

## **As American As Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad**

ICSR is pleased to announce the release of its newest report, *As American As Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad*, by Research Fellow Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. This study provides the first forensic analysis of Anwar al-Awlaki's work, which tracks his ideological path from a supposedly moderate preacher to an al-Qaeda recruiter.

The tenth anniversary of 9/11 provides an ideal opportunity to assess the current nature of the al-Qaeda threat to the West and how it may evolve. One of the most notable changes since that day has been al-Qaeda's increased focus on mobilising Western Muslims to commit acts of so-called 'lone-wolf' terror, and this report both analyses and demonstrates how Awlaki plays a pivotal role in the success of this strategy.

### **Homegrown Jihadism: Lessons Learned**

- The story of Anwar al-Awlaki, and in particular his intellectual progression to jihad, provides a unique and revealing insight into jihadism in the West. This movement is no longer confined to Muslim majority countries, and through arguments he and others have provided, its message now resonates with small sections of Western Muslims.
- The movement has achieved this level of resonance through a process which includes the appropriation of contemporary Western political discourse about human rights, injustice and foreign policy, interwoven with the history of Islam and the fostering of a global Islamic consciousness which demands violent action in order for it to survive and expand.
- Throughout his career, Awlaki's main focus has been to convince Western Muslims that their governments are actively engaged in a multifaceted war against Islam and Muslims. During his more Muslim Brotherhood-influenced phase, his suggested responses to this threat included political activism within Western Islamist lobby groups, and as he embraced Salafi-jihadism, this gradually became a call for violence.
- Using a number of case studies of individuals influenced to act by Awlaki's work, this report also shows precisely how Awlaki has made key Salafi-jihadi theological and ideological dictums relevant and accessible to Western Muslims through translation and his use of language.

### **Impact on al-Qaeda Post-bin Laden?**

- A significant feature of much of Awlaki's work is the lack of direct references to the al-Qaeda network or any of its leading members. This reflects his desire for the global jihad to move away from a reliance on a particular group or individual, and instead to take the shape of a social movement that transcends personality, culture and organisational affiliation. This is particularly important in the post-bin Laden era, where al-Qaeda and other global jihadists are struggling to remain appealing and relevant.
- Despite his popularity, there is a large gap between Awlaki and senior al-Qaeda leaders like the late Osama bin-Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Yahya al-Libi, in terms of both the depth of his arguments and his personal experiences in the global jihad. Awlaki's presentation of global jihadist ideology is a simplified version of what these and other men have already formulated, and he has tailored it so as to appeal to as many people as possible within the new 'Facebook generation' of young, Western Muslims.

### **Policy Implications**

- While not providing any definitive answers, Awlaki's path to al-Qaeda suggests that there is no easy

formula or grand strategy which will solve the problem of homegrown extremism and radicalisation. In particular, his experience warns against policies that are predicated on the distinction between violent and non-violent actors within the Islamist movement; these distinctions are unclear, and the boundaries that do exist are blurry and easily traversed.

- According to intelligence officials who were involved with the initial assessments of the ideologue for the United States government, Awlaki's main role in the global jihad is ideological rather than operational. Despite his direct involvement in a number of attempted terrorist attacks in the West, it is his ability to project Salafi-jihadi ideology and mobilise Western Muslims through his sermons that represents his greatest threat. Awlaki is therefore a key tactical asset to the global jihad's strategy for garnering Western recruits and expanding the movement.

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