

## Will \$5M bring down tweeting, rapping US jihadi?

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JASON STRAZIUSO - Associated Press - Associated Press

Will the allure of a \$5 million reward be the downfall of a tweeting, rapping American jihadi who once fought alongside the Somali militant group al-Shabab but now denounces their methods and motivations in online feuds?

A U.S. State Department official who specializes in Somalia said Thursday that the new \$5 million reward offered for the arrest of Omar Hammami could exploit what are believed to be fault lines between extremist groups in Somalia that may be for and against Hammami. The Alabama-born American was once close to al-Shabab's leadership, but has since had a falling out with the group's leader.

"I think that this kind of (reward) program is designed precisely to elicit those who have information and those who are willing to respond to that offer," Pamela Friest, the State Department Somalia expert, said in a telephone news conference. "As far as the internal dynamics to where Hammami is, etc., I think it's anyone's guess as to whether he's sheltered by anyone in particular."

Hammami, whom the FBI named as one of its most-wanted terrorists in November, "has always been a controversial figure inside Somalia. He's certainly been a controversial figure for the United States," Friest said.

Part of that controversy stems from Hammami's high Internet profile. The star of several YouTube videos where he raps about jihad or fights on the front lines of Somalia's insurgent battles, Hammami over the last year has become a mini-star on Twitter, where he engages in running conversations with militant fighters and even U.S.-based terrorism experts.

Hammami appeared to confirm last week in a Twitter conversation with terror analyst J.M. Berger what intelligence experts have long suspected — that he posts on Twitter using the handle (at)abumamerican. Hammami's nom de guerre is Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki, or "the American."

While he's made his interest in global jihad well known, Hammami hasn't made public threats against the U.S. Berger, who runs the website Intelwire.com, said in an interview Thursday that the \$5 million bounty is "an awfully large reward" for someone who "hasn't taken direct violent action against the U.S. or worked with al-Qaida proper in any meaningful capacity."

Kurt R. Rice, a top official at the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, said the reasoning behind reward levels are classified but that the threats posed by individuals to Americans and U.S. property are taken into account. The U.S. announced the \$5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Hammami and another \$5 million reward for a second American fighting in Somalia, Jihad Mostafa, on Wednesday.

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"The fact that these rewards are at the \$5 million level should give you some understanding where they are with regard to the threat that they pose," Rice said.

Along with Adam Gadahn in Pakistan — a former Osama bin Laden spokesman — Hammami is one of the two most notorious Americans in jihad groups. He grew up in Daphne, Alabama, a bedroom community of 20,000 outside Mobile. He is the son of a Christian mother and a Syrian-born Muslim father.

Hammami had a falling out with al-Shabab and has engaged in a public fight with the group over the last year. He first expressed fear for his life in an extraordinary web video in March 2012 that publicized his rift with the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab. He said he received another death threat earlier this year that was not carried out.

Hammami accuses al-Shabab leaders of living extravagant lifestyles with the taxes fighters collect from Somali residents. His second major grievance is that the Somali militant leaders sideline foreign militants inside al-Shabab and are concerned only about fighting in Somalia, not globally. He also claims that al-Shabab assassinates fighters inside its group.

Al-Shabab slapped Hammami publicly in a December Internet statement, saying his video releases are the result of personal grievances that stem from a "narcissistic pursuit of fame." The statement said al-Shabab was morally obligated to stamp out his "obstinacy."

The U.S. will advertise the rewards for Hammami and Mostafa inside Somalia on posters and matchbooks and over the Internet on Facebook and Twitter. Both wanted Americans are believed to be in Somalia, Rice said.

One question that cropped up on Twitter on Thursday was if members of al-Shabab would try to turn Hammami in and claim the reward. Rice said the government would closely vet any claimant to "to be sure we don't end up becoming a terrorist financier."

Hammami might be in an area of Somalia controlled by Mukhtar Robow, a rival al-Shabab leader of Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr, who is also known as Godane, terrorism expert Clint Watts previously told The Associated Press.

Wherever Hammami might now be, he continues to tweet, and has survived death threats issued by al-Shabab. Analysts have suggested that al-Shabab would suffer big damage to its reputation among foreign fighters if it kills off an American militant.

"I suspect that Hammami's major enemies are unlikely to turn him over to the Americans, but you never know," said terror analyst Berger. "It seems to me that the bigger challenge in arresting Hammami is physically getting him into custody rather than locating him."

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