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and Political Violence*

Challenging the Influence of Anwar Al-Awlaki

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Summary

The US-Yemeni cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki's alleged connections to and influence upon the perpetrators of the Fort Hood and Detroit airline attacks in 2009 underscore the significant motivating effect of this popular English-speaking Imam on militant Islamists living in the West.

The strategic challenge posed by Al-Awlaki to Western governments and those involved in countering Islamist radicalisation is how to address the influence of his popular writings and lectures. These may continue to inspire a minority of young English-speaking Muslims long after he is captured or killed.

In this context it is significant that opposing voices within Islam – and Salafism in particular – are emerging to refute Al-Awlaki's motives, teachings, and methods. Much of this debate is occurring on the Internet, which has been an important factor in Al-Awlaki's rising popularity. The success of their efforts may help decide the extent to which Al-Awlaki and his contemporaries among the English-speaking Salafi-Jihadi *Shuyookh* continue to inspire would-be Jihadists in the West.

This paper examines the nature of this important intra-Salafi discourse, and assesses its relevance to government counterterrorism strategists and strategic communication planners.

About the Author

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Challenging the Influence of Anwar Al-Awlaki

Investigations into last November's shooting rampage by a US soldier at the Fort Hood military base in Texas, and an attempt a month later by a Nigerian national to blow up a trans-Atlantic airliner, have elevated the public profile of the US-Yemeni cleric suspected of having been a spiritual advisor to both attackers.

Anwar Al-Awlaki was a name relatively unfamiliar to the general public until these incidents, when the media reported his possible links to Nidal Hassan, the Muslim American Army Major who gunned down 13 fellow servicemen at Fort Hood, and later Omar Farouk Abdulmutalib, who attempted to bring down an airliner bound for Detroit with a concealed explosive device.

While Al-Awlaki, who is currently in hiding in Yemen, has praised the attacks in media interviews and blog postings, he has so far denied providing specific clerical sanction to the perpetrators.¹

¹ Writing on his blog shortly after the Fort Hood attack, Awlaki said: *"Nidal Hassan is a hero. He is a man of conscience who could not bear the contradiction of being a Muslim and fighting against his own people. No scholar with a grain of Islamic knowledge can deny the clear cut proofs that Muslims today have the right — rather the duty — to fight against American tyranny."* Al-Awlaki's blog had been removed from the Internet at time of writing.

Al-Awlaki's name, however, had been well-known to the intelligence community for several years, specifically his position as an inspiration to many young English-speaking Salafi-Jihadi supporters living in the US and elsewhere in the West.^{2 3}

US government and media attention has lately focused on the extent to which Al-Awlaki may be more operationally tied to terrorist organisations than had previously been assumed - his appearance this Spring in a video by Al-Malahim Media, the online media production organisation of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been interpreted by some analysts as pointing to a role beyond that of spiritual figurehead.⁴ He has certainly become more outspoken in recent months; during the interview with Al-Malahim Media, Al-Awlaki openly called for Jihad against the United States, saying: 'My message to the Muslims in general, and to those

2 Readers may question the author's use of the term 'Salafi-Jihad' in this paper. To some, the term may appear to intrinsically associate organisations such as Al-Qaeda with Salafism, the Islamic reformist current which appeared in Egypt in the 19th Century and which has since grown and diversified into a global movement with millions of adherents and numerous distinct sub-sets. The author's intention is not to suggest that being an adherent of any form of Salafism somehow predisposes a Muslim toward potentially adopting violent Jihadist sympathies. Indeed, those Muslims who have declared themselves so vehemently opposed to Al-Qaeda have themselves been leading Salafi groups and their scholars. Use of the term 'Salafi-Jihadist' is more specifically an attempt to acknowledge the development of a new ideology based upon a uniquely metastasized strand of Salafism. This ideology emphasises and selectively interprets particular Islamic concepts such as *Tawhid* (monotheism), *Al-Waala wa'al Baraa* (loyalty and disavowal, sometimes referred to as 'commanding good and forbidding evil'), the duty of jihad (in the context of this paper, read largely as *qital*, or fighting), and *takfir* (excommunication – a process by which one Muslim declares another to be apostate). A fusing of parts of a basic Salafi *Aqeedah* (creed) with a particular *Manhaj* (practice) and aspects of the worldview of political Islamist movements has seen the development of the Al-Qaeda ideology.

3 It is worth noting that Salafi-Jihadists would not consider their *Aqeedah* or *manhaj* to be in any way innovative (innovation itself constituting a major sin in Islam). Rather, they would argue that their ideology is merely that of *Ahl-us Sunnah wa'al Jamaah* ('Community of Followers of the Traditions'), or Islam based purely upon complete adherence to the *Quran* and *Sunnah* (with both sources taken together and with equal importance) with the understanding of the *Sahabah* (the early Companions of the Prophet Mohammed). Salafi-Jihadists see themselves as being among the few followers of *Ahl-us Sunnah* to both fully believe and practice all aspects of their religion without compromise and in spite of whatever personal hardships this may create.

4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQ71qjnGMYs>

in the Arabian Peninsula in particular, is that we should participate in this Jihad against America.'⁵

More recently, the United States has proscribed Al-Awlaki as a terrorist under Executive Order 13224, which freezes any US financial assets he holds and makes it a crime for any US nationals to provide him with financial or material support. According to US Treasury Under-Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, Stuart Levey:

*'He has involved himself in every aspect of the supply chain of terrorism – fundraising for terrorist groups, recruiting and training operatives, and planning and ordering attacks on innocents.'*⁶

While the debate over the nature of Al-Awlaki's operational involvement with AQAP continues, this paper will focus on a wider strategic question; namely the potential his many writings and audio-lectures (now in wide circulation on the Internet) have in inspiring young would-be Jihadists living in the West.⁷ For instance, Faizal Shehzad, the Pakistani-American detained earlier this year on suspicion of involvement in a failed car-bomb attack in Times Square, New York, has reportedly told US investigators that Anwar Al-Awlaki's lectures were an important spiritual influence on him.⁸ The trial of the five men who had plotted a terrorist attack on the Fort Dix military base in 2008 revealed how the group had been at least partly inspired by Al-Awlaki's lectures posted on the Internet.⁹

According to an 11 June report in the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, the British Government concurs that Al-Awlaki's lectures may have the power to inspire a new generation of would-be Salafi-Jihadi militants in the UK. Reportedly, Al-Awlaki was the subject of a briefing paper recently circulated among UK Government ministers warning that the cleric had

5 <http://publicintelligence.net/anwar-al-awlaki-may-2010-interview-video/>

6 <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/tg779.htm>

7 A host of Islamist web sites and YouTube channels now contain sections devoted to Anwar al-Awlaki's lectures. For example, an extensive collection can be found at: <http://www.kalamullah.com/anwar-alawlaki.html>

8 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/07/world/middleeast/07awlaki-.html>

9 <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/anwar-awlakis-terror-ties/story?id=9055322>

‘cemented his position as one of the leading English-speaking Jihadi ideologues.’¹⁰

The motivating potential of Al-Awlaki’s lectures is likely to remain long after his arrest or demise, an outcome which seems likely given his recent addition to a US “kill or capture” targeting list.¹¹ This raises the question of what, if anything, can be done to limit the appeal of Al-Awlaki’s works and those of his contemporaries among the English-speaking Salafi-Jihadi *Shuyookh*. One possible component of a counter-strategy might be to challenge his legacy at the ideological level with strategic communication campaigning on the Internet, the “battle-space” that has been so intrinsic to his extraordinary impact. Such campaigning might be usefully underpinned by insights gained from the growing number of hostile theological and methodological critiques, or “refutations”, of Al-Awlaki’s work that have appeared on the Internet in recent months. Most of these have originated from more “apolitical” Salafist movements in the West, who have deployed their detailed knowledge of issues such as the *Fiq* of Jihad to expose his alleged methodological shifts, errors of jurisprudence, and the many occasions where he has supposedly sought to deceive his audience by quoting *Hadith* or classical scholarly works on Jihad out of context. Many Salafi clerics and their supporters in the West have viewed with growing concern not only the propensity for the media (and to a degree academia) to readily associate Salafism with Jihadist terrorism, but the fact that Al-Awlaki is being characterised as a truth-sayer for what some regard as the true nature of Salafism – a polarising and violent ideology which represents the theological undercarriage of the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

Salafists both in the Gulf States and the West are therefore eager to correct such misconceptions. In November 2009 Saudi Salafi scholar Sheikh Ubayd al-Jabiree called upon Salafists everywhere to produce refutations of Al-Awlaki that sought to expose his grave theological mistakes and deviations.

10 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/7822761/Anwar-al-Awlaki-MI5-warns-of-the-al-Qaeda-preacher-targeting-Britain.html>

11 http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article7089899.ece

‘They think Al-Awlaki represents Islam and that his predecessors and contemporaries represent the people of Islam and that this path of theirs represents the true path of Islam,’ [he said] ... ‘I warn the Muslims against this man and I call upon them to boycott him and to sever ties with him and to refute him with a knowledge based refutation that will expose him and his dawa, reveal his true condition and show him as an enemy to the people of Islam and the Sunnah.’¹²

This paper will argue that analysis of refutations of Al-Awlaki by Islamic scholars – in particular those from the Salafi movement – offers insight into the strategic and doctrinal weaknesses in his rhetoric. This insight may help underpin more effective strategic communication aimed at damaging his reputation and the perceived credibility of his message, which in turn may reduce its capacity to contribute to the violent radicalisation of young Muslims. The Internet seems the most obvious platform for delivery of such messaging, given the critical role it has played in the growth of Al-Awlaki’s popularity.

This does not necessarily require direct engagement with Salafist groups. Those groups with the potential to be most effective at countering Al-Awlaki’s message should largely be left to their own devices by authorities, as attempts to engage with or support them risks damaging their perceived credibility. Remote observation of this intra-Salafi discourse may be sufficient to equip strategic communication campaign planners with the insights necessary to challenge Al-Awlaki’s message more successfully.

Understanding Al-Awlaki’s popularity

Before examining in detail the nature of these Salafi refutations, their significance and implications for counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation, it is worth exploring how Al-Awlaki originally established himself as so influential with English-speaking militant Islamists.

12 A transcript can be found at: <http://abdurrahmanorg.wordpress.com>

Al-Awlaki has certainly been outspoken on the issues of violent Jihad and what he claims is an obligation on all able-bodied Muslims to fight the US and its allies, whom he believes are waging a global “Crusade” against Islam and Muslims.¹³ He is the author of ‘44 Ways to Support Jihad’, a tract widely circulated around English language Salafi-Jihadi web sites.¹⁴ He has condoned controversial tactics such as suicide bombing and praised the actions of Salafi-Jihadist groups in countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Yemen, and Somalia.

In 2009, Al-Awlaki delivered a sermon to students in Pakistan entitled ‘The State of the Ummah’, in which he appeared to suggest that violent Jihad in Pakistan and Afghanistan was a religious obligation, and that those refraining from supporting Jihad, be it physically or financially, were sinful. He told the audience that:

‘Two of the most important battles that the Ummah is fighting today is the battle in Afghanistan, which is spilling over into Pakistan, and the battle of Iraq. Whoever is capable and able to participate with them physically, then that should happen, and whoever is not able to participate physically should participate in all the other ways that are possible. We are taking about a stage where this support is obligatory and not recommended or voluntary, and when something is an obligation it becomes a sin and a shortcoming by not being a part of it.’¹⁵

Al-Awlaki has written and spoken extensively on a range of Islamic topics, often juxtaposing the examples of the Prophet and his Companions during Islam’s early trials with contemporary situations faced by Muslims in the West. Hence many of his lectures specifically address the circumstances in which Muslims are obliged to defend, through word and deed, the threats to their religion. Lectures on this topic have included discussion of the Sharia rulings on those

13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbAr1Ms1CeA&feature=related>

14 <http://www.nefaafoundation.org/.../nafaawlaki44waysupportjihad.pdf>

15 This lecture series can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i5wX_kRSG4&feature=related

who blaspheme against Islam,¹⁶ or those Muslims who allegedly sin by adapting the practice of their religion in order to conform to the requirements of the non-Muslim societies in which they live. He alleges Muslims in the West have been made the target of an ideological war being waged by the United States,¹⁷ which is spreading “moderate” or so-called “RAND Islam”¹⁸ in order to divert the youth away from the correct knowledge and full implementation of Islam’s fundamentals including *Tawhid* (monotheism), *Al-Wala wa’al Bara* (enjoining good and forbidding evil), and Jihad.

It is worthy of note that not all of Al-Awlaki’s lecture series have focused on controversial subjects such as Jihad. Content analysis of a wide array of English-language Islamic web sites, blogs, and forums suggests his lectures on relatively benign topics such as the lives of the Prophet’s Companions have proven widely popular with his supporters. For example, his lecture series ‘The Hereafter’ examines subjects such as the journey experienced by the human soul throughout life and into death, and the conditions that determine whether that soul will enter heaven or hell. Salafi scholars opposed to the views of Al-Awlaki maintain distribution of such lectures is a deliberate tactic designed to appeal to the widest possible range of potential supporters with discussions of more general Islamic topics, before moving on to discuss geopolitics and Jihad. Abu Yusuf Khaleefah, a US Salafi cleric, said in a lecture in 2009 that he had warned young Muslims several years ago to treat Al-Awlaki’s lectures with extreme caution, saying:

‘Stuff like this ‘Hereafter’ series...the brothers and sisters shouldn’t be listening to this stuff. [I said to them] we don’t know who he [Al-Awlaki] is. You stick to those you know to be Ahl ul-Sunnah. ‘Stories of The Prophets’...’The

16 See ‘The Dust Will Never Settle Down’, May 2008, <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?172360-New-Anwar-Al-Awlaki-The-Dust-will-Never-Settle-Down>

17 See ‘The Battle For Hearts and Minds’, available via <http://www.kalamullah.com>

18 A reference to a 2004 report by the RAND Corporation which recommended supporting moderate Muslim groups as a bulwark against the propagation of radical Islamist ideologies. See ‘Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, Strategies’, RAND Corporation, 2004 http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1716/

*Hereafter'...Now it is clear he is Khawarij.*¹⁹ *Those people listening to him have to go into detox now because the love these individuals have for this individual is in their hearts.*²⁰

Like many of his contemporaries, the respect afforded Al-Awlaki by his support base is not the result of a lifetime spent in formal Islamic education. Though he received an early religious education in Yemen, on moving to the US his subsequent education was largely secular; he obtained a BSc in Civil Engineering and an MA in Educational Leadership. According to his biography, he headed the Dar al-Hijrah Islamic Centre in Falls Church, Virginia, for several years and was also a chaplain at George Washington University. According to information on Islamic forums, blogs, and in other open sources, he may have undergone short periods of religious education in Saudi Arabia and again in Yemen, where he reportedly studied under controversial Salafi cleric Abdul Majid al-Zindani.

Al-Awlaki's personal style differs from that of other English-speaking radical *Shuyookh* such as Jamaican-born Abdullah Faisal, whose blood-and-thunder *Takfiri* rhetoric has proven popular with much of the same constituency. Nevertheless, Al-Awlaki's fluency in both English and Arabic, combined with his ability to explain complex religious concepts with simplicity and clarity to an often lay audience, has perhaps given him an even greater level of appeal. In many cases, his detractors argue, his audience will be none the wiser when he selectively quotes classical texts on the *Fiq* of Jihad and attempts to legitimise violence in various contemporary scenarios. His supporters claim that he is a rare source of clear and beneficial Islamic advice to Muslims living in the West who face growing challenges to their faith. In other words, while many scholars lack the courage to preach "true Islam", Al-Awlaki is seen by his supporters as one of the few *Shuyookh* to have lived in the West who were brave enough to preach their religion without compromise. As one member of the Seventh Century Generation Islamic web forum noted

19 The Khawarij were one of the first extremist groups in Islamic history who rejected the authority of the Fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib

20 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u4BDE0MHHA>

in April: 'I love this Sheikh for the sake of Allah as he has opened the eyes of many through lectures including me.'²¹

Al-Awlaki's popularity also stems from his use of the Internet to communicate his message – he had his own web site and blog until it was shut down this year – both through written tracts and lengthy audio lectures. His online presence has become pervasive thanks to a committed support base that has ensured widespread dissemination of his work across web sites, blogs, and forums as download links or embedded YouTube videos.²² One YouTube channel surveyed in the production of this paper contained a video featuring excerpts of Al-Awlaki's 'Lives of the Prophets' series that had been viewed over 260,000 times.²³ Similarly, another video on YouTube featuring part of his lecture series 'Major Signs on the Day of Judgement' had received at least 134,000 viewings.²⁴ Al-Awlaki has delivered lectures to Islamic groups and conferences worldwide, including the United States, the UK, Pakistan, and South Africa. In recent years many of these lectures have been delivered by Al-Awlaki via video link from his base in Yemen. The lectures have been recorded and subsequently disseminated widely online.

Al-Awlaki has used his language skills to satisfy the appetite of a Western Muslim audience for translations of Islamic texts by classical and contemporary Salafi ideologues, in particular those writing on the subject of the *Fiq* of Jihad. For example, some of Al-Awlaki's most popular oratories have been based on translations and explanations of seminal works on Jihad, such as *The Book of Jihad* by the classical scholar Ibn Nahhas,²⁵ as well as more contemporary personalities such as Yusuf Al-Ayyiri, a member of AQAP in Saudi Arabia who

21 <http://www.7cgen.com>

22 <http://www.youtube.com/user/AnwarAwlakiLectures> is an example of just one such channel promoting al-Awlaki's lectures.

23 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzPjllb_6Wg

24 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ech7anRaJA>

25 Ibn Nahhas (real name Abi Zakaryya Al Dimashqi Al Dumyati) was a 13th century Islamic scholar who wrote extensively on the *Fiq* of Jihad. One of his most well-known works, *The Book of Jihad*, has been translated into multiple languages in both full and abridged formats and is frequently referenced by Salafi-Jihadi ideologues. A copy of the book can be found at: [http://www.hoor-al-ayn.com/Books/6\)%20Mashari%20Al-Ashwaq%20Ila%20Masari%20al-Ushaaq%20%5BRevised%20Edition%5D.pdf](http://www.hoor-al-ayn.com/Books/6)%20Mashari%20Al-Ashwaq%20Ila%20Masari%20al-Ushaaq%20%5BRevised%20Edition%5D.pdf)

was killed in a shootout with Saudi security forces in 2003. Ayyiri's book, *Constants on the Path of Jihad*, is one of the most popular texts on Jihad by a contemporary Salafi-Jihadi ideologue, and Al-Awlaki's lecture series on this book has been widely distributed online.

Additionally, Al-Awlaki's many years of residency in the US have given him not only fluency in English but also an understanding of the issues and concerns facing Muslims there. He is thus able to use contemporary political, cultural, and recent historical references in his lectures that will resonate with a Western audience. As Charles Allen, Deputy Director of the US Department of Homeland Security, remarked in 2009: 'He appeals to young people and bends the minds of young American Muslims, and to some degree he has succeeded.'

He is also perceived by his supporters to have suffered for his beliefs, and yet continued to "speak the *Haqq* [truth]" in spite of the personal risks. He is much admired as a scholar who made *Hijrah* [migration] to an Islamic country where he continued to proselytise even under threat of imprisonment. As one participant in a Salafi web forum discussion on Al-Awlaki this year noted: 'He's simply tired of sitting in the filth in order to get us out of the filth.'²⁶

Al-Awlaki's standing among English-speaking supporters rose further following his imprisonment by Yemeni authorities (he was arrested in 2006 and incarcerated for at least two years), and will likely receive a further boost when – as seems likely – he is ultimately detained again or killed. Even the news of his alleged inclusion on a US targeting list was interpreted by his supporters as proof that he was merely speaking the truth about Islam. As one supporter posting in April on the Islamicawakening web forum noted: 'One principle I have is that whoever the Kuffar speak ill about is the one who is on the *Haqq* [truth] i.e. Al-Awlaki.'²⁷

26 <http://www.forums.islamicawakening.com>

27 <http://www.forums.islamicawakening.com>

A hint of the degree to which Al-Awlaki's status is likely to be elevated in the event of his capture or death was provided by another member of the same forum, who remarked:

'If he's killed in an air strike tomorrow, al-hamdulillah [God be praised]. He joins the likes of the classical [scholars] as well as his recent brothers in Da'wah Abdullah Azzam, Yusuf Al-Ayyiri, Said al-Buryati etc who testify to the fact that you don't have to live among the filth to be a da'ee [caller to Islam].'

In a similar discussion in April on the Seventh Century Generation forum, a participant in a discussion on Al-Awlaki said:

*'If they are successful in making the Imam Anwar a Shaheed [martyr] then all that will happen is that his status will be elevated in this world and the next. Then he will become regarded as the most popular English-speaking da'ee [caller to Islam] and everyone will listen to all his talks even more.'*²⁸

Muslim scholars respond

Al-Awlaki is currently being pursued both on the ground in Yemen and in cyberspace. On the one hand he is now the target of a man-hunt by Yemeni and US authorities; on the other, he is being attacked by a range of Muslim groups and individuals who have been active on the Internet in an attempt to challenge his writings and lectures on the theological level.

Though rarely publicised in mainstream media, Islamic scholars and Muslim groups in the West have not allowed Al-Awlaki's proselytising to go unchallenged. A survey of dialogue on Islamic web sites and forums reveals a range of voices opposed to Al-Awlaki's views. Most importantly, given the nature of Al-Awlaki's support base, these refutations have been delivered in written and spoken English; where Arabic-speaking Salafi scholars have refuted him, Salafi groups in the US, UK, and Europe have provided translations of their

28 <http://www.7cgen.com>

statements. Their rejections of Al-Awlaki do not appear to be nearly as widely disseminated online as the cleric's own material. However these critiques bear close scrutiny for what they suggest about the strategic and doctrinal vulnerabilities of Al-Awlaki and other English-speaking radical *Shuyookh* who preach a similar message.

An emotive rejection of Al-Awlaki's 'Call to Jihad'²⁹ was issued in April by a US Imam on his blog The Lotus Tree. Abu Laith Luqman Ahmed, Imam of the Masjid Ibrahim Islamic Centre in Sacramento, California, claimed that peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims was 'not a crime' and that 'the Lord that we worship favors not the East or the West; He favors the righteous wherever they dwell.'

Imam Ahmed added:

'We live here because we are free men, women and children. We have the right to live here and this is our country. We live here because Millions of American Muslims attend this nation's masjid every week without being accosted, bombed while in prayer, or hindered in any way from worshipping our Lord.'

*As for your call for American Muslims to wage jihad against our country and homeland; the land that you are urging us to wage war against, is the land of our homes that we are obligated to protect...I shall not lift a finger in jihad against the only country that I can call home.'*³⁰

A modest groundswell of other Muslim bloggers have joined in condemnation of Al-Awlaki's teachings; one blogger, writing in April, posted on his site audio recordings of Salafi scholars refuting Al-Awlaki, with the comment: 'I post this video 'cause in this period there are people ready to call out for Jihad just like they are starting a war game...they are a threat for our Ummah, especially the youth.'³¹

29 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbAr1Ms1CeA>

30 <http://imamluqman.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/an-american-muslim-imam-s-response-to-imam-anwar-awlaki-s-call-for-jihad-against-america/>

31 <http://alahzab35.wordpress.com/2010/01/04/salafi-refutation-of-anwar-al-awlaki/>

One member of the Seventh Century Generation Islamic forum, responding to a recent discussion on Al-Awlaki, said:

'Awlaki dug his own grave...because he condoned the killing of innocent civilians...on board that commercial aircraft to Detroit. One of my friends was on that flight and she is a Muslim. So you tell me – how fair is that? Let's not make Awlaki into a martyr just yet.'

Perhaps the most detailed and potentially damaging attacks on Al-Awlaki's teachings, however, have come from Salafi scholars and their supporters, who like Al-Awlaki and his contemporaries also wish to position themselves to Muslims as having the correct interpretation of the *Aqidah* [creed] and *manhaj* [methodology] of *Ahl us-Sunnah*. These movements have challenged Al-Awlaki's work with detailed refutations, attempting to expose his alleged doctrinal errors and warn Muslims that he risks leading them toward *bidah* [innovation]. In some cases they allege his deviations are so severe that he should not be regarded as Salafi at all.

Salafi web sites, blogs, and forums have frequently circulated refutations of Al-Awlaki by prominent Salafi scholars including Shaykh Abdullah al-Jarboo (former head of the *Aqidah* Dept. at Medinah University), and Shaykh Ubayd Ibn Abdullaah al-Jabiree^{32 33} (a Salafi scholar from Medina), among others.³⁴ Many such refutations have appeared as audio recordings accompanied by English translations on YouTube,³⁵ where at least one dedicated Al-Awlaki refutation channel has been set up.³⁶

Salafist groups have attacked Al-Awlaki on a number of levels, but the two most common forms of criticism are methodological, specifically shifts in his *manhaj*, and theological, where his detractors point specifically to what they claim are his many errors concerning the *Fiq* of Jihad,

32 www.troid.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=922&Itemid=338

33 A useful selection of English translations of this Sheikh's work can be found at: <http://www.ubayd.co.uk/>

34 www.sunnahaudio.com/modules.php?name=Current_Affairs

35 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-FsX_HhPpg

36 <http://www.youtube.com/user/RefutationofAwlaki>

along with what they allege is his selective and sometimes inaccurate interpretations of classical texts on this issue.

In methodological terms, Al-Awlaki's detractors have characterised him as an opportunist who intentionally began to shift his *manhaj* after the September 11 2001 attacks from a fusion of Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwani*) ideology and Qutbi-influenced Islamism to a more Salafi-Jihadist position in order to cement his appeal to young Muslims.³⁷ In one refutation, the authors repeatedly juxtapose excerpts from Al-Awlaki's early sermons such as '*Tolerance – the Hallmark of a Muslim*', with his more recent lectures on Jihad to demonstrate the extent of this shift. In this lecture, Al-Awlaki is quoted as saying: '*I think that in general Islam is presented in a negative way, I mean there's always this association between Islam and terrorism when that is not true at all, I mean Islam is a religion of peace.*' Such statements are presented not as evidence of any sincere change in outlook post-9/11, but as a cynical act of re-branding to gain popularity among a minority of young Muslims who in the post-9/11 environment saw support for the Salafi-Jihadi *manhaj* as "de-rigueur". Labelling Al-Awlaki as "Khawarij", "Ikhwani", or "Qutbi" could be seen as an attempt by these scholars to delegitimise him as a Salafi ideologue.

His detractors further claim that Al-Awlaki's populist tendencies can be seen in his aggressive use of the Internet to spread his message, the result of his *Ikhwani* background which they say favours leveraging the media in attempts to mobilise Muslims of various stripes around shared issues of concern.

Opinions differ among analysts regarding the reasons for Al-Awlaki's apparent methodological and ideological shifts. Some are convinced Al-Awlaki has long held extremist Islamist views influenced by radical scholars such as Sayyid Qutb, but tempered these views in public for many years to avoid attracting excessive attention from US law enforcement. Others believe the Imam was indeed opposed to terrorist attacks on US soil around the time of September 11 2001—he gave an interview to a US television network following the

37 For example, see the following discussion thread at the SalafiTalk forum: <http://www.salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=9&Topic=5903>

9/11 attacks in which he clearly stated that the US had a right defend itself and that the perpetrators of the attacks 'must pay a price for what they have done.' However, they add that he was deeply affected not only by subsequent events in the Muslim world but also by the shifting political climate in the US, and his outlook began to harden. Imam Johari Abdulmalik, an Imam at the Dar al-Hijrah Islamic Centre once attended by Al-Awlaki, said Al-Awlaki decided to leave the US in 2002 after growing tired of media and law enforcement attention and the growing propensity of the public to view Islam through the lens of domestic security. During an interview for a US television network, Imam Abdulmalik recalled:

'He [Al-Awlaki] said, the climate here – you can't really do your work....it's always anti-terrorism...investigative this and this...the FBI wants to talk to you...I would rather go somewhere I can preach, I can teach and have a discourse that's not about 9/11 every day.'

But commenting on Al-Awlaki's later praise on his web site for the Fort Hood attacker, he added: 'I can't put together that person [Al-Awlaki]...with the person who wrote this drivel on a blog.'

Al-Awlaki's alleged lack of an extensive formal religious education is also a subject of criticism by his detractors, who claim he lacks the patience to engage in the sort of exhaustive self-study required to provide genuine knowledge-based guidance. The absence of a deeper knowledge and contextual understanding of the Quran, Sunnah, and works of classical scholars is often used to explain why he allegedly propagates a "cut-and-paste" *manhaj* of *Ikhwani* and *Qutbi* ideology and selective interpretations of classical and contemporary works on Jihad.

One of the most comprehensive Salafi refutations of Al-Awlaki seen in English to date was published in December 2009 by *Salafimanhaj*, a UK-based Salafi organisation which aims to propagate the "correct" Islamic *Aqidah* and "expose" those ideologues it deems deviant or extremist.³⁸ The 132-

38 <http://www.salafimanhaj.com>

page document presents a detailed theological critique of what it claims are Al-Awlaki's numerous errors on the Fiq of Jihad and his misrepresentation of the work of classical texts on this issue.

The authors cite numerous Salafi scholars to underscore their argument that Jihad is an activity whose potential benefits and harms have to be carefully weighed before a decision is made on when and how to fight. Approaching Jihad in terms of its potential for *Maslahah* [the public benefit] or *Mafsadah* [the public harm] is regarded by Salafi clerics as indispensable context when considering this issue.

Many Salafi-Jihadi *Shuyookh*, Al-Awlaki included, are scornful of the *Maslahah/ Mafsadah* argument regarding Jihad. They claim such deliberations often constitute a "false prevention" of Jihad that can lead to inaction where action is often needed to defend Islam and Muslims. Put another way, Al-Awlaki argues that while warfare by its nature brings harm to people, inaction can also bring harm to Muslims.³⁹

However, a core argument presented in the refutation is that Al-Awlaki is irresponsibly leading Muslims to greater harm. He is doing this by extolling the virtues of violent Jihad, while neglecting to discuss many of its important conditions: in particular, the stipulation that Jihad is not embarked upon in circumstances that would do Muslims more harm than good. For example Al-Awlaki frequently discusses a Muslim's obligation to wage Jihad in various contemporary circumstances and supports his assertions with references to the rulings of classical jurists such as Ibn Taymiyah; his detractors, however, allege he fails to contextualise

39 For example, one prominent contemporary Salafi-Jihadi ideologue who has written on this issue is Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartusi, a Syrian resident in the UK whose essay *Education of Jihad First?* asserts that seeking knowledge is a perpetual process that can be pursued at the same time as waging Jihad. He is critical of those scholars who claim *tarbiyah* is necessary before making Jihad, alleging that they are teaching Muslim youth to avoid their Islamic duty of Jihad by raising education as a barrier. Al-Qaeda ideologues such as Sheikh Abu Yahyah al-Libbi have made similar arguments to al-Tartusi – see excerpts of Abu Yahyah al-Libbi's lecture 'Balancing Between Jihad and Seeking Knowledge' at: <http://www.tibyan.co.cc/2009/09/balancing-between-jihad-and-seeking.html> or <http://www.youtube.com/user/striving2martyrdom#p/u/31/O1TR2PdjvOc>

these arguments by reminding his audience that the same scholar warned against fighting an enemy from a position of weakness to avoid placing Muslims in even more dangerous circumstances. Al-Awlaki is thus accused of fostering a culture of "Jihad for Jihad's sake" by cherry-picking from classical scholars to support his arguments while ignoring the same scholars' advice on conditions that ensure fighting only takes place when it is in the Ummah's strategic best interests.

In this context the authors are particularly critical of Al-Awlaki for allegedly claiming in one of his lectures that Muslims who discourage the youth from Jihad are *munafiqs* – hypocrites who practice Islam outwardly but who conceal *Kufr* [disbelief]. This serious claim is made by Al-Awlaki in a lecture series based on his interpretation of *Constants on the Path of Jihad*. He is thus accused of attempting to lead Muslim youth along an errant path long since recanted by many of the Saudi religious scholars on whose rulings Al-Ayyiri based many of his arguments. The authors liken Al-Awlaki to the *Ruwaybidah*, described in a *hadith* of Abu Hurayrah, a Companion of the Prophet Mohammed, as 'an insignificant foolish man who speaks on general affairs.'

The authors highlight a range of other alleged inconsistencies and errors in Al-Awlaki's arguments, many of them stemming from a lecture series he recorded which offered interpretations of Ibn Nahhas *Book of Jihad*, in which he said:

*'So here you have a man who jumps into the army, seeking martyrdom. Might as well just put on an explosive belt, what's the difference!?! Jump in with an army of thousands?! So...(either way) it's definite death.'*⁴⁰

They disagree, for instance, with a lecture in which Al-Awlaki claims *Tarbiyah* [educating the heart, mind, and soul of Muslim youth] is not a pre-requisite for Jihad. In his interpretation of *Constants on the Path of Jihad* Al-Awlaki states:

40 Commentary on The Book of Jihad, by Anwar al-Awlaki. The commentary is to be found in multiple parts at: <http://www.islamictube.com/watch/f27e1191082e12a27b0b/1-The-Book-of-Jihad-by-ibn-Nuhaas-Commentary-by-Al-Awlaki>

*'Many say before Jihad, there must be tarbiyah...If someone starts practising Islam, or someone reverts to Islam, would we tell them that they have to have tarbiyah before they start fasting?...There is no difference in this matter and Jihad feesabilillah [for the sake of God].... Why must we require tarbiyah, when our rasool [the Prophet Mohammed] did not?'*⁴¹

Al-Awlaki's critics claim this is a dangerous over-simplification for a number of reasons, not least of which is that fasting is *farḍ-ayn* [an individual obligation] whereas Jihad, they claim, is typically *farḍ-kifayah* [a communal obligation wherein if enough members of a Muslim community discharge the obligation then the remaining Muslims are freed from the same responsibility]. The authors remind their readership that *tarbiyah* is essential for Muslims to ensure that they possess the correct *Aqidah* and *Ikhlas* [faithfulness to one's beliefs] in order to wage Jihad correctly. They warn that clerics such as Al-Awlaki risk leading their supporters into dangerous innovations on issues such as Jihad because of a failure to properly study its conditions.

The refutation then goes on to attack Al-Awlaki on assertions regarding the military tactics permissible in Jihad. His claim that Muslims outnumbered on the battlefield can barricade themselves into a building to await reinforcements is rebutted with reference to numerous rulings by prominent contemporary Salafi scholars, who describe circumstances in which it is legitimate for Muslims to withdraw rather than fight to the death if they face a massacre.

Al-Awlaki's referral to the martyrdom and bravery of the Prophet's Companions to provide legitimacy for suicide bombings is the target of heavy criticism in this refutation. Al-Awlaki uses the examples of Al Bara ibn Malik al Ansari and others who immersed themselves in the ranks of their apostate enemies at the Battle of Yamama to underwrite the permissibility of suicide attacks. However these and other stories of Companions who fought or were martyred in battle and used by Al-Awlaki to justify suicide bombing

41 Al-Awlaki's commentary on Constants can be found in multiple parts at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLMbdd8IP78>

are described as being a 'tremendously fragile analogy' for several reasons:

- Firstly, because materials such as explosives did not exist at that time.
- Secondly, because those Companions who plunged into battle against overwhelming odds (known as "immersing oneself in the enemy" – *Inghimas fi'l-'Ad*) did so to fight the enemy until being killed, not to kill themselves in order to fight the enemy. The refutation states:

'The battlefield martyr, according to the divinely-revealed texts and consensus of jurists, is the one who fights and then dies by other than his own hand; the exception to this being the one who kills himself accidentally. As for the lone warrior charging the enemy ranks during Jihad, he never sets out to kill himself – unlike the suicide bomber.'

- Thirdly, the Companions cited by Al-Awlaki and his contemporaries in this context are inappropriate - the Companions generally took calculated risks which, although they were in the face of enormous odds, were still not predicated around seeking certain death.
- Fourthly, unlike modern suicide bombers, the Companions did not use deception to gain access to the enemy, such as dressing and shaving to resemble a non-Muslim, in order to attack their targets – they attacked their targets head-on.

Elsewhere, Al-Awlaki is taken to task on issues such as the targeting of civilians during Jihad. Here, his detractors claim that he cites classical Islamic jurists such as Imam al-Shaafi out of context by attempting to misuse the scholar's assertion that those civilians providing intellectual support to an enemy were viable targets. He is criticised for extending al-Shaafi's ruling to encompass those paying taxes to any government making war on Muslims, even though many of those civilians may have opposed such wars and campaigned against them.

Another emphasis of this refutation concerns Al -Awlaki's stance on *Aqd aman* [a Covenant of Security], a non-aggression pact between Muslims and non-Muslims which

dictates a Muslim's obligations when living under the protection of a non-Muslim government.⁴² They allege that Al-Awlaki again selectively quotes from *The Book of Jihad* when discussing this issue, for example neglecting to mention in his lectures that Ibn Nahhas wrote that Muslims were prohibited from making war on their non-Muslim hosts and taking spoils of war if they were living under a Covenant of Security.

Other detailed refutations have been produced by Salafi groups in the US. Seemingly alarmed by media reports that characterised Al-Awlaki as a Salafi cleric, Sunnah Publishing recently issued an 11-page critique that claimed Al-Awlaki was a deviant scholar whose ideology bore no resemblance to Salafism at all. In the introduction, the authors said:

'The reality is that Anwar Al-Awlaki has nothing to do with Salafism and has never – to our knowledge – claimed such for his self.

*At the most, this is alarmist propaganda that puts the thousands of Salafi Muslims who currently live peaceful and productive lives in the United States under suspicion.*⁴³

The majority of this refutation centres on Al-Awlaki's alleged methodological shifts rather than his grasp of *Fiq*, which was the focus of the refutation published by Salafi Manhaj.

The refutation firstly seeks to attack perceptions of Al-Awlaki's clerical authority by alleging that the meager levels of formal religious education he received were at the feet of scholars discredited by authoritative Salafi Sheikhs such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz ibn Baz and Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan. The authors are particularly scathing about Al-Awlaki's short tutelage under controversial Yemeni sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani at

42 For an overview of the key tenets of a Covenant of Security and debates among Salafi-Jihadists over conditions for nullification, see: *Can Al-Qaeda Use Islam To Justify Jihad Against the United States? A Debate in Progress* (Jack Barclay, Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, Vol 8 Issue 26) http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36562&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=fc06364f14

43 This document can be found at: <http://www.sunnahpublishing.net/modules/Manhaj/awlaki.pdf>

the University of Eman in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. They claim more eminent Salafi clerics in Yemen, such as Muqbil Ibn Hadi al-Wadi, had long since discredited al-Zindani's University as allegedly offering incorrect Salafi teaching by introducing students to the proselytizing of Muslims of other sects. Al-Awlaki's further claims to have studied for a brief period under Sheikh Salman Al-Awda in Saudi Arabia are interpreted by the authors as further evidence of his deviation, given what they allege is Al-Awda's history of claiming that there is no contemporary legitimate Islamic state.⁴⁴

The authors repeat allegations made by other Salafi scholars that that Al-Awlaki's interest in such doctrine stems from his admiration of Sayyid Qutb, whose writings he claims to have studied closely while serving jail time in Yemen, and who advocated revolt against regimes in the Muslim world which he considered "apostate". Their referral to Al-Awlaki as a "Qutbi" is again used as a derogatory term intended to separate him from association with Salafism and "expose" his real agenda not as an ideologue calling for defence of Islam and Muslim lands, but as an advocate of the overthrow of Muslim governments that will bring more, not less, instability to the Middle East.

The Saudi cleric Sheikh Ubayd al-Jabiree, in an oratory to US Salafis in November 2009, scolded Al-Awlaki for 'his ignorance concerning the *fiq* of jihad.' Sheikh al-Jabiree said: 'He [Al-Awlaki] does not know anything about the jihad which is from the well-planned obligations which Allah has established.'

He went on to highlight what he saw as Al-Awlaki's ideological association with *takfiri* ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb, Abu Qatada al-Falastini, and Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi. '[He has been] polluted by the ideas of Sayyid Qutb,' he said. 'Sayyid Qutb is flag-bearer of takfir....this Sayyid has declared the entire Ummah kaffir falsely.'

44 Sheikh Salman al-Awda is a Saudi Salafi ideologue whose affiliation with the country's dissident Awakening Movement in the 1990s resulted in his arrest and imprisonment. Following his release, however, he attempted to re-assert his allegiance to the Saudi state and went on to become a vocal public critic of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

He added:

'Whoever calls to Jihad in a general manner then he is one of two men; he is either ignorant concerning the fiq of jihad or a person of desires who is misguided and misleading others.' And he warned that it was an obligation on the Ummah *'to be cautious of him and to have hatred of him.'*⁴⁵

Significance and implications for counter-radicalisation

Al-Awlaki is not a cleric of repute in the Arab-speaking world. His recent appearance in an AQAP-affiliated video is the closest he has to come so far to being officially anointed by the Al-Qaeda leadership, which to date has not mentioned him in its strategic communication.

That he enjoys a particular position of popularity among young Salafi-Jihadi sympathizers in the West stems from a range of factors, few of which ostensibly appear unique. He has written and spoken on a wide variety of Islamic topics, including what he sees as the contemporary threats to Muslims and the obligation of violent Jihad in defence of Islam. He is bilingual. He has lived in the West and can identify with his Western Muslim audience, thereby giving his teachings greater resonance among this constituency.

However, the history of Al-Awlaki's use of the Internet goes some way to explaining why his popularity has eclipsed that of fellow English-speaking Salafi-Jihadi *Shuyookh*. For several years, Al-Awlaki's writings and oratories have been distributed by a committed trans-national network of supporters as download links well beyond avowedly Salafi-Jihadi web sites and onto a much wider range of Islamist sites, blogs, and web forums, and most recently YouTube. While it may be an overstatement to suggest that this sustained, widespread Internet presence has conferred a level of "acceptability", it

has certainly brought him to the attention of a broad spectrum of Muslim communities active on the Internet, be they already committed Salafi-Jihadists or those with a developing sense of a more Islamist or militant Salafi identity. The ostensibly benign nature of many of his oratories, which often avoid substantive discussion of politics, Jihad, and current affairs, may also have given him a greater level of accessibility and thus helped him cement a stronger online following than some of his more outspoken contemporaries. It is possible therefore, that many of Al-Awlaki's supporters first developed an affinity for him not because they were actively seeking radical Islamist content to begin with, but because they were initially pursuing broader, beneficial Islamic guidance on the Internet and came across one or more of Al-Awlaki's more broadly appealing lectures on Islam's fundamental tenets.

Al-Awlaki's committed support base have ensured not only that his many audio lectures receive widespread distribution, but that his reputation is vigorously defended whenever it is called into question on Internet blogs and forums.

It is also noteworthy that Al-Awlaki's popularity appears to rise each time he is perceived to have shown bravery in defending his religion, despite harassment and the threat of imprisonment. Until his move to Yemen, this harassment might have amounted to little more than the periodic attention of television network journalists and the FBI. However, his later imprisonment in Sana'a and subsequent targeting by the US and Yemeni authorities after he continued his controversial writings and oratories, has further elevated his standing. His supporters consider this harassment proof that his enemies are attempting to silence him for merely telling the truth about Islam and the obligation upon Muslims to defend their religion. It is worth considering whether such pressure has been self-defeating in as much as it may have bolstered the perceived credibility of a Salafi-Jihadi cleric who would otherwise have been no more prominent than many of his contemporaries.

Al-Awlaki's prominence will continue to rise due to what his supporters see as his enduring bravery and commitment to his religion by performing *dawa* in the face of adversity and personal danger. In response to the news of his inclusion on

⁴⁵ A transcript of the Sheikh's statement can be found at: <http://abdurrahmanorg.wordpress.com/2009/11/25/transcript-shaykh-ubayd-al-jaabiree-refutes-anwar-al-alack-advises-ummah-to-refute-him-with-knowledge-boycott-him/>

a US targeting list, supporters have already stated on blogs and web forums that his death will elevate him to the status enjoyed by the likes of Sayyid Qutb, whose own writings on Jihad and the obligation to revolt against Arab regimes resulted in his incarceration and later his death in 1966. Qutb's execution was viewed by many Muslims as a martyr's death and it significantly boosted the popularity of his works, in particular the seminal book *Milestones* which has since become an ideological touchstone for Islamist and Salafi-Jihadist groups worldwide.⁴⁶

Towards a counter-strategy

Beyond his capture or death, therefore, Al-Awlaki's legacy of writings and sermons may continue to motivate would-be Salafi-Jihadists in the West. The success – or otherwise – of rival Salafists in discrediting these works, and in ensuring they are distributed as widely as Al-Awlaki's – remains to be seen.

A related issue is the degree to which the counterterrorism community should involve itself in this process, either by supporting the “establishment” of “apolitical” Salafists, or by monitoring the ongoing discourse, and independently harnessing its output, as the basis for more effective strategic messaging.

Direct support for Salafi groups in the West opposed to Al-Awlaki is one possible option. This could be done by building their capacity to produce and more widely disseminate written and audio-visual refutations in English. However, even if these groups would be willing to accept such support, the risk is that their credibility as authoritative voices would be severely

46 Sayyid Qutb (09/10/1906 – 29/8/1966) was one of the 20th century's most influential Islamist ideologues. An author, poet, and teacher, Qutb was a leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood movement until his execution by the Egyptian government on charges of conspiring against the State. His works strongly advocated the re-Islamisation of society by the removal of non-Islamic political and legal systems from the Muslim world and their replacement – by force if necessary - with an Islamic state governed by Sharia. Sayyid Qutb is best known for his books *In The Shade of the Quran*, a lengthy commentary on the Quran, and *Milestones*, his manifesto for the step-by-step re-creation of a Muslim society. Downloadable copies of *Milestones* can be found at <http://www.bandung2.co.uk/books/Files/Politics/Milestones.pdf>

damaged if their affiliation with government became obvious. More than likely, it would strengthen the hand of Salafi-Jihadist supporters by helping them frame the debate even more acutely in terms of a conflict between *Haqq* and *Baatil* [falsehood], with establishment Salafists being characterised as the “palace scholars” willing to compromise their religious obligations for patronage.

Such direct engagement may not be necessary when analysis of refutations of Al-Awlaki already in circulation offer such valuable insight into the strategic and doctrinal weaknesses in his rhetoric. Identification of these potential “wedge issues” might help underpin more effective strategic communication campaigns aimed at damaging his reputation and the perceived credibility of his message, which in turn may reduce its capacity to contribute to the violent radicalisation of young Muslims. The Internet seems the most obvious platform for delivery of such messaging, given the critical role it has played in the growth of Al-Awlaki's popularity.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the practicalities of how insights from this intra-Salafi dialogue could be deployed by authorities as strategic communication. The challenges here are significant, but by no means insurmountable. Firstly, however, there is a need to develop a better understanding of the social environment in which strategic messaging would be deployed. For example, deeper insight is needed into how an individual's online identity forms, and how an individual establishes credibility with a group. Of particular importance is an understanding of how the nature of an individual's contribution to online discussions gains or loses the trust of his peers.

Insights from this research would underpin development and delivery of strategic messaging campaigns that have the greatest chance of gaining traction within target communities; this might take the form of campaigning designed to spark debate among target communities over the flaws in Al-Awlaki's rhetoric. The result would hopefully be the generation of self-sustaining online discussion of the doctrinal wedge issues that would ultimately threaten the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of Al-Awlaki, as well as the integrity of his message.

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Anwar Al-Awlaki's audio lectures are now accessible via a host of download sites, web sites, and blogs. A useful collection of his more popular lectures can be found at: <http://www.kalamullah.com/anwar-alawlaki.html>

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