

## I. Articles

### Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy

by Lorenzo Vidino

#### **Abstract**

*This article seeks to explore the history, ideology and tactics of various radical Islamist organizations inspired by the al Muhajiroun-style of activism that have operated in various Western European countries over the last twenty years. It devotes a particular focus to their complex relationship with violence. Finally, it also looks at how European authorities have dealt with these groups over time.*

**Keywords:** *al Muhajiroun, Sharia4, Hizb ut Tahrir, radicalization, non-violent extremism, Islamism, foreign fighters, Omar Bakri Mohammed, Anjem Choudary*

#### **Introduction**

Since the early 2000s, countless theories have sought to analyze radicalization processes among Western Muslims. Studies have dissected the many internal and external factors that, operating concurrently, lead some young European, North American and Australian Muslims to join violent groups like al Qaeda or, more recently, the Islamic State. One relatively understudied aspect is the role of extremist but not directly violent Islamist organizations in this process. Particularly over the last few years, in fact, it has become apparent that in most (but not all) Western countries a large and growing percentage of individuals who engaged in violent jihadist activities have been involved in groups like al Muhajiroun or the Sharia4 global movement before making the leap into violence.

These groups are complex and difficult to categorize entities, epitomizing the heterogeneity of Islamism in the West. They adopt unquestionably radical positions, often engaging in highly controversial rhetoric and actions to attract attention and create tension while straddling the line between legally allowed stunts and illegal behaviors. Yet, despite endorsing the worldview and actions of militant jihadist groups, most of their activities tend to be non-violent or, at worst, entail scuffles with police or intimidation of adversaries. At the same time, the cases of individuals that, with varying degrees of intensity, gravitated around these organizations and subsequently engaged in terrorist activities are plentiful. And, in some recent cases, there are indications that the leadership of some of these organizations have transformed from headline-grabbing agitators (dismissed by most as buffoons) into full-fledged jihadists actively involved in combat in Syria and Iraq.

Given these dynamics, it is not surprising that these organizations have often been at the center of heated debates. One argument—an academic one, but with important practical implications—is related to the role they play in the radicalization process. While some scholars and policymakers consider them as “conveyor belts” facilitating and expediting radicalization towards violence, others have challenged this analysis.<sup>[1]</sup> A related and equally controversial topic of discussion revolves around the necessity, legal feasibility and practical effectiveness of banning these organizations.

This article seeks to explore these and other aspects.<sup>[2]</sup> It aims to look at the history, ideology and tactics of various organizations (each of which, to be clear, has its own peculiarities) that have operated in various Western European countries over the last twenty years. It then devotes a particular focus to their complex

relationship with violence. Finally, it also looks at how European authorities have dealt with these groups over time.

### ***From Hizb ut Tahrir to Sharia4: A Diverse Scene***

The ideology and forms of political activism of the groups examined in this article trace their roots to a large extent to those of the pan-Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT, Liberation Party). Founded in the early 1950s in East Jerusalem by Taqiuddin al Nabhani, an al Azhar-educated judge, the group espouses a pan-Islamic doctrine that sees in the reestablishment of the Caliphate the only answer to the military, economic and moral subjugation it alleges Muslims suffer at the hands of Western powers and corrupt Muslim rulers. [3] The group claims to resort only to non-violent means, such as education and public demonstrations, to further its goals. It nonetheless possesses a clandestine structure and sometimes, allegedly, engages in violent activities (albeit not under its own name).

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, HT never developed into a large social movement. Rather, within each country where it established a presence it remained always a small, somewhat cultish and secretive group. Yet, like the Brotherhood, it managed to spread to dozens of countries worldwide, including in the West. It was in Great Britain, in fact, that in the 1990s the group—while stifled by harsh repression in Middle Eastern countries—had somewhat of a re-birth. The main engineer behind this was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood from Aleppo, Omar Bakri Mohammed. After studying at al Azhar and other prestigious Islamic law faculties, Bakri joined HT in Beirut in 1983 and later moved to Saudi Arabia, where he was repeatedly arrested. In 1986 he moved to London, where he quickly developed a small following.[4]

The charismatic Bakri introduced a new form of Islamic activism in Europe. Unlike other groups, which operated without drawing attention, Bakri's HT branch began leafleting, manning booths, and organizing all sorts of events in public venues to disseminate its message. Its rhetoric was also deliberately confrontational and provocative. It was through stunts such as calling for the conversion of the Queen in a poorly attended but loud event in Trafalgar Square that Bakri's group managed to attract the attention of both British Muslims and the media.

Yet HT's leadership did not see these developments favorably, as it had envisioned the role of its newly established British branch mostly as a hub for media activities aimed at the organization's main goal: establishing a caliphate in the Middle East. Bakri's provocative and insubordinate style brought him in conflict with HT's leadership, and the two parted ways in January 1996. Just three days later he launched a new organization, al Muhajiroun, which initially comprised only three members.[5] The group's trademark in-your-face rhetoric and tactics made it extremely popular, even though its membership remained fairly small. It soon established branches throughout the UK. In the post-9/11 environment the group ramped up its rhetoric, attracting increasing scrutiny from British authorities. Arrests and other forms of pressure led the group to disband in 2004. In August 2005 Bakri left for Lebanon and then Home Secretary Charles Clarke banned him from returning, declaring his presence in the country "not conducive to the public good." [6]

Yet al Muhajiroun activists, led by Bakri's right hand man, Anjem Choudary, began forming an alphabet soup of organizations that carried on—often with even more incendiary tones—the group's legacy.[7] Despite various bans imposed by the British government, groups like the Saved Sect, al-Ghurabaa, Muslims against Crusades, Need4Khilafah, Muslim Prisoners, the Islamic Emergency Defence (often shortened to IED as a play on Improvised Explosive Device) and many others carried on the message and style first introduced by Bakri (who kept in close contact with his followers from his exile in Tripoli).

## *The Spread to Continental Europe*

The continuous metamorphosis of the al Muhajiroun network was not limited to the UK. Small spinoffs of the movement had been present throughout Europe and in the United States since the late 1990s. But around 2010 Choudary began to systematically export a new brand: Sharia4. In an interview with Joe Mulhall, the former lawyer turned firebrand cleric recounted the birth of the movement as follows:

*I was being approached by Abu Imran, he came to see me in February or March 2010 and he said he was very impressed with our activities and he wanted to know how they could do something similar. [...] He stated that his own movement was called Sharia4Belgium after our Islam4UK and then I think he initiated Sharia4Holland and then people in France wanted to be part of it and people in other countries and basically it spread like that without us. Many people started to attribute themselves to us, they started wanting to know more about us. I started to be invited to different places. I went to Indonesia, I went to Belgium. It was a natural thing.[8]*

One of the largest and well known of the Sharia4 franchises is, as Choudary recounted, Belgium's. In early 2010, in fact, a small group of mostly Antwerp-based activists led by the charismatic Fouad Belkacem (the above-mentioned Abu Imran) started Sharia4Belgium. The group adopted the same tactics as their British counterparts: confrontational protests aimed at attracting media attention, publicity stunts, disruption of events and aggressive online presence. Its message was also identical, from a direct condemnation of democracy as un-Islamic to a stated goal of introducing sharia in the country. Belkacem was arrested in June 2012 and later sentenced for inciting hatred and violence against non-Muslims.<sup>[9]</sup> The group announced its disbandment in October of that year. As will be seen later in this discussion, many members of the group later traveled to Syria to join various jihadist groups and recruited many of their contacts in Belgium to follow them.

Sharia4Belgium attracted the attention of like-minded individuals across the border in the Netherlands, where soon some activists from The Hague, Delft, and Amsterdam established Sharia4Holland. Around the same time two similar groups appeared on the Dutch scene.<sup>[10]</sup> The first, Straatdawah, came together after the success of an October 2011 demonstration held by various Salafist-leaning activists in The Hague to protest the law to ban the integral veil in the country. The informal cluster that coalesced from the event began conducting public preaching events (also known as “street dawa”—hence the name Straatdawah in Dutch) in city centers of various Dutch towns. Their literature and rhetoric targeted equally Dutch society at large and Muslim leaders, including prominent Salafist leaders of the first generation, who, in their view, failed to pursue the cause of sharia in the Netherlands.

Similar views motivated another Dutch group that was formed at the time, Behind Bars. The founders of the group were former worshipper at The Hague's As Soennah mosque.<sup>[11]</sup> As Soennah had long been one of the key centers of Salafism in the Netherlands and authorities had often linked it, at least on an ideological level, to terrorism.<sup>[12]</sup> But around the mid-2000s, while retaining many controversial views, the mosque and its charismatic leader, Fawaz Jneid, began changing their positions. Partially under pressure from the government and the media after the Theo van Gogh assassination, Jneid began reneging his previous rejection of democracy and some of his most extreme positions, creating dissatisfaction among some of his followers. Relations between the mosque and the hardline group further deteriorated when the former decided to alert the Dutch security services that some former As Soennah worshippers had attempted to travel to Somalia to join al Shabaab. Rejected from mosque, the small group of hardliners began a campaign to free some of their former fellow As Soennah attendees who had been imprisoned in Morocco, Pakistan and the Netherlands itself—hence the name Behind Bars.

Since the late 2000s, groups inspired by Sharia4's ideology and tactics have popped up throughout Europe. In Denmark, where a HT branch had been established by British activists already in the early 2000s[13], a group calling itself Kaldet til Islam (Call to Islam) appeared around 2010. The group has links to Choudary and its activities and style closely resemble those of the al Muhajiroun network. In Norway the "branch" of this informal network is represented by the Profetens Ummah (Prophets of the ummah).

Over the last few years authorities in several other European countries have also witnessed the birth of small groups that, while largely adopting the ideology and tactics of the Sharia4 movement, do not seem to possess any operational link to it. Rather, they tend to form autonomously through the initiative of one or more charismatic leaders with an ability to mobilize small groups of sympathizers through cleverly framed social media and real-life activities. A quintessential example of this dynamic is Forsane Alizza (Knights of Pride), a network of some 15 activists that formed around self-proclaimed Nantes-based imam Mohamed Achamlane in early 2010. The group organized several events in various French cities that attracted small numbers of protesters but, given their rhetoric and occasional confrontation with law enforcement, received large attention from the media. The group was eventually dismantled by the French Ministry of Interior in March 2012.[14]

While still attracting little more than a few hundred activists, the organizations operating in northern and central European countries seem to be able to mobilize significantly larger numbers than those seeking to emulate them in southern Europe. In Italy, for example, Anas el Abboubi, a young Brescia-based activist, managed to make contact with the leadership of the al Muhajiroun network and Sharia4Belgium through the Internet. El Abboubi attempted to form an Italian branch of the network, establishing a handful of related websites and organizing events in the Brescia—events that failed to attract more than half a dozen sympathizers.[15]

An explanation for the limited success of these organizations in Mediterranean countries is likely to be found in their immigration history. Groups like Sharia4 appear to attract almost exclusively second/third-generation European born Muslims (plus a sizeable number of converts to Islam). Unlike central and northern European countries, large-scale Muslim immigration to countries like Italy or Spain began only in the 1990s and therefore only now a second generation of locally-born Muslims is coming of age. It will be interesting to see whether the phenomenon will spread to southern European countries in the future.

### ***Similarities and Differences***

The general worldview of HT, the Sharia4 movement and groups like Forsane Alizza is largely similar. They all embrace a highly politicized version of Salafism that shuns democracy and sees the formation of a purely Islamic state, often framed as an a-historically interpreted Caliphate, as the solution to all the cultural, military, economic and political ills plaguing the global *ummah*. They all see the West as a morally corrupt entity intent on attacking Islam and dividing Muslims. And they combine various forms of political activism, ranging from public *dawa* to more secretive activities, as the best tactics to advance their goals.

Yet there are some profound differences between HT and the "second generation" of organizations (which, to be clear, also have differences among themselves):

***Structure and membership structure profile:*** Both HT and "second generation" organizations attract only small numbers of activists. Their internal dynamics are quite different. HT is organized through a strict and secret system of units following a hierarchy that leads all the way to the group's leadership in the Middle East. Groups of the new generation, on the other hand, are spontaneous and fluid formations of like-minded

individuals without a clear leadership and structure. In many cases, they also tend to ignore HT's proverbial secrecy, openly revealing their identity and views on- and offline (although they do tend to operate with more discretion if discussing terrorism-related activities).

Their membership profiles also tend to differ. HT's members tend to be university students and highly educated individuals—a fact that is reflected in the group's intellectual approaches and rhetoric. While exceptions are not uncommon, groups of the second generation on the other hand tend to attract less educated individuals. Many of them even have a recent past in criminal activities and gangs. Even their looks tend to differ. HT members dress somberly: shirts and trousers for men, *jilbab* for women. The "new" activists adopt a different style. Men tend to wear more visible "Salafist clothes" (such as ankle-length pants) but also flashy track suits and sneakers (a reflection of their street background). Women tend to wear the *niqab*.[16]

**Tactics:** Many of the tactics adopted by the new groups are similar to HT's, but they tend to be more confrontational. Both, for example, perform street *dawa*, leafleting and manning booths distributing literature. But the new groups often accompany these activities with public prayers; these tend to be held deliberately in symbolic places and with the display of flags of (or with references to) various jihadist groups.

HT itself has always made provocation one of its trademarks, but the new groups have taken this approach to a higher level. Arguably the watershed moment for the new groups was represented by the protest held in February 2006 in front of the Danish embassy in London. There activists of the al Muhajiroun network held highly provocative banners with slogans such as "Butcher those who mock Islam" and "Europe you will pay, your 9/11 is on the way." And while the protest did not degenerate into a full confrontation with the police, the atmosphere around it was extremely tense.

The protests in front of the Danish embassy set a precedent that a few years later various organizations throughout continental Europe sought to emulate. In June 2011, for example, some twenty Forsane Alizza sympathizers protested in front of the Limoges courthouse in which Mohamed Achamlane was tried for having conducted a disruptive protest the previous year inside a local McDonalds, which he accused of having links to Jewish financial circles. The men, who wore scarves over their faces, held placards which read "*Secularism to the devil*" and "*Sarkozy go to Hell*" and eventually stormed the building.[17]

Similarly, Sharia4Belgium became notorious because of its deliberately aggressive protests. The violent disruption of the speeches by Dutch writer Benno Barnard at the University of Antwerp and Dutch Green Party MP Tofik Dibi and feminist advocate Irshad Manji in Amsterdam—all individuals the group identified as anti-Islam—gave Sharia4Belgium significant media attention. In June 2011 the group was also behind protests in Molenbeek, an immigrant-heavy area of Brussels, that degenerated into violent street clashes with police. The protests were triggered by an incident in which a woman wearing the *niqab* had been reportedly brutalized by the police who had sought to detain her under the country's law banning the use of integral veils in public.

In many cases groups of the second generation engage in deliberately provocative actions whose main goal is not to disrupt or seek a violent confrontation but, rather, attract media attention. These publicity stunts tend to be successful because mainstream media find these events very camera-friendly, therefore triggering a relationship of mutual exploitation with extremist groups. A quintessential example of this perverse mechanism is represented by the announcement made in early 2010 by Islam4UK, an al Muhajiroun spinoff, to conduct a protest in Royal Wootton Bassett, the English town where British military casualties are repatriated. The group planned to march through the town with black coffins and signs disparaging soldiers.

The march never took place but the group nonetheless achieved its goal, as Anjem Choudary explained:

*On the Friday I [...] said I was considering doing a procession through Wootton Bassett [...] that obviously got the whole world talking. By Monday Gordon Brown was talking about it in parliament [...] by about Tuesday or Wednesday the whole of our methodology was printed verbatim on the BBC website. I had written a letter to British soldiers and the whole letter was printed in the Guardian. The amount of coverage we received globally for the ideas that we had was phenomenal.[18]*

A similar dynamic took place in the summer of 2011, when various areas of East London were flooded with bright yellow posters and leaflets with the puzzling and ominous header “You are entering a Sharia-controlled zone – Islamic rules enforced.”[19] Posted on walls, bus stops and poles in Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Newham, East London boroughs with large Muslim populations, the slickly designed signs also identified the allegedly prohibited activities: “No Alcohol,” “No Gambling,” “No Music or Concerts,” “No Porn or Prostitution,” and “No Drugs or Smoking.”

The leaflets were the work of Muslims Against Crusades and Islam4UK.[20] In typical al Muhajiroun fashion, its leaders were unapologetic about their initiative and happy to receive media attention over it. Claiming that up to fifty thousand leaflets had been printed, Choudary stated that the area of Waltham Forest was about to become Britain’s first *sharia*-controlled zone. “We have hundreds, if not thousands, of people who are willing to go out and make sure our laws are obeyed,” stated the London-born former lawyer. “This is the best way of dealing with drunkenness, loutishness, prostitution and the sort of thug life you get in Britain.”[21] He also added that his group aimed at “run[ning] the area as a Sharia-controlled zone and really to put the seeds down for an Islamic Emirate in the long term.”[22]

Muslims Against Crusades leader Abu Izzadeen hinted that the initiative was just the first step of a larger campaign called the Islamic Emirates Project. “Twenty-five areas around Britain have large Muslim populations, including Bradford, Dewsbury, Leicester and Luton,” stated the London-born convert Abu Izzadden, who in 2008 had been sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail for terrorism-related offences. “We want to turn them all into Islamic Emirates, where the excesses of Western civilization are not tolerated.”[23]

British media alarmingly reported the introduction of “Britain’s first Sharia law zone,” triggering strong condemnations from politicians and intellectuals of all political persuasion and faith. In reality, the campaign by Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades was similar to what most of the groups’ actions are: publicity stunts aimed at attracting media attention, provoking and creating tensions. Despite their leaders’ claims, there are no reports of any of the groups’ members—let alone the thousands of people invoked by Choudary—enforcing the dicta of the leaflets.[24] Yet the massive coverage it garnered made this publicity stunt extremely successful. Unsurprisingly, it has been repeated in other countries.[25]

*Geographic aims:* Both HT and the new groups see the formation of a strict sharia-ruled Islamic state as their end goal. But while both milieus eventually envision a global caliphate ruling the entire planet, there is a significant difference in the geographical boundaries of their more immediate ambitions. While HT advocates the introduction of Islamic law only in countries where Muslims form the majority of the population, the new groups are equally interested in Western countries. A Dutch HT activist interviewed by Ineke Roex clearly explained the difference: “Sharia4Holland wants to implement sharia law in the Netherlands, but that is not our job. We focus on the Islamic countries, where Islam is in people’s hearts. In the Netherlands, the majority is non-Muslim, so it has no sense.”[26]

### *Relationship with Violence*

The relationship between violence and groups such as HT or those of the new generation is a particularly controversial and policy-relevant topic. At the center of this debate, scholars and policymakers have often placed the so-called “conveyor belt” theory of radicalization. In substance, many have argued that these organizations, while not openly and directly advocating violence, propagate positions that fall immediately short of it and that, they argue, provide the ideological foundations for violent groups.

This theory has many supporters and an equal amount of critics, and has been at the forefront of the terrorism debate since the 9/11 attacks. It inserts itself in a much more dated (though arguably timeless) debate over the relationship between extremist ideas and violent actions. While often utilizing different names to indicate the two phenomena, scholars have in fact long distinguished between cognitive and violent radicalization. Cognitive radicalization is the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a belief system that is completely different. Violent radicalization occurs when an individual takes the additional step of employing violence to further the views derived from cognitive radicalism.[27]

The relationship between radical ideology and violent actions is extremely contested among scholars and policymakers—not just when it concerns Islamists but also all kinds of radicals.[28] Some of those involved in the debate tend to focus almost exclusively on ideology, ignoring all other personal, political and circumstantial factors that, in the vast majority of cases, do play a substantial role in the trajectory that leads individuals to embrace the use of violence for political goals. Others tend to underplay if not completely dismiss the role of ideology in the radicalization process, arguing that people become violent radicals because of personal connections or psychological traits.

Striking a balance between the extremes in this polarized debate is not easy. It is nonetheless fair to state that ideology is just one of the factors, together with personal circumstances, that drive individuals to radicalize and eventually commit acts of violence. It is indeed apparent to most scholars and experts that extremist belief is not always a precursor to terrorism. As Peter Neumann argues, “being a cognitive extremist, in other words, is neither sufficient nor necessary as a condition for becoming a terrorist.”[29] Similarly, it is evident that not all individuals who embrace radical ideas eventually commit acts of violence in their furtherance. To the contrary, most cognitive radicals will never make the leap into violence.

At the same time, most scholars and practitioners agree that the role of ideology in the radicalization process cannot be dismissed. In 2008, the European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalization argued that radicalization takes place “at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory.”[30] An individual’s personal profile and history is crucial in understanding why he reacted in the way he did to outside stimuli, influences, push and pull factors on the radicalization path. Understanding his (or her) psychological processes is extremely difficult but of fundamental importance. At the same time, argues the Expert Group, the absorption of a certain ideology is an equally fundamental component of any radicalization trajectory.

The “enabling environment” to which the Expert Group refers indicates the places, whether in the physical or virtual world, where individuals are first introduced to a radical ideology and where they can subsequently develop and nurture their devotion to it. Violent political behaviors are not born in a vacuum. Rather, those who carry them out have had to be exposed to various influences that led to them embracing a radical political ideology. That does not mean that other factors, from psychological traits to the influence of charismatic mentors, do not play a role. But it appears clear that the individual must have interacted, even

superficially, with factors that introduced him to a certain worldview.

While in many cases operating together with other elements, organizations like HT or al Muhajiroun contribute to an “enabling environment” and constitute a powerful gateway into militancy in violent groups. That is not to say that all militants of these groups make the leap into violence. Exactly as in drugs, from which the term “gateway” is borrowed, most marijuana users will not make the leap into harder drugs, similarly most activists in this “lighter” former of Islamism will not graduate into violent militancy. But for those who do, militancy in these groups was the necessary introduction to a worldview that is virtually identical to that of groups like al Qaeda or the Islamic State.

These dynamics are extremely difficult to assess in general terms and each case should be analyzed individually. But there are many cases of individuals who at some point were involved, albeit with varying degrees of engagement, with HT and second-generation organizations like al Muhajiroun in various Western countries who then made the leap into violence. HT members who engaged in violent actions include, for example Moez Garsallaoui, the Tunisian-born Switzerland-based militant who established some of the first jihadist online forums for French speakers before becoming a key trainer in al Qaeda-linked training camps in Pakistan,[31] and the perpetrators of the failed 2007 Glasgow airport bombing. In the UK, data released in 2009 by the Centre for Social Cohesion showed that one in seven individuals convicted for terrorism-related offences had links to al Muhajiroun.[32] More recent data by Raffaello Pantucci indicate that about half of terrorist attacks carried out by Britons at home or abroad had links to the group.[33] They include “shoe-bomber” Richard Reid, Tel Aviv’s Mike’s Place suicide bombers, some of the July 7, 2005 bombers and, most recently, the killers of British army fusilier Lee Rigby, among many others.

On one hand it would be simplistic and misleading to see the path that brought these individuals from activism in HT or al Muhajiroun to violent militancy as a straight, predictable line, uninfluenced by other factors. As a 2010 classified paper presented by the British government to the Cabinet’s home affairs committee, stated: “It is sometimes argued that violent extremists have progressed to terrorism by way of a passing commitment to non-violent Islamist extremism, for example of a kind associated with al-Muhajiroun or Hizb ut Tahrir ... We do not believe that it is accurate to regard radicalisation in this country as a linear ‘conveyor belt’ moving from grievance, through radicalisation, to violence ... This thesis seems to both misread the radicalisation process and to give undue weight to ideological factors.”[34] Indeed, there is ample evidence that some individuals have engaged in terrorist activity without being fully radicalized by an extremist ideology.

On the other hand, as well-known former HT member Ed Husain argues, “[t]here will always be a segment of this movement that will take jihad to its logical conclusion and act immediately, without leadership.”[35] Furthermore, evidence gathered throughout Western countries over the last 15 years clearly shows that many members of these organizations do make the leap into violence. Many—arguably the majority—do not. And yet the number of individuals engaging in violent activities who had in the past been more or less actively involved in these groups is extremely high.

A subset of the debate related to the relationship between al Muhajiroun and its spinoffs throughout Europe (and, similarly, North America and Australia) and violence is focused on whether such groups provided simply an ideological *antechambre* (or cognitive precursor) to terrorism or were directly involved in the mobilization of those in their milieus who wanted to make the leap to violence. Many in the Western counter-terrorism community, in fact, had long perceived these groups as dogs that bark but don’t bite. Most observers acknowledged that the activities of these organizations provided an ideologically conducive environment for some individuals to move on to violent actions. But it was often argued that that shift

happened autonomously through a personal decision made by the individual who -dissatisfied with the groups' loud talk but absence of concrete follow-through–distanced himself from them and joined violent groups.

In reality, there is considerable evidence that al Muhajiroun has long been directly involved in the mobilization of its members and hangers-on. Choudary has openly boasted about recruiting for various conflicts as early as the 1990s:

*Now before 2000 if you look at our demonstrations we would openly say yes, jihad in Chechnya, you should go, not that we were sending people but we would say yea. [...] You know we were actually collecting for Chechnya, you know in Trafalgar Square. There was no problem about supporting the Jihad in those days either verbally, even financially or to go abroad it was not illegal. The fact is that all those things were done openly. We were even recruiting people standing in Trafalgar Square to send them abroad.[36]*

It is never easy to determine whether assertions by Choudary like these are boastful propaganda or truth. But in this specific case, his claims are supported by substantial evidence documenting several cases of top al Muhajiroun members establishing training camps in Pakistan and openly recruiting individuals for various terrorist activities as early as the late 1990s. Bakri and Choudary have always managed to remain one step removed from these activities, at least when it comes to the evidence that prosecutors have been able to produce, but the role of individuals who were immediately close to them is well documented.

These dynamics have taken a new turn, particularly in continental Europe, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. While in the past the direct involvement of these enabling environments (which, to be sure, are characterized by a high degree of informality and fluidity) in the mobilization for violent activities was unclear, it is now much clearer when it comes to the facilitation of the passage of hundreds of aspiring European jihadists to the battlefields in Syria first and, subsequently, Iraq. In many cases it was evident that the increased brutality and sectarian nature of the Syrian rebellion, combined with the ease with which its members could reach the Syrian battlefields, led to a shift in these extremist network activities, which transformed from simply jihadist-leaning to fully involved in mobilizing for combat.

This phenomenon has been particularly evident in Belgium. During the first half of 2012, Sharia4Belgium engaged in extremely provocative actions in Belgium, although–other than scuffles with the police during some protests–there were no indications that the group was involved in any violent activity. But in August 2012 a handful of Sharia4Belgium members who had spent some time in Lebanon with Bakri returned to Belgium and, in just over a few weeks, the massive mobilization of Belgian volunteers towards the war-torn Arab country began.[37]

The first to leave for Syria were many of the core Sharia4Belgium members who had not been detained by Belgian authorities. Over the following months larger numbers of Belgian aspiring jihadists followed them–many of them second-tier Sharia4Belgium members, sympathizers or personal contacts of first-tier members already in Syria. The active involvement of Sharia4Belgium in mobilizing its networks arguably explains the disproportionately large number of Belgians fighting in Syria. Authorities estimate, in fact, that some 400 Belgian citizens and residents have fought in Syria, the highest per capita number among all Western countries.[38]

A very similar dynamic took place in neighboring Holland. The AIVD, the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency, argued that by the end of 2012 Shariah4Holland, Behind Bars and Street Dawah had ceased their public activities. “This,” states the AIVD, “coincided with the first wave of jihadist departures from the

Netherlands to Syria, the success of which was probably attributable to the close contacts between Behind Bars/Street Dawah and Sharia4Belgium. Individuals associated with the two movements were at the heart of that sudden exodus.”[39] The agency continues its analysis:

*Several members of radical Islamist organisations such as Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars are among those that left to Syria to join the jihad. This is indicative of how blurred the line between radicalism and jihadism has become. These movements have created an environment in which people with similar ideas meet and develop radical ideas into jihadist ideologies. This group dynamic has led to a rapid radicalization of many individuals as well as concrete attempts to join the jihad in Syria.* [40]

The conflict in Syria seems to have brought to the fore a difference between HT and the new groups that was only somewhat detectable before. HT, in fact, seeks to achieve its goal of establishing Islamic states mostly through two tactics: propaganda and infiltration of military forces. Through the former it seeks to win hearts and minds and mobilize popular support. But HT has always stressed the importance of placing small cadres of trusted followers in strategic sections of countries’ armies in order to eventually organize a coup d’etat, the fastest way to seize power.[41]

Yet, as a group, HT does not tend to involve itself directly with violence. Its rhetoric does not shun it—to the contrary, in many cases it glorifies it. Significantly, in its internal rhetoric the endorsement of violence is more explicit than in its public statements.[42] Overall, HT’s position towards violence is ambiguous to say the least. As Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley cleverly put it, there are two ways of seeing it: “The first is to say that they have been committed to non-violence for fifty years. The second is to say that they have been waiting fifty years for the right moment to begin violent struggle.”[43]

Yet HT, for both ideological and tactical reasons, does not directly engage in violence in the West. Some of its members (or, more frequently, hangers-on) do make the leap into violence, but there are no indications of the group being directly involved in any kind of terrorist-related mobilization in the West.[44] Groups of the second generation, on the other hand, have made it abundantly clear in both words and deeds that they do engage in violent activities. In most countries this shift from the HT activism-based approach to violent militancy has taken place over time. In the UK it matured shortly after 9/11 and, even more decidedly, after 7/7.

In the wake of the London attacks, in fact, Saved Sect leader Abu Uzair declared: “We don’t live in peace with you any more [...] The banner has been risen for jihad inside the UK, which means it’s allowed for the bombers to attack.”[45] Choudary described the difference of thinking between his group and HT with these words:

*It’s a very fundamental difference. It’s the difference between saying someone is an apostate and fighting against them. [...] Are the leaders of Muslim countries Muslims or non Muslims, are the regimes apostate regimes, are the armies apostate armies? [...] HT still believe armies are still ok to seek a relationship with because of their belief in the separation of their inner belief and their outer action. Which we don’t believe.*[46]

In most continental European countries the shift from HT’s largely non-violent confrontation to the new groups’ open use of violence has taken place a few years later, often triggered or at least accelerated by the Syrian conflict. This is how the AIVD summarizes the evolution of the movement in the Netherlands:

*At first it was not clear what direction this new activist movement would take. Depending on the groups, by and large their public message kept within the boundaries allowed by Dutch law. As did*

*the methods used to disseminate it. Nonetheless, jihadist rhetoric and symbolism were used openly. The movement was led by jihadists, and it attracted supporters of the jihad. But there were no signs of any intention to commit acts of violence, and for a long time departures to join the struggle elsewhere were rare. Only with the emergence of Syria as a theatre of jihad did attention finally shift from dawah to actual participation in the holy war.[47]*

### To Ban or Not to Ban?

Over the last fifteen years Western authorities have been debating what to do with organizations like HT, al Muhajiroun and the like. The recurring philosophical and legal dilemma is whether to ban them or not. As for the former, opponents of a ban argue that a democratic state should not police ideas, no matter how despicable they are. Essentially, they advocate the application of the Voltairian principle “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Other opponents argue that a ban would feed into the group’s narrative and create resentment in the broader Muslim community.[48] On the other hand, proponents of a ban argue that some ideas are so repugnant and dangerous that the state has a right—and even a duty—to ban groups that spread them. This debate focusing on the extent of freedom of speech is shaped by each country’s cultural, political, legal and historical circumstances.

But, even assuming philosophical objections are bypassed, states encounter various legal difficulties—which, again, vary from country to country—in banning these groups. Because of the country’s recent history, Germany’s constitution is particularly strict against groups that promote racist and anti-democratic views. Unsurprisingly, Germany is the only Western country to have formally banned HT from public activities (even though the ban does not make membership in the group illegal). The ban, which was issued in January 2003, was based on the fact that the group had been distributing anti-Semitic propaganda.[49]

Despite its rejection of Western legal systems, HT appealed the ban both within the German court system and in front of the European Court of Human Rights. And despite the group’s constant rejection of the principle in its propaganda, the leader of the German HT branch appealed to freedom of speech in criticizing the ban. “The German government,” has stated Shaker Assem, “has decided it would rather subvert its own principles by banning a political group, and prohibiting its thoughts, rather than engaging in debate or intellectually challenging it.”[50]

But in countries that do not have provisions as stringent as Germany’s, a ban is often not a feasible option. In Denmark, for example, article 78, 2 of the Constitution states that only “organizations that seek to obtain their goals through violent means, instigate violence or similar punishable impact on individuals of other convictions, can be dissolved by law.” Both the 2004 and 2008 inquiries on HT by the Danish Director of Public Prosecutions came to the conclusion that the group did not possess these characteristics and therefore—despite calls from politicians throughout the spectrum of Danish politics—could not be banned. [51] Unsurprisingly, new calls to ban HT were made by prominent Danish politicians after the January 2015 terrorist attacks in Copenhagen.[52]

But even when a ban is possible, its substantial effectiveness is hardly guaranteed. British authorities have repeatedly proscribed al Muhajiroun spinoffs: al-Ghurabaa and the Saved Sect in July 2006, Islam4UK, Call to Submission, Islamic Path, and the London School of Shari’ah in January 2010, Muslims Against Crusades in November 2011, Need4Khilafah, the Shariah Project and Islamic Dawah Association in June 2014. After each ban the activists of the proscribed organizations simply continued their activities under a new name. Choudary, a trained lawyer who is deeply aware of the limitations of British law, candidly described this dynamic to Joe Mulhall:

*I'll put it like this, names are irrelevant. The important thing is your activities. [...] The point is, platforms, bodies and organizations are there for the same reason which is to pass on the message. [...] I wouldn't read too much into the names. You know the government proscribe organizations but you know I could give you another 20 or 30 bodies and platforms which are associated with us, which continue. [...] The way it all functions is that unless you operate openly as al-Muhajiroun with the same people and stuff like that, organized in the same way, the government will have difficulties, they have difficulties prosecuting anyone.[53]*

One case where the ban seems to have worked is that of Forsane Alizza, which French authorities proscribed in February 2012 under a 1936 law prohibiting “combat groups and private militias.” Yet the case presents two peculiarities. First, Forsane Alizza was significantly smaller than HT, al Muhajrioun or Sharia4Belgium, as it had only a dozen members. Moreover, many of its members, including its charismatic leader, were arrested right before the ban. The group, in essence, resembled a cell rather than a relatively large informal network as its counterparts throughout Europe.

### **Conclusion**

The Syrian conflict has further highlighted the security implications of the activities of groups belonging to the al Muhajiroun family. The assessment that they are “dogs that bark but don’t bite” has been revised by counterterrorism authorities throughout the continent, even though mobilization dynamics change from group to group and from country to country.

But concerns about these organizations are not limited to violent radicalization. If views are somewhat split on the relationship between their activities and terrorism, few challenge the accusations that their rhetoric is extremely dangerous from a social cohesion point of view. Their positions on integration, women’s rights, freedom of religion, homosexuality and several other aspects often clash with the views and values embraced by the vast majority of Western citizens and enshrined in all Western countries’ constitutions.

Moreover, the fact that their polarizing views receive high media visibility has created a dangerous dynamic in many European countries. Various right wing groups—whether established ones such as Belgium’s political party Vlaams Belang, or more improvised formations such as the English Defense League and, more recently, Germany’s Hooligans Against Salafism—have largely utilized the stunts of al Muhajiroun-like groups as mobilizing tools for their own campaigns. In what is becoming a perverse but constant mechanism, European right wing groups and al Muhajiroun spinoffs are mutually reinforcing enemies, the propaganda of each providing ammunition to the other.

Yet, despite all the clear challenges posed by these groups, it is extremely difficult for any democratic society to take effective measures to clamp down on them. Repressive measures are not always available and, even when they are, they could prove ineffective if not counterproductive.

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### **Notes**

[1] Zeyno Baran, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency*, Nixon Institute, December 2004.

[2] Substantial information and analysis for this article is derived from the findings of a recently published book edited by the author of this piece (*Sharia4:*

*Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*, Dubai, al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2015, in Arabic). The author wishes to thank the contributors: Rashad Ali, Joe Mulhall, Pieter Van Ostaejen, Ineke Roex, Jarret Brachman, Kirstine Sinclair, Saad Ali Khan, and Philippe Migaux.

[3] Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006).

[4] For the history of Bakri in the UK, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 8–10.

[5] Ibid.

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[7] Catherine Zara Raymond, *Al Muhajiroun and Islam4UK: The Group behind the Ban*, paper for the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, London: King's College, May 2010.

[8] Joe Mulhall, "From Clowns to Contenders: The History and Development of al-Muhajiroun and its International Networks," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*, Dubai, al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2015.

[9] "Celstrafoor Belgische moslimextremist," *De Volkskrant*, February 10, 2012.

[10] *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, AIVD, September 2014; Ineke Roex, "The rise of public dawa networks in the Netherlands: Behind Bars, Sharia4Holland, and Straatdawah," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*. Dubai: al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre,, 2015.

[11] Ineke Roex, "The rise of public dawa networks in the Netherlands: Behind Bars, Sharia4Holland, and Straatdawah," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*. Dubai: al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2015.

[12] AIVD. *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, The Hague: AIVD, September 2014.

[13] Maajid Nawaz, *Radical* (WH Allen, 2012). Pp. 175-83.

[14] Stéphanie Le Bars, "Claude Guéant dissout un groupe islamiste radical," *Le Monde*, February 29, 2012.

[15] Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, ISPI (Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale) and European Foundation for Democracy, April 2014. El Abboubi was arrested in June 2013 for distributing online material for terrorism training purposes. Released after a few weeks he left Italy and traveled to Syria, where he reportedly joined the Islamic State group.

[16] Kirstine Sinclair and Saad Ali Khan, "Current Islamist and Jihadi-Salafi Trends in Denmark: Hizb ut-Tahrir and Kaldet," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*. Dubai: al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2015.

[17] Philippe Migaux, "Forsane Alizza: From radical demonstration to the preparation of terrorist action," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*. Dubai: al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2015.

[18] Joe Mulhall, "From Clowns to Contenders: The History and Development of al-Muhajiroun and its International Networks," in Lorenzo Vidino, *Sharia4: Straddling political activism and jihad in the West*, al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, Dubai, 2015. The interview with Choudary was conducted on June 18, 2014.

[19] Rebecca Camber, "No porn or prostitution: Islamic extremists set up Sharia law controlled zones in British cities," *Daily Mail*, July 28, 2011.

[20] For a relatively comprehensive and updated history of al Muhajiroun and its spinoffs, see Catherine Zara Raymond, *Al Muhajiroun and Islam4UK: The Group Behind the Ban*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, May 2010.

[21] Sue Reid, "As Islamic extremists declare Britain's first Sharia law zone, the worrying social and moral implications," *Daily Mail*, July 29, 2011.

[22] Rebecca Camber, "No porn or prostitution: Islamic extremists set up Sharia law controlled zones in British cities," *Daily Mail*, July 28, 2011.

[23] Sue Reid, "As Islamic extremists declare Britain's first Sharia law zone, the worrying social and moral implications," *Daily Mail*, July 29, 2011.

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- [37] Personal interview with Belgian official, Brussels, February 2014.[
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, AIVD, September 2014. Page 13.
- [40] *Jaarverslag 2012: technologisering bepaalt dreigingsbeeld*. The Hague: AIVD, 2012, p. 24.
- [41] Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, Centre for Social Cohesion, November 2009. Available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/HIZB.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2015).
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- [43] Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al- Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006), p. 328.
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- [47] *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, The Hague: AIVD, September 2014.
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