

## JOINING THE CAUSE: AL-MUHAJIROUN AND RADICAL ISLAM

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### INTRODUCTION

On the surface, a decision to join a radical Islamic movement seems irrational. Participation entails enormous costs and risks, especially if the movement supports the use of violence for the cause. In addition, less controversial options are typically available for those who desire a deeper religious experience. Participants are frequently referred to as “zealots,” “fanatics,” and “militants,” connoting an irrational adherence devoid of reflective logic. Given the disincentives, why do individuals join these movements?

At the heart of decisions about joining is a process of persuasion. Individuals do not typically awake with a sudden epiphany that drives them to join radical Islamic groups. Instead, they experience an often extensive socialization process that includes exposure to movement ideas, debate and deliberation, and even experimentation with alternative groups. Only when an individual is convinced that the group represents the “true” version of Islam is he or she likely to join. This article identifies four key processes that enhance the likelihood that a potential joiner will be drawn to a radical Islamic group and eventually persuaded to participate: 1) cognitive opening—an individual becomes receptive to the possibility of new ideas and worldviews; 2) religious seeking—the individual seeks meaning through a religious idiom; 3) frame alignment—the public representation proffered by the radical group “makes sense” to the seeker and attracts his or her initial interest; 4) socialization—the individual experiences religious lessons and activities that facilitate indoctrination, identity-construction, and value changes. The first three processes are necessary prior conditions for the fourth (socialization). In other words, if an individual is not open to new ideas, does not encounter the movement message, or rejects the movement message after initial exposure, he or she will not participate in the kinds of movement activities necessary to fully disseminate the ideology and convince an individual to join.

This article uses al-Muhajiroun as a case study to demonstrate how these four processes draw individuals toward participation in radical activism. Al-Muhajiroun is a transnational Islamic movement based in the UK that supports the use of violence against western interests in Muslim countries and the establishment of an Islamic state through a military coup. In the British media, the movement is linked to terrorism and even al-Qaeda itself. As a result, there is enormous pressure on the British government to crack down on the movement and increased risks for activists. Yet despite the risks and the public outcry, it has become the most visible radical Islamic group in the country. In addition, the fact that al-Muhajiroun has expanded in a western liberal democracy with few of the political and socio-economic pathologies endemic in the Muslim world raises interesting questions about decisions to participate. It thus offers a rich empirical case for exploring why individuals join radical Islamic movements.

#### A NOTE ON METHODS

The primary obstacle to research on radical Islamic groups is most obviously access, as represented by the paucity of studies based upon ethnographic fieldwork. Where access is obtained, respondent pools typically remain limited in number, given the oftentimes secretive nature and internal movement security concerns of such movements. Random samples or surveys are extremely difficult. This limits generalizability, but an ethnographic approach with small groups of respondents provides unique insights into radical Islamic groups that are virtually impossible to generate through other methods.

I made initial contact with al-Muhajiroun through Mohammed al-Masari, the leader of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), a Saudi Islamist dissident movement. Masari is a friend and fundamentalist ally of Omar Bakri Mohammed (OBM), the founder and world wide leader of al-Muhajiroun, and his personal referral led to an initial interview. This first meeting was best characterized as an opportunity for OBM to size me up and assess my expertise in Islam and possible intentions. After a detailed conversation about Islamic law and jihad, he seemed satisfied with my academic credentials and opened access to the movement.

During trips to the UK in March, June, and December 2002, I was allowed to conduct unfettered interviews with members. Each member, of course, could refuse an interview, though this never occurred. I conducted thirty interviews, many of which were tape recorded. Certain key leaders were chosen for their broad knowledge about the movement. Regular members were randomly approached for interviews at movement events, a process that enhances the representativeness of the sample, even though the limited numbers circumscribe generalizability. I also interacted with about one hundred other members and movement “supporters” and attended movement-only religious lessons, public study circles, demonstrations, and community events. An assortment of movement documents and audio materials were collected, including leaflets, protest announcements, training manuals, taped lessons/talks, and press releases. This overall access provided exceptional opportunities for empirical data collection on a radical Islamic group.

## THEORIES OF JOINING

Most explanations of radical Islam are rooted in socio-psychological accounts of mass behavior, which emphasize the primacy of grievances and discontent. The underlying assumption is that grievances are generated by socio-structural, economic, and political strains and crises which produce psychological distress and prompt individuals to participate in collective action. The literature is replete with almost inexhaustible lists of precipitating factors, including the failure of secular modernization projects, blocked social mobility, economic malaise, Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the legacy of colonialism and cultural imperialism, and political alienation (Waltz 1986; Haddad 1992; Burgat and Dowell 1993; Keddie 1994; Dekmejian 1995; Hoffman 1995; Faksh 1997; Esposito 1998). Although scholars have debated the relative importance of each of these factors, there is general agreement that individuals join groups and movements in response to crisis.

This general explanation suffers from several critical shortcomings. First, although strain and discontent are ubiquitous and Islamic groups exist in most Muslim countries, the extent of their presence varies tremendously. In fact, many countries with severe stress and crisis, including Iraq (prior to the

U.S.-led invasion) and Syria, exhibit low levels of Islamist mobilization. Grievances may provide impetus for joining a movement, but other factors, such as the level of repression or resource availability, influence decisions about participation. As Leon Trotsky once stated: “the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt” (as quoted in Goodwin and Skocpol 1989: 490).

Second, it cannot explain why some individuals choose to join Islamic groups while others do not. Studies that detail the demographic profile of Islamists indicate that recruits frequently come from particular socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Ibrahim 1980, 1996; Ansari 1984; Munson 1986; Waltz 1986); however, not everyone from that shared background chooses to join. Even if one accepts the argument that particular constituencies have a greater propensity to join because of a shared set of grievances and psychological stress, there must be other mechanisms that help explain why this commonality translates into joining in some cases but not others.

Third, the socio-psychological framework does not explain differential patterns of joining among Islamic movements. Why, for example, do individuals with similar experiences, levels of distress, and grievances opt to join different movements? Why do some people turn to violent Islamic groups while others join moderate, non-violent organizations and movements? What explains variance across countries with similar structural strains?

Recognizing the deficiencies of such an approach, scholars have recently turned to social movement theory as a possible remedy to the proliferating lists of precipitating factors in grievance based explanations of radical Islam (Alexander 2000; Munson 2001; Wiktorowicz 2001, 2002, 2003; Wickham 2002; Clark 2003a; Hafez 2003). Resource mobilization theory, for example, proposes a rational actor, in contradistinction to the distressed, “unbalanced” joiner of the earlier socio-psychological framework (see Oberschall 1973; Gamson 1975; Jenkins 1983; Tilly 1978; Zald and McCarthy 1987). From this perspective, participation is facilitated by movement entrepreneurs, who offer selective incentives (material, solidary, and/or purposive) to attract members, thereby overcoming the free-rider dilemma. Joining is thus portrayed as a rational decision based on utility calculations.

Other social movement theorists emphasize social networks as the primary vehicles for joining (Snow et al. 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; McAdam 1986; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Gould 1991; McAdam and Paulsen 1993). While grievances create potential participants and selective incentives offer inducements, individuals still need exposure to the movement. In some instances, “moral shock” may prompt previously unaffiliated individuals to seek out movements, irrespective of whether they are embedded in related social networks (see Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Jasper 1997), but one of the most consistent findings in social movement research is that social relationships are important network pathways to participation, especially where high risk activism is involved (McAdam 1986).

Recent interest in the role of ideas, culture, and cognition has led still others to emphasize the importance of “framing” in attracting support and members/activists (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow and Benford 1992; Benford and Snow 2000; Williams and Benford 2000). Frames represent interpretative schemata that provide a framework for comprehending the surrounding environment. They offer a language and cognitive tools for making sense of events and experiences by interpreting causation, evaluating situations, and offering proscriptive remedies. David Snow and his colleagues argue that “By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective” (Snow et al. 1986: 464). However, only when there is “frame alignment” between individual and movement interpretive orientations is recruitment and mobilization possible. That is, the movement’s schemata must resonate with an individual’s own interpretive framework to facilitate participation. This alignment is contingent upon fidelity with cultural narratives, symbols, and identities; the reputation of the frame “articulator”; the consistency of the frame; the frame’s empirical credibility; and the personal salience of the frame for potential participants (Benford and Snow 2000: 619-622). In addition, movements must compete with frames proffered by governments, counter-movements, and intra-movement rivals (Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000: 625-27; Noakes 2000).

All of these factors impact the recruitment capabilities of a movement, but it is questionable whether the theories can effectively explain why individuals join radical Islamic groups in particular.

Such movements demand total adherence and submission to the movement ideology, self-sacrifice in high risk activism, and the abandonment of previous life-styles (the suicide operation is only the most extreme example). They rarely offer selective incentives that offset the enormous costs and risks associated with participation; and while networks, “moral shock,” and frame alignment may expose an individual to a movement, alone they do not explain why the individual, after the initial exposure, decides to participate irrespective of costs and risks. Social movement theory’s relatively limited universe of cases and tendency to focus on progressive, left-leaning groups in western liberal democracies (especially the civil rights and labor movements) leave it ill-equipped to address radical religious groups. As David S. Meyer observes, “[b]y ignoring movements from the other side of the spectrum, we collect less information on political realities, with a sampling of movements whose bias jeopardizes the generalizability of what we have learned” (2003: 6). Perhaps the dynamics of joining are similar across movement types, but this is an empirical question and demands broader research.

A starting point in the development of a theory of joining for radical Islamic groups is to identify the common process underlying the various social movement explanations. Incentives, networks, and frames are all part of a more general process of persuasion, intended to convince individuals to participate in activism. The specifics of the “persuasion mechanism,” however, vary according to movement type. Selective incentives, for example, seem most likely in non-violent, institutionalized social movement organizations, where most members participate by paying dues. Given the low risk and cost of involvement, selective incentives such as magazines or information may be enough to persuade an individual with congruent political or social views to write a check. Riskier movements, in contrast, may necessitate a greater role for social networks to foster the trust and solidarity needed to encourage new participants. Rather than assuming a universal process of joining, it seems more fruitful to create models according to “movement families” (della Porta and Rucht 1995), where the dynamics are likely to follow similar patterns. The objective is then to move from the more general mechanism of persuasion to the particulars of movement types.

## PERSUASION, SOCIALIZATION, AND JOINING RADICAL ISLAMIC GROUPS

Given the importance of ideas and the difficulty of indoctrinating individuals to the extent that they sacrifice their lives and adopt high risk activism for a radical Islamic group, socialization takes a critical role. Individuals need to be convinced that the cause is worth the risks and costs of belonging. A series of prior processes, however, are necessary before socialization can take place.

This section outlines the processes that draw individuals toward value internalization and commitment to a movement, either as a formal member or, in cases where there is no formal membership, as a deeply involved activist. For simplicity, I refer to both formal members and activists as “members” while recognizing that there are distinctions, especially depending upon whether the movement is predominantly constituted by formal organizations or informal networks.

As with Lofland and Stark’s “value-added” model of conversion, these processes can be conceptualized as elements of a funnel “that systematically reduces the number of persons who can be considered available for recruitment, and also increasingly specifies who is available” (1965: 863). The arrangement is depicted in Diagram 1 below and shows the way in which individuals are drawn toward participation while recognizing that the pool of potential joiners becomes increasingly narrow.

[Insert diagram 1 about here]

### Cognitive Opening

Given the extreme views of radical religious groups, a basic prerequisite for joining is an individual’s willingness to expose him or herself to the movement message. Prior socialization experiences heavily influence a priori views of radical groups and thus the likelihood of conscious exposure. Most individuals will reject the movement outright as “extreme,” “militant,” or “irrational.” However, a crisis can produce a “cognitive opening” that shakes certainty in previously accepted beliefs and renders an individual more receptive to the possibility of alternative views and perspectives. The specific crisis varies across individuals, but there are several common types found in the literature on

Islamic movements, which can be categorized as economic (losing a job, blocked mobility), social/cultural (sense of cultural weakness, racism, humiliation), and political (repression, torture, political discrimination). To this list I would add “personal,” since cognitive openings can be produced by idiosyncratic experiences, such as a death in the family, victimization by crime, and family feuds.

In addition, movements themselves can foster a cognitive opening through outreach activism. Activists can use current social networks or make new acquaintances to germinate a sense of crisis among contacts through discussion and subtle interactions. Islamists, for example, frequently initiate innocuous discussions about Islam with congregates at the mosque in an effort to develop new relationships and instill a sense of urgency about the need to address pressing concerns. Similar to the Mormons, Islamists in this context often hide their identity and involvement in the group until after the development of an interpersonal bond and trust (see Stark and Bainbridge 1980: 1385-89). In this manner, movements not only use pre-existing social ties for recruitment, but develop new relationships and networks of previously unconnected individuals as well (see Glenn 1999: 202-203; Clark 2003b). Many also use demonstrations, pamphlets, and pictures to generate a sense of moral shock among bystanders that could lead to a cognitive opening and a willingness to learn more about the crises and possible proscriptions.

### Religious Seeking and Frame Alignment

Where an individual’s identity is in part tied to religion, a cognitive opening may lead to “religious seeking”—a process in which an individual searches “for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent” (Lofland and Stark 1965: 868). Although more research is needed, it seems reasonable to argue that the greater the role of Islam in an individual’s identity, the greater the likelihood he or she will respond to the opening through religious seeking. This may not always be the case (for example, friends may convince an individual to look more closely at religion as a possible remedy irrespective of prior beliefs), but prior socialization and sense of self most likely influences the direction of seeking.

Religious seeking takes two forms. First, individuals may look into religion more deeply. In most instances, they rely upon friends and family for directions and possible sources, though some use books, the internet, and other independent avenues of learning. In “self-initiated religious seeking,” the process is akin to shopping in a religious marketplace of ideas (Iannaccone 1991; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000). The seeker examines possible religious commodities to see whether they suit his or her needs and/or taste.

Second, members in the movement can foster “guided religious seeking,” especially where the cognitive opening is prompted by movement outreach. In some cases, this may directly incorporate the individual into movement activities and socialization. In other instances, a movement member may help a potential joiner “shop around” and sample different religious products while subtly guiding him or her toward the conclusion that the movement ideology is the most reasonable and appealing choice. The latter strategy is typically more effective, since individuals feel empowered in making informed decisions based upon comparisons, all the while subtly influenced so that joining becomes more likely.

A willingness to listen and contemplate alternative ways of viewing the world, however, does not inexorably lead to joining. These movements are voluntary in nature, and as a result cannot rely upon direct coercion to indoctrinate potential participants. Instead, the process of persuasion is characterized by discussion and debate, an exchange of ideas through which movement members attempt to convince seekers that the movement ideology provides logical solutions to pressing concerns. In this sense, the potential joiner is an active agent rather than a passive object of indoctrination (Richardson 1985).

Because the seeker is typically a relative novice in the religion, he or she does not command the breadth of knowledge to effectively adjudicate the theoretical merits of competing religious perspectives, and as a result is most likely to satisfice—accept the religious commodity that seems “good enough” to fit the consumption needs of the individual, as opposed to a utility maximizing choice that considers all possible choices (Simon 1982). This choice, in turn, is contingent upon whether the movement achieves frame alignment with the views of the seeker. Given the relative lack of expertise, individuals do not select objective religious “truth” and are instead heavily influenced by whether the argument makes sense

and is persuasive, given individual backgrounds, experiences, and biographies. This leads many movements to initially focus on local, immediate concerns or emotional issues. If frame alignment is not achieved and the seeker is skeptical, he or she will either continue seeking or abandon the process.

### Socialization and Joining

Once frame alignment is achieved (even if only in part) deeper socialization processes can take place. It is at this point that the individual becomes a willing learner and delves more deeply into the movement ideology through an assortment of micromobilization contexts that can include study groups, one-on-one interactions and discussions, lessons, independent reading, social events, protests, and other movement activities. During this initial stage of learning the seeker becomes a student of the movement. Movements will, of course, vary in terms of how much involvement is possible and the duration of non-member participation (after which point membership is required), but there is usually an initial period of deeper exposure without formal joining.

During this stage, socialization (or resocialization) takes place as individuals learn about the ideology of the movement. The process is intended to alter the values of the individual so that self-interest is defined in accordance with the goals and beliefs of the movement ideology (see author's citation). In addition, movements foster identity construction (or reconstruction) and encourage social bonds that facilitate joining by creating a new social network and solidarity to encourage individuals to stay the course and continue training.

At the point that an individual internalizes much of the ideology (i.e., accepts it as his or her own worldview) and adopts the identity of the movement, formal joining becomes a natural progression. Individuals will differ in terms of the duration of the process according to the severity of the cognitive opening, the degree of cognitive sophistication, prior socialization experiences, prior knowledge of the religion, countervailing pressures (for example, friends opposed to the movement or family responsibilities), the composition of the individual's social networks, the availability of alternative resonant ideologies (and the individual's awareness of these alternatives), and other exogenous factors.

Differences in such factors help explain why some join and others leave after initial involvement and socialization.

In addition, exogenous conditions can suddenly inject a degree of uncertainty into the process, producing a halting or uneven trajectory. Cognitive openings, in particular, are not singular events. In fact, exogenous conditions frequently emerge that lead individuals to question their beliefs or contemplate values, even if this is merely a ritual of affirmation in which problems emerge and are answered and addressed by internalized norms and beliefs. Severe openings, however, will likely lead individuals to question their values. In the context of a radical religious movement, these openings can lead individuals to question the group's ideology.

Once an individual chooses to become a member, instruction is directed toward training the new adherent as a leader, organizer, and/or participant in movement activities intended to reproduce the movement message and attract new followers. Most movements offer special training for members to prepare them as advocates and teachers of the ideology. This creates a feedback mechanism in which sufficiently trained members lead outreach efforts to draw in new participants through social networks and activities. This experience, in turn, ties the members' identity even closer to the movement.

The above is a broad overview of processes that influence persuasion, socialization, and indoctrination. It differs from widely accepted theories of joining in social movement theory by focusing on how movements construct "networks of shared meaning" (Melucci 1996) rooted in the religious ideology. This process of construction is the vehicle of recruitment and joining, and thus plays a critical role in the reproduction and expansion of the movement membership. The following shows how these processes can be used to effectively explain why individuals join al-Muhajiroun, a radical transnational Islamic movement based in London.

## AL-MUHAJIROUN IN THE UK

The antecedents of al-Muhajiroun are rooted in Saudi Arabia, where Omar Bakri Mohammed (known as OBM) set up a branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Islamic Liberation Party, HT) in the early 1980s

after fleeing from Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> Through personal connections, OBM acquired the ability to move around the country freely and began gathering people at the various Islamic universities. In total, he succeeded in building forty-four members, but the HT leadership outside Saudi Arabia prohibited him from using the movement's name because of the dangers of activism in the kingdom. Although OBM maintained that they were still part of HT, he began issuing leaflets in 1983 under the name al-Muhajiroun, which means "the immigrants" (an appropriate name since the vast majority of members were non-Saudi students).

The movement functioned in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1980s until a series of arrests undermined its viability. Those who were caught by the authorities were tortured; some disappeared (presumably killed); and others were deported. OBM was forced to leave the country in 1987 and traveled to Britain since he already had a travel visa to the UK.

Once in the UK, OBM began building an impressive HT following, especially on university campuses. In the more liberal political setting, he engaged in public activism, including massive conferences, rallies, and protests. His growing prominence (or notoriety) drew concern from the HT leadership in Germany and elsewhere, and he was told to discontinue the more overt forms of activism. OBM's refusal led to an internal movement clash, and he eventually left the movement.

He immediately went about organizing a new movement through his network of non-HT students and re-launched al-Muhajiroun (AM) in Britain in 1996. Since that time, AM membership has expanded dramatically, though accurate membership numbers are difficult. Although local leaders are required to maintain membership rosters, there is a strict policy that administrative issues are not discussed with other members (and certainly not outsiders). Newspapers in Britain have estimated around 7,000 members, but the accuracy of the number is questionable. Conversations with OBM indicate that the number of members is somewhere around 700, which does not include any number of individuals who participate in AM activities without actually joining as formal members. Despite difficulties with data, two things are clear: a) it is the most visible and active radical Islamic movement in the country; and b) it is spread throughout the UK in a number of different cities and neighborhoods. AM has also established branches

in other countries, including Lebanon, Pakistan, and the US, which are connected through cyberspace meetings, lectures, lessons, and public events.

Since September 11, it has become a central focus in debates about political expression and national security in the UK because of its past and current support for the use of violence. A core tenet of the movement is the use of military coups to establish Islamic states wherever there are Muslims, including Britain. It also condones the use of violence against western militaries operating in Muslim countries. Several members of AM went to Afghanistan to fight against American-led forces in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, and OBM issued a fatwa (jurisprudential opinion) supporting jihad against coalitional forces in Iraq in 2003 (reports indicate that AM members tried to go to Iraq to implement the fatwa). In addition, OBM and leaders in AM have issued an assortment of controversial statements perceived as supporting violence against western targets, including fatwas condoning attacks against John Major and Tony Blair if they set foot in a Muslim country and a statement supporting the 1998 US embassy bombings in Africa.

Perhaps the most contentious action came a year after September 11 when AM sponsored a conference at the Finsbury Park Mosque reflecting upon the consequences of the attacks and the aftermath for Muslims. The advertising for the conference was framed in such a way that it implied a “celebratory tone,” though OBM claimed that the event was a reflection on the oppression of Muslims in the war on terrorism (and much of the content suggests that this was in fact the case). Regardless of intentions, the British press billed it as an event to celebrate the triumph of 9-11, which did not sit well with the public. Members of Parliament have called for a ban on the movement and the expulsion of OBM from the country.

The movement is highly controversial and membership entails enormous costs and risks (see author’s citation). Members are consistently arrested and several have lost their jobs as a result of activism. In the spring 2003, the British government began enforcing new terrorism laws and initiated a broader crackdown on the movement (author’s telephone conversation with OBM, April 2003), including a series of raids on its headquarters and the homes of leaders in July 2003 (BBC, July 30, 2003).

### Racism, Cognitive Opening, and Religious Seeking

Most of those who eventually became members experienced a severe identity crisis prior to their initial stages of participation. The vast majority of these individuals are South Asians from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (about half of the Muslims in the UK are from South Asia). Their parents are typically practicing Muslims who focus on ritual and eschew any risky behaviors. At home, tradition and religious values dominated the socialization environment, while other environments such as schools and social settings were permeated by the secular values of British society.

Although the Race Relations Act of 1976 provided legal protection for South Asians in employment and education, legal protection did not always translate into equity for all segments of the South Asian population. AM members fixate on this discrepancy and decry the racist nature of British society. One member went so far as to call Britain “the most racist society in the world.” This sense of inequity is reinforced by statistical data which indicates that South Asians have higher levels of unemployment than whites and other racial minorities (Modood et al. 1997: chapter four). There is also a general sense of discrimination in housing and social services (Weller et al. 2001; Ansari 2002).

For members of AM, this created a disconnect between the professed values of the secular British society and actual practice. More importantly, individuals were trapped between two competing socialization environments: a) secular British society and institutions that proposed equity but in reality offered discrimination; and b) the traditional home with its passive religious values and narrow focus on the Muslim community and rituals. In short, they felt like they did not fully belong in either of these worlds. Members consistently referred to things that prompted them “to really think” about their lives, and this reflection created a “cognitive opening” as individuals reassessed their beliefs and identity and opened to the possibility of learning new ways of thinking. Anjem Choudary, the leader of the UK branch of AM, captures this cognitive opening:

Maybe thirty, forty years ago in Britain people were coming over here as economic migrants. And they were really trying to find where the next meal was coming from. In

the 1970s, it got gradually better. The Race Relations Act came in 1976. In the 80s you talk about the second generation coming along and these people have gone to university. They don't have the financial pressures. They have certain laws they can rely upon to make sure they are not discriminated against. And if you are not thinking about where your meal is coming from, you are thinking about the problems that beset society. You have a chance to reflect and to think about whether this is the kind of society I want to live in and bring up my children in. And despite the fact that you have just as many qualifications as the next man and gone to the same universities, there is still a feeling that you are disadvantaged or people are still discriminating against you. And those kinds of obstacles have pushed people to reevaluate their ideology, their culture, to say that "I am more successful than Mr. Jones and he still has a job."

Look, say I wanted to be a physician and those doors weren't open to me. I am still being discriminated against. Many of the kinds of problems in society like racism, the breakdown of the social structure of society, the stigmatism attached to your own religion, your own color and your own nationality, all of those things have pushed many people, youth especially, to reevaluate their own religion and their own ideology and that has led to a massive revival taking place. That new generation has come out from the universities, from the cities, from the professions, and has engaged rigorously in da'wa [propagation], and they found people like Omar Bakri Mohammed (author's interview, London, March 7, 2002).

For South Asians, the reevaluation or new openness to introspection tends to lead them to think about religion in particular. Islam is an inextricable component of ethnic identity for South Asians. Ninety-six and ninety-five percent of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, respectively, are Muslim; and these ethnic groups are more likely than other minority groups to see religion as "very important" to how they

live their lives. This is consistent across age cohort. In fact, two-thirds of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis between the ages of 16 and 34 believe religion is important to how they live their lives, as compared with only 5 percent of whites and 18 percent of Caribbeans in the same age category (Modood et al. 1997: 306-308). The result is that given the age cohort of AM members, who tend to be in their late teens and early 20s, they are likely to think about their identity and beliefs in terms of religion rather than ethnicity.

This identity crisis is critical for AM recruitment, since it creates a new openness to socialization while pushing toward a reevaluation in terms of Islam rather than other possible ideologies. OBM notes the problem facing many Muslims in the UK:

People are looking for an Islamic identity. You find someone called Muhammad, who grew up in western society, he concedes a lot so people accept him. He changes his name to Mike, he has girlfriend, he drinks alcohol, he dances, he has sex, raves, rock and roll, then they say, “You are a Paki.” After everything he gave up to be accepted, they tell him he is a bloody Arab, or a Paki (as quoted in Lebor 1997: 129).

The movement tries to attract potential joiners by offering an identity of empowerment in the context of discrimination and sense of alienation. OBM is explicit about his function in the midst of this crisis: “Here is my role. ‘Come on Abu Jafar. You are not *Bobby*. You belong to a very great nation [Islam]. You belong to the history of civilization, 1300 years of a ruling [Islamic] system.’” AM offers a new sense of self, one tied to the pride of the Islamic civilization. As OBM recognizes, “If there is no racism in the west, there is no conflict of identity. People, when they suffer in the west, it makes them think. If there is no discrimination or racism, I think it would be very difficult for us” (author’s interview, London, June 2002).

Of course, not every AM respondent described a specific identity crisis. Instead, some couched their crisis in terms of a general sense of unease about what they saw around them in society—drugs, crime, casual sexual relations, etc. One member made cryptic references to his rough past in London and

recounted his sense of despair until someone from AM approached him and gave him hope. Another lost his mother suddenly and spent much of his night shift job thinking about the hereafter and what it all means. Sitting in the pub with his friends, he had no sense purpose and felt as though he did not fit in the world around him. Virtually all of the members who were interviewed recalled a point in their lives where they felt they had no purpose in life and lacked a sense of belonging. The key for the process of joining is that these individuals felt as though neither their parents' version of Islam nor the secular culture of Britain offered an answer.

In other cases, individuals described contact with AM members in the mosque or at university and intensive interactions that eventually prompted them to think about religion and the problems of society. One white convert, for example, described a year long experience of heated debate and discussion until he was finally convinced to switch religions (he considered himself an atheist). Another member, who eventually became a local leader in the movement, was initially disinterested and skeptical. His uncle dragged him to the mosque where he eventually met some members of AM. During the initial contacts, the members of AM hid their affiliation and instead spoke to him about general problems in society. This particular individual was eventually convinced that the problems were severe, and he sought out more information about how Islam might provide a solution. Others were deeply affected by AM outreach programs and activities, which used emotional appeals and moral shock to encourage individuals to learn more about Islam and its possible solutions to life (for example, by showing pictures of mutilated children killed in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine). Still others were encouraged to sit and listen to OBM after discussions with friends about the need to change society; the trust and bonds of friendship facilitated initial contact with the movement. For all of these individuals, the "facilitated cognitive opening" lent itself to guided religious seeking.

Regardless of the precipitant or dynamics of initial exposure to AM, all respondents in this study referred to a period following the cognitive opening in which they sat with different Islamic groups and experimented. This period was generally described as a search for a sense of meaning that was applicable to their lives. The search included attendance at lessons, activities, and events sponsored by various

Islamic movements (typically the more radical groups that tapped into the emotional energy of the young seekers). This represented a period of discussion, debate, and thoughtful reflection as the seekers listened to the different arguments and perspectives. It is critical to note that these seekers were not religiously knowledgeable and so choices about which group to follow were ultimately rooted in a subjective sense of whether the group made a convincing argument. This, in turn, was heavily contingent upon the ability of the movement to achieve frame alignment.

### Framing and Initial Interest

A cognitive opening and religious seeking do not guarantee even initial participation. If the movement message does not resonate with individual perceptions and understandings of the world, seekers are likely to dismiss the movement. This is particularly the case for radical religious groups, since the message is extreme and unlikely to appeal to most individuals, even under conditions of stress.

As a result, the process is much more subtle, and AM frames its message in broad terms that appeal to the vast majority of Muslims. AM primarily focuses its public outreach projects on “raising awareness about the plight of Muslims” rather than its particular solutions. In this manner, the movement taps into generic concerns in an effort to draw initial interest. A sample of forty-two notices for public events, including demonstrations, talks, open circles, and conferences reveals that two-thirds were about the “oppression of Muslims” by non-Muslims in places such as Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> These are hot button issues in the Muslim community and evoke interest regardless of ideological differences. They are likely to attract attention from a cross-section of Muslims, particularly because they play on emotions by using pictures and phrasing that imply genocide. A more specific analysis of issue framing regarding Iraq prior to the US-led invasion indicates that the diagnostic frame used by AM was nearly identical to that used by the mainstream Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The major difference was over whether the pending invasion was part of a “Christian” crusade or an American drive for global hegemony (AM would argue that they are one and the same).<sup>3</sup>

Other outreach programs are designed to address local conditions. For example, one of the most pressing issues for the Muslim community in the UK is education. Many parents are concerned about sending their children to secular institutions and want the government to provide funding for Islamic schools (the government already provides funding for Christian schools). AM tapped into this broad concern by holding a community “bazaar” in Slough where Muslims could purchase Islamic schoolbooks, clothing, and other religious products of interest. Following the bazaar, Anjem Choudary gave a talk on Islamic education in the UK in which he outlined a design for a parallel Islamic school system (similar to home schooling), including educational goals for each grade. The event was advertised through pamphlets and word of mouth at the local mosque, and the attendees came from a wide spectrum of the Muslim population. Within the lecture, Anjem embedded elements of the movement’s ideology and identity, facilitated by a discussion “moderator” (actually a leader in the movement) who asked strategic questions intended to provide an opportunity for ideological explanations. At the center of such events is the overall argument that Islam and the adoption of a religious identity can provide solutions to local problems.

Even when addressing local concerns, name recognition and notoriety can impede message dissemination by radical Islamic groups and thus reduce the prospects for frame alignment. Given the bad press and controversy surrounding these groups, individuals may avoid movement sponsored events or dismiss the message based on negative impressions of the frame articulator and his or her credibility. In the UK, the press and moderate Muslim leaders frequently dismiss AM as part of the “lunatic fringe.” As a result a cognitive opening may lead an individual toward other, less controversial groups or movements.

To address this, AM utilizes an assortment of different “platforms”—affiliated organizations run by members of AM under different banners, including The Society of Muslim Lawyers, The Society of Converts to Islam, The Society of Muslim Parents, The London School of Shari‘a, The Society of Muslim Students, and the Islamic Council of Britain (set up as an alternative to the Muslim Council of Britain). In many instances, individuals are unaware of the affiliation, something that is fostered by the leaders of

the various platforms (author's interview with OBM, London, December 2002). This enhances the prospect of frame alignment.

When asked why they decided to join AM, members typically responded that it was because OBM spoke "the truth." This perception of truth was not rooted in an understanding of the theology—potential joiners were previously irreligious and ignorant about Islam (even by their own admissions). Instead, members noted that OBM and AM "made sense" and spoke about "the reality" (a reference to the plight of Muslims in Chechnya, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, etc.). Perhaps most importantly, respondents emphasized OBM's credibility—his honesty, willingness to speak about important issues, and training in Islam. When asked why he became interested in AM, one respondent replied that it was because of "[t]he sincerity of the man [OBM]." Another emphasized OBM's honesty and hard work on behalf of Islam. Almost every member noted that they were impressed by OBM's depth of knowledge relative to the other scholars they had encountered during the process of religious seeking (aided in part by OBM's native command of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and the Prophet Mohammed). Even individuals who decided not to become formal members emphasize OBM's impressive level of knowledge (author's phone interview with a former AM follower in the US, April 2003). This credibility leads to trust, which facilitates frame alignment.

### Socialization and Joining

Religious seeking sparked by crisis and frame alignment makes individuals amenable to new ideas and perspectives presented by the movement, but openness to learning does not translate into immediate joining, particularly where there are high risks and costs involved. During the stage of initial interest, it is unlikely that an individual will jump immediately into sacrifice, hard work, and risk for an unfamiliar group. Why risk yourself for a group of perfect strangers and an ideology that you don't yet understand? The tendency is likely to be non-joining, even if there may be an occasional person who enjoys taking risks. Once interest in learning is sparked, however, AM provides a number of institutions for learning

without commitment to high risk activism and the costs of full membership. As a result, it can begin socializing potential joiners before they become members.

AM does not require that these religious seekers pay dues and take risks; instead, it offers a number of micromobilization contexts where individuals can engage in low-risk, low-cost activism at their leisure. In particular, there are a number of open study groups held in a variety of cities and towns throughout the UK, many in the surrounding cities outside London. Members are required to hold at least one open public circle of this type, which is advertised at the main mosque in the area and in the movement's newsletter/magazine. The stated purpose of these lessons is to: "1) Create a profile for the movement; 2) create public awareness about the vital issues; and 3) make new contacts" (AM Constitution).

Members are encouraged to bring their "contacts" and interested Muslims to the sessions. There is no obligation on behalf of the seeker; and although one might expect a degree of social pressure to join or become more intensely involved, members cite the absence of such pressures, in contrast to other fundamentalist movements, as one of the things that attracted them. They felt at ease, as though they were allowed to come to the decision themselves through learning and argument rather than coercion. The "truth" they reach is thus their own, facilitating the process of value internalization.

Most of the lessons provided to non-members are emotional appeals dominated by motivational, rather than prognostic, frames. I attended one lesson in London that focused on the conflict in Kashmir (a topic of great importance to the South Asian community). Rather than concentrating on theological doctrine, OBM used his charisma to touch the emotions of the young crowd, decorating his rhetoric with images of Muslims dying by the millions at the hands of unbelievers. The audience was whipped into an emotive state. At the end of the lesson, members of AM handed out leaflets detailing upcoming demonstrations outside the Indian and Pakistani embassies to protest the repression of Muslims in Kashmir. Already primed by the lesson, individuals readily took the leaflets, and I saw several of them at one of the demonstrations later that week.

Theoretically, seekers could merely free-ride and enjoy the benefits of these lessons and information without joining the movement as formal members or advancing to riskier behavior. The process of early socialization, however, overcomes this free-rider dilemma by reshaping individual values through lessons and other events. In particular, although lessons and this early “culturing” (what the movement refers to as tarbiya) do not provide complex theological discussions, they do present elements of the ideology that are likely to increase the potential involvement of seekers. A few key parts of the ideology are commonly injected into motivational lessons:<sup>4</sup>

- We are on this earth to fulfill the command of God. The commands of God must be fulfilled in their entirety, since God did not will that Muslims follow some commands and not others. Students are taught that one cannot pick and choose for convenience sake and thus must follow the lessons laid out in the Qur'an and Sunna in their entirety, without exception
- Understanding God's will requires textual evidence from the sources of Islam; therefore, any action must find passages from the Qur'an or authentic hadiths (verified stories about the Prophet). This sets up a literalist approach to the religion whereby students are socialized to look for specific parts of religious scripture that support their choices and behaviors.
- Muslims must be part of a group to remove the sin from their neck. This is based upon Qur'an 3: 108: “Let there rise from among you group(s) calling society to Islam, commanding society to do what Allah orders and to refrain from what He forbids. And these group(s) are the ones who are successful” (AM translation).
- AM is one of the only groups to fulfill the entirety of God's law by supporting the establishment of an Islamic state through military coups and fulfilling the shari'a injunction amr bi'l ma'ruf wa-nahy 'an al-munkar (to command right and forbid wrong) through public collective action.

The process of persuasion is thus one in which individuals are initially attracted to the movement because of the congruence of the broad motivational and diagnostic frames proffered by AM at public events. They are then drawn into religious lessons that combine motivational appeals with ideological underpinnings, thereby enhancing the learning process. Individuals who continue to attend the lessons become increasingly socialized (or indoctrinated) into the movement ideology. Once the potential joiner accepts the tenets outlined above, they are led to the logical conclusion that joining a group like AM is necessary to fulfill the word of God. One member captures the contours of this decision: “I didn’t become a fully pledged member until I realized that they [AM] are following the correct methodology laid down by the Prophet...The only group that I can see that is commanding the good and forbidding evil in society is al-Muhajiroun” (author’s interview, London, June 8, 2002). In other words, he joined once he had internalized the ideological precepts outlined above.

The socialization process at the point of joining becomes deeper and more complex. Members participate in movement-only lessons that deal with more specific technical elements of the ideology. These more sophisticated lessons not only further solidify the internalization of the values, but also deepen understanding and commitment to the ideology so that members can effectively debate and persuade other Muslims of the righteousness and correctness of AM’s convictions. At one lesson, for example, OBM carefully went through scripted responses to counterarguments used by other Islamic groups and movements to prepare his students for debates. At this point, commitment to activism is secured and reinforced through deeper member-only activities and an increasingly heightened sense of group identity and solidarity.

## CONCLUSION

A focus on the process of persuasion allows one to examine patterns of joining that are specific to particular movement types. In the case of radical Islamic groups, socialization is needed to indoctrinate individuals into the movement ideology so that they are willing to sacrifice themselves for a radical cause. Prior processes, such as cognitive opening, religious seeking, and frame alignment, all affect the prospect

of successful socialization and thus participation. A case study of al-Muhajiroun shows how the experience of racism led eventual joiners toward a cognitive opening that manifested itself in religious seeking. They were attracted by OBM's message, frame, and reputation, and decided to learn more. As they engaged the movement through deeper activities such as lessons, those who joined internalized the movement ideology, particularly elements that presented activism in the group as a fundamental obligation of Islam.

Although this study indicates a particular trajectory of joining, future research needs to examine each of the processes in more depth. What explains different responses to crisis? Under what conditions does a crisis lead to a cognitive opening and religious seeking? Why are movements able to achieve frame alignment with some and not others? What explains the differential effects of indoctrination? And what explains defections? Some possible variables include prior beliefs and knowledge about Islam, countervailing pressures, the duration and intensity of exposure, cognitive capacities, and changing environmental conditions and events. Part of the difficulty in answering such questions is locating individuals who were exposed to the different processes but decided not to continue with deeper involvement. This kind of comparative analysis, however, would be useful in further detailing the process of persuasion.

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<sup>1</sup> The following history is based on extensive, in depth interviews with Omar Bakri Mohammed during several trips to London in 2002 and various news sources.

<sup>2</sup> For this analysis, I gathered all written notices available from the movement at the time of fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> This comparative analysis is based on an examination of all major press statements on the topic issued by the MCB and AM's written response to the pending invasion, titled "Fight the Invaders vs. Stop the War" (March 20, 2003). The latter was the only available press release on the issue, but it is consistent with the movement's views toward other U.S. involved conflicts in Muslim countries. In the analysis, I approximated the method of micro-discourse analysis advocated by Hank Johnston (1995; 2002).

<sup>4</sup> This is based on participant observation, interviews with OBM, and an analysis of material used in lessons.