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**THE INFLUENCE OF THE WAHHABI DOCTRINE ON AL-  
QAEDA'S IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE ON VIOLENCE: FROM  
SALAFIYYA TO SECTARIAN VIOLENCE**

Maddalena Zupin

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**Abstract**

*The relationship between Wahhabism and Jihadism has been often misinterpreted as a result of both a public and a scholarly debate lacking in an informed understanding of the two movements' doctrinal underpinnings. The elaboration of an extremely puritan form of creed and the enforcement of social conservatism on part of Wahhabi ulama have been taken as evidence for Wahhabis' doctrinal closeness with the ideology of radical Islamic organisations such as al-Qaeda. As a matter of fact, the issue is far more complex, and requires a careful analysis of the Jihadis' discourse on violence in order to discern the actual influence exerted by the Wahhabi or by other Islamic traditions on it. In this essay this analysis has been carried out with regard to some key notions of the Jihadi ideology, in an attempt to shed some light on the debate over the doctrinal origins of Salafi-Jihadi thought.*

**Key words:** Islam, Wahhabism, al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, jihad

## Introduction

In the last two decades and especially after the 9/11 attacks, Jihadism has become a central topic in the public debate, which has been shaped by security studies (Meijer, 2009). In this framework, the Wahhabi religious tradition has been put under the spotlight for its alleged role in supporting terrorism against the West. Its puritan character and the promotion of a religious interpretation that leaves little space for compromise and dialogue with other religious traditions, coupled with the enforcement of a strict social conservatism, have been taken as evidence for the spread of religious intolerance, radicalisation and violence (al-Rasheed, 2007; Meijer, 2009). This view is supported by various authors, such as Stephen Schwartz, who argues that “Osama bin Laden and his followers belong to a puritanical variant of Islam known as Wahhabism, an extreme and intolerant Islamo-Fascist sect that became the official cult of Saudi Arabia.” (Schwartz, 2002, pp. 1). Moreover, the Saudi nationality of fifteen of the nineteen hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks, as well as the conspicuous participation of Saudi fighters in the Iraqi civil war, gave further substance to this thesis (al-Rasheed, 2007; Commins, 2006, pp. 194).

While this analysis can be considered simplistic as it overlooks many important points regarding the political role of Saudi Arabia in the region and its close alliance with the United States (al-Rasheed, 2007), it appears that it lacks of an informed understanding of the doctrinal underpinnings which characterise the two religious movements, Wahhabiyya and Jihadism. Without such analysis, the risk of misinterpretation of the Jihadi phenomenon is high, and the development of policies that seek to address it in terms of counter-terrorism strategies might be affected too. A closer examination of the relationship between the two movements, on the contrary, could be beneficial in terms of a better understanding of reality and development of effective policies.

In this essay, the Jihadi ideology and discourse on violence, which represents its distinguishing feature, will be examined in terms of points of contacts and departure from Wahhabism, in the attempt to chart their evolution and the influence exerted by Wahhabi doctrinal elements on them. Since "Jihadis" and "Jihadism" are terms used to

indicate a broad category of groups and related ideologies that can differ substantially from one case to another, al-Qaeda has been chosen as a case study relevant for the purpose. This choice is related to different reasons. On one hand to the availability of statements translated into English on the web, which represent an important primary source to look at in order to investigate the group's ideology. Although the translation into another language is certainly a limit, the amount of material allows for a comparison of the various sources, and consequently represents a fair guarantee of the reliability of these. On the other hand, the worldly fame of al-Qaeda for its involvement in many acts of terrorism and for the role the group has played in terms of conceptual and strategic change within the Jihadi universe (Fawaz, 2009) makes of al-Qaeda a reality that is worth of further study.

When looking at the doctrinal origins and orientation of al-Qaeda, there appears to be considerable disagreement in the scholarly production. The two major trends identified as matrixes for the Jihadi ideology are Salafism and Islamism. The first indicates a broad, heterogeneous movement divided in various branches sharing a common methodology and principles, of which Wahhabism represents a prominent example. The second indicates the more recent tradition that refers to the thought of Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, which spread primarily in Egypt and, to a lesser degree, in Saudi Arabia, mainly as a result of the latter's propaganda.

In academic writings, al-Qaeda is sometimes associated with or considered closer to the Islamist thought by authors who stress the importance that Qutb's worldview and notion of jihad have played in shaping the organization's ideology, to the point of stating that "the ideology of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda is not Wahhabi. It is instead part of the contemporary Jihadist tendency that evolved from the teachings of Sayyid Qutb and took shape in Egyptian militant groups that appeared in the 1970s and spread in the 1980s" (Commins, 2006, pp. 185; a similar view is expressed in Delong-Bas, 2004, pp. 166-174). Sometimes, emphasis is placed on the Salafi background to understand the doctrinal basis of Jihadi groups, al-Qaeda included (Haykel, 2009; Wagemakers, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2006). In his "Anatomy of the Salafi movement", Wiktorowicz operates a distinction between purist, politico and jihadi

Salafis that has been widely used by other authors writing on Jihadism. In the article, while he mentions the dramatic impact of Qutb's thought on some al-Qaeda leaders, he still uses Salafism as a useful category for identifying a common creed shared by all these groups, arguing that the fundamental difference among them lies in their reading of reality and the subsequent elaboration of practical actions to deal with it, rather than in conceptual and doctrinal terms (Wiktorowicz, 2006; a similar vision can be found in Haykel, 2009). According to this reading, Jihadis are referred to as "Jihadi-Salafis", and fall in the broader Salafi framework.

It is arguably correct to state that both Islamism and Salafism have had a profound impact on the development of Sunni Jihadism, and that elements of the two traditions can be found to different degrees in the ideology of a same Jihadi group. This is the case for al-Qaeda as well. However, if a dichotomous distinction might lose its operational effectivity in the analysis of such groups, it appears that Salafism still represents a useful analytical category when it comes to the doctrinal examination of Jihadism. As a matter of fact, while actors that are identified as Salafis express a whole range of contrasting political positions, they still share a set of common beliefs that points to a same doctrinal matrix (Paz, 2009).

Salafism has been taken here as a common ground for the study of al-Qaeda's ideology and of Wahhabism, which is strongly grounded in the Salafi tradition (al-Rasheed, 2007; Meijer, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2006). The first chapter will be dedicated to a brief exposition of the basic principles and notions of Salafism and early Wahhabism. The contradiction between doctrinal and political tradition implicit in Salafism has been particularly visible in the Wahhabi doctrine, whose origins and recent developments in the context of the transformation of Saudi Arabia into a modern state will be discussed with reference to the tension between religious purism and political quietism. The second chapter will be dedicated firstly to the events that have marked the emergence and evolution of al-Qaeda, secondly to an analysis of its doctrinal basis and the influences played by past ideologues on it. There are two doctrinal elements that can be identified as constituting the core of Jihadi ideology, which is to say *takfir* (excommunication) and *jihad* (religiously sanctioned warfare). These will be examined in detail in the attempt to highlight to what extent a specifically Wahhabi influence can

be discerned in their elaboration, and consequently in the elaboration of the discourse on violence. Finally, the third chapter will focus on the organization set up by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi in Iraq soon after the American invasion, which after 2004 became al-Qaeda's branch in Mesopotamia. Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the person of al-Zarqawi represents an important step in the evolution of al-Qaeda's ideology and in the broader Jihadi thought, as it introduces the element of sectarian violence in a new context. From occupying a marginal place, sectarian violence has come to constitute a central element in Jihadi discourse and justification of violence (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 111), and the one that has been taken up in the most recent developments of the Jihadi phenomenon represented by the Islamic State (Isakhan, 2015).

The argument drawn from such considerations with respect to the initial question is the following: while in the first phase, which goes from its foundation in 1988 to 2003, al-Qaeda's ideology and discourse on violence have essentially drawn from the broader Salafi background more than from specific Wahhabi doctrinal elements, in a second moment – from 2003 onwards – characteristic traits of Wahhabism have been adopted by al-Qaeda in Iraq in order to justify its acts of violence, and have consequently reshaped its broader Jihadi discourse.

## Chapter 1 – Salafism and Wahhabism

### 1.1 Salafism: doctrine and principles

The term "Salafism" derives from *al-salaf al-salih* (the pious forefathers) and refers to the first three generations of Muslims. Salafis believe that in order to reform Islam and "cleanse" it of external corruptive influences it is necessary to go back to a literal reading of the textual sources of authority, the Qur'an and the Sunna, as a means to return to the pristine purity of religion (Meijer, 2009). The emphasis on doctrinal purity is stressed to the point that all forms of elaboration of faith and rituals that have come after the experience of the Companions are questioned; the Sufi and Shi'a traditions are rejected, and the Islamic jurisprudence must not be blindly imitated. The only source that allows for interpretation of the Qur'anic message – or better, for understanding of how the message has to be applied in practice - is the normative example of the Prophet, and the traditions of those who had a direct contact with him and could produce reliable reports on his life and teachings. The *ahadith*, thus, have become the only interpretive link between the divine message and the contemporary context, and as such assume enormous relevance in the elaboration of the Salafi doctrine. Due to this literal and scripturalist interpretation, Salafis see themselves as the protectors of the only right form of creed; such claim to a greater certainty of the divine laws has also meant an absolutist claim to authenticity, and the ensuing "hostile othering" of non-Salafi Muslims (Duderija, 2011; Haykel, 2009, pp. 37).

The other distinguishing element of Salafism is the emphasis on *tawhid* - absolute monotheism in the sense of worship of God as the sole creator and supreme Lord, and direction of all worship to God alone, with its unique attributes - as the founding element and basic principle of Islam. From *tawhid* derives the forbiddance and rejection of all forms of innovation, and especially of those practices that denote *shirk*, association to God. It is implicit in this premise the antipathy that Salafis show towards other forms of Islamic creed, such the Shi'a and the Sufi ones. All these elements are to be traced back to the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya, considered to be the father of Salafism for the importance he attributed to the concept of *tawhid*,

purification of the Sunni tradition from all non-Salafi influences and active rejection of unbelief, as well as his mentor Ibn Hanbal (Haykel, 2009).

As already hinted above, Salafism presents itself as a reformist project, since it focuses entirely on the reformation of creed, while eschewing other matters which have to do with the political realm. The emphasis on doctrinal purity is at the basis of a clear rejection of worldly affairs, seen as carrying corrupting influences that deviate from the development of religious knowledge. Salafis' political stance, thus, is quietist, reflecting their tendency not to take position with regard to political issues. This sort of attitude clearly has resulted in a stark contradiction, where the political quietism has to come to terms with a reality in which compliance with the divine law cannot be achieved under the rule of deviant leaders (Haykel, 2009; Meijer, 2009).

The traits briefly outlined above raise some important issues for the understanding of Jihadi doctrine. The emphasis on the principle of *tawhid*, with its literal interpretation that leads to a narrow definition of what constitutes belief; the denial of innovations; the upholding of an unmediated, literal approach to the two sources of religious authority; all these elements denote a common creed and methodology that are shared by both Salafis and Jihadis (Wiktorowicz, 2009), and that entail the taking of similar positions with regard to the certainty of religious interpretation and the hostile attitude towards other Islamic groups and traditions.

## 1.2 Wahhabi doctrine

Wahhabism is a revivalist Salafi movement of the 18th century, which emerged in the central part of the Arabian peninsula as a response to the spread of what Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) considered to be blasphemy and ritual innovations (al-Rasheed, 2007).

The movement aimed to renovate belief and rituals as well as everyday practices by educating people on how to worship God in the right way and avoid *bida'* (popular innovations), which most of the time took the shape of acts of *shirk* (association of any other being to God). From the Salafi concept of faith as absolute monotheism, indeed, derived a particular attention for practice as the outward manifestation of the Islamic

creed, and as an indisputable condition to the devotion of all worship to God. Proclaiming, understanding and affirming the supreme unity of God could not be separated from doing it practically in every facet of life and from denying actively other objects of worship (Commins, 2006, pp. 14). *Kitab al-Tawhid*, the cornerstone opera of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, presents a long list of acts classified as idolatry and *shirk*, as they do not find any precedence either in the Qur'an or the Sunna - included acts irrelevant to other religious sensibilities, such as showing off - where the individual, most of the times without proper intention, calls attention on a certain object and places it above God (al-Wahhab, n.d.). Crucially, it called for active rejection of those idols, if necessary by destroying the object itself - no matter if it was the case of the Companions' tombs - and killing those who persisted in their actions without repenting. This active component of faith was embodied by the Salafi principle of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, loyalty (towards what is Islamic) and disavowal (*vis-à-vis* what is un-Islamic). In the Salafi tradition, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* is the principle regulating the relationship between the community of believers and the non-believers. Wahhabis, instead, characterised themselves for a sectarian attitude towards Muslims that were not in line with their interpretation of Islam, using *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* to distance themselves from these Muslims (Mejier, 2009, pp. 10).

In a sympathetic portrait of Wahhabism, the American scholar Natana Delong-Bas argues that al-Wahhab placed emphasis on intent rather than ritual perfection: since every action is the reflection of inner faith, a correct form of belief should lead to correct behavior (Delong-Bas, 2004, pp. 41, 59). On the contrary, harsh readings of original Wahhabism argue that al-Wahhab was willing to immediately declare apostasy on all those Muslims who did not align with his understanding of faith (Algar, 2002). Although it might be difficult to judge to what extent the intention-based approach corresponds to the truth, and conversely to what extent al-Wahhab actually focused on the act itself, as a matter of fact he is within the Salafi tradition - which places the emphasis on intention - when it comes to the practice of *takfir* (excommunication).

A brief digression on the debate over *takfir* in Islamic thought is here required, since the issue is a crucial one in Jihadi ideology and represents an important connection to



the Salafi doctrine. The origins of the debate are to be traced back to the Khariji split, which took place after the death of the third Caliph, in the ensuing context of civil war. While in mainstream Muslim opinion faith is formed by both belief and action, and the first constitutes its defining characteristic – which means that who is a wrongdoer is a sinner but still remains a believer, while who does not believe is an infidel - according to the Kharijites there is no such difference between belief and action, in the sense that who is a sinner is also an unbeliever (Wiktorowicz, 2006, pp. 228-229). The Khariji understanding of faith has been regarded as deviant throughout Islamic history, since Qur'anic references to apostasy are about belief and not faith (ibidem, pp. 229); moreover, it enhances *fitna* (sedition) within the Muslim community.

Salafis, on their part, believe that an act of apostasy is not equal to a status of apostasy, as the *intention* to renounce Islam represents the dividing line. Therefore, one could commit an act of sin out of ignorance, coercion or other reasons that have nothing to do with disbelieving Islam, such as error or personal benefit. As long as the person does not consider it to be lawful, knowing that it has been declared to be unlawful in the Shari'a, he or she is not a disbeliever (ibidem, pp. 229-230). The position described above is the one upheld by al-Wahhab. He argued that all sins will be forgiven by God, with, however, the notable exception of acts of major *shirk* (as revealed in the Qur'an). Who dies while committing an act of *shirk* will enter Hell, even though he might have been a great worshipper. Supplicating pious persons, in fact, constitutes the gravest form of *shirk* and means automatic expulsion from Islam (al-Wahhab, n.d.).

Wahhabi scholars today are within the Salafi framework in stressing the relevance of intent in the evaluation of instances of *kufr* (unbelief), which have to be analysed in the light of the impediments above explained: ignorance, compulsion, error ("Kufr can occur without believing in kufr or desiring it", in <http://www.spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=AQD13&articleID=GSC050005&articlePages=1> [binbaz.co.uk]), or other reasons such as seeking somebody's benefit ("Imaam Ibn Baz on Imaam, Kufr, Irij'a and the Murji'ah", in <http://www.spubs.com/sps/downloads/pdf/AQD130001.pdf> [binbaz.co.uk]). Acts of major associationism cannot be excused, as there is no

possibility of ignorance in prostrating or sacrificing ("Kufr can occur without Istihlaal of Juhud", <http://www.spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=AQD13&articleID=GSC050006&articlePages=1> [binbaz.co.uk]).

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The nuances regarding *takfir* described above assume enormous importance when it comes to the exercise of violence within the Muslim community. Due to the Qur'anic prohibition to kill and violate the property of fellow Muslims, a part from some strict exceptions, and the legal impediments to revolt against the ruler (Scott, 2003), the declaration of apostasy is the only means through which it becomes possible to wage jihad against an internal enemy. For this reason, such details provide an important clue in discerning which religious tradition Jihadis refer to when exposing their justifications of violence.

Directly linked to *takfir*, as just mentioned, is the issue of jihad. The revivalist project of al-Wahhab aimed to reform popular behaviour through *da'wa*, the call to faith, which involves preaching and persuasion. This is in line with the fact that he did recognize that, most of the times, idolaters were just ignorant folk that had gone astray and could be guided back to the right path. This stage was fundamental in the process of conversion of the population: only those who had received the call, understood it and consciously rejected it were ultimately considered unbelievers and fought (Commins, 2006, pp. 25; Delong-Bas, 2004). The violent method of last resort must not divert the attention from the fact that Wahhabism was primarily a mission of reformation and return to the pristine purity of religion, not of blatant destruction of the enemy.

The other situations identified by al-Wahhab as requiring military action are closer to the notion of jihad in traditional Islamic jurisprudence, where jurists traditionally have been united in condemning warfare among Muslims, and have come to see it mostly as a collective duty (*fard al-kifaya*, opposed to *fard al-'ayn*, which indicates an individual duty). Al-Wahhab envisages jihad against an external enemy in the following cases: when an enemy attacks Muslim lands, when the Muslim army encounters and confronts another army and when the *imam* (the legitimate leader) calls for it, presumably again in case of defensive jihad, where defense is obligatory (Delong-Bas, 2004, pp. 203). Moreover, he asserted that jihad as a collective duty had overtaken

jihad as an individual duty (Ibidem, pp. 43). What is important to point out here is that the role of jihad in all these cases appears to be functional to other issues, such as the combating of unbelief, the spread of belief and the defense of the community. It never becomes a duty to be exercised for its own sake.

Finally, it is important to underscore how al-Wahhab, in line with the spirit of his mission, felt more urgency in the first kind of jihad – the internal struggle against blasphemy - than in the second. As Commins put it, “he did not fear the prospect of an enemy conquering the believers, but that of misguided leaders restoring idol worship and the appearance of false prophets” (Commins, 2006, pp. 16). As a further confirmation, it is recognized that historically most of Wahhabi violence has targeted other Muslims rather than non-Muslims (al-Rasheed, 2007, pp. 45).

### 1.3 Contemporary Wahhabism

With its specific interpretation of Islam and the tendency to rule out other deeply rooted interpretations, Wahhabism would have probably remained an isolated sect, had it not been for the pact al-Wahhab made with the al-Sa'ud clan in 1744. The alliance with a group that soon started a conquest campaign provided the political protection and enforcement needed in order to make Wahhabism the hegemonic religious discourse in the peninsula (al-Rasheed, 2007; Commins, 2006; Haykel, 2009). This deal somehow allowed for a solution to the dilemma over political authority of Salafi origins which has been previously described (Haykel, 2009). As an extremely puritan movement, Wahhabism could not tolerate to recognize to be legitimate a ruler that did not enforce the Shari'a; at the same time, it needed the political sponsorship without which it would be probably doomed to disappearance. On the other hand, the al-Sa'ud clan and future monarchy found in the Wahhabi doctrine a powerful source of religious legitimacy. The tensions implicit in the agreement between the religious and the political establishments could not but emerge with the development of the kingdom into a modern nation-state fully inscribed in an increasingly globalized world.

The monarchy soon initiated a process of centralisation and consolidation of political power, which was gradually concentrated into the ruling family's hands; in this context, Wahhabism was progressively institutionalized through co-optation of the religious scholars, who came to fully support a monarchy pursuing interests that had little to do with Islamic principles and more with a project of national consolidation. In al-Rasheed's words, "in the 21th century [Wahhabism] is a discourse of consent, that requires subservience to the political power" (al-Rasheed, 2007, pp. 26).

This situation has been at the basis of the emergence of schism and opposition within the Wahhabi movement, facilitated by the arrival in the 60s of the Egyptian Ikhwan. Members of the movement in that period were fleeing from the Nasserist persecution, bringing in Saudi Arabia their radical political stances. The gradual development of dissent against a corrupted and deviant élite was met with repression. This factor, alongside a process of centralisation of power and institutionalisation of the religious establishment's role, caused fragmentation and further contestation (ibidem, 2007).

This climate and the events that unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s, with the war in Afghanistan first and the Gulf war in 1991, represented a crucial factor in the formation of Salafi Jihadism, as well as the driving force under an ideological shift internal to the movement.

## Chapter 2 – Jihadism and the emergence of al-Qaeda

### 2.1 Bin Laden, the birth and the evolution of al-Qaeda

The vicissitudes of al-Qaeda and the ensuing development of its ideology have been here examined with reference to the organization's leader, Osama Bin Laden, as it has appeared the best way to provide a quick insight into the events that have shaped its formation.

Born in Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden (1957-2011) studied in Saudi schools under famous figures such as Muhammad Qutb, brother of Saiyyd Qutb, and sheikh Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, who played a crucial role in the shaping of al-Qaeda's ideology. Similarly to Bin Laden, many Salafi-Jihadis received their formation in Saudi universities under Ikhwan members. In 1988 at the end of the war in Afghanistan, Bin Laden founded al-Qaeda in Peshawar, in order to continue the global struggle against the infidels. The victorious conflict against a distant enemy galvanized the *mujahedin*, who had come in Afghanistan believing that it was a duty of all to help fellow Muslims against the unbelievers. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm for a mission that went beyond the territorial boundaries of their own countries as part of a broader struggle, the notion of Islamist jihad was still bounded to fighting domestic, secular authoritarian regimes (Commins, n.d.; Fawaz, 2009). At the basis of Jihadis' stress on the centrality of jihad against the internal enemy there was the enormous influence exerted by the Islamist thought of Saiyyd Qutb, who informed much of Jihadi thinking and action. From the 1970s to the mid-90s, the treacherous role played by local regimes in allowing Western penetration was seen as the main reason behind the Western ability to subjugate Muslims. At that point, there was not yet an international Jihadi agenda (Fawaz, 2009, pp. 12).

In the early 90s, Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia, where he offered to the monarchy his services and that of the “Arab Afghans” in the war launched against Iraq following the Kuwait invasion. The refusal on part of the Saudi leadership and the acceptance of the American support instead represented an outrage to the *mujahedin* and their leader: the Saudis had blatantly violated the Shari'a by renouncing to their

right to a defensive jihad and turning over the task to the unbelievers, and by letting the infidel troops to station permanently on Saudi soil. This could not but signify abandonment of Islam (DeLong-Bas, 2004). Thus, since the early 90s Bin Laden became a Saudi dissident alongside many others. The Kuwait episode in particular has been indicated by many scholars as the crucial moment in the process of radicalization of Saudi Jihadism and in the shift towards a global jihad (Fawaz, 2009; Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2004; Peters, 2014). The infidels' occupation of the cradle of Islam and the site of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina gradually convinced Bin Laden that the USA represented the main enemy, a primary target on whose annihilation depended the success of the struggle against the forces of unbelief (Peters, 2014). This view finds its complete expression in the 1996 Declaration of War against America and the ensuing *fatwa* (legal opinion) of 1998. In these documents it is argued that Muslims are the target of a Judeo-Crusader alliance aimed at destroying Islam, as it is demonstrated by the killing and oppression of Muslims in many countries. Americans in particular are the main cause of the Muslim predicament, aided by renegade Muslim governments, as it is the case of Saudi Arabia, whose occupation represents the last and most serious attack against the Islamic world. Only by liberating the land from the US occupation the jihad against local clients would be successful. The ensuing consideration is the necessity to call for an international jihad against Americans (Commins, n.d.).

The response of the official Wahhabi scholars to the monarchy's and the US provocations constituted another element that could not but confirm the degree to which corruption had penetrated both the political and the religious realm. In 1991 the scholars issued a *fatwa* justifying the American presence in Saudi Arabia, showing a support for the monarchy that would have been reiterated in the events of the following years (al-Rasheed, 2007, 44; al-Rasheed, 2008, pp. 210).

From the mid-90s onwards, jihad against the far enemy has thus become the new ideological and operational focus of the broader Jihadi movement, as a result of a push initiated by a section of trans-nationalist Jihadis led by al-Qaeda (Fawaz, 2009, pp.12). There are different reasons at play behind this shift, a part from the ones explained above (see Fawaz, 2009); for our purpose suffice it to say that the 1996 Declaration

must be read as the embodiment of the mixing of religious dissent directed towards domestic governments with the emergence of the notion of fighting an external enemy (Commins, n.d.).

## 2.2 Al-Qaeda's discourse, recurrent themes

In al-Qaeda's documents, recurrent themes include the denunciation of a long list of misdeeds committed by the US and its Jewish ally in an analysis of American policies in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the parallel denunciation of renegade Arab governments. These regimes are believed to have been installed by and be tied to the infidels, and are guilty for not applying the Islamic law and for preventing people from establishing a right order through violence and lies (Lawrence, 2005, pp. 160-172 and 186-206). In practice, al-Qaeda engages in an analysis of the contextual situation and elaborates a certain reading of reality – essentially one where a sequel of instances of oppression on Muslims are read not as distinct events, but as part of a broader, destructive plan - thus individuating the reasons behind the Muslims' predicament and weakness. The third great recurrent theme is jihad, presented as a sacred and obligatory duty now pending on every Muslim. These views are largely expressed in writings such as “To the Americans”, “Among a Band of Knights”, “Declaration of War against America”, “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” (Bin Laden et al., 1998; Commins, n.d.; Lawrence 2005, pp. 160-172 and 186-206).

With regard to the first theme - jihad against the far enemy - it is easy to see how it is far from the Wahhabi tradition; in fact, it constitutes a first important factor of differentiation. As already pointed out, Wahhabis historically have maintained a certain continuity in promoting jihad against Muslims. If support of warfare against foreign invaders has been used at certain points by the leadership in response to contingent political interests, it is jihad within the *umma* that constitutes the trademark of Wahhabi religious tradition.

The second broad theme - the denunciation of domestic governments as treacherous and apostates - calls into question two issues. The first and most striking one relates to the practice of performing *takfir* upon a ruler. As mentioned before, Wahhabism since

its inception elaborated on the necessity of not revolting against the ruler and obeying him. This fact alone significantly distances Wahhabism from Jihadism: although after the mid-90s the main target came to be the far enemy, al-Qaeda still carried on a strategy of parallel fight against Muslim governments. The second issue involves the underlying understanding of *takfir*, which has been used in order to attack Muslim rulers. By analysing how Jihadis conceptualize this notion, it is possible to discern its proximity with the Wahhabi-Salafi understanding.

Finally, the way Jihadis conceptualise the notion of jihad represents another issue that sheds further light on their ideology and its relationship with the Wahhabi notion.

### 2.3 *Takfir* in al-Qaeda's ideology and Wahhabi doctrine

As a matter of fact, the emphasis that Wahhabis place on absolute monotheism as the cornerstone of their doctrine and the deriving narrow understanding of belief have represented the fertile ground for the development of both peaceful and radical Islamic thinking. This element has been taken as evidence for doctrinal affinity between Wahhabism and Jihadism. More specifically, the alleged influence of Wahhabism on Saudi Jihadism has been referred to the Wahhabi provision of religious justification for *takfir*, in particular with reference to al-Qaeda (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

This last assertion would imply that al-Qaeda has used elements that are proper to the Wahhabi doctrine in order to justify excommunication in broad terms and, consequently, the use of violence against apostates. When looking at al-Qaeda's statements until 2003, however, it appears clear how, in purely doctrinal terms, the organization does not distance itself from the Wahhabi-Salafi tradition, which places a set of regulations and restrictions before the application of *takfir*.

As a result of the Salafi influence, Jihadis in al-Qaeda share Salafis' attention when it comes to the excommunication and killing of Muslims; moreover, they reject the use of *takfir* against broad segments of population (Wiktorowicz, 2005, pp. 89). This preoccupation is reflected by Abu Hamza al-Misri, a radical preacher and supporter of al-Qaeda, in his treaty named "The Khawaarij and Jihad". He argues that declaring unbelief without proof is a grave mistake, namely the mistake of the Kharijites. To



illustrate further this point, he makes reference to al-Wahhab and previous scholars who, when calling an act *kufir*, did not declare every person that did it a *kafir* (unbeliever); in fact, “to apply *kufir*... has to go through specific rules and regulations according to Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama’ah“ (“Misunderstandings of the Khawarij regarding the issue of *takfir*”, al-Misri, 2009). He goes on listing the impediments to *takfir*: the person must be sane and well in his senses, he must have knowledge or access to knowledge of the Islamic law, and must have committed the action deliberately and free of coercion. However, praying saints is a major *kufir*, a major act of associationism that has no excuse whatsoever (*ibidem*).

Al-Qaeda in the document titled “al-Qaeda's Creed and Path” presents nearly the same arguments. The organization distances itself from the Kharijites, as they are extremists who abuse of excommunication. It declares that sins that fall short of associationism do not constitute evidence of unbelief, unless the person considers them to be lawful; performing acts of major *shirk*, however, means unbelief even if there is no intention behind them, as it represents one of the gravest ways of falling outside Islam. Moreover, “the excommunication of a specific person depends on the fulfillment of the conditions of excommunication with respect to him and the suspension of the obstacles to its application against him” (Haykel, 2009, pp. 51-56).

Another instance that is revealing of al-Qaeda's attitude towards deviant Muslims is the statement released after the Riyadh attack in 2003, where several Muslims were killed (Wiktorowicz, 2009, pp. 230). Al-Qaeda responded to its critics defending its willingness to help all Muslim brothers, even if they are ignorant and only know the *shahada*, the testimony of faith, as it was the case for Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya. “We declare no one that prays towards Mecca to be an unbeliever for any sin, as long as he does consider it licit. Our method is that of the People of the Sunna and al-Jama'ah” (al-Qaeda, 2003, pp. 24). What is more, some Jihadis had argued that one of the victims was an advocate of debauchery and obscenity, implying by that that he was an unbeliever and had deserved such treatment. Significantly, in the justification for the attack al-Qaeda responded that sinfulness was not a mark of apostasy unless there was legal evidence (*ibidem*, pp. 41-42).

Since the Wahhabi-Salafi notion on *takfir* requires that there be absolute certainty of the individual's intention to reject Islam, by considering licit the illicit, before declaring apostasy, it is clear how it becomes difficult if not impossible to practice *takfir* upon a ruler (Wiktorowicz, 2005, pp. 77). As we have just demonstrated, Jihadis at least until the early 2000s showed a similar understanding of *takfir*. How do they arrive at excommunicating entire governments then?

In "al-Qaeda's Creed and Path" it is stated that the ruler who does not rule according to the Shari'a and substitutes it with some other law is an infidel apostate. Armed revolt against those leaders is said to be an individual duty upon all Muslims (Haykel, pp. 53). Sheikh Ibn Baz, one of the most prominent Saudi scholars, argued in his *fatwas* that the replacement of Shari'a with secular laws constitutes a major *kufir* only if it is made permissible. If it is made out of disobedience to Allah, bribery or pleasing somebody, then it is a matter of minor *kufir* ("Imaam Ibn Baz on Imaam, Kufr, Irij'a and the Murji'ah", in <http://www.spubs.com/sps/downloads/pdf/AQD130001.pdf>). According to Wiktorowicz, starting from the same doctrinal premises and arriving to such different conclusions on the same matter is due to a different contextual reading of reality that the two groups make (Wiktorowicz, 2009). Bin Laden did not discard the necessity to look for certain evidence of unbelief, nor changed the notion of what constitutes unbelief. What allowed him to declare *takfir* in such broad terms was the fact of opposing a sharp analysis of reality to the Saudi scholars' unwillingness to distinguish between Islamic and un-Islamic behaviors when it comes to their rulers. With regard to the Saudi monarchy, Bin Laden took the pervasiveness of their corrupted actions as a valid proof indicating that they deemed these actions to be legitimate (Wiktorowicz makes the case with the practice of usury. Wiktorowicz, 2009, pp. 233). Following this line of reasoning, it is easy to see how the pervasive character of an illicit act becomes a sufficient criterion denoting unbelief if this is widely applied, as it is the case for governments systematically applying certain practices at a national level.

While purist Salafi scholars have traditionally refused to engage in contextual analysis of reality, which fits with their subservience to the political power, the contextual reading of the situation that Muslims face today in al-Qaeda is informed by the

Islamist legacy of Saiyyd Qutb. As it appears quite evident from al-Qaeda's writings, the organisation's global message is founded on a dichotomous worldview, which finds its origins in the tradition initiated by Ibn Taymiyya and taken up by Qutb (al-Rasheed, 2007; DeLong-Bas, 2004). The vision of the world as characterised by a cosmic battle between belief and unbelief, where jihad naturally becomes part of the very nature of Islam and represents a permanent and universal duty, constitutes the trademark of the Qutbian message (Qutb in ed. al-Mehri, 2006). The same goes for the theme of a global Crusader-Zionist conspiracy, which recurs time and again in al-Qaeda's writings and is key to the justification for waging a global jihad in a context where the survival of religion is at stake (DeLong-Bas, 2004, pp. 267-7). On the contrary, al-Wahhab's critique and ensuing violent action was all for the internal corruption of faith that was taking place in Muslim lands, and it was specifically directed towards individuals or groups threatening Islam with their blasphemy. Although Ibn Taymiyya also addressed an "internal issue", as his preoccupation concerned the Mongols, who had officially converted to Islam, his attack against "false believers" and their agents developed within a broader framework, where the battle against unbelief took a wider – cosmic indeed - dimension. It is this element that, further elaborated by Qutb through the notions of *hakimiyya* (absolute sovereignty of God), *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic state of barbarism) and jihad as a permanent and universal duty, has been taken up and has become a key feature of Jihadi ideology. The Islamist worldview has become the lens through which Jihadis understand reality and judge the behavior of Muslim leaders, significantly lowering the threshold required to individuate evidence of disbelief and justify violence against them (Wiktorowicz, 2006).

To summarise, the Jihadi notion of *takfir* differs from the Wahhabi-Salafi notion in two important points: in being directed toward rulers and in being informed by an Islamist worldview, that fundamentally changes the way the notion is applied in practice.

#### 2.4 *Jihad* in al-Qaeda's ideology and Wahhabi doctrine

In classic Islamic jurisprudence, jihad has been conceived either as expansionist warfare against unbelievers or as defensive effort against an attacking enemy. In both cases, it was directed towards non-Muslims (DeLong-Bas, 2004; Scott, 2003). Wahhabism, in this sense, represents a historical exception; similarly, the Jihadi operation through which a Muslim ruler is declared to be an apostate and jihad is called against him represents a modern development in Muslim thought (Commins, n.d.). By doing so, Jihadis break the Sunni tradition that put the preservation of the unity of the *umma* as a priority, and draw from the radical thought of Qutb, al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya.

From this point of view, Jihadis are in line with the Wahhabi tradition of pronouncing *takfir* and waging jihad against fellow Muslims as an implication of the emphasis they both place on *tawhid*. However, they differ significantly with regard to who is meant to be the target of excommunication and jihad. This consideration leads us to the first important differentiation between the Wahhabi and the Jihadi conceptions of jihad, which is to say the purpose for which war is waged. Al-Wahhab's main focus and purpose of jihad was the eradication of idolatry among people, which was reproduced through everyday life practices. On the contrary, this is not the focus in al-Qaeda's discourse. Throughout their discourses, Jihadis when talking about jihad do refer much more to the themes elaborated by Sayyid Qutb than to al-Wahhab, to the point that Qutb has been often considered to be the spiritual father and ideologue of Jihadism (DeLong-Bas, 2004, pp. 266; Fawaz, 2009, pp. 4-5; Meijer, 2009, pp. 24-25). In Qutb's thought, jihad is the duty to perform in order to eradicate *jahiliyya* and establish *hakimiyya*. The main agents responsible for spreading unbelief are figures and institutions of power – chiefly corrupted Muslim governments. The focus and the target is thus represented by treacherous Muslim institutions, rather than popular practices. The Jihadi discourse, indeed, is replete with statements heavily condemning renegade governments as the cause of all evil and the Muslims' predicament; there is no mention of the need to reform society at large from the bottom-up, but rather to overthrow corrupted institutions and establish the Shari'a

through a top-down approach. To put it differently, Qutb gave a distinct political dimension to the concepts of *tawhid* and *hakimiyya*, while al-Wahhab eschewed any political implication of its doctrine, an attitude still retained today by the Wahhabi *ulama*.

As we have seen, Jihadis have also appropriated the Islamists' worldview, which is intimately linked to *takfir* and, arguably, to the very conception of jihad. This represents the second relevant element to consider in analysing the two different notions of jihad. According to al-Wahhab, jihad is just one instrument functional to reformation. Since reformation is the aim, this leaves the door open for different ways to achieve it: peaceful preaching and persuasion and, if necessary, use of force. In Qutb and Jihadis' thought, jihad is functional to the annihilation of the enemy. In the context of a cosmic battle between good and evil, no middle-way is envisaged; the forces of unbelief must be eliminated so that faith can triumph and the divine order be established. Because the end goal is total destruction, military warfare becomes the only means possible to adopt, as God has revealed through Muhammad. What follows is that in Qutb and al-Qaeda's discourse jihad appears to have been placed one step further in the scale of importance towards the implementation of the divine will, to the point that Jihadis refer to it as an individual duty upon all Muslims, a personal obligation and one that is second only to belief (Fawaz, 2009, pp. 3).

Elements showing how Jihadis make out of jihad a sacred duty in itself are to be found in its invocation as a permanent and personal obligation, instead that of a collective duty, and as a vital pillar of Islam (Fawaz, 2009, pp. 3). This understanding of jihad has been embraced by al-Qaeda. In the 1998 *fatwa* it is stated that "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies - civilians and military - is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it" (Bin Laden et al., 1998; also cited in Peters, 2014). Moreover, the glorification of jihad constitutes a recurrent theme alongside the accusation against the enemies of Islam. The cosmic dimension of the battle that is taking place appears to charge jihad of new religious importance, making warfare a primary duty and defining tenet of faith. In conclusion, the Jihadi notion of jihad is close to the Wahhabi tradition in the sense that they both represent exceptions to the traditional elaboration of jihad. Having said that, the first is

informed by a different purpose and understanding of its religious nature, to the point of marking a significant distance from the Wahhabi conception.

### Chapter 3 – Al-Qaeda in Iraq

#### 3.1 Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi and the rise of anti-Shi'ism in the region

There is one instance where Wahhabi thought has been used as the primary justification for jihad. It is the case of al-Zarqawi and the violent battle he waged against Shi'is in Iraq after 2003.

Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006), of Jordanian origins, belonged to the vast network of militants who took part and became radicalised in the events that unfolded in the 1980s and 90s, starting with the war in Afghanistan. From Afghanistan he moved to Peshawar, where he met Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (whose real name was Asim Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi), a prominent radical Salafi preacher of Wahhabi formation. This encounter represented arguably the most significant event for al-Zarqawi's formation (Napoleoni, 2005). The element that constitutes the hallmark of al-Maqdisi's thought is the concept of *al-wala' wal-bara'*, the necessity to uphold *tawhid* and actively reject any form of *shirk*. Polytheism is essentially identified as non-adherence to the Shari'a and, also, as befriending in any way those who do not strictly follow the Islamic law and values. What is more, jihad is understood as the highest form of disavowal, as it represents the most unambiguous method to reject the enemies (Wagemakers, 2008). Hence, what was to influence greatly al-Zarqawi's thought and practice was the teaching to reject violently all those who do not uphold *tawhid* as well as all those who do not join in condemning the "deviants", leading to a radicalisation of modern Salafi doctrine (Napoleoni, 2005, pp. 58). At the beginning of the 1990s, the couple returned to Jordan, where they founded the armed organization *al-Tawhid* and started preaching the infidelity of the Arab regimes (Napoleoni, 2005, pp. 62-63). In 2003, the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing chaos provided the occasion for the expansion of al-Zarqawi's network (Kepel and Milelli, 2008). In Iraq al-

Zarqawi formed *al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* and started preparing the ground for another civil war, this time targeting Shi'is as the first enemy to strike in the process of liberation of the country. In 2004, al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Bin Laden, and the group was renamed al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (Kepel and Milelli, 2008). Behind the decision to attack the Shi'is first there were different reasons. First of all, it was a religious duty. Zarqawi considered them to be treacherous apostates, an internal enemy in collusion with the external enemy in its attempt to destroy Islam from within. Secondly, it represented a strategic choice towards the end of the occupation, by depriving the US of its internal ally. Finally, attacking and defeating the Shi'is implied the takeover of power in the country, since it was the Shi'a majority who now had acquired it (Napoleoni, 2005; Steinberg, 2009). From these premises al-Zarqawi launched a total war on Shi'is, indiscriminately attacking them with the end goal of eliminating the sect altogether. Although al-Zarqawi's strategy in Iraq attracted some criticism from other Jihadi-Salafis, these focused more on tactics than on principles (Kepel and Milelli, 2008, pp. 246). In fact, while al-Qaeda's leadership questioned the efficacy of targeting Shi'is as the best strategy to end the occupation, it did not put into question the fact that they were ultimately infidels (see al-Zawahiri's letter in <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>).

Anti-Shi'ism appears to have been fundamentally supported by Wahhabi clerics, in the past as well as in the present days (Kazimi, 2006; Khanzadeh, 2013; Steinberg, 2009; Teitelbaum, 2010). This fact has to be related to the Wahhabi traditional religious discourse, but also to a politicization of the original notion of anti-Shi'ism, which has taken place in the last decades (al-Rasheed, 2007). This process also helps to explain the different layers at play in the anti-Shi'a upsurge that took place in the context of the Iraqi war. From the 1980s, the major events that unfolded in the region and that have profoundly changed the regional balance of power – the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and later Saddam's fall and the Iraq invasion – have triggered a process of politicization of religious differences, which were now read in the light of the regional confrontation between two emerging powers – Iran and Saudi Arabia (al-Rasheed, 2007, pp. 105-111). In this context, Saudi Arabia started to look at the world through a “Shi'a prism” (Teitelbaum, 2010, pp. 72), where its main concern in foreign

policy (and, to some extent, in domestic policy as well) came to be the rise of Iran and the role Shi'a communities scattered around the region played in it. These dynamics have arguably made the position of Shi'is even worse, as they have become a central concern to the Saudi monarchy in political terms.

### 3.2 Al-Zarqawi's ideology

The origins of the fracture between Shi'is and Sunnis date back to the conflict that unfolded over the succession to the third Caliph, 'Uthman. As for the development of an anti-Shi'a religious discourse, this is referred back to the initiator and the followers of the Hanbali school of law, in the 8th and 9th centuries Baghdad (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 107). Later, Wahhabis adopted the same discourse in the 18th century, and still promoted it in the first decade of 2000s through a plethora of propaganda directed against Shi'is (Kazimi, 2006, pp. 66). Hence, it is Wahhabism that is ultimately identified as the tradition which has laid the intellectual foundations for Salafi anti-Shi'ism (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 109).

Anti-Shi'ism, therefore, is not a new theme in Islamic doctrinal discourse; it belongs instead to a consolidated religious tradition. Nevertheless, al-Zarqawi represents a particular case since "he is unique in having put theory in practice to the point of aiming to the annihilation of the entire Shii population" (Kazimi, 2005, pp. 68). In his chapter "Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'is" in *Global Salafism*, Steinberg argues that al-Zarqawi's anti-Shi'ism is hardly distinguishable from Wahhabis', as many of the concepts used by the Jordanian Jihadist are drawn from the writings of Wahhabi scholars, and especially from the doctrinal works of al-Wahhab himself (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 111-112). Moreover, Steinberg refers to the crucial influence exerted by al-Maqdisi on the development of al-Zarqawi's ideology (ibidem, pp. 109). Given the strongly operational character of al-Maqdisi's interpretation of the concept of *al-wala' wal-bara'*, it is arguably correct to state that, on one hand, Wahhabi traditional views on Shi'ism informed al-Zarqawi's ideology in terms of the strong aversion to Shi'ism; on the other hand, the legacy of al-Maqdisi in the form of the necessary rejection of



*shirk* provided the operational input that sparked extended violence. The final result has been a total, indiscriminate war against Shi'is.

There appear to be two main sets of reasons behind Wahhabis' strong aversion to Shi'is. The first concerns rituals that are an integral part of Shi'a popular creed, and that directly challenge the core principle of the Wahhabi doctrine. In this sense, practices related to the veneration of the *imams* constitute blatant acts of associationism and polytheism; even worse, visiting tombs and shrines represents the greatest act of *shirk*, and automatically denotes unbelief (Khanzadeh, 2013; Teitelbaum, 2010).

The second relates to the Shi'is' rejection of the legitimacy – and thus the authority – of the first three rightly-guided Caliphs. Since the Caliphs were the main guarantor of the authenticity of the Sunna, attacking and even reviling them means attacking the very foundations of Salafism and of al-Wahhab's project of reform, which was based on the close observation of the conduct of the Prophet in order to distinguish permitted practices and creed from innovations (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 113). This *hadith*-based approach was the characterizing element of the Hanbali school of law, of which al-Wahhab was an adherent. It was Ibn Hanbal in fact who introduced the term "rejectionists" and initiated the fight against Shi'is, carried on later by his followers, most notably by Ibn Taymiyya (*ibidem*). More recently, Wahhabi clerics have demonstrated to be still in line with the teachings of al-Wahhab, through the circulation of treaties and internet material (Kazimi, 2006, 55; Khanzadeh, 2013; Teitelbaum, 2010). As illustrative examples can be cited the infamous *fatwa* calling for Shi'is' death issued by the prominent scholar Ibn Jibreen in 1991, as well as the *fatwa* signed by radical clerics following the sectarian war in Iraq (Teitelbaum, 2010; more on *fatwas* against Shi'is where they are labeled as polytheists and infidels can be found at <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2006/12/influential-saudi-cleric-denounces-shiites-as-infidels> ). Violent Shi'a polemics have been also disseminated by *ulama* through various websites (Kaizmi, 2006, pp. 66; Teitelbaum, 2010), contributing to the creation of a climate of hatred and violence (on recent attacks against Shi'is see <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/05/saudi-arabia-eastern-province-attacks-on-shiites.html> ).

For the reasons above explained, Shi'is have been cast by Wahhabis in the role of the “quintessential other” (Teitelbaum, 2010, pp. 74). Being guilty of apostasy make them even worse than Jews and Christians, as they threaten the religion from within (Steinberg, 2009; Teitelbaum, 2010). These views have been appropriated and virulently expressed by al-Zarqawi in his writings. In a letter sent to Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2004, al-Zarqawi describes the Shi'is as “a crafty enemy that wears the garb of a friend... the unhurried observer and inquiring onlooker will realize that Shi'ism is the looming danger and the true challenge”. Moreover,

“... Shi'ism is a religion that has nothing in common with Islam except in the way that Jews have something in common with Christians under the banner of the People of the Book. From patent polytheism, worshipping at graves, and circumambulating shrines, to calling the Companions [of the Prophet] infidels and insulting the mothers of the believers and the elite of this [Islamic] nation, [they] arrive at distorting the Qur'an as a product of logic to defame those who know it well, in addition to speaking of the infallibility of the [Islamic] nation, the centrality of believing in them, affirming that revelation came down to them, and other forms of infidelity and manifestations of atheism with which their authorized books and original sources -- which they continue to print, distribute, and publish -- overflow”

(al-Zarqawi, 2004, in <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm> ).

He goes on accusing the Shi'is of having cunningly infiltrated the Iraqi state apparatus in the security, military and economic branches, in order to liquidate previous Sunni officials and seize power in a gradual way, avoiding open confrontation. This strategy is part of a broader plan, in which Shi'is are allied with the Crusaders in the effort to destroy Islam. What is happening now is in continuity with history; al-Zarqawi in fact quotes Ibn Taymiyya, who accused the Shi'is of having helped the Mongols, the Tatars and the Franks against the true Muslims (ibidem). The accusation leveled by al-

Zarqawi, thus, is double: Shi'is are engaged in a doctrinal and political struggle against Sunnis. From these considerations ensues that the only way for getting rid of the foreign occupier is to defeat its internal agent first (Kazimi, 2006, pp. 53-54). Also, Shi'is must be provoked, so that the hidden rancor they feel towards Sunnis comes out; only at that point they can be dragged into a sectarian war and be eliminated once and for all (al-Zarqawi, 2004).

It is clear how al-Zarqawi's anti-Shi'ism played out at both a religious and a political level. Shi'is, indeed, were described as deviants and traitors, as they were part of a conspiracy uniting the Crusader-Zionists with Iran (Kazimi, 2006, pp. 54-55). Consequently, the defeat of the "traitors" and the takeover of the country became a political problem, which intermingled with the issue connected to their doctrinal deviance. As previously explained, both issues have been integral parts of the Wahhabi religious-political discourse, and have recently contributed to the promotion of violent anti-Shi'a polemics in the context of regional politics.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, in the early phase of the history of al-Qaeda (until 2003) the doctrinal influence of Wahhabism remained substantially limited to its Salafi background, with the emphasis on *tawhid* and the related specific definition of belief. The use of violence in this context derived more from a particular contextual reading of reality. This reading pointed to a condition of global war, where sins were easily interpreted as attempts to harm Islam from within, and were thus taken as instances of apostasy. At the same time, jihad against the enemy was elevated to the status of a sacred duty in itself, with no precedent in Sunni Islamic tradition. In this sense, the doctrinal justification for the use of violence can be traced more in the Islamist than in the Wahhabi legacy, as Jihadis drew extensively from Qutb's Manichean worldview involving a cosmic, violent struggle between the forces of belief and unbelief.

In 2003, the combination of regional factors created the fertile ground for the exploitation of sectarian differences in the context of the Iraqi war. Al-Zarqawi appealed to the Wahhabi tradition of sectarian intolerance and aversion towards Shi'is in order to trigger a total war against them, where the doctrinal issue became a key element of justification for their elimination.

Al-Zarqawi was the one who introduced the sectarian element in al-Qaeda's discourse on violence. After his death, the dynamics he had initiated continued to operate in the context of a country precipitating in civil war and a region in turmoil. Given also the success al-Zarqawi had achieved with his anti-Shi'a campaign, as Steinberg puts it, "in 2006 and 2007 it became clear that anti-Shi'ism had become a standard feature of Jihadi-Salafi discourse" (Steinberg, 2009, pp. 111). This element has remained central in the ideology of the direct descendant of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) (Isakhan, 2015). The organisation, in fact, had changed its name into ISI in 2006, as part of a re-branding strategy in response to a temporary decline (Kirdar, 2011).

The profound hatred displayed by the Islamic State towards Shi'is is symptomatic of one of the main legacies of the Iraqi war, which is to say the destruction of the pre-existing delicate sectarian balance in the region (Isakhan, 2015, pp. 230). This situation has created the perfect conditions for the growth and spread of ISI, and is

likely to ignite further and even worst carnage in the future (ibidem, pp. 230, 224). For this reason is it essential to have an informed understanding of the doctrinal roots from which sectarian hatred has spread, and to distinguish the different religious matrixes that have had an influence on the ideology of al-Qaeda.

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