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US based Islamist Network: Presence in Cyberspace and Online Projects

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The purpose behind this paper is to explore how the organizations and individuals affiliated with the Islamic movement (Haraka Islamiyya i.e., Islamism/ political Islam) in the U.S. make use of electronic media as part of a broader "soft da^cwah" strategy, to promote their interpretation of Islam and to attain political goals. It covers the web presence of major Islamist organizations based in the U.S.[1]

Introduction - Islamism in the US

We want to make clear at the beginning that we do not imply any judgmental position through the term "Islamism". We have taken "Islamists" here to mean those with a political agenda, the term "islámíjún" is accepted by the movement itself (besides the term Haraka islamiyya) and we also do not intend to speak about Islamic militancy or extremism. Islamism is a modern ideology promoting the view of Islam as a complete religious, political, social and economical order and a total way of life. It was brought to the US in the '60s by immigrants - members or sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaa^ct-e Islami, especially student activists from Egypt and Pakistan who were influenced by the Islamic revival in their countries of origin and were committed to da^cwah work (missionary activity) and determined to resist assimilation into the Western environment.

The institutional form of Islam and its organizations is rather different in the US than in the Middle East. The absence of the state authority over Islam or official religious leadership and the framework of civil society and absolute freedom of worship give way to various Islamic groups and diverse interpretations. It is welcomed by Islamists who do not recognize the religious establishment (^culama) and traditional fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and who, in most cases, occupy the position of political opposition in their home countries; it enabled them to establish a wide range of institutions and take a leading role as the most assertive da^cwah force and representative of Islam in the public square and officialdom.

The Islamists who inherited the ideology of Sayyid Qutb at first objected to the political and civic participation of Muslims in the US and viewed any institutional involvement of the Movement

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[1] Due to limited space we can't provide detailed case studies of the sites, rather will we provide a brief overview of the sites and introduce the large scope of activity of the Islamic movement.

as illegitimate.[2] Nevertheless, over the course of time Islamism in the US has made credible steps towards moderation. The "orthodox" isolationistic ideology was abandoned, and many organizations have been set up as part of a "multiple–organization structure" strategy of Islamization. A new outreach strategy of "soft daᶜwah"[3] was adopted, using media, educational campaigns and political lobbying. In contrast to the traditionalists' approach to daᶜwah, the Islamist view the daᶜwah performed by institutions and Muslim professionals as insufficient and inadequate, and they emphasize the call to Islam as a religious duty imposed upon every Muslim individual who should therefore take on the role of an "Islamic worker".[4] The target is to transform the public space into an "Islam–friendly" environment within the framework of multiculturalism.

Organizations and on-line daᶜwah

Naturally, media play a crucial part in this outreach strategy[5], and the Internet provides an opportunity to spread the Islamic message in the West and across the globe virtually at no cost. Islamist organizations in the US manage multiple web sites focused on legal counseling and issuing fatwas (recommendations interpreting the provisions of shariᶜa – Islamic law), dissemination of Islamic literature and resources, online broadcasting of radio and TV channels, community building and networking through Islamic finders, directories, chat rooms, online matrimonial matching, etc.

US-based Islamists were among the first Muslims who maintained a web presence in the '90s, before other Islamic perspectives went on-line; in particular, the Muslim Student Association was active. Compared to other groups within Islam, the Islamists build their public relations extensively. It is most probable that a casual browser entering "Islam USA" in a search engine will be directed to a website affiliated with the Islamic movement conveying its particular interpretation of Islam. Indeed, the websites seek to represent themselves as the authentic and orthodox voice of Islam and as the ultimate authority.[6]

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[2] See Haleem, A.: *Path to Peace: Calling to Allah in America*, Islamic Horizons 6/1987, p. 29.

[3] Also called lifestyle or indirect daᶜwah. The concept of soft daᶜwah was elaborated by Khuram Murad - the former head of Islamic Foundation in Leicester UK and disciple of Mawdudi -the founder of Jamaaᶜt-e Islami movement in Pakistan. See Poston, L.: *Islamic Daᶜwah in the West. Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*, Oxford 1992, p. 81-90. Murad's writings *Dawah among non-Muslims in the West* and *Shariah -The Way to Allah* can be accessed online at Witness Pioneer Virtual Islamic Organization, online: http://www.witness-pioneer.org/ (15.11.2006).

[4] Murad, K.: *Dawah among non-Muslims in the West*, chapter *Dawah –Basic Concepts and Framework*, online http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/KM_Dawah/index.htm (15.11.2006). Al Qaradawi, Y.: *The Priorities for the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, Witness Pioneer Virtual Islamic Organization, online: http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_Priorities/ch4p1-1.htm#The%20Movement%20And%20Expatriates (15.11.2006).

[5] The importance of mass media for daᶜwah was acknowledged already in the 1980 by the first Islamic Mass media conference in Jakarta. See the Islamic mass media charter comprising also the code of conduct for an Islamic journalist who should work for the sake of Islam, International Journalists' Network, online: http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=38189&LID=1 (15.11.2006).

[6] Although the websites oftentimes lack any explicit identification of the subject that established and runs the website which is only described on a general level as Islamic, there are some basic keys to recognize its affiliation with the Islamic movement quickly. The mission statement puts strong emphasis on practicing Islam as a complete way of life, unification of the Muslim community (umma) and „Islamic work", re-phrasal of the Quranic verse 3/110 „Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah" often appears. Islamist websites in opposition to Salafi websites do not list formal religious authorities, ᶜulama and teachers

We should mention the most important Islamist organizations in terms of membership and influence exerted in the public square. They are very diverse but share the agenda of Islamization; we will cover student organizations, community grassroots organizations, research institutions, media outlets, and political lobby groups and will browse through their websites.

A majority of the organizations in question is connected to the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT)[7] which is a service organization of Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and which is in fact the economical backbone of Islamist network in North America. It was financially backed by Saudi Arabia, using the Muslim World League (MWL) as its proxy. NAIT's website state it is an Islamic waqf (foundation) managing the property of American Muslim community in accordance with the provisions of both shariᶜa law and American law.

Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

The Islamic Society of North America is the umbrella organization for Islamist activism in North America. Its board (majlis ash-shura) is composed of prominent Islamist leaders and scholars. On the continent, its management is structured into hierarchy of zonal, regional and local branches. ISNA identifies the goals and interests that are perceived as "Islamic" and sets the strategies how to achieve and promote them. It coordinates other specialized and local Islamic organizations, organizes events and annual conventions of Muslims; it is estimated that about 30% of mosques in the U.S. are affiliated with ISNA.[8] ISNA members hold multiple positions on boards and as staff members in other subordinate organizations we are going to mention.

The ISNA website[9] targets primarily its members and partner organizations, it focuses on fundraising (e.g., enables zakat collection) and leadership and community development. The main media outlet of ISNA is "Islamic Horizons," a magazine available in print as well as online.[10] The ISNA website issues press releases expressing its positions on affairs pertaining to Muslims, but otherwise it does not target the general public or non-Muslims - it is not a propagation-oriented site.

Muslim Student Association (MSA)

The real pacesetter and executive force in online and media daᶜwah is the Muslim Student Association. MSA was the first Islamist organization in the US, founded in 1963 at a university in Illinois by a group of student activists influenced by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and

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and their biographies. They do not quote historical fuqaha (lawyers) except for few such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim. Modern and contemporary authors published by Islamist websites commonly include Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi, Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, Marjam Jameela, Yusuf Al Qaradawi and even Hasan Al Turabi and Ahmad Deedat followed by more moderate FCNA and ISNA members Jamal Al- Badawi, Taha Jaber Al-Alwani and other American „home-grown or domesticated" ᶜulama.

[7] NAIT online: http://www.nait.net/ (15.11.2006).

[8] According to the most recent count based on a survey, there are approximately 1,200 mosques in the U.S., 27% of which claimed affiliation with ISNA in 2001. See Bagby I.: *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait*, CAIR 2001. We have to note that estimates of Muslim population as well as the number of mosques vary considerably in various sources.

[9] ISNA online: http://www.isna.net/ (15.11.2006).

[10] Islamic Horizons online: http://www.isna.com/services/horizons/current/ (15.11.2006).

Jamaaᶜte Islami who pursued their studies in the U.S. at that time. Its success was enormous. It attracted tens of thousands of members and now remains the largest Muslim student organization. Its headquarters is located in Plainfield, Indiana and it currently has more than 400 branches at American universities.

MSA has a rich record of missionary activities: it spread daᶜwah literature through its own publishing house (the American Trust Publication), and its distribution company (the Islamic Book Service[11]), it operated daᶜwah programs in correctional facilities. MSA expanded its activities far beyond the university campus, and in 1982 a new umbrella organization, ISNA (mentioned above), seceded from the MSA to serve as a coordination body. Former student leaders from MSA relocated to ISNA and MSA continued its university-based activities.

MSA places a strong emphasis on information technology and media as means to foster Islamic values and identity. It currently runs a national-organization website[12] and more than 400 affiliated websites[13] that seek to target Muslims and non-Muslims. The sites contain material related to religious issues (e.g., information about the congregation of believers, the set of beliefs and practices, prayer times) and deal with political issues (e.g., encourage activism concerning the Palestinian question and other questions where Muslim countries and minorities are stakeholders). MSA members have done a great job in the digitization of Islamic primary sources such as the Quran and the collections of hadith (e.g., the website run by the MSA at the University of Southern California[14], where a searchable compendium of text is available). MSA administers a comprehensive database of online resources about Islam and links to Islamic organizations in the US and abroad[15] (media, schools, NGOs and charities, mosques, businesses).

There are also several websites run by youth organizations affiliated with ISNA, such as the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA)[16], which promotes the Islamist perspective on Islam among American-born, second-generation Muslims, and the Malaysian Islamic Study Group (MISG)[17], which focuses its daᶜwah on specific ethnic community.

Media

Probably the most influential website connected to ISNA and MSA is IslamiCity.com[18]. IslamiCity was established in 1995 to promote Islam on the Internet, and the site now claims to receive more than 1 million unique visitors every month. It is surely one of the most resource-filled sites about Islam on the web; it contains Islamic primary sources (searchable Quran, hadith), sermons, fatwas (questions and answers section[19]), a mosque locator, a prayer-times calculator, chat room, youth section, section for converts (new Muslims), news and analysis are provided by subordinate news-site Iviews.com[20], and it runs online radio and cyber TV[21]. Useful documents

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[11] IBS online: http://www.islamicbookstore.com/publisher-ibs--islamic-book-service--tx.html.INS (15.11.2006) is one of the biggest online distributors of „Islamic literature" in English.

[12] MSA national online: http://www.msa-natl.org/ (15.11.2006).

[13] http://www.msa-national.org/resources/msawebsites.html (15.11.2006).

[14] MSA-USC online: http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/ (15.11.2006).

[15] http://www.msa-national.org/resources/islamorg.html (15.11.2006).

[16] MYNA online: http://www.myna.i-p.com/, www.jannah.org/myna (15.11.2006).

[17] MISG online: http://misgonline.com (15.11.2006).

[18] IslamiCity online: http://www.islamicity.com (15.11.2006).

[19] IslamiCity Q&A online: http://www.islamicity.com/qa/ (15.11.2006).

[20] Iviews online: http://www.iviews.com/ (15.11.2006).

about recent developments in American Islam can be downloaded (speeches of imams, conference proceedings etc.). Zakat collection is one part of IslamiCity fund-raising efforts.

A further media outlet connected to ISNA is the Islamic Broadcasting Network (IBN)[22]. IBN is an offspring of the Islamic Media Foundation[23], whose mission is to educate and train Muslim media professionals and enhance the effectiveness of daʿwah carried out through mass media. IBN was launched in 2001, and its programming offers Quran recitation, lectures, talk shows, political comments and news - IBN news[24]. The website has an interactive youth section[25] offering psychological and legal counseling (not exactly fatwas), and it spreads "Islamic" games and entertainment for Muslim youth. Music broadcasting on the channel is restricted - only proper (halal) "Islamic" music is selected (nasheeds), Islamic hip-hop and rap.

There are also commercial websites, often connected to online Islamic media, marketing "Islamic products" and literature that share the Islamists' ideological focus. For instance, the Soundvision company[26] and its Internet broadcaster Radio Islam[27], a daʿwah-oriented channel launched in 1999 covering religious, political and social topics. Another site, MeccaCentric daʿwah group[28], features the most-popular American imams and Islamist thinkers, many of them converts and African-Americans.

Professional organization and the Islamization of knowledge

MSA set up several affiliated organizations, including professional ones such as the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS)[29], the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE)[30] and the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA)[31], each working "for the cause of Islam" in its field of specialization. Each of them maintains its own website.

The professional associations implement the so-called Islamization-of-knowledge plan - the objectives and guidelines of which were set out by prominent Islamist intellectual Ismail Raji Al Faruqi.[32] The overall objective pursued by supporters of the Islamization-of-knowledge plan is to Islamize the larger sphere of acts and behavior classified by traditional Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) as mubah (indifferent, not regulated by shariʿa provisions). Intellectual Islamization, i.e. of every

[21] Radio Al Islam and Cyber TV online: http://www.islamicity.com/multimedia/ (15.11.2006).
[22] IBN online: www.ibn.net (15.11.2006).
[23] IMF online: http://www.islamicmedia.net/home.htm (15.11.2006).
[24] http://news.ibn.net/ (15.11.2006).
[25] http://youth.ibn.net/ (15.11.2006).
[26] Soundvision online: http://www.soundvision.com/ (15.11:2006).
[27] Radio Islam online: http://www.radioislam.com (15.11:2006).
[28] MeccaCentric daʿwah group online: http://www.meccacentric.com/home.html (15.11.2006).
[29] AMSS online: http://www.amss.net/ (15.11.2006).
[30] AMSE online: http://www.amse.net/home.asp (15.11.2006).
[31] IMANA online: http://www.imana.org/mc/page.do (15.11.2006).
[32] Al Faruqi, R. I.: *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan*, IIIT , Herdon, Virginia, 1982.
Al Faruqi, R. I.: *Defining Islamic Traditionalism: First Principles in the Islamization of Thought*, International Strategy and Policy Institute, online: http://www.ispi-usa.org/archives/islamictraditionalism.html (15.11.2006).

branch of human knowledge and science and its methodology (literature, history, medicine, international relations etc.), is part of this far-reaching reform.[33]

Apart from the professional associations, a research and scholarly institution that should implement this new scientific revolution was established – the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)[34], with Ismail Raji Al Faruqi as its first director in 1981. Its headquarters is in Virginia, but it has established offices worldwide. Naturally, the da'wah efforts exerted by the IIIT exhibit an academic and educational emphasis - it operates an Arabic website, Islamiyat al Maarifat[35], which tackles the perceived problem of the duality of education compliant with shari'a standards and secular education perceived as value-free or rather overloaded with Western values. Research conducted by the IIIT also touched upon the Islamization of cyberspace.[36] The IIIT continuously expands its activities - in 2003 an educational branch was established, the Fairfax Institute[37], which aims to "enhance understanding of the laws, traditions, culture, and nuances of Islam and the Muslim world." As for the personnel, the IIIT is interlinked with ISNA and the professional associations.

Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA)

An important issue Muslims in general have to tackle in the American diaspora is the possible scope of adhering to the provisions and principles of shari'a (Islamic law) and the need to resolve the conflict of some of its regulations with American law. The ISNA established a legal branch, called the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), which issues fatwas (legal recommendations), and examines the possibilities of applying shari'a as a legal framework governing the life of the Muslim community in the US. In this respect, the Islamist approach, like Muslim reformism in general, is quite flexible in re-interpreting shari'a provisions to conform to the new environment and not hinder Muslim participation in elections, the economy and so on.

Although the Fiqh Council is an organized body of legal experts, it does not exercise any authority or power over persons of Muslim faith. There is of course no Islamic jurisdiction which US citizens are obliged to obey, and therefore the Fiqh Council competes with other sources of legal authority disseminated locally and internationally for its recognition. FCNA issues its analysis and legal opinions on its own website[38], where innovative fatwas in the fields of family law and marriage and economic issues (e.g. permissibility of insurance and certain kinds of loan financing) can be found.

FCNA lawyers (fuqaha) consider the traditional fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence produced by the four schools of law) mandatory only in matters of ritual ('ibadat), and they promote the so-called minority fiqh (fiqh al-aqalliyat) in matters of civil law (mu'amalat) and, of course, penal law

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[33] We can trace this kind of thinking and the notion that shari'a prescribes everything in human life, including the principles of knowledge, to the work of Sayyd Qutb and his brother Muhammad Qutb. See Qutb, S. : *Milestones* (chapter 8: *The Islamic Concept and Culture*), http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/SQ_Milestone/default.htm (15.11.2006).

[34] IIIT online: http://www.iiit.org/defaultE.asp (15.11.2006).

[35] Islamiyat al maarifat online: http://www.eiiit.org (15.11.2006).

[36] Crane, R.: Shaping the Future, Challenge and Response, IIIT Virginia 1995.

[37] Fairfax Institute online: http://www.fairfaxi.net/ (15.11.2006).

[38] FCNA online: http://www.fighcouncil.org/ (15.11.2006).

(ᶜuqubat). The main theoretician and promoter of fiqh al aqalliyat is Taha Jabir Al Alwani, a scholar of Iraqi origin and a FCNA and ISNA member.[39]

The minority fiqh promoted by the Fiqh Council in the US is in fact a local realization of the concept of the "fiqh of balances and priorities" and a response to the calls for a new political fiqh pronounced by prominent Islamist thinkers such as Yusuf Al Qaradawi.[40]

Political organizations – Islamic lobby groups

Islamic political lobbies and human-rights organizations represent the last type of Islamist organization that established a web presence and makes use of several sites to promote their interests, especially the policy of Muslim-bloc voting in the US. Its mission is to empower American Muslims as a political entity.

This new kind of organization emerged in the '90s, as the reason for its establishment was to overcome the ideology pertaining to the legitimacy of the engagement of the Islamic movement with mainstream, non-Islamic society at the institutional level. At present, lobbying and participation in the electoral and political processes are seen as an effective tool and natural opportunity to promote the interests of the Islamic movement. Four major political groups were founded – the Muslim Political Affairs Council (MPAC)[41], the American Muslim Council (AMC)[42], the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)[43] and the American Muslim Alliance (AMA).[44]

Their political interests were defined as causes pertaining to the Muslim umma at large (e.g., the conflict in Palestine, the status of Jerusalem, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir, the Indian Muslim minority, etc.). Regarding domestic issues, the fight against "Islamophobia" was a top priority. Following 9/11, the focus shifted towards domestic issues – the protection of the civil liberties of Muslims and people of Middle-Eastern descent, opposition to the Patriot Act and the current form of the anti-terrorism campaign. Another objective of the Islamist lobby is to promote the policy of Muslim-bloc voting in a coalition gathered under the American Muslim Task Force (AMT)[45] – a Political Action Committee (PAC) created during the 2004 elections that comprised 11 major Islamist organizations in the US and continues its activity in non-election years. Its site is used to encourage voter registration, support Muslim candidates in elections on local and federal level and enhance Muslim participation in politics and the public sphere in general. The existence of these organizations is a positive sign of the adaptation of Islamist activism to standard political process and indicates a shift toward political parties.

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[39] Al Alwani, T. J.: *Toward a Fiqh for Minorities: Some Reflections*, In: Bukhari, Z., Nyang, S., Esposito,J.L. (eds.): *Muslims´ Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears and Aspirations*, Altamira Press 2004.
[40] See Al-Qaradawi, Y.: *Fi fiqh al-awwaliyyat: dirasa jadida fi dawᶜ al-quran wa as-sunna*, online: http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.aspx?cu_no=2&item_no=877&version=1&template_id=89&parent_id=12 (15.11.2006), Al Qaradawi, Y.: *Priorities for the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, online: http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_Priorities/index.htm (15.11.2006).
[41] MPAC online: http://www.mpac.org/ (15.11:2006).
[42] AMC online: http://www.amcnational.org/ (15.11.2006).
[43] CAIR online: http://www.cair-net.org/ (15.11:2006).
[44] AMA online: http://www.amaweb.org/ (15.11.2006).
[45] AMT online: http://www.americanmuslimvoter.net/ (15.11.2006).

Conclusion:

It is striking how groups and individuals affiliated with the Islamic movement use the web and information technologies to promote their perspectives on Islam. The mass media are uniformly considered a proper and effective tool for missionary activities by the Islamists, and there are no objections raised against the employment of modern technology for their religious and political purposes. Daᶜwah activities carried out through the Internet combine an educational and informative approach, political activism and media work. The strategy effectively targets groups with various religious, educational, regional and ethnic backgrounds. It reaches out to groups with specific interests and different ages. In some cases, the websites display clear signs of secularization and laicization of Islam in the Western environment, but it by no means represents a virtual or autonomous form of "cyber Islam." The material and interpretations are not unique to the web. It appears clear that the websites are an extension of the established organizational structure of the Islamic movement that evolved in the US since the '60s, promoting the same ideology and fully complying with its activities in the real-world setting.

Political opinions and pan-Islamic ideology disseminated through these websites might influence readers in both Western and so-called Muslim countries. As for the legal content, it probably has profound impact on English-speaking Muslim minorities, the Western diaspora, converts and non-Muslims searching online for information about Islam, rather than on Muslims in the Middle East who live under particular jurisdictions that in some way tackles the problem of shariᶜa codification and incorporates the provisions of shariᶜa into its legal framework.

In spite of the fact that the Islamic movement represents a dissident voice within Islam from the perspective of traditional Islamic authorities, as well as that it currently occupies the position of political opposition in most of the Middle-Eastern countries, it is becoming a mainstream voice on the Internet, reaching out especially to Western, English-speaking Muslim communities and non-Muslims.

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