

DWING HE HFUL

The Rev. D. George Spagnolia pumps his fist at a press conference declaring his innocence and right to due process after being removed from his post because of allegations of sexual misconduct.

Photo: Bill Greene, The Boston Globe

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CITY PORTRAITS

Role of religion
starkly different
in town profiles

BY JILL LAWRENCE
USA TODAY

On my first trip to Montclair, N.J., at a routine meeting about economic development, Alison Barnett rose to discuss downtown decorations. “We’re calling it seasonal lighting instead of holiday lighting because I don’t want to get into trouble with anybody,” she said. “We are looking at the snowflake theme because it seems very non-denominational.”

When I stopped by Franklin Book-sellers in downtown Franklin, Tenn., manager Carol Ann Shull volunteered that all her employees are Christian. “We try to avoid having things that aren’t wholesome,” she said.

I could not have asked for a better introduction to the contrasting religious attitudes in these two towns. Moments like these over the course of an eight-month project crystallized one of the principal conclusions of my three-day series stemming from the 2000 election: that religion is the wellspring of the culture gap in America. It’s at the root of opposition to abortion and homosexuality.

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IMAM UPROAR

Imam’s history
hurts credibility
on local scene

BY TOM MERRIMAN
WJW-CLEVELAND

The instructions were simple: Catch a flight to a city on the east coast. Rent a car. Drive to a specific parking garage. Await instructions.

The rules were uncompromising: No cameras. No taxis. No disclosure of my ultimate destination.

The payoff was unbelievable: Complete access to volumes of hidden camera tapes, transcripts, and translations documenting the Islamic terror network in America.

Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, the WJW I-Team began unraveling the controversial past of Cleveland’s most prominent Islamic leader. A personal history far different from the public persona Imam Fawaz Damra had crafted during the prior decade. To most people in northeast Ohio, Damra was not only the local face of Islam, he was a man of peace.

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IMAM UPROAR

from page 23

He reached out to the Jewish community, lectured at local universities, and showed restraint after a drunken hater plowed his car through the front door of the Islamic Center.

By the end of our investigation, that public persona was changed forever. It was shattered by hidden camera videotapes, court filings, and a single-page, 13-year-old, public record maintained by the New York Secretary of State's Office. The real Imam Fawaz Damra advocated the murder of Jews, raised money for Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and established what the U.S. Justice Department described as "Osama bin Laden's first beachhead in the United States."

The Cleveland media often turned to Imam Fawaz Damra as a local expert on all things Islamic. We were no different. Developing a story on the Holy Land Foundation, we asked the imam to talk about the group's fund-raising activities in northeast Ohio.

When I mentioned Damra's name to our source, however, it quickly became clear we had stumbled upon a much bigger story. It was rooted in a Florida deportation case involving a

was probably the first time we ever started an investigation by interviewing the subject.

Damra was so enraged by the questions, he showed up at the station the next day demanding we discard the interview. We refused, but agreed to give the imam a second chance before our cameras. By this time, we had obtained a videotape of a 1991 speech in which Damra called Jews "the sons of monkeys and pigs."

Realizing this would probably be his last opportunity to interview Fawaz Damra, Sheil made the unorthodox decision to ask a wide range of questions for which we had little or no foundation (Have you ever met any of the original World Trade Center bombers? Have you ever met Osama bin Laden? Have you ever met any of bin Laden's associates?) Damra's answers (particularly his denials and evasions) gave us important clues for conducting the investigation.

Tight-lipped law enforcement

We quickly learned the Justice Department's interest in Fawaz Damra grew out of his role in the late 1980s as imam of the Al Farooq Mosque in Brooklyn, N.Y. The Al Farooq had long been known as a hotbed of Islamic radicalism and the place of worship attended by several of the 1993 World Trade Center bombers. Damra's resume, however, revealed he had left the Brooklyn mosque in the summer of 1990. Damra insisted during the second on-camera interview that he had never met any associates of Osama bin Laden and didn't know any of the original Trade Center defendants.

The most difficult challenge facing journalists attempting to investigate terrorism-related stories is the virtual lockdown of government sources since 9/11. It is extremely difficult to cultivate law enforcement officials willing to talk off the record about closed terrorism investigations. We overcame this obstacle by identifying individuals who had retired from various joint terrorism task forces, specifically, retired New York police detectives who were more than willing to give us personal history lessons about the Al Farooq. One retired officer even turned over undercover videotapes, transcripts, and mug shots arranged on a poster board outlining the relationships between individual suspects and

various acts of terrorism. None of the information was confidential. It had all been entered into evidence in some court at some point in time. And yet, it was completely inaccessible through typical official channels.

Looking for help

To this day, I have never met Steve Emerson. He is a very difficult man to track down. A pioneering terrorism expert with some serious enemies, Emerson directs The Investigative Project from an undisclosed location. He first exposed the presence of an Islamic terror support network in the United States in his documentary "Jihad in America," a former IRE Tom Renner Award winner. Critics may dismiss The Investigative Project as a pro-Israeli think tank, but the intelligence-gathering skills of Emerson's research staff can be an invaluable asset to journalists.

After weeks of conversations with his staff, I finally spoke to Emerson by phone. He agreed to grant me complete access to the extensive library of tapes and documents his organization had amassed since 1995. I was to come alone without cameras. For security reasons, I would not learn of the office's location until I reached a pre-determined destination.

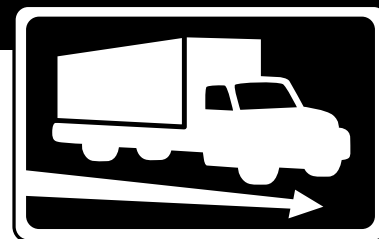
Although Emerson's researchers had



Palestinian named Mazen Al-Najjar. Included in the evidence was the affidavit of a federal agent describing Al-Najjar's frequent phone calls to "known alien terrorist suspect Fawaz Damra." There was also reference to a videotape in which Damra was allegedly shown raising donations for the Islamic Committee for Palestine. ICP was allegedly a front for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

With little time to digest the information, I caught I-Team reporter Bill Sheil as he was leaving for the Damra interview, "Read this and ask the imam about the videotape!" It

MOVING?



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– Anonymous (from seminar evaluation)

"Well worth the money!"

– Anonymous (from seminar evaluation)

More information is available at www.ire.org/training

FOLLOWING THE FAITHFUL

not previously focused on Fawaz Damra, they were able to identify several key court transcripts describing Damra's activities. Most importantly, we were able to confirm that Damra had lied during his interview with the I-Team. Damra not only knew several of the original World Trade Center bombing defendants, they had discussed their falling out with "Brother Fawaz" on an FBI wiretap. Without the help of The Investigative Project, our exploration into Fawaz Damra's controversial past would have barely scratched the surface of the truth.

Final puzzle piece

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, a focal point of American Islamic militancy was an organization called the Alkifah Refugee Center. It was housed in Brooklyn in the basement of the Al Farooq Mosque. In court records, the Justice Department described the Alkifah Refugee Center as bin Laden's first base of operations in the United States.

According to the filings, Bin Laden and his partner Abdullah Azzam had set up Alkifah to funnel guns, money and volunteers to their training camps in Pakistan. We knew Damra had served as the imam of the mosque, but was he actually involved with the Alkifah operations? A microfilmed copy of the organization's original incorporation papers from the New York Secretary of State's Office held the answer. Fawaz Damra was actually a founding corporate officer of the Alkifah Refugee Center.

Any investigation of a respected religious leader is certain to trigger extraordinary scru-

tiny, public debate, and even outrage. When that leader is Islamic, the context is post-September 11th, and the topic is terrorism, however, the story has the potential to be a community powder keg. Broadcasting an investigation linking an unindicted, non-arrested, non-convicted



individual to terrorist organizations raises the stakes even higher.

Station management remained committed, news management asked tough questions, and our lawyers pressed hard for privileged documentation of our claims. In the end, the records and tapes we obtained through retired law enforcement agents, The Investigative Project and a simple FOIA request enabled us to air the investigation without compromise or equivocation.

Tom Merriman is an investigative reporter with the WJW-FOX 8 I-Team in Cleveland. When he researched "The Imam Investigation," he was prohibited by a non-compete clause from appearing on air. His I-Team colleague Bill Sheil reported the story.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- National Association of Secretaries of State – election information and links to each state (www.nass.org/electioninfo/electioninfo.html)
- American Factfinder at the U.S. Census – population, housing, economic data (<http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>)
- Microsoft Network's House & Home – city comparisons on costs, education, etc. (<http://houseandhome.msn.com/pickaplace/comparecities.aspx>)
- Also: Web sites for city governments, school systems, civic groups, newspapers, businesses, religious institutions and historical associations.