

28/2015

13th, May 2015

Ignacio Fuente Cobo

Historical approach to the yihadist
phenomenon

[Visit the WEB](#)

[Receive Newsletter](#)

This document has been translated by a Translation and Interpreting Degree student doing work experience, ISABEL LIMA, under the auspices of the Collaboration Agreement between the Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, and the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies.

Historical approach to the yihadist phenomenon

Abstract:

To understand the jihadist phenomenon in its contemporary meaning, it is necessary to study the internal struggles that have undermined the Muslim world since its inception. It is by analyzing the nature of Jihadism and placing Islam in its historical, social, political and religious context, that we can prove that it is not a product arising spontaneously, nor is it the result of political mistakes made in the modern times, or the logical consequence of the injustices that plague Muslim societies. On the contrary it responds to some root causes that have shaped the Islam throughout history. It is therefore necessary to break through the historical analysis, the jihadist discourse that justifies the execution of terrorist acts on the basis of democratic systems' demonization and the de-humanization of all those considered outside the Islamic law. Only Insisting on the historical facts will it be possible to de-construct the idea deemed as indisputable, that explains jihadist terrorism as a defensive reaction of Islam, almost as a necessity, as opposed to the politics of aggression implemented both by the West and the Arab states themselves.

Keywords:

Jihadism, Hanbali, Salafist, Muslim Brotherhood, Afghanistan, Ibn Taymiyya, Wahabism, Takfir.

Introduction

Even if Jihadist violence has often been linked to the very origins of Islam, reality has it that the warmongering aspects of this religion are related to circumstantial situations produced by the geopolitical environment in which it is to form and spread. It is true that Muhammad was a war leader and a statesman as well as a Prophet and spiritual leader, but it is the circumstances in which Islam started that motivated the use of violence, rather than the Koranic text. If the Islam from Medina after the exile – Hegira – in the year 622 was about conquests, battles and expansion, in sum a political Islam, the one from Mecca related to a period of revelation, learning and spirituality, in which violence was categorically forbidden, and patience advocated to confront oppression.¹ It was only after the Hegira, when Mecca's notable men expropriated Muslims' goods that the first verses calling for an armed struggle started spreading, even though resorting to warfare was expected to be strictly limited to defence purposes.²

The spread of Islam made the interpretation of the Jihad gradually offensive. The conquest and subjugation of non-Muslims was one of the main characteristics of wars in the times of the Prophet, who carried out many military campaigns during his years in power. It relates to a period in which the political vision of Jihad prevails, understood as a 'holy war' to defend an Islam that feels threatened. This concept of Jihad must therefore be understood in this specific historical context. No matter the Quran's literal or rational exegesis, violent action that manifests today as terrorist acts should be forbidden.³ Hence, when the conquest period and the political Islam represented by the Caliphate were over – Umayyad first and later Abbasid – Islam stopped feeling threatened, and the idea of Jihad as personal improvement developed and overlapped its military meaning. This more spiritual and peaceful

¹ *Patience* is one of the best-known terms in Islam. In Islamic literature, this sentence appears very frequently and in several fields with an encouragement tone in the discussion about rewards, praise and explanation about its relevance. Ayatullah Sayyed Ali Jamenei: *las profundidades de la oración, discurso sobre la paciencia*, Fundación Cultural Oriente, 2006, pp.41-51.

² Sura 22, versículos 39 y 40.

³ That is how the big four juridical schools of Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Malequita and Hanbali) understand it. All of them reject the "offensive Islam", understood as an obligation to make war to all of those who do not accept Islam as their religion. Yusuf Fernández: *El Islam y las Escuelas Jurídicas*, Kalamo Libros, Madrid, 2006. <http://www.libreria-mundoarabe.com/Boletines/n%BA43%20Nov.06/IslamEscuelasJuridicas.html>.

conception was linked to the Sufi movement that started developing in this period and claims that the 'small' armed Jihad must be substituted by the 'big' spiritual Jihad.⁴

Nevertheless, the warmongering conception of Jihad did not disappear; on the contrary, it was after Muhammad's death – under circumstances in which religion became a tool for power – that the idea of Jihad became established in its most aggressive meaning. The first four caliphs following Muhammad had to face great difficulties, and three of them (Omar Ibn Al-Jatab, Osmán Ibn Afane and Ali Ibn Abi Taleb) were murdered in the midst of strong fights for power. The laborious task of passing laws – that were inspired by the Koranic texts and should adapt to the social organisation and habits of the Arabian Peninsula – for the lands that were progressively annexed to the young Muslim nation as a consequence of the successive conquests was in the hands of these four caliphs. Even if the Quran addressed concepts such as 'razzia' and conquest in its Medina period, these must be placed in the context of that period⁵, and as such their annulment in different contexts should have been unquestionable.

The schism of Islam after the defeat of the fourth caliph Ali – Muhammad's son-in-law – at the hands of Damascus Governor Muawiya and his subsequent murder by a member of the minority Khariji sect would give rise to the two main branches of Islam – Sunni and Shia –, which would fight for the religious and political supremacy in the Muslim world until today. Radical Islamism would take its first steps after the establishment of the capital in Damascus and the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyad would use Islamic texts to legitimise their seizure of power, which was strongly contested within the Muslim community. They established some sort of Pan-Arab nationalism that marginalises non-Arab Muslims, starting with the Persians. They would do this since the first moments, starting by the transmission of power in a hereditary way. The leaders of the new dynasty used Islam to attain political advantages. They were not the only ones; several political and religious

⁴ Bernard Lewis: *El lenguaje político del Islam*, Ed Taurus, Madrid, 2004, p.125.

⁵ Anne-Marie Delcambre : *L'islam : histoire des origines et histoire califale*, Le Monde Clio, March 2001. https://www.clio.fr/BIBLIOTHEQUE/l_islam_histoire_des_origines_et_histoire_califale.asp.

leaders would follow their example and make of Islam a tool to take power through violence.

It is through the political exploitation of Islam that the cause for violence as a way to solve political issues starts being trivialised. During this period, the idea that cruel actions such as beheadings or mutilations are consubstantial to Islamic culture is finally assumed in the collective subconscious of wide sectors in the Muslim world.

The Umayyad would be followed by the Abbasids – the Prophet's descendants – from 750 AD onwards. They would reign as caliphs over the Muslim world for over five centuries, but they would also face strong political opposition, to which they would respond with violence. Thus, after the first years – in which the Mu'tazilas or rationalists based their reflections on the idea of responsibility of each believer or freewill⁶ – the four main schools of Sunni Islam would end up prevailing, and would forbid the 'speculative theology' that the Mu'tazilas praised⁷. The strictness that would become the hallmark of the Islamist movement has its origin in this period. Between the end of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th, the four big schools of Sunni thought – called 'Madahib'⁸ – and mainly Hanbali – considered the most strict one – would consolidate the idea that Islam is constituted by an ensemble of normative texts that must necessarily regulate believers' lives.

From this perspective, it is in this historical period when the Islamic law or Sharia would be sacralised; Muslims would then have to abide by the rules of the different juridical schools, but without departing from their theological discipline. Only Shia and Sufi Islam, together with some Sunni intellectuals would keep the speculative theology based on interpretation and their own opinion, even if those wishing to fight would be perceived as heretic before the eyes of the dominant Sunni schools because of taking that stance.

⁶ Sayyed Hossein Nasser: *Intelecto e intuición: su relación desde la perspectiva islámica*, Revista Alfil nº 95, July 2011.

⁷ Fernando Peregrin: *La racionalidad en el Islam y en Occidente*, Cuadernos de Pensamiento Político, Faes Foundation, Madrid, April/June 2007.

⁸ D. Stewart: *Law, Islamic*, *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, 2005. http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Islamic_law.aspx.

Hence, Hanbali School's Sunni doctrine would lay the foundations for modern Islamism as it portrays the Sharia and the Caliphate as the main arguments of a political discourse that aimed at forming a 'perfect' model of society ruled according to God's law. From this point of view, democratic or representative systems would be left out, since the only source of power is divine – through the Quran – and does not come from the people's will.⁹

In the Shia world, it would be the 'murderers' sect – the 'hashish smokers' – who would spread terror for over two centuries, both in the Abbasid dynasty and among the Christian kings in the Holy Land.¹⁰ The murderers' activism would unveil a new era that spread from 1080 up to 1256 and that coincides with the Christian crusades for the liberation of the Holy Land, a period during which a new and unknown terror method would be put into practice: suicide bombings. Founded by the charismatic Hassan Al-Sabah – also called "the old man from the mountain" – and composed by Ismailis – a current of Shia Islam that goes back to the death of the sixth Imam in the year 756 and the fights for his succession –, murderers would terrorise the region for two centuries from the impregnable fortress of Alamut, in the mountains of North Iran. In the end, only the physical destruction of their fortresses by the Mongols would put an end to the murderous terror.

The warmongering efforts that the Crusades entailed, along with the European centurial efforts to control the Holy Land and the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols in the 12th century – a catastrophe only partially mitigated by its nominal conversion to Islam – gave the Jihad a new chance. The defensive position led to a theological and political hardening of Muslim positions, and gave the Jihad new significance as it judged the validity of a person's faith according to their disposition to undertake the former.

Under these circumstances, the authors of the period who were supporters of Hanbalism – namely Ibn Taymiyya – promoted the classical theory of Jihad, with the aim of setting up the strict application of the Sharia and imposing Islam's authority,

⁹ Mohamed Sifaui, *ibídem*. pp. 5-5.

¹⁰ Edward Burman, *Los asesinos, La secta de los guerreros santos del Islam*, Madrid, Ed. Martínez Roca, 1987, pp.55-77.

thereby becoming modern Salafist's main ideological reference. This would be the case for the two main Al-Qaeda leaders – Osama Ben Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri –, who assumed the interpretation that Muslims should be judged according to their tendency to fulfil the Jihad.¹¹ Takfir – the equivalent to the excommunication – was the principle they applied to the Muslims who rejected adhering to it. The same is true of the ideologues of Daesh or Islamic State. If Hulagu Khan's Mongols destroyed Bagdad in the 12th century and “tinged the Tigris's waters in red”¹², the fighters of the new Islamic State had to dye the Mediterranean waters in the same colour, poured by the bodies of the infidels from the “people of the cross, followers of the hostile church of Egypt”.¹³

After Ibn Taymiyya, the violent Jihad became a sort of natural act in the Muslim subconscious, and the successive ideologues would sacralise the concepts of ‘Sharia’ or ‘Jihad’ more and more, until they gained a predominant place in the imaginary of Muslim societies.

During the 18th and 19th century, Jihads of purification and return to the past took place in several regions. They were waged both against the colonial powers and against other Muslims. The most radical and important of them was that of the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. According to them, the Jihad was a sixth pillar of Islam, at the same level as the other five: faith profession, fasting, praying, alms and pilgrimage to Mecca. Based on Ibn Taymiyya, the Wahhabis condemned most of non-Wahhabi Muslims as infidels (kafirs) and waged a Jihad against them, getting to destroy Kerbala – Shia's holy city – on the 21st April 1802.

Their alliance with Muhammad Ibn Saud – boss of one of the most important tribes in Saudi Arabia at the time – under the “Nejd pact” (1744) would give birth to the current

¹¹ Thomas Joscelyn: *Analysis: Why AQAP quickly denied any connection to mosque attacks*, The Long War Journal, March 20, 2015.

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/analysis-why-aqap-quickly-denied-any-connection-to-mosque-attacks.php>.

¹² Hassan Haidar: *Le Complexe du Mongol*, Al-Hayat, Londres, 26/02/2015. Recogido por Courier International, nº1271, 12-18 de marzo de 2015, p.33.

¹³ Como se puso en práctica con la decapitación de 21 cristianos coptos egipcios por parte de la rama libia del Estado Islámico. Ricard González: *La rama libia del Estado Islámico decapita a 21 cristianos coptos egipcios*, El País, 16/02/2015.

http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/02/15/actualidad/1424034769_777056.html.

Saudi Arabia in the 20th century, where Wahhabi ideology would become the State's doctrine. Thus, a political-religious alliance was made in the Arabian Peninsula, justified by the decadence of the Turkish Empire and the colonising process of the Western powers in the lands of Islam. The result is the so-called quietist or Scholastic Salafism, which is grounded on the commitment among religious leaders and the political power as long as the latter acts according to the principles of the Sharia.¹⁴

Hostility towards non-Muslims and the use of the writings by cofounder Abdelwaheb to spread the Wahhabi ideology all around the world became natural strategies of this rigorist current that calls for a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna. This interpretation allows for the punishment of political activists and common criminals through "medieval methods"¹⁵. The discovery of abundant oil in 1938 would allow the Saudi monarchy to use the abundant financial resources provided by energy income so as to facilitate their conception of Islam in Muslim regions and communities, very far both geographic and spiritually from this extreme version.

Thus, the Wahhabi ideology strongly supported by the Gulf monarchies would spread fast and gradually increase its influence on the nature and shape of Islam in several Muslim states, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or Sudan. Likewise, Wahhabism would play an important role in the Euro-Mediterranean theatres of operation, as it was the case during the Balkan wars of Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. Its influence would also be felt in Algeria after the interruption of the 1991 legislative elections, when the Armed Islamic Group – AIG – would make its appearance. The savage character of this group would lead to its conversion into the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat – SGPC –, which had the same aims but used more moderate tactics.

On the other hand, European colonisation – interpreted as the defeat of Islam against Christianity – had a deep impact on the subconscious of Muslim masses, which perceived it as a humiliation – which allowed for the creation of the appropriate context for political and ideological radicalisation of the Muslim population. The

¹⁴ Laurent Bonne: *Saudi Arabia and the expansion of Salafism*, NOREF (Norwegian Peacebuilding resource Centre), September 2013. http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/51ecc6aed984f0b32dce709cd02cab49.pdf.

¹⁵ Le Watan: *La leçon suédoise*, Algeria, 14/03/2014.

extremist currents of thought became an excellent means of popular mobilisation and social contestation, which would facilitate their expansion in the Muslim countries that were submitted to colonial order.

Nevertheless, the efforts made by the Islamist resistance – especially in India, Caucasus, Somalia, Sudan, Algeria and Morocco – against Turkish and European imperialism ended up in failure. This situation translated into the appearance of a new Islamist current of thought that started in Egypt in the 1920s with the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan Al-Banna. However, this current only acquired the contemporary idea of a fundamentalist warmongering offensive with Egyptian thinker Sayid Qutub.

Qutub developed Ibn Taymiyya's distinction between true and fake Muslims in order to judge those who were non-Islamist as non-Muslims and start the Jihad towards them. Therefore, he thought Muslims should unite under Islamic faith rather than under national identity: he called for the notion of Umma (nation or community of Muslims) against that of Watan (territorial nation, homeland). With his slogan 'to us the action, to God the success', he meant that political action should not only consist of fighting against the colonial invader, but also of the instauration and diffusion of the Sharia. This way of thinking would give rise to the 'activist or reformed Salafists', who would develop a political option based on the acceptance of democracy and respect of the results shown by the votes, as long as these were favourable.¹⁶ They would acquire great significance over the months following the 2011 Arab Spring.¹⁷

The Muslim Brotherhood became very popular in Egypt and spread to neighbouring countries, creating a religious network of ideological, religious and social character. This network would act as a counter-power against the State, providing the Egyptian population with the basic services the former was not offering – schools, charity associations, medical facilities, libraries and small companies. Even if they are often seen as moderate Islamists, reality has it that the Muslim Brotherhood aims at an

¹⁶ Juan José Escobar Stemmann: *Salafismo en el Sahel: lo que Europa se juega*, Madrid, Política Exterior, March-April 2013.

<http://www.politicaexterior.com/articulos/politica-exterior/salafismo-en-el-sahel-lo-que-europa-se-juega/>.

¹⁷ Laurent Bonne, *ibidem*.

extreme vision of Islam and the use of religion as a means to access power. Their speech shows some hypocrisy: they reject terrorism, but at the same time allow their partisans to use it; they consider themselves modernists and respectful towards democracy, but in fact they attack it and undermine its values. This double standard would become an identification sign of their doctrine, political culture and an ideology that openly calls for the Islamisation of the society in relevant aspects, such as gender segregation in schools and public life, the prohibition of dancing, or the censoring of readings.¹⁸ This concept of bottom-up Islamisation would inspire several Arab organisations – namely Algerian and less importantly Moroccan – that would choose to violently oppose the constituted power. Their partisans would play an important role in the foundation and expansion of the Armed Islamic Group, which would initiate the confrontation with the Algerian State from 1989 onwards.¹⁹

Over the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, important historical events, such as the murder of Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat in 1981, the taking over power in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, the attacks on holy places of Mecca in 1979, and especially the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan also in 1979 introduced the idea that Jihad could be a way for world domination, the final aim in the evolution of Islamist thought. The slogan 'Islam is the solution',²⁰ predicated by the Muslim Brotherhood would become the slogan of wide social sectors, as well as the grounds for political indoctrination – leaving thus aside the old ideas of pan Arab socialism, which was very popular in former decades. Saudi Arabia, supported by other monarchies of the Gulf would contribute to this, as it was more and more willing to spread Wahhabism thanks to the resources provided by the oil. It would be precisely the confluence of these two currents of thought – Saudi Wahhabism and Muslim Brotherhood's Takfirism – that would allow for the readiness of Salafism to address the conquest of the world, either through the proselytism of its followers or through violent actions.

¹⁸ Point de bascule: *The 50-Point Manifesto of Hassan Al-Banna*, 10/02/2011.
<http://pointdebasculecanada.ca/the-50-point-manifesto-of-hassan-al-banna/>.

¹⁹ Ricard González: *La inestabilidad de Argelia y Libia arrastra a Túnez*, El País 20/03/2003.
http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/03/19/actualidad/1426792776_138869.html.

²⁰ Eugenio García Gascón: *El islam es la solución*, Diario Público, 29/11/2011.
<http://www.publico.es/internacional/islam-solucion.html>.

Afghanistan would be the testing field; Jihadists from all over the world would come for the first time to fight in the name of Islam against an ideology – Soviet socialism – they considered hateful, and a Palestinian – Abdullah Azzam – would become a master of the global Jihad – portraying it as the way to the salvation of Muslims and Islam.²¹ Ben Laden's terrorism and the creation of Al-Qaeda – which would spread at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st across different regions of the Muslim world under a system of regional franchises – would find its roots in this historical circumstance and in Afghan soil.

The failure of Jihadist uprisings in the Arab countries over the 1990s would lead Azzam to the conclusion that it was necessary to defeat the 'far-away enemy' – understood as 'Zionist crusaders' – before launching large-scale offensives in Muslim countries. The operation 'Desert Storm' during the first Iraqi war reinforced his conviction about the need to destroy American power – the 'head of the snake'²² –, which had dared to step on the 'holy lands' of Islam with its display in Saudi Arabia. The authorization given by Arab monarchies to display American troops on their own territory placed regimes like the Saudi one on the side of the 'Apostates', hence producing an internal break in the Salafist movement after the surge of 'combatant or Jihadist Salafism'. This new branch denounced Saudi power and excommunicated the royal family, as it issued several fatwas in which the fight against them was authorised.

The political strategy of Jihadist Salafism would be from then on grounded on three principles: building the Islamic State through the Jihad, enforcing the obligation of carrying it out for all Muslims, and the need to fight both the close enemy – the Arab regimes – and the far-away one – the West and Christian and Jewish infidels, as well as laic and pro-democracy Muslims –. The attacks in the last years of the 20th century against North American and Saudi interests, together with his personal wealth and ability to attract funds for the Islamist cause turned Ben Laden into the undisputable leader of the international Jihadist movement that operated from

²¹ Trevor Stanley: *Abdullah Azzam "The Godfather of Jihad"*, PWHCE, Perspectives on World History and Current Events, 2003-2005, <http://www.pwhce.org/azzam.html>.

²² Eric González: *Un icono del siglo XXI*, El País, 03/05/2011, http://elpais.com/diario/2011/05/03/internacional/1304373606_850215.html.

Afghanistan through a strongly-centralised network in the planning and organisation, although very decentralised in the execution of its actions. Ben Laden would issue the famous 'fatwa against Jews and Crusaders' (1998) from Afghanistan, which would be useful for the launching of the Jihad concept against the 'external enemy'. He stated that 'killing Americans and their allies – civil and military – is an individual duty of all Muslims who are capable of doing it'.²³

The attacks on the 11th September 2001 and their publicity effect made of Al-Qaeda the objective of the fight, as it showed a structure that seemed much more solid than it actually was. Before the eyes of many Jihadists who had not yet found the way to efficiently face the governments they were opposed to, Al-Qaeda seemed to be the only organisation that was strong enough to attack the US and its Western allies on their own territory. The idea of a 'far-away Jihad' was not a mere theoretical expression anymore; from then on, it became an attainable objective.

North American invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 fostered the incipient international Jihadi movement as they created new theatres of operation where new operational procedures and terrorist methods could be put into practice. The directive head hid in the mountainous area between Afghanistan and Pakistan and was named 'Central Al-Qaeda', whereas in several areas of the Muslim world Jihadists who had received training in Afghanistan – many of them having fought in this country against the Soviets – started organising regional franchises in their homelands, namely in the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia and the Maghreb.²⁴

The effect of this organisational decentralisation was a certain defocus of Al-Qaeda's ideological disorientation. As the regional franchises became more relevant due to the prosecution suffered by the central organisation – with many of its leaders arrested or killed – the interest in 'close targets' increased in the ever more decentralised regional organisations, thus leaving the rhetoric of the attacks against the West as the responsibility of the central directorate. As measures taken both by Western nations and by the very Arab regimes made it more difficult to attack them

²³ Erin Marie Saltman & Charlie Winter: Op. Cit. Pp.17-19.

²⁴ Camille Tawil (2011), 'How Ben Laden's death will affect al-Qa'ida's regional franchises', Combating Terrorism Center: CTC Sentinel (May), 7-8.

strategically, the attention shifted again towards the closest enemy, which was an easier objective.

This presented another advantage: now that the far-away enemy had dared to display its troops in the holy lands of Islam, it was easier to attack it. Defence of Muslim values and the fight against Western powers became the grounds of a pragmatic strategy that presented Jihadist organisations to the Muslim public opinion as a defensive and not offensive movement. The concept of 'takfir' – typically used by the Muslim Brotherhood to justify terrorist attacks on societies with Muslim majority, something Ben Laden's Al-Qaeda did not quite agree with – was also revived.

This context witnessed the emergence in Iraq of Jordan Abu Musa Al-Zarqawi, a veteran – like many other Jihadists – of the 'Afghan Arabs', who were well trained in the fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. He would create in 2004 Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), whose daring attitude in the attacks against North American forces and brutal tactics would make it famous. The franchise would also be pioneer in the use of the still incipient social networks for propaganda and militant recruiting, which would allow for the generalised diffusion of their most spectacular actions.

Al-Zarqawi's ideological legacy is clearly perceivable in current Jihadism. His interpretation of Islam is even more radical and sectarian than that of Ben Laden; it can be easily seen in the methodology and ideological appearance of the Islamic State or Daesh. AQI's strategy was based almost exclusively on fostering chaos and creating internal instability; with that aim, their strategies included indiscriminate attacks against mainly Shia civilians, generalised use of explosive artefacts, or beheading of foreigners.²⁵ The objective was to establish an irreparable chaos in the country in order to bring institutional stability and political order under their own rules.

One last factor contributed to the arising of Jihadism: the 2011 'Arab Springs' triggered the fall of the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Initially, the Jihadist networks were relegated to a situation of marginalisation as opposed to the

²⁵ Táctica que comenzó a ponerse en práctica con el asesinato del hombre de negocios norteamericano Nicholas Berg en mayo de 2004.

groups who called for a pacific transformation. However, the chaos that followed Gaddafi's fall in Libya, and especially Bashar al-Asad's brutal repression in Syria and Iraqi President Al-Maliki's political ineptitude created new unintended battlefields that would act as an attraction pole for international Jihadism.

At the same time, Ben Laden's death due to an action of the North American special forces in Abbottabad (Pakistan) that very same year, and the elimination of most high-level Al-Qaeda directors thanks to the efficient combination of special operations and drone attacks, destroyed the central organisation, which paved the way towards greater autonomy for all regional organisations who wished so. The most relevant case was that of the Islamic State (IS) or Daesh, an organisation that split from Al-Qaida's Iraqi franchise as they have deep ideological and strategic differences – they use different methods to attain their objectives. Daesh has been able to take advantage of Al-Qaeda's weakness so as to become an independent organisation and defy the latter's leading role in international Jihadism. The irruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 allowed for a reinforced and much more professional Daesh, and for the spread of its activities within this country as they took advantage of the on-going revolution and the subsequent civil war.

The internal ideological disputes translated into divergent strategies. Whereas Al-Qaeda blames the West for all the suffering in the Muslim countries and aims at its destruction, the IS fights for the cleansing of the Islamic world first in order to erase what it sees as heretical behaviour, even if that means all minorities must be eliminated in the territories controlled by them – together with all those Muslims who do not accept their radical interpretation of Islamic law. Therefore, they defend a territorial strategy rather than a focal one, based on the occupation of territories rather than on carrying out attacks on far-away objectives. The IS and Al-Qaeda keep today a dispute over their legitimacy to lead the international Jihadist movements. The IS accuses Al-Qaeda of having perverted the founding principles that Ben Laden gave to the organisation; hence, the IS sees itself as Ben Laden's legitimate successor. On the other hand, current Al-Qaeda leaders accuse IS of breaking their religious promises and having become a rebel group whose cruel actions are also harmful for the Jihadist cause.

As a conclusion, we can say that the way the Jihad is understood today is its most extreme interpretation in the history of Islam. This religious fundamentalism shows that the Muslim world is going through a definition phase about its future, whose final form we cannot see yet. This final vision might reject the radical interpretation of Jihad that is currently practiced by Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other affiliated groups. But this rejection might as well not take place, or it may not be fast enough to prevent the world from sinking into a situation of insecurity similar to those of the worst periods of history. If the first option succeeds, the Jihad should evolve to become a non-violent concept, thus retrieving its essence of inner fight, personal effort and self-improvement with which Islam has been identified over long periods of its history. The great challenge for moderate Muslims and their non-Muslim allies is to succeed in making this possible.

*Ignacio Fuente Cobo
COR.ET.ART.DEM
Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies (IEEE)*