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BOOK REVIEW

AVILÉS FARRÉ, Juan (2017). A History of Jihadist Terrorism: from al Qaeda to Daesh. Madrid: Síntesis. 248 pgs. ISBN: 978-84-9171-057-08 Pages: 244. Price: 22 Euros.



Political terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Recourse to direct action which, with reduced means, seeks to achieve effects of far greater political and social impact was already in use by nihilists and anarchists in the XIX century. Nor is its international dimension new. Current jihadist terrorism, which current surveys show is regarded as one of the principal threats, even greater than the economic crisis, presents similarities with nihilist characteristics, but also notable differences. To some authors there is a clear connection, both ideological and psycho-sociological, between this kind of terrorism and libertarian nihilism, especially in that which operates in Western societies. Others connect it directly with a particular development within Islam. Among the current controversies over these two interpretations, one which stands out is that upheld by Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel. While the former speaks of an «Islam of radicalism», the latter, throughout his wide body of work, but especially in his analysis of the evolution of radical Islam in France, maintains that we are facing a «radicalization of Islam». We find a similar debate among many of the serious studies of the subject. This is why the book by Juan Avilés is so timely. For it traces, synthetically and didactically, the history of jihadism, with a broader scope than its title indicates, since its contents are not limited to following the evolution which goes from Al Qaeda to Daesh, but rather begin with a useful introduction in which is explained the way historical research works, the need to start from a contrasted documentation in order to be able to carry out an analysis based on a clear conceptual definition, indispensable in a subject such as this one in which insufficiently based opinion often takes precedence. The title of the book itself makes clear this conceptual precision, since it speaks, not of Islamic terrorism, but of jihadist terrorism, whose discourse justifying violence «is not to be found in Islamic tradition itself but rather in a re-interpretation of it carried out in mid-twentieth century by means of a current of thought usually designated “Salafist jihadism”».

A few brief introductory pages deal with the differing concepts; on the one hand, that of terrorism, on the other, that of Islam, which is differentiated both from political Islam or Islamism, the movement gestated in mid-twentieth century, and, more specifically, from the Salafist current of thought, with its different lines (purist, political and jihadist). The study is centered on jihadism, and on the different interpretations of its causes, from those which consider that its origin lies in poverty and oppression,

1 Avilés Farré, Juan (2012). Anarchist terrorism and jihadist terrorism: a comparative analysis. *History and Politics* 27: 227-240.

2 A good current study of the subject in Miguel Angel Ballesteros, 2016, *Jihadism*, Madrid. La Huerta Grande.

3 Roy, Olivier (2016). *Jihad and death*. Paris: Seuil.

4 Kepel, Gilles (2016). *Terror in the Hexagon, genesis of the French jihad*. Ed. Gallimard, Paris. (There is a Spanish translation), 2016, *The Terror Among Us. A History of the Jihad in France*. Barcelona: Península.

5 Avilés Farré, Juan (2017). *A History of Jihadist Terrorism: from al-Qaeda to al-Daesh*. Madrid, Síntesis, p. 12.

to those which see it directly related to Western imperialism, or the interpretations along Huntingtonian lines, of the clash of civilizations. Mr. Avilés recognizes that although each has some foundation, none on its own explains jihadism; an integration of the various factors is required, methodologically differentiating between three types of causal explanations: international factors, external antecedents and functional explanations.

The book, which is organized along these lines, deals in the first place with jihadist discourse and shows how its terrorist interpretation of the jihad is a version «accommodated to the scenario of asymmetric conflicts. But it implies as well a moral rupture, for the practice of terrorism steps outside the traditional norms of the jihad, which for the most part exclude deliberate death of non-combatants, especially in the case of women and children»⁶. The jihad is no longer looked upon as a collective obligation of every Moslem (*fard'kifayah*), when it is ordered by the legitimate authority, but is also an individual obligation (*fard'ayn*), for which there is no need even for the permission of parents. It is the «nearby» enemy, before the «far-away», who must be fought against, that is, the leaders of Moslem countries and the Moslems who, according to these thinkers, live in ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) and not according to the precepts of Islam.

The author expounds synthetically upon the most representative theses. In the first place Sayyid Qutb, executed by the Nasser regime in 1966, author, among other works, of *Maalim fil-Tariq* (Milestones along the Way), published a year before his death, a sort of manual for militants highly influential on this current of thought. Along the same line is Muhammad Abd al Salam Faraj, head of the *Tanzim al Jihad* (the group that, in 1981, assassinated Sadat) and author of *al-Farida al gaiba* («The forgotten duty» or «The hidden duty»), which represents the transition of the classical jihad into the terrorist. Finally, the third author studied is Abdullah Azzam, the mentor of Osama Bin Laden in the 1980's, during the jihad in Afghanistan, author of «*Join the Caravan*» (1987). Azzam defends the individual obligation of the jihad and advocates, as does Qutb, the formation of a vanguard to establish a solid territorial base (*al-qaeda al-sulba*), which according to F. Gerges, has a character totally different from the organization headed by Bin Laden in the second half of the 1990's. But unlike Qutb and Fard, Azzam is against the fight against Moslems and, face of what Zawahiri stands for, would maintain his opposition, until his assassination in 1989, the responsibility for which has never been clarified.

The chapter closes with references to the Islamic discourse on women as well as to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the House of Saud with Wahabbism and radical discourse. The author shows their influence upon the expansion of Islamism:

6 Avilés, 2017, *Ibid*, p. 31.

7 Avilés, 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

8 Gerges, Fawaz A. (2011). *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (pp. 43 *et al.*).

«Saudi money financed the establishment of religious organizations, such as the World Islamic League, the building of mosques, and the mass distribution of religious literature, including the works of Ibn Tamiyya.../...it reinforced in all countries of Moslem population, including those in Europe, a fundamentalist vision of Islam, which favored the emergence of Salafist jihadism». The paradox is that the jihadists would later denounce Saudi Arabia as one of the regimes which had repudiated true Islam».

After this necessary introduction, the central nucleus of the book follows a chronological as well as analytical order, and sets forth a process in which the prime initial element is nationalism, both of the secular type, as represented by the Palestinian PLO, as well as of the religious, whose exponent is the Palestinian Hamas. A series of events would prove to be determinants in the evolution towards a radicalized Islam; in the first place, the defeat of pan-Arab nationalism in the Arab-Israeli war in June of 1967, and just over a decade later, the triumph of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the same year in which the Afghan war began. Nasser died in 1970. Sadat, his successor, gave a great turn-about to Egyptian policy, breaking off the cooperation treaty with the USSR, and domestically, confronting movements close to the USSR and moving closer to the Islamists. Within this turn-about was his policy of approach to Israel and his resulting assassination in 1981 by the aforementioned Islamist radical group «Tanzim al Jihad». The following years, which saw a growing weight of jihadism in Egypt, almost coinciding with the Algerian civil war and the rise of the Islamic Front for Salvation, give way to the fourth chapter, on the origins and first steps of al Qaeda, the figure of Bin Laden and his ideological and social influence, as well as the first actions of the network at the end of the 1990's (Afghanistan, assaults on embassies, etc.).

The two following chapters (five and six) study the attacks on September 11th of 2001. The former examines the complexity of their preparation, the failure of the U.S. measures to prevent them, as well as the supposed aims of Al Qaeda, quoting al-Zawahiri and the importance he gave to the necessity of having an echo among the Arab masses similar to that achieved by the Palestinian Intifada⁹. The latter analyses the response of the U.S. and the measures taken in the «war on terror», among them the invasion of Iraq in 2003 which is, for many, the greatest error committed by President Bush¹⁰. The seventh chapter, focused on the analysis of the attacks of March 11 2004 in Madrid is a must reading one for, in his concise style, the author presents with clarity and balance facts which had undeniable social and political repercussions in Spain. The same concise style and balance characterize the eighth chapter, which analyses the so-called «Arab spring» (pp. 141-146) as well as the following chapter, which studies,

9 Avilés, J. (2017), *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

10 Zawahiri (Ayman al-Zawahiri), 2001. *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ayman_bk.html (quoted in Avilés, 2017, *op.cit.* p. 91).

11 Avilés, 2017. *Ibid*, p. 105.

on the one hand, the evolution of al Qaeda after the March 11 events, and on the other, the new threat represented by Daesh, from its origins in «Al Qaeda in Iraq» to its current situation of retreat; the author points out the importance which the Syrian civil war has throughout the development, with the proclamation of the Caliphate in 2014, as well as the tactics employed in what he calls the «Empire of terror», with the efficient utilization, among others, of modern communications media.

The book ends with an interesting chapter on the jihadist threat in the world. First, its impact in the Moslem countries is analyzed, (in the Middle East, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the Maghreb and the Sahel, in Nigeria with the Boko Haram group, and in Somalia with Al Shabbab). The chapter continues with the study of the presence of jihadist terrorism in Europe and in Spain (herein including references to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils), ending with a final analysis of the responses made by the European Union in the face of the threat represented by jihadist terrorism. In his conclusion the author warns that «while it is true that a sudden and complete disappearance of jihadist terrorism should not be expected, it is likely that its incidence will be gradually reduced. In the short term, however, it is to be feared that Daesh will increase its terrorist attacks to mask the collapse of the Caliphate»¹².

To sum up, this is a necessary, timely and very useful book, not only for students who need a broad approach to the subject but for any interested person. It is a book which not only presents the development of the facts but makes note of possible guidelines for efficient action in the face of these. The book has the added advantage of its Spanish publication. Here it should be noted that, while remaining far from that published in other languages, basically English or French, in recent decades there has occurred notable growth in Spain in the number of quality specialized studies on these subjects, among others those published by Spanish think-tanks such as the SISS, the REI, and the CIDI, to cite the most outstanding¹³. To these studies must be added more general works, aimed at a wider public, among which is to be found this book, which as of the end of 2017, brings them up to date¹⁴. Professor Avilés has, as well, written an easy-to-read, balanced and complete book in which the presentation of concrete and updated data and references predominate, a book that avoids falling into the all-too-frequent interpretative simplifications, so often seen when dealing

12 Avilés, 2017, *Ibid*, p. 216 (written August 31, 2017).

13 SISS (IEEE in its Spanish abbreviation) the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (www.ieee.es); REI (RIE in its Spanish abbreviation) the Royal Elcano Institute (www.reallinstitutoelcano.org); CIDI (CIDOB in its Spanish abbreviation) the Center for International Documentation and Information in Barcelona (www.cidob.org).

14 Among them, in addition to the aforementioned work by M. A. Ballesteros, and to cite only those most globally related, are to be found that published in 2007 by Luis de la Corte and Javier Jordán (2007), *Terrorist Jihad*. Madrid. Abstract, or study, by the aforementioned L. de la Corte, 2006, *The Logic of Terrorism*, Madrid, Alianza. Other outstanding studies in Spanish about more concrete cases (Hizbollah, Hamas, suicide attacks, terrorism in various countries, the Moslem Brotherhood, Syria, Yemen, etc.) may be seen in the bibliography included in the work herein summarized.

with this subject. The indices, with a selection of the most significant texts, as well as the final recommendation of filmed materials, constitute a fine complement to a work in which, curiously, no maps are included to permit visualizing more clearly the geographical context within which this political phenomenon moves as well as its complex inter-relations. Perhaps, given the characteristics and the current nature of the book, these could be included in a future and very probable second edition.

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