



القوات الخاصة  
المين اغلي

# UNDERCOVER MUSLIM

A JOURNEY INTO YEMEN



THEO PADNOS

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I dedicate this book to everyone who taught me about Islam, to everyone who fixed my bike when it was really broken, and everyone who gave me money when I really needed it (thanks, Mom).



# Undercover

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## Muslim

A JOURNEY INTO YEMEN



THE BODLEY HEAD  
LONDON





# Introduction

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The Yemeni American internet imam, Anwar Awlaki, came into his own in the summer of 2008. He had previously been known to a small collection of admirers mostly through cassettes and pamphlets but now, leveraging the power of the internet, his popularity grew. That summer, as wider audiences tuned in, he often wrote about reading. ‘Thrice,’ he said, he read *Hard Times*; he also read *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield* (twice). He concluded that Uriah Heep was ‘similar to some pitiful Muslim today’, that ‘the thick and boastful Mr Josiah Bounderby of Coketown was similar to George W. Bush’ and that he did not like Shakespeare: ‘Probably the only reason he became so famous is because he was English.’

In general, Awlaki felt that books written by unbelievers were a kind of weak medicine which one could administer to oneself or not, whereas books by and for Muslims affected the soul. The best literature of this kind brought the reader into proximity with God.

Such books were not to be read as, say, one might read *Hard Times*. Instead Muslims were to position themselves within the range of these books, and then to allow the power of the text to consume the reader. In describing his encounter with *In the Shade of the Koran*, a twelve-volume commentary on the Koran by Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian radical, Awlaki described what a reading experience of this order was like:

Because of the flowing style of Sayyid I would read between 100-150 pages a day. In fact I would read until my eyes got tired. My left eye would get exhausted before the right eye so I would close it with my hand and carry on reading with my right eye until it can handle it no more and would just shut down. My vision started deteriorating especially in my left eye. Was it because of too much reading, or was it because of poor lighting? Allah knows best.

For the fans who read this essay where it was originally published, at anwar-awlaki.com, Sayyid Qutb, and Dickens and Shakespeare for that matter, were beside the point. Occasionally, readers used to write in to the website to enquire if the Islamic histories and commentaries Awlaki wrote about were available in translation. Sometimes the fans asked Awlaki if Sayyid Qutb was upon the *h* (the truth) or if he had strayed from it. The great majority of Awlaki’s admirers, however, skipped over Sayyid Qutb – and the older greater philosophers the blogger wrote about – entirely.

The fans were rather interested in the writing of one person in particular: Anwar Awlaki.

‘Sheikh,’ wrote a blog fan, Abu Dharrar after Anwar had posted his *In the Shade of the Koran* review: ‘We need to know more about a scholar from whom we take these precious pearls of knowledge. Please write your biography.’

‘i was thinking,’ wrote another fan,

why not know more about the one [sheikh] we listen [to] the most. For the ones that havent met you but InshAllah we will  
If its possible:  
Your daily life?  
Your Profession?  
your hobbies if you have any?  
are you married if so do you have children?  
Imam Malik liked Bananas haha what foods do you enjoy?  
Who were your teachers?

Anwar Awlaki’s pronouncements hadn’t always generated such enthusiasm but the summer of 2008 was a turning point in his career. In the spring of that year, Yemeni police released him from eighteen months of detention in Sana’a, without a trial.

Shortly thereafter, a group of fans in England set up anwar-awlaki.com. Now for the first time in his career, the itinerant preacher was in minute-to-minute contact with a world of blog fans. He opened a Facebook page.

‘Alhamdulillah that you are online Sheikh!’ wrote an Abdallah. ‘You have benefited the Ummah greatly (already) but we want more! :)’

‘I make dua [prayer] that i meet you in person, pray behind you and learn under you,’ wrote a correspondent from Australia. He signed himself, ‘Your brother on the other side of the earth, Muhammad Hassan.’

‘Every person that I have come across who has already listened to the talk of Imam Anwar,’ wrote another admirer, ‘would like to be close to him and ask more questions or learn more about Islam. Is this not a spirit of Muslim brotherhood?’

That summer, as Anwar wrote about his reading, his eating habits in prison, and the advisability of Muslims playing guitar (not advisable) the level of fan admiration kept ratcheting upwards. The fans wrote in to say that they loved their ‘beloved brother, Sheikh Anwar’, that they missed him, needed immediate advice and were wondering why he wrote private emails so rarely.

Others, fearing that Yemeni and American intelligence officials might harm Awlaki, wrote to supply spiritual support: 'Fear y not!' assured one fan, Muslimah314, quoting from the Koran, 'we are your protectors in this life and in the hereafter. Therein shall have all that ye desire.'

Many of these fans had resigned themselves to lives in the West. They spoke of settled families and commitments. But many other fans were not tied down at all; instead they were in a mood to travel. On 14 July, jihad4life wrote with a query about travel study:

Asalam alikum brother Anwar

Since you live in Yemen. I was wondering if you can tell me if Yemen is [a] good place to seek knowledge.

Other fans like this one, Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum, were more direct:

Dear Shaykh ... I have a very short question and that is; Do you accept students in Jemen? Please answer it dear shaykh, as it is very important for me.

Over time during the summer of 2008, anwar-awlaki.com became an unsettling place to hang out online. The site, which has since been removed from the internet, plied its visitors with news of upcoming Paltalk lectures and links to lectures already delivered. The speeches themselves were learned but often wool-gathered or quoted at too conspicuous length from the scriptures, or combining these oratorical flaws somehow into fifty-megabyte blocks of speechifying. Nevertheless the ardour of the fans knew no bounds. There they were on page after page of anwar-awlaki.com, down in the comments section, declaring themselves prepared to do 'whatever you think best', 'to study with you one day as well as join you on any front', and to 'go and study overseas inshaAllah'. Many of the fans said they couldn't speak Arabic. Many others were still having issues with English. Now, it seemed, they were ready to pick up sticks, to move to Yemen, and to plunge into the study of the early medieval Arabic in which the Koran was written.

It would have been entirely reasonable for an outsider, happening by for the first time, to wonder: *what on earth is going on here?*

Because I was imprisoned in Yemen myself, and because, in other respects, I have followed Awlaki's footsteps – the travel to Yemen, the settling into a mosque there, the years of Koranic study – the atmosphere at Awlaki's website has always been a relatively familiar thing to me. Though I never recognised any of the fans personally, I've studied with this demographic for years, in Yemen and Syria, and by now I know enough about its enthusiasms to know that the excitement has almost nothing to do with Awlaki's preaching and still less to do with his writing. Awlaki's extraordinary accomplishment is his life.

It's no less extraordinary for its familiar opening chapters. Awlaki's story begins where the stories of his fans begin: in suburban tranquillity in the West. In his case, it was Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the heart of a middle-class family, the elder generation of which had recently arrived from Yemen. For Awlaki, there was normal schooling in America followed by a standard university degree (BS Civil Engineering, Colorado State, 1994). Later, there was an abandoned attempt at an advanced degree (Human Resource Development, George Washington University, 2001— ) and a period of drifting between his parents' homeland and American Muslim communities in San Diego and Falls Church, Virginia.

The story picks up momentum after 2001 when 'a climate of fear and oppression' (the phrase belongs to a fellow imam in Falls Church) caused him to flee, first to London, and from there to Yemen.

In Yemen, Awlaki returned to his parents' native village, an ancient incense capital, now called Shabwa. He established a household here with a local wife, and a string of children.

It's worth pausing at this point in the story to mention an important sub-theme in Awlaki's blog and lectures: the slight but unbelievable piety and silence with which he discusses women. As an American imam, Awlaki was arrested for soliciting prostitutes three times, twice in San Diego and once in Virginia.

Many of the young Westerners who've been turning up in Yemen over the past ten years have also left behind a history of troubled – in some cases anguished – relations with women. Many of them have likewise arrived in Yemen with visions of a local bride – the deep, submissive eyes, the black clothing – dancing in their heads. Some of these young men marry once. Many marry several women.

Awlaki doesn't allow a trace of his former ambivalence to enter his blog. Where women are mentioned – and they are mentioned much – a spirit of paternal protectiveness hovers over the writing. He is magnanimous. He is wise. The women are grateful and dignified but much too modest to speak.

One reads a lot about this particular model of male–female togetherness in the Koran and in the record of the Prophet Muhammad's deeds and sayings, the hadith. Since women scarcely speak in public in Yemen and rarely reveal details of their domestic lives to anyone under any circumstances, it would be difficult to maintain that such harmony doesn't exist. Perhaps it does. Perhaps in Yemen it is widespread. In any case, to the young men who read Awlaki's blog in the partner-swapping suburbs of the West, the Yemeni model presents a fantasy of love and stability. Sex may be out of control in the West, Awlaki's blog hinted, but out here in Yemen it is not. On the contrary, in a believing society, all is domestic harmony and fruitfulness in the desert.

Awlaki's domestic harmony was interrupted in August 2006, when the Yemeni government arrested him as he was trying

mediate a tribal dispute. It's unlikely that he was doing anything criminal. He was never charged. Still, the local authorities have never looked kindly on self-styled Americo-Yemeni religious figures who turn up in Yemen, particularly when they meddle in local affairs. He was sent off to a basement cell in the political security prison in Sana'a.

For the young sheikh with the international blog audience, the prison spell was a gift from Allah. It bound him much more tightly to his fans and generated writing that is by far his greatest accomplishment as a preacher. It's much better than anything he has done before or since:

I was in an underground solitary cell made up of four concrete walls, with an iron gate on one side and on the opposite side a small window - rather a hole - covered with iron mesh to allow for some fresh air to come in ... Then there was the roof with a light bulb hanging from it which was on continuously day and night. Then the floor with a mattress 2-3 inches thick, a blanket, a worn off pillow, a plastic plate, a bottle for water ...

And then there was a Quran. In this environment there is nothing to do and nothing to read but the Quran, and that is when the Quran reveals its secrets. When the hearts are clean; when there is nothing clouding the spirit, the Quran literally overwhelms the heart.

This is Awlaki at his best. The writing works because it discovers the oldest, most heroic Islamic themes - the striving towards virtue, the transcendence of one's oppressors, the communion with the Koran, the cleanliness of the heart - in a crappy Yemeni jail cell.

The fans in cyberspace responded predictably: 'Subhanallah! - With tears I read the last few lines of your post,' wrote Naeem from ... he doesn't say where. 'Allahu akbar!' exclaimed Muhammad Hassan from Australia.

Zachir (from America?) was also impressed but drew a conclusion that Awlaki probably did not intend: 'Maybe I should go to Prison, coz whenever I read the Quran it dont hit me as it used to, my heart has gone too hard.'

This of course is the real source of Awlaki's power and it has nothing to do with his theology or his fluency in Arabic (or English for that matter), as some of the terrorism experts seem to believe. Awlaki has had a deeper experience of the Koran than most of the other young men, and he's had it in Arabic, and he's had it under extreme conditions. In short, he has taken a voyage of the spirit, as all heroes must.

His was as classical as any: when his conventional schooling had run its course, he left home. Finding himself on the far side of the earth, in a land both dangerous and magical, he faced his enemies. The battle in which he then engaged was a physical one that had a powerful spiritual dimension. It purified his soul, and opened up the mysteries of the sacred writings to him. The ordeal, several of his fans pointed out on the website, could well have killed him. But instead because he relied on his faith in God - never wavering, never losing an iota of dignity - his inner powers were strengthened.

Luke Skywalker has lived out a similar tale, as did Jesus, Jason of the Argonauts, Joseph and the other figures discussed in Joseph Campbell's study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* - including, by the way, the Prophet Muhammad. In Awlaki's case, the story is true. He lived it, and wrote it up himself, day by day, and published it on his blog.

To paraphrase another spiritual voyager, Walt Whitman, there is miracle enough in this to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Nowadays, young Muslims are unlikely to invoke the myth of the hero when they speak of leaving the West. They're likely to say, 'In my religion, I'm required to seek beneficial knowledge. It happens to be in Yemen', or simply, 'I left England because the country is spiritually dead.' Nevertheless, the Awlaki model, his voyage to the Koran, is the dream that hovers over the lives of ambitious young Muslims in the West.

One of Awlaki's most popular internet lectures is called 'Allah is Preparing us for Victory'. If I were one of the investigators charged with discovering how middle-class kids are turning into terrorists, I would pay special attention to this theme - the triumph to come on anwar-awlaki.com. Better yet, I would spend a few hours people-watching in one of the mosques in Yemen where foreign students are welcomed. To do so is to undergo a speedy but deep education in what victory means to this particular class of young men.

These are not the lucky golden children of life. Not one of them has the winning good looks of the star athlete on the football team; not one of them knows how to charm a room with his smile. Many have the mousy air of people who've been overlooked in life. Which doesn't mean they intend to renounce popularity. They do want it. Most of all, they want women.

Islam in Yemen makes a promise to these - and to all - young male believers. The *ummah*, the global family of believers, will smooth away problems concerning the female sex, it says. We will bring you your helpmeet, it promises. She will have been raised on the Koran. She will love you for your Islamic learning, and for your dedication to the *deen*, or religion.

Westerners who come to Yemen in search of brides believe this - and with good reason. Many of their older friends have asked the local imam for a wife, have paid the bride price, have gone through an Islamically proper engagement, and have married. The bride is now the property of the groom. He will decide if she will study, or work outside the home - and where and when and with whom. It has always been thus in Yemen.

Often, these arrangements work. Anyway, when you bring up the subject of marriage with young men in the mosque, the unions they discuss certainly seem promising. There is trust. There is a religious law. There is the backing of the community and 1,400 years of local tradition supporting the couple. Now the young men can stop worrying about how to get along with women. What does this species really want? No one in Yemen asks this question. The sheikhs and the students already know: they want to become mothers in pious, Koran-reading families.

To have reached this level of certainty is in itself a major victory for many young men. With proper prayer, say the mosque

authorities, there will be other, greater victories to come.

No verse in the Koran reinforces this teaching as well as the Sura An Nasr (Chapter of Victory), which is thought to have been delivered to the Prophet hours before his death, when his thoughts were on his imminent ascension. Every student of Islam in Yemen who doesn't know this vaguely eschatological sura will memorise it in his first days in the country, not because it is a creed, but because it is simple and beautiful:

When the assistance of God shall come and the victory;  
And thou shalt see the people enter into the religion of God by troops:  
Celebrate the praise of thy lord and ask pardon of Him;  
For He is inclined to forgive.

The excitement surrounding Anwar Awlaki's release from prison eventually died down, but he returned to prominence in a much bigger way towards the end of 2009. On 5 November, Nidal Hassan, a sometime email correspondent of Awlaki's who lives alone in a rented flat near Killeen, Texas, murdered thirteen US soldiers at the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood. Two days later a notice of approval appeared on Awlaki's blog.

Nidal is a hero, Awlaki wrote.

He opened fire on soldiers who were on their way to be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan ... How can there be any dispute about the virtue of what he has done? ... May Allah grant our brother Nidal patience, perseverance, and steadfastness, and we ask Allah to accept from him his great heroic act. Ameen.

US officials have since said that Awlaki had no direct 'operational' role in the Fort Hood attack. He was, however, in contact with Hassan via email, and this correspondence, it seems, was enough.

Three weeks after the attack, American counter-terrorism strategists were huddling in the White House, where, according to WikiLeaks documents, they were devising a strategy, approved by the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, to launch missiles at Awlaki's house in the Yemeni village of Shabwa.

The rest of the story is familiar enough. A twenty-three-year-old Nigerian blog fan, Umar Abdul Mutallab, had been having depression issues of his own. When he was living in London in 2005, he used to fantasise that jihad would deliver him from his problems: 'all right I wont go into too much detail about my fantasies,' he wrote to the Islamic Forum website, 'but basically they are jihad fantasies. I imagine how the great jihad will take place, how the muslims will win, and, inshallaha, rule the world, and establish the greatest empire once again!!!'

This happiness, however, seems to have given way to moments of acute self-doubt. Clearly he hoped that someone would rescue him from the emptiness. What else could he have meant when he posted this message, also in 2005, to the same chat room? 'I am in a situation where i do not have a friend, i have no one to speak too, no one to consult, no one to support me and i feel depressed and lonely. i do not know what to do?'

By the autumn of 2009, Mutallab had found his way to Yemen. At first he studied in the capital, Sana'a, but he disappeared in September. He probably made his way into the Yemeni mountains which is where all the most dedicated voyagers of the spirit eventually go. He seems to have established contact with Awlaki at some point though where and when we do not know.

In any case, Mutallab was soon sending startling text messages back to his father in Nigeria. According to a cousin who saw them, they said that in Yemen, Mutallab 'had found a new religion, the real Islam'. Another text, whose contents have appeared in the press, said: 'Please forgive me. I will no longer be in touch with you.'

To me, these sound like the words of a young man in the throes of religious excitement. He's discovered a new religion. The new religion has given him a new family. He can now tell his oldest adversaries (so often, it seems, this person is Dad) to fuck off.

Young men who begin to feel these sensations in Yemen can easily find themselves in a dangerous spot. If they have suffered from depression in the past, and have access to weaponry now, anything can happen.

The first strike landed on the village of al-Majalah, 300 kilometres to the east of Sana'a on 17 December 2009. The Yemeni government later said that it killed twelve villagers. The second one, which targeted Awlaki's house and killed about twenty people, occurred on 24 December. Awlaki was not in the vicinity.

It's not clear that the strikes advanced any of the US military's strategic goals but they did provide Awlaki's fans with exactly those ingredients required for a new round of spiritual excitement. A Muslim hero was once again set upon by a merciless force. What did he do wrong? He was never charged and no evidence against him was brought forth. Nevertheless, innocent Muslims were killed. Awlaki himself emerged without a scratch, which is exactly what one would expect of a spiritual hero. One would also expect him to take revenge.

Within twenty-four hours of the second strike, Mutallab turned up in Amsterdam with a ticket, paid for in cash, for Northwest Airlines Flight 253 to Detroit. He was wearing his explosive-lined underpants and carrying a cigarette lighter. I suspect he was in a pleasant, victorious frame of mind.

I happened to be in Aleppo, Syria, when these events occurred but my thoughts were focused on Yemen. In the back of my mind, I had known that my hitherto self-contained world of religious students in Yemen, Islamic study, and anwar-awlaki.com would

one day turn up on the front pages of the world's newspapers. Now it was happening, more or less as I feared it would, with instant analysis on CNN, statements from the White House, and reporters doing live stand-ups from the terrace of the Mövenpick hotel in Sana'a.

One thing I didn't anticipate: I would begin to worry myself. I did worry, however, because I could see that neither the reporters nor the Western intelligence authorities had any idea how many Western kids were studying in Yemen. I could see that they didn't know much about what these students were learning, how long they stayed in Yemen, how they changed over the years, and what might make them go, as the specialists say, 'operational'.

I also fretted for this reason: I knew the teachers and students with whom I had lived in Yemen were against book writing. I knew my account of my experience in Yemen would seem to them, a priori, the account of an enemy of Islam, a spy-apostate. The people knew me well. Now it seemed clear that if I were to publish my book, they reserved the option to take revenge in any of a variety of unfathomable ways.

Of course, they don't read secular books, I told myself. A voice in my head replied: This isn't necessarily good.

At the time, in January 2010, there was no immediate need to worry about the situation. I went to Russia to think things over.

One of the best things about getting to know the Western religious students in Yemen is that eventually they will tell you the story of their travels. Sometimes, it's boredom that makes the young people light out for the territory ahead and sometimes it's a spur of the moment decision, made in a mosque, or in front of a computer, or during a late night rap session. Once the students arrive in the Arab world, however, the narratives coalesce. Everyone lives through the same stages of the same voyage, more or less, and so everyone tells a similar story.

The tale below, which follows the conventional pattern, was posted by an Abu Suleyman to a popular internet forum in 2008. It describes the experience of a family of Muslims from Sweden at large in Egypt: 'Our childrens ages are 10, 8, 6 yrs old,' wrote Abu Suleyman (in English):

We have almost lost hope in this country and thinking of going to Yemen. Anyone who could give us naseeha [advice] in this regard, Yemen vs Egypt with regard to being able to raise God fearing children!!! That is, a good islamic environment for children to be in.

Sometimes you feel that you made hijrah [immigration] from dar ul Kufr [domain of unbelievers] and all the bad things there but here in Egypt you found liars, muslims are using drugs in the streets, most of the people are very far away from the religion they are even going to graves to worship, superstition, uttering things of kufr and so on.

In some versions of this tale, the narrators locate the site of Arab dissolution in an unhappy city or neighbourhood within Yemen. Often the young men travel alone, and often they have in mind proper Islamic schools for themselves rather than for their kids. The basic pattern of the story, however, does not change: it is always a quest narrative whose object is a wiser, ancient, truly Islamic place. Perhaps it will be a village or a region or an entire society – anyway, Muslims will practise their religion proudly there, in peace, as one. The action of the story gets under way in Mansoura or Cairo, or Damascus or wherever the seekers happen to align. Here they discover that the business tycoons who rule Middle Eastern countries revere Islamic law even less than Western governments do. Nor do the tycoons have any special fondness for secular, civil law. Students are thrown in jail at the drop of a hat without even the pretence of an accusation.

Meanwhile, the travellers wander around their new neighbourhoods. They usually live in low-rent districts since they will not be living, for an indefinite period, off their savings. The Prophet counselled careful husbandry in all financial matters. So they rent cheap apartments in cheap areas and thus discover, right away, the social problems of the Arab street – the unemployment, the aimless young men, the boredom that afflicts them, their jealousy of the ruling class, their incomplete education, their longing to flee. Many of these young Arabs turn to petty crime, hashish and alcohol.

Is this what Islam has come to? wonder the Abu Suleimans of the world. The local religious authorities nod their heads.

Don't take your children into the public schools at all, they say. Stay away from the official, state-run mosques, since they've all been taken over by government agents. Perhaps you should consider going back home, say the religious teachers. Is there more freedom there?

Eventually of course the students find what they're looking for: in Yemen it's not so hard to find villages dominated by the face of God, in which every citizen lives under the law spelt out in the ancient texts.

The communities where this kind of Islam is still alive are almost always far away – up in the mountains or by the edge of the desert or in some rarely visited but storied village like Tarim or Dammaj in Yemen; anyway, they are in places not frequented by reporters or embassy officials or unbelievers of any kind. It's often dangerous to get to them, and the trip almost always involves secret drivers, disregarded roads, and several vehicle changes.

They are always in spectacular, Koran-redolent settings, in other words, but they are always, also, troubled.

Many of the Western students and not a few of the Middle Eastern ones have been in jail in the past or close to it. Many of the Westerners have had attention deficit disorder problems or depression or drug issues or all of these things. Now they've fled their native countries, and have given themselves new Islamic names. The night-time prayers are playing with their sleep rhythms, and the new clothing, the new friends and the new language are playing with the very nature of personal identity.

Add to this a further interesting factor: personal identity is not built from the same components in the Arab world as it is in the

West. Among Muslims, especially in Yemen, you are who you pray with; that circle of beings with whom you break your fast, memorise the Koran, and travel around the countryside is you in a way no concept of the self in Western life comprehends. Whenever this collectivity is threatened, it is as if the organs of the self (in the Western sense) are threatened. Action must be taken.

In response to this new world, almost all students, at least at first, go through a period of depression – although they are surrounded by friends, although they are living in the cradle of Islam, although they are doing what they always dreamed of doing.

When they emerge from their dark moods, the students are transformed. Now, at last, they are surrounded by friends and family. Here is Islam as it should be: the orderly, barefoot rows of believers, every forehead glistening, everyone equal before God, every prayer spoken as if it emanated from a single body.

When I was in Russia recently the atmosphere of the religious schools I had attended in Yemen and Syria came back to me. This education had given me a healthy disregard for material things, to say nothing of a solid understanding of the Koran, but even when I was memorising, I knew that this education had a harmful side. In two and a half years of study, I had attended three schools and had visited friends in several more. Without exception, these academies taught that evolution is a fable, that Islam is the wisest solution for life's problems and that the Hebrew bible is a fraud, forced on the world's Jewish population by elders who wish to hijack references to Muhammad. In none of these academies were students asked to read widely. In no schools were students directed to use their reading to construct a modern, self-supporting, nuanced system of ethics. In religious schools in the Middle East if you do not know what to do, you ask the sheikh. He has memorised much more than you. He knows what the Prophet would do and understands the Golden Time of Islam. Whatever the problem is, the sheikh, not the student, knows the answer.

As I walked around in the mountains of southern Russia, it also occurred to me that Anwar Awlaki's internet presence has, over the years, made him the owner of an important topic: young people's personal transformations through Islam. He speaks about this more persuasively, and more frequently, than anyone. Why should he, I thought, have this field to himself?

In a notebook, I drew up a CV for a rival teacher of Islam. Such a person, I thought, ought to begin as Awlaki had begun: he ought to leave the US for Yemen. *Al fiqh Yemeni, al iman Yemeni*. (Faith is of the Yemen; jurisprudence is of the Yemen.) So the Prophet is reported to have said when he stood on a bluff in Medina, looking south. Muslims often take this hadith to mean that the essential Islamic properties inhere in the Yemeni landscape itself. It's an interesting idea, and it's made an impact in the housing developments and first floor walk-up mosques of the West.

Once the teacher-to-be gets to Yemen, it hardly matters which school he chooses or which strain of Islam he apprentices himself to. If he's memorising the Koran, learning to speak the classical Arabic in which scholarly discourse is conducted, performing every one of the prayers, hewing close to that which is enjoined and avoiding that which is prohibited, he is on the path of God.

Perhaps, during his travels, he'll be arrested somewhere out on the highway; perhaps he'll spend some time in jail. I did. If he is arrested the resulting jail time will contribute to his education rather than delay it – but prison is not indispensable because sooner or later every religious student in Yemen will be persecuted by some government agency. Usually the experience will teach the student to stay as far away from official places and people as possible.

Above all, if you want to have authority with young Muslims from the West these days, you must not look for the easy way out. If you got your degree in Islam in a two-year programme at a university with a campus and quadrangle cafes, it will be meaningless – for you and for whatever audience you'd like to address. If you lived in a decrepit, overcrowded neighbourhood in Sana'a, owning a Koran and a bike and not much else, and did this in winter and summer, over and over through your thirties, you might be on to something.

What I want to say to the population of young men who educate themselves in this way, or would like to do so, is contained in the pages of this book. I address these questions: what happens when a well-meaning, curious, adventure-friendly Westerner enrolls in a religious academy in Yemen? What happens as the years pass? Also: what is beautiful about an education in Islam these days and what is sick?

Your target audience will not read your book, my book-reading friends in the West tell me. Fine, I reply. I'll find that audience on YouTube, as Awlaki did, on Facebook and via Paltalk. Your former schoolmates and teachers will be angry with you, says my knowledge of their behaviour. Fine. I will do these people the courtesy of writing for them and to them. I will speak directly, not as an academic or a journalist or an expert of any kind but as someone with a story to tell.











# THE ROAD TO DAMMAJ

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THE RULE CONCERNING who may study at the most famous Salafi academy in Yemen is as follows: anyone on earth of any stripe or kind or age is welcome. In theory, women should be accompanied by a guardian but this convention doesn't have the status of law and anyway isn't enforced.

You have to say that you believe Allah to be the one and only God, and that you believe Muhammad to be his prophet. After this the success of the student depends entirely on how well he warms to what's happening around him: does he like memorising? If so, he can go far. Can he learn Arabic quickly? If so, he's likely to make friends quickly. Does he have a talent for fasting? Is his body changing as the fasts go on? The kids who pray so well that they grow little clots of hardened flesh on their foreheads, a sign of piety not just to one's teachers but also to the guardians at heaven's gate, are usually well loved in Yemen. But these bumps grow naturally. Everyone who sticks around long enough has one. Most students enjoy seeing these rashes emerge, and thus pray more, which leads to smiles from their teachers, and admiring glances from fellow students.

Once this feedback loop kicks in, anything in Islam is possible, especially in Yemen. In my case, the feedback loop had always run smoothly. Still, eight months into my life as a Muslim, all was well. I was memorising Koran every day, doing the five prayers and making friends. I knew I was going to go deeper in, and was vaguely frightened by the prospect, but like the others around me, I felt I was learning things about Islam I could never learn elsewhere. Islam was changing me.

I didn't want to stop this from happening. On the contrary I wanted to see what would develop if I kept on going to my classes and kept on praying and memorising and fasting.

So in the morning, when I'd finished my prayers, I used to lie in my bed, daydreaming and wondering about my future. One course one day the call I'd been waiting for came.

It was Ramadan of 1427, year of the Hejira, or 2006 in the Gregorian calendar. A Nigerian brother, Abdul Gorfa, was knocking on my dorm room door. 'Thabit,' he whispered. 'Driver here! Driver waiting. Hurry!'

I sat up in my bed. A stream of multicoloured light was falling across my prayer rug, my sandals, and an English-Arabic Koran I had been given on the street.

'Thabit? Sleeping? No, please. Rush!'

When foreign religious students set out for Dammaj, they try to slip out of Sana'a in the early morning dusk, as the citizens of the nation sleep. If they don't, the police force will awaken, man the checkpoints on the highways, and peer into the recesses of taxis and vans. They might ask for ID cards and passports.

The students, therefore, have to hurry.

Being a reader of American newspapers, I was especially alert to a further danger. At this time, back in 1427, Rumsfeld and Cheney were still in charge of the government back home. Those two had been known to send Hellfire missiles on to people who drove along the roads we drove, worshipped in our mosques, and believed as we believed. Then there was the problem of the Shiites who were hostile to our kind of Islam; they were inclined to ambush people they didn't like. Beyond this, there were restive tribes in the back country and, so the news media said, terrorists.

Abdul Gorfa wanted to know if I had a white, Saudi-style robe he could borrow. The driver told him that his African dishdasha would raise the suspicions of people we might encounter on the highway.

I ransacked my luggage. Yes, I had something suitable. Abdul Gorfa changed in front of the ablution sink in my room, then hurried away, down a flight of stairs, through the mosque and into the street. I folded my prayer rug into a square, and fetched my toothbrush. Five minutes later I was standing in front of a van in my robe and sandals.

'Passport?' the driver asked me.

'Left it with a friend,' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Do I need it?' I asked. He shrugged again.

This would have been a good time for my nervousness to kick in. I have a tendency to worry at the outset of important voyages. On this morning, however, I wasn't anxious or uptight in any way.

It happened to be the morning after the Laylat al-Qadr, the Night of Destiny, which is a pretty holy evening in Islam. It's the anniversary of the first time the angel Gabriel brought certain special words down to Muhammad. It was the birthday of the Koran, a manner of speaking, and I was feeling lucky.

Actually, I was more than a bit surprised to be travelling into the back country at all. Though I was a fairly serious Muslim at this point, with a beard and a tiny abrasion on my forehead from the prostrations I had been doing on our mosque carpet, not even one of my fellow students had confidence in me. In fact, certain French brothers had doubted, even in front of our sheikh, the degree of my commitment. They thought I laughed in my heart at the Prophet, which I did not do, exactly, and that I underestimated the Book of Allah, which I also didn't do.

So, for eight months, they talked to this driver and that fixer and made sure that I stayed stuck in our mosque in the capital.

Being stuck, I memorised Koran. I went to my classes. I learned about the problems the *ummah* faces in this day and age, and discovered the excitement of praying with people who will solve those problems. Of course, I learned to respect my teachers. I hope they learned to respect me.

As I was taking my seat in the van, the driver stood in the street, squinting at my pinkish American face. ‘Thabit,’ he muttered. ‘That your real name?’

In Arabic, Thabit means ‘immovable’. For me, it stood for Yemeni qualities I admired – steadfastness, unshakeable faith, rectitude – and this is why I had chosen it. But Thabit was a country boy, salt-of-the-Arabian-earth sort of name. Sometimes, people smiled at me, an American from a city, when I introduced myself.

‘Thabit is my real name now,’ I said, and gave the driver a blank look.

He wondered at this information for a moment but did not smile. He shrugged his shoulders, then looked away. In Yemen, no one asks questions. You can be whoever you’d like to be.

It took the driver only seconds to strap the overflow luggage on to the roof. It took us a few more seconds to roll out of the alleyway behind the mosque. Soon, we were doing 80 miles an hour through the Ramadan dawn. Every time we came to a boulevard intersection, the driver accelerated. He was a holy man, with a long beard who said prayers as he came into the intersections. Traffic lights blinked. The Koran played on the van sound system. Sunlight streamed into his eyes.

If there had been a pedestrian or bicyclist in one of those intersections we would have mowed him down like a melon. Pedestrians don’t have many rights in Yemen. Drivers will swerve for them but they won’t brake. Our guy didn’t brake and he didn’t swerve. He too was feeling lucky, it seemed. Or anyway, guided by Allah.

We passed a few policemen right in the centre of the city, in front of a big international bank. They nodded. Were they winking? Maybe so.

We flew by Yemeni hoboes slumbering in the central reservation. We careened past little flocks of goats.

I scarcely knew my fellow passengers. The Nigerian brother, a family of Algerians from France, two American converts on a bench and in front, a young computer science student who’d come from Birmingham in England just two weeks earlier and could not speak more than three words of Arabic – that was pretty much it. The men wore checked headscarves, red for some people, white for others, robes, sandals, and in our breast pockets we carried a tiny book of occasional prayers called *The Fortress of Islam*. The woman in the van – from somewhere near Paris, like her husband – was dressed as all women in Yemen dress: black across the face, black across the head, black dress, black shoes, black gloves – black and black and black. Personally, I didn’t think she had a lot of choice when it came to colours. Maybe she would have disagreed. Her two daughters – silent, about the height of elves – also wore facial veils and black robes.

Anyone who drives north out of Sana’a probably knows that the Yemeni government has forbidden outsiders from entering the Governorate of Sa’ada in the north. An enclave of Shia has been making trouble up there for several years now and the government likes to bomb them in peace, without outsiders poking their noses into the business.

So on this morning our van was, technically speaking, taking us into illegal territory.

We didn’t care much about the Yemeni government (we cared even less about the Shia) but still, whenever we came to a government checkpoint, all but the French family wrapped their faces in their scarves. ‘Sleebing, sleebing,’ the driver called out. The van would slow. As he rolled up to the candy cane barrier with its little soldier hut and limp flag, the students would fold themselves on to the floor of the van. Limbs lay on top of limbs. Heads nestled between duffel bags: the smell of suitcases and floor sand. ‘Na’een, sleebing, sleebing,’ the driver would say again and we would press ourselves down deeper under the benches.

In this way, anyone looking into the interior of our van in a casual, rubber-stamp sort of way would have seen: a chaotic Muslim woman, face covered in Dacron, her offspring, similarly clad, and her long-bearded husband. A driver. On the rooftop, a pile of luggage. In other words: a family expedition into the countryside.

It was true in a way. Once you submit to Islam, you belong to the *ummah*. Our little branch of the *ummah* was making an excursion into the countryside, though a particular, sacred one where the Prophet of God is thought to have walked. In the physical sense our destination was an academy on the Saudi border called the Dar al-Hadith, or the House of Prophetic Tradition. In a spiritual sense we were heading backwards, through the centuries, into the golden time of Islam.



ABOUT 50 KILOMETRES outside Sana'a, an overstaffed government checkpoint loomed ahead at a rise in the land. We had no choice but to give it the slip. We dropped off the lip of the tarmac, on to a sandy path. Soon we were lost in a little sea of vineyard. Then suddenly, two little boys stepped out of the vines. Their long shadows sloped across the pavement. The van slowed. 'Which way back to the main road?' asked the driver. Simultaneously, in slow motion, they lifted their left arms. Their stillness, their white gowns, the clusters of purple grapes in the fields behind them, and the way the sun backlit their hair made them seem like visitors from the Islamic afterlife.

'Allah be with you,' the kids said.

'May he make you strong,' said the driver.

'All of us together,' said the kids. They lowered their arms by imperceptible degrees, like boys in a trance. Then they turned their eyes on us, the passengers in the back of the van, and smiled shyly as if to say: *we know where you're going. May Allah open the way!*

In previous excursions around Yemen in my earlier, secular, touristic life, the drivers I'd been with had been working for money. They had been taxi drivers and tourist company jeep excursion drivers. I'd never submitted myself to a driver working in the name of God. Things are different with the believers: easier, smoother, safer.



OUT HERE IN the vineyards, the weight of the fruit pulled the vines down on to the valley floor. Here and there, between plots of grapes stood patches of stunted corn that resembled parchment. On the fig trees, fruit hung. Millet, which looks like bulbs of cauliflower on a cornstalk, was ripe. I hadn't realised that autumn came to Arabia. But it does come. The cities have been denuded of greenery. The trees have been replaced by hideous cement towers. If you only live in the city, you don't see. If you only come to Yemen for a little while, say in the summer or winter, you also don't see. In those seasons, the landscape, even outside the cities, is the surface of a science fiction planet: red, barren, unchanging, murdered by the sun. But in the autumn – this was news to me – there was fertility. There was fruit and there were harvests.

Soon we were back out on the highway. Two crumbling twin towers of sandstone blocks rose up on the horizon, then loomed and stared at them as they floated past the windows. They were conical piles of stone, derelict and staggering into one another, like minarets or ziggurats, too destitute to attract the interest of the outside world. They cast black shadows across the grapes. Then qat fields flew past the windows, and a parentless family of children rose up out of the sunlight. Each child held a translucent bag of qat gleanings in the air. 'For sale!' said the children's eyes. Their mouths said nothing. 'For shame!' said the driver. We sailed by. The entire nation was addicted to qat, a leafy plant similar in effect to amphetamines. But the sheikhs of Islam had forbidden it.

'What are these people doing to themselves?' Abdul Gorfa wondered. 'Why?'

'For shame,' the driver said again.

We sped on, into the north. We slowed for further checkpoints but only as a formality and when the guards were sleeping, they sometimes were, we really didn't slow.

To have slipped through the security cordon around Sana'a so easily was a surprise to me. The president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, doesn't want rural extremists traipsing into the city to blow up embassies. Nor does he want foreign religious enthusiasts falling into the hands of zealots in the countryside. The checkpoints outside the capital are thus, in principle, well staffed. But the president doesn't personally control the checkpoints. Really, he has no idea what's happening on his roads. Or perhaps he does, and doesn't care.

Of course, it matters not a whit what the president of Yemen cares about. In Yemen, the Prophet is just a little bigger than the president. Soldiers on the highway almost always defer to people who love his messenger.

Anyway, the soldiers know what's going on. They know that a sheikh up in the Yemeni highlands has taken over a village and that under his guidance the village is bringing the ways of the Prophet back to life: the ancient justice system, the scholarship, the love of recitation, the harmony between man and wife, the terror in front of God. It's all coming back.

When news like this appears on the internet, Western kids who feel strongly enough will eventually find their way into the highlands. I did.

So one morning the travellers will be woken in their bedrooms. A tape of the Koran will be playing in a van outside. As they sail through the countryside, as the military men wave at them, they're likely to feel the strength that comes to travellers on the Path of Allah. It's a personal dignity, a sense of proximity to holy places, holy people, and it is a command of the landscape.

But these young men – and the occasional women who come along with them – are now in a strange situation.

Belief in Allah is under threat in Yemen. Islam is far from dead but it isn't the force it once was in this pious country and everyday Western commercial culture and Western science conquer it a little more.

With the religion under threat, instability has spread across the land.

In Yemen's north, where Shia and Sunni have often been at one another's throats, the society has descended into something close to permanent warfare. There are suicide bombers in the mosques, attacks on government buildings, and Shia takeovers of remote villages. Most of the Jews who once lived in the region have been displaced or murdered.

Even if the young men in the van have brought maps with them, which none of them will have done, the maps are not likely to show what is happening here in the heart of Islam. Who is in danger? Who controls what? Why does a sheikh in a tiny village in the middle of the war zone welcome Western Muslims?

The internet will have had nothing to say about these topics. When it comes to Dammaj, the Muslim chat rooms and the popular websites usually say that the purest of the pure still hold sway in Yemen's north. 'Voyage should be made and Knowledge should be sought in Dammaj,' says [Salafitalk.net](http://Salafitalk.net). 'It is a lighthouse from all the lighthouses in the world.'

So as the van rolls northward, the young men are likely to feel that they are leaving the virtual reality of the web for a true, 3D real-time Islamic utopia. Many of them will have been waiting for years for this crossing over to occur. It's an exciting moment. Now it is at hand.



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