V. Editorial Notes

Op-Ed: Challenging Jihadi Chains of Authorization (ijazat)

by Philipp Holtmann

Jihadis, especially those who belong to the Islamic State (IS) – extremists among extremists – often uphold outlandish Islamic legal opinions based on classical precedents that are basically absent in mainstream Sunni theology. Nevertheless, with these ideological-theological discourses jihadis are able to build protean networks. The discourses are disseminated through authorizations (*ijazat*) among the ideologues, who allow each other to distribute and teach their opinions. They cite these authorizations among their networks as a way to demonstrate erudite knowledge, and to honor each other, as well as to legitimize their leaders.

For a better understanding of this issue we first need to recall that jihadi theology is grossly under-researched, especially when it comes to such intricate but immensely important details as scholarly authorizations *(ijazat)*. A rare exception is the scholar of Islamic studies Rüdiger Lohlker from Vienna University. Lohlker recently wrote an article in German in which he elaborates on an argument he has already highlighted in 2011. He approaches the study of Islamic authority and leadership from a sociological point of view, using the concept of "symbolic capital" introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to show how Islamic learning and legal authority are organized by *ijazat* from elder sheikhs, who allow subordinate sheikhs to distribute certain texts and to disseminate certain legal views.

This method of authorization is also extremely important within jihadi subculture, since it creates social, cultural and economic capital. It produces pure power that bolsters the jihadi scene from within and without. Ideological leaders cite authorizations by other authorities to teach and to disseminate their bodies of works and the works they favor. In turn, subordinates distribute these shariatic ideas and visions in terms of ideological, tactical and strategic guidelines in a coordinated manner, so that donors and converts are attracted to support these networks. All forms of capital are interconnected and can reinforce each other.

By displaying such authorizations, for example on their websites, jihadi ideologues show how connected and knowledgeable they are, thereby parading how much social and cultural capital within their circles they possess. Beyond the structuring of Islamic networks in terms of knowledge, respect and influence, these *ijazat* create clear hierarchies as well. One example is the Austrian Muhammad Mahmud (aka Abu Usama al-Gharib), who left Germany for Syria in 2013 and recently married a high-ranking female propagandist in the Syrian ISIS-stronghold al-Raqqa. Al-Gharib has collected international *ijazat* from at least six jihadi and salafi authorities from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and Morocco—respected figures in Islamic law and in the hadith sciences (oral transmissions of Islamic tradition). Such authorizations allow Mahmud in turn to issue authorizations to distribute his own knowledge—a patchwork of opinions he holds on the strengths of the other scholars—to the leaders of the German jihad network "al-Tauhid," using his *nom de guerre* Abu Ibrahim.

Sharia—also known as "Islamic Law"—is not a monolithic body of law, comparable to European Civil Law or Anglo-Saxon Statutory Law. Rather, it is a matter of Islamic legal interpretation (*fiqh*). As Rüdiger Lohlker notes, most jihadis of IS perform a kind of Islamic legal archeology, which serves to create a halo of Islamic authenticity: IS scholars dig out old stories, opinions and precedents from the vast corpus of interpretations of original sources [the Quran and stories on the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (sunnah)] which fit their worldviews. Yet those archeological findings have been largely forgotten, or are even discarded by more mainstream Sunni Islamic scholars. Examples are the throwing of homosexuals from the

top of high buildings, or the killing of prisoners of war. Precedents of both can be found in some older legal discussions, but not in modern Islamic theological discourses. Nevertheless IS appropriates such sidelined opinions from the past and tries to re-anchor them in post-modernity; a tool to achieve this is widespread Internet propaganda. Legitimacy derives, in their view, from chains of *ijazat* among leading Islamic scholars. These scholars present themselves and their interpretations of Islamic law as infallible, claiming to represent Allah's divine guidance (*hidaya*).

Specifically Jihadi subculture tries to present itself as true, original and traditional, by using the Islamic method of authorization and legitimation to attract followers and convert them to their point of view, which places greater importance to life in paradise than on earth. Ultimately, *ijazat* among and between jihadi ideologues and authorities are directly linked to issues of leadership and organization, power and authority within jihadi groups, and last but not least, to corresponding actions in the form of acts of terrorism and war crimes.

Such chains of permission in the jihadi sharia, however, can only be challenged from within mainstream Islamic thinking. The standard "selling points" of Western civilization—human rights, freedom and equality, rule of law and democracy—have for many Muslims lost much of their persuasiveness due to unholy alliances of Western powers with Muslim autocrats and due to double standards in Western foreign and domestic policies. Yet, the West still has one major possible ally: the tens of millions of Muslims who live in the West and have, with very few exceptions, accepted democracy and the separation of state and religion. They have developed a more moderate interpretation of Islam, for which there are also historical precedents and theological authorities. These can be revived and mobilized and thrown into the struggle against jihadi and extremist-salafi sharia interpretations within which the (thus far unchallenged) *ijazat*-chains of permission and authorization play a crucial role. A reformation of Islam, based on alternative Islamic traditions, might in the end come from Muslims in the West, rather than from Muslims in the heartlands that are currently caught in internecine struggles between Shias and Sunnis.

About the Author: **Dr. Philipp Holtmann** *is a specialist on Islam in the Middle East and in Europe and an expert on Israeli and Palestinian society, history and politics. He also researches contemporary populist movements in Europe. Philipp Holtmann received his PhD from the University of Vienna and has lived and worked for several years in the Middle East.*