Islamic revival movement quietly sweeps Middle East

by Taylor Luck in the February 3, 2016 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Abu Murad surveyed the captive audience in the mosque in West Amman, Jordan.

“I was a Muslim,” he began, “but I did not know Islam.”

He talked about his past failings, of being too distracted by worldly pleasures to pray regularly. He evoked tales of the prophet Muhammad’s companions who trekked hundreds of miles and braved bandits and armies to spread the word of Islam in the seventh century.

The Islamic world has never been more in need of a spiritual revival, he said. If the prophet’s companions sacrificed their lives to preach Islam, surely Muslims today can do the same thing.

At first, the 60 men at the mosque stuck around out of curiosity or politeness. But now, nearly all are listening intently.

“Religion is not just prayer, it is action!” Abu Murad said, his voice rising. “It is effort! And we Muslims have never been more in need of action.”

Then comes the moment of truth: “Who’s willing? Who’s ready?” he asked.

Dozens of hands shoot into the air. Men young and old, in Western suits and white ankle-length garments, some leftists, others Islamists, all pledge themselves to one of the fastest-growing Islamic movements now sweeping the Middle East: Dawah and Tabligh.

What began as a revivalist movement for a beleaguered Muslim minority in British-ruled India has become a global phenomenon that may have as many as 50 million followers.

Their task is to travel lightly and spread the word to fellow Muslims—from village to village, mosque to mosque—so that more are brought into the fold. With only backpacks, sleeping bags, and a simple message, Dawah activists go door-to-door in

more than 200 countries, including the United States. They fund their own efforts and often depend on locals for meals.

Dawah seeks to show Muslims that the injustice and oppression they face in countries such as Syria are a symptom of a society that has lost its morality. They insist that the solution lies not in armed resistance or political activism but in spiritual practice.

When Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi began his revivalist movement in northwest India in 1927, it was a response to a dominant Hindu culture that Muslims feared could sweep away their traditions. Kandhlawi, director of an Islamic school, wanted to take his teachings from the classroom to the common man and woman.

In Urdu, it was dubbed Tablighi Jamaat, or proselytizing group. Its name later evolved to Dawah and Tabligh in Arabic, meaning “calling and proselytizing.”

Dawah has roots in the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam that emerged in northern India in the 19th century. Deobandis sought to educate Muslims and encourage their spiritual growth. The Deobandi movement was split by the partition of India in 1947, yet remains influential in Pakistan.

Today, Dawah leaders say their decentralized movement, with headquarters in India, is not bound to any school of thought. Its biggest annual event is a three-day prayer and fast held in Bangladesh that attracts as many as 5 million followers, making it the largest gathering of Muslims in the world after the Hajj pilgrimage.

Dawah activists often have no formal education or training. The movement has no website or social media channels, and supporters don’t broadcast their teachings via YouTube. Leaders even forbid delivering the Friday sermon that is the soapbox of the Arab street.

Instead, every day thousands of groups of Dawah followers go on door-to-door missions, called *kharooj*. They dress in the flowing white robes worn by Muhammad and his followers, complete with white turbans. They give a two-minute speech, offer a blessing to the people they visit, and make one request: that people join them for prayer and a brief lecture at the neighborhood mosque.

In their lessons, drawn from Qur’anic verses and the sayings of Muhammad, Dawah supporters encourage fellow Muslims to return to what they believe are the

standards and morals of the prophet's companions. And they ask worshipers to join Dawah and take part in *kharooj*.

A group of Dawah followers came to the doorstep of Mohammed Mustapha, who runs a minimarket in west Cairo, with an offer: come to the local mosque and tell your story. He soon became an active member.

Previously, Mustapha supported the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's largest and best-organized Islamist movement. But he became disillusioned after he felt the Brotherhood failed to bring about a greater Islamization of Egyptian society.

"For years, we focused on political reform, parliamentary seats, and the presidential palace—and where did it get us?" Mustapha said. "Now we are fighting the real battle for the hearts of Muslims."

Dawah activists say the movement may have doubled its membership in the past five years in Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, to roughly 300,000. Scholars say the setbacks suffered by political Islamists in Egypt and other Muslim countries roiled by the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have created fertile ground for revivalist movements like Dawah.

"People who are disenfranchised with Islam and the way it is presented in the world gravitate towards [Dawah and] Tabligh," said Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, who has studied the group. It offers "an Islamic authenticity and identity, something that many in the Brotherhood are suddenly finding themselves searching for."

Moosa first encountered the movement at a mosque in his native South Africa. It is "Islam 101," he said. "It is good for the heart, but not intellectually satisfying."

In an apartment in Amman, a 20-year-old Syrian man named Mohammed is struggling with a choice: Which armed group should he join?

Sitting across from him are three Dawah activists who have rushed to the apartment at 11 p.m. to extol the virtues of "loving thy fellow Muslims and non-Muslims" and reason with the young man.

"Sheikhs, I appreciate your time and wisdom," Mohammed said. "But we are in a state of war in Syria. Muslims are being slaughtered every day. It is my duty, and our duty, to defend the Muslim nation—to wage jihad."

Dawah activist Abu Adam smiled before responding: “But jihad is not waged on the battlefields; it is waged in the hearts of men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Dawah is jihad.”

Mohammed gave a rehearsed response: “Surat Al Hajj of the Qur’an says, ‘Permission to fight is granted to believers against whom war is waged.’”

Abu Adam completed the verse: “Because they are oppressed and God has the power to grant them victory.” He then added a saying of his own: “When those raise their swords against Islam, God will raise the swords of the nonbelievers against them.”

He told Mohammed that the wars and catastrophes afflicting the Islamic world are just symptoms. “In order to heal, you must cure the disease, not cure the symptom—it is basic science. And the disease is Muslims’ abandonment of Islam.”

Mohammed relented. “OK, OK, I won’t go right away,” he said. “I will give it a chance.”

“Forty days *kharooj*?” Abu Adam asked.

“Forty days,” Mohammed said. “But if I still feel the call, I will go to Syria right away.”

Leaving the apartment, Abu Adam was confident. “Once they open their hearts and join us, they never go back,” he said.

Dawah activists said that over the past year they have convinced hundreds of young Muslim men in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia that they should not join the ranks of IS.

“Corruption, unemployment, and oppression are driving Muslim youths to run away from their lives and run towards something greater,” said Alaa Omar, a Jordanian activist. “We wish more would run to Dawah, but there are still some that run into the arms of jihadists.”

In the United States and Europe, Dawah targets Muslim communities where it encourages second- and third-generation immigrants from Africa and Asia to return to their roots. It has Islamic centers in New York and Chicago.

In Britain, members of the movement have been accused of promoting the idea that Western values pose a threat to Muslims. Dawah urges women to wear the full face veil and gather in homes, not mosques. In pursuing *kharooj,* women meet with other women at a neighborhood “guesthouse.”

Graham Fuller, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst who monitored Islamist movements, is skeptical of claims that Dawah is a gateway to extremism. He argues that it is a nonviolent alternative to armed groups and that its expansion should be welcomed.

The movement “is speaking to a very basic need to express one’s faith beyond prayer,” he said.

This article was edited on January 20, 2016.