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**From Spirituality to Radicalization**  
**Tableeghi Jamaat and the Potential for Transnational Violence**  
**By Newton Howard and Ammar Qusaibaty\***

An increasing number of disaffected young men and women are joining the ranks of fundamentalist religious organizations. A nonpolitical congregation of Muslim preachers that proselytize and operate mosques across the world, Tableeghi Jamaat<sup>1</sup> (TJ) may be considered one of the largest Muslim religious groups. Headquartered in the New Delhi suburb of Basti Nizamuddin, the organization is active through established “contacts and centers throughout the Muslim world.” (Raman 1999) A number of TJ mosques are spread throughout Europe and in the United States, where the organization has secured over 50,000 members. (*All Things Considered* 2005) Most popular in South and Southeast Asia, home to half of the world’s Muslims, the group operates more branches in more countries than other Muslim fundamentalist movements. (Sadowski 1996)

Considered the largest Muslim missionary movement in the world, Tableeghi Jamaat’s annual November gathering in Raiwand, Pakistan may be second only to the *hajj*<sup>2</sup> in the number of Muslims it draws. (Smith 2005) Close to 3.5 million followers from some 70 countries were estimated to have attended the final sermon, or *akheri munajat*, in 2004. (*Hindustan Times* 2005) In addition to undertaking a month-long trip to Pakistan for study at the organization’s central mosque, each Tableeghi is expected to proselytize three times per month and 40 days each year. (Smith 2005; NBC 2005) In an attempt to emulate the life of Prophet Muhammad, Tableeghi Jamaat, “the Preaching Party,” encourages its members to adopt a highly ascetic lifestyle and a strict interpretation of the *shari’a*, or Islamic law, in order to reinforce and extend the spread of Islam. (Smith 2005; Bokhari 1998) The group’s leadership is highly hierarchical, and instituted through blood or marriage ties to Ilyas, the group’s founder. (Gaborieu 1999; Alexiev 2005: D2)

### **A Violent Potential**

TJ draws from the Deobandi sect, one described as “extremely intolerant of all other Islamic trends.” (Belokrenitskiy 2000: A3) While TJ extols its belief that Muslims can live peacefully with other communities, certain Deobandi groups, such as the Harkat ul-Mujahideen, encourage jihad against India in Kashmir. (Joshi 2001) In line with the fundamentalist groups Jamaat e-Islami and Markaz Dawa ul-Irshad, Tableeghi Jamaat rejects the inclusion of subcontinental characteristics in Islam. (Joshi 2001: C2)

While Tableeghi Jamaat endows itself with the peaceful mission to spread Islamic spirituality (Ali 1997) by fostering “an egalitarian atmosphere in which members emulate the dress, speech, and habits of the Prophet Muhammad,” (Sadowski 1996) TJ affiliation has at times been linked

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as *Jamaat at-Tableegh wa ad-Dawa* in Arabic

<sup>2</sup> One of the five pillars of Islam, the hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca after the holy month of Ramadan that every Muslim is expected to accomplish at least once in his lifetime.



with radicalization. Dr. Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the Muslim Parliament in Afghanistan, acknowledges that “a lot of people who have gone on to become involved in [extremist] Islamic activities have at some stage been involved with Tablighi Jamaat.” (Gadher 2002) 80 percent of Muslim extremists in France are namely estimated to have received mentoring from TJ. (Alexiev 2005) Members of the group have also been linked to the transnational Muslim fundamentalist organization Al-Qaeda and have been considered accessories to a number of attacks. (*Eesti Paevaleht* 2005)

Aiming to build a transnational Islamic state, (Bassey 2005) TJ seeks to undertake a “planned conquest of the world” close to medieval holy war. (Gaborieau 1999) Although not explicitly encouraged, violence is sanctioned as a means to carry out this goal. Raouf ben Halima, a Tableeghi, namely insists that the group “only cares about bringing people back to Islam,” but acknowledges that TJ-sponsored trips to Pakistan have a secondary effect of placing young men in contact with fundamentalist groups. Although most Tableeghi Jamaat members adopt moderate forms of Islam, impressionable youth easily adopt more militant forms. (Smith 2005) TJ’s Taxila, Punjab center, headed by Sufi Iqbal (Mufti Iqbal), explicitly encourages jihad and active political participation. The center supports *jihad bi as-saif* (jihad through the sword), a call to arms, in contrast with the *jihad bi an-nafs* (jihad through conscience) advocated by TJ as a whole. (Raman 1999)

### **Tableeghi Jamaat Hijacked**

Tableeghis have been linked to acts of political violence, such as the March 11, 2004 Madrid bombings. (Agence France Presse 2005) Zacarias Moussaoui, the only man charged in connection with the September 11 attacks, was a TJ adherent in France. A former Tableeghi in France, Algerian-born Frenchman and confessed al-Qaeda member Djamel Beghal was convicted for plotting to destroy the American Embassy in Paris. Herve Djamel Loiseau, a Frenchman who died fleeing the 2001 American bombardment of Tora Bora in Afghanistan, was also a Tableeghi in France. (Smith 2005: B2) India’s Central Bureau of Investigations accused Maulana Sufiyan Patangia, mentor to the acting head of TJ’s Waliullah Madrassa, of managing a terror cell that murdered former Gujarat Home Minister Haren Pandya. (Swami 2003) Two of the prime suspects for the February 2002 torching of a train carrying 58 Hindu worshippers returning from the holy town of Ayodhya are allegedly associated with TJ. (Abraham 2002: A16). American Taliban John Walker Lindh was radicalized at the TJ-affiliated mosque in California (NBC Nightly News 2005; Sanders 2005). 29-year old Kamal Derwish recruited the “Buffalo six,” young US citizens from the suburb of Lackawanna to first attend religious training from TJ and later al Qaeda camp. (Augusta Chronicle 2002; Ciotta 2002) These serve as mere examples of the potential for radicalization presented by TJ affiliation.

While Tableeghis in India have confined themselves to peaceful activities, Tableeghi Jamaat’s branches in Pakistan and Bangladesh have helped Pakistani International Islamic members recruit youth for terrorist activities. (Indo-Asian News Service 2005) Tableeghi Jamaat members allegedly schemed to overthrow the government of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in



1995. (Alexiev 2005: 5) Senior-level army officers led by Major General Zaheerul Islam Abbasi were detained in connection with the coup attempt. Tableeghis, these officers were shown to have collected resources to purchase arms to support TJ-backed Kashmiri groups. These 20 civilians and 30 army officers worked closely with the Pakistani group Harkat ul-Mujahideen (HUM). (Raman 1999) TJ is also suspected of recruiting young Muslims in Arab countries to fight in Kashmir and Afghanistan. (Belokrenitskiy 2000; Stern 2003: A10; Zremski 2002)

TJ is considered a fertile recruiting ground for terrorist groups and violent activities. (Smith 2004) Michael J. Heimbach, then deputy chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s international terrorism section, asserts that Tableeghi Jamaat presence in the United States has been established and that Al-Qaeda has used Tableeghis as recruiters. Nonetheless, Tableeghi Jamaat leaders consider such allegations as "grossly unfair," asserting that their beliefs are the very opposite of Al-Qaeda's aims. (Sanders 2003) Those members advocating violence are therein considered to be only a fringe of TJ as a whole. Meanwhile, TJ activists have been expelled from Germany for preaching Islamic extremism (Agence France Presse 2005: B1) and from Kazakhstan for preaching religious extremism and recruiting youth to study at religious schools in Iran and Pakistan. (*Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty* 2003) Calling TJ a "foreign radical movement," the Kazakh government accuses the group of building an "underground cell network [to] conduct propaganda [for] religious intolerance." (*Ekspress* 2003) Russia has considered placing Tableeghi Jamaat on its list of terrorist organizations and prohibiting the group's activities within its territories. (Interfax 2005) A US Defense Intelligence Agency memo indicatea doubts that "radical extremists have been infiltrating this otherwise peaceful evangelical movement [Tableeghi Jamaat] and are using the organization as cover to network with other extremists in the US." (*The Frontrunner* 2005)

### **Engaging TJ Leadership: A Means to Halt Exploitation**

Tableeghi Jamaat presents an interesting case in terrorism doctrine, whereby a seemingly neutral network becomes polarized but must assure its neutrality in order to avoid problematic political discourse. If a violent militant organization such as Al-Qaeda highjacks an apolitical religious network such as Tableeghi Jamaat, can Al-Qaeda radicalize it, mobilize it and conduct highly coordinated transnational attacks through the active participation of Tableeghis? As demonstrated by investigations into recent terrorist attacks, Al-Qaeda, which advocates violence in the name of Islam, has the capacity to exploit groups such as Tableeghi Jamaat, which commends peaceful objectives. By exploiting the alienation many Tableeghis adopt toward society, Al-Qaeda can easily influence the most susceptible amongst them, such as youth. In collaboration with Al-Qaeda, these individuals quickly become radicalized and readied to perform coordinated acts of violence on a global scale. Tableeghi Jamaat's refusal to adopt a political stance and the ease with which its missionaries cross national borders further serves the purposes of violent groups.

As a 2003 Canadian intelligence service analysis recently highlighted, "there may be groups that do not actually profess its basic ideology and profound religiosity and yet use the cover of the



Tablighi Jamaat in order to evade scrutiny of the security forces, knowing full well that the Jamaat would not take a public stance against any defectors.” (Sanders 2003) Preventing such developments requires significant engagement of TJ leadership. While no government abiding by the universal laws of human rights can deny Muslims the right of congregating or engaging in activities that do not violate state laws, TJ leadership can halt violent exploitation of TJ preachings through increased organization and transparency. Though clearly abiding by no political agenda, Tableeghi Jamaat members include individuals who abide by a specific political ideology. In order to maintain its apolitical status, Tableeghi leadership must declare and act to underscore its separation from the militant indoctrination of some of its members, or face the inevitable consequences of being associated with violent, politically-motivated groups such as Al-Qaeda.



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