

The origins of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order
and its current prominence in the UK

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The Sufi order known as Naqshbandi-Haqqaniya has been described “as one of the fastest growing and most important orders in Western Europe and North America”¹ and is gaining members within the South Asian communities even though its immediate origins are Eastern Mediterranean rather than the Sub-continent. The purpose of this paper is to explore where this movement comes from and what its appeal is in the UK in the early 21st Century.

What emerged from Arabia following the death of Muhammad in 632AD was neither a religion propagated by preachers nor a warrior kingdom seizing territory, though similarities with both might be drawn. Islam dates its calendar not from the first revelation but from the founding of the first community defined by Islamic identity, namely the city of Yathrib which came under Islamic governance in 622AD to become *Madinat al-Nabi*, the city of the prophet. Islam was and is an entity rather than a doctrine, something practiced by real people rather than an idea. That this entity is defined in religious terms does not diminish the fact that Islam itself is not simply a religion. Islam’s unusual blending of faith with civil law, governance and religious practices is key to understanding the many developments that emerged within it.

At the point when Islam emerged from Arabia, it was in every sense seriously undeveloped. There was no scriptural canon, no agreed set of commandments, no constitution, no plan of how to proceed, only a crude agenda to extend Islam to the wider world. Even the basic matter of appointing a successor was an area of uncertainty and conflict. What Islam did

¹ David Damrel, *Aspects Of Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in North America* in Malik & Hinnels *Sufism in the West*, (London: Routledge 2006), p115.

have was a unified belief that God had spoken definitively, that Muhammad was not only God's mouthpiece and his spokesman (i.e. even when his speech was not deemed as directly inspired, it still carried authority) but also God's model for humanity. What he had said and had done were to be the base material from which all religion, ethical conduct, governance, jurisprudence and philosophy were to be derived. This belief shaped the embryonic community of Madina and was expected to shape whatever followed. The centrality of the claim that Muhammad was the very last prophet inevitably meant that developments in every arena had to look back to him for their inspiration and validation.

Arab Islam did not erupt into a vacuum. On the contrary, it installed itself upon populations whose histories were rich in theology, philosophy and spirituality. A tight alliance between state power and religious identity was already the established model for both the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Zoroastrian Persian Empire. For ordinary people, the confluence of the requirements of deity and state was well established. Islam's blend of state and faith easily moved into this world and, if anything, the position of religious minorities became easier than it had been.

Nevertheless, huge developments had to take place within Islam for it to transform from a regional mono-ethnic community into a functioning empire. Though scholars may describe what happened in a variety of ways, the fact that there was a process of development in law, theology, ethics and governance is a truth universally attested. All of these had to validate themselves with reference to the founder and his immediate companions. The codification of Islam was completed in the late 9th Century under imperial governance and virtually all the documentary sources on which Islam subsequently relied found their current form at that time. The official system of Islam gave people a list of what things they should

believe in and what acts of worship were required daily, weekly, monthly and annually but it could not prescribe personal piety. The basic requirements of belief and practice were, and indeed remain, extremely simple. At one level, that is the genius of Islam. Its simplicity makes it accessible and easy to export. On the other hand, the lack of elaboration left multiple vacuums. The scope for development was immense.

Personal piety, characterised by simplicity, humility, kindness and a devotion to the transcendent was and is highly valued in the Middle East and Asia. The socio-religious space formed by Islam created a need for the development of the pursuit of piety. In any culture, the relationship between political power on the one hand and personal simplicity on the other has always been a problematic one. The two are not totally incompatible, but they are difficult to combine and in many a culture saintliness is contrasted to the worldliness of secular rulers. Given these factors it is of no surprise that religious leaders arose that addressed the spiritual needs of ordinary believers and to answer the questions that the simple outline provided by official religion did not address.

The catch-all term for this dimension of Islam is Sufism. The term covers a vast spectrum the extremes of which look nothing like each other. The *ulama*, the scholars, generally mistrusted any manifestations which drew on personal experience rather than canonical sources, but advocates of Sufism defended their practices on the basis of the piety of Muhammad, Ali, Aisha and others of the founding community. The early Sufis we know of attracted admirers and followers. In the 8-9th Century, patterns of Sufism were established with generally agreed stages for the transition from the normal believing life, through repentance and heightened awareness, to intimacy with God. Sufism was premised on the conviction that secret knowledge existed and could be attained. That secret knowledge

consisted of unpublished truths passed by Muhammad to the spiritually privileged and also knowledge that could only be attained through experience, that is, through the intentional exercise of disciplines as taught by spiritual masters. In these matters, as in all others, new developments had to be described as emanating from the original founders. For that reason, the tracing of secret knowledge back to Muhammad through intentional transmission and indeed through direct biological descent were and remain vital to the validation of Sufi movements.

In the 10th and 11th Centuries manuals of Sufism began circulating and enabling the proliferation of Sufism across the Islamic empire. At the same time, jurisprudence, theology and philosophy were being developed as distinct disciplines within the Islamic world. Jurists and theologians sought to perfect the *shari'a*, the one complete way to live, encompassing both public and private life, covering everything from the colours permitted for clothing to the operation of capital punishment, all to be validated by looking back to the words and example of Muhammad. Sufism drew criticism from theologians and jurists who generally did not see how the burgeoning world of Sufism could be read back into the foundations of Islam. In the 12th and 13th Centuries, Sufi scholars arose who set out to harmonise Sufi sciences with theology, Islamic law and accepted philosophy. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) wrote extensively and propounded the doctrine of the Unity of Being which provided a theoretical basis for the pursuit of union with God. Furthermore, he argued the case from Islamic sources for a cosmology in which Muhammad himself was the perfect manifestation of the underlying creative principle of creation², or to put it in New Testament terms, the *Logos*. While Ibn Arabi affirmed that Muhammad was the final prophet and that no further revelation was possible, he also asserts that Muhammad continues to interpret his

² Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, (London: Penguin 1956) 149.

revelation and to disclose the hidden meanings to his chosen ones centuries later. In effect, living prophecy was restored to Islam forever. Ibn Arabi was taking ideas already in circulation, synthesising them and furnishing the Muslim world with text books. These were not without their critics but nevertheless they lent academic rigour to the Sufi movements.

In the 12th Century Sufi practices gave rise to structures often referred to as brotherhoods or orders. The Arabic word is *tariqa*, plural *uruq* which simply means 'way' 'path' or even 'method'. The *uruq* were premised on convictions held by many other religious traditions, namely that disciples had to learn from masters, that spiritual power could be imparted from masters to successors, that submission to a guide was a necessary step in liberation from the limited self, that obedience to God required obedience to his representatives and that living as a community of disciples was an essential part of attaining spiritual knowledge.

To join an order a disciple had to take a sort of oath of submission called *bay'ah* to his master and commit to learning through obedience. The *uruq* generally derived their name from their founder. The *tariqa* of a named master referred to both the methods he taught and the people who followed them. Each *tariqa* diligently cultivated its *silsila*, its chain of transmission, its spiritual lineage. To what extent this process involved creativity as well as diligence is not now possible to determine, but the principle is clear. Masters trained up under one *tariqa* might gain disciples of their own and found a new branch or even a new *tariqa*, always careful to validate its authority with reference to the past. The greater the change, the greater the need to validate it. Although establishing legitimacy through the *silsila* was essential, the real power of the Sufi masters lay in their claim to have attained access to the level of ultimate truth which gave them access to Muhammad and God as taught in the doctrine of the Unity of Being.

Central to Sufi practice is *dhikir*. The word means ‘remembrance’ picking up the Qur’anic recommendation of the “remembrance of God” (e.g. Qur’an 14:28, 63:9). Over the centuries many forms of *dhikir* have been developed from silent contemplation through to exuberant dancing. In all its various forms, the practice of *dhikir* is seen as a key to developing awareness and closeness to the transcendent. Many forms of *dhikir* focus on the person of Muhammad and the love the believer should not only have but intentionally cultivate for him.

The formation of *turuq* also gave Islam disciplined bodies of practitioners wholeheartedly committed to the practices of Islam. While the rule of Islam was often extended through military conquest, it was the Sufis that usually took Islam to the ordinary people. Indeed, in some cases Sufis went or were sent by their spiritual masters beyond the boundaries of Islamic rule. In other words, at least some of the brotherhoods developed a missionary function. In this we can see similarities with many of the monastic movements in the West. In another similarity with Christian practice, those in authority made endowments to the pious which enabled the development of Sufi “lodges” and elaborate shrines at the burial sites of attested saints.

The Naqshbandi Sufi order derives its name from Bahu’ddin Naqshband, the name by which Khwaja Muhammad al-Uwaysi was better known. He lived in Bukhara located in modern day Uzbekistan. Bahu’ddin lived in the 14th Century and is believed to have died in 1389. By the 13th Century there existed an established tradition of Sufi masters in the oases of Central Asia referred to as the *Khwajagan* (the word *khwaja* meaning ‘master’ in Turkish)³. The region had a Turkic population and lay within the zone of Persian cultural influence.

³ Itzhak Weisman, *The Naqshbandiyya, Orthodoxy and activism in a worldwide Sufi tradition*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 14

Naqshband comes from two Persian words combined to mean engraving the divine name on the heart⁴.

Bahu'ddin's order was established through his disciples who wrote down his story and teaching. They traced his spiritual lineage through local *khwajagan* back to Abdul Khaliq of Ghidjuwan (d. 1179 or 1220) and also claimed that he was directly commissioned by the long dead Ghidjuwan himself through a vision. He would be neither the first nor the last to attribute his commissioning to esoteric experiences alongside verifiable authorities. Ibn Arabi's theory of sainthood made ample allowance for such phenomena. Their successors further extended his spiritual pedigree back to Abu Bakr the first caliph and close companion of Muhammad. This was in marked contrast to the majority of Sufi orders which traced their origins through Ali. This *silsila* indicates a high commitment to Sunni Islam. The *tariqa* was in no way disadvantaged by this alleged ancestry since they also claimed two more parallel lines of succession from Ali, one through Imam Husayn and one through Hasan al-Basri thereby combining the merits Muhammad's family (Ali), the archetypal proto-Sufi (al-Basri) and Muhammad's recognised successor (Abu Bakr) into the heritage of the one Sufi order⁵.

Ghidjuwan was said to have articulated eight principles which were reaffirmed to Bahu'ddin in his commissioning vision. To these Bahu'ddin added three more. The eleven principles remain to this day the basic foundations of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* as Dr Muzamil Khan mentions in his recent autobiography⁶. Ghidjuwan's eight principles were Recollection, Return, Watchfulness, Remembrance, Awareness of breathing, Watching one's steps,

⁴ Weismann *Naqshbandiyya*, 14

⁵ Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya*, 22-24

⁶ Muzamil Khan, *Bawanory An Autobiography of a Free Spirit*. (Peterborough: Fast-Print Publishing, 2012) 177

Travelling in the home, and Solitude in the crowd. The first four were common to many Sufi orders. All eight are intended to heighten awareness of one's self in the presence of the divine. To these Bahu'ddin added Awareness of Time, Awareness of Multiplicity and Awareness of the Heart⁷. All these were cultivated through the practice of *dhikir*. In contrast to many Sufi orders, Bahu'ddin taught silent *dhikir* which became a Naqshbandi distinctive. Of particular importance is the principle of Solitude in the Crowd. Solitude had long been advocated for those seeking spiritual enlightenment and many Sufis practiced some level of withdrawal. The Naqshbandis advocated the cultivation of an internal solitude which could be maintained in the midst of everyday activity. This allowed masters to occupy a place in public life and also facilitated the order's growth among working artisans. Naqshbandi masters have often been deeply involved in politics.

Bahu'ddin's practices of *suhba* (the close companionship between master and follower) and *rabita* (the binding of the disciple to the master) were later developed and put to effect by successors in creating a robust movement. As Weismann remarks "More than any other major Sufi Brotherhood in Islam, the identity and continuity of the Naqshbandiyya rest on a firm foundation."⁸

In 1220 the pagan Mongols had destroyed Bukhara and with it the local influence of the *ulama*. It was in this environment that the Khwajagan Sufi masters became influential. Bahu'ddin arose as Muslim rule was being restored to Bukhara. He and his followers were active in urging temporal rulers to be faithful to *shari'a*. The equal weight given to *shari'a* (the external and public practice of Islam) and *tariqa* (the internal and spiritual practice of Islam) became another key characteristic of the Naqshbandiyya. This combination has come

⁷ Weismann *Naqshbandiyya*, 27

⁸ Weismann *Naqshbandiyya*, 10

to the fore time and again and enabled the Naqshbandis to take the lead in meeting the challenges thrown up by a changing world.

Under Timurid rule in Central Asia, the order expanded beyond Bukhara and became important in Samarkand and other major cities. It attracted the patronage of rulers and grew in influence. Its commitment to Sunni Islam, to *shari'a* and to silent *dhikir* all marked it out from the other Sufi movements in the region and to varying degrees challenged them. Although the Naqshbandiyya has often had warm relations with other Sufi orders, it has always had a reformist edge and has a tradition of critiquing excesses. Over the years, the Naqshbandis have had many masters who were accomplished scholars as well as mystics.

In the 18th and 19th Centuries, Islam was being challenged by the rise and increasing dominance of the West. This gave impetus to reformist movements such as the Wahhabis of Arabia who blamed Islam's relative weakness on Sufism. Naqshbandis in both Moghul India and in the Ottoman Empire were key players in the defence of Sufism, advising rulers on how to deal with foreign incursions and reformist revolts. In this setting, Diya' al-Din Khalid (1776-1827) arose in Baghdad⁹. He established a new branch of the order, the Naqshbadiyya-Khalidiya, introducing adaptations to give him a more robust organisation. He redefined *suhba*. Unlike other masters, he had his deputies train up new members and then took them into a 40 day exclusive retreat with himself. In so doing, he was able multiply the number of activists. He raised the importance of *rabita* and called his followers to visualise him wherever they were. The Khalidiya embraced the emerging technology of industrialised printing and so extended its range of influence engaging with the rapidly changing world of

⁹ Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya* 87ff

the 19th century. It became the most powerful Sufi order in Turkey before the nationalist government banned all forms of Sufism.

Sheikh Nazim (b.1921 d.2014) who was to found the Haqqani branch of the Naqshbandiyya was born in Turkish Cyprus in 1922. While he was studying Chemical Engineering in Istanbul, he was drawn into the serious study of Islam. He is said to have investigated seven Sufi orders before choosing the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiya¹⁰. He pursued his spiritual exploration in Syria and eventually took *bay'ah* with Sheikh Abdullah al-Daghestani in Damascus. Under Daghestani's direction he travelled and preached extensively within the region. Following the death of Daghestani in 1973, he moved to Lebanon where he established a community and an alliance with the influential Kabbani family. He also started to visit London each Ramadan, claiming to have been commanded to do so by his master and to have been given a mission to the West by Muhammad himself. He went on to establish an "Islamic Priory" in Tottenham in 1992 funded by the Sultan of Brunei¹¹. He sent Sheikh Hisham al-Kabbani as his representative to the USA in 1990 who established a strong and high profile presence.

Haqqani engaged with Westerners seeking enlightenment from the East. The growing interest in Eastern spirituality starting in the 1960s had brought Sufism primarily as a form of spirituality rather than as an expression of Islam into some Western circles. Haqqani tapped into this interest and adapted his message to be inclusive of such seekers referencing such *hadeeth* as the one that says "Speak in accordance with peoples' understanding."¹² While being strictly devout in his own spiritual exercises, he greeted all

¹⁰ Ron Geaves, *The Sufis of Britain*. (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1999), 145

¹¹ See Jorgen Nielsen, Mustafa Draper & Galina Yemelianova, in Malik & Hinnels, chapter 5.

¹² As in the opening words of Haqqani, *In the mystic footsteps of saints* 2002.

seekers with friendly tolerance and never criticised them¹³. He was ready to use the language of the New Age movement and to accept invitations to non-Muslim events. In 1999 he visited Glastonbury and set up a Haqqaniya presence there¹⁴.

Haqqani visited London every year during Ramadan and then travelled overland back to Lebanon or Cyprus. In the 1990s he started visiting the USA as well. He was willing to take *bay'ah* from would-be followers during his visits even though there was no prospect of them spending time with him as would have happened the days of classic Sufism. *Suhba* was practiced during his visits and extended first through written materials and then using the internet. Many of the homilies he gave during such visits are now available on-line so that followers can practice *suhba* from afar. Similarly, the American-based website also offers online *bay'ah*¹⁵. The *dhikir* taught to followers includes *rabita* through an intentional focus on Haqqani as the prime connection with Muhammad and the divine. The *dhikir* includes the vocal chanting *khatam al-khwajagan* which recounts his spiritual lineage. While such things were once communicated in seclusion with the master they are now available via the worldwide web.

Haqqani traced own spiritual *silsila* through the Naqshbandi masters to Abu Bakr as evidenced in the order's publications and websites. In the introduction to a book by Haqqani posthumously published¹⁶, Kabbani further asserts Haqqani's mother's lineage included the great Sufi poet Rumi and that his father's genealogy included the great Sufi scholar AbdulQadir Jilani held by many as the greatest of all Sufi sheikhs. For Sufis, lineage is about authority not history. None of these claims on their own account for his success. The man

¹³ Ron Geaves, *Sufis of Britain*, 149

¹⁴ Weismann, *Naqshbandiyya*, 170.

¹⁵ <http://www.naqshbandi.org/the-tariqa/initiation/>

¹⁶ *A New day, New Provision* Fenton MI, ISCA 2014

had charisma; the lineage is published to justify it, to silence critics and to give assurance to followers.

The few Sufi sheikhs who found themselves in diaspora communities in the West were preoccupied with preserving the traditional religious culture. Haqqani addressed himself to the wider public, commenting on current affairs and giving advice to the wider secular authorities. For example, he spoke out during the UK Foot and Mouth outbreak advising vaccination rather than mass slaughter. He commented on the death of Princess Diana and used it as an opportunity to affirm the values of *shari'a* saying that if she had lived according to divine law she would not have come to a tragic end¹⁷. He addressed financial crises by denouncing the whole un-Islamic system and claiming that the problem was paper money when the divinely approved currency was gold¹⁸. On all such matters, he spoke with calm otherworldly authority like a messenger from a higher plane.

Haqqani was not the first Naqshbandi sheikh to become active among South Asians in the UK. Sheikhs of Pakistani origin have been active since the early 1960s but mainly functioned in Urdu and addressed themselves to continuing their own tradition. The Asians that have responded to Haqqani are mainly British-born or at least raised in Britain. As many commentators have observed, these have had to contend not only with living as a minority in a secular culture but also have also been subject to the English speaking Salafist onslaught rejecting much of Asian spirituality as merely cultural rather than truly Islam. Haqqani found a following among them by embodying the cosmology and values of their heritage while being rooted in an international rather than local expression of Islam. He appeared as a representative of a global rather than local Islam and addressed secularism from what

¹⁷ Damrel, *Aspects*, in Jamal & Hinnels, 123-4

¹⁸ For example, Haqqani *New Day* 35

looked like a position of strength. The fact that he was drawing a following among Westerners could only enhance his credibility¹⁹.

In addition to what might be deemed general Sufi teaching, Haqqani brought in an apocalyptic dimension. He regularly spoke of the imminent arrival of the Mahdi and the *Dajjal* (anti-Christ), both precursors to the coming of Christ in Islamic eschatology. He asserted that the Mahdi was already on Earth awaiting his moment to emerge and that they were in communication with each other²⁰. Speaking in such a way adds urgency to his call to engagement as many a cult leader has found in the past. And like cult leaders of old, he gave some specific predictions which failed to materialise. For example, amid the anxieties attendant to the approach of the year 2000, he predicted a range of catastrophes which, of course, did not happen²¹.

Haqqani has succeeded in scaling up a Sufi order to become a global force. Once again the Naqshbandiyya has produced a champion to address new challenges. Others will doubtless follow where he led. Traditionally, Sufism has depended on personal intimacy between master and disciple. The personal bonds between practitioners has always been fundamental, whether in the transmission of hidden knowledge to a disciple or to the impartation of blessing to a supplicant. The world is continuing to change. The question is not so much whether what Haqqani has started will endure so much as what it will lead to next.

¹⁹ Muzamil Khan, *Devotional Islam in Kashmir and the British Diaspora* (Thesis, Liverpool Hope University, 2006) p201-203

²⁰ Damrel, *Aspects*, in Jamal & Hinnels, 122

²¹ Itzchak Weismann, *Myth of Perpetual Departure* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014) 133

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