

## Tabligh Jamaat

Tabligh Jamaat is a revivalist missionary movement within Islam, founded in India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term means ‘those who preach’ and is sometimes called the ‘Society for Spreading Faith.’ Adherents do not proselytise non-Muslims. They seek only to revive the faith of ‘weaker’ Muslims and to follow Islamic religious practices more vigorously.

Tabligh Jamaat originated in the Deobandi School of Sunni Islam<sup>1</sup> in Uttar Pradesh in north India. Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi (1885-1944), an Islamic scholar and Sufi teacher, is credited as its founder. Its world headquarters are located in the New Delhi suburb of Basti Nizamuddin.

The movement has grown significantly over time. It is said to have around 80 million followers in 150 countries of Asia, Africa and Europe<sup>2</sup> but it is particularly prevalent in South and Central Asia.

In Europe its headquarters, complete with a *madrrasah*, are operating in the UK with about 50,000 followers in Dewsbury (Yorkshire), with further centers in London, Glasgow, Leicester, and Birmingham. In France, Tabligh Jamaat has been able to attract a significant number of Muslims of Arabian and African extraction (about 100,000 followers). Its activity is concentrated in the larger Paris region. In Spain it operates from Barcelona among a quickly growing number of Muslim migrants.

In North America, Tabligh Jamaat has met with some success in gaining converts among African-Americans and Caribbean immigrants. Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, and Washington, D.C., are the major centers of Tabligh Jamaat activities in the United States.

Tabligh Jamaat adherents never constitute themselves into formal ‘trusts’ or ‘companies’ and shun political, legal, or social engagement with the wider world. There are—intentionally—few formal points of contact at all.

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 Ijtima*) is the most popular Tabligh Jamaat pilgrimage in the world with approximately five million people attending each year, significantly larger than the traditional *Hajj* to Mecca.

---

<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.

<sup>2</sup> “Understanding and engaging with the Tabligh Jamaat” by Jenny Taylor. <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2015-11/understanding-and-engaging-with-the-tablighi-jamaat>

## Teachings

Tabligh 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*)

Those six points act as a perimeter fence on both the experience and the critical faculties of the devotees. They include 'respect for Muslims'—but not for non-Muslims<sup>3</sup>.

Tabligh Jamaat followers 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 Tabligh Jamaat's central mosque in Pakistan for a month.

## Controversies

The controversies mainly concern their teachings about the role of women in their communities, their relations with political Islam and accusations of alleged links to terrorism.

### *Women*

Women are under male control in Tabligh Jamaat. They are required to practice complete seclusion and segregation in everyday life<sup>4</sup>, and to cover themselves entirely in public with a *burka* or face veil. Tabligh Jamaat has been strongly criticised on these points.

Women are encouraged to share their Islamic beliefs with other women and may travel for this purpose. However, only married women are allowed to have such missionary activities and they must always be accompanied by a male relative, preferably their husband.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> More information about the status of women in the movement in "The Tablighi Jamaat and Gender: Women, Narrative, and the Religious Discourse of Struggle in an Indian Muslim Reform Movement" by Megan Adamson Sijapati.

In their daily lives, they are locked into a medieval system of patronage that results in illiteracy and disaffection. Female literacy rate in Mewat, a region of Haryana and Rajasthan states in northwestern India, where the movement started, is just 5% today. They still live in *zenanas* (harems) there and are normally forbidden, even in Britain, from leaving the house unaccompanied by a male. Marriages are conducted in their name, not in their presence.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Politics***

Tabligh Jamaat claims to be apolitical<sup>6</sup> and does not advocate the use of violence, the overthrow of the political leaders in Muslim majority countries or the establishment of a caliphate.

Tabligh Jamaat's loose internal structure means that people associated with it may have diverse views and practices in different parts of the world. The movement has sometimes been regarded as a gateway and a fertile recruiting ground for political Islam, violent activities and terrorism because some of its young zealots were vulnerable to shadowy jihadi-groomers infiltrating its ranks.

In some countries, Tabligh Jamaat is perceived as rather innocuous whilst other states consider it a dangerous hotbed for radicalism and have banned it.

Dr Taj Hargey, an *imam* in Oxford who is persona non grata for criticizing Tabligh Jamaat publicly, says of them: 'They encourage Muslims already disenchanted with life in the West . . . to disassociate from the world by pursuing a trans-national, self-imagined construct that can be exploited by extremists.' 'They are', he adds, 'scornful of secular democracy and Western values' and espouse 'voluntary apartheid as not merely beneficial, but crucial.'<sup>7</sup>

### ***Bans on Tabligh 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 Tabligh Jamaat is an extremist organisation and prohibited it from operating on Russian territory. No adherent to that movement is currently known to be in prison.

---

<sup>5</sup> This and other facts can be found in Zacharias Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat* (Lapido Media), available from Amazon in paperback or Kindle at [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tablighi-Jamaat-Handy-Religion-Affairs-ebook/dp/B00KGKEI0M/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1438685449&sr=1-1&keywords=tablighi+jamaat+kindle](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tablighi-Jamaat-Handy-Religion-Affairs-ebook/dp/B00KGKEI0M/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1438685449&sr=1-1&keywords=tablighi+jamaat+kindle).

<sup>6</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.'

<sup>7</sup> Pieri, *Tablighi Jamaat*, 40f

In **Kazakhstan**, a court in Astana banned Tabligh Jamaat as an ‘extremist’ organisation on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2013 although the court did not specify which of the movement’s teachings were considered extremist. Most religious prisoners in that country are Sunni Muslims accused of involvement in the Tabligh Jamaat movement. Similar vague judgements have led to Tabligh Jamaat’s banning in **Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.**

In **Tajikistan**, a number of Muslims found to be suspicious of membership of the banned Tabligh Jamaat movement are in prison.

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

Even still, there are some in Kyrgyzstan who oppose the movement, objecting to Tabligh Jamaat’s missionary approach and noting its appeal to poorly educated youth at risk of joining Islamist organisations.

## **Tabligh Jamaat Muslims in Prison**

### **Kazakhstan**

**Forty-five cases of Tabligh Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained** are documented in the **Prisoners’ Database** of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Of these cases, eight arrests were made in 2017.

Prisoners were charged under article 405, Part 1 and/or Part 2. Part 1, which prohibits *organizing* activities of a social or religious association or other organization after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism. Part 2 prohibits the *participation* 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.

Sentences include one to four years imprisonment in either a regime labour camp or prison, with a two-year ban on practicing their religion after their term.

*The Case of Saken Tulbayev (2015)*

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 being 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 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** and was banned from conducting any religious activity for three years following his release, until the end of 2022. On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2016, the Supreme Court lifted Tulbayev's ban, but imposed two new conditions instead: He will be banned from sharing his faith with others and banned from membership of "extremist" organisations.

On 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, the Supreme Court lifted Tulbayev's ban, but imposed two new conditions instead: He will be banned from sharing his faith with others and from membership with "extremist" organizations.

### ***The Case of Iliyan Raiymzhan (2017)***

**Iliyan Raimzhan**, an ethnic Khazak born in China, was arrested in April of 2017 after his case was initiated by the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police. Prosecutors claim that Raiymzhan is a member of Tabligh Jamaat and that he had studied at its centres abroad, including in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere.

For his involvement in Tablighi Jamaat, **Raiymzhan** was charged under Article 405, Part 1 of the criminal code (“organizing the activity of a religious association after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism”) and Part 2 (“participation in the activity of a religious association after a court decision banning their activity in connection with extremism or terrorism”).

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2017, Iliyan Raiymzhan was sentenced to **four years in prison** by Tekeli Court in the Almaty Region. The Judge also banned him from exercising freedom of religion or belief for two and a half years after his prison term.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2017, Raiymzhan lost his appeal in Almaty Region. The 25-year-old leaves behind his wife and two young children.

### **Russia**

In late October 2016, it was reported that a court in Nizhny Novgorod recognized a citizen of Uzbekistan, a team leader in a cleaning company, guilty under Article 282.2 Part 2 of participation in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat and sentenced her to one year of imprisonment to be served in a settlement colony.

The criminal case under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code for involvement in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat was initiated in Crimea. Several homes on the peninsula were searched, and four people were arrested.

In late September 2016, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan changed the verdict, issued by the Naberezhnye Chelny City Court under Part 2 of Article 282.2 in April with respect to nine Tablighi Jamaat supporters. The reference to an aggravating circumstance in the form of committing a crime by a group of persons was excluded from the verdict, and, therefore, the prison terms were reduced.

### **Tajikistan**

Five cases of Tablighi Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained are documented in the **Prisoners' Database of Human Rights Without Frontiers** (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Of these cases, four arrests were made in 2015, with one in 2009.

This movement has been banned in Tajikistan since 2006, although it does not use or advocate violence. It does not call for the overthrow of the political regime in Tajikistan.

### **Cases**

**Amrokhon Ergashov**, a Tajik national from Kulob, was arrested in 2015 on suspicion of his membership to Tablighi Jamaat. He was charged under article 187 (Organizing a criminal community or organisation), article 195 (Illegal buying, selling, keeping, transportation or carrying of weapons, ammunitions or explosives), and article 307 (Public calls for extremist activity) of the country's criminal code. He was sentenced to **twelve years in prison**.

In January 2015, **Mulloh Abdulloh, Abdulloh Ishogov, Payravjon Ashurov, and Zarif Nuriffinov** were arrested on suspicion of membership in the banned Tablighi

Jamaat. They were sentenced to **three years in prison** on the basis of Criminal Code Article 307 (Public calls for extremist activity)

## Conclusions

Opinions differ on whether Tabligh Jamaat actually encourages or indirectly contributes to violent jihadism through its teachings and preaching.

With origins in a particularly exclusionary and restrictive form of Sunni Islam, Tabligh Jamaat has been hastily suspected of links to Islamic terrorism. French sociologist of religion Marc Gaborieau contends that Tabligh 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 Tabligh 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.

Members of Tabligh Jamaat may be 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 Tabligh Jamaat, portraying it as a breeding ground for extremism and not viewing the movement as a whole.

Tabligh 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. Tabligh Jamaat can however not entirely prevent some of its followers from becoming disillusioned with the movement's officially neutral position and being lured by Islamist extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the Talibans. That Tabligh Jamaat 'harboured terrorists does not necessarily mean that it is therefore a hotbed of terrorism,' commented Jenny Taylor of the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs.<sup>8</sup>

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) view the ban of the religious association Tabligh Jamaat and the criminalization of its members' activities inappropriate, since the organisation was engaged in promotion of Islam by increased spiritual edification of its followers and was never implicated in incitements to violence. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) consider the repression of the Tabligh Jamaat members to be unjustified, inefficient and counter-productive.

---

<sup>8</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.