The Author
Cole M. Bunzel is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. A historian and Arabist, he studies the history and contemporary affairs of the Islamic Middle East, with a particular focus on violent Islamism and the Arabian Peninsula. He is the editor of the blog Jihadica and has written widely on the ideology of Sunni jihadism. Bunzel received his MA in international relations from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and his BA and PhD in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University. He has been a research fellow in Islamic law and civilization at the Yale Law School and is a nonresident fellow at the George Washington University Program on Extremism.

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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20006
www.extremism.gwu.edu
THE ISIS FILES

The Islamic State’s Ideology: History of a Rift

COLE BUNZEL

Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
The Islamic State, along with al-Qaida, belongs to the ideological current in Sunni Islamism known as *al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya*, or Jihadi Salafism. The movement, also known as jihadism, began in the 1960s and 1970s as a radical outgrowth of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Rejecting a gradual approach to Islamizing state and society, the jihadis called for revolutionary change and embraced violence in the form of armed jihad as the means for achieving it. They cast the rulers of the Arab Islamic world as not only illegitimate but apostates on account of their failure to rule by God’s law, or the Shari’a. Their goal was to unseat the standing regimes of the Arab Islamic world and eventually bring about a global unitary Islamic state—the caliphate.

In addition to its militancy, Jihadi Salafism is also defined today by a commitment to the doctrinal principles of Salafism, a theologically purist movement in Sunni Islam. The term Salafism derives from the phrase *al-salaf al-salih*, “the pious ancestors,” who are generally understood to be the first three generations of Muslims. Salafis purport to adhere to the views and practices of these earliest Muslims, yet the puritanical theology at the heart of Salafism was formulated by the fourteenth-century Syrian scholar Ibn Taymiyya and his heirs in the Wahhabi movement, the Arabian subset of Salafism that emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century. In the 1980s and 1990s, the jihadis gradually adopted a Salafi doctrinal orientation—hence the term Jihadi Salafism—and today they are fiercely loyal to the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya and the even more stringent views of the Wahhabis regarding *tawhid*, or God’s oneness. The Salafi monotheist doctrine emphasizes a strict understanding of *tawhid* that requires the eradication of all manifestations of *shirk*, or polytheism, as well as the dissociation (*bara‘*) from and excommunication (*takfir*) of so-called polytheists. For the jihadis, some of the worst forms of *shirk* in the modern day are democracy and Shi’ism, both of which are to be fought for the purpose of upholding *tawhid*.

As is now well known, one of the fault lines separating al-Qaida from the Islamic State today concerns this purist dimension of Jihadi Salafism. Generally speaking, al-Qaida is somewhat more tolerant of Muslims deemed to hold errant doctrinal views. For example, its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, considers ordinary Shiite Muslims to be Muslims, excusing
their allegedly problematic beliefs on the basis of ignorance. The Islamic State, including its predecessors in al-Qaida in Iraq, is not so generous. Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaida’s Iraqi branch and a cherished figure in the Islamic State today, disagreed sharply with Zawahiri and deliberately targeted the Shia in mass attacks. Another point of contention concerns the Taliban in Afghanistan, which al-Qaida presents as a legitimate Islamic government to which it is loyal, going so far as to say that all al-Qaida members are ultimately soldiers in the army of “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” The Islamic State, meanwhile, considers the Taliban a heretical movement on account of its non-Salafi theology and alleged support for Sufi mystical practices.

Even within the Islamic State there have been divisions related to the stringency with which one enforces Salafi purism. The ISIS Files, and particularly the texts and notes among the Martyrs Brigade files, together with numerous other documents that have been leaked online, help to shed light on these internal ideological rifts.¹

The Danger of Spiraling Takfīr

Among the documents in The ISIS Files is a 67-page primer on the concept of tawhid prepared by a body known as the Committee for Research and Fatwas (Hay‘at al-Buhuth wa’l-Ifta‘).² Titled Muqarrar fi ‘l-tawhid (A Précis on God’s Oneness), the document was leaked online in years past, and earlier reporting shows that it was taught in Islamic State training camps as an introduction to Islamic doctrine as formulated and understood by the Islamic State.³ The heavily marked-up copy of the text, discovered in January 2017 among the documents of the Martyrs Brigade in Mosul, confirms that reporting and underscores the text’s significance.

Yet the Muqarrar fi ‘l-tawhid was by no means a document that all members of the Islamic State agreed should be taught and studied. In fact, in the summer of 2017, some six months after the Martyrs Brigade files were found, the book, among other similar works, was withdrawn by order of the Islamic State’s executive council, the Delegated Committee (al-Lajna al-Mufawwada).⁴ The withdrawal order came amidst an escalating ideological conflict in the Islamic State that was soon brought
into the open. The conflict had already resulted in detentions and executions, and this next phase was to be even more contentious.

The *Muqarrar fi 'l-tawhid*, as its introduction states, was prepared as a primer on *tawhid* following the announcement of the caliphate in June 2014, intended to be taught in Islamic State training camps. Dated 1436 of the Islamic calendar (equivalent to 2014/2015), its lead author was almost certainly the young Bahraini scholar Turki al-Bin’ali, who headed the Committee for Research and Fatwas, later renamed the Office of Research and Studies (Maktab al-Buhuth wa’l-Dirasat). According to the text, a correct understanding of *tawhid* is essential to sound faith, and one must furthermore act upon *tawhid* by rejecting its opposite, namely *shirk*.

The *Muqarrar fi 'l-tawhid* includes numerous quotations of the theological principles outlined by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, together with explanatory notes and further quotations by Ibn Taymiyya and his students. Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) was concerned above all with distinguishing between true Muslims and those he considered to have lapsed on account of having committed some form of *shirk*. In numerous epistles and tractates, he elaborated the concept of *tawhid* as the central doctrine of Islam, one that in his view required Muslims to excommunicate so-called polytheists (themselves professed Muslims), to show them enmity and hatred, and to fight them in jihad. One section of the book, beginning on page 26, is devoted to an epistle by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab known as the nullifiers of Islam (*nawaqid al-Islam*). This is a list of ten “nullifiers,” meaning acts or beliefs that contravene *tawhid* and thus expel one from the faith (i.e., nullify one’s Islam). In the *Muqarrar fi 'l-tawhid*, the third of these nullifiers receives special attention, and that is because it had proven particularly controversial in the Islamic State. Indeed, much of the ideological conflict in the group has revolved around its interpretation.

The third of the ten nullifiers in Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s list reads as follows: “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.” The word translated here as excommunication, *takfir*, means to declare someone an unbeliever (*kafir*). In traditional
Wahhabism, it was obligatory for true Muslims to pronounce *takfir* on those Muslims deemed to be polytheists/unbelievers. In other words, Wahhabism imposed on them the calling out as unbelievers of their nominal coreligionists. There was to be no middle ground in the struggle between Islam and unbelief, *tawhid* and *shirk*.

Yet in its explication of the third nullifier, the *Muqarrar fi ’l-tawhid* emphasizes restraint, warning against an unqualified reading of the principle. It is possible, it states, that a Muslim who fails to pronounce *takfir* on an unbeliever has a valid reason for not doing so, such as being ignorant of the person’s condition or believing that the person in question ought to be excused on account of ignorance. A poor understanding of the third nullifier, it warns, can lead to an endless spiral of *takfir* (*al-tasalsul fi ’l-takfir*).

An even longer explication of the third nullifier is found in another text recovered from the Martyrs Brigade files. This is a 145-page commentary on a set of epistles by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab printed by the Islamic State as “The Necessities Required to Be Known by Every Muslim Male and Female” (*al-Wajibat al-mutahattimat al-ma’rifa ’ala kull Muslim wa-Muslima*). The undated commentary is titled “Establishing Knowledge of the Necessities Required to Be Known” (*Tahqiq al-ma’rifa bi’l-wajibat al-mutahattimat al-ma’rifa*). Its author was the Saudi religious scholar Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, who worked in the Committee for Research and Fatwas as the deputy of al-Bin’ali. In his commentary, al-Azdi devotes eight pages to the third nullifier (pp. 103-111), explaining that it ought to be understood as a general principle that should not necessarily be applied to specific individuals. Al-Azdi distinguishes between those unbelievers whose unbelief is clear and obvious and those whose unbelief is obscure, the latter being people who are associated with Islam. In the case of the latter, it is necessary to clear up any misconceptions or doubts before excommunicating them and requiring others to do so. In making these distinctions, al-Azdi quotes at length from Wahhabi sources, showing how Wahhabi scholars, even Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, could be nuanced in their approach to the third nullifier.
Another relevant document is a notebook from the Martyrs Brigade that appears to include a student’s notes from a class on Islamic doctrine. One page of the notebook concerns Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s third nullifier and shows that the more nuanced approach to the principle was in fact being taught. The notebooks states that a Muslim who fails to pronounce takfīr on someone who has fallen into unbelief should not himself be excommunicated until his misconception (shubha) has been made clear to him. Only then, if he does not relent, is he to be excommunicated.

The danger of the third nullifier leading to an endless spiral of takfīr (al-tasalsul fi ‘l-takfīr, sometimes translated as “chain takfīr”) was not simply theoretical for the Islamic State. In fact, in 2014-2015, a faction of the group was accused of espousing the concept. According to an internal report from November 2015 prepared by the Islamic State’s General Security Department (Diwan al-Amn al-‘Amm), there had arisen an extremist tendency in the organization influenced by a strict reading of the third nullifier. As the report states, “Many of the extremist misconceptions among the soldiers of the [Islamic] State originate from their faulty understanding of the third of the nullifiers of Islam mentioned by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.” For the General Security Department, this “faulty,” meaning strict understanding of the third nullifier was attributable to the teachings of a certain Saudi religious scholar named Ahmad al-Hazimi.

Al-Hazimi was known for emphasizing the importance of excommunicating those who excuse the unbelief of alleged unbelievers. In his view, someone who excuses unbelief is himself to be denounced as an unbeliever, an idea known as “takfīr of the excuser” (takfīr al-‘adhīr). An example given by the General Security Department report concerns those in the Islamic State who refrained from pronouncing takfīr on the leader of al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri. For the “extremists” in the Islamic State, anyone in the group who did not excommunicate al-Zawahiri was himself to be excommunicated. Another issue was the default position to be taken with respect to Muslims in Syria and elsewhere who were not members of the Islamic State. For the “extremists,” these were to be regarded as unbelievers, and those who deemed them Muslims were to be regarded as
unbelievers as well, in accordance with the third nullifier. On these grounds, the “extremists” were said to be pronouncing takfir on the leaders of the Islamic State, accusing them of not excommunicating those who, like the leader of al-Qaida, had manifestly fallen into unbelief. According to the report of the General Security Department, some seventy of the extremists had been put to death and another fifty or so had fled.

The Decline of the Scholars
The next phase of the ideological conflict witnessed the declining influence of men like Turki al-Bin’ali and Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, who represented the class of self-styled scholars (‘ulama’) in the Islamic State. While there was consensus in the Islamic State concerning the threat posed by the extremists identified in the General Security Department report, there was less agreement concerning the position on takfir being elaborated by the scholars associated with the Office of Research and Studies. For some in the Islamic State, including Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, the head of the Central Media Department (Diwan al-I’lam Markazi), the views al-Bin’ali and his associates were too nuanced. Whereas the extremists following al-Hazimi were rightly accused of overindulgence in takfir, the scholars exhibited an excessive restraint in takfir.

An attempt to reach a more balanced position culminated in the proclamation of a statement by something called the “Central Office for Overseeing the Shari’a Departments.” Issued on May 29, 2016, the statement criticized both the too extreme and the too moderate positions regarding “those who hesitate to pronounce takfir on polytheists.” While the statement allowed that there could a valid reason for hesitating to excommunicate an unbeliever, it stressed that this was not always the case and that nuance was not always warranted.

Some of the Islamic State’s scholars, including Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, did not take kindly to the statement. Al-Azdi and another scholar, the Jordanian Abu Ya’qub al-Maqdisi, each wrote a sharply worded letter to the leaders of the Islamic State, complaining that the statement, rather than resolving the dispute over takfir, created more ambiguity around it.
Al-Binʿali’s Office of Research and Studies took a less confrontational approach, producing a commentary on the statement that sought to settle the ambiguity in favor of its own views on *takfir*. However, the commentary’s publication was rejected by the Delegated Committee in February 2017.

By this time, a number of leaders in the Islamic State, including Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, had been killed as the U.S.-led coalition recovered increasingly more territory from the group in Iraq and Syria. Those who took their place would show even less tolerance of al-Binʿali and his associates. In May 2017, the Delegated Committee issued a memorandum on *takfir* titled “That Those Who Perish Might Perish by a Clear Sign, and [That Those Who] Live Might Live by a Clear Sign.” Taking aim at the views of the scholars, the memorandum condemned those who seek to strip the third nullifier of all meaning, emphasizing that “*takfir* of polytheists is one of the manifest principles of the religion.” This was to say that *takfir* is a foundational religious principle, and thus there is never a legitimate excuse for eschewing it. A summary of the memorandum was subsequently printed in the Islamic State’s weekly newsletter, *al-Naba*.

The scholars did not hold back in criticizing the *takfir* memorandum, authoring numerous refutations and releasing them online. Turki al-Binʿali, for instance, in a 21-page letter to the Delegated Committee that was leaked online, argued that the memorandum effectively adopted the position of Ahmad al-Hazimi and “chain *takfir*.” Shortly thereafter, he was killed in an airstrike. Other scholars were detained for voicing their objections to the memorandum; some of them would die in detention as a result of airstrikes. One scholar would soon suggest that the supporters of the memorandum had arranged for these men to be killed.

In September 2017, amid the uproar caused by the scholars, the memorandum was retracted and the Delegated Committee reconstituted. During the reshuffle, some of the Islamic State’s leaders in the more extremist camp were detained and executed, while others fled. The scholars, for their part, seemed to have regained the upper hand. They produced an official audio series spelling out their position on *takfir* as the right one. It appeared that their influence was being restored.
But soon the detentions of the scholars resumed. As the Islamic State continued to lose territory, they leveled more criticism at the group’s leadership, claiming it was dominated by “extremists” and “oppressors.” In a cascade of essays and other statements released online, they argued that the decline of the Islamic State was attributable to the leadership’s extremist views and heavy-handed policies. This did not help their case. In November 2018, a group of detained scholars were killed in a coalition airstrike, leading to more protests from the remaining scholars. Finally, in March 2019, one of these men, Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, authored a long book calling on followers of the Islamic State to retract the oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State’s scholarly remnant thereafter divorced itself from the organization.

Conclusion

Other documents in The ISIS Files, possibly related to these disputes, pertain to fissures in the Islamic State more generally. One example concerns two letters, found in the Omar Khan village in the Nineveh Plains, sent from the administration of the Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi military unit to “the brothers” in the area. The letters, dated spring 2016, indicate a significant level of discord in the ranks. “Let us pledge to God,” one of the letters reads, “that from this point onward we will show tolerance of one another and not reproach one another or regard one another with enmity. For reproaching one another is one of the causes of failure and the delay of victory.” It is evident that, whatever the source of the dispute, not all members of the Islamic State were getting along.

Somewhat less vague is a pamphlet issued by the Islamic State’s publishing house, Maktabat al-Himma, a year earlier in summer 2015. A copy was found in a police station in Tel Kif, Nineveh. The pamphlet, titled “Verify before Judging and Reporting,” notes that it is based on a memorandum of similar name issued by the General Advisory Committee (al-Lajna al-‘Amma al-Mushrifa), the predecessor of the Delegated Committee. “Some of the brothers,” it notes, “have been afflicted with acting hastily in judging events and persons,” and in reporting complaints to their superiors. “O brother mujahid,” it advises, “when you observe an
issue with your mujahid brother or hear something about him, do not rush to judgment, and do not report [a complaint] to your emir or to your brothers before you have verified [it].” For mistrust and bad faith, the pamphlet warns, “sow division and in the end will lead to failure and defeat.” In the case of ideological conflict, this admonition went unheeded.

How much did the ideological turmoil in the Islamic State contribute to the organization’s enfeeblement and territorial decline? According to one jihadi insider, who writes on Twitter under the pseudonym Muzamjir al-Sham, its contribution was in fact significant.²³ He claims that some 1400 people died in the course of the dispute’s final years, and that these “bloody struggles” not only undermined the Islamic State’s esprit de corps but even hastened its military defeat. This is almost certainly overstated, yet it is difficult to evaluate the significance of these battles over ideology given the secretive nature of the jihadi group. What is clear is that the Islamic State failed to achieve harmony over ideological matters and that many died and fled as a result, including those whose attention could otherwise have been devoted to administrative and military affairs. What is more, the legacy of the ideological conflict could affect the future, making a caliphal renaissance all the more challenging.

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¹ For an earlier analysis of these ideological disputes, see Cole Bunzel, “Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State,” Perspectives on Terrorism 13, no. 1 (February 2019): 1-11.

² *Muqarrar fi ‘l-tawhid* (“A Précis on God’s Oneness”), Hay’at al-Buhuth wa’l-Ifta, 2014/2015. Book found in The ISIS Files, 16_001056; Please note, this file will not be published in the digital repository.


6 al-Wajibat al-mutahattimat al-ma’rif `ala kull Muslim wa-Muslima (“The Necessities Required to Be Known by Every Muslim Male and Female”), Maktabat al-Himma, January/February 2015. Book found in The ISIS Files, 29_001455; Please note, this file will not be published in the digital repository.

7 Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, Tahqiq al-ma’rif `bi I-wajibat al-mutahattimat al-ma’rif ("Establishing Knowledge of the Necessities Required to Be Known"), n.p., n.d. Book found in the ISIS Files, 34_001557; Please note, this file will not be published in the digital repository.


al-Hashimi, Kuffu ‘l-ayadi.


Tathabbat qabl an tahkuma wa-tanqula (“Verify before Judging and Reporting”), Maktabat al-Himma, July/August 2015. Book found in the ISIS Files, 25_001322; Please note, this file will not be published in the digital repository.

See tweets by Muzmajir al-Sham (@MzmjerSh), November 3-5, 2019, beginning at https://twitter.com/MzmjerSh/status/1190929488860897282.