British Muslim communities comprise a diverse range of traditions, in which four major tendencies are identifiable: the largest numbers of followers come from the Barelwi tradition, followed by Deobandi, then Jamaat-i-Islam inspired institutions, and finally the Ahl-i-Hadith network. All of these are theological and ideological trends imported into the UK with the arrival of the early South Asian settler communities in the 1960s and 1970s. The remainder of British Muslims tend to be organized around ethnicity. Only a handful of mosques openly identify themselves as Salafi; key among them are institutions like the Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham, Salafi Institute, Birmingham, Masjid Ibn Taymiyyah in Brixton, and the Islamic Centre of Luton. Pinpointing the precise entry of Salafi ideas into the UK is speculative at best, but it is thought to have occurred towards the late 1980s.1

The Emergence of British Salafism

The instrumental organization for the spread of Salafism in the UK was the Jamiat Iyyat Iyana Minhaj as Sunnah, “The Society for the Revival of the Prophetic Way” (JIMAS).2 Its leader Manwar Ali, also known as “Abu Mun-
tas,” is credited by many as being the father of “Salafi dawah” (proselytizing) in the UK. He is largely responsible for the spread of Salafism among young people through his delivery of countless “study circles” at mosques, community centres, and universities across the country. Furthermore, replicating global patterns, the spread of Salafi interpretations of Islam in the UK was underwritten by the financial investment into religious institutions and distribution of literature from Saudi Arabia and the return of religious studies graduates from Saudi Arabia’s two main universities. Methodologically, Salafism relies upon scriptural literalism and revolves around a set of binary opposites: tawhid (oneness of God) and opposition shirk (all forms of divine association-ism), loyalty to the sunnah (prophetic example) in matters of belief and religious ritual as opposed to bid’a (innovation), an emblematic respect for the pious first three generations of Muslims, and general loss of confidence and interest in subsequent phases of Muslim intellectual history, and rejection of taqlid (adherence/loyalty to one school of Islamic law) in favour of literalist approaches to Islamic jurisprudence.

The early 1990s was the defining era for second-generation Islamic activism; indeed this decade was perhaps the most intense for its identity politics. Adherents to Salafi perspectives were drawn mainly from second generation male and female South Asian Muslims with a significant number of black and white converts. The average age of followers was between eighteen and thirty years; they were geographically located most often near the mosque communities already mentioned. Membership to religious organizations provided opportunities for the creation of communities of shared meaning and strong friendship networks important to younger people wanting to feel part of something bigger than themselves. Muslims tired of what they saw as “cultural Islam” found in the Salafi perspective an approach to religious commitment which seemed to be intellectually rigorous, evidence-based, and stripped of the perceived corruptions of the folkloric religion of the Barelwis, or the “wishy washy” alternatives offered by rival Islamic tendencies such as Young Muslims UK or Hizb ut-Tahrir. Adopting a Salafi identity was in effect a process of buttressing arguments from authority and silence those with an inferior command of scholastic frames of reference. For subscribers to Salafism, the messages of other groups were not seen as convincing due to their lack of scholarly reference points and perception of compromise with kafir (heathen) culture. British Salafis could also frequently cite the senior scholars of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Baz (d. 1999), Ibn al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), and the hadith specialist al-Albani (d. 1999), to buttress arguments from authority and silence those with an inferior command of scholastic frames of reference.

Towards the middle 1990s, Salafism as an alternate religious paradigm became well established through mosques, networks, publications, media, and a large body of literature available on the Internet. Joining the Salafi dawah meant acquiring membership into a multi-ethnic, supranational identity which offered a revival of “pure” Islamic practices that were seen as lacking in other Islamic trends. These communities of meaning provided an intellectual as well as physical refuge from readings and practices of Islam that were judged to be inauthentic, inferior, or deviant. In comparison to other Muslim groups, the Salafi trend seemed to offer a cohesive iden-
Salafism

The counter attack of “traditional Islam”

Another major factor in the evolution of Salafism in the UK has been the increasing appeal of “traditional Islam,” an activist and scholarly form of Sufism, which was initially popularized by charismatic American convert scholar Hamza Yusuf. He seemed to mesmerize audiences with the depth of his knowledge of Islam and apparent polyomatic command of subjects as diverse as music, literature, and science. Prominent moderate Salafis at the time, though privately in awe of his learning, publicly dismissed him as Sufi. The traditional Islam trend in effect appropriated some of the authority from the Salafi scholars, resulting in a reduction of some of the aura of knowledgability from British Salafis and offering a broader, richer understanding of Islam that emphasized the spiritual dimensions of religion. The impact of Hamza Yusuf’s message was reinforced and echoed by two other prominent convert scholars, the English Abdal Hakim Murad (b. 1960), a Cambridge professor of Islamic Studies, and the American Shaykh Nuh Keller (b.1954) who is based in Jordan. The three figures spearheaded a strategy of discrediting the politiced readings of Islam found in the literature of the reformist Islamists and deconstructing the claims to textual orthodoxy of the Salafi groupings. Especially Abdal Hakim Murad has been prolific in this regard; his writings constitute one of the most popular resources for “traditional Islam.”

The influence of Salafi trends on British Muslim communities has been larger than its numerical presence among communities; their influence is disproportional as a result of the effectiveness of their literature distribution and web presence. Today, people that subscribe to Salafi perspectives can broadly be described as either those that gravitate to the outlook of the “Super Salafis,” or feel more comfortable with the JIMAS approach; those whose religious praxis is what could be described as a “methodological Salafism”—a literalist reading of scripture but which is not aligned with any particular group or institution; or those who might be described as “post-Salafi.” Leading British Salafis such as Abu Aliyah, Abu Muntasir, and Usama Hasan are not obsessed with defining themselves as Salafi. More complex hybridized identities are emerging where, for example, Usama Hasan goes as far as to refer to himself as a Wahhabi–Sufi. In an interview with the author, he argued that some of the categories used by analysts miss the complex, evolving nature of contemporary British Salafi trends. Leading Salafi activists are now trying to bridge the sectarian divide once thought impossible. In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion and ensuing intra-Muslim violence, there have been high profile attempts to reconcile opposing theological trends, through initiatives such as the Amman Message6 and the Sunni Pledge,7 a pledge of mutual respect and cooperation between Sunni Muslim scholars and organizations. These developments challenge the prejudice-lacking representations of Salafism in recent times as well as indicate the dynamic and organic nature of religious identity formation.

Joining the Salafi dawah meant acquiring membership into a multi-ethnic, supranational identity . . .

Notes
7. See http://www.masud.co.uk/ISIM/ahm/default.htm.

Sudek Hamid teaches Muslim Youth Work at the University of Chester, England, where he is also a Ph.D. candidate researching British Muslim youth, religious activism, and the role of Islamic movements.
Email: s.hamid@chester.ac.uk