

The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left

by Ed Husain, Penguin, 2007, 288 pp.

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Also under review: *Inside the Global Jihad* by Omar Nasiri & Gordon Corera, Hurst & Company, 2006, 336 pp.

The current political landscape of the Muslim community is one that is dominated by Islamist groups. The South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami finds its outlet via the Muslim Council of Britain, the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, the UK Islamic Mission and a conglomeration of organisations based in East London Mosque, one of the largest and most influential in the country. The Muslim Brotherhood used the protests against the war in Iraq to project itself onto the national stage via the Muslim Association of Britain and, more recently, the British Muslim Initiative. It is only in recent years, particularly since 7/7, that non-Islamist groups have emerged to challenge their control and present an alternative political agenda. Yet this Islamist dominance has not come about organically. It is the result of years, decades even, of Islamist activism and agitation within a Muslim community in which the older generation is politically much more moderate than their children. In the same way that al-Qaeda declared war on America in 1996, but nobody paid attention until September 2001, so Islamists in Britain had already fought and, in many places, won the battle for hearts and minds long before most people were aware there was even a fight to be joined.

The development of Islamist strength was common to many parts of the Muslim world during the 1980s and 1990s. The Iranian revolution; the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan; the Rushdie affair; the Balkan wars; all were catalytic moments in the growth of Islamism as a political movement, in Britain as much as anywhere else. This important period is coming under increasing scrutiny from writers such as Ed Husain and Omar Nasiri, who were deeply involved in Islamist and jihadist activity respectively during the 1990s and have emerged from their new lives to tell their stories.

Husain drifted into Islamist circles in East London in 1991 as a way of rebelling against the traditional religion and culture of his parents, joining the Young

Muslims Organisation (YMO), a group in East London that was orientated to the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) of South Asia. Husain became an important local activist for the YMO but found their focus on Bangladesh and idolisation of JI's founder, Abul Ala Mawdudi, too restrictive. He transferred his allegiance to Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), but his sense that HT's activities had contributed to the murder of a black Christian student at Newham College in February 1995 led him to question his political beliefs and associations, and he resolved to leave HT. This led to a brief period in the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), a Muslim-Brotherhood linked group with more of a focus on bringing Islam to British society, but Husain found the same disillusioning ideas of Muslim supremacy and a contemptuous racism towards the *kuffar* (non-Muslims). Husain does not say, but it is worth remembering, that whereas HT is generally regarded as an extreme organisation, YMO and ISB are seen as mainstream organisations, pillars of the Muslim community that are regularly enlisted as moderate counterweights to the radicals. One of the strengths of Husain's book is his clarity in identifying the common Islamist assumptions that run through each.

All the Islamist groups Husain encountered on his journey showed impressive levels of organisation. The YMO required all its activists to fill out a weekly 'routine sheet' listing their religious and political activity during the week. Husain's mentor in HT, Farid Kassim, was previously an activist in the Socialist Workers' Party, and HT used many of the standard methods of far left campaigning. Their activists were trained to debate, heckle, argue and ultimately destroy their political opponents both inside and beyond the Muslim community. Their organisation, dynamism and self-confidence were unmatched; and as Husain describes, these 'Islamist paradigms of political engagement' (Husain p. 203) came to be accepted by the wider Muslim community:

Consequently a loathing of Muslim rulers, a desire to see the overthrow of regimes and their replacement with 'Islamic' governments, and enmity towards Israel, the USA, and Britain became unquestioned. The political void was not always filled with participatory, democratic politics, but the ubiquitous speechifying of Islamists at colleges, universities, and mosque entrances. Looking back, I am astounded at the depth of the psychological damage caused by Islamism. (Husain p. 203-4)

While at Newham college, Husain and his fellow HT activists did everything they could to divide the student body along religious lines, antagonise non-Muslims

and inflame Muslim students. Yet Husain repeatedly states that they could not understand why the college authorities did absolutely nothing to stop them until the murder of Ayotunde Obanubi during one of several confrontations between Muslim and non-Muslim students. The paralysing fear generated by anti-racist dogma prevented well-meaning lecturers and administrators from intervening to stop Husain and his friends creating racial division, suspicion and violence.

An intelligent and spiritual man, Husain gradually left Islamist politics behind and returned to the Sufism in which his family had raised him. He is fortunate that he had enough religious knowledge from his childhood to understand that political Islamism was not the sole authentic version of his faith. In a book that is partly a political exposé and partly a personal confession, Husain describes the slow, difficult process of shedding the Islamist assumptions which stayed with him long after he left Islamist politics. He paints a familiar picture of the British Islamists of which he was typical: young, British-born Muslims rebelling against their South Asian immigrant parents; student radicals excited by their ability to shock authority with their antagonistic, confrontational rhetoric. Of course HT are not the first group of youthful idealists to think that they are about to change the world. What makes their activities more significant, and their threat more acute, is the wider context of the global jihadi movement with which they share influences and aims.

This global jihad is the subject of Omar Nasiri's extraordinary account of his experiences inside jihadist terrorist networks in Western Europe and the training camps of Afghanistan. Moroccan by birth but raised in Belgium, Nasiri was a petty criminal and drug dealer before his Salafist older brother took him under his wing, telling him 'you must come back to God' (Nasiri p. 21). Unfortunately for Nasiri, his brother was an activist in Belgium for the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armée (GIA), which was responsible for some of the worst atrocities during the civil war that was raging in Algeria. Nasiri began sourcing guns, ammunition and explosives for the GIA; but when the scale of this activity, taking place in his family home, began to endanger his mother and younger brother, he offered his services to the French external intelligence agency, the DGSE. Thus in 1994 he began his life as a spy inside the nascent global jihad, taking him from Belgium to the Afghan training camps, then to London at the height of the Londonistan phenomenon, before 'retiring' as a spy in 1998. Nasiri displays the inner conflicts of many spies and provides a compelling portrait of a man torn by his divided loyalties and tormented by his rootlessness. He never loses his Salafist tendencies and his commitment to jihad, while feeling disgust at the brutal reality of jihadist terrorism.

This, then, is the other side of the Islamist movement for which Ed Husain became an activist: the reality of jihad, in which Nasiri's friends celebrate the GIA's hijacking of an Air France plane and the execution of some of its passengers; in which explosives that Nasiri smuggles to Morocco are then used in a car bombing in Algiers that killed 42 people. Husain only grasped the connection between the rhetoric of jihad and its violent reality with the murder at Newham college:

I had advocated the ideas of Muslim domination, confrontation, and jihad, never for one moment thinking that their catastrophic consequences would arrive on my own doorstep. It had all seemed abstract and remote, relevant for Bosnia or the Middle East, not Britain. (Husain p. 154)

HT is itself non-violent and consistently argues that jihad can only be carried out by the army of an Islamic state, and that the creation of this Caliphate must be the first priority for Muslims. However, it is no coincidence that several Islamist terrorists – Omar Ahmed Sheikh, Dhiren Barot, Omar Khan Sharif, to name but three – have passed through HT on their path to violence. It is unrealistic to fill people with ideas of jihad, martyrdom and conquest but tell them they must never enact their beliefs; once the culture of jihadism takes root, it is naïve to imagine it can be controlled. In one of the core texts Husain read as an HT activist, Taqi Nabhani, the founder of HT, wrote that the organisation was the 'flaming heat under the kettle ... a flame whose heat would transform the society to boiling point, and then to a dynamic force.' (Husain p. 97) But by teaching this idea in a country where an Islamic state is simply not going to appear any time soon, HT have brought their followers to boiling point in pursuit of the utopian dream of the Caliphate, with no regard for the consequences when this dream remains unfulfilled. The lack of a single theological authority in Islam and the proliferation of independent religious scholars, of varying degrees of learning, mean that a would-be jihadi will always be able to obtain a ruling from somebody permitting an attack in London, or New York, or wherever. Husain has no doubt that 'More than any other group, Hizb ut-Tahrir introduced the notion of jihad to the streets of Britain' (Husain p. 119), from which British suicide bombers are a 'direct result' (Husain p. 119).

Long before the first British-born suicide bomber, though, Nasiri was immersed in a jihadist movement of astonishing organisation and professionalism. During 1995 and 1996 he spent almost a year in Afghanistan, training in the use of countless types of handgun, machine gun, assault rifle, grenades, mortars, tanks, artillery, mines and anti-tank rockets. He learned how to use every kind of explosive, and how to make

them out of ordinary household materials. He was trained in the use of poisons and unarmed combat. He learned tactics for kidnapping, hostage taking, assassinations, interrogations and how to survive them. He witnessed groups of jihadis arrive from Chechnya, Tajikistan and other neighbouring countries, spend two or three weeks training for a specific mission – attacking a convoy, say, or sabotaging a bridge – and then leaving with their trainers to carry out their attack. It should not have been such a surprise that this amorphous grouping, under the new label of al-Qaeda, was capable of imagining and executing the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But what Ed Husain found at Newham College was also the case for the intelligence services of most Western nations. While Islamist and jihadist movements were building networks, acquiring skills and recruiting followers during the 1990s, too few people were aware of their growing abilities and alert to their intentions. Nasiri is consistently disappointed by the narrow-minded approach of the British agents with whom he worked while in London. Unlike the French DGSE, they showed little understanding of the mentality and capabilities of jihadists, while being interested only in whether they were planning an attack in Britain. The observations of both Husain and Nasiri add weight to the idea that the provision of a safe haven for foreign jihadists and Islamist agitators in Britain was a deliberate policy, born out of a misguided belief that their activities would have no domestic impact.

It is possible to understand how the British authorities came to this assumption. In the early and mid-1990s this jihadist exile community was mostly Arab and largely self-contained, with little contact with the Pakistani and Bangladeshi-focussed Islamist groups like YMO that were actively recruiting British-born Muslim youth. It was HT's then-leader, Omar Bakri Mohammed, who brought these two Islamist worlds together in Britain, first as leader of HT and then from 1996 with his own organisation, al-Muhajiroun, and fittingly he is the only person to make an appearance in both these books. Omar Bakri was a Syrian exile who, although he never fought in a jihad [1], mixed in jihadist circles in London at the same time that he was recruiting young British Muslims to HT. It is because of Omar Bakri that British Muslims started attending Abu Hamza's sermons at Finsbury Park Mosque, alongside Arab Islamists and jihadi veterans. The process which led to the formation of a British jihadist network, including the 7/7 suicide bombers, the British suicide bombers of Mike's Place bar in Tel Aviv, and the would-be suicide bombers of several other foiled terrorist plots in Britain, began with Omar Bakri Mohammed. Still, though, there were differences. Many of the Arab jihadis in London followed Abu Qatada, an important and learned theologian of the global jihad for whom Nasiri was regularly passing messages to and from the Afghan camps. Qatada preached in

Arabic, whereas Abu Hamza preached in English; and as Nasiri put it, 'Abu Qatada was a true scholar, and Abu Hamza was nothing more than a demagogue.' (Nasiri p. 275)

Nasiri depicts the global jihadis as a movement of true believers, 'a community of complete devotion to God.' (Nasiri p. 152), and trainees at the Afghan camps received religious instruction alongside their military classes. Their studies mainly covered the laws of jihad, in which innocents, women and children must not be attacked, property should be spared, and so on. Nasiri accurately describes the strict laws covering warfare in Islam; and just as accurately describes how these are often twisted to define just about anyone as an enemy who can be attacked: 'It is the logic of the supply chain: anyone who supports the enemy is fair game. There are no civilians anymore. Everyone is at war.' (Nasiri pp. 318-9) Ideological instruction came once a week in the form of a class on the writings of the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb. If Omar Bakri Mohammed is the only person to actually appear in both Husain's and Nasiri's accounts, Sayyid Qutb is the only modern ideologue whose works were encountered by both writers. Qutb was required reading in YMO, and it was while reading his seminal political tract, *Milestones*, that Husain first developed a 'growing animosity for the *kuffar*' (Husain p. 49). He describes Mawdudi, Qutb and Nabhani as the three ideologues of modern Islamism, but it is Qutb who is the common ideological thread between the political seminars of HT and the suicide bombers of the global jihad. Husain finds *Milestones* on sale in the bookshop of East London Mosque, one of the largest mosques in Britain. This is a revolutionary book that still, to this day, inspires terrorists around the world. Its presence in the bookstores of mainstream Muslim organisations indicates a self-destructive adherence to the culture of jihadism that is incompatible with genuine moderation.

Another common theme is the global vision that underpins Islamist and jihadist activity. Husain relates how HT cadre were trained to politicise and internationalise every argument. Newham College's refusal to provide a prayer room for their Muslim students was on a par with the first Gulf War or Russia's bombardment of Grozny. Every opportunity was taken to bring up the idea of the Islamic state, to 'pass on the concepts' (Husain p. 107). Where the YMO focused on Bangladesh, and the ISB wanted to bring Islam to Britain, HT had pretensions to become a global movement, even recruiting foreign students in Britain and sending them back to their home countries to form HT branches across the Muslim world. Nasiri finds himself immersed in a global brotherhood in the Afghan camps. Jihadi recruits

from all over the Muslim world train and fight together as Muslims; conflicts viewed from the West as separate national struggles are seen as merely different fronts in a single global jihad. This connecting thread, taken as axiomatic by the jihadists themselves, was expressed in practical terms by the sharing of manpower, knowledge and support via the training camps in Afghanistan. The insistence of some Western commentators, looking down the other end of the telescope, that all these local conflicts have entirely separate causes and factors, seems wishful by comparison.

One conflict in this global vision that particularly exercises Islamists of all stripes, though, is Israel-Palestine. Husain, during his brief time in the ISB, attended a weekly class which was run by a Hamas member called Abu Luqman, in which Luqman's 'deep and powerful hatred of Israelis and Jews was unmistakable' (Husain p. 171). Husain's fellow classmates included Inayat Bunglawala and others who are now in the Muslim Council of Britain. All three sat through the weekly sessions of 'Koran recitation, religious discussion, anti-Semitism and good food' (Husain p. 171) without complaint; nobody challenged the Islamist presumptions of 'hatred of Jews, Hindus, Americans, gays, the subordination of women.' (Husain p. 171)

Antisemitism plays an important role in the philosophy of the global jihad. In recent years terrorists have attacked synagogues in Turkey and Tunisia, and the Jewish community in Morocco. Other plots to attack Jewish communities in Germany and Australia have been prevented. Again, this is not a recent development. In the Afghan camps, the jihad against Israel was seen as the most important battle. America, Nasiri relates, was viewed as being controlled by Israel; its refusal to prevent Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims was because 'the Jews were pulling the strings' (Nasiri p. 182). When Nasiri is sent back to Europe to set up a terrorist cell, it is with this instruction from the commander of the training camp:

We must fight the Zionists efficiently; we must hit them where they are most vulnerable. We need brothers who can live among them, who can watch them, surveil them. We need blueprints and photos of their clubs, their synagogues, their banks, their consulates. Anywhere they gather in large numbers. (Nasiri p. 235)

This exchange took place early in 1996. Ed Husain and his ISB friends were getting classes in anti-Semitism from Hamas in 1995. This was a period when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared to have been transformed by the Oslo Accords and

a genuine peace process, overseen by an engaged American president, offered the possibility of a permanent settlement. Yet for Islamists, this was an unacceptable compromise with Zionism, an act of treachery by the secular PLO. British Islamists imbibed the hatred and rejectionism of Hamas, while global jihadis plotted terrorist attacks against European Jews. The notion that Islamist terrorism is fuelled by anger over, amongst other things, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that settlement of this conflict would lead to a reduction in Islamist terrorism, is a common and attractive one. Yet as the Islamist reaction to the peace process of the 1990s shows, Islamists have their own agenda and their actions are not always merely reactions to Western policy; and when they do react, it is not always in the way that most people might hope or expect. Husain and Nasiri both write about a time when the recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the War on Terror and the second Palestinian Intifada were not available for people to cite as 'root causes' of terrorism, but the 1990s were not short of alternatives. The first Iraq war, Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir were all conflicts that caused genuine grievances amongst Muslims. But it requires an ideology and an organisation to take these transitory political triggers and convert them into the rationale for radicalism and violence.

One impetus for the development of the global jihad was that many local jihads faltered as the 1990s neared its end, with those Arab governments that had been under threat, particularly in Algeria and Egypt, holding onto power. This led to a new approach, whereby the way to defeat the near enemy – that is, the governments of Muslim countries – was to attack the far enemy that supported them, such as America, France or Britain. This was the tactical thinking behind the formalising of the global jihad under the banner of al-Qaeda and the decision to attack America directly in Africa in 1998, and then the cataclysmic attacks of 9/11. In Britain the jihadist movement was also beginning to reach boiling point. Several of Omar Bakri's disciples, now with al-Muhajiroun, found their way to Afghanistan to fight against British troops; British suicide bombers in Tel Aviv and London would follow soon after.

But the 7/7 attacks do not fit the near enemy/far enemy paradigm of al-Qaeda. Mohammed Siddique Khan and his fellow bombers were products of British society, attacking a symbol of their capital city and killing their fellow citizens. This was the global jihad in reverse: the global made local, a revolt by British Muslim youth against their own government, society and community. Ed Husain argues that HT, although itself non-violent, provides the ideological foundations for terrorism and should therefore be treated as partly responsible for the violence its ideas have

indirectly spawned. In so doing, and in his wider assault on Islamist politics, he provides a moral and linguistic framework for criticising Islamism while avoiding the accusation of Islamophobia. His critique is all the more compelling for the fact that he is a devout and knowledgeable Muslim, his rejection of Islamist politics facilitating a deeper connection to his faith. Husain is not the only British Muslim to speak out since 9/11, and particularly since 7/7, a reflection of the fact that there is a genuine process of re-evaluation within the British Muslim community and a movement away from the hardline Islamism of the 1990s. The battle for hearts and minds is in reality an ideological struggle going on within the Muslim world. It is one that only Muslims can win, and *The Islamist* is an important addition to the fight.

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Notes

- [1] Husain claims that Omar Bakri's limp is from an injury sustained fighting the Israeli army in Beirut in the early 1980s, but I have not seen this story elsewhere and suspect that it is not correct.