

Student Journeys Into Secret Circle Of Extremism

Muslim Movement Founded in Egypt Sent Tentacles to University in Knoxville

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One afternoon, Mustafa Saied, a junior at the University of Tennessee, was summoned by a friend to a nearly empty campus cafeteria. The two settled themselves in a quiet corner, and Mr. Saied's friend invited him to join the Muslim Brotherhood.

``Everything I had learned pointed to the Muslim Brotherhood being an awesome thing, the elite movement,'' says Mr. Saied of his initiation in 1994. ``I cannot tell you the feeling that I felt---awesome power.``

On that day in Knoxville, Mr. Saied entered a secretive community that was slowly building a roster of young men committed to spreading fundamentalist Islam in the U.S. A movement launched 75 years ago in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has inspired terrorist acts, as well as social reform, throughout the Middle East and has chapters in some European nations. Until recently, law-enforcement officials saw little evidence that the organization was active in the U.S.

Once inside this world, Mr. Saied railed against Jews and Israel during Friday services. He attended meetings in hotels in Toledo and Chicago where radical sheiks glorified jihad. He raised money for Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya, some of which he later learned was funneled to mujahedeen fighters.

In recent years, especially in the wake of the terror attacks in 2001, much of this radical activity in the U.S. has been tamped down, according to law-enforcement officials. The State Department in 1999 barred the sheik Mr. Saied heard endorsing jihad from entering the country. The Treasury Department two years ago froze the accounts of the charity that sent his donations abroad, later designating it a ``financier of terrorism.``

Mr. Saied, now an executive at a Florida environmental-testing firm, underwent a conversion to a less orthodox form of Islam in 1998. Today, his story offers a rare inside look at an extremist movement that flourished in the U.S. And it raises questions about how it managed to spread undetected in the U.S. and whether, since Sept. 11, it has simply moved deeper underground.

``Anti-American sentiment is usually reserved for closed-door discussions or expressed in languages that most Americans don't understand,'' says Mr. Saied. ``While such rhetoric has been drastically reduced since 9/11, it is still prevalent enough to be a cause for concern.``

# Bungee Jumping and Paula Abdul

Mr. Saied's roots were anything but radical. On the plane to America from India in 1990, he made a to-do list: learn to skateboard and bungee-jump, go on road trips, hang out with girls. It was his first time in the U.S., though he already spoke fluent English, learned from rebroadcasts of Sesame Street and Starsky & Hutch. He selected the University of Tennessee because its catalogue was in the library of the American consulate in his home state of Chennai and happened to include a tear-out application.

In Knoxville he roomed with another outgoing engineering major who, like Mr. Saied, came from a highly educated Indian family. ``We had many hobbies in common: basketball, football, movies, especially music,'' recalls Rajesh Juriasingani. Pop singers George Michael and Paula Abdul were favorites. Religion didn't come up much, says Mr. Juriasingani, a Hindu who works for a semiconductor company in Chaska, Minn.

When Disney recruited on campus for a work-study program, Mr. Saied leapt at the chance to spend a semester at Disney World,

taking evening classes on the company's approach to business. He left Orlando in 1993 with a photograph of himself, in a suit and tie, shaking hands with Mickey Mouse.

Back in Knoxville, he decided on impulse one afternoon to drop by the inconspicuous mosque near campus, even though it wasn't a Friday, the day Muslims gather to pray. In the sparsely furnished, one-story mosque, he found a small group of students discussing verses from the Quran. Never shy, Mr. Saied offered a few opinions. His listeners praised his insight and invited him back. He was deeply flattered. ``I knew a couple of things, and they were so impressed,' he recalls. He says he felt like he had been invited into an elite club. Within days, he had stopped shaving, in the orthodox Muslim fashion, and started praying five times a day.

Mr. Saied had received a religious education growing up. But his father, a petroleum-plant supervisor, and his mother, an electrical engineer who stayed home to raise Mustafa and his older sister, taught their children that ``Muslims weren't better; they were just people, like Hindus and others,' he says.

Spurred on by his new friends, Mr. Saied reshaped his worldview according to a handful of passages from the Quran. Mr. Saied says he and other immigrant-Muslim students were drawn to verses preaching intolerance, such as one that claims that ``whomsoever follows a religion other than Islam \ldots in the Hereafter he will be among the losers.''

Within a few months of his first visit to the mosque, Mr. Saied was asked to deliver the sermon during a Friday prayer service, attended by students and other Muslims. Speaking from the mosque's elevated pulpit to about 300 congregants seated on the carpeted floor, Mr. Saied excoriated Americans who indulged in alcohol and premarital sex, or celebrated ``false' holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. He continued periodically to give sermons, often peppering his speeches with condemnations of Jews and Israel. ``Our view was that suicide bombings were fine,' he recalls. ``Israel is the oppressor; Israel does not have the right to exist. It must be destroyed.''

Usually, a few worshippers scolded him after his talks. But Mr. Saied and his circle of a dozen or so immigrant-Muslim friends dismissed proponents of a more moderate approach to their religion.

When a visiting religion scholar gave a talk on campus expressing skepticism of Muslim fundamentalists, ``Mustafa stood up, glared around at people and announced, ``I'm a Muslim fundamentalist and there is only one true Islam,'\,' recalls Rosalind Gwynne, the longtime faculty adviser of the University of Tennessee chapter of the Muslim Student Association. ``You see this among some of the immigrant students from time to time: trying to live in this country in a box, hermetically sealed.''

Some of Mr. Saied's former friends qualify aspects of his account. Khaled Bahjri, then a biology major of Yemeni descent, says some talks focused on Islam being the only legitimate basis for all institutions in society. He confirms that students often denounced ``Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.' But Dr. Bahjri, now a physician in southern California, says, ``This activist involvement was not anything extremist or wrong,' and it wasn't derogatory toward non-Muslims.

By 1994, Mr. Saied had taken to wearing the sort of keffiyah headdress favored by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Mr. Juriasingani says he watched in dismay as his roommate declared he was through with pop music, movies and dating. Mr. Saied eventually dropped all of his non-Muslim friends.

Like many activist Muslim students, Mr. Saied belonged to an Islamic study group. His often focused on the writings of Youssef Al Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric based in Qatar who is a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Sheik Qaradawi is known among many Muslims as relatively moderate on such issues as relations with the West, while endorsing what he calls ``martyrdom operations' against Israel and Jews.

For months in 1994, Mr. Saied sensed that his allegiance to radical Islam was being tested by members of his study group. He wasn't sure why he was being scrutinized, but he steadfastly expressed enthusiasm for Sheik Qaradawi's views. Finally a friend from the United Arab Emirates asked him to join the Muslim Brotherhood, during their conversation in a campus cafeteria. ``Needless to say, I said, `Yes,\'` Mr. Saied recalls.

The Muslim Brotherhood began as a social-reform and religious-revival movement in the 1920s in Egypt. It resisted British domination and evolved into a sometimes-violent organization. Brutally repressed in Egypt, its members scattered throughout the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s, spreading their influence. Some attended graduate schools in the U.S. and helped start the Muslim Student Association in 1963, as well as other Muslim social and financial groups.

Today, the Brotherhood remains an active, controversial organization working within the political systems of some Arab countries. Its violent offshoots include the faction that assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and the Palestinian terrorist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Another outgrowth of the Brotherhood, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, is led by Osama bin Laden's top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahri, who merged his organization into the al Qaeda network in 1998.

In the U.S., the Brotherhood has not operated openly. But federal prosecutors say they are investigating whether Brotherhood members who arrived in the U.S. decades ago have used businesses and charities here to raise and launder money for terrorism abroad.

Mr. Saied started meeting weekly with a handful of students---a subset of Muslim fundamentalists who were deemed hardcore enough for admission to the Brotherhood. They drank tea and ate baklava or other sweets, and then discussed, theoretically and practically, how to motivate Muslims to return to a way of life entirely shaped by the Quran and Islamic law. They talked of the need to keep the movement's existence secret.

The leader of the group, who has since returned to the U.A.E., recounted with admiration how the Brotherhood has functioned as a wellspring of jihadist factions. The subject of using violence in the U.S. came up, but the Knoxville Brotherhood circle's attitude was, ``We don't do that here, unless necessary,\'` Mr. Saied says. The trigger would be ``the Muslim population being in danger, as it is in Palestine,\'` and that didn't seem likely.

Some meetings were hosted by Dr. Bahjri, the former biology major. But he says the participants ``were not involved as a direct group with the Muslim Brotherhood.\'` He adds: ``Indirectly, we were impressed by the Muslim Brotherhood understanding of Islam, yes, and we discussed the comprehensive view of Islam. But this is not membership.\'`

Whatever the precise status of these students, other Muslims in Knoxville eventually became aware of the Brotherhood-influenced circle on campus, says Tarek El-Messidi. As a teenager, Mr. Messidi took religious classes from Mr. Saied on Sundays. Sitting at a table in the mosque's library with three or four other students, he listened to Mr. Saied discuss Islamic history and sometimes ridicule other religions.

When Mr. Messidi moved on to the university, he headed the Muslim Student Association in 2000 and 2001. ``The Ikhwan influence was still there,\'` he says, using the Arabic name for the Brotherhood. Mr. Messidi says that he considered Brotherhood ideology and strategy to be irrelevant in the U.S., and banned it being taught within the MSA.

But for Mr. Saied and his friends, it was very relevant. In December 1994 they attended a conference at a Chicago hotel sponsored by the Muslim Arab Youth Association. The meeting attracted some 6,000 people, according to a report in the Chicago Sun-Times. Students listened to lectures, ate communal meals of lamb, chicken and rice, and worshipped in a makeshift prayer area---a portion of a large banquet

room with sheets spread on the carpet to mark a sanctified zone.

At one point, Mr. Saied says, the lights in a packed ballroom went dark, with spotlights trained only on the stage, where several speakers sat. Suddenly, six or seven masked young men dressed as Hamas militants ran down the aisles, waving the organization's green flags and shouting, ``Idhbaahal Yahood!'' ('Slaughter the Jews!')

``There were people who were ecstatic over the display, shouting in response, `Allahu Akbar!' ('God is Great!'), and there were also people who were simply shocked that something like this was going on,' Mr. Saied recalls. He says his own reaction was, ``Cool.''

Mr. Bahjri, who was there, plays down the significance of the Hamas display and the crowd's response. ``It was just emotional---a reaction,' he says.

In December 1995, Mr. Saied attended another Muslim Arab Youth Association conference at a hotel in Toledo, Ohio. Sheik Qaradawi, the cleric affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, gave a speech later transcribed and translated by the Investigative Project, a terrorism-research group based in Washington. Islam will ``overcome all the religions'' and dominate the world, the sheik told his audience of several hundred people. He quoted Islamic texts as saying, ``You shall continue to fight the Jews, and they will fight you, until the Muslims will kill them. And the Jew will hide behind the stone and the tree, and the stone and the tree will say, `Oh, servant of Allah, Oh, Muslim, this is a Jew behind me. Come and kill him!' The resurrection will not come before this happens.''

That weekend, Mr. Saied ran into Sheik Qaradawi as the luminary emerged from a crowded hotel elevator and attempted to fend off people trying to kiss his hand. Mr. Saied stepped forward and greeted the cleric and they talked briefly, he recalls. ``I was awestruck because he was the biggest Muslim Brotherhood figure in the world, and I had met him,' says Mr. Saied.

In Knoxville, Mr. Saied says he was raising thousands of dollars after Friday prayers at the mosque to buy supplies for needy Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya. Once he stood up and asked the congregation for enough money to buy 100 tents at \ \$60 each. By the next day, he says, the full \ \$6,000 had been donated.

He contacted the Benevolence International Foundation, a nonprofit in Chicago that sent money to Muslims overseas, and a foundation representative periodically visited Knoxville to pick up contributions. Mr. Saied assumed the money was going to civilians, but in a 1995 conversation at his apartment, the foundation emissary explained that some was channeled to Muslim fighters. Mr. Saied says he immediately stopped raising money.

In November 2002, the Treasury Department alleged that the foundation had extensive financial ties to al Qaeda. The charity denied the allegations, but its chief executive pleaded guilty in 2003 to illegally buying boots and uniforms for Muslim fighters in Bosnia and Chechnya. As part of the plea deal, prosecutors dropped the charges involving al Qaeda.

Mr. Saied left the University of Tennessee in 1996, several credits shy of graduating. He moved to Florida with his new wife, Sadaf, who he had met at a Muslim student conference in Baltimore. Devoutly religious, Sadaf Saied, who is of Pakistani descent, recalls being dismayed at the arguments her husband and his friends made in favor of suicide bombing. ``That was a foreign thing to me,' she says. As an undergraduate at the University of Miami, Ms. Saied says she helped start a moderate Muslim group on campus as an alternative to the one dominated by Arab immigrants whose views were similar to Mr. Saied's.

Mr. Saied continued his activism in Florida, preaching his view of Islam at a camp for Muslim teenagers. In 1997, he brought Yasir Billoo, one of his former campers, to a meeting of about 30 men in an Orlando hotel conference room. ``Leadership was the topic---how to organize and get people to follow Muslim Brotherhood members,' says Mr. Billoo. Afterward, Mr. Billoo says, he was invited to join the Brotherhood. He declined. ``It was way too secretive for me,' says Mr. Billoo, then 18, who came to the U.S. \ from Pakistan as a child.

A year later, after attending a young Muslims conference, Mr. Saied and Mr. Billoo joined a discussion in the book-lined basement of a Chicago house. Over coffee, tea and fresh fruit, Mr. Saied launched into a tirade against non-Muslims and Americans. Assim Mohammed, who was hosting the gathering at his parents' home, had encountered the same attitudes in Muslim circles as a student at the University of Illinois .

Mr. Mohammed, now 27, says he and another young man launched a counterattack, arguing that ``the basic foundations of American values are very Islamic---freedom of religion, freedom of speech, toleration.'' The battle raged for four hours, as several other people listened avidly. Mr. Mohammed and his ally deployed Quranic verses that suggest an embrace of pluralism. One he quoted states, ``O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other.''

Late that night, Mr. Saied says he realized that he and Mr. Billoo ``were out of arguments.'' Mentally exhausted, he says he thought, ``Oh my God, what have I been doing?'' Mr. Billoo, now attending Nova Southeastern University's law school in Fort Lauderdale, describes a similar ``deprogramming experience.''

In the following months, both say they gravitated back toward the more moderate values they had learned growing up.

Today Mr. Saied, who is applying for U.S.\ citizenship, helps run an environmental-testing firm in Hialeah owned by his wife's family. He says he still feels guilty about his years of extremism. After the Sept. 11 terror attacks, he co-wrote articles for USA Today and the Christian Science Monitor calling on American Muslims to raise their voices in support of religious moderation and the West. He worries that pockets of ``venomous hatred toward Western society'' persist on some campuses and in certain Islamic communities.

He continues to participate in online Islamic forums, trying to spark debate about how to be a ``progressive Muslim.'' He attends mosque but has shed his head covering and trimmed his beard short. These days he listens to music, both American pop and traditional Indian. He and his wife send their children to public school during the week and religious classes on the weekend. ``Religion,'' as he now sees it, ``gets you close to your spiritual connection with God, and that's about it.''

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