The "Al-Muhajiroun brand" of Islamism
Mohamed Ilyas

Abstract

Although Al-Muhajiroun and its offshoots 'no longer exist' as organised groups in the UK because they have been proscribed by the British government, their ideology and worldviews have gained a constituency in a number of European countries such as Belgium, Netherlands, Germany and Norway. The evolution of these groups can be categorised into three generations, and parallels the commercialisation and the availability of new modes of communication technology. The first generation during the 1990s and early 2000s used VHS and audiotape, the second generation started to use personal computers, the Internet and CDs, while today's third generation, continues to use personal computers, but now also takes advantage of Smartphones, iPad and the emergence of Web 2.0 technology – social media platforms.

These groups are best known for their 'shock and awe' activism, which often resulted in members burning the flags of Western nations, especially the American flag. Flag burning has become an iconic image and a frame to understand the groups. It was a powerful symbol because it aimed to subvert and reject, as well as symbolically challenge everything that Western countries represent.

Great attention has been paid to these groups over the last two decades by the British and international media, and some academics and think tanks. Although there has been ample media coverage of the groups and their members, there are only a few academic publications. Among these, the best known are those by Wiktorowicz (2005) and Baxter (2005), Pargeter (2008) and a report published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) (Raymond, 2010). These works provide a good understanding of the history, ideology and activism of Al-Muhajiroun and its immediate offshoots but they do not consider how the groups laid down the foundations for a brand of political Islam, which I call 'brand Al-Muhajiroun', that is provocative, in your face, performance and salvation oriented.

This paper focuses on how the first generation of Al-Muhajiroun groups started to develop their brand of political Islam. In doing so this paper will not try to establish connections with the Al Qaeda type groups or brand, nor will it detail the radicalisation processes, the ideology or the topologies that are used by experts, policy makers and the media to describe the groups because they are contingent and determined by a number of continuums that have different purposes, as well as members having a 'plasticity of positions' on a range of social issues.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Islamism, Al-Muhajiroun, Muslims Against Crusaders, Shariah4Belgium, Jihad, Islamic State, Europe, the West

Introduction

Islamist groups have been part of the British socio-political landscape since the 1980s. The French Secret Service dubbed London 'Londonistan' due to the number of Islamists operating in the city (Kampfner, 2002). Journalist Melanie Phillips used the term as a title for her book, published in 2006. Al-Muhajiroun re-appropriated the term to describe London as an Islamic state (Interview 2).

The groups understood the world through the lens of local, regional and global events, which involved Muslim suffering, as well as through the 'us versus them' binary. The global events were the Afghan war in the 1980s, the 1990s Bosnian war, the on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the first Gulf war in 1991, the Afghanistan invasion in 2001, the Iraq invasion in 2003, 9/11 (New York), 7/7 (London), and the rise of Islamophobia in Europe. These events fostered a climate that facilitated members wanting to change the socio-political and religious conditions of Muslims, not only in the UK but also across the world through various means, as evidenced through their activism.

The history of Al-Muhajiroun and its successors is one of precariousness. The groups and their members have always had a tightrope existence because of their provocative activism and anti-terrorism and incitement to violence legislation. Consequently, the British government regarded them as a security threat. According to the British government's 2011 *Prevent* document, about 15% of people convicted for terrorist-related offences here between 1999 and 2009 had been connected with the extremist group Al-Muhajiroun (Prevent, 2011, 20).

However, this has not stopped members from re-grouping under different names. I argue that Brand Al-Muhajiroun has had three development phases, with the first being the focus of this paper. Al-Muhajiroun, the progenitor group, was set up in the UK during the 1990s by Omar Bakri Mohammed and it was disbanded in October 2004 (Johnston, 2004). In 2005 it was replaced by the 'Saved Sect', which in turn was banned in 2006 (Travis, 2006). During the same period 'Al Ghurabaa' was established, and it was also proscribed in 2006 (BBC, 17 July, 2006).

These groups were replaced by what I call the second generation, which consisted of Islam4UK and Muslim Against Crusaders (MAC) and which have now been replaced by a third generation. This generation is a network of diffused groups and individuals scattered across European countries, such as Holland, France, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Belgium and Kosovo. According to media reports, groups such as Shariah4Belgium have become an access point for some European Muslims to engage in Jihad in Syria (Russia Today, 16 April, 2013) furthermore, a report published by a anti-fascist organisation - Hope, not Hate - stated that Anjem Choudary, former leading member of Al-Muhajiroun, has facilitated British Muslims in travelling to Syria (Hope, not Hate, 25 November, 2013).

This paper will discuss how the first generation of groups - Al-Muhajiroun, The Saved Sect and Al Ghurabaa - laid down the foundations for 'brand Al-

Muhajiroun' by using interviews that I carried out with individuals that had been members of the aforementioned groups. The interviews took place in London. Additionally, I also use academic publications and media reports to make my argument. I will first outline the key Islamic concepts that the groups adhered to, not because of their ideological importance but due to the impact of their public performance, which was the key mechanism that the groups used to distinguish themselves from their counterparts, as well as being the basis to foster brand identification. I then move on to detail the activities that the groups used to develop their brand. I argue that they did this by engaging in provocative activities such as burning sacred symbols, 'free riding' on Al Qaeda violence, and staying abreast of the latest media communication technology to engender an assertive and aggressive political Muslim agency. Through this the groups developed an emotive brand, where 'shock and awe and moral outrage' were tools for expressing social and political grievances and engendering a new type of activist within the British Muslim context.

Key concepts

The first generation of brand Al-Muhajiroun groups were the product of a uniquely British multiculturalism, the introduction of political Islam, and events that involved Muslim suffering in the Muslim majority countries and Europe during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Most members of the groups were from second-generation British-Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim backgrounds, as well as some black and white converts (Wiktorowicz 2005: 91).

The groups understood the world by combining a constellation of concepts - *aqeedah*, *taweed*, *takfeer*, and *jihad*. The public performance of these concepts was essential, and they were used to develop a hierarchy of Muslim-ness that aimed to place group members at the top. Together these concepts and their performance not only dictated the continuum that determined the 'politics of group members' and, by implication, which Muslims would gain salvation.

For the first generation of groups Islam was not only a issue of the heart but also of action, meaning that *iman* (faith) automatically translated into action, and public performance of Islamic concepts was essential because it was the most visible way to demonstrate that one was a 'real Muslim' (Abedin, M. 2005). These performances are best illustrated by the numerous protests the groups organised, sometimes involving flag burning and the carrying of placards that demonstrated support for Al Qaeda activities and their Muslim brethren.

For such performance and salvation orientated understanding of Islam to work it needed to have three ingredients, which also aided the development of brand Al-Muhajiroun. These were witnesses, authentication and sacredness. For members, God as a witness was not sufficient because the performance of the concepts constantly needed to be authenticated to have impact, to be meaningful and for members to gain affirmation for their commitment to group ideology and attaining salvation. This authentication came from other group members, bystanders and the global media that covered the protests.

The performance and authentication were of such significance that the groups would inform the media and public well in advance of any demonstrations and conferences that they were planning because they were aware of the media interest in their activism and world views. This enabled the groups to carve a position for themselves within the British Islamist scene and develop a hard 'no-nonsense' image.

Islam as understood by the groups resulted in four necessary beliefs and corresponding actions for members and sympathisers. Firstly, the concepts are sacred and performing them constitutes working towards one's salvation, thus making activism unavoidable; secondly, activism is made sacred because it is performed in the path of God; thirdly, adherents automatically become activists because they are performing sacred concepts in the path of God, and finally, salvation could not be delegated to collective action, it was dependent on the individual and his actions. All of these elements ensured that members were locked into a circular performance-orientated logic that is underpinned by notions of sacredness and salvation.

Although the constellation of concepts is shared by other Muslim groups, what set Al-Muhajiroun groups aside from others was how they combined and performed them during their protests, through burning of flags, and by accusing other Muslims of engaging in *shirk* (following man-made law and not fully adhering to shariah). These performances demonstrated, at least for group members of their superior Muslim-ness and their politics, which is evidenced through what they chanted and what was written on the placards they carried.

The foundational concept in the constellation was *aqeedah*. The concept is complicated, and has no set agreed meaning, but in the simplest terms it means belief in the Islamic faith. The groups claimed that they followed *aqeedah* of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama'aha, meaning 'following the companions of the prophet'. However, the groups did not have a monopoly on the concept, in that other Salafi-orientated and political Islamist groups claimed that they also followed the same *aqeedah*. In this sense the group were part of the global Salafi trend. The only way they could distinguish themselves from others, as I have noted earlier, was through provocative public performances, which would both affirm their conviction to their faith and determine them as 'real Muslims'.

The most visible way the first generation groups differentiated themselves from other groups was by being witnessed engaging in a provocative activism. This strategy was employed because the groups were aware that the majority of Islamist groups shared the same concepts and it would be very difficult to recruit only on this basis (Wiktorowicz 2005: 184), as well as to develop an attractive and distinctive brand. Visibility and provocativeness were essential markers to distinguish themselves from other groups, not only through the shock value of their activism but also via the media attention they received. In some cases this led members to engage in high-risk activism, such as inciting violence through their chanting and the placards they carried during protests (Casciani, 2007).

The second concept in the constellation was *taweed*, which is performatively connected to *aqeedah* and the groups placed great emphasis on the performative element of *taweed*. This enabled the groups to distinguish themselves from their competitors, such as Hizb ut Tahrir, and to emphasize that they were the only ones that adhered to *taweed* in its entirety and by default were 'real Muslims' (Wiktorowicz 2005: 184). The concepts of *taweed* and *aqeedah* enabled members to demonstrate their emotional attachment to, and support for their Muslim brethren that were suffering as a result of being oppressed by their leaders or Western aggression.

The groups understood *taweed* as the connectedness of all things to, and the belief in the oneness of God, which made Islam inseparable from other domains of life, including how the human body was represented and politics. This unification is commonly expressed through the statement 'al-islam din wal dawla', meaning that Islam is both religion and state (Mandaville, 2007, 12). *Taweed* has two constitutive parts. The first is *taweed rububiyya*, which is the belief that God is the sole Lord and sovereign of the Universe, but the groups also believed that in *taweed al-asma' wa al-sifat*, meaning that the Quran can only be understood literally.

The second part of *taweed* is *taweed al-ilah*, which means the worshipping only of God. This part of *taweed* was used by the groups to distinguish themselves from, and to verbally attack and accuse other Muslims of *shirk*. In the main the groups accused Barelvi Muslims and leaders of Muslim countries of *shirk* for worshipping saints and not ruling by the shariah. They based their accusations on an understanding of shariah that they regarded as the correct version. This resulted in the groups having considerable latitude in defining which activities involved engaging in *shirk* (Wiktorowicz 2005: 174). One could be accused of engaging in *shirk* and therefore contravening *taweed* by voting, calling for secularism, mocking religion, being friends with non-Muslims and not praying. These activities were sufficient for the groups to declare *takfeer* (excommunication for engaging in practices that contravene shariah) on other Muslims (Wiktorowicz 2005: 176).

According to the groups, emanating from the correct understanding of *taweed* were three divine duties, which they claimed needed to be performed in order for members, and other Muslims to attain salvation (Wiktorowicz 2005: 177), as well as be considered as 'real Muslims'. The first of these duties was to propagate the correct interpretation of Islam to Muslims and call non-Muslims to Islam. This included making Muslims aware that they must support jihad and in not doing so would jeopardize their salvation. The groups advocated supporting jihad in three ways - verbally defending those that are fighting in the jihad, financially supporting the jihad and joining the jihad and fighting. This action-orientated understanding of Jihad led to individuals that were affiliated with the first generation groups, especially Al-Muhajiroun being convicted for supporting terrorism.

For example, Abu Izzadeen, who was associated with Al-Muhajiroun and a spokesman for Al Ghurabaa was convicted for verbally supporting jihad in 2008

(Gardham, D. 2008). According to media reports members of the 2007 fertilizer plot were involved with Al-Muhajiroun (Summers, C and Cascinai, D. 2007), and Britain's first suicide bombers were suspected of having links with Al-Muhajiroun (Britten, N et al, 2003). The second duty emanating from *taweed* was to command the good and forbid the evil. Evil covered everything that was outside the interpretation of Islam that the groups held to be authentic (Wiktorowicz 2005: 144). Commanding the good for members was to call for the creation of an Islamic state, and inform Muslims not to engage in activities that would lead to *shirk*. The third divine duty was to call for and work towards establishing an Islamic state. Members of the groups took every opportunity to call for the creation of an Islamic state through protests and the literature that they produced and distributed (BBC, 29 April, 2004). For the first generation groups anyone who did not adhere to and act upon *taweed*, as well as the accompanying criteria, would not attain salvation and was not a real Muslim. Adhering to these duties often involved members engaging in high risk activities, which resulted in house raids, surveillance by the security services and arrests during protests (BBC, 30 July, 2003, Guardian, 7 March, 2007).

For the first generation of Al-Muhajiroun groups the public performance of the aforementioned concepts and visibility were essential in distinguishing themselves from other groups and they were embedded within a set of values and attitudes about the West and other Muslims. Moreover, the performances enabled the groups to develop an image and reputation for a brand of political Islam that was aggressive and highly emotive.

In the next section I will outline how the first generation groups started to develop brand Al-Muhajiroun in order to gain popularity by engaging in provocative protests, using the media to gain maximum exposure, and producing and distributing VHS and audio tapes, CDs and magazines.

The media and brand Al-Muhajiroun

For any brand to be successful it has to be able to deliver its message clearly, it has to be able to connect with its audience emotionally, it has to be able to convince its audience that they need their product or that it is essential for them to adopt their ideas and practices, as well as have a consistent message that will foster loyalty through emotional identification. To this extent the first generation of Al-Muhajiroun groups used all the tools at their disposal to develop a successful brand. In the main the groups used both the media to gain publicity and develop their profile because it was free, as well as producing and distributing their own material, which I will discuss in the next section. But at this point it is important to make some rudimentary comments about the material in order to highlight why the groups relied so much on the media.

Al-Muhajiroun came into existence according to Baxter (2007) in 1996, and during the 1990s VHS, audiotapes and magazines were the dominant media communication tools. However, the tools were limited because VHS and audiotapes could not be produced in bulk, meaning that, as one former member

of Al-Muhajiroun describes, 'we used to watch the videos and listen to the audiotapes in a groups (Interview 5). Not being able to disseminate material to a wider audience not only hindered the development of brand Al-Muhajiroun but also the recruitment of new members. This forced the groups to rely heavily on the media in order to cultivate an audience, deliver a clear message, or sufficiently mobilize Muslims.

Therefore, from the outset Omar Bakri Mohammed, the founder of Al-Muhajiroun, recognised how important national and international media were, such that the media were present at every event the groups organised. According to Wiktorowicz (2005), Al-Muhajiroun members were obsessed with media coverage of the group (Wiktorowicz 2005: 150). This influence has continued with members of successor groups avidly reading newspaper articles and watching and critically analyzing news clips and documentaries that reported on their activism (Interview 2). Furthermore, as one former member of the Al-Muhajiroun stated to me 'the media wanted to see flag burning, they wanted to hear us say anti-Western things, so we gave them what they wanted' (Interview 1).

It is clear that from the inception of Al-Muhajiroun had a media strategy and Omar Bakri Mohammed was aware that the media was a powerful vehicle for agenda setting, issue framing, and consciousness-raising (Wiktorowicz 2005: 150). Consequently, the first generation of groups became very skilled in using the media, especially broadcast and print media. This is evidenced by how Omar Bakri Mohammed interacted with the media. By using the media strategically Omar Bakri Mohammed and other senior members were able to set the group agenda, frame issues, make Muslims aware of Muslim suffering, as well as cultivate a media profile for themselves. The groups did not have any preference over which media outlet they interacted, in that Omar Bakri Mohammed even welcomed Israeli media despite his anti-Israel stance (Wiktorowicz 2005: 151).

The groups used the media to propagate their ideologies, evoke moral outrage, and promote religious and political awakening among Muslims and non-Muslim communities through street protests (Wiktorowicz 2005: 151). The protests often involved protesters using volatile language, which ensured that the media had a story to tell, as well as fostering anger among some members of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The politics and the form of protests that the groups engaged in resulted in many documentaries being made, as well as leading members being interviewed by national and international television and radio stations: Omar Bakri Mohammed, Anjem Choudary and Abu Izzadeen have all been interviewed by various British and international news outlets, such as BBC News (Watson, 2005) and FOX News (Choudary, 2011). All the media reporting about group activities and on television and radio by senior members fostered brand awareness.

Another way the groups tried to gain media attention and agenda setting was by making controversial statements that targeted Muslim and Western leaders. For example, it was reported that Omar Bakri Mohammed stated in a 1991 article that the then Prime Minister of the UK, John Major, was a legitimate target for

attack (Ulph, 2005). He later revoked his comments, saying that he had been misquoted and clarified his statement by explaining that John Major would be a legitimate target if he entered a Muslim country, with the same applying to Tony Blair. He also said that he would not condemn the killers (History Commons, n.d.).

Additionally, he also made a similar statement regarding the 9/11 bombers. In 2001 he is reported to have called the 9/11 bombers 'the magnificent 19' (Blomfield, 2010). The statement was complemented by Al-Muhajiroun organising protests and conferences that celebrated the 9/11 attacks. Protesters carried 'pictures of the 19 hijackers around a backdrop of the World Trade Centre in flames and a smiling Osama bin Laden' (O'Neill, 2003). Other members of Al-Muhajiroun also used controversy as a tactic, such as Abu Omar, who was quoted in the Telegraph newspaper stating that 'the hijackers were completely justified and quite splendid and that any Muslim who thought otherwise was an apostate' (O'Neill, 2003).

These controversial statements resulted in some members of the first-generation groups being prosecuted for glorifying terrorism and violence. Abu Izzadeen was convicted for glorifying terrorism in 2008, he reportedly had made comments such as, 'so we are terrorists - terrifying the enemies of Allah. The Americans and British only understand one language. It's the language of blood' (Gardham, 2008). In addition, four men were convicted for inciting racial hatred after carrying provocative banners inspiring Al Qaeda type attacks during the protests against the publication of cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammed in 2006 (Casciani, 2007).

However, despite having a lot of national and international media attention, the groups neither had control over their image nor were able to offer their audience their product in a comprehensive way. The product, in the case of the groups, was an anti-Western and Islamist ideology, aggressive in your face Muslim agency and a form of protest that engendered intense emotions among its supporters, competitors and enemies. Not having full control over their media profile, the groups found it very difficult to effectively develop a positive self-image and make people amenable to their ideas. Moreover, experts on Islamist groups and Muslim leaders added to the negative image of the groups and their members by referring to them as 'whack jobs', 'loonies', 'clowns' and 'lunatic fringe' (Wiktorowicz 2005: 45-46). In the next section I detail how the groups addressed the aforementioned concerns.

Self-branding: Brand Al-Muhajiroun

In order to address these concerns, the groups started to produce VHS and audiotapes and magazines, which members sold during *dawah* stalls (calling non-Muslims and Muslims to Islam) and conferences. The material and the modes of dissemination helped to cultivate a small audience for their ideology. However, the material was not of a high quality. One former member of Al-Muhajiroun, in an interview for this paper stated, 'our early material was

amateurish and the content was very dense and difficult for people to understand, especially for those that had little knowledge about Islam'. He further added, 'our early products were produced by individuals that had little knowledge of, or skills in production, design and marketing. Therefore the quality and dissemination was not effective, meaning that the groups were not successful in being able to convey their ideology and a 'Muslim conscious' brand of Islamism to the wider Muslim community' (Interview 2).

As the groups became well known through their activism and *dawah* stalls that they held in town centres and on university campuses, as well as by word of mouth, they started to attract new members with useful skills. As one former member of Al-Muhajiroun stated, 'when I joined Al-Muhajiroun, I had qualifications in computing (Interview 4). The new additions had knowledge and qualifications in business and computing, as well as possessing skills in video production and graphic design. This, according to former Al-Muhajiroun members, took the production and dissemination of material to a different level (Interviews 2 and 3). With the injection of new members with skills, the groups no longer produced amateurish VHS videos, audiotapes and magazines. Instead, the material had a structure and narrative from cover to content, which aimed to attract and evoke religious and political awakening among visitors to the *dawah* stalls.

From the early 2000s the groups introduced a number of changes to the production and dissemination of the material that they produced, which helped brand development. The first change was to replace VHS and audiotapes with CDs because they were the latest mode of storing data, as well as being a quicker and cheaper way to produce a quality product. This ensured that group members and sympathisers had their own copies of lectures and could watch and listen to them at their leisure. This was also facilitated by personal computers becoming cheaper to purchase, meaning that the households of many members and sympathisers owned at least one computer. Secondly they introduced a more organised network of production and distribution, as well as using the Internet to set-up websites to propagate their ideas and sell their CDs. The introduction of a structured production and distribution system enabled the groups to quickly produce high quality CDs containing lectures, conferences and documentaries that focused on politics and Islam (Interview 2).

One aim behind the material was to cultivate among Muslims the de-linking of Islam from culture in favour of a transnational and universal set of practices (Roy, 2004: 120). The aim of de-linking was twofold. Firstly, to dis-embed individuals from their local sociocultural and religious communities and re-embed them into a global socio-political and religious community (*ummah*). Through this dis-embedding process the groups wanted British Muslims to reject both Western culture and the culture of their parents. The aim here was to foster a community based around what Roy (2004: 124) calls neo-ethnicity, as well as way of life that was concretely embedded in their version of Islam. Another aim was to establish an emotional relationship between the Muslim communities, brand Al-Muhajiroun, and Muslims that were suffering in conflict

zones.

The sellers in this system approached their role in an interesting way. According to former members of Al-Muhajiroun the audience was cultivated by giving them samples of the product, which they liked, and they then came back for more until they became addicted, much like selling drugs (Interviews 1, 2 and 3). This approach corresponds to Omar Bakri Mohammed seeing his followers as 'men of the street' (Wiktorowicz 2005: 148). By this, he meant that the groups had their fingers on the pulse of the street. Therefore, selling magazines and CDs, as well as promoting the brand was simple for members because they were aware of the issues that concerned the Muslim communities, especially young Muslims. This was not only because they possessed the language and social skills of the street, but also the street was where they felt most comfortable and at home (Interview 2). The combination of members having IT skills, street credibility, as well as employing production, distribution and sales strategies, not only enabled Al-Muhajiroun ideology to be disseminated but also ensured that a constituency members and sympathisers was being developed and brand awareness was being cultivated.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the first generation of Al-Muhajiroun groups, in the form of Al-Muhajiroun, Al Ghurabaa and The Saved Sect, were instrumental in laying down the foundations for 'brand Al-Muhajiroun'. The brand was based on a constellation of Islamic concepts and anti-Western politics that also employed an emotive, aggressive, proactive and provocative form of activism. This type of activism became a distinctive hallmark of the groups, which also meant that the groups were easily identifiable and attracted new members.

The paper also contends that central to the brand development was group members staying abreast of technological advancements and being media savvy. Meaning that they employed the latest communication technology and used national and international media to set the agenda and influence debates concerning Muslims, which also enabled them to cultivate an audience for themselves, and drive a wedge among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK. Staying abreast of technology went hand-in-hand with recruiting new members that had skills and qualifications in marketing, computing, and business. This ensured that everything had a structure, from production, distribution and use of the media to market the brand, enabling the groups to carve out a position and take advantage of political opportunities that arose from political and social events.

Together the Islamic concepts, engaging provocative activism, the use of the media and staying abreast of technology ensured that the foundations of brand Al-Muhajiroun were laid and brand awareness was cultivated. These foundations have paved the wave for the second and third generation of groups to emerge and continue to develop the brand through similar activities, make use of Web 2.0 Internet platforms, gain an international audience, as well as

increasingly attract female and male converts from various parts of Europe.

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About the author

Mohammed Ilyas gained his PhD from the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2011. The PhD adopted an original and innovative approach to investigate why and how some Muslims from Europe join political Islamist groups and some volunteer to become suicide bombers. He has recently completed an international project that looked into the experiences of Muslims in Western societies. At present he is independently researching inter-Muslim hate, Islamophobia, and the attraction of convert Muslims to violent Jihadism.