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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Anwar al-Aulaqi had ties to Va. mosque Dar Al-Hijrah



By [William Wan](#)

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In 2001, [Anwar al-Aulaqi](#) was hired to be the imam at [Dar Al-Hijrah](#), the Falls Church, Va. mosque that would later come under scrutiny by investigators for its connections to terrorist cases.

The mosque acknowledged the death of Aulaqi Friday in a statement: "While employed at Dar Al-Hijrah, Imam Al-Awlaki was known for his interfaith outreach, civic engagement and tolerance in the Northern Virginia community... In recent years, while in his self imposed exile, Mr. Al-Awlaki encouraged impressionable American Muslims to attack their own country. With his death, Al-Awlaki will no longer be able to spread his hate speech over the Internet to our youth." Read the mosque's full statement [here](#).

"Before he came to Dar Al-Hijrah, I didn't know anything about him," said Bassam Estwani, one of the early founders of Dar Al-Hijrah and former chairman of the board. "Brothers from California recommended him as a good scholar."

Estwani said he was stunned by Aulaqi's later evolution into a radical extremist, describing him as, "very nice, very disciplined, polite, helpful to everyone. Never saw any sign of extremist thinking. He was a scholar, spoke both languages, Arabic and English, very well. I wondered to myself afterward is he the same person who spoke here?"

(Watch the video: [Under Suspicion: Voices about Muslims in America](#))

Right after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Aulaqi was in demand as an articulate spokesman for [American Islam](#) and interfaith understanding. He hosted a [chat about Ramadan on washingtonpost.com](#) and allowed a [Post videographer to chronicle a day in the life](#) of an American imam. [Eventually](#), however, federal investigators learned that two of the Sept. 11 hijackers — Hani Hanjour and Nawaf Alhazmi — had briefly worshiped at Dar Al-Hijrah when Aulaqi was the imam there. The FBI and the federal 9/11 Commission were unable to determine whether Aulaqi met with the hijackers then. But they noted that he and some of the hijackers had met the year before at his former mosque in San Diego.

The way the commission's report put it, the two hijackers' appearance at Dar Al-Hijrah in 2001 "may not have been coincidental."

In 2002, after Aulaqi had already left the mosque and gone abroad, he returned one last time to Northern Virginia. Hossein Goal, a former member of Dar Al-Hijrah's executive committee, and newly hired Imam Johari al-Malik met with Aulaqi at a Northern Virginia cafe to try to convince him to return to the mosque, Johari said.

He turned them down, saying the atmosphere for Muslims after 9/11 was just too toxic. He said he could find an even bigger platform in the Arab states, and described a few of the options he was pursuing. He was seriously considering running for parliament in Yemen, he told Goal and Malik. He also was mulling hosting a TV show in the Gulf or landing a teaching job at an Islamic university.

Later, news reports surfaced that during his time leading a mosque in San Diego, Aulaqi had been arrested on allegations of soliciting prostitutes and was once spotted in Washington, D.C. with escorts.

Ten years after the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans of all religious backgrounds candidly talked about the roots of suspicion, misunderstandings about Islam and confronting their own fears in dozens of video interviews conducted by Washington Post journalists across the country.

Below, watch the video: "Under Suspicion: Voices about Muslims in America":

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