CHAPTER 12

“The Kāfir Religion of the West”: Takfīr of Democracy and Democrats by Radical Islamists

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1 Introduction

Over the past twenty to thirty years, it has become clear that many Islamists have accepted the rules of democracy, defined here in a very minimal way as a political system that has the people as its ultimate source of power and holds regular elections through which the public can express its political views.¹ Publications from the last two or three decades have shown convincingly that organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood have been willing to work within the political system—instead of overthrowing it—in countries such as Egypt,² Jordan³ and others.⁴ Moreover, it has also become clear that, while doing so, many Islamists have actually accepted (aspects of) democracy and have done this on Islamic grounds through concepts such as ijmāʿ (consensus),

¹ For more definitions of democracy, see Heywood, Politics, pp. 67–84.
² See, for instance, Abed-Kotob, “The Accommodationists Speak,” pp. 321–39; Auda, “The ‘Normalization’ of the Islamic Movement in Egypt,” pp. 375–77, 379–81, 385–95; Farschid, “Ḥizbiya”; Forstner, “Auf dem legalen Weg zur Macht?”; Harnisch and Mecham, “Democratic Ideology”; Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, Islam in Contemporary Egypt, pp. 41–70.—This chapter was written before the rise to (and subsequent fall from) power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and does not take into account the developments after 2011. The same applies to developments among radical Islamists after the advent of the Arab Spring. It seems, however, that radical Islamists’ views on democracy—with the exception of elections, which some of them seem to accept now—have not fundamentally changed because of the Arab Spring, although this may, of course, change in the future. An in-depth study of radical Islamists’ views of the Arab Spring and the changes it has brought about requires a separate article, however.
³ See, for example, Abu Rumman, The Muslim Brotherhood; Boulby, The Muslim Brotherhood, pp. 73–157; Robinson, “Can Islamists be Democrats?”; Schwedler, “A Paradox”; idem, Faith in Moderation.
⁴ For overviews of how Islamists in different countries have dealt with democracy and democratic elections, see Esposito and Piscatori, “Democratization”; Esposito and Voll, Islam, pp. 52–191.
bay’a (oath of fealty) and, particularly, shūrā (consultation). This widespread acceptance of democracy by moderate Islamists, however, cannot obscure that radical Islamists, represented by Jihādī-Salafīs in general and organisations such as al-Qāʿida in particular, very often reject democracy as an “un-Islamic” system. These radical Islamists who reject democracy are often referred to as takfīrīs by their opponents because of their relatively broad application of the label kāfir (“unbeliever”, pl. kuffār) to Muslims they deem apostates (murtaddūn). This same concept is also applied by them to democracy and its supporters, although not always in the same way. While the support for and, to a lesser extent, the rejection of democracy have been dealt with extensively in the literature, the exact reasons for applying takfīr to democracy and democrats and how this differs from one context to another have not. This topic is therefore what this contribution focuses on.

Based mostly on the Arabic radical Islamist writings (books, articles, fatwās) on this issue, I will first deal with the legitimisation of takfīr of democracy as a system, followed by the application of the concept to democrats. While the radical Islamist rejection of democracy as such is quite uniform, takfīr of democrats is not, as we will see. The differentiation between radical Islamists on this issue becomes even greater when we turn to the third subject of this contribution, namely the application of takfīr to democratic processes in actual practice in two different Muslim countries: Jordan and Iraq. The goal of this article is three-fold: firstly, it seeks to show what arguments radical Islamists use to


6 I define radical Islamists here as those Islamists who reject working within the system and call for or even actively work towards overthrowing it.

7 I define Jihādī-Salafīs as those Salafīs who not only see jihād as a tool with which to confront the dār al-kufir (“the abode of unbelief”, i.e. the lands where Islamic law is not applied), but who also believe it can be used to confront nominally Muslim opponents within the dār al-Islām. See also Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi, pp. 9–10. There are also other, non-Jihādī-Salafīs who reject democracy, however. For more on Salafism, see Meijer, Global Salafism; Rougier, Qu’est-ce que le salafisme?


9 The Arabic writings used for this article were downloaded from the biggest online jihādī library, www.tawhed.ws (see notes for more precise links), unless stated otherwise, and were all still available on 02/01/2014. All URLs given provide links to the HTML-versions of the writings since direct links to Word-versions often do not exist. Word-versions of most writings themselves do exist, however, and the page references given in the present contribution refer to those, except when only HTML-versions were available.