

Exploring *Takfir*, Its Origins and Contemporary Use: The Case of *Takfiri* Approach in Daesh's Media

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Abstract

Muslims have been the primary targets of Daesh's attacks since 2014 in different countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. These attacks were based on its *takfiri* ideology. As Daesh official media and documents indicate, *kufir* (unbelief, infidelity) in Daesh's approach is not limited to non-Muslims (original disbelievers), but Muslims are the most significant parts of *kuffar* (unbelievers) in its view and defined as incidental disbelievers. Through studying Daesh's official documents and various Arabic, English, and Persian media productions, in an explanatory research, this article attempts to display Daesh's *takfiri* approach toward Muslims and explains its historical and ideological roots, difference with Al-Qaeda's *takfiri* approach, different approaches to *takfir* inside Daesh, main targets of Daesh's *takfir*, and the reasons behind its *takfiri* view. This article displays that for Daesh, the Muslims are limited only to Sunni Muslims who are accepting and following its approach. Other Sunni and non-Sunni Muslims are thus *kuffar*. This study also shows that the assertion of *takfir* has become a method for Daesh to discredit its opponents, such as Shi'a Muslims and other Muslim groups.

Keywords

Daesh, ISIS, *kafir*, Media, Muslims, *Takfir*

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Introduction

The majority of people that Daesh (known more widely as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, [ISIS]) has killed since its inception in 2014 were Muslims (Global Terrorism Database, 2020; Herrera, 2019; Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights & United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) Human Rights Office, 2014; Ibrahim, 2017; Obeidallah, 2014; 2015) because it has regarded them as *kafir*. Anthony Cordesman (2017) stresses that “the overwhelming majority of ... violent terrorist incidents do occur in largely Muslim states, and most of these incidents are perpetrated by a small minority of Muslims...whose primary victims are fellow Muslims.” Daesh has been one of the most important extremist movements that claim to represent Islamic values and target other Muslims.¹

This article concentrates on the concept of *takfir* in Daesh’s media since June 2014 to find its view about *takfir*, reasons behind its *takfiri* ideology, changes in Daesh’s approach about *takfir*, its differences with Al-Qaeda (AQ) in the domain of *takfir*, and the main targets of its *takfiri* ideology. The main aim is to show how Daesh’s *takfiri* ideology has affected its propaganda, and display how Daesh’s media disseminated ideological messages, including *takfiri* and hate messages against “others” in diverse genres in recent years. The article underlines that the concept of *takfir* is a kind of “otherness” where difference and discrimination are at its core. It negatively defines other Muslims as *kafir* or *murtad* (apostate) and distinguishes Daesh supporters as pure Muslims. Daesh’s *takfir* is a significant part of its struggle for identity and being, and an attempt for distinction between the self and others. Through studying *takfir*, this article tries to display the dualism or the binary in Daesh’s approach that defines the critical part of “other/not-self” (that is, Muslims that Daesh considers as non-Muslim and *kafir*).

Otherring is “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities” (Powell & Menendian, 2016, p.17). The process of “othering” is an integral part of Daesh’s ideology, and through its use Daesh distinguishes itself from other Muslims. Daesh constructs the otherness of a wide range of Muslim countries, groups, and religions based on its *takfiri* ideology. By this otherness, which is rooted in its ideological ingroup and outgroup identifications, Daesh puts itself and others within a broader binary distinction.

Takfir is a dialectic and paradoxical term in Daesh’s view. Through *takfir*, Daesh uses coercive approach toward other Muslims that do not accept it from one side and creates consent among its supporters on the other side. Based on its media, Daesh was seeking a new world order (and new border), which is not state-centric but is based on the division between *kufir* (*dar al-kufir*/abode of disbelief, including different Muslim countries, Muslim groups, and Muslim people) and *iman* (*dar al-islam*/abode of Islam, that limits to Daesh’s Khilafah). *Takfir*, hate, threat, fight, and “just terror” are the main methods against others that Daesh’s media highlighted.

This study is an explanatory research to have a better focus on the issue of *takfir* to understand it more efficiently. The main methods used to collect data are

archival research and desk research. There is a large body of data across different Daesh's official media, such as al-Hayat Media Center (including videos, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah* magazines), *Al-Furqan*, *Ajnad*, *Al-Himmah* publications, *Al-Naba* newsletter, *Al-Bayan* Radio, and Wilayat media offices, reflecting its various activities, including its *takfiri* ideology. Relevant data are gathered through observation of Daesh's online texts on different platforms; for example, advertisements of written texts, videos, audios, *nasheeds* (Islamic vocal music) and statements in Daesh's official Telegram, TomTom, and Hoop channels, its online magazines and newsletters, and various websites. In addition to those mentioned earlier that originate from Daesh's official sources, other primary sources, including different websites that monitor and track jihadist activities (for example, Jihadology, SITE Intel Group, Jihadica, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's website) are also examined.

Historical and Ideological Roots of *Takfir*

Takfir is about labeling other Muslims as *kafir* (non-believer) and infidels, and legitimizing violation against them. According to Juan E. Campo (2009, p.420), in the Quran, "*kafir* or the plural *kafirun/kafirin* is used directly 134 times (its verbal cognates occur about 250 times, the verbal noun *Kufr* (unbelief, infidelity) occurs 37 times." Although terms such as *kufir* and *kafir* are present in the Quran and Prophet's Hadiths, neither used the term "*takfir*" to declare Muslims as "*kafir*." This indicates that *takfir* is not a Quranic term and also was never used by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) against others, and as Campo (2009, p. 421) notes, "The word *takfir* was introduced in the post-Quranic period and was first done by the Khawarij." Furthermore, the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Takfir, n.d.) explains, "*Takfir* is used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious." However, the domain of *takfir* has widened in the last decade, and now includes different Islamic groups and ordinary Muslims. The Quran emphasizes that "O you who have believed, when you go forth (to fight) in the cause of Allah, investigate; and do not say to one who gives you (a greeting of) peace 'You are not a believer'," (4: 94), or "whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption {done} in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely" (5:32) but several groups such as Daesh used *takfir* to brand other Muslims as *kafir* as a way to delegitimize them and promote their goals.

The history of *takfir* (that is, labeling a Muslim as a *kafir*) dates back to the early Khawarij who emerged in the mid-7th century, more specifically in a battle of Siffin (657 AD) which occurred due to the rebellion by Muawiyah (the first Umayyad caliph) against the fourth pious caliph (first imam of Shi'a), Ali ibn Abi Talib. When Ali's armies were close to overcoming Muawiyah's troops, Muawiyah suggested arbitration. Several soldiers of Ali's army turned against him when he agreed with Muawiyah's arbitration. These fighters became famous as the Khawarij and believed that God alone has the right to judge; they suggested that Ali's agreement to arbitrate was a violation of the divine will and announced that

Ali and his supporters were apostates. Their position was that “Muslims who commit grave sins effectively reject their religion, entering the ranks of apostates, and therefore deserve capital punishment” (Sonn & Farrar, 2009).

The Khawarij later became a political doctrine that sought political power. They defined the concept of *takfir* based on their own specific understanding of who is not a believer or a Muslim. In this regard, Toshihiko Izutsu (1980, p.4, cited in Timani, 2018, p. 30) argues, “They did not ask ‘What is belief?’ or even ‘What is unbelief?’ Rather they asked, ‘Who is an unbeliever or infidel?’” Furthermore, for them, a grave sin was determined based not only on belief or disbelief in God but also on acts and practices (Timani, 2018, p.32). Through this *takfiri* approach, they legitimized their own views and condemned, de-legitimized, and eliminated others who they viewed as *kafir*. These two approaches demonstrate the diverse similarities between *takfiri* movements, such as Daesh and Khawarij.

In general, the Khawarij’s *takfiri* approach triggered much debates and controversy among scholars and theologians, especially in defining *kufir* (disbelief), *iman* (belief), Islam, *kafir* (unbeliever), and *mumin* (believer). For example, Murji’ites refused to label other Muslims as unbeliever (*kafir*) and believed in “the postponement (*irja*) of judgment on committers of serious sins, recognizing God alone as being able to decide whether or not a Muslim had lost his faith” (Murji’ah, 2007). Their views were different from the Khawarij with regards to passing judgment on *iman* and *kufir*, and what makes a Muslim a *kafir*. “The Murji’ah took the opposite stand, asserting that no one who once professed Islam could be declared *kafir* (infidel), mortal sins notwithstanding. Revolt against a Muslim ruler, therefore, could not be justified under any circumstances” (Murji’ah, 2007). Importantly, they also believed that a grave sinner is still a believer.

The Mu’tazilah, another important theological school of thought, took a third stance about *kufir* and *iman*. The Mu’tazilah can be traced back to Wasil ibn Ata (699–749 AD), who stresses that a grave sinner (*fasiq*) could be classed neither as believer nor unbeliever but was in an intermediate position (Mu’tazilah, 2018). In similar fashion, Ibn Hazm (1902, pp. 233, 234, cited in Timani, 2018, p. 52) explains that a believer who has committed a grave sin “is a Believer in regards to his good deeds, and a non-believer in regards to his evil acts.” It has been argued, “the general Mu’tazilite conception of *īmān* is the view that the acts of obedience are essential for belief and whoever neglects these acts is not a Believer” (Alam al-Dīn, 2000, p. 266, cited in Timani, 2018, p. 49).

Another important theological school of thought is the Ash’ari. Unlike the Mu’tazila that believed a Muslim guilty of a serious sin was neither a believer nor an unbeliever, the Ash’ari insisted that s/he remained a believer, but was liable to punishment in the fire (Abu ‘l-Hasan al-Ash’ari, 1999). The Ash’ari narrowed down the realm of *kufir* and widened the realm of belief, placing emphasis on acts and arguing that it is the belief in the heart that matters the most (Timani, 2018 pp. 61–70). Imam Al-Ash’ari in *Al-Ibanah an Usul ad-Diyanah* (The Elucidation of Islam’s Foundation; cited in Timani, 2018, p. 58) distinguishes acts from belief, and notes that “any of these mortal sins, such as fornication or theft or the like, presumptuously declaring it lawful and not acknowledging that it is forbidden, is an infidel.”

One of the most influential figures in the domain of *takfir* is Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 AD)—a member of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence and a medieval Sunni Muslim theologian and scholar. According to Henri Laoust (2020), Ibn Taymiyyah “sought the return of the Islamic religion to its sources: the Qur’an and the *sunnah*, revealed writing and the prophetic tradition.” He theorized the practice of *takfir* against many Muslims and Islamic groups (for example, the Mu’tazila, Shi’a Muslims, Sufis and the Sufi mystic, Ibn Arabi, etc.), declaring them as *kuffar* for deviating from Islamic beliefs, based on his specific interpretation of Islam. He also considered Mongols as “non-authentic” Muslims whose conversion to Islam was not valid, and so Muslims must fight them. Ibn Taymiyyah insisted on the *kufir* of the Tartars, or others than them, people who leave many of the laws of Islam, or most of them, and suggests “it is obligatory to fight them until they comply to all of the Sharia, even though they may utter the *Shahaadataayn* (The Two Declarations of Faith, which means: “There is no god except Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger”)” (Taymīyah & Lahḥām, 1993, pp. 544–546).

As a consequence of the threat from the Tartars, Ibn Taymiyyah assumed fighting the jihad against the enemies of the community a higher obligation than prayer, pilgrimage or fasting (Whine, 2001, p. 58). In response to questions such as: “Is it permissible to fight them even when they are not fighting against the imam?” Ibn Taymiyyah argued that “these Tartars are like Kharijites in the time of Ali and Muawiyah... and they are people of ignorance and misguidance” (Al-Jedy, & Al-Bordini, 2018, p.10).

Ibn Taymiyyah also held a negative stance against Shi’a Muslims:

Many of the *rafidha* (rejectionist) would favor the infidels within his heart more than he would favor the Muslims. That is why when the infidel Turks emerged from the east and fought the Muslims and spilled their blood, in the lands of Khurasan and in Iraq and Sham and in the Peninsula and elsewhere, the *rafidha* were there to aid them in killing Muslims. And the Baghdad vizier known as Al-’Alqami; it was he and others like him who greatly aided them against the Muslims, as well as those who were in Al-Sham’s Aleppo and other *rafidha* who were the fiercest collaborators in fighting Muslims. The same goes for the Christians (the Crusaders) in Al-Sham where the *rafidha* were their greatest helpers. And should the Jews get a state in Iraq or elsewhere, the *rafidha* will be their greatest helpers, for they are always supportive of the infidels whether they are idolaters or Jews or Christians, and help them to fight Muslims and show aggression toward them (cited in Kazimi, 2006, p. 54).

In another fatwa Ibn Taymiyyah discredited the Alawites (the Nusayris) and claimed:

The Nusayris are more infidel than Jews or Christians, even more infidel than many polytheists. They have done greater harm to the community of Muhammad than have the warring infidels such as the Franks, the Turks, and others. To ignorant Muslims they pretend to be Shi’is, though in reality they do not believe in God or His prophet or His book... Whenever possible, they spill the blood of Muslims... They are always the worst

enemies of the Muslims... war and punishment in accordance with Islamic law against them are among the greatest of pious deeds and the most important obligations (Ibn Taymiyyah, cited in Pipes, 1992, p. 163).

As the above extracts indicate, besides religious factors, in Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatawa* (religious edicts) other ethnic issues are also evident. For example, since he was born in turbulent times, according to the Jamestown Foundation (2010, p.1), "The shaykh solved the tricky problem of Muslims fighting Muslims (forbidden by the Quran) by ruling that the Mongols occupying Mardin were not fully-practicing Muslims, thus legitimizing the mobilization of the state's full resources in a jihad against the invaders."

Ibn Taymiyyah's controversial *fatawa* were based on his loose interpretation of *takfir* to allow *jihad* against other Muslims. These *fatawa* have strongly influenced different Salafi-*Takfiri* groups, such as AQ and Daesh, who have extensively invoked *takfir* against Muslim governments/rulers, Islamic groups, Islamic figures, and ordinary Muslims in recent years, and engaged in the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Ibn Taymiyyah's approach, especially his political thought, influenced his notable disciple, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350 AD) and, later, they impressed Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792 AD), both of whom are quoted frequently in Daesh's media.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab developed the label of *kafir* further and allowed invocation of *takfir* against Muslims who did not accept his strict interpretations and condemned people who believed in saints as *kuffar* (Crooke, 2014; Valentine, 2015, p. 81). The vast dissemination of the *takfiri* ideology all around the world should be regarded as the consequence of the Saudi-funded Wahhabi propaganda in recent decades (Daou, 2012; Kepel, 2006; Kristof, 2016; Shane, 2016). The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (2013, p. 1) identified Salafism/Wahhabism as the main sources of global terrorism and pointed to their involvement in the "support and supply of arms to rebel groups around the world." Considering Daesh's media and its leaders' speeches, it seems Daesh is an enemy to Saudi Arabia. However, like the latter, Daesh's ideological roots lie in Wahhabism. Daesh shares and publishes Wahhabi ideology and holds anti-Shi'a attitude. Daesh's various media, such as *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *Al-Naba* quote Ibn Abd al-Wahhab repeatedly, and *Al-Himmah* publications reproduced all of his books.

Wahhabism is a form of Salafism, which was influenced by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah. It claims that it is the only legitimate version of Islam. Wahhabism, like Salafism, emphasizes the return to the Quran and Hadith, as the primary sources of Islam and the only fundamental texts taken with the understanding of the Salaf and the beliefs of the early Muslims to find how they dealt with specific situations. It denounces all innovations (*bidah*), opposes doctrines of non-Wahhabi Muslims such as Sufis and Shiites, and denies grave glorification, visiting tombs and the act of entreat (*tawassul*) through saints. Apart from cleansing Islam of Shi'a, Wahhabism advocates the destruction of tombs and shrines (Beránek & Tupek, 2009, p.20).

The critical idea in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teaching—which determines whether one is a Muslim or an infidel—was spread amongst Muslims by the support of

Saudi Arabia (Crooke, 2014; Özev, 2017). Wahhabization of the Islamic world has been one of the main projects of Saudi Arabia during recent decades to spread its particular interpretation of Islam and fight against the influence of the Shi'a. Wahhabism has had a continuing impact on different Salafi organizations. It has been active in funding Salafism all around the world by funding mosques, schools, religious institutions, publishing books, newspapers and magazines, TV channels, and websites to spread its *takfiri* ideology (Crooke, 2014; Daou, 2012; Kepel, 2006; Kristof, 2016; Shane, 2016). Oil money has been vital in the spread of Wahhabi ideology and Saudi policy amongst Muslim societies (Crooke, 2014; Özev, 2017).

Other than Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, one of the recent writers who propound the ideology of *takfir* is Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966 AD). The contemporary usage of *takfir* has its roots in Qutb's writings against the state or the society which he regarded as being in the state of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance). In the mid-20th century, Qutb (2014) divided Muslim societies into good and evil, and invoked the idea of *takfir* against those he considered evil. Through terms such as *jahiliyyah* and *takfir*, he not only considered Muslim regimes as ignorant but also demanded their overturn. He wrote against some Islamic governments and societies and considered many Muslims to be disbelievers. He claims: "Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws - is *Jahiliyyah*, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of *Jahiliyyah*!" (Qutb, 2014, p.20). According to Qutb, using violence is necessary against corrupt Muslim rulers. His view on the *Jahiliyyah* of Muslim societies has influenced the *takfiri* thoughts of groups such as AQ and Daesh.

Daesh's roots, its *takfiri* approach and sectarian plan in Iraq can directly be traced back to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).² AQI was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004 who declared an "all-out war" on Shi'a Muslims in Iraq and ordered other religious and tribal groups to join his anti-government campaign or face attacks (Al-Zarqawi declares war on Iraqi Shia, 2005). Zarqawi's key legacy was to place anti-Shi'a views as central part of radical Sunni jihadist groups in Iraq. Both AQI and Daesh viewed Shi'a as their main enemy, sought political power for the Sunnis, and tried to remove their rivals and fulfill their goals using the *takfiri* approach. Their propaganda was fueled by a condemnation of the Iranians and Shi'a Muslims that they perceived as being behind conspiracies against Islam, in an alleged alliance with the Jews and the Christians (or Crusaders in their vocabulary).

As the historical and ideological review illustrates, while Daesh is historically rooted in AQI, its *takfiri* ideology's roots can be found in the Khawarij's view, and in the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Sayyid Qutb.

Al-Qaeda and *Takfir*

Daesh is not the first Salafi-Jihadi group following *takfiri* ideology. AQ was another Salafi-Jihadi group to invoke *takfir* to explain the world in terms of a dichotomy between belief (*iman*) and non-belief (*kufir*). Daesh and AQ both

follow a similar ideology and the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Qutb have stimulated both. Both follow a narrow interpretation of Islam and claim they want to revive the glory of Islam as it existed in the 7th century. Both denounce any group that does not share their Salafi-Jihadi ideology or anti-Shiite views. However, AQ's priority has been fighting the West while Daesh focused on sectarian activities against Shi'a. It means that while they both follow the same ideology, in practice, their priorities are different.

Furthermore, while Daesh through several coercive approaches, such as executions, public beheadings, repentance, and crucifixion tries to control, terrorize and purify its society, AQ prefers a softer approach. Also, AQ stresses the performance of *takfir* with more consideration and wariness. In the statement signed by Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad Taha, and Shaykh Mir Hamzah and Fazlul Rahman, it emphasized on its priorities and announced, "Crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims" (Text of world Islamic front's statement urging jihad against Jews and Crusaders, 1998, p.3). It stressed on defensive jihad and claimed "ulema have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries" (Text of world Islamic front's statement urging jihad against Jews and Crusaders, 1998, p.3). In this statement, they issued the following *fatwa* to all Muslims:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (Mecca) from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.

... We—with God's help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's US troops and the devil's supporters allying with them and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson... (Text of world Islamic front's statement urging jihad against Jews and Crusaders, 1998, p.3).

The above extract targets Americans and American allies and supporters, including Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia to liberate the holy mosque (Mecca).

Moreover, AQ regards Shi'a Muslims to be apostates; for example, Al-Zawahiri (2005) considers Shi'a as "a religious school based on excess and falsehood", but he is against any attack on ordinary Shi'a, their mosques, and the mausoleum of their Imams (Al-Zawahiri, 2005). He also considers killing Shi'a to be too extreme and believes the "conflict with the Shi'a lift the burden from the Americans by diverting the mujahedeen to the Shi'a, while the Americans continue to control matters from afar" (Al-Zawahiri, 2005). He emphasizes that the Americans are targeting "we and the Iranians", so, we "need to refrain from harming each other"

(Al-Zawahiri, 2005), which shows his pragmatic approach to politics. Similarly, in September 2013, Al-Zawahiri advised his supporters to avoid targeting Shi'as. Instead, he says, jihad should be directed toward the United States and the "Crusader Alliance," and notes, "deviant sects" of Islam such as Shiism, Ismailism, Qadianism, and Sufism should be attacked only in self-defense (Stewart, 2017). Al-Zawahiri also prohibits his followers from attacking the homes, places of worship, religious festivals or social gatherings of members of other Islamic sects (Stewart, 2017).

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, another influential figure of AQ criticizes any kinds of excesses in *takfir*, and rejects killing ordinary people, such as women, children, and the lay Shi'as; and targeting their mosques and holy places as there is no justification according to Al-Maqdisi for these activities (Kazimi, 2005). He notes they would deflect energy and attention from fighting the enemy (Kazimi, 2005, pp. 60–63). AQ, therefore, has prioritized targeting "far enemy" and its allies. AQ has also legitimized coalition with groups such as Ba'athists (Bin Laden tape: Text, 2003) or Shi'a/Iran against America. It only excommunicates and legitimizes targeting Muslim soldiers when they work as the allies of the West against Muslims.

Daesh and Takfir

While in Islam, anyone who accepts oneness of God and Prophecy of Muhammad, and utters the *kalima* of *tawhid*: "There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" is considered a Muslim and cannot be called a non-Muslim, Daesh regards many Muslims as apostate and infidels if they do not accept its interpretation of Islam. This interpretation permits the killing of Muslims as infidels and apostates. *Takfir* in Daesh's view consolidates the faith of *al-wala' wal-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), identifies the enemies to fight, justifies killing them, and accordingly, determines the domain of friends. Through *takfir*, Daesh has tried to purify the Islamic society by attacking Shi'a and Sunni Muslims and also its rival *takfiri* groups.

The politics of fear, denial, exclusion, ignorance, violence, and brutality have worked as different parts of a powerful political strategy for Daesh not only in the battleground but also in other areas, such as its media. Daesh commits this strategy in the name of Islam and jihad, and to do this, it selects what it wants from vast amounts of Islamic texts and then provides its particular reading and interpretation of the tradition and texts. William McCants (2015) explains: "Want to find passages justifying peace and concord? They're in there. Want to find passages justifying violence? They're in there too..." (p.15). Since Daesh selected texts to fit its desires and ideas, many of the Salafi and non-Salafi scholars have equated Daesh with the Khawarij of the early years of Islam.

Daesh publicly announced its official position on *takfir* in different texts, such as *Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir* (The Creed and Methodology of Takfir in the Islamic State), *Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat* (Standard Text for Islamic Monotheism for Military Camps) and

Hazihi Aqidatuna Wa Haza Manhajuna (This is Our Creed and This is Our Methodology) (Hassan, 2017), various memos of the Delegated Committee, and several more official documents. *Daesh has announced that it invokes takfir* on governments, groups or individuals based on the *manhaj* (methodology) of Ahl as-Sunnah (Sunnites), and follows *Salaf* and does innovate about *takfir*. An important statement released by the Shari'i Committee in Wilayat al-Baraka (Legal Committee in the Baraka Province) in June 2014 (Sha'aban 1435 AH) before the Khilafah's announcement declared, "Whoever shows for us *kufri*; we declare *takfir* on him according to the Shari'i regulations, whatever his name and whatever his lineage. Moreover, we do not fear in that a critic's censure" (Important Statement, 2014). The statement stressed, "We consider that the original principle among our peoples is Islam and we deal with them as Muslims..." (Important Statement, 2014). Nevertheless, following the takfiri attitude, Daesh has attempted to purify the world by opposing Muslim countries, killing other Muslims, including Shi'a, Sufis, and many Sunni Muslims who are against Daesh's methods, actions, and ideology. Jabhat al-Nusrah (Al-Nusrah Front) and AQ are also among the groups that Daesh rejects, despite their similar ideology. Another target of Daesh's *takfiri* propaganda is the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwanul Muslimin)—a Sunni Islamist organization with large following in the Middle East, especially in countries such as Egypt (was in power during Mohamed Morsi's presidency, 2012–2013) and Turkey (under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership).

Daesh has shared the "10 nullifiers (*nawaqid*) of Islam" that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab announced for *takfir* and stressed that people should not consider a person a *kafir* until he commits one of the 10 nullifiers of Islam (*Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir*, 2015). One of the most controversial and confusing nullifiers within Daesh and across its supporters is the third nullifier: "Whoever does not hold the polytheists (*mushrikeen*) to be disbelievers (*kuffar*), or has doubts about their disbelief or considers their ways and beliefs to be correct, has committed disbelief" (Al-Binali, n.d, p.30; *Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu'askarat*, 2015; *Majmou Rasa'il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, pp. 39–41). For example, in a notification from the Shari'i Committee in Hasakah Province, it was announced that "we declare *takfir* ... from those who have committed a clear nullifier from creed, word or deed..." (Notification from Shari'i Committee in Hasakah Province, 2014). According to this statement and other similar documents, adopting democracy or fighting for the sake of patriotism, nationalism or civil state are among the reasons of *takfir* (*Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir*, 2015; *Majmou Rasa'il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, pp. 40–51; Notification from Shari'i Committee in Hasakah Province, 2014; Important Statement, 2014).

Alternatively, in a memo published by the Delegated Committee (ruling on the factions that fight the Dawla, 2015), Daesh announced its official stance concerning the Islamic factions that fight it. *Takfir* is the key theme in this memo and it identifies two main actors: first, "that raise Islamic banners and slogans and lay claim for themselves to jihad" (meaning jihadist organizations other than Daesh) and second, the "Islamic State" (that is Daesh). The former are negatively

predicated as “sects that have apostatized from the religion of God, nullified the principle of the religion, striving to build a civil, democratic, pluralist state, removing the rule of God from the land of the Islamic State, and replacing it with rulings of Jahiliya” and the latter is positively qualified as the only state that rules by the Sharia. This memo regards fighting Daesh as what nullified the “principle of the religion” and hence justifies invoking *takfir* (Ruling on the factions that fight the Dawla, 2015).

Two main Approaches toward *Takfir*

Since its inception in June 2014, Daesh has suffered from an ongoing internal conflict between a more extremist side and another less extremist branch. Following the decline of its power and the loss of territories, especially in 2017, the internal dispute has intensified. The documents leaked by the two sides of the dispute revealed Daesh as a fragmented entity, which suffered from a lack of unity between its high-ranked figures and fighters and ordinary supporters. These documents reflect the power struggle in the higher ranks of Daesh, and mainly their stance on the subject of *takfir*. According to Cole Bunzel (2017), a division within Daesh can be described as “between the more extreme ‘Hazimis’ and the more moderate ‘Binalis’.”

Hazimis are the followers of Ahmad Al-Hazimi, a Saudi Salafi scholar, whose controversial doctrine known as *takfir al-adhir* (the excommunication of the excuser) concludes that *takfir* is in infinite regress (*al-takfir bi'l-tasalsul*) (Bunzel, 2017). His views towards *takfir* were criticized and denounced by some of the high-ranked figures within Daesh, such as Turki Binali and Abu Sulayman Al-Shami in mid-2014. While supporters of Binali accused Hazimis as *Khawarij* and *Ghulat* (extremist), the Hazimis believe Binali’s advocates are *murji’a* (that is those who postpone their judgment). Therefore, due to this division, Daesh’s *takfiri* stance has been subject to several significant changes in recent years.

The changes are consistent with the dominant view of the members in the Delegated Committee, who wrote and released statements about *takfir*. They were either in support of a “restrictive” (less extremists) trend (that is, *Binalis*) or encouraging more extremism (that is, *Hazimis*) on the issue. While Daesh announced that “we are neither extremists *Khawarij* nor the crude people of *Irja*” (Important Statement, 2014), and explained that it takes the middle road between them, these trends (that is, more extreme and less extreme approaches) have at different points dominated others within Daesh. When dominant, they have accused each other of following one of the mentioned two types of attitudes and committing *takfir*.

In a seven-page memorandum (titled *That Those Who Perish Would Perish upon Proof*), which was published by the Delegated Committee about *takfir* in May 2017, Daesh confirms that it follows the Wahhabi ideology and explains that “it was established upon the same principles as the blessed Najdi da’wah state founded by the followers of the Mujaddid Imam Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdil-Wahhab” (Important memorandum, 2017, p.12). Like other documents, this memo outlines

and rejects two camps of “*irja*” (postponement) and “*ghuluw*” (extremism) and stresses that its view differs from their approaches on *takfir*. This memo stresses:

The Islamic State has not ceased for a single day from making *Takfir* of the *Mushrikin*, and that it treats the making of the *Takfir* of the *Mushrikin* as one of the utmost principles of the religion, which must be known before knowing the prayer and other obligations that are known of the religion by necessity (Important memorandum, 2017, p.13).

According to this memo, those who do not excommunicate the *Mushrikin* (polytheists) must be excommunicated. As in other texts in which Daesh uses religious content to legitimize its views, this memo (Important memorandum, 2017, p.12) with a title borrowed from a Quranic verse (8: 42) is not exceptional. Furthermore, in a controversial view, it considered *takfir* as necessary as other pillars in Islam, and announced, “*Takfir* is one of the principles of the religion.” This document reflects the views of the more extremist figures in Daesh (Hazimis’ supporters) whose views differ from the less extreme ones in the domain of *takfir*, and the examples of *Kafir* in the Muslim world. While *Al-Naba* newsletter (*Li-yahlike man halaka an Bayyinah wa Yahya man hayya an Bayyinah: Tasmim ham min al-Lajnat al-Mufawwadah min Amir al-Muminin*, 2017, p. 15) calls this document “an important memo from the Delegated Committee on behalf of *Amir al-Mu’minin*” (Commander of the Faithful), several highly-ranked figures of Daesh, especially in the Office of Research and Studies (for example, Al-Binali and Al-Maqdisi) have challenged this memo.

The Delegated Committee released another memo to all Wilayat, Dawawin, and committees in September 2017, which Al-Bayan radio released in six sessions. This memo that reflects the views of the less extremist figures inside Daesh (Binalis’ supporters), fundamentally contradicted the previous seven-page memo and announced that its content is not to be acted. This memo interprets *takfir* restrictively, rejects *takfir* as “the principle of the religion”, and considers it to be “one of the requirements of the religion” (*Silsilat al-Ilmiyyah fi Bayan Masai’l al-Minhajiyah*, 2017; The Islamic state delegated committee. To: All wilayat, dawawin, and committees (may Allah safeguard them) 2017). This memo, which announces a more nuanced approach to *takfir*, also advises referring back to two books: *At-Taqrirat al-Mufidah fi Ahamm Abwab al-’Aqidah* (Useful reports in the most important sections of faith) that was published by Al-Maktabah Al-Buhuth wal Dirasat (Office of Studies and Research), and *Ta’allamu Amr Dinikum* (Learn about your religion), which was published by Diwan al-Da’wah wa al-Masajid (Department of Invitation and Mosques) that were previously banned by the Delegated Committee. These changes indicate that despite Daesh’s frequent attempts to show itself as a united entity, there were internal dissents, especially in the context of its ideological approach to *takfir*.

The dispute has been mainly about whether *takfir* is a “foundation/principle of religion” (*asl al-deen* in the first memo) or a “requirement/necessity of religion” (*lawazim al-deen* in the second memo). The release of two different memos about *takfir* in 2017 provided additional vital signs indicating the fragmentation inside Daesh and the power conflict in the higher ranks of Daesh. As a result of these

disputes, Daesh has taken different actions against some of its high-ranked official members, such as Sharia office members, judges, and *amirs* of *wilayat*, and entailed warnings, imprisonment, and execution (ISIS executes one of its Sharia judges, 2015; Al-Husseini al-Hashimi, 2017; Al-Shami, 2019; Bunzel, 2017; 2018; 2019; Hamming, 2019).

Targets of Takfir

As different documents indicate, *kufir* in Daesh's approach is not limited to non-Muslims. Based on Daesh's view, the main disbelievers in this regard are of two types:

1. Original disbelievers: These are all who have not belonged to Islamic faith and have not professed the two *shahadas* (declarations of faith), such as the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus and those like them.

2. The disbelievers affiliated with Islam: These are all those who have professed the two *shahadas* but have committed a deed of disbelief that takes them outside of the fold of Islam (*Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat*, 2015, pp. 30–31).

In a Friday sermon in Ninawa Province (2015a; 2015b), news of which was published by Diwan al-Da'wah wa al-Masajid, the Imam also defines *dar al-kufir* politically, and divides it into two parts. It underlined:

The abode of disbelief is divided into two divisions: the abode of original disbelief, like America, Europe, Greece and other lands besides them from the land of original disbelief, and the abode of incidental disbelief: disbelief of apostasy after Islam, like the Arab states now, and others besides them, from those who claim Islam when they are apostates waging war on the law of God Almighty.

The inhabitants of both parts, including non-Muslims and many Muslims, are therefore considered disbelievers in Daesh's view. However, Daesh considers the *kufir* of apostasy to be more severe than the *kufir* of an individual who is originally a disbeliever (that is, he/she was never a Muslim). So, it believes fighting the apostates (near enemy) holds a higher priority than fighting those who were originally disbelievers (This is our *aqidah* and this is our methodology, 2015, p. 5).

Also, the domain of *kufir*, in Daesh's view is more extensive. For instance, in an audio message, Daesh's first spokesperson, Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani (2015a) introduces different groups, such as the atheists, Jews, Crusaders (Christians), Rafidah, Murtagh, Sahwat, and criminals as being *kafir* and enemies of Allah altogether. Similarly to the above official extracts, Daesh considered *kuffar* "the covert members of the same secret society" (Conspiracy theory shirk, 2015, p. 19) and "followers of religions of falsehood included Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christians; Orthodox, Conservative, or Progressive Jews; Buddhists, Hindus, or Sikhs; capitalists, communists, or fascists – as allies of one another against Islam and the Muslims" (You think they are together, but their hearts are divided 2015, p.43). Also, Daesh regarded them as "the *murtaddin* of the Turkish and Nusayri armies, the Sahwat, the Rafidi militias, and the Russian and American

Crusaders (Christians), and their allies from the evil scholars, the claimants of jihad, and the political parties and organizations, the *murtaddin* who refuse the rule of Sharia” (That Allah should test those who believe and destroy the disbelievers, 2017, pp. 4–5). Daesh defines *kuffar* negatively as “the allies of *Shaytan* (devil)” (That Allah should test those who believe and destroy the disbelievers, 2017, pp. 4–5) and justifies its battles as jihad against the enemies of Allah. They are characterized negatively as “followers of religions of falsehood” and include many groups, religions, and countries.

The assertion of *takfir* has become a method for Daesh to discredit its opponents, such as Shi’a Muslims and other Muslim groups.

Shi’a Muslims

Although Daesh has targeted many of its Sunni opponents as *kafir* and killed them, Shi’a Muslims have been the main target of its *takfiri* ideology (*Majmou Rasa’il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, pp.117–144). This *takfiri* approach, as the legacy of Al-Zarqawi, primarily singled out the Shi’a Muslims. Daesh’s media, like its military, has identified the Shi’a Muslims, who form the second largest branch of Islam, as its primary target and has followed sectarian goals in its activities against them. Various historical, ideological, and political elements overshadowed the long-term differences between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims (Appleby, 2008; Moore, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012; 2014). However, Wahhabization of some parts of Sunni Muslims has been an essential element in fostering hatred and the *takfiri* approach among them in recent decades (Kepel, 2006).

Daesh has used *rafidah* (rejectionist; a derogatory term to describe Shi’a Muslims, as they do not recognize Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad, and consider Ali to be the first Imam and the legitimate successor of the Prophet) as a central term (instead of Shi’a) in its propaganda. Using this and other similar terms, such as *majus* (meaning Zoroastrians to show Iranian Shi’a as insincere Muslims), pagan (as a pejorative term for a polytheistic group to ridicule Shi’a beliefs), and Safavid³ (as a derogatory term to reduce Shi’a to an Iranian dynasty), Daesh has labeled the Shi’a Muslims in pejorative ways.

Moreover, in different texts, the Shi’a Muslims are characterized negatively as *murtad* (apostate) and *mushrik* (polytheist) with extreme ignorance and deviance and the faction of *hirabah* (armed transgression and banditry). Daesh categorizes the 12 Shiites (Ithna Ashari) as *kafir*. Daesh also considers “those who reject the *takfir* of Twelver Shiite scholars as disbelievers” (*Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat*, 2015). Furthermore, Iran, as the main base of Shi’a Muslims, is placed at the center of *dar Al-kufr*, according to Daesh’s media. For example, while Daesh considers America to be “the head of the tyrants in the world” (*Qital America ... Qadiyyah Shariyyah Awwalan*, 2016, p. 13), it follows Zarqawi’s opinion (*Ma`rakatona ma`a ar-Rafidah hatta la takun fitnah*, 2016, p. 3) that says:

The danger from the Shi’a, as the proximate dangerous enemy of the Sunnis, however, is greater, and their damage is worse and more destructive to the (Islamic) nation

(Ummah) than the Americans, as a far enemy, so fighting the Shiites has not stopped in the last centuries and will not end until the land is being purified of them.

Daesh fallaciously claims that the Shi'a leaders and laymen are *murtaddin*, due to "their extreme ignorance and deviance" (The Rafidah: from Ibn Saba to Dajjal, 2016, p. 35), and stresses that "we hold the Rafidi Shi'a to be a faction of *shirk*, apostasy, and *hirabah* (armed transgression)" (This Is our Aqidah and this Is our methodology, 2015, p.4), "who must be killed wherever they are to be found until no Rāfidī walks on the face of earth" (The Rafidah: from Ibn Saba to Dajjal , 2016, p. 45). Also, according to Daesh's propaganda, "the most evil enemy of Islam is the Safavī regime of Iran" (Foreword, 2015b, p. 4). Furthermore, Daesh announced, "Al-Rafidah is a disease... There is no cure for them but the sword" (*Inna Rafida Daa' ... Lisa lahom illa al-Saif Dawa*, 2016, p. 4).

Moreover, the strategy of magnifying Iran/Shi'a threat, creating fear among Sunnis, provoking Sunnis against Shi'a, and igniting a sectarian war inside Iraq and Syria, have been at the forefront of Daesh's *takfiri* approach since its inception. It has indoctrinated Sunnis through its different media and tried to show that Shi'as were swallowing Sunnis in recent decades. In a defiant message, Al-Adnani (2015b) considers the current war to be "a Crusader-Safavid war against Islam, a war against *Tawhīd*, a war against the Sunnis" and claims, "the paganism of the *Rāfidah* will never defeat your *Tawhīd*" (Al-Adnani, 2015b). He excludes Shi'as from Islam, regards them negatively, like pagan, Safavid, and as the allies of the crusader, and puts them outside monotheism.

Daesh also uses *takfir* to describe anyone who rejects the *takfir* of Shi'a Muslims and considers them as disbelievers. Similarly, Al-Zarqawi who was under the influence of Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir and who sought to cleanse Iraq of the Shi'as, emphasized the necessity of spilling their blood; Daesh follows the same steps. Before the terror attacks in Tehran on June 7, 2017, one of the terrorists threatened the Shi'a population in Iran, and said "*bi-iznillah* we will burn you... we will kill all of you." ('Tehran attackers' final message, 2017). Also, in a video (*Bilad Fars az Diruz ta Emruz*, 2017), the narrator calls Iran *dar al-kufr*, refers to Daesh as a legitimate state, and mentions:

Today, Iran is *Dar Al-Kufr*. It is a place for *Rafidah* polytheists, against Muslims to weaken them... This Persian government is support and shelter of every infidel and apostate... Today, Iran stands at the head of the war and confronts the legitimate Islamic Khilafah (*Bilad Fars az Diruz ta Emruz*, 2017).

This argument is an example of a faulty analogy between Iran and *dar al-kufr*. Similarly, in the Tehran attackers' final message video (2017), one of the attackers says "we are the Ummah of Islam, and *Rafida* is the Ummah of *kufr*", which indicates another faulty analogy between the *Ummah* of Islam and "we" (Daesh) on one side and Iran and the *Ummah of kufr* on the other. As per Daesh's discourse, Muslims can only be Sunnis who follow its ideology. Therefore, by propagating the alleged threats of the Shi'as and Iran, and calling Sunni people their victims, Daesh introduces Shi'a/Iran as a cruel nation and puts them under accusation in front of its audience.

Through attacking Shi'as in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, and also in its media, Daesh has attempted to create sectarian cracks and has used them to its advantage. Other than the different religious beliefs of the Shi'as and Daesh, the latter's approach reflects its ideological Wahhabi roots, which are at its core understanding against the Shi'a (Crooke, 2014; Hassan, 2016). Also, Iran and Shi'a forces have been at the forefront of the war against Daesh, and this has caused Daesh much anger. Furthermore, Daesh is worried about the increasing power and influence of Iran, as a Shi'a country, and its Shi'a allies in the region, and shows its anger and hatred against Shi'a/Iran through its media. In addition to the ideological and political differences between Daesh and other Muslims, particularly the Shi'as (in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Alawite in Syria), Clark McCauley (2016) underlines "ethnicity" as an important component propelling hatred and othering by the Daesh.

Muslim Brotherhood

Daesh has targeted other Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*) in its media as *kafir*. Therefore, *kafir* in Daesh's view is not limited to the Shi'a and the followers of other religions. Different Sunni groups who did not support Daesh or did not recognize its Khilafah, have been considered as *kafir*. For instance, Daesh has called the Muslim Brotherhood the "Murtadd brotherhood" or as "*Ikhwanul Muflisin*" (*Majmou Rasa'il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, p. 2704), which means bankrupt brothers. It likens this organization to a "devastating cancer" that has quickly spread from Egypt to other Muslim countries and then to the West and other countries throughout the world, waging war against Islam and the Muslims (The Murtadd brotherhood, 2016, p.28). Daesh claims, "To actualize the 'New World Order' project, the Crusaders (Christians) found none better than the Murtadd Brotherhood to be the role model for people" (The weakest house is that of a spider, 2016, p. 2).

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (2016) negatively characterizes the Muslim Brotherhood as "the brothers of *Shaytan*, a deviant sect, and the laboring agents of the Crusaders against Islam and its people", and notes, "the *Murtadd* Brotherhood has emerged as a poisoned spearhead carried by the Crusaders in their war against the Khilafah" (Al-Baghdadi, 2016). Al-Baghdadi (2016) also criticizes the Muslim Brotherhood in different countries, due to "their partaking in man-made laws and *Kufiri* legislation, and fighting violently against the mujahidin." Moreover, according to Al-Adnani, "The Ikhwan party...abandoned all the principles of *imān*" (The Murtadd brotherhood, 2016, p.40) and mentions that there is no difference between the Arab leaders (tawaghit) and the Ikhwan leaders. "But the latter group is more dangerous for the Muslims" (The Murtadd brotherhood, 2016, p.40). Daesh also insists that the Shi'as and the Muslim Brotherhood are allies that "altogether attempt to destroy the religion of Islam..." (The Murtadd brotherhood, 2016, p.43). Daesh considers democratic ways of governance that Muslim Brotherhood follows as *kufir* that weakens the jihadi approach among Muslims against enemies.

Al-Qaeda

Daesh has targeted other Salafi-Jihadi groups, such as AQ and its leaders in its media. It has considered those in AQ to be apostates, infidels, and tyrants, and it has killed many of AQ's fighters. For example, according to a statement that was published by the Central Office to Track the Shari'i Diwans (Extended explanation of *takfir* on one who refrains from *takfir* of the idolaters, 2016):

The Organization of al-Qaeda in Syria (*Jabhat al-Nusrah*) and those with it from the militant factions who fight Islamic State are *tawaif mumtani'ah bi-shawkah 'an tahkim shar' Allah* (groups forcefully resisting the implementation of the Sharia of Allah), who have assisted the apostates in establishing a "democratic civil" state of *kufr*.

Daesh insists that AQ is an apostate group which has openly committed *kufir* and based on Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab's third nullifiers of Islam threatens to punish soldiers who refuse to engage with the *takfir* of these individuals (Extended explanation of *takfir* on one who refrains from *takfir* of the idolaters, 2016). The Delegated Committee had released the same content in 2015 without naming these factions. These statements are examples of the power conflict and competition between Daesh and other *takfiri* groups, such as Al-Nusrah/AQ in Syria.

Furthermore, Abu Maysarah al-Shami, one of Daesh's influential ideologues, likens AQ to 'Jews' among jihadi organizations, and accuses them of "infiltrating the Khilafah to distort its methodology from within" (Al-Shami, 2016). In his description, based on the false view that Shi'a was founded by the Jews to divert Muslims, he regards AQ as Shi'a and notes that today AQ plays the same role. His claim is another instance of an analogy between AQ, Jews, and Shi'as. Also, Abu Musab Al-Tunisi, amir in Deir ez-Zour and one of the extremist figures of Daesh, was accused of proclaiming former leader of AQ Bin Laden as *kafir* (cited in Hamming, 2016). He also invoked *takfir* for al-Zawahiri (Suleiman Ali, 2014). Once al-Zawahiri refused to issue a fatwa for the ruling of *takfir* upon the Shiites, Abu Omar al-Kuwaiti, another extreme figure of Daesh, took a public stance against al-Zawahiri, emphasizing his *takfir* in the process (Suleiman Ali, 2014).

As a reaction toward Daesh's violent approach, Abu Qatada Al-Filistini, one of the famous Salafi thinkers, notes:

Its threats to kill opponents, side-lining of other groups and violent way of fighting opponents, constitute a great sin, reflecting the reality of the group ... They are merciless in dealing with other jihadists. How would they deal with the poor, the weak and other people? (Jordan's Abu Qatada says caliphate declaration "void", 2014)

The above approach to AQ relates to the deepening disputes between Daesh and AQ in recent years around the conflict of interests and power struggle among Salafi-Jihadi groups. It means that while both want to impose Sharia rule and share similar ideological aspects, several issues such as leadership, targets, strategies, and tactics divide them.

Muslim Governments

Apart from Islamic groups, Daesh has also targeted Muslim governments to be disbelievers and therefore sees them as worthy of death. For instance, Al-Baghdadi (2015) addresses Muslims in different countries and regards their rulers as apostate tyrannical rulers, slaves, servants, and guard dogs of the Jews and Christians. Daesh calls the Saudi regime as *Al Salul*⁴ and the apostate House of Saud. Apart from *Al-Salul*, it is referred to as “the dogs of the Jews and Crusaders” (Al-Adnani, 2015a) and the “nullifier of Islam” (Kill the Imams of kufr, 2016, p. 7). Daesh has challenged the Saudi power to show itself as a unique and legitimate representative of the Sunni Muslims and to cultivate more credibility for itself.

Furthermore, for Daesh, any slogans other than Islamic slogans with a Salafi-Jihadi interpretation of Islam are symbols of the *shirk* and *kufr* that pull Muslims away from their religion, and should thus be challenged and objected. For example, a notification from the Shari’i Committee in Hasakah Province (2016) announced: “We declare *takfir* ... from those who have committed a clear nullifier from creed, word or deed....” According to this statement and other similar documents, adopting democracy, or fighting for patriotism, nationalism or civil state are among the reasons of *takfir* (Important Statement, 2014; *Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir*, 2015; Shari’i Committee in Hasakah Province, 2016; *Majmou Rasa’il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, pp. 40–51). Other texts indicate that democracy is a *Bidaa* (heresy or innovation), an election is *kufr*, and countries following this approach are *kafir* (*Majmou Rasa’il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, p.41, 47, 99). Daesh also defines all proponents of democracy and those who promote it as *kafir* (*Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat*, 2015). Based on Daesh’s view, therefore, *takfir* deals with the rejection of all Muslim countries that have followed democratic ways of governance, elections and human-made laws.

Also, Daesh’s *takfir* is also about governments that do not rule by Sharia, those that are governed by different secular and nationalist parties in the Muslim World, and any country, which considers democracy to be compatible with Islam. Daesh considers all these governments as *kafir*. It also categorizes members of Tawaghit’s military, police officers, intelligence, executive and judiciary apparatuses as *kafir*. Daesh also stresses on the necessity of Islamic Sharia courts and considers courts and judges based on civil laws are nullifiers of Islam (*Majmou Rasa’il wa Moallafat Maktab Al-Buhuth wa Al-Dirasat*, 2017, p.41, 47, 99). Daesh has also lashed out against Turkey in its media. Turkey’s pursuit of new Ottomanism in its foreign policy and intervention in different regional crises, especially in Syria, collectively indicate Turkey’s goal to increase its strategic role in the region as a dominant Sunni Power (Taspinar, 2012), which was not acceptable for Daesh.

Unlike other states (including Muslim countries), one of the main characteristics of Daesh is its rejection of nationalism and consequently its rejection of nation-states, national borders, and national identities. Daesh’s Khilafah is a state without recognizable traditional borders. Daesh believes that “secularism in its various banners and distinction between its schools of thought like populist, nationalist, communist and Ba’athist is manifest disbelief nullifying Islam, taking one outside

the path” (*This is our Aqidah and this is our methodology*, 2015, p.4), any signs of nationalism is *kufri*, and “all parties based on communism, secularism, nationalism and liberalism are *Kafir*” (*Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat*, 2015). Daesh emphasizes that nationalism opposes Tawhid and the Sharia (Foreword, 2015a, p. 4). It has used several negative terms, such as ‘*kufri*’ and *shirkī* ideologies’ (which refers to nationalism), “two crusaders”, which refers to Sykes and Picot, who brought those ideologies to the Muslim world (Foreword, 2015a, p. 4), and stresses that “amongst the greatest deeds the muwahhid performs is his rejection of nationalism” (Foreword, 2015a, p. 4), and pure Tawhid and nationalism can never coexist. Besides its *takfiri* ideology, Daesh’s rejection of nationalism shows its attempts to reach different objectives, such as the expansion of its Khilafah beyond national borders and winning power conflicts with other Muslim countries.

Scholars and Imams

Daesh has also declared some Muslim scholars and imams to be *murtad* and has negatively qualified their deeds as apostasy in its media (Foreword, 2016, pp. 2–3; Kill the Imāms of *kufri* in the West, 2016, p. 17; The extinction of the greyzone, 2015, pp.60–61), and has asked sympathizers to kill these disbelievers by any available means (including knives, guns, and explosives). It criticizes Islamic scholars and their *fatawa*. For example, Al-Adnani (2016) labels them “evil and wicked scholars, and the *shuyukh* of dollars and dinars.” Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi is one of these scholars that has been targeted by Daesh because of his harsh criticism of Daesh. Daesh announced its Khilafah in June 2014, without the consensus of the majority of Muslims who did not approve it inside and outside its territory, but after the Sunni imams of Mosul did not pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi as a Khalifah, Daesh killed them.

Daesh has invoked *takfir* against other Muslims and categorized and qualified them as being *kafir* in its media. While Daesh stresses that its view on *takfir* is based on Islam, 126 Muslim scholars in the open letter to Al-Baghdadi have rejected Daesh’s *takfiri* approach, and they have noted: “it is forbidden in Islam to declare people non-Muslim unless he (or she) openly declares disbelief” (Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias “Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi”, to the fighters and followers of the self-declared “Islamic State”, 2014, p.1).

Socio-Political Roots of Daesh’s *Takfiri* Approach

Besides ideological motives, the significant reasons behind Daesh’s hate and *takfir*-laden literature should be studied in the context of oppression, humiliation, corruption, discrimination, marginalization, and the unfulfilled expectations of Sunni Arabs. This *takfiri* approach is a reaction to the authoritarian Arab/Muslim regimes, the interference of Western countries, Shi’a domination and the marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq, and increasing Iranian influence in the region. Therefore, *takfir* has been used as a justification to overcome different religious

and political threats and rivalries. Several decades ago, Hisham Sharabi (1965, p. 471) had explained that “the radical changes taking place today in the political and economic systems of the Arab world represent, *au fond*, an ideological rebellion against Europe and Western social and political values.” This argument is still valid when considering the growth of insurgent groups and ideologies, for instance, Daesh and its *takfiri* ideology. However, the socio-political situation of the region is more complicated than it has previously been. Similarly, one group of scholars including Ḍuhā al-Khatīb (2007, pp. II-III, cited in Timani, 2018, p.2) believe adopting the concept of *takfir* by some Muslim groups is due to the decline of Islamic values and the loss of solidarity among the people after centuries of colonialism and foreign domination of Muslim societies.

In addition to Western interference, which generated much anger among people, the furious Sunni population from the Shi’a-dominated Iraq and Syria in the last decade and the rivalries between regional powers and their proxies have contributed to an increase in tensions and a power vacuum that occurred following the derailment of the Arab uprisings. This subsequently ignited protests against the dominant powers. The Arab uprisings escalated the Iran–Saudi sectarian rivalry in the region. Both countries tried to increase their influence through proxy wars that heightened the chaotic situation in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and so on and deepened tension and division in the region, consequently creating a fertile ground for the emergence of *takfiri* groups such as Daesh. In this regard, to strengthen its regional power, Iran conducted a number of activities such as investing in Shi’a groups and supporting its allies (such as Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and Bashar al-Assad in Syria) in addition to its proxies in the region, which created anger among Sunnis and gave them a reason to support or join Daesh.

On the other hand, intimidating Sunni Muslims through providing an exaggerated account of the threats posed by “Shi’a Crescent” or “Iran’s Land Bridge” while downplaying the danger of the *takfiri* ideology in the region, led various countries to underestimate Daesh’s *takfiri* danger. Considering (a) Iran has been the main target of the United States, Israel, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf since Iran’s 1979 revolution and (b) weakening Iran has been one of the common goals of these countries ever since, therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that the same approach has been used in recent years, with Iran underlined as a greater threat than Daesh (Fox Business, 2014; Opall-Rome, 2017; Perry, 2016; Sly, 2015; Israeli minister: Iran’s presence in Syria greater threat than ISIS, 2017). This policy has helped Daesh to expand its *takfiri* ideology in the alleged shadow of Iran’s threat.

In this atmosphere, rebellious and counter-hegemonic groups such as Daesh created a new hegemony and attracted the dissatisfied to become involved in its coercive activities such as its *takfiri* approach.

Conclusion

Daesh’s propaganda indicates its exclusive language against “others” (both Muslims and non-Muslims), which is filled with rejection, excommunication, and

violence. This language shows how and why Daesh disparages and delegitimizes “others” based on their religious beliefs and ideologies. Daesh has disseminated its *takfiri* ideology through various texts in different genres such as through political speeches/messages, written texts, videos, audios, documents, and statements. Similarly, Daesh’s language entails both overt and covert calls to violence and discrimination against certain groups or individuals, and thus creates a negative image for them. Daesh’s *Takfiri* ideology justifies the power relations between Daesh and other political groups (AQ, Al-Nusra, and Muslim Brotherhood), other religions and faiths (Shi’a Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Jews) and other countries (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey), that is, between believers and non-believers in Daesh’s discourse.

While ideology is a significant part of Daesh’s power, which creates consent among its people, it also plays a notable role in Daesh’s coercive power. The texts examined in this article have shown that Daesh needed the ideology to justify its coercion. Without the *takfiri* ideology, its excommunication, hate, violence, and terrorist activities would have been unjustifiable. Furthermore, religion is an essential part of the Arab culture, and Daesh is not an exception in this regard. Its propaganda showed that it is based on “cherry-picking” Quranic verses and the Hadiths, without paying appropriate attention to the context of verses or authenticity of the Hadiths. Daesh not only seeks to legitimize its claims and arguments through religious discourse but also likens the current events with religious events in the early days of Islam to support its claims.

Uncovering the ideological meaning of the different texts has indicated that Daesh’s ideology is an aggressive and centrifugal one, based on negative judgement and the direct accusation of others. This aggressive approach is not only rooted in *takfiri* ideology but relates to a variety of socio-political and historical elements in the region, especially in the Arab countries. Therefore, Daesh’s texts should be studied in this broad context of power and society in which this particular ideology developed. They also must be seen mainly as responses to the unbearable socio-political and economic conditions of those people who have joined Daesh.

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Notes

1. Since 2014 Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, and Pakistan have been the five countries most impacted by terrorism, and Daesh has been one of the deadliest groups active in

these countries (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018, 2019) targeting Muslims and non-Muslims. Similarly, terrorist activity in Iraq has been dominated by ISIL since 2013 (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018, 2019). Daesh has also killed tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian soldiers during the civil war in Iraq and Syria. Since 2014, directly or through affiliated groups, Daesh “has been responsible for 27,947 terrorist deaths. Of these, 80 per cent were in Iraq and 17 per cent in Syria” (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019, p.16). Also, according to Shaheen (2016),

(Daesh’s) “most infamous large-scale killings were the Camp Speicher massacre in Iraq, when the group murdered more than 1,500 Shi’a army cadets in Tikrit, and the August 2014 massacre of more than 700 members of the Shaitat tribe in eastern Syria for their opposition to its rule.”

Following territorial losses in Iraq and in Syria in 2017, Daesh has relocated its militants to the Khorasan Province in Afghanistan (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019). According to the The Institute for Economics and Peace (2019, p.17) “like ISIL, the Khorasan Province engages in sectarian violence with civilian attacks deliberately targeting Shi’a Muslims.” It was responsible for 801 deaths from terrorism in 2018 or 76 per cent of total deaths in Iraq, with the remaining 24 per cent having unknown perpetrators (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019, p. 20). Furthermore, “despite a decline in deaths attributed to ISIL, it remained the deadliest in Syria for the fifth consecutive year. It was responsible for 73 per cent of deaths from terrorism in Syria in 2018” (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019, p. 22).

2. AQI’s historical roots return to Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi’s organization *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) (1999–2004). In 2004, Al-Zarqawi joined AQ, pledged allegiance to Bin Laden, formed AQI or Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (*Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*), and became Amir of AQI. AQI was one of the key actors against the Iraqi government and foreign occupying forces, especially the United States soldiers.
3. It is one of the most important Iranian ruling dynasties, which established the Twelve Schools of Shi’a Islam as the official religion of Iran.
4. Āl Salūl is a derogatory term that historically returns to Abdullah bin Abi bin Salul, the head of the Khazraj tribe, (d. 631), who is infamous as a hypocrite and a leader of the hypocrites.

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