

Carmen López Alonso

*Professor emerita. Faculty of Political Sciences. Complutense University of Madrid.
Guest lecturer IUGM-UNED*

E-mail: clopezal@cps.ucm.es

Book Review

SALIR DEL CAOS. LA CRISIS EN EL MEDITERRÁNEO Y EN ORIENTE MEDIO [GETTING OUT OF THE CHAOS. THE CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST]. Translation by Elena M. Cano and Íñigo Sánchez-Paños. Gilles Kepel, Publisher: Alianza, 2021

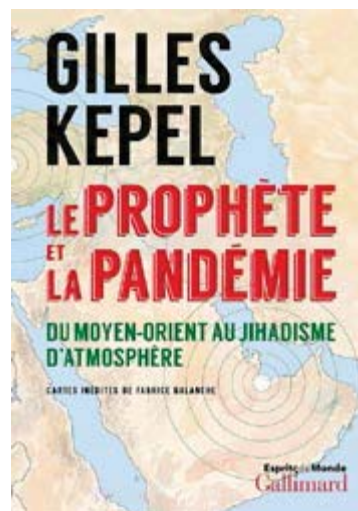
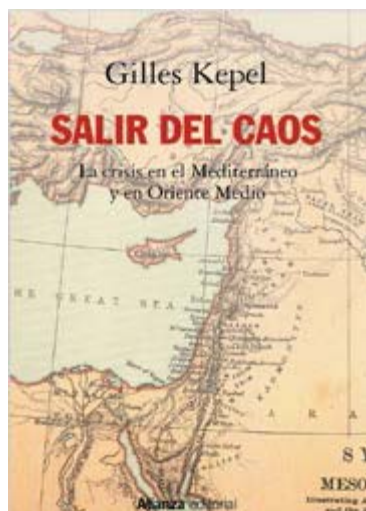
ISBN 978-84-9181-885-4 (456 pages)

(Original edition). SORTIR DU CHAOS. LES CRISES EN MÉDITERRANÉE ET AU MOYEN ORIENT.

Gilles Kepel, Publisher: Gallimard, 2018 (528 pages)

LE PROPHÈTE ET LA PANDEMIE. DU MOYEN-ORIENT AU JIHADISME D'ATMOSPHERE. Gilles Kepel, Publisher: Gallimard, 2021

ISBN 978-20-7292-312-8 (324 pages)



Gilles Kepel, one of the world's leading experts on the MENA region and political Islam, writes in *Salir del Caos*, a work that is both an expression of a desire and a compendium of his long history of study on these issues. The book starts in the 1970s and concludes in 2018, in the post-Daesh time and the beginning of the end of the war in Syria. Unlike many studies on this area that tend to rely on univocal interpretations, whether focused on the religious-cultural or on a strictly socio-economic and geopolitical analysis in which culture and religion would be seen as sort of malleable epiphenomena, Kepel's study shows the interconnectedness of all these factors. It does so in a clear and easy-to-read presentation, despite the multiplicity of data from a large number of direct and indirect sources, including the many interviews with different actors in the field. By combining chronological tracking and detailed thematic study, with a special emphasis on Syria and Iraq, Kepel succeeds in bringing an explanatory coherence to the great complexity of the area. His analysis revolves around two major axes, oil and Islam, which, interconnected, mark the development of a period that reaches its real turning point in 2020, a time he analyses in *Le prophète et la pandémie*.

Salir del Caos is organised into three parts. The first begins with a brief account of his personal trajectory of half a century of research on the area until "he was absorbed in his own object of study by the death sentence passed against him by Daesh" (:18), and continues with an extensive introduction to the period that follows the line of all his previous work¹. The starting point is the crucial date of 1973, the year of the Arab-Israeli war in October (Yom Kippur/Ramadan), after which OPEC turns to oil prices and achieves an almost complete control of the market that dramatically increases the rents of the oil monarchies. From this time onwards, Kepel explains, the oil-Islam relationship will progressively displace Arab nationalism as a driving force in the region.

It was in 1979 that "the Pandora's box of international Islamic terrorism" (:17) was opened. In this pivotal year, which began with the Iranian revolution and ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was ratified in Washington (26 March), in which the Palestinian question ceased to be central. It is also the year of the hostage-taking at the US embassy in Tehran (November) and the storming of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by the *al Jamaa al Salafiya al Muhtasiba* (JSM) group with similar ideas to the later Daesh, which ended in a massacre and marked a turning point in Saudi policy² (Kepel 2020: 42-43).

In the development of this part, Kepel analyses the process of continued political Islamisation that manifests itself in the three successive phases of jihadism. The initial

¹ Gilles Kepel (1984) *Faraón y profeta*. El Aleph, Barcelona; (2002) *La yihad, expansión y declive del islamismo* Península, Barcelona; (2004) *Fitna. Guerra en el corazón del islam*, Paidós, Barcelona; (2008) *Terreur et martyre. Relever le défi de la civilisation* Flammarion, Paris.

² "The mosque siege that changed the course of Saudi history» (BBC, 27/12/2019) <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379> (last accessed on 29/3/2021)

one focuses on the struggle against the ‘near enemy’ (Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria) in which a key year is 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan, with the help of Saudi petrodollars and the CIA, which trained and financed the mujahideen³ in an “alliance with the devil”, the price of which proved incalculable (:48). The second phase, centred on the fight ‘against the distant enemy’, is dominated by al-Qaeda, which breaks with the “jihadist Salafism” loyal to Saudi Arabia and initiates a “jihadist Salafism” that reaches its zenith with the attacks of 11 September 2001, to which it responds with the “war on terror” with the consequences that this, in turn, unleashes. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, which was supposed to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime and reshape the Middle East, ended in failure and encouraged the jihadist drift into a new phase (:109-113).

The central part of the book analyses this new jihadist phase which, unlike the pyramidal and centralised al-Qaeda model conceptualised by Zawahiri, is characterised by territorial expansion and the dominance of networks and manifests itself in a “reticular” terrorism which, like a rhizome, spreads from below around the world and connects radicalised young European Salafists with those from the slums of the Maghreb and the Middle East, creating “a jihadist ubiquity around the Mediterranean basin” (:340). A drift that manifested itself over a period that began with the Arab rebellions of 2011, continued with the proclamation of Daesh’s Islamic State in 2014 and the spread of Islamist terrorism, also on European soil, and ended with the fall of Raqqa to the Kurdish YPG militias and Mosul in autumn 2017. Kepel studies the different evolution of the six ‘spring’ countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria) which, except in the case of Tunisia, end in a failure of the hopes for democratisation, either with the restoration of an authoritarian regime, as in Egypt after the coup against Morsi in 2013, or in prolonged civil wars as in Yemen, Libya and, especially, Syria. The political processes correspond to a shift in authoritarian Arab regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, away from their previous support for the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement and towards its repression in the context of a Turkish-Saudi struggle for hegemony within the Sunni world, reminiscent of the last period of the Ottoman Empire. This struggle is intertwined with the Sunni-Shi’a confrontation that Kepel believes is becoming the main fault line in the Middle East. Although with nuances, as noted in the last part of the book, which focuses on the time after Daesh and the challenge of the “battle of the Levant”, when new lines of fracture are opening up, with renewed political actors, especially Turkey and Russia, which is taking advantage of the vacuum left by American withdrawal in the area, explained in part by the new oil and natural gas extraction techniques that have made the US the world’s leading producer. Not to mention China, with its diverse and shifting alliances and interests in the region.

Two years after the publication of this first book, which presented a broad overview of the region and its multiple intertwined processes rather than solutions, the chaos

³ Kepel starts calling the 40,000 or so foreigners who join their ranks *jihadists*, to differentiate them from the indigenous guerrillas.

continues and is growing with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is disrupting the world economy and increasing inequalities and tensions, and whose medium-term effects are still uncertain. Some of the questions raised by *Salir del Caos* are addressed in *Le prophète et la pandémie*, which, without forgetting the historical background that marked the former, is a chronicle made in the rhythm of the succession of events. For Kepel, the fourth jihadist phase is already clear in 2020, dominated by what he describes as an “atmosphere jihadism” or “contagion jihadism”, in which networks and organisation no longer prevail, but rather it spreads like a virus among the most vulnerable individuals and social sectors. A jihadism promoted by “anger-mongers”⁴ whose main representative would be, according to Kepel, Turkish President Erdogan, leader of the “Shiite-Hermanist” axis (Turkey, Iran and its broad framework of influence) with its neo-Ottoman and re-Islamising programme. Opposing it is the Abraham Agreement (Washington, 15.09.2020) between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), joined by Bahrain and Morocco and implicitly by Saudi Arabia, supported by the United States and, despite Palestinian protests, approved by the Arab League. One of the common threads in these agreements is the rejection of political Islam, although it should not be forgotten that the fall in oil revenues requires the petro-monarchies to reformulate their economies, in which Israeli high technology plays an important role. The confrontation between the two axes now crosses the entire area (from Central Asia to the Mediterranean and the Gulf, with Syria and Iraq at its core), where the Palestinian question is no longer the structuring factor in the Middle East.

For Kepel, the present moment is as crucial as the one in 1914 and requires urgent measures for a way out of the chaos, which he says is possible. This requires, and not least, better training in Arab history, language and civilisation, the shortcomings of which in Western countries have led many so-called experts to conclude analyses that are inconsistent with the reality on the ground and to propose erroneous formulas that have left the way open for the intervention of other, better-trained actors, Russia among them. Not only has this been the case with the interpretation of the Arab Spring, but, Kepel argues, it has also had consequences for the failures of the fight against terrorism within Europe, as shown by the attacks in France, or on 11 March 2004 in Madrid or in 2005 in London (:116-117) and the more recent attacks of that atmosphere jihadism, such as the one that led to the assassination of Professor Samuel Paty (16.10.2020). Europe, Kepel argues, must take independent and common security and defence and development measures throughout the Mediterranean area.

Both books include a detailed chronology and a series of original explanatory maps (ten in the first, sixteen in the second) that facilitate and illustrate this journey through the history of the area and its multiple interconnections over the last half century. *Le prophète et la pandémie* partially completes the first book, although its immediate chronicle nature leaves important questions open, such as the possible impact of the new Biden administration’s policy or that of Qatar’s reconciliation with Saudi Arabia. *Salir del Caos* is a far-reaching work. Even those who do not agree with some of his

4 Expression taken from Bernard Rougier, ed. (2020) *Les Territoires conquis de l’islamisme*, PUF:Paris.

interpretations, such as the excessive emphasis he places on the development of radical Islamism as a determining factor and who understand, like Olivier Roy among others, that this is not the origin, but rather the instrument, of a large part of radicalisation⁵, should read it if they wish to have a panoramic and critical vision of the issue, a vision that is an essential element in the search for solutions.

Review received: 31 March 2021.

Review accepted: 13 April 2021.

.....

⁵ The controversy between the two authors, with great academic and media repercussions, intensified in 2015-2016, when the aforementioned study by Kepel on Islamist terrorism in France was published. A summary of the controversy can be found in O. Gutiérrez (2017) *¿El islam se radicaliza o los radicales se islamizan?* http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2017/02/15/actualidad/1487154199_174004.html (last accessed on 29/02/2021)