

# The Ethics of ISIS: *Takfir* in Surah 9

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## Introduction

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, the Islamic State (ISIS) posted a video showing the burning of a captured Jordanian pilot. The gruesome video sparked outrage across the Middle East. Ahmed al-Tayeb, the leader of Sunni Islam's most venerated institution, Egypt's Al-Azhar University, said, "The militants deserve the Quranic punishment of death, crucifixion or the chopping off of their arms for being enemies of God and the Prophet Muhammad."<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, westerners viewed the incident with shock and horror, bewildered at the incompressibility of such barbarism. Since such behavior is so outside of our ethical framework, we assume there is no coherent ethical framework behind it. However, is this indeed the case?

To further complicate our understanding, a debate rages within the US government over associating Islam with ISIS or others espousing *salafi-jihadist* ideology. Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama identified these threats as pure terrorism that had nothing to do with Islam.<sup>2</sup> President Trump, on the other hand, has insisted on the public use of the phrase "Radical Islamic Terrorism" saying, "Unless you're going to say that, you're never going to solve it."<sup>3</sup> Many others, including the national security advisor, have warned against such language.<sup>4</sup>

While there are compelling strategic reasons for divorcing *salafi-jihadist* ideology from Islam,<sup>5</sup> there might be dangers in dismissing this worldview as well. Over time, might our strategic messaging effect our own understanding and shape our operational approach? While this paper does not intend to suggest that ISIS is the correct form of Islam, it does submit that they believe they are. Said pointedly, the *Islamic State* believes they are *Islamic*.

Therefore, it is logical to accept their worldview as the basis for understanding them. As Shadi Hamid said, "For Muslims and non-Muslims alike, there should be one overarching objective: to understand and to explain, rather than to make judgements about which interpretations of Islam are correct."<sup>6</sup> For the US military, understanding Islam from the perspective of ISIS may be a core part of "knowing thy enemy."<sup>7</sup> We should not only condemn, but endeavor to comprehend.<sup>8</sup>

This paper hopes to make a small contribution toward comprehending the Islam of ISIS (and other *salafi-jihadist* groups) and the behaviors—or ethics—that flow from a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an. While much research exists to explain the political, economic, and sociological factors that have led to *salafi-jihadist* ideology, there is little attention given to its theological roots.

To make the scope sufficiently narrow, the author will look exclusively at the practice of *takfiri* in Surah 9, *al-Tawbah*. *Takfir* is the verbal noun for a Muslim declaring another Muslim an apostate (i.e. "you have transgressed and are no longer Muslims. You are excommunicated and deserving of death").<sup>9</sup> The following exposition does not represent the majority view of Islamic scholars;<sup>10</sup> but attempts to show that the ethic of *takfiri* can be derived from the principal Islamic source of authority—the Qur'an. First, we shall consider a few concepts that empower *salafi-jihadist* to diverge from mainstream Qur'anic understandings.

## Factors Enabling Divergence

*Salafism*: A *salafi* is a Muslim who was alive during the first three generations. A number of *salafi* groups have emerged in the last 40 years, desiring to return to the pristine Islam of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* as practiced by the first three generations who learned it directly from Muhammad.<sup>11</sup> *Salafis* preach a total rejection of any innovation (*bi'da*) within Islam. They call Muslims to disregard traditional understandings and embrace the pure Islam of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. The purpose of these groups is to purify Muslim society and return it to the pattern of the early community.<sup>12</sup> *Salafist* are not only “scripturalists but also literalists” who believe “Muslims must behave exactly like the pious forefathers whose deeds and thoughts were found in the sources of Islam.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a *salafi* tends to give more weight to a plain reading of scripture at the expense of contextual nuances or the consensus of the *ulama* (Islamic legal scholars). In a sense, Salafism is akin to the *sola scriptura* of the protestant reformation.

*Abrogation (naskh)*: Some verses are considered “cancelled” by a more recent abrogating passage.<sup>14</sup> In these cases, abrogation means not only a repeal of the old verse but a replacement with the new.<sup>15</sup> This doctrine is based, in part, off *Surah* 2:106 which says, “None of our revelations do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but we substitute something better or similar.” Moreover, in *Surah* 17:86 it says, “If We willed, We could take away that which We have revealed to you.” While this was first understood to apply only to Jewish and Christian Scriptures, *surah* 22:52-53 showed that abrogation relates to the *Qur'an* as well (the so called “Satanic verses”).<sup>16</sup> In recently years, *salafi-jihadists* have applied the doctrine of abrogation in a more intense way, abrogating the verses that for centuries tempered the concepts of *takfir* and *jihad* and laying increased emphasis on later revelations. As the narrative goes, Mohammed was first told to “turn away” from the infidels (Q 15:94) in 621 AD, then to “debate” with them, then to fight if attacked (Q 22:39) in 622 AD, then fight offensively after then “sacred months” had passed (Q 9:5) in 630 AD, and finally until all non-believers convert or pay *Jizya* (Q 9:29).

*Ijtihad*: *Ijtihad* means to struggle or strive intellectually and is used for legal or independent reasoning. This principle originally allowed for the Sunni schools of Islamic Jurisprudence to form and accept one another. However, at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Sunni jurists agreed that further *ijtihad* would be harmful to the Muslim community, and the doors to new interpretations were closed.<sup>17</sup> For many centuries, interpretation within Sunni Islam was rather static and *taqlid* prevailed (the strict following of an established juristic school of thought). Then in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Muhammad Iqbal championed the use of *ijtihad* as necessary to restore the vitality of Islam.<sup>18</sup> Although Iqbal intended to make Islam compatible with modernity, the opening of *ijtihad* ultimately served to take power out of the hands of the *ulama* and gave it over to the people.<sup>19</sup>

*Mujaddid*: A *mujaddid* is a renewer of Islam.<sup>20</sup> Muslims believe that through periods of decline, Allah has appointed men to call Muslims back to the straight path and the pristine teachings of Islam. As Abu Daawood in his *sahih* (authentic) hadith records: “God will send to this *ummah* at the beginning of each century those who will renew its faith.”<sup>21</sup> Muslims recognize that a true *mujaddid* has the authority to exercise *ijtihad* and to correct the religious community. The difficulty lies in determining who is a *mujaddid* during their lifetime. Nevertheless, the existence of the concept can empower some Muslims to champion views contrary to the establishment (i.e. ISIS declared al-Zarqawi a *Mujaddid*).<sup>22</sup> These are only a few factors that empower Muslims to adopt interpretations of the *Qur'an* that are outside the exegesis of the establishment. Having established the possibility of alternative interpretations, this article now turns to *surah* 9 to look specifically at the concept of *takfir*.

### Al-Tawbah (Surah 9)

*Al-Tawbah* is one of the last, if not actually the last, *Qur'anic* revelation.<sup>23</sup> Because of the doctrine of abrogation, this is an eminently significant point. According to ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali this *surah* was revealed

in the ninth year after the *hijra* (A.D. 630) “and sums up the lessons of the Prophet’s Tabuk expeditions” that summer against those pagans who had broken treaties with the Muslims.<sup>24</sup> Because of this, the *surah* has a strong emphasis on fighting the idolaters in Arabia and champions the necessity of taking part in such fighting. It commands Muslims to fight the Jews and the Christians (29-36) and calls Muslim “hypocrites” who do not want to fight.

Verse 5 is known as the “verse of the sword” among classic Muslim commentators.<sup>25</sup> In this passage Allah commands Muslims to “fight and slay the idolaters wherever you find them.” While “idolaters” primarily refers to the non-Islamic Arabian tribes Muhammad had a treaty with, it is not unreasonable to conclude that this verse abrogates the earlier passages calling for peace, tolerance, and restraint toward polytheists “on the earth in general.”<sup>26</sup> Averroes, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century legal scholar, went so far as to say this verse gives “as a general rule that every polytheist must be slain, whether he is a monk or not.”<sup>27</sup> In his classic and widely accepted *tafsir* (commentary), Jalalyan said this shall continue until “they have no choice except being put to death or Islam.”<sup>28</sup> These two examples are only provided to show that this is a reasonable position for a group to take.

A few verses later Allah says, “Fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands.” (v. 14). We see here that Allah’s perfect will is revealed and brought forth through warfare. It was not enough for Muslims to do nothing and watch Allah bring vindication upon the pagans. That vindication was executed through the obedience of *jihad*. Considering Qur’anic abrogation, it is reasonable that these verses may impact how ISIS views its relationship with the nations that surround it, and the pagan countries of the world.

Verse 20 says, “Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in Allah’s cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of Allah: they are the people who will achieve salvation.” First notice that Allah’s cause here includes violent physical *jihad* against the Pagans that surrounded the *ummah* (community of Muslims). In historical context, this is the meaning. Those that strive (*jihad*) with “their persons” are those who are willing to risk their lives in Muhammad’s wars. A few verses later (v. 25) Allah says, “Assuredly Allah did help you in many battlefields,” further exposing the context. The reference to “their goods” in this verse refers to the act of leaving all behind in Mecca and migrating to Medina.<sup>29</sup> ISIS had this very “blessing” in mind when, in the third issue of *Dabiq* (“A Call to *Hijrah*”), they called Muslims everywhere to join them.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, this verse says that those who *jihad* (fight) the pagans in war, risking their lives and forsaking their homes—they will be the ones who earn paradise. And for the *salaf*, who has discarded centuries of jurisprudence, little stands in the way of a twenty-year-old with average intelligence reading this and concluding that he must personally immigrate and fight to merit paradise. This conclusion emerges from a literal reading of the text.

In verse 38, Allah gives a sharp rebuke to non-violent Muslims. It reads, “O ye who believe! What is the matter with you, that, when you are asked to go forth in the Cause of Allah, ye cling to the earth? Do ye prefer the life of this world to the hereafter?” He rebukes Muslims for resisting war. In the next verse he then warns, “Unless ye go forth, He will punish you with a grievous penalty, and put others in your place” (verse 39). Ibn ‘Abbs translates this as: “If ye go not forth with your Prophet at the Battle of Tabuk...” This is a straightforward demand with a serious consequence for disobedience—“March to war or go the hell.” This narrative is simple and emerges from a plain reading of the text. As leaders—and those believed to be *mujaddid*—exercise *ijtihad* and champion this literal meaning, it is reasonable that devout Muslims would follow.

In verse 41 Muslims are instructed to “go yea forth (whether equipped) lightly or heavily, and strive and struggle, with your goods and your persons, in the Cause of Allah. That is best for you, if ye (but) knew.” Ibn Kathir, in his *tafsir* emphasizes that this was against “the disbelieving, People of the Book,

the Romans.”<sup>31</sup> In this verse, Allah essentially says that there are no excuses for not joining the fight. If someone does not feel he has the proper weaponry or skill, he should deploy anyway. Allah says it will be best for them. If someone feels they are too old or too feeble, they can give money in support of the cause.<sup>32</sup> None are excused. Given this interpretation, it is not difficult to imagine a *salafi-jihadist* calling the disenfranchised and those who lament Islam’s political weakness to come and join the fight. It is not difficult to conceive of these same ideologues declaring *takfir* upon those who excuse themselves from the call of *jihad* against the crusaders.

In verses 44-45 Allah rebukes Muhammad for allowing some to turn back from fighting: “Those who believe in Allah and the Last Day ask thee for no exemption from fighting...only those ask thee for exemption who believe not in Allah and the last day” (verses 44-45). One can see how *jihad* can become the test of whether one is a true Muslim or not. This verse is part of the theological underpinning for declaring *takfir* against those who do not migrate to the Islamic State or otherwise support their cause.

In verses 67-68 the Qur’an then declares that “Allah has promised the hypocrites [those who do not respond to Muhammad’s call to Jihad] the fire of hell.” In verse 73 Allah orders the prophet to fight against both the unbelievers and the hypocrites. This *surah* has thirty references to “not believing” (*kafara*) and “unbelief” (*Kufr*) or “unbelievers” (*kafir*, *kafirun*, *kuffar*, *kawafir*), and many of these references are to those who called themselves Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Cashin explains:

This level of anger can only be explained in the context of a military campaign. In modern parlance, these soldiers have gone AWOL in time of war in their disobedience to the Prophet. This is why male apostates from Islam are executed according to all books of Islamic law. A Muslim male who leaves Islam deserts the Muslim army in time of war. That war is conceived of as perpetual until the non-Muslim lands or *dar ul-harb* (house of war) is conquered, so the punishment of death on apostates is also perpetual.<sup>34</sup>

Verse 90 says those who “sat inactive” and did not campaign are “Unbelievers” and will receive a “grievous penalty.” Here again the Qur’an declares these pacifist as unbelievers and therefore fit objects of the wrath of *jihad*. In the ensuing verses this *surah* states that “Hell is their dwelling place” (verse 95) and that these desert Arabs “are the worst in unbelief and hypocrisy.”

Next follows praise of the “Vanguards” starting in verse 100. *Vanguard* literally means those of the first rank. That is, those who stand in the first rank during battle. “Well-pleased is Allah with them.” In verse 111, the passage says that “The Believers...they fight in His Cause, and slay and are slain: A promise binding on Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur’an.” Here we see that Muhammad understood the responsibility of *jihad* as a reaffirmation of what was first given in the *tarat* (torah) and then the *injl* (gospel). That is how important the concept was to Muhammad’s understanding of Islam. It should not be shocking that those who attempt to follow in his way (*sunnah*) feel likewise. This, from our examination of *surah* 9, it appears that a prime reason to declare another Muslim an apostate is his refusal to participate in *jihad*.

This reading of *surah* 9 does not include nuanced scholarly understandings, nor has it included the classic conditions placed upon *jihad*.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, for a *salafi* who believes in abrogation and *ijtihad*—and who puts his faith in a charismatic leader (*mujaddid*), the practice of *takfir* does not appear to be unethical from his worldview. Since the *takfir* narrative is simple and concrete, an uneducated but devote Muslim could come to the following conclusion from a plain reading of the text: *Those who refuse to participate in jihad are hypocrites and apostates. They have become non-Muslims, and as such deserve death. Ethics demands that good Muslims join Allah in this cause.*

While it is understandable that western political strategists seek to disassociate *salafi-jihadist* from Islam, the military must not get sidetracked by this message. The armed forces must continue to understand *salafi-jihadists* from their worldview—a worldview rooted in the Qur’an. Let us not lose sight of this.

## Endnotes

- 1 CBS News, “Jordanian pilot’s “obscene” burning death by ISIS sparks outrage in Mideast,” *CBS News/AP*, (2015): <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/jordanian-pilots-obscene-burning-death-by-isis-sparks-outrage-in-mideast/> (Accessed February 18th, 2016).
- 2 Barack Obama, “The President’s Statements on ISIS: Speech to the Nation on U.S. Strategy to Meet the Terrorist Threat,” *Congressional Digest* (November 2014), 9, 32.
- 3 Jim Acosta: “Trump refers to ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ despite NSC pushback,” Cable News Network, (2017): <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/28/politics/radical-islamic-terrorism-hr-mcmaster-trump-speech/>. Updated 9:37 PM ET, Tue February 28, 2017, (accessed 10 March 2017).
- 4 Jim Acosta: “Trump refers to ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ despite NSC pushback,” Cable News Network, (2017): <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/28/politics/radical-islamic-terrorism-hr-mcmaster-trump-speech/>. Updated 9:37 PM ET, Tue February 28, 2017, (accessed 10 March 2017).
- 5 Many have pointed out that if westerns assert that the Islamist view of Islam is correct, we will help fuel the spread of this ideology and alienate ourselves from our Muslim allies.
- 6 Shadi Hamid, “Does ISIS really have nothing to do with Islam? Islamic apologetics carry serious risks,” *The Washington Post* (November 2015).
- 7 Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. by Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 113.
- 8 Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 291–292.
- 9 PJ Bearman, C.E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. *Encyclopedia of Islam Vol. 10* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 122. Excommunication of a Muslim provides today, as it did in medieval Christianity, a rationale for executing that person as a “heretic.”
- 10 For a refutation of *salafi-jihadist* ideology from 500 Islamic scholars from over 50 countries see *The Amman Message, The Royal all Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* (Jordan, 2009). Available at [www.jordanembassy.de/Amman%20Message%20English.pdf](http://www.jordanembassy.de/Amman%20Message%20English.pdf). These scholars recognized the validity of all 8 Islamic *Mathahib* (Sunni, Shi’a, Ibadi, Ash’arism, Sufi), forbade *takfir* between Muslims, and established clear rules for issuing *fatwas*.
- 11 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 133.
- 12 Abdulbasit Kassim, “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihādī-Salafism and the Ideology of BokoHaram.” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, no. 2-3 (2015): 173–200, 175.
- 13 David Cashin, “Takfir: Excommunication in the Salafi-Jihadist Narrative.” Unpublished Paper (Received from author on 20 January 2017). 7
- 14 Oliver Leaman, ed., “Abrogation,” *The Qur’an: an encyclopedia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
- 15 Oliver Leaman, ed., “Abrogation,” *The Qur’an: an encyclopedia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
- 16 Oliver Leaman, ed., “Abrogation,” *The Qur’an: an encyclopedia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.
- 17 James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation States* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), 6.

- 18 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.
- 19 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.
- 20 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.
- 21 Abu Dawud, *English Translation of Sunan Abu Dawud: Volume 4*, ed. by Fafiz Abu Tahir Zubair ‘Ali Za’I (Riyadah: Darussalam, 2008), 37:4291.
- 22 “Dabiq, Issue #1: The Return of the Khilafah,” <https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf> (accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 23 Sayyid Qutb, “Sura 9: Al Tawbah,” in *Tafsir Fi Zilalil: In the shade of the Qur’an*, accessed February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://tafsirzilal.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/at-taubah-eng.pdf>.
- 24 ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur’an: New Edition with Revised Translation, Commentary and Newly Compiled Comprehensive Index* (Beltsville, Maryland, Amana Publications, 2002), 435.
- 25 “*Quran Tafsir of Ibn Kathir*,” [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64) (accessed March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 26 “*Quran Tafsir of Ibn Kathir*,” [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64) (accessed March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 27 Andrew Bostom, *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 151.
- 28 *Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli*, trans. Feras Hamza (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 194.
- 29 Abdullah Ibn ‘Abbas and Muhammad al-Firuzabadi, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 196.
- 30 “Dabiq, Issue 3: A Call to Hijrah,” <https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-3-the-call-to-hijrah.pdf> (accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 31 “*Quran Tafsir of Ibn Kathir*,” [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64) (accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 32 “*Quran Tafsir of Ibn Kathir*,” accessed March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64) (accessed March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017).
- 33 David Cashin, “Takfir: Excommunication in the Salafi-Jihadist Narrative.” Unpublished Paper (Received from author on 20 January 2017). 19. He further records that surah nine of the Qur’an uses these terms in the following verses: (kafara): Verses 3, 26, 30, 37, 40, 54, 66, 74, 80, 84, 90, (kufir): Verses 12, 17, 23, 37, 74, 97, 107, and (kafir, kafirun, kuffar, kawafir): Verses 2, 26, 32, 37, 49, 55, 68, 73, 85, 120, 123, 125. Most of these verses deal with Muslim “hypocrites”. “This is the foundation to declaring Muslims to be non-Muslims (*takfir*), and the attitude towards such is abject hatred.”
- 34 David Cashin, “Takfir: Excommunication in the Salafi-Jihadist Narrative.” Unpublished Paper (Received from author on 20 January 2017), 19.
- 35 Shaybani, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani’s Siyar*, trans. Majid Khadduri (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1966).