

Deconstructing Ibn Taymiyya's Views on Suicidal Missions

By Rebecca Molloy

JIHADIST IDEOLOGUES REGULARLY advocate the legitimacy of suicide attacks, and some sectors of Muslim society accept the authenticity of this tactic. It is, therefore, critical to examine the more significant primary sources that have been misused by jihadists to formulate and support their arguments.¹ This article sheds light on a lesser known treatise attributed to the Hanbali theologian and scholar Ibn Taymiyya, who is probably the most widely cited medieval scholar by the Salafi-jihadi trend in Islam.² The treatise, entitled *Qa`ida fi al-inghimas fi al-`aduww wa-hal yubab fihā?* (*A Principle Regarding Plunging into the Enemy, and is it Permitted?*) is a short work comprising 48 pages in the original manuscript.³ Despite the brevity of the work, it demonstrates Ibn Taymiyya's perception of *inghimas* (plunging into). Although his understanding of *inghimas* greatly differs from that of today's jihadists, they exploit his writings and the concept of *inghimas* to justify suicide attacks.

The Context of Ibn Taymiyya's Writings

Ibn Taymiyya lived in the wake of the Mongol onslaught that culminated in the fall of Baghdad and the destruction of the `Abbasid caliphate in 1258 AD. The murder of the caliph and his family left the Muslim umma without a central authority. Baghdad and other centers of Islamic civilization were seized and destroyed. Unlike his jihadist followers, Ibn Taymiyya coped with an enemy that was initially pagan, but subsequently

accepted Islam. He witnessed the military strength of veteran Muslims crumble at the hands of the newly converted, and he despaired at the sight of soldiers fleeing from the conventional battlefield.⁴ Despite these difficult conditions, what was most distressing to him was not an elusive victory in battle or the Mongols' legitimacy once in power, but rather the latter's mismanagement of the Muslim community's affairs. Underlying Ibn Taymiyya's confrontations with

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the authorities was “a structural disposition to cooperate with the state, and it is cooperation rather than confrontation that is the keynote of his political thought.”⁵ Moreover, even when he expressed concern with the prevailing political order, Ibn Taymiyya unfailingly accepted the legitimacy of Sunni Muslim society. He consistently argued that the best response to unjust rulers is forbearance.⁶ What is at stake, according to him and other scholars, is lawlessness and “corruption on earth,”⁷ or a complete breakdown of governance and social order if certain forms of dissent go unchecked. This occurs if dissenters reject the legitimacy of the

political order as well as the Sunni Muslim society governed by it. Ibn Taymiyya asserted that even if such people believe that they are commanding good and forbidding evil, when they rebel against authority they are in fact doing more harm than good, and they must be fought and stopped.⁸

Today's jihadists have no such claim to fame; they are not faced with similar historical and geopolitical conditions. They rebel against authority and delegitimize Sunni Muslim society in a manner that in certain regions is contributing to a breakdown of government and social stability (Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan). Jihadists' form of dissent fits Islamic legal definitions of brigands (*muharibun*)⁹ and rebels (*bugha*) who spread terror and destruction. Their terror-based methods and pursuit of indiscriminate slaughter and lawlessness are difficult to distinguish from those of bandits, such as their historical counterparts, the Khawarij.¹⁰

Manipulating Ibn Taymiyya's Definition of Inghimas

Jihadist ideologues have manipulated Ibn Taymiyya's use of the term *inghimas* in an attempt to justify suicide bombing tactics.¹¹ Their interpretation has not been derived in accordance with appropriate Shari`a procedure, and it does not override explicit Qur'anic and legal texts prohibiting suicide.

8 Taymiyya, *Majmu` al-Fatawa*, vol. 4, pp. 440-441, 444, 450-452; *Minhaj al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya* (Riyadh: Ibn Sa`ud University, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 233, 244.

9 In a video in 2000, Abu Mus`ab al-Suri called jihadists to commit larceny, murder and arson against non-Muslims in Muslim countries. For more, see Emrullah Uslu, “Al-Qa`ida Robbers Target Jewelry Stores,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6:25 (2009).

10 During the battle of Siffin (657 AD), some of `Ali b. Abi Talib's supporters (shi`a) rejected arbitration, on the argument that judgment belongs to Allah alone, using the slogan “*la hukma illa lillah*.” These dissenters eventually withdrew from `Ali's supporters and were later known as Khawarij. See, for example, Cook, p. 157: “The activist moralist believes it to be his duty to take a stand against political injustice, and to do so by recourse to arms; thus he ends up fighting against Muslims in the manner of the Kharijites.”

11 Jihadist lexicon does not use the term “suicide attack,” rather one finds phrases such as “carrying out jihad.”

1 For a detailed account on the proliferation of suicide attacks and popularization of martyrdom, see Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

2 See, for example, William McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), pp. 7, 12.

3 This treatise has not been published in the West and is currently available only in Arabic, edited and prepared by Abu Muhammad Ashraf b. `Abd al-Maqsud, *Qa`ida fi al-inghimas fi al-`aduww wa-hal yubab fihā?* (Riyadh: Adwa' al-Salaf, 2002). The only copy of the manuscript (#444) is said to be located at the Egyptian National Library in Cairo.

4 Jihadists extend the conventional meaning of battlefield to include civilian populations, even those protected under Islamic law.

5 Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 150.

6 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu` al-Fatawa* (Madina: Majma` al-Malik Fahd li-Taba`at al-Mushaf al-Sharif, 1995), vol. 35, p. 21 and vol. 4, p. 443; Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhaj al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya* (Riyadh: Ibn Sa`ud University, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 241-242; *Al-Siyasa al-Shar`iyya* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2003), p. 39 in Khalid Medhat Abu al-Fadl, *The Islamic Law of Rebellion: The Rise and Development of the Juristic Discourses on Insurrection and Insurgency and Brigandage* (unpublished doctoral dissertation submitted to the faculty of Princeton University, 1999).

7 Accusations of causing corruption were often used between political rivals in Islamic history. See al-Fadl, p. 60.

In *Qa`ida fi al-inghimas*, Ibn Taymiyya opens the discussion with a number of scenarios that help describe what he means by the term “*inghimas*” and where it would be more appropriate to carry it out. The author introduces the matter of “an individual or group fighting [an enemy] that outnumbers them, on condition there is some benefit to Islam in fighting, even if the (individuals) are likely to be killed.” Next, he introduces three scenarios in which *inghimas* applies:

First Scenario

“Like [in the case of] a man who storms the ranks of the infidels and penetrates them. Scholars call this ‘plunging into the enemy,’ since [the man] is swallowed up in them like a thing that gets submersed in something that engulfs it.”

Second Scenario

“And like a man who kills an infidel officer among his friends, for instance, by pouncing on him publicly, if he [can] get him by deceit, thinking he can kill him and take him unaware like that.”

Third Scenario

“And [like] a man whose comrades have fled and so he is fighting the enemy alone or with a few others, and yet this is inflicting harm on the enemy, despite the fact they know they are likely to be killed.”

The aforementioned scenarios are all “permissible according to most scholars of Islam who belong to the four schools of law and others.”

The legitimacy of being outnumbered in battle in the third scenario is further highlighted on page 45 of the document by comparing the notion to the events of the battle of Badr (624 AD).¹² Ibn Taymiyya says:

And know that a group is permitted to fight those who outnumber them despite their weakness, and there is no difference in this between an individual and the very few; thus one person fighting three is like three people fighting ten.

¹² Badr was a key battle in early Islam and a turning point in Muhammad’s struggle with his Qurayshi opponents in Mecca. It is considered in Islamic history a decisive victory attributable to divine intervention and the genius of Muhammad.

Ibn Taymiyya inextricably ties his notion of *inghimas* with the undesirable situation of confronting a numerically superior army, and the three example scenarios correctly read as cases in which a soldier on the battlefield decides to carry out an attack that will likely result in his death. Such a mission is dangerous and self-destructive, and in this sense may be considered “suicidal.”¹³ The idea of a “suicidal mission” also appears in Ibn Taymiyya’s *Majmu` al-Fatawa* where he mentions the widely-cited Qur’anic story of the Companions of Pit (*ashab al-ukhdud*). He writes:

In the story [of the Companions of the Pit] the young boy is ordered to get himself killed in order to manifest religion’s splendor. For this reason the four imams¹⁴ have permitted a Muslim to plunge into the ranks of the unbelievers, even if he thinks they will kill him, on condition that this [act] is in the interest of Muslims. We have expanded on this matter elsewhere. Thus, if a person does what he believes will get him killed in the interest of the battle (jihad), even though his death is more powerful than his killing of others, and if what he causes the death of another for the benefit of Islam, which would not occur except through this [act of him losing his life], and if it [constitutes what] staves off the enemy’s corrupting damage to religion and earthly possessions which cannot be defended except by this means, then it is *more* appropriate.¹⁵

Clearly, *inghimas* (plunging into) pertains to an extreme situation, as on the battlefield or elsewhere in the course of a conventional war, involving combatants. The description and language in the passages lend themselves to a restricted context to justify missions that in all likelihood result in Muslim casualties. Since suicide is absolutely forbidden in

¹³ This is different from other meanings signified by the word “suicidal”: causing, intending, or relating to suicide.

¹⁴ This refers to the imams of the four Sunni legal schools.

¹⁵ Taymiyya, *Majmu` al-Fatawa*, vol. 28, p. 540. Also see “Martyrs of Nejan” in David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 20.

Islam,¹⁶ there would have to be a clear benefit to the outcome of the war and engagement in jihad, a decisive repulsion of the enemy’s damage to Islam, in order to embark on a mission that would surely end with the individual’s death. Where it is unmistakably beneficial, then, “it is *more* appropriate.” Note Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the comparative in the last passage; it is not absolutely appropriate, merely “*more* appropriate” than, for example, doing nothing. This places several restrictions even before reaching the statement on the relative appropriateness of employing *inghimas*. In addition, Ibn Taymiyya’s repeated use of the phrase “and thus [the soldier] fights until he is killed” connotes an ongoing battle, rather than a single event occurring in a concentration of non-combatants.

Ibn Taymiyya, like other scholars who deal with *inghimas*, is neither implying nor legitimizing “suicide mass-murder” of non-combatant men, women and children. Instead, Ibn Taymiyya offers a limited context within which an almost certainly “suicidal attack” on numerically, or by analogy technologically, superior enemy combatants could be rendered “more appropriate.” There is, without a doubt, a difference, as Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly states that Muslim and non-Muslim non-combatants must not be harmed and collateral damage should be avoided.¹⁷

To justify their tactics, jihadist ideologues have attempted to analogize suicide bombings with *inghimas*. In particular, they have attempted to portray the technological superiority of Western countries as justification for

¹⁶ For example, Qur’an 4:29-30 states, “And do not take your own lives for God has mercy on you. And so he who does this in transgression and violation. We shall burn him in Hellfire. This is an easy feat for God.”

¹⁷ One example of many is Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation of Qur’an 2:190 and his stance on aggression against non-combatants: “aggression means transgressing/ exceeding a limit, and so (the Qur’anic text) indicates that fighting those who do not fight us constitutes aggression, and God confirms this and indicates that excessiveness is prohibited.” See Ibn Taymiyya, *Qa`ida mukhtasara fi qital al-kuffar wa-muhadanaatibim wa-tabrim qatlibim li-mujarrad kufribim* (Riyadh: `Abd al-`Aziz b. `Abd Allah b. Ibrahim al-Zayr al-Hamad, 2004), pp. 91-92. Also see *al-Sarim al-maslul `ala sabbim al-rasul* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1997), vol. 2, p. 513.

suicide-murder. The analogy, however, is invalid. Partial statements by Ibn Taymiyya were isolated, stripped of deliberate restrictions, and elaborated on devoid of syntactic, juridical and historical contexts.¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya was obviously aware of the notion of inequality, and despite that put several restrictions on the applicability of *inghimas*. Jihadist ideologues did not follow proper Shari`a procedure, because if they did they could not have manipulated the language of *inghimas* to suit their case. With false premises, their improper analogy might take the form of the categorical syllogism:

- a. [All] Endangering oneself to harm the enemy is permissible.
- b. Endangering oneself by *inghimas* includes taking one's own life.
- c. Definition of enemy includes Shari`a-protected groups.
- d. Therefore, taking one's own life to harm Shari`a-protected enemy groups is permissible *inghimas*.

This barely qualifies as weak inductive reasoning. For one, as seen above, endangering oneself to inflict harm on the enemy is permissible on condition there is a benefit to the outcome of the

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war and a decisive repulsion of the enemy's damage to Islam. Even the worst wave of suicide bombings has not accomplished that. Second, *inghimas* applies to armies in the heat of battle, of which their Shari`a-protected victims are usually not part. Third, in the more acceptable “suicidal missions,” one dies at the hands of the enemy, not by one's own doing. In this respect, the jihadists' case for their brand of martyrdom

18 In fact, Ibn Taymiyya himself criticized those who use partial statements of Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 AD) thereby ignoring the complexity of his juridical opinion. See *al-Sarim al-masul* (Saudi Arabia: al-Haras al-Watani al-Sa`udi, undated), vol. 2, pp. 483-484.

attacks lacks the legal reason (Ar. *`illa*) identified in the case of *inghimas*.¹⁹ On page 36 of the *inghimas* text, Ibn Taymiyya says:

And God, the Sublime, tries the believers in self-devotion to the point of being killed for the sake of God and the love of His messenger. And so, if they are killed, they are martyrs (*shuhada'*), and if they live, they are happy.²⁰

Indubitably, Ibn Taymiyya sees the possibility of coming out alive from such a mission even when advocating martyrdom in the cause of God. He neither asserts that the lone fighter will be killed, nor argues that the success of the mission depends on the fighter's death. This is crucial, since the possibility of surviving is absent when considering the state of mind of a suicide terrorist, up to and during the act of taking his or her own life.²¹

On page 37, Ibn Taymiyya commentates on the Qur'anic verse 2:54 where he reconstructs ellipses in the Qur'anic text to explain its meaning. He uses the verse to show that it is prohibited to kill sinners among one's own people as it is tantamount to being killed “at one's own hands.” It is best and entails greater reward, explains Ibn Taymiyya, “to die for the sake of God at the hands of the enemy, not at the hands of one another.”

Conclusion

The promotion of suicide-murder as a legitimate case of *inghimas* is an unfortunately successful name-game and an evasive legal device.²² With false legal reasoning and a manifold decontextualization of a historical term, jihadist ideologues have managed to apply the word *inghimas* to a staple tactic

19 On the concept of *`illa*, see Nabil Shehaby, “*`Illa* and Qiyas in Early Islamic Legal Theory,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102:1 (1982): pp. 27-46.

20 Ibn Taymiyya, *Qa`ida fi al-inghimas fi al-`aduww wal-yubab fiha?* (Riyadh: Adwa' al-Salaf, 2002), p. 36. This refers to the Qur'an.

21 Dr. Boaz Ganor, “The Rationality of the Islamic Radical Suicide Attack Phenomenon,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, March 31, 2007.

22 On prohibition of evasive legal devices, see Dr. Ahmad al-Raysuni, *Imam Al-Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005), pp. 56-57.

in their strategy book. They have been spinning Islamic tradition and law to suit their cause. Ibn Taymiyya and other Muslim jurists, however, have expressed their condemnation of those groups pursuing indiscriminate slaughter and lawlessness. Thus, not only have jihadists removed themselves beyond the pale of mainstream Muslim society constituting today's Khawarij, but they have acquired—in pursuing tactics of indiscriminate murder, suicide-murder and banditry—the status of brigands (*mubaribun*), people who disrupt social order, with all the Shari`a consequences of that distinction.²³ Jihadists have blurred the line within Islamic law between expression of bravery and anti-Shari`a, deviant criminal behavior.

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23 Ibn Taymiyya stated his opinion on the legal consequences: “Scholars have disagreed whether or not (the murderer) should be killed by reason of (his) brigandage, but the stronger (argument) is that he should be killed as a punishment for killing because killing for the sake of general corruption is a *badd* crime, similar to the one who steals money having his hand cut off and like withholding their rights.” Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Siyasa al-Shar`iyya* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2003), p. 63.