

The UK's Experience in Counter-Radicalization

By James Brandon

IN LATE APRIL, a new British Muslim group called the Quilliam Foundation, named after Abdullah Quilliam, a 19th century British convert to Islam, will be launched with the specific aim of tackling “Islamic extremism” in the United Kingdom. Being composed entirely of former members of Hizb al-Tahrir (HT, often spelled Hizb ut-Tahrir), the global group that wants to re-create the caliphate and which has acted as a “conveyor belt” for several British jihadists, the Quilliam Foundation represents a significant departure from conventional counter-radicalization efforts. If successful, it may become an important model for tackling Salafi-jihadi ideologies in Western Europe and in the United States.

The group's launch reflects the mixed results of previous British counter-radicalization efforts that have been dominated by conflict between Salafist Islamists and their secular Sufi rivals. These groups disagree substantially over the causes of Islamic extremism. On the whole, Islamist groups blame British foreign policy, Islamophobia and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for radicalizing young Muslims; Sufi groups acknowledge that these are contributing factors, but blame extreme Salafist ideologies for transforming these grievances into a literal *casus belli*.

“Preventing Extremism Together”

One of the earliest government attempts to encourage Muslims to tackle Islamic radicalism were the “Preventing Extremism Together” consultations. Held soon after the July 7, 2005 London bombings, the consultations brought together prominent Muslims and asked them to investigate the causes of the bombings and suggest ways to prevent future attacks. The discussions were dominated by members of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an umbrella group of Muslim organizations mainly run by supporters of Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the South Asian equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood, who packed the consultations with fellow Islamists. As a result, the consultations' conclusions,

published in October 2005, denied that Salafist ideologies played any role in the July 7 bombings and blamed British foreign policy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and “Islamophobia” for the attacks.¹ They recommended that the government tackle Islamic extremism by altering foreign policy and increasing the teaching of Islam in schools. Haras Rafiq, a Sufi member of the consultations, said of the meetings: “It was as if they had decided what their findings were before they had begun; people were just going through the motions.”²

Sufi Muslim Council

As a direct result of witnessing the Islamists dominate the Preventing Extremism Together consultations, Haras Rafiq established his own group called the Sufi Muslim Council (SMC). It was launched on July 19, 2006 at an event attended by Hazel Blears, the minister for Communities and Local

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Government.³ Rafiq said that he set up the SMC because he was frustrated that government efforts to tackle extremism had been repeatedly hijacked by Islamists and was angry that their attempts to make political Islam synonymous with the Islamic religion were damaging the faith as a whole. Rafiq hoped the SMC would tackle Islamist influence over government policy and, through grassroots work, give young Muslims a strong secular Sufi identity that would inoculate them against Salafi-jihadi thought. From its inception, however, the SMC suffered damaging attacks by established Muslim groups that accused it of being unrepresentative,

having “neo-con” links and supporting government anti-terrorism policies.⁴ Rafiq admitted that he was unprepared for the hostility—or effectiveness—of these Islamist attacks:

The Islamists are highly-organized, motivated and well-funded. The relationships they've made with people in government over the last 20 years are very strong. Anyone who wants to go into this space needs to be thick-skinned; you have to realize that people will lie about you; they will do anything to discredit you. Above all, the attacks are personal—that's the way these guys like it.

In spite of this, Rafiq was able to gain access to senior members of government, including Tony Blair, the then-prime minister, and urged them to re-think the government's deepening dependence on groups such as the MCB. Despite such successes at a policy-making level, however, the abuse directed at Rafiq—including death threats—gradually deterred others from speaking on behalf of the group, creating the impression that, in the words of one Muslim blogger, the SMC was “an outfit whose membership could probably fit on one piece of furniture.”⁵

Freelance Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Although the SMC became widely discredited among many British Muslims, by mid-2006 the group had broken the Islamists' stranglehold over government policy and emboldened Muslim secularists. In many cases, the most outspoken and influential of these critics were former extremists. In mid-2006, Shiraz Maher, a former mid-ranking member of HT, became the first to denounce his former ideology, writing newspaper articles and fronting television documentaries explaining how the ideas of HT and other Islamists lead to terrorism. Inevitably, he was attacked by HT and also received death threats. Similarly, in the summer of 2007, Ed Husain, a local leader of

1 *Preventing Extremism Together: Working Group Report August-October 2005*, available at www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152164.

2 Personal interview, Haras Rafiq, London, February 2008.

3 “Launch of the Sufi Muslim Council,” Department of Communities and Local Government, July 19, 2006, available at www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/sufi-muslim-council.

4 For an example of such criticism, see the article “Finally Exposed! The Sufi Muslim Council” on the website of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK) on February 8, 2006, available at www.mpacuk.org/content/view/2816/35/.

5 “Hunt Down the Sufis?” Indigo Jones Blog, December 17, 2007.

HT in East London during the 1990s, published a book, *The Islamist*, about his experiences, providing not only an insider's view of HT, but also describing Jamaat-i-Islami's attempts to monopolize Islamic practice in London's heavily Muslim East End. Although Husain—like Maher and Rafiq—came under assault from Islamist groups that sought to intimidate and discredit him, his bestselling book circumvented the Islamists to explain to the British public how Islamist teachings can lead to violence.

Others also renounced their former views. Hassan Butt, a former al-Muhajiroun member who helped British jihadists join the Taliban during 2001-2002, renounced his former views and claimed to have begun de-radicalizing former jihadists in Manchester.⁶ As a result, he was reportedly stabbed by other al-Muhajiroun members. He now plans to co-publish a book on his experiences later this summer. Others include Usama Hasan, a Salafist imam in East London, who denounced Muslim “pacifists” in 2001 and had joined the Afghan mujahidin to fight the country's communist government in 1990. Now, however, Hasan has become a prominent opponent of Salafi-jihadi ideologies—using his jihadist past to win credibility with his congregation, while continuing to identify himself as a Wahhabi. Hasan does not argue merely that jihadist attacks on the United Kingdom are only undesirable at present; instead, he challenges the theology behind such violence. For instance, he has challenged the use of *kafir* (heathen), calling the term intrinsically derogatory, and says that Islam prohibits the killing of all and any non-combatants, arguing that theological justifications for attacks against Israeli citizens inevitably open the door to similar attacks in Western countries. “Others argue that this terrorism is just counter-productive; I'm arguing that it's wrong and immoral and evil,” he said.⁷

Others also felt emboldened to stand up to pro-jihadist organizations. For example, Musa Abu Bakr Admani, the Muslim chaplain of London Metropolitan

University, a former stronghold of groups such as HT, independently took action to challenge student extremists. Admani has said that he took action himself after the government ignored his request for assistance.⁸ By early 2008, his efforts had begun to succeed; on March 11, members of the campus' Islamic Society complained on the radical website islambase.co.uk that they were no longer able to invite extremist preachers to their events because of Admani's influence.⁹

Quilliam Foundation

The Quilliam Foundation is expected to pose the biggest threat to radical Islamists thus far when it launches on April 22. Funded by Muslim donors, it is entirely composed of former HT members who have renounced their former beliefs. Its director is Majid Nawaz, formerly one of HT's most prominent members who gained celebrity status within the group after being jailed for three years

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in Egypt before being released in early 2007. In addition, the group's deputy director is Ed Husain, while Usama Hasan sits on the group's advisory council. Also involved is Rashid Ali, a former director of HT's secret command structure who wrote and edited many of the group's publications. “To refute or criticize Islamism as an ideology, it's important to have people who have been involved in it,” Nawaz explained. “People on both sides of spectrum still don't understand what Islamism is about. We can understand and explain this ideology because we were training people in it.”¹⁰

8 “Islamic Radicalisation,” BBC Radio 4, November 14, 2006.

9 Post entitled “Speakers needed!!!!!!” islambase.co.uk, March 11, 2008.

10 Personal interview, Majid Nawaz, London, March 20, 2008.

Once operational, Nawaz said that Quilliam will argue that Islamism is “the biggest form of extremism” and also “put out ideas regarding how to counter the Islamist narrative.” While Islamist groups often aim to defend political Islam from criticism, Nawaz says Quilliam aims to protect Islam itself from being associated with violence and refute arguments that Islam itself is the source of terrorism:

If people of both sides of the equation are saying Islam is the problem, then we can point to the biggest theologians who are around today who are saying that Islam can and is adapting to these problems. From a policy perspective, it is key to say that Islam isn't the problem. If you say that Islam is the problem then you're basically saying that 1.5 billion people are the problem.¹¹

Unlike the SMC, the Quilliam Foundation will launch without government backing. Instead, its launch will be attended by a range of prominent Muslim leaders, including Ali Goma, the mufti of Egypt. According to Nawaz, “In the Muslim community, it's important to have theologians with us if we're going to make progress.” In this respect, as in others, the group aims to learn from the mistakes of previous groups, keeping its distance from the government, working within the Muslim community and using the “extremist” background of the group's members to earn vital credibility among young British Muslims.

Conclusion

It is too early to judge the ultimate success of British counter-radicalization efforts. It is clear, however, that Muslim secularists are increasingly successful in finding ways to challenge jihadist ideologies. The Quilliam Foundation itself illustrates several important lessons of the British experience in combating extremism:

- The most committed opponents of extremism are often former radicals who are best able to explain the attractions and implications of radical Islam.

6 Ed Husain, “If Words Could Kill Me,” *New Statesman*, June 14, 2007.

7 Personal interview, Usama Hasan, London, December 28, 2007.

11 Ibid.

- Radical Islam's most ardent opponents are often pious Muslims who are motivated by a desire to protect Islam from being associated with violence and hatred.

- While Islamists regularly work closely with the government without losing influence in Muslim communities, reformists are often more successful if they keep their distance from government.

Nevertheless, many challenges remain. Hundreds of mosques and Islamic schools around the country are run by highly conservative members of the Deobandi and Salafist traditions, while Islamist groups frequently enjoy levels of foreign funding that their secularist and Sufi rivals cannot match. Furthermore, many politicians—particularly on the left—are willing to support Islamists in return for their support in elections. Despite this, it is clear that increasing numbers of secular Muslims are stepping forward to question jihadist ideologies regardless of the personal risk. One important outcome of this is that Islamists no longer monopolize the interpretation of Islam and can no longer portray their version of Islam as more genuine than others. Haras Rafiq said, "A few years ago the Islamists were able to say that their's was the only version of Islam and no one would contradict them; I don't think that's any longer the case." In other words, counter-radicalization efforts are not only tackling terrorism, but are also aiding the development of a more pluralistic, tolerant and, indeed, recognizably "Western" version of Islam.

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