

Salafis and Former Right Wing Extremists join Forces in Commemorating Holocaust

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News:

When the international community commemorates the Holocaust on 27th January 2014 (also known as: "The International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the victims of Holocaust"), one of the events in Britain will be co-hosted by a Salafi organisation and former members of a right wing organisation.

Summary:

This news analysis takes its point of departure in the controversial joint venture between the Salafi organisation JIMAS and former members of the English Defence League who are co-hosting an event commemorating the victims of Holocaust during the Second World War. One would expect Islamic Salafis and former far right activists who oppose Islamic extremism would find it difficult to agree on matters like Fascism, Nazism and Jews, but the cooperation has been unfolding for some time, and the parties do share views and interests after all.

Key Words:

Salafism, Jihad, salafi-jihadism, right-wing extremism, holocaust, commemoration of holocaust

Analysis

Each year on 27th January the international community commemorates the liberation of prisoners of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland on 27th January 1945. The day has been named “The International day of commemoration of the memory of the victims of the Holocaust” by the UN, and is marked with speeches by holocaust survivors, marches, theatre performances and other activities all over the world. This year, for the first time, former members of two radically opposed groups in Britain, namely JIMAS and EDL, join forces in events commemorating the Holocaust.

As mentioned, the Salafi organisation involved in the cooperation with former right-wing extremists is Jam’iat Ihyaa’ Minhaj Al-Sunnah (JIMAS), which means “the organisation to revive the way of the messenger”. The former right-wing activists were members of the English Defence League. The latter works under the motto “No surrender” and characterises itself as a human rights movement protesting Islamic extremism.¹

In the following, the two organisations will be introduced, first JIMAS then EDL, and after that, we shall take a closer look at how one can understand the cooperation between individuals who used to be so very far apart in terms of ideology and worldview.

JIMAS: From Salafi-Jihadism to British Salafism

According to Brill’s Encyclopedia of Islam, “al-Salaf wa ‘l-Khalaf” can be defined as: “the predecessors and the successors, names given to the first three generations and to the following generations of the Muslim community respectively”.² Salafis are characterised by a wish to return to “The Golden Age of Islam” and to study the ways of the Prophet in order to follow his example.³ Traditionally, Salafist groups have been preoccupied with

¹ www.englishdefenceleague.org (last accessed 19th January 2014)

² See: Brill’s online *Encyclopedia of Islam*:

http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/search?s.q=salaf&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&search-go=Search, (last accessed 19 January 2014)

³ Wahhabism also sprung from the 19th Century reformist thinking, however, in this line of thought one finds no ambition of mediating between Western modernity and scholarship and Islam. On the contrary, according to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), the aim of reforming Islam was to reject

pious individuals and missionary activities and have kept their distance to the surrounding societies.⁴

JIMAS was founded in 1984 by Manwar Ali, who is still leading the organisation. The initiative which saw the light of day while Ali was attending the University of Kingston in Surrey with his three brothers, was heavily influenced by Salafi thinking. The four brothers wanted to establish an organisation, which supported young Muslims fulfilling their obligations to Islam through personal sacrifice and study of the canonical Islamic texts. To this day, thirty years on, this aim is still at the heart of the organisation. However, what is understood by these terms has changed.

Manwar Ali used to be involved in Jihadi activities and was responsible for taking individuals to jihad activities in various places including Afghanistan and Burma in the 1990s. Today, Ali is engaged in interfaith-dialogue, community work and is a strong advocate for proselytising Islam. The Salafi emphasis on studying as a necessary point of departure for any engagement with Islam and the surrounding society – followed by da’wah (missionary activities) – is still visible on the organisation’s homepage⁵ as is the more recent conviction that Muslims through Islamic practices can contribute to the British society:

modernity and any other “un-Islamic” influence. See Saudi Salafi inspired prayer books amongst other titles on this JIMAS page: <http://www.jimas.org/pubs.htm> (last accessed 19th January 2014)

⁴ In a forthcoming publication, I discuss differences in current Salafi trends (Sinclair (2014) “What They Really Want is a Caliphate!” in *Middle East Critique*.

⁵ www.jimas.org/aims.htm (last accessed 19th January 2014)

JIMAS AIMS

To provide Muslims with the means to realise recurring charity through education, da'wah and relief activities

To facilitate and develop better understanding and practice of Islam and remove ignorance

To invite those who have not yet been blessed with Islam to the true worship of Allah

To promote unity and co-operation among Muslims and cultivate brotherhood for the general welfare of society

To seek out and merge efforts with complementary organisations

To contribute to British society and its success through Islamic values and practices

In connection with the development away from jihadi activities towards a more social orientation, the wording below is of interest. Here, JIMAS distinguishes itself from Muslim organisations originating from outside Britain and makes the claim that due to their British origins they have a more natural feel for the needs of British Muslims:

"JIMAS seeks to promote an organic, home-grown, indigenous following of Islam, which is relevant to British Muslim concerns in particular and issues of the UK in general. As such JIMAS is distinct from those political movements and ideologies that had originated abroad which by their nature is not synchronised with the needs of the British public."⁶

Disappeared has the praising of Anwar al-Awlaki and today the organisation stresses that it will not be held responsible for any evil deeds done in the name of Islam, just as the organisation takes it upon itself to help familiarise the world with "good Islam", or, as it is phrased by the organisation: *"It is up to us to take a responsible and correct position*

⁶ www.jimas.org/aims.htm (last accessed 19th January 2014)

with regards to the unIslamic [sic] and anti-Islamic new-fangled teachings associated with him and extremists.”⁷

JIMAS's interests come together in events with educational purposes, and they have attracted mass audiences since the mid-1990s. Of recent events, one could mention a co-hosted event in 2011 with the Islamic Society of Britain, which seems to have freed itself from its Muslim Brotherhood and thus Islamist heritage and is today known as a “very British” organisation. Also, JIMAS has co-hosted conferences with the explicit aim of generating a British Islam for secular society just as they have issued reports to that effect.⁸

In 2012, JIMAS started cooperating with Jewish societies and in 2013, Manwar Ali talked at conferences on how to challenge hate crime and violent extremism (The Google Dublin Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), in June 2013).

JIMAS's new self-understanding as a Muslim organisation with special insight into both the “real meaning” of Islam due to its Salafi heritage and into the challenges of British society due to the fact that it was not imported from overseas but originated at a British university, helps one understand how, today, JIMAS is working together with former members of the English Defence League (EDL).

Tommy Robinson: From EDL to Commemorating Holocaust

Tommy Robinson co-founded United Peoples of Luton (UPL) with Kevin Carroll in 2009, later the organisation's name was changed to EDL, and later again, in 2013, both Robinson and Carroll ended up leaving the enterprise. The initiative was a direct consequence of activities by the Salafi-Jihadi organisation al-Muhajiroun in Luton. Al-Muhajiroun organised counter-demonstrations in Luton when the Royal Anglian Regiment marched, and they tried to recruit Muslims in Luton to go to Afghanistan and join the Taliban fighting the British troops. This was one provocation too many for Robinson and Carroll, and thus the battle to diminish Islamic presence on British soil began. Amongst typical events were street demonstrations and rallies, and the idea behind the organisation as well as the activities spread to the rest of Western Europe during 2011 and 2012.

In October 2013, when the two co-founders left EDL, Tommy Robinson explained to the British media, that he had never been against Muslims per se, only Islamic extremism, and that he left, because he spent the majority of his time handling in-fights

⁷ <http://www.jimas.org/anwrwlk.htm> (last accessed 19th January 2014)

⁸ <http://www.jimas.org/jms2011.htm> (last accessed 19th January 2014)

and keeping Nazis at a distance. In the autumn of 2013, Robinson took part in several dialogue-oriented events and spoke at counter-radicalisation events.

Before leaving, Robinson represented EDL in a march where JIMAS also took part. The march was in the honour of Drummer Lee Rigby who was stabbed and killed in London 22nd May 2013 by al-Muhajiroun affiliated individuals. At the events, JIMAS's Manwar Ali stated: *"We were strongly motivated to march [sic] for three reasons. Perhaps first it was to show our respect and offer our condolences to Lee Rigby's family. We also wanted to support our troops in general and show respect for the job they do. (...) The third reason was defiance. We wanted to send a message to the extremists that they are committing crimes against Islam. They are not doing these things in our name.(...) Although we don't support the far right, I don't like to paint people in general terms. They happened to be there and marching alongside them was about bridge building and preventing other parts of the Muslim community from coming to harm. By being there and opening up lines of communication we helped avoid a fracas."*

At the same event, a member of EDL told the local media: *"This is what we need. We need to be seen working together and talking together (...) If we can work together, that has got to be good."*⁹

Thus, the us-them dichotomy is not as clear-cut as one might expect in the case of the Islam-critical right wing EDL and the Salafi JIMAS. As we have seen, in June 2013, the two organisations met and expressed a shared wish to oppose extremist interpretations of Islam resulting in murder and terror.

Seen in this light, it is less of a surprise that Tommy Robinson, formerly EDL, and Manwar Ali, still JIMAS, are co-organising an event commemorating the victims of holocaust during the Second World War. The two join forces in two respects: First of all, they both wish to distance themselves (and in Ali's case the whole of JIMAS) to political extremism, fascism of any kind, violence, murder and genocide. And secondly, they share an agenda of emphasising Britishness. Robinson still works for a Britain free of Islamic extremism, and by associating themselves with Robinson, Ali and JIMAS demonstrate to other Muslim organisations in Britain that they speak the language of even right-wing Brits and thus that they know how to engage in the modern, British, secular reality.

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/06/04/lee-rigby_-edl-muslims-islam-jimas-_n_3383410.html (last accessed 19th January 2014)