The Evolution of Kufr, Takfir and Jihad

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Following the declaration of the Islamic State's (henceforth IS) caliphate in June 2014, critics have attributed their behaviour to a combination of barbarism, and their self-appointed role as the saviours of Islam. [1] The fixation on their archaic nature has produced numerous accounts that document the group's 'evil' nature through their ignorance toward what are and, inadvertently, are not, permissible forms of conduct and target in warfare – explained by a seemingly false reading of Islam. [2] There are multiple flaws with such narratives, per the author's argument. Denying the Islamic character of the group engages in a sort of 'liberal takfīr', to quote McCarthy [3], dictating who is and is not considered Muslim in accordance with perceptions of correct and incorrect (Islamic) belief. Secondly, these accounts impose a particular view of legitimate and illegitimate violence. Subsequently, because IS do not subscribe to the laws of warfare conceptualized in Western countries, their actions are seemingly beyond logical explanation. [4] This ignores the modus operandi of violent terrorist groups which, put simply, is to target non-combatants for political gain. [5]

Through the use of takfīr which, for definitional purposes, is the excommunication of Muslims, IS places those threatening to its existence beyond Islamic legal protections – in essence, justifying their death(s). [6] By dictating who can and cannot die by the sword, based on an individual and/or group's threat perception, IS operates as the judge of correct, and inadvertently, 'incorrect' Islamic belief system(s). Takfīr thus performs a dual function as both a legal and theological justification for the use of lethal violence against Muslims. [7]

In order to understand how IS justifies lethal violence against Muslims, the concept of takfīr requires close analysis. The forthcoming section situates itself away from traditional debates on the concept, to ones focused on the practice of jihād – the reason for which can be explained by the former's focus on the legality of who can and cannot declare takfīr. The aforementioned argument immediately discredits IS's mobilization of takfīr, thus failing to understand their particular reading of religious concepts, and how they are utilised in the service of violence. The mobilization of takfīr as a punishment for unbelief, the author argues, coincides with the shift in meaning of *kufr*'s root KFR through the various Meccan periods described in the Quran. The foremost section will function as a sort of close reading of relevant theological figures in IS; of interest are those responsible for formulating and adopting takfīr as the prescribed punishment for unbelief in IS.

The Evolution of *Kufr*

Through a chronological approach to the Quran and Meccan periods, the progression of *kufr*'s root KFR is visible. [8] Understanding this evolution is key for 'post-Quranic Islamic thought'; that is, *kufr*'s shift in meaning and how it influences its modern-day understanding and use. [9]

In the first Meccan period, the kafir is the one who fails to act as a Muslim should. This suggests he is ungrateful towards Allah, despite what He has given him:

"Some faces on that Day shall be dust-ridden, enveloped by darkness. These are the ungrateful, the wicked." (Q. 80: 40-2).

In this example, *kufr* describes the condition of those that lie and commit wrong doings. The kafir's heart is covered by his ungratefulness, though this does not translate as unbelief. [10] The meaning of *kufr* relates to the mistaken and ignorant nature of certain believers. They are unappreciative of Allah, His message and what He has given them.

While the kafir's ungratefulness in the first Meccan period is a reflection of ignorance, in the second, it is the result of exposure to un-Islamic practices and beliefs. *Kufr* thus incorporates polytheism (shirk) to its meaning. [11] This is evident in the following:

"I do not worship those that you worship, neither do you worship Him Whom I worship." (Q. 109: 2-3).

The kafir is separated from the true believers for looking beyond Allah and seeking alternatives to Islam. [12] Of interest here is the addition of belief into *kufr*'s definition; it is not just what an individual does, but what they feel, that can be judged as *kufr*. [13] Though ingratitude is still relevant, the nature of the kafir shifts from ungratefulness for what He has given him, to actively looking for alternatives to Islam and its prescriptions.

Kufr's meaning further transitions in the third Meccan period. The focus is not so much on what a kafir is; rather, why the kafir becomes *kufr*. [14] This is context-specific, relating to the *Hijra* (migration) to Medina in 622 CE, and the incorporation of those hostile to Muhammad into the fold of Islam. [15] *Kufr*, here, no longer indicates that one is ungrateful for Allah, nor does the kafir conflate Him with someone else; the focus is, rather, the hypocrisy of those who claim to be Muslim. Put differently, *kufr* is henceforth a charge rendered against those who do not obey God perfectly – their *iman* (belief) is impure and, ultimately, fails to mask their enmity toward the religion. The following is indicative of the aforementioned argument:

"And recite to them [O Muhammad] the story of the man to whom We gave Our signs and who turned away from them; then ultimately Satan caught up with him and he was led astray." [Q. 7: 175]

The kafir attempts to conceal his disdain for the religion by covering his true feelings; seeking to undermine the religion from within. For that reason, the 'true' believers seek to identify and remove such individuals and groups from the *umma*. If one follows the chronology of the Quran, *kufr*'s root KFR has shifted from a term implying ungratefulness on the part of the believer, to *kufr* as shirk, to its final conception as the hypocrite who says he is Muslim, but is not. [16] This context is essential for understanding takfīr.

Kufr as grounds for Takfīr

The impact of this shift is evident in takfīr becoming the proscribed punishment for *kufr*. By focusing solely on the latter Meccan period's understanding of *kufr*, legal scholars – particularly in the medieval period – believed it to define unbelief, negating the context behind its use against those hostiles to Muhammad in Medina, rather than Muslims who followed alternative understandings of Islam. [17]

Based on the former's understanding, legal scholars have developed the framework of apostasy in conjunction with impure belief.

It is at this junction that *kufr* meets takfīr and jihād. *Kufr* is essentially 'a trigger for takfīr', if one follows the argument forwarded by Nagata. [18] Accusations of unbelief result in 'threatening' individuals and/or groups losing their Islamic status; subsequently, they are no longer privy to the legal protections provided by virtue of being Muslim. [18] Takfīr considers the kafir to, ad infinitum, both resist God's sovereignty, and pose an active threat to Islam. [19] By drawing imaginary boundaries between true believers and all others, takfīr becomes a form of 'sinless sin' whereby the dissolution of legal barriers renders permissible lethal violence, broadly speaking, against 'Muslims.' [20] The regulations surrounding the proclamation of jihād are suspended to counter the threat posed by Muslims whose Islamic status has been removed, voluntarily or involuntarily. Their (read: the Islamic State, their supporters, and territorial occupation) survival, they argue, is dependent upon the use of the sword; to ensure the dissolution of any potential threats to the group. [21] Without takfīr, jihād still contains an element of morality. [22]

The combination of *kufr*, takfīr and jihād has, here, produced a seemingly legal and theological justification for lethal violence against Muslims. *Kufr*'s interpretive nature means it can be readily abused against one's enemy, for the idea of correct and incorrect belief is entirely personal. [23] Defining one's *iman* as incorrect suggests they are betrayers of the faith and threatening to the *umma*'s existence. [24] Whilst it is impermissible to declare jihād upon, or fight against, fellow Muslims, the declaration of takfīr removes the legal protections associated with being Muslim and thus permits ('legally', not morally speaking) the use of lethal violence. [25] This, per the author's argument, provides an adequate explanation of the violence IS commits against Muslims for their failure to follow their specific reading of Islam, and the threat they subsequently pose, to this 'community.' Death, henceforth, becomes the tactic of choice to ensure the *umma*'s survival and purity. [26] The logic behind takfīr's operationalization is inherently necropolitical, for it is dependent on an imagined dichotomy between their version of Islam, and all others. [27] Moreover, this idea of a threat to IS concerns the socio-political context in which the group finds itself: the 'enemy' is not just those who follow a different version of Islam, but rather, those who challenge their existence and belief system.

The Boundaries of Takfīr in IS

Also, worth investigation is who, in IS, defines the boundaries of takfīrism. As demonstrated throughout the course of this article, IS are concerned with explaining the legal background for their actions. [28] The most relevant institution for the use of takfīr is the Shura Council. [29] Its duties involve ensuring the law they have prescribed is followed by the various institutions in their bureaucracy. [30] The group's ability to proscribe takfīr is dependent on its formulation by religious clerics and their understanding of unbelief.

The primary contribution of scholars is their dismissal of jihād as da'wah (read: preaching), focusing instead on its militaristic element. [31] Sinful Muslims are assimilated into the category of unbeliever, permitting the application of Quranic passages relating to jihād against non-Muslims to impious, nominal Muslims. [32] One such influence is al-Naji, who outlined the necessity of jihād based on the enemy's

dismissal of God's oneness. [33] The principle reason for their excommunication is, per IS's line of argumentation, their 'un-Islamic' ways (read: dismissal of the group) and repudiation of tawhid (disavowed oneness of God) outlined in both Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines. [34] The threat and enmity toward these 'Muslims' must be reflected in their rejection of, and use of violence against, those who threaten Islam. [35] Takfīr and jihād, in this scenario, operate as a dual-justification for the use of violence to purify the *umma* of those threatening to it, and return to the ways of the most pious Muslims. [36]

Said theologians also outline permissible forms of violence. For al-Muhajir and al-Rashed, amongst others, the spilling of infidel blood is permissible by any means, including beheading. [37] While acknowledging the theorised 'deviance' of their enemies, especially the Shī'as, such violence is not always justified or beneficial. For some scholars, deviance indicates such Muslims are misguided in their beliefs, not inherently un-Islamic. [38] This demonstrates the willingness, and justifies the criticisms, of IS adopting an extreme reading of an already extreme typology of violence. [39] The decision of IS's religious clerics, including Turki al-Binali, to declare takfīr upon fellow Muslims is a reflection of the socio-political and 'religious' threat they pose to the caliphate or, put differently, the existence of IS's creed. [40]

These arguments should not suggest IS adopts ad hoc takfīrism. Its mobilization is dependent on the sociopolitical context that allows this logic to gain traction and support. For those utilising takfīr as a response to claims of Islamic illegitimacy and misinterpretation, they are both confirming the idea of a correct orthodoxy, and simultaneously producing its opposite. The ability to define correct and incorrect orthodoxy is based on the power of those creating it, rather than the nature of the beliefs themselves. [41] Takfīr operates as a (theological) control mechanism to be used against those who have aggrieved, and pose a risk to, the survival of particular groups (read: IS). [42] By appealing to these grievances, microcommunities of jihādis justify takfīr as a means of removing said threats. [43] While jihād is the operationalization of legitimate violence against non-Muslims, mobilizing takfīr – removing a Muslim's Islamic status – means jihād, in its militaristic sense, is viewed as a form of 'legitimate' violence against 'Muslims.' The necropolitical logic of takfīr exists in that the menacing 'Other' is situated outside the confines of deserving life based on their behaviour and/or membership of a specific, seemingly threatening group. The label *kufr* not only places them outside the fold of Islam, but categorises them as a direct threat to Allah and His sovereignty, appearing to justify the use of extreme modalities of violence. This is entirely dependent on what an individual, or group, categorises as unbelief.

This essay has functioned as a sort of brief exegetical genealogy of *kufr*, takfīr and jihād – and how the aforementioned concepts have, through time, shifted. Understanding this genealogy is essential to interpreting and, as such, better understanding IS's particular, seemingly theological, justification for the use of violence against fellow Muslims. Such argumentation rests on particularly nuanced, and entirely subjective, understandings of belief and, inadvertently, unbelief. In essence, understandings of unbelief are constituted (read: dictated) by perceptions of threat; actors that are dismissive of, or in opposition to, IS's particular worldview and belief system, constitute unbelief.

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

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[4] Revkin, "The legal foundations", pp. 5-6.

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[7] Alshammari, "*Takfīr* and Terrorism", pp. 58-9.

[8] As Waldman, Marilyn Robinson. (1968) "The Development of the Concept of Kufr in the Qur'ān", <u>Journal of American Oriental Society</u>, 88(3): pp. 443 argues, a chronological approach such as this depends on the verses in the Qur'ān being arranged in the right order.

[9] Waldman, "The Development", pp. 443.

[10] Waldman, "The Development", pp. 444.

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[17] Nagata, "Assessing apostasy", pp. 25, 74; Waldman, "The Development."

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To expand on necropolitics, concerned with the relationship between power, sovereignty and death. Mbembe (2003) argues that controlling threatening populations cannot be achieved through biopower alone; death is a necessary control mechanism for the sovereign. Necropolitics thus permits the killing of those who threaten the population's homogeneity and stability. This is established through the creation of the 'living-dead'; the intermediary between life and death. The 'living-dead' are reduced to non-life, justifying the decision to kill them (Mbembe, 2003; Raja 2005; Wilcox 2017). Death, for necropolitics, operates as a form of population management: populations cannot flourish in the presence of those who challenge their existence.

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