

# Ibn Taymiyyah: Salafism and Jihadism

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

## Introduction to Ibn Taymiyyah

Some Islamic scholars have demonstrated a predilection to dismissing Ibn Taymiyyah as insane, mentally unstable, or incompetent<sup>1</sup>. This tendency, although understandable, is an immature way to discredit his ideas, which ought to be countered not through calumniating his character but through careful and measured theological study and argument. Theology, not slander, is our greatest instrument as researchers of Islam and the best way to delegitimize theological views that have inspired violent actors such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS) to commit atrocities in the name of Islam.

An examination of Ibn Taymiyyah's theology is salutary to understanding the ideological roots of various iterations of ultraconservative Islamic thought, including Wahabism, Salafism, and Jihadism. An influential logician, jurist, and philosopher active in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Taymiyyah's theology is perhaps the most essential to understand if one is to develop a detailed ideological picture of ultraconservative Islamic modes of philosophical and theological apprehension. Understanding these lines of thinking clarifies the theological approach of extremist groups such as AQ and IS, and sheds light on the theological roots of the interpretation of various Islamist doctrine that characterize these textual interpretations, including but not limited to his controversial views on takfir and the veneration of saints.

## Background

A member of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, Ibn Taymiyyah was thoroughly iconoclastic in his thinking, and a controversial figure both during his time and today. Particularly controversial and influential is his fatwa on permitting jihad against other Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, there is no critical edition of Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas, although *Kitab al-Jihad* contains some of his more controversial fatwas<sup>3</sup>. This view has continuously inspired groups such as IS and AQ and has been referenced by other ideological affiliates as an influential interpretation<sup>4</sup>. This essay will focus on the theological views of Ibn Taymiyyah that have been most influential to AQ and IS in order to illuminate the theological backdrop to these extremist movements. It will specifically trace Taymiyyah's view on the sources of the Sharia, his rejection of consensus of jurists (ijma), his appraisal of the consensus of companions, or *sahaba*, and his view on *qiyas*, or analogy and its relation to exegesis. Following this theological summary, this essay will then relate these theological views to contemporary manifestations of ultraconservative Islamic thought and practice.

<sup>1</sup> Little, Donald P. "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica*, no. 41 (1975): 93-111. Accessed October 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/1595400.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad* (Birmingham, England: Maktabah al-Ansaar Publications, 2001), 8.

<sup>3</sup> 27 *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Ahmad ibn Taymīyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī (Riyadh/Mecca, 1381–86/1961–67, repr. 1417/1995). Old edition, also not critical: *Ibn Taymīyah, Kitāb Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (Cairo, 1326–29/1908–11). In this edition, the anti-Mongol fatwas are located in vol. 4, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, 289–302.

<sup>4</sup> As Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated, 'O Muslims, the apostate tyrannical rulers who rule your lands in the lands of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina), Yemen, Shām (the Levant), Iraq, Egypt, North Africa, Khorasan, the Caucasus, the Indian Subcontinent, Africa, and elsewhere, are the allies of the Jews and Crusaders. Rather, they are their slaves, servants, and guard dogs, and nothing else'. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 'March Forth whether Light or Heavy' (Audio Message, 14 May 2015).

## *Ibn Taymiyyah on the Sources of Shari'a*

Like all Islamic jurists, Taymiyyah avowed a hierarchy of sources for the Sharia. Most eminent was the Quran. Taymiyyah held the view that the Sunnah or any other source could not abrogate a verse of the Qur'an. For him, an abrogation of a verse, or Arabic *Naskh*, was only permissible by means of another verse in the Quran. Secondary to the Quran, Taymiyyah held, was the Sunnah which other sources besides the Quran should not contrast in matters of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence. Critical to Taymiyyah's interpretation of the source of the Shari'a is a rejection of the speculative and the unverifiable<sup>5</sup>. Leaning heavily on the views of the companions of the Prophet, Taymiyyah emphatically rejected all *ijma* of any Muslims besides the companions, marking another example of his inveterate literalism and unfettered adherence to an interpretation of Islam deeply rooted in its early history and eminently literal in its adherence to the text. For Taymiyyah, any consensus other than the immediate companions of the Prophet was not a legitimate source of Islamic law or jurisprudence.

Ibn Taymiyyah's view on Analogy, or *qiyas* also merits consideration in an assessment of his hierarchical organization of Shari'a sources. He considered *qiyas* to be valid, although this validity hinged on whether or not the interpretation was literal or speculative. To be concise, any straying from literal interpretation was anathema to Taymiyyah. He rejected anything resembling speculation, conjecture, guessing et cetera which partly accounts for his appeal to literally minded exegetes and those who seek to interpret without laborious consideration of historical and textual nuance. This literal style of interpretation accounts for how AQ writers such as Ayman al-Zawahiri and IS writers such as Yahya al-Bahrumi are able to take Quranic verses such as 9:5<sup>6</sup>, ignore the fact that most jurists consider Quran 9:6<sup>7</sup> to abrogate 9:5, and interpret the seemingly violent injunction *prima facie* rather than undertaking the proper exegesis and appreciating the historical and textual context. This sort of blithe, willful ignorance to historical and textual context primarily accounts for how these violent actors are able to commit atrocities in the name of Islam.

## *Ibn Taymiyyah's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought*

With a basic examination of his theology formulated, it is cogent and relevant to the aim of this paper to relate these core theological views to contemporary iterations of ultraconservative Islamic thinking and practice. Ibn Taymiyyah is regarded by some thinkers in Islamic studies to be the principal inspiration behind the emergence of Salafism. He emphasized understanding and interpreting Islam as it was understood and practiced by the *Salaf*, or the first three generations of Muslims.

Some conceptual underpinnings to contemporary Islamism, or political Islam, have drawn inspiration from Ibn Taymiyyah. Scholars such as Yahya Michot have claimed that Taymiyyah serves as the primary ideological forefather to Al-Qaeda (AQ). Contributing to this phenomenon was his balkanizing the world into different notional territories including *dar al-Islam*, or the abode of Islam where the Sharia law is practiced and Islam is the dominant belief system and *dar-al-kufr*, or the abode

5 Al-Matroudi, Abdul-Hakim (2015-02-14). "Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad". Oxford University Press. Archived from the original on August 13, 2018/

6 "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, an seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem."

7 If one amongst the Pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of Allah; and then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge. ... As long as these stand true to you, stand ye true to them: for Allah doth love the righteous.



of disbelief, where unbelief in Islamic doctrine reigns supreme. Finally, Ibn Taymiyyah asserted that there was a *dar al-harb*, or abode of war, which described the territory characterized by conflict and schism between believers and unbelievers. Another critical concept adopted by some interpreters of Ibn Taymiyyah's theological worldview is the permissibility of designating another Muslim as an apostate, or *takfir*, who does not abide by the appropriate interpretation of Islam. This interpretation has exerted tremendous influence over groups such as AQ and IS, who murder their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters without compunction. Further, Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized in his work "the duty to oppose and kill Muslim rulers who do not implement the Sharia." This theological view has shaped the tendency of jihadists to condemn the so-called "apostate regimes" in the Muslim world who do not implement what they view to be the proper ultraconservative interpretation of Islam as the governing law.

### *Conclusion*

If we are to discredit the views of AQ and IS and the writings of men like Ayman al-Zawahiri, understanding Ibn Taymiyyah may well be the most important theological element of this rejection of extremist narratives and interpretations. The eminence of Taymiyyah can well be apprehended by appreciating the designation of him with the honorific title "Sheikh al-Islam.", a title given to him for his contributions to Islamic scholarship. I intend this short study to serve as a provisional background to Ibn Taymiyyah that will hopefully inspire scholars better versed in the theological debates and literature to explore his thought and influence more deeply. Islamic State theologians such as Turki Bin Ali were able to capture the hearts and minds of Muslims through persuasive and enthralling speeches and sermons. It is our duty to counter these dangerous messages with well-versed and careful theological understanding rooted in Islamic jurisprudence and aimed at providing the *umma* with a historically and textually valid interpretation that also begets peace, tolerance, and harmony in the Muslim world. This task falls above all upon moderate Muslims and tolerance minded reformists within the *umma*.

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