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in Security Culture,
Terrorismus

Kommentare (0)

Muslim Critique of IS Ideology

Von *Hazim Fouad*



Teil XVIII unserer **Serie** zum „Islamischen Staat“

The burning of the Jordan pilot Muath al-Kasabeh created a worldwide outcry, which was noticeably vocal in the Islamic world. Not only were we able to see people taken to the streets, we could also witness an utter condemnation of this act by prominent religious institutions like al-Azhar. Moreover, even before this terrific event the so called Islamic State (IS) has been criticized on various occasions by prominent Muslim scholars. The common trope these statements share is that despite its name, IS does not represent “true Islam”. The most prominent document in this regard surely is the open letter, which was addressed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed “caliph” of IS, signed by 174 prominent Muslim figures and spokespersons from all over the world and which has been translated into multiple languages. The **Facebook group** that formed around this letter has currently reached over 100.000 likes and has developed into a hub for people from all over the world, who oppose IS ideology from a Muslim perspective. Although there has been some media coverage mentioning the publication of the letter, its actual contents have not been discussed very much in detail so far. So what does the document actually say? Let’s have a closer look:

The letter is formulated as a piece of religious advise (*nasiha*) and the critique put forward against IS ideology can broadly be categorized into legal/methodological and doctrinal arguments, which are substantiated via references to religious texts. Accusations which belong into the first category are for example the prohibition of cherrypicking verses of the Quran without regarding their context in order to support one’s argument, the permission to have different opinions on a certain matter which can all be equally valid and a general accusation of ignoring the legal concept of the consensus of the scholars (*ijma*) and disrespect for Muslim tradition and the development and changing nature of Islamic law.

On the doctrinal side the matter of *jihad* shall be looked at in greater detail. First of all, *jihad* as a term may not be used when fighting other Muslims. Second, it remains a communal obligation and not an individual one, despite claims made by jihadi ideologues such as Abdallah Azzam. The letter also highlights the dual nature of *jihad*, referring to a well-known *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad said after coming home from a battle: “We have returned from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*.” Foreseeing the accusation that the chain of narrators for this *hadith* is weak (and indeed several jihadis have made this accusation in the past), the authors of the letter try to support the message by putting the *hadith* into a perspective with verses from the Quran as well as with another *hadith*. This methodology corresponds with their claim made at the beginning of the document, which states that it is forbidden in Islam to issue legal verdicts without looking at everything that the Quran and the *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*) teach related to that matter.

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By taking the intention, the reason, the goal and the rules of conduct for *jihad* as a reference point, they authors try to prove that the actions of IS cannot be regarded as *jihad*. As for the reasons, *jihad* is defined as a mere defensive war. Bearing in mind that jihadis often point to the concept of *jihad al-talab* which means offensive war, the scholars argue that this concept reflects the opinion of a minority within the Shafi'i school of law. The overwhelming majority of scholars, including Ibn Taymiyya, who might be the most prominent medieval scholar frequently quoted by modern jihadists, permit *jihad* only in a defensive manner. In this way the authors try to place IS and its supporters outside the consensus of the majority of Muslims and accuse them to rely on minority opinions and singular incidents in Muslim history. Regarding the rules of conduct the document states that it is forbidden in Islam to kill war prisoners. However, the execution of war criminals may in some cases be justified and the letter gives examples from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem and also mentions the Nuernberg trials. This shows that the scholars do not restrict their references to the early period of Islam but take the whole Islamic history as well as incidents from outside the Islamic world into account.

This is just one example of how the authors try to deconstruct IS ideology; others have to be left aside at this point due to a lack of space. In sum, the authors argue against a scriptural understanding of Islamic sources and promote a wider consideration of Islamic history as well as taking into account the current reality when interpreting religious texts. Although it is highly unlikely that the letter will change the mind of any IS-member and/or supporter, it still serves two important purposes. First, it might dissuade potential recruits from joining IS at a stage where they are still receptive for religious/theological arguments. Second, it sends a signal to the non-Muslim world to prove that contrary to its claim, IS does not represent Islam or the worldwide Muslim community. In a time of rising anti-Islamic sentiments in Europe and elsewhere, the recognition of such statements seems more urgent than ever before.



Hazim Fouad studied Near and Middle Eastern studies in Bochum/Germany, Kairo/Egypt and London/UK. He currently works as an analyst for the Senator for the Interior and Sports Bremen. 2014 he published together with Behnam T. Said the anthology on Salafism "Salafismus. Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam." Beside his work he is preparing his PhD on Muslim counter-narratives to Salafist ideology.

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