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al-Muhajiroun?

Containing the Emigrants in a
Democratic Society

Paper prepared for the Commission for Countering Extremism
London, United Kingdom

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What is to be Done about al-Muhajiroun? Containing the Emigrants in a Democratic Society¹

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¹ I thank Dr. Kurt Braddock and several anonymous readers for their thoughtful comments on this paper.

Al-Muhajiroun (Arabic for “the Emigrants”) is an outlawed network that indoctrinates young Britons into its radical ideology and high-risk activism.² Since its formation as an offshoot of Hizb ut-Tahrir in 1996, the activist network has sought to create a religious theocracy in Britain grounded in its interpretation of Islamic scripture and history. Over the years its supporters have been implicated in political violence, including terrorist attacks within and outside Great Britain. Yet the Emigrants have tried to establish the Islamic state primarily through provocative, nonviolent activism. They exercise their activism through “da’wah,” preaching their politicized interpretation of the faith on public streets, and “commanding good and forbidding evil,” protesting against British and Western policies activists consider harmful to Muslims. “The main purpose of the organization,” a leading activist explains, “is to call society to Islam, command good and forbid evil, and to establish the khilafah [caliphate], which is the Islamic state.”³

Al-Muhajiroun and its affiliated groups, including Followers of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama’ah, Islam4UK, and Muslims Against Crusades, have never come close to achieving this final objective. They have, however, captured the attention of Britain’s authorities and news media, primarily through their confrontational protests. The British government has tried to eliminate the network for years. This pressure has weakened the activist network, but failed to eliminate it. One reason for this is the Emigrants’ adaptability. Whenever the government cracks down against them, activists respond by changing their activism. This malleability has allowed them to continue their contentious politics long after their original leader,

² Activists no longer refer to their group as al-Muhajiroun or themselves as al-Muhajiroun activists. The British government banned the organization known as “al-Muhajiroun” in January 2010 (other groups in the network, including al-Ghurabaa and the Saved Sect, were banned in 2006). Since then it has been illegal for anyone to belong to al-Muhajiroun or to organize activism in its name. In this paper, I use this term, along with its English equivalent, “the Emigrants,” to refer to the network of different groups and individuals who follow the teachings of Omar Bakri Mohammed and seek to create an Islamic state in Britain, primarily through street preaching and provocative activism. These activists follow a “covenant of security” in Britain, meaning they cannot attack their fellow citizens as long as their lives and livelihoods are protected by the government and they are allowed to preach their political and religious beliefs. Al-Muhajiroun’s ideology is “radical” in the sense that if successfully implemented it would profoundly change the United Kingdom, replacing its democratic system with an ISIS-style theocracy. Whether these activists are capable of bringing about such a revolutionary change is a separate question.

³ Interview with leading activist, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010. All references to activists and supporters refer to al-Muhajiroun activists. I conducted the interviews myself. References to “Islam” and related phenomena refer to activists’ understanding of these concepts. Al-Muhajiroun’s interpretation of Islam is quite specific and grounded in Omar Bakri’s teachings.

Omar Bakri Mohammed, left Britain, and the network suffered other setbacks, including the organization's formal ban or "proscription" by the authorities. In recent years, a number of former activists and supporters have been implicated in terrorism. These disrupted plots and executed attacks amplified the network's notoriety. The Emigrants' decision in 2014 to accept Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate as legitimate, and the subsequent exodus of numerous activists to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), further cemented their extremist credentials.

Beginning in the autumn of 2010, I spent four-and-a-half years interviewing al-Muhajiroun activists and former activists.⁴ During seven research trips to Britain, between November 2010 and July 2015, I carried out ninety-seven interviews with forty-eight activists.⁵ I also conducted eleven interviews with eight former activists, some of whom were still active during our initial discussions.⁶ I supplemented my interviews by observing activists in their "natural" settings.⁷ I spent hundreds of hours watching activists at two dozen street preaching or "da'wah" stalls, political protests, and study circles, and hanging out with them at restaurants and two indoctrination centers in East London. The purpose of all my "soaking and poking" was to better understand how and why individuals decided to join this controversial network, how they adapted their activism in response to pressure, and why many activists eventually left. I reported the results of my research in several publications, including *The Islamic State in Britain*.⁸ This paper draws from and extends the findings in that book.

⁴ I first met and interviewed network activists in September 2007 while researching a different project. This initial research facilitated my access to the network three years later.

⁵ These included eight leading activists who directed the network's activism, eleven veterans with years of experience in al-Muhajiroun, and twenty-nine rank-and-file "da'is" or proselytizers who performed much of the network's day-to-day activism.

⁶ I also interviewed forty-one respondents who were not personally involved in al-Muhajiroun, but who followed the network's activism closely. These included British and American law enforcers, security officials, and community activists. In all, I conducted 148 interviews with ninety-seven people within and outside the activist network.

⁷ Richard F. Fenno, Jr., "Notes on Method: Participant Observation," in *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Pearson, 2002), pp. 249-295; Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd edition (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2011).

⁸ Michael Kenney, *The Islamic State in Britain: Radicalization and Resilience in an Activist Network* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The Ideological Struggle

The heart of al-Muhajiroun's activism is what activists call the "ideological battle" between their Salafi-Islamist world view and what they see as the "corrupt" Western ideas of liberal democracy and free market capitalism.⁹ The Emigrants are essentially a proselytization network engaged in a political struggle. They pursue their struggle through da'wah stalls, demonstrations, and conferences that push the limits of free speech and association in Britain. The network's protests and conferences are often deliberately confrontational, to attract attention from the news media. During demonstrations activists express their outrage against the West's perceived "war on Islam" by shouting provocative slogans and burning symbols of national power, including replicas of the British and American flags. When their protests receive widespread media coverage, activists consider it a success, encouraging them to be even more provocative the next time.

The Emigrants' "Media Jihad"

In their quest to establish the Islamic state in Britain, the Emigrants have frequently engaged the news media. Prior to hosting high-profile events, leaders would text and email their press contacts, encouraging them to attend. This increased the spread, if not necessarily the appeal, of their message through broad media coverage. Over the years, Britain's tabloid media has churned out hundreds of reports documenting al-Muhajiroun's most provocative antics.

Activists realized that many reporters portrayed them as outrageous fanatics. They accepted this as necessary to spread their message to the widest possible audience, including potential supporters. When curiosity seekers approached them to verify media accounts, activists tried to recruit them.¹⁰ Even the most

⁹ Under the guidance of its original emir and spiritual mentor, Omar Bakri Mohammed, al-Muhajiroun incorporates elements of "Salafism" and "Islamism" in its religious beliefs and political activism. For more on these beliefs, and the network's Salafi "activist" and Salafi "jihadi" leanings, see Kenney, *The Islamic State in Britain*, fn. 3, p. 3. My use of the terms "Salafi" and "Salafi-jihadi" will be problematic to some, given how controversial this terminology has become to many Muslims. Yet the alternatives suggested to me, including "khawarij" and "takfiri," are even more problematic given their polemical usage by the same people who recommend I apply them to the Emigrants. As the search for satisfactory, "objective" terminology continues, I prefer to use the language of my respondents—"Salafi" and "Salafi-jihadi"—while acknowledging that many Muslims are offended by al-Muhajiroun's appropriation of these terms. Interviews with activists, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010, and Leyton, East London, November 14, 2010, and former activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011.

¹⁰ Interview with veteran activist, Tottenham, North London, December 4, 2010. Other respondents

scandalous reports in British tabloids enhanced the Emigrants' strategy of "media jihad" by creating the impression that the activist network was a vanguard movement of thousands of supporters spread across the United Kingdom, preparing society for the inevitable coming of the caliphate.

In reality, even during its peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s al-Muhajiroun never numbered more than 150 to 200 dedicated members, along with several hundred supporters. After the British government cracked down against the Emigrants, first after the 9/11 attacks, and then more systematically after the 7/7 bombings in 2005, the number of activists declined to several dozen members and little more than a hundred supporters.¹¹ During the years of my field work, when the network came under intense pressure from the authorities, it shrank even more, to a couple dozen members and several dozen supporters.

Al-Muhajiroun's provocative protests and outsized media presence also made it the perfect foil for far-right and counter-jihad groups in Britain and the United States. Some of these groups sought to exploit the network's activism for their own purposes. The English Defence League, for example, formed in response to a protest against homecoming British troops organized by the Emigrants' spin-off, Islam4UK. Over the next several years the EDL achieved significant notoriety when it countered a number of al-Muhajiroun's high-profile demonstrations. When these protests and counter-protests received substantial media coverage, it enhanced the profile of both the EDL and the Emigrants, a point not lost on activists today. In seeking to remobilize, network activists recently announced their determination to take on far-right extremists in Britain.¹² The widespread media coverage that would likely result from such a confrontation would help the network reemerge as a significant player in London's Islamist scene.

confirmed this. Author's field notes, Centre for Islamic Services, Whitechapel, East London, December 16, 2010, and interview with veteran activist, Southall, West London, June 28, 2011.

¹¹ Interviews with former supporter, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011, former activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011, and U.S. official, Mayfair, Central London, December 3, 2010. Also, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 10.

¹² Ceylan Yeginsu, "One of U.K.'s Most Prolific Extremist Cells Is Regrouping," *New York Times* (May 18, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/18/world/europe/uk-extremist-cell-anjem-choudary.html> [Accessed May 20, 2019].

Recruitment Focuses on the Young

Al-Muhajiroun's dangerous reputation and media notoriety enhanced its appeal among young people. This fit the network's recruiting strategy, which targeted youngsters who were searching for a sense of identity and who had the time and inclination to become involved in high-risk activism. Activists identified recruits through social networks and group events, including da'wah stalls and public talks by Anjem Choudary and other leading activists. They would invite recruits to these open events, "to engage them" and steer them "into closed study circles."¹³

When recruits expressed interest in learning more, they were put in halaqahs, invitation-only study circles. In these study circles, recruits learned Omar Bakri's teachings and their obligation to prepare British society for the caliphate. Activists and recruits studied the network's religious doctrine and political ideology, but they also spent a lot of time together just hanging out, sharing meals and participating in social activities. The idea was to have fun and build fellowship, so that recruits and activists continued their involvement, while creating a shared identity and sense of belonging. Through these interactions and small group settings leaders and activists built rapport with recruits and established themselves as trusted sources of information, priming them to accept the network's ideology.

Al-Muhajiroun's Malleable Activism

British authorities have repeatedly cracked down against the Emigrants over the years, arresting and convicting activists for a variety of criminal offenses, placing others under administrative controls, and preventing Omar Bakri from returning to Britain after he fled the country in the wake of the 7/7 bombings. Under the authority of the Terrorism Act, amended in 2006, the government sought to ban al-Muhajiroun and its spin-off groups for glorifying terrorism. On four occasions—July 2006, January 2010, November 2011, and June 2014—different British Home Secretaries formally proscribed eleven al-Muhajiroun-affiliated groups.¹⁴

¹³ Interview with former activist, Walthamstow, East London, July 17, 2012. Also, interviews with leading activist, Walthamstow, East London, June 22, 2011, former activists, Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011 and Walthamstow, East London, July 17, 2012, and former female activist, Hounslow, West London, June 21, 2011.

¹⁴ Home Office, *Proscribed Terrorist Organisations*, May 3, 2017, p. 6; Legislation.gov.uk, "Terrorism Act 2000 c. 11, Part II, Procedure, Section 3, Proscription, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/3>.

Rather than crumpling from the pressure, activists bounced back to continue their activism. When the British government banned their groups, activists created new ones and revived old platforms that had not been outlawed.¹⁵ When the government prevented Omar Bakri from returning to Britain, activists reconnected with him through PalTalk and other communications platforms. They also replaced Bakri with several of his most prominent students, who provided day-to-day leadership in Britain. When the government cracked down on their street preaching, activists moved their stalls, took down their most provocative signs, and emphasized the religious nature of their da'wah. When the government restricted their access to large halls, activists engaged in deception to reserve different venues and moved their public talks to smaller sites. They also turned to the Internet to promote their activism, posting their lectures and other materials on websites and social media.

In making these and other changes, activists overcame setbacks and continued their activism in an increasingly hostile environment. Al-Muhajiroun's adaptability, reinforced by the commitment of its activists, made for a resilient network.

The Persistent Activists

Participation in al-Muhajiroun is largely a youth phenomenon. Youngsters typically become involved in the Emigrants during their middle-to-late teenage years and early twenties. Once engaged, they participate enthusiastically for several months to a few years before eventually turning away. Turnover is high in al-Muhajiroun, a point conceded by current and former activists alike.¹⁶ In fact, turnover is so common among rank-and-file activists that network leaders have resigned themselves to it. "People come and go," explains a leading activist. "It's not anything strange and we are not really keeping count of who's with us and who's not."¹⁷

¹⁵ This was how activists revived the "al-Muhajiroun" name in 2009, almost five years after Omar Bakri publicly "disbanded" the group. *The Islamic State in Britain* contains a table with the names of 181 spin-off groups and platforms network activists have used over the years, within and outside Britain (pp. 152-154).

¹⁶ Interviews with former supporter, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011, and former activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011. High turnover is not unique to al-Muhajiroun. It is common in high-risk activist groups. For more on this phenomenon, with reference to peace and labor activists in the Netherlands, see Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 97.

¹⁷ Interview with leading activist, Whitechapel, East London, December 7, 2010. Also, Interview with

The principal exception to al-Muhajiroun's high turnover is a small group of leading and veteran activists who have been involved for many years. These are the "persistent activists."¹⁸ These devoted followers are career activists. During my field work they organized the network's da'wah stalls and protests, formed its spin-off groups, indoctrinated activists in its worldview, and represented the Emigrants to the news media. They typically joined at a young age and studied closely with Omar Bakri. Their loyalty to Bakri knows few bounds. Their mentor is beyond reproach, his ideology unassailable.

Many persistent activists have paid a steep price for their loyalty. They have been arrested and had their homes raided, repeatedly. They have been imprisoned for crimes related to their activism. They have been subjected to administrative controls, such as the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs). They are vilified in the news media and they are disavowed by other Muslims. Despite the pressure, most of these activists have continued their involvement well into their thirties and, in some cases, forties and fifties. Al-Muhajiroun owes much of its resilience to their persistence.

Leaving al-Muhajiroun

Turnover is higher among rank-and-file activists, the people who perform much of the network's daily activism. For these individuals, participation is a passionate, and ultimately passing, fancy of adolescence and young adulthood. As with joining the Emigrants, leaving is a dynamic process involving multiple factors. These factors interact in different ways for different people.¹⁹ Yet patterns do emerge. Many activists gradually mature out of the Emigrants as they age beyond adolescence and accept the responsibilities of adulthood. They burn out from the relentless pace of their activism, of constantly having to participate in another da'wah stall or demonstration. They grow tired of repeating the same lessons in

another leading activist, Leyton, East London, November 4, 2010.

¹⁸ The term comes from research on social movements. See Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest*; James Downton Jr. and Paul Wehr, *The Persistent Activist: How Peace Commitment Develops and Survives* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); and Donatella della Porta, "Leaving Underground Organizations: A Sociological Analysis of the Italian Case," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 66-87.

¹⁹ Mary Beth Altier, Christian N. Thoroughgood and John G. Horgan, "Turning Away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology, and Criminology," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (2014), p. 648; Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest*, p. 97.

their weekly halaqahs and listening to the same speakers, often working from their notes of Omar Bakri's old lectures. They become frustrated with the network's demands on their time and the frequent requests for money. They grow weary of fighting with their parents, of having to justify their activism to Muslim relatives who dispute their understanding of the religion.

In the midst of all this burning out and growing up, activists' commitment to the Emigrants weakens. They begin to question how shouting aggressive slogans and burning replicas of British and American flags will actually lead to the caliphate. They see that the network's strategy of activism has produced few tangible results, beyond landing some activists in jail and building up their leaders' profiles as some of the "most hated" preachers in Britain. They realize that their provocations cause more harm than good to fellow Muslims who are stigmatized with the network's belligerent activism. And they become disillusioned with al-Muhajiroun's understanding of Islam, which they see is grounded in one man's interpretation of scripture, a man who has changed his theological beliefs more than once.²⁰

Disengaging, Deradicalizing, and Escalating to Violence

People who leave the Emigrants experience a range of outcomes. Some "disengage" from the network without necessarily "deradicalizing" in the sense of changing their ideological beliefs. Others leave and gradually alter their political and religious beliefs in basic and profound ways.²¹ Still others depart only to escalate to political violence. This variation is reflected in my respondent sample. Table 1 (below) classifies the different outcomes experienced by my respondents.

²⁰ During al-Muhajiroun's early years, Omar Bakri followed a "rationalist" theology associated with the Maturidi tradition of Sunni Islam. By 2002 he changed his theological beliefs and embraced the fundamentalist doctrine associated with Salafism. This major theological change led some of Bakri's less committed followers to question his religious credibility. Some even left the network over this issue. But persistent activists saw Bakri's willingness to question and change his theological beliefs as a sign of his piety and intellectual maturity.

²¹ The distinction between "disengagement" and "deradicalization" comes from John Horgan and other researchers. See Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, "Turning Away from Terrorism"; and Sarah V. Marsden, *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Table 1: Status of al-Muhajiroun Respondents, circa 2017²²

Estimated status of respondent at end of data collection	Number of al-Muhajiroun respondents	Percentage of al-Muhajiroun respondent sample (n = 48)
Still involved with al-Muhajiroun	13	27%
Status unknown	18	38%
Left without escalating to violence	7	15%
In prison custody serving sentences for crimes related to their activism	10	21%
Implicated in terrorist plot in the UK or left Britain to join ISIS or another militant group in Iraq and Syria	9	19%

Source: Kenney, *The Islamic State in Britain*, p. 193.

Starting with those who did not leave, of the forty-eight activists I interviewed, at least thirteen were still involved in the network at the end of my research. Most of these were persistent activists. This represents 27% of my activist sample.²³ Given the amount of pressure activists faced in the United Kingdom this number is striking. It speaks to the resilience of the network, at least among a small, core group of persistent activists. At the time of my coding in 2017, several of these individuals were not involved in day-to-day activism because they were serving prison sentences or under some form of administrative control, which kept them from interacting with other activists.²⁴

²² Readers should interpret these numbers with caution. The percentages refer only to my sample of respondents and cannot be generalized to larger populations, within or outside al-Muhajiroun. Also, eighteen “status unknowns” in a sample of forty-eight is a lot of missing data. The respondent count in the table’s middle column is higher than forty-eight because I classified several respondents as being imprisoned yet still involved with the activist network. Finally, I cannot discount the possibility of measurement error in these estimates. I share these figures to illustrate my respondents’ diverse trajectories, rather than to suggest I have complete or perfect knowledge about their outcomes.

²³ I am reasonably confident in this estimate because I could see for myself that these activists remained involved. However, the real number may be higher because I do not know what happened to eighteen respondents who were active when I interviewed them.

²⁴ These controls include Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Terrorism Prevention and

This is changing. A number of persistent activists have recently been released from prison or completed their administrative controls. Activists who are no longer “on licence” (parole) or under other restrictions are free to reengage in their activism, as long as they do not organize under a proscribed name such as al-Muhajiroun. I return to this issue and the challenge it presents to authorities below.

At least seven respondents left the Emigrants in the years after their interviews without radicalizing further into political violence. This represents 15% of my sample of network activists.²⁵ This does not include seven more respondents who had already left the network by the time I interviewed them, between 2010 and 2016. These fourteen individuals no longer participate in the network’s activism, but not all of them have left its ideology behind. Some remain sympathetic to al-Muhajiroun’s ideals, including its mission of establishing a theocracy in Britain. They have disengaged from the network but not deradicalized from its culture.²⁶

Other respondents no longer believe many of the ideas they once followed. They have truly left al-Muhajiroun behind, rejecting its core beliefs and confrontational activism. Leaving the Emigrants is usually a gradual process. It involves moving along a continuum of small, yet significant, attitudinal and behavioral changes. Some individuals reject Omar Bakri’s teachings and accept the legitimacy of Britain’s political system, but they still hold beliefs many Britons would find objectionable. Others move farther along this continuum, internalizing the values of Great Britain’s inclusive, multi-cultural society. And some go beyond changing their beliefs to changing their behavior. Four of my respondents who were involved in al-Muhajiroun not only disengaged from the activist network, they became involved in preventing violent extremism.

Tragically, other individuals moved in the opposite direction, leaving the Emigrants only to escalate into political violence. Among the forty-eight respondents who were involved in the activist network at the time of their interviews, nine were later implicated in terrorist plots in the United Kingdom or left Britain to fight on behalf of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This represents 19% of my sample of activists. Four of these nine activists were later reported in the media as being killed in Iraq or Syria. At least one has reportedly returned to the United Kingdom. Five more

Investigation Measures (TPIMs), and Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAAPA).

²⁵ The real number of activists who left the network without escalating to violence is probably higher because I do not know what happened to eighteen of my respondents. At least some of these individuals likely discontinued their activism without escalating to violence.

²⁶ Interviews with former supporter, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011, and Whitechapel, East London, June 18, 2011, and leading activist, Ilford, East London, November 29, 2010.

respondents tried to leave Britain for Iraq and Syria but were caught before they made it and sent home by the authorities. When added to the list of those who made it to the Islamic State or who were implicated in recent terrorist plots in the United Kingdom, this suggests that at least fourteen activists in my sample, representing 29%, mobilized to political violence. This remarkably high figure suggests that many activists accepted the legitimacy of the Islamic State's caliphate and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's invitation to emigrate.²⁷ It also underscores the challenges facing British security officials.²⁸

The departure of so many activists in recent years has further weakened al-Muhajiroun. Replacing activists is not easy, particularly in a marginalized network under pressure from the authorities. Today, the Emigrants are smaller, more fragmented, and less active than they have been since the earliest days of their activism. Following the group's decision to embrace the Islamic State in the summer of 2014, the government cracked down again. This led to the imprisonment of several persistent activists, along with administrative controls for others. The network has declined from hundreds of supporters who followed Omar Bakri and Anjem Choudary during its heyday in the late 1990s to a few dozen supporters. Activists do not currently organize high profile demonstrations, public conferences, or even the large da'wah stalls they once called "Islamic roadshows." The public preaching they do organize, within and outside London, tends to be small and low-key, with a focus on the religious side of their da'wah.

²⁷ This appears to have been an individual decision. Activists were not told by Anjem Choudary or other leaders to "make hijrah" or emigrate to the Islamic State. They made this decision on their own. Moreover some activists decided *not* to emigrate. These individuals believed their role was to continue the political struggle in the United Kingdom.

²⁸ Like the other outcomes, the real number may be higher given that I don't know what happened to eighteen of my respondents. Significantly, a number of individuals who mobilized to violence faced legal problems related to their activism in Britain. As the authorities turned up the pressure, making it harder for them to engage in da'wah, the attraction of waging jihad and building the caliphate increased. Government pressure, in other words, helped push some of these individuals towards political violence. The relationship between state pressure and escalation to violence is not limited to al-Muhajiroun. Scholars who have observed this dynamic in different countries and historical periods include Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Marc Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

The Network Has Begun to Remobilize

In recent months, a number of persistent activists have finished their TPIMs and other administrative controls. They are now free to reconnect with their colleagues and reengage in their activism. Despite participating in compulsory “deradicalization” programming, these leading and veteran activists have not changed their beliefs. For them, the ideological struggle continues. Mindful of their hostile environment, they proceed with caution, testing the waters in various online and offline settings. The loss of ISIS’ territorial caliphate does not deter them. In their view, the Islamic State came back before and will come back again. They also insist that the ultimate reward for their activism comes not from creating the Islamic state in this life, but in reaching “paradise” in the next.

It remains uncertain whether the Emigrants can rebound as robustly as they did from previous crackdowns. But they seem determined to try. Whether they succeed will depend on at least three factors. First are the persistent activists themselves. These leading and veteran activists have weathered previous counter-terrorism storms, including prison and proscription, only to emerge more committed than before. Rather than turning these activists away from al-Muhajiroun, imprisonment often increases their status in the network and prolongs their activism. No amount of state pressure or compulsory deradicalization is likely to change their beliefs. Paradoxically, such pressure tends to reinforce them, reminding activists they must be on the right path because, in accordance with their reading of scripture, the “hypocrites” and “non-believers” hate them.

A second factor necessary for the remobilization of network activists are recruits and rank-and-file activists. This remains a weakness for the Emigrants. Even if persistent activists reengage, as they have begun to do, there are too few of them to make much of an impact without help from others. A dozen or so diehards can only do so much. Getting rank-and-file activists reengaged in the network and recruiting new supporters will be essential if the activist network formerly known as al-Muhajiroun is to reemerge as a force in London’s Islamist scene. Will these former rank-and-file activists decide to reengage with the Emigrants now that ISIS has lost its territorial caliphate? The challenge facing persistent activists is to draw their former colleagues back in while expanding their pool of recruits.

The third factor that will shape the network’s re-emergence are the halaqahs. These small, tightly-knit groups have always been essential to the Emigrants. They allow activists to indoctrinate each other in the network’s ideology and coordinate their activism despite intense counter-terrorism pressure. As persistent activists reengage in their activism, they will seek to renew their bonds with rank-and-file activists and build relationships with new recruits through the halaqahs. These

small groups, located within and outside London, continue to provide the social base for al-Muhajiroun's activism. Their small group structure allows activists to meet and interact on a regular basis, strengthening their in-group ties and their fellowship.

Containing al-Muhajiroun in a Democratic Society

Whether the Emigrants succeed in reinventing themselves in Great Britain depends not only on their persistent activists, potential recruits, and halaqahs. It also depends on how the British government, the news media, and local communities respond. Many policy discussions on countering extremism in the United Kingdom focus on what the government should do, such as increasing criminal penalties for extremism-related crimes and giving police and prosecutors broader powers to pursue their investigations.

In one sense this focus is understandable. The British government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from violence. The country suffered several terrorist attacks in 2017, including at least one by a former al-Muhajiroun supporter.²⁹ The government's pursuit of more aggressive counter-terrorism laws in this context is not surprising. However the focus on legislation and enforcement should not overshadow the critical role local communities and civil society can play in countering extremism.

The current approach risks overemphasizing the government's ability to stamp out groups like al-Muhajiroun without undermining the country's political rights and civil liberties. The British government may have reached the limits of its state-centric approach to combatting the Emigrants. Persistent activists who were convicted of inviting support for a terrorist group, and others who were caught traveling to Iraq and Syria, have been arrested, prosecuted, and convicted for their crimes. Activists who made it to Iraq and Syria and joined the Islamic State and

²⁹ Lizzie Dearden, "London attack linked to hate preacher Anjem Choudary's extremist network," *The Independent* (June 6, 2017), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-attack-bridge-borough-isis-perpetrators-khuran-butt-links-anjem-choudary-documentary-jihadis-a7776101.html> [Accessed June 6, 2017]; Rukmini Callimachi and Katrin Bennhold, "London Attackers Slipped By Despite an Avalanche of Warnings," *New York Times* (June 6, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/europe/london-assailants-terrorism-warning-signs-fbi.html> [Accessed June 7, 2017]; Robert Booth, Ian Cobain, Vikram Dodd, Matthew Taylor, and Lisa O'Carroll, "London Bridge attacker named as Khuram Butt," *The Guardian* (June 6, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/05/london-bridge-attacker-named-as-khuran-butt> [Accessed June 6, 2017].

other terrorist groups have mostly been killed, or their whereabouts remain unknown. In Britain, some persistent activists stayed behind and continued their political struggle after Anjem Choudary and others were jailed in 2016 and 2017. They are now being joined by senior colleagues who completed their TPIMs. Persistent activists like Choudary who have recently been released from prison remain on license and are not likely to re-engage with the Emigrants for now. Otherwise they risk being sent back to prison for violating their parole. However, these activists are expected to complete their sentences in the summer of 2021, after which they will presumably be free to renew their activism.

The history of al-Muhajiroun suggests that recent changes in British law, as established in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act (2019), may not have the desired effect of stopping the Emigrants. Now that the British government has increased criminal penalties for extremism-related crimes, including inviting support for a proscribed terrorist organization, network activists are likely to adapt so that they remain on the right-side of the law. This was how they responded to previous attempts to curtail their activism, including the government's proscription policy. For example, the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act lowers the inviting support threshold by making it illegal for people to "recklessly" make statements in support of a terrorist organization. Activists will likely avoid this lower threshold by stopping such reckless statements.³⁰ It will be relatively easy for them to propagate their ideology without mentioning the names of specifically proscribed groups, like ISIS and al-Muhajiroun. Similarly, in this new legal environment activists are likely to discuss the "khilafah" (caliphate) as an abstract, aspirational goal, without stating or suggesting they mean ISIS' territorial caliphate.

Activists thrive off making these sorts of simple, tactical changes, while pressing the limits of free speech in Great Britain. Her Majesty's law enforcers have their sights set on Anjem Choudary and other leading activists. They can be expected to use all the tools at their disposal to pressure and disrupts activists who continue their political struggle in Britain. But unless officials are prepared to criminalize all discussion of the caliphate, or prevent activists from meeting in small groups and proselytizing on public streets, which would likely violate their freedom of

³⁰ Home Office, "Overarching Fact Sheet," and "Terrorism Offences Fact Sheet," *Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778175/2019-02-12_Overarching_Fact_Sheet_RA.pdf; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778108/2019-02-11_Terrorist_Offences_Fact_Sheet_RA.pdf [Accessed March 21, 2019]. Also, see Parliament, "Royal Assent: Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill signed into law," (February 12, 2019), <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2019/february/royal-assent--counter-terrorism-and-border-security-bill-signed-into-law/> [Accessed March 18, 2019].

expression and association, increasing criminal penalties and police powers may not destroy what remains of the network.

Beyond the State: Local Communities and Former Activists

Fortunately, public officials and local communities have other options. Turnover is high among the Emigrants, especially among rank-and-file activists. This provides an opportunity to those who find their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and childhood friends drawn to the network. Rather than pushing loved ones who have embraced the Emigrants away, they should engage them and challenge their ideas and practices. Such engagement forces activists to consider different views, while maintaining relationships outside the network. Personal relationships and social bonds can be just as important to pulling people out of al-Muhajiroun as drawing them in.³¹

Engaging activists effectively often requires knowledge of their beliefs and practices. Few people are better positioned for this than former activists, including individuals who now work in local Prevent councils. These “formers” understand al-Muhajiroun’s ideology and culture, and the personal pathways to—and from—the activist network. They’ve lived it. These individuals have the potential to make excellent intervention specialists, especially for young men and women who have gravitated to the network, but not fully embraced its culture. Despite growth in Prevent programs in Great Britain over the past decade, there has been no organized attempt to channel deradicalized former activists into a coherent effort focused on al-Muhajiroun. Several formers in my sample work in different Prevent programs, but these government-funded projects focus on an assortment of people who have been exposed to a range of extremist influences, not just the Emigrants.

What I am proposing here is different: a small, community-led initiative composed of former Emigrants who come together on a volunteer basis to engage young people who are being drawn into the activist network. These former activists would draw on the knowledge they developed in al-Muhajiroun to engage and mentor young recruits. They would seek to develop relationships with them through repeated, noncompulsory interaction. As they break bread together in local restaurants and participate in other activities, the former activists would build trust and rapport with these young supporters. The establishment of rapport and

³¹ Of course, some activists have close family members who are also involved in the network. This makes it harder for them to leave.

credibility is essential. Those who are gravitating to the Emigrants will be more likely to engage meaningfully with former activists if they trust them and listen to what they are saying.

Once former activists have established some trust and rapport with young supporters, they can recall their own days in the activist network, highlighting the aggravations they experienced as activists. Significantly, many of these frustrations revolved around the network's practices and culture of activism.³² These included the Emigrants' constant demands on their time, the frequent requests for money, and the gnawing feeling they were "going nowhere" while their friends outside the network were progressing in their careers and personal lives. The former activists could also share their stories of how they came to question al-Muhajiroun's activism, and the personal successes they experienced after they left the network. They could remind young supporters that virtually all of the Emigrants' teachings are based on the lectures and writings of a single person who is not a classically trained scholar and a few of his hand-picked students. They could assure them that leaving the network does not mean they have to discard their beliefs. They can still engage in da'wah and protest government policies they consider harmful to Muslims. Finally, they could encourage them to expand their intellectual horizons by engaging other Islamic scholars, within and outside the Salafi tradition.

The success of such an undertaking remains far from certain. If directed towards persistent activists it is not likely to work. These deeply committed activists view former activists working in Prevent as "apostates" who have turned their backs on the cause and are cynically exploiting their religion to make money. They regard any compulsory deradicalization programming with deep suspicion, as an attempt by the government to control their thoughts and compel them to accept a "correct," state-sanctioned understanding of Islam. They see their forced participation in such programming as another form of repression, to go along with the raids, arrests, and other controls they have already endured. Drawing their inspiration from the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions when they were persecuted during the early years of Islam, these persistent activists will likely hold steadfast to their beliefs.

If they break the law, these individuals should be held accountable for their actions. But when they engage in lawful, nonviolent activism, they should be given the political space to do so. This is consistent with Great Britain's standing as a democratic society, where believing radical ideas, even ideas that challenge "British

³² For a similar argument, see Damon L. Perry, *The Global Muslim Brotherhood in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 219-220.

values," is not a crime. The people who challenge persistent activists on the da'wah stall should not be the police, but Britain's own Muslim and non-Muslim citizens, who have little interest in seeing their country converted into an ISIS-style theocracy. This already happens, and when it does it makes it harder for activists to spread their ideology and recruit newcomers. They are too busy debating their interlocutors—or being driven away from mosques by groups of worshippers. It also makes it harder for activists to claim that they are not allowed to call people to Islam. This is important because activists have long insisted that if they cannot practice da'wah in Britain "their only option is jihad."³³ Allowing activists to engage in street preaching weakens such claims, and empowers British citizens to challenge the Emigrants' views in public, or simply ignore them.

The Media Should Avoid Sensationalizing the Emigrants

The news media also have an important role to play—and not to play. Like the government's response, sometimes less is more. Since the network's earliest days leading activists like Omar Bakri and Anjem Choudary have sought the media spotlight to spread their views. The media should avoid feeding the Emigrants' strategy of "media jihad" by reporting excessively on the network, even when such coverage may be profitable. Not every provocation by activists is newsworthy. When deciding whether to cover an event, reporters and editors should consider whether the public interest of the story outweighs the risk of playing into activists' hands. If they determine the event merits coverage, they should not only describe the provocative details but report the number of activists in attendance and explain that the flag-burning or other provocation is designed to incite people and attract media attention. Reporters might also avoid writing stories that feature interviews with activists. This only gives them the media platform they crave. When they decide that the greater good merits such interviews, they should balance their accounts by including interviews with former activists and other experts who can explain the activists without sensationalizing or demonizing them.

Above all, print journalists and television producers should avoid turning activists into media stars, like has already happened with Anjem Choudary. With his relentless coverage in the media, Choudary has become the Muslim Britons love to hate. Does his every move and mischievous grin merit the amount of national and international media coverage that greeted his release from prison in October

³³ Interview with leading activist, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010.

2018?³⁴ How will the news media react when Choudary is eventually released from his licensing and other controls, and he becomes free to actually speak with reporters? Reporters, editors, and television news producers should start thinking about this now, so they are prepared for Choudary's return to British society as a free man. Their challenge will be to report newsworthy events clearly and accurately, without sensationalizing the man, amplifying his cause, or suggesting that he somehow represents Britain's "Muslim community."

Conclusion

Al-Muhajiroun's activism has always revolved around what it sees as the ideological battle, not the military one. The Emigrants have sought to create the Islamic state in Britain through preaching and protest, not insurgency and terrorism. The problem facing security officials is that some former activists have rejected the covenant of security and become involved in terrorist plots and attacks in Britain. Others have fled the country and become fighters for ISIS and other terrorist groups. The government has responded to this challenge by increasing criminal penalties for extremism-related offenses and increasing the powers of police and prosecutors to investigate these crimes.

Britain's state-centric approach to countering the Emigrants and counter-extremism more broadly is not surprising. But it has created a "bristling armoury of counter-terrorism laws" that risks undermining the country's political rights and civil liberties, while failing to stop the Emigrants.³⁵ The focus on government legislation also downplays the importance of former activists and local communities in countering al-Muhajiroun. Former activists have the knowledge and experience to counter the Emigrants' narrative. They could engage and debate

³⁴ *NBC News*, "Extremist Preacher Anjem Choudary Greets The Media After Release From U.K. Prison," (October 19, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaWFyDW9eJY> [Accessed March 17, 2019]; Ceylan Yeginsu, "Britain Releases Anjem Choudary, Radical Islamist Preacher, Under Strict Controls," *New York Times* (October 19, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/world/europe/uk-radical-preacher-anjem-choudary.html> [Accessed October 19, 2018]; Vikram Dodd, "Jailed preacher Anjem Choudary faces strict controls after release," *The Guardian* (October 16, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/oct/16/jailed-preacher-anjem-choudary-faces-strict-controls-after-release> [Accessed October 16, 2018]; and Steve Swann, "Anjem Choudary: Security concerns over radical preacher release," *BBC News* (21 September 2018), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45590895> [Accessed September 21, 2018].

³⁵ The "bristling armoury" comment is from the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord David Anderson, "Extremism and the Law," *Treasurer's Lecture*, The Honourable Society of the Middle Temple Hall, 18 March 2019, p. 8.

persistent activists, who they are not likely to change, and young supporters, who they just might.

To be sure, there is no silver bullet solution to al-Muhajiroun. The suggestions offered here may help contain activists, but they are not likely to eliminate them. With their strong ideological orientation, the Emigrants, along with the larger ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated movement, remain as much a state of mind as a specific collective. In the United Kingdom having a certain state of mind, even one that many find extreme and deeply offensive, is not illegal. Nor is engaging in religious proselytizing and political protests. Government authorities and local communities should therefore prepare themselves for the network's re-emergence, at least in some diminished capacity.

Britain and other Western democracies can manage the risk from al-Muhajiroun and other like-minded groups without sacrificing the political rights and civil liberties that are essential to their democratic societies. The discussion over what to do about the Emigrants is merely the latest manifestation of older historical debates about how to handle social groups that espouse revolutionary ideologies. One lesson Great Britain and other Western democracies have learned from their history is to allow groups that engage in nonviolent dissent the political space to express their views lawfully, however extreme and unpopular those views may be. Applied to the Emigrants, this should be done without turning activists into media darlings and giving them the platform they need to amplify their notoriety. Activist networks like al-Muhajiroun may not be wiped out completely, but they can be contained.

One reason for this is that the Emigrants' state of mind is highly marginalized. In recent years they have become increasingly isolated from Britain's diverse Muslim communities. Their isolation grew after leading activists' short-sighted decision to align themselves with the Islamic State in 2014, and the country experienced several ISIS-inspired attacks in 2017. Former activists are not the only British Muslims who resist the Emigrants' desire to convert their country into an ISIS-style theocracy. Even if Anjem Choudary and other persistent activists rebound from their prison sentences to reengage in their activism, they will not likely return the activist network to its former glory—let alone establish the Islamic state in Britain.