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Reassessing the Threat of Hizbut Tahrir

By Nurrisha Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Hizbut Tahrir Britain was proscribed by the UK's Home Office in January 2024. Although the group has not been prioritised as a terror threat in the past because of its overt focus on nonviolence, its micro-activities appear contradictory. It is important to conduct a holistic threat assessment of this global organisation as such.

COMMENTARY

On 19 January 2024, the UK Home Office [officially designated](#) Hizbut Tahrir (HT) as a terrorist organisation because of its alleged endorsement of Hamas in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. This act has [raised various concerns](#) ranging from questions of policy efficacy to ethical implications.

Commentators have questioned the ban's effectiveness, claiming that it legitimises the organisation's "struggle" and inadvertently fuels its rhetoric. Critics also fear that the move is a political decision pandering to entrenched Islamophobic sentiments.

The different views on the HT ban highlight how critical it is to continually reassess the potential threat from this pan-Islamist party through the monitoring of its "micro-activities", such as the materials it publishes online and incidences of its engagement with the community. Broad designation labels may be vital for national security on a systemic level but may not sufficiently illuminate underlying threats.

An Ambiguous Brand of Nonviolence

Founded in 1953 by Palestinian scholar Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, HT identifies itself as a pan-Islamist party advocating the establishment of the *Khilafah* (Islamic caliphate) and the implementation of *shariah* law as the mode of governance.

The party is banned in 17 countries largely because of its desire to bring about “[radical change](#)” and to overturn existing structures of Western domination in its pursuit of an Islamic caliphate.

Although HT does not officially condone the use of violence to achieve these ends, ideological ambiguities relating to *jihad*, as it corresponds to armed struggle and the use of violence, have consistently emerged within the organisation.

Primary source documents outlining the group’s ideology demonstrate [contradicting understandings](#) of “offensive” and “defensive” *jihad* as well as the permissibility of *jihad* in the absence of a caliphate.

HT’s equivocal stance on the use of force leaves room for subjective interpretation by adherents to engage in acts of violence, especially if sociopolitical circumstances are perceived as sufficiently dire.

Hence, it is not surprising that HT’s Central Media Office (HT CMO) has issued several inflammatory calls – following the proscription of HT Britain in the UK – encouraging its members to act against global injustices involving the persecution of Muslims. While some statements have sought to raise awareness of humanitarian abuses, others have implied the need for military retaliation.

These micro-activities cumulatively present a more precise indicator of the potential threat HT poses in the face of an ever-evolving geopolitical landscape, including the [risk of inspiring splinter movements](#) and sowing [enmity between communities](#).

Recent Calls for Aggression and Inflammatory Rhetoric

HT frequently relies on [inciting a sense of crisis](#) amongst existing and prospective members to promote its long-term goals and encourage them to take action in what is known as the *ummah* (global community) revolution. It employs emotionally charged language and the strategic use of scriptural verses to reinforce commitment to the movement, which includes the [avowed rejection](#) of “Western structures of oppression”.

A media release in January 2024 substantiates this idea with the justification that “the events that have afflicted the *ummah* in recent years have proven beyond doubt that there can be no break from the shackles of the international community”.

According to this media statement, the only escape from such shackles would be through transforming the international order with the establishment of the *Khilafah*. Buttressed by violent rhetoric, these sentiments have become particularly incendiary following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and the proscription of HT Britain.

Online monitoring of HT CMO’s micro-activities in 2023 and 2024 reveals evidence of HT’s *Al-Mukhtar* magazine, Punishment Forum posts, and media releases explicitly calling for “Muslim armies” to fight against oppression and to kill the enemies. Such content was often accompanied by scriptural verses – employed out of context – to legitimise these acts of violence. Of particular concern is the recurring misuse of the

Quranic verse 2:191 “[...] kill them where you find them”, which has been [similarly employed by ISIS](#).

HT blog posts also included provocative calls for aggression and retaliation through proclamations that “Muslim blood is being spilled” and that the “enemy knows the strength of the *Khilafah*”. These narratives state that if military action is not taken against the “oppressor”, i.e., the West, the latter would “kill (their) families and destroy (their) homes”.

Furthermore, the global leader or Emir of HT, Ata Abu Rashtah, who is described as a Palestinian Islamic jurist and writer, released a post directed at “armies in Muslim countries”, imploring them as “believing people” to participate in *jihad* instead of obeying political leaders who have allegedly conformed to the orders of “infidel colonial countries”.

Implications for Southeast Asia

HT’s presence in Southeast Asia declined after the group was proscribed by Indonesia in 2017 and partially restricted in Malaysia following its ban at the state level in [five territories](#). However, recent HT micro-activities in the region suggest that the group remains resilient through its community engagement despite government sanctions.

In November 2023, HT Malaysia (HTM) held a rally commemorating the “*100 Tahun Tanpa Khilafah*” (100 Years Without the Caliphate) campaign, a regional variant of the global movement celebrating the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and calling for the revival of the Islamic caliphate. At the rally, HTM’s leaders proclaimed the need to counter the tyranny of Western rule and for the Islamic caliphate to “return as a global superpower”.

The commemoration of the campaign between January to March 2024 led to more topical and targeted posts online, with some leveraging the Palestinian cause to emphasise the need for the caliphate. Both HTM and HT Indonesia (HTI) were recently involved in supporting the campaign at community events such as the *Al-Waqiyah* online lecture series, which featured religious leaders.

Malaysia’s Ustaz Abdul Hakim Othman and Indonesia’s Dr Muhammad Ismail Yusanto (both associated with HTM and HTI, respectively) asserted that Muslims would continue to live in subjugation without the caliphate. Both attested to the obligatory nature of *jihad* and called upon Muslim armies to “fight enemies of the faith”.

Further, HTM organised the “*Khilafah Summit 2024*” as a potential pathway for recruitment. Attendees were given an introductory course on HT’s work and the objectives for establishing the caliphate.

So far, over 2,500 posts on TikTok have included the “*100 Tahun Tanpa Khilafah*” hashtag. The efficacy of the online campaign, in terms of messaging and reach, is reflected in the proliferation of social media posts from Indonesia and Malaysia calling for the establishment of the caliphate. These posts condemned the injustices inflicted on Muslims and asserted the importance of *jihad* and countering Western governance as religious obligations.

Conclusion

Given HT's central tenet of nonviolence, the proscription of HT Britain has reignited debates concerning the threat the group poses. However, it is important to look beyond the binary construct of violence and nonviolence to obtain a holistic assessment of HT's present threat. Consistent inflammatory rhetoric, calls for violence, and other micro-activities derived from the group's engagement activities, suggest that continual monitoring remains necessary.

From a policy perspective, it is vital for governments to work in tandem with accredited religious bodies and community stakeholders to promote peaceful and tolerant approaches towards religion in diverse societies. By providing platforms for dialogue and further mutual understanding, community issues can be better addressed, potentially diminishing the appeal of radical online narratives in turn.

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