



# Al-Hazimiyya: the ideological conflict destroying the Islamic State from within

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International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

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# Contents

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<b>Abstract</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	2
<b>Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi</b>	3
The ideology of the Hazimiyya	3
The Hazimi conflict within the Islamic State	5
Extremism from within	6
Fighting for power	8
<b>Hazimis in the West</b>	15
The Netherlands	16
Austria	18
<b>Conclusion</b>	18
<b>Bibliography</b>	20
<b>Appendix: Well-known Hazimis in the Islamic State</b>	23

## Abstract

While the Islamic State's early years after its expansion from Iraq to Syria are generally considered a success, it was also during this period that internal ideological tensions developed within the group. The emerging faction of al-Hazimiyya, named after the Saudi cleric Ahmad al-Hazimi, instigated a power struggle within the group that posed a serious threat to the Islamic State's internal cohesion and which eventually resulted in it fragmenting. Based on the author's doctoral research, this report details the internal conflict within the Islamic State, how it evolved over time and its impact on the group. Through two brief case studies, it also details, with the scarce sources available, how the conflict migrated outside of the Levant to influence European networks of Islamic State sympathizers in the Netherlands and in Austria among other places.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, extremism, Hazimi, Syria, Netherlands, Austria

## Introduction

On 31 May 2017, a United States (US) coalition airstrike targeted and killed Islamic State's senior ideologue Turki al-Binali in the eastern Syrian town of Mayadeen. While enemy aircrafts were the direct culprits, Islamic State sympathisers and allies of al-Binali suspected that it was in fact people from within the Islamic State that leaked information about the ideologue's whereabouts. The following year, in September, it was reportedly the group's late caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, that was the target, albeit this time unsuccessfully. During the final days of the Islamic State's territorial control in Syria, a group of dissatisfied Islamic State members attempted a failed coup, planning to kill al-Baghdadi and take over the leadership of the Islamic State.

These stories are just a few resulting from the internal conflict that has since 2014 wreaked havoc within the Islamic State and led to defections, assassinations, and an intense power struggle for the control of the group's most powerful institutions. The conflict is essentially ideological in nature concentrating mainly around the issue of *excommunication* (takfir) and is fought out between two opposing factions within the Islamic State. One faction is often referred to with the eponym *Hazimis* (al-hazimiyya), or the extremists (al-ghulat), named after the obscure Saudi preacher Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi. The other faction similarly goes under an eponym, the *Binalis* (al-binaliyya), or the reformers (musallihin), after the late Turki al-Binali.<sup>1</sup>

While some aspects of the conflict have already been well covered,<sup>2</sup> this report intends to provide a full overview of the phenomenon of al-Hazimiyya, its impact on the Islamic State, and how the conflict transpired to the West. Doing this provides key insights into an ideological stream within the global extremist movement that is likely to continue to exist, albeit as a minority phenomenon, in years to come. Although the conflict appears to have reduced slightly in intensity since 2019, understanding its nature and trajectory is important because it has been such a central catalyst of instability within the Islamic State over the years affecting the group's internal cohesion at an important stage in its history in addition to its strategic prioritisation. Hence, studying the conflict enables us to reach a sounder analysis of the current state of the group and a better understanding of the internal dynamics within an extremist and generally closed organisation. While we know little about how the conflict has evolved since 2019, understanding the development over the previous years nonetheless helps us better assess the future evolution of the Islamic State.

First, the report profiles Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi and discusses the ideological concepts that are the sources of debate and contestation. The second part covers the trajectory of the conflict within the Islamic State as it played out in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2020. The final third part expands the geographical focus and looks at the spread of Hazimi thought in the West among Islamic State sympathisers, a perspective that so far has received scarce attention.

The conflict between the Binalis and Hazimis was a central part of the author's doctoral research

<sup>1</sup> Some observers refer to the Hazimis as '*takfirist*'. While it is true that Hazimis do focus extensively on the practice of takfir, the label is rather misleading as all Jihadis are in fact proponents of takfir to various extents.

<sup>2</sup> See Tore Hamming, "The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, 9 June 2016; Tore Hamming twitter thread, 15 June 2018: <https://twitter.com/ToreRHamming/status/1007576448159412226>; Tore Hamming, "The Evolution of the Islamic State and its Internal Fragmentation," *IPSI*, 28 June 2019. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/evolution-islamic-state-and-its-internal-fragmentation-23410>; Cole Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, 3 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray>; Cole Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide," *Jihadica*, 5 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/>; Cole Bunzel, "Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 13, Issue 1 (2019). Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-1/bunzel.pdf>; Djallil Lounnas, "The Failed Ideological Hybridization of the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759186>; Vera Mironova, Ekaterina Sergatskova, and Karam Alhamad, "The Bloody Split Within ISIS," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 December 2017. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-08/bloody-split-within-isis>.

and, as a result, the report relies extensively on this research including a range of primary sources and interviews the author conducted over the past years.<sup>3</sup> Our knowledge about the conflict primarily comes from online Islamic State fora between 2016 and 2019 when sympathisers of the respective factions attacked one another and leaked material. As a close observant of this virtual warfare, the author was able to draw on a wealth of sources to establish a detailed account of the internal power struggle and how it resonated among sympathisers in the West.

## Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi



Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi

Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi is an obscure Saudi scholar and ideologue believed to be somewhere in his fifties. Born in Mecca, he completed a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies at the Umm al-Qura university, specialising in the Quran and Sunna, and afterwards he studied under several scholars, most importantly the Ethiopian Muhammad Ali Adam, at the Dar al-Hadith. At some point he was appointed imam at the Badr Grand Mosque in Mecca's Al-Zahir neighborhood.

On 28 April 2015, al-Hazimi was arrested by Saudi authorities for unknown reasons and it appears that he remains in prison although there is limited information on his current situation. al-Hazimi, or his supporters, runs a website<sup>4</sup> and a YouTube channel with hundreds of audio lectures on a broad range of religious topics including creed (aqida), jurisprudence (fiqh), and exegesis (tafsir).<sup>5</sup> From the comment section on his website, it appears that al-Hazimi has a large following from around the world and especially in the Arab World. Testament to his relative popularity in some circles, his profile has 102,294 views on the website Islamway.net.

## The ideology of the Hazimiyya

Because of his popularity among segments within the Islamic State, it is occasionally assumed that al-Hazimi himself is a Jihadi or even supportive of the Islamic State. However, none of these accusations appear to be true. Al-Hazimi appears to follow the ideological trajectory of the exclusivist Najdi Wahhabi line that is characterised by its extreme devotion to religious purity, yet also loyalty to the Saudi royal establishment.<sup>6</sup> This also implies that the followers of al-Hazimi are not exclusively Jihadist but span the continuum of Salafis in terms of *manhaj* (methodology). One interesting thing to note is how this translates to an ambiguous attitude towards Saudi Arabia. While there is clear opposition to the Saudi regime's imprisonment of Ahmed al-Hazimi, there are segments among his followers who clearly hesitate to explicitly criticise the regime. In his own work, the Saudi ideologue is exclusively theological abstaining from involvement in political issues. As such, he has simply provided the interpretations, or tools, for his followers to apply.

<sup>3</sup> See Tore Hamming "Jihadi Politics: Fitna within the Sunni Jihadi movement 2014-2019," PhD dissertation, European University Institute, 28 October 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For Ahmad al-Hazimi's website, see <http://www.alhazme.net/>.

<sup>5</sup> For Ahmad al-Hazimi's Youtube channel, see <https://www.youtube.com/c/alhazmenetwwwalhazmenet/videos>.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Stéphane Lacroix. *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 103-109.

While al-Hazimi discusses a wealth of theological concepts in his lectures, what is relevant for this report is his view on excommunication (*takfir*) as it is on these issues that he has gained influence within Jihadi circles. Especially two issues that al-Hazimi discusses became central to the internal conflict within the Islamic State and among its supporters:

1. Whether *ignorance* (*jahl*) is acceptable as an *excuse* (*'udhr*) when committing acts of unbelief (excuse out of ignorance: *'udhr bi-l-jahl*).<sup>7</sup> The question is whether somebody committing *shirk* (polytheism) or in another way breaking Islamic law due to ignorance should be considered an apostate or not.
2. Whether the one excusing the unbeliever should be proclaimed an unbeliever as well (excommunication of the excuser: *takfir al-'adhir*). The question here is whether one should excommunicate the one who refrains from or rejects excommunicating the one who commits *shirk* out of ignorance. This doctrine would risk leading to an endless *chain of excommunication* (*al-takfir bi-l-tasalsul*).<sup>8</sup>

These questions are related to the *nullifiers of Islam* (*nawaqid al-islam*), the ten principles Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab defined to delineate the boundaries of the Islamic faith, which are generally accepted among Salafi. The transgression of any one of these ten nullifiers would automatically expel one from Islam. The questions of *'udhr bi-l-jahl* and especially *takfir al-'adhir* are specifically connected to the *third nullifier* that reads: "Whoso does not excommunicate the polytheists, or is doubtful about their unbelief, or affirms the validity of their doctrine, he is an unbeliever by consensus." This "requirement that Muslims excommunicate not only those guilty of polytheism, but also those who fail or hesitate to excommunicate them" is what Michael Crawford calls *secondary takfir*.<sup>9</sup> Bunzel explains how this was particularly important to al-Wahhab as a mechanism for dividing the community into Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>10</sup> According to Ahmad al-Hazimi *ignorance* is not a legitimate excuse, and he considers the one *excusing* the unbeliever to be an unbeliever himself. Even within Jihadi circles, this is a highly controversial opinion only supported by a small, extreme minority. Another important influence of al-Hazimi, that is particularly well-tuned to the Jihadi movement, is his argument that everyone can proclaim *takfir* and that such pronouncement is not a privilege of religious scholars.<sup>11</sup> This provided the Hazimis, who were at first a fringe element within the group, the theological backing to engage in discussions about excommunication despite lacking the religious credentials and authority.

Al-Hazimi's influence on the Jihadi movement can be traced back to 2011 when he travelled to

<sup>7</sup> *'Udhr bi-l-jahl* is not an entirely new concept of disagreement within Sunni Jihadism. Wagemakers has showed how the three ideologues Sayyid Imam, al-Maqdisi and al-Tartusi previously debated the acceptance of ignorance. This, however, was mainly in the context of nominal Muslim rulers and democracy. See Joas Wagemakers, "An Inquiry into Ignorance: A Jihadi-Salafi Debate on Jahl as an Obstacle to Takfir," in *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam*, ed. Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh, and Joas Wagemakers (Brill, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State." Discussing the factionalism with Ahmad al-Hamdan, a Jihadi observer who is close to al-Qaida and a childhood friend of Turki al-Binali - a protagonist in one of the competing factions - it was explained like this: "I will try to explain that to you. A person went to a grave and stood by the grave of one of his deceased ones and said "Oh deceased one, help me and assist me to solve some matter". This action is termed in the Islamic Shareeah [*shari'a*] as "Shirk" i.e. polytheism because instead of asking Allah, he asked from the dead for matters that only Allah alone can do. And he thought that these people can cause benefits and harms and not Allah. This action is considered by the both the movements [the Binalis and the Hazimis] as Shirk and the one who does this loses faith and becomes a disbeliever. But the point of the dispute is.... Will the one who does not make Takfir on this person (i.e. does not consider him to be a disbeliever) be a disbeliever himself or not? Bin'ali says no, rather the matter must be discussed and explained to him, and if he still insists after that, he will be a Kaafir (disbeliever). Al Hazimi says there is no need for a discussion or explanation in his case, rather is a Kaafir if he does not consider that person to be a Kaafir."

<sup>9</sup> Michael Crawford. *Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Manifest Enmity: The Origins, Development, and Persistence of Classical Wahhabism (1153-1351/1741-1932)," PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, Department of Near Eastern Studies, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Ahmad al-Hazimi, "Takfir is not a boogeyman," [Youtube video], 2016, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuJkKXeiVps> [Accessed 11 May 2016].



Tunisia on several occasions to lecture. Aaron Zelin explains how al-Hazimi between December 2011 and May 2012 visited Tunisia four times where he, in association with local Islamist organisations linked with Ansar al-Shari'a, lectured on takfir al-'adhir. During his visits to Tunisia, al-Hazimi also established the Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani Institute for Shari'a Sciences located in Hay al-Khadra', promoting his teachings and enhancing his ideological impact on the local Tunisian militant milieu. In illustration of his influence, Ansar al-Shari'a propagated al-Hazimi's teaching on its Facebook page, thus partly explaining the prevalence of extremism among Tunisians joining the Islamic State.<sup>12</sup>

What fascinates al-Hazimi supporters about the Islamic State is not particularly the groups' extreme violence or terror campaign in the West, but rather its dedication to follow and implement a literalist creed. This, however, was also what eventually turned out to be the problem; in the eyes of Hazimis, the Islamic State's creed would in fact not be sufficiently rigid and literalist, thus in their eyes meaning that the group itself was beginning to deviate. Over time, this led to a fragmentation of the Hazimi movement into three distinctive stances on the Islamic State:

- The loyalists: those who support the Islamic State and, despite the internal conflict, remain in the group;
- The disillusioned: those who support the Islamic State and who were part of the group but left it as a result of the internal conflict; and
- The opponents: those who believe the Islamic State never truly followed the Hazimi doctrine and that al-Hazimi never endorsed the group.

## The Hazimi conflict within the Islamic State

The Jihadi movement is no stranger to internal conflict, neither in terms of struggles for power or ideological disputes.<sup>13</sup> During his lifetime, Usama Bin Laden entirely prohibited al-Qaida members from engaging in excommunication and when members with too extreme opinions were discovered, they were forced to undergo a sharia course to 'correct' their views. Former Guantanamo prisoner Walid Muhammad Al Haajj has narrated how Bin Laden

*“gathered all the Mujahideen at the Farooq military camp leaving only the guards at the gate when he had heard that some of the Mujahideen at the camp had made their main concern to say that such and such a person is a Kaafir and such and such a person is an apostate. So he gathered them together and said ‘Oh my sons, you came here to train and prepare, so do not concern yourselves with Takfeer, and leave it to the scholars.’”<sup>14</sup>*

While this sort of ideological disagreement never spiralled out of control within al-Qaida, it certainly did within the Islamic State. Internal cracks within the group quickly emerged after its divorce from al-Qaida in early 2014. Initially this was mainly a fringe group phenomenon, although the substance of the tensions was far more critical than the issues dividing the Islamic State from al-Qaida since it mirrored two distinctive positions on issues pertaining to creed.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron Zelin, “Ultra Extremism Among Tunisian Jihadis Within the Islamic State,” *Jihadica*, 18 February 2020. Available at: <http://www.jihadica.com/ultra-extremism-among-tunisian-jihadis-within-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>13</sup> Tore Hamming, “Polemical and Fratricidal Jihadists: A Historical Examination of Debates, Contestation and Infighting Within the Sunni Jihadi Movement,” *ICSR*, August 2019. Available at: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ICSR-Report-Polemical-and-Fatricidal-Jihadists-A-Historical-Examination-of-Debates-Contestation-and-Infighting-Within-the-Sunni-Jihadi-Movement.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Tore Hamming, “The increasing extremism within the Islamic State,” *Jihadica*, 19 November 2016: footnote 2. Available at: <https://www.jihadica.com/the-increasing-extremism-within-the-islamic-state/>

These differences crystallised as two identifiable factions: the Hazimis and the Binalis.

In September 2014, the late Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani prepared for this future scenario when he in reference to the Hazimis claimed that “some people have entered your ranks who are not of you and are only claimants. And thus some disorder has occurred. So it has become necessary for a trial to come, expel the filth, and purify the ranks.”<sup>15</sup> At this point the Hazimi faction within the Islamic State was still too weak to seriously challenge the existing structures within the group, which successfully suppressed the faction through the work of its security establishment. This changed in 2016 when internal competition re-emerged, leading to challenge the internal cohesion. Eventually the Hazimis succeeded in briefly claiming institutional power and leadership, before losing out once again.

Understanding this evolution is important because it enables a more nuanced analysis of the Islamic State’s identity and its future trajectory. As the following sections illustrate, the Islamic State was never an entirely cohesive group but was divided along ideological lines and strategic concerns. As the group was facing increasing pressure, these divisions intensified to the extent that senior leaders within the group were imprisoned and executed.

## Extremism from within

At the time of al-Adnani’s claim in September 2014, the Islamic State was already seeing the first signs of dissidence. Determining exactly *when* these problems emerged is impossible to say, but there is evidence of this as early as spring 2014 when Islamic State ideologue Turki al-Binali published a Tweet denouncing a Saudi religious scholar, Ahmad ibn Umar al-Hazimi, and his views on excommunication.<sup>16</sup> During the summer, the Islamic State moved to arrest a group of its members whom it accused of excessive excommunication.

The first to be targeted was a group of six foreign second-rank leaders and rank-and-file who were arrested and later killed in August 2014: Abu Jafar al-Hattab, Abu Musab al-Tunisi, Abu Asid al-Maghribi, Abu al-Hawra al-Jazairi, Abu Khalid al-Sharqi, and Abu Abdullah al-Maghribi.<sup>17</sup> The most prominent from the group were al-Hattab and al-Tunisi. Al-Hattab was a former member of the Sharia Committee of the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia group. During his brief time in the Islamic State, he released an audio recording declaring his view on takfir, including his rejection of ignorance as an excuse for excommunicating other Muslims. Some supporters of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State even accused al-Hattab of issuing a fatwa stating that all opponents of the Islamic State are infidels, much like the fatwa produced by the Groupe Islamique Armé proclaiming takfir on the entire Algerian population.<sup>18</sup> Al-Tunisi was a shari’a official in Deir ez-Zour, but he faced problems within Islamic State ranks when he declared the Taliban and Bin Laden infidels.<sup>19</sup>

The following month, in September, the Islamic State executed another of its Shari’a judges, Abu Umar al-Kuwaiti (Husain Rida Lare). Originally from Kuwait, Abu Umar allegedly entered Syria in 2012 where he established the *Soldiers of the Caliphate Battalion*, which developed into *Jama’at al-Muslimin* before finally pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Even before joining the Islamic State, the vocal Abu Umar became infamous for his takfiri inclination when he

<sup>15</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful,” 22 September 2014, Al-Furqan Media.

<sup>16</sup> Turki al-Bin’ali’s tweeted through the account @turky\_albinali on 22 May 2014.

<sup>17</sup> For an examination of this early period of the rise of the Hazimis within the Islamic State, see Hamming, “The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State.”

<sup>18</sup> Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Zelin, “Ultra Extremism Among Tunisian Jihadis Within The Islamic State.”

<sup>19</sup> Abu Musab al-Tunisi also pronounced takfir on al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia. See Ibid.

pronounced takfir on Jabhat al-Nusra. As a judge within the Islamic State, Abu Umar also argued in favour of excommunicating al-Zawahiri and eventually also al-Baghdadi. Unsurprisingly, this cost him his life. Yet, killing the seven would not immediately solve the problem for the Islamic State. An article entitled *Assisting the imprisoned brothers in the Kafirs' Jahmiyyah State* issued 16 August 2014 illustrated that the Hazimi ideas propagated by al-Hattab and the rest had a following that would continue to cause problems.<sup>20</sup>

Radicalisation often happens at the fringes of a group and this was also the case in the Islamic State. The dissidents were initially a small minority and their view of takfir was considered extreme even by Islamic State standards. For the Islamic State leadership, the problem was particularly that in the principle of takfir of the excuser lies the potential for 'chain takfir', which leaders quickly realised would eventually involve excommunication of themselves. Some Hazimis considered al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri an infidel because of his refusal to excommunicate the Shia as a group and his pledge of allegiance to the Taliban. If Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not excommunicate al-Zawahiri and al-Qaida more broadly, the caliph himself would become an infidel. However, the marginal support the Hazimis enjoyed within the Islamic State in 2014 implied that their internal rebellion was manageable for the Islamic State, despite it spreading among rank-and-file, particularly among foreign fighters and the Russian-speaking contingent.<sup>21</sup>

The Hazimis' main platforms for airing their frustrations about the official Islamic State stance were initially Facebook and Twitter, where they debated the requirements for excommunication. However, some more elaborate primary accounts telling the story from a Hazimi perspective do exist. One of them was written by an Abu Jafar al-Shami, who published a strong condemnation of the Islamic State, which he refers to as the *State of al-Baghdadi* (dawlat al-baghdadi).<sup>22</sup> Although he does not mention the name of Ahmad al-Hazimi, he clearly sympathises with known Hazimi figures such as Abu Musab al-Tunisi. Al-Shami's article rebukes the Islamic State for refraining from making takfir of the one who excuses greater *shirk* (idolatry) and for excusing the ignorant. He suggests this is because al-Baghdadi and his loyalists are not sufficiently devoted to theology, but more focused on power and strategy. To illustrate this al-Shami uses the example of al-Qaida, explaining that al-Qaida never changed in the period after Bin Laden's death in contrast to the official Islamic State narrative.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it was the Islamic State that changed its view of al-Qaida because of the strategic interest it had in doing so.

The Islamic State's hope at this early stage was to suppress the extremist faction, and thus the leadership did not comment officially on the Hazimis. Instead, in late 2014, its *General Committee* (al-lajna al-amma), the forerunner to the Delegated Committee, issued a general instruction on the "*precision of the base of excommunication on the dismaying issues of the excuse out of ignorance,*" prohibiting members to discuss matters of excuse out of ignorance and threatening to prosecute members sharing material on this issue.<sup>24</sup> Around the same time, Abu Maysara al-Shami, the American media official, issued a condemnation entitled *al-Hazimi between the great sin of abstention and the error of the Jamiah*, in which he discredits Ahmad al-Hazimi, explaining that al-Hazimi is not a Jihadi, but in fact loyal to the Saudi monarchy.<sup>25</sup> Al-Shami denounced al-Hazimi stressing his exclusively 'theoretical' approach, which he claims is devoid of any

20 Maslahat al-Tawhid, "munasirat al-ikhwa al-ma'surin fi dawla al-jahmiyya al-kafirin" [Assisting the imprisoned brothers in the Kafirs' Jahmiyyah State], 16 August 2014. Available at: <https://justpaste.it/gonv>

21 The issue of takfir al-adhir was already a problem within the Russian speaking militant environment prior to 2014, but it migrated into the Islamic State when large numbers of Russian speaking Jihadis joined the group.

22 Abu Jafar al-Shami, "al-qawl al-naddi fi kufr dawlat al-baghdadi [the Moist Words on the Unbelief of the State of al-Baghdadi]," April 2015. The piece is most likely authored in late August or early September 2014 as the deaths of Abu Musab al-Tunisi and others are mentioned (killed in August), but not the death of Abu Umar al-Kuwaiti (killed in September).

23 In Abu Jafar al-Shami's view, al-Qaida was always an apostate group.

24 The author holds a copy of the document issued by the General Committee.

25 The author holds a copy of Abu Maysara al-Shami's article.

connection to reality, and his decision not to emigrate to the Levant despite being encouraged by his supporters. The Saudi's view of takfir, he claims, is an innovation that resembles the early khawarij sect<sup>26</sup> and necessarily results in endless excommunication. Ending his article, al-Shami writes: "To the 'Hazimites' I say: disbelieve your sheikh or shut up. I swear by Allah that you are living in contradiction (...) O Allah reveal the disappointment of al-Hazimi, reveal his secrets and make him an example to those who might learn."<sup>27</sup>

The most elaborate account about the internal factionalism in this early period comes from an internal report from November 2015 but only leaked by IS members in 2018 and published by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. Authored by the 'public security department' (diwan al-amn al-amm), it explains the internal challenge that the Hazimis posed, how they were structured, the substance of the disagreement and how the Islamic State as an institution should deal with them.

Naming several of the Hazimis' early leaders, many of whom occupied senior organisational positions within the Islamic State, the report identifies Abu al-Hawra al-Jaza'iri and Abu Khalid al-Sharqi as central figures in spreading the Hazimi ideology by giving courses in creed to Islamic State imams and ordinary members in Raqqa. The report explains that the group's security department responded in various ways to the Hazimis' assertiveness: members suspected of sympathising with extreme views were reported to the security department, arrested and questioned. Eventually some were released after retracting their views. Leaders of the faction, however, were mainly executed after being labelled as khawarij. In its Dabiq magazine issue 6, the Islamic State included a brief notice on the dismantling of a 'khariji cell' which was working on recruiting others. Later a video was published showing the interview with the four men that had been arrested. The report from the Department of Public Security further explains that the crackdown did not solve the internal problems, but it changed how the Hazimis operated in 2015. While initially they had aired their criticisms publicly, they now began to work clandestinely and to organise in secret cells led by Alfir al-Azeri, Abu Huraira al-Shishani, Abu Abdullah al-Tunisi, Abu Suhail al-Masri and Abu Ayub al-Tunisi. In this period, they generally blended in within the Islamic State or, in some instances, left the group in order to publish their criticism.

## Fighting for power

The first two phases of Hazimi rebellion within the Islamic State unfolded in 2014-2015. These two phases were characterised by a distinctive operational modus whereby a minority who had once publicly aired their criticism began to operate in clandestine cells. In 2016, a third phase started when Hazimis managed to take advantage of the Islamic State's changing fortunes in Syria and effectively challenge the power balance within the group.

While the dominant issues in 2014-15 were *excuse out of ignorance* and *takfir of the excuser*, from 2016 and onwards the debate centred on whether excommunication is a *foundation of religion* (takfir min asl al-deen) or not.<sup>28</sup> In the first half of 2016, the Hazimis continued to be the inferior

26 Al-khawarij refers to ancient Islamic sects that initially became infamous for killing Uthman and Ali, the third and fourth caliphs after the prophet Muhammed, due to the perceived deviance of Uthman and Ali's acceptance to arbitration in his conflict with Muawiya. This made the khawarij hugely unpopular within the Muslim community due to their alleged extremism, which has made it a term applied in modern times to vilify one's opponent. There are discussions about how many sects the khawarij divided into, but Patricia Crone mentions the four best known: the Ibadiyya (only khariji sect to survive today), Najdiyya (originally from Basra, but mainly active in Arabia and was suppressed in 693, but managed to survive a few centuries), Azariqa (originally from Basra but fled to Iran where they disappeared after suppression in 699), and Sufriyya (active in North Africa until 10th century). For more on the khawarij, see Patricia Crone. *God's rule: government and Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

27 Abu Maysara al-Shami, "al-hazimi been kabira al-qu'ud wa dalal al-jamiyyah [Al-Hazimi between the Great Sin of Abstention and the Error of the Jamiah]," 2014.

28 Turki al-Binali, "Untitled Letter to the Delegated Committee," *The Islamic State's Department of Research and Studies*,

faction within the Islamic State and the group's leadership supported the ongoing crack down. Characterising this situation, one Islamic State supporter told this author in an interview on Telegram as part of his doctoral research that "al-Hazimi manhaj ideology is forbidden within Dawla [the Islamic State] due to its extremism and wrong understanding of the third nullifier of Islam."<sup>29</sup> Illustrative of the position of the leadership, in July the group's *Delegated Committee* (al-lajna al-mufawwada, previously known as lajnat al-'amma al-mushrifah) issued a circular with a warrant for an Islamic State member named Muhammad Yahya Qirtas (also known as Abu Muath al-Jaza'iri al-Assimi) on accusation that he pronounced takfir on the group's leadership.<sup>30</sup> In the circular, the committee ordered all Islamic State provinces to search for al-Assimi and either capture or kill him for propagating the ideology of the khawarij.<sup>31</sup> Further illustrating the inferiority of the Hazimis, there are stories that hours before his death, al-Adnani, in answering a question from a Hazimi named Abu al-Mahi, said: "The fronts take precedence over these matters you speak of. Go see how your brothers are sacrificing their lives for the sake of Allah while you discuss these matters. I don't have time to talk to discuss these issues with stupid people."<sup>32</sup>



In 2017 the situation changed dramatically.<sup>33</sup> Correlating with the group's extensive loss of territory, Turkey's military intervention (August 2016) and the offensive against Mosul (October 2016 - July 2017), the Hazimis evolved from a fringe phenomenon to an increasingly imposing faction able to exert real pressure on the group leadership.<sup>34</sup> The mounting pressure made the group more susceptible to factionalism and the leadership was incapable of both inhibiting the growing strength of the Hazimis and of balancing the opposing factions. The situation was further aggravated when al-Adnani and Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, two senior *centrist* leaders who functioned as barriers against the Hazimis, died within a span of eight days in mid-2016. This enabled a struggle between some of the caliphate's powerful institutions: the Binali-dominated *Office of Research and Studies* (maktab al-buhuth wa-l-dirasat) and the Hazimi-controlled *Central Media Department* (Diwan al-'lam al-Markazi) and *Security Department* (Diwan al-Amn al-Aam). Both factions were competing for the control over the Delegated Committee, the Islamic State's most powerful institution except for the Caliph's office.

The re-emergence of tensions became clear in two letters from Turki al-Binali to the Delegated Committee. In the first letter, al-Binali complains that he has been accused of *permitting*

February 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Islamic State supporter, May 2016. The recent resurgence of the dispute did not go unnoticed in Islamic State supporter networks. On 12 May 2016 an Islamic State affiliated Telegram channel (re-)published several pieces on the issue of takfir as a critique of the Hazimi trend. First, it re-published an explanation titled "Details regarding the questions of takfir on al 'adhir" by the Saudi sheikh 'Ali Al Khudayr, originally from March 2016, in which he gives his interpretation of the third nullifier of Islam. This was followed by a piece on the Ansaru Khilafah website on the same topic, but attached with the Islamic State's official interpretation of the third nullifier as it is taught at their military camps. From this document, it is clear that the Islamic State's position on takfir follows the interpretation of Turki al-Bin'ali rather than the Hazimis.

<sup>30</sup> The circular containing a picture of Muhammad Yahya Qirtas was issued on 27 July 2016 to all Islamic State provinces.

<sup>31</sup> A series of tweets allegedly by Abu Muadh al-Assimi on the Islamic State's persecution of himself and other Hazimis can be accessed here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160707110752/justpaste.it/vy9e>

<sup>32</sup> MEMRI, "Losing Faith In Al-Baghdadi – Part 2: 'Extremists' Explain Why They Left ISIS," 15 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.memri.org/jttm/losing-faith-al-baghdadi-%E2%80%93-part-2-extremists-explain-why-they-left-isis>.

<sup>33</sup> In an interview, captured senior leader Abd al-Nasir Qardash says that after Kobane, the 'extremists' (ghulat) had the upper hand, but that assessment seems too early compared to my reading of primary documents. The interview is accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmyDWOuQIY>

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Milton, "Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, July 2018.

*polytheism* and asked to repent.<sup>35</sup> In the second letter, he warns against the Hazimis' proclamation of takfir while explaining how ignorance in some situations should be considered a legitimate obstruction to takfir. The main point of this letter is that the new position of the Hazimis is to argue that takfir is part of the *foundation of religion* (asl al-deen) and anyone who argues that it is merely a *requirement* (wajib) is murji'a or jamiya. Stressing the serious nature of this matter, he requests the Delegated Committee to respond.<sup>36</sup> A few months later, and in relation to a document proclaiming takfir on Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State circulated an internal ruling which was clearly aligned with al-Binali's position, but which nonetheless attempted to reach out to the Hazimis in a diplomatic manner. Authored by al-Furqan but with input from al-Binali, it established that *excuse* is invalid on the level of the *foundation* of religion, but not on the level of *requirements* (wajibat) of religion, while *proof* (hujjah) must be presented to the excuser.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the document prohibits the use of certain terms such as 'takfir of the excuser'.<sup>38</sup> Despite the group's official policy aligned with al-Binali, he was becoming increasingly uneasy with the institutional accommodation of the Hazimis. Describing it as a *theory of balance*, which he finds *false in theory and in reality*, he laments the leadership's appointment of Hazimi figures to positions of power as a means of easing the increasing pressure; this, he argues, provides the faction with additional legitimacy, status and authority. Threatening the leadership to choose sides, al-Binali recounts a story of a lecture given by a Hazimi in a mosque in Tabqa:

*Days ago one of them arose in one of the mosques of al-Tabqa (may God protect it), arose and spoke to the crowd. And among the things he (may God mute his mouth) said: 'And this idolatrous tyrant Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,' with all boldness and insolence, while the enemy are at the peripheries of al-Tabqa [a town in Raqqa province in northern Syria].*<sup>39</sup>

The Hazimis had their eyes on winning the support of al-Baghdadi and gaining control of the Delegated Committee. Under the leadership of al-Adnani, the delegated committee managed to find a balance between the two rivalling factions, but when al-Adnani was killed on 30 August 2016, Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, the head of the Central Media Department and the Central Office for Overseeing the Shari'a Departments (al-maktab al-markazi li-mutaba'a al-dawawin al-shar'iyya), allegedly took over heading the committee for a week before he was killed.

The establishment of the Central Office for Overseeing in February 2016 was essentially the first institutional concession to the Hazimis, as it limited the power of the Islamic State's scholars which was overrepresented by the Binalis.<sup>40</sup> The situation became still worse for the Binalis when Hajji Abd al-Nasir took charge of the Delegated Committee and established the Office for Methodological Inquiry (maktab al-tadqiq al-manhaji) as a successor to the Central Office for Overseeing, with a mandate to investigate Islamic State scholars and to ensure their creed and methodology was correct. Confirming the early fears of al-Binali, the Hazimis did now exercise serious control over the Delegated Committee, while several prominent Hazimis like Abu Maram al-Jaza'iri, Abu Ahmed al-Firansi,<sup>41</sup> Abu Anisa and Abu Daoud al-Maghribi had a seat in the Office

35 Al-Binali's letter can be accessed here: <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/masalat-al-istitaba.pdf>.

36 Al-Binali, "Untitled Letter to the Delegated Committee."

37 From another internal document, showing the final part of al-Binali's input to al-Furqan, he mentions that document 155 can be misinterpreted and needs clarification. For instance, he mentions that followers of the Islamic State can perceive it to state that those not proclaiming takfir on figures like Abdallah Azzam, al-Zawahiri, al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada are themselves apostates.

38 Islamic State, "Document no. 155," *Central Office for Overseeing the Shari'a Departments*, 29 May 2016. The document was circulated internally, but a summary was included in Rumiya magazine no. 2 and later it was published in al-Naba no. 76.

39 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Turki Binali's Critique of The 'Theory of Balance': Translation and Analysis," 8 January 2019: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/turki-binali-critique-of-the-theory-of-balance>

40 The Central Office for Overseeing appears to have been established in February 2016 by Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, Abu Maysara al-Shami and Abu Khabbab al-Masri with the blessing of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. Already before its establishment, al-Furqan functioned as an 'advisor' to al-Binali's office of scholars.

41 A French national who lived in Saudi Arabia and studied at the Islamic University in Medina. He once tried to join al-Qaeda in Iraq but was arrested in Syria and handed over to France, where he was imprisoned until 2009.

for Methodological Inquiry, which was likely headed by another Hazimi Abu Hafs al-Jazrawi (Abu Hafs al-Wadani).<sup>42</sup>

During this period of institutional dominance, the Hazimis made sure to take advantage of the situation. The first things they did was to initiate a process to investigate religious scholars and jurists within the Islamic State, which quickly took the form of a persecution campaign against Binali scholars. From a status report assessing the work of the Central Office for Overseeing after its first four months of activity under the direction of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, Abu Maysara al-Shami and Abu Khabbab al-Masri we know that it conducted interviews with twenty-nine jurists who were either known to have controversial opinions or were under suspicion. While the results of these interviews are only briefly described in the status report, they all led to more exhaustive reports on the individual jurists of which several have been leaked. Interestingly, the report also states that the original focus of the Office was in fact investigating the Hazimis, whose resurgence al-Binali had warned about, but according to al-Masri, it quickly became apparent that the main problem among the jurists was not their extremism but their adherence to the principle of *postponement* (*irja'*) associated with the Binalis.<sup>43</sup> The report's conclusion indicates that the Hazimis were able to exert massive pressure on al-Furqan and his colleagues as early as mid-2016.<sup>44</sup>

One of the scholars questioned by the Central Office was Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, a prominent cleric and member of the Delegated Committee. Among Binali scholars, al-Qahtani is renowned for opposing the Hazimis and debating them theologically.<sup>45</sup> This would cost al-Qahtani dearly as the conclusion reached at the meeting was that his opinions deviated from the methodology of al-Zarqawi and were closer to “the murjiah of jihad represented by al-Maqdisi and his companions”. He would eventually be asked to repent.<sup>46</sup>

The ultimate triumph for the Hazimis came when the Delegated Committee in May 2017 issued a controversial seven-page memorandum defining takfir of the idolaters as a foundation of religion. This implied that takfir should be considered mandatory for everyone, thus prohibiting any excuses – like ignorance – for refusing to proclaim another person an apostate. The Hazimis had thus managed to turn their primary objection into official Islamic State ideology, gaining a major victory.

When the Delegated Committee issued the memorandum, the Binalis had been bereft of much of their institutional power, leaving its scholars as mere spectators. Trying to counter the new official theological line of the caliphate, several of the most senior Binalis authored internal letters to the leadership. Just two days after the memorandum was issued, al-Binali himself sent a letter to the Delegated Committee condemning the process leading to the memorandum and its impact. The drafting process was too quick and without scholarly oversight, he wrote, and the decision removes many obstacles to takfir.<sup>47</sup>

42 It has also been rumoured that the head of the Office for Methodological Inquiry was an Abu Zeid al-Iraqi (Ismail Alwaan al-Ithawi).

43 A separate committee was formed to work on a report on the issue of the Hazimis and was comprised of senior representatives from various Islamic State institutions. Almost nothing is known about this committee's work and conclusion, but in the Central Office's status report the challenge from extremism is considered under control.

44 This most likely explains why al-Furqan is described in ambiguous terms by the Binaliyyah faction. He was generally seen as centrist who eventually gave in to the extremists.

45 See Turki al-Binali's letter to the Delegated Committee in February 2017.

46 Bunzel, “A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide.”; The Office for Methodological Inquiry continued the work of the Central Office. One of its investigations, led by the Algerian Hazimi Abu Maram al-Jazairi, was into Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Shami al-Zarqawi, another senior veteran Islamic State member, see Bunzel, “Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State.”

47 Turki al-Binali, “Letter to Delegated Committee,” May 2017.

The letter was followed by several critiques from al-Binali's colleagues, two being particularly condemnatory. The first was a 'public letter' by Abu Muhammad al-Husayni al-Hashimi which is framed as *advice* (nasiha) but stands out for its critical tone in addressing the caliph. Indicating that the Islamic State has recently changed, he writes "it is not my state that I pledged allegiance to" and asks "why has the flag deviated and the manhaj changed?" Although the "war against the students of knowledge" is executed by the Office for Methodological Inquiry, the responsibility, in al-Hashimi's view, is ultimately with the caliph who all along was aware of the situation. In his concluding remarks, he attributes blame for the state of the caliphate to its leaders' lack of knowledge; resulting in a caliphate deviating from the prophetic methodology.<sup>48</sup> The second piece was authored by Abu Abd al-Malik al-Shami, who portrays al-Baghdadi as absent and urges the caliph to intervene to save the group. He argues that the Hazimi dominated media department is misleading the caliph through manipulation of the news stream, while Binalis are sent to the frontlines to fight (and get killed). The solution, he concludes, is institutional reform, that al-Baghdadi should step up and manage the situation, and that the Delegated Committee should be dissolved. Eventually prominent figures like al-Binali and al-Qahtani were killed in coalition bombings, with Binalis drawing a link between these peoples' opposition to the Hazimis and their deaths.

Whether in response to the letters or not, al-Baghdadi finally arranged a meeting to solve the mounting tensions. Abu Hafs al-Wadani and Abu Zeid al-Iraqi represented the Hazimis, and Abu Muhammed al-Masri, Abu Yaqub al-Maqdisi and Abu Muslim al-Masri represented the Binalis. At the meeting, the caliph decided not only to *retract* the controversial memo, but also to disband the Delegated Committee and reconstitute it in a smaller form, appointing Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Shami to the committee while imprisoning al-Wadani and Abu Zeid al-Iraqi.<sup>49</sup> The retraction of the memorandum was officially announced on 15 September 2017 in an internal circular issued by the Delegated Committee; the explanation given was that it contained *knowledge-related errors* and *imprecise phrases* that could easily be misinterpreted.<sup>50</sup> This represented a major and unexpected victory for the Binalis.

The internal situation remained volatile, however. After just forty days in prison, al-Wadani was released in late October and in early December he complained in a letter to al-Baghdadi about the decision to retract the memorandum and the ongoing oppression of Hazimis. Blaming al-Baghdadi for the situation, he accuses the caliph of being absent and not in control, which leaves his fighters without trust in him. To correct the situation, he writes, al-Baghdadi must assert himself as a leader in control and undo the mistake. Even though the Hazimis were about to regain control, al-Wadani's letter made him a wanted man and on 27 June 2018 he was executed by the Islamic State's security department.<sup>51</sup>

In the aftermath of the retraction of the memorandum, tensions between the two factions turned increasingly public through the work of media institutions and Telegram channels siding with or run by one of the two. These institutions and channels began to publish unauthorised material and leak incriminating internal documents and testimonies. On the side of the Binalis, the main institutions were *Mu'assasat al-Turath al-Ilmi*, *Mu'assasat al-Wafa*, *al-Nasiha* and *Ahl al-Tawhid*, while the Hazimis' primary outlets were the Telegram channels *Nadhira al-Uryan* and *Wa Harridh al-Mu'mineen* and Islamic State supporter accounts like *Tarjuman al-Asawarti*. The latter's control of the Islamic State's Central Media Department also meant that it could to some extent

48 Al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State: 'Hashimi Advice' to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

49 Some accounts state that Abu Maryam al-Jaza'iri was also imprisoned or successfully fled to Turkey like many other Hazimis.

50 Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya'," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 11, Issue 9 (2018). Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-states-mufti-trial-saga-silsila-ilmiyya/>.

51 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Killing of Abu Hafs al-Jazrawi by the Islamic State," 19 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-killing-of-abu-hafs-al-jazrawi-by-the-islamic>



control official communication and publications.<sup>52</sup> For instance, in the Spring 2017, it prevented the publication of a book authored by a senior Binali-scholar, Abu Yaqub al-Maqdisi, on the third nullifier, which was later published through a Binali-loyal institution. A leaked account by Binali-loyalists in the subunit of the Central Media Department also recounts how the internal tensions within the department even led to the official 'Amaq News Agency closing down for a short period. Intended to counter unauthorised publications from the Binalis, in July 2018 the media department prohibited publishing any written, audio or visual material through unofficial channels, and clarified that such material did not represent the Islamic State. This did little to help, however, and the following month *Ahlut Tawhid* released a booklet entitled *Refutation of al-Hazimi and the Misconceptions of al-Ghulah al-Hazimiyyah*, describing al-Hazimi as an *innovator* (mubtadi') and his theology as following the *mu'tazila*.<sup>53</sup>

The Binalis' triumph was short-lived, however. In December 2017 the Hazimis seem to have regained control of the new Delegated Committee and initiated a new crackdown against Binali-scholars. This occurred amidst the Islamic State was losing out on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, which led to a change in military strategy back to insurgency. Judging from a series of letters by Binalis, it appears the faction tried to do its best to oppose this development.<sup>54</sup> In a letter directly addressed to al-Baghdadi, they ask for a meeting with the caliph. While it is very unlikely such a meeting ever materialised, it forms part of the critique in several of the other letters. One of the main points they raise is that the caliph's disappearance is against the prophetic methodology and that he should be available. Drawing on hadith of the prophet's presence during war, they say that he never fled, and so al-Baghdadi's absence is not justified as it prevents him from knowing the reality of the situation. Another point is that the current military and religious leaders in the Islamic State are seen as unqualified for the job. As a remedy, the Binali scholars suggest reforming the system by implementing a committee consisting of three scholars to assess the leaders. A third point is that the group's practice of shura (consultation) is no longer on the prophetic methodology, since the leaders only seek advice from likeminded people. According to Abu Yaqub al-Maqdisi, al-Binali's successor as head of the Office of Research and Studies,<sup>55</sup> the internal struggle against the Hazimis is now the most important challenge to the group. He writes that "Indeed regulation of the principles of the shar'i manhaj that the Islamic State adopts represents the highest grades of priority, in order to protect its sound manhaj, and for cohesion of its group." The solution, he argues, is to raise the level of knowledge of its leaders, to provide the scholars with more influence, and to strengthen their oversight mechanism.<sup>56</sup>

While the Hazimis have been described as a homogenous faction so far, the truth is, however, that the Hazimis are divided in their views about the legitimacy of al-Baghdadi and the caliphate. While the majority of Hazimi supporters appear to accept al-Baghdadi's claim to be a caliph and his group's claim to constitute a caliphate, others take a different view, describing al-Baghdadi as an apostate and his caliphate as un-Islamic. These differences have an impact on how different actors relate to the caliphate and whether they find it acceptable to reform it from within according to their own ideas, or alternatively disassociate themselves from the group entirely. The latter faction of Hazimis no longer consider themselves part of the Islamic State but prefer to criticise

52 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Opposition to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Sheikh Abu Eisa al-Masri's Critique of Islamic State Media," 27 May 2019. Available at: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22742/opposition-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-sheikh-abu>. It has even been asserted that Abu Hakim al-Urduni, the head of the Central Media Department at the time, was running the Telegram channel Wa Harridh al-Mu'mineen. Al-Urduni was later replaced by Abu Abdullah al-Australi.

53 Isa ibn Abi Abdillah, "Refutation of Al-Hazimi and the Misconceptions of Al-Ghulah Al-Hazimiyyah," *Ahl al-Tawhid*, 27 August 2018.

54 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State: Secret Advice Sent to Islamic State Leaders," 12 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/23234/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-secret-advice-sent>

55 The office was later replaced by the Council of 'Ilm, which then ceased to exist.

56 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Abu Ya'qub Al-Maqdisi's Reform Plan: Translation and Analysis," 22 January 2019. Available at: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22274/abu-yaqub-al-maqdisi-reform-plan-translation>

it from the outside. One such example of this rebellious current is Abu Mu'adh al-Assimi who authored several articles excommunicating al-Baghdadi, describing him as both a *tyrant* and an *apostate*. Compared to the Hazimis who remained within the Islamic State, the rebellious Hazimis took an even more extreme position on the question of takfir of the excuser and takfir as a religious foundation. They believed that al-Baghdadi committed apostasy in two ways:

1. He changed the religion of God by declaring takfir as a *requirement* (wajibat) but not foundation (asl) of religion, and
2. He failed to proclaim takfir on apostates such as al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>57</sup>

Similar accusations of the Islamic State being a *state of idols* (dawlat al-asnam) have also been made by other rebellious Hazimis, who implicated al-Adnani in the deviance of the Caliphate.<sup>58</sup>

In the end neither the Binalis nor the Hazimis seem to have won the struggle for power. At some point during 2018, the Hazimis lost control of the Delegated Committee and this is likely what led to the coup attempt in September that year when Hazimi supporters allegedly attempted to assassinate al-Baghdadi with an IED targeting his convoy travelling in Eastern Syria.<sup>59</sup> Since 2019 there has been limited information on the state of the conflict and the status of the two competing factions. Yet whether this is the result of difficulties communicating or that the group finally managed to quell the internal tensions is unknown. After the EURPOL-led crackdown on Islamic State affiliated Telegram accounts in November 2019, Islamic State supporters and members have found it increasingly difficult to communicate freely on the encrypted platform. Telegram was the main outlet for Binalis and Hazimis to voice their criticism and leak material and hence the challenge of administrating accounts on the platform may partly explain the current absence of information.

What we do know is that several prominent figures from both factions who managed to stay alive have fled the group to seek refuge in primarily Turkey from where some of them continued to criticise the state's leadership. This appears to be the main position among the majority of the remaining Binali proponents, who no longer consider the Islamic State as a legitimate caliphate. This resulted in rumours in 2019-2020 that frustrated



A Hazimi, and former Islamic State member, Abu Yusuf declares the group to be a 'mushrik' (polytheist) state and its leaders to be 'kuffar' (unbelievers)

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Abu Mu'adh al-Assimi, "bayan taghutiyya al-baghdadi [Statement on the Tyrannical Baghdadi]," 28 February 2017.

<sup>58</sup> For an example, see Moaz al-Fatih, "fasadu 'aqida abu muhammad al-'adnani, al-mutahaddith al-sabiq bi-lism dawlat al-asnam fi-l-iraq wa-l-sham [Corruption of the Creed of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Former Speaker of the State of Idols in Iraq and Sham]," April 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Rafid Jaboori, "Alleged Coup Attempt Exposes Hazimite Faction Within Islamic State," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 5 (2019). Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/alleged-coup-attempt-exposes-hazimite-faction-within-islamic-state/>

Binalis would ally with the Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and seek a merger with al-Qaida loyalists in Syria, but this never materialised. Others, however, have remained in the Islamic State but keeping a low profile similar to the situation in 2015. For the Islamic State, it therefore remains a risk that tensions will re-emerge sometime in the future, and that the competing factions will continue their struggle to influence the future direction of the group. Yet for now, at least, it appears that the new leadership under the caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi has succeeded in suppressing the internal dissent.

## Hazimis in the West

In contrast to the Hazimi conflict within the Islamic State in the Levant that has received some scholarly attention, the extent to which Hazimi's teachings have found support in the West and how it may have affected established extremist milieus remains largely unknown. There are, however, a few known cases about Western foreign fighters who sympathised with the Hazimis and were targeted as a result.

One such example is Omar Hussein, better known as Abu Sa'eed al-Britani, who was a vocal supporter of the Islamic State but that fell from grace and was imprisoned by the group itself. Whether his imprisonment in February 2016 was because of his Hazimi sympathies is not known, but after his release he was explicit about his support. In June 2017, a month after the Islamic State issued the controversial memorandum, al-Britani published a comment on it making clear which faction he supported. In the comment he explains how Binalis opposed the memorandum, "ripping it [the memorandum] off masjid [mosques] notice boards", and as a reaction fled from Raqqa to Idlib.

Abu Sa'eed Al-Britani 22/06/17

\*This is a copy of the letter which Dawlah released stating it's 'Aqeedah. And in refutation of all those Murji'ah Saudi scholars who joined and we're speaking on behalf of Dawlah without permission.

Note: Anything which contradicts this letter is NOT the 'Aqeedah of Dawlah.

Page 4, second last line of paragraph 4 clearly states that takfir of the Mushrikin is from the asl of the religion.

This has always been the aqeedah of dawlah and this was the aqeedah of Abu Umar Kuwaiti, Abu Ja'far Khattaab, Abu Mus'ab Tunisi, etc.

Those who said that the aqeedah of dawlah was "takfeer of the Mushrikin is not from the asl of the religion" were given the authority to speak on behalf of Dawlah but Dawlah was unaware of their position on this issue.

It was these shar'is who ended up ordering the execution of the above mentioned Shaykhs saying they had extremism in takfeer. And due to them having high positions given by Dawlah, everyone believed them.

Alhamdulillah now many of these murji'ah shar'is have fled to Idlib after this 7 page letter came out. SubhaanAllaah many were even ripping it off masjid notice boards here in Raqqa when Dawlah printed it out and spread it.



Two other examples are that of British Islamic State member Raphael Hostey and the Australian Neil Prakash. Hostey, in Jihadi circles known as Abu Qaqa al-Britani, joined the group in September 2013, but was killed in April 2016. As Canadian scholar Amarasingam alludes to there is speculation that Hostey was in fact killed by the Islamic State's own security apparatus as part of its crackdown on Hazimis.<sup>60</sup> This is certainly plausible since in early 2016 the Islamic State was still persecuting the Hazimis internally. Hostey's friend Neil Prakash, or Abu Khaled al-Cambodi, who is arguably Australia's most infamous Islamic State member and a prominent recruiter, had more luck. After migrating to Syria in 2013 to join the Islamic State, Prakash fled the group in late 2016. While it has been argued that Prakash mainly fled Islamic State territory for the fear of dying, it appears more plausible that the primary reason was his support for the Hazimi faction.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam twitter thread, 25 November 2016: <https://twitter.com/AmarAmarasingam/status/802179263868891137>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid; Christopher Knaus, "Neil Prakash extradition risks creating 'totem to other Islamic radicals,'" *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/29/neil-prakash-extradition-risks-creating-totem-to-other-islamic-radicals>

The Hazimi ideology was not exclusively a phenomenon of the Levant, however, but eventually transpired to Europe. While more research needs to be done to uncover the actual prevalence of the ideology in the West, below follow two brief examples outlining the situation in the Netherlands and Austria. Although sources are scarce, these examples nonetheless give an impression of the scale and attitude of Hazimis in the two countries. One major question is to what extent Hazimis pose a greater terrorism threat in the West than other ideological streams. The author assesses this is not the case since the ideological tenets of the Hazimis largely centre around the issue of excommunication of Muslims, which is not particularly conducive to terrorism in the West. Furthermore, the author is not aware of any terrorist attacks or plots in the West since 2014 that have been attributed to Hazimis. Hazimi milieus in the West generally appear more focused on theology than mobilisation for terrorism. While this in no way functions as a guarantee that Hazimis will not pose a future terrorism threat in the West, there are no indications that this is their current focus.

## The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, a Hazimi community established as early as 2015 centred in The Hague. Functioning as a loose network rather than a formal grouping, the small community focused its energy on media production through its Irshaad Publications that was active on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook in addition to its own blog.<sup>62</sup> While little more is known about this early group of supporters, it likely represented the beginning of the community in the country.

In 2017 it appears the community had evolved with several active Telegram channels producing Hazimi-sympathetic material in Dutch. That year, in its terrorism threat assessment from June 2017, the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice identified the Hazimis as a specific group although it assessed that it was only comprised of a few dozen members and that it was unlikely to constitute a terrorism threat in the short term.<sup>63</sup> Later on, the authorities also reported that Hazimi ideology was influencing women within the extremist milieu.<sup>64</sup>

The central figure in the administration of these channels was a Dutch-Moroccan Hazimi supporter based in Utrecht, Abu Asim al-Matalsi al-Maghribi, who was present on Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. Describing himself as a 'literary translator' from Arabic to English and Dutch, he headed the network Onze Religie Publicaties where he translated the work of al-Hazimi, whom he regularly referred to as 'our beloved sheikh' and 'al-sheikh al-allamah', and other pro-Hazimi figures while also publishing his own writings.<sup>65</sup> In one of his articles, al-Maghribi relies on a lecture of al-Hazimi to argue that Ibn Taymiyyah was against the excuse of shirk based on a mistake. Testament to his following of the *Najdi dawa*, in another article he translates excerpts from the work of the late Wahhabi scholar Sulayman ibn Sahman an-Najdi on the removal of doubts regarding the 3<sup>rd</sup> nullifier of Islam to argue in favour of takfir on the excuser and the related chain-takfir.

62 Author's online interview with a Dutch Jihadi, January 2021.

63 National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, "Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45," *Ministry of Security and Justice*, June 2017. Available at: <https://english.nctv.nl/topics/terrorist-threat-assessment-netherlands/documents/publications/2017/07/05/summary-terrorist-threat-assessment-netherlands-45>

64 National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, "Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 53," *Ministry of Security and Justice*, October 2020. Available at: <https://english.nctv.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/03/terrorist-threat-assessment-netherlands-53>

65 See also Tore Hamming twitter thread, 15 June 2018: <https://twitter.com/torerhamming/status/1007576557462933505?lang=en>



Abu Asim al-Maghribi

Despite being a devout follower of al-Hazimi, al-Maghribi belonged to the faction of the Hazimis opposing the Islamic State. In 2017, he wrote an article using al-Hazimi's theological concepts to outline the unbelief of the group. In the article he offers two reasons why the Islamic State has fallen into kufr: (1) in certain situations, the group would refrain from declaring a person worshipping idols an unbeliever, and (2) the group has monopolised the authority to declare a person a kafir (unbeliever) in the hands of the scholars and not every Muslim.<sup>66</sup> In September that year, he also commented on Twitter on the internal struggle within the Islamic State writing that "some great muwahhidin are starting to see the kufr of IS."<sup>67</sup>



Abu Asim al-Maghribi now appears to have distanced himself from al-Hazimi's teachings. After the police raided his home, in August 2020 he announced on his Facebook that he retracted his Hazimi views, or specifically his view on takfir of the excuser and chain takfir.<sup>68</sup> Based on his reading of early Islamic scholars, he explains that he now accepts that an *unknowing* excuser, meaning someone to whom proof (hujja) has not been presented, can legitimately be excused. He now runs the Tabyin Publicaties, a Salafi dawa outlet, still translating and producing his own material.

<sup>66</sup> NTA "De Hazimi-beweging: Een op takfir gebaseerde ideologie," June 2020. Available at: <https://docplayer.nl/187102501-De-hazimi-beweging-een-op-takfir-gebaseerde-ideologie.html>

<sup>67</sup> This tweet is no longer available online since the account has been deleted.

<sup>68</sup> See Abu Asim al-Maghribi's Facebook profile <https://www.facebook.com/rachidabuasim>

## Austria

According to Guido Steinberg, Austria has the largest Hazimi supportive community in Europe.<sup>69</sup> Like in the Netherlands, in Austria the community is built around a few individuals, namely Nedzad Balkan (Abu Muhammad), and Farhad Qarar (Abu Hamza al-Afghani), who were both arrested in Vienna on 26 January 2017. Both Balkan and Qarar were originally part of Austria's mainstream Jihadi scene, but around 2006-07 they started to adopt more radical views that involved a stricter interpretation of the application of takfir.

Nedzad Balkan is arguably the most interesting and senior of the two. Originally from Serbia, he is, according to sources, seen as a leading Hazimi in several European countries and in Bosnia. He studied two years at the Medina University in 2000-2001 and although he never graduated, he nonetheless managed to become an imam first of Vienna's al-Sahaba mosque from 2004 and later at the Melit Ibrahim mosque. The latter was a controversial place because it over the years was frequented by later terrorists 'Lorenz K' and Kujtim Fejzulai, the perpetrator of the November 2020 Vienna attack, which led to its eventual closure in 2020 in the aftermath of Fejzulai's attack.<sup>70</sup> Farhad Qarar similarly has a long history within Austria's extremist environment and is known for his sympathy for a takfir-prone ideology, which he authored several articles in German dealing with.<sup>71</sup> This resulted in him early on getting in conflict with Austrian al-Qaida supporters like Mohammed Mahmoud (Abu Usama al-Gharib), who were less inclined to proclaim takfir on ordinary Muslims. Interestingly to note, Mahmoud would later join the Islamic State in Syria, but in 2018 he was imprisoned by his own group for supporting the Hazimi-critical Binali-faction.

Balkan and Qarar both frequented the al-Sahaba mosque, where they were eventually forced out by the mosque's less radical Salafi leaders, and later the Melit Ibrahim mosques in Vienna, where they were both teaching classes. From January 2013, however, Qarar started teaching in Vienna's al-Iman mosque instead after some disagreement with Balkan.<sup>72</sup> In January 2017, both preachers eventually got into trouble and were arrested by Austrian authorities for attempting to recruit 37 members of the mainly Bosnian extremist Taqwa Faith Association in the city of Graz to join the Jihad in Syria. Balkan was eventually released after spending 17 months in custody but has since been arrested again and sentenced to five years in prison. Despite the sentence, there remains doubt whether Balkan and Qarar in fact support the Islamic State or are part of the disillusioned Hazimis. In the case of Balkan at least, there are rumours that some of his followers instructed western foreign fighters to return from the Islamic State because of the group's alleged apostasy. Over the years, the influence of Balkan and Qarar also extended outside of Austria. In neighbouring Germany their supporters helped establish the al-Furqan mosque in Bremen led by Rene Marc Sepac.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

Al-Hazimiyya, or the Hazimis, have been part of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq since its inception in 2013-2014, but it is especially since 2016 that it evolved into a destructive force within the group and on its fringes. Inspired by specific theological concepts relating to excommunication

69 Guido Steinberg, "Die »Takfiristen«: Eine salafistisch-jihadistische Teilströmung gewinnt an Bedeutung," *SWP*, 9 January 2021. Available at: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2021A09\\_Takfiristen.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2021A09_Takfiristen.pdf)

70 Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe, "The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihadi Threat to Austria," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2021). Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-network-of-the-november-2020-vienna-attacker-and-the-jihadi-threat-to-austria/>

71 Steinberg, "Die »Takfiristen«: Eine salafistisch-jihadistische Teilströmung gewinnt an Bedeutung."

72 Ibid.

73 Johannes Saal twitter thread, 10 November 2020: [https://twitter.com/johannes\\_saal/status/1326099625628020736?lang=en](https://twitter.com/johannes_saal/status/1326099625628020736?lang=en)

(takfir) promoted by the Saudi cleric Ahmad bin Umar al-Hazimi, some of its followers joined the Islamic State and started to challenge the group's stance on excommunication. This led to a bloody feud within the group and a struggle for control of its central institutions.

The polarisation and fragmentation that ensued has undoubtedly weakened the Islamic State at a stage where the group was already facing heavy external pressure. Since 2018, large numbers among both the Hazimis and its opponent represented by the so-called Binali-faction, dominated by the group's religious scholars, have been ostracised or fled the group in fear of persecution. While this may imply that the group's internal dynamics are currently more stable, it has likely lost a significant number of members including senior figures and is now facing criticism from defectors on both sides.

Although critically understudied, the Hazimi ideology has also gained some support in the West among small communities of extremists. While sources are extremely scarce, this report discussed the examples of the Netherlands and Austria where small number of Hazimi supporters have been active in recent years. To what extent the dynamics witnessed in the Levant have transpired to the West remains unknown, but one thing is as relevant in the West as in the Levant: the Islamic State has an enemy within.

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## Appendix: Well-known Hazimis in the Islamic State

Name	Position	Nationality	Status
Abu Jafar al-Hattab	Senior member Official of the Diwan al-Ta'aleem	Tunisian	Dead
Abu Musab al-Tunisi	Senior member Shar'i of Deir ez-Zour	Tunisian	Dead
Abu Asid al-Maghribi	-	Moroccan	Dead
Abu al-Hawra' al-Jaza'iri	Senior member Awqaf official in Wilayat al-Raqqa	Algerian	Dead
Abu Khalid al-Sharqi	Senior member Shar'i of Wilayat al-Raqqa and qadi of the security officials	UAE	Dead
Abu Abdullah al-Maghribi	-	Moroccan	Dead
Abu Muhammad al-Tunisi	Shar'i of Hasakah	Tunisian	-
Abu Usama al-Iraqi	Wali of Hasakah	Iraqi	-
Abu Umar al-Kuwaiti	Senior member Shar'i	Kuwaiti	Dead
Abu Anisa al-Daghestani	-	Dagestani	-
Abu al-Bara' al-Madani	Senior member	-	-
Abu Hajer al-Jazrawi	Senior member	Saudi	-
Abu Suhaib al-Tunisi	Senior member	Tunisian	-
Abu Ahmad al-Daghestani	Senior member	Dagestani	-
Khattab al-Azeri	Senior member Military commander	Azerbaijani	-
Abu Ahmad al-Tunisi	Head of Hisba in al-Bab	Tunisian	Dead
Umair al-Azeri	Senior member	Azerbaijani	-
Alfir al-Azeri	Cell leader	Azerbaijani	-
Abu Huraira al-Shishani	Cell leader	Chechen	-
Abu Abdullah al-Tunisi	Cell leader	Tunisian	-
Abu Suhail al-Masri	Cell leader	Egyptian	-
Abu Ayub al-Tunisi	Cell leader	Tunisian	-
Muhammad Yahya Qirtas / Abu Muath al-Jaza'iri al-Asimi	Senior member	Algerian	-
Abu Khaled al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Abu Daoud al-Maghribi	-	Moroccan	-

Abu Hafs al-Wad'ani / Jazrawi	Head of the Office for Methodological Inquiry and member of the Delegated Committee	Saudi	-
Abu Hafs al-Masri	Amir in Jarablus, then amir of emigration and finally amir of Damascus	Egyptian	-
Abu al-Dahda al-Tunisi	Amir of fighters	Tunisian	Dead
Abu Dajana al-Masri	Official in Media Department	Egyptian	Dead
Abu Maram al-Jaza'iri	Official in Office for Methodological Inquiry	Algerian	-
Abu Ahmed al-Faransi	-	French	-
Talha Mulla Hussein	-	-	-
Abu Hudhaifa al-Tunisi	Qadi Wilayat Aleppo	Tunisian	-
Abu Zeid al-Iraqi	Allegedly the author of the May 2017 memo issued by the Delegated Committee	Iraqi	-
Abu Hakim al-Urduni	Head of the Central Media Department	Jordanian	-
Abu Saleh al-Iraqi	-	Iraqi	-
Abu Abdullah al-Australi	Head of Central Media Department after Abu Hakim al-Urduni	Australian	-
Abu Ishaq al-Iraqi	Deputy to al-Furqan in the Central Media Department	Iraqi	-
Abu Muslim al-Masri	Head of Egyptian Hazimiyya faction	Egyptian	-
Abu al-Mahi al-Muhajir	-	Turkish	-
Abu Zayd al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Abu Bakr al-Gharib	Member of the Media Tracking Committee	Jordanian	Dead
Abu Majid al-Falastini (Abu Amer)	Assistant to Hajji 'Abd al-Nasir	-	-
Abdel Nasser al-Turkmani	-	Turkman	-
Abu Asma al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Abu al-Yaman al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Libi	-	Libyan	-
Abu al-Mu'atasem al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Jahabdha al-Tunisi	-	Tunisian	-
Abu Shuaib al-Hadrami (Abu Turab al-Yemeni and Abu Hassan al-Sanaai)	Member of Shari'a council	Yemeni	-

Abu Saad al-Atibi	-	-	-
Abu al-Rabab al-Tunisi	Shar'i	Tunisian	-
Abu al-Adham	Shar'i	-	-
Abu al-Najem	Shar'i		-
Abu Maysara al-Tunisi	Shar'i	Tunisian	-
Abu Ubada al-Tunisi	Shar'i	Tunisian	-
Abu Talha al-Hijazi	Shar'i in the committee of the governor of Aleppo	Saudi	-
Abu Omar al-Masri	Qadi of Damascus and Homs	Egyptian	-
Abu al-Fidaa al-Tunisi	Department of Education in Al-Khayr	Tunisian	-

## About the Author

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### Tore Hamming

Tore Hamming holds a Ph.D. in political and social sciences from the European University Institute in Florence. He is a non-resident fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College and a former fellow at the Middle East Institute, CERI-Sciences Po, and the Danish Institute for International Studies.

In his research, Hamming specializes in Sunni Jihadism and particularly the internal dynamics between and within Sunni Jihadi groups. His Ph.D. dissertation builds on primary material and interviews with Jihadi ideologues and deals with the split in early 2014 between al-Qaida and the Islamic State and the ensuing conflict and competition between the two groups, not just affecting the two groups in question but the Sunni Jihadi movement more broadly. Hamming has conducted field work in Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, Nigeria and Somalia among other places.

Hamming's academic research has been published in *Perspectives on Terrorism and Terrorism and Political Violence*, while his analysis has appeared in international media including *Le Monde*, *Al Jazeera*, *World Policy Review*, *War on the Rocks* and *the Guardian*. Hamming is also a regular contributor to the blog *Jihadica*.

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