



Islamic Identity under Excommunication (*Takfir*): Crisis and Sectarian Rapprochement in the Thought of Sheikh Shaltout

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ABSTRACT

Islamic unity has long been a foundational pillar of the power, stability, and cultural flourishing of Islamic civilization. Religious leaders and reform-minded thinkers have therefore treated unity not only as a moral virtue but also as a strategic necessity for the future of the Muslim *ummah*. Historic initiatives for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought (*taqrīb*)—most notably Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltout's recognition of Ja'fari jurisprudence—sought to narrow sectarian divides through religious rationality, institutionalized dialogue, and educational reform. In recent decades, however, the rise of extremist discourses grounded in *takfir* (excommunication) has undermined coexistence and intensified intra-Islamic fault lines. Movements such as ISIS, relying on superficial and absolutist readings of scripture, have repudiated rational *ijtihad* and legitimized organized violence. Adopting a critical-analytical approach, this study examines the conceptual foundations and socio-political contexts of *takfir* while assessing the operational capacity of Shaltout's unificationist thought as a coherent framework for countering exclusionary and violent discourses. Ultimately, it proposes an implementable model to reinforce Islamic cohesion and contain *takfirī* currents, grounded in religious legitimacy, rational jurisprudence, and structural reforms.

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1. Introduction

The unity of the Muslim community, beyond its symbolic and identity-based dimensions, plays a decisive role in safeguarding political stability, fostering cultural flourishing, and strengthening the social capital of Islamic societies. In modern history, reformist and proximity-oriented movements have sought—often driven by both intellectual and political motivations—to dismantle sectarian boundaries and revive the ideal of a single ummah.

Within this broad trajectory, the political-jurisprudential thought and institutional praxis of Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltout during his tenure as Sheikh al-Azhar occupy a distinctive position. By officially recognizing jurisprudential plurality—especially Ja‘fari fiqh—Shaltout sought to promote inter-sectarian dialogue and religious rationalism, linking educational reform to the long-term project of reducing religious polarization.

Contemporary political and social dynamics, particularly the diffusion of *takfir* ideologies, have threatened ummah cohesion in unprecedented ways. These currents reject centuries of accumulated jurisprudential and interpretive heritage, label adherents of other Islamic traditions as “apostates,” and weaponize religious discourse for symbolic and physical elimination. This fractured environment—shaped by political deadlock, identity crises, and geopolitical interventions—underscores the urgency of re-examining and operationalizing unificationist thought. Accordingly, this research asks how Shaltout’s jurisprudential vision and unity-oriented methodology can be translated into a pragmatic roadmap for curbing *takfir* expansion and consolidating durable Islamic unity.

2. Methodology

The research integrates Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory with Thomas Spragens’ four-stage crisis model to form a dual analytical framework. Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, grounded in the premise that identities and social orders emerge through discursive construction and contests over meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), enables analysis of the hegemonic struggle between *takfir* and unificationist discourses. Specifically, it facilitates identification of central signifiers, chains of equivalence, and mechanisms of othering that structure each discourse, thereby clarifying how identity and power relations are produced and stabilized. Spragens’ model complements this by imposing a process-oriented logic of crisis analysis and resolution. It conceptualizes political thought as primarily crisis-responsive, organizing inquiry into four stages: (1) recognizing disorders, (2) diagnosing causal roots, (3) envisioning the ideal polity, and (4) prescribing strategic remedies. Combining these perspectives synchronizes semantic–structural analysis of discursive closure (Laclau & Mouffe) with a staged causal–prescriptive cycle (Spragens). Data were collected through purposive sampling of Shaltout’s foundational writings, official al-Azhar pronouncements (including relevant fatwas), and primary documents produced by *takfir* groups.

3. Findings

The *takfir*–Salafist discourse, anchored in “anti-Shi‘a *takfir* hegemony” as its central signifier, constructs an exclusionary narrative that legitimizes systematic othering and delegitimizes intra-Islamic pluralism. Within this structure, terms such as “holy war,” “abode of disbelief,” and “deviation” function not merely as rhetorical devices but as nodes that bind the semantic architecture of *takfir* ideology. Historically, othering was primarily directed outward toward non-Muslim adversaries; after the Islamic Revolution, however, discursive shifts reoriented the axis inward, positioning Shi‘ism as the primary internal “Other” and producing discursive formations such as “Shi‘a-phobia” and “Iran-phobia.”

Genealogically, the anti-Shi‘a *takfīrī* hegemon can be traced through four phases:

Epistemic groundwork associated with Ibn Taymiyyah and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, prioritizing uncompromising scriptural literalism over rationalism;

Institutional consolidation through Wahhabism under Saudi patronage, embedding this discourse within organized jurisprudential and propagandistic structures;

Identity redefinition in response to twentieth-century geopolitical events—most notably the Islamic Revolution—recasting Shi‘ism as a threatening internal “Other”; and

Globalization of *takfīrī* messaging via ISIS and transnational media networks, extending the discourse beyond regional confines.

By contrast, Shaltout’s unificationist paradigm—grounded in *taqrīb* and rational *ijtihād*—articulates an open, pluralist, and constructive vision of Islamic unity. Sectarian difference is reframed as a source of jurisprudential enrichment and civilizational integration. Through initiatives such as institutional support for *Dār al-Taqrīb*, development of comparative jurisprudence, and unity-oriented fatwas, Shaltout offers a principled and operational alternative to the *takfīrī* logic of exclusion and violence. This approach combines hermeneutic re-reading of sources with purposive *ijtihād* attentive to *maṣlaḥa* and *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a*, thereby equipping it to counter sectarianism more effectively.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The *takfīrī*–*Salafist* trajectory and Shaltout’s unificationist framework represent opposing orientations in contemporary Islamic political thought. The former reinforces epistemic closure and doctrinal rigidity, legitimizing both symbolic and physical exclusion and treating intra-Muslim diversity as a target of delegitimation. The latter foregrounds shared monotheistic commitments, social justice, and dialogical engagement as unifying forces capable of reconstituting the *ummah* on cooperative and pluralist terms.

Through Spragens’ lens, the contemporary *takfīrī* phenomenon constitutes a multilayered crisis of meaning and identity. Addressing it requires a deliberate shift from exclusionary signifiers toward inclusive and interactive paradigms. Shaltout’s legacy provides key resources for such a shift: establishing rational *ijtihād* as a hegemonic signifier over literalist orthodoxy, expanding *taqrīb* into a civilizational strategy, and concretizing its values through institutions, curricula, and normative jurisprudential outputs.

5. Proposed Strategies for Overcoming the Crisis (Based on Shaltout’s Framework)

1. **Redefine the central signifier of the Islamic *ummah*.** Replace “*takfīr*” with “*taqrīb*” through coherent educational programs, public discourse, and media initiatives that regenerate unity-oriented narratives locally and transnationally.
2. **Strengthen rational *ijtihād* and counter literalism.** Expand comparative jurisprudence, cultivate dialogical jurists, and institutionalize inter-sectarian scholarly training to revive dynamic reasoning within religious governance structures.
3. **Institutionalize structured dialogue and interaction.** Establish regional and national *taqrīb* centers as platforms for joint scholarly, religious, and social projects, thereby normalizing tolerance and discursive openness.
4. **Reframe the self/other boundary.** Ground identity in shared monotheistic and civilizational heritage so jurisprudential differences are contextualized constructively rather than weaponized for sectarian rupture.

5. **Disrupt the enabling infrastructures of violence.** Employ international legal mechanisms, cross-border cooperation, and transparency in financial and media flows to weaken the operational capacities of *takfirī* and extremist networks.

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