

# Islamisation in Eastern Europe

## - A case study of Arraid in Ukraine

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The concept of Wasaṭiyya (from *al-wasat*, middle, in Arabic) has been increasingly promoted in recent years. Originating from the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn), it is often referred to as 'Islamic centrism' and Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī is featured as its major proponent. The stress is on presenting Islam as a moderate and adaptable religion, with focus on families and social participation. The Wasaṭiyya ideas found a fertile ground in some surprising contexts. An example is Ukraine, a predominantly Orthodox country in Eastern Europe. Arraid, a group purporting these principles of Wasaṭiyya, has been gaining influence there among the local Muslim community as well as among non-Muslims.

### 1. Islam in Ukraine

All together Muslims make up less than 1% of the Ukrainian population, which is 375,000 Muslims. Most of them, about 75-80% (i.e. about 300,000), reside in the Crimea in the southern part of Ukraine. A suggested division of Muslims in Ukraine is (1) indigenous Muslims (Crimean Tatars in the Crimea); (2) Diaspora from Russia, Caucasus and Central Asia (Kazan Tatar, Azeri, Tajik, Uzbek); (3) Diaspora from the Middle East and South-East Asia (Turkish, Arab, Pakistani, Iranian, Afghan) and (4) Converts to Islam (Russian and Ukrainian). The latter is a rather recent phenomenon as a trickle of converts keeps growing.

Traditional Islam is represented in the form of Muftiat (Islamic council) with four *Muftiats* in the territory of Ukraine. The main one, Muftiat of Crimea (DUMK) targets the predominantly Crimean Tatar community in the Crimea and has a somewhat nationalistic and political agenda. It also has close ties to Mejlis, an unofficial Crimean Tatar government. The other three Muftiat represent mostly the interests of Diaspora, especially Kazan Tatars – Ukrainian Muftiat (with a strong Ḥabashī influence), Kiev Muftiat and the Donetsk Centre of Muslims. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought not only religious freedom but also exposure to different trends of Islam, mostly of Arab and Turkish origin. Thus, there are also autonomous Muslim communities aligned to the teachings and agenda of Salafī and Ḥizb ut-Taḥrīr movements. The ideas of Fethullah Gülen and Nurcu are also popular, especially among the Crimean Tatars. Tablighī Jamāat is yet another group that made its presence in Ukraine but remained rather elusive.

The focus of this paper is yet another group known as a 'federation of social organisations' in Ukraine – Arraid. The name of the organisation comes from an Arabic word *al-Rā'id* which means 'pioneer.' Its conventional spelling in English is Arraid. This organisation was founded in 1997 by an Arab expatriate, mostly student, community. By now it is a network of twelve Islamic centres in Ukraine with the headquarters in the capital of Ukraine – Kiev. In more than ten years of its existence Arraid has gained national and some international recognition due to its ever expanding range of charitable and educational projects and a high profile in the local media. Indeed the emergence of Arraid is a significantly new development in

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Ukraine as well as in the post-Soviet context.

Arraid has gained a reputation as an Islamic charitable organisation, while at the same time being much more than that. It runs social and educational projects, employs modern technology such as the Internet, strategically uses the local lingua franca (Russian rather than Ukrainian), empowers women, addresses current topics and interacts with the government and academic establishments. Arraid has been active primarily in Ukraine but exerts its influence over neighbouring Russia, Moldova and Poland. However, an Islamic charitable organisation or an Islamic NGO with an agenda and strategic activities is not a recent or an isolated phenomenon. Thus Arraid, its activity and connections will be viewed against the backdrop of Islamic NGOs in general.

Arraid presents itself as a 'moderate' Muslim organisation adhering to 'middle/ centrist' Islam (Wasatiyya) and advocating the ideas of Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī. Thus, after a short introduction to the Wasatiyya movement, the main discussion of the paper will be on the charitable and social work of Arraid in the context of its ideological framework. Drawing on Arraid as a case study presents multiple opportunities for looking at the application of Wasatiyya and Muslim Brotherhood ideas in Eastern Europe and the results produced. Results, however, are not as tangible and easy to measure.

## 2. The Wasatiyya movement – ideology

The Wasatiyya movement is a relatively recent phenomenon of the late twentieth century. The Egyptian Islamic intellectuals behind the Wasatiyya define it as the 'New Islamist Trend.'<sup>2</sup> Sagi Polka is one of the key researchers on the Wasatiyya or Centrist movement. He describes the movement as some kind of a middle ground between Islamist and secularist Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Originating in Egypt in the late eighties from within the Muslim Brotherhood, it inherited some of the Brotherhood features. However, it also developed some distinctive ideas of its own. The movement was started as an intellectual trend by some prominent Egyptian theologians and well-known Islamic activists such as Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, Kamāl 'Abū al-Magd, Fahmī Hūwaidī, Ṭarīq al-Bishrī, and Muḥammad Sālim al-'Awwā.

The Wasatiyya movement is known for promoting social action and holism leading to reform and social transformation. Dialogue and cooperation with non-Muslims is also one of its distinctive features. Baker described their agenda of cultural rebuilding with an emphasis on education as following,

The New Islamists asserted the priority of culture over politics as means of addressing the cultural crisis. ... For the New Islamists, Islam represents a civilizational choice with implications that go far beyond the political realm. They juxtapose a comprehensive vision of Islam as such as a civilization to the much narrower conceptions of the advocates of political Islam.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the adherents of the Wasatiyya or as Baker calls them 'New Islamists,' look not for a

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2. Raymond Baker, *Islam without Fear. Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

3. Sagi Polka, 'The Centrist Stream in Egypt and its Role in the Public Discourse Surrounding the Shaping of the Country's Cultural Identity,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2003) : 40.

4. Baker, *Islam without Fear*, 40.

rapid change but for a long term transformational process. These ideas proved popular in the Middle East, particularly in Kuwait, a country that facilitates the expansion of the Wasatiyya. Furthermore, al-Qaradāwī's ideology is also popular among some Muslims in Europe. He is often featured as a moderate Muslim. A degree of tolerance and attempts to adapt to the modernity seem to contribute to the attractiveness of his ideas. However, al-Qaradāwī is also known for his controversial views on *jihād* and suicide bombers.

Established in 1997 and presided over by al-Qaradāwī, the European Council for Fatwa and Research is one of the channels of al-Qaradāwī's ideology and the Wasatiyya movement. Al-Qaradāwī's programmes on the al-Jazeera channel and a number of his web sites (especially [www.IslamOnline.net](http://www.IslamOnline.net) and [www.qaradawi.com](http://www.qaradawi.com)) are among other innovative ways employed to reach a much broader audience.

In contrast to the Salafī teaching and literalist interpretation of the Qur'an, the proponents of Wasatiyya emphasise the importance of *ijtihād* (individual reasoning): 'As a result, Wasatiyya jurisprudence reflects a certain modernist orientation, one that has allowed its adherents to adopt a much more pragmatic approach to the task of assimilating to the realities of life in Western democracies.'<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Charity

The growth and proliferation of various Islamic NGOs has been visible in the 20-21st centuries. In some parts of the world they would even rival the secular and Christian NGOs. Benthall attributes this to several factors: the rise of NGOs in general, Islamic resurgence, oil money and a changed attitude among Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Among the most prominent Islamic charitable organisations are Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), the al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF) and the Muslim World League to name a few.

In the recent years, however, some Islamic NGOs have been associated with terrorism and money laundering. Such an attitude has bred suspicion and has thrown a shadow on other Islamic charities including Arraid.<sup>7</sup> As Warde puts it:

If money is the residual explanation of choice for acts of terror, then Islamic charities - sprawling, mysterious, and ubiquitous - became the favorite "usual suspect" - an ill-defined, all-purpose explanation for the inability to track and seize terror money. Soon after the September 11 attacks, sweeping statements about charities, usually combined with references to "the Saudis," became a staple of the terrorist financing debate.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, a deeper look at the way some charities operate makes the picture not so simplistic. While some Islamic charities have certainly blackened their reputation by supplying arms to

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5. Eric Brown, 'After the Ramadan Affair: New Trends in Islamism in the West,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005) : 7.

6. Jonathan Benthall, 'The Overreaction against Islamic Charities,' *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 20 (Autumn 2007) : 6.

7. A work by Millard Burr and Robert Collins, *Alms for Jihad*, is perhaps the most notorious publication on that topic (Burr, Millard and Robert Collins. *Alms for Jihad. Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Under the pressure from Khalid bin Mahfouz in Saudi Arabia this book was withdrawn from the circulation and even from some libraries.

8. Ibrahim Warde, *The Price of Fear. Al-Qaeda and the Truth behind the Financial War on Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 128.

the conflict zones and participating in financial schemes, others have been providing a genuine service to the local communities (involved in charitable work in the strict sense). However, charitable work always comes in a package. Islamic values are promoted and the popular image of Islam is challenged and redefined. A comment by Wiktorowicz is relevant here: 'Islamic NGOs offer just such an alternative reality, one that claims to address socioeconomic issues within an Islamic framework and challenge Western cultural codes. These organisations are used to promote Islamic values as an alternative to secularism and Western value systems.'<sup>9</sup>

The growth of Islamic NGOs may be a reflection of a wider phenomenon. Islamic organisations seem to play an increasing role in expanding and transnationalising Islam. Even the fact that the vehicles of charity - *zakāt* (obligatory almsgiving) and *ṣadaqa* (voluntarily almsgiving) – are collected in one part of the world and distributed in another makes the Islamic *umma* a more interconnected and interdependent community. Indeed, it shows not only Islamic solidarity but also Islamic transnationalism.

Projects run by an Islamic NGO may range from mosque building to literature distribution; from care for orphans and the poor to medical service for the community; from disaster relief to educational programs; from food distribution to income-generating projects. In addition it provides non-material benefits such as friendships, confidence-building experience and skills training.<sup>10</sup> There are also some new trends emerging such as extending humanitarian aid to non-Muslim recipients and replicating some methods of secular and Christian NGOs.

However, not differentiating between Muslim and non-Muslim beneficiaries can also be perceived as a way of Islamisation. Benthall argues that 'In the Islamic NGOs' vision of the world, there is a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims; but that is not necessarily inconsistent with a universal conception of aid, which could be summed up as helping "brothers"(Muslims) and "potential brothers".'<sup>11</sup> Not that those beneficiaries necessarily become Muslims (though it may be a case in some African countries). However, Islamic values and behaviour are promoted and the perception of Islam is challenged.

Arraid not only runs charitable projects, it has also been increasingly active in the academic milieu of Ukraine. It arranges a number of conferences in Ukraine and supports such initiatives as contests for scholars of Islam, inter-religious dialogues and distribution of publicised materials. Its main goal is to introduce Islam in its proper understanding (in the case of Arraid – the Wasatiyya interpretation) not only to scholars but also to the wider circle of the media, educational establishments and social organisations. In fact, challenging a popular negative image of Islam and presenting the Islamic way of living as a compatible and viable option is very high on Arraid's agenda.

Arraid also seems to make the Muslim community more cohesive and vocal. A number of studies by such scholars as Clarke, Sullivan, and Wiktorowicz shows another important dimension - the role that Islamic NGOs may play in the empowerment of the community through social action especially in contexts where they are legally constrained only to social work (such as Egypt). As Benthall stresses, 'A more specific reason for studying Islamic

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9. Quintan Wiktorowicz and Suha Taji Farouki, 'Islamic NGOs and Muslim Politics: a Case from Jordan,' *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2000) : 687-688.

10. Janine Clark, 'Social Movement Theory and Patron-Clientelism: Islamic Social Institutions and the Middle Class in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen,' *Comparative Political Studies* 37 no. 8 (October 2004) : 964.

11. Jonathan Benthall and Jerome Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent. Politics of Aid in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 83.

organized charity is that, as is well known, the Islamist movements of the Middle East and North Africa have achieved their salience and popular support through blends of religious, political and welfarist activism.<sup>12</sup> Some also see Islamic charitable and social work as a potential bridge for the interaction:

In the current world environment, Islamic charities and welfare associations have become major actors that need to be taken seriously. ... A dispassionate look at these charities and welfare associations may suggest that, in spite of all reservations, here lies one of the most promising prospects of a meaningful engagement with the Muslim world.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Arraid and its links with the Muslim Brotherhood

Tracing Arraid's connections offers some insight to its ideological framework and agenda. Arraid is an intermediary organisation, i.e. it claims to have no funds of its own and it mediates between the Ukrainian Muslim community and some international bodies that provide funding. Most of Arraid's funding comes from Kuwait and Qatar, from such high level groups as their Ministries of Endowments. Among its other most frequently featured sponsors are the Islamic Development Bank, the World Muslim League and the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Some of its donors, however, are either associated with or have been impacted by the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, WAMY has been influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, as many of its members are from among the Egyptian refugees in Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> A Kuwait-based Social Reform Society, one of Arraid's donors, is also associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>15</sup>

Arraid's links in Europe, such as the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE) and the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO) are also tainted by the association with the Muslim Brotherhood. It should be indicated, however, that the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe is not a clear-cut body or organisation. Described by Vidino: 'But the issue of formal affiliation to the *Ikhwan* is moot because the Muslim Brotherhood is more than a group; it is now better defined as a movement whose organization is far from monolithic and whose members are kept together mostly by ideological affinity.'<sup>16</sup>

Further connections may be traced in the direct cooperation between Arraid and some individuals, for instance with 'Amr Khāled. 'Amr Khāled is known as a controversial figure in Egypt and his *da'wa* efforts are viewed with great suspicion both by the government and the official Islamic establishment. 'Amr Khāled offers an interpretation of Islam which is relevant to the modern day Middle Eastern context. In a way he reflects the tension between

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12. Jonathan Benthall, 'Financial Worship: the Quranic Injunction to Almsgiving,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 1 (March 1999) : 27-28.

13. Martin van Bruinessen, 'Development & Islamic Charities,' *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 20 (Autumn 2007) : 5.

14. Mohammed Kroessin and Abdulfatah Mohamed, 'Saudi Arabian NGOs at work in Somalia: "Wahabi" Da'wah or Humanitarian Aid?' in *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, eds. Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 225.

15. Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds. Islam and the West* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 173.

16. Lorenzo Vidino, 'Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 4 (2006) : 24.

Islamism and globalisation. Summarised by Wise, 'Khaled emerges as only one incarnation of a broader social movement in which the medium and the message work together to respond to the persistent demand for Islamic answers to modern questions of identity, politics and ritual.'<sup>17</sup> There are indeed some revealing parallels between his interpretation and application of Islam and Arraid's approach.

Perhaps the most prominent of Arraid's connection is with Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, who has also been affiliated with or influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>18</sup> Arraid features his decrees and books and promotes his ideas. Unsurprisingly Arraid has further links with the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) that is headed by al-Qaradāwī. There are also some personal connections as some of Arraid's leaders have visited al-Qaradāwī. Furthermore, one of the al-Qaradāwī's web sites - [IslamOnline.net](http://IslamOnline.net) - has some regular reports on Arraid activity and progress in Ukraine.

Arraid vehemently tries to disassociate itself from politics. However, from its very inception the Muslim Brotherhood has been known for its heavy involvement in politics. In his seminal work on the Muslim Brotherhood Mitchell clarifies, '... "politics" and "religion" (*din*) are not opposite and incompatible spheres of activity but, like all other types of human behaviour, aspects of the indivisible Islam. Political action, then, was inseparable from the movement by definition.'<sup>19</sup> In case of Arraid it may be a telltale sign pointing to a deeper understanding of social action and perhaps a broader understanding of politics. Wiktorowicz, and Taji Farouki note that:

Seemingly apolitical activities, such as education and health care provision, become political when they challenge other cultural codes and institutions. Rather than directly confronting the state or participating in formal politics, Islamic NGOs are engaged in social struggle at the level of cultural discourse and values.<sup>20</sup>

While excluding itself from direct involvement in a country's political arena, Arraid nevertheless is gaining some leverage through its social and educational work. Aiding the poor and caring for orphans becomes more than just an act of benevolence. As noted by Utvik, 'The whole development effort is likened to a jihad.'<sup>21</sup> Another Islamic concept applicable to Arraid's approach and activity is *da'wa* or missionary activity. As emphasized by Clark, 'The Islamist project, therefore, is an attempt to create a seemingly seamless web of religion, politics, charity, and all forms of activism. All of these realms should reinforce one another and promote public virtue and personal piety. In this invention of tradition, the concept of *da'wa* becomes central.'<sup>22</sup> This holistic approach is very characteristic of the Muslim Brotherhood with whom Arraid not only has a family resemblance but some direct links and connections.

Finally, Arraid inception and development mirrors the processes that have been taking place elsewhere. In his article 'Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood' Vidino describes the steps taken by the Muslim Brotherhood towards the establishment and

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17. Lindsay Wise, "'Words from the Heart": New Forms of Islamic Preaching in Egypt,' (MPhil. Diss., University of Oxford, 2003), 66.

18. Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 114.

19. Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 264.

20. Wiktorowicz, 'Islamic NGOs,' 686.

21. Bjørn Olav Utvik, 'Development as Divinely Imposed Duty,' *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 20 (Autumn 2007) : 16.

22. Clark, 'Social Movement,' 948.

proliferation of Muslim communities:

In almost every European country, they [MB] founded student organizations that, having evolved into nationwide umbrella organizations, have become—thanks to their activism and to the financial support from Arab Gulf countries—the most prominent representatives of local Muslim communities. They established a web of mosques, research centers, think tanks, charities and schools that has been successful in spreading their heavily politicized interpretation of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

Vidino is rather apprehensive of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe. He further elaborates on their long term goal of bringing these Muslim communities under the *shāri‘a* law in Europe: ‘At the moment the Brothers have embraced compromise as the best means of increasing their influence, which will allow them in turn to lobby more effectively for their goals—goals that include the establishment of *sharia* in Europe.’<sup>24</sup> Within such an ideological framework the activity of Arraid is not as neutral as the organisation may strive to present it. Its ever-expanding work and the key role played in the Muslim community by Ukraine is an indicator of how far the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood has already progressed in Eastern Europe.

## 5. Conclusion

Arraid’s ideological framework is strongly affected by the principles of Wasāṭiyya. One may surmise that Arraid acts as a mouthpiece of the Wasāṭiyya movement and its chief ideologue Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī. Its broader association is with the Muslim Brotherhood, which takes a modified, loosely connected and somewhat undercover form in Europe. Arraid is essentially a *da‘wa* or a missionary organisation. Its contribution to the Islamisation and the transformation of the Muslim community in Ukraine has already been recognised as significant by a number of scholars.

The emphasis on social action and charitable work is just an outgrowth of the ideology inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. Educational and charitable activities of Arraid in Ukraine seem to be apolitical, even more so as Arraid strongly disassociates itself from politics. However, on a deeper level their approach presents a cultural struggle over Islamic values in a post-atheist and nominally Christian environment.

Arraid acts as a transformational agent with a thought-through strategy and agenda. It strives to exemplify a model Islamic community with an ‘Islam is the solution’ approach. It is, however, just a part of a broader network with a far-reaching goal. Similar to other front and undercover Muslim Brotherhood organisations in Europe Arraid is striving for a peaceful conquest of Europe for Islam. Quoting its main ideologue Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, ‘This means that Islam will return to Europe as a conqueror and victor, after being expelled from it twice - once from the South, from Andalusia, and a second time from the East, when it knocked several times on the door of Athens. I maintain that the conquest this time will not be by the sword but by preaching and ideology.’

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23. Vidino, ‘Aims,’ 23.

24. Ibid., 40.

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