

POLICY BRIEF 10 - Tablighi Jamaat and its role in the Global Jihad

By South Asia Democratic Forum

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Abstract

This SADF Policy Brief deals with Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), a transnational Islamic missionary movement. Despite declaring itself as officially apolitical and non-violent, TJ is cited by German and other European intelligence reports that underline (manifold) threats originating from the movement. An increasing number of assessments emphasise TJ's function as a catalyst, gateway, springboard, or antechamber for an extreme and militant interpretation of Islam – indoctrinating Muslims into Jihadists. Experts [point out](#) that TJ 'has appeared on the fringes of several terrorism investigations, leading some to state that its apolitical stance simply masks a "[fertile ground for breeding terrorism](#)".

In spite of this, up until this point, the majority of critical evaluations by international intelligence have not reached public discourse or political decision-making processes in the states where TJ holds a significant presence. Especially in Europe and the US, TJ remains largely unknown outside Muslim communities – and when known, actions and motives are misread. This lack of knowledge regarding the dissemination of an Islamic supremacist agenda facilitates TJ's function as a driving force for Islamic extremism and as a major recruiting agency for the cause of Global Jihad - the movement bluntly threatens societies based on liberal and democratic norms. TJ has a relatively clandestine character, but reports point to TJ being extremely effective at [spreading Islamic fundamentalism](#). In sum, TJ is seen as an essential component of a phenomenon which the French political-

sociologist Bernard Rougier (2020) calls an ‘Islamist Ecosystem’. We believe this concept is most useful to understand the role that TJ plays in the Global Jihad.

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List of Abbreviations

AFPC	American Foreign Policy Council
AVID	General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz/Federal Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution
BMI	Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat/Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community
BND	Bundesnachrichtendienst/Federal Intelligence Service
BSTMI	Bayrisches Staatsministerium des Inneren, für Sport und Integration/The Bavarian Ministry of the Interior, Sport and Integration
COBA/ SOVA	Center for Information and Analysis
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DGSI	Direction générale de la Sécurité intérieure/General Directorate for Internal Security)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (US)

HHBI	Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg. Behörde für Inneres und Sport/Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg. Department of the Interior and Sport.
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir
IBW	Innenministerium Baden-Württemberg/ Baden-Württemberg Ministry of the Interior
LfV	Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz/ State Office for the Protection of the Constitution
LfVBW	Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg/ Baden-Württemberg State Office for the Protection of the Constitution
LfVNW	Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Nordrhein-Westfalen/North Rhine-Westphalia State Office for the Protection of the Constitution
MAD	Militärischer Abschirmdienst/Military Counterintelligence Service
MIKNW	Ministerium für Inneres und Kommunales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen/ Ministry of Home Affairs and Local North Rhine-Westphalia
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
NDB	Nachrichtendienst des Bundes, Schweiz/ Federal Intelligence Service/FIS, Switzerland
NMIS	Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Inneres und Sport/ Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior and Sport
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty
SADF	South Asia Democratic Forum
SIS	Serviço de Informações de Segurança, Portugal (Intelligence and Security Service)
TJ	Tablighi Jamaat
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
VG	Verwaltungsgericht/Administrative Court

1. Tablighi Jamaat - A brief introduction

Not much is known about TJ. The group's founder, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) was not in favour of writing about the movement and made it a principle to keep away from the press (and other media) as well as avoid detailed publications elaborating on the movement's membership and activities. It was one of Ilyas' convictions that 'action and practice were the best method to effectively change minds' (Putra, 2013, p.19). The movement presents itself as officially apolitical, preferring 'word-of-mouth instruction to public, written or online communiqués; [thus] TJ has heretofore flown largely under the analytical radar' (AFPC, 2012, p.1). This stands in sharp contrast with other pan-Islamic groups (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb ut-Tahrir).

Academic and mainstream literature describes TJ as a '[Islamic missionary movement](#)', '[Islamic revivalist organization](#)' or 'transnational Islamic pietist movement' (Horstmann, 2007, p.107), 'transnational Islamic reform movement' (Siddiqi, 2018, p.1), among other terms. TJ originated in India in the 1920s as a reaction to what was perceived as the depraved state of Islam in the South Asian region (Pieri, 2012, p.103), and Ilyas largely directed the principles guiding the organisation's 'formal structure'. Since its formation, and to this day, TJ adopts the form of an 'informal organization and keeps an introvert institutional profile' (Putra, 2013, p.22). Importantly, the movement did not build up any formal bureaucracy or employs paid staff. TJ consists of small groups (jamaats) of perhaps eight or ten people, who are expected to finance themselves.¹

Officially, TJ (as an organisation) does not ask for donations and depends in financial terms upon the resources of its senior members' (Putra, 2013, p.22). 'Double-memberships' with other religious organisations are not unusual for Tablighi. Jamaats are based on regular meetings and (preaching) journeys. Tablighi educational and missionary endeavours are organised in four ways: one day a week, one three-day period a month, one forty-day period a year, and one four-month tour (ideally abroad) at least once in a lifetime. One of the core activities of local jamaats involves going out door-to-door on converting missions (Putra, 2013, p.22). It is

¹ Each Tablighi has to manage his/her own expenses for travel and dawah. 'They are encouraged to share in the cooking, cleaning, and other menial tasks that they would usually not engage in at home' (Pieri, 2015, p.63; Siddiqi, 2018, pp.98, 136).

important to note that belonging to - or being a member of - TJ does not involve any formal registration process.²

Ilyas also formulated a set of principles³ to guide preachers as well as instructions to carry out the organisation's core mission: to revive and revitalise Islam among its adherents, dilute the influence of other religions, and renew the purity and spirit of Islam as conceived by Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Riyaz Timol states that TJ's 'distinct style of activism' seeks to reinvigorate basic Islamic piety among Muslim communities, through the persistent creation and dispatch of its jamaats composed of 'itinerant lay preachers to sympathetic mosques around the world' (Timol, 2019, p.20).

TJ sees 'Muslims as being under threat of becoming corrupted by the modern world' (Freedman, 2006, p.32), as such, the movement's core *raison d'être* is *da'wa*, or Islamic proselytization, (Timol, 2019, p.20) 'making Muslims into true Muslims'. The group's apolitical and peaceful nature is much stressed. Alexander R. Alexiev states that 'from its inception, radical Deobandi attitudes permeated Tablighi philosophy. The movement rejected modernity as antithetical to Islam, excluded women, was hostile to Shiites and syncretic Muslims, and preached that Islam must subsume all other religions' (Alexiev, 2011, p.83).

Over the years, as TJ grew in size and influence, its traditional structure was strengthened by additional resources and leaders and, in fact, gained the framework necessary for the creation of a global network. Subsequently, the movement has expanded from local to national, and further into a transnational movement. It is reported that TJ operates in at least 165 countries (Putra, 2013, p.17) – some estimations suggest that TJ is active in around [200 countries](#) – with significant influence, not only in several majority Muslim, but in 'non-Muslim' majority

² It is reported that TJ 'does not maintain an account of its members, their names, addresses, profession, family, and other such details'. 'There is no card-holding cadre' and people can join or leave TJ regarding volition (Salam, 2020b).

³ TJ is guided by the following six key principles: '*Kalimah*: An article of faith in which the tabligh accepts that there is no god but Allah and the Prophet Muhammad is His messenger; *Salaat*: Five daily prayers that are essential to spiritual elevation, piety, and a life free from the ills of the material world; *Ilm and Dhikr*: The knowledge and remembrance of Allah conducted in sessions in which the congregation listens to preaching by the emir, performs prayers, recites the Quran and reads Hadith. The congregation will also use these sessions to eat meals together, thus fostering a sense of community and identity; *Ikram-i-Muslim*: The treatment of fellow Muslims with honor and deference; *Ikhlas-i-Niyat*: 'Reforming one's life in supplication to Allah by performing every human action for the sake of Allah and toward the goal of self-transformation'; *Tafrigh-i-Waqt*: 'The sparing of time to live a life based on faith and learning its virtues, following in the footsteps of the Prophet, and taking His message door-to-door for the sake of faith'.

countries in the West (Putra, 2013, p.17). At present the organisation's activities are coordinated via centres and headquarters known as 'Markaz' (Salam, 2020b). The organisation's international headquarter is located at the Bangla Wali Masjid Nizamuddin Markaz, in New Delhi, India. TJ's European headquarter is located at the Dewsbury mosque, UK (Alexiev, 2011, p.45). Like the jamaats, the Markaz are organized based on voluntary work and its members are self-financed (Putra, 2013, p.22).

The group holds national headquarters in several countries where they are active. In some countries, there is a formal shura with an Amir, while in others TJ units are run without a formal Amir. All local and state workers are asked to appoint an arbitrator or Amir-e-mashwara for their regular mashwara – consultation on various programmes from the mosque level to district, state and even in some cases national-level work. This arbitrator is selected by the local group for a limited period and the position is rotative (Pieri, 2015). Today, TJ's annual congregations (three days gathering, known as Ijtima) in Bangladesh (Tongi, near Dhaka), Pakistan (Raiwind) and India (Bopal), attract the largest number of Muslims outside the annual Islamic pilgrimage Hajj in Mecca (Reetz, 2004, p.298; Pieri, 2012, p.103). With [tens of millions of followers](#),⁴ TJ is today the largest Islamic globally operating movement (Sikand, 2003, p.42). In this context, it seems perhaps obvious that TJ [aims to recruit](#) as many followers as possible. This is important because of TJ's recruitment process and the secrecy surrounding the internal structure ('closed door meetings'⁵).

[The Sunday Telegraph](#) states that 'no limit was placed on the potential pool of [TJ] converts, and so, implicitly, the ultimate objective was the Tablighisation of the world'. Moreover, it is [argued](#) that 'the group, for all the mystique that surrounds it, has been diligent, and, today, with a growing presence in the West, it is viewed by anxious critics as a Trojan horse of Islamic fundamentalism'. Furthermore, the Tablighi possess a 'scant regard for the logic of loyalties of national territory' (Putra, 2013, p.17). This can of course become a challenge for the integration of Tablighi in host countries. Policy Analysts and Islamic scholars are [fiercely divided](#) in their assessments of TJ. On one side some scholars denounce any *a-priori* ties between TJ and terrorism and stress that Tablighis implicated in terrorist activities

⁴ The exact number is difficult to measure due to the absence of a formal registration.

⁵ Expert [Patrick Sukhdeo states](#) that TJ 'operates in every sense as a secret society...'.

‘represent a miniscule percentage’ of the movement (Hedges, 2008, p.6). On the other side, a growing number of experts state that there is clear evidence that TJ as an organisation is linked to global Jihadism. Despite this debate about the real nature of TJ and its massive expansion, ‘this movement hardly gets governments suspicion’ in Western countries (Putra, 2013, p.19).

2. The concept of ‘Islamist Ecosystem’

TJ can be seen as a component of a phenomenon which the French political-sociologist Bernard Rougier (2020) calls an ‘Islamist Ecosystem’. His example [involves](#) a network established in French suburbs which links schools, mosques, sports halls, shops, and even prisons. ‘The components of this ecosystem’ – foremost the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist groups, and TJ, among others – are “competing” to control social spaces (neighbourhoods, associations, etc.); however, “they join forces against a common enemy, secularism, which they hate above all else”. All these movements have been “working” within the neighbourhoods for a long time – through “religious entrepreneurs”, preachers engaged in a real territorial conquest’ (French Sénat, 2020a, p.33). TJ conducts ‘initial preaching that paved the way by bringing young people back to Islam before they, now interested in the things of faith, turned to a more learned version of Islam’ (Rougier, 2020). As such, TJ contributes to ‘the expansion of ecosystem resources which in turn feeds the jihadist dynamic, providing its fighters with the ideological and material bases legitimising the fight against global society (Rougier, 2020). Preachers and recruiters from [TJ are](#) ‘deployed there to detect weak spirits capable of forming the first line of the Holy War’.

Tablighi are sometimes seen as oscillating on an ideological continuum between moderate and radical positions, between TJ as organisation and militant Jihadist groups (Ragazzi, 2014, p.13, referring to CEIS and Change Institute). ‘This ecosystem does not advocate armed struggle on French soil [as well as in other countries with a TJ presence] but maintains a logic of rupture with global society and its institutions. This rupture is then exploited by the theological and political argument of the jihadists’ (Rougier, 2020). In other words, joining TJ could [turn out](#) ‘to be the first step on the road to extremism’. [Farhan Zahid](#) describes TJ as ‘system driver and integral element of Islamist Violent Non-State Actors internal dynamics’. Furthermore, he identifies TJ as ‘one of the agents responsible for

Islamist activities’ which acts in many cases as ‘a nursery for indoctrinating Islamist terrorists’.

3. Tablighi Jamaat in the focus of the international intelligence community

3.1 German intelligence

In its 2019 Report on the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutzbericht, BMI, 2020b, BMI, 2020a), the Federal Interior Ministry of Germany (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, BMI) points to that, even though the country has not witnessed any major terrorist attack since August 2017, ‘the threat posed by Islamist terrorism remains at high levels’ (BMI, 2020b, p.27). For the last few years, the country’s domestic intelligence agency – Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV, Federal Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution⁶) and its counterparts at the state level (State Bureaus for the Protection of the Constitution,⁷ Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz/LfV) – under the BMI –, have been publishing these reports. Focusing on Germany’s internal security situation, these reports assess external threats, indigenous left and right-wing groups, and the threat potential by Islamist extremists and terrorists (organisations and individuals) in the country, among several other issues.

Already at the occasion of the presentation of the 2004 Annual Report (BMI, 2005), the then German Federal Minister of Interior, Otto Schily, warned that Islamic terrorism poses the greatest global threat to Germany.⁸ TJ was first mentioned in the 2004 report (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, p.332). It was classified as one of the foreign Islamist organisations active in Germany (BMI, 2020a). Among other concerns regarding TJ, the report specifically mentions a considerable increase in its support base⁹ (BMI, 2005, pp.190-191) contributing to the overall rise in reported membership levels of foreign Islamist organisations in the country. The

⁶ Besides the Federal Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) under the Ministry of the Interior, the most important intelligence authorities in Germany are the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) under the Federal Chancellery and the Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD) under the Ministry of Defence. The BfV is given authority to track any activities by extremist groups that seek to foment ideological or religious strife domestically (Archick, K et. Al., 2006, p.n.n.).

⁷ State Bureaus for the Protection of the Constitution work independently of each other and independently of the BfV (Archick, K et. Al., 2006, p.n.n.).

⁸ Statement by the Bundesinnenminister Otto Schily zum Verfassungsschutzbericht 2004 am 17. Mai 2005 in Berlin, quoted in focus migration (2005, May). Deutschland: Verfassungsbericht 2004. Newsletter Ausgabe, 5/2005.

⁹ It is stated that ‘considering the hard numbers, one can say that the Islamist extremist following increased by around 5% to a total of 28,020 individuals in 2019 (2018: 26,560)’ (BMI, 2020b, p.26).

latest BMI 2019 report (2020a, pp.181, 224; 2020b, p.26) – compiled by the BfV –, as well as reports by several agencies at the state level (for example, BSTMI, 2020, pp.39-40; NMIS, 2020, pp.230, 232) continue to recognize TJ as part of the potential threat by ‘Islamist extremism/Islamist terrorism’. German intelligence agencies hold that several factors justify monitoring TJ as a potential threat in the context of ‘Islamist extremism/Islamist terrorism’.

When assessing TJ’s threat potential, the ‘2019 Report on the Protection of the Constitution’ states that ‘the rejection of secular principles and the demarcation from non-Muslims’ through TJ, ‘can lead to the formation of closed parallel societies and at least passively promote individual radicalisation processes’ (BMI, 2020a, p.224). These phenomena had already been mentioned by the BfV in 2011, which stated that ‘the successful proselytizing efforts of TJ often lead to a visible change in the social behaviour of the recruits. The rejection of Western values can have a socio-political disintegration effect in non-Muslim countries and contribute to the emergence of parallel societies. This can promote individual radicalisation processes and thus create the conditions for a further slide into a terrorist environment’¹⁰ (BMI, 2012, p.308).

Overarching visions of TJ draw additional attention by German intelligence agencies: namely its long-term goals to establish an Islamist regime (NMIS, 2020, p.230) and make Sharia law universal.¹¹ From the TJ’s perspective, this requires a comprehensive Islamization of their host countries’ societies. The purpose of all TJ activities is to achieve ‘the transformation of the society shaped by Western values into an Islamic form of society’ (BMI, 2006, p.194). Here, both the BfV and the LfVs are concerned that the notion of an Islamic societal transition could also ‘extend to jihadist ideas’ (MIKNW, 2013, p.128). The Nordrhein-Westfalen State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfVNW) states that TJ must be classified as an ‘extremist movement’ (MIKNW, 2013, p.128).¹²

More specifically, German intelligence sees a threat potential in ‘the pursuit of an exemplary practice of faith in the sense that TJ includes a largely verbatim and rigid interpretation of the Koran and its legislation, so that the fulfilment of religious

¹⁰ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019 BMI, p.308, author’s translation.

¹¹ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019 BMI, p.224, author’s translation.

¹² The LfVVBW comes to a similar conclusion by questioning TJ’s self-description as a religious, apolitical, and non-violent phenomenon. Instead, the intelligence agency comes to the conclusion that TJ must be classified as a ‘extremist organisation’ (IBW, 2012, p.67)

regulations is given priority in principle over a way of life based on state law¹³ (NMIS, 2020, p.231). Thus, TJ's ideology – especially propagating Sharia law as the basis of its social model, contradicts essential democratic principles, in particular that of the separation of state and religion' (BMI, 2012, p.309; NMIS, 2020, p.231).

Here an area of concern for the LfVNW is that 'TJ calls for the application of all sharia law provisions' (MIKNW, 2010, p.109). 'This includes the application of the provisions of classical Islamic procedural law, classical Islamic law of marriage and divorce, and the so-called "Hadd" penalties (e.g., the flogging of offenders), which are not only incompatible but directed against the liberal democratic basic order (freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung) of Germany' (MIKNW, 2010, p.109; BSTMI, 2020, p.39). Furthermore, the image of women represented by TJ, largely expressed in the social exclusion of women (NMIS, 2020, p.230; BSTMI, 2020, p.39)¹⁴ cannot be reconciled with Germany's constitutional principles.

TJ presents itself as apolitical and non-violent (unlike other Islamist groupings such as Salafist circles) but the assessment of the organisation by security authorities is different (NMIS, 2020, p.231; IBW, 2012, p.67). In this context, it is interesting to mention that violent clashes between different factions of TJ occurred in the past, undermining the movement's narrative of promoting non-violence. Most remarkable were the events in the aftermath of TJ's leadership decision to establish a 'governing body' (Shura¹⁵) in 2015 (BMI, 2020a, p.2004). During the following years, particularly in 2018, strong reactions among the Tablighi led to serious clashes between opponents and supporters of the innovation in several countries, foremost in Bangladesh - but also in European states, such as the UK¹⁶ (BMI, 2020a, p.224).

¹³ The LfVB further argues that the 'traditional prayer clothing and rules of conduct in everyday life, which are binding down to the last detail, are intended to express the absolute devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. These aspirations are necessarily disintegrating in non-Muslim societies, so that a lasting and serious turn to Western social orders, values and models of integration is not possible' (BSTMI, 2020).

¹⁴ This includes 'the subordination of women to men, the woman's duty of obedience to the man and the limited freedom of movement of women are postulated as well as their sexual availability' (MIKNW, 2010, p.109).

¹⁵ The Shura is supposed to function as an advisory committee '[to deal with all important matters including international congregations \(ijtima\)](#)'.

¹⁶ [Shah and Mushtaq are stating](#): 'The differences grew so much that several incidents of brawl occurred, and members and elders assaulted each other in London Markaz – also known as Masjid Ilyas and Abbey Mills Mosque. Tableeghi Jamaat and police sources have confirmed that the police were called about 13 times and four people were arrested on different occasions. A source said that

The Baden-Württemberg State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfVWBW) stressed that ‘various investigative procedures and trials in recent years have clearly shown that the one-sided interpretation of Islamic sources – with the aim of aligning the behaviour of an individual Muslim strictly according to Islamic standards – can, in individual cases, lead to an intensive transfer of ideology’¹⁷ (IBW, 2012, p.67). As indicated above, the vast scope for interpretation of the movement’s ideology makes the emergence of a jihadist orientation within TJ possible (IBW, 2012, p.67; MIKNW, 2013, p.128).

It is noteworthy, that ‘in the literature of TJ a pronounced glorification of the militant jihad can be found. Therefore, although it is true that there is no explicit call for militant jihad, jihad is described as the ‘outstanding duty of faith of every Muslim’ (MIKNW, 2010, p.109). Thus, some Islamist terrorists had life-changing experiences through their membership and exposure to TJ (MIKNW, 2010, p.109). TJ became a focus of the German judiciary as well; in fact, the movement’s hostility towards the country’s constitution has already been the subject of several court decisions. For example, the Administrative Court (Verwaltungsgericht/VG) of Bayreuth (State of Bavaria/Bayern) concluded in one of its decisions¹⁸ that TJ supported international terrorism.

For the judges involved it was clear that several persons belonging to TJ had committed terrorist attacks in different countries – or were linked to TJ in their terrorist attacks. At the very least, this grouping is used to facilitate individual terrorists’ journeys or as a point of contact (NMIS, 2007, p.28). The Administrative Court (VG) Ansbach (State of Bavaria/Bayern) issued two resolutions (9 and 18 May 2005), stating that TJ supports terrorism. In addition, it was stated that TJ endangered the liberal democratic basic order and the security of Germany. As early as 24 November 2005, the VG Bayreuth had established that the suspicion of TJ’s support of terrorism was objectively justified (NMIS, 2007, p.28). In its judgment of 2 March 2005,¹⁹ the VG Hannover followed the previous decision of VG

a group of Tableeghi followers from Bangladesh and Indian Gujarat ganged up against the Tableeghi members from Pakistani background and other countries and as a result the Abbey Mills Mosque became a battleground’. ‘The two factions now don’t go to each other’s mosques and security personnel are deputed at the gate of Ilyas Masjid to identify the members who come to the mosque to attend sermons’.

¹⁷ Verfassungsbericht Baden-Württemberg 2011, p.67, author’s translation.

¹⁸ Case No. Az.: B 1 S 05.763, 24.11.2005.

¹⁹ Case No. Az.: 10 A 5681/04.

Bayreuth. It classified TJ as an organisation whose objective is directed against the liberal democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany (NMIS, 2007, p.28).

The Thüringen State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfVT) came to a similar conclusion and stated that ‘although TJ itself does not actively support Islamist terrorism, it does seem to serve as a recruitment base for violent Islamist groups and jihadist networks’²⁰ (TI, 2012, p.142; BMI, 2012, p.308). The BfV described TJ not only as a recruitment pool but also as a ‘catalyst for Jihadist recruitment efforts’ (BMI, 2012, p.308). More concretely, TJ is seen as cultivating such a conservative understanding of Islam among its followers that several organisations and networks just must add a ‘Jihadist component’ to recruit the Tablighi (BMI, 2012, p.308). In addition, there are indications that ‘the largely common ideological base of TJ with Jihadists and other militant groups enables the latter to make use of the global TJ infrastructure’ (HHBI, 2012, p.51; TI, 2012, p.142). Here, the Nordrhein-Westfalen State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfVNW) goes a step further by arguing that ‘recent cases suggest that TJ, on the one hand, endorses Islamist and jihadist ideas in its ranks, and that on the other hand, its global networks are being used by Islamist terrorists – and that TJ tolerates this’^{21,22} (MIKNW, 2013, p.128).

It appears that there is a growing awareness within Germany’s intelligence community regarding potential causal links between TJ’s missionary activities, particularly religious trainings and instruction courses, and the radicalisation of individual followers. The BfV warned already in 2005 that ‘trainings by TJ can constitute for individual young Muslims an entry into Islamism and – subsequently – also into Islamist-terrorist groups’²³ (BMI, 2006, p.194). The federal agency emphasizes the significance of study tours abroad [namely those to Pakistan] offered by TJ. It is stated that ‘successfully proselytised people are often provided several months of training events in Pakistani Qur’anic schools [madrasas]. Such intensive training courses can indoctrinate participants and make them receptive to

²⁰ Verfassungsschutzbericht Freistaat Thüringen 2011, p.142, author’s translation.

²¹ It is [reported](#) that TJ not only tolerates the use of its networks by extremists but also that individual Tablighis actively support extremist’s through the facilitation of contacts to Jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban – among others – to receive military training and/or serve as fighters.

²² Verfassungsschutzbericht des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen für das Jahr 2012, p.128; author’s translation.

²³ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005 BMI, p.194, author’s translation.

Islamist ideas'²⁴ (BMI 2006, p.226). 'In individual cases, trainees then found their way to "Mujahideen" training camps in Afghanistan'²⁵ (BMI 2006, p.226).

Finally, it must be mentioned that the targets of TJ's missionary activities in Germany are mostly young people from social and weaker segments of society, or those who feel a lack of belonging²⁶ (BMI, 2006, p.194). Furthermore, in the sermons it became clear that TJ in Germany has not only 'fallen-from-faith Muslims' as a target group, but also different believers' (BSTMI, 2007, p.53). The fact that TJ also wants to appeal to German decision-makers such as mayors and parliamentarians demands special attention (BSTMI, 2007, p.53). The LfVBW identifies the potential threat that 'this can lead to a re-Islamisation, especially among young Muslims who have been discriminated against or feel disadvantaged. This revival then leads to a rejection and demarcation from the surrounding society, whether it is supposedly Islamic or non-Islamic'²⁷ (IBW, 2012, p.67).

3.2 French intelligence

The French intelligence agency Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure (DGSI, General Directorate for Internal Security) in its '2018 Rapport. Etat des lieux de la pénétration de l'islam fondamentaliste en France' (2018 Report – state of the situation regarding the lodging of Islamic fundamentalism in France) describes TJ²⁸ as one of the four most active Islamist movements in the country – besides the Frères Musulmans (Muslim Brotherhood), Salafistes (Salafists), and the Mouvement Turc ('Turkish Movement') – constituting 'the ultimate risk' in the form of 'an advent of a counter-society on national territory' (DGSI, 2018, p.3). Furthermore, the DGSI states that TJ experienced a strong development in the 1970s – playing a major role in the re-Islamization of working-class Muslims in

²⁴ This assessment of the German intelligence is strengthened by international observers. For example, after interviewing a Tablighi, [Craig S. Smith highlights](#) the causal role of such training courses not only for radicalising Muslims but also transforming them into militants: 'Tablighi-sponsored trips to Pakistan put young men in contact with fundamentalists of many stripes, including adherents of Salafism, a fundamentalist school of Islam whose radical fringe advocates war against non-Muslims'. [Smith's interviewee](#) also 'acknowledged that young men wishing to migrate from the Tablighi to more militant forms of Islam had no trouble finding their way' and 'it's easy to get into the jihadi network' since as a Tablighi you know where you can meet Salafists. Furthermore, the interviewee estimated that half of the Tablighis are being recruited by the Salafists.

²⁵ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005 BMI, p.226, author's translation.

²⁶ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005 BMI, p.194, author's translation.

²⁷ Verfassungsschutzbericht Baden-Württemberg 2011, p.67, author's translation.

²⁸ TJ has a main presence in the Paris region, with a centre located in Saint-Denis (French Sénat, 2020a)

suburban areas (banlieues;²⁹ DGSI, 2018, pp.4, 109). Here, the French intelligence service sees a major threat. For even though it classifies TJ as apolitical, the movement ‘constitutes a reservoir of individuals in total break with society’ (DGSI, 2018, p.4).

The DGSI is particularly vigilant regarding TJ’s growing influence within the educational system. More specific concerns regard the indoctrination of the teenager and parents by TJ supervisors, the influence of [TJ] imams on children education, and the immense difficulties faced by non-Muslim families (foremost Jewish ones) to get their children enrolled in public educational institutions where the majority of children are Muslims (DGSI, 2018, pp.62-63). This partly reflects the threat potential of antisemitism among Tablighi identified by German intelligence agencies.³⁰

Another major concern of the DGSI, is that through to the strong cohesion among active Tablighi – reinforced through religious practises, teaching missions, and omnipresent prayers among others –, the social ties of adherents outside the Tablighi community disappear quickly (DGSI, 2018, p.108). Indeed, many Tablighi are experiencing a ‘turn-over’ within the movement. Here the DGSI states that ‘in general, after observing an important rigorism in his practice of Islam, the individual ends up moving away from the movement. The weakness of the religious discourse served in the organisation (based on some literalist precepts) and the lack of prospects offered by the preaching activity have the effect of causing individuals to leave to other Islamist ‘offers’, especially Salafists’ (DGSI, 2018, p.108).

This assessment by the French intelligence is further substantiated by reports on behalf of the Commission³¹ of Inquiry³² ‘on the organization and means of state

²⁹ TJ fed on an emerging identity crisis among Muslim migrants and the major economic crisis following the oil shock of 1973 which created fragile socio-economic conditions. It is reported that not only urban but also rural Muslim populations are in the focus of TJ (DGSI, 2018, pp.4, 109).

³⁰ The BfV states in its 2019 report (summary) that during the period of assessment, again a large number of anti-Semitic incidents motivated by Islamist extremism occurred. These incidents ranged from anti-Semitic speeches and sermons to anti-Jewish postings on social media and verbal or physical attacks on Jewish individuals. Antisemitism serves as an ideological link connecting all Islamist extremist movements, including TJ. The vast majority of Islamist extremist organisations operating in Germany holds anti-Semitic ideas, which they disseminate through various channels (BMI, 2020b, pp.26, 27).

³¹ Rapport fait au nom de la commission d’enquête sur l’organisation et les moyens des services de l’État pour faire face à l’évolution de la menace terroriste après la chute de l’État islamique. [Report created in the name of the enquiry commission regarding the organisation and means available to the state so as to face terrorist threats following the fall of the Islamic State.]

³² These reports are based on Committee hearings with academic and non-academic researchers and other specialists.

services to deal with the evolving terrorist threat following the fall of the Islamic State’ by the French Senate. In a 2018 report (French Sénat, 2018, p.34) it is stated that TJ – described as a sectarian movement – can also be considered as fundamentalist because of its literalist reading of the Qur'an and its orthopraxy, and this despite its links to a Sufi tradition which Salafists fight (sometimes through arms). Islamic fundamentalisms [and their respective representatives – organisations as well as individuals] have complex, often conflicting relationships for the control over territories, communities or places of worship (French Sénat, 2018, p.68). In his official rhetoric, TJ stresses its differences with Salafism (which is seen as a school of ignorance). TJ seems to view itself as a bulwark in the fight against Salafism: ‘But many young people discover Islam via TJ before joining the Salafist movement, or even radical organisations’ (French Sénat, 2018, p.68).

In a bipartite report (French Sénat, 2020a; 2020b) by the same Senate Commission of Inquiry it is declared – referring to expert Bernard Rougier –, that even if there is no organisation or agreement between the different foreign Islamist groups in France, they form an ‘Islamist ecosystem’ (French Sénat, 2020a, p.33). The reports further highlight that despite TJ’s claim of being apolitical, it ‘advocates a logic of rupture with French society’ (French Sénat, 2020a, p.35) and ‘often sets the stage for Salafism’ (Bernard Rougier quoted in French Sénat, 2020a, p.35).

It is interesting to mention that the second part of the report, identifies a kind of hybridisation (French Sénat, 2020b, p.42), obviously referring to the above-mentioned ‘Islamist Ecosystem’. More concretely, it is stated that some terrorists are initially trained by TJ and then transited through the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movements (French Sénat, 2020b, p.42). It is also claimed that TJ is constantly used as a gate of entry for the before-mentioned Islamist organisations (French Sénat, 2020b, p.42). When TJ is present in a mosque, there is a particularly good chance that, a few months or years later, the Salafists have taken their place. It's almost mechanical (French Sénat, 2020b, p.72).

Even though different Islamist groups compete in the control of the version of Islam (understood as ideology) prevalent in a neighbourhood, territory or prison, they are bound together when it comes to defining themselves in relation to - and in opposition with - French society. A strong common ground involves all these competing and converging components of Islamism, which undeniably share the same hatred of secularism (French Sénat, 2020b, p.71). TJ in this context ‘advocates

in a non-violent way a progressive logic of breaking with the institutions of global society’ (French Sénat, 2020b, p.71). Observers believe that the [TJ acts](#) as a ‘foundation for radical Islamic terrorism’. According to one estimate, ‘perhaps 80 percent of Islamist extremists have come from Tablighi ranks, prompting French intelligence officers to call TJ the “antechamber of fundamentalism”’ (Alexiev, 2011, p.84; 2005). The French expert on Islam Gilles Kepel [stresses](#) that theoretically TJ is opposed to violent action, whether political or jihadist. However, to this Policy Brief’s interpretation, the religious radicalization they propose sometimes serves as a foreplay, or even as a [gateway to terrorism](#). Kepel refers – as does the German intelligence, to the involvement of Tablighis in terrorist attacks.³³

A noted French scholar, Marc Gaborieau, closely examined TJ activities in France and other European countries. He believes that TJ’s philosophy and transnational goals include the ‘planned conquest of the world’ from the outset (Gaborieau, 1999, p.21). He further sees TJ as a militant movement, since the Tablighis are able ‘to organise people quasi militarily’ (Gaborieau, 1999, p.21). The author also rejects the movement’s pacifist claim and notes that Tablighi have never condemned violence (Vilela, A. J., et. Al., 2006, p.50). Thus, experts see TJ as ‘a way to join more radical movements’ in France, as well as in other countries in Europe and Asia (Vilela, A. J., et. Al., 2006, p.50). Notably, Gaborieau refers to Felice Dassetto, who describes TJ as a ‘Total Institution’ comparing Tablighi with ‘sects’. Dassetto adapts Erving Goffman’s (1961) concept of ‘Total Institution’ to TJ context.

A ‘Total Institution’ is ‘a place of residence and work where many like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’ encompassing most day-to-day activities (Goffman, 1961, p.xiii). Furthermore, Gaborieau deemed the group’s strategy – especially regarding politics –, difficult to understand. Still, it seems clear to him that TJ is not entirely apolitical since its aim is the Islamisation of society. The French scholar argues that TJ possesses ‘a far-sighted conception of politics’ which goes ‘beyond the narrow borders of nation-states’. According to Gaborieau, the Tablighi strategy is to first build individuals and institutions ‘which over time may exert a more lasting Tablighi political influence’ (Gaborieau, 1999,

³³ [For example](#), the stabbing attack on a soldier patrolling in La Defence, a business district in Paris in May 2013.

p.21). For him, this sets TJ apart from other Islamist organisations which have only a short-sighted conception of politics (Gaborieau, 1999, p.21).

3.3 Perspectives of other European intelligence forces

The observations and assessments by Germany's intelligence agencies are supported by other members and experts of the European intelligence community. Regarding Muslim radicalism in Europe, the General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands (AVID) identifies a new phase in the development of Islamic radicalism related to the presence of not only the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) but also TJ (AVID, 2007, p.42). The MB, the HT and TJ are described as radical *da'wah*³⁴ movements encouraging the rise of Islamic neo-radicalism (AVID, 2007, pp.27, 48). They employ different strategies and tactics, disagree on certain ideological and theological interpretations; however, their objectives greatly converge (AVID, 2007, pp..27, 48). In another report, AVID stresses that Tablighi are a variant of radical Islam and 'manifest themselves in non-violent, radical-Islamic puritan groups' which overtly propagate isolationism, advocating 'exclusivism³⁵ and parallelism' (AVID, 2004, p.38).

In Portugal, too, TJ became a focus of the country's intelligence services, foremost for the Serviço de Informações de Segurança (SIS, Intelligence and Security Service). According to Maria do Céu Pinto, since 2001, the country's intelligence and law enforcing agencies have identified links 'between individuals residing in Portugal and radical Islamic operatives within the ideological network of Al Qaeda, as well as logistical and support activities for terrorism, namely of a criminal nature' (Pinto, 2012, p.115). According to SIS sources, aside detecting organisation's structures and monitoring individuals (especially their travels abroad), TJ's funding

³⁴ Dawah (literally 'call' or 'invitation') is understood as 'the propagation of the radical-Islamic ideology' (Mukhopadhyay, 2006, p.333). According to Siddiqi, TJ interprets the concept of Dawah 'as Allah's way of bringing believers to faith' which 'includes both activities with other people in one's own locality and missionary journeys to other places' (Siddiqi, 2018, p.2).

³⁵ According to Mukhopadhyay, *exclusivism* 'denotes the trend of a general aloofness of Muslims in the European host societies. They have less interest in local and national politics and refuse to integrate into the mainstream of European societies. There exists among them, a general attitude towards their countries of residence as a temporary halt, from where they would eventually return.' (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, p.333).

Parallelism he defines as 'the idea of establishing an alternate society, i.e., a transplanted version of their countries of origin with rituals, religious practices and mosques in a foreign land. If extended or as propagated by the global Islamic movements, this idea of parallelism may eventually lead to parallel Muslim societies (totally based on the literal interpretation of Islamic texts by these global Islamic movements) in a predominantly Christian setting. In the long run, such parallelism will result in greater division and ghettoisation in European societies solely on the basis of religion.' (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, p.333).

has constituted one of the most important points of SIS surveillance (Vilela, A. J., et. Al., 2006, p.49-50; Marques, T., & Vilela, A. J., 2006, p.52). This funding constitutes a major cause for concern among observers of TJ. This for several reasons: firstly, there are contradictions between TJ leadership’s official rhetoric as regards the funding of missionary tours and gathering abroad of its adherents.

On the one hand, as mentioned above, TJ claims that members are responsible for covering expenditures themselves. Conversely, however, it is reported that TJ offers financial support for such travel activities. For example, Marc Gaborieau – referring to investigations by the French police – points out that TJ funded trips to India and Pakistan for unemployed young Muslims. This defers from TJ’s principle of self-financing (*khuruji*), supposedly an inherent characteristic of Tablighi. Furthermore, the movement appears to hold enormous financial resources. This is relevant since ‘the envoi of missionaries all over the world is expensive to the institution’ (Marques, T., & Vilela, A. J., 2006, p.52). Secondly, TJ is apparently ‘averse to financial and banking records’ (Marques, T., & Vilela, A. J., 2006, p.52). Thus, TJ does not use formal banking channels so as to avoid any scrutiny of its funds. It seems to rely instead on the informal Hawala money transfer system based on transactions in cash.³⁶

Lastly, funding sources remain anonymous and there is no accessible data regarding the numbers or profiles of those who visit (and donate to) TJ offices and centres. According to [Francesca Marino](#), TJ is being investigated by Italian intelligence and law enforcing agencies. Italian authorities suspect that a ‘cultural centre’ of the movement as well as individuals are involved in collecting and/or transferring money to fund Jihadist activities abroad. During its investigation, the police

³⁶ With the ‘Hawala system’ it is possible to deposit an amount in one country to be raised in another by an indicated person. The method functions on the ‘basis of honor’ and there are no records. Besides being hardly traceable (if at all), the Hawala system is vulnerable to misuse (infiltrations by criminals for [money laundering](#)) Marques, T., & Vilela, A. J., 2006, p.52). However, one must mention that TJ does maintain some bank accounts with the funds needed to carry out activities. On a more general note, regarding TJ’s financial affairs, experts believe that the movement relies heavily on voluntary contributions (collection and contributions) of largely unknown amounts (Salam, 2020b; Siddiqui, 2018, p.136). There are also cases in which land or property are offered as donations. Construction work, community outreach programmes and other types of developmental work are sponsored by wealthy supporters. It is reported that a large amount of contributions flow to TJ from Gulf countries so as to fund large congregations, the construction of mosques, and other activities (Salam, 2020b). Larger known [patrons include](#) Saudi Arabia and several among the Pakistani establishment.

detected an ‘illegal funding network’ – with ties to Pakistani sources – not only running associations and activities in Italy, but also maintaining links to TJ.

Drawing on interviews with members of the country’s intelligence community as well as the press, Pinto states ‘that in some Wahabi and conservative mosques the religious discourse has become stricter and more intolerant’ and that there is the possibility that TJ ‘developed more extremist tendencies, at least on the fringes’ (2012, p.199). Noivo, who also refers to Portuguese intelligence, states that TJ uses ‘Portugal as a platform for spreading its pan-Islamic message to Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and Latin America, particularly Brazil, and that there are indications that ‘the movement’s message has been the catalyst for the radicalisation of some of its members’ (Noivo, 2010, pp.4-5). Furthermore, as is the case in other European countries, Noivo stresses that in Portugal too there is the threat perception that due to its action and self-exclusion from social and political participation, TJ constitutes an interpretation of Islam ‘that perpetuates ‘otherness’, thus possibly jeopardising integration and, consequently, social harmony’ (Noivo, 2010, p.5).

Based on publicly available information collected by the Nachrichtendienst des Bundes (NDB), Switzerland’s intelligence agency, and the Swiss Federal Office of Police, the Centre for Security Studies (CSS, ETH Zürich) describes TJ (besides the HT) ‘in regard to Islamist inspired violent radicalization’ as ‘most commonly been considered a gateway organization’ (Vidino, 2013, p.27).

3.4 Views from Russia and Central Asia

The Center for Information and Analysis COBA,³⁷ [emphasises](#) that already over a decade ago, Russia (as well as other several Central Asian nations) banned TJ for constituting an extremist group.³⁸ It is [reported](#) that the ban of TJ is based on a

³⁷ [COBA](#) (Center for Information and Analysis) is a Moscow-based Russian non-profit organisation.

³⁸ It is reported that in Russia TJ has been making inroads through underground cells. The movement’s underground activities in the country have been noticed in Moscow, St. Petersburg and in the Muslim-dominated Republics of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and Karachai-Cherkessia. In 2016, the Russian police busted several TJ underground cells. Cadres were detained and extremist literature as well as communication tools and electronic data storage devices were recovered. A few Tablighi cadres arrested in Moscow were planning to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan for training in extremist camps. In one instance, a busted cell operated by Central Asian nationals also included Russian citizens. In August 2020, the Russian Federal Security Service's Directorate for Mordovia, in interaction with other law enforcing agencies, [withheld a TJ cell for its extremist activities](#). TJ cell unearthed in St. Petersburg was run by a Tajik national suspected to be the head of a local HT cell. This is indicative of TJ’s alliance with other extremist groups. [Russia banned](#) the group in 2009 for ‘assistance to international terrorist organisations’ and for actions ‘aimed at the violation of the

recommendation by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO³⁹). The recommendation was adopted by Russia and other Central Asian states - [all except Kyrgyzstan](#). TJ was included in the Russian Federal List of Extremist Organizations. After an appeal in May 2009, the [Russian Supreme Court ruled](#) (and thus confirmed) that TJ was to be considered an extremist organisation and banned its activity.

According to the Prosecutor General's [statement](#), the court had resolved that the activities of TJ's structural divisions 'threaten interethnic and inter-religious stability in Russian society and the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation'. Russian prosecutors [argued](#) that 'the said religious association's purposes include the establishment of global supremacy through disseminating a radical form of Islam and the foundation of a unified Islamic state called the Global Caliphate on the basis of regions with traditionally Muslim populations'. According to Russian political analyst [E.N. Yegorov](#), 'in the long run, the influence of this movement on the religious-political situation should not be underestimated'.⁴⁰ The researcher further [states](#) that TJ 'defiantly refuses to participate in politics, but there are reasons to believe that the strategic goals of its activities are connected precisely with politics and power'. There is a [notion](#) that Tablighi do 'not call for a change in the social system or creating caliphate'. Then again, according to Kyrgyz expert [K. Murzakhalilov](#), TJ does impose demands and transmit these into the social and political processes in host countries around the world.

Besides domestic concerns, the Russian news agency [Interfax highlighted](#) that 'the law enforcement agencies of some Central Asian states consider the Tablighi Jamaat as a potential threat to their national security'. In Tajikistan, '[Tablighi Jamaat's activities were banned by a court too](#)'. In [Kazakhstan](#) in 2012, law enforcement agencies broke off the activities of over 200 TJ missionaries operating illegally as an unregistered organisation. Subsequently, the Kazakh Prosecutor-General's Office [declared](#) on February 26, 2013, that TJ 'had been designated as extremist and all its activities in Kazakhstan were now considered illegal'. In both Tajikistan and Kazakhstan numerous Tablighi were arrested and given lengthy jail

territorial integrity of Russia and religious discrimination of its citizens'.

³⁹ The CSTO is a Russia-led military alliance of seven former Soviet states created in 2002. For more information see: Avedissian (2019).

⁴⁰ For the original text, see: «The Tablighi Jamaat» movement: The Ideology and the Activity Specifics <http://islam.dgu.ru/Stat/Islamoved%202016-3-1.pdf>

sentences for running afoul of national laws against miscreant versions of Islam and for advocating extremism (AFPC, 2012, p.6-7). It is interesting to note that as is the case in France and other European countries, also here TJ influence in education causes concerns to authorities and regional experts. According to [Tologon Keldibayev](#), educational grassroots activities by Tablighi preachers are hardly noticed, if at all

Finally, it is also interesting to mention that concerns by European intelligence agencies and other observers are reflected in US intelligence sources. Susan Sachs [reports](#) that the FBI is much worried with TJ's influence in the country. Since 9/11, Tablighi have 'increasingly attracted the interest of federal investigators'. According to US law enforcement officials, TJ serves as 'springboard into militancy'. More concretely, despite its fundamentalist character, TJ [appears](#) to potential adherents (and authorities) as 'a natural entree, a way of gathering people together with a common interest in Islam' and not as a militant or terrorist outfit.

However, the US intelligence is aware that TJ activities are exploited by international terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda. In 2003, Michael J. Heimbach, Deputy Chief of the FBI's International Terrorism Section, stated: 'We have a significant presence of Tablighi Jamaat in the United States, and we have found that Al Qaeda used them for recruiting, now and in the past' (Freedman, 2006, p.41). Here, like in most other countries with an active TJ presence, a major concern among authorities regards TJ's susceptibility to infiltration and manipulation. [Prosecutors are convinced](#) that extremists using TJ structures, particularly its gatherings, as an 'assessment tool to evaluate individuals with particular zealotry and interest in going beyond what's offered' by TJ itself. In brief, like their European colleagues, US intelligence agencies concluded that TJ serves as a recruiting ground for terrorists. Law enforcement officials and moderate Muslim scholars state that what worries them most about the Tablighi Jamaat is its disengagement from society.

4. Tablighi Jamaat and international terrorism - A symbiotic relation

International counter-terrorism officials who monitor TJ state that in [several cases](#) terrorists have emerged from the movement or had at least peripheral links with TJ (Freedman, 2006, p.47). Mukhopadhyay points out that there are numerous examples of individuals – including westerners – who joined the armed Jihad in

Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places (2005, p.336) and were involved in terror attacks in their home countries after being influenced by TJ preaching. A French intelligence official states that TJ serves ‘[definitely as fertile ground for breeding terrorism](#)’). According to [Fred Burton and Scott Stewart](#), TJ provides a meeting platform, an unsupervised facilitation centre, which can offer refuge and even a hiring place to terrorists. There are also indications that TJ serves not only as recruitment ground but effectively as operational headquarters for terrorist cells. An example concerns the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, pp.38-39) – it is [reported](#) that three leading members of TJ network carried out this terror attack (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, pp.52-53).

There are numerous other cases in which TJ played a role in leading followers to violent extremism. For example, some of the individuals allegedly involved in the plot to blow up several airlines *en route* on transatlantic flights in August 2006, had links to TJ (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, pp.53). Other terrorist plots and attacks to which members of TJ have been connected strengthen the argument that TJ is ‘increasingly active as a recruitment agency for terrorist cadres’ (Alexiev, 2011, p.86). They include the following: according to Freedman, federal prosecutors in the US have suggested in October 2002 that TJ was identified as a springboard by at least one of the defendants of a terrorist group known as the ‘Portland Seven’ (2006, p.48).

This last Jihadist cell was allegedly trying to fight with the Taliban and Al Qaeda against American forces; it also conspired to bomb a synagogue and was charged with providing material support to Al Qaeda (Freedman, 2006, p.48). Another example concerns the so-called ‘Lackawanna Six’ case in September 2002 in which those involved were coordinating a secret trip by one member to join a terror training camp in Afghanistan. This group had a clear link to TJ and was using one of TJ’s training courses in Pakistan as excuse and cover for their activities. ‘American Taliban’ John Walker Lindh was found as traitor for his role in aiding the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Before joining the Afghan Taliban, he joined a group of Tablighi missionaries on a proselytizing tour to Pakistan. The Tablighis also helped Lindh to enrol in a Madrasa so as to handle some of the administrative and logistic hurdles (Freedman, 2006, pp.47-48). Other indicted terrorists include Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer (two of the suicide bombers from the July 7, 2005, London transit

attacks that killed 52 civilians), the ‘shoe bomber’ Richard Reid, the ‘dirty bomber’ Jose Padilla, and Lyman Harris, who sought to bomb the Brooklyn Bridge. These were all members of TJ at one time or another (Alexiev, 2011, p.86).

TJ’s [name also came up](#) in the July 2007 attempted bombings in London and Glasgow, Scotland. Furthermore, the fourteen men⁴¹ arrested in Barcelona in January 2008 for allegedly plotting to attack the Barcelona transit system had links with TJ as well⁴² (Alexiev, 2011, p.86). The two perpetrators of the [San Bernadino massacre](#) in December 2015 not only pledged loyalty to the IS but had also worshipped at the local TJ mosque. Furthermore, it is [reported](#) that among over 50 Indians who have gone to fight for IS in Iraq and Syria, about a third had links to TJ (AFPC, 2012, p.7).

5. Concluding remarks: TJ as engine of an Islamist Ecosystem

There have been several instances of violent Islamists who started their path with TJ. TJ’s activities (particularly at the grassroots level) and the subsequent role it plays within the Islamist Ecosystem, ensures that Jihadist organisations do not have to export Jihadism and Islamism from Pakistan and other South Asian countries to Europe and North America, since the work on the field is already accomplished. Actually, it can be stated that this Islamist Ecosystem works in two directions. One direction can be said to evolve from ‘outside’ TJ – through the infiltration of TJ gatherings and activities followed by manipulation and recruitment of Tablighi. Another operates from ‘inside’ TJ – by preaching an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam -, Tablighi provides not only an intellectual platform but also a course of action which may result in acts of terrorism.

Both dynamics are mutually reinforcing. The problem of TJ’s ambiguity creates an enabling environment in which individuals may find jihadism appealing and ultimately become terrorists (AFPC, 2012, p.7). This ambiguity can also be described as an attempt to keep a neutral position between different camps. As Freedman rightly points out, ‘Tablighis do not collaborate with other religious groups with whom they disagree; neither do they fight them. They do not support Islam’s jihad obligation neither do they oppose it. They do not support violent terrorism; neither do they criticize it when it occurs’ (2006, p.32). This ‘neutrality’

⁴¹ [12 Pakistanis, an Indian and a Bangladeshi.](#)

⁴² According to Noivo (2010, pp.4-5), at least two persons of this group were members of TJ.

gives Tablighi flexibility to deny the responsibility regarding terrorist cases conducted by its (former) members.

Furthermore, it helps to cultivate their image of being apolitical and peaceful, blurring the line regarding as to which degree TJ supports Jihad and the implementation of *Shari'a* law. At the same time, this supports Tablighi efforts to portray themselves to their host governments as a moderate force able to counterbalance radicalisation among Muslim communities. This can also lead to severe consequences, foremost grievances and frustrations among Tablighi. According to a former Tablighi, these ambiguous positions of TJ 'can galvanize identity crises, making individuals more susceptible to extremism and bring them into contact with more radical actors' (Mubin Shaikh⁴³ quoted in AFPC, 2012, p.7).

Such an interaction between radicalised elements and an organisation like TJ, 'which has no political dimension but a sectarian functioning, can be influential in provoking attitudes and sentiments of frustration in which the more active means and ideologies of the militants may become of more interest' (The CEIS and Change Institute quoted in Ragazzi, 2014, p.13). Such experiences can create a situation in which TJ might start 'serving as a front for terrorists and terrorist groups – either intentionally or unintentionally' (Freedman, 2006, p.32). Consequently, as an essential part of the Islamist Ecosystem, TJ functions as an engine that supports Jihadist aims to 'produce terrorism' directly on the soil of target countries. Indeed, to some experts, the 'neutrality' of Tablighi '[enough to make them culpable](#)'.

It is crucial for the understanding of the TJ as a pillar within the Islamist Ecosystem to be aware that it does not stay within national parameters, but that it indeed has an international dimension as well. There are clear indications that Pakistan takes on a central role in TJ symbiosis with other Jihadist organisations and movements. As outlined above, the 'TJ also serves as a de facto conduit for Islamist extremists' and for groups such as the Taliban, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Al Qaeda, and IS to recruit new fighters. [Significantly](#), 'Tablighi recruits do intersect with the world of militant Jihadism when they travel to Pakistan to receive their initial training'. By offering Tablighis major facilities for their educational training and preaching tours, TJ structures provide the key hub for connecting militant Jihadists and Tablighis.

⁴³ Mubin Shaikh is a former Tablighi, who joined a Jihadi group temporarily but later became engaged in the struggle against violent extremism (AFPC, 2012, p.7).

In other words, TJ's facilities in Pakistan offer locations where Jihadist spotters can look for potential new recruits.

This process can be best summarised in the words of Alexiev, who states: 'While there is no concrete evidence of direct recruitment for terrorist purposes by Tablighi members, there is no doubt that at least some people that first discover radical Islam through this organisation, eventually gravitate to extremist and terrorist activities. One way in which this is accomplished is by sending 'promising recruits' to the Tablighi headquarters in Raiwind, Pakistan, for four months of additional religious training. While there, recruits are approached by Pakistani jihadist organizations and end up in the terrorist training camps' (Alexiev, 2011, p.84). According to [Burton and Stewart](#), 'this link provides a medium through which Tablighis who are disgruntled with the group's apolitical program could break orbit and join militant organizations'.

In sum, the fact that TJ became a focus of the international intelligence community highlights a growing awareness regarding the need to monitor not only apparent militant organisations, but also self-described non-violent apolitical religious movements. Since 9/11 European authorities started to recognise that radical Islamic groups are finding renewed targets for their anti-West, anti-US, anti-Semitic, pro-Jihadi rhetoric – which not only challenges European society and legal order but also serves to transform radicalised Islamists into Jihadists and international terrorists. TJ exemplifies this symbiotic relation. The Tablighis' (followers of TJ) rigid understanding of Islam and the movement's related goals and activities not only enhance the challenges of indoctrination and counter-integration but also create a favourable environment for the emergence of Islamist terrorism.

More concretely, TJ's ideology stands in clear contrast to the liberal democratic order (*freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung*) of Germany as well as the constitutional principles of other European states. This is relevant because TJ belongs to those Islamist organisations 'that endeavour to achieve their anti-constitutional aims using legal means' (BMI, 2020b, p.31). The preaching and teaching by TJ go far beyond the rejection of Western value systems: they makes Tablighi and their adherents 'susceptible to Islamist positioning' (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, p.336) and serves as a gateway for the creation of 'Jihadist milieus'. As such, one can state that we are witnessing Tablighi and Jihadists working in tandem

within the symbiotic network of an Islamic Ecosystem, enhancing the threat of international terrorism and Jihadism.

6 Recommendations

1. Due to the secrecy surrounding TJ – the lack of formal membership combined with a low level of institutionalisation, and the lack of centralized (administrative) control –, the movement is difficult to monitor. It is reported that European security agencies are yet to hold the necessary scope of action (authority) to adequately investigate TJ. Intelligence forces and other law enforcing agencies were not able to fully articulate the role TJ as an organisation plays in support of Jihadism. Supervision of TJ (centres and individuals) must be intensified, including financial transactions. More focus is needed regarding not only suspect surveillance of (potential) militant Islamists, but also of individuals who are promoting radicalisation. The case of TJ clearly demonstrates that Islamist indoctrination often leads to acts of terrorism. It also appears that during the last 15 years, reports by European intelligence agencies either were not fully considered by much of the political leadership, or were otherwise not translated in concrete policies.

2. We must send a strong and consistent message that the propagation of an ideology based on the supremacy of one religion, gender inequality, anti-Semitism, and other forms of religious intolerance (which pave the way for radicalisation and the eulogy of violence) will not be tolerated in liberal democracies. This also includes a ‘zero tolerance’ policy towards the promotion of rigid faith practices which undermine the integration of societies and lead to an alienation from democratic norms and values.

3. Due to its large size, it is apparent that not all Tablighi are (potential) terrorists, and that TJ is not *per se* a Jihadist group. Nevertheless, we need to change the notion among (several) political decision makers and experts to deny *a-priori* links between TJ and the Global Jihad. It is often seen as extremely effective to differentiate among Islamist groups based on their attitudes towards violence (and politics). However, the case of TJ shows the distinction between militant from non-militant organisations is of limited use. Both usually have the same overall goals: making ultra-orthodox Islam universal, implementing *Shari’a* law and establishing a (worldwide) caliphate. In this sense, the decision regarding whether to use violence only marks tactical differences between TJ and militant Jihadist groups.

The result is the same: the unfolding of a ‘war of ideas’ against the notion of a society based on liberal democratic norms and value systems.

4. European governments need to understand the movement’s global network, particularly the dynamics by Tablighi within the Islamist Ecosystem. It is apparent that TJ activities, foremost recruitment and mobilisation processes, fundraising, and training are being exploited by global Jihadists – with or without the consent of TJ leadership. Regardless, preaching an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam always creates an enabling environment for the support of international terrorism. More specifically, TJ teachings promote the legitimacy of (militant) Jihad and do not leave room for a liberal, moderate interpretation of Islam. As such, the notion that TJ is ‘helpful in facilitating grassroots counter-radicalisation programmes by providing the necessary religious arguments’ (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, p.94) against global Jihadism must be severely questioned.

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