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## *The transformation of the global jihadist movement*

### **Abstract**

The jihadist movement has undergone a transformation since its origin, which we can place in the late 1970s. During this time, the jihadist organizations have changed their tactics and methods, fluctuating through a series of stages in which the movement asserted, consolidated and even denied itself, acknowledging its failures. Their defeats have not ruined the jihadist organizations, which on the contrary have drawn very useful lessons to learn despite everything, given that thanks to them, they have been renewed. The threat of the jihadist dimension continues to worry today, due to its dynamism, its extraordinary capacity for adaptation and versatility, and its lethality.

### **Keywords**

Global Terrorism, Islamic State, Al Qaeda, Caliphate, Arab Springs.

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## Part One: Background

### Introduction

From the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the fourth Arab-Israeli war<sup>1</sup>, to the uprisings of the so-called “Arab Springs”, we have witnessed ongoing instability in the Middle East. It is scenario of conflict and tension that has been exploited by jihadist terrorism, which has always used situations of fragility and crisis for its expansionist ends. This 40-year-long spiral of jihadism has gradually invaded the planet.

The era of global jihadist terrorism would begin after the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, a crucial date when, parallel to the development of the war another conflict, the “oil war”, would use oil as an economic weapon, demonstrating the possibility of using this natural resource as an instrument of international pressure. The oil embargo on countries supporting Israel, starting with the US (the “oil conflict” led to the classification of states into “friendly countries”, “neutral countries” and “countries supporting the enemy”), and the use of oil as a weapon until the withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories and the restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people, consolidated the financial power of Saudi Arabia and the other exporting countries, demonstrating its strategic importance.

The oil crisis demonstrated both the possibility of using oil as a diplomatic weapon and the improvement of the international image of Arab countries, which managed to get Israel to return part of the territories occupied in 1967. However, it did not achieve all its objectives, given that the Israeli state did not abandon the territories of the West Bank and Gaza, or the Golan Heights, and nor did it recognise the rights of the Palestinian people, which would consolidate the Israeli occupation and the conflict between the two states. The Yom Kippur war not only entrenched Saudi financial power, but it also facilitated the expansion of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi current<sup>2</sup> originating in the state (the Saudi state would in the immediate future be blamed for the rise of the self-styled Islamic State)<sup>3</sup>, as well as the spread of “Islamist group-

1 In the context of the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict, with UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947 authorising the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab, the Yom Kippur War would be the fourth and was fought by Syria and Egypt against the State of Israel. It was preceded by the 1948 War, the Suez War (1956) and the Six-Day War (1967). The UN plan would result in a chain of confrontations between the two states that has continued to this day, affecting the entire international community and its own security. See González, J. L. (2016). The Arab-Israeli conflict and the influence of the terrorist groups from the first to the second Intifada. Final degree thesis. Universidad Empresarial Siglo XX.

2 Islamic doctrine dominant in Saudi Arabia and named after its founder, Ibn Abd al Wahhab (1703-1787). It takes a rigorist and conservative view of dogma and demands the strict application of Shari'a (Islamic law) by its adherents.

3 [Consultado 15/05/2022]. [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151219\\_arabia\\_saudita\\_culpa\\_estado\\_islamico\\_wbm](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151219_arabia_saudita_culpa_estado_islamico_wbm)

ings” that soon emerged on the political and social scene, favoured by the petro-monarchies and conservative regimes that would “finance any Islamic initiative”<sup>4</sup>. In the following years, from these modern Islamist movements, terrorist groups, also known as “jihadists”, would emerge.

The year 1979 marked the first phase of contemporary jihadism, beginning with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which projected the universal dispute between Shia and Sunni for the power of Islam and demonstrated that the idea of the “Islamic state”, albeit in this case Shia, was not a utopia but a politically achievable goal<sup>5</sup>. It coincided with the year of the “Afghan jihad” (the jihadist international), which would be of capital importance in the global evolution of the jihadist movement, becoming the cause par excellence with which all militants, be they moderate and radical,<sup>6</sup> would identify, and where “action and devotion” converged<sup>7</sup> according to its greatest propagandist, the Palestinian ideologist Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989), mentor of the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, in the 1980s and one of its greatest exponents.

The 1980s culminated in the Soviet withdrawal from Kabul and the fall of the Soviets. A jihadist international had managed to defeat a superpower on the battlefield<sup>8</sup>. The successive phases of an already established international jihadism would include the dramatic blow to the US in the newly inaugurated 21st century, the fateful 11 September 2001; the ill-named “Arab Springs” in the winter of 2010-2011, a “virus of indignation” in the words of analyst Blanco Navarro<sup>9</sup> and a breeding ground for jihadism; and the proclamation of a pseudo-Islamic state in 2014 accompanied by the self-appointment of its pseudo-caliph. Three years later, the caliphate fell, and two years later, its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, disappeared, leaving a “caliphate without territory or caliph”<sup>10</sup>.

During these 40 years of terror expansion, the jihadist movement has undergone a major purge and transformation marked by events, which has not only demonstrated

4 Saborido, M. (March 2007). Radical Islamism. Centro de Estudios del Medio Oriente Contemporáneo.

5 Fuente, I. Jihadism in its historic context. The jihadist international. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Strategy paper. N.º 173, p. 53. Available at: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_173.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_173.pdf).

6 Kepel, G. (2000). Jihad. Expansion and decline of Islamism. Barcelona, Editorial Península. P. 39-47.

7 López, R. (2014). The Afghan jihad and the Algerian jihad: global perplexities, in Fernández, M. et al. (coord.). *War and conflict as society-revitalising elements*. Valladolid. P. 254.

8 López. Op. cit., p. 256.

9 Blanco, J. M.<sup>a</sup>. (2011). Arab Springs. Protests and Revolts. Factor analysis. *IEEE Opinion Paper*, 52/2011.

10 Title of the essay by Professor De La Corte, L. (2019). A caliphate without territory or caliph. Baghdadi's life and death and its Implications for the future of Daesh and the global Jihad. *Opinion Paper, IEEE*, 13/2019.

its incredible resilience and adaptability, but has also raised the question of where the movement is heading.

### Background. Birth of the global jihadist movement

The 1980s saw a steady advance of the Islamisation of the political order in the Middle East and the exacerbation of antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites. The main battleground aside from the Afghan jihad would be the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), initiated by Iraq, which sought a “Sunni channelling of Khomeini’s Iranian revolution”,<sup>11</sup> an Islamic revolution that had been taken by Islamist forces around the world as an encouragement and good model of the power of Islam to end tyrannies, helping prompt the emergence of a kind of Islamic awakening around the Muslim world<sup>12</sup>.

For their part, with the “Afghan jihad”, Saudi Arabia and its allies wanted to show that Islam would triumph against the Soviet invasion and that total hegemony vis-à-vis Shia defiance of Islam was universally Sunni.

Ayatollah Khomeini took advantage of the year 1989 to overshadow the victory, albeit only symbolic, of the Sunni jihad against the Soviet Union. To this effect, on the eve of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Khomeini would issue a fatwa against the Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rusdhi, accusing him of apostasy and condemning him to death for his work “The Satanic Verses” which, according to Khomeini, insulted the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. Thanks to convenient media publicity surrounding this event, the effects of the Sunni victory were overshadowed, once again exacerbating the conflict between the two factions and causing the issue to take on an international dimension. Europe would begin to perceive “the extent to which fundamentalism was moving beyond the boundaries of the Muslim world and into Western territory”<sup>13</sup>.

The Soviet invasion was considered the first of the “holy wars”<sup>14</sup> (jihad) of the contemporary era, an invasion of dar-al-Islam (land of Islam)<sup>15</sup> by the kuffar (Western

11 Kepel, G. (2020). *Emerging from Chaos. Crises in the Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial. P. 6.

12 Alkhalifa, W. (2007). *The Radical Wing of Islam. Political Islam, reality and fiction*. Madrid, Siglo XXI. Pp. 68-69.

13 Algora, M.<sup>a</sup> D. (2001). *Fundamentalist Islam in Europe in the last decades of the XX century*. *Information Bulletin*. N.º 270. Madrid, Higher Centre for National Defence Studies.

14 The term “jihad” is generally translated as “holy war”, but it should be understood that, strictly speaking, in Arabic “holy war” is al-harb al-muqaddas, an expression that does not exist in the Islamic tradition. De León Azcárate, J. L. (2018). *The jihad and the how war is handled in the Koran*. *Human Rights Journal*. N.º 3.

15 According to classical Islamic jurists, the world was composed of two kinds of territories: those dominated by Islam (dar al-Islam) and those outside Muslim control, i.e., the “territories of war” (dar al-harb).

infidels). A demonstration of the incompatibility between Islam's jihadist prism and the West would be observed by the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda (AQ), and embodied in his most influential work, "Knights under the Banner of the Prophet", which came out after the 9/11 attacks. An "incompatibility" that would replace the classic planetary antagonism of communist East and capitalist West, giving prominence to Professor Samuel Huntington's famous concept of the "clash of civilisations"<sup>16</sup>.

The Afghan jihad thus served as an interpretative and formative framework for the 21st century jihad<sup>17</sup>, a call to jihad that attracted thousands of "holy warriors", the Afghan Arab volunteers, eager to fight against unholy forces in defence of their Afghan brothers (mujahideen), and significantly influencing future jihadist mobilisations. Among them was a young Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who would transplant to the region a part of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (Tanzim al-Jihad) responsible for the assassination of Israeli President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, for which he would be arrested and imprisoned<sup>18</sup>. The "jihad against Sadat", which sought the total overthrow of the existing order, was coordinated by the Egyptian militant Abd al-Salam Faraj (1954-1982)<sup>19</sup>, and proposed and executed by an Egyptian army lieutenant, Khalid El Islambouli, together with other members of the Tanzim al-Jihad cell. All of them would be executed by hanging for this assassination in 1982.

The year 1988 would be the year of the founding of al-Qaida, "a vanguard that constitutes the solid foundation [al-Qaida al-Sulba] of the hoped-for society", wrote Abdullah Azzam<sup>20</sup>, not only its main ideologue and Osama bin Laden's mentor but also the creator of the first jihadist organisation, the Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen ("service bureau" for the financial support and recruitment of Arab jihadists), a revolutionary vanguard. "Every principle needs one"<sup>21</sup>, Azzam would write. It would be the first organisation to transcend national borders to encompass militants from various Arab countries<sup>22</sup>, defined as an "organised Islamic faction" with a mission:

16 Huntington's book. (1996). *The clash of civilisations and the reconfiguration of the world order*. Barcelona, Paidós Ibérica.

17 Gómez, L. (2018). *Between sharia and jihad, an intellectual history of Islamism*. Madrid, Editorial Catarata. P. 145.

18 De La Corte, L. (2020). *Afghanistan: from a troubled past to an uncertain future*. *Global Strategy Reports*. 31/3/2020.

19 Marín, R. (2002). *Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt (II). Neo-Fundamentalist Groups in Egypt*. *Asian and African Studies*. 117.

20 Abdullah Azzam would use the term 'qaeda' in an article written in the magazine *Al Jihad*, entitled *Al Qaeda al-Sulbah - the solid base*.

21 *Al Jihad*. No. 41, April 1988. Quoted in Bergen, P. (2007). *Osama Up Close: An Oral History of the Al Qaeda Leader*. Barcelona, Debate. P. 132.

22 Avilés, J. (2011). *Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda: the end of an era*. Madrid, La Catarata. P. 43.

“spread the word of God and lead their religion to victory”<sup>23</sup>. Azzam’s death in 1989 in strange circumstances that were never fully clarified would leave Osama Bin Laden as the undisputed leader of AQ.

The USSR pulled its last soldiers out of Afghanistan in 1989. The jihad fighters, triumphant vis-à-vis victory, gained extraordinary prestige on a global scale as an unpredictable military terrorist force to which Bin Laden put a face<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, a civil war broke out in Afghanistan. In 1994, the Taliban (Talib means “student” in Pashto) established themselves as an independent force until they conquered Kabul in 1996, dominating much of Afghanistan until the US withdrew. Their objectives, which were purely local,<sup>25</sup> moved away from Al Qaeda’s international project of global jihad, focusing on a return to ancestral customs and away from the beginnings of modernity that were penetrating some Afghan cities<sup>26</sup>.

When Bin Laden, followed by the other AQ members, decided to return to Afghanistan in the 1990s, he made a pact with Mullah Omar, who was elected Emir of All Believers (amir ul mominin) in 1996, receiving his protection and unconditional support. It was in Afghanistan that Bin Laden found the secure resources and infrastructure that would allow him to implement his ambitious future plan: “Afghan training camps would open the doors to anyone willing to join the global jihad against the distant enemy”<sup>27</sup>. All Muslim volunteers willing to sacrifice themselves would receive military training and instruction there.

### *Internationalist jihad fails*

The goal of mobilising the masses failed on all three fronts, Algerian, Bosnian and Egyptian<sup>28</sup>. The jihadists’ initial popularity with the masses waned as the population started to fear the indiscriminate violence of a jihadism that was becoming less and less selective, targeting the whole of society in attacks of great brutality that were rejected even by Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri<sup>29</sup>, who drew the relevant lessons.

In 1997, the last communiqué of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA)<sup>30</sup> justified its massacres and extreme cruelty on the grounds of the apostasy of the Algerian

23 Avilés. (2011). Op. cit., p. 40.

24 Kepel. (2020). Op. cit., p. 44.

25 For more about the background, interests and formation of the Taliban group, see Burke, J. (2004). Al Qaeda. The real history of radical Islam. Barcelona, RBA Libros. Pp. 118-123.

26 Avilés, J. (2017). History of Jihad terrorism: from Al Qaeda to Daesh. Madrid, Síntesis. P. 78.

27 Avilés. (2017). Op. cit., p. 79.

28 Kepel, G. (2004). Fitna. War in the heart of Islam. Madrid, Paidós. P. 98.

29 Jordán, J. and De La Corte, L. (2017). La jihad terrorista. Madrid, Síntesis. Pp. 95-97.

30 The Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was a Salafist organisation that fought in the Algerian civil war (known as the Black Decade), combining methods of urban terrorism with bloody massacres

population, which had not joined the jihad. Although indiscriminate killings continued the following year, the jihad against the Algerian regime proved a failure, and there was a return to normality<sup>31</sup>. The same would happen in Bosnia, where the Bosnian mujahideen (also called El Mudzahid) lost all hope of transforming that nation's ethnic war into a jihad after the Dayton peace accords<sup>32</sup>.

This failed jihad, in the words of Islamologist Kepel,<sup>33</sup> was seized upon by the two hitherto leaders of the parent jihad, AQ, Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, who drew lessons from the failed processes of jihadist expansion, a “bloody lesson” in the words of Al-Zawahiri<sup>34</sup>. The Afghan arena became a practical example of jihad against “corrupt, and apostate regimes”<sup>35</sup> and renegade rulers who had allied themselves with the foreign enemies of Islam. For al-Zawahiri, Afghanistan was the example to follow, making it necessary to focus attention there because of all that had been achieved.

The mutation was in the making. According to Zawahiri, the focus had to be on more “distant” targets, a global offensive, a global jihad far removed from the international brigades that were engaged in the liberation of territories seized from Islam. AQ would have to confront the “far enemy”, a call to the West as a whole, the territory of the “ungodly enemy” (kuffar), by offering a unique proposition that would overshadow any other news, mobilising the Muslim community. It was a challenge that the jihad movement should strive to meet. The message to the people could not be weak, but had to be clear, understood and accepted by them. It was necessary to connect with the masses in any way possible.

### *The objective*

The aim now was to cause many deaths and to do so spectacularly. This strategy was first put into practice in 1998, with the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which showed that AQ was capable of organising highly sophisticated

in various rural localities. Some of its members were combatants who had returned from the war in Afghanistan. Local support for the GIA declined drastically due to its indiscriminate violence against civilians, leading to its fracture and the subsequent formation of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). On the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Zawahiri would announce the integration of the GSPC into his ranks and shortly thereafter the GSPC would announce its new name, Al Qaeda, in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

31 Kepel. (2000). *Op. cit.*, pp. 382-412; Avilés. (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

32 Jordán, J. (2015). “Daesh”, in *The Jihadist International. Strategic Notebooks IEEE*. N.º 173.

33 Kepel. (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

34 Cited in Romero, A. J. (2006). The roots of Islamic terror in Algeria and Egypt. *International Social Science and Humanities Journal, SOIOTAM*. Vol. XVI, no. 2, July-December 2006.

35 Al-Zawahiri. (2001). Al-Sharq Al-Awsat publishes extracts from al-Jihad leader Al-Zawahiri's new book. 2/12/2001.

operations thousands of miles away from its home base in Afghanistan,<sup>36</sup> employing suicide bombers, which undoubtedly increased the sense of threat, and demonstrating a stark reality to the enemy: the deep conviction of those who were willing to give their lives for the cause<sup>37</sup>.

The love of martyrdom thus became a sublime aspiration for many. At the tactical level, AQ would use convincing its soldiers to die to instil fear in the enemy, making terrorism one of the most effective tactics for AQ, though not the only one. Despite the brutality of the embassy attacks, in which 224 people lost their lives, including Muslim victims, the audacity of the challenge to the US made Osama bin Laden a larger than life and admired figure for sections of the population throughout the Muslim world.

During the 1990s, several events were to culminate in the famous “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans occupying the land of the two Holy Places” (Medina and Mecca) in 1996. In this declaration of war, Osama bin Laden promulgated that his home country (Saudi Arabia) had deviated from the right path by embracing a pagan code that made it a country that was no longer Muslim but hypocritical and infidel, and so should be fought. For Bin Laden, this would be a jihad of resistance and therefore a defensive struggle and a duty of every Muslim<sup>38</sup>.

The goal for AQ was to liberate Saudi Arabia, occupied by US military bases authorised by the Saudi monarchy itself after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in the 1990s, and a sacrilege and humiliation for Islam according to the Saudi. Bin Laden offered the Saudi regime his contingent of “fighters of the faith” (mujahideen) to defend the country from possible Iraqi attacks, but the House of Saud declined his offer, allowing and preferring the protection of US troops to its exclusively Muslim and genuine army made up of former fighters from Afghanistan. This further radicalised the stance of an offended Bin Laden, who eventually lost his Saudi nationality and was subjected to incisive persecution until the end of his days.

The Saudi monarchy ceased to have legitimacy for Bin Laden and AQ, because in addition to allowing the occupation of US troops in dar-al-Islam, it had introduced the law of man outside that of Sharia<sup>39</sup>. Bin Laden therefore took up Abdullah Az-zam’s call for “defensive jihad” as an obligation of all Muslims to liberate the usurped land of Islam, something that has always stimulated and incited jihad, thus taking a further step in the transition to international (“far enemy”) jihad two years later, in 1998, with the founding charter of the World Islamic Front against the Jews and the Crusaders. The ultimatum was clear: every Muslim capable of doing so would have an individual duty (fard ayn) to kill Americans and their allies, civilian and military, wherever they were found.

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<sup>36</sup> Bergen. (2007). *Op. cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>37</sup> Avilés. (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>38</sup> Burke. *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>39</sup> Islamic law; in Arabic, literally, “way or path of Islam”.

The fight against the “near enemy”, i.e., the rulers of Muslim countries considered apostate, impious and corrupt, and the Muslims who had been established in the jahiliyah<sup>40</sup> and ignored the rules of Islam and turned away from God’s law (takfir), would give way to the fight against the “far enemy”, the US and the West, on their own territory.

In retrospect, the publication of the World Islamic Front’s founding charter can be seen as a transitional moment between the first phase of jihadism, in which the jihadist awakening focused on the “near enemy” (from Sadat’s assassination in 1981 to the Algerian jihad) and the challenge to Muslim governments, and the second phase, which focused on the “far enemy”.

The announcement of the creation of the World Islamic Front would point to the birth of the global jihad.

### *The global jihad*

The first attack on the distant enemy, a harbinger of the attacks of 11 September 2001, was on the World Trade Center in 1993. It was followed by the simultaneous 1998 attacks on the Tanzanian and Kenyan embassies, giving credibility to the threat made in the 1998 fatwa, which explicitly called for the death of Americans and their civilian and military allies<sup>41</sup>; and two years later by the attacks on the destroyer Cole in Aden (Yemen) on 12 October 2000, likewise a consequence of the new tactic that targeted the heart of the “infidels”, the “globalisation of combat in the face of the future of the jihadist movement”, as Al-Zawahiri would describe it<sup>42</sup>. We can say that this would be the turning point of what defined the AQ organisation in the following years, thus setting up the faithful commitment that AQ, the sole matrix of global jihadism up to that point, would acquire against the US superpower in the future.

Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri drew conclusions from this decade by initiating a long debate within the Islamist movement, asking themselves whether to “privilege the fight against the near enemy, or on the contrary against the far enemy”<sup>43</sup>. They concluded that they had neither managed to seize power following the unsuccessful jihad

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40 Jahiliyah, a term derived from the verbal root jahala “to be ignorant”, representing a time prior to Muhammad’s revelations. The term “modern jahiliya”, first coined by the Pakistani theologian Abul Ala Maududi, was understood as the “new barbarism”, incompatible with Islam. It would be popularised by the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb in his famous work *Milestones of the Way* (1964), where he emphasised the disobedience of Muslim societies which, partially secularised, had abandoned the obligatory submission to divine law.

41 Gunaratna, R. (2003). *Journey into Islamist Terrorism*. Barcelona, Servidoc, pp. 105-106.

42 Gómez. (2018). *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

43 Kepel. (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

in Algeria, Egypt and Bosnia, nor brought the masses closer to the movement so that they would perceive the jihadists as the true saviours of the Muslim world.

The first transformation of the organisation was to begin very soon, at the turn of the millennium. Spectacular attacks, staged and magnified by the media, would be the instrument of choice. The objective was clear: New York, Washington and Capitol Hill, “to strike a blow at the snake’s head<sup>44</sup>, at home, to shatter its arrogance”. The date too: the action was to take place on 11 September 2001. The great superpower, the US, had to be weakened, to facilitate successive blows to “make it come out of its hole and make it make mistakes”, to make the Muslim community believe in AQ<sup>45</sup>.

The international notoriety that Bin Laden achieved with this attack as the leader of AQ thus followed the old principle of “propaganda by deed” enunciated in the late 19th century by the first promoters of anarchist terrorism (an attack would be much more effective and generate much greater repercussions than mere words).

The 9/11 attacks made this abundantly clear.

## The transformation of the movement

The attacks of 11 September 2001 tore the great superpower in two, and it responded to the attack with a global, open-ended “war on terror”. The AQ leader did not believe that 9/11 alone would destroy the US, but that it would both unleash a devastating process on the West and have a huge propaganda impact through which the jihadist message would become known throughout the world.

Two months after the attacks, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s well-known manifesto “Knights under the Prophet’s Banner” was published, a title that alluded to the victories achieved by the armies of the Prophet Muhammad and the first caliphs in spreading the “true faith” throughout the world until it was completely subdued. The deeds of the Prophet and his companions would, in fact, be repeatedly revived by jihadist groups over the years, as if they represented a new Qur’anic generation whose mission was to destroy barbarism (jahiliyah).

Jihadist terrorism had declared war on the West<sup>46</sup>.

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44 In Arab-Muslim culture, the snake represents cunning, danger and evil. The US is known among Arab-Muslim peoples as “the head of the snake”. To strike a blow to the head of the snake (figuratively occupied by the US), where the animal holds its venom, would be tantamount to eliminating all the danger posed by this country.

45 Bergen. *Op. cit.*, pp. 398-399.

46 [https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-terrorismo-islamico-declara-guerra-occidente-200109120300-46394\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-terrorismo-islamico-declara-guerra-occidente-200109120300-46394_noticia.html). Accessed on 01/05/2022

### *Jihad texts*

Each stage of contemporary jihadism has left a prolific (and political) text for the movement, which has served as a reference and guide for acolytes and sympathisers.

Thus, a large part of the ideological essence of what would become the Al Qaeda organisation would have Abdullah Azzam, author of the book “Join the Caravan” (1987), as a point of reference and inspire of numerous Jihadist groups with his call, without pretext, to defend Islamic lands as the first obligation after faith. In this call, Azzam would introduce for the first time the notion of “qaeda” as a strategic element of jihad; a jihad that would be obligatory, according to Azzam, “when the enemy enters the land of the Muslims”<sup>47</sup>. A year later, in 1988, he would insist on this concept, giving it a double meaning, psychological (mental preparation for jihad) and spatial (in that the ‘base’ was a liberated territory from which to “expand”).

In issue 27 of February 1987 of the magazine ‘al-Jihad’, a monthly publication in Arabic that has become the main means of communication between Arab youth in different parts of the world and the jihad in Afghanistan, an article written by Abdullah Azzam and entitled ‘Jihad, not terrorism’, spoke of ‘jihad as a religious duty for the Umma, to liberate the people, give them Islamic justice and protect the religion’, stating moreover that jihad would be waged ‘only if the infidel is fought with the sword until he submits to Islam’<sup>48</sup>.

As a prelude to the naming of the parent organisation of the global jihad, “joining the caravan” was to lay the solid foundation for dar-al-Islam (“the house of Islam”).

Not to be forgotten is another text, published a few years before Azzam’s “Join the Caravan”, the treatise by Abd al-Salam Faraj, leader of Tanzim al-Jihad, the group that killed Anwar al Sadat in 1981, entitled al-Farida al gaiba (“The Forgotten Duty”). The “forgotten duty”, which was simply jihad, would be the cause of the humiliation and division to come among Muslims. Faraj held that jihad was another pillar of Islam, its sixth pillar, and as such an inescapable and personal duty of every Muslim when it came to defending themselves against the aggressor. Faraj gave priority to the struggle against the rulers of Muslim countries (“near enemy”) over the struggle against Israel and Western imperialism, which he considered a “waste of time”<sup>49</sup>.

A copy of his work was found during investigations into the death of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat in 1981. Al-Sadat’s signature, on 26 March 1979, of the peace treaty with Israel (Camp David Accords) was the justification for Khaled El Islambouly, a member of the Tanzim al-Jihad group, to carry out the assassination. Islambouly would be executed for the assassination, becoming a symbol of inspiration for jihadist

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47 Gunaratna. *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

48 Bergen. *Op. cit.*, p. 86.

49 Avilés. (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 201.

movements and considered one of the first modern martyrs (shahids). Faraj and several other conspirators were also executed in 1982.

Al-Zawahiri, for his part, would leave for posterity his famous “Knights under the banner of the Prophet”, mentioned above. The great interest of this text, according to the Arabist Gilles Kepell,<sup>50</sup> lies in the objective assigned to the movement at the turn of the century, making a critical balance of the previous decade and a radical strategic mutation aimed at shifting the war to “the land of the enemy”, hence its importance. Moreover, the establishment of a caliphate “in the manner of the Prophet”, in the heart of the Islamic world, would be one of AQ’s goals, to be achieved through jihad against the apostate rulers and their removal. This, however, would require popular support, which would be decisive.

However, the idea was that there would be no rush to achieve this because, although AQ’s ultimate strategic goal remained the establishment of a global caliphate made up of local Islamic emirates acting as franchises, it was a very long-term one. For the short term, the objectives were much more pragmatic: to join or start insurgencies against local rulers considered corrupt, to spread *dawa* (propaganda) and to direct terrorist actions against the distant enemy (the US and its allies, Europe and Israel)<sup>51</sup>.

But before that, the masses had to be mobilised, the undecided Muslims had to be convinced of the power of the forces of jihad and the arrogance of the enemy. This new paradigm shift appeared to be set in stone in “Knights under the Prophet’s Banner”, in which al-Zawahiri made a bleak diagnosis and critical assessment of the 1990s, a decade full of setbacks for jihadism and not at all prolific for the movement given that, from Egypt to Bosnia and from Saudi Arabia to Algeria, jihadist activists had failed to mobilise the Muslim masses to overthrow the near enemy<sup>52</sup>.

### The United States and 9/11: *There is no solution but jihad*<sup>53</sup>

The terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) in 1998, the attacks on the US destroyer USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, and the double holy raid (*al ghazwatayn al Mubarakatayn*)<sup>54</sup> in America on 11 September 2001, were the consequence of this new tactic that targeted the heart of the “infidels”

50 Kepel. (2020). *Op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

51 Fuente Cobo, I. (2018). *Al Qaeda versus Daesh: two antagonistic strategies and the same objective*. IEEE Analysis Paper 21/2018.

52 De La Rivieré, L. *Anti-Westernism, Opium of the Islamic World*. *International Review of Political Thought*. 3, pp. 45-74. Available at: <https://www.upo.es/revistas/index.php/ripp/article/view/1540>, Accessed on 01/05/2022.

53 Extract from *Gentlemen under the standard of the prophet*, apud Gómez, L. (2018). P. 165.

54 The name given to the operation by Al Qaeda in its subsequent documents.

rather than the “hypocrites” in what Al-Zawahiri would call “the globalisation of combat for the future of the jihadist movement”<sup>55</sup>. According to al-Zawahiri, in contrast to the “coalition to fight Islam”, a “jihadist alliance” made up of jihadist movements from various Muslim countries had formed, and although it had just come into being it was growing “fast and robustly”<sup>56</sup>.

This strike against the “distant enemy” demonstrated the presence of a new type of conflict waged by the AQ organisation, understood as “a new type of war”, given that it employed organised force, on a large scale, and it aimed to achieve concrete objectives (establish the politico-religious unity of Islam and destroy its enemies: The West and “false Muslims”). It was also evidence of an “asymmetric strategy”, a product of the nature of the actors involved (non-state actors, and therefore without conventional military capacity), which called for alternative paths to conventional warfare to exploit their vulnerabilities. This idea would be very present in the strategy of AQ leaders, including Bin Laden, who already in his 1996 “declaration of war” made clear the need to fight, considering the imbalance of power between his armed forces and those of the enemy, clearly alluding to “guerrilla warfare”<sup>57</sup>.

The “Al Qaeda war” was also favoured by an extraordinary media impact (“we are in a battle, and more than half of it is taking place on the media battlefield”, wrote Al-Zawahiri in his famous letter to the Jordanian jihadist militant Al-Zarqawi<sup>58</sup>, founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)), which would multiply to infinity the annulment of the enemy and the enthusiasm of its sympathisers. Likewise, the AQ terrorist nebula exemplified very well the complexity and multidimensionality of this new type of “war”: an enemy without an army, hidden among the civilian population, offering no clear target to attack and using global television channels to magnify the spectacle of it and spread its propaganda, turning the entire planet into a combat zone<sup>59</sup>.

The effect of such an attack on the West would be devastating.

The attacks of 11 September 2001, the most spectacular event of the early 21st century, imposed by the jihadism invented by Al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden, profoundly changed the geopolitics of the Middle East, giving rise to the “war on terror” in its first two settings: Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

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55 Gómez. *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

56 Gómez. *Op. cit.*, p. 165.

57 Jordán, J. (2004). *Terrorism and the transformation of war. Considerations about Al Qaeda's global fight*, in *Spanish yearbook on International Law*. Vol. 20.

58 Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi. (2005). [Consultado 1/05/2022]. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>

59 Jordán. (2004). *Op. cit.*

## Part Two: The passage of time, the best mirror to show the face of reality

The war against the “distant enemy” had failed. The jihad that sought to rally the Muslim masses under the banner of Al Qaeda had failed, giving way to a new phase of jihadism that was taken by the movement itself as a window of opportunity for a change of strategy. The third phase of the global jihadist movement was beginning.

### Jihadism mutates and reasserts itself

The key aspect of the mutation was the spectacular 11 September 2001, which introduced the “universal jihadist grand narrative” that would transform the new millennium from a Christian calendar into a jihadist one<sup>60</sup>. It was target that had been unsuccessfully attacked eight years earlier, and which now displayed the death cult characteristic of jihadist martyrdom operations, along with the praise of their fallen soldiers in the jihad (shahid). This attack showed the world a new type of conflict that consolidated terrorism as a true act of global warfare. The three ingredients needed for the big strike against the “head of the snake” came together: intent, attack capability and opportunity.

The following years would be marked by the third phase of jihadism, which went beyond the model theorised by Al-Zawahiri in “Knights under the Prophet’s Banner”.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the US “war of errors” was unleashed<sup>61</sup>. With this “war”, President Bush wanted, in effect, to use every means at his disposal to finish off AQ first, and then any terrorist group with global reach, using means only considered legitimate in an armed conflict<sup>62</sup>.

The intervention in Afghanistan (“Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan”), launched on 7 October 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks and leading to the fall of the first Taliban Islamic Emirate established in 1996, would show how terrorism could incite war; in this case, the one waged by the US and its NATO allies against the Taliban vis-à-vis the latter’s refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden for trial. The intervention also led to new pockets of terrorism in Pakistan’s tribal areas with the arrival of the Taliban, who enjoyed local support in Pakistani border areas, and AQ. The

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60 Kepel. (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 349.

61 Analyst Peter Bergen, in an essay whose title included a play on words, wrote in 2005 that Bush had proclaimed a “war on terror”, but that it had become a war of error. Bergen, P. (2007). *The New Republic*. 15/10/2007. [Accessed on 01/05/2022]. <https://newrepublic.com/article/61770/war-error>.

62 Avilés. (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

two groups had forged a solid alliance over the last two decades, although not without their ups and downs and disagreements<sup>63</sup>.

Two years later, on 20 March 2003, under the justification of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's figurative relationship with AQ, the US invasion of Iraq took place, considered by many analysts to be President Bush's biggest mistake. The outcome was that the country was plunged into a situation of total and permanent destabilisation that aroused the fury of the Muslim world, and which years later would give a new jihadist actor, the self-styled Islamic State (IS), its big break.

### *In search of an "Arab awakening"?*

It has been concluded that the aim of the 9/11 attacks was to provoke a US military intervention that would reawaken the will of Muslims to fight, as had happened in 1979 with the Afghan mujahideen who defeated the Soviet Union<sup>64</sup>. And perhaps it was, because this veritable "act of global war" that terrorism became and that triggered the US war of error would facilitate the recruitment of volunteers for jihad throughout the Muslim world.

The US offensive, in its first phase against Afghanistan (in which AQ's "base", the largest it ever had, was lost, drastically reducing the organisation's size and operational capacity), and in its second phase against Iraq, did not manage to annihilate the jihadist nebula, although it did demonstrate once again the arrogance, power and arms might of the great superpower. Notwithstanding, while 9/11 may have been a tactical victory for AQ, it was also a strategic disaster for the organisation<sup>65</sup>, because it led to the fall of the Taliban and the end of the legend of the God-protected hero Osama bin Laden, who had escaped to Pakistan with other Taliban leaders, while the Bush administration was already focusing its attention on neighbouring Iraq, invaded in 2003.

However, AQ had managed to consolidate itself as an organisation during its time in Afghanistan. The entire infrastructure created by Bin Laden since the 1980s, from the training of thousands of volunteers to the exploitation of other theatres of operation in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus, in addition to the expansion of the "AQ-network", would forge his future structure and alliances.

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63 When AQ decided to target the US and the West, the Taliban leadership, concerned about an international defensive response, advised Mullah Omar to sever all ties with the organisation, which he rejected outright despite the risk of an invasion by Western troops, which finally happened in autumn 2001.

64 Avilés. Op. cit., 67; 97.

65 Bergen. Op. cit., p. 401.

There can be little doubt that the reputation that the AQ organisation achieved after the attacks of 11 September 2001, with Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri as hugely influential figures, would make it a pole of attraction for thousands of people across the globe,<sup>66</sup> strategically influenced by what had become an ideological vanguard and leader of the global jihadist movement.

With the conflict transferred to Iraq by the US, which claimed, in the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell, “a potentially sinister link between the AQ terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarkawi and Iraq, which hosted the deadly organisation”,<sup>67</sup> what was intended to be the beginning of a virtuous cycle that would democratise the Middle East after the fall of Hussein<sup>68</sup> only led to an alliance between local jihadism and former members of the Iraqi army. What is more, these alliances were forged in large part in prisons used by the US after the invasion, such as Camp Bucca and Abu Ghraib. And so, the Iraq war aroused the fundamentalist fervor of Sunnis and Shiites, provoking a defensive jihad that stimulated jihadist-leaning Muslims around the world.

AQ accepted the integration of an independent group (Jamaa al Tawhid wal jihad) led by the bloodthirsty Abu Musab Al-Zarkawi, a foreigner (not Iraqi but Jordanian) who took on the name of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after declaring his vow of loyalty to Bin Laden on the internet in October 2004, and who soon became known for his lethal use of terrorist attacks, especially against Shiite targets, who were always in the Jordanian’s sights. These actions would be reproached by Al-Zawahiri in a letter,<sup>69</sup> in which he warned him that the Muslim people would never accept the targeting of Shi’ites, their mosques or hostages<sup>70</sup>.

The Iraq war appeared to offer benefits and aggrandisement to AQ, mainly for the purposes of maintaining its media presence, shifting the US focus away from Afghanistan and gaining tactical experience by engaging in a popular struggle.<sup>71</sup> However, al-Zarkawi’s bloodthirsty strategy of driving Iraq into a civil war pitting Sunni against Shia, opening up the sectarian divide to capitalise on Sunni support, alienated the organisation from popular support and led to its failure. In early 2004, US intelligence intercepted a letter from Al-Zarkawi to Osama bin Laden, in which the latter advised him on the situation in Iraq by suggesting that a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites be unleashed, something that Bin Laden had always rejected, as his desire was to restore a unified caliphate.

66 Jordán, J. (2010). *Terrorism without borders. Actors, scenarios and responses in a global world*. Pamplona, Aranzadi, P. 20.

67 Collin Powell’s address to the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003. Cited in Bergen. (2007). *Op. cit.*, p. 459.

68 Kepel. (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

69 Zawahiri’s letter to Zarkawi. *Op. cit.*

70 Bergen. *Op. cit.*, p. 468.

71 Avilés. *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

This strategy was counterproductive and deviated entirely from the intended fight against the distant enemy desired by Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, and which was reflected on paper in two well-known letters. The first, already mentioned, was written by Al-Zawahiri, who recommended Al-Zarkawi that he abandon his bloody acts that had little popular support; and a second, written at the end of 2005 by a leader of Algerian origin, Atiya Al Libi, also highly critical of Al-Zarkawi's tactics and behaviour which, according to Al-Libi, were undermining AQ's ability to win the hearts of the people, and in which he asked him to consult on substantial matters with "Shaykh Osama and the Doctor"<sup>72</sup>, reminding him of a lesson from history: the action of the Armed Islamic Group Algerian (GIA), who's excessive violence turned the population against it.

Al-Qaeda was quick to recover from the setbacks suffered, especially via the Internet, which proved to be a great ally of the movement, but also through new attacks. Bin Laden's rhetorical prowess crossed borders, again condemning American civilisation - "the worst civilisation in the history of mankind", according to the Saudi Arabian, for its eagerness to separate religion and state - and again calling for a resumption of attacks against the West<sup>73</sup>.

Events such as the allegations of mistreatment, abuse and torture of terrorist suspects imprisoned at the Guantánamo Bay detention centre in Cuba and Camp Bucca in these years only served to further inflame jihadist groups, creating exceptional breeding grounds for jihadism, which once again invoked the Law of Talion symbolised by an orange jumpsuit, the one worn by Guantánamo detainees, which became the icon of injustice<sup>74</sup>. All these events contributed to the fierce hatred of the West (*wala wa al baraa*)<sup>75</sup> so characteristic of Salafist jihadist doctrine, and to the formation of a victimhood image that helped the jihadists to give the US back its grand narrative of the "war on terror". These internment camps strengthened the networks from which the Islamic State would emerge a few years later.

Camp Bucca would come to be known as the "university of jihad, the place where an ideology was built"<sup>76</sup>. It was here that numerous AQ members met with Iraqi Baathists linked to Saddam's regime (some of them former members of the special forces and military intelligence, and who would later join the ranks of the Islamic State), gathering under the entire disregard of the US military. Possibly at no other time could these leaders of the most radical fundamentalism have come to be together at the same time and in the same place.

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72 Al-Zawahiri would follow in his father's footsteps, studying medicine in Cairo. He worked as a surgeon for three years in the Egyptian army and as a doctor in a Cairo hospital. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

73 Avilés. (2011). Op. cit., p. 103.

74 Kepel. (2020). Op. cit., p. 110.

75 Loyalty and Repudiation.

76 Chulov, M. (2019). ISIS: the inside story. *The Guardian*. 11/12/2019. [Accessed on 1/5/2022]. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/sp-isis-the-inside-story>

### Third generation “jihadism”: Mustafa Setmarian Nasser

The jihadist model changed and was transformed, marking a new phase in jihadism called “third generation” and led by Mustafa Setmarian Nasser (Abu Musab al Suri), born in Aleppo (Syria) and founder of the first AQ cell in Spain, the “Abu Dahdah cell”, named after its founder and leader, the Syrian-Spanish Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas.

The extensive document that brought him to prominence was “Call for Global Islamic Resistance”, published in 2005, his major contribution to the history of jihadism. Considered one of the most distinguished jihadist strategy books, it includes military and organisational theories and training doctrines for recruiting the “future generation of jihadists”<sup>77</sup>.

Setmarian, in an important work of introspection, would qualify AQ’s previous strategy as a failure. According to the strategist, the pyramidal, top-down, global organisation, which gave orders to be obeyed, set up by Osama Bin Laden, and the strategy of fighting the distant enemy conceptualised by Al-Zawahiri, were responsible for the great failures of the jihad in Algeria and Egypt. Therefore, it was necessary to advocate a jihad “from below” and extended to the whole world. The counter-terrorism measures that were adopted by Western countries and by US military power in Afghanistan called for the introduction of a new system, that of the “individual jihad”, that of isolated individuals and self-sustaining independent cells<sup>78</sup>.

This model, as it was understood by the Syrian, who advocated achieving an esteemed movement not as an organisation but as a system, would spread in all directions, mainly in Europe (with a focus on France) and in the Levant (with polarisation in Syria and Iraq), culminating in the establishment of a caliphate in 2014 and the self-proclamation of its purported caliph (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who would remain so until his death in 2019). However, the uprisings in the Arab world in 2010-2013, which began with enthusiasm and hopes and dreams for democratisation, ended in the restoration of authoritarianism in Egypt and in civil wars, especially the one in Syria, from which AQ and the Islamic State would soon profit greatly.

It was in this new context that this “third-generation jihadism” was able to develop to its most monstrous culmination: the self-proclaimed caliphate, the greatest challenge of the second decade of the 21st century.

With Setmarian and his forecast, which augured new, much more virtual times for the movement, jihad’s online uploads were available to anyone who wanted to heed its

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77 Brinjar, L. (2017). *Al-Suri’s doctrines for decentralized jihadi training- Part I*. The Jamestown Foundation. 21/2/2017.

78 Lia, B. (2009). *Architect of global jihad: the life of Al Qaeda strategist Abu Mus`ab Al-Suri*. June 2009.

call, while simultaneously renewing the ways in which its supporters could mobilise and contribute. The shaping of the “virtual jihad” was a given. This doctrinarian of individual terrorism, an inspiration and reference for many lone wolves today, proposed the *nizam la tanzim* - system, not organisation. This motto sums up Setmarian’s doctrine, based on the desirability of initiating a new kind of decentralised and global insurgency, capable of undermining the entire international political system in the decades to come<sup>79</sup>.

To this effect, establishing an operational system available wherever there is a desire to participate in the global jihad, individually or as a small group of associates, would transform the jihadist cause into a mass phenomenon<sup>80</sup>, accessible to anyone.

His reflections in “Call for Global Islamic Resistance” dealt with all the details: indoctrination, guerrilla technique, war strategy, provisioning, training, propaganda, security, etc., leading the struggle towards a popular global jihad tailored to the aspirations of any Muslim with the will to wage a warlike jihad. Once indoctrinated, individual mujahideen could take the initiative to attack as and where they saw fit, independently of organised cells.

In a videotaped course in Kabul in 2000, lasting some 20 hours<sup>81</sup>, Setmarian called for turning all Muslims into terrorists. At a time when new communication technologies were still in their infancy and the term ‘social networking’ did not yet exist, Setmarian was already advocating the importance of the internet for the future of jihadism, not only as a channel for marketing and proselytising, what al-Zawahiri defined as “a media jihad to capture the hearts and minds of the Umma”, but above all for its organisational possibilities. In his words, it would be a new strategy for “a time of discouragement after the failure of the jihadism of internationalist mobilisation”<sup>82</sup>. His proposal anticipated a very cutting-edge reality, that of self-training, self-radicalisation, self-recruitment and self-training.

Its appeal lay precisely in the fact that it allowed each proselyte to carry out his or her own jihad: “customised jihadism”, as defined by the Arabist Luz Gómez (2018), exercising violence on a small scale and, depending on the place, in the name of global jihad. In other words, “glocalising” jihad to keep alive the idea of a common jihad.

The evolution of terrorism seemed to be moving closer to the idea of a “leaderless jihad”, especially in terms of the threat to Europe and the US, which would come mainly from independent cells and self-reliant terrorists. Concepts such as “copycat

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79 Toboso, M. (2014). *Wolves of the West. The individual terrorist as an emerging and evolving tactic of Al Qaeda*. General Gutiérrez Mellado University Institute. Madrid. UNED. Pp. 22-59.

80 L. Op. cit.

81 El Mundo. (2006). This is how the Spaniard Setmarian, a member of Al Qaeda, taught how to carry out an attack in an intensive course. [Accessed on 31/5/2022]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2006/02/01/espana/1138821369.html>

82 Gómez. Op. cit., p. 188.

terrorists”, “independent cells” and “autonomous terrorists” (better known as “lone wolves”) would begin to surface not only among analysts and academics, but also in AQ’s own propaganda. In its January 2011 issue, the magazine *Inspire*, published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA), AQ’s franchise in the region, already outlined an essential element for understanding the strategic evolution of jihadist terrorism in the following years: the expansion and dissemination of the organisation’s ideology in the image and likeness of the social movement or, to be more precise, and as advocated by Setmarian, in its “idea”<sup>83</sup>.

Parallel to Setmarian’s “Call for Global Islamic Resistance” (published online in 2004), a highly influential text on military doctrine and a reference for the global jihadist movement to this day, was the text “The Management of Savagery: the most critical phase through which the Ummah must pass” by Abu Bakr Naji, whose real name was Muhammad Hasan Khalil al-Hukaymah (killed in 2008 in a drone attack)<sup>84</sup>, an influential figure in AQ’s strategic apparatus. This book also transcended the rigorist thinking of the Islamic State organisation for its reflections on jihadism, becoming an operational guide for controlling territories and “administering savagery”. The text describes how only the “chaos” generated through terror could allow a “minority group with limited operational capabilities” to generate a sense of strength powerful enough to impose Sharia on otherwise unwilling societies.

The strategy, according to Naji, incorporated important issues for the military leadership, such as the infiltration of spies among the enemy; the generation of a heightened sense of insecurity in entire regions of the West; the winning of the hearts of the masses; the advisability of wearing down the opponent through “continued actions, although not of a great magnitude”, which would weaken the enemy states; the undertaking of a policy of “paying the price”, thus deterring governments from their crimes committed against Muslims; and what Naji would call the “phase of humiliation and exhaustion”, undermining the confidence and moral security of democratic societies, essential for the constitution of the ultimate goal, the establishment of the “Islamic state”. To this effect, the objective would be to create or take advantage of areas of the countryside or the city that had fallen into “chaos” to expel the armies of the local government by imposing a proto-state<sup>85</sup>.

Jihadist terrorism in the West would thus begin a new journey where the virtual would replace the chain of command, and where online operational manuals would over time replace the classic training in training camps.

83 Toboso. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

84 Torres. *Op. cit.*

85 Torres, O. (2017). al-Harawi’s advice on war stratagems: a 12th century Arab political military manual. *Journal of Studies in International Security (RESI)*. 15/5/2017.

### *An unprecedented jihadist mobilisation*

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, an unprecedented global jihadist mobilisation took place, affecting not only the Islamic world but also Western European countries. This mobilisation was led not only by young men, who became “foreign terrorist fighters”, but also by a minority, albeit statistically significant, of women; a polymorphous and highly intense phenomenon that showed the harsh face of a terrorism that has not disappeared, but rather worsened, in the wake of the political instability and social confrontations that have plagued various Arab countries since 2011. A “growing challenge”, in the words of the professor and scholar of the phenomenon, Fernando Reinares<sup>86</sup>.

No Western society was exempt from the terrorist threat, although it was not evenly distributed. Let us recall, for example, the 2012 attacks in Toulouse and Mountabaun (France) by a young Mohamed Merah, who was soon labelled a “lone wolf” - with no links whatsoever to a jihadist organisation - but whose links to AQ later became known, even though he acted alone. This attack (perpetrated on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the ceasefire of the Algerian War, whether by coincidence or premeditation on Merah’s part, we do not know) was followed by many others on European soil, serving to verify the transnationalisation of the movement.

In Europe, home to millions of young people of Muslim origin, many of them poorly integrated culturally and socially, fertile grounds for jihad would soon emerge, a context where Setmarián-sponsored “third generation” jihadism could develop productively. The reality would bear this assumption out. The most monstrous culmination of this jihadism was the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014 and the chain of attacks that, in turn, and in concatenation, would bloody Europe.

### *Self-proclamation and fall of the Caliphate. “The sun of jihad has risen”<sup>87</sup>*

On 2 May 2011, almost a decade after the 9/11 attacks, a US Navy special forces commando (DEVGRU) killed Osama bin Laden in his safe house in Pakistan. AQ had already lost many of its original leaders and a large part of Muslim opinion had turned its back on the organisation,<sup>88</sup> despite its efforts to attract Muslim communities to the cause. Moreover, the misnamed “Arab Springs”, wrongly associated with democracy and revitalisation, were in the throes of popular revolts and demonstrations spreading

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86 Reinares, F. (2015). A jihadist challenge on the rise. Real Instituto Elcano. 8/1/2015.

87 Phrase contained in the official document in several languages, “This is the promise of Allah”, announced during the proclamation of the Caliphate by the spokesman of the self-styled Islamic State, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani. [Accessed on 15/4/2022]. <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/14242/ADN20140629.pdf>.

88 Avilés. (2017). Op. cit., p. 163.

from one country to another (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya), protests that far from achieving renewal ended in revolution, coups, civil wars and destabilisation, a great boon for radical militants linked to AQ who would soon become involved in terrorist activities. The civil war in Syria would attract jihadists from all over, thus revitalising the AQ affiliate for Iraq (AQI).

In October 2006, AQI, whose leader Al-Zarkawi had been killed in a US airstrike in June 2006, and other jihadist groups, jointly announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a decision that was not consulted the AQ leadership, who considered it premature<sup>89</sup>. Although the ISI went into decline as an insurgent force capable of mounting guerrilla operations and controlling territory, it retained a very lethal terrorist capability.

The ISI was to announce its new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and its new military commander, Allah Abu Suleiman, on 16 May 2010. Al-Baghdadi sent one of his fighters, the Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, to Syria in 2011, where he made contact with other jihadist groups, leading to the formation of a new organisation called Jabhat al-Nusra as early as January 2012. Its members' military training and combat experience in Iraq favoured the group, whose growth was spectacular, becoming the main opposition force to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by mid-2012. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi formally declared that Jabhat al-Nusra was incorporated into his organisation, which would be renamed the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - ISIS or ISIL by its English initials, or Daesh by its Arab initials - becoming the new vanguard of the global jihadist movement.

Joulani, however, publicly rejected this merger, proclaiming his allegiance to the central leadership of AQ, whose leader al-Zawahiri tried unsuccessfully to get the two organisations to cooperate, one operating in Iraq and the other in Syria, a dictum that al-Baghdadi nevertheless rejected. ISIS sought to prevail over Al Nusra and other jihadist groups by seizing the northwestern Syrian city of Raqqa in January 2014, which would soon become the capital of a renamed IS.

Although the final break with Al Qaeda would not take place until February 2014, the Islamic State (IS) and its predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), always maintained a different pattern of behaviour and operational tempo than AQ. Its brutal actions in Iraq and Syria and the spread of terror among the population were based on the conviction that extreme violence was the only possible tool to generate "the strategy of chaos" (using media propaganda) of which Naji spoke, and which would include campaigns of ultra-violence and graphic displays of barbarism to shock and divide Western-led states and return Muslim communities to the purity of Islam.

In February 2014, the CIA estimated that the Islamic State had around 10,000 members; in June it raised that figure to 15,000, an estimate that was revised upwards again two months later. Irrespective of the numbers, on 6 June 2014, Al-Baghdadi's

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89 Avilés. (2017). Op. cit., p. 172.

followers penetrated Iraqi territory and reached the gates of Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, conquering it and surprising the whole world with the self-proclamation of a new Caliphate, as announced by the organisation's spokesman, Muhamed Al-Adnani. Al-Bahgdadi would be recognised as "caliph of all Muslims" on 4 July 2014 at the Mosul Mosque, in a newly inaugurated Islamic State.

By mid-2014, the Islamic State had already secured a large territorial base in Syria and Iraq. Control of the north-eastern area of Syria, bordering Iraq, allowed the Islamic State to strengthen its position in Iraq, which soon expanded its presence in both Syria and Iraq to a vast territory of a similar size to the UK<sup>90</sup>.

The Islamic State spread effective propaganda like no other, using the internet to describe a reborn caliphate where "true Islam" was practised, and to which Muslim men and women alike from all over the world would be called to undertake the obligatory hijra (emigration).

Between 2014 and 2015, the Islamic State internationalised, capitalising on the flow of foreign volunteers and creating a transnational network of jihadist groups and organisations from different African and Asian countries (Nigeria, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines), whose leaders pledged allegiance to Caliph Al-Bahgdadi. An unprecedented phenomenon unmatched by any previous conflict, it became a reference for the new generation of jihadists, offering them a new project that was much more accessible than that of AQ.

From this time onwards, the global jihadist movement would be divided into two factions, AQ and the self-styled Islamic State, an organisation that would acquire great strength thanks to its extraordinary financing capacity based on clandestine exports, extortion, illicit trafficking of all kinds and even black market sales of archaeological artefacts, highlighting the fine line that separates the activities of terrorist groups such as IS and organised crime, and even leading to models of hybridisation between the two violent non-state actors<sup>91</sup>.

The organisation managed to run a real "state" (Dawla) administration in the occupied territories, building its own political project and giving effect to the group's famous motto "to remain and expand" by creating an administrative organisation with a central, provincial, sectoral and local structure that allowed it to exercise sovereignty in the controlled territory,<sup>92</sup> based on a treasury and the financing or provision of goods, aid and services, and a judicial system where the administrative department (diwan)

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90 Igualada, C. (2019). The most immediate future of the global jihad movement. A prospective analysis. Study Group on International Security (GESI). 29/4/2019.

91 Marrero, I. (2017). New dynamics in the relationships between organised crime and terrorist groups. *Spanish Journal of International Law*. Madrid. [Accessed on 15/4/2022]. [http://www.revista-redi.es/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/6\\_estudios\\_marrero\\_rocha\\_nuevas\\_dinamicas.pdf](http://www.revista-redi.es/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/6_estudios_marrero_rocha_nuevas_dinamicas.pdf)

92 Servitja, X. (2015). The Islamic State and the administrative organisation of the Caliphate at the provincial level. Study Group in International Security (GESI). September 2015.

of the Hisba would apply Islamic morality (“commanding the good and forbidding evil”)<sup>93</sup>. IS ruled with ruthless authoritarianism. The conformity of its civilian population (the group would seek to engender a practically and ideologically “obedient” population) would be vital to its functioning and the legitimacy of its proto-state<sup>94</sup>.

In late 2015, the military pressure exerted against IS by the armies of the official governments of Syria and Iraq, in addition to various local and international allies, led the organisation to a progressive loss of conquered territories, eventually including its two main strongholds, Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, between the summer and autumn of 2017<sup>95</sup>. By November 2017, the caliphate had imploded, having lost 98% of its territory. In little more than two years, IS had lost all the territories over which it had dominated, defeated militarily and with its territorial structure destroyed, returning once again to its origins and towards an insurgent strategy which, from 2018 onwards, would be particularly relevant in Iraq.

Its military defeat fractured the organisation, perhaps making it less credible, but it failed to obliterate a robust ideology that has ably sustained the movement to this day, and which continues to pose a serious threat to the West and to Muslim countries alike. The deployment of its propaganda, which has shrewdly come to drive popular discourse, has complemented its military defeats, making the fight against this type of terrorism extraordinarily difficult to deny in terms of its communicative success<sup>96</sup>.

### The renewed Taliban rise

Jihadist violence did not stop its progress, both before and after 2014. As Professor De la Corte cites<sup>97</sup>, and according to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, between 2001 and 2018 the number of existing jihadist organisations and groups in the world increased by 270%, noting that the overall number of jihadist fighters grew steadily between 1980 and 2018. There are therefore many more jihadist organisations today than in 2001<sup>98</sup>.

93 Al-Tamini, A. J. (2018). The internal structure of the Islamic State’s Hisba Apparatus. Middle East Center. 1/6/2018. [Accessed on 2/4/2022]. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21246/the-internal-structure-of-the-islamic-state-hisba>.

94 Vale, G. (2020). Piety is in the eye of the bureaucrat: the Islamic state’s strategy of civilian control. Combating Terrorism Center. SENTINEL. Vol. 13, Issue 1, June 2020.

95 De La Corte. (2021). Op. cit., p. 365.

96 Winter, C. and Haroro J., I. (2017). Why ISIS is so good at branding its failures as successes. 19/9/2017. [Accessed on 2/4/2022]. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/isis-propaganda/540240/>

97 De La Corte, L. (2021). History of jihad. From its origins to the end of the first Taliban emirate. Madrid, Cataract.

98 Igualada, C. and Yagüe, J. (2021). The new paradigm of international terrorism after the Taliban’s return to power. International Observatory for the Study of Terrorism (OIET). 25/8/2021.

It is worth noting that in 2018, the Taliban overtook IS in the list of the world's most lethal organisations, taking first place (fourth place was held by the Islamic State Korashan Province (IS-KP), an IS affiliate in Afghanistan since its establishment in 2015). Thereafter, and until mid-2021, the Taliban would maintain their top position in the world terrorism ranking, a resilience that can be explained by the fact that although they were defeated two decades ago after the US invasion, losing power and battles, their entity as a group was untouched, remaining holed up in a cosy Pakistan, which kept them in the rearguard.

The agreement reached in Doha (Qatar) between the Taliban and the US on 29 February 2020, which would put an end to two decades of military intervention (the US would accede to the Taliban's request to exclude the Afghan authorities from the agreement, thus depriving the government of any legitimacy), marked the beginning of the Taliban's meteoric rise to power and the proclamation of their second Islamic Emirate.

Despite their pledge not to harbour any terrorist organisations (AQ), and to fight any terrorist group that might pose a threat to the US and its allies, AQ and Taliban links remained intact,<sup>99</sup> reminding us that despite the passage of two decades, neither AQ has been defeated nor the partnership between AQ and the Taliban fractured, although this does not mean that the Taliban group is willing to make the same strategic mistake that led to their withdrawal with little resistance during the US invasion.

AQ may be patiently awaiting future guidance from the Taliban, who have given it more covert than overt support, but it will not tolerate being targeted again by the international community should AQ decide to revive its actions in the West, which is unlikely but not impossible.

This second rise to power of the Taliban has also meant a window of opportunity for IS - a staunch enemy of the Taliban, whom it considers *khawarij* or alien to Islam<sup>100</sup> who is accustomed to taking advantage of areas of vulnerability, instability and chaos, and who has sought by all means to make the Afghan population wary of the new regime, threatening its survival and provoking attacks that have generated even more confusion and disarray. In this respect, its position is identical to the one it held years ago: total and absolute rejection of the Taliban group for negotiating and reaching agreements with the "Western infidels"<sup>101</sup>.

Less than two weeks after the declaration of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with the seizure of Kabul, IS-KP claimed responsibility for the first terrorist attack under their regime, the double bombing of the Afghan capital's

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99 Igualada and Yagüe. (2021). *Op. cit.*

100 Requeijo, A. (2021). What is ISIS-K? The Afghan Daesh affiliate that sees the Taliban as traitors to Islam. *El confidencial*. [Accessed 1/5/2022]. Available at: [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2021-08-27/isiskhorasan-grupo-terrorista-atentado-kabul\\_3253330/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2021-08-27/isiskhorasan-grupo-terrorista-atentado-kabul_3253330/)

101 Igualada and Yagüe. (2021). *Op. cit.*

international airport, leaving at least 70 people dead, including 13 US troops<sup>102</sup>. IS-KP promised a 'new phase of jihad' in Afghanistan, claiming a wave of attacks. This has indeed been the case, as IS affiliate attacks on infrastructure and public spaces frequented by Afghans in Afghanistan have steadily increased in number since the Taliban's rise. On 2 November 2021, the Islamic State in Khorasan province again claimed responsibility for an attack on the country's main military hospital, Sardar Daoud Khan, located in Kabul. It left more than 20 confirmed victims and dozens more injured<sup>103</sup>.

The main IS branch in Afghanistan has become a concern for the Taliban regime's leadership and its own stability, which is why the Taliban are struggling to eradicate this home-grown terrorism that plagues the population. This has had a direct impact on the regime's popularity vis-à-vis a population in desperate straits due to the economic crisis and high levels of famine, which have led to skyrocketing indicators of poverty, discontent and social unrest<sup>104</sup>.

After two decades of war on terror, the year 2021 ended with the inauguration of the Second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and a situation where both sides of the same perverse entity that is the jihadist movement were vividly celebrating the triumph of Muslims for what they consider a great conquest over the infidels.

And in parallel, the widely shared perception of a new failure of the West.

## Final Considerations

Although it did not take long for the caliphate to run out of territory and caliph, another symptom of the evolution of the jihadist threat worldwide, this did not mean the disappearance of IS or AQ, which are vying with each other for the leadership of global jihadism, but rather a further challenge to the West and a further demonstration, seen from today's perspective, of the movement's extraordinary capacity for resilience and acclimatisation. The caliphate fell, but the retrograde ideology that inspired it did not, and is still very present in the minds of the jihadists, keeping this type of terrorism alive through groups or splinters that maintain the cause, along with others that have emerged over the years.

We have witnessed the mutation of the jihadist movement, which has gone through three successive phases of affirmation, denial and overcoming. In a struggle for Islamic power, the Afghan jihad, coinciding with the Iranian revolution, overwhelmed the Muslim world after the overthrow of the Soviet Union, a world it sought to absorb

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<sup>102</sup> Requeijo. Op. cit. Accessed on 1/5/2022.

<sup>103</sup> Aguilera, A. (2021). ISKP, an open wound in the new Afghan agenda. International Observatory for the Study of Terrorism (OIET). 4/11/2021.

<sup>104</sup> Aguilera. Op. cit.

into itself with 9/11, but from which AQ did not draw the popular support it sought, never achieving the single-minded goal of turning the Muslim masses in its favour. Nonetheless, this did not represent the end of the organisation, and much less the end of jihadist violence, which has been perpetuated thanks to the contribution of many actors aligned, at least partially, with the “global jihad” project championed by Osama<sup>105</sup>.

We have also witnessed the new urban jihad that originated in Mumbai (India) in 2008, with 173 people killed in twelve coordinated attacks, carried out by trained, organised and highly motivated individuals. This new jihad is now Europeanised<sup>106</sup> and resides everywhere, with no need for sophistication since the attacks use much more accessible and rudimentary techniques, and is within the reach of anyone, because anyone, as Setmarián stated, can contribute to jihad if they set their mind to it. The aim is simply to destabilise the international political system; to make states, “pay the price”.

For years, both AQ and IS have sought to self-replicate by adapting to circumstances, re-emerging stronger after setbacks. Since the fateful attacks of 9/11 in 2001, jihadism has continued to spread with an incredible recruitment capacity that has mobilised thousands of young people from the Sahel to Southeast Asia. There are many more jihadist organisations today than there were then, highlighting the destabilising potential of these groups and the serious threat they pose to global security.

The Taliban’s rise, celebrated by the jihadist movement, has given a strong boost to both the regime and other jihadist fighters, and Afghanistan has once again become a safe haven for terrorist organisations. The relationship between AQ and the Taliban, close and co-dependent for years, is unlikely to break down anytime soon, especially since they share a common enemy, IS-KP, which in turn has sought Afghan territory to proliferate and regenerate.

Following this prospective line, AQ and the Taliban’s confrontation with the third actor involved in the issue, IS-KP, will probably continue to hold firm, since IS’s objective, faithful to the strategy advocated by Naji in his *Manual of Barbarism*, is and has always been that of territorial exclusivity and leadership of the global jihadist movement, attacking any group that is not akin to its ideology.

The revival of AQ, which has once again received support from the Taliban movement, retaining its link to the group as in the past, represents a future opportunity for the organisation’s reputation and its consolidation. The new situation in Afghanistan, the territory that witnessed the “Afghan jihad” and the birth of AQ and other terrorist groups, once again, 20 years later, represents a scenario of possible re-launching of the global jihadist movement, especially that aligned with AQ. Volunteers to receive terrorist training could even be welcomed if the organisation so decides, as it did before,

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105 De La Corte. (2021). *Op. cit.*, p. 360.

106 Echeverría, C. La jihad urbana se europeiza. *El País*. 18/7/2016. [Accessed on 1/5/2022]. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/07/15/opinion/1468590804\\_594110.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/07/15/opinion/1468590804_594110.html)

given that it enjoys the support and protection of the Taliban and operates in a comfortable space between Afghanistan and Pakistan for the possible planning of attacks outside the region, something that could have a direct impact on Western Europe.

Local AQ franchises such as Al-Shabab, the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM), and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA), have praised the Taliban's rise as the victory of a local movement through "patience and determination", finally overcoming a broad international coalition. This will no doubt boost the morale of jihadist groups, who may find inspiration in the group's takeover<sup>107</sup>.

For its part, IS, in relative decline after the fall of its caliphate, and whose local factions, unlike those of AQ, are silent on the Taliban's rise to power, has also taken advantage of the new Afghan situation, despite accusing the Taliban of being "traitors of Islam", to further its own global narrative (aimed primarily at young Muslims), extolling violent jihad as a means to "achieve the final victory of Islam"<sup>108</sup>. This could allow it to distinguish itself as a ruthless jihadist group, which will continue to degrade Taliban control (and recruit the disaffected among them) as promised, in an Afghanistan on the road to humanitarian disaster, economic collapse and universal poverty. Rebuild the group, re-empower it and regenerate, which has always characterised the Islamic State and the jihadist movement in general.

Today, after 40 years, the jihadist threat is ongoing and spreads "from below" around the world, connecting young people everywhere to the global jihad and inspired by the return to power of the Afghan Taliban - a great victory for their cause.

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108 [Accessed on 15/5/2022]. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/afganistan-razones-por-las-que-el-acceso-al-poder-de-los-taliban-incidira-sobre-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-europa-occidental/>

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