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## Islamist Indoctrination: Exploring the Techniques Used by Hizb Ut-Tahrir to Radicalize Young British Muslims

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### Abstract

Trying to generate ethnographic data to study Islamist groups in a natural setting has always presented a problem for researchers seeking to comprehend the radicalization process. Islamist groups operate in a clandestine manner, making it difficult to penetrate their inner workings. The researcher was given access to the inner workings of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a clandestine radical Islamist organization. Having accessed the group, the paper seeks to present an account of the methods used by Hizb ut-Tahrir to indoctrinate new members to its ideology and activist orientation. The personal narratives obtained from this ethnographic fieldwork are placed into a frame of reference related to how indoctrination occurs within Hizb ut-Tahrir. My access to Hizb ut-Tahrir put me in the unique position of being able to gather the biographical information required to study indoctrination. As the findings show, Hizb ut-Tahrir indoctrination is a narrow cognitive process that has distinct behavioral outcomes.

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### Introduction

Hizb ut-Tahrir (henceforth, HT), a radical fringe group, encourages young people to turn away from British culture and ideology, indoctrinating them with Islamism. For over three decades, HT has operated freely within British society, yet its inner workings are still unknown. Since HT's arrival in the UK, its activism has focused on recruiting young people. The demographic composition of UK membership is disproportionately skewed towards youth, for instance, '85 per cent of members are below the age of 30 and 96.3 per cent were recruited before the age of 25' (Wali 2013, p. 116). The age composition of HT membership

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is not unexpected, as countless popular movements attract young activists (Engel 2001, p. 39). However, the focus is not to determine why some young British Muslims join HT, but rather to understand the method of indoctrination within HT. It is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly how some young Muslims become indoctrinated within HT because this side is kept secret. As a result, trying to gain proximity to HT radicals is an incredibly complicated task. After lengthy negotiations with senior HT officials, I was granted limited access to observe the *Halaqah* (indoctrination) process of HT. By observing the *Halaqah*, I witnessed the transformative method of HT indoctrination, as young novices gradually adopted the ideology of HT.

### **Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Liberation Party)**

Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, the founder of HT, witnessed the West colonize the Muslim world, solidifying non-Muslim supremacy. He was disgusted with the hegemony of western culture, which he blamed for weakening the Muslim world (Al-Nabhani 2002a, p. 4). Western culture played a key role in evoking HT's ideological awakening. According to al-Nabhani (2002b, p. 13), the only way to neutralize the dominance of western culture was to enact HT ideology.

At the practical level, HT ideology is derived from the Islamic core sources. The groups aim is rather simplistic, as they want "to impose Islam on the world" (Nadeem, HT Member). Therefore, the official goal of HT is to "resume the Islamic way of life" and to convey it to the whole of humanity (al-Nabhani 2002b, p. 24). Very little is known about how this clandestine group functions, in terms of its structure and recruitment, but since its conception in the Middle East it has progressively sought to expand, making the lack of scholarly focus surprising. As a result, HT's activities have gone relatively unnoticed, allowing them to establish a popular base of support among some young Muslims in Britain. In the early 1980s, HT surfaced as a revolutionary Muslim youth movement in the United Kingdom. They besieged university campuses in order to provoke an Islamist revival among the apathetic student populace. Consequently, they rapidly acquired notoriety for their

combative public activity. The media branded them a “fanatical group of Moslem extremists”, intensifying their attractiveness among the Muslim youth (Daily Mirror, 04.03.94). Despite increasing its national profile, HT received widespread condemnation for its intolerant stance to other religious groups. Universities quickly became a central battleground for HT, despite the National Union of Students (NUS) authorizing a total ban preventing HT from assembling any kind of campus activism. Attempts at curbing HT did not stop estranged Muslim youth turning to HT ideology. HT ideology is championed as the divinely inspired method to solve the complexities of western society, offering a sense of belonging and purpose to disaffected young Muslims. In this paper, the primary objective is to understand the procedures utilized by HT to indoctrinate new recruits, shedding light on these techniques will help me tackle the appeal of Islamist ideology.

### **Methodology: An Ethnographic Approach**

Trying to document HT indoctrination techniques was very challenging because the process occurs behind closed doors. For this reason, the research collected in this paper occurred over two separate periods. In 2004, as part of my research into the history of HT, I conducted extensive interviews with the pioneers of the UK branch, namely Farid Kassim and Omar Bakri Mohammed.<sup>2</sup> These historical narratives provided invaluable insight into how HT formed and established its first study circles, giving a full account of the methods used to indoctrinate young people during 1986-1996. However, the interviews with these founding members of the UK branch were conducted in 2004. I did not want to simply accept the historical accounts of Omar Bakri and Farid Kassim as fact, because their observations may be outdated. In other words, is the current *Halaqah* system in HT the same as the one established under the leadership of Omar Bakri? I believe the interviews conducted with Omar Bakri and Farid reveal a great deal about how the first *Halaqahs* formed in the late

<sup>2</sup> When the interview with Omar Bakri took place, he was not a member of HT. He left HT in 1996 and formed Al-Muhajiroun (ALM), a splinter organisation that was banned in the UK in 2005. So, his reflections are as the former leader of the UK branch, which is still important as he formulated and implemented key HT strategy related to indoctrinating novices.

1980s. According to several senior members, the *Halaqah* structure has not changed, the techniques and strategy employed by Farid and Omar Bakri remain active.<sup>3</sup> This means for over three decades the *Halaqah* system has been indoctrinating young novices in relatively the same way.

In 2009, I began the second phase of research, employing an ethnographic approach to capture the member's opinions on the indoctrination process. This entailed conducting lengthy fieldwork amongst HT members. After spending several months interacting with new recruits and members, I was granted access to the private *Halaqah*. The fieldwork observed four separate *Halaqah*'s over a 12 month period, and within this time, 36 activists were interviewed and observed, providing insight into the inner workings of HT indoctrination. The *Halaqahs* took place weekly, and approximately lasted two hours. The primary function of the *Halaqah* is to indoctrinate novices, making attendance compulsory. A *Mushrif* (leader/instructor) is appointed to explain HT ideology and oversee the indoctrination process. All the *Halaqahs* I observed comprised of a *Mushrif* and five to six novices. The *Mushrif* would go through the book *Nidham al-Islam* (System of Islam), one paragraph at a time, explaining its meaning and significance. The novice was expected to progress in their conceptual knowledge and understanding of HT ideology and it was the *Mushrif*'s responsibility to provide weekly reports on individual progress to the *Masool* (area leader).

I was not permitted to record or make written notes while observing the two-hour *Halaqah*. Initially, I was told that I could not interact with the novices attending the *Halaqah*. However, as I gained partial acceptance, I was allowed to engage with novices. Often I would accompany activists after the *Halaqah* to get food, giving me an opportunity to talk to the novices in greater detail. Furthermore, I was not given permission by HT to document the location where the *Halaqahs* took place, nor the details of those who attended. Despite these limitations, I was still able to observe and monitor the techniques HT employed to indoctrinate new activists. This gave me a sense of the inner workings of the *Halaqah*.

<sup>3</sup> In 1996, Omar Bakri formed ALM; he initially duplicated the HT indoctrination model. However, in 2003, he adopted the ideology of Wahhabism. He changed the *Halaqah* to an educational format, employing a fixed syllabus with large number of students.

process.

Conducting research amongst clandestine organizations, like HT, raises important ethical concerns related to informed consent and conflict of interest. Although I undertook the necessary ethical precautions prior to beginning my research, as I engaged in the fieldwork I quickly discovered that the boundaries between researcher and research subject started to become distorted. This posed significant ethical challenges. I revised my ethical approach, after consulting the literature related to “insider research” (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). I first sought to acquire informed consent from the leadership; rather than just approaching local novices, because command structure in HT is centralized and non-democratic. This meant I could not engage with grassroots activists until I had acquired formal consent from the leadership committee. Utilizing my network of contacts, I was initially granted limited access to the organizational activity of HT. This allowed me to develop familiarity with the activists and eventually I was not seen as an outsider. In due course, HT leadership granted me entry to the *Halaqah*, upon the request of the local activists. In some way, I believe the local members believed I could be indoctrinated by HT ideology, as they saw it as divine truth. However, I did not hide my intentions and purpose, and thus all participants were aware of my research. The second aspect related to conflict of interest. Hizb ut-Tahrir is not a banned organization under UK law, and thus they have the right to organize in a public or private manner. Therefore, I did not witness any act contravening British law, which meant I could report my findings without conflict with the UK legal framework.

During the fieldwork, the problem of “selective perception” became an issue of concern (Ray 2009, p. 297). In other words, as Ray (2009, p. 297) explains, if one studies a distinct process at length, then representativeness of the sample may be compromised. In order to offset this possible problem, four separate *Halaqahs* were observed, giving observational access to multiple novices in different social settings.

Although there has been a significant study of Islamist movements, little research has used an empirical approach to study this phenomenon. After reading major works, and through personal contact with some main theorists and researchers engaged in the debates, a

number of problems concerning methodology were identified. Firstly, there was a considerable lack of access to reliable data sources. This is because Islamists operate secretly and use morally unacceptable behavior to achieve their goals, making it difficult to document their activities in real settings (Hoffman 2006, p. ix). Secondly, throughout these research studies, the relationship between data and theory was not properly constructed, providing only a partial picture of the influence that radical Islamist groups have on individual identity.

Adopting an ethnographic approach gave an opportunity to study the activities of group members in their natural surroundings. This method provided a means to interpret the social world of the Islamist, giving insight into the indoctrination method within HT. For this reason, adopting an ethnographic approach provided an opportunity to study the activities of group members in their natural surroundings (Gobo and Molle 2016, p. 49). Burgess (2002, p. 65) believes, “the value of being a participant observer lies in the opportunity that is available to collect rich and detailed data based on observations in natural settings”. Conversely, a critical appraisal of previous approaches to Islamic radicalization showed that most theorists reject “participant observation” of radical groups because it is judged infeasible (Stump and Dixit 2013, p. 83). There are two reasons for this view: ethnomethodology is often difficult to understand, and it is even harder to apply. However, this study was able to observe Islamists through participant observation, which most social scientists have been unable to achieve when trying to understand processes of radicalization in a group setting. In summary, the justification for this study is primarily based on methodological grounds, enabling me to answer some key questions related to how radical Islamist groups indoctrinate young people.

### **Indoctrination**

At the beginning of this study, it was assumed once entry into HT had been achieved, then it would be relatively easy to locate instances of indoctrination. Instead, it was extremely difficult to isolate specific techniques constituting indoctrination. So, it became apparent clarity concerning indoctrination had to be obtained. Wilson (cited in Snook 2010, p. 17-18) makes an interesting distinction between indoctrination and conditioning based on

dichotomizing belief and behavior. This would imply indoctrination fits together with beliefs, while conditioning relates to behavioral process. In simple terms, “we condition people to do something; we indoctrinate them to believe something” (Snook 2010, p. 2). Another way of framing this process would be radicalization. Indoctrination and conditioning represent two distinct components of the same larger process, namely radicalization.

In this respect, radicalization is a transformative process. According to Horgan and Braddock (2010, p. 152), radicalization is a “social and psychological process” whereby an individual adopts an “extremist political or religious ideology”. Some social theorists see radicalization as consequential for violence, or at least a natural precursor of violence (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017; Horgan and Braddock, 2010). Trying to equate HT with violence is extremely problematic, because it does not actively incite violence. In a leaked home office report, for instance, HT were described as a “radical, but to date non-violent Islamist group” (*The Guardian*, 22/07/2005). For this reason, Snow and Byrd (2007) argue that a gap can occur between radical opinion and radical action. The outcome, however, is not necessarily towards more violence. In fact, flexibility of ideology may either support or help undermine violence, and there is no clear-cut cause and effect to be seen (Snow and Byrd 2007).

After surveying the available literature, it is relatively clear that most scholars agree radicalization involves three fundamental ingredients: (1) individual change (Kennedy and McGarrell 2012, p. 83; Koomen and Pligt 2015, p. 234); (2) interaction with social environments and external situations (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008; Wiktorowicz, 2005); (3) contact with radical actors and groups (Sageman, 2016; Hafez and Mullins, 2015).<sup>4</sup> As Sageman (2016) points out, within these transformative phases individuals develop negative associations (e.g. discrimination or social deprivation), which distort their reading of the social world, making them susceptible to indoctrination.

This is why, when the novice enters the *Halaqah*, they are first subjected to indoctrination. The division between indoctrination and conditioning is quite apt for the

<sup>4</sup> Online radicalization (e.g. that may take place within cyber space) still involves these elements, but without the physical interaction (Mandaville, 2005).

processes that take place in the *Halaqah*, as novices freely join HT and actively agree to undergo indoctrination. Therefore, as will be revealed, indoctrination within HT is a group activity lead by the indoctrinator, which takes place in the *Halaqah*. It is the indoctrinator's primary function to inculcate his novices with the correct ideological belief system. As explained in Nidham al-Islam (Al-Nabhani 2003c, p. 1), "man revives according to what he carries of thought...in order for man to revive, it is necessary to radically and comprehensively change his current thought and generate another thought for him". Therefore, indoctrination occurs within the *Halaqah*, while behavioral modification and conditioning occur outside of the *Halaqah*. Abdul (HT member) described the *Halaqah* as a "deep and profound culturing experience", giving him a totally new cognitive perspective with which to view the social world. This would indicate that, first of all, the *Halaqah* was the location of indoctrination. This is because from social constructivist theory<sup>5</sup> 'framing' of indoctrination and radicalization draws upon a collective phenomenon that is essentially contextualized to two key agents: the group and the individual (Pisoiu 2011, p. 143). Consequently, radicalization occurs after lengthy and sustained indoctrination, as it relates to individual transformation (Kennedy and McGarrell 2012, p. 83). This would suggest that indoctrination is the first step in the radicalization process.

There are many different ways of framing the subject of indoctrination. This paper will utilize social psychology, because as the term implies it incorporates both social and mental processes (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2015, p. 28). Indoctrination, in a social psychology context, entails renouncing traditional ideals, which then facilitates thought realignment (Popplestone and McPherson, 1999). This definition offers a good starting point, but it requires adjustment because it is far too broad in its scope and application. For example, the same definition of indoctrination could be given to those who undergo a religious conversion. According to Rambo and Farhadian (2014, p. 2), there are two transformations that are central to the conversion process: complete change in all aspects of life, and a new

<sup>5</sup> Social constructivist theory is grounded within the sociological school of thought, it relates to the mechanisms individual's experience when participating in group settings (Greene and Kropf 2009, p. 123).

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consciousness of the well-being of others. In general, the act of religious conversion might have a similar result to indoctrination, but these two forms of change are not identical.

A central aspect of change in HT is the deep process of indoctrination, which fashions a fresh cognitive viewpoint with which to view the social world. At this time, I want to quickly look at cognitive theory, in order to understand its meaning in the context of indoctrination. Social cognitive theory defines behavior as a mutual interface between an inner emotional state and triggers that exist in the environment (Gawronski and Payne, 2011). Social psychologists seek to identify the key cognitive and motivational changes that occur within individuals when they become group members. The Islamist group is the principal location for the construction of a new cognitive outlook because members are ready to bend towards group expectation (Le Bon, Gustave, 2012). This indicates a strong relationship exists between individuals and groups, enabling HT to change the cognitive perspective of members. According to Wiktorowicz (2005, p. 19), direct contact with the extremist group can trigger a “cognitive opening”. This opening is a gateway to the comprehensive alteration of previously held beliefs. Thus, the fascination with the radical group often leads to a “cognitive opening”, activating a process of ‘religious seeking’ (Wiktorowicz 2005, p. 19). The triggers for this opening are multifaceted and greatly hinge on the experiences of the individual, making them vulnerable to the movement.

Consequently, individuals are characterized and placed in an in-group. Members then internalize this membership as an aspect of their identity (Amer and Awad 2015, p. 92). In this respect, the basis for a member’s self-definition changes within the group, allowing his or her personal identity to be submerged into a collective identity (Le Bon 2012, p. 18). According to Triplett (1898), moving from a state of social exclusion to a group setting can drastically diminish one’s sense of individuality. Similarly, Cicchetti and Cohen (2006, p. 431) found that increased interaction with other members prompts individuals to change their attitudes in accordance with the group consensuses. In other words, for the cognitive transformation to take effect the individual must align his viewpoint with HT ideology.

In a group environment, members come to understand their social world by way of shared representations. According to Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2015), cognitive change provides a framework for understanding the external world, by rendering a situation meaningful. At this stage of the HT indoctrination process, an individual aligns their cognitive viewpoint with that of the group. This reconfiguration acts as a unifying force, shaping the individual's thoughts and behavior into synchronization with HT ideology. This makes the cognitive process an active force in the construction of one's reality (Valle and Eckartsberg, 2012). At the heart of this cognitive process is the making sense of the 'other'. The perception of the 'other' is reconfigured and various forms of 'us and them' are constructed. In theory, the individual then internalizes these representations in their actions and responses. Forging a new cognitive essence within HT requires a change in the way a novice thinks and acts until he or she becomes a walking manifestation of HT ideology.

### Pre-HT Indoctrination

Omar Bakri, the first UK *Amir* (leader), claimed HT targeted young people that had experienced racism in their childhood, utilizing the psychological pain they felt, as a means to radicalize them in adulthood.<sup>6</sup> By exploiting a key developmental stage HT were able to redirect a recruit's negative feelings to a radical treatment. In Britain, as HT started its activism in the early 1980s, the leadership quickly realized that second generation British Muslims were struggling to develop stable identities. According to Omar Bakri, this perpetuated two completely opposing identities, which he dubbed, the "Bobby and Abdullah syndrome" (Omar Bakri interview, 26.03.2004). At home, the "Abdullah persona" would revert to an ethnic association, speaking the language of his parents and adhering to their custom. However, outside the home, the "Bobby persona" would materialize. As Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) declared, "he would drink, go clubbing and be fully integrated

<sup>6</sup> The interviews conducted with Omar Bakri sought to document how HT established itself in the UK (e.g. mode of activism, organisation, targeting young Muslims etc.). Therefore, the interviews were based on Bakri's reflections from 1986-1996 (the year he arrived in the UK and the year he left HT).

[British culture]”. The HT radicalization process required finding young people that had become socially estranged, during their socialization, because these individuals exhibited greater enthusiasm towards HT ideology. Uncertainty during socialization adversely affected identity development, enabling HT to target young British South Asians (Wali, 2013).

HT deliberately singled out British South Asians as a distinct demographic, because they supposedly suffered through their socialization. They developed dysfunctional identity structures that lead to a proclivity for greater belonging. Data indicates that 98 per cent of HT activists in the UK are South Asian, making HT ethnically homogenous (Wali 2013, p. 128). HT’s South Asian recruits developed through the life cycle struggling to adjust their identity, lacking the ability to control their surroundings, which perpetuated a deep feeling of frustration. As Bakri explained, the individuals he recruited all experienced some form of social difficulty that marred their socialization. Thus, under Bakri’s leadership HT sought to establish radical cells, comprising almost exclusively of young Muslims. To facilitate this process, the founding members methodically targeted ethnic minorities, arousing a sense of conflict with the dominant culture. This would be achieved by exploiting the dual aspect of socialization received by minority groups. Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) explained how the experiences of young Muslims being racially attacked, in the cases he observed, caused them to be “distrustful of Kuffar (non-Muslims)”.

This process of ‘othering’ non-Muslims can be traced back to the development of HT ideology. According to Taji-Farouki (1996, p. 114), the inception of the movement “lies in the response … to the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the fragmentation of its territories into nation-states, the creation of Israel and the impotence of Muslim societies in the face of neo-imperialism”. In this respect, HT ideology was articulated post-World War Two in response to the perceived cultural and political dominance of the West and thus was contrived within a specific framework of confrontation. Firstly, al-Nabhani framed the conflict with the West into a religious dichotomy and as an inevitable clash between ‘*Iman*’ (belief) and ‘*kufr*’ (disbelief). This, as Kurtz and Turpin (1999, p. 641) explains, gives the confrontation a “larger-than-life” dimension. Secondly, as the interaction with the West matured, al-Nabhani sought

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to fabricate a distorted narrative of confrontation with the West, depicting it as monolithic and dangerous. This manufactured polarization between Islam and the West allowed al-Nabhani to demonize Western culture and society.

Consequently, these and other adverse social experiences enabled HT, during the 1980s, to cultivate a group of young Muslims who had been marginalized through socialization. According to Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004), the young Muslims he encountered were ‘lost’, because they had “no personality of their own”. These young men were stripped of their identity, as Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) states: “your identity is corrupted, you feel pain because the western culture created racism, you have (the) western personality, (this) must be taken away”. When I asked Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) that this appears to be indoctrination, he said “it is brainwashing...these young people have been corrupted by the west and this corruption must be washed out, so it’s brainwashing, but with *Haq* (truth)”. Consequently, HT in its infancy in the 1980s was dependent on a select group of young people, directing their efforts on those who appeared to be unsuccessful in obtaining a traditional place in society.

The second condition that created motivation for HT ideology among the recruits during 1986-1996 was their apparent estrangement from society. According to Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004), these Muslims had become alienated by society, because they felt rejected and lacked opportunity for participating in society. In this case, the young recruits developed social grievances against the majority population becoming largely apathetic. Why did young HT recruits feel alienated from their society? The disaffection of an individual often tends to be a combination of frustrations that have been triggered by various social environments. In order to exploit the perceived alienation of some young Muslims, HT would concentrate on specific themes, such as racism. HT would specifically target alienated young Muslims at universities, as Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) explains: “this is where I met Bobby...when he start[s] to rave and dance with them, they call him paki, now that’s a crisis. He sacrificed everything, and then you call me paki”. Consequently, one can conclude social alienation was used to manipulate the recruit, creating susceptibility to HT ideology. This

insidious technique sought to exploit young Muslims, by projecting them as victims of the “unbelievers”.

### In-group Indoctrination: The *Halaqah* system

HT Indoctrination invites questions about how it influences novice behavior and attitudes. During interviews with HT novices in 2009, it became difficult to discuss the issue of HT indoctrination, as many novices refused to acknowledge the term. They felt it had a negative connotation and it implied they had been forced to join HT. On the surface, HT indoctrination does not include any form of physical confinement, coercive persuasion or bodily threat. Some theorists have described indoctrination as “milieu control” (Lifton 2012, p. 420). This entails the enforcement of “unethical practices” to control intellectual thoughts within the group setting, manufacturing a deep sense of separation from society (Snook 2010, p. 12). This definition needs more clarification. Unethical practices may refer to the inculcation of concepts and beliefs into an individual in a closed environment, like the *Halaqah*. There is a noticeable problem with this definition: it is too general. According to this definition, teaching children in a classroom environment could be classified as a form of indoctrination. Using the term in this way ignores the content of teaching, which determines whether teaching is indoctrination. As Flew (1972, p. 285) stated, “no doctrine, no indoctrination”. It is important to divide indoctrination into two distinct stages: primary (the *Halaqah*) and secondary (pursuance).

Members believe HT is unique. A key reason for this belief relates to the rigid protocols that govern group activity. These protocols permit HT to assign tasks at every level, but in actuality, it confines novices from rationalizing activity. Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) claimed he “built all the cells” in the early 1980s and placed the new recruits into the *Halaqah*, which is a private study group comprising one member and five to six novices. HT indoctrination occurs in the *Halaqah*, cultivating new thoughts and creating dependency on HT. The *Halaqah* became the static point of HT indoctrination, as it placed the novice

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within a closed setting that removed them from an external anchor, allowing inculcation of HT ideology. Before entering the *Halaqah*, the novice has an established set of ideas related to society and life, forming the ideological point of reference for their existence. However, when placed in the *Halaqah* with other novices, the ideological point of reference fragments as the HT indoctrinator engineers a new ideological viewpoint. As Wilson (2010, p. 14) asserts embedding beliefs through authoritative figures can replace reason, making it a form of illegitimate indoctrination.

At the start of the fieldwork in 2009, the presence of the researcher monitoring the *Halaqah* was a concern, as it seemed to distort the normal function of the *Halaqah*. However, as time passed acceptance was gained, allowing the *Halaqah* to be observed in its natural environment. By observing the *Halaqah* in its everyday setting, the cognitive and behavioral changes experienced by novices over a 12-month period could be observed and documented. Initially, the changes observed were attributed to indoctrination and conditioning. However, this according to Winn would suggest that the novices were ‘unaware’ of the *Halaqah* purpose (Winn 2012, p. 4). Yet, as observed, novices join the *Halaqah* process willingly. As AQ (novice, 04.07.2009) declared, “the H [Halaqah] removes ideological contamination and builds the correct ideological foundation”. This suggests novices acknowledge the transformative agenda of the *Halaqah*.

As Lifton (2012, p. 4) noticed, indoctrination is not an all-encompassing transformative method that can achieve “total control over the human mind”. As Farid (interview, 26.06.2004) explained, the *Halaqah* does not “create mindless automatons...we want ideologues”. The *Halaqah* is the location where novices are ideologically reformatted, having their thoughts and behavior realigned to HT ideology. Authoritative indoctrination may seek a similar outcome, but it employs a range of persuasive techniques as Lifton’s (2012) study of Chinse communists revealed. In this regard, radicalization as a descriptive measure fits the aims and method of the *Halaqah*, as HT radicalization centers on the novice’s ideological framework.

From 1986, Omar Bakri assembled the first UK *Halaqahs*, indoctrinating the first

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generation of HT recruits. In the *Halaqah*, Omar Bakri went about changing the novice, indoctrinating them with HT's Islamist ideology. This would involve attaching the thoughts and ideas to specific modes of behavior, as to generate a change, which apparently 'developed a deep and profound way of thinking based on the Islamic ideology' (Omar Bakri interview, 26.03.2004). The *Halaqah* process became the central mechanism to sustain the purity of HT ideology by dispersing the ideology throughout the party cells. According to Omar Bakri, the *Halaqah* enabled him to mobilize HT into active cells, which through constant replication gave birth to newer cells across the country.

Omar Bakri assigned great importance to the *Halaqah* process, bestowing serious attention to its precise undertaking. The *Halaqah* had one primary function to indoctrinate the novice in a concentrated manner. The *Halaqah* was used to indoctrinate the novice with a shared belief system, forming a single unit of members, embodying HT ideology. According to Farid (26.06.2004), the *Halaqah* focused on developing the '*aql ya'* (mentality) and the '*nafsyya'* (disposition) of the novice. The process of constructing the '*nafsyya'* (disposition) among the novices was essential because HT activity was dependent on the commitment of its members. Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) believed the '*nafsyya*' would determine the "level of sacrifice and commitment" members allocated to the party cause. Omar Bakri was the main *Mushrif* (instructor) of the early recruits in the 1980s, regulating the *Halaqah* and assuming full responsibility for its supervision. The *Halaqah* was configured in a way that made it differ entirely from the academic and philosophical styles of teaching. According to Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004), the academic style had been rejected as a means of disseminating HT ideology because it detracted the novice from HT's ideological aim and it did not "build Islamic personalities". Importantly, the numbers admitted into the *Halaqah*, by Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004), was deliberately restricted and organized broadly around the same level. Bakri claimed the academic style "lacks productivity". For instance, he felt culturing novices in large classes prevented the *Mushrif* from tailoring HT ideology to the varying strengths and levels of each novice.

### **Halaqah Procedure**

Starting the *Halaqahs* was given special consideration because it was the *Halaqah* that created ideological change. Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) declared “if the *Halaqah* was organized incorrectly” then HT indoctrination would not occur. Thus, he formulated a comprehensive set of preventive procedures that would safeguard the *Halaqah* process. Firstly, the preliminary stage of acceptance would be used to maintain the integrity of the *Halaqah*, Bakri explained. In this respect, four standard guidelines would be used to first establish in the novice a general awareness of HT ideology, which a prospective novice had to obtain as a prerequisite for entry into the *Halaqah*. At this stage of entry, HT makes a crucial distinction between acquiring a general awareness and that of conviction; the latter is only procured after a deep process of indoctrination through many years of study within the *Halaqah*. In contrast, a general awareness entails a basic acceptance that these auxiliary thoughts are correct and require action. For this purpose, Bakri developed four entry-level guidelines that had to be fulfilled to gain admittance to the *Halaqah*, which is designed to extend beyond energetic zeal. Firstly, to consolidate, a novice must accept Islam as a complete way of life that addresses all temporal and spiritual problems. Secondly, the need to abide by the ‘*Hukm Shari*’ (divine Islamic law) in all remits of life must be demonstrated, especially related to the establishment of the ‘*Khilafah*’ (Islamic State). Thirdly, the novice must agree that the work to establish the ‘*Khilafah*’ is a political action. Finally, admittance cannot take place until the novice acknowledges HT as the only Islamic party correctly working to establish Islam. The novice prior to admittance into the *Halaqah* must agree on these four areas.

The preliminary discussions with the novice would usually take place through individual contact or in small public circles, commonly referred to as an intermediate *Halaqah*. The intermediate *Halaqah*, Farid (26.06.2004) explained, would consist of “three or four circles addressing each of the guidelines”. Omar Bakri made it clear to the new recruits they had consented to “work” for HT. This was important, as Farid explained because HT

strongly discourages the use of the term “study”. Rather, “emphasis was given to work”, as HT does not invite people for scholarly study, instead they seek ideological activists who will energetically work to establish the objectives of HT (Farid, 26.06.2004). According to HT, Islam is a religious and political ideology, within which sovereignty belongs exclusively to God. This means human agents do not have the mandate to govern, making “man-made” ideological systems invalidated. This is why HT rejects participation within the political system, and thus require the recruitment of activists willing to operate outside of the system.

The new recruits on their admission to HT were explained two further issues by Omar Bakri. Firstly, the work to establish *Khilafah* required clear ideas about Islam. According to HT, Islam is a divine doctrine from which a complete system of human governance emanates. This ideological interpretation seeks the holistic enforcement of the Islamic legislative system in society (e.g. enactment of Sharia Law), as Islam is the only source of worldly guidance. HT ideology view’s Islam as a complete system of human governance, deciphering all human problems (e.g. political, economic, social and ethical). This makes it mandatory for human beings to implement the ideology of Islam. In order to acquire this ideological understanding of Islam necessitated committing to studying these ideas within the *Halaqah* system. Secondly, the novice must attend the *Halaqah* regularly, being punctual and committing themselves to two hours a week, non-compliance is ‘*haram*’ (sinful act).

Therefore, the *Halaqah* has been ordained with special administrative consideration, as it implants the ideology within the novice. This means its regulation must be conducted in a strict and consistent manner. For this reason, the *Mushrif* assumes direct responsibility for the supervision of the *Halaqah*. The *Mushrif*, for example, must submit a detailed *Halaqah* report to the *Masool* (area supervisor) after every *Halaqah* informing him of the progression of each novice. Within this report, the *Mushrif* documents tardiness. If a novice is late on a regular basis, then the *Masool* will take action. As Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) explained, “lateness cannot be tolerated” as this reduces the importance of HT’s work.

This is why the *Halaqah* has distinct stylistic rules. The *Halaqah* should be given in a manner that influences the novice to initiate thinking and feeling. The *Halaqah* facilitates the

novice to construct his or her own views rationally and freely. This suggests indoctrination is an “intentional activity” (Wilson 2010, p. 18). However, this ignores the *Mushrif*, who is the indoctrinator. The *Mushrif* guides the novice to arrive at the correctness of HT ideology, but this should not occur through blind obedience. The *Mushrif* assumes full responsibility for explaining the content of HT ideology, which is proceeded by a discussion of the concepts raised to gain clarity. Importantly, HT enforced strict guidelines on the *Mushrif*, for instance, he alone could answer questions, without exception, as the credibility of the *Mushrif* would be brought into question if a particular novice answered questions on his behalf. HT administrative law had gone to meticulous depths to explain every minute detail related to the *Halaqah*. According to Farid (26.06.2004), detailed guidelines had even been documented about the mannerisms of the *Mushrif*, especially when delivering a *Halaqah*. “The *Mushrif* should be quiet and soft spoken, and control his nerves during questions, discussion and explanation and be cautious not to get angry or agitated”. HT has given the ‘*Halaqah*’ the highest seriousness, as it indoctrinates novices.

### Starting a *Halaqah*

During the establishment of the first UK cells, Omar Bakri gave each newly started *Halaqah* special consideration. In this respect, Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) requested all *Mushrifs* to act like a “father figure to the novice”, guiding and fostering the burden of the novice’s development. The *Halaqah* built the *Hizbi* personality. This ideological remolding starts with changing the cognitive perspective, which entails removing the remnants of the old ideological viewpoint. The novice grew up in a secular environment, exposed to an array of non-Islamic standards. The western ideological viewpoint became the basis for action. For this reason, the first phase of *Halaqah* was assigned to studying the book ‘*Nidham al-Islam*’ (system of Islam). The first chapter deals with belief, while the second confronts the topic of fate and destiny. These two chapters were used to indoctrinate the novice with a new ideological outlook. As one member explained: “*Halaqah* is a building process...corrupt

concepts are destroyed and the correct concepts built” (Wali 2013, p. 106). This suggests the goal of the *Halaqah* is an indoctrinated individual. The HT activists interviewed all objected to the use of the term indoctrination, as they collectively felt it implied a lack of rationality. According to Wilson (2010, p. 19), indoctrination can be generated through rational and non-rational methods. In the *Halaqah*, the *Mushrif* rigidly regulates the discussion, making the *Halaqah* a contrived social space.

Al-Nabhani, in his book *Mefahim* (Concepts of Hizb ut-Tahrir), states study in *Halaqah* should be a cultural process and not an academic one. Thus, teaching in *Halaqah* should not be detached from the individual; rather, the culturing process needs to build “warmth, enthusiasm, deep thinking and broad knowledge” (Al-Nabhani 2001, p. 27). In its broadest sense, warmth refers to building a link between the ‘*Iman*’ (faith) and the obedience to the ‘*Sharia*’ (Islamic Law). Enthusiasm is the subsequent energy that needs to be directed towards carrying out positive activity. Deep thinking involves understanding a set of concepts intensely from its nucleus, degrading the reliance upon superficial thought. Finally, broad knowledge is to have a wide array of understanding on an assortment of issues that are not restricted to a few sources. The primary focus for the *Mushrif* is to build warmth and enthusiasm, which is then proceeded by depth and broadness.

### **Secondary HT Indoctrination: Persuance**

The first *Halaqahs* were designed to change the sentiments and inclinations of the novice because, as Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004) explained, “they were brought up in a corrupt western society”. However, Omar Bakri realized the *Halaqah* was a short medium, as it is conducted once a week for two hours. To build a conceptual framework in a clear and precise manner required substantial pursuance outside of the *Halaqah*. Pursuance entailed following the novice naturally outside of the *Halaqah*, to see whether they had assimilated the concepts of the *Halaqah* into their daily life. According to Omar Bakri (interview, 26.03.2004), the *Mushrif* would visit the novice “in his home or take him to the Mosque”,

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bringing him closer to the novice. At this early stage, converts to Islam were treated differently, as *Mushrifs* were required to give more time to them because they had to be taught the fundamentals of religious belief and practice. Through the *Halaqah* Omar Bakri sought to create an environment of ‘spirit’ that connected the novice to God, via HT. The new members were key to this pure environment; they had to lead by example. Therefore, the *Mushrif* was sanctioned with the duty to consolidate his *Halaqah* into a unified cell. In this respect, the process of indoctrination occurred within the peer group setting.

In order to understand pursuance, I was able to observe the interplay between *Mushrif* and novice outside of the *Halaqah*. In essence, novices formed closed peer group bonds, which reinforced HT ideology. As Nina (novice) said: “...practicing was hard early on because you’d be told what to do and how to do it” (cited in Wali 2013, p. 107). This interface seems disproportionate, as the behavioral norms within the peer group are regulated by HT ideology. In addition, pursuance developed close relationships with amongst the novices and the *Mushrif*, making indoctrination easier. As Sara explained: “I really trusted the sisters; we became close and I revealed a lot to them about myself” (cited in Wali 2013, p. 107). Familiarity with peer groups cultivates ideological socialization (Howe, 2010). Peer socialization was an important developmental stage in the pursuance process, as it gives the novice a framework to view and interact with the social world. The novices I observed seemed fully engaged within the peer group, creating a strong attachment to HT. As one novice observed: “we’d do *dawah* (spread HT ideology) and then we’d chill...there is a collective spirit we have”. As with all group dynamics, the peer group indoctrinated a deep sense of group identification among the novices. “In sum, the novice sought identification with the peer group for the following reasons: (1) membership provided benefit; (2) it offered distinctiveness from other social groups; (3) there was a sense of common experience” (Wali 2013, p. 106).

When an individual joins HT, they are deliberately engineered towards conformity. This pressure is exhibited, in the first instance, by assuming the role of a novice. This initial stage of interaction with HT gradually brings their behavior into alignment with the norms of

HT. Most importantly, HT exploits the need to belong within the novice, providing him or her with a feeling of self-importance by conveying a new cognitive worldview. As the indoctrination process deepens, the novice is gradually conditioned to accept the moral supremacy of HT ideology. This is clear from the comments made by Farid, concerning the need for the individual to embody HT ideology in all aspects of his or her life, as he states:

“The power of the ideology attracted us to the party, and I felt that power when I used to visit other people’s circles and meetings. You just felt this incredible confidence, not arrogance, but confidence. The truth is arrogant, so you feel this power and that’s never gone away from me, twenty years plus now” (Farid Kassim interview, 26.06.2004).

This view suggests how the individual develops reliance on HT, inspiring loyalty and long-term commitment. Shaw (1986, p. 359) makes a similar claim about membership in a terrorist group, as they provide ‘a solution to the pressing personal needs’ that is not realized in the wider society. This gives the individual a new identity and a role in society, albeit a negative one, which in a passive sense forces conformity. This is equally true for members of HT, as they cannot envisage life outside of HT.

### The *Halaqah* Experience

Up until now, a descriptive account of the organizational procedures used by HT to indoctrinate novices has been the focus, now attention is given to the reactions of novices to the *Halaqah* process. Before the *Halaqah* formally began, several novices expressed a sense of eagerness. As Irfan (interview, 02.09.2009) explained, “I had to wait two months for the H [*Halaqah*] to start, so I was desperate to lift the *Fard* [Islamic duty] of my neck”. Shahid (interview, 05.07.2009) expressed a similar sentiment, “the *Halaqah* is the highest activity in the *Hizb*, and it’s where you experience the party culture”. These two reactions provide some interesting insight into the novice’s psychological state of mind prior to starting the *Halaqah*.

As Allen and Cowdery (2014, p. 451) discovered, the ‘learner’ displays greater eagerness to learn than the instructor does. This is because the novice enters the *Halaqah* process to initiate intellectual transformation, as they believe the implementation of HT ideology relies on the *Halaqah* process. Furthermore, novices believe attending *Halaqah* is an Islamic duty. Attaching the mundane activity of the *Halaqah* to the sacred elevates it to a higher value act. In other words, attending *Halaqah* becomes a religious duty, which if neglected incurs divine punishment in the afterlife.

After several weeks had elapsed, the novices began to demonstrate a sharp shift in their personal disposition, which started to give way to the collective group identity. As AQ (interview, 18.07.2009) suggested, “after the first month we [novices in *Halaqah*] were a unit...our criteria were Allah and his Messenger”. This indicates the reference point for action was Islam, as governed by HT ideology. According to HT, British Muslims only partially understand Islam, as they mix it with non-Islamic laws. In fact, as one member declared: “Muslims only know Islam by its rituals”. This suggests members view Islam as a religious and political ideology. As Aminur (interview, 30.08.2009) explained: “Islam is not just a list of do’s and don’ts, it gives solutions to daily problems”. Although the Islamic religious system was revealed 1400 years ago, HT activists believe the ideological side of Islam is still alive and intact in the ‘Quran and Sunnah’ (divine legislative sources). HT argues these two sources generate a comprehensive set of legal laws that governs all aspects of human affairs. As Irfan (interview, 02.09.2009) declared, “Islam is superior to western ideology because it makes the human being subservient to Allah (god) rather than to his own desires”. This suggests HT ideology orients member’s actions exclusively to God. This translates into complete submission to the speech of the “law-giver” relating to human actions because according to HT, God has laid down the *hukm* (rule) for every action and thing in this world (Al-Nabhani 1998, p. 36).

## Dropping Out

The study monitored 36 HT activists, 32 novices, and 4 *Mushrifs*, over a 12 month period. During this period 11 novices ‘dropped out’. After interviewing the novices who dropped out, it became apparent that ideological disagreement was the primary reason for dropping out. As Adam (interview, 05.10.2009) explained, “I only had two or three conversations with HT members before I joined, I think after the fourth or fifth *Halaqah* I left...I kept challenging the *Mushrif* about Islamic history and philosophy, which he knew nothing about...they just want blind followers”. An analysis of the small sample of data collected suggests 34 percent of novices left HT. This dropout rate is not evenly distributed, as 90.9 percent dropped out in the first six weeks, making orientation the most likely period of dropping out. This is not surprising as cognitive realignment is sought during the early formation of the *Halaqah*. If novices are unwilling to abandon their ideological viewpoint, then dropping out is likely. As Dawud (ex-novice, interview, 15.08.2009) noted, “HT culture is weak, it rationalizes ideals that are out molded...*Khilafah* is not compatible with modern society”.

However, beyond ideological disagreement, several other factors were also cited. Two novices had to drop out because of family pressure. As Jamal (interview 16.05.2009) explained, “when my dad found out I joined the *Hiszb*, he lost it; I just decided it was not worth all the grief”. In Muslim households, the family is usually patriarchal, with elder males dominating the social affairs of the family. Therefore, parental control played a role in some novices dropping out, fearing the reaction of family members to joining a clandestine Islamist group. However, as Ash (ex-member, interview, 06.07.2009) explained, “the *Hiszb* [HT] encourages the *shab* [novice] to disobey [parents] as they [HT] say loyalty belongs to god, not the father”. If the novice allows family bonds to supersede HT ideology, then the novice may become susceptible to returning to old ideologies.

When novices join HT, they must confront a social world at odds with their ideological viewpoint, making it difficult to remain if doubts exist. Therefore, the *Halaqah* is

designed to challenge the ideological makeup of a novice, gradually replacing the old beliefs with HT ideology. In other words, the *Halaqah* becomes the focal point for change, as it provides answers to the meaning of life. The novices remaining in the *Halaqah* process eventually underwent a cognitive transformation over a period of three months, changing the way they viewed the social world. As Irfan (interview, 02.09.2009) revealed, ‘the party culture is superior to anything I have ever experienced’. They adopted a ‘holistic’ viewpoint, which gave them guidelines and systems that applied to every aspect of their daily life. In other words, HT indoctrination changed the novice’s self-awareness, as their new ideology took center stage in their lives. HT indoctrination is an ongoing process, providing meaning and purpose to the novice. As Sara explains, “...when I started the H [*Halaqah*] things became clearer; I could understand the concepts and culture better” (cited in Wali 2013, p. 109). This data suggests, despite large numbers of young Muslims joining HT, there are equal numbers dropping out.

## Conclusion

The study has revealed HT indoctrination to be a narrow and distinct psychosocial phenomenon with identifiable patterns related to controlling an individual’s behavior. Indoctrination is not simply an individualistic process; rather, it is embedded in a group context that exerts influence over the individual.

HT indoctrinates the novice with a distinct ideological worldview, shaping how the novice perceives and interacts with the social world. The inculcation of HT ideology occurs in the closed group setting of the *Halaqah*. HT describes this activity as an intellectual exercise, but as a political movement, they seek social change and this requires ideologically trained activists. The *Halaqah* is the central instrument employed to inculcate HT ideology. As Passmore (2010, p. 128) declares, ‘indoctrination is a special form of drilling in’, which in the case of HT entails ‘drilling’ HT ideology within the novice.

The function of the *Halaqah* is to inculcate the novice with HT ideology. Initially, this entails engineering a new cognitive outlook. The *Halaqah* as a change agent is a life-long technique employed by HT to reinforce HT ideology for the entire lifespan of the novice. However, the *Halaqah* does not end with membership, as all activists perpetually receive weekly *Halaqah*. This prolonged radicalization method allows the novice to navigate the paradoxes of the outside world. As the novice re-enters society, they encounter ideas that challenge their newly adopted ideology. Attending the weekly *Halaqah* allows the novice to align their social experiences with HT ideology, providing the novice with a constant point of reference.

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