Chapter 13

On the takfīr of Arab Women’s Rights Advocates in Recent Times

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1 Initial Remarks: Takfīr and the Gender Aspect

The Arab world has witnessed an increasing number of takfīr campaigns and trials over the past decades. The accusations of apostasy, blasphemy, or unbelief—overlapping offences in Islamic doctrine—have mainly been instigated by an Islamist lobby and coincided with their demand for the codification and implementation of Islamic Law (sharīʿa). Their favourite targets have been open- and secular-minded intellectuals, university professors as well as journalists, writers, artists, bloggers, and feminists, on the basis of their published works and statements. The attacks formed part of an effort to silence those intellectuals suspicious to them who dare to speak out against the imposition of the politically motivated Islamist agenda and are deemed dangerous because of their ideas for a radical transformation of the socio-political system.

The cases of the Sudanese reformer Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā (b. 1909 or 1911; executed in 1985), the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie (b. 1947), and the Egyptian scholar Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (b. 1943; d. 2010), for instance, are well documented due to extensive research. Campaigns and trials against

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1 I use the words feminists and women’s rights activists as synonyms, although I am well aware that not every woman activist, including the protagonists mentioned here, would like to be identified with the label feminist—either for pragmatic or ideological reasons—as it carries negative connotations (cf. Al-Ali, Secularism, pp. 4f.; Karam, “Political-Social Movements,” p. 583). Feminist (and feminism), understood in a broad sense, refers to the consciousness that women are discriminated in many ways. This awareness leads to thinking, behaving, and acting in a way that contradicts the social mainstream norms, defies patriarchal order and resists oppression and subjugation, with the aim of promoting a better society for both men and women (cf. for the Arab States, Karam, “Political-Social Movements,” pp. 583f.; cf. in general, Lenz, “Frauenbewegungen”).

prominent women’s rights advocates have also attracted some media attention but have rarely been examined in greater detail. The articles by Nancy Gallagher (1995, 2005) or Susanne Olsson (2008) are among the few exceptions. This common gender imbalance in academic research notwithstanding, the mere fact that both men and women were confronted with charges of *kufr* raises the important question as to whether sex and gender are relevant factors in the verbal and written attacks and if so, to what extent. My argument is that *takfīr*, as it is embedded in other dominant discourses in contemporary times, is not gender-neutral—at least insofar as it concerns the polemics and populist (or popular) reproaches in Arab media including Internet, blogs, etc. In this sense, it is striking that the female activists are often portrayed (both in words and pictures) as being in absolute opposite of the traditionalist, conservative ideal image of a woman: they are maligned as aggressive, furious, striving for fame, as notorious critics, obsessed with sex and gender, as westernized ‘devils’, or even as ‘whores’ and shameful representatives of their gender and nation. To substantiate my argument, I have chosen three examples to be analysed and compared. As a result, this article should only be viewed as a first step towards integrating the gender perspective into the research on *takfīr*, and it might motivate further studies on non-conformist, uncompromising, free-spirited and self-assured women as targets of *takfīr* assaults in the modern as well as the pre-modern era.

### 2 Biographical Sketch of the Selected Women’s Rights Advocates

The following short biographies will serve to illustrate the fact that these outspoken advocates of free speech, essential domestic reforms and gender equality share many similarities in their visions of a better society, though differing in their respective family backgrounds, careers and fame and in the attacks they experienced on their persons, writings and activities for allegedly transgressing religious (or rather social) norms.

I start with the first Muslim woman who had to face an apostasy case in contemporary Islam in 1989, namely Tūjān al-Fayṣal, born in 1948 in Amman/Jordan, from a middle-class Circassian background, a mother of three children and now widowed. As the first woman elected to Jordan’s Parliament, a former...