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## **From Kharijites to IS: Muhammad's Prophecy of Extremist Thought**

*By Mohamed Bin Ali*

### **Synopsis**

*The Prophet Muhammad had prophesied the coming of extremism. The roots of the vicious beliefs of IS can be traced back to the Kharijites - the first extremist group in Islamic history. What were the defining characteristics of the Kharijites and their impact?*

### **Commentary**

EXTREMISM IN Islam is not something new, has been prophesied by the Prophet Muhammad and will continue for many years to come. Looking into Islamic history, contemporary scholars have identified many similarities between Muslim extremist groups today like IS and the Kharijites, the extremist group that emerged during the reign of the fourth Caliph of Islam, Ali Bin Abi Thalib. These similarities include both physical and ideological manifestations.

The re-emergence of the Kharijites today in the form of extreme groups like IS was foretold by Prophet Muhammad in his time, with warnings about the future emergence of extreme groups within the Muslim community which would serve as trials and tribulations for the people.

### **Who are the Kharijites?**

The term Kharijites came from the Arabic word *Khawarij* which means "those who left". It refers to a group of Muslims who were initially followers of Ali, the fourth Caliph, but later went against him and broke away from him.

Ali was the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. He assumed the position of

the Caliph after the demise of Caliph Uthman Bin Al-Affan. During his reign, Ali had a leadership dispute with Muawiyah Bin Abi Sufyan, the governor of Damascus. This ended up with a civil war in Siffin, Syria in year 658. During the battle, Ali and his opponent, Muawiyah decided to end the war and agreed to arbitration.

However a group of 6,000 men, who later would be the Kharijites, rejected the arbitration and rebelled against Ali. They accused Ali of apostasy for agreeing to arbitration and not judging with the Book of God. The Kharijites declared *takfir* (accusing Muslims as disbelievers) on Ali and those who accepted the arbitration. They used the slogan "*inil hukmu illa lillah*" (legislation is for none but Allah) which they quoted from the Quran and went against anyone who ruled not with God's revelations.

Although the Kharijites were extreme in their religious beliefs and practices, Ali initially tolerated and accepted them as part of the Muslim community. However, when the Kharijites killed Abdullah Bin Khabbab, a companion of the Prophet and his wife in a barbaric and inhumane manner, Ali decided to fight the Kharijites. They met in the Battle of Nahrawan in 659 which was won by Ali. In 661, Ali was killed by Abdul Rahman Ibn Muljam, a member of the Kharijite community.

### **Characteristics of the Kharijites**

A very significant attribute of the Kharijites was their strict and uncompromising views of Islam. They considered sinful Muslims to be disbelievers and would fight them if they did not repent. They rebelled against the rightful rulers and Muslim rulers who did not rule with Islamic law. Kharijites were the first group in Islamic history to practise takfir and hence justified the killings of those who they deemed infidels.

A second characteristic of the Kharijites is their shallow understanding of the religion and lack of rigorous Islamic scholarship. As such, their comprehension of the Quran is superficial and prone to literal, extreme misinterpretations. However, they were scornful of the people of knowledge and would consider the true scholars of Islam as misguided. This is so as to consider themselves to be more righteous than the people of knowledge.

A third characteristic of Kharijites was the outward piety that they portrayed. They appeared to be very religious and were fanatics in their worship. Their piety and devotional acts would impress many but they did have an effect on their behaviour. The Prophet had described these characteristics and warned Muslims not to be deceived by their outward piety and use of the religion.

He said there would arise from the Muslim community people who would recite the Quran, perform the prayers and fast and all these acts would seem insignificant compared with the recital, prayers and fasting of the rest of the Muslims. However, their prayers did not get beyond their collar bone; they would swerve through Islam just as the arrow passed through the prey.

### **Prophet's Prophecy and Modern Extremist Groups**

The first Muslim extremist emerged as early as the period of the Prophet. A man

known as Zul Khuwaisirah At-Tamimi who accused the Prophet of injustice in a derogatory manner was believed to be the first Muslim extremist in Islamic history while the Kharijites were the first Muslim extremist group.

According to the Prophet, Muslim extremist groups will continue to exist until the Day of Judgement. He said that in the end of time, there would be young people rebelling with foolish dreams. They would say the best of words but they would go out of Islam just as an arrow goes through its game. Their faith would not go beyond their throats.

### **Modern Extremist Groups**

When we look at modern extremist groups like IS, we find the same symptoms as the Kharijites. For instance, just like the Kharijites, IS and other violent Islamist groups are known to practise *takfir* on Muslims who do not agree with them. They also believe that a perpetual war must be fought to force Muslims to join their ranks and this can include killing the innocent.

Another manifestation of the unyielding nature that is similar to the Kharijites is IS' narrow interpretation of Islam; they believe there is just a single way to practise Islam and that their way is the only way towards salvation. Hence, they are closed to multiple interpretations of Islam and reject the various sects and movements that form the global Muslim community as misguided innovations.

IS consists of young people who are mostly ignorant of Islam. Yet they give the impression of being firmly adherent to the Quran by their way of worship, speech and propagation of Islam. This is especially apparent in their main propagandic mode, their online magazines such as Dabiq and Rumiya where Islamic messages including texts from the Quran and the prophetic tradition are prominently displayed.

The Prophet Muhammad's prediction of the emergence of the Kharijites and other Muslim extremist groups was to serve as a warning and guide post to the community in dealing with these extreme groups who would emerge as a trial and tribulation for Muslims across various times and ages. Thus, an understanding of the Kharijites is pertinent and would give a better insight and understanding into the IS phenomenon and similar extremist groups in the future.

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