

PolicyWatch #1390 : Special Forum Report

The Way Back from Islamism

Featuring Maajid Nawaz
July 16, 2008

On July 11, 2008, Maajid Nawaz addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Nawaz was a longtime member of the British leadership committee of Hizb al-Tahrir (HT), an international Islamist movement. In 2002, while studying in Egypt, he was arrested for his membership in the group and was imprisoned in Egypt's Mazra Tora prison until 2006. He returned to Britain upon his release and publicly announced his withdrawal from HT in 2007. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Youthful Discontent

To minimize and counter the effects of the radicalization process, one must understand both the ideology and factors that make individuals susceptible to it. To begin my story, my mother, who was fully integrated into British society, raised me in a liberal household in Essex, England, while my father worked for an oil company overseas.

During my teenage years, several experiences disenfranchised me. Combat Eighteen, a neo-fascist organization that used violence to intimidate whites who associated with immigrant populations, stabbed a Caucasian friend right in front of my eyes. After the charges against the perpetrators were dropped, I began to feel frustrated with British society. I was further disillusioned when local police wrongfully arrested me at gunpoint on suspicion of armed robbery. I was later released without an apology, and the police claimed it was a case of mistaken identity.

Another factor exacerbating my identity crisis was the language barrier between the local imams and me. They were not fluent in English, making it difficult to relate or communicate with them.

Global Muslim Community

In addition to these local experiences, there was the international context. In the early 1990s, I associated all of my problems with racism, but the ethnic violence in Bosnia brought religious identity problems to the forefront. As a result, I was confronted with an identity crisis and began to wonder, "Am I British? Am I Pakistani? Am I Muslim?" At this point, when I was sixteen years old, I encountered a member of Hizb al-Tahrir (HT) who answered these questions by saying that I was a part of the global Muslim community.

This had a profound effect on me when I went to college, where I met Ed Husain and established an HT cell. From there, I went to Pakistan in 1999 to set up an HT presence. The organization wanted to establish itself in Pakistan because it had just become the first Muslim country to test nuclear weapons in May 1998, and HT wanted to facilitate the acquisition of nuclear technology for the caliphate it hoped to establish. In 2000, I was sent to Denmark to start another HT branch, and then I left for Egypt to study Arabic where I was imprisoned by the Egyptian government.

My experience in prison was a critical step in my de-radicalization. While in prison, I learned Arabic and was able to read classical Islamic texts as well as interact with intellectuals and dissidents, such as Egyptian

opposition leader Ayman Noor who challenged and debated my ideas. Another factor that proved vital to my de-radicalization was my adoption by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. Since HT does not advocate the use of violence, Amnesty does not consider it a terrorist organization. It worked to secure my release, which opened my heart to the fact that the "enemy" went out on a limb to defend me, making me realize that there were good non-Muslims.

The Radicalization Process

In understanding the power of the HT movement and ideology, it is important to consider why other ethnic groups, who have experienced similar socioeconomic and racial issues, do not participate in a global struggle. The answer to this question is found in my experiences and what I later taught young HT recruits. The organization's method is to access the individual through existing grievances, and then build an ideological framework in the recruit's mind. Each recruit must participate in the process of "culturing," which consists of at least one two-hour discussion every week that addresses broader political and theological matters. For example, they would present dictatorships as illegitimate and then discuss alternatives.

I now consider HT's approach an abuse of theology for political ends. It rejects freedom and liberty as alternatives to dictatorships, and instead presents the caliphate as the solution -- in reality, a dictatorship to replace a dictatorship. A good example of its hypocrisy is HT's opposition to the establishment in Turkey. Its complaint is not that Turkey needs to be more democratic, its real grievance is the absence of God's law on earth, or in other words, ruling by *sharia*. For this reason, it is actively involved in infiltrating the Turkish military to spark a coup. Simply put, HT is actively opposed to democracy in any Muslim country.

HT has used a meta-narrative to recalibrate recruits' minds to the Islamist ideology, and also to create new grievances where none existed before. The Islamist meta-narrative was articulated first by the founder of HT, Taqiuddin Nabhani, and was later built upon by Sayyid Qutb, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamist explanation of problems lies in *haq* versus *batil* (truth versus falsehood), or put another way, Islam versus heresy. Previous local grievances (socioeconomic or racial) are reinterpreted, and new global grievances (Iraq, Bosnia, etc.) are discovered through this framework. In essence, localized problems of economics and racism are reinterpreted as a global Muslim struggle.

Finding Solutions

To address radicalization, one must undermine local grievances and counter the Islamist ideology. The Quilliam Foundation, which I helped establish, works to critique and refute this ideology wherever it is found. Quilliam advises government officials and articulates a counter-narrative so that Islamists cannot indoctrinate aggrieved populations. This counter-narrative asserts that Islamism is an irreligious, modern concept, and that extremists are falsely claiming to preach a religious, traditional ideology. The Quilliam Foundation is challenging not only HT, but all Islamist groups including al-Qaeda. These groups share Islamist ideology, but differ on tactics. Nabhani crystallized HT's ideology in 1953, laying out three core aims: to overthrow every Arab and Middle Eastern regime through a military coup, to replace them with caliphate, and to use that caliphate to conquer the rest of the world. Today you can hear these aims from al-Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri -- the same theory coupled with a tactical shift toward terrorism.

It is critical for Muslims to develop a "Western" Islam. Historically, Islam has developed differently in various countries. For instance, Moroccan Islam is different from Indonesian Islam. Western Muslims need an Islam that is in harmony with society, not in conflict with it. Furthermore, Muslims should engage in politics not as Muslims, but as citizens of their country.

Muslim communities are dynamic. Consequently, a nuanced approach to countering the Islamist ideology is needed. To begin, there are Islamists and non-Islamists. In the non-Islamist camp, there are conservatives and progressives. In the Islamist camp, there are political Islamists, who wish to establish Islamism through the electoral process, revolutionary Islamists, who want to instigate military coups but do not target

non-combatants, and jihadists, who are militant Islamists that use terrorism and target non-combatants. The danger lies in assuming that jihadists and terrorism are the only threats. The Quilliam Foundation believes that ideology is the real threat, and consequently, critiques and refutes all Islamists. Quilliam believes that the British government should not work with any Islamist groups, though banning them may not necessarily be the answer.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Albar Sheikh.

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