What They Really Want Is a Caliphate! British Salafi Reactions to the Arab Spring

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What They Really Want Is a Caliphate! British Salafi Reactions to the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This contribution discusses the lack of references to the success of Salafi parties in the Middle East after the Arab Spring, in Egypt especially, by groups who self-identify as Salafi outside the Middle East. In their interpretation of the uprisings known as the Arab Spring, British Salafis have emphasised that Arab Muslim populations in the Middle East want an Islamic Caliphate despite cries for liberal rights and democracy. The aim of this contribution is to provide a theoretical frame for analysing a type of European Salafism on the rise preoccupied with establishing “Sharia Zones” and controlling fellow Muslims’ observance of Islamic principles in British cities but with little interest in political developments in Muslim majority countries. Rather than working for political influence, the British so-called Salafis in al-Muhajiroun are preoccupied with defining a place of their own in their European context. Thus, the argument is that in order to understand current Salafi-inspired movements in the Middle East and Europe, it is necessary to analyse practice, rhetorical expressions and political context rather than how various groups self-identify.

Introduction

In Tripoli in north Lebanon lives a man who dreams of world domination. He calls himself a Salafi, he is a source of inspiration for a growing number of young followers all over Western Europe, and he revels in provocation. His name is Omar Bakri Mohammed (Bakri). Having studied his organisation, al-Muhajiroun, and the developments and activities of his proselytes in Denmark and Britain, I was curious to find out what this man had to say about recent developments within Salafi organisations and parties in the post-Spring Arab world—Egypt especially. In 2011, when the popular uprisings began in North Africa, they were interpreted as an expression of a wish for the re-establishment of an Islamic Caliphate by Bakri and his followers. However, before the Salafi al-Nour party gained parliamentary influence in Egypt, Bakri and his companions in al-Muhajiroun had long lost interest and were focusing on “Muslim causes” in Mali, Syria, Myanmar and Angola.¹

Based hereon, the questions are as follows: Why were Bakri and his followers so vocal at the sight of events developing in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011? And why did members...
of al-Muhajiroun stop commenting on developments or referring to the apparent political success of their Egyptian Salafi brothers in their own drive for political influence?

The preliminary and quick answers are: Bakri and al-Muhajiroun are not real Salafists, and they have no interest in or understanding for developments in politics in Muslim majority countries. These answers, however, only provide half of the explanation. In the following, I will analyse and discuss what is at stake in al-Muhajiroun and like-minded organisations and how it all makes sense.

In order to do so, I use concepts from Social Movement Theory characterising the dynamics within an organisation with a confrontational outlook and aim and the role of the charismatic leader. Then I use concepts and ideas from cultural geography focusing on how people in organisations place themselves making use of specific geographical, cultural and political contexts. Furthermore, I draw on Michel Maffesoli’s sociological work on affectual tribes. This combination of approaches serves as the theoretical frame for my analysis. The empirical material analysed is an interview with Bakri carried out in Tripoli in April 2013 and footage from al-Muhajiroun demonstrations and written material distributed via mailing lists and online fora.

On this basis, I argue that in order to understand current Salafi-inspired movements in the Middle East and Europe, it is necessary to analyse concrete practice, rhetorical expressions and the specific political context and understand the political in broad terms rather than look narrowly at how various groups self-identify.

In the following, I am going to outline my theoretical framework and the empirical material at hand. Then I am going to briefly outline the example of the Egyptian al-Nour party for the sake of comparison with al-Muhajiroun’s activity and profile in Britain, and finally, I offer an explanation as to how al-Muhajiroun members make sense of their activities and self-understanding as Salafis.

A Social Movement Theory Characterisation of Al-Muhajiroun

Al-Muhajiroun was founded by Bakri in the late 1990s. Bakri was the person who brought the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir to Britain in the mid-1980s, but after approximately 10 years of engagement, he was either expelled or chose to leave voluntarily. The story differs depending on whom you ask. Current members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain and Bakri do, however, agree on the reason why ties between Bakri and Hizb ut-Tahrir were broken: a profound disagreement regarding what was considered legitimate methods for bringing about the Islamic Caliphate. Hizb ut-Tahrir maintains that the Caliphate should be re-established as the result of popular uprising against existing regimes in Muslim majority countries or in the shape of a coup d’etat performed by Hizb ut-Tahrir inspired military leaders; while al-Muhajiroun is of the persuasion that only through a combination of legal and illegal, violent means can the Caliphate be re-established. However, the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate is the overall goal for both Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun and many other Islamist, Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi groups.²

Such groups see the caliphate as a system of government that has been given by Allah, albeit, historically, “caliphate” (the word stems from the Arabic khalifa meaning successor) refers to the system of government introduced after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632. The caliphate was continued under the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750) centred in Damascus, the Abbasid Dynasty (750–1517) first centred in Baghdad, afterwards in Egypt. Between 1517 and 1924, the Ottoman Sultan had the title of Caliph until Kemal Atatürk abolished the last caliphate as part of the creation of the
modern Turkish national state in 1924. To the Turkish leader, the termination of the caliphate was a necessary step towards the creation of a modern, secular Turkey.\(^3\) From a historical point of view, the caliphate has been many and very different systems of rule, each one reflecting the prevailing societies and epochs. However, al-Muhajiroun does not differentiate between the different caliphates and their specific characteristics. On the contrary, members of al-Muhajiroun see the caliphate as one and the same system despite the different forms and manifestations. To al-Muhajiroun, the caliphate is a unifying historical, religious and political basis shared by all Muslims regardless of ethnicity, geography and orthodoxy.\(^4\)

Apart from the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, Al-Muhajiroun is devoted to activities to bring attention to Muslim causes and injustices. Activities include demonstrations, meetings, leaflet distribution and participation in public talks and debates. In particular, the organisation is known for its very recognisable demonstrations outside embassies in the British capital and in Wootton Bassett where British soldiers killed in overseas military interventions arrive. The people responsible for the Woolwich killing in the summer of 2013 were affiliated with al-Muhajiroun.\(^5\) Since 2004, the activities have been carried out under different names, as Bakri officially terminated the organisation and all activities and left the British Isles for Lebanon. After the terror bombings of London on 7 July 2005, Bakri was denied the right to return as the then Home Secretary found his activities and opinions were “not conducive to the common good (...)”.\(^6\) The consequence hereof was not that activities stopped, rather these continued under the daily leadership of Bakri’s right-hand man Anjem Choudary and under different names: al-Ghurabaa, The Savior Sect, islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusaders to name the best known of the front names employed. All of the initiatives mentioned have been banned one by one, but seemingly followers of Bakri and Choudary have run out of neither enthusiasm nor new and creative labels for their activities. This can continue as, according to British law, only names of organisations are banned, not the individuals initiating or carrying out the activities.

American Sociologist Quintan Wiktorowicz has contributed to research on Islamism with discussions of relevant aspects of Social Movement Theory (SMT) as well as very thorough studies of al-Muhajiroun.\(^7\) Wiktorowicz’s overall point is that the explanation as to why some people choose to become members of a radical Muslim organisation in Europe should be found in commonly known sociological phenomena, such as group dynamics, influence from charismatic leaders as well as in individuals’ own rational choices and life strategies. Or put differently: the link between involvement in high-risk Islamist or Salafi activities and the individual consists of a long list of individual experiences and choices and more or less coincidental elements and events.

Wiktorowicz’s study of al-Muhajiroun showed that several of the informants perceived the founder, Bakri, as both an equal because he cared, listened, remembered people’s names and always asked for relatives, but also as a leader, someone they would listen to and take advice from. Bakri was and is still known for delivering enthralling and captivating speeches publicly as well as internally at more intimate gatherings. This corresponds with the characterisation of Bakri by my interviewees.\(^8\) Overall, the impression and evaluation of Bakri and his message was that it was not created in a vacuum but emerged in competition with other religious scholars who took an interest in the primarily young people in the circles around al-Muhajiroun. Many Imams in the bigger cities in Britain have a reputation for having a static view of Islam and of being unwilling to discuss the religion in theory and practice. Contrary to this, Bakri always urged his followers to discuss and form arguments, and this was part of the attraction of his group.
However, Wiktorowicz’s interviews demonstrate that the attraction to Bakri’s ideology and work went beyond that and involved both an intellectual, cognitive level and an emotional level based on personal religious search.9

Al-Muhajiroun in the Streets

As mentioned, al-Muhajiroun engages in highly visible activities in public such as demonstrations and street patrolling. As an example of a typical street demonstration, al-Muhajiroun gathered approximately 40 individuals in front of the French Embassy in London in January 2013. They were protesting French military presence in Mali. Mali was referred to as “a Muslim land,” France as a Western intruder on Muslim land. This juxtaposition of Muslims and Westerners is at the core of all political and religious rhetorical expressions, activities and self-understanding in this organisation and is not of interest here. Rather what is so remarkable about this and similar demonstrations and street rallies organised by al-Muhajiroun is that all signs are in English, and on the footage uploaded to YouTube by supporters, all French and Arabic quotes from the speeches are translated to English. This taking place in Britain, of course it makes sense to have signs in the language of the participants, but translations from Arabic and French to English on the internet suggests that al-Muhajiroun is addressing a home audience. Furthermore, Anjem Choudary, Bakri’s right-hand man, addresses the crowd in English: “What do we want?” And the crowd replies: “Jeehad!” . Anyone with even modest Arabic skills will know that Arabic speakers pronounce this word: “Jehaad.” When putting the emphasis on the first syllable of the word, “Jeehad,” the crowd is miming the typical English or American pronunciation of the word. So who is al-Muhajiroun’s targeted audience with this demonstration? I would argue: the English-speaking public.

In January 2013, a number of incidents with so-called Muslim Street Patrols were reported and soon related to al-Muhajiroun. The incidents involved members of the public being approached by a group of masked men who claimed they were on Muslim territory and should abide by certain rules. The self-appointed vigilantes referred to themselves as a “Muslim Patrol” and demanded from the individuals approached that they dress modestly and give up alcohol. In a video clip circulated on YouTube, the masked men are calling white women: “(…) naked animals with no self-respect.” The video clip also shows how Muslim Patrol members take away bottles containing alcohol from people passing by followed by the words: “We don’t care if you are appalled at all,” before calling themselves “vigilantes implementing Islam upon your own necks” (YouTube, “Muslim Street Patrol”, 17 January 2013). The video was recorded with a mobile phone, and the incident is believed to have taken place in Waltham Forest, East London. The London Borough of Waltham Forest is an area with a population of approximately 220,000 people, of whom a majority has Muslim background. This borough has formerly been the point of departure for Islamist groups’ demonstrations as have boroughs such as Whitechapel and Tower Hamlets closer to the centre of London. Similar incidents have also been reported from Tower Hamlets. All of the mentioned boroughs are characterised by having a Muslim majority population of East Asian descent. Little is known of the background of these Muslim Patrols, but similar phenomena have previously been seen in East London. For instance, two years ago, a group of individuals affiliated with Al-Muhajiroun proclaimed Tower Hamlets a “Sharia Zone.”10 This idea was copied by a Danish group called The Calling (Kaldet) who in connection with a local government election in 2011 declared the social housing estate
Tingbjerg a “Sharia Zone.” The Calling has been related to Bakri in Tripoli and seems to be corresponding with him via chat fora online.

Who is a Real Salafi?

“Salaf” (or “al-Salaf wa ‘l-Khalaf”) can be defined as “the predecessors and the successors, names given to the first three generations and to the following generations of the Muslim community respectively.” and while the phenomenon of Salafism arose in the nineteenth century as a reformist movement centred in Egypt around thinkers such as al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Abduh (1849–1905), the self-understanding amongst present-day Salafis is marked by references to the immediate successors of the Prophet. The point of departure of Salafi thinking is that available interpretations of scripture are deviant and that traditional, consensus readings have corrupted the true meaning of the textual basis for Islam. Central to the reformist thinking by al-Afghani and Abduh was the aim of returning to: “(...) the ‘Golden Age of Islam’, according to the example set by the Prophet and his Companions (salaf) [and they] demanded a fresh interpretation of the original religious sources, the Koran and the Sunna (traditions of the prophet).”

There are two main strands emanating from the nineteenth century Salafi reform movement: al-Afghani and Abduh represent the modernist strand combining reinterpretation of scripture with rationalism, emphasis on education and leaving open the possibility of *ijtiyad*. The other one is more conservative in nature and is closely linked to Saudi Wahhabism. Here the dominant thinking is that the Qur’an and Sunna are the literal words of God which all law and state principles should be based upon. Traditionally, Salafist groups have been preoccupied with pious individuals and missionary activities and have kept their distance to the surrounding societies. But in Egypt, together with al-Asal and the Building and Development Party (Jamma al-Islamiyya), al-Nour formed first the Democratic Alliance for Egypt and later the Islamist Alliance for Egypt and took part in the electoral campaigns in the aftermath of the fall of Mubarak in 2011–2012. This resulted in the alliance winning approximately 37% of the votes in the 2011/2012 parliamentary election which was equivalent of 127 of 332 seats in Parliament.

As a political party with parliamentary influence, al-Nour launched a programme expressing a wish to work for the promotion of democratic rights and liberties such as the freedom of expression and association, *albeit* within the framework of Shari’a. Furthermore, the party suggested political reformation of the Egyptian agricultural, industrial and financial and sectors.

The shift of perspective from a traditional quietist focus on literal reading of scripture and piety to the overtly political participation in the “Alliance for Egypt” can be explained with reference to Wiktorowicz’ characterisation of Salafist trends since the middle of the 1990s.

In “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement” from 2006, Wiktorowicz singled out three contemporary trends within the Salafi movement based on disagreement concerning US presence on Muslim soil during the Gulf War following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1991: (1) a purist trend characterised by groups and individuals loyal to the Salafi creed, posing no threat to Saudi authority; (2) a political trend represented by groups wishing to address a need to make changes through reforms and (3) finally, a third trend consisting of jihadis characterised by impatience with world affairs and the belief that violence in the only effective means for creating changes to the status quo.
Thus, the purists are carrying the inheritance from the traditional Salafis, while both the politicos and the jihadis wish to see changes to the status quo of world affairs but differ in terms of methodology. Put differently: traditionally, Salafis would neither engage in parliamentary politics like al-Nour or in street rallies like al-Muhajiroun.

Bakri characterised himself and his organisation as Salafi when I interviewed him in Tripoli in April 2013 as is shown in the following: (please note the initial joke where he refers to the portrayal of his followers and like-minded individuals in Western media):

The term “Salafi” has different meanings but it is used in the media to cover men with beards and covered women. “Salafiya” is a phenomenon defined as reformist by scholars, and it means going back to basics. In this line of thinking, there is a focus on the first community, the first three generations and a leaning towards the thinking of Wahhab.

To go back to basics means reading the basic doctrines and sources. (…) Everyone who came after the Prophet and the first generations following him (i.e. the first three generations)—well, to them it is “have a nice day!”—We do not care too much about them. Jihadis are the only ones who fight to establish God’s law. In this way, it is not just another resistance movement.

Jihadis are not guided by nationalist logic. Why should I fight for the mud of Palestine? The mud, the land is still there—Palestine—so there is no point in fighting for mud. So what if they will implement other laws for that land? It would still not be God’s law.

“Salafi Jihadi” is a term we do not use. We just say “Salafi” in order to distinguish ourselves from Islamist chocolate-faced Muslims.

Bakri’s terminology matches the definition above as well as the characterisation of the Egyptian al-Nour party. However, Bakri’s al-Muhajiroun belongs to the jihadi trends within Salafism, while al-Nour has developed from a purist organisation to an organisation trusting the capability of political reform through parliamentary participation.

What is of interest here, however, is why Bakri’s followers are protesting against French military presence in Mali rather than in support of their Salafi brothers in Tunisia, Egypt or Bahrain, or elsewhere in the Middle East influenced by current uprisings and war.

While Mali is a useful cause for al-Muhajiroun for at least three reasons—Mali’s insurgent Islamist groups are of direct Wahhabi influence, there was direct involvement from the former colonial power, France, and finally, by drawing attention to Mali, al-Muhajiroun was able to demonstrate to members and sympathisers once again that nationality and nationalism are of no concern in the organisation: they address Muslim causes regardless of national divides—this still does not explain why successful Salafi developments are not emphasised more. However, the preliminary response could be that while Bakri’s followers maintain a self-understanding as Salafis, their practices suggest otherwise. When they call for “Jeehad!” in the streets of the British capital, it has less to do with repeating the examples set by the Prophet, and more to do with creating media headlines and furor.

What Is Al-Muhajiroun Really About?

During the interview with Bakri in April 2013, I posed questions concerning the role of Salafis organisations in the Arab uprisings, and potential links between Salafis in Europe
and the Middle East. Although Bakri had agreed to discuss these topics, he evaded answering during the actual interview. Only superficially during the hour-long interview did he touch on cooperation between himself and organisations with groups and organisations in Denmark and Britain and elsewhere in Europe (“Our work in Britain is going brilliantly”\textsuperscript{17}), whereby implicitly he was both claiming leadership to al-Muhajiroun and taking the role of representative of Middle Eastern Salafis.

Instead, he talked at length about the difference between Christianity and Islam and about the political situation in Lebanon and Syria.\textsuperscript{18} For instance, he claimed to be instrumental in helping foreign fighters and students across the border to Syria, and to represent an organisation which, over time, would challenge the power of Hizbollah in Lebanon. All references to the Arab uprisings were related to condescending remarks about Egypt’s then-President from the Muslim Brotherhood, Mursi:

Salafi Jihadis are capable of running an Islamic state and so are al-Qaeda and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Mursi on the other hand is just another Mubarak with a beard. The Muslim Brotherhood sees us as a deviant, and Hizb ut-Tahrir lets someone else use weapons while they engage in intellectual debate.\textsuperscript{19}

Throughout the interview, Bakri was constantly and consistently ridiculing Middle Eastern state leaders, the Muslim Brotherhood, emphasising the necessity for Muslims (meaning his followers) to challenge Western imperialism and praising al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The latter is impossible to over-interpret as he named his son, who entered the reception room during the interview, and who was born 2nd May 2011, the day after Osama was killed by American secret service agents in Pakistan, Osama, and introduced him as follows:

This is my son Osama born on 2\textsuperscript{nd} May 2011. He will grow up to kill the Obama of his day!\textsuperscript{20}

Summing up, Bakri takes pride and joy in provoking and entertaining his audience, and while he can talk for hours, holding him to concrete matters and answers is hard. Compared to the findings regarding the street activities of al-Muhajiroun in London, where provocations targeting Western audiences also seem predominant, it seems that the activities of the organisation have little to do with realpolitik.

**Al-Muhajiroun as an “Affectual Tribe”**

If al-Muhajiroun is not about parliamentary politics or political changes \textit{per se}, and the charismatic leader providing ideological content to the enterprise is kept in Lebanon, what is activism about? What keeps members going?

The French Sociologist Michel Maffesoli offers a set of sociological explanations as to why it makes sense for individuals to actively engage in al-Muhajiroun. He argues quite simply that in the world today, people form groups—or “affectual tribes”\textsuperscript{21}—based on the desire to belong to a group. This idea is linked to a suggested broad definition of the political and the argument based hereon is this: What rational individuals call their groups is of little importance compared to the actual belonging to a group with a political agenda and defined channels for expression.

Maffesoli also stresses the importance of emotional ties and belonging in his analysis of dynamics in groups in the post-modern world. According to Maffesoli, any type of voluntary participation in a community has to do with a basic human desire to belong to a group. Maffesoli’s argumentation is founded on the idea that the dominant mechanical
structures of the modern world organised human beings in contractual groups. However, in the post-modern world, the mechanical structure of the modern world has been superseded by a more complex and organic structure. In post-modern sociality, human beings are no longer characterised according to their function in society but rather by the role they play in “affectual tribes.”

By the use of the term “affectual tribes” Maffesoli is not implying that the world of today is marked by tribes in the traditional anthropological sense. On the contrary, Maffesoli’s tribes are short-termed and shifting. Maffesoli’s argument is that the masses become tribalised in the post-modern world and that this tribalism is connected with a certain quality of vitality expressed in the collective. Hereby, Maffesoli breaks with the understanding that modernity is equal to a loss of community and belonging. Instead he states that the modern experience of fragmentation and individualisation has resulted in greater creativity in the post-modern era. It should be noted that Maffesoli does not speak of creativity but rather pouvoir (power) as characteristic for the modern era, and puissance as characteristic for the post-modern era (see translator’s comments: Maffesoli: 1996: 1 and 31). All human beings wish to belong to a group and if the societal structures change, group formations change accordingly. Thus, Maffesoli argues that individuals living in mass societies form new tribes for longer or shorter periods. At the core of these new tribal formations is the longing for home; individuals long to belong, according to Maffesoli. An example of a so-called tribe could be a group of commuters that meet on the same train every morning and begin to relate to each other and hence identify as a group. In this example, the tribe is identified through the setting. They meet in the same place, on board the same means of transportation at specific times. In other examples of Maffesolian tribes, it is visible markers that a group is identified by. Al-Muhajiroun could serve as an example here.

As Maffesoli explains, the desire for homeliness, continuity and rootedness can override any rigid structure:

There are times when these fundamental uses and customs are rejected, or at least relativized, through historical movements. Modernity belongs to this class of events, tending to erase or minimize all of the effects and contingencies of rootedness. At times, however, rootedness returns with a vengeance. Things such as territory, space, and symbolic values again make sense.

Taking this line of thought into consideration, one can argue that membership of al-Muhajiroun is about belonging to a group and via public performances being seen as members of a group by the audience.

However, it is necessary to combine this understanding of al-Muhajiroun as “just another group amongst many” with recognition of the members’ profound belief in their ideology and religion. There is so much more at stake for them than just belonging to a group. According to statements by former members, they were convinced as members that they were instrumental in bringing about drastic changes to the power hierarchies of the Muslim world and over time change Western domination of Muslims globally. The ideological ahistorical perception of the Caliphate and the firm belief amongst members that it can and will be re-established is very central to this thinking.

Who Is Al-Muhajiroun’s Audience?

“What do we want? Jeehad! When do we want it? Now!” As mentioned already, this slogan was shouted repeatedly during al-Muhajirouns’ demonstration outside the
French embassy in London in January 2013. The demonstrators propagated the caliphate as the solution to Muslims’ problems throughout “the Muslim Nations,” and Choudary chanted:

“What do we want? Jeehad! When do we want it? Now! Khilafah for Mali, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq! The Islamic nation is boiling! We got rid of Ben Ali, Mubarak, al-Qadhafi! Now is the time for dictators in Mali, Pakistan, Bangladesh!”

A close look at the content demonstrates that “Jeehad” mimes the English/American pronunciation of the Arabic, “Jehaad.” Choudary and al-Muhajiroun activists would like to see the caliphate established in countries witnessing conflicts of various sorts involving Western military troops at the time of the demonstration (Mali, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq), and link the fallen dictators of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi) directly with an explicit wish to see the leaders of Pakistan and Bangladesh fall, too.

What is of particular interest here, is the mention of Pakistan—and Bangladesh especially as Bangladesh is not involved in any conflict involving the presence of Western military. Bangladesh is relevant for another reason: by mentioning Bangladesh, Choudary is implicitly addressing his own crowd of followers: the majority of Muslims in Britain are from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. And people of Bangladeshi origin dominate the East London boroughs such as Tower Hamlets where al-Muhajiroun has been most successful in recruiting and executing street activities as the mentioned street patrols. When Bangladesh is mentioned in connection with the Arab uprisings, Bakri—who is still orchestrating events from afar—and Choudary are aiming at getting the attention of British Muslims of South Asian origin who are unhappy with the political regimes of their former homelands. In this manner, with their demonstrations and other activities, al-Muhajiroun in Britain are addressing an English-speaking home audience consisting of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Added to this, al-Muhajiroun’s repeated cry for the caliphate serves the purpose of establishing the caliphate as a place that members long for. This can be explained through the work of Cultural Geographers such as Cresswell. In his introduction to Theorizing Place, Cresswell argues that the notion of place is not necessarily bound to either authenticity and rootedness or the nomadic. Based on work by Soja and Lefebvre he introduces the concept “lived space”:

Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sided and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable (...) it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived.

Thus, lived space is practiced space, and when al-Muhajiroun activists take to the streets and shout for the establishment of the caliphate, what they are really doing is carving out a place for themselves in the British capital and in Britain as such. They are creating a stage, and a performance, and they are demonstrating their agenda and their self-understanding with all means visible. This is how the caliphate makes sense to members: as a place they believe in to the extent that it becomes a way of life in their British context.

Conclusion

Returning to my initial query: How do al-Muhajiroun members make sense of their activities and self-understanding? When ideologues and members refer to themselves
as Salafi this reveals a self-understanding as being followers of the Prophet and having a literal and thus correct approach to Islamic scripture. This name is used for recruiting new members and for securing identification amongst members within the organisation. Members are proud to have access to the truth as well as an all-encompassing solution to the Muslim causes, namely, the re-establishment of the Caliphate.

When members take to the streets and call for the re-establishment of the Caliphate in connection with some identified Muslim cause, this specific name for the organisation’s Utopia provides a permanent occasion for creating a place of their own in their actual homeland, Britain. Thus, when Bakri, Choudary and ordinary members of al-Muhajiroun do not go into details of Middle Eastern realpolitik and the political programmes and agendas of like-minded Salafis in Egypt and elsewhere, it is because their own political agenda has very little to do with political reforms and slow, parliamentary changes. Rather, their agenda is based on their British context and the need for members there to fit in and create a distinct group identity of their own. Put differently, for the majority of activists in Britain, it is all about their own struggle to create a platform in Britain and when they engage in activities such as street patrols and demonstrations, it makes sense because they are—quite literally—demarcating territory.

NOTES

1. Wiktorowicz’s definition of Islamic activism is “The Mobilization of Contention to Support Muslim Causes”. See Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 2. On this deliberately broad basis, Wiktorowicz is aiming at establishing mechanisms behind collective motion and motivation. He does so by focusing on how social networks provide resources to organisations’ survival and activism. Wiktorowicz studies the motivation behind activism rather than the Muslimness of the actors and their political goals so to speak.


4. See Kirstine Sinclair, The Caliphate as Homeland: Hizb ut-Tahrir in Denmark and Britain (unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 2010) for an elaboration of the significance of the Islamic Caliphate in Hizb ut-Tahrir. Al-Muhajiroun shares this understanding as one of several central features shared by the two organisations explained by similar ideological underpinnings and the founding role of Bakri; This passage has already been published in an article in Journal for Muslim Minority Affairs discussing two Danish Muslim organisations’ perception of the concept of ummah. See Kirstine Sinclair, “Deterritorialized Identity and Reterritorialized Agendas”, op. cit., p. 46.


8. Interviews carried out in Birmingham in January 2013.


10. For a more developed analysis of al-Muhajiroun’s street patrols, see Kirstine Sinclair, “Muslim Street Patrols in London”, Resource Centre News Analysis, Centre for Middle East Studies, Odense: Univer-

12. Dietrich Jung, “Islamist Politics after the Spring: What Do Salafist Parties Want?”, Resource Centre Netos Analysis, Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 2012, http://static.sdu.dk/mediafiles//2/7/A/%7B27AA3B0D-1962-4267-A1F7-A36C00CA4674%7D0112DJx2.pdf (accessed 10 December 2013); Wahhabism also sprang from the nineteenth century reformist thinking. However, in this line of thought one finds no ambition to mediate between Western modernity and scholarship and Islam. On the contrary, according to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), the aim of reforming Islam was to reject modernity and any other “un-Islamic” influence.


15. Interview with the author, 25 April 2013, Tripoli, Lebanon.


17. Interview with author 25th April 2013 in Tripoli, Lebanon.

18. As a contrast to this, Hizb ut-Tahrir would never engage in discussion comparing Islam to another religion like Christianity in this manner, as this would be seen as a reduction of Islam to merely a religion like so many others. Rather, Hizb ut-Tahrir members are very careful always to portray Islam as an ideology comprising both politics and religion. Bakri is less stringent and uses both types of argumentation depending on his audience. The author would like to thank Saad Ali Khan for stressing this deviation.


22. They are also referred to as “post-modern tribes” or “pseudo-tribes” in the introduction to the English translation of his book. Please see Maffesoli, Ibid., p. x.

23. In the English translation of Maffesoli’s work, puissance is either kept and used in French or it is translated to “will to power.” The latter has clear reference to Nietzsche, a source of inspiration in Maffesoli’s work that often surfaces. In the present context, I find it purposeful to leave out concrete Nietzsche references and thus use the French “puissance.”


25. Interviews with former members in Britain conducted by the author during the winter of 2012–2013.


27. Ibid.


29. Ibid., p. 21.