

Dead cleric's videos may find eternal life online

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(RNS) Radical American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki may be dead, but the power of the Internet means he won't soon be forgotten. And that, experts say, could make him just as dangerous dead as he was alive.

Counterterrorism experts say al-Awlaki, who was killed by a U.S. drone in Yemen on Sep. 30, either influenced or had direct contacts with people involved in 16 of the last 26 cases of domestic terrorism involving Muslims.

The New Mexico-born cleric often found his recruits -- or vice versa -- through charismatic video messages and websites. Al-Awlaki was linked to failed plots to blow up a plane over Detroit, detonate a bomb in Times Square and held sway over an Army psychiatrist who killed 13 people at Fort Hood in Texas in 2009.

While Osama bin Laden may have been the public face of al-Qaida, al-Awlaki may have had more influence, experts say, especially on impressionable young Muslims in the United States who were groomed into his deadly acolytes.

Just as the Internet has given a second career from beyond the grave for radio and TV preachers who are long dead, American Muslims fear al-Awlaki could have as much influence on impressionable young minds in death as he did in life.

"It could further reduce what little influence al-Qaida had, or it could turn him into an icon," said Alejandro Beutel, a counterterrorism expert with the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles, who knows firsthand al-Awlaki's ability to captivate his listeners.

Beutel became an al-Awlaki fan in the early 2000s, before his public turn to extremism as the head of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. Beutel was initially drawn to the cleric's lectures on innocuous topics like Prophet Muhammad and the afterlife.

"He wasn't a typical American imam. He combined scholarly erudition with great storytelling. He spoke to me as an American and as a Muslim, and many imams didn't have that ability," said Beutel.

When al-Awlaki veered into extremism and called on Muslims to attack Americans, Beutel was "shocked," he said, and stopped watching.

Some Muslims, however, kept listening to al-Awlaki, who developed what Beutel called a "cult following," one that won't easily vanish with his death. While it is only a "small number of individuals," Beutel said, "even one is too many."

The threat is compounded by al-Awlaki's continuing online presence. His writings and lectures can be viewed on websites with names like AlGhurabaa.com (The Strangers), Salaattime.com (Prayer time), Halaltube.com, and IslamicTube.com, as well as blogs devoted to spreading his videos and writings.

Several al-Awlaki videos have received more than 100,000 views, including one titled "Major Signs Before the Day of Judgment," with more than 260,000 views.

As al-Awlaki's popularity grew, Muslim leaders in the Middle East and the English-speaking West, where his sway was greatest, saw a need to challenge him.

According to a 2010 report, "Challenging the Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki," published by The International Center For The Study Of Radicalization at King's College in London, some of the most scathing criticism has come from members of the ultra-orthodox Salafi sect of Islam, who generally eschew violence and feel that al-Awlaki had tainted their creed.

Al-Awlaki has also been criticized by American imams, in literature published by Sunnah Publishing, a Salafi publishing house in Grand Rapids, Mich., and on Salafi websites with names like 7th Century Generation, Islamic Awakening, Salafi Talk, and Islam Against Extremism.

"I don't think the battle is over," said Yasir Qadhi, a prominent conservative Muslim cleric and dean of academic affairs at the Al Maghrib Institute, a nonprofit institute that sponsors seminars and

other courses in "Islamic sciences" in different U.S. cities.

"I do believe that we did a lot of good by publicly discrediting his message, but there are still a lot of angry kids out there, and his death and the manner of it will only succeed in enraging them further."

Even in death, al-Awlaki is able to counter his critics with online denunciations that criticize scholars and what he considered the excessive deference given to them.

"Shaytan would rather have you read the opinions of scholars than read (the) Quran," said al-Awlaki, using the Arabic term for devil, in a YouTube clip called "Do Not Blindly Follow The Scholars Of Today." "Don't think that everyone who's a scholar is a righteous person."

Still, not everyone believes al-Awlaki will become an icon. Some say that America's focus brought him more notoriety than he deserved.

"How enduring his ideas are depends less on his ideas, and more on how much others pay attention to them," said Michael Wahid Hanna, a fellow specializing in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East at the Century Foundation, a progressive public policy institute in New York. "But it seems he'll be less effective dead than alive."

Even if al-Awlaki's influence does wane, counterterrorism officials warn that other lesser-known terrorism inciters could pick up where he left off, and their lack of visibility is what makes them dangerous.

"The most worrying recruiters are the ones we don't know about," said John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University. "The one predictable thing about killing terrorists is that there is always another waiting to take his place."