

## Muslim Street Patrols in London

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The London Metropolitan Police is currently investigating incidents where vigilantes have approached members of the public in London neighbourhoods stating that they were in "Muslim Areas" and accusing them of breaching rules concerning dress, behaviour and intake of drink. This article looks at the phenomenon and responses from mosques and Muslims online.

In January this year, incidents where members of the public were approached by a group of masked men who claimed they were on Muslim territory and should abide certain rules, were reported to the police and evidence was posted online. This has sparked responses from Muslims and non-Muslims alike and also resulted in an East London Friday sermon dedicated to the topic.

The self-appointed vigilantes referred to themselves as "Muslim Patrol" and demanded from the individuals approached that they dress modestly and give up alcohol. In a video clip circulated on YouTube, the masked men are calling white women: "(...) *naked animals with no self-respect*". The video clip also shows how Muslim Patrol members take away bottles containing alcohol from people passing by followed by the words: "*We don't care if you are appalled at all*", before calling themselves "*vigilantes implementing Islam upon your own necks*" (YouTube, "Muslim Street Patrol", 17 January 2013).

The video was recorded with a mobile phone, and the incident is believed to have taken place in Waltham Forest, East London. The London Borough of Waltham Forest is an area with a population of approximately 220,000 people of which a majority has Muslim background. This borough has formerly been the point of departure for Islamist groups' demonstrations as has boroughs such as White Chapel and Tower Hamlets closer to the centre of London. Similar incidents are also reported from Tower Hamlets. All of the mentioned boroughs are characterised by having a Muslim majority population of East Asian descent.

Little is known of the background of this/these Muslim Patrol/s, but similar phenomena have been seen in East London previously. For instance, two years ago, a group belonging to the network of Al-Muhajiroun offshoots proclaimed Tower Hamlets a "*Sharia Zone*".

### **Groups known to be associated with "Muslim Patrolling"**

The street patrol phenomenon is linked to certain interpretations of the Islamic concept of *hisba* referring to the Qur'anic duty of Muslims "*to promote good and forbid evil*" and furthermore, as also explained in Brill's Encyclopaedia of Islam, it means: "*the function of the person who is effectively entrusted in a town with the application of this rule in the supervision of moral behaviour and more particularly of the markets (...)*." (Brill, Encyclopaedia of Islam)

The practice of is associated with a number of groups functioning as fronts or offshoots from A-Muhajiroun, *hisba* and these groups have interpreted it to mean social control of the practices of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Al Muhajiroun was founded by Omar Bakri Mohammed (Bakri) an Islamist activist who settled in London

in 1986 after failed attempts at disseminating the ideas of the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir in Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. In both his homeland Syria and Saudi Arabia, the authorities had and still have no tolerance towards political ideologies and organisations which challenge the status quo. In the United Kingdom, Bakri facilitated the growth of Hizb ut-Tahrir from around 400 members in 1990 to approximately 2000 in 2000, but he broke with the organisation and founded Al-Muhajiroun due to disagreements with the Hizb ut-Tahrir leadership committee members concerning the organisation's public profile. Up until 2005, al-Muhajiroun had active members and branches in Ireland, Lebanon, Pakistan, the United States and Britain. Bakri also tried launching a Danish branch 2002. The main difference between Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun concerns participation in what is understood as Muslim wars and conflicts. Hizb ut-Tahrir argues that active participation in war and conflict can never be more than a temporary solution (the only acceptable and long-lasting solution is the creation of a Caliphate), whereas al-Muhajiroun welcomes war participation and salutes Muslims who fight on Muslim side against the ever-suppressing West.

Bakri dissolved al-Muhajiroun in 2004 and travelled to Lebanon. In 2005, he was denied entry back into Britain, because as the then Home Secretary stated: his activities and conviction was found to be: "*not conducive to the public good*" (BBC, 9 August 2005). Since 2004, Anjem Choudary has been in charge of the day-to-day activities on the British Isles and the individuals formerly involved in al-Muhajiroun have formed groups adhering to the same line of thought and the same practices only under different names. They have been known to use names such as: The Saviour Sect, *Al-Ghurabaa* (the strangers), *Ahl al-Sunnah wal al-Jamma'ah* (the followers of the *sunnah* and *jammah*, i.e. the prophetic practice and community), Call to Submission, Islamic Path, London School of Sharia, Islam4UK and Sharia4UK. All of the groups and activities linked to these names have been banned in Britain. The last to be banned were Call to Submission, Islamic Path and Islam4UK in January 2010. (Raymond 2010, Wiktorowitz 2005, Sinclair 2009).

Anjem Choudary and the circle of activists surrounding him are still busy, though. Last month, January 2013, they demonstrated outside the French embassy in London protesting against French military presence in Mali, and just last week, on the 23rd of February, they were behind a conference in Birmingham protesting against imprisonment of Muslims associated with terrorism such as Omar Abdul Rahman, Abu Hamza, Aafia Siddiqui, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Mullah Krekar. The title of the conference was: "Free All Muslim Hostages" which in all clarity demonstrates their take on what in the West is defined as terrorism. However, whether the individuals patrolling the streets of Waltham Forest and Tower Hamlets belong to the same network in unknown as of yet, but their practice fits a recognizable pattern.

### **An Islamic Response to Muslim Street Patrols**

Even though attempts to take control of London neighbourhoods – even if only symbolically – have been seen before, the latest Muslim patrol incidents have resulted in stronger reactions from the local Muslim establishment than previously seen. On the 18th of January, the Whitechapel based Imam Shams Ad Duha, delivered a Friday sermon in which he presented an Islamic response to the street patrols. The Imam runs the Ebrahim College in Whitechapel and belongs to the conservative Tablighi Jamaat-movement which originates from India and is an offshoot from the Deobandi-movement. The goal of the Tablighi Jamaat is to challenge what is seen as moral decay amongst Muslims and bring Muslims closer to Islam. The movement is related to the Hanafi-tradition within Islamic jurisprudence but claims political and juristic independence.

As part of the introduction of his sermon, Imam Ad Duha explained that it is normal practice for Muslims to criticise other Muslims in private but avoid doing so in public. This practice he intends to stray from in his sermon, as he finds the “Muslim Patrol”-incidents too problematic not to comment on publicly. He stresses that as “*we live here*” [and he later continues] “*we take ownership of the area in every sense*” meaning that solving social problems, fighting crime etc. is part of the responsibility of all community members and leaders. However, his point is not only to emphasise the problematic aspects from a societal perspective, but rather to state that the practice of these “*complete bigots*” involved in “Muslim Patrolling” is in opposition to Islamic law. (YouTube, 18 January 2013).

His argument went as follows: As the *Sharia* says nothing about co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Towers Hamlets for obvious reasons, one must consider what I said about co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims at the time of the Prophet, or as he phrases it: “*Let’s look at what the Sharia says about implementing Sharia in an Islamic state.*” According to the Hanafi interpretation of the Prophet’s *Sunnah*, the Prophet forbade Muslims to damage the stock of wine and pork of non-Muslims. This means that even though non-Muslims have a practice that deviates from Muslim practice, no Muslim man or woman is permitted to intervene with this practice. There are, quite simply, different rules for Muslims and non-Muslims and no Muslim becomes a better Muslim by interfering with the business of non-Muslims. So it was at the time of the Prophet, and so it should be in the United Kingdom in 2013

### **Other Muslim Responses**

The sermon was broadcast on YouTube and circulated widely. Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of January, the clip got 20,000 views and the debate between viewers on YouTube following the clip was very positive. One Muslim commentator wrote: “We can only

apologise to our non-Muslim brothers and sisters for what these idiotic people have done." And according to the daily *The Independent*: "Fiyaz Mughal from Faith Matters, a conflict resolution charity which works in the area, said he had in fact been "given hope" by the response to the videos because the chorus of opposition from Muslim leaders was so "quick and unanimous" while the media response recognised that the vigilante groups were an unpleasant minority." (...) "I think it's something of a turning point because this could have turned into something much worse," he said. "Local leaders weren't afraid to tackle the problem head on while the press did a pretty responsible job of recognising that these guys are such a minority." (Taylor, *The Independent*, 27 January 2013). Also, non-Muslims have joined the choir of people applauding the Imam's efforts and pedagogical skills in explaining how the street patrols are not acting in correspondence with Islam. (Taylor, *The Independent*, 27 January 2013).

Furthermore, local residents in Tower Hamlets have helped the police identify the members of the vigilante patrols, and so far two men have been arrested.

Thus it seems that the incidents related to "Muslim Patrols" and particular interpretations of *hisba* are not likely to be carried out unnoticed. The serious criticism voiced by a conservative cleric – whose organisation has often been accused of isolationism in a British context – has sparked positive reactions amongst very different critics of this form of social control from Muslims from all walks of the British society and from Muslims and non-Muslims alike.



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