



AMHERST COLLEGE

Department of Religion

PROFESSOR JAMAL J. ELIAS

December 13, 2004

Baher Azmy, Esquire  
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Dear Professor Azmy:

At your request, I am writing to provide an expert opinion on the philosophy and activities of the Tablighi Jama'at movement, in connection with an administrative military proceeding your client faces as part of his detention in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I hold the position of Professor of Religion at Amherst College, with a specialization in Islamic thought. One of my books on Islam has been translated into five languages and I have written quite extensively on religion in contemporary Pakistan. My most recent research trip to the country was in December 2003 and was focused in large part on the Tablighi Jama'at, their emphasis on travel and their attitudes toward international and domestic Pakistani politics.

In this letter, I will attempt to describe the general philosophy and history of the Tablighis (the common term for the members of the Tablighi Jama'at movement), which should be highly relevant to understanding the circumstances of your client's travel to and within Pakistan. I will also attempt to explain why it is extremely implausible that the Tablighis support terrorism or are in any way affiliated with any terrorist or "jihadi" movements such as the Taliban or Al Qaeda, or even with extremist movements operating in Pakistan.

The formal beginnings of the organization date from the mid-1930s when the Tablighi Jama'at first emerged as a movement aimed at reforming Muslims through greater adherence to ritual, particularly to prayer. Since that time, their fundamental beliefs have consisted of Six Principles (*Chhe Usul*): (i) the Islamic credal formula (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah) is an individual covenant with God which has to be understood in its true meaning and with all its implications; (ii) prayer is the most important ritual obligation of a Muslim and should be performed in a congregation whenever possible; (iii) religious knowledge (*ilm*) and remembrance of God (*zikr*) are obligatory for every Muslim, and both derive from the study of the Qur'an; (iv) respect for all Muslims is imperative (kind treatment of all non-Muslims is actively encouraged but it is not an explicit principle); (v) sincerity of purpose (*ikhlas-e niyyat*) is obligatory, in the sense that all acts must have appropriate intentions since, in the absence of such intention, even good acts will not be rewarded by God; and (vi) members must donate time (*tafrigh-e waqt*) to the movement to engage in missionary activity.

The last principle refers to the obligation of members of the Tablighi Jama'at to take time from their regular lives to travel and actively engage in spreading the message of the movement in the Muslim community. The sixth principle is also referred to as

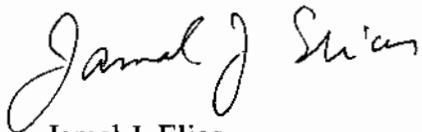
*tabligh*, emphasizing its centrality as a doctrine. Depending on the interpretation, a follower of the movement is required to spend between one day and four months a year traveling to call people to the movement (other teachings state that this obligation can be met by traveling as a missionary for four months cumulatively during the course of one's lifetime). Local, regional and international travel as *tabligh* has come to fulfill the Muslim obligation to 'strive in the path of God' (*jihad fi sabil Allah*) in Tablighi understanding.

I must emphasize this last point, that the Tablighis formally and actively believe that traveling to engage in missionary activity fully discharges any religious obligation to engage in Jihad. This is fully in keeping with others of the Six Principles which take a spiritual interpretation of rituals such as prayer and emphasize an almost mystical (Sufi) understanding of the nature of religious knowledge and remembrance of God. Followers of the Tablighi Jama'at are forbidden from actively participating in politics or extremist movements, a stand that has frequently put them in conflict with religious political parties in Pakistan.

Personal reform through prayer is one of the most identifiable features of the Tablighi Jama'at movement. At the same time, travel (including international travel) has become an essential characteristic of the movement through which followers not only call others to the 'true faith' (i.e. engage in *da'wa*), but also a means for self-improvement. As such, there is absolutely nothing out of the ordinary for a young man in Germany to associate with the Tablighi Jama'at movement in a personal spiritual attempt to discover (or rediscover) his faith. If he were to do so, it would be completely expected that he would end up traveling with a group of Tablighi men as a necessary requirement of their faith. Given that Pakistan forms the practical international center of this movement, it would be logical that his early travels would take him there where he would not only meet with other members of the movement but would be expected to travel from city to city as part of the sixth formal principle of their movement. I would also posit that it would be especially important to members of the movement to take new European converts around with them when they were traveling in Pakistan because it would help with missionary activity: "prize" converts – people from exotic or more economically developed backgrounds – are used by many religious movements the world over to show off the attractiveness or dynamism of their message, its "truth" as it were. It is a major part of the public rhetoric of the Tablighi Jama'at that their movement contains people from all over the world and that their annual gatherings at Raiwind in Pakistan and Tongi in Bangladesh have a wide international attendance. There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that extremist groups have been trying to infiltrate the Tablighi Jama'at's annual gathering at Raiwind either to make trouble or else to win converts from the million-strong crowd that congregates there. However, it is important to note that these extremist groups are not condoned by the structure, leadership or teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at, that they would be using a very large crowd as cover as opposed to infiltrating the rank and file of the movement, and that they would be there to win converts AWAY from the Tablighis, not to share with them in any ideological or political sense. Furthermore, I gather that your client is not accused of attending the annual gathering at Raiwind; it is therefore highly unlikely that he would have had contact with any extremist or "jihadi" groups through his travels with the Tablighis.

In conclusion, I would like to state that, in light of the formal emphasis the Tablighi Jama'at places on encouraging personal spiritual reform through prayer and studying the Qur'an, it would be very natural for a young Muslim in Europe to get involved with them in order to become more religious. Given the importance placed on group travel for purposes of missionary activity and self-improvement in the teachings of the movement, it would follow that he would then join with other Tablighi men and journey to Pakistan, the functional center of their movement. While there, he would be expected to go from town to town with these and other members of the movement in order to fulfill his religious obligations and increase his sense of fellowship. There is absolutely nothing in these activities to suggest that he either started out with any desire to join a political or extremist group or that he would have had contact with them in Pakistan. On the contrary, affiliation with the Tablighi Jama'at would normally mean that one had made the conscious decision to distance oneself from politics and armed conflict.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jamal J. Elias".

Jamal J. Elias  
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January 7, 2005

Prof. Baher Azmy  
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Dear Prof. Azmy:

I am writing this letter in response to our discussion on the reformed religious movement in Pakistan called the *Jama'at al-Tablighi*. The knowledge I am supplying on the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* group is the combination of scholarly research, field-work research, and personal interviews in the reformed movement. This brief information will assist you and others in understanding the organization.

The *Jama'at al-Tablighi* ("The Party of Missionary Work") is approximately eighty years old and it originated in northern British India as a response to aggressive conversion campaigns by Hindu fundamentalist and Christian missionary groups. In midst of colonial rule by English rulers, the declining legitimacy of the religious authority, and communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, Indian Muslims were especially concerned with their survival and their ability to maintain their faith in a hostile environment. In the early 1900s throughout the Muslim world, there was an enormous development of Islamic revivalist movements: from Egypt, to Turkey, to Sudan, to South and Southeast Asia. The *Jama'at al-Tablighi* was one type of Islamic revivalist movement that stressed the importance of maintaining a religious identity, of adhering to Islamic ethical principles, and rediscovering the essence of religious self-understanding through texts, history, and rituals. Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) was the founder of the *Jama'at al-Tablighi*, and he asserted that the primary way for Muslims to defend themselves against Hindu and Christian conversion tactics was to ensure that the individual was firm in one's beliefs. The emergence of the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* as a movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is very much connected to the broader trend of Islamic revivalism or the reaffirmation of faith and Muslim cultural identity.

The northern India Muslim *Jama'at al-Tablighi* organization was primarily a response of survival from the aggressive attacks of Hindu proselytizing movements such as the Sangathan and Shuddhi ("Consolidation and Purification") groups. These Hindu conversion movements

organized themselves to reconvert and reclaim the “lost Muslims” back to the original religious tradition of India. In 1927, Ilyas formally launched the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* in order to protect the Muslim community by emphasizing the Islamic tradition had to be first understood and then practiced by Muslims. However, unlike other revivalist movements, the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi*’s primary aim was to improve the religious knowledge of Muslims and to connect this knowledge with everyday living. It does not have any political aspirations, in fact, Ilyas and his successors, often criticize other Muslim organizations of becoming too closely connected with political institutions and losing sight of the goal of leading an ethical-religious life.

Ilyas was a scholar of the Deobandi seminary, and a follower of the mystical order Naqshbandiya, which demonstrate a hybrid form of Islamic religious identity. After realizing the dismal state of Muslim’s knowledge of Islam in his village of Mewat, he established several *madrasas* or religious learning centers. Realizing that these religious schools were not touching the masses of people, he designed a system of “door to door” missionary work (*tabligh*). He organized units of people (*jama‘at*) to go to remote villages or poor urban areas and invite them to the mosque to listen to an open lecture. Muhammad Ilyas message was concise and easily understandable for the layperson: the six essential points to *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* was not difficult to follow. First, each person needed to recite the testimony of faith (*shahada*) accurately and understand the various interpretations associated with the *shahadah*. Second, members needed to be able to perfect their ritual prayers by ensuring that they were correctly reciting it in Arabic. Third, according to Ilyas, Muslims needed to have a strong understanding of the essential beliefs and practices of Islam. This entailed reading collected essays and books on past prophets and the companions of Muhammad. Members of the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* were able to advance in the group by demonstrating their knowledge of these texts, and also living a life of a dedicated missionary. Fourth, Ilyas advocated that Muslims living the legacy of the past prophets meant that they inherited a unique tradition which meant that their outer living needed to maintain proper codes of behavior. To be an ethical practicing Muslim, according to Ilyas, meant that proper moral behavior (*adab*) was crucial in all aspects of life. One needed to treat elders respectfully, treat young ones with love, treat one’s spouse as a partner and companion, and all of your neighbors needed to be viewed as one community. Fifth, life is mainly about seeking God and inculcating a God-consciousness at all times. The *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* mission is to serve in God’s cause, to help all of those in need, and to not seek worldly benefits. And Sixth, the critical component of the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* work is to commit oneself to do missionary work or *da‘wa* toward other fellow Muslims. One is asked to donate time to spread the word of God to Muslims- this may range from 40 days or 10 days per year. Those who can spare 40 days may commit to 40 one-day retreats throughout the year. It is required that each member must preach up to four months in one’s lifetime. According to Ilyas, the act of preaching in unfamiliar areas allows one to reflect on faith, and it was an opportunity to articulate ones understanding of religious truths to a complete stranger. The combination of enduring hardship in missionary work and connecting with people outside their normal contacts strengthened their spiritual lives.

After the partition of India in 1947, the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* established itself in each of the South Asian nations. In Pakistan, Raiwind, a small town outside of Lahore, became the headquarters for the *Jama‘at al-Tablighi*. Following Muhammad Ilyas’ death, his son, Maulana Yusuf (1917-1965) took control of the Pakistani *Jama‘at al-Tablighi* group. His primary contributions were leading missionary groups all over South Asia, Africa, Asia, and Middle East.

He established religious learning centers and his efforts in organizing the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* ensured continuity of the movement. Following Yusuf, Maulana Inamul Haq has led the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* and made the movement attractive for all ages around the Muslim world. He is credited to internationalizing the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* beyond the South Asian context. From the very beginning the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* has deliberately distant itself from politics, political activities, and political controversies. The mystical influence on the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* has shaped it to view politics as an ugly form of human aspirations, where, according to them, politics brings out the worst type of behavior. In order to reform society, reforming the individual was more important than reforming political and social institutions. Their nonpolitical message is integral to their missionary work because for the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* religious truths are not confined to any political agenda or political theory.

During my field work research I was able to interview many *Jama'at al-Tablighi* members and also observe their annual meeting in Raiwind, Pakistan. The annual meeting attracts approximately one million people from 85 different nationalities. It is the second largest gathering of Muslims after the pilgrimage or *hajj* in Mecca. With guest speakers, plenary sessions, workshops, the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* annual meeting brings mainly men together focus on their religious practices and beliefs. The attraction of westerners, Europeans, Middle Easterners, Africans, and Southeastern Asians, to the annual meeting is tied to the fact that the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* is viewed as a successful group that influences internal change. Everyday laypersons meet one another and they themselves become empowered with religious authority by teaching each other. There are very little hierarchical positions in the organization, and most importantly, individuals instantaneously inherit a community of committed and friendly people. The stress on moral treatment of all people and obeying the proper code of conduct cultivates a warm friendly atmosphere. I've met people from Nepal, Turkey, Bosnia, Mali, and South Africa – all who reiterated the point that it is a non-judgmental movement that “truly wants us to reorient our lives toward good.” Another dimension to the success of the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* is attributed to the failures of other political reformist movements who concentrated too much on political power and could not produce real changes to the lives of individuals or to society. For many in the *Jama'at al-Tablighi*, what matters is how the individual can gain further control in his/her own life and with this new empowerment, how can they construct a world of fairness and justice. To the members, the *Jama'at al-Tablighi*'s nonpolitical activities and emphasis on the six points has proven that missionary work directed at Muslims by Muslims is the only cure for their dismal affairs, and nothing less than hard work and face-to-face interaction can improve their community.

I hope this information will help you understand the *Jama'at al-Tablighi* and its activities. If you need any further information, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely Yours,  
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Dear Professor Azmy:

At your request, I am writing to provide an expert opinion on the philosophy and activities of the Tablighi Jamaat/Jamaat al Tablighi, in connection with an administrative military proceeding your client faces as part of his detention in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I am currently a Professor of History and Director of the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan and have been specifically studying the Tablighi Jamaat movement for about 15 years. I have written extensively on the group and a list of my publications is attached as part of my C.V. In this letter, I will attempt to describe the general philosophy and history of the Tablighis, which should be highly relevant to understanding the circumstances of your client's travel to and within Pakistan. I will also attempt to explain why it is implausible to believe that the Tablighis support terrorism or are in any way affiliated with other terrorist or "jihadi" movements such as the Taliban or Al Qaeda.

I might begin by noting that this movement originated in India in the 1920s but its participants now are found throughout the world. A collection of articles, *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jamaat as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud (2000) would give you a good sense of the extent and characteristics of participants in what they themselves sometimes simply call "a faith movement." (I am among the contributors to that volume.)

Five brief points:

\* There is no "organization" as such, in the sense of paid staff or formal hierarchy. There is no membership. Any Muslim, man or woman, who seeks to be a better Muslim can participate as a way of honing one's own faith through encouraging others to participate. Thus to speak of the Jamaat as a "front for" or "allied with" another organization does not make sense.

\* The modus operandi of the movement is for males to join in small groups, 10-12, who travel together, perhaps in their own city, throughout a country, or internationally, ideally staying in a mosque, paying their own way, and gathering groups of Muslims (e.g. after prayers) to encourage them to correct performance of the prayer, fast, tithing, etc. In France, for example, critics refer to Tablighis as "praying machines." Women are

expected to operate within homes or joining public meetings in mosques or halls in a women's section (I, for example, have been to gatherings of women in homes in Pakistan and a huge hall in Toronto, where a women's section was curtained off from the men and loudspeakers conveyed the preaching.) For traveling men, the presence of the group is key because it is the experience of common correct practice and exhortation, taking them out of everyday activities, that teaches them the faith. Moving from city to city in a group should be understood as standard practice, not as something suspicious.

\* Ideally a group includes both more experienced participants and novices. Since many European or Turkish muslims don't know Islam well, participation might be attractive to someone very serious about learning the religion.

\* Tablighis are active in Europe and North America. The volume above, for example, includes articles on France, Germany, and Belgium, and Canada.

\* Participants are scrupulously a-political. Their mission is transformation of individual lives, starting with their own. More practically, they need to be seen as wholly neutral because they need the benign support of government officials so that they can conduct their travels and their meetings. Tablighis periodically gather in large meetings, annually, for example, in Dewsbury, Raiwind, Bhopal, and Dhaka, when they need permits, water trucks, special buses, etc.

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