

Jama`at al-Fuqara': A Domestic Terrorist Threat to the United States?

By Christopher Heffelfinger

ORGANIZED ON COMMUNAL compounds in the United States and Canada, surprisingly little is known about Jama`at al-Fuqara' (Community of the Impoverished)¹ and its current operations. The secretive organization—it publicly operates under the name Muslims of the Americas (MOA)—has been known to law enforcement since the 1980s for dozens of violent and white collar crimes in North America. It has been described by prosecutors as advocating “the purification of the Islamic religion by means of force and violence.” Yet, the group’s nature and organization as a terrorist entity seems as unclear today as at any point in its history.

The current Jama`at al-Fuqara' is obscured by a vague public ideology, careful to avoid any reference to Islamist ambitions or armed struggle. MOA and its subsidiary, the International Qur'anic Open University (IQOU),² carries out a number of public events and hosts videos and news of its activities online.³ Its Pakistan-based leader, Shaykh Mubarak Ali Gilani, and other U.S.-based leaders have done much to present a devout but always law abiding image, even organizing a Muslims Scouts wing for boys that helps the needy in their various communities. Fears persist, however, due to the group’s origins as al-Fuqara', and whether the militancy present at some of its compounds could turn anti-American.

Jama`at al-Fuqara' was designated a terrorist organization by the State Department in 1999 for its earlier offenses in the United States, including a range of firearms and explosives charges and a series of violent crimes.⁴ Yet its founder, Pakistani cleric Shaykh Gilani, continues to deny that such an

organization called Jama`at al-Fuqara' has ever existed. Gilani expressed in interviews to the Pakistani press his fears that the U.S. government seeks to brand him as a terrorist and thus jeopardize the security of his thousands of followers in the United States, the majority of whom are African-Americans living in compounds largely isolated from the rest of American society.⁵ That fear may be true; the group’s past ties to militancy and Gilani’s own record are correctly a cause for concern for U.S. law enforcement and counter-terrorism officials.

Al-Fuqara's History of Violence

There is no mention of outright militancy anywhere on IQOU-MOA’s website or in its public literature, but some members have had alleged ties to Salafi-jihadi militancy. Clement Rodney Hampton-El, the only American to be charged in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was reported to be a member of Jama`at al-Fuqara', although the information was not used at his trial.⁶ He was sentenced to 35 years in prison for his role in the attacks, and al-Fuqara' was mentioned as a target in the investigation of the bombing by officials in 1993.

Members of the group were also alleged to have cooperated with Wadih El-Hage (Wadih al-Hajj), an al-Qa`ida member who participated in the U.S. Embassy attacks in East Africa in 1998.⁷ In 1990, Dr. Rashad Khalifa, considered an unorthodox imam, was murdered in Tucson, Arizona. James D. Williams and a co-defendant were charged with conspiracy to commit the murder; both were identified by the Colorado Attorney General’s office as members of Jama`at al-Fuqara' and charged under the state’s organized crime act.⁸ El-Hage was then living and working in Tucson, and around that time hosted an unknown individual from New York

who had come “to check” on Imam Khalifa.⁹

Although al-Fuqara' members may have cooperated with Salafi-jihadi activists seeking mass casualty soft targets, their typical attacks have been smaller and more targeted, often directed against individuals. One of the first investigations of al-Fuqara' was initiated by the FBI in 1983, involving a murder and firebombing directed

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against the Ahmadiyya¹⁰ community in Detroit.¹¹ During the next two decades, al-Fuqara' members participated in several bombings against the worship centers of those they considered to be unbelievers—both Muslims and non-Muslims—across the United States.

Colorado police began investigating the group following the discovery of a storage locker in Colorado Springs containing an array of explosives, firearms, manuals for guerrilla warfare and bomb-making, and “Fuqra-related publications.”¹² That investigation—and the successful prosecution of several members in the late 1980s and early 1990s—revealed that the organization was comprised of at least 30 different closed communities in the United States, alongside “covert paramilitary training compounds.”¹³ The raids also discovered the existence of units called

1 Jama`at al-Fuqara' is frequently transliterated as Jamaat al-Fuqra.

2 It officially operates as IQOU-MOA.

3 The IQOU-MOA website can be accessed at www.iqou-moa.org.

4 “1999 Patterns of Global Terrorism,” U.S. Department of State, 1999.

5 Arshad Sharif, “Gillani Threatens to Sue Minister on Allegations of Links with India,” *Dawn*, February 23, 2002.

6 Francis X. Clines, “U.S.-Born Suspect in Bombing Plots: Zealous Causes and Civic Roles,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1993.

7 Martin A. Lee, “Strange Bedfellows,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Spring 2002.

8 “Attorney General Salazar Announces 69 Year Sentence for ‘Fuqra’ Defendant Convicted of Racketeering and Conspiracy to Commit Murder,” Colorado Attorney General’s Office, March 16, 2001.

9 Oriana Zill, “A Portrait of Wadih El-Hage, Accused Terrorist,” PBS Frontline, September 12, 2001.

10 The Ahmadiyya are an Islamic movement that began in the late 19th century in present-day Pakistan. Fuqara' members considered them unorthodox. The Ahmadiyya claim to have 60 chapters in the United States.

11 John Kane and April Wall, “Identifying the Links between White-Collar Crime and Terrorism,” National White Collar Crime Center, September 2004.

12 “Information Regarding Colorado’s Investigation and Prosecution of Members of Jamaat UI Fuqra,” Colorado Attorney General’s Office, December 10, 2001.

13 Ibid.

Muhammad Commandos divided into at least five different sections across the country. These units were designed to train Fuqara' members covertly, and based on the documents recovered by Colorado police, looked intent on hitting further targets in Colorado—such as the U.S. Air Force Academy—and other targets in the western United States. They also appeared to focus on intelligence gathering and reconnaissance. In addition, the *jama'at*, or community, in Colorado ran security firms, one that laundered \$350,000 in fraudulent workers' compensation claims for the al-Fuqara' organization and MOA.¹⁴ The creation of the security firm also allowed group members to obtain licenses for automatic weapons.

Al-Fuqara's leader, Gilani, was seen in a recruitment video from the early 1990s speaking of the "highly specialized training in guerrilla warfare" he offered his followers.¹⁵ The video, entitled "Soldiers of Allah," also showed guerrilla fighters using firearms and explosives, designed to bring potential combatants to Pakistan for paramilitary and religious training. As part of that effort, Muhammed Haseeb Abdul-Haqq—an American convert and member of MOA—helped set up "jihad councils" across the United States that sent 12 members to Pakistan in the early 1980s to fight in Afghanistan before they were stopped by U.S. and Pakistani officials.¹⁶

After 9/11, a few members from the group's Red House, Virginia compound were arrested and charged with firearms violations, including the property's owners, Vincente Pierre and Traci Upshur. In the arrests, investigators detailed Pierre's extensive ties to the al-Fuqara' organization; both he and his wife were convicted on multiple felony firearms charges.¹⁷ Investigators also said that one of the members from the Red House compound received training in Afghanistan.

Aside from the community in Buena Vista, CO, investigators discovered that Jama'at al-Fuqara' maintained around 30 different compounds that were "somewhat mobile in nature."¹⁸ While the Colorado compound was shut down in 1993, others—including those in Oklahoma, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, California and Michigan—continued to operate. The California *jama'at*, known as Baladullah, or "Land of God," was home to around 300 followers situated on 1,000 acres in Tulare County until it ran into legal challenges and apparently closed.¹⁹ As at other compounds, armed guards secured the entrance. Yet, Fuqara's largest enclaves are located at Holy Islamville in York County, South Carolina, and its headquarters, Islamberg, in Hancock, NY, where the property is registered under Muslims of the Americas Inc., according to county property records. Each of those communities also maintain their own websites. Their press releases and online publications have also listed addresses in Canada, Venezuela and Trinidad.

The Public Image

Mubarak Ali Gilani's image as guerrilla leader sharply contrasts with that of his persona as a peaceful Sufi spiritual leader. The website of IQOU-MOA's headquarters in Islamberg, New York, for example, describes Gilani's miracles in healing the sick, and the leader as a positive force for change among the numerous converts who have come to follow him.²⁰ Gilani even published a refutation of an investigative reporter who reported on militancy at MOA compounds in the United States.

In a statement refuting al-Fuqara's ties to terrorism, Gilani argued that their charitable activities with Muslim youth demonstrate that the group is not a threat:

On September 11th, about 100 MOA Boy Scouts belonging to MOA/IQOU were assisting the rescue and relief effort, on site, at Ground Zero, World Trade Center.²¹

18 "Information Regarding Colorado's Investigation and Prosecution of Members of Jamaat Ul Fuqra."

19 Jerry Seper and Steve Miller, "Militant Muslims Seek Virginia Base," *Washington Times*, July 1, 2002.

20 The group also hosts videos at www.youtube.com/islamberg.

21 Shaykh Mubarak Ali Gilani, "Exposing Roots of Terrorism in USA," IQOU-MOA, undated.

IQOU-MOA's literature describes the group's leader as a *murshid* (a spiritual guide, a term specific to Sufi Islam, particularly in the subcontinent), his full title being Sultan Muhyidden Syed Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani Hashimi, Al-Hasani wa'l-Husaini.²² The "al-Hasani wa'l-Husaini" indicates that he is *Ahl al-Bayt*, or a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad's family. He is also a direct descendant of `Abd al-Qadir Gilani, one of the most famous mystics in Sufi Islam.

The general Islamic information site, ummah.net, has a page dedicated to Gilani outlining his writings, contributions to Islamic sciences, miracles, and his efforts to "invigorate and refine" Islam in America.²³ It adds that

the majority of Sheikh Jilani's followers purchased land in areas away from the urban metropolis and developed small villages where they could raise their children in a wholesome environment and live a life of pure Islam, free from the decadence of a godless society.

Gilani went on to set up campuses for his Qur'anic Open University throughout the United States, Canada, West Indies, South America and Pakistan.²⁴ The group sent "aspiring believers" to Pakistan for intensive courses in Islamic studies, who then returned home to teach others. He also authored a number of works covering Islamic sciences and psychiatry, as well as traditional works of Hanafi *fiqh*, one of the Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence. One of his most impressive works is an English translation and "revision" of Khavendesh bin Mahmoud's *Rauzat-us-Safa*, a detailed biography of the Prophet Muhammad originally written in Persian.

Where Does al-Fuqara' Fit?

Jama'at al-Fuqara' is by no means a traditional Salafi-jihadi organization; clearly, Gilani's authority as an Islamic leader rests on his Sufi credentials, and

14 Ibid.

15 David E. Kaplan, "Made in the U.S.A.: Hundreds of Americans Have Followed the Path to Jihad," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 2, 2002.

16 Ibid.

17 "South: Virginia: Link To Terrorist Ring," *New York Times*, January 30, 2002.

22 Information on Gilani can be accessed on the Islamberg website, located at www.islamberg.org.

23 This page can be currently accessed at www.ummah.net/Al_adaab/sheikh/sheikhji.html.

24 Ibid.

his teachings support that assessment. IQOU-MOA celebrates the Prophet's birthday, performs songs in his honor, believes in saints and their power to heal through the Qur'an—in short, a list of grievous innovations (*bid'a*) to the Salafist school. Even Gilani's translation of a work of Islamic scholarship from Persian (as opposed to Arabic sources) is a deviation from Salafist norms.

A dossier from the Manhattan's Institute Center for Policing Terrorism—one of the few comprehensive open source documents available on Jama'at al-Fuqara—states that “Gilani preaches a Wahhabist, anti-Western worldview that ordains violence as the only means of purifying Islam.”²⁵ Gilani's beliefs, however, and the doctrine he formulates for his followers is in fact expressly anti-Wahhabi. Wahhabis, or the Salafis of Saudi Arabia, have depicted him as a deviant for his beliefs in Sufism and many of the practices associated with it. Yet, this cloak of quietist Sufism may well be an ideological cover for Gilani's violent activism, and that of his followers in the United States.

Jama'at al-Fuqara' is a unique organization in the world of Islamist militancy, and its leader claims a distinct legitimacy in Islam, counterpoint to Salafist currents. While members have cooperated with Salafi-jihadis at times, that is not the public ideology presented by its leadership—it purports to be Hanafi Sunni and Sufi. In that sense, Gilani can be considered more of a rival to Usama bin Ladin and other Salafi-jihadis, previously training his own mujahidin to serve in the fight against the Soviets, and allegedly sponsoring the paramilitary training of American Muslims since the early 1990s. Given the adaptability of its leadership and public message, its past criminal activities and the high degree of military training among al-Fuqara's members—in combination with potentially militant instruction from Gilani in Lahore—the organization remains a high risk for U.S. security.

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²⁵ Zachary Crowley, “Jamaat al-Fuqra Dossier,” Center for Policing Terrorism, March 16, 2005.