

# The Khawarij Paradigm Takfirism as Expression of Unconstrained Islamism

**Arturo Morselli**



## **TAKFIRISM**

- *What is Takfir/Takfirism*
- *Takfirism as Epiphenomenon*
- *Takfir/s Operational Consequences*
- *Ibn Taymiyyah's Philosophy*

## **KHARIJITES**

- *What is Khawarij/Kharijites*
- *Khawarij Ideological Parable*
- *Wahhabi Revival*
- *The Khawarij Paradigm*

## Abstract

The evolution of the ‘Islamic State’ from an integrated to a fragmented group is now close to becoming an irreversible process. Senior figures of internal competing factions are striving to de-legitimize one another by authoring contradicting publications. These, it seems, serve a two-fold purpose: to strengthen respective claims over central institutions; and to fight for the support of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the organisation. The primary causes of this internal conflict appear to be the dispute over specific theological issues, such as differing interpretations of the concept of apostasy – *takfir*, as well as a more generalized criticism of the group’s attitude towards its territorial demise. Focusing on the former issue, this article strives to examine the existing relation between the ‘Islamic State’, through its systematic abuse of the doctrine of *takfir*, and the ancient Islamic sect of the Kharijites, which are considered by many to be the precursors of the modern-day extremist interpretations of takfirism. The telos of this research, then, is to shed light around this topic, on and of which little is said and known. The hope is that this will increase the understanding of those global extremist ideologies that features such doctrine and, in turn, result in more effective counter-narratives. Furthermore, this report wishes to argue in favour of a ‘Kharijite paradigm’ to outline the feature commonalities between the above-mentioned sect and contemporary takfirist organisations. Through its function of quasi-category, this paradigm also captures set-flaws inherent to the current interpretations of the notion of *takfir*, as will be shown with the case of the ‘Islamic State’. Finally, this report argues that it is possible to distinguish a clear pattern amongst takfiri organisations. The volatile nature of takfirism, in fact, seems to concur as a factor in generating a mechanism of internal self-disruption wherein a potentially perpetual decay causes the splintering of the initial organisation into multiple sub-groups. From a theoretical standpoint, moreover, this process extends *ad infinitum*, and thus represents a theoretical model worth examining for counter-terrorism purposes.

Accordingly, it will be argued that takfirism can indeed be considered a determinant to the demise of terrorist organisations. Hence, the way we think about its relevance within the ‘Islamic State’s ideology must directly reflect its relevance there in. This report does not claim to offer definite solutions to the threat of violence and extremism that modern-day societies increasingly face from attacks perpetrated by terrorist organisations around the world. More simply, the hope is that this analysis, and the ideas herein presented, might help articulate new ways of thinking about such problems, and provide at least the beginning of possible answers.

- Throughout its entirety, this paper refers to the terrorist organisation as the Islamic State, as it understands this to be the name that the latter uses to describe itself. Patently, however, this choice does not imply this paper’s endorsement or recognition of the group’s self-description–

## Introduction

In 2017, the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research published an article that reflected the increasing concern for what its author, Muhammad Haniff Hassan, referred to as the Islamic State’s permissiveness in the practice of *takfir*<sup>1</sup>. By no means the simple expression of a reasonable doubt, this article was indeed the product of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s failure, both on the conversational and practical level, to withstand the consequential effect of an open letter than had been issued against him back in 2014.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* (Vol. 9, No. 4, April 2017).

Signed by one-hundred and twenty-six prominent Muslim scholars from around the world, the letter condemned the Islamic State, through its leader, fighters, and followers, for its numerous religious transgressions<sup>2</sup>. Amongst these, particular attention was given to the analysis of the group's misguided interpretation of *takfir*. As stated in the letter, the urgency to address this issue stemmed from the fact that it had been used to justify the indiscriminate killing of Muslims, both combatants and non-combatants, as well as that of non-Muslims.

The infamous case of Shaker Wahib, whom was affiliated with the earlier Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is testament to the atrocities that were committed in the name of this warped ideology. Appearing in a YouTube video<sup>3</sup>, in fact, he was filmed questioning unarmed Muslim civilians on specific prayer and religious matters. He then proceeded to kill those who had answered wrongly by virtue of declaring *takfir* – the crime of apostasy - on them.

By no stretch of the imagination an isolated case, this heinous act was part of a long-standing tradition of abuse, within the Islamic State, of such doctrine<sup>4</sup>. It would not be long, however, before the group's misrepresentation of Islamic doctrines started attracting unanimous and wide-spread condemnation not only from civil society, but from fellow jihadists as well. Among these, it is worthwhile mentioning Al Qaeda Central<sup>5</sup>, and competing groups such as Jabhah al-Nusrah (now part of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

While Muhammad Haniff Hassan's article, then, does extremely well in providing a nuanced analysis of the Islamic State's flawed and dangerous takfiri ideology, it only briefly mentions its correlation to the Khawarij group of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. Furthermore, while the focus of his paper revolves around outlining the interpretational inconsistencies between the group's manifesto and that which, conversely, appears in the Qur'an, it never attempts to provide a thorough explanation of what takfirism signifies from the standpoint of its doctrinal content.

This research, then, strives to go deeper into these two aspects – the history of the Khawarij sect and the religio-legislative content of takfirism-in the attempt to bring together the scattered literature available on both. The aim of this paper is thus to provide an organic and clear explanation of the history and evolution of the doctrine of takfirism, while maintaining a focus on the Islamic State as its modern-day ideological product. Given the analytical complexity of this process, however, it will also prove crucial to consider the phenomenon of takfiri revivalism. The need for this ulterior analysis stems from the conviction that succeeding in framing the re-birth of this doctrine might ultimately help in understanding its causal determinants. Specifically, this reflection will focus on the causes of the resurfacing, the ways in which it took place, and, finally, its temporal starting point.

Regarding the proposed structure and methodology of this paper, it is of use to point out that the analysis will be construed around four main sections. The first step will be to provide an account of takfirism, with regards to both its doctrinal meaning and its legal implications, in order to better disclose the inherent complexities of those ideologies that are partly or fully shaped around it. The paper will then consider the historiographical and hermeneutical dimension of the Kharijites and their interpretation and usage of

---

<sup>2</sup> See [www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com) (23 March 2017), particularly Section 9 - Paragraph C.

<sup>3</sup> YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yrVPE-f9I/>, (June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> This, for example, served as justification of the Mosul civilian massacre. For further reading see Yasmeeen Serhan's article 'ISIS's Mass Killings of Civilians in Mosul', (June 8, 2017), published by *The Atlantic*. Available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/counting-the-dead-in-mosul/556466/>

<sup>5</sup> For further information consult TRAC – Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium.



takfirism. The following section will focus on two documents of great importance in their open condemnation of the use of *takfir* as a license to indiscriminate killing. While the first of these two documents, namely, the Open Letter to al-Baghdadi, is aimed specifically at the Islamic State, the Amman Message<sup>6</sup> can be considered a more general denunciation of a warped takfiri ideology, irrespective of particular groups or geo-temporal contingencies.

The final part of this paper will then consider the idea of 'Khawarij paradigm' as a quasi-category that further classifies extremist organisations, thus increasing the specificity of their analysis and study, based on whether takfirism is integrated and influences their ideologies<sup>7</sup>. As I will proceed to explain, this serves a two-fold purpose: to differentiate them from other terrorist groups on the basis of fundamental doctrinal differences, in this way operating a qualitative judgement that increases nuance to the existing categories<sup>8</sup>, and to open them to the numerous inconsistencies that have characterised wrongful declarations of apostasy within the Muslim world<sup>9</sup>.

Furthermore, this last section will also argue that the available evidence suggests a possible trend within the Islamic State. The competing interpretations given to *takfir* have caused ideological rifts within the group. Ultimately, this fracture has evolved to represent an exponential decay of the organisation's structure. As the analysis will show, there appears to be a regression from an initial cohesive group to numerous sub-groups who end up becoming independent actors. The hope of this analysis, then, is that by theorizing, albeit speculatively, a model that might represent a potential dynamic of structural fragmentation can inform policies and counter-terrorism efforts in targeting specific ideological elements that might cause infighting within a group, such as the case of the Islamic State.

### ***Takfirism as Epiphenomenon and its Operational Consequences***

*Takfir: "...the practice of declaring that an individual or a group previously considered Muslims are in fact kafir(s) (non-believers in God)" and in some cases legalizing the shedding of their blood.*

Dealing with the concept of *takfir* firstly requires analysing Islamism. The reason behind this may be understood if carrying out a brief terminological exegesis of the latter concept. Islamism acquired its modern-day connotations in the French academic *milieu* of late 1970s and 1980s, but the contentious academic debates that surround the word still make attempts to define it extremely complicated. Over time, however, the term has become closely associated to that of Islamic fundamentalism in academic circles<sup>10</sup>, resulting in a connotation that is almost exclusively negative.

In accordance with its widespread understanding, then, the term Islamism is herein understood according to the Tibian definition of a form of "religionized politics" and an instance of religious fundamentalism<sup>11</sup>. While takfirism has traditionally been a marginal religious doctrine, it has become an integral part to some of today's most extreme ideologies. For this reason, it is argued that it has become

---

<sup>6</sup> See the Three Points of The Amman Message, available at <http://ammanmessage.com/the-three-points-of-the-amman-message-v-1/> (23 March 2017).

<sup>7</sup> For further reading on the topic see Mark Juergensmeyer (2004). 'Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence', (University of California Press).

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Jonathan A.C. (2009). 'Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World', (Oneworld Publications) - Kindle edition.

<sup>9</sup> See The Mardin Declaration, available at [www.alhabibali.com/en/news/the-mardin-declaration](http://www.alhabibali.com/en/news/the-mardin-declaration) (30 March 2010).

<sup>10</sup> For further reading on the topic see *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Consult Bassam Tibi (2012). 'Islamism and Islam', (Yale University Press).

the unconstrained expression of Islamism, manifest especially in the latter's jihadist variants<sup>12</sup>. The existing relation between the two concepts, however, may be best understood when thinking of takfirism as epiphenomenal<sup>13</sup> to Islamism – a by-product of extreme ideological variants that refer to the wider theoretical Islamist framework. Accordingly, this section will focus on analysing the determinants of this secondary phenomenon, as well as examining the flaws in the current hermeneutics of takfiri ideologies. If its theoretical locus is to be found within the boundaries of Islamist narratives, then, takfirism bears significant operational consequences for Salafi-jihadist groups.

The determinants of this effect can be explained conceptually. From an ideological perspective, in fact, one need not forget that Salafism is intertwined with Islamism as it represents its institutionalised expression. While Islamism rests on the proposition that political legitimacy derives solely from Islam, Salafism asserts that such legitimacy resides in the emulation of the precedents and tenets of early Islamic history. It is clear that these two concepts partly overlap. The resulting subset is thus Salafi jihadism, which is the ideology that informs most of today's notorious terrorist organisations, including the Islamic State.

Having briefly outlined the ideological meaning of these three concepts, as well as the ways and extents to which they overlap, it is now possible to undertake the analysis of takfirism with greater clarity. As will be explained, in fact, this doctrine is particularly complex. This is mainly due to the fact that within it are enclosed two distinct dimensions. While the first informs a more general narrative or manifesto, and thus is ideological in nature, the second has legal bearing. In other words, the doctrine of *takfir* is a comprehensive element that is at the same time signifier and signified. Its inherent intricacy and consequentiality make the ideologies it becomes part of extremely dangerous and interpretatively contentious.

The semantic landscape to which this notion refers to is extremely compelling. Terminologically, takfirism derives from the Arabic word *takfir*, which rests on the three root letters k – f – r<sup>14</sup>. The origin of this root is understood as associated to the denial of a solemn truth<sup>15</sup>, and also shapes two other important terms related to this discourse: *kufr* and *kafir*. Both must be considered when analysing the phenomenon of takfirism. The first of these two words is used exclusively to describe an act of deliberative rejection of an Islamic precept, such as fasting in the month of Ramadan, on behalf of a Muslim. This act, then, is considered an act of *kufr*. *Kafir*<sup>16</sup>, on the other hand, denotes a non-Muslim, for example, who rejects the call to Islam. This person, accordingly, is referred to as a *kafir* (plural *kuffar*).

This second term, however, is central to understanding the legal meaning of takfirism. Analysing the rationalization and formalization of the legal treatment of the *kuffar* will prove helpful when addressing the operational differences between infidels and apostates. It is important to note that the historical framework herein considered is that of early Islamic scholasticism<sup>17</sup>, which has undergone numerous changes over time. While Islamic jurisprudence, then, through its laws regarding the conduct of war, granted some protection to a limited number of categories of *kuffar*, it also stipulated that hostility and belligerence had to be the default attitudes towards the latter.

---

<sup>12</sup>Kramer, Martin (Spring 2003). 'Coming to Terms: Fundamentalists or Islamists?'. Middle East Quarterly. (Vol. 10, No. 2).

<sup>13</sup>An epiphenomenon is a secondary phenomenon that occurs alongside or in parallel to a primary phenomenon. The word has two senses: one that connotes known causation and one that connotes absence of causation.

<sup>14</sup> See Quora for a detailed explanation of Arabic word-roots and heuristics, available at <https://www.quora.com/>

<sup>15</sup> See the relevant analysis available online at <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/takfirism>

<sup>16</sup>It is important to point out that the term *kafir* herein still refers to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The differentiation between the two will be considered later in this section.

<sup>17</sup>Islamic scholasticism is widely considered to have come to an end around the XIX century. For further reading see 'The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World' (2009), ed. by John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press).



On a practical level, this meant that *kuffar*, but not Muslims, could be enslaved and had their properties looted. The relevance of this particular issue is self-evident when thinking, for example, of the massacre committed by the Islamic State in the city of Homs<sup>18</sup>. Therein, it was clear that the group's *modus operandi* had become that of systemic looting of civilian properties, while forcing tens of families out of their homes, causing strategic displacements of the population.

On the contrary, however, the formulation of specific notions in Islamic jurisprudence safeguarded vast sections of *kuffar* from what has been described above as pardonable mistreatment. Among these, the development of *dhimma* - communal trust - guaranteed a minimum level of security, both physical and legislative, to non-Muslims residing permanently in Islamic states. Another extremely relevant notion is that of *aman*. This word referred to the general concept of personal safety. Its use was reserved to describe non-Muslims legally visiting Islamic states. It specifically guaranteed inviolability to those who also came from hostile states, sanctioning any harm brought upon them.

This concept, then, is at odds with the Islamic State's practice of indiscriminately killing journalists, for example, whom represent a sub-category of *kuffar* and thus ought to be endowed with the respective security privileges. One need only remember, for example, the case of Steven Sotloff, the Israeli American journalist who was captured in Aleppo by militants of the Islamic State. In the footage of his execution<sup>19</sup>, Sotloff was filmed giving a speech addressed to then-President Obama, criticising his administration's foreign policy and the American military presence in the Syrian region<sup>20</sup>.

The dealignment between the theoretical and practical understanding of these notions, then, is as apparent as it is problematic. The literature available<sup>21</sup> clearly suggests that several geo-political factors have increasingly played a role in warping specific concepts, such as the ones analysed in the paragraph above, in the pursuit of territorial and political expansion. Islamic political power and Islam, in fact, were once firmly entrenched. This, at times, proved to have detrimental effects on the understanding of the content of specific Islamic doctrines. In the attempt to promote *ad hoc* narratives, which could then bring legitimacy to politically guided decisions, notions like the ones of *dhimma* or *aman* were bent to accommodate the specific needs of the moment.

Accordingly, it seems, the Islamic State is at fault in its manipulation of such notions. The group's attitude towards its territorial expansion, just as much as its recent demise has been characterised by the systemic manipulation of the above-mentioned doctrines. This has resulted in the complete override of the requirements of safeguard specific to designated categories of individuals. Understanding the complex theoretical landscape from which jihadi ideology and propaganda draws certain concepts must become a priority. Counter-narratives, in fact, will only prove effective if their aim also becomes that of exposing interpretational idiosyncrasies, which differ among the arena of terrorist organisations. This, ultimately, serves the purpose of undermining the legitimacy of particular claims that, in turn, are used to reinforce extremist narratives.

As it appears, then, conversations surrounding the concepts of *dhimma* and *aman* are no longer relevant. These notions have been progressively abandoned, as they seemingly posed a significant challenge to

---

<sup>18</sup> See the relevant article on Al-Masdar News, available online at <https://www.almasdarnews.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAauDvil2zU>

<sup>20</sup> For full details see Paul Hirschson (September 3, 2014). "Steven Sotloff, Journalist Beheaded by ISIS, Was Also Israeli Citizen". NBC News. Retrieved September 3, 2014. Available online at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/ncna194381>

<sup>21</sup> For introductory reading see *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 7, No. 2, Apr. 1976).



widespread and accepted hostility, within terrorist organisations, towards civilians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Islamic scholasticism, however, did engage in two other particularly relevant discussions to modern Islamism. While the first was concerned with treating the concepts of apostasy and infidelity<sup>22</sup>, the second scholastic discussion was interested in the distinctions between pronouncing an action or statement un-Islamic<sup>23</sup>, and pronouncing an individual *kafir*. Given the Islamic State's systemic abuse of the concept of *takfir*, these themes become particularly important. Their analysis must be rigorous if the aim is to locate a possible flaw within extremist narratives that feature them.

In regard to the discussion surrounding the differences between apostates and infidels it will prove crucial to consider the legal dimension of the issue. Firstly, however, it is important to point out the salient differences between the two categories. The infidel, by virtue of not originally being a Muslim, was mostly subject to the protective categories previously mentioned. The treatment of apostates, however, appears to be more complex. Those guilty of apostasy did not benefit from the same possibilities of protection that infidels enjoyed. Furthermore, they were subject, as part of the legal procedure, to capital punishment. In this regard, it would seem that the Islamic State's procedural understanding is correct. If one is to be found guilty of apostasy, it is not only permissible, but legally required that he is put to death. The procedure, however, is more complex than this<sup>24</sup>.

There are two distinct conditions which were agreed to be necessary in the exercise of capital punishment. Both of them need to be satisfied for any sentence to be valid. The first requisite is that the act of apostasy satisfies an established set of criteria. This, in turn, has to be agreed upon by a recognised jury. Recognition need not be herein understood as self-determinable<sup>25</sup>. A given body of jurists must receive approval on the basis of clear Islamic legal dictums<sup>26</sup>, objective and not open to interpretation. Since the Islamic State is amenable to Sunni Islam, the Four Schools of Law represent the source of authority according to which legal propositions must be made. The group's takfiri ideology, however, is clearly at odds with the understanding of takfirism in mainstream Sunni tradition. Furthermore, the Islamic State's cavalier attitude regarding proclamations of apostasy, that finds expression in the large number of Muslims who are declared *kuffar*, is contrary to Sunni creed. Mainstream scholars, in fact, have always been circumspect on dealing with *takfir* in view of its serious implications. Simply put, the group's claim of adhering to Sunni tradition, and holding its scholars in high esteem, is at the same time erroneous and deceptive<sup>27</sup>.

The second condition that must be set when examining a case of apostasy is that the punishment should be meted out by the State. While the relation between State rulership and Islam remains a complex one<sup>28</sup>, and is still highly contested in modern-day Islamic political discourse, it is nonetheless possible to shed some light on the matter. The issue underlying this condition seems to be that the secularly-illusioned

---

<sup>22</sup> If referred to an individual, Arabic language uses *kafir asli* to denote an infidel, and *kafir murtadd* to denote an apostate.

<sup>23</sup> In Arabic, the difference between un-Islamic statements and actions is expressed through the respective notions of *takfir al-qawl* and *takfir al-f'il*.

<sup>24</sup> The analysis that follows briefly touches upon the Four Schools of Islamic Law. These legal traditions are now recognised by the vast majority of Sunni Muslims. For further reading see *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 10, No. 1, Feb. 1979).

<sup>25</sup> See Tore Hamming (November 19, 2016). 'The increasing extremism within the Islamic State'. Article available online at <http://www.jihadica.com/the-increasing-extremism-within-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>26</sup> For an argumentative analysis of Sunni jurisprudence see *Arabica* (T. 37, Fasc. 3, Nov. 1990).

<sup>27</sup> See Abdul Rahmaan al-Mutairi, trans. Jamaal Zarabo (2001) 'Religious Extremism: in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims', (Denver: Al-Basheer Publications & Translations).

<sup>28</sup> For further reading see John R. Pottenger (2007). 'Reaping the Whirlwind: Liberal Democracy and the Religious Axis', (Georgetown University Press).

Islamic twentieth century had abandoned the juristic field that specifically dealt with the concept of *takfir*. This, in turn, caused modern-day jurisprudence of apostasy, in all its interpretations, to be extremely inadequate. The new geo-political order, in fact, presents altogether different features<sup>29</sup> from those of early Islamic societies. Accordingly, effective hermeneutics of takfirism must be able to account for the new religious and political paradigms of modern, globalised and heterogeneous societies.

The conversation surrounding the distinction between pronouncing an action or statement un-Islamic, and an individual *kafir*, is equally complex and disputed. Traditionally, debates within Islamic scholasticism have seen jurists and theologians allow for a large margin of disagreement. The difficulty in agreeing on what was to be considered a breach of Islamic dictums has always persuaded eminent scholars to refrain, if in doubt, from levelling accusations of apostasy to an individual. This was the reason behind the need to have a formal process to determine whether a believer was a *kafir* or not.

Accordingly, the pronouncement of *takfir* has always been limited to acts and statements alone, as opposed to persons. Unfortunately, the discontinuity that the Islamic scholastic tradition has suffered in the last century, and the emergence of militancy as a challenge to it, have allowed modern Islamism to improperly blend these two conversations. With a sweeping hand-gesture, pragmatic opportunism showcased by many extremist groups created a mechanism through which to revive apostasy accusations against whomever was deemed inconvenient, soon forgetting the required legal procedures.

Fundamentally, it is possible to consider takfirism, first and foremost, as conceptual tendency – the result of a black-and-white worldview that has lost all nuances. Manifest in many Salafist-jihadist organisations, this doctrine is based on conflating the pronouncement of the actions or statements of an individual as un-Islamic. This, in turn, results in the accusation of apostasy. Without the adequate legal procedure to examine each specific case, takfiri extremist groups have increasingly abused this doctrine, turning it into a license for indiscriminate killing<sup>30</sup>. On a practical level, this has meant invalidating the lengthy and complex juristic process of apostasy. Salafist-jihadist have, de facto, reassigned to themselves the prerogatives to mete out capital punishment – the judgement of the many (State) abused by the priorities of the few (terrorist organisations).

The most extreme forms of this ideology, however, have also seen the repeal of all protective categories for non-Muslims, two of which have been discussed earlier in this paper. Furthermore, some terrorist organisations, the Islamic State being one of those, have gone as far as proclaiming *takfir* on parts or entireties of Muslim communities<sup>31</sup>. Proponents of this ideology have also been found culpable of violating the conduct of war. This is because they were able to lift the constraints imposed by Islamic jurisprudence through the manipulation and exploitation of scholastic discussion. The latter, in fact, allowed the rescission of such constraints in a limited number of scenarios. These instances, however, are as few as they are rigorous, and by no means represent feasible cases of legitimacy to the multiple violations that have occurred.

After the takfirist phenomenon was pioneeringly applied by extremist groups for the first time in Algeria during its civil war<sup>32</sup> in the 1990s, it soon started plaguing a vast number of countries worldwide.

---

<sup>29</sup> An example of this is that shifting religious allegiance is no longer equivalent to treason in warfare.

<sup>30</sup> See *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* (Vol. 5, No. 3, March 2013).

<sup>31</sup> For a general introduction to the fundamental concept of *jahiliyya* see *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 35, No. 4, Nov. 2003).

<sup>32</sup> During the month of Ramadan (January–February 1997) hundreds of civilians were killed in massacres, some with their throats cut. Pregnant women were sliced open, children were hacked to pieces or dashed against walls, men's limbs were



Terrorist organisations have since been using this doctrine indiscriminately. This has resulted, in a number of cases, in ideological backlash. Unfortunately, the work of some Islamist ideologues has only been that of attempting to qualify the premises appealed for by takfirists. While their call has been that of moderation, it has lacked in the effort to counter the manipulation of scholastic literature and has thus failed to address the root of the problem.

### ***The Khawarij Ideological Parable and its Wahhabi Revival***

*The Khawarij, also known as the Kharijites or the ash-Shurah, belonged to a school of thought that was born in the first century of Islam during the First Fitna, the crisis of leadership after the death of Muhammad.*

In the hope of having clarified the doctrinal content of takfirism, and having thus provided an outline of its conceptual dimension, this section aims to focus on the geo-temporal and political determinants that have helped shape the Khawarij sect. While many believe this group to have gone extinct<sup>33</sup>, it is my opinion that the evidence available strongly disputes this possibility – its ideological heritage is both alive and well. The intersectional analysis of terrorist attacks<sup>34</sup> carried out by many global extremist organisations, with the focus in this instance being on the Islamic State, and the group ideologies to which they are inspired clearly showcase many of the traits typical of the early Kharijites.

The understanding of the doctrine of *takfir*, as this analysis will attempt to show, results predominantly from the societal reality in which the Khawarij lived in. In regard to the plethora of factors at play in the development of their community, this paper understands the political one to be fundamental. However, much confusion arises in mistaking religious tenets for eminently political ones<sup>35</sup>. The need to distinguish between these two dimensions, which is by no means an easy task, stems from the realisation that the dubiety surrounding takfirism is a result of having mistakenly characterised many of its aspects and features.

The influence of the Khawarij sect has always been present<sup>36</sup>. In differing degrees and behind numerous façades, the history of Islam has recurrently featured some of the extreme interpretations typical to the former sect. It seems to be the case that this ideology found renewed momentum and vitality through the writings of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab<sup>37</sup>, which go back to the end of the eighteenth century. However, it is reported that the eminent Hanbali scholar Ibn Fayruz al-Tamimi himself publicly repudiated the teachings of Abdul Wahhab. This is testament to the deep religious misguidedness that informed the extremist thought of al-Wahhab. Furthermore, the Hanbali theologian referred to the Wahhabis as the seditious Kharijite sect of Najd, giving reason to believe of an existing correlation between the two.

---

hacked off one by one, and, as the attackers retreated, they would kidnap young women to keep as sex slaves. The GIA - Groupe Islamique Armé - issued a communique claiming responsibility for the massacres and justifying them by declaring impious (takfir) all those Algerians who had not joined its ranks. For further reading, see Kepel, Gilles (2002). 'Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam', (Harvard University Press).

<sup>33</sup>The Najdiyya sect are considered to be the last sub-sect inspired to the Khawarij. While it is possible that they survived through the eleventh century, there is widespread agreement among scholars that they eventually went extinct. For further reading see Patricia Crone (2005). 'Medieval Islamic Political Thought', (Edinburgh University Press).

<sup>34</sup>For a complete statistical report of the attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State see <https://www.statista.com/statistics/328097/isis-attacks-by-type/>

<sup>35</sup>The documented start of the interplay between Islam and politics goes back to the pre-modern Islamic era. For further reading see Edward Mortimer (1982). 'Faith and power: The politics of Islam' (Random House Press).

<sup>36</sup> See <http://sunnah.org/aqida/kharijites1.htm>

<sup>37</sup>Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a religious leader and theologian from Najd in central Arabia. He is considered the founding figure of Wahhabism. This term, however, is highly disputed. See Mannah, Buṭrus Abū; Weismann, Itzhak; Zachs, Fruma (11 June 2005). 'Ottoman Reform and Muslim Regeneration', (I.B. Tauris).

This section will thus aim to explore the relationship between Abdul Wahhab and the Kharijites, from an ideology standpoint, while also diving deeper into the position of the former. While the origins of the Khawarij sect go back to the times of the Prophet, the first recorded evidence of their existence is to be found in the Hadith of Hurqus ibn Zuhair, as narrated in *Bukhari and Muslim*<sup>38</sup>. According to the chronicle therein reported, the end of the Battle of Hunayn, which was fought between the Prophet and his Companions against the Bedouin tribe of Hawazin and the Thaqif, marked the starting point of the ideological secession of interest to this analysis.

It is reported that the end of the battle had seen the Prophet intent in distributing the war looting. In trying to attract and convert to Islam some of those present, he had given preference in the distribution of the spoils to a number of non-Muslims. Hurqus, who had fought alongside the Prophet, resented this choice. Hence, he addressed the Prophet, urging him to be just in making the division of the riches. It is reported that the former then rebuked Hurqus for questioning his judgement. Furthermore, he added by warning those present that, in time, a group of individuals would eventually leave their ranks in revolt. What would be characteristic about them was that they would recite the Quran as passionately as true Muslims, but its essence would never reach their souls. In other words, while seeming perfectly knowledgeable and fervent Muslims, this seceding group would never fully embrace the spirit of Quranic teachings.

The Battle of Hunayn does not represent the precursor moment to the birth of the Khawarij. While it is significant to the extent of being the first time in which their imminence is foreshadowed, the Kharijite birth and secession was caused by other factors. The Battle of Siffin<sup>39</sup>, in fact, is considered the geo-temporal context to which the determinants of the group's parturition are attributable. The story of the battle is both compelling and intricate. The focus hereinafter, however, is limited to some parts of the latter, particularly the three days of main engagement between the two sides.

The Battle of Siffin, then, was one to determine Muslim rulership. The two sides were led respectively by Ali ibn Abi Talib, who ruled as the Fourth Caliph, and Muawiyah I, whom at that time had been appointed Governor of Syria. However, with the two armies encamped on the river plain of Siffin for more than one hundred days, neither wished to fight. The main reason for this was that the two sides were not split over matters regarding faith, and thus found it hard to kill each other on this premise. During this time, in fact, the two armies engaged nearly exclusively in negotiations. Displeased by this, it is reported that a group of Iraqis within the ranks of Ali refused to abide by his orders and engaged in battle with Muawiyah's army. These individuals were referred to as Qurra<sup>40</sup>, and would later become known as the Kharijites.

The peculiarity of this group, which translated into the name they were referred to, was their literalist reading and understanding of the Quran. Moreover, the according hermeneutical approach to faith manifested itself in the Qurra's zealous commitment and militant devotion to Quranic teachings. These traits have thus characterised this belligerent group since their first reported apparition during the aforementioned Battle of Siffin. It is immediately possible to see a level of resemblance between the Qurra's approach to Islam and the Islamic State's use of it in justifying its numerous attacks.

---

<sup>38</sup> See <https://sunnah.com/bukhari>

<sup>39</sup>The Battle of Siffin occurred during the First Fitna, or first Muslim civil war, with the main engagement taking place from July 26 to July 28. It was fought between Ali ibn Abi Talib who ruled as the Fourth Caliph and Muawiyah I, on the banks of the Euphrates river, in what is now Raqqa, Syria.

<sup>40</sup>This term is loosely translatable with "the Quran readers".



Ascertaining the two group's level of truthful belief in the militant and literalist sense of the Quran is a complex and, in this case specifically, secondary task. Conversely, the way in which this belief was, and currently is, put into use is a directly relevant aspect to consider. As the following analysis will highlight, in fact, both the Qurra and the Islamic State fall into the same ideological continuum, as shown in some of their fundamental beliefs and tenets<sup>41</sup>.

There is a further moment during the Battle of Siffin, however, that must be considered. The need for arbitration, in fact, was decided bilaterally as a result of the refusal from both sides to engage in battle. In retrospect, it is possible to view this parable of arbitration as a quasi-epitome of the fundamental belief that characterised the Kharijites and the following groups inspired to their ideology. While Muawiyah's army unanimously came to a decision regarding their arbitrator, a military commander by the name of 'Amr ibn al-'As, Ali's choice was vehemently disputed by those same individuals that had illicitly engaged in battle, that is, the Qurra. To avoid any possible in-fighting – a recurring tendency to be further considered - within his own ranks, Ali conceded in appointing Abu Musa al-Ashari as his side's arbitrator<sup>42</sup>.

After the verdict was announced, however, Ali refused to accept it. This greatly weakened his authorial status within his ranks. Amongst those opposing him, the most vociferous were, once again, the Qurra. Their dissatisfaction came due to several factors. Firstly, they did not believe that Ali, given his weak position of power, could represent their interests anymore. On top of that, they feared prosecution, once peace had been reached, for their presumed involvement in the murder of Uthman, whom had acted as third Caliph of the Rashidun. Finally, they ideologically opposed both the need for arbitration and the subsequent obligation to accept its verdict. For these reasons, the Qurra decided to desert Ali's ranks under the pretence that arbitration belongs only to God; they would accept man-made decisions.

Muslims, in their opinion, had no say in matters of faith, but had only to follow religious dictums. Their departure, then, marked the start of a new and extremely dangerous ideological tradition. Over the course of time, in fact, it is reported that they developed into a quasi-anarchist movement that fought to preserve a high level of independence from foreign political and economic interference. While the argument that the primary cause of this rebellion was a rightful dispute over fundamental theological elements can be made, it does not withstand systematic scrutiny. Hiding behind a veil that appeared lawfully religious, the Kharijites had only sought to protect their own economic and political interests from the time of the arbitration during the Battle of Siffin. Being initially in favour of arbitration, in fact, they later revolted against its verdict fearing it would not be in their interests to obey what it dictated.

It was clear to Ali himself that the Kharijites had a political agenda. Furthermore, this seemed to be inspired by an idiosyncratic sense of isolationism, both economic and political, due to their Bedouin status. Such behaviour, however, is at odds with the very same nature of Islam. The Prophet had in fact spent his lifetime attempting to eradicate tribalism, and the universalistic essence of Islamic religion goes

---

<sup>41</sup>For an introductory reading on Salafi jihadism see Fawaz A. Gerges (2016). 'ISIS: A History', (Princeton University Press), particularly chapters 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> The determinants of the Battle of Siffin, and more generally of the clash between Ali and Muawiyah, are numerous. While the political and economic necessity of this war are clear, there was a further motive at play that is of interest to this analysis. The murder of the former caliph Uthman ibn al-Affan, whom was Ali's brother-in-law, had in fact ultimately triggered the conflict. The clash between Ali and Muawiyah, who acted as a subaltern to Uthman until his death, was caused by a disagreement on when to bring those responsible for Uthman's death to justice. It is reported that the Qurra feared prosecution for the murder, though their level of involvement is unclear and disputed. A detailed analysis of Uthman's murder is available online at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/div-classtitlethe-murder-of-the-caliph>

against such tendency. In order to defend the legitimacy of their belligerence towards fellow Muslims, the Khawarij sect claimed to be acting upon a well-defined set of principles. Among these, the declarations of *kufr* and *takfir* played a central role in shaping and defining their ideological orientation.

Staggering similarities come to mind when thinking about the Islamic State. Their understanding of takfirism assumes the same meaning as that of the Kharijites. Both groups resort to it to legitimise their respective agendas and justify the killing of Muslims, as has been reported extensively, through the declaration of *kufra* and *takfir*. There remains, however, a further legal requirement when attempting to fully legitimise such action. Following the pronouncement of apostasy, in fact, the territory in which the targeted people lived has to be declared *Dar al-Harb* - as opposed to *Dar al-Islam*<sup>43</sup>.

Terminological nuances herein become extremely important. In a *Dar al-Islam*, in fact, the citizenry abide by the ordinances, rules, edicts, and assembly of Islam. Furthermore, the Muslim state guarantees the safety of life, property, and religious status of minorities, provided they have submitted to Muslim control. On the contrary, a *Dar al-Harb*, which refers to an abode of war, denotes territories that are not governed by the assembly of Islam, and are directly contiguous to the abode of Islam. Warfare – *jihad* - can be invoked in order to convert the abode of war into the abode of Islam, or if it is deemed that such territory has openly expressed hostile intentions towards the latter.

A closer look, however, reveals a systematic abuse by both the Khawarij and the modern-day Islamic State in regard to this legal procedure. This resulted in the misconception that the relations between *Dar al-Islam* and all other entities should be informed by hostility. The Khawarij, in fact, mistakenly abused this legal pronouncement by declaring *jihad* on whomever they viewed as a threat to their interests. However, the concept of warfare in Islam is intended exclusively in the sense of self-defence. It is by no means permissible, according to Islamic jurisprudence, to declare war on any other basis but that of the defence of the borders, both physical and spiritual, of the *Dar al-Islam*. The use that the Khawarij made of the concept of *jihad*, then, greatly resembled actions of terrorism and warmongering, as opposed to justified and lawful acts of self-defence.

Similarly, the Islamic State's record of indiscriminate and unjustified massacres asks numerous questions of their interpretation of *jihad*. While having been openly condemned for it in the Open Letter<sup>44</sup> issued to their leader - Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi - it is worthwhile considering a further related point. The Islamic State's exertion of *jihad* and its wrongful declarations of the concepts of *takfir* and *kufir*, in fact, completely overlook not only the extensive Islamic jurisprudence that outlines their required prerogatives but are also indifferent to the space-time context that had significantly influenced the Khawarij in shaping those same concepts.

The tendency to promote what seems a lawful religious ideological stance is common to both the Khawarij and the Islamic State. However, the eerily similar use they have made of such concepts as *takfir* and *kufir*, as well as their understanding of territorial jurisprudence, shows a systematic carelessness of the complexity and nuance surrounding these notions. While their manifestos seemingly fight for a cause that seems eminently religious in nature, based on a clear set of theological elements, it becomes clear that both these groups have political agendas for which they merely seek a religious justificatory basis.

---

<sup>43</sup>See *Islamic Studies* (Vol. 47, No. 1, Spring 2008).

<sup>44</sup>In the paragraph relevant to Jihad - particularly section 8. B – it is clearly stated that “the reason behind jihad for Muslims is to fight those who fight them, not to fight anyone who does not fight them, nor to transgress against anyone who has not transgressed against them”. See Open Letter to al-Baghdadi available at [www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com)



Their aim is ultimately that of giving off an image of legitimacy at the eyes of those same Muslims that, more often than not, have been the ones to suffer at their hands.

What appears to be the connecting ideological link between the sect of the Khawarij and the Islamic State comes in the form of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab<sup>45</sup>'s writings. As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this section, in fact, takfirism seems to have gained renewed momentum through the religious movement known as Wahhabism. An analysis of the main ideological features of the takfiri Islamic doctrine reveals numerous commonalities not only with the Khawarij sect, but also with many of today's extremist organisations, including the Islamic State.

Wahhabism has been widely recognised as an ultraconservative and fundamentalist movement. As a reform movement that started in the remote region of Najd, in modern-day central Saudi Arabia, it was born with the ultimate objective of eliminating many widespread Sunni practices of the time, such as the veneration of saints and visiting their tombs and shrines. This is interestingly a practice against which the Khawarij had also spoken fiercely in their time, considering it idolatrous and a case of unlawful *bid'ah*<sup>46</sup>. The Islamic State, as the extensive evidence suggests, has been no different. From their rise to power, in fact, al-Baghdadi and his group have been involved in systematic attacks on mosques and shrines, as well as churches and monasteries<sup>47</sup>.

What motives the Islamic State in carrying out these attacks is their claimed adherence to Salafism. This Islamic revivalist movement is the same one that Wahhabi's claim to follow. From an ideological standpoint, then, both these movements go back to a common Salafist framework, albeit being guilty, once again, of a number of misinterpretations. Traditional Salafism, in fact, is by no means an inherently violent movement. Furthermore, it does not condone terrorism in any form. Takfiris, however, have been classified as a violent offshoot of the latter.

Consequently, there seems to be an extensive ideological overlap between the Wahhabis and the Islamic State. The emphasis given to the concept of *tawhid*<sup>48</sup>, in fact, represents a further element that had been central to al-Wahhab and that was later resumed by the Islamic State. This doctrine, the religion's central and single-most important concept, upon which a Muslim's entire faith rests, unequivocally holds that God is One and Single. Therefore, the Islamic belief in God is considered Unitarian. Both the Wahhabis and the Islamic State, however, have used this doctrine as a justification for fighting other Muslims who, in their eyes, were guilty of practicing idolatry. Similarly, both these groups have systematically resorted to the use of takfirism to carry out indiscriminate attacks on believers who were found violating their doctrines.

Much of the Islamic State's ideology is a direct product of al-Wahhab's extremist interpretation of the central doctrines of Islam. It may be argued that Wahhabism as a movement found a new and reinvigorated expression in the Islamic State, which in turn maintains principles such as *tawhid*, *bid'ah*, and *takfir* central to its extremist and violent ideology.

---

<sup>45</sup>The figure of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab is an extremely interesting one from the standpoint of his religious stance. For a nuanced analysis of his writings see Samer Traboulsi (2002). 'Arabic Literature and Islamic Scholarship in the 17th/18th Century: Topics and Biographies', (Brill).

<sup>46</sup>In Islam, *bid'ah* refers to innovation in religious matters. Linguistically the term means "innovation, novelty, heretical doctrine, heresy". It represents a contentious notion and is central to the religious critique put forth by particularly conservative religious movements.

<sup>47</sup>See Thornhill, Ted (10 March 2015). "ISIS continues its desecration of the Middle East: Islamic State reduces Sufi shrines in Libya to rubble in latest act of mindless destruction". Daily Mail, available online at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2987800>

<sup>48</sup>Tawhid is the indivisible oneness concept of monotheism in Islam.

While the religious interpretations of the Khawarij sect, the Wahhabis, and the Islamic State have much in common, there remains a further characteristic element to all three groups. A political agenda, in fact, has guided and informed much of the decisions taken by the various leaders of these three entities. The Khawarij, as this analysis has previously argued, proved to be guided by a clear political and economic agenda in their fierce opposition to Ali ibn Abi Talib. In fact, they ultimately strived to maintain a high level of political and economic independence owing to their Bedouin status.

Al-Wahhab, accordingly, proved to be driven by a strong will to affirm his territorial control and to ensure that his movement had the necessary protection to do so. In order to achieve this goal, he eventually allied with Muhammad bin Saud<sup>49</sup>, offering political obedience and promising him support through the ideological action of his movement. This allegiance would prove to be extremely durable and successful. The House of Saud, in fact, maintained its religio-political ties to the Wahhabi sect through the eventual proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Today, furthermore, al-Wahhab's teachings are the official, state-sponsored form of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia<sup>50</sup>.

However, it is of particular importance to consider the revivalist phenomenon in regard to Wahhabism. The evidence available, in fact, suggests that the exponential growth of this movement occurred when numerous Saudi charities started funding Wahhabi schools and mosques around the 1970s. Their presence from Islamabad all the way to Culver City, California, allowed a movement that had strong but geographically limited influence to expand greatly and become a trans-national ideology<sup>51</sup>. This, in turn, exponentially augmented the reach of terrorist organisations that share their message through this specific ideological channel, enabling them to become truly global.

The interplay between Wahhabis and the Islamic State, then, is better understood at the ideological level. While both these groups claim to adhere to Salafism, albeit guilty of interpretational aberrations of most of its theological content, it is possible to further classify these distinct entities. According to Oliveti<sup>52</sup>'s position, in fact, takfiris are Wahabi Salafi radicals. According to his definition, takfirist organisations such as the Islamic State distinguish themselves for their practice of labelling targeted groups as infidels before proceeding to killing them, a dynamic this analysis has also aimed to show. To fully understand the Islamic State's ideology, it is ultimately necessary to analyse it in light of both the Salafi framework and the Wahhabi one. The blending of these two traditions, revolving around certain concepts in particular, has in fact found a new and modern expression in the Islamic State's extremist and deeply flawed religious stance.

*Open Letter to al-Baghdadi, the Amman Message, and Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwa regarding Mardin*  
*"Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa concerning Mardin can under no circumstances be appropriated and used as evidence for levelling the charge of kufr (unbelief) against fellow Muslims, rebelling against rulers, deeming game their lives and property or terrorizing those who enjoy safety and security..."*

Thus far, this analysis has attempted to follow a linear and chronological progression. Starting from the concept of takfirism, this paper has aimed at understanding the meaning of such doctrine from both a

---

<sup>49</sup>Muhammad ibn Saud was the emir of Ad-Diriyah and is considered the founder of the First Saudi State and the Saud dynasty, which are technically named after his father – Saud ibn Muhammad ibn Muqrin.

<sup>50</sup> Consult the excellent article by Stephen Schwartz (February 27, 2003). 'Saudi Arabia and the Rise of the Wahhabi Threat', Middle East Forum. The article is available online at <https://www.meforum.org/535/saudi-arabia-and-the-rise-of-the-wahhabi-threat>

<sup>51</sup>For an analysis of Wahhabism consult <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html>

<sup>52</sup>See Vincenzo Oliveti (2002). 'Terror's Source: The Ideology of Salafism and Its Consequences', (Amadeus Books).

theological and a legal perspective. Subsequently, the focus has shifted to the sect of the Kharijites. While providing a historiographical account of the group's evolution, this analysis has also strived to understand its ideological dimension. It is now clear, then, that the Khawarij distinguished themselves for their systematic use of takfirism as a means to justify their attacks on Muslims, both combatants and unarmed, as well as hostility towards non-Muslims. While their actions appeared to be exclusively informed by a rigorous interpretation of certain theological elements, this analysis has shown that such was not the case. This sect had clear political and economic agendas that it aimed to reach through the use of violence. In the attempt to make their crimes appear legitimate, however, they made use of their religious banner - judgement belongs to God alone - as a mere blanket behind which to hide.

Accordingly, this analysis has found ideological similarities between the Khawarij and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Particularly, both completely rejected certain practices that had become widespread in Sunni Islam. Through their emphasis on *tawhid*, their dismissiveness of other Muslims as *shirk*<sup>53</sup>, and, finally, their abusive tendency of declaring *takfir* on all those who were found in disagreement with their creed, both the Khawarij and the Wahhabis have laid the foundation for a hybrid ideology that the Islamic State has fully embraced.

It may be argued that the Islamic State, as the modern-day product of these intellectual traditions, represents an extremely interesting case-study. While there are many existing and important elements in the latter's ideology that deserve full attention, this analysis has decided to focus on takfirism. This choice comes from the realisation, as shown throughout this paper, that the interpretation given to this notion represents a major breach from traditional Sunni precepts, by which the Islamic State claims to abide. While the Amman Message and the Mardin Declaration temporally precede the birth of the Islamic State - June 2014 - they are nonetheless extremely relevant. This is due to the fact that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and subsequently the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)<sup>54</sup>, two organisations that preceded the Islamic State (IS), already existed and characterised their action by applying *takfir* indiscriminately. The Open Letter, on the other hand, was issued directly at Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and offers precious insight into the complex Islamic religious landscape.

Hence, this analysis wishes to initially focus on the Amman Message and the Mardin Declaration. In regard to the latter, however, the paper will consider specifically Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatwa* concerning Mardin. According to many scholars, particularly Trevor Stanley<sup>55</sup>, this *fatwa*<sup>56</sup> created a precedent for the declaration of *takfir* against a leader or ruler, and thus represents the epitomic element on which the modern-day practice of takfirism rests. However, it was resumed in 2010 by a group of Islamic scholars at the Conference of Mardin and thoroughly discussed. The aim of this discussion was ultimately that of putting an end to the abusive use that many terrorist organisations were making of this *fatwa*, through which they were seeking validation for the attacks they were perpetrating on fellow Muslims. This analysis, however, will firstly consider the nature and purpose of the Amman Message.

---

<sup>53</sup>In Islam, shirk is the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism, i.e., the deification or worship of anyone or anything besides the singular God, i.e., Allah. Literally, it means ascribing or the establishment of partners placed beside God. It is the vice that is opposed to the virtue of tawhid (monotheism).

<sup>54</sup>To understand the evolution of the Islamic State, see Megan Specia (March 20, 2019), 'The Evolution of ISIS: From Rogue State to Stateless Ideology', The New York Times. The article is available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/world/middleeast/isis-history-facts-islamic-state.html>

<sup>55</sup>See Trevor Stanley (July-December 2005), 'Definition: Kufr - Kafir - Takfir - Takfiri', Perspectives on World History and Current Events. Available online at <http://www.pwhce.org/takfiri>

<sup>56</sup>A fatwa is a nonbinding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law (sharia) given by a qualified jurist in response to a question posed by a private individual, judge or government. Fatwas have had a recurring importance in the history of the Islamic world.

The latter<sup>57</sup>, in fact, strived to achieve the same goal and started as a detailed statement released on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2004 in Amman, Jordan. King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein<sup>58</sup>, being a strong promoter of inter-faith dialogue, sought to declare what Islam is, as opposed to what it is not. Ultimately, its aim was also that of clarifying the true nature of Islam to the modern world. In order to substantiate this declaration with religious authority, King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein issued three questions to twenty-four prominent Muslim scholars from around the world; these would represent all the branches and schools of Islam. The questions issued inquired specifically on who could be considered a good Muslim and why; if it was indeed possible to declare anyone an apostate – *takfir*; and, finally, on who should hold the right to issue *fatwas* – legal rulings.

Then, in 2005 King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein convened an international Islamic conference in the city of Amman. With an attendance of more than two hundred Muslim scholars from fifty countries around the globe, the conference served to officialise the ruling issued unanimously on the three fundamental questions initially posed. The ‘Three Points of Amman’, as they were later referred to, explicitly forbade the practice of *takfir* between Muslims on the basis of a shared definition of what constitutes a true Muslim. Moreover, they set forth both the subjective and objective preconditions for the issuing of *fatwas*. This resulted in exposing all the illegitimate edicts made in the name of Islam, a practice that the Islamic State was soon to be found guilty of.

Alongside the Mardin Declaration, the Amman Message has openly discredited the use made of takfirism. Both represent an open challenge to the religious interpretations of the Islamic State, just as much as that of many other extremist organisations that characterise themselves for their use of *takfir*. From a wider outlook, however, the challenge that these two events pose has a much deeper reach. While tackling specific theological concepts, in fact, they also undermine jihadist-Salafism as a whole. This transnational religious-political ideology, in fact, is in many ways the foundation on which many of today’s most notorious terrorist organisations stand. Once again, it seems to be the case that any attempt to overpower extremist narratives must aim to succeed at the level of ideas. To do so, however, there is firstly a need to grasp the complexity of the ideologies that guide terrorist organisations. In this regard, *takfirism* represents a central element of the latter. As such, it provides an important opportunity to breach these narratives and compromise the manifestos behind which many criminal acts are perpetrated and justified.

The need for declarations such as the one of Amman is immense, especially in a contemporary geo-political arena that has seen the emergence of so many faith-based terrorist organisations. The Mardin<sup>59</sup> Declaration, then, is arguably even more important than the Amman Message. The primary reason for this is that it tackles an extremely consequential *fatwa* in the attempt to provide an interpretation of the latter that might suit the political and social paradigms of modern-day societies. Furthermore, it directly disputes the way this legal ruling had been used by many extremist groups. To understand the way this was achieved, however, it is firstly necessary to analyse the space-time context of which this *fatwa* was product.

---

<sup>57</sup> The Amman Message is available online at <http://ammanmessage.com/>

<sup>58</sup> Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein has been King of Jordan since 1999. He belongs to the Hashemite family, who have ruled Jordan since 1921 and claim agnatic descent from Muhammad's daughter Fatimah.

<sup>59</sup> Mardin is a city in south-eastern Turkey and capital of Mardin Province.

Ibn Taymiyyah's<sup>60</sup> *fatwa* regarding Mardin was shaped by the Mongol's conquer and destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258. The crucial point of the historiographical account of this *fatwa* is that the Mongols, victorious over the Caliphate, converted to Islam<sup>61</sup>. This aspect is fundamental as it set the stage not only for Ibn Taymiyyah's ruling but created the controversial circumstances through which many of today's jihadist-Salafi organisations portray the theologian as precursor of their own flawed beliefs. As an authoritative religious scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah was called upon to resolve a dispute among the people of Mardin.

Once the Mongols had seized control over the Turkish city, in fact, they started to systematically mistreat its population. The inhabitants of Mardin then turned to Ibn Taymiyyah for his legal verdict on regarding the classification of the territory in which they lived. The scholar reportedly categorized the territory as similar to *dar al-kufr*<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, he ruled that the Mongol leader, Ghazan, was to be declared an unbeliever, together with all those who did not accept the *Shari'ah* in full. Ibn Taymiyyah, seemingly, had declared *takfir* on a leader who had converted to Islam, and was thus a Muslim in all effects. What makes this *fatwa* particularly controversial, however, is not merely the declaration of *takfir* on a fellow Muslim, but its subsequent verdict of *jihad*.

According to the theologian, the people of Mardin were not only encouraged, but required to perform *jihad* on the Mongols. Ibn Taymiyyah deemed this measure necessary as he believed that the foreign invaders were still ruling according to their own, man-made code, called *Yassa*. Hence, they were guilty of not following and applying the dictums of the *Shari'ah*, and, most importantly, did not abide by it themselves. It is sufficiently clear how this event has lent itself to contemporary extremist interpretations of the use of *takfir*, as shown by groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Following Taymiyyah's ruling, in fact, the people of Mardin mobilised against their rulers, with the aim of killing the Mongols and any other Muslim or non-Muslim who sided with them.

The controversy surrounding this *fatwa*, however, manifests itself particularly through the statements of jihadis and Salafis who have misappropriated bits of Ibn Taymiyyah's statements. This resulted in a fundamentalist ideology that had little in common with the works of the aforementioned theologian<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, Pavlin believes that contemporary misinterpretations of Taymiyyah's work came as a result especially of the limited knowledge of his substantial corpus of writings. Extremist narratives, once again, seem to be a product, among other factors, of a general unawareness of the complex and extensive literature of a specific thinker on which they wrongly base their flawed religious assumptions. The answer to these erroneous narratives, accordingly, will only come from those same bodies of work from which some parts have been taken out of context and blended together in order to fuel a specific ideological position.

In 2010, a Peace Summit Conference<sup>64</sup> was held in the city of Mardin. Its objective was to bring together eminent Islamic scholars from around the world to discuss Ibn Taymiyyah's famous *fatwa*. Because of its significant intellectual, civilizational, and symbolic meaning, it was necessary for contemporary Islamic

---

<sup>60</sup> Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, known as Ibn Taymiyyah for short, was a controversial medieval Sunni Muslim theologian, juriconsult, logician, and reformer. For further reading see *Journal for Arab Studies* (Vol. 5/6, 1987-1988).

<sup>61</sup> See Bassiouni, M. Cherif (2013). 'The Shari'a and Islamic Criminal Justice in Time of War and Peace', (Cambridge University Press).

<sup>62</sup> This term can be loosely translated as 'the domain of the unbelievers'.

<sup>63</sup> Taken from Ibn Taymiyyah, Epistle on Worship: Risalat al-'Ubuliyya, tr. James Pavlin (London: Islamic Text Society, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> The analysis of the Conference is available online at <https://www.alhabibali.com/en/news/the-mardin-declaration/>



jurists to review its classification and content. This need stemmed from the understanding that Taymiyyah's space-time context presented extremely different features from those of modern societies. The participants to the Conference came to important conclusions of interest to this analysis.

It was in fact declared forbidden to appropriate and use the *fatwa* as evidence for levelling the charge of apostasy on any Muslim. Accordingly, it was deemed unlawful to declare *takfir* and perpetrate attacks on anyone, Muslim or non-Muslim. This conclusion was reached through the consultation of Taymiyyah's original manuscript and its transmission by Ibn Muflih, one of his students. In accordance with the preceding religious literature produced by Muslim scholars in this regard, the conclusive verdicts reached at the Summit in Mardin allowed for no further possibility of conceptual manipulation. As most radical movements of the last two centuries of Sunni Islam<sup>65</sup>, however, the Islamic State has claimed to consider the Hanbali theologian – Ibn Taymiyyah – as one of its main sources of authority. The group's radicalised interpretation of the latter's writings, however, has been greatly undermined by the conclusions reached at the Mardin Conference.

Both the latter and the Amman Message had aimed to achieve similar goals. Not only did they attempt to clarify the confusion surrounding the use of complex notions such as *takfir* and *kufr*, but they tried to disclose Islam and its essence to the rest of the world. It is important to understand that these two declarations were not limited to the analysis of individual notions or doctrines but tried to provide a cohesive and modern account of the Islamic religion. The Open Letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on the other hand, was much more specific in its scope and reach.

This letter was the product of the joint effort of one hundred and twenty-six Muslim scholars whom listed down more than twenty points of the Islamic State's serious transgression of Islamic teachings. Among these points, this analysis finds the one regarding *takfir* of particular interest. What appears to be peculiar is that this document was not initially aimed to warn al-Baghdadi<sup>66</sup>. On the contrary, the letter was intended to dissuade any potential radical to join the ranks of the Islamic State. Hence, this document represents in its own right an example of what effective strategies for counterterrorism should focus on. It is ultimately to be understood as offering a counter-narrative to the religious misinformation that the Islamic State, just as much as other extremist groups, promotes.

The need for the Open Letter to al-Baghdadi becomes clear when thinking at the excess to which the Islamic State has brought its declarations of *takfir*, an ideological attitude that distinguishes them from other extremist groups. Through the work of Elie Podeh<sup>67</sup> it is possible to grasp the extreme violence that characterises takfiri groups. In his writings, in fact, the latter differentiates between conservative Islamists, "jihadi" Muslims, and takfiri groups, such as the Islamic State or the Taleban. Podeh maintains that jihadis and takfiri groups are similar in their endorsement of an armed struggle against secular regimes. Both, in fact, justify their action on the basis of the same Islamic notions of *jahiliyya*, *al-hakimiyya*, and *al-takfir*<sup>68</sup>.

---

<sup>65</sup>See John Moore 'The Evolution of Islamic Terrorism: An Overview', Frontline. Available online at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/etc/modern.html>

<sup>66</sup>See Samuel Smith (September 25, 2014). 'International Coalition of Muslim Scholars Refute ISIS' Religious Arguments in Open Letter to al-Baghdadi', The Christian Post. The article is available online at <https://www.christianpost.com/news/international-coalition-of-muslim-scholars-refute-isis-religious-arguments-in-open-letter-to-al-baghdadi-127032/>

<sup>67</sup>See 'Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East', edited by Efraim Inbar and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>68</sup>In current use, the term *jahiliyya* refers to secular modernity. It is an important feature in the works of both Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Mawdudi. Radical groups have greatly shaped their manifestos around the ideas of these two thinkers, who represent



What makes takfiri groups unprecedentedly violent and dangerous, according to Podeh's analysis, is their refusal to distinguish between the regime, or the leader authorities of a territory, and the general population. When employing violence, then, these groups operate according to a mutually exclusive black and white worldview – one can either be with them or against them, there is no way in between.

The Open Letter to the Islamic State is thus the attempt to break this dualistic and arbitrary reasoning by tackling the group's ideology. Therein, the section relevant to the use of *takfir* clearly disputes the reading that al-Baghdadi and his followers have given to religious literature and their manipulation of the ideas of some of the most eminent Sunni scholars, both past and contemporary. Quintessentially, the document drafted by the one hundred and twenty-six scholars holds that anyone who performs the *Shahadah*<sup>69</sup> is a Muslim and cannot be declared a non-Muslim. Given the abuses perpetrated by the Islamic State in this regard, then, to clarify the meaning and practice of *takfir* is of the utmost importance. Its wrongful application, as has been seen numerous times, has resulted in the spilling of Muslim and non-Muslim blood, as well as the violation of human sanctity and the usurpation of the wealth and rights of the victims.

### ***The Khawarij Paradigm and its Potential as a Model of Perpetual Decay***

*The word paradigm is used to indicate a pattern or model or an outstandingly clear or typical example or archetype. It is also used in relation to its applicability in identifying worldviews at specific points in history.*

Ultimately, the resurgence of takfirism has increased the analytical complexity of terrorist organisations. The need to add nuance to existing categories has become ever more incumbent. One trend in particular has asked fundamental questions of the wide-spread analytical convictions on which much counter-terrorism policing has been done. A growing number of splintering sub-groups, in origin both Wahhabist and Salafist, have started to develop a new way of establishing *takfir*. By splitting from the orthodox method of declaring apostasy through the established processes of the *Shari'ah*, in fact, these groups have started to arbitrarily claim a direct right to declare *takfir* on Muslims and non-Muslims *ad hoc*. For this reason, some scholars have started referring to these minor groups as Salafi-Takfiris, thus adding ulterior depth to the existing compartmentalisation of the intellectual heritages of terrorist organisations. This new class of extremists, distinguishable for its unprecedented use of *takfir*, is of particular interest to this analysis. The serious threat they pose forces counter-terrorism efforts to inquire into potential factors that may expose these new groups to weaknesses.

Hence, when considering all the possible determinants of the demise of terrorist organisations, this paper wishes to ask the following questions: (1) For those terrorist groups that end owing to internal difficulties, can takfirism be considered as a variable, part of the wider ideological orientation, that is amongst the determinants of the organisation's demise? (2) And, if so, how is its effect of decay set into motion and how does it manifest itself?<sup>70</sup>

---

an important source of authority. the term *al-hakimiyya* can be translated as 'God's sovereignty' and is use as opposing concept to the modern paradigm of people ruling over people. Finally, *al-takfiris* the practice of branding someone as an apostate.

<sup>69</sup>The *Shahadah* is the profession of faith, and one of the Five Pillars of Islam. There are two *Shahadahs*: "There is no god, but God" & "Muhammad is the messenger of God".

<sup>70</sup>This section relies on the work of Khusrav Gaibulloev and Todd Sandler. For further reference see *Southern Economic Journal* (Vol. 79, No. 4, April 2013).

The research carried out, however, has identified three elements as clear limiting factors to the possibility of providing a certain answer to both points (1) and (2). Firstly, there does not seem to be a considerable body of literature devoted to this specific issue. Secondly, in regard to the few and scattered existing work which is relevant to the aims of this analysis it is difficult to convincingly ascertain the reliability and legitimacy of the data used to reach any analytical conclusion<sup>71</sup>. Finally, given the nature of the focus point of this particular research, obtaining new and reliable empirical data is especially complex due to the fact that the practice of takfirism is not, in most cases, a self-applied label. Accordingly, to categorise a group as takfiri requires evidence that is not easy to gather.

For the moment, the need to observe these groups and gather data supersedes the need to reach conclusions, albeit even temporary ones. Conversely, the information gathered on the Islamic State's relation to its use of *takfir* is sufficiently widespread and corroborated. This paper will then consider the latter group, and from the particular it hopes to reach a more general conclusion on whether takfirism might be considered a determinant to the potential demise of this organisation.

There are several terrorist groups that resemble one another for their application of *takfir* and, as mentioned earlier, are referred to as Wahabi-Salafists, or in more recent times as Salafi-Takfiris. Amongst these, some of the most notorious are the Taliban - Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), Boko Haram - The Islamic State in West Africa or the Islamic State's West Africa Province (abbreviated as ISWA or ISWAP), al-Shabab - Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (HSM), Sepah-e Sahaba – renamed to Millat-e-Islamia but also known as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (SSP), and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi – an offshoot of SSP (LeJ)<sup>72</sup>. While these groups represent compelling case-studies of takfirism as a potential product of ideological infighting, this paper wishes to focus on the Islamic State. With enough information and data collected on the latter's activities, it is possible to theorize a tentative model – the result of the correlation between disputes surrounding takfirism and internal ideological rifts.

Based on the recent analysis carried out by Bunzel, in fact, it is possible to start foreseeing a new pattern based on the fluid dynamic between the Islamic State's territorial successes and failures and, consequently, the overall strength and health-state of its ideology. To ascertain an existing direct proportionality between the two variables is of interest only in part to this analysis. While it certainly represents an extremely important finding, the focus herein is to determine the impact that takfirism has had in the history of the ideological infighting within the group. Ultimately, this will be revealing of the determinant effect that such concept might have in the demise of the latter<sup>73</sup>. This variable, however, will be considered in a discrete-time specification, so as to circumscribe its analytical framework that would otherwise be too broad and dispersive.

Through the gathering and cross-analysis of numerous leaked documents and other sources in Arabic, a compelling image of the state of health of the Islamic State has emerged. Since its declaration of the caliphate, in fact, the organisation has been marked by disagreements concerning doctrinal matters. Ultimately, this has led to fierce ideological infighting among different wings within the group. While intellectual disagreement has constellated its evolution, the Islamic State has witnessed two important recorded moments in regard to its infighting.

---

<sup>71</sup> See David B. Carter (30 January 2012). 'A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups', (Vol. 66, Issue 1). Available online at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/blessing-or-a-curse-state-support-for-terrorist-groups/>

<sup>72</sup> Consult RAND, available online at <https://www.rand.org/>

<sup>73</sup> See *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 13, No. 1, February 2019).

The first outburst of internal disputes culminated in 2014 with the execution of a number of scholars and activists who were deemed to be too extreme<sup>74</sup>. With a potential ideological rift starting to create, it is important to point out that there have been other key factors that have contributed to the loss of a sense of equilibrium within the group<sup>75</sup>. Particularly, questions about differing personalities and choices made in matters of grand strategy concurred to exacerbate internal tensions. The issue regarding how the group's ideology ought to be approached, however, has been and remains the critical factor. While it is not possible to ascertain whether this conflictual situation will persist, the failure to settle internal differences will result in the fragmentation of the group.

The second major ideological paroxysm culminated in 2016 and was extremely consequential. The increase of the existing disputes, in fact, led to declarations of *takfir* being levelled at internal members of the organisation, as well as the exclusion of several officials from the Islamic State's executive council. These, ultimately, defected the group and fled its ranks. From the information that has been leaked, however, it appears that those remaining are disaffected. While some believe that the organisation has become too moderate, others blame it of excessive extremism<sup>76</sup>. The first and second ideological rifts created as a result of infighting, however, had different focus points.

The first reported internal clash seems to have been caused by profound theological disagreements over the understanding and application of *takfir*. The second infighting, on the other hand, ended with accusations of *takfir* being aimed at various scholars and activists within the group. While it will be necessary to analyse the specific contexts that shaped these two distinct events, it is already possible to see an underlying tension that unites them. In fact, the initial tension created by what seemed to be an eminently intellectual dispute resolved itself in the actuation of that same theological proposition – declarations of apostasy - that, until that moment, had been relegated to a purely conversational level.

*Takfir*, understood as part of a wider intellectual dispute, appears to have had a deep impact on the group. While its first concrete influence has been that of causing the emergence of relatively competing factions within the Islamic State, as well as strategic executions, the disagreements surrounding takfirism ended up causing an irremediable ideological rift within the organisation. In turn, this led to the defection of several high-ranking officials, posing a serious threat to the structural cohesiveness of the latter. Having thus provided a general outline in the evolution of the dispute surrounding the aforementioned notion, it is necessary to go into the theological background that has shaped the internal debate.

This may be revealing of the depth to which the doctrine of takfirism has rooted itself within the group's ideology and, in turn, the impact it could have to the organisation's structure if the dispute around it is not settled.

The 2014 infighting episode was, fundamentally, a result of two competing propositions within Sunni Islamic thought. The first imperative holds that it is prohibited to wrongfully excommunicate fellow Muslims. Furthermore, it clearly states that any misplaced accusation of apostasy will backfire on the accuser. The section of this paper relevant to the content-meaning of takfirism has already dived into the various dimensions and implications of such practice.

---

<sup>74</sup>See Cole Bunzel (January 29, 2013). 'Jihadism's Widening Internal Divide: Intellectual Infighting Heats Up', (Jihadica). Article available online at <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadism's-widening-internal-divide-intellectual-infighting-heats-up/>

<sup>75</sup>See Cole Bunzel (2015). 'From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State', (Brookings Institute).

<sup>76</sup>For more information on the Islamic State's ideology see Hassan Hassan (June 2016). 'The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context', (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). The PDF is available online at [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_253\\_Hassan\\_Islamic\\_State.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_253_Hassan_Islamic_State.pdf)

Having moved from an exclusively theoretical scenario, however, it is now possible to start deducing the practical implications of having different understandings of takfirism, as it emerges from the case of the Islamic State.

The second Sunni imperative on *takfir*, on the other hand, is primarily associated with the Wahhabi movement. Being a much more extreme position in its understanding of apostasy, some scholars within the Islamic State have been strictly adhering to a short treatise written by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab called “The Nullifiers of Islam”<sup>77</sup>. In this work, al-Wahhab articulates his interpretation of the doctrine of takfirism. Accordingly, this has shaped the ideological stance of its more extreme promoters within the organisation.

Hence, it seems that the re-appropriation of the concept of *takfir* by the Islamic State has come at great cost. The difficulty in establishing an ideological impairment in regard to such doctrine has led to an increasingly profound fracture between various adherents to the group. Furthermore, the volatile nature of takfirism, particularly in its interpretative difficulty, has ultimately put the group’s leadership under great pressure<sup>78</sup>. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in fact, has been unable to find common ground and resolve the issue in a definite way. For the time being, his choice of papering over the differing ideological stances is nothing but a palliative and may not represent a feasible action line in the future. Furthermore, his inability to bring the various sides closer has left these feeling deeply resentful of each other.

Accordingly, this current state of things gives reason to believe that, if not resolved, the contentiousness surrounding the group’s position on *takfir* may become the key cause to its fragmentation. Hence, while a full-scale structural breakup is still far in the making, it is possible to distinguish a clear fractural dynamic within the Islamic State.

Bunzel’s work, then, provides an extremely precious insight into the current ideological battle being fought within the Islamic State. The data therewith gathered unequivocally points to the importance that the group has given to its theological and, consequently, ideological orientation. Furthermore, Bunzel suggests that there is a correlation between the organisation’s success or failure on the ground<sup>79</sup>, and the apparition of internal infighting.

This analysis, however, finds the latter claim particularly interesting for a less obvious reason. The Islamic State, according to this finding, places great importance on its religious-based ideological orientation. Setbacks experienced through the loss of territory, particularly in Syria and Iraq between 2016 and 2017, have exacerbated and intensified theological debates within the organisation. As mentioned earlier in this section, moreover, the theological conundrum around which most fighting has been done is *takfir*. This factor becomes ever-more significant if one thinks that the defeats suffered on the field never caused the questioning of the group’s strategy and policy before that of its ideological stance.

The Islamic State might then represent a model to understand the way in which internal disagreements over a doctrine as unpredictable and fickle as takfirism causes its application to literally backfire. As argued in this section, the disruptive potential of such a doctrine might lead to the fragmentation of the initial group. However, this analysis understands that there is currently no data to substantiate the claim

---

<sup>77</sup> See Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz (March 5, 2019). ‘Explanation of the Nullifiers of Islam’ – Independently published.

<sup>78</sup> For a more general reading on the competing ideological frameworks see Jeevan Deol, Zaheer Kazmi (1 February 2012). ‘Contextualising Jihadi Thought’, (Oxford University Press).

<sup>79</sup> For further information see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (January 4, 2019). ‘Dissent in the Islamic State: Hashimi Advice’ to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’, aymennjawad.org. Available online at <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22199/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-hashimi-advice-to>

that takfirism certainly leads to a potential group's internal infighting and ultimately to its structural collapse. Notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to speculatively think of it as a potential determinant to the demise of terrorist organisations. Moreover, the declarations of apostasy made by the various factions within the Islamic State have given way to what could be a perpetual pattern. In other words, a first reported proclamation of *takfir* results in a same but opposite accuse. Given the multifaceted nature of the existing literature on takfirism, then, ascertaining the right interpretation becomes harder than pronouncing it, as has been reported happening in the Islamic State.

Ultimately, the spiral of accuses may go on *ad infinitum* and result in the complete annihilation of a faction or, on the other hand, a mass defection and thus the splintering of the initial group. It remains to be seen which path the Islamic State will ultimately follow. However, this analysis has strived to show that the importance given by the latter to the doctrine of *takfir* revealing of how determining this concept can be to the group's demise. According to the findings of Blomberg, Gaibulloev, and Sandler<sup>80</sup>, in fact, the splintering of a terrorist group has direct bearing on its survival. In other words, fragmentation of an initial nucleus is symptomatic of its ultimate demise. And while the Islamic State might experience structural changes that will have a deep impact on its chance of survival, it is certain that the concept of *takfir* will have a part to play in it. For this reason, it would prove beneficial to consider the latter as a concurring determinant to the possible demise of the Islamic State, and thus aim to grasp all its complexities in order to offer effective counter-narratives based on its interpretative inconsistencies and impact<sup>81</sup>.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

This analysis does not claim to provide final answers to the questions posed by the ideological infighting of the Islamic State. Furthermore, it is fully aware that numerous of the topics and issues touched upon throughout the various sections require more extensive consideration. However, the hope of this paper was, first and foremost, to outline the vast and intricate conceptual locus that informs the ideological discussion currently present in the Islamic State. While the group's evolution is continuing, it is only possible to speculatively think about what its trajectory might be, and what determinants will contribute to its potential demise. More simply, the aim of this paper has been that of showing how the way we perceive a problem might be itself part of the problem.

Accordingly, the belief that the theological dimension of the Islamic State's ideology, in all its doctrinal complexities, is marginal in informing the group's actions and grand strategy is deeply mistaken. This analysis has in fact shown the contrary – in times of ground defeat and territorial loss, leading figures have put into question the organisation's ideology before its strategy. Therefore, we must rethink the role played by contentious doctrinal elements, such as takfirism in the case relevant to the Islamic State. Given its potential for creating internal ideological rifts and structural destabilization, the notion of *takfir* must be made use of and inform new and targeted counter-narratives and strategic policies. In order to do so effectively, however, multifaceted notions such as the latter must firstly be analysed in depth. Only a clear understanding of the single elements that shape a wider ideology can lead to weakening the message it tries to promote.

---

<sup>80</sup> For the complete statistical analysis see *Southern Economic Journal*, (Vol. 79, No. 4, April 2013). Moreover, see *Journal of Monetary Economic* (Vol. 51, February 2014).

<sup>81</sup> See Cole Bunzel (June 5, 2018). 'A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Internal Divide', (Jihadica). Article available online at <http://www.jihadica.com/divine-test-or-divine-punishment/>



This paper has thus attempted to provide a general overview of the concept of *takfir* in regard to its content as much as the history of its application - takfirism has certainly represented a paradigm through its first recorded Khawarij manifestation. Particularly, the concept of *takfir* helped shape a dualistic, black-and-white worldview which now appears to have re-emerged. To successfully resist this neo-takfiri ideology, it becomes pivotal to look back and consider its history and evolution. We could end up finding that what determined its defeat then might just be enough to cause its collapse now.

Photo credit: Daily Motion

*ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

# ABOUT ITCT

ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

ITCT conducts a comprehensive research to find out the key elements that draw the most vulnerable people of the society into the fire of religious extremism. ITCT works on three main factors in order to educate the Muslim community:

- That Islamist Terrorism is wrongly associated with Islam
- And is committed by misguided Muslims
- By manipulating religious texts to brainwash Muslims

## ITCT has three pillars to stand on:

- **MISSION**

Countering Islamist Terrorism

- **VISION**

Educating Muslim Community

- **OBJECTIVE**

Providing the Solution of Islamist Terrorism

ITCT is an independent organisation that generates funds through donations. ITCT warmly welcomes talented writers, researchers and experts and would like to publish their work.