Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel
Gabriele Pedrini

In 1996, the U.N. General Assembly established a committee for drafting a Global Convention on International Terrorism. However, the Committee on International Law was unable to complete its task. The main obstacle concerned the impossibility of reaching a unique definition of "terrorism" because of the obvious political implications that such a definition would have entailed. The themes susceptible of important repercussions were, on the one hand, wars of national liberation and the so-called "State terrorism". Depending on the definition given to the term "terrorism", an armed struggle would have gained, on the one hand, the legitimization/de-legitimization if referred to the principle of self-determination of peoples and, on the other, the legitimization/de-legitimization of state's security forces involved in such conflicts. The extent of the legal-political consequences and the strong polarization of interests on the ground wrecked the Convention's work.

Therefore, it must be noted that there is no unambiguous definition of "terrorism" at a global level. In legal terms, this definition varies from one legislation to another, as well as its predominant interpretations are different in each international organization. The use of such a term, being at the center of many dichotomous narratives in contexts of conflict, has a strong political value that pertains to the "perception" of legitimacy towards those who fight terrorism and the perception of de-legitimization towards those who are defined as "terrorists". Consequently, understanding such "perceptions" of terrorism is certainly more useful than its mere definition as it allows to understand the phenomena under that label. This is even truer in international terrorism where criminal and criminogenic behaviours are more difficult to be classified than those within a single state system.

The theme of terrorism has also been dealt with in the field of international treaty law, but the various conventions (in the field of aviation, maritime navigation, atomic energy, etc.) deal with those issues of individual violent actions that are traditionally associated with terroristic phenomena (e.g., air hijacking). In addition, these conventions are limited to their own specific sector and, by their very nature, they do not deal with the theme of terrorism in an organic way.

A definition of "terrorism" on which a broad consensus can be found is what was stated in 2005 by the then Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan who, in turn, recalled the definition given in the work of the Global Convention on International Terrorism: "Any action constitutes terrorism if it is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians and non-combatants, with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or international organization to do or abstain from doing an act." Regarding the sensitive issues related to the wars of national liberation and the so-called "State terrorism", in such definition the international rules on the use of force by states and the general principle of self-determination of peoples should be applied.

This compromise definition is certainly a common denominator which, because of its generic nature, describes the individual terroristic action in itself rather than as a structured and organized phenomenon. Moreover, there is no explicit reference to political, religious or ideological aims which are the usual basis for the terrorist phenomenon as it is commonly perceived. However, such definition sufficiently reflects what is the widespread perception of the phenomenon in itself.

Lastly, it should be noted that Law 155/2005 partially transposed in Italy this definition by incorporating it in Article 270 *sexies* of the Criminal Code with some amendments and additions: "Conducts are considered to be for purposes of terrorism if, by its nature or context, it can seriously harm a country or an international organization and is carried out with the purpose of intimidating the population or compelling the public authorities or an international organization to take or refrain from doing any act or to destabilize or destroy political, constitutional, economic and social structures of a country or an international organization, as well as any other conduct committed for purposes of terrorism as defined by conventions or other rules of international law binding on Italy."

Islamic terrorism, jihadist terrorism or takfiri terrorism?

Starting from the 90s of the last century, the phenomenon of the so-called "Islamic terrorism" has gradually emerged. Today, following a long series of events (wars, attacks, and demonstrative actions), the perception of terrorism has shaped the equation "terrorism = Islamic terrorism". However, the very concept of "Islamic terrorism" is as misleading as tendentious. Theses that support validity of such category are based on the symbolic, discursive and propaganda apparatus used within those phenomena labelled as "Islamic terrorism". Yet, beyond this propaganda apparatus, little or nothing justifies the attribution of the adjective "Islamic". It is worth considering the poor and insignificant preparation in terms of "religion" by members of such groups, as well as the observation that they can't even be considered as practitioners.

If the term "Islamic terrorism" is thus misleading, "jihadist terrorism" can be a better compromise to reconcile analytical needs and labelling needs. The groups that can be attributed to this phenomenon, in fact, are characterized, in very approximation, by the practice of armed *jihād*, the so-called "small *jihād*", the "outward effort". In this regard, the famous scholar Gilles Kepel talk about "salafi jihadism". As we have said, however, these are phenomena that, apart from the symbolic and discursive apparatus, remain without solid religious foundations in the strict sense.

This phenomenon may perhaps be better circumscribed with the definition of "takfiri terrorism". In Arabic and in Islamic sciences, the term "*takfīr*" is the verbal name (a kind of infinitive) of the verb "*kaffara*" which literally means "accusing someone of unbelief/disbelief", "declaring someone unfaithful". In the perspective of groups that work in this field, this declaration/accusation makes any action lawful against those who have been declared unbelievers (*kāfir*) and can target indiscriminately Christians and Muslims, Shiites and Sunnis.

The practice of *takfīr* took hold in the Sunni context with the rise of *wahhābiyya* (Wahhabism) in the Arabian Peninsula during the 19th century, and later with the spread of *salafiyya* (Salafism) in certain minority sectors of Sunni Islam from the second half of the 20th century. The main feature of these currents is the so-called "literalism", that is, the literal interpretation of sacred texts that leaves no margin to any spiritual exegesis and even less esoteric interpretation. Although some have defined such religious interpretation as "a return to pure origins", to an "orthodox" or "traditional" Islam, thus accepting the Wahhabi and Salafi claims, such approach is an unknown phenomenon in the millennial history of Islamic civilization, which, on the contrary, has revealed profound doctrinal, cultural and spiritual elaborations in truly traditional and orthodox Islam. Since its early beginnings, Wahhabism has risen against such defined elaborations, accusing improperly of *bid'ah* ("innovation", "heresy") and *shirk* ("idolatry") anyone in the Sunni field who "deviated" from the literal interpretation of Qur'an and Sunna.

For these and other reasons, the overwhelming majority of Islamic (Sunni and non-Islamic) scholars, as well as simple believers, see in such takfiri practices an antithetical interpretation of what was and is indeed traditional Islam. Finally, if we consider that the overwhelming majority of victims due to this phenomenon are Muslims, including authoritative scholars of religion, it is evident that the term "Islamic terrorism" is far from reality.

Main terrorist groups active in the area

The following groups have been selected according to the criteria mentioned above and taking into account their relevance. All these groups have a certain connection with al-Qa'ida or the self-proclaimed "Islamic State". For such record, documents of the United Nations Secretariat (Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate) have been used, integrating information through open sources.

• Dā'ish (al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī al-'Irāq wa al-Shām)

Also known as ISIL, ISIS, "Islamic State" or with its Arabic acronym Dā'ish, it is the most important and troublesome terrorist organization that has gained the spotlight since its proclamation in 2014. Such proclamation constituted a breakthrough in the strategy of the Salafi jihadism whose element of novelty is represented by the construction of a state entity in a vast territory which it controls as a true form of state sovereignty. However, in spite of the apparently relentless expansion during its debut, between Syria and Iraq, the self-proclaimed Caliphate is undergoing an equally unstoppable series of military defeats on the ground.

A breakthrough took place also in the modality of propaganda, which has created a new kind of proselytism based on a sophisticated use of internet, social media and online publications.
The use of advanced communication techniques and the high number of foreign fighters attracted to combat areas from over 70 countries are significant indicators of this leap in quality.

The number of its fighters is roughly estimated in a range from 12,000 to 20,000 fighters, including a high percentage of foreign fighters. But these numbers should be revised downwards due to defeats suffered in recent months, as well as the decreasing influx of fighters from abroad. In parallel, the return of foreign fighters in the countries of origin poses a serious threat to the security of these states.

As regards to the Da'ish's goals, they have never been black-and-white, nor its leadership developed a long-term organic strategy. Beyond the initial threats against United States and Europe, emerged that the concrete struggle was against the state entities in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, considered as impious and ruled by unbelievers. Therefore, Da'ish's aims are the abolition of those states and also the elimination of all the Islamic components which are considered not to comply with the literal and rigoristic reading of sacred texts that has its historical and cultural roots in the *wahhābiyya* of the Arabian Peninsula: Shiites and Alawites in the first place, but also Sunnis, Christians, secular people, and anyone else who does not adhere to their project.

Its main domestic revenue comes from sale of hydrocarbons and taxation on the territories controlled by Da'ish. In addition to those, other activities of extortion, ransom, trafficking of human beings, antiquities and raw materials that insist on the territory. The defeats suffered in recent months and the subtraction of territory and resources have led to a significant decline of these two sources of supply. Compared to 2015 oil sales ($ 500 million), losses are quantified in 50%. These internal revenues include sums of money from abroad and, in particular, from the Arabian Peninsula. Given the continuous territorial losses, the consistency and seriousness of the threat to the States of the Levant will be directly proportional to the extent of the funding and support from abroad, which will help to compensate loss of revenue deriving from the control of the territory. Just as it will depend on the propaganda ability to attract new militants and sympathizers.

However, if the organization is gradually losing control over the ground, the future threat to the states of the region will be the return to a renewed asymmetrical guerrilla, as in post-2003 Iraq, but with more incisive and rooted modalities. A similar threat will involve other state entities in different areas, such as the European states, due to the "return effect" of foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq to their respective countries of origin. The intelligence capabilities of the latter countries will be crucial in monitoring, preventing and contrasting "Da'ish 2.0". Such transformation, in all likelihood, will seek to create and train cells guided by war veterans in Syria and Iraq. This will be on a wider scale of the Afghanistan effect during the 1980s, which laid the foundation for al-Qa'ida's birth.

Affiliations to Da'ish - or better to the so-called "Islamic State" - in North Africa and the rest of the Islamic world, instead, must be read as a marketing operation or, worse, as coordinating actions on a par with regard to specific initiatives rather than an effective integration within a single hierarchical command structure. In such "affiliations" both parties, Da'ish and local groups, earn respectively prestige and authoritativeness.

Because of the chaos context, Libya has witnessed the formation of the most important affiliation to the so-called "Islamic State" outside the Levant. Here, however, such re-branding process acted by local actors was short-lived and, after having officially returned to Benghazi, Sirte and other coastal areas of central-eastern Libya, its cadres were forced to flee to the southern and southwestern areas of the country due to the defeats suffered on the ground. Its fighters, estimated at 3,000 units, have disappeared in the country, laying the foundations for the emergence of insurgency cells.

• **Taḥrīr al-Shām e Jabhat Fatḥ al-Shām (former Jabhat al-Nuṣra li-Ahl al-Shām)**
    Born in January 2012 as an al-Qa'ida-affiliated organization under the name of Jabhat al-Nusra al-Ahl al-Sham, it is the most important armed group fighting against the Damascus government. He has acted as a channel of foreign fighters to Syria where it leads guerrilla activity against the Syrian Arab Army and his allies, especially in the northwest of the country. It is also active in Lebanon and has a support network in Iraq. Initially tied to Da'ish, later the group broke away from it in 2013 after an open clash with the organization of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which was intended to incorporate al-Nusra into its planned state entity.
    In July 2016, its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani announced that the new name of the group would be Jabhat Fath al-Sham ("Front for the Conquest of the Levant"), proclaiming the simultaneous split from al-Qa'ida. However, in this last regard it would appear that the separation between the two organizations (al-Nusra and al-Qa'ida) was consensual and more aimed at tactical needs than due to ideological divergences. Indeed, the goal of the movement continues to be the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Syria, on the model proposed by al Qa'ida: the rule of Islamic law (*sharī'a*) and rejection of secularism and democratic system; refusal of a political process of pacification with the government of Damascus; establishing an Islamic state based on the *shūrà* ("consultation") between Islamic law scholars.
    As for the organization's numerical consistency, according to a January report prepared by the United Nations Secretariat, the combatants would be about 10,000, half of them made up of foreign fighters from North Africa, the Gulf and former Soviet republics with Islamic population. This figure has to be reasonably re-evaluated downward owing to the heavy losses suffered in the meantime on the Syrian theatre. The financial supply channel of the organization consists mainly of foreign donations, as well as ransoms, war boots and taxation of the controlled territories.
    At the end of January 2017, its leader announced the merger between four other organizations under the name Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham ("Levant Liberation Committee"), of which al-Jawlani continues to be the military commander, while General command is in the hands of Abu Jaber Hashim al-Shaykh, former leader of Ahrar al-Sham. Such merger would have led to more than 30,000 fighters under a single organization, thus posing a serious threat to the Syrian and Lebanese states. The strength of this organization, which seeks to monopolize the jihadist phenomenon in Syria's northwest, is a real threat to other Salafite groups operating in the area of Idlib province. Including Ahrar al-Sham (militia supported by Turkey), accused of being too "moderate" because of its involvement in Astana talks.

• **'Aṣbat al-Anṣār and Fatḥ al-Islām**
    'Asbat al-Ansar is a salafist organization born in the mid-1990s in the Palestinian refugee camp of 'Ayn al-Hilwa (Ein el-Helwe), on the outskirts of Sidon in southern Lebanon. The group is accused of planning attacks on UNIFIL forces and against Western diplomatic missions, including the Italian Embassy (September 2004). The group is also responsible for numerous armed clashes with Lebanese security forces and other Palestinian factions within refugee camps in the country.
The number of its militants, mostly Palestinians, does not exceed one thousand and throughout time it has extended its activity also to post-2003 Iraq.

Fath al-Islam is another Salafi group operating in Lebanon, born in 2006 it too among the Palestinian diaspora. Its center of historic activity is the refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid near Tripoli of Lebanon, in the north of the country. Both groups are suspected of having contacts with al-Qa'ida and many militants actively participated in the Syrian conflict.

• Wilāyat Sīnā' al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya (former Anṣār Bayt al-Maqdis)

Created under the name of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in 2011, following the so-called "Arab Spring" upheaval, the organization is strongly active in the Sinai Peninsula and represents the most active jihadist group in Egypt. Because of the desert frontiers' porosity, the organization has also a certain network in Libya. Since Morsi's resignation in July 2013 and following the iron hand of al-Sisi government against Islamist groups, the movement has set its primary target on the security forces and Egyptian government institutions, creating quite a few security problems in the country.
The number of its militants is around 1500.

In November 2014, the group declared its affiliation to Da'ish by changing its name to Province of Sinai (Wilāyat Sīnā') of the Islamic State, although it cannot boast an effective control of territory but rather it acts with the typical al-Qa'da's modalities in terms of asymmetric guerrilla. As proof of such close ties with Da'ish, its militants have received training in Syria and Iraq. He has led numerous and striking suicide attacks, including that at Coptic Cairo Cathedral on 11 December 2016, which resulted in the deaths of 25 people and the wounding of 50. He is also accused of being behind some attacks that hit western tourists.

• Anṣār al-Sharī'a

It is a jihadist organization active since 2011 in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Mali lacking a unique command structure over each branches in such countries. He has close ties with AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and al-Murabitun. In Libya, he has run training camps for foreign fighters in Syria, Iraq and Mali. Its Tunisian leader is Sayf Allah Bin Husayn, while in Benghazi its leader was Muhammad al-Zahawi. In Benghazi, the group would organize the attack against the US diplomatic mission on 11 September 2012. In May 2017 the Libyan branch announced its dissolution, but continues to be present in Tunisia.

• AQIM - Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (al-Qa'ida fī bilād al-maghrib al-islāmī)

Particularly active in coastal areas of Algeria and on either side of the border between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, the organization also operates in certain areas of Tunisia and Libya. Until January 2007, it was called Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (al-Jamā'a al-Salafiyya li-l-Dawa wa al-Qiṭāl) and was also known by its acronym (GSPC). With the latter name was originally created by Hassan Hattab in 1998 and, currently, it's headed by Abdelmalek Droukdel. AQIM is the largest jihadist organization in Algeria and its cadres are mostly of Algerian nationality.

In terms of funding and training it is the most important jihadist organization in the region, and much of its revenue comes from abductions and ransoms. With the aim of overthrowing the Algerian institutions, the organization attacks on security forces, government buildings, and infrastructures. Western tourists and international officials too are targeted by such actions. A series of attacks by its Tunisian branch (Uqba bin Nafi Battalion) hit the Tunisian army in several areas of western and southern hinterland.

In 2011, the organization suffered a split from which the Unity and Jihad Movement in West Africa (Jamā'a al-Tawḥīd wa al-Jihād fī Gharb Afrīqīyā) was born, led by a "black" leadership. Although its aim is to expand into the West of Black Africa, its operational area remains largely limited to southern Algeria and northern Mali.

- **Jund al-Khilāfa fī Arḍ al-Jazā'ir (Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria)**

    Born in September 2014 following the split by AQIM, the group declared its affiliation to Da'ish. The group is particularly active in the Cabila region of Algeria and hit the headlines for the kidnapping and decapitation of French tourist Herve Gourdel. He has claimed numerous attacks in the country against the Algerian police forces, while two attacks at the airports of Algiers have been foiled by security forces. According to some sources of intelligence, the group would have a certain level of coordination with Da'ish leaders in Syria and Iraq.

- **Other noteworthy groups**

    Al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya al-Maghribiyya al-Muqātila (Moroccan Islamic Combat Group); Al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya al-Muqātila al-Lībiyya (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group); Al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya al-Musallaḥa (Armed Islamic Group); Al-Jamā'a al-Tūnisiyya al-Muqātila (Tunisian Combat Group); Al-Jihad al-Islāmī al-Miṣrī (Egyptian Islamic Jihad); Al-Muaqi'ūn bi-l-dām (Those who sign with the blood); Brigades 'Abdallah' Azzam; Shām al-Islām (The Levant of Islam); Al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya (Islamic Group); Jamā'a Ḥumāt al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya (Group of Protectors of the Salaf Preaching); Jaysh al-Muhājirīn wa al-Anṣār (The Army of the Muhajirin and Ansar); Jund al-Aqsa (Al-Aqsa Soldiers); Shabka Muḥammad Jamāl (The Network of Muhammad Jamal).