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South Asia

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There has been much speculation on the significance of the Tablighi Jama'at, the workings of which remain secretive. The main controversy relates to its stance on political matters. Since its foundation, it has claimed to be completely aloof from politics. However, doubts have been sporadically raised as to the reality of this apolitical position, particularly in Pakistan where some well-known members of the movement were recently involved in the Afghan problem and in internal politics.

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PHOTO: MARIE-FRANCE MOURÉGOT

Tablighi preachers from Mauritius at the airport of Saint-Denis, Reunion Island

Tablighi Jama'at, a transnational Muslim proselytizing movement founded in India in 1927, has its headquarters in Nizamuddin, a suburb of Delhi. From there it expanded quietly all over the world from 1948 onward, finally becoming conspicuous and influential by the end of the 1970s. It was founded on six basic principles: the invitation (*da'wa*, or *tabligh*) to Islam is not the affair of religious specialists, but the responsibility of all Muslims who must devote their time and money to it; one should not wait for people to come to hear the preaching, but rather preachers should travel to reach the people; preaching is done by self-financing itinerant groups; the mingling of all social classes is obligatory within these groups; the primary objective is to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims, proselytism toward non-Muslims being marginal; and the promotion of the unity of Muslims being a primary objective, theological as well as political controversies are prohibited inside the movement.

The secretive nature of the movement makes it impossible to find direct evidence of political strategies. There is nonetheless an indirect means of doing so: reconsidering its history, instead of focusing, as is usually done, on self-statements and on doctrinal literature, and trying to see if one can read in this history indications of political involvement.¹ The historical literature concerning Tablighi Jama'at is of two kinds, internal and external. From the founding of the movement until 1965 – a time when the movement was inconspicuous – the sources are exclusively internal and consist in biographical (or rather hagiographical) litera-

ture in Urdu, mostly produced by an institution closely linked to the Tablighi Jama'at, the Nadwatul-'ulama. The literature is comprised of biographies of the founder, Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi (1885-1944), of his son and successor, Muhammad Yusuf (1917-1965), and of their close associates, particularly Muhammad Zakariyya (1898-1982), who produced the edifying books used in the movement under the collective name *The Teachings of Islam*.² For the period after 1965, biographies are not available for In'amul-Hasan, who ruled the movement from 1965 to 1995. In'amul-Hasan died recently and his biography has not yet come out. However, the movement having become by that time conspicuous, there are external testimonies (unfortunately disparate and not continuous) about its spreading and workings.

Origins and expansion

The first striking point of this history is that the very foundation of the movement is firmly rooted in politics. It emerged in the decade of 1920-1930, which is crucial in Indian history: it witnessed a growing political divergence of the Hindu and Muslim communities, which ultimately led to the partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in 1947. This hostility was accompanied by fierce competition in proselytizing: Hindu revivalists of the Arya Samaj tried to bring back Muslim descendants of converts to their fold; and Muslims, in order to win their backing and comfort the other Muslims, created organizations for 'preaching', a word which was rendered by the Arabic term *tabligh*. All of these organizations proved ephemeral, except the most recently created Tablighi Jama'at. One would be tempted to say that it survived because it was, unlike the others, apolitical. Upon closer examination, however, politics always remained in the background. It is not coincidental that the only pamphlet that Muhammad Ilyas ever wrote was addressed to the politicians on the eve of partition. It would therefore be more precise to say that – contrary to other Tabligh organizations – he had a long-term political strategy which eschewed short-term political involvement, and which ensured the durability of his movement.

The world-wide expansion of the Tablighi Jama'at was the main task of Muhammad Ilyas' son and successor, Muhammad Yusuf. After the disturbances which followed the Partition in 1947, he first consolidated the movement all over the subcontinent. The newly drawn border between India and Pakistan was ignored: as a transnational movement, Tablighi Jama'at does not consider borders to be significant. With this base firmly established, Yusuf began to systematically extend his organization worldwide. He established bridgeheads in the two areas which he considered crucial for the world-wide expansion of his movement (Arab countries, from 1948 and Western countries

from 1950 onwards). Starting from 1956, he established branches in the Afro-Asian countries. Lately the movement has also been active in China and Central Asia. In the hagiography, this expansion is openly presented as a planned conquest of the world in a wording and spirit reminiscent of the medieval holy war or *jihad*: Tablighi Jama'at is presented as a militant movement which organizes people quasi militarily. It is able to mobilize millions of people over the five continents, as one can observe in the annual meetings called *ijtima'* or on special occasions such as the funeral of In'amul Hasan in Delhi in 1995. It evidently aims to build on Muslim solidarity across borders, ignoring the nation-states.

Tight organization

Tablighi Jama'at has a considerable hold on those who enter its fold. It has remained from the beginning very centralized: the leadership has been jealously kept by the lineage of the founder, with a Centre (*markaz*) at Nizamuddin, from which authority is delegated to chiefs (*amir*) in the countries, provinces, districts and towns. Local leaders from all over the world come regularly to the Centre for training. Members who want to remain or even rise in the movement must prove their commitment, showing that they are not reluctant to spend their own time and money for it. They have to demonstrate the capacity to lead an austere life according to the model of the Prophet and his Companions as described in the edifying literature, which is circulated and indefinitely commented upon at the meetings. This hold on its members is so complete that sociologist Felice Dassetto described the movement as a 'total institution', and compared it to the 'sects' which have multiplied in the contemporary world.

But to what end is this power? This is difficult to answer since the inner core of the Tablighi Jama'at is not open to outsiders; nor is it open to ordinary members who have not risen in the hierarchy and pledged their commitment. None of those having reached this inner core have ever spoken. Given its planned strategy of the conquest of the world, which has been consistently maintained, and the tight organization remaining in the hands of one lineage, it is difficult to believe that spiritual development is the only aim. It would not be necessary to keep such a tight grip on members if this were the case. Given its secrecy, however, its ultimate aim is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, there are several indications, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh, that Tablighi Jama'at is far from being indifferent to politics. Prominent members have been closely associated with the army and the intelligence service active in Afghanistan. The president of Pakistan, Mohammad Rafiq Tarar, is a Tablighi; he is believed to be the main promoter of the new bill for the enforcement of the *shari'a*. More generally, in its origins and in its leadership, Tablighi Ja-

ma'at is closely linked with the Deobandi school, which has always been highly politicized and which currently backs the Taliban movement in Afghanistan.

Although the final interpretation of the significance of Tablighi Jama'at is not yet at hand, scholars should not be too irenic and manichaeic, putting on one side purely spiritual, peaceful and apolitical movements (among which Tablighi Jama'at would be the best example); and on the other side the politically committed and often violent Islamists which are represented, for example, in South Asia by the Jama'at-I Islami founded by Maududi (1903-1979).

To my mind the dividing line is not between apolitical and political movements; it is between two ways of conceiving politics. On the one hand, with the Islamists, we have a short-sighted conception of politics in the framework of the nation-states, which aims at conquering power by the shortest route. On the other hand, with other schools like the Tablighis and the Deobandis, there is a far-sighted conception of politics. Going beyond the narrow borders of nation-states, they have not set fixed short-term ends. Putting politics most often in parentheses, they first build individuals and institutions, which over time may exert a more lasting political influence. ♦

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Notes

1. Marc Gaborieau, *Tablighi djamā'at*, Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., Leiden, E.J. Brill, Vol. X, 1998, pp.38-39; 'Renouveau de l'Islam ou stratégie politique occulte? La Tablighi jamā'at dans le sous-continent indien et dans le monde', in Catherine Clémentin Ojha (ed.) (1997), *Renouveaux religieux en Asie*, Paris, École Française d'Extrême Orient, pp. 211-229; 'The Transformation of Tablighi Jama'at into a Transnational Movement under the Leadership of Muhammad Yusuf, 1944-1965', in Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.) *Travellers in Faith. Studies of Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Movement for Faith Renewal*, Leiden, E.J. Brill (forthcoming). See also: 'Islam on Tour: Die indo-pakistanische Bewegung Tablighi Jamā'at', *Orient*, vol. 39/no 2, pp. 219-234; Yoginder S. Sikand (1998), 'The Origins and Growth of the Tablighi Jamaat in Britain', *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, vol. 9/no 2, 171-192.
2. For a conspectus of this hagiographical literature, see the biographies of the leaders of the Tablighi Jama'at published in Marc Gaborieau, Nicole Grandin, Pierre Labrousse and Alexandre Popovic (eds) (1992), *Dictionnaire biographique des savants et grandes figures du monde musulman périphérique du XIXe siècle à nos jours*, Paris, EHESS, fasc. No.1, pp. 6-20.