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## Bangladesh

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# The British/Saudi Slush Fund And the Rise of Wahhabism

by Ramtanu Maitra

Oct. 9—On Sept. 18, Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, reported the arrest of ten members of the British-headquartered Islamic militant group Hizb ut-Tahrir, in northeastern Bangladesh. The police said the Hizb ut-Tahrir men were distributing leaflets calling for the establishment of Islamic caliphate rule, and the ousting of the present, parliamentary government, during the holy month of Ramadan.

The report is one of many in recent months which indicate that the British-Saudi nexus, run through militant Islamic groups, has consolidated its position in Bangladesh—a Muslim-dominated nation that has made efforts, since winning its independence in 1971, to prevent the country from becoming a staging ground for extremism and a threat to the regional security.

However, there are reasons to believe that Dhaka is losing this battle. The old British plan—executed with the help of various Wahhabi outfits and the use of the slush money generated by the British-Saudi Al-Yamah arms deal—to use Bangladesh as a flank to spread communal violence in India, is progressing rapidly. Wahhabism is a conservative form of Sunni Islam, dominant in Saudi Arabia. It is also known as Salafism.

### Is India the Target?

Across from Bangladesh's border with India, in the northwest, communal violence has broken out in the sparsely populated Indian state of Assam. Assam is infested with small secessionist movements, as are the tribal areas adjacent to it, where many ethnic groups were kept isolated in "Palmerston's zoo,"<sup>1</sup> by the British colonials during the Raj days through apartheid-like

regulations. New Delhi has not succeeded in integrating them adequately. However, Assam did not suffer any communal problem until Bangladesh was formed, in 1971. But, things have changed. A large number of Bangladeshis (mostly, if not all, Muslims) have begun to move out of Bangladesh to avoid the crushing poverty that continues to haunt this 140 million-strong nation. Many have moved into Assam.

This illegal immigration caused serious changes in Assam's demography, and the immigrants often became victims of those who do not like their presence. This has also provided an opportunity for anti-Indian forces, such as the Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) and the Islamic militants to bring in armed and trained individuals, not only to protect the immigrants, but also to foment communal conflict between Muslims and Hindus. In early October, the Indian daily *The Hindu* reported the death toll at 39, in the clashes between Bodos, an ethnic group in Assam, and immigrant Muslim settlers in the northern districts of Udalguri and Darrang, and the lower district of Baksa. The exodus from the riot-struck areas has continued, with the number of displaced people rising to 110,000.

These developments pose a serious threat to India, which has already become extremely vulnerable because of the authorities' disillusioned economic policies, and the new threats that emerged in a neighborhood that is becoming increasingly violent. New Delhi is focused on beating back what it sees as the perfidious designs of Pakistan, executed through the ISI. Because of the blinders that New Delhi has put on, it has failed to address the real problems, and, as a result, has further jeopardized India's internal security.

Over the years, a very strong anti-India, and, in es-

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1. See "Lord Palmerston's Multicultural Zoo," *EIR*, April 15, 1994.

sence anti-stability, force has begun to assert itself in populous Bangladesh, which has a fragile political structure and is poorly governed. Bangladesh became the target of the Wahhabis. The driving force behind militant Islam's spread in Bangladesh is not only financial backing from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, but also, the international flows of migrant workers, the invisible foot soldiers of globalization. For example, according to the Migration Policy Institute, Saudi Arabia has been one of the largest importers of Bangladeshi laborers, but many of these immigrant workers have been rendered jobless by Riyadh's desire to "Saudi-ize" their workforce. They return to Bangladesh imbued with Salafist intolerance, unemployed, and with few future prospects. Many of these returnees are ready to promote orthodox Wahhabism at odds with traditional, moderate Bengali practices.

### **Al-Yamamah Money**

Since Bangladesh has scores of millions of poor, it was relatively easy for Wahhabis from the Gulf area to recruit, and recruit heavily. The method was the same these Wahhabis adopted in spreading their version of Islam in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the case of Bangladesh, it was even easier, since the Jamaat-e-Islami group, which never saw eye-to-eye with most Bangladeshi Muslims, existed since 1971. Plentiful money was available, created by the British-Saudi Al-Yamamah contract. As *EIR* uniquely reported (June 22, 2007: "Scandal of the Century Rocks British Crown and the City," by Jeffrey Steinberg), the real story behind the BAE-Saudi oil-for-weapons barter deal in 1985 is much bigger than the billions of dollars in bribes paid to Prince Bandar and a host of other Saudi officials and princes. The real story is that at least \$100 billion in offshore, off-the-books funds has been accumulated since the original Al-Yamamah deal was signed in 1985, and those funds have been used to finance covert intelligence operations around the globe—including the Afghanistan "mujahideen" war against the Soviet Union, the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scheme, the channeling of Soviet-made weapons to Africa, etc. In December 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair ordered the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) to shut down its investigation into the BAE-Saudi Al-Yamamah scandal, invoking British national security interests. Just before leav-

ing office, Blair inked another deal between BAE and the Saudi Ministry of Defense, worth an estimated \$8.7 billion.

By 2005, it became evident that Bangladesh was already awash with non-native Islamic charities and banks which are closely associated with the Islamist movement. Deobandi and Wahhabi preachers were also increasing their missionary work in the country. In 2005, a joint report was compiled by Bangladesh's Special Branch, National Security Intelligence (NSI) and Defence Forces Intelligence, which concluded that ten Islamic charities and NGOs were helping to promote and finance Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. They listed: Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), Rabita Al-Alam Al-Islami (Muslim World League), Society of Social Reforms, Qatar Charitable Society, Al-Muntada Al-Islami, International Islamic Relief Agency, Al-Forkan Foundation, International Relief Organization (IRO), Kuwait Joint Relief Committee, and Muslim Aid Bangladesh (U.K.). The report found that more than 100 foreigners from different West Asian and African countries were working with these NGOs and were in the country illegally.

According to one terrorist watcher, the Muslim Council of Bangladesh (MCB) in the U.K. is the prime controller of the extremists in Bangladesh. It has gained almost unparalleled political power over British Muslims and it has done so with the backing of ministers from the British Home Office and Foreign Office. The Islamist movement that MCB represents is reportedly heavily coordinated by the Muslim World League (MWL), which is based in Saudi Arabia. It was set up in 1962, to counter the spread of communism and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalism. It was originally based in Geneva, but moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 1969. The organization helps fund Islamist organizations around the world, and often invites Islamist leaders to Saudi Arabia to talk about global strategy for coordinating their activities. The late Maulana al-Maududi, the ideological leader and founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami, was a founding member of the organization. Wael Hamza Jalaidan, a Saudi businessman, who is believed to be a co-founder of al-Qaeda, was also a founding member of the MWL.

Another U.K.-based group that provides physical support to the Bangladeshi extremists is Muslim Aid (U.K.). Muslim Aid was founded in 1985 and is the

largest Muslim charity in the U.K. It has often been accused of supporting terrorism, but it continues to carry on as before, while it is common knowledge that Muslim Aid leaders work closely with the Jamaat-i-Islami movement in Pakistan and Bangladesh. There also exists a closely interwoven relationship between the Muslim Aid and the MCB. For instance, Dr. Muhammed Abdul Bari, the current secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, is a trustee of Muslim Aid U.K., while Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the former secretary general of the MCB, is a trustee and a former chairman of Muslim Aid. The majority of the trustees also worked for the Islamic Foundation U.K., which was founded by Prof. Khurshid Ahmed, the vice president of the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan.

### Three Terrorist Groups

On the ground, the British-Saudi-led efforts are carried out by three major terrorists groups, although there exist other local operations, which also receive funding. These three are: Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkatul Jihadi al-Islami (HUJI) and the ostensibly peaceful Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) Bangladesh.

JMB has a clear political agenda: It aims to capture power through armed revolution, and run the country by a Majlis-e-Shur (central committee) under Islamic law. JMB came to light in 2005, when the group carried out a series of blasts in 63 of 64 districts across Bangladesh, planting 458 locally made bombs, while distributing leaflets which declared, “We are the soldiers of Allah. We’ve taken up arms for the implementation of Allah’s law the way the Prophet, Sahabis [companions of the Prophet] and heroic Mujahideen have done for centuries. . . . It is time to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh” (*Bangladesh Observer*, Aug. 18, 2005). In the crackdown that followed, two top leaders of the group, Shaykh Abdur Rahman and Sidiqul Islam (alias Bangla Bhai), were executed in 2007; several hundred cadres have also been arrested from different parts of the country. Many of these have since been given tough sentences by a judiciary which was once high on the list of JMB’s potential targets. However, observers point out that the JMB still exists underground, and they have not stopped recruiting members.

On the other hand, HUJI was founded first in Pakistan in 1980, when Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq sought MI6 and CIA help in recruiting mujahideen to fight the invading Soviet forces in Afghanistan. From the outset, HUJI members were trained in arms. Two

of the Pakistani Wahhabi groups, Jamiatul Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and the British-based Tablighi Jamaat, set up this organization. Initially, HUJI recruited mujahids (holy warriors) for Afghanistan’s Hizb-e-Islami (Yunus Khalis). Later the HUJI was recognized by al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, reports indicate. With financial assistance from bin Laden at the initial stage, they created an underground organization in Bangladesh in 1992. Young followers of Jamat-Shibir joined the terrorist outfit. At that time, a movement arose in Bangladesh to ban the Jamaat e-Islami (JI) for its anti-liberation war activities in 1971, and its continuing pro-Pakistan views. To counter this movement, JI sought help of the HUJI, observers point out.

With blessings from JI and the British-Saudi nexus, HUJI started its activities in Bangladesh in 1992. Of all the militant outfits in the country, HUJI is the strongest and most organized.

The third terrorist group is Hizb ut-Tahrir, headquartered in Britain and operating in more than 100 countries. Its Bangladeshi arm operated for a while under the name of East London Youth Forum. According to one British undercover journalist, Hizb ut-Tahrir is spending considerable sums of money recruiting Bangladeshi Muslims in the area; taking out full-page recruitment ads in Bangladeshi newspapers; inviting Bangladeshis to Hizb ut-Tahrir study circles and events; and telling Bangladeshis not to vote in local or national elections as this, they claim, is against the principles of Islam.

More worrying is the evidence uncovered on the area’s East London Youth Forum, which is operating as a front organization for Hizb ut-Tahrir. The Youth Forum engages Muslim youths in seemingly innocent activities, ranging from hiking to paint-balling—which their parents are happy to see them partake in. Yet, an undercover London *Sunday Times* journalist accompanied members of the group to one paint-balling session a few years ago, in Manchester, where an Imam described Osama bin Laden as a “Muslim brother,” and said it was the “responsibility” of every Muslim to bring back the caliphate.

Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh’s focus lies in its search of an “elusive state” and has lowered its presence in Central Asian states like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan—for now. It is gearing up primarily to take over control of the country, using the financial and political muscle of the Bangladeshi population living abroad, and the Al-Yamamah slush fund.