

# Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State

By Cole Bunzel

## Abstract

Drawing on leaked documents and other original sources in Arabic, this article examines the internal struggles over defining the Islamic State's ideology during the period 2014 to the present. Since the Islamic State declared the caliphate in summer 2014, disagreements over doctrinal matters—primarily related to *takfir* (excommunication)—have sparked furious debates among different factions of the group. The earliest bout of infighting culminated in 2014 in the execution of a number of “extremist” scholars and activists. Infighting would reemerge in 2016, however, and grow increasingly more contentious, leading to the release of dueling pronouncements on *takfir*, the dismissal of numerous officials in the Islamic State's executive council, and later their defection and flight from the group. The disaffected include both those who believe the group has become too extreme and those who believe it has become too moderate. The ideological incoherence in the Islamic State may well affect its long-term prospects.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, jihadism, ideology, theology

## Introduction

Beginning in 2013, it became increasingly clear that al-Qaida and the Islamic State were deeply divided over ideology, each representing a competing strand of the ideological movement known as Jihadi Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*).[1] As the Islamic State of Iraq restyled itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, then the Islamic State in full caliphal garb, its ties with al-Qaida unraveled and the ideological fissures in Jihadi Salafism, once held in abeyance, came rushing to the fore.[2]

The Islamic State, representing the more hardline wing of the jihadi movement, accordingly embraced a more doctrinally exclusivist brand, encouraging *takfir* (excommunication) of Muslims deemed insufficiently pure in regard of *tawhid* (monotheism). The Taliban, for instance, once the vaunted ally and defender of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida, was cast as beyond the pale: a “nationalist” movement all too tolerant of the heretical Shi'a. [3] Even the Islamic State's jihadi competitors in al-Qaida could be targets of *takfir*. In a 2015 statement, for instance, the Islamic State pronounced Jabhat al-Nusra, then al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, an apostate group;[4] a subsequent statement in 2016 established that the charge of apostasy applied to both the group as a whole and its individual members.[5] Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was generally spared explicit accusations of unbelief, but nonetheless was frequently derided as wayward and misguided.[6] In May 2014, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the Islamic State's official spokesman until his death in August 2016, called on al-Zawahiri to “correct” (*tashih*) his “methodology” (*manhaj*) by publicly condemning the Shi'a as unbelievers and being clearer about the infidel nature of the military forces of the Middle East's apostate regimes.[7] In saying this, al-'Adnani was distinguishing the Islamic State from al-Qaida ideologically. The ideological discrepancy between the two groups was soon confirmed when al-Zawahiri portrayed the Islamic State as “Kharijites,” “*takfir*is,” and “extremists.”[8]

In distancing itself from al-Qaida, the Islamic State was adopting a distinctly rigid and uncompromising version of Jihadi Salafism around which its members and supporters could rally and unite. Yet ideological differences within the Islamic State itself were no small matter, and soon these began manifesting in controversy and dissent. Indeed, ideological infighting in the Islamic State has been rampant, with serious consequences for the group's unity and even perhaps its long-term survivability. Until recently, little was known about the precise nature, extent, and severity of these disputes, as the group's leadership sought to keep them under wraps. Over the past year and more, however, leaked documents and other sources have emerged that allow us to give an account of these ideological quarrels and to see where they might be headed.[9]

### ***Theological Background***

First, it will be helpful to begin by introducing something of the theological background against which these wars over *takfir* have been fought. Of greatest importance are two competing imperatives in Sunni Islamic thought, one discouraging *takfir* and one encouraging and even requiring it.

The first imperative is deeply rooted in Sunni tradition. It is the general prohibition against wrongfully excommunicating fellow Muslims, combined with the warning that misplaced accusations of unbelief will boomerang on the accuser. The prohibition is grounded in a number of *hadith*, or prophetic statements, in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have cautioned against *takfir* and pointed to the potential boomerang effect. According to one such statement, found in the most authoritative Sunni *hadith* collections, the Prophet declared, “If a man says to his brother, ‘O unbeliever,’ it redounds upon one of them.”[10] The implication is clear: Do not call someone an unbeliever unless you are absolutely certain.

The second imperative also has deep roots in Sunni tradition but is primarily associated with the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism, a Sunni revivalist movement founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, historically has been concerned above all with the distinction between pure monotheism (*tawhid*) and polytheism (*shirk*). To enforce the distinction, the Wahhabis decreed that those seen as committing polytheistic acts—in the traditional Wahhabi view, acts such as calling upon or seeking the aid of saints or prophets—must be declared unbelievers. In other words, *takfir* of polytheists was a duty. Furthermore, the Wahhabis made it a duty to excommunicate those who failed or hesitated to excommunicate polytheists. Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), the founder of Wahhabism, articulated this doctrine in a short treatise known as “The Nullifiers of Islam” (*nawaqid al-Islam*). The third nullifier in the list states, “Whoever does not excommunicate the polytheists, or is doubtful about their unbelief, or affirms the validity of their doctrine—he is an unbeliever by consensus.”[11] This idea—that one must pronounce *takfir* on those failing or hesitating to pronounce *takfir*—is known commonly in jihadi circles as “the third nullifier” (*al-naqid al-thalith*).

In the Islamic State, as in Jihadi Salafism at large, the Wahhabi heritage (under the guise of Salafism) enjoys pride of place as representing the correct approach to theology. Most ideological infighting in the Islamic State has revolved around the question of how exclusivist the group ought to be—that is, how narrowly the boundaries of Islam and unbelief ought to be drawn. In this context, it is Wahhabi principles, and the third nullifier in particular, that are being debated.

### ***The Hazimis***

The early phase of ideological contestation in the Islamic State can be traced to the rather obscure figure of Ahmad ibn ‘Umar al-Hazimi, a middle-aged Saudi religious scholar from Mecca.[12] To all appearances, al-Hazimi is not himself a jihadi, but his views on *takfir*, including especially his strict interpretation of the third nullifier, would have a tremendous impact on a group of jihadis who went on to join the Islamic State. Most of these came from Tunisia, where al-Hazimi had traveled as a preacher following the 2011 revolution there. In 2013, following his trips to Tunisia, he delivered a series of lectures on the third nullifier in which he elaborated doctrine that he called *takfir al-‘adhir*, or “the excommunication of the excuser.” The excuser, al-Hazimi explained, is “one who excuses polytheists on account of ignorance.” In other words, it is someone who excuses a person’s unbelief or polytheism on the grounds that the person is ignorant of the fact that he or she is committing unbelief or polytheism. At question here is the theological concept known as *al-‘udhr bi’l-jahl*, or “excusing on the basis of ignorance,” which many Salafi Muslims, including jihadis, have seen as a restraint on excessive *takfir*. Al-Hazimi is categorically opposed to *al-‘udhr bi’l-jahl* when it comes to so-called “greater polytheism” (*al-shirk al-akbar*) or “greater unbelief” (*al-kufr al-akbar*), categories that include acts such as supplicating the dead or voting in elections. He therefore deems those who excuse polytheists on the basis of ignorance to be unbelievers in accordance with the third nullifier.

Those in the Islamic State who adopted al-Hazimi’s views came to be known as “the Hazimis” (*al-Hazimiyya*, *al-Hazimiyyun*).[13] Chief among them was a Tunisian named Abu Ja’far al-Hattab, a former member of the

Shari'a Committee of Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia who became an early supporter of the Islamic State. In June 2013, he authored a book calling on Muslims in Iraq and Syria to give *bay'a* (the contract of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[14] According to one source, al-Hattab belonged to an early Shari'a committee in the Islamic State (probably set up in 2013) that also included the Bahraini Turki al-Bin'ali and the Iraqi Abu 'Ali al-Anbari.[15] Unlike these other men, however, al-Hattab was a fierce advocate of al-Hazimi's concept of *takfir al-'adhir*. Al-Bin'ali, in a mid-2014 tweet, denounced the concept of *takfir al-'adhir* as an innovation;[16] later that year, Abu Sulayman al-Shami (aka Ahmad Abu Samra), a Syrian-American high-level official in the Islamic State, authored a scathing critique of al-Hazimi and his views, describing him as a supporter of the Saudi regime and explaining that the notion of *takfir al-'adhir* had plunged its proponents into an endless spiral of *takfir*. [17] This was the main critique of the Hazimis: namely, that their obsession with *takfir al-'adhir* inevitably led to *takfir* in infinite regress, or an endless chain of *takfir* (*al-takfir bi'l-tasalsul*). In September 2014, it was rumored online that al-Hattab had been executed by the Islamic State.[18]

A document from the Islamic State's General Security Department (Diwan al-Amn al-'Amm), dated November 14, 2015, confirms that al-Hattab, among other leaders of the "extremists" described here, was indeed arrested and executed.[19] The document, which is dedicated to examining "the extremism phenomenon in the Islamic State," highlights the influence of al-Hazimi on a "current" (*tayyar*) of Islamic State members who adhered to the doctrine of *takfir al-'adhir* and who believed that most Muslims ought to be regarded as unbelievers. These men had even reached the conclusion that certain leaders of the Islamic State were unbelievers on account of their failure to excommunicate Ayman al-Zawahiri. Approximately 70 of the extremists, according to the document, were killed after being arrested and interrogated, while more than 50 managed to flee to Turkey. Abu Ja'far al-Hattab is named first in a list of 11 leaders of the current. Following the leaders' execution, the document says, a number of secretive extremist cells were formed, some of which plotted against the caliphate. The document concludes that while "the danger of the extremists" has been alleviated, "the extremism phenomenon" is beginning to take a different form, its members practicing *taqiyya* (dissimulation).

The Islamic State said little in public about the Hazimi extremists, though in late 2014 the General Committee (al-Lajna al-'Amma), the predecessor of the Islamic State's executive body known as the Delegated Committee (al-Lajna al-Mufawwada), issued a statement prohibiting discussion of the "secondary issues" related to *al-'udhr bi'l-jahl* and forbidding distribution of related audio, visual, and written materials.[20] In late 2014, a video was released from "Raqqqa Province" featuring the arrested members of an "extremist cell," who are seen confessing to having excommunicated the Islamic State and plotted to rebel.[21] An English-language article in the Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine also discussed the rounding up of this "Khariji cell." [22] This was likely one of the cells mentioned in the document that were formed in the wake of al-Hattab's death.

### ***The Methodological Committee***

Others in the Islamic State agreed with the General Security Department's conclusion that extremism remained a problem. One of these was Turki al-Bin'ali, the young Bahraini who had become the head of the Islamic State's scholarly research outfit, the Office of Research and Studies (Maktab al-Buhuth wa'l-Dirasat).[23] In a February 2016 letter to the Delegated Committee, al-Bin'ali offered his appraisal of the problem.[24] "It saddens me to tell you," he wrote, "that from time to time the troublemaking of the extremists continues in the ranks of the brothers." Yet "the new extremists," he continued, were not quite the same. For one thing, their leaders were Saudis, not Tunisians as before. For another, they "have appeared in a new garb and with a new issue." The issue was whether *takfir* was to be considered "part of the foundation of the religion" (*min asl al-din*) or "one of its requirements" (*min lawazimih*). According to "the new extremists," al-Bin'ali said, *takfir* was "part of the foundation of the religion," meaning that it was a foundational religious principle that one could not shirk without falling into unbelief; those claiming otherwise were to be excommunicated. For al-Bin'ali, this insistence on *takfir* as foundational was no different from the Hazimi doctrine of *takfir al-'adhir*, since if *takfir* is foundational then it is not permitted to engage in *al-'udhr bi'l-jahl*. It is simply *takfir al-'adhir* stated another way.

However, not all agreed with al-Bin'ali that extremism remained such a problem. On the contrary, around this time an important segment of the Islamic State's leadership was coming to the view that the greater problem was in fact excessive theological moderation, or restraint in *takfir*. This was the conclusion reached by a special committee formed in mid-February 2016 to assess the doctrinal views of the Islamic State's scholars in Iraq and Syria. The committee, which bore no official title but was known as "the methodological committee" (*al-lajna al-manhajyya*), was overseen by Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, the head of the Central Media Department (*Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi*), and staffed by, among others, Abu Sulayman al-Shami, the forenamed Syrian-American leader, and an Egyptian named Abu Khabbab al-Masri (aka *Shu'ba al-Masri*). According to an internal report written by al-Masri in July 2016, the committee began its activities at a time when the "new extremists" were allegedly on the rise; but after interviewing several dozen of the Islamic State's scholars, the committee concluded that the "new extremists" were for the most part a reaction to the greater problem of moderation.[25] The word used to indicate the latter was *irja'* (Murji'ism, or "postponement"), a theological term denoting an early Islamic sect that postponed judgments of unbelief.[26]

The scholars suspected of *irja'* included Turki al-Bin'ali, who was himself interviewed by al-Furqan's methodological committee on April 10, 2016. A summary of the meeting, written by al-Masri, shows that the committee regarded al-Bin'ali with great skepticism, deeming some of his views on *takfir* to be inadequate.[27] This included his view that professed Muslims living in the so-called "lapsed abode of unbelief" (*dar al-kufr al-tari*)—that is, Islamic lands that had forsaken the Shari'a—were to be regarded *prima facie* as Muslims, not as unbelievers. Others assessed to be in the *irja'* camp included Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, a Saudi on the Delegated Committee who argued that *takfir* was "one of the requirements of the religion" not "a part of the foundation of the religion," and Abu al-Mundhir al-Harbi, a Saudi belonging to the Office of Research and Studies who believed that appealing to infidel courts was not in every case tantamount to unbelief.[28]

One outcome of the committee's work was an official statement condemning "those who hesitate to excommunicate polytheists" (*man tawaqqafa fi takfir al-mushrikin*).[29] This statement, dated May 29, 2016, was issued by an obscure body called the Central Office for Overseeing the Shari'a Departments (*al-Maktab al-Markazi li-Mutaba'at al-Dawawin*). Written primarily by al-Furqan, who solicited the input of the Islamic State's scholars and officials, it condemned the language of *takfir al-'adhir* as problematic while affirming that there is no excuse for hesitating to excommunicate polytheists. On the all-important question whether *takfir* is part of the foundation of the religion or one of its requirements, it was equivocal, stating that discussion of *takfir* in terms of foundational and required is prohibited.

Al-Furqan's statement should thus be seen as an attempt to forge a theological compromise between those of relatively more extremist and those of relatively more moderate orientation in the Islamic State. The men who saw themselves as occupying the middle ground as regards *takfir*—al-Furqan, Abu Sulayman al-Shami, Abu Khabbab al-Masri, *inter alios*—were trying to keep the two sides at bay.[30] Scholars such as al-Bin'ali do not seem to have agreed with al-Furqan's statement—weeks before the statement was issued, al-Bin'ali wrote to al-Furqan saying that *takfir* should be understood as "one of the requirements of the religion"[31]—but they did not erupt in protest.

### ***The Takfir Memorandum and the Scholarly Backlash***

Al-Furqan's theological compromise may have lasted longer had he not been killed in an airstrike on September 7, 2016.[32] Several months later, in January 2017, Abu Sulayman al-Shami was killed by the same means,[33] and around this time Abu Khabbab al-Masri was killed as well.[34] There was great turmoil in the upper ranks of the Islamic State's leadership, and as subsequent events were to show, some of the vacant positions were filled by men of more extremist persuasion than their predecessors. It was in this context that Turki al-Bin'ali, on January 20, 2017, sent al-Baghdadi a letter warning him against embracing a "theory of balance" whereby a certain number of extremists would be empowered in order to accommodate their constituency. Al-Bin'ali had it on good authority that this was the policy al-Baghdadi was pursuing, and he appears to have been correct. [35]

The work of settling and clarifying the group's ideology had been put on hiatus. When it was resumed in early 2017, it was under the leadership of a young Saudi newly appointed to the Delegated Committee named Abu Hafis al-Wad'ani. Al-Wad'ani, a former governor (*wali*) of Raqqa Province, was tasked with reestablishing al-Furqan's methodological committee and ensuring ideological conformity among the Islamic State's scholars.[36] But unlike before, al-Wad'ani's efforts had an explosive effect. Unlike al-Furqan, al-Wad'ani showed no interest in finding middle ground, instead siding entirely with those identified by al-Bin'ali as the "new extremists," that is, those who consider *takfir* to be "part of the foundation of the religion" (*min asl al-din*). Al-Wad'ani sought to enshrine this more extremist position as official doctrine and, in doing so, to put the perceived moderates in their place once and for all.

On May 17, 2017, the Delegated Committee released a seven-page memorandum under the title "That Those Who Perish Might Perish by a Clear Sign, and [That Those Who] Live Might Live by a Clear Sign," a quotation of Qur'an 8:42.[37] Addressed "to all the provinces, departments, and committees" of the Islamic State, it condemned the "extremists" who promote the idea of *takfir* in infinite regress (*al-takfir bi'l-tasalsul*), but its main concern was the moderates, or the "Murji'ites." The memorandum took an uncompromising position on those who waver in excommunicating "polytheists," including those who vote in elections, affirming that *takfir* of polytheists is "one of the manifest principles of the religion" (*min usul al-din al-zahira*). The latter phrase is effectively the same in meaning as "part of the foundation of the religion" (*min asl al-din*). In stating this, therefore, the Delegated Committee was adopting the position of the "new extremists." Significantly, the memorandum stood in contradiction to the earlier statement produced by the Central Office for Overseeing the Shari'a Departments, which had warned against classifying *takfir* as either foundational or required.

The response of the Islamic State's scholarly class, headed by al-Bin'ali, was swift and dramatic. Unlike in previous episodes of infighting, the scholars made their objections public, leaking their refutations online.

On May 19, 2017 al-Bin'ali addressed a long letter to the Delegated Committee with his critical "observations" on the memorandum.[38] He complained bitterly that the memorandum was issued in undue haste, not having been subjected to the scrutiny of "the scholars." Some of al-Bin'ali's criticisms were trivial or pedantic—the new statement contained typographical and grammatical errors, and it relied on a few weak *hadith*—but his main objections were substantial. He noted that the memorandum seemed intended to appease "the extremists" (*al-ghulat*), who were, he claimed, celebrating in mosques and on social media that "the Islamic State had repented and returned to the truth." By declaring *takfir* "one of the unambiguous foundations of the religion," he argued, the Delegated Committee had contravened al-Furqan's instruction to avoid classifying *takfir* one way or the other. For al-Bin'ali, the implication of the phrase "one of the unambiguous foundations of the religion" was without question *takfir* in infinite regress. Another concession to the extremists that he bemoaned was a line to the effect that professed Muslims beyond the Islamic State's territory—that is, in *Dar al-kufr al-tari'*—are not necessarily to be regarded as Muslims. What "most people" have taken away from this line, he noted regretfully, is that "the Islamic State excommunicates everyone outside its borders." He then quoted several earlier speeches by Islamic State leaders seemingly contradicting this position. The letter closes with an appeal to the Delegated Committee to revise and correct what it has written.

On May 31, al-Bin'ali died in Mayadin, Syria in an airstrike carried out by the U.S.-led coalition.[39] In June, another Islamic State scholar who refuted the memorandum, the Kuwaiti Abu 'Abd al-Barr al-Salihi, also died in an airstrike; at the time of his death, he was imprisoned by the group's senior leadership.[40] The supporters of these men regarded their deaths as suspiciously convenient for the more extremist elements of the Islamic State. They speculated that these scholars and others had been killed at the direction of their ideological opponents, who in this case would have leaked the men's locations to the coalition.

These accusations were made explicitly by another Islamic State scholar, Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, in an open letter to al-Baghdadi dated July 5, 2017.[41] Al-Hashimi, who notes that he worked under al-Bin'ali at the Office of Research and Studies, is extremely critical of the caliphate in his letter, calling it an "entity in which innovations and extremism have spread." The extremists, he alleges, have assumed power in the Delegated Committee and waged a "war against the scholars." "The soldiers," he tells al-Baghdadi, "are saying among

themselves” that al-Bin‘ali’s death “was contrived by those who wrote or supported the memorandum of error.” Al-Hashimi also seems convinced that al-Salihi’s death was intentional. He describes how al-Salihi was arrested by the Islamic State’s security service in the last days of Ramadan 1438 (equivalent to the last days of June 2017) and brought to a “cramped, old prison” along with “more than 60” of his supporters, only for them to be killed soon afterwards in an airstrike.

The next month, in August 2017, another prominent ally of al-Bin‘ali’s, Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, was killed in an airstrike in Iraq.[42] One of his supporters wrote that his death recalled the “murky circumstances” of al-Bin‘ali’s demise.[43]

The *takfir* memorandum had thus created a situation of all-out ideological warfare in the Islamic State. Extremist figures such as Abu Hafs al-Wad‘ani were using their newfound power to isolate and perhaps even eliminate the scholars. Naturally, the latter were losing confidence in the Islamic State’s leadership, and some, such as al-Hashimi, were on the verge of leaving the caliphate altogether. At this point, al-Baghdadi realized that he needed to intervene before the scholars and their supporters completely abandoned ship.

### ***The “Return to the Truth”***

On September 15, 2017, the Delegated Committee released a new statement withdrawing the *takfir* memorandum issued back in May.[44] “Adherence to the content of the memorandum titled ‘That Those Who Perish Might Perish by a Clear Sign’ ... has been terminated,” it stated, “on account of its containing errors of knowledge and misleading and unreliable statements that have given rise to disagreement and division in the ranks of the *mujahidin* particularly and the Muslims in general.” The brief statement concluded by reminding readers of “the virtue of returning to the truth,” and in a postscript announced that an audio series dedicated to the ideological issues in dispute was forthcoming.

According to one account of the events leading up to this “return to the truth,” when al-Baghdadi learned of the uproar caused by the *takfir* memo he called a special meeting between himself, members of the Delegated Committee, and some of the Islamic State’s scholars.[45] After hearing both sides of the ideological divide, he decided to dissolve the Delegated Committee and withdraw the May 2017 memorandum. One of the scholars present, the Egyptian Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was appointed to a seat on the newly reconstituted Delegated Committee; another, the Jordanian Abu Ya‘qub al-Maqdisi, was named the successor to al-Bin‘ali as head of the Office of Research and Studies. Following the meeting, several of the members of the former Delegated Committee, including Abu Hafs al-Wad‘ani, were imprisoned, as were the members al-Wad‘ani’s methodological committee. Many of those incarcerated would flee the Islamic State as its territory shrank; others, including al-Wad‘ani, were eventually executed.

Al-Wad‘ani himself would write a fascinating retrospective on al-Baghdadi’s intervention and its aftermath. In December 2017, after being released from prison, he sent a long letter to al-Baghdadi questioning the wisdom of withdrawing the *takfir* memorandum and complaining about the rapidly deteriorating condition of the caliphate.[46] The Islamic State, he said, has become “two factions” (*fariqayn*), one having been empowered and the other having been subject to a campaign of suppression. He noted that “many of the brothers” are unsure whether al-Baghdadi is fully aware of what is going on. “We truly do not know,” he wrote, “whether this is happening with your knowledge or without your knowledge.” Al-Wad‘ani urged al-Baghdadi to return to the battlefield to reassure the soldiers, and to “try to repair what your recent decisions have ruined.” After writing his letter, al-Wad‘ani became a wanted man, though this time he managed to escape capture for two months. In June 2018, he was executed by the Islamic State on charges of being a “Kharijite.”[47]

In the second half of September 2017, the promised audio series appeared in six installments.[48] Titled *Silsila ‘ilmiyya fi bayan masa’il manhajiyya* (“Knowledge Series Clarifying Matters of Methodology”), it made a number of points regarding the right approach to *takfir*, one of which stands out about above all. This comes in the third episode, where *takfir* of polytheists is classified as “one of the requirements of the religion” (*min wajibat al-din*), not as “part of the foundation of the religion” (*min asl al-din*). It was a complete reversal of the

position set out in the memorandum issued four months prior.

The scholars thus seemed to have achieved a major victory with the *Silsila 'ilmiyya*, but it soon emerged that they were not satisfied. The recantation of the May 2017 memorandum was, in their view, half-hearted and incomplete. For one thing, al-Baghdadi had not released the entirety of the audio series prepared by the scholars; he had withheld three critical episodes discouraging excess in *takfir*. In July 2018, these three missing episodes were leaked by an online media organization with close ties to the scholars.[49] This outfit, Mu'assasat al-Turath al-'Ilmi ("The Scholarly Heritage Establishment"), was founded in October 2017 for the purpose of publishing the books, essays, and other works (i.e., the "heritage") of the Office of Research and Studies. In December 2017, Mu'assasat al-Turath began reporting the occasional arrest of the Islamic State's scholars, including Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Abu Ya'qub al-Maqdisi, as well as the return to power of some of the "extremists" of the previous Delegated Committee.[50] The scholars were once again being clamped down on.

### Conclusion

Indeed, neither of the two sides—that is, neither the more moderate wing nor the more extremist wing of the Islamic State—was entirely victorious following the September 2017 "return to the truth." Presumably, al-Baghdadi's aim was to restore the balance between the two sides, not to have one of them devour the other. In granting the scholars a symbolic victory by formally adopting their position on *takfir*, he was wary of alienating the more extremist types represented strongly in the Islamic State's Central Media Department, among other places. But in trying to alienate neither side, al-Baghdadi seems to have disappointed both. The relative extremists became resentful of the official position on *takfir* outlined in the *Silsila 'ilmiyya*, while the relative moderates became upset with him for tolerating the extremists.

Unable to find an ideological middle ground, al-Baghdadi opted for papering over the ideological divisions in the Islamic State, yet his approach may not be viable in the long term. The scholars, representing the more moderate wing, appear increasingly sidelined. The Office of Research and Studies was shut down,[51] and in July 2018 its leader was imprisoned and accused of, among other things, collaborating with Mu'assasat al-Turath.[52] The latter has continued to publish the "heritage" of the scholars, portraying those who remain as powerless and persecuted. Should the scholars and their supporters decamp en masse, it could deprive the Islamic State of a critical base of support in the wider Jihadi Salafi community for years to come.

What is most striking about the ideological infighting described above is that much of it has coincided with a pivotal moment in the Islamic State's history—namely, its loss of the vast majority of its territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria between 2016 and 2017. These setbacks, rather than distracting from theological debates, have instead intensified and exacerbated them. This says something about the nature of the Islamic State and its constituents and supporters. When a militant group is on its heels and is being beat back, it is only natural that the strategy and policy of the group be called into question. In the case of the Islamic State, this has meant first and foremost the group's theological orientation. The level of ideological discord has correlated with the level of worldly decline and failure. Whether the Islamic State can manage to repair its ideological house, or at least keep the infighting at bay, may well depend on whether conditions on the ground improve.

For the moment, the ideological divisions continue to fester, leaving open the possibility of an organizational split, which would see the departure of the Islamic State's more moderate members and supporters. It is worth mentioning that some al-Qaida supporters online have welcomed the development of this ideological split in the Islamic State. For instance, in May 2018, pro-al-Qaida channels on Telegram shared a message by a certain "Son of al-Qaida" who expressed pleasant surprise by a "more open and more moderate" tendency forming in the Islamic State both online and on the ground. The author urged his readers not to "curse the darkness" but rather to "light a candle," suggesting that those in al-Qaida's orbit ought to reach out to these disaffected Islamic State members and supporters of less extremist persuasion.[53] Whether such efforts will succeed—that is, whether some kind of rapprochement between al-Qaida supporters and disaffected Islamic State supporters might be achieved—is yet to be seen. The "Murji'ites" of the Islamic State have not completely given up on the

caliphate yet. If they do, there may still be too much bad blood with al-Qaida for them simply to return to it.

**About the Author:** Cole Bunzel is a research fellow in Islamic Law and Civilization at Yale Law School, where his work focuses on the history of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, and the Jihadi Salafi movement. He received his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University in 2018 and edits the blog *Jihadica*.

## Notes

[1] See further Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Institution, 2015. Ideology was not the only factor separating al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Issues of personality and strategy were also key, but different approaches to ideology have been and remain critical.

[2] For an excellent study of these fault lines in the preceding period, see Brynjar Lia, “Jihadis Divided between Strategists and Doctrinarians,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 69-87.

[3] See, for instance, “The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjāl,” *Dabiq* 13 (January 2016): 32-45, available at <https://jihadology.net/2016/01/19/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-13/>. See further the widely shared essay in online Islamic State circles, “Juz’ fi bayan harakat Taliban wa-kufriyyatiha min bayanatiha ’l-rasmiyya wa-majallatiha wa-dasturiha ’l-taghuti,” available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/bayan-aqidat-harakat-taliban.pdf>.

[4] Letter from the Delegated Committee, December 12, 2015, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/hukm-al-fasail.pdf>.

[5] Letter from the Central Office for Overseeing the Shari’a Departments, June 1, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/hukm-tanzim-qaidat-suriya.pdf>.

[6] See, for instance, Abu Maysara al-Shami, “The Qā’ida of adh-Dhawāhiri, al-Harārī, and an-Nadhārī, and the Absent Yemenī Wisdom,” *Dabiq* 6 (December 2014): 16-24, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-622.pdf>.

[7] Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “Udhran amīr al-Qā’ida,” *Mu’assasat al-Furqān*, May 11, 2014, transcript available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/udhran-amir-al-qaida.pdf>.

[8] Ayman al-Zawahiri, “al-Sham amana fi ‘anaqikum,” *Mu’assasat al-Sahab*, January 14, 2016, transcript available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/al-sham-amana.pdf>.

[9] The most illuminating sources have come from two Telegram channels called *Wa-harrid al-mu’minin* (“And Rouse the Believers”) and *Ma’dhiratan ila ’llah* (“As an Excuse before God”), which are run by men convinced that the Islamic State has become too moderate. The latter channel, which has changed its name to *al-Nadhir al-’Uryan* (“The Bare Warner”), is operated by a former colleague of Abu Hafsa al-Wad’ani (d. 2018), a high-ranking member of the Delegated Committee on the more extremist side of things (more on him above). Together, *Wa-harrid al-mu’minin* and *al-Nadhir al-’Uryan* have leaked many official Islamic State documents—memorandums, letters, internal assessments, etc. Filling out the picture are the many leaked documents—mainly books and essays but also statements on current events—distributed by *Mu’assasat al-Turath al-’Ilmi* (“The Scholarly Heritage Establishment”) and *Mu’assasat al-Wafa’ al-’I’lamiyya* (“The Fidelity Media Establishment”). These channels are aligned with the Islamic State’s scholarly establishment, which has grown distrustful of the caliphate’s leadership for reasons opposite those of *Wa-harrid al-mu’minin* and *al-Nadhir al-’Uryan*: the scholars believe the Islamic State has become too extremist in orientation.

[10] See Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *Sahih al-targhib wa’l-tarhib*, 3 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’arif, 2000), 3:55.

[11] ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Qasim, ed., *al-Durar al-saniyya fi ’l-ajwiba al-Najdiyya*, 16 vols., rev. ed. (Riyadh: Warathat al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Qasim, 2012), 10:91-93, at 91.

[12] See further on al-Hazimi Cole Bunzel, “Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State,” October 3, 2017, *Jihadica*, <http://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray/>.

[13] For an overview, see Shams al-Din al-Naqaz, “al-Qissa al-kamila lil-tayyar al-Hazimi al-akthar ghuluwwan fi ’l-takfir qabl Da’ish wa-ba’dahu,” *Noon Post*, July 31, 2016 (part 1), <http://www.noonpost.org/content/19129>, August 2, 2017 (part 2), <http://www.noonpost.org/content/19167>.

[14] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*, 26.



- [15] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, October 1, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/nadhir-hattab.png>
- [16] Tweet by @turky\_albinali, May 22, 2014, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/binalitweet.png>.
- [17] Abu Maysara al-Shami (aka Abu Sulayman al-Shami, Ahmad Abu Samra), "Al-Hazimi bayna kabirat al-qu'ud wa-dalal al-Jamiyya," available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/al-Hazimi-bayn-kabirat-al-quud-wa-dalal-al-Jamiyya.pdf>.
- [18] Tweet by @abitns, September 9, 2014, <https://twitter.com/abitns/status/509320893030731776>.
- [19] "Taqrir 'an zahirat al-ghuluww fi 'l-Dawla al-Islamiyya," Diwan al-Amn al-'Amm, November 14, 2015, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/zahirat-al-ghuluww.pdf>. For more on this document, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "An Internal Report on Extremism in the Islamic State," *aymennjawad.org*, November 1, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21757/an-internal-report-on-extremism-in-the-islamic>.
- [20] Statement by the General Committee, 1435/2014, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/tamim6.jpg>.
- [21] "Al-Qabd 'ala khaliyya min al-ghulat khattatat lil-khuru'j 'ala dawlat al-khilafa," al-Maktab al-'I'lamī li-Wilayat al-Ra'qa, December 2014, [https://archive.org/details/rqa\\_gwll](https://archive.org/details/rqa_gwll).
- [22] "Dismantling a Khārijī Cell," *Dabiq* 6 (December 2014): 31.
- [23] On al-Bin'ali, see Cole Bunzel, "The Caliphate's Scholar-In-Arms," July 9, 2014, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate%E2%80%99s-scholar-in-arms/>; on his role in the Office of Research and Studies, see Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide," June 5, 2018, <http://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/>.
- [24] Turki al-Bin'ali to the Delegated Committee, February 13, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/al-binali-ila-al-lajna.pdf>.
- [25] Abu Khabbab al-Masri, *Taqrir 'amm 'an amal al-lajna*, July 9, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/taqrir-amm-an-amal-al-lajna.pdf>.
- [26] See further on this term as used by the jihadis Joas Wagemakers, "'Seceders' and 'Postponers'? An Analysis of the 'Khawarij' and 'Murji'a' Labels in Polemical Debates between Quietist and Jihadi-Salafis," in Jeevon Deol and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Contextualising Jihadi Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145-164.
- [27] Abu Khabbab al-Masri, *Taqrir ba'd al-jalsa ma'a al-shaykh Abi Hammam al-Athari*, April 10, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/taqrir-bad-al-jalsa-maa-al-shaykh-Abi-Hammam.pdf>.
- [28] al-Masri, *Taqrir 'amm 'an amal al-lajna*.
- [29] Statement from al-Maktab al-Markazi li-Mutaba'at al-Dawawin, May 29, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/155.pdf>.
- [30] For a lengthy treatment of the issues of extremism and Murji'ism in the Islamic State from the standpoint of this intermediate group, see *al-Tashjir li-masa'il al-irja' wa'l-ghuluww fi 'l-takfir*, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/tashjir.pdf>. According to al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, this was co-authored by Abu Sulayman al-Shami and Abu Khabbab al-Masri with the assistance of al-Furqan. See Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, September 3, 2018, <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/al-jadwal-alahu.png>.
- [31] Turki al-Bin'ali to Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, May 19, 2016, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/al-binali-to-al-furqan.pdf>.
- [32] "Statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Airstrike Against ISIL Senior Leader," U.S. Department of Defense, September 16, 2016, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/946983/statement-from-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-airstrike-against-isil-se/>.
- [33] "Among the Believers are Men: Shaykh Abu Sulayman ash-Shami" *Rumiyah* 8 (April 2017): 40-45, available at <https://jihadology.net/2017/04/05/new-release-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-rome-8/>.
- [34] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, October 16, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/abu-khabbab-al-masri.png>.
- [35] Turki al-Bin'ali to the Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, January 20, 2017, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/hawl-mawdu-ihtiwa-al-ghulat.pdf>. For more on this document, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Turki al-Binali's Critique of the 'Theory of Balance': Translation and Analysis," *aymennjawad.org*, January 8, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/turki>

binali-critique-of-the-theory-of-balance.

[36] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, September 24, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/nadhir-09.24.2018.pdf>.

[37] "Li-yahluka man halaka 'an bayyinatini wa-yahya man hayya 'an bayyina," Delegated Committee, May 17, 2017, available at [http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/tamim\\_h\\_8\\_t\\_31.pdf](http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/tamim_h_8_t_31.pdf). For an English translation, see "That Those Who Perish Would Perish upon Proof and Those Who Live Would Live upon Proof," May 17, 2017 available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/That-Those-Who-Perish.pdf>.

[38] Turki al-Bin'ali to the Delegated Committee, May 19, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Binali-letter.pdf>.

[39] "Coalition forces killed Turki-al-Bin' ali," U.S. Central Command Press Release, June 20, 2017, <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1220221/coalition-forces-killed-turki-al-bin-ali/>.

[40] "Maqtal al-Da'ishi Abu 'Abd al-Barr al-Salihi," *al-Ra'y*, August 29, 2017, <http://www.alraimedia.com/Home/Details?Id=30a4c251-161f-42b2-9c6b-453ef88ebe17>. For his refutation, dated May 23, 2017, see <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Salihi-refutation.pdf>.

[41] Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, *al-Nasiha al-Hashimiyya li-amir al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*, July 5, 2017, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/al-Nasiha-al-Hashimiyya.pdf>. For more on this document, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State: 'Hashimi Advice' to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," *aymennjawad.org*, January 4, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22199/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-hashimi-advice-to>.

[42] 'Ali al-Husayni, "Maqtal al-mufti al-shar'i li-Da'ish Abu Bakr al-Qahtani fi 'l-'Iraq," *al-'Arabi al-Jadid*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/8/13/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%80-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%A8%D9%83%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AD%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>.

[43] Khabbab al-Jazrawi, *Ta'liqan 'ala khabar maqtal Abi Bakr al-Qahtani shar'i al-Dawla*, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/taliq-al-Jazrawi.pdf>.

[44] For the statement, see <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/new-tamim.jpg>.

[45] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, September 24, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/nadhir-09.24.2018.pdf>.

[46] Abu Hafs al-Wad'ani to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, December 6, 2017, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Abu-Hafs-letter.pdf>.

[47] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, October 14, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/nadhir-10.14.2018.pdf>.

[48] For the Arabic transcript, see <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/silsila-ilmiyya.pdf>. For an English translation, see "Knowledge Series Clarifying Matters of Methodology," Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Knowledge-Series.pdf>. See further on this series Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya,'" *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018, 14-17.

[49] *Bayan wa-tawdih bi-khusus tatimmat halaqat Silsila 'ilmiyya fi bayan masa'il manhajiyya*, Mu'assasat al-Turath al-'Ilmi, July 7, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/bayan-watawdih.pdf>. For a transcript of the three missing episodes, see <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/tatimmat-halaqat.pdf>.

[50] For the news reports of Mu'assasat al-Turath al-'Ilmi between December 2017 and September 2018, see <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/turath-reports.pdf>.

[51] Telegram post by al-Nadhir al-'Uryan, September 24, 2018, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/nadhir-09.24.2018.pdf>.

[52] Cole Bunzel, "Death of a Mufti: The Execution of the Islamic State's Abu Ya'qub al-Maqdisi," *Jihadica*, January 4, 2019, <http://www.jihadica.com/death-of-a-mufti/>.

[53] Cole Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Internal Divide," *Jihadica*, June 5, 2018, <http://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/>.