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# A Community of True Believers: Learning as Process among “The Emigrants”

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## ABSTRACT

This paper applies the concept of “communities of practice” to al-Muhajiroun (“the Emigrants”), an outlawed activist network that seeks to create an Islamic caliphate in Britain and the West through activism and proselytizing. Responding to recent studies on terrorism learning and adaptation, the author argues that focusing exclusively on the outputs of learning is unsatisfactory. Instead scholars should analyze learning as a process and unpack the causal mechanisms behind it. To support his within-case analysis, the author draws on extensive field work, including interviews and ethnographic observation. Newcomers to al-Muhajiroun learn the community’s norms and practices through repeated interactions with more experienced activists. These interactions take place in study circles and through companionship. Activists also learn by doing, preaching the Emigrants’ Salafi-Islamist ideology at da’wah stalls and protesting against the West’s “war on Islam” at demonstrations. The more they do, the better they become at performing the network’s high-risk activism, and the more deeply committed they become to its community of practice. However, far from allowing activists to adapt seamlessly to all challenges, the Emigrants’ insular and dogmatic community of practice creates its own problems, hindering its ability to innovate, expand, and thrive in an increasingly hostile environment.

## KEYWORDS

adaptation; al-Muhajiroun; communities of practice; ethnography; learning; innovation; interviews; Islamist militancy; process tracing; within-case analysis

## Introduction

Individuals who preach extremist ideologies or engage in political violence do not just appear, fully formed and ready to act. They undergo a process of development in which they acquire beliefs, norms, and values that legitimize violence—and skills, practices, and procedures that help them transform their convictions into action.<sup>1</sup> Terrorists and violent extremists form their views and develop their abilities through knowledge and experience. Apart from lone-actor extremists, this process typically unfolds in the company of like-minded companions who learn from each other, through interaction and performance. Such learning is not unique to terrorists and violent extremists. Cognitive anthropologists and organizational sociologists have shown how practitioners from a variety of craft professions, like midwifery and butchery, and sundry legal and extra-legal pursuits, including engineering, insurance claim processing, and drug trafficking, learn the principles and practices behind their vocations. They do so by forming “communities of practice,” groups of like-minded experts who socialize newcomers to the ideas and

customs of their shared pursuits. Through repeated engagement with knowledgeable veterans, and by performing the activity themselves, newcomers gradually develop a mastery of the activity, becoming competent practitioners in their own right. As their competence grows, so does their commitment to the community, culminating in the desire to pass along their expertise to the next generation of recruits.<sup>2</sup>

Building on the work of Karsten Hundeide, Max Taylor and John Horgan introduced the communities of practice concept to readers of this journal in 2006.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, as Horgan and his colleagues acknowledge in a more recent article, the concept has not gained much traction in terrorism studies in the decade since.<sup>4</sup> What has gained traction is a growing literature on terrorism learning and adaptation.<sup>5</sup> While these studies have increased our understanding of how terrorists train, innovate, and adopt new technologies, few scholars have traced the processes through which violent extremists develop the beliefs and skills they need and become competent practitioners of their craft. Horgan's lament suggests that communities of practice hold unfulfilled promise for the field. Realizing this promise will require that scholars move away from their current focus on the outputs of learning, attributing changes in terrorist behavior to tactical or strategic "adaptation," and focus more on how participants in extremist groups acquire knowledge and experience and share it with each other through interaction and performance.

I embrace this change in orientation by applying communities of practice to *al-Muhajiroun*, an outlawed activist network based in the United Kingdom. While "the Emigrants" are not a terrorist group, over the years they have indoctrinated hundreds of young men and women into a revivalist, highly politicized interpretation of Islam that, if implemented, would revolutionize Western society by transforming it into a religious theocracy based on a strict interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law). Since 1996 they have worked to establish an Islamic caliphate in Britain and the West through public preaching (*da'wah*) and political protest (*hisbah*).<sup>6</sup> Political violence is a recurring theme in *al-Muhajiroun*'s activism. Activists have pushed the bounds of free speech by calling for military *jihād* and other forms of violence against perceived enemies, including the British and American governments. In the United Kingdom, authorities have responded to the network's provocative activism by outlawing its protest platforms, convicting leading activists of crimes related to their demonstrations, and banning the network's charismatic *emir*, Omar Bakri Mohammed, from Britain in 2005. After British officials began another crackdown against the activist network in the fall of 2014, arresting and eventually convicting several leaders for their support of the Islamic State, a small but growing number of activists decided to "make *hijrah*" to Iraq and Syria, transforming themselves from metaphorical "emigrants" to real ones. A number of these individuals became fighters for ISIS and other militant groups in the region, joining a larger set of former activists who have carried out acts of political violence within and outside Great Britain, most recently the London Bridge and Borough Market attack that killed eight and wounded dozens more in June 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike most of the literature on terrorism learning, this study is based on primary-source data I collected through my own field work. Between November 2010 and July 2015, I visited London on seven occasions, and carried out ninety-seven interviews with forty-eight different activists. Almost all of my respondents were young male British citizens. Most of them were born in the country. Like other East Londoners of South Asian heritage, their parents or grandparents typically immigrated to the United Kingdom

from Pakistan or Bangladesh. While my sample included several converts to Islam, most of my respondents grew up in Muslim households, often following beliefs and traditions associated with the moderate Barelwi tradition of Sufi Islam. I also conducted eleven interviews with eight former activists, some of whom were still active in al-Muhajiroun during our initial encounters.

This article draws on my respondents' testimonies to trace how they became competent activists and committed insiders in al-Muhajiroun.<sup>8</sup> It also draws on hundreds of hours I spent observing activists in their "natural" settings: watching them engage in da'wah at preaching stalls and hisbah at demonstrations, sipping tea and breaking bread with them at cafés and restaurants, and hanging out with them at their educational centers in East London.<sup>9</sup> I recorded these observations in field notes, which I analyzed, along with my interview transcripts, in *NVivo*, a software program for interpreting large amounts of text. Through a reiterative process of reading and coding the field notes, verbatim interview transcripts, and hundreds of additional documents, I identified over two thousand themes and sub-themes related to my research questions.<sup>10</sup> In this article, I draw on the themes and sub-themes related to communities of practice that emerge from these data.

To clarify, this article does not examine how and why young people join al-Muhajiroun and convert to its violent worldview. That topic, while important, is beyond the scope of this paper and covered elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Here I investigate what happens to people *after* they join the activist network. I focus on how novices acquire the ideological and practical knowledge they need to become competent activists and devoted insiders, and how veterans share their cultural expertise with their companions. As in other communities of practice, the existence of al-Muhajiroun's community is not self-evident to its practitioners.<sup>12</sup> This is neither surprising nor disconfirming. My respondents are Islamic activists, not organization theorists, and the concept of communities of practice is not widely understood among Salafi-jihadis. In the sections below, respondents do not speak of the Emigrants' "community of practice," but they do identify themselves as "students" of their religion, and they describe their activism as a "learning process" that never ends. They emphasize how they learn al-Muhajiroun's ideology through *suhba* or "companionship" with more experienced activists who show them how it's done. They talk about how they "learn on the job" and compare their proselytizing network to business firms. They highlight the importance of their neighborhood-based *halaqahs* or study circles, where they meet regularly with their fellow activists to discuss the network's ideology and plan their activism. They stress the need to "account" themselves and "review" their behavior, so that they can improve themselves and their activism. Finally, they unwittingly demonstrate the limits of their learning, expressing such confidence in their ideology and their status among God's chosen seekers that He will protect them no matter what, reducing the need to adapt to government pressure, as long as they continue to follow the straight path. In the following sections I unpack these themes and paradoxes, tracing the processes through which activists develop their cultural competence, while allowing their insularity and ideological dogmatism to restrict their learning and activism.

## From novice to practitioner

The relationship between novices and veterans is essential in communities of practice. When novices join such a community, they rely on experienced practitioners who

socialize them to the community's norms and practices. In some communities, this occurs through formal apprenticeships that match beginners with knowledgeable veterans; in others, the process unfolds informally, with novices seeking out mentors on their own. In both cases, newcomers learn from old-timers by watching them, asking them questions, and imitating their behavior.<sup>13</sup>

The Emigrants do not have a formal apprenticeship program. Instead, novices seek out and learn from more experienced activists. "The best way to learn is to get amongst the brothers and watch them," explains one respondent at a da'wah stall in East London. "Most of the brothers have experience, so you watch and you listen."<sup>14</sup> "My mentor is the brother there," notes another activist at the same stall, pointing to the *emir* (leader) running their da'wah. "Any question I have I will call on him. I don't have the full knowledge of how this works. I'm still learning. But any question I've got, I'll ask him."<sup>15</sup> "We watch and we learn, like an apprenticeship," confirms another respondent, explaining how he and his colleagues observe activists engage in da'wah. "It's a learning process. You're constantly learning."<sup>16</sup>

Activists also learn from instructors who deliver lectures on the network's ideology in private talks and public speeches. The student-teacher relationship in al-Muhajiroun is grounded in activists' understanding of Islamic tradition and scripture. "We see from history that even with the Prophet, *Aleyhi al Salam* [Peace Be Upon Him/PBUH], he learned from the Angel Gabriel," explains an activist. "Gabriel called to him and God guided him. And then the Prophet was an example for his companions. And it carried on like that. They had students and then the students had students. And this is how Islam was passed through the generations."<sup>17</sup> Something similar happens in al-Muhajiroun. Veteran ideologues share their expertise with novices who gradually develop their own knowledge and experience. Once these novices develop into full participants, they pass along their knowledge to the next generation of recruits.

The original emir, Omar Bakri Mohammed, was al-Muhajiroun's first and most important teacher. Virtually all of the network's ideology was based on Bakri's lectures and writings, which reflected his Salafi-inspired interpretation of religious theology mixed with an Islamist ideology that borrowed heavily from *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation). Formed in the early 1950s by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, Hizb ut-Tahrir is a transnational activist movement that rejects democracy and calls for re-establishing the *khilafah* (caliphate) in Muslim-majority countries, including, if necessary, by military *coup*.<sup>18</sup> Both Hizb ut-Tahrir and its splinter group, al-Muhajiroun, view establishing the Islamic state based on *sharia* (Islamic law) as part of the "divine method" described in the Qur'an. However, Hizb ut-Tahrir does not work towards achieving this objective in Western countries like Britain. Al-Muhajiroun does. This is based on Omar Bakri's belief that Muslims have a collective responsibility to establish the Islamic state and legal system everywhere, irrespective of their location or chances of success.<sup>19</sup> "It's unlikely the shariah will come here, but that doesn't mean we don't call for it," explains one former Hizb ut-Tahrir member turned al-Muhajiroun activist. "You call for it wherever you are, regardless of the results."<sup>20</sup>

When he was still in Britain, Omar Bakri communicated his syncretic blend of Salafi-Islamism to his students through formal lectures and private talks, many of which were recorded and later posted on the Internet, and in self-published booklets, including *The Islamic Standard*, *The Road to Jannah*, and *The Islamic Verdict on Jihad and the Method to Establish the Khilafah*. These writings and recordings, along with activists' copious notes

of Bakri's talks, comprise the shared body of al-Muhajiroun's knowledge-based artifacts.<sup>21</sup> They contain the language, concepts, and scriptural quotes and interpretations that represent Bakri's, and by extension the network's, world view and the ideological knowledge students must master to become full members in the Emigrants' community of practice. Students learn this knowledge by attending public lectures and private halaqahs, and through "self-study," reading the booklets and watching or listening to the lectures on their own.<sup>22</sup>

When Bakri left Britain in 2005, under intense pressure in the wake of the 7/7 bombings in London, activists lost face-to-face access to their main teacher. Fortunately for them, several of Bakri's closest students had mastered his teachings and emerged as effective preachers in their own right. Veteran activists such as Anjem Choudary, Abu Izzadeen, and Mizanur Rahman assumed Bakri's teaching responsibilities. They traveled around London and Great Britain to deliver public talks and halaqah lectures, often working from notes of their mentor's speeches. When the authorities prevented Bakri from returning, these activists replaced him as the network's leading ideologues and instructors. "*Sheikh* Bakri's not here anymore, he's in Lebanon," explains one activist at a da'wah stall in Ilford, East London, "but his students are here, and I learn from them."<sup>23</sup> Referring to one of these students, another respondent elaborates: "The Sheikh's moved on, but now Anjem has learnt enough that he can teach. He studied his notes. Everything Sheikh Omar learned, he passed on to Anjem, and now Anjem is our teacher."<sup>24</sup>

As Choudary and other network leaders learned from Omar Bakri, so did the next generation of activists learn from them, underscoring the dynamism of al-Muhajiroun's community of practice. By observing Choudary and other leaders present talks and engage in da'wah, these activists gradually acquired the ideological knowledge and practical skills they needed to become competent practitioners. Eventually, some of them became network teachers themselves, delivering talks on different topics around Britain.<sup>25</sup>

One summer evening during my field work I observed one of the Emigrants' younger teachers deliver a ninety-minute lecture on the "heroes of Islam" at the network's educational center in Whitechapel.<sup>26</sup> Much of this activist's involvement in al-Muhajiroun occurred after Bakri had left Britain. Consequently, his teachers were people like Anjem Choudary, Abu Izzadeen, and Mizanur Rahman. But he was a quick learner with a knack for Arabic and within a few years of joining the community he was delivering his own talks.<sup>27</sup> In addition to lecturing, this activist helped lead an al-Muhajiroun spin-off group called Muslims Against Crusades. The group specialized in organizing confrontational demonstrations, including an infamous protest during which activists set fire to large symbolic poppies on the 2010 anniversary of Armistice Day, when people across Europe mourn soldiers who have died in war since World War I.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond his leadership role, this activist also performed da'wah regularly and recruited new activists to the network. Indeed, in an interview, one of his recruits talked about learning from his mentor: "He and other brothers in the *jama'at* [group] are very knowledgeable, especially in history. I asked him what the poppy symbolizes and why we had a poppy burning day and he enlightened me."<sup>29</sup> Like other rising stars in the network, and their teachers before them, this activist developed from a novice to a competent practitioner and leading activist in his own right. Critical to his development, and the resilience of the network's community of practice, was his and other emergent leaders' willingness to share their knowledge with new recruits. Such "cross-generational"

learning illustrates the dynamic nature of al-Muhajiroun's community of practice. During my field work, I observed three "generations" of activists, all of whom carefully cultivated their recruits and shared their knowledge and experience with them. This helped the new recruits develop into competent practitioners who were willing to share their own expertise with those who came after them.

### **Suhba: Learning from companionship**

In communities of practice newcomers learn by watching experienced practitioners in action. As Lave and Wenger put it, novices accompany and observe "how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives."<sup>30</sup> Learning through companionship is essential among the Emigrants. Respondents believe it is even more important than studying in the classroom or reading books. "It's called *suhba* in Arabic," explains a leading activist. "It's when you accompany somebody. It's not about sitting down in the classroom and taking notes, it's about following someone and listening to them and taking notes."<sup>31</sup> "You can only learn so much from lectures and in a classroom environment," observes another leading activist. "The real way you will educate yourself is by accompanying someone and seeing how they live their life, their character and their behavior. You can learn more in a day in this kind of companionship than you could attending lectures for a whole year."<sup>32</sup>

The Emigrants do not have a monopoly on *suhba*. Many Islamic scholars in both the Sunni and Shia traditions emphasize the importance of *suhba* or learning religious beliefs and practices by accompanying and observing more knowledgeable *sheikhs* or teachers.<sup>33</sup> This traditional model of Islamic learning continues to be influential today, as seen in the practice of many contemporary religious schools or *madrassas*. Reflecting the importance of *suhba* in al-Muhajiroun, activists often accompany their teachers as they travel around Britain delivering talks. "I accompanied him on many tours around England when he was teaching, giving seminar lectures," explains one of Omar Bakri's oldest students, who is now a leading activist in the network. "Many people wanted to travel with him and follow him around."<sup>34</sup> "I was going with him everywhere I could to attend all of his lectures," recalls another leading activist who studied closely with Bakri. "If that meant driving him or accompanying him in the car, I'd jump in. He used to give lectures all over the UK: Luton, Derby, Birmingham."<sup>35</sup> After Bakri left Britain, the tradition of *suhba* in al-Muhajiroun continued with his protégés, like Anjem Choudary. "Brother Anjem gives about thirteen classes a week around the country, if not more," explains a respondent, referring to his *suhba* with Choudary. "Many brothers go with him."<sup>36</sup> "We travelled around together," adds another activist, discussing his own companionship with Choudary. "He could see I was eager to learn so he took me around with him a lot. We'd go to different classes. It was intensive learning."<sup>37</sup>

While *suhba* traditionally refers to the relationship between a "sheikh" and his "disciples," in al-Muhajiroun novices also learn from their companionship with other experienced activists.<sup>38</sup> These interactions build friendships, enhance group solidarity, and deepen newcomers' devotion to the cause. As part of this companionship, novices supplement what they learn from their teachers' lectures with knowledge they accumulate from talking with their peers. "We're constantly learning from each other," explains one activist. Asked to specify how this happens, he adds, "through companionship, through



traveling, through gatherings and meetings, even having some food together.”<sup>39</sup> Another activist elaborates: “Companionship is very important. You learn from the people who have more experience. They’ve faced different situations, which you’ve never faced because you are new.” He gives an example from his initial forays in street da’wah: “I started to engage and if I had any trouble I would refer to someone else who knew. It’s like when you go into a job and you learn from your peers who have more experience.”<sup>40</sup>

## Learning by doing

Novices also learn through participation in communities of practice.<sup>41</sup> Newcomers to al-Muhajiroun develop their skills and build their identities by watching and listening to more experienced activists as they perform the network’s contentious activism before joining the action themselves. “The only real way to learn the da’wah is to get out there,” explains an activist at a busy stall held outside a popular shopping mall on Ilford’s High Street. “You just have to get out there and watch and listen to the brothers, see how they give da’wah, and do it.”<sup>42</sup> “You learn by doing,” confirms another respondent at a da’wah stall near the Brick Lane market in Tower Hamlets. “It’s learning on the job.”<sup>43</sup>

For many newcomers, learning on the job begins soon after they are first exposed to the network’s ideology. “You start straight away,” notes one respondent at a da’wah stall in Stratford, explaining how he became involved in street preaching right after joining al-Muhajiroun’s community of practice.<sup>44</sup> “From day one, pretty much,” adds an activist at a stall on Lewisham’s High Street. “The important thing is to act upon the knowledge as you go along.”<sup>45</sup> When asked why he started proselytizing so early in his activism, he answers by citing the network’s interpretation of scripture: “The Prophet [PBUH] commanded us to convey, even if you know only one verse. This is enough for me to pass it on to people.”<sup>46</sup>

Unlike some activist groups, al-Muhajiroun provides little formal training to its recruits on how to preach or carry out protests. “There wasn’t a lot of training,” confirms one respondent. “I was just watching the actions of my peers and my elders. I followed in their footsteps because I trust them and I trust what they’re doing.”<sup>47</sup> “It’s not like you get a certification or permit or permission from anyone to do da’wah,” explains a second activist at a stall he is running on Hounslow’s High Street in West London. Speaking with me on a nearby bench as he keeps an eye on his companions, he elaborates: “Whether you’re good at it or not will come from time and experience. You don’t have to be the best speaker in the world. You just come out and give da’wah to your ability.”<sup>48</sup>

Learning by doing is not limited to da’wah stalls. Network activists experience a similar transformation when performing hisbah at public demonstrations. Like first-timers on the stall, novices begin their immersion in “commanding good and forbidding evil” by silently observing network protests and asking their fellow activists questions. Following their initial exposure to the network’s rallies, they progress to waving signs and chanting slogans like “British soldiers go to hell” and “burn, burn USA,” sometimes while surrounded by riot police and counter-protestors. If their enthusiasm doesn’t wane after their exposure to al-Muhajiroun’s contentious hisbah, they advance to greater involvement. Once they establish themselves as protest regulars, they may be asked to perform additional roles, including serving as protest stewards, making impromptu speeches, even organizing demonstrations.<sup>49</sup>



The more they preach at stalls and the more they protest at demonstrations, the better activists they become. “They say practice makes perfect,” explains a veteran respondent, when asked whether his activism improved over time. “With practice, you get more confidence and you learn more things, like how to counter particular arguments.”<sup>50</sup> Another activist agrees, highlighting how he and his companions benefit from the challenges that arise at different stalls and protests. “If the police come and ask questions, or if a fight breaks out, it’s good for us,” he emphasizes. “It’s a learning experience because we see how to deal with that situation the next time.”<sup>51</sup> As they perform their activism repeatedly under challenging circumstances, activists become absorbed in al-Muhajiroun’s culture, gradually transforming themselves from raw novices into skilled practitioners.

## Learning in halaqahs

At the same time that activists are becoming competent practitioners by performing da’wah and hisbah, they are also acquiring the basic concepts underlying their activism. Newcomers may initiate themselves into al-Muhajiroun’s community of practice by participating in its activism, but to understand what they are doing, they must learn its doctrine and ideology. Acquiring this knowledge deepens their commitment to the network and gives direction to their activism.<sup>52</sup> “They’ve got to know the good in order to command it,” explains a leading activist. “They’ve got to know the evil to forbid it.” Acknowledging that not all newcomers know about “concepts like shariah and democracy” when they first join the Emigrants, he continues, “a priority for us is to give them the culture in order to achieve our activities: the processions, demonstrations, conferences and seminars.”<sup>53</sup>

While novices absorb this culture through suhba or companionship with their peers and teachers, much of their ideological learning occurs in *halaqahs*, neighborhood-based discussion circles where activists come together on a regular basis to study and build friendships. “The best way to study is together,” remarks one activist, referring to the learning and fellowship within his own circle. “It gets me closer to the brothers and builds my brotherhood.”<sup>54</sup> When newcomers are recruited into the activist network they are placed in one of these invitation-only study circles, where they meet weekly with other activists and a *masoul* who leads their halaqah discussions.<sup>55</sup> While the masoul enjoys some discretion in choosing discussion topics, all halaqahs follow the same general course of study. “The reason we have these halaqahs,” explains a veteran activist, “is because we wanna teach them sequentially.”<sup>56</sup>

Reflecting different influences on Omar Bakri’s teachings, the network’s course of study combines Salafi religious doctrine with an Islamist political ideology derived from Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose British franchise Bakri ran for years before he had a falling out with the party’s global leaders over his increasingly strident activism.<sup>57</sup> Like other Salafi-inspired fundamentalists, al-Muhajiroun emphasizes the concept of *tawhid*, or belief in monotheism, along with a literal interpretation of the *Qur’an* and the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed known as the *sunnah*, in culturing its activists.<sup>58</sup> However, unlike most Salafis, who believe that involvement in protest politics is forbidden, halaqah lessons emphasize al-Muhajiroun’s confrontational style of da’wah and hisbah. Illustrating Hizb ut-Tahrir’s influence on its ideology, halaqah lessons also address Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani’s vision for how the caliphate will govern once it has

been re-established, including how its leaders will be selected, how its tax revenues will be levied, and how its laws will be implemented and adjudicated. Describing the closed circle where he used to receive “deep culturing from Omar Bakri himself,” a former activist explains, “we were studying the same books that Hizb ut-Tahrir uses, *The Islamic State* and *The Ruling System*, which are written by Sheikh Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani.”<sup>59</sup>

During al-Muhajiroun’s early years, many halaqaahs studied directly with Omar Bakri. But after Bakri left Britain, responsibility for culturing halaqaah members passed to several of his most trusted and knowledgeable students. These activists continued their mentor’s practice of visiting different circles within and outside London, lecturing them on tawhid, *usul-al-fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and other topics related to al-Muhajiroun’s doctrine and ideology.<sup>60</sup> Reflecting the cross-generational nature of learning within al-Muhajiroun’s community of practice, some of Anjem Choudary’s students, who became involved in the network only after Bakri’s departure, also delivered talks to study circles around Britain. “My friend, who was a senior guy amongst us, gave lectures up north,” explains a former activist, referring to one of these young leaders. “He used to travel up to Bedford and Derby. A group of twenty people would sit in, and he would give lectures and halaqaah talks to the brothers.”<sup>61</sup>

The purpose of delivering halaqaah talks is not to culture activists for its own sake. The goal is for supporters to develop the knowledge they need to engage in activism. “Private halaqaahs are the preparation for the real work, the public da’wah,” explains a leading activist. “The halaqaah is the life and blood of the organization’s culture, but we didn’t arise to culture people. Rather we rose to command good and forbid evil, to bring about the shariah, and to change society.”<sup>62</sup> Reflecting the practical side of al-Muhajiroun’s study circles, some halaqaah talks focus on teaching participants how to engage in public da’wah and hisbah.<sup>63</sup> One respondent refers to this as the “secondary aspect” of the network’s teaching, giving activists “the tools to know how to deal with people, the method in calling people to Islam.”<sup>64</sup> Tools covered in these classes include rhetorical techniques for debating non-Muslims, so that activists are prepared to engage them on the da’wah stall.<sup>65</sup> “We teach people in the halaqaah how to deal with Christians,” explains a veteran activist, “We teach them how to deal with the society of Western civilization, or evolution.”<sup>66</sup> “This is how to debate a Jewish person,” adds a former supporter, listing different topics covered in these practical discussions. “This is how to debate an atheist. These are the questions they’re likely to ask and these are the answers. It’s almost like being a sales person.”<sup>67</sup>

### **“Accounting” and learning from mistakes**

In communities of practice members often come together to discuss and review their activities.<sup>68</sup> They do this by meeting regularly to talk about their performance, identify problems and opportunities, and share ideas for how to improve. While the Emigrants have little interest in organization theory, they do appreciate the importance of meeting to review and improve their activities. As with so many elements of their activism, their understanding of this activity is based on their reading of scripture, as interpreted by Omar Bakri. During interviews, respondents cite sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed about the necessity of “accounting,” holding themselves accountable for

their behavior at the end of each day.<sup>69</sup> Accounting helps activists recognize their mistakes—and learn from them.<sup>70</sup>

Accounting is not limited to activists' personal lives. It forms an essential part of their activism. "It is as important as carrying the message of Islam, openly and publicly," emphasizes a leading activist.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the practice of accounting and learning from mistakes informs how activists carry their message. They learn from their mistakes by getting together after da'wah stalls, demonstrations, and other events and discussing how it went. "We would have a review and say, 'Look, these are the mistakes,'" notes a veteran activist. "It's called constructive criticism. We'll say, 'Next time this should not happen.' It's just like a company."<sup>72</sup> These brainstorming sessions occur during meetings scheduled for this purpose, and more informally, on the phone or over a meal at a restaurant. "Sometimes the brothers will call a specific meeting about something they were not happy with and we try and rectify it for the next time," explains a respondent.<sup>73</sup> "We meet up with him once a week," notes another activist, referring to regular meetings with his halaqah masoul. "We discuss what we did in the week and how we can improve results."<sup>74</sup> Another respondent describes how his da'wah stall leader would convene informal meetings to discuss their activities: "The emir would send out a text, 'Meet me at this café or this place. We're going to have a general meeting on how we can improve the da'wah.' So we'd just get together. It wasn't really a fixed date."<sup>75</sup>

As in any community of practice that allows for a robust exchange of ideas, these discussions can become contentious, with activists disagreeing over problems and solutions.<sup>76</sup> "We often have differences of opinion, over what was beneficial and what was not," notes a respondent, referring to group discussions after da'wah stalls and demonstrations.<sup>77</sup> However, such disagreements are typically limited to everyday practices, or what respondents refer to as the "styles and means" of their activism, rather than the Emigrants' ideology and vision. These are "just minor disagreements, nothing that will take you out of the fold of Islam," clarifies a respondent. "In terms of the main issues, there's no disagreement."<sup>78</sup> A veteran activist elaborates with an example: "I can't have a meeting saying, 'Maybe we should not call for the *khilafah* [caliphate].' That's not acceptable. But I can say, 'Maybe our leaflet should be yellow because I think yellow will attract people.'"<sup>79</sup> "There are styles and means," confirms a leading activist. "A person might believe there is a better way. As long as it's not prohibited, not un-Islamic, we don't have a problem with it."<sup>80</sup>

## On the straight and narrow path

For all its benefits al-Muhajiroun's community of practice should not be romanticized. While the community fosters knowledge sharing among activists, strengthens their companionship, and helps them fix mistakes, it also hampers their activism by limiting their ability to learn. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming in the Emigrants' community of practice is its dogmatism and insularity. Like other ideologically driven communities of practice, network activists display an "unbending commitment to established canons and methods."<sup>81</sup> Once they acquire their ideology and develop into competent practitioners, activists often become "static" in their understanding and "resistant to change."<sup>82</sup> Not unlike members of some religious cults, they become insulated from alternative beliefs and worldviews.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, the Emigrants' exclusive focus on their own internal teachings and their efforts to filter out external voices adds a cultish dimension to its community of practice. Becoming a committed insider in al-Muhajiroun means accepting, absolutely and without reservation, Omar Bakri's and, by extension, the network's unorthodox blend of Salafi-inspired theology and Hizb ut-Tahrir-inspired ideology. Activists rely almost entirely on Bakri's interpretation of the Qur'an and sunnah, to the exclusion of other Islamic scholars: "He was our only source of information. People treated his words like they would treat the Qur'an. If you say that to them, they will deny it. They will say, 'No, no, no. He's a sheikh, we take his understanding.' But in reality, they will not take from anyone who disagrees with their Sheikh. They have a blind allegiance to him."<sup>84</sup> Preachers who have not studied with Bakri or his students are viewed with great suspicion, even when they follow a similar understanding of the faith. Activists not only consider the teachings of these preachers to be "deviant," they refer to some of them as "*murtad*," apostates who have committed the major sin of rejecting the Islamic creed—and against whom violence is acceptable.<sup>85</sup>

To protect the ideological purity of their community, network leaders zealously seek to limit the influence of outside preachers. One former masoul who referenced writings by non-al-Muhajiroun scholars in his halaqah discussions, "just to give it another flavor," recalled being admonished by Anjem Choudary for using an external source to teach his students. "Anjem said to me, 'Oh, no, you should only use our books,' which I thought was quite narrow because you should be able to refer to other materials as well."<sup>86</sup> This ban on external materials is not limited to halaqah lessons. "You're not allowed to have anybody's lectures or talks, audios or leaflets at any of their centers or da'wah tables," adds another former activist. "So no scholars, no literature by any other people, apart from al-Muhajiroun speakers. That was the rule. It was their speakers, their leaflets, their talks. Everything has to be in house, nothing from outside."<sup>87</sup> Over the years, a number of activists have been removed from the network for failing to limit their ideological indoctrination to internal sources. After some supporters insisted on distributing lectures by external scholars at network events, they were "pushed away from certain roles and stopped from talking," explains one former activist. "They wouldn't give any lectures" on behalf of the activist network. "It happened to a few brothers I know," he adds.<sup>88</sup>

Al-Muhajiroun's insularity and dogmatism is steeped in its conviction that it is one of the few Islamic groups in the West that follows the "true path" of Islam. Activists believe that most Muslims living in Britain, and the West more broadly, have watered down their faith, practicing a cultural form of Islam that does not follow the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions. "The vast majority of the Muslim community doesn't really practice their religion," explains a leading activist. "Either you're a Muslim and you believe in the shariah and the khilafah and jihad and you live by it, or you've got to compromise."<sup>89</sup> Any compromising of the network's ideology and vision is unacceptable to activists. After all, their activism is "a complete way of life," as another respondent puts it. Mindful of outsiders' tendency to dismiss their devotion as a consequence of cult programming, he adds, "Many people would say that I've become brainwashed." He offers a ready response to such dismissals, one that I heard from other respondents as well. "I would say to them, 'Of course, my brain was dirty. And after this process of Islam and this learning, it's been very nicely washed for me.'"<sup>90</sup>

Such dogmatism has hampered activists' ability to adapt their practices in an increasingly hostile environment. During the network's early years, when Omar Bakri and his closest supporters were establishing al-Muhajiroun's identity as a worthy inheritor of the Prophet's banner in a country with many Salafi and Islamist competitors, it made sense for them to proclaim their ideological purity and exceptionalism, as a way of "outbidding" other groups in the competition for young recruits.<sup>91</sup> Al-Muhajiroun's strategy worked, as long as British authorities did not trouble themselves with the activist network and the master himself was around to indoctrinate his charges.

After the 9/11 attacks and especially the 7/7 bombings in London, these conditions changed. Authorities no longer viewed Bakri and other "radical preachers" as harmless fanatics. Her Majesty's government increased the pressure against them. When Bakri himself fled Britain shortly after the 7/7 attacks, his followers were left to pick up the ideological pieces. In one sense the transition was relatively smooth. After laying low for a while, Bakri's most trusted and knowledgeable companions continued to lecture on his behalf, drawing on their knowledge of his old talks. These speakers were engaging, but they were not as fluent in Arabic, nor as well versed in Islamic scripture and Islamist ideology as their teacher.

This led to pressure from activists in one of the network's most prominent halaqahs, based in Whitechapel, to invite other preachers to lecture, including Anwar al-Awlaki and Abu Bashir al-Tartusi. Both preachers were highly regarded ideologues, well-known for their Salafi-jihadi leanings. After delivering a popular series of lectures on Islamic history and jihad in London and other British cities, Anwar al-Awlaki returned to his ancestral home in Yemen, where he reportedly helped plan terrorist attacks for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula before being killed by a CIA drone strike in 2011.<sup>92</sup> Far from permitting such figures to strengthen al-Muhajiroun's bonafides, Anjem Choudary, Bakri's leading representative in Britain, considered their preaching a threat to his network's ideological purity. He refused his followers' request, turning the dispute into a crisis of his leadership. The Whitechapel activists viewed Choudary's reliance on Bakri's teachings as too narrow and uncompromising, and they expressed their dismay to him in several private meetings. When Choudary continued to rebuff them, they tried to overthrow him as network leader. After their attempted "coup" failed, they left with twenty-five other followers, splitting the Emigrants' Whitechapel halaqah in two.<sup>93</sup>

Al-Muhajiroun's insularity not only weakened it internally. It also prevented the activist network from building stronger relationships with outside groups that would have strengthened its standing in local Muslim communities at a time when authorities were cracking down. "They don't really have any links with the wider community," explains the research director of a think tank specializing in violent extremism. "They're sort of self-contained." This go-it-alone approach may have allowed activists to proclaim their ideological superiority, similar to some religious cults, but it did not endear them to other British Muslims. "They've got no institutional support in the Muslim community," the research director adds. "There's not a single mosque in the country that would let them hold an event in their community, and no one will stand up for their right to do so either."<sup>94</sup>

It wasn't always this way. During the network's early years, activists regularly held talks and other events at mosques and Islamic community centers around Britain. Having access to these local organizations facilitated their proselytizing, allowing them to spread their ideology to young people across the country. However, after government authorities

cracked down against the activist network, activists found it harder to secure the venues needed to hold conferences. Community centers that collaborated with them in the past no longer wanted to have anything to do with their controversial activism. This limited the network's ability to convene the large public gatherings that are essential to laying the ideological groundwork for the caliphate. "That's one thing they really haven't adapted to," explains the research director of the London counter-extremism think tank. "Instead of just denouncing everyone who isn't in the group, if they adapted and developed alliances with some people, they would be in a lot stronger position in places like Tower Hamlets."<sup>95</sup>

The reason network activists have not worked harder to build relationships with local communities is that they don't see their isolation as a problem. "They see it as strength, to be honest," explains the research director. "Only they've got eyes on the 'true path.'"<sup>96</sup> Activists readily agree. "Of course we are the minority," confirms a respondent at a da'wah stall in Stratford, where most people walk around him without taking one of his leaflets. "You can look at how the Prophet [PBUH] used to teach. He would say it is the minority that gets the truth."<sup>97</sup> "Everybody claims to be on the right path," adds another activist, while giving da'wah at the same location, months earlier. "But the one on the true path never compromises his religion for anything, even if you kill him. Yet you see other people who will compromise their religion."<sup>98</sup> No matter how unwelcoming their environment becomes, activists have no desire to "compromise" their activism or to collaborate with anyone who fails to meet their narrow standards. If anything, they view their "persecution" by the authorities and their seclusion from Muslim communities as validation that they are on the "right path," a path that will end in their salvation, irrespective of whatever real world successes they achieve.

Activists' dogmatic beliefs hamper their activism in another way. Like followers from a variety of religious traditions, the Emigrants believe that whatever they do, their actions and results are already predetermined by God. "We don't need to adapt and change that much because we believe Allah's will is there to protect us," explains a leading activist. Activists are more than willing to adapt their practices in response to feedback, but they accept that no amount of change they make will spare them from what God has planned for them. "We believe in taking precautions," continues the leading activist. "We don't believe that any amount of precaution is going to save you from the test that Allah has destined upon you." Drawing oblique reference to some of the changes he has presided over, he continues: "So in our case, going underground, changing the policy, changing the structure, we do not need to change that much."<sup>99</sup> "The way we do our meetings and our stalls may change," confirms another respondent. "But our aim's always the same. We have to continue our da'wah and we have to continue calling for jihad in Muslim lands." This remains true, he adds, "whether we get imprisoned or whether we get killed."<sup>100</sup>

In other words, activists' willingness to adapt to external pressure is both motivated and constrained by their steadfast conviction in their cause and the virtue of their struggle. They view themselves as ideological warriors in a global struggle whose ultimate winners are determined by God, not men. Seen from this perspective, it may not matter whether Anjem Choudary missed an opportunity to strengthen his network by inviting Anwar al-Awlaki or Abu Bashir al-Tartusi to lecture to his students. It may not matter that he and other network leaders refused to enhance al-Muhajiroun's standing in the community by building alliances with local groups and community centers. As far as activists are



concerned, whether they avoid jail, whether they get killed, or whether they establish the Islamic state has less to do with the mistakes they fix and the improvements they make, and more to do with God's fate for them.

## Conclusion

Over ten years after Taylor and Horgan's original appeal, this article has sought to fulfill, or at least begin to fulfill, the promise that communities of practice holds for understanding how (non)violent extremists and terrorists learn. Recent literature on terrorism learning and adaptation constrains itself by focusing almost exclusively on the outputs of learning rather than its processes, and by failing to gather observational data from participants involved in these processes. Rather than simply highlighting changes in al-Muhajiroun's activism and attributing them to the network's "innovation" or "adaptation," I have sought to trace the causal processes that produced these results. In doing so, I have gathered data from inside the activist network, not by reading web pages and discussion board posts, but by interacting with real live practitioners and observing them in action over a period of many years.

One of the principal findings to emerge from this field work is that the Emigrants are not just an activist network dedicated to establishing an Islamic caliphate in Britain. They are a community of practice whose participants learn from each other by sharing their knowledge and performing their activism. At the heart of this community are the interactions between novices and veterans. Newcomers learn the community's norms and practices through repeated engagement with more experienced activists. This comes from *suhba* or companionship with their mentors, and from participating in network *halaqa*hs or discussion circles, where they meet each week to study with a small group of like-minded peers. Activists also learn by doing, preaching the network's Salafi-Islamist ideology at da'wah stalls and protesting against the West's "war on Islam" at demonstrations. The more they preach and the more they protest, the better they become at performing the network's high-risk activism, and the more deeply committed they become to its community of practice. Some novices-turned-practitioners eventually become leading activists in their own right, attracting followers and organizing events under the banner of their own spinoff groups and platforms. These emergent leaders allow al-Muhajiroun's community to build on itself by transforming new generations of recruits into devoted insiders who continue the network's high-risk activism.

These devoted insiders seek to improve their da'wah and hisbah not only through practice, but by reviewing their activism on a regular basis. In formal meetings and informal discussions, they identify problems and prospects, share ideas, and brainstorm solutions. Their discussions are often frank, with activists disagreeing over different matters. But their disagreements are limited to everyday tactics. They troubleshoot and learn by exploiting the styles and means of their activism, not by reevaluating their strategy or mission. Engaging in such exploratory learning would require activists to question the underlying premises of their ideology and activism, something they are loath to do given their dedication to Omar Bakri and his interpretation of Islamic scripture.<sup>101</sup> They are nothing if not true believers, and their ideological purity must be maintained, even at the cost of losing members and marginalizing themselves from Britain's diverse Muslim communities. Far from being an elixir of learning that allows



the Emigrants to adapt seamlessly to all challenges, the network's insular, cult-like community of practice has created its own challenges, hindering its ability to innovate, expand, and thrive in an increasingly hostile environment.

If the challenges for peering inside extremist communities of practice appear formidable, this study shows that it can be done, at least in one activist network that has repeatedly been implicated in political violence. As with all within-case analyses, however, my findings should be treated with caution. These insights are limited by the time and place of my field work and by my ability to interpret the data I gathered. Readers should not apply my findings loosely to all extremist groups and terrorist networks. The Emigrants are activists and proselytizers, not bomb-makers and sky-jackers. A limitation of this study is that I do not systematically explore how learning may differ across extremist groups and terrorist networks. In one sense, my findings may be more applicable to other Islamist groups, like Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Muslim Brotherhood, that privilege ideological indoctrination and non-violent activism over carrying out terrorist attacks. But many terrorist groups also contain veterans who socialize newcomers to the norms and practices of their craft. And terrorist groups also learn by doing and fix their mistakes in order to improve the effectiveness of their operations. Of course, the broader applicability of my inductive analysis will have to be confirmed, or discounted, through additional research into more groups. This research agenda is worth pursuing, despite the methodological and logistical challenges researchers are likely to face. There is no reason to believe the Emigrants are the only extremist community of practice that helps and hinders its practitioners' learning. If terrorism scholars are willing to explore the possibilities, they may discover that such communities are as commonplace as common sense suggests.

## Notes

1. John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009), 144–45.
2. The communities of practice concept originates in the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, particularly their co-authored book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and the second author's subsequent publications, including Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 2002). Subsequent applications include John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, "Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (1991): 40–57; Julian E. Orr, *Talking about Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Wanda J. Orlikowski, "Knowing in Practice: Enacting a Collective Capability in Distributed Organizing," *Organization Science* 13, no. 3 (May–June 2002): 249–73; Davide Nicolini, Silvia Gherardi, and Dvora Yanow, eds., *Knowing in Organizations: A Practice-Based Approach* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); and Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).
3. Max Taylor and John Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4

- (2006): 585–601; and Karsten Hundeide, “Becoming a Committed Insider,” *Culture and Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2003): 107–27.
4. John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter, “From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221252> (accessed May 5, 2017).
  5. Some of the more prominent examples of this literature include Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo, and Peter Chalk, *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism* and *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational in Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005); James JF Forest, ed., *Teaching Terror: Knowledge Transfer in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, May 2006); Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technologies, Tactics and Global Trends* (London: Routledge, 2007); Maria J. Rasmussen and Mohammed M. Hafez, eds., *Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect: Preconditions, Causes, and Predictive Indicators* (Ft. Belvoir, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2010); Kenney (see note 2 above), especially Chapter 5, “How Terrorists Learn”; and Magnus Ranstorp and Magnus Normark, eds., *Understanding Terrorism Innovation and Learning: Al-Qaeda and Beyond* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015). For a recent review, see Louise Kettle and Andrew Mumford, “Terrorist Learning: A New Analytical Framework,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1237224> (accessed May 5, 2017).
  6. See Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); and Michael Kenney, Stephen Coulthart and Dominick Wright, “Structure and Performance in a Violent Extremist Network: The Small World Solution,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (March 15, 2016), DOI: [10.1177/0022002716631104](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716631104); and Michael Kenney, John Horgan, Cale Horne, Peter Vining, Kathleen M. Carley, Michael W. Bigrigg, Mia Bloom, and Kurt Braddock, “Organisational Adaptation in an Activist Network: Social Networks, Leadership, and Change in al-Muhajiroun,” *Applied Ergonomics* 44, no. 5 (September 2013): 739–747.
  7. Other widely-reported examples of terrorist attacks carried out by activists and former activists include Omar Sharif’s participation in a suicide bombing of a popular bar in Tel Aviv, Israel, in April 2003, which killed four people (including one of the suicide bombers) and injured dozens more, Michael Adebolajo’s and Michael Adebowale’s brutal slaying of an off-duty British soldier on the streets of Woolwich, South London, in May 2013, and, most recently, Khuram Butt’s participation in the London Bridge and Borough Market attack that killed eight and wounded many more in June 2017. Michael Kenney, *Striving for the Caliphate: Radicalization and Resilience among ‘the Emigrants’*, unpublished manuscript.
  8. For more on the qualitative method of process tracing, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005); Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 64–67; and Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
  9. For more on ethnographic observation, see H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 5th ed. (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Altamira Press, 2011); and Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd ed. (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Altamira Press, 2011).
  10. For more on qualitative coding, see Lyn Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 109–15.
  11. Wiktorowicz (see note 6 above), and Kenney (see note 7 above).
  12. Joanne Roberts, “Limits to Communities of Practice,” *Journal of Management Studies* 43, no. 3 (May 2006): 625; and Wenger (see note 2 above), 125.
  13. Lave and Wenger (see note 2 above), 95, and Wenger (see note 2 above), 100.

14. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010. Consistent with my informed consent protocol, I cite all activists' interviews anonymously, to protect their privacy and the confidentiality of what they told me.
15. Author interview with different al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010. Also, author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011.
16. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010.
17. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010. Also, author interview with another al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
18. For more on Hizb ut-Tahrir, see Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb al-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate* (London: Grey Seal, 1996), and Kathleen Collins, "Ideas, Networks, and Islamist Movements: Evidence from Central Asia and the Caucasus," *World Politics* 60 (October 2007), 64–96.
19. Wiktorowicz (see note 6 above), 9–10; Mahan Abedin, "Al-Muhajiroun in the UK: An Interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed," *Jamestown Monitor* (March 23, 2004), [http://www.jamestown.org/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=38](http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=38) (accessed November 24, 2007).
20. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Hounslow, West London, September 4, 2013. Also, see Muslims Against Crusades, "Frequently Asked Questions," <http://www.muslimsagainstcrusades.com/faq.php> (accessed June 19, 2011).
21. Roberts (see note 12 above), 624–5; Wenger (see note 2 above), 125–6.
22. Author interviews with al-Muhajiroun activists, Leyton, East London, December 9, 2010, and Stratford, East London, June 20, 2011.
23. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
24. Author interview with different al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010. Also author interviews with al-Muhajiroun activists, Stratford, East London, December 6, 2010, and Lewisham, South London, December 11, 2010.
25. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010.
26. Author's field notes and audio recording of lecture, Whitechapel, East London, June 16, 2011.
27. Author interviews with leading young al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010, June 17, 2011 and December 4, 2013; Kensington, Central London, November 11, 2010; and Leyton, East London, November 14, 2010 and December 9, 2010.
28. The poppy flower is a prominent symbol used in Armistice Day ceremonies. Many people in Britain wear the small red flower on their lapel in the days and weeks leading up to the anniversary. Activists were protesting the remembrance of British soldiers who have died in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Author's field notes, Kensington, Central London, November 11, 2010.
29. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011.
30. Lave and Wenger (see note 2 above), 95.
31. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 8, 2010.
32. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010.
33. See Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace: The Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Smita Tewari Jassal, "The Sohbet: Talking Islam in Turkey," *Sociology of Islam* 1, no. 3–4 (2014): 188–208.
34. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010. Also, author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011.

35. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, December 7, 2010.
36. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, December 9, 2010.
37. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Mile End, East London, June 26, 2011.
38. Berkey (see note 33 above), 34; Abun-Nasr (see note 33 above), 60.
39. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Lewisham, South London, June 18, 2011.
40. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Southall, West London, June 28, 2011.
41. Lave and Wenger (see note 2 above), 95; Orlikowski (see note 2 above), 250.
42. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010; author's field notes from Supporters of Sunnah da'wah stall, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
43. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Bethnal Green, East London, December 5, 2010.
44. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010; author's field notes from Supporters of Sunnah da'wah stall, Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010.
45. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Lewisham, South London, June 18, 2011; author's field notes from Convert2Islam da'wah stall, Lewisham, South London, June 18, 2011.
46. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Lewisham, South London, June 18, 2011. Also, author interviews with al-Muhajiroun activists, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010 and November 14, 2010, Lewisham, South London, December 11, 2010, and Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010.
47. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Southall, West London, June 28, 2011.
48. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Hounslow, West London, September 4, 2013; author's field notes from da'wah stall, Hounslow, West London, September 4, 2013. Also, author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
49. Author interviews with al-Muhajiroun activists: Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010, Kensington, London, November 11, 2010, Leyton, East London, November 14, 2010, and Wembley Central, West London, June 25, 2011. Author's field notes from network protests at Kensington, Central London, November 11, 2010, Mayfair, Central London, June 17, 2011, and Westminster, Central London, September 6, 2013.
50. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, November 16, 2010.
51. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, December 9, 2010.
52. Taylor and Horgan (see note 3 above), 594.
53. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010.
54. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Lewisham, South London, December 11, 2010.
55. Author interviews with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011, and with former al-Muhajiroun activists, Hounslow, West London, December 13, 2010, Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011 and June 26, 2011, and Walthamstow, East London, July 17, 2012. Also, see Wiktorowicz (see note 6 above), 47.
56. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011. Also, author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, July 17, 2012.
57. Wiktorowicz (see note 6 above), 9; Abedin (see note 19 above); and author interviews with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, December 2, 2010, and London Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism officer, Central London, November 9, 2010.
58. Author interviews with veteran al-Muhajiroun activists, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011, Hounslow, West London, September 4, 2013 and Wembley Central, West London, September 5, 2013.

59. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Hounslow, West London, December 13, 2010. The books mentioned by the respondent are Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, *The Islamic State* (London: Khilafah Publications, n.d.) and Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, *The Ruling System in Islam (Nidham ul-Hukm fil Islam)*, 5th ed. (London: Khilafah Publications, n.d.).
60. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, December 9, 2010.
61. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Poplar, East London, July 24, 2015.
62. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, December 9, 2014. Also, author interviews with another leading activist, Leyton, East London, November 8, 2010, and former halaqah discussion leader, Hounslow, West London, December 13, 2010.
63. Author interviews with al-Muhajiroun activists, Bethnal Green, East London, December 5, 2010 and Islington, North London, July 21, 2012.
64. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Tottenham, North London, December 4, 2010.
65. Wiktorowicz (see note 6 above), 195.
66. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011. Also, author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, July 17, 2012.
67. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun supporter, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011.
68. Wenger (see note 2 above), 125; Roberts (see note 12 above), 624–5.
69. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010.
70. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010. Also author interviews with leading al-Muhajiroun activists, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010 and November 8, 2010, and al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011.
71. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 8, 2010.
72. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011. It is also just like some terrorist organizations. In his discussion on maintaining organizational discipline through indoctrination, Shapiro highlights the role of “self-criticism sessions” in some left-wing social revolutionary groups: “These were essentially group meetings, at which everyone would discuss each other’s failures.” Similarly, McCauley and Moskalenko note “the constant round of meetings and discussions” devoted to “criticism and self-criticism” in the Weather Underground, which they claim had a radicalizing effect on the group. See Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 80; and Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 143.
73. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Mile End, East London, June 26, 2011.
74. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011.
75. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
76. Lave and Wenger (see note 2 above), 116. Disagreements are also common in terrorist organizations, a point emphasized by Shapiro in his comparative study (see note 72 above).
77. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Tottenham, North London, December 4, 2010.
78. Author interview with different al-Muhajiroun activist, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010.
79. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Tottenham, North London, December 4, 2010.
80. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010. Also, author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011.

81. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (see note 2 above), 149.
82. Roberts (see note 12 above), 629–30.
83. For more on religious cults, see John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December 1965): 870, and Michael D. Langone, “Responding to Jihadism: A Cultic Studies Perspective,” *Cultic Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (2006): 268–306.
84. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011. Also, author interview with former female al-Muhajiroun activist, Skype, November 20, 2012.
85. Author interviews with former al-Muhajiroun activists, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011 and Poplar, East London, July 24, 2015.
86. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011.
87. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Poplar, East London, July 24, 2015.
88. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Poplar, East London, July 24, 2015.
89. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Skype, November 8, 2011.
90. Author interview with veteran al-Muhajiroun activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010.
91. For more on outbidding see Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1981): 379–99; and Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
92. Relying on U.S. intelligence sources, Scott Shane argues that Awlaki escalated from preaching violence against Western targets to planning terrorist attacks. Such contentions, however, remain controversial. I take no position on this debate. See Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan, 2015).
93. Author interview with former al-Muhajiroun activist, Poplar, East London, July 24, 2015.
94. Author interview with research director, think tank, Central London, December 14, 2010.
95. Author interview with research director, think tank, Central London, December 14, 2010.
96. Author interview with research director, think tank, Central London, December 14, 2010.
97. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011 and author’s field notes, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011. Also, author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Kensington, Central London, November 11, 2010.
98. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010; author’s field notes, Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010.
99. Author interview with leading al-Muhajiroun activist, Woolwich, South London, September 22, 2007.
100. Author interview with al-Muhajiroun activist, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011.
101. James G. March, “Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning,” *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (February 1991): 71–87.