The Holy War. Assessing the roots of radical Islam and Jihadist movements from Sayyid Qutb to al-Qa'ida

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Abstract

The 9/11 attacks came as a major shock for the West. However, its causes and motives can be backdated to the early 1990's. The article argues that the 2001 attack was not the beginning of something new, rather the manifestation of something older. Al-Qa'ida gave priority to the international Jihad against the 'far enemy', in so doing accepting a theory that was harshly debated within the Islamist movements in Egypt between the 1960's and the 1970's and later in Afghanistan during the 1980's. By exploring this connection, the article wants to give a broader view of a phenomenon that has never been monolithic, rather weak, divided, and oftentimes inconclusive despite its undeniable dangerousness.

Keywords: al-Qa'ida, Sayyid Qutb, Islamism, Tanzim al-Jihad, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Introduction

The 9/11 attacks came as a major shock for the West. However, its causes and motives can be backdated to the early 1990's. The article argues that the 2001 attack was not the beginning of something new, rather the manifestation of something older. Al-Qa'ida gave priority to the international Jihad against the 'far enemy', in so doing accepting a theory that was harshly debated within the Islamist movements in Egypt between the 1960's and the 1970's and later in Afghanistan during the 1980's. By exploring this connection, the article wants to give a broader view of a phenomenon that has never been monolithic,

rather weak, divided, and oftentimes inconclusive despite its undeniable dangerousness.

Islamism as modern political phenomenon. Egypt, the Brotherhood and Qutb

The use of terrorism within radical Islam was theorized in Egypt during the 1960s, by some groups close to or inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. Preachers like Sayyid Qutb and 'Abd al-Salam Faraj promoted the fight against the 'nearby enemy' to bring down 'apostate' regimes and impose an Islamic State. The strategy failed and, after the murder of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, the Islamist movement suffered a 'diaspora'. Many activists and militants moved to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight against the USSR. After the Soviet's defeat, veterans of that war, such as Abu Musab al-Suri, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, started to promote the fight against the 'far enemy', i.e. the USA and the West. The article explores the connections between those two-different kinds of thoughts within radical Islam, arguing that the 9/11 attacks came not as the beginning of something new, rather as the ending manifestation of something older. Indeed, a clear-cut rationality was hidden beneath the fanaticism of the hijackers. The logic behind the attacks went far beyond the aspiration to martyrdom: 9/11 came as the result of strategic consideration about the limits of American power after the end of the Cold War.[1]

In a broader perspective, *al-Qa'ida* terrorism arose from the Egyptian and Saudi *mujahidin* groups fighting the USSR in Afghanistan. However, it was also the consequence of the failure of Jihad in the 1990's.[2] Egypt, Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, became theatres of failing wars, so much to push al-Qa'ida leaders to develop a new strategy and give priority to international Jihad. This change did not come as something radically new. It recalls earlier debates

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[1] L. Wright, *The Looming Tower. Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (Alfred Knopf, 2006).

[2] G. Kepel, *Fitna. Guerre au Coeur de l'Islam* (Editions Gallimard, 2004), p. 73.

within the Egyptian Islamists movement during the rule of Gamal 'Abdel al-Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat between the 1960's and the 1970's. Egypt was a model for movements from Saudi Arabia to Southeast Asia, seeking to infiltrate society to subvert the established order and to promote an Islamic conception of the State and the Law.[3] As a matter of fact, political Islam is a modern, if not contemporary, phenomenon.

The birth of a modern Islamic political thought can be traced back to the foundation of the *Muslim Brotherhood* by Hasan al-Banna in 1928.[4] His thinking affected the Egyptian society first through the university militants of the *Jama'at Islamiyya,* then through the followers of the visionary preacher Shukri Mustafa. At a time when the Nasserist regime sought to instil Nationalist and Socialist beliefs, Islamism was able to grasp the contradictions inherent in the relationship between a Western-type of political proposal and the teachings of the Prophet.[5] Radical Islamism is therefore defined, with a clever intuition of Gilles Kepel, as an 'access of fever' of political Islam.[i] Moreover, since Egypt saw itself as the leader of the Arab world, it is not surprising that the main actors of today's radical Islamism took their first steps in the late 1960's within the Egyptian political and student associations.[6] 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, a preacher who in the 1970s at the University of Asyut refused to answer women's questions to avoid sinning 'even with his ears', is detained in the USA for attempting to detonate the World Trade Center in 1993. Ayman al-Zawahiri, currently head of al-Qa'ida, was a member of the

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[3] G. Kepel, *Le Prophete et Le Pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l'Egypte contemporaine* (Editions La Decouverte, 1984); G. Neamatalla, *The Jihad Organization: An Islamic Alternative in Egypt* [in Arabic] (Cairo, 1988).

[4] On the Muslim Brotherhood see: R. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood* (Oxford University Press, 1969); N. Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (Routledge, 1991); B. Rubin (ed.), *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Organization and Policies of a Global Islamist Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); J. Voll, *Islam, Continuity, and Change in the Modern World* (Syracuse University Press, 1994).

[5] T. Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to the Muslim Brotherhood* (Yale University Press, 2010).

[6] A. al-Arian, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

Organization of Islamic Jihad at the time of Sadat's murder. In the same period, movements close to the Muslim Brotherhood flourished around the Middle East and within the European Muslim communities: Shukri Mustafa, the agrarian engineer who condemned to excommunication all the Muslims who did not adhere to his movement, founded the *al-Takfir wa-l hijra*; ʻAbd al-Hamid Kishk, a blind al-Azhar graduate, became known thanks to his stance against Sadat and his sermons and achieved great popularity in the Arab world; the aforementioned Jamaʼat Islamiyya were a pervasive presence in the Egyptian universities, and tested techniques to control social activism and students' behaviour.[7] The same techniques were reproduced from Jakarta to Islamabad and made their appearance in the first moments of the Arab Springs in 2011.[8]

Besides these movements, the most important figure was the preacher Sayyid Qutb, who was incarcerated and tortured by the Nasser regime. He became prominent thanks to a series of controversial works, such as *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Mile Stones), which still exerts powerful influence over the contemporary radical landscape.[9] 'Qutb's appeal to loyalty to the uniqueness of Allah, to submission to his sole authority and to his sole sovereignty (*hakimiyya*), was the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution against the enemies of the Islam all over the world'.[10] In 1966, Qutb was sentenced to death and executed. His lawyer, Mahfuz 'Azzam, was a great-uncle of Ayman al-Zawahiri who, in those years, saw his political consciousness grow. Qutb's passion, as well as the disappearances of students in clandestine detention centres, shocked and radicalised a young generation of activists. While in Europe and

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[7] Kepel, *Le Prophete et le Pharaon,* pp. 172, 175.

[8] M. Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings. The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (PublicAffairs, 2013).

[9] F. Gerges, *Making the Arab World. Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash that Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2018). On Sayyid Qutb, see also: A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism* (Praeger Press, 2005); S. Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (Routledge, 2006); J. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (Columbia University Press, 2010); J. Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[10] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 79.

the USA their peers were engaged in Trotskyist, Maoist or extreme left-wing groups, in Egypt these activists began to create small Islamist groups theorizing a transition to armed struggle.

The nearby enemy. The Neglected Duty and the Egyptian Jihad in the 1970s

At the ending of the 1960's, repression in Egypt pushed the Islamists into a corner and forced the fiercest groups to re-think their strategies to survive. Thus, Israel became the main enemy: on one hand because at that time Tel Aviv was truly perceived as a threat to the Arabs by the majority of the Egyptian public opinion, on the other because having the same enemy of the regime was somehow a safety insurance for these groups. In so doing, Nasser's political designs came later to coincide with the political-religious impulse that animated the Islamists. However, in a small book entitled *Al-Farida Al-Gha'iba* (The Neglected Duty), the electrical engineer Mohammed 'Abd al-Salam Faraj, the main thinker of the organization that killed Anwar al-Sadat, stated that the Brothers were wrong in supporting the war of Arab Nationalism against the 'far enemy' (i.e. Israel and Western Imperialism). According to Faraj, Nationalism was nothing more than a ruse to co-opt the moderate wing of the Islamist movement, thus isolating the more radical fringes, which made them easier to purge. Faraj supported the renewal of the doctrine of Jihad and a change of priorities: fighting against the 'far enemy' was no longer needed, since the real obstacle to the birth of a purely Islamic State was the 'nearby enemy'.[11] Faraj quoted the thought of Ibn Taimiyya, a Medieval Sunni Muslim theologian - acclaimed by the Islamists but despised by scholars of Muslim theology, and declared that Jihad should be the primary task of Islamist movements. He rejected Qutb's assumption that there should be a dialectic between the phase of weakness (*marhalat alistid'af*) and that of power (*marhalat al-tamakkun*) of the Islamist movement. The latter, according to Qutb,

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[11] G. Kepel, *Jihad. Expansion et Decline de l'Islamisme* (Gallimard, 2001), pp. 144-145. See also: O. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Tauris & Co., 1994).

must adapt its strategy, preaching when it's weak and fighting when it's strong, waiting for the masses to be ready to topple the regime and restore tradition.[12] That was inconceivable to Faraj. He thought of the modern Arab State to be *wicked* and governed by *apostates*, hence the Jihad against the 'perverse prince' (i.e. Sadat) was the only acceptable solution.[13] In the eyes of the *Tanzim al-Jihad* group, the fact that Sadat was attempting a re-Islamization of Egyptian society meant nothing, since his government was one of 'apostates' who made the State, and therefore society, impious and condemned to *Jahiliyya* (i.e. ignorance, state of minority of those who did not know the message of the Prophet, typical of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula according to Qutban thought).[14] The duty of every Muslim was therefore to fulfil Jihad against the nearby enemy, before turning against the far enemy.

'In Islamic countries, the enemy is in place, it is he who holds the command. It is embodied by those rulers who have seized power over Muslims, and for this reason Jihad is an imperative that addresses each individual (*fard'ayn*)'. With this statement, Faraj wanted to inscribe his conclusions in the line of the Muslim Tradition where the imperative to Jihad is of two types: *fard kifaya*, when it is a

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[12] R. Guolo, *Il fondamentalismo islamico* (Laterza, 2002), p. 40.

[13] G. Kepel, 'Les Stratégies Islamistes de Lègitimation de la violence', in *Raisons Politiques,* Vol. 9 (2003), p. 81.

[14] S. Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (Routledge, 2006), p. 80; S. Fayyad, 'Sayyid Qutb bayna al-Naqd al-Adabi wa-Jahaliyyat al-Qarn al-Ishrin' [Sayyid Qutb between literary criticism and the jahiliyya of the 21st century], in *al-Hilal* (September 1986). One should look also at Al-Mawdudi's work. He was born in India, 1903. *Jahiliyya* and the *vanguard* are two concepts which Qutb had adopted twenty years after Mawdudi's publication. For Mawdudi, Islam is 'a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals'. Quoted in: A.A. Al-Mawdudi, *Jihad in Islam* (International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1980), p. 5. Mawdudi called for an 'objective Jihad', claiming that Islam 'was never a metaphysical proposition; it was a charter of social Revolution'. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Muslims should belong to a 'Hizb Allah' (party of God), whose task is to 'devour to destroy the hegemony of an un-Islamic system and establish in its place the rule of that social and cultural order which regulates life with balanced and humane laws, referred to by the Qur'an with the comprehensive term "the word of God": *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. Mawdudi is the 'first twentieth-century Muslim thinker to build a political theory around the original break that led to the founding of Islam': Kepel, *Jihad*, p. 35. For the above references, see: Gerges, *Making the Arab World,* p. 443.

collective duty in which a part of the Muslims ensures its execution and another is found dispensed; *fard 'ayn*, when it is an individual duty for each believer, even if not personally attacked.[15]

The *Tanzim Al-Jihad* was imbued with Faraj's thought, its activists devoured the pages of *The Neglected Duty*, and they believed that if the State had to be fought, then it was necessary to kill its living symbol: the *ra'is* (chief). The group decided to act when Sadat and his own government were the least popular. They faced high rates of youth unemployment, corruption, inefficiency in the public sector and brutality in the security apparatus, which suppressed all forms of dissent. The murder should have appeared as a popular upheaval, as a reaction to the repression against the opposition that happened in September 1981. For a while, Tanzim Al-Jihad became, in the minds of many Egyptians, the 'armed wing' of a popular uprising, rather than a minority Islamist group.

The decision to kill the President did not come from 'Abd al-Salam Faraj, but from Lt. Khalid al-Islambuli. A twenty-four-year-old, born into an upper-class family of intellectuals near Mallawi, he decided to pursue a military career instead of a medical one. On 3 September 1981, he returned home and discovered that his brother, Muhammad, a prominent member of the students' Jama'at at the University of Asyut, had been arrested overnight without charge. Khalid told his parents that he would seek justice and that 'there is an end to every tyrant'.[16] He proposed his plan to Faraj on 24 September, sparking off a heated discussion within the organization on the possibility of killing Sadat and thus establishing an Islamic State. However, aside from an attempted insurrection in Asyut, a stronghold of the Islamist movement in Upper Egypt, the assassination only led to even more severe repression under Hosni Mubarak. During the 1982 trials, the Egyptian judges declared that the President's murder was the result of Faraj's preaching. There were two distinct lawsuits: The first involved twenty-four defendants of *Tanzim Al-Jihad*, five of whom were sentenced to death and executed on 15

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[15] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 80.
[16] *Ibid.,* p. 80.

April 1982. Among them were Lt. Khalid, his three associates and 'Abd al-Salam Faraj. The second one saw three hundred people, in various ways linked to the terrorist group, prosecuted, and a young Ayman al-Zawahiri was among them.

From Egypt to Afghanistan. The Jihad against the Red Army and the appearance of Osama bin Laden

Two years before the trial, Ayman, while working in a clinic in the outskirts of Cairo, had joined a Muslim NGO to bring relief to the Afghan mujahidin, who were fighting against the Red Army. This experience convinced al-Zawahiri that only armed struggle could make Islam triumph and that Afghanistan was the most propitious land for victory. Upon his return to Egypt, he learned of the initiative of Tanzim al-Jihad but he remained sceptical of its success; on the one hand, because it was premature and poorly organized, on the other, because it lacked a 'social base'. According to some sources he broke under torture after his arrest, which could have been one of the causes of his definitive departure from Egypt after his release.[17] Al-Zawahiri witnessed the collapse of Egyptian Jihad as well as the execution of Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj and of Khalid al-Islambuli. Two years later, in 1985, he left Egypt for Saudi Arabia and started working in a clinic in Jeddah. The village was also both the headquarters of the main Saudi organization linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (World Assembly of Muslim Youth, WAMY) and the entrepreneurial stronghold of the Bin Laden family. From Jeddah, al-Zawahiri could reach, via Peshawar, the battlefields in Afghanistan.[18] In the years of the guerrilla against the Red Army, hundreds of Egyptians joined the Mujahidin troops through this way, and at least 526 of them (almost a

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[17] Kepel, *Fitna,* pp. 79-80.

[18] On Ayman al-Zawahiri, see: M. Al-Zayatt, *Ayman al-Zawahiri kama 'ariftuhu* (Le Caire, 2002). Eng. Translation: *The Road to Al-Qaeda: the story of Osama bin Laden's right-hand man* (Pluto, 2003); A. Abd al-Rahim, *Hilf al-Irhab, 'Abdallah 'Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Oussama Ben Laden,* 3 Volumes. (Le Caire, 2004); L. Wright, 'The Man Behind Bin Laden: How an Egyptian doctor became a Master of Terror', in *The New Yorker* (16 September 2002); N. Raphaeli, A. M. Rabi', 'Al-Zawahiri: The Making of an Arch Terrorist', in *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 14, (2002), p. 1.

fifth of the 'Arab' fighters) died in the mountains around Kabul.[19] In 1986, Ayman went to Afghanistan for the third time and during that stay he met Osama bin Laden for the first time.

Son of Mohammed bin Laden, magnate of the Saudi Binladin Group (SBG), Osama was never an austere and reserved intellectual like Ayman. He didn't spend his adolescence as a clandestine activist, but lived the typical contradictions of a rich young Saudi: observant at home but much less so during periods of studying abroad. Like so many of his generation and his rank, bin Laden committed himself to the Afghan Jihad at the beginning of the 1980s. In those years, the Saudi monarchy did not view the religious fervour of its young people with suspicion and, indeed, it tried to encourage their fighting aspirations against the Red Army.[20] For the conservative monarchies of the Gulf, fostering an 'Islamic epic' had multiple functions. On the one hand, it helped recover legitimacy in the Muslim world, and on the other, it removes from the Saudi territory a generation that had begun to listen to the fiery messages of Khomeini's Iran.[21] Furthermore, the assault on the Great Mosque in 1979 had been a wake-up call for the Saudi royal family, who suddenly realized that it was necessary to somehow channel the anger and idealism of those young activists.[22]

In Afghanistan, the young Jihadists were mentored by a Muslim Brother of Palestinian origin, 'Abdallah Yūsuf al-'Azzam, who became bin Laden's mentor.[23] Herald of the Jihad, famous lecturer

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[19] S. Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin, 2005).

[20] M. Azzam, 'Al-Qaeda: The misunderstood Wahhabi Connection and the Ideology of Violence', in *Royal Institute for International Affairs*, Briefing Paper 1 (2003).

[21] M. Fandi, *The Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (Macmillan Basingstoke, 1999); J.E. Peterson, *Saudi Arabia and the Illusion of Security* (IISS, Adelphi, 2002); R. Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil. How Washington Sold our Soul for Saudi Crude* (Crown, 2004); C. M. Sennott, 'Driving a wedge: Bin Laden, the USA and Saudi Arabia', in *Boston Globe* (March 2002).

[22] Y. Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda* (Doubleday, 2007).

[23] On al-'Azzam see: T. Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

throughout the world and author of several publications, 'Azzam could direct the fight against the Soviet Union. Without ever mentioning the petro-monarchies and the United States, which provided money and weapons, he could educate a generation of fighters who came from very different backgrounds: on the one hand, the children of wealthy families of the Arabian Peninsula; on the other, activists tortured by Sadat's *Mukhabarat*.[24] Bin Laden was indoctrinated by 'Azzam, which led him to mix the puritanical ethos typical of Saudi Wahabbism, but devoid of political content, with the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood which, which was motivated by the will to reform Islam in a political sense.[25]

The Jihad crisis in Afghanistan and the diaspora of the fighters

Despite the victory over the Soviet Union, between 1986 and 1989 the Islamist movement started to split and conflicts arose among factions. By now, al-Zawahiri was replacing 'Azzam as Osama's spiritual mentor. In a book published between 1988 and 1989, *The bitter Masses of the Muslim Brotherhood in sixty years,* al-Zawahiri attacked the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that they had sacrificed Jihad on the altar of their personal gains, by accepting that Islam could coexist with democracy.[26] This was a particularly serious accusation since, for the radical Islamists, it is not possible to think of sovereignty as independent of God. In the same period, American financial aid began to grow scarce. Washington disengagement gave pretext for al-Zawahiri's faction to frame Jihad in a global eschatological perspective: after the Soviet Empire, it was time to turn against America and destroy it.

On 24 November 1989, after a political strife which arouses between the various mujahidin factions, al-'Azzam was mysteriously murdered. With him gone, Al-Zawahiri could exercise his influence

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[24] A. Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, 2000), p. 129.

[25] M. Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Potomac Books, 2002), p. 68.

[26] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 84;

over Bin Laden without any interference.[27] However, what triggered the Saudi billionaire was less the preaching of Ayman, and more the desecration of the holy places of Mecca and Medina by American troops. Fearing an offensive manoeuvre by the Iraqi army, which had recently invaded the emirate of Kuwait, in 1990 the Saudi royal family asked the USA to deploy men and vehicles to defend the kingdom. This was, for Bin Laden, the last evidence necessary to condemn, on the one hand, the apostasy of Saudi Arabia, and on the other the USA presence in the Middle East.[28]

However, the ability of the Islamist movement to turn itself into a resistant front was inhibited both by the rapid American victory over Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and by the impossibility for Bin Laden to leave for Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in April 1992, Kabul fell and a civil war erupted in Afghanistan. But both the USA and the Saudis, endorsed by Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, decided to disperse the Jihad brigades. In so doing, many fighters were forced into another 'diaspora', this time from Afghanistan to North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.[29] The Arab States played the Jihad card against the Red Army to get rid of the Islamist opposition, hoping that most activists would never return; against all expectations, hundreds of them survived and returned not only imbued with the indoctrination received by al-Azzam and Salafist preachers, but also with military training and combat experience. Above all, the 'Egyptian faction' would become particularly active in supporting, inspiring and training dozens of armed groups in the region, such as the Algerian *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) and the Libyan *Al-Jama'a al- Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah bi-Libya* (LIFG).

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[27] O. Roy, *Globalized Islam. The Search for a New Umma,* (Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 296–297. But also: F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy. Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 24-34.

[28] S. Wright*, The United States and Persian Gulf Security: The Foundations of the War on Terror* (Ithaca Press, 2007); and A. Munro, *Arab Storm: Politics and Diplomacy Behind the Gulf War* (I.B. Tauris, 2006).

[29] A. al-Masri, 'The Story of the Afghan Arabs: From the Entry to Afghanistan to the Final Exodus with the Taliban', in F. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qa'ida* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 61.

However, the 'second diaspora' did not only involve Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, North and East Africa, but also the Europe. Dozens of veterans and Islamist preachers reached the outskirts of major European cities like Paris, Hamburg, London, Milan and Madrid. In London, two important Egyptians took refuge to carry on their preaching in the Finsbury Park mosque. The first one, Mustafa Kamel, better known as Abu Hamza al-Masri, a naturalized British engineer, was the editor of *Al-Ansar*, the weekly magazine of the Algerian GIA and the father of a young jihadist detained in Yemen for having abducted a group of tourists. Al-Masri was arrested in 2004 for eleven charges of terrorism and sentenced to life imprisonment in January 2015 without the possibility of parole. The second, Yasser al-Sirri, who was the director of the *Islamic Media Observatory*, was suspected with his agency of providing accreditation letters to the two fake journalists who killed Commander Ahmad Shah Mas'ud in Afghanistan three days before 9/11.[30]

In 1992, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, their families and a small circle of followers fled to Sudan and were greeted by President Hassan al-Turabi, champion of Islam in East Africa. The hospitality was not uninterested since, during his Sudanese exile, Bin Laden invested millions of dollars in infrastructure projects in the country. In return, Sudan, between 1992 and 1996, became the sanctuary where Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's organization began to take its form. In 1992, international Jihad also opened three new fronts: Egypt, Algeria and Bosnia.[31] Autochthonous groups were joined by foreign fighters, including veterans of Afghanistan, who arrived in each of these countries partly thanks to the Bin Laden network. In London, the various activists and preachers acted as 'mouthpiece' of jihadist activities, opening websites, newspapers, publishing

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[30] Kepel, *Le Prophete et le Pharaon,* Introduction.
[31] Kepel, *Jihad*, pp. 365-454; C. al-Tawil, *Al-haraka al-Islamiyya al-mussallaha fi-l jazair man "al inqadh" ila "al jam'a"* (Dar al-Nahr, 1998), pp. 84-85; X. Bougarel, *Islam et Politique en Bosnie-Herzegovine. Le parti de l'Action Democratique,* Ph.d. Thesis, (Institute d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 1999).

pamphlets, contacting the Arab press, while Osama provided for logistics.[32]

The proliferation of the terrorist method within the radical fringes is perhaps the most important event that characterized the history of Islamism during the 1990's; yet its danger was underestimated by US intelligence. In 1993, the USA granted visas both to 'Omar 'Abd al-Rahman, who performed the first attack on the World Trade Centre, and to al-Zawahiri.[33] The latter was a known face of the Afghan Jihad, but despite his presence had been reported to the FBI, little or nothing was done to monitor his movements.[34]

In the same year, some fighters, from Sudan and Yemen, were sent to Somalia during Operation *Restore Hope*. According to Gilles Kepel, a strand of Islamist literature loudly denounced the US-led Western intervention, claiming it was an attempt to indirectly destabilize Sudan and thus overthrow Turabi.[35] However, Somalia also became the battlefield where they understood, looking at the impact that that war was having on Bill Clinton's presidency, that military failure is a source of political vulnerability—a lesson well learned by the time al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) set up the guerrilla warfare in Iraq after the 2003 invasion.[36]

The far enemy. The globalization of Jihad in the 1990's and the birth of al-Qa'ida

The years in which Osama bin Laden was in Khartoum were the most aggressive period of the 'regional' Jihad. The name al-Qa'ida was not widely known, and the Saudi billionaire was seen more as an

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[32] On terrorist financing, see: N. Passas, 'Demystifying Hawala: A Look into its Social Organization and Mechanics' in *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, Vol. 7 (2006), p. 46; S. R. Müller, *Hawala. An Informal Payment System and Its Use to Finance Terrorism* (AV Akademikerverlag, 2006).

[33] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 50.

[34] See: L. Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 224.

[35] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 88.

[36] See: J-C. Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al Qaeda* (Other Press, 2005); Z. Chehab, *Iraq Ablaze: Inside the Insurgency* (I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006); P. Rogers, *Iraq and the War on Terror: Twelve Months of Insurgency* (I.B. Tauris, 2006).

opponent in exile of the Saudi Kingdom than as the leader of an international terrorist group. Al-Zawahiri, between 1992 and 1996, was engaged in a strategy of attrition in Egypt, through the killing of regime dignitaries and spectacular attacks, such as the attempted assassination of Mubarak in Ethiopia and the destruction of the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad. However, in 1996, the balance of Jihadist activities appeared to be negative: Bosnia, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Chechnya, in each of these battlefields the radical militants inexorably lost ground. After the attack against Hosni Mubarak, Egypt increased the pressure on Khartoum to isolate the Bin Laden group and, inside the Sudanese government, some began to think about handing him over to the Egyptians or the Americans, not unlike how they delivered Carlos 'The Jackal' to the French in 1994. The indifference of the United States and Saudi Arabia allowed bin Laden to leave the country on a private jet and return to Kandahar, the capital of the Islamic Taliban Emirate which, thanks to Washington's apathy and the support of the Pakistanis, was about to conquer Kabul. At the same time, al-Zawahiri, conscious of the defeat in Egypt and Algeria, moved to Chechnya. The Caucasus seemed at that time to possess all the characteristics suitable for a prolonged guerrilla warfare against the Russians.[37] Nonetheless, the lack of financial support prevented the Chechen Jihad from consolidating and achieving important victories. In 2002, after the death of Commander Khattab - a Saudi citizen and veteran of Afghanistan - the strategy changed and terrorists attacked Russian soil. The massacre at the Dubrovka Theater in December 2002, carried out by a suicide commando, echoed in its motives and strategy the 9/11 attacks: strike the 'far enemy' on its territory.[38]

On 23 August 1996, Bin Laden issued a declaration 'of Jihad against the Americans, which occupy the land of the two holy places', shifting the goal of Jihad to the liberation of Saudi Arabia from the presence of foreign troops. In February 1998, a new declaration, this

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[37] Al-Zayatt, *Ayman al-Zawahiri kama 'ariftuhu*, p. 102.

[38] V.M. Mastronardi & S. Leo, *Terroristi. Dalle Brigate Rosse all'IRA, dal terrorismo basco al terrorismo turco, dal PKK al terrorismo ceceno, fino ad arrivare alla temutissima al-Qaeda* (Newton Compton, 2007), pp. 69-78.

time also signed by al-Zawahiri and the leaders of various Islamist groups around the world, ratified the birth of the *World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders*.[39] The strategy against the nearby enemy, supported by theorists and preachers like Faraj, Qutb and 'Abd al-Rahman in the 1970's and the 1980's, was replaced by a will to fight the far enemy. The name al-Qa'ida, however, does not appear in the 1996 document nor in the 1998 one.

In the aftermath of September 2001, the West conceived al-Qa'ida in the strict sense, i.e. as a network with physical structures and a precise organization. Destroying the 'bases' and beheading the leadership should have rendered the organization harmless. However, looking more closely at the nature of al-Qa'ida and the testimonies of its militants, some scholars and journalists have even wondered if an organization called al-Qa'ida ever existed.[40] According to Taysir Aluni's interview with Bin Laden in October 2001:

'Al-Qa'ida found itself being called so long ago, without really having wanted it. The late Abu Ubaida al-Banshiri had set up training camps for our mujahidin against Russia's terrorism. It was the habit to call this field "the base" [al-Qa'ida]. And the name remained.'[41]

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[39] 'However, contrary to the dominant terrorism narrative, bin Laden had very limited success in co-opting domestic jihadis and broadening the social base of his new organization among Muslims in general. With the exception of Zawahiri's small inner circle within Tanzim al-Jihad, fewer than a dozen lieutenants, most domestic jihadis—including junior and senior members of al-Jihad and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, the largest jihadist organization in the region, or the military wing of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)—joined al-Qaeda, fearing, rightly, that transnational jihad was a reckless venture that could bring ruin to the Islamist movement. Aft er the leadership of al-Gamaa al-Islamiya found out that one of its mid-level lieutenants, Rifaa Ahmad Taha (alias Abu Yasir), a hardliner, was present at the ceremony announcing the formal launch of the World Islamic Front and was one of the signatories, it forced him to release a disclaimer about being a member of al-Qaeda, or speaking for the Islamic group. Taha released a statement in which he denied that al-Gamaa al-Islamiya was a founding member of the World Islamic Front: "We are not a party in any front that confronts Americans", in Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda,* p. 65.

[40] C. Bonini & G. D'Avanzo, *Il Mercato della Paura. La Guerra al Terrorismo Islamico nel Grande Inganno Italiano* (Einaudi, 2005), pp. 20-21.

[41] Kepel, *Fitna,* p. 112.

If this were the case, al-Qa'ida would be nothing more than a rhetorical figure with a double value. On the one hand, it is a group of radical Islamists who are trained in the same physical location; on the other, it is a microcosm of Islamists scattered all over the planet and connected by Internet technology, forums, chats and satellite TV, with a singular. The name gave the illusion of being able to identify a material reality, to territorialize it within the borders of the compliant Taliban regime, without realizing that precisely the high communicative power of an intangible 'nebula' represented its true danger. Even by decapitating its head in the 'Afghan house', the monster could have been reproduced in any other shrine around the world as well as in the suburbs of Europe like the cells of a cancer. The natural example that comes closest to describing al-Qa'ida, after all, is that of the constellations and not the anthill or the hive.[42]

A few months after the birth of the Islamic Front in 1998, two attacks devastated US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. The day chosen for the attack, 7 August, was not accidental, as it was the anniversary of day - 7 August 1990 - when King Fahd asked the 'infidel' troops to settle in Saudi territory to protect the Kingdom. Two years later, in October 2000, the USS Cole was attacked in the port of Aden with a rubber boat loaded with explosives.

This first offensive, although spectacular and terrible was largely ignored by the international community. Few took them as a warning or noticed the strategic intent behind them. Indeed, between 1998 and 2001, Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri did not order the attacks to win the favour of the masses of the Muslim world, rather to excite the aspiring martyrs who were training for the 9/11 operation. The hijackers were not poor men from Jordanian refugee camps, but educated militants who had spent time in the West, and could accomplish a complex and articulated operation. However, transforming young students of architectures, engineering, medicine, into delusional *shahid* (martyr) and murders, required not only

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[42] Interview with Sir Mark Allen, London 2019.

physical training but also emotional and psychological stimulation. The offensive campaign of 1998-2000 served the purpose.[43]

The Knights under the banner of the Prophet and the road to 9/11

Scholars have very few historical sources on al-Qa'ida; possibly, the best ones, although to be handled with care, are its texts and publications.[44] The most important is perhaps Ayman al-Zawahiri's *Knights under the banner of the Prophet,* of which numerous extracts have been published by the Saudi newspaper in London, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, in December 2001. Among the delirious words of hatred, it is possible to trace the cold intellectual logic that led to 9/11.

Al-Zawahiri exposed a view of the world that mirrors that of Samuel Huntington, although in a much less sophisticated way.[45] According to the Egyptian terrorist: 'the battle is universal' and 'Western forces hostile to Islam have clearly identified their enemy - which they call Islamic fundamentalism. In this, they were joined by their former adversary, Russia'.[46] Against this alliance a coalition of jihadists movements has taken shape, according to al-Zawahiri, and they were achieving great victories in the name of Allah in Afghanistan and Chechnya. It is likely, based on this last reference, that the text was written shortly after the outbreak of the Second Intifada (2000-2005), a time when it seemed that the jihadist guerrillas in Chechnya were causing serious problems to the Russians. In the words of al-Zawahiri, attacking the United States, Israel and Russia is a necessary response to the suffering of Muslim people, tormented and tortured from Turkmenistan to Andalusia in Spain. The use of 'Andalusia' is a clear reference to the imaginary that saw the conquest of Tariq ibn Ziyad as the moment of consolidation of Muslim rule over

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[43] D. Gambetta & S. Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad. The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

[44] J-P. Milelli & Gilles Kepel (eds.), *Al Qaeda in its Own Words* (Belknap, 2009); R. Ibrahim & V. D. Hanson, *The Al Qaeda Reader* (Crown Publications, 2007).

[45] F. Gerges, *America and Political Islam. Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 22.

[46] The next quotes are from: Kepel, *Fitna,* pp. 92-97.

the Mediterranean, a 'golden age' ended in the violence of the Catholic *Reconquista* in 1492. Not by chance, Spain was the target of the bloody attacks of 11 March 2004.In his book, Ayman bitterly acknowledges the failure of local Jihad in the first half of the Nineties but also argues that 'every movement goes through a cycle of exhaustion and rebirth'. He states that, on the threshold of the new millennium, there is an awakening of a new generation of young Islamists ready to sacrifice themselves in the name of Allah to protect the *'Umma*. These observations immediately evoke Sayyid Qutb who, in the early 1960s, spoke of a 'new Quranic generation'. To win the war against the West and the apostates, the Islamist movement must rethink the relationship that exists in the Muslim world between masses and elites, since the latter, especially in Algeria and Egypt, proved to be completely inadequate. Using a language with a Marxist flavour - al-Qa'ida 'putchistic' strategy recalls the experiences of the Spartacists in Weimar Germany, of Lenin and of some European left-wing terrorist groups such as the Italian Red Brigades – Al-Zawahiri claims that the elites, the 'enlightened vanguard of Islam', must mobilize the largest number of supporters to the cause. '[...] we must not reproach the 'Umma for not reacting or not being up to it. We are the ones who must be blamed for not having been able to spread our message, for not having been able to demonstrate our solicitude, our sacrifice'. The vanguards are the custodians of the truths and, with a distorted sense of paternalism, al-Zawahiri feels a duty to guide the Muslim masses, infusing them with a spirit of mobilization that reduces their passivity and indolence. The condition of 'isolation' in which this Jihadist avant-garde lives seems almost an obsession for him. They must perform an exemplary military action, following a terrorist or 'putsch' logic, so that the masses will awake from their numbness. To do so, one must take the battle to the enemy's territory, into the *dar al-harb* (House of War), and 'speak with the only language that they [the enemies] understand'.

These pages show evidence of an eschatological conception of time, whose pillar is the Divine Revelation to the Prophet, realized between 622 and 657 AD. Since then, humanity has benefitted from a

positive push towards an infinitely good future represented by the worldwide spread of Islam; but humanity is also plagued by a negative movement, characterized by the apostasy and corruption of those politicians who, instead of applying the law of God and 'order the Good and forbid the Evil', according to the words of the Thirteenth century preacher Ibn Taymiyya, govern according to their arbitrariness.[47] History then becomes a finite and repetitive motion, which tends to restore a perfect order emanated by God but corrupted by men. Jihad, for bin Laden and his men, is nothing but the repetition of the first moment in the history of Islam, when 'the knights under the banner of the Prophet' destroyed the Sassanid Empire of Persia and then faced the other great empire of that time, that of Byzantium. Similarly, having destroyed the Soviet empire in 1989, the time had come to make the American one capitulate.

From these delirious visions, and from a methodical analysis over the limits of USA unipolar moment, they started developing the plan for the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, between 2000 and 2001, two other factors made the plot possible. The first was the failure of the Oslo Agreements and the consequent Second *Intifada* with its wave of suicide attacks. The second was the availability of devout men ready for martyrdom. As a matter of fact, the practice of suicide attacks, typical of revolutionary Iran, was gradually accepted by the Arab culture after *Hezbollah*'s military campaign in Lebanon in the 1980s.[48] The method was then transferred to Palestine in the hope that just as Shiite militias had succeeded in forcing the Israeli army to withdraw, so could the Palestinian militants. The failure of the Oslo Agreements, the beginning of the Second *Intifada* and the acceptance of martyrdom

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[47] On Ibn Taymiyya: M. Papa, 'La Shar'ia e il Potere Politico nel Pensiero di Ibn Taymiyya', in *Rivista Italiana di Intelligence,* Vol. 3 (2017), p. 35; A.H. Al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyya* (Routledge, 2006); H. Laoust, *Essai sur les Doctrines Sociales et Politiques de Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya* (Cairo, 1939); J.J.G. Jansen, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Thirteen Century: A formative Period of Modern Muslim Radicalism', in *Quaderni di Studi Arabi,* Vol. 18 (1987), p. 21.
[48] R. Baer, *The Devil We Know. Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (Crown, 2008). On suicide and Islam: C. Reuter, *My Life is a Weapon. A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton University Press, 2006); D. Cook, *Matyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

in the Arab world as an effective tool to fight an unequal war, set the conditions that make Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri understand that time was favourable for a spectacular operation on a large scale.[49]

Conclusions: Something old that came as new

Since 1998, the Jihad became international and the far enemy the primary target of al-Qa'ida. Attacking the USA, for bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, meant to assume on themselves the responsibility to guide the Muslim masses to awakening, taking advantage at the same time of the rage that was arousing in the Arab world during the Second *Intifada.*.[50] n the one hand, the 9/11 attacks would mobilize the Muslim world behind Osama bin Laden and his acolytes; on the other hand, they would draw the United States into a battlefield already tested with the Soviets, to impose on them a strategic defeat. What came as a major shock for the West, was indeed the manifestation of something older. The originality of the attack was in the means they employed, rather than in their ideology. The contradictions that sprouted in the Middle East in the late 1950's, involving the problem of modernity and legitimacy in Muslim societies, were paved over by Cold War dynamics and regional competition for leadership in the Arab world. As soon as the USSR ceased to exist, the United States had to rethink its role as the only superpower, but within an environment that unleashed all the regional problems left unsolved by 50-years of bipolar conflict. Al-Qa'ida was the fruit that ripen from unfinished business in the Arab world. In 2000, almost every single Arab country

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[49] On the 9/11 planning and the role of Khalid Shayk Mohammed, see: Y. Fouda & N. Fielding, *Les cerveaux du terrorisme: rencontre avec Ramzi Binalchibh et Khalid Cheick Mohammed, numero 3 d'Al-Qaida* (Ed. Du Rocher, 2003).

[50] The outcome was less favourable to Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri than they may have expected. The television preacher Yusuf al-Qardhawi while justified and praise the Palestinian suicide-attacks, he condemned the 9/11 attacks. A war against the United States is not a legitimate Jihad. Al-Qa'ida reacted discrediting those ulema who condemned the attacks labelling them as 'court ulema'. G. Kepel, *Chronique d'une guerre d'Orient, automne 2001. Brève chronique d'Israël et de Palestine', avril-mai 2001* (Gallimard, 2002).

was still ruled by authoritarian regimes as in the 1950's. According to al-Qa'ida, that is because the causes of apostasy were not rooted in the local government, the nearby enemy, rather in their sponsor abroad, the far enemy. However, even 9/11 was not enough to create consensus around Bin Laden, and al-Qa'ida remained highly contested within the Islamist movement as any other Jihadist organization before and after it. The history of radical Islam is that of its divisions, clashes, vulnerability and, despite the undeniable dangerousness, of its weaknesses,

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