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**The Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and
Efforts to Counter it**

**Before the US Senate committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

Thursday July 10th 2008

The Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and Efforts to Counter it

Chairman Lieberman, ranking member Collins and esteemed members of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs committee, please allow me this opportunity to thank you all for inviting me here to testify before you today. I convey to you warm salutations from all our staff at the Quilliam Foundation in London, and in particular from my friend and co-Director Ed Husain who is currently in Egypt on an official FCO delegation on behalf of the British Government. Violent Islamist extremism is truly the bi-partisan issue of the day. This phenomenon affects those on all sides of the political spectrum, and as such it is one of those rare issues concerning which people of differing political persuasions and backgrounds can find common ground, especially through independent voices.

As director of The Quilliam Foundation, Britain's first counter-extremism think tank, I have made it my aim to spare no effort in directly challenging the Islamist ideology wherever I happen upon it. I believe that my staff and I are uniquely placed for this endeavour due to our past involvement, at a senior level, with various Islamist organisations. In fact, my own history involves thirteen years as a committed activist with the extremist Islamist group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (The Liberation Party). I served on *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* UK leadership and personally exported the group from London to Pakistan and Denmark. My international activities eventually lead to my witnessing torture and a five-year conviction in Egypt as an Amnesty International adopted prisoner of conscience.

The makings of an international Islamist ideologue: my story

Having been born and raised in the boisterous county of Essex, the early nineties exposed me to situations that I never should have had to witness as a teenager. Despite my liberal British upbringing, I was subject to an appalling level of racist violence by a minority of thugs. Many of my white friends were stabbed before my eyes simply for associating with me. Arrests were made but repetitive procedural errors amidst boasts of 'contacts' in the police meant that the perpetrators were never convicted. By the time I reached fifteen I had been falsely arrested at gunpoint by the police because somebody had earlier seen my older brother, himself only sixteen at the time, playing with a plastic pellet gun. We were released the next morning with an apology, and the plastic gun was returned to us broken. The culmination of such incidents eventually led me to a crisis of identity. Not feeling fully accepted in the country of my birth left me wondering whether I was British, English, Pakistani, Muslim or even something else entirely. What I did know was that I could not relate in any way to the Pakistani heritage of my grandfather. The religious mosque *imams* could not speak English and I in turn found it almost impossible to relate to what they preached. Whilst such a crisis of identity initially concerned only racial and ethnic dimensions, the tragic slaughter of white Muslims that was to eventually play out in Bosnia brought to the fore of my mind Europe's Muslim Question. Through this rude awakening, and for the first time in my life, I became critically aware of a Muslim identity. I could not, however, relate to my religion as taught by the poorly educated mosque *imams*. I began instead to relate to a mid-nineties trend whereby American rappers would use radical Islamic messages through Hip-Hop to engender a sense of empowerment and identity into African-Americans. The early Malcolm X, with his radical and uncompromising message, quickly became my inspiration as I became more and more disillusioned with my own society. I somehow conveniently ignored that even Malcolm tempered his views before he was assassinated - and I believe that a great deal can be still be learnt from this mans late change of heart.

At this critical juncture in my life, whilst already feeling quite anti-establishment, I stumbled across an articulate medical student from my hometown who had gone to London and returned as a *Hizb ut-Tahrir* activist. Here was a man who could speak my language, who felt my pain and who most importantly of all could answer my questions concerning identity and faith in radically

different way. Since Malcolm X, I had never heard Islam presented in this way. Islam was not about mere rites and backward rituals. Islam was a revolutionary ideology that came to liberate man from being a slave to other men's colonial laws. Muslims must refuse the artificial identities imposed upon them by colonialism. We were not Pakistani or British, rather we hailed from the pre-colonial Caliphate, an exclusively Muslim political entity for an exclusively Muslim political identity that was wiped from the minds of our fathers through years of colonial education. Muslims must reject calling Islam a religion, rather ours was a comprehensive and divine political ideology surpassing Communism and Capitalism in its detail and potential power. All we needed to do was to re-ignite this forgotten ideology in the hearts and minds of the Muslim *Ummah*, or global community, and this sleeping giant would automatically arise from his slumber to challenge Western hegemony over the world. The fire within me finally found its oxygen and at the tender age of sixteen I joined *Hizb ut-Tahrir* not because I was in any way religious, but because I sought a radical political solution to the various grievances I felt. I wanted to be an ideologue and now I had discovered a divine ideology.

After I joined *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, I immediately decided to leave my hometown for London so as to enrol at the heavily Muslim populated Newham College for the purpose of using this campus as a recruitment ground. On this campus, after joining forces with Ed Husain, I was quickly elected as President of the Students' Union with my union committee all being *Hizb ut-Tahrir* activists too. Now, as this powerful collective and with Students' Union funds at our disposal we embarked upon radicalising the campus and recruiting more activists. My time at Newham College was brought to a sudden end when one of our non-student associates used our rhetoric to justify murdering a non-Muslim student on campus. The entire Students' Union committee were subsequently expelled from this college, but my reputation grew amongst party ranks.

Soon I was to become a national speaker, and then an international recruiter to *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. In 1999 the global leadership of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* requested that I personally travel to Pakistan to set up the group there. Pakistan had just acquired a nuclear bomb and I was told that the Caliphate would benefit immensely from this development. I duly took leave from my UK law degree and moved to Pakistan, moving from city to city leaving party cells in my wake. After my return to the UK in 2000, the group again requested that I travel to Denmark to aid with recruitment there. In between resuming my law degree I would fly out every weekend on the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* expenses until I had set up a sufficient amount of recruits for the Danish branch of the group to take over. My travels eventually led me to Egypt, where in 2002 my house was subjected to a dawn-raid and I was taken blind folded to the Egyptian State Security headquarters in Cairo, a building known as the Apparatus - or *al-Jihaz* - in Arabic. After being subjected to witnessing torture and held incommunicado in extended solitary confinement I was eventually convicted by Egypt's Supreme State Security Emergency court to five-years imprisonment.

My time in Egypt's notorious Mazra Tora gave me the opportunity to finally study Islam myself from its primary Arabic sources. I also had the opportunity of debating with some of Egypt's most well known convicted terrorists, such as the surviving assassins of late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, or such as the founders of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyyah* - formerly Egypt's largest terrorist group. I also had access to imprisoned liberals such as runner-up to the Egyptian Presidential elections Ayman Nour, and the then imprisoned Sociology Professor Saad el-Din Ibrahim. My adoption by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, and in particular the tireless efforts of one Amnesty activist - John Cornwall - served to open my heart to non-Muslims again for the first time in 10 years. My mind, however, would still not follow without rigorous investigation. After four years of daily debate and organised studying with the whole spectrum of reformed political prisoners I gradually came to the realisation, subconsciously at first, that what I had thought was Islam, was in fact a modern political ideology masquerading as the ancient faith of Islam. Islamists had taken modern day political paradigms and superimposed them onto religion. I now refer to this ideology as Islamism, so as to distinguish it from Islam the faith.

Upon returning to the UK in March 2006 I continued in my activities with *Hizb ut-Tahrir* at the leadership level. At this stage I was in psychological denial, after thirteen years of Islamist activism, that I could have been so wrong. The more my status grew on the Islamist circuit, the

more I felt hypocritical for no longer believing that Islam was a divine political ideology. I had become one of the most well recognised figures amongst Islamists generally and in *Hizb ut-Tahrir* ranks specifically, yet I could not face the fact that I no longer believed in the ideology. I eventually learnt that the group was preparing me for leadership of the UK branch, and this news led me to my final tipping point. In May 2007, thirteen years after joining, I unilaterally announced my resignation from *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, and in September 2007 I appeared on national television to declare that I now recanted Islamism itself.

Understanding the ideology of Islamism

In understanding what the ideology of Islamism is, it would help to begin with the name. The suffix 'ism' has been added to Islam so as to draw attention to the political nature of the subject matter. Islam is a faith; Islamism is an ideology that uses Islam the faith as a justification. Some of you may be reluctant in calling this ideology Islamism. There exists an understandable concern of not wanting to alienate Muslims. It is my contention however that only by using Islamism can one popularise the notion that the ideology is indeed distinct from the faith, and that Islam is innocent from the excesses of Islamism. The presence of Islam in the title should be no more troubling for Muslims than the presence of 'social' in Socialism is for sociologists. The presence of the word Islam in Islamism, like social in socialism, indicates the justificatory claim made by the ideologue rather than an admission of the validity of such a claim. I firmly believe that by claiming the word Islamism, and helping shape how it is used, one can direct the debate in the right way with the intention of distinguishing the ideology from the faith. Finally, for all their feign of offence, Islamists use this word in Arabic when differentiating themselves from other Arab political trends, just as Bathism.

When dealing with this question one must remain cognisant of the fact that the majority of Muslims are not Islamists. Generally, non-Islamist Muslims are from the conservative camp, such as traditionalist Sufis or Deobandis, or the literalist Wahhabis. This camp holds to socially conservative views and is historically apolitical. Non-Islamist Muslims could also be of the progressive camp, such as many leading theologians and academics today. Many in this grouping, and some from the conservatives, may even be politically active. These form the nascent post-Islamist movement of morally inspired politically active Muslims, or Muslim Democrats. However, the majority of progressives are simply secular legal positivists, believing that religion and morals cannot be a basis for strictly defining legal and political decisions. Key to the political activism of the above Muslims is that their politics is not driven by ideology.

The natural question then arises: what is the difference between an Islamist and an ordinary Muslim who may be politically active? Here some identifiers will be highlighted, not as hard and fast rules, but general guidance on the fundamental beliefs that the vast majority of Islamists will hold dear to. It is important to note that just as there is no one single definition to Communism, it is likewise for Islamism. This, of course, does not mean that Communism does not exist just as it does not mean that there is no such thing as Islamism. If, as is claimed, Islamism is a modern ideology, it follows that there must be some basic ideational factors that help shape it, ideas that can be clearly traced as being modern. In this endeavour, I aim to identify an Islamists ideology, law, people and state.

The first identifier of Islamism is the Islamists belief that Islam is not a religion, but a divine political ideology surpassing Communism and Capitalism. An implication of this is the Islamist assertion that Islam must have provided a detailed and divinely pre-ordained stance on matters such as political structure or the economy and these must lie, by definition, in contradistinction to structures already available in Capitalism and Communism. If these structures and systems are deemed absent, the Islamists will work to bring them about. Hence the Islamist desires to 'Islamise' all aspects of society and life. This also carries with it the Islamist assertion, subsequently also subscribed to by prominent non-Muslim commentators, that Islam is in perennial conflict with other ideologies, just like Communism in the cold war. In fact, the founder of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* used to be a Bathist or an Arab Socialist, which is where he found much of his

political inspiration. Moreover, Islamists have long suffered due to their lack of theological legitimacy having been founded by political activists rather than theologians. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, was a school-teacher. The founder of the Indian subcontinent offshoot of the Brotherhood, Jamat-e-Islami, was a journalist by the name of Abul 'Ala Mawdudi. Osama Bin Laden is an engineer and Zawahiri a medical doctor, as was the man who recruited me to *Hizb ut-Tahrir* all those years ago, the current head of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in the UK. Due to Islamists' emphasis on modern political thought they tend to attract those who have a modern education, those who can grasp discussions on sovereignty, statehood and economy yet whose disciplines are not these social science subjects themselves, thereby explaining their willingness to adopt political ideas that lack nuance. A qualified theologian would rarely claim that Islam is a political ideology, unless he has been reared exclusively by an Islamist party to become a theologian so as to reinterpret the theology in light of the ideology, such as the Brotherhood reared Qardawi.

The second identifier is the Islamist claim that the Muslim religious code, known as the *Shari'ah*, demands implementation on state level as codified law. In other words, the legal and illegal of state law must be synchronised with *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (impermissible) of the religious code. This again is a modern innovation unheard of in traditional Islamic sources. Muslim history is in fact bereft of examples of any type of *Shari'ah* being wholesale adopted as state law. Despite this, Islamists place so much emphasis on synchronising the *Shari'ah* with codified state law that they consider it a matter of apostasy if someone were to claim otherwise. Such a demand gives rise to Islamist claims of un-Islamic, hence illegitimate, laws that subsequently need to be Islamised. On the contrary, normal Muslims are perfectly happy for the *Shari'ah* to remain a personal code of conduct.

The third identifier is the Islamist notion of the *ummah*, or Muslim community, forming a political rather than simply a religious identity. This has parallels to the Communist idea of the international proletariat. The subsequent implication for Islamists is that loyalty and allegiances are owed to this global community above all else. Hence, an Islamist will not consider a non-Muslim as being from 'his people', nor will he accept any national identity. Normal Muslims, on the other hand, consider the *ummah* as a religious community; hence they are free to adopt as their political identity any of a number of things. In fact, the Prophet himself declared – as a civil leader – that Jewish, Christian and Muslim residents of his city-state were all “one *ummah*”, as ‘citizens’.

The final identifier is the Islamist dream of having an ideological entity to represent the above three elements in the form of an expansionist Muslim bloc, the Caliphate. Its Ideology will be Islamism, its law an adoption on *Shari'ah* and its people the global Muslim political bloc. Just as the international proletariat, the global political bloc for Communists, required an expansionist state to proactively 'liberate' workers from the tyranny of Capitalism, likewise the Caliphate must proactively intervene in the affairs of other states so as to 'liberate' Muslim residents from the yoke of '*kufir*', or disbelief. Normal Muslims have no such expansionist dreams. Muslim theological authorities in each country have time and time again made the point that the days of religiously inspired expansionism went out with the Middle Ages.

It is not strange that a modern-day supremacist ideology with aspirations of a super-state and a higher people emerged in the Middle-East post World War I. The end of the age of empires led to the same phenomenon in Europe. Whereas European Fascist, Communist and Nazi parties emerged from the ashes of defeated European empires, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to Islamist parties emerging in the Middle East. The very same characteristics of expansionist super-states, a higher-people, and political party organisation are to be found in each of these supremacist phenomena. Such a development can be explained in the crisis of identity experienced by collective peoples in the aftermath of the old-world order empires collapsing.

Trends in Islamist movements

The above four elements, in general, form common ground for all types of Islamists. Despite sharing these core ideological goals however, Islamists may differ in both the intensity and candour with which they advocate them. Moreover, they certainly do differ in their strategic methodology of bringing about these four. There are three overarching strands of methodology employed by Islamists, political, revolutionary and militant. There is a great deal of both intra and inter rivalry between the many groups of each strand.

Political Islamists form the original expression of religion as ideology. Founded in 1928 by a school-teacher, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood now employs entry-level tactics to gain power in Muslim majority countries through the ballot-box with a view to gradually “Islamising” the political structure and laws via a fifth column of committed activists. The Muslim Brotherhood – *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* – encompassed a social movement more than an ideology, though the party was very well disciplined. In 1941 a journalist by the name of Abu ‘Ala Mawdudi founded the Indian Jamat-e-Islami. By building on the Brotherhood’s generalised expression Mawdudi articulated a clearer intellectual case for Islamism with slightly more conservatively religious tendencies, but still adhered to entry-level tactics.

Revolutionary Islamists are those, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (1953), who are fundamentally anti-establishment. This category believes in instigating military coups against regimes with the purpose of coming to power in one clean sweep. They advocate that to use the ballot box legitimises the system of ‘*Kufr*’ - or apostasy- and hence is absolutely forbidden. Founded by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, a former Arab Socialist - or Bathist, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* crystallised the generalised ideological expression of the Brotherhood by heavily borrowing from Communist ideological paradigms and Bolshevik party political theory. Uniquely, Nabhani was the only qualified Islamic jurist amongst the founders of major Islamist movements and had served as a *Shari’ah* court appeals judge in Jerusalem. His academic background allowed Nabhani to skilfully weave European political thought with *Shari’ah* legalisms, combining them with the Bathist tactic of military coups. Through *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, Islamism had found its polemicists. In 1964 Sayid Qutb, having met and debated Nabhani in Jerusalem, marked a departure from the Brotherhood’s generalised ‘social movement’ by exporting a combination of Nabhani’s revolutionary Islamism and Mawdudi’s conservative Islamism into Egypt through his book, ‘Milestones’. Nabhani’s ideas were also shared by his good Iraqi friend Baqir al-Sadr, a hugely revered Shi’ah theologian, who popularised Islamism to many Shi’ah in Iraq through his book “Our Philosophy”.

Militant Islamists – or Jihadists - built on the solid theoretical grounds provided to them by Nabhani and Qutb but believed in creating their own army – instead of using Nabhani’s theory of recruiting from the existing army – so as to remove the infidel regimes. This category forms the violent Islamists, many of whom legitimise terrorism as a tactic, and eventually lead to what is witnessed today of the loose affiliation known as al-Qaida.

Islamist roots behind the tactic of terrorism

Not all Islamists employ terrorism as a tactic, but Islamist terrorists are by definition a product and offshoot of Islamist groups. This in no way implies that non-violent Islamists should be legally proscribed; rather it highlights the need for civil society to challenge Islamists even if they are to remain legally tolerated. Civil tolerance must be and always has been distinct from legal tolerance. In the UK the BNP are legal, but are shunned in civil society. Such a shift in tolerance attitude is only possible through education about what it is that Islamists actually believe, and how their beliefs act as ideological inspiration to terrorists. The heritage of Islamist terrorists can be traced both via the ideational inspiration behind key terrorist leaders and via the historical evolution of terrorism as a tactic.

Ideational roots:

In 1953 it was Nabhani, and *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, who first expressed the three aims most commonly associated with al-Qaida and Ayman al-Zawahiri today. These three aims, stated clearly in Nabhani's early works, are to i) overthrow Muslim majority regimes, ii) establish in their wake an expansionist Caliphate ruling by '*Shari'ah*', and iii) destroy Israel and then conquer the rest of the available world via '*Jihad*'. It was Nabhani who first classified the entire world as *Dar al-Harb* – the abode of war - due to the dominance of '*Kufr*' throughout. It just so happened that Nabhani's methodology in fighting this war was by using pre-existing militaries rather than creating his own army. Only a return to ruling by the '*Shari'ah*' would restore *Dar al-Islam* - the abode of peace to the world. Nabhani also considered that no legitimacy could be granted to the existing rulers, as they were violating God's mandate by ruling with '*Kufr*'. Hence, forcibly removing them was legitimate and no international treaty or law of theirs was to be recognised. It doesn't take a long leap in the imagination to move from *Hizb ut-Tahrir*'s stance of recruiting from an existing army to al-Qaida's stance of recruiting their own.

Historical evolution:

The above ideational history is born out by historical cases where many violent off-shoots have indeed emerged from Islamist groups where ever they have operated. It is important to note that Islamism began as a non-Wahhabi, Salafist reform movement in Egypt. Politically, it grew into a rigid dogma, yet socially it remained relatively liberal, even through the emergence of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. In fact, much to the protestations of non-Islamist conservatives, Islamists dressed in Western dress, listened music and did not oblige women to cover their faces. These modern political ideologues eventually found themselves seeking asylum in the Gulf. Here, the political rigidity of Islamism fused with the social rigidity of conservatives, in this case Wahhabis, and it is through this powder-keg that Islamist terrorism emerged.

The historical evolution from Islamism to Jihadism, after mixing with conservatism, requires proper attention. In the Egypt, Sadat's assassins, known as Tanzim al-Jihad, eventually split into al-Gama'a al-Islamiyyah and al-Jihad al-Islami. These groups are Wahhabi in creed. The teacher of the parent group, the terrorist Tanzim al-Jihad, was a non-Wahhabi *Hizb ut-Tahrir* Islamist member known as Salim al-Rahhal. To cite another example, the Islamist Mohammad Qutb, Sayyid Qutb's brother, was Wahhabi Osama Bin Laden's teacher. Abdullah Azzam, the first leader who so inspired Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan was also a non-Wahhabi Islamist Muslim Brotherhood member. In Great Britain, Omar Bakri, the former leader of Islamist but non-Wahhabi *Hizb ut-Tahrir* UK began glorifying terrorism after becoming a Wahhabi. The same phenomenon – of Islamism merging with conservatism to produce terrorism – occurred in the Indian sub-continent. The very conservative Deobandi denomination was exposed to Islamism via Pakistan and the Afghan Jihad, leading to the emergence of the Taliban.

The above submission has focused till now on the Islamist ideology, or the pull factor behind terrorism. What cannot be ignored also are the grievances that may be exploited by Islamists to further aid their recruitment. It is noted that the aforementioned evolution of political Islamism to the more extreme revolutionary Islamism, ending with militant Islamism, largely occurred through Egyptian prisons. However, what is noteworthy is the way in which ideology interacts with grievances. Ideology serves to reinterpret local grievances as a global ideological struggle, in turn 'discovering' more grievances where the ideological solution is deemed absent. If such local grievances could be minimised, the fodder that ideologues use to plant new pastures would be denied to them. Policy grievances, however, must only be changed if they form bad policy, not merely because terrorists hold a country hostage.

Concluding recommendations

The Quilliam Foundation has been established in London as a counter-extremism think tank aimed at simultaneously providing advice on policy reform where needed, and to provide a thorough counter-narrative to the Islamist ideology for the first time. An alternative of Western Islam, which would be at one with its host society, is encouraged as the long-term option.

In concluding this submission to the Senate, I recommend that the US government does not enter into the 'representative' game with the organised minority who have hijacked, as I once did, the voice of the silent non-Islamist majority. I recommend that work must be done to solve this problem without subconsciously accepting any Islamist premise. Hence, a 'Muslim' based approach by government – seeking to find the 'Muslim political voice' will only serve to aid the Islamist cause of identifying Muslims as a political bloc rather than religious community. Such a mistake falls for the assumption that Muslims must indeed have one political stance on any given matter, as they form one ideological bloc defined by religion. Rather, a problems-based localised and bottom-up approach, treating Muslims as citizens, is advised. This approach has been adopted by the British government and involves networking amongst normal non-Islamist local Muslims who are working in their communities to make better neighbourhoods for all. Governments cannot win arguments in communities; only civil society can achieve this. Governments can, however, empower civil society to make the necessary arguments and some very encouraging efforts towards this already exist. Existing State Department fact-finding missions to Europe should be encouraged and broadened so that networking and support can truly be facilitated for Europe's nascent voices rising against the dominant Islamist discourse. Banning non-terrorist Islamist movements is counter-productive, provides them kudos and would merely drive them underground. However, government cooperation with Islamist groups provides them with much-craved legitimacy and should be avoided. Rather, civil society should be fully equipped in dealing with and challenging Islamist ideas and groups where they emerge.

Senator Leiberman, ranking member Collins, Committee members and staff I thank you all for your time and for presenting me with the opportunity to address you here today. I hope that my contributions serve to distinguish the noble faith of Islam from the scourge that is Islamism, so that adequate policies can be adopted when dealing with this problem without targeting or alienating normal ordinary Muslims, who are as much victims to this scourge than anybody else. The Quilliam Foundation's staff stand ready to be called upon whenever they may be required, and hope to assist in any way possible to liberate Islam from Islamism.