



National Security Implications of Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra

Joshua L. Gleis

Background

The radical Islamist movement *Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra* originated in Egypt in the 1960s as a radical offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Believing that much of the world is heretical, members of the movement adhere to a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam, and aim ultimately to return to what they consider to be a true Islamic society—the Islamic caliphate. This interpretation thus requires that its followers purify the world of infidels. The group is known for perpetrating violence against those it considers *kufar* (heretics), including those Arabs and Muslims whom *Takfiris* do not consider to be living in accordance with true Islam.¹ According to the U.S. Department of Justice, *Takfiris* are guided by fatwas issued by influential radicals, such as the “blind sheikh,” Omar Abdel Rahman.²

The movement was founded by an agricultural engineer named Shukri Mustafa in Egypt in the 1960s. During his stay in prison, Mustafa had been part of a Muslim Brotherhood splinter group, *Jama'at al-Muslimeen* (Society of Muslims) that believed in a radical interpretation of Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb's text *Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq* (Milestones on the Road).³ As is explained on the website *Perspectives on World History and Current Events*, “the name *al-Takfir w'al-Hijra* was applied to *Jama'at al-Muslimeen* by journalists after the group became publicly known.”⁴ True *Takfiris* still prefer the denomination of *Jama'at al-Muslimeen*. However,

as the site points out, “[a]s a descriptive name, *Takfir Wal-Hijra* has far more utility than *Jama'at al-Muslimeen*. *Takfir* is a verb which means to declare *kufur* (infidel), that is, to excommunicate. The *hijra* is the flight, or migration, of Muhammad and his *jama'at* from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) in 622 AD.”⁵

The *Takfiri* name re-emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A group calling itself *Takfir Wal-Hijra* that opposed the Syrian government and non-observant Muslim Lebanese⁶ also took credit for the killings of Christian civilians in the Dinnieh area of Lebanon.⁷ In the 1990s the name resurfaced yet again with attacks on mosques in the Sudan as well as against Sudanese government interests. These attacks were carried out under the leadership of Abbas Al-Bakr Abbas and with members who had been formerly of *Ansar Al-Sunna Al-Mohamadiya*.⁸

Takfir Wal-Hijra is not simply a terrorist organization. Instead, it is better described as a radical ideology than an organization per se—a web of Islamic militants around the world connected only by their beliefs.⁹ As a result, it has been depicted by some as an “Islamic fascism” of sorts.¹⁰ Indeed, *Takfiris* are seen as so extreme that even many radical Islamists such as Abu Hamza, the claw-handed imam of London's Finsbury Park Mosque who has endorsed and defended the 9/11 attacks, described *Takfiris* as “nothing but a bunch of extremists... [they] create nothing and destroy everything. It is not right to

be as harsh as they are. These people want to be judges and executioners.”¹¹ As an ideology, Takfir Wal-Hijra today operates with no overall central structure; it is impossible to attribute one leader to the movement.¹² There are, however, some figures within the movement who are worth noting:

Shukri Ahmed Mustafa (1944-1978). As previously described, Mustafa was Takfir’s founder and spiritual leader, and a disciple of Sayyid Qutb. Mustafa was also thought by some to be the Mahdi who, according to Islamic tradition, would be the deliverer of the end of time.¹³ In the Egyptian crackdown on Islamic extremism in the 1970s, Mustafa was captured and executed.

Youssef Fikri (aka: the “Emir of Blood”) was the spiritual leader of a Takfir Wal-Hijra group in Morocco. He was captured in 2002 in Casablanca and sentenced to death. It is said that he killed his own uncle because Fikri believed he was living with a prostitute and had ties to communism.¹⁴

Bassam Ahmed Kanj (alias: Abu Aisha, aka the ‘Afghan Arab’) was the leader of a terrorist group

of 200-300 Lebanese fighters that Lebanese authorities called Takfir Wal-Hijra.¹⁵ It is reported that while working as a taxi driver in Boston, Kanj befriended Riad Hijazi, who later plotted to bomb tourist targets in Jordan over the millennium celebrations.¹⁶ He was killed by Lebanese forces in Lebanon in 2000.¹⁷

Due to the loose structure of the Takfir Wal-Hijra movement, it is very difficult to estimate the number of adherents. The movement has a known presence in North Africa, as well as in Western European countries such as France (in at least 16 mosques), Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom—the latter believed to be a major hub for recruitment.¹⁸ Takfir Wal-Hijra also has a presence in various countries in the Middle East, East Africa, and in North America.¹⁹ Many governments, particularly those in North Africa,

have labeled their Islamist opponents as members of Takfir Wal-Hijra in order to discredit them politically, adding to the confusion over who is in fact truly Takfiri.²⁰ While the size of the movement is unknown, considering its presence in dozens of nations and involvement in terrorist acts around the world, the number is likely in the thousands.

Links with Al Qaeda

Takfir Wal Hijra is now also associated with Al Qaeda, although the depth of their relationship is unclear and debated among experts. While many Al Qaeda members are Takfiri, Takfir Wal-Hijra is not an affiliate of Al Qaeda and operates independently. Takfiri have been implicated in several terrorist plots attributed to Al Qaeda elements. They are believed to have provided support for the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid. There is a growing fear that Takfiri are mobilizing to carry out additional operations in Europe.²¹ Takfiri were also known to have fought the Soviets alongside Osama bin Laden’s mujahideen in Afghanistan,²² and it is believed that bin Laden has been a Takfiri financier.²³

Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda’s presumed second-in-command, and Mohammed Atta, lead suicide hijacker in the 9/11 attacks, are two among several international terror masterminds also linked to Takfir Wal-Hijra.²⁴ Some believe that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ramzi Yousef, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, Ali Mohammed (of the U.S. Special Forces) and Mahmoud Abouhalima are/were Takfiri as well. This is supported by the fact that as part of their cover they acted as non-observant Muslims, a practice associated with Takfir who justify such behavior for jihadist purposes of waging Jihad. However, Takfiri elements are also believed to have attempted the assassination of Osama bin Laden when he was living in Sudan in 1996.²⁵

Due to the similarities and connections between Al Qaeda and Takfir Wal-Hijra, future attacks in Europe will likely be a result of the merging of the expertise of Al Qaeda elements with the ideology of the Salafi Takfir Wal-Hijra movement.²⁶ As Dr. Mamoun Fandy, an Egyptian-born professor of politics and senior fellow at the James A. Baker III

Future attacks in Europe will likely be a result of the merging of the expertise of Al Qaeda elements with the ideology of the Salafi Takfir Wal-Hijra movement.

Institute of Public Policy, has stated: “[Takfir] is very central to the Al Qaeda movement.”²⁷

Since the 9/11 attacks there have been several events that may be associated with members of the Takfiri movement. In 2002, a Takfiri terrorist sleeper cell that was planning attacks on airliners, the U.S. embassy in Jordan, Disneyland, and a Las Vegas casino, was captured in Michigan.²⁸ In Morocco, more than 400 persons belonging to a group known as *Al-Salafiyah al-Jihadiyah* and Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra were arrested for the murder of over ten Moroccan citizens who had “deviated from Islamic Sharia.”²⁹ Dutch authorities have added that the murderer of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, Mohammed Bouyeri, was also Takfiri.³⁰

Some believe that it is now in Europe where Takfir Wal-Hijra should be of most concern to top anti-terrorism authorities. *Jane’s Intelligence Review* has predicted that “Al Takfir Wal-Hijra now presents perhaps the most pressing security concern [in Europe].” This has been supported by the French terrorism expert Roland Jacquard³¹ and by leading European scholar on radical Islam, Gilles Kepel, who noticed a significant increase in the number of European Muslims embracing Salafi and jihadist schools of thought. Kepel contends that “Salafist jihadists are now a burgeoning presence in Europe, having attempted more than 30 terrorist attacks among European Union countries since 2001.”³² Further evidence of this can be found in the case of Djamel Beghal, a French Algerian who was arrested in Dubai. Beghal and other associates have admitted to being members of a Takfiri terrorist cell that had planned a suicide attack on the U.S. embassy in Paris and a canteen located at the NATO airbase at Kleine Brogel in Belgium.³³

National Security Implications for Middle Eastern States

The implications of Takfir Wal-Hijra’s popularity and growth for the national security policies of Middle Eastern states are significant. Today’s media makes much of Wahhabi elements (more accurately known as *Muwahhibun*) present throughout the Middle East.³⁴ While this concern

is legitimate, more attention should be paid to the radical Salafi elements such as the Takfiris. They are not only widely present in Middle Eastern states today, but have also proven less interested in compromising and cooperating with Arab governments, such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Furthermore, they have shown their continued ability and willingness to target non-Muslims and Muslims alike in a number of Middle Eastern countries. In Lebanon, for example, Takfiris did not only target Christian pilgrims but also fought for the overthrow of the Syrian and Lebanese governments.

At first glance, Takfiri aims of overthrowing the Syrian or Lebanese governments may not appear to be in conflict with United States interests in promoting democracy throughout the world. Takfiris, however, are not interested in establishing a democracy or even a moderate Islamic regime. Rather, they are concerned with creating an extremist Islamic government that would make highly conservative Muslim states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran look free and open. Furthermore, the reemergence of such elements in Lebanon would add to the already volatile situation there that has led to the recent departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon and is marked by tensions with the pro-Syrian government in Beirut.³⁵ Considering these events, and recent doubts raised over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s ability to retain power following the most recent political storms, any new activity is likely to further ignite and complicate the already unpredictable environment.³⁶

The latest upsurge in terrorist attacks in Egypt by Islamic extremists is another sign of the danger posed by Takfir Wal-Hijra.³⁷ These attacks may significantly damage the vital Egyptian tourism industry that only recently was beginning to recover from the previous attacks in Luxor.³⁸ If Takfiris were to employ their high level of training, support and expertise to carry out attacks on a larger, more strategic scale, the political and economic impact on the Egyptian state could be disastrous. Such actions could even lead to the overthrow of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Such a move would be

catastrophic for U.S. interests, considering that a stable Egypt is central to U.S. interests in the Middle East, and that the United States has pumped billions of dollars in aid to the Mubarak government.³⁹ The Lebanese and Egyptian instances are merely two small examples of the Takfiri movement's potential for causing future upheaval in Arab states if scholars and policymakers continue to neglect this movement.

There is a debate as to what more Middle Eastern states can do to counter the threat posed by radical Islamism, including Takfir Wal-Hijra. While some argue that democratizing the region is key to eliminating this threat, others counter that elections would only allow Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood to gain political legitimacy. The answer probably lies somewhere in between. It appears necessary that Middle Eastern states slowly move towards democratic reform—a move that is critical not only for the improvement of the Arab people, but for U.S. interests and global

stability as well. However, such steps must also be accompanied by the simultaneous outlawing of political groups that preach hatred or seek to restrict citizens' freedoms. Indeed, this would not be unlike what Western democracies have already done in some instances.⁴⁰

National Security Implications for Western States

Western states must also pay more attention to the Takfiri movement. Takfiris have a strong presence in the West, and their practice of temporarily ignoring Islamic precepts for the sake of Jihad enables them to more easily infiltrate and maintain a low-key presence there. This modus operandi renders them particularly dangerous; unlike other Islamic terrorists who had lived in Muslim communities, Takfiris often live separately from such groups. They can thus be

harder to identify. Furthermore, members of Takfir Wal-Hijra come from a wide range of the economic spectrum, from the slums in Morocco to the educated classes in Egypt.⁴¹ They thus have a special gift for being able to blend in with their surroundings. Considering that a large number of intelligence leads are procured by the general public tipping off law enforcement agencies, this characteristic has the potential of eliminating a critical resource of intelligence collection. This author predicts that as anti-Muslim sentiment increases in Europe, and as the alienation of the European Islamic community continues to rise, extremist Islamic terrorists and their support base will rise concomitantly.⁴²

Conclusions - Outlook and Future Indicators

Takfir Wal-Hijra members pose a serious security risk to the Western world. They operate such that they blend into Western 'infidel' societies unnoticed, and they come from widely divergent economic backgrounds⁴³—from the slums in Morocco to the educated classes in Egypt.⁴⁴ These characteristics, together with the ruthlessness, dedication, experience, and large number of Takfiri members in Western Europe, come together as ingredients for a potentially deadly mix. Indeed, it is no surprise that Takfiri elements were connected to the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004. When the media today reports of attacks by Muslim extremist 'Wahabbis' or associates of Al Qaeda, the perpetrators are likely to be Salafi adherents of Takfir Wal-Hijra.

Due to the nature of the movement and its ideology, it is extremely difficult for Western countries to successfully defeat such a group. Consequently, Western states must work to support elements in the Arab and Muslim worlds that seek to combat these extremists. This must be done not solely through military power and support, but also through improving the educational, social, political, and economic situations of the Muslim population around the world. It will also require Western nations to work specifically to better integrate the European Muslim populations into the mainstream communities. Such encouragement, coupled with increased vigilance and intelligence focused on

When the media today reports of attacks by Muslim extremist 'Wahabbis' or associates of Al Qaeda, the perpetrators are likely to be Salafi adherents of Takfir Wal-Hijra.

Takfiris and Salafists, will help diminish the number of attacks that are still to come. Improving intelligence may prove to be particularly difficult and will require Western countries to associate themselves with figures that may have blood on their hands. In the long term, agents should be placed in the lower echelons of

the movement, from where they will have to slowly work their way up over time. Until the severity of this movement is recognized, and the appropriate steps are taken, the United States and indeed the entire Western world will remain at serious risk.

-
- 1 Philip Johnston, "Alert over Islamic terrorists who tried to kill Bin Laden," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 1, 2005.
- 2 Al Takfir Wal Hijra (accessed April 10, 2005); available from <http://www.rotten.com/library/history/terrorist-organizations/al-takfir-wal-hijra/>.
- 3 Shukri Mustafa (accessed April 8, 2005); available from <http://www.pwce.org/shukri.html>.
- 4 Supra note 3.
- 5 Supra note 1.
- 6 "Lebanese Army Ousts Islamic Militants" (accessed April 21, 2005); available from <http://www.ict.org.il/>.
- 7 The Organizations, (accessed July 2004); available from: <http://www.rantburg.com/thugburg/DOrg.asp?ID=121>.
- 8 Showdown in Sudan (accessed April 10, 2005); available from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/512/re4.htm>.
- 9 Tamara Makarenko, "Takfiri presence grows in Europe," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1, 2005. Accessed April 12, 2005.
- 10 Hate Club, accessed April 9, 2005); available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/story/0,9171,1101011112-182881-4,00.html>.
- 11 Nicholas Hellen, "Super militants thriving: Bin Laden's a pussy cat compared to Takfir," *Calgary Herald*, October 21, 2001. Accessed April 21, 2005.
- 12 Supra note 9.
- 13 Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2001. Available from <http://www.comm.cornell.edu/als481/readings/fundamentalism.pdf>.
- 14 Alison Pargeter, "The evolution of radical Islamist groups in Europe," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1, 2005.
- 15 Supra note 2.
- 16 Asbat al-Ansar, *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, January 18, 2004.
- 17 Supra note 16.
- 18 Supra note 1.
- 19 Supra note 9.
- 20 Supra note 14.
- 21 Supra note 9.
- 22 Supra note 2.
- 23 The Secret War (accessed April 11, 2005); available from <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,1373,560787,00.html>.
- 24 Supra note 2.
- 25 Supra note 8.
- 26 Al Qaeda's Trajectory in 2003 (accessed May 1, 2005); available from <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&lr=&q=cache:768QKQNa6tEJ:www.ucm.es/info/unisci/Rohan.pdf+takfir+w+al+hijra>.
- 27 The Salafist Movement (accessed April 22, 2005); available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html>.
- 28 Supra note 2.
- 29 "Morocco: Al Qaeda supporters rounded up after gruesome killings," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, August 5, 2002.
- 30 "Islamist group Takfir wal Hijra may target Europe: Janes," *Agence France Press*, February 1, 2005.
- 31 Supra note 10.

32 The Salafist Movement (accessed April 22, 2005); available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html>.

33 Supra note 32.

34 Mohammed Abdul Wahhab founded the sect of Islam known as the Muwahhibun in the 1740s. It is incorrect to call followers of the Muwahhidun doctrine “Wahhabis.” Derived from ISP-422 class notes of April 8, 2005.

35 “Lebanon Marks Syria Pullout From Country” (accessed April 30, 2005); available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/latest/story/0,1280,-4974281,00.html>.

36 “Bush discusses Syrias future with Assads opposition” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from http://www.aljazeera.com/cgi-bin/review/article_full_story.asp?service_ID=8126, and:

“Syrian president could be toppled- Israeli intel.” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from http://www.aljazeera.com/cgi-bin/news_service/middle_east_full_story.asp?service_id=8052.

37 “Two Israelis Lightly Hurt as Wave of Terror Strikes Cairo” (accessed April 30, 2005); available from <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/570569.html>.

38 “Attack on tourists in Egypt leaves 71 dead” (accessed August 16, 2005); available from <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9711/18/egypt.attack.on/>.

39 “\$50 billion later, taking stock of US aid to Egypt” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0412/p07s01-wome.html>.

40 For example, Germany has outlawed neo-Nazi and other far-right wing parties from participating in elections, and Israel has outlawed the Kach party from being a political party. For more information on the German move, see: “Germany Seeks to Outlaw an Extreme-Right Party - Nazis” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from <http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/Germany-Outlaw-Nazis.htm>, and Protecting Democracy:

Germany Wants To Ban Far-Right Party” (accessed August 16, 2005); <http://www.aicgs.org/at-issue/ai-npd.shtml>. For more information on the Israeli action, see: Kach and Kahane Chai (accessed May 1, 2005); available under “International Terrorism” and “Terrorist Organization Profiles” from <http://www.ict.org.il/>.

41 “Global Jihad (Holy War) Against Non-Muslims” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from <http://www.middle-east-info.org/gateway/jihadterr/>.

42 “Anti-Muslim Backlash Rises in Europe as Amnesty Condemns Racist Attacks” (accessed May 2, 2005); available from <http://www.islam-online.net/English/News/2001-10/06/article2.shtml>.

43 Supra note 2.

44 “Global Jihad (Holy War) Against Non-Muslims” (accessed May 1, 2005); available from <http://www.middle-east-info.org/gateway/jihadterr/>.