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WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT AL- QAEDA

Abstract

This paper puts into context the knowledge gathered on the al Qaeda terrorist organisation over the past 15 years. It briefly assesses the approach taken, primarily by academia, to the study of al Qaeda, and how this may have led to misinterpretations. The article points to a certain lack of rigour amongst some academics in favour of immediacy in order to be the first to publish studies on the phenomenon of religious Islamic terrorism. Subsequently, the history of al Qaeda is studied from its origins to its partial dismemberment and dismantling in Pakistan in the mid-2000s. When carrying out this study, the limited information available from primary sources, such as the letters from Abbottabad and other documents from the CTC's Harmony Project, were used.

KeyWords

Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, terrorism, Pakistan, jihad

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT AL- QAEDA?

1. INTRODUCTION

Thirteen years after the September 11 attacks against the United States, the knowledge we have today of the organisation responsible for the attacks remains incomplete, despite the vast amount and variety of material that has been published on the subject. The first part of this article briefly explains why this has come about and outlines the general starting points and approach taken by academia to the research of al Qaeda.

The immediate conclusion is that much of what we take to be established facts about al Qaeda need to be called into question, and the final version of the history, ideology and goals of the organisation led by Osama bin Laden has not yet been written.

Therefore, without it being a contradiction, the following two sections trace the evolution of al Qaeda from its origins to the mid-2000s. When doing so, every effort was made to use the sources closest to and most relevant to the organisation. Nevertheless, as explained throughout the article, the vast amount of sources still outside of the public domain makes it extremely difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of al Qaeda.

2. WHAT AND HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT AL QAEDA?

Al Qaeda came to the attention of the world as a result of the September 11 attacks against the United States. While the al Qaeda name surfaced after the bombings of the U.S., embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, it was not until 9/11 that the organisation was elevated to the status of “public enemy number one”.

Despite the little that was known about the group up to that point, and the fact that there was practically no direct information on the organisation, the decade following the New York and Washington attacks saw a proliferation of articles and publications of every description on the subject. Prior to 9/11, academic research on

subjects relating to al Qaeda was extremely limited.¹ During the twelve years prior to the attacks, the two leading academic journals on the study of terrorism, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*, had merely published two articles where al Qaeda was the central theme. In the five years immediately following 9/11, this figure had risen to thirty.²

However, from 2001 there was a dramatic upsurge in the number of articles, analyses, features and publications on al Qaeda, primarily by the media, which was eager to disseminate information on an apparently new phenomenon as quickly as possible. The number of publications on terrorism by the pseudo-academic world and, perhaps more worryingly, the academic world, also increased considerably.

On the one hand, the 9/11 attacks prompted an urgent need for information that would shed some light on why they had occurred. This, coupled with a complete absence of experts in the subject, led the media to temporarily suspend its capacity for critical analysis and saw a multitude of – very often contradictory – information about al Qaeda appear in media around the world. Some media quoted others, seemingly without verifying the information. Overnight, journalists became experts in al Qaeda on the basis of how quickly they could deliver their information, and not on any real knowledge of the subject.

On the other hand, the academic world, hitherto ignorant of the al Qaeda phenomenon, saw a new field of study, which presented an opportunity for quick recognition and funding, appear before its eyes. As a result, there was a race to become the first to occupy the coveted position of expert in al Qaeda.

In May 2002, nine months after the 9/11 attacks, Rohan Gunaratna, hitherto devoted to the study of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, published the first book on al Qaeda: *Inside al Qaeda, Global Network of Terror*, hence making him the world's main authority on al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism. Unfortunately, some of the events recounted in his book are based on sources that cannot be verified.³

A well known case is that of Alexis Debat, an acclaimed expert in terrorism who it was revealed had fabricated his professional credentials. Debat was director of the Terrorism and National Security Program at the Nixon Center in Washington until this was revealed in a series of research articles in the French news media, *Rue89*.⁴

1 RANSTORP, Magnus, *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions*, London, Routledge, 2007, p.4.

2 SILKE, Andrew, *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London, Routledge, 2004, p.40.

3 RANSTORP, 2007, pp.28-30

4 FAURE, Guillemette and RICHER, Pascal, "How Alexis Debat managed to cheat everyone in Washington", *Rue89*, 15 September 2007.

Unfortunately, constant repetition of certain information of dubious credibility on al Qaeda has resulted in some statements being accepted as fact. This is partly due to the fact that most academic works on Islamic terrorism are based on earlier publications by authors believed to be authorities on the subject, and this is inevitable, given the lack of primary sources. However, a critical spirit is also lacking in approaches to the study of the subject.

Indeed, even among recognised authorities on al Qaeda there are marked differences in opinion which lead us to question whether this is due to different analyses of the sources or a lack of sources. On this point, we can mention the debate that arose between Marc Sageman and his theory about a terrorist organisation with no clear leader, and Bruce Hoffman, who sees al Qaeda as having a perfect hierarchical structure, in addition to every conceivable viewpoint in between.⁵ And then there are the authors who consider al Qaeda of little significance in the present day (Jason Burke) and those who magnify the threat it poses (Rohan Gunaratna).

The large numbers of experts in jihadism that have emerged in the academic and pseudo-academic worlds constitute an additional obstacle to serious knowledge of the matter. The need to publish work in order to maintain their status and exploit events to increase interest in the subject have led to widespread analyses of terrorist attacks or attempted attacks in studies which put immediacy before thoroughness.⁶ These works are usually produced ad hoc and their conclusions are generally simplistic.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that works on the subject of terrorism are often produced by a single author, when you consider the wide ranging fields of study required for a full grasp of the subject, particularly in cases with an underlying religious component, such as that of al Qaeda. Experts in international relations or political sciences cannot also be expected to be authorities on Islamic theology or cultural anthropology, or vice versa. The fact that study of the phenomena has generally been in the hands of the two former fields of knowledge has meant that certain terms have become commonplace for describing terrorism and are somewhat vague.⁷

Concepts such as Wahhabism and Salafi jihadism which are often used to describe al Qaeda and what have been termed al Qaeda-linked groups are complex and subject

5 NEUMANN, Peter, EVANS, Ryan and PANTUCCI, Raffaello, "Locating al Qaeda's Center of Gravity: the Role of Middle Managers", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No.34, 2011, pp.825-842.

6 The quest for immediacy sometimes results in slip ups, such as the publication of an article that attributed the 2011 Norway attacks to the jihad. Published within hours of the Utoya massacre, it was linked to threats made to Norway by Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2003. The article was quickly withdrawn from the newspaper and a correction published by the author: REINARES, Fernando, "Matanza terrorista en Noruega", *El País*, 27 July 2011.

7 HELMICH, Christina, "Creating the Ideology of Al Qaeda: from Hypocrites to Salafi-Jihadists", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No.31, 2008, pp.111-124.

to considerable controversy. They are in no way schools of monolithic thinking as many would have us believe when explaining al Qaeda.⁸

This tendency to over simplify has happened with al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism in general. In the words of Martha Crenshaw prior to 2001, which are equally relevant today, “researchers should be careful in constructing general categories of terrorist actors that lump together dissimilar motivations, organisations, resources and contexts.”⁹ Consequently, the tagline “al Qaeda-linked” has become commonplace for describing insurgent groups in Mali, Boko Haram in Nigeria and the al-Shabaab in Somalia, to mention just a few examples, and sometimes no effort is made to study the context surrounding each of these organisations in-depth.

In general, the primary sources of information available to academic researchers of al Qaeda are the public statements made by the organisation’s most important members or spokespeople¹⁰ However, researchers have tended to give too much credibility to these statements, very often taking them at their face value. In the case of Spain, special mention must be given to the references to al Andalus made by some leaders of al Qaeda and seven other terrorist organisations. There is a tendency to interpret these threats as a direct risk of an attack in our country without pausing to seriously analyse the real capabilities of the people behind the statements.

As a group asymmetrically confronting the USA and the Western World, al Qaeda’s strength is not so much based on military power in the traditional sense as on its ability to manipulate the audience in order to inspire fear and provoke a response. Therefore, public discourse calling for jihad cannot be taken at its face value. It should be seen as a means of attaining a certain status among its target because the terrorists obviously wish to appear as united, competent and powerful as possible.¹¹

Similarly, al Qaeda’s skill at claiming responsibility for acts of terrorism, whether the case or not, continues to be an effective form of publicity for the organisation, its supporters and the rest of the world.¹²

From 2005 onwards, the U.S. Department of Defense began to make primary sources of information on al Qaeda available to academics in the form of documents

8 Ibid.

9 CRENSHAW, Martha, “The Psychology of Terrorism: an Agenda for the 21st Century”, *Political Psychology*, Vol.21, no.2, 2000, p.405.

10 With a few honourable exceptions, such as Peter Bergen’s book, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, based on interviews with people who had direct connections with the leader of al Qaeda, as well as bin Laden and members of his organisation.

11 HELLMICH, Christina, *Al Qaeda: from Global Network to Local Franchise*, London, Zed Books, 2011, p.17.

12 Idem. p.49.

seized on the battle fields of Afghanistan and Iraq. Initially ceded solely to the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, these have gradually been made available to the public. The dissemination of 17 documents seized from bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad in 2012 provided the first perspectives on the organisation from the inside. The dissemination of these primary sources was accompanied with a formidable translation and analysis that resulted in an interesting series of reports by members of CTC's Harmony Program.

Academic works by the CTC on al Qaeda are the first ones to be based on sources from inside the organisation.¹³ Up until now, academics did not have access to primary sources, which resulted in an "academic" al Qaeda that may not have been consistent with the real situation. There has been a tendency to assume that al Qaeda has almost omnipotent organisational capacity, is responsible for every act of jihadist terrorism committed in any place, and is the undisputed leader in world Islamic terrorism, all of which may be far from the truth.

Unfortunately, the knowledge academia has been able to glean about al Qaeda from primary sources is very limited, given that these sources and the testimonies of detained members of the organisation are classified information reserved for intelligence services.

The following sections recount the history of al Qaeda based on what are regarded as the most reliable sources and analyses. This history is therefore provisional and likely to change as new sources of information become available.

3. THE ORIGINS AND IDEOLOGY OF AL QAEDA

Osama bin Laden first arrived in Afghanistan in 1984, where he quickly made contact with and became the second-in-command of *Maktab al-Khidamat* (MAK), led by the Palestinian, Abdullah Azzam. MAK was not a jihadist organisation, but an intermediary between the Afghan Mujahideen groups and the foreigners, mainly from the Arab world, who travelled to Pakistan with the intention of fighting in Afghanistan.

¹³ This excludes public statements made by al Qaeda or its members; while these provide an insight into the group and its ideology, they are subjective and propagandist, in contrast to internal documents of the organisation.

In 1986, Osama bin Laden set up his own jihadist group together with Abu Ubayda al-Banshiri and Rida al-Tunisi in the Jaji mountains in north Paktia.¹⁴ Bin Laden's money allowed them to set up their own base with the consent of the Haqqani group who controlled the region. The base and this initial jihadist structure were called *Masadat al-ansar*. In 1988, the name was changed to al Qaeda and a hierarchical organisational structure established. In late 1989, bin Laden left Afghanistan to return to Saudi Arabia. However, the al Qaeda training camps and activity in Afghanistan as a jihadist group continued.

Throughout the 1990s, the organisation's ideology was formed, and international developments incorporated into the organisations' view of the world. In 1989, bin Laden proposed to the head of the Saudi intelligence services, Prince Turki bin Faisal al Saud, that illegal Saudi veterans of Afghanistan be used to overthrow the communist regime in South Yemen,¹⁵ a proposal that was rejected. In late 1990, the Saudi authorities again rejected bin Laden's offer to place the al Qaeda jihadists at its disposition to defend the Kingdom against the threat posed by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.¹⁶ Instead, the Saudi king sought the aid of its ally, the United States, who sent almost half a million soldiers to the peninsula to recover Kuwait from the Iraqis. Bin Laden saw this as a violation of the teachings of the Prophet who, according to him, did not allow the presence of infidels in Arabia. Furthermore, using U.S. troops to defend the peninsula was, in his opinion, a humiliation for the Kingdom and Islam. Successive attempts by bin Laden to secure support from religious academics exhausted the patience of the Saudi authorities who eventually banished him in 1991.

Bin Laden took refuge in Sudan in 1992, after a brief stay in Peshawar where he witnessed the start of the civil war of the Afghan mujahideen. In Khartoum, the regime of General al Bashir, influenced by the Islamic ideologue Hassan al-Turabi, welcomed bin Laden with open arms. Over the next four years bin Laden established a new base for al Qaeda in Sudan, a safe haven from which to plan the continuity of the jihad. Here he was joined by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. The two had coincided in Afghanistan in the 1980s, although al-Zawahiri had

¹⁴ LAHOUD, Nelly, "Beware of Imitators, Al-Qa'ida through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary", *CTC Harmony Program*, 2012. Lahoud's work is based on an analysis of the autobiography of Fadil Harun, a member of al Qaeda since 1991. The manuscript, comprised of two volumes, 1,156 pages and written in Arabic, appeared in Internet in February 2009 and became one of the most interesting sources for the study of al Qaeda at the time. For an assessment of the interest and reliability of the document, see pp.15-29 of Lahoud's analysis. The original manuscript, in Arabic, is available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-war-against-islam-the-story-of-fazul-harun-part-1-original-language-2> y <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-war-against-islam-the-story-of-fazul-harun-part-2-original-language-2>

¹⁵ WRIGHT, Lawrence, *The Looming Tower, Al-Qaeda's Road to 9/11*, London, Penguin, p.153.

¹⁶ COLL, Steve, "Ghost Wars: the Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001", New York, Penguin, 2005, pp.222-223.

not been involved in the foundation of al Qaeda. Over time, Zawahiri became an important ideologue and the second-in-command in the organisation after his group merged with al Qaeda in 1998.

In 1996, bin Laden and senior members of al Qaeda were expelled from Sudan when the Sudanese Government ceded to international pressure and after losing the patronage of Sheikh Turabi when he fell out of favour with President al-Bashir. From here, they returned to Afghanistan, where they initially sought refuge in the Jalalabad area which was under the control of the Taliban at the time. It was from here that they orchestrated and carried out the terrorist attacks that catapulted al Qaeda to world fame and gave it pre-eminence over other jihadist organisations.

Al Qaeda was built around combatants from different countries who gathered in Afghanistan in a bid to wage a jihad against the Soviet invasion. Later on it joined forces with an Egyptian group, many of whose members had also fought in Afghanistan in a jihad against the “apostate” regimes, starting with the Egyptian one. The disparate origins of the members was at the core of the organisation’s ideology. Two elements distinguished al Qaeda: the Afghan jihad and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, the international jihadist community saw it as a triumph of the Islamic faith over the atheist superpower. Although the defeat of the USSR cannot be attributable solely to the mujahideen, it was engraved in jihadist ideology as a success story which proved what the jihad could do for Muslims. It was also in Afghanistan that the jihad doctrine of Abdullah Azzam¹⁷ penetrated to the ideological foundations of al Qaeda.

Moreover, the all-important Arab-Israeli conflict in Zawahiri’s Islamic Jihad ideology is very much present in the thinking of al Qaeda.¹⁸ The Zawahiri faction brought with it the convictions of Sayyid Qutb¹⁹ in relation to the leaders in Muslim countries. It comes as no surprise that Zawahiri was part of the organisation that assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981. One of the goals of the Islamic jihad was to overthrow the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. This mixture of ideology led al Qaeda to point to the culprit of the problems of Muslims worldwide: according to the organisation, the Muslim community was divided by artificial borders imposed by Western powers in the early and mid-20th century. Furthermore, it believed that the leaders in the

¹⁷ Abdullah Azzam claimed that the jihad in defence of Islam was an individual obligation of every Muslim and that it should be undertaken on one’s own behalf. For more information on Azzam’s influence on Arab extremism in the 1980s, see BERGER, Peter L., *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, New York, Free Press, 2006, pp.24-48.

¹⁸ RIEDEL, Bruce, *The Search for Al Qaeda, its Leadership, Ideology and Future*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2010, p.136.

¹⁹ I.e., the legitimacy of waging a jihad against the regimes of Muslim countries that were considered apostate by Qutb.

countries formed after the division of the Muslim world had no authority whatsoever and were the “nearest enemy”. These ideological views were shared by many Islamist schools of thought, without their necessarily being radical or jihadist.

Indeed, what distinguishes these from al Qaeda is the pragmatism of the latter and the primacy of practical objectives in the holy war/jihad over religious fanaticism. Al Qaeda was a fighting organisation, not a religious one.²⁰

By the late 1980s, Peshawar was a hotbed of jihadist activity, with numerous newcomers looking for a ticket to the Afghan front. The city was full of hostels to accommodate jihadists coming from abroad, where they were received and housed while waiting to be sent to fight with one of the mujahideen groups. Normally these hostels would house individuals of specific nationalities or religious ideologies or who belonged to a particular fighting group. However, al Qaeda’s hostels in Peshawar, like the organisation’s training camps in Afghanistan, were willing to take anyone, irrespective of their sectarian, ideological or national affiliations. A form of “multiculturalism”²¹ characterised the bases of al Qaeda.

Unlike other, more narrow-minded jihadist groups, al Qaeda saw itself as above any form of sectarianism, regionalism, nationalism or ethnocentrism. This may initially have been for practical reasons, to allow the organisation to distance itself from the obvious factionalism that existed in the late 1980s between the different Afghan mujahideen factions, which disillusioned and alienated many foreign fighters from the jihad. The different origins of al Qaeda’s members gave rise to a cosmopolitan organisation, not characterised by the strictness of other jihadist movements.

Al Qaeda claimed that it embodied the *ahl al-sunnah wa-al-jama’a*,²² that is to say, its view of the world was based on the Koran and the Sunna. Its members drew no distinction between the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence and took a flexible approach to religious beliefs and doctrine. Al Qaeda officially rejected regionalism and fanaticism²³ and the organisation had a cordial but distant relationship with the religious scholars or *ulemas*. Within the organisation, the legal committee, which

²⁰ LAHOUD, 2012.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2012, p.36.

²² This could be translated as “the followers of good practices and solidarity within the community”. This concept emerged in the ninth century when the Muslim community was beginning to define its political and theological differences. In the classical sense, the concept aims to include all Muslims, regardless of their religious orientation. While this definition is used by numerous groups, jihadists or otherwise, very few seem to interpret it in the classical sense nowadays. The Pakistani Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), for instance, was the new term adopted by the Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) after being banned. The ASWJ, like the SSP, is an anti-Shia sectarian organisation.

²³ AFGP-2002-600048, available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-bylaws-english-translation>.

was responsible for assessing whether the Islamic jurisprudence of the group was in compliance with religious doctrine, was subordinate to the military committee, the most important committee within al Qaeda. The legal committee decided whether the operations planned by al Qaeda complied with the requirements of classical Islam in relation to the laws of war, and had the right of veto. However, the experts in jurisprudence had no say in the management or direction of operations.²⁴

Unlike other jihadist groups, Al Qaeda did not follow a doctrine laid down by the teachings of its leader. Indeed, as the leader of the organisation, Osama bin Laden was considered just another Muslim. His position was not permanent and he was not considered infallible, nor were members of the organisation expected to swear allegiance to him. The requirements for membership were a commitment to the jihad, the mission to establish a caliphate, the willingness to keep the organisation's activities secret and to perform activities within the group in a responsible manner. Members of al Qaeda were free to leave the organisation whenever they wished.²⁵

The group originally defined itself as an international entity and source of financing for other jihadist organisations, primarily in the area of military training and combat. In the 1980s and '90s, by which time al Qaeda was operating openly, it placed its accommodation and training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan at the disposal of anyone looking for military training in order to be able to participate in the jihad in Afghanistan or elsewhere. This did not mean that anyone who passed through an al Qaeda training camp automatically became a member of the organisation, nor was cooperation with other jihadist organisations conditional on their integration into al Qaeda.²⁶

Despite this cooperation, al Qaeda never sought to formalise these relations under a unified leadership. Members of al Qaeda saw themselves as an entity that was separate from and superior to other jihadist groups. As part of the goal of promoting a global jihad by providing support to all kinds of groups, al Qaeda took it upon itself to carry out "special operations", i.e., terrorist attacks of major importance and media impact.

24 LAHOUD, 2012, p.34.

25 Ibid., 2012, p.39. There is a degree of controversy over the matter of the oath of allegiance or *bayat*. Lahoud's statement is based on Fadil Harun's autobiography. Abu Jandal, who was recruited by al Qaeda in the late 1980s, speaks of the necessity to take this oath, see BERGEN, Peter, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, New York, Free Press, 2006, p.86. However, Abdal Rashim al Nashiri, the brain behind the attack on the USS *Cole*, repeatedly refused to swear allegiance to bin Laden, without this being an impediment to membership of al Qaeda, BERGEN, 2006, p.252.

26 LAHOUD, N., CAUDILL, S., COLLINS, L., KOEHLER-DERRICK, G., RASSLER, D., AL-UBAYDI, M., "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?" *CTC Harmony Program*, 2012.

Surprisingly, according to Fadil Harun's autobiography, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam: Quissat Fadil Harun*,²⁷ al Qaeda believed that most jihadist groups suffered from gross ideological vulgarity. In the 1990s, the leaders of the organisation were horrified – according to Harun – by the proliferation of the *takfiri*²⁸ and their growing influence on the jihadist circles in Peshawar.²⁹ Moreover, al Qaeda rejected Salafism in the belief that it verged on fanaticism. Despite this, academics have often described al Qaeda as being Salafist. Al Qaeda took care to criticise other Muslims and supported the idea of guiding by example. According to Harun,³⁰ the group felt no particular hostility towards the Christians or Jews, which it has sometimes been claimed. This is hard to believe in view of some of the official statements made by al Qaeda, although in some cases these may be open to interpretation.

As we saw earlier, the occupation of Muslim territory by infidel forces, basically Palestine by the Jews and Saudi Arabia by U.S. troops, in addition to U.S. support for dictatorship regimes in the region was the main leitmotiv of al Qaeda. In a statement in 1996, bin Laden authorised a defensive jihad against the Americans on account of their presence in Saudi Arabia. He also denounced the oppression and injustice suffered by Muslims at the hands of the Judeo-Christian or Judeo-Crusader alliance.³¹ Another statement made in early 1998 announced the formation of the World Islamic Front and the jihad against Jews and Crusaders until their expulsion from the lands of Islam.³² In both cases, the grounds given for justifying the jihad against the Jews and Crusaders – note that the Christians appear to be equated with the Americans in these references – are more political than religious. They do not express hatred of the Jews and Christians on account of religious differences, but rather based on the organisation's perception of international politics.

There has been a tendency to present al Qaeda as an organisation that abhors the West and the values it proclaims, such as freedom. However, Bin Laden himself refuted this interpretation in a statement³³ in which he ridiculed these claims and

27 Fadil Harun was the "Confidential Secretary" of al Qaeda until his death in 2011.

28 A *takfiri* is a Muslim who accuses other Muslims of apostasy, thus declaring them impure.

29 LAHOUD, 2012, p.43. It is not surprising that bin Laden was the target of an assassination attempt in Sudan in 1994 by a takfir group that considered him an infidel, BERGER, 2006, pp.135-136. The rivalry between al Qaeda and the takfiri was also evidenced by the testimony of Abu Jandal, who was appointed bodyguard of bin Laden after protecting him from a Sudanese takfiri in Kandahar, BERGER, pp.259-261.

30 LAHOUD, 2012, p.38.

31 LAWRENCE, Bruce (ed.), *Messages to the World, the Statements of Osama bin Laden*, London, Verso, 2005, pp.23-30.

32 Ibid., pp.58-62.

33 Ibid., pp.238-244.

asked why, if al Qaeda hated Western freedoms so much, it had not attacked Sweden? In this statement, which appeared in Al Jazeera in late October 2004, bin Laden first admitted responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and explained, in a speech addressed to the West, the motives behind the attacks. Once again, obvious political motivations tainted with religious rhetoric were evident.

Al Qaeda started as, and remained, a somewhat elitist organisation open to every school of thought within Islam. It did not erect regional or national barriers to membership and aimed to defend the *umma*, to restore it to its former glory in a utopian and idealised *umma* period. What prevented it from achieving its goals was the division of the Muslim world, which could not be united as long as its leaders remained in power. Believing that these rulers had the support of the West, the latter was identified as the enemy to be defeated. The paradigm of power and Western influence was the United States, the only superpower at the time. The conviction that the jihad was to be credited for the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and its subsequent dismemberment led al Qaeda to actually believe it could defeat the United States. The weapons used in this new jihad would be those of terrorism.

Al Qaeda's lack of dogmatism and its ability to integrate jihadists of different nationalities into the organisation were what set it apart from other jihadist groups. This also allowed it to quickly create a network of supporters in several parts of the world. Its promotion of the global jihad, by supporting jihad groups of different backgrounds with all of its capabilities, allowed the organisation to garner a network of contacts, very often personal ones, which encompassed most radical Islamic militants around the world. Nevertheless, as a differentiated and hierarchical organisation, the core of al Qaeda remained small.³⁴

All of the aforementioned factors enabled al Qaeda to become a global organisation that would gain fleeting success and international notoriety between 1998 and 2002. Its attacks against U.S. targets in Africa and Yemen and later on on home ground led the international jihad community to see it as a differentiated and reference jihad group.

It was the attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam in 1998 that first brought al Qaeda to the attention of the media. Washington responded by launching Tomahawk missiles against the group's training camps in Afghanistan and an alleged chemical weapons factory in Sudan, a move which further raised the organisation's profile in the eyes of other jihadist groups. On 12 October 2000, al Qaeda attacked the U.S. military apparatus by attempting to sink the USS *Cole* guided-

³⁴ In 2002, at the height of international panic following the 9/11 attacks the previous year, Rohan Gunaratna, quoting sources at the CIA, estimated the number of al Qaeda sympathisers at between six and seven million Muslims worldwide, of which around 120,000 were willing to take up arms. In GUNARATNA, 2002, p.95.

missile destroyer off the coast of Yemen. While it did not succeed in sinking the ship, it did manage to kill 17 American sailors and injure a further 39, thus confining the vessel to dry dock for almost two years.

Nevertheless, the event that cut al Qaeda's successful trajectory short and led to its virtual dismantling in the ensuing years, was the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. in 2001. There is little new to say about the attacks or al Qaeda's involvement in their orchestration and execution after the publication in 2004 of the report by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, set up by the U.S. Congress in 2002.³⁵ However, the objective pursued by al Qaeda is still open to interpretation.

The mastermind of the 9/11 attacks was the jihadist, who it is alleged acted alone, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, or KSM. Born in Balochistan (Pakistan) and believed to be of Baloch ethnic origin, KSM grew up in Kuwait, where he soon came under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was widely embraced by Palestinian refugees. KSM was part of the Afghan jihad between 1987 and 1989, where he fought alongside bin Laden. Mohammed planned his first terrorist operation, together with his nephew, Ramzi Yousef,³⁶ from the Philippines. Later known as the Bojinka Plot, the operation consisted of smuggling explosives onto 12 transoceanic flights and detonating them over the Pacific Ocean. The operation was discovered by the Philippine authorities, but Yousef and Mohammed managed to escape.³⁷

In 1996, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, by now on the radar of the U.S. authorities because of his relationship with Yousef, moved to Afghanistan where he came into contact with al Qaeda. During meetings with bin Laden, KSM raised the possibility of using commercial aircraft as missiles against U.S. targets. It was after the attacks of Kenya and Tanzania (1998) that the leaders of al Qaeda gave their approval to KSM's plan. From then through the early months of 1999, they planned the operation that would result in the 9/11 attacks.³⁸

35 The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (VV.AA.), *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. The literary quality of the official report and its thoroughness led to its being published as a book by several publishers.

36 Ramsi Yousef, three years younger than Mohammed and also a lone terrorist, gained notoriety for masterminding and carrying out the first terrorist attack against the World Trade Center in 1993, where a bomb was planted in the car park of one of the towers in an attempt to knock it. Yousef was arrested in Islamabad by the Pakistani authorities in February 1995 and then extradited to the United States.

37 RIEDEL, 2010, p.58.

38 VV.AA., *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, pp.145-150.

In the years since 9/11, some studies on al Qaeda have suggested that the ultimate goal of the attack against the U.S. was to bring Western military forces to Afghanistan. Emboldened, as we have seen, by the defeat of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the leaders of al Qaeda may have planned to annihilate the U.S. troops in the same way.³⁹ Other writers go a step further, suggesting that al Qaeda's motives for provoking the U.S. into a war in Afghanistan can be traced to a number *hadith*.⁴⁰ According to the latter, the battles that would precede the end of the world would begin in Khorasan, a name which in classical Islam was given to the East in general and encompassed present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.⁴¹

The idea that the motive behind the 9/11 attacks was U.S. intervention in Afghanistan may have been given post-9/11. This would have been the case of members who joined the organisation after 2001, such as Ilyas Kashmiri.⁴² With the information available to us today, it is difficult to assess whether al Qaeda really intended to lure the U.S. to Afghanistan. However, as Fadil Harun pointed out in his autobiography in 2000, he was accompanied by another senior member of Qaeda, Sayf al'Adl, on a reconnaissance mission to the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their aim was to identify places where the organisation's leaders could take refuge in the event of a worsening of the security situation following the planned attack in the U.S. According to Harun, Waziristan was quickly identified as a suitable place.⁴³ Having said that, anticipation of a reprisal attack, such as the one carried out by the USA in 1998, could also explain these activities.

According to the Commission report, citing intelligence sources, the USS *Cole* attack in 2000 was also intended to provoke a response from the U.S., as occurred after the attacks on the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.⁴⁴ According to the sources cited in the report, bin Laden frequently complained about the lack of response from the Americans, and threatened to wage a much more serious attack if the U.S. failed to react.

39 RIEDEL, 2010, pp.7 and 78.

40 Sayings and deeds of the Prophet.

41 SHAHZAD, Syed Saleem (2011), *Inside al Qaeda and the Taliban, Beyond bin Laden and 9/11*, pp.200-201. Shahzad worked as a journalist for several Pakistani media and the Asia Times online newspaper until his – as yet unsolved – assassination in May 2011. While his press articles denote a close knowledge of Pakistani jihadist groups and the Taliban in tribal areas, his book cited here credits al Qaeda with an omniscience that is hard to justify. Without wishing to question his knowledge or sources, his analysis of these may not have been the most accurate.

42 SHAHZAD, Syed Saleem, "Al-Qaeda's Guerrilla Chief Lays out Strategy", *Asia Times Online*, 15 October 2009.

43 LAHOUD, 2012, p.26.

44 VV.AA., 2004, p.191.

Another indication of what al Qaeda was anticipating would happen after attacking the U.S.A. was the assassination on 9 September 2001 of Ahmed Shah Masud, the Northern Alliance's leader and most competent military commander. Masud was assassinated at his base in Panjshir valley by two members of al Qaeda passing themselves off as journalists. However, even if al Qaeda had been aiming for the military intervention of the U.S., as Riedel has asserted,⁴⁵ bin Laden could not have anticipated the small number of American troops on the ground, the quick defeat of the Taliban regime by Northern Alliance forces with the support of the U.S. or Pakistan's "betrayal" of the jihad cause by supporting the U.S.

4. AL QAEDA IN PAKISTAN SINCE 2001

The original leaders of al Qaeda fled Afghanistan at the start of the U.S. invasion. Some members of the organisation headed for Iran via Herat,⁴⁶ where they remained in the custody of the Iranian authorities from 2001 to 2009, when they were gradually released.⁴⁷ However, most of the original members of al Qaeda fled to Pakistan and initially settled in tribal areas before gradually spreading throughout the country. Although the speed with which the Taliban were defeated took al Qaeda by surprise, as did the "betrayal" of Pakistan, as mentioned earlier, there were two events that provided the group with some respite: the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which took considerable pressure off Afghanistan, and the crisis between India and Pakistan, which broke out in late 2001 and lasted all of 2002, consequently forcing Pakistan to withdraw a large part of its troops from the western border.

Since then, there has been the belief that al Qaeda was at the centre of a network that controlled jihadist activity around the world from its base in Waziristan. Numerous acts of jihad-inspired terrorism in such far-flung places as Yemen, London and Bali have repeatedly been attributed to al Qaeda. However, in light of the internal documents of the organisation that were made public in 2011, it is possible that the original leaders of al Qaeda had less to do with these international events than is often thought.

A significant number of al Qaeda members of varying ranks within the organisation were killed in U.S., bombings in Afghanistan in late 2001. Those who managed to

45 RIEDEL, 2010, p.58.

46 JONES, Seth G., "Al Qaeda in Iran. Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group", *Foreign Affairs*, 2012.

47 SOCOM-2012-0000012-HT, "Letter from 'Atiyatullah al-Libi'".

escape to Pakistan were able to enlist the aid of jihadist groups in this country. As mentioned previously, there were close personal, if not organisational ties between the members of the jihadist groups. Zawahiri's wife died in a U.S. airstrike while sheltering in a safe house belonging to the Haqqani network in Khost on her way to the Pakistani border.⁴⁸ The *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* and other organisations helped members of al Qaeda to flee the country.⁴⁹

In the early months of 2002, several al Qaeda members were arrested in Pakistani cities. The first important member of the group to be captured by the Pakistani authorities was Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, the commander of a training camp in Afghanistan who provided the initial information on the perpetrators of 9/11. However, the first major blow to the group came on 28 March 2002, when Abu Zubaydah (also known as Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn) was arrested in Faisalabad. Zubaydah had been in charge of recruitment for al Qaeda, living in Peshawar since 1997, where he managed the reception of foreign recruits. In late 2001 he was appointed chief of military operations after his predecessor, Muhammed Atef, was killed in a U.S. air raid over Kabul. Zubaydah had also overseen the USS *Cole* operation in 2000. In the days following his arrest, more than sixty suspected terrorists were detained in Faisalabad and Lahore, almost half of whom were foreigners, mostly Arabs and Afghans. Furthermore, Zubaydah knew the identity and whereabouts of numerous al Qaeda operatives around the world. The safe house where he was staying when he was captured had been exposed by the *Lashkar-e-Taiba*.⁵⁰

Shortly after, on 30 April 2002, Khalid al-Atash, a Yemeni who had been involved in the attack on the USS *Cole*, was arrested together with five Pakistanis in Karachi. On 11 September this same year, a joint operation by the ISI⁵¹ and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) led to the capture in Karachi of Ramzi bin al-Shibh, one of the leaders of the al Qaeda branch in Hamburg that had carried out the 9/11 attacks. Other, less important members of the organisation were arrested throughout 2002 in Karachi, where they had been able to regroup with the assistance of local jihadist groups.

In early 2003, the arrest of certain al Qaeda members had major implications for al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan. On 1 March, Rawalpindi Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the brain behind 9/11, and Mustafa al-Hawsawi (alias Abu Zuheir al-Maliki), a member of the group's communication apparatus and main financier for the organisation, were

48 WRIGHT, 2007, p.371.

49 RASHID, *Descent into Chaos, the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, New York, Viking., 2008, p.224.

50 HUSSAIN, *Frontline Pakistan, the Struggle with Militant Islam*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p.127.

51 Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, Pakistan's main intelligence agency.

arrested. Mohammed was aware of the whereabouts of most of the al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan. Two weeks later, on 15 March, the Algerian, Abu Yasir al-Jazairi, was arrested in Lahore.

Jazairi played a particularly important role in the organisation as supervisor in Pakistan, and he may have acted as a link between al Qaeda and the Pakistani intelligence service from the late 1990s. His detention marked a turning point in any relations that may have existed between al Qaeda and the ISI. What is more, Jazairi was aware of the whereabouts of many of the organisation's members at this time, including Osama bin Laden. He was detained by the Pakistani authorities for three years and then transferred to Algeria, despite the U.S.'s interest in taking him into custody.⁵² At the time, there were even talks of his possible and immediate release,⁵³ which suggests that the ISI may have been keen to keep its relations with al Qaeda under wraps.

The capture by the security forces of two figures that were so important to the organisation drove many senior members of al Qaeda into hiding. In addition, according to Harun, they were forced to stop communication for almost three years.⁵⁴ From that point on, al Qaeda ceased to occupy a pre-eminent role in the global jihad. Furthermore, Harun also claims that virtually none of the terrorist attacks attributed to al Qaeda following 9/11 were approved by bin Laden or the organisation's leaders. Harun specifically disclaims al Qaeda's involvement in the attacks in Bali in 2002 and in Madrid in 2004.⁵⁵ With regard to the Madrid Train Bombings, of particular importance for our country, the debate over al Qaeda's involvement remains open. Although the president of the court that tried the case, Judge Javier Gómez Bermúdez, claimed there was no evidence to suggest the direct involvement of al Qaeda,⁵⁶ international terrorism expert Fernando Reinares sees clear links with the organisation⁵⁷ and claims that the attack was planned in Karachi.⁵⁸

52 LAHOUD, 2012, pp.106-107.

53 BBC, "Pakistan suspects ordered freed", 18 February 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south-asia/2772337.stm>.

54 LAHOUD, 2012, pp.106-107.

55 LAHOUD, 2012, p.75.

56 GARCÍA-ABADILLO, Casimiro, "Diez años después, no sabemos quién dio la idea de atentar el 11-M", interview with Javier Gómez Bermúdez, *El Mundo*, 7 March 2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/03/07/5318f00e2704e2e028b457d.html>

57 REINARES, Fernando, "The evidence of al-Qa'ida's role in the 2004 Madrid attack", *CTC Sentinel* 5(3), 2012.

58 REINARES, Fernando, ¡Matadlos! Quién estuvo detrás del 11-M y por qué se atentó en España, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2014, p.145.

Many of the planned attacks that were averted by Western security forces showed some sort of a connection to Pakistan, and have been attributed to the general name of al Qaeda and its allies. In an article for the New America Foundation,⁵⁹ Paul Cruickshank studied 21 of the attacks, or attempted attacks between 2004 and 2009, and found that in 11 cases, the perpetrators had received instructions from Pakistan, or had been trained there. Of these, special mention must be given to the attacks in London in July 2005,⁶⁰ the plan to bring down at least seven airliners flying between the UK and the USA which was averted in 2006, and the plan to attack the Barcelona metro in 2008. It is believed that all of these attempted attacks can be linked in some way to al Qaeda in Pakistan. In addition to these, we have the attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square, New York, on 1 May 2010.⁶¹ *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)* claimed responsibility for the attempt, and, similarly, its connection with Pakistan is a direct one.⁶²

This dichotomy between what Harun says in his autobiography and evidence of the involvement of al Qaeda or al Qaeda members in Pakistan in international attacks may have an explanation. It is quite possible that when senior members of the organisation had to go into hiding, there was less or absolutely no communication within the group. In this case, second or third-level operatives may have continued with previous plans or come up with new plans for attacks.⁶³

59 CRUICKSHANK, Paul, "The Militant Pipeline", *New America Foundation*, 2010.

60 With regard to the latter, in seemingly contradictory opinions, Rohan Gunaratna believes that Ayman al Zawahiri – who claimed responsibility for the attack – was not aware of the plan. Gunaratna's claims are based on the fact that Zawahiri was slow to make the confession and that there was no statement prepared in advance. On the other hand, Bruce Hoffman is convinced of al Qaeda's involvement in the attack. See: GUNARATNA, Rohan and NIELSEN, Anders, "Al Qaeda in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan and Beyond", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No.31, 2008, pp.705-807 and HOFFMAN, Bruce, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No.32, 2009, pp.1.100-1.116.

61 MASUIKE, Hiroko, "Times Square Bomb Attempt", *The New York Times*, 24 May 2010. In this case, we must point out bin Laden's concern when the perpetrator of the failed attack, Faisal Shahzad, admitted to taking a failed oath of allegiance to the United States when he became an American citizen. Bin Laden disapproved of this on the grounds that Islam prohibits the breaking of an oath, see SOCOM-2012-0000015-HT, "Letter from UBL to Atiyatullah al-Libi 3", p.7.

62 When acts are attributed to the TTP on the basis of its own statements, its history for making false claims must be borne in mind. The most notable case was Baitullah Mehsud's phone call to a media company to claim responsibility for a shooting in New York in April 2009. The individual who attacked an immigration centre was in fact a North American of Vietnamese origin who had no connection whatsoever with the TTP. Similarly, Hakeemullah Mehsud gave himself a disproportionate role in the attack on a CIA base in Khost by a Jordanian double agent; it transpired that the operation had actually been carried out by al Qaeda, see WARRICK, Joby, *The Triple Agent*, New York, Doubleday, 2011, 186-187.

63 NEUMANN, Peter, EVANS, Ryan and PANTUCCI, Raffaello, "Locating al Qaeda's Center of Gravity: the Role of Middle Managers", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, No.34, 2011, pp.825-842.

Following 9/11, al Qaeda continued to have a renowned reputation in the jihad world. Afghanistan had again become a centre of attraction for the global jihad; this time, to fight the U.S. invasion. As a result, there was a steady flow of would-be jihadists into Pakistan from 2001, although never at the levels of the 1980s. Some of these future jihadists were from countries in the West, to which they may have been sent to carry out attacks.

Furthermore, al Qaeda's situation in the tribal areas of Pakistan had never been comfortable. Part of the organisation had focused on consolidating its bases in South Waziristan in 2002 and 2003, while other operatives spread throughout Pakistan or left the country. After the blows suffered by the organisation in urban areas of Pakistan, the members probably sought refuge in South Waziristan.⁶⁴ Here they were hit by Pakistani troops who carried out numerous operations in the area between 2004 and 2006. Again according to Harun, whose wife remained in the tribal areas until 2006, al Qaeda's situation in the area was distressing.⁶⁵ The peace agreements of 2006 and 2007 between the Taliban and the army relaxed military pressure in the region, allowing al Qaeda members to relocate, mainly to North Waziristan, which was the base of the Haqqani network and several Pakistani Taliban groups.

Attacks by unmanned U.S. aerial vehicles which started in 2005 were stepped up after the Obama Administration arrived at the White House in late 2008. These had a considerable effect on the operations of al Qaeda and other organisations in the tribal areas.⁶⁶ An interrogation of several Belgian jihadists who had received training in the tribal areas in 2008 revealed the limits the Taliban and al Qaeda had been driven to by the U.S. *Predators*. It also evidenced the Belgian jihadists' disappointment at the conditions the organisation was now in.⁶⁷

Between 2003 and 2005, the Pakistani security forces made a number of significant arrests, including Naeem Noor Mohammed Khan in Lahore in July 2004. The information found on his computer led to the arrest of a number of al Qaeda members in Great Britain. Two weeks later, information obtained from Khan led to the capture

64 SUDE, Barbara, "Al-Qaeda Central", *New America Foundation*, 2010.

65 LAHOUD, 2012, p.108.

66 For more information on the effectiveness of attacks by U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles in the FATA, see: POZO SERRANO, Pilar, *La guerra de Af-Pakistán y el uso de la fuerza en las relaciones internacionales*, Pamplona, Eunsu, 2011, pp.243-288 and JORDÁN, Javier, "La campaña de ataques con drones contra Al Qaeda en Pakistán", *Inteligencia y Seguridad*, No.14, julio-diciembre de 2013, pp.73-102.

67 CRUICKSHANK, Paul, "The 2008 Belgium Cell and the FATA's Terrorist Pipeline", *CTC Sentinel* 2(4), 2009. See also, SOCOM-2012-0000015-HT, p.2, in which bin Laden recommends that al Qaeda members unable to keep a low profile or take the proper security measures leave Waziristan for safer regions like Kunar, Nuristan, Gazni and Zabul in neighbouring Afghanistan.

of another important al Qaeda operative in Gujrat (Punjab), the Tanzanian Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, wanted for his connection with the terrorist attacks in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. In May 2005, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's successor within al Qaeda, Abu Faraj al-Libbi, was captured in Mardan (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa).⁶⁸ In December, the latter's successor, Abu Hamza Rabia, was killed in a U.S. drone attack in North Waziristan.⁶⁹ And these were just the first of many al Qaeda "number threes" eliminated in Pakistan. While it is not clear whether these had had contact with Zawahiri or Osama bin Laden, Libbi's capture appears to have provided the first clues that led to the discovery and subsequent death of bin Laden in 2011.⁷⁰

The case of Noor Mohammed Khan is a curious one in that he was released without being charged in 2007.⁷¹ It so happens that the lawyer who represented Khan was Babar Awan, senator and finance secretary of the Pakistan People's Party, the party in power at the time. The fact that such a prominent figure handled Khan's case suggests that there may have been an institutional interest in his release, or it may have been in exchange for his collaboration while under arrest.

Following 9/11 and the loss of the original al Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan, jihad groups using the al Qaeda name began to emerge in other parts of the world. The first of these al Qaeda "franchises" was al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which emerged in 2003.⁷² It was followed by al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia or al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by the Jordanian al-Zarqawi and the only "franchise" that was officially recognised by bin Laden. Later on, there was al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which was formed after the merging of several groups, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), the Algerian

68 When writing this article, Libbi was still being held prisoner in the U.S. prison Guantanamo. See the New York Times project, the Guantanamo Docket, at <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/10017-abu-faraj-al-libi>, accessed on 11 March 2014.

69 The same attack killed Amer Azizi, a member until 2001 of the Spanish branch of al Qaeda led by Abu Dahdah, the main link between the Madrid Train Bombings and the al Qaeda organisation, REINARES, 2014, pp.127-143.

70 FINN, Peter and KORNBLUT, Anne E., "Al-Qaeda couriers provided trail that led to bin Laden", *The Washington Post*, 2 May 2011.

71 HASAN, Syed Shoaib, "Pakistan's Extraordinary Prisoner", *BBC News*, 21 August 2007.

72 Bin Laden's role in this organisation appears to have been confined to that of moral advisor, and he had no say in the group's decision-making. Even in this capacity, he does not appear to have exerted much influence, as evidenced by the letter he himself, or 'Atiyya, the leader of AQAP, wrote recommending that the organisation focus on the fight against the U.S. and not attack Yemeni security forces. In practice, AQAP activity in Yemen goes completely against this advice, see SOCOM-2012-0000016-HT, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi", p.5.

Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC),⁷³ and the Somali group Al-Shabab,⁷⁴ sometimes called al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa.⁷⁵

Given the great many groups that were using the al Qaeda “trademark”, Western media and academia began to use the term al Qaeda Central (AQC) to refer to the central command of the original organisation in Pakistan. This name often implied that AQC had a degree of control or leadership over the other groups using its name, which in hindsight appears to have been far from reality. All too often, the organisation created and directed by bin Laden has been identified with its regional namesakes, and there has also been a tendency to exaggerate and magnify its threat.

Curiously enough, Osama bin Laden himself, in one of the documents he wrote that was seized in Abbottabad and made available to the public, accepts the name al Qaeda Central, which he claimed was coined by the media. He believed that the term was useful for drawing a distinction between al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and al Qaeda in other regions.⁷⁶ It is apparent from the documents seized in Abbottabad and Fadil Harun’s autobiography⁷⁷ that al Qaeda Central had no operational control whatsoever over the “franchises”. In view of the ideology of the original al Qaeda, which we looked at earlier, it is hard to consider the franchises as an extension of the organisation, primarily because the objectives of all these organisations have a marked regional or local component, in contrast to the contempt al Qaeda had for regionalism.

It can be deduced from the documents that were seized that Bin Laden was aiming to revitalise his organisation and regain its central role in the jihadist conglomerate. It is possible that he wanted al Qaeda to play the central role in the jihad and was therefore drafting a framework document laying down the rules of conduct for groups wishing to use his “trademark”. Bin Laden may have been trying to take advantage of a situation beyond his control and centralise global jihad activity in al Qaeda.⁷⁸ His

⁷³ At the start, both the GSPC, which came from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), and the LIFG had individuals who had fought in the Afghan jihad.

⁷⁴ With regard to al-Shabab, of special interest is the letter from Osama bin Laden to the group’s leader, Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, in which the former politely turns down the Somali’s request to become part of al Qaeda. Al-Shabab was eventually accepted into the organisation by Ayman al-Zawahiri after the death of bin Laden. See SOCOM-2012-0000005-HT.

⁷⁵ LAHOUD, N., CAUDILL, S., COLLINS, L., KOEHLER-DERRICK, G., RASSLER, D., AL-‘UBAYDI, M., 2012.

⁷⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT, “Letter from UBL to Atriyatullah al-Libi 4” p.17.

⁷⁷ The English translations of the “Abbottabad Documents” are available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/publications/harmony-documents>. With regard to Harun’s testimony, it should be taken into account that, according to Harun himself, he lost contact with the organisation in Pakistan after 2003.

⁷⁸ LAHOUD, N., CAUDILL, S., COLLINS, L., KOEHLER-DERRICK, G., RASSLER, D., AL-

death by shooting by U.S. combatants on 2 May 2011 put paid to this line of action which, in any event, would have been met with hostility by the “franchises”, which were unwilling to be controlled by anybody.

Furthermore, relations between al Qaeda in Pakistan and its alleged affiliates, such as the TTP and the Afghan Taliban, were already tense to say the least. AQC was very critical of the TTP’s activities, particularly its indiscriminate attacks on civilians,⁷⁹ and cooperation with the Afghan Taliban had been very limited since it had fled Afghanistan in 2001.⁸⁰

After bin Laden’s death in Abbottabad, doubts immediately emerged as to Pakistan’s level of involvement with al Qaeda.⁸¹ Because the compound where bin Laden was hiding is located in a residential district close to the Military Academy in Kabul, it has been suggested that members of the Pakistani intelligence service may have been trying to cover up the al Qaeda leader’s presence in the area. Indeed, the U.S. operation itself demonstrated the shortcomings of the Pakistan Army’s defence systems, which led to considerable deterioration in relations between the two countries.

The successful concealment of bin Laden may in fact have been due to strict observance of security measures. Bin Laden was extremely worried about the U.S. intelligence systems and had no confidence whatsoever in the Pakistani services. He did not use telephones or communicate via the Internet and his only contact with the outside world was through couriers. These couriers relayed messages orally or on digital storage devices, such as pen drives that had not contained any data prior to this and which were disposed of afterwards. Face-to-face meetings or gatherings with other

⁷⁹ UBAYDI, M., 2012.

⁷⁹ An example of this is the letter written by Mahmud al-Hasan (Atiyya) and Abu Yahya al-Libi to the then leader of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Hakimullah Mehsud. In the letter, the two important al Qaeda members severely criticise the activities of TTP and its leader. The document is available as SOCOM-2012-0000007-HT, “Letter to Hakimullah Mahsud”, on the Harmony project website. Another document that openly criticises the TTP is that written by the AQ spokesman, Adam Gadahn. The document provides a long list of reprehensible activities carried out by the Pakistani Taliban that tarnish the image of the jihad, SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, “Letter from Adam Gadahn”, pp.12-14.

⁸⁰ STENERSEN, Anne, “Al-Qaeda’s allies, explaining the relationship between al-Qaeda and various factions of the Taliban after 2001”, *New America Foundation*, 2010.

⁸¹ These doubts remain unresolved and any new information that emerges could radically change the perspective of the issue, in which case some of the conclusions of this article would have to be revised. See: GALL, Carlotta, “What Pakistan Knew About Bin Laden”, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2014, or the book by the same author: “*The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*”, pp.248-249, in which she claims that the Pakistani intelligence agency, ISI, had a one-man office devoted to managing the leader of al Qaeda. According to Gall, the operation was so confidential that it was not even known within the ISI and the officer responsible for the office only reported to the most senior officials of the ISI and the Pakistani Army. Unfortunately, the sources from which this information was obtained have not been revealed in the book for security reasons.

leaders of the organisation were avoided and none of the leaders knew the whereabouts of the others. Messages were exchanged between couriers; no leader was allowed to have more than two couriers or receive more than two couriers a week. To avoid gaps or leaks, leaders who were considered incapable of maintaining the discipline required for this level of security were sent to fight in Afghanistan, where the risk of being pumped for important information was lower.⁸² In such circumstances, it can be assumed that the organisation's operational capacity was reduced to the minimum.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As we saw in the first part of the article, the huge amount of information produced about al Qaeda since 2001, far from promoting an understanding of the organisation and its activities, has actually served to obscure what we already know. The task of undertaking an academically rigorous study of the subject will have to be left to the historians of the coming decades. These, with the benefit of perspective and, possibly, much easier access to primary sources of information will be able to tackle the arduous task of separating the wheat from the chaff and coming up with a clear and realistic picture of al Qaeda.

Members of al Qaeda continue to be killed in U.S. drone attacks in the tribal areas since the first attack in 2005, and the attacks have not abated even after bin Laden's death. For Pakistan, al Qaeda was, from the outset, a clear enemy that had to be fought at the request of the U.S., unlike the Taliban with whom it shared conflicting interests. After the blows suffered by the organisation in 2003 and 2004, al Qaeda in Pakistan has posed a less serious threat at the local level, in no way comparable with the TTP or other jihadist groups in Punjab. Indeed, it could be said that the original al Qaeda was dismantled in 2003, with the final blow, which was more symbolic than anything else, coming with bin Laden's death in 2011. Today, groups and individuals claiming to belong to al Qaeda, both in Pakistan and other countries, continue to pose a threat as jihadist terrorists but are very different from the organisation that carried out the 9/11 attacks from which they take their name.

Al Qaeda was capable of creating and developing an effective organisation on account of its ideology, as we saw earlier, of training elite members and, above all, of setting up secure bases in states that were tolerant of its activities. Pakistan, Afghanistan

82 COLLINS, Liam (2012), "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Laden's Security Measures", *CTC Sentinel* 5(5), 2012. See also: SOCOM-2012-0000010-HT, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah Al-Libi 2", p.8.

and Sudan provided this security at different times. However, when the organisation could no longer count on this security and the states that had temporarily lent their support withdrew it, al Qaeda lost its operational capabilities and its pre-eminent position in the jihadist arena.

Despite Ayman al Zawahiri's desperate attempts to retain al Qaeda's pre-eminence in the global jihadist scene, particularly following the huge publicity garnered for the Islamic state in recent times, it is quite possible that al Qaeda has finally become – what the academic world erroneously described it as following 9/11 – a mere ideology. A distorted ideology that has and will continue to trigger the emergence of many more radical groups and individuals willing to use terrorism as a form of jihad.

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