

‘Infidel’ Keyword to Understanding Risks of Islamic Radicalization

In recent history, genocides have often been accompanied by the preparatory dehumanization of victims.

In 1994 in Rwanda, for example, the Hutu *interhamwe* labelled the Tutsis as “termites” or “cockroaches” before they killed more than one million (mainly) Tutsis. Similarly, before World War II, the Nazi regime in Germany often featured illustrations of Jews in cartoons and other propaganda materials looking decrepit or sub-human and forced Jews to wear yellow stars saying “Achtung Juden (Warning: a Jew).” In other cases, such as in the predominantly Ibo region of Biafra in 1961, the northern Nigerian military used terms such as “gwadai gwadai” (mosquitos) to refer to the Ibo, who suffered up to one million deaths as a result of the military’s putting down of the rebellion.

Each generation, each region and each group of victims has seen different terms and methods used against them, but the one common factor behind all genocides or mass killings is that the victims are dehumanized before the violence can take place. One of the more recent challenges in preventing a possible next genocide or mass killing is that, for the first time in recent memory, the perpetrators of such attacks are using and citing religion to justify their violence. From Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon, to the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to al-Qaeda in its global operations, the religious ideology to justify the kidnapping, killing and rape of tens of thousands of people is *takfirism*.

Etymology and Background of ‘Takfirism’

The word *kafir* in Arabic—incorporated into almost all languages that Muslims speak—translates most closely to “infidel” in English. *Takfir* is based on the root word *kafir* and most closely means the “act of labeling another person an infidel.” *Takfirism* therefore refers to the doctrine in Islam of labeling other people as infidels, usually non-Sunni Muslims who comprise more than 80% of Muslims around the world and maintain that their religious belief and practice is truer than other sects, such as the Shi’a. However, also assumed under the concept of *kafir* in Islam are “apostates,” or those who have disassociated from their Muslim background and no longer consider themselves Muslims (in many cases, they have adopted Christianity or another religion). The doctrine of *takfirism* is broad enough to include the labeling of all non-Sunni Muslims as *kafirs*, therefore including those Muslim background believers who left their religion.

Since the U.S. and Allied war in Iraq in 2003, the doctrine of *takfirism* has been increasingly used to target Muslims who are perceived to collaborate with the U.S. and other “infidel” powers by, for example, enlisting in Iraqi security services, participating in democratic elections or migrating to Iraq to work for companies involved with the U.S. forces. Abdul Basit, the pseudonym of a scholar for a Taliban media wing called “Neda ul-Jihad” (“call of jihad” in Arabic) even advocated that ordinary Muslims (who are not linked to the government or indeed to foreigners) are also *kafir*, simply on the basis that they did not actively participate in jihad.

View of Scholars (Ulema)



The Qur’an’s original Arabic text is considered by Muslims to be the final revelation of God

(Flickr/ Creative Commons / Özgür Mülazımoğlu)

The overwhelming majority of Islamic scholars (*ulema*) hold that the punishment for those who are *kafir* is, for

individuals, the death penalty. But there is not consensus as to whether it is applicable to entire groups. In other words, one individual who leaves Islam for another religion, or becomes an atheist, would be subject to the death penalty, but if an entire group in a previous generation left Islam for another religious belief, such as the *Bahais* or the *Ahmediyas*, they as an entire group are no longer subject to be killed *en masse*.

This is nonetheless contradicted by the fact that whether or not their predecessors left Islam, in this life they are still seen as *kafir* for being non-Sunni Muslims and are, therefore, according to the harshest of *takfirists*, subject to the death penalty.

An alternative to killing people labelled *kafir* is nonetheless available; namely if the *kafir* pays *jizyah*, or tax, to the Muslim rulers, then this will afford them “protection.” In recent years, *takfirist* organizations such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State and the Taliban have employed *jizyah* to pressure minorities, such as Christians, Shias or Sikhs, to pay them money for “protection,” or to justify rape and enslavement or expulsion—as justification or compensation in cases where such *jizyah* is not paid.

An issue of debate is whether *takfirism* is a spin-off of Salafism or a separate doctrine altogether. Salafism is an interpretation of Islam rooted in Saudi Arabia (there known as *wahabbism*) that calls for Islamic practice based on the ways of the *salafs*, or devout followers of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. It is hostile toward mystical Sufism and syncretic brands of Islam that combine elements of local tradition—and it allows followers to practice *takfir*.

The Syrian-born Spanish national and Al-Qaeda ideologue (with a focus on “jihad”) Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, for example, argued that “some prominent men from the Salafi-Jihadi wave, or at least those scholars ... who followed them, offered

interpretations which were either extremist, or were articulated in such a general manner that some ignorant jihadis took them a step further and widen[ened] the concept of *takfirism*".

As a result of this, according to al-Suri, the difference between mainstream jihadism and *takfirism* has become so narrow that the two are nearly inseparable today.

(al-Suri is believed to have been captured by Pakistan and sent to Syria in 2011 and then either freed by President Bashar al-Assad at the start of the Syrian uprising in 2012, or is still in a Syrian prison).

Others have argued that "the concept of global jihad and *takfir*" was developed on the basis of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founder Sayyid Qutb's ideology, whose main notion was that the Muslim community (*umma*) was dead so long as it was not fighting to extend Sharia everywhere in the world.

Yet others argue that *takfir* is a "stepping stone" to engaging in violence against secular Muslim rulers and those who are perceived to be supportive of those rulers, such as Christians, foreigners or those who participate in elections. Still others suggest that *takfirism* is merely a product of strictly textual interpretations from Islam itself, such as Qur'an (4:89), which says: "[Infidels] wish that you should disbelieve as they disbelieve, and then you would be equal; therefore take not to yourselves friends of them, until they emigrate in the way of God; then, if they turn their backs, take them, and slay them wherever you find them; take not to yourselves any one of them as friend or helper."

Conclusion



Christian refugees displaced by Boko Haram violence in Cameroon near Mokolo on October 4

(Courtesy of Open Doors)

Whatever the outcome of these debates, it is clear that almost all of the most violent actors in the global jihad, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and IS in Iraq employ *takfiri* ideology. We need to understand this concept of “infidel” to understand militant Islam.

Al Shabaab’s leaders, for example, state that Western citizens and their allies are *kuffar* (plural of *kafir*) and that it is *halal* (lawful) to kill and rob non-Muslims. Boko Haram similarly states “that we shall make the country ungovernable, kill and eliminate irresponsible political leaders of all leanings, hunt and gun down those who oppose the rule of Sharia in Nigeria and ensure that the *kafir* does not go unpunished.”

The Islamic State has forced Christians to leave their homes, burned their churches and raped or “forcibly married” Christian women, all in the name of *takfirism*.

As a result, it can be said that following *takfirism* is the means by which these jihadist groups justify their attacks on their enemies, who include anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim and possibly even Sunni Muslims who do not side with them. With Christians and other non-Sunni Muslims increasingly becoming the targets of murders *en masse* by *takfirist* groups, it raises the concern that the next mass genocide—or, more likely, *religicide* will be—or is already—being carried out by *takfiris*. It would appear that this doctrine and ideology must be confronted before the world experiences another “never again” moment. We need to understand this concept of *kafir* or “infidel” to understand violent extremist tendencies infiltrating Muslim populations today.

One method of confronting the threat from *takfirism* is to prohibit speech and advocacy in support of this ideology because it infringes on the rights of others. This is especially imperative in countries where it is not yet so prevalent that the *takfiris* could launch their jihad in

response, such as Central Asia or Europe. Some countries are likely already late in confronting the threat, while others are on the cusp of being too late, such as Cameroon, where Salafist-sponsored mosques and madrassahs emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, which is about 10 years later than its neighbor, Nigeria, which is now struggling greatly with *takfirism*. It is important for governments and civil society to de-legitimize *takfirist* ideology.

Another key way to stop *takfirism* is through protecting freedom of religion. Since *takfirism* calls for the punishment of death to non-Sunni Muslims, it is inherently a violation of the freedom of religion. Any preacher that espouses such ideas would be subject to prohibition or bans. Thus far, it seems that only in countries like Uzbekistan, Chad and Kazakhstan is the threat of *takfirism* being taken seriously, but these are the same countries that human rights groups often criticize most vehemently for violating religious rights, although they are trying to protect their own religious identities and freedoms. This is an issue that requires further understanding, discussion and resolution.

The world must take notice of the doctrine of *takfirism* before it is too late. If any continent should recognize these signs, it should be Europe, given its history and understanding of how a small and seemingly marginal group of people can within a decade's time manage to become extremely powerful. While history will not repeat itself the same way as in World War II, history does, in the words of Mark Twain, "rhyme," and this is what we are seeing across the European, African, Middle Eastern and Central Asian landscapes today.

(The author writes in a personal capacity; his report was originally commissioned by the World Watch Research Unit, Open Doors International, which works to support Christians under pressure for their faith worldwide.)