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Transnational armed Salafi Jihadi networks: emergence and development

I. Introduction

The deployment of transnational Salafi Jihadi networks after 2011 has dismayed European countries. Jihadi Salafism contrasts with mainstream Islamism, broadly defined as the inclusion of religion in the political domain, and Salafism, which refers to a specific religious approach often considered fundamentalist that does not necessarily deal with politics. Salafi Jihadis are defined by their embrace of violence against local Muslim leaders not enforcing Islamic law as well as against Western countries vilified for their foreign policies towards the Muslim world. Transnational Salafi Jihadi networks have mobilised a growing number of European citizens in foreign conflicts for over two decades. Their growth after 2011 was accompanied by numerous armed attacks in European cities that resulted in hundreds of deaths. But recent qualitative and quantitative change does not mean that transnational radical networks interconnected with the Middle East are a historical anomaly.

Transnational radical networks connected to the Middle East are not historically the monopoly of Islamist groups. Individuals from the Middle East and North Africa participated in the Spanish civil war in support of the republicans and, one decade later, European Jews sustained the Zionist war effort to establish the state of Israel.[1] The most significant collaboration between Middle Eastern and European radical networks preceding the growth of Islamist networks primarily involved leftist groups. In the 1970s and 1980s, European leftists collaborated extensively with Middle Eastern non-state armed groups, primarily Palestinian. They trained in shared facilities located in Jordan, Lebanon and South Yemen, premises for their coordination of larger armed operations in the Middle East and Western Europe.[2] Transnational radical left-wing collaboration abated by the end of the 1980s. The end of Soviet support and the termination of the communist experience of Eastern Europe combined with the dismantlement of Western left-wing armed networks and dwindling support for their Palestinian counterparts substantially marginalised them. Left-wing transnational solidarity was then supplanted by Islamist transnational networks. Against the backdrop of the Islamic revival witnessed in the Middle East for over half a century, transnational Islamist networks surfaced in the 1970s before expanding in the next few decades. This article provides an analytical retrospective of their construction and development in changing circumstances.

II. The emergence of a new armed Islamist transnational solidarity

For domestic and regional reasons, Muslim actors primarily began to participate in foreign conflicts from the 1970s onwards. Prior to that decade, Muslim individuals or groups only marginally participated in conflicts in neighbouring countries, including the Syrian-born preacher Izz ad-Din al-Qassam in the 1936 Palestinian uprising against British occupation and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1948 Palestine war. But previous episodes

[1] For more analysis of comparative foreign fighters, see Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 2013.
[2] On non-state armed groups transnational collaboration, see Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, 2018.

were relatively limited in scope. They were more regional than transnational in nature since their participants did not belong to a relatively well-defined transnational movement, but simply provided assistance to their neighbour under foreign pressure.

Modern Salafi Jihadi transnational networks have two complementary roots in the 1970s, which inaugurated early transnational Islamist militant solidarity. These two branches paved the way for the emergence and consolidation of Salafi Jihadi networks in the next few decades, which then became fully emancipated from them. The first source is the Palestinian question. The loss of Palestine in 1948 and 1967 compelled many Palestinian intellectuals and activists to question its rationale in regional and international terms. Why had the Arab and Muslim world proved unable to protect Palestine against the Zionist state project? Some, like Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, believed that the abolition of the Muslim Caliphate underpinned the weakness of the Muslim world. Al-Nabhani accordingly created the internationalist movement *ḥizb ut-taḥrīr* (the Liberation Party) to revive the Caliphate and unite the Muslim world through political action. Others endorsed the same root cause for the loss of Palestine but promoted another strategy: seize power in Egypt, create an Islamic state, and liberate Palestine with a newly created Islamic army. They mobilised like-minded Egyptians in the 1970s, which formed the early cells of what would subsequently become the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Regardless of internal differences, these Palestinian activists all believed that the liberation of Palestine would ultimately mark the renaissance of the Arab and Muslim world.[3]

The second foundation of transnational radical networks was not as political as it was religious. The relative failures of pan-Arabism and socialism to emancipate the Arab and Muslim world from Western dominance occurred alongside a major power shift in the Middle East in the 1970s. The two successive oil crises boosted the role played by Gulf countries in the region and marginalised Arab republics, especially Egypt. The new financial resources at the disposal of Gulf countries bolstered their political role but also their promotion of the Salafi approach to Islam in the Muslim world at large. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. The modern Saudi state has historically been structured around a family controlling the political realm and a revivalist religious movement institutionalised in a clergy broadly embracing the Salafi approach to Islam.[4] Saudi-inspired revivalism used newly available financial resources to grow in the region through the financing of religious associations, publications and training. This development did not occur in a vacuum. It reinforced existing domestic religious dynamics congruent with the Salafi approach to Islam. These regional and domestic developments shaped the emergence of a new type of religious solidarity drawn from a conservative and literalist approach to Islam.[5] It was not explicitly violent, although fringes of the movement were associated with the violent takeover of Mecca in 1979 by Saudi and foreign Islamist activists.[6]

The Palestinian and Salafi roots of the Salafi Jihadi transnational networks initially intersected through a prominent Palestinian religious preacher, Abdullah Azzam.[7] Azzam was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood

[3] On the role of Palestinians in the Salafi Jihadi trend, see Hegghammer and Wagemakers, *The Palestine Effect*, 2013.
[4] Mouline, *The clerics of Islam*, 2014.
[5] Hegghammer, *The rise of Muslim foreign fighters*, 2010.
[6] Hegghammer and Lacroix, *Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia*, 2007; Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 2008.
[7] On Azzam see Hegghammer, *ʿAbdallāh ʿAzzām and Palestine*, 2013.

who had briefly fought alongside the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Jordan before settling in Saudi Arabia. A doctor in theology, Azzam taught religion in Saudi Arabia, where he mingled with the Saudi clergy as well as a new generation of activists, including Osama bin Laden. Azzam's fame peaked in the 1980s when he published a religious edict sanctioning individual Jihad in Afghanistan. In parallel, he actively mobilised a whole new generation of young Muslims worldwide in support of the Afghan resistance. Newly mobilised activists settled in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they socialised with Jihadi militants who had previously used violence in Egypt and Syria. This association of Jihadi militants, new activists and mainstream Salafis has shaped the foundation of the Salafi Jihadi social movement to the present day. Its main ideological premises converged upon individual Jihad in support of occupied Muslim lands and the establishment of Islamic states in the Muslim world. They nonetheless initially diverged on the legitimacy of armed violence against Muslim countries and foreign targets as well as a range of tactical and strategic issues.

The end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the assassination of Azzam and the dawn of the Afghan civil war marked the end of the Afghan Arab episode. New activists returned to their home countries or new battlefields. North Africans, especially the Algerians and the Egyptians, arrived back in countries on the brink of civil war. Many contributed to the war effort against their regimes, others were arrested when they returned, and the remaining tried to find alternatives.[8] The few alternatives in the 1990s included Bosnia and Chechnya a few years later. Another prominent place was Sudan, which embraced an open-door policy for Islamist movements worldwide. Osama bin Laden and prominent Egyptian groups who would conjointly shape the future of al-Qaeda (AQ) settled in Sudan. The dispersion of transnational networks occurred against the backdrop of the division of Salafism in Saudi Arabia between supporters of the regime and the awakening (*ṣaḥwa*) movement,[9] which opposed collaboration with the US and demanded domestic reforms.

During the decade preceding 9/11, violence was primarily directed toward the Muslim world, with only limited exceptions. The most notable groups fought domestic civil wars in Algeria and Egypt, communitarian conflicts in the Balkans, and non-Muslim foreign forces in Chechnya. These conflicts only seldom spilled over, as in the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé's (GIA) armed campaign in France in the mid-1990s. AQ's agenda against the US foreign enemy did not enjoy the popularity of the so-called classic Jihad against foreign forces in Chechnya. The growing popularity of the Salafi Jihadi milieu worldwide, including in London, continued to attract a constituency mostly swayed by armed violence in the Muslim world and its periphery. Jihadi Salafism was increasingly interconnected, but also plagued by severe internal divisions. AQ was only a marginal player, even though the group managed to orchestrate a few daring armed operations against US targets abroad.

III. The impact of 9/11

On 9/11, AQ coordinated large scale attacks against the United States. The US decision to retaliate against affiliated non-state armed groups throughout the world as well as their state supporters transformed international relations. The US declared war on Afghanistan one month later and ended the Taliban regime. The 9/11 attacks therefore positioned AQ at the head of the Salafi Jihadi social movement, considering that competing groups in Algeria and Egypt had been deci-

[8] On violence in North Africa in the 1990s, see Tawil, *Brothers In Arms*, 2011.
[9] Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 2010

mated by the late 1990s. While Bin Laden's group intended to demonstrate the weakness of the United States' so-called empire, the initial US reaction resulted in a paradoxical outcome for the organisation. AQ took the lead of a movement that was unable to resist the US onslaught against its leaders and members in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By 2003, AQ was on the verge of collapse.

But the hubris of the US was AQ's salvation. The quick victory in Afghanistan combined with the initial postulate that Islamist violence resulted from the absence of democracy in the Middle East transformed the US approach to the region. US President George W. Bush's so-called freedom agenda aimed at transforming existing regimes and establishing democracies that would entertain good relations with Western countries. The first step was Iraq. The decision to topple the Iraqi regime was a historical failure. The war dramatically destabilised the region and replenished AQ's ranks. In contrast with the war in Afghanistan, the one in Iraq was widely perceived as illegal worldwide and, more dramatically, as an attack against Islam in the Muslim world. While AQ's foreign enemy agenda was upheld only by a minority of Jihadi Salafis before 9/11, the war in Iraq changed the odds. Even the Jihadi Salafis who denounced the group's offensive against the US due to the consequential destruction of the Taliban emirate gradually closed ranks.

The centre of gravity of transnational Salafi Jihadi networks switched to Iraq. Jihadi militants increasingly joined the insurgency, swayed by a Jordanian warrior, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi initially mobilised during the first war of Afghanistan, before developing his own Levantine Jihadi networks in the 1990s.[10] He used the opportunity presented by the US invasion to mobilise regionally and become the looming figurehead of the insurgency with staggering attacks. Young Muslims from neighbouring countries – but also North Africa and, progressively, Europe – joined in. The Salafi Jihadi social movement radicalised as a product of a sectarian conflict pitting them against Shia Muslims in Iraq. New Salafi Jihadi sympathisers worldwide who were initially radicalised by US impunity in Iraq embraced the trend's new ideological tenets and reinforced the expansion of its transnational networks.

AQ's new monopoly on military resistance to the US combined with increased pressure on its heartland in Afghanistan transformed the group's organisational structures. The new franchising strategy adopted by its leaders consisted of structuring a network of local franchising pursuing shared interests throughout the world to strengthen the group's resilience.[11] The new strategy was sustained by the US demonisation, which only served to bolster AQ's reputation. AQ's transnational network accordingly expanded in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and Somalia. The contradictory outcome was that AQ became more threatening while new franchises, especially in Iraq, could not be meticulously controlled by bin Laden and AQ's senior lieutenants, who were losing control over effective use of violence.[12] At the same time, AQ managed to capitalise on its new popularity to recruit unaffiliated individuals, who coordinated armed operations throughout Europe, from Madrid to London.

While AQ had just hundreds of members to defend its controversial agenda before 9/11, the US overreaction after the September attacks transformed the Jihadi social movement. On the eve of 2011, the Salafi Jihadi transnational movement broadened its inf-

[10] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2015.
[11] Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise*, 2015.
[12] Drevon, *The Jihadi Social Movement*, 2017.

luence worldwide and socialised thousands of supporters in the Muslim and Western worlds. Although most violence continued to threaten Muslim countries with a more distinctive anti-Western political agenda, a minority also became involved in violent activities in Western countries. The US so-called war on terror was generally used by AQ to develop and structure transnational Salafi Jihadi networks around a unifying ideology.

IV. Post-2011 developments

In 2011, a wave of popular uprisings destabilised the Arab world. A unifying call for political change erupted in North Africa before spreading to the Middle East, against autocratic regimes. The popular uprisings were perceived as a unique opportunity to change the status quo that had prevailed for half a century. Demonstrators managed to remove the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents from power but failed to stimulate a non-violent transition in Libya and Syria, where civil wars erupted.[13] The impact on transnational Salafi Jihadi networks was initially contested. The argument that successful non-violent protests had proved AQ strategy wrong was contested in the new political openings, which were a unique opportunity for Salafi Jihadi networks to fill the vacuum and spread in the region.[14]

But the main critical juncture for the Jihadi social movement was not the political opening in Egypt in Tunisia as much as the civil wars that plagued Libya and Syria. The wars started in Libya, where former leader Muammar Gaddafi violently repressed the protest movement, which quickly militarised. The Libyan diaspora mobilised in support of the insurgency but Western military support ended the first phase of the civil war relatively rapidly. That was not the case in Syria. The non-violent Syrian protests were similarly repressed by the regime but the civil war quickly escalated on an unprecedented scale. Armed groups coalesced throughout Syria with contrasting ideological leanings. Many were merely composed of locals vying to protect their localities, but the most sustainable groups in the long run were formed by Salafi activists, many of whom had been associated with the Salafi Jihadi trend previously.

The Syrian civil war was the second turning point after the war in Iraq in 2003. The popularity of the protest movement lead by Sunni Muslims against a vilified Alawi-lead regime portrayed as both Shia and obedient to Iran exacerbated pre-existing sectarian tensions. Moreover, the easy access to Syria via Turkey fuelled the mobilisation of thousands of Muslims worldwide, who were initially diverse ideologically. Salafi Jihadi groups were more capable of integrating them into their organisational structures than local militias. From 2012 to 2014, Syria's Sunni foreign fighter mobilisation far exceeded that of any previous battlefield. Its mobilisation far transcended Afghanistan's in the 1980s.

The formation of dozens of large Jihadi groups in Syria contributed to the transformation of the Salafi Jihadi social movement. The presence of a large number of groups underpinned the necessity to differentiate themselves from one another to survive in a competitive social movement environment. The groups were divided based on their peculiar priorities, approaches to political action and strategic objectives. While Salafi Jihadi groups broadly embraced the legitimacy of violence against US troops and their supporters in the 2000s, the complexity of the Syrian conflict fragmented them. On one side of the spectrum, groups like *Aḥrār*

[13] For a broader comparison see Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, *The Arab Spring*, 2015.
[14] Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi, *Perceptions of the 'Arab Spring' within the Salafi-Jihadi movement*, 2012.

al-Shām (the Freemen of the Levant) distanced themselves from Jihadi Salafism and progressively embraced the Syrian revolutionary agenda. AQ conversely oscillated between ground-level military collaboration with other Syrian factions and a real desire to impose its political agenda. But the group generally distanced itself from immediate attacks against Western targets.

The main outlier was the so-called Islamic State (IS) group. By defining itself as a state and not merely an ideological avant-garde like AQ, IS tried to mobilise much more extensively than any of its predecessors. Most foreigners, especially previously unaffiliated actors, joined the group since it was both willing to integrate them and better prepared to do so. The group's spectacular operations and effective declaration of a caliphate across Iraq and Syria bolstered its credentials and positioned it favourably to contest the leadership of the Jihadi social movement. Despite the group's early local focus, changing war dynamics informed the decision to subsequently attack Western and Muslim countries as well. European citizens previously mobilised as soldiers for the Syrian civil war were mobilised to launch war back home. New sympathisers were then encouraged to launch individual Jihad in their home countries as well instead of trying to reach foreign battlefields. The trend was only exacerbated with territorial losses by IS in Iraq and Syria.

V. Conclusion

The violence perpetrated by transnational Salafi Jihadi networks for the past few years has certainly been qualitatively and quantitatively novel. Western countries, especially in Europe, had never suffered large scale attacks resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties perpetrated by their own citizens. But radical transnational networks are not a new phenomenon. Islamist networks had taken over their leftist counterparts by the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. This development was sustained by the continuous political closure in the Middle East and North Africa, the absence of a palpable ideological alternative, and spreading armed conflicts. The latter have notably contributed to the expansion of these networks worldwide despite internal differences of views.

Transnational networks of violence are nonetheless not merely a North African and Middle Eastern issue. They have not mobilised a growing number of European citizens, including many initially non-Muslims, in a vacuum. The crisis of Western liberal democracy, the absence of an ideological alternative, and some of the failures of the integration of European immigrant populations provided the seeds from which transnational networks have prospered. These factors also account to some extent for internal European differences.

IS has recently lost momentum. The substantial contraction of the group's geographic presence in the region has impeded the organisation of large-scale armed attacks abroad. IS-inspired attacks often organised independently from the group's logistic assistance are a poor compensation for real losses on the ground despite a limited expansion outside Iraq and Syria – in Nigeria and Afghanistan in particular. This does not mean that the IS networks will disappear. A large array of individuals have been mobilised, socialised, and trained by the group over the years. Many have returned to their home countries for various reasons, from genuine rejection to disappointment and temporary relocation. Their future is, to a large extent, contingent on their countries' reactions. The end of the war in Afghanistan has already substantiated that a small group of people can inflict a large amount of damage worldwide. Their reintegration will shape the future prospects of Salafi Jihadi transnational networks for years to come.

The failings of the Muslim world persist. Recent regime gains in Syria do not mean that the war is definitely ending. The factors that facilitated the growth of IS remain. The vacuum of meaningful Sunni political representation in Iraq and Syria is undeniable. Similar causes can product similar outcomes in the future. This is also true for Afghanistan, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen. Transnational Salafi Jihadi networks have demonstrated their resilience and ability to adapt to new contexts in changing circumstances. This will not end with the territorial losses of IS in the Levant.

The most worrying development is the return of unchecked political repression. The counter-revolutionary wave propped up by Gulf countries against the Arab uprisings have had calamitous effects. In addition to the discredit inflicted on democratic political processes, repression has reached unprecedented peaks. Egypt is the clearest example. Aside from bin Laden, most AQ cadres were historically Egyptians. Egypt is the country that has most shaped the development of the Salafi Jihadi trend since its inception, primarily as a response to state repression. Endorsing autocrats that imprison tens of thousands of political prisoners as a price of short-term stability is likely to backfire in the long-run, although the next radical transnational networks might not be the monopoly of Jihadi Salafism anymore.

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