



Anwar al Awlaki: Pro Al-Qaida Ideologue with Influence in the West

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A NEFA Backgrounder on Anwar al Awlaki
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Summary

U.S. government agencies are increasingly concerned about the ability of pro-Jihad ideologues to use the Internet to incite U.S.-based Muslims to conduct terrorist attacks. Indeed, there have been several terrorism cases in the years since 9/11 in which actors based in Western countries were influenced by lectures, writings, and videos downloaded from the Internet.

Anwar al Awlaki (a.k.a. Anwar al Aulaqi), an American who lives in Yemen, who is regarded as an Islamic scholar, may be a key player in Al-Qaida's efforts to radicalize and incite American Muslims to commit terrorist acts.

Biography

A U.S. citizen,¹ al Awlaki was born in New Mexico in 1971.² After his father completed his college studies, the family returned to Yemen, where al Awlaki remained until 1991, when he came back to the U.S. to study for a B.S. in Civil Engineering at Colorado State University. He then went on to San Diego State University for a Master's in Education Leadership.³ While in San Diego, he served as an imam at Rabat mosque.⁴ In 2001, he enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Human Resource Development at George Washington University, where he worked as the Muslim chaplain. At that time, he was also an imam at Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, VA.⁵ He left the U.S. in 2002 and lived in London, where he also gained a following. He moved to Yemen in 2004.⁶



Anwar al Awlaki; Facebook

¹ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pg. 434, W.W. Norton, 2004.

² Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008.

³ Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008.

⁴ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pg. 434, W.W. Norton, 2004.

⁵ Brian Handwerk and Zain Habboo, *Attack on America: An Islamic Scholar's Perspective*, National Geographic News, September 28, 2001.



Promotional poster for a London event at which al Awlaki was scheduled to speak via remote audio connection; <http://www.noorpro.com>

Potential Influence

According to a description of his education, which he posted on his web site,⁷ al Awlaki's Islamic education consists of a few months' study here and there with various scholars. He also read and "contemplated" the works of several prominent Islamic scholars. Questions about his credibility as an Islamic scholar compelled him to write about his background; however, despite the fact that he did not earn a degree in Islamic studies, there is no doubt that al Awlaki is considered a respected scholar by many young Muslims in English-speaking countries.

Hundreds of young Muslims joined Al-Muhajiroun in the U.K. because the group's leader, Omar Bakri Mohamed, fashioned himself as a spiritual mentor and introduced those who only spoke English to Jihadi literature that had only been previously available in Arabic and Urdu. Similarly, Anwar al Awlaki may continue to gain status among English-speaking audiences because he interprets the writings and theories of Al-Qaida masterminds in straight-forward English.⁸ As al Awlaki wrote in "44 Ways to Support Jihad":

"Most of the Jihad literature is available only in Arabic and publishers are not willing to take the risk of translating it. The only ones who are spending the money and time translating Jihad

⁶ Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008.

⁷ Anwar al Awlaki, "A Question from a Reader on my Islamic Education," <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com>, August 12, 2008.

⁸ Evan F. Kohlmann, Expert Report II: U.S. v. MOHAMAD IBRAHIM SHNEWER et al., http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_ekftdixexpertreport.pdf, September 2008.

literature are the Western intelligence services...and too bad, they would not be willing to share it with you.”⁹

Al Awlaki’s lectures are circulated widely on the Internet, and CD collections of the lectures are also sold in general Islamic bookstores across the U.S. and around the world. In addition to operating his own web blog, al Awlaki is active on several social networking sites, including Facebook. His supporters have created groups on Facebook and on MySpace devoted to sharing lectures and expressions of support. His “fans” are from around the world, but a substantial percentage are based in the United States. Many of the participants in al Awlaki’s fan groups are high school students.

His recorded lectures on Yousef al-Ayyiri’s book “Constants of the Path of Jihad,” which concerns leaderless Jihad, were downloaded and praised by the men who were convicted of plotting an attack on the U.S. Army base at Fort Dix, New Jersey in 2006-2007.¹⁰

In January 2009, he published an essay titled “44 Ways to Support Jihad” on his web site. In it, he asserts that all Muslims are enjoined to participate in Jihad, whether in person, by funding mujahideen, or by fighting the West by the pen. He also calls for all Muslims to remain physically fit and to participate in arms training in order to be prepared for the battlefield.¹¹

In December 2008, al Awlaki wrote an open letter of support for the Somali Islamist group, al Shaabab,¹² which the U.S. State Department has designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization.¹³ The letter, written in English and clearly meant to appeal to an English-speaking audience, urged Muslims to support al Shaabab in whatever manner they could:

“. . .their success depends on your support. It is the responsibility of the ummah to help them with men and money. Al-Shabab have already started a program of enforcement of law that would bring peace and security to the people. They are also applying hudud and fighting against innovations that have been around for centuries. We ask Allah to grant them success.”

⁹ Anwar al Awlaki, “44 Ways to Support Jihad,” posted to <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com> on January 5, 2009. Note: The NEFA Foundation released a transcript of this document on February 5, 2009.

¹⁰ Evan F. Kohlmann, Expert Report II: U.S. v. MOHAMAD IBRAHIM SHNEWER et al., http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_ekftdixexpertreport.pdf, September 2008. Note: For more on this case, see the NEFA Foundation’s extensive library of trial exhibits at <http://www.nefafoundation.org/ftdixdocs.html>. Al Awlaki was called “very good” and “one of the best.”

¹¹ Anwar al Awlaki, “44 Ways to Support Jihad,” posted to <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com> on January 5, 2009.

¹² <http://myummah.co.za/site/2008/12/27/an-update-on-sh-anwar-al-awlaki/>. See also: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/awlakishebab1208.pdf>.

¹³ “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” U.S. State Department.

Members of al Shaabab wrote a letter in response, which acknowledges al Awlaki's high level of influence.

"Sheikh, we look to you as one of the very few scholars who stand firm upon the truth and defend the honor of the Mujahideen and the Muslims by continuously uncovering the feeble plots of the enemies of Allah. Allah knows how many of the brothers and sisters have been affected by your work so we ask you to continue the important effort you are doing wherever you are and never to fear the blame of the blamers."¹⁴

Connections to 9/11

9/11 hijackers Khalid al Midhar and Nawaf al Hazmi came into contact with al Awlaki at the Rabat mosque in San Diego, though The 9/11 Commission Report notes that "We do not know how or when Hazmi and Midhar first met" him. According to The 9/11 Commission Report, the two "may even have met or at least talked to him the same day they first moved to San Diego."¹⁵

Al Midhar and al Hazmi "reportedly respected al Awlaki as a religious figure and developed a close relationship with him."¹⁶ The Congressional Joint Inquiry on 9/11 labels al Awlaki "their spiritual advisor" and asserts that there were reports of "closed-door meetings" involving the three.¹⁷

In January 2001, al Awlaki moved to Virginia¹⁸ and became the imam at the Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, VA, a mosque with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹ In April 2001, al Hamzi and fellow hijacker Hani Hanjour showed up at Dar al Hijrah. The 9/11 Commission Report asserts that al Hazmi's "appearance may not have been coincidental. We have unable to learn enough about al Awlaki's relationship with Hazmi and Midhar to reach a conclusion."²⁰

Connections to Al-Qaida and Others of Investigative Interest

According to The 9/11 Commission Report,

¹⁴ "Reply to the Greeting and Advice of Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki," Shebaab al-Mujahideen, Released December 27, 2008, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/shebabawlakireply1208.pdf>.

¹⁵ The 9/11 Commission Report, pg. 221, W.W. Norton, 2004.

¹⁶ The 9/11 Commission Report, pg. 221, W.W. Norton, 2004.

¹⁷ Report of the Joint Inquiry into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001 by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Note: According to The 9/11 Commission Report, "When interviewed after 9/11, al Awlaki said he did not recognize Hazmi's name but identify his picture. Although al Awlaki admitted meeting with Hazmi several times, he claimed not to remember any specifics of what they discussed."

¹⁸ The 9/11 Commission Report, pg. 229, W.W. Norton, 2004.

¹⁹ Caryle Murphy, *Facing New Realities as Islamic Americans*, Washington Post, September 12, 2004.

²⁰ The 9/11 Commission Report, pg. 221, W.W. Norton, 2004.

“The FBI investigated Aulaqi in 1999 and 2000 after learning that he may have been contacted by a possible procurement agent for Bin Ladin.²¹ During this investigation, the FBI learned that Aulaqi knew individuals from the Holy Land Foundation²² and others involved in raising money for the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas. Sources alleged that Aulaqi had other extremist connections.”²³

The Congressional Joint Inquiry on 9/11 provides additional detail, noting that, “in early 2000,” al Awlaki “was visited by a subject of a Los Angeles investigation closely associated with Blind Sheikh [Omar Abdel] al-Rahman,”²⁴ who is jailed for life for his involvement in a 1993 bomb plot targeting New York City. A Treasury Enforcement Communications System document establishes that he received money from the subject of a Houston Joint Terrorism Task Force investigation.²⁵ Additionally, court documents allege that after returning to Northern Virginia in 2002, al Awlaki unsuccessfully “attempted to get [Ali] al Timimi to discuss issues related to the recruitment of young Muslims” for jihad.²⁶ In April 2005, al-Timimi was convicted on an array of counts, including soliciting others to wage war against the United States.²⁷

In his description of his educational background, al Awlaki writes that he studied with Salman al Odeh,²⁸ a Saudi cleric who is alleged to have been one of Usama Bin Laden’s spiritual mentors.²⁹

²¹ Media reports have identified that individual as Ziyad Khaleel. See: Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008. For background on Khaleel, see: <http://www.globalterroralert.com/iaradossier.pdf>.

²² On November 24, 2008, after seven days of deliberation and six weeks of testimony, a jury convicted the Holy Land Foundation and five of its leaders on charges of providing material support to Hamas. See: The NEFA Foundation’s extensive library of trial #1 and trial #2 exhibits; <http://www.nefafoundation.org/hlfdocs.html> and <http://www.nefafoundation.org/hlfdocs2.html>.

²³ The 9/11 Commission Report, pg. 517, W.W. Norton, 2004. Note: According to the Congressional Joint Inquiry on 9/11, “The FBI closed its inquiry into the activities of the imam in March 2000, approximately two months after al-Hazmi and al-Midhar arrived in San Diego...In the case closing memorandum, the agent asserted that the imam had been ‘fully identified and does not meet the criterion for [further] investigation.’”

²⁴ Report of the Joint Inquiry into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001 by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

²⁵ TECS II record: Anwar Aulaqi, <http://www.sperryfiles.com/images/1-2.jpg>.

²⁶ Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008.

²⁷ Department of Justice Press Release, April 26, 2005.

²⁸ Anwar al Awlaki, “A Question from a Reader on my Islamic Education,” <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com>, August 12, 2008.

²⁹ Hassna Mohktar, *Bin Laden’s Mentor a Reformed Man*, Arab News, January 6, 2008.



Dhikrullah.com

While in San Diego, al Awlaki served as Vice President of the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW), which was founded by Yemeni Sheikh Abdul Majeed al Zindani.³⁰ During a 2004 terrorism trial in New York, FBI agent Brian Murphy testified that CSSW was a “front organization to funnel money to terrorists.”³¹

In 2004, al Zindani was listed as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” by the U.S. Treasury Department and the United Nations, but Yemen has not taken any steps to freeze his assets.³² In its designation, Treasury noted that al Zindani “has been able to influence and support many terrorist causes, including actively recruiting for al-Qaeda training camps.”³³

Al Zindani allegedly knew Usama Bin Laden personally while they were in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Treasury labels al Zindani one of Bin Laden’s “spiritual leaders.”³⁴ In an April 2008 interview, al Zindani stated that he left Afghanistan in 1987 and disagreed with Bin Laden’s vision to pursue a global jihad after the Soviet’s defeat.³⁵ Al Zindani is also leader of al-Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood’s party in Yemen, as well as the founder of the “Meeting for Protecting Virtue and Fighting Vice,” which proposes to alert police of infringements of Islamic law.³⁶

³⁰ Susan Schmidt, *Imam from VA. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al Qaeda*, Washington Post, February 27, 2008.

³¹ Tom Hays, *FBI Eyes NYC ‘Charity’ in Terror Probe*, Associated Press, February 26, 2004.

³² Ginny Hill, *Yemen Divided on Vice and Virtue*, BBC News, August 11, 2008.

³³ “United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist,” U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, February 24, 2004.

³⁴ “United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist,” U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, February 24, 2004.

³⁵ *Interview with Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, President of Al-Eman University*, Yemen Post, April 28, 2008.

³⁶ Ginny Hill, *Yemen Divided on Vice and Virtue*, BBC News, August 11, 2008.

Al Awlaki's connection to al Zindani extends beyond CSSW, as he also took classes and lectured at Iman University³⁷ in Sanaa, Yemen, which al Zindani heads. While al Zindani claims that the university has a robust science department where they have discovered a cure for AIDS,³⁸ others believe that the curriculum deals exclusively with the study of radical Islam.³⁹

Iman University students allegedly were involved in numerous attacks, including the assassination of three American missionaries and the assassination of one of the leaders of the Yemeni Socialist Party.⁴⁰ Al Zindani asserted that the accusations were unfounded.⁴¹

John Walker Lindh is a former student of Iman University.⁴²

In 2003, al Awlaki was a featured speaker at several conferences sponsored by U.K. organizations with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and the Young Muslim Organization (YMO).

The poster is for a charity dinner titled "Muslim Students... Remaking of A Great Nation". It is organized by SORS, Imperial College, LSE, and Kings Islamic Societies in association with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). The event is scheduled for Wednesday, 18th June 2003 at 6:00pm. The main speaker is Imam Anwar Al-Awlaki, with other speakers including Bidwan Makwan and Dr. Farid El-Shayyal. Special features include a presentation by the Human Relief Foundation (HRF) and the Al-Bashair Nasheed Group. The venue is the Camden Centre, located at 510 Borough St off Euston Rd, London. The poster also lists contact information for SRS (0775 121 6465) and HRF (0795 163 2246), and mentions sponsors Human Relief Foundation and Khan's Restaurant. The background of the poster features a globe and a cityscape.

³⁷ Anwar al Awlaki, "A Question from a Reader on my Islamic Education," <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com>, August 12, 2008.

³⁸ Al Zindani interview on Al Jazeera, January 12, 2007.

³⁹ Glenn R. Simpson, *Terror Probe Follows the Money*, The Wall Street Journal, April 2, 2004.

⁴⁰ "United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist," U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, February 24, 2004.

⁴¹ *Interview with Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, President of Al-Eman University*, Yemen Post, April 28, 2008.

⁴² Danna Harman, *Officials Start Deporting 115 Detained Students*, The Christian Science Monitor, February 6, 2002.

In mid-2006, al Awlaki was arrested by Yemeni authorities. In an interview after his release, al Awlaki claimed that his arrest in Yemen was at America's behest. He was incarcerated for approximately a year and a half and was released because there was never a specific charge against him. During his incarceration, he was interviewed by FBI agents on several topics, including 9/11.⁴³

Implications

- Al Awlaki is a highly regarded, American-born, pro-Jihad ideologue with access to a young audience in the United States, even from his location in Yemen. There is no other comparable pro-Al-Qaida American figure who has such tremendous access to audiences or who has such credibility.
- His incarceration in Yemen and his associations with Al-Qaida figures adds to his credibility among young aspiring Jihadists. He has also managed to create a seemingly mainstream profile, with his books and CDs sold at general Islamic bookstores.
- Al Awlaki tells his young audience that participation in Jihad is obligatory for all Muslims.

⁴³ Al Awlaki interview with Moazzam Begg, <http://muslimmatters.org/2007/12/31/new-moazzam-beg-interview-with-anwar-al-awlaki/>