Hizb ut-Tahrir’s Caliphal Counter-Narrative

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Abstract: The article has a history of religions approach, and analyzes the “counter-narrative” of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is a global political Islamist group which aims to establish a universal caliphate. It is a “vocal radical” radical group, rejecting the use of violence. The group is against democracy, secularization and liberal values, and promotes a return to “true Islam”, which obliges Muslims to establish a caliphate, ruled by divine will. The analysis of the ideology will contextualize it within Islamic theology and other current interpretative Islamic currents that dominate, with the aim of explaining why they are banned in several countries.

Keywords: Hizb ut-Tahrir; caliphate; counter-narrative; democracy; Islamism; jihad; political Islam

1. Introduction

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a global political Islamic movement that openly calls for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Calling itself the liberation party, an aim is to liberate Muslims from infidelity (kufr) and establish a caliphate based on divine revelation, where shari'ah shall rule everything. Muslims are to choose a caliph and give allegiance (bay'ah) to him. The caliph is to rule according to the Qur’an and Sunnah, and Islam shall spread through mission (da’wah). This will make the Islamic community (ummah) reach its former strength and the caliphate will become the leading nation in the world, fighting against infidelity (kufr).1

This article focuses on the counter-narrative presented on the official website of the Swedish Hizb ut-Tahrir. It has developed into a global movement, and the strongest support is found in Indonesia and the Central Asian republics. Hizb ut-Tahrir Sweden does not appear to have a large following, at least judging from the activities and views on the YouTube channel and open Facebook site with few followers.2 Judging by this, Hizb ut-Tahrir cannot be said to be successfully recruiting in the Swedish context. One reason may be the failure to resonate with the majority of Swedish Muslims since the ideology is at odds with perceptions of Islam that dominate. Furthermore, there seem to be no attempts to try to conform the message to existing and prevailing notions of Islam among Swedish Muslims.3 Islamic counter-narratives are often affected by geopolitical priorities, which affect formulations of worldviews and strategies.4 In the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, contextual considerations are not highlighted much in their propaganda as the narrative has global claims, which is also reflected in the introductory section summarizing the counter-narrative.

What merits a closer scrutiny of Hizb ut-Tahrir ideology in my view are the explicit calls for establishing a caliphate. This is contrary to, for example, puritan Salafi groups in Sweden or other Muslim groups who reject such claims or leave them uncommented.5 Apart from the Islamic State, the most explicit group regarding the topic of the caliphate is currently Hizb ut-Tahrir that, as a part of the mission (da’wah), spreads information about the ideology in social media, through lecturing, as well as distributing flyers. The article will present Hizb ut-Tahrir’s counter-narrative and its worldview, including how the group argues for the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. Authority making is discussed where an opposition is created between the stance of Hizb ut-Tahrir and that
of other Islamic stances. This includes their arguments concerning loyalty to revelation related to the fact that Swedish Muslims live in a liberal democracy. The intended target group of Hizb ut-Tahrir appears to be Muslims who are not yet convinced of the ideology, which may explain the strategy to use revelation as a foundation to claim authenticity.

2. Aims and Scope

The main aim with this scrutiny of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideology is to include analytical comments informed by a study or religions approach that addresses Islamic juridical and theological notions in the material that may not be apparent to those not familiar with Islamic theology and jurisprudence. All are part of mainstream Sunni Islamic reasoning and likely to be understood even by nominal Muslims, which may explain the rhetoric and formulations in the material. Moreover, we presently find a large number of concepts that relate to political interpretations of Islam. Therefore, the analysis will discuss what kind of Islamic interpretation Hizb ut-Tahrir constitutes, how it relates to the established juridical Sunni schools (madh¯ahib), and whether it ought to be designated as Salafi or Islamist. The analysis will also address reasons as to why Hizb ut-Tahrir is perceived as a threat, and banned in some countries.

It is of importance that the study of religious scholars include research on religion as a political phenomenon. That should not be left to others, such as sociologists or security studies scholars. In the case of studies related to political Islam, there is, not surprisingly, a large amount of publications from the angle of security studies. To read ideological pamphlets or other material without a disciplinary knowledge in the study of religions may lead to a failure to understand what is being said, and why, as well as how it can be perceived by the intended audience. There are several examples of how violent interpretations of Islam are presented as un-Islamic by academics, in an apologetic and normative manner, such as: “This is violence in the name of Islam, but not violence permitted by Islam”, and “misguided theological notions adapted and adopted by leaders of these groups in communicating their messages to the world and in drafting their narratives for recruiting followers and members from across the globe.”

Scholars of religion can also contribute in avoiding to be generalizing and alarmist, as research will be based on empirical material and knowledge of the religious traditions in focus. Furthermore, with a functionalist approach to religion, we can contribute with contextualized studies and comparative perspectives. We can show that religious interpretations actually can play a political role and include religiopolitical phenomena and avoid explaining such phenomena away as merely being strategic “tools” for legitimacy used by political activists. This is also a part of a striving on behalf of historians of religion to avoid essentialist and normative perspectives, such as in the examples cited in this section. Religion will in this manner not be reduced to “nice” things, or as only faith based. It can also contribute to reflections on how we often uncritically separate religion from politics, as if they were two separate domains.

There are studies that show that public opinion in many Western countries often is negative towards the compatibility between democracy and Islam. “Significant parts of the population express reluctance to fully accept Muslims as equal citizens, questioning the compatibility between what they consider to be Islamic norms, on the one hand, and often blurrily defined Western liberal values, on the other.”

Critical voices hesitate about whether Islam is compatible with certain liberal values, such as gender equality, free speech, and sexual minority rights. Studies also show that Muslims tend to have a more conservative stance in these matters, similar to other Christian subgroups for example, as well as the political right. There are also studies that show that Muslims generally deny that there is a conflict and that there are no problems combining being Muslim with social activism and a civic identity compatible with living in a democratic state. In this respect, the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir stands out with the explicit denunciation of liberal values and democracy as a political system.
3. Material and Methodology

The material used are texts that relate to topics that are concerned with the creation of the caliphate and the view on participation in liberal democracy, which are the focus of this article. That means material that is focused on, for example, ritual details or gender roles will be left out. We can also note that there are press releases and articles concerned with what happens globally related to Muslims, such as burnings of the Qur’an, and terror attacks, that will be left out as well. The material is in the form of flyers published on the website, which is a forum for outreach of their propaganda material. The flyers consist of two pages each with colorful design and a summarizing text according to topic. Similar flyers calling for the establishment of the caliphate were distributed in the suburbs of Stockholm in March 2021, which gained the attention of local and national news media. During parliamentary elections in 2018, Hizb ut-Tahrir was in the news due to the argument that Muslims should not participate in the vote. In media, other Swedish Muslim voices are presented that reject the claims of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the group is portrayed as extreme, controversial and a threat to democratic values risking disruption of social order. Articles published are for example entitled “Radical Islamist Movement Recruits in [the Stockholm suburb] Järva” and “Imam: The Järva Mosques does not agree to the message of Hizb ut-Tahrir”.

4. Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir was established by the cleric Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (1909–1977) in Palestine 1953. Many of the original members were Palestinians, but it quickly spread in Arab countries. The ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir has been rather constant and the ideological platform is based on the writings of the founder, which are rather detailed and will be presented in the next section. The organization is pyramidal. The activities are based on the work of underground cells and new members are organized in small study-circles with a leader (mushrif). There are also local committees at district levels that administer regionally. Hizb ut-Tahrir describes the world in provinces (wilāyah), which may be a larger region or a nation state. A provincial leader (mu’tamad) is appointed by the central committee of the international party headed by the supreme leader (amīr). In this manner, Hizb ut-Tahrir strives to create cells globally, held together by the pyramidal organization, and this has been its methodology for recruitment since the beginnings. Today it is spread around the globe. As we will see next, the ideological foundation presents a global mission, which is reflected in the contemporary material as well. This is different from many other political Islamic groups that are more often focused on local, national or geopolitical issues.

Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani wrote a book entitled Nizām al-islāmī, The Islamic System in the English translation. The book serves as the foundational manifest for the movement. Al-Nabhani presents basic Islamic dogma, a rejection of Western ideologies and colonialism, it addresses that Muslims have failed to follow true Islam, and the need to do so, and the obligation to appoint a caliph. He even presents a draft constitution, which includes 186 articles on general rules, the ruling system, the caliphate, delegated assistant, execution assistant (mu’āwīn al-tanfīdh), amir of jihad, army, judiciary, governors of the provinces, state departments, the ummah assembly (majlis al-ummah), social system, economic system, education policy, and foreign affairs. Article 3 reads: “The Khaleefah is empowered to adopt divine rules (Ahkam Shari’ah) enacted as constitution and canons. Once the Khaleefah has adopted a divine rule, that rule, alone, becomes the divine rule that must be enacted and then implemented. Every citizen must openly and secretly obey that adopted rule.”

Based on this, it is clear that Hizb ut-Tahrir must reject liberal ideas, such as democracy, and shun a human rights jargon. The ideology presented in the book has been described as aiming to establish a confederate system of Muslim states united under a caliph, which is also apparent in the draft constitution mentioned above. The caliphate is to be ruled by shari‘ah but each state has freedom to organize the political systems, in line with shari‘ah. The group is, therefore, radical in an ideological sense, but strategically moderate. Hizb
5. Counter-Narrative

Based on the above, the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir will here be treated as a counter-narrative. A narrative is understood functionally, as an ideology constructed to influence Muslims’ identity and loyalty. A narrative is not simply a story, but consists of several stories, forming a systematic and coherent whole. Following Halverson et al., narrative is defined as a “coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories” and as discourse producing meaning through constructing subjects and social reality. Within the frames of this article, a master narrative is defined as “a transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture.” As we shall see, Hizb ut-Tahrir identifies the master narrative with Western mainstream culture, upholding democratic and secularized values, where religion ideally is a private matter. A counter-narrative is analytically defined as a coherent rhetoric aiming to destabilize the master narrative. Counter-narratives are constructed with the aim to end a perceived conflict or problem, and to do so it would be necessary to present the ideal worldview, the defined problem, and a method to solve the problem, and also to motivate adherents to engage in the method to establish the promoted system. The article will address all of these aspects of the counter-narrative. Considering the material as conveying a counter-narrative, we will probe into how Hizb ut-Tahrir motivates a course of action and strives to legitimize it as the only true way to move towards the future goal of establishing the caliphate.

If we regard the material under study, produced by Hizb ut-Tahrir, as a counter-narrative, we must assume that there exists a primary or master narrative. The argument is not that there is a static dichotomy in reality, but the analysis illustrates what Hizb ut-Tahrir holds to be the master narrative that must be countered. Narratives are embedded in power relations, and a counter-narrative normally expresses a marginalized position resisting a dominant narrative, which is also the case here.

The function of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s counter-narrative is to counter a specific and mainstream acceptance of certain values, which here relates to the general acceptance of secularization and democracy as parts of a superior political model, which, as we shall see, constitutes the master narrative objected to. To analyze a specific narrative gives the possibility to probe into how the world is apprehended and how the moral critique challenges certain power structures and dominant values. The ideology presented attempts to destabilize mainstream values, and to make sense of the group’s proposal for how to understand the world and to create an ideal society. From the perspective of this article, an analysis using notions of narratives are useful in analyzing how a group understands itself and makes sense of the world.

The counter-narrative of Hizb ut-Tahrir derives its legitimacy from revelation, and creates a universal ideology, with the intention to conquer the entire world, creating a caliphate. Similar to other Jihadi Salafi groups, there is a call for a return to the caliphate through returning to a true understanding of the sources. Below we shall see that legitimacy is drawn from the sources of revelation, that the established schools of law are rejected, that there is a call for reinterpretation (ijtihād), and how a worldview is built based on the notion of a colonializing Western world that needs to be resisted through following true Islam. The mentioning of Muslim suffering around the world is prevalent as the stress on the global Muslim community (ummah) is a major part of the counter-narrative. A strategy to engage Muslims seems to be to make them accept the worldview and identify with the global Muslim community. The analysis will show how Hizb ut-Tahrir makes sense of the world and those inhabiting it, and how to solve the problems that the narrative presents.

Among counter-terrorism scholars, the concept counter-narrative is at times used as a normative and value laden concept. A counter-narrative is what is considered a positive alternative to extremism. One example is from The Counter-Narrative Handbook: “This Handbook defines a counter-narrative as a message that offers a positive alternative
to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives.” The present article does not share such a normative approach but rather uses concepts descriptively and comparatively.

Last in this section, a comment on the term ideology that is used to characterize the interpretation in focus. It is used as “a grand idea around which people cluster” and it “functions as a social system to organize and educate people, motivating them to develop certain attitudes, adopt certain worldviews, and seek, through collective action, certain objectives.” Furthermore, Mohamed Rabie describes ideology as a tool for group cohesion and delimitation:

Since ideology represents the core of many cultures, it tends to shape the attitudes of people, causing them to feel different from others, sometimes superior to them, and sharpen their collective sense of identity. As a consequence, ideology makes its followers more committed to the welfare of their own group or nation, and less tolerant of other groups’ beliefs and convictions, giving them an excuse to be prejudiced, belittle others, and often discriminate against them.

An ideology that is value-related, such as religious socio-cultural ideologies, is associated with convictions, values and morality that can be described as existential. Such ideologies are less prone to negotiations and compromise and more ready to turn to violence, coercion and conflict than ideologies that are interest-related, such as issues of labor or trade.

6. Hizb ut-Tahrir on Political Islam

Abid Abdulmajid’s definition of Islamism is an “ideology, with a religionized political agenda, that establishes a fundamental relationship between ḍin (religion) and dawla (state) in a Shari’ā-based political order.” Following the definition by Emin Poljarevic, Hizb ut-Tahrir can be described as Islamist. He defines Islamism as a sociopolitical concept and the term represents a social and political activism guided by Islamic principles. “Islamist activism is a public manifestation of religiously informed political will, often expressed as resistance to various types of competing ideas, policies, and even lifestyles.” One important thing that makes Islamism differ from Salafism is the Islamist acceptance of ijtihād, which means a striving to reinterpret the sources related to contextual needs. An Islamist approach to the sources is thus very different from a Salafi, and there is an openness among Islamists for contextualized interpretations.

Hizb ut-Tahrir comments on the differentiation that is often made between Islam and Islamism, and argues that true Islam is a political ideology that should be established in society. The interpretative stance is apparent in all publications, seen in the call for textual evidence for the claims. The Qur’an and Sunnah are used to “prove” that Islam ought to organize society on all levels, including asylum politics, economy, jurisprudence, health care, and city administration. That people differentiate between “moderate (read: secularized) Muslims and ‘radical’ Muslims” is objected to and Hizb ut-Tahrir holds that secularism gives a space to religion in the private sphere, and furthermore that it is an attempt to “depoliticize Islam, and present it as a light-version of Islam, without the Caliphate or shari’ah.” Islamism is described as a Western “brain ghost”. Put simply, true Islam is political. “The responsibility for Muslims to stand up for the whole of Islam means actively working to establish the Islamic caliphate that manifests Islam as a whole and tear down these sneaky plans.”

Furthermore, Hizb ut-Tahrir describes itself as a political party. Political engagement is allowed, which is different from many Salafi oriented groups. One argument is that monotheism (tawḥīd) was not only a theoretical subject to the prophet but that he worked hard to put it into practice, and that he actively sought the support from influential people in order to be able to put Islam into practice. The ideal is to create such a group that works to implement true Islam based on revelation: “All groups who strives to their utmost to change society shall take their methods from the Qur’an and Sunnah in the same what that
the Prophet (peace be upon him) worked with a group in Mecca and managed to change society and establish the Islamic state.}\(^{37}\)

To participate in a democratic system and vote in elections is forbidden, since it is regarded as voting for a party that is not Islamic, i.e., voting for \(\text{kuf\'r}\).\(^{38}\) Hizb ut-Tahrir states that Islam requires the existence of at least one political Islamic party, based on the Qur’an:

“And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful.” (Q3:104) Parts of another verse is used to reject voting or working in a non-Islamic political party: “help ye one another unto righteousness and pious duty. Help not one another unto sin and transgression, but keep your duty to Allah.” (Q5:2)\(^{39}\)

Homosexuality, for example, is explicitly forbidden. A rhetorical question that is brought up related to homosexuality is that if a Muslim engaged in a political party would reject the right to be homosexual, should he then defend the spread of \(\text{kuf\'r}\) in order to be allowed to continue working for the party? Two choices exist, either leave Islam or pretend to follow suit. Both strategies are rejected. “This is a lie and hypocrisy! How can a Muslim give a true image of Islam while cheating the Westerners regarding the most fundamental question, namely that Allah only has the right to decide what is right and wrong?”\(^{40}\)

Hizb ut-Tahrir refers to a duty to invite to goodness, and to enjoin right and forbid indecency, which pertains to the Islamic duty of \(\text{al-amr bi al-ma\textsuperscript{r}r\textbaruf wa al-nahy \textasciitilde an al-munkar}\), enjoining good and forbidding wrong, which is of high ideological relevance. Historically, it could concern controlling prices in the market (\(\text{hisbah}\)). Among contemporary Salafis it often includes charges of infidelity or apostasy (\(\text{takf\'r, irtid\textbarad}\)).\(^{41}\) For Hizb ut-Tahrir rejecting voting or working in non-Islamic political parties are considered part of this divinely ordained duty.

7. Hizb ut-Tahrir on Democracy

Many scholars have argued that Islam is incompatible with democracy, while we also find examples of scholars who hold that Islam and democracy are not mutually exclusive.\(^{42}\) There are several different interpretations of Islam related to democracy. Islam and Islam, who are in favor of a democratic form of Islam, present a number of Muslim ideologues who have interpreted Islam as compatible with democratic ideals. The argument is that: “Islamic political philosophy is conducive to democratic processes in many compelling ways. The obligation of public allegiance (\(\text{bay\textbara}\)), the insistence on the equality of all believers, the emphasis on individual responsibility, the encouragement of consultative rule (\(\text{shura}\)), the stress on consensus (\(\text{ijma}\)), the open doors of independent reasoning (\(\text{ijtihad}\)), the requirement of establishing justice and pursuing public interest, and the persistence of tolerance toward other faiths are all strongly indicative of democracy and pluralism.”\(^{43}\)

This, however, is not the interpretation of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Democracy is completely rejected and defined as an ideology based on secularism, giving people the false idea that they actually participate and have influence. Such a kind of participation is not considered in accordance with true Islam. On the other hand, Islam is described as being the result of an intellectual examination of reality, resulting in the realization that there is one creator, who decides how to rule society. \(\text{Shar\textbariah}\), not people, rule. Hizb ut-Tahrir explicitly states that things divinely forbidden are not allowed, such as the creation of banks, stock markets, or popular vote.\(^{44}\) Some verses from the Qur’an are referred to in order to prove that revelation must be followed: “So judge between them by that which Allah hath revealed (to you Muhammad), and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee” (Q5:48); “And it becometh not a believing man or a believing woman, when Allah and His messenger have decided an affair (for them), that they should (after that) claim any say in their affair” (Q33:36); and “This day have I perfected your religion for you” (Q5:3).

That Islam is totally different from democracy is repeated. Moreover, that Islam is compatible with reason is stressed, which may be because of the wish to present Islam as
an enlightened religion, meeting expected criticism of medievalism and fundamentalism. In the following citation from a flyer entitled “Democracy”, we can see how a limited conception of reason is used, as realizing the truth of Islam is described as the result of enlightened thinking, and where the conclusion is that a caliphate must be established:

Islam is fundamentally different from democracy. The source of Islam is Allah, and Islam demands that all affairs of life is regulated by Allah’s rules and regulations. Thus, humans do not have any right to create a system of their own, instead it is a duty for humanity to follow the system revealed by Allah. The Islamic worldview is for everyone as it is based on reason. Through the use of enlightened thinking, every human can realize that the Islamic ideology is the only correct ideology that can lead humanity towards correct development. It is an ideology that convinces reason, that match the human nature and fills the heart with peace. “We sent thee (Muhammad) not save as a mercy for the peoples” (Q21:107). Islam has given the Muslims the task to implement the rules and regulations of Allah. It is therefore obligatory for the Muslim nation to choose a leader that implements the rules and regulations of Allah.45

Furthermore, Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects that shūrā and parliamentary processes are parallel institutions, in stating that shūrā means to be advisory to the caliph.46 Interpretations such as the one of Islam and Islam mentioned above are rejected, where shūrā is presented as a democratic consultative rule compatible with democracy. The Hizb ut-Tahrir states that if working in a parliamentary system, you would contribute to establish laws that are not based on the divine will, which is by them equalized to kufr: “Whoso judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed: such are disbelievers” (Q5:44).

8. Hizb ut-Tahrir on Identity and Loyalty

A basic issue that is stressed by Hizb ut-Tahrir is that Muslims are presented as being in a weak state, and the reason is explained to be their lack of understanding Islam. One aim is therefore to make Muslims understand what a true Islamic identity is and how to live as a minority Muslim. Considering minority Muslims, Hizb ut-Tahrir turns against both assimilation and integration, which are considered two sides of the same coin. Hizb ut-Tahrir encourages Muslims to participate in debates, so complete isolation is also rejected. One flyer addresses that there are many who think that isolation is the best way in order to strengthen Islamic identity and to work for Islam. This is considered wrong: “Islam demands that we are active and engaged in society with the rest of the Muslims, within the frames of Islam”.47 In this respect, Hizb ut-Tahrir is at odds with Salafi claims that withdrawal is preferred in order to enable Muslims to practice Islam and avoid to be affected by the moral pollution of the surrounding society.48 There are reports that some Swedish Salafi segments chose to isolate themselves from society: “with those effectively isolating themselves within already separated housing enclaves, many choose to rely more on their community and personal networks for opportunities rather than on the government or society despairing of help from either.”49

True identity is defined as conforming to divine will at all times. One example presented is that if a woman covers her hair as a part of her democratic right, not because it is an Islamic duty, she has accepted a Western identity, which is not allowed. A Muslim must obey the divine commands all the time, which is described as the foundation for their identity: “We hear and we obey!” (with reference to Q24:51).50 A true Muslim identity is described as a problem for the Western world, and the reason given is that a true Muslim identity means realizing that the nation one belongs to is the Islamic ummah. It is not allowed to be loyal to non-Muslims. “Muslim questions”51 are addressed and the ummah is presented as one, with reference to Muslim and Bukhari: “We are one ummah! We are one body!”52 The following citation uses both the Sunnah and the Qur’an to stress the Islamic ummah and Islamic identity:
“A Muslim is the brother of a fellow-Muslim. He should neither commit op-
pression upon him nor ruin him” [Sahih Muslim 2580]. Don’t let us betray our
brothers and sisters! Let us be brave and strong. We shall have the strength to
stand by Islam. We shall have the strength to stand by our Islamic identity. What
is bigger and more honorable than standing by the truth, and explaining, proud
with a high head, that you are one of the Muslims: “And who is better in speech
than him who prayeth unto his Lord and doeth right, and saith: Lo! I am of those
who are Muslims (surrender unto Him)” (Q41:33).

Previous research has shown that those who become members of Hizb ut-Tahrir
remain loyal and as members their entire lives. Ethnographic research among members
has shown that study groups (halaqāt) serve as a setting to spread the worldview and
ideologically train members and give them a cognitive outlook to navigate the outside
world. Seen from a social movement perspective, this has been analyzed as caused by the
skills in framing activities, where members are continually reminded about the terminal
values, aims and goals of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Framing is often used to analyze how a group
identifies problems, who the enemies are, and what the solutions are. Moreover, it also
brings instrumental values in the form of modes of social behavior, which contributes to
forming social identity, through constitutive values and norms that once internalized affect
the interpretation and understanding of reality.

9. Hizb ut-Tahrir on Establishing the Caliphate

The ultimate aim of the counter-narrative is to establish an Islamic caliphate. This is
in line with the ideology that demands loyalty only to God, which means that society as
a whole must be ruled by the divine will, which is expressed in revelation, consisting of
the Qur’an and Sunnah. Using other sources is not allowed. Again, reference is made to
the verse “Whoso judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed: such are disbelievers”
(Q5:44). Islam gives people faith (imān) and solutions to all problems. The argument is
that when the Muslims earlier in history conformed to Islam, they established the most
powerful and civilized nation in history. When not living in accordance with Islam, they
regressed and were enslaved and exploited by others. This is not allowed: “Allah will not
give the disbelievers any way (of success) against the believers” (Q4:141).

Juridical authorities are also referred to for legitimacy reasons, such as al-Qurtubi
(d. 1273) stating that the caliphate is the pillar on which all other pillars rest, and al-
Nawawi’s (d. 1277) saying that the ‘ulamā‘ agree that it is a duty for Muslims to choose a
caliph. The caliphal legitimacy depends on oaths of allegiance: “The caliph is the leader in
the caliphate, he is neither king nor dictator but a chosen leader who only gains legitimacy
to rule the population, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, when the Muslims with consent
enters into a contract with him through a process called bayah (oath of loyalty).”

The only rightful type of leadership is the caliphate. A caliph must rule according to
sharī‘ah, and itjihād is described as a careful and detailed process to adopt rules based on
revelation. Hizb ut-Tahrir stresses that the caliph is not the representative of God on earth,
but a leader chosen by the people. In the caliphate there is no room for racism, nationalism
or patriotism. It is an expanding state with the purpose of calling to Islam. The caliphal
state is not to be totalitarian and people have the right to express dissatisfaction with the
politics. The correct form of political activism is described as calling for the good and
prohibiting the bad through holding political leaders to account. Here, we recognize the
aforementioned Islamic duty of al-amr bi al-ma‘rūf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar, enjoining good
and forbidding wrong, that is used to legitimate political activism as an actual duty. This
attitude differs radically with mainstream Sunni Islam and with mainstream Wahhabi
and Salafi Islam as well, where the general argument is that even an immoral leader must
be obeyed as long as he does not order his subjects to go against the sharī‘ah. A central
Wahhabi dogma is to reject all forms of rebellion and violence. This is based on the Wahhabi
interpretation of the Islamic phrase “loyalty and disavowal” (al-walā‘ wa al-barā‘), which is
understood as loyalty to the political leaders. By extension, this is also an explanation to
the apparent non-violent message in Wahhabi influenced groups, such as Puritan Salafis,
as all forms of violence and rebellion is disavowed. It is thus common that Wahhabi clerics
legitimate political rulings as authentic Islam. This is contrary to Hizb ut-Tahrir ideology.

Hizb ut-Tahrir demands that a caliphate is established, and furthermore argues that it is an
individual duty for all Muslims to work towards this end:

To establish the caliphate and appoint a caliph is obligatory for all Muslims, both men
and women. To perform this duty is the same as performing other duties that Allah has
ordered us to do. The caliphate is truly a vital topic for Muslims. The proof regarding the
duty to appoint a caliph for all Muslims is found in the Sunnah, when the Prophet (peace
be upon him) said: “When oath of allegiance has been taken for two caliphs, kill the one
for whom the oath was taken later” (Muslim 1853).

The citation illustrates how Hizb ut-Tahrir stresses the individual duty to appoint
a caliph, and compares it with other obligations from God. Duties are often discussed
juridically as either individual or collective. Collective means that it is the responsibility
of the political leaders or institutions, such as the army, while individual means each and
every Muslim. Since there is no caliph today, it is presented as an individual duty to
appoint one. This interpretation makes it incumbent for Muslims to act in line with the
Hizb ut-Tahrir ideology. It can be explained if we are familiar with basic Islamic theology
where all individuals are responsible for all of their actions, and if they fail to perform a
divine duty they will be held accountable for that on Judgement Day.

With the caliphate, the end of Western colonization and exploitation will come, and the
caliphate will appear as the only alternative to the capitalist system. The “Islamic system
remains perfect and unchanged in its form, and is universally applicable for all people
regarding time and space.” A strategic method to describe the perceived problem that
must be combatted is to stress the colonial aspirations of Western countries, where corrupt
regimes in Muslim countries are included, who are elsewhere described as Western agents
in the Islamic world. This argument is similar to many other groups engaging in politics
and/or violence. This view is also reflected in the critical remarks to the contemporary
negative media image of Islam and Muslims. Muslims are encouraged to create their own
media for the sake of spreading the true image of Islam, and the caliphate is presented as
the only actor who can stand up against the Western media: “The Islamic caliphate is the
only actor who can stand up against the lies, attacks, demonizing, and brainwashing of the
Western world, that is being preserved through a capitalist dominated media.”

10. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the Qur’an and Sunnah are stressed and used as proofs of authenticity.
Unlike among Salafis, there are no call for texts referring to the example of the pious
forebears (al-salaf al-sâlih) or companions (sahâbah). The interpretation is fundamentalist in
the sense of the interpretative method to return directly to the textual sources of revelation.
There is an openness for caliphal reinterpretation (ijtihâd), and a rejection of imitation of the
established schools of law (taqfi’d), as well as the Salafi inclination to imitate the prophet and
the first generations of Muslims in detail (ittibâ’). Considering this, Hizb ut-Tahrir ought not
to be described as Salafi, but rather Islamist in its approach to sources and interpretation, as
well as political engagement. A Salafi understanding of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s Islamic political
party would be that it is not in accordance with true Islam. Several Wahhabi scholars
have explicitly rejected them as antagonists with a faulty understanding of Islam. The
methodology (manhaj) also differs radically with that of most Salafis and Wahhabis, not
least considering the activist demands and non-passive stance on loyalty, which is more in
line with Jihadi stances.

The interpretative stance is compatible with the definition of Islamism used in this
article. The aim is to establish a universal caliphate and establish shari‘ah. This is not
expressed as explicitly in other Islamist groups, who are more oriented to geopolitical issues,
such as the Palestinian nationalist movement Hamas. As such, Hizb ut-Tahrir appears less pragmatic and less open for cooperation with others than several other Islamists.

Based on the limited material, we can conclude that Hizb ut-Tahrir’s counter-narrative is developed on rhetorical power to establish recognition and legitimacy for the ultimate political goal to establish a universal Islamic caliphate. The Western world and corrupt Muslim regimes are criticized as are Muslims who lack true knowledge. Hizb ut-Tahrir attempts to educate Muslims about true Islam, through basing themselves on revelation to prove that political participation is not allowed, unless it is the Islamic party that Hizb ut-Tahrir represents. Democracy and secularization are regarded as threats to true Islam and must be rejected. Muslims should not withdraw from society, but actively contribute to spread Islam and strive to establish a universal caliphate. For Swedish Muslims, to accept and act upon such a counter-narrative would put them at odds with values in majority society.

The stress on the ideology being true Islam, based on revelation, is understandable as the only way to achieve legitimacy is to discredit other interpretations and practices of Islam, concluding that it is an individual obligation to engage in the establishment of the caliphate, making each and every Muslim responsible. Hizb ut-Tahrir are well aware of different interpretations of Islam globally, and attempt to carve out a space in the midst of this pluralist field, through using revelation as proof and interpreting and using well known juridical phrases and theological concepts that are part of mainstream Sunni Islam.

Based on the presentation above, Hizb ut-Tahrir can be described as a “vocal radical” Islamist group, which means that it is a group with strong anti-Western sentiments and with an explicit rejection of engaging in violence. There are studies showing that vocal radicals may appeal to many who sympathize with the goals of terror groups but simultaneously reject violence and killing of innocents. Even though there is a rejection of the use of violence as a method for members, Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned in several countries, including Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Turkey and Uzbekistan, but also in non-Muslim countries such as Russia, China and Germany. By contrast with many other activist groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir does not reject the violence used by others. This is expressed by Orofino: “HT members (Hizbis) represent a living exception that refutes the unavoidable path from radicalisation to terrorism, as they are radical and extreme (in terms of ideology) but do not engage in or condone violent activities.” Simultaneously, the fact that violence is rejected must be understood from an ideological perspective as conditional. If the caliphate would be in place and the legitimate caliph would declare jihad, the conditions would be there to participate in jihad. In addition to this, the fact that Hizb ut-Tahrir advocates the establishment of a shari'ah-ruled caliphate may be an explanation to why the group is being perceived as a threat, portrayed as extreme, and a threat to democratic values and social order.

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**Notes**

1. Hizb ut-Tahrir—Hizb-ut-Tahrir Sverige.
2. 11 January 2021 the number of subscribers to their Youtube channel (HT Sverige) were 160. This can be compared with one of the biggest Salafi groups that had 11,900 subscribers the same date. There is no statistics regarding adherents to the group in Sweden, but it is most likely very small since it is not much heard of in Sweden. The group established the Youtube channel in 2014, it is not very active, and the videos do not have many views. Views range between 15 and 1812. The most viewed is one of the oldest videos that concerns participation in democratic elections. Most videos posted during the last year have less than 50 views.
3. See Al-Raffie (2012) for an analysis of Jihadi Salafi discourses related to successful narratives.
4. Al-Raffie (2012).
5. See Olsson (2020b) for a Swedish example.
6. See Olsson (2021) for a longer discussion on such stances.
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7 Bassiouni (2015, p. 651).
8 Mansouri and Zuleyha (2019, p. 3).
9 See Olsson and Stenberg (2021) for a discussion on such problems related to contemporary Islamic studies.
10 See for example Strenski (2010); Fox (2018).
11 Peucker (2018). See also Stratton (2016).
12 See Peucker (2018). Examples are Smerencnik et al. (2010); Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (2017); Adamczyk and Pitt (2009).
13 Peucker (2018). For an Australian study, see Jakubowicz et al. (2012).
14 Examples of articles are published 8 March 2021 on the website of the Swedish national publicly-funded television broadcaster, svt.se website (2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The article will focus on the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir in general, not specifically in Sweden, and the question of how the ideology relates to liberal democracy. Therefore, the local Swedish context will not be presented in much detail, but some of the reactions to the material will be mentioned, as the reactions relate to how they view liberal democracy.
15 See Karagiannis (2010, pp. 18–57) for an overview of origins, ideology, and structure of Hizb ut-Tahrir.
16 Karagiannis and McCauley (2006).
17 It has also been translated to Swedish 2015 and is published on the Swedish website, Nidham2.pdf (hizb-ut-tahrir.se, accessed on 23 April 2021).
18 al-Nabhani (2002, p. 115). English version.
19 See Poljarevic (2015). See al-Nabhani (2002) for the draft constitution. See Karagiannis (2010, pp. 103–20), for an overview of political violence in Central Asia.
20 Halverson et al. (2011, p. 14).
21 Al-Raffie (2012); Halverson et al. (2011, p. 2).
22 Halverson et al. (2011, p. 14).
23 Halverson et al. (2011, p. 20).
24 See also the handbook of counter-narratives by Lueg and Lundholt (2021).
25 Tuck and Silverman (2016, p. 6).
26 Rabie (2013, p. 127).
27 Rabie (2013, p. 127).
28 Rabie (2013, pp. 128–29).
29 Abdulmajid (2021, p. 85).
30 Poljarevic (2015).
31 Brenner (2017, p. 9).
32 Broschyr-Islam-en-ideologi.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
33 Broschyr-Islam-en-ideologi.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
34 Broschyr-Islam-en-ideologi.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
35 See Wiktorowicz (2005).
36 Grupper.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
37 Grupper.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
38 Islamisk-politik-år-alternativet-A4-extra.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
39 Islamisk-politik-år-alternativet-A4-extra.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
40 Islamisk-politik-år-alternativet-A4-extra.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
41 For a more elaborate discussion on the duty to command right and forbid wrong, see Cook (2001). See also Olsson (2008) for a discussion of contemporary cases regarding hisbah.
42 See Islam and Islam (2017) for details on scholars and publications discussing this topic.
43 Islam and Islam (2017).
44 Demokrati.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
45 Demokrati.pdf. See also Islam-rationell.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
46 Islamisk-politik-år-alternativet-A4-extra.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
47 Islamisk-politik-år-alternativet-A4-extra.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
48 See for example Olsson (2019); Dogan (2014).
49 Sjöblom-Fodor and Speckhard (2021).
50 identitet-och-lojalitet.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2021).
See Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) for the term “Muslim questions”.

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see Olsson (2020a).

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As an example, see Olsson (2016, pp. 189–90) for a discussion on a fatwa on global jihad arguing that it is an individual duty to perform jihad, not a collective duty, i.e., the duty of the army, which is the opinion held by the juridical schools.

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See Wali (2016, p. 102).

See Orofino (2020), referring to amongst others Ali and Orofino (2018); Karagiannis (2018); Khalil (2014); Nawab (2018); Orofino (2015, 2018); Peucker (2018). See also Orofino (2019).

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See also Karagiannis (2010, p. 120).

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