



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES**  
**POLICY DEPARTMENT**



**THE INVOLVEMENT OF  
SALAFISM/WAHHABISM  
IN THE SUPPORT AND  
SUPPLY OF ARMS TO  
REBEL GROUPS  
AROUND THE WORLD**

**AFET**



DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES OF THE UNION

**DIRECTORATE B**

POLICY DEPARTMENT

**STUDY**

**THE INVOLVEMENT OF SALAFISM/WAHHABISM  
IN THE SUPPORT AND SUPPLY OF ARMS  
TO REBEL GROUPS AROUND THE WORLD**

**Abstract**

The war in Afghanistan is undoubtedly a key moment in the emergence of an armed rebellion in the Muslim world. The impact of this conflict quickly exceeded the borders of Afghanistan to extend Pakistan. Since then, the Iraq war, the civil war that engulfed Syria and the armed conflict in the Sahel have helped to increase guerrillas in the Muslim world. This study aims to analyze the role of the Salafi / Wahhabi networks in financing and arming rebel groups.

This study was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

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**LINGUISTIC VERSION**

Original: EN

**ABOUT THE EDITOR**

Editorial closing date: 11 June 2013

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*Printed in Belgium*

ISBN: 978-92-823-4385-2

Doi: 10.2861/21042

The Information Note is available on the Internet at

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies.do?language=EN>

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## PREAMBLE

Presenting a comprehensive picture of Salafist/Wahhabi organisations who have deliberately chosen to abandon non-violence for terrorism or who turned violent following major geopolitical transformations of the past decades would be a serious challenge as the number of jihadist movements increased.

From the most nebulous organisations to the most organised ones, from smaller cells with to the most complex networks, no country in the Muslim world is safe from their operations, crude or sophisticated, as they always aim to terrorise their opponents and arouse the admiration of their supporters.

Not to mention a new dimension of the problem, i.e. competition between groups and leaders of Salafist /Wahhabis terrorist organisations. The very recent hostage crisis on the Algerian site of In Amenas (from 16 to 19 January 2013) is an illustration of this “new war chiefs”. Under the guise of the French offensive in Mali, Mokhtar Belmokhtar actually led a publicity campaign designed to impose his splinter group of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Due to the complexity of the operation, In Amenas attack certainly occurred after a long preparation and had certainly been planned well before the French engagement in Mali on January 11, 2013.

Clearly, the risks posed by Salafist/Wahhabi terrorism go far beyond the geographical scope of the Muslim world. The attacks on New York, Washington D.C., London and Madrid remind us of this. However, these deadly attacks remain “exports” of problems whose origin is located in the cradle of jihadist Salafism.

We have therefore chosen to build this study around the original historical and geopolitical contexts of Salafism/Wahhabism jihad.

This study is divided into four geopolitical zones.

In the case of South and South East Asia, we have given priority to the Afghan-Pakistan area due to the historical significance and consequence of the Soviet occupation on the development of jihadist networks.

To account for the situation in the Middle East, we decided to focus our analysis on the Syrian civil war which is at the heart of the jihadist problem.

We gathered in the same chapter the case of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. With the exception of Morocco, these countries have experienced revolutions whose ultimate consequences are not yet final but which have produced direct effects on the Salafi/Wahhabi jihadist movement. Despite belonging to the same geographical area, we excluded Algeria from this chapter to account for its influence on networks that operate today in Saharan Mali, Niger, and Mauritania until Nigeria and Cameroon.

The question of these last Salafist networks is studied in the chapter which deals specifically with the Saharan issue on the basis of the perspective displayed by the war which is currently being played out in Northern Mali.

## 1. SOUTH AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Saudi Arabia has been a major source of financing to rebel and terrorist organisations since the 1970s. These were some of the conclusions of a 2006 report issued by the U.S. Department of State titled International Narcotics Control Strategy Report - Money Laundering and Financial Crimes (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Since the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia and Saudi-based private actors (i.e. wealthy businessmen, bankers, charitable organisations ) have been providing financial and relief assistance to Muslim communities affected by natural calamities or conflicts. It has been estimated that Saudi Arabia has invested more than \$ 10 billion to promote its Wahhabi agenda through charitable foundations. Some of the most influential charitable organisation operating in South and Southeast Asia are: the Islamic International Relief Organisation (IIRO), the Al Haramain Foundation, the Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MERC) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). These organisations have provided funds to build educational and religious facilities, as well as hospitals, in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Philippines, just to mention some.

Nevertheless, it is believed that some of the money destined to charitable activities has been diverted toward rebel and terrorist organisations throughout the region including Al Qaeda, the Haqqani network and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). This was possible because during the 1990s Al Qaeda and JI filled leadership positions in several Islamic charities with some of their most trusted men (Abuza, 2003). Al Qaeda and JI's operatives were than diverting about 15-20 percent of the funds to finance their operations. In some cases, like the Philippines, such percentage could reach even 60 percent.

The paragraphs that follow will analyse Saudi sponsorship to terrorist/rebel groups in South and Southeast Asia, with case studies on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Philippines. The case studies of Afghanistan and Pakistan will be treated together considering the strong interlink (also known as AfPak) they share due to cross border activities of Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Separate section will be than dedicated to Indonesia and the Philippines.

### 1.1 Afghanistan/Pakistan <sup>1</sup>

The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 can be considered as the starting point of Saudi financing to Sunni Muslims fighting for religious or political goals. That war in particular was the occasion to affirm wahhabism as the "true belief", in sharp contrast to the atheism promoted by "infidel" communists and the "deviating" Islam followed by Sufis and Shiites (Firdous, 2009). Since then, organisations like Maktab al-Khadamat al-Mujahedeen started to receive funding from Saudi Arabia through the Islamic International Relief Organisation (IIRO) or the Muslim World League (MWL) (Abuza, 2003), as well as from single personalities like Osama Bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam<sup>2</sup>. During the 1980s, the IIRO and the MWL were used by the Saudi intelligence to transfer money to mujahedeen, while the IIRO is also known to have directly funded six training camps in Afghanistan (Abuza, 2003, p. 24). At the same time, Bin Laden used to rely on a network of Saudi and Gulf-based sponsors known as the Golden Chain (Blanchard, 2008). According to the 9/11 Commission Report report, the Golden Chain provided Bin Laden with financial support to rebuilt Al Qaeda's assets in Afghanistan following his departure from Sudan in 1996 (Blanchard, 2008). Quoting the 9/11

<sup>1</sup> Considering the strong relations between terrorist organisations and radical madrasas, this paragraph is in common with ESISC's other report "Salafist / Wahhabi financial support to educational, social and religious institutions". However, it has been expanded with a section centered on the financing of the Haqqani network.

<sup>2</sup> Abdullah Azzam was the head of the Muslim World League's in Peshawar (Abuza, 2003, p. 24).

Commission Report, Christopher Blanchard states that Al Qaeda's financing activities: "were facilitated in part [...] by the "extreme religious views" that exist within Saudi Arabia and the fact that "until recently" Saudi charities were "subject to very limited oversight."" (Blanchard, 2008). Indeed, Saudi Arabia have been implementing reforms to better control charitable organisations supporting terrorists activities only after the 2003 bombing in Riyadh and after persisting requests from Washington to do so.

At that time, Pakistan became a logistic base for mujahedeen fighting in Afghanistan. During the war, several Saudi-sponsored madrasas in Pakistan's Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province (now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) were operating as recruit centers for the jihad against the communist occupiers (Firdous, 2009). In one of these madrasas were indoctrinated some of the most prominent Taliban leaders including Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the Haqqani network. In fact, both of them studied at the Haqqania madrassa (Darul Uloom Haqqania), also known as the "University of Jihad", in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Green & Khattak, 2011; Ali, 2007).

The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point has well documented how during the 1980s the Haqqani network received financial supports from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states through Pakistan's Inter Intelligence Service (ISI) (Peters, 2012). In addition, the report mentions how Jalaluddin Haqqani and some of his closest relatives were used to travel to Saudi Arabia during religious celebrations like Umrah and Haj to raise funds. Other travels were made to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait until recent years. For instance, it is known that Khalil Haqqani, brother of Jalaluddin, went to Dubai in September 2009 to raise funds for the Haqqanis. Another form of funding came from extortion money paid by Afghan traders in the United Arab Emirates, as "insurance" to safeguard their businesses at home (Peters, 2012). The network of supporters that Jalaluddin built during the 1980s/90s is believed to be still in place and at disposal of his son Surajuddin, the present leader of the network.

Other interesting information regarding Saudi-based sponsors toward Taliban fighters have been found in leaked communications of the US State Department. According to the Wikileaks' cable #178082 jihadi recruitment networks were established in Punjab and supported with the funding of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates since 2005 (The Dawn, 2011). The cable regards a communication to the US State Department sent by the then Principal Officer at the US Consulate in Lahore, Bryan Hunt, on November 2008. Hunt refers about information he received through discussions with local religious and political authorities, as well as with representatives of the civil society. Radical madrasas following the Deobandi and the Ahl al-Hadith (wahhabi) creed were established in Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan villages, from where children were indoctrinated to jihad before being sent to training camps in the FATA areas (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). Arab-sponsored "charity organisations" like Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), the Al-Khidmat Foundation (AKF) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) were the link between Deobandi/Ahl al-Hadith religious leaders and local communities. It is important to note that in order to evade restrictions and sanctions the JuD has diversified its portfolio of charitable organisations into separate branches such as: Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, Tehreek-e-Hurmat-e-Rasool, Tehreek-e-Azadi-e-Kashmir, Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, Paasbaan-e-Ahle-Hadith, aasban-e-Kashmir, Al-Mansoorian, and Al-Nasaryeen. It is believed that all these organisations are nothing but branches of JuD (The Guardian, 2010/a).

According to local Punjabis, the recruitment activities and the number of Deobandi and Ahl al-Hadith's madrasas and mosques have dramatically risen since 2005. This surge was caused by an important influx of money coming from Islamic donors on behalf of the aforementioned charitable organisations as relief measure for the earthquake in Kashmir and North West Frontier Province (NWFP). For instance, JuD's alias organisation Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation was responsible for the Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps in NWFP (The Guardian, 2010/b). However, the report says that a part of these funds were diverted to expand Deobandi and Ahl al-Hadith's influence in Punjab, a province particularly hostile to

those cults. It is also believed that JuD is common to inflate the costs of charitable infrastructures (e.g. schools, hospitals, madrasas) to siphon money destined to the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) terrorist group (The Guardian, 2010/a). In this regard, another cable leaked from the US State Department states that: “Some of JuD’s budget, using fund raised both from witting donors and by fraud, is dedicated to social



services or humanitarian projects, while some is used to finance LeT operations. – In December 2005, an official of Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq forwarded JuD donation receipts to a probable LeT front company in Saudi Arabia where an LeT finance official may have been closely associated to the general manager acting as a front for moving LeT funds [...]” (The Guardian, 2010/a).

Once the JuD and similar organisations had succeeded in establishing a presence in the

territory (e.g. through a madrasa or mosque), a flux of annual “donations” begun to arrive from private donors from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These donations have been estimated at around \$ 100 million / year (The Dawn, 2011).

The recruitment process started with JuD, AKF and JeM organisations selecting and approaching families in difficult economic conditions and with several children; preferably male aged between 8 and 12. Then they were introducing Deobandi/Ahl al-Hadith religious leaders (mawlānā) to the families. These mawlānā were then convincing families that their poverty was caused by their deviation from the “true Islam”, due to their following of the Sufi creed. To return to the “right path” they had to offer one or two of their sons to the cause of Islam. This meant that Deobandi/Ahl al-Hadith mawlānā were offering families to educate their children in their madrasas and to give them employment afterward; either as clerics or as jihadists. In the latter case, a compensation of about \$ 6.500 per son was given to the family for each “martyred” son. About 200 madrasas with less than 100 students each have been established for this purpose in the villages of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan in eastern Punjab, while the northern village of Gujranwala has more than 500 (Walsh, 2011). Once the indoctrination was completed, some of the students were sent to jihadi training camps in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP) or to act as suicide bombers in targeted areas.

The United States is well aware about the financing network starting from Arab countries and reaching terrorists organisations through charitable institutions. In the US State Department’s memo dated December 2009 it is written that “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorists groups worldwide” (The Guardian, 2010/b). It is said that countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait do too little to stop rich and conservative donors from financing terrorist organisations through charitable and religious institutions. The document urges the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to monitor overseas operations carried out by Saudi-based charities and NGOs, as well as to prevent terrorists from exploiting religious celebrations like Ramadan, Hajj and Umrah for raising funds. The US is aware that Saudi-based charity and religious organisations are used to raise money for Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Haqqani network and LeT. Although acknowledging the Kingdom’s efforts to control such activities when they are meant to target the country, the US urged Saudi Arabia to act even when these funds are raised to finance terrorist activities abroad: “While the



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) takes seriously the threat of terrorism within Saudi Arabia, it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority" (The Guardian, 2010/b). Therefore, more control and regulations over the charitable sector is requested.

The importance of a stricter oversight over Al Qaeda financing in the Middle East is twofold: first of all, it limits Al Qaeda's funds for its own operations, secondly, it limits the amount of funds Al Qaeda can redirect toward its affiliates organisations like Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines.

## **1.2 Indonesia**

South-East Asia represents an important theatre for Al Qaeda's financial operations; above all since many Arab countries have applied stricter control on financing and money laundering. In Indonesia Al Qaeda has found in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) a strategic asset for its global jihad. JI was founded in 1993-4 by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir (Bashir) and Abdullah Sungkar, who worked as recruiters of mujahedeen in Afghanistan, while their main associates Riduan Isamuddin (Hambali) and Mohammed Iqbal Rahman (Abu Jibril) fought as mujahedeen (Abuza, 2003). The link between JI and Al Qaeda has been strong since the very beginning, although JI has never been subordinated to Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, indeed, is one of the main financer of JI although letting JI free to follow its own agenda in the region (Abuza, 2003, p. 8).

According to Malaysian and Singaporean intelligence, Al Qaeda funded JI with about \$130,000 in the period 1996-2001. This money was usually given to Hambali by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the "architect" of the 9/11 attacks. Other incomes were obtained by charity organisations in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Pakistan, as well as through front companies in these countries. Malaysian intelligence believes that Hambali had accumulated about \$500,000 in assets for JI's operations. This is an enormous amount of money in relations to the costs of single terrorist attack carried out by JI. For instance, it has been estimated that the 2002 terrorist attack against the nightclubs in Bali cost between \$ 35,000 and \$ 50,000. Its impact has been way higher. Apart from the 202 victims, it has been estimated that Indonesia lost about 1 % of its economic growth rate (about \$ 1 billion) due to losses in tourist revenues (Abuza, 2003, pp. 4-10). Following the Bali bombing, Al Qaeda awarded JI with other \$ 100,000 to use for future attacks (Abuza, 2003, p. 12). Part of this money (about \$ 27,000) was sent to the MILF in the Philippines (Abuza, 2003, p. 21).

In addition, Al Qaeda used both Saudi and Indonesian-based charities to channel money to its affiliates. One of the most important charities in this sense was the Indonesian KOMPAK (Komite Penanggulangan Krisis). KOMPAK was founded in 1998 to provide relief to Muslim people involved in the Maluku sectarian conflict. KOMPAK was sponsored by Saudi charities like IIRO and Al Haramain, with whom it had common projects in Ambon and Poso. However, according to an International Crisis Group's report, KOMPAK was actively financing Muslim rebel groups (International Crisis Group, 2003). The report says KOMPAK received funds from Al Qaeda, with which it funded terrorist organisations in Maluku and Poso, as well as in Mindanao, Philippines (International Crisis Group, 2003, p. 20).

Nevertheless, Al Qaeda was not the only financer of JI. Private donations, remittances from Indonesian workers living in foreign countries and front companies were also alternative source of financial supply. Charities like Al Haramain have funded madrasas in Jakarta and Central Java, in the latter case through the Al Irsyad Foundation. The Foundation supports the Tarbiyah movement that reflects "the views and religious inclinations of the Yemeni and Arab communities in Indonesia and espoused Wahhabism and Salafism." (Abuza, 2003, pp. 32-33).

In addition, JI is also running licit and illicit businesses in Indonesia and abroad that contributes with 10 % of their earnings to the group's activities. This money is transferred to a JI's fund called infaq fisbilillah (Abuza, 2003, p. 14).

### **1.3 Philippines**

As for Indonesia, the formation of financing networks in the Philippines started during the Afghan war, when Filipino fighters joined Afghan mujahedeen. According to the Filipino National Police (FNP), about 1.000 Filipinos were sent by MILF to Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 1980s to get both indoctrination and military training (Mendoza Jr., 2010). Declassified intelligence reports from the FNP revealed that in 1988 Bin Laden sent his brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal Khalifa to the Philippines to set up Al Qaeda's branches in Southeast Asia. The so-called Khalifa network counted at least twelve charitable organisations and front companies that provided funds to both the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf. One of the most active organisations in this sense was the IIRO. In fact, IIRO-funded facilities were mainly built in Mindanao, a region under the control of the aforementioned rebel groups. For instance, the head of IIRO's branch office in Tawi Tawi, Mindanao, was Abdul Asmad, former Abu Sayyaf's intelligence chief until 1994 when he died (Abuza, 2003, p. 27). The office was used by Al Qaeda to siphon money on behalf of the MILF and Abu Sayyaf. According to defectors' interrogations, this practice was very effective considering that Al Qaeda was able to divert the 70-90 percent of funds for arms acquisition destined to the rebel groups. This means that only the 10-30 percent of the money remained available for legitimate purposes.

Although the IIRO has always stated that its activities were carried out with the consent of Filipino authorities, Abuza argues that such "consent" was the outcome of a strong diplomatic pressure. In this regard, he states that: "The IIRO is politically well-connected, and its supporters include the Saudi royal family and the top echelon of society. One of the board members of the IIRO office in the Philippines was the Saudi ambassador. The Saudis' most important source of leverage in this was the visas and jobs for several hundred thousand Filipino guest workers." (Abuza, 2003, p. 28).

## **2. SYRIA**

Salafism is heavily involved in the current civil war in Syria and the presence of Salafi foreign and Syrian fighters is a matter of great concern both for the secular rebels and for the Western and Arab countries. There are several Salafi units fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and often they are better equipped and more effective on the battleground. Many of their fighters are veterans of other insurgencies fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya. They often receive more funds and arms from private Salafi donors than the other rebel combat organisations. Their appeal is increasing both among the nationalist rebels and among the population.

It is important to recall that the Syrian conflict began as a secular revolt against the Assad's autocracy. The presence of Salafi terrorists was just one of the regime's justifications for his harsh crackdowns against protesters and armed rebels who were depicted as Islamist terrorists manoeuvred by foreign powers. Only as the war protracted and frustration rose due to international inaction, divisiveness of the Syrian opposition and military stalemate, the Salafis emerged within the opposition. At the beginning of 2012 two prominent Salafi armed groups emerged: Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front) and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (the Freeman of Syria Battalions) both of which embraced the language of jihad and called for an Islamic state based on Salafi principles (International Crisis Group, 2012). The presence of

the Salafis among the opposition galvanises Assad's support base and complicates western involvement in the conflict.

## **2.1 The rise of Salafism in Syria**

Syria has previously experienced struggles between Sunnis and Alawites even during the rule of President Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad. It is important to recall that between 1976 and 1982 a long campaign of terrorism carried out by Sunni Islamists, mainly members of the Muslim Brotherhood, took place in the country killing hundreds of Syrian officers and government servants, most of them Alawis (Seale, 1989). In 1982, thousands of people were slaughtered in Hama by regime troops after a revolt led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Up to 20,000 people were reported killed in the streets and underground tunnels of Hama (Fisk, 2010).

When the current civil war began, in March 2011 with a series of nationwide demonstrations, President Bashar al-Assad denied the existence of civil protests and blamed a "foreign backed conspiracy" as responsible for the riots. In an interview he said: "Many people were misled in the beginning, thinking that what is happening is a state of excitement, a wave of the 'Arab spring'.... [But it] isn't a revolution or a spring; it is terrorist acts in the full meaning of the word" (al-Assad, 2012).

It is important to underline, as noted by Elizabeth O'Bagy, that Syrian intelligence services sponsored Salafi terrorist groups during the Iraqi insurgency.

"Due to Syria's long-standing policy of supporting terrorist networks, these dangerous elements have built robust logistical lines that they have built up over the past decades. Moreover, these networks could allow more radical groups to infiltrate the mainstream Syrian opposition and use it as a platform to prop up their own ideological objectives" (O'Bagy, 2012).

The crackdowns of the Alawite-dominated elements of the regime security forces on a predominantly Sunni uprising both exacerbated and highlighted the sectarian identity of the conflict. It is important to emphasize that at the beginning the uprising was a revolutionary movement focused on toppling the regime without sectarian divides.

A crucial role was played by the brutal shabbiha paramilitary groups, consisting of pro-regime members, who have been blamed for some of the most gruesome massacres over Sunni areas (International Crisis Group, 2012).

As reported by Aron Lund,

"The "Islamization" of the Syrian conflict is primarily driven by two factors. First, the descent into sectarian conflict pits Sunni Muslims against supporters of the secular, Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar el-Assad. This polarization benefits jihadists by creating a demand for their brand of violent Sunni chauvinism. The second factor is the foreign support pouring in from regional governments and non-state organisations, which is disproportionately empowering Islamist groups." (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012)

The confessional dimension over which the civil war intensified is certainly the most critical factor behind the spread of the Salafis. Nowadays almost all members of the armed insurgent groups, regardless of their ideology, are Sunnis. Religion is not the driving force of the rebellion but "the insurgent movement's most important common denominator" (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012). For Sunnis fighting against the regime in Syria, Islam is a sectarian identity maker, an effective mobilisation tool and a source of spiritual comfort in wartime.

Since the mounting influence of Shiism in 2006, when Iraq experienced its sectarian war and Hezbollah gained political strength as a result of its war with Israel, Salafi preachers in Gulf countries shared their

government apprehensions over Iran's expanding influence. To recall, a 2008 Zogby poll conducted in six Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) found Hassan Nasrallah (Hizbollah's leader), Syrian President Assad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be the three most admired world leaders because of their challenges to Israel and to the United States (Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland with Zogby International, 2008).

But for many prominent Salafis, confronting the geopolitical and cultural axis embodied in the Shiite axis composed by Iran, Syria and Lebanese Hizballah took precedence over the one composed by Israel and the West.

The current conflict has given the Salafists the opportunity to become popular between the Sunnis posing themselves as defenders of the majority Sunni population which is estimated at around 65% while the Alawites at 12% of the total Syrian population (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012). They identify the regime not only as a secular tyranny but also as a heretical religious group, the Alawites, or "Noseiris" as they prefer to call them using a denigrating term. The stricter Salafi interpretations don't accept Alawites as Muslims and call for their expulsion and even extermination.

Several trends and dynamics benefited the Salafist propaganda:

- Only a handful of Alawite figures joined the opposition while the community by and large either remained silent or lent support to the regime.
- The regime's reliance on domestic Alawite fighters and foreign Shiites made Sunnis perceive the war as resistance against a foreign occupation.
- The lack of unity within the opposition and the consequent lack of credibility.
- The international community's failure to decisively support the opposition.

The West is often perceived as passive partner in the regime's crimes because of its hesitation to decisively support the opposition. Also the initial failure of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to smuggle large amount of arms to the Free Syrian Army favoured the Salafist rebel groups.

As reported by the International Crisis Group,

"These groups felt freer, aggressively marketing their violent raids against regime forces and shabbiha throughout the spring of 2012. The upshot has been a growing, if somewhat exaggerated, popular perception of Salafi groups as the only game in town. By the same token, Western reluctance to provide support to armed opposition groups and Gulf Arab state tardiness in doing so gave wealthy private Gulf donors a head start; insofar as they tend to be Salafis themselves, they have been more likely to donate to Salafi groups, giving those yet another comparative advantage. Members of a leading Homs activist group told Crisis Group that donations from Syrian expatriates and other Arabs in Gulf countries helped fuel a growing Islamist trend among militants as of early 2012. By May, according to an activist, most of the money received by armed groups in Homs was sent "from Islamists to Islamists" (International Crisis Group, 2012)".

Salafi Gulf preachers are very popular among the Sunni population and are very influential among rebel militants and activists. This is due also to the fact that many leading moderate clerical figures kept a low profile or remained loyal to the regime. Opposition supporters discredited the two most prominent Sunni clerical establishment personalities, Muhammad al-Bouti and Mufti Ahmad Hassoun, because they have defended the regime since the outbreak of protests. For the most part the traditional clerical establishment has been unwilling or unable to directly challenge the regime, damaging its credibility in front of many Sunnis (International Crisis Group, 2012).

Also opposition politicians have been discredited for the lack of a pragmatic and charismatic leadership. The divisiveness of the Syrian National Council led to the formation of another coalition of opposition groups, The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, in November 2012. The absence of a united and clear opposition government boosted the Islamist hardliners.

Salafism benefits from the actual situation also because provides several assets which increase its popularity among the rebels and population:

- a sense of purpose at a time of violence and suffering;
- abundant resources in terms of funds, fighters, and weapons;
- military know-how acquired by Salafi veterans in former conflicts;
- a clearer identity and sense of belonging;
- the feeling of enjoying the backing of the Islamic nation as a whole.

## **2.2 Foreign funding**

One of the main reasons of the increasing weight of Salafi formations among the rebel groups is that they have easier access to funding because they rely on non-state channels such as Islamic aid organisations, Syrian business families in the Gulf and clan support within communities affected by war (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012). For months Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been funnelling money and small arms to Syrian rebels but have refused to provide heavier weapons, like shoulder-fired missiles, that could allow opposition fighters to bring down regime aircrafts and take out armoured vehicles. Despite the fact they have publicly called for arming the rebels they have held back in part discouraged by the United States which fears the heavier weapons could end up in the hands of terrorists (Worth, 2012). According to American officials and Middle Eastern diplomats, “most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists” (Sanger, 2012). What the United States fear most is to reply the mistake made in Lybia when weapons that Qatar supplied to Libyan rebels with American approval ended up in the hands of anti-Western jihadis (Tim Arango A. B., 2012).

The West’s fear that weapons could furnish the Salafi’s arsenals paradoxically benefited them because these States don’t provide the Free Syrian Army with sufficient arms and funding. The side effect is that Salafi military units are better able to attract volunteers and allies, purchase better equipment and in some cases, offer a monthly salary to their fighters. Furthermore, rebels in the battleground have just enough weapons to maintain a stalemate

Syrian rebels have been refurnished of small arms through a network of land and sea routes moving through Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. However the munitions supply chains remains tenuous and often rebels were compelled to retreat during clashes with regime forces because they ran out of ammunition. Turkey, although stating that it is not supplying the rebels with weapons and it doesn’t allow the passage of arms through its ports or its territory, allowed the smuggle of small amounts of arms across its frontier (Karouny, 2012)

The two Gulf States providing weapons to the rebels, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have funnelled free weaponry to separate and competing rebel groups. As TIME magazine reported, the Qataris want to aid regional military councils, FSA umbrella groups set up in 2012 partly in order to get around the favouritism of the representatives. Weapons would be delivered to a council and then distributed to the brigades under its umbrella. However the Saudis, allegedly through a Lebanese politician named Okab Sakr, belonging to the Future Movement, the organisation of former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, apparently want to support only certain groups within the military councils and not others. To

complicate things, Qatar has strong ties with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood while the Saudis consider Muslim Brotherhood formation with hostility.

Often it happened that Salafi formations received military support because their units are part of the military council receiving the arms supply. It is important to emphasise that rebel offensive are joint operations between different rebel units formed by secularist FSA fighters, Islamists, Salafists and even the Al-Qaeda-linked extremists of Jabhat al-Nusra (Abouzeid, 2012).

Saudi and Qatari officials now fear that the fighting in Syria could turn into an uncontrollable jihad with consequence far more threatening to Arab governments due to the likely raise of a new Al-Qaeda generation. As the New York Times reported,

“In May 2012, a group of conservative Saudi clerics, including some who had called for volunteers to fight in Iraq, announced a fund-raising drive on Facebook to support the Syrian rebels. Days later, they posted messages saying the government had barred them from sending donations” (Worth, 2012).

As a consequence, FSA rebel commanders have received fewer weapons in the recent months. In one occasion, a rebel commander from the Syrian northern town of Saraqib complained that a 200-man fighting brigade received just six Russian-made AS Val assault rifles, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Thus, rebel groups have adapted their identities to gain more money and weapons. One group named itself Rafik Hariri brigade, after the former Lebanese prime minister and Saudi ally who is believed to have been assassinated by the Syrians, in a bid to receive more aid from the Saudis (Worth, 2012).

In January 2013 members of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces complained that the Gulf Arab government supplied fewer arms each week. As a result the rebel forces focused on a gradual war of attrition besieging isolated government military bases to stop the regime using aircrafts against them and to capture more weapons. However even the new formed coalition seems to be lacking cohesion and having the same problems of its forerunner, the Syrian National Council (Borger, 2013).

Then the presence of Salafis is the major obstacle to providing support to the opposition and more sophisticated weapons and, paradoxically, the Salafi groups are receiving most of the foreign funding. Many FSA rebels blame the lack of Western support for driving the rebellion into the arms of extremists. Salafis benefit also from increasing disenchantment with the international community and increasing support from private donors from the Gulf.

Despite the fact that high-ranking members of the Saudi religious establishment, such as Ali bin Abbas el-Hakami and Abdullah bin Mohammed el-Mutlaq of the Senior Ulema Commission, decreed that it is unlawful for Saudis to finance or fight in the Syrian jihad on their own initiative, private donations continue to be sent to Salafis through informal methods of transfer. Lund reported that: “a financing network run on behalf of the Syrian Salafi theologian Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin (funded mainly by Gulf donors) appears to be active in supporting both humanitarian and paramilitary Islamist groups, primarily in southern Syria” (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012).

The Salafi preachers are very effective in collecting funds through their television shows. For example Adnan al-Arour, a Syrian Salafi preacher, based in Saudi Arabia, emerged as a key and pragmatic figure within opposition activists and militants who follow his television show, aired by several Salafi satellite channels. He repeatedly characterised the uprising as part of the Sunni struggle against Shiite oppression but he condemned Jabhat al-Nusra, a Salafi group which received the endorsement of Al-Qaeda and which will be discussed later, and urged non-Syrians to refrain from fighting in his country arguing that would be counterproductive for the uprising. Other leading Salafis such as Kuwaiti cleric

Nabil al-Audi and Saudi preacher Muhammad al-Arifi have sponsored the Salafi view of the conflict very effectively in social media. According to them, “the uprising does not embody a fight for democracy but rather a jihad on behalf of Sunnism against a polytheistic Alawite regime waging full-scale war against Islam as part of a broader Iranian-led regional Shiite conspiracy” (International Crisis Group, 2012). In Kuwait, fundraising efforts were carried out by sheikh Hajaj bin Fahd al-Ajami, a Salafi cleric who used his Twitter account to inform potential sponsors when and where they can donate. He has expressed admiration for Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham as among the strongest and best organised militant groups (Dickinson, 2013). In June 2012 a small group of militants based outside Abu Kamal (a small city on the Iraq border), adopted the name Katibat al-Sheikh Hajaj al-Ajami to thank the Salafi Kuwaiti cleric for his support (Youtube, 2012).

The most striking characteristic of the Salafi raising strength due to the money flow from Islamist conservative donors is proven by the fact that many non-Salafi fighters joined Salafi units capable of providing them with proper military equipment and money (International Crisis Group, 2012). Individuals and groups with no ideological affiliation began to adopt the symbols, rhetoric associated with Salafism for that purpose. Several combatants grew their beards to match the Salafi style. Many times these behaviours are just opportunistic to receive the assets of the Salafis but over time they could turn in genuine feelings.

### **2.3 The foreign fighters**

Another controversial aspect of the Syrian civil war is the presence of foreign volunteers among the ranks of the rebels. Not all of them are Salafis but they are disproportionately over-represented and it is believed that many will be further radicalised through violence and socialisation into Salafi organisations. Their presence is monitored by several intelligence agencies because it could increase the risk of regional and international “blowback”. As Thomas Hegghammer states,

“Foreign fighters matter because they can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy [...] Indeed, a majority of al-Qaida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations” (Hegghammer, 2010/11).

Between 800 and 2,000 foreigners are currently fighting in the country according to some estimates. This number is believed to be less than 10 percent of the total rebel manpower but most of them are Salafis bringing funds and military know-how that further empower Salafi groups (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012).

The main entry-points for foreign fighters into Syria are the border regions of northern Lebanon and southern Turkey. The single largest group of volunteers appears to be the Lebanese, aided by powerful Islamist networks in the Tripoli region. In the south, the Jordanian government tried to limit the traffic of fighters, but more than 100 Jordan Salafis are believed to fight for Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

Furthermore tens of Libyans, Tunisians, Kuwaitis and Saudis have also joined the battle, while individuals or small groups have been spotted from countries including Algeria, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and even Chechnya and Pakistan. Even some Western-based Salafis reportedly joined the fight (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012). Many of these fighters are Salafi-jihadists committed to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate through violence.

Some of these Salafi-jihadists are members of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq (O’Bagy, 2012). In late March, a leader of an Iraqi tribe in Fallujah, in Iraq, told CNN that he had sent 30

fighters, expert bomb makers and hundreds of thousands of dollars in the neighbouring Syrian province of Deir al-Zour (CNN International, 2012). On July 21, Al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu-Bakr al Baghdadi released an audiotape expressing support for the Syrian “jihad” and arguing for the importance of “applying the sharia, uniting the Umma by demolishing the borders implemented by the Sykes-Picot [agreement], eradicating filthy nationalism and hated patriotism, and bringing back the Islamic state, the state that does not recognize artificial boundaries and does not believe in any nationality other than Islam (Jeremy Sharp, 2012).”

The most tangible effect of the presence of foreign fighters has been on tactical operational matters. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and vehicular-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) were introduced to the insurgency in early 2012 by Jabhat al-Nusra and Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham whose members had links with fighters with experience in the Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies (International Crisis Group, 2012).

However foreign volunteers, especially Salafis, are viewed with suspicion from the rebels of the FSA and from the population for fear of their extremism. In fact in February 2012 al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri called upon “every Muslims and every honourable and free person in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to go to aid his brothers in Syria”. Many of these foreign Salafi fighters have adopted a global jihadist ideology.

Many tensions took place between mainstream rebel units and foreign jihadists. On 4 September 2012, Farouq al-Shimal fighters, whose own ideology is moderately Islamist, kidnapped and executed Abu Muhammad, the leader of the Mujahadeen Shuraa Council, a team of 100 Syrians and foreigners, inspired by al-Qaeda, which kidnapped two journalists in late July 2012, a British and a Dutch national, threatening to kill them before they were rescued. He had refused “to join battles with Muslims he deemed too liberal and gathered foreign jihadi friends, from Britain, Libya and Pakistan, in a tented camp close to the border” (AL-KARAMA, 2012).

Many of these fighters have sharper skills as well as connections to networks of funding and weapons. Then jihadist foreign fighters can be force-multipliers as during the Iraqi insurgency (Zelin, 2012).

## **2.4 Syrian Salafi groups**

The Salafi groups operating in Syria are not a unified force but a collection of divided units which differ from one another in many ways but form a jihadist network. It is important to recall that this network was established in Syria in 2003 at the beginning of the Iraqi war. The country was the main gateway from which most of the Arab foreign fighters infiltrated Iraq with the support of the Syrian intelligence services. These groups see their struggle against Bashar al-Assad’s regime as a holy war and some of them openly express that their aim is to establish an Islamic state based on the Sharia, the Islamic law. There is a possibility that the objectives of these groups will be ever more influenced by al-Qaeda globalising their current national agenda and turning it into Jihad against the West. However while some groups, Jabhat al-Nusra especially, are largely influenced by al-Qaeda’s rigid jihadist ideology, and see the struggle as a sectarian war against the Alawites, other claim they want to accept all factions, including Alawites, whilst maintaining “an Islamic frame of reference”.

Their strategies are based on two main dimensions: military and media. Militarily they depend on guerrilla warfare and terrorism tactics such as the use of suicide bombings (a tactic employed particularly by Jabhat al-Nusra). Their media strategy is based on propaganda through the involvement of social media by publishing videos, songs and statements (Benotman, 2012).

International Crisis Group reported the following Salafi groups operating in the country (International Crisis Group, 2012):



## **1. Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People of Syria)**

Jabhat al-Nusra emerged in January 2012, it is not the biggest Salafi group in Syria but the most famous having skillfully employed urban terrorism to draw media attention (Lund, Holy Warriors, 2012). The leader of the formation is "Al-Fateh" (The Conqueror) Abu Mohammed al-Golani. The group is a direct offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq which has contributed veteran fighters and weapons and was designated as a terrorist organisation by the United States in December 2012. Its fighters have the boldness and skills to carry out suicide attacks in key regime areas and to storm fortified positions and lead other rebel units to capture military bases and oil fields. As their success mount they attract more fighters and gather more money and weapons (Tim Arango A. B., 2012). The group has distinguished itself for its rhetoric against seeking Western help and its attacks against the Turkish government for being insufficiently Islamist and "a U.S. pawn". The aim of the group is to replace the regime with an Islamic state following Salafi principles. Jabhat al-Nusra has taken responsibility for several suicide attacks in civilian neighbourhoods and is viewed by Al-Qaeda as its favored Salafi-jihadi group. It portrays itself as the Sunni community's defender against the "Alawite enemy" and the "Shiite agents". Its fighters have operated many times alongside FSA formations on the battlefield earning public praise from prominent rebel leaders and local activists. The group is active across all Sunni areas of the country but most of its attacks occurred in the Damascus region. It also has a powerful presence in the eastern border region, in Idlib, in Aleppo and in the northern Hama province. It has also tried to demonstrate a charitable side by showing clips of fighters handing out food to the civilian population. Jabhat al-Nusra employs the foreign fighters to carry out the majority of suicide operations and for training local members. During the Iraqi insurgencies some of its members collaborated with the Assad regime and the group has been accused by other groups to be "indirectly" manipulated by the government propaganda (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012).

Their growing popularity does not reflect popular support for their radical ideology. Many are afraid of their growing influence and some rebel leaders believe their popularity is indicative of increasing desperation. Another reason for its popularity is a shift in tactics. Following a number of spectacular attacks in early 2012 in which many civilians were killed, the group has become more careful of civilian casualties. However its presence is one of the main reasons that deter the U.S. and the West from greater action in Syria (O'Bagy, 2012).

## **2. Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (The Freeman of Syria Battalions):**

The Ahrar al-Sham brigades are the most prominent Salafi group best known for its roadside bomb attacks and sophisticated online propaganda. The group was one of the first to document by videos its attacks against regime forces. It was first established in late 2011 and consists of about 25 brigades spread across Syria with at least a few thousand fighters. Little is known about its leadership but the militarily responsible is named Abul-Hassan. Even if its units used IEDs, snipers and even suicide bombers against government checkpoints and bases they have not been involved in high-profile urban bombings such as those carried out by Jabhat al-Nusra (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012). The Ahrar al-Sham brigades accept foreign fighters but do not seem to possess the same strong links to the international Salafi community as Jabhat al-Nusra. Through social media the group has claimed that its principal goal is waging jihad against Iranian-led efforts to project Shiite power across the Levant and establish an Islamic state (International Crisis Group, 2012). The group also is engaged in non military activities such as children's education, aid distribution and the administration of sharia courts in rebel-held areas. The group is funded by Islamist networks in the Persian Gulf and among the donors there is the Kuwaiti sheikh Hajaj bin Fahd al-Ajami.

### **3. Liwa Saqour al-Sham (Falcons of Syria Brigade)**

This Salafi group was established in November 2011 and is considered one of the most powerful in Idlib province with an estimated strength of 4,000 fighters. Its leader, Ahmad Eissa Ahmad al-Sheikh, also known as Abu Eissa, used ambiguously Salafi rhetoric. He said that the group's ultimate goal is the establishment of an Islamic state but also accepted the minorities' democratic rights, a stance closer to the Muslim Brotherhood than to Salafis.

### **4. Liwa al-Islam (Islam's brigade)**

The group is active in Doula and in Damascus suburbs and operates frequently with FSA units. Its "Sharia Committee" stated that rebels must fight regime troops regardless of sect and that calls for ethnic cleansing against Alawites are both religiously illegitimate and inconsistent with the uprising's interests.

### **5. Katibat al-Ansar (Supporters' Battalion)**

The group is active since March 2012 in the city and suburbs of Homs and speaks openly of the conflict's sectarian nature describing its mission as jihad.

Another unit formed by foreign fighters but persistently distancing itself from jihadism is the Umma Division (Liwa el-Umma) whose leader is the Libyan Mahdi al-Harati. While it has ties to Salafis they do not want to destroy the Syrian state or establish an Islamic caliphate (Lund, Syrian Jihadism, 2012).

According to Aron Lund, other Salafis fight also in the Syria Liberation Front (SLF) one of the biggest insurgent alliances including about twenty Islamist groups, and in small units such as the el-Mouminoun Yusharikoun ("Believers Participate"), the Harakat Fajr el-Islam ("The Dawn of Islam Movement"), the Suleiman Company (Firqat Suleiman el-Muqatila).

## **2.5 Challenge for the revolution**

Many Salafis are believed to fight also within FSA units but these rebel formations portray the uprising as a national struggle against an oppressive dictatorship rather than as a Sunni jihad against an Alawite regime. At the same time differences between the FSA and independent Salafi groups (including Jabhat al-Nusra) have not thwarted their collaboration in the battlefield. As an International Crisis Group report underlines:

"mainstream rebel groups eager for more effective weapons and tactics likely find that benefits of such collaboration outweigh any long-term political and ideological concerns, particularly as prospects for Western military intervention seem remote" (International Crisis Group, 2012).

The problems inherent to the presence of the Salafi groups and their rise are very problematic for the Syrian opposition. The Salafi rebel units:

- validate the regime's thesis that rebels are just terrorists and justify its repression;
- it is the main reason of the restraint of potential foreign backers, mainly the Western countries;
- enhances the regime's ability to mobilise its own base and allies;
- weakens the opposition's political platform and appeal.

The emergence of popular Salafi-jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra presents a grave challenge for the stability of the Syrian state in the wake of Assad's fall. These Salafi elements prove that the civil war is not a clear-cut struggle between a pro-democracy movement and a dictatorship. To complicate the situation, it is precisely the lack of Western support in terms of adequate funds and equipment to the

secular rebels that favours the popularity of extremists. Like in a vicious circle the lack of support is caused by the difficulty to exclude the Salafi units. The worse scenario would be another sectarian war such as the Iraqi case.

As some Israeli analysts pointed out:

“For the main Syrian opposition, the radical Islamic elements are currently a necessary but problematic partner in its fight against the Syrian government: By keeping these radical Islamic groups at arm's length, making alliances with some, and denouncing others (especially al-Qaeda), they are hoping to utilize these groups' fighting power without damaging their credibility in the eyes of the Syrian people and the international community. Yet in the long term, with these radical Islamic groups gaining more support and competence, this uneasy relationship may waver and the opposition, especially the FSA, may find it faces an additional challenge to its rise to power in Syria. The ability of any future Syrian government to control the impact of these radical Islamic groups is a key question, as a possible repeat of events in Iraq after the American-led invasion of 2003 demonstrated. In the Iraqi case, radical Islamic elements took advantage of the power vacuum left from the disintegration of the security apparatus and established a strong presence there that is still felt today” (Institute for National Security Studies, 2012).

### **3. NORTH AFRICA**

#### **3.1 Morocco, the constant threat of Salafiyah-Jihadiya**

The Kingdom of Morocco was until the beginning of the 2000's a stronghold of moderate Islam spared by terrorism. This situation was greatly due to two factors, since the independence in 1956 Moroccan authorities remained constant in containing the opposition in general even though Islamist activists were favoured and exploited to counter the leftist organisations, besides the King has the particularity of being the Commander of the Faithful (Emir al-Munimeen/Amir al-Mu'minin), giving a religious legitimacy that is hard to challenge even for religious extremists.

Nevertheless, since the Casablanca terrorist attacks of May 16, 2003 that killed 45 people and injured more than 100 Morocco remains highly concerned by “Salafi-Jihadi”terrorism that remained very active over the last ten years. The most recent large scale attack was indeed on April 28, 2011 in Marrakesh where a bomb placed in a bag killed 17 people, including 15 foreign nationals, and injured more than 25. The Ministry of Interior informed that the principal suspect of the attack Adil el-Atmani was portrayed by the Moroccan Ministry of Interior as a Salafist and an ideological supporter of al-Qaeda. It seems noteworthy to mention that in the specific example of Morocco the terrorist cells are named by the government “Salafiyah-Jihadiya”. Such a specific generic designation is due to the fact that most of the terrorist groups and cells are not part of a broader organisation as most of their members are homegrown self radicalised Islamist, even though some of them went abroad in training camps or to wage Jihad, in Afghanistan or Iraq for example. Many of these Salafiya Jihadiya cells are the remains of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) believed to be behind the 2003 Casablanca bombings.

Moroccan authorities insisted since the emergence of large scale terrorism on denouncing its foreign dimension and support, especially pointing the role of Saudi Arabia and their will to spread wahhabism. Nevertheless some experts blame the Kingdom of fainting to discover the extent of the problem as it somehow has tacitly accepted the process accepting the support of Saudi Arabia. Professor Mohamed Darif, specialist on Islam in Morocco, explained in an interview to the Christian Science Monitor back in December 2003: “Wahhabi theorists, who endorse a rigorous, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam,

reject other forms, like the open Malikism of Morocco. They also describe Shiites as apostates. The introduction of Wahhabism to Morocco dates to the 19th century, but it remained marginal. "Wahhabism existed, but it did not benefit from the support of the state until 1979," says Mr. Darif. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Wahhabi doctrine was key in preventing the spread of the Shiite revolution to Morocco. At that time, Moroccan authorities were also facing the rise of political Islam, also at odds with traditional Wahhabism. "The Iranian revolution led the state to rethink its mechanisms to face political Islam," says Darif. "Wahhabism delegitimizes both [political Islam] and Shiites." Strengthened by the oil boom of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia sponsored Wahhabi religious schools and distributed scholarships and religious literature to hundreds of students. The schools attracted students from the rest of the Arab world, and hundreds of Wahhabi-trained preachers returned home to spread their theories. Morocco was also receiving much-needed financial help from Saudi Arabia to support its military effort in the Western Sahara, a territory disputed by Morocco and the Polisario, a rebel independence movement. "When Saudi Arabia gave money [to Morocco], it had to welcome its ulemas [theorists]. There was a political price to pay," » (Rachidi, 2003)

But beyond the notion of strategic alliance made between the two kingdoms that considerably fostered the wahhabi influence in Morocco some senior officials also favoured it for personal reasons including their own enrichment (Pargeter, July 15, 2008).

Radicalisation and the growing terrorist threat seem to coincide with the royal transition at the death of Hassan II in 1999, but particularly accelerated in the post 9/11 attacks as many homegrown terrorist cells got inspired by the ideology of a global Jihad promoted by Osama bin Laden. Wahhabism have undoubtedly favoured, at least on the ideological level, the emergence of Islamist terrorism within the country, nevertheless an active foreign support or an international Jihadi presence does not seem to match the profile of most of the terrorists arrested in recent years: "These bands of young militants generally follow a similar pattern. They have tended to come from the same neighbourhood, were often childhood friends and in many cases comprised siblings or members of the same family. Their education levels have for the most part been low, and they have tended to drift from job to job as street hawkers or petty traders hardly scratching a living. It is through militant Islam that these individuals seem to have discovered a form of salvation and self-esteem. It was just such a group that carried out the Casablanca bombings in May 2003. Similarly, the cell that appeared in the spring of 2007, which included 23-year-old Abdelfattah Raydi, who blew himself up in a cyber café in Casablanca to avoid being captured by the police, had a similar profile." (Pargeter, July 15, 2008)

Moroccan authorities mostly feared that local terrorist cells gain in power and establish direct ties with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI). Therefore Morocco significantly enhanced its police and intelligence work. On January 19, 2013 ESISC reported a wide police operation in Tangiers and Meknes where that dismantled two terrorist cells recruiting Jihadist to be sent abroad. Fifth recruiting terrorist cells have been dismantled in the last four months and authorities admitted that the growing trend was of serious concern especially in a harsh social and economical context.

At last, the Islamist ruling Justice and Development party is in power since November 29, 2011 as it won 107 seats on 395 during the last elections. The government does not seem to match the expectation especially regarding social and employment issues. Furthermore the government is being criticised on its right by hard-line Salafi who denounced the police operations and the arrests targeting Islamist radicals in the kingdom. Islamists in Morocco, but also in Tunisia and Egypt, now in power have to rule countries in a poor social and economic condition with the constant risk of being contested by more radical Islamists.

### 3.2 Tunisia, from violent Salafism to Jihadi recruiting cells

The fall of Ben Ali regime in January 2011 largely reshaped the political arena and the Arab Spring in Tunisia resulted in the election of the Ennahda Movement a moderate Islamist party on October 2011 winning 89 seats of the 217 in the Constituent Assembly. One of the main consequences of the Ennahda political victory has been a relative policy of tolerance towards Salafist groups causing an overall phenomenon of radicalisation in the country as most of these groups severely repressed under Ben Ali were now free to express their ideas and their political agenda.

Recently two major incidents shed light on the Islamist radicalisation experienced in the post-revolutionary Tunisia. On September 14, 2012 in Tunis the US embassy and the American Cooperative School of Tunisia were attacked by an angry crowd following the release of an underground amateur anti-Islam movie on the internet. During the attack the US embassy was partially burnt and the school totally burnt, 4 protesters killed and 49 injured. The assailants were mostly from Salafist groups. The government was largely criticised for the management of the crisis from both side of the opposition, the secular one denounced the lack of preparation and organisation and the Salafist one that criticised the repression against “Muslims defending Islam”. This radicalisation trend was later confirmed by the assassination on February 6 of Chokri Belaid, opposition leader from the left-secular movement Democratic Patriots’ Movement (Mouvement des patriotes démocrates) by suspected hard-line Salafists although the perpetrators have not been identified. Some are even directly accusing Ennahda of being involved. Since the death of the opposition leader the country is facing a severe political crisis as the ruling party Ennahda refused the arrangement of a technocrat led government proposed by the Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali who subsequently threatened to renounce to his office (AFP, 2013). After a series of violent demonstrations Ennahda accepted to reshuffle the government and to renounce to key ministries. The new coalition government is still led by Ennahda and backed by the centre-left Ettakatol and the secular Congress for the Republic was appointed on March 8, nevertheless the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Interior have been given to independent senior civil servants. Ali Larayed has been designated Prime Minister and will head the coalition government until the next elections supposed to take place at the end of the year.

Radical Islam is no longer a hypothetical threat as it appeared to be in the direct aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, Salafist groups and political parties are indeed a major challenge for Tunisia’s stability and democracy. Nevertheless a distinction should be made between the majority of Salafists promoters of a strict and puritan Islam with an occasional use of violence, especially during demonstrations or rallies at universities for instance, and between the Salafi Jihadi groups that clearly opt for terrorist actions and systematically use of violence: “Yet it was only after the revolution in 2011 that Tunisia began to suffer from frequent small-scale religiously-motivated violence—this being despite the fact that the majority of ultraconservative Muslims in Tunisia belong to the “scientific Salafists” who reject the use of violence and focus on preaching a “pure” version of Islam. Most of the scientific Salafists are apolitical, but recently some have also decided to join the political game through the creation of the Salafist Reform Front Party, or Jabhat al-Islah. The ultraconservative Hizb-ut-Tahrir party—belonging to the international organisation with the same name—was also recently licensed in Tunisia. Similar to the scientific Salafists, Hizb-ut-Tahrir has endorsed non-violence, although some of its leaders have in the past expressed more violent rhetoric. Both ultraconservative groups advocate the establishment of a caliphate, but Jabhat al-Islah favours a gradual national approach to achieve this goal, while Hizb-ut-Tahrir advocates an international Islamic revolution.” (Wolf, 2013)

On the other hand, terrorist Salafi Jihadi cells although active in Tunisia mostly focus lately on recruiting fighters to be send on Jihad areas such as Syria. Indeed, Syrian authorities sent in October 2012 a list of 108 arrested foreign terrorists including 46 Tunisian nationals among them (RIA Novosti, 2012).

Therewith the question of Jihadi fighter's recruitment becomes the problem of border security considering the trouble region shared with both Libya and Algeria. Tunisian authorities have complained about the important flow of weapons smuggled into the country since the fall of Gaddafi's regime as many Libyan militias are now capitalising on the arsenal seized from the former Libyan army. Arms trafficking from Libya to Tunisia are a cause of serious concern as it could provide the means for terrorist cells to carry out broader attack on Tunisia soil. Consequently Tunisia signed at the beginning of 2012 a memorandum of understanding with Libya in order to foster the security cooperation especially in terms of intelligence sharing regarding terrorist groups; the initiative also aims at facilitating the movement of citizens crossing the borders of both countries (AFP, 2012).

The new perspective that sees Tunisia as a relative safe haven for terrorists reverses the traditional understanding from a foreign support to Tunisian terrorist groups to the support of Tunisian recruiting cells for other Jihadi groups abroad. Journalists and analysts repeatedly mentioned the possibility of the presence on Tunisian territory of AQMI terrorists rear bases in order to avoid being directly confronted to Algerian, and to a lesser extent Libyan, security forces. These assumptions were unsurprisingly strongly denied by Tunisian Ministry of Interior (RIA Novosti, 2012).

Tunisia's Islamist led government seems to be in a very awkward situation where it has to be careful in not being overstepped on its right by more radical Salafi groups while trying to appear as a reliable partner for its international counterparts. Meanwhile, in the light of the recent events, secular political parties and unions along with the civil society remain a constant and growing source of defiance.

### **3.3 Libya, the side effects of supporting rebels**

Libya is celebrating the two year anniversary of the beginning of the uprising that overthrown Muammar Gaddafi and started in Benghazi in the eastern part of the country in a tense social and security context. Numerous calls for demonstrations on February 15 have been made to protest against a wide range of issues mainly regarding employment and the improvement of living conditions. The country struggles to build a state as its territory remains profoundly divided and controlled by armed militias. Libya unlike Tunisia and Egypt, countries of the Arab spring, benefits from a considerable source of financial incomes through its oil exports; nevertheless the redistribution of wealth has not improved and a huge majority of Libyans is still asking for faster changes.

On a more security perspective the Libyan government officially asked, during an international conference in Paris on February, 12 the international community to help Libya to secure its border mainly in providing a technical support. Moreover, Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, also mentioned the risk for Libya of being plagued by Salafi Jihadi fighters from AQMI fleeing from northern Mali and seeking refuge in the wide desertic Sahel area that includes Algeria, Niger, Libya and Chad. The issue of border security became even more essential after the hostage taking at the In Amenas gas field in Algeria by a group of AQMI affiliated terrorists that came from Libya. In addition to the specific question of borders and security comes a more worrying issue in the massive presence of weapons in possession of terrorist groups and militias coming from both Libyan arsenals and shipments delivered by Qatar.

The former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton said she had no doubt Libyan weapons were used in the attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria, which left 39 hostages dead. "The Pandora's box of weapons coming out of these countries in the Middle East and North Africa is the source of one of our biggest threats," she said. "There is no doubt that the Algerian terrorists had weapons from Libya." Bilal Bettamer, a Benghazi lawyer and democracy activist, said: "It's not a secret that Libyan weapons are going everywhere, you might find them being used against British soldiers. (Hopkins, 2013).

The question of weapons proliferation became particularly accurate after the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012 when heavily armed terrorists killed 4 Americans including the United States ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens. The incident made public the divergence between the United States and its allies in the region Qatar but also the United Arab Emirates. US intelligence services were indeed since the beginning of arms deliveries to the rebels aware that the weapons could fall in the hands, or be delivered, to Al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadi groups (mostly AQMI). Qatar was and is still playing an ambiguous role after having deliberately supported Salafi terrorist groups in Libya and seems to have its own political and ideological agenda strictly opposed to US and western interest in the region.

Concerns in Washington soon rose about the groups Qatar was supporting, officials said. A debate over what to do about the weapons shipments dominated at least one meeting of the so-called Deputies Committee, the interagency panel consisting of the second-highest ranking officials in major agencies involved in national security. "There was a lot of concern that the Qatar weapons were going to Islamist groups," one official recalled. The Qataris provided weapons, money and training to various rebel groups in Libya. One militia that received aid was controlled by Adel Hakim Belhaj, then leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who was held by the C.I.A. in 2004 and is now considered a moderate politician in Libya. It is unclear which other militants received the aid. "Nobody knew exactly who they were," said the former defense official. The Qataris, the official added, are "supposedly good allies, but the Islamists they support are not in our interest." No evidence has surfaced that any weapons went to Ansar al-Shariah, an extremist group blamed for the Benghazi attack. (JAMES RISEN, 2012)

Although the strategy pursued by Qatar in Libya remains unclear it is however certain that the Gulf country gained a great influence in the region. This influence could grow further if the Islamist groups affiliated to AQMI favoured by the Emirates managed to gain the upper hand on the more nationalist movements.

### **3.4 Egypt, Sinai stronghold of the Salafi-Jihadi terrorism**

Egypt is facing issues of the same nature experienced by both Libya and Tunisia. The social and economic situation has even further deteriorate since the fall of Mubarak and the Muslim Brotherhood led government, and especially the President Mohamed Morsi, are being fiercely criticised by both secular and leftist movements and the Salafists. Since the end of 2012 the country is constantly experiencing violent protests mostly at the call of opposition parties contesting the overextended powers of President Morsi. Meanwhile the entire Sinai Peninsula became out of control and is now sheltering a significant number of heavily armed Jihadi terrorist groups. To recall, in August 2012, 16 border guards were killed during an attack against their post on the border with Gaza. In November 2012, 3 police officers were killed in the city of Arish.

Terrorism, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, remains a constant threat. On November 2012 the United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office raised the terror threat not only in Sinai but in the entire country: "The UK's Foreign Office has raised its terror threat level for Egypt from "general" to "high». It follows reports of an al-Qaeda plot to attack Western holidaymakers, foiled by Egyptian police in northern Sinai close to the border with Gaza. The Foreign Office said there was now a "high threat of terrorism throughout Egypt, including the Sinai" (BBC, 2012)

It remains a complex issue for intelligence services to clearly identify the terrorist groups in the Sinai Peninsula: The majority of the attacks along the Egyptian border in the past year were the work of a single terror network, made up of Islamic extremists who identify with the ideology of Al-Qaeda, Israeli intelligence sources said Tuesday. The sources told Hebrew media that Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (Arabic for Partisans of the Holy Temple) is headquartered in the Sinai desert and enlists local Bedouins to its ranks,

but that many of its members are citizens of Egypt proper and other Arab countries. An analysis by intelligence officials of terror attacks emanating from the Sinai desert over the past year has revealed a common denominator, all pointing to one Jihadist network based in the Sinai, the sources said. These attacks include the Sept. 21 attack at the Egypt-Israel border fence that killed IDF Cpl. Netanel Yahalomi, the deadly strike on August 5 against an Egyptian military installation in Rafah, in which 16 Egyptian soldiers were killed, the August 2011 cross-border infiltration that killed eight Israelis at Ein Netafim and several incidents of rocket and mortar fire. (ZEIGER, 2012)

The empowerment of the Salafi terrorist groups is largely due to arms trafficking from Libya as many weapons are now smuggled to Egypt. Egyptian police authorities declared in February, 2012 that in less than a year 6000 firearms were seized during controls on the border. (RIA Novosti, 2012).

## **4. SAHEL**

### **4.1 The Malian crisis and the Jihadi penetration in Sahel**

In the early days of January, French President François Hollande launched operation Serval and ordered hundreds of air strikes in areas controlled by Islamist fighters in the Northern part of Mali. Hours later, fighter jets based in Chad began to bomb positions and command posts of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (RFI, 2013). Combat helicopters based in Burkina Faso also helped block the progression of Islamist columns towards the Bambara land, which lays at the boundary between northern and southern Mali. The French-led military offensive in northern Mali quickly gained significant momentum, as waves of air strikes drove terrorists out of the symbolic cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal by the end of January (France 24 , 2013). Despite these obvious military successes, the situation in northern Mali remains delicate, as many of the Jihadi fighters have retreated to the mountain areas north of Kidal while others have melted in with the civilian population, ready to launch terrorist attacks against Malian and French forces<sup>3</sup>.

As soon as September 2012, the French president had attempted to focus world attention on the crisis in Sahel during the general debate of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly. François Hollande highlighted the unacceptable risk created by the occupation of northern Mali by terrorist groups – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJWA) and Ansar Dine. He also commended the determination of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and declared its support to any initiative aimed at ending the conflict in North of Mali and restoring the territorial integrity of the country. It has to be noted that in the meantime, the ECOWAS has agreed on a military deployment plan and has submitted a request for assistance in this regard to the U.N. Security Council (Irish, 2012).

The Malian Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra also stressed the need to intervene quickly during a special session held later in the week:

“There is an urgency to act to end the suffering of the people of Mali and to prevent a similar situation that would be even more complicated in the Sahel and the rest of the world (Al Jazeera, 2012).”

At the time, these emergency calls have been faced with deep divisions among the international community. The United States stressed several times on the absolute need for a legitimate government

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<sup>3</sup> The MUJAO has claimed responsibility for an attack carried out in the city of Gao on February 10 and a suicide bombing the day before. (Al Jazeera, 2013)



in Bamako<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, many diplomats in New York expressed serious doubts about the strategy drawn up by the ECOWAS and its ability to afford the costs of an international military deployment. Not surprisingly, France was therefore supported by its Western allies when it decided to assume responsibility on the ground, at the request of the Malian transitional authorities (Le Monde, 2012). In particular, it is worth noting the strong support of the United States, which had expressed for years their concern about the growing presence of terrorist organisations in the region. Lastly, it should be observed that the launching of the French intervention has impelled the ECOWAS to eventually organise the deployment of the African-led International Assistance Mission to Mali (AFISMA, accordingly with Resolution 2085, passed on 20 December 2012 by the UN Security Council (Security Council, 2012).

These events are taking place in a very complex area characterised by geographical and human features which largely explain the present situation of lawlessness. Moreover, the Libyan crisis and the fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 has been the decisive disruptive factor that upset the extremely delicate geopolitical balance of the region.

The Sahel Belt is running from west to east, from Mauritania and Senegal in the East to western Sudan. From an institutional point of view, nine states belong to the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Chad. However, one has to note that human and geographical realities of the region do not correspond to the political borders (Dumont, 2010). The heart of Sahel region is indeed inhabited by Tuareg people who have little in common with their official state affiliation. Moreover, the local governments have no means to protect and secure their borders and had to appeal to the international community for assistance on many occasions. As a matter of fact, for years the area has been penetrated by major trafficking routes of drugs, weapons and other smuggled goods such as cigarettes. As has been noted in the assessment mission mandated by the United Nations in 2011, the explosion in trafficking has had destabilising effects on all the countries of the region and has fuelled terrorism (Security Council, 2012).

We shall therefore analyse how terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda could emerge as an actor capable of overtaking and controlling large areas within Mali, thanks to the afflux of men and weapons from Libya, as well as a vast network of financial flows. We'll also try to highlight how eternal factors and international rivalries within the Muslim world have played a role in the chain of events that led to the French military intervention on January 11 2013.

#### **4.2 AQIM implantation in Sahel**

At the end of the 1990s, dozens of members of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) fled Algeria under constant battering by the military and took refuge in the mountainous zones of the Adrar des Ifoghas and Timétrine, in Northern Mali, only a few dozen kilometers from the border with the Algerian Sahara. These men were the heirs of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which was dissolved by the Algerian authorities in 1992, and subsequently became the Islamic Army of Salvation (AIS) in 1993 and later the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). After being defeated by the Algerian military, the survivors retreated southward and spent years creating links with local Tuareg tribes and drug trafficking networks. The GSPC emerged on the international stage in 2003, after succeeding in the dramatic capture of 33 European tourists (Raffray, 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> The U.S.' position was clearly expressed in a statement released by the U.S. embassy in Bamako on May 24, 2012 : "No party in Mali, whether civilian or military, is justified in depriving Mali's citizens of a speedy return to stable, democratic government working in their service." (Embassy of the United States in Bamako, 2012)

In 2007, the GSPC pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and took the name Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Le Figaro, 2001). They aim to establish an Islamic emirate in the “Grand Sahara”, which lies from the borders of Mauritania and Algeria to the Chadian border. They also divided themselves into three mains “katibats” (“battalions”), which have established their operational basis in the heart of the Tuareg land. Several leaders gradually imposed their authority over the different branches of the organisation, whereas local figures emerged at the head of new groups inspired by the salafi-jihadi ideology (Berthemet, 2012).

- **Mokhtar Belmokhtar**, 40, a former Algerian tradesman from the Chaamba tribe who had fought against soviet troops in Afghanistan. On his return from the Jihad in 1992, he poured himself into the smuggling of cigarettes and weapons, gaining the nickname of “Marlboro man”. Thanks to his smuggling activity, he was able to establish strong links with local Tuareg tribes and to impose his authority as one of the man leaders of AQIM (Euronews, 2013).
- Former head of the Katibat al-Mulathameen (The Masked Brigade) he announced in December 2012 the creation of the Jihadi group al-Muwaqqi’ün bi-d-Dim (Those who Sign with Blood), a new jihadist movement pretending to be independent from all the other terrorist organisations operating in northern Mali. The group claimed responsibility for the hostage taking at a gas facility In Amenas, during which at least 40 foreign hostages were killed from January 16 to January 19. According to Algerian media, Mokhtar Belmokhtar maintained close links with his former deputy Omar Ould Hamaha, who founded the MUJAO in October 2011. Both have been fighting against the MNLA for controlling Cocaine smuggling in the Sahara (Plasse, 2013).
- On Sunday March 3, Chadian military sources claimed they had killed him during a raid conducted the previous day against a terrorist in the Ifoghas Mountains. Al-Muwaqqi’ün bi-d-Dim however denied the death of their leaders on several Jihadi websites.
- **Abou Zeid**, 55, known as the “Emir of the Sahara”, is a veteran of the Jihad in Algeria. Known for his fanaticism and for his ideological rigor, he prompted further the radicalisation of AQIM brigades at the end of the years 2000s. Among other things, he has been held accountable for the assassination of British hostage Edwyn Dyer in 20019 and of French hostage Michel Germaneau in 2010. In September, he ordered the kidnapping of 7 employees of the French group Areva in Niger’s northern city of Arlit. Still today, he holds most of the western hostages kidnapped in the Sahara over the past years. (Simon, 2010)
- The struggle of influence between Abou Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar has triggered deep divisions inside Sahel’ Islamist movements, which do not all share the same hardline and Al-Qaeda inspired vision of Jihad and compete for the control the hostage taking and drug business. However, the French military intervention has had a unifying impact on them whose effects in the long term remain to be seen.
- Chadian authorities also announced that Abou Zeid had been killed during fierce fighting in in the mountainous area of Tigharghar. The information was confirmed by several sources, but French military authorities remain cautious, stating that killing an important leader was less significant than securing the area.
- **Iyad ag Ghaly**, 54, is a former commander of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s. He has been converted into the Salafi-Jihadi ideology during his tenure as Malian consular officer in Saudi Arabia from 2007 to 2010. He was expelled from the kingdom because of its links with Al-Qaeda and spent some times with Al-Qaeda fighters in Pakistan. He is the leader of the Jihadi group Ansar Dine, which has allegedly benefited from his links with generous donators from the Gulf countries (Lebovich, 2013).

- Ansar Dine has aligned itself with AQIM to impose sharia law in northern Mali. According to several security reports, the group has been recruiting numerous combatants in other Sahel countries, among which Senegal Niger and Nigeria. These fighters are reportedly framed and trained by veteran Jihadi coming from Saudi Arabia or from the Pakistani tribal belt. One has to note that Iyad ag Ghaly, who is hailing from the Adrar des Ifoghas, has attempted to distance himself from AQIM to preserve his popularity among the local populations frightened by the abuses carried out in city's under Jihadi control, especially Timbuktu (Daniel, 2012). Some experts have also pointed out his alleged links with branches of the Algerian security services (Lister, 2012).
- **Abdelkrim Targui**, 40, is said to be the cousin of Iyad ag Ghaly. He is a Tuareg imam belonging to a tribe established in the Kidal region. He was formed to Salafi-Wahhabi ideology in Saudi Arabia and trained to Jihad in Pakistan. Briefly detained in Algeria, he was freed following a negotiation conducted by Iyad ag Ghaly. He is today the leader of the Al Ansar katibat of AQIM (Berthemet, 2012).

Firmly implanted in northern Mali, AQIM's katibats could radiate throughout the Sahel area, adopting different modes of action specific according to the countries' realities. As an example, they commissioned and remotely controlled hostages taking in Niger, while affiliated groups perpetrated bombings hit and run attacks and bombings against military buildings in Mauritania. In this case, several attacks were committed either by a car bomb or by suicide volunteers wearing an explosive vest. At the same time their strongholds in the Adrar des Ifoghas fulfilled three functions: detention of hostages, place of execution, and source of arms and ammunition.

In addition to its original Algerians members, AQIM soon recruited new fighters and tapped into a large pool of volunteers coming from Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria. Between 2008 and 2011, their personnel were increased from 200 to 400 fighters with a logistic core of 150 men. The equipment, made up of at least 20% of material belonging to Sahelian armies, is adapted to the modern guerrilla warfare in the desert: 4x4 vehicles mounted by crews of 4 to 6 men armed with AK 47's and support weapons (rocket launchers, machine guns, sniper rifles) and pickups with 12.7mm or 14.5mm machine guns. In 2009, the group also expanded their arsenal with anti-personnel mines. Moreover, one has to note that they can count on an excellent mobility capacity enhanced by excellent communication skills. They regularly use walkie talkies, cell phones, high frequency radios, satellite phones and even Skype connections... However, terrorist leaders still resort to traditional human messengers to carry their most important messages.

Another of their main activities is the taking of hostages. Over thirty Westerners have been caught in the Sahara-Sahel area since 2009. This activity serves first at obtaining money, but also at exchanging prisoners, spreading political demands and gaining media attention. French citizens are the main target of AQIM, which is still holding six of them. For the record, French intelligence services believe that the kidnapping industry has provided 100 million US dollars to Islamist terrorists between 1998 and 2012 (Raffray, 2013).

In addition to this important source of income, AQIM has also succeeded in collecting "taxes" from the traffic road which runs across the area. The terrorist organisation became one of the largest beneficiaries of the new drug routes from South America to Europe via West Africa (Yapp, 2010). These important financial means allowed the organisation to acquire the modern military equipment which will be used to take control of Northern Mali.

### 4.3 The aftermath of the Libyan civil war

As we have mentioned in the introduction of the present chapter, the Libyan civil war and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi have been the catalyst for the subsequent Malian crisis. The fighting in Libya indeed triggered the return of hundreds of thousands of people to their home countries in the Sahel region. Moreover, notwithstanding the disastrous humanitarian and economic consequences for the affected countries, thousands of Tuareg fighters who had served as mercenaries in Gaddafi's armies also choose to return to Niger and Mali, becoming a major destabilisation factor.

In the specific case of Mali, these fighters joined the ranks of MNLA or the Azawad National Liberation Movement (Movement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad), which was created on October 16, 2010 to unite different separatist groups with the aim of the "total liberation of the Azawad region." They seized temporary control over the northern cities of Ménaka, Tessalit, Anderamboukane and Aguelhok, and gained ground near the Algerian border, occupying a military base in Tessalit on March 10. By the end of the year 2011, that had seized control of at least 1/3 of Mali's territory, allying themselves with the Islamist fighters of AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO. The MNLA was therefore able to take control of Gao, Kindal, and Timbuktu, before being ousted by their own allies. On Monday April 2, 2012, Jihadi fighters indeed raised their black flag over the holy city of Timbuktu and began to apply the more strict and fundamentalist Islamic law.

The military coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo on March 22 in Bamako further complicated the situation. The stated reason for the coup on March 22 by members of the Malian army was the inability of the government to defend against the northern rebels or to support the military to fight against them successfully. The coup fractured the army, and caused confusion throughout the country, which created an opening for the rebels to gain more power (Djémani, 2012). In that situation, Islamist groups were left free to impose their rule and to prepare for further progress towards the South.

One has to note that these events have also had an impact on the neighbouring countries of the Sahel, including Niger, Nigeria and Mauritania, where several terrorist attacks were committed over the past years due to the inability of the Malian authorities to impose the rule of law over its own territory. One should pay particular attention to the case of the Nigerian Salafi-Islamist sect Boko Haram, which is developing increasingly strong links with AQIM. As have noted the UN mission mentioned here above, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a spectacular terrorist attack against the U.N. representative office in Abuja on 26 August 2011. It is now considered as a source of concern by most countries in the region:

"For example, the radicalisation of youth was a particular concern in the south, where interlocutors said that Boko Haram was already active in spreading its ideology and propaganda and, in some cases, had succeeded in closing down public schools. The mission representatives were also informed that Boko Haram had established links with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and that some of its members from Nigeria and Chad had received training in Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb camps in Mali during the summer of 2011. Although Boko Haram has concentrated its terrorist acts inside Nigeria, seven of its members were arrested while transiting through the Niger to Mali, in possession of documentation on manufacturing of explosives, propaganda leaflets and names and contact details of members of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb they were allegedly planning to meet. Whereas Nigerian authorities viewed the group as a national threat without any links to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, it has become a growing source of concern for the countries of the region." (Security Council, 2012)

#### 4.4 Qatar and Saudi involvement

In addition to its destabilising effect over Mali, the international military intervention in Libya also allowed the emirate of Qatar to assert itself much more on the North African scene. Departing from its traditional diplomatic activism, Qatar indeed sent six Mirage fighter jets to conduct air operations side by side with the French and British air forces. Moreover, it gave financial support to the rebellion and played a major role in the organisation of the political transition. According to several media reports, Doha also supplied the rebellion with state-of-the-art weaponry, including assault rifles and French-made anti-tank guided missiles MILAN. Other reports pointed out that the rebels were given military training in the emirate, and that Qatari Special Forces may have been involved in ground combat operations, including the final assault against Muammar Gaddafi's compound in Bab al- Aziziya on August 24, 2011 (Roberts, 2011).

The strong Qatari interventionism was a response to the exceptional circumstances of the Libyan crisis. It was also aimed at meeting diplomatic objectives drawn by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, among which were converting financial strength into political influence, helping to bring down hostile regimes, gaining economic benefits and promoting its Islamist agenda. In this regard, one has to note that Qatar has been the exile place of Libyan cleric Ali al-Salabi. The latter is closely linked to Al-Jazeera's radical "televangelist" Yusuf al-Qaradawi and to Libyan Islamic Fighting Group's leader Abdelhakim Belhadj. Together they created the Islamist party Hizb al-Wa an (homeland party), which wants to impose sharia law in post-Gaddafi Libya. Like the struggle between the Muslim brotherhood and the Salafi organisations in Egypt, this ideological and material involvement of Qatar through the media figure of Yusuf al-Qaradawi should be understood as an element of the competition for influence in the Islamic World that is taking place with Saudi Arabia (Roberts, Behind Qatar's Intervention In Libya, 2011).

As we can see, the role of Qatar in the Libyan crisis has expanded far beyond the moral and logistical support to a new western intervention in the Arab world. As a result of that, it is not surprising to find the Emirate again in the North Mali crisis, which is a direct consequence of the Libyan Civil war. On several occasions in 2012, the French weekly newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* indeed suggested that Qatar was financing them. In an article issued on June 6, 2012 and entitled "Our friend Qatar is financing Mali's Islamists", the investigative satirical paper quoted an anonymous source in the French military intelligence agency DRM as saying:

"The MNLA [secular Tuareg separatists], al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine and MUJAO [movement for unity and Jihad in West Africa] have all received cash from Doha<sup>5</sup>." (Allemandou, 2013)

The weekly added that former French President Nicolas Sarkozy had been informed that Egyptian, Libyan and Tunisian rebels and revolutionaries had received large quantities of weapons from Qatar, many of which had later found their way into the hands of terrorist groups in Sahel. Quoting the same unnamed source from the French secret services, the paper wrote:

"Earlier this year, the DGSE [General Directorate for External Security, French: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure], sent several notes to warn the Elysée [Palace] of the Emirate of Qatar's international activities, if we may say so. And, without really insist, to be diplomatic, on the boss of this tiny state, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who has always been treated as a friend and ally by Sarko [President Nicolas Sarkozy]. The officers of the DRM said that the unparalleled generosity of Qatar is not only

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<sup>5</sup> « [...]Les insurgés du MNLA (indépendantistes et laïcs), les mouvements Ansar Dine, Aqmi (al Qaïda au Maghreb islamique) et Mujao (djihad en Afrique de l'Ouest) ont reçu une aide en dollars du Qatar. »

financial, as it is sometimes delivering weapons to revolutionary Tunisia, Egypt or Libya<sup>6</sup>." (Slate Afrique, 2012)

An important part of this policy has been guided by the determination of the Qatari authorities to take control of the hydrocarbon resources of an emergent state of Azawad on the Malian territory. French media haven't produced more evidence of these allegations, but an increasing number of reports have pointed out the visible impacts on the ground of the Qatari-Saudi competition, as well as the consequences of the political changes in France. Of particular interest is the article published by the French daily Le Figaro on May 27, 2012. Entitled "Mali: Tuareg rebels proclaimed an Islamic state" ("Mali : les rebelles touaregs proclament un État islamiste"), the article shows how the defeat of president Nicolas Sarkozy and the election of president François Hollande prompted Qatar to renege some financial promises made to the MNLA (Berthemet, Mali : les rebelles touaregs proclament un État islamiste, 2012). Deprived from its financial support, the secular rebel group has therefore chosen to unite with the Ansar Dine group of Iyad ag Ghaly, hence opening the door of Northern Mali to the radical Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of the swing of Salafism/Wahhabism into terrorism is not monolithic, but is divided on the grounds of realities, historical context and local customs. Similarly, we must take into account the relatively low importance of boundaries between States that most often deal with various ethnic and religious ensembles.

The impact on the war in Afghanistan on the emergence of Salafist jihadism is a well-known phenomenon and it's a safe bet that the current conflict in Northern Mali will have consequences on the entire Sahel. Not to mention, in the case of Mali, the weight of the "tradition" of Ghazi, the warrior who participate in an operation against "infidels" and thereby contribute to jihad and traffic of all kinds that marked Saharan nomads and semi-nomads.

In the same way, terrorists operations conducted against national interests by organisations strongly anchored in their countries of origin are to be distinguished from networks operating in vast areas straddling several countries (the Sahara and Afghanistan-Pakistan region, for example). In the case illustrated by the very recent French operation in Mali, such groups have targeted foreign interests, military or civilian.

Not to mention the handling and direct use of Salafist terrorist organisations by intelligence services on behalf of state interests (Indo-Pakistani conflict, Qatar and Saudi funding, manipulation by the Algerian secret services, etc.).

It should be noted here that this type of manipulation is growing rapidly. The civil war in Syria is a perfect illustration.

Based on these findings and the extent of the involvement in terrorism of Salafist/Wahhabi movements we must conclude the risk of the perpetuation of the threat which above all menaces the local populations but also the political and economic interests of all nations present in those areas.

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<sup>6</sup> « Au début de cette année, écrit encore l'hebdomadaire, plusieurs notes de la DGSE ont alerté l'Élysée sur les activités internationales, si l'on ose dire, de l'émirat du Qatar. Et, sans vraiment insister, diplomatie oblige, sur le patron de cet État minuscule [sic], le cheikh Hamad ben Kalifa al-thani, que Sarko a toujours traité en ami et en allié. Les officiers de la DRM affirment eux, que la générosité du Qatar est sans pareille et qu'il ne s'est pas contenté d'aider financièrement, parfois en livrant des armes, les révolutionnaires de Tunisie, d'Égypte ou de Libye ».

This is all the more true given that we are witnessing the internationalisation of jihad since the war in Afghanistan. We should therefore expect that the growing number of indoctrinated jihadi fighters will be an additional risk factor for the emergence of new conflicts and terrorist actions.

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ISBN: 978-92-823-4385-2  
doi: 10.2861/21042

