

Tabligh-e-Jama'at Under the Scanner of German Intelligence

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On May 17, 2005, the Federal Interior Ministry of Germany published its annual report on the Protection of Constitution for 2004. For the last few years, the country's domestic intelligence agency – *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV)* – under the Federal Interior Ministry, has been publishing such reports on its website. Focusing on the internal security situation of Germany, the recent report includes external threats, indigenous left and right-wing groups, their potential for violence, foreign terrorist and militant groups active in Germany and the presence of foreign intelligence services on German soil. On the occasion of the publication, German Federal Minister of Interior Otto Schily warned that Islamic terrorism poses the greatest global threat as well as for Germany. Highlighting the slight increase (from 30,950 in 2003 to 31,800 in 2004) in the membership strength of Islamist organisations in Germany, he emphasised the need to ban the existing organisations and their activities as an effective instrument to combat the threat.¹

The significance of Germany in the post -9/11 global scenario needs little reiteration. The unearthing of the fact that Hamburg was the birthplace of the conspiracy to attack US civil and military installations on 9/11, the arrests of some key terrorists in Germany and their subsequent trials have indeed evoked global interest. As counter-measures to tackle the terrorist threat on its own soil, Germany has already approved two security packages in order to enable its security apparatus to meet the new challenge. Three Islamist organisations have been banned as a part of the process. The Caliphate State, essentially a Turkish diaspora-based organisation with its headquarters in Cologne, was banned in December 2001. After a protracted legal tussle, the leader of the organisation, Metin Kaplan, was extradited to Turkey in October 2004. Likewise, in August 2002, the German Interior Ministry prohibited the activities of the Aachen-based charity *Al Aqsa*, accused of collecting funds for the Hamas. German agencies have also been watching the propaganda initiatives and other related activities of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (Party for Islamic Liberation). The German chapter of the global Islamic

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organisation *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (HuT) through its propaganda literature and especially through its German website, www.explicit-islam.de, has not only been propagating its radical Islamic agenda but also its virulent anti-Israel, anti-West worldview. Interestingly, HuT's anti-Semitic and anti-US ideological standpoint is shared by the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). In January 2003, Germany prohibited HuT and its website was closed. In December 2004, German agencies also foiled a suicide attack on the visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi in Berlin. Two members of the organisation *Ansar al-Islam* were arrested in this connection.²

However, it is noteworthy that for the first time a global Islamic movement, *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* (Community of Preaching and Mission), basically a South Asian movement, is mentioned in the Annual Report of 2004. Under the category of other foreign Islamist organisations active in Germany, the report specifically mentions the considerable increase in its support base (present strength: 450).³ Under the rubric of 'Foreign Extremist Efforts Ominous to Security', the report describes the root of the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at*, its activities and the threat potential for Germany. Though the report admits that the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* presents itself as apolitical and refutes violence in principle, however given the movement's rigid interpretation of Islam and its global reach, the possibility of Islamist groups instrumentalising the structure of the movement cannot be ruled out.⁴

The significance of the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* citation in the Annual Report of a European intelligence agency is manifold. Prior to this, European agencies have observed the activities of various traditional militant, terrorist or separatist South Asia based-organisations active in Europe – for example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) and *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen*. In 2000, the UK, following the US, prohibited some of the above-mentioned organisations. Because of political developments in South Asia, activities of traditional organisations like LTTE or ISYF are almost frozen in Europe. In consonance with the trend of previous years, the strength of the LTTE in Germany has stagnated (about 750 from 2001 to 2004).⁵ However, in the post-9/11 environment, security agencies have started to vigorously investigate, locate and expose various terrorist groups and sleeper cells throughout Europe. The general awareness about the threat to European society and legal order has begun to increase. Realising the public mood after 9/11, radical Islamic groups in Europe, whose shrill anti-West, anti-US, Jihadi rhetoric were a daily feature, either toned down or changed their techniques.

The year 2004 was a milestone in the domestic security situation in Europe.

Terrorist attacks on March 11, 2004, in Madrid claiming 191 lives highlighted the capability of terrorist sleeper cells to conspire and target civilians on such a large scale. On November 2, 2004, Theo van Gogh, the controversial Dutch filmmaker, was brutally killed in Amsterdam. Mohammad Bouyeri, 26, a Dutch-Moroccan alleged to be a member of a radical Islamic network in the Netherlands, is facing charge in this connection before a Dutch court. The killing of Van Gogh and subsequent attacks on mosques in Dutch cities, point to the delicate nature of inter-community relations in the Netherlands. Madrid and Amsterdam also underscored the need for continuing the ongoing governmental efforts to tackle the present perceived threat. On their part, European agencies have been successful in prosecuting some key terrorists, masterminds or indoctrinators in Europe or extraditing them to their countries of origin.

Europe has clearly recognised the fact that the threat from global radical Islamic movements is not just external. Continuous propaganda in print outlets and in websites of these Europe-based Islamist organisations has now found its target audience in the second-and third generation of Muslim immigrants. Lack of education, poor integration of these young Muslims in the European societies, high rates of unemployment, crime and drug abuse, generation gap and a simplistic interpretation of international affairs by these global Islamic movements or indoctrinators are the contributing factors of the growing radical trend amongst young Muslims in Europe.

It is, therefore, noteworthy that European security agencies have been trying to study the origin, evolution, arrival in Europe and *modus operandi* of global Islamic movements. These movements apparently seem to be non-violent and apolitical but their ultimate aim is to establish a global Caliphate based on an all-encapsulating Islam. The identification of the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* by European agencies signifies that the agencies are attempting to have an understanding of global Islamic movements originating not only from the conflict zones of West Asia but from South Asia as well. As the General Intelligence and Security Services (AIVD) of the Netherlands says in its comments upon the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at*: "In the Western world the view is winning ground that deeper study is necessary into the exclusivism and parallelism advocated by these groups."⁶

Tabligh-e-Jama'at in Europe

In 1927, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalwi (1885-1944) founded the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* at Mewat near Delhi. As an offshoot of the Deobandi School, the movement extended its influence in the whole subcontinent. Every year, their

annual congregations (*ijetma*) are held in Bhopal (India), Tongi near Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Raiwind near Lahore (Pakistan). Observers who have witnessed these annual assemblies opine that these are very large gatherings of followers only comparable with the annual pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca. Leading political figures of Bangladesh and Pakistan (like former Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar) are followers of the movement.⁷ It has members in the Pakistan Armed Forces and its preachers are allowed to deliver sermons in Pakistani army installations. Insofar as religious activities of *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* are concerned, it is a pietistic and proselytising movement. It underscores the need for reawakening the faith of the Muslims and its followers pledge to travel in order to enrol new members. Some of the new recruits are sent to the Tabligh-run madrasas in Pakistan for further training.

Historically, after the partition of India and particularly in the 1960s, a large number of Muslim immigrants from South Asia arrived in Britain and settled near big British cities like Bradford and Manchester. As per the British Census of 2001, people of Pakistani origin constitute the largest minority group (14.5 per cent) in Bradford and Muslims are the second-largest religious group (16.1 per cent) in this city. Manchester has 100,000 Asian Muslim settlers out of which 20,000 are from Pakistan.⁸ Establishment of the European headquarters of *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* in the British town of Dewsbury, close to both Bradford and Manchester, may therefore be seen from the context of a higher density of South Asian immigrants. Since 1968, *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* has been active in France. Apart from its headquarters at the Ar-Rahma mosque near Paris, it is also active in Lile, Marseille, Mulhouse and Dreux.⁹ In Germany, the adherents of *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* use the mosques in Munich, Nürnberg, Erfurt and Cologne. In 1977, the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* started its activities in Norway amongst Pakistanis and Moroccans.¹⁰ Broadly speaking, *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* in Europe has been working among poor South Asian and Maghreb guest workers¹¹ and through their annual gatherings at Dewsbury.

Alcoholic Anonymous or an Obscurantist Sect?

As already mentioned, the Dutch AIVD in its study has characterised the activities of movements like *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* in Europe as exclusivist and parallelist. Exclusivism here denotes the trend of a general aloofness of Muslims in the European host societies. They have less interest in local and national politics and refuse to integrate into the mainstream of European societies. There exists among them, a general attitude towards their countries of residence as a temporary halt, from where they would eventually return. Parallelism, on the contrary, refers

to the idea of establishing an alternate society, i.e., a transplanted version of their countries of origin with rituals, religious practices and mosques in a foreign land. If extended or as propagated by the global Islamic movements, this idea of parallelism may eventually lead to parallel Muslim societies (totally based on the literal interpretation of Islamic texts by these global Islamic movements) in a predominantly Christian setting. In the long run, such parallelism will result in greater division and ghettoisation in European societies solely on the basis of religion.

As far as an exclusivist movement like *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* is concerned and the immediate threat of proliferation by the terrorist networks to use its ranks, it must be noted that the characterisation of this movement oscillates from one extreme to another. Barbara D. Metcalf compares this movement with Alcoholic Anonymous, which implies that the basic aim of the movement is for self-improvement of an individual by spiritual blessings.¹² On the contrary, Soheib Bencheikh, the grand Mufti of Marseille in France, terms the movement as an obscurantist sect, which is ravaging the Muslim youth in France.¹³ Alex Alexiev, a terrorism expert with the Center for Security Policy in the US describes the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* as “Jihad’s stealthy legions”.¹⁴ This kind of diverse interpretation of a single movement arises out of the ambivalent nature of such Islamic movements active in various Muslim diaspora in Europe. The AIVD correctly observes: “. . .Dawa (the propagation of the radical-Islamic ideology)-oriented groups often make *ambiguous* comments about the legitimacy of the armed Jihad in areas where Muslims are oppressed and persecuted (for example, Kashmir, Chechnya or recently, Iraq).”¹⁵ It should also be added that the influence of the preaching of *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* to join the armed Jihad in different parts of the world cannot be totally excluded as it is already highlighted in some instances that Western Jihadis (like the American Taliban John Walker Lindh who fought in Afghanistan) were indeed influenced by the preaching of this movement. This kind of threat perception of religious indoctrination is also shared in the annual report of the German Intelligence, when it forewarns that intensive training courses for the selectively recruited members of the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* at the Quranic schools in Pakistan are suitable for indoctrination and also make the participants susceptible to Islamist positioning.

Conclusion

It is premature to come to a definitive conclusion on whether the *Tabligh-e-Jama'at* does really encourage Jihad, because primarily it is an amorphous movement and not a hierarchical organisation. A consultative council of senior members runs its European headquarters at Dewsbury. As the movement avoids the media and prefers to work quietly, it is also difficult to analyse its ultimate aim

and tactics. However, it is clear that the target of the perceived radical elements in this movement is the second- and third generation South Asians in Europe. The prevailing demographic trend in Europe and the need for immigration are also indicative that more immigrants are expected to arrive in Europe from South Asia and North Africa in the coming decades. A UN study predicts that even if 0.6 million immigrants arrive in Europe between 2000 and 2050, the European population would nevertheless decrease by 96 million during the same period.¹⁶ A majority of these immigrants would be Muslims. Already, Islam is the second-largest and fastest-growing religion in Europe. These global Islamic movements will, therefore, definitely compete with each other to extend their support base.

However, these radical Islamic organisations and movements have also some inherent drawbacks. First of all, prior to and especially after 9/11, the open support by some of these Europe-based groups to the terrorist attacks in US brought them not only under the scanner of European intelligence agencies but attracted global attention. In this scenario, their overt propaganda and sufficient space for manoeuvrings are already restricted. Because of an attentive European media, it is also difficult for them to exploit religious gatherings like the Friday prayers in the mosques to disseminate their propaganda. Coordination at the level of the European Union also poses obstacles for them to exploit the free movement within the Schengen area. Second, these movements are themselves divided on ethnic lines in composition, leadership issue, theological debate and about their ultimate goal and present tactics.

The growing awareness within the Muslim communities already settled in Europe is also an impediment. During the last decade, there has been a concerted attempt to form a European Muslim community leadership with whom at least a dialogue can be started on integration, assimilation and multiculturalism in respective European societies. Encouragement from the government side may differ from nation to nation, however the importance of the issue is accepted even in the European Security Strategy. As the dialogue between the moderate Muslim community and the governments is a two-way process, both sides are expected to communicate and formulate innovative methods to counter the challenge of religious indoctrination and counter-integration theses by these global Islamic movements.

The British parliamentary elections in May 2005 are a sign of progress in this regard wherein the Muslim community enthusiastically participated in the whole process. In the case of Germany, it will be interesting to observe as to how the Muslim community will participate in the coming national elections, to be held in

September 2005. Germany has a total Muslim population of 3.3 million, out of which 732,000 possess a German passport.¹⁷ However, like in other European countries, the Muslim community in Germany is also divided on the basis of ethnicity as well as on denomination. For instance, the Ahmadiyahs, who are mostly refugees from Pakistan, are a 50,000 strong community. The Alevites, who are mainly from Turkey, number 4,00,000. Both these groups are considered by the major Muslim sects in Germany as ‘heretics’ and seen with disdain.¹⁸ Considering this social divide, it will be instructive to study the voting pattern of the Muslim communities, especially where the community forms a considerable mass of the electorate, like Berlin-Kreuzberg. It is also expected that during the electoral campaign in the coming months, the issue of Islam, Muslim communities and their role in Germany will be thoroughly deliberated upon.

References/End Notes

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- ¹⁶ “Europe needs more immigrants”, *EUObserver*, November 30, 2004.
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- ¹⁸ For an authoritative work on the intra-Muslim discourse in Germany see, Claudia Dantschke, *Freiheit geistig-politischer Auseinandersetzung – islamistischer Druck auf zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure in Islamismus*, German Federal Ministry of Interior, Berlin, 3rd Edition, 2004, pp. 103-32.

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