



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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Anwar al-`Awlaqi: Profile of a Jihadi Radicalizer

By Christopher Heffelfinger



IMAM ANWAR AL-`AWLAQI was thrust into the media spotlight following news of his involvement with Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the gunman in the November 5, 2009 shootings that killed 12 U.S. soldiers and a doctor at the Fort Hood Army base in Texas.¹ Before the shootings, al-`Awlaqi was only a concern to a select few in the U.S. law enforcement community. Now, however, al-`Awlaqi is an open enemy of the United States. Indeed, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian man who attempted to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight as it landed in Detroit on Christmas Day, was reportedly one of al-`Awlaqi's students.² Al-`Awlaqi, currently believed to be in Yemen, is now

the subject of an extensive manhunt. In late December, it was reported that he may have been killed in a missile strike in Yemen's Shabwa Province, but he survived.

Al-`Awlaqi has already served to radicalize a sizable number of young Muslims, including Americans and other English-speaking Muslims who aspired to learn more about jihad and its permissibility according to Shari`a (Islamic law). He has translated and discussed famous Arabic-language tracts on jihad in his lectures and articles, as well as hadith stories and other matters of faith and doctrine. He has been able to connect across cultures; the American-born al-`Awlaqi received his higher education in the United States after spending his formative teenage years in his native Yemen.³ Moreover, while al-

1 Mark Schone and Rehab el-Buri, "Fort Hood: Hasan Asked Awlaki if it Was Okay to Kill American Soldiers," ABC News, December 23, 2009.

2 "U.S. Preacher Says Backs Failed Plane Bombing: Report," Reuters, February 3, 2010.

3 Tom Sharpe, "Radical Imam Traces Roots to New Mexi-

Awlaqi's online videos have inspired a number of mostly self-formed jihadist groups in the years following 9/11, he was also connected to the well-established Salafist network in the Washington, D.C. area.⁴ Al-Awlaqi served as imam at the popular Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, where, during his tenure, two of the 9/11 hijackers prayed in 2001, as did Major Hasan.⁵

Despite the increased media focus recently, al-Awlaqi's role in furthering the global jihad has not yet been adequately understood. What makes al-Awlaqi unique is his role in the radicalization process, serving as the critical link that takes dedicated students of Salafi-jihadi ideology from an inspirational to an operational mode. Accordingly, al-Awlaqi's greatest significance lies in his ability to function as a motivational speaker for jihad, demonstrating a proven talent to drive believers into action. Far beyond his eventual survival, capture or death, al-Awlaqi will have a lasting impact on jihadist activism. Like many other jihadist ideologues whose output has been hindered by the duress of combat, his videos continue to find a wide audience online. Martyrdom would only amplify his popularity.

co," *New Mexican*, November 14, 2009.

4 Until about 2004, Salafist activism thrived in the northern Virginia suburbs outside Washington. Scores of educational institutions, non-profits and outreach groups provided ideological instruction and spiritual guidance to the area's Muslims, many with ties to universities in Saudi Arabia that have been bastions of Salafist activism. Aside from a small number of other communities, such as those in East Orange, New Jersey, some communities in Michigan and perhaps Richardson, Texas, northern Virginia was the largest of the Salafist communities in the United States. It was the center of national Salafist organizational efforts given its proximity to Washington, D.C.—this network of organizations dated back to the late 1960s.

5 A third 9/11 hijacker attended his lectures in San Diego. U.S. law enforcement officials, however, do not believe that al-Awlaqi played an operational role in his contact with any of those militants. For details, see Philip Sherwell and Alex Spillius, "Fort Hood Shooting: Texas Army Killer Linked to September 11 Terrorists," *Telegraph*, November 7, 2009; Susan Schmidt, "Imam From Va. Mosque Now Thought to Have Aided Al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2008.

Background on Anwar al-Awlaqi

Anwar al-Awlaqi was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1971.⁶ His father Nasir, who hailed from the Awlaqi tribe that dominated much of Shabwa Province in eastern Yemen, came to the United States to pursue a degree in agricultural economics.⁷ He would eventually become agricultural minister in Yemen.⁸ Anwar al-Awlaqi spent his early years in the United States, but returned with his father to their native Yemen where he spent his teenage years. In 1991, he returned to the United States to seek an engineering degree at Colorado State University.⁹ After graduation, he became a leader at a local mosque in Fort Collins, Colorado, and soon afterward at an Islamic center in San Diego, where he worked toward a master's degree in education.¹⁰

In 1996, Anwar al-Awlaqi led San Diego's Masjid al-Ribat al-Islami, and served as imam there for four years.¹¹ In 1998 and 1999, he served as vice president for a charity founded by the influential Yemeni Islamist figure Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, who the U.S. government labeled a "specially designated global terrorist" in 2004.¹² Federal prosecutors have described that charity, the Charitable Society for Social Welfare, Inc., as a front used to finance al-Qa'ida and Usama bin Ladin.¹³ During his years in San Diego, al-Awlaqi also came into contact with Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, two of the 9/11 hijackers, when they attended Masjid al-Rabat al-Islami.¹⁴

6 Michelle Shephard, "The Powerful Online Voice of Jihad," *Toronto Star*, October 18, 2009.

7 Schmidt.

8 Sudarsan Raghavan, "Cleric Linked to Fort Hood Attack Grew More Radicalized in Yemen," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2009.

9 "Profile: Anwar al-Awlaki," BBC, January 3, 2010.

10 Ibid. Despite his lack of formal religious credentials, Anwar al-Awlaqi is considered charismatic, which explains his success in the mosque.

11 "Profile: Anwar al-Awlaki."

12 Al-Zindani is one of the most influential Islamist figures in Yemen. He is president of al-Iman University in Sana'a and has extensive ties to Saudi Salafist institutions and their leaders. Al-Zindani is also a leader of al-Islah, Yemen's largest opposition party. The United States labeled him a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" in 2004.

13 Schmidt.

14 Ibid. While the two did speak to al-Awlaqi and attended his lectures, U.S. law enforcement officials find it

Witnesses told FBI agents investigating al-Awlaqi's ties to the hijackers that he had a close relationship with the two and frequently attended closed door meetings with them.¹⁵ Some of the investigating agents remained suspicious of al-Awlaqi's alleged non-involvement in the 9/11 plot given this relationship, but he was never charged in connection with the attack.¹⁶

In early 2001, al-Awlaqi moved to northern Virginia, taking a position as imam at the Dar al-Hijrah mosque, one of the largest in the area. The mosque was also a place of worship for al-Hazmi and another 9/11 hijacker, Hani Hanjour (al-Hazmi moved from San Diego to northern Virginia around the same time as al-Awlaqi). Board members of the Dar al-Hijrah mosque said they hired al-Awlaqi because he was popular with Muslim youth. During his time in northern Virginia, al-Awlaqi also served as a Muslim chaplain at George Washington University.¹⁷

In 2002, al-Awlaqi left the United States for the United Kingdom, where he went on a lecture tour over the course of several months, giving numerous talks that attracted Muslim youth in particular.¹⁸ Before moving to Yemen in early 2004, al-Awlaqi returned briefly to northern Virginia around the end of 2003 where he met with the now-imprisoned radical Ali al-Timimi,¹⁹ and allegedly discussed recruiting young Muslims for jihadist campaigns abroad.²⁰ Al-Awlaqi also had connections to other prominent militant Salafists, including Umar Abd al-Rahman (the imprisoned "blind shaykh").²¹ In mid-2006, al-Awlaqi was

unlikely that al-Awlaqi was aware of the 9/11 plot beforehand.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Brian Handwerk and Zain Habbou, "Attack on America: An Islamic Scholar's Perspective—Part 1," *National Geographic News*, September 28, 2001.

18 Raghavan.

19 Ali al-Timimi was the spiritual mentor of the Virginia Paintball Group, and he is currently serving a life sentence for inciting his followers to jihad.

20 Schmidt.

21 U.S. officials claim that al-Awlaqi met with a close associate of Umar Abd al-Rahman. Al-Rahman is currently imprisoned in the United States for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. For details, see Joseph Rhee and Mark Schone, "How Anwar Awlaki Got

arrested by Yemeni authorities (roughly two years after he resettled in Yemen with his wife and children) and detained for 18 months.²² Al-`Awlaqi said he was repeatedly interrogated during that time by agents from the FBI regarding his ties to the 9/11 hijackers.²³

Al-`Awlaqi himself may have been further radicalized by his time in Yemen's prisons. If nothing else, it reinforced his existing jihadist beliefs. Although he previously showed an affinity for Salafi-jihadism and support for Muslim resistance in Palestine, he began making increasingly public calls for violent struggle after his incarceration and interrogations in Yemen.²⁴ After this period, his popularity continued to increase, as did his calls for jihad against the West.

Al-`Awlaqi's Popular Propaganda

The importance of al-`Awlaqi's role in the global jihad lies in his ability to radicalize Muslim youth through his English-language writings and online presence. Until November 2009, Anwar al-`Awlaqi had a Facebook page with 4,800 fans and a popular blog. Both were taken offline after his endorsement of Nidal Hasan as a hero for the Ft. Hood shootings. On these outlets, al-`Awlaqi was presented as a scholar, imam and *da'i* (one who calls people to Islam). He answered questions on various aspects of belief and provided inspirational words on faith, particularly to the youth audience. Many of his teachings reflected that persona; Facebook fans, for example, discussed inspirational points on faith made by al-`Awlaqi in his audio lectures and how he brought Muslim youth closer to Islam, even as their modern environment seemed estranged from it.

In "The Journey of the Soul" audio lecture, for example, al-`Awlaqi discussed the period of waiting (*al-Ihtidhar*) between death and the afterlife. In the eight-minute talk, he provided explanation of various Qur'anic verses dealing with the subject, the processes of the angel of death and what one can expect in this

period of waiting. It is not a discussion of politics, jihad or the "tyranny" of the United States, but a speech typical of an imam at virtually any mosque providing exegesis of scripture on the nature of the soul as described by the Qur'an—what the believer can expect upon death and what will come of the "evildoer."

His more prominent contributions have played an important role in radicalizing Muslims to take part in jihad. In his well-known discussion of "Constants on the Path of Jihad," al-`Awlaqi discussed the issue of "Is tarbiyyah a prerequisite of Jihad Fi Sabilillah?" ("Is education/instruction a prerequisite for waging jihad for the sake of Allah?"). In this talk, he dispelled the conception that extensive religious instruction is necessary before partaking in jihad, and instead made the argument that jihad is required in Islam, as is fasting, prayer and other religious obligations. After invoking the *ayah* (2:216)—"Fighting is prescribed upon you, and you dislike it. But it may happen that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that you love a thing which is bad for you. And Allah knows and you know not"—al-`Awlaqi asked his audience,

If someone starts practicing Islam, or someone reverts to Islam, would we tell them that they have to have *tarbiyya* before they start fasting?...There is no difference in this matter and jihad *fi sabil Allah*. The instruction for *siyam* [fasting] and jihad is no different.

Al-`Awlaqi's discussion of "Constants on the Path of Jihad" and his other contributions provide legal justification for Muslims to join in jihad against the United States.

After hearing al-`Awlaqi's lectures, the fluid interchange between Arabic terms and English discourse is immediately evident. In a consistently calm and measured demeanor, al-`Awlaqi provides many terms, such as *tarbiyya*, in the original Arabic without providing translation, clearly intending his discussions for a Muslim audience educated on key Islamic terms in their original language. This imbues the talks with a feel of authenticity, which has proven a draw for many of his followers.

Many of al-`Awlaqi's lectures, mostly on religion, are available on YouTube. They discuss the importance of Ramadan, the lives of the prophets, paradise, and stories of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. Yet his lectures also veer into the topics of prototypical Salafist discourse. Beginning around 2004-2005, al-`Awlaqi neglected to temper his message against militancy and spoke openly of a war between Muslims

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and the United States, seeing the latter as an oppressor and working against the will of Allah. Among the videos of his lectures posted online are talks on the importance of fulfilling jihad and its legitimacy in Islam, along with examples of the mujahidin and how they lived. One of his most popular lectures is a six-part series explaining the late al-Qa`ida strategist Yusuf al-`Uyayri's "Thawabit `ala Darb al-Jihad" (Constants on the Path of Jihad). That lecture seems to accompany another of al-`Awlaqi's works, "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad," quite well.

Significantly, in both of these popular works on jihad, al-`Awlaqi borrows heavily from the works of well-known jihadist ideologues. This is no doubt part of their popularity. Yusuf al-`Uyayri is considered to have been one of the most effective al-Qa`ida jihadist thinkers and a veteran fighter who died while waging jihad against the Saudi regime. Moreover, "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad" is clearly taken from Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim's famous "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad," with much of it identical or paraphrased. Such deference to earlier Salafist texts is not uncommon in jihadist ideologue circles, but al-`Awlaqi fails to provide any mention of al-Salim's text anywhere in his own, which is indeed surprising considering the text is so clearly inspired by al-Salim's well-known tract.

Away," ABC News, November 30, 2009.

²² "Profile: Anwar al-Awlaki."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Raghavan. Many fervent Salafists openly advocate militancy against the West yet do not partake in physical violence.

Al-`Awlaqi's Role in the Global Jihad

Anwar al-`Awlaqi's threat is not merely as an operational planner or recruiter, as has frequently been mentioned in the storm of Western press coverage, but as a motivational speaker, whereby he can mobilize thousands toward jihad. His strength is to connect with a young audience and impress upon them the necessity of joining the struggle. Indeed, both "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad" and "Constants on the Path of Jihad" are ideological rather than strategic or tactical works that provide evidence from early Islamic sources to legitimize jihad for a devout and studious English-language audience.

Moreover, al-`Awlaqi is a charismatic speaker. He is distinct from most of the other Salafi *da`is* available online in that he received no formal Islamic higher education. To many, this is a clear mark against him (and is perhaps reflected in his heavy borrowing of others' texts), but for his target audience of Western Muslims it seems to have helped forge a common ground and connection. Al-`Awlaqi can relate culturally to a Western audience, while bringing religious authenticity at the same time.

Another strength al-`Awlaqi demonstrates is his ability to speak about international politics with more clarity and authority when compared to Usama bin Ladin or Ayman al-Zawahiri. For example, al-`Awlaqi stated:

Political strength, diplomacy around the world now is revolving around the central idea, which is fighting Islamic terrorism. EU meets to talk about Islamic terrorists, NATO meets to talk about the challenge of Islamic terrorists, the US is mobilizing its political force to fight the Islamic threat. On the political level the world is united in fighting Islam. There is no exception on the political level.²⁵

English-speaking al-Qa`ida members do not seem to have nearly the same sway. The American al-Qa`ida spokesman Adam Gadahn, for example, fails to resonate with Western Muslims in the same way, perhaps because he lacks authenticity as a convert to Islam.

Some observers have commented that al-`Awlaqi's popularity among some Western Muslims is his fluency in English. Yet it is not simply his ability to speak English well; instead, it is his adept skill at moving between fluent English and Arabic, quoting the Qur'an and hadith in flawless Arabic. This gives him the credibility needed to influence a serious Muslim audience. Until the last few years, he was able to move seamlessly between the Arab and Western worlds.

Moreover, part of what makes al-`Awlaqi so remarkable is that he served Muslim communities in the United States as a prayer leader and spiritual guide for years. He was part of a large community of Salafist activists in northern Virginia. While U.S. federal law enforcement was unable to build a strong enough case to arrest him in the immediate years after 9/11, they did

"Al-`Awlaqi can relate culturally to a Western audience, while bringing religious authenticity at the same time."

against another northern Virginia imam with a similar background and who ran in the same circles, Ali al-Timimi. Al-Timimi, born in Washington, D.C., but educated in his teenage years in Saudi Arabia, was the spiritual mentor of the Virginia Paintball Group, and he is currently serving a life sentence for inciting his followers to jihad. In essence, both he and al-`Awlaqi have committed the same offense, but the latter was never brought to justice.

Conclusion

Al-`Awlaqi's connections to jihadists are remarkable. Not only was he in contact with some of the 9/11 hijackers, along with Ali al-Timimi, but his propaganda influenced a large number of recent jihadist plots. One of those convicted in the Fort Dix plot in New Jersey, Shain Duka, raved about al-`Awlaqi's talks.²⁶ Al-`Awlaqi was also a figure in the radicalization of

a Minnesota Somali man, Mohamoud Hassan, who in November 2008 gave up a university education to enlist in al-Shabab training camps in Somalia.²⁷ He too had listened to audio lectures by Anwar al-`Awlaqi.²⁸ Al-`Awlaqi was again instrumental in the radicalization of those involved in Canada's largest terrorist plot, the so-called "Toronto 18" who planned a large-scale attack against the Canadian government and targets in Toronto. His videos were played at a training camp the group held six months prior to their arrests.²⁹

Al-`Awlaqi has been a critical figure in Salafi-jihadi radicalization, particularly for the audience of English-speaking Muslims. He is one of a number of clerics spreading radical messages on internet forums, through media distribution outlets online, and previously in lectures at Islamic centers. Among this group of Salafist preachers and ideologists there is a circle of militant Salafists advocating violent jihad as the necessary means of establishing an Islamic state and improving the status of Muslims worldwide. Sadly, al-`Awlaqi will certainly not be the last Western cleric to promote such views, and the United States and European governments must come to understand the critical role ideology plays in jihadist militancy before it can be mitigated or reversed.

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²⁵ See www.forums.islamicawakening.com/fl8/shaykhanwar-al-awlaki-constants-jihad-693.

²⁶ Scott Shane, "Born in U.S., a Radical Cleric Inspires Terror," *New York Times*, November 18, 2009.

²⁷ Andrea Elliott, "A Call to Jihad, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Shephard.