



Freedom of Expression or Apostasy Fatwa Condemning Two Saudi Journalists to Death



'Abdallah bin Bajad Al-'Uteibi - Yussif Aba Al-Khayl

The battle of ideas between moderate voices seeking a more harmonious relationship between Islam and other religions and entrenched *Salafi* ideologues who continue to dictate rigid interpretations of Islamic *Shari'a*, and demand that Muslims strictly adhere to those principles, has resurfaced this week in Saudi Arabia.

Sheikh 'Abdul-Rahman Al-Barak is one of the most conservative religious personalities in the Kingdom. The seventy-five year old sheikh issued a Fatwa against two writers, which is certain to re-ignite the controversy over the conservatives' insistence on legitimizing recourse to violence against all those who disagree with them. The conclusion of the fatwa by *Al-Barak* seemed simple enough in its straightforwardness and cruelty. Referring to the Saudi writers, he stated: "They must be tried and renounce what they wrote. If they do not, they must be killed as apostates without benefit of proper burial rights and Muslims must not pray on them or eulogize them."

PI Online examines the rationale that the two writers presented as well as the reasoning for *Al-Barak's* indictment. The fatwa against the two writers 'Abdallah bin Bajad Al-'Uteibi and Yussif Aba Al-Khayl was in response to two articles they wrote in *Al-Riyadh* newspaper. In the articles, they criticized the practice of accusing all non-Muslims of *takfir*,¹ rendering them "Kafir (pl. *Kuffar*") [unbelievers]. As most observers know, the problem is not in leveling the accusation but in the consequences that flow from it. In radical Islam, all "*kuffar*" [unbelievers] must be fought. It is this confrontational attitude by *Salafi* Islamists towards non-Muslims that the writers were trying to address and alleviate.

The Claim

Al-'Uteibi presented his views in a January 7th, 2008 article entitled "Islam in the text and Islam in the struggle." The article by *Aba Al-Khayl* was entitled "The Other in the Balance (or Judgment) of Islam." *Al-'Uteibi* condemned those who, in his opinion, had added erroneous interpretations to the Islamic scriptures. As an example, he referred to the most fundamental proclamation of faith in Islam: "there is no God but God." He explained that this simple text only expresses Muslims' belief in monotheism. Radicals, however, have expanded the meaning of the proclamation, asserting that in rejecting polytheism and idolatry, Muslims must denounce all those pertaining to other faiths beside Islam, as "unbelievers" and treat them like the enemy. That assertion, *Al-'Uteibi* contends, was espoused by those he described as battling to monopolize Islamic heritage and present themselves as the only true form of Islam. To

¹ It is difficult to capture the full meaning or gravity of *Takfir* with a single English word. The word, which is used liberally by radical Islamists, represents the most serious accusation in Islam. It stems from the word "*Kafir*" which is often used in the Qur'an and means non-believer or infidel. For an etymological and historical discussion of the term see [\[PI Online 511-Violent Takfiri Groups are back\]](#)

achieve this goal, they have resorted to excessive zeal in their belligerent and inflammatory interpretations.

The second writer *Aba Al-Khayl* expanded on the meaning of the Arabic word “*kafara*” [becoming an unbeliever] and noted that the original meaning of the word is “to hide or conceal.” Within the context of the declaration of faith “there is no God but one God”, the term “unbeliever” can therefore only apply to those who hide or conceal the truth of monotheism. He went on to explain that the Abarahamic religions, including Christianity and Judaism, are monotheistic and therefore their members cannot be called “*kuffar*” unless they forcefully prevent Muslims or others who abide by the same monotheistic principle to freely practice their religion.

PI Online notes that even though *Aba al-Khayl*'s article received less attention, his linguistic and theological interpretation of who should be labeled an “unbeliever” presents fundamentalist Muslims with a major challenge. He essentially denounces “all those who would fight monotheistic followers.” In doing so, he implies that the accusation of “*takfir*” can also, in principle, be leveled against Muslims who deny Christians and Jews their right to freely practice their monotheistic religions. That logic creates a major problem for the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia whose conservative members have prevented religious freedom in the kingdom.

The Fatwa

It was not until this week that the issue of the articles was presented to sheikh *Al-Barak* and he issued his pronouncement calling for the trial and execution of the two authors if they do not retract their statements. *Al-Barak*'s rationale for condemning the writers put into perspective the most basic assertion made by fundamentalists. He stated that “Muslims who reject the interpretation that all those who do not belong to the Muslim religion, including Jews and Christians, are considered *kuffar* [unbelievers] are in conflict with Islam.” He also criticized the freedom to publish such articles in Saudi Arabia and portrayed all those who contributed to the publication, including the newspaper's editors, as equally guilty.

Al-'Uteibi's Reaction to the Fatwa

Al-'Uteibi described *Al-Barak*'s fatwa as belonging to the Middle Ages and a reflection of principles enunciated by *Al-Qaeda*, who direct their members to kill intellectuals, politicians and writers who disagree with them. He added that his only weapon is his pen which he will continue to use to present his views. *Al-'Uteibi* also noted that *Al-Barak* is mostly supported by extremists in the Kingdom. He condemned what he described as the emergence of the “*Shari'a* of the Jungle” where anybody is allowed to use the accusation of *takfir* to justify violence. In a March 17th article entitled “No to extremism and no to terrorism” in “*Alhewar*,”² *Al-'Uteibi* concluded his critique by stating that “a clear message must reach those extremists that enlightenment and change are on their way and shall always remain our goal and mission – that a compassionate Islam shall triumph and prevail – and that their distortions and superstitions shall find ample room in the junkyard of history.”

Source: <http://www.islamonline.com/news/newsfull.php?newid=100008> 3/14/2008

Word root and derivatives of: كفر k-f-r . *kufr* : non-belief; *kafir* (pl. *kuffar*): non-believer(s); *kafara*: to disbelief be or become and non-believer; *takfir* : Declare a person non-believer,
Takfiri : Those who excommunicate (declare others *kuffar*)

Return to: www.politicalislam.org

Political Islam Online holds copyrights in all translations & analyses presented on this site. Materials may only be cited or reproduced with proper attribution.

² <http://www.menber-alhewar.info/news.php?action=view&id=2356> – 3/17/2008