



# Daesh and the terrorist threat: from the Middle East to Europe





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## PREFACE

It is an undeniable fact that the issue of terrorism, both as a theoretical area of analysis and as a practical phenomenon, has grown exponentially in significance over the past few decades. Indeed, terrorism has for some time stopped being a term solely discussed in academic settings and in strategic documents, but has recently been introduced in our everyday lexicon in ways that are far more profound than in the past. Put more simply, in understanding the extremely intricate nature of today's international affairs, the analysis of the concept and praxis of terrorism no longer belongs to an obscure area of study, and has developed into an urgent necessity, as a means of exploring how to respond to the phenomenon in an appropriate manner.

As the illustrative examples of the rise of al-Qaeda and Daesh and their expanded global landscape of terrorist attacks indicate, this dual realisation that terrorism has unequivocally become a part of our reality and that its analysis has become more urgent than ever is particularly true of what has been widely termed as "Islamic fundamentalist terrorism". Due to the kaleidoscopic interests involved in it, the multifarious dynamics that have been at play in the region from which it has primarily originated, and the multiplicity of its actors, methods and cause, Islamic terrorism has come to the fore of our attention in spectacular fashion, necessitating consistent and rigorous analysis.

This book is focused precisely on this area. Covering a wide range of pertinent aspects and referring to the causal links and history behind this strand of terrorism in various countries of the world, this book intends to provide an in-depth look at the rise and evolution of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Divided into three parts, the first one focusing on the Middle East and Africa region, the second one on the recruiting methods, financing and propaganda instruments used by Islamic terrorist organisations, and the last part on the evolution of the phenomenon in a select few European countries, it attempts to answer some of the very basic questions surrounding this very important topic.

What are the causes behind the phenomenon? What are its principal methods of recruiting and financing? What are the primary challenges in designing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to tackle it? Why has it spread in the Middle East and Africa? What explains its presence in Europe? These are all relevant questions into which this book attempts to offer much needed insights, aimed to aid our shared understanding concerning the past, present and future of Islamic terrorism. What is more, and perhaps more crucially, drawing from the analysis, it also provides a set of conclusions with a view to assisting the reader to better comprehend what is needed in order to minimise the future ramifications of this strand of terrorism and severely undermine its future dynamics.

*Foundation for European Progressive Studies  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Andrea Manciuilli*

On January 7, 2015 a terrorist cell with al-Qaeda ties carried out an attack on the editorial headquarters of “Charlie Hebdo”, and European public opinion deemed it the beginning of a new phase in the shared perception of the seriousness and unpredictability of the jihadist terrorist threat. This attack in the city of Paris was a watershed moment, effectively marking pre- and post-Charlie Hebdo eras. Just a few months later, Europe and the entire world were shaken by other attacks in the city of Paris and elsewhere. This time Daesh militants claimed responsibility for what proved to be even bloodier and more violent attacks, and the effect on our perception of the terrorist threat was even greater.

The most striking and upsetting part of the latest series of attacks carried out beyond Daesh’s territory was evidence of a precise strategy carried out by men commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who views terrorism as but one potential bellicose option for fighting the West and enemies of the “self-proclaimed caliphate”. Furthermore, the assailants displayed military and tactical competency in the field, especially in the more recent attacks in Paris. If we examine the three most striking attacks as part of a series taking place over just a couple of days and beyond the territory claimed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, we see how they had been launched against three symbolic enemies with the goal of sending a message well beyond the very victims of the attacks: Leba-

non's Shiite population, Russia and France. We must not underestimate the precise series of events taking place over a very short period of time, from the downing of the Russian airplane in Sinai to the massacre in Paris on November 13. Indeed, these attacks now show a change of pace on the part of Daesh and place us squarely in front of the reality of the situation and the type of war that we are fighting: a hybrid war in which the terrorist threat is one of the weapons used by our enemies in order to take the conflict beyond the confines of their territory, bring it directly into our home and create an atmosphere of terror in our communities.

These attacks provide the necessary starting point for a more profound and broad-ranging consideration not simply of the varied and complex jihadist terrorist threat but rather of the type of conflict and the enemy that we are facing. Our efforts in the way of research and analysis are necessary to make our communities more aware of the risks that we face and to ensure that our politics, institutions and society are prepared to appropriately meet this long-standing challenge. Presented to us some time ago and based on a well-delineated strategy, this challenge will unfortunately give life to a long and difficult battle. The provocation of jihadist terrorism targeting the international community is primarily tied to the present and future geopolitical order of the Arab world and to both the security of the West and the survival of the open and democratic model of our society. It is no coincidence that this challenge has once again arisen and been fuelled with renewed vigour and greater momentum in the wake of the collapse of the 2011 Arab Spring and following the upheaval, produced by those traumatic events, that took place across the Middle East and along the southern coast of the Mediterranean.

In order to more thoroughly understand the nature, the likely evolution and the targets of the challenge that we face, it is necessary to probe and analyse the events that have taken place around us and to better understand their causes and progression. We must also increase our awareness of both the constantly changing nature of the situation that surrounds us, ranging from Afghanistan to West Africa, and the turmoil that prevails on our southern borders, which is much greater than Europe has truly been able to understand over time. Our attention must be focused on the threat before us and on its greater setting in an attempt to better discern the underlying scheme determining its

movement. While for some time the strategy has existed as clear as day and been recognised by experts in the field, it is now well known by many. It amounts to a project neatly structured in stages that seeks to determine the future order of the Middle East and Arab nations, and slowly but surely within the present international landscape of turmoil and rampant crises, this project is taking shape. The underlying strategy may essentially be traced to the document “Towards a New International Order”, written by Osama Bin Laden in 2004, in which we can discern the outline of a real, programmatic manifesto subdivided into a series of stages. Codified in a consequential logic, these stages set the goal of ultimately building a new global world order and founding a political entity in the Middle East that is capable of overthrowing the present regimes and squaring off against the West. Even then the specific steps of the strategy foresaw that a first stage of intra-Arab conflict, both between Sunnis and Shiites and intra-Sunni, would be followed by a period of struggle against the Arab governments allied with the West and then specifically against Western governments. The goal of destroying the possibility of promoting democracy in the Arab world is the common thread in the second and third stages; in Bin Laden’s eyes the second stage is closely tied to the third, which is directed more broadly toward the West. Speeches dating to 1998 already demonstrate the al-Qaeda leader’s strong hope for crisis within those Arab states closely allied with the West, and he proposed inciting political and military instability in the countries surrounding the Arabian Peninsula, the principal objective given its religious, political and economic importance. The peninsula is home to one of the regimes most strongly tied to the West throughout history. Most importantly, however, it is the land of the holiest places for Muslims and the cornerstone of the potential new caliphate, the heart of the project for the new world order. According to this strategy, Saudi Arabia would be surrounded by intensely unstable situations to the north, east and south. As a result of a number of events, such as the war in Iraq, the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, these unstable situations have unfortunately materialised, offering tangible proof of the risk that a similar proliferation of battlefronts might not only pose a serious threat to the Arabian Peninsula but also force the West to intervene in very tumultuous circumstances, as theorised.

It is important to be aware of the other diverse fundamentalist hotbeds that are steadily opening up, which attest to the actualisation of this strategy. These areas range from Nigeria to Yemen and extend across the whole of North Africa and, more generally, along the southern coast of the Mediterranean. They include the territory under siege in Syria and Iraq, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where unrest and violence are far from coincidental, and India, in which new groups affiliated with al-Qaeda are forming. When the battlefronts are multiplied, the enemy is effectively confused in its attempt to plan a strategic response, making it difficult to discern which instruments to use, the timeframe and the logistics of a potential counter operation. Considering the clarity of the strategy adopted by Bin Laden and of those who follow it, we see how our response appears less lucid, confused at times, and insufficient to confront the institutional and political crises in the Arab world. Furthermore, it is not suited to confront the crises in our society, whose contradictions offer fertile ground for the growth of radicalism that is “homemade”, unorthodox and promoted on-line by today’s messengers of Daesh.

Against this backdrop the unexpected rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (or Daesh), due to the way it came about and those who established it, has helped develop and accelerate the strategy of proliferating the battlefronts and of assaulting the geopolitical layout of the Middle East, which has probably exceeded the greatest expectations of its very theorists. This is the case in spite of the fact that Daesh is something very different and separate from al-Qaeda. Unknown to most until the summer of 2014, Daesh has presented a new local and global threat that differs significantly from the al-Qaeda model. It is carrying out an actual hybrid war on several fronts, and terrorist attacks amount to just one of several methods of striking the enemy. Daesh has managed to grow and gain strength, above all, in recent years by taking advantage of both the setting in which it has operated, the so-called “Syraq” area in the midst of a civil war, and a series of errors (some even committed by the West) beginning with the decisions made in Iraq first by Paul Bremer and then by the Nuri al-Maliki government, which isolated the country’s Sunni minority, often in a sectarian manner. This was the opposite of the situation under the leadership of General Petraeus, who had actively in-

volved the Sunni tribes in the Iraqi reconciliation. Lacking power or any role in society and in the country's government, the Iraqi Sunnis did not oppose or obstruct Daesh's claim as they could have. Contrarily, many Sunnis joined the ranks of its militias.

In light of this turn of events, the ranks of Daesh leaders now include some of the most important representatives of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party (confirmed by numerous analysts) and also secret service operatives of the previous regime. Some of these men are thought to have come in contact with local jihadist radicals within Iraqi detention centres. They have made significant contributions to the creation of the power structure, the improvement of ties with local communities and the establishment of networks of tribal alliances throughout Iraqi territory under the control of Daesh. By capitalising on the Syrian crisis, they have managed to breathe new life into the organisation founded by the notorious Jordanian terrorist al-Zarqawi, which was considered dismantled after his death, allowing it to reach its present levels and setting its ambitious goal not only of becoming a "state" but also of challenging the supremacy of al-Qaeda within the sphere of global jihadism.

In the wake of the November 2015 attacks in Paris, Daesh poses a triple threat as protagonist of a new form of hybrid war. First of all, it is fighting for land and the establishment of a state in Iraq and Syria in a conventional and symmetrical war. Secondly, it is carrying out a full-scale media war on a global level. Finally, it is waging an unconventional war through the asymmetrical threat of terrorism. Along with these three military features there is the illusion invoked in the world of radical Islam, which consists of the establishment of a "pure" Islamic State and a return to the historically symbolic caliphate. The caliphate is promoted as the cause that Muslims must dedicate themselves to (and not solely as fighters), and in this way it distinguishes itself from the model and methods that al-Qaeda had adopted on the Afghani and Iraqi fronts. Moving beyond the prevalently global but identifiable terrorist strategy followed over time by al-Qaeda, Daesh has changed the nature of the conflict by becoming the principal player in this new hybrid war that is complex and well structured. It has declared its intention of creating a state with administrative control of its territory and its own government, which it aims to support through the recruitment of not only soldiers but

also engineers and experts in other fields. Its marked improvement in the field reveals connections with the new international order strategy, which allow us to understand how these events are proceeding along a defined path towards the realisation of a new order. This is presumed to consist of the creation of an Arab state that has the makeup of an international power capable of posing a great challenge to the West. As a sovereign state, it will play a role in international politics, call one of the world's most resource-rich areas its home and actively oppose the West. The result will be the establishment of a new caliphate that includes the holy sites of Islam and unites both political and religious engagement in its government. It will serve as a point of convergence for all Muslims and surpass al-Qaeda's rigid and moralistic makeup.

Al-Qaeda saw itself as the leader of a global mobilisation of Muslim communities against secular control and attracted followers with religious rhetoric advancing the good of the *ummah*. Its members appeared as ascetic warriors seated on the ground in far-away caves, absorbed in study in libraries or even sheltered in remote encampments. Daesh, on the other hand, has the goal of seizing territory and creating a "pure" religious state capable of eradicating the Middle Eastern political borders created by Western powers in the twentieth century, beginning with the Sykes-Picot agreement. By doing so, it positions itself as the only political, religious and military authority for all Muslims throughout the world. It seeks to achieve its goal by preaching and creating proselytes "at the speed of the web", motivating militants via the internet and through social networks and offering them short-term gratification and success. This success is achieved through active participation in the organisation's scheme by following the tactics of striking the enemy and carrying out acts of terrorism. Savage violence is an effective instrument for intimidating enemies and suppressing dissent. It communicates an absolute dominion over conquered territories whose unification under the same black flag is highly attractive to those who convert to a ground-breaking and mass Islamic movement.

One area that presents the most intense challenge to the West is Daesh's use of digital media. It has quickly developed skills in several complex platforms, has a strong social media presence and offers "glossy" propaganda promoting the self-proclaimed caliphate. Indeed,



we speak of a “media war”, which is unconventional and part of the more widespread and complex hybrid war. The representation of jihadists is carefully studied and defined in order to attract converts and propagandise the narrative of the realisation of the Islamic State.

Al-Qaeda and Daesh have a relationship that is not fully consolidated and is rife with conflict and competition on some occasions yet also collaborative at times. In the meantime, the West finds itself in the middle of this relationship marked by methodological and “promotional” differences. It is no coincidence, for example, that the early 2015 attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, for which al-Qaeda claimed responsibility, indeed helped it reaffirm its existence by reclaiming its (declining) primacy over Daesh and transferring the resulting tension to us by means of a series of strategic attacks against a number of countries and symbolic targets.

Let us consider the two attacks that greatly disrupted Tunisia, which was slowly managing to democratically rebuild itself; the country and its economy were substantially brought to their knees as a result. Symbolically striking three distinct enemies of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the targets of the November 2015 terrorist attacks are worthy of our attention: a Shiite village in Lebanon, the Russian passenger jet and the city of Paris. The Shiites are fighting alongside Assad’s loyalist troops in Syria; Putin’s Russia was outwardly challenged as a result of its involvement against Daesh in Syria, and the downing of the Russian passenger jet also struck a blow at Egypt’s tourism system, which has been irreparably damaged by the attack. Lastly, the West (Europe, in particular) and its lifestyle were struck by a genuine military attack on one of its most beautiful and populous capitals. The assault precisely targeted places that symbolise its social way of life: a theatre, the football stadium and crowded restaurants on a Friday evening. The Paris attack is changing our approach in a broader sense and not only concerning the terrorist threat.

Thanks to its promotional strategy that stretches throughout the radical Muslim world and beyond, Daesh attracts male and female supporters who are thirsty for religious and social justice and a personal and collective *raison d’être*. They search for a sense of community different from that of the West, which does not seem able to integrate young people like them, often second- or third-generation immigrants ranging in age from 16 to 25 years old. They leave behind liberal European and Western

democracies in order to join the ranks of jihadist militias in Syria and Iraq after having been subject to unsophisticated indoctrination on the web, which makes them much different from the religiously knowledgeable foreign fighters of the 1980s in Afghanistan and of the 1990s in Bosnia. While in no way new, the greatly transformed foreign fighter phenomenon now concerns the West and the contradictions within our society.

The recruiting of foreign fighters once followed a more traditional path, but now the phenomenon is more complex, is tied to causes that are social and cultural in nature, and involves several European countries, not only France and Great Britain, but also the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Belgium. In time Italy could also be increasingly affected. With many thousands of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq, the phenomenon is on the upswing, and the protagonists are increasingly younger individuals who come to embrace the jihadist cause principally through the internet. Tunisia ranks first in the number of foreign fighters while countries such as France and Russia also show high numbers. In the wake of the November 13 attacks in Paris, the phenomenon makes our future look increasingly worrisome and menacing as authorities have discovered related networks in the outskirts of several European cities, such as the municipality of Molenbeek in Brussels, which has proven to be a “strategic centre” of European jihadism.

The new breed of terrorism we are facing is unpredictable and dangerous by virtue of the global reach of Daesh’s call to arms and the difficulty of monitoring the threat, which can strike the heart of our cities. The agents of the threat can consist of “lone wolves” that are essentially individuals or cells acting autonomously and often striking random targets through unsophisticated means. The tragedy in California and the act of aggression by a deranged individual in the London underground fall into this category by which an individual armed with a kitchen knife turns deadly in a crowded area. The horrible “Knife Intifada” that has bloodied Jerusalem for months could set a trend in this case, and the single events and acts of aggression could engender an unmanageable copycat effect among the deranged admirers and unpredictable zealots of the jihadist cause.

In the face of such a complex situation and dangerous threat, we are undeniably and urgently in need of a strategy capable of confronting the

current emergency, but such a strategy must also be projected toward providing feasible responses and alternatives in the future, because we will certainly face a long and technically hard-fought war that will likely require us to reconsider some of our most robust certainties. Europe will have to act in a unified way, finding a common strategy given the need to confront an articulate variety of threats that endangers its southern borders, jeopardises the security and development of the entire Mediterranean area, and continuously gives rise to contradictions and new hazards within its borders. It will be necessary to act as quickly as possible to make political decisions and execute concrete actions that can tackle this challenge on the ground, not only in the places of origin of the jihadist threat but also in our home.

From this standpoint, regarding internal affairs, for example, the recently approved antiterrorism decree in Italy, which is in line with similar measures enacted in Great Britain and France, was without a doubt a first important attempt to respond in a timely manner with the aim of preventing and suppressing these phenomena. The decree was consciously drawn up despite the inherent difficulty of enacting legislation dealing with a still evolving phenomenon. In Italy, from the time of its approval to the present day, the new antiterrorism regulations have allowed security forces to intervene against types of cases that were previously non-existent, thus neutralising a number of threats. In addition to the new regulations, conceived and written in order to strike a blow at terrorism, its web messengers and its prospective volunteers, political action involving deradicalisation is also necessary to effectively confront this challenge. There is the possibility, for example, of examining several models currently being tested in Germany, where officials work with Islamic associations that deal with the phenomenon of radicalisation by providing services to families with at-risk members with the goal of deradicalising them.

Finally, yet equally important, it will be necessary to review and improve budgets and investments intended for our security and the development of methods to prevent and suppress terrorism by following the indispensable process of strengthening our public security, intelligence and defence systems. Europe has the opportunity to overcome another significant challenge by succeeding in fostering real coordination and real collective cooperation in security and defence.

The West is full of internal contradictions, some of which can wind up feeding widespread feelings of intolerance to the point of xenophobia and racism. Through their actions terrorists have the apparent goal of adding fuel to the fire of rancor and fear, which presents a battle that must be fought not only through appropriate security measures but also from a cultural standpoint. This is yet another cultural and societal challenge that must be met and overcome in our cities, in our suburban areas, in our schools and also in our institutions with a diverse and greater understanding shared by all. The common good must be pursued in the face of threats of this nature, and partisan interests must be cast aside. Awareness of the seriousness of the situation is essential toward making timely decisions to benefit all citizens and safeguard our democracy. Public opinion will need explanations and effective communication of difficult decisions, some of which would probably have seemed unimaginable until only a few years ago. For this reason unity and awareness are necessary starting with politics and our institutions. The reaction in the wake of the events unfolding in Paris has been important, in particular the dramatic and collective raising of consciousness in the face of a multiform and ruthless enemy intent on changing our lifestyle and habits and instilling in us the fear that each moment of our existence might be at risk.

Daesh has launched a war against us on three fronts; it is societal, cultural, and also military and political. We must keep these three battlegrounds in mind with the understanding that the war cannot be won in our cities alone: it must also be fought at its source. Europe can do more to confront and defeat Daesh's threat. The time has come to set aside fears and the national selfishness that clamorously emerged during the humanitarian crisis of Syrian refugees in 2015 in order to create a united front, together with the Atlantic Alliance countries, our partners on the southern shores of the Mediterranean and the Islamic countries that have been hit and threatened harder than us by Daesh. In this way we can overcome the challenge that lies before us and guarantee the future for the countries that are currently overwhelmed by civil war and terrorism. A European strategy is needed for our common security and also for the Mediterranean area and its development.

This publication, which takes its cue from a collection of articles published by the journal "Italianieuropei" in July 2015, includes essays

by distinguished European and extra-European experts on the subject of jihadist-inspired international terrorism and its many facets and forms, its history and its evolution to the rise of Daesh. It aims to offer a contribution to the European political dimension in order to devise a shared strategy to confront and defeat jihadist terrorism. This volume, whose authors we wish to thank, also offers a contribution toward defeating this challenge on the level of understanding and culture. Following the attack in Paris on November 13, 2015 and the resulting commotion, fear and anger that it triggered throughout the continent, Europe will have to emerge more unified. Certainly in the wake of the attack and, regrettably, amidst the fear that our enemy might carry out others, political Europe cannot surrender and must meet this challenge courageously. It is essential that we heighten attention and awareness and deepen our examination and understanding of the enemy not only to achieve military victory but also to assert, in this battle, the guiding principles of democracy by defending our security and the freedom of millions of European citizens.



PART I

**ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION  
OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM:  
FROM AFGHANISTAN TO LIBYA**







# FROM THE AFGHAN RESISTANCE TO ABBOTTABAD: THIRTY YEARS OF AL-QAEDAISM

*Elisa Giunchi*

*It is now well known that the roots of al-Qaeda date back to the Afghan revolt against Soviet occupation and to the aid given to the mujahideen in the 1980s by the US and its allies. In the ensuing decade the organisation broadened its goals and diversified its financing and means of fighting through a network of affiliated groups. The profile of al-Qaeda recruits has also gradually changed. In recent years, al-Qaeda has progressively lost support and broken apart as a result of its lack of a constructive vision and of any prospect of statehood, and its increasing internal discord. The Islamic State has taken its place in its embodiment of jihadist ideals. By proclaiming the emergence of the caliphate, it has transformed what had been for al-Qaeda a generic reference into a powerful means of recruiting.*

## **Origins**

The origins of al-Qaeda date back to the 1980s, when funding from the Gulf countries and the complicity of the West allowed tens of thousands of Muslim volunteers from various countries to travel to north-west Pakistan in order to fight against the Soviets, which had invaded Afghanistan in 1979. In Peshawar and the surrounding area, volunteers were trained by Pakistani secret services so that they could fight beside those

*mujahideen* factions that were ideologically closer to their sponsors in the region, first among them Hezb-e-Islami. The more moderate factions or those not ideologically motivated were marginalised; others, like the Maoist movement, were decimated by a twofold repression at the hands of Kabul and the Islamist *mujahideen*.

The Afghan resistance, which was divided into an assortment of groups according to ideological, tribal and ethnic affiliations, had begun at the end of 1978 with support from Islamabad. In the summer of 1979, Afghan *mujahideen* had also begun to take advantage of non-military assistance from the United States through a secret programme authorised by President Carter in April of that year, eight months prior to the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR. The United States, deeply concerned about the revolt against the Shah in Iran, hoped to weaken the government of the communist and pro-Soviet PDPA (the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan), which had gained power in Kabul in 1978 with a coup d'état and a platform of radical reforms. It was a dangerous strategy, since the support to the *mujahideen* could potentially provoke an armed intervention by the Soviets. However, according to the National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and other representatives from the National Security Council and the CIA, "drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap" could have the effect of weakening them economically and hurting their image, consequently compromising their appeal, above all in the event of a conflict lasting "for a sufficiently long period".<sup>1</sup> This is exactly what happened.

According to American rhetoric, in December 1979 the Red Army's entrance into Kabul, after the victorious Iranian revolution, transformed Afghanistan into an "offensive wedge" for the Soviets<sup>2</sup> that threatened the West's "vital interests" in the Middle East. Inevitably, American support for the *mujahideen* became military in nature: in the following decade the United States and their European and Arab allies supplied the *mujahideen* with billions dollars' worth of arms. The weapons, initially Soviet-manufactured in order to cover up American involvement, were purchased from several countries and transported by the CIA to the province of Sindh. There they were taken by the Pakistani secret services, who distributed them in Peshawar to *mujahideen* factions that were recognised by Islamabad. As noted previously, Hezb-e-Islami, the most fanatic

of the factions, gained the greatest benefit from this situation. The group had the advantage of being tied to Jamaat-e-Islami – an Islamist party allied with President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan – and of being in favour among the Saudis, who had been an important sponsor of Pakistan since the 1970s. Several declassified documents show that American authorities were aware that Hezb was a radical party and strongly anti-Western. However, the agreement between the United States and Pakistan, which was vital to the success of the operation, was that Zia's government would decide how to distribute the weapons. Ignoring Pakistani priorities was not possible: its cooperation was key to success.

Between 1980 and 1990, Saudi Arabia, for its part, transferred approximately 4 billion dollars solely in official aid,<sup>3</sup> which arrived through an account in Switzerland controlled by the CIA and was used in order to purchase arms in the international market. Fuelling the resistance were also private contributions, money collected from mosques, and proceeds from *Shari'a* compliant finance. Around 1983 the Saudis began to pay for travel and lodging for militants from the Arab world and (though to a lesser degree) from other areas heading to Peshawar in order to take part in the jihad. There, in what Gilles Kepel called the *bouillon de culture* of al-Qaeda, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a Palestinian supporter of global jihad, and Osama Bin Laden, who had been his student at the University of Jeddah, founded the Maktab al-Khidmat (MAK) around 1984. The organisation provided meals, lodging and training for volunteers. Belonging to a rich Saudi family of Yemeni origin, Bin Laden also contributed his own personal funds to the Maktab. Thanks to his important ties, Bin Laden managed to gain additional financing for a cause that was widely shared in the Gulf and in areas connected to the Gulf: what was at stake was not only driving back Soviet aggression directed at a Muslim nation but also spreading Wahhabism throughout the world. This continued an enterprise begun by Riyadh in the 1960s through a variety of means, from the direct financing to governments to the construction of mosques and the circulation of Wahhabi texts.

The spread of Wahhabism (or Salafism, as nowadays the two currents are indistinguishable) had coincided with the growth of Islamic unrest in the cities of Middle Eastern countries at a time when Nasserism was losing favour. Islamism and Wahhabism shared some elements, like

the dichotomous vision of the world, the desire to return to a former idealised Islam, and the plan of applying *Shari'a*. The latter was understood as a strictly normative system resulting from a literalist exegesis of the primary sources of Islam and was meant, against any historical experience, to apply to every aspect of the public and private life of believers. However, in the domesticated form typical of the Saudi religious establishment, Wahhabism was politically quietist, while Islamism had the objective of subverting the status quo at the national level (with the removal of “impious” governments) and at the international level. In the MAK and then in al-Qaeda the anti-establishment activism of Islamism, which assimilates the themes and language of anti-imperialism, and the moral rigour and literalism of Wahhabism merged.

### **Developments in the 1990s**

With the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the central reason of MAK had been achieved. Before leaving the country in 1989, Bin Laden transformed it into al-Qaeda (meaning “the Base”), which, according to several scholars,<sup>4</sup> owed its name to a database containing the names and contacts of militants who had poured into Peshawar. These jihadists could then be reactivated elsewhere, in other jihads. Many “Afghan Arabs” returned to their countries of origin, fomenting violence against reformist intellectuals, Western tourists, government employees. This was the case with Egypt and Algeria, which experienced violence throughout most part of the 1990s. Militants also travelled elsewhere, including Kashmir, Chechnya, and Bosnia, in order to overturn “impious” governments or chase away occupying forces. Afghanistan, in the meantime, with its agricultural economy mostly destroyed as a result of Soviet bombing, fell into a civil war between rival groups of *mujahideen*. The descent of the country into chaos was greeted with disinterest by the Western powers, which by then had won the Cold War, and by Osama Bin Laden, who had won the jihad against the Soviets.

The billionaire returned to Saudi Arabia and in 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened Riyadh, he offered “his own” militants to the Kingdom. King Fahd preferred to rely on American military forces, causing a deep rift between the two: from that moment

onwards, Bin Laden became extremely critical of the Saudi royal family, accusing them of innovation (*bid'a*), which in Wahhabi discourse is substantially equivalent to apostasy. In 1992, he was expelled and took refuge in Sudan, where he attracted other militants and organised terrorist attacks in the Middle East. In 1996, he was expelled from Sudan due to mounting pressure from the United States and returned to Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban, which had emerged from the Pakistani madrassas in order to re-establish order and impose *Shari'a* in Afghanistan. Already that summer, Bin Laden issued his first *fatwa* against the West: the "Declaration of jihad against Americans occupying the land of the two holy places". In 1998, the year marking attacks on American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, Bin Laden repeated his call to strike the United States and its allies in a new *fatwa*, which was followed in subsequent years by similar announcements. This time, however, the target was expanded to include not only US troops on Saudi land but all Americans and their allies, wherever they were, until the Masjid al-Aqsa (the main mosque in Jerusalem) and the Masjid al-Haram (in Mecca) could be liberated. The 1998 *fatwa* bore the signature not only of Bin Laden but also of other jihadists of different nationalities; among them was Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor who had led the Egyptian Islamic jihad and who became Bin Laden's right-hand man.

Financial support for al-Qaeda had in the meantime become more diversified, deriving increasingly from a large variety of investment schemes and business activities. Financial globalisation contributed to the globalisation of al-Qaeda, though the latter also relied on traditional methods, such as *hawala*, which cannot be easily traced. Al-Qaeda, like lesser organisations in other parts of the world – from the Taliban to al-Shabaab – also developed ties with organised crime in the 1990s in an increasingly give-and-take relationship.

The southern and south-eastern areas of Afghanistan, in the meantime, became the primary operating base of the al-Qaeda network, which rewarded the Taliban through generous financial backing that allowed the group to free itself from the exclusive protection of Pakistan. In Afghanistan militants trained by al-Qaeda and originating from a number of regions across the globe, including Chechnya, Xinjiang, and the Philippines, developed ties with like-minded organisations, and planned

attacks targeting the West. In 1993 a first attempt at striking the United States had failed: Ramzi Yusef, a Kuwaiti of Pakistani origin, who had earned an engineering degree in Wales, attempted to blow up the World Trade Center. Eight years later, on September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center was once again targeted; three airplanes struck the Twin Towers and the Pentagon while a fourth crashed in Pennsylvania, setting in motion operation Enduring Freedom a month later.

### **Al-Qaeda's ideology**

Globalisation, which has accelerated since the end of the bipolar international system, has allowed al-Qaeda to spread its ideas, form alliances with local groups, transfer funds, and communicate through a transnational network that is sophisticated and, in some ways, impenetrable. It is primarily through the internet that the writings of Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have spread. They consist of proclamations, interviews, treatises, and *fatwas* that reveal an evolution of the notion of the enemy. In an initial phase, the enemy, as pointed out previously, is the American on Saudi soil; then the enemy becomes all Americans and their allies, including civilians, who by voting and paying taxes share the responsibility for their countries' foreign policy choices. Killing civilians is justified according to the principle of reciprocity,<sup>5</sup> which is unprecedented in classical political doctrine and even runs counter to the Qur'an. This principle has also been cited by the Islamic State in the claiming of responsibility for the recent attacks in Paris.

Al-Qaeda's writings express a variety of claims: the goal of establishing an Islamic state where *Shari'a* would be applied is accompanied by a number of concerns. These include injustices suffered in Palestine, Kashmir, and Chechnya; environmental policies and consumerism of the West; despotic nature of Muslim governments; and the general malaise produced by global systems of government that impose themselves culturally through the spread of immorality and godlessness beneath the cloak of human rights and the United Nations.<sup>6</sup>

Close examination of the texts reveals differences in style and, in part, in content in accordance with the target audiences. In statements addressed to the West, Bin Laden emphasises that the motive for the

confrontation with the West is essentially political and defensive in nature: revenge is sought for “terrorist acts” perpetrated by the West, and Muslim territory occupied by infidels must be re-conquered. In writings addressed to Muslims, both Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri underline the importance of an offensive jihad as a religious duty: it is necessary to fight the West because it is faithless, not simply because it occupies Muslim lands and murders Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, there is no room for compromise, nor is any form of coexistence with the infidel envisaged, contrary to well-established principles of Islamic classic doctrine. Influenced by Qutb and subsequent activists, al-Qaeda’s jihad is an all-out, unremitting fight devoid of the limits and rules of *bellum iustum* formulated in the medieval period. It is aimed at all that goes against divine will, including democracy. Echoing the words of Abdul al-A’la Mawdudi, who is the jihadists’ privileged point of reference along with Qutb, al-Zawahiri writes: “Whoever agrees [to give] the rights of legislation to anyone else instead of Allah makes him Allah’s equal in regard to the sovereignty of law-giving. And whoever makes another equal to Allah by giving him the sovereign rights is surely an infidel”.<sup>8</sup> However, while Mawdudi had participated in the electoral process in Pakistan, like other ideologically similar movements ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Ennahda, for al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden the rejection of participatory democracy is absolute inasmuch as it violates not only the principle of divine sovereignty but also God-given religious and gender distinctions and constitutes a mere imitation of the infidel. Nationalism is also accused of being alien to divine will, as it is based on ethno-linguistic identity, although al-Qaeda’s writings do betray a sense of Arab pride in several instances.

## **The militants**

Despite al-Qaeda’s criticism directed at the perverse aspects of globalisation, the transnational jihadism that took shape in the 1980s is in many ways its product. Jihadists who joined al-Qaeda came from “modern”, urban areas, in which cultural confusion and socioeconomic disparities are more pronounced. They were familiar with the West (often through direct experience) and had transnational families and lives. They were

citizens of the world yet belonged to no country. They were uprooted, without any clear cultural affiliation, and alienated. They did not identify with their parents' Islam, which was watered-down by tradition and perceived as not "modern", nor did they identify with the "official", state-sponsored version of Islam.

Since the 1990s, jihadist ideas have also attracted increasing numbers of radicalised young individuals living in Europe who are second-generation Muslims and, more recently, converts. Both have no personal history of devotion or religious activism and are disaffected by their parents' culture and confused by contradicting messages. Lacking nuances, Salafi Islam is a simple form of Islam that rejects classic Islam's pluralism and bases itself on selected elements of the primary sources (the Qur'an and the prophetic Sunnah), which are decontextualised and read literally. It is, therefore, an easily to manage tool-kit that attracts individuals with limited knowledge of Islam and in need of a normative system that, contrary to classic Islam, is structurally rigid and lacks nuances and spirituality. Salafi Islam also provides a grand narrative and a strong identity that unites all the other identities while also submerging them.

## **After 9/11**

As operation Enduring Freedom began in October 2001, al-Qaeda's leadership sought refuge in the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), tribal areas adjacent to the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along the Afghan-Pakistani border. New attacks were devised here even if the planning became more decentralised. With greater frequency, al-Qaeda supplied funds and weapons to local groups that not only offered "manpower" to carry out attacks but also helped to identify specific targets and particular operational strategies. It became increasingly difficult to distinguish one organisation from the other, and it was not uncommon for a group to declare its affiliation with al-Qaeda in order to gain greater prestige and financing even though its short-term goals were quite different. A prime example is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In 2004, he established al-Qaeda in Iraq with the approval of Bin Laden, but their strategic alliance began to experience difficulty soon after, when al-Zarqawi



appeared interested in fighting the Shiites more than in striking the “far enemy”, the al-Qaeda leadership’s top priority.

In 2011, Bin Laden was killed by American special forces in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad. But even before then al-Qaeda was no longer able to impose its own strategic goal (the pre-eminence of attacking the “far enemy”) on its affiliate organisations and had begun to break down into autonomous cells, while other groups showed a greater capacity to attract militants. These groups either had closer ties to local groups and responded to local grievances, as is the case with the Islamic State, or were able to offer goods and services to the population, as with Hamas and Hezbollah. Al-Qaeda, for its part, has no territorial control and seeks consensus only on an ideological level, without concern for the distribution of welfare and order. The organisation has no institutional blueprint that goes beyond perpetuating violence and upheaval. The writings of Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri include mention of the goal of creating “Islamic states”, as do Qutb and Mawdudi, who wished to establish a political entity within the existing borders of the nation-state, but political and institutional details in this regard are absent. The caliphate, which is not even mentioned in the *fatwas* of 1996 and 1998, appears as a far-away and barely sketched-out ideal. It is presumed to develop from the expansion and union of a number of Islamic states, but nothing is mentioned concerning its specific structure. The call for the caliphate becomes more frequent only after the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Like the liberation of Palestine, which is mentioned for the first time in the 1998 *fatwa*, the call for the caliphate seems part of a strategy aimed at gaining greater consensus and attracting recruits, but remains in the background.

In 2013, al-Qaeda’s vague call for a caliphate was transformed into a reality by al-Baghdadi, who proclaimed the emergence of a supranational entity that eliminates the boundaries imposed by colonial powers, thus evoking a long-desired union that had nominally existed until the thirteenth century. Besides evoking a glorious past and legitimising al-Baghdadi’s absolute power, the caliphate provides a real opportunity for applying *Shari’a* to every aspect of private and public life, thus actualising an objective that has gained popularity all over the Muslim world since the 1990s as a panacea for all ills. By controlling a specific territory, IS can also appeal much more than al-Qaeda ever did to mil-

itants yearning for a new world to create from scratch and a new self. At the same time, IS pursues a fight against both the nearby enemy, such as Assad, al-Maliki, and the Shiites, and the far enemy, the West, thus coalescing different strands that had uneasily coexisted until then within the jihadi movement.

## NOTES

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- 5 J. Millar, *Interview with Bin Laden*, PBS, May 1998, available on-line at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html).
- 6 Bin Laden's open letter *Why We Are Fighting You*, written in 2002, is paradigmatic. It may be found in R. Ibrahim, *The Al Qaeda Reader*, Doubleday, New York 2007, pp. 197-208.
- 7 See, for example, O. Bin Laden, *Moderate Islam Is a Prostration to the West*, in R. Ibrahim, *Works Cited*, in particular p. 32.
- 8 See the excerpt from al-Zawahiri's *The Bitter Harvest: The Brotherhood in Sixty Years*, which may be found in *Sharia and Democracy*, in R. Ibrahim, *Works Cited*, p. 134.



# FROM TERRORIST GROUP TO SELF-PROCLAIMED STATE: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF IS

Andrea Plebani

*Even if it seems that the Islamic State became headline news only recently, its roots run deeper in the transformations and mergers that have involved jihadist groups active in Iraq since the occupation by international coalition forces in 2003. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, takes the “merit” for having launched a project originally devised by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He managed to tap into the widespread discontent among Iraq’s Sunni population in the face of Nouri al-Maliki’s Shia-led government and subsequently lead Daesh forces to a series of considerable military victories, which allowed him to expand his control over increasingly larger areas of Iraq and Syria. However, compared to his predecessors and other jihadist organisations, the self-proclaimed caliph raised the stakes by aiming to reconstruct the caliphate not in the distant future but rather “here and now”.*

In 2014 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reclaimed the position of caliph that had been vacant since 1924. The Iraqi militant had rapidly climbed the ladder within the jihadist scene despite being relatively unknown outside academic and security circles. At the same time the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) came into being, which, according to its supporters, was destined to unite the entire *ummah* under its banner. As had been the case seven years earlier on the event of the proclamation of the

Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the move was received with suspicion and an ill-concealed embarrassment not only within the Middle Eastern governments but also within the same jihadist circles. The governments felt once again obliged to distance themselves from seemingly medieval and obscurantist declarations while the jihadist groups, who had the rebirth of the caliphate as one of their primary goals, were divided concerning its legitimacy, the correctness of its method of operation, and its actual effectiveness. This was the case even though the proclamation of IS had been preceded by a rapid rise that over little more than a year allowed al-Baghdadi to broaden his sphere of influence in an area that ranged from north-eastern Syria to middle-western Iraq, continued to an occupied Mosul, and then spread rapidly through the Nineveh Plains and the Sunni-Arab heartland of Iraq. Once again the strength of the jihadist cohorts had been widely underestimated, which resulted in consequences greatly more dramatic than those initially expected. Analysts had predicted a rapid breakdown due to internal divisions or an inability to manage large and complex territories, but they were forced to change their minds. The same holds true for strategists (or, more precisely, political decision-makers) from the international anti-IS coalition who had gambled on pairing airstrikes with (local) boots on the ground, even though both then and now it remains unclear whose “boots” are actually involved.

Despite the losses suffered in Kobane, Tal Abyad, Tikrit, Sinjar and Ramadi the Islamic State has demonstrated not only an ability to take punches but also a capacity to maintain over time concentrated attacks on several fronts. This is shown by victories obtained in 2015 in Ramadi, the “capital” of the Iraqi governorate in al-Anbar, and in Palmyra, one of the last strongholds of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in central Syria and a city known across the globe for its priceless archaeological heritage.

The significance and particular nature of the threat posed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State cannot be understood through analysis of the present situation, which would prove insufficient. A thorough examination of its history is indeed necessary in order to connect the dots that began in Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, passed through al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and led to the present configuration of the movement.

## The origins of IS

The origins of IS are inextricably linked to the figure of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist who sadly gained fame as the first to slice the throats of westerners dressed in orange jumpsuits (an obvious reference to Guantanamo detainees) and then post videos of the executions on the web. A number of peregrinations had led him to tread the most important battlefields of last century's "armed jihad" before arriving in Iraq, which was occupied in 2003 by international coalition forces. There he found fertile ground to turn his organisation into one of the most important reference points of the Iraqi insurrection. Despite its reduced size and its composition of predominantly foreign fighters, the group named Tawhid wa-l-Jihad reached its goal thanks to a series of attacks that were highly symbolic and designed to increase media exposure. In this way the group gained a reputation that did not go unnoticed in the eyes of the global jihadist community. Osama Bin Laden himself was even led to reconsider his initial uncertainty towards al-Zarqawi, eventually accepting his vow of loyalty and placing him at the head of the fledgling al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004. It was a marriage of convenience that, as will be seen, would have profound repercussions not only within the al-Qaeda network but also throughout the entire jihadist community. Through its association with al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda was able to return to fight the American enemy just two years after the events of September 11 by co-opting an inconvenient, though undeniably charismatic, leader; on the other hand, despite having to submit to the supervision of al-Qaeda, the Jordanian terrorist gained resources, men, and, above all, the essential legitimacy for the continuation of his strategy.<sup>1</sup> After successfully holding in check the American-led international coalition as well as the nascent Iraqi security forces and the increasingly important Shiite militias, AQI fell into a gradual yet evident state of decline that brought it to the brink of an abyss beginning in 2006. The elimination of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (June 2006) and the loss in the battle for Baghdad had been followed by the decisive change of mind of the formerly allied Sunni Arabs, who had reunited beneath the emblems of the Awakening Councils (*Sahwa*).<sup>2</sup> However, the greatest scars were left, above all, by the collapse of the Islamic State proclaimed in Iraq in 2007. Just three years after its proclamation, ISI had not only suffered a military

loss but also proven incapable of holding onto territory, of creating an administration equipped to provide services for its people, and of adequately representing its interests. In 2010 ISI was a shadow of the movement that had emerged under the leadership of al-Zarqawi, and, while far from annihilated, it remained in the north-west of the country, specifically in Mosul, the city that would leave an indelible mark on its destiny.<sup>3</sup>

## **The rebirth of ISI**

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged from this backdrop. After a few months only, he succeeded in re-establishing ISI from its roots by rebuilding the union between leaders and militants, which had disappeared after the death of al-Zarqawi. Above all, he managed to reposition his own organisation in such a way as to tap into the growing dissatisfaction within the Iraqi Sunni Arab community and to take advantage as best he could of the volatility in the entire region.

In the area of internal affairs, the wave of sectarian politics of Nouri al-Maliki's administration<sup>4</sup> allowed ISI to recover part of its lost space of manoeuvre and to begin a destabilising campaign that would result in its introduction once again as the only competitor capable of confronting Baghdad's sectarian administration. In a period of just a few months the group once again managed to work its way into the country, relying ultimately on those who had ended up identifying al-Maliki as their main enemy. In order to do this, ISI did not limit itself to increasing attacks in the capital and the rest of the territory but rather sought the support of those who had lost everything following the regime change while also targeting the establishment of the new Shiite-led Iraq. It is principally from this perspective that one must interpret the operations aimed at liberating thousands of detainees locked up in the country's prisons and, above all, gaining the support of hundreds of former officials from Saddam Hussein's military, who quickly became the backbone of the movement's operative system.<sup>5</sup>

If much of al-Baghdadi's merit lies in his achievement of bringing ISI back within the Iraq's Sunni Arab community in Iraq (or, at very least, of once again gaining the opportunity to operate in its areas of traditional influence), his greatest success is certainly tied to his movement's

incredible rise to power recorded in Syria. Within this landscape Abu Muhammad al-Julani was positioned as the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), a group of guerrillas that would quite quickly become the spearhead of the opposition against Bashar al-Assad. This was made possible thanks to the remarkable operational ability of the members of JaN, support from ISI, but also the group's close attention to building relationships with the many components of the Syrian social system. Far from repeating ISI's errors, which had ultimately tarnished the name of the movement in Iraq, Jabhat al-Nusra dedicated enormous resources towards winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population by distributing food and basic goods, imposing a law and order system aimed at stopping crime (petty crime in particular), and establishing collaborative relationships with the most influential tribal and religious leaders. These factors came into play when Washington decided to include the movement in its list of terrorist groups. This decision was heavily criticised by many Syrians and also by several Syrian opposition forces, which considered JaN an essential part of the fight against Assad's regime.

### **From ISI to ISIS and then to the proclamation of the Islamic State**

ISI's sustained development reached a crucial stage in April 2013, when al-Baghdadi proclaimed that Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq would join forces to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).<sup>6</sup> The move created a profound rift not only with the leadership of JaN but also with al-Qaeda and the various forces of the Syrian insurrection. In fact, al-Baghdadi's declaration included a strategic vision that was antithetical to the one shared by the groups that had fought on the Syrian soil up to that time. The Iraqi leader was aiming not to overthrow al-Assad or to give life to a "new Syria", but rather to mould a supranational entity that would redefine the entire geography of the Middle East by eliminating states like Iraq and Syria, which were considered nothing more than vestiges of the region's colonial past. In this way, he placed ISIS on a much higher level compared to the other insurgents, who were no longer seen as equal partners (along the same lines as the model adopted by JaN) but were forced to choose between joining the new Islamic State or being considered as an enemy. These events led to the definitive fracture not



only between Daesh<sup>7</sup> and al-Qaeda but also with the majority of Syrian opposition forces, which became the first victims of al-Baghdadi's new strategy. Aside from a series of victories by the Syrian opposition forces at the end of 2013 in north-west Syria, the influence of ISIS spread like wildfire after only a few months without encountering the least bit of resistance in its path. At the outset of 2014, Daesh's influence extended from Raqqa all the way to Syria's northern and eastern provinces, stretching from there to the heart of Sunni Arab Iraq, especially in the provinces of Nineveh and al-Anbar as well as in Salah al-Din, Diyala and even the capital region.<sup>8</sup>

While attention was focused on Baghdad, ISIS once again demonstrated its military wherewithal by concealing its real goal: Mosul. The heart of Sunni Iraq as well as the largest metropolitan area in the north of the country, Mosul had been a central focus of the group's strategy for several years as well as a safe haven from 2007 to 2010. ISIS militants exploited the presence of active cells in the city, the unpreparedness of the Iraqi security forces, and the atmosphere of terror that the group had knowingly created over the years, which allowed them to occupy the city in June 2014 and push away divisions of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) deployed there to protect the city. The militants succeeded despite an enormous disparity in terms of numbers and operations, and the considerable gains included not only huge financial resources and military provisions but also a popularity deemed unimaginable up to then (at least within the most radical jihadist circles). Bolstered by this success, al-Baghdadi finally managed to proclaim the birth of an Islamic State, which aimed at including not just a specific portion of the *Dar al-Islam* but rather the entire Islamic community. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared, the long-awaited and strongly desired reestablishment of the caliphate had finally become a reality: "O Muslims everywhere, (...). Raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and *khilafa*, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership".<sup>9</sup>

### **Remaining and expanding. A motto that must give pause for reflection**

After two years since its founding, it appears clear how the self-proclaimed Islamic State's motto, "Baqiya wa Tatamaddad" (remaining and

expanding), embodies the quintessence of a movement that has proven capable of openly challenging opponents not only on the battlefield but also in terms of ideology. In fact, the victories alone do not play the most critical role in the creation of the legend or in the dramatic rise of the Islamic State; equally important and influential is its blueprint of a society (according to its supporters) modelled after ancient Medina, the city of the prophet. However, the firm beliefs of the self-declared caliph (and those of his supporters) appear unaffected by the fact that these results were obtained through massacres of innocent individuals and the perpetration of crimes expressly forbidden by an Islamic tradition that has developed over hundreds of years. The very fact that we are more and more forced to distinguish between, on the one hand, a sort of jihadist wing that appears almost moderate in light of the horrors perpetrated by Daesh and, on the other, a reality in which there are no limits to atrocities represents a paradox that can only be overcome through a paradigm shift. The international community, therefore, must consider its responsibility in the face of a menace that is striking not only one of the most important areas in the Middle East but also the entire international landscape.

It was once thought the jihadist threat could be contained in “far-off lands”, like Afghanistan. This strategy was unsuccessful then, and it is unlikely that it will work now that the enemy is much closer to our borders and actively involved in a fight that knows no geographical or moral limits.

## NOTES

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- 3 A. Plebani, *Ninawa Province: Al-Qa'ida's Remaining Stronghold*, in "CTC Sentinel", 1/2010, available on-line at [www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ninawa-province-al-qaida%E2%80%99s-remaining-stronghold](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ninawa-province-al-qaida%E2%80%99s-remaining-stronghold).
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- 6 The acronym refers to *al-Sham*, the term meaning the Levant in Arabic.
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- 9 A. al-Baghdadi, *A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan*, extract from *Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action*, SITE Intelligence Group, July 1, 2014, available on-line at [news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html](http://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html).



# THE ORIGINS AND AFFILIATIONS OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN AFRICA

Alessandra Sasso

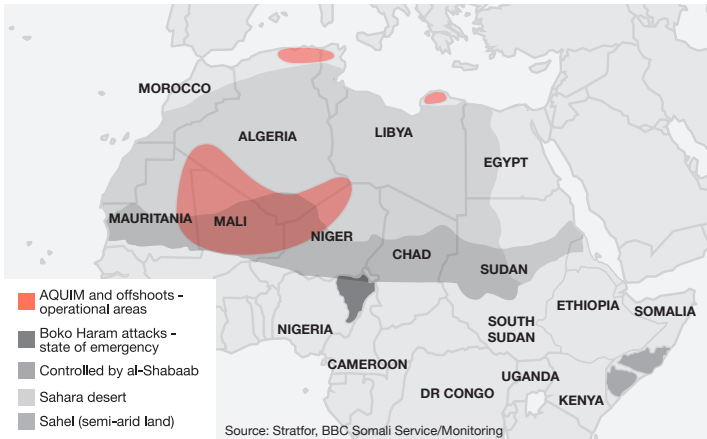
*The panorama of terrorist groups of Islamic origin in the African continent is rather varied and consists of a series of Qaedist-inspired organisations, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or others that have sworn loyalty to the Islamic State, like Boko Haram in Nigeria. Despite their common goal of strict enforcement of Shari'a in controlled territories, their affiliation, the development of specific tactics, and the increasingly sensational nature of public violence adopted from IS, these organisations do not depend on centralised leadership and are integrated for the most part in regional dynamics. The danger is, however, not diminished.*

The fluid nature of Qaedist-inspired groups and the difficulty involved in defining the core of the original movement<sup>1</sup> led the American President Barack Obama to affirm that the primary threat represented by the Qaedist movement “comes from decentralised al-Qaeda affiliates and extremists, many with agendas focused in the countries where they operate”.<sup>2</sup> In recent years the terrorist group, guided once by Osama Bin Laden and led now by Ayman al-Zawahiri, has slowly branched out, moving from a more vertical organisation to include a more horizontal, autonomous, and decentralised structure.<sup>3</sup> Africa is undoubtedly the theatre for expansion of some of these Qaedist-influenced groups, which are increasing the range of their activities to an extent that they are no

longer perceived as an exclusively regional threat. Without a doubt the Islamic State is exercising influence over these groups in the areas of organisation and communication, raising the threat to a more serious level.

The historical and social events that have led to the development and expansion of integralist Islamic groups on the African continent are markedly different, just like some of the terrorist groups operating there: al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram, to name only a few.

### Islamist militant groups and their areas of influence in Africa



### Al-Shabaab's Somalia within the geopolitical game in the Horn of Africa

Somalia is one of the world's poorest countries and the setting for a bloody civil war that erupted in the beginning of the 1990s after the fall of Mohammed Siad Barre's dictatorship and also as a result of the Somali elite's inability to form a new government. The ensuing instability provoked a restructuring of Somali society in clans, which became a reference point for the population given the lack of governmental authority capable of exercising control over the region. Vying for the position of dominance held by various "warlords" were various Islam-

ic tribunals present in the capital Mogadishu, which joined together to form the so-called Islamic Courts Union (ICU). In 2006 the ICU suffered a defeat at the hands of the transitional federal government, which was supported by various Somali clans, and thanks to Ethiopian military operations. It was at that time, also as a result of Ethiopian intervention, that the al-Shabaab fundamentalist group under the command of Abu Zubair gained popularity and radicalised its activity, implementing strict enforcement of *Shari'a*. Through a series of systematic guerrilla operations al-Shabaab managed to impose its control over vast strategic areas in central and northern Somalia, supporting itself thanks to access to Somali ports, the practise of piracy, and the taking of hostages, not to mention the perpetration of predatory and criminal activities carried out in the area. Although al-Shabaab's activity was initially concentrated in Somali territory, the movement began to draw progressively closer to al-Qaeda<sup>4</sup> to the point of professing its loyalty in 2012 to the movement founded by Osama Bin Laden<sup>5</sup> and invoking a jihad in the entire region of the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup>

In 2010 an attack carried out by al-Shabaab in Uganda ushered in a new season in the Somali terrorists' action plan, initiating a series of attacks aimed at countries that provided forces as part of the peacekeeping efforts of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

Their goal involves action designed to disrupt and weaken the countries involved in the fight for Somali liberation and, as a result, a reduction of pressure in Somalia's internal conflict.<sup>7</sup> A favourite target is nearby Kenya, which is guilty of offering support in the fight against the movement, is easily accessible, and counts on a large presence of foreigners. The most recent and visible attack was on the campus of Garissa University, which had a death toll of nearly 150 people.<sup>8</sup> The method of attack differs slightly from those implemented previously, which implies that al-Shabaab may be adopting a new communication strategy, ultimately seeking greater international visibility in the wake of media promotion and sensationalised violence sponsored by the Islamic State. However, al-Shabaab still holds firm control over some areas of Somalia and continues to pose a serious threat. This is the case even though the offensive strategy carried out by AMISOM and Somali forces helped them gain ground and also despite a leadership dispute within

the movement, in which a pan-Somali current, which deems the centrality of the clans as fundamentally important, runs counter to a trend that is more supportive of the group's ties with al-Qaeda and increasingly oriented toward the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup> The primary goal in combatting the movement, together with military operations aimed at reducing the threat represented by al-Shabaab and the fight against piracy, must be the development of a realistic political solution through the involvement of as many social constituencies as possible in order to support a process of legitimisation that is shared as much as possible.

### **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its sphere of influence in the Sahel: between regionalism and localism**

Evidence of phenomena tied to religious integralism in North Africa dates back to the Algerian civil war of the early 1990s, which erupted following the annulment of the parliamentary elections that would have offered victory to the Islamic Salvation Front. Arriving on the North African country's political scene were the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was led by Hassan Attab and born following conflicts within the GIA concerning tactical management of the group, whose goal was the institution of an Islamic state.<sup>10</sup> Its activities were concentrated in Algerian territory and were conceived to ensure as much support as possible among the local populations, with a particular focus on the fight against governmental, civil and military institutions. Between 2006 and 2007 the group merged with Osama Bin Laden's movement and changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), offering evidence of the broadening of its scope and targets on a more global scale. Both groups benefited from the union: the legitimacy gained by AQIM facilitated its efforts to expand and to recruit new combatants, while al-Qaeda broadened its sphere of formal influence in the eyes of the international community and also managed to gain access – at least symbolically – to a region close to Europe.<sup>11</sup> With the success of antiterrorist measures organised by the Algerian government, AQIM was forced to change the trajectory of its activities and expand its range into the Sahel region. Against this backdrop, the porous nature of border with Mali and the lack of widespread governmental control helped it to sur-

vive economically – through the practise of kidnapping and the trafficking of arms, cigarettes, motor vehicles and human beings – and to continue fighting. AQIM's ability to increase its sphere of influence in Mali can be examined in light of the particular relationship that it established with the Tuareg tribes in the north of the country, offering them concrete assistance during the 2012 insurrection against the central government that led to civil war and French intervention, support that was later exploited in order to exercise autonomous control over the territory.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring enabled extremist movements to appear once again on the North African scene, especially in Libya and Tunisia, where the void left in the wake of the fall of the Gaddafi and Ben Ali regimes created the preconditions for the successful infiltration and spread of integralism, and two groups called Ansar al-Sharia have since appeared. In Libya the outbreak of civil war led to the emergence of historical ethnic divisions, inciting a real confrontation between two opposed governments claiming to rule the country and supported by different tribal militias;<sup>12</sup> the Islamic State has found fertile ground to enter the fray as a third player in the conflict and gained control over the Libyan city of Sirte.<sup>13</sup>

Groups appearing on the scene in Mali are the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, Ansar al-Din and al-Qaeda of West Africa, a product of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Algerian national and presumed mastermind of the November 2015 attacks on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako. In the emergence of these movements and in the expansion of Daesh in the Maghreb a duality can be deciphered, which consists of the necessity to limit the range of the activities to local targets – a concern connected to each group's intrinsic nature – and the strategic interest of adhering to a more global project like the one promoted by the Islamic State.

Specific language and the trend toward sensational terrorist acts have been adopted from the Middle Eastern movement to such a degree that the Islamic State offers support in the form of money, trainers and fighters, giving life in terms of visibility to a mutually profitable process and increasing the level of threat.<sup>14</sup>

The response to jihadist expansion in the region should include firstly the local communities and the international community with the goal of creating stability and initiating a process of state-building and



law enforcement. This can be achieved by involving local communities and ethno-religious groups, reinforcing within them the role of moderate Islam, and filling the voids in power that have permitted the development of these groups.<sup>15</sup>

## **Boko Haram and Nigeria**

The extreme poverty of northern Nigeria and the impossibility of incisively gaining access to the process of governance led in 1998 to the development of Boko Haram, the Salafi-influenced extremist movement founded by Mohammed Yusuf.

Despite its objective of fighting in order to establish an Islamic state with a strict application of *Shari'a*, the group's activities were initially calm. Born in the northern region of Borno, the movement began to increase the intensity of its attacks in 2009. The re-election of the outgoing Christian president Goodluck Jonathan was the motivation for Boko Haram's radicalisation of its operation. The customary procedure established in Nigeria calls for alternating the presidency between Muslims and Christians, thus guaranteeing equal representation among social and religious factions. The re-election provoked a series of disorderly events in the northern region, which were quickly stifled by Nigerian police; this exacerbated the feeling of marginalisation and the perception of limited transparency in the management of the public sector suffered by the Muslim majority in the northern states.<sup>16</sup> Boko Haram's anti-government sentiment translated to violent attacks against institutions and, above all, civilians to the point of perpetrating outright massacres and seizing control of large expanses of land in the north of the country. The increased intensity of Boko Haram's activity led to terrorist activity even beyond the national borders, extending to countries such as Cameroon, Niger and Chad, which spurred the African Union to authorise a multinational offensive<sup>17</sup> in the territory under the influence of Boko Haram near the Nigerian borders. The group's activity is tenacious to the point of having forced the postponement by several weeks of the presidential elections that were originally scheduled for February 2015 and eventually won by the Muslim candidate from the All Progressives Congress, Muhammadu Buhari.

The Islamic State casts a threatening shadow: Boko Haram pledged its loyalty to the organisation on March 7, 2015, gaining considerable media coverage from the event and becoming part of the global jihadist network. However, despite its movement toward the brutal tactics and media propaganda typical of the Islamic State, there is no evidence of an effective cooperation between the two entities, thus limiting the union to a symbolic level. The landscape in which Boko Haram has developed does not allow for comparisons between this group and other Qaeda-inspired groups due to the fact that the group formed as a result of the phenomenon of social marginalisation linked to its territory, and this, indeed, is the symptom of a social disadvantage present in the northern regions of the country. The Nigerian system of government is solid, which is precisely why the battle against Boko Haram should be carried out through social inclusion, reinforcement of the political system, and the implementation of a law enforcement strategy, as well as through military intervention aimed at ensuring the safety of citizens and the restoration of public order.<sup>18</sup>

### **The nature of islamic fundamentalism in Africa**

Ethnic identity is still a pillar of the African system, and it often conditions political and social processes. The sense of belonging to diverse ethnic groups and the demise of socialism as a foundational ideology of protest movements after the end of the Cold War have pushed the disagreement of many Africans toward movements influenced by Islamic radicalism of Salafi origins.<sup>19</sup> A lowest common denominator may be found at the root of the spreading of jihadist movements: precarious economic conditions and ethnic and religious tensions are exacerbated by the lack of control, fragility, and flaws within governmental systems, which presents fertile ground for the emergence and development of these groups. Their adherence to organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State expands ideologically the range of these groups to a regional and global level. Aside from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and a group tied to the Islamic State present in Libya, whose actions can be framed in a transnational context, the other groups have, nonetheless, continued to focus their operations locally rather than within the greater *ummah*. In

their public expressions of unity and in their exploitation of the outward appearance of shared goals, there is no corresponding dependency on central leadership and no level of concrete and effective cooperation. Although the ethnic and social motivating forces that have brought about the development of these groups are different from the impulses that led to the establishment of the caliphate, one must not underestimate the ideological influence of the Islamic State on these groups thanks to the widespread exposure of its strategy of inflicting terror.

The problem concerning the spread of Islamic terrorism in Africa is far from being solved and requires medium- and long-term investments. In order to do so, the engagement of governmental, ethnic and social stakeholders is essential, and the international community must offer support through diplomatic means and the promotion of greater social inclusion, with the aim of creating political stability and reinforcing governmental systems.

*The views and opinions expressed herein are entirely those of the author.*

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# LIBYA, DAESH ON EUROPE'S DOORSTEP

*Kader A. Abderrahim*

*In February 2011, France and the UK decided to get rid of Colonel Gaddafi and launched a military campaign to bring about the fall of the Libyan dictator and the destabilisation of the Sahel and the Maghreb. The Islamic State (IS) found new territory to conquer. It was a predictable manoeuvre in view of the deterioration of the political and security situation in Libya. IS established itself on the ruins of a country that had itself also been the target of a western military intervention. Now present in the Mashreq, the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, IS was formed in 2006, against the background of the chaos in Iraq, resulting from the American military operation in 2003. Within a few months, the Islamic State became the most powerful and feared of terrorist organisations. Since the taking of Mosul in the summer of 2014, IS has continued to make territorial and military advances.*

## **Daesh's strategy**

The break-up of Libya was a stroke of luck for Daesh, which managed to unite under its banner ex-Gaddafites, Islamists, soldiers, and of course foreign fighters. IS extends its influence by regionalising conflicts and waging proxy wars. In the case of Libya, Daesh took advantage of clan rivalries, and rekindled tensions in the Sahelian band. In the face of weak

states and fragile institutions, the challenge was easy and the outcome guaranteed. Mali, Chad, Cameroon, Sudan, Tunisia, the Central African Republic and Nigeria: the list of countries neighbouring Libya affected by attacks by the jihadist organisation continued to grow. Throughout 2015, Daesh continued to advance and carry out operations on Libyan territory or in its neighbouring countries. One of them, Tunisia, a democracy undergoing consolidation, experienced three attacks. Moreover, Daesh was careful to strengthen the bastions it occupied before embarking on new conquests. Daesh took control of Sirte, home city of Muammar Gaddafi, has a strong presence in Derna in the east, and occupies areas of Benghazi. Its presence on the Mediterranean coast is linked to strategic and practical concerns. It serves as a reminder to Europe that its territory is no longer ring fenced, and a way to engage in all kinds of trafficking (arms, human beings, drugs) to fund the terrorist organisation. The next step for Daesh could be to extend southwards to join up with movements such as Boko Haram, which pledged allegiance to IS in March 2015.

Today, the Islamic State has an army of 3,500 to 4,500 men in Libya. This army consists of Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Sudanese and Iraqis. At the end of 2015, there was a change in IS strategy, advising those who wish to join jihad to go to Libya, not Iraq or Syria. This trend marks a turning point, because the Maghreb was not initially one of the Daesh leaders' priorities. The fragility of countries such as Algeria and Tunisia, and especially the proximity to Europe, led them to modify their plans. This demonstrates strong adaptability and an excellent knowledge of local conditions.

### **Social and cultural disparities**

Libya is in a state of chaos, divided by geographical, ethnic, economic, and religious rifts, and with two militia-supported governments competing for the country's oil. The establishment of jihadist activity, the growth of numerous types of trafficking, and the exploitation of the flow of migrants, are all factors that mean Libya's state of disorder is becoming a significant regional issue. Libyan political leaders seem to have accepted this state of affairs, and there is no sign of any medium-term compromise between the various protagonists of the civil war.

Since the 2011 revolution, Libya has fallen into a destructive spiral, which has had consequences for the Maghreb, the Sahel and the whole of the Mediterranean. The conflict has killed almost 30,000 people, and since the beginning of 2015, the country has become a regional base for jihadist activity. The production and export of oil, which represents virtually all Libyan exports, fell by more than 80% compared with pre-war levels. There are increasing numbers of displaced persons and refugees within the country and in neighbouring countries, and the absence of a state provides a favourable area for criminal organisations, which sometimes control whole swathes of territory and are involved in the trafficking of drugs, arms and migrants, whose numbers are constantly rising.

The complexity of the current war stems from the fact that Libya must in reality face the cumulative effect of a number of conflicts. On a national level, the confrontation between old and new elites partially overlaps a rift between Islamists and secularists, but primarily has its roots in the economic competition between the various coastal cities.

Since the revolution, this rivalry has taken the form of a growing hostility between officials of the old regime and the revolutionaries, turning into an armed struggle in 2013. On an international level, Libya now constitutes a front, with international jihadism set against the secular powers of the region. The Islamic State has signalled its presence in Libya and Tunisia with blood, claiming responsibility for a series of attacks and executions, following the *modus operandi* of its Iraqi counterpart. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are directly involved in the conflict along with the government of Tobruk, while Qatar and Sudan support some Islamist militias in Cyrenaica. The south of the country, which enjoys a de facto autonomy, has become the refuge for armed bands of all origins that have participated in the various regional conflicts.

Libya is a vast country, made up of a narrow coastal plain bordering on mountain ranges and steppe plateaus, and opening out onto the Sahara. On the coastline is the natural east-west boundary between Maghreb and Mashreq, while the boundary between the Sahel and the Mediterranean is drawn in the Sahara Desert. Gaddafi's regime retained power over these geographical divides for 42 years through a redistribution of oil revenue based on clientelism, deliberately preventing the emergence of local representative institutions. As well as the multitude



of disputes linked to the abuse of power and manipulative practices by the old regime, post-revolutionary Libya continues to face the dilemmas of identity that already existed at the time of its independence in 1953. The issues of power sharing between the various cities and the desert, minority rights, and the terms of redistribution of the country's natural resources, have been brought back to the table and debated by a multitude of players, who would not hesitate to use armed force. Libya's coastal cities, which share the political history of Europe and the Middle East due to their central location in the Mediterranean, became autonomous civil-military authorities at the time of the revolution. Against the background of a sudden opening of the political spectrum, and in the context of rapid development based on Mediterranean trade, the institutional debate rapidly reflected an intense economic competition. The material interests of the various cities were thus the main reason for their national political positioning. In particular, the debate on the federal character of the future Libyan state – according to a Tripolitania-Cyrenaica-Fezzan division, which refers to an alleged golden age of the Libyan Kingdom – has been used as a pretext by political stakeholders, intent on getting their hands on the oil wealth of the Gulf of Sirte, or justifying irredentist aims for the Sahara desert. Currently, the behaviour of the numerous militias from the Libyan coast still has more to do with interest in their city of origin than with ideological alignments.

Saharan Libya is historically the place of conflict between Arab tribes and desert tribes, the Tubus and Tuaregs. The Arab tribes of central and south-west Libya formed the core of the political base of Gaddafi's power, and priority was given to recruiting them into the security forces. In this way, the regime maintained control over trafficking with neighbouring countries: import of cigarettes and alcohol, export of oil and other subsidised products. Later on, the Tuaregs and the Tubus were the main victims of the regime's misguided pan-African policies. Their recruitment as back-up troops during the Colonel's conflicts with his neighbours was based on a manipulative use of access to Libyan nationality. Over several generations, Gaddafi granted citizenship to groups of mercenaries from these two ethnic groups according to his geopolitical needs, only to go back on his decisions later. As a result, to date, several thousand Libyan Tubus and Tuaregs are stateless. In August 2013, the Nationality Reform

Commission declared the status of nearly a million people to be illegal, resulting in turn in a declaration of autonomy by Fezzan and a show of force by armed groups. Fewer in number, the Berber-speaking groups paid in a different way for their alleged support for the previous regime, when the Misrata militias drove them out of the town of Tawergha. In short, radical Islamism has a long history in Libya, despite the brutal repression it has been subjected to. Returning from exile or coming out of hiding, old members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) entered the post-revolutionary political field, some of them trying their hand at legal policy while others took control of militias in their home towns. Abu Suleiman, Warfallah and Khadafah have sent their men to the military units stationed in the south, firstly to Gaddafi's son Khamis's 32<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. From 2012, radical Islamism has invaded political discourse, creating a tense social climate, while young militia members acted as guardians of virtue at numerous check-points. While the first Islamists have now been marginalised by IS, overtaken by a new, more radical generation, their views formed the matrix of post-revolutionary Libyan jihadism.

This is the anthropological and social context in which the Islamic State is expanding, using a unifying discourse under the green flag of Islam and the black banner of Daesh. Libya's size, its regional environment and the lack of any state structure, make it a "blessed" area for IS, which can in the worst-case scenario envisage withdrawal from the Middle East to this country. In the best-case scenario there is the prospect of settling long-term, which would enable it to become a key stakeholder or interlocutor. The rifts between Libyans play a central role and enable Daesh to exploit antagonisms to further its aims.

## **Two governments**

Libya in 2015 is theoretically under the control of two competing governments. In the east of the country, the Tobruk government was formed after the 2014 House of Representatives (HoR) elections, and remains the only authority recognised by the international community. Tripoli is the seat of a government supported by the Islamists of Fajr al Libya (Libyan Dawn), from the previous parliament, the General National Congress (GNC).

Beyond the attachment proclaimed to one or the other of these parties, which are currently clashing in the Arab world – Islamists or secularists, the two authorities exercise their power in a similar way. Both wear the legitimacy of the ballot box, but are not in fact representative. Neither of these governments has effective control of a continuous portion of the territory, and neither has a reliable administration. They are backed by disparate military forces, driven more by private interest than by ideological affinity.

They are officiated over by a number of strong men, who also contributed to the escalation of the conflict by placing armed groups under their direct authority to put pressure on the political staff. Today, the militias affiliated to the two camps indulge in similar abuses of power, carry out political assassinations and are involved in criminal activity.

Between these two sides in the war in Libya, IS represents a coherent, uniform force based upon a clear objective and a unified leadership. It will be difficult to get rid of Daesh without first achieving a political compromise between Libyans. Paradoxically, the chaotic state of the country could provide the best chance of dislodging the jihadists. For 18 months, Daesh has not managed to make any territorial inroads, such as winning Tripoli or Tobruk, which would have given it an unquestionable advantage. Local conditions are changing; the agreements of yesterday are not necessarily the same as those of tomorrow. Tribal culture continues to dominate political life in a land that has never experienced genuine statehood and has not experienced it at all since 2011.



PART II

**TERROR BY ANY MEANS:  
RECRUITING AND FINANCING  
IN THE DIGITAL ERA**





# FOREIGN FIGHTERS: AN IDENTIKIT OF VOLUNTEERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Claudio Neri

*It is well known that the phenomenon of foreign fighters is nothing new. Nonetheless, the number of foreign fighters has increased considerably as the phenomenon has accelerated in recent years, particularly with regard to the on-going conflict in Syria and Iraq. Relevant data are not easily found, but there is apparent consensus that most volunteers leaving their countries to take part in the fight come from Middle Eastern countries, above all Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, joining forces in particular with militants from Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. However, a foreign fighter who has taken part in a civil war does not automatically become a terrorist.*

Participation in Middle Eastern conflicts among foreign fighters, in other words among non-mercenary volunteers from countries different from those at war and not citizens of those countries, is not a phenomenon that has begun in recent years in Syria or in Iraq. It is rather one that has roots in the recent past. Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian researcher who has studied in depth the movement of foreign fighters, defines the phenomenon as “private global foreign fighter mobilization”<sup>1</sup> and traces its origins to 1967-68 and to the Arab-Israeli conflict. During that period a small nucleus of foreign fighters comprised of fewer than 100 men hailing above all from Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Sudan volunteered to fight

alongside the Arab coalition. In the 1980s, however, the phenomenon established itself more fully. In fact, between 5,000 and 20,000 foreign volunteers are estimated to have streamed into Afghanistan in support of their Muslim brothers under attack by the Soviets between 1978 and 1992. Of 70 armed Arab conflicts taking place after 1945, it is possible to identify contingents of foreign fighters in 18 of them, in groups of extremely limited numbers for the most part. Among the 18 conflicts, 10 were in the 1990s and 5 following the year 2000. The presence of foreign fighters in Arab/Middle Eastern conflicts is, therefore, a fundamentally contemporary phenomenon (it has not been possible to identify the movement of foreign fighters prior to the 1940s) that emerges forcefully during the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s, continues in Bosnia in the 1990s, proceeds to Chechnya and Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and is now at play in Syria.

The situation in Syria, however, presents several peculiar matters that raise concern among those responsible for national and international security. First of all, there is the matter of the number of subjects involved.

According to one of the most detailed current analyses of the subject, which was published by the Soufan Group in 2014<sup>2</sup> and then recently updated<sup>3</sup> to include the four years of the Syrian conflict (2011-15), between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters travelled to Syria to fight alongside the rebels.

This number includes those who returned to their countries of origin and those who died in the field, the latter of which amount roughly to between 8% and 10% according to data collected at the close of 2013. It does not include, rather, foreign fighters who operated and continue to operate among the ranks of government forces. In particular, according to the Soufan Group, approximately 3,000-4,000 men are said to have rushed to the aid of Assad's regime, most coming from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon and receiving substantial assistance from the Iranian government.<sup>4</sup> In a general sense, estimates of the overall number of foreign fighters arriving in the Syrian and Iraqi area are subject to variation due both to the fluidity and dynamism of the constantly evolving situation and to a real difficulty in making such estimates, but the process is also complicated as a result of the difference in the very definition of the term "foreign fighter" that one encounters when analysing various reports. For exam-



ple, in January 2014 Washington's director of intelligence, General James Clapper, estimated that the number of foreign fighters present in Syria and, according to the CIA, hailing from some 50 different countries was at least 7,000.<sup>5</sup> At the end of 2014, rather, President Obama checked the number and increased it to more than 15,000. Keeping this in mind, it is certainly possible to assert that the contingent of foreign fighters that has operated in Syria since the beginning of the war probably constitutes the largest ever recorded in the history of Middle Eastern conflicts. The number is even greater than the one relative to the contingent of foreign fighters present in the Afghan conflict in the 1980s. There remains, however, one important difference: the high intensity of arrivals of foreign fighters in the region of Syria and Iraq, a fact that is undeniable and also alarming. If, as Hegghammer reports, between 5,000 and 20,000 foreign fighters travelled to Afghanistan in a period of roughly twelve years (1980-92), between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters are said to have streamed into Syria in only five years. The conflict in Syria, therefore, is attracting foreign fighters at a noticeably higher rate compared to previous conflicts in the area. Most striking and alarming, in particular, is the rate of increase in the influx of foreign fighters from 2012 up to the present day. In the first half of 2012 between 700 and 1,400 were recorded. In August 2013 the number increased to 6,000, and at the end of 2014 estimates made by Western intelligence agencies placed the number at 15,000. In 2015 the number appears to have more than doubled, arriving at 31,000. At present the Syrian-Iraqi conflict constitutes a very powerful catalyst within international Muslim communities, in particular within those in the Middle East.

Where do the foreign fighters in Syria actually come from? They arrive from roughly 86 countries, but the majority hails from Middle Eastern Arab countries and the Maghreb (more than 16,000 foreign fighters). Detailed estimates of these foreign fighters are as follows: no fewer than 6,000 from Tunisia, about 2,500 from Saudi Arabia, between 2,000 and 2,500 from Jordan, and about 1,500 from Morocco. There are also at least 800 from Lebanon, roughly 2,000 from Turkey (according to official data) and between 600 and 1,000 from Egypt. From Libya, rather, roughly 1,000 individuals are estimated as having arrived. It is also worth mentioning that Libya and Tunisia, in particular the areas of Ben Gardane

(Tunisia) and Derna (Libya), are strategic hubs for fighters streaming into and out of the Syrian-Iraqi area.

Of the 30,000 foreign fighters estimated to offer support to the rebels, approximately 5,000 are presumed to hail from Western countries, European ones for the most part.<sup>6</sup> This number has more than doubled in the last year. Foreign fighters arriving from Europe are far fewer than those coming from the Arab world even if hundreds of volunteers in Syria are shown to have departed not only from France, Great Britain and Germany but also from Belgium, Denmark, Australia and the Netherlands. More specifically, 1,800 have departed from France, 760 from both Great Britain and Germany, and 470 from Belgium. On the whole one can conceivably assert that the present phenomenon relating to the influx of foreign fighters into the Syria-Iraq region is for the most part specific to the Arab world with only a numerically limited component arriving from the West, above all from Europe. This confirms a well-established trend: even in previous conflicts foreign volunteers came predominantly from Arab countries, in particular from Saudi Arabia.

According to information currently available there are four main fighting groups that benefit from the influx of foreign volunteers: Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, a group that counts on a sizeable presence of Chechens; Sukur al-Sham, a group approximately 10,000-20,000 strong in which combatants from France and Belgium are suspected to operate and whose leadership consists of individuals with al-Qaeda ties; Jabhat al-Nusra, a member group of al-Qaeda in Syria with a strong presence of veterans who fought against the Americans in Iraq; and IS, which has its roots in the organisation of the Islamic State of Iraq created in 2006. This last group is believed to count on a very high number of foreign fighters, comprising as much as 30% and 40% of the total according to some estimates. In particular, volunteers arriving predominantly from North Africa and the Middle East appear to be joining forces with al-Nusra and IS, two groups in which foreign fighters are believed to play an important operational role.

Herein lies yet another contradictory feature that distinguishes the situation in Syria. If in the past contingents of foreigners have had only marginal effects in conflicts (also in terms of their numbers),<sup>7</sup> in Syria and Iraq foreign fighters have conversely assumed an important role, one

that is actually on the increase as the tragic consequences of civil war have reduced the number of local fighters. In general, foreign fighters travelling to Syria, above all those hailing from Europe, do not have military training due to their young age. Of these men 85%-90% are younger than 40, with an average age between 18 and 29 years old. They are, therefore, very young compared to those joining forces previously in Iraq and Afghanistan, conflicts in which the average age was between 25 and 35 years old. This is obviously not always the case, and there are many confirmed cases of veterans of previous conflicts who are fighting in Syria and Iraq. Fighters hailing from the Middle East tend to be more militarily competent compared to their comrades in arms arriving from Western countries, precisely because in many instances they have gained guerrilla experience in other theatres. In any case, untrained subjects undergo a swift conditioning period (around six weeks) in order to prepare for inclusion among the fighting forces. The foreign fighters' military contribution is considered significant above all in jihadist and Qaedist groups, in particular when involving suicide attacks (with a high percentage of Saudis and Jordanians used in such attacks). Do foreign fighters, therefore, pose a terrorist threat? Or even more, is it possible that foreign volunteers who have embraced the extremist ideal and carried out military training in the conflict in Syria and Iraq could decide to carry out guerrilla operations or terrorist attacks upon return to their countries of origin (in some case European countries)?<sup>8</sup> As demonstrated by recent events in the news, the danger exists and is real. Though making predictions based on reliable models is impossible at present, it is possible on the other hand to identify some problematic elements in the process of radicalisation of those foreign fighters flocking to Syria and Iraq. Foremost among them is the large number of foreign volunteers. A sizeable contingent growing at an unusually steady pace manages to significantly increase the pool of individuals who can potentially be radicalised. The earlier conflicts included groups consisting of a limited number of foreign volunteers that ultimately banded together, like a cliquish elite in some cases, to form closed circles in which only few others were welcome. This phenomenon has increased tremendously in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. A second problematic element in the present conflict involves the ease of communication and transportation. For example, while travelling

to Pakistan and Afghanistan was a complicated and challenging task in the 1980s, especially without the presence of a developed network of facilitators, travelling to Syria and Iraq in the present day is rather easy and inexpensive. Furthermore, the internet and social media guarantee the rapid and easily controllable propagation of jihadist teaching toward potential recruits located in theory across the globe. The presence of guerrilla and terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq constitutes a third and, in this case, extremely critical element: these groups, like al-Qaeda for instance, are battled tested and deadly. In other conflicts (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia) such groups either did not exist or emerged only after several years. In Syria and Iraq, on the other hand, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State have commanded the fight for a couple of years now. All this increases the likelihood of foreign volunteers joining the ranks of such jihadist groups, which consequently leads, on the one hand, to their exposure to a path toward radicalisation and, on the other hand, to the reinforcement of fraternal bonds, which will likely endure even after the volunteer returns to his country of origin.

In conclusion, history teaches us that volunteering as an insurgent in a civil war, even if marked by the presence of jihadist forces, does not automatically make the individual a terrorist. In fact, in past conflicts the majority of foreign fighters upon return to their countries of origin did not form terrorist networks or organise terrorist attacks. Many of those who had travelled to participate in the fight did not even develop anti-Western sentiment. However, it is also true that terrorism is an activity that essentially requires a limited number of players. A group of adequately trained individuals who are motivated and well-connected to jihadist networks is all it takes to execute deadly attacks. In this sense, the conflict in Syria and Iraq constitutes a dangerous field in which the seeds of anti-Western terrorism can easily grow. The risks resulting from the conflict in Syria and Iraq can be reduced to a minimum through the elaboration of a precise and timely international strategy of opposition with the employment of intelligence as its cornerstone.

## NOTES

- 1 T. Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*, in “International Security”, 3/2010-11, pp. 53-94, available on-line at [belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/The\\_Rise\\_of\\_Muslim\\_Foreign\\_Fighters.pdf](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/The_Rise_of_Muslim_Foreign_Fighters.pdf).
- 2 Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, June 2014, available on-line at [soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf).
- 3 Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015, available on-line at [soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).
- 4 Data found in the 2014 report. According to other sources, Israeli and American, the estimated number is higher, between 7,000 and 8,000.
- 5 According to data provided by the Soufan Group, however, the 12,000 foreign fighters hail from 81 countries.
- 6 According to the Soufan Group’s latest report, between 20% and 30% of volunteers from Europe ultimately re-entered the country from which they had departed.
- 7 Based on data in our possession, excluding Syria, the highest percentage of foreign fighters was found in Iraq in 2000. In that conflict 5% of the insurgents were foreign fighters.
- 8 For additional information on the “model of foreign fighter radicalisation” see D. Byman, J. Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Policy Paper n. 34, Brookings, 2014, available on-line at [www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-byman-shapiro/be-afraid--web.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-byman-shapiro/be-afraid--web.pdf).



# THE JIHADIST VOCATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THE RESPONSE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

*Sandro Menichelli*

*While news stories and investigative reports have made us more familiar with the terms jihad, caliphate and foreign fighters, there remains the problem of gaining a deeper understanding of the motives that lead individuals to choose the path of terrorism despite their being raised in European societies and according to a European system of values. How can an effective strategy for the prevention and elimination of these phenomena be developed on the national level and within the European Union without first understanding who these individuals are and why we have become their targets? What can be done and, above all, what is being done in Europe to tackle this phenomenon?*

The graphic image of a policeman, who will only later be identified as Muslim, lying wounded in a street in Paris and then brutally murdered by a hooded individual leaves us once again bewildered concerning how killings can be inspired by religious faith even in the twenty-first century. With the cry of “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad!” the killer of the policeman, along with his brother, had just carried out a massacre at the headquarters of the satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo”, whose editors had been accused of offending the two killers’ religious faith. A similar scene was once again witnessed as a group of young French and Belgian men willingly armed themselves with machine guns and explo-

sive belts in order to massacre hundreds of their peers guilty of spending time in a “place of perversion” in the despised French capital. Along with the extremely fateful attacks against European tourists at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, the attacks against police in the same North African capital and on the beaches of Sousse, or, though slightly different, those taking place in Ankara, Beirut, Brussels and Copenhagen, these events are unfortunately just a few of the latest tragic ones in the news. Nonetheless, public opinion has not been able to fully comprehend the underlying motives. What should the response be? How should it be carried out? Above all, how can this deadly violence be prevented?

We must certainly acknowledge and praise the numerous displays of indignation in response to these events. Some have consisted of large demonstrations that have united (both physically and ideally) millions of people across the globe, who are convinced that individuals must not die for expressing their opinions, for belonging to one religion or the other, for choosing a line of work involving public safety, for spending an evening in an outdoor cafe or for listening to music in a concert hall.

While this response may offer evidence of indispensably shared democratic values, it does not appear to solve the problem of radicalisation in our societies in which increasing numbers of individuals, mostly young men and women, are prepared to embrace forms of violent extremism, travel to war zones and then, perhaps, return to their country of origin carrying with them significant and sinister baggage of experience in the battlefield ready to be put to use for the cause of international terrorism.

News stories and investigative reports have helped familiarise with the terms jihad, caliphate and foreign fighters. However, objectively transcending our day-to-day lives, they lead us only to an indistinct sense of disapproval, confusion and fear. The real problem lies in our inability to fully understand the motives behind such negative behaviour, which is often quite simplistically attributed to individual choices that reveal social uneasiness, an inability to fully integrate in society or an outright inclination toward delinquency. The key to confronting this problem lies in the necessity of understanding not only the makeup of these young people, raised in our societies and according to our value systems, but also the motivating forces behind their decision to carry out such atro-

cious acts. Furthermore, it is consequently necessary to outline the appropriate course of action in order to stop and, above all, prevent these attacks according to the rules of law.

Quite obviously, the response to a phenomenon that inherently transcends individual states and ultimately assumes a global reach, even though it must be identified and carried out on a national level, must not exclude a specific and coordinated approach that is global and multidisciplinary. Based on this premise, one must, therefore, ask who these individuals are and why we have become their targets. Furthermore, in reaction to this phenomenon in Europe and on the national level, we must consider what can be done and, above all, what is being done. From a practical standpoint, we must also ask how we can prevent the radicalisation of these people and convince them not to depart for today's war zones. For those who do depart to fight in foreign battlefields, we must ask how their movements can be monitored, above all, when they travel beyond the borders of the European Union and, even more so, once they return. It is worth mentioning that the figure of the young Muslim departing "to fight the infidels" amounts to nothing new. Such cases have been recorded, for example, in the wars fought in Afghanistan, in the former Yugoslavia and in Algeria. Today, what is new and alarming is the scale of the phenomenon. If we begin to examine the reason behind such a decision, we can safely conclude that a more ideologically oriented jihadist vocation must be linked with the overall radicalisation movement of Sunni Islam and its desire to advance the cause of Islamification through the seizing of power, which is understood as complete control of the State with the goal of re-establishing Islamic order in societies distinguished today by their religious ignorance. For radical ideologists and, ultimately, for supporters of the Islamic State, the so-called "grass-roots strategies for the Islamification of modernity" have repeatedly proven incapable of producing significant political and social changes, such as the establishment of the caliphate. Such strategies are typical of a neo-traditional form of Islam, based on preaching and charitable actions, which is desired above all by the Muslim Brotherhood and its local branches. For radical ideologists Islam is not only religious faith but also life itself in its individual, social, domestic, political and economic dimensions, which offer the possibility of serving and worshipping God.



Consequently, jihad, in its double meaning of “fighting” and “striving”, each “in the path of God”, embodies the complete submission of believers to the divine message and serves as the necessary instrument for the elimination of every obstacle in the way of the complete victory of faith. Based on the *takfir*, or rather the declaration of nonconformity with any human expression of *Shari’a*, it is necessary to launch and carry out a jihad against any human authority that ignores the Qur’an and the Sunnah as the only legitimate sources of socio-political and individual order, thus allowing the adoration of veritable “idols” in the place of God. Such idols include the sovereignty of the people, free elections and the rule of law. The principle of *tawhid*, which upholds the uniqueness and absoluteness of God, must instead be reclaimed and defended. The true meaning of the divine message, therefore, may only be fulfilled on earth by violently opposing supporters of “Satan’s party”, and doing so amounts to nothing more than an expression of faith for the true Muslim. These supporters may be ostensibly Muslim governments, which are essentially impious and corrupt, the “crusading” West, worldwide Zionism, all those indifferent to Islam’s message or apostates.

Impious governments, in this case, are those that formally claim to be Muslim but apply a secular and nationalistic ideology in their political workings and adopt laws and customs typical of infidels. By doing so, they foster the penetration of Western culture in their societies, and if in the past figures such as Nasser, Sadat, and Algerian and Tunisian rulers fell into this category, in the present day Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi leaders have taken their place, constituting an obstacle in the fight for the (re)establishment of the caliphate. The caliphate would embrace the entire community of believers or, geographically speaking, the Greater Middle East extending from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Pakistan. This principal ideological call continues to incite hundreds of young Europeans, predominantly Sunni Muslims but also converts, to travel to war zones as foreign fighters and join the ranks of the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamic groups so that they might help their “brothers in faith” break free from the subjugation of neo-paganism. Our societies and their colonial politics were accused in the past of provoking the division of Islam into nation-states, thus preventing the political reconstitution of the *ummah*. They belong, therefore, to the category of the “Western crusad-

ers” and have become the target of varied forms of Islamic radicalism for a number of reasons, even though two major ones come forward. On the one hand, there is the question of the support offered to impious Muslim governments, which have ultimately adopted secular ideologies. On the other hand, the West, through its insidious and “satanic” cultural messages, is deemed capable of causing dangerous and profound changes to Muslim society and way of life that will ultimately lead to the erosion of their very foundation. Taking this and other factors into consideration, we can begin to understand the motives behind the various attacks that have been carried out or planned in the world, even at the hands of those who return to their countries of origin after an experience of fighting in the battlefield against impious governments. We must consider, on the one hand, the profound sense of humiliation and frustration experienced by those who see themselves as heirs to the powerful and militarily glorious tradition of the original Islam, yet today feel dominated and exploited by the very infidels who were once militarily their subjects, and, on the other hand, the renewed confidence and power felt by those who manage to arouse a sense of tangible fear in Western societies, forcing them to change their routines by closing underground railway systems, schools, museums and shopping centres. Closely related to these considerations is the subject of violence against Christians. We all know the profound doctrinal differences involved here, but violence in this case is incited by the choice of separating politics from religion, which objectively promotes a state of materialism. The direct consequence of this choice is religious ignorance and the recourse to pagan symbols. Attacks can end only if and when Christians convert and submit themselves to Islam.

A religious and political dimension offers an explanation for the continued attacks on individuals, synagogues, *yeshivas*, kosher shops and other targets involving Judaism and the State of Israel. From a religious standpoint, if it is true that one must exercise tolerance towards other religions as stated in the Qur’an (2:256: “there is no compulsion in religion”), then Jews would autonomously imagine themselves as God’s chosen people. The purification of their presence from the “House of Islam” is, therefore, a religious obligation, just as Christians must be forced to convert and assume an inferior role. The political dimension stems from the unresolved Palestinian question. God’s messenger began his ascent

into heaven in Jerusalem, which is considered the third holiest city of Islam. The occupation of Jerusalem and the founding of the State of Israel on land historically considered the “House of Islam” represent open wounds because they offer tangible evidence of the insertion of a foreign body in the community of believers, which undermines from within the sacred desire for unity. As a result, peace is impossible, and Israel must, therefore, be fought until it is destroyed and its land is consequently returned to its legitimate owners.

Those who prefer to accept various forms of pagan idolatry in their lives rather than conform to the message of Islam by living it in their daily lives belong to the category of the indifferent ones, be they men, women, elderly or children, not to mention the detested Shiites. Directed toward these indifferent subjects, war and the practise of decapitation and of annihilation are symbolic; they ensure both the purification of the victim and propaganda that ends up terrorising the enemy and, at the same time, offer a point of reference for all those ready to join the fight against the infidels. The apostates belong to the last category and must be fought because they have committed a capital offence punishable by death: the repudiation of God’s great gift received through birth, that of belonging to the Muslim religion. Those who are guilty of committing this offence and those who lead others to commit it must be punished.

Some jihadist choices are less ideologically driven though perhaps more difficult to interpret because they are more individual in nature and often common among young people. It is impossible to create a typical and uniform profile of the new jihadists of European cities. For the most part, these young men and women are adolescents, post-adolescents and, progressively more, converts. A robust and well-established ideological inclination appears only marginal, even if at the end of their process of radicalisation they come to understand Islam as the religion oppressed by the arrogant West, which must, therefore, be fought and punished. The possibility of “crossing swords” with the West and its absolutely negative values is welcomed as opportunity for redemption among those who, facing an identity crisis and/or belonging to a minority group, feel as though they are the lowest on the social scale and barely accepted.

For these reasons an examination of the dynamics that lead individuals to make choices of this nature shows that a lowest common denom-

inator is found in the profound hatred toward those who hold power and in the resulting desire for revenge. In such cases, these individuals are often third- or fourth-generation immigrants who face the difficult reality of living in large and anonymous suburbs of European cities. At some point they may have been found guilty of a petty crime and are, at least initially, in the dark concerning the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Hadith. Their hatred toward the West is often developed in the prison system where inmates consider themselves victims of unjust sentences and of persecution. While in the past meeting places such as mosques, places of worship, cultural centres and gyms were considered typical locations in which radicalisation occurred, today it happens in different places that are less subject to monitoring by the police. Aside from the prison system, in which the path to radicalisation is easily followed, attention must now be focused on highly individual areas such as neighbourhoods, streets and the internet, which allow potential fighters to remain anonymous like thousands of other young men and women. The essentially infinite possibilities of communicating anonymously on the internet allow individuals not only to share their opinions, taking comfort in those who are of like mind, but also to quicken their path toward radicalisation through the contribution of others. The appearance of these individuals is also changing. The *djellaba*, the *kamis* and long beard have been replaced by a style of dress completely in line with the vast majority of young people, allowing for greater anonymity. The same may be said of expressions of religious faith that no longer include showy displays during congregational prayers or the imam's readings of the *khutbah* on Fridays, which could potentially attract the attention of security officials. Conversely, they adopt techniques that allow them to appear as regular people, which bring to mind the strategy of terrorists belonging to Italy's Red Brigades in the 1970s, though with obvious differences. There is a similar religious basis in a certain behaviour borrowed from the hated Shiites, which consists of the dissimulation of faith that is ultimately legitimised at times when a display of religious faith could potentially pose the risk of persecution to the believer.

We are all aware of the profound changes concerning the time, composition and organisation of today's attacks compared to those in New York, Madrid or London. The personal stories of the perpetrators of the

attacks in Toulouse, Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris and Tunis reveal different types of jihadists, who work in smaller cells if not on their own, like “lone wolves”. In these men and women a new type of bond supplants ideology. It consists of a competitive spirit among those courageous enough to rise up and reveal themselves to a world that is disinterested and hostile. They risk their very lives in order to add a heroic dimension to their choice and make themselves not only visible to the world but also worthy in the “eyes of God”, whose cause they are ready to defend even to the point of martyrdom. In fact, for the subjects of this new form of indoctrination and radicalisation, attacking the West embodies the fight for a world that is neither chaotic nor depraved but rather firmly oriented toward the values of *Shari’a*. These men and women can live in “honour and goodness” in a world different from Western societies, which permits smoking, drugs, alcohol and pornography while using the media as a means of distorting reality and manipulating the individual.

It seems, therefore, that for the new generation dissimulating and appearing anonymous might help an individual attract significant media attention through some spectacular act and consequently gain a great deal of notoriety, effectively allowing that individual to remove himself from a relatively obscure social situation. The jihadist vocation appears as the only opportunity to rediscover one’s identity through the sacralisation of hatred directed towards a particular society and its symbols. For such an individual there is a need to become visible and to leave proof not only of a given choice but also of existing and making a mark in the world. This necessity is easily demonstrated by the cases involving Mohamed Merah in Toulouse and Mehdi Nemmouche in Brussels, who chose to film their exploits.

## **The European response**

Up to now we have managed to paint a more complete picture of the motives behind the protagonists whose behaviour indeed appears heinous to us. The crucial next step is to determine if there is an awareness of the new nature of the jihadist vocation and, consequently, to examine what has been done up to now and how we are preparing to confront not only this threat but also, more generally speaking, its actors in the Euro-

pean Union. The topics of radicalisation, recruiting and, of course, foreign fighters are worthy of particular attention in this context.

An examination of this nature is, from an operative standpoint, closely and inevitably tied to the subject of police cooperation among member states. Relevant core business naturally consists of the exchange of information among those authorities charged with upholding the law, specifically in this case in the realm of antiterrorism. Over time European Union legislators have demonstrated a steadfast willingness to provide the member states' police operatives and/or intelligence services with the appropriate instruments. Within the greater context of objectively diverse legislation and sensibilities, these instruments are designed to tangibly contribute to efforts in the way of prevention and investigation of some of the most serious criminal cases, foremost among them the varied expressions of international terrorism. Indeed, the increasingly transnational nature of these criminal phenomena has prompted the occasion of building upon bilateral agreements among member states by adding more extensive methods of cooperation that consequently enhance the general principal of subsidiarity. In this light, it is worth mentioning the quality and quantity of these instruments, such as the Swedish Initiative, the Prüm Convention and the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II), which the Union has used over time in order to promote and realise the exchange of information.

Before reviewing the initiatives adopted in recent months by the European Council and the Justice and Home Affairs Council in light of the increasing attacks recorded in Europe, it is worthwhile to take a general look at the politics of the Union with regard to the fight against international terrorism. A natural point of departure is the Communication to the European Parliament and the Council with which the European Commission proposed "The EU Internal Security Strategy in Action: Five Steps towards a More Secure Europe".<sup>1</sup> The document identified five strategic objectives through which security could be improved. These objectives involved preventing terrorism and made specific reference to recruiting and radicalisation, dismantling international criminal networks, raising the level of security for citizens in cyberspace, strengthening security through border management and increasing Europe's resilience to crises and disasters. The strategy put at the disposal of the European Union

and its member States all resources and the best experiences available in order to effectively respond to such common security threats, forecasting also a periodic review of their implementation. Towards meeting this goal, an important role was assigned to the Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security (COSI), which was instituted in accordance with article 71 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFUE) and presented in the Council Decision of February 25, 2010 as a body designed to facilitate police cooperation.

The second report on the implementation of the internal security strategy pointed out the necessity of defining, as quickly as possible, two other instruments, whose combined implementation will place greater importance on actions in the way of preventing and countering the phenomena in question; the European Union's Smart Borders Package and Passenger Name Record (PNR) directive are now under discussion in the Council and in the European Parliament. Now, while the smart border rules will be used to provide additional tools promoting collaboration among policing agencies, especially during security checks at the external borders of the European Union,<sup>2</sup> the European PNR has been adapted to help prevent and counter terrorist offences and other related crimes on flights to and from Europe, offering a clear advantage for police intervention. In fact, the European Parliament and the Council have proposed a directive concerning the use of the reservation code for prevention, verification, investigation and legal action involving terrorist offences and serious crimes. The proposal involves the personal information provided by passengers upon purchasing tickets and registering for travel prior to departure, which is recorded in the databases of the air carriers for predominantly commercial purposes. Airlines will be required, upon request by specific authorities of member states via the so-called "push" method, to transfer information relative to the reservation code registration of passengers travelling beyond the European Union and to its member states. This information is transferred to the Passenger Information Units (PIU) of member states, which are entitled to use it exclusively for prevention, verification, investigation and legal action involving terrorist offences and other related crimes.

Both the European Council and the Council for Justice and Home Affairs were in favour of adopting this instrument, and the JHA Council

pushed yet again for its implementation in an emergency meeting following the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015. Within the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) there emerged some difficulties, which are currently under discussion among the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. The primary concern involves the possibility of increasing the reach of this instrument to include all flights within the European Union, strongly favoured by the Council, and the subject of data protection, with specific focus on relative time limits and storage methods.<sup>3</sup>

As we move from discussion of the more practical elements to an examination of the strategic features from a political standpoint, two strategic guiding principles are worthy of attention, namely the EU's strategy involving radicalisation, recruitment and foreign fighters on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the new home security strategy. Thanks to the significant amount of experience gained in recent years in this area and in response to the new "jihadist next door" phenomenon, the European Union has shown a willingness to offer an approach that strikes a balance between appropriate security measures and direct intervention aimed at confronting the factors that promote situations leading to radicalisation and recruitment. This leads us to the necessity of combining government efforts with action carried out by local communities, society at large, and both non-governmental and private organisations. Generally speaking, the strategy aimed at opposing these two phenomena will need to adapt by advancing the following initiatives: the enhancement and promotion of security, of law enforcement and of equal opportunities for all by directly opposing inequality and discrimination; the widespread diffusion through mass media outlets and social networks of the credible majority opinion that condemns the use of violence by extremists; the enhancement of governmental communications aimed at refuting extremist ideologies in support of terrorism on-line and off-line; the show of absolute support for messages condemning terrorism, with particular emphasis on arguments presented by well-known and influential individuals; opposition to these phenomena on-line; the complete reliance on the competencies of front-line experts, such as social service and health professionals, teachers, religious leaders and personnel employed in the penitentiary system so that they might be able to intervene in likely cas-



es of radicalisation at the beginning stages, thus preventing individuals at risk from becoming involved in terrorist activities; the enhancement of recovery programmes through political initiatives in support of young adults so that they may develop a positive sense of self and recognise the inherent dangers of jihadist rhetoric; the support of release initiatives modelled after relative socio-cultural conditions; the development of research studies involving ongoing and future trends and challenges related to these phenomena, all the while ensuring coherence and decency with regard to actions carried out within and outside the European Union and working toward both improved integrated management of borders and a more functional relationship with other countries.

The real challenge presented by this strategy obviously lies in the necessity not only of implementing it but also of doing so quickly. For this reason, in the second semester of 2014 the Italian Presidency of the European Union steadfastly pushed at different negotiating tables for the JHA Council to approve, among other instruments, a set of guidelines for the implementation of each of these strategic policies. As a result of the Council's adoption of these strategic initiatives in December 2014, member states, the European External Action Service and the European Commission now have at their disposal a well-articulated series of instruments that may be quickly implemented by some of the most diverse branches of the European Union's operative network. Instruments such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Horizon 2020, the Internal Security Fund, the Syria Strategic Communication Advisory Team and INTCEN may be used to fight radicalisation and/or recruitment by identifying effective methods of communicating between the institutions and individuals according to the social norms of the communities in question.

Response to the subject of foreign fighters is more focused, especially in the wake of attacks in Brussels, Copenhagen and Paris. In Paris on July 11, 2014 the Ministers of the Interior of eleven countries issued a joint statement, and on February 12, 2014 the heads of state of the European Union also delivered a formal statement. Each statement addressed the problem of foreign fighters and articulated the need to devise appropriate responses aimed at improving the security of citizens, preventing radicalisation and fostering cooperation with international partners. Here the goal of improving the security of citizens is linked with the ex-

pectation of certain actions, such as the necessity of using the current Schengen legal system to its full potential. The aim is to ensure that at all external borders of the European Union security checks are systematic and integrated with the relevant databases of the European Union and Interpol. Such checks must be carried out on individuals from the European Union and other countries with the goal of identifying every suspicious border crossing possible both entering into and departing from the European Union, thus helping to determine common indicators and carry out integrated risk analysis involving the movement of possible foreign fighters. The system has also seen improvement in the fight against the illegal trafficking of weapons and the financing of terrorism, as well as in the areas of intelligence sharing and operational cooperation on the national level of intelligence and among policing agencies, to which both Eurojust and Europol must offer their full assistance.

Regarding the question of preventing radicalisation, monitoring remains a primary concern along with the elimination of messages from the internet that promote terrorism or other forms of violence, which must be a joint-effort between public and private sectors. Equally important are the development of communication strategies aimed at promoting messages of tolerance, non-discrimination, protection of civil liberties, and inter-religious dialogue as well as initiatives dealing with the topics of education, work, social integration and rehabilitation. The last necessary component involves international cooperation. In this case, it is necessary to rethink pre-existing strategies in areas of crisis and conflict, to create a tighter dialogue with Middle Eastern and North African countries, which includes aid and capacity building projects, and to collaborate more closely with the United Nations and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

Up to now discussion has been focused on the guiding principles of the European Union's strategy for combating radicalisation, recruiting and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. The next topic of discussion is the second guiding principal of the European Union's action plan, what will become the new Internal Security Strategy. Recently adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council, the document includes a list of priorities for the coming years, among them: the fight against terrorism and terrorists' access to funding through the prevention of radicalisation (also

in prisons), the appropriate management of external borders within the greater sphere of integrated border management according to EU norms, the fight against organised crime and the fight against cybercrime.

The challenge obviously remains that of obstructing the ever-increasing flow of European citizens who travel to war zones and then return without being checked. With this in mind, special attention must be paid to internet use, the detection and freezing of funding in support of terrorist activities and a firm legal response. In this regard, all national regulations must include as crimes particularly significant acts such as, for example, those involving recruitment, training and financial support for terrorist activity as well as incitement to carry out such activity.<sup>4</sup> Within this landscape, on the European, national, regional and local levels much more must be done to improve or enact processes involving education, participation among young people and inter-religious dialogue in order to fight inequality and prevent instances of social marginalisation. Lastly, of fundamental importance is the role carried out by the EU with its neighbours, specifically with countries in the Middle East, North Africa, the Western Balkans and Turkey. Turkey and the Western Balkans (area traditionally exposed to Wahhabism) must be constantly monitored. Two elements demonstrate the necessity of “investing” in these areas: on the one hand, the vastness and porosity of the borders between Turkey and Syria, and, on the other hand, the strategic importance of the airports of Istanbul and Sanliurfa, which have become important crossroads for foreign fighters arriving from and departing for Europe. Sanliurfa, in particular, is situated just a few kilometres from Raqqa, the Syrian city elected as capital of the Islamic State. From this perspective, the initiative of the European External Action Service deserves praise for its placement of security experts in various crisis areas. It is hoped that their work will be carried out in the actual areas of conflict rather than in the capital cities of the host countries.

Discussion thus far has centred on the response of the European Union, but how has Italy responded? As a member of the EU, in recent months Italy has played a role in all of the European Union’s important relevant groups, such as the COREPER, the Justice and Home Affairs Council, and the European Council. It has pressed for the close consideration of the topic of foreign fighters, the adoption of the guidelines

for the implementation of the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment, and the necessity of filling a gap by creating together with Europol a network of contacts with the goal of collecting and sharing operative information on foreign fighters. For a number of reasons Italy has not witnessed a large number of departures of foreign fighters for war zones, as has been the case in France, Great Britain and Belgium, but it has created a combination of regulations that have proven fully functional for the prevention and suppression of the phenomena discussed herein. Activity aimed at preventing and suppressing these phenomena on the operational level has produced significant results, thanks to the possibility of sharing information available among police forces or intelligence agencies in the Committee for Strategic Anti-Terrorism Analysis. This instrument, in fact, serves as an organisational model “ready for export” to countries that, as was once the case with Italy, have complex systems of interaction between police forces and intelligence agencies. Distinguished by its pragmatic and informal approach, it has proven highly functional and also complemented pre-existing operational activity.

Will the aforementioned politics, regulations and operational instruments on both the European and the Italian level guarantee success? Regrettably, there is no definite answer since, as is witnessed on a daily basis, there is still room for the threat to evolve despite the great amount that has been done up to now, especially in the way of understanding new patterns of terrorism and responding appropriately to them. Certainly, an effective response to this challenge must consist of a joint effort to spread a greater understanding of the basis of the problem without succumbing to an indistinct sense of fear. Legal action against relevant criminal activity is naturally a necessity, but while a number of appropriate actions may not offer permanent solutions to the problem, they will go a long way to limiting its spread. In order to do so, we must understand motives behind these acts, equip ourselves to prevent them beginning in our local communities, foster dialogue with the relevant players and adapt the training of the diverse public and private professionals through modernisation that will result in a shared language and direction. As for the European Union, it must explain more effectively the motives behind its politics and their inherent value.

We must face an inevitably long and complex challenge in order to offer a clearer understanding of our society to these young men and women by means of the complete reliance on the instruments available to us through the rule of law. Our society will appear to them neither as *dar al-harb* (House of war) nor as *dar al-islam* (House of Islam), but quite simply as *dar al-salam* (House of peace), the realisation of which will prevent any possible foothold of hatred. It is a truly great opportunity that we must not let slip away.

## NOTES

- 1 European Commission, *The EU Internal Security in Action: Five Steps towards a More Secure Europe*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM(2010) 673 final, Brussels, November 22, 2010.
- 2 With these new regulations two systems will be developed. One is an entry/exit system that will allow for the tracing of entry and exit dates and places of non-EU citizens in the Schengen Area. The other system includes registered travellers that will offer automatic crossings for regular foreign travellers, who will be subject to preventative security screening.
- 3 On the subject of personal data and the protection of privacy, the greatest difficulties surfacing in LIBE are two. One involves the desire of some parliamentarians to wait for the decision of the European Court of Justice on the potential compatibility with the Treaties of the PNR agreement between the European Union and Canada. The other involves the necessity that this new instrument keeps in consideration both the contents of the Court of Justice's April 8, 2014 sentence on data retention (Cases C-293/12 and 594/12), with a subsequent annulment of the related directive, and the forthcoming adoption of the new package (regulations and directive) dealing with data protection.
- 4 Towards this end the Commission intends to carry out an impact assessment in view of a potential modification in 2016 of the 2008 framework decision on terrorism. The United Nations Resolution 2178 of September 24, 2014 will be taken into account, which requires signatories to "prevent and suppress the recruiting, organising, transporting, and equipping" of foreign fighters. The resolution was issued as a result of the self-proclaimed Islamic State's military role as well as its role as recruiter of volunteers.



# THE CHALLENGES OF FIGHTING TERRORISM FINANCING: FOLLOWING THE DAESH MONEY TRAIL

*Inês Sofia de Oliveira*

*In the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks in Paris, the international community must take time to review and rethink its approach to terrorism and the new challenges that emerge as terrorist organisations grow stronger and evolve. Terrorist organisations finance their activities in a number of ways, and much has been done to limit their access to funds. However, new challenges to the pre-existing strategy are emerging. Whereas tools are in place to freeze and follow the money headed towards terrorist groups, the international community must do more in terms of coordination and information sharing across borders if it is to successfully drain terrorists of financial means and profit. Analysis of the financing structure adopted by Daesh reveals a stunning flexibility and diversification capability that must be matched by international efforts to tackle the financing of terrorism, which is an essential piece of the so-called “war on terror”.*

## **What is terrorist financing?**

Terrorist financing is the process through which funds are made available to groups working towards acts of terrorism as defined by states and the international community.<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373, adopted on September 28, 2001,<sup>2</sup> defined terrorist

financing as the “wilful provision or collection, by any means, directly or indirectly, of funds [...] with the intention that the funds should be used, or in the knowledge that they are to be used, in order to carry out terrorist acts”.

Unlike money laundering, the conversion of the proceeds of crime into legitimate goods or capital, the financing of terrorism often involves “controlling funds coming from legal sources that may be intended to be used for crime (perhaps primarily but not exclusively terrorism)”.<sup>3</sup> “Following the money” through the identification, monitoring and reporting of suspicious financial transactions is, therefore, the key pillar of the international strategy to tackle terrorist financing and maintain the integrity of the formal economic structures that may inadvertently support it.

International action against the financing of terrorism is distinct from other areas (military and political) of response to the terrorist threat due to its intrinsic reliance on the collaboration of financial service providers and other transnational business involved in trading and transport.

“Following the money”,<sup>4</sup> as it has become known, relies on the premise that criminal groups and terrorist organisations alike use financial institutions<sup>5</sup> to launder money and finance activities, which not only compromises law enforcement efforts to prevent the corruption of the formal economy but also endangers global economic stability by weakening its core infrastructure.

Government and global financial institutions, therefore, work in close cooperation, exchanging information and building common understandings of the main strategies and financing tools being used by terrorists. As implemented by states, existing counter-terrorist financing measures require private businesses to identify, monitor and report on their clients if and when transactions suspected of being related to terrorist activity take place.<sup>6</sup> Among others, the existing strategy includes a strict understanding of the identification and background of clients, the beneficial ownership of enterprises, the restriction of capital transfers in case of suspicion, the monitoring of all accounts for traces of terrorist acts and the transmission of relevant identified information to authorities.



## The international (un)coordinated response

The international adoption of counter-terrorism financing measures and legislation is fairly widespread and consistent. UNSC Resolution 1373 (2001) calls upon states to criminalise, freeze and prohibit terrorist financing.<sup>7</sup> As a binding act, it triggered the obligation on states to prevent funds from being accessed by terrorists (and those aiding or abetting) and from entering the international financial system. More recently, in order to reflect the adjustment and new challenges posed by terrorist organisations, the UNSC updated its intentions to specifically target Daesh and its related funding streams. UNSC Resolution 2170 (2014) specifically aims to restrict Daesh financing by including binding provisions prohibiting profiting from or dealing with: revenues generated from the control of oil fields and related infrastructure, kidnapping ransoms, trade, donations from individuals and entities, and any sanctions evasion through aircraft or other transport to transfer gold or other valuable items and economic resources for sale on international markets. These measures were furthermore corroborated by UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014) to include the financing and support of foreign terrorist fighters and all those seeking to travel to fight alongside terrorist organisations.

In February 2015, the UN reinstated its conviction that limiting funds is an essential element of its counter-terrorism strategy<sup>8</sup> by adopting yet another resolution, UNSC Resolution 2199, which aimed specifically at suppressing the financing of terrorism<sup>9</sup> and included restrictions on all trade, banking and similar commercial dealings counter to international law. International action to combat the financing of terrorism is, therefore, not only a political tool but also one with significant implications for international industry.

The multilateral actor supporting the implementation of UNSC measures – and their impact on the private sector – is the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which has been the standard setter for anti-money laundering regulations since 1989. FATF recommendations on “international anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism and proliferation” broadly define the measures required to address anti-money laundering and terrorist financing that must be put in place by

states in order to respond to the threat. FATF recommends that all relevant stakeholders, public and private sectors alike, pay special attention to alternative remittance systems, cash couriers, non-profit organisations and wire transfers, which are identified as particularly vulnerable given the difficulties in determining the provenance and destination of funds in these areas. As a result of the binding nature of UNSC resolutions and the enforcement capacity of FATF recommendations, the criminalisation of terrorism financing, including the preparation, abetting, facilitation or financial support of terrorism, is a globally adopted practice.

Regional organisations also support international counter-terrorist measures. The European Commission (EC) has recently proposed a package of measures to complement, review and harmonise EU action to combat terrorism, including some measures on terrorism financing. Presented by Frans Timmermans, first Vice-President of the Commission, the package is divided into a Terrorism Directive and an Action Plan on illegal trafficking of firearms and explosives<sup>10</sup> and will ultimately aim to increase information sharing, mutual legal assistance and joint investigations among EU member states.

In sum, actions to counter terrorist financing are relatively well established and implemented globally. However, although the process of criminalising terrorism and restricting its support has been easy for governments, the extent to which countries have been able to cooperate in real terms to track, pursue and detain potential terrorist finances is still a challenge. Governments, through the guidance of the UNSC and FATF and with the assistance of the private sector, are able to “follow the money” and determine criminal finance trends, perpetrators and destinations. However, Daesh’s diversification of terrorist financing poses new challenges that require awareness of not only the source and destination of money but also methods of curtailing the new activities used to finance terrorism.

## **Daesh financing**

2014 estimates put Daesh’s oil profits at 1 million dollars per day and kidnap ransoms at 20 million dollars per year.<sup>11</sup> The diversification of the funding strategy illustrates the group’s acknowledgement that it

cannot rely on one single income source and that it faces increasingly greater restrictions within the international financial system. Daesh's "fortune" originates essentially from its control of territory and the appropriation of existing revenue sources.<sup>12</sup> Bank looting, oil trade, agricultural exploitation, external funding networks and taxing civilians are crucial, but militants also rely on human trafficking, smuggling of precious goods, kidnapping for ransom, and the looting and selling of cultural artefacts.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Occupation of territory and taxation***

Daesh has made its fortune through occupying territory belonging to Iraq and Syria and by the looting of state assets and available resources. The 2013 take-over of Mosul's central bank and its treasures is thought to have generated a profit of 420 million dollars,<sup>14</sup> not including property, transport vehicles and other goods appropriated during the occupation. As an aspiring state, Daesh has also begun to collect taxes from citizens and businesses and also from the very few individuals that travel across its controlled territory.

### ***Natural resources***

Trading in natural resources is perhaps the second largest source of financing after territorial gains. Taking into consideration declining oil prices and the increased difficulties in refining oil, FATF estimates that Daesh is able to produce 50,000 barrels of petroleum per day selling at around 35 dollars per barrel.<sup>15</sup> Currently, despite the efforts of the international anti-Daesh coalition<sup>16</sup> prioritising airstrikes on the terrorist organisation's oil refineries, which aim to limit their oil production capacity, it is believed that the group is still able to trade unrefined oil on the black market by hiding or disguising the origin of the product.<sup>17</sup>

Daesh's reliance on the exploitation of natural resources, especially oil and gas but also agriculture and products of other extraction industries, represents one of the most difficult challenges to the international combat strategy due to the impossibility of distinguishing or identifying the provenance of these resources. Unlike with other trafficked goods, if

the international community fails to identify the transport of the products and if “smurfing” is successful, then little can be done to counter these practices other than freezing any identifiable financial transactions.

### ***Antiquities***

Although looting had always been a problem in Iraq and Syria, now it represents a source of income and offers “hope for people”.<sup>18</sup> “The trade begins with ‘local diggers, who sell their finds through a black market to intermediaries, who in turn resell to local or foreign dealers’ who then resell artefacts to collectors”.<sup>19</sup> Professional criminals, civilians, rebels and government forces (in Syria), and Daesh co-exist in this sphere and compete over the market and profits from the trade of artefacts.<sup>20</sup> Daesh, however, has deployed an organised strategy, which, through an intensive network, access to tools and relevant markets, and an outright willingness to destroy, has helped it emerge as the largest looter and greatest threat to cultural heritage in the areas under its control.<sup>21</sup>

As part of its aspiration to operate as a state rather than an armed group, it issues licenses for excavation and facilitates the transport, thus profiting from a trade that would consume too much time and too many resources to carry out on its own. It also enforces taxation, at a flat rate of 20%, for the transport and sale of artefacts.<sup>22</sup> Daesh takes advantage of the historical sites and artefacts within its reach “by running a trafficking network, facilitating smuggling through offering a service, or levying a tax on traffickers who move looted artefacts through their territory”.<sup>23</sup> The US Department of State has recently found evidence that Daesh has raised at least 1.25 million dollars from antiquities smuggling.<sup>24</sup> Judging from satellite pictures of Daesh-controlled areas that illustrate the increase in excavation sites since 2012,<sup>25</sup> profiting from the trade of artefacts appears to be firmly on the rise and facing little resistance.

### ***Donations***

FATF has also identified donations by non-profit organisations and individuals as an important, albeit much smaller, source of income.<sup>26</sup> Daesh carries out some fundraising activities on-line that target international

supporters, particularly donors from the Gulf region. Some donations are in the form of goods and services rather than capital, which makes them increasingly more difficult to trace.

Overall, Daesh's financing model illustrates a diversified strategy and highlights the varied challenges posed to the international community, which must address this threat in its many different forms. Following the money trail of such a multi-resourceful actor is insufficient, and the existing measures must become more reliable in the area of collaboration among states, which facilitates targeted cross-border action against trafficking in antiquities, illegal oil sales, and any sort of supply chain heading towards terrorist-controlled areas.

### **The devil is in the detail**

The international community has produced and agreed upon sufficient documents and legislation to address terrorist financing. However, recent terrorist attacks have actually been relatively inexpensive to carry out.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the increasing incidence of lone-wolf terrorist attacks, which are carried out by extremists drawing inspiration from terrorist organisations but acting alone, further indicates that the time when terrorism was a costly and complex network operation may be behind us.

Daesh's multifaceted financing structure, which simultaneously engages in trading, illicit trafficking and state-like fundraising schemes, is challenging the international community's existing strategies to limit terrorist financing. The result is the unavoidable recognition that terrorist organisations are adjustable actors with the capacity to respond and adapt to counter-measures and adversity.

International action to identify and restrict terrorism financing has thus far been focused on asset freezing and ensuring the criminalisation of all those aiding, abetting and financing terrorism. However, criminal action is constantly evolving and making use of a number of resources, and the efforts to stop it, therefore, must also evolve and make use of diverse resources. While the use of financial intelligence to identify the origin of attacks and their perpetrators may prove relatively successful, recent attacks and Daesh's financing structure demonstrate that significant challenges still remain regarding sharing information among

states, coordinating investigations, addressing diverse cross-border threats in tandem, and making full use of partnerships with the financial institutions involved.<sup>28</sup>

Solid relations and partnerships between states and financial institutions are, therefore, key elements of any future action aimed at addressing the relative challenges and building a cooperative and consistent implementation of the existing strategy. Since September 11, 2001, the international community has come a long way towards counteracting terrorist financing, but, as is the case with most everything in life, the “devil is in the detail”. States must now focus on working together and finding new allies if they are to respond effectively to the threat at hand.

## NOTES

- 1 Whereas no agreed common definition exists, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) broadly sets out some defining characteristics as “criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act”, available on-line at [www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8214.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8214.doc.htm).
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- 4 W. F. Wechsler, *Follow the Money*, in “Foreign Affairs”, 4/2001, pp. 40-57.
- 5 See FATF’s General Glossary. Financial institutions include “any natural or legal person who conducts as a business [...] acceptance of deposits [...] lending [...] money or value transfer services [...] trading [...]”, available on-line at [www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/?hf=10&b=0&s=desc%28fatf\\_releasedate%29](http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/?hf=10&b=0&s=desc%28fatf_releasedate%29).
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- 7 “The Security Council [...] decides that all States shall: (a) prevent and suppress the financing of terrorist acts; (b) criminalise the wilful provision or collection, by any means, directly or indirectly, of funds by their nationals or in their territories [...]; (c) freeze without delay funds and other financial assets or economic resources of persons who commit, or attempt to commit, terrorist acts or participate in or facilitate the commission of terrorist acts [...]; (d) prohibit their nationals or any persons and entities within their territories from

- making any funds, financial assets or economic resources or financial or other related services available". UNSC Resolution 1373 (2001) adopted by the Security Council at its 4385<sup>th</sup> meeting, September 28, 2001, UN Doc S/RES/1373 (2001), available on-line at [www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/specialmeetings/2012/docs/United%20Nations%20Security%20Council%20Resolution%201373%20%282001%29.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/specialmeetings/2012/docs/United%20Nations%20Security%20Council%20Resolution%201373%20%282001%29.pdf).
- 8 See United Nations Action to Counter Terrorism, available on-line at [www.un.org/en/terrorism/background.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/background.shtml).
  - 9 UNSC Resolution 2199 (2015), adopted by the Security Council at its 7379<sup>th</sup> meeting, on February 12, 2015, UN Doc S/RES/2199 (2015), available on-line at [www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11775.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11775.doc.htm). See also *UN Security Council Votes Yes to Cutting off ISIL Funding*, Euronews, February 12, 2015, available on-line at [www.euronews.com/2015/02/12/un-security-council-votes-yes-to-cutting-off-isil-funding/](http://www.euronews.com/2015/02/12/un-security-council-votes-yes-to-cutting-off-isil-funding/).
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# THE MEDIA, METHODS AND MESSAGES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

*Harith Hasan al-Qarawee*

*This article examines the communication strategy of the Islamic State. As an outlawed terrorist group, IS has focused great attention on controlling information and using available media to recruit fighters or deliver messages. It has been under no obligation to abide by legal, moral and professional standards. As a consequence, it is willing and able to use all types of messages that magnify its strengths and conceal its weaknesses, no matter how abusive and elusive they might be. It has branded itself as a spectacularly violent group whose cruelty and preparedness to commit atrocities have no limits. This article addresses the subject in three sections. The first deals with the group's communication strategies, the second with its tools and tactics and the third with its messages. It draws on materials published by the group through its media outlets, in addition to what has been written on the topic in Arab and Western media and research centres.<sup>1</sup>*

## **The Islamic State's communication strategies**

The Islamic State's methods of communication and messages are used as strategic tools of war and power consolidation. As a terrorist organisation adopting a militant and messianic ideology, the group has multiple interests in elaborating an effective communication strategy. It wants to

communicate with the world on its own terms, mainly by controlling information and disseminating messages that serve its propaganda without harming its secrecy.

On rare occasions, IS has allowed foreign journalists to visit its “territories” and embed with its members, as was the case with the German journalist, Jürgen Todenhöfer.<sup>2</sup> In general, however, the group does not trust the coverage of Western journalism and prefers to confide in its own propaganda machine and media partners in constructing the narrative about its activities and operations.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, IS uses a variety of media outlets to propagate its promise of an unremitting “holy” war and salvation for “true Muslims” that follow this promise. As an outlawed group that is denied access to most mainstream outlets, it depends significantly on new media and social networks, especially given the fact that these media tolerate anonymity and allow the publication of non-verified content.

In December 2015, “The Guardian” published a document written by a leading member of IS<sup>4</sup> proposing an administrative plan for the Islamic State. In this document, media and propaganda are identified as significant elements in IS’s management of its so-called state. The document discusses the need for a major “promoter” serving the objectives and interests of the Islamic State, which requires full-time media institutions functioning under the supervision of one administration.

This attempt to control the group’s propaganda and centralise key outreach decisions has not prevented IS from building a decentralised structure to guarantee the flow of messages from different sources. Each *wilayah* (region) controlled by the group has its own media office covering the group’s activities in the region. The main concern is to make sure that these messages serve the group’s main objectives. For that reason, it assigns key media positions to people whose loyalty to the group is not in question. The position of the spokesperson, for example, which is the highest media position in the group, was given to one of its core leaders and ideologues, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani.

The group publishes, releases and distributes its materials through media centres such as al-Hayat, al-Furqan, Ajnad, al-l’*tisam*, al-Battar and al-A’*maq*. Most of these centres exist only virtually and are part of a sophisticated decentralised network functioning from different places

around the world. In addition, there are thousands of fervent individuals who support the group by disseminating relevant materials. In this sense, even if the group's physical existence suffered a severe attack, its virtual network could continue to function and deliver a narrative inconsistent with the realities on the ground. Hence, these media outlets have enhanced IS's ability to construct its own reality.

The Islamic State is engaged in a war of narratives with various enemies and on different levels.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it has diversified its media and tactics, as well as the content of its speech and language. In this sense, it uses a degree of market segmentation. Its messages targeting local populations residing in territories under its control are distinct from those aiming to recruit fighters and supporters and also from those targeting other Muslim countries or the Western audience.<sup>6</sup>

### **Media, tools and tactics**

Unlike other jihadist groups, IS has widely used audiovisual production to deliver its messages. It has produced several films or short videos characterised by technical sophistication and exaggerated exhibitionism. The group has attracted people with experience in audiovisual production and taken advantage of the technological development in this field, especially new software.<sup>7</sup> IS has also published magazines and used traditional media outlets in order to deliver ideological content and more detailed messages. Among its well-known publications is "Dabiq", the on-line magazine first published in July 2014 in a number of different languages. The group also founded al-Bayan Radio, which broadcasts in Mosul. In addition, billboards and murals have been installed in Mosul and Raqqa to standardise the spatial symbolism and assert the group's ascendancy. Important vehicles for IS's propaganda are virtual libraries and websites, designed to post the group's publications, videos and audios, and to promote its narrative in political and ideological debates. They contain vast collections of e-books and pamphlets on jihad and its ideological and operational aspects, as well as information about fighting tactics and instructions on ways to design and create explosive devices.

It is well known that social networks are the most important medium for the Islamic State. They can be divided into two types: closed

jihadist networks and popular open networks. The former are specialised social media that appear for a period of time to circulate publications and materials and to host debates on issues of concern. The latter include networks and platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. They have become a crucial tool to spread propaganda and recruit new members and have been used widely because they are inexpensive, easy to use and capable of providing a high degree of anonymity. A recent study published by the Brookings Institution explains that Twitter, in particular, has been one of the most favourite tools used by the group and its sympathisers.<sup>8</sup> The study identifies more than 46,000 Twitter accounts affiliated with or sympathetic to IS. Although many of these accounts have been closed by Twitter and do not, after all, represent a large percentage of the network's 288 million users, the study notes an attempt to organise harmonious and effective campaigning for IS.

Another study released by George Washington University breaks down Twitter accounts into three categories: nodes, amplifiers and shout-outs. The nodes are the top voices in the IS Twittersphere, which set its agenda and create content. The amplifiers re-tweet and share this content, while the shout-outs introduce new accounts to the community and promote the new accounts of previously suspended users.<sup>9</sup>

## **Key messages**

Messages produced by ISIS vary according to their targeted audience and objective. Through its discourse and communication content, the group seeks to achieve several strategic objectives that, for the purpose of this study, can be divided into three main categories: legitimisation, mobilisation and terrorising.

### ***Legitimisation***

Seeking to consolidate its power and recruit people, IS markets itself through two main legitimising narratives: one emphasising that it is a state and the other asserting that it is truly Islamic. In mediatic terms, IS has worked to demonstrate this by spreading standard images and symbols such as the black flag and the black uniform-like costume of its mem-

bers. As an important legitimising tool to assert its status as a “state”, IS has strived to appear as an authority exercising governance and securing loyalty within areas under its control. Here, its messages to local population are usually delivered through traditional media, such as billboards and murals, and direct personal contact. The group publishes images of its social services, such as providing cheap medical care, distributing aid or petrol to local residents, offering classes to teach Qur’an, reaching out to children and patrolling the cities in police cars.<sup>10</sup> Recent photographs circulated by IS-affiliated websites show that the group completed a project to pave a key commercial road in Aleppo. The group also released pictures in November 2015 showing its members actively working in (and also supervising) a lettuce farm in Fallujah, a dairy factory in Aleppo and a centre for the rehabilitation of war-wounded and disabled patients.

IS presents itself as the ultimate objective of any true Muslim. It has frequently urged Muslims to migrate to its lands, join forces under its umbrella and support the Islamic State in every possible way. *Khilafah* is portrayed as an integral part of Islam that Muslims had lost for a long time but now has finally been restored, thanks to its *mujahideen*.

In his first speech as *khalifa*, al-Baghdadi pleaded for Muslims everywhere to join the *khilafah* state: “Come to your state. Syria is not for Syrians, and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The land is for Allah, who decides to whom it is entrusted”. He specifically called on religious scholars, preachers, judges, military officers, administrators and public servants, doctors and engineers to remember that it was their obligation to help the “true” nation of Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

As a Salafist organisation, IS believes that justice has no other meaning but submission to *Shari’a*. Accordingly, a just state is, in keeping with the group’s definition, an Islamic Salafist state. Therefore, people have to follow its mandates as the group “purifies” society from non-Islamic laws and practices. The group installed a large billboard in Mosul showing one of its militants placing a foot on what seemed to be books of law while holding a machine gun in his hand; beside the image Arabic words read: “Under my foot man-made laws”. Another billboard included the following statement in Arabic: “We want to have nothing but God’s law to judge us”. A similar message was seen on a mural with the slogan: “The Islamic State: a book guides and a sword brings victory”.<sup>12</sup>

While seeking to appeal to all Muslims, IS cannot ignore the competition with other jihadist organisations, especially al-Qaeda and its branch in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, in addition to smaller Sunni groups both in Syria and Iraq. The terrorist organisation has engaged in this competition politically, ideologically and militarily. Its propaganda emphasises that it represents an expanding Islamic state to which all other jihadist groups should pledge loyalty. It insists that no other flag but its own can be raised in the lands of *khilafah* and celebrates the declarations of *baiyah* (allegiance) made by other jihadist groups in the region. It uses these proclamations, even the most symbolic ones, to give the impression of an incessantly growing project despite the hostilities it has been facing.<sup>13</sup>

Jihadist forums have seen intense debates on IS's actions and decisions. Its advocates have sought to justify in religious terms the declaration of *khilafah* as one based on true Salafist jurisprudence. The group has declared an ideological and military war against those challenging its authority, issuing several statements to justify actions against them. This legitimising narrative is associated with a mythology viewing today's conflict in apocalyptic terms. The group named its magazine, "Dabiq", after a small town in Syria's Aleppo (Halab) region near the border with Turkey. An Islamic prophecy predicted that Muslims would defeat "Rome" (reimagined by jihadists as a reference to Western powers for some time) in the area of Dabiq before moving to conquer Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). The prophecy was quoted at length in the opening pages of the magazine.<sup>14</sup> This prophecy has been recognised by small circles of jihadists and does not represent an influential element in mainstream Islam. However, it has been used to generate the sense of inevitability that IS seeks to spread about its ambition of "lasting and expanding".

### ***Mobilisation***

The idea of jihad and that Muslims should be ready to fight for their "Islamic State" is present in most IS statements. Murals and billboards in Mosul and Raqqa have been rife with slogans praising jihad. One famous quote from Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian jihadist intellectual, has been seen written on walls and has also appeared repeatedly in IS texts: "Whoever does not pay the price of jihad, shall pay the price of abstention".<sup>15</sup>



IS's media outlets regularly produce and distribute anthems glorifying the group and its achievements. Among these anthems are "The Clanging of the Swords", "The Islamic State Emerged", and "Why Kneeling Down". IS's anthems have been spread on-line by jihadists and supporters, using a language of determination and love of martyrdom. Although jihadist anthems do not use music, they are usually sung by *munshideen* (performers) with powerful voices. By the end of 2013, IS released the song "My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared", which has become very popular on jihadist platforms and among IS supporters. These anthems provide the soundtrack to all the Islamic State's videos and have been played from cars in towns under IS's control and even on the battlefield.

One main objective of the Islamic State's communication strategy is to recruit more fighters and operatives. It is well known that social media are one of its main recruitment tools. Publications and audiovisual productions have also aimed to present its image as a triumphant and undefeatable entity. For example, in June 2014 the group issued a video entitled "The Breaking of the Borders", showing tractors removing border lines between Iraq and Syria, which was followed by another video with the title "The End of Sykes-Picot" in which one of its militant, Abu Sayyaf, states that IS will eventually break all of the Middle East's borders to pave the way to Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

In September 2014, the group released a film called "Flames of War", which covers battles fought by its militants and is followed by a defiant message addressing the international coalition. Al-Furqan Media Foundation released four parts of a film entitled "Clanging of the Swords",<sup>17</sup> which follows the group's battles since before its taking of Mosul. The group also released a series of 50 videos titled "Messages from the Land of Epics", documenting its military achievements. Interestingly, while these videos have aimed to communicate an enthusiastic recruiting message, the group has usually been careful not to jeopardise the anonymity of its militants or reveal sensitive military information regarding the sites of their operation or deployment.<sup>18</sup>

The group's messages employ narratives of victimisation in order to recruit Sunni Muslim militants. Hence, they have stressed the sectarian dimension of the conflict and the idea that Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria had been humiliated for a long time before the emergence of the

Islamic State, and that only by joining IS and subscribing to its radical approach, Sunni Muslims will restore their dignity and the ascendancy they had once achieved in the past. The victimhood narrative was also used after the international coalition began its military campaign against IS. One example is a video released following the escalation of the French airstrikes in Raqqa as an act of retaliation following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. The video shows smashed buildings while an IS fighter, speaking in French, states that the airstrikes targeted a medical centre and a bakery. Then another masked militant speaking in French says: “Oh West. Did you not understand yet? Muslims are no longer what they were. Your aggressions will not go without punishment. Muslims today are respected, something you are not used to. [...] We will retaliate”.

### ***Terrorising***

An important element in the group’s war and communication strategies is what jihadists call “the victory by terror” (*Nasr bil-r’ub*). The use of videos and images showing IS’s extreme violence and cruelty is intended to psychologically defeat the enemy even before engaging with him militarily. The group justifies this strategy by citing an account (*hadith*) attributed to the Prophet Mohammed in which he said that he was divinely favoured over other prophets by six characteristics, one of which was “the victory by terror”. As in many other examples, the group has decontextualised this *hadith* and re-interpreted it to legitimise its brutal behaviour.

These images depict IS as a ruthless, cruel group and a murdering machine that does not compromise with its foes. They seem to have been effective in some contexts, especially in the group’s early march to control Iraqi cities after its sudden occupation of Mosul. Influenced by the cruelty of those images, thousands of Iraqi soldiers are said to have fled their positions. The video showing IS militants murdering 1,700 Iraqi soldiers who were deployed in Camp Speicher military base near Tikrit<sup>19</sup> was one of the early manifestations of the group’s dependence on “terrorising methods”. Afterwards, the group released a series of terrorising videos of beheadings, beginning with one named “Message to America”, which showed the beheading of James Foley, an American

journalist. Shortly thereafter, in September 2014, another video was released showing the beheading of Steven Sotloff, an American hostage. In February 2015, the group released one of its most shocking videos showing its members burning alive a Jordanian pilot who had been captured in Raqqa. This video appeared to have upgraded the terrorising methods to a new level of cruelty.

## **Conclusion**

As an outlawed group seeking to mobilise new recruits and communicate rebellious messages, IS has developed communication strategies dependent on a mixture of primitive and new media tools. It has used billboards, murals and mosque sermons to communicate with local populations, while building a relatively sophisticated presence on the internet to communicate with its targeted audience abroad. The Islamic State seeks to achieve three key objectives through its communication strategy: legitimisation, mobilisation and terrorising. To achieve these goals it relies on market segmentation and diversification of media. Clearly, its on-line activities have been crucial to achieving its last three goals. Efforts to shut down its websites and social networks have recently escalated but are still far from considerably weakening its “virtual” presence. The degree of interdependence between the group’s physical existence in Iraq, Syria, and Libya and its virtual presence is still unclear, but they are undeniably feeding each other. IS has benefited from the vacuums created by failed states and civil wars in those countries by establishing its physical existence as a self-proclaimed state. Similarly, it has benefited from the networked, decentralised and globalised on-line media that are tolerant of anonymity and non-verified content by building its virtual network. This confirms the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict against the terrorist group. However, putting an end to its physical existence, if indeed possible, might not be sufficient to stop its virtual appeal.

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# THE LIMITS OF CYBERTERRORISM

Manuel R. Torres Soriano

*Despite the generalised perception of the danger arising from cyberterrorism and threatening jihadist propaganda, terrorist groups do not appear to possess the resources – human, economic, and technological – to conduct a cyberwar. Furthermore, it does not seem that such a situation can evolve in time to the point of increasing the likelihood of a cybernetic attack by the mujahideen. This does not detract from the notion that actions carried out on the web, especially if repeated and aimed at symbolic targets, can have an enormous emotional impact, thus increasing the actual weight and substance of the danger.*

There is a generalised perception that it is relatively easy to use the internet to cause catastrophic damage by striking a random target connected to the web. Among the many players deemed to have a clear interest in creating such apocalyptic scenarios, terrorist organisations are recognised due to their penchant for carrying out sensational acts and finding ways to create panic among the targeted populations. Nonetheless, a good portion of these predictions stems from a distorted view of the nature of cyberspace and the prerequisites necessary to operate within it. One of the principal problems in understanding the actual magnitude of this phenomenon is the ongoing confusion concerning the scope of the concept of cyberterrorism. Actions typically perceived as cyberter-

rorism range from “hacktivism” (political activism through sabotage or the disclosure of classified digital content) to the use of the internet as a means of advancing common terrorist activities, such as propaganda, financing, research, or private communication among the members of the very terrorist groups.

However, in the strict sense cyberterrorism implies quite exclusively the use of cyberspace as an instrument to cause physical harm to individuals and objects, which amounts to something infinitely more complex compared to the rest of the activities that are less rigorously associated with it.

Is there really any foundation to the alarm concerning the threat that could originate from cyberterrorism? In this essay I sustain the thesis that not only are terrorist groups, especially jihadist, very deficient in the competencies necessary to utilise cyberspace as an instrument to bring to fruition attacks (this despite their irrefutable interest in doing so) but also that it is rather unlikely that they will be able to reverse this situation in the future.

### **Interest versus competency**

Groups like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State have demonstrated their skills quite clearly when presented with the need to utilise new information technologies as an instrument useful for the enhancement of their traditional terrorist activities. The propagandistic production of jihadism has aimed to spur its followers to carry out their own initiatives also in the realm of cybernetics. However, these appeals, which are far from constituting an actual terrorist blueprint, have seemed for the most part like deliberations uttered aloud in hopes of inspiring some other sympathetic follower who possesses the necessary skills. An analysis of information available from open sources underscores the apparent scarcity and limited scope of events of this nature. Most of the information seems to indicate that some militants might be trying to get trained or experimenting with the possibility of carrying out attacks on the internet. Appearing in the public eye in recent years have been presumed groups of jihadist hackers whose stated goal is that of tapping into their computer skills in order to carry out “electronic jihad”. Nonetheless, beyond

their triumphal harangues regarding the mujahideens' ability to degrade the economy of the West, the reality is that the operational knowledge of these "groups of experts" has been limited to the sewing together of manuals and tutorials, which are not only easily traced on-line or in other ways but also lacking in practical value. The "open jihad university" that radical groups have claimed to establish on the internet is essentially a propagandistic and motivational tool for its followers rather than a training institute for future cyberterrorists. Indiscriminate distribution of technical information, in effect, runs counter to the hermetical closing and the surprise factor that ought to distinguish a successful cyberterroristic attack.

A greater level of sophistication has been expected from these groups, whose "operations" have been limited to uncomplicated attacks against insufficiently protected web pages. In some cases their acts of sabotage against virtual content deemed offensive from an Islamic perspective have been carried out using methods that demonstrate an absolute lack of special technical skills. These include, for example, obtaining passwords of targeted pages by using "social engineering" tactics, or sending threatening messages to businesses or enterprises with servers with the goal of forcing them to eliminate given content from cyberspace.

### **Cyberconflict's barriers**

The most alarmist projections concerning the feasibility of cyberterrorism are based on results of exercises that some American government institutions carried out in the late 1990s with the goal of assessing the security of their information technology systems. These results, however, are not directly applicable to what a terrorist organisation could obtain if it proposed to arrive at the same goal. Forced to operate in a clandestine manner and dedicated to the protection of its members, a non-government entity would find it difficult to mobilise a similar critical mass and to provide a secure environment for collaborative work. On the other hand, the bellicose use of cyberspace is not an activity free from economic costs. "Digital Pearl Harbor", a simulation completed in 2002 by the US Naval War College, came to the conclusion that the re-



alisation of a complex act of cyberterrorism would require a budget of 200 million dollars and would also take some five years to implement.

Over the years these entrance barriers have only increased. For example, when the Stuxnet worm is used as a paradigm for the destructive capacity of a “simple” computer program, the actual scope of the cyberattack is overestimated. Stuxnet is the work of a multidisciplinary team that included experts in many different fields, from nuclear physics to the engineering of a specific component of industrial products marketed by Siemens, but it is also the product of organising operational intelligence, goal identification, and the ability to physically insert the program in a network of computers that for security measures were not connected to the internet at the time.

The availability of such specialised skills and know-how is as limited in terrorist groups as it is in the rest of society. Despite the proclamations of jihadist propaganda, which claim that there are thousands of members who study computer science in order to use their knowledge in combat, the reality is that only a marginal number of activists can count on advanced training in computer science or other potentially useful fields of study. Conversely, the American National Security Agency (to mention just one of the Western organisations charged with fighting a cyberwar) has on its payroll more than one thousand mathematicians, nine hundred PhDs researching in different scientific and technical fields, and four thousand computer scientists, which represents the largest global concentration of this type of expertise in a single organisation.

For a terrorist group wishing to complete the development process of a cyberweapon, the most important obstacle involves securing the means of experimenting developed software repeatedly and of evaluating its effectiveness on real targets. Before being put into action, Stuxnet had been tested on experimental nuclear installations located in the United States, and these installations were equipped with features identical to those present on Iranian soil and configured exactly as a target would be under attack. Cyberweapons are products created specifically to operate against a concrete objective and under unique conditions that are unlikely to appear in other victims. The “spread” of cyberweapons and the knowledge of their coding by other individuals

do not necessarily presuppose a danger of proliferation. Although it is certainly possible to obtain useful information concerning the architecture and functioning logic of these programs through an action of inverse engineering, we are dealing with know-how that may serve solely to inspire future innovations, which is also limited to those possessing the necessary human and material resources to use it. There is no evidence in support of the thesis that the mere passing of time plays in the favour of the cybernetic aspirations of terrorism. Take the case of the hypothetical threat involving the use of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, a threat that never materialised due the terrorists' inability to access crucial resources and to master the complexity of instruments of this nature.

One often speculates on the possibility that necessary expertise could be subcontracted to "cyberdelinquent" groups demonstrating greater technical sophistication, but quite certainly even these groups face the same difficulty regarding logistics and preparation. In reality, it seems improbable that organisations such as these would be inclined to open this "line of exchange". Even if their motivations are principally economic, these groups secure earnings far greater than those that terrorism could potentially offer by carrying out actions on an international scale, such as bank fraud directed at individuals, extortion, theft, and the sale of data via the internet. Agents of organised crime are aware that the pressure they face from diverse policing agencies is infinitely lesser than what they would face if they decided to collaborate with terrorist organisations.

There are, for that matter, few incentives that would lead a government to opt to lose direct control of one of the most valuable assets of its arsenal and to assume the risk of transferring it to a group that could use it later against its benefactor. In theory the principal advantage could be its use against an enemy, which would allow the state to avoid retaliation by preserving its ability to deny responsibility. Even though the realms of cybernetics and of non-conventional weaponry share a degree of complexity that leaves no doubt concerning those who are actually able to use such resources, identifying the perpetrator of such attacks is not impossible, which makes the idea of working collaboratively on an enterprise of this nature even less attractive.

## **Beware what you think**

Despite these negative elements, the obsession about the presumed risk of cyberterrorism can be transformed into a partially self-fulfilling prophecy. Repeated discussion of the ease of producing catastrophic results through cyberspace does nothing more than increase the groups' interest and determination in continuing such attempts. Additional practise can help them reach a certain skill level in other kinds of actions that have a greater impact in the media, such as data destruction, personal data theft, and on-line identity theft. Actions such as these are within their reach, and given the low level of technical difficulty involved in carrying them out, if they were to be used repeatedly against highly symbolic targets, they could promote among the general public the idea that terrorists dominate cyberspace, indeed making their most deranged threats seem real.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Published here is an abridged version of M. R. Torres Soriano, *¿Es el yihadismo una ciber-amenaza?*, in “Revista de Occidente”, 406/2015.

PART III

**ISLAMIC RADICALISATION AND  
TERRORISM IN EUROPE**





# RADICAL ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN FRANCE: A STRUCTURAL THREAT?

*Jean-François Daguzan*

*While terrorism is not a new phenomenon in France, jihadist terrorism has taken on a new dimension after 9/11 and, more recently, with the Syrian civil war and its call to arms, which has persuaded tens of thousands of foreign volunteers to travel to the Middle Eastern country, fight to defend the “oppressed” Islam from persecution and an alleged plot hatched by the Jews, the Western countries and the heretic ones, and to expand the true Islamic State. France “supplies” a large portion of these foreign fighters and has also become a prime target of the jihad, which has unquestionably acquired a European dimension. The motives and social background of this new generation of fighters are being investigated. What has emerged is the lack of a typical jihadist profile.*

The January 2015 attacks on the weekly “Charlie Hebdo” and the Hyper-casher supermarket (which targeted cartoonists and Jews) and those of November 13, 2015 at Bataclan and throughout Paris, which targeted young people, marked the beginning of a new phase in the Jihadist fight against the rest of the world and France in particular.

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in France – in the past, it has come in all forms (anarchism, revolutionary communism, regionalism, and decolonisation). Terrorism linked to the Arab world and the Middle East emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was exclusively political. It

was from the mid-1980s that Afghanistan became the crucible of armed radical Islamism, that its structural doctrine was outlined in Egypt, and that favourable conditions existed for the emergence of al-Qaeda.<sup>1</sup> A few French youths joined this movement. However, from the 1990s onwards, the Algerian civil war brought the conflict to France, with the support of dual nationals and young people from immigrant backgrounds. This is the moment when radical Islamic terrorism emerged in France.

### **External terrorism that, little by little, became a national issue**

This wave coincides with the Algerian crisis and appearance of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which brought the conflict onto French soil with the Saint-Michel and Port Royal bombings (1995 and 1996). During this period, European terrorists began to travel to the fields of jihad, in other words, the areas which represented focal points for Muslim issues, notably Bosnia, Egypt, Algeria, Chechnya and Afghanistan. Less than one hundred French citizens travelled to fight in Bosnia, but the most radicalised of these returned to France ready for action.

Of course, jihadist terrorism took on a new dimension after 9/11, which brought al-Qaeda's cause to the world's attention. From this time on, Bin Laden and the Algerian Islamists have posed a threat to France. Meanwhile, various heads of the French intelligence services have stated that two or three major incidents have been prevented in France each year.<sup>2</sup> The American invasion of Iraq began to attract volunteers, but their numbers were low. France's involvement in Libya then Mali provoked renewed condemnation from Islamists of various origins. Some French citizens (including one convert) were arrested in Mali. But the real widespread call to arms was to come with the Syrian civil war, which led tens of thousands of foreign volunteers (30,000) to travel to the region to fight. French citizens make up a large proportion, occupying first place in Europe and third worldwide after Tunisians and Chechens.

Like Bosnia twenty years ago, but with the addition of internet technology, Syria has offered a space for jihadists which is in relatively close proximity. All it takes is a bus ticket, and some volunteers travel with their wives and children. In 2014, former Minister of the Interior and current Prime Minister Manuel Valls estimated the number of jihadists who had



passed through Syria to be 700, with around 250/280 there present at that time and roughly twenty dead. 150 potential recruits were believed to be preparing for departure.<sup>3</sup> One year later, 1,775 have passed through Syria and 543 are there currently (139 have died). Not all of these departures represent the same level of danger. However, it cannot be denied that this increase makes them harder to manage, especially given that the total number has risen by 51% since January 1, 2015. 73% have joined Daesh and 22% al-Nusra. This exodus includes 73 women. 23% of these jihadists are converts, 30% of them women.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is so worrying that the French Prime Minister stated that 10,000 individuals are subject to “fiche S” files, issued by the security forces for individuals, flagging them as jihadist sympathisers.<sup>5</sup>

The *modus operandi* of the terrorists has become simpler. Rather than aiming to carry out bomb attacks, which call for a minimum level of equipment and technical expertise, and therefore often require a network, they favour attacks using automatic weapons. The “militarised” staging and filming of massacres of defenceless people give their perpetrator a feeling of power, instant media attention and create the sense of a brotherhood of arms among the guerrillas. Moreover, they enable the terrorists, as it did Merah or those involved in the January and November 2015 shootings, to continue their “fight” against society – which is, of course, not possible with suicide attacks using explosive belts.

Radical Islamic terrorism has replaced the old guard of international terrorism (anarchism, revolutionary communism, etc.) and the old totalitarian regimes, but it relies on tools which were not available to these ideologues of the past: instant global communication via social networks (with self-radicalisation becoming a fact of society), the accessibility of technology, the availability of small calibre guns and explosives, and, for radical proselytisers, a ready supply of frustrations and identity issues on which to found a long and deadly “adventure”.

## **Motives**

Terrorists explain that Islam faces persecution in a number of countries and that “true” Muslims have good reason to defend themselves or to attack (this offensive dimension is stronger in Daesh than al-Qaeda). As a

result of its actions at home (the headscarf policy, secularism, caricatures of Mohammed) and abroad (Mali, Libya, Syria), France is considered to be a prime target. This “oppressed” Islam acts as a banner for those who feel humiliated and oppressed themselves. They therefore have a “duty” to fight their oppressors. The “plot” against Islam, instigated by the Jews, the Crusaders (Westerners), the unbelievers (bad Muslims) and the heretics (Shiites) therefore becomes an obsession, and something which they must fight against using all possible means. They must flee to the place where Islam is at its purest (in other words the liberated lands of the Islamic State) and aid in its expansion, or if this is not possible, fight where they are. With the shift from GIA to GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), which later became AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), France was named the second greatest enemy after the United States.<sup>6</sup> Daesh has made it number one!

### **No “typical” jihadist**

Essentially, we are faced with French people killing French people! It is true that these include dual nationals, but, despite the global nature of this issue, the large number of converts makes it a French phenomenon. However, there is also an undeniable European dimension, as jihadists from Belgium were at the heart of the 13 November attack.

While radicalisation can affect all sorts of people, there is no typical jihadist profile. Research carried out on radicalisation in France reveals extremely varied cases.<sup>7</sup> Among the jihadists, we find a certain number of dropouts, individuals trapped in the *banlieues*, the deprived suburbs outside major cities, unemployed and with unemployed parents.<sup>8</sup> However, it would be a serious mistake to associate terrorism solely with the economic crisis and poverty. Converts are found in all settings. They include those from well-integrated and educated backgrounds, those left behind by society, converts and thugs radicalised in prison. The common threads are the age group (25-35 years old), level of education (secondary on average), and a social background of small shopkeepers and family businesses.

Of course, the radicalisation of petty criminals is nothing new. Khaled Kelkal, the main perpetrator of the Saint-Michel bombing, acting for the GIA, was the first visible example of radicalisation in prison. The Rou-

baix Gang, dismantled in 1997, was a mixture of radicals (including the convert Lionel Dumont) and hardened criminals. Since then, there have been numerous recorded cases (both in France and the United States) – Mehdi Nemmouche, perpetrator of the massacre at Brussels Jewish Museum (2014), and Mohamed Merah, responsible for the murders of soldiers and Jews in the Toulouse region in 2012 are good examples of this. However, research demonstrates that prison is just one element in radicalisation among many others.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, attending radical mosques is no longer ubiquitous. The internet and social networks play a major role, as do small, local recruiters.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, all studies carried out in France by researchers or public authorities show us that there are only individual cases. These young people are aged between 15 and 29. Women represent around 30%. All social backgrounds are present. There are also numerous converts. The loss of family authority and that of society (school, official bodies) appears to be a major factor. The feeling of exclusion, humiliation and ghettoization also plays a role. The impression that there is an on-going plot (against Islam) controlled by the Jews is also widespread. For the better-off, it is a question of a teenage identity crisis and a quest for adventure. As a result, radicalised young people can no longer believe anyone except their brothers in Allah (“the *Truthful ones*”), the only ones to possess the truth. Group bonds play an important role.<sup>11</sup> The girls are attracted to the humanitarian aspect of jihad – helping people who are facing persecution and bombings. “The new believer restructures himself around a counter-system of supposedly traditional values, which set him apart from the world around him: he creates an opposition between frugality and the opulence of the world; modesty and the aggressive commercialised sexuality of western countries; spirituality and materialism; solidarity and individualism”.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, death is easy as it leads to Heaven. The jihadist therefore establishes an opposition between his fascination with and valorisation of death and the “cowardice” of the unbelievers. He acquires, as Farhad Khosrokhavar notes, a “Superman status”.<sup>13</sup> As such, suicide bombings are both a tactical weapon and an end in themselves.

The current situation in France is therefore characterised by a change in scale. The number of terrorists has reached a level that has not

been seen since the end of the Second World War! The second factor, as we have mentioned, is the massive impact of social networks. Globalisation, internet use and mobile phones have created what is known as a “cyberjihad”, an underground recruitment system in which lost individuals can find empirical answers to a quest, for adventure, for identity. The jihadists are aware of this. For the past year, an original French version of a jihadist website (“Dar al-Islam” magazine) has been realised. This is a significant development as in the past it had been translated into French from English. The third factor is *surterrorisation*, or “over-terrorisation”: Bombay, the attacks in Kenya, the massacre of a hundred and thirty-two children in Peshawar, throats slit in Syria, Boko Haram setting fire to villages and their inhabitants and the killings carried out by Daesh are illustrations of this. *Surterrorisation* and its impact are sold as a recruitment method and the preferred form of action. This use of terror as a propaganda tool has been theorised by several Daesh authors and publications, such as “Idaratou Atawahouche” (The management of barbarity) by Abu Bakr Naji, and “Fiqh al-Dima” (The jurisprudence of blood) by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir.

Should we speak of a “radical generation”, as socialist Member of Parliament Malek Boutih did in his government mission report?<sup>14</sup> While it may be an exaggeration to speak of a generational phenomenon, the number of aspiring jihadists poses a major long-term threat to France.

In conclusion, Islamist terrorists do not appear to be winning what they believe to be a war against the West and other Muslims. However, we can be certain that a considerable pool of volunteers will step in to replace the pseudo-martyrs and continue this terrorist fight which calls more for willingness than for means. The fragmented, worldwide and unseizable nature of the network, the charisma of its leaders, the fantasy of the caliphate, the shifting of the jihad on a global level and the ruthless violence of the followers of *takfir*,<sup>15</sup> make it possible to imagine a continuation of terrorist activity and on-going attempts to carry out ever more spectacular acts, whether by conventional means or otherwise. The definitive annihilation of Daesh on Syrian soil is just one aspect of this multi-faceted phenomenon.

While the elimination of these groups and the fight against terror is essential for the security of our societies, it cannot be the only response

to this movement. The constant state of emergency, which appears to be taking hold in France as a result of government measures, is not sustainable. It is true that the most radicalised fringe is totally indifferent to anything but suppression. But for the sake of the “lost” young people searching for an ideal, we must also attack the underlying causes behind the emergence of this new threat. They are political, economic and social and stem from a societal model that offers no ideal to its most defenceless young people.

## NOTES

- 1 See J.-F. Daguzan, *Terrorisme(s), abrégé d'une violence qui dure*, CNRS Editions, Paris 2006.
- 2 See J.-F. Daguzan, *El terrorismo islámico en Francia*, Real Instituto Elcano, December 22, 2008, available on-line at [www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/riecano\\_es/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_es/zonas\\_es/ari166-2008](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/riecano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari166-2008).
- 3 S. Mantoux, *Cachez ces djihadistes que je ne saurais voir... les volontaires français en Syrie*, Historicoblog, July 26, 2014, available on-line at [historicoblog3.blogspot.it/2014/07/cachez-ces-djihadistes-que-je-ne.html](http://historicoblog3.blogspot.it/2014/07/cachez-ces-djihadistes-que-je-ne.html).
- 4 Figures authorised and confirmed on October 22, 2015.
- 5 Valls: '20.000 personnes font l'objet d'une fiche S en France', Lefigaro.fr, November 24, 2015, available on-line at [www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2015/11/24/97001-20151124FILWWW00383-valls-20000-fiches-s.php](http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2015/11/24/97001-20151124FILWWW00383-valls-20000-fiches-s.php).
- 6 J.-F. Daguzan, *El terrorismo islámico en Francia*.
- 7 France did not begin to carry out in-depth sociological studies of jihadism until very recently.
- 8 S. Belaala, *Les facteurs de création des processus de radicalisation violente, chez les jeunes en particulier*, CEIS, Paris 2008, p. 64, available on-line at [ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/docs/pdf/ec\\_radicalisation\\_study\\_on\\_trigger\\_factors\\_fr.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/docs/pdf/ec_radicalisation_study_on_trigger_factors_fr.pdf).
- 9 Institut national des hautes études de sécurité et de la justice, *Radicalisation islamiste et filières djihadistes. Prévenir, détecter, traiter*, INHESJ, July 2015, p. 12, available on-line at [www.inhesj.fr/sites/default/files/files/publications/rapport\\_gds\\_3.pdf](http://www.inhesj.fr/sites/default/files/files/publications/rapport_gds_3.pdf).
- 10 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes*, June 2, 2015, p. 42, available on-line at [www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-enq/r2828.pdf](http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-enq/r2828.pdf).
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 13 D. Bénichou, F. Khosrokhavar, *Le jihadisme. Le comprendre pour*

*mieux le combattre*, Plon, Paris 2015, p. 308; see in particular the chapter “Approche sociologique: anatomie de la radicalisation”.

- 14 M. Boutih, *Génération radicale*, June 2015, mission report for the French Prime Minister, available on-line at [www.boutih.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/G%C3%A9n%C3%A9ration-radicale.pdf](http://www.boutih.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/G%C3%A9n%C3%A9ration-radicale.pdf).
- 15 The *Takfir wa hijra* (excommunication and exile) movement, born in Egypt in the 1980s, authorises the killing of the enemies of Islam, in particular “bad Muslims”, and to flee to places where Islam is pure – like the Islamic State in Syria today.



# THE HISTORY, MOTIVATIONS, FRAMING AND PROCESSES OF BELGIAN JIHADISM: THE MOLENBEEK CASE

Johan Leman

*The municipality of Molenbeek, which gained notoriety after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, due to its large Muslim population, offers a useful sample to analyse and better understand the process of radicalisation of young Muslims, the context in which this process takes place and the motivations that drive them towards jihadism. The following analysis<sup>1</sup> is based on interviews with family members of twenty young people, mostly from Molenbeek, who left Belgium between 2012 and 2015 for “small jihad”. Analysis is based also on YouTube videos that the subjects had watched<sup>2</sup> and on insights shared between other researchers, fieldworkers, police officers and some Salafist acquaintances.<sup>3</sup>*

## History

Khaled Kelkal is one of Europe’s first jihadists.<sup>4</sup> Kelkal radicalised during a prison sentence between 1990 and 1992, became a member of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), carried out his jihadist attacks in the summer of 1995 and was killed by French police on September 29, 1995.

Kelkal provides an interesting link when discussing jihadism in Belgium, and particularly in Molenbeek, since it is Djamel Beghal, also a member of the GIA in France, who stayed some months in Molenbeek during his visits to the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain.



Beghal left for Afghanistan at the end of 2000 and returned to France one year later. During his stay in Molenbeek, Beghal came into contact with Malika El Aroud and Ayachi Bassam, the French-Syrian sheikh.

Bassam was obliged to leave France in 1992 and came to Molenbeek, where he started his pro-jihad activities in 1997 with the creation of the Centre Islamique Belge (CIB) and the website Assabile.com. He had contact with Farid Melouk, an Algerian member of the GIA, who had travelled between France and Belgium before his arrest in 1998 following a shootout with police in Brussels.

In the same marginal neighbourhood in the lower part of Molenbeek, sheikh Bassam, Malika El Aroud, from time to time also Beghal, and Abd al-Sattar Dahmane, who had married El Aroud and killed Afghan commander Massoud a few days before 9/11, could start their recruitment activities, first for Afghanistan, and later for Somalia. Also belonging to the network was Nizar Trabelsi, the former soccer player arrested in 2001 and condemned in 2003 to ten years in prison. After a 2006 court case in Brussels against his son and also against his comrade, Raphaël Gendron, sheikh Bassam left Molenbeek for Italy, where, in Bari, a new case was brought against him in 2008. Once free, in 2012, Bassam left first for Molenbeek and later for Syria. In Molenbeek, Bassam developed once again new connections, among them, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a young man who would make contact with Mehdi Nemmouche, the killer at the Brussels Jewish Museum in 2014. Abaaoud would become one of the brains of the Paris attacks in November 2015. Obviously, the France-Belgium (in particular, Molenbeek) connection has a twenty-year history. Abaaoud and Nemmouche, however, were already part of a new generation: the so-called third-generation jihadists.

It is interesting, as Kepel observes,<sup>5</sup> that in France beginning in 2012 a third jihad-generation (after the Afghan and al-Qaeda ones) took over, including jihadists such as Mohamed Merah, who was responsible for killings in Toulouse and Montauban, Nemmouche, and others. They are the jihadists that Abu Musab al-Suri hoped for in “The Global Islamic Resistance Call”,<sup>6</sup> which called for an inter-religious civil war in Europe against all *kuffar* (infidels), an approach that was reinforced when al-Baghdadi proclaimed a global jihad in 2014. *Nizam, la tanzim*: a system, not an organisation.

There is, however, more. A London hate preacher of Pakistani descent, Anjem Choudary, the founder of Sharia4UK, came to Belgium

in 2006 to found Sharia4Belgium. He met Fouad Belkacem, who had already begun promoting *Shari'a* legislation for Belgium in Boom and Antwerp in 2004. Starting in Antwerp, the small group around Belkacem became active in Vilvoorde, a small city near Molenbeek. Many Moroccan families in Molenbeek have family members living in Vilvoorde. Their children meet during the year and not only during holidays in the Rif in northern Morocco.

In Molenbeek, still in the second-generation spirit, Rachid Benomari became a jihadist recruiter for Somalia between 2010 and 2011. He was arrested in Kenya in 2013. He recruited, among others, Mustapha Bouyahbaren, who appeared in court in Brussels with Benomari. The fact that Mustapha Bouyahbaren helped Trabelsi find a new spouse at the end of Trabelsi's stay in jail in 2012 proves that the original France-Belgium connection is still active. The Bouyahbarens are part of the sample of twenty jihadists that we studied.

However, there is yet another connection that warrants our attention. When studying Moroccan migrations to European countries, one may see that migrants from Nador and Oujda (where many jihadists come from) are very present in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. In our Molenbeek sample we discovered that at least one jihadist project was elaborated in Nador by people coming from Vilvoorde as well as from Molenbeek. Nador and Oujda are quite close to Senhadja de Srair, in the central Rif (Ketama), which is an area under control of organised crime as a result of its large hashish production. From the central Rif an important hashish smuggling activity begins, passing through Spain, France and Belgium to the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> Is it pure coincidence that a certain number of jihadists are drug dealers before their "conversion"?

We must not, however, reduce all possible jihadist recruitment in Belgium to the three aforementioned connections. There clearly also exists a connection between jihadists in the Netherlands and Flanders, and there is also the internet with its virtual connections: cyberjihadism.

## Numbers

In Belgium, in December 2015, the police followed 1,050 people suspected of having sympathies with terrorism and radicalism. Some 500

are from the Brussels region, and 118 live in the police zone where Molenbeek is located.<sup>8</sup> Of these 118 people, 15 are presumed dead. The remaining 103 files concern 25 people living in Syria, 13 who have probably returned, 8 who unsuccessfully tried to leave for Syria, 31 who are thought to be leaving, 17 jihad recruiters and/or supporters, 6 children that were brought to Syria by their parents, and 3 people whose intentions are not precisely known. This analysis indicates that the follow up of the jihadist phenomenon is not that simple and that figures have only a relative value everywhere.

## Motivations

Fraihy sees the following motivations for “small jihadists”: Salafist ideology, the image of Syria created in the social media, opportunism and peer pressure. Furthermore, many of these people are already known by the Belgian services for their extremism and their affiliation to extremist groups.<sup>9</sup>

According to Van San, there is, for the most part, not one motivating force that leads an individual to become a jihadist. It may be faith, but a lack of authority in a family, financial problems, or other issues may come into play.<sup>10</sup> Once at the absolute limit, they may further radicalise, and contact with their family may decrease over time.<sup>11</sup>

In my own sample, I distinguish between four subgenerations of what Kepel calls the third generation of jihadists, which also involves a variety of motivations. There is a 2012 Sharia4Belgium subgeneration, in which young criminals are not an exception. In Molenbeek they are not settled criminals but rather young ones involved mostly in drugs. They convert to an aggressive “small jihad” ideology. The 2013 subgeneration feels attracted by adventure; they have no doctrine. In the 2014 subgeneration we see more girls and young women in search of a better life and a lucky marriage in a caliphate. They often come from broken families. In the 2015 subgeneration we still see the attractiveness of the caliphate on young women, who are allured by young, radicalised Islamic men, and on young people, in general, who feel socially downcast.<sup>12</sup> A possible heroic death becomes an alternative for a social death.<sup>13</sup>

We can take into consideration many elements that have created a social fabric fostering radicalisation and jihadisation. Let us look closely at

the social fabric of lower Molenbeek. There was a significant demographic explosion in Molenbeek as a whole from 1995, when there were 68,000 inhabitants, to 2015, which saw 96,000 documented residents and 4,000 undocumented ones. The four districts in lower Molenbeek are characterised by enormous density, fluctuating between 18,267 and 23,414 per square kilometre. 49% of the families live in apartments smaller than 55 square metres. The population is very young, with 7% under the age of three. One third of the families with children are single-mother households. Only 25% of the young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years have a job, which offers evidence of a significant youth unemployment problem. The job market in Molenbeek provides work for only 3,055 inhabitants, while 21,755 workers come from outside the area. 58% are working on their own, as shopkeepers or hairdressers despite having a Diploma of Higher Education. There is a high mortality rate due to pollution. Low incomes explain why half of the population does not pay taxes. The municipality is very poor. There is a street culture that includes drug dealing, tenant exploitation and illegal weapons trade. In such a context, one might feel socially downcast, marginalised and stigmatised.

## Framing

Where there is marginalisation there is space for countercultures, which may become micro-settings for radicalisation.<sup>14</sup> Conspiracy theories may become common food. Youth culture, *mises en scène* of violent practices (a result of gaming culture) and elements of Salafism become intermingled. Narratives, not ideologies, drive this Salafism.<sup>15</sup> In other cases it concerns, rather, a late-adolescent identity crisis. One may radicalise, which is not necessarily a problem, but it may become problematic when a process of disaffiliation starts up, marking the beginning of a secluding jihadisation that leads the youngsters into a “new, isolated and alienating world”, the world of the caliphate.<sup>16</sup>

The *Ikhwan*, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and the *Salafiyya Jihadiyya* are the preachers of a caliphate under divine *Shari'a* legislation. Alienating myths may become the new framing macro-horizon in the jihadisation process. On June 19, 2014, *Ad-Dawla as-Islamiya fi'l-Iraq wa'sh-Sham* (Daesh), represented by sheikh Abu Muhammad

al-Adnani al-Shami, published a message in “al-Furqan”, referring to Qur’an 3:110: “*Khilafah* is back!”. *Khilafah* is said to be a just society of total equality, represented by a descendent of the Prophet, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose full name denotes his personal profile: Ibrahim ibn ‘Awwad, ibn Ibrahim, ibn ‘Ali, ibn Muhammad al-Badri al Husayni al Qurashi (his lineage), al-Samarra-i (his birth place), al-Baghdadi (where he studied Islam). Three months later, al-Baghdadi pronounced a *fatwa*, turning the territorial jihad into a global one. The ideologies of al-Baghdadi and of al-Suri began reinforcing intra-European civil war aspirations among young jihadists.

The apocalyptic dimension of the caliphate is also something very attractive to youngsters in search of heroism. Some Hadith narratives support the idea that the *Mahdi* is coming, appearing with the *Dajjal* (the false Messiah) and *Issa* (Jesus). There are signs of *fitna*, chaos and disorder, in *Sham*, Syria and Iraq. Even martyrdom is part of the myth of jihadism, according to sheikh Kishk.<sup>17</sup> One could wonder how post-modernism leads to an ideological climate in which individuals may find their own authoritative sources.<sup>18</sup> It is a fundamental problem in Islam. According to a postmodern interpretation, one’s *niyyah* (intention) becomes common good: a Muslim’s good intention is enough to justify an action that might even be criminal. The internet and its virtual space of narratives, images, colours and sounds create a new “second order semi-otic system”<sup>19</sup> in the Y-generation.

### The triggers in the process

How does a person enter from the micro-horizon into the macro-horizon? What are the triggers? Conversion literature offers an interesting model. After an encounter with a significant other, one may disaffiliate from former networks to re-affiliate slowly or quickly in a new, smaller one.<sup>20</sup> In my sample there is a case involving two cousins who embraced Salafism. In Salafism, an ideology where there is always a delegitimation of democratic structures since Salafists strongly believe that *Shari’a*, and not a secular legislation, is the one that should rule the world, a distinction is made between the *takfirist* and non-*takfirist* interpretations of the *al-wala wa-l-bara* doctrine. *Al-wala* is what God loves, *al-bara* is what

God rejects. The *takfirists* give themselves the right, and even the duty, to fight against the *kuffar* since God asks them, in their view, to support Him in preparing a clean world that will hasten the *Mahdi's* arrival on earth. In opposition to them, the apolitical, so-called orthodox *al-firqatou l-annajia* Salafists, who strongly believe in a select, small group of true believers, do not adhere to the *takfir* doctrine and reject violence. Of the two cousins, after a stay in Morocco where he took Qur'an lessons, the first one opted for the *Salafiyya Jihadiyya* and left for Syria, while the other cousin did not leave. In the words of the latter, his sheikh in Belgium convinced him that the non-*takfirist* interpretation of the *al-wala wa-l-bara* doctrine is the only right one.

A second trigger moment is when the jihadist sympathiser becomes convinced that it is even an act of love and of respect for her/his family (and for her/his mother) when s/he becomes disposed to cut the physical relations with them for a higher objective: caliphate and *Shari'a*. Videos on the internet, conversations with peers in prayer houses and meetings with recruiters convince jihadist candidates that leaving their families may even become a benefit for them in later life, in Paradise.

Very often, jihadists leave with humanitarian objectives in mind. Obviously, the process of joining a sect does not end when they cross the Belgian border, and surely not once they arrive in Syria.

## NOTES

- 1 See J. Leman, [www.johanleman.be](http://www.johanleman.be), manuscripts, 2015.
- 2 Videos of Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Muammad al-Maqqdisi, Rachid Abou Houdeyfa, Abu Qatada al-Filistini and information may be found on-line at sites such as [DeWareReligie.nl](http://DeWareReligie.nl). See also: [muslimmatters.org/2012/02/17/yasir-qadhi-khutbah-o-bilaad-al-shaam-you-are-in-our-hearts](http://muslimmatters.org/2012/02/17/yasir-qadhi-khutbah-o-bilaad-al-shaam-you-are-in-our-hearts), the Islamic State's magazine "Dabiq" and At Tibyan Publications.
- 3 Researchers include Elke Soors, Montasser ElDe'emeh, Pieter van Ostaeyen, and Younous Lamghari. Fieldworkers include Peter Calluy in Boom, Alexander van Leuven in Mechelen, and the Foyer team in Molenbeek.
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- 5 G. Kepel, A. Jardin, *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*, Gallimard, Paris 2016.
- 6 1,600 pages that can be found on the internet (January 2005).
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- 8 Brussels has six police zones.
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*ters around Them*, PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, 2010.

- 15 O. Roy, *Al-Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement: The Power of a Narrative*, in M. Emerson (ed.), *Ethno-Religious Conflict in Europe. Typologies of Radicalisation in Europe's Muslim Communities*, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels 2009, p. 14.
- 16 S. Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order*, Hurst, London 2014.
- 17 K. F. Allam, *Nuovi paradigmi dell'Islam militante. L'épopée acculturata dei predicatori islamisti*, in "Religioni e società", 14/1992.
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## KEYBOARD JIHADISM OR VIOLENT MILITANCY: THE PHENOMENON IN ITALY

Lorenzo Vidino

*The Italian jihad scene follows the dynamics of radicalisation and mobilisation already present in other countries, though on a much lesser scale. Even in Italy a new generation of Islamic extremists is taking shape. It consists of individuals not belonging to structured organisation, tends to operate outside mosques, and, in the majority of cases, carries out its activity on the internet, aiming above all to publish and distribute material ranging from purely theological to operational in nature. Only rarely have authorities identified cases of aspiring jihadists who left the country to participate in a jihad or were planning a terrorist attack. The phenomenon, nonetheless, seems to be dangerously on the increase.*

In 2015 Italian anti-terrorism authorities carried out two high-profile operations that reveal the actual presence and the varied nature of jihadist cells on Italian territory. In one operation, organised by the public prosecutor's office in Cagliari, a network of Pakistani militants with close ties to al-Qaeda was dismantled. The militants had actively participated in acts of terrorism in Pakistan and, according to investigators, had also planned a possible attack against the Vatican. The cell follows the typical model of jihadism in Italy: first-generation immigrants arrive in Italy already radicalised and belonging to a sophisticated structure that offers logistical support to a formation operating outside national

territory. Dynamics of this nature, above all regarding North African networks, have been noticeable in Italy since the beginning of the 1990s. In Brescia, in March 2015, the DIGOS (General Investigations and Special Operations Division) carried out an equally important operation, which resulted in the arrest of two alleged recruiters of Albanian origin residing in the Torino area and two young North Africans. Known as the “Balkan Connection”, the case reveals the new face of jihadism in Italy. The two North Africans are, in fact, prototypes of the “home-grown radical”. Unlike “classic” jihadists, they are young individuals who were born or, at very least, raised in Italy and are often well integrated. At a certain point they adopt the jihadist beliefs. Both men were active on the web, and one of them, the naturalised Italian citizen Halili El Mahdi, had become the first Italian translator of the Islamic State’s texts, among them “The Islamic State, a Reality that Would Like to Speak with You” (“Lo Stato islamico, una realtà che ti vorrebbe comunicare”) which he had made available on-line. The two Albanian citizens involved in the operation represent, rather, the new face of recruitment in Italy, which is not tied to mosques but based on the internet, where the two North Africans were “caught”.

This evolution of Italian jihadism follows dynamics already present for some years in the rest of Europe. Today Italy, too, no longer sees the jihadist threat as external, that is, caused by individuals who establish inactive cells on Italian soil. While this threat is not reduced, as demonstrated by the Cagliari investigation, it is now evident that the problem of internal radicalisation exists. As the Italian secret service authorities had predicted in 2009, Italy has also witnessed the rise of “a new generation of Islamic extremists, not belonging to a structured organisation and for the most part not identified previously, who have undertaken a path toward the jihadist beliefs, to the point of embracing militant activism”. The Report on Information Security Policy (“Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza”) continued by stating “In some cases, the assimilation of radical ideology has been fostered through the encounter with influential Islamists within Italy during a period of imprisonment for common felonies. More frequently, however, the formation of young militants is facilitated by the ideals of indoctrination and training obtained from the ‘web’. Within this perspective, what is especially significant is

the propagandistic work of Italian-speaking activists and, in some cases, of Italians converted to radical Islam who spread in the Italian language public statements made by the al-Qaeda leadership”.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Italian jihadist scene**

The news media in recent months have reported stories of the few (“few” compared to the “many” seen in other European countries) Italians (be they citizens or youngsters raised in Italy and, as such, “sociologically” Italian even if not holding a passport) who have travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State and other groups within the jihadist galaxy. These individuals include Ibrahim Giuliano Delnevo, the Genoese convert killed in Syria while fighting with an Islamist militia; Anas El Abboubi, an ex-rapper from the province of Brescia who had tried to create the group Sharia4Italy before travelling to Syria; the Balkan labourers Ismar Mesinovic and Munifer Karamalesky who left from the valleys of Belluno and died in Syria; and Maria Giulia Sergio, the convert of Neapolitan and Lombard extraction. Add to this list several instances involving individuals who were planning attacks in Italy (such as Mohamed Jarmoune, a twenty-year-old Moroccan national raised near Brescia and suspected of planning an attack against the Jewish community in Milan) and dozens of foreigners thrown out of Italian territory in recent months. Before travelling to Syria or engaging in significant criminal conduct, these individuals simply belonged to the informal world defined as the “local Italian jihadist scene”. This actual subculture is a small world that has formed spontaneously in recent years, one that individuals can join in a purely informal way. However, coming from this world are the few individuals who, at a certain point in their paths to radicalisation, decide to move from “keyboard jihadism” to violent militancy, doing so for reasons that are varied yet often mysterious and unpredictable. It is impossible to determine the definite number of individuals belonging to this scene. One can presume that they amount to several hundred. Similarly one can also estimate that a greater number of individuals sympathises with jihadist ideology, though with varying levels of intensity. For the most part, this group is small, comprised of extremely heterogeneous individuals (age, sex, ethnic origin, level of education, social status) who

share jihadist beliefs. Most of these subjects interact on the internet with others in Italy and abroad who share their beliefs (one might say that most of these people meet through social networks on the internet). They live above all in Northern Italy, in big cities like Milan, Genoa and Bologna, as well as in small towns in the country, but some may be found in Central and Southern Italy.

It must be made clear that the majority of these individuals is not involved in any violent action, limiting its militant action to an often spasmodic activity on-line that has the goal of publishing and disseminating material ranging in nature from purely theological to operational. Although in specific cases activities such as these might constitute a violation of article 270 *quinquies* of the Italian Penal Code (“Training for activities for the purpose of terrorism, even if international in scope”), aspiring home-grown, Italian jihadists are prevalently just that: nothing other than “aspiring” individuals who do not carry out violent actions. Nonetheless, as the cases involving Jarmoune, El Abboubi and Delnevo demonstrate, at times this transition takes place, often in a manner and with a timeframe that Italian authorities have a hard time predicting.

The new Italian jihadist scene has some important characteristics. First of all, its members tend to operate beyond the sphere of mosques, where their ideas do not find fertile ground. Rather, the community is active on the internet, though not exclusively so. It is important to state that the term “community” must not be interpreted as meaning a cohesive and well-structured group. On the contrary, more correct is the assertion that there are individuals residing in Italy who adopt varied forms of jihadist ideology and operate and interact with one another on-line to different degrees.

Despite these differences, all the subjects belonging to this scene are interested in the most conservative and militant fringes of Salafism. Some are more and others less interested in jihadism, and they are connected on Facebook. Even if it is difficult for this author to reconstruct these trends, it seems that many of these individuals also know one another in the real world. In some cases the connection in the real world begins after an encounter on-line while just the opposite happens in other cases involving individuals who form relationships after meeting at an event, in a mosque, or through mutual friends.

The cornerstone of this scene consists of about fifty individuals who are extremely active on-line (and, in some case, even in the real world) and in constant contact with numerous other internet users. Their sociological profiles are heterogeneous, but many are Italian converts between the ages of 20 and 30, with a fair number of forty-year-olds among them. Others have foreign origins even though they were born and spent most of their lives in Italy. It should be noted that this group does not include a large number of individuals of North African origin, who are demographically the largest Muslim group in Italy and traditionally the driving force behind Italian jihadism. Overrepresented are individuals with origins from Albania, Kosovo and, though to a lesser extent, Bosnia. For these subjects it seems as though their principal interest in life is militant Salafism, be it openly jihadist or less extremely so. They constantly update their Facebook pages and also often manage one or two blogs and Twitter accounts. Unlike the majority of first-generation militants, who were only passive consumers of internet propaganda, the new generation of home-grown activists is also often active in the production of its own jihadist material. As witnessed in the cases of Jarmoune, El Abboubi, Delnevo and many others, these activists translate and post their own texts and make their own videos, which are very well produced in some cases. Around this strong core of activists there exists a larger group of individuals whose dedication – at least judging from the material included on their Facebook pages – seems less intense. In this larger category it is not unusual to chance upon subjects who occasionally hit “like” beneath a jihadist video or add a favourable comment to a post dealing with jihadist subject matter, but their dedication to the cause seems to end there. Some among them seem to have a less “wholesome” profile when compared to the core members: they are Muslim (even though this is not always clear), but some, if not most, of their interests (discotheques, hip-hop, interaction with the opposite sex) are not among those typically associated with militant Islamism.

This virtual Italian, pro-jihad scene is rather fluid and informal and operates much like other on-line communities. Its “members” become “friends”, “tag” one another in photographs, and post on their friends’ walls. They publicise various events and interesting news stories taking place in their area and organise real-world meetings and on-line discus-

sion groups. They also interact with one another in ways that vary from offering mutual expressions of support and sharing personal life events to displaying strong disapproval and entering into outright scathing arguments. One of the most common forms of interaction is the exchange of comments including links or videos on current events, whether they deal with Italian politics or the various global conflicts pertaining to Muslims. These expressions of approval for jihadist groups may be interpreted in different ways. From one standpoint, it seems wise to avoid alarmist reactions. Several studies have demonstrated that it is normal for people to say and do things on the internet that are much more extreme in nature than their typical real-life behaviour. There are thousands of forums replete with threats of violence that involve extremist militants, be they right wing, leftist, anarchist, environmentalist, or of other ideologies. The same is true for global websites visited by ultras or even websites visited by fans of singers and actors. Nonetheless, the majority of subjects invoking such violence on-line will never commit any violent act in the real world. The vast majority of jihadist “cyber warriors” is exactly like other cyber-warriors: they are virtual extremists whose emphatic expressions of opinion will never move from the keyboard to the street. Many individuals belonging to the Italian community of jihad sympathisers will likely leave it altogether at some point, considering it nothing more than a phase of their young life. Others will probably stand by their opinions without ever acting violently.

At times some members of the home-grown, Italian jihadist community move to action, which might consist of planning attacks in Italy (such as Jarmoune) or travelling abroad to join a jihad. The drive to begin a path leading to violence is a personal trajectory determined by the complex interaction of psychological, ideological and circumstantial factors that are specific to each single case. A similar combination also influences the choices made by an individual once the decision has been made to use violence. Will that person travel abroad to join a group of jihadists? If so, where? Or will that person stay in the country to execute attacks there? And in this case, what are the targets? Will the person work alone or with other individuals?

A set of diverse factors determines these dynamics. Some are psychological, conditioned by personal preferences. However, a determin-

ing factor often consists of the encounter with individuals who have the “right” connections and manage to put the aspiring jihadist in contact with organised groups.

Often called “recruiters” but more aptly identified as “facilitators”, these individuals offer the right hook-up, connecting supply and demand in the jihadism market. The two Albanian citizens involved in operation “Balkan Connection” in Brescia fall into this category. Acting as “facilitators”, they assist two young radicalised men who are interested in mobilising and departing for Syria but lacking the means of interacting with IS or any other jihadist group toward the achievement of their goal.

### **Future dynamics**

As stated previously, the Italian jihadist scene follows radicalisation and mobilisation dynamics present in other countries, though on a much lesser scale. The magnitude of mobilisation for the conflict in Syria clearly demonstrates this analysis. French authorities speak of more than one thousand citizens and residents having departed to join jihadist groups in Syria. English and German authorities each recognise around 700, and officials from the small country of Belgium count 400. Italian authorities, however, estimate Italian foreign fighters in Syria to be only slightly more than 50.

The phenomenon, nonetheless, appears to be growing and has alarming consequences, some of which are operational in nature. Home-grown nuclei or, even more so, lone actors are often difficult to identify considering that they do not work within a structure whose communication and activity may be more easily traced by authorities. The aforementioned article 270 *quinquies* of the Italian Penal Code offers an excellent tool. It has been used on several occasions in order to apprehend home-grown Italian jihadists active on the internet well before they had put into action real plans aimed at bringing to fruition terrorist attacks. However, application of the article in courts of law has been problematic. The phenomenon places limits also on the frequent use of expulsion, one of the methods preferred by the Italian anti-terrorism authorities. Some home-grown jihadists, despite being born in Italy, may not have Italian citizenship, therefore making them

liable to expulsion as a result of the strict Italian legislation on the subject. But others, beginning with converts, are fully entitled Italian citizens and, therefore, not subject to such a penalty.

The second consequence of the arrival of the phenomenon in Italy is sociopolitical in nature and probably even more worrisome. In a replay of a situation already witnessed on several occasions in some other European countries, the mere possibility that a Muslim raised in Italy could carry out an attack in Italy is likely to have enormous repercussions within the nation-wide debate concerning issues such as immigration and the presence of Muslims in Italy, which is already extremely tense and highly politicised.



## NOTES

- 1 Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza*, 2009, p. 19, available on-line at [www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/relazione-2009.pdf](http://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/relazione-2009.pdf).



# ISLAMIC RADICALISATION AND TERRORIST CELLS IN THE BALKANS: FACT OR MYTH?

*Marina Ragush*

*In the wake of civil wars in the Balkan countries during the last decade of the twentieth century, Wahhabism and jihad have gained traction within the Muslim populations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro and some parts of Serbia. Even though the majority of official Western sources initially claimed that terrorist cells and Islamic radicalisation were a myth or propaganda between ethnically and religiously divided countries, the twenty-first century has proved them wrong. Foreign “holy warriors” came predominantly from Arab countries to fight, offering “moral support” to Muslims in Bosnia and eventually creating a foothold for terrorist cells affiliated to Daesh, which pose a real and constant danger for Europe. This essay offers insights into the organisation, origin and network of global jihad in the traditionally turbulent region of the Balkan Peninsula. Analysis is based on mainstream media news, official reports, and judgments and hearings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.*

During the civil wars in the Balkans, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) between 1992 and 1995, the “holy warriors” of jihad appeared as “brothers in arms” on the Bosnian Muslim side. Bosnia is a country in which Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks govern themselves according to the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

also known as the Dayton Accord. The war saw horrible atrocities committed by all sides. Concerning the subject at hand, the most relevant feature of the war was the presence of the *mujahideen*, or members of the El-Mujahid Detachment that was under the jurisdiction of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ABiH). Arriving predominantly from Arab countries and well organised through Muslim charities and NGOs, they waged jihad against Christians, mobilised local Muslim populations and created a network for future “projects”. The Dayton Accord required that all foreign fighters leave Bosnia. Some of them returned to their homes while others failed to do so and eventually received BiH citizenship, sometimes under different names, which allowed them to continue their work or, as we will learn later, their mission.

These facts are known and agreed upon by a majority of analysts, scholars, practitioners and officials. However, disputes arise among them concerning the question of terrorist cells in the Balkans and whether or not they have gained a foothold in the area as a result of civil wars in the 1990s. Before we address this issue, it is important to note that the *mujahideen* became geopolitical instruments during the Afghan war, when the US decided to provoke Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. A 1998 interview published by “Le Nouvel Observateur” provides evidence in support of this assertion. When asked to comment on the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan, President Carter’s National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, stated that, “According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahadeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, [in] December 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the President in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention”. Asked by journalists if he had any regrets, Brzezinski responded, “Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: ‘We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War’. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupporta-

ble by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralisation and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire". Even though the operation offered support to Islamic fundamentalists and advice to future terrorists, Mr. Brzezinski felt it was justified and concluded by asking, "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?".<sup>1</sup>

This secret alliance, as a legacy of the Cold War era, is well documented in several books, the most popular and best selling being Robert Dreyfuss's "Devil's Game" and Steve Coll's "Ghost Wars". Not long after the operation, terror phenomena, such as al-Qaeda, appeared. Now the strongest terrorist organisation is the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In this network of terrorist cells, the Balkans are now playing a significant role.

### **Wahhabism, mujahideen, al-Qaeda and Daesh in the Balkans: fact or myth?**

Most analysts, scholars and practitioners of Wahhabism see the movement as a relatively new sect, but it dates to the eighteenth century, following the teachings of Muhamad ibn Abdul Wahhab. The term Wahhabi that is used today comes from the Turkish language, but it derives originally from the Arabic term Wahhaiyyah and describes followers of early Muslims, or Salafism. After the Balkan civil wars, Bosnia became fertile ground for Islamic fundamentalism, which spilled over to other countries of the region: Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, though mostly in the Raska and Sandzak regions. According to some sources, there are more than 3,000 Wahhabis practising in Bosnia, and they live in a typically Arab way and show a strong unwillingness "to integrate into the infidel society". In Raska, the Wahhabi movement started in 1993 with propaganda by Alia Mahmutovic that included verbal and physical harassment of believers and imams, both within and outside the mosques. Some sources indicate that the movement started with around 200 men and their families, a number that has increased significantly. In Kosovo, where slightly more than fifteen men were practising, Wahhabism has not gained a strong foothold. In Macedonia, however, there is

rapid diffusion. The Wahhabi movement is mainly concentrated in the Skopje region and in rural parts of the nation. In 2001 and 2002 there were about 550 fundamentalists in the Republic of Macedonia.<sup>2</sup>

The links between members of the El-Mujahid Detachment, al-Qa-eda and Osama Bin Laden in the years following the end of the civil wars have been confirmed despite a majority of analysis that once refuted this fact. In 2001, the International Crisis Group (ICG) completed a report on “Bin Laden and the Balkans”, which concluded that local politicians and media coverage had “joined anti Muslim harangue”<sup>3</sup> following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The introduction of the report coloured the atmosphere: “Although the world may have changed on 11 September 2001, Balkan politicians and propagandists are still trying to make the new world fit the old. If, suddenly, the only stories the foreign media wish to hear concern threats from former, potential or imaginary Islamist terrorists, the Balkan markets of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia have been quick to oblige – for reasons of their own”.<sup>4</sup> The “wave of anti-Islamist propaganda”, as ICG put it, had the simple aim to impose pressure on the Muslim population in Kosovo, other parts of Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro. “Ironically,” as the ICG reported, “the two groups that most benefited from US and Western European engagement in the region during the 1990s – Bosniaks and ethnic Albanians – have now been portrayed within the region, and even beyond it, as potential supporters of bin Laden and al-Qaida. Poorly researched or sensationally written stories in Western newspapers about terrorist hotbeds in the Balkans probably have no ulterior motive. [...] There, the intention is to justify a tougher stance towards ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia, and to increase international suspicion of – and pressure on – Bosniak and other Muslim leaders”.<sup>5</sup>

However, the sequence of events showed peculiar but real links that gave different perspectives on terrorist activities and their Balkan foothold dating to the years of the civil wars. Numerous analyses, appearing in sources ranging from the Centre for Peace in the Balkans and regional media to “The New York Times” and “The Washington Post”, showed that former El-Mujahid members, later holders of Bosnian passports, planned and organised several terrorist attacks in Europe and the

US. In December 1999, Algerian national Ahmet Ressemi was arrested at the US-Canadian border in a car filled with bomb-making materials. He was allegedly preparing to target the US infrastructure at the start of millennium and, according to the Centre for Peace in the Balkans, had fought as a member of the *mujahideen* in Bosnia. The following year, "The New York Times" reported that Jordanian sources had warned the CIA of at least three plots to attack US targets in Europe, each led by Bosnia-based Islamist terrorist cells.<sup>6</sup>

In 2005, "The Washington Post" reported that "Terrorist Cells Find [a] Foothold in [the] Balkans"; an October 19 raid in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, confirmed the suspicion among several intelligence agents that Bosnia and other parts of the Balkans were becoming a launch pad for terrorist attacks in Europe. In particular, Islamic radicals were looking to create cells of so-called white, non-Arab al-Qaeda members who could avoid racial profiling techniques used by police forces to watch for potential terrorists. "'They want to look European to carry out operations in Europe', said a Western intelligence agent in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and Montenegro, adjacent to Bosnia. 'It's yet another evolution in the tools used by terrorists'". During the raid a group that had links with cells in Denmark and Great Britain was stopped. In the same year Croatian and Italian police arrested five people who had allegedly plotted a bomb attack during the funeral of Pope John Paul II in Vatican City in April. The group originated from Gornja Maoca in north-eastern Bosnia and planned to smuggle rocket launchers, explosives and a detonator to Italy.<sup>7</sup> The plot was stymied along with many others that, in the majority of cases, demonstrate a Balkan connection to Islamic radicalism. These cases signal that the Balkans may be seen as a platform for terrorists aiming to conduct attacks throughout Europe. Moreover, if we look at the chronology of jihadism in Western Europe from 1994 to 2007, we notice the pattern of a long and well-prepared process. From 1994 to 1996, Europe was an arena for local jihad, as the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) operated in France. From 1998 to 2004, Europe became an arena for global jihad under the auspices of al-Qaeda networks, cells and support. From 2003 to 2007, it was a target of a global jihad when al-Qaeda inspired Islamists from the European jihadist underworld who were motivated by some EU member states' participation in the invasion of Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

The following years proved that each intervention in the Middle East by a US-led coalition triggered a new form of jihadist organisation, networking, mobilisation, finance and infrastructure. The situation came to a boiling point when civil and sectarian war began in Syria in 2011, and now the self-proclaimed Islamic State has proven to be the most powerful terrorist organisation in world history with financial backing that could give it long life and also numerous followers and supporters. The seizing of oil fields in Iraq and Syria, the sale of oil on the black market and earnings worth around 50 million US dollars per month have made the so-called Islamic State even more dangerous than one could ever estimate.<sup>9</sup>

According to one calculation, Bosnia has provided more volunteers per capita for the Syrian jihad than any other country in Europe, and various reports suggest that there are probably more than 500 jihadists from south-eastern Europe now in Syria.<sup>10</sup> Over time, thanks to corruption and ties between some government officials, intelligence agencies and organised crime networks, militant Islamists have created a very progressive infrastructure in parts of south-eastern Europe, such as in villages in isolated mountain areas and in mosques run by local clergy. Furthermore, the media offer a powerful vehicle for radical teaching, mobilisation and the indoctrination of youngsters in those poor Balkan countries with Muslim populations. Internet outlets, social media and well-equipped methods of electronic communication facilitate the transfer of operational plans, information and orders from fundamentalist fronts, such as Daesh and al-Qaeda, whose jihadist leaders were initially financed by NGOs, charities and very generous Middle Eastern donors. This system has offered a real platform that could easily run any activity on European soil. The Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the Gulf's largest donors to the Balkans, was funded by hundreds of millions in donations from members of the Saudi royal family. A Bosnian investigative journalist disclosed that from 1992 to 2001 the Saudis alone spent 500 million US dollars to reconstruct and also build mosques in Bosnia alone. A Kosovar investigative journalist discovered in 2012 that some of the country's Islamic institutions received payments from Al-Waqf Al-Islami (AWAI), otherwise known as the Islamic Foundation. In 2011, as the Saudi government announced the end of the two-decades-long relief

programme in Bosnia, the Islamic Development Bank, Al Baraka Banking Group and other Saudi investors formed a joint investment company for the Balkan country worth about 50 million US dollars and focusing on infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, Macedonia and Qatar established a Joint Committee for Economic Cooperation. The same year marks the agreement of 200 million US dollars between Jugoimport SDPR, the Serbian arms manufacturer, and the United Arab Emirates. Etihad Airways and JAT, the Serbian national airline, signed a strategic investment partnership. In 2014, the Speaker of Albanian Parliament met with Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyab, the Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in order to discuss economic cooperation, and the Albanian Parliament formed an Albania-UAE friendship group.<sup>12</sup>

The CIA has estimated that one third of Bosnian NGOs operating worldwide have terrorist connections or employ people with terrorist links. In the aftermath of 9/11, a raid on such a “charity” in Sarajevo, the Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, netted “maps of Washington, material for making false State Department identity cards, and anti-American manuals designed for children”.<sup>13</sup> The arrival of a new generation of Islamist preachers from academically rigorous places such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, with millions of dollars for building madrassas and Islamic schools in the Balkans, marks the beginning of a new phase of Islamist fundamentalism. It will take time for the secularist and peaceful integration of followers of moderate Islam to take place because, first of all, after so many recent threats and terrorist attacks, the trust in multicultural and religious societies has eroded and become rife with tension. Rebuilding this trust will be a difficult mission in the midst of a rising tide of ultra-conservative factions in multicultural societies, which advocate strict anti-immigration policies. Secondly, a moderate form of Islam does not help fulfil the strategic goals of radical Islam and its followers, which aim to steer all forms of Islam towards fundamentalism. In short, rebuilding societies that are culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse represents the challenge of our time. Educational and social assistance programmes and initiatives must aim for inclusion, especially among younger and economically disadvantaged members of society, who are viewed as easily mobilised and manipulated by jihadist groups



operating through radical Islamist schools and charitable organisations established and supported by wealthy Gulf countries. With significant financing deriving also from the oil fields and criminal activity of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the challenge posed to the European ideal of multiculturalism appears even greater.

Having just tackled the phenomenon of “Sunni revolution”, it may now be easier to answer the question concerning the real or imagined presence of al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the Balkans. How is it, then, that discussion of the topic of the terrorist threat in the Balkans has not made progress? From one perspective, we have seen how some international organisations charged with monitoring the phenomenon and predicting its development and risks, such as the ICG, concluded that local politicians and the media had “joined anti-Muslim harangue”, which implies the use of propaganda. However, has there been a local or regional attempt to spin the truth concerning the presence of terrorist cells in the Balkans? Indeed there has. On the other hand, however, are we dealing with political propaganda used by the spread by the elite in the Balkan region? Certainly not. As stated previously, some of the mainstream media, think tanks and independent researchers were unbiased in their treatment of the civil wars in the Balkans, and their work has allowed us to gain a better understanding of not only the origins, development and aftermath of terrorist activity in the Balkans but also the threat of future acts of terrorism deriving from the area. Finally, after so many years, we have access to legal hearings and sentences that offer hard evidence, beyond any reasonable doubt, of the connection between al-Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State and the Balkans.

### **The ICTY has proven the link between al-Qaeda and the Balkans**

In September 2007, a former *mujahideen* fighter appeared before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the trial against General Rasim Delić, once Commander of the Main Staff of the ABiH, and offered testimony concerning the nature of the relationship between Arab fighters and the ABiH. Ali Ahmed Ali Hamad, the Hague Tribunal’s prosecution witness, stated that *mujahideen* units in Bosnia could not conduct their military operations in the country unless they were in

agreement with the ABiH. The witness claimed that although *mujahideen* units had their own commanders, a significant amount of coordination with the ABiH took place as well. “Us, foreign Mujahedeen, received orders from our chiefs only, but this does not mean that we were not under the control of the ABiH”, said Ali Hamad, also known as Abu Ubejda. “We agreed on all actions. All our attacks were done in collaboration with the ABiH”, he added. He told the trial chamber how he had arrived in Bosnia as a member of al-Qaeda after having trained in Afghanistan. The *mujahideen* only took orders from their “al-Qaeda bosses”, the witness said. “We responded to the Bosnia and Herzegovina Army’s calls to take part in the actions, but we prepared for actions alone and we alone decided when the attack would start and end”, he went on to say. He claimed that the *mujahideen* stuck to this rule throughout the war.<sup>14</sup>

We have also learned from this testimony that the al-Qaeda leadership and Middle Eastern sponsoring countries had a close connection with Bosnia’s political and military leadership. Al-Qaeda terrorists were first trained in camps and in a military academy founded by Osama Bin Laden and then deployed to battlefields in order to gain experience and create al-Qaeda cells.<sup>15</sup> Rasim Delić was sentenced in 2008 to three years imprisonment for the crimes committed by the El-Mujahid Detachment of ABiH.<sup>16</sup> The sentence was determined based on the cruel treatment of Serbian soldiers by *mujahideen*, which had included the first decapitation witnessed in the Balkan region. This evidence refutes all the aforementioned cases of “propaganda” concerning the notion that in the Balkan region there is no real foothold or threat of terrorist cells serving as a platform for terrorist attacks in Europe.

This discussion also leads us to the current refugee and migrant crisis. The Western Balkan route has traditionally been used for human trafficking, and drugs and arms smuggling. Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda was also financed by proceeds from, among other sources, heroine smuggling from Afghanistan to the Western drug market. In this context, the infrastructure of organised crime offers terrorists much needed channels, such as crime routes and access to weapons, thus enabling them to challenge public security as well as armed forces. Terrorism and organised crime are different types of criminal activities, and their actions are driven by different incentives. Nonetheless, they cannot be examined as isolated

and unrelated entities. Organised crime and terrorist networks operate on a global level and do not recognise nationalities and borders. These groups are only motivated by the rule of supply and demand, which involves the strategies and tactics of effective marketing.<sup>17</sup>

Since October 2015 more than 200,000 refugees have used the Western Balkan route,<sup>18</sup> and some among them, as has been speculated, belong to hidden terrorist cells. Speculation has given way to fact following the investigation of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. A Syrian passport bearing the name of twenty-five-year-old Ahmed Almuhammed was found near the body of one of the suicide bombers. It was used by an asylum seeker who had registered on the Greek island of Leros on October 3, 2015. According to reports, he reached Leros after his makeshift boat from Turkey, carrying around 70 migrants, had foundered off the coast and the Greek Coast Guard had rescued him. He then reportedly applied for asylum in Serbia before travelling to Croatia, Austria and then, it is believed, France.<sup>19</sup> No one could tell how many future terrorist cells have used the Western Balkan route to reach their desired destinations, but all threats might turn into horrific events.

## **Conclusion**

Terrorists as geopolitical agents and terrorism as a geopolitical means have provided some secret alliances that compromise Western civilisation in the areas of finance, economy, security and stability. Today, our civilisation is facing the most powerful terrorist organisation in world history, known as Daesh or the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Terrorism with religious motivations has evolved over the last two decades with a precise plan to gain a worldwide state, the Islamic caliphate. This product of social, ethnic, religious and cultural engineering has almost proved to be a success also because the international community has been late in responding to prevent the group's horrific agenda. This phenomenon could easily be described as the last Sunni revolution, brought to the surface by means of terror. Finally, some poor decisions have been made as a result of a belated response to the migrant and refugee crisis. Attempts to suspend the Schengen Agreement in order to protect borders from refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and, among them, potentially hidden ter-

rorists cells strike a heavy blow to the very foundation of the EU project. Some of Europe's guiding principles are at risk, and the European project is experiencing a period of hardship. Therefore, the greatest and most difficult question today is the following: is the European Union strong enough to overcome these challenges and to quickly and efficiently develop an adequate policy regarding the rising tide of Islamic radicalism and the brutality of its expression?

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# EUROPE'S DELAYED RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

*Nicolas Gros-Verheyde*

*The events that took place throughout 2015 in Paris, Copenhagen, Sousse and Bamako reflected a certain amount of difficulty on the part of EU institutions in grasping crises and responding rapidly. Although the threat was known and identified, it still took several series of attacks to bring about awareness and lead to practical action. Structural and economic factors were the reasons behind this delay. Only after the November Paris attacks has there been a more adequate European response.*

## **A threat that was known, if not clearly defined**

### ***Repeated warnings***

For several months, if not years, there had been no shortage of warnings of the risk posed by foreign and European fighters, issued by the intelligence services, and regularly relayed by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove. A number of ministers (especially in Belgium, the Netherlands and France) had also sounded the alarm. The list of measures to be taken was relatively well known and defined. But awareness was very slow in coming at the European level. Political attention was focused elsewhere: the Eurozone crisis, European elections,

then the migrant, refugee and border crisis, and the political crisis. It took more than one attack to provoke a reaction.

### ***A warning, a wake-up call, a shock wave***

The first warning came in 2014, with the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels. It did not cause any major reaction. This apathy can be explained by Europe's inward-looking attitude at the time, the European elections, the setting up of new management within the various institutions, and critical management of the Eurozone, coupled with the death toll of four, which seemed relatively small. The attacks on Paris and Copenhagen at the beginning of 2015, therefore, came as a real shock and a wake-up call. After the first somewhat disjointed reactions, several decisions were made, but they were really only a matter of intention. Once again, Europeans' attention had gone astray... The migrant and refugee crisis, mass drownings in the Mediterranean and forced border crossings urged Europe to direct its attention elsewhere. The Paris attack on the Bataclan and surrounding areas, in November 2015, seemed like another brutal wake-up call, a sense of obligation to act. Then the pace of measures escalated more rapidly.

### **Structural causes for the lack of rapid response**

#### ***First element: the issue of terrorism is first and foremost the prerogative of the state***

This is an obvious element. Terrorism is not within the competence of the Union. At least that is the argument often used to justify a certain degree of European paralysis. In fact, this assumption is not entirely accurate. The EU Treaty, revisited in Lisbon, even makes provisions for a number of competences and instruments (see Box 1).

#### **Box 1 – European competences regarding terrorism**

The Lisbon Treaty provides for two main competences. Article 75 provides a competence for the freezing of funds,



financial assets, or economic gains held by terrorist groups or persons. And Article 83 allows the European Parliament and the Council, by means of directives, to establish “minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in the areas of particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension”. Terrorism is cited first on the list of areas of threat.

And the EU has two instruments clearly intended for the fight against terrorism. Firstly, the Europol agency, whose mission is “to support and strengthen action by the Member States’ police authorities and other law enforcement services [...]” (Article 88). Secondly, peacekeeping field missions (CSDP), whose field of action has been extended to the fight against terrorism, “including by supporting third countries in combating terrorism in their territories” (Article 43.1).

Not forgetting the solidarity clause (Article 222), which requires “The Union and its Member States” to act “jointly in a spirit of solidarity if a Member State is the object of a terrorist attack [...]”. The Union must then “mobilise all the instruments at its disposal, including the military resources made available by the Member States, to [notably] prevent the terrorist threat in the territory of the Member States, protect democratic institutions and the civilian population from any terrorist attack [...]”.

### ***Second, more tangible element: the European economic crisis***

The economic crisis inevitably led to introspection and a reduction in national resources. And, contrary to the predictions of some observers, reduced budgets do not lead to better cooperation. The logic of “I share my resources if I have less” translates rather into the opposite, “the less I have, the less I can or want to share my resources”. This has the effect of reducing resources (financial and human) allocated to the intelligence services.

***Third element, slightly taboo: the slowing down of the EU community mechanism***

To that was added a more institutional component. The policy of José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, and to a lesser extent that of Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, from 2009 to 2014, opted to slow down the community harmonisation mechanism. The key was given back to the member states. The European Commission's power of initiative and its readiness to anticipate legislation slowed down. Now was the time for doing "less law-making", and for conducting impact studies. Taking over as head of the Commission at the end of 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker saw things differently. But ten years of decline had caused the machine to get stiff.

***Fourth element, often given less emphasis: lack of political unity***

Enlargement of the EU also led inevitably to a certain dilution of the threat. For the dozen or so countries that joined the Union, terrorism is not really a threat. None of the new member states has really known the various European-style waves of terrorism, be they national (IRA, ETA, Corsican), or ideological (Baader-Meinhof Group, Action Directe, Cellules Communistes Combattantes, etc.), or "imported" (Palestinian, Armenian, Algerian, Iranian, etc.). Under Soviet control, the leaders of these states had even supported them, more or less. The idea of risk and of crisis management had gradually disappeared.

***A Europe disarmed and not really united***

In January 2015, when the first attacks on "Charlie Hebdo" in Paris occurred, Europe was not only unarmed, it was not really united in its reaction to the incident, as it had been during the wave of attacks in 2001-04. The reaction of the Latvian Prime Minister, who held the presidency of the European Union, was a prime example. In an exchange with journalists, Laimdota Straujuma even mixed up the fight against terrorism and a new strategy on immigration (legal or illegal), and spoke of a "clash of

religions”, “which, luckily, we do not have in Latvia”. Implying that what had happened in France could be blamed on immigration... and France. Latvia was not affected.

### **The economic causes of this delay**

There are three major elements, both linked to the economic climate, that have delayed awareness.

#### ***First element: lack of significant political impetus***

There was no special meeting of heads of state and government after the shockwave of the Paris attacks.<sup>1</sup> That was a first in the short history of the response to European terrorism. After the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, an exceptional summit of the heads of state was convened by the Belgian presidency of the EU, for September 21, ten days later. After the Madrid attacks, in March 2004, there was no need for an extraordinary meeting. A summit had already been scheduled for March 25, 2004, just two weeks later. Under the Irish presidency, the European Union adopted a comprehensive declaration (18 pages) containing a plan of action. Various measures were taken.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the London attacks on July 7, 2005, an extraordinary meeting of the Ministers of the Interior was sufficient. It was convened for July 13, 2005 in Brussels by the British presidency. That was barely a week later. All this would be put on hold a few years later. “Terrorism is no longer on the European Union’s radar”, acknowledged a European expert on the subject.

In 2015, the response was much slower and less focused. The High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, decided to disrupt the agenda for the meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers, scheduled to take place ten days after the attacks, on January 19, but that was to be the only emergency response. Latvia, which held the presidency of the EU, chose to procrastinate. The subject was put on the agenda of the informal meeting of Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs in Riga on January 29 and 30. On the other hand, Donald Tusk, former Polish Prime Minister and permanent President of the European Council, chose

to use the meeting already scheduled for February 12 to “discuss how to respond to the challenges”. That was one month later. The meeting resulted in a declaration that paved the way for a series of measures to be devised and approved. But it already seemed a little too late.

### ***Second element: the migrant and border crisis***

The migrant crisis began. It reached its peak in April 2015 and in summer it turned into a political crisis. The centre of gravity moved from the central Mediterranean (Italy-Libya) towards the east (Greece-Turkey), from sea to land. Front line countries (Italy, Greece, and Malta) were no longer the only ones affected. In turn, the states of central (Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and Germany) and northern Europe (Denmark, Sweden, Finland) were affected and sought to protect their borders. They tried desperately to find solutions, by appealing to neighbouring countries (Turkey, Africa, etc.) to ensure the protection of their borders. The Schengen area was under threat.

### ***Third element, being the consequence of the first two: few practical measures to discuss***

There was a lack of political impetus as the arrival of the migrant crisis had a long-term impact on the pace of implementing decisions. When the European Commission introduced a new Agenda on Security in April 2015, largely devoted to terrorism, attention had already turned elsewhere. Admittedly, it reiterated some of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator’s recommendations, with nine key measures: defining terrorism, strengthening Europol, setting up a European Passenger Name Record (PNR) file, defining risk indicators, countering radicalisation, penal cooperation, exchanging information, and combatting the trafficking of weapons. However, all this would take many months to put into practice.

In June, Europeans were divided, particularly on how to respond to migration and resettlement plans. The meeting of Home Affairs Ministers merely “took note” of the new Agenda on Security and planned to discuss the subject again... in October. When autumn came, ministers still had no proposals to discuss in concrete terms. Conclusions were adopted

on strengthening the fight against firearms trafficking. And a meeting was scheduled for December.

### **Late 2015, the European response is set in motion**

In effect, it was the November 13 attacks that finally pushed Europe to take stock of the events and regard the fight against terrorism as a matter of the utmost urgency. Within a matter of weeks, nearly all the measures that had been proposed and prepared for many months were introduced.

#### ***A demand for national solidarity***

France decided to invoke the solidarity clause of Article 42.7 of the European Union Treaty, the European counterpart of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It was a small revolution on the political level. All the Defence Ministers, gathered together for their ordinary meeting on November 17, assured their French counterpart, Jean-Yves Le Drian, of their full support. However, no real European dialogue or European coordination has been set in motion. Paris does not want it. The Europeans have not pressed the matter. The call for solidarity did not, however, produce the expected results with regard to European defence. France wanted minimal involvement from European institutions and preferred to manage the issue bilaterally. But it had the effect of catalysing other domestic decisions.

#### ***A political impetus***

A special meeting of Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs was also convened only a week after the attacks, on November 20, by Luxembourg, which had taken over the presidency of the EU. It stressed the need to “speed up the implementation of the decisions” announced on February 12, 2015. According to the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, there was no question of creating a European CIA, as some European ministers and leaders had suggested. “The intelligence services are already cooperating intensely. It’s more a question of resources”, and legislative framework.

## ***The pace of proposals is accelerating***

The European Commission has shifted up a gear. Some legislative texts are already ready. On November 18, it proposed a more stringent framework for the possession of firearms, which seeks to strengthen control over “deactivated” firearms. On December 2, it proposed a European definition for foreign fighters and put forward an “action plan” to deal with illegal trafficking of weapons and explosives. Two days later, a political agreement was finally reached by the European legislator on the European register of air passenger data. The European PNR scheme appeared. Ministers also confirmed the agreement reached with the European Parliament on strengthening the Europol agency. On December 15, the European Commission put forward a proposal to revise the Schengen Borders Code to introduce systematic checks at the borders. In 2016, the legislative pace will hopefully be resumed.

## **Conclusion: one more step to take at the policy coordination level**

Though speed is never a good guide on civil liberty issues, it has one merit when it comes to European affairs: it helps take advantage of political opportunity to push forward decisions that would not have stood a chance of succeeding outside the crisis period. Paradoxically, it is at critical times that Europe is at its best and can move forward. In losing sight of this axiom, some European leaders wasted precious months in the fight against terrorism. Lessons must be learned, and maybe the European structure should be provided not with a new institution, but with a “restricted security council” or European “Cobra” type mechanism, enabling the various officials concerned (President of the Commission, High Representative, President of the European Council, Commissioners for Justice and for Home Affairs, Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, head of EU Intelligence Analysis Centre INTCEN) to be brought together in the event of an emergency.

## NOTES

- 1 A meeting of the European Council has two highly political objectives. One of them is symbolic. It is a demonstration of European unity, a symbol of solidarity for European citizens and the rest of the world. The other is more practical: it drives and accelerates the pace of decision-making of other bodies at both national and European level (Commission, Council of Ministers, Parliament).
- 2 Legislation was put in place: a common definition of a terrorist act, initial measures to combat terrorist funding, implementation of de-radicalisation actions. A “situation centre” (SITCEN) was set up within the Council, to allow for the informal exchange and analysis of information.







## CONCLUSION

*Massimo D'Alema*

The phenomenon of Islamic terrorism is not new. Ample evidence to that effect has been provided by several of the prominent authors contributing to this book. From the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which launched deadly assaults in France in the 1990s, to the much more notorious al-Qaeda, whose 2001 attacks on US territory have led terrorism at large and the Islamic strand in particular to a never-before-seen level of violence, the phenomenon has constantly accelerated its pace. In our time it is supported by the increasing speed of communication, the widespread diffusion of the internet and new technologies, the unstoppable movement of people across continents, the growing accessibility to weapons and, more in general, as keenly noted by Elena Giunchi in her essay, the process of globalisation.

However, to a certain extent, we can also sustain that what we are witnessing today is something completely new because Islamic terrorist movements nowadays strive for an unprecedented political and military goal: the constitution and unremitting expansion of a “truly” Islamic state. As a state, Daesh is exerting the monopoly of control over a defined territory and using coercion on its inhabitants, while also providing services to its citizens. It also shows an unrelenting willingness to violently oppose Western oppression and the alleged Zionist plot against Islam; to overthrow impious Muslim governments that try to imitate

Western political systems; to lure and offer shelter and *raison d'être* to Muslim individuals and converts from all over the world, people in search of a religious and political cause, of an identity and, surprisingly, in some cases, of simple and pure adventure – as underlined by both Jean-François Daguzan and Johan Leman, who, together with Lorenzo Vidino, have investigated the spread and grip of terrorist cells in France, Belgium and Italy respectively.

In the Islamic State envisaged by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers (whose birth, growth and main features are delineated in Andrea Plebani's contribution), the old borders defined by the Western powers in the twentieth century are to be cancelled. There is no room for coexistence with the infidel, or for any form of participatory democracy (which is inconsistent with the concept that laws are exclusively God-given); only a rigorous interpretation of *Shari'a* shall regulate every aspect of both public and private life, indissolubly merging the political dimension and the religious one.

Such a prospect – that is, the existence of a state in which the caliphate, idealised and craved for by Muslims for centuries, is eventually realised – is proving more and more attractive to a growing number of people, particularly young men and women, often enticed by the Islamic State's exceptional propaganda skills.

The threat posed by Daesh today, which clearly emerges from the essays published in this volume, is, therefore, threefold. It is military, as it unfolds in a ferocious war fought in Syria and Iraq. It is terrorist, as it reveals itself in the deadly attacks against Western targets or "sacrilegious" objectives not only in Europe but also in an ever-expanding territory that stretches along the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and from Africa to Indonesia. And it is societal and political, as it has an impact on our societies and our democratic systems. In other words, it affects European states' capability, on the one hand, of integrating and offering responses to the rightful quest for identity of second-, third- and even fourth-generation immigrants, who risk otherwise falling under the spell of Daesh, as the growing phenomenon of foreign fighters (efficaciously illustrated in this book by the essays of Sandro Menichelli and Claudio Neri) proves; and, on the other hand, of responding to the terrorist threat without losing sight of the fundamental and undisputable values and principles

on which the European project has been built. The latter is not an odd assumption, considering how, in the course of 2015, some EU governments have been reacting to the enormous flow of immigrants – most fleeing the Syrian civil war – that is continuously crossing the European frontiers, and have been calling into question one of the most significant successes of the European project, the Schengen system.

The social and cultural background of those European citizens or immigrants that decide to abandon their families and lives, join the Islamic State's forces and either fight in one of the Middle Eastern battlefronts or import terror in Europe; the motives that drive such extreme decisions; and the details of this process of radicalisation are all topics featured in most of the essays that compose this book. What emerges is, on the one hand, that social inequalities by themselves are not enough to explain the diffusion of the phenomenon, and, on the other hand, that it is not possible to draw a unique profile of the European foreign fighter. Another compelling element is that, unlike the *mujahideen* who went to fight in Afghanistan or Chechnya in the last decades of the twentieth century, today's foreign fighters lack a deep knowledge and understanding of their own religion. As philosopher Tariq Ramadan observed, today's young radicalised Muslims tend to lean towards an archaic and decontextualised reading of the Qur'an, where they look for answers to the inexorable process of globalisation and to the "Westernisation" of Arab societies, two developments they are not equipped to deal with. The origin of this phenomenon of radicalisation is therefore to be found, above all, in a cultural and social identity crisis.

Thus, in order to contain its diffusion, it will be necessary to re-think the different patterns of integration that have so far been adopted in European Union member states and to actively involve the many Muslim communities that live in our countries. The goal should be, in my view, the promotion of the growth of a European Islam. The antidote to an archaic understanding of Islam should be the development of a modern form of Islam, encouraged by a new generation of European Muslim intellectuals and theologians.

The peculiar nature of the Daesh's menace, in its international and European dimensions, has now been recognised, even if, I am afraid, later than it should have been. But in our search for a response, we shall

also be aware of the role played by the Western countries in the rise of the Islamic State. As Andrea Manciuoli – and other authors, such as Marina Ragush – highlights in his introduction, the United States and European countries are far from being free of guilt to the extent that the birth and evolution of Islamic terrorist organisations are concerned. Without going too far back in time (as in 1970s and 1980s Afghanistan, whose experience is clearly illustrated in Giunchi's contribution on the birth and evolution of al-Qaeda), the case of post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq offers a valuable example of the incompetence, negligence and lack of foresight with which the United States and its allies managed the state- and institution-building processes and the dismantling of armed forces in the Middle Eastern country, feeding the long-standing mutual mistrust between Sunnis and Shiites and the process of marginalisation of the former within Iraqi institutional and political settings. This marginalisation, on the one hand, explains the significant role that Iraqi Sunnis play within Daesh militias today, and, on the other, reflects the broader on-going conflict between Shiites and Sunnis in the Muslim world.

Likewise, in the early stages of the Arab Spring, Western countries betrayed a deep lack of understanding of the events that were unfolding in the Arab world and of the weight that fundamentalist organisations held within revolutionary movements, with the result that the West has too often ensured support to forces that it should have rather restrained.

However, whatever the faults of the West may have unquestionably been, today we are facing a threat that is destined to last for a very long time, that is going to challenge not only our security but also our very way of life, principles and beliefs, and that requires on our part a broad and widely shared strategy.

I am firmly convinced that it would be a renewed mistake to build a coalition of Western forces to fight against the Islamic State. Such a move would deepen the already wide gap between Western and Arab civilisations and would not take into due account a fundamental feature of the current menace. Arabs and Muslims are the principal victims of the Islamic State and of the wave of terrorism that is shaking the world with increasing frequency and intensity. From the young women harassed, kidnapped and killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria to the unknown number of casualties of the Syrian civil war (which ranges, according to sources,

from 150,000 to 350,000), Daesh is targeting above all other Muslims, be they Shiites or supposed apostates. I do not intend to underestimate the scope of the threat to European cities and citizens, but I am afraid that numbers cannot be mistaken.

In order to neutralise Daesh's threat, it is first of all necessary to drive it out from the very territories in which it is taking root, whether it be Syria, Iraq or, more recently, Libya, which, in the wake of a change of strategy on the part of the Islamic State, is increasingly becoming a new jihadist battlefield. But this can hardly be done by a Western army. The Syrians, the Iraqis, the Libyans are to be given the instruments and the support to fight against this common enemy.

In Libya, the constitution of a joint government, after years of negotiations between the Tripoli and the Tobruk ones, is the precondition for the search for stability and the eradication of the Islamic State's forces. Yet, as Kader Abderrahim's enlightening contribution points out, deep-rooted ethnic, tribal, economic and political interests and rivalries among the several components of Libya's society are difficult to overcome and indeed offer fertile ground for Daesh's actions.

In Syria, the rough and difficult path undertaken by the participants of the Vienna talks aims at reaching a cease-fire between Bashar al-Assad's forces and the non-fundamentalist elements within the Syrian opposition, at consequently isolating the Islamic State and establishing a transitional government, which should not, in my opinion, include President Assad. Without a doubt, it is an extremely complex strategy. Yet, it is a necessary first step towards the removal of the deep-seated reasons for distrust and hostility between Shiites and Sunnis, which, it has to be emphasised, the West has fed for decades.

Against this backdrop, the Islamic Republic of Iran can, in my opinion, play a significant role. To this aim, the establishment of a dialogue between two long-standing enemies, Teheran and Riyadh, would be complex yet extremely worthwhile. It would help mitigate differences between Shiites and Sunnis and isolate the most dangerous forms of fundamentalism.

In his introduction, Andrea Manciuilli discerns a blueprint for the subverting of the present international order and the creation of a new one drawn from Osama Bin Laden's strategy, as outlined in the al-Qaeda leader's *fatwas* and other documents. This plan seems to be in-

exorably unfolding in events in the Middle Eastern countries, and the Islamic State seems to be implementing it. Whether it is part of a larger strategy or not, Daesh's challenge and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism pose today a major threat to both the Western world and the Muslim one. This threat must be faced and fought on multiple levels and will require on our part, on the one hand, a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon and, on the other hand, the support and promotion of moderate Islam, both in Europe and in the Middle East, as the only instrument capable of isolating extremism. We shall not succumb to xenophobia and Islamophobia because they stem from the same roots of fundamentalism and share the idea that Islam, no matter what kind of Islam, carries the seed of jihad. This is, in my opinion, an assumption that we must strongly reject.

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Islamic terrorist attacks showed a dramatic escalation in 2015. Targeting increasingly European countries and objectives, they represent a phenomenon that we must confront and better understand. This collection of essays aims to provide insight into the origins, evolution, principal characteristics, and unique means of recruitment and financing of Islamic terrorist organisations. Moreover, it examines the diffusion of Islamic radicalisation among young Europeans and of the foreign fighters, who, in growing numbers, leave their home countries to join Daesh. Cooperation among EU member states in the fight against this threat has strengthened following the Paris attacks. Nonetheless, the EU's response has been late and feeble thus far. Much remains to be done in order to put in place measures capable of facing the direct menace and reducing the risk of radicalisation.

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