

## Introduction: Meeting the Emigrants

The main purpose of the organization is to call society to Islam, command good and forbid evil, and to establish the *khilafah*, which is the Islamic state.

Leading activist

In the early morning of September 25, 2014, dozens of police officers raided the homes of several men in London. They belonged to al-Muhajiroun (Arabic for “the Emigrants”), a banned activist network dedicated to establishing the Islamic caliphate in Britain. The police arrested nine leaders, some of whom called on their followers to support the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which had recently been outlawed by the British government as a terrorist organization. The charges against several activists were soon dropped. But the authorities continued their investigation of two leaders, Anjem Choudary and Mizanur Rahman, both of whom were later prosecuted – and convicted – for their support of the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup>

This was not the first time British authorities cracked down on al-Muhajiroun. In the aftermath of the London bombings in July 2005, government officials prevented the network’s founder and original emir, Omar Bakri Mohammed, from returning to the country, transforming what was supposed to be a temporary visit to Lebanon into his permanent exile from Britain. With Bakri out of the way, officials arrested other network leaders, convicting several of crimes related to their activism. When activists bounced back from

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with three leading activists, Ilford, East London, December 9, 2014, Whitechapel, East London, December 11, 2014, and Stratford, East London, December 13, 2014. For more on the arrests, see Dominic Casciani, “Anjem Choudary held in London terror raids,” *BBC News* (September 25, 2014), [www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-29358758](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-29358758) [Accessed September 25, 2014]; and Vikram Dodd and Josh Halliday, “Anjem Choudary among nine arrested in London anti-terrorism raid,” *The Guardian* (September 25, 2014), [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/sep/25/nine-arrested-london-anti-terrorism](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/sep/25/nine-arrested-london-anti-terrorism) [Accessed September 25, 2014].

these early setbacks to continue their efforts to establish the caliphate through protests and street preaching, the British government formally outlawed al-Muhajiroun, making it a crime for individuals to belong to or support the group in any way. After activists dropped the al-Muhajiroun name, officials outlawed spin-off groups that appeared in its place, like the Saved Sect and al-Ghurabaa (“the Strangers”). The police enforced the bans by disrupting the network’s public talks and conferences, pestering activists during their demonstrations and street preaching, and searching their homes and educational centers.

The activists rounded up in September 2014 were veterans of such treatment. They had been raided and arrested many times. In an interview three months after his 2014 arrest, one of them, a leading activist I refer to as “Rohan” in this book, told me that his home had been searched by the British police every year since 2011. Rohan’s house was also raided earlier, in 2006, when he was arrested after a provocative, but mostly peaceful, protest. When I asked him whether anything had changed with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s recent declaration of the Islamic State, the same goal the Emigrants had been striving towards since 1996, he looked at me and said, “I think the officials are worried. That’s why they’re stepping things up.”<sup>2</sup>

For many years, al-Muhajiroun proved to be remarkably resistant to British officials’ periodic attempts to “step things up.” The network not only survived the crackdowns. It bounced back from them to recruit new supporters, indoctrinate them in its Salafi-Islamist ideology, and mobilize them into high-risk activism. What explains this puzzle? Why did al-Muhajiroun not crumble after its charismatic emir left Britain? How did activists continue to recruit and radicalize supporters despite government repression? Did pressure from British authorities, along with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, push activists towards political violence? This book sets out to answer these questions through an ethnographic group analysis of an outlawed group that was at the center of London’s vibrant Islamist scene from the late 1990s until recently.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with “Rohan,” leading activist, Whitechapel, East London, December 11, 2014. Also, earlier interview with Rohan in Whitechapel, December 7, 2010, and interviews with different leading and veteran activists, Ilford, East London, December 9, 2014, and Stratford, East London, December 13, 2014. Field notes, Whitechapel, East London, December 11, 2014. Rohan is not this respondent’s real name. It is a pseudonym I have given him. In this and the following chapters, I use pseudonyms for a few respondents whose interviews and personal stories I draw on repeatedly. One goal of ethnography is to demystify the extraordinary by revealing its normality. I use pseudonyms to normalize these respondents. All my pseudonyms are fictitious, with no connection to the people they represent. I created these fake names from a list of common Pakistani and Bangladeshi names, reflecting the ethnic heritage and family ties of many, but not all, of these respondents. See “Students of the World,” [www.studentsoftheworld.info/penpals/stats.php3?Pays=BNG](http://www.studentsoftheworld.info/penpals/stats.php3?Pays=BNG) and [www.studentsoftheworld.info/penpals/stats.php3?Pays=PAK](http://www.studentsoftheworld.info/penpals/stats.php3?Pays=PAK) [Accessed October 1, 2017].

### WHY AL-MUHAJIROUN?

This book tells the story of a network of deeply committed activists who sought to replace Great Britain's secular democracy with a religious theocracy based on their interpretation of Salafism and Islamism.<sup>3</sup> The Emigrants never came close to establishing an Islamic caliphate in Britain, but their tale is worth telling for a number of reasons. First, as a proselytization network that recovered from the removal of their original leader, the banning of their organization and other setbacks, al-Muhajiroun is a fascinating case of organizational resilience under pressure. This study contributes to the literature on resilience and organizational adaptation because researchers have largely avoided studies of non-state actors who have been outlawed and repressed by the same governments whose authority they challenge.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on 148

<sup>3</sup> Salafism is a puritanical reform movement within Sunni Islam whose followers seek to return the religion to its "purest, most authentic" state, as practiced by the Prophet Mohammed and his contemporaries and the first two generations of Muslims who came after them, known collectively as "the pious predecessors." Salafis base their understanding of the religion on a literal reading of scripture, specifically the Qur'an and hadiths (collected sayings and stories of the Prophet). Drawing on these sources, Salafis seek to emulate Mohammed in all aspects of their daily lives, including dress and physical appearance. While Salafis largely agree on their religious beliefs (*aqeedah*) and matters of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), they often disagree when applying these principles to contemporary life. One point of contention concerns acceptable forms of political engagement in modern society. Mainstream Salafis, variously referred to as "quietists," "purists," or "scholastics," reject political activism as religiously "deviant" and counter-productive, preferring to focus their efforts on personal "purification and education." Other Salafis, called "activists" or "politicos," embrace activism as a way of increasing social justice and implementing Islamic law. A third set of Salafis, often referred to as "Salafi-jihadis," go beyond non-violent activism to support the political violence they believe is necessary to establish God's rule on Earth. Al-Muhajiroun incorporates elements of both the Salafi activist and Salafi-jihadi perspectives. Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Sunni "Islamists" are similar to Salafi activists in that they engage in social and political activism to establish the *shariah*, or Islamic law, as the basis for organizing political and legal authority in the community. However, Islamists do not follow the Salafi creed and *manhaj*, the practical method of applying these religious beliefs to their daily lives. Al-Muhajiroun activists do. Interviews with leading and veteran activists, Ilford, East London, November 13, 2010, Stratford, East London, November 29, 2010, and Whitechapel, East London, June 22, 2011. For discussion on the different types of Salafism, see Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, edited by Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 33–57; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006), pp. 207–9; and Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For more on Islamism, see Mohammed Ayoub, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism," *Middle East/North Africa Report*, No. 37 (March 2, 2005), pp. 1–35; and Shadi Hamid, *The Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions include Sharon Erickson Nepstad, "Persistent Resistance: Commitment and Community in the Plowshares Movement," *Social Problems* 51, no. 1 (2004), pp. 43–60; Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007);

interviews, hundreds of hours of field work, and thousands of news reports, the following chapters explain how al-Muhajiroun adapted its activism in response to government efforts to destroy it.

These changes include both structural and tactical adaptations. The next chapter uses formal and informal network analysis to explore the Emigrants' main structural change, shifting from a centralized, "scale-free-like" system based on a single leader to a more diffuse "small-world-like" network featuring redundant hubs who bridged different clusters of local activists. Chapter 4 draws on interviews and field observations to examine activists' tactical adaptations, including creating new spin-off groups when British officials outlawed old ones, replacing their original emir with veteran activists after authorities banned "Sheikh Omar" from Britain, and increasing their online activism when officials made it harder for them to secure venues for their public talks and conferences. These structural changes and tactical adaptations allowed activists to continue their activism for many years, despite being targeted for disruption. Al-Muhajiroun's resilience is not just important for network activists and British policy makers. It has implications for other non-state actors, including terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS that are part of the larger Salafi-jihadi movement to which the network belongs. I revisit these larger questions in the final chapter.

A second reason for focusing on al-Muhajiroun has to do with the network's persistence in Great Britain. Some cases are important enough to understand on their own.<sup>5</sup> Al-Muhajiroun is one such case. Throughout its twenty years of preaching and protesting, it has captured the attention of British society like few other activist groups in the country. It has been the extremist network Britons love to hate. To be sure, other preachers and activist groups have permeated London's Islamist counterculture, including Abu Qatadah, Abdullah Faisal, and Abu Hamza and his Supporters of Shariah group. The Emigrants not only achieved greater notoriety than these other extremists, they outlasted them all. By the summer of 2014, al-Muhajiroun was the last group standing that publicly called for replacing Britain's liberal democracy with an ISIS-style caliphate.

Over the years, Britain's tabloid media has churned out hundreds of reports documenting the Emigrants' most notorious antics, from public conferences celebrating the anniversary of 9/11 to demonstrations against the repatriated remains of fallen British soldiers to "Muslim patrols" enforcing "shariah law

René M. Bakker, Jörg Raab, and H. Brinton Milward, "A Preliminary Theory of Dark Network Resilience," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31, no. 1 (2012), pp. 33–62; and Nathan P. Jones, *Mexico's Illicit Drug Networks and the State Reaction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the substantive importance of certain cases in qualitative research, see Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 184–5.

zones” in East London. Journalists and politicians have frequently depicted leading activists as “hate preachers” and vile layabouts who exploit state benefits to subsidize their activism while converting Britain’s impressionable youth into fire-breathing fanatics. Al-Muhajiroun thrived in the glare, using its strategy of “media jihad” to spread its ideology and recruit new supporters. In the process, activists, and the tabloid media that enabled them, inflated themselves into something much bigger than they were: a vanguard movement of thousands of *da’is* (propagators) spread across dozens of cities in the United Kingdom, preparing British society for the inevitable coming of the Islamic state.

In reality, even during its peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s, al-Muhajiroun never numbered more than 150 to 200 dedicated members, what activists refer to as “intellectual affiliates,” along with several hundred supporters, known in network circles as “contacts.” After the British government cracked down against the Emigrants, first after the 9/11 attacks, and then more systematically after Operation Crevice in March 2004 and the 7/7 bombings in 2005, the number of activists declined to several dozen intellectual affiliates and little more than a hundred contacts.<sup>6</sup> During the years of my field work, when the network came under intense pressure from the authorities, it shrank even more, to a couple dozen intellectual affiliates and several dozen contacts. Leading activists liked to brag to journalists about the network’s outsized presence in Britain, but privately they acknowledged their footprint was much smaller. After I had been in London for a couple of months interviewing and observing activists at various events, one leader admitted as much. “You know and I know we’re not many in number,” he told me at a café near Walthamstow’s main square. “But in the media we’re big, massive.”<sup>7</sup>

Media coverage was essential to maintaining the Emigrants’ creative fiction that they were on the verge of bringing the Islamic state to Britain, even as they were dismissed by other British Muslims. Contrary to the impression created by some reports, al-Muhajiroun never enjoyed widespread popular support among Britain’s diverse Muslim communities. Although some local mosques and community centers tolerated their presence during the late 1990s, after the 9/11 attacks and the 7/7 bombings a few years later, the Emigrants and their

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with “Haroon,” former contact, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011, “Rashid,” former activist, Whitechapel, East London, June 26, 2011, and US official, Mayfair, Central London, December 3, 2010. Also, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with leading activist, Walthamstow, East London, December 2, 2010. In this book, all references to “activists” mean al-Muhajiroun activists, unless stated otherwise. I refer to three types of activists: leading activists, veteran activists, and rank-and-file activists. Leading activists are network leaders who direct its activism and serve as al-Muhajiroun’s ideologues. Veterans are experienced activists who have been involved in al-Muhajiroun for years. They often serve as local leaders for the network. Rank-and-file activists are low-level proselytizers who perform much of the network’s day-to-day activism. For a list of the interviews in this book, see Appendix: Interviews.

message became increasingly marginalized.<sup>8</sup> Activists themselves acknowledge their isolation. “We do feel ostracized, many times within the society,” explains one respondent. “We find that we are outsiders in society because we bring our revolutionary idea.”<sup>9</sup> “Sadly, we are a minority in this country,” adds a leading activist. “Even within the Muslim community, the vast majority have integrated fully into the idea of British culture and democracy.”<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of the Emigrants’ paradoxically small presence but large impact on British society, and another reason they are worth studying, has been their success in indoctrinating hundreds of young men and women while maintaining their ideological cohesion. Unlike many Salafi-jihadi groups in the Middle East and Western Europe, the Emigrants of Britain have suffered relatively few ideological splits.<sup>11</sup> This is a reflection of the strong, almost cultish influence Omar Bakri Mohammed exerted over his followers and the network’s energetic “community of practice,” both of which I explore in Chapter 3. Bakri’s followers internalized his ideas and worked hard to prepare British society for the caliphate. His preaching network may have been small and marginalized, but it was also productive, with activists organizing countless *da’wah* stalls and private study circles, along with regular demonstrations and public conferences. Al-Muhajiroun has always specialized in ideological indoctrination and contentious politics, not terrorism. Yet some activists and supporters went beyond activism to become involved in political violence, both within and outside Great Britain. In doing so they amplified the network’s impact by transforming themselves from annoying “loudmouths” into a legitimate security threat facing the United Kingdom and other countries where they engaged in violence.

In fact, the Emigrants have long posed a vexing challenge for British policy makers. As one of the world’s leading democracies, Britain’s legal and political institutions allow the robust, peaceful expression of political dissent. Al-Muhajiroun’s activism is repellant to many Britons, but it is grounded in legally protected free speech and association that are a cornerstone of the country’s political system. When activists organize *da’wah* stalls to preach their

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Haroon, Westminster, Central London, June 14, 2011; “Ali” and “Maryam,” two other former activists, Hounslow, West London, June 21, 2011; research director, think tank, Bloomsbury, Central London, December 14, 2010; and two London Metropolitan Police officers, Vauxhall, South London, June 15, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with veteran activist, Skype, March 23, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with leading activist, Skype, June 26, 2013. Also, interviews with activists in Kensington, Central London, November 11, 2010, Stratford, East London, June 27, 2011, and Southall, West London, June 28, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the ideological divisions that have plagued Salafi-jihadis in Europe and Egypt, see Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus’ab al Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Jérôme Drevon, *Institutionalising Violence: Strategies of Jihad*, unpublished book manuscript; and Lawrence Wright, “The rebellion within: An al Qaeda mastermind questions terrorism,” *The New Yorker* (June 2, 2008).

extremist blend of Salafi-Islamism, or stage demonstrations outside foreign embassies to denounce the West’s “war on Islam,” they are engaging in lawful protest. This raises important questions over the British government’s ability to control activist groups that radicalize young men and women, without sacrificing core political values and civil liberties underlying the country’s democracy.

Of course, the British are no strangers to dissident politics, even terrorism, having struggled with political violence from Irish nationalists and other terrorist threats in recent decades. Her Majesty’s authorities have ample police powers and legislative resources to counter the Emigrants, including the Public Order Act (1986), the Terrorism Acts (2000, 2006), and the Anti-Terrorism, Crime, and Security Act (2001). Over the years British police and prosecutors have used these tools to arrest and convict network activists for public disorder, inciting racial hatred, terrorist fundraising, and soliciting murder at protests that went beyond legally protected speech.<sup>12</sup> On several occasions, they have used the Terrorism Act, as amended in 2006, to outlaw al-Muhajiroun and a number of its spin-off groups. More recently, law enforcers have exploited administrative controls such as the Terror Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs), Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), and Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) to restrict activists’ movements and activities, even after they are released from prison.

These counter-terrorism efforts have weakened the Emigrants, but not destroyed them. During the years of my field work, from 2010 to 2015, the network continued its high-risk activism, both locally and internationally, despite being formally outlawed and coming under heavy police pressure. Locally, activists regularly called passersby to Islam in da‘wah stalls on some of London’s busiest thoroughfares, while protesting everything from the London Summer Olympics to the British government’s extradition of Abu Hamza and other terrorism suspects to the United States to alcohol sales in Brick Lane, the popular East London restaurant district.<sup>13</sup> To facilitate their activism,

<sup>12</sup> Robin Simcox, Hannah Stuart, and Houriya Ahmed, *Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections* (London: The Centre for Social Cohesion, 2010); Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, pp. 61–67. For a broader discussion of the British government’s counter-terrorism institutions and operations, see Frank Foley, *Countering Terrorism in Britain and France: Institutions, Norms and the Shadow of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Field notes, Islington, North London, July 21, 2012; Anjem Choudary, “Demonstration Exposing the Evil of the Olympics,” press release (July 26, 2012); Anjem Choudary, “What Every Muslim Should Know About the Evil of the Olympic Games,” press release (August 1, 2012); Associated Press, “Police: Small group of Islamist protesters near Olympic Park ahead of closing ceremony,” *Washington Post* (August 12, 2005), [www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/police-small-group-of-islamist-protesters-near-olympic-park-ahead-of-closing-ceremony/2012/08/12/ce4a7ed4-e4b2-11e1-9739-ef99c5fb285\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/police-small-group-of-islamist-protesters-near-olympic-park-ahead-of-closing-ceremony/2012/08/12/ce4a7ed4-e4b2-11e1-9739-ef99c5fb285_story.html) [Accessed August 17, 2002]; Anjem Choudary, “The Real Criminals are the US and UK Regimes Not Abu Hamza!,” press release (September 25, 2012); Anjem Choudary, “Stop the Extradition! A Warning to All Muslims in the UK,” press release (October 1, 2012); Associated Press, “Hate preacher Abu Hamza

activists continued to create spin-off groups, including Need4Khilafah, Muslim Prisoners, and Islamic Emergency Defence (featuring its provocative acronym, IED).<sup>14</sup> Internationally, activists worked to establish a “fifth column” in Western Europe by assisting groups in Belgium (Shariah4Belgium), Denmark (Kaldet til Islam), and Norway (Prophet’s Ummah), among other countries. When British authorities made it harder for activists to host public events at brick-and-mortar venues in London, activists turned to the Internet, posting their lectures and other materials on websites and social media.

In the wake of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s proclamation of the Islamic State in June 2014, the Emigrants’ environment became even more hostile. At a time when hundreds of young men and women from Britain were traveling overseas to join ISIS and fight against the Bashar al-Assad regime, government authorities struggled to keep their young citizens from leaving. After network leaders declared the new caliphate to be legitimate and activists held rallies declaring their support for the Islamic State, the police cracked down even harder, culminating in the September 2014 raids. Following their arrests, several leading activists were barred by a London magistrate from participating in da’wah stalls. But even this did not stop them. At one event near the Olympic Park in Stratford in December 2014, I saw two of

extradited to US after UK ruling,” (October 6, 2012), [www.timeslive.co.za/world/2012/10/06/hate-preacher-abu-hamza-extradited-to-us-after-uk-ruling](http://www.timeslive.co.za/world/2012/10/06/hate-preacher-abu-hamza-extradited-to-us-after-uk-ruling) [Accessed October 11, 2012]; Trevor Grundy, “British shop owners threatened with 40 lashes for selling alcohol,” *Washington Post* (December 16, 2013), [www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/british-shop-owners-threatened-with-40-lashes-for-selling-alcohol--resend/2013/12/16/7b950054-668b-11e3-997b-9213b17dac97\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/british-shop-owners-threatened-with-40-lashes-for-selling-alcohol--resend/2013/12/16/7b950054-668b-11e3-997b-9213b17dac97_story.html) [December 17, 2013].

<sup>14</sup> Field notes, Islington, North London, July 21, 2012, and personal communications with network activists, various dates; Adam Barnett, “Video: ‘Fear Allah’, hate preacher Anjem Choudary tells shopkeepers at anti-alcohol march,” *East London Advertiser* (December 13, 2013), [www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/court-crime/video\\_fear\\_allah\\_hate\\_preacher\\_anjem\\_choudary\\_tells\\_shopkeepers\\_at\\_anti\\_alcohol\\_march\\_1\\_3111141](http://www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/court-crime/video_fear_allah_hate_preacher_anjem_choudary_tells_shopkeepers_at_anti_alcohol_march_1_3111141) [Accessed December 16, 2013]; Daniel Binns, “Waltham Forest: Campaigners to ‘shame’ kerb crawlers,” *Waltham Forest Guardian* (June 19, 2012), [www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/9768051.WALTHAM\\_FOREST\\_Campaigners\\_to\\_shame\\_kerb\\_crawlers/?ref=mr](http://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/9768051.WALTHAM_FOREST_Campaigners_to_shame_kerb_crawlers/?ref=mr) [Accessed June 25, 2012]; *Daily Mail*, “Police arrest 20 protesters ‘from banned group Muslims Against Crusades’ outside US embassy in London,” (December 2, 2011), [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2069190/Muslims-Against-Crusades-protesters-arrested-outside-U-S-embassy-London.html?ITO=1490](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2069190/Muslims-Against-Crusades-protesters-arrested-outside-U-S-embassy-London.html?ITO=1490) [Accessed December 8, 2011]; Ted Jeory, “Islamic preacher Choudary peddles hatred from a sweet shop,” *Sunday Express* (May 26, 2013), [www.express.co.uk/news/uk/402663/Islamic-preacher-Choudary-peddles-hatred-from-a-sweet-shop](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/402663/Islamic-preacher-Choudary-peddles-hatred-from-a-sweet-shop) [Accessed June 10, 2013]; Omar Karmi, “‘Muslim Patrols’ prompt backlash in UK,” *The National* (February 22, 2013), [www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/muslim-patrols-prompt-backlash-in-uk](http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/muslim-patrols-prompt-backlash-in-uk) [Accessed March 15, 2013]; and Martin Robinson, “Muslim group backed by hate preacher Anjem Choudary called IED ‘mocks Britain’s war dead’ with its name,” *Daily Mail* (June 25, 2013), [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2347987/Muslim-group-backed-hate-preacher-Anjem-Choudary-called-IED-mocks-Britain-s-war-dead.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2347987/Muslim-group-backed-hate-preacher-Anjem-Choudary-called-IED-mocks-Britain-s-war-dead.html) [Accessed June 25, 2013].



the arrested activists calling people to Islam with other supporters engaged in public da‘wah. When I asked one of them whether the da‘wah stall was a violation of his bail conditions he denied it was a stall. “It was not a da‘wah stall because there was no table,” he explained, in response to my puzzled expression. “If there was a table,” he continued, “then it would be a da‘wah stall. But there was no table, so it’s just da‘wah, not a da‘wah *stall*.”<sup>15</sup> He flashed me a mischievous grin as he said this, as if to underscore his duplicitous remark – and the challenge facing law enforcers who sought to curtail his activism.

The escalation in government pressure against the Emigrants had another unintended consequence. Facing increased pressure from the police at home, some activists decided they could no longer practice their contentious politics in the United Kingdom. With the *khilafah* now declared, they felt obligated to help Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers build the caliphate. A number of them fled to Iraq and Syria; others were caught trying. Al-Muhajiroun, which helped establish London as the center of the European Salafi-jihadi scene ten years earlier, now emerged as a small, but significant channel in the flow of British citizens to the Islamic State.

A final reason why I focus on the Emigrants is because I can. As a social scientist who combines ethnography, process tracing, and network analysis, I rely on primary source data to document activists’ beliefs and behaviors and the cultural processes through which they acquire them. One of the biggest challenges in studying radicalization and political violence is accessing respondents who are willing to discuss their principles and practices – and who can do so in meaningful ways.<sup>16</sup> Those with the right cultural expertise are typically insiders in a group or counterculture that faces substantial pressure. Often these people are suspicious of outsiders who do not share their world views. Nor are they particularly eager to share their hard-wrought experience with them.

As a research subject, al-Muhajiroun largely defies these expectations. I originally accessed the Emigrants in September 2007, hoping to get as close as possible to a cultural group engaged in radicalization, and – if I were “lucky” – political violence. At the time I saw the network as a proxy for al-Qaeda-inspired extremism, given its already well-earned reputation as a militant group seeking to establish the caliphate. When I first met a leading activist and three of his young students at a park in Woolwich, South London, not far from where Michael Adebolajo would later murder Lee Rigby, I could not

<sup>15</sup> Interview with leading activist, Stratford, East London, December 13, 2014; field notes, da‘wah stall, Stratford, East London, December 13, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Kenney, “Learning from the ‘Dark Side’: Identifying, Accessing, and Interviewing Illicit Non-State Actors,” in *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide*, edited by Adam Dolnik (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 29; Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, pp. 30–31; and H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th edition (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2006), p. 146.

have foreseen the rise of the Islamic State and how closely the activist network would come to approximate Salafi-jihadi terrorism and insurgency. What I could see from my first encounter was that activists were willing to talk with me. They saw our discussion as a form of da‘wah, obligatory preaching for which they would be rewarded in the afterlife.<sup>17</sup>

When I returned to London three years later, I discovered that all three students were not only still involved in al-Muhajiroun, each had risen to become a prominent activist in the network.<sup>18</sup> They remembered me and our earlier meeting. More importantly, they remembered that I kept my promise of protecting the confidentiality of what they told me that afternoon.<sup>19</sup> With the blessing of network leaders, these and other gatekeepers opened their world to me, introducing me to additional respondents, inviting me to observe them at da‘wah stalls and demonstrations, even tolerating my presence at private talks. “This is Michael Kenney,” one of them said as he introduced me to a small group of supporters early on in my field work. “It’s okay to talk with him. We have a relationship.”<sup>20</sup>

I spent the next four-and-a-half years building my relationship with these and other respondents. The activists I interviewed and observed during my trips to London are the experts of their social setting and culture. They understand better than most, certainly better than many of the journalists and think tank “experts” who write about them, why they do what they do, and how they do it. In this book, I draw on their interviews and stories to trace the processes by which they join the activist network, how they radicalize into full membership or “intellectual affiliation,” and why so many of them eventually decide to leave.<sup>21</sup> Before exploring these processes in the following chapters, in the remainder of this one I elaborate upon al-Muhajiroun’s confrontational activism, discuss activists’ decision to ally themselves with the Islamic State, describe the network’s connections to political violence within and outside Britain, and briefly consider whether, as many believe, the Emigrants are a “conveyor belt” to political violence.

<sup>17</sup> Field notes, Woolwich, South London, September 22, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Field notes, Leyton, East London, November 6, 2010, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010, and Bethnal Green, East London, November 28, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> I continued to follow this human subjects’ protection throughout my field research. This is why I refer to my respondents anonymously throughout this book. Doing so makes it difficult, if not impossible, for other researchers to replicate my findings. I accept this as a necessary trade-off to encourage my respondents to discuss their experiences in high-risk activism.

<sup>20</sup> Field notes, Whitechapel, East London, November 9, 2010. Also, see Kenney, “Learning from the ‘Dark Side,’” p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> For more on process tracing, see Goertz and Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures*, pp. 106–109, and Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). I discuss my research methods and strategy of analysis in more detail in the methodological appendix.