There has been much speculation on the significance of the Tablighi Jama`at, the workings of which remain secretive. The main controversy relates to its stance on political matters and its perceived influence in Pakistan where some well-known members of the movement were recently involved in the Afghan problem and in internal politics.

**Transnational Islamic Movements: Tablighi Jama`at in Politics?**

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**Notes**


2. For a perspective of this historical literature, see the biographies of the leaders of the Tablighi Jama`at included in the *The Origins and Growth of the Tablighi Jama`at in Britain*, Islam and Christian Muslim Relations, vol. 10, no. 1, 1999.

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**Regional Issues**

**Transnational Islamic Movements: Tablighi Jama`at in Politics?**

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**South Asia**

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**Tablighi Jama`at**, a transnational Muslim proselytizing movement founded in India in 1927, has its headquarters in Nazimuddin, a suburb of Delhi. From there it expanded quietly all over the world from 1948 onward, finally becoming conspicuous and influential by the end of the 1970s. It was founded on six basic principles: the invitation (da`wah, or tabligh) to Islam is not the affair of religious specialists, but the responsibility of all Muslims who must devote their time and money to it; one should not wait for people to come to hear the preaching, but rather preachers should travel to reach the people; preaching is done by self-financing itinerant groups, the mingling of all social classes is obligatory within these groups; the primary objective is to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims, proselytizing toward non-Muslims being marginal; and the promotion of the unity of Muslims being a primary objective, theological as well as political controversies are prohibited inside the movement. The secretive nature of the movement makes it impossible to find direct evidence of political strategies. There is nonetheless an indirect means of doing so: reconsidering its history, instead of focusing, as is usually done, on self-statements and on doctrinal literature, and trying to see if one can read in this history indications of political involvement. The historical literature concerning Tablighi Jama`at is of two kinds, internal and external. From the founding of the movement until 1965—a time when the movement was inconspicuous—the sources are exclusively internal and consist in biographical (or rather hagiographical) literature in Urdu, mostly produced by an institution closely linked to the Tablighi Jama`at, the Nadwatul-Ôulama. The literature is comprised of biographies of the founder, Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi (1885-1944), of his son and successor, Muhammad Yusuf (1917-1965), and of their close associates, particularly Muhammad Zakariyya (1898-1982), who introduced the edifying literature, which is circulated among ordinary members. It is a far-sighted conception of politics. Going beyond the narrow borders of nation states, they have not set fixed short-term ends. Putting politics most often in parentheses, they find a world which is at once more and less political: political strategies have to demonstrate the capacity to lead an austere life according to the model of the Prophet and his Companions as described in the edifying literature, which is circulated and indefinitely commented upon at the meetings. This hold on its members is so complete that some have described the movement as a ‘total institution’, and compared it to the ‘sects’ which have multiplied in the contemporary world. But what to eat is this power? This is difficult to answer since the inner core of the Tablighi Jama`at is not open to outsiders; nor is it open to ordinary members who have not risen in the hierarchy and pledged their commitment. None of those having reached this inner core have ever spoken. Given its planned strategy of the conquest of the world, which has been consistently maintained, which has expanded without changing in the hands of one lineage, it is difficult to believe that spiritual development is the only aim. It would not be necessary to keep such a tight grip on members if this were the case. Given its secrecy, however, its ultimate aim is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, there are several indications, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh, that Tablighi Jama`at is far from being indifferent to politics. Prominent members have been closely associated with the army and the intelligence service active in Afghanistan. The president of Pakistan, Mohammad Rafiq Tarar, is a Tablighi, he is held by the main provider of the new bill for the enforcement of the chari’s rule. More generally, in its origins and in its leadership, Tablighi Jama`at is closely linked with the Deobandi school, which has always been highly political. However, doubts have been sporadically raised as to the reality of this apolitical position, particularly in Pakistan, where some well-known members of the movement were recently involved in the Afghan problem and in internal politics.