

Al-Muhajiroun in the UK: An Interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed

Publication: Spotlight on Terror Volume: 2 Issue: 5

May 25, 2005 04:02 PM Age: 11 yrs

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Jamestown Special Correspondent from London Mahan Abedin speaks with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed. Founder of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the United Kingdom, Bakri Mohammed later started the Al-Muhajiroun organization, which he now heads. He also acts as Supreme Judge of the Sharia Court of the United Kingdom and the Principal of the London School of Sharia. Mahan Abedin conducted this interview on March 10, 2004 at Bakri Mohammed's private residence in northeast London.

Q: I would like to start with your personal history. When did you join the Muslim Brotherhood [MB] in Syria?

A: I studied Islam from the age of 5 in the Al-Kutaab Islamic Boarding School. In the following 10 years I came across many Islamic teachers, ranging from Sufis, Usuli's, Ahl-ul-Hadith and Muslim Brotherhood. But my relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood really took off from the age of 15.

Q: Which year was that?

A: I was born in 1958, so it was around 1972-3. I pursued my Islamic studies alongside my association with the Muslim Brotherhood until the age of 17, and then I joined Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT).

Q: In Syria?

A: I joined MB in Syria, whereas I joined Hizb ut-Tahrir in Lebanon.

Q: The MB's challenge to the Syrian regime started in earnest from the mid-1970's onwards, and it climaxed in 1982 in Hama. Were you in any way involved in that struggle?

A: No, I was not. At that time the MB was an underground movement. They studied the works of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyed Qutb in private study circles. I was a seeker of Islamic knowledge in that sense, but was never involved in any type of military struggle. You should also note, that the main driving force behind the Syrian Jihad was al-Talaa' Al-Islamiyah, a group that was in alliance with the MB, but in later years distanced itself from the Brotherhood.

Q: These were the people who formed the al-Talaa' al-Muqatalah lil Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Combat Vanguard of Fighters of the Muslim Brotherhood), which constituted the military divisions of the Muslim Brotherhood, right?

A: Exactly.

Q: What caused the schism between Al-Talaa'i and the mainstream MB?

A: Al-Talaa'i promoted a Jihadi method, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood was largely inactive and underground.

Q: Did you ever come across the core of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria? I am referring to people like Adnan Saad al-Din and Issam al-Attar.

A: No, I heard about them, but I did not meet them. I use to know Sheikh Sa'eed Hawa (ra), Sheikh Marwaan Hadeed (ra), Sheikh Omar Jawad, and Sheikh Adnan Uqlah.

Q: How would you assess the Islamist challenge to the Baathist regime in Syria today? I say this in light of the fact that many exiled Brotherhood leaders have now gone back to Syria and seem to have made their peace with the Baathist regime.

A: There is still some opposition, but the Brotherhood itself can no longer be regarded as a true opposition force.

Q: Because they have extensive surreptitious links to the regime?

A: Yes, they have now entered into dialogue and discussion with the regime. They are becoming a state party. I was proud of my affiliation to the old Muslim Brotherhood, but the Muslim Brotherhood today really disgusts me. They are becoming co-opted into the political systems of the countries in which they operate. In Egypt, the Brotherhood even wants to change its name to receive greater recognition.

Q: How active is the armed Islamic opposition in Syria?

A: The Jihadists in Syria have now become proper Salafis and are basically linked to al-Qaeda.

Q: How come we don't hear about them, there has not been a dramatic attack on the Baathist regime for many years?

A: That is because they are busy elsewhere, particularly in Iraq.

Q: When did you leave Syria?

A: I left in 1977.

Q: You went to Beirut, right?

A: Yes. I was wanted in Syria as a member of the MB.

Q: When did you leave Lebanon?

A: I left in 1979. I made my way to Egypt and went to Al-Azhar to complete my Islamic education in Cairo.

Q: That was the main purpose of your trip?

A: Yes, in fact I spent 6 months studying in Al-Azhar, but I was not able to complete my studies since conflicts arose between the tutors and me. Therefore I went to Saudi Arabia in December 1979. I re-started my education in Mecca in an establishment called The Islamic School of al-Saltiyah.

Q: You must have been in Saudi Arabia when Juhaiman al-Utaiba started his uprising in December 1979.

A: That is right, I was there.

Q: Did you take part in the uprising?

A: No, I witnessed it. But Juhaiman al-Utaiba was a great man. He led a serious uprising against the House of al-Saud. In the end the Saudi authorities could not defeat Juhaiman and his men; therefore they brought in the Jordanians and the French. The French forces used gas and that was the decisive factor.

Q: Did you establish the Al-Muhajiroun in Jeddah?

A: It was established in Mecca, but we launched it in Jeddah. Al-Muhajiroun first came on the scene on March 3, 1983. I had joined Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) in Beirut and maintained contacts with it in Cairo. But in Saudi Arabia, there was virtually nobody affiliated to HT. I started forming HT cells in Saudi Arabia, and by 1983 I had built a team of 38 brothers. Some of these people were previously affiliated to Juhaiman al-Utaiba and some were Salafis. However, HT was banned in Saudi Arabia; at the same time HT leaders in Kuwait were reluctant to form or organize any activities in Saudi Arabia, and this was a huge shock to me. A serious dispute broke out between me and HT organizers in Kuwait who subsequently suspended my membership in the party. Therefore on March 3, 1983 — the 59th anniversary of the destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate —

I launched a separate organization with the help of these 38 brothers and called it Al-Muhajiroun.

Q: In a way, you formed this new organization by default?

A: Yes, in fact I had worked hard for three years to build a platform for HT in Saudi Arabia, and the upper echelons of the party did not appreciate these efforts. From an Islamic perspective, I had no choice but to organize the dedicated cadres I had built up under the aegis of Jamaat al-Muhajiroun.

Q: Did you choose 'Jamaat' (Community) because it is a benign term as opposed to 'Hizb' (Party), which has obvious political connotations? Were there any political calculations behind the selection of this name?

A: Yes. If I had chosen the prefix 'Hizb', i.e. 'Party', my organisation would have fallen foul of the Saudi authorities. I chose 'Al-Muhajiroun', as this means 'Emigrants' and refers to the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad (saw).

Q: I want to speed up the chronology, so you set up al-Muhajiroun in 1983, when did you leave Saudi Arabia?

A: I came here to Britain on January 14, 1986.

Q: Were you expelled from Saudi Arabia?

A: Yes. When I became independent of HT, I got bolder. We started a stickers and leaflets campaign in the major cities, attacking all Kufr systems (i.e. man-made regimes), including the al-Saud Regime.

Q: You seem to have been openly challenging the Saudi regime with these activities.

A: Not openly. We pasted and distributed stickers and leaflets in an underground manner. The regime was not able to trace the massive sticker campaign to Al-Muhajiroun as we worked furtively and were skilled in these activities. We built up dedicated cells. Our people studied Islam during the day and engaged in distributions and other activities during the night.

Q: You seem to have never been under any illusions about the nature of the Saudi regime. I say this in light of the fact that many of the Islamic activists that eventually ended up in Afghanistan and formed Jihadi-Salafi groups, were initially sponsored by the Saudi regime.

A: I always believed the Saudi regime was Kufr. This is because I subscribed to the HT ideology which condemned all regimes in the Muslim world as Kufr.

Q: Was your expulsion from Saudi Arabia conducted in a civilized manner?

A: No. I was first arrested in Jeddah in 1984 and we were subsequently released on bail. They found nothing on us apart from some glue and leaflets, which were going to be distributed around Mecca. They were not able to link us to any recognizable organization like HT. We simply presented ourselves as Muhajiroun (emigrants) who had left their countries in the hope of securing sanctuary in Saudi Arabia. The next time they arrested me was in December in 1985 in Riyadh. They raided one of our houses at a time when I was teaching from the subversive book, "The Money Circulation under the Khilafa System", which had been written by Abdul Qadeem Zalluom, one of the early leaders of HT. This destroyed our alibi, as they made a direct connection to HT.

Q: Were you badly treated during your time in detention?

A: Honestly we spent seven days in hell in the Al-Malaz detention center. There were tough interrogations and some beatings.

Q: Which security outfit was responsible for your detention and interrogation, the Mabahess? [1]

A: Yes, they were from Al-Mabahess.

Q: Had they done their homework properly? Did they have lots of intelligence on your clandestine activities?

A: Not really. They tried to elicit information through beatings and torture.

Q: How did you end up in Britain?

A: The reason I came to Britain was because I had a multiple-visa. I had visited Britain briefly in 1984 for few weeks.

Q: Were you questioned by police when you arrived here?

A: No.

Q: Were the British authorities not aware that you had been expelled from Saudi Arabia?

A: No. Anyway I never planned to stay in Britain. I had wanted to go to Pakistan or Malaysia.

Q: Why Pakistan?

A: Pakistan is the ideal place for Islamic activities, it has nearly 150 million Muslims, and it gives you access to hundreds of millions of Muslims in India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. People in the Indian Subcontinent believe in Islamic nationalism and hence it is easier for them to digest the Khilafah message.

Q: And why Malaysia?

A: It has a dedicated Muslim population. There are links to Muslims in Indonesia, Central Asia and China. Anyway I could not go anywhere else. I was wanted in Syria, and the Syrian security services in Lebanon had raided my house and killed one of my brothers. [2]

Q: Before we discuss the development of the Muhajiroun organization in the UK and elsewhere, could you provide a brief insight into the history of HT since its inception in Palestine in 1951?

A: It was obviously founded by Sheikh Taqi-ud-deen Al-Nabahani in Palestine in 1951, who believed firmly that the malaise of the Muslim Ummah was rooted in the destruction of the Khilafah (Caliphate) in 1924. In the beginning the group founded by Nabahani was known as al-Hay'at al-Tahrir al-Islami [3] and spread to Lebanon and Syria in the period 1951-53. Its early leaders were Ibrahim Hamdan, Shuqeiri and, of course, Sheikh Taqi Nabahani. They tried to establish themselves legally in al-Quds (Jerusalem) but the authorities refused to recognize them. Consequently the core group became more confrontational and began to tout itself as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (The Liberation Party). The authorities then began to arrest the active membership and the party subsequently went underground.

Q: When exactly did Hay'at al-Tahrir become Hizb-ut-Tahrir?

A: In 1953.

Q: So initially, the core membership was based in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, basically the Levant area and its periphery?

A: Yes.

Q: How did HT spread beyond this region and into virtually every country in the Muslim world?

A: Sheikh Nabahani married in Lebanon and his wife's family happened to be wealthy. They lent him considerable financial support and he used the inflow of funds to develop robust units in Lebanon, Jordan and that area in general. Then it spread to Iraq and Egypt, and in the 1950's,

1960's and 1970's, it spread to all corners of the Muslim world.

Q: Okay, so by the 1960's and 1970's HT had become a universal phenomenon?

A: Yes, they were everywhere.

Q: But not in Iran?

A: Actually HT sent some teams to Iran. They did not believe, like I do now, that Shias in general and Khomeini in particular, are Mushrik (Polytheists). They saw Khomeini as a Muslim, but viewed his regime as Kufr (non-Islamic).

Q: So what happened?

A: They sent some teams to Iran after Khomeini came to power and offered to make him the Khalifah (Caliph) of all the Muslims.

Q: I had read something about this, so were those guys from HT?

A: Yes.

Q: And of course Khomeini rejected their offer?

A: Khomeini rejected their offer despite the fact he was a champion of the Velayat al-Faqih system.

Q: But Velayat al-Faqih is another form of caliphate, would you not agree?

A: Yes. But the mainstream Shias reject Velayat al-Faqih.

Q: But do you accept Velayat al-Faqih as legitimate Islamic discourse?

A: Before I became a Salafi I believed that Velayat al-Faqih as a principle can facilitate the unity of the Shias and the Sunnis. However at that time most senior Shia leaders, people like Ayatollah Al-Kho'ee, rejected the principle and this undermined its potential.

Q: Okay, going back to HT, they have never had any serious organization in Iran, have they?

A: They don't have any membership in Iran.

Q: Is this rooted in the Shia-Sunni split?

A: Yes. Also the HT insists on 'adoption', basically you have to adopt their principles and of course the principles of HT diverge significantly from the beliefs of Jaafari Shias.[4]

Q: Okay, let us put all this into perspective. Are you saying that HT looks at itself as some kind of mother organization or holding company and in order to become part of it you have to accept certain rigid pre-conditions — and once these have been accepted you are co-opted as some kind of franchise?

A: Actually they don't believe that. They believe they are a distinct theological and juridical school. They have developed sophisticated principles and ideas regarding economic systems, social systems and legal systems that need to be adopted. This is why Shias could not really join HT, because they believe in 12 infallible Imams and hence have multiple sources of reference as far as the practice of Islam is concerned.

Q: Why is it that HT has such a strong presence here in the UK?

A: Because I established it (smiles). When I first came to Britain, half of me was Ikhwani-Jihadi and the other half was Salafi-Tahriri, in short, I was a combination of different modes of knowledge and I channelled all this energy into developing networks here in the UK.

Q: Did you operate under the name of HT?

A: Not initially. At that time, the Amir of HT in Germany visited me and said that he had heard about my departure from the party in 1983 and expressed his regrets about that. He offered me the chance to operate as a 'member' of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT). This effectively divorced my organization from the Party's leadership and allowed us to operate autonomously.

Q: Was there no HT structure here in the UK before your arrival?

A: There were two brothers only. Together, we set upon developing the party here in the UK. We built basic units and in time these units multiplied. Of course we could not call ourselves HT proper. The leeway offered to me by the Amir of HT in Germany allowed us to operate independently from the party's global leadership as members of HT in the UK.

Q: How did the Al-Muhajiroun fit into all this?

A: I kept this as a separate platform. I contacted my brothers in Saudi Arabia and instructed them to pursue their underground activities as part of the global HT network.

Q: Basically you are saying that Muhajiroun was kept on life-support under the aegis of HT.

A: Yes, something to that effect.

Q: What made you leave the HT umbrella entirely in 1996?

A: I had built the teams from nothing in this country and had been their leader in the UK for 10 years before finally resigning on 16 January 1996 in response to a violation of Islamic rules by the worldwide Amir of Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Q: What had brought this about? Was it due to lax organization and the penetration of undesirable elements?

A: My activities in the UK (from 1987-1996) awakened all the sleeping cells of HT around the world. After Sheikh Nabahani's death in 1977, the party experienced severe persecution by all Arab regimes, and this led to retreat and stagnation. It also sparked internal disputes between various members of HT in Jordan and the leadership committee. However, after my departure from HT in 1996, the old internal disputes arose again and this time around caused an official split in the party. I am not saying that the official split of 1997 was caused by my activities; in fact it could not have been as I had left a year earlier to re-launch Al-Muhajiroun independently from HT.

Q: Did the split have global ramifications?

A: Yes. A man called Abu Rami and his followers dismissed the Amir of HT, Abdul Qadeem Zalloum, who at that time led HT from a secret location, and established a separate organisation. The Zalloumis became HT Camp 1 and the followers of Abu Rami, the so-called Nakithoun (renegades), became known as HT Camp 2.

Q: Which one is stronger?

A: HT Camp 1.

Q: Because they are the original HT?

A: Yes.

Q: How significant is HT Camp 2?

A: They are big in Jordan.

Q: And this original split manifested itself in all HT organizations around the world?

A: Yes, the split was everywhere. But the splits multiplied. HT Camp 1 split again, and the new faction became known as Hizb Waed (Party of Promise) and is led by Mr. Muhammad Showeiki. There was yet another split, and HT Camp 4 are known as the Reformers of Hizb-ut-Tahrir and are led by Lyad Hilal in America and Dr. Tawfiq Mustafa in Germany.

Q: How do you assess the individual strengths of these four camps?

A: HT Camp 1 remains the strongest. The next strongest is HT Camp 2. The third one, Hizb Waed, is only present in Jerusalem. As for the reformists (HT Camp 4), they merely constitute a few individuals who aspire to re-unite Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Q: How are camps 1 & 2 represented geographically, especially in places like Central Asia?

A: In Central Asia they are all HT Camp 1. There are very few HT Camp 2 people in Central Asia.

Q: You cited violations of Islamic laws as the main reason behind your departure, briefly explain these violations.

A: It related to the methods involved in establishing the Khilafah system and many other Aqeedah (ideological) and Fiqh (Jurisprudence) issues.

Q: Please elaborate on this.

A: Muhajiroun and HT disagreed on three points.

1- Muhajiroun engage in the divine method to establish the Khilafah wherever they have members, whereas HT works to establish the Khilafah only in a specific Muslim country (they called it Majal— i.e. geographical area in any part of the Muslim world) and restricted their members' activities outside the Majal.

2- Muhajiroun follow the Aqeedah of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah (ASWJ) and the path of Al-Salaf Al-Saalih (companions and family of the Prophet), whereas HT subscribe to a different Aqeedah.

3- Muhajiroun believe in twinning Da'wa (the call to Islam) and Jihad, whereas HT does not believe that Jihad can be waged by agents not affiliated to the Islamic state.

Q: Please elaborate on the Aqeedah of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah (ASWJ).

A: The followers of ASWJ, in summary, follow only the Quran and the Sunnah in accordance to the understandings of the Companions and the Family of the Prophet Muhammad. We follow the Nahj-ul-Salaf (the path of the pious predecessors). The central theme is Al-Talazum (Correlation), which forbids divorcing Shari'ah from Aqeedah. In the Salafi worldview there can be no separation between Aqeedah and Shariah; they have to be moulded together. Moreover Iman (faith) is no longer an issue of the heart, Iman must automatically entail action. It goes further than this, insofar as there must be a union between Koran and the Sunna as core constituents of Wahy (revelation).

Q: What you are outlining here is, in its simplest form, a merger between theory and praxis.

A: Indeed, thought determines action.

Q: The idea of combining theory and praxis has Marxist overtones, would you not agree?

A: This is the Salafi approach, and the difference is that Marxist theories are man-made whereas Islamic ideology is divine insofar as it is derived from the Quran and Sunnah.

Q: The worldview that you are outlining has broad implications, particularly insofar as it makes the agency of the Ulama (religious scholars/clerics) superfluous.

A: We want Ulama as long as they promote the pure concept of Islam with complete Talazom between Al-Baatin (the inner) and Al-Zaaher (the outer). There is no scope in Islam for divergent schools of thought or sects. Who can understand Islam better than the Prophet and his companions? Who aided the Prophet in the major battles of early Islam like Badr and Khandaq? The Hanafis, Shafi'is, Tahriris? Of course not! The Prophet fought alongside the Sahaba (companions & family).

Q: Presumably this elaborate Salafi ideology that you are describing is firmly established in your organization.

A: Anybody who does not follow the path of the Salaf cannot join al-Muhajiroun.

Q: Apart from these theological and ideological disputes, did the fact that you were maintaining a parallel organization in the form of al-Muhajiroun cause any friction between you and HT?

A: The real dispute was over the methodology to establish the Khilafah, they did not like me

attacking man-made laws here in the UK, and they did not like the fact that I was condemning the policy of John Major and the British government.

Q: Okay, I want to move on now and address some of your recent activities. You told the Birmingham Sunday Mercury in December 2000 that Muhajiroun recruits people for Jihad in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya and Kashmir. Did you have the organization in place to recruit and direct these people to those theatres of conflict?

A: That is not true. I never recruited people to go abroad and fight against anyone. However, people used to come to us if they wanted to join Jihads abroad but soon discovered that we are merely Jihad sympathisers. Anyway, legally speaking, all our activities were permissible during that period. We did not breach any laws as we were helping suffering people overseas.

Q: Were you involved in sending young men to theatres of conflict?

A: No, I was not. I used to encourage people to go to Bosnia to help their Muslim brothers and sisters, when the law in the UK permitted that type of intervention. But when the law forbade it, we stopped these activities altogether.

Q: To which law are you referring here?

A: The new law against terrorism.

Q: The one introduced straight after September 11, 2001?

A: Yes.

Q: To which location did you direct most of the young men who came to your organization?

A: We used to help mostly in Bosnia and Kosovo as part of a broader humanitarian effort.

Q: In another interview with Milan's Il Giornale you said that the 'International Islamic Front' (IIF) is the political wing of Osama Bin Laden's 'International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders'. What were the implications of this statement?

A: Another fabrication and distortion from the media! I did set up the IIF in August 1990 as a political platform to oppose the stationing of American forces in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. This was designed to act as a broad umbrella for a range of UK-based organizations.

Q: Therefore there are no connections to the 'International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders set up by Bin Laden in 1998?

A: Of course not. But certain people exploited this coincidence. They tried to portray us [as] the political wing of Bin Laden's military structure and this used to make me laugh. I wish we had a connection, as there is no shame in being linked to Sheikh Osama Bin Laden.

Q: But there was clearly an ideological link.

A: If you mean devotion to the sect of ahlus-Sunah wal-Jama'ah it is true, but I have never met Sheikh Osama Bin Laden in my life.

Q: You are even known in Thailand. The Bangkok Post once reported that training camps for Thai Muslim separatists were partly financed by your organization; is there any veracity to these allegations?

A: Another fabrication from the media! All that happened was that some Chinese Muslims came to Britain seeking financial help to build mosques and schools and we obliged.

Q: Who helped them, Al-Muhajiroun?

A: Yes, as a charity organization we used to raise funds for Muslims in need to ease their suffering just like any charity would do.

Q: How did you raise these funds?

A: We held public talks and mobilized our followers to undertake fund-raising activities on behalf of fellow Muslims abroad within the framework of the law.

Q: Did you run any commercial enterprises and businesses to raise money?

A: No, we have never done that.

Q: How do you raise your money now in light of the recent anti-terrorism legislations?

A: Al-Muhajiroun has always had three sources of income. Firstly, every member has to contribute a third of his salary if he is working.

Q: And if he is not?

A: Then he will have to make commitments to the activities of the organization. Secondly, we sell audio cassettes, videos, CD's, and thirdly, we receive donations from Muslim businessmen here and abroad.

Q: Which of these constitutes your biggest source of income?

A: Donations.

Q: Going back to your activities now, was Bin Laden really scheduled to send a video cassette to the rally for Islamic Revival in September 1996?

A: In 1996, a letter from Bin Laden was published in the Independent and the Quds al-Arabi, and we simply made a copy of it and said we were going to read it in public. The media simply sensationalized this. In the same vein there was to be no tape from Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman.

Q: But where do the media get all these sensational stories?

A: You know very well that the media loves to sensationalize these things.

Q: But is there anybody in your organization who is helping them in this process?

A: Not at all. You know very well that they used the same tactic against Marxists and Communists.

Q: You are alluding to psychological warfare here, right?

A: No. All I am doing is making people aware of the other side of the story.

Q: But you are not doing a good job of this; cynics would say that you simply make it worse by making sensational statements.

A: We try to counter their propaganda. We always issued denials at first, but then there came a time when we just grew tired of making denials. We figured that if they want to give us publicity we should just leave them to it.

Q: What caused the cancellation of the Islamic Revival Rally?

A: It was MI5 (British Intelligence Service). They intervened with the London arena and suddenly the arena increased the costs and the insurance by astronomical amounts. They were trying to force us to cancel but we would not oblige them. In the end they refunded our money.

Q: Did MI5 approach you directly about the event?

A: Yes, they contacted me via my solicitors. They told us there would be a security risk as we had invited different organizations and speakers.

Q: Did MI5 interview you personally?

A: No, they spoke to my solicitors. I never agreed to meet anyone unless of course they wanted to interrogate me, and even then my solicitors always had to be present.

Q: From the meetings you had with them, did you ever get the impression that they had an in-depth knowledge of your organization?

A: We knew we were being continuously monitored by Special Branch; they even said this to us on many public functions.

Q: But Special Branch does not have the analytical and political skills to make proper sense of Islamic organizations. They are good at conventional security work like surveillance and monitoring of communications, but the analytical work is carried out by MI5.

A: Even none of the senior people from MI5 who met us asked me the kind of complex questions that you are putting to me in this interview.

Q: This does not mean that they don't have an in-depth understanding of where you are coming from and where you could be heading.

A: I don't think so. Anyway I will let you [in] on an open secret. I never published any leaflet in the UK without sending a fax to all media organizations, including the Police press officer. This foiled the machinations of anyone who might have been tempted to distort what I was saying. I was advised to do this by my students who are solicitors by default as the Muhajiroun legal team.

Q: Who is your legal team?

A: The Society of Muslim Lawyers are my students. I teach them Islamic law and they help me to make sense of English law.

Q: Are they British Muslims?

A: Yes. These lawyers advised me to adopt this method, as it would stop my detractors right in their tracks. The media always present some quotes out of context, but now there would no longer be any scope to link me with distorted and sensational statements.

Q: How come you have never sued any publication for libel?

A: How can I do that? You know very well that in this country, major publications have unlimited budgets. In any case I would not stand a chance in front of a jury because there are likely to be people there who disagree with my views.

Q: Like who?

A: Homosexuals, Jews etc. I was advised a long time ago by my legal team that owing to the jury-based system of libel adjudication in this country, I would not stand a chance of winning as I have to present my case in a public arena, and of course I have been consistently demonized in this public arena.

Q: There is a consensus amongst observers that you are legally savvy; I notice that you have many books on English law in your library.

A: Yes, I study English law. Therefore I can tell you when I am right on the edge of the law.

Q: What do you make of English law in particular and Western jurisprudence in general, is it not an effective way of organizing society and guaranteeing some justice?

A: I believe Islam is superior. The law here does not protect the average person – it only protects the one who understands it. This is very unfair from an Islamic perspective as the law is designed to be an intrinsic part of social welfare.

Q: Why is Islamic law superior, because it is simpler?

A: Exactly, besides it is divine.

Q: Okay, let's discuss 9/11 and its aftermath. How do you see 9/11?

A: The fact that Americans were attacked was no surprise, what was surprising is that they came

under such a devastating attack in their own country. The attacks were really a magnificent operation in every way. They were magnificent terrorists.

Q: "Magnificent Terrorists"? This strikes me as a classic oxymoron!

A: What they did was an act of terrorism no different from what the US forces have been doing in Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan both before and after 9/11.

Q: Were their actions Islamic?

A: Islamic or not, it was an act of terrorism.

Q: Were their actions Islamic?

A: The Prophet Muhammad once said to the enemy: I have come to terrorize you; he said: "O, people of Qureish I have come to slaughter you"; in another quote he said: 'I am the Prophet who kills while laughing'.

Q: Are you sure these traits are attributable to the Prophet Muhammad?

A: I can quote to you the authentic references. Anyway for me "terrorism" is not necessarily a bad word; it depends on the context and whether it is based on the commands of Allah.

Q: Do you believe there will be another attack equalling or even exceeding the 9/11 assaults?

A: I believe this phenomenon of al-Qaeda is not going to stop. The phenomenon of martyrdom operations is contagious as the Prophet Muhammad correctly said.

Q: What do you understand by the term al-Qaeda?

A: Al-Qaeda for me, are people who revived the memory and traditions of the Messenger Muhammad (saw) and his companions, and follow the path of the late Salaf such as Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab (ra), Sheikh Ibn Taimiyah (ra). But of course we do not encourage Muslims in Britain or in any other Western country to copy al-Qaeda as we are all bound by the 'Covenant of Securities'. I came to this country with a visa and hence cannot fight anybody. In return I reserve the right to speak my mind and be left alone to pursue my peaceful activities.

Q: What is the Islamic term for 'Covenant of Securities'?

A: A'qed Al-Aman, or Al-A'hed.

Q: Okay, all this is beginning to sound somewhat bizarre, you stress the importance of this Covenant and yet maintain that it is Islamic to slaughter thousands of innocents.

A: Of course nobody cares about the untold number of Muslims slaughtered by the Americans, but when Kafirs are killed it is different.

Q: Okay, would you concur with the analysis that from a Western perspective the only solution to the challenge posed by the Salafis is a security one?

A: There is a solution, hands off Muslim lands!

Q: That entails concessions in foreign policy—concessions that are unlikely to be made.

A: Then they (Kafirs) will go to hell, and we will go to paradise. The Magnificent 19 did not come to negotiate.

Q: Are you absolutely sure there will be more attacks like it?

A: The phenomenon of fighting the occupiers has now become an overriding wish for millions of Muslims.

Q: You are neglecting the practical dimensions of all this—after all, what allowed these 19 to strike so efficiently? The Taliban regime in Afghanistan facilitated the convergence of what one notable researcher has referred to as the 'three elements of al-Qaeda' and of course the Taliban are no longer dominant in Afghanistan.

A: That plan was concocted in the U.S. and it had nothing to do with Afghanistan....

Q: But most of the support networks emanated from Afghanistan-based operatives and planners.

A: The operation was not that sophisticated; a group of men seized planes with knives, and they could have planned this anywhere in the world, even in a room in Zimbabwe.

Q: But al-Qaeda has been severely weakened since the war in Afghanistan.

A: Come on! Al-Qaeda is still intact.

Q: How come we have not seen a dramatic attack in the West since 9/11?[5]

A: Al-Qaeda is not interested in small attacks. Of course al-Qaeda freelance supporters carry out such attacks in places like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, but the real al-Qaeda is not interested in these minor attacks, they go for massive operations. When they want to strike they will strike. Also bear in mind that the Americans are not holding any al-Qaeda people in Guantanamo Bay.

Q: Really? What about Abu Zubaida?

A: Abu Zubaida was killed in Pakistan according to sources close to al-Qaeda.

Q: Are you sure about this?

A: They want to fool the world.

Q: What about Khaled Sheikh Muhammad?

A: He has been arrested, but he was never part of the hard core of al-Qaeda.

Q: What about [Ramzi bin al-] Shibh, he was arrested and taken away by the Pakistani ISI agents in full view of the cameras. You will be hard pressed to get better proof than that.

A: That was somebody else.

Q: You are saying that al-Shibh is still at large?

A: You need to ask these questions from al-Qaeda, I am not al-Qaeda. All I am saying is that you are seeing everything from one side and that is the propaganda disseminated by the CIA. The CIA knows exactly what they are up against; they are up against the most determined Salafi-Wahabis who have come together in al-Qaeda. That is why the Americans are trying to stop the dissemination of works by Sheikh ibn Abdul Wahab. They are also trying to change the curriculum in some countries. But by starting the war against Islam they have imperilled their own future.

Q: Okay, Sheikh Omar let us move onto other things, what do you make of the name 'Londonistan'?

A: Nobody wants to establish an Islamic state here in the UK, but we will continue to work for Islam.

Q: I was not referring to that, the name is used to characterize the high concentration of Islamic activism here in the UK's capital.

A: I believe Britain is harbouring most of the Islamic opposition leaders of the Muslim world.

Q: Why?

A: Because the British elites are very clever, they are not stupid like the Americans. Remember these people used to rule half of the world.

Q: Okay, but why are they specifically harbouring so many Islamists?

A: I believe the British recognize that the Khilafah will rise again one day, and they are anxious to influence this process.

Q: Do you really believe this Sheikh Omar Bakri?

A: The British are not like the French and the Germans, they don't slap you in the face, they stab you in the back. They want to buy some of these Islamic groups.

Q: Has there ever been, to your knowledge, a secret deal between some Islamists and British security whereby radical Muslims would be left alone as long as they did not threaten British national security?

A: I believe all the people referred to as "moderate" Muslims have at one time or another struck deals with the British government. But the British have been unable to corrupt radical groups like the HT.

Q: Who are these moderate Muslims?

A: The Muslim Brotherhood in the UK, UK Islamic Mission, Gammaa Islamiyah, Iranian opposition groups, the so-called Ahlul Bait groups.

Q: The Ahlul Bait societies are not Iranian opposition; on the contrary they are aligned to the Islamic regime in Tehran.

A: Whatever! All the Shia groups enjoy excellent relations with the British government, and this includes the Kho'ee foundation in London.[6] Abdul-Majid Al-Kho'ee, who was killed in Iraq, is

reported to have pledged allegiance to the Queen, and look at the punishment that Allah meted out to him in Iraq.[7] Also this man Baqir Hakim.

Q: You are referring to Ayatollah Baqir al-Hakim, the former leader of Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)?

A: Yes. He used to make typical Shia statements against the Sahaba (companions of Prophet Muhammad); in particular he used to make the greatest insults against Aisha[8] and look at what happened to him; Allah sent somebody who blew him into a thousand pieces.

Q: Who killed Hakim, al-Qaeda?

A: Al-Qaeda has no time for people like Hakim. They are minor players in the wider scheme of things. They are focused on America. The Shias themselves or the Americans could have killed Hakim. If you look at the history of the Shias since the dawn of Islam you will see that it is full of splits, internal conflicts and betrayals. The Shias themselves killed Imam Hussein in Karbala and then said it was Yazid who committed the atrocity.

Q: Okay, let us discuss the security situation here in the UK; it is often said that you are under constant surveillance, are we under surveillance right now?

A: To be honest, I think everything I say and do is monitored.

Q: How many times have you been interviewed by MI5?

A: I cannot really differentiate between MI5, Special Branch or the Police; they all represent the same authority as far as I am concerned—and I have been questioned by these people on at least 16 occasions.

Q: And every single time your lawyers have been present?

A: Yes.

Q: I have noted a discrepancy in the way you assess the British; on the one hand you maintain that British security is poor, while on the other you assert that the British are comparatively clever as they used to rule half the world, so what is your real position?

A: I meant that their understanding of Islam is poor. But I believe the really clever people are the elites in this country, as they know how to divide Muslims.

Q: Who are these elites?

A: The landlords, think-tanks and the decision makers.

Q: Have you ever had any reason to suspect that your organization has been penetrated?

A: I believe they have tried to do this, as the British are desperate to buy intelligence.

Q: Do you have security procedures in place to prevent this?

A: Yes. I teach intensive theology to all new recruits. If they find it boring they will run away after six months.

Q: But competent spies can be very persevering.

A: Okay, if they persevere then they will become Muslims.

Q: I see. Would you then consider using this new convert as a double agent?

A: No. Why would I want to penetrate them? It is forbidden in Islam to have contacts with non-Islamic authority. Anyway, I believe their intelligence is not efficient, as they have arrested people on several occasions and subsequently let them go. I have heard some of them were important figures.

Q: Had they inadvertently come across senior figures in the Islamic underground?

A: I heard that they arrested two people who had come from abroad and subsequently let them go, and they just disappeared from the country.

Q: Who were they?

A: I don't know! The point to deduce from that random arrest is that the British have poor intelligence.

Q: But would you say that they are now making a much more concerted effort to crack down on underground Islamic activism?

A: I believe so, yes.

Q: Are you not afraid that one day they will arrest and subsequently deport you from the country?

A: I have got indefinite leave here.

Q: But where would you go if they decided to deport you?

A: That is up to them. First they will need to get me a passport; I have no Syrian passport.

Q: Okay, let us presume this happens, where would you go?

A: That is an interesting question (laughs).

Q: Okay, you mentioned Abu Qatada earlier, what do you make of this man?

A: He is a great Ulama and committed Salafi insofar as he subscribes to the ethos of Ahlus Sunna va al-Jammaa.

Q: When exactly did he come to the UK?

A: I think in 1994. He came from Jordan.

Q: Why was he arrested?

A: He was arrested for no reason as the new anti-terrorism law enables the authorities to detain suspects without charge.

Q: They are detaining 16 people altogether under that law, correct?[9]

A: Yes.

Q: Are they mostly Algerian?

A: Yes, they are mostly Algerian. There is also Khaled Fawwaz, the Saudi oppositionist.

Q: You don't think Fawwaz is linked to al-Qaeda?

A: No, he is not; in fact he left Bin Laden's office in London in 1995. The point is, that these people have been interrogated heavily, but the British have nothing on them.

Q: Why are they being held then?

A: Because they have enacted this new law, and they have to show something for it otherwise they will come across as ridiculous.

Q: Okay, Sheikh Omar Bakri, let us bring this to a close. Where is all this heading, is it a fight to the finish between the United States and the Salafis?

A: Allah knows best, however, our main concern is to please Allah, and to die in the cause of Allah and go to Jannah (Paradise). If the U.S. continues with her policy against Islam and the Muslim world, Muslims will be more inclined to strike blows against America.

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Notes

[1] The Mabahess is the main internal security/intelligence service in Saudi Arabia.

[2] Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad is referring to an "ideological" rather than "biological" brother.

[3] This roughly translates into "Islamic Liberation Society".

[4] Jaafari (or "twelver") Shiaism is, by far, the most predominant sect in Shia Islam.

[5] This interview was conducted a day before the Madrid bombings.

[6] The "Kho'ee Foundation" named after the late Grand Ayatollah Kho'ee of Iraq is the largest Shia foundation in the world. Its global operations are controlled from a large HQ complex in London.

[7] Majid Kho'ee of the "Kho'ee Foundation" in London was stabbed to death in Najaf immediately after the fall of the Baathist regime.

[8] Aisha was one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad. The Shias, unlike the Sunnis, do not regard her as a saint as she led her followers against the armies of Ali Ibn Abi Taleb in the battle of the Camel in December 656 A.D.

[9] Of the original 16 men held, three have since been released. One of the detainees died immediately after his release. A Libyan man (identified as "M") won his appeal against continuing detention without charge on 18 March 2004.



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