

American Dissent: Interview with Muslim rights activist Omar Ahmad

'Four years ago, most Muslims lined up behind Bush . . . We blew it'

Omar Ahmad is a technology entrepreneur and Board Member of San Francisco's AMILA (American Muslims Intent on Learning & Activism). He was CIO (Chief Information Officer) for Napster, the revolutionary technology company that pioneered music downloading on the Internet. Today, Omar is starting a new technology company in San Francisco and is also an activist for Muslim rights in America. Recently he spoke to The Daily Star New York correspondent Naeem Mohaiemen about being a Muslim American, a pilot from Florida, and the FBI.

Daily Star (DS) : I understand you had an interesting visit from the FBI after 9/11. Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

Omar Ahmed (OA) : I had returned from Africa a few days before the attacks. I remember being wide awake and watching CNBC live as the 2nd plane flew into the WTC. The Sunday after the attacks I got a knock on the door at around noon. I saw from the window that it was two guys in suits. As I opened the door, one guy says, "Mr. Ahmad?" Then he whipped out a badge, identified himself as FBI and asked if he could talk to me. I asked why and he said it was based on an anonymous phone call.

I invited them in and they proceeded to ask me their questions which centered around my flying.

I am a pilot. I grew up in Florida. Damn.

As they started to ask me about my flying experience, it was clear they didn't know much about FAA regulations and I was telling them what it meant to be "current", how long a medical lasts, etc. The interview went for about an hour, and I think that I cleared some sort of magic barrier when they saw on my wall a picture of me shaking hands with the head football coach of Florida. They left and I don't know quite what they were thinking. I can tell you it was depressing for me for many weeks afterward thinking that I was born in the US, grew up in the US, vote, pay taxes, and that

someone may have actually picked up the phone and called the FBI and told them that I may be a threat.

I've been able to piece together that after 9/11 the FBI did profile all pilots and student pilots with Muslim names. I guess I rang a bunch of bells and they did their job. I can tell you they were professional in their conduct and asked me if I had been harassed by anyone in town or felt any repercussions as a result of the attacks.

I never felt intimidated -- I was truly confused as to why they were talking to me -- it didn't make sense. I can only imagine someone who has an immigration issue, or anything that could make them nervous that the experience would be terrifying.

DS: What do you think is the situation of Muslims in America? In spite of everything, are you optimistic about our place here? Are Muslims a part of the fabric of this nation, or are they outsiders? What are the positive trends for the future?

OA: I'll take the easy question first -- yes, I am optimistic about the role that Muslims have and will expand into over time. We have a lot of work to do.

I think there is a genuine desire to understand what Islam is and who Muslims are. The situation will be made better when Muslims decide to make it so. We're faced with a media that is presenting a negative face for Islam, and unfortunately for



Bowing for prayer on New York's Madison Avenue before start of United American Muslim Day Parade.

us, we have a group of cult-leaders screaming for death in the name of our faith. Until articulate, rational spokespeople come forward, these are the loons who have the mike and are getting the airtime. Let's be clear that there are a few issues we need to deal with:

1. the nuts in our own backyard
2. the misconceptions of what we

as people and our faith stand for.

One interesting example of this is with my parents. We have lived in a rural area of north Florida for more than 30 years. I like to call it the "buckle of the Bible Belt." Now our family has been fairly involved in the local community and we are open about our faith. Dad closes the office on Friday so he can open our home for Juma prayers. After 9/11 there was an interesting set of events. The sheriff sent a car to Dad's office to make certain he was OK. My mom wears hijab and dozens of the town's ladies called her up to ask what they could do to help, and that they wanted to walk with her when she went shopping so that she would be safe.

The local churches started to invite my folks to their meetings to understand Islam. They felt confused seeing how the terrorist actions could be reconciled with the people who they had lived beside for decades. Mom still goes to various churches in the area and is always welcomed. Her seminars are generating a lot of dialogue, questions, Koran requests -- and I pray -- some understanding. There is a real desire to understand -- and candidly, if it can happen in the Bible Belt, we can do it anywhere!

We as Muslims have work to do, but among the things to recognise is that if we call the US "home" we need to invest in it. It means we have to get out of ethnic ghettos of Asian-only Muslim communities and take part in the greater community in which we live. This is something that overall as a "community" we haven't done as good a job as we could.

DS: I understand that although you opposed the Iraq invasion, you had a very different point of view on Gulf War I?

OA: During Desert Storm I was with a company that produced communication software that boasted among our clients, DoD and other intelligence agencies. I was in contact with the Joint Chiefs and others during this time lending technical assistance and expertise. That said, the real issue for me was quite a bit more personal. The company I worked in was very small and several of our key programmers, guys I had worked beside for years, came from Kuwait. After Saddam invaded Kuwait, I saw the lives of these guys turn upside-down. They were desperate to find family and loved ones. The fate of their country was unclear. Saddam can never be considered a benevolent guy, nor his regime just. I look at Desert Storm as the only way that thug was going to get out of Kuwait. It was apparent to me in the time prior to and during the occupation of Kuwait by Saddam that any response without the US was going to be impotent. I remember thinking that the countries with the greatest stakes probably couldn't agree on what to eat for lunch much less how to deal with this brigand who had invaded a sovereign nation on the whim he wanted to annex it.

That said, our follow-up, our responses, and subsequent actions were the mark of truly stupid decisions. The sanctions did nothing but introduce suffering and if we look to Cuba, sanctions have never worked to bring down a regime.

The recent invasion was one that saw international protest, as well as significant protest inside our borders. Saddam was a discredited tin-pot dictator who took great pleasure in the torture of his countrymen. No one is going to miss this guy and most will be happy to see him go. However, for the current administration to do this action was flat-out wrong. The

crucial one for America. There are many who believe that for America to regain its lost standing in the world, its essential that we have change of government here. What are your views on this? How is the Muslim vote aligning on Kerry vs. Bush? What are your own activities in this area?

OA: Four years ago, most Muslims lined up behind Bush. Candidly his social agendas, profamily stance and "compassionate conservative" approach seemed to fit a profile Muslims could get behind. We blew it. I know what they say about hindsight, and I can tell you that the Muslim base isn't going to be fooled twice. I don't know that folks are specifically pro-Kerry as much as they are "anyone-who-is-not-Bush."

This is a crucial election. So was the one two years ago when congress was up for election. We tend to think of elections only in four-year cycles and only at the presidential level. There is a lot of law and policy that the president has nothing to do with. We as Muslims have had very few candidates run, and none of them have won office. We need competent Muslims to run and serve in office. There are thousands of offices around the US that are contested every election. Everything from School Board to Sheriff to city council. Muslims need to take part in campaigns, elections and run for office. Again -- we need to invest in our communities.

DS: Let's talk about AMILA (American Muslims Intent on Learning and Activism). Eight years ago it was primarily a spiritual group that discussed religious texts. Now it seems to be a lot more politically active, which was probably shaped by post 9/11 realities. Can you talk about the work you guys do now?

OA: The "activism" part is a major focus for us. The spiritual portion is still very active with our Ramadan retreat and monthly programs. I mentioned that many Muslim communities in the US tend to be centered around a particular ethnic group. AMILA has been American-centric. We are part of the American fabric. The work has been wonderful, from raising money for the annual Eid Gift Drive, to helping in soup kitchens, to hosting thought provoking speakers to share their thoughts. We're continually looking for more ways to bring the American Muslim community together and build greater ties with our countrymen.

DS: The 2004 elections are a



All health information to keep you up to date

ABC of Anthrax

WHENEVER we talk about the 9/11 incident, the word "chemical attack" comes to mind automatically. Do you remember those days? Switch on either CNN or local news -- Anthrax Scare is a travel companion together with terrorism.

Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. The Anthrax spores can survive in soil for years or decades. Anthrax most commonly occurs in animals like cattle, sheep, goats or camels. It can also occur in wild animals like antelopes and other herbivores. Humans generally acquire the disease directly or indirectly when they are exposed to infected animals or occupational exposure to contaminated animal products. Control in livestock is therefore the key to reduced incidence. So far there are no recognised cases of person to person transmission.

The disease still exists in animals and humans in South and Central America, Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East and certain areas of Australia. We are lucky in Bangladesh that it's free from Anthrax.

The disease's impact on human health can be really distressing. Symptoms of disease vary but usually occur within 7 days. This infection can occur through skin (cutaneous), inhalation (pulmonary) and gastrointestinal. We can be infected with anthrax by handling products from infected animals or by inhaling anthrax spores from contaminated animal products. And also by eating undercooked meat from infected animals.

About 95 per cent of cases are skin type when a spore enters the skin through a cut or an abrasion; may be while handling contaminated wool, hides, leather or hair products from infected animals. Skin infection looks like an insect bite in the beginning but within 1-2 days develops into a vesicle and then a painless ulcer with a characteristic necrotic area in the centre. Doctors may find a swelling in adjacent lymph glands. Initial signs of gastrointestinal type are loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting and fever followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood and diarrhoea. Initial symptoms in inhalation type may look like a common cold. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing troubles and shock. In reality, inhalation anthrax is most dangerous.

All these three types of anthrax are very dangerous if not treated promptly. Anthrax is diagnosed by examining the blood, skin lesions, or respiratory secretions. Vaccines are offered for animals and humans. It is reported to be 93 per cent successful. Anthrax vaccines considered for animals should not be used in humans. Nevertheless their use should be limited to high-risk groups, such as those occupationally exposed and in some military settings. Antibiotic therapy usually results in dramatic recovery of the individual infected with anthrax if given before onset or immediately after onset of illness. Antibiotic therapy may also be used for prophylaxis in asymptomatic patients believed to have been exposed to Anthrax.

Naeem Mohaiemen is New York correspondent for The Daily Star.