



# THE RISE OF ANWAR AL-AWLAKI

TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 2010  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

**WELCOME/MODERATOR:**

**Christopher Boucek**

Associate, Middle East Program,  
Carnegie Endowment

**SPEAKERS:**

**Christopher Heffelfinger**

Consultant,  
Combating Terrorism Center

**Scott Shane**

The New York Times

Transcript by Federal News Service  
Washington, D.C.

CHRISTOPHER BOUCEK: Good afternoon and welcome to the Carnegie Endowment. I'm Chris Boucek, part of the Middle East program here at Carnegie. And I'd like to welcome everyone here today and our viewers on C-SPAN to what I think will be a very stimulating and informative discussion about Anwar Awlaki. Awlaki's been in the media an awful lot over the last several months, including being linked, or being accused of being linked to the Fort Hood shooter last November and the Christmas Day attack, with ties reaching back to Yemen.

So today, we have two great speakers – Chris Heffelfinger, who's going to speak first, and Scott Shane. Chris is a consultant with the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, as well as to the FBI. And he's author of the forthcoming book, "Radical Islam in America." Chris is going to speak for about 15 or 20 minutes, and then Scott Shane will speak. Scott is a national security reporter for The New York Times.

I'd like to ask everyone to turn off your phones, as they will interrupt and disrupt the speaker and the audio system. Also, during the Q&A, I'd like each of you who asks a question to please identify yourself and to phrase your question in the form of a question. With that, Chris, thank you.

[2:14]

CHRISTOPHER HEFFELFINGER: Well of course, I'd like to thank you, Chris, for organizing this. I think it's certainly an important topic right now. It's one more and more people have started to follow, especially since last November.

So I would like to start, really, by – I'd like to cover three things in the next 15 minutes, if we can. First of all, I'll give a brief overview of his biography, what he's all – thank you – and trying to account for his popularity. Why are we here talking about him today in the first place? Why is he unique?

Secondly, I'd like to talk about Northern Virginia, going back about a decade. It was, I think, maybe a scene – a Salafi activist scene that not all of us are that familiar with. And I think the context of what he was preaching, just leading up to 9/11 and really, those critical years in the U.S. up until 2004 – the context and backdrop for those are important. So I'd like to provide some of that.

[3:17]

And then lastly, I want to talk about his role and relationship with al-Qaida, specifically al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula – AQAP – and what, if any, role he has – relationship with them. Let's see, Awlaki has been someone of interest to me for – since 2004, 2005. He first popped up in an FBI investigation of the Northern Virginia paintball group. It was a group of 11 young men that were studying under someone named Ali al-Tamimi, who was originally Iraqi, but was actually born in Washington, D.C, spent his adolescence in Saudi Arabia, and then returned.

And he had been encouraging these young men to go fight in Afghanistan. And he started to appear in some of the investigation and on that case file. And what really struck me, and a lot of people after that, was his relationship with two of the 9/11 hijackers at the mosque here in Falls Church.

And so I had sort of started – kept tabs on him, but from a distance. And even until today, even having this event now, it's sort of hard to peg down, why is this guy significant, what has he really done? Was he instrumental in organizing an attack? Was he simply mentoring these young men towards it? Did he have any knowledge of the attacks, or other attacks? It never has really been clear.

[4:56]

And maybe that's what makes him so interesting; there's some mystery about it, still. He was born in New Mexico in 1971, so he's coming up on his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, here. And I believe he was here until the age of 9. So he had an early foundation in the U.S., but even people that knew him after – he returned at the age of 20, in '91.

So he came back to Colorado and received an engineering degree. And the people that talk about him during that time say that he's missing some gaps in his American pop culture – you know, references everyone would understand as an adolescent, had they grown up here, sort of went right over his head. So even from this early age, I think, he's sort of torn between the two places – or at least, divided between Yemen and America.

So he has this period throughout the '90s until 2000 where he's sort of working his way up. He has, up until this point, no higher Islamic education. He's studied in Yemen, and he has the basics. He's done – memorized some Koran; he's learned hadiths; he's learned what any young man, with a religious background, would learn in Yemen throughout that period.

[6:13]

But he's not considered a scholar in the U.S. He's not a cleric. He doesn't really take on that role until, maybe, the last two or three years. Even in his earlier time, when he's preaching at San Diego or in Falls Church, he's more or less an assistant imam. He wasn't a sensation. He wasn't, you know, the main attraction for Northern Virginia Muslims, let's say.

So he's working his way through Colorado and San Diego State, and some of his radical activities start to pop up during this time. He's part of an investigation tied to a cleric in Yemen named Zindani – Abdul Majid Zindani – who's the president of the university in Sana'a – (in Arabic) – it's called. This is where John Walker Lynd happened to study. A lot of Salafi activism is taught in this university.

And I think it has around a quarter – out of the 4,000 students, I believe 1,000 are foreign. So it's been a cause for concern for U.S. officials and European officials for students coming and then returning to their home countries and potentially being radicalized. So I think the first inquiry into Awlaki was on that subject – on his connection with Zindani. And as far as I know, that sort of blew over. It wasn't, sort of, something hanging over his head. There were no charges.

So around '99, 2000, he makes his move from San Diego to Northern Virginia. He had completed a master's in education at San Diego State, but he never completed it. He didn't actually – I talked to someone at the university, and he never actually completed that, but somehow, was able to enroll in a Ph.D. program in Washington, at George Washington University, if I'm not mistaken.

[8:07]

And so at this – I know in San Diego, he had connection with one of the other hijackers. He seems to have had a relationship with them, and I believe it was more of a mentoring relationship than any kind of operational guidance or instruction. But there are people in the government, and some people in the 9/11 Commission, that disagreed with that and felt strongly that he did have an operational position.

I haven't seen any evidence for that, and I know this is someone who has no training whatsoever in battle, per se. He doesn't understand bomb-making. He doesn't understand the tradecraft of terrorism – forming cells and managing them. Really no tactical or strategic experience on that front. So I think what he offered them – the reason

they came together was a shared viewpoint. You know, they saw the world in a similar way and formed a connection on that basis.

And that's really the way that radicalization works. That's how this process has been working across the country. I won't say in mosques across the country, because it doesn't typically happen at the mosque. It may be where likeminded people find each other. But typically, the more in-depth discussions about what to do about this problem, how to confront the tyranny and oppression of the United States, takes place, you know, in basements or in people's homes or outside of the mainstream.

[9:35]

And I know in Colorado, there was a member of the congregation at the mosque who noted that Awlaki and some others were sort of self-segregating and talking about – they seemed to be dangerous, radical issues. And so – I think that's typical – you see that in a lot of radicalization cases, where the individuals sort of move out of the mainstream. But it's curious for him, because he was continuing to serve as an imam for a large congregation.

So he was sort of playing both roles. You know, he was keeping his public persona as an advocate for the Muslim community in the U.S. and the world, but particularly American Muslims, particularly youth, and at the same time, he was pursuing ways to get young men to get training for jihad and to move in that direction. So he was really pursuing these two concurrently.

So in, I believe it was, 2004, he moves to the U.K. Part of this move, I think, was because of the pressure from the FBI. There were agents trying to make a case against him. And there were a variety of reasons this didn't happen, but one of them was political pressure from Muslim advocate groups in the United States, that I know from certain people within the FBI at the time, that there was concern that political pressures – you know, essentially the idea that they're conducting an anti-Muslim witch hunt, and if they were to arrest this well-known imam in a large congregation, that, that would fuel that. So that was why he got away, in part.

But he – so under this pressure, he moves to the U.K. and sort of, then, really gets underway with his speaking tour, as it were. Now, most of these are, of course, online. Some of them are tele-linked privately to conferences and to groups. And some of them are stay on YouTube and remain public indefinitely.

[11:48]

But his talks, really, after he becomes the imam at Dar Al-Hijra in Falls Church, his talks start to – you know, he finds that market – this large, Salafi activist market in Northern Virginia – and finds an audience so that people are really – and this was a time when collecting audiotapes was a big deal. All the young men, really, from the Muslim community are vying to collect the latest tapes from this scholar or that scholar who gave this talk. And so there's a buzz about him that emerges.

And he's a very effective speaker. He's charismatic. He's able to reach and connect with youth in a way that a lot of other imams weren't able to. They might be stodgy or they might just be out of touch. But at the same time, you know, he's not the only English-speaking imam that's come along. I mean, that doesn't account, I don't think, even 10 percent, for his popularity. It's partly, in my opinion, this inter – this dual identity that he's formed between being Yemeni and being American, so that he's able to communicate the authenticity of what he learned in Yemen.

[13:04]

I mean, to an extent, it's the culture – the culture of, when you're giving a talk, Islamic terms are given in Arabic, and the pronunciation is correct, and he can provide the hadith that backs up what he's saying. That's something a lot of English-speakers can't do as fluently – a lot of the English-speaking imams, I should say. They're able to – and you know, there's a lot of people attempting to rouse young men into action. They don't find the same traction that he does.

So I think part of it is because he's that bridge between the two cultures and he has this authenticity that a lot of others didn't. Another reason, I think, is his – the way that he manipulated popular culture. Going back into his – I was rereading a 2002 sermon he gave this morning, and there's all these references to Malcolm X, to Jamil al-Amin, to H. Rap Brown, and the sort of theme of overcoming oppression. Now, this was in 2002, right? So his perspective, his worldview, was formed a long time ago.

Like Ali al-Tamimi, these guys weren't radicalized at one particular juncture. You know, there's a lot of discussion right now about, where did his radicalization occur, and was it in prison in Yemen? Was it – there's actually, frankly, just a lot of questions. I haven't seen any real satisfactory answer. And I think part of the answer is, there is no – in his case, there was no radicalization. He didn't become radicalized at any given point. He, like Ali al-Tamimi – they were raised here and then got the bulk of their education overseas.

Now, I'm actually more familiar with Ali al-Tamimi's formal education and where he went in Saudi Arabia, but what they brought back with them to the U.S., then, was a very austere form of Islam that I think he was attempting to reinterpret into American society, not unlike, actually, what Sayyid Qutb did here at college here in Colorado what was it, three decades before that, where he comes and sort of interprets everything as decadence and sin, and you know, he's not able to talk to women at all, even covered women.

[15:20]

And so there's a gap. You know, even though he's American and he's born here, he's immersed in this American activist community and with a large Muslim congregation at his mosque – but he's still not – he's not fully American. You know, he's not fully integrated into society; I think to a large extent, he's sort of self-segregated from what he considered to be the more decadent parts of society.

And so in that context, I actually believe that there's a chance he didn't know anything about 9/11. I don't think he had any operational role with the hijackers. There was a Saudi minister who stayed in the same hotel as three of the hijackers on September 10<sup>th</sup>. And you know, at first, these coincidences, you kind of think, that can't be – that's not coincidence – but in this setting, in Northern Virginia, it was. Because this is an activist community that had been there for at least three decades before that – from the early '70s.

Millions and millions of dollars had been provided from Saudi Arabia from individuals in the government to set up a wide range of Muslim organizations – educational ones, exchanges, research institutes, and investment firms – really, the whole gamut. And those, of course, were the organizations that were raided in Operation Green Quest four or five months after 9/11 – early 2002.

[16:48]

So in that lecture that I was mentioning – it's a March, 2002 sermon that Awlaki gives – and he discusses Operation Green Quest, and how this is a war against Muslims. We can say no longer this is a war on terrorism; it's a war against Muslims. They raided IIIT; they raided WAMI they raided all these organizations; they arrested them; they held them in handcuffs; they held their wives at gunpoint, et cetera, et cetera.

So even from that point on, I mean, this idea that he was once moderate and was there to speak out against 9/11 and he was, you know, the representative, moderate Muslim voice – I think that’s a misrepresentation, whether it’s from our side or, intentionally from his, maybe both. But this is not someone who was – had a dramatic shift in his attitudes in, you know, 2003 or 2004 or some specific point. He’s been on this steady track.

So I think what turned him to militancy in the formal way was after his imprisonment in Yemen. I think he was hardened by that experience, like Zawahiri was when he was imprisoned in Egypt. And so it forces him to look for other means. You know, after that – it’s actually a very typical path in radicalization that someone will have all the same concerns and want to address the oppression of their fellow Muslims of the Ummah, but they’ll attempt to do so through nonviolent means, reputedly. And after those have failed, or don’t produce the results they want, they’re more willing to turn to militancy.

[18:26]

And I think that was facilitated by his imprisonment in Yemen, although I, again, certainly don’t think there’s any one key trigger. And so we find him, then, in the last two or three years, in this position where he’s becoming more and more popular on the Internet, he has a wider audience, and on his Facebook page, which was up until mid-November or late November or something, the majority of comments are from young people who are just passing along his talks. You know, this is a great talk on spirituality, on this point, on that point – whatever it may have been.

It’s rarely even a political discussion. There isn’t much talk of, you know, attacking the U.S. or jihad or anything of that nature. It’s really about his – simply his ability as an orator and a compelling speaker. And that still accounts for 90 percent of his popularity, even today. I mean, his CDs and recordings are being sold in a lot of mainstream Muslim outlets. And they’re not about jihad. So as the imam in Falls Church said recently, he’s a gateway to the unsuspecting, was his quote. I mean, I think that’s putting it very mildly.

But you would find yourself listening to – one could find themselves becoming a fan of Awlaki, listening to nothing related to jihad or violent activity. And you may find that in one out of 10 of his talks leading up to that point. And now, there’s a tremendous difference in his talks. You know, when he releases a statement, it’s an all-out call for jihad on Americans and he renounces his position that he hadn’t taken this up sooner, and I think that’s a lot of – a combination of the U.S. pushing him into that position and AQAP in Yemen taking advantage of him being in that position – what accounts for his current role.

[20:33]

I don’t think he has any operational role in al-Qaida whatsoever, the reason being he has nothing to offer. This is someone who has no operational training. He’s never spent time on a battlefield. He doesn’t know how to manufacture a bomb. He doesn’t know how to carry out a guerrilla attack. There’s plenty of people in Yemen who have been engaged in that sort of activity, whether al-Qaida-related or otherwise, for a long time. And so there isn’t a need – he doesn’t offer anything from that front.

He’s also not – he’s not a cleric. He doesn’t have any higher Islamic education. I don’t think al-Qaida is in need of people with master’s degrees from San Diego State, per se. So what does he offer? I think what he offers is a stick in the side of the U.S., that, similar to the way they promoted al-Qahtani, recently, to be a leader of AQAP. He’s someone who was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay and then he was supposedly rehabilitated by the Saudi system, and then infiltrated the border and rejoined AQAP.

And now, I think they're promoting him to a leadership position for a similar reason. This is a great PR opportunity. And so Awlaki is fulfilling that role and AQAP is a smart group and they're able to take advantage of it, and I think they've done so well. But in my perspective, his tremendous ability is bringing people who are sympathetic to this movement – people who have an inclination already to support the mujahideen, to support the global jihad in the defense of their brothers and sisters – people who are, you know, moving in that direction, have that tendency.

[22:15]

He's able to get them to actually do something. He's able to, in essence, fire them up. And so it's difficult. It's difficult to give a really good explanation of what he's so popular right now. In a way, I think it's like trying to explain why skinny jeans are popular at the moment. (Laughter.) Maybe there's a reason based in the '80s or in people's psychology or in this or that, but it's just a trend. So he is not the first English speaker who was trendy.

There are people like Bilal Philips who will be more popular and influential after him. But for now, he's the man in the spotlight. So I think a great deal of this is charisma that counts – you know, he's able to reach people, able to reach young people, and really have an impact on them. And his role as a radicalizer, then, is much greater than his role in trying to organize an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a or something like that.

In a way, anyone can do that – not anyone, but they have a dozen, two-dozen guys that can do that. But for someone to be able to bring thousands of people a step closer to joining the mujahideen, to going into a camp, to getting training – that's a tremendous asset for that movement. So I think that's what his significance is. And with that, I'll leave it to Scott.

[23:42]

MR. BOUCEK: Great, thank you very much. Scott?

SCOTT SHANE: Well, I'll just elaborate on a few points that Chris touched on, and begin with the point that Chris was saying he didn't see a turning point where this guy went from moderate to radical, or first embraced violence. And I think that's true. There does seem to be an evolution. But from his point of view, I think if he were here today, he might say that the world changed, or if you observe the world as it's evolved during his lifetime, he might say, you know, it's not me that's changed; it's you.

And what do I mean by that? Well, a kid who was about his age who grew up in the same neighborhood in Yemen – as Chris mentioned, he'd spent his very early years in the U.S., then went back to Yemen, spent his teenage years in Yemen, and then came back to go to college here. And this friend of his said that it was the mujahideen against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan that was the inspirational hot topic of the day for young, Yemeni men.

Some Yemeni men were going off to fight. You know, this guy remembered people coming back with videotapes, you know, of bits and pieces of the fighting over there. And they were extremely enthusiastic about this fight. So then he comes to Colorado State and during the summer, he travels to Afghanistan.

[25:19]

I don't know exactly what year, but probably around '92. And he comes back to Fort Collins, Colorado wearing an Afghan hat and, you know, kind of begging people ask me where I spent my summer, you know. It's clearly a point of pride with him to have been there. This was, like, the great triumph – the mujahideen against the infidels.

And he's living here and then, you know, it's really – 9/11 comes along and I totally agree that this March, 2002 speech after what are sometimes called the SAAR raids – S-A-A-R – for a couple of the institutions that were raided – raids on Muslims institutions where he knows a lot of the people. That seems to have been – just, his voice is shaking with rage during this talk. That's when he first uses the language that America is at war with Islam, although it seems to be a little bit metaphorical at the time.

But he seems kind of shocked by this. And that comes at a time, in the weeks after 9/11, where he seems to have been, sort of, trying on different roles, partly with the connivance of we, in the news media. He is often called upon as a fluent speaker of unaccented English to explain various aspects of Islam, to comment on 9/11. And he reveled in the limelight, according to his colleagues.

[26:53]

And you know, he said some very moderate stuff. He said, in fact, to The New York Times, “in the past, we were oblivious” – we, meaning the Muslim imams. “We didn't really care much because we never expected things to happen. Now I think things are different. What we might have tolerated in the past” – in terms of rhetoric – “we won't tolerate anymore. There were some statements that were inflammatory and were considered just talk, but now we realize that talk can be taken seriously and acted upon in a violent and radical way.”

So he's either sincerely or not-so-sincerely presenting himself as a moderate guy who's going to, you know, root out this radicalism, but at the same time, his main role is sort of explaining a Muslim point of view, and even a sort of, you know, here's why the violence came to America. So and then, you know, he really seems to have been set off, also, by the invasion of Iraq. And you know, now, you've got the air strikes in Yemen. So his list of grievances and his list of proof that the U.S., as he long suspected, is openly at war with Islam, now, is a long one.

So I think he sort of revels in his understanding of not only the language, but the sort of American political viewpoint, and in a recent statement, he said jihad is now as American as apple pie and as British as afternoon tea. You know, he's taunting this country. And what's intriguing about his most recent, lengthy pronouncement, which was excerpted on Al Jazeera and then the full text or the full video recently came out. And it's a long talk, but one of the things that's kind of fascinating to see is, his analysis of what the U.S. wants versus what he wants is not that different from our analysis.

[28:47]

He says, “What they want is an American, democratic, liberal, passive and civil Islam.” And in a typical note sort of, again, showing his off his, sort of, knowledge of the enemy, he cites a RAND report for that – a RAND Corporation report. So he's – you know, that, I think, is probably a fair description of what many in the United States are seeking. And he's completely broken with that and is seeking a very different brand of Islam.

Let me just make a couple of other points quickly. One is – I think Chris kind of hinted at this – but in some ways, I think that is English is almost a little bit misleading in the sense that it disguises the depth of his cultural roots in Yemen and his sort of shaping adolescence in Yemen. And a friend at – a guy who he was close to in the Muslim Student Association at Colorado State talked about how uneasy he was with women. I mean, we're talking about Colorado State, right? I mean, there aren't many guys who are running the other way from women on American college campuses.

[30:01]

But he carried that with him very much. He married a distant cousin who was always covered and never, you know, sort of shown to friends right after graduating from college. So this guy remained very Yemeni even as he worked in these American mosques and, you know, certainly absorbed American culture. Finally, I would take slight issue with Chris saying that he doesn't have any operational role.

I mean, I think, you know, as Chris sort of suggested, in a way, guys to hook up bombs or, certainly, cannon fodder, like Abdulmutallab, the guy who got on the plane – you don't need rare skills, necessarily, to do that. But I think American authorities believe that Anwar al-Awlaki had an important role in convincing Abdulmutallab to get on that plane. And in that sense –and supposedly, he is part of the, sort of, recruiting, persuading, and preparing a chain of supply in al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula now.

So you know, certainly, the Americans think he has an operational role, and for that reason, earlier this year, he had the distinction of being the first American citizen put on the CIA's official list of approved targets for capture or kill, you know, notably killing. And that raises one final question, which I think we might want to get into in the questions, and that is, to what degree has the United States' attention to this guy – and you know, as a member of the media, media attention to him – made him what he is today?

[32:04]

You know, if you talk to people who mainly follow the jihad through Arabic sources, he was sort of a nobody. But in the English-speaking world, he was very big. But by – you know, as a Yemeni guy I talked to about him said, it was only after the reports starting going around that the CIA wanted to kill him that a large number of people started saying, who is this Awlaki guy who the great America wants to kill? So are we sort of playing to his strength, in a way, by putting him on a pedestal? And it is certainly true that, among those who cover terrorism movements and terrorist groups, historically, they've always relied on the reaction, or often, the overreaction, of the enemy.

And it's interesting to see that after being accused in the sort of pre-9/11 era of being at war with Islam – you know, and I'm not making any comment here on whether we should or should not have taken any particular step – but from the point of view of a young, Muslim man who's looking at the world, you know, we now have pretty big wars going on in Afghanistan, Iraq, basically Pakistan and, to a much more limited degree, Yemen, and certainly covert stuff in other parts of the Muslim world.

And so you do wonder to what degree we are generating, as Don Rumsfeld once asked, are we generating more new recruits for the global jihad than we are capturing or killing? And you know, if you look at the sort of curve of Awlaki's fame and influence, you know, he's sort of a case study, I suppose. So let me stop right there.

[34:06]

MR. BOUCEK: Great, thank you very much. I think – in many ways, I think any discussion of Anwar al-Awlaki raises more questions than it does answers. But I think many of the points that both of you were hitting on – it's not just his language skills or his ability to switch between English and Arabic. But I think there's been a good deal of discussion about how his ability to speak in clear, fluent, idiomatic English and to switch into Arabic, I think, lends a real sense of authenticity and credibility.

And I think, in many senses, for people who, I think, are already going a certain direction, I think this is all you need to get even further. I have a number of questions, and one of the things I often think about is how popular he is in Yemen, or how popular has he become in Yemen, because of what we've done. I think that's something that

both of you touched on. I'd like to open it up to questions now, and again, please just introduce yourself before you start and please ask a question. So who'd like to start?

I guess I will. (Chuckles.) I think the – one of the things that I've kind of been thinking about is, I'm not sure what he's done in Yemen that's a crime. I don't know the answer to that question, but I wonder – and I think this is something that came out in his video; all he's doing is explaining and defending what is already known, right? And I think this was a point that you were making. So I think maybe if one or both of you could comment on that, like, what is it we want the Yemeni government to do?

[35:49]

MR. SHANE: Well, I mean, even going back – and I know that the American agencies, as they slowly became aware of this guy, mostly – you know, as Chris mentioned, there was a brief counterterrorism investigation of him in '99-2000, but mostly after they discovered his ties to the hijackers, there was sudden scramble. They interviewed him a number of times after 9/11.

But then, and later when he was in London, and later after he went to Yemen, I know there was a very active debate inside the U.S. government as to, sort of, essentially, where does the First Amendment stop and some kind of terror-related crime begin? You know, we – this country is much less liable to charge people with crimes related to free expression than many countries, even in Europe. And I also know that there was a dispute inside the American government over his incarceration in Yemen.

This is an American citizen being held in Yemen. He was visited by diplomats. He was also visited by the FBI. And at one point, I know the Yemeni government went to John Negroponte, who was then director of national intelligence, and said, hey, we've got your citizen, Awlaki, in jail. He was originally jailed over a tribal dispute but they kind of were holding him, partly because they knew the U.S. was interested in him.

[37:18]

And Negroponte, I'm told, essentially said, you know, we have no particular objection to his being held, and so they kept holding him for months. And then they came under some pressure from tribes and others to let him go and they went back to the Americans. And I know that the FBI and Robert Mueller, the director of the FBI, had been quite uncomfortable with the idea that an American – that we were sort of conniving in the incarceration without charges of this guy.

And so the second time, the U.S. government apparently said, we have no objection to his being released. And he was released and the rest is history. But I think you know, if the Yemeni government has a hard time figuring out what to do with this guy, so does the U.S. government.

MR. HEFFELFINGER: Yeah, I think – well, partly, you were asking, has he committed any crime in Yemen, right? I would say you don't actually need to commit a crime to be held in Yemen – (chuckles) – so I'm not sure it's essential to act on that basis. But I think the reason they haven't done anything with him – if you look at a map of Yemen in 1965, near Hadramawt, where Awlaki is from, is Upper Awlak, Lower Awlak and the Awlak Sultanate. It's a big part of Yemen – that's his family. And he's there, essentially in his family's kingdom. So arresting him and trying him – handing him over to the Americans, I think forget it.

But even arresting him and trying him there would anger so many tribesmen, which you may know, there's a separate insurgency going on in Yemen – three right now, I think – but in the South, there's been sort of a

renaissance of southern culture and identity, and you know, a revival of the old South Yemen that's taken place, mainly in Dali and Lahij and areas near Shabwa, where we believe he is. So there's an internal dynamic, too, in Yemen, that it's not worth riling the mass – thousands of people, really, that are affiliated with that tribe in that area over this one guy. I think that's a part of their inaction.

[39:22]

MR. BOUCEK: Yes, sir?

Q: I'm Mark Randol.

MR. BOUCEK: There's a microphone coming, actually.

Q: I'm Mark Randol with the Congressional Research Service. My question is related to what exactly is the role that al-Awlaki has had in some of these cases? Every single time there's a new terrorist event, it's immediately reported that he was – you know, the perpetrator was influenced by al-Awlaki – either his lectures, or so forth.

What we do know in the Hasan case is that Hasan reached out to him. There were only two e-mails that al-Awlaki responded to. And it's led some to speculate that he thought maybe he was being entrapped. So all of these other e-mails that Hasan had sent, al-Awlaki did not respond to. And there's talk in the case of Abdulmutallab, and now Shahzad, that he was influenced. But what do we know in the open-source literature about what that was, exactly, other than maybe they just listened to his CDs?

[40:28]

MR. SHANE: I can take a stab at that. I mean, it is a very good question, because, you know, somebody said that finding a young Muslim man who was influenced by Anwar Awlaki is a little bit like finding a Republican who was influenced by Rush Limbaugh. I mean, there is an element – and again, this goes to the difficulty that the U.S. government had, at least in earlier times, in sort of pinning a crime on this guy.

You know, he says what he wants; people listen or don't listen. The thing that was striking, however, is in a number of cases – I counted a dozen or so – before Fort Hood, his material – the more radical material, not the CDs on the life of the prophet and the life of the companions of the prophet and so on, but the more radical material had turned up in about a dozen cases, all English-speaking Muslims, in investigations in Britain – that was more than half – the U.S., and Canada.

And you know, in some ways, it's hard to distinguish cause from effect. If you begin to get radicalized and you go out looking on the Web – I mean, I recommend this to everyone – put Anwar al-Awlaki, under any of his several spellings, into Google and you'll be amazed at the number of MP3s. They're posted everywhere. Everybody's got this guy posted somewhere. You can listen to his voice. He's in English, for those of us who don't have Arabic. And you know, is it that young guys are getting radicalized and therefore, they go out on the Web and they find Awlaki and they say, wow, what a great talk; I'm going to put this on my laptop and save this to my laptop?

Or you know, that's probably a little more plausible than the alternate scenario where they're, you know, absolutely moderate, they go surfing on the Internet and they stumble across a radical talk by Awlaki and the next thing you know, they're ready to plant a bomb. But there is this sort of symbiosis. And you know, when you think about an American Muslim in a relatively small community, also often quite isolated, and perhaps not getting a lot of

encouragement for any radical thoughts he might be having for his family or his community, this is sort of a virtual community he can join.

[42:53]

And I guess the only thing about the Nidal Hasan business that I might add is, alas, despite many efforts, we haven't been able to get ahold of those e-mails – the text of those e-mails. But certainly, if you listen to what Awlaki himself has said, the first question he recalls Nidal Hasan sending him was, “How would it be, under the laws of Islam, if I were to kill, or if a soldier were to kill his fellow American soldiers, because they're about to go out and kill Muslims?”

And certainly, Awlaki indicated that he thought that would be a good idea. And certainly, after the fact, of course, he famously posted a posting saying, Nidal Hasan is a hero, and approved it in retrospect. But you're absolutely right to raise this question.

MR. HEFFELFINGER: I think so, yeah. I would just add that he was – I think he was catapulted into the mainstream media after the Fort Hood shootings. But before that, going back to – you recall in Toronto, there was a plot to do a lot of things – abduct the prime minister and behead him and take over parliament. And it was about 18 guys involved. He was involved in that case, too, and I think three or four others, at least, we could point to. But it's a very good question to ask how was he involved – what is this involvement?

[44:12]

And it's really just dialogue – maybe not even dialogue; we can just say watching, in some cases, his lectures. You know, these were people – I know in that case, they had some sort of video link-up with him. But in essence, he's providing inspiration to them; he's providing support and assistance, which is critical. You remember the Fort Dix case, perhaps, in New Jersey. And those guys – there were six of them that had, towards the end of it – they were being monitored closely throughout it, so there wasn't ever really a serious threat there.

But they were, towards the end stages, looking for an imam who would give – who would legitimize their actions. So in that sense, they weren't being radicalized by an individual; they were seeking one, right, who would not radicalize them further, but give them direction. And so he's provided that. I think that's the most critical aspect of his involvement, and that's maybe all that we know of, frankly.

[45:11]

MR. BOUCEK: Ambassador Mack?

Q: David Mack from the Middle East Institute. This has been a fascinating conversation and I really thank you for it, all three of you. But it does lead me to wonder, as politically difficult as it is for the Yemeni government to prosecute and hold Anwar al-Awlaki, it sort of sounds to me like some good lawyers could mount a pretty strong First Amendment defense in a courtroom in this country, and I'm a little bit unsure as to what the precedents are.

You know, given that people can preach as long as they don't actually try to kill an abortionist, they can preach that it's a good idea to kill abortionists, and other fairly outrageous political speech is protected under our Constitution, are there any parallel cases where our government has successfully prosecuted people who were preaching violent jihad of this kind?

MR. HEFFELFINGER: Yeah, if I could just add real quickly, there was almost an identical, parallel case with Ali al-Tamimi. They were raised in the same way. They were carrying out the same activities. And Tamimi was tried and convicted and is serving life in prison. So I think there certainly is. I mean, it was almost identical cases.

[46:48]

MR. SHANE: I would add to that just that the Tamimi prosecution was and is quite controversial. And there's, you know, a major appellate effort to try and overturn it and so on. But if you believe what you hear from American intelligence officials, Anwar al-Awlaki, at least in recent months, has crossed a line he hadn't crossed before. He allegedly had direct contact with Abdulmutallab before he got on that plane to try and blow it up over Detroit.

So I think if what's alleged about his more recent activities is correct, there may be a much more direct case of even attempted murder and the same kinds of charges that Abdulmutallab himself is facing, or conspiracy, certainly. But you know, we haven't seen that evidence. But that's certainly what's alleged.

But that does raise, also, the uncomfortable question of, if you're targeting him for death, potentially, by a missile fired from a drone, you know, as a former CIA lawyer pointed out to me, under the law, if we want to eavesdrop on Anwar al-Awlaki's cell phone, which we presumably do, we have to go to the FISA court – the foreign intelligence surveillance court – and lay out the evidence that he's an agent of an international terrorist group and get a warrant.

But as far as anyone knows, the approval process for designating him to potentially be murdered or killed has not gone to the judicial branch. It has been strictly within the executive branch. It supposedly went to the NSC for approval. But it does seem like there's something kind of out of whack when Congress has passed something that says you need a warrant to listen to somebody, but you don't need a warrant to kill him.

[48:54]

MR. BOUCEK: Next. I mean, I think this is a really interesting point – the difference between advocating violence or inciting violence and actually stepping over the line. Something that, as I've listened to both of you speak, something that comes to mind is, well, one way or another, there's something after Anwar al-Awlaki, and what is that like?

Either, what are the implications for, big picture, war on terror or radicalization and – there are other guys out there like him, as you both have noted. So I wondered if you could both kind of comment a little bit on that.

MR. HEFFELFINGER: Well, I think in his case, now, it's sort of lose-lose for the U.S., which is why AQAP has been so excited to get him on their media docket there. His videos are increasing in popularity. We know after the Fort Hood shooting and the Christmas Eve attempt, these things happen and it grows to a wider and wider audience who are familiar with his name, though none of us pronounce it right. But we're familiar with it.

I think in death or in life, either way, he's going to grow in popularity, to a certain point, and then he'll fade, like all trends, I think. So there will be other English-speaking, French-speaking, Italian-speaking, cross-cultural imams that are able to find an audience. And just, I think, as culture changes, those people who are able to best be in touch with – to best connect to a youth audience – there will be – there may be another five Awlakis within the next five years. I think that's probably the most likely possibility.

[50:53]

what Awlaki did over the last 15 years. We can replicate this and I can become the next one. I mean, I don't think there's any formula for it. Again, it's like trying to assess why a trend is trendy. But I think it's the means of finding an audience on the Internet, now, or finding an audience through the Internet, it just makes the whole process so much easier that more and more people are going to be competing for this space.

There's going to be people continually trying to compete to represent the Ummah, to speak on behalf of Muslims, to be the one speaking out in defense of all these atrocities, wherever they may be – Gaza or Afghanistan or Iraq or – you know, that's been going on for 10, 20, 30 years, and that will continue.

MR. SHANE: To add to that, one thing that struck me in reporting on Awlaki is that, as I said, he's all over the Web – you can find him out there – and that's not going away. So if he's hit by a Hellfire missile tomorrow, you know, it barely changes his status and his influence, and arguably, it would enhance his status to become a martyr. You can kind of imagine all the flowery tributes pouring in from branches of al-Qaida around the world.

[52:17]

And you know, you can't remove this guy, now, from the Web. If you take postings down, his followers will put them back up. So that also, as the U.S. tries to think about this in a strategic way, that's an interesting thing to consider, is that, you know, is his death actually a desirable goal, or could he be more dangerous after death, at least for a period of time?

And the other thing that's made him, I think, a subject of so much fascination recently is that, as you know, in 2009, there was what seems to be a real uptick in the number of U.S.-based, U.S.-focused terrorist plots, almost all of them broken up and a couple of them in the category of, sort of, totally controlled by the FBI, sort of, from beginning to end with fake bombs supplied by the FBI – the kinds of things that never pose much of a threat.

But you also have Najibullah Zazi, and so on. And you also have a case, which I think is troubling to a lot of people, including me – I've reported on this – and that's the five young guys from Northern Virginia who headed off to try and join the jihad against American troops in Afghanistan, allegedly. They're being held in Pakistan. They kind of wandered around Pakistan looking for a jihadi group that could hook them up with the war.

[53:46]

And they seem kind of hapless. But when you go back and study their histories, there's a little bit of variation. One had a minor criminal record; one was a stellar dental student at Howard University. But they're very diverse. They're from different national backgrounds. They're all U.S. citizens. And the idea that these guys, growing up in Northern Virginia, could kind of look around and say, the best option for me is to go off and sacrifice myself in Afghanistan, it's a kind of shocking thing.

And I don't know of any influence Awlaki had. They are the kinds of guys who undoubtedly went on the Web and listened to Awlaki. But I think that is another reason why when you ask what comes after Awlaki, you know, what a lot of people are worried about, I think, is this – is the erosion of this notion that the American Muslim community was not particularly susceptible to radicalization. I think that remains true.

But the thing is, you need so few people. A guy like Shahzad – look at what he's done with an incompetent bomb placed on Times Square: enormous impact. You just need a handful of these guys to have huge impact. And so if there has been, through the work of a guy like Awlaki, a kind of erosion of the barriers against extremist violence

among young Muslim men in this country or, you know, even a handful of young Muslim men in this country that's a very significant thing.

[55:22]

MR. BOUCEK: I think, as I tried to say earlier, I think this case really demonstrates how complex and difficult a lot of these questions are. It strikes me that, you know, listening to what both of you had to say, Awlaki is not going to go away no matter what. And most likely, he will only become much more popular. I think – I didn't look this morning, but you can still get all of these sermons and all of these addresses online.

And "War Against Islam" is an incredibly powerful speech. And I think it's – I mean, this is only emblematic of a larger problem, but I wonder, in how we are dealing with this problem if we aren't making it worse. And I think that's a very interesting question. Are there any other – yes, sir?

Q: Thanks. David Trads of – (inaudible, off mike) – Berlingske. I have a question regarding whether it has been more difficult, whether it's the same now to radicalize young Muslims in this country since the country got a new president. And there's obviously a big difference from President George Bush. But has it changed in any way that we now have a new president here. Has it made it easier or more difficult to radicalize young people?

MR. SHANE: Well, I think there is. I mean, I asked people this. I went and visited all of Awlaki's mosques in this country and talked to a lot of people at each of them. And I would say that there is a disillusionment, not surprisingly. And this is probably not restricted to Muslims, but anyone who puts high hopes – who feels strongly about a subject and puts high hopes in any presidential candidate, on the right or on the left, Republican or Democrat – they're inevitably disappointed by what actually happens on the ground because these problems are so difficult. And American presidents tend to hug to the middle, anyway.

But you know, here was a guy with a Muslim name, a Muslim father, who also, early on, went and gave that speech in Cairo. And yet, you know, certainly if you read what Awlaki says about the "great pharaoh Obama," he's trying to encourage this sense of disillusionment. If you thought America was going to change its stripes, well, forget about it. You know, all he's done is increase the drone strikes, killing innocent Muslims. And so they're playing that card and maybe that sense of disillusionment is playing into the equation a little bit.

[58:02]

MR. HEFFELFINGER: Yeah, it didn't change al-Qaeda's approach when Obama was elected. You remember that Zawahiri came out with a talk against him within the first year – near the Cairo talk, I think. And it was, frankly, racist. It was pretty unsavory, I think. And as far as I can understand, or as far as I could see, that didn't gain a big audience.

So there isn't the same easy-trigger issue that they have, but in reality none of the policies have changed. So I think it's not difficult for them to make an argument that, hey, whoever you elect, there's no difference, you know? And the situation in Gaza, with Israel and the Palestinian question, is no closer to being resolved. It doesn't seem any – look any closer during this administration.

Iraq and Afghanistan remain very active battlegrounds, obviously, and we've been engaged in firing missiles into Yemen and, in addition to that, giving a large degree of intelligence and tactical support to the Yemeni services. So even on that level, yeah, I mean it's hard to say that – you know, he's much more likeable, sure. But for jihadis, no, it's not game over, you guys won.

MR. BOUCEK: Yes, ma'am in the front.

[59:24]

Q: My name is Dalia Mogahed. I direct the Center for Muslim Studies at Gallup and I want to thank you for your talk. There's one point that I'm still unclear about and that is, why can't the Yemeni government arrest al-Awlaki, like they did one time before, and simply hand him over for trial in the United States? Why couldn't that be a route that the U.S. government could pursue instead over making him a target for assassination?

MR. SHANE: Chris, you might be the best person to answer that.

MR. BOUCEK: I think the first thing that comes to mind, in addition to the level of political will inside Yemen to want to do this, or for the reasons I think that Chris had laid out about internal Yemeni politics, is that the Yemeni constitution forbids the extradition of its nationals abroad. That's the end of the story.

And this has been a problem between the United States and Yemen on a number of issues, right? There are several individuals – Abana and Badawi – who are wanted in this country for terrorist crimes, and the Yemeni government will not extradite them because of their nationality, their citizenship. Do either of you want to add anything to that?

MR. SHANE: I guess the only other aspect of that is, now that his profile is so high – it was one thing when they grabbed him in 2006, in this tribal dispute, and locked him away. You know, he was a very low-profile guy at that point. Now, if they grab him, he's sort of called on the Awlak tribe to, you know, come to his rescue. There have been competing statements from tribal leaders as to whether they're going to stick with him or let him go. But there's no question that that would be a very high-profile event in Yemen and, certainly, in the world. So it poses much more of a political dilemma, I would think, for the Yemeni government.

MR. BOUCEK: Would anyone else like to ask a question? Yes, ma'am.

[1:01:22]

Q: Thank you. My name is Laura Provencher. I'm with the University of Arizona. My question is, you both have been speaking about how, in many ways, the American media, public, government has almost propelled him to this statute. And we're not sure, now, what we can do in response. Either way, it's a difficult decision. But what about the future? What should be done differently so that this is not a continual – we're stuck in response mode – but we're preventing things such as this?

MR. SHANE: (Chuckles.) I'm just a reporter. I don't say what we can do. I mean, you know, I will say that there are other countries, European countries and many Muslim countries – Saudi Arabia, Indonesia – have done much more along the lines of counter-radicalization: either individual rehabilitation programs, where you take someone who is seen to be an extremist and, you know, try to brainwash him or un-brainwash him, and then more general counter-radicalization efforts.

The U.S. has not done much of that and is very nervous about it because the government is not really supposed to get on its hobby horse and start expressing itself, particularly about religious matters. So it's a very tricky thing. But some people might say that – certainly many people in the American Muslim community have done this on a small scale, some of the Muslim groups.

And some think that more needs to be done in terms of putting out – you know, not allowing a guy like Awlaki to go unanswered out there in cyberspace – to give young people an alternate view and a view of a guy like Awlaki that they can, sort of, at least put some kind of argument on the other side.

[1:03:29]

MR. HEFFELFINGER: I could say, a little bit off the direct question, but I think it's relevant here: You mentioned those five guys from Northern Virginia who were arrested in Pakistan recently. I found that case fascinating, for the reason that they had been active in the local ICNA chapter – Islamic Circle of North America. That's an organization that's been in the U.S. since, I believe, 1971 and was part of a longer activist tradition of Islamist activists who came to the U.S. in the early '60s and set up in Urbana-Champaign in Illinois.

And for most of their history, they were not concerned with preventing radicalization. I'll say that. I think it's fair to say they were more concerned with pursuing anti-Muslim discrimination than worrying about their people becoming radicalized and the terrorism issue. After that happened, that was the first time I can recall very clearly that they were going to take action about it. They wanted to set up programs to intervene. They wanted to be involved. And obviously, it's out of self-preservation, to a degree, but that's still a change from what was happening in the past, over the last 10 or 15 years.

And so I think encouraging more of that is the answer, that you have to be involved with the Muslim community. Period. You have to – that's more of an issue, I think, for law enforcement and for policing, but the models – I worked with some people in Australia who had, I believe, who are ahead of us in countering radicalization. And they had learned a very simple motto that I think they learned from the U.K., that communities defeat terrorism. It was learned from the IRA. It's really the only way that that can be done, that you can defeat radicalization.

To counter-radicalize people, I think, is almost an impossible objective – or to prevent them from – you know, you can't prevent people from liking bad thoughts. I don't think we can be in that business. But you can learn to address the signs and, most importantly, you can work with people in these communities that know the signs even more acutely, who are more aware of them than we are. And I think that's the best model.

[1:05:36]

In terms of Awlaki's jump to stardom, so to speak, through the media in the U.S., yeah, I mean, it was just – I think it was a confluence of influence, or of events, excuse me. I don't think we can sit back and say, well, if we'd just ignored him and didn't speak about it, he wouldn't be there. You know, we can't. So it's really – I don't know that it's possible to do that on a media or government level wholesale, but at the community level, with law enforcement, I think that's where it can be most effective.

MR. BOUCEK: I think Chris makes a great point, that you can't just ignore these points. And I think, to pick up on some of what Scott was saying, I think there are opportunities to respond to some of these messages. I mean, in "A War Against Islam," I'd say – I don't know if it's, what, 75, 80 percent is probably factual. But it's that last 20 percent or so that kind of goes off message. And there is an opportunity to respond and correct some of those falsehoods.

Just as in this last video that came out two weeks ago, I guess, where Awlaki says everyone in America is a target because they all pay taxes and they all are responsible for electing this government. And anybody who spends time in this country would know that that's not true, right? There's a huge range of opinions on American policy and on

American policy in the Muslim world, to be sure. So I think there is an opportunity to draw out the differences and say, this is not a factual representation of the United States that's being advanced. Yes, ma'am.

[1:07:05]

Q: I just wanted to make the point that there actually was a very eloquent response to that last message by another popular American imam named Zaid Shakir. And he went through not only a factual refutation, but a religious refutation according to law – very detailed, very well-cited and very authoritative. And that's been circulating among Muslim Americans, but it hasn't gotten media attention. And I think that just like we can't ignore Awlaki and his messages, I think that these responses also need to be covered.

MR. HEFFELFINGER: (Inaudible, off mike) – and I would say, I mean, there's people since 9/11 that have been saying, where are the moderate Muslim voices? And they're everywhere, all right? They're everywhere. It wasn't hard to find them before that, or after that, or during. But they're not newsworthy, people saying everything is fine.

You know, you're not – so unfortunately, I don't know the mechanism of bringing those voices – having, whether it's a governmental mouthpiece, or media, or private – but you know, there should be a way to amplify those voices so that they have equal time in the spotlight. But that hasn't, has never been the case so far.

Q: I'm glad that you make that point because your New York Times colleagues – (inaudible). It's kind of an indictment for the U.S. media that this is not different.

MR. SHANE: Well, far be it from me to defend the U.S. media, but you know, there is an element of, what is news? You know, we don't write about all the planes that did not crash. And so when these five guys go off to seek jihad in Pakistan, that's news. The 500,000 guys who did not go off, you know, may be much more sensible in a way, but they don't lend themselves to news. But I think we are obligated to do a better job than we've done of looking at the, sort of, dynamics within the Muslim community in this country.

[1:09:22]

And one thing that strikes you when you go out on the hustings and visit mosques and so on, especially as a non-Muslim reporter, is you find that, you know, there is this dilemma that American Muslims often face, which is, you know, if you say – or a couple years ago, if you said you were against the Iraq war, it's like, well, so what? As an American, an American against the Iraq war – well, what was that, 50 percent of the population or something, right? And the other 50 percent was for it for a while.

But if you're Muslim and you say you're against the Iraq war, oh, there's something potentially devious about that. You know, how do you feel about the Afghan war? How do you feel about this and that? And so there is this – you know, it's sort of like, I suppose, the left in the days of Red Scare and McCarthyism and so on, where, you know, so-and-so is connected with so-and-so. You know, so-and-so attended the same mosque that Awlaki had preached at. What's this mean? And so there is a lot of, sort of, suspicion – most of it, I think, without any grounds whatsoever – that's out there.

[1:10:32]

MR. BOUCEK: I'd like to thank both of you for coming out to add to this discussion today. I was really hoping that this conversation would do a lot to kind of explain and elaborate and add some nuance to some of the

discussions that we've been having about Anwar al-Awlaki. And I think we've definitely done that, in addition to raising a whole lot of other questions that we need to focus on in the future.

Both of our speakers have written excellent pieces, which you can find outside. Chris has a piece in the West Point Sentinel from a few months ago, a great profile of Anwar al-Awlaki. And Scott also has an excellent New York Times magazine article, which you can get outside. Please join me in thanking our speakers. (Applause.)

(END)