

## Constructing Takfir: From `Abdullah `Azzam to Djamel Zitouni

By Shane Drennan

ON APRIL 2, 2008, jihadist websites posted an “open interview” with Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri wherein the al-Qa`ida leader fielded a number of often hostile questions. The first, and arguably the most important, concerned al-Qa`ida’s invocation of *takfir* (excommunicating or declaring a Muslim an apostate, which is punishable by death):

Excuse me, Mr. Zawahiri, but who is it who is killing with Your Excellency’s blessing the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria? Do you consider the killing of women and children to be Jihad?...Why have you—to this day—not carried out any strike in Israel? Or is it easier to kill Muslims in the markets?<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the correlation between religious training and the construction of the definition of *takfir* for leaders of Salafi-jihadi movements.<sup>2</sup> This is established using four cases of contemporary Salafi-jihadi leaders: `Abdullah `Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and Djamel Zitouni. For each case, the individual’s level and type of religious training and his most recent definition of *takfir* are outlined and analyzed.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the evidence suggests that the less religiosity a jihadist leader has gained via formal training, personal piety, and/or the duration of his adherence to Salafist Islam, the more likely he is to

1 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Open Meeting with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri,” al-Sahab, April 2, 2008.

2 This article does not analyze the practical application of *takfir* by these individuals or their lieutenants. In practice, *takfir* often varies from the definition created by the leader of an organization.

3 The most recent definition was chosen because such concepts are epistemologically constructed, resulting in definitional variations throughout one’s lifetime. For example, Kant discusses the construction of concepts through experience and the reconstruction of those concepts once they are applied outside of the previous limits of experience. For a full explanation of the construction of language and definitions, see Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

accept *takfir* as necessary and the broader he is able to construct his definition of *takfir*.

### Dr. `Abdullah `Azzam

`Abdullah `Azzam is considered to be the godfather of the Afghan jihad. His writings calling for the unification of the umma through defensive jihad, and his *Maktab al-Khidmat* (Services Bureau), created the organizational archetype for the current manifestation of the global Salafi-jihad and al-Qa`ida specifically. Although `Azzam’s Salafi-jihadi ideology was considered radical by most academics, his eschatological grounding made him relatively moderate compared to many of the jihadists<sup>4</sup> who answered his invitation to Afghanistan,<sup>5</sup> especially regarding *takfir*.

### Religious Training

`Azzam enveloped himself in Islam and Shari`a throughout his entire life. Even as a child he was considered “serious” and “pious.”<sup>6</sup> His higher education focus was Shari`a, earning a bachelor’s<sup>7</sup> and a master’s degree<sup>8</sup> in Shari`a from Shari`a College at Damascus University, and a Ph.D. in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) from the renowned al-Azhar University in Cairo.<sup>9</sup> His level of scholarly authority is rare among Salafi-jihadis, especially those directly engaged in physical warfare.<sup>10</sup>

`Azzam continued to self-reinforce his radical Salafist views as a lecturer. He taught at the University of Jordan in Amman and lectured at Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia where

4 See, for example, `Abdullah `Azzam, *Fi Dhilal Surat at-Tawbah* (place, publisher and date unknown). Also see Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 130.

5 For further commentary on how misunderstandings of Islam lead to extremist views, see Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).

6 `Abdullah `Azzam, *Defence of Muslim Lands* (place, publisher and date unknown).

7 Andrew McGregor, “Jihad and the Rifle Alone: ‘Abdullah `Azzam and the Islamist Revolution,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 23:2 (2003): pp. 92-113.

8 `Azzam, *Defence of Muslim Lands*.

9 McGregor, “Jihad and the Rifle Alone: ‘Abdullah `Azzam and the Islamist Revolution,” pp. 92-113.

10 While a number of Salafist scholars with credentials similar to `Azzam advocate jihad, none have physically taken up arms themselves.

he eschewed a radical interpretation of Islam and jihad.<sup>11</sup> While in the training camps of Afghanistan, `Azzam interacted with jihadist leaders from around the globe as he continued espousing his messages of defense and resistance. It was in this context that he produced his two most famous works on jihad: *Defence of Muslim Lands* and *Join the Caravan*.

### Definition of Takfir

`Azzam did not excommunicate Muslims. For him, defending Muslim lands from invasion by *kuffar* (infidels or nonbelievers) and uniting the umma was paramount, and *takfir* only served to create *fitna* (division). His opinion of *takfiri* jihadists suggests that a deficiency in formal training in Shari`a may result in expansive violence through incorrect or incomplete understandings of Islam: “They, because of their lack of knowledge, are simply youth with much zeal, and the hearts of these youth were made to follow their desires.”<sup>12</sup> `Azzam’s Islamic training even trumped political pressures of infighting among the mujahidin in Afghanistan,<sup>13</sup> essentially deriving an order of combat precedence from the scriptures placing jihad against occupiers over reforming those led astray from Islam.<sup>14</sup>

### Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri

Ayman al-Zawahiri, commonly referred to as al-Qa`ida’s second-in-command, is one of the most influential leaders of the current Salafi-jihadi movement. He has issued numerous communiqués concerning every front of the global Salafi-jihad and has campaigned to unify Salafi-jihadi movements worldwide under the banner of al-Qa`ida.<sup>15</sup> Recently, al-Zawahiri’s authority has come under attack for al-Qa`ida’s

11 Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 50, p. 55.

12 `Azzam, *Fi Dhilal Surat at-Tawbah*.

13 Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 131-137.

14 See `Azzam’s response to the question “Do we fight alongside Muslims that are below acceptable levels of Islamic education?” in `Azzam, *Defence of Muslim Lands*.

15 For example, in 2004 al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership was successful in incorporating the part of the militant Saudi Salafist movement and al-Zarqawi’s Jama`at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad under the al-Qa`ida name. Recently, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has also changed their name in a formal allegiance to al-Qa`ida.

expansive invocation of *takfir*.<sup>16</sup>

### Religious Training

Having no collegiate level religious training, al-Zawahiri's understanding of Islam is derived mostly from the religiosity of his upbringing (much of which was self-induced) and the ideas propagated within Islamist and jihadist organizations in which he has been involved. Al-Zawahiri was raised in a strict Muslim family in Egypt where he attended all of the daily prayers at the local mosque. His adolescence was devoted to Islamic self-studies, especially concerning *fiqh* and Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>17</sup> Throughout his education, he was not openly involved in Islamist organizations; however, al-Zawahiri confessed to being a founder and active member of a militant Islamist cell with a violent *takfiri* bent as a teen<sup>18</sup> and maintained a covert affiliation with similar groups thereafter.

Several Islamists and jihadists informed al-Zawahiri's interpretation of Islam and Shari'a. Al-Zawahiri became interested in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb as an adolescent and attributes much of his ideological development to Qutb's writings.<sup>19</sup> Typical of Salafi-jihadis, al-Zawahiri also often references Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir to give his writings a sense of timeless jurisprudence.<sup>20</sup> Since 1986, al-Zawahiri has been undoubtedly influenced by other radical Salafi-jihadi ideologues (mostly within al-Qa'ida's ranks) beginning with Sayyid Imam (Dr. Fadl) and Dr. Ahmed el-Wed.<sup>21</sup> His knowledge of historic Islamic rulings suggests that al-Zawahiri has a good comprehension of

*fiqh* through personal studies, although his neo-scripturalist hermeneutic approach has likely been prejudiced by his combat surroundings.

### Definition of Takfir

Al-Zawahiri embraces *takfir*, but maintains a relatively selective definition of it. He views the governments ruling over Muslim lands to be illegitimate and apostate, to include civilian government employees, security forces<sup>22</sup> and any persons collaborating or engaging with those entities.<sup>23</sup> This is likely derived from his personal historical hatred for and experiences with the Egyptian regime rather than an objective analysis of the situation through the guidelines of *fiqh*. He also declared that an organization, Islamist or not, which participates in the political process is a transgressor,<sup>24</sup> again derived from personal differences with the Muslim Brotherhood rather than an educated hermeneutic ruling. Al-Zawahiri accepts a great deal of collateral damage in the form of "innocents," stating, "we don't kill innocents: in fact, we fight those who kill innocents...it may be the case that during [targeting enemies], an innocent might fall unintentionally or unavoidably."<sup>25</sup> Lastly, he considers all Shi'a apostate and pejoratively describes Shi'a Islam as "a religious school based on excess and falsehood" that has cooperated with the enemies of Islam throughout history.<sup>26</sup> Although al-Zawahiri does consider a great number of Muslims apostate, he is nevertheless selective in his definition of *takfir* compared to many jihadist leaders less familiar (although for al-Zawahiri familiarity was gained informally) with the nuances of Islam, Shari'a and *fiqh*.

### Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi

Although Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi was killed by U.S. forces in 2006, he remains one of the most popular jihadist figures in contemporary history. During his few years in Iraq, he amassed a force capable of controlling cities,<sup>27</sup> engineered a sectarian clash that threatened a full-scale civil war<sup>28</sup> and waged murder and intimidation campaigns that continue today. He is hated by most Iraqis and is celebrated as a hero by much of the Salafi-jihadi community.<sup>29</sup> Yet, for his fame, al-Zarqawi had one of the most latitudinal and controversial definitions of *takfir*.

### Religious Training

For the first 21 years of his life, al-Zarqawi was nearly antithetical to his later jihadist self. Raised in the anti-Amman milieu of Zarqa,<sup>30</sup> he was described as a tattooed delinquent who drank heavily, experimented with drugs and was involved in criminal activity. Al-Zarqawi had no religious training until he was 22 when he was ordered to a local mosque known for radicalism and its relationship to the Afghan jihad.<sup>31</sup> There, al-Zarqawi's trajectory swung 180 degrees and he became entrenched in Salafism.<sup>32</sup>

Before setting out for Afghanistan in 1989, al-Zarqawi received a few

16 For example, see al-Zawahiri, "The Open Meeting with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri."

17 Montasser al-Zayyat, *The Road to al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Laden's Right-Hand Man* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 15-18.

18 Ibid., pp. 42-46.

19 See the section on Sayyid Qutb in *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, in Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri* (Old Tappan, NJ: TLG Publications, 2006), pp. 47-53.

20 William McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), p. 13, pp. 261-274.

21 Conversations with these two individuals were likely the catalyst behind the expansion of al-Zawahiri's definition of *takfir*. See Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 122-126.

22 For example, see al-Zawahiri's discussion of the Iraqi and Pakistani governments and security forces in Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri*, pp. 324-336.

23 U.S.A. v. *Usama bin Laden et al.*, Southern District of New York, 2001.

24 See al-Zawahiri's numerous references to the Muslim Brotherhood throughout *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, in Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri*.

25 This was al-Zawahiri's answer to the question quoted in the introduction of this essay. See al-Zawahiri, "The Open Meeting with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri."

26 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi," July 9, 2005.

27 Tom Ricks, "Situation Called Dire in West Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2006.

28 Michael Howard, "Iraq Slips Towards Civil War After Attack on Shia Shrine," *Guardian*, September 11, 2006.

29 This is evidenced by the continued elation of his "heroism" in jihadist forums, including a video game showing his face beside Bin Laden's. See, for example, "Web Video Game Aim: 'Kill' Bush Characters," CNN, September 18, 2006. He was also recently featured in a series of jihadist cell phone videos released by al-Qa'ida media outlets. See "Al-Qaeda Offers Cellphone Video Downloads," *USA Today*, January 5, 2008.

30 Jean-Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005), pp. 6-9.

31 Brisard and Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*, pp. 11-14.

32 This type of radicalization, swinging from one extreme to the other, is not uncommon. It is similar to the effect of those having "found themselves" in a new religion. For example, see Bernhard's description of converts in Brendan Bernhard, *White Muslim: From L.A. to New York...to Jihad?* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2006). For a broad review concerning the tendency of converts toward radicalism, see Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 1988).

months of religious indoctrination at al-Husayn Ben `Ali Mosque.<sup>33</sup> In Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi, like most other “Afghan Arabs,” was taught and further radicalized by a number of Islamist scholars and ideologues including `Abdullah `Azzam, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>34</sup> He devoted his spare time to self studies of Salafi-jihadi sermons and the Qur’an. In Jordan, after returning from Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi continued his regimented self-studies (especially in prison<sup>35</sup>) and strengthened his relationship with al-Maqdisi.<sup>36</sup> During his second trip in Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi was largely concerned with international operations and his training camp, an explosives and firearms training center, leaving little time for religious studies. In Iraq, al-Zarqawi was affiliated with local Salafi-jihadi religious leaders in addition to his continued contact with al-Maqdisi and al-Zawahiri,<sup>37</sup> although his operational focus and tempo likely occupied most of his time. This self-taught understanding of Islam and jihad left al-Zarqawi to construct his own interpretation of Salafism and *takfir* within his combat environment.

#### Definition of Takfir

The breadth of al-Zarqawi’s definition of *takfir* left few in his graces, likely because his Islamic “education” was wholly gained from *takfiri* ideologues and self-studies in combat settings. Sunni politicians were excommunicated, as were Sunni police and military, which he considered “the eyes, ears and hands of the occupier.”<sup>38</sup> Those collaborating with the government security apparatuses

and especially those working with U.S. forces were deemed traitors. In towns controlled by al-Zarqawi’s forces in Iraq, anyone violating his organization’s interpretation of Shari`a was excommunicated for their transgressions.<sup>39</sup> Lastly, al-Zarqawi considered all Shi`a apostates.<sup>40</sup>

#### Djamel Zitouni

In the 1990s, Algeria witnessed an extremely bloody civil war. The heart of the struggle was the Islamist opposition to the repressive incumbent government. Djamel Zitouni led the Salafi-jihadi front (the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA) against the government from 1994 to 1996, continually increasing the target set of apostates until the time of his death. His brand of *takfir* was one of the most inclusive definitions to date and led to some of the grossest massacres of civilians in recent jihadist history.

#### Religious Training

Little is known of Zitouni’s religious scholarship, suggesting that his Islamic education was unimpressive and therefore omitted from his media constructed persona. The son of a chicken farmer, Zitouni likely received only rudimentary formal religious training.<sup>41</sup> Omar Sheikhi, a self-proclaimed GIA *amir*, described Zitouni’s Islamic background as being “average.”<sup>42</sup> He was undoubtedly inculcated with militant Islamist ideas during his short tenure in prison for his involvement with the

Islamic Salvation Front (FIS),<sup>43</sup> and further indoctrinated into the world of militant Islamism by Mustafa Bouyali, the leader of the Algerian Armed Islamic Movement.<sup>44</sup> Zitouni’s religious training and expertise was informed largely by the Afghan Arabs<sup>45</sup> and he was further radicalized by the paranoid exclusivity characteristic of the GIA’s worldview. His reliance on the guidance of others with combat experience rather than institutional Shari`a education likely allowed Zitouni to use Islam as an ex post facto justification for operations rather than an organizational determinant.

#### Definition of Takfir

Learned wholly in the context of an armed struggle, Zitouni likely molded his religion to fit his goals rather than his learned religion determining his means; this allowed him to unapologetically kill thousands of Algerian Muslim civilians.<sup>46</sup> Zitouni’s concept of *takfir* eventually placed the whole of Algerian society in one of two categories: GIA or apostate. Initially, government leaders, members of the intelligentsia, government security forces, and collaborators were determined “apostate.” Additionally, anyone even tangentially employed by a state-affiliated institution was an apostate. Zitouni’s organization then declared all other organizations (to include the FIS) illegitimate and apostate. Having “proved” the GIA to be the only legitimate movement, any dissenters (and often those suspected of dissent) were automatically excommunicated and killed. Finally, in light of the successful presidential election in November 1995, Zitouni argued that the whole of Algerian society “had left Islam” and should be considered apostate.<sup>47</sup>

33 Brisard and Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*, pp. 11-14.

34 Ibid., pp. 16-26.

35 Al-Zarqawi was sentenced to 15 years for his leadership role in Bay`at al-Imam, a radical Salafist organization aimed at overthrowing the monarchy in Jordan and establishing a Shari`a-based state.

36 Brisard and Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*, pp. 33-41.

37 Al-Zarqawi was warned and rebuked for his indiscriminate killings by both al-Zawahiri and al-Maqdisi. See al-Zawahiri, “Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi”; and Nibras Kazimi, “A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi,” in Hillel Fradkin et al. eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 2* (2005): pp. 60-63.

38 Nimrod Raphaeli, “The Sheikh of the Slaughterers’: Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qa’ida Connection,” Middle East Media Research Institute, July 1, 2005.

39 Examples of “transgressions” are women in public not wearing a *hijab*, shop owners selling Western music and movies, and individuals selling or making alcohol. This information comes from the author’s interview of Kevin Hutchinson, U.S. Marine Corps Explosives Ordnance Disposal Sergeant, January 2005. Hutchinson was part of the U.S. Marine force that retook Falluja in the fall of 2004. He relayed a detailed account by the Falluja residents of the enforcement of Shari`a there.

40 “Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi: Collateral Killing of Muslims is Legitimate,” Middle East Media Research Institute, June 7, 2005. It is interesting that al-Zarqawi openly declared this in a Shi`a majority country, stating that their “perfidy is engraved in the forehead of history.”

41 The only reported Islamic guidance Zitouni is reported to have received came from readings of Shari`a with an unknown figure named Sherif Kouasmi. See Camille al-Tawil, “Lakhdaria Emir Reveals Secrets and Internal Liquidations of the Mountain, GIA Emir was Accused of Becoming Shiite After Some Elements Received Training in Lebanon - Part III,” *Dar al-Hayat*, June 13, 2007.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 See the “Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) Dossier,” available from the Center for Policing Terrorism at [www.cpt-mi.org](http://www.cpt-mi.org).

45 Evan Kohlmann, “Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria: The GIA, the GSPC and al-Qaida,” The NEFA Foundation, May 2007, pp. 2-3.

46 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

47 International Crisis Group, “Islamism, Violence, and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page,” July 30, 2004, p. 14. This is an exaggerated form of Qutb’s declaration that the Muslim world has returned to *jahlīyya*, the state of societal ignorance prior to the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation of the Qur’an.

### Conclusion

While there are rare instances of formally trained “pen jihadists” advocating *takfir*,<sup>48</sup> these cases suggest two general trends regarding the relationship between religious training and *takfir*. First, a lack of formal religious training will likely lead a Salafi-jihadi leader to accept *takfir* as a valid and necessary doctrinal component. From the cases examined, extensive formal religious training has led to a rejection of *takfir* altogether.<sup>49</sup> Second, the less religious training a jihadist leader has, the greater his proclivity to excommunicate and kill more categories of Muslims. Longevity within the religion and extensive self studies of Shari`a outside of a combat environment has led to a more “moderate” interpretation of *takfir*. Furthermore, individuals radicalized during jihad and having irreligious pasts espouse extremely broad definitions of *takfir*. Comparing al-Zarqawi and Zitouni, al-Zarqawi’s personal interest in Islam and Shari`a prior to his second trip to Afghanistan versus Zitouni’s apparent sole interest in battle seems to have given al-Zarqawi a slightly less encompassing definition of *takfir*.

This correlation between *takfir* and a lack of religious training challenges Salafi-jihadis’ claim to a nuanced and veracious understanding of Islam. Given constant debate over the correct construction and implementation of *takfir*<sup>50</sup> and noting the decline of several

movements due to their proclivity for killing Muslims,<sup>51</sup> *takfir* is evidently an existential determinant for Salafi-jihadi organizations.

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48 `Umar `Abd al-Rahman and Abu Qatada are two *takfiri* “pen jihadists” having formal Islamic credentials. Even as “pen jihadists,” these individuals seem to be exceptions to the rule; to call Islamic Ph.D.s who espouse a *takfiri* ideology a minority would be a gross understatement. Additionally, a comparison between “pen jihadists” and combat leaders is difficult to make. “Pen jihadists” are able to make conjecture absent any experience of physical jihad and irrespective of practical application.

49 Also of note is that `Azzam is the only leader of a Salafi-jihadi organization to have achieved a doctoral level of Islamic training. While there are a few “pen jihadists” who espouse a *takfiri* cant, `Azzam is the only Ph.D. of Islam to have physically led an organization in battle.

50 See Pakistani opinions of targeting the Pakistani military and killing of Pakistani civilians in “Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Pakistan before the February 18th Elections,” Terror Free Tomorrow, January 2008. Also, see responses to questions about attacking civilians by those polled in Muslim countries in Steven Kull et al., “Muslim Public Opinion on U.S. Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda,” WorldPublicOpinion.org, April 24, 2007.

51 For example, the GIA, al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra, and al-Zarqawi’s organization are all victims of their extreme *takfiri* doctrines.