis said an Islamic marriage must include the officiant and at least two witnesses, preferably one from each side of the family, to be a valid union. El-Amin, who did not perform Omar's marriages, said he has credentials to sign a marriage certificate. But just like any wedding at a church or synagogue, it's not legal in the state of Minnesota until processed by the county.

Similarly, an Islamic divorce requires two witnesses, ideally the same two who witnessed the marriage, plus a three-month waiting period, El-Amin said. The marriage can be then dissolved in the faith, although the divorce would require a Minnesota court to earn civil legal standing.

2014-15: Omar files joint tax returns with Hirsi, though they are not yet legally married; she remains legally married to Elmi.

2016: Omar, endorsed by the DFL over longtime incumbent Phyllis Kahn, is elected to the Minnesota House, becoming the first Somali-American, Muslim legislator in the United States. But her campaign is rocked by allegations in a Somali news forum and the conservative Power Line blog suggesting that Elmi is her brother and they married for unspecified immigration benefits.

2017: Omar is granted a legal divorce from Elmi.

2018: Omar legally marries Hirsi and is elected to Congress.

Source: Public records and campaign statements

In her 2017 divorce, Omar attested that she had no contact with Elmi after their 2011 separation. Conservative activists say photos and other social media posted by Omar and Elmi on Instagram and Facebook suggest Omar may not be telling the truth. The Star Tribune has been unable to independently obtain the original posts, although images purporting to be screen grabs continue to populate right-leaning media sites such as Power Line Blog, PJ Media and Alpha News. They remain in public view.

One image featured on AlphaNewsMN depicts an Instagram photo purportedly posted by Elmi on June 12, 2012, the day after Omar gave birth to her third child. It shows a close-up picture of Elmi holding a newborn child the website says is Omar's, based on accompanying text that ostensibly refers to the baby girl as "nieces."

That and other Instagram photos have since been removed.

In her divorce, Omar said she had tried unsuccessfully to reach Elmi to respond to her court filings, including through social media. She also said that she did not know any other friends of family members who could contact him.

Omar and Elmi used a Columbia Heights address on the marriage application. Three months later, Hirsi used the same address to obtain a business license for his One-on-One Cafe Lounge, public records show.

Omar declined to offer an account of their living arrangement at that time.

Siblings who petition for a U.S. visa for a noncitizen sibling have typically had to wait more than a dozen years to obtain the document, according to the U.S. State Department. Applications for a spouse carry a minimal waiting period, but Minnetonka-based immigration lawyer Steven Thal said examples of siblings fraudulently marrying to gain immigration benefits are nearly unheard of compared to cases of strangers marrying to get green cards.

"It is so rare that you would think that it would be more easily uncovered," Thal said.

Omar's relatives could also clear the air, but they have remained silent about her marriage to Elmi. She declined to make her family available for this story.

In 2016, her campaign provided the names of six siblings, but only their first names, citing their need for privacy. Elmi was not among them.

In October 2018, Omar showed a Star Tribune reporter cellphone photos of family immigration papers but would not share the actual documents.

Omar's sister Sahra Noor was a high-profile executive of the Twin Cities health care nonprofit People's Center Clinics & Services until 2018. She declined interview requests in 2016. She currently runs her own health care consultancy in Kenya. An e-mail to her was not returned and efforts to call her there were unsuccessful.

Over the years Elmi, who attended high school in St. Paul, has had occasional contact over the internet with other friends and acquaintances, including retired DFL activist and Minneapolis city worker Barb Lickness, who lived in the same downtown Minneapolis apartment building with Elmi around 2012, before he moved to London.

She described him as "friendly in a soft way," and a neighbor who participated enthusiastically in the building's social scene. She recalls that he was tall, dapper, and spoke with a pronounced British accent, indicative of a foreign upbringing. He never mentioned being married, Lickness said.

Lickness confirmed Elmi's identity in an Instagram photo purportedly posted by Omar showing the two of them and three others posing in London in 2015. The photo is featured on several conservative media websites, but could not be verified by the Star Tribune.

What's clear from the recently released documents of the campaign finance board is that the young upstart's campaign was unprepared for any potential blowback from the questions surrounding Omar's marriage to Elmi, first reported in 2016 on Somalispot.com, an online public affairs forum.

Omar created a “crisis committee” comprising a few DFL veteran operatives to try to respond. Their priority was preparing a dossier on their own candidate — a fairly typical task usually completed before a campaign, not after a primary victory.

“There was a lot of frustration that any of these things were not disclosed to any of the campaign staff when I decided to run for office. And so I think everybody who was doing this wanted to put a research file together that had the benefit of making sure that there weren’t any other dark things in my closet that I might not have told them about,” Omar said during a December deposition before the Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board.

The board would eventually fine her \$500 and require her to use her own money to pay lawyers who did personal tax work.

During the deposition, Omar suggested she is disconnected from details — unaware, for instance, that she violated tax law by filing a married-jointly return with the wrong husband.

Asked if she amended her tax filings, she replied, “I don’t think so.”

The board’s staff asked again. Omar replied, “I don’t recall doing any.”

Asked about using campaign money to take political trips, Omar said they were always approved by the Minnesota House, but then placed responsibility on her staff: “They always gave me an opinion that said, sure, this looks fine. Or at least that was my understanding that that’s what my staff was doing before they would commit me to doing anything.”

Carla Kjellberg, an attorney and political adviser during the crisis period, paints a different picture of Omar’s engagement level with details: “I did nothing, I want to make that clear, without Representative Omar’s authority. And she was in these meetings where those things were decided upon and I was directed to do that,” Kjellberg said during her own deposition.

Kjellberg declined to comment.

Campaign e-mails disclosed by the campaign finance board also show a concerted effort to quash the Elmi story. An August 2016 internal e-mail written by campaign spokesman Ben Goldfarb, a veteran DFL operative, suggested reaching out to political newsletter writer Blois Olson “and shut it down with him as we do with the Strib.”

The Star Tribune wrote about the controversy the next day under the headline, “Marriage discrepancy clouds Ilhan Omar’s historic primary victory.”

Omar expressed frustration over the controversy again last October, telling the Star Tribune in an interview that like many refugees without birth certificates, “anybody can accuse me of whatever they want and I don’t have a way to defend myself.”

Rep. Mohamud Noor, DFL-Minneapolis, lost to Omar in the primary before replacing her at the Legislature when she went to Congress. He compared the attacks on Omar to claims that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States.

Because he took over Omar’s state legislative office phone number, Noor’s voice mail was getting filled with hateful, racist messages until Google removed the number when people conducted Google searches for Omar.

In the end, Noor said, Omar will be judged by what she does for her district.

“Initially there were missteps, and so much focus on her rather than on what she was doing,” Noor said. “She’s made some tremendous efforts to reconnect and re-engage and focus on the district.”

Star Tribune staff writers Eric Roper and Torey Van Oot contributed to this report.

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