

## "The Islamist": a radical journey

By Tahir Abbas,  
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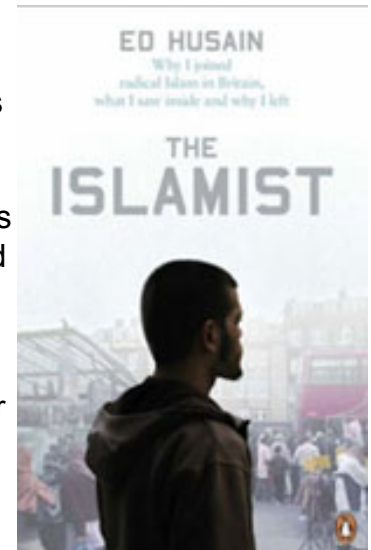
Ed Husain's autobiography *The Islamist: why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left* [1] (Penguin, 2007) is a remarkably candid account of the life of a British-born Muslim who was initially seduced by radicalism but gradually came to his senses to return to the more spiritual and devotional Islam that had defined his early years. It is also an important work, in that it both carefully grounds the issue of radicalisation that has so dominated recent intellectual and political discussion of Muslim communities in Britain, and points to potential solutions.

Ed Husain grew up in a largely monocultural (though not overly poor or marginalised) Muslim setting in the east end of London in the early 1980s, where he developed early an acute sense of "identity politics". He recalls in melancholy fashion some inspirational interactions with (white) English schoolteachers whom he warmed to, but it was Islam that came to shape and characterise his very being. In adolescence he began to break away from the norms and traditions of his Sufi-orientated Bengali family, and sought expression for his emotions and intellect through a more hardened political-Islamic approach to life - one he had to hide from his parents.

At college, his vigour and popularity helped him become president of the Islamic society, a position that allowed him to share with fellow-students the ideas of some of his intellectual influences: [Abul A'la Maududi](#) [2], [Sayyid Qutb](#) [3] and [Taqiuddin al-Nabhani](#) [4]. Ed came to be convinced that a radical overhaul of Muslim minds and nations was required, and that a return to a stricter *jihadi* interpretation of Islam provided the vehicle.

The book offers here an interesting portrait of the various organisations and individuals active around Muslim student circles at the time, and how they gradually remodelled themselves. Among them are Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which has had a particular presence in Britain since the late 1970s, particularly through the work of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester; and Ghulam Sarwar, who published the first English [textbook](#) [7] for *madrasa* students in Britain. But it was the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), essentially a youth wing of the JI, that captured Ed's imagination.

But YMO proved only another stage of Ed's journey. Against the background of the assault on Bosnian Muslims in the early 1990s, he gravitated towards the emerging [Hizb-ut-Tahrir](#) [8] party and into the orbit of the charismatic [Omar Bakri Mohammed](#) [9]. Hizb,



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Among his books are (as editor) *Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure* (Zed, 2005 [6]) and *British Islam: The Road to Radicalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Also by Tahir Abbas in

which operated legally in Britain (as it still does, despite government threats to ban it) though nowhere else in western Europe or the middle east, was then refining its "entryist" tactics to gain a foothold among young Muslims by burrowing into Islamic societies at college and university campuses. In its utopian worldview, the force of radical Islam would overthrow puppet regimes in the middle east and (in Omar Bakri Mohammed's delusion) "raise the flag of Islam over Downing Street". Omar Bakri's desire to bring an Islamic revolution to Britain led eventually to his expulsion from Hizb and his formation (in 1996) of the more extreme al-Muhajiroun. This group's flamboyant rhetoric brought it [media attention](#) [10] out of proportion to its true numbers, but it was Hizb-ut-Tahrir itself that had catalysed the process of radicalisation of many young Muslims.

Among those affected by this process were [Asif Hanif](#) [11], who died in a suicide-bomb mission in Tel Aviv in 2003, and Mohammed Siddique Khan, the ringleader of the London bombings of 7 July 2005. For some of the young Muslims of this generation, the new life-routines that might include spending time in countries such as Syria and Yemen to learn Arabic or studying religion in Pakistan risked becoming staging-posts in a journey that led into a more sinister and violent game.

### The road back

A chance encounter at college with the woman who would become his life-partner was part of a new phase in which led Ed Husain began to find the Hizb-ut-Tahrir dogma controlling, insensitive and stifling. In an effort to find a way back from a political focus to a religious one - to get to the root of Qur'anic understanding - he spent time living in Saudi Arabia and Syria. In Saudi, the eyes of this British Muslim were further opened by a society he finds grossly unequal, rabidly racist, sexually frustrated, and Islamically blinkered.

In Syria, the social conditions are more relaxed and his experience is more positive, but he still missed the freedoms of a Britain whose social problems did not prevent him from living both as a good Muslim and a good citizen.

Soon after he and his wife returned to Britain, 7/7 happened. How could it have occurred; why had people been so blind to the radicalisation of young Muslims? These questions lead Ed to reflect on the inadequacy of leadership of Muslims in Britain. He argues that (for example) the main figures of the Muslim Council of Britain emerged from an assortment of groups with degrees of affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, whose age and formation make them unsuitable to lead a young community shaped by very different social and political experiences. Many of the leaders of the [British Muslim](#) [12] community are unaccountable, self-appointed Islamists whose indulgence by the New Labour government has been damaging.

The lesson Ed Husain draws from his trajectory, one I firmly share, is that a notion of British Islam must be developed that can provide a beacon to the rest of western Europe. Britain's [model of multiculturalism](#) [12] is far more advanced than anywhere else in "old Europe", and it has many achievements and successes to its name. Yet multiculturalism has a double aspect: it is a space that society and its institutions have created to recognise and encourage diversity,

Among openDemocracy's many articles on British Muslim experience:

Mohammed Sajid, "[The gap between us: British Muslims and 7/7](#) [11]" (18 July 2005)

Maruf Khwaja, "[Muslims in Britain: generations, experiences, futures](#) [11]" (2 August 2005)

Ehsan Masood, "[British Muslims must stop the war](#) [11]" (30 August 2005)

Ehsan Masood, "[British Muslims: ends and beginnings](#) [11]" (31 October 2006)

Mukul Devichand, "[Telling Muslim tales](#) [11]" (29 December 2006)

and an invitation to communities to develop a healthy, forward-looking, holistic approach to define who they are and how they relate to others. The latter is the challenge now for British Muslims. A generational shift in the profile of political, cultural, intellectual and theological leadership is now underway, and this offers grounds for optimism.

*The Islamist* should be read and reflected on as part of the building work of the new generation of British Muslims. But it is not just for them. It has broader lessons about humility and humanity, forgiveness and fortitude, and it is unified by a pervading message of hope. All this continues to be needed to meet the intellectual and psychological influence of a radical Islam that still runs deep among a minority in Britain. Policy-makers, commentators, researchers, and educators: take note.

#### Attachment

#### Size

<a href="#">islmaist_book_cover.jpg</a> [14]	24.06 KB
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#### Links:

- [1] <http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780141030432,00.html>
- [2] <http://www.abulala.com/shortbio.asp>
- [3] <http://www.pwhce.org/qutb.html>
- [4] <http://www.yadim.com.my/english/Ulama/UlamaFull.asp?id=75>
- [5] <http://www.sociology.bham.ac.uk/staff/abbas.htm>
- [6] <http://zedbooks.co.uk/>
- [7] <http://www.muslim-ed-trust.org.uk/pdetail.php?use=mfj4Z44vB87s06Kq07rW7j8hn&pid=17&cid=1&ude=2124851584>
- [8] <http://www.hizb.org.uk/hizb/>
- [9] [http://www.jamestown.org/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=38](http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=38)
- [10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/05/02/wbomb202.xml>
- [11] <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=12263>
- [12] <http://www.counterpoint-online.org/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=615>
- [13] [http://opendemocracy.net/blog/tony\\_curzon\\_price/coherent\\_disagreement](http://opendemocracy.net/blog/tony_curzon_price/coherent_disagreement)
- [14] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/files/islmaist\\_book\\_cover.jpg](http://www.opendemocracy.net/files/islmaist_book_cover.jpg)



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