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Labelling IS Fighters: Khawarij, Not Jihadi-Salafis

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

Islamic State (IS) fighters are more suitably called Khawarij and not Jihadi-Salafis. An accurate labelling of them is important to avoid the wrong and misleading use of Islamic terms.

Commentary

THE TERM 'Jihadi-Salafis' was first used by the French scholar Gilles Keppel in 2002 to describe a hybrid ideology in the anti-Soviet Afghan war. The event of September 11 saw this term widely used to refer to those Muslims who believe in using violence in the name of Jihad. They include members of Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS).

The use of this term is inaccurate and problematic as it does not reflect the actions and characteristics of the true Jihadis or Salafis in traditional Islam. In fact, their indiscriminate violent actions go against the spirit of the teachings of Islam itself. A more accurate term to describe them is probably 'Khawarij', 'Neo-Khawarij' or 'Modern-Day Khawarij'.

The Problem of Labelling

The term Khawarij refers to a group of Muslims in the early days of Islam believed to be the first violent movement in Islamic history. The ideology and characteristics of the Khawarij and IS show similarities between the two.

Labelling IS fighters with terms such as fundamentalists, extremists, radicals, terrorists and others are often problematic. Likewise the Arabic terms Jihadis and Jihadi-Salafis.

The problem arises when people adopt a broad-brush approach and are not careful when using these terminologies. As for the Arabic terms, many do not fully comprehend their meaning in the Arabic language. These terms are also not clearly defined while others simply define them based on mere assumptions and not on facts and knowledge.

The Arabic term Jihadi-Salafi is not suitable to describe Muslims who are involved in senseless violent activities. This is simply because terrorism is not Jihad and a Muslim who truly follows the teachings of the *salaf* (referring to early pious Muslims) hence known as Salafi, will never commit indiscriminate violence.

A more accurate term to describe the likes of IS fighters, one which has been recognised by many Muslim scholars today, is “Khawarij”.

Who are the Khawarij?

The term Khawarij (English: Kharijites) means renegades and comes from the Arabic word that means “those who left”. It refers to a group of Muslims who were initially followers of the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali Bin Abi Talib. Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. This group which was later known as Khawarij went against Ali and broke away from him. They ex-communicated Ali and subsequently killed him as they claimed Ali did not rule with God’s laws.

Khawarij was believed to be the first Muslim group to practise the ex-communication of believers (*takfir*) and legitimise violence on those whom they deem infidels. In fact, Prophet Muhammad had forewarned Muslims on the emergence of this group and described them as the worst of mankind.

Many contemporary Muslim scholars have also labelled groups such as IS as the modern-day Khawarij or Neo-Khawarij because of their common characteristics.

A renowned Muslim scholar, Shaykh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi, author of “Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal of Its Religious and Ideological Foundations”, mentioned in his book that there are solid reasons to consider IS followers as Khawarij.

Three main characteristics of the Khawarij as described by Al-Yaqoubi are: 1) revolting against the Muslim community (both against rulers and the community of believers; 2) accusing the majority of Sunni Muslims of being unbelievers; and 3) deeming as permissible the spread of injustice by means of wanton killing, destruction and plunder. Undoubtedly, these are also the characteristics of IS.

Khawarij: Neither Jihadi Nor Salafi

The Arabic term Jihadi-Salafi used to describe violent IS fighters is misleading and needs to be corrected. The blatant and inappropriate use of these terminologies have resulted in the violation of the real meaning of these terms and how they should be understood.

The term Jihadi comes from the Arabic word Jihad which means ‘to strive’. In the

Islamic legal tradition, Jihad refers to the act of fighting a legitimate battlefield according to the regulations and conditions prescribed by Islamic law and jurists. From this definition, the word “Jihadi” means someone who performs Jihad.

Even if we refer to those who fight in a legitimate Jihad, the correct term to call them is *Mujahidin* or *Mujahidun* (those who perform Jihad). As such, IS followers should not be called Jihadis nor Mujahidin as they are not performing Jihad. In fact, they have truly violated the Islamic tradition of Jihad.

True Meaning of Salafi

The term *Salafi* refers to those who follow the early Muslims who were companions of Prophet Muhammad, those who followed them and the scholars of the first three generations of Muslims. These early Muslims are known as *salaf al-salih* (pious predecessors); they enjoyed a special status among Muslims based on the Prophet’s saying, “*The best century of my people are those of my century, then the following, then the following.*”

Linguistically, a Salafi is a follower of the *salaf* and the *salaf* never advocated killings and violence. It is thus inaccurate to label violent IS fighters as Salafis. Their action are clearly against the teachings of the *salaf*.

Nevertheless, there are those who claim themselves to be followers of the *salaf* generation but advocate violence – such as IS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram and Jemaah Islamiyah. This is not in the true spirit of the *salaf* generation.

Based on this explanation, it is misleading to use the term Jihadi-Salafis; worse, this would provide a sense of legitimacy to the violent IS fighters and approval of their atrocities as act of Jihad. As such, the most appropriate term is to label these individuals as the Khawarij of modern times as it reflects the common ideology and characteristics of the original Khawarij renegades.

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