



TABLIGHI JAMA'AT

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa

Numerical Strength (Members): Estimated from 12 to 80 million

Leadership: Unknown

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts Courtesy of 2009 Stratfor Report: Tablighi Jama'at: An Indirect Line to Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Tablighi Jama'at is a vast, transnational, apolitical Sunni Islamic propagation and re-pietization organization, originally founded in India, which has a major support base in South Asia. It is estimated to be active in at least 150 nations throughout the world.¹ Its annual assembly in Tongi, Bangladesh, is larger than any other in the Islamic world except for the Hajj itself, and estimates of Tablighi Jama'at's membership have ranged from 12 to 80 million.² Tablighi Jama'at has heretofore flown largely under the analytical radar, unlike other pan-Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood, which are more transparently political and occupy a significantly higher profile. Nevertheless, Tablighi Jama'at's global presence and growing influence in both Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries make it arguably the modern world's most dynamic Islamist group.

HISTORY & IDEOLOGY

Tablighi Jama'at, or TJ, began in British-ruled India, emerging from the Islamic Deobandi trend.³ From its inception in 1926, the Deoband movement fused some aspects of Sufism with the study of the *hadith* and a strict adherence to *sharia* law, as well as advocating non-state-sponsored Islamic *dawa* (missionary activity).⁴ The Deoband movement emerged within the context of an increasingly self-aware Muslim minority in British India that felt caught between the resurgent Hindu majority and a small British-supported Christian missionary agenda.

Tablighi Jama'at's founder, Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi (1885-1944), graduated from the central Deoband *madrassa* in 1910 and, while working among the Muslim masses of Mewat, India (just south of Delhi) questioned whether education alone could renew Islam.⁵ He eventually decided that "only through physical movement away from one's place could one leave behind one's esteem for life and its comforts

for the cause of God.”⁶ Some have even described his movement as the missionary arm of the Deobandis.⁷ Other Muslim groups in the subcontinent, notably the Barelvis, practiced missionary work—*tabligh*—in order to counter Hindu (and Christian) conversions of Muslims.⁸ Ilyas believed that *tabligh* should be the responsibility of each and every individual Muslim.⁹ He aimed to recreate the alleged piety and practice of Muhammad and his companions in the 7th century A.D. Ilyas was concerned not only with Hindu or Christian inroads into the Muslim community, but with stemming the rising tide of Westernization and secularization. Unlike other contemporary Islamic reformers, Ilyas did not believe that Islam could be reconciled with Western science, technology and political ideologies.¹⁰

In the mid-1920s, Ilyas enjoined upon his followers the practice of *gasht* (rounds): summoning Muslims who lived near a mosque to study the Quran and prayer. By the mid-1930s, Ilyas was promulgating a more detailed program of belief expression. This new doctrine included Islamic education, modest dress and appearance, rejection of other religions, propagating Islam, self-financing of *tabligh* trips, lawful means of earning a living, and strict avoidance of divisive and sectarian issues.¹¹

Tablighi Jama’at’s incursion into new territories follows a regular pattern. An initial “probing mission” is followed by entrenchment into several local mosques which are increasingly controlled by the organization and eventually either taken over by TJ or, barring that, supplanted by TJ-administered mosques.¹² From these mosques, the Tablighi Jama’at teams teach their beliefs and practices to local Muslims, initially approaching local religious leaders, then intellectuals and professionals, followed by businessmen. Lastly, TJ reaches out to the general Muslim community.¹³ TJ finds its greatest following among the poor, who are often attracted to the movement’s flexibility and openness.

Upon Mawlana Yusuf’s death in 1965, Ilyas’ grand-nephew Mawlana In ‘am al-Hasan assumed leadership of the organization, and subsequently directed the group’s activities for the following three decades. Then, beginning in 1995, and for the following decade or so, the organization was supervised by a collective leadership based at Nizamuddin, New Delhi and consisting of Mawlana Said al-Hasan (grandson of Yusuf), Zubair al-Hasan (son of In ‘am) and Izhar al-Hasan (another relative of Ilyas’).¹⁴

There is a typology of Islamic renewal/reform movements as 1) emulative (adopters of Western ideas); 2) assimilationist (attempting to reconcile Islamic and Western concepts and practices); or 3) rejectionist (allowing only strictly Islamic answers to the challenges of personal and collective life).¹⁵ Tablighi Jama’at is clearly in the last category, based on its promulgation of strict adherence to the Quran and *sharia*, as well as its emphasis on emulating the lifestyle of Islam’s founder, Muhammad. While undeniably conservative, even puritanical, whether TJ serves as an incubator for *jihād* remains a hotly debated topic.

The movement teaches *jihād* primarily as personal purification rather than as holy warfare.¹⁶ This may be because, following Deobandi doctrine, Tablighi Jama’at preaches martial *jihād* as unwise when the *ummah* is weak, rather than disavowing violent *jihād* altogether.¹⁷ However, practical connections between Tablighi Jama’at practitioners and acts of terror (such as the 1998 attacks in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya), as well as anecdotal evidence that Ilyas himself believed he was “preparing soldiers” for *jihād*, paint the organization as more complex and possibly dangerous.¹⁸

Available data indicates that Tablighi Jama’at can be considered, ipso facto, a passive supporter of *jihād*ist groups via its reinforcement of strict Islamic norms, intolerance of other religious traditions and unwavering commitment to Islamizing the entire planet in the preponderance of its global locations. TJ is much less political than its transnational Islamic rivals (*Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Gülen movement) and is much more focused on personal Muslim piety. As a result, TJ has so far largely escaped government suppression. Whether the organization ever decides to risk state tolerance by transforming into an active supporter of *jihād*ist movements remains to be seen.

GLOBAL REACH

Tablighi Jama'at expanded out of South Asia and into at least 150 countries,¹⁹ while broadening its mission under Mawlana Yusuf, Ilyas' son. Previously focused on simply re-instilling piety among Muslims, TJ subsequently also attempted to convert non-Muslims to Islam.²⁰ Most of the Muslim-majority nations of the world saw the infusion of some TJ presence between the end of World War II and the 1960s, with the exception of Soviet Central Asia (that region opened up to TJ influence after the end of the Cold War).²¹ Tablighi Jama'at has been perhaps most successful in Africa, where it is known to be active in at least 35 countries on the continent.²² The Jama'at has its own headquarters in every country it operates in, but its global spiritual center remains the *Markaz* (center) in Delhi.²³

Africa

Gambia may be the hub of *Tablighi* activity in that part of the continent; the country's population of 1.5 million people is 90% Muslim.²⁴ TJ's popularity there was limited until the 1990s, when its missionaries' knowledge of English and the global Islamic resurgence made many Gambian Muslims, especially Gambian youth, more receptive to the organization's agenda. Some Gambian Muslim leaders, steeped in West Africa's heavily Sufi tradition, have expressed fears of Tablighi Jama'at coming to dominate the country.²⁵

Tablighi Jama'at was introduced to Morocco in 1960 under the name Jama'at al-Tabligh wa-al-Da'wah (JTD), although it was not recognized by the government until 1975.²⁶ While proselytizing to Moroccan Muslims to re-Islamize their lives, JTD also makes hospital calls upon the sick and indigent. But TJ's focus is on increasing ritualized conduct—persuading Moroccans to eat, drink, prepare for bed and sleep, go to the market, and bathe in the proper ways, emulating the Prophet Muhammad.

Tablighi Jama'at has also committed several teams to Mali, Mauritania and Niger.²⁷ These three countries have a collective population of some 26 million people, the majority of them Muslim. By the 1990s, TJ had a substantial presence in a region more traditionally aligned with Sufism.²⁸ Shortly after 9/11, the government of Mali extradited 25 TJ members, though the crackdown did little to slow the group's growth in the region.²⁹ Tuareg tribal leaders have hastened to point out that the group's activities are totally unconnected to global *jihād*.³⁰ As the Tuareg's long-running rebellion exploded into a civil war in 2012, the impact of TJ's Salafist inroads became evident. Alongside the traditional Tuareg separatist group, Movement National Pour la Liberation de l'Azawad (MNLA), the Islamist Ansar ud-Dine (Defenders of the Faith) emerged. Ansar ud-Dine established harsh *sharia* law in areas it controlled, including the historic city of Timbuktu, and allied itself with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.³¹ Mali's Islamists were pushed back when the French intervened, but have continued their violent campaign with high-profile attacks.

South Africa has become a focal point for Tablighi Jama'at's work, despite 85 percent of its population identifying as Christian.³² South Africa shares a legacy of British rule with India and Pakistan, and some two million of its people are of South Asian origin, of whom perhaps half are Muslim. TJ's "Sufi-lite" orientation and its Deobandi origins give it legitimacy with many South African Muslims, although the more Salafi/*Wahhabi* groups dislike any hint of Sufism. These groups denigrate TJ for "un-Islamic" practices such as asking for Muhammad's intercession and promoting the reading of other books in tandem with the Quran. Many Muslims in South Africa, encouraged by TJ, became disenchanted with majority Christian rule after rules were relaxed on abortion, prostitution and other "immoral" activities. Tablighi Jama'at appears to have contributed to, and possibly sparked, the polarization of the Muslim community in Africa's southernmost country.³³

Tablighi Jama'at has a significant presence in Eastern Africa. This is partly because of geographical proximity to the Subcontinent, but also because, like South Africa, there are substantial expatriate Indian and Pakistani communities in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Perhaps one-third of Tanzania's population

of 52 million is Muslim (but over 90 percent of the population on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba is Muslim).³⁴ Kenya is home to about five million Muslims (out of a population of over 46 million, mostly Christian) and a sizeable 14 percent minority of the Ugandan population identify as Muslim.³⁵ Jamil Mukulu, the founder of Uganda's Allied Democratic Force (a Muslim separatist group that straddles the border between Uganda and the DRC) converted to Islam under the auspices of TJ. Founded in 1989, in recent years the group's presence in the Eastern DRC has grown and they have claimed responsibility for large-scale massacres. They are also linked to the militant *al-Shabaab* movement in Somalia.³⁶

Tablighi Jama'at has been most visible in Tanzania, particularly in Zanzibar. Its message of "return to Islam" has been received as complementary to *Wahhabi*-Salafi ideology. These two strains of Islamic renewal have come together in the preaching of militant TJ members such as Zahor Issa Omar, who, from his base on Pemba, travels to mainland Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Omar advocates *jihad* and is reportedly supported by Saudi *Wahhabi* money.³⁷ More traditionalist Tanzanian Muslim leaders consider TJ an intruder bringing a foreign brand of Islam because of the group's opposition to full-blown Sufism.³⁸ There are anecdotal claims that TJ serves as a conveyor belt, at least indirectly, to Islamic terrorism.³⁹ Two of the al-Qaeda terrorists indicted in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi—Khalfan Khamis Mohammad and Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani—were Zanzibaris previously involved with Tablighi Jama'at.⁴⁰

There is conflicting data on the relationship between the neo-*Wahhabi* al-Shabaab militia which controls much of southern and central Somalia and Tablighi Jama'at. In 2009, a story surfaced that al-Shabaab had attacked a TJ mosque, killing at least five of its members.⁴¹ However, in mid-2010 Indian media cited at least one terrorism analyst who claimed that TJ "has been very active in Somalia, including sending terror fighters to al-Shabaab."⁴²

Southeast Asia

Aside from Africa, one of Tablighi Jama'at's primary theaters of operation is Southeast Asia. TJ has been active in Indonesia since 1952, and in its far-eastern province of Irian Jaya (West Papua, the western half of the island of New Guinea) since 1988.⁴³ Originally a phenomenon of the working classes of large urban areas, it has increasingly penetrated the smaller cities, towns and villages.⁴⁴

Tablighi Jama'at has tried, with limited success, to exploit the Jakarta-supported transmigration of thousands of Muslims from the rest of Indonesia to heavily-Christian West Papua.⁴⁵ TJ teams are stymied by indigenous Papuan customs (especially the local affinity for pork) and the large Christian missionary presence there.⁴⁶

Tablighi Jama'at has, counterintuitively, been more successful in majority-Buddhist Thailand.⁴⁷ In 2003, some 100,000 Muslims from Southeast and South Asia came to a mass TJ gathering at Tha Sala in Nakhon Si Thammarat province.⁴⁸ In two decades, TJ has made inroads not only among the country's roughly 3 million Muslim citizens, but among Buddhists as well. One effective strategy has been to play up the Sufi, mystical side of TJ while also practicing asceticism, which is more familiar to the largely Buddhist population. However, TJ activities have also polarized the Thai Muslim communities; many traditionalist Muslims dislike the long absence of husbands and fathers on TJ mission treks, while more modernist Muslims reject TJ members as "fanatic mullahs" who neglect their families and have given up on the world. However, TJ in Thailand is well on its way to creating an independent mosque network, alternative to the existing national Muslim association created by the Thai government.⁴⁹

The Indian Subcontinent

The heart of Tablighi Jama'at's presence remains in the Indian subcontinent, and the group is significantly prominent in Pakistan. In the 1980s, Pakistan's President, General Zia al-Haq, attended TJ's annual conclave in Raiwind (Pakistan's largest Sunni gathering, attended by hundreds of thousands of people).⁵⁰ General Javed Nasir, a former director of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, was an open member of

TJ who expanded ISI engagement with religious extremists, including supporting Tablighi's proselytizing in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Xinjiang.⁵¹

Pakistan is one of the world's centers of radical Islam and home to numerous terrorist organizations. There is significant cross-fertilization between Tablighi Jama'at and these groups. While TJ's leadership insists that it eschews violence and rejects efforts by terrorist groups to infiltrate their ranks, there is significant evidence that groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi attempt to recruit from TJ's ranks.⁵² Harkat-al-Mujahedin, a Pakistani terrorist group active in Kashmir, was reportedly founded by TJ members; thousands of TJ members have since trained in its camps.⁵³ Anecdotal evidence has also documented that the Pakistani Taliban has in the past used death threats and kidnappings to force singers and actors to renounce their former professions and join TJ — indicating, if true, a troublesome intersection between South Asian Islamic militancy and ostensibly peaceful Islamic missionaries.⁵⁴

Recently, there has been a noticeable uptick in Tablighi Jama'at's presence in Myanmar. The end of socialist autarky in 1988 was a pivotal moment for TJ's national growth. Missionaries from the Arabian Peninsula were able to visit and preach in Myanmar and increasing numbers of Burmese Muslims began travelling to Arabia for work and for the *Hajj*. Arabic and South Asian conservative Muslim styles of dress were on the rise and religious practices became more rigid. This increased conservatism and the rise of Tablighi Jama'at coincided with the Burmese military's push to cement a Burmese identity centered around Buddhist exclusivity. These changing social and political strands resulted in increased Buddhist-Muslim tensions leading to widespread social unrest and sectarian tensions. The movement's popularity in Myanmar has been at least partly built on disaffection with traditional hierarchies and leaders, and the unique opportunities such new affiliation affords.⁵⁵

Russia

Moscow banned TJ activities in 2009 after the Russian Supreme Court recommended the group be added to the country's list of proscribed terrorist organizations. TJ has nonetheless continued to quietly operate within the Russian Federation. In February 2020, the Russian Federal Secret Service arrested seven members of the group after a counter-terrorism operation in Moscow led to the dismantling of a terror cell closely affiliated with TJ.⁵⁶ According to Russian intelligence, the cell was engaging in various activities—recruiting new followers, dissemination of propaganda material and managing training camps— to assist in radicalization.⁵⁷

Europe and the United States

There are an estimated 150,000 Tablighi Jama'at members in Europe, mainly in the UK (primarily among the country's large South Asian diaspora), France, and in Spain (where TJ members from North Africa predominate).⁵⁸ TJ's European headquarters is at the Markazi Mosque, which was established in 1978 by Hafiz Patel in the British Midlands.⁵⁹ Under Patel's influence, TJ had been a dominant influence in shaping Islam in the UK (Patel himself died in 2016).⁶⁰

In 2007, Tablighi Jama'at's British branch announced plans to build a “mega mosque” with room for over 10,000 worshippers and 190-foot-tall minarets. The site was adjacent to the site of the London 2012 games and engendered substantial community opposition. In 2015, the government made a final decision to block the proposed project.⁶¹

Some analysts claim that there may be as many as 50,000 Muslims affiliated with Tablighi Jama'at in the United States.⁶² They also claim that influential Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) cooperates with, and hosts, TJ teams and activities.⁶³

Tablighi Jama'at's role in the radicalization process is not clear. There have been numerous cases of Western recruits to al-Qaeda who had links to Tablighi Jama'at, but many left the group before committing violence. In the early 2000s, French intelligence asserted that about 80% of French radical Islamists were drawn from TJ's ranks. Richard Reid (the infamous “shoe bomber”) had been involved in TJ in the

United Kingdom. Several prominent American Muslims have been linked to TJ (including “American Taliban” John Walker Lindh, the “Lackawanna Six,” and al-Qaeda operative Jose Padilla).⁶⁴ Lindh initially converted to Islam under the auspices of TJ but left them to join the Taliban in Pakistan. The Lackawanna Six, Yemeni-Americans who travelled to Afghanistan and fought with the Taliban, claimed to be members of TJ going to study in Pakistan. However, they were later shown to not have an affiliation with the organization.⁶⁵ Padilla was sentenced in 2014 to 21 years in prison charges of terrorism conspiracy and support, 12 years after he was arrested for participation in a plot to set off a radioactive dirty bomb.⁶⁶

RECENT ACTIVITY

In recent years, Mawlana Said has moved to the fore, once again giving TJ a single spiritual leader.⁶⁷ Yet it is also noteworthy that the world’s most famous TJ personality is not Said but rather the group’s *emir* in Pakistan, Hajji Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, who was ranked by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre as the 10th most influential Muslim in the world in 2017.⁶⁸

An internal struggle for leadership of the Tablighi Jama’at has emerged in recent years. A senior Tablighi leader named Professor Mushfiq Ahmed and his followers began a dispute with the current leader of the Bangladeshi branch of TJ, Syed Wasif Islam. This dispute reached new heights when the two factions engaged in a violent clash outside of the Kakrail Mosque in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka in November 2017.⁶⁹

Even though “the Tablighi’s have apparently moved from a fringe phenomenon to the mainstream of Muslim society in South Asia,” they still suffer significant backlash.⁷⁰ From one side, TJ is attacked by Barelvis, whose mystical Sufi leadership deems the group “a thinly disguised front for the Wahhabis.”⁷¹ Some Barelvi propagandists even accuse TJ of being a tool of the British, Americans, and Indians, employed to drain Muslims of *jihadist* zeal.⁷² From the other side, the Ahl-i Hadith groups charge TJ with abandoning the concrete concerns of the world for a vacuous mysticism.⁷³ Jama’at-i Islami, the Islamic political organization established by Sayyid Abu ala `Ali Mawdudi, considers TJ a threat to its own powerful position in Pakistani society. They disparage TJ’s alleged lukewarm attitude towards establishing a caliphate.⁷⁴

TJ does not always succeed in its attempts at winning foreign hearts and minds for strict Sunni Islam. In early 2010, almost a hundred members of the organization were arrested in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan and given lengthy jail sentences for violating local laws against miscreant versions of Islam.⁷⁵ In neighboring Kazakhstan, there have been numerous instances of TJ members advocating extremism, although human rights groups accuse that government of repressing religious activity to marginalize potential opposition.⁷⁶

In recent years, TJ has emerged as a possible feeder to the Islamic State, among other extremist groups. A 2017 survey of the more than 50 Indians who had gone to fight for IS in Iraq and Syria found nearly a third were linked to TJ.⁷⁷ In one case, a group of French Muslims attended a TJ mosque before traveling to Syria to fight for IS.⁷⁸ Syed Rizwan Farook, who, along with his wife Tashfeen Malik committed the San Bernardino massacre in December 2015 and pledged loyalty to IS, had worshipped at a TJ mosque in San Bernardino.⁷⁹

In August 2017, Tablighi Jama’at was banned from the *Darul Uloom* Deoband Islamic seminary. The organization will be reinstated only when the two factions of TJ warring over the title of the organization’s *emir* end their dispute⁸⁰ – something that has not yet happened.

Most recently, India saw coronavirus breakouts at congregations of TJ members in 2020, involving both Indian nationals and a collection of foreigners from around the world. In response, the government vilified the organization and has virtually persecuted its supporters. For instance, in March, TJ was widely criticized for hosting a congregation in New Delhi, which was blamed for the spread of COVID in the

media about two weeks after the event. In the aftermath of the gathering, some 3,500 TJ volunteers from 35 countries were detained at various government and private facilities.⁸¹

Ultimately, TJ is perhaps the modern world's most effective Islamic group at fostering pan-Islamic identity; one only has to be a Muslim to join and enter a "virtual transnational space" where every Muslim is immediately part of the Dar al-Islam.⁸² As such, TJ is both a help and a hindrance to more political Islamic groups.

ENDNOTES

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6. *Ibid.*, 7.
7. Shireen Khan Burki, "The Tablighi Jama'at: Proselytizing Missionaries or Trojan Horse?" *Journal of Applied Security Research* 8, no. 1 (January-March 2013), 98-117.
8. Usha Sanyal, *Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi: In the Path of the Prophet* (London, United Kingdom: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 129. In Arabic-speaking Islam, the word usually employed for such work is *da`wah*, but in Urdu, India, and, later, Pakistan, *tabligh* ("transmission, communication, propaganda") came to be substituted; founded by Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilly (1856-1921), the *Ahl al-Sunnat* ("Family of the Sunnah") movement—popularly known as Bareilvis or Barelwis—advocated Islamic renewal much as did the Deobandis, although Bareilvis were (and are) "more inclined toward the emotional or magical," according to Sanyal.
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 26. Masud, *Travelers in Faith*, 161-173.
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