The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism

A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis

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Abstract

Salafi-jihadis, the foundation of many of today’s (most notorious) terrorist organizations, has achieved a significant impact on world affairs within less than three decades. It has given rise to many organizations such as al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Yemen and North Africa. In this article, I argue that an important change is occurring within the Salafi-jihadi camp. Material published on jihad websites in the last few years reflects an imminent and noteworthy split within the Salafi-jihadi movement. Evidence suggests that the Salafi-jihadi community has split into two groups in Jordan (Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris), and that some of the views expressed by Neo-Takfiris coincide with those upheld by Takfiris in Egypt between the 1960s and the 1980s. A similar split may be occurring in other locations as well. I describe the emerging rift, examine its causes and assess its essence. At the root of the fragmentation observed to date, I argue, is a profound legal and ideological debate that has the potential to impact Salafi-jihadi organizations worldwide.

Keywords

Salafi-jihadi – takfīr – jihād – Neo-Takfiri

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Introduction

The Salafi-jihadi ideology – the foundation of many of today’s (most notorious) terrorist organizations – grew into a distinct doctrine that rejects traditional Salafism (Salafiyya ʻIlmiyya) only around 2003, after al-Qaeda had launched attacks in Kenya and Tanzania (1998), Yemen (2000), the United States (2001) and Saudi Arabia (2003).\(^1\) Salafi-jihadis embrace violence as an appropriate and necessary reaction to what they regard as attacks on Islam by the West and by ruling elites of Islamic countries. Their goal, \textit{inter alia}, is to purge Muslim societies of immorality and non-Islamic practices and to restore what they view as a pure form of Islam.\(^2\) They believe that acts of terrorism are a justified means of achieving these goals. Within less than three decades, the Salafi-jihadi ideology has significantly impacted world affairs. It has given rise to organizations such as al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Yemen and North Africa, Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn in Somalia, Majlis Shūrā al-Mujāhidīn in Gaza and Sinai, Jabhat al-Nuṣra in Syria, Anşar al-Shāri‘a in Yemen and Egypt, and Fatḥ al-Islām in Lebanon and Gaza.

In this article I argue that an important development has occurred within the contemporary Salafi-jihadi camp. Material published on jihad websites in the last few years reflects an imminent and noteworthy split within the Salafi-jihadi movement. Evidence suggests that the Salafi-jihadi community has split into two in Jordan\(^3\) – Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris\(^4\) – and that a similar split may be occurring in other countries as well.\(^5\) The newly emerged Neo-Takfirism

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1. The roots of Salafi-jihadi ideology may be found in the radical jihad movements that emerged in Egypt in the 1970s and in the rest of the Islamic world in the 1980s. It was only in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, that this radical ideology became known as Salafiyya-Jihadiiyya. For a detailed study of the rise of Salafi radicalism in Saudi Arabia, see Stephane Lacroix, \textit{Awakening Islam} (London, 2011), English edition.

2. For Salafi-jihadis, pure Islam is reflected in the conduct of the first three generations of Muslims.


4. In this article I use the term ‘Neo-Takfiri’ to describe the splinter group that broke away from the Salafi-jihadi mainstream and adopted an extreme interpretation of Takfīr. Followers of this ideological current were eventually expelled from the ranks of Salafi-jihadis. See further below.

5. There are indications of growing Neo-Takfiri tendencies in countries other than Jordan. See, for example, an October 7, 2009 report in the London daily \textit{Al-Sharq al-Awsat} on Neo-Takfiri groups in Lebanon, http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11271&article=539032&feature. See also a post on the jihadi forum \textit{al-Hisba} by a Salafi-jihadi in Lebanon complaining about extreme Salafi youth who proclaim sweeping \textit{takfīr} against Muslims,
embraces some of the ideas promoted by Sayyid Quṭb and radical thinkers and leaders inspired by him (e.g., Shukrī Muṣṭafā, ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj) between the 1950s and the 1980s and includes some new ideological features. This article describes the emerging rift within the Salafi-jihadi camp, examines its causes and assesses the ideological questions that mark the fault line between Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris.

**Historical Background: The Emergence of Ultra-Extremist Tendencies within the Salafi-Jihadi Camp**

Although Salafism attracted popular attention in the West only after the 9/11 attacks, its ideological roots are as old as Islam itself.6 Salafis are believers who posit that the Qur’ān and the Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet) are the only legitimate sources of law, aspire to emulate the Prophet and the first three generations of Muslims in their worship and daily conduct, strive to purge Islam of all non-Islamic elements and deem it obligatory to declare as apostates Muslims who violate certain Islamic laws (e.g., engaging in witchcraft).7 Though Ibn Ḥanbal (780-855) is considered by many to be the precursor of Salafism because he insisted on relying exclusively on the Qur’ān and the Sunna, Salafism only emerged as a school of thought in the fourteenth century. The extensive compilations of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) and his distinguished pupils turned Salafism from a mere idea into a complete philosophy with numerous applications in real life. The vast scholarship they produced remains an authoritative

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7 Although many movements, including the Muslim Brothers, adopt title Salafi, very few are committed solely to the Qur’ān and the Sunna and strictly follow the example of the Prophet in their daily conduct.
source among Salafis today. Salafism emerged as a socio-political movement in the eighteenth century when the combination of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s (1703-1792) fervor and Muhammad Ibn Saʻūd’s (d. 1765) military force yielded a powerful movement that used the sword to impose Salafi ideas on the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. This early form of militant Salafism was a major source of inspiration for Salaﬁ-jihadis in the early 1990s.

Another important ﬁgure in the evolution of modern militant Salafism was Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966). His notion of al-jāhiliyya al-ḥadīth (a modern form of idolatry comparable to that of pre-Islamic Arabia), his idea of ḥākimiyya (the indivisible sovereignty of God) and his insistence on reforming Muslim society by force coincided with eighteenth-century Wahhabi theory and practice and inspired revolutionary groups in Egypt, Syria and other Muslim countries in the 1970s and 1980s. As demonstrated below, the ideas promoted by Quṭb and his followers coincide in part with notions advanced today by adherents of Neo-Takfiris. Two particular issues stand out. The first is the claim that Muslims living under apostate regimes are apostate simply by virtue of their political leaders’ apostasy. The second is the idea that Muslims must make jihad against the “near enemy” (i.e., the Muslim apostate) a top priority and postpone jihad against the “far enemy” (mainly Jews and Christians) until Islamic rule is re-established.

A third factor that contributed to the growth of contemporary Salafi-Jihadism was the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Quṭb’s ideas were introduced into Afghanistan by Egyptian jihadists. These ideas merged with the Wahhabi ideology introduced into Afghanistan by Saudi jihadis and Saudi trained ideologues such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Followers of al-Qaeda’s network solidified the newly formed ideology in the early 1990s.

Salafiyya in Jordan

The emergence of the Salafi ideology in Jordan is linked to the Syrian Salafi scholar Muḥammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī. During the 1970s many Jordanian students travelled to Syria to study with al-Albānī. The number of Jordanian

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8 On Ibn Taymiyya’s life, philosophy and contribution to Salafism, see Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmad eds., Ibn Taymiyya and His Times (Oxford, 2010).
students increased when al-Albānī chose Jordan as his permanent residence. The students surrounding al-Albānī were Salafi quietists: They refused to engage in politics, opposed any attempt to proclaim Muslim rulers as apostates and rejected any form of violence.11 The rise of a more militant form of Salafiyya in Jordan began in 1991, when thousands of Jordanians returned from the Gulf region to their homeland (particularly Salt and Zarqa). Many of the returnees were Salafi-jihadi veterans of the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Upon their return to Jordan, these jihadis – who no longer had a war to fight – were ready for a new cause.12

An important factor in the quick spread of Salafi-jihadism in Jordan was the ideological activism of two central figures within the Jordanian Salafi-jihadi movement, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006). A December 2004 article in the London Arabic-language daily al-Ḥayāt describes this activism: “Al-Zarqawi frequently accompanied al-Maqdisi on his trips around [Jordan] to visit the homes of jihad activists in various cities. In the early 1990s, al-Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi founded the secret Bay‘at al-Imām13 organization”.14 Al-Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi actively taught and spread the Salafi-jihadi creed in many parts of Jordan. What increased the receptiveness of the ideas they disseminated was the fact that Islamists, Salafis and others had become disillusioned with the Jordanian regime and state, viewing the former as impious and as such illegitimate, and the latter as morally corrupt. As Wagemakers pointed out, when al-Maqdisi started preaching in Jordan the seeds of his ideology had already been sown. There were several radical groups in Jordan, including:

Muhammad’s Army (Jaysh Muhammad), a group that is said to have been founded by a former Muslim Brother, the “Afghan Arab” Sami Abu

12 As Anouar Boukhars points out, “by the late 1990s, the city of Zarqa became a hub of militancy with a fast-growing network of Islamists, jihadis and their sympathizers... Another central hub for a number of jihadist organizations was the town of Salt.” Anouar Boukhars, “The Challenge of Terrorism and Religious Extremism in Jordan,” Strategic Insights, 5:4 (April 2006), 2-3, se.isn.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/32258/.../boukharsApr06.pdf.
13 Bay‘at al-Imām was a terror cell whose purpose was to attack the Jordanian regime and Israel.
Zaydan, in 1988, but there were many more. Some of them attacked supposedly sinful places, such as shops selling alcohol or cinemas, but they do not seem to have had a clear agenda, let alone a guiding ideology ... Their discontent was fuelled by grievances ... and by relatively incoherent religious ideas, which employed the radical beliefs of men such as Qutb but also the Salafi writings of the likes of Ibn Taymiyya. In this climate of disillusionment and these groups’ search for a radical and clear alternative to what the regime, the quietist Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood were offering, al-Maqdisi entered the fray.15

As demonstrated in his books published in the 1980s (al-Kawāshif al-jaliyya fi kufr al-dawla al-saʿūdiyya, and Millat Ibrāhīm),16 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi had a clear vision of what a legitimate regime is and how an-illegitimate regime must be dealt with. At the time of his arrival in Jordan, however, the Salafi-jihadi movement was a loosely organized group of individuals who differed considerably in the degree of their radicalism. In his 1998 book Al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya fi’l-taḥdhīr min al-ghulūw fi’l-takfīr (An Epistle Warning Against 33 Types of Exaggerations in Takfīr),17 al-Maqdisi alludes to the existence of “extreme Takfīri thinking” (i.e., accusing other Muslims of apostasy with no legal basis) among members of the Salafi-jihadi movement.18 The language used by al-Maqdisi to describe the Neo-Takfiris suggests that they were not an organized or independent movement. Moreover, al-Maqdisi regarded them as members of the Salafi-jihadi movement who occasionally went overboard due to excessive religious zeal. He explained that one of his purposes in writing the book was to guide these individuals and to warn them against grave sins, such as accusing their coreligionists of apostasy without proper legal cause.19

15 Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi, 200-201.
16 In al-Kawāshif al-jaliyya fi kufr al-dawla al-saʿūdiyya, and Millat Ibrāhīm, al-Maqdisi develops his understanding of what makes a Muslim apostate and explains why the Saudi government is an apostate regime which must be fought against.
17 Al-Maqdisi explains the meaning of the title in the book’s introduction.
18 Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, Al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya fi’l-taḥdhīr min al-ghulūw fi’l-takfīr, 8, http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=fmgd7w80. According to al-Maqdisi, the book was written in prison and was intended for members of the Salafi-jihadi camp.
19 Al-Maqdisi explains that the book was intended to undermine efforts by Jordanian authorities to present the entire Salafi-jihadi camp as Neo-Takfiri. This suggests that Salafi-jihadis were very careful in applying the doctrine of takfīr, unlike Neo-Takfiris who eventually were expelled from the ranks of the Salafi-jihadis.
The first public signs of the growing tension within the Jordanian Salafi-jihadi camp appeared in the middle 1990s when al-Zarqawi, then in prison, rebelled against the authority and teachings of his mentor and fellow prisoner al-Maqdisi. Upon his release from prison in 1999, al-Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan, and the rift began to emerge. His relocation to Afghanistan gave him an opportunity to establish his own authority independent of al-Maqdisi’s and to develop his own understanding of the Salafi-jihadi creed. Al-Qaeda strategist Muhammad Makkawī later wrote of him:

[When he arrived in Afghanistan in 1999,] Abu Mus‘ab [al-Zarqawi] held extreme views on some issues, [which caused] him to have disagreements with the other brothers ... These disagreements are not new to us... We have disagreed [on similar] issues with hundreds of [other] brothers who came to us from various places around the world. The [dispute with al-Zarqawi] stemmed from his different understanding of elements in the doctrine of *al-walā‘ wa’l-barā‘* (loyalty and disavowal) and its impli-
This description suggests that al-Zarqawi adopted an inflexible interpretation of the Salafi-jihadi doctrine and was not willing to accept other doctrinal interpretations, even prior to arriving in Afghanistan.

Once al-Zarqawi assumed command of al-Qaeda in Iraq, in 2003, he was ready to confront al-Maqdisi and dispute his jurisprudential views. The conflict between the two was made public in al-Maqdisi’s 2004 open letter to al-Zarqawi entitled “Al-Zarqawi – Support and Advice, Hopes and Pains.” Although he avoids making explicit accusations against al-Zarqawi, the tone and wording of the letter indicate that al-Maqdisi believed that al-Zarqawi had overstepped the boundaries of legitimate jihad. Al-Maqdisi writes:

I pray to Allah that [Abu Mus‘ab] will not cause himself [moral] harm through his choices in jihad and in fighting, [just] because of ... the enemy’s crimes and oppression... If he does not [endorse the position of] issuing sweeping proclamations of takfīr against people, or of proclaiming people to be apostates because of their sins, and if he recognizes that the masses in this country [i.e. Iraq] adhere to Islam, he must take [all] this into consideration in making choices about fighting. He must exercise the utmost care not to shed the blood of Muslims, even if they are sinners. He must be cognizant of the obvious distinction between war in the original abode of kufr [i.e. lands that have never been under Islamic rule], whose dwellers are mostly infidels, and war in the ‘renewed abode of kufr’ [i.e., Muslim lands that were once subject to shari‘a rule but are no longer so] whose dwellers are mostly adherents of Islam ...26

24 Irjā’ is a theological principle according to which a sinful act does not necessarily reflect inner disbelief. Only God can see into an individual’s soul and measure the extent of his belief. For this reason judgment (and declaration) of apostasy can be made only by God, not by one’s fellow man. On early Islamic debates over irjā’ and its use in contemporary Islamic radical discourse, see Daniel Lav, Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology (Cambridge, 2012).


26 Muslim scholars distinguish between the original abode of infidelity (dār al-kufr), i.e., lands that were never conquered by Muslims or subjected to shari‘a law, and lands that were once part of the abode of Islam (dār al-Islām), but have since been taken over by (Muslim or non-Muslim) regimes that do not implement the shari‘a in full. Salafi-jihadis
The entire world is against the mujāhidīn... and hastens to conspire against them and... to tarnish their image... For example, [the mujāhidin are condemned for] targeting non-combatant Iraqis... for targeting the general Shiʿī community, [and for diverting] the battle away from the occupier and his crimes [by focusing instead] on Shiʿī mosques... It is forbidden to place the [unarmed] masses and the combatant leaders on the same level... In any event, declaring war on these sects that are obedient to Islam and on Muslims [living] under the shadow of the criminal Crusader occupation... has nothing to do with Islamic political thought (laya min al-siyāsa al-sharʿīyya fī shay').

The letter implies that al-Zarqawi had developed his own ideas regarding the legal status of civilians in contemporary Muslim countries. Since these countries are no longer subject to sharīʿa laws, al-Zarqawi insisted that their citizens are no different from infidels living in the West. In addition, he apparently disagreed with al-Maqdisi on the issue of proclaiming takfīr against ordinary unlearned Shiʿis and on the legality of targeting non-combatant infidels and Muslims.

Al-Zarqawi’s response to this letter was much more direct and explicit than al-Maqdisi's original rebuke. In an audio message posted on Islamist websites in July 2005, he openly disagreed with al-Maqdisi and rejected his criticism of the mujahidin’s policies in Iraq. Citing Islamic sources, he argued that it is justified to attack non-combatant Muslims and non-Muslims in Iraq if they assist the enemy in any way, and that it is permitted to kill Shiʿi civilians because they are apostates who ally with the Crusaders.

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28 In the message, al-Zarqawi explained: “When the [Americans] realized that they were in dire straits and that their losses were high, they rushed to form [Iraqi] army units and the [Iraqi] ‘National Guard,’ so as to create a protective shield for the Crusaders and an arm to strike the jihad fighters. Lowly people responded to their call, betrayed their religion, and relinquished their divine reward. The jihad fighters’ verdict for them is plain and clear, without any ambiguity – namely, that it is obligatory to wage jihad against them, because they have committed apostasy and allied themselves with the Crusaders. Sheikh [al-Maqdisi] has expressed reservations about our fighting Shiʿis, and claimed that ordinary Shiʿis are like ordinary Sunnis. To this I respond: ‘As for fighting Shiʿis, we have declared a number of times... that we did not start the fighting... but that it was they who started to liquidate the cadres of Sunnis and to expel them, and to take over their mosques and homes. The crimes of the al-Badr Brigades are still fresh to us, not to mention the fact that they...”
Perhaps the clearest indication of al-Zarqawi’s complete independence of al-Maqdisi’s authority at this stage is the following section of his message:

I have benefited from Abu Muhammad [al-Maqdisi’s advice] just as I have benefited from [that of] other religious scholars. However, this does not mean that I adhere to everything al-Maqdisi says, for he does not have a monopoly on knowledge. Not everything he says is correct and must be followed, particularly in matters of jihad and current events. In [pursuing] the path of jihad, I do not take any step before perusing the laws of the sharī‘a. Nor do I dare to handle any matter before consulting with pious jihad scholars. Allah knows that I am constantly in touch with scholars whose knowledge supersedes that of Abu Muhammad [al-Maqdisi]... and who are currently incarcerated in the tyrants’ prisons. Had I not been afraid to harm them, I would have mentioned their names. Those who have known me and Sheikh [al-Maqdisi], in prison and out of it, know very well that I disagree with al-Maqdisi on many issues, especially on issues pertaining to jihad and activities relating to our organization [viz., Jamā‘at al-tawḥīd wa’l-jihād]. Upon my release from prison, when I decided to travel to the land of jihad [i.e. Afghanistan], I did not consult Abu Muhammad. I simply saw a way to assist this religion that differs from the path taken by Sheikh al-Maqdisi.29

These statements leave no room for doubt: By 2005, the tension among Salafi-jihadis in Jordan had become overt. Al-Zarqawi’s decision to take “a different path” from al-Maqdisi represented not only a disagreement over specific doctrinal issues, but also a rejection of al-Maqdisi’s leadership and, ultimately, a struggle for authority over the Salafi-jihadi camp in Jordan.30

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30 Al-Zarqawi also made the argument that as someone waging jihad in the field, he had a greater right to decide on doctrinal, tactical and strategic matters than “armchair jihadis” like al-Maqdisi, who was present at the first Afghan war but who never really fought there.
The Struggle for Authority between Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris

Evidence relating to al-Maqdisi’s and al-Zarqawi’s joint prison stay sheds some light on this struggle. According to one account, the Salafi-jihadis in the prison initially regarded al-Maqdisi as their leader, due to his extensive learning, but within a short time they transferred their allegiance to al-Zarqawi. One testimony states: “The people surrounding [al-Zarqawi] in prison were actual jihad fighters. Therefore, they rejected the authority of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, preferring Abu Mus‘ab [al-Zarqawi] because of his strength and determination.”

The nature of al-Zarqawi’s “strength and determination” is described in an open letter that one prisoner, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Zāhir, wrote to al-Maqdisi. In it, he relates the following episode:

I remember [the time] when the [Jordanian] interior minister visited Jafr [prison], where we were held. I remember that [he] said to Abu Mus‘ab [al-Zarqawi], “We are family and kin,” to which Abu Mus‘ab replied: “We are not family. You are from the ranks of the tyrant while we are from the ranks of Allah. Renounce the tyrant, and then we will be family...” The interior minister visited Jafr [prison] with the chief of police and [several] journalists. When he entered, nobody returned his greeting, in accordance with Abu Mus‘ab’s order. He asked: “Why do you not return my greeting?” Abu Mus‘ab replied: “Sit with us and we shall present you with our da‘wa.” The [minister] said: “... How can I sit with you when you don’t [even] greet us?” To which Abu Mus‘ab answered: “Religion forbids us to greet [you], but sit... We wish to present our da‘wa to you.”

This passage portrays al-Zarqawi as a leader who adheres unwaveringly to the doctrine of al-walā’ wa’l-barā’ (loyalty and disavowal), which requires hostility towards all infidels and apostates (including representatives of Muslim regimes

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31 MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 848, “Al-Ḥayāt Inquiry: The City of Al-Zarqa in Jordan – Breeding Ground of Jordan’s Salafi Jihad Movement,” January 17, 2005, http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP84805. In an interview, al-Maqdisi provided a different account according to which he preferred to concentrate on writing books and thus transferred leadership to al-Zarqawi. However, evidence presented by Wagemakers fits well with the explanation that jail inmates identified more with al-Zarqawi’s confrontational attitude towards infidels and apostates than with al-Maqdisi’s friendly and less confrontational approach (see Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi, 215-16).

that do not fully apply *shari’a* law) and prohibits adherents from greeting apostates and/or infidels with the phrase *al-salāmu ʿalaykum* (peace be upon you).³³

Al-Zarqawi’s conduct earned him the reputation of a devout militant who remained firm in his adherence to the doctrine even at the risk of incurring severe punishment from prison authorities. This characterization is reinforced when the writer contrasts al-Zarqawi’s conduct with that of al-Maqdisi:

I remember, oh my sheikh [al-Maqdisi], ... that you used to smile at the police[men] and sometimes you even shook hands with them. [In fact,] you [once] wrote a book about the permissibility of shaking hands [with apostates]... Our brother al-Zarqawi, [on the other hand], never smiled at them, and spoke to them only from a position of superiority ... Nevertheless, despite the difference [between your behavior and al-Zarqawi’s], I never heard even a single policeman maligning Abu Mus‘ab. On the contrary, you [may] remember that policeman who wanted to kiss Abu Mus‘ab’s hand, and you may [also] remember that no policeman [ever] attached any importance to you, because you were concerned with being liked by others even at the expense of the *da‘wa*. Strangely, none of [the policemen] addressed any questions about *tawḥīd* to you, but [instead appealed to] Abu Mus‘ab.³⁴

While it is possible that the writer’s account of policemen consulting with al-Zarqawi is merely a polemical claim, the fact that the writer attributes religious authority to al-Zarqawi despite the latter’s obviously inferior level of learning as compared to al-Maqdisi is noteworthy.

The closing sentence of the letter points to the superiority of piety over scholarship in the eyes of al-Zarqawi’s followers: “[O sheikh al-Maqdisi,] if I ask why you, who are still in prison, are not the *Amīr* (the leader), despite the fact that you are [the eminent scholar] Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, whereas the Amīr is uneducated... I would reply: ‘Be brave and tell the truth, my Sheikh...!’” Here, the author chastises al-Maqdisi for not having the courage (and ultimately the piety) manifested by al-Zarqawi in acknowledging the true doctrine and acting upon it regardless of the consequences.


³⁴ http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=312502
Clearly, both Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris advocate religious activism, particularly waging jihad and confronting apostates/infidels. Both argue that the creed (‘aqīdah) of purging Islamic society of non-Islamic practices and of establishing an Islamic state must be implemented through the method (manhaj) of struggle and not solely through preaching, education or asceticism. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two ideological trends. Neo-Takfiris appear to consider resolute confrontation as a required form of piety and thus as a goal in itself. By contrast, Salafi-jihadis view confrontation as a means to achieve the end goal of establishing an Islamic state that should be employed only under appropriate circumstances and subject to the restrictions of Islamic law. Accordingly, Salafi-jihadis insist on having a solid understanding of the legal principles of jihad, in order to ensure that they operate within the boundaries of the law and that they carry out the Divine will in the most accurate way. For Salafi-jihadis, a lack of profound knowledge of the law (and creed) necessarily renders one’s religious stance imperfect and one’s spiritual authority deficient.

It is important to note that Salafi-jihadis pursue legal knowledge not for the sake of erudition per se but rather for the sake of application (taṭbīq). Their writings invoke the classical notion that “knowledge should be sought for sake of practice” (al-ʿilm li'l-ʿamal).35 By contrast, Neo-Takfiris consider uncompromising zeal to constitute perfect piety. For them, a person who is not zealous lacks religiosity and authority. Indeed, al-Zarqawi’s followers considered his piety as a legitimate and sufficient basis for religious authority. Erudition and scholarship were secondary.36 In the eyes of al-Zarqawi’s followers, a Muslim’s

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35 Indeed, Salafi-jihadis describe their martyrs as people whose knowledge of Islamic law was immediately turned into practice. See, for example, Abū Ismā‘īl al-Muhājir, Siyar aʿlām al-shuhadā’, http://www.archive.org/details/seira3lamalshuhda, 2008, the biographies of Abū Khālid al-Sūrī and Abū Fāris al-Anṣārī. The book is a compilation of on-line biographies of martyrs of al-Qaeda. The book lacks pagination and therefore references here are to specific entries instead of pages. For Salafi-jihadi publications that stress the importance of pursuing knowledge for the sake of implementing it, see, for example, Shiekh al-Ṭarṭūsī, “Mudhakkīrah fī ṭalab al-ʿilm” www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=0504095q.

36 Al-Zarqawi’s pietism was bolstered by his altruism, which verged on self-effacement: “He was [a] father to his group... He would part with the little money [he had]... and would give it to any of his fellows whom he felt needed it more than he did. He would take off his garment and would hand it over to any of his fellows, if he felt that [this person] liked the garment... He used to check on his brothers at night and cover [with a blanket] anyone who was exposed so he would not be harmed by the cold... He would kiss the feet of his brothers out of love for them, [even though he was the amīr]...” http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=312502.
spiritual level and thus his authoritative position are determined by strict religious practice and not by knowledge.

Interestingly, when describing Neo-Takfiris, al-Maqdisi notes their disregard for learning and their obsession with piety. Such people, he asserts, “know nothing about the Salafi-jihadi creed” and “do not bother to pursue religious knowledge, [for they] never [even] think to read a book [on religion] or to attend a lesson in religion...” They value what al-Maqdisi terms “hollow zeal.” Al-Maqdisi may be exaggerating when he asserts that Neo-Takfiris never even consider opening a book, but the essence of his characterization may be correct: They deem the pursuit of knowledge as less important than zeal which, for them, constitutes the epitome of piety.

The appeal of al-Zarqawi’s piety-based authority can be explained, at least partially, by the character of the prisoners who adopted his creed and became his followers. Many of them were petty criminals who were regularly in and out of jail. As Anouar Boukhars points out:

Radical Islamists [in Salt] successfully tapped the violent energy and frustration of petty criminal networks and gave them a virulent twist. The result was a steady growth of religious fervor and the transformation of decadent young thugs into Islamic vigilante thugs [who were] used by radical Islamists... to harass people.

For such people, learning and scholarship are not accessible means to religious salvation, whereas extreme piety is within their reach. This does not mean that

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38 In A Quietist Jihadi, Wagemakers identifies the principal source of conflict between al-Maqdisi’s camp and al-Zarqawi’s camp as the question of da’wa versus jihad. Whereas followers of al-Zarqawi hold that the Salafi-jihadi creed can be fulfilled only through jihad on the battlefield, al-Maqdisi and his followers hold that given the state of affairs Salafi-jihadi da’wa must precede jihad. As the current article shows, however, this was not the only point of debate. The question of hasty and sweeping proclamation of takfīr against Muslims was also a matter of great debate among the two sides.


they disregard scholarship altogether. Rather, piety is a more prominent factor in their newly-found religious convictions. Moreover, rigid piety, which can be achieved quickly, transforms them almost overnight from despised criminals into “chosen people” who are admired. It fosters feelings of supremacy in them.

The notion that the Neo-Takfiris view extreme piety as a basis for religious authority and that deep knowledge is not a sufficient basis for such authority is advanced in al-Maqdisi’s comments in his Waqafāt ma‘a thamarāt al-jihād (Reflections on the Fruits of Jihad), published online in 2004:

This [i.e., prison experience, which drives some people to extremism,] is the source... of Takfiri thinking, which sweepingly proclaims takfīr against people and against entire societies. For these [people, a proclamation of] takfīr does not require proof; it becomes a sort of [instinctive] vengeful reaction that does not spare anyone except those who completely share their path and beliefs.

Here, al-Maqdisi implicitly contrasts responsible scholarship, based on accurate definitions and exact legal distinctions, with extremism (i.e., Neo-Takfirism), which is anchored in impulsiveness, religious fervor and ignorance. Al-Maqdisi suggests that the Neo-Takfiris are deficient in their learning and thus have no legitimate claim to any religious standing or prestige.

The Rift During the Post-Zarqawi Era: The Emergence of a Rudimentary Neo-Takfiri Doctrine

Information about the tension within the Salafi-jihadi camp after al-Zarqawi’s death in 2006 is sparse, because Islamist websites and other media rarely allude to it, and when they do, they usually present, with few exceptions, the Salafi-jihadi standpoint and ignore the Neo-Takfiri one. There is, however, evidence indicating the existence of Neo-Takfirim in Jordan and elsewhere, as reflected

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41 According to the Jordanian journalists Muḥammad Abū Rummān and Ḥassan Abū Hanīyah, most of the Salafi-jihadis in Jordan come from either the uneducated poor or to the lower-middle-class. This may explain why the notion of piety-based authority has gained influence among them. Al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya fī l-urdunn ba‘d maqtal al-Zarqāwī (The Jihadi-Salafi Movement in Jordan after the killing of al-Zarqawi) (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stifun, 2009), 94-5. I am indebted to Assaf David for bringing this book to my attention.

in legal questions addressed to al-Maqqasi, websites that are clearly associated with Neo-Takfiri ideology, and several Neo-Takfiri publications. The available information is illuminating. It indicates that following al-Maqqasi’s release from prison in 2008, the dispute about Takfīr became an open divide.43

Shortly after al-Maqqasi’s release, an anti Neo-Takfiri communiqué entitled “A Disavowal of the Mistaken Party, the Takfiri Extremists and their Deviant Beliefs,” signed by twenty-five Salafi-jihadi scholars, including al-Maqqasi, was published in Jordanian newspapers and posted on Islamist websites. The communiqué, which attacks “a group of extremists in the city of Zarqa,” confirms the emergence of a doctrinal split between Neo-Takfiris and Salafi-jihadis, and indicates that this split led to hostility and friction between the two camps in al-Zarqa:

Many [Neo-Takfiris] have spoken ill of the mujāhidīn brothers [i.e. Salafi-jihadis], accusing them of impeding the jihad or of running away from the jihad arenas ... They accuse those in charge of supporting widows and orphans of [stealing] the property of the mujāhidīn, when in fact [the accusers] have no proof of this, but only suspicions and lies ... They attribute to the mujāhidīn a tendency to renounce [their jihadi views] or to encourage [others to do so] ... They disseminate their errors and lies through the Internet and through pamphlets they distribute among the youth, with titles such as “Legal Contemplations on [the Issue of] Fleeing from the Arenas of Jihad” ... and “Al-Maqqasi Is Advancing Backwards”... When our brothers [the Salafi-jihadis] denounced them, warned people [not to listen] to them, and called to drive them out, [they] became angry...44

The communiqué ends with an explicit warning to Salafi-jihadis to refrain from “sitting with [Neo-Takfiris] or befriending them,” and with an instruction “to keep this mistaken group from writing on [Internet forums] and from spreading their mistakes.”

A few months after the publication of this communiqué, Islamist forums reported yet another escalation in the conflict. This time al-Maqqasi was the direct target of the Neo-Takfiris’ assaults. According to one posting, the Neo-Takfiris “attacked [him] verbally... and proclaimed takfīr against [him and his followers].”45 The gulf had now become unbridgeable, with each camp viewing the other as a deviant sect.

Al-Maqdisi’s reaction to the attacks was severe. In a June 2009 communiqué, he openly challenged the Neo-Takfiris’ claims to piety and religious prestige by characterizing the Neo-Takfiri as a person who:

agrees to study with the sheikhs only if they never contradict him in anything, [because] if they do, [he believes that] they are not worthy to be his sheikhs. A person who displays this [attitude] is a person of hollow zeal; [he is a Salafi only in his appearance, i.e.] in that he wears the black headgear and Afghani clothes... He knows nothing about religious proselytizing [daʿwa] and jihad, beyond how to dress... He treats [other Muslims] with affection or hatred based on whether or not they are dressed [like him], even though many pious... Muslims who are dear to us do not wear these clothes...46

To demonstrate the hollowness of the Neo-Takfiris’ piety, al-Maqdisi relates the following anecdote:

A learned person [once] told me that a devout [acquaintance of his] used to pass by his workplace every morning and evening... [but] took no notice of anything [around him] and did not greet anyone. One time, this learned scholar stopped him and said: “Oh brother, don’t you see that I, your Muslim brother, have a beard like you and dress according to the Sunna, [just as you do]? Why then do you not greet me?” [The devout man] replied: “Listen, I greet only a person who wears Afghani clothes and black headgear!!” The scholar asked me [i.e. al-Maqdisi] whether I approved of this behavior, to which I replied: “God forbid, it is wrong, and I disassociate myself from it. It is not [sanctioned by] Islam.”47

It is no coincidence that this polemical attack focused on Neo-Takfiri claims that they are pious by virtue of their religious practice. The Neo-Takfiris’ extreme devotion had strong popular appeal, especially in al-Zarqa and Salt, where many young people had been converting to a stricter and more militant version of

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46 See MEMRI JTTM, “Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi Calls on Salafi-Jihadis to Denounce Extremism within Their Camp,” http://www.memrijttm.org/content/en/report.htm?report=3368&param=AJT. According to Abū Rummān and Abū Hanīyah, Salafi-jihadis in Jordan often “grow beards, line their eyes with kohl (a cosmetic used to darken the eyelids), let their hair grow long, and wear long gowns that reach below their knees, loose baggy pants, and a skullcap.” Al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya fīl-urdunn ba‘d maqtal al-Zarqāwī, 89.

Islam (a trend that began in the early 1990s, with the aforementioned return to Jordan of hundreds of veterans of the Afghan war). In denying the piety of Neo-Takfiris, and in presenting them as ignorant people who cloak themselves in piety, al-Maqqdsi was attempting to undermine the primary basis of their claim to legitimacy and to decrease their social appeal and religious standing.

After attempting to undermine the religious legitimacy of Neo-Takfiris, al-Maqqdsi called for their isolation and public denunciation. He instructed his followers:

We [must] be patient with [small] mistakes and sins that sometimes disgrace some of [the Salafis]. However, we should not remain gentle ... or silent in the face of flawed [religious] methodologies and doctrinal deviations, which defame our da’wa. We do not wish our opponents to use [these extremists’] words and conduct [as ammunition] in the debate against us, nor do we want them to hold us responsible for [Neo-Takfiri] confusion [about the true nature of Salafism] ... Hence, we should ... disassociate ourselves from the erroneous conduct and the mistakes of these [extremists], and denounce them publicly ...

Al-Maqqdsi’s call for disassociation from Neo-Takfiris and for their open condemnation, and Salafi descriptions of Neo-Takfiris as extremists whose creed is “equivalent to that of the Khawārij (a seventh century group considered deviant by mainstream Sunni Muslims),”48 confirm that by 2009 Salafi-jihadism and Salafi-Takfiris had become two distinct movements, with different views on major doctrinal issues and distinct perceptions of the basis for legitimate religious authority.

**Doctrinal Disagreements Between Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris**

The emotional conflict among Salafi-jihadis in Jordan, which ultimately divided them into two distinct religious trends – a Salafi-jihadi trend with a considerable following and a Neo-Takfiri trend with an unknown number of followers – cannot have been fueled merely by a disagreement about sundry legal issues or the sources of legitimate authority. What, then, is the root-cause of the disagreement between the two groups? A closer look at the specific doctrinal issues that Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris debate offers important insight into

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the fundamental cause of the tension between them. The principles of Neo-Takfiri doctrine, which is still in the early stages of development, appear in a variety of sources but have not yet been compiled in a single book or corpus of writings. At present, much of the information about this nascent creed comes from the rival camp, the Salafi-jihadis. However, documents written by Neo-Takfiris, questions addressed to Salafi-jihadi sheikhs (that describe Neo-Takfiri tendencies worldwide), books published by Neo-Takfiris and websites administered by them corroborate most of the accounts of Neo-Takfiris found in Salafi-jihadi writings. Based on the available information, the major jurisprudential distinctions between the two camps appear to be related to the following issues.

**What Constitutes Proof of Apostasy**

For most Sunnis, belief (*imān*), which is a matter of the heart, is established through affirmation (*taṣdīq*) and is not conditioned on one's commitment to religious practice. Hence, once a person affirms his belief, any failure to fulfill the legal requirements that accompany this belief does not render him an apostate but only a sinner. By contrast, Salafis maintain that belief is established through intention, affirmation, and practice (*al-imān niyya qawl wa-ʿamal*). Therefore, they view a Muslim who consistently disobeys the requirements of the law as an apostate. However, Salafis disagree among themselves on which sins or violations of the law constitute apostasy. Neo-Takfiris argue that if a Muslim man shaves his beard, adopts Western dress or imitates infidels in any way, he may be proclaimed an apostate whose life and property are forfeit.49 By contrast, Salafi-jihadis contend that such practices do not constitute sufficient legal grounds to proclaim *takfīr* against a Muslim (i.e. to declare him an apostate).50 For them, the only exception to this rule is the wearing of the attire of, or the use of instruments related to, infidels’ religious symbols (e.g., a priest’s gown or a cross).51

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50 Once declared an apostate, an individual is no longer protected under Islamic law and may be killed with impunity. Additionally, he may not inherit the property of a Muslim relative and may not be buried in a Muslim graveyard. See Abū Ḥafṣ Ṣufyān al-Jazā’iri, “Mādha taqṣidūn bi-l-manhaj al-takfīrī,” 30, http://www.tawhed.ws/a/?a=abu-hafs.

51 abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/201-225.doc, question number 222.
Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris both maintain that in a country ruled by *shariʿa* law, all citizens are assumed to be believing Muslims unless their conduct or appearance indicates otherwise. This principle is known as *al-āsli ʿill-nās al-ʾIslām*. Under this principle, for example, an individual in a country which accepts the *shariʿa* as its only source of law may assume that his fellow worshipers at the mosque are Muslims and he does not have to inquire into their actual beliefs. That individual may also sell weapons in the open market (a sale permitted only between Muslims), and he may assume that the purchaser is a Muslim without verifying his religious identity.

However, Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris disagree over the status of Muslims in *dār al-kufr al-ṭāriʿ*, a Muslim country in which *shariʿa* law once was, but is no longer, fully and exclusively applied, as is the case in all Muslim countries today. Salafi-jihadis consider such countries to be *diyār murakkaba* (territories whose status is compounded), in which signs of apostasy are manifested but whose citizens are still assumed to be Muslims. Thus, they contend that one should assume that citizens of such a country are Muslims, unless their behavior or appearance indicates otherwise.

Neo-Takfiris, by contrast, assume that citizens of these countries are infidels (*al-kuffār al-āsliyūn*), like the citizens of non-Muslim countries. A Neo-Takfiri writer with the *nom de plume* Abū Maryam al-Kuwaitī provides the rationale for the Neo-Takfiri position:

If the infidels [i.e., people who have never been Muslims] or apostates overcome the abode of Islam, and this abode submits itself to them without fighting the infidels or resisting them, the people of this territory are collectively considered to be apostates, even if there are among them _

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52 According to some Muslim scholars, the presence of an infidel worshipper at mosque during public prayer can invalidate the prayer of believers attending the mosque. See, for example, Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī* (Cairo: Hajar liʾil-ṭibāʿa waʾl-Nashr, 1992), 3:56.

53 abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/51-75.doc. Question number 74.

54 See, for example, the reply by Sheikh al-Ṭarṭusī in abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/151-175.doc, question number 154. See also question number 443.

55 A question addressed to Sheikh al-Ṭarṭusī indicates that at least one group in Iraq holds the Neo-Takfiri view on the status of Muslims in Iraq today ( abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/851-875.doc question number 855). See *ibid*, question 1022.

people who [inwardly] are not [apostates]. [In their initial passiveness, the citizens] express[ed] their contentment with the infidels ...⁵⁷

According to Abū Maryam, people who are passive when faced with apostasy tolerate apostasy and therefore are themselves apostates. He adds that in the case of formerly Islamic countries (i.e., all contemporary Muslim states) apostasy is caused not merely by one’s passive attitude towards apostasy but also from the active adoption of apostate ideologies such as communism, democracy, and ba’thism.⁵⁸ A similar position appears in a manifesto written by ‘Alī Jalīl, the first known Maldivian suicide bomber, who took part in an attack on the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence agency headquarters in Lahore in 2009. The manifesto was posted in full on the Anṣār al-Mujāhidīn forum on July 3, 2010.⁵⁹ This view was also reiterated by another Neo-Takfiri writer with the nom de plume Anṣār Allah.⁶⁰

The Neo-Takfiri position on apostasy is consistent with the view expressed by Sayyid Quṭb in the 1950s and by Shukrī Muṣṭafā (the leader of the violent Egyptian organization “al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra”) in the 1970s.⁶¹ Both men regarded Muslim society in its entirety as Jāhilī, i.e., a non-Islamic idol worshiping society). Quṭb declared in court: “We are the true community of believers that lives in the midst of a Jāhilī society. We have no links to either the state or to society ... and as a community of believers we see ourselves at war with the state and society ...”⁶² Shukrī Muṣṭafā told his interrogators that whoever does not accept his group’s ideology is an apostate (aḥkumu ‘alyahi bi’l-kufr).⁶³

The Neo-Takfiri view has numerous practical implications. Neo-Takfiris reportedly regard the property of citizens in Muslim countries as legitimate booty – just like the property of people in the abode of war (dār al-ḥarb) or the abode of unbelief (dār al-kufr). In addition, some Neo-Takfiris in Jordan apparently refuse to greet people on the street even if their dress is Islamic, unless

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⁵⁹ http://www.memrijttm.org/content/en/report.htm?report=4825&param=GJN.
⁶¹ On Quṭb and his influence, see Gilles Kepel, Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh (Berkeley, 2003); Emmanuel Sivan, Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics (Tel Aviv, 1994); Sayed Khatab, The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb (New York, 2006); John Calvert, Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism (New York, 2010).
⁶² Emmanuel Sivan, Radical Islam, 95.
the Neo-Takfiris personally know them to be devout. In addition, some Neo-
Takfiris refuse to purchase meat slaughtered by local Muslim butchers unless
the latter adhere to their creed.

Collective Proclamations of Takfir
Salafi-jihadis reject the notion of collective proclamations of takfir (takfir bi'l-
ʻumūm). They maintain that proclamations of takfir can be made only against
specific individuals (a procedure known as takfir muʻayyan), based on convinc-
ing evidence. In addition, before proclaiming takfir against an individual, one
must rule out all potential mitigating circumstances: the accused must be a
mature adult, it must be proven that he acted intentionally and of his own free
will and it must be shown that he was aware of the fact that his act was sinful.
This approach to proclaiming takfir is manifest in the answer given by Sheikh
Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarṭūsī, a prominent Salafi-jihadi authority who currently resides
in London, to a question addressed to him on whether the prevailing custom
among Muslims today of visiting graves and supplicating the dead renders these
Muslims apostates. In his reply, al-Ṭarṭūsī held that apostasy may be declared
only against individuals, and only after evidence has been produced that the
individual knowingly followed the grave-visiting custom.

Neo-Takfiris, by contrast, allow sweeping proclamations of takfir against
entire groups of people. In this they resemble their counterparts in Egypt in the
1960s-1980s (Sayyid Quṭb, Shukrī Muṣṭafā, and ʻAbd al-Salām Faraj), who defined
the entire Egyptian society as apostate. A question addressed to al-Maqdisi
suggests that some Muslims today consider their co-religionists apostates sim-
ply because they appeal to apostate rulers.

64 Neo-Takfiris probably fear to violate the Prophet’s instruction as expressed in the ḥadith
“Do not initiate greetings of al-salām [i.e., al-salāmu ʻalaykum] to Jews and Christian (i.e.,
to non-Muslims) (lā tabda‘u’ al-yahūd wa;lā al-naṣārā bi'l-salām).

65 http://www.memrijttm.org/content/en/report.htm?report=3368&param=AJT. See also
al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya, 108. Neo-Takfiris are concerned that if they greet
people on the street with the phrase “Peace be upon” (which is reserved exclusively for
Muslims) and these people turn out to be non-Muslims, they would be at fault for violat-
ing the Prophet’s instruction: “Do not greet Jews and Christian with Salām ...” (Ṣaḥīḥ
Muslim, Kitāb al-Salām).

66 Al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya, 40.

67 On the conditions for proclaiming takfir, see further al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya,
45-105.

68 abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/1-25.doc, question number 22. See also questions
number 36 and 58, ibid.
My question, my esteemed sheikh, is about the Takfiris or the Khawārij. It is not hidden from you, our eminent sheikh, that there are people of ahl al-Sunna who believe in proclaiming sweeping takfīr against the [Muslim] masses and who consider the proclamation of takfīr against the people of jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places. They do not excuse the masses of ignorance in their appeal to the tyrant but support [the idea of] proclamation of takfīr against them. Among their [viz., the Neo-Takfiris] known sheikhs are Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Qudsī, Abū Maryam al-Mukhlīf, Abū ʻAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣūmālī69 and others ... My question, may Allah strengthen you, is: what is our position regarding them? Should we confer [the status] of apostasy on them?70

Some Neo-Takfiri writers have adopted a more moderate position by accepting the idea of a sweeping proclamation of takfīr in principle but prohibiting the application of the legal implications of takfīr to the newly proclaimed apostate. Abū Maryam al-Kuwaitī, for example, prohibits the use of violence against an individual apostate in this situation:

I do not permit today the blood and property of people even if they commit shirk (association of any deity with God) because of the lack of public announcement (balāgh ʿāmm) [warning people against shirk] ... This does not mean that I do not consider a person who committed shirk to be an apostate because it is clear that he is an apostate who must be excommunicated. At the same time, however, his blood and property are not permitted until evidence is brought against him [that he was warned about his transgression but he persisted in it].71

According to Abū Maryam, issuance of a warning is a prerequisite to applying all the implications of takfīr against an individual apostate, particularly in a place or time in which the phenomenon of apostasy is common among Muslims.

Proclaiming Takfīr against Government Employees
Salafi-jihadis do not proclaim takfīr against all government employees of Muslim states that are not under shari‘a law, but only against those employees whose occupation is directly linked to activities that Salafi-jihadis regard as kufr (infidelity) or shirk, such as enforcing secular legislation or assisting the govern-

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69 For a website dedicated to the writing of Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Qudsī and Abū Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣūmālī, see the following link http://www.twhed.com.
ment to take action against pious Muslims or the mujāhidūn.72 Neo-Takfiris, by contrast, consider all government employees in any country not run in accordance with shari‘a to be apostates, and thus issue a general proclamation of takfīr (takfīr bi‘l-‘umūm) against them, solely on the basis of their association with the apostate “tyrants” (i.e. the authorities).73 Such association, they claim, is in-and-of itself a violation of the al-walā‘ wa’l-barā’ doctrine, which regards any association with an apostate as an act of apostasy. In so holding, Neo-Takfiris construe Qur‘ān 5:54 literally: “O You who believe, take not Jews and Christians [i.e., infidels] as associates for they are associates of each other. And he amongst you who takes them as associates becomes one of them.” A question addressed to sheikh al-Ṭarṭūsī by a resident in Iraq indicates that this position on the apostasy of government employees has gained currency among some jihadists in Iraq:

Our respected sheikh. An extreme sect has splintered from the jihadists in Iraq ... They claim that the default status (al-asl) of Iraqi society [today] is apostasy until it is proven otherwise ... And they say also that any [government] employee in Iraq now is an apostate such as the employees of [the Ministries of] Education, Training and Health ...74

In short, for Neo-Takfiris, employment by an apostate government is a form of association that is forbidden. An employee of an apostate state necessarily partakes in the regime’s apostasy, whether or not he himself commits an apostatizing act.

72 http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=4781&x=jzoyrjz8. In a similar manner, Sheikh Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarṭūsī permits to work for organizations controlled by the United Nations, on the condition that the position does not directly promote or facilitate apostasy or sin. See abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/26-50.doc, question number 26. See al-Maqdisi’s detailed answer regarding the proclamation of takfīr on the Hamas government, http://shomookhelhaq.mam9.com/t686-topic. Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarṭūsī holds that one must bring proof establishing that a Muslim who entered an apostate parliament was warned, before takfīr is proclaimed against him. Al-Ṭarṭūsī explains that it is possible that this Muslim member of the parliament was following one of the mistaken legal opinions issued by Muslim scholars that permit Muslims to join an apostate parliament. abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/176-200.doc question number 187.


74 abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/851-875.doc question number 855.
Pledging Loyalty to the Correct Imam

Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris also disagree over the correct understanding of the following Prophetic hadith: “One who dies without having pledged loyalty [to an Imam, i.e., leader] dies a jāhilī death.” Both Neo-Takfiris and Jihadis construe the phrase “jāhilī death” to mean dying in a state of apostasy, as did the people of the Jāhiliyya (pre-Islamic era). They contend that any Muslim who fails to pledge loyalty to an Imam is an apostate. However, they disagree over who is a legitimate Imam. Neo-Takfiris maintain that there is only one legitimate Imam to whom all Muslims must pledge loyalty at any given time. Since they regard themselves as the only ‘righteous society’ (jamāʻat al-ḥaqqaq), they consider their Imam to be the only legitimate Imam, and any Muslim who does not pledge allegiance to him is thus an apostate.75 This position concurs with Shukrī Muṣṭafā’s statement that whoever does not accept his group’s ideology is declared an apostate by him (ahkumu ‘alayhi bi'l-kufr).76

Salafi-jihadis, by contrast, maintain that there is more than one legitimate Imam (leader), and that a Muslim may pledge loyalty to the Imam of his choice so long as the Imam follows what they perceive to be the correct path.77

Attending Prayers led by a Government-appointed Imam

According to Salafi-jihadis, it is forbidden to attend services led by a government appointed Imam who actively promotes the government’s apostate ideology. Prayers said in the presence of such an imam are null. However, if the Imam acts as a prayer-leader solely for the purpose of making a living, and if he does not promote the government’s apostate ideology, then it is permitted (albeit not recommended) to attend his service;78 provided that he does not end his prayer with an invocation to God to bless the apostate ruler.79

By contrast, Neo-Takfiris “forbid praying with any Imam appointed by the Ministry of Endowments (ʻulamā’ al-awqāf), and some even proclaim takfīr against all such Imams.”80 Such a position is manifested in a question addressed to Sheikh al-Ṭarṭūṣī:

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75 Al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya, 175, 182.
77 Al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya, 177-8.
79 http://www.al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=38348. Al-Maqdisi points out that some Neo-Takfiris in Jordan publicly boast that they have avoided praying in any mosque led by such an imam for many years. Nūr al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, a student of al-Maqdisi,
I used to pray in a mosque but one of the brothers told me that praying behind those imams is forbidden because they [viz., the imams] attend meetings conducted by [the Ministry of] Endowments where Islam is ridiculed and they [viz., the imams] do not protest...81

The nature of the question indicates that Neo-Takfiris make sweeping assumptions about government-appointed imams. Neo-Takfiris do not act upon concrete evidence indicating that meetings in the Ministry of Endowments involve the ridicule of Islam and that the imams who attend those meetings in fact do not protest against such behavior. Rather, they assume this to be the case and act upon their assumption.

**Voting in Elections**

Salafi-jihadis, who hold that Allah is the ultimate and exclusive source of legislation, view man-made laws that are not consistent with the law prescribed by the Qur’ān and the Prophetic tradition as a form of *shirk*. At the same time, however, they do not proclaim *takfīr* against all Muslims “who participate in parliamentary elections, because, by doing so, most of them do not seek [to promote secular] legislation but [merely to elect]... representatives [who will provide] them with services needed in [daily] life.”82

Neo-Takfiris, by contrast, hold that a citizen becomes an apostate merely by participating in the general elections in an apostate state. This is reflected in the following question addressed to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi:

Ninety-five percent of the Turkish people participate in the general and municipal elections. I therefore proclaim *takfīr* against every person who participates in these elections. [I do so] knowing that every citizen at least hears [today] statements about apostasy. Our era is one of knowledge and technology and there is a Qur’ān in every house and several


81 abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/851-875.doc, question number 861.

82 http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=4781&x=j2oyf28. See also al-Maqdisi, *al-Risāla al-thalāthī-nīyāh*, 345. See abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/326-350.doc, question number 336, where al-Ṭarṭūṣī explains that many Muslim voters today are ignorant of the prohibition of participating in democratic elections; for this reason, *takfīr* should not be proclaimed against them until they have been presented with legal proof indicating that democratic elections are forbidden in Islam.
commentaries. The nation in its entirety knows that the Turkish state is secular and it rules by a law other than Allah’s ...

Differentiating between Administrative and Substantive Laws

Neo-Takfiris and Salafi-jihadis prohibit following any man-made law that directly contradicts the Qur’ān and the Sunna, such as a law banning polygamy or permitting usury. However, the two camps appear to disagree over adherence to administrative law. Salafi-jihadi texts accuse Neo-Takfiris of forbidding Muslims from obeying any law created by an apostate ruler, including rules that do not contradict the Qur’ān or the Sunna. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi states:

One of their [i.e., the Neo-Takfiris’] most common mistakes in proclaiming takfīr ... is not distinguishing between following and turning to administrative law and between relying on apostate legislation. Some of the extreme and ignorant Takfiris proclaim takfīr against every person who obeys ordinances, instructions, or regulations issued by administrative entities, organizations, institutions, companies and their administration. They consider these [rules] to be apostate legislation ...

However, two texts posted on the Neo-Takfiri website www.twhed.com, seem to contradict al-Maqdisi’s accusation. A writer using the nickname Anṣār Allah explains that he rejects traffic laws not because they are inherently apostate but because they incorporate punishments and regulations that are incompatible with the teachings of the Qur’ān and the Sunna:

I gave the example of traffic laws, which all of you [non-Takfiris] accept, which contain purely unjust punitive measures on property and [other] ordinance pertaining to punitive measures that do not exist in Islam [in equivalent cases,] such as imprisonment, penalties, and the suspension of [the Islamic law of] blood money ...

84 abubaser.bizland.com/verdicts/read/701-725.doc question number 716.
85 Al-Maqdisi, al-Risāla al-thalāthīniyya, 403.
86 http://www.twhed.com/vb/t5198.html, accessed May 29, 2013. Whether or not a judge can impose those punishments as Ta‘zīr is debated by the various schools of law. See Farrukh B. Hakeem, M.R. Haberfeld, Policing Muslim Communities (New York, 2012), 7-22.
Another text posted anonymously on the same website explicitly claims that Neo-Takfiris accept administrative law:

In what lies outside that domain [of the Divine law,] it is permissible for a person, whether a Muslim or an infidel, to insert [his] opinion. It is permissible to initiate regulations or to lay down laws to rule some of the affairs, to conclude peace agreements and the like. [A person] can set conditions and accept conditions provided that they do not contain anything that comes close to the [Divine] domain which is prohibited for a human being to enter ... There are two types of ruling mechanism: administrative law and shari'a law ... Administrative [law] is designed to regulate matters and perfect them in a manner that does not contradict [shari'a] law. There is no reason to prevent it ... Once we became aware that a person who lays down these administrative ordinances and laws does not commit apostasy and does not become a legislator to the exclusion of Allah, then [it is clear that] those who follow and use [these laws,] such as [using] passport, driving license, identity cards, pension laws, would not be apostates ...  

This last sentence directly contradicts al-Maqdisi’s depiction of Neo-Takfiris as refraining from applying for drivers’ licenses and passports and as proclaiming takfīr against any Muslim who agrees to pay for a bus ticket or an electric bill because the rates have been set by an apostate government.

Other texts on Neo-Takfiri websites demonstrate that Neo-Takfiris are not unanimous on the question of administrative law. For example, a writer using the nom de plume al-Luqmān rejects the attempt to distinguish between administrative and shari'a law. According to him, since contemporary Muslim rulers claim lordship (rabūbiyya), a divine characteristic, and believe that authority belongs to them (lahum al-ḥukm), believers must not submit even to their administrative law. Following their administrative law, claims al-Luqmān, necessarily indicates one’s acceptance of their lordship and thus one’s recognition of lordship other than Allah’s.

Interestingly, the debate among Neo-Takfiris about administrative law may be a manifestation of the disagreement that al-Maqdisi described as having occurred in Zarqa. Neo-Takfiris may be divided over how to assess whether it is permissible to adhere to a code of law. Whereas some Neo-Takfiris examine the
content of the law to determine whether it contradicts the Qurʾān or the Sunna, other Neo-Takfiris assess the ruler’s intentions in laying down the laws. According to the latter, if a ruler creates laws because he believes absolute sovereignty lies with him, then obeying his laws is forbidden since such obedience indicates submission to a flesh and blood ruler and not to Allah alone.

**Jihad against the “Near Enemy” and the “Far Enemy”**

Salafi-jihadis view jihad against apostates (“the near enemy”) and jihad against infidels (“the far enemy”) as equally obligatory for Muslims today.\(^90\) By contrast, Neo-Takfiris maintain that military struggle against contemporary apostates is the only permissible jihad. According to them, in the absence of an abode of Islam (a territory ruled fully and exclusively by Islamic law), jihad directed against infidels is prohibited and Muslims should focus their efforts on deposing apostate Muslim rulers. The Neo-Takfiris’ view here is in perfect harmony with ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj’s position, as expressed in his 1979 publication, *The Neglected Duty* (*al-farīda al-ghā’iba*): “We [pious Muslims] must focus on our Islamic issue, which is, first and foremost, implementing the Divine law in our land and rendering the word of Allah most supreme. Undoubtedly, the real jihad [today] is uprooting the apostate regimes and replacing them with an Islamic rule ...”\(^91\)

Abū Maryam elaborates on the contemporary Neo-Takfiri position:

Repulsing the [infidel] invader [to prevent his harm] to the sanctity of the religion and the honor of the people is a duty when there is an abode of Islam in which Muslims rule according to the Divine Law. If the infidel attempts to conquer the Muslims’ lands, those who live in the abode of Islam are obligated to strive to their utmost to repel the infidel. If those who reside there [i.e., in the abode of Islam] do not possess sufficient force, other Muslims must provide that force until the infidel is driven out of the abode of Islam. However, if the infidel has already taken control of the Islamic state and seized it, and the dwellers obey him, and he is able to rule [the state], then the fatwa of sheikh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyya] regarding the city of Mārdīn [in Turkey]\(^92\) applies: He who cannot display

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\(^{90}\) See, for example, the fatwa issued by sheikh al-Ṭarṭūṣī, abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/326-350.doc question number 329.

\(^{91}\) This book can be downloaded using the following link http://www.tawhed.ws/a?a=a5ieej5j. For the views of al-Faraj see Steven Brook, “The Near and Far Enemy” pp. 48-49.

\(^{92}\) Ibn Taymiyya was asked about the status of Muslims in Mārdīn, which was invaded by the Mongols in the middle of the 13th century, whom he considered to be apostates. Ibn
his religion publically must emigrate [from his country] to the abode of Islam, even if the land seized by the infidel was previously part of the abode of Islam.93

Abū Maryam holds that the obligation to fight the invading infidel is no longer in effect when the infidel controls the abode of Islam and imposes its infidel laws, because in this situation the abode is not one of Islam but one of infidelity. Armed with this conclusion, Abū Maryam proceeds to criticize al-Qaeda for waging jihad against infidels when in fact they should be fighting apostates:

[N]o one has permission to immigrate to [help] you [i.e., al-Qaeda in Iraq] and you have no permission to admit the immigrants [to Iraq]. Moreover, the [immigrants] must fight any [apostate] without any conditions ... You who belong to al-Qaeda are transgressors: Either you neglect your personal duty to fight the [apostate] tyrant who controls [your country of origin,] or you run away in the face of the advance of the [tyrant]'s army. [In doing so] you let the tyrant's army attack your home countries, roam free and rule, while you went to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Herzegovina and other places.94

Abū Maryam concedes that fighting the apostate regime in Iraq is a duty, but he claims that this is a personal obligation (farḍ ‘ayn) of the Iraqi people and a collective duty (farḍ kifāya) of the rest of the Islamic community. The obligation to fight the regime in Iraq would become a personal duty for the entire Islamic community outside Iraq only if and when the Iraqis permanently failed to repulse the apostates on their own. Abū Maryam explains that even if Iraqis do permanently fail to depose their apostate government, in which case all Muslims would be personally obligated to attempt to do so, the law still requires that

Taymiyya defined the city as a third category between the abode of Islam and the abode of war. He held that Muslims’ bodies and property are inviolable so long as they preserve their Islam, but the land is no longer an abode of Islam. Hence, he instructed people who could not practice Islam to emigrate.

93 Abū Maryam al-Kuwaitī, al-Radd ‘alā shubuhāt Abī Mārīya, 44. See abubaseer.bizland.com/verdicts/read/901-925.doc question number 901, where sheikh al-Ṭarṭūṣī was asked about people who claim that jihad to repel the apostate in Iraq is no longer a duty.

94 Abū Maryam al-Kuwaitī, al-Radd ‘alā shubuhāt Abī Mārīya, 107. A similar claim is made by Muḥammad Salāmī, another Neo-Takfiri writer, in his article “Al-Taṣawwur qabl al-ḥaraka” in which he states that the goal of “inner jihad” against the apostate is to cleanse the Islamic camp, a prerequisite for the establishment of the caliphate. http://www.twhed.com/news-5.html.
Muslims fulfill the personal duty of jihad in their own country before doing so abroad. Hence, it is clear that for Neo-Takfiris the duty of jihad today entails first and foremost fighting against apostates, not infidels. Clearly, al-Zarqawi’s choice to move to Iraq and not to stay and fight in Jordan is not consistent with the Neo-Takfiri position expressed here. However, as Wagemakers suggests, al-Zarqawi’s choice derived from the crackdown on radicals in Jordan, which could lead to his immediate re-imprisonment. In addition, his decision to fight the Americans in Iraq does not indicate that fighting the far enemy became a top priority for him. Rather, for al-Zarqawi it was a fight against an invader and an occupier.

**The Status of Sinners**

Neo-Takfiris hold that sinners who commit major sins (kabā‘ir), and who die without repenting their sins, are apostates doomed to eternal hellfire. Salafi-jihadis, by contrast, hold that such sinners, unlike apostates, may be saved from Hell at God’s will after a certain period of time.

**Conclusion**

What started as a tension within the Salafi-jihadi camp in the mid-1990s turned into an open rift a decade later, giving rise to a new ideological trend, Neo-Takfirism, which mirrors some of the views expressed by the Takfiris between the 1950s and the 1970s. The information available indicates that Neo-Takfirism has gained some currency in a growing number of Islamic countries in the past two decades, though it is unclear how many people follow this creed or whether they form actual communities. It is possible that the Neo-Takfiri views expressed in the texts cited in this study reflect the views of scattered individuals or small groups rather than consolidated communities. On the other hand, as Neo-Takfirism spreads worldwide, we may see the evolution of Neo-Takfiri communities.

At the core of the debate between Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris lie differing conceptions about what it means to lead a pure Islamic life in a morally corrupt environment, and, thus, about how to achieve salvation. Neo-Takfiris hold that only total rejection of society and uncompromising adherence to the Salafi

95 Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi*, 216.
96 http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=4781&x=jzoyrjz8. A similar belief was held by the extremist 7th century Khawārij.
creed guarantee one’s salvation. Accordingly, they create and promote enclaves dominated by what they view as pure Islam, and keep their distance from the surrounding Muslim society, which they view as apostate society. By contrast, Salafi-jihadis hold that salvation is possible within the world as it exists today. Accordingly, they disassociate only from people or entities whose apostasy is unquestionable, while permitting cautious interaction with those whose conduct may be unacceptable but does not amount to apostasy. The differing ideologies have significant real-world consequences.

In addition to disparate views about achieving salvation, Neo-Takfiris and Salafi-jihadis also disagree about what it means to be a true believer. According to Neo-Takfiris, in order to be a believing Muslim one must not only shun apostatizing actions but also avoid grave sins (kabā’ir), even if they do not rise to the level of apostasy. For them, a true Muslim must not resemble infidels in any way, must reject the apostate regime’s authority (even in administrative matters that do not contradict the divine law, according to some Neo-Takfiris), and must sever his ties with any person or entity associated with an apostate ruler. By contrast, Salafi-jihadis consider a person who renounces apostasy and who eschews behaviors that are clearly apostatizing as a true Muslim, even if that person accepts the administrative authority of an apostate ruler and imitates infidels in his daily appearance and mundane conduct.

From a practical perspective, the difference between the two groups is significant. Neo-Takfiris are doctrinaires who regard themselves as being under an obligation to pursue their vision of a pure religious life at all costs. They do not adapt their religious ideals to the political and social reality in which they live. Salafi-jihadis are more pragmatic in their approach. They accept their “impure Islamic surrounding” as a reality with which they must cope, and they interpret their religious creed in ways that enable them to accommodate this reality. If a strict reading of Salafi-jihadi doctrine yields an undesirable social outcome, e.g., defining an entire Muslim society as an apostate society, Salafi-jihadis interpret their laws in a way that avoids such an outcome.98

The ideological disagreement between Salafi-jihadis and Neo-Takfiris has produced a power struggle, with each group attempting to impose its worldview on the general Salafi community. The representatives of both camps claim to

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98 For example, some Salafi-jihadi sheikhs accept visas issued by an apostate government to infidel tourists as an agreement that protects tourists against harm, even though they generally accept only an agreement issued by a righteous imam. This is because they understand that at the present time a visa is accepted internationally as a form of agreement and that the tourists traveling with a visa expect to be protected while visiting the country that issued it.
possess authority to conclusively interpret religious law, but each camp has
developed a significantly different notion of that authority. Both camps view
authority as deriving from religious activism (either waging jihad or confronting
the infidels/apostates). However, whereas Salafi-jihadis tie this activism to the
acquisition of the relevant religious knowledge, Neo-Takfiris tie this activism to
uncompromising confrontation with apostates regardless of the circumstances.
For Neo-Takfiris, resolute confrontation is a central if not the ultimate aspect
of piety and as such a source of religious authority.
Interestingly, the disagreement over religious authority between Neo-Takfiris
and Salafi-jihadis mirrors the disagreement between Salafi-jihadis and non-
militant Salafis (salafiyya ʻIlmiyya) in the early 1990s in Saudi Arabia. Ironically,
in the early 1990s – when Salafi-jihadis felt inferior in learning to non-militant
Salafis – they claimed that religious authority is rooted in religious piety.99
Today, however, seizing upon the perception that their knowledge of Islamic
law is far superior to that of al-Zarqawi and his followers, Salafi-jihadis claim
that religious authority is anchored in learning and is not limited to piety.

Epilogue

With the death of al-Zarqawi in 2006 the Neo-Takfiris lost their charismatic
leader. Since then texts posted on websites and questions addressed to Salafi-
jihadi sheikhs demonstrate that Neo-Takfiris are active in Jordan, Turkey, Iraq,
Chechnya, Gaza and other places. Although Neo-Takfirism continues to thrive,
a new leader has not yet emerged. Nonetheless, it appears that Jabhat al-Nuṣra,
the al-Qaeda affiliated jihad group in Syria commanded by Abū Muḥammad
al-Jūlānī and the newly announced entity “The Islamic State in Iraq and the
Levant (al-Shām),” commanded by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī (an organization that
is part of al-Qaeda Iraq), may be serving as a center of gravity for Neo-Takfiris.
After visiting Syria’s battlefields and meeting with Jihadis, Sheikh al-Ṭarṭūsī
harshly criticized members of Jabhat al-Nuṣra, accusing them of Neo-Takfiri
tendencies: “[They] entered Syria not in order to assist [the Syrians] ... or to
defend the oppressed among the Syrian people ... but to proclaim takfīr on
Muslims, to classify them [saying] ‘you are an apostate and you are not an apos-
tate’ and to spread chaos and the culture of extremism (ghulūw) among people.”

in Religious Knowledge, Authority and Charisma: Islamic and Jewish Perspectives, ed. Daphna Ephrat and Meir Hatina (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2014), 157-70.
Al-Ṭarṭūsî also accuses Jahbat al-Nuṣra of refusing to recognize Sunni Syrians as Muslims despite the fact that:

[they] proclaimed takfir against the buried one [Bashshār al-Asad’s father] and his son and despite the fact that they cursed the spirit of the buried one, destroyed his idols and statues ... and fought the tyrant rule. In the eye of these extremists (ghulāt), all of this does not constitute proclamation of takfir against the tyrant [an act which is required of a person to be considered a Muslim] ... Those extremists (ghulāt) are from among the preachers of chaos and extremism (ghulūw) ...

Al-Ṭarṭūsî’s criticism echoes the reproach, mentioned above, that he and al-Maqdisi expressed towards Neo-Takfiris elsewhere.

The fact that many members of Jabhat al-Nuṣra and The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant are former members of al-Zarqawi’s forces101 reinforces the possibility that at least some members of those groups adhere to Neo-Takfirism. As more information about these groups emerges, it will become possible to determine whether Jabhat al-Nuṣra and/or The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant have become a hub for Neo-Takfiris. As these and other groups evolve, a new Neo-Takfiri leader will likely emerge.102

100 http://www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/492737914101569.
102 Recent research suggests that it is the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant that is now carrying the Takfiri flag while Jabhat al-Nuṣra attempts to moderate its views and come closer to Salafi jihadism. See relevant articles on http://www.jihadica.com.