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The Competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State

Abstract

Present-day jihadism is led by two groups that attract international attention: Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. This article focuses on demonstrating that, despite their different strategic approaches, the survival of both is based on jihadist ideology. For this purpose, an analysis of the key aspects of these groups is presented: the leaders, the ideological principles, the concept of territory, the franchises, the attacks and the recruitment model. While Al Qaeda bases its resilience on a more moderate network model, the Islamic state adopts a more territorial approach that is attractive because of its radical nature.

Keywords

Terrorism, jihadism, ideology, Al Qaeda, Islamic State.

To quote this article:

AHMED-ABENZA, O. «The Competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State». *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, n.º 14. 2019, pp. 251-276.

Introduction

Al Qaeda (AQ) became known through large-scale attacks. In August 1998, attacks on US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania cost the lives of 224 people, twelve of them Americans. Less than six months later, Bin Laden gave Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the chief architect of the attacks of September 11, 2001, approval to plan the deadly attacks in New York and Washington. In the decade following 9/11, the evolution of the Global Jihad was led by the organisation Al Qaeda and its regional franchises.

The Islamic State (IS) appeared on the scene in 2013 under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq and in the Middle East and took the name of IS from June 2014, when, in the wake of significant territorial gains in Iraq, it proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group became particularly renowned for its campaigns of terror and for the inspiration it passed on to groups and individuals who have carried out attacks in many different parts of the world.

At present, neither of the two groups has the same visibility that they both enjoyed in their infancy. Today the possibility of a large-scale repetition of attacks in the West by an organised group acting on the ground seems difficult, but the attacks of April 21, 2019 in which 321 people died in hotels and churches in Sri Lanka, responsibility for which has been claimed by IS, or the frequent attacks in Kabul, remind us that the threat still exists. Countries affected by the presence of jihadist groups continue to suffer their attacks, and adherents to their ideology could carry out attacks in third countries.

This article sets out to demonstrate that the survival of jihadist groups and their capacity for expansion is based on the ideology of Global Jihad. To this end, the key aspects of these groups are closely examined: the leaders, their ideological conception, the concept of territory, the franchises, the attacks and recruitment models. In the early stages, large jihadist groups such as AQ or IS began their journey based on a territory. However, with the passage of time, both have given way to a structure in which the occupation of territory has become secondary and, on the other hand, ideology has remained the centre of gravity.

State of play

Among the theories that endeavour to explain the proliferation of jihadist terrorism, I will first mention the one that links jihadism with criminality. For Beatriz Mesa “the combination of criminal acts with the drug business in the north of Mali has transformed the jihadist project of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Mesa, 2014, p.103).

Contrary to this theory, Boeke asserts that «there is little empirical evidence to support allegations of direct involvement of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in drug smuggling, but it is plausible to assume that it has on occasion, like many other groups in northern Mali, imposed transit fees or provided security escorts» (Boeke, 2016,

p. 927). Most reports credit the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), with a larger role in the drug trade above other jihadi groups, and the city of Gao, as their primary base and recruiting ground, is an important centre on the cocaine route.

On the other hand, one may wonder about the purpose pursued by jihadist groups. For Saverio, the main hypothesis is that the strategies of jihadist groups «constitute specific activities aimed at intervening in the constituent elements of a territory, that is, they are acts of territorialisation and influences on the population, insofar as they create or mould new social, economic, administrative and cultural structures; in other words, they create an organisation of the territory and contribute to building a dimension that can be defined as territoriality» (Saverio, 2018, p. 26). However, as we will see later on, the terrorist strategy aims at political change, without necessarily having to control a territory.

It is true that all groups need an infrastructure and a certain freedom of action in a given area and also that they act on a population linked to a territory, but Global Jihad is the key factor. In this sense, AQ's Global Jihad has followed a «network of networks» and «moderate» model, while IS has followed a territorial model with a more radical profile, but the resilience of both groups lies in their link with Global Jihad.

Methodology

This study focuses on the last decade and the AQ and IS groups. Based on an analysis of the attacks by groups linked to them at regional and local level, a study has been conducted on the interaction between these areas and Global Jihad, aimed at exploring in greater depth the processes linked to jihadist terrorism.

In preparing this article, we have used sources such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), successor to the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), an open database that contains direct information on terrorist events around the world and includes data up to 2017¹. In addition to this database, sources of published opinion have been also considered, such as the reports prepared by the International Crisis Group and those of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which have been of immense value in studying incidents related to jihadist terrorism in the countries concerned.

Theoretical framework

Al Qaeda and the Islamic state share a Salafist and jihadist ideology. Salafism comes from the term *Salaf al-Salifh*, the «pious ancestors», which refers to the *Rashidun*, the

¹ This database is managed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). It can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>. This database is also used for the compilation of the Global Terrorism Index.

four perfect caliphs, Abu Bakr, Omar, Utman and Ali, successors of the Prophet and, therefore, heirs of his teachings, known as *Sunna*. Salafism calls upon Muslims to return to the Islam of the *Salaf*, since they considered that the rapid expansion of Islam at that time was due to the purity of those men, purity that had been lost with the passing of generations and the consequent social evolution.

For Sageman, author of the seminal work *Understanding Terror Networks*, there are basically three different approaches to Salafism (Sageman, 2004, p. 5-7). A non-violent form was Ilyas Muhammad's creation of the *Tablighi Jamaat* (Society for the Propagation of Islam) in 1927, in India. Ilyas advocated setting politics aside and proposed intensive religious discipline to bring back Muslims who had succumbed to the temptation of Hindu or Western culture².

A second approach is that of peaceful political activism for the purpose of changing society through the organs of the state. This second current is identified with the struggle against colonialism and appears in countries such as North Africa, where Muslims take refuge in religion in the face of exploitation by Western countries.

The third branch of Salafism is associated with thinkers such as Sayid Qutb and Mohamed ibn Abd al-Wahhab³, who legitimize *jihad* to combat the state of *jahiliya* or ignorance, similar to that found in humans before the prophet's revelations. Leaving al-Wahhab aside because of its association with the Saudi royal house, Qutb's influence would be reflected in the thinking of contemporary jihadist leaders.

Before ascending to the highest ranks of IS and AQ, Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and shared their ideology. The Muslim Brotherhood and, in particular, Sayid Qutb, influenced the beliefs of AQ and IS, as well as the thinking of these jihadist leaders. The Muslim Brotherhood brought the idea of changing society from the political sphere, in keeping with Salafist principles, but violent inspiration was to come from the thinking of Qutb (Counter Extremism Project, 2017, p. 1).

The leaders and ideology

In Bin Laden's case, Qutb's influence can be clearly seen in the rhetoric of the «near enemy» and the «far enemy». The core of Bin Laden's work is made up of two

² This discipline is based on the literal and strict imitation of the life of the prophet and his disciples as a model of Islamic virtue and proved successful in socio-political contexts where Muslims were in the minority.

³ The Wahabi current was born in the eighteenth century at the hand of the religious reformer Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-1792), who lived in the context of the growing domination and control over the Islamic world through contact with the Europe-Ottoman Empire. As a reaction to this reality, al-Wahab decided to initiate an Islamic current that, due to its relationship with the incipient Saud house, would end up prevailing in Arabia and being promoted by the Saudi Royal Household.

declarations of war or jihad against the United States. The first was issued in 1996 and was specifically directed against «the Americans occupying the land of the two holiest sites»⁴. On February 23, 1998 Bin Laden expanded the decree to include the assassination of «Americans and their allies, civilian and military ... in any country in which it is possible to do it.» (Washington Post, 2001).

Bin Laden's message was an individual plea to young followers of Islam anywhere in the world to «pursue jihad and roll up your sleeves; follow the right path and be careful not to support men who follow their whims, those who remain sitting at rest, or those who trust oppressors» (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004, p. 266). This appeal included *martyrdom*, and the ideology that promoted the surrender of one's life in suicide bombings. The appeal revealed that the strength of the group did not lie in its global infrastructure or membership itself, but in the attractiveness of its ideology. From its inception the group sought to build an organisation with a solid structure, whose main objective has been «to inspire and incite Islamist movements and the Muslim masses worldwide to attack those perceived to be the enemies of Islam» (Gunnaratna and Oreg, 2011, p. 1044).

In spite of sharing a common Salafist and jihadist ideology, differences arose between AQ and IS. The latter was born in a more recent context and, therefore, with different influences. In Afghanistan, for example, the origin of the IS was influenced by the Jalalabad school, which emerged in the 1990s. In 1989, after the end of the Afghanistan War (1979-1989) against the Soviets, Bin Laden left for Saudi Arabia and his mentor, Abdullah Azzam, was assassinated. These losses left a leadership vacuum that favoured the influence in Afghanistan of other jihadists from the Gulf and North Africa, especially Algeria, who promoted a more rigid doctrinal view than AQ, as well as a vehement opposition to the authority of the Global Jihad leader. These leaders, such as the Algerian Abu Zubaydah or the Egyptian Abdullah al-Muhajir practised a more extreme ideology than that of AQ and, in particular, disapproved of the link with the Taliban. They therefore criticised Bin Laden and AQ (Hamming, 2019, p. 1).

The IS is part of a legacy of *takfir*⁵ schools and ideas that arise from AQ, but despite their initial affiliation or subordination, the two groups subsequently separated ideologically. For the IS, Islam's worst enemies are internal enemies, and it argues that the focus on the distant enemy (the West), ignoring the nearby enemy (Muslim enemies in the region, especially the Shiites) is not effective (Hassan, 2016, p. 9). This belief has led AQ leaders to emphasise that attacking these groups is not the top priority, while the IS has carried out mass killings of minorities in their territories. The controversy had already been the subject of a letter sent in 2005 by Zawahiri to Zarqawi,

4 Bin Laden was referring to the 500,000 American soldiers who had remained since the 1991 Persian Gulf War in his native Arabia, where the two holiest Muslim shrines are located: Mecca and Medina.

5 A heretical current of Islam that consists of denying the condition of true Muslims to all those whose dogmas or rites do not fully coincide with their own.

then leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)⁶, in which he questioned the death of Shiites (Combating Terrorism Center, 2005).

Divisions between the two groups were evident when the Syrian conflict broke out in 2011 and Al Zawahiri encouraged the participation of Iraqi jihadists. Syria was in chaos and offered a great opportunity to establish bases there to raise funds and win new militants for the cause. To this end, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of AQI, sent several members of the organization led by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, who had been released in 2008 from Camp Bucca⁷. Al-Golani soon became the leader of the al-Nusra Front in Syria, a split from AQ that pursued the creation of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law.

By the end of 2012, the al-Nusra Front had sufficient operational capacity to confront the forces of the Bashar al-Asad regime, but had not yet sworn allegiance to AQ. In the spring of 2013, Al-Baghdadi announced that his organisation, AQI, was merging with al-Nusra to form the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Bustillo, 2017, p. 301). Al-Golani was forced to respond to the merger declared by al-Baghdadi in April 2013 by claiming to renew his pledge of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, Emir of AQ, who then ordered the dissolution of IS and its supporters in Iraq to work together with the al-Nusra Front. This break-up did not occur and the IS remained in Syria, but Jabat al-Nusra began to show its affiliation with AQ more openly (Al-Tamimi, 2016, p. 16). Once the split occurred, the IS initially gained strength and quickly took control of large areas, benefiting from the affiliation of some fighters belonging to Jabhat al-Nusra, most of them non-Syrian jihadists (Al Monitor, 2013).

On January 28, 2017, the al-Nusra Front announced that it was being disbanded as an independent cell and was operating under the banner of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), a coalition combining the five main Islamist factions: the al-Nusra Front, Harakat Nur al Din al Zenki, Liwa al Haqq, Ansar Dine and Jaysh al Sunna, along with dozens of Islamic and secular groups of the Syrian Free Army under a central leadership, with Al-Golani leading its militant branch. However, after a series of clashes with other rebel groups in Idlib in July 2017, dozens of factions and leaders deserted the HTS, reducing the coalition to a core of al-Nusra Front supporters. That same year, Al-Golani declared that he had relinquished his role as leader of the al-Nusra Front in order to cede leadership to Hashim al-Sheikh, leader of the HTS coalition and

6 In December 2004 he was appointed by Bin Laden as Al Qaida's emir in Iraq and died in June 2006 as a result of a US precision bomb attack on a house in Baquba.

7 Camp Bucca is an American prison in the Irak desert. In April 2003, when the Americans took control of the detention camp, it was renamed in honour of Ronald Bucca, a New York fire chief who died in the rescue effort following the 9-11 attack on the Twin Towers. Various analysts agree that this prison was the place where the creation of the Islamic State was first conceived. There, several members of the group met, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who stayed at Camp Bucca for five years. He was transferred after being detained in Fallujah, west of the capital, Baghdad, in February 2004.

resign from his role as military commander of the group. However, with Al-Sheikh's subsequent resignation in October 2017, Al-Golani once again became the undisputed leader of HTS. According to the estimates of several analysts, from the 5,000 to 7,000 combatants the al-Nusra Front had in 2016 this figure increased to approximately 10,000 in 2018 (Gutierrez, 2018).

AQ's «triumph» over IS in Syria reinforced Al-Zawahiri's leadership, who is also credited with devising the strategic model, based on three of his main principles. The first was to strengthen the decentralised franchise approach, which facilitated the survival of the movement. Today, AQ is truly «glocal» and has incorporated the local approach into a global narrative that forms the basis of a grand, all-encompassing strategy. The second major move was the order issued by Zawahiri in 2013 to avoid operations that could produce mass casualties, especially those that could kill Muslim civilians. AQ has thus been able to present itself as a more moderate organisation than the IS. Finally, Zawahiri has avoided confrontation with the forces of the international coalition in order to preserve his operational capacity, contrary to the open battle presented by IS (Hoffman, 2018).

IS, on the other hand, originally based its strategy on the conquest of territory. The initial belief was that the enormous potential of the IS, particularly motivated by the fact that the Muslim population would rise to more than 1.5 billion in the short term, terrorising the enemy and encouraging a rapid withdrawal. (Foundation For Defence of Democracies, 2011). It is considered that «until 2015 IS's strategy was primarily geocentric. It aimed initially to capture geographical territory, then cleanse and control it, and then to state-build within it according to its ideology» (Ashour, 2015, p. 10). The IS had, indeed, a strong kick-start and conquered large expanses of territory, but military pressure and the difficulty in recovering combat capacity made it gradually lose territory.

Ideology as the basis of jihadist resilience

In this section we will look at the evolution of the main jihadist groups. By examining the attacks we trace the history of alliances and establish the link with the Global Jihad.

Al Qaeda and its affiliates

Illustration 1 shows the evolution of the main jihadist groups linked to AQ ideology. This graph reveals the resilience of Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the decrease in AQIM attacks. The case of the latter group, as we shall see, is different in that its evolution has been marked by affiliation to regional groups, which has allowed the influence of jihadist ideology to be maintained in the Sahel.

AQ initially existed as a formal organisation with a solid structure, albeit based on identifiable territory. This infrastructure provided the ability to survive the pressure AQ faced after the declaration of the World War on Terrorism that followed the attack of September 11, 2001. The organisation's ability to regroup and recover from the loss of its physical infrastructure and relevant leaders is what enabled it to survive and maintain the resilience of the ideology the group sought to spread (Gunaratna and Oreg, 2005, p. 1044). But, as the effects of the fight against terrorism were felt, AQ evolved into a highly decentralised and agile organisation. Central to this agility was the ideology based on Islamic fundamentalism around which its members gathered (Hutchison, 2010, p. 5). This ideology allowed it to continue to have visibility through attacks perpetrated by regional franchises.

From 2007 onwards, «regional franchises» emerged, which were linked to the Global Jihad. Among these regional franchises, three stand out: AQIM, Al-Shabaab and AQAP. These franchises were characterised the allegiance or *Bayat* offered to AQ and the support they received from the organisation in return.

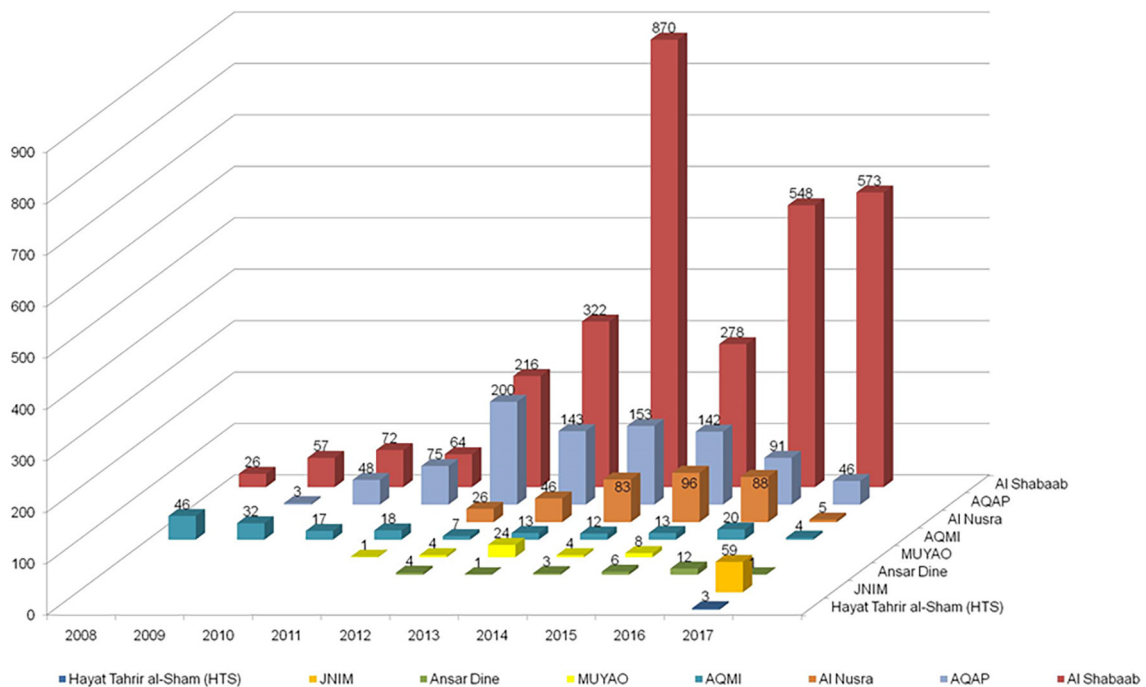


Illustration 4. Activity of jihadist groups
Source: compiled by the author with GTD data.

Al Qaeda in the Sahel

In early 2007 the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) officially merged with AQ and was renamed AQIM (Filiu, 2009, p. 213). On September 11, 2006 AQ's second-most senior man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, used the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the United States to announce this union by posting a video. In his message he said that "this blessed union will be a bone in the throat of the American and French Crusaders...and will provoke fear in the hearts of the treacherous sons

of France” (Guidère, 2006). For its part, the GSPC declared its intention to attack Western targets and Drukdal, head of AQIM, pledged allegiance to Bin Laden. This pledge was sealed with an attack near Algiers on a bus carrying foreign employees of the American firm Brown, Root and Condor (New York Times, 2006).

One of the reasons for this change may have been to improve AQIM’s legitimacy among the most militant members and facilitate recruitment, while AQ could renew its international credentials and access a region geographically close to Europe. Central AQ saw this connection as satisfying its interest in North Africa, while the GSPC moved from a focus on nationalist ambitions to a more international agenda (Arieff, 2013, p. 8). This change of name, therefore, also gave a boost to the local jihad in that membership of a global organisation lent legitimacy to its struggle. Illustration 2 shows the process of transformation from the GSPC into AQIM.

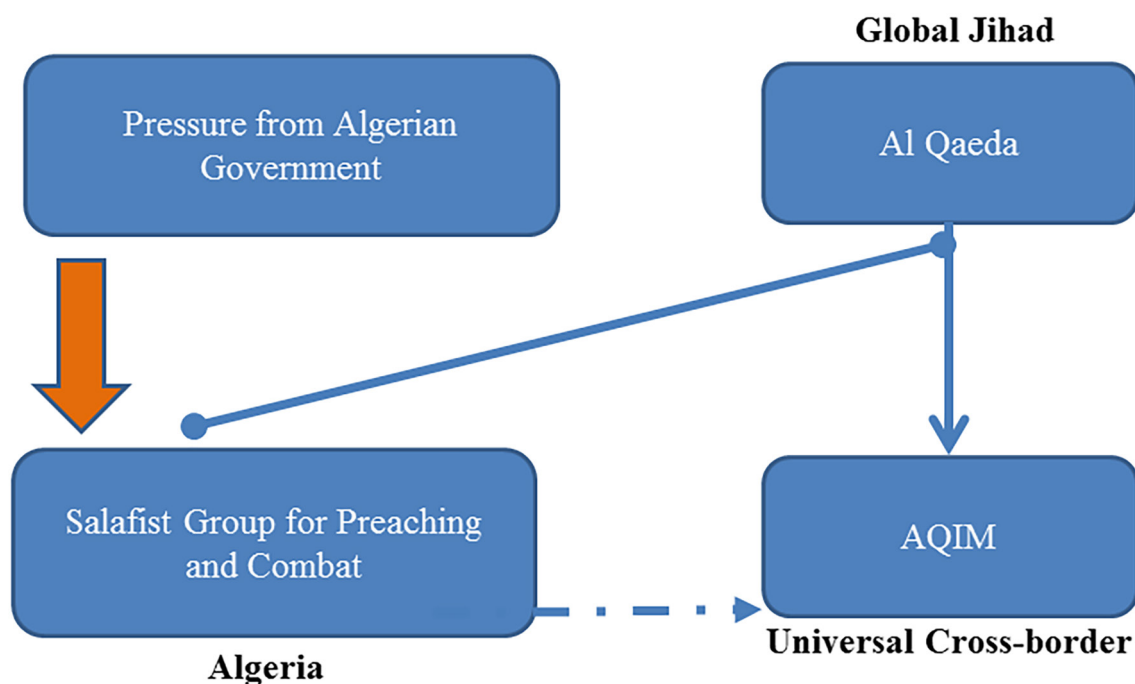


Illustration 5. Transformation from the GSPC into AQIM
Source: compiled by the author with GTD data.

AQIM-related activity in countries such as Mauritania, Mali and Niger remained somewhat under control until 2008, but thereafter jihadist attacks were on the increase⁸. 2012 is identified as the beginning of the «Sahelisation of Jihad», a period marked by the impact of the Arab Spring, encompassing the revolts that broke out between December 2010 and January 2011, first in Tunisia and Egypt followed shortly afterwards by the civil war in Libya. These events «had consequences throughout the Sahel, with particular impact on the stability of Mali» (Echeverría, 2013, p. 21). In

⁸ In 2005 there were two attacks perpetrated by the GSPC. The first took place in Mauritania, in June, in the city of Lemgheity, and a month later, in July 2005, another attack took place in Mali in which an Algerian helicopter was shot down without any fatalities.

addition to the regional franchises (AQIM, AQAP, AQI...), jihadist groups such as MUJAO and Ansar Dine began to emerge and extend their activity throughout the Sahel countries, infiltrating their societies.

From 2014, all G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) were affected by the activity of these groups or divisions of them. The combination of political, social and economic factors facilitated the radicalisation of Islamists and the emergence of terrorist groups inspired by the ideology of Global Jihad. Moreover, certain circumstances such as pressure from security forces or the displacement of combatants contributed to the spread of jihadism from one country to another.

Military pressure resulted in the dispersion of the jihadist groups, but from the end of 2015 the situation began to change. Groups such as the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) and Ansaroul Islam (AI) had managed to organise themselves and became active. In August 2015, the FLM claimed responsibility for the attack on the Byblos Hotel in Mopti and involvement in that of the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako (which was also attributed to Al Murabitún and AQIM) and was mainly active between Burkina Faso and the Malian border (Weiss, 2018). In its early stages, AI, founded by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, preacher of Soum, emerged from the upsurge of widespread social discontent in the province and may have had the support of other jihadist groups such as the FLM, with which it was able to collaborate in various attacks in central Mali (Long War Journal, 2018). Since Dicko's death in 2017, there has also been speculation about the switchover of some militants to the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (Le Roux, 2019).

In the case of AQ, its associated groups became progressively closer until they were able to join forces and thus have a greater impact in the region. In March 2017, the most powerful jihadist organisations in the Sahel announced their unification and the creation of Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali. These organisations were: Ansar Dine, the jihadist movement led by Ghali himself who was born at the beginning of this decade and was one of the protagonists of the occupation of northern Mali in 2012, the AQIM faction, led by the Algerian Djamel Okacha⁹, which included the katiba (brigade) Al-Murabitoun under the famous Algerian terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar; and, finally, the aforementioned FLM, a terrorist movement born in 2015 and led by the preacher Amadou Koufa.¹⁰ (El País, 2017).

⁹ Djamel Okacha was Abu Zeid's successor after his death in February 2013 in an alleged attack by the French Army. AQIM appointed him responsible for operations in the region of the Sahara. Aged 34, Okacha, whose war name is Yahia Abou El Houmam, initially led the so-called Falange El Forqane, which dealt with the recruitment and mobilisation in the Sahara of troops to integrate them into the ranks of AQIM in northern Mali. He is allegedly responsible for the assassination of US humanitarian aid worker Christopher Leggett in 2009.

¹⁰ Although left for dead after an attack by French forces in November 2018, he appeared in a video in 2019. He is a preacher who has developed his activity mainly in the city of Niafunke, in the centre of Mali and his mentor is Ghali. His group, the LWF, began to take centre stage in January 2015 and

The creation of JNIM put an end to the factionalism that had been a long-standing feature of jihadist organisations in the region and gave rise to what can be considered one of AQ's most powerful affiliates. Thus, on the one hand, Sahelian jihadism reorganised its forces in the face of increased military pressure from Operation Barkhane and Operation AQ¹¹ as well as G5 Sahel¹². On the other hand, AQ reinforced its position against the penetration of IS in the area, since its affiliate, the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS), a division of Boko Haram, had gained prominence with the attacks of September and October 2016¹³. The new organisation introduced nuances of Islamism in West Africa and the Sahel but «despite the presence of local militia among its militants there was a preponderance of North African middle management, emerging figures and AQIM leaders who ensured that the essence of the brand was safeguarded» (Altuna, 2018, p. 12).

On the other hand, with the creation of JNIM, AQ positioned itself to remain the predominant group in the region and absorb groups that were beginning to see the fall of IS. Through its terrorist operations, JNIM helped mitigate the decline of the military potential of the AQ matrix in North Africa, where Mali became a JNIM nerve centre because, in addition to facilitating operations in a destabilised country, Mali's strategic location allowed JNIM's actions to resonate beyond its immediate neighbours¹⁴. As an illustration of this stance, it sought to increase its influence and capacity

its objective is to revive the Macina Empire, which flourished in the nineteenth century and centred in the cities of Mopti and Segou.

¹¹ Operation Barkhane was launched on August 1, 2014 with the aim of fighting terrorism in the Sahel region. Also present in the region are the MINUSMA forces created by the Security Council in 2013 and which since 2014 have focused on ensuring the security, stabilisation and protection of civilians; supporting national dialogue on policy and reconciliation; supporting the restoration of State authority throughout the country, the reconstruction of the security sector and the promotion and protection of human rights.

¹² The presidents of the five Sahel States exposed to the terrorist threat officially launched the G5 Sahel Cross-Border Joint Force on July 2, 2017 in Bamako. The African Union supported the creation of this joint military force, which was approved by the UN Security Council in resolution 2359 (June 21, 2017), submitted by France. Its mandate is the fight against terrorism, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking in the geographical area of the G5 Sahel. Its first intervention took place in November 2017, with the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

¹³ The first attack occurred on the night of September 1, 2016, when ISGS attacked a gendarmerie in Burkina Faso near the Nigerian border and killed two guards. The second occurred about a month later, on October 12. The group attacked a police post in Intoum, Burkina Faso, a few kilometres from the Malian border, where three policemen were killed. The third, and certainly the most sophisticated, was the organisation by ISGS of an escape attempt from the Koutoukale high-security prison in Niamey, Niger, on October 17, 2015.

¹⁴ Like Niger, Mali is a gateway linking sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa and the Mediterranean, making it a key crossroads for migrants and refugees heading to Europe. It is true that these flows are an important source of income for a group accustomed to smuggling goods throughout the region, but the focal point remains the jihadist link, without which organised crime gangs would be much easier to fight. Its proximity to Libya also offers the group new avenues for smuggling and buying weapons in an affluent post-conflict market.

by assuming the cause of groups present in the region such as the FLM, which defended the Fulani cause and its extremist ideology, and JNIM endorsed it by engaging in a revenge attack after a Fulani teenager was murdered (Geopolitical Monitor, 2018).

Al-Qaeda in East Africa

In this region Al-Shabaab exploited the social, economic, ethnic, religious and political factors fuelling the instability that existed before the fall of Siad Barre's government in 1991. The group controlled much of southern Somalia and parts of territory in Kenya and Ethiopia along the Somali border. In areas under its control, Al-Shabaab imposes its strict version of Sharia law. It is engaged predominantly in targeted attacks against the Somali government and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMI-SOM).

In February 2012 Al-Shabaab pledged allegiance to AQ (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019) and the most prominent group attack took place in 2013 when it attacked the Westgate Mall in a luxury neighbourhood of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, resulting in a four-day occupation of the shopping centre, 67 deaths and a disappointing performance by Kenyan security forces. At the time, Al-Shabaab seemed to have lost ground in Kenya, partly because of its own brutality and also as a result of pressure from the security forces, but since then the group has adapted and shown considerable resilience, allowing it to continue to represent not only a major threat to the country, but also to spread to parts of Tanzania, where militant violence was on the rise, and even to Mozambique (Crisis Group Africa Report, 2018, p. 2). As evidence of this, in 2015 the group killed 148 people in an attack on a university in the city of Garissa, in what became the most lethal attack in Kenya since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi, in which more than 200 people had lost their lives.

In recent years, Al-Shabaab has displayed a remarkable capacity for carrying out attacks. In April 2017, the new Somali president Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo declared war on Al-Shabaab and offered his militants amnesty within 60 days. The government offered employment and education to the fighters who surrendered during this period, but the group formally rejected the offer and declared war the next day. On April 9, an Al-Shabaab suicide bomber killed at least 15 people in an attack near a military base in Mogadishu. In October 2017, Mogadishu again suffered its worst terrorist attack to date when a truck loaded with explosives killed more than five hundred people (El País, 2017), although the group never claimed responsibility.

Al-Shabaab's main strength was then its dominance of key territory. On the one hand, the group dominated the land surrounding the capital, Mogadishu, from where it coordinated complex attacks targeting the Federal Government of Somalia. On the other hand, it also had controlled strong points in central and southern Somalia. From there, Al-Shabaab was able to devise attacks against Kenyan security forces and soft targets. Al-Shabaab's safe havens on the outskirts of the capital allowed it to carry out

occasional complex attacks against well-protected targets, such as federal ministries. However, pressure from the security forces led them to switch targets to focus more on lethal and “hit-and-run” attacks against international forces deployed in the country and Somali security forces.

Operations by Kenyan security forces increasingly forced Al-Shabaab to move elsewhere. They thus began to forge alliances with local Islamist groups in Tanzania and northern Mozambique¹⁵. In Tanzania, it has capitalised on the situation to forge links with national activists. These militant groups have been engaged in attacks on police officers and churches, and since 2015 the number of attacks has further accelerated, particularly along the coast and in large cities such as Mwanza, Arusha and Dar es Salaam. In 2016, the group kidnapped and beheaded leaders of political groups in a campaign designed to spread fear and to prevent them from gathering intelligence. In 2017 militants from the group ambushed and killed eight policemen on the outskirts of Kibiti on the Tanzanian coast, the focus of clashes between militants and security forces (International Crisis Group 2018). In Mozambique, the province of Cabo Delgado has become a new hotbed for militancy¹⁶. Tanzanian militants escaping pressure from security forces have retreated to the south and crossed into Mozambique.

Most of the group’s attacks are reprisals against perceived injustices against Muslims and against the Al-Shabaab mission in Somalia. Targets include the United States and other Western countries, as well as other states such as Uganda and Kenya, which have contributed troops to AMISOM. A feature of Al-Shabaab is adaptability. For example, Al-Shabaab has combined the use of suicide bombers and hand grenades to penetrate heavily fortified perimeter structures (Counter Extremist Project, 2018).

Al-Shabaab ideology is described as a branch of Salafism and Wahhabism that supports *takfir*, the excommunication of apostates or infidels. The group is fighting first and foremost to create a fundamentalist Islamic state in the Horn of Africa, which would include not only Somalia but also Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia. The strict enforcement of Al-Shabaab sharia involves stoning, amputations, and decapitations, which are regular punishments for criminals and apostates. The group violently persecutes non-Muslims and frequently attacks humanitarian and international aid workers.

15 Attempts by transnational jihadism to build ties with Tanzanians were already underway in 1998 as investigations into the 1998 attack on the US embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, have revealed. Al Qaeda then turned to the locals for logistical support.

16 The wave of attacks against civilians began in October 2017, when suspected armed Islamists attacked a police station in the Mocimboa da Praia district, causing two days of lock-down in the area and a military response that led to the evacuation of villages. Despite the police presence in the region and the establishment of a special military operation to combat armed groups, attacks on villages continued sporadically in 2018. Between May and July 2018, at least 39 people were killed in attacks by an alleged armed Islamist group in the northern province of Cabo Delgado killed and more than a thousand were displaced.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

In Yemen, AQ was beginning to see the fruits of its local strategy in 2017. Civil war provided the ideal scenario for AQAP which, like all insurgent groups, thrives in environments where there is a lack of state authority, poverty and fragmented opposition forces. The war was the ideal setting for a more covert strategy that allowed it to expand its links with local communities and groups opposed to Yemeni Houthi rebels and their allies.

The new strategy based on local support was fundamental to AQAP's ability to sustain and expand in Yemen. The AQAP leadership went on to incorporate the lessons learned during its defeats and setbacks over the period from 2012-2014. AQAP then embraced the gradual approach advocated by its late leader, Al-Wuhayshi, and later accepted by Al-Raymi, who advocated self-restraint to facilitate rapprochement with those he sought to govern (Horton, 2017, p. 17). AQAP's growing concern for local community problems meant less interest in direct attacks on foreign targets, but a more pragmatic path to growth in the region. Strengthening local ties makes it more resilient and more difficult to combat. In addition, it secures its future as long as the civil war in Yemen continues.

AQAP went on to operate throughout Yemen, mainly in the southern and central regions of the country. In many of these provinces it ruled small areas of territory with sharia courts and a heavily armed militia. AQAP tried to engage with the Yemeni people by meeting their basic needs and integrating into the local population, even in compliance with local government structures. However, since mid-2017, AQAP has suffered losses in its leadership and commanders on the ground due to extensive Yemeni and international counter-terrorist operations.

The evolution of Al-Qaeda

Through its affiliates in Syria, Somalia, Yemen and West Africa, AQ has taken advantage of weak and deficient states, turning ungoverned spaces into alternatively governed spaces, with the government provided by AQ franchise groups working at grassroots level to generate legitimacy among local populations. This has been a hallmark of the AQ sister organisation in Syria, where the group softened its tone and juxtaposed its control to that of the much more draconian IS. AQ appears to be the most active group in Syria, at least for now, firmly rooted throughout Idlib province. Also worrisome is the possible expansion of AQ to southwest Libya as well as the stockpiles of weapons scattered throughout the Maghreb and Sahel.

Finally, the AQ was able to reinforce its leadership with the appearance on the scene of Hamza bin Laden, who might achieve the reunification of the Global Jihad. On September 14, 2017, the group issued an audio statement from Osama bin Laden's son calling on jihadists to double their jihadi efforts in Syria against what it described as a

U.S.-Russian-Shiite conspiracy against Islam. These signs of leadership are important as the Islamic state continues its decline. IS members were unlikely to pledge allegiance to Al-Zawahiri, whom they considered unworthy of bin Laden's legacy. Hamza, on the other hand, had in his favour his pedigree and his marriage to the daughter of an AQ founding member, Abu Mohammed al-Masri, making him a possible leader for IS militants (Soufan, 2017, p. 5).

Islamic state

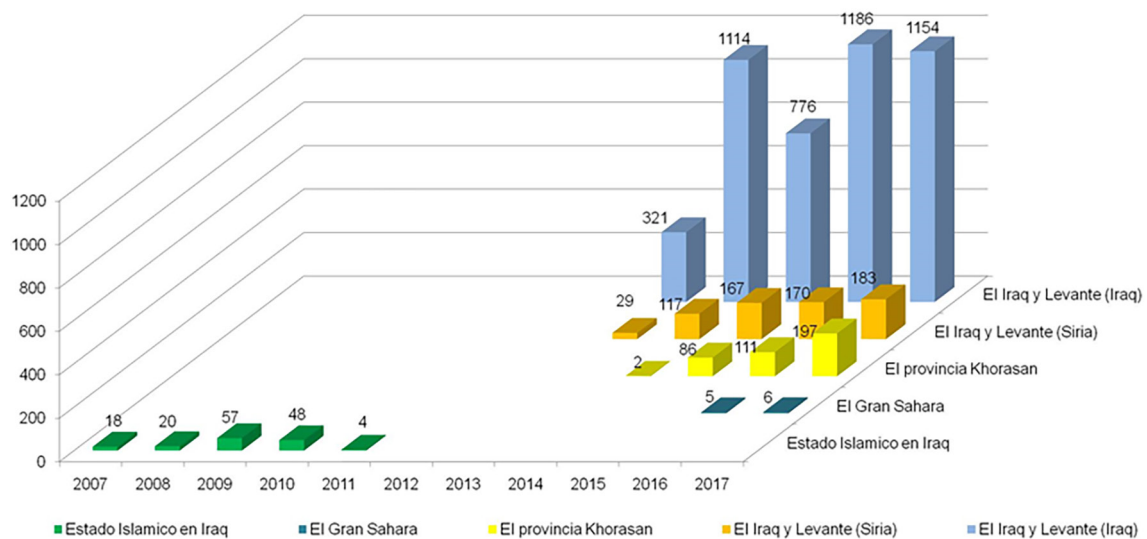


Illustration 6. Activity of jihadist groups associated with the Islamic State
Source: compiled by the author with GTD data.

The Islamic State of Iraq originated in the Jama'at al-Tawhidwal-Jihad group, founded in 1999. This group pledged allegiance to AQ and participated in the Iraqi insurgency following the invasion of Western forces in 2003. It was from this group that Abu Musab al Zarqawi founded Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. The group lost momentum after the build-up of US forces in Iraq in 2007 and the death of Al-Zarqawi in 2006, but began to re-emerge again in 2010 and in subsequent years has taken advantage of the growing instability in Iraq and Syria to carry out attacks and reinforce its ranks.

From 2011 onwards, in the wake of the aforementioned crisis with the al-Nusra group and the setback of Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi in attempting to expand into Syria, there was a break with AQ and the birth of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant¹⁷. Despite the setback in Syria, in 2014 the Islamic State in Iraq emerged very forcefully

¹⁷ The group is known as Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham in Arabic, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The term «al-Sham» refers to a region stretching from southern Turkey to Syria and Egypt (which also includes Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Jordan). The group's stated goal is to restore an Islamic state, or caliphate, throughout this area. The standard English term for this vast territory is «the Levant». Therefore, the translation is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL.

and managed to conquer territories in Iraq and Syria until Baghdadi declared the caliphate in the summer of 2014 in the great mosque of Mosul, leading the way to a campaign of terror. Since then the IS has succeeded in attracting affiliates in numerous countries that joined the group because they identified with its model of antagonism towards local jihadist competitors and its hatred of non-Muslim nations. In the majority of countries where the IS has been successful its recruitment capacity has been based on its reputation for its intransigence in imposing the ideology of Global Jihad (McCants, 2016, p. 20).

In 2014 IS was clearly on the rise at the expense of the decline of AQ. It proved victorious over AQ after its march through Iraq capturing town after town before concluding with the seizure of Mosul in June 2014. In a matter of months, a significant portion of AQ had fractured and in various places groups had emerged that favoured adherence to the IS. This was the case in Algeria, Pakistan, Yemen and, ultimately, in numerous countries from Morocco to Indonesia (Intel Center, 2016). The appeal of Islamic State branding caused the jihadist landscape to become more diverse than at any previous time in history. Initially, AQ and IS competed destructively against each other; however, since the creation of the caliphate, they were aggressively pursuing attacks in an attempt to one up each other. (Watts, 2016, p. 5).

In September 2014 the United States built an anti-IS coalition together with Kurds and Syrian Arabs known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which gradually captured the Islamic State's key positions. Although IS managed to take Ramadi in Iraq and the former desert city of Palmira in Syria, it gradually began to lose ground. In June 2017 Mosul was lost to Iraqi forces after months of fighting and Baghdad declared the end of the caliphate. In 2018 the Syrian government regained the IS enclaves in Yarmouk, south of Damascus, and on the border with the Golan Heights occupied by Israel. Finally, on December 19, 2018, President Donald Trump declared that IS had been defeated and indicated his intention to withdraw the 2,000 U.S. troops supporting the SDF in Syria. But the SDF continued its offensive and in February 2019 launched a final siege on IS forces in Baghouz, their territorial last stand. Baghouz fell on 23 March 2019, formally ending the caliphate's claim on any territory.

Despite the enormous territorial losses and military setbacks in the Middle East, the violent ideals advocated by the IS remain resilient and seem to resonate in the hearts and minds of a section of inspired Muslims. An example is India, where after a brief pause in IS-led or IS-inspired events in the country, security agencies unearthed multiple pro-IS secret networks, and foiled conspiracies to carry out terrorist attacks aimed at key facilities and sites around the state capital, New Delhi, and locations in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (Jamestown Foundation, 2019).

Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS)

The ISGS clearly emerged from its link to the Global Jihad, as a split from Al Murabitún. The group was created when its leader, Al Sharawi, Emir of Al Murabitún,

a group linked to AQIM, pledged allegiance to the leader of the IS in May 2015, a commitment that the IS recognised in October 2016. The group has focused on local targets in rural areas of Mali and its recruitment base is in Niger, fuelled by ethnic conflicts as well as the lack of state presence and legitimacy. Estimates of the number of militants vary considerably between 50 and several hundred (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

The group has shown an increase in its operating capacity in recent years. Since its creation in May 2015, the most significant attack perpetrated by the group was that of Tongo Tongo in October 2017, when ISGS militants ambushed a convoy of joint U.S.-Nigerian army green beret forces in the Tillabéri region near the Malian border, in which four U.S. special forces soldiers (green berets), four Nigerian soldiers and an interpreter were killed and others wounded. That same month, ISGS militants assaulted the gendarmerie in Ayorou, also in the Tillabéri region, where thirteen gendarmes were killed and five wounded, and vehicles, weapons, ammunition and other materials were seized.

In recent years the ISGS has stepped up its activity considerably, from approximately ten incidents in 2017 to a hundred in 2018. The group has carried out attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. However, it has failed to implement attacks resulting in massive casualties or complex operations against protected targets and is also far from reaching the operational capability of its rival, JNIM. The group has managed to capture several hostages in order to exchange them for a substantial ransom (Stratfor, 2019), but most of the group's attacks have been ambushes, assassinations, kidnappings and disruption to communication lines. The only attack that could have had a major impact was that of March 10, 2019, when they attempted a complex strike on the French Operation Barkhane forces near Akabar, but the suicide car bomb was detonated prematurely with fifteen French soldiers wounded as a result.

ISGS grew rapidly after the Tongo Tongo attack in October 2017. Although weakened by counter-terrorism operations in 2018, the group gained popular support in northern Mali and contributed to the scaling-up of the Salafist-jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso. The persistent conflict conditions that allowed ISGS to grow in Mali foster the group's resilience.

Islamic State in the Province of Khorasan

The IS became known in Afghanistan in 2014, when the group's first leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, pledged *bayat*, or allegiance to the group that originated in Iraq (The Defence Post, 2018). The faction gained strength in Nangarhar province¹⁸ from mid-2014 by recruiting dissatisfied Taliban commanders, exploiting local resources and winning over or forcing support from Salafist religious networks (Garret, Karokhaily Amir, 2016). Another factor in the emergence of IS in Afghanistan was the counterin-

¹⁸ Nangarhar is one of the few areas in Afghanistan with Salafist communities.

surgency operation carried out by Pakistan in 2014 and 2015, the so-called “Zarb-e-Azb” operation¹⁹. This resulted in the displacement of Pakistani activists arriving from across the border from Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Many of these activists were separate members of the Terik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-Islam groups. In addition, the appointment of Khan as the first emir of the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), and that of a Taliban commander, Abdul Rauf Khadim, as his deputy, further facilitated the group’s growth by connecting to recruitment networks established in Afghanistan. From 2017, members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the Haqqani Network and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) could also have joined IS-K (CSIS, 2018).

Most Islamists, especially those of Pakistani origin, have never identified closely with the official Taliban ideology, but have reached agreements with mutual benefits²⁰. However, since the coalition forces deployed in Afghanistan expelled the Taliban from power, relations between AQ and its former benefactors have changed considerably (Council on Foreign Relations, 2009).

From 2015 onwards, IS registered significant expansion in Afghanistan. In January 2015, an IS spokesman based in Raqqa, Syria, announced that the group was expanding its operations into the province of Khorasan, a medieval name for a territory comprising territories of Afghanistan and parts of Iran and Pakistan (Oxford Analytical Daily Brief, 2015). The main attraction of IS was its ideology. The group quickly managed to muster enough strength to represent an active threat in Afghanistan, through the use of a narrative based on purity that permeated the local commanders and emirs, dissatisfied with the lack of application of Sharia law and collaboration with the Pakistani army. In these early years the group demonstrated its ability to infiltrate and attack populated areas, most notably the attack on the Pakistani consulate in the provincial capital, Jalalabad, in January 2016.

Territorial conquest has been a hallmark of IS-K. Afghanistan was important for the Global Jihad and this was manifested in the support of the central leadership of IS in Iraq and Syria. As the IS lost territory in Iraq first and Syria later, Afghanistan grew in importance as a base for its global caliphate. Like the IS’s central leadership in Iraq and Syria, IS-K envisioned a caliphate that began in South and Central Asia, governed by Sharia law that would spread as Muslims from across the region and the world united. In its vision, IS-K had no international borders and foresaw that its territory

19 On June 14, 2014, the Pakistani army launched a large-scale offensive called «Zarb-e-Azb» with the stated aim of eliminating the militant pockets in the North Waziristan Area (NWA), which is a strategic area in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The name «Zarb-e Azab» refers to one of the seven swords of the Holy Prophet.

20 Let us not forget that the US and NATO campaign against Taliban forces in Afghanistan aims to prevent Al-Qaeda from re-establishing a base that could be used to plan attacks against third countries. This is intended to avoid the situation prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when Al-Qaeda enjoyed refuge under the Taliban government and the Taliban leader Mullah Omar refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to international authorities.

would transcend the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018).

Islamic State in Khorasan was unable to consolidate the land it had conquered. In Afghanistan, the group never achieved the success rates of Syria and Iraq for different reasons. On the one hand, the group's brutality and inflexible ideology caused it to lose the support of the local population and, as a consequence, its recruiting capacity diminished. On the other hand, they suffered attacks from both the Taliban and members of the Afghan security forces supported by the United States and NATO forces. The IS was at a disadvantage in expanding into a country where the Taliban had been struggling for decades against multiple attacks from abroad, living among Afghans and supported by families and tribes with whom they had ethnic ties.

The rejection of the Taliban, together with the counter-terrorist effort of the United States, resulted in IS-K finally losing its strongholds in the west and south of the country and concentrating in the province of Nangarhar in the east. There they managed to gain strength in villages in districts such as Achin, Naziyan, Bati. Kot and Shinwar, as well as some territories in Deh Bala, Rodat and Chaparhar, in the province of Nangarhar. In these territories they succeeded in expelling the Taliban (Middle East Institute, 2016, p. 6).

The case of IS in Khorasan demonstrates that, in addition to expanding into Afghanistan through the link to Global Jihad, territorial dominance is a vulnerable issue for jihadist groups. For this to be effective there has to be support from the local population and passiveness on the part of the security forces. This failed the IS in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, IS ideology inspired many of the jihadists who carried out attacks in the West.

Islamic State in the West

In the United States, more than three-quarters of all deaths caused by jihadist attacks in the country since the 9/11 attacks occurred when IS was at the height of its popularity and more than half of the deadly attacks in the same period were somehow ISIS-inspired (Berger and Serman, 2018). Increased IS influence caused many to fear that the threat had changed radically. Although no foreign terrorist group has successfully carried out a deadly attack in the United States since September 11, there have been a considerable number of attacks inspired by IS ideology and it cannot be ruled out that they may occur in the future.

Europe is currently at the end of a wave of jihadist violence that began on November 13, 2015, with a series of IS-related attacks in Paris and which, in addition to France, also impacted on Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom²¹. In 2015, 150

²¹ Since the 11-M attacks in Madrid, there have been nine European Union states that have suffered Islamist attacks resulting in loss of life: Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany,

people died in jihadist terrorist attacks, followed by 135 in 2016 and 62 in 2017. However, 2018 ended with some 20 fatalities due to terrorist attacks in Europe, a significant reduction from previous years (New America, 2018).

Conclusions

Ideology has been the cause of the expansion of jihadism in different regions. Networks related to illicit trafficking and organised crime have existed and continue to exist in different regions without having the significance of the jihadist phenomenon. In order to reach its present magnitude, the existence of ideology has been necessary, although the financing of these organisations is an essential requirement. On the other hand, cases such as that of the Islamic State in the province of Khorasan or that of Al-Qaeda in Iraq demonstrate that control of territory does not constitute the centre of gravity of jihadist groups, but rather the inspiration in their ideology and the moral supremacy granted to their militants.

The ideology of Global Jihad is universally represented by Al-Qaeda. The organization has evolved through different franchises and alliances, but its ideology has endured over time. The main idea remains the Global Jihad against the United States and its allies that will be fought around the globe, first conceived by Bin Laden and his Palestinian partner Abdallah Azzam in the 1980s during the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

The group's resilience resides mainly in the consolidation of a secure network and the existence of safe havens where the core of the organisation can be maintained. With this starting point, AQ has implemented an ambitious strategy to protect the central leadership and discreetly consolidate its influence in other regions. It has thus expanded into the Sahel, Syria, Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, maintaining only a central core in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This has been possible thanks to the strength of its message, which has enabled the growth of local groups in different regions, maintaining a link with the global Jihad.

The evolution of AQ has been influenced by a series of processes based on the existence of similar nuclei in certain territories. Among these processes, the destabilisation caused by the Arab Spring stands out. An example of this is the GSPC, its transformation into AQIM and, finally, its rise following the impact of the Arab Spring in Mali. In other words, the reconstruction of AQ after 9/11 and subsequent operations bore fruit in the wake of the Arab Spring. Although initially the yearning for democracy and economic reform aroused great optimism in several Maghreb and Sahel countries,

Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and France. Of these, the one with the highest number of fatalities was Madrid, with 191 deaths on commuter trains, followed by the 130 victims of the assault on the Bataclan hall and other targets in Paris in 2015, and the 86 victims of the atrocity in Nice in 2016.

AQ gained significant support from the local population, providing it with new opportunities for expansion.

Recent years have witnessed a rivalry in the Global Jihad between AQ and the Islamic state. In the early years following the proclamation of the Caliphate in 2014, the IS had the upper hand over AQ in the field of information. However, after the initial momentum, the IS suffered major setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, also evident in the reduction of its ideological influence to inspire attacks in Western countries. AQ initially lost appeal vis-à-vis the strength of the IS, but has invested in a strategy based on the support of the local population that has made it increasingly relevant in territories such as North Africa, the Levant, parts of Asia and, in addition, it continues to be strong on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The success of AQ's strategy resides primarily in its ideology and adaptability, reflected in its shift towards a «soft» or moderate approach. AQ is an idea, and an idea cannot be physically destroyed. Thus, despite operations aimed at killing their leaders and dismantling training camps, the ideology prevails. The clearest examples may be Afghanistan and Mali where, despite the military operations deployed, AQ survives and is even stronger thanks to its adaptability. Unlike the IS strategy based on headline-grabbing terrorist attacks, brutal public executions and propaganda, AQ pursues a softer approach, focused on seeking the support of Sunni Muslims in conflict countries.

In contrast, the IS has lost strength in recent years, particularly in Iraq and Syria. In Afghanistan, while the group has lost territory, the future presents opportunities for expansion. At present, negotiations in the context of a peace process that would put an end to the conflict could lead to the reintegration of the Taliban in different spheres of Afghan society, but we cannot rule out the possibility that some of the disenchanting will join the ranks of IS in order to continue the fight from an ideological perspective.

For the foreseeable future, the threat of AQ and IS will most likely continue to manifest itself in attacks in regions with associated groups. In the Sahel, despite military operations carried out by security forces, terrorist activity is expected to remain high in the Mopti region, where AQ-associated jihadist groups enjoy some freedom of movement and seek to control illicit trafficking networks in order to secure funding. In Burkina Faso, recent attacks in August confirm the presence of JNIM and Ansarul Islam. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab has suffered a severe loss of operational capacity, accentuated by the death of its leader, Oman Mahad Karata, and 18 other militants following a drone attack, but the group remains active in the region. The IS continues its activity in West Africa and could expand into areas of the Maghreb such as Morocco or Tunisia, due to the return of jihadists from Iraq and Syria. In addition, the attacks in Kabul confirm that it also has operational capacity in Afghanistan to carry out high-impact attacks.

The IS continues to be the benchmark of radical Jihad and also the one that has inspired the most attacks in Western countries but, nevertheless, it can no longer compete with AQ in terms of influence, scope, operational capacity or cohesion. Both

AQ and IS represent an ideology that attracts its militants, whose attacks have given them visibility and have succeeded in attracting new followers. At present, efforts against jihadist terrorism have managed to mitigate the risk of attacks in the West and downgrade the capacity of these organisations, but these groups or their predecessors have already suffered major defeats in the past and have managed to re-emerge, so the threat persists.

Hamza bin Laden's arrival on the scene, coupled with the IS's loss of operational capacity, could bring about progress towards the reunification of the Global Jihad. As with the creation of JNIM from other existing groups in the Sahel, the loss of IS territory, combined with the leadership that Hamza Bin Laden may represent, could make possible the future unification of Jihad with the merger of AQ and IS.

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Submitted: June 18, 2019.

Accepted: October 28, 2019.
