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‘They are not Muslims. They are monsters’: The Accidental Takfirism of British Political Elites

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Abstract

It has become increasingly common for British political elites to engage in *takfir,* the process by which individuals are declared to not be Muslims despite their self-proclaimed Islamic faith. This apparently accidental *takfirism* denies that members of Salafi-Jihadist groups are themselves Muslims in contrast to the more nuanced approaches taken by 'mainstream' Sunni religious and political figures.

This paper draws on constructivist and poststructuralist approaches to discourse analysis in order to examine the use of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites. Additionally, this paper will draw on discussions of Islamic jurisprudence to problematise the utilisation of these discursive practices. In so doing, this paper contributes to the literature on British political elite's discursive construction of the threat posed by Salafi-Jihadist terrorism and subsequent policy responses. More broadly, this paper will contribute to constructivist and postructuralist approaches within Critical Terrorism Studies by analysing a number of the discursive practices used by British political elites to police the boundaries of religion. This paper focuses on statements made by British politicians which display the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices in a number of contexts and for a range of purposes. This paper will analyse why and how British political elites have engaged in this seemingly 'accidental' *takfirism*. It will further suggest that this analysis has a number of important policy implications, arguing that these discursive practices incur a range of potential risks which policymakers appear to be unaware of.

Key Words

Takfir(ism), Shari'ah, British Political Elites, Discourse Analysis, Counter Violent Extemism, Counter Terrorism

Introduction

In a speech given in September 2014, responding to the murder of British aid worker David Haines by the Islamic State, David Cameron declared of the Islamic State and its members that "they are not Muslims. They are monsters" (GOV.UK, 2014). In doing so, and apparently entirely accidentally, Cameron engaged in the process of *takfir*, declaring that individuals could not be considered to be Muslims regardless of their self-professed Islamic faith, and replicated a crucial element of the discourse produced by those he was aiming to condemn, the Islamic State. This phenomenon of British political elites engaging in *takfirism,* in order to condemn Salafi-Jihadist organizations and their members, has not been an isolated one. Indeed, a number of politicians in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia have engaged in this process of asserting not just that members of Salafi-Jihadist organisations have misinterpreted or abused Islam but that they are not Muslims at all.

The exploration of this practice, its implications, and its possible causes has been prompted by Mohamed Badar, Masaki Nagata, and Tiphanie Tueni's analysis of the usage of the concept of *takfir* by radical Islamist groups which referenced but did not explore this phenomenon (Badar et al., 2017). The engagement of British political elites in the exercise of *takfir* indicates an ignorance both of the concept of *takfir* itself and the importance of *takfirism* for the discourse produced by Salafi-Jihadist groups, particularly for justifying their acts of violence. This stands in contrast to a number of notable Islamic scholars, as well as, political figures in a number of Muslim majority countries who have condemned *takfir* and consciously endeavoured to condemn members of Salafi-Jihadist organisations without themselves falling into *takfir* (Nagata, 2016).

This exploration of how and why British political elites accidentally draw upon *takfirist* discursive practices in constructing their policy discourses is imperative given the potential risks incurred by this practice. The reproduction of *takfirist* discursive practices used by Salafi-Jihadist groups and authoritarian states has the potential to legitimise these discursive practices and to reduce attempts to counter such actors to arguments over the subjects of *takfirism*, not the practice itself. It also brings British political elites' counter-terrorism and counter-extremism narratives into conflict or contradiction with alternative narratives produced by Islamic scholars and institutions which

emphasise the illegitimacy of *takfirism*. This runs contrary to the need to reinforce the authority of 'mainstream' Islamic scholars and clerics emphasised by a range of institutions and academics, such as Thomas Hegghammer, involved in Countering Violent Extremism and could, therefore, undermine Counter Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism efforts. (Mandaville and Nozell, 2017; Loopcast, 2020). At the most basic level engaging in a sensitive and controversial discursive practice from a position of ignorance is inadvisable. Thus, this piece may hold a number of policy implications for how British and, more broadly, Western political elites construct and reproduce their policy discourses in order to take into account these possible implications. More broadly, this article also raises the issue of the extent to which it is appropriate for political elites to police the boundaries of religious belief, especially with regards to beliefs which they themselves do not hold and which they may have only a limited understanding of.

This paper will contribute to the extensive literature on the construction and usage of *takfir* as a discursive practice by highlighting and exploring the understudied phenomenon of Western political elite's utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices. The construction and significance of *takfir* for non-state Salafi-Jihadist actors has been widely examined, particularly in relation to al Qaeda (Drennan, 2008; Maher, 2016) and the Islamic State (al-Ibrahim, 2015; Maher, 2016; Badar et al., 2017; Hassan, 2017). Although, less scholarship has discussed the exclusionary discursive practices of Muslim majority states with reference to *takfir*, Abbas has explored the parallels between Pakistan's blasphemy laws and the fatwas issued by Saudi religious authorities and *takfirism* (2013), while Kenney (2006), Power (2018), and others have explored state actors construction of Islamists as non-Muslim 'rebels' or 'blasphemers'. Moreover, Nagata has recently engaged in an explicit exploration of the *takfirist* discursive practices of Muslim majority states (2016). In contrast, there has been little prior discussion of the *takfirist* practices of Western political elites with Badar et. al. (2017) referencing it only briefly, with their primary focus being on the utilisation of *takfirism* by Salafi-Jihadist groups. Therefore, this paper's exploration of this understudied phenomenon will augment and add to the wider literature on the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices. In addition, this article will contribute to discussions about Western political elite's discursive construction of both

Salafi-Jihadists and Muslims more generally and the relationship between these discursive constructions and the formulation of foreign and counter-terrorist policy practices. In contrast to much of this literature, such as Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton's work on the construction of Muslims as a 'suspect community' (2009) and Islam as inherently linked to Jihadist terrorism, this paper will explore how the *takfirist* discursive practices of British political elites attempt to construct Muslims as entirely distinct from Salafi-Jihadist terrorism and as part of the national communities within which they reside, while failing to avoid representing Muslims as 'other', at least implicitly. Thus, this paper will limit itself to the analysis of how British political elites utilise *takfirist* discursive practices in constructing their policy discourses and the potential implications of this phenomenon without making claims as to the relative significance of these discursive practices as opposed to other discursive practices used in the construction of foreign and counter-terrorism policies.

The first section of this article will briefly explore the concept of *takfir* and its theological prohibition in 'mainstream' Sunni Islam in order to highlight the contested nature of the concept. The second section will move on to examining the 'accidental' *takfirism* of British political elites through an analysis of speeches and contributions to parliamentary debates made by British politicians which declared that members of Salafi-Jihadist organisations, primarily Islamic State, are not Muslims regardless of their profession of faith in Islam. This will involve an analysis of the potential risks incurred through the use of these discursive practices, such as the legitimization or reinforcement of the *takfirist* discursive practices of Salafi-Jihadist groups or authoritarian states, the the construction of certain policy discourses which may be counter-productive, and the representation of dissent or opposition as being counter to Muslim's 'real' interests or even Islamaphobic. The third section will explore alternative approaches to the use of *takfirist* discursive practices against Salafi-Jihadist organisations, namely approaches which condemn these organisations and their members whilst at the same time explicitly refusing to engage in *takfir* against them. Thus, this section will emphasise the contingent nature of British political elites' *takfirist* discursive practices, demonstrate the conflict between British political elite's counter-terrorism discourses and those produced by some Islamic institutions and Muslim majority states, and highlights concerns over the potential for these *takfirist*

discursive practices to resonate with and reinforce those of Salafi-Jihadist organisations or authoritarian states.

Methodology

This paper's exploration of the *takfirist* discursive practices utilised by British political elites through an analysis of the texts produced by these elites draws on Hansen's argument that policies, both foreign and domestic, are dependent on the constructed identities and representations of the phenomena which these policies are intended to engage with (2006). Thus, an analysis of the *takfirist* discursive practices of British political elite's is necessary to understand both how the foreign and counter-terrorist policies of these elites can be constructed and enabled. It is of course important to recognize that British political elites do not solely rely on *takfirist* discursive practices in the construction of their foreign policy and counter-terrorism policy discourses. However, as Hansen argues those discourses and discursive practices which are worthy of examination are not necessarily those which appear or are argued most frequently within or across texts (2006). The emergence of the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites and their value in constructing certain foreign and counter-terrorism policy discourses, the potential implications of this phenomenon, and the fact that it has not been subject to sufficient study and analysis merits this paper's focus on examining these particular discursive practices. Moreover, the significance of these *takfirist* discursive practices is indicated by their utilisation following moments of particular importance, namely the terrorist attack in Sousse, Tunisia on the 26th June 2015 and the murder of David Haines on the 13th September 2014, and their reproduction in both national and international media (Isis Are Not Muslims but Monsters', Says David Cameron - Video. – The Guardian, 2014; UK's Cameron on Islamic State: They Are Not Muslims, They Are Monsters - The Jerusalem Post, 2014; ISIS 'Are Not Muslims, They Are Monsters,' Cameron Says. – NPR, 2014; After Beheading, Cameron Says: 'They Are Not Muslims, They Are Monsters. – The Indian Express, 2014). This focus on the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites and their relationship to policy construction

has meant that this paper is primarily engaged in analysis of a 'single Self', British political elites, and its construction of both itself and 'Others' within official discourse (Hansen, 2006). In so doing, it exposes differentiation and ambiguity with regards to both the construction of the 'Self' and 'Others'. However, the paper will also explore alternative approaches to the use of *takfirist* discursive practices developed in the Islamic world in order to highlight both the contingent nature and potential implications of British political elite's utilisation of *takfir*.

It is also important at this stage to clarify what is meant by the reference to the use of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites as 'accidental'. Fairclough asserts that discourse can be understood as referring to particular ways of representing and assigning meaning to phenomena and experiences in the world (2003). Therefore, discourse should be understood as having an ideological or strategic intent which serves to construct, reproduce, or subvert relationships of power (Fairclough, 1992; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Thus, this paper does not contend that British political elites' utilization of *takfirist* discursive practices is 'accidental' in terms of their being used without any attempt to construct or reproduce certain policy discourses. Instead, the contention is that the specific *takfirist* connotations of these discursive practices is not recognised by those using them and, thus, they are ignorant of the potential risks entailed. As argued by Hansen, the use of discursive practices to construct certain identities and discourses can resonate with, reinforce, and reproduce other discourses even when this is not the intent of the original author (2006). This highlights one of the potential risks inherent in the use of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites, namely that when these discursive practices parallel or directly reproduce the discursive practices of authoritarian leaders in Muslim majority countries who do intend to construct *takfirist* discourses they serve to reproduce and reinforce these discourses.

In order, to examine the role of *takfirist* discursive practices in constructing identity this paper will draw upon methods developed within the field of Discourse Analysis in order to examine the selected texts. Discourse Analysis refers to a wide variety of theories and methods which are intended to engage in empirical analyses of the relationships between discourse and social and cultural processes (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 1992). In particular, the significant role played

by the process of *takfir* in constructing a given 'Other' and defining the relationship between that 'Other' and range of other actors entails an exploration of 'differentiation', the process through which identities are created through the demarcation of the 'Self' from the 'Other' (Campbell, 1998). As a number of the texts implicitly or explicitly construct a range of identities which interact with each other in different ways, this piece will draw upon Lene Hansen's work on 'differentiation', which highlights how a given actor might be engaged in defining itself in relation to multiple' Others' all of which might be identified and constructed through juxtaposition and differentiation but in radically different ways that construct particular identities (Hansen, 2006). In addition, Hansen (2006) emphasises that the relationships between these constructed identities need not be conflictual.

This exploration of the role of *takfirist* discursive practices in British political elites' construction of identity will also draw upon Jennifer Milliken's work on predicate analysis. Analysis of the utilisation of predication, the association of certain attributes to subjects through the use of predicates, is useful for understanding how a given actor constructs identities in such a way as to attempt to determine or constrain how given subjects can act (Milliken, 1999). The interaction between British political elite's use of *takfirist* discursive practices and their use of predication in order to construct particular identities is significant in understanding how British political elite's utilise *takfirist* discursive practices to enable the production of certain policy discourses.

This analysis of the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites also necessitates an exploration of both the concept of *takfir* and the highly contested debate over *takfirist* practices. This will demonstrate the *takfirist* nature of British political elite's construction of Salafi-Jihadists as non-Muslims and clarify the implications of *takfirist* discourses. Moreover, this paper will explore the intertextual relationship between the *takfirism* and other discourses which aim to police the boundaries of religion and construct self proclaimed Muslims as being non-Muslims, apostates, or generally excluded from Islam, such as the construction of Salafi-Jihadists and other 'rebels' as *Khawarij*. The specific focus on *takfirist* discursive practices within British political elite's policy discourses enables an exploration both of the capacity of British political elites to demarcate the

boundaries of a religion and community to which many of these elites do not belong and how they attempt to do so.

Data

In her work on the rigorous methodological application of post-structuralism, Hansen sets out three criteria to be considered when selecting texts for analysis: the text clearly constructs identities and policies, the text is widely read and receives significant attention, and the text has the formal authority to set out a political position (2006). The texts chosen as data sources for this paper all conform to at least the first and third of these three criteria and, therefore, provide a useful data set for analysing the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices within the official discourses produced by Western political elites. These data sources were selected after searching through digital archives which recorded the texts produced by political elites in three 'Western' countries, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Australia. Hansard and the gov.uk website were utilised for the UK, Pandora and the National Library of Australia for Australia, and congress.gov for the USA. The same search terms were used on all platforms: "not muslim", "not muslims", "not islam", "not Islamic", and "takfir". All the texts which were identified as containing these terms, prior to September 2019, were examined and those which were relevant were subject to analysis in this piece. Relevance was determined on the basis of whether the texts contained examples of Western political elites engaging in *takfir* or explicit repudiations of *takfir*. Texts where *takfir* was mentioned in passing, for instance in reference to the name of a specific organization, such as *Takfir wal-Hijra,* were not included. This resulted in six instances of Western political elites engaging in *takfir* being identified and examined. Five of these cases came from British politicians, with David Cameron being responsible for two incidents, while the sixth came from a speech given by Malcolm Turnbull, the former Prime Minister of Australia (*Trove*, 2018). A seventh potential case concerning President Barack Obama's declaration in 2014 that '"ISIL" is not Islamic' (Transcript: President Obama's Speech on Combating ISIS - CNNPolitics, 2014) was discounted as an ambiguous case as proclaiming that an organisation is not Islamic does not necessarily imply that members of said organisation are not Muslims. The text produced by Malcolm Turnbull was subject to analysis and found to exhibit a number of similar features to the

texts produced in the British context. However, the analysis of this text has been excluded from this paper as its distinctiveness, being the only example of the utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices produced in an Australian context, suggested the possibility that it might not be representative of wider trends. Thus, this paper is based on an analysis of five texts produced by British political elites which clearly engage in the construction of identities, through *takfirist* discursive practices, in order to construct and enable certain policy approaches.

The Concept of *Takfir* and its Prohibition in 'Mainstream' Sunni Islam

The concept of *takfir* is most accurately understood as the pronouncement of unbelief against an individual and roughly equivalent to the concept of excommunication. The concept involves the assessment of an individual as rejecting or failing to adhere to *hakimiyah*, the sovereignty of God, and following on from this assessment the denial of the individual's status as a Muslim and their ejection from the community of Islam (Karawan, 1995). This is in spite of the individual's profession of their Islamic faith which is deemed by the majority of *takfirist* organisations, and in contrast to 'mainstream' Sunni orthodoxy, to be insufficient if it is not matched by behavior which displays the requisite level or form of piety for the group in question. This position was explicitly stated by the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, when he declared that even the recitation of the *shahadah,* the statement that 'there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God', which acts as the primary article of Islamic faith and the formula by which one declares their membership of the community of Islam, (Clarke, 1995) is insufficient to render one a Muslim if it is not matched by the necessary action:

> O you who testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah… Speech will not benefit you without action, for there is no faith without action.

> So whoever says, "Allah is my Lord," it is incumbent upon him – if he is truthful – to obey Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) who enjoined fighting, meaning that He made it obligatory upon those who believe in Him, and commanded the performance of jihad. (SITE, 2015)

This emphasis on the necessary connection between belief in Islam and action is significant for Salafi-Jihadists in constructing religion as an active and dynamic ideal and supporting their demands for fellow Muslims to be active agents (Maher, 2016). This demand for belief to be expressed through practice corresponds with Sayyid Qutb's conception of the universe as being based on an integrated Islamic ideal, within which all activity, including political action, must conform with the principle of *hakimiyyah*, the sovereignty of God (Khatab, 2006). Thus, Islam is rendered as *din wa dawla*, both religion and 'state', and, therefore, true belief in Islam must consist both of belief in Islam and active adherence to its principles (Khatab, 2002). In this manner the process of *takfir* is of great importance as a tool by which Salafi-Jihadists can attempt to compel, and in many cases coerce, other Muslims into engaging in behavior which they believe is required by Islam.

This conception of *takfir* also has a significant role in the discourse of Salafi-Jihadist groups as a means to explicitly determine the boundaries of Islam and to construct their organisations and supporters as a pious or pure 'in-group' while excluding others. In so doing *takfir* acts as an instrument for the protection of Islam, enabling the expulsion and punishment of those who are perceived as failing to adhere to its tenets and, thus, protecting the purity of the faith (Maher, 2016). The Islamic State has fully embraced this conception of *takfir* which has become vital in achieving its aims of socio-spatial homogenisation, the homogenisation of the populations living in those areas which it controls or has previously controlled, as well as those, in areas which the group is intent on capturing (Kadercan, 2019). Thus, all non-Sunni Muslims and the majority of Sunni Muslims who do not adhere to the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam are excluded from the community of Muslims and designated apostate, justifying the use of violence against them in order to punish them for their apostasy. Shiraz Maher has asserted that the practice of *takfir* "has been particularly effective in fueling intra-Muslim violence" (2016). This is because the very capacity of *takfir* to construct a righteous in-group and an apostate out-group both enables the identification of 'enemies of Islam'

while making it imperative to protect the boundaries of the in-group in order to maintain the purity of Islam. This is closely linked to the discourse of fear that if these distinctions were not rigidly enforced Islam would follow Christianity and other religions in becoming little more than frameworks for meaningless ritual, within which belief is disconnected from the reality of the nominal believer (Maher, 2016). Moreover, *takfir* is a vital element in the discourse of Salafi-Jihadist groups due to the significant prohibitions on violence between Muslims and against Muslims states laid out in the *Sunnah*. The ability to utilise *takfir* to render self-proclaimed Muslims and Islamic States as non-Muslim is of considerable significance for Salafi-Jihadist groups discursive capacity to engage in intra-Muslim violence.

This conception of *takfir* is condemned within 'mainstream' Sunni Islam as contrary to Islamic law and in violation of the tenets laid out in the primary sources of Islamic law, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. First and foremost, those who condemn *takfir* argue that both the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* prohibit allegations of 'unbelief' being made against those who have recited the *Shahadah.* Indeed, those who do make such allegations of unbelief, as a result of their breach of this principle, might themselves be guilty of unbelief (Badar et al., 2017). In addition, to this the Qur'an recognises the right for individuals to repent of their 'unbelief' at any point up until their death and subsequent judgement by God, a right which is contradicted and curtailed by the Salafi-Jihadist conception of *takfir*.

Condemnations of the practice frequently draw reference scripture in order to construct and reinforce their arguments. The Qur'an does not refer to *takfir* explicitly but does explicitly recognize the right of individuals to repent of their apostasy and return to Islam. Indeed, even those sections of the Qur'an which condemn apostasy as a sin refer to the potential for apostates to repent and do not condone their murder. Verse 9: 74 states that apostates "would be better off turning back [to God]" and although this verse comes from a section of the Qur'an which condemns apostasy and calls on the Prophet Muhammad to strive against 'unbelievers' it suggests that apostates may repent and that the punishment of those who do not is reserved for God, "God will inflict painful torment on them in this world and in the Hereafter" (Haleem trans., 2008). Moreover, these verses referring to 'unbelievers'

and apostates seem to relate to those who have explicitly turned away from Islam not to those who declare themselves to be Muslims but are deemed to be of insufficient piety. With regards to this latter group, the Qur'an suggests that not only can they not be punished for apostasy but also that it is a crime to declare them to be apostate. Verse 4: 94 is explicit in condemning those who declare one of their fellow Muslims to be an unbeliever, "you who believe, be careful when you go to fight in God's way, and do not say to someone who offers you a greeting of peace, 'You are not a believer'… God is fully aware of what you do" (Haleem trans., 2008).

The *Sunnah*, the compilation of actions and sayings of the Prophet, referred to as *hadith*, constitutes the second most significant source of *Shari'ah*, as well as, providing exegesis for the Qur'an in order to clarify some of the ambiguities and contradictions within the latter text (Nanji, 1995; Hallaq, 2009). With regards to the issue of *takfir* a number of *hadith* seem to prohibit declaring Muslims apostate, with some going further and stating that doing so constitutes a sin. A *hadith* taken from *Sahih Muslim* quotes the Prophet Muhammad's statement that "Whoever calls a man a disbeliever (*Kafir*) or says to him: ' O enemy of Allah!' when he is not like that, it will rebound upon him" (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī et al., 2007), whilst the Prophet is also quoted in the *Sahih Bukhari* declaring that "If a man says to his brother, 'O *Kafir* (disbeliever)!' Then surely one of them is such (i.e., a *Kafir*)." (Bukhārī, 2007). Although, Salafi-Jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State have referenced *ahadith* in order to justify their declarations of *takfir* and the violence which they have employed against those whom they label as apostate, a number of these *ahadith* refer to individuals being punished for crimes other than apostasy and the majority do not refer to Muslims (Badar et al., 2017).

It is important to note this debate regarding the validity of the concept of *takfir* and its application in different contexts when considering the question of whether the discursive practices analysed in this paper can be categorised as 'properly' *takfirist'.* In particular, questions could be raised as to whether a non-Muslim declaring that a self-professed Muslim is outside of the community of Islam should be considered to be a declaration of *takfir*. However, the contestation over the concept and practice of *takfir* indicate the difficulty in providing a universal definition of *takfir* beyond the

basic formulation of declaring a Muslim to be outside of the community of Islam (Maher, 2016). Although, all practitioners of *takfir* would likely agree that non-Muslims can not engage in the process of *takfir*, many such practitioners would dispute on another's claim to be Muslims and capacity to pronounce *takfir* with Nagata documenting the proliferation in the range of actors seemingly able to engage in *takfir* (Nagata, 2016). In addition, although declarations of *takfir* are most commonly made in the form of *fatawa*, advisory opinions issued by Islamic religious scholars and jurists (Badar et al., 2017), this need not be the case. It has been noted that a number of declarations of *takfir* have been undertaken on the basis of *hisba,* the Qur'anic instruction that Muslims should command good and forbid evil, by ordinary Muslims and supposedly secular legal institutions without the provision of a *fatwa* (Badar et al., 2017; Nagata, 2016). It should also be recognised that non-Muslim political elites reproduction of the *takfirist* discursive practices of political elites in Muslim majority countries, as in the case of David Cameron drawing on statements made by the King of Jordan, or the accidental *takfirist* discursive practices of British Muslim political elites indicates the difficulty in drawing the boundaries regarding 'proper' declarations of *takfir*. Moreover, it is not necessarily the argument of this paper that the *takfirist* discursive practices of British political elites constitute 'proper' *takfir* and would be recognised as such by practitioners of *takfir*. Rather it is this paper's contention, in line with the examination of the process of *takfir* Badar et. al., that the discursive practice of British political elites which are under discussion '[bear] the imprint of the concept of *takfir'* and that both the *takfirist* connotations and resonances of these discursive practices and their potential implications merit examination and discussion. Hansen argues that, although a given text may not purposefully formulate or articular a particular discourse, if said text produces a construction of identity or utilizes discursive practices which resonate with those found in other texts this may influence the reading and understanding of the given text and its implications (Hansen, 2006). In this instance, regardless of whether the discursive practices of British political elites constitute 'proper' *takfir* their mirroring of the discursive practices of *takfirists* is significant.

The Accidental *Takfirism* of British Political Elites

In spite of the importance of *takfir* in the discourse of many Salafi-Jihadist groups and the role it has played in justifying their acts of violence, the fundamental principle of *takfirist* discourse, that one can declare that a self-professing Muslim is not in fact a Muslim, has been present on multiple occasions in speeches and statements made by British political elites. In doing so, these elites may unknowingly perpetuate *takfirist* discourses and hinder attempts to counter Salafi-Jihadist organisations and *takfirism* more widely (Badar et al., 2017). Moreover, although British political elites who engage in *takfirist* discourse likely do so unknowingly and, in some instances, to defend Muslim communities, their statements indicate both their ignorance with regards to Islamic law and the discourses utilised by Salafi-Jihadist organisations. Given the importance of law within Islam and the significant role which Western, particularly European, ignorance of and insensitivity towards Islamic law has historically played in alienating Muslims and fuelling Salafi-Jihadism, these examples of the ignorance of British political elites are concerning (Hallaq, 2002).

David Cameron

The clearest and most explicit example of *takfirism* within the discourses of British political elites is David Cameron's statement, in September 2014, that members of the Islamic State "are not Muslims. They are monsters" (GOV.UK, 2014). This is a clear and unambiguous declaration that members of the Islamic State, regardless of their own professions of Islamic faith and their recitation of the *Shahadah*, are excluded from the community of Muslims. The statement's juxtaposition of 'Muslims' and 'monsters' seeks to clearly distinguish the two categories and establish the Islamic State and its members as an 'Other', establishing an identity clearly distinct from that of 'Muslims'. The construction of identity is relational, necessitating the construction of boundaries distinguishing between identities, usually referred to as the 'self' contrasted with the 'other' or the 'in-group' from the 'out-group' (Campbell. 1998). However, as Lene Hansen reminds us, not only do texts not necessarily refer to the 'Self' in explicit terms when constructing a given 'Other', they may also construct multiple 'Others' in relation to both each other and the 'Self' and these relationships need not be inherently conflictual (2006). David Cameron's statement that the Islamic State are "not

Muslims. They are monsters" acts to construct an identity for the Islamic State and its supporters as both non-Muslims and non-humans through their discursive juxtaposition with a homogenised and distinct 'Muslim' identity group. This simultaneously humanises Muslims but also renders them an 'Other' or at least a distinct sub-group within the wider community of, in this instance, British citizens. In so doing the statement retains an element of unintended ambiguity. Although, one of the aims of discourse is to attempt to remove such ambiguities and to construct fixed identities of a relationship between subjects and objects (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Fairclough 1992; See also Hansen, 2006), the failure of discourse to ever completely eradicate ambiguity and establish entirely fixed identities is clear in this statement. The choice to juxtapose 'Muslims' specifically, as opposed to the wider community, with the 'monsters' of the Islamic State implies at least a perceived relationship between the two identity groups, in order to render the juxtaposition necessary.

In addition, the discursive construction of the Islamic State as 'monsters' aims to provide an explanation for the violent acts perpetrated by the group which is not rooted either in the ideological claims made by the Islamic State or grievances resulting from material conditions but from the group's 'monstrous' character. Mahmood Mamdani argues that political violence which does not conform to a Western framework of historical progress is generally identified and framed in the West through two discursive frameworks, the first being that of cultural backwardness or an absence of modernity and the second being 'theological' with acts of violence being expressions of moral perversity (Mamdani, 2004). Thus, David Cameron's statement is an attempt to construct a discourse which frames the Islamic State's acts of violence as being purposeless acts of 'evil' and to help in constructing and reinforcing a foreign policy and counterterrorism discourse which represents government policy as targeting the Islamic State specifically not the community of Muslims. Indeed, the above excerpt from the text is preceded by statements emphasising the Islamic State's violence towards Muslims and the declaration that the Islamic State's claims to represent Islam are "nonsense. Islam is a religion of peace" (GOV.UK, 2014). Jennifer Milliken argues that the role of predication, the attribution of certain qualities to subjects, is significant both in defining how subjects may be related and rendered distinct, as well as, in the assignation of different capacities for modes of action

to particular subjects (1999). Cameron's statement, by claiming 'peace' as a predicate of 'Islam', acts to construct a discourse within which 'peace' is claimed to be an inherent feature of 'Islam'. This necessarily reinforces his subsequent *takfirist* claims that the Islamic State and its members are not Muslims. If peace is rendered as an inherent attribute of Islam then those who commit acts of violence can not be Muslims by definition. In addition, by constructing an identity for the Islamic State as not only non-Muslim but opposed to or in conflict with Muslims, Cameron aids in the construction of a foreign policy discourse within which the UK government is represented as an ally or partner of the Muslim community against a common enemy. At the same time this continues to implicitly represent the Muslim community as an 'Other' or at least a distinct and homogenous sub-group, separate, to some extent, from the wider British population. This is arguably an improvement on the competing discourse that there are 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, with the former needing to prove their 'goodness' (Mamdani, 2004). However, by rendering the Muslim community wholly separate from the Islamic State this discourse still attempts to co-opt the Muslim community, implies both their separation from wider society and at least at some level a relationship or commonality with the Islamic State, and unknowingly introduces *takfirism* into mainstream British political discourse.

David Cameron again engaged in the process of *takfir* on the 2nd of December 2015 during a debate in the House of Commons regarding the possibility of British military action against the Islamic State in Syria. During the course of this debate he declared of the Islamic State that these "women-raping, Muslim-murdering, medieval monsters are hijacking the peaceful religion of Islam… these people are not Muslims, they are "outlaws" from Islam" (ISIL- in Syria, 02 April 2015). This reiteration of Cameron's *takfirism* reconstructs and reinforces the discursive representation of the Islamic State as 'evil' non-Muslims juxtaposed with a peaceful Muslim community of which they are not a part. Cameron is explicit in stating that his *takfirist* discursive practices were drawn from an article written on the same day by the King of Jordan, King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein, arguing for the extension of British military action into Syria. Although, King Abdullah does not explicitly state in his article that the Islamic State and its members are not Muslims he does identify them as 'Khawarej' and as 'outlaws of Islam' (2015).

The *Khawarij* were a group of Muslims who, having supported the claim of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to the title of Caliph, became disillusioned by his decision to resolve the issue of the leadership of the Caliphate by arbitration rather than by violence, arguing that in so doing he was taking the decisions out of the hands of God and undermining God's sovereignty (Donner, 2010). The *Khawarij* are commonly referred to as the first sect in Islam and were the first to attempt to construct a coherent theological position justifying the declaration of self-professed Muslims as non-Muslims and the subsequent killing of those labelled apostate (Badar et al., 2017). Indeed, it is because of the role played by the *Khawarij* in constructing the concept of *takfir* that Muhammad Badar has claimed that the sect 'can be seen as the starting point for Islamic extremism' (2017). This discursive representation of the Islamic State as *Khawarij* draws upon a wider cultural model within which the *Khawarij* are constructed not as a specific sect but as a trans-historical threat to the unity of Islam. The anthropologist, Alexander Laban Hinton, describes cultural models, such as this one, not as discourses in and of themselves but as broader symbolic frameworks constituted of thousands of 'texts' from which elements can be utilised to construct specific discourses (1998). Indeed, the lawyer and critic of Islamism, Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, describes his use of the label *Khawarij* to represent his Islamist opponents in these terms:

> the term Kharijite is less a name designating a group of sects than a qualifier for all those who, by manipulating language and exploiting religion in order to arrive at their political ends, place themselves outside Islam and its law (Kenney, 2006)

This cultural model has provided what Jennifer Milliken refers to as the 'cultural raw materials' (Milliken, 1999) and which Natalie Zemon Davis identifies as the cultural resources present within given societies (Davis, 1973), to those wishing to undermine or delegitimise their opponents using frames of reference with which many Muslims may be familiar. King Abdullah II drew upon the cultural resources provided by this model to construct an identity for the Islamic State in which they are yet another expression of this longstanding threat to the unity of Islam which needs to be expunged. In so doing he constructs a foreign policy discourse within which military action against the Islamic State is not just desirable but necessary for the defence of Islam.

The cultural model of the *Khawarij* as an eternal threat to the unity of Islam has been drawn upon, not just by secularists, such as al-'Ashmawi, but also by Islamists and Salafi-Jihadists, including the Islamic State. Indeed, mirroring King Abdullah, the Islamic State utilises discursive representations of its opponents as *Khawarij* in its *takfirist* discourses to represent both its enemies and Muslims who don't recognise the authority of their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as Caliph as non-Muslim dissidents attacking the unity of Islam. Thus, the Islamic State refers to those criticising the group and attempting to undermine its authority as the "Khawarij, or other groups of discord, bid'ah (innovation), and deviance", representing them, therefore, as non-Muslims who not only can but should be killed (*Clarion Project*, 2014). Indeed, this applies not only to the discursive narratives produced by the Islamic State but also to other actors who have drawn upon the cultural model of *Khawarijism* as a trans-historical threat to the unity of Islam, for instance the dictatorship of Gamel Abdel Nasser which used this cultural model to bolster the authoritarian state and to persecute both radical and moderate Islamists (Kenney, 2006). King Abdullah II's construction of a discourse representing the Islamic State and its supporters as *Khawarij* can be seen as part of a wider trend of Muslim regimes, particularly authoritarian dictatorships, discursively representing their opponents as *Khawarij*.

This highlights the risks incurred by Western political elites when utilising or drawing upon the discursive practices of the leaders of Muslim majority countries, particularly discursive practices which engage in *takfir*. Although, Cameron may not be aware of the historical significance of labelling self-professed Muslims as 'outlaws' or *Khawarij* by engaging in such discursive practices he parallels and potentially legitimises their utilisation by both Salafi-Jihadists and authoritarian regimes.

Simultaneously, Cameron's continued emphasis on the Islamic State's acts of violence perpetrated against Muslims constructs a discourse which represents the Muslim community as victims of the Islamic State and allies of the United Kingdom in this conflict. The above excerpt is followed by Cameron's declaration that:

> "We must stand with our Muslim friends, here and around the world, as they reclaim their religion from these terrorists. Far from an attack on Islam, we are engaged in a defence of

> Islam, and far from a risk of radicalising British Muslims by acting, failing to act would actually be to betray British Muslims and the wider religion of Islam in its very hour of need."(ISIL in Syria - Hansard, 2015)

Mirroring Cameron's statement from September 2014, this text represents Muslims not as a part of the 'We' referred to but as an allied and homogenous 'Other', which requires British protection and assistance both to ensure their safety and security and to police the boundaries of their religion. Indeed, the reference to the need to 'reclaim their religion [Islam]' replicates and deepens the ambiguity of Cameron's juxtapositions of the Islamic State with Muslims by suggesting that the Islamic State does exert some claim or authority over the religion of Islam, which it is the duty of Muslims to combat.

The continued representation of the Islamic State as 'monsters' suggests that the term is acting as a discursive nodal point, a privileged sign which acts to 'fix' discourses, as well as, being a site where multiple discourses interact in order to ascribe meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 1992). The term 'monsters' and its juxtaposition with 'Muslims' acts as an arena where two of the discourses being operationalised by Cameron, the discourse of the Islamic State and its acts of violence as an incomprehensible 'evil' and the *takfirist* discourse that the Islamic State and its members are non-Muslims interact and overlap. This discursive practice constructs an overarching set of foreign policy and counterterrorism discourses within which the UK government is represented as being both the partner and the protector of the Muslim community. This not only enables but actively encourages support for British military action against the Islamic State by representing this action not as violence committed against Muslims but as violence committed on behalf of the Muslim community. Thus, in these instances, Cameron's *takfirist* discourse is rendered crucial to the overarching foreign policy and counterterrorism discourses produced by the British government.

Khalid Mahmood

The use of *takfir* as a discursive practice to represent the Islamic State and other Salafi-Jihadist organisation as non-Muslims can be identified in statements made by a number of other British Members of Parliament. On the 29th of June 2015, during a debate following the terrorist attack carried out by a supporter of the Islamic State in Sousse, Tunisia, Khalid Mahmood, the Labour MP representing Birmingham Perry Barr, explicitly and repeatedly declared that the Islamic State and its members were not Muslims and called on other members of the House of Commons, including the Prime Minister, to recognise this as fact (Tunisia and European Council - Hansard 2015). Indeed, Khalid Mahmood made clear that his statement directly pertained to the issue of "recognising as Muslims those in the Daesh group" (Tunisia and European Council – Hansard, 2015). Mahmood's *takfirist* claims served to construct a discourse within which the Islamic State and its supporters were represented as non-Muslim outsiders luring or grooming young people into supporting them and their ideology. Similar to the discourses constructed by David Cameron and discussed above, this discourse presents the Islamic State as an external and incomprehensible threat to the Muslim community with the specific nature of this threat or its causal mechanisms being obscured. However, this discourse does not represent this threat as being one of direct violence but of ideological persuasion or manipulation. In contrast, to Cameron's employment of *takfir* to construct a foreign policy discourse which requires British military action overseas, Mahmood utilises *takfirist* discursive practices to construct a counter-extremism narrative within which deradicalisation is represented as a defence of young people from an external and non-Muslim ideology and which places responsibility on a range of communities and institutions. In addition, Mahmood links his *takfirist* discourse with a discourse representing the Islamic State and its supporters as *Khawarij* or Kharajites. Khalid Mahmood is drawing upon the aforementioned cultural model of the *Khawarij* as a longstanding threat to the unity of Islam and engaging with the same discourse as that constructed by al-'Ashmawi by labelling the Islamic State as 'Khawarijite' (Tunisia and European Council – Hansard, 2015) in order to represent the Islamic State as being a part of this trans-historical threat which is both external and opposed to Islam. This discourse is inextricably engaged with the *takfirist* discourse also promulgated by

Mahmood through his juxtaposition of 'Muslims' with 'Khawarijite'. In this construction the Islamic State can not be Muslim precisely because they are *Khawarij* and, therefore, excluded from Islam. Thus, Khalid Mahmood's *takfirism* can be seen to be drawing on a wider cultural model and a longstanding discourse which has been used to exclude Islamists from the community of Muslims in a variety of contexts.

However, the interaction between the two discourses constructed by Khalid Mahmood, that of the Islamic State as non-Muslims and that of the Islamic State as *Khawarij*, as previously discussed, demonstrates both the contradictions and the dangers incurred in the use of *takfirism* against Salafi-Jihadists. Thus, Khalid Mahmood's *takfirist* discourse regarding the Islamic State could act to legitimise the discursive narratives produced by the Islamic State by accepting the validity of *takfir* and accusations of *Khawarijism* and merely contesting the subjects of these concepts.

It is also noteworthy that in response to Khalid Mahmood's contribution to this debate, David Cameron appeared to repudiate or at the very least caveat this engagement in *takfir* in contrast to both his previous statement following the murder of David Haines and his subsequent contribution to the debate on extending British airstrikes into Syria. Cameron stated that although he concurred with Khalid Mahmood that the Islamic State were 'bastardising' and 'perverting' the religion of Islam "we cannot ignore the fact that they [the Islamic State] are self-identifying Muslims" (Tunisia and European Council – Hansard, 2015). This suggests that Cameron's *takfirist* discourse is not consistently applied but instead utilised in certain contexts or in order to advance certain policy discourses. The first instance of Cameron's *takfirism* was part of a statement broadcast to the country as a whole and may, therefore, have aimed to avoid divisive language in order to unify the country in support of his policy proposals and to allay the concerns of the Muslim community. Similarly, Cameron's second engagement in *takfirism* was part of a statement primarily aimed at the House of Commons, with significant emphasis being placed on persuading members of the opposition to support the military action being proposed. Therefore, it also aimed to avoid divisive language and to appeal to a broad spectrum of support, including those concerned by the Conservative Party's attitude towards Islam. However, Cameron's response to Khalid Mahmood was given during a debate which,

while partially aimed at projecting a united response to the terrorist attack in Tunisia, did not require Cameron to win support from opposition MPs and during which members of his own party criticised his approach to the UK's relationship with the EU as being partly responsible for acts of terrorism. Therefore, Cameron may have been more equivocal in labelling the Islamic State as non-Muslim' in order to avoid appearing overly liberal or alienating more right wing Conservative MPs.

Shabana Mahmood

During a debate which took place on the 26th of September 2014 regarding British air support being provided to those fighting the Islamic State in Iraq the Labour MP for Birmingham Ladywood, Shabana Mahmood, engaged in *takfir* when she declared that "those in ISIL are fanatics and monsters; they are not Muslims" (Iraq: Coalition Against ISIL - Hansard, 2014). This statement closely mirrors that subsequently made by Cameron in the debate on the extension of British military action into Syria and it acts to construct a similar discourse within which the Islamic State is represented as an external non-Muslim threat. Indeed, this statement also uses the term 'monsters' in an attempt to erase or obscure ambiguity and to establish clearly distinct identities of 'Muslims' on the one hand and the 'monsters' of the Islamic State on the other, as well as, discursively representing the Islamic State as being motivated by an incomprehensible 'evil'. This *takfirist* discourse enables and encourages support for the foreign policy and counter-terrorism position outlined by Cameron during the debate, namely the need for the UK to engage in military action against the Islamic State in Iraq (Iraq: Coalition Against ISIL - Hansard, 2014). Discursively representing the Islamic State as 'monsters' who are both explicitly not Muslims and implicitly not humans enables the utilisation of violence against them with Shabana Mahmood declaring later in the debate that "the rightful place for those in ISIL is behind bars or 6 foot under the earth" (Iraq: Coalition Against ISIL - Hansard, 2014). The similarity between this discursive approach and that subsequently utilised by Cameron during the debate on extending British military action into Syria indicates that *takfirist* discursive practices are useful either in constructing foreign policy and counter-terrorism discourses which involve the use of military action against Salafi-Jihadist organisations or in rendering these discourses appealing to certain audiences.

The discourse constructed by Shabana Mahmood utilising these *takfirist* discursive practices does differ from that utilised by Cameron in some important respects, namely that she centres this discourse around her person and makes a discursive claim to represent Britain's Sunni Muslim community. Unlike Cameron she does not implicitly represent the Muslim community as an allied 'Other' in need of protection and guidance. Instead, she constructs a discourse focused on the conflict between the Islamic State and the British Muslim, particularly Sunni, community focused on the latter as a direct actor and not on the British state as some overarching protector. This would suggest that Shabana Mahmood is using both *takfirist* discursive practices and subject positioning practices which centre around herself and her personal opposition to or conflict with the Islamic State to construct foreign policy and counter-terrorism discourses similar to Cameron's but which more directly appeal to British Muslims. This is further indicated by preceding elements of the text within which Shabana Mahmood emphasises the reluctance of her support for military action and the difference between the military action proposed and earlier British military involvement in Iraq.

Neil Coyle

On the 3rd of July 2018 during a Public Bill Committee debate regarding the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, specifically during a discussion about amending the Bill to include a review of the PREVENT Programme, the Labour MP for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, Neil Coyle, declared regarding the perpetrators of the terrorist attack on London Bridge that "[they were] not Muslims, and it is not Islamophobic to try to prevent such men from committing atrocities" (Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill (Fifth sitting) - Hansard, 2018). Similar to the aforementioned uses of *takfirist* discursive practices by British politicians, Coyle constructed and reinforced his discursive representation of Salafi-Jihadist terrorists as non-Muslims in order to construct a counter-terrorism policy discourse and did so by juxtaposing the 'non-Muslim' terrorists with 'real Muslims'. In addition, Coyle utilised takfirist discursive practices to mirror their discursive representation of Salafi-Jihadist terrorists as an external non-Muslim threat to the Muslim community and, therefore, implicitly represent the state as an ally and protector of British Muslims. However, unlike Cameron, Khalid Mahmood, and Shabana Mahmood, Coyle framed his *takfirism* by implicitly attacking the

piety of the terrorists through a juxtaposition with 'real Muslims' who were breaking fast at the time of the attack. Thus, Coyle suggests that the terrorists' non-Muslim nature was demonstrated by the failure to observe this religious ritual and, therefore, that they were insufficiently pious to be considered 'Muslims' (Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill (Fifth sitting) - Hansard, 2018). The risks of this discursive approach are readily apparent when one considers the extent to which it parallels the *takfirist* discourse of Salafi-Jihadists which emphasis the need for individuals to not only profess their Islamic faith but also to actively demonstrate their piety in order to be considered Muslim. Moreover, the implications of Coyle's discourse could be considered to relate not only to the specific individuals who were not breaking fast because they were engaged in terrorist activity but all self-professed Muslims who were not breaking fast at that particular moment.

In addition, Coyle's *takfirist* discursive practices were aimed not at constructing a foreign policy and counter-terrorism discourse which enabled and encouraged the use of military action overseas. Instead, Coyle was constructing a counter-terrorism discourse regarding the controversial PREVENT Programme which simultaneously supported calls for an independent review of the programme whilst at the same time representing the programme as beneficial. Coyle's *takfirist* discursive practices are central to the construction of this discourse as, by representing the terrorists claimed to be the target of the PREVENT Programme as non-Muslim, the programme itself can not be considered to be Islamophobic. Indeed, by representing Salafi-Jihadists as a non-Muslim external threat which is in conflict with the Muslim community, Coyle constructs the PREVENT Programme as being both beneficial to and vital to the safety of the Muslim community. Indeed, Coyle's statement was made in the context of a longer contribution to the debate which emphasised the level of support within the Muslim community for measures to prevent radicalisation, particularly of young people. By combining a *takfirist* representation of Salafi-Jihadists as non-Muslims with discursive claims about the desire expressed by 'real Muslims' for efforts to prevent radicalisation, Coyle constructed an overarching discourse within which the PREVENT Programme was both beneficial and necessary.

Alternative approaches

In contrast, to the accidental or unknowing use of *takfirist* discursive practices by British political elites and the aforementioned operationalisation of these practices by the leaders of some Muslim majority countries, a number of Islamic scholars, institutions, and states have explicitly renounced all forms of *takfir*, including the labelling of Salafi-Jihadists, such as the Islamic State, as non-Muslims (Badar et al., 2017). The most significant of these interventions came from the Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayyeb, when he explicitly refused to condemn the Islamic State as heretical or label its members apostate (Ibrahim, 2015). Al-Azhar is the most significant university and centre of religious scholarship in the Muslim world and is widely considered by Sunni Muslims to be the primary authority with regards to issues of Islamic theology and jurisprudence (Reid, 1995; Nagata, 2016). El-Tayyeb's statement explicitly referred to the risks incurred in mirroring the Islamic State's *takfirist* discursive practices when condemning the group, arguing that by declaring the Islamic State un-Islamic and its members non-Muslims he would be engaged in the same process of *takfir* and, thus, morally equivalent to the group:

> we rule that they deviated from the straight path, and that they sinned, but not that they are heretics... Anyone who commits a grievous sin does not leave the religion but is a believer who is undisciplined. Even if someone who has committed a grievous sin dies determined to commit the sin, we cannot rule that his punishment is Hell, because that is in the hands of Allah... If I rule that they are heretics, I will be like them. ISIS believes that anyone who commits a grievous sin is a heretic, and that the peoples who do not rule according to the laws of Allah are heretics. If I rule that they [ISIS activists] are heretics, I will be like them. (*MEMRI*, 2018)

This and other statements made by el-Tayyeb are intended to construct a discourse within which the Islamic State and its members are identified not as non-Muslims but as sinners within Islam. This discourse enables conflict with the Islamic State and represents the killing of terrorists as a religious obligation (*MEMRI*, 2018) without accusing them of heresy and identifying them as non-Muslims. This discourse constructed by el-Tayyeb and al-Azhar more widely is produced through the

interaction of a range of discourses and is motivated by a number of concerns, some emerging from the specific context within which al-Azhar is positioned. Thus, after the Nigerian Mufti, Sheikh Ibrahim Salah al-Husseini appeared to issue a *fatawa* declaring the Islamic State heretical, during a convention hosted at al-Azhar, he was compelled to clarify his position and make clear that a Muslim could not accuse another self-professed Muslim of heresy (*MEMRI*, 2018). This latter declaration was reinforced by an official announcement from al-Azhar which declared that no Muslim could be accused of heresy regardless of whether they had engaged in sin or in criminal activity and that this prohibition on *takfir* was a key tenet of Islam. Indeed, el-Tayyeb has not just refused to engage in *takfir* against the Islamic State, he has also condemned declarations of *takfir* more widely, arguing that it is these declarations which sow disunity within the community of Muslims and are 'a catastrophe for Islam' (Badar et. al., 2017).

Beyond al-Azhar's concern that declarations of *takfir* against the Islamic State both mirror and legitimise the *takfirist* discourse produced by the organisation and are, regardless, a sin against Islam, the institution's approach to the issue of *takfir* reflects their Egyptian context. In particular, the institution is sensitive to concerns that legitimising declarations of *takfir* might assist the Egyptian state in operationalising *takfir* against their political opponents, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. This reflects the al-Azhar's historically precarious position as an institution placed under pressure by various Egyptian governments, including the state takeover of al-Azhar in the 1960s, and the need to maintain its reputation and identity as an independent and impartial centre of Islamic scholarship and authority on Islamic jurisprudence (Kenney, 2006; Reid, 1995). In particular, various Egyptian governments have actively pressured al-Azhar into condemning the Muslim Brotherhood in an attempt to undermine the group's legitimacy and isolate it within the wider Islamist milieu (Kenney, 2006). Although, the institution has not explicitly stated that its refusal to condemn the Islamic State as apostate stemsfrom its concern that the present Egyptian government will utilise this legitimation of *takfir* to condemn its political opponents, this concern is implied in statements issued by the institution and its representatives (*MEMRI*, 2018). AL-Azhar's deputy, Sheikh Abbas Shuman, has stated that:

> opening the door to the possibility of accusations of heresy will arouse those who love accusation of heresy, and will whet their appetite to level such accusations against [all] those who have a different faith or religious stream, or even [a different] political or ideological implication. At this point, Al-Azhar will be transformed from an institute for the [religious] sciences that operates in an orderly and disciplined manner to an element that issues accusations of heresy on demand. In that very moment it will become much worse than the terror organizations that accuse all of society of heresy, including even Al-Azhar and its clerics. (*MEMRI*, 2018)

This statement produces a discourse within which the threat of declaring *takfir* against the Islamic State is represented as greater than that posed by the group itself, precisely because of the potential for the abuse of this mode of discourse. Not only that but Shuman is also constructing a discourse within which declarations of *takfir* are framed as an existential threat to al-Azhar by undermining its autonomy, complementing the previously discussed discourse within which *takfirism* threatens the souls of those who are members of or associated with al-Azhar by drawing them into sin. The concerns laid out by al-Azhar and a number of its leading scholars indicate the risks incurred when Western political elites utilise *takfirist* discursive practices, especially when they invoke the discourses produced by the authoritarian leaders of Muslim majority countries. However, it is important to note that al-Azhar has not always opposed *takfirism*, with members of the institution having themselves engaged in the practice in the past. Most notably the majority of al-Azhar's sheikhs issued a *fatawa* declaring the write Farag Foda a *kafir* and calling for him to be killed (Badar et. al., 2017). Indeed, this has led to criticism of the institution's failure to declare the Islamic State apostate with Raymond Ibrahim suggesting that al-Azhar's alleged hypocrisy demonstrates that the institution is more opposed to liberal or secular Muslims than it is to Salafi-Jihadists (Ibrahim, 2015).

A number of Muslim majority countries have gone so far as to outlaw *takfir* on the basis that the practice is the ideological driving force for Salafi-Jihadist terrorism (Badar et. al., 2017). Indeed, Tunisia has enshrined the prohibition of *takfir* within article 6 of the constitution drawn up in 2014, following the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011:

> The state undertakes to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance and the protection of the sacred, and the prohibition of all violations thereof. It undertakes equally to prohibit and fight against calls for Takfir and the incitement of violence and hatred (Constitute, 2020, P. 4.).

The positioning of this prohibition on *takfir* following on from a commitment to 'moderation' and 'toleration' and preceding a ban on 'incitement of violence and hatred' constructs a discourse within which *takfir* is represented as directly linked to violence and disunity, whilst the prohibition of *takfir* serves as a guarantee of religious moderation. These alternative approaches to the utilization of *takfirist* discursive practices indicate the contingent nature of British political elites use of *takfirist* discursive practices and highlight their potential implications. The concern expressed regarding the role of *takfir* in encouraging violence, legitimising both the discourses and practices of Salafi-Jihadist groups, and legitimisting and reproducing the discourses through which authoritarian states represent opposition is suggestive of the potential risks posed by these discursive practices.

Conclusion

The practice of *takfir*, long a mechanism by which a number of Islamic and Islamist actors have sought to label their opponents not just as non-Muslims but as apostates from Islam, has seeped into the discourse of British and some other Western political elites. Although, it is apparent that these elites have utilised *takfirist* discursive practices unknowingly or accidentally, it is this very ignorance which renders this phenomenon so dangerous. Not only does it demonstrate Western political elites ignorance of Islamic theology and jurisprudence and showcase the hubristic insensitivity with which they claim authority to speak on these subjects, it also leads them to simultaneously draw upon and legitimise the *takfirist* discourses of authoritarian or violent political actors. The process by which Western political elites 'borrow' the authority of leaders or political elites in Muslim majority countries to make authoritative statements on Islam engages in a reciprocal legitimisation of these actors policing of the boundaries of acceptable religious and, therefore, political practice.

This is not to say that Western political elites utilisation of *takfirist* discursive practices to represent Salafi-Jihadists as non-Muslims are not necessarily well intentioned. The distinguishing of Muslims on the one hand and non-Muslim terrorists on the other might be seen as an improvement on the dichotomy of 'good muslim/ bad muslim', which implicitly require that Muslims actively demonstrate their 'goodness' (Mamdani, 2004). At the very least a dichotomy of 'Muslim/ non-Muslim' terrorist indicates that Muslims should not have to apologise for or actively condemn Salafi-Jihadists in order to demonstrate that they have no connection to terrorism. However, the potential contradictions and risks posed by Western political elites drawing on *takfirist* discursive practices which have been and are being used to justify acts of violence and persecution by both Salafi-Jihadist organisations and authoritarian regimes can not be ignored. Muhammad Elewa Badar is clear and emphatic in his argument that engagement with *takfirist* discourses should be limited to refuting the *takfirist* practices of Salafi-Jihadist groups through jurisprudential analysis and should under no circumstances involve declarations of *takfir* against such groups or their members (Badar et. al., 2017). It is this paper's contention that at the very least Western political elites decision to utilise *takfirist* discursive practices should be a conscious political action taken with full consideration of the potential implications of *takfirist* discourse and their interaction with other discursive practices.

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