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Zakir Naik: Controversial Islamic Orator with Influence in the West October 2010

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Overview



Zakir Naik is a Muslim orator from Mumbai, India who has thousands of fans around the world, including many in the U.S. Naik reaches between 50 and 100 million viewers through the popular satellite station he runs, Peace TV. This station features regular lectures by Naik, imams, and others who focus on the study of Islam, including several Americans.¹ Peace TV also broadcasts chat shows, Arabic lessons, and youth programming in English and in Urdu. Naik's lectures are also easily accessible on the Internet.

Naik's exceptional speaking and memorization skills draw thousands to his live lectures. He is able to quote the Koran, the Bible, the Torah, and other religious texts, chapter and verse, and impresses audiences with his ability to cite numerous examples to support his claims. He espouses a strict interpretation of the Koran, and tells his audiences that apostates should be put to death.² He also asserts it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife under certain circumstances and with specific techniques.³ It is important to note, however, that Naik is not a formally trained religious scholar, and has been labeled "deviant" by some orthodox clerics.⁴

¹ Siraj Wahhaj, the imam of the at-Taqwa mosque in Brooklyn, New York, and Yassir Fazaga, the imam of the Orange County Islamic Foundation, are two examples.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM0pOyQue6c>, last accessed on September 2, 2010.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kTRKOG2RTs>, last accessed on September 7, 2010.

⁴ Fatwa against Zakir Naik from Indian Deoband. Last accessed from <http://darulifta-deoband.org/viewfatwa.jsp?ID=7077> on September 15, 2010.

While Naik is regarded as controversial by many observers and several government agencies (he has been banned from entering Canada and the UK,) he does not publicly or overtly promote violent jihad. However, he insinuates that violence is an acceptable response to a threat, and he has made statements that suggest he is in agreement with terrorist attacks that have been perpetrated against the United States and its interests.

Several convicted terrorists can be counted among his fans, including Najibullah Zazi, who plotted to attack the New York City subway system, and several of the attackers and planners of the 2008 Mumbai massacre. He also promotes the theory that the 9/11 attacks were planned and coordinated by the U.S. government in order to gain control over oil-rich countries.

Naik is the founder and president of Mumbai's Islamic Research Foundation (IRF), an organization which serves to "concentrate on the educated Muslim youth who have become apologetic about their own religion and have started to feel that their own religion is outdated."⁵

Biography

Zakir Abdul Karim Naik was born in Mumbai, India, on October 18, 1965. He is referred to as "Doctor Genius" and is touted as an "outstanding Kokaniz" by the Kokani Muslim Jamaat of India and Pakistan.⁶ Kokanis are a diaspora community that originally came from the Kokan region of India; many settled in Mumbai.

Naik studied medicine at Topiwala National Medical College, in Mumbai, but gave up practicing in 1991, at the age of 26, in order to dedicate his time to studying and propagating Islam. He has no formal religious training, a fact that has sparked criticism.

Naik's wife, Farhat, heads the "ladies' wing" of the IRF, which conducts seminars and other events to promote the study of Islam to women. Farhat Naik holds a masters degree in philosophy.⁷

The Naiks' son and three daughters make appearances, both at live lectures and on Peace TV. Like his father, son Faqir Naik travels the world delivering speeches on Islam and comparative religion, and also appears frequently on Peace TV.⁸ According to Faqir's biography on the IRF web site, he was born in 1994, and became a hafiz (memorized the Koran) at the age of 13. The Naiks' daughter, Rushda, can be seen on Peace TV performing songs about Islam.

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dr-Zakir-Naik/82909429924>, last accessed July 20, 2010.

⁶ <http://www.tungekar.com/faisal.html>, last accessed on August 26, 2010.

⁷ Sweta Ramanujan, "Beyond the Veil: Am I Not a Normal Muslim Girl?" India Express, July 16, 2004.

⁸ Faqir Naik's speeches can be found on YouTube.com. See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXihYhqRhys&NR=1>, last accessed on August 5, 2010.

Naik was the protégé of Ahmed Deedat. Deedat was a South African-Indian orator who died in 2005. Like Naik, Deedat also adhered to a very fundamental interpretation of Islam. For example, at a live lecture, in response to a Christian woman's question about whether the veil is oppressive, Deedat stated that a woman who does not cover her hair is sending out an invitation to be raped. He also told the audience that in the United States women are raped in the street in broad daylight and people simply walk by⁹, as though it were commonplace.

Naik founded the IRF in 1991. The IRF is an umbrella organization that includes Peace TV; an Islamic cable network; and the Islamic International School, which is located in Mumbai and which provides general and religious instruction to primary and secondary school-aged students.



Ahmed Deedat

Naik appeared on *The Indian Express'* 2010 list of most powerful Indians, at number 89. They wrote that Naik is included on their list because of the size of his viewership on Peace TV. Estimates of worldwide viewership range from 50 million to more than 100 million. The station airs in 125 countries.¹⁰ *The Indian Express* also cites Naik's ability to draw enormous crowds at his live events around the world and reported that his "10-day Peace Conference" in Mumbai, in 2009, drew 1 million people¹¹

Naik Banned from U.K. and Canada

Naik travels the world to deliver lectures. In 2010, he made personal appearances in numerous countries including Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.¹² He was also scheduled to make appearances in the U.K. and Canada, but was denied entry by their governments.

In June 2010, Naik was banned from entering the U.K. Home Office Secretary Theresa May ordered the ban, citing "comments made by Dr. Naik", which were deemed to be evidence of "unacceptable behavior."¹³ The Home Secretary has

⁹ Ahmed Deedat lecture. Date unknown. Last accessed from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWueNI6na5E&feature=related> on August 27, 2010.

¹⁰ "The Most Powerful Indians in 2010," *The Indian Express*, February 5, 2010, last accessed from <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-most-powerful-indians-in-2010-no-8190/575690/2> on August 9, 2010.

¹¹ "The Most Powerful Indians in 2010," *The Indian Express*, February 5, 2010, last accessed from <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-most-powerful-indians-in-2010-no-8190/575690/2> on August 9, 2010.

¹² See clip from Q&A session in Sri Lanka, which took place in May 2010. Naik discusses converts ("reverts") to Islam, saying that they are more committed to Islam than those who were raised with the religion. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuK0XGV0eVk>, last accessed on August 2, 2010.

¹³ Christopher Hope, "Home Secretary Theresa May Bans Radical Preacher Zakir Naik from Entering the UK," *The Telegraph*, June 18, 2010.

authority to exclude entry to persons whose behavior is not considered conducive to the public good.¹⁴

Although the Home Office did not cite specific examples of Naik's objectionable behavior, one of Naik's statements about Usama Bin Laden was quoted in many of the news articles covering the ban.

The controversial comment about Bin Laden was made during an appearance in Singapore, in October 1998, in reference to the August 1998 East Africa Bombing.

"Beware of Muslims saying Osama bin Laden is right or wrong. I reject them....we don't know. But if you ask my view, if given the truth, if he is fighting the enemies of Islam I am for him. I do not know what he is doing. I am not in touch with him. I don't know him personally. I read the newspaper. If he is terrorizing the terrorists, if he is terrorizing America the terrorist, the biggest terrorist, every Muslim should be a terrorist. The thing is, if he's terrorizing a terrorist then he is following Islam."

A June 2010 *Telegraph* article quoted Home Office Secretary Theresa May's reasons for banning Naik.¹⁵ The same article also included several quotes attributed to Naik, including his statement about Bin Laden. Naik's efforts to dispute the Home Office are tied to the premise that the Home Office based its decision on the bin Laden comment and that it had taken the quote out of context. The *Telegraph* article incorrectly states that Naik's comments were made in 2006, rather than in 1998. It is not clear if the date stated in the article was provided by the Home Office or was provided by the author of the article. Nevertheless, Naik has used this error as an anchor for his arguments against the Home Office in an effort to discredit it. He further claims that the Singapore conference footage was somehow manipulated in order to make it appear as though the comments were made post 9/11.¹⁶

Naik continues to claim that, regarding Usama Bin Laden, he has not formulated an opinion. "Just because I am neutral doesn't mean I am a supporter of Usama Bin Laden."¹⁷ Conversely, however, he does not state that if Bin Laden is guilty of masterminding terrorist attacks around the world that he would denounce him or his activities, nor has he retracted his suggestion that America is the world's "biggest terrorist" and therefore it is justifiable that the U.S. should be "terrorized."

It is likely that the Home Office also considered the magnitude of Naik's influence on the U.K.'s Muslim population when it made its decision to ban him. Among others, Dr. Kafeel Ahmed, the Indian-born aeronautical engineer who

¹⁴ "Law enforcement liaison with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) to support foreign witnesses or covert investigations," Home Office circular, issued March 7, 2006, last accessed from <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/home-office-circulars/circulars-2006/002-2006/> on August 7, 2010.

¹⁵ Christopher Hope, "Home Secretary Theresa May Bans Radical Preacher Zakir Naik from Entering the UK," *The Telegraph*, June 18, 2010.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcoxaF9PW9o>

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcoxaF9PW9o>, last accessed August 16, 2010.

masterminded the car bomb attack on Glasgow airport and the attempted car-bomb attack in London in June 2007, was a Naik admirer.¹⁸

Following the UK's lead, Canada announced it would deny Naik entry in June 2010. He had been scheduled to speak at the Journey of Faith Conference, which was held in Toronto, in July 2010. The event was billed as the "largest Islamic conference in North America." Event tickets were sold through Peace TV, which was listed as a co-sponsor.¹⁹

Controversial Statements

In addition to Naik's statement, "*If he (Osama bin Laden) is terrorizing the terrorists, if he is terrorizing America the terrorist, the biggest terrorist, every Muslim should be a terrorist. The thing is, if he's terrorizing a terrorist then he is following Islam*," Naik has made a number of other comments that have stirred controversy.

In May 2010, Naik discussed converts (to whom he refers as "reverts") to Islam, saying that they are more committed to Islam than those who were raised with the religion.²⁰ Also in May 2010, Naik visited Maldives²¹ where a gentleman in the audience said he intended to renounce Islam. Naik responded that if someone renounces Islam then speaks against Islam he should be put to death. After the event,



Mohammed Nazim announcing his reversion to Islam on Maldives national television in the wake of national controversy over his statement at Zakir Naik's lecture that he would renounce Islam. [Source: Haveeru Online]

the man who expressed his doubt about Islam was arrested. According to Maldives' press, the man received death threats but had been counseled in jail by Islamic scholars for two days. Upon his release from jail, the man issued a televised public apology and declared he had accepted Islam again.²²

Naik claims he can prove 9/11 was an "inside job" orchestrated by the U.S. government. He tells audiences that "75 professors and scientists from the U.S. believe it was an inside job," so that the

¹⁸ Praveen Swami, "Glimpses Into the Mind of Suicide Bomber," The Hindu, July 14, 2007.

¹⁹ <http://www.journeyconference.com/index.php>.

²⁰ See tape of comments at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuK0XGV0eVk>, last accessed on August 2, 2010.

²¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM0pOyQue6c>, last accessed on August 2, 2010.

²² "Maldivian Who Renounced Islam Reverts," Haveeru Online, June 1, 2010, http://www.haveeru.com.mv/english/details/30901/Maldivian_who_renounced_Islam_reverts, last accessed on August 2, 2010.

U.S. could “have control of oil rich countries.”²³ He asserts explosive were planted on the inside of the towers in advance of the airplanes’ impact, which is what caused them implode. Without the explosives, Naik claims, the buildings would have been able to sustain the impact of the airplanes. Naik further expresses to audiences his opinion that the explosions occurred prior to the impact of the airplanes and that the planes had no actual windows.

Naik also suggests the July 7, 2005 bombings on the London transit system may also have been a set up, telling audiences as recently as February 2010 it has not been proven that the perpetrators were Muslims.²⁴

Travel to the United States

Naik participated in a dialogue on the Koran, the Bible, and science, hosted by the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), in Chicago, Illinois, in 2000.²⁵

According to his own statements, Naik also visited the U.S. in October, 2003 in order to receive an award from an internet-based university located in Los Angeles.



He tells a story about being detained at immigration and questioned about a video in his luggage titled “Jihad and Terrorism”. According to his account, when officials asked him his opinion concerning jihad, he quoted biblical references to them about requirements for Christians to take up the sword to fight.²⁶

In October 1996, Naik delivered a lecture at The Islamic Cultural Center of New York.²⁷

²³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwEjtnd_Yg

²⁴ “Is Terrorism a Muslim Monopoly,” lecture by Zakir Naik February 2010, last accessed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZopHcVO-i8&NR=1> on August 9, 2010.

²⁵ The dialogue can be viewed on YouTube, accessed from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-j_WRUDaw4

²⁶ Video of Naik’s description of being detained at U.S. customs in Los Angeles can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN6DrPVScUc>. Last accessed on August 26, 2010.

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Shc3of0tE4s>, last accessed on September 15, 2010.

Scope of Influence, Extremist Affiliations, and Terrorism Connections

As one of the best-known Islamic orators in the world, Zakir Naik's influence stretches well beyond the borders of India. His lectures are widely circulated on the internet. Peace TV is also available via live stream on the web, via satellite, and from its dedicated channel on YouTube.²⁸

Naik is featured on more than 30 Facebook fan pages; one page has 196,000 fans.²⁹

Naik's countless fans include individuals charged or convicted of terrorism. Terrorist groups also utilize Naik's lectures as propaganda material to indoctrinate supporters and trainees.

Taped lectures by Zakir Naik, along with Taliban propaganda videos, were recovered in a raid on an Indian Mujahideen safehouse in October 2008.³⁰ Indian Mujahideen bomb attacks in India have caused hundreds of deaths and injuries.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) promoted Naik's organization on its web site as recently as 2008. Feroz Deshmukh, an LeT foot soldier involved in several terrorist attacks, was an employee of an Islamic bookstore located adjacent to the IRF. This book store was owned by a relative of Naik's. A representative of the IRF told reporters that Deshmukh regularly frequented the IRF to use the library;³¹ however, it is suspected he used the premises to conduct meetings with other LeT members.³²

According to his friends, Najibullah Zazi was fascinated by Naik and watched his lectures on YouTube.³³ Zazi is the former New York coffee cart operator who plotted to detonate explosives on the New York City subway system in 2009.

²⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/user/officialpeacetv>

²⁹ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/DrZakir-Naik/19033142579>, last accessed July 20, 2010.

³⁰ Praveen Swami, "The Rebirth of the Indian Mujahideen," *The Hindu*, April 19, 2010.

³¹ Shahid Razi Burney, "Bombay Blasts: Kashmiri Among Many Arrested," *Arab News*, August 2006.

³² "Man Who Led Cops to Mumbai LeT Chief Booked in Aurangabad Arms Haul Case," *India Express*, August 4, 2006.

³³ Michael Wilson, "From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2009.



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21-Jan-2007, DAWA Team

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16-Mar-2007, Shehr Bano Khan

A screenshot of the Jamat ud Dawa website from January 2008 shows a link to the IRF web site, www.irf.net.
Jamat ud Dawa is an LeT front organization.

Fundraising

Zaik has claimed he does not own Peace TV and, further, that his media enterprise is owned by a company based in Dubai; however, he has declined to provide the name of the company.³⁴

³⁴ Mohammed Wajihuddin, "Popular Religious Channel is Illegal," The Times of India, April 6, 2009.

Naik makes appeals on Peace TV for donations to support the network, instructing viewers to deposit money into the organization's account in the Islamic Bank of Britain.³⁵

The IRF has a charitable branch called United Islamic Aid (UIA), which has an independent page on the IRF web site.³⁶ The web site requests a minimum donation of the equivalent of \$250 (US) per year. Advertisements appealing for donations to UIA are aired on Peace TV. Neither the web site nor the television ads describe what the charity supports, nor do they mention the projects in which they are involved, stating only that the charity supports Muslims who are in need. No news articles describing the charity's projects or naming aid recipients could be found in the course of research for this report.

Implications

- Zakir Naik is a respected Islamic orator who is popular with audiences around the world, including the United States. Although he does not blatantly advocate for violent jihad, some of his comments imply he believes the U.S. seeks to subjugate Muslims in order to gain control over the Muslim world. He has stated that the United States staged the attacks of 9/11 in order to succeed in its effort.
- Naik is not formally trained as a religious scholar. His popularity is due to his exceptional ability to memorize and quote religious texts and his great stage presence. His Koranic quotes support his very literal interpretation of Islam. He quotes the Koran with authority to define the enemies of Muslims, provide justifications for violence, and to establish a strict framework for personal behavior and beliefs. It is possible that some of Naik's fans do not have access to trained religious scholars or may be unable to interpret the Koran for themselves, and thus may accept Naik's interpretation as the final word.
- Naik appears credible and is persuasive; his lectures have been used by terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, to indoctrinate recruits and trainees. Although he is not likely to directly involve himself with any terrorist organization, his statements may be used to justify terrorist acts.

³⁵ "Illicit Channel Broadcast Mired in Blame Game," *The Pioneer* (New Delhi), November 15, 2009.

³⁶ United Islamic Aid website <http://www.irfuiia.org/index.htm>