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## Ibn Taymiyya on the Frontier: Renewal, Resistance and Rebellion

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**Ibn Taymiyya on the Frontier: Renewal, Resistance and Rebellion**

By

Kenneth Meyer

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Kenneth Meyer

1 June 2023

**Ibn Taymiyya on the Frontier: Renewal, Resistance and Rebellion**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Kenneth Meyer  
June 2023

## Abstract

The Muslim jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE) inspired those advancing into battle in his time, and inspires many on battlefields today. He lived on the physical frontier of his state, defended it, and in ideological terms defined it. The jurist is frequently portrayed in our time as an unyielding, hard-line, intolerant theologian and social critic. However, Part One of this work contends that when his positions are examined in the context of his times, a rational, realistic, methodical figure emerges.

Part Two of this thesis reviews the use of Ibn Taymiyya by several mostly well-known activists, Islamic revolutionaries and Jihadists. I use a wide aperture, “*umma*-wide” or “system-wide,” medium-*durée* methodology in considering the revivalist, rebel, and jihadi/Salafi movements from the period roughly 1964 to the present. If this approach is used, so many connections and common (but not identical) agendas become clear, arising from grievances concerning corruption, loss of cultural identity, lack of economic development, resentment of foreign interference or occupation, frustration over limited access states, and so on. In many settings, invocation of Ibn Taymiyya’s image sounds a kind of alarm that disruption, rebellion or insurgency are imminent or already underway.

Since this Damascus jurist is not alive today, it falls to those in the present to try to ascertain if his essays and arguments have been decontextualized or distorted. It is equally important to contend with peers in the academic and commentator domains who sometimes unknowingly repeat mischaracterizations made by modern day activists and radicals.

## Prefatory Note on Languages Used and Acknowledgements

I have reviewed quotes from the Quran in the Arabic.<sup>1</sup> Regarding collections of sayings of the prophet such as *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih al-Muslim*, and some passages (but not the whole text) of al-Dhahabi's biography of Ibn Taymiyya, I have also engaged with the Arabic directly.<sup>2</sup> For the bulk of the quotes from Ibn Taymiyya's collected works, I have taken material from the collection *Ibn Taymiyyah Expounds on Islam* (hereafter *Expounds*), published by Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (2019). I have also used such short items in French (cited in footnotes) as my less-than-impressive facility with that language will permit. Regarding the first leap of western scholarship into Ibn Taymiyya's works, the essays of Henri Laoust (in French), I take issue below with the approach of Dr. Mona Hassan regarding Laoust on the necessity of a Caliphate. She accuses Laoust of a "fundamental misreading" of Ibn Taymiyya, but this topic needs caution. I propose a different understanding, citing the words of the jurist himself.<sup>3</sup>

Of only passing interest in this thesis, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, surviving in its Chinese edition of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, makes a unique contribution in explaining the Mongol drive towards Baghdad, and perhaps sheds light on why further westward expansion was less compelling.<sup>4</sup> Although it has been suggested this work was used by the Chinese bureaucrats in a

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<sup>1</sup> There are many editions of the Quran. I have used this: <https://www.corequran.com/1#1> .

<sup>2</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari>. Carterina Bori, "A New Source for the Biography of Ibn Taymiyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 67, no. 3 (2004): 321-48.

<sup>3</sup> Mona Hassan, "Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 340-349; Henri Laoust: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibn-Taymiyyah>. My thoughts, p. 29-31.

<sup>4</sup> Mongolian fragments of the history are also extant, but the main version which comes down to us is: *Yuan Chao Mi Shi Zhu* (hereafter YCMS), "The Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty." The Yuan dynasty being the Mongol dynasty in China. (Beijing: Beijing Zhongguo Shudian, in an

dual-language edition as a practice work for learning the Mongolian language, I contend that for the Chinese of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE) it was also the equivalent of our modern “area studies” handbooks, such as our North American contemporary works focused on China, Japan, Pakistan, India, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

In the latter part of this work, in two cases where I was only able to find an issue of *Dabiq* in Bahasa, the language of Indonesia, I lifted the quotations pertaining to Ibn Taymiyya out of the text and translated them using a translation application.

Thanks to all committee members for their patience; to Committee Chair Charles Anderson, to Jonathan Miran for half the reference works cited here, and to Steven Garfinkle. Thanks also to my wife for her patience, to all the helpers at the Hacherl Research and Writing Studio, to Andy Nelson for our joint writing sessions and for sharing thoughts, to my old colleague from another graduate studies period, Tim Koors, for proof-reading, and to friend from Tunis days Faouzi Fertani of the Bank of Qatar in Paris for the note on the Abu Dhabi series on Ibn Taymiyya.

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edition in the possession of the author, no date of the is edition cited, I believe published circa 1990, obtained in Beijing in 1992), in four volumes. The reference to Baghdad is in vol 4, *chuan* 13, pp. 36-37. See also, *The Secret History of the Mongols; A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. Trans. Igor De Rachewiltz (Canberra: Australian National University, 2015), section 260, p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> For example, *Pakistan, A Country Study*, ed. Peter R. Blood (Washington D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995). “Area handbook series.”

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### Abbreviations and Contractions Used in This Work

*Declaration* for Usama Bin Laden’s *Declaration of War Against the United States* (1996)

*Duty* for *The Neglected Duty* of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj (1981)

El-Fadl for *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (2001). This individual is not to be confused with the jihadi ideologue “Dr. Fadl.”

*Expounds* for the anthology of excerpts from Ibn Taymiyya’s *Majmu‘ al-Fatawa*, compiled and translated by Muhammad Abdul Haqq Ansari (2019)

Hoover for repeated references to his biography, *Ibn Taymiyya* (2019)

*Initiative* for the *Initiative to Stop the Violence*, trans. Sherman A. Jackson (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015)

IS for Islamic State; what has in various periods been referred to as ‘ISIL,’ ‘ISIS,’ ‘the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham,’ etc.

*Letter* For the June 2005 letter of Ayman al-Zawahiri to Musab Zarqawi

*MF* for the collected works of Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu‘ Fatawa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad b. Qasim al-Najdi al-Hanbali (Riyadh and Mecca, reprint of 1995).

## Timeline of Ibn Taymiyya and his Era

(All dates CE)

- 1258 Baghdad falls, ‘Abbasid Caliphate ends
- 1260 Battle of ‘Ayn Jalut in Palestine, Mongols are defeated<sup>6</sup>
- 1263 Ibn Taymiyya born in Harran, in present-day Turkey, his parents later flee to Damascus. He receives training as a Hanbali jurist
- 1281 Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Mansur Qalawun (r. 1279-1290) defeats the Mongols at Homs.
- 1298 Tried concerning text about divine attributes, acquitted
- 1299 Mongols are victorious at the Battle of Wadi al-Khaznadar  
 1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Mongol fatwa issued around this time<sup>7</sup>  
 3<sup>rd</sup> Anti-Mongol fatwa issued a little later
- 1300 The Mongols and il-Khan Ghazan in Damascus  
 Part of a delegation that asks Ghazan to spare the city; he sees or does not see Ghazan; prisoners released<sup>8</sup>  
 14 Feb 1300 Meets with Mongol General Amir Qutlugh-Shah, who says that, “God has sealed the line of prophets with Muhammad and Genghis Khan.”<sup>9</sup>
- 1303 Participates as a soldier in the Battle of Marj al-Suffar, Mongols defeated
- 1305 Tried again on the matter of the attributes of God (i.e. anthropomorphizing God, *tjsim*), After arguing with the judge, he is sent to prison (with his brothers) for seventeen months.<sup>10</sup> Altogether, he is away from Damascus for seven years.
- End of 1308 or beginning of 1309 Il-Khan Oljeitu converts from Sunni Islam to Twelver Shi’ism.  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Mongol fatwa issued in response to this event. In Ibn Taymiyya’s eyes, the Mongol court is “going from bad to worse.”
- 1310 Al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun returned to power in March; he brings Ibn Taymiyya to Cairo from Alexandria where he had been confined, praises him, and sets him up in a house.<sup>11</sup>
- 1310 or 1313 (the date is in contention) Writes the *Minhaj al-Sunna*, a response to Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli’s (d. 1325) *Minhaj al-Karama fi Ma‘rifat al-imama*, The Miraculous Way of Knowledge of the Imamate.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Multiple authors have portrayed this as a “decisive battle” in history. That is debatable. Only the “advance guard” of the Mongols, led by Kit-Buqa, was defeated. See also John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 210-211.

<sup>7</sup> In assigning these dates for the anti-Mongol Fatwas, I am following Denise Aigle (2014).

<sup>8</sup> The events are contested. Al-Dhahab’s account (see Bori, op cit), says Ibn Taymiyya met with the il-Khan three times; another account says aides put him off, saying the conqueror was too busy—but at any rate prisoners were freed, and the city was not destroyed.

<sup>9</sup> Aigle, 300. One can just see Ibn Taymiyya biting his tongue during this interview.

<sup>10</sup> Bori, *al-Dhahab Bio*, 345.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. In other words, al-Nasir overturned the judgement given under the previous sultan, al-Malik al-Muzaffar Rukn al-Din al-Jashankir Baybars II, who only reigned 1309-1310 CE.

<sup>12</sup> The date of composition of the *Minhaj al-Sunna* is under discussion. Tariq al-Jamil argues for a composition date after 1313; “Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli: Shi‘i Polemics and the Struggle for Religious Authority in Medieval Islam,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, op cit,

- 1313 Oljeitu undertakes the last invasion of Syria, it is unsuccessful; it can be suggested that after this defeat, Ibn Taymiyya seems less useful to the Mamluk regime. In the latter part of the year, the jurist arrives back in Damascus
- 1318 Nusayri ('Alawite) revolt in Syria: Ibn Taymiyya accompanies armed forces against the rebels and issues violent fatwas against them, including the guidance that the leaders of the sect may be killed; these *fatawa* are quoted by IS and others in the near now, with deadly results
- 1320 Brought to trial again over his views on divorce in August
- Feb 1321 Sultan issues a directive freeing him from prison after five and-a-half months
- 1323 A peace treaty is signed between the il-Khanate and the Mamluks
- 1326 Back in jail in July over his opposition to *ziyara*, visitation to saints' graves. Ibn Taymiyya's student Ibn Al-Qayyim is whipped and paraded through Damascus on a donkey in connection with the same charges. In this case the sultan does not side with Ibn Taymiyya.
- 1 May 1328 Deprived of pen, ink and paper, and thenceforth, he is not allowed to read either
- 26 Sep 1328 Dies in Damascus<sup>13</sup>

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235. My suggestion would be that the battles on the Mamluk-Mongol front, and the composition of the two religious works, seem to proceed in parallel.

<sup>13</sup> Bori, al-Dhahab, 348. Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 38-39.

## Introduction and Rude Awakenings

This is a thesis attempting to, first, uncover or I might say *recover* the meaning and meanings of Taqi Ad Din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE, hereafter Ibn Taymiyya). Uncover, because his arguments have in some part been obscured by the din and contention of rebels, reformers and fighters in our contemporary times. Recover, because somehow, in many instances his meaning has been turned around; I would suggest frequently turned into something he wouldn't even recognize.

In Part One of this work I review some of the major arguments of this Sunni jurist of the fourteenth century, and in Part Two I examine his treatment in the near now—where he is nearly as well-known as he was in his own lifetime. In Part Two, which constitutes over half of this work, I go through six “test cases” assaying how he has been used and cited by various authors, activists, jihadis and Salafi groups. The test cases are: Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Faraj in Egypt, Usama Bin Laden's 1996 *Declaration*, the Egyptian *Gama'a Islamiyya's* 2002 *Initiative to Stop the Violence*, a controversy concerning a 2003 bombing in Saudi Arabia, Ayman al-Zawahiri's 2005 letter to Musab al-Zarqawi—which brings us into the war in Iraq, and finally, more recently, Ibn Taymiyya as he appears in 2014-2016 citations in the Islamic State's periodical, *Dabiq*. The faithfulness with which Ibn Taymiyya is used in these test examples varies considerably.

My approach to the works of Ibn Taymiyya and his relationship to his era, and my approach to the use of his works in the near now, both follow a similar inclination, which I might characterize as, in the first instance, a “wide aperture” approach to Ibn Taymiyya's works, situating him among a variety of topics of compelling interest in his time. I believe these examples give us a vision of his thought as wide-ranging, imaginative, and yet down-to-earth, pragmatic, concerned with results in this world. Despite his fulminations against *bid'a* (innovation), his arguments are not without

individual vigor, not without new perspectives. In many cases, such as his meditations on the meaning of the caliphate on the prophetic model, and when it might be logical to try and implement it, a close reading of his arguments takes us down a completely unexpected path.

Similarly, for the section of this work focusing on the near-now, I have taken a kind of *medium durée* approach, seeing the period from the appearance of Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones* (1964) through to the crumbling of the Islamic State in its last hold-out areas in Syria in 2022-2023 as one coherent era. And that era would include the still-evolving Arab Spring. I contend a "system-wide" perspective encompassing much of the *umma* or Islamic community, stretching over several regions and countries, illuminates common responses to economic distortion, hybridity, foreign intrusion, and persisting limited-access states.<sup>14</sup> Limited access states, as defined by North, Wallis and Weingast, are characterized by government and/or elite ranks to which only a subset of a class, or a group of families, or a particular ethnic group or tribe can gain entry. Springborg, using a term which may not be helpful (since it has a different meaning in the U.S.), suggests a kind of "deep state" exists in such countries, i.e. one social group or sub-group has a stranglehold on the bureaucracy and upper governmental ranks.<sup>15</sup>

To say, as some have done, that Arab rebellions and civil wars erupt in direct proportion to the failure of the Arab states to democratize and make material progress, is inadequate, but I believe those are two contributing factors. The fact that a huge proportion of Islamic State fighters in Syria

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<sup>14</sup> Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), but more specifically, in this discussion, see: Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 154-156. Regarding Salafists see: Roel Meijer, (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). On the nature of Salafi thought and action, same volume: Bernard Haykal, 33-56.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Meyer, Review of *Political Economies of the Middle East and North Africa*, by Robert Springborg, *African Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2022): 81–83.

and Iraq came from Tunisia, for example, with its soaring levels of youth unemployment, is no coincidence.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, I contend that it is not always helpful to see the eruptions of jihadism and Salafism over the last sixty years as divided into different periods, phases, or philosophies. Many of the same players in the dramas of rebellion and Islamic resistance show up again and again in various countries, they quote (or sometime misquote) the same sources, and invoke similar visions of Islamic rule or a caliphate. When a “region-wide” view is employed, many connections become clear. But this is not to say all these movements are the same, or that they are expressions of one “master plan.” I don’t believe there is a master plan, but there are similar plans, executed by groups that are by turns fraternal, then contending.

The writings of Ibn Taymiyya would fill two large bookcases, and commentary, denunciations and refutations of his thought would fill another several bookcases. My main focus in this project heeds the complaint of Tony Judt: that finally, history should be about politics and the contest for power.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, I’ll pay particular attention to Ibn Taymiyya as a public personality and political figure, his participation in the contests of his time, and the invocation of his name in confrontations of the near now. Accordingly, I’ll spend less time with the Ibn Taymiyya specialists Carl Sharif el-Tobgui, Yasir Qadhi, and Jon Hoover, who are largely concerned with theological questions, and more time on Ibn Taymiyya’s words in selected anthologies, and in papers dealing

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<sup>16</sup> Twenty-six per cent of Islamic State and other Jihadi prisoners cited poverty as the main inspiration for their recruitment. Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg. “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907414>.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop Journal* (Spring 1979).

with his anti-Mongol fatwas, discussions of the Sufis (a subject with political implications), and discussions of the Caliphate.<sup>18</sup> I find that Salafi condemnation of the Sufis is not a necessary consequence of Ibn Taymiyya's arguments, and that contemporary activists, reformers, and rebels shouldn't be so assured that the jurist would concur in their decision to fight for a caliphate today.

In terms of temporal focus this inquiry looks like a barbell, with an initial exposition of Ibn Taymiyya's significance in his own time, but saying very little about the centuries after his death up to the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt (1798). In the second section I'll discuss uses and misuses of Ibn Taymiyya in the near now. I'll leave the period from the death of Ibn Taymiyya to the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt ("the middle period") to Caterina Bori et al.<sup>19</sup> Bori and friends demonstrate that, far from falling into obscurity after his death, his judgements and references to them turn up from Yemen to Iberia. Since Ibn Taymiyya was controversial, his works were sometimes discussed without attribution. Dr. Bori's special issue of "The Muslim World" (2018) neatly demolishes Khaled El-Rouayheb's 2010 contention that Ibn Taymiyya's positions and fatwas enjoyed little circulation in the centuries after his death, so there's no need to comment on that further.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004412866>; Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, "Ibn Taymiyya: Life, Times, and Intellectual Profile." In *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' Ta'arud al-'aql Wa-l-Naql*, 78–131. Brill, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwv76.8>. For Yasir Qadhi, see his lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn0QbNUbh7I>. Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*. London: Oneworld Academic, 2019. The last work, however, I do use extensively, as a good outline. There are some issues, however, where I take exception to Dr. Hoover's descriptions and conclusions, as noted in this work.

<sup>19</sup> "Ibn Taymiyya: Receptions (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century)." *The Muslim World*, Special Issue, guest editor Caterina Bori, January 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, "From Ibn al-Haytami (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Din al-Alusi (d. 1899) Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Hanbali Sunni Scholars," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 340-349.



What captured my attention in contemplating this project was the fact of Ibn Taymiyya as an exemplar, even heroic figure if you will, and respected jurist in his own time, and the fact that his works are heard today on the battlefields of the Arab world. Discussion of them is an ongoing battle as well.

I referred to Ibn Taymiyya as being “on the frontier,” meaning, first, he was literally on the physical frontier facing the Mongols. At the same time, he was on the frontier of defending the Muslim community or umma as he defined it, and also on the frontier of *ijtihad*, or reasoning through the doctrinal, cosmological and philosophical problems debated by the community. Regarding the physical frontier, Ibn Taymiyya was not so much on it, as it was *on him*. His family fled from Harran in what would today be southeastern Turkey, and settled in Damascus, but the Mongols several times entered what today we would call Syria and briefly occupied Damascus in 1300 CE. You might even describe him as *pursued* by the frontier.

Since the Syria-Palestine area at the time of the fall of Baghdad (1258 CE) was a patchwork of fiefdoms and poorly-organized entities left over from the Ayyubid days, it was Ibn Taymiyya and others who were instrumental in convincing the Mamluk authorities to bring the army to Syria to defend against the approaching Mongols. In this sense Ibn Taymiyya and some of his fraternal jurists and public personalities *created* the frontier. Therefore, the frontier and what happened at it dominated the lives of Ibn Taymiyya and his fellow-citizens, and he played a role in creating it, defending it, and defining it.

In this kind of research the student makes discoveries and suffers rude awakenings, and I can think of at least three rude awakenings arising from this inquiry into Ibn Taymiyya and his role in contemporary Islam.

First of all, taking on this subject I thought I would be lauded as a brave soul venturing into hardly-examined territory. After all, in North America at least, the name of Ibn Taymiyya is not well-known. But I quickly found there were at least four scholars working in-depth on topics related to Ibn Taymiyya (“the four Ibn Taymiyya gurus”): Carl Sharif el-Tobgui of Brandeis University, laboring quietly in relative obscurity on Ibn Taymiyya’s difficult text relating to transmitted revelation versus rationality, *Dar’ ta’arud al-‘aql wa-l-naql*; the myth-busting Catherine Bori of the University of Bologna; the far-ranging Jon Hoover of the University of Nottingham; and the somewhat mischievous Yahya M. Michot, professor emeritus at Hartford Theological Seminary—or this final place might also be assigned to Yasir Qadhi (thesis done at Yale), also concerned with the debate over reason versus revelation, *‘aql* versus *naql*.<sup>21</sup> Most of these scholars are working with theological topics, but Bori has broader interests, Hoover raises several questions I touch on in this thesis, and Michot dares take on the topic of Ibn Taymiyya and contemporary fundamentalists.

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<sup>21</sup> El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of the Dar’ ta’arud al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, op cit. This is El-Tobgui’s *magnum opus*. “Ibn Taymiyya: Receptions (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century).” *The Muslim World*, Special Issue, guest editor Caterina Bori, January 2018. Bori already demonstrated her potency in this field with her translation of al-Dhahabi’s biography of Ibn Taymiyya. John Hoover, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism” (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Hoover, “Reconciling Ibn Taymiyya’s Legitimation of Violence with his Vision of Universal Salvation”, in *Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism*, ed. Robert Gleave and Istvan T. Kristo-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 107-116. Regarding Michel Yahya, a convert to Islam, see for example his 2015 remarks at a book publication event, at which gives a concise summary of all things Ibn Taymiyya relating to contemporary Islamism: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SpvOLm5Orw> . Also: Yahya Michot, “Mamluks, Qalandars, Rafidis, and the ‘Other’ Ibn Taymiyya,” *The Thirteenth Annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, 2015). For Yasir Qadhi, covering largely the same ground as el-Tobgui, he summarizes his thesis in this 19 Feb 2015 item: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn0QbNUbh7I>.

There has also been a parade of articles and essays about Ibn Taymiyya in the past twenty years. Many people have written about his views on very narrow topics, such as Denise Aigle on Ibn Taymiyya's three anti-Mongol fatwas (or *fatawa*), Carolyn Baugh on Ibn Taymiyya and the position of women, and Henri Lauziere on Ibn Taymiyya as the first Salafist—or was he.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the last point, my conclusion would be: according to the jurist's definition, yes, he was a Salafist—but shouldn't everyone be? He's a Salafist according to his general definition, of respecting and emulating the example of the first three generations of Muslims.

I also found that in recent times it seems to have been impossible to write a book on a specific theme in Islam without having a chapter on Ibn Taymiyya and what he said about it: Rosenthal on political thought in Islam (1955), Abou el-Fadl on rebellions and violence (2001), and Nebil Husayn on anti-Shi'i authors (2021) would be three examples.<sup>23</sup> These chapters attest to Ibn Taymiyya's abiding influence and the consequentiality of his views. So, I have examined what the thematic works say. Husayn's work is particularly useful.

There are, however, contradictions and paradoxes one comes brushes up against in studying Ibn Taymiyya.

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<sup>22</sup> Denise Aigle, "A Religious Response to Ghazan Khan's Invasions of Syria. The Three Anti-Mongol Fatwas of Ibn Taymiyya." In *The Mongol Empire Between Myth and Reality*. Studies in Anthropological History (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Carolyn Baugh, "Ibn Taymiyya's Feminism? Imprisonment and the Divorce Fatwās." In *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, edited by Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen, and Elif Medeni, 181–96. Peter Lang AG, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4f10.14>; Lauzière, Henri. "The Construction of *Salafiyya*: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 369–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784818>.

<sup>23</sup> E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam; An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); Abou el-Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nebil Husayn, *Opposing the Imam; The Legacy of the Nawasib in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

The jurist assures us repeatedly that the weight of consensus of the Islamic community, the majority of scholars, and the *ahl al-Sunna* is never wrong, yet he himself goes against the majority or the consensus of the community on several points: the validity of three pronouncements of divorce in a single sitting, regarding Ibn al-‘Arabi, on the eternity of hellfire, and so on. It appears that the thinker warring against innovation (*bid‘a*) himself occasionally innovates, as Elliott Bazzano puts it.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya is still human. It would be unrealistic to expect that over a roughly twenty-eight-year period an author, public personality and jurist would be consistent in all regards and pronouncements, and he is not. Regarding such juxtapositions and contradictions Albert Hourani even supplies the alarming note that there was one group of Naqshabandi Sufis in Aleppo, Syria, who studied the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-‘Arabi together, viewing Ibn Taymiyya as the master on the *shari‘a*, and Ibn al-‘Arabi as the guide to the *haqiqa*, the higher truth.<sup>25</sup> Such a thing would be exactly the kind of syncretism that drove Ibn Taymiyya to distraction. I will speak below about the general topic of his relations with the Sufis. The consensus of the Islamic community or *umma* may continue to be that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-‘Arabi are both due respect.

There is also difficulty in discerning when Ibn Taymiyya is losing his temper, and when he may simply be having us on. He sometimes seemed to delight in provocation, as when he jumped off a chair before the famous traveler Ibn Battuta saying God could “come down” (*nzīl*) “just like this.” It was regarding exactly that moment that Ibn Battuta wondered if “there was something wrong

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<sup>24</sup> Bazzano, Elliott A. “Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part I: Scholarly Perceptions.” *Religion Compass* 9, no. 4 (2015): 100–116; and Part II, 117-139.

<sup>25</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 181.

with his head.”<sup>26</sup> But Ibn Taymiyya felt so strongly on these points that he willingly went to prison over them.

Ibn Tamiyya expert Jon Hoover in his 2019 biography of the jurist provides a skeleton guide—and it is a useful one—of the adaptations of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought after his death, but it is little more than a beginning of a sketch.<sup>27</sup> He laments there is no comprehensive review of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought in contemporary times. Nor does this paper fill that need, but I hope I fill-in some details and identify some broad trends.

The second rude surprise: I thought that when I consulted the actual arguments of Ibn Taymiyya himself—largely through the weighty (654 pages) *Expounds*--I would find a dogmatic, rigid, and thoroughly exasperating jurist. Instead, I discovered essays that were replete with citations of earlier jurists and schools, which weighed not only two sides but often several sides to many inquiries, and frequently didn’t even venture to specify a definitive solution. In many cases the jurist simply said, “If you believe in this tradition, then this would be the solution,” or he hedged, “It may be--” such and such, or: “This may also be the case...” And so on. This didn’t sound like the dogmatic firebrand I was expecting. I respected his patient and thorough approach to theological and societal questions.

The third rude awakening was that I expected to find that the modern ideologues consistently distorted or misquoted Ibn Taymiyya. Indeed I did find many novel uses of his image and example, and distortions of his arguments, but I also found many passages, noted in the second part of this

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<sup>26</sup> Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta; A Muslim Traveler of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 210 footnote 4. Ibn Battuta with his wide-ranging travels and detailed observations is helpful again and again to modern students of the Muslim world in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. His impression of Ibn Taymiyya has been commented upon many times. E.g. D.P. Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?” *Studia Islamica* 4 (1975): 39-111.

<sup>27</sup> Hoover, *Epilogue*, pp. 141-145.

work, where contemporary commentators and activists used the jurist's works astutely. I found there were also cases where scholars and commentators accepted the distortions of activists and radicals and repeated them, without examining the original positions of Ibn Taymiyya.

What brought me to this project was a growing unease over the years that the name of this jurist who resided in Damascus seven hundred years ago kept turning up in connection with alarming current developments. Ibn Taymiyya is in Usama Bin Laden's *Declaration of War* issued in 1996. He has the dubious distinction of being the only Islamic jurist mentioned in the 9/11 Commission Report, where he is characterized as a representative of a minority tradition of "extreme intolerance" within Islam.<sup>28</sup> That characterization obviously lacks nuance, but the relationship of Ibn Taymiyya to contemporary extremists of many stripes has been noted, if not always understood.

A personal anecdote: the resting place in the Peshawar environs of Rehman (Rahman) Baba, a popular Sufi and poet in Pakistan, was given a new memorial shrine complex in 1993, and I visited the site in March 2000.<sup>29</sup> An explosive device was set-off by extremists at the site in March 2009, but did not destroy the shrine. The attack is lodged in my mind because at the time I was on serving on temporary duty at the U.S. consulate in Karachi.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The 9/11 Commission, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 362.

<sup>29</sup> For an introduction to this poet, see Jens Enevoldsen, *The Nightingale of Peshawar; Selections from Rahman Baba* (Peshawar: Interlit, 1993). I visited the site together with other members of a local writers' group.

<sup>30</sup> "Sufi Shrine 'Blown Up by Taliban,' BBC, 5 March 2009.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7925867.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7925867.stm) Between January 1998 and December 2010 there was hardly a year where I was not in Pakistan at some time or another, for a total of three years, including two years stationed at the consulate in Peshawar, and another year consisting of several stints of temporary duty in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar.

It is Ibn Taymiyya’s opposition, as well as that of others, to the practice of *ziyara*, visiting the shrines of the saints, veneration of the saints, and invoking the intercession of the saints, that is frequently cited as a reason and justification for attacks on many of these locations, as well as attacks on various festivals in the Muslim world commemorating the saints.<sup>31</sup> William Dalrymple sheds light on the attack on the Rehman Baba shrine in his *Nine Lives* (2009): “The groundskeeper said, ‘Before the Afghan war there was nothing like this... But then the Saudis came, with their propaganda to stop visiting the saints and to stop us preaching *‘ishq* (love, passion). Now this trouble happens more and more frequently.’<sup>32</sup> This “propaganda” from the Saudis is precisely the modern reflection (or perhaps distortion) of the Taymiyyan line, coming via the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. A fine point should be noted: the jurist did urge that shrines and mosques built over graves should be taken down, but he surely would not have condoned blowing them up—which would be inciting *fitna*, civil strife.<sup>33</sup>

There were several more encounters with quotes from Ibn Taymiyya or connected with people carrying out acts that they claimed “he would have approved of,” which made me more and more curious about this figure from a period I knew nothing about. In 2020 I resolved to ascertain: what was the standing of this jurist in Islam generally? Did his pronouncements and arguments actually provide a basis for many of these acts? The answers to these questions are not simple.

First let’s examine several of the jurist’s key arguments and his fortunes during his own era. When we look at the details, several of his pieces of guidance are not as they are portrayed today.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Be it noted, in the case of this shrine, the local extremist elements also complained about the site as a locale encouraging “obscenity”—not further identified, perhaps a reference to prostitution. The author observed the site was a location where local youths smoked *bhang*, cannabis.

<sup>32</sup> William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives; In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 134.

<sup>33</sup> Hoover, 69.

### **Part One: Ibn Taymiyya in His Time**

Before I summarize several major arguments found in Ibn Taymiyya's works, I believe it is useful to itemize five "takeaways" which, taken together, form an epitome of the jurist's world-view. The significance of these five points will immediately become obvious in Part Two of this work.

First, as described in the three Anti-Mongol fatwas, Ibn Taymiyya believes that foreign invasion or incursion should be resisted and repelled, even if the attackers are Muslims or claim to be Muslims, or if their leaders are Muslims or claim to be Muslims. He has a completely different view on civil war or civil strife, which he urges should be avoided at all costs.

Regarding tension and possible conflict between the imperative to respect and emulate the example of the first three generations of Muslims (the Salaf), and the mystical current in Islam, Sufism, which developed later (or arguably was a later development), the jurist does not see an unavoidable conflict between the two impulses. His criticisms of Sufism are specific and highly-focused, but he indicates respect for the mystical path, and for individual Sufis. In a limited sense, he may have been a Sufi. At the same time, there was no term "Salafism" in Ibn Taymiyya's time, but it is not altogether inappropriate to call him a "forefather" of modern Salafists.

On the subject of *takfir*, or calling transgressors "non-believers," the jurist urges that such a charge is not to be levelled lightly. In the case of the Shi'a, he confirms repeatedly that they are Muslims and should not be mischaracterized as anything else. They should be taught, engaged with in dispute, and invited back to the right (Sunni) path. His call to war in the three Anti-Mongol fatwas is in connection with a foreign invasion, which is a separate matter entirely.

Regarding the Shi'a in general, in addition to the above point, Ibn Taymiyya recognizes 'Ali as the fourth righteous prophet, but he was a man and nothing more. In the jurist's evaluation, the



further along the list of Shi‘i imams one goes, the more divorced the sect becomes from the affairs of this world and effectiveness in this world. He believes Islamic practice involves dedication and good works in the here and now. The Shi‘a are Muslims, but merely sinners.

On the red-button issue of the caliphate, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that working towards it is an obligation. He can hardly say otherwise, since this affirmation is in the sayings or traditions of the prophet. However, in a very careful exposition, the jurist argues that the move towards a caliphal form of government must be assessed by the people according to their set of circumstances in their time. Under some conditions, such as while responding to a foreign invasion, or when the people are convinced a less perfect government may still have few egregious faults, it may be acceptable to settle for a less ambitious form of government.

Let us now go into more detailed descriptions of Ibn Taymiyya in his time.

The jurist was born shortly after the Mongols under Hulegu sacked Baghdad (1258 CE) and destroyed the ‘Abbasid dynasty—a traumatic event for the *umma* and its subset, the Arab world, which brought the borders of the Mongol domains right into Syria. In fact, the scholar’s family fled to Damascus from Harran in Turkey, running in front of the invaders. There was a not entirely unreasonable fear at the time that the Mongols would ride south and west all the way to Morocco.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For many reasons, that didn’t happen, and why it didn’t is beyond the scope of this research. It would make an interesting paper or lecture, however, to expand upon the point that the old adversaries Constantinople and Baghdad both went through crises in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with unexpected outcomes. In 1250 CE the Eastern Romans were clinging by their fingernails to the precipice in their court in Nicea, having lost Constantinople in 1204 CE to a coalition of western invaders. Onlookers might have thought, “The rump government in Nicea, they’re finished!” In the same year, the ‘Abbasids, on the other hand looked relatively secure, if presiding over a much-reduced empire. The court in Baghdad had decreased the power of the Seljuk military commanders and was capable of fielding a force of some twenty thousand soldiers. That was not an overwhelming force, but it was respectable. Twelve years, later, however, in 1262 CE, the situation had somehow reversed: against all expectation, a small force of Greeks and others managed to recapture Constantinople, which they held for another nearly 200 years, while

That Ibn Taymiyya was a controversial and difficult character in his own time is not a subject for debate. Even his admirer al-Dhahabi (1274-1348 CE), writing portions of a biography during the jurist's lifetime, commented on the shaykh's troublesome and combative nature.<sup>35</sup> I already noted that the famous traveler Ibn Battuta, who heard him lecture in Damascus, quipped that there seemed to be something wrong in his head.<sup>36</sup> Following disagreements with other jurists and their factions, Ibn Taymiyya spent several stretches in prison and eventually died imprisoned in Damascus. However, such was his fame that his funeral was attended by a mass of women—an odd homage for a jurist who was celibate (not generally a practice of muftis or Muslim scholars), but apparently in recognition of the scholar's advocacy of the woman's right to divorce (one of his quotes is, "The hostage can be ransomed")—the reason for one of his three stints in prison. Perhaps the women were also grateful for his argument that a woman cannot be divorced in one session alone.<sup>37</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya did not always conform to his own Hanbali school values: he suggested followers did not need to belong exclusively to one of the four schools of jurisprudence—quite a radical proposition. He is repeatedly quoted today—perhaps in some instances out of context—as opposing *bid'a* (innovation). That position of his needs careful handling. Almost every jurist of his age would have to aver he was against innovation—that stance goes all the way back to the

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Baghdad fell and the 'Abbasids were swept away forever. At the time, no one would have predicted such disparate and unexpected fortunes.

<sup>35</sup> Bori, 326-328.

<sup>36</sup> There are many citations of this remark, but among them: Donald P. Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica*, no. 41 (1975): 93-111; and Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), footnote on p. 210.

<sup>37</sup> That needs unpacking: in many schools of Islamic practice, a woman can be divorced if the man merely recites *talaq* three times. Ibn Taymiyya said that won't do. He believed that even if the word is pronounced three times together, this would only count as one utterance. In other words, "Not so fast." Regarding the woman's right to divorce, Ibn Taymiyya affirmed the woman can simply pay back her dowry. See C. Baugh, 181-196.

Salaf, the first three generations of Muslims. But in Ibn Taymiyya's case he may have also used that posture to give cover for many of his own arguments that were somehow daring or unconventional, and in several cases went against *ijma'*, the "consensus of the ages." We will see examples.

It is impossible to assess the impact of Ibn Taymiyya's life and writings without quite a bit of attention to legal and theological topics, but I want to stress again that my focus is on the political, and contests for power.<sup>38</sup> In Ibn Taymiyya's life these domains overlap. The jurist's statements on the need for a simple, unadorned Islam, and regarding resisting foreign influences and invasion, are central to this inquiry.

In summarizing Ibn Taymiyya's far-reaching impact in his own time, let me briefly discuss his three anti-Mongol fatwas, his relations with Sufis, the Minhaj al-Sunna, his position on the Caliphate (is it necessary? Obligatory?), and three other topics.

#### An Anecdote Which Sets the Trend of Ibn Taymiyya's Life

One story which encapsulates the typical Ibn Taymiyya mode of operation and its usual consequences is the 1293-1294 CE affair in connection with which he wrote *The Drawn Sword against those who Insult the Messenger (Al-Sarim al-Maslul 'ala Shatim al-Rasul)*.<sup>39</sup> The progression of events here can be summarized as follows: he sees unacceptable behavior in society or he is asked to give a judgement on such a matter, and he does so. Some in the community disagree and/or the ruler asks him not to be hard-headed. He refuses to change his position. Then he lands in jail. This happens at least four times in Ibn Taymiyya's life over a thirty four-year period—and he perished behind bars in 1328 CE.

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<sup>38</sup> As stated in the *Introduction*.

<sup>39</sup> There are several treatments of this incident available, but see for example, Hoover, 9-10. And we will see reference to this work again in Part Two.

In 1293 CE the jurist was asked by the authorities to issue a fatwa against a Christian priest or scribe, Asaf al-Nasrani, who was accused of insulting Muhammad (details unknown). He complied and asked for the man to be given the death penalty, which would have been a traditional judgement. The governor of Syria, however, decided on leniency and offered to spare Asaf's life if he would convert to Islam. Asaf accepted this offer, but Ibn Taymiyya and his followers demonstrated outside the governor's residence. For his temerity, Ibn Taymiyya was thrown into prison (length of sentence unknown), where he wrote *Al-Sarim*.

### The Three Anti-Mongol Fatwas

The composition of these three *fatawa* and Ibn Taymiyya's actions in those periods see him checking off every possible box in the sense of defending the *umma* (Muslim community) and putting himself in the forefront of events.<sup>40</sup> He was at various times a soldier, emissary, and jurist exhorting the citizens of the *umma* to resist the invaders. The several battles of this period and the part Ibn Taymiyya played in them went a long way to cementing him as a public personality and hero of the era—and perhaps of every era.

His three anti-Mongol fatwas were composed at different times, the first in the period after December 1299 CE, the second after il-Khan Oljeitu's conversion to Twelver Shi'ism, after the end of 1308 CE or in early 1309 CE, and the third again in the earlier period, perhaps in 1300 CE.<sup>41</sup> In these fatwas the jurist prepared a kind of Gramscian hegemonic line of defense for the Sunni world, an act he repeated in the 1313 CE composition, *Minhaj al-Sunna*. In that case he was more focused on refuting the Twelver Shi'a.

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<sup>40</sup> In our contemporary era, one can hear this word used to connote a specific state or country, but in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, it would have meant the transnational Muslim community in general.

<sup>41</sup> It is unclear why the "official" order of the *fatawa* got mixed up. See again Aigle.

In the 1299-1300 CE period Ibn Taymiyya wrote letters to the Sultan in Cairo urging him to come to the defense of Damascus and Syria. After the defeat of the Mamluk forces at Wadi al-Khaznadar (22 December 1299 CE), when Damascus was briefly occupied, he joined city notables traveling to meet with Il-Khan Ghazan (r. 1296-1304 CE) and generals Qutlughshah (d. 1307 CE), and Mulay (also d. 1307 CE). Whether Ibn Taymiyya met with Ghazan is contested, but al-Dhahabi's biography says he met with him thrice to request that the city not be destroyed. The citadel was still holding out and there was the danger that the Mongols would bring their siege engines into the city. In March 1300 CE Ibn Taymiyya met Mulay and asked that prisoners be set free, including Christians and Jews.<sup>42</sup>

At the age of thirty-seven, in 1300 CE Ibn Taymiyya was sent to Egypt to procure reinforcements for the Mamluk forces in Damascus, an important mission. He himself fought, probably as a simple footsoldier, in the battles opposing Il-Khan Ghazan's campaign into Syria that same year.<sup>43</sup> Although Il-Khan Ghazan converted to Sunni or mainstream Islam, Ibn Taymiyya along with most opponents in Syria and lands to the west doubted the sincerity of this conversion. The Mongol regime still looked like the Mongol regime, and Genghis Khan's system of

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<sup>42</sup> Caterina Bori, "A New Source for the Biography of Ibn Taymiyya." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67, no. 03 (2004): 343. This is an excellent piece of work. Bori even includes the Arabic text. In the Egyptian movie and Qatari series on Ibn Taymiyya's life, Ghazan is always presented as boorish, though il-Khan era accounts aver he spoke several languages and was interested in other cultures.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the participating as a footsoldier, this places Ibn Taymiyya right in the mainstream of Islamic practice: every able-bodied man was expected to defend the umma. See for example Ibn al-'Arabi on Abu Muhammad 'Abdallah al-Qattan in *Sufis of Andalusia; The Ruh al-quds and al-Durrat al-fakhirah of Ibn 'Arabi*, Trans. R.W.J. Austin (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1970), p. 114. Regarding the general need to defend the Muslim community or *umma*, see for example the Almohad Caliph al-Mansur's last testament of 1199 CE: "That they had no greater charge than the defense of al-Andalus." Amar S. Baadj, *Saladin, the Almohads and the Banu Ghaniya: The Contest for North Africa (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 150.

administration remained intact. The Mongols still observed the *yasa*, Genghis Khan's law code, drank wine, and carried out shamanistic rituals.<sup>44</sup>

In the first and third *fatwas*, Ibn Taymiyya rallies the Mamluk forces and assures them the Mongols must be fought even though their leader Ghazan, supposedly converted to Sunni Islam. As for the protest that the Mongol forces included Muslims, so how could they be fought? The jurist had a ready answer: those who were prisoners or were willing soldiers for the Mongols should refuse to participate in an invasion of Muslim lands. If they were forced to fight, they should prepare to fall and consider themselves martyrs for the cause.<sup>45</sup>

In the second fatwa (the later one), Ibn Taymiyya considered included among those who should be fought the Twelver Shi'a, Isma'iliyyas, and 'Alawites (it is clear that in his apprehension of their teachings, he sees the 'Alawites as being a kind of offshoot from Shi'i Islam).<sup>46</sup> From Ibn Taymiyya's point of view the later conversion of il-Khan Oljeitu to Twelver Shi'ism was even worse than Il-Khan's Ghazan's conversion. And he noted the Mongols were still practicing divination. Their Mongol law was still in effect, and so on.

Generally speaking, all these *fatawa* were successful in consolidating public sentiment in Syria and Egypt. They have even reverberated down to the contemporary era, where many activists, Islamists and Salafis have invoked passages from them to rouse Muslims against enemies in the near now. These arguments and exhortations in our times, however, frequently go astray or take passages out of context. We'll examine examples in the second part of this work.

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<sup>44</sup> See also Evgeny I. Zelenev and Milana Iliushina. "Jihād in the Mamlūk Sultanate." *Iran & the Caucasus* 23, no. 4 (2019): 332–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26855551>. This is a less helpful article, but it does present a chronological review of theories of jihad during the Mamluk Sultanate.

<sup>45</sup> Aigle, 287-290.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 290-291.

### Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn al-‘Arabi and on Sufis Generally

George Makdisi has no problem in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* stating that Ibn Taymiyya was a Qadarite Sufi.<sup>47</sup> However, it’s a bit more complicated than that.

Our jurist’s posture regarding the Sufis can be boiled down to two points: first of all, he opposed and sought to uncover any kind of charlatanism and excessive reverence toward individual masters. Associated with that point, he debunked false miracles and trickery wherever he found it.

Secondly, and more complicated theologically, he opposed the concept of *wahdat al-wujud*, or the unity of being. Ontologically, God consists of one essence or kind of being, and persons and created things are composed of another. Therefore, in a moment of ecstasy—or in any other moment—it is not permissible to shout, “I am one with God!” or “I am the Truth!” The mystic al-Hallaj (circa 858-922 CE) did that and was executed for it, and Ibn Taymiyya said the punishment was appropriate. At the same time, by the way, the jurist admitted that al-Hallaj was a person of spiritual attainment. It is a bit paradoxical. Ibn Taymiyya explained: during the mystical experience, you have subjective impressions which may take many forms. But whatever it is you’re feeling and experiencing, don’t say you’ve become one with God.

In the theological domain Ibn Taymiyya opposed excessive veneration of saints, in some respects opposed the trend of Sufi thought, even the very popular Ibn al-‘Arabi, yet several accounts have Ibn Taymiyya as being member of the al-Qadiriyya Sufi sect.<sup>48</sup> He sanctioned modest and austere forms of Sufism, such as one finds in the writings of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-

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<sup>47</sup> Makdisi, George. "Ibn Taymīyah." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 4276-4279. Vol. 6. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. *Gale eBooks*. [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424501449/GVRL?u=wwu\\_wilson&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=f2189fe9](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424501449/GVRL?u=wwu_wilson&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=f2189fe9)

<sup>48</sup> For example, Qais Assef, *Le soufisme et les soufis selon Ibn Taymiyya*, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/IFPO/halshs-00584673/fr/>, thesis, 2019.

Jilani (1078-1176 CE). In fact he wrote a commentary on the latter's "Revelations of the Unseen," which does not seem like the act of a fervent anti-Sufi.<sup>49</sup> Quite the contrary.

It sounds jarring, but it may be that, in the understanding of Ibn Taymiyya, he had no problem calling himself a Sufi, of the modest and retiring stripe (i.e., he didn't claim to be any kind of a master), while at the same time, he would as easily have affirmed he was a Salafist ("respecting and attempting to emulate the example of the first three generations of believers")—though that term did not exist in his time. Such a set of co-existing affirmations would sound strange to self-proclaimed Salafists today. But in Ibn Taymiyya's era and according to his logic, they could co-exist.

Ibn Taymiyya's campaign against Ibn al-'Arabi and other Sufis who believed in *wahdat al-wujood*, the unity of being, was doctrinally involved, extended throughout his career, was generally otiose, and politically dangerous, making him many enemies.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding Ibn Taymiyya's interaction with the heritage and writings of Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240 CE), in order to understand why this issue should have generated such heat, it is useful to step back from the jurist's era and review the general popularity of Ibn al-'Arabi in the Arab world and beyond.

Among the aspects of his life which make attacks on Ibn al-'Arabi Sisyphean include the impressive geographic scope of that master's life--he was born in a Muslim state in Iberia but traveled to Mecca, resided in present-day Syria and Palestine, and is buried in Damascus. Works and stories about him are well-known throughout the Arab world. Ibn Taymiyya of course also

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<sup>49</sup> Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Revelations of the Unseen* trans. Muhtar Holland (Houston: Al-Baz Publishing, 1992). Ibn Taymiyya's commentary is Ibn Taymiyya, *Sharh Futuh al-Ghaib* trans. Muhtar Holland (Houston: Al-Baz Publishing, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> M. Abdul Haq Ansari. "Ibn Taymiyya and Sufism," *Islamic Studies* 24, no. 1 (1985): 1–12.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847290>.



traveled and performed the hajj, the pilgrimage, but has no itinerary matching the Iberian. Second, Ibn al-‘Arabi is the author of a number of works ranging from the easily accessible, such as his portraits of the Iberian Sufi masters, which have a kind of “Zen” flavor, to more challenging works such as the *Journey to the Lord of Power*, or--a repeated target of Ibn Taymiyya: *Bezels of Wisdom*.<sup>51</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya has a wide-ranging corpus of writings, but, as has been repeatedly noted, they are poorly organized--or not organized at all--and reflect his tendency to respond to various questions others addressed to him as they came up. Ibn Taymiyya’s corpus of works is vast, but that corpus is by no means as widely-read as that of Ibn al-‘Arabi.

It must be stressed, particularly for North American readers, that when one talks about the Sufis, this is not some small array of groups out of the public eye, sitting in remote locations in their hideaways or *marabouts*. Particularly in North Africa including Egypt, these groups are omnipresent. Some of their historical leaders—such as ‘Abd al-Qader (1808-1883 CE), who fought in present-day Algeria, or more recently al-Qassam (d. 1935 CE) in Palestine—were regional or national leaders resisting European encroachment and invasion. No one can effectively argue that these groups are “out of touch with events in their countries,” as some contemporary Salafists attempt to do. Masters also supplied meditation and devotional works that are read to this day. O.O. Kane’s recent anthology, *Islamic Scholarship in Africa* (2021) includes papers clearly showing Sufis groups in several countries today are in the vanguard in terms of finding new ways to teach the young, even mastering teaching via modern internet platforms, and so on.<sup>52</sup> They play

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<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Journey to the Lord of Power; a Sufi Manual on Retreat* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1981). *Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> Ousamane Oumar Kane, *Islamic Scholarship in Africa; New Directions and Global Contexts* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2021).

key roles in education in several countries, cooperate with local governments, and are capable of dealing with technological innovation in today's environment.

Regarding local festivals in honor of saints, and how popular they are, an anecdotal but I think telling example would be the following: in 1976 the author attended a popular festival for Said al-Badawi (born in Morocco but died in Tanta, Egypt in 1276 CE) which was attended not by thousands but by tens of thousands of people, including visitors from conservative Saudi Arabia and North African countries.<sup>53</sup> Local lodges of Sufi schools marched in the streets, chanted, and in the evening there was music and various forms of *dhikr* or remembering, usually involving chanting and dancing. This was not some little-known event only of interest to locals. During the parade through Tanta I inadvertently got caught up in the ranks of one of the local Sufi lodges, and later, through my minder from Alexandria University, Bushra, spoke briefly with the leader of that contingent. The *murshid* (guide or leader of that lodge) made the pertinent comment: "Some accuse us of taking license and not following the obligations of the *shari'a*, but we say we are even more strict about the general obligations incumbent upon all Muslims." That comment replies to a legion of warnings from Ibn Taymiyya and others, one example being:

Hence those who perceive this existential truth [i.e. that God is supreme], stand by it, [yet] do not submit to the religious truth which is to serve God as his divinity demands, and carry out His orders and the orders of His Messenger, belong in the same category as Iblis [i.e. the fallen angel] and the people of Hell, even though they may think they are friends [*awliya'*] of God, saints and agnostics, or that they are no more subject to the commands of the *shari'a*. To be sure, they are the worst heretics and infidels. [MF 10:1449-57]<sup>54</sup>

To return to the question of Ibn al-'Arabi in the modern age, his position and popularity remain ubiquitous. To cite a few examples: the Turkish series presenting a partially historical preface to

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this saint, see also Ibrahim Ahmed Noor al-Din, *al-Said al-Badawi fi al-Tarikh w al-Tswf al-Islami* (Tanta: al-Midan al-Mudiria, 1948).

<sup>54</sup> *Expounds*, 368; MF 10: 1449-57.

the founding of the Ottoman state, *Dirilis: Ertugrul* (aired 2014-2019), features a hero operating mostly in what today we would call Syria, who is regularly counseled by, in one episode has a wound treated by, and in one episode is rescued from execution by Ibn al-‘Arabi.<sup>55</sup> In 2017 Saudi author Muhammad Hasan Alwan won a prize in Arabic literature for his novel based on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s life, *A Small Death*.<sup>56</sup> In 2019 Abu Dhabi Productions presented a mini-series, *Maqamat al-Ishq*, Sanctuaries of Love, which featured a somewhat sensational--not without prurient and scandalizing elements provided by peripheral characters--plot-line describing Ibn al-‘Arabi’s early years in the Muslim state of Murcia (in Iberia).<sup>57</sup> These are only a few examples of the wide popularity and respect Ibn al-‘Arabi enjoys today.

Ibn Taymiyya also had an Egyptian movie made on his life, and there was a 2019 Qatari series covering the same material, but my point is, the Damascus jurist commands no far-reaching and universal love such as is enjoyed by Ibn al-‘Arabi. And the situation would not have been much different during Ibn Taymiyya’s lifetime.<sup>58</sup> So Ibn al-‘Arabi was a very dangerous adversary to take on.

Returning to the question of whether Ibn Taymiyya himself was a Sufi, Hoover cites Makdisi as discussing that Ibn Taymiyya was buried in a Sufi cemetery, and in two statements the jurist

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<sup>55</sup> T.V. series: *Dirilis: Ertugrul* (Istanbul: director, Metin Gunay; producer, Mehmet Bozdag, TRT, 2014-2019). For the scene where Ibn al-‘Arabi saves Ertugrul’s life, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsUE5clbLjg>. In episode 49 Ertugrul is grievously wounded but his wound is cauterized by Ibn al-‘Arabi.

<sup>56</sup> There are many references to this novel, but see for example: “Muhammad Hasan Alwan’s book *A Small Death* wins the top prize for Arabic Fiction,” *Hindustan Times*, 26 Apr 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/mohammed-hasan-alwan-s-book-a-small-death-wins-the-top-prize-for-arabic-fiction/story-d3LL8dDMR5U3zxVF4DFI2J.html>

<sup>57</sup> T.V. series: Mohamed el-Batish (writer), *Maqamat al-Ishq* (Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Media Productions, 2019). See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xBa6FHkI9M&t=225s>.

<sup>58</sup> Egyptian movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri9kUzz1RQo&t=10123s>. Qatari series of 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7OUv-gyKE8&list=PLz5ly10e1CtR\\_aGkteMwyyzc5vNqJX8b\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7OUv-gyKE8&list=PLz5ly10e1CtR_aGkteMwyyzc5vNqJX8b_).

avers he “donned the cloak” of ‘Abd al-Qadir, which would usually have meant he joined the Qadiriyya order. In *MF* 10-455-548 Ibn Taymiyya twice calls ‘Abd al-Qadir “our shaykh.”<sup>59</sup>

In one anecdote Ibn Taymiyya refers to attending a Sufi event and probably listening to a lecture by the guide of that lodge.<sup>60</sup> But when the group proceeded to chant the various names of God, a practice known as *dhikr*, literally “remembering,” Ibn Taymiyya demurred and merely sat to one side—but notice: he’s still in the meeting.

In a 2020 interview Jon Hoover asked the intelligent question: since Ibn Taymiyya does not disrupt or denounce the meeting, what was he doing there? It would seem the jurist was on a friendly basis with some of the Sufi lodges of his time, but not approving of all of their actions and positions. This matter isn’t simple. The same anecdote provides no specificity as to whether the jurist was a member of the group he was visiting. To Dr. Hoover’s question about what he was doing there, we know that Ibn Taymiyya was an activist in his own community of Damascus: if he heard wine was being sold, he went out with pupils to close the shop down. If he heard a stone or place was being accorded reverence, he went out with pupils to see what was happening. In this case, it sounds like he came to hear what the *murshid* was preaching, but he didn’t interfere. Nor would he participate in *dhikr*. He may have had friendly but limited relations with the lodge. Further, it must be noted the jurist didn’t denounce all forms of *dhikr*, merely certain forms of it, such as chanting one word.<sup>61</sup>

Thus Ibn Taymiyya did not oppose a kind of modest Sufism, congruent with his beliefs that worship and devotion (*‘ibada*) were paramount. Grandiose claims of interaction or identity with

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<sup>59</sup> Hoover, 71.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibn Taymiyya*, 72. See also Hoover’s interview of 2020: John Hoover, “Ibn Taymiyya,” interview by Elliot Bazzano, *New Book News*, <https://newbooksnetwork.com/jon-hoover-ibn-taymiyya-oneworld-2020> .

<sup>61</sup> Hoover, *Interview*, op cit. See also *Expounds*, 383-385; *MF* 10: 660-661.

the prophet or the Almighty were to be condemned, but he tolerated Sufi practice which did not advocate *wahdat al-wujud*, the unity of being.

“The *umma* does not unite on anything wrong.”<sup>62</sup> Ibn Taymiyya says this repeatedly. But then, if this is the case, how can the near-universal approbation of Ibn al-‘Arabi be wrong? Jamal al-Din Al-Qasimi (d. 1914 CE) and more recently Albert Hourani observe that, whatever errors some Sufis may fall into, the reverence for and reading of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works has been affirmed by *ijma’* (consensus) extending over a period of centuries.<sup>63</sup> The experiences of Sufis during states of ecstasy or meditation may require a careful explanation, but they still have value.

However, opposition to the Sufis could be politically dangerous, and it was dangerous for Ibn Taymiyya personally.

The popularity of Sufi practices and schools in Ibn Taymiyya’s time cannot be overemphasized. Works of Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165-1240 CE) such as *Ruh al-Quds* and *al-Durrat al-Fakhirah*, which took readers on a journey around Iberia and recorded interactions with various charismatic Sufi masters of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, were immensely popular and would have been the *On the Road* or *Dharma Bums* of Jack Kerouac, *The Way of Zen* of Alan W. Watts, or the *Be Here Now* of Baba Ram Dass of Ibn Taymiyya’s era.<sup>64</sup> Tellingly, he admits that in his youth he and all his friends were under the spell of *al-Durrat al-Fakhirah*, for precisely that reason.<sup>65</sup> It was only later that he

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<sup>62</sup> *Expounds*, 531; *MF* 15: 157-169. Hoover, 98-101.

<sup>63</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991, 179-181.

<sup>64</sup> The two Ibn al-‘Arabi works are combined in a well-known modern tome: *Sufis of Andalusia*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (various editions, but one of them: Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1971). Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Signet Books, 1955); *Dharma Bums* (New York: Signet Books, 1958); Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage, 1957); Baba Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (Albuquerque: The Lama Foundation, 1971).

<sup>65</sup> *Expounds*, 179; “In the beginning, I was very impressed with Ibn al-‘Arabi and held him in great esteem as I found many of his discussions in the *Futuhah*, *Al-Kunh*, *Al-Muhkam al-Marbut*, *Ad-Durrat al-Fakhirah*, *Matali’ an-Nujum* and other such works very illuminating and useful. I

realized that there were serious innovations (*bid'a*) in al-'Arabi's works which needed to be singled-out, opposed, and if possible eradicated.

It might be thought at first that Ibn Taymiyya's stint in prison around 1310 CE had to do with doctrinal arguments that turned nasty, but it is likely that it was politically dangerous in the Mamluk administration of Egypt (which extended into what today we know as Syria) to chip away at--much less come at it with a sledgehammer--Sufi structures and schools (*turuq*). The entire Mamluk establishment--a regime which lasted a quarter of a millennium but which had no particular legitimacy from the preceding 'Ayyubids based in Cairo, nor from the suddenly-extinguished 'Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad--was based upon a creaky balance of competing interest groups. Not commenting on how well they understood the theological or metaphysical points involved in Sufi teachings, several of the Mamluk leaders were themselves Sufi devotees. In Mamluk-era Cairo, Sufi worthies shared with the *'ulama* the duty of educating the young and newly-converted. Finally, the fragility of the Mamluk balance of power in Cairo can be gleaned from the fact that Sultan Baybars (r. 1260-1277 CE) directed that the group of five supreme judges in Cairo be composed of representatives of all the legal schools, and not merely the dominant Shafi'i school (propounded by Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, 767-820 CE). In other words, no one school of thought should have the upper hand.

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was not aware at the time of his esoteric ideas as I had not read the *Fusus* and other like works. I used to sit with friends and discuss things so that we could find out the truth and follow it. We tried hard to know the essence of the *tariqa*. When things became clear, we knew what we had to do. Then there came a number of leading Sufis from the East, and people began to question us about the Way and the faith of Islam, on the one hand, and about the lives and experiences of these people, on the other. We had no choice except to tell the truth about them..." Notice Ibn Taymiyya's careful description about his evolution on Ibn al-'Arabi: he frames it as a group change in thought, he among his friends and fellow students: "we discussed" the texts, and later "we knew what to do..."

When Ibn Taymiyya fulminated against the practice of *ziyara*, visiting the resting places of saints, or against the doctrines of Ibn al-‘Arabi and other *ittihadis*, those who believed in “oneness,” this actually threatened the tranquility of the Mamluk state, and that at a time when that entity was facing an il-Khan regime which could field over 100,000 troops at a time, and when there were still Crusader strongpoints (though greatly weakened by this time) on the Palestinian and Lebanese coasts. A reaction came about, and the jurist was thrown into prison—one of several times.

#### The Question of *Takfir*: Calling Opponents and Schismatics Unbelievers

This is a red-hot question in contemporary politics in the *umma* or Muslim world, right down to this minute. The Taliban in Afghanistan called the Northern Alliance followers “non-Muslims” because they didn’t obey the command to submit to the amirate. Current foes of the Taliban face the same judgement. Sayyid Qutb’s argument in *Milestones* (1964) in large part revolves around the proposition that current leaders—in his case Nasser in Egypt—permitted the community to devolve into being a *jahili*, or pre-Islamic state. Such leaders were no longer even to be considered Muslims. Therefore they could be opposed even to the extreme degree; toppling them and killing them.

Contrary to what many modern students of Islamic movements and Islamic extremists might think, Ibn Taymiyya takes thoughtful line on this question. He states that “people of *bid‘a*” are not to be excommunicated.<sup>66</sup> The Shi‘a, Mu’tazilah, and Khawarij *were not called unbelievers*—and thus Shi‘a today should not be regarded as unbelievers. Ibn Taymiyya takes Caliph ‘Ali as a guide, noting he commanded war against the Khawarij, but did not permit taking their women

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<sup>66</sup> *Expounds*, 560. “Excommunicated” is the word the Saudi translator uses.

captive or property as spoils.<sup>67</sup> “The fundamental principle is that the life, property and honor of a Muslim are inviolable.” The jurist quotes a hadith: “When two Muslims take out swords against one another both the killer and the killed go to hell.”<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, regarding the battle of the Camel (8 December 656 CE), Ibn Taymiyya notes that Caliph ‘Ali directed that those who fled were not to be killed, the wounded were not to be slain, those hiding in dwellings were not to be touched, and those who laid down their arms were to be secure.<sup>69</sup> This passage is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that later Ibn Taymiyya is accused of being an anti-‘Alid or *Nawasib*. The jurist attempts to carefully negotiate the gap between respecting ‘Ali’s position as one of the four righteous caliphs, and opposing the Shi‘i sect. That is an enterprise fraught with perils.

#### *Minhaj al-Sunna* and Refuting the Shi‘a

Il-Khan Oljeitu (r. 1304-1316 CE) converted to Twelver Shi‘ism circa 1310 CE, inspired in part by the influence of the charismatic Shi‘i theologian Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli (d. 1325 CE). I wish we had more information on the relationship between the latter two, but we do know Oljeitu sponsored many debates between Buddhists, Christians, Sunni theologians and Shi‘a at court—the Mongols delighted in this sort of thing—and felt himself free to support and listen to whomever took his fancy.<sup>70</sup> At about the same time (1310 CE), al-Hilli wrote a Shi‘ism-boosting work,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> *Expounds*, 566. *MF* 28: 510-516.

<sup>70</sup> There are many essays describing such practices, but one is: Jonathan Brack, “Rashīd Al-Dīn: Buddhism in Iran and the Mongol Silk Roads.” In *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, and Intellectuals*, edited by Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti, 1st ed., 215–37. University of California Press, 2020, p. 217. See also the recent, Jonathan Brack, *Disenchanted Heaven: Interfaith Debate, Sacral Kingship, and Conversion to Islam in the Mongol Empire, 1260–1335*, “Past & Present”, Volume 250, Issue 1, February 2021, Pages 11–53, especially section four.



*Minhaj al-Karama fi Ma'rifat al-imama*, “The Miraculous Way of Knowledge of the Imamate.”<sup>71</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, observing this from Damascus, saw a convergence between il-Khanid threats of invasion—the last one from the direction of Mesopotamia took place 1312-1313 CE—and the possibility of the minority sect (Shi'ism) obtaining a dominant position.<sup>72</sup> In the jurist's opinion, both advances needed to be repulsed. His response was to write *Mihaj al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya fi naqd Kalam al-Shi'a al-Qadariyya*, “The Way of Prophetic Practice in Opposing the Theology of the Qadarite Shi'a.” The prophetic way would of course trump any “miraculous way” (*Minhaj al-karama*) of mere descendants of the prophet. Composition of Ibn Taymiyya's work followed after his release from prison in Egypt, when he was ready to take on new foes. *Minhaj al-Sunna* would therefore have been written after 1310 CE; Tariq al-Jamil in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, suggests that since the jurist refers to several times to his own *Dar' Ta'arud al-'aql wa al-Naql*, it must have been written after 1313 CE.<sup>73</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya had a talent for and commitment to identifying where battle on the ground and theological fault-lines met, and placing himself in the center of the maelstrom, or, to use another image, placing himself on the ramparts. That place of danger was also a frontier, which he identified and in part created. The writing of *The Way of the Sunna* (*Minhaj al-Sunna*), sees him at the height of his powers, and “taking the point” (leading a unit into battle), to use a soldier's metaphor.

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<sup>71</sup> See in particular Nebil Husayn, *Opposing the Imam; The Legacy of the Nawasib in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 18-21, and on Ibn Taymiyya specifically, 112-160. Also, Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 32; and *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 15, 230.

<sup>72</sup> Grousset, 384-385.

<sup>73</sup> Tariq al-Jamil, “Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli: Shi'i Polemics and the Struggle for Religious Authority in Medieval Islam,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 235.

Today, with hindsight, we know that the Mongol attacks on Syria all failed; it may seem as if writing this work constituted no act of daring, but if they had succeeded, the Mongol forces and their allies would have been in Damascus again, with who knows what dangers befalling the residents of the city.

It is worth remarking in passing that whether the mass of Mongols followed mixed beliefs, some of them being animists, some Buddhists, some Christians, etc., as could have been said of the invading armies of 1258 CE, or whether in 1299 CE with Ghazan's conversion to Sunni Islam some of them professed to be Muslims, or whether following Oljeitu's conversion, the invasion of 1313 CE could be seen as a Shi'i threat, Ibn Taymiyya opposed them all. In his view, all of these waves of invaders needed to be repulsed, both on the battlefield and on paper.

A contrast which stands out in this face-off is that al-Hilli was an advisor to the il-Khan and therefore represented the Mongol regime at the highest level, but Ibn Taymiyya had no such position *vis a vis* Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad. Nevertheless, he had no compunctions about responding immediately as the equal of the Persian, even though he had only recently emerged from prison, and was writing far from the center of Mamluk power, in Damascus. That was bold.

Tariq al-Jamil outlines the basic points of contention between al-Hilli and Ibn Taymiyya, but Nebil Husayn in his more recent work gives a detailed examination of the jurist's responses to the Shi'i challenge, and Ibn Taymiyya's arguments are not without dangers.<sup>74</sup> In fact several Sunni authors through the ages have charged Ibn Taymiyya with coming close to heresy. The challenge here was how to knock down Shi'i arguments while maintaining belief in 'Ali as the fourth righteous caliph. Al-Hilli repeatedly used *hadith* from the Sunni canon, from the very *Sahihayn* (collections of sayings of the prophet and the companions) of al-Muslim and Bukhari which Ibn

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Taymiyya acknowledged to be of the highest standard. He had to explain these sayings/traditions in ways which precluded the lauding of ‘Ali as more than a member of the family of the prophet, and more than one of the four righteous caliphs. This was the equivalent of tip-toeing through a minefield, and he knew it. It required very careful footwork.

Let me rework the list of gradations in Husayn’s 2021 book assessing levels of anti- and pro-‘Alid sentiment, going up to the most extreme Shi‘i belief. I believe we can fit Ibn Taymiyya into this list, based on his statements in *Minhaj al-Sunna*, and it is useful to do so:<sup>75</sup>

- 1) Anti-‘Alids (*Nawasib*) supported the first three caliphs only. These persons would have been on the side of the prophet’s wife ‘Aisha during the battle of the Camel (656 CE). There is no school of thought endorsing this argument today. Husayn generally calls Ibn Taymiyya a *nawasib*, but in fact the jurist would fit more into the second group:
- 2) Those opposed to any special veneration of ‘Ali. Ibn Taymiyya did not dispute ‘Ali’s place as fourth caliph, but felt free to criticize his actions, and calls him “abandoned by God” in several contexts. He specifies however: “No one should have rebelled against ‘Ali.” Because he was the caliph. Group two Muslims believe there’s no special value to kinship with the prophet, but descendants are respected.

We must digress for a moment. Abou el-Fadl wrote a useful book on the topic of rebellion and violence in Islam, with extensive reference to Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>76</sup> Regarding the early centuries of Islam, that author stresses: “the idea of revolt as a means to power was neither alien nor abhorrent

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<sup>75</sup> Nebil Husayn, *Opposing the Imam; The Legacy of the Nawasib in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 18-21, and on Ibn Taymiyya specifically, 112-160. For a glancing note on the context of the writing of the *Minhaj al-Sunna* see also: Michal Biran, “Baghdad under Mongol Rule,” in *Baghdad: From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century*, eds. Jens Scheiner and Isabel Toral-Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 285-315.

<sup>76</sup> Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

to Muslim jurists.”<sup>77</sup> He calls Ibn Taymiyya a “revisionist,” a term the jurist would have reacted against; though he would have been fine with “revivalist.”<sup>78</sup> Ibn Taymiyya’s main contention is that early jurists confused political versus religious wars.<sup>79</sup> Religious wars are the fighting of factions or sectarians, and are in theory permissible. For example, in the early struggles among the companions, all sides had plausible arguments. But in the final analysis, as Ibn Taymiyya makes clear repeatedly, he wants to avoid *fitna*, civil war or civil strife, at all cost. He is doubtful of the benefit of *any* rebellion, and suspicious of justifications for it, including in the case of ‘Aisha and the companions. We need to keep this point in mind when we come to the “near now.”

- 3) Those opposed to *tafdil* ‘Ali; preferring ‘Ali. Generally, Ibn Taymiyya would be in accord with this sentiment.
- 4) In this group were people who affirmed ‘Ali was the greatest Muslim after the prophet, agreeing with *tafdil* ‘Ali and going further, but they opposed characterizations of ‘Ali as working miracles, having clairvoyance, knowing all languages, etc. In this group would be early Imamis, Zaydis, Mu’tazilis, pro-‘Alid Sufis, and a small number of other Sunnis. Ibn Taymiyya would never tolerate the suggestion that “‘Ali was the greatest Muslim after the prophet.” A review of his remarks regarding the fourth caliph makes clear the jurist did not even consider ‘Ali a particularly good leader.
- 5) A “further out” group opposed ‘Ali’s deification but believed ‘Ali and his descendants had miraculous powers over the natural world, were infallible, had some kind of omniscience.

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<sup>77</sup> Al-Fadl, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 271-279.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 271

- 6) *Ghulat* (“extremists”) deified the Household of the Prophet as manifestations of God. They were frequently exclusivist, viewing non-Shi‘a as infidels. Ibn Taymiyya specifically singles out this group in his Second Anti-Mongol fatwa; these people are among the invaders, they must be repulsed.<sup>80</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya viewed the conversion of Oljeitu to Twelver Shi‘ism as a very serious threat to the *umma*, and that would have been the case even without considering the invading armies that were sent after the il-Khan’s conversion. In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, things were not getting worse, not better. When Hulegu arrived with the Mongol army and the Chinese siege-engineers, these were clear unbelievers leaving a path of destruction. When Ghazan professed to convert to Sunni Islam, Ibn Taymiyya condemned the regime for still practicing shamanistic rituals, the ruling circles still drank wine, and the *yasa* was still in effect. The conversion of Oljeitu to Twelver-Shi‘ism was even worse, with its occluded imams and separate book of traditions.

As the *Minhaj al-Sunna* proceeds, Ibn Taymiyya advances into dangerous ground by defending the Umayyads, even the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid, who had al-Husayn (grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, son of the fourth “righteous caliph” ‘Ali) killed at Kerbala, Iraq, in October 680 CE. He goes so far as to say Yazid should not be portrayed negatively.<sup>81</sup> The problem is that the consensus of the ages already viewed Yazid as a heinous figure.

Ibn Taymiyya goes further: the decision of ‘Ali’s son al-Husayn to rebel was unsound (*ra’y fasid*) and that rebellion resulted in “not one benefit in the world,” because for one thing, Yazid was the rightful caliph.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps al-Husayn was led on by bad advisors. A similar rhetorical argument was used to exempt ‘Aisha from any blame in her war against ‘Ali, saying she wanted

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<sup>80</sup> In some instances we see Ibn Taymiyya engaging in hyperbole and “spin.”

<sup>81</sup> Husayn, 149-151.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 152, 154. *Minhaj al-Sunna* 2: 90-92.

to turn back, but the soldiers convinced her to continue with the war. Such narratives diminish or preclude agency on the part of al-Husayn and his confederates.

Similarly, and consistent with his pragmatic bent, the jurist points out that, whatever their purported strengths and perceptiveness, the acts of the Twelver imams “resulted in no tangible benefit to Islamic jurisprudence or to government in this world.”<sup>83</sup> Since much of their teaching is esoteric and occluded, they had no effect in this world whatsoever. For Ibn Taymiyya, this is the opposite of the role religion is supposed to play; it is about *‘ibada*, worship, devotion, and must be demonstrable and visible in this world, in the here and now. In his eyes, the trend Shi‘i thinking took after the death of ‘Ali and Husayn was increasingly divergent from the behavior and devoted works of the first three generations. It was *bid‘a*.

Al-Hilli held that the Twelver imams were infallible in their words and deeds. Ibn Taymiyya replied that after the sixth Imam, Ja‘far al-Sadiq (perhaps 700-765 CE), the supposed imams were less admirable, less meritorious.<sup>84</sup> Ibn Taymiyya argued that the imams were not successful “in this world.”<sup>85</sup> In his view the real exemplars who moved the Muslim community forward were the collectors of hadith and other scholars of the Sunna. All of the companions and their reported views and discussions were important. ‘Ali himself (says Ibn Taymiyya), while certainly the fourth righteous caliph, made no lasting impression on Islamic law or reasoning.<sup>86</sup> He contended that no

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<sup>83</sup> Husayn, 156.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. See also Britannica, Ja‘far al-Sadiq, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jafar-ibn-Muhammad>. Ibn Taymiyya means that al-Sadiq at least made some contributions in thoughts on traditions versus the word of the Quran and in other regards. Ibn Taymiyya also knew that among al-Sadiq’s circle of pupils were the founders of schools of jurisprudence, Abu Hanifah (699-767 CE) and Malik ibn Anas (715-795 CE). They incontestably had an effect on the broader *umma*.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn Taymiyya contradicts himself here: he himself uses the example of ‘Ali when arguing that Shi‘i and other mistaken parties should not be called unbelievers. He cites ‘Ali’s statement when asked if ‘Aisha and her cohorts at the battle of the camel were hypocrites or unbelievers. ‘Ali

imams or ‘Alid scholars had a big impact on the formation of general jurisprudence.<sup>87</sup> “If you say they had hidden knowledge, that knowledge did not benefit the wider community.”<sup>88</sup> Shi‘i hadith collections were curtly dismissed by Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>89</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya accepted many old ‘Uthmani and ‘Umayyad arguments about pro-‘Alids, thereby extending the life of many anti-‘Alid narratives and arguments.<sup>90</sup> His ultimate objective was the refutation of Shi‘ism. But he also eroded the prestige of ‘Ali and his family. Was this “service to orthodoxy?” Or did Ibn Taymiyya cross the line of what was appropriate?

### Is a Caliphate Absolutely Essential?

Given the heat on this subject among many modern-day activists, self-proclaimed Salafists, and proponents of the Islamic State or some other form of re-born Caliphate, and in particular in light of actions taken citing Ibn Taymiyya fatwas as justification, one would assume the jurist holds firm convictions about the necessity of establishing or reestablishing a caliphate.<sup>91</sup> However, when one reads what Ibn Taymiyya actually said, a different picture emerges, and it isn’t what we would expect. Yes, he viewed having a caliphate to be obligatory, in light of the hadith, “You must therefore follow my *sunna* and that of the rightly-guided caliphs. Hold to it and stick fast to it.

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said no, clarifying, “They are our brethren, who have treated us unjustly” (*Hum ikhwanuna baghu ‘alayna*). Or, ‘who have transgressed against us,’ Ibn Abi Shayba, *al-Musannaf*, VIII: 707-708. In al-Fadl, 125.

<sup>87</sup> Husayn, 158. This statement is a little tricky, maybe misleading. Abu Hanifah and Malik ibn Anas were followers of the Sunni way, but also in Ja‘far al-Sadiq’s circle. They incontestably had an influence on the formation of jurisprudence and Islamic legal thought. Abu Hanifah certainly had pro-‘Alid sympathies—to what extent is indeterminate.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>91</sup> I should point out at once that there are varying kinds of Islamic geo-political entities. You can have some kind of Islamic state which does not claim to be the reference-point for all Muslims, for the entire *umma*—which is what the caliphate should be. The emirate of Afghanistan in its present incarnation (i.e. since August 2021) would be one example.

Avoid new things (*muhadithat*), for every new thing is an innovation (*bid'a*), and every innovation is error.”<sup>92</sup> But for Ibn Taymiyya there are several exceptions.

He believes that in certain circumstances, the people may be unable to establish a government on the caliphal model.<sup>93</sup> There may be times when it is difficult if not impossible to establish such a state.

Ibn Taymiyya’s family fled northern Mesopotamia with the Mongol forces nipping at their heels. These were the very forces which had in 1258 CE put an end to the ‘Abbasid dynasty and which in the next sixty years ensured it did not revive. Yet neither during the years of the Mongol invasions of 1299-1300 CE, nor during the later attacks of il-Khan Oljeitu (1313 CE), nor at any other time, did Ibn Taymiyya call for the reestablishment of the caliphate, or of a new caliphate. Why not? The obvious answer is that he was concerned about more immediate problems. For Ibn Taymiyya, the first imperative of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century was to resist the foreign invaders, whether they called themselves Sunni Muslims, followers of Twelver Shi‘ism, or whatever. After these invaders were repulsed, then there would be time to talk about who was failing in *‘ibada* (worship) and who should be in charge of the community.

Mona Hassan portrays the twentieth century scholar Henri Laoust as “fundamentally misreading” Ibn Taymiyya and stating that he believed a caliphate was not necessary, but Ibn Taymiyya’s statements on this subject are delicate, we must approach them with great caution.<sup>94</sup> First, he says clearly in *MF* 35 that establishment of the caliphate is obligatory.<sup>95</sup> There’s no talking that away. However, there are caveats; there may be extenuating circumstances; the situation of

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<sup>92</sup> There are many variations on this hadith, but for one: Mishkat al-Masabih 165, <https://sunnah.com/search?q=caliphate+innovation> . In *Expounds*, 498-500; *MF* 35:18-20.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 499; *MF* 35:18-20.

<sup>94</sup> Hassan, *op cit.*, 340-349. Laoust’s *Britannica* bio of Ibn Taymiyya repeats this position.

<sup>95</sup> *Expounds*, 498; *MF* 35: 18-20.



the umma at such and such a time must be considered. This is a Tamiyyan argument of particular subtlety.

My sense of it is that Laoust has simply presented this matter without adequate detail. Dr. Hassan wants to force Ibn Taymiyya back to an orthodox position. I contend the matter is not so simple. Let's look at his actual argument. Here is one passage from the *MF*, 35:18-20:<sup>96</sup>

To sum up: the change from rule by the deputies of the prophet [i.e. the four righteous caliphs] to non-caliphal rule may occur either because the society is unable to set up the *khalifat nubuwwah* [caliphal rule based on the example of the prophet] because it holds non-caliphal rule to be lawful, or it prefers non-caliphal rule even though it has the knowledge and power to set up a caliphate. If it is the first case, that is, if the society does not have the knowledge and power to set up a caliphate, the ruler who sets up his government will have an excuse. For even though the establishment of a caliphate is a duty when the society has the necessary ability, it would not be incumbent, like other duties, when one does not have the capability. A case in point is Najashi, the ruler of Abyssinia who embraced Islam [in private] and could not declare it openly. The case of Joseph, the Righteous One, too, is also somewhat relevant. To be sure, monarchical rule was lawful in the cases of some prophets like David, Solomon and Joseph. However, if monarchy is established instead of a caliphate when society has the knowledge and power to set up a caliphate, and if the people are of the view that a caliphate is only something desirable, not obligatory, and that monarchical [or non-caliphal] rule is lawful in our *Shari'a*, too, as it was lawful in earlier codes, then a just king [or ruler] will not be guilty of any sin.<sup>97</sup>

The reader can see that here Ibn Taymiyya gives the *umma* a kind of "out." And notice also his deference to the majority opinion, which would perforce include that of the legal scholars, the elders of a society, and so forth. But we have already seen he states clearly the caliphate is obligatory. What then? He goes on to say:

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<sup>96</sup> *Expounds*, 499-500.

<sup>97</sup> Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly refers to *mulk* or monarchy being the alternative to a government based on prophetic practice and example. Apparently, even if he had heard of oligarchies or various kinds of republics (Venice and some of the northern Italian cities had alternate forms of government at this time), he generally didn't believe them to be possible or useful. And after all, the bulk of the governments in west Asia and Europe were monarchies at this time. *Expounds*, 500, *MF* 35: 18-20.

But this is so only when the people are correct in this view of theirs... If [on the other hand] the establishment of a caliphal government is a duty as well as being within the powers of the society, then to ignore it [i.e. that duty] is to call for condemnation and punishment.<sup>98</sup>

But mark his conclusion to this line of thought:

... One may say that if the king who rules does the good which is enjoined and refrains from the evil which is forbidden and by so doing earns more reward than the penalty he incurs by ignoring what is obligatory or committing what is forbidden, it is possible that his good deeds outweigh his evil deeds...<sup>99</sup>

Wouldn't these ruminations be applicable to the situation of the *umma* and the Mamluk leaders in the jurist's own time? In his day and age resisting the Mongols was the first priority. From Ibn Taymiyya's point of view, repulsing them was an absolute necessity.

So then, we must ask, why is it the Salafists, fundamentalists and revivalist of today don't cite or discuss these Ibn Taymiyya arguments?

Because they aren't what they want to hear.

Let's go on to one final example of Ibn Taymiyya at work in his time, which illuminates an unusual Taymiyyan train of thought, and also provides a questionable characterization made by a contemporary scholar.

*Fana' al-Nar*, "The Extinction of the Fire": a Universalist tract?

I want to speak very briefly about the work *Fana' al-Nar* because I believe, a) it is another example of the jurist's imaginative handling of *hadith* material, and b) Jon Hoover describes it in a way which I fear gives an inaccurate impression to modern readers. The last thing Ibn Taymiyya wrote before his death in 1328 CE was this essay on hellfire and the damnation of unbelievers, positing that the sinner's time in hellfire would eventually come to an end, along with the fires

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

themselves.<sup>100</sup> Regarding the proposal that punishment in hellfire would not be unending, Hoover sees it as arising both from Caliph ‘Umar’s statement that, “Even if the people stayed in the fire to the amount of sand in the ‘Alij (a location in Arabia), they would have, despite that, a day when they would come out,” as well as the fact that the mercy of God was unending, but the wrath of God was not.<sup>101</sup>

It is certainly unusual that one should find a piece by a jurist concerning eschatology based on an anomalous statement from one caliph. But at any rate, by Ibn Taymiyya’s reasoning, after a time, whether hundreds of thousands of years, or millions of years—who could say how long? The torture of the unbelievers in hellfire would come to an end, and all would be united in an Afterlife. Jon Hoover calls this a kind of Universalism—all will eventually be saved. Or it might be characterized as an example of soteriological inclusion: again, everyone will eventually be redeemed (*soter*, Grk.; redemption, saving).

“Universalism” seems to be a strong characterization for this speculative work by Ibn Taymiyya written shortly before his death. He is not talking about all the faiths being one or “equal” here, or anything close to that. It is more likely that he was merely following the saying of ‘Umar to its logical conclusion. We must remember, in all his writings, Ibn Taymiyya firmly believes that eventually the world will be dominated by Sunni Islam. Those few Christians and Jews who persist

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<sup>100</sup> Jon Hoover, "Reconciling Ibn Taymiyya's Legitimation of Violence with His Vision of Universal Salvation," in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism*, ed. Robert Gleave and Istvan T. Kristo-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 107-116. Hoover however does not seem to be the only contemporary scholar looking into this. See also Pagani, Samuela. "Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and the Political Functions of Punishment in the Islamic Hell." In *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, edited by Christian Lange, 175–207. Brill, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h1w3.15>.

<sup>101</sup> Hoover, 110.

in their mistaken beliefs will merely be tolerated. He never deviates from this standard position, which would have been a commonplace in his era.

Therefore, regarding the proposal that the fires of damnation will end, there was no “mellowing” of the Damascus jurist here, much less any discernable urge towards what today we call ecumenism. Indeed, throughout his writings Ibn Taymiyya seems anything but ecumenical.

#### Entre' Acte

Before we move into our “test cases,” it may be useful to briefly address several peripheral (and some not-so-peripheral) concerns, such as: contradictions in dealing with Ibn Taymiyya’s use in the near now, and why does Saudi Arabia have such a strongly positive view of this jurist? In the above discussion of *The Extinction of the Fire*, we had one example of the need to keep contemporary ideas away from our understandings of Ibn Taymiyya’s arguments. We’ll hear of other examples when we discuss Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj’s *The Neglected Duty* and other works. Finally, a few remarks on figures discussing Ibn Taymiyya in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will bring us up to the battlefields of the near now.

When we move into the use and meanings of Ibn Taymiyya in the last seventy years, it is important first of all to state this paper is not in any way suggesting that all insurgencies, rebellions, and revolutionary movements in the Middle East in the recent decades derive from religious motivations. It would be foolish to say that, and the Arab Spring alone, commencing in 2011 and still reverberating, shows that many uprisings and movements have been largely secular in nature—no matter how disappointing that is to some parties.

What this paper examines is the use of a celebrated medieval jurist by groups and ideologues who *are* concerned with a revival of Islam, which in many cases they see as necessitating sweeping away corrupt regimes, and resisting foreign incursion and invasion. It would be axiomatic that at

some point such movements would have to move towards establishing a state that is “more” Islamic in orientation, a caliphate, or some other political entity on the ground that controls actual territory.

Aside from being respected as a “Shaykh of Islam” writing on a wide variety of subjects, the writings of the Damascus jurist such as the anti-Mongol fatwas, are today taken as justifying various forms of action, even rebellion, attacks upon civilian targets, and so forth. Ibn Taymiyya thus gets caught up in the crossfire between Jihadis, so-called Salafis and their opponents. In the “blame game,” some would say Ibn Taymiyya is the godfather of many contemporary extremists. I contend it would be more accurate to characterize him as being “captured” by individuals such as the author of “The Neglected Duty,” writers of the Islamic State’s periodical *Dabiq*, et al.

Natana DeLong-Bas gives us an example of the blaming faction when in 2004 she exonerates the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia and accuses Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Taymiyya of being responsible for the jihadi movements of today.<sup>102</sup> But this is too simple. Al-Wahhab in fact made jihadi type attacks into Iraq and believed himself to be a kind of renewer, a *mujaddid*. If he didn’t proceed further and was not so successful, it was not for lack of intent. Regarding Ibn Taymiyya, there can be no balanced examination of him without noting that he called for resisting foreign incursions and invasions, but condemned civil war and civil strife.

Before we reach the near now, we should say a few words about the impact of Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792 CE), the founder of Wahhabism. The formation of the Wahhabist enclave in Arabia, a kind of outlier in the Ottoman empire resulted in several anomalies. Al-Wahhab was another revivalist who closely followed Ibn Taymiyya in the rejection of uses of

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<sup>102</sup> Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: from Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Greek philosophy, proscribing pilgrimage to the grave of the prophet, rejecting saints and their tombs, and so on. Al-Wahhab said worship should be to God alone. From one point of view al-Wahhab can be seen not only as precursor to modern Salafists, but also as a destabilizing, warlike (engaging in military jihad) force. The protests of Natana Delong-Bas notwithstanding, it is difficult not to see al-Wahhab as being at least one forerunner to the Sayyid Qutbs, Muhammad al-Farajs, and Usama Bin Ladens of the twentieth century. And Arabia provided a kind of “safe preserve” for the writings of Ibn Taymiyya.

Today of course the kingdom controls immense wealth, while at the same time constituting in many locales a source of destabilization, as foundations and groups in the kingdom send out their Wahhabi missionaries. The in some cases spectacularly disruptive actions of Wahhabi or Wahhabi-derived extremists (fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 attackers were Saudi citizens, Usama Bin Laden was a Saudi, and so on) are a stark contrast to the kingdom’s repeated presentation of itself as retiring and self-effacing.<sup>103</sup>

Before we proceed to our test cases in the near now, let’s briefly note some views of Ibn Taymiyya and Salafists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Khaled El-Rouayheb, a renewed interest in Ibn Taymiyya is discernable in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Mahmud al-Alusi and his son Khayr al-Din al-Alusi.<sup>104</sup> Following in the footsteps of Khayr al-Din al-Alusi, the Syrian reformer Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866-1914 CE) takes a moderate approach in claiming a place for Ibn Taymiyya while at the same time arguing for tolerance of the immensely

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<sup>103</sup> Safiullah, Sheikh M. Safiullah, “Wahhabism: A Conceptual Relationship Between Muhammad Ibn ’Abd Al-Wahhab and Taqiyy Al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya.” *Hamdard Islamicus* 10.1 (1987): 67–83.

<sup>104</sup> El-Rouhayeb, 307-310

popular writings of the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi, whom Ibn Taymiyya criticized at length.<sup>105</sup> Mun‘im Sirry makes an intelligent contribution to views on Ibn Taymiyya’s lambasting of Ibn al-‘Arabi through the ages in his 2011 discussion of al-Qasimi. Many scholars and jurists, and al-Qasimi was one of them, hoped to find a middle way acknowledging the contributions of both these thinkers.<sup>106</sup> Perhaps, if we weigh the aggregate judgements of the scholars and Sufi groups over time, this “willing to let the stage be shared” attitude may predominate.

Elaborating upon the latter point, both western scholars and Islamic thinkers, somewhat simplistically, pigeonhole Ibn Taymiyya as a progenitor of the reforming Salafists. No specific groups with that name existed in his time, but Ibn Taymiyya did enjoin coreligionists to “return to the path of the Salaf”—i.e. to the practices of the first three generations of Muslims. That is incontestable. Proceeding from that interpretation, a consensus grew—extending to Qasimi’s time (indeed, we still hear it today)—that the Salafist current is inexorably opposed to Sufism and mysticism. Qasimi indicated this point needs consideration; it isn’t so simple.<sup>107</sup> I have already suggested the jurist would not have opposed the appellation “Salafist,” but he seems to have been at ease with a modest, retiring variety of Sufism as well.

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<sup>105</sup> Sirry, Mun‘im. "Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Qāsimī and the Salafi Approach to Sufism." *Die Welt Des Islams* 51, no. 1 (2011): 75-108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41105370>. This goes to the perhaps over-stressed point of Ibn Taymiyya’s repeated criticism of the Sufis. But to put it humorously, criticizing the very popular Ibn Arabi in the Arab world and Middle East is almost like saying there is no Santa Claus. It’s going against the tide. See also Part I of this work.

<sup>106</sup> See also Hourani’s reference to the Sufi group in Aleppo, which looked to Ibn Taymiyya for guidance in matters of the *shari‘a*, but to Ibn al-‘Arabi in matters *haqiqa*, the higher or mystical truth: Hourani, op cit, 181. Also cited in the beginning of this work.

<sup>107</sup> Sirry, 75-108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41105370>. On the western side, Henri Laoust wrote a number of essays on Ibn Taymiyya also touching on this matter of the jurist and the Sufis. Laoust’s most frequently cited work appears to be *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Tamiya, cannoniste hanbalite ne a Harran en 661/1262, mort a Damas en 728/1328* (Cairo: Imprimerie de L’institut Francais d’Archeologie Orientale, 1939). See also Bazzano, Elliott A. “Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part I: Scholarly Perceptions.” *Religion Compass* 9, no. 4 (2015): 100–116.

Rashid Rida (d. 1935 CE) has been identified as a writer in the reformist spirit who increasingly leaned towards the thought of Ibn Taymiyya, particularly in the last ten years of his life. This was a different kind of “Salafist” from what we might expect today: he published a newspaper, participated on the sidelines of politics, and believed in modernization.

Now let’s proceed to our six “case studies.”



## Part Two: Ibn Taymiyya in the Near Now

Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones* (1964) and Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj's *The Neglected Duty* (1981)

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) was an employee in the Ministry of Education who gradually became disillusioned with secularism. After a 1954 assassination attempt on Nasser by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb was swept-up in the ensuing round-up of Muslim Brothers, and spent a decade in prison. His ground-breaking work, *Milestones*, was published in 1964. In it he accused current leaders in the Arab world of being “creatures of imperialism”—presumably he meant dominated by them, as well as being content with a “diluted”, “degraded” culture. In 1966 Qutb was executed for his temerity.

What is interesting in Sayyid Qutb's work, *Milestones*, is what is not there.<sup>108</sup> Contrary to what many modern-day commentators might expect, there is no mention in this book of Ibn Taymiyya at all, perhaps because Qutb knew Ibn Taymiyya would take a dim view of Qutb's contention that nearly every administration in the entire Arab world—except perhaps that of Saudi Arabia—would have to be condemned, its leaders essentially guilty of apostasy; they would be under sentence of death. Since acceptance of Qutb's doctrine would certainly incite *fitna*, he seems to realize it would be contradictory to cite any Ibn Taymiyya writings in support of his arguments. It would have been good if other near now ideologues and extremists had shown the same caution and thoughtfulness.

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<sup>108</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, no attribution for translator (Cedar Rapids: Mother Mosque Foundation, 1981); also Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, appears to be the same text as the first volume, no translator identified (Damascus: Dar al-'ilim, 2014); also Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, trans. Isha Haider, perhaps 2020. The last appears to be only available on-line at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu). For some reason, Haider's work does not include the last three chapters. The original text appeared in 1964.

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj (executed 1982), writing in 1981, carried this Qutbian line to its logical end, urging an overthrow of the *jahili* leaders, and the establishment of some kind of caliphate (he doesn’t go into the details), and his group of course was responsible for the assassination of President Anwar Sadat (October 1981).

Oddly—as opposed to Qutb--Faraj quotes Ibn Taymiyya at length, deriving material in particular from his anti-Mongol *fatawa*. Qutb implied that current rulers (in his day, Nasser) substituted man’s law for God’s and extreme action was necessary—such as removing current leaders and overthrowing them by force. Faraj and *confreres* translated those arguments into action.

It is useful here to consider the atmosphere and general comments heard at the time of President Anwar Sadat’s assassination. The suspicion frequently voiced was that Sadat must have been killed because of signing a peace treaty with Israel. These sentiments were on clear view in the 1983 *Autumn of Fury* of Muhammad Haykal (various spellings), the one-time editor of *al-Ahram* and Nasser’s old ally and helper.<sup>109</sup> Haykal condemned Sadat for his personal corruption and avarice, his “capitulating” to the “Zionist entity,” and for turning his back on the Nasserite path—which of course included repudiating a close relationship with the USSR and expelling their military advisors.

Muhammad Faraj, however, writing a kind of manifesto for Islamic extremist action against the Egyptian government, went in another direction. In his 1981 work, he condemned the signing of any treaty with Israel, but for him that act was merely one set in a mosaic of capitulations,

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<sup>109</sup> Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal. *Autumn of Fury: the Assassination of Sadat* (New York: Random House, 1983). Haykal wrote various public statements and policy works for Nasser. He may even have been the author of such works as Nasser’s *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Buffalo: Economica Books, 1959).

toadying to the west and the U.S. in particular, failing to live up to the strictures of Islam, and reducing the whole country to a state of ignorance, *jahiliya*.<sup>110</sup> This was a completely Qutbian line of argument.

Faraj's text was apparently already written and circulated—though probably not widely—prior to the October 1981 assassination of President Sadat. Commentators have observed that details on the soon-to-arrive caliphate Faraj demanded were vague or non-existent—perhaps those specifications were to be worked-out later.

What caught my eye was that although *The Neglected Duty* made several references to Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Mongol fatwas, calls for the cessation of violence composed by leaders of the same group (but different people of course, Faraj was long since executed) in 1999-2002 also quote Ibn Taymiyya. How can that be? How can all these references to Ibn Taymiyya co-exist?

First let's look at *The Neglected Duty*. Muhammad Faraj was not a trained jurist, in fact he graduated with a degree in electrical engineering and worked as an administrator in Cairo University.<sup>111</sup> Faraj's pamphlet uses a common theological format in which he raises a point with "Some people say," and then refutes it, moving closer to his conclusion, namely, that the current regime in Egypt had brought the society back to *jahili* times. It could no longer even be considered Islamic, even though the leaders professed to be Muslims. Their removal was justified. So far this is all Qutbian argumentation.

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<sup>110</sup> It's worth noting in passing, however, that in May 1979 al-Azhar scholars declared that signing a peace treaty with Israel was not contrary to Islamic law. The Gama'a Islamiyya leaders argued in 2002, citing several scholars, that Muslim authorities could initiate and ratify as many treaties and cease-fires as they thought necessary, without any time-limits, to protect the *umma*. See the *Initiative* section of this work.

<sup>111</sup> Michot unkindly refers to him as "the electrician." Lecture of 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SpvOLm5Orw&t=1297s>.

Faraj uses the condemnation from Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Mongol fatwas declaring that, just as the Mongols brought in their own law or *yasa*, the United Arab Republic (Egypt's Nasser-era name) had substituted laws of Man for laws of God, and this could not be tolerated.<sup>112</sup> A certain thirteenth and fourteenth century fixation on the Mongol *yasa*, and I would suggest, a misapprehension of it, was already a recurring theme in Ibn Taymiyya's time. Since the Mongols still used their law promulgated by Genghis Khan, therefore the conversion of Ghazan to the Sunni variant of Islam (1295 CE) was suspect.

Faraj states that there were Christian and Jewish elements and influences present in the *yasa*.<sup>113</sup> This is flat-out wrong.<sup>114</sup> There may have been references to how to treat adherents of different religious sects, but that is all. There is no complete text of the *yasa* which has come down to us, but such sections as we do have concern themselves with the structure of the army, administrative desiderata, and thoroughly practical matters such as comportment at the court. This was a corpus of directives with no religious overtones.

The fact of the matter was—and this was also unacceptable to the Muslim thinkers and rulers—that the Mongols, at least in their initial period in Iran and Iraq, didn't care what religious faiths the people followed. Their concern was that the il-Khan be obeyed, period. How the Mongols viewed the *yasa* and how the Muslims viewed the *shari'a*, were not the same.

In sections eighteen to twenty of his work Faraj discusses Ibn Taymiyya's Mardin fatwa, in which the jurist argues that the world cannot simplistically be divided into the domain of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the domain of war (*dar al-harb*). This world is more complicated than that.

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<sup>112</sup> *The Neglected Duty*, 29. "The Comparison between the Mongols and Today's Rulers."

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>114</sup> Lectures of Bayasaikhan Dondashdog, visiting professor at Western Washington University, Fall 2019. Also, Rene Grousset, 230-231, and many other sources.

Some locales—and perhaps many of the Arab states today would fall into this third possibility—are mixed; they may have Muslim rulers but a considerable segment of unbelievers (Egypt is perhaps ten per cent Christian, for example). The situation in these regions or states must be evaluated carefully; these places are neither domains of Islam nor domains of war. Muslims must maintain awareness of the constitution of the population, be attentive to local conditions, and consider all segments of the populations. Faraj, however, bulldozes past the entirety of the Damascus jurist’s argument. He simply says, “So peace to whom peace is due, and war to whom war is due.”<sup>115</sup> This is to completely miss the meaning of Ibn Taymiyya’s essay.<sup>116</sup>

Yahya Michot makes the good observation that the division of the world into the two domains is only the view of certain jurists, “It is not canonical.”<sup>117</sup> So this would be an example of Faraj simplifying, or really distorting, the views of Ibn Taymiyya. For his part, Michot is repeatedly at the forefront of the effort to defend or demythologize Ibn Taymiyya, saying in essence: a jurist can’t be held accountable for all his followers, some of whom may have misread the master, or even distorted his words.

In Sections 117 and 118 Faraj argues in favor of “penetrating into the ranks of the infidels” and quotes Ibn Taymiyya in support of such actions.<sup>118</sup> Penetrating being *inghimas* in Arabic; this phrase needs unpacking. Although the original meaning was no doubt plunging into the enemy ranks in a set battle, ‘penetration into the ranks of the enemy’ is frequently used by contemporary radicals to justify actions like suicide bombings, assassinations, and other actions from which the perpetrator won’t return. Faraj makes it sound like Ibn Taymiyya would support such actions,

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<sup>115</sup> The Neglected Duty, 18, p. 167.

<sup>116</sup> Yahya Michot concurs, see his lecture on “The Ibn Taymiyya You Never Knew,” 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SpvOLm5Orw> , 15:15.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Faraj cites Ibn Taymiyya, *Jihad*, p. 296.

whereas the jurist argued again and again that the benefits and drawbacks of any actions had to be carefully weighed. And attacks against civilians, whether Muslims or not, would never have been approved by Ibn Taymiyya. The later Gama‘a Islamiyya (hereafter *Gama‘a*) leadership in their 2002 *Initiative to Stop the Violence* addresses this point at some length.<sup>119</sup> We’ll get to their recantation later.

In section 119, Faraj argues there’s no need to give the chance for enemies to “come to Islam” before the battle. This is a sloppy reduction of the imperative cited by several scholars that dissatisfied or oppressed citizens had the right to voice their protests, and righteous leaders should respond to such complaints. If the leaders fail to respond, only then can the aggrieved consider rebellion.

According to Faraj, the soldiers to be employed in the current struggles should be “strong and devoted.” The commander should not tolerate the presence of dissenters or those who are merely “lukewarm to the cause.”<sup>120</sup> He means they should be committed and good Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya in his anti-Mongol fatwas, however, took a more pragmatic approach, suggesting that in an emergency, even unenthusiastic leaders, wine-drinkers, and those who are not even practicing Muslims can be thrown into the fray. If the enemy is invading, there’s no time to discuss who’s drinking wine. Sins of the soldiers and rulers can be discussed and condemned later.

Immediately after the assassination of Sadat, the Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Jadd al-Haqq—apparently the only respected jurist on the scene at the time who dared to rebut *The Neglected Duty*--first of all observed that, in the contemporary consensus of the *umma*, aside from not believing in the one and only God, there are no sins which would render a Muslim an apostate.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> See pp. 67-82 of this essay.

<sup>120</sup> *The Neglected Duty* 134, 135, 139; 225-226, 228.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

Al-Haqq then presented ten points. Briefly, they are: jihad, as presented in the Quran and the *hadith*, does not refer only to combat, *qital*, but has many other meanings, such as to remonstrate against someone, to criticize someone, endeavor to persuade them via argument, and so on. *Juhud*, after all, means “efforts.” *Faraj’s The Neglected Duty* repeatedly fails to distinguish between these meanings of *jahada* and jihad.

Second, Al-Haqq cites Qur’an 5:48, “Whosoever does not rule [*yahkum*] by what God sent down, they are the unbelievers.” This passage, he argues, is in fact discussing the Jews in Medina, not Muslims at all.<sup>122</sup> This is a case of simply misreading the scripture.

Third, regarding whether Egypt can be called an Islamic country, “the mosques are open, people go on pilgrimage, and religious taxes are collected.” Only in a few matters such as punishments are there deviations, and the people can work to correct those deviations over time.<sup>123</sup>

Mufti Al-Haqq contends that *hukm al-Islam* in the hadith and traditions is used simply in the broad sense, meaning “Islamic practice, Islamic customs.” It does not mean “Islamic government” or “Islamic governance,” as several near now writers have declaimed. This relates to a point which arches over many discussions of ideologues, Islamists, and their western or North American commentators or scholars: modern conceptions or misconceptions should not be superimposed upon writers and jurists of another age, much less upon passages of scripture.

To provide only one parallel example of presentism or projection, the contemporary scholar Yahya Michot observes that regarding Ibn Taymiyya’s work *Siyasat Shari’a*, near now radicals take the work to be about *shari’a*, Islamic law, in the political domain, but the meaning of the title in Ibn Taymiyya’s time would simply have been, “taking the *shari’a* as our daily guide”—having

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 55.

nothing to do with politics as we understand it today.<sup>124</sup> Unfortunately, the modern scholar Jon Hoover goes in the other direction, referring to the general theme of *Siyasat Shari‘a* as “law-guided public policy.”<sup>125</sup> This is overlaying the modern meaning on *siyasa*.<sup>126</sup> Michot cautions that *shari‘a* is not equivalent to the Greek term *nomos*, law.<sup>127</sup>

Some of these cases of mistaken interpretation among European and North American scholars suggest the “outsider” commentators and analysts (another example would be Natana Delong-Bas’s remarks on Ibn Taymiyya, referred to earlier in this work) have taken at face value the claims and, if I may call them this, “appropriations” of the activists, radicals and rebels. Let us read the contemporary commentators and cited original thinkers critically.

But to return to al-Haqq: in his fourth point he urges that if the ruler performs the prayers and in general conforms to Islamic practice, whatever his or her other failings, Islam does not condone let alone make a duty of rebelling against such a leader. Qur’an 2.85, “Do you believe in part of the book and disbelieve in part,” cannot be understood (says al-Haqq) to justify such actions as Faraj urged.<sup>128</sup> This same point—as we shall see later—is muddled by the Islamic State in their periodical, “Dabiq”—in fact repeatedly.

In his fifth point al-Haqq refers to the “verse of the sword,” Quran 9.5. “Slay the polytheists wherever you find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere,” Al-Haqq points out that once errant parties establish the prayer and pay the *zakat*, they should be forgiven.

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<sup>124</sup> Yahya Michot, *The Ibn Taymiyya You Never knew*. 2015 Lecture, 20:00.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SpvOLm5Orw&t=1297s>

<sup>125</sup> Hoover, 98-101. I think what is clear here is that Hoover’s strength lies in discussing the theological points. When he ventures into politics, modern idioms intrude. The political is not his *metier*.

<sup>126</sup> Ahmed S. Hashim makes the same mistake in *The Caliphate at War* (2018).

<sup>127</sup> Michot, op cit.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 55.



Furthermore, the verse in its context refers to dealing with the pagans of the Arabian Peninsula, who had no treaties with the early Muslims. The contemporary theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022) makes the same observation about a similar quote.<sup>129</sup> Al-Haqq asks: how can such a verse be applied so generally as to justify killing contemporary heads-of-state?<sup>130</sup>

*The Neglected Duty* repeatedly compares the administration and depredations of the Mongols to the state of affairs in contemporary Egypt. Al-Haqq asks in his sixth point, is it reasonable to compare those Mongols to present-day Egypt, its government and people?<sup>131</sup> No.

Al-Haqq has also read the Ibn Taymiyya fatwas. In his seventh point he quotes *MF* 28:520: “We saw the camp of those Mongols and noticed that they do not perform prayer ceremonies, we saw no muezzin in their camp, nor an imam to lead the prayer.” Al-Haqq points out: the Egyptian army shouts “Allahu Akbar,” prays and fasts, has ‘ulama to lead the men in prayer--how can anyone compare those Mongols with the Egyptian army?

In his eighth point Al-Haqq discusses politics. Quran 42.36 says: “Their public affairs must be made a matter of counsel [*shura*] among them.” He suggests: the nation (*umma*) selects its own ruler (*hakim*) by whatever variety of shura is made convenient by the circumstances, such as direct elections.<sup>132</sup> “No authoritative texts determine a way to select a ruler... since this differs in different times and places.”<sup>133</sup> The mufti argues that the title of ruler or caliph is also determined by many factors. The Egyptian jurist may stretch the point when he compares the system of pledging loyalty to the prophet as the early equivalent of the modern conscription system.

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<sup>129</sup> See this work, p. 67.

<sup>130</sup> *Duty*, 56.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Al-Haqq here uses *umma* in the modern sense, where it can also mean, ‘the nation.’ This would not have been the understanding of the term in Ibn Taymiyya’s time.

<sup>133</sup> *The Neglected Duty*, 57.

Therefore (he argues), those who rise up to fight against the army of the state, are very much like fighting God and his Apostle himself.<sup>134</sup> The broader point is, it is the *Gama'a* who are the rebels.

In this same section al-Haqq takes on the somewhat romantic obsession with the idea of the caliphate. He points out that Abu Bakr (d. 634 CE) was the literal successor (*khalifah*) of the prophet, but the rulers after him were usually simply called *amirs*.<sup>135</sup> The rulers of the early days claimed no special rights or privileges.

The Egyptian mufti also points out that the quest for knowledge (*talab al-'ilm*) is the equivalent of jihad. If the Egyptian radicals wish to denigrate that quest, that is a kind of “call for illiteracy and primitivism”.<sup>136</sup>

In looking for antecedents to Faraj and his colleagues, al-Haqq in his ninth point suggests they seem similar to the Khawarij, or the Kharijis, an early fundamentalist/extremist sect, which viewed many of the companions as apostates; a charge no one today would take seriously. “They viewed every Muslim who committed a sin as an unbeliever,” which, if carried over to today’s world, would condemn everyone.<sup>137</sup>

In conclusion al-Haqq asks in his tenth point, is jihad really a *farida gha'iba*, a neglected duty? He argues that the Quran and Sunna do not command Muslims to attack other Muslims or non-Muslim compatriots. The state today has the army to defend the country and religion. It would be better for a citizen to conquer “oneself and Satan.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 59, 60.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 60.

Unfortunately, the later leadership of the *Gama'a* found themselves having to make some of these very same points twenty years later in their *Initiative*. It reminds me of Economist Paul Krugman's despair over having to rebut the same "zombie arguments" over and over again.<sup>139</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya in Usama Bin Laden's *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places* (1996)

Before we proceed into the decades commencing with the 1990s, it is useful to sketch out very briefly some ideologues/radicals or authors who had an effect on Usama Bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and the later Islamic State (IS). Four near now ideologues stand out (and in fact others could be added—but these examples are sufficient for now). They are, in something like a chronological order: Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (b. 1941, assassinated in 1989), Abu Musab al-Suri (real name, Mustafa Sitmiriam Nasar, or Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sitmariam Nasar, or Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir al-Rifa'i, captured in Pakistan and rendered to Syria by the U.S., probably killed by the Syrians in 2005), Abu Bakr Naji (or Najji, whose real name may be Muhammad Khalil al-Hukayma, reportedly killed in a drone strike in North Waziristan in November 2008), and "Dr. Fadl" or Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (b. 1950, recanted 2007).<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Paul Krugman, *Arguing with Zombies: Economics, Politics, and the Fight for a Better Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021).

<sup>140</sup> Regarding Abdallah Azzam, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 53-54, 76; Ahmad S. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: Operational Realities and Innovations of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 68, 75-76; and Glenn Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 24-25, especially 40-44, and 68-69. Regarding al-Suri, see Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zarqawi, The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005), 185-187; William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 29, 51-52, 86-87; Hashim, 144; Robinson, 136, 139-140, 143, 147. Regarding Naji, see McCants, 82-84, 87; Gerges, 34-41; Hashim, 171, 247-250; Robinson, 100-103. Regarding Dr. Fadl, see Gerges, 34-35, 38, 92.

Abdullah Azzam, an influencer of both Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, engaged in a clear-cut, doctrinally straightforward (i.e. defending the *umma*) call for Muslims to expel the Soviet invaders from Afghanistan and participated in various ways in the 1979-1989 CE war there.<sup>141</sup> Azzam's renown spread far and wide in the Arab world. His call and similar calls from others were answered by thousands of volunteer fighters (*mujahidin*), who came to Afghanistan and Pakistan and were supported by Saudi Arabian funds, Pakistani logistical lines, and so forth. Zarqawi said that when he was still in Jordan, "We used to receive audiocassettes recorded by... Abdallah Azzam... He had a great influence on my decision to engage in jihad."<sup>142</sup>

One of Azzam's quotes was, "Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues." That quote was echoed in the position of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the Algerian civil war of the mid-1990s. Their paraphrase was, "No agreement, no truce, no dialogue." As we shall see, from 2014 to 2019, the IS followed a similar policy.

Following the 1989 expulsion of the Russians from Afghanistan, in the absence of the common enemy, as often happens, the jihadi factions fell to arguing amongst themselves regarding where to take the fight next. Azzam favored increasing operations in the Israel/Palestine theatre. He was killed in a car-bombing in Peshawar in 1989, perhaps arranged by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (b. 1949), an unsuccessful opponent of what became the Taliban with his own group, the Hezb-e-Islami. Hekmatyar changed sides a dizzying number of times and it isn't clear that he killed Azzam. The latter had plenty of other enemies. Azzam's call to action dovetailed with Ibn Taymiyya's general position: that if there are foreign invaders, combatants from all over the *umma* should come forward to push the enemy out.

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<sup>141</sup> Gerges, 53-54; Hashim, *Caliphate*, 75-76; Robinson, 24-25, 40-60.

<sup>142</sup> Hashim, 75.

Abu Musab Al-Suri was probably the most unusual of the near now ideologues, with wide-ranging ideas. He had an extensive resume which started with the 1980 Islamist uprising in Syria, which was bloodily put-down. In addition he probably had some connection to the 1995 Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA)-associated bombings in France, the 2004 attacks in Madrid, and the 2005 bombings in London.<sup>143</sup> His thought includes some western and I would even say Leninist elements: he believed in a vanguard of extremists who will lead the way, and embraced the label of terrorist—which most Islamists and jihadis/Salafis seek to avoid.<sup>144</sup> He had no problem with attacking completely civilian targets, and called for small-group or individual (*jihad fardi*) actions, even without an organization (*nizam, la tanzim* in his quote—which might loosely translate to “a method without an organization.”)<sup>145</sup> Glenn Robinson identifies al-Suri’s strategy as the beginning of what he calls “the fourth phase” of the contemporary global jihad. He envisions small-group and individual actions as continuing beyond the collapse of the 2014-2019 incarnation of the IS.<sup>146</sup>

The precedent for this kind of small group/lone wolf action in Islamic history would be the *inghimas* attack: “plunging into the enemy,” of which Ibn Taymiyya approved, and about which he wrote a tract.<sup>147</sup> The Damascus jurist, however, only approved of this action in two specific categories: a) a battlefield situation, and b) what today we would call an assassination, which might involve the sacrifice of the attacker’s life. Al-Suri took *inghimas* in a different direction, referring

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<sup>143</sup> Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005), on al-Suri and the Madrid bombings, 185-187. Robinson on al-Suri in general, 124-144, Madrid bombings, 134.

<sup>144</sup> Glenn Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) vanguard, 126-128; terror, 129-130, 133-135.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 126-128, 144, 147.

<sup>146</sup> I address this idea in more detail below.

<sup>147</sup> See also pp. 64, 65 of this thesis. Glenn Robinson (2021), who otherwise supplies a rather detailed summary of al-Suri’s life, misses this antecedent.

to individuals or small groups who will strike without warning. For al-Suri, inflicting civilian casualties was not only permissible, but the more, the better.

In al-Suri's conception, attackers will be identified with no known group—at least initially. He called this beneficial because if the initiators of action belong to no fixed organization, then security organs in the Arab world and beyond the Arab world can't degrade and wipe out those organizations, can they?

Al-Suri was also unusual in that he urged jihadi-Salafi elements learn from their mistakes, and learn to cooperate—something which we will shortly see the IS was absolutely unable to do. He was not afraid to criticize the jihadi/Salafi leaders, calling Bin Laden “a pharaoh,” etc.<sup>148</sup> He considered the 9/11 attack a strategic mistake.<sup>149</sup>

The al-Suri call to action guarantees that there is no organization to be disrupted, but it *is* dependent upon the call to action, the “consciousness raising” or we might say radicalization of perpetrators, and finally, that a “beacon” somewhere continues to send out the signal. I believe Glenn Robinson correctly suggests that this strategy can supply a continuing progression of bloody incidents, but ultimately, it seems to this author like a dead-end. When do these “lone wolves”—some of them being small wolf-packs—finally claim territory, and set-up or take over a state? Apparently never. In other words, they never reach al-Naji's stage—described below--of controlling territory and supplying services. Therefore, there is a teleological problem to al-Suri's program: is there any positive end result to this strategy?

Robinson, writing in 2020 or 2021, worries that returning *jihadis* (i.e., after being defeated in Iraq and Syria) will follow al-Suri's game-plan and unleash a series of bloody attacks in Europe

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<sup>148</sup> Robinson, 125.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

and North America, but it is now nearly four years since al-Baghdadi was killed (October 2019), and in fact the opposite has happened: “lone wolf” attacks have decreased--though certainly any commentator or observer worth his or her salt will expect there to be more in the future.<sup>150</sup> Also, in order for the “unorganized” to attack, there still needs to be a beacon and ongoing radicalization. So the fears voiced by Robinson seem misplaced—at least for the present.

Abu Bakr Naji wrote a galvanizing tract called “The Administration of Savagery” (2004), which delineated three distinct phases of waging jihad, culminating in a stage (*shawkat al-tamkin*) in which the rebel forces begin to control territory and provide services. It is this kind of more specific agenda rather than (for example) the rambling letters and vociferations of Zarqawi which provided essential underpinning for the Islamic State project.

Following six years after the 1982 demise of Muhammad al-Faraj, Dr. Fadl provided a lengthy tome, “The Essentials of Making Ready [for Jihad]” (1988), which he described as a kind of “training manual” for the next stages of jihadi rebellion.<sup>151</sup> In *Essentials*, Fadl carried forward the Qutbian/Faraj exposition—that is to say, current rulers in the Arab world were corrupt, had brought the land back to a state of ignorance, etc., and prescribed specific measures for training and action. After various personal vicissitudes, Fadl recanted while in jail in Egypt and in 2007 published *Rationalizing Jihadist Action*. Thus, with similar exhortations to action, and later, with a similar recantation, in both cases Fadl followed *Gama’ a* manifestos and initiatives by about five years. He

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<sup>150</sup> Robinson’s fear: in particular, 140, but generally, 140-144.

<sup>151</sup> Also useful to consult regarding Dr. Fadl and other ideologues/extremists, but very brief, is Peter A. Tortorici, Major, USAF, “The New Global Jihadist: Extremist Reassessments of Violent Jihad in a Changing Middle East” (Research Report, *Air Command and Staff College, Air University*, 2011).

recanted before the Islamic State reached the zenith of its expansion in 2014 and 2015. His *Rationalizing Jihadist Action*, in which he describes his change of heart, makes a clear reference to the idea of the common good favored by Ibn Taymiyya and other jurists: do the benefits of proposed actions outweigh the harms that will be done? He urges the assessment of the common good must be specific and thorough.

We can see while there is no “master plan,” there are certainly overlapping arguments and programs, some with great specificity, and some inchoate.

Moving on to Bin Laden, considered within narrow and specific confines, his *Declaration* is a very Taymiyyan document, for its aversion to *fitna*, civil strife; for its focus on foreign incursion and the need to repel it; and for its stress on identifying the more harmful threat—that stress demonstrating a relativist, rational approach to challenges.<sup>152</sup>

There were many communiqués, letters and declarations issued by Bin Laden in the period from 1996 to May 2, 2011, but here I’ll discuss only his August 1996 *Declaration*. Bin Laden’s also rather lengthy November 2002 letter repeats many of the same themes, but without references to Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>153</sup>

I don’t argue here that Bin Laden was justified in this action or that. My focus is on how a modern activist and Islamist used the works of this jurist from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Did he decontextualize Ibn Taymiyya? How close has he kept close to the Damascus jurist’s original language and intentions?

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<sup>152</sup> The *Declaration* was first published in the west in *Al Quds al-Arabi*, August 1996, London. There are many problems with English word usage, redundancies, etc., in this translation. Where I correct a word or words, I’ll so indicate.

<sup>153</sup> “Full Text: Bin Laden’s Letter to America,” *The Guardian*, 24 November 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>.



For North Americans, especially after the passage of nearly thirty years, it is worthwhile to review the context of Bin Laden's 1996 document, which did not have to do primarily with the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, nor with the Arab-Israeli (or Palestinian-Israeli) conflict—though that is mentioned repeatedly, but with the 1993 establishment of U.S. bases in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia pursuant to the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait (January-February 1991). Bin Laden asks: how can the policymakers of the kingdom tolerate the establishment of foreign (and in his view, “non-Muslim”) bases in the land of the two sanctuaries (*haramayn*)? It is of course useless to argue that Muslim personnel were also among those foreigners stationed in Saudi Arabia—Bin Laden's arguments are broad-brush arguments. The presence of these bases cannot be permitted. Furthermore, he charged that the extra-territoriality granted to U.S. and allied personnel was a “substitution of man's law for God's law.”

The *Declaration* is a rhetorical text of a type well-known in the Arab world; shrouded in Quranic references, containing quotes of traditions (sayings) of the prophet, providing a litany of current-day wrongs (occupation of Palestine by the Zionists, sanctions against Iraq, presence of “Christian” forces in Saudi Arabia) and finally urging action against the “common” enemy. In many passages it is more like a poem in its cadence.

Contrary to what some North Americans might remember—after all, a ‘declaration’ usually has no need to be prolix—this document is in fact twenty-six pages long. It contains a number of rhetorical arguments, references, and exhortations, but what is pertinent is that nowhere does Bin Laden demand that the king be removed or another kind of government instituted. He is not rebelling against the king. The fact that Bin Laden demands action against the foreign forces (whether characterized as the “Zionist-Crusader alliance,” or the “the great *kufir*,” disbeliever, etc.) but taking care to urge the Saudis to avoid internal strife or civil war (*fitna*), is one of the aspects

that hold Bin Laden’s argument close to those of Ibn Taymiyya. He is largely influenced by the jurist’s three anti-Mongol *fatwas*.<sup>154</sup> Yet unlike Faraj, Bin Laden makes only very narrow and pointed references to Ibn Taymiyya; he is precise in what he wants. He makes no broad accusations against the monarchy, he makes no demands for a new caliphate.

Bin Laden’s point is not that the king needs to be overthrown; he merely needs to heed the urgings and pleas of right-thinking subjects. According to him, the king and his government made repeated errors. The people needed to resist “the oppressive and illegitimate behavior and measures of the ruling government.”<sup>155</sup> A merchant commented: “—the king is leading the state into a sixty-six-fold disaster.”<sup>156</sup> A letter requesting corrective measures was sent to the king immediately following Gulf War I in May 1991, but it was not heeded.<sup>157</sup> A “memorandum of advice” was handed over to the king in July 1992, but was also ignored.<sup>158</sup> King Fahd repeatedly misrepresented or lied about what was happening regarding the stationing of foreign troops, which policy according to Bin Laden needed to be corrected and reversed.<sup>159</sup>

Internal strife (*fitna*) was to be avoided at all costs.<sup>160</sup>

The *Declaration* cites Ibn Taymiyya two times. The first reference is in paragraph eight:

[I am speaking now] ...After a long absence, imposed on the scholars [*‘ulama*] and callers [*da‘is*] of Islam by the iniquitous crusaders’ [*salibiyyin*] movement under the leadership of the USA; which fears that they, the scholars and callers of Islam, will [incite] the *umma*

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<sup>154</sup> Hoover, 141, 142. Bin Laden uses nearly one whole page from the first and shortest anti-Mongol *fatwa*, probably composed in early 1300 CE: MF 28: 501-508. See also Denise Aigle, 302.

<sup>155</sup> I will cite the *Declaration* by paragraphs. *Declaration*, para 12.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, para 13.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, para 18.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, para 19.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, para 50.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, paras 39, 46.

[community] of Islam against its' enemies as their ancestor scholars--may Allah be pleased with them—Ibn Taymiyya and ‘Abdul ‘Aziz ‘Abdu-Salam did.<sup>161</sup>

The term crusaders, *salibiyyin*, of course hearkens back to the medieval presence of the European orders and armies in Palestine and adjacent areas. Bin Laden urges: just as our ancestors resisted the crusaders, so today the Arabians and others should resist the establishment of foreign bases, the stationing of foreign military personnel, the imposition of foreign laws or foreigners not being subject to “our” laws.

Back to the *Declaration*: since Ibn Taymiyya was active in a period when the Islamic world and in particular the Arab world were under severe threat, facing the Mongol invasions, his name and exhortations are employed frequently when activists today search for an appropriate response to egregious injustice. Or another way to put this would be: it appears that invoking the emotionally-charged and perilous period of the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries serves well in raising temperatures today, even 722 years later. As we have seen elsewhere in this work, Ibn Taymiyya was a well-known public personality of his time, urging the Mamluk Sultan to bring soldiers to Syria, urging resistance to the Mongols, and serving himself as a soldier more than once.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, para 8. No author is cited in connection with translation. I put “incite” instead of the “instigate” of the original translation. In the original rendering there are several places with problematic English word usage. ‘Abdul ‘Aziz ‘Abdu-Salam (various spellings, 1181-1261 CE), refers to the scholar and jurist, mostly living in Damascus and Cairo known for a) forbidding the sale of weapons to Crusaders coming to Damascus, b) urging the sultan in Cairo to free officers still officially in slave status administering state affairs—which in his opinion should only have been handled by free men, and finally, c) upon the ascension of Sultan Sayf ad-Din Qutuz in 1258 CE, Abdu-Salam was instrumental in strengthening the resolve to reject the Mongols’ demand for submission, but told Qutuz he could only raise taxes (for the purpose of war) if, after turning over his own and other Mamluk leaders’ wealth, funds were still insufficient. For the first two judgements the jurist landed in hot water, at some points being put under house arrest, etc. In some ways, his career anticipates that of Ibn Taymiyya. See article (no author cited), “Al-‘Izz Ibn ‘Abdu-Salaam,” Islamweb.net, 1 Sep 2016, <https://www.islamweb.net/en/article/136057/al-izz-ibn-abdu-salaam> .

The second lengthy quote is:

The right answer [i.e., to our situation today] is to follow what has been decided by the people of knowledge, as was said by Ibn Taymiyya [Allah's mercy upon him]: "People of Islam should join forces and support each other to get rid of the main unbeliever [lit. *kufir*] who is controlling the countries of the Islamic world, even to bear the lesser damage to get rid of the major one, that is the great unbeliever."<sup>162</sup>

[Bin Laden continues:] If there is more than one duty to be carried out, then the most important one should receive priority. Clearly after belief [*iman*] there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the holy land. No other priority, except belief, could be considered before it. The person of knowledge, Ibn Taymiyya, stated: "to fight in defense of religion and belief is a collective duty; there is no other duty after belief than fighting the enemy who is corrupting the life and the religion. There are no preconditions for this duty and the enemy should be fought to the best of one's ability. [Ref: supplement to the *Fatawa*].<sup>163</sup> If it is not possible to push back the enemy except by the collective movement of the Muslim people, then there is a duty on the Muslims to ignore the minor differences among themselves. The ill-effect of ignoring these differences, at a given period of time, is much less than the ill-effect of the occupation of the Muslims' land by the main unbeliever." Ibn Taymiyya explained this issue and emphasized the importance of dealing with the major threat at the expense of [bearing with] the minor one. He described the situation of the Muslims and the Mujahidin and stated that even the military personnel who are not practicing Islam are not exempted from the duty of Jihad against the enemy.<sup>164</sup>

In the second paragraph Ibn Taymiyya's calm, rational, and we might say relativistic approach is clear.

The last sentence comments on a matter brought up also by Faraj in his *The Neglected Duty*, but Bin Laden follows Ibn Taymiyya's meaning, whereas Faraj does not. The jurist's position is that if certain individuals or groups are not doing their prayers, or some of them even drink wine, or some of the leaders do not obey every law and guidance of the *shari'a*, that's bad, but this is an

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<sup>162</sup> *Declaration*, para 35.

<sup>163</sup> Unclear reference, but to some section of the *MF*.

<sup>164</sup> *Declaration*, para 36. This seems to be the passage referred to by Hoover (141, 142) identified as *MF* 28: 501-508 (see also footnote 158, op cit). I have taken the liberty of correcting the English word usage and grammar where appropriate. Al-Faraj in his *Neglected Duty* takes a different view, presenting quotes asking for recruits who are full of zeal, heedful of the Sunna, etc. See *The Neglected Duty*, para 134, pp. 225-227.

emergency, there's no time to quibble about such matters. The invaders should be repelled, and once the threat is neutralized advisors can urge the leaders to refrain from misguided acts; this soldier or that can be exhorted to perform his prayers; or the wineshops might be closed. This is an accurate rendering of Ibn Taymiyya's views on repelling invaders. Faraj in his *The Neglected Duty*, however, in a rather puritanical way urges that fighters in the cause of Islam should be high-minded, devoted, and so on.<sup>165</sup>

Bin Laden goes on to say:

[Ibn Taymiyya], after mentioning the [Mongols] and their behavior in changing the law of Allah, stated that: "the ultimate aim of pleasing Allah, raising His word, instituting His religion and obeying His messenger [blessings upon him] is to fight the enemy, in every aspect and in a complete manner. If the danger to the religion from not fighting is greater than that of fighting, then it is a duty to fight them even if the intention of some of the fighters is not pure; i.e. even if some of them are merely fighting for the sake of being the leader, or if some of the fighters do not observe some of the rules and commandments of Islam. To repel the greatest of the two dangers at the expense of [bearing] the lesser one is an Islamic principle which should be observed. It was the tradition of the people of the Sunnah [*ahl al-Sunna*] to stand together and go to war with both righteous and non-righteous men. Allah may support this religion with righteous and non-righteous people as has been told by the prophet [peace be upon him]."<sup>166</sup>

If it is not possible to fight except with the help of non-righteous military personnel and commanders, then there are two possibilities: either fighting will not take place and the others [Ibn Taymiyya means the Mongols], who are the great danger to this life and religion, will take control; or there will be fighting with the help of non-righteous rulers, therefore fending off the greatest of the two dangers and implementing most, though [perhaps] not all of the Islamic laws. The latter option is the right duty to be carried out in these circumstances and in many other similar situations. In fact, many of the fights and conquests that took place after the time of *Rashidun*, the rightly-guided imams [Ibn Taymiyya refers to the first four caliphs], were of this type. (MF 26: 506).<sup>167</sup>

The reference in the first paragraph to 'changing the law of Allah' is to the fact that the Mongols—even after Ghazan (r. 1295-1304 CE) nominally converted to Islam—maintained the

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<sup>165</sup> *Duty*, section 136, p. 226.

<sup>166</sup> *Declaration*, para 37.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*.

*yasa* or administrative and military law of Genghis Khan. This is what Bin Laden calls “substituting the laws of man for the laws of God,” and of course must be rejected. Maintenance of the *yasa* appeared to be emblematic to Ibn Taymiyya and others of what was wrong with the Mongol government and leadership. I have addressed this already but the subject of the *yasa* and how the Arab and Mamluk thinkers and leaders (Sultan Baybars and others) rejected it is central to the repudiation of Mongol rule in Ibn Taymiyya’s age.<sup>168</sup>

Bin Laden in his day states that the legal extraterritoriality of allied personnel stationed in the kingdom is also an example of “substituting the laws of man for the laws of God.”

In the same paragraph: regarding the motivation of the leaders, even if they are merely fighting because they are the leaders, in the middle of the crisis, Ibn Taymiyya doesn’t care. Again, the motivations and shortcomings of those on the side of the defenders can be sorted out later. Even those who were only nominally Muslim needed to join the fight. Who was the better Muslim could be argued about later. Ibn Taymiyya’s reasoning was pragmatic and focused on getting results—in his time, winning the war.

The jurist saw the Mamluk regime—perhaps not completely accurately, but arguing forcefully—as “the last holdout” of the Muslim world. He either didn’t know or didn’t view as powerful enough the Muslim administration of the Indic subcontinent, and since the Seljuk Turks had already offered their submission to the il-Khans, they had already acquiesced to the destructive, non-faithful Mongol rule. Similarly, and Ibn Taymiyya in his *fatawa* refers to these countries and regions specifically: Yemen was too weak to resist, and western Arabia had no coherent forces ready to fight. In his argument, North Africa west of Egypt was fragmented and not prepared to resist any army of the magnitude of the Mongol forces, and Muslims in Iberia were barely holding

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<sup>168</sup> See the first section of this paper.

on to what they had (in fact they were losing ground in this entire period).<sup>169</sup> Thus, the Mamluk forces were “the last and best hope for Islam.” Hence Ibn Taymiyya’s reference to the Mamluks as the “victorious group,” *tai’fa mansoura*, a Quranic quote.<sup>170</sup> That is: they will be victorious against the Mongol invaders.

The spirit of the Ibn Taymiyya fatwa is followed in that if the Saudi king and advisors acknowledge mistakes were made and correct course, all will be well. If the policymakers do not take action, then Bin Laden will place his hope in the “youth who do not fear death.”

It is worth pointing out that by April 2003, U.S. policymakers realized that having these bases in Saudi Arabia—with whatever motives, and however rationalized--was too incendiary, and the facilities were removed, though cooperation between Arabian and U.S. forces continued. According to polling not only Saudis but citizens throughout the Arab world opposed any such forces being stationed in Saudi Arabia.<sup>171</sup> In 2003 U.S. forces were moved to such facilities as al-Udeid Airbase near Doha, Qatar, which to this day hosts significant functions of Centcom, the U.S. command dealing with the Middle East.

#### *The Initiative to Stop the Violence (2002)*

By the mid-1990s, most of the original Egyptian *Gama’a* leadership—or as they call it, “the historical leadership”—was captured and in jail.<sup>172</sup> In 1997 the same leadership read out a statement

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<sup>169</sup> Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Empire Between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History* (Leiden, Brill, 2014), Chapter 13: p. 298. The reference is from Ibn Taymiyya *Collected Fatawa*, 28:533. See also p. 18 of this thesis, footnote 43.

<sup>170</sup> There are many invocations of this title by Ibn Taymiyya. See again Aigle, 298.

<sup>171</sup> Julie Ray, “Opinion Briefing: U.S. Image in Middle East, North Africa,” Gallup, 27 January 2009. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/114007/opinion-briefing-image-middle-east-north-africa.aspx>. See the reference to pulling out of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>172</sup> The “historic leadership” responsible for the *Initiative* consists of Karam Muhammad Zuhdi, the main leader, and ‘Ali Muhammad ‘Ali al-Sharif, Hamdi ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Azim, ‘Asim ‘Abd al-Majid Muhammad, Najih Ibrahim ‘Abd Allah, Usamah Ibrahim Hafiz, Fu’ad Muhammad al-Dawalibi, and Muhammad ‘Isam al-Din Darbalah.

renouncing violence and in 2002, all of them, still in jail, issued a footnote-laden and scripture-based argument filling-out their new position: the *Initiative to stop the Violence*.<sup>173</sup> This document, published in English in 2015 in a Yale-sponsored series, gives several justifications for turning to a peaceful path, and it includes several references to Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>174</sup>

Unfortunately, and this is not the first time in this research this has happened, Sherman A. Jackson in his 2015 work already made the observation I was hoping to claim as my own: that the *Gama'a* in their 2002 *Initiative* used some of the same Quranic, *hadith*, and Taymiyyan sources as Faraj used in his 1981 *The Neglected Duty* justifying the assassination of Sadat and other attacks.<sup>175</sup> In other words, Taymiyyan positions or purported positions were used to justify violent acts, and in the statements of the late 90s and 2000s were quoted again to urge that they cease. And the leadership also found several new Ibn Taymiyya quotes to use.

This happened also in the works of Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, known as “Dr. Fadl,” an early Egyptian mentor of and associate of al-Zawahiri. He was the author of “The Essentials of Making Ready [for Jihad]” (1988), who recanted in his 2007 work, “Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World,” (hereafter *RJA*, 2007).<sup>176</sup> Dr. Fadl was also originally connected to the *Gama'a*. He initially argued that *jihad*, whether against local apostates or distant enemies, was a *fard 'ayn*, obligation on all Muslim males over the age of fifteen, but in 2007, in a Taymiyyan argument,

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<sup>173</sup> Usamah Ibrahim Hāfīz, and Jamā'ah al-Islāmīyah. *Initiative to Stop the Violence : Sadat's Assassins and the Renunciation of Political Violence*, trans. Sherman A. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>174</sup> There are many articles and discussions of the change of heart of the *Gama'a Islamiyya* leadership. See for example Hoover, 142-143.

<sup>175</sup> *Initiative*, Introduction, 48.

<sup>176</sup> Mentioned previously. See also: Saer El-Jaichi and Joshua A. Sabih, “Preventing Harm: Refutation of Militant *Jihad* in ‘Revisionist Literature.’” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 1 (2022): 46–59. See also Gerges, 34-35, 41.



argues that the greater good must be evaluated.<sup>177</sup> In other words, jihadi impulses should be subjected to a rational evaluation process. Are jihadi acts effective, are they useful, do they yield results? I have already observed Dr. Fadl's positions closely track with the arguments and then recantations of the "historic leadership" of the *Gama'a*. Since the *Initiative* lays out these same arguments in greater detail, let's keep our focus on the *Gama'a*.

I should make a quick note in passing that the specificity of footnotes within the hundred-page *Initiative* is inconsistent. Quranic verses and *hadith* are given number and verse, but some jurists including Ibn Taymiyya are only referred to generally. This essay after all was a group enterprise and composed in prison; who knows what sources they had access to. Citation is haphazard.

It is also worth noting that there are many Egypt-centric points in this work, even though the *Gama'a* is ostensibly a group concerned with issues pertaining to the entire *umma* or Islamic community. Some passages state that Egypt should retain her capabilities as a "front-line adversary" against the Zionist entity; Egypt should maintain her prestige as the premier power of the Arab world; and Egypt should maintain her position as a country which is respected.<sup>178</sup> Do such points bring into doubt the authenticity of the whole work? In other words, were the *Gama'a* leaders sitting at a table somewhere with pistols pointed to their heads?

Dealing with citation difficulties as best we can, I'll proceed to the basic arguments of the *Initiative*, but with special attention to its use of Ibn Taymiyya. Regarding common good versus common harm, paragraph 12 refers to the Damascus jurist's use of Quran 2:219: "They ask you about wine-drinking and games of chance. Say, in them is great vice, along with benefits for

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<sup>177</sup> El-Jaichi and Sabih, 50-52.

<sup>178</sup> *Initiative*, paras 57-63, 71-74. But especially para 62. Does this sound like the statement of a group defending the *umma*?

people, but their vice is greater than their benefit.”<sup>179</sup> Ibn Taymiyya was not known for his calm responses to backgammon and chess. There was for example the Cairo incident concerning him shaking a chessboard and turning it over on the way to the mosque.<sup>180</sup>

The document returns to Ibn Taymiyya on benefits versus harms a few pages later:

The law came to obtain benefits and perfect them, to obstruct detriments and reduce them. It makes preponderate the best of what is good and the least of what is evil. [It came] to obtain the greatest of two benefits by foregoing the lesser of the two and to repel the greater of two detriments by bearing the lesser of the two. (*MF* 20:48)<sup>181</sup>

Readers familiar with the history of the *Gama‘a* might point out that the turnaround of the leadership was helped along by leadership stints in jail and/or severe treatment by the Egyptian authorities—but what interests me here is the theological basis of the argument. And when we view the *Gama‘a* arguments the matter needs care. The case of *the Gama‘a* and their first advocating one course, then another, shows that the arguments of Ibn Taymiyya can be used in many different ways. And the jurist himself in many cases provides varying recommendations, as in ‘author A suggests this is the path that should be followed,’ but ‘author B suggests this path should be followed.’

Chapter one, paragraph two refers to innovation (*bid‘a*), which is to be avoided at all costs.<sup>182</sup> I have already noted that that concern is not confined to Ibn Taymiyya’s works but is foundational in Islam, stretching back to its earliest days.

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, para 12, p. 56.

<sup>180</sup> Ibn Taymiyya’s combative nature is on full display in that incident, commented on in many sources, but see for example, Hoover, 89. In the incident in question, the jurist was on his way to a mosque in which he had already been physically attacked—but this didn’t deter him from risking starting another fight, in this case on the street.

<sup>181</sup> *Initiative*, paras 32, 33: pp. 63-64. The *Initiative* does not identify the *MF* citation, but it is also in Hoover, 142, 143.

<sup>182</sup> *Initiative*, 52.

When the *Initiative* reaches chapter 1.13, the point is brought up (Quran 2:219) that benefits versus harm must be weighed, with a note that Ibn Taymiyya discussed this very point.<sup>183</sup> Ibn Taymiyya commonly advocates such an appraisal, such as in justifying the use of flawed leaders and soldiers against invaders and enemies of Islam; the benefits outweigh the negatives. He used a similar logic urging that there should be no rebellions against flawed leaders, since the danger and harms of *fitna*, discord or rebellion, usually outweigh any proposed benefits.<sup>184</sup> Of course, another jurist could come to opposite conclusions, based on the specific set of circumstances. The *Gama'a* in these sections is moving at high speed away from what we would call a Sayyid Qutb-type position.

In several early sections the position of Egypt is assessed and viewed to be important; it's importance should not be compromised, etc. But these passages do not appear to accord with the general thrust of the *Initiative*.<sup>185</sup> They may indicate the presence of an outside hand.

In addition to Ibn Taymiyya, the *Gama'a* uses many other jurists in their arguments and observations, some of whom are new to this author, while others are relatively well-known, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi.<sup>186</sup>

The core of the *Initiatives* deals with ten “impediments” to violent action. In other words the *Gama'a* leaders wish to focus on ten mitigating circumstances which indicate means other than war or attacks should be pursued in order to advance Islam and “guide the people.” The points raised

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>184</sup> Abou el-Fadl reviews Ibn Taymiyya pronouncements on this subject in depth.

<sup>185</sup> *Initiative*, 73-75.

<sup>186</sup> Based in Doha till his death in 2022, he was invited at one point to be the advisor to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but he turned the position down. He also famously said that Qaddafi might have to be “sacrificed” during the Arab Spring uprising, meaning: in general he did not approve of rebellions against Muslim leaders, but in this situation it was difficult to “save” Qaddafi.

by the leadership might be raised in connection with all the positions taken (some citing Ibn Taymiyya, some not) by Islamists and Arab militants in our contemporary age. Let's examine these impediments.

The first impediment proposed by the leaders is that for their group, violent jihad will not realize the specified aims. Or to put it another way, in order for violent action to be justified, it must have a chance of success, i.e., the government will change its behavior, the misguided leader will change his path, and so on.<sup>187</sup> At this juncture the group brings in a quote from Ibn Taymiyya: "Killing people, including unbelievers, is a harm. It has only been allowed in view of a [greater] interest."<sup>188</sup> By 1997 the leaders felt it was not likely the desired aims would be achieved, therefore, most if not all violent operations against the Egyptian government and others should be stopped.

The second impediment emerges when fighting conflicts with Guiding Humanity.<sup>189</sup> The *Gama'a* authors make the point here that the ultimate goal is that God's word should prevail, not that there should be military victories, or military action for its own sake. The hadith is adduced that Muslim generals setting out in the first three generations were urged to call possible opponents to come to God before joining battle.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, people of the Book (Christians and Jews) have every right to remain in Muslim-administered lands, as long as they accede to a treaty of protection (*'aqd al-dhimma*), in other words, accept *dhimmi*, or lesser, status.<sup>191</sup> The first inclination when

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<sup>187</sup> *Initiative*, para 89, p. 85.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, para 90, p. 85. Unfortunately, there is no citation for this quote. It clearly derives, however, from one of the jurist's discussions of benefits versus harms, and how such assessments must be weighed carefully.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, para 94, p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, para 97, p. 88.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, para 98, p. 88.

the Muslim community is in difficulties should not necessarily be to fight.<sup>192</sup> The group concludes this section with a quote from Ibn Taymiyya the leaders call “really valuable:”

If two obligations compete with each other and cannot be mutually accommodated such that precedence is given to the more pressing of them, the other ceases to be an obligation. And one who abandons the lesser for the more pressing of these has not really abandoned any obligation.<sup>193</sup>

If the guiding of humanity and placing God’s word first can be accomplished without violent action, there is no need to consider the armed *jihad* a pressing obligation. You usually don’t think to find Taymiyyan quotes employed in such a way.

The third impediment addresses incapacity, in other words, does the group of individuals feeling they have been wronged actually have the numerical or material capacity to realize their aims through violent action?<sup>194</sup> In cases where the odds against the wronged are overwhelming, there is no obligation to take up the sword. Ibn Taymiyya is quoted here (rather unexpectedly): “Physical capability, capacity, and potential are all implied stipulations in every affair. God said [Quran 64:16], “Be mindful of your duty to God to the extent that you are able. And He said [Quran 65:7], God places on no soul an obligation greater than the capabilities He has granted it.”<sup>195</sup>

Or in concrete terms, is the urge to wage violent opposition practical? Because many scholars suggest if violent attacks only result in the deaths of the believers, the action is futile. A quote of Ibn ‘Abidin (d. 1836 CE in Damascus) is cited: “[In addition to the ability to wield weapons, there is] the physical capability to fight, procure supplies, and secure transportation... otherwise the

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, para 99, p. 89.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, para 101, p. 90. This quote is also in *Expounds*.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, paras 102-104, pp. 90, 91.

<sup>195</sup> The *Gama‘a* gives no specific attribution of this quote in the *MF*.

obligation falls, because the degree of obedience required is commensurate with the amount of potential possessed. So ponder this.”<sup>196</sup>

The fourth impediment refers to self-destruction, such as has attended the actions of many *Gama'a* projects and attacks.<sup>197</sup> The point here is that many jihadis state that martyrdom for Islam is pleasing to God. But God also said in Quran 2:195: “And do not cast your hands into self-destruction.”<sup>198</sup> At first glance this would be taken as a proscription against suicide, but by extension it would also apply to actions which result in the martyrdom of Muslim soldiers and resisters. Do the benefits to be obtained outweigh the cost in Muslim lives? The leaders cite many examples and arguments denouncing a focus on martyrdom for its own sake, and especially where there is faint hope of victory. One example:

[Some jurists approved of martyrdom] where there is an interest to be served thereby and where it leads to victory. As for instances where his plunging [into the ranks of the enemy] will simply lead to his death, accompanied by an increase in the audacity of the enemy and a sapping of the strength of the Muslims, there is no way to permit this. And were we to imagine that someone would permit it, this would only apply to an individual member of the army. As for the entire group that is dedicated to the cause of God and calling [others] to His religion plunging itself into enemy ranks only to be killed with no hope of realizing victory or elevating the word of religion, it is unimaginable that this would be permitted under any circumstances.”<sup>199</sup>

On the subject of “plunging,” *inghimas*—which we already touched upon with respect to the policies of the radical al-Suri—a whole literature is devoted to this subject, debating its meaning, and it is worth clarifying some of the particulars. Rebecca Molloy—although her essay is

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<sup>196</sup> *Initiative*, para 104, p. 91.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, para 109, p. 93

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, *ibid*. From the Quran.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, para 112, p. 94. Regarding plunging into enemy ranks, see also Rebecca Molloy, ‘Deconstructing Ibn Taymiyya’s Views on Suicide Missions,’ *Combating Terrorism Center* 2:3 (2009), 3, and Bozzano, ‘Radical Polymath’ part II, 8. *Religion Compass* 9/4 (2015): 117–139, Molloy points out that the jurist’s tract says nothing about attacking civilians. See also the earlier section of this work dealing with *The Neglected Duty*.

polemical and even screedish—reviews a forty-eight page work by Ibn Taymiyya, *A Principle Regarding Plunging into the Enemy, and is it Permitted?* Which has been repeatedly used and perhaps mis-used by Salafists and jihadis.<sup>200</sup> The Ibn Taymiyya work identifies the following scenarios (Molloy’s translation) where a majority of scholars might support “plunging,” *inghimas*:

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.<sup>201</sup>

This clearly refers to a battle—military against military—situation, with no question of civilian involvement, casualties, or strictly civilian targets.

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.<sup>202</sup>

This apparently refers to an assassination type of action, perhaps but not necessarily in a public setting. Ibn Taymiyya may have been thinking of some of the actions which took place during the early days of the four righteous caliphs, in which apostate leaders around the Arabian Peninsula were attacked and killed. The meaning here is that the attacker, while obtaining the desired result, would almost certainly be killed himself.

And finally:

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.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Rebecca Molloy, “Deconstructing,” 3.

<sup>201</sup> Malloy, 2.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. There are no excerpts from this text, by the way in the *Expounds* anthology published in Saudi Arabia, so I am very grateful to Rebecca Molloy for giving us selected passages from this text.

Again, this clearly refers to a battlefield situation, military against military. And the jurist concludes: The aforementioned scenarios are all “permissible according to most scholars of Islam who belong to the four schools of law, and others.” It is important to note that in typical way he specifies that these kinds of *inghimas* would be acceptable to “most” scholars. Maybe not to all of them. These opinions are not unanimous. And these examples do not at all touch upon the question of possible Muslim casualties occurring during an *inghimas* operation, which he would almost certainly have condemned. He would have been even less enthusiastic about killing women and children, much less attacking strictly civilian gatherings. Molloy also points out that in the examples Ibn Taymiyya gives, one is probably killed by the enemy, one doesn’t kill oneself. Therefore, in the Ibn Taymiyya examples the adjuration of the Quran not to turn oneself to self-destruction is not disobeyed.<sup>204</sup> Molloy’s work is quoted by Elliott Bazzono and Charlie Winter.<sup>205</sup>

As we see in the overall trend of the discussion by the *Gama’a* historical leadership, the concept of *inghimas* in its original context pertains to military battles and struggles, and even there it would necessitate a rational weighing by the commanders of benefits and harms. Without being tedious, it is worth pointing out that in the majority of the attacks of the Islamic State, as collated and described by Winter, say in Ninevah province in Iraq in the 2015-2016 period, even in the battlefield context, the attacks appeared to have no benefit when they could not be backed up by conventional attack, or when not supplemented by in-depth defense.<sup>206</sup> In other words, to put it simply, *inghimas* attacks cannot win a war or turn the tide of a war.

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<sup>204</sup> Molloy, 3.

<sup>205</sup> Bazzono, op cit. Charlie Winter, “War by Suicide: A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State’s Martyrdom Industry.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 2017.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29440>.

<sup>206</sup> Winter, section 2.



The standard literature describing *inghimas*, such as Ibn Taymiyya's essay, would in no way appear to sanction attacks such as the November 1997 attack in Luxor, Egypt, which was strictly upon civilians, including women and children.

The fifth impediment refers to the presence of Muslims among a non-Muslim populace, and also extends to the general question of wounding or killing women and children.<sup>207</sup> The relevance of these topics is clear, since in attacks we have seen in the last thirty years, such as 9/11, and the November 1997 attack on tourists at the Temple of Hatshepsut, women, children and persons of all faiths perished. Here the *Gama'a* leadership brings in a quote directly from the Quran (48:25) regarding the Treaty of al-Hudaybiyah (January 628 CE):

And were it not that you might trample upon believing men and believing women of whose presence you were unaware, by which action you would bring shame upon yourselves unwittingly [God would have permitted you to press your cause] that God might bring into His mercy whomever He pleases. Had they distinguished themselves from the others, We would have chastised the Unbelievers among them with a grievous chastisement.

The meaning here is that God stayed the hand of the Muslim army, which would have clashed with the enemy in Mecca, lest that army harm and kill Muslim believers among the population. Distilling this and several other references down, the *Gama'a* leadership argues that when there is a chance of harming believers, whether they are prisoners, or living in an enemy city, or in whatever other case, the target should not be attacked or destroyed.<sup>208</sup>

The *Initiative* goes further and cites al-Shawkani (probably Muhammad al-Shawkani, 1759-1839 CE), Malik (probably Malik Ibn Anas (711-795 CE), and al-Awza'i (probably Abd al-Rahman al-Awza'i, 707-774 CE) to the effect that it is also not permissible to kill women and children in general, whether believers or non-believers.<sup>209</sup> Obviously, if one concurred with these

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<sup>207</sup> *Initiative*, p. 96.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, paras 119, 120, p. 97.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, para 124, p. 99.

jurists and Islamic thinkers, the 9/11 attack, the 1997 attack on the tomb of Hatshepsut, and many other incidents would have been precluded.

The Sixth impediment discusses putative opponents who declare the testimony of faith, repent their apostasy, or rebels who accept legitimate authority.<sup>210</sup> This segment would have only limited application to the actions contemplated or carried out by the *Gama'a* in Egypt. After all, it was the *Gama'a* elements who were the “rebels.”

In this connection, the *Initiative* narrative (para 125) quotes al-Bukhari hadith 1335:

I have been commanded to fight the people until they declare that there is no God but God. Thus, whoever declares that there is no God but God has rendered his property and his person safe from me, except by lawful right, and his ultimate reckoning rests with God.<sup>211</sup>

The *Initiative* translator and commentator Sherman A. Jackson supplies a very pertinent footnote to this hadith, citing Yusuf al-Qaradawi as observing that when the hadith refers to “the people,” this probably does not mean “all the people of the world;” in other words, that there would not be a kind of open-ended or endless jihad against everyone. The utterance probably referred very specifically to the polytheists of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian Peninsula.<sup>212</sup> Al-Qaradawi supplies a forceful quote from Ibn Taymiyya on the matter:

This [i.e. the war-against-the-entire-world rendering of the hadith] would violate scripture and unanimous consensus. For he [the prophet] never did this. Rather, his way was to refrain from fighting those who conducted themselves peacefully towards him.<sup>213</sup>

This hearkens back to the Quranic line 8:61, “And if they incline towards peace, you too incline towards it.”

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p. 99

<sup>211</sup> *Initiative*, para 125, p. 99-100.

<sup>212</sup> See also al-Haqq commenting on *The Neglected Duty*, earlier in this work.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 154-155, fnote 35. Jackson cites Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-jihad*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, (1430/2009), I: 327-37, esp. 1: 327 and I: 335. Unfortunately, the actual *fatwa* or opinion of Ibn Taymiyya is not identified. The passage does not appear in the *Expounds* compilation.

The seventh impediment discusses the problem of harms or setbacks resulting from armed conflict being greater than the desired benefits; or when the benefits forfeited are greater than those that were to be secured.<sup>214</sup> The leaders argue that whatever designs were proclaimed or demanded after the fact, *Gama'a* attacks drove a wedge between the Christian and Muslim communities, sullied the name of Islam, threw the *Gama'a* into disrepute, benefitted external enemies (particularly Israel and what is vaguely called “the west”), and finally, of course did not result in a change in leadership in Egypt or even a change in policies.

Although Ibn Taymiyya, whom the leaders repeatedly quote in their volume, could not avoid admitting that certain types of rebellion might have been forgivable—such as occurred when the Companions fought against one another; they all had justifications and convictions—his usual response to bad leaders was to recommend correct or better courses of action. On the domestic front, he practiced non-violence. Abou el-Fadl (again, not the jihadi Dr. Fadl) lays out the Taymiyyan precedents for this position in his work, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*, and the jurist practiced what he preached. He believed that ‘the best response to unjust rulers is patience.’ Furthermore, in almost every case, he felt an unjust ruler was better than chaos (*fawda*). He considered fighting fellow Muslims an especially grave offense.

The eighth impediment discusses specific problems in dealing with the people of the Book, and has a special relevance to Egypt.<sup>215</sup> Perhaps ten percent of Egypt’s population is Christian.<sup>216</sup> Reading between the lines, one of the upshots here is, to put it bluntly: *Gama'a* local entities and youths should not shake-down Christian communities, which in some parts of Egypt, particularly

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<sup>214</sup> *Initiative*, p. 101 I have changed the wording of the translation somewhat.

<sup>215</sup> *Initiative*, p. 102.

<sup>216</sup> Estimate in *The World Factbook* (Langley: Central Intelligence Agency, 2006), “Country File, Egypt.”

Upper Egypt, constitute whole villages, for “protection money” using the excuse of instituting the *jiziyah* or tax on minorities.<sup>217</sup> The tax on religious minorities is meant to be implemented with the understanding that the minorities will be left in peace, and protected by the governing Muslim authority. Local *Gama‘a* groups, however, are not the legally constituted authority and thus have no legal authority to conclude any agreement with Egyptian minorities—and for that matter in many of these locales or towns the Christians are actually the majority. Nor are the local *Gama‘a* groups and elements in any position to provide the protection and affirmation of rights which a governing body would possess. Therefore the *Gama‘a* leadership concludes that no so-called taxes on religious minorities should be assessed.<sup>218</sup>

Impediment nine returns to the subject of extending to foes an invitation to turn to or return to Islam, or to accept the tax upon religious minorities, before attacking them, in accordance with the Quranic phrase (17:15), “We would not engage in punishment before sending forth a messenger.”<sup>219</sup> This is the point, by the way, discussed in connection with *The Neglected Duty*, which Faraj made such a muddle of.

Presuming the enemies are some kind of rebels, The *Gama‘a* cites Shaykh al-Mahalli (apparently Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, approximately 1389-1460 CE) in one commentary as going further: there should be an inquiry to the enemy asking if they have some specific grievance, and if they do, the leader should address it. Only afterwards can the enemy be commanded to return to recognizing the leader’s authority, and if they refuse, they can be attacked.<sup>220</sup> In the majority of

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<sup>217</sup> *Initiative*, pp. 102, 103.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, in particular paras 138, 139, pp. 106, 107.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, paras 141, 142; pages 107, 108.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, paras 143, 144; pp. 108, 109.

the *Gama'a* actions the victims or targets were neither unbelievers, rebels (the *Gama'a* elements in fact were the “rebels”), nor apostates.

Impediment ten refers to contracting peace treaties, whether with polytheists during the early days of Islam, or with forces of People of the Book, or with others, and admits there are many varying points of view on this matter.<sup>221</sup> The general impetus towards peace—whether it be temporary or a more permanent one—is again the Quranic line 8:61, “And if they incline towards peace, you too incline towards it.” The *Initiative* quotes Shaykh al-Haskafi (probably ‘Ala al-Din al-Haskafi, who lived in Damascus in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE), however, who says that in the case of apostates, peace can only be concluded if they control a piece of territory apart from the realm of the *umma*, because otherwise this would constitute tolerating apostasy within Muslim territory, which is unacceptable.<sup>222</sup> However, these points notwithstanding, the *Gama'a* leadership affirms that periods of peace and contracting peace treaties between warring factions are permissible.

Moreover, Abu al-Khattab (d. 1116 CE) stated such arrangements can extend as long as ten years and even beyond ten years.<sup>223</sup> The earlier-cited al-Qurtubi has stated the Muslim community can contract a peace treaty with contending parties “whenever they feel a need for it,” as long as the benefits to be obtained surpass any harms which may occur. Al-Shafi‘i and Khaybar and Ibn Taymiyya are referred to as authorities who have confirmed that peace treaties and halts in hostilities may be extended “with no time limit whatsoever.” There is no specific citation verifying Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion on this matter, and thus far I don’t remember him commenting on this subject.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, para 148, p. 111.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, para 149, p. 112. Unfortunately, this is another free-flying Ibn Taymiyya quote.

My sense of it is that, even if the change of the heart of many of the *Gama'a* leaders came about encouraged by long stints in jail and harsh treatment by the Egyptian authorities (and many Egyptian doubters raised these points), the scripture-based arguments raised by the leaders, reinforced by not one but several renowned scholars, including Ibn Taymiyya, are reasonable and substantial. The pragmatic point about the necessity to weigh possible benefits against possible harms has been made repeatedly by Ibn Taymiyya and other jurists. The arguments against killing and wounding women and children, of whatever faith, are not of recent provenance.

Even if the *Gama'a* leaders wrote these points in large part while in jail, the resulting document, though brief, is still impressive. The direction of the group's comments is in accord with a broad scholarly tradition within Islam. If in some places sources are not adequately documented, or there is an occasional anachronistic stress on Egypt, or passages have logic which is only general or even questionable, these points do not fatally damage the *Initiative's* overall arguments.

#### 2003 Bombings in Saudi Arabia

I wish we had more information on this incident, but briefly, citing another attack “justified by” the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, following suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia on 12 May 2003, the perpetrators purportedly quoted a work of Ibn Taymiyya's called *The Jihad*.<sup>225</sup> In that work the jurist purportedly said, “If the infidels take shelter behind Muslims, that is, if these Muslims become a shield for the infidels, it is permitted to kill the Muslims in order to reach the infidels.”<sup>226</sup> The quote may be from an argument of a kind found in the anti-Mongol *fatwas*, in which the jurist suggests if good Muslims are forced to serve in the army of the invaders, and they cannot escape

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<sup>225</sup> Not further identified.

<sup>226</sup> “Saudi Editor-In-Chief Fired Following Criticism of Ibn Taymiyya, Spiritual Father of Wahhabism,” *Memri Special Dispatch* No. 35, 9 Jul 2003, [www.memri.org/reports/saudi-editor-chief-fired-following-criticism-ibn-taymiyya-spiritual-father-wahhabism](http://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-editor-chief-fired-following-criticism-ibn-taymiyya-spiritual-father-wahhabism) .

serving, they should be prepared to die and consider themselves martyrs. Here the perpetrators may have referred to a situation in which a foreign (“infidel”) facility or group was in proximity to or partially staffed by local Muslims. Or the rhetoric may derive from the idea of “plunging into the enemy,” a point this paper already discussed in connection with Faraj’s *Neglected Duty* and the *Gama’ a Initiative*. But the first example refers to a battlefield situation, and regarding “plunging,” we have already seen that Ibn Taymiyya felt that such operations were permissible only in strictly defined circumstances. In addition, several jurists through the ages proscribed endangering or killing civilians (whether Muslims or non-Muslims) in the course of attacking enemies.<sup>227</sup> It is doubtful either Ibn Taymiyya or other famous jurists would have approved of the 2003 bombing, which involved civilian casualties.

After the editorial of the daily *al-Watan* in which Khaled al-Ghanami opined that “We have a problem with Ibn Taymiyya,” the editor of the daily, Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi was dismissed. This was the same Khashoggi who was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018. The meaning of Khashoggi’s being sacked would appear to be that in Saudi Arabia in 2003 it was not permissible to have “a problem” with Ibn Taymiyya, who is viewed as having had a major influence on al-Wahhab, whose variant of Islam is the guiding light of Saudi Arabia. One wants to ask, is it possible today to have such problems?<sup>228</sup> Certainly it is possible to have a problem with some of the readers of Ibn Taymiyya.

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<sup>227</sup> The *Gama’ a* leaders go over this point in some detail, *Initiative*, sections 109-124. Al-Qurtabi, Ibn al-‘Arabi, al-Shawkani and others are quoted to buttress the argument that Muslim civilians or for that matter any civilians should not be endangered.

<sup>228</sup> Writing in 2019, Muhammad Abdul Haqq Ansari at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University calls Ibn Taymiyya a *mujaddid*, but “he was not a prophet; he could make mistakes,” *Expounds*, xxiv.

## Ayman al-Zawahiri to Musab al-Zarqawi (2005)

Centering Iraq as the major incubator of the Islamic State and movements like it—a tendency I hope is now receding—necessarily includes the danger of making Musab al-Zarqawi more of a pivotal figure than he really was.<sup>229</sup> Jean-Charles Brisard (2005), Brian Fishman (2016), Ahmed Hashim (2018) and Nibras Kazimi (2017) lean towards such thinking.<sup>230</sup> I believe Fawaz A. Gerges (2014, 2016, 2017) is more useful with his broad-based view, describing the appearance of the Islamic State (hereafter IS) in the early 2010s as arising from the “broken politics of the Middle East,” which of course would include the failure of local regimes to deliver on economic advancement, the failure to give the people a voice (in other words, these are limited-access regimes, as Robert Springborg and others describe), and so on.<sup>231</sup> After 1950 in many of the countries referred to in this thesis there was a feeling of loss of identity, and resentment of being in a hybrid culture, etc. In other words, there were “system-wide” problems extending from Morocco to the Iranian border; or indeed throughout the Islamic community, which created fertile ground for instability and rebellions, exacerbated of course in Iraq in 2003 by foreign invasion.

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<sup>229</sup> Gerges, *ISIS*, regarding Zarqawi: 63-91. Gerges also is interested in Zawahiri’s letter to Zarqawi. See also Peter Admirand, review of Fawaz Gerges, “ISIS: A History,” *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 233–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26300492>, and Fawaz A. Gerges, “ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism,” *Current History* 113, no. 767 (2014): 339–43.

<sup>230</sup> Brisard, *Zarqawi*, op cit.; Fishman, *The Master Plan*, referred to earlier; Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*; Nibras Kazimi, “What Was That All About? Flawed Methodologies in Explaining the Origins of ISIS (2003–2013),” in works by Brian H. Fishman, Fawaz A. Gerges, and Graeme Wood,” *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 8, no. 2 (2017). Kazimi’s review is very useful—although I disagree with many of his characterizations and statements—particularly the early section where he discusses the analyses of Fishman, Gerges, and Wood. For some reason Kazimi valorizes journalists and interviewers out in the field, and appears to deprecate Gerges, even though the latter has read all the interviews and is familiar with most of the jihadi leaders and theorizers. Of all the “IS *in media res*” tomes, I believe that of Gerges is one of the best. Brisard unfortunately rushed his volume into print in 2005. If he had waited another year, he could have wrapped up his biography with the 2006 death of Zarqawi.

<sup>231</sup> Gerges, *ISIS*, and *ISIS and the Third Wave*, 339; Robert Springborg, *Political Economies of the Middle East & North Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).



Accordingly, I contend that when situating Zarqawi in a meta-narrative of renewal, resistance and rebellions since Sayid Qutb's *Milestones* (1964) it is imperative that his program and utterances not be given a coherence they didn't possess.<sup>232</sup> He was not a jihadi following a studied grand design, as Brian Fishman suggests in *The Master Plan*. There was no master plan—but the human heart wants things to be simple. It is true that Abdallah Azzam, the Palestinian who encouraged Muslims to go to Afghanistan to fight, and who was in 1989 killed in Peshawar, had a major effect on Zarqawi.<sup>233</sup> Zarqawi probably also read Naji's *Administration of Savagery*. But there was no “newness” in the style of Zarqawism, contrary to Nibras Kazimi's 2017 characterization.<sup>234</sup> Zarqawi's “style” embodied centuries-old prejudices, particularly against the Shi'a, was sustained for a time by improvisation, but was finally terminated by his own recklessness. He spoke of the resurrection of a caliphate, but as in the case of the assassins of Sadat (1981) there was no specificity or exposition of details. His case I believe is another example of why a community-wide and longer *durée* perspective serves us better than a breathless narrative set only in one decade, focused on one locale. Also, no number of proclamations of the forming of “Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” the “Islamic State in Iraq and Sham,” the “Islamic State” and so forth, can obviate the fact that the majority of the population of Iraq are Shi'a. Sunni insurgent groups, however deadly and/or ruthless, would tend to be confined to the central thirty percent of Iraq—which is exactly where Zarqawi operated, and where the Islamic State made its spectacular eastern

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<sup>232</sup> For example, Zarqawi in a 2004 letter blithely states, “In a general sense Iraq is a political mosaic, a country where the ethnic groups are mixed together and where there exist side by side various confessions and sects...” This is vague and dishonest. He doesn't want to face the fact that the Kurds constitute fifteen to twenty percent of the population, and the Shi'a sixty-one to sixty-four percent. See Brisard, 234-235.

<sup>233</sup> Hashim, *Caliphate*, 75. We have already spoken about Azzam at some length. More on him in the *Dabiq* chapter, below.

<sup>234</sup> Kazimi, 166.

advance to capture Mosul. For the purpose of this thesis, however, al-Zawahiri's epistle is useful because it brings out several commonalities among these radical and rebel groups. Let's examine its Taymiyyan themes:

One might question the utility of including notes on this fourteen-page letter from al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, written moreover in the midst of ongoing hostilities in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but al-Zawahiri provides us with a well-reasoned and cogent missive, presenting Ibn Taymiyya as an example of restraint and focus whom Zarqawi would do well to emulate, and touching on several tactical problems al-Zarqawi faces.<sup>235</sup> I can't help but wonder, if Zarqawi had only heeded several of the points raised by Zawahiri, wouldn't he have been a much more serious threat than he was to the coalition forces? But I'll comment no further on that. The reference to Ibn Taymiyya, though brief, is pointed and part of a consistent argument made by Zawahiri.

Zarqawi saw himself as a classic *mujahid*, ultimately aiming to install an Islamic caliphate or something similar to it in Iraq, but later he sponsored several attacks against Shi'i personalities, institutions and mosques—some of them very famous ones, igniting what began to look like a civil

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<sup>235</sup> *Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi*, "Global Security Org," Homeland Security Section, date of inclusion unknown: [https://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter\\_9jul2005.htm](https://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm) . Letter of July 9 2005. Henceforth referred to as *Letter*, cited by paragraph or section. Ayman al-Zawahiri: b. 1933, originally affiliated with the Egyptian GI in the days leading up to the assassination of Sadat, later number two of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, still a leader in al-Qaeda after the death of Usama Bin Laden 2 May 2011; killed in a U.S. airstrike in Kabul 31 July 2022. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: Jordanian, a leader or the leader of "al-Qaeda in Iraq," associated with several grisly killings of hostages, and bombings of Shia facilities and mosques, killed in a U.S. airstrike 7 June 2006. Regarding Zarqawi, see also Jean-Charles Brisard, op cit.; and Ahmed S. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*, 90. Hashim may be a better writer of short articles than of books; he seems to over-stress Zarqawi's importance—but that dovetails with his focus on Iraq as a battlefield involving Islamic radicalism. He gives only a very cursory reference to this letter.

war in the Shi'i majority country. Zawahiri and others saw these later actions as questionable military strategy, as well as less than sound theology.

Three aspects of this letter commend themselves to our attention: a) Zawahiri's use of Ibn Taymiyya, b) his remarks in passing on "the Shi'a problem," and not at all least for the purposes of this thesis, the necessity or lack of necessity of establishing a caliphate, a question Ibn Taymiyya addressed with such caution.<sup>236</sup>

Regarding Ibn Taymiyya, although his remarks are clothed in praise and encouragement, Zawahiri urges Zarqawi to consider the broad swath of Islamic history, and to emulate the examples of earlier *'ulama* and *mujahidin* such the Turkoman who ruled in Syria, Nur al-Din Zangi (d. 1174 CE), Saladin (Ayubbid ruler of Egypt and parts of Palestine, nominally loyal to the 'Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad, d. 1193 CE), and (in Zawahiri's view) lesser lights such as Sayf al-Din Qutuz (briefly Mamluk Sultan, d. 1260 CE), Sultan Baybars (d. 1277 CE), et al, leaders who ruled over subjects with differences in theology and legal schools, but who focused on the greater enemy, whether the European crusaders or the Mongols.<sup>237</sup>

It is in the latter connection al-Zawahiri refers to Ibn Taymiyya, who urged Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad Bin Qallawun (ruled several times, d. 1341 CE) to send the army against the Mongol invaders, despite the protests of some contemporaries that the invaders were fellow Muslims. Even during his repeated stays in prison (says Zawahiri), Ibn Taymiyya refrained from criticizing the Mamluk leadership, much less calling for their overthrow (para 45). The implication is that Zarqawi too should "focus on the main enemy," and show restraint.

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<sup>236</sup> On establishing a caliphate, *Letter*, 4.A.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 45.

Zawahiri cautions that without popular support, “the Islamic *mujahid* movement will be crushed in the shadows” (para 29), which is essentially what happened to Zarqawi and the elements aligned with him. Therefore, Zarqawi needs to “bring the masses with him” (paras 37, 38). “He should not separate from the masses” (para 40). The Egyptian expresses his concern over scenes of slaughter and bloodshed, such as horrify the people (para 59). Zawahiri also asks if it wouldn’t be useful to establish Iraqi leaders of the movement, since Zarqawi was Jordanian (para 64).<sup>238</sup>

According to Zawahiri, the expulsion of the Americans must be the first objective. Regarding the Shi‘a (paras 48-54), Zawahiri questions if it is right and effective to open up a second front fighting them when the Americans are still there. Is it useful? Zawahiri’s unease about opening up the front against the Shi‘a is not because he believes fighting them is wrong (para 51)—he doesn’t believe that; merely that it is wrong *at this time*. When the amirate or caliphate or other Muslim state is established, then it will be time to confront and deal with the Shi‘a.

Emblematic of the above concern, Zawahiri asks how can Zarqawi or elements allied with him attack the mosque of the fourth caliph (and first Shi‘a imam, para 54), ‘Ali? Such acts “will not be acceptable to the Muslim populace.” And the Shi‘a are still Muslims.

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<sup>238</sup> Islamic Jihad as an *umma*-wide endeavor is a fact, but frictions between local fighters and foreign volunteers surface repeatedly. This was also a problem in the later Islamic State, 2014-2019. See Ahmed S. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War; Operational Realities and Innovations of the Islamic State*, 269-271. Parallel to Zawahiri’s remarks, Hodayfah Azzam, the son of the famed Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian responsible for creating the justification for fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan and recruiting foreign fighters to help the mujahidin, understood the dangers attendant upon Zarqawi’s behavior very well. He observed: “Zarqawi is now playing a harmful role in Iraq. Zarqawi is only a guest in its struggle for independence and he should understand that he must not interfere in the domestic affairs of the country by presenting himself to the world as the spokesman for the Iraqi resistance.” See Ahmed S. Hashim, “The Caliphate at War, Ideology, War Fighting and State-Formation,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, issue 1, 24 March 2016, 42-58.

Zawahiri touches briefly on the matter of the capture of purported al-Qaeda number three Abu Faraj al-Libi in Pakistan and cautions Zarqawi to be careful in meeting colleagues, avoiding public places and places he doesn't know.<sup>239</sup>

Zawahiri doesn't want actions against the Shi'a to give any benefit or opening to the Americans, who are the greater enemy. Or in Zawahiri's words, Zarqawi should "keep his eyes on the target" (para 57). As far as these specific references and urgings go, these passages could easily have been written by Ibn Taymiyya himself, because the focus here is on a foreign invader. And note that Zawahiri carefully cautions that the Shi'a are still Muslims, which is the position of Ibn Taymiyya.

Regarding the matter of the caliphate, I have already pointed out that Ibn Taymiyya in his lifetime made no calls at all for the restoration of an active and governing caliphate (disregarding the merely ceremonial and completely ignored 'Abbasid caliph maintained in Cairo).<sup>240</sup> He landed in prison because of several other charges. Although the establishment of a caliphate was generally desirable in his eyes, and certainly an obligation (*fard*), the leaders of the *umma* had to make their decisions in accordance with their times, and in light of their priorities. For Ibn Taymiyya, the priority of his time was repulsing the Mongols. Zawahiri urges Zarqawi to maintain a similar focus. All in all, the *Letter* is quite a Taymiyyan document.

Zarqawi did reply, although somewhat indirectly, to Zawahiri's epistle in a September 2005 speech that declared "total war" against anyone cooperating with the new Iraqi government. In the

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<sup>239</sup> Abu Faraj was captured in Pakistan 2 May 2005. The author was in Pakistan on temporary duty at the time and I remember the incident. Abu Faraj was captured in Mardan, I believe in a cemetery, wearing a burka (women's full length covering) as a disguise.

<sup>240</sup> This is discussed in Part One of this thesis.

speech he condemned the Shi‘a with the same rabidity as before. There would be no change in focus for Zarqawi.<sup>241</sup>

I don’t think it is worth a section in this thesis by itself, but a 2010 Bin Laden letter to followers found after the 2011 raid on his compound echoes Zawahiri’s adjurations. In that epistle Bin Laden cautions followers not to be so anxious to establish emirates or caliphates in various locales, “because experience showed that the United States would crush them.”<sup>242</sup> Bin Laden of course did not live to see the eventual triumph of the Taliban in August 2021, but generally, and particularly in view of the fate of various iterations of a caliphate, “Islamic State” etc., in Syria and Iraq, this was good advice. It was also very Taymiyyan: repulse and weaken the foreign forces first, and then consider if the time is right for an emirate or caliphate. Assess priorities and timing carefully. It is also worth noting that the Taliban leaders established a state which only claimed local jurisdiction; they did not announce they were establishing a caliphate which would demand the obedience of the entire Islamic community. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan only aims to be “local.”

#### Ibn Taymiyya in *Dabiq* (2014-2016)

When we come to the Islamic State (IS) in its various incarnations, first as a kind of offshoot of al-Qa‘ida, established in Iraq by Zarqawi and associates, and later gathering strength alongside (but not caused by) the eruption of the Arab Spring, we have an entity which is not a mere local insurgency (indeed, it aims to be “local” everywhere), but a movement, established in its final form

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<sup>241</sup> Gerges, *ISIS*, 80-81. On this exchange in general see also McCants, 12-13; Hashim, 90; Robinson, 93. Overall, Gerges presents a more perceptive evaluation of al-Zawahiri’s letter and what followed.

<sup>242</sup> Gerges, 95. We have to thank Fawaz Gerges for bringing forward this item, which is included among the information available on-line (in Arabic) from the U.S. Director of National Intelligence. Of the crop of “Islamic State *in media res*” authors, he is the only one that seems to grasp the significance of this letter.

(pending new incarnations) in June 2014, whose objective is to establish a whole new kind of state. A state which aims to dominate the entire Islamic world, and eventually, the world, period. At its height the IS controlled parts of Iraq and Syria, and its “lone wolf” sympathizers created scenes of destruction in several far-flung locations. Much scholarship and commentary, such as by Fawaz Gerges (2014, 2016, 2017), William McCants (2015), Nibras Kazimi (2017), Ahmed Hashim (2018) and Glenn Robinson (2021), has been devoted to debating whether the U.S. invasion of Iraq “gave an opening” to underlying Islamist impulses, or whether the Iraqi Shi‘a-dominated government exacerbated the situation by “shutting-out” the Sunnis. There is certainly some truth to both contentions, but I find any explanation which looks at the long-term, overall trends of the region--and Gerges takes this approach—yields the more persuasive explanation of what happened after 2003.<sup>243</sup>

Gerges uses a broad-based approach which acknowledges economic stagnation in several Arab countries, the structural dysfunction of Syria, the endless aggression of the Saddam regime (the biggest victims of that autocracy were not the Iranians or Kuwaitis, but the Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi‘a of Iraq itself), and so on.<sup>244</sup> I find this helpful not only in explaining the motive forces at work behind the rise of Al-Qa‘ida in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, and the IS, but also as a predictor regarding why such movements are likely to continue to appear. In other words, since structural flaws have not been remedied, why won’t there be further similar movements and rebellions as the opportunity arises?

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid, op cit.

<sup>244</sup> For example, twenty-six percent of currently detained Islamic State and other Jihadi prisoners cited poverty as the main inspiration for their recruitment. Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg. “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907414>. This work is very useful.

Returning to Ibn Taymiyya in *Dabiq*, material in this section contains the use of our jurist in the “nearest now.”

The question has been asked whether writers and participants in jihadi and Islamic State enterprises actually believe Ibn Taymiyya and other jurists from Islamic history would have supported their actions, or are these quotes merely *de rigueur* gestures to demonstrate righteousness. And for that matter does it really matter if the instructors of the “caliphate now” ideology believe their program is what the famous jurists of Islamic tradition would have sanctioned? Kazimi suggests the references to Ibn Taymiyya and others are merely pro forma, but my suspicion is that the testimony of Abu Jarir al-Shamali in *Dabiq* 6 (2014, below) is representative: the recruits believe they are being faithful to the values of Ibn Taymiyya and other Islamic exemplars.<sup>245</sup> But the depth of the acquaintance of the fighters and *Dabiq* authors with the judgements and arguments of famous jurists and heroes from history is another matter altogether.

I would go further: if the contemporary purveyors of extremist agendas and theorists of “caliphate now” programs aver their statements are faithful to the spirit of Ibn Taymiyya and other figures, even if we doubt their sincerity, it is still incumbent upon scholars and commentators today to illuminate the positions of the claimed exemplars and respected jurists, and show what they really advocated. Of course, such a mission is unending, and probably thankless as well.

As we might expect, among the key points not addressed by the Islamic State authors are: Ibn Taymiyya argues that resistance to foreign invasion and occupation are legitimate, civil war and fomenting civil strife are not.

The meaning of the gray zone, as discussed for example in *Dabiq* issue 7 (2015), appears to be twofold. First of all, the term fits into the apocalyptic, “end of days” discourse frequently used by

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<sup>245</sup> Kazimi, 170.



IS recruiters and pronouncements, which was so effective in drawing tens of thousands of young men and sometimes entire families from Arab countries and frequently Europe too.<sup>246</sup> The meaning here would be: there's no place in this age for temporizing or reaching compromises with local rulers or foreign powers. If there is a "gray zone," it's urgent that you leave it. On a more traditional level, the phrase may refer to "*dar al-Islam*" versus "*dar al-harb*" model, meaning either there are locales in the *umma* that are peaceful and secure, where no hostilities or combat should take place, or else there are territories and whole regions where war and attacks may take place. And there is no uncertain ground or areas where "the verdict is not yet in." In other words, in the Islamic State's view, "you're either with us or against us."

The matter may not be so clear-cut, however. Ibn Taymiyya in the *Mardin Fatwa*, argued (as we have discussed in Part One) that in some areas a mixed situation may prevail; the rulers may be Muslim, but the inhabitants not, or the area may be in a state of transition. These areas should neither be called part of the "*dar al-Islam*," nor are they "*dar al-harb*." They should be assessed according to the "hearts of the inhabitants" (*hasb qlub al-sukan*). They should not be attacked. In recent times Yahya Michot, Egyptian mufti al-Haqq and others have brought to light these points from the *Mardin Fatwa*. Islamic State authors seem unaware of or ignore these objections.

*Dabiq* authors take for granted Ibn Taymiyya would have approved the launching of a caliphate at the juncture in history when the Islamic State appears. Everything we have reviewed in this paper so far demonstrates that is doubtful. Isn't one of the central takeaways of Ibn Taymiyya's life that he doesn't believe it is useful/productive to seek to establish a caliphate when the people are in the middle of a war with a foreign invader?

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<sup>246</sup> Explanation of this rhetoric and for that matter its limitations and contradictions was documented by McCants in his *ISIS Apocalypse* (2015), cited earlier in this work.

The jurist devotes long passages to ruminations on whether the setting-up of a caliphate is necessary (generally, he feels it is). However, there are conditions under which the time might not be right; the people and their leaders may not sin too badly if they are content with lesser forms of government, and so on.<sup>247</sup> There may be other priorities. No *Dabiq* author examined appears to be aware of or dares to address these points raised in Ibn Taymiyya's *Minhaj al-Sunna*.

Now, of course, the forcefulness of IS arguments for setting up their state at this time do not rise or fall upon their agreement with the works of Ibn Taymiyya, but my point is, since they repeatedly claim to admire his example, and wish to follow it in these times, contemporary scholars and observers should hold them to account for what they say.

The references to Ibn Taymiyya in the Islamic State periodical, *Dabiq*, are chaotic and frequently contradictory, as well as decontextualized.<sup>248</sup> Several axial dilemmas are not faced by the authors, much less resolved: for one, Ibn Taymiyya's views on the difference between resisting a foreign invader, versus engaging in or fomenting civil war. Again, the problem here is not that the fundamentalists and Islamic state advocates have read Ibn Taymiyya, but that they didn't read enough of him, or that they didn't in addition take note of his actual life. That is to say, they have nothing to say about his acquiescence to being repeatedly sentenced to prison, where he eventually perished (i.e., at no point does he advocate replacing the sultan in Cairo). At no point did he rebel against the established rulers of his time. It is important not only to review what the jurist wrote,

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<sup>247</sup> See pp. 35-38 of this work.

<sup>248</sup> There are a number of books and articles on the Islamic State, ranging from the hand-wringing to the dismissive, and back again. Among them would be Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State's Way of War in Iraq and Syria: From Its Origins to the Post Caliphate Era," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 22–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590505>, and also Hashim, *The Caliphate at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). One problem with the subject of the Islamic State, as with all subjects contemporary with the Arab Spring is that one runs the danger of one's book or article becoming instantly out-of-date, because with these topics, we go from the near now to "right now."

but what he *did* in his life—which is another kind of “work,” as all our lives are. That objection notwithstanding, there are some sections where valid points from Ibn Taymiyya’s corpus of work are raised.

*Dabiq* was published over a three-year period, from 2014-2016, and the issues are or were available on-line.<sup>249</sup> Generally, the appearances of Ibn Taymiyya in *Dabiq* are haphazard and unpredictable.

These articles have a breathless nature and velocity: one can almost hear gunfire in the background, explosions, and shouts for more ammunition. Sources are not always clear and for many articles no author is given (reminding me of that Foucault article where he discusses “books with no authors”).<sup>250</sup> There is growing conviction as one reads along that the authors are pressed for time, giving only what references they can remember (perhaps few materials were available). A scattershot method of argument is employed. That being said, there are a handful of quotes and

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<sup>249</sup> Sometimes these issues and related matter are taken off-line by various governments, then some organization or other puts them up again. For *Dabiq*, see [www.leproject.org/projects/dabiq1.pdf](http://www.leproject.org/projects/dabiq1.pdf) et al. Issues of the periodical are available in Arabic, Bahasa (Indonesian), and English. Unfortunately, that web-site was taken down in 2022. Some articles are also useful in connection with examining *Dabiq*, such as: Azani, Eitan, and Francesco Dotti. “The Islamic State’s Web Jihadi Magazine *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.: More than Just Propaganda.” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep37748>. Or, less helpful: Sidq Miqal, “From Ibn Taymiyyah To Daish (ISIS/ISIL),” *The Shia Public Affairs Committee*, 7 February 2015, <http://www.shiapac.org/2015/02/07/from-ibn-e-taymiyyah-to-daish-isisil-by-sidq-miqal/>. Also, but too cursory: Abdulmajid, Adib. “Discourse and Terrorism: Religionization, Politicization and the Incitement of Sectarian Conflicts.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2022): 50–61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27140396>. Regarding Ibn Taymiyya, p. 56.

<sup>250</sup> Foucault says towards the end of this essay: “New questions will be heard... Where does it [the book] come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?” Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 245. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrs61.31>.

references, such as al-Anfal 39 from the *Quran* (discussed below), which turn up again and again, with certain interpretations attached to them. These are examples of “zombie arguments.”<sup>251</sup>

Another way to put it would be that reading *Dabiq* is like watching the television screen with only one side of the screen showing; the complete background of arguments is not given, nuance is lacking. Quotes are given, but what was their original context? Quotations and conclusions are cherry-picked. There are typos and inaccurate citations, some of which I correct below.

The above notwithstanding, however, *Dabiq* was an endeavor with high-level production values; the layout, photography (even if some of the subject-matter is grisly), and presentation are all first-rate. This was no amateur production.

There are several references to Ibn Taymiyya in the issues of *Dabiq*. The jurist is taken without question to be a hero from a time of crisis, not only as a model of resistance to foreign invasion, but as a competent commentator who also served as a soldier (or at least he was at the front during Mamluk anti-rebel actions), and as a diplomat (meeting the entourage of Il-Khan Ghazan and perhaps Ghazan himself), and as a public personality who, in the current popular phrase, “spoke truth to power.” He is even apparently assumed to be an exemplar as a foe of the Shi‘a—but this point is perilous, as has been pointed out in this work. Ibn Taymiyya views the partisans of ‘Ali as still Muslims, they simply need to be called back to the correct path. They should not be, cast out or “otherized.” War should not be declared against them.

Among the troublesome details not addressed or conveniently ignored are: Ibn Taymiyya’s three anti-Mongol *fatawa* were issued in response to a massive invasion of the *umma*, undertaken by non-Muslim forces which had already toppled the ‘Abbasid dynasty. References to Ibn

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<sup>251</sup> See p. 55 of this work.

Taymiyya assume a common worldview and common vocabulary, but the worldviews may not be the same, and the meanings of the words may have changed over time.

Second, as described above, there should be no simplistic division of the world into “*dar al-Islam*,” and “*dar al-harb*.” Ibn Taymiyya explains this in-detail in the *Mardin Fatwa*, yet the *Dabiq* authors embrace the dualistic identification of territories wholeheartedly.

Third, as cited in the *Initiative*, several jurists have argued that Muslim authorities in whatever polity can establish ceasefires and truces with enemies at any time, for as long as they see fit. At whatever juncture you examine, however, Islamic State leaders were unwilling to stop fighting even one enemy group.<sup>252</sup> This was reckless, to put it mildly.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the Ibn Taymiyya called the ‘Alawites “worse than the Christians and Jews” and urged that their leaders be killed off, and that any remaining teachers of their sect be carted off to a remote place “where they can do no harm.”<sup>253</sup> That was in the context of dealing with rebels. Ibn Taymiyya would likely have been horrified to see Syria ruled by the Assad family, but I shouldn’t be speculative.

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyya would have been stunned (but not into silence) to view the spectacle of Israel, since in his time the Jews were only a downtrodden minority, maintaining a low profile. Benjamin of Tudela, for example, visiting Damascus during the reign of Zengid Amir Nur al-Din (1146-1174 CE), about a century before the birth of Ibn Taymiyya, observed that there were only 3000 Jews in the city.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> *Initiative*, “Contracting Peace Treaties,” 110-112. The opinions of Shaykh al-Haskafi, Ibn ‘Abidin, Abu Hanifa, Al-Qurtabi, and others are enumerated in this regard.

<sup>253</sup> “Worse than the Christians and Jews,” Lesch, *op cit*, 2. Regarding the ‘Alawites, killing their leaders, Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 33.

<sup>254</sup> Be it observed, making population estimates for these cities in medieval times is problematic. Manuel Komroff, *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), 281, 282.

I should caution also that I don't claim these *Dabiq* references to Ibn Taymiyya are comprehensive. They are merely the ones I have found in several issues of the periodical; there may be others. But I believe these are representative. We can venture inferences and generalizations from them. In many cases the *Dabiq* authors do not supply the sources of quotes. Where I can identify the sources, I do so in a footnote.

Let's proceed to the Islamic State quotes and arguments.

The first issue of *Dabiq* (14 Jul 2014), "The Return of the Caliphate" explains the meaning of the title of the magazine, citing a hadith from Abu Muslim, describing one of the battles of the "last hour" which will be fought near Dabiq or al-A'maq in Syria.<sup>255</sup> This is not to be precisely the last battle, since the hadith further specifies that the favored people (i.e. the Muslims) will go on to conquer Constantinople, but the meaning surely is that, since the Islamic State in 2014 had de facto jurisdiction over Dabiq and that area, other victories were soon to follow, etc. IS references to "end of times" traditions and myths are recurring and, as we have already observed, had an effect.

It is unavoidable to talk at least briefly about the millennial or apocalyptic aspect of the late Islamic State (2014-2019) pronouncements—such as are made so much of by William McCants.<sup>256</sup> There's no doubt that certain Islamic State spokesmen found "end of times" talk a useful recruiting opener, but the actual references cited by spokesmen and Islamic State authors are largely from

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Benjamin notes, however, that there was a Jewish "University of Palestine" in Damascus, and members of the Samaritan sect could still be found.

<sup>255</sup> <https://sunnah.com/search?q=dabiq>. The source has English and Arabic versions of the text. Battles of the last hour, *Sahih al-Muslim* 2897, book 54, Hadith 44.

<sup>256</sup> Particularly in his *The ISIS Apocalypse* (2015). This book was apparently written between June 2014 to about May 2015, at the "high tide" of the IS conquests, and forms a part of the "IS *in media res*" group of books. It therefore misses the precipitous fall of IS. A snapshot cannot be completely helpful in describing a period of rapid change.

the medieval period, or are contradictory, or are isolated quotes from the voluminous hadith literature, or some combination of all of these. Such rhetoric is tied-up with claims and hopes about the caliphate—which we have seen Ibn Taymiyya addressed in a more sober and cautionary light. What a return of the caliphate would look like and how it would be administered “on the prophetic model” (which is the phrase one hears repeatedly) is a highly divisive topic, and this is reflected in the history of Islamic State pronouncements and discussions. There is no doubt, however, that al-Baghdadi’s spokesmen and writers found such rhetoric useful.

The first noted use of Ibn Taymiyya (my notes/corrections in brackets) is in *Dabiq* issue 2 (27 July 2014), p. 23:<sup>257</sup>

[Regarding] the [miracles] that appear at the hands of the *awliya* [persons close to God, saints], Shaykh al Islam Ibn Taymiyya said in his book *al-Wasitiyyah*, “And [among] the *usul* [principles] of *Ahl-Sunnah* is to believe in the *karamat* [miracles] of the *awliya*.”

This quote actually goes in the opposite direction of the bulk of the Damascene jurist’s observations. He was cautious in his treatment of miracles and wondrous actions, particularly those associated with saints.<sup>258</sup> He was constantly on-guard against charlatans—of which he found many in his time--and those who might be inventing their own doctrines.<sup>259</sup> He says, “Prophets are greater than the saints [literally, friends of God; *awliya*],” meaning, the first priority of the faithful should be to simply hold fast to the practice of the prophets.<sup>260</sup> The saints may occasion miracles,

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<sup>257</sup> From *Internet Archive*. <https://archive.org/details/dabiq-2/page/22/mode/2up?view=theater> .

<sup>258</sup> *Expounds*, 487-490; *Majmu‘at ar-Rasa’il wa al-Masa’il*, 5:2-9.

<sup>259</sup> The statement from the Introduction of this work of the Sufi *murshid* in Tanta, Egypt is pertinent: “They accuse us of not following the customary prayers and practices, but we say we are even more conscientious in following them.” The meaning is, the Sufis anticipate the warning that they better not deviate from standard devotional practice. See p. 22 of this work.

<sup>260</sup> *Expounds*, 479; the general section in the *MF* is 11: 221-61.

but the saints are in the final analysis to be measured by how close they approximate the behavior and devotion of the Prophet.<sup>261</sup>

In *Dabiq* issue 4 (11 October 2014), the article, “Tawhid and our duty to our parents,” (no author cited) states, “the monotheist [*muwahhid*] should always obey and respect his parents.”<sup>262</sup> But then later, “among the sins forced upon children by parents is the neglect of *fard ‘ayn jihad*—the obligation to wage *jihad*.”<sup>263</sup>

The author continues:

Shaykh al Islam Ibn Taymiyya said, “If the enemy plans to attack the Muslims, then repelling him becomes obligatory upon all those even not about to be attacked, so that they [those Muslims not in danger of being attacked] support them, just as Allah said, “And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help, and just as the prophet ordered the Muslims be supported.”<sup>264</sup>

Leaving aside the lack of Quranic and Ibn Taymiyya citations, this is a good use of Ibn Taymiyya, as far as it goes. The context in the *shaykh*’s time was that the Mongols were attacking Syria repeatedly. Any forces of the *umma* which were available should come to the aid of the frontline locales; specifically, the Mamluk army should come and defend Syria. In the Islamic State context, the U.S. and allies had invaded Iraq, Russian bases were in Syria in Tartus and Qamishli (as of 2023). This article of course does not touch on the central question of the suitability of trying to establish a caliphate, is this the time, etc. Regarding the obligation of jihad, the author

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 485-487; *Ar-Radd ‘ala al-Mantiqiyyin*, 514-516. More on miracles, 488-490; *Majmu‘at ar-Rasa’il wa al-Masa’il* 5:2-9.

<sup>262</sup> *Majmu‘at*, 14.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 15, second column.

<sup>264</sup> *Dabiq* 4 (November 14, 2014), p. 16. The Quranic quote is al-Anfal 8:72. The unknown author is unable to supply a reference for the Ibn Taymiyya passage, it is *MF* 28: 349-60, also found in *Expounds*, 547, 548.



may have read Dr. Fadl’s *Essentials*, which argues for the “jihad against everyone, everywhere” posture—something Ibn Taymiyya would have rebutted.<sup>265</sup>

Very briefly: *Dabiq* 5 (21 Nov 2014), “Remaining and Expanding” (or more usually, “Enduring and Expanding;” two recurring IS themes) in describing the situation on the Arabian Peninsula, the section on Yemen, expresses the regret that “the dominant methodology” (i.e. of the fundamentalists) “was one that forbid the targeting of the [Shi‘i] Houthis because they were allegedly Muslims.”<sup>266</sup> The unknown author implies they should have been targeted. This is reckless talk. Ibn Taymiyya specifically cautions that the Shi‘a are Muslims, they should not be called unbelievers, nor should they be treated as such.<sup>267</sup>

In an article in *Dabiq* 6 (29 Dec 2014), “Al-Qaeda of Waziristan; a testimony from within,” one Abu Jarir al-Shamali (or Ash-Shamali) notes that while still in Jordan (the author is presumably Jordanian) he learned with comrades from the al-Tawhid group from such books as al-Maqdisi, Ibn Taymiyya (no particular works specified), Ibn al-Qayyim (student of Ibn Taymiyya), and others. Zaraqawi “was like an amir for us.”<sup>268</sup> There is not enough here to discuss in detail, but the reference does speak to the ubiquitous nature of the assumption of Ibn Taymiyya’s concurrence for the general IS program and establishing of the caliphate.

*Dabiq* issue 7 (12 Feb 2015), entitled “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy, the extinction of the Gray Zone,” contains the article, “Islam is the religion of the sword, not of Pacifism,” a rather tedious essay reviewing that the roots of the word “Islam,” as in ‘to submit to God,’ the word “peace,”

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<sup>265</sup> See Mufti al-Haqq on this same point pp. 52-53.

<sup>266</sup> *Dabiq* issue 5:

<https://www.wrldrels.org/special%20projects/jihadism/dabiq.%20issue%205.%20remaining%20and%20expanding.pdf>, p. 27.

<sup>267</sup> *Expounds*, 553-554; *MF*, 3:345-55.

<sup>268</sup> *Dabiq* 5, 40. Abu Musab al-Zaraqawi (d. in air-strike, June 2006): discussed earlier in this thesis.

*salam*, all have the same roots (*sin, lam, mim*).<sup>269</sup> No author is cited in this work but it does have extensive quotes from Ibn Taymiyya on the same subject, including his famous quote: “The basis of the (Muslim) religion is a guiding book and supporting sword.” And he said that, no doubt about it. But he also repeated the hadith, “Religion is sincerity and well-wishing.”<sup>270</sup> The aim of the *Dabiq* author’s quote is to emphasize the need for the sword, but this is a haphazard argument. Those who prefer to see Islam “as a religion of peace” still have points to cite.

The entire Mardin fatwa of Ibn Taymiyya is devoted to arguing that in many zones and regions, the situation isn’t as clear cut as “zone of Islam” or “zone of war.” The *Dabiq* authors aren’t having any of such reasoning. In fact, most of issue 7 focuses on banishing any such proposals.

Later in issue 7, “The Extinction of the Gray Zone” argues that Muslims can either be with the Caliphate, or else they are the enemy. In this connection, Ibn Taymiyya is quoted as a basis or one basis for acting violently against Christians and others:

The [justifications] for the nullification of the dhimmi’s covenant [are] if he curses Allah, his book, his religion, or His Messenger. And the obligation to kill him and kill the Muslim who does the same are: the Quran, the Sunnah, the *ijma*’ [consensus] of the *sahaba* and the *tabi’in*, and analytical deduction.” [from *As-Sarim al-Maslul*.]<sup>271</sup>

This thesis already gave one example of the early foray of Ibn Taymiyya into the matter of punishing those who curse the prophet or defame Islam.<sup>272</sup> And a little later:

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<sup>269</sup> *Dabiq* 7, 20-24. In a May 2015 recording IS leader al-Baghdadi repeats the Islam a religion of the sword theme: “O Muslims, Islam was never for a day the religion of peace,” etc. Gerges, 252. This would be the argument—debunked by Yusef al-Qaradawi and many other jurists and Islamic experts—that offensive jihad should be endless.

<sup>270</sup> “*Religion* is well-wishing,” is repeated by Ibn Taymiyya three times. The quote is from: <https://sunnah.com/search?q=religion+is> Sunan an-Nasa’i 4199 book 39, hadith 51. The key term here is *al-nasiha*: sincerity, encouraging interaction with others, exhorting, etc.

<sup>271</sup> Regarding this early work of Ibn Taymiyya, see also p. 13 of this thesis. It is interesting that the Islamic State authors call on Ibn Taymiyya in this matter, when there are so many other jurists addressing the same topic. See also: Also [https://archive.org/details/dabiq-7\\_202011/page/58/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/dabiq-7_202011/page/58/mode/2up?view=theater)

<sup>272</sup> Following Hoover, 9-10.

[Ibn Taymiyya also said:] “Sometimes the hypocrites say to the believers, ‘what has become of us is due to the bad luck you bring with you, for you called the people to this religion, fought them over it, and opposed them.’ This was the statement of the hypocrites to the believers from the Sahabah. Sometimes they say, ‘you told us to remain and stay here on this frontline until now, and if we had left before, we would not have been harmed by this calamity.’ Sometimes they say, ‘you--despite your small numbers and weakness—want to break the enemy? You have been deluded by your religion’... And sometimes they say, ‘You are crazy and without intelligence! You want to destroy yourselves and the people with you!’ And sometimes they say different kinds of extremely harmful speech.” [MF].<sup>273</sup>

Although the Ibn Taymiyya quote is not familiar, where this is all going is that the *Dabiq* author is making a connection between the above sentiments and the “secularist” and “democratic” military factions in Syria opposed to the Islamic State. According to the author, the groups opposed to the Islamic State hope to shelter in a kind of “gray zone” where they can still proclaim themselves Muslims, but in many cases they seek help from the foreign, *kufir* powers. The author condemns the whole idea of there being a “gray zone.”

In *Dabiq* 8 (30 Mar 2015), the article, “Returning,” justifies fighting local professing Muslims who do not follow all the laws or do not follow them as the Islamic State believes they should. In this connection, a lengthy Ibn Taymiyya quote from the anti-Mongol *fatawa* is brought in.

The Shaykh of Islam Ibn Taymiyya said that he was asked about the issue of fighting the Tatars while they claim to follow the basic principles of Islam. [He said:] “Any group which professes to be Muslim but which rejects the clear and definite Islamic laws of these or other people, it is obligatory to fight them until they submit to its laws, even if they recite the *shahada* and follow some of its laws, just as Abu Bakr [may God be pleased with him] and his companions fought those who refused to pay *zakat*.”<sup>274</sup>

<sup>273</sup> *Dabiq* 7, 63-64. Another free-flying Ibn Taymiyya quote.

<sup>274</sup> *Dabiq* 8, p. 45, second column. See <https://archive.org/details/dabiq-edisi-8-hanya-syariah-yang-akan-mengatur-afrika/page/38/mode/2up> . This copy is in Bahasa language. Regarding Ibn Taymiyya’s position, see also Denise Aigle, *A Religious Response to Ghazan Khan’s Invasions of Syria. The Three Anti-Mongol fatwas of Ibn Taymiyya*, in “The Mongol Empire Between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 287, 288. The Abu Bakr reference is to *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 37, hadith 4. See <https://sunnah.com/search?q=abu+bakr+fighting+group+didn%27t+pay+zakat> Be it noted, there are many variants of this hadith.

The *fuqaha* [jurists] 'after splitting agreed on this'. He [Ibn Taymiyya?] then said, “So any self-defense group [*ta'ifa mumtani'a*] who opposes some of the obligations of prayer, fasting, hajj, or opposes obeying the prohibition against shedding blood, seizing property, wine, gambling, incest, or against jihad against the disbelievers or the application of *jizya* [tax] to the People of the Book [i.e. to Christians and Jews], or obeying in addition to religious obligations and prohibitions, those laws which no one has excused themselves from being [ignorant of] or abandoning [certain laws] and where an individual commits disbelief by refusal, the group which defends itself is fought on the basis of these laws even if they outwardly protest they believe in all of them.”<sup>275</sup>

These passages appear to be revving-up to yet again justify attacks on the non-IS rebel forces in Syria and Iraq. At one point they are discussing the “refusers,” which would be the Shi'a.

*Dabiq* volume 8 (30 March 2015), “Shari'ah Alone will Rule Africa,” contains the Ibn Taymiyya reference to those who were lacking in some areas of belief nevertheless being required to participate in struggles against invaders; “the above narrations indicate that the hypocrites could participate in jihad and could even be decisive in the victories of some battles.”<sup>276</sup>

The text continues:

And the Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya said, [Quran 2:8] “There are some among the people who say, ‘We believe in God and the day of judgement,’ but they are not believers. They pray with people, they perform the Hajj and participate in wars. Muslims and hypocrites marry and inherit from each other.”<sup>277</sup> [MF]

This is a kind of echo of sentiments voiced in *The Neglected Duty*; that hypocrites must be rooted out or else admit their errors and subscribe to Islamic State views. Ibn Taymiyya's attitude, however, as reviewed in earlier parts of this thesis, was that in the moment of crisis, anyone who wanted to fight on our side was to be welcomed

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<sup>275</sup> Unclear reference, but probably from the anti-Mongol *fatawa*.

<sup>276</sup> *Dabiq* 8, 52. <https://archive.org/details/dabiq-edisi-8-hanya-syariah-yang-akan-mengatur-afrika/page/52/mode/2up>. On the Ibn Taymiyya side, there are many variations on this argument, but for one see *MF* 26: 506. Ibn Taymiyya says something similar about leaders in *Siyasa Shari'a* 30, per Hoover, 100.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* In this case the *Dabiq* author identifies the Quranic quote correctly. Where in the *MF* this is is unknown.

In *Dabiq* 10 (13 July 2015), in “The Allies of al-Qa‘ida in Sham Part III,” an unknown author lambasts rebel groups opposing the Islamic State in Syria using several Ibn Taymiyya quotes.<sup>278</sup> Be it observed, “allies of al-Qa‘ida in Sham” is said ironically. The author believes that this group or that claims to be aligned with al-Qa‘ida, but they are really “hypocrites.” The argument of the unknown author is that Zahran Alloush and others sold out and compromised their Islamist credentials by talking to representatives of the U.S. and other powers. In some instances the accused praised secularist objectives.

Untangling the names and leaders of all the condemned groups is no easy matter, but the IS author identifies the following groups as enemies: the Jaysh al-Mujahidin; the Syrian Revolutionary Front (Jabhat Thuwwar Suriya) led by Jamal Ma‘ruf; the Islamic Front, led by Zahran Alloush (killed in an airstrike, 25 Dec 2015), and the Jawlani Front, apparently a reference

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<sup>278</sup> *Dabiq* 10, 6-13. See [https://archive.org/details/dabiq\\_10/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/dabiq_10/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater).

to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham led by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (b. 1982), currently (June 2023) the dominant force in the province of Idlib.<sup>279</sup>

Alloush in 2015 made several statements backing away from the call for an Islamic state, and endorsing (without specificity) some form of democracy, while Jawlani and his group are condemned in *Dabiq* on several other points, one of them being his attack on some Druze after proclaiming he would not persecute minorities.<sup>280</sup> In this connection guidance from Zawahiri (at that point he was the al-Qa'ida number one; the guidance apparently referred to is not his letter to Zarqawi, but some other communication—notice again how all these factions and groups stay in touch with each other) is quoted to the effect that non-Muslim groups should be left alone as long as they do not attack the *ahl al-Sunna*—in this case meaning the Sunni Islamist groups.

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<sup>279</sup> Regarding Jamal Ma'arif or Jamal Maarouf, see Liz Sly, "The Rise and Ugly Fall of a Moderate Syrian Rebel Offers Lessons for the West," *The Washington Post*, 5 Jan 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/the-rise-and-ugly-fall-of-a-moderate-syrian-rebel-offers-lessons-for-the-west/2015/01/04/3889db38-80da-4974-b1ef-1886f4183624\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-rise-and-ugly-fall-of-a-moderate-syrian-rebel-offers-lessons-for-the-west/2015/01/04/3889db38-80da-4974-b1ef-1886f4183624_story.html). Ma'arif is called a "moderate" rebel leader—the meaning of that being not at all clear. He didn't appear to be active as of February 2023. Al-Jawlani's (alternate spellings Al-Jolani, Al-Joulani) original name is Ahmad Husayn al-Shar'a. The history of Jawlani and his group is complicated, but he was originally sent into Syria by al-Baghdadi to quietly create a force not overtly connected to ISIS. That force was the al-Nusra Front. When in April 2013 al-Baghdadi revealed the group's ties to ISIS, in effect calling for the groups to merge, Jawlani formally swore allegiance to al-Zawahiri and the original al-Qa'ida, in other words splitting ISIS. Jawlani's motives and priorities are complicated and not central to this thesis, but suffice it to say that through several name-changes and reorganizations over the past nine years, Jawlani's group has tried to steer between the competing imperatives of being effective and trusted locally in Syria, while maintaining credibility as a participant in the transnational jihadi movement. Jawlani's group, now named Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was still controlling most of Idlib Province in Syria's northwest as of June 2023. See also Khalid al-Khateb, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military maneuvers in Idlib," *Al-Monitor*, 11 June 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-holds-massive-military-maneuvers-idlib>. Jawlani in *Dabiq*: [https://archive.org/details/dabiq\\_10/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/dabiq_10/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater). Regarding the death of Zahran Alloush, see "Zahran Alloush, Syrian Rebel Leader of Jaish al-Islam, Killed by Airstrike," *Associated Press*, 26 December 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/zahran-alloush-syrian-rebel-leader-jaish-al-islam-killed-airstrike-n486076>.

<sup>280</sup> *Dabiq* 10: 7,8. Perhaps in an isolated case or two hostilities erupted between the two sides.

Jawlani on the same page says simply, “We do not fight those who do not fight us.” According to him, the Druze in his territory did not fight on the side of the government, so he is leaving them alone. The phrase, “We do not fight those who do not fight us” has a sterling pedigree in Islam, being derived from Quranic verse 8:61, which we have encountered several times already: “But if they incline towards peace, do you incline towards it, and place your faith in God.”

The *Dabiq* author, however, isn’t satisfied. He goes on to quote Ibn Taymiyya’s fulminations against the Druze and Nusayris (‘Alawites), who in his time rebelled against the Mamluk authorities, and the jurist subsequently went off with the troops to put down the rebels. The *Dabiq* author presents the quote that the Druze are worse non-believers than the most extreme Shi‘a.<sup>281</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, however, clearly states that the Shi‘a are not unbelievers; they are merely sinners.<sup>282</sup> Regarding the ‘Alawites, Ibn Taymiyya in his anti-Mongol *fatwas* did recommend that their leaders be killed and their adherents dispersed, but this was in response to their rebelling. Such measures would not be a course urged against peaceful ‘Alawite and Druze villages in Syria. It is true that the jurist recommended—in his usual aversion to intermingling between the faiths and sects--that Muslims not sleep in Druze or Nasiriyah homes, walk with them, or follow their funeral processions, much less marry their women.<sup>283</sup> There is much confusion and inconsistency in this *Dabiq* article.

*Dabiq* 10 also contains the article “The law of Allah or the laws of men” (no author cited), which argues there can be no cease-fires or truces with the Safwan front, in other words other anti-

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<sup>281</sup> *Dabiq* 10: 9. This quote must be taken in the context of Ibn Taymiyya’s time, but yes, he made these statements.

<sup>282</sup> “If anyone declares *kafir* any of the seventy-two sects, he goes against the Qur’an the Sunnah, and the Consensus of the Companions and their righteous successors.” The Shi‘a are only sinners. *Expounds*, 557-8; *Minhaj as-Sunnah* 3:62.

<sup>283</sup> *Dabiq*, 10: 8,9. See also Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 16, 33.

government fighters in Syria, whether they are fellow Islamists, secularists, or advocating some kind of “democracy.”

In fact, it would have made good sense for all the anti-Asad forces to sketch out zones of influence in order to facilitate deconfliction. In that way, they could have concentrated on fighting the main enemy, the Asad forces. None of the *Dabiq* authors seem to have heard of the many jurists through Islamic history (some cited in this paper’s *Initiative* section) who pointed out that during conflicts, the Muslim side (however defined) can have truces for as long as it wants, whenever is judged necessary. The *Dabiq* authors aren’t having it.

Thus, this article again goes back to Ibn Taymiyya on fighting the Mongols, who “did not follow the proscriptions and directions of the *ahl-Sunna*.”<sup>284</sup> “Even if these parties profess there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet, if they do not follow the laws, they must be opposed... I know of no difference on these points among the scholars.”

The author here brings up a Quranic quote from al-Anfal, 39: “and fight them until there is no *fitna* and until the religion, all of it, is for Allah.” However, in this work we have already seen repeatedly that several scholars explain this and similar verses as pertaining to specific conditions in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. They are not meant to cover hostilities with anyone—or everyone.<sup>285</sup>

Going after the Jawlani front again, the author complains that that front and other groups are not imposing the *jizya* on the Christians, “so are they ruling by *shari‘a*?”<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> *Dabiq* 10: 56, 57.

<sup>285</sup> See this paper’s sections dealing with *The Neglected Duty*, and the *Initiative*; such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s remarks on p. 69.

<sup>286</sup> *Dabiq* 10: 57.



In our final excerpt from *Dabiq*, also from the tenth issue (13 July 2015), addressing the need to fight everyone, the unnamed *Dabiq* author refers to the need to fight “the heretical parties who forcefully resist adopting the ‘*aqida* (certainty, creed) of the *ahl al-sunnah* concerning the *tawhid* (unity) of Allah’s names and attributes.”

Surrounding Arab rulers backing some of the other factions in Syria are usually called, pejoratively, the *tawaghith* (sing: *taghit*), tyrants, or those worshipping things other than God. This is a term found repeatedly in *Dabiq* and other Islamic State writings. So, asks the unknown author, how can those factions who are even more deviant not be fought? “How is it that those who dignify the *tawaghith* [rulers not following the word of God] ‘Abdallah [refers to the king of Saudi Arabia, d. Jan 2015], Salman al Salul [probably Salman al-Saud is meant; Saudi prince and astronaut], Hamd [sic, probably referring to Hamad al-Thani, ruler of Qatar from 1995-2013], Tamim al Thani [Amir of Qatar], [Turkish Prime Minister] Erdogan, and the Syrian National Coalition... and declare them to be brothers and friends, how are they not to be fought?”<sup>287</sup>

Following this logic, *Dabiq* authors argue they must fight all factions, the Syrian government forces, and all hostile foreign powers (Iran, Russia, the U.S. etc.), without a break, without finding any temporary allies, and unrelieved by any truces or cease-fires. How could this course go well for the IS? By 2020 the IS had lost most of its territory, and thousands of IS fighters had been captured by Kurdish and other forces.

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<sup>287</sup> *Dabiq* 10: 63. <https://abukhadeejah.com/the-meaning-of-taghut-according-to-the-early-scholars/>. *Tughyan* means “to go beyond,” i.e. “transgress,” so leaders are *tughut* who accept bribes, who believe in soothsayers, those who require they (i.e. the rulers) be worshipped, who are tyrants, and so on and so on. Most of these rulers would not be “disbelievers.” In Ibn Taymiyya’s worldview, most of them would merely be sinners.

### Conclusion: Ibn Taymiyya, Still on the Frontier

I see three ways in which Ibn Taymiyya and his meanings will remain vital to the Islamic community. First, and in this regard he is no longer on the frontier: today he is accepted as a figure of monumental consequence in the Islamic world, even if there is disagreement over many of his arguments. Even those who are lukewarm to his conclusions or oppose them call him a “Shaykh of Islam,” a title of praise.

My contention has been that if we approach the writings of Ibn Taymiyya with what we might call a “wide aperture view,” and examine (even if briefly) a range of his writings, we see a jurist, *mujtahid* (person concerned with addressing weighty problems by their own proofs and reasoning), and *mujaddid* (renewer, or, as we would say today, “revivalist”) who grapples with nearly every general topic central to the endeavor of Islam—the status of women, the nature of God, problems in ontology and epistemology, including several topics such as the caliphate, that are of enduring and urgent importance today.

Above all he was pragmatic, realistic, and down-to-earth, attempting to find and consistently adhere to solutions which would protect citizens in his time, defend the *umma*, and yet not ignite civil discord or *fitna*. The more detailed one’s inquiry into his work is, in many respects the more impressive he becomes—which is not to say all Muslims or modern readers will agree with all his conclusions. But he is exhaustive in his citations, and for the most part, consistent in his posture over his more-than-thirty-year career. Several of his arguments, such as on divorce (i.e., that three pronouncements of it at one sitting only constitute one event; in other words, making divorce more difficult), have already been accepted in many Muslim countries and found their way into law.

Secondly, in the public imagination Ibn Taymiyya is fixed on the frontier as a historical figure, as a public personality exhorting the authorities to defend the *umma*. He resided in Damascus

facing the Mongol invaders when they arrived, and even went out to meet them. With other worthies from the city he engaged in desperate diplomacy and saved Damascus from suffering further damage. He also served in the army on more than one occasion. For all these acts, he became emblematic; a hero for Muslims worthy of emulation. I wonder sometimes if this image of Ibn Taymiyya as the defender of Sunni Islam has not had more impact than his detailed writings on the Sunni-Shi'a divide, on the caliphate, and so on. There is frequently a disconnect between this popular image and the jurist's actual arguments.

Finally, and this is related to his image as a hero from a time of crisis, the jurist remains on the frontier and I believe is likely to remain there because, even though he believed civil war and civil strife should be avoided at all costs, some Islamist rebels, jihadis and revolutionaries will continue to champion his meaning and meanings, or claim they are doing so, in many cases taking his image and simplifications of his writings "captive." Those captives need liberating by other jurists, scholars and commentators. They will continue to need liberating.

The extent to which various locales in the *umma* fail to deliver on economic improvement, political inclusion, and rational governance, is precisely the extent to which dissatisfaction will bloom and rebellions of all varieties emerge. Why should they not continue to do so? And Islamist rebels will repeatedly look to and quote Ibn Taymiyya for inspiration.

Political scientists and historians are better at creating models and identifying phases of movements than they are at predicting the future, and that includes this author. My suspicion, however, is that even if the Islamic State in its Iraqi and Syrian incarnation is currently (June 2023) in ruins, advocates of such movements can reappear very quickly. It is likely that they will continue to do so, as the opportunity arises. It follows that the invocation of Ibn Taymiyya's name will

continue to serve as a kind of warning signal that rebellion is breaking-out, and as an indicator that certain justifications will be deployed.

Since the jurist is not alive today to defend his words, it falls to contemporary scholars, members of the faithful, and others to dare to be interlocutors and disputants, assaying the anticipated benefits versus possible harms of campaigns and actions of self-proclaimed followers—just as the Damascus jurist would have done. In many cases, the meanings of Ibn Taymiyya will need “uncovering” or recovering.

Similarly, we should not be afraid to call out colleagues in the realm of journalism or in the scholarly world when they accept the mischaracterizations of some of the subjects of this work who say, “Ibn Taymiyya was a firm advocate of this, or that,” who project contemporary definitions onto writings of the medieval age, or who do both. Of course, taking up these challenges is a task with no end.

There is also a danger of going in the other direction and making Ibn Taymiyya too “reasonable,” or too rational. He was still a citizen of his time who believed that Sunni Islam would eventually dominate the world. For example, when the contemporary scholar Yahya Michot argues that the jurist believed the Muslim ruler should guarantee an intellectual climate where diversity of opinion is protected, that may be going too far. In all my readings for this project, I’ve come across no quote like that (but there may be one). My suspicion is—and I don’t mean to sound flippant—that the jurist believed there should be freely contesting views, until everyone came around to his point of view. Ibn Taymiyya seemed conflicted on the importance of consensus. Although he repeatedly voiced respect for the consensus (*ijma’*) of the jurists and judges through the ages, he still felt free to oppose that consensus, and did so several times.

It is not too much to hope that today there would be representatives in Islamic jurisprudence and theology who can examine all points of view of a problem, who will present multiple possible conclusions in an orderly way, who will speak the truth to power and even be willing to risk imprisonment for uttering such views, but without invoking insurrection, who will rely on encouraging and exhorting (*al-nasiha*) rather than battles and chaos, and who can maintain that all Muslims should find common ground. Ibn Taymiyya also represents all those things.

I am optimistic that relatively calm and mediating (or correcting) voices can be heard amid the battles where Ibn Taymiyya's meanings are frequently distorted. The selections in the recent *Expounds* anthology (2019) illuminate for an English-speaking audience the breadth and careful reasoning of the Damascene jurist. Yahya Michot has been tireless in debunking Islamist selective readings of Ibn Taymiyya's works, and has been helpful in correcting western and other scholars who have said, "Ibn Taymiyya is to blame for all of this!"

Although the suggestion would probably have alarmed him, in recent times the jurist Yusuf al-Qaradawi (d. 2022) might be a good example of a scholar who could quote from Ibn Taymiyya's works, who lauded his writings, and yet who rebuked extremists with authority. He was imprisoned multiple times before he left Egypt and eventually settled in Qatar. At one time he was asked to be the spiritual advisor of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but he declined that position. During the Arab Spring he observed that "it might not be possible to save Qaddafi," and earlier, he sanctioned resistance to invading forces in Iraq. However, as noted in this work, he unambiguously rejected the position that "armed jihad against everyone" was a scripture-sanctioned policy for Muslims. He also without hesitation declared void the June 2014 announcement of the establishment of al-Baghdadi's caliphate. In an argument still being contested, at one point he sanctioned suicide attacks in Israel. Wasn't he in many respects a Taymiyyan figure?

No matter what the prevailing climate in the Arab world and *umma*, Ibn Taymiyya's works will always be available to make a contribution. But the renewer will continue to need periodic reviewing, renewing and defending.

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