

Religious propaganda, charitable organizations and jihad. The evolution of the Saudi network, the Maktab al-Khidamāt and the path to al-Qā'ida

Abstract

From the 1980s onwards, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a radicalization campaign was witnessed within the international Muslim community of fundamentalist tradition, which was carried out through the promotion of the concept of jihad. The process, led by some of the main political actors, followed the strategy of global propagation of the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology initiated in the 1960s by Saudi Arabia, which through a system of associations and institutes of solidarity and charity wanted to exert its influence on the umma universally. The system was transformed into a network that became the main instrument for the promotion of religious extremism. The Saudi network then became part of a new entity that emerged on Afghan territory to organize Muslim resistance, the Maktab al-Khidamāt (MAK). The MAK favored mobilization, prepared its members ideologically and militarily, and developed a system of alliances between factions. In one of its training camps, a paramilitary jihadist group was later formed that used the MAK as a base for recruitment: this group would become the al-Qā'ida terrorist organization.

Keywords: Jihad, MAK, al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, Wahhabi-Salafism

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Received

To cite this article: Tratzi, C. (2022), Religious propaganda, charitable organizations and jihad. The evolution of the Saudi network, the Maktab al-Khidamāt and the path to al-Qā'ida, *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo*, n°6, pp. 19-31.

07/26/2022

Accepted

08/08/2022

1. Introduction

The international geopolitical scene underwent a radical change in the second half of the 20th century. Saudi Arabia decided to participate in the political mutation by presenting itself as the representative of the entire community (*umma*); it presented the *Wahhabi* doctrine as the true and only form of Islamic religious interpretation and established a strategy for the global propagation of its own belief. The aim was to maintain control of believers around the world by standardising the doctrine according to its ideological imposition. It is important to highlight the role played by religion in the formation of the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia was born under the ideological banner of Wahhabism¹, had a legal structure based on the application of the *Sharī'a* in accordance with the Hanbali school of *fiqh*² (DeLong-Bas, 2004:95-7) and modelled the organisation of the state on the principle of necessity professed by Ibn Taymiyya³, according to which religion (*dīn*) and state (*dawla*) could not exist without each other (Campanini, 2015:21).

The global dissemination of Wahhabi ideology was part of a soft power strategy, the success of the Saudi plan depended on the control of the community and the realisation of the programme could make them the protectors of the authentic religious message, while giving them the opportunity to play a leading role on the Middle Eastern stage. It was also essential to gain legitimacy in the eyes of Muslims and to eliminate the movement's violent image, which is why Saudi Arabia sought to open its doors to the outside world.

The programme drawn up by King Abd al-'Azīz ibn Sa'ūd initially consisted of the imposition of a political-economic system that would attract foreign powers, constituting a privileged market line linked to the sale of oil and the acquisition of military equipment and political protection. At the same time, he saw the creation of a system of personal mobilisation towards the peninsula, with the intention of culturally and socially training young Muslims, people with a low level of education and academic staff (especially

1 The Wahhabi movement emerged in the 18th century as a new religious interpretative form with strong political implications. It promoted the renewal of a decadent society through a return to the message of Revelation; true monotheism could only be realised by following the Holy Sources (*Qur'an* and *ḥadīth*) and the example of the first three generations of Muslims (*salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). At the doctrinal level it emphasised the concepts of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), rejecting every association (*shirk*), innovation (*bid'a*), interpretation (*ta'wīl*), giving great importance to the practice of jihad. It is considered an extremist and violent interpretation of Islam (Esposito, 2003:333).

2 *Fiqh* refers conceptually to the effort of human beings to understand the divine law (*Sharī'a*); contrary to the *Sharī'a*, which is immutable and infallible, *fiqh* is mutable and fallible. It also refers to the system of Islamic jurisprudence created in the 8th century by Muslim scholars interested in bringing to life a corpus of rules of behaviour based on God's will. From the beginning, different opinions emerged, especially regarding the validity and nature of the sources to be used in interpreting the *Sharī'a*; four authors in particular gained great influence, respectively Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, who gave the names to the four schools of *fiqh* that would be the juristic references since the gates of the *jihād* closed (Esposito, 2003: 87; Otto, 2010:23).

3 Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) was a Syrian 'ālim adherent to the neo-Hanbalid school, he focused his studies on Qur'anic exegesis, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* (issuing *fatāwā*) and in the religious field he emphasised the concept of *tawḥīd* and a literal application of the *Sharī'a* in accordance with the first three generations of Muslims. He promoted the importance of the primary sources and the first three generations of Muslims, opposing the *Sunna al-nabī* to every innovation (*bid'a*). He theorised his notion of the Islamic state erected on religious principle and the worship of God (*ibāda*), indicating *al-Hisba* (promotion of what is good and prohibition of what is evil) as the ultimate realisation of Allāh's will. Jihad, military effort for the defence of religion, was the way for the preservation of order and the triumph of faith. Living through the Mongol occupation he theorised on the subject of holy war: he promoted a separation between Muslim individual and state, identifying as Muslim those who respected God's laws and fought for their victory, and indicating as infidels those who were in the opposite position; jihad was the first obligation after faith and its practice distinguished a true believer from a false one (Cook, 2005:93; Hoover, 2019; Laoust, 2000). His extreme position and the possibility of considering regimes that do not represent the true (according to him) Islam as infidels have created an interpretative margin used by contemporary jihadists to justify violent actions in the face of unjust authorities vis-à-vis the community. Considering the *umma* and the Islamic state universally, the obligation of intervention can be considered universal by jihadists, which is why Ibn Taymiyya's works represented and represent the main references for jihadi-Salafi propaganda.

university students), in order to exert his influence on them at a later stage (Farquhar, 2017:3). The instrument for its realisation consisted of *da'wa* (proselytising), by means of which the doctrine could be spread. The first adherents came from Salafi circles, which with Wahhabism had in common the doctrinal apparatus, in particular the most traditional form of Salafism - which contemporary historiography identifies as Salafi purism, and which in some cases may coincide with the same message of Wahhabism, the ideological basis of jihadism (Lauzière, 2016: 9; Wiktorowicz, 2006:207) - which shared with the followers of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb the identification in the sacred sources and the example of the pious predecessors, both in orthodoxy and orthopraxis. They also had in common the acceptance of the works of important Salafi theologians (such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal or Ibn Taymiyya). Much support for the Wahhabi openness also came from the Muslim Brotherhood movements in Egypt, from the *Jamā'a al-islāmīya* of Mawdudi and from other groups that recognised themselves in the doctrine of the pious predecessors (*madhhab al-salaf*).

It was within this complex that the Saudi power group and the '*ulamā'*' developed the new line of propaganda from the 1960s onwards, giving life to a wide range of institutes and associations for the control of faith and believers. For the educational sphere, the University of Medina (IUM) was established in 1961, which took over the legacy of the Scholastic Institute and received a large number of Muslims, of Salafi belief, to provide them with academic training that they would use for proselytising operations when, after graduation, they returned to their own country of origin (Farquhar, 2017:71). In addition, a large number of Saudi-trained personnel found employment in leading universities, thus having the possibility of transforming their teachings into tools in the service of propaganda.

The social and religious sphere was controlled through official non-governmental organisations that emerged under the pretext of Islamic solidarity and charity, which managed and registered religious centres, schools and youth activities, and channelled financial aid by setting up special funds and opening offices in different countries around the world. Some of these associations have represented real umbrella organisations, whose purpose was to support illegal and violent activities that in some cases coincided with the support and financing of Islamic terrorist groups. The most relevant of these were certainly the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), founded in 1969 in Jeddah with a diplomatic role on the model of the United Nations, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), which from 1972 onwards dealt with youth issues, and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), based in Saudi Arabia and dedicated to assisting Muslims, especially in the economic sector.

However, the organisation that most represented the strategy of ideological propagation and global control emerged in May 1962, when King Fayṣal organised a major conference in Mecca, giving life to the *Rābiṭa al-ālam al-islāmī*, known as the Muslim World League (MWL)⁴. The first president was the grand mufti Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (a descendant of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb) and the successor appointed to the General Secretariat was Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ḥarkān, the future Saudi minister of justice. The organisation was established by one hundred and eleven people, divided between '*ulamā'*' and members of the Wahhabi high clergy, who were also part of the Constituent Council (Gold, 2003:76). Its

4 The MWL was founded as a non-governmental organisation, set up to propagate the true vision of Islam (of the Wahhabi type) and to aid Muslims around the world. Its dependence on Saudi Arabia was still evident: the MWL's staff, wherever they were in the world, came from the Kingdom or had been trained there, while financial support came from Gulf funds, transmitted through *zakāt*, *waqf* or *ṣadaqa* (Algar, 2002).

launch conference was attended by important personalities in the Salafi purist scene, testifying to the will to establish an important common international network. The MWL opened offices in all countries of the world, centrally controlling the activity of its satellites, managing the belief, and sending specialised personnel. It was the nucleus of a system that became a network, capable of linking different organisations and standardising the message conveyed. The religious message spread through the system, creating an international network of adherents dependent on the Royal Household.

The historic events of 1979, with a particular focus on the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, brought about a change in the strategic line of its foreign policy. Aggression from a Muslim territory forced the Saudis to take matters into their own hands, defending the umma and promoting a call for a war of resistance. Propaganda was radicalised by focusing mainly on the concept of jihad, religiously legitimising the conflict, and inviting international involvement. Within the network created by Saudi Arabia and controlled by the MWL, a strong radicalisation campaign began to take place, with the intention of recruiting fighters, forming the group that some years later would become the pillar of the MAK, which would lead the Afghan resistance and would be the historical predecessor of the terrorist organisation *al-Qā'ida*.

2. Saudi network: jihad propaganda and the defence of dar al-islām.

The invasion of a territory identified as *dar al-islām*⁵, considering the idea of the universality of Islam and its religious community, created the conditions for the conflict to be presented as a sacred struggle justified by religion⁶. Propaganda emphasised the concept of the unity of the umma and its defence, embracing the pan-Islamic current that was developing in the 20th century and transforming the movement - accompanied by Wahhabi-Salafi rhetoric - into the future global jihadist movement (Hegghammer, 2014:258-260).

The MWL led the proselytising campaign by inviting Muslims belonging to its network to join the fight, which was seen as a collective obligation (*fard 'ayn*). Pakistan and the US offered logistical and financial support, while Saudi Arabia stepped up from an ideological-religious point of view by focusing on legitimising jihad and creating a wide range of solidarity organisations to invest money and fund the resistance. At the same time, OIC, WAMY and MSA (and their satellite associations and campuses around the world) worked to find volunteers and money, liaising with the local offices of the MWL, which provided overall coordination. Influential figures in the Kingdom stressed the importance of jihad as an instrument of religious expansion and Muslim struggle. The illustrious Ibn Bāz, grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, an important professor at the IUM and an influential figure in the MWL, was certainly involved in the agenda. Participating in the Afghan jihad

5 *Dar al-islām* designates the territory of Islam, where Islamic law is respected, initially referring to the territories conquered by Muslims. Its meaning is geographical and conceptual and its definition has been constructed in contrast to that of *dar al-ḥarb* (territory of war). The jihadist idea of the universality of the umma has modified the concept, universally transforming *dar al-islām* into any territory where Muslims live, taking the global right of intervention for the defence of religion (Esposito, 2003:62; Cook, 2005; Scarcia, 2015:29-31).

6 The concept of the sacredness of jihad is a debated element within the Muslim religion. Sacred sources have given special prominence to the subject both in the Qur'an and in *ḥadīth* literature. Sura number 9 (*Sūra al-Tawba*) in particular is one of the most frequently mentioned by jihadists: it is the only one not preceded by the Basmala and contains two of the most violent verses in the Qur'an: the 'verse of the saving covenant' (9:111) and the 'verse of the sword' (9:5), used by traditionalist Muslims to declare war on all non-Muslims (Cook, 2005; Bonner, 2006; Bonney, 2004; Robinson, 2021).

according to Ibn Bāz represented the greatest form of righteousness (*afḍal al-qurbat*); the struggle further required a total association towards Muslims and a consequent disregard for infidels (concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*) and also included participation of an economic kind (*jihād bi-l-māl*) alongside the military one, which met with the full approval of Wahhabi circles in the Gulf and the United States (Gold, 2003: 111). Another important personality was Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ḥarakān, a native of the Najd who trained at the IUM (becoming one of its directors) and had very good relations with the Royal Family. He held positions of power, answering directly to the Saudis and ensuring the defence of the Islamic religion. He was also secretary general of the MWL and was in charge of organising conferences around the world (Farquhar, 2017:215-6). The league, in fact, continued to be directed towards territorial and ideological expansion activities⁷.

The most significant presence - and one that had the most consequences for the ultimate creation of the global jihadist movement - was probably that of 'Abd Allāh al-'Azzām, at the time a professor at the Jordan University of Amman. An individual who had spent much of his life in the main Muslim territories (Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and to a lesser extent Pakistan and Afghanistan), he came into contact with personalities belonging to Islamic fundamentalism, who held him in high esteem. He became the ideologue of the new global jihadist theory, articulated according to the principle of *tawḥīd* of action (*tawḥīd al-'amali*), according to which the worship of Allah had to be demonstrated by faith, the study of sacred texts and the performance of individual practices (Hegghammer, 2020:293). Jihad was one of these, which is why al-'Azzām considered combat an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) and a duty comparable to the five pillars. In Indianapolis he was able to meet the leaders of the main Saudi organisations, especially within the MWL, and it was also the place where the first meeting between him and Osāma bin Lāden took place⁸, laying the groundwork for future collaboration.

The Indianapolis conference was followed by the Kuala Lumpur conference in 1980 and a special MWL congress in Mecca. The strategic agenda, influenced by the Afghan events, explicitly addressed the issue of jihad by combining the propaganda plan with a war plan, and inviting Muslims to mobilise (The Muslim World League, 1992). A year later the instructions of the congress found realisation in the publication of a commemorative work for the 20th anniversary of the MWL entitled “*Rābiṭa al-'ālam al-islāmī: 'ashrūn 'āman 'ala ṭarīq al-da'wa wa al-jihād*” (“Muslim World League: twenty years on the road to *da'wa* and *jihād*”), a text that perfectly outlined the MWL's (and consequently Saudi) strategy. Secretary 'Alī al-Ḥarakān presented in the work the programme, which consisted of defending the territory of Islam by restoring the pre-invasion scenario. The MWL opposed the practice of the sacred Islamic jihad to the attack on the 'Islamic nation', continually pointing out the danger that Muslims faced and the importance of coordination and an international mobilisation of the umma (The Muslim World League, 1981). It is difficult to know who actually worked on the drafting of the important libretto, although the involvement of the heads of official Saudi publications, as well as leading academics from universities and the Wahhabi clergy ('*ulamā'* and the

7 Of the various initiatives undertaken by the MWL in Europe, Africa, Asia and the United States, it is worth drawing attention to a particular conference organised in Indianapolis, at Indiana's Islamic Teaching Center (ITC) in January 1978. The meeting was attended by prominent members of Saudi politics and professors from the most prestigious universities in the Islamic world, among them Muḥammad Quṭb (brother of Sayyid Quṭb and professor at King Abdul University), Shaykh Tāis al-Jumālī (imām and professor at the Kuwait Central Mosque and in close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood), Shaykh Sa'ūd al-Finaisan (director of the Muhammad ibn Saud University of Riyadh) and El-Tigani Abugideiri, director general of several Saudi solidarity associations in the US (Hegghammer, 2020: 111-112).

8 The meeting between al-'Azzām and Bin Lāden has also been confirmed by Bin Lāden's family (Bin Laden et. al, 2009: 25).

ministries of propaganda, education and foreign affairs), seems likely. The involvement of Ibn Bāz (because of his jihadist propaganda efforts and his relationship with al-‘Azzām) and Muḥammad al-Majdhūb, a Syrian member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was a professor at the IUM and editor of the university’s official newspaper, a delegate of the MWL and a personality who maintained close contacts with the Saudi intelligence services, is also likely but not confirmed.

The process of radicalisation of religious propaganda by the MWL was gradually being completed. The proselytising strategy began to be more closely linked to that of al-‘Azzām, who had moved to Pakistan thanks to a professorship at the Islamic University of Islamabad offered by the MWL. It was precisely in Pakistan, thanks to al-‘Azzām, that the MWL reaped the rewards of years of propaganda, taking official control of the resistance and establishing its own headquarters in the town of Peshawar, in the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

3. The Peshawar system and the role of al-‘Azzām. The network of the Rābiṭa and the creation of the Maktab al-Khidamāt.

The Peshawar area represented a strategic point where resistance began to take shape and where most of the radical Islamic components were gathering. Populated by ethnic Pashtūn, the area had witnessed the rise of the influence of the Deobandi religious school and had hosted Afghan fundamentalist exiles who fled after the change of regime in the country.

There operated the network of ‘Abd Rabbi al-Rasūl Sayyāf, an Afghan scholar who identified himself in Wahhabi doctrine and head of the Ittiḥād-i Islāmī party (a party supported by the Saudis, with whom he had a deep relationship). He was also a professor of *Sharī‘a* at Kabul University and ran proselytising operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, becoming the leader of the mujāhidīn group that led the Afghan resistance. He travelled extensively between the US and Saudi Arabia (and around the Gulf in general), came into close contact with the MWL leadership in 1980 and the following year met al-‘Azzām, who in the meantime was moving permanently to Peshawar convinced by Kamāl al-Sananiri after a meeting the two had in Mecca (Hegghammer, 2020:149). Al-Sananiri was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Secret Apparatus who had arrived in Afghanistan in 1979, where he had established a great many contacts that proved useful in transforming al-‘Azzām into the intermediary between the mujāhidīn and the Arab volunteers who were beginning to arrive. Bin Lāden also began to approach the area in these years, initially offering financial support.

The arrival of al-‘Azzām encouraged interventions by the US and Pakistani diplomatic and intelligence corps to establish themselves in Peshawar, where al-‘Azzām began to have command of the fighters entering the country through the MWL channel. Saudi solidarity organisations began to operate actively in the region, coordinating revenues and providing humanitarian and economic aid to the mujāhidīn. Saudi and Kuwaiti capital financed logistical facilities and operations, the IIRO secured money from mainly Gulf investment funds (such as the Dār al-māl al-islāmī Trust, the Dallah Al-Baraka Holding Company, the BCCI Bank of

Credit and Commerce International) while the various NGOs most prominently present were the Islamic Da'wa Committee, the Islamic Relief Agency, the Saudi Relief Committee and above all the Saudi Red Crescent agency. Along with the Kuwait Red Crescent; all had their own headquarters in Saudi Arabia (Millar Burr J. & Collins R. O., 2006). The head of the Saudi Red Crescent (and also of the Saudi Relief Committee) in the Chitral area was Wā'il Ḥamza Julaīdān, also known as Ḥasan al-Madanī, a Saudi insider who had studied at the IUM and spent part of his life in Arizona. He also had deep friendships with figures linked to the jihadist cause, particularly al-'Azzām and Bin Lāden. Another important person in the agency was Abū 'Ubayda al-Banshīrī, who was particularly distinguished in the jihadist cause.

Aid reached the mujāhidīn through the NGO channel and was mainly intended for the Sayyāf and Wā'il Ḥamza Julaīdān groups (Rubin B. R., 2020), which used MWL (even more involved in propaganda operations), the CIA and the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence, the most important Pakistani intelligence agency) for personnel management. The war had dragged on, the number of fighters had, in fact, increased from 1982 onwards with the arrival of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamā'a al-islāmīya and volunteer fighters from Egypt, Yemen, Algeria and Arab countries. The system, which saw the coordination of the MWL, was known as the 'Peshawar Alliance' and was founded on strong ideological propaganda about the unity of the umma and jihad (Commins, 2006:174).

Saudi Arabia headed the structure, using the MWL and thus avoiding direct involvement⁹. The influence of al-'Azzām in the jihadist movement was growing, curing the ideological aspect of the mujāhidīn by engaging in religious centres, promoting the theme of jihad. The MWL encouraged his ultimate rise, giving him control of territory and making its network of contacts available to him. Al-'Azzām was thus able to access a large number of personal and financial resources, overseeing the entire system. To facilitate the arrival of volunteers and organise the distribution in the different sectors (training camps, logistics, propaganda, worship) in 1984 he founded, together with Julaīdān, an organisation called *Maktab al-Khidamāt al-Mujāhidīn al-'Arab*, transforming Islamic solidarity/charity into military effort. The MAK was born as an evolution of the MWL (Gold, 2003:97), its official medium of communication being the new *al-jihād* newspaper.

The idea of creating the MAK was in al-'Azzām's mind as early as 1983, due to misunderstandings between the different factions (especially between Afghan and Arab mujāhidīn) and the need to create a common ideological line based on Islam (Wahhabi-Salafi type) and jihad. It was divided into four sub-committees, which dealt with training, military affairs and intelligence, health and logistics, and also managed the housing (*mada'if*) of the volunteers (Hegghammer, 2008:93). It incorporated within it the networks operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Sayyāf's and Jalāluddīn Ḥaqqānī's) and the most important personalities from the MWL - as well as from nearby solidarity organisations - and from the global jihadist scene. These will occupy relevant positions in the Department Committee and above all in the Advisory Council, whose heads will be Osāma bin Lāden, Wā'il Ḥamza Julaīdān, and Abū Hajir al-'Irāqī (a close friend of al-'Azzām and an important figure in the Kurdish-Iraqi area). The director of the MAK was evidently al-'Azzām.

9 CIA and ISI activity in recruitment, economic and military support had increased. They sent a large number of weapons and specialised personnel to train fighters. The Saudis, with their General Intelligence Directorate (GID), wanted to avoid direct contact between the US and the mujāhidīn, fearing possible exclusion, so they decided to use the MWL (Dimitrakis, 2013).

Although the functions of the MAK were multiple, the military purpose remained crucial. Al-'Azzām then thought of establishing an area dedicated strictly to training. In late 1983 he had a meeting with the wealthy Saudi Ṣaleḥ 'Abdullah Kamal, head of the Dallah Al-Baraka Holding Company, who took over the financing of the plan with the direct management of the MAK. The project, named "Project Badr", was realised with the creation of the military camp in the southeast area of Peshawar, precisely in Pabbi, where all the jihadist components would converge.

4. The general test of Pabbi and jihadist militarism. Sada, al-Ma'sada and the road to the Qā'ida al-jihād.

The event of the Badr project set the direction for shaping the new jihadist strategic line of mujāhidīn management. The plan of centralised control and coordination with a physical presence had worked: al-'Azzām founded the programme on the concept of a 'solid base' (*qā'ida ṣulba*)¹⁰, a territory where Muslims could live under true Islam and receive a true jihadist education (*al-tarbiyya al-jihādiyya*). The aim was to re-establish an Islamic state (*al-dawla al-islāmīyya*) for all Sunni Muslims (Van Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012:61). If Afghanistan was the place to start, jihad was the means to victory. In the meantime, doctrinal education had an essential role and the mosque the same importance as the military field, thus creating a new jihadist culture.

After Pabbi came the Sada project. After the defeat suffered by Ḥaqqānī's group in Zahawar, al-'Azzām decided to open a new specific training camp under the religious-administrative leadership of the MAK and the military guidance of Sayyāf. At Sada, the Holy Texts, the Arabic language and subjects such as philosophy, history and social sciences were studied together, testifying to the importance of Islamic cultural preparation (Hamid & Farral, 2015:84-85). The Sada base could rely on the Saudi network's personnel embedded in the MAK, and improved its infrastructure from 1986 with the arrival of Abū Burhān al-Suri (a former Syrian military officer with extensive war experience), 'Abd al-'Azīz 'Alī (Muslim Brotherhood veterans) and Alī Muḥammad (US-trained military officer and agent of the American intelligence services and in the future al-Qā'ida). He also had increased support from the CIA, which increased the number of its officers, diplomats and generals sent to Pakistan and increased the financial outlay, channelling the money through the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), founded by the Pakistani Āghā Ḥasan 'Abidī. The money passed through Saudi supervision (via the MWL) and went directly to the MAK (Bonney, 2004:328)¹¹. Sada became a key centre where qualified personnel worked to prepare the mujāhidīn in all components influencing combat. The scheme envisaged the arrival of mujāhidīn in Peshawar and their transfer to Sada, where they received training and later reached the front line, joining the battalions present (Berger, 2011:25-7).

The first contrasts over Sada came from the more belligerent section of the MAK, initially emerging in relation to the camp's secretive status: while al-'Azzām insisted that the fighters arrive at the time of the

10 Al-'Azzām promoted the notion of *qā'ida ṣulba* also in the journal al-jihād. According to Hegghammer it can be argued that the article, interpreted by many analysts as the manifesto of al-Qā'ida, actually had nothing to do with the organisation and simply referred to a strategic-ideological discourse (Hegghammer, 2020:115).

11 It is important to note once again how the MWL staff, who were involved in supervision, had been almost completely incorporated into the MAK.

centre's opening, the group led by Bin Lāden, Abū Hajir and Ḥaqqānī urged more caution, hoping to receive a larger number of Muslims and a higher level of security. Eventually al-'Azzām's line was adopted, which met with discontent especially from Abū Hajir (Hegghammer, 2020:335-6). He asked Sayyāf and Bin Lāden for help, proposing to seek an alternative solution. The concern about not being able to provide essential services to the mujāhidīn - which could drive away fighters by making the propaganda effort futile - was coupled with the fear that the presence of a reduced number of soldiers would not have been sufficient to defend the camp against an enemy attack. The new contemporary global jihadist current began to groan right there.

Al-'Azzām began to favour the arrival in Sada of Arab volunteers, distancing himself from Bin Lāden who, on the contrary, appreciated the presence of non-Arab Muslims in Sada's battalions; he was also dissatisfied with the level of military preparation that was achieved, as he expected a higher quality of training and wanted the fighters to become truly special groups. He put forward the idea of creating a separate detachment from Sada, which would deal exclusively with the military training of the mujāhidīn to form elite jihadist special forces. In October 1986 Bin Lāden instituted the separate camp of al-Ma'sada (translatable with 'tana of the lions') in the province of Jaji (Stenersen, 2017:14-5).

Al-'Azzām promoted the camp, although he remained sceptical about the danger and difficulty of its defence, because of its geographical positioning and proximity to the enemy front. Bin Lāden did not want to give up his position, considered strategic for guerrilla operations against the Soviets. They decided to develop a strategy to protect al-Ma'sada by initially integrating their system with the MAK, until it was secure. Abū 'Ubayda, a leading personality in the SRC, was at the head of the command, Abū Hajir was appointed director of training while supervision was in the hands of Bin Lāden, who invited members of Islamic terrorist organisations to join the cause¹² (Hegghammer, 2020:342-3).

Al-Ma'sada began to follow a different line from the MAK, distancing itself from its schematic trajectory. The camp attracted people who were exclusively interested in the military aspect and who wanted to be trained for combat. It became the real elite jihadist force in the Peshawar system and launched its first operation in 1987, with the so-called 'Operation Badr' in which all the leaders participated. Bin Lāden individualised the new trends within global jihadism and was adept at orienting them towards al-Ma'sada (Cook, 2005:197). As some of the incoming volunteers began to turn directly to Bin Lāden, the al-Ma'sada group began to separate its network from that of the MAK by establishing its own recruitment system. Progress was natural, from 1988 onwards the al-Ma'sada system began to call itself "the Base" (al-Qā'ida) and its group "the people associated with the base" (Hegghammer, 2020:352). From the union of the database containing the names of the jihadists who had frequented his camp Osāma bin Lāden created Qā'ida al-jihād, a jihadist terrorist organisation of Wahhabi-Salafi ideology (Kepel, 2016:361). The founders of the organisation included Abū 'Ubayda, Abū Hajir al-'Irāqī, Abū Ḥafṣ al-Maṣrī or Abū Khālid al-Maṣrī, but did not include al-'Azzām (Farrall, 2017). These were individuals who had had contacts with the Saudi network and had worked with the MAK. Thus, al-Qā'ida represented the natural evolution of the system¹³.

12 Ayman al-Zawāhirī of the Jamā'a al-Islāmiya al-Misrī group and Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī, leader of jihadist groups in the Mesopotamian area, will appear in al-Ma'sada.

13 The MAK has been recognised by the United Nations, with paragraph 13 of resolution 1828 (2008) as the progenitor of al-Qā'ida and its network as the basic infrastructure for the terrorist group (United Nations Security Council, 2010).

Al-Qā'ida was born with a well-defined structure: it consisted of a Consultative Council (*Shūrā*) and a Committee on *Sharī'a* and Politics for the purpose of issuing legal opinions (*fatāwā*). It had a Military Committee and a Finance Committee, accompanied by an office responsible for the procurement of arms and explosive material. It also had a delegation for security and intelligence, and another for propaganda (Cordesman & Obaid, 2006:3).

It was a movement based on the purest form of religion, its activity was not bound by territorial borders and had a global dimension, because the aggression experienced by Muslims was global (Stenersen, 2107:21). With the end of the war in Afghanistan, the members of the new organisation, fascinated by the new jihadist ideology that emerged in these training camps, did not abandon the group, whose global character allowed it to continue its activity in any country in the world. Many associations of Salafi belief joined al-Qā'ida, making it one of the largest and most structured terrorist organisations in the world.

The transactional nature of al-Qā'ida drew on the historical trajectory of Islamic fundamentalism, identifying itself in a Wahhabi-Salafi interpretation of Islam, although it emerged from a group of people interested in the military aspect of defending the religion rather than the will of the Saudi establishment (Commins, 2006:157). The political implications have been obvious. The al-Qā'ida board was composed of individuals who had close ties to Saudi Arabia and its network, and who had progressed by joining the MAK. The recruitment of al-Qā'ida was straightforward and saw mujāhidīn interested in reaching a higher level as fighters as its protagonists. After al-'Azzām's death in 1989, Bin Lāden took command of the MAK, incorporating it fully into the al-Qā'ida network and transforming it into the largest jihadist organisation that has ever existed.

The religious element has been central to al-Qā'ida propaganda. While its activity still contradicted some Wahhabi principles, presenting the problem of the validity of a jihad proclaimed by an unrecognised authority and the question of causing casualties among civilians and Muslims, the issue can demonstrate how the terrorist organisation emerged from a jihadist current, rather than from Wahhabi-Salafi propaganda. Moreover, membership of the group came from a willingness to practice jihad rather than religious belief, although the propaganda literature disseminated was of a Wahhabi-Salafi type (Commins, 2006:186). The ideological character of the organisation therefore respects an extremist and violent interpretation of Islam whose validity has not been proven. The terrorist actions carried out have testified to the fact that the religious message has served exclusively as an instrument in the service of propaganda and violence, seeking a legitimisation that only a very restricted number of people recognise.

5. Conclusions

If Peshawar has represented the central point where al-Qā'ida found fertile ground to originate, due to particular geopolitical (Afghanistan invasion) and social (years of extremist religious propaganda) conditions, al-Qā'ida has represented the end point of a system of which politics has lost control, causing problems for international security. Analysis of the movement must consider the socio-political elements that have led to its birth. The process of radicalisation of the umma had been favoured by political actors with strategic interests that have allowed the creation of an international fundamentalist network that was incorporated first in the MAK and then in al-Qā'ida. The system of interconnections allowed the mujāhidīn, once they returned to their own countries, to find a well-defined network where they could carry out proselytising activities spreading jihadist ideology. Thus a phenomenon of “return terrorism” was created, which definitively transported the issue of jihad to Western territory.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role played by Saudi Arabia in the creation of an international network, fed by aid under the pretext of solidarity, which constitutes the ideological and military foundations of the existing terrorist groups. Cells associated with al-Qā'ida are still active, and the influence of the core group remains strong. It is important to continue to study the phenomena by tracing their trajectories from their beginnings, in order to understand the causes that have generated the consequences we are experiencing today. It will be essential to continue to combat religious extremism that expresses itself in violent forms, as well as to continue to block the propagation and support networks that nurture these forms.

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