At first glance, the arrival of the year 2000 AD seems unlikely to provoke any great reaction – much less spiritual anxiety – among most Muslims. Any Western ‘centurial mysticism’ surrounding the date 1 January 2000 AD is the equivalent of Ramadan 24, 1420. But despite the outward irrelevancy of the Gregorian 2000 to most of the ummah, one thing is certain: spiritual activism within the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order – finds the advent of the turn of the century ‘centurial mysticism’ surrounding the date 1 January 2000 AD

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, with roots in the 11th century Central Asian mystic Khwaja Baha’u’din Naqshband, has enjoyed enduring popularity and are active today especially in Turkey, Afghanist..., the Balkans, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, India, northwest China, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Linking the Naqshbandis across these diverse ethnic, social and historic elements are a set of defining features: an uncompromising Sunni orientation, emphases on war, peace and nonviolence, and a tradition of full social and political participation in the world.

Shaykh Nazim Haqqani (b. 1922) is the ‘grand shaykh’ and namesake of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani lineage. The son of a junior Egyptian colonial administrator in British Cyprus, Shaykh Nazim’s spiritual education began in Istanbul, later, in Damascus, he joined the order under Shaykh ‘Abd Allah Haqqani (d. 1937). Dependent on Gurdjieff, Shaykh Nazim spread spiritual guidance and Islamic teachings for seven years before eventually returning to Syria.

Naqshbandi-Haqqani hagiographies portray the parlay from the early 1950s until 1974 as one of intense spiritual activity for Shaykh Nazim, marked by lengthy retreats and extensive preaching tours in Syria and Cyprus. He encouraged people to ‘leave atheism, secularism and materialism and to come back to God’, but his criticisms of the Cyprus coalition government led to his excommunication in 1965 and his eventual return to Damascus.

The Haqqani branch, based around Shaykh Nazim’s distinctive practice, emerged in the late 1980s. Influenced by the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad, Shaykh Nazim began his mission ‘to spread the light of Islam into the European countries’. He travelled first to London and, encouraged by the followers of Gurdjieff protégé John G. Bennett (d. 1974), established a centre. Each year since then, Shaykh Nazim has made it his custom to spend Ramadan in London before returning overland across Europe to the Middle East, halting on route to teach about Islam and the Naqshbandi order. His efforts expanded to include South and Southeast Asia, and by the late 1990s, the Haqqanis had claimed to have followers all over Asia, including thousands in Pakistan and over 20,000 disciples in Sri Lanka.

Shaykh Nazim’s first trips to the United States and Canada were in 1991, with the result (according to Haqqani literature) of over 10,000 people becoming Muslims and Naqshbandis. That same year, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani (Shaykh Nazim’s son-in-law and spiritual deputy) was named shaykh of the order in the Western Hemisphere and ordered to reside in the United States. Today Shaykh Hisham oversees a network of twenty-three mosques, centres and retreats, anchored by a convention and retreat centre on farmland in Michigan and by his own residence in northern California.

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order is virtually alone among contemporary Sunni groups in its accent on the Mahdi, the ‘signs of the Hour’ and the end of the world. It is at once timely and timeless, from a wealth of prophetic tradi...
even when the predictions are discredited. Explaining the year 2000 – and not the year 1420 – becomes the point of entry to a larger project of inviting a generation of Europeans and North Americans to discover Islam. ‘Last day’ imagery serves as a timely and effective teaching tool with which the shaykhs drive home to their followers more subtle spiritual teachings about the afterlife, mystical praxis and Islam. The Haqqanis speak to modern millennial anxieties, religious disenchantment, interest in prophecy, and the search for spiritual truth – familiar themes informing some of the most diverse and dynamic expressions of spirituality in the modern West – and change the conversation from one about the end of this world to an Islamic dialogue concerned with life in the next.

Notes
1. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, (1993), Mercy Oceans Secrets of the Heart, Haqqani Islamic Trust, Fenton, Michigan, p. 10 I am grateful for Mr Mateen Siddiqui’s help in clarifying the meaning of this passage.

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