

Jama`at al-Fuqara': An Overblown Threat?

By Farhana Ali and William Rosenau

ALTHOUGH JAMA`AT AL-FUQARA' (JF) is virtually unknown to the general public, the group has periodically generated concern within U.S. intelligence and law enforcement circles. A Muslim sect with a long criminal past and extensive international connections, including ties to Pakistan's political and religious fringes, JF's activities have received heightened official and media scrutiny since 9/11. The organization has been described as a "terrorist outfit" with extensive links to al-Qa`ida;¹ as "one of the most elusive terrorist groups resident in the U.S.;"² and as "perhaps the most dangerous fundamentalist sect operating in the United States."³ In 1999, the U.S. Department of State categorized JF as a "terrorist group,"⁴ and more recently, in his important *CTC Sentinel* article on the organization, terrorism analyst Christopher Heffelfinger categorized JF as "a high risk for U.S. security."⁵

This article will offer some additional perspective on JF, or as the organization prefers to call itself, Muslims of the Americas (MOA).⁶ It will develop a deeper understanding of the group by exploring some particularly salient issues, such as the nature of the JF/

MOA's rural compounds, and the organization's ongoing evolution. In addition, the article will touch on the relatively unexplored subject of group leader Shaykh Mubarak Ali Gilani's activities in Pakistan, drawing on interviews conducted by one of the authors in that country in the spring and summer of 2008. The article will conclude with a reframing of JF/MOA that positions the organization as a public-safety rather than a counter-terrorism challenge.

JF/MOA Compounds

The organization maintains an estimated 20-30 compounds (known as *jama`ats*), primarily in the northeastern, mid-Atlantic, and southeastern regions of the United States. Compounds also reportedly exist in Canada, and in Trinidad and Tobago and other countries in the Caribbean basin, an important region for JF/MOA proselytizing.⁷ A *jama`at* can house as many as 300 members, according to one source.⁸ The percentage of JF/MOA's overall membership (estimated at 1,000-3,000)⁹ that lives in these compounds is unknown. The camps are physically isolated and not particularly welcoming to outsiders. Members of the Red House, Virginia *jama`at* have been convicted of a variety of weapons-related offenses, and reports of gunfire and "military-style training" at the Islamberg compound in remote Tompkins, New York have drawn the attention of local authorities.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that these or other *jama`ats* have functioned as "covert paramilitary training compounds," as the Colorado Attorney General's office alleged in December 2001.¹¹ It should also be mentioned that neither the presence of weapons (or even arsenals), nor weapons training are particularly unusual phenomena in rural America. It must also be noted that JF/MOA's self-imposed isolation from

a society it deems sinful and corrupt is hardly unique within the American religious tradition. Other Muslims, as well as Christians and members of other faiths, have engaged in various forms of intentional separation from American society. As early as 1938, Muhammad Ezaldeen, leader of the Addeynu Allahe-Universal Arabic Association (AAUAA), established the community of Jabul Arabiyya in West Valley, New York. The creation of autonomous, self-sufficient rural communities was for Ezaldeen and his followers an expression of the doctrine of the *hijra*, a concept from seventh century Arabia that refers to a physical migration, dating back to the time when the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims fled persecution in their homeland in Mecca to seek refuge in Medina. Moreover, the AAUAA argued that the right to establish such religious communities was constitutionally guaranteed.¹² This position is echoed in an MOA press release, which describes how the followers of "El Sheikh" have "left the decadence of the inner cities to practice the religious freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution."¹³

An Organizational Rebranding?

Given the group's secrecy, and the scarcity of primary sources, any conclusions about JF/MOA are necessarily preliminary and tentative. What can be said with some degree of confidence is that the group is working to present a more respectable appearance to the outside world. As noted by Heffelfinger and other analysts, JF/MOA earned a notorious reputation in law enforcement circles during the 1980s and 1990s when members were convicted for crimes ranging from fraud to conspiracy to commit murder. Clement Rodney Hampton-El, an alleged JF/MOA member, was the lone American among the conspirators convicted in the so-called "landmarks plot" to attack the UN headquarters and other prominent targets in New York.¹⁴ Group members

1 "Jamaat ul-Fuqra," *MilitantIslamMonitor.org*, March 27, 2006.

2 John Kane and April Wall, *Identifying the Links Between White-Collar Crime and Terrorism* (Glen Allen, VA: National White Collar Crime Center, 2004), p. 17.

3 Sean Hill, *Extremist Groups: An International Compilation of Terrorist Organizations, Violent Political Groups, and Issue-Oriented Militant Movements* (Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston University, 2002), p. 750.

4 "1999 Patterns of Global Terrorism," U.S. Department of State, 2000. It should be noted, however, that the State Department dropped JF from subsequent editions of "Patterns of Global Terrorism." Moreover, the secretary of state has never designated JF as a "foreign terrorist organization," which unlike the "terrorist group" appellation carries with it a variety of criminal sanctions. See "Jamaat ul-Fuqra Designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization?" U.S. Department of State, January 31, 2001.

5 Christopher Heffelfinger, "Jama`at al-Fuqara': A Domestic Terrorist Threat to the United States?" *CTC Sentinel* 1:9 (2008).

6 Members also sometimes identify the organization as the International Qur'anic Open University.

7 Chris Zambelis, "The Threat of Islamic Radicalism in Suriname," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:21 (2006).

8 Stewart Bell, "Extremists Train at Communes," *National Post*, June 22, 2006.

9 "Group Profile: Al-Fuqra," MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, accessed June 6, 2006.

10 "Authorities Eye Catskills Commune," *United Press International*, June 4, 2007.

11 "Information Regarding Colorado's Investigation and Prosecution of Members of Jamaat Ul Fuqra," Colorado Attorney General's Office, December 10, 2001.

12 Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 34.

13 "Muslims of the Americas Initial Press Release," November 28, 2002, previously available at www.holyislamville.org.

14 As Heffelfinger noted, the subject of Hampton-El's alleged membership never emerged during the trial. The closest evidence of a JF/MOA connection is a June 1993 *New York Times* article, whose author reports that un-

Barry Adams (alias Tyrone Cole) and Wali Muhamad (alias Robert Johnson) were prosecuted successfully in 1994 for conspiring to bomb a Hindu temple in Toronto.¹⁵ JF/MOA members have also been implicated in attacks on Laotian and Hari Krishna temples, and on members of a rival Muslim sect, the Ahmadiyya.¹⁶ More recently, JF/MOA has been offering a more benign public face. “We abide by the constitution,” a member told a reporter in 2002. “We do support our government, and we are peace lovers.”¹⁷

Whether such statements reflect a genuine move toward the religious and political mainstream is difficult to determine. JF/MOA, facing increased and unwanted scrutiny, may be attempting to obscure ongoing illicit

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operations. The group’s preference for the names MOA and the International Qur’anic Open University (IQOU), and its denial that JF exists, may reflect a desire to “rebrand” and reposition the organization, or possibly an effort at deception.¹⁸ Similarly, JF/MOA’s public

named New York City police detectives said that Hampton-El “worked closely with al-Fuqra.” See Craig Wolff, “Police Link Suspect to a Radical Sect,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1993.

15 Dominic Kalipersad, “Trinis Deported for Terror Links,” *Trinidad Guardian*, April 8, 2006.

16 Dannin, pp. 35-37. The attacks on the Ahmadiyya is an irony, given the central role Ahmadiyya missionaries from South Asia played in introducing African-Americans to Islam in the early decades of the 20th century.

17 Quoted in Jim Puzzanghera, “Muslim Group Denies Involvement in Terrorist Activities,” *San Jose Mercury News*, January 10, 2002.

18 See, for example, *Khadija A. Ghafur v. Jonatban Bernstein et al.*, First Appellate District of the California Court of Appeal, 2005.

service activities, such as its Hand to Hands Social Service Agency, which according to the group’s website provides assistance to victims of natural disasters and other services, could represent either an attempt at “mainstreaming”—taking part in charitable activities is a religious obligation for all Muslims—or continued deceit.¹⁹ Further complicating any assessment is the possibility that such measures could simultaneously signify normalization and deception. Given the scarcity of credible data on the group, it is currently impossible to reach any firm conclusions about its development.

Looking ahead, one indicator that could help analysts determine whether JF/MOA is in fact moving toward the mainstream is the trend in the group’s criminal behavior. Violent criminality was a notorious feature of JF/MOA during the 1980s and 1990s, as noted above. As even opponents of the group concede, however, JF/MOA has not engaged in that sort of criminal behavior since the early 1990s.²⁰ Since its founding in 1980, JF/MOA has also engaged extensively in revenue-generating crime, such as fraudulent claims for workers’ compensation. Although firm evidence is difficult to find, investigations into alleged fraud at a JF/MOA charter school near Fresno, California suggest that the organization continues to generate illicit revenue.²¹ Indeed, from Gilani’s perspective, JF/MOA’s most important feature could be its ability to raise financial resources for the Pakistani leader, who is alleged to support armed groups such as Hizb al-Mujahidin (HM) in Indian-occupied Kashmir.²² According to one former JF/MOA member, members “used to send

19 The website of Hand to Hands Social Service Agency can be accessed at www.handtohands.org.

20 See, for example, Zachary Crowley, “Jamaat al-Fuqra Dossier,” Center for Policing Terrorism, March 16, 2005.

21 Sean Webby and Brandon Bailey, “The Mysterious Saga of Sister Khadijah,” *San Jose Mercury News*, February 11, 2007; *Organized Crime in California: Annual Report to the California Legislature 2004* (Sacramento: California Department of Justice, 2005), p. 24.

22 See, for example, “Guide to Wahhabi Organizations in North America,” Center for Policing Terrorism, undated. According to one source, Pakistani intelligence provided much of HM’s initial funding. Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 165.

10% of all their earnings to the shaykh and then it got bumped up from 10% to 30%.”²³ Transfers to Gilani went “in cash through elders who frequently visited Pakistan.”²⁴ A dramatic reduction in such remittances—and in JF/MOA-associated crime—would represent an important development that could signal the increasing normalization of the group.

The Pakistani Connection

Gilani earned international notoriety in connection with the kidnapping and murder of Daniel Pearl, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was abducted while on his way to interview the shaykh in early 2002. Khalid Khawaja, a former intelligence officer allegedly tied to Gilani, was Pearl’s guide in Pakistan, according to a respected local journalist.²⁵ Why Pearl was seeking an interview remains uncertain, as does Gilani’s role in the case. Gilani was detained briefly by Pakistani authorities, and he has insisted publicly that he had nothing to do with the Pearl case, al-Qa`ida, or Usama bin Ladin. He also denies any connection with Richard Reid, the so-called “shoe bomber” who is alleged to have been a Gilani disciple. “I’m a reformer, educationist,” he told an American television reporter in March 2002.²⁶

Since then, Gilani has slipped back into obscurity. Interviews with government officials, analysts, and journalists in Pakistan this year suggested that Gilani was no longer receiving any extensive scrutiny. A high-ranking official in the Ministry of the Interior and a senior military officer both dismissed Gilani as irrelevant. According to one respected reporter, “Shaykh Gilani now keeps a low public profile,” adding that Gilani operates at two levels: politically (through figures such as Khawaja), and militarily, through his support for extremist groups in Kashmir.²⁷ According to another Pakistani

23 Quoted in Catherine Herridge, “Muslim-American Group Suspected of Channelling Money to Radical Pakistani Cleric,” Fox News, June 22, 2007.

24 Ibid.

25 Personal communication, Khalid Khawaja, September 2008.

26 “Sheik Gilani: CBS’ Man in Pakistan Tracks Him Down,” 60 Minutes, March 13, 2002.

27 Personal e-mail communication, anonymous journalist, September 2008.

journalist, "There is no doubt that he is still supporting the jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, but so is every other jihadist leader...Gilani is not important to the Pakistani security services right now. He is not on their terrorists' watch list."²⁸

During the 1980s and 1990s, JF/MOA reportedly sent more than 100 of its members to Pakistan. According to JF/MOA, they went solely for religious study, but U.S. sources cited in press accounts claimed that the real purpose was to receive military training, with dozens of individuals going on to the "fields of jihad" in Kashmir, Chechnya, and Afghanistan.²⁹ Whether JF/MOA continues to send its members to Pakistan for religious instruction or other purposes is uncertain; however, the high-profile prosecution of members of the so-called "Virginia Jihad Network" for traveling to Pakistan to receive terrorist training, and heightened law enforcement and intelligence scrutiny, may have dampened enthusiasm for such ventures.

Conclusion

JF/MOA's long history of criminality, and its apparent role as Gilani's North American "back office," makes the group a proper subject for official interest and attention. It is unlikely, however, that JF/MOA will become a terrorist threat, or serve as a U.S. platform for al-Qa`ida, as some sources have alleged. Heightened scrutiny of JF/MOA since 9/11 makes it an improbable operating partner for al-Qa`ida. Moreover, as Heffelfinger observed, Gilani and Bin Ladin are best understood as rivals rather than as confederates. In addition, Gilani's attention has always been directed principally at Pakistan and Kashmir, with North America serving merely as a financial means to an end. To the extent that U.S. national security policy aims to cut off funding for armed groups such as the ones that operate in Kashmir, and to the extent that JF/MOA is helping to fund those groups via Gilani, the organization poses a counter-terrorism challenge. Within the United States, however, JF/MOA should be framed in law enforcement

rather than counter-terrorism terms. For American Muslims, the challenge will be to help the group (or, perhaps, individual members) move away from the wilder shores of extremism that have been fostered by isolation.

For researchers, JF/MOA is likely to remain an analytical conundrum. Much of the available information on the group is dated or questionable. The group's membership is often described as primarily African-American, and made up largely of converts.³⁰ To what extent these factors have shaped JF/MOA merits additional study, as does the question of the group's place (if any) within the American black-nationalist movement. Moreover, little is known about the organization's North American structure, decision-making practices, or recruitment strategy. JF/MOA, with its charismatic leadership, secrecy, and physical isolation, would seem to resemble other religious cults, or as sociologists of religion prefer to term them, New Religious Movements.³¹ Indeed, one federal investigator said that the group's behavior and self-imposed isolation has led government officials to characterize the group primarily as a cult.³² Only a tiny handful of cults have engaged in acts of "collective implosion."³³ Yet, given JF/MOA's history of violence, its access to weapons, and the physical isolation of its members, law enforcement and social service agencies should remain alert to any indications that the organization is on a violently self-destructive trajectory.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of RAND or its research sponsors.

²⁸ Personal interview, anonymous Pakistani journalist, April 2008.

²⁹ David E. Kaplan, "Made in the U.S.A.," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 10, 2002.

³⁰ See, for example, Chris Zambelis, "Radical Trends in African-American Islam," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:16 (2006).

³¹ Alternatively, JF/MOA might be understood as a political cult. For more on this concept, see Dennis Tourish and Tim Wohlforth, *On the Edge: Political Cults Right and Left* (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2000).

³² Personal interview, anonymous federal investigator, Washington, D.C., June 2008.

³³ J. Gordon Melton and David G. Bromley, "Challenging Misconceptions About New Religions-Violence Connections," in David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton eds., *Cults, Religion, and Violence* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 48.