

# Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat is a revivalist missionary movement within Islam, founded in India in the early twentieth century. The term means ‘those who preach’ and is sometimes called the ‘Society for Spreading Faith.’ The Tablighi Jamaat movement seeks to revitalise Muslims in their faith and encourage them to follow Islamic religious practices more vigorously.

Tablighi Jamaat originated in the Deobandi School of Sunni Islam<sup>1</sup> in Uttar Pradesh in north India. Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi, an Islamic scholar and Sufi teacher, is credited as its founder. The movement has grown significantly over time to include millions worldwide and is now present in some form or another throughout the Muslim world. It is particularly prevalent in South and Central Asia.

Annual gatherings (called *ijtima*) are held in various countries and attract large crowds. The largest ones occur in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The annual World Gathering in Tongi, Bangladesh, (called *Bishwa Ijtimā*) is the most popular Tablighi Jamaat pilgrimage in the world with approximately five million people attending each year, significantly larger than the traditional *Hajj* to Mecca.

The world headquarters for Tablighi Jamaat is located in the New Delhi suburb of Basti Nizamuddin. There are some 50,000 active Tablighi Jamaat members in the UK, and in France an estimated 100,000 followers.

## Teachings

Tablighi Jamaat’s doctrine is based on six principles, commonly referred to as the *Six Points*. They are:

- Faith in the oneness of Allah (the *Kalima*)
- The offering of the five prayers daily (*Salat*)
- The knowledge and the remembrance of Allah (*‘Ilm & Dhikr*)
- Respect for every Muslim (*Ikram al Muslim*)
- Sincerity of intention (*Ekhlas*)
- Time set aside for this work (*Dawah & Tabligh*)

Tablighi Jamaat members try to imitate the life of Prophet Muhammad and adopt a lifestyle of personal piety and austerity. Members are expected to proselytize at least three times per month (approximately 130 days per year) as well as study at Tablighi Jamaat’s central mosque in Pakistan for a month.

---

<sup>1</sup> Zacharias Pieri, ‘Tablighi Jamaat – Handy Books on Religion in World Affairs’ (*Lapidomedia*, 2012) <[http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi\\_Jamaat\\_Introduction.pdf](http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi_Jamaat_Introduction.pdf)> accessed 30.01.2015, 9.

Tablighi Jamaat claims to be apolitical and asserts that Muslims should only participate in politics and carry political power 'once all Muslims have corrected their ways, accepted the *Sharia* as a complete system of life and abandoned their attachments to worldly gains.'

## **Controversies**

Tablighi Jamaat aims to revive and strengthen the faith of Muslims worldwide. Although it has no formal membership, adherents spend significant periods of time travelling and preaching in mosques to spread their message. Women are encouraged to share their Islamic beliefs with other women and are required to practice complete seclusion and segregation in everyday life. Tabligh Jamaat's loose internal structure means that people associated with it have diverse views in different parts of the world. In some countries, people associated with it peacefully exercise their freedom of religion or belief, yet in other countries people associated with Tablighi Jamaat have been linked to violent acts.

For some Tablighi Jamaat appears to be rather innocuous; however, it has not been without controversy and has been banned in a number of countries.

### ***Bans on Tablighi Jamaat***

The movement is prohibited in **Iran**, **Uzbekistan** (2004), **Tajikistan** (2006), **Turkmenistan**, **Russia** (2009) and **Kazakhstan** (2013).

In **Russia**, on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009, the Constitutional Court held that Tablighi Jamaat is an extremist organisation and prohibited it from operating on Russian territory. The ban was justified with claims that its associates in Russia 'have called [in sermons] for the violent seizure of power and [made] statements aimed at inciting national, racial and religious hatred.'

Similarly, in **Kazakhstan**, on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2013, a court in Astana banned Tablighi Jamaat as an 'extremist' organisation, although the court did not specify which of the movement's teachings were considered extremist. Similar vague judgements have led to Tablighi Jamaat's banning in Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

In both **Uzbekistan** and **Tajikistan**, anyone found to be practicing Tablighi Jamaat teachings can face criminal prosecution. In 2009, in **Tajikistan**, 124 people were arrested in a mass raid on a mosque in Dushanbe, but only four suspected Tablighi Jamaat members went to trial for allegedly inciting religious, national, and ethnic hatred.

Although the movement is banned in **Kazakhstan**, it is still said to be active and popular.

In recent years, there has been debate in **Kyrgyzstan**, where there are an estimated 10,000 Tablighi Jamaat adherents, on whether the movement should be banned. The State Commission on Religious Affairs has frequently referred to Tablighi Jamaat as an ‘extremist organisation’; however, the head of the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims has declared that it is not a militant movement and should be accepted with more tolerance. Similarly, Kadyr Malikov, the director of the independent Kyrgyz think-tank *Religion, Law and Politics*, stated that Tablighi Jamaat ‘is neither extremist nor terrorist or political.’

Even still, there are some in Kyrgyzstan who oppose the movement, objecting to Tablighi Jamaat’s missionary approach and noting its appeal to poorly educated youth at risk of joining Islamist organisations. Tablighi Jamaat proponents argue that the movement does not force anyone to join their ranks but is merely laying out an alternative to mainstream Islam.

In **Russia**, Tablighi Jamaat has been active in the Orenburg since 2010, despite the government ban on its operations. In September 2012, more than 500 Tablighi Jamaat members were arrested in the Sol-Iletsk district of Orenburg, close to the border with Kazakhstan. A police search of private homes uncovered 500 copies of religious books containing so-called extremist content.

### ***Alleged Links with Terrorism***

Tablighi Jamaat portrays itself as a peaceful and non-political movement.<sup>2</sup> Even still, Tablighi Jamaat has drawn criticism from some quarters for certain individuals that have been associated with Tablighi Jamaat and have also been linked to Al-Qaeda and terrorist actions.

For example, on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2008 Spain arrested fourteen Pakistani and Indian citizens, all Tablighi Jamaat members, who were plotting to carry out suicide bombings in Barcelona and other European cities.

Other potential links between Tablighi Jamaat and terrorist acts include:

---

<sup>2</sup> Political scientist Mumtaz Ahmad has written: ‘In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat detests politics and does not involve itself in any issues of socio-political importance.’

- Abdullah Ahmed Ali, the leader of the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot,<sup>3</sup> was known to frequent the Tablighi Jamaat -related Masjid-e-Umer mosque in East London;
- Zacarias Moussaoui, known as the ‘twentieth hijacker’ in the 9/11 attacks, is said to have routinely worshipped at a Parisian Tablighi Jamaat mosque;
- Shoe-bomber Richard Reid and Taliban partisan John Walker Lindh,<sup>4</sup> were recruited by Al Qaeda while they worshipped at Tablighi Jamaat mosques.

Despite the movement’s claims to being politically neutral, it has not explicitly distanced itself from Islamist leaders that have promoted *jihad bi as-saif* (jihad through the sword) over *jihad bi an-nafs* (jihad through conscience), the ideology more commonly accepted by Tablighi Jamaat. The movement has therefore sometimes been regarded as a fertile recruiting ground for terrorist groups and violent activities.

Tablighi Jamaat has also been strongly criticised for promoting *purdah*, or seclusion, where women cover themselves entirely in public with a *burka* and face veil. Women must also always be accompanied by a male relative. This social tradition, prevalent in some Afghani and Pakistani Muslim communities and perpetuated in Tablighi Jamaat communities, has been an obstacle for Tablighi women to integrate into general society.

## **Tablighi Jamaat Muslims in Prison**

### **Kazakhstan**

Sixteen cases of Tablighi Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained are documented in the **Prisoners’ List of Human Rights Without Frontiers** (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>).

Trials of people alleged to be part of Tablighi Jamaat have been surrounded in secrecy. Such trials in South Kazakhstan Region ended in December 2014 with a three-year prison sentence being imposed. In Taldykorgan [Taldyqorgha] in Almaty Region five prison terms of between eighteen and twenty months were imposed. More alleged members of Tablighi Jamaat were prosecuted in 2015.

#### ***Arrests of five members of Tablighi Jamaat***

---

<sup>3</sup> The 2006 transatlantic aircraft was a terrorist plot in which liquid explosives carried on board as many as 10 airliners travelling from the UK to the US and Canada should have been detonated. The plot, however, was thwarted by British police.

<sup>4</sup> Lindh was an American who travelled with Tablighi preachers to Pakistan in 1998 to expand on his Islamic studies but then joined the Taliban and was sentenced for aiding the Taliban in Afghanistan.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2015, five persons suspected of being members of Tablighi Jamaat were sentenced to prison terms by Taldykorgan City Court in Almaty Region of south-eastern Kazakhstan. Four of them – **Bakyt Nurmanbetov, Aykhan Kurmangaliyev, Sagyndyk Tatubayev, and Kairat Esmukhambetov** – were sentenced each to twenty months imprisonment. The fifth – **Ruslan Kairanov** – received an eighteen-month term.

The defendants were prosecuted under the old Criminal Code Article 337-1, Part 2 (replaced by an almost identical Article 405 in the new Criminal Code), which makes it illegal to participate in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation that has been banned by a court in connection with extremism or terrorism. The trial has mostly been held in secret.

### *The Case of Saken Tulbayev*

On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015, police raided the four-room flat in Almaty's Bostandyk District which **Saken Tulbayev**, a Tablighi Jamaat Muslim, shares with his eighty-two-year-old mother, his wife Rumina Fakhrudinova, two of his three children, his sister Feruza Tulbayeva and her child. During their three-hour search, officers confiscated notes and booklets. On leaving the flat, they also claimed to have found forty-three copies of a leaflet which **Tulbayev** said they had planted.

After a court ordered he be held in pre-trial detention, he was transferred to Almaty's Investigation Prison. He was charged under Criminal Code Article 174, Part 1 ('incitement of social, national, clan, racial, or religious hatred or antagonism' with imprisonment of two to seven years) and Criminal Code Article 405, Part 2 ('participating in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism they have carried out' with a fine or up to two years' imprisonment). Like most of the new Criminal Code, these articles came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2015, **Saken Tulbayev** was sentenced to a four-year and eight-month term in a labour camp. Upon his scheduled release in December 2019, he is banned from exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief until December 2022.

## **Russia**

In May 2015, up to 20 Muslims in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk were tried for involvement in the banned 'extremist' organisation. Only one of the arrested is known by name: **Kamolitdin Rakhmanov**. In 2012, the law enforcement agencies of the Novosibirsk Region reported that the regional FSB opened a criminal case under Parts 1 and 2 of Article 282.2 (organisation of an extremist group or participation in it)

against five residents of the region. He was expelled from Russia for involvement in Tablighi Jamaat and banned from returning for five years. He later returned to Russia with a fake passport. Most likely, he will also be prosecuted under Part 2 of the Criminal Code Article 322 (illegal crossing of the state border). The investigators consider he is the leader of local Tablighi Jamaat cells.

### **Tajikistan**

On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010, thirty-seven suspected members of Tablighi Jamaat were sentenced to prison terms of between three to six years and heavy fines for being members of a banned religious organisation:

**Erkin ABDUHALILOV, Talabsho ABDUSAMADOV, Khudaydod ALNAZAROV, Mahkamjon AZIZOV, Umarjon AZIZOV, Mahmadjon BAKIYEV, Faridun BOBOYEV, Jamshed BOYAKOV, Rustam BOYMUHAMEDOV, Amirali and Murodali DAVLATOVS (brothers), IGBOLSHO, Abdujabbor IZZATULLAYEV, Saynurdin KALUGSHOYEV, Saidkomil KHALOV, Doniyor KHASHIMOV, Nasrullo KHISOMOV, Mahmatali KURBONOV Churakhon MIRZOYEV, Abduvali MURODOV, JALOLIDDIN, Ismoil MAHMUDOVI, NASRULLAYEV, Muhibullo RAHMONOV, Nosir RAKHIMOV, Bashir SAIDOV, Azizhudja SALIMOV, Habibullo SHARIPOV, Churabek SAIDZODA, Toirjon SAMADOV, Nemat SANGINOV, Abdukahor SATTOROV, Abdumanon SATTOROV, Raufjon SHEROV, Rahmonazi TALIBOV, Suhrob TEMIROV and Ahmad VALIYEV**

They were sentenced on the basis of Criminal Code's article 307-3 (organisation of banned extremist religious organisations). Part 1 specifies prison terms of between five and seven years for leaders of such organisations. Part 2 of the same article specifies fines of between 1,000 and 2,000 times the 'minimum calculation index' - 25 Somonis before 1 July 2009 and from this date 35 Somonis - or prison terms of between three and five years for those participating in such organisations.

Their whereabouts and further details about the situation of each of them are unknown.

### **Conclusions**

Some analysts claim that certain tendencies within Tablighi Jamaat reveal a 'violent potential' within the movement. With origins in a particularly exclusionary and restrictive form of Sunni Islam, Tablighi Jamaat has been hastily linked to Islamic terrorism. French sociologist of religion Marc Gaborieau contends that Tablighi Jamaat's aim to conquer the world for Islam would not preclude violent jihad to

achieve that goal. Others have pointed to the fact that Tablighi Jamaat-sponsored trips to Pakistan have served to put young Muslims in touch with fundamentalist groups. However, secondary links of this sort are insufficient to make a direct connection to violent jihadism.

Tablighi Jamaat cannot entirely prevent some of its members from becoming disillusioned with the movement's officially neutral position and being lured by Islamist extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Members of Tablighi Jamaat are vulnerable to exploitation by militant or terrorist organisations just like many other groups. Unfortunately, this has led to media and government authorities moving to ban Tablighi Jamaat, portraying it as a breeding ground for extremism and not viewing the movement as a whole.

Opinions differ on whether Tablighi Jamaat actually encourages terrorist activities through its teachings and preaching. Tablighi Jamaat's claim to be apolitical would suggest that the movement itself cannot be blamed for inspiring some of its members to engage in terrorist activities. That Tablighi Jamaat 'harboured terrorists does not necessarily mean that Tablighi Jamaat is therefore a hotbed of terrorism,' commented Jenny Taylor of the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs.<sup>5</sup>

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) view the ban of the religious association Tablighi Jamaat inappropriate, since the organisation was engaged in promotion of Islam and was never implicated in incitements to violence. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) consider the repression of the Tablighi Jamaat members to be unjustified.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Taylor 'What is the Tablighi Jamaat?' *The Guardian* (September 2009)  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/08/religion-islam-tablighi-jamaat>>  
accessed 29 January 2015.