

## **Is Hizb ut-Tahrir Changing Strategy or Tactics?**

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### **Introduction**

In order to determine whether Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is changing either its strategy or its tactics, we must briefly ask what its strategy and aims are, examine whether these have been altered to any degree in light of recent developments, and then consider the tactics the group employs. Only then can we make an assessment.

In *The Islamic State*, Taqiuddin al-Nabhani set forth his plan for the removal of (artificial) barriers between Muslim countries in order to create one transnational state. Then, he advised, Muslims abroad “should work towards turning their land where Islam is not implemented, and which is [thus] considered as *Dar al-Kufr*, into *Dar al-Islam*.”<sup>1</sup>

He further noted that the original *Ummah* had represented “a world superpower in the face of the two major camps at the time, whereupon she struck them both simultaneously, [c]onquered their lands and spread Islam over almost the whole of the inhabited parts of the world at that time.”<sup>2</sup>

For Islam to regain its former dominance, he argued that “It is therefore the duty of every Muslim to work from this moment on in order to establish [a] greater Islamic State [that] would convey the message of Islam to the world. One’s work should start by carrying the Islamic *da’wah* with the aim of resuming the Islamic way of life in all the Muslim countries; concentrating one’s practical scope in one country or some selected [others] in order to achieve the point of support so that this serious task can be resumed.”<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore clear that HT plans to establish a trans-national state—first among Muslim states, and then ultimately throughout the rest of the world. Nothing that successive HT leaders have said or published since the 1950s suggests that this aim has changed.

It has been noted that “the doctrine of Hizb ut-Tahrir has not changed in the last fifty years, although its leadership has occasionally attempted to provide an alternative Islamic view on contemporary issues such as space exploration. In fact, al-Nabhani’s writings constitute the basis for Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideological platform and any major changes would undermine the essence of the party.”<sup>4</sup> HT does however appear to be changing its tactics in order to achieve

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its ultimate end. These changes are clearly a reaction to—and a consequence of—local circumstances.

Nabhani had posited a strategy of three stages. In the first, the party recruits its cadres while engaging in intellectual and political dialogue; in the second, it launches itself against centers of power with the aim of consolidating its support; in the third, it implements Islam via the creation of the Caliphate.

In the Arab world, the party appears to consider itself at the second stage, although members' involvement in past violent attempts to seize power suggests that has on occasions believed itself to be on the brink of the third. In the region, it is seen as a challenge to the existing order—whether or not existing governments are elected—and is banned in almost all states in which it is active. In Europe and elsewhere, HT has clearly advanced no further than the primary stage, that of educating members and potential recruits.

Some observers have noted an increased radicalization among its Arab members, which they attribute to the party's reaction to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the PA's implicit recognition of Israel. Following this event, the party forbade its members to participate in the official Palestinian census or the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Thereafter it is said to have increasingly incited violence in the West Bank and Jerusalem, where the bulk of its Arab members live.<sup>5</sup> In Jordan, in September 2005, for example, seven members were arrested after declaring jihad on the West, stating that the end of the US and Israel "is a simple issue" and demanding the end of existing Muslim regimes.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is reported to have established itself in Central Asia in the early 1990s, HT's presence in the region became more clearly manifest after the arrest of its members in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in connection with terrorism after 2000.<sup>7</sup>

In Europe, HT leaders have become adept at promoting the party, underplaying its violent history, and refraining from spelling out how they aim to achieve power—other than by means of its "intellectual struggle." Former members tell of the seductive nature of the group's appeal to assist in "putting the Islamic world to rights," and ensuring the worldwide spread of a utopian Islam.<sup>8</sup>

In Britain, HT now publishes a glossy and attractive magazine, *New Civilization* (also available online), which barely mentions its origins while trumpeting the prestigious central London address of its headquarters. Through the magazine, party spokesmen now seek out events at which they can project their "moderate" image.<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, HT has generally softened the tone of its online *fatwas* and announcements—which are now fewer in number—and appears to have undergone a public relations makeover. However, much offensive material—illegal in some states—remains on its websites.

The group's response to the Danish cartoons issue is instructive. Both in its online and printed material, the party called for peaceful demonstrations and diplomatic and educational initiatives, while condemning the more violent manifestations that incited violence. However, Lebanese members may have been involved in attempts to attack the Danish embassy in Beirut.<sup>10</sup>

HT's British spokesman, Imran Waheed, is particularly adept at publicizing the new, polished line:

“Our aim is to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate in the Muslim world. Our vision of the Islamic Caliphate is one of an independent state with an elected and accountable leader, an independent judiciary, political parties, the rule of law and equal rights for minority groups. Citizens of a caliphate have every right to be involved in politics and hold the ruler accountable for his actions. The role of the ruler (caliph) is to be a servant to the masses who governs them with justice.”<sup>11</sup>

In response to a question about violence, Waheed answered that:

“[T]he party considers violence or armed struggle against the regime a violation of the Islamic *Sharia*... [T]he party works with people of influence within societies to convince them of the need for intellectual and political change.”<sup>12</sup>

To its members, however, HT does not hide its strategy and intentions. As it has told them,

“The Islamic State is by no means an easy acquisition, nor a question of simply becoming ministers (this applies to both parties and individuals) or becoming part of the present ruling system. The road is embedded with thorns, full of perils, obstacles and hardships, not to mention the non-Islamic culture, shallow thinking and pro-Western regimes which form a formidable obstacle. Those who tread the path of the Islamic call to restore the Islamic State **would in fact be aiming at seizing power in order to resume the Islamic way of life in the Muslim lands**, and to convey the Message of Islam to the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> (author's emphasis)

HT therefore appears to be undergoing a transition in which it is developing a variable message to suit different audiences, while retaining its original strategy. Since the death of Nabhani, intellectual stagnation and an ideological vacuum have resulted—allowing more militant groups to challenge what are seen as the old-fashioned doctrines of HT. The third and fourth generation of its Palestinian central leadership, which still remains largely underground, has suffered a loss of focus; this may explain why some announcements made by spokesmen outside the Arab world contradict traditional HT policy.

Now, the increasingly central role of its UK leadership—whose members largely belong to the professional classes, and are mostly of South Asian origin—is providing HT with the more diplomatic and polished veneer that it previously lacked. The transfer of many administrative and publishing functions to the London leadership has given HT a renewed lease of life as it seeks to fend off the challenge of other groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Political Activity**

In its early days HT members were engaged in the political process. Nabhani, his successor Abdul Qadeem Zallum, and others all ran for office in Jordan between 1950 (prior to the group's formation) and 1956. Thereafter, they withdrew, effectively going underground throughout the Arab world.

In the UK, and elsewhere, HT activity is frequently carried out covertly, although the level of secrecy depends on the local environment, including the attitude of law enforcement and

security services. This is evidenced by the group's continuing universal practice of using cover names for reserving venues, publishing propaganda and even carrying out political activity.

A major change occurred recently, however, when the Lebanese government approved the registration of HT as a political party—thereby allowing it to emerge from the shadows after fifty years of covert activity. This may of course have been a reflection of the Lebanese government's own weaknesses and desire to offset other influences such as those of Syria and Hezbollah, both of which are regarded as harmful by HT's leadership.

On 19 May 2006, HT called a press conference at a Beirut restaurant at which its local spokesman, Dr Ayman al-Kadree, stated that HT would be transformed into a political party, after the Lebanese government arrested some of its members on terrorism-related charges. The head of the HT media office stated that “the party will concentrate on an ideological and political call (*da'wah*) using argument and persuasion and conducting lectures, philosophical and political conferences, campaigns, forming and sending political delegations, etc.”<sup>14</sup>

In Britain, HT has also emerged from the shadows, opening some of its meetings to journalists and granting occasional press interviews—while also maintaining its covert activities.<sup>15</sup> In the May 2006 local elections, unlike in during previous campaigns, it did not call on its members to refrain from voting. Instead it called for Muslims to consider Muslim issues when casting their ballots. At about the same time, the party joined other groups in demonstrations following the police anti-terror raid in Forest Gate, East London.<sup>16</sup> It also campaigned jointly with the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) at the National Union of Students annual conference in Blackpool. Such activities would previously have been anathema.<sup>17</sup>

### **Anti-Semitism**

After HT was prosecuted for its anti-Semitic publications in the UK, Denmark, and Germany (in the latter country, the group was banned as a result), it has been forced to hide its anti-Jewish ideology in countries where it might prove a barrier to its progress.<sup>18</sup> However, such sentiment is still promoted in other countries—where there is no Jewish community to protest anti-Semitism, where the local government has adopted an anti-Israeli stance, or where there is no effective legislation against anti-Semitic incitement.

In Indonesia, for example HT communiqués continue to feature the following *hadiths*: “And kill them [the Jews] wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out...The Jews are a people of slander. They are a treacherous people who violate oaths and covenants....Allah forbids you to befriend them.”<sup>19</sup>

In Uzbekistan, HT refers to President Karimov as the “Jewish *Kafir*” and “the Jew Karimov.”<sup>20</sup> (He is not, in fact, Jewish) In Sudan, HT has declared that “Recognition and negotiation with the Jews is a betrayal of Allah,” and repeated the above *hadith*, “Kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out.”<sup>21</sup>

Although under legal pressure it has removed such content from its publications in some countries, HT has not disowned anti-Semitism, which is still an integral part of its ideology. A substantial part of Nabhani's writings is devoted to anti-Semitism, which is unsurprising given his background in the Muslim Brotherhood, and given the influence on his thinking by

Hajj Amin Al Husseini. Such anti-Semitism continues as an ideological current within HT to this day.<sup>22</sup>

The antisemitism of HT is not merely a product of, nor a reaction to, the Israel-Palestine situation. This conflict is considered by the group to be a historic, existential struggle between Muslims and Jews rather than a territorial dispute between Arabs and Israelis. HT's documents make this distinction clear, as do comments by its speakers. In 1994, an HT member at a University College London meeting declared that "The Quran does not mention Zionists, it mentions Jews. They are our enemy and *insha'allah* we will finish them."<sup>23</sup>

### **Terrorism**

From the beginning, HT's leadership decreed that members should not participate in terrorist activity prior to the establishment of the Islamic State. Even after the establishment of the Caliphate, terrorist activity was restricted to activities designed to expand Muslim territory. Party members were, however, given leave to carry out jihad in defense of themselves or the party. Notwithstanding this principle, throughout the party's history HT members have been involved in terrorist activities; in some cases, they have even instigated them. One informed commentator has suggested that permission to embark on "personal jihad" by joining other groups was granted only as a consequence of internal pressure within the party.<sup>24</sup>

A partial list of terrorists who were also HT members and/or influenced by its teachings includes the following individuals:

In Britain, Faisal Moustafa, Shafihur Rehman and Iftikar Sattar, who in 1995 were arrested and charged with conspiring to assassinate the Israeli ambassador, were reported to have been in possession of HT literature and to have helped organize HT meetings in Manchester. (Moustafa was again arrested in November 2000, but acquitted of terrorism charges—though his co-defendant, Moinul Abedin, was sentenced to twenty years).<sup>25</sup> Omar Khan Sharif and Asif Hanif, the Mike's Place suicide bombers, had contact with HT before moving on to more extreme organisations.<sup>26</sup> Mohammad Babar, who is linked to the seven men currently on trial in London on charges of planning terrorist attacks between January 2003 and April 2004, has stated that he was a member of HT while in college.<sup>27</sup> Imam Ramee, an American, spoke on behalf of HT while living in Manchester, and was the featured speaker at the HT-organized Muslim Unity Action March against the war in Iraq on March 15, 2003. He was reportedly an associate of Abu Hamza, and is said to have preached to "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, along with Hanif and Sharif, at the North London Mosque in Finsbury Park.<sup>28</sup>

In Germany, HT leader Shaker Assem lectured to the 9/11 terrorists after one of the plot leaders, Ramzi Binalshibh, facilitated his introduction.<sup>29</sup> In Russia, HT leaders Alisher Musayev and Akram Dzahalolov were among 55 party members arrested in June 2003 for possession of plastic explosives, grenades, TNT, and detonators. In August 2005, 9 members were convicted of these offences and of incitement to racial hatred.<sup>30</sup> In Syria, the assassins of Syrian cleric Muhammed Amin Yakan, who after being reported to be mediating between the government and the banned Muslim Brotherhood was gunned down in Aleppo in December 1999, were said to have been HT members.<sup>31</sup>

In Egypt, Salih Sirriya—a Palestinian HT member—led a coup attempt in April 1974 along with approximately 100 other members. Together, they stormed the Technical Military Academy in Heliopolis, where they attacked the armory. They seized weapons and planned to assassinate President Sadat, but were apprehended after an ensuing fire that killed eleven

HT members and injured many others. Sirriya was tried, convicted and executed in November 1976.<sup>32</sup> In Denmark, HT members compiled a “hit list” of Danish Jewish community leaders, for which they were convicted and imprisoned in August 2002. In particular, HT leader Fadi Ahmad Abdel Latif was convicted of incitement to racial hatred.<sup>33</sup> It is reported that both the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were HT members before joining al Qaeda.<sup>34</sup>

Until 2001 it might have been reasonable to accept HT statements and conclude that the radicalization process that HUT members encountered on progressing through the party merely provided a springboard for violent activity, activity that was not central to the party’s main strategy and goals.

However the publication in June 2001 in *al-Waie*, its Arabic-language online journal, forced a reassessment. In a lengthy article entitled “Martyrdom Operations,” the group argued that the texts that permit the killing of unbelievers impose no restrictions on how the killing is to be carried out:

“According to these texts, all ways and means which a Muslim uses to kill unbelievers is permitted as long as the enemy unbeliever is killed—whether they are killed by weapons from afar or if their ranks are penetrated; whether their stronghold is captured and penetrated before their eyes, or whether you blow up their planes or shoot them down; or whether you blow yourself up amongst their military encampments or blow yourself and them up with a belt of explosives. All of these are permissible means of fighting unbelievers.”<sup>35</sup>

The *al-Waie* article then argues that those who oppose suicide missions to kill unbelievers, on the grounds that such missions also kill Muslims, are wrong for two reasons:

“First, the Prophet had confirmed that a Muslim should enter battle to fight even if he is facing certain death. Second, suicide is killing oneself out of hopelessness with regard to one’s life, and not out of an aspiration to go to Paradise, i.e., it does not cause the enemy to suffer by killing him. Suicide in itself leads to Hell; killing non-believers while also killing oneself leads to Paradise.”

The article then examines whether it is permissible in these circumstances to carry out “martyrdom” operations against Jewish soldiers and not against civilians (who are defined as women, children and the elderly). It concludes that operations that inevitably kill bystanders cannot be helped, whereas killing by sword, rifle or other weapons is more controllable and therefore not permitted. Additionally, the article notes, it is permissible to kill using destructive weapons (suicide bombings) if the enemy uses them. Furthermore, it is permitted to kill old men if they are involved in planning attacks in which Muslims are killed, and allowable to kill women if they are combatants.

It concludes in the light of the above reasoning that suicide terrorism against “the Jewish entity in Palestine” is permissible so long as the intention is “righteous and sincere to Allah.”

<sup>36</sup> Read together with the injunction by then-leader Abdul Qadeem Zallum to hijack airplanes carrying Israelis and Jews (published in 1988), it is clear that HT does indeed support terrorism against both groups, and that the distinction between Israelis and Jews is made only to include both.<sup>37</sup>

It has been suggested, by the translator of the “Martyrdom Operations” paper that “such legitimacy (of suicide missions) applies not only to Israel, but potentially also to other “enemies,” thereby providing an open *fatwa* supporting those who engage in suicide terrorism against those deemed (by HT) to be enemies of Islam.”<sup>38</sup>

This fits with the basic strategy of the party, which has been explained as follows:

“Those saying Islam is a *deen* (religion) of peace deny offensive *jihad*, i.e., initiating fighting with the disbelievers...Some of them believe there is no necessity for this matter since it is possible to overcome the material obstacles...by using the Internet, media, books, leaflets, mosques, and Islamic centers in the heart of the disbelievers’ countries...This view collides with the texts of the Book [the Quran], Sunnah and Ijmaa Us-Sahabah, all of which command that we initiate fighting against them, even if they do not initiate against us, if they do not accept Islam or pay the *jizya* and submit to the rule of Islam.”<sup>39</sup>

However, in contradiction to this view UK spokesman Imran Waheed, in the interview cited above, stated in response to a question about HT’s attitude toward suicide bombings that “under no circumstances does Islam allow the killing of innocent civilians, and this is why we have issued a clear denunciation of the attacks of 9/11 and more recently the London bombings of July 7<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>40</sup>

States faced with Islamist insurrection by other groups also target HT because of its incendiary language and its engagement in subversion. Two such countries are Uzbekistan and in Russia. An authoritative Russian human rights body, SOVA, has argued that, because HT is one of 15 banned organizations under the Russian Federation Supreme Court ruling of February 14, 2003, its members are automatically charged with terrorism in addition to whatever other crimes they are alleged to have committed.<sup>41</sup> Informed observers further argue that HT is dealt with particularly harshly by Russian authorities because of the party’s support for Chechen Islamist separatists, along with its rejection of parliamentary government and its support of coups d’état.

HT is also viewed as a terrorist group by all the Central Asian republics due to these states’ broad legal definitions of terrorism, which include the promotion of nonviolent radical ideas.<sup>42</sup> The Russian human rights group (SOVA) referred to above has also suggested that “We cannot trust [HT]’s critics, as they may confuse HT with other Islamist groups, or simply take for granted statements made by the Supreme Court in Russia or by President Karimov in Uzbekistan. Similarly, we should not believe [HT]’s advocates, as they may have their own agendas in defending [HT].”<sup>43</sup>

### **Assessment**

It cannot be denied that members of HT continue to provide a manpower pool for terrorist recruitment. One former senior member stated some years ago his belief that “if Hizb ut-Tahrir [is] not stopped at this stage, and we continue to let them politicize and pollute the youngsters’ minds and other gullible peoples’ minds, then what will happen in effect is that these terrorist acts and these suicide bombings that we hear going on around in foreign countries, we will actually start seeing these incidents happening outside our doorsteps.”<sup>44</sup>

It seems reasonably clear that the basic aim of HT—to re-establish the Caliphate and to extend it elsewhere—remains in place. It is indeed also the ultimate aim of all Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the subsequent offshoots of

these groups. It must be noted that HT was the first group to do so, at a time when the Brotherhood focused only on the Arab world, while the Jamaat concentrated solely on the Indian subcontinent.

HT's basic strategy also still remains, while it only occasionally makes explicit mention of the violence implicit in the third stage of its program—the seizing of power. What appears to be happening, however, is that historical events and local circumstances are forcing either a change of emphasis or a softening of the initial message, in order either to avoid problems with local law enforcement or to enable the party to appear more attractive to prospective members. Many former members have explained the attraction of HT's strategy, which appears to offer solutions to all the problems experienced by the Muslim world by permitting it once again to dominate all the lands it once ruled.

Those countries which have experienced the consequences of HT's process of radicalization—which produces militants inspired by a vision of a dominant Islam, and given sanction to use violence to achieve it—have recognized this threat.

The primary focus of HT has always been Muslim states which have failed to govern by *Shariah* and which have not adopted the ideal form of governance called for by the party. Its secondary targets have been those states which are deemed to oppress Muslims. However, due to the relative absence of limits on its operations, the group has based its administrative and propaganda centers in countries such as the UK.

In part, the continued relocation of its activity has been a consequence of its forced moves from Palestine to Jordan, from Jordan to Lebanon and thereafter to Germany, the UK and now Central Asia. On the one hand, these moves have fueled its global aspirations; on the other, they have allowed the emergence of non-Arabs in the party leadership.

Over time, divisions within the group have consequentially begun to appear. These are not deep—since enlargement of such differences would strike at the heart of the very concept of the *umma*—but they are reflected in the differing tactics adopted in different countries.

## Notes

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