TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM AND THE INTEGRATION OF ISLAM IN EUROPE

Jørgen S. Nielsen

1. *Introduction*

It has become a truism to state that the Muslim community in western Europe is now increasingly a European community. Population statistics, to the extent that they can be used for this purpose, show that a growing proportion of the Muslim populations have been born in Europe or at least came so young that all their education has taken place in Europe. This image has to be tempered with reference to the still significant numbers arriving, although now mostly as refugees and asylum seekers. Of course, when one looks at eastern Europe one is dealing with native communities of many centuries' standing. Today, ten years after the Soviet collapse, the east-west divide, also in our subject, is no longer as absolute as it was. It is possible to suggest a number of points at which east and west are converging, and observations about Muslims in Europe can no longer be confined to one or the other. At the same time the growth of a self-consciously Muslim sector among the younger people has encouraged an interest in the broader Muslim world, an interest which is not confining itself to distant observation or exclusively to the countries of their parents' origin or the immediately local environment. Networks are being created, and it is these networks this paper is interested in.

2. *Networks*

There are a variety of different kinds of networks which have gradually been developing in Europe increasingly based among this younger generation. But first it is important to consider what we actually mean by a network. It was never satisfactory to think of networks in terms of formal structures only, although they doubtless

are one type of network. Anthropologists have since the 1960s worked on social networks and their impacts on society and individuals.[1] If individual identity is formed primarily under the impact of relational networks, then Gerd Bauman's more recent work (1996) on the discourse of multiple social identities provides some valuable depth to more mechanical analyses of networks. Such networks are much more flexible and essentially informal.

But discussions about networks have had to adapt very quickly in recent years to new technologies, because central to any understanding of a network, whatever its nature, is how its various parts interact and communicate with each other. This is partly a question of the existence of lines of authority—this is central to what distinguishes a formal from an informal network—but more significantly it is a question of the modalities of the communications within the network.

Viewed with historical depth the question of technology becomes qualitative, not just mechanical and quantitative.[2] Few would challenge the assertion that an imperial naval department working out of London or Paris in the 18th century was a formal network. The lines of information, command and authority were, at least on paper, as clear as one would expect in a military structure. However, the time it took to communicate information and orders over vast distances meant that the Sea Lords in London could only give very general orders. It was left to the officer on the spot to interpret such orders into operational instructions within tactics and even into local and regional strategic terms, effectively giving him an autonomy of the kind which we today might very well associate with our understandings of what characterises informal networks.[3]

Essentially, the speed of communications was a major factor determining the quality of what was communicated and, thence, the operational cohesion of the network. The Romans had realised this when

---

[1] An example of this approach with relevance to this paper and reference to some of the earlier theoretical literature can be found in Lithman 1988.

[2] We have not yet begun to see the full impact on this discussion of the seminal work of Castells 1996–98.

[3] This was the context which, legend tells us, allowed Horatio Nelson to put the telescope to his blind eye and proceed to batter the Danish sea defences at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801—and the orders he ignored had come by flag semaphore from only a few miles away.

they built their roads, as had the Middle Eastern caliphs and sultans when they established their, for the time, high speed postal systems,[4] although the gains in speed were, by later standards, marginal. But the new technology of the telegraph and then radiotelephony from the late 19th into the 20th centuries radically consigned such times to the nostalgic memories of imperial adventurers. The now effectively instantaneous nature of communications meant that the cohesion of formal networks became much closer and tighter. The centre could receive detailed information about events at the periphery and respond with detailed instructions in real time, before events had progressed far enough to invalidate the instructions. For the first time, an almost real-time feed-back loop became possible by which the effectiveness of instructions were testable, and instructions became adjustable in the light of the feed-back.

However, two factors continued to constrain: cost and capacity. Most significant was the cost. The construction of the new technology—submarine cable, overland wire or radio ground station networks—was so capital intensive that it was the subject of major international competition and, not infrequently, crisis. At the same time the carrying capacity was strictly limited, so cost levels were exacerbated by the monopolies which arose. Often state-controlled, such monopolies also tended to censor the possible content of communications using the new technology.

The revolutionary change which the electronic communications of the last two decades have encouraged is founded on breaching these two constraints. Essentially, the gain in speed has been marginal—that gain was achieved in the previous technological revolution—and the capital mobilised by the new electronic technology is way beyond the wildest dreams (even in inflation-adjusted terms) of the telegraph and radio entrepreneurs of a century ago. It is the quantitative carrying capacity of the new technology which this time constitutes the core of the revolution by reducing the unit cost of carriage to the infinitesimally minute. As a result, the local military commander or diplomatic representative is expected to provide much more information, in response to which the centre can provide much

---

[4] I provide an account of such a postal system between Cairo and Palestine in the Mamluk period, with both its routine horse-born as well as its urgent pigeon-born element in Nielsen 1988.

more detailed instruction—and woe betide the local person if the report attempts to be selective, because the centre now has other sources of information from business, the media and NGOs who can also afford to use the new technology. The diplomatic plenipotentiary or naval freebooter from the metropolitan capital who used to be his own master and then became a powerful and authoritative representative of the distant capital has become a glorified office messenger.

This collapse in the cost of communication has opened the possibility of broad access to its resources with as yet only vaguely discernible consequences. Perhaps too much is made in the contemporary literature of the potentially 'democratising' impact—a healthy dose of skepticism never comes amiss—but there is little doubt that the ease of access means that older forms of maintaining networks, formal or informal, are profoundly changing. The older forms of maintenance continue: constitutions and regulations find physical reality in paper files and are backed up by legislation and the actuality or potentiality of resort to the law; or feed-back loops of information and instructions are reinforced and tightened by the deployment of favours of career advancement, material reward and sanctions, and ultimately the possibility of dismissal or redundancy.[5] However, the low cost of access means that any active and motivated participant within a network, however defined, can directly and freely (at least initially, until the feedback strikes) take the initiative to enter the communications processes which in various ways constitute the essence of the network. So even those traditionally most centralised and most secretive of networks, namely government security and intelligence, are having to adapt themselves to a more 'open' environment.

3. *Traditional networks persevere*

However, one should not make the mistake of centering all the analysis on the electronic revolution in communications, despite the pressures of fashion. Other forms of maintaining networks continue to

---

[5] While these descriptions may appear most satisfactorily to fit political or commercial structures, it takes little imagination to transpose them to, for example, certain ecclesiastical structures in the Christian tradition or to aspects of Islamic institutional history.

be important, and the form of communication is only a factor in influencing the authority of the content of the communication.

There is no doubt that among the Muslim communities in western Europe, formal networks continue to play a significant role. This is not only a function of the organised structures of the immigrant generation, which I shall come back to, but also of the institutional frameworks of the European environment. To achieve an impact, both broadly and within the community, in terms of public status and of delivering services expected by the community, the political-legal environment requires structural formats which can be linked together and can 'speak' to each other within a mutually comprehensible discourse. So organisational forms have to be found which can operate within the parameters set by the 'host' society. It is probably no coincidence that, at least in the public space, the immigrant generation have had some success in establishing such formal networks, networks with some success in imprinting themselves on the political and other agendas of the public space. After all, many of them arose in the countries of origin as a response to the impact of the European imperial nation states.

At the same time, governments were concerned to minimise the risk arising out of migration. So most countries of emigration have actively sought to sponsor the process of Muslim organisation among their emigrés. Between Germany and Turkey this is exemplified by the complex of inter-governmental conventions and agreements regarding the management of Turkish 'guest workers', in which the Turkish government has adopted an ever more interventionist approach in relation to Muslim dimensions since the September 1980 military coup (Karakasoglu and Nonneman, 1996). The Moroccan government has actively attempted to maintain political control of its emigrés through its workers' association, the *Amicales* (Dassetto and Bastenier 1984, 187–189). In France the situation has regularly been complicated by the impact of Algerian politics and political organisations, not made any simpler by the anomalous status of the Paris Mosque (Boyer, 1992).

3.1. *Example UK*

Let me before proceeding further give an example of how these 'first-generation' networks were developed in the United Kingdom as part of the first phase of immigration and settlement into the 1980s.

Coming particularly from the Indian subcontinent, Muslim communities brought with them also a heritage of Islam which had organised (or, rather, to a certain extent reorganised) itself in response to the formal imposition of British rule in 1858. Much of this organisation had been centred in the major cities and can be roughly identified in two categories, which at the same time are also phases.[6]

Firstly was a group of movements which had concentrated on renewing Islam through education and the encouragement of religious learning. First off the mark was the movement which came to be know as Deobandi after the town in which its first college was founded in 1868. Using Urdu as a *lingua franca* the Deobandi system quickly expanded into a network of hundreds of colleges in which the curriculum concentrated around the study of the Qur'ānic sciences and Hadith, the anecdotes of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad which are an essential foundation for Islamic law and piety. The emphasis of the movement was on the correct understanding of the foundation texts and their implementation in daily life. As this tended to pit them against those tendencies in Indian Islam which were rooted in popular culture, the Deobandi movement has often been labeled 'puritanical'. The commonality of teaching was ensured through a common curriculum and the centralised process of authorisation of teachers for the network of colleges, including those which have been set up in Britain.

The centrality of the Hadith was taken to a greater extreme by the Ahl-i-Hadith movement which cut behind the centuries of accumulated scholarly tradition and, especially disdaining the Sufi traditions, insisted on working directly with the texts of the Hadith. They saw their precedents not in the classical *madhāhib*, or schools of law, but in the work of key individual Hadith scholars. Their enemies tended to label them 'Wahhabi' thus linking them in with the puritanical movement of that name based in the eastern part of the Arabian peninsular at the time.

Both of these movements tended to emphasise an intellectual approach[7] to religion and an individual approach to faith. This had

---

[6] For a more detailed discussion of the Muslim movements in the Indian subcontinent see Metcalfe 1982.

[7] This is far from necessarily suggesting a 'rational' approach. While many of the scholars of these movements stress that 'Islam is a rational religion', they reject

its attractions among the educated young, especially in the cities, but
much less so among the broad mass of Indian Muslims, especially
those living in the rural areas. Here the much more diverse Brelwi
movement took hold, especially in the Punjab and neighbouring
regions. However, the term 'movement' implies a cohesion which
hardly exists among the Brelwis. Their name comes from the col-
lege which they founded in 1872 in Bareilly, but that was soon taken
over by the Deobandis. They represent a trend or tendency which
links closely with the Sufi traditions of the northern Indian subcon-
tinent. In legitimising both the centrality of the Prophet Muhammad
and the various accumulated traditions of piety and worship, the
Brelwis connected closely with the traditions of popular piety cen-
tred around charismatic spiritual leaders, *pīr*s or 'saints', and their
shrines. They tended to see the Deobandis and their associates as
their main opponents rather than the British authorities.

Out of the Deobandi movement grew the Tabligh-i-jama'at, a
loosely organised movement centred around the belief that individ-
ual piety and good action was the only way in which Muslims could
revive their Islam. Fundamental to their activity was the obligation
to preach, and so its adherents will often take some months out of
their normal daily life to dedicate themselves to itinerant preaching.
Tabligh has been among the most successful contemporary Islamic
movements in crossing the boundaries of ethnic and religious divi-
sions, spreading out of its north Indian origins to almost all parts of
the Muslim world (Masud, 2000).

The second category arises during the 20th century in the con-
text of movements towards independence from imperial rule. This
was a time when something akin to 'modern' political parties was
taking shape, above all in the form of the Indian National Congress.
But as the independence project began to get caught up in religious
differences, Muslim parties also came into being. The most significant
in the longer term was the Jama'at-i-Islami founded in 1941 by one
of the leading Muslim thinkers of his age, Abu al-A'la Mawdudi
(d. 1979). Initially opposed to the concept of a Muslim state, when
Pakistan was formed in 1947 Mawdudi and the Jama'at set as their

---

the 'reason' of the philosophical tradition with its hellenic origins. In this instance,
'intellectual' is opposed to the emotional and spiritual, especially as these dimen-
sions are perceived as being central to the Sufi mystical tradition.

target the translation of the stated Islamicness of the new state from being a slogan into a political reality. Although often influential in key debates and controversies in Pakistan, the party never gained a significant representation at parliamentary elections. Its influence was strongest among the urban educated classes and in the universities.

It was out of these various movements that most early outside initiatives to organise the newly settled Muslim communities in Britain originated. The fragmentation of the traditional social networks provided the space for such movements to gain influence, space which had only been found with difficulty before. By providing a service, initially in the form of establishing mosques and religious instruction for children, such movements were able to gain access to communities which would often not have permitted them access back home. In the early phase of settlement, this process must not be exaggerated, but with the passage of time it gained momentum. And as the movements established their own infrastructures in Britain, they were increasingly able also to forge connections with mosques which had been founded at local initiative.

There was a time during the late 1970s and the 1980s when significant competition was taking place among the different movements in recruitment of local mosques and Muslim organisations into their own networks. It became almost a cliché that a contest for control over a mosque was between Deobandis and Brelwis. While in some cases the initiative for such contests had come from the movements themselves, it was as often the case that the contest had originated in family or clan rivalries within the community, with each party seeking external support by identifying themselves with one or the other movement.[8]

Of the various movements identified above, it was the Jamaʿat-i-Islami and the Deobandis which first established themselves in Britain. The Jamaʿat does not formally exist in Britain, in the way it does as a political party in Pakistan or India. It is rather a question of a group of organisations which have been established at various times at the initiative of individuals coming out of the Jamaʿat tradition, particularly in its Pakistani form. Key members of the Pakistani Jamaʿat have played central roles in establishing such organisations, but at least in some of them active participation is not restricted to

---

[8] Shaw (1988) reports such an incident as it took place in Oxford.

people with Jama'at background or sympathies (Nasr, 2000). Some
key personnel are active in several of these related organisations. It
should be noted that for the Jama'at and similar Islamic tendencies,
the organisation is a means to an end and does not have any sacral
or religious significance in itself, as distinct from the pattern in the
Brelwi tradition.

The first organisation of Jama'at inspiration was the UK Islamic
Mission (UKIM) founded in 1962 (*OEMIW*, 1995, 4:273f.). It betrays
its Jama'at heritage in the three-tier membership system. Core mem-
bers commit themselves to living fully by Islamic principles includ-
ing, for example, avoiding any form of interest in borrowing or
lending. Core membership ranges in the region of a few hundreds.
Associate members, which reached about 500 by the end of the 1980s,
are those which are fully committed to the principles of the UKIM
but for one or other reason are unable fully to abide by the rules.
Finally come the sympathisers who in the mid-1980s numbered some
12000. The UKIM has set itself the task of providing a range of
activities around them, especially religious instruction.

The intellectual core of the tendency is to be found in the Islamic
Foundation, founded in Leicester in 1973 and now housed in a con-
ference centre at Markfield north of the city (*OEMIW*, 1995, 2:309f.)
The Foundation cooperated with the UKIM in founding mosques
and centres in various cities and towns. Around conferences and
publications, the Foundation has particularly worked in Islamic edu-
cation and Islamic economics (it has probably the best library on
the latter subject in Britain), in youth work and established docu-
mentation resources on Central Asia and on Christian-Muslim rela-
tions. The Foundation is identified by most of the Muslim community
as being Jama'at in identity and has therefore been shunned by those
who refuse to have contact with the Jama'at, especially after the
period of the Zia al-Haq regime when the Pakistani Jama'at took
part in government. It has, however, had some success in its youth
work providing hospitality for a number of newer Muslim youth
movements. Because of its open attitude to British institutions it has
also had some success in establishing itself as a dialogue partner with
local government.

The Deobandi movement has established itself in Britain as a net-
work around graduates of the Deobandi *madrasa*s in India. Several
schools based on this model have been set up in Britain, the most
prominent being those in Bury and Dewsbury where the traditional

Deoband curriculum is taught together with National Curriculum subjects. Graduates of these British *madrasa*s are now beginning to appear as imams in mosques around the country and are thus establishing a British-trained Deobandi network.

It is rather more difficult to describe the Brelwi movement in simple terms. Given its background it is particularly prominent in Punjabi and Mirpuri communities and has very close associations with Sufi orders and more locally and regionally based *pīr*-led networks. 'Brelwi' is more realistically a description of a type of organised Islam than of a specific organisation. Often in Britain such groups represent an alliance between a charismatic spiritual leader and a group of families or clans led by a business or professional elite. Such a more informal type of grouping has in the past been more 'invisible' to outside observers and has been slower to establish a recognisable form of organisation. This delay has had the consequence that just when funding from external sources, often related to oil wealth, has withered and thus affected the more 'orthodox' groupings, we begin to see Brelwi groups taking their place as sponsors of major mosque construction projects funded overwhelmingly by the community itself.

Across the rest of western Europe, it is possible to offer similar accounts of the import of organisations which already existed in the countries of origin (Dassetto and Bastenier, 1991, and Nielsen, 1995).

3.2. *New networks*

Picking up on some of the elements identified in the 'first generation' of Islamic networks established in the UK, a number of interesting points arise as the next generation has moved into active participation. This applies to the Deobandi network which has increasingly found itself torn between, on the one hand, UK and Pakistan priorities and, on the other, between those of the two generations, especially where the latter overlap with the Tablighi-jama'at. The Deoband movement which migrated to Britain was, in many ways, the traditional manifestation. It concentrated on piety and education of the young. It was politically quietist.[9] Within the UK context it

---

[9] In Birmingham the Saddam Hussein Mosque (it was constructed with Iraqi financial support) is essentially a South Asian Deobandi mosque. It has stayed out of both national and international politics, even during the 2nd Gulf War, when its leaders insisted to me as they did to others that they did not involve themselves in politics.

has formally kept itself separate from the extensive Pakistani Deobandi involvement during the 1990s with the Taliban in Aghanistan and Kashmir-related militancy. However, the younger generation appear to be looking for a more public profile on international Islamic issues, and some of them have been, it seems, prepared to take this to the point of active militancy.

As has already been suggested above in the reference to the Islamic Foundation, this was one of the first formal organisations to adapt to changes in the environment. One may speculate as to why this might be. While the impression continues to be given that because its founder was a leading member of the Pakistani Jama'at (and a Jama'at minister in the first Zia ul-Haq cabinet) (Vali, 2000, 47, repeats this) it remains a Jama'at organisation, I have taken the view that the link is looser (*OEMIW*, 1995, 2:309f.). Certainly, the Foundation has from its establishment inherited participation in a network of like-minded organisations across the continents and within Europe. This included some with a history from the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*), such as the Islamic centre in Munich and the Association of German Muslims, with whom there has been a regular interchange both of publications and of the occasional personnel and projects, usually conferences. It has also included a continuous close relationship (not restricted to funding) with the major Muslim organisations sponsored by Saudi Arabia, especially the Muslim World League. However, for anyone who is familiar with the politics of the Middle East, it is clear that the only way of balancing such relationships is to make sure that they remain loose.

Since the Islamic Foundation moved to a new site outside Leicester about ten years ago, it has had at its disposal much more space to experiment with broader networks. While it retains its own specific projects, it has also been able to host a number of newer independent projects, usually linked to the concerns of the developing younger European Muslim trends, whether involving converts (as in activities with 'new Muslims') or the descendants of the immigrant generation. Here we have seen the Islamic Foundation during the 1990s increasingly working together with like-minded trends across the contemporary Islamic spectrum. At a low level this had started in the 1980s, but the campaign against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* raised the profile and commitment. The significance of the Foundation's part in raising international Muslim concern is still subject to debate: was it central, as suggested by Nasr (2000, 38f.), or was it comple-

mentary to the broader UK-based campaign, as Philip Lewis presents it?[10] But whatever the facts of that event were, it helped the Foundation connect to these other groups.

If one looks at this process as it has affected the Islamic Foundation from a broader perspective, it is arguably part of a re-assessment of how Muslim trends and interests function most effectively within the European environment to the benefit of the European generation of Muslims. Centrally significant, in my view, is the way priorities have broadened. Two decades ago, the priorities of Muslim organisations in Europe were overwhelmingly determined by the priorities of the countries of origin, when they were not very narrowly local. Turkish politics dominated the German-Turkish discourse (see, for example, the papers in Hoffman, 1981, and Blaschke, 1985), as did Pakistani the British one, and the North African the French one, although in both the latter cases possibly less so than in the German case, at least until the Algerian civil war of the 1990s intervened.

In Birmingham two incidents took place in the early to mid-1980s which illustrate this. A major international incident was caused when a Deputy High Commissioner (deputy ambassador) of India was murdered, apparently by Kashmiri militants, an incident which also created a major stir across the Muslim community not only in Birmingham but also in the whole country. On another occasion I happened to be present at the *jum'a* prayer at the Birmingham Central Mosque on the Friday after the Sabra-Chatilla massacre in September 1982. Money was collected to support the survivors, but otherwise there was no action or publicity. Twenty years later the issue of Kashmir continues to exercise the community and be a major concern of Muslims of Pakistani origin, regardless of age. But the growth of the younger generation has led to a situation where broader Islamic issues now also exercise major interest: Bosnia and then Kosovo, Palestine, Chechnya. Indeed, groups of young Muslims whose ethnic origin is not in the Indian subcontinent (e.g. Arabs or Turks) have in recent years started, in their turn, to show solidarity with the Kashmir issue as a Muslim issue (*BMMS, passim*).

Such a broadening of interest, spurred on by a younger, more Europe-based, generation has strengthened a tendency towards closer,

---

[10] In fact, Lewis (1994, 160–164) makes no mention of the Foundation's role in the campaign or in the formation of the UK Action Committee for Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) with the aim of coordinating the campaign.

informal cooperation among organisations and movements which, having arisen out of a specific local-national heritage in the country of origin, now begin to identify significant areas of common interests and perspective. One might risk calling this a process of inculturation. In the 19th century, movements which arose out of a broadly common Islamic theological heritage in response to the expansion of European empire and, more generally, cultural, economic and political influence of necessity functioned within the particular local circumstances and therefore became local in character (Jamaʿat was Indian subcontinent, Brotherhood was Egyptian-Arab, etc.). But they are now, in the European environment, showing signs of the adaptations of having to work within this new environment.

The particular 'family' of movements, which I am highlighting in this particular example, is what might be broadly termed *salafī*. The term covers a wide spectrum of views but has in common the understanding that the Islamic theological and jurisprudential foundations laid by the learned and pious *salaf* ('ancestors') have a pivotal role to play in Islamic conceptions and ideas. The disagreements within this broad trend have tended to be over who these *salaf* are, the hermeneutical approaches to their texts, and the methodologies of making them relevant to the contemporary world. Some observers have gone so far as to talk of this as the 'Islamic Movement' (with capitals) implying a cohesion which I personally do not think exists.[11] While the arguments among the various trends remain of significance in the Muslim world, in Europe (and in North America) there is a blurring of the boundaries.

The alliances which have been forming within European countries— like those which I have indicated above regarding the UK—have also been taking shape across borders. So one sees regular and often intensive contacts between the individuals at the Islamic Foundation and such people (and their associates) as Dr Mustafa Ceric, Chief Mufti of Sarajevo, the exiled leader of the Tunisian Islamist movement Dr Rashid al-Ghannouchi, and leaders of the Francophone Muslim youth and student organisations, including Dr Tariq Ramadan, as well as the international network around the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). Out of this network has arisen the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (www.fioe.org), which has

---

[11] A balanced and realistic view of this is offered by Ira Lapidus (2001).

its office on the Islamic Foundation's site outside Leicester. But this is also a network which is increasingly openly and actively interacting with other institutions and structures of the wider European society. Individuals in this network have, for example, had a residential conference at Leicester entitled 'Islam in Europe: a joint [Christian-Muslim] consultation', a conference funded by the European Commission and jointly organised with my own centre.[12]

However, while such networks are active, they remain informal—of necessity, as they do not share anything like full agreement. Events can force the various constituents apart, just as other events can bring them together. So while there was, during 1989–90, a degree of cooperation with networks linked to Iran over the Rushdie question, in Britain signified in particular by the role of Dr Kalim Siddiqui and his UK Muslim Parliament (Nielsen, 1991), this was not an alliance which lasted long as other issues came to the fore.

In the same manner, there have clearly been circumstances in which local groupings of very different orientations and backgrounds have established forms of interaction which would have been difficult to imagine in the Muslim world itself. One example could be a period of cooperation in the late 1980s and early 1990s which linked the Shi'ite mosque in Hamburg (sponsored by Iran both before and since the revolution) in a cooperation with the Turkish Milli Görüs mosque in the same city and a small Naqshabandi Sufi group in Birmingham where the sheikh was of Pakistani origin but most of the followers were Afro-Caribbean converts. This is a network which has remained fluid but with a high degree of internal communication through travel, telephone and, more recently, e-mail. Interestingly, one of the places this informal network has met physically has been the annual Jewish-Christian-Muslim students conference at Bendorf near Koblenz in Germany, thus linking into a multi-faith dimension.

Perhaps more resistant to change is the strength of ethnic, as distinct from strictly national or ideological networks. Of course, the ethnic factor is reinforced by relations of clan and kinship, particularly strong among communities of Indian subcontinent origin. This is a dimension which I shall not discuss, since it is probably the one which has been most extensively covered by the social sciences literature.

---

[12] Some of the papers were published by the Islamic Foundation in their *Encounters: Journal of inter-cultural perspectives*, 4:2 (Sept. 1998).

But even given the strength of ethnic ties, it seems possible that as
parts of the younger generation increasingly see themselves as Muslims
first, the boundaries of ethnicity and national origin are beginning
to become more porous.

As this shifting of identity takes place, the importance of the media
of communication rises. Above all, the language associated with ethnic
and national identity loses an absolute role and is complemented by
those languages which enable Muslims to communicate across the
particularities. This has, of course, meant an increasing attention
being paid to Arabic among those communities where Arabic is not
the mother tongue. As young Muslims are seeking to discover for
themselves what it means to be Muslim in Europe, they have nat-
urally had to turn to Arabic to be able to read the source texts of
Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. The major part of the rising demand for Arabic
language teaching in Britain, as an example, can be attributed to
young Muslims thus motivated, even to the extent of taking univer-
sity degrees in Arabic language.

However, equally remarkable has been the extent to which English
is becoming an Islamic *lingua franca*. The reasons for this are to be
found partly in the way in which many significant Islamic scholars
have turned to working in English, not infrequently because they
have found themselves in Britain or the US as political exiles. But
of course the predominance of English in international communica-
tions, especially with the rise of electronic communications and the
Internet, has more than confirmed this trend. One recent example
will serve to illustrate this process. A doctoral thesis presented at the
end of 2000 at Lund University in Sweden studied the Swedish
Muslim journal *Salaam* (Otterbeck, 2000) during the years 1992–8.
The themes which were taken up by the editors, and the material
reproduced, depended overwhelmingly on English and Arabic sources.
The author made the point to me in conversation that after his
research was completed Tariq Ramadan's first significant work in
English, *To be a European Muslim* (1999), had been published. Now
Salaam was including references to Ramadan's discourse for the first
time—the editors had not previously had access to French-language
material. A similar development has taken place in Denmark since the
autumn of 2000 when Dr Ramadan was, for the first time, invited
to speak there by a Christian-Muslim dialogue project—in English.

Some of the more general points I have made up to this point,
arising out of the discussion of what I have termed the broadly *salafī*

networks, can be applied also to Sufi networks. But this is an area which has only recently been attracting the attention of researchers working with Muslim communities in Europe. In the following I shall present some preliminary impressions of one particular Sufi network which I have recently been involved in researching,[13] before drawing some overall conclusions on the theme of the paper.

4. *Sufism*

Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is the mystical dimension of Islam. Appearing already in the first Islamic century in the form of individual mystics and ascetics, the impact Sufism was to have on Sunni Islamic society and culture was due to its organisation into *ṭarīqa*s ('orders') with specific traditions of teaching and spiritual practices, usually traced back to an eponymous founder, whose leadership was inherited by a spiritual chain (*silsila*) of initiated *shaykh*s, often closely linked to the social structures (*Shorter EI*, 1961, 573–578). Always in a very tense relationship with the Sunni scholar class (the '*ulamā*'), the links between the *ṭarīqa*s and the social structures, at their closest in the 13th to 18th centuries, guaranteed the position of Sufism in society. At their height, individual *ṭarīqa*s were identified with particular craft guilds or, as in the case of the Bektashis and the Ottoman Janissaries, with particular military units.

The changes in society and economy of the 19th and 20th centuries were such as to undermine the social basis of Sufism. It declined in the face of modernisation[14] and in the face of the attacks of new, more puritanical Islamic movements, on the one hand, and of the secularisation of the intellectual and professional classes (Hanna, 1990, 327–338). However, the decline was uneven across the Muslim world. In the Soviet Union so-called *tariqatism* was a major obstacle to the imposition of Soviet power and continued to retain significant force behind the scenes, so much so that observers during the 1970s and 80s often suggested that it was the continuing strength of these unofficial networks which constituted the main Islamic threat to Soviet

---

[13] This is a 30-month research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and involving field work in Dagestan, Lebanon, the UK and the Internet; see http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/mdraper/transnatsufi.

[14] Thus, of twenty Madyani and Shadhili groups in Egypt in 1920, only half survived in 1940 (Trimingham, 1971, 278f.).

power. In the Indian subcontinent Sufism in a wide variety of forms
continued to thrive. The secularist suppression of all forms of organ-
ised Islam in Turkey after 1924 broke the institutional continuity of
the traditional *ṭarīqa*s, and in the case of the Bektashis destroyed its
organisational leadership (Birge, 1937, 83ff.). But as the Kemalist state
pulled back from its earlier radicalism, new movements started to
appear out of the embers of the Sufi tradition, movements which have
gradually reconstituted continuity with their pasts, real or imagined.

   The most marked growth in Sufi *ṭarīqa*s has been among newly
settled Muslim communities in the West and, especially, among con-
verts to Islam. Of course, where Sufism existed in the countries of
origin it tended to migrate with the migrants, but it tended not to
be visible in the public space.[15] I have argued elsewhere that pub-
lic visibility has come to Muslim organisations with increasing inte-
gration, especially at the political and community level (Nielsen, 1999,
42f.). Sufi based groups have shared in this process, and there is
some evidence that links between particular *ṭarīqa*s and social struc-
tures are developing, for example in sectors of French organised
labour and among taxi drivers in some cities.

4.1. *The Nazimis*

One of the most publicly noticeable of these Sufi groups has been
that led by Sheikh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani, a branch of the
Naqshabandi tradition (Küçükcan 1999, 215–219).[16] A Turkish Cypriot,
Sheikh Nazim studied Islam in Syria (after first having trained as an
engineer in Turkey) where he became a disciple of the Dagestani
Sheikh Abdullah al-Dagestani. In the early 1970s he moved to London
to start a mission to Europeans and quickly built up a following with
an extended network across Europe and then into North America,
where his deputy is Sheikh Hisham Qabbani. What makes this Sufi
group so interesting from the point of view of my topic is the very
loose nature of the network. The immediately most noticeable dimen-
sion is the common substance of the attitudes to events and the sur-
rounding world.

---

[15] This invisibility of Sufism in Europe has remained pronounced until quite
recently: the index of the collection of papers from three conferences on Islam in
Europe, edited by Nonneman *et al.* (1996), contains only two references to Sufism.
   [16] An extended account by the leader of the group in the US can be found in
Kabbani, 1995.

4.1.1. *Content*

It is characteristic of the Nazimis that they usually work with the political *status quo*, regardless of the whether that is republic or monarchy. This is reflected in a number of ways. In Malaysia and Brunei prominent members of the royal families are followers of Sheikh Nazim, and some of them are said to have provided significant financial support. Generally, local groups of the *ṭarīqa* tend to express their support for the existing political system and occasionally are politically active within it. In Dagestan during 1998 Sheikh Nazim's help was solicited by the ultimately unsuccessful presidential campaign of Magomed Khachilaev, to the extent that the two men were seen together in Moscow in search of support from that quarter.

Sometimes such support becomes controversial in broader Muslim circles. Over the years Sheikh Nazim has praised Queen Elizabeth II in sometimes exuberant terms. This praise has been listed as one of the fourteen points by which Sheikh Nazim is accused of negating Islam by the Ahbash[17] of Lebanon (www.aicp.org, 5 Nov. 1997). In several published statements, Sheikh Nazim expressed his support for Prince Charles in the breakup of his marriage to Princess Diana, and when she died he was reported to have stated that this was God's punishment for her adultery. In both instances, arguments out of Islamic law were mobilised, although one has to say that those used to legitimise the adultery of Prince Charles, in his turn, were rather convoluted.

Equally controversial, but attracting much more opprobrium at the time, was a statement made on 7 January 1999 by Sheikh Nazim's *khalīfa* (deputy) and son-in-law, Sheikh Muhammad Hisham Qabbani. The statement was made at an open forum on Islamic extremism held at the US State Department (www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/Statements/islamic_extremism.htm, 9 June 1999). In it Sheikh Hisham made a broad attack on every form of 'extremist' Islam, covering the whole spectrum from Usama bin Ladin to the Muslim Brotherhood. In the process he accused most Muslim organisations in the US of being, or potentially being, covers or fronts for extremist and terrorist

---

[17] The Ahbash, officially known as the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, was founded in 1930 in Beirut. According to Hamzeh and Dekmejian (1996) the movement arises out of a multiple Sufi tradition including particularly Qadiri, Rifa'i and Naqshabandi ones. It is strongly opposed to Ikhwan and Wahhabi tendencies and while engaging in aggressive proselytism opposes political destabilisation.

networks. He supported US policy in the Muslim world and asked for closer surveillance of Muslim NGOs. While some parts of the political spectrum welcomed the statement as confirming all their suspicions, it effectively isolated Sheikh Nazim and his 'Islamic Supreme Council of America' from the vast majority of Muslim tendencies in the US.

In his statement, Sheikh Hisham had made the point that also Russia and the other post-Soviet states were threatened by Islamic extremism. In the face of actual and perceived threats by Islamic movements, governments in the region have wavered between repression and negotiation.[18] An interesting case in point has been Uzbekistan, where the initial reaction of the regime had effectively been to criminalise all expressions of Islam so, for example, men with beards and women with headscarves were harrassed and imprisoned. At the same time, however, growing emphasis was being placed on the historical role of Uzbekistan as one of the great cradles of Islamic learning. Millions of dollars were spent on building a massive new mausoleum compound outside Samarkand for Imam al-Bukhari, the great compiler of *ḥadīth*. President Islam Karimov was portrayed as a staunch supporter of the true Uzbek Islamic tradition, and an official Islamic university was founded. Measures were taken to encourage regime-friendly tendencies, and here great hope has been placed in the strong Sufi traditions of the region.

The eponymous founder of the Naqshabandi order was born in a village outside the city of Bukhara, where his tomb is also located. With the disappearance of formal Sufi institutional structures during the Soviet era, the field was open for Sheikh Nazim to offer himself and his *ṭarīqa* as the rightful heir to the Central Asian Naqshabandi tradition. A meeting was arranged between Sheikh Nazim and President Karimov at the UN Millenium Peace Summit in New York on 8 September 2000. According to Nazimi network accounts, the two parties "shared their aspirations for preserving traditional scholarship and values of Islam, in the face of rising tide of radical movements throughout Central Asia." (Naqshbandi network, 20 Sept. 2000: Uzbek President Islam Karimov . . .) The same day, the network reproduced an analysis by Paul Goble carried by Radio Free

---

[18] Aspects of this are discussed extensively in the paper by Galina Yemelianova in this volume.

Europe/Radio Liberty headed "Fighting fundamentalism with Sufism". A week later, Sheikh Hisham was in Tashkent as the official guest of President Karimov, taking part in a conference on interreligious dialogue in Central Asia organised jointly by the Uzbek government and UNESCO, a conference among whose main objectives, at last on the part of the Uzbek hosts, seems to have been to gather international religious support for the struggle against "extremism and terrorism". Sheikh Hisham and his entourage received VIP treatment and were extensively interviewed by the Uzbek media. Afterwards, the Naqshbandi network of Sheikh Nazim attributed major significance to the visit as the precursor of significant cooperation between the Nazimi *ṭarīqa* and the Uzbek government.

Among the topics which have recently contributed to embodying the network of the followers of Sheikh Nazim was a widespread expectation that the year 2000 would see the coming of the *mahdī*. This builds on a very strong popular tradition within Sunni Islam which has traces back to the earliest centuries and which has regularly been condemned by the majority of Sunni scholars. (*Shorter EI*, 1961, 310ff.).[19] There are many variants of the tradition but a common thread is that a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad will return to earth as the 'guided one' (*al-mahdī*) to restore the faith and justice. In some accounts he will be accompanied by Jesus ('Isa) who, according to some traditions, will reappear in Damascus.

When Sheikh Nazim first started his activities in Europe in the early 1970s there were several occasions on which he is said to have foretold the coming of the *mahdī* and the end of the world. The expected events did not happen. The Sheikh's utterances were reinterpreted with much less definite meanings, while a number of his earlier followers left him disillusioned. He is not recorded to have made eschatological statements which could be open to such specific interpretation since the 1970s, but it seems that the approach of the year 2000 was too strong a temptation, if not to Sheikh Nazim himself then to a number of his prominent associates. During the winter and spring of 1998–99 the approach of a catastrophe for, especially, urban civilisation was being predicted with rising urgency. A number

---

[19] This should not be confused with the main Shi'ite understanding of the *mahdī*, the twelfth Imam who is believed to have gone into hiding, occultation, and will return at the end of time to restore faith, justice and harmony.

of events were written into the agenda, above all the widely expected
computer chaos to be caused by the Y2K problem. During 1999,
the Turkish and then the Greek earthquakes were interpreted as a
foretaste of what was to come. Nazimi websites carried extensive dis-
cussion, interpretation and advice to help and guide followers and
others. The borderlines between a Muslim Nazimi discourse and the
wider disaster predictions prevalent on the Internet were at times
very unclear. On at least one occasion a Nazimi website carried
extensive verbatim advice, without attribution of source, copied from
a fundamentalist Christian survivalist source based on the US west
coast.

   In the spring of 1999 messages circulated to the effect that fol-
lowers were advised by the sheikh to gather in the village of Sir
Dennyé in the mountains of Lebanon in anticipation of the disas-
ters of the end-time. Much to the confusion of the villagers a num-
ber of young Europeans and Americans, dressed in the exotic garb
and coloured turbans of the disciples, started to appear in the area.
Of course, this also attracted wider public attention in a region which
is, for good reason, highly sensitive to strange events, not least if
they have security implications. In the event, it seems that they were
deemed to be reasonably harmless, although the landlords of the vil-
lage had to threaten court action in defence against the threatened
'invasion'. But the event had sparked a fair amount of public dis-
cussion in which the Nazimis' claims to represent the Naqshabandi
tradition were often accepted uncritically (e.g. *L'orient-Le Jour*, 19 Oct.
1999, 5). Again, however, it was possible for more intellectual apol-
ogists to interpret Sheikh Nazim's predictions in more general terms
as referring to catastrophes brought about by human materialism,
climate change and the like, which would have much more devas-
tating effects on urban than on rural civilisation. This was certainly
the explanation of Prof. Mohammed Dernaika, dean of the faculty
of philosophy on the Tripoli campus of the Lebanese University and
reputedly a follower of Sheikh Nazim (ibid.).

4.1.2. *Form*
But the substance of the discourse of the Nazimi network is not
sufficient to explain the extent to which it can be described as a net-
work. It is noticeable that most of the time, at least in the UK, the
local groups are effectively a law unto themselves. Each group behaves
very differently, does different things within its own walls and in

relation to the broader community, and even conducts its rites in different ways although maintaining the core of the Naqshabandi tradition of a silent *dhikr*. This has consequences for the processes of the network which is very open and easily penetrated. Twice during the two years 1999–2000, preachers appeared claiming to represent Sheikh Nazim, giving directions and trying to collect funds. While both were sooner or later publicly declared false, the response was slow and some local groups were attracted away or were so disrupted by the experience that they effectively collapsed. In both cases it took some time for the network to identify and exclude the interloper.

In this network there is very little in the way of regular instruction passed along a 'chain of command' or management hierarchy. At the western end of the network—Europe and above all the US— communications are extensive and intensive, mostly by electronic means. But these communications are multi-centred in the form of a variety of websites and various e-mail discussion groups and notice boards, most of which do not function under any kind of control by the sheikh or his deputy. In such circumstances local autonomy is significant. This provides an opportunity for ethnic networks to assert themselves, something which Sheikh Nazim himself has implicitly encouraged in the practice of different nationalities normally using different colours for their turbans. Over the last few years we have thus seen an expansion of the Turkish part of the network in Britain and its assumption of control of the London premises of the *ṭarīqa*. Notable parts of the white convert part of the London community have subsequently moved many of their activities to Glastonbury.

At the East Mediterranean end of the network, on the other hand, the groups are less closely linked into these processes. The small group in Tripoli, Lebanon, maintains closer direct personal links with Sheikh Nazim with regular visits between Tripoli and Turkish Cyprus where the sheikh has his main home. The Dagestani followers are, in effect, completely isolated from the broader network because of the absence of anything but the most elementary forms of communications.[20]

---

[20] In fact, the member of the research team working with Dagestan, when it became know that he had recently visit the sheikh in Cyprus, found himself adopted as the interlocutor with the sheikh who had not visited for several years.

5. *A formless network?*

So is it in any way justified to consider all of these distinct experiences and manifestations of the following of Sheikh Nazim as a network? While there is a degree of common discourse, and events in one place have an effect in most of the rest of the network, and while large parts of the *ṭarīqa* share in common communications, at every point when one attempts to state that here is something shared which justifies the appellation of 'network' one has to accept that there are exceptions. As one Nazimi I spoke to in Milan in the spring of 2000 said: "You cannot study the *ṭarīqa* fully where you are. You must go to Cyprus—that is where the full story is." The full story he was referring to was the person of the sheikh. The *ṭarīqa* is the sheikh and the sheikh is the *ṭarīqa*. The network therefore coheres in the presence of the sheikh and only exists fully where he is and in him. When he is not physically present there is an awareness of him and of his potential physical presence. The esotericism of the Sufi tradition talks of 'bilocation' and 'translocation' of the sheikh.[21] From a less esoteric perspective there is no doubt that the actual or potential presence is the major, if not the defining, force of cohesion and identity. Here consideration of networks has to incorporate concepts of charismatic leadership, and the media of communication become secondary.

REFERENCES

Baumann, G. (1996), *Contesting culture: discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blaschke, J. (1985), "Islam und Politik unter türkischen Arbeitsmigranten", in J. Blaschke (ed.), *Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Gesellschaft des Vorderen und Mittleren Orients 1984*, Berlin: Express.

BMMS, British Muslims Monthly Survey, Birmingham: CSIC, 1993–2002.

Boyer, A. (1992), *L'Institut Musulman de la Mosquée de Paris*, Paris: CHEAM.

Castells, M. (1996–8), *The information age: economy, society and culture*, 3 vols, Oxford: Blackwell.

Dassetto, F. and Bastenier, A. (1991), *Europa: nuova frontiera dell'Islam*, Rome: Lavoro.

———. (1984), *L'Islam transplanté: Vie et organisation des minorités musulmanes de Belgique*, Antwerp: EPO.

---

[21] Several papers describe such beliefs and stories in contemporary Bulgarian sufism in Zheliaskova and Nielsen (2001).

Hamzeh, A.N. and Dekmejian, R.H. (1996), "A Sufi response to political Islamism: al-Ahbash of Lebanon", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28, 217–229.

Hanna, A. (1990), "Mizān al-qiwā al-ijtima'iyya bayna 'l-turuq al-ṣūfiyya wa-ḥarakāt al-tajdīd al-islamī fī 'aṣr al-nahḍa", in Markaz Dirasāt al-Wiḥda al-'Arabiyya, *Al-Dīn fī al-mujtama' al-'arabī*, Beirut, 327–338.

Hoffman, B. ed. (1981), *Graue Wölfe, Koranschulen, Idealistenvereine*, Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein.

Kabbani, M.H. (1995), *The Naqshbandi Way*, Chicago: Kazi Publications.

Karakasoglu, Y. and Nonneman, G. (1996), "Muslims in Germany, with special reference to the Turkish-Islamic community", in Nonneman et al. 1996, 241–267.

Küçükcan, T. (1999), *Politics of ethnicity, identity and religion*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Lapidus, I. (2001), "Between universalism and particularism: the historical bases of Muslim communal, national and global identities", *Global Networks*, 1, 37–55.

Lewis, P. (1994), *Islamic Britain: religion, politics and identity among British Muslims*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Lithman, Y.G. (1988), "Social relations and cultural continuities: Muslim immigrants and their social networks", in T. Gerholm and Y.G. Lithman (eds.), *The new Islamic presence in Western Europe*, London: Mansell, 239–262.

Masud, M.K. (2000), *Travellers in faith: studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a transnational Islamic movement for faith renewal*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Metcalfe, B. (1982), *Islamic revival in British India, 1860–1900*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nasr, V. (2000), *International relations of an Islamist movement: the case of the Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan*, New York: Council of Foreign Relations.

Nielsen, J. (1988), "The political geography and administration of Bahri Mamluk Palestine: the evidence of al-Qalqashandi", in H. Nashabe (ed.), *Studia Palaestina: studies in honour of Constantine K. Zurayk*, Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 114–136.

———. (1991), "A Muslim agenda for Britain: some reflections", *New Community*, 17, 467–476.

———. (1995), *Muslims in Western Europe*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

———. (1999), *Towards a European Islam*, London: Macmillan.

Nonneman, G. et al. (eds.) (1996), *Muslim communities in the new Europe*, Reading: Ithaca.

OEMIW (1995), *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 4 vols. New York: Oxford University Press.

Otterbeck, J. (2000), *Islam paa svenska; Tidskriften Salaam och islams globalisering*, Lund: Lund University.

Ramadan, T. (1999), *To be a European Muslim*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation.

Shaw, A. (1988), *A Pakistani community in Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Shorter EI (1961), *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Trimingham, J.S. (1971), *The Sufi orders in Islam*, London: Oxford University Press.

Zheliaskova, A. and Nielsen, J. (eds) (2001), *The ethnology of Sufism*, Sofia: IMIR.