

THE IMAM'S VERY CURIOUS STORY

A skirt-chasing mullah is just one more mystery for the 9/11 panel

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

It's been more than 2½ years since the 9/11 attacks, but lots of questions remain about how the plot came together and just who might have been involved. This week in Washington, the federal commission investigating the attacks will try to answer some of those questions in its 12th and final public hearing. Sources say the commission will reveal dramatic new information about the plot that has been gleaned from al Qaeda detainees, including 9/11 operational mastermind, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed. "This," says Democratic commissioner Timothy Roemer, "will be a blockbuster hearing."

Commissioners hope the two-day hearing will help fill in the gaps in what is still a sketchy story. Among those gaps is the possible role of a charismatic young Islamic cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, 33—allegedly a spiritual adviser to at least two hijackers who plunged American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon. A congressional joint inquiry report released last year says that al-Awlaki (aka, al-Aulaqi) is one of 14 men who had dealings with some of the hijackers while under FBI investigation; the bureau shut down a counterterrorism probe against him in 2000. The FBI has long downplayed al-Awlaki's role, but bureau sources now acknowledge that during the 9/11 probe, agents became "very interested" in al-Awlaki and yet failed to prevent him from leaving the country for Yemen. "We don't know how he got out," says one FBI source.

Al-Awlaki could not be reached for comment but has denied prior knowledge of the attacks. The lanky imam was known for his fiery anti-American rhetoric and for his side business peddling pure, expensive Yemeni honey—and investigators were interested in both. The feds were tracking al-Awlaki's honey trade, *U.S. News* has learned, because of evidence that Osama bin Laden was using a network of honey operations to fund the movement of gun ship-

ments and possible terrorists.

Educated in Yemen and the United States, al-Awlaki first attracted attention in 1999 in Los Angeles. According to the congressional inquiry, an FBI counterterrorism investigation indicated that the imam had ties to several suspicious characters and that he had allegedly met in early 2000 with someone close to convicted terrorist Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, a blind Egyptian cleric. But the FBI closed its investigation in March 2000, stating that, "the imam . . . does not meet the criterion for [further] investigation."

By then, al-Awlaki had settled in San Diego. And so had two of the hijackers, Khalid Almihdar and Nawaf Alhazmi, who began attending al-Awlaki's mosque. In January 2001, the imam moved to the Dar Al-Hijra Islamic Center in Falls Church, Va., the largest mosque in the country, and sure enough,

Alhazmi and a third hijacker, Hani Hanjour, soon followed suit. Al-Awlaki has denied knowing the men.

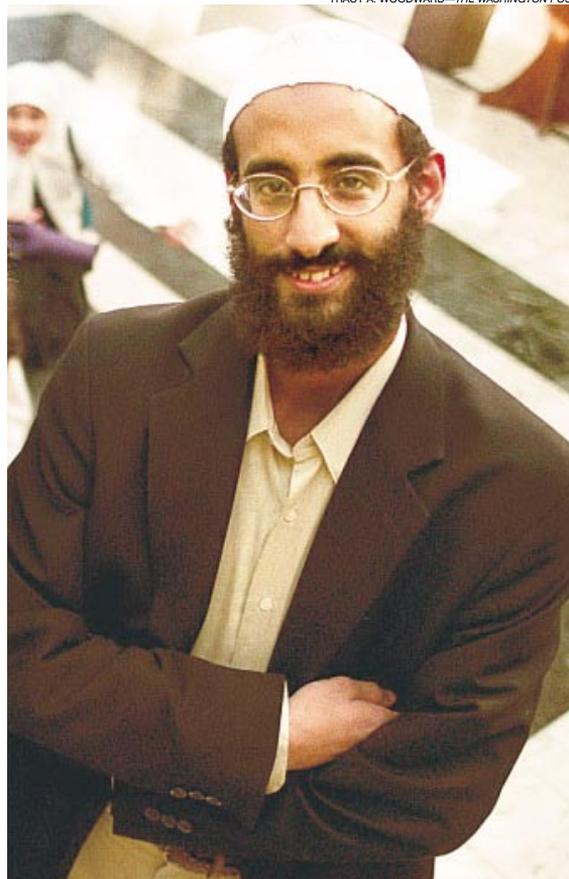
Bogus? After the attacks, German police found the mosque's phone number in the apartment of a major 9/11 co-conspirator, Ramzi Binalshibh, according to the joint inquiry. The spokesman for the Falls Church mosque, Imam Johari Abdul-Malik, did not return calls. But Randall Hamud, a San Diego defense attorney, said al-Awlaki was a "respected intellectual" and had an honest reputation among Hamud's clients.

Al-Awlaki and his followers blamed Israel for the 9/11 attacks. "There is an expectation that Muslims should apologize for something that they never did," al-Awlaki told *National Geographic* magazine in September 2001.

The probe of the 9/11 attacks soon led Washington FBI agents back to San Diego, where they found that al-Awlaki

had twice been busted for soliciting prostitutes in 1996 and 1997 but had avoided jail time. Al-Awlaki has previously described these charges as "bogus." But FBI agents hoped al-Awlaki might cooperate with the 9/11 probe if they could nab him on similar charges in Virginia. FBI sources say agents observed the imam allegedly taking Washington-area prostitutes into Virginia and contemplated using a federal statute usually reserved for nabbing pimps who transport prostitutes across state lines. But in March 2002, al-Awlaki abruptly left the country for Yemen. "When he left town, it was as if the air went out of the balloon," says one FBI source. Al-Awlaki briefly returned to the United States in October 2002, but federal authorities did not have sufficient cause to detain him, even though his name popped up on a terrorist "lookout" database. Now he's back in the Middle East, where FBI agents are said to be keeping their eyes on him. ●

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IMAM. Investigators are probing possible ties to hijackers.

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