Construing Takfir: From `Abdullah `Azzam to Djamel Zitouni

By Shane Drennan

ON APRIL 3, 2008, jihadist websites posted an “open interview” with Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri wherein the al-Qa’ida leader fielded a number of often hostile questions. The first, and arguably the most important, concerned al-Qa’ida’s invocation of takfīr (excommunicating or declaring a Muslim an apostate, which is punishable by death):

Excuse me, Mr. Zawahiri, but who is it who is killing with Your Excellency’s blessing the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria? Do you consider the killing of women and children to be Jihad?...Why have you—to this day—not carried out any strike in Israel? Or is it easier to kill Muslims in the markets?1

This article explores the correlation between religious training and the construction of the definition of takfīr for leaders of Salafi-jihadi movements.2 This is established using four cases of contemporary Salafi-jihadi leaders: `Abdullah `Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and Djamel Zitouni. For each case, the individual’s level and type of religious training and his most recent definition of takfīr are outlined and analyzed.3 Overall, the evidence suggests that the less religiosity a jihadist leader has gained via formal training, personal piety, and/or the duration of his adherence to Salafist Islam, the more likely he is to accept takfīr as necessary and the broader he is able to construct his definition of takfīr.

Dr. `Abdullah `Azzam
`Azzam is considered to be the godfather of the Afghan jihad. His writings calling for the unification of the umma through defensive jihad, and his Maktab al-Khidmat (Services Bureau), created the organizational archetype for the current manifestation of the global Salafi-jihad and al-Qa’ida specifically. Although `Azzam’s Salafi-jihadi ideology was considered radical by most academics, his eschatological grounding made him relatively moderate compared to many of the jihadists4 who answered his invitation to Afghanistan,5 especially regarding takfīr.

Religious Training
`Azzam enveloped himself in Islam and Shari’a throughout his entire life. Even as a child he was considered “serious” and “pious.”6 His higher education focus was Shari’a, earning a bachelor’s7 and a master’s degree8 in Shari’a from Sharja College at Damascus University, and a Ph.D. in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) from the renowned Al-Azhar University in Cairo.9 His level of scholarly authority is rare among Salafi-jihadis, especially those directly engaged in physical warfare.10

`Azzam continued to self-reinforce his radical Salafist views as a lecturer. He taught at the University of Jordan in Amman and lectured at Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia where he eschewed a radical interpretation of Islam and jihad.11 While in the training camps of Afghanistan, `Azzam interacted with jihadist leaders from around the globe as he continued espousing his messages of defense and resistance. It was in this context that he produced his two most famous works on jihad: Defence of Muslim Lands and Join the Caravan.

Definition of Takfīr
`Azzam did not excommunicate Muslims. For him, defending Muslim lands from invasion by kuffar (infidels or nonbelievers) and uniting the umma was paramount, and takfīr only served to create fitna (division). His opinion of takfīr jihadists suggests that a deficiency in formal training in Shari’a may result in expansive violence through incorrect or incomplete understandings of Islam: “They, because of their lack of knowledge, are simply youth with much zeal, and the hearts of these youth were made to follow their desires.”12 `Azzam’s Islamic training even trumped political pressures of infighting among the mujahidin in Afghanistan,13 essentially deriving an order of combat precedence from the scriptures placing jihad against occupiers over reforming those led astray from Islam.14

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri
Ayman al-Zawahiri, commonly referred to as al-Qa’ida’s second-in-command, is one of the most influential leaders of the current Salafi-jihadi movement. He has issued numerous communiqués concerning every front of the global Salafi-jihad and has campaigned to unify Salafi-jihadi movements worldwide under the banner of al-Qa’ida.15 Recently, al-Zawahiri’s authority has come under attack for al-Qa’ida’s

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2 This article does not analyze the practical application of takfīr by these individuals or their lieutenants. In practice, takfīr often varies from the definition created by the leader of an organization.
3 The most recent definition was chosen because such concepts are epistemologically constructed, resulting in definitional variations throughout one’s lifetime. For example, Kant discusses the construction of concepts through experience and the reconstruction of those concepts once they are applied outside of the previous limits of experience. For a full explanation of the construction of language and definitions, see Jerome Bruner, Acts of Meaning (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
4 See, for example, `Abdullah `Azzam, Fi Dhiilal Surat at-Taubah (place, publisher and date unknown). Also see Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 130.
5 For further commentary on how misunderstandings of Islam lead to extremist views, see Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism (Washington, D.C.: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).
6 `Abdullah `Azzam, Defence of Muslim Lands (place, publisher and date unknown).
8 `Azzam, Defence of Muslim Lands.
10 While a number of Salafist scholars with credentials similar to `Azzam advocate jihad, none have physically taken up arms themselves.
12 `Azzam, Fi Dhiilal Surat at-Taubah.
13 Wright, The Looming Tower, pp. 131-137.
14 See `Azzam’s response to the question “Do we fight alongside Muslims that are below acceptable levels of Islamic education?” in `Azzam, ‘Defence of Muslim Lands.
15 For example, in 2004 al-Qa’ida’s senior leadership was successful in incorporating the part of the militant Saudi Salafist movement and al-Zarqawi’s Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad under the al-Qa’ida name. Recently, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has also changed their name in a formal allegiance to al-Qa’ida.
expansive invocation of takfir.16

Religious Training
Having no collegiate level religious training, al-Zawahiri’s understanding of Islam is derived mostly from the religiosity of his upbringing (much of which was self-induced) and the ideas propagated within Islamist and jihadist organizations in which he has been involved. Al-Zawahiri was raised in a strict Muslim family in Egypt where he attended all of the daily prayers at the local mosque. His adolescence was devoted to Islamic self-studies, especially concerning fiqh and Qur’anic interpretation.17 Throughout his education, he was not openly involved in Islamist organizations; however, al-Zawahiri confessed to being a founder and active member of a militant Islamist cell with a violent takfir bent as a teen18 and maintained a covert affiliation with similar groups thereafter.

Several Islamists and jihadists informed al-Zawahiri’s interpretation of Islam and Shari’a. Al-Zawahiri became interested in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb as an adolescent and attributes much of his ideological development to Qutb’s writings.19 Typical of Salafi-jihadis, al-Zawahiri also often references Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir to give his writings a sense of timeless jurisprudence.20 Since 1986, al-Zawahiri has been undoubtedly influenced by other radical Salafi-jihadi ideologues (mostly within al-Qa’ida’s ranks) beginning with Sayyid Imam (Dr. Fadl) and Dr. Ahmed el-Wed.21 His knowledge of historic Islamic rulings suggests that al-Zawahiri has a good comprehension

16 For example, see al-Zawahiri, “The Open Meeting with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri.”


18 Ibid., pp. 42-46.

19 See the section on Sayyid Qutb in Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, in Laura Mansfield, His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zarqawi (Old Tappan, NJ: TLG Publications, 2006), pp. 47-53.


21 Conversations with these two individuals were likely the catalyst behind the expansion of al-Zawahiri’s definition of takfir. See Wright, The Looming Tower, pp. 122-126.

of fiqh through personal studies, although his neo-scripturalist hermeneutic approach has likely been prejudiced by his combat surroundings.

Definition of Takfir
Al-Zawahiri embraces takfir, but maintains a relatively selective definition of it. He views the governments ruling over Muslim lands to be illegitimate and apostate, to include civilian government employees, security forces22 and any persons collaborating or engaging with those entities.23 This is likely derived from his personal historical hatred for and experiences with the Egyptian regime rather than an objective analysis of the situation through the guidelines of fiqh. He also declared that an organization, Islamist or not, which participates in the political process is a transgressor,24 again derived from personal differences with the Muslim Brotherhood rather than an educated hermeneutic ruling. Al-Zawahiri accepts a great deal of collateral damage in the form of “innocents,” stating, “we don’t kill innocents: in fact, we fight those who kill innocents...it may be the case that during [targeting enemies], an innocent might fall unintentionally or unavoidably.”25 Lastly, he considers all Shi’a apostate and pejoratively describes Shi’a Islam as “a religious school based on excess and falsehood” that has cooperated with the enemies of Islam throughout history.26 Although al-Zawahiri does consider a great number of Muslims apostate, he is nevertheless selective in his definition of takfir compared to many jihadist leaders less familiar (although for al-Zawahiri familiarity was gained informally) with the nuances of Islam, Shari’a and fiqh.

Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi
Although Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi was killed by U.S. forces in 2006, he remains one of the most popular jihadist figures in contemporary history. During his few years in Iraq, he amassed a force capable of controlling cities,27 engineered a sectarian clash that threatened a full-scale civil war28 and waged murder and intimidation campaigns that continue today. He is hated by most Iraqis and is celebrated as a hero by much of the Salafi-jihadi community.29 Yet, for his fame, al-Zarqawi had one of the most latitudinal and controversial definitions of takfir.

Religious Training
For the first 21 years of his life, al-Zarqawi was nearly antithetical to his later jihadist self. Raised in the anti-Amman milieu of Zarqa,30 he was described as a tattooed delinquent who drank heavily, experimented with drugs and was involved in criminal activity. Al-Zarqawi had no religious training until he was 22 when he was ordered to a local mosque known for radicalism and its relationship to the Afghan jihad.31 There, al-Zarqawi’s trajectory swung 180 degrees and he became entrenched in Salafism.32

Before setting out for Afghanistan in 1989, al-Zarqawi received a few
months of religious indoctrination at al-Husayn Ben ‘Ali Mosque. 33 In Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi, like most other “Afghan Arabs,” was taught and further radicalized by a number of Islamist scholars and ideologues including ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Ayman al-Zawahiri.34 He devoted his spare time to self studies of Salafi-jihadi sermons and the Qur’an. In Jordan, after returning from Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi continued his regimented self-studies (especially in prison35) and strengthened his relationship with al-Maqdisi.36 During his second trip in Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi was largely concerned with international operations and his training camp, an explosives and firearms training center, leaving little time for religious studies. In Iraq, al-Zarqawi was affiliated with local Salafi-jihadi religious leaders in addition to his continued contact with al-Maqdisi and al-Zawahiri,37 although his operational focus and tempo likely occupied most of his time. This self-taught understanding of Islam and jihad left al-Zarqawi to construct his own interpretation of Salafism and takfiri within his combat environment.

Definition of Takfiri
The breadth of al-Zarqawi’s definition of takfiri left few in his graces, likely because his Islamic “education” was wholly gained from takfiri ideologues and self-studies in combat settings. Sunni politicians were excommunicated, as were Sunni police and military, which he considered “the eyes, ears and hands of the occupier.”38 Those collaborating with the government security apparatuses

34 Ibid., pp. 16-26.
35 Al-Zarqawi was sentenced to 15 years for his leadership role in Bay’ al-Islam, a radical Salafist organization aimed at overthrowing the monarchy in Jordan and establishing a Shari’a-based state.
38 Nimrod Raphael, “The Sheikhs of the Slaughterers: Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qa‘ida Connection,” Middle East Media Research Institute, July 1, 2005. and especially those working with U.S. forces were deemed traitors. In towns controlled by al-Zarqawi’s forces in Iraq, anyone violating his organization’s interpretation of Shari’a was excommunicated for their transgressions.39 Lastly, al-Zarqawi considered all Shi’a apostates.40

Djamal Zouitni
In the 1990s, Algeria witnessed an extremely bloody civil war. The heart of the struggle was the Islamism opposition to the repressive incumbent government. Djamal Zouitni led the Salafi-jihadi Front (the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA) against the government from 1994 to 1996, continually increasing the target set of apostates until the time of his death. His brand of takfiri was one of the most inclusive definitions to date and led to some of the grossest massacres of civilians in recent jihadist history.

Religious Training
Little is known of Zouitni’s religious scholarship, suggesting that his Islamic education was unimpressive and therefore omitted from his media constructed persona. The son of a chicken farmer, Zouitni likely received only rudimentary formal religious training.41 Omar Sheikhi, a self-proclaimed GIA amir, described Zouitni’s Islamic background as being “average.”42 He was undoubtedly inculcated with militant Islamist ideas during his short tenure in prison for his involvement with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS),43 and further indoctrinated into the world of militant Islamism by Mustafa Bouyali, the leader of the Algerian Armed Islamic Movement.44 Zouitni’s religious training and expertise was informed largely by the Afghan Arabs45 and he was further radicalized by the paranoid exclusivity characteristic of the GIA’s worldview. His reliance on the guidance of others with combat experience rather than institutional Shari’a education likely allowed Zouitni to use Islam as an ex post facto justification for operations rather than an organizational determinant.

Definition of Takfiri
Learned wholly in the context of an armed struggle, Zouitni likely molded his religion to fit his goals rather than his learned religion determining his means; this allowed him to unapologetically kill thousands of Algerian Muslim civilians.46 Zouitni’s concept of takfiri eventually placed the whole of Algerian society in one of two categories: GIA or apostate. Initially, government leaders, members of the intelligentsia, government security forces, and collaborators were determined “apostate.” Additionally, anyone even tangentially employed by a state-affiliated institution was an apostate. Zouitni’s organization then declared all other organizations (to include the FIS) illegitimate and apostate. Having “proved” the GIA to be the only legitimate movement, any dissenters (and often those suspected of dissent) were automatically excommunicated and killed. Finally, in light of the successful presidential election in November 1995, Zouitni argued that the whole of Algerian society “had left Islam” and should be considered apostate.47
Conclusion

While there are rare instances of formally trained “pen jihadis” advocating takfir, these cases suggest two general trends regarding the relationship between religious training and takfir. First, a lack of formal religious training will likely lead a Salafi-jihadi leader to accept takfir as a valid and necessary doctrinal component. From the cases examined, extensive formal religious training has led to a rejection of takfir altogether. Second, the less religious training a jihadist leader has, the greater his proclivity to excommunicate and kill more categories of Muslims. Longevity within the religion and extensive self studies of Shari’a outside of a combat environment has led to a more “moderate” interpretation of takfir. Furthermore, individuals radicalized during jihad and having irreligious pasts espouse extremely broad definitions of takfir. Comparing al-Zarqawi and Zitouni, al-Zarqawi’s personal interest in Islam and Shari’a a priori to his second trip to Afghanistan versus Zitouni’s apparent sole interest in battle seems to have given al-Zarqawi a slightly less encompassing definition of takfir.

This correlation between takfir and a lack of religious training challenges Salafi-jihadis’ claim to a nuanced and veracious understanding of Islam. Given constant debate over the correct construction and implementation of takfir and noting the decline of several movements due to their proclivity for killing Muslims, takfir is evidently an existential determinant for Salafi-jihadi organizations.

Shane Drennan is an analyst for the U.S. Navy. He is concurrently completing his master’s dissertation on Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s “The Call for Global Islamic Resistance” at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Mr. Drennan was an Arabic linguist in the U.S. Marine Corps in special operations and intelligence units with experience in Afghanistan (2001-2002) and Iraq (2003, 2005). He was also a terrorism exercise specialist and a Red Team planner and operator for the Department of Homeland Security. His previous published works on the global Salafi-jihad have been featured in Jane’s Intelligence Review.

48 ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman and Abu Qatada are two takfiri “pen jihadis” having formal Islamic credentials. Even as “pen jihadis,” these individuals seem to be exceptions to the rule; to call Islamic Ph.D.s who espouse a takfiri ideology a minority would be a gross understatement. Additionally, a comparison between “pen jihadis” and combat leaders is difficult to make. “Pen jihadis” are able to make conjecture absent any experience of physical jihad and irrespective of practical application.

49 Also of note is that ‘Azzam is the only leader of a Salafi-jihadi organization to have achieved a doctoral level of Islamic training. While there are a few “pen jihadis” who espouse a takfiri cant, ‘Azzam is the only Ph.D. of Islam to have physically led an organization in battle.

50 See Pakistani opinions of targeting the Pakistani military and killing of Pakistani civilians in “Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Pakistan before the February 18th Elections,” Terror Free Tomorrow, January 2008. Also, see responses to questions about attacking civilians by those polled in Muslim countries in Steven Kull et al., “Muslim Public Opinion on U.S. Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al-Qaeda,” WorldPublicOpinion.org, April 24, 2007.

51 For example, the GIA, al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra, and al-Zarqawi’s organization are all victims of their extreme takfiri doctrines.