

Not bowled over by Tablighi Jamaat

Contributed by Dominic Whiteman
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In the summer of 2006, I was asked by a senior British politician to draw up a list of organizations operating in Britain which deserved to be banned. This list did not include already proscribed entities, like Al Qaeda or the LTTE.

Top of my list were the offshoots of Al Mujahiroun - Al Ghurabaa and the Saved Sect (which were banned in August by the British Home Secretary). They sat alongside the anti-Semitic, extreme Islamist sect Hizb ut Tahrir (ban under review). Included in a column marked "increased monitoring essential" was Tablighi Jamaat - an Islamic missionary and revival movement, now with several million members worldwide, founded in what is now Pakistan in the early twentieth Century, as a response to Christian evangelists working among poor and poorly educated Muslims in British India.

No one with access to reliable intelligence accuses Tablighi Jamaat of direct involvement in terror. Indeed, it's more often than not a mistake to see them as political at all. Yet some interesting connections are emerging:

We already knew that two of the 7/7 bombers attended the Tablighi European headquarters mosque in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. In August, we learned that at least four of those charged with the alleged airline 'terror plot' worshipped at another Tablighi mosque. In September, Muslims in Gillingham, Kent, warned of a Tablighi Jamaat "fundamentalist" takeover there. Finally, this month, we learned that Aishah Azmi, the Dewsbury teaching assistant who wore her veil in class, followed the instructions of a Tablighi Jamaat imam.

American intelligence analysts have justified the continued extrajudicial detention of dozens of Guantanamo captives, including Abdul Hakim Bukhary and Ghallab Bashir, in part, on allegations that Tablighi Jamaat has ties to terrorism.

{mosgoogle left}The question of just who Tablighi Jamaat are is a pressing one in London, where the group has put forward for planning permission a 50,000 square meter "super-mosque" - to be built right alongside London's Olympic Park in the Newham area of East London. If the intended building is permitted, it will eventually accommodate 70,000 worshippers, cost 100 million UK pounds, be called the London Markaz and will be the largest mosque in Europe.

Although Tablighi Jamaat's charitable trust, the Anjuman-e-Islahul Muslimeen, already owns the 18-acre site, it is understood that the British Government will intervene and turn down the planning application for the mosque. Nonetheless, Tablighi Jamaat has hired a lobbying firm with a track record of supporting controversial planning applications, in an attempt to build political support for the project. Indigo Public Affairs says, "Our client utterly refutes any links to terrorism. It is a predominantly apolitical organization seeking to go about its faith in a peaceful way." Indigo has been told to go for a scaled-down building (which can be added to later) should opposition to construction win the day.

More than six months have passed since I drew up my list of groups who should face a ban in Britain. During those six months, after visiting Tablighi Jamaat mosques in London and Yorkshire, while listening to the advice of VIGIL associates now living in London who have been attending Tablighi Jamaat meetings and mosques, I am more than convinced that Tablighi Jamaat should not be banned. Tablighi Jamaat's leadership is no more guilty for the group's links to Islamist terrorists than the Pope is for the Catholic church's links to IRA terrorists. In fact, if all Britain's Muslims were Tablighi Jamaat devotees and lived their lives according to Tablighi doctrines, there would be little to no problem with violence-espousing, extreme Islamism in the UK.

For Tablighi Jamaat's brand of Islam focuses on Ijtima, Ghust, Chilla and Kitaab reading - drawing the attention of its followers away from jihad. It is focused primarily on proselytism and in Britain the thing it focuses on most is door knocking. Its leaflets - unlike Hizb ut Tahrir's - are non-political and certainly not inflammatory. It is less a stealthy legion and more a time-consuming cult.

But surely the true litmus test of whether the group should face a ban or not is displayed by how other extremist Islamist groups see it and react to it. And Tablighi Jamaat gets the backs up of the Islamists -political Muslims - in the UK and across the world, who whine about how the Ummah's energies are diverted and sapped by Tablighi Jamaat because of its popularity, while these energies should be used to "defend the Ummah" and get up the noses of the Kuffar (unbelievers) instead. For this one reason alone, Tablighi Jamaat should escape a ban. As one veteran campaigner of MPAC(UK), the Islamist (but recognizing British voting systems) group wrote, "Imagine all these door knockers at election time, the message they could spread. One can only dream. Actually the most potent Muslim force out there, it takes courage and conviction to knock on people doors, and take rejection, and here we in the Muslim community have a latent potent force, which is being wasted."

If their ban is off the agenda, are Tablighi Jamaat an organization which should be encouraged by passing plans for the Markaz? Are they at one with, or opposed to, British values?

Tablighi Jamaat is not political (as yet). This does not mean that it is a group bursting with sweetness and light. Far from it - it teaches world domination by Islam; it does not recognize the nation state; and teaches the doctrines such as the second class status of women and the sinfulness of both interfaith dialogue and the toleration of non-Muslim religions.

In December 2006, one London Tablighi imam urged followers, including one of VIGIL's associates, to spend more time off work and on pilgrimage saying that they had no excuses, especially in a country where they could claim all sorts of state benefits. It is true that Tablighi imams try as best they can to draw followers away from being economically productive in the sense that they urge followers to devote more and more of their time to the Tablighi cult - two days a week becomes two weeks a month becomes six months a year.

The group is ridiculously secretive - which can only foster outsider suspicions - and certainly its Dewsbury headquarters is more Hitler's bunker than, just as an example, the welcoming open doors of equivalently proselytizing "happy-clappy" Christian evangelical groups in operation in the UK. Its religious education programs are discriminatory and promote intolerance. Its leadership prefers languages like Urdu to English and its women folk are often dressed from head to toe - thus erecting social barriers rather than dismantling them.

Tablighi Jamaat seek an Islamic society throughout the world, and that includes Britain. At the last time of counting, 98.3 percent of Britons could think of nothing worse than Britain as an Islamic Society. Perhaps this would explain the findings of an ICM opinion poll in February 2007, to which the Labour MP Sadiq Khan commented, "vast numbers of Muslims feel disengaged and alienated from mainstream British society"... the British Muslim population is only 2.5 percent of the population.

The London Markaz should be prevented from being built - in the sense that the last thing Britain, let alone London, needs is another "ghetto" (recall radical Muslim Abu Izzadeen last year chiding the Home Secretary in Leytonstone for visiting "Muslim land") which the Markaz will promote in what is currently a diverse part of the country where Tamils of

various religions live peacefully alongside Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews.

Abdul Khalique, the Markaz project manager, is being blind when he says, "My foremost vision is to break down the barriers - to bring the people of Newham together. If we can understand culture, and not try to change culture, we will get on together more happily." The planned Markaz is gargantuan and will dominate Newham if built - peaceful coexistence between religions in such a cosmopolitan inner city area is hardly encouraged by one religion plunking its ownership so visibly over such a large piece of both land and skyline, where its history is trifling compared to the history of the Jews and Christians who have lived there for centuries. History not relevant? Then try size ...Liverpool's Anglican cathedral, the largest Christian place of worship in Britain, has a capacity of 3,000 not 70,000 and is not crammed into an inner city which is so culturally diverse.

Tablighi Jamaat is able to pursue its aims because Saudi Arabia spends billions of dollars of its oil revenues every year on building and maintaining mosques and supporting it. And - dare the elephant in the room be acknowledged - why should we allow the Saudis to fund mosque building, let alone super-mosque building, in the United Kingdom when they do not allow any non-Muslim places of worship to be built on their territory, nor do they allow any other forms of religion to be openly practiced?

From VIGIL's examination of Tablighi Jamaat in the United Kingdom - our report will be published in June 2007 after one year of monitoring the group's activities - there are undoubtedly rotten apples in the organization. Our findings tend to chime with Alexis Debat of The Nixon Center who stated that, "The organization is present in more than 80 countries, and about 99.9 percent of its activities are legitimate, peaceful and apolitical... It's dedicated to improving society through individual development... They claim it's not a political goal, but I'd argue that trying to change a society's values is a political project, philosophically speaking. The question is how to root out the 0.1 percent ... without antagonizing the rest of the community." Certainly, our findings show that members of Tablighi Jamaat put religion first and last - they have no concept of what is Caesar's and what is God's, thus run contrary to Britain's cherished secular, free society and hard-fought British values. In light of this alone, as they are seeking to dominate with their beliefs, they are not a group who should be encouraged; certainly not given "landmark" status.

Tablighi Jamaat shows a lot of ambition and its ambition is undoubtedly organised. It's a group which tries to gain legitimacy and following within the Muslim world by openly advertising the various celebrities and notables in its ranks. (Its hiring of Indigo for the Markaz project is indicative of such organized ambition). But if it wants to dominate a country, Britain's the wrong place for it to try - Britain's not interested in becoming an Islamic society. And the last thing Britons want when the London 2012 Olympic Games are flashed across the world's screens is a gargantuan symbol of Britain's tolerance towards men who oppress women - might as well have a colossal statue of John Knox sitting alongside it and have a grand old male-only celebration while we're at it of medieval values.

It's beyond most people in Britain as to why religions bother proselytising any more. After all, we've got Broadband now and can choose to engage in religion of our own volition if we so wish, rather than having it rammed down our throats by those who "know" the truth. It's also beyond most people in Britain why Islamists persist in mixing Islam with British politics when they have about as much chance of politically imposing their religion on our secular lives as we have of being eaten in one by a mosquito.

Sure - Tablighi Jamaat, for now, is not mixing Islam and politics. But by imposing the Markaz and by being so ambitious in its celebrity recruitment and in other areas it is either disclosing that it has political presence or getting very close to coming out as a political organization.

Maybe Tablighi Jamaat just needs a change at the top - some new decision makers who aim to step less on the toes of people who do not belong to the cult and reinforce in the minds of those who may ban it that they're a peaceful bunch who are catching up with the better values of the twenty-first century after all. Perhaps appoint a woman (though we'd have to see her face) as its Ameer?

Or maybe Tablighi Jamaat - in its attempts to get too big for its boots - is losing its vogue? Speaking to a Pakistani colleague this morning after breakfast, I am told that Tablighi Jamaat is now getting the blame for the Pakistan cricket team's extraordinary loss to Ireland in the Cricket World Cup. (Yesterday on St Patrick's Day, Ireland - where virtually no cricket is played at all - beat Pakistan in Sabina Park, Jamaica, and knocked one of the world's foremost cricketing nations out of the cup altogether. One of the most shocking things that has ever happened in international sport).
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The Pakistani Newspaper notes, "The 3-4 months in a year that the Pakistani team members such as Imran Khan, Majid Khan, Asif Iqbal, Sarfraz Nawaz, Javed Miandad, Zaheer Abbas, Mohsin Khan, Rameez Raja, etc, used to spend in England playing county cricket, would make them adopt the lifestyle of any other English cricketer: liquor, nightclubs, girlfriends and everything else that comes with the package. However, those days of cricketing casualness are now memory, as are so many aspects of secular life in Jinnah's Pakistan. The Pakistani cricketers have never pursued their religious beliefs as devoutly as they do nowadays.

"Bismillah" (In the name of Allah) or "Inshallah" (God willing) stud their every utterance, no matter whether they are on the field or elsewhere. The team members huddle together to pray on the ground during pre-match preparations; 'Islamic beards' are sported as an advertisement of their faith; batsmen have known to cramp because they fast and play during the holy month of Ramadan. This religiosity has come about because a clutch of players -- Inzimam, Mushtaq Ahmed (bowling coach), Mohammad Yousaf, Saqlain Mushtaq, Shahid Afridi, Shoaib Malik and Yasser Hameed - have become members of the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), participating in public gatherings organized to propagate Islam and stress the virtue of an 'authentic Islamic lifestyle'. The TJ has invaded the dressing room of the Pakistani cricket team - they can be seen praying with players and reciting the Holy Quran for the team's success (never mind that it has been performing poorly). As TJ membership makes it incumbent upon a person to preach, most of the Tablighi cricketers, especially Inzimam, often conduct preaching tours across Pakistan. Inzimam's penchant to mix religion with cricket has already sparked accusations that he favours Tablighi players over those who are either secular or prefer to confine religion to their private lives. The non-Tablighi group is reportedly led by Vice-Captain Younas Khan and includes Shoaib Akhtar, Mohammad Asif, Danish Kaneria, Imran Nazir, Abdul Razzaq, etc. This divide often shadows differences between players. This shrinking of the secular space is perhaps already happening in the cricket team. But for those persevering in the way of Allah Almighty, these are minor matters."

Apparently, the conspicuous Islamicisation of the Pakistani cricket team recently prompted even Pakistan's President - General Pervez Musharraf - to advise the Chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board Dr Naseem Ashraf to ask the players to strike a balance between religion and cricket. One imagines his prompts sounded more like orders this morning.

Whether it's religion and politics or, more importantly, religion and cricket - religion just doesn't mix.

Tablighi Jamaat should not be banned in Britain. But someone should tell it to focus its ambitions less on unattainable erections and more on bringing its subjugated womenfolk into modernity.

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