The Early Khawaarij Sect And The Takfiri’s of Today

The Khawaarij or Kharijite as written in many books, were the first group to deviate from mainstream Islam. The Prophet Muhammad warned of their appearance and explained how dangerously they would be: “they kill Muslims and leave off the enemies of Islam”; he also said: “If I live to see them I will kill them like the destruction of the people of Ad”2. Knowing the motives and methods deployed by the takfiri extremists will aid future generations and the world in general.

This small treatise will involve comparative analysis - a technique which will be particularly useful when making the comparison between the extremists responsible for the political violence we witness today and the early Khawaarij. This treatise will discuss who they are, and a brief mention of their history, appearance, characteristics and dangers. Their pride and honour in violence against the state demonstrate similarities as well as differences between them and those contemporary takfiri extremists. The issue of haakimiyyah, which was the central argument of the Khawaarij against Ali, will be discussed to show the similarity between them and the Takfiri extremists.

Khawaarij is defined as “those who render Muslims apostates because of sin and who rebel against the Muslim leaders and the state”3. They are also known as takfiri. Extremist is defined in Islam as “those who go beyond the prescribed limits, in excess of the boundaries laid down by Allah”6.

A brief look at the Khawaarij origins

The first trial to befall the Muslims which lead to sectarianism was the trial during the caliphate of Uthman. This small treatise will involve comparative analysis - a technique which will be particularly useful when making the comparison between the extremists responsible for the political violence we witness today and the early Khawaarij. This treatise will discuss who they are, and a brief mention of their history, appearance, characteristics and dangers. Their pride and honour in violence against the state demonstrate similarities as well as differences between them and those contemporary takfiri extremists. The issue of haakimiyyah, which was the central argument of the Khawaarij against Ali, will be discussed to show the similarity between them and the Takfiri extremists.

Khawaarij were the first group to deviate from mainstream Islam. The Prophet Muhammad prophesised the forth coming of this sect claiming Ali had done much wrong and accused him of not making them understand that this was not permissible but they did not inwardly accept his ruling, though they followed him at that moment. This was the first discord which appeared from the Kharijite.

The battle against Mu’awiya was called the battle of Siffin. In it Ali was winning until Mu’awiya’s army called for arbitration and a group of Ali’s army insisted on accepting it. This group was the same group who did not accept they were not allowed the booty from the battle of the camel. They were fierce fighters on the right flank of Ali’s army.

In his book called ‘al Bidaya wa Nhaya’, Ibn Kathir narrates the army of Mu’awiya began to lose the battle so they raised the musalab above their heads on their spears saying, “let the Book be judge between us”. The leader of Ali’s right flank army led by Ashita al Nakhaah, which was the section of the battle which inflicted the worse casualties to Mu’awiya, came to Ali. He said: “they are asking for Allah’s book to arbitrate between us; let us allow the judgement of Allah to settle this dispute and the spilling of Muslim blood”. Ali said to him: “it is for Allah’s judgement I am fighting in the first place. Indeed I called them to consultation before, but they were bent on fighting, so fight them now and do not leave anyone alive except those who will still be guarding the baggage. They are the loosing the battle, so fight them”. The leader of the right flank and the group who came with him to Ali were known as the ‘reciters’ due to their constant recitation of the Qur’an. They refused to fight, and disobeyed Ali’s command to accept the arbitration against his will which he made clear. His right flank was his strongest and he had no choice but to accept or loose the battle.

The two sides agreed to appoint a judge who would meet and agree to a solution to end the calamity amongst them. So Mu’awiya appointed Amr ibn Kas and Ali appointed Abu Musa al Ashari. They wrote an agreement between them stating: “this is what Ali ibn Abi Taalib chief of the believers agrees to”. Then Amr ibn A’as said: if I believed he was the chief of the believers I would not have fought him so write his name and his fathers name as he is your chief not ours. Upon this Ali said: “write this is what Ali ibn Abi Taalib agrees to and omit the words chief of the believers”. The scribe then wrote as he was instructed. The reciters were agitated and rejected this action of Ali arguing that being the chief of the believers is a cloak which Allah gave to Ali and he should not remove it. After the agreement had taken place, each party went back to where they came from. Mu’awiya went back to Damascus and Ali headed back to Kufa.

On the way to Kufa, Ali faced enmity from the reciters and false accusations began to spread in his army causing disunity. When they got close to Kufa, a group separated from Ali’s army and left claiming Ali had done much wrong and accused him of not judging by the Book of Allah. They committed ‘kharooj’ (went out) from Ali’s army and settled in a place called ‘al Harooj’. Thus the Kharijite sect was established. Some scholars called them al Haruqiyah after the name of the place which they separated to. They totally disassociates with Ali and accused him of a number of transgressions against the shar’ah. They openly spread propaganda denouncing Ali and neglected to be caliph. Ali was the first sect in Islamic history to be separate from the main body of Muslims10.

The Khawaarij killed Companions

Ubayyaan quotes a narration from Ibn Kathir’s book Bidaya wa Nhaya also showing the Khawaarij spread corruption on the earth, shed blood, obstructed the paths, and made lawful the prohibited. Among the many Muslims they killed was an illustrious companion of the Prophet, Abdullah ibn Khabaab. They captured him and his wife while she was pregnant. They asked him: “who are you?” he replied: “I am Abdullah ibn Khabaab, a companion of the Messenger of Allah and you have terrorised us without right”. They said to him: “do not be afraid, narrate to us something you heard from your father”. to which he replied that he heard his father say that he heard the Messenger of Allah saying “whenever there will come a tribulation (so severe) during which a person sitting will be better than one standing, the one standing better than the one walking, and the one walking better than the one running”. So they led him by the hand. While he was walking with them, some of them found a pig that belonged to some of the non-Muslims living under Muslim rule. One of them killed it with his sword, so another one asked him “how could you kill it when it belongs to a non-Muslim living under Muslim rule?” and he paid him for it. Later, while they were walking, a date fell from a palm tree so one of them took it and placed it in his mouth. Another said to him “You eat it without permission or paying for it” so he spat it out. Even with all these seemingly good deeds they still came to Abdullah ibn Khabaab and slaughtered him. Then they went to his wife while she was saying: “I am a pregnant woman! Do you all not have any fear of Allah?” They slaughtered her and cut open her stomach exposing her unborn baby11.
Advice given to the Khawaarij before fighting them

Imam Ahmad brings the three main claims against Ali that he sources from Majma al Fawa’id in the narration of Ibn Abbas who said:

"After they separated to al Harurah, I went to them to call them back. When I got there they welcomed me and I asked them: what is it you have against Ali which has made you separate from him and his governance?" They said:

"Firstly, he called for judgment of men in the religion of Allah, and Allah states in the Qur’an “verily judgement is for Allah alone”12. Secondly, he fought and did not speak badly about the enemy nor take booty even though they had become disbelievers. The wealth of the disbelievers is permissible to take and if they were believers then the shedding of their blood is impermissible in the first place.

Thirdly, he removed his name as the chief of the believers during the writing of the agreement”. So I said, “if I am able to narrate to you from the Qur’an and the Sunnah which you cannot reject, will you return to his governance?” They said “yes”. Then I said to them: “As for your complaint that he called for judgment of men in the religion of Allah, Allah states: “Oh you who believe do not kill prey”13. As for your complaint that he called for judgment of men in the religion of Allah, and his governance?” They said: “yes”. Then I said: “are you free from this also?” They replied: “By Allah, yes.”

I then asked: “as for your complaint that he fought and did not speak badly about the enemy nor take booty, will you speak badly about your mother? Or will you make halal, to do with other than her? If so then you have against Ali which has made you separate from him.” They replied: “By Allah, yes.”

[And] as for your complaint he removed his name as the chief of the believers then indeed the Messenger of Allah made an agreement with the Quraish in Hudaybiyah and removed his title of Messenger of Allah for Mohammad Ibn Abdullah. Who is better the Messenger of Allah or Ali? They replied: “the Messenger of Allah.” I said “are you free from this also?” They replied: “By Allah, yes.”

So twenty thousand of them returned [to us], four thousand remained and were fought by Ali and defeated in Nahrawaan.

Ali did not fight them until they began to spread mischief in the lands and spill the blood of the innocent. As mentioned above, Abdullah bin Khabab bin al Aratt passed by them while he was an appointee of Ali in some of those lands. He had with him his wife who was pregnant. They killed him and cut open the stomach of his wife. This news reached Ali and he sent an army which met them at Nahrawaan.

After the battle was over and Ali annihilated them, he sent a party to search for the one whom the Messenger described as having a hand which was like a small breast of a woman. When this individual was found Ali exclaimed: “Allahu Akbar I have been utilised to fulfil the prophecy and you all know the hadith”14. After Ali demolished them, they lived under his caliphate in hiding. Some of them still spread their corruption in secret, until Abdur Rahman Ibn Muljam killed Ali.

The different types of Khawaarij

According to Qadhi Abuk bin Alaaarabi Al Maaliki, the Kharijite were of two types. One type believed that Uthman and Ali and those who fought in the battle of al Jamal and al Siffin and everyone who accepted the judgement of arbitrators were disbelievers. The other type believed that whoever committed a major sin is a disbeliever, who shall reside in hell forever. Others claimed the first type are a branch of the second because the reason for them believing the rest of the Muslims were disbelievers was that they sinned by supporting Uthman and Ali. According to Abu Mansoor al Baghdadi the Kharijite split into twenty sects.

1 Bukhari
2 Bukhari
3 Such as present groups like Muhajiroon, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Ikawa Muslimoon and others who excommunicate Muslims from the religion.
4 Governance or rule
5 Al Khawaarij Awal firaq fil Ilsam by Al Aqal p28
6 Religious Extremism by Dr Abdul Rahman al Mutairi p67-74
7 Taken From Haqqatul Khawaarij by Sheikh Faisal al Jaaasim
8 Surah Tawbah verse 58
9 Muslim
10 Al Bidaaya wa Nihaaya p283
11 The Khawarij by Ubaykan p49-51
12 Surah al Anam verse 57
13 Surah al Maidaah verse 95
14 Surah al Maidaah verse 95
15 Surah Nisa verse 35
16 Surah Al-a’Aqab verse 6
17 A hadith in Muslim in which the Prophet prophesised the Khawarij will be killed and amongst the killed will be a man whose hand will be like a breast of a woman.

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