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For Conservative Muslims, Goal of Isolation a Challenge

9/11 Put Strict Adherents on the Defensive

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Twelve girls sat in rows at the front of the community room in Silver Spring's Muslim Community Center, calming their nerves with giggles and girl talk. In their sweaty hands, they held prepared speeches. On their heads, they wore scarves in a rainbow of colors: pink, brown, gold, white and lavender.

The seventh- and eighth-graders were competing in a debate on this question: Is a segregated, all-Islamic upbringing key to protecting your Muslim identity?

Eight of the dozen argued yes, using variants of the theme offered by Fatimah Waseem. Young Muslims "join with the non-Muslims, copy them and look up to them. This is hurting our identity. . . . Sometimes, we turn way from Islam," she said. "In conclusion, . . . we cannot sway in the wind and become weak. We need to be protected . . . by segregation."

"*Takbeer!*" shouted some in the audience of proud, clapping parents as each girl concluded her case. "Let us praise God!"

Like Fatimah, most of the debaters attend Al-Huda School in College Park. It is run by Dar-us-Salaam, one of the Washington area's most conservative Muslim congregations. Many of its members believe that, in order to be true to their faith, they should live apart from secular society as much as possible. The congregation's Web site describes how it hopes one day to become a self-contained Islamic community.

The kind of Islam practiced at Dar-us-Salaam, known as Salafism, once had a significant foothold among area Muslims, in large part because of an aggressive missionary effort by the government of Saudi Arabia. Salafism and its strict Saudi version, known as Wahhabism, struck a chord with many Muslim immigrants who took a dim view of the United States' sexually saturated pop culture and who were ambivalent about participating in a secular political system. It was also attractive to young Muslims searching for a more "authentic" Islam than what their Westernized immigrant parents offered.

But the discovery that 15 of the 19 Sept. 11, 2001, hijackers were Saudi and that their violent al-Qaeda ideology was rooted in Wahhabism had a particularly deep impact on Salafis, whose theology and practices were suddenly suspect.

The attacks "shook the foundations of anyone affiliated with Wahhabism or Salafism," said Chris Khalil Moore, 31, of Annandale, a convert who became immersed in Wahhabism while studying in Saudi Arabia before abandoning that approach to Islam. "Because they were fingered, pointed at, as being the ideology that helped foster the mentality of those hijackers," he said, "I think a lot of people got scared."

One of the area's most prominent Salafi preachers, Ali al-Timimi, is in prison, convicted on charges that he incited young Muslims to wage war against the United States. Dar al-Arqam Islamic Center in Falls Church, where he preached, is now closed. The Saudi government's proselytizing campaign has also been rolled up. Its preachers were sent home, and a Saudi-run institute in Fairfax that taught a strict Salafi outlook no longer has any students.

Moderate Muslims have become more vocal in warning about the dangers of separatism and fundamentalism while policing rhetoric that could be construed as radical or extremist. In particular, they increasingly take exception to the sharp divide between Muslims and non-Muslims drawn by some Salafis, saying it can encourage intolerance and violence.

The sense of beleaguerment among many Muslims in the Washington area is particularly strong among Salafis. "In the past, people would say, 'I'm Salafi.' Now, I never encounter people who say that," District resident and Muslim activist Svend White said. "It's a combination of fear, anxiety and a real change in the community."

Seeking 'Pure' Islam

Taken broadly, practicing Salafism means imitating the ways the prophet Muhammad and his companions in the 7th century practiced their faith, from their clothing to the spiritual principles that guided them. Salafism also stresses a return to fundamentals in pursuit of "pure" or "authentic" Islam.

Wahhabism is an ultra-conservative brand of Salafism that emerged in Saudi Arabia. Its strictest adherents read Islamic scriptures literally, reject centuries of Islamic legal scholarship as unnecessary "innovation" and regard many Western values as un-Islamic. They also regard Jews, Christians and non-Wahhabi Muslims as "unbelievers" who should be avoided.

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"Salafis are the fundamentalists of the Muslim world," said Ihsan Bagby, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Kentucky. "Just as Christian fundamentalists are focused on who's going to heaven and hell, who's the true believer and who's the nonbeliever," Salafis "are really focused on belief. . . . For the most part, they are apolitical."

Polling by Bagby found that about 8 percent of worshipers at U.S. mosques favor a Salafi approach. But although Salafi Muslims are more isolated now, some scholars say their approach to Islam could become more appealing in response to increasingly negative views of Muslims among Americans and vitriolic Islam-bashing on the Internet.

"Salafi teachings begin to be more attractive to more Muslims as a defensive response," said Peter Mandaville, an assistant professor in George Mason University's Public and International Affairs Department. "In the face of this new global war on Islam, they are saying, we will hold fast and emphasize anew the fundamental tenets of our faith."

Safi Khan, Dar-us-Salaam's imam, declined requests to discuss the mosque or his theological beliefs, and Minhaj Hasan, a spokesman for the mosque, said its officials had decided not to talk to Washington Post reporters.

But other Salafis have tried to allay fears that their brand of Islam fosters extremism.

Salafi Society D.C., a group of mostly African American Muslims who worship in an unadorned white brick building in Northeast Washington, has a prominent disclaimer on its Web site stating that "we are free from . . . car bombings, highjackings [sic], suicide killings, and all forms of terrorism."

Nihad Awad, executive director of the D.C.-based Council on American-Islamic Relations, said Salafis increasingly are prepared to participate in the U.S. political system instead of shunning it. "I have been invited [by Muslims] to talk about election strategy, whereas I would not have been invited before," he said.

Yasir Qadhi, a lecturer with AlMaghrib Institute, an Islamic educational organization founded by a former prayer leader at Dar-us-Salaam, cited his own experience as an example of how Salafism has adapted in the United States.

Qadhi, who was born in Houston and graduated from Saudi Arabia's Islamic University of Medina, is getting his doctorate in Islamic studies at Yale University -- a sign, he said, of how second-generation Muslims are adapting. "It's unprecedented that a Salafi is doing a graduate degree at an Ivy League school," said Qadhi, 31. "Our forebears would see that as anathema."

In the past, Qadhi said, Salafis debated whether Muslims should even live in the United States. "For me, that question is so utterly ridiculous," he said. "Where do you want us to go?"

The Saudi Campaign

Nabil Samman's urgent voice filled the prayer rooms -- one for men, one for women -- at the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America on a recent Friday afternoon. The white-bearded, Jerusalem-born prayer leader was giving a *khutba*, or sermon, about the perils of not properly supervising Muslim girls.

Parents should be concerned if "girls start wearing makeup or waiting after school," he said. "Girls who have secret affairs hide things from their parents."

The midday prayer service over, scores of Muslim men poured out of the sprawling two-story brick building opposite a sandlot on Hilltop Road in Fairfax. Heading for their cars, they passed a bearded youth hawking materials about Islam at a folding table. Grabbing a handful of DVDs, he yelled, "Take one and share it with a non-Muslim!"

As *khutbas* go, Samman's was fairly typical, a man identifying himself only as Ahmed stressed to a visitor. "Now," he said, "the sermon here is no politics, nothing controversial, only talk about good morals, good behavior. We don't associate ourselves with any sect or any group."

These days, the institute is open only for Friday prayers, which draw as many as 800 worshipers. But from the time it opened in 1989 as a satellite campus of a Saudi religious university in the capital Riyadh until it was closed in January, it was a key element in the Saudi campaign to spread Wahhabi Islam, an effort intended to counter radical Shiite Islam coming out of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The Saudi Embassy's Islamic Affairs Department, which at its peak in the late 1980s had an annual budget of \$8 million and 35 to 40 staff members -- many of them with diplomatic visas -- ran the campaign. Across the country, they built mosques, distributed Korans and brought in foreign imams to lead congregations.

For many years, the Saudis distributed a widely used English edition of the Koran with commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. But in the late 1990s, they began giving out a new edition called "The Noble Koran," with commentary that reflected the Wahhabi outlook of two scholars at the University of Medina.

Many local Muslims were particularly embarrassed by commentary that disparaged Jews and Christians even though neither group is mentioned in the original Arabic. "The outcry was so great. . . . People were disgusted," said Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, head of Bethesda's Minaret of Freedom Institute, an Islamic think tank. "And it wasn't just liberals. I couldn't find an American Muslim who had anything

good to say about that edition. I would call it a Wahhabi Koran."

The institute in Fairfax was a way for the Saudis to tap the talents of the brightest Muslims in the United States. Its free Arabic classes were a boon for new converts. And those who did well academically were offered full scholarships to study at Saudi universities.

Most of the institute's faculty were Saudi-born or Saudi-trained religious scholars who had a conservative Salafi or Wahhabi perspective. Sheikh Abdel Aziz Fawzan, who taught Islamic law, drew a theological lesson from the 2004 South Asia tsunami that was similar to the one evangelical Christian Jerry Falwell initially drew from the Sept. 11 attacks. The tsunami, Fawzan declared, was God's punishment for allowing resorts where "especially at Christmas, fornication and sexual perversion of all kinds are rampant."

When the U.S. government took a harder look at Saudi activity here after Sept. 11, the Fairfax institute was targeted. Sixteen faculty members were asked to leave the country in December 2003 when the State Department revoked the diplomatic visas of more than 20 Saudis involved in religious outreach.

The revocations were part of an effort to curb what U.S. officials considered intolerant religious rhetoric and ensure that all embassy staffers were engaged in legitimate diplomatic activities, U.S. and Saudi officials said at the time. A senior Saudi official added then that his government intended to "shut down the Islamic affairs section in every embassy."

In mid-2004, federal agents raided the institute, confiscating computers and documents. But no one closely associated with the facility has ever been charged with a terrorism-related crime.

In a recent interview in his elegant wood-paneled embassy office, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Prince Turki al-Faisal, said his government had suspended its missionary activities in this country. "We are in a very intense review of all of the past activities that were undertaken," he said. "And we haven't yet reached any specific plan for where we're going for the future."

Part of that review involves examining religious material "that could in any form, way or shape be interpreted as bigoted or extreme or offensive, not just to non-Muslims, but even some Muslims," he said. The embassy, he added, distributes only Arabic editions of the Koran, with no commentary.

Turki rejected the idea that his country's proselytizing might have contributed to the 2001 attacks. The institute in Fairfax and its mother university in Riyadh "have graduated literally thousands of people over the years," he noted. "If they had been proselytizing for jihadist [ideas] as such, there would have been even more numbers from those thousands . . . who would have turned toward that inclination."

A Separate Community

The utopian vision of an all-Islamic oasis within the United States' secular society has taken seed in College Park's Dar-us-Salaam congregation. Its one-story, red-brick building sits at the end of a narrow, tree-lined street of compact homes built in the early 1950s off Route 1, a few blocks from an IHOP and a Dunkin' Donuts.

A sign in a corner of the parking lot underscores its strict gender segregation.

"Sisters Only," it reads.

Inside is the congregation's prayer room -- divided by a tall barrier so men and women cannot see one another during worship -- and classrooms for Al-Huda School's 300 to 400 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Here, too, is Muslim Link, a community newspaper published by Dar-us-Salaam.

The building houses a bookstore, grocery store and a tiny office that runs the mosque's religious outreach, a top priority for the congregation. Office shelves are stacked with giveaways: English translations of the Koran -- both "The Noble Koran" and Yusuf Ali editions -- as well as glossy color brochures with instructions on how to become a Muslim. "It is best not to hesitate," the brochures state, "if you are certain that you believe."

Dar-us-Salaam, whose Friday prayer services draw 500 to 700 worshipers, describes on its Web site its plan to create an Islamic enclave as a way to sustain its members' Muslim identity and spread Islam by example. Besides a mosque and school, "such an Islamic environment would include . . . businesses and shops for employment and basic needs, housing, medical and financial institutions."

This dream reflects the strict Salafi approach of Saudi-trained Safi Khan, Dar-us-Salaam's imam, who believes that Muslims in this country need close-knit communities to cope with pressures from law enforcement officials and a Western culture alien to Islamic values.

Khan's outlook is clear from his recorded lectures, which are sold online and appear to have been given in the past few years.

The U.S.-raised son of Pakistani immigrants, Khan invokes the certainty of hellfire for those who flout God's commandments, and he preaches that attaining a moral Islamic life in contemporary America requires shunning many commonplace things.

"For example, if you go home and watch TV every day . . . that's not going to help you get close to God," he says in one lecture. "If you go out to the game . . . or if you go to the movies often, if you love to go to parties, if you love music -- all these things are not going to bring you closer to Allah."

Also forbidden by Islam, Khan teaches, are "love letters, or chatting in the chat room without the presence of a guardian, . . . or writing e-mails that you know you have no business writing."

Young Muslims in particular must be aware of the dangers to their faith, Khan says, because youth "is the time when there are a lot of temptations . . . when all these Ivy League universities try to take you to brainwash you into the way they want you to grow up, the way they want you to think." It is the time "that all of America, all of the West, tries to concentrate on you . . . because once they control you, . . . then they have you, and for the rest of your life, you think like them."

Khan believes that Islamic schools are imperative because Muslim children "now are not equipped to deal with mainstream America without compromising their Islamic values." Usually, he says, "a big mixture happens between mainstream America and mainstream Islam, and . . . in most cases . . . Islam loses."

He stresses how Muslims are different from non-Muslims, whom he calls "unbelievers." Citing the mistreatment of Muslims, he says, "we must come together so we can ward off all these attacks." Khan adds that by an Islamic community, he means "we begin to buy houses and begin to live right around the [mosque] so we meet each other" during the five daily prayer sessions.

In the hostile environment cited by Khan, Dar-us-Salaam offers a comforting alternative. The congregation has a "real community feel, so a lot of young people are attracted," said Irfaan Nooruddin, 25, of Silver Spring, a financial analyst who is not a member but sometimes prays there. "I don't agree with their Salafi [outlook] at all. But I do respect the fact that they're people who are attempting to understand the religion."

Mostafiz Chowdhury said he chose Al-Huda, the congregation's school, because he wants to provide his children with an "Islamic upbringing" and protect them from public-school ills such as drugs and "having free sex."

Ultimately, if American Muslims continue to feel embattled, Salafism itself could become more attractive. When moderate Muslim groups that promote integration feel they are under scrutiny or discredited by the government, said Najam Haider, an adjunct professor of Islamic studies at Georgetown University, "Muslims turn societally inward, and that turning inward gives Salafism more influence because Salafis aren't saying we need to integrate."

What they offer, Haider added, is an alternative: "Muslim identity that is separate from America, grounded in Islamic history, a very demarcated community of Muslims. Those are very separate from American values in a lot of ways."

Staff writer Mary Beth Sheridan and news researcher Karl Evanzz contributed to this report.

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