

Terrorists, Not Kharijites

by [Saud Al-Sharafat \(/experts/saud-al-sharafat\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Saud Al-Sharafat \(/experts/saud-al-sharafat\)](#)

Dr. Saud Al-Sharafat is a former Brig. Gen in the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate, as well as founder and chairman of the Shorufat Center for the Study of Globalization and Terrorism. His writings mainly focus on issues pertinent to globalization and international terrorism.



Brief Analysis

January 5, 2018

The use of the term “Kharijite,” an Islamic sect that is well-known in Islamic history and heritage, has accompanied the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to the point where the term “Kharijite” is used today to directly refer to the organization.

Just as history repeats itself, it appears that history is recycling and reproducing the concept of “Kharijite,” or the Kharijite sect, according to what has been inherited from Islamic religious heritage. From a list that I recently compiled of more than 100 Islamic heritage terms that have entered the lexicon of English and other languages in research studies, news reports and forums on the Internet, social networks, and scientific research websites, and especially on Google, I found the use of the term “Kharijite” in Arabic repeating itself to refer to what is known in terrorism literature as “Islamic terrorism,” and specifically terrorism by the Islamic State.

\ Politicization of religion and forms of religiosity is a phenomenon inherent to political development throughout the world and is not related to a specific religion or political organization. It has assumed various forms throughout history, from accusations of heresy, unbelief, and atheism. The objective has often been to preserve a pure identity, or to create a different identity and demonize the other to facilitate their isolation, and then pounce on and eliminate them.

In Islamic heritage, the Kharijite sect has received a great deal of attention due to the danger it posed to nascent political institutions, whether to the caliph Ali ibn Abi Taleb or to the caliph Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. Its threat persisted through the Umayyad Caliphate. It was at this time that a major shift occurred in the way that the term “Kharijite” was religiously exploited for political objectives to take away any legitimacy or justification from the Kharijites in demanding social or political reform. The religious institution controlled by the Caliphate provided the epistemological and ontological basis to shatter the Kharijite ideology and instill a deeply-rooted notion that Kharijism only refers to rebellion or schism, whether ideologically, spatially, or over time, in the sense of completely expelling the Kharijites from the sphere of an Islamic state. The political and military institutions took on the responsibility of carrying out this task, which explains the fame of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf and al-Muhallab ibn Abi Sufra and, in turn, the fame of Kharijite leaders, such as, Qatari ibn al-Fuja'a.

The term “Kharijite” came back into use as a reference to the Islamic State in 2014, when the Islamic State captured Mosul and declared the establishment of a Caliphate. Jordanian King Abdullah II was one of the Muslim leaders who made the most frequent use of the term in English, employing it in all of his speeches on the Islamic State, in which he spoke of the necessity of combatting and eliminating it after Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh was burned alive in 2015. Prior to King Abdullah’s use of the term, two prominent scholars on Salafi Jihadism, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Abu Qatada al-Filistini themselves stated that the Islamic State is the modern day Kharijites.

This was then followed by fatwas issued by the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and al-Azhar University in Egypt. Naturally, a huge number of the Islamic fatwas and the studies and reactions published on the Internet, forums, and social networks, whether in support of or against the Islamic State, have affirmed that, regardless of its barbarity, the Islamic State has nothing to do with the Kharijites and is instead merely a manifestation of Sunni Islam.

However, the question then arises: What is the point of this widespread, superficial use of a term that, to this day, has led to nothing? It will not help to combat religious extremism and terrorism.

What we need is a different approach that does not limit itself to a desperate attempt to recycle historical terms, and that does not limit itself to military or legal solutions, because such solutions have failed. We need a holistic approach that considers all of the factors that engender religious extremism and political violence in general, and that addresses those factors according to the relative importance of each one.

Furthermore, it is possible for this approach to be based on several different elements, including combatting the ideology in question by consolidating a parallel, alternative approach rather than one that confronts, opposes, or competes with it. It must be a serious approach that is based on building a broad, compelling, and feasible system of interests, relationships, and economic, social, and cultural programs that reflect peoples’ interests and encourage them to defend and protect those interests instead of wasting their energy on ineffective, zero-sum games.

The contemporary religious and political use of the term “Kharijite” is loaded with different perspectives and approaches to authority across the Arab and Muslim world. The term has failed to offer any qualitative contribution to critiquing the discourse of religious extremism and terrorism, nor has it contributed in any way to the efforts to combat terrorism in general. To the contrary, it has further complicated things, recycled obsolete rhetoric, and fueled differences and disputes among Muslims. Rather, we must focus on emphatically condemning acts of killing, destruction, and barbarity by calling them “terrorism,” just like we must emphatically condemn the perpetrators of these acts by calling them “terrorists.” No other language is needed. ❖

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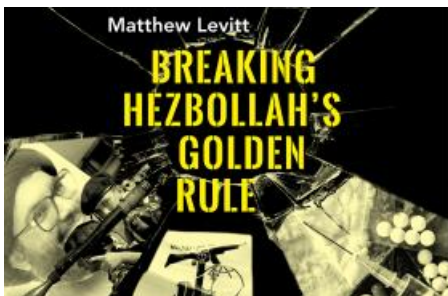
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