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ANSAR AL SHARIA AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

Investigating the genesis and presence of the various “Ansar al Sharia” ramifications throughout the Islamic world:

Morocco

The group appears in Morocco in September 2012 with a public statement on the internet and the opening of a page on Facebook. Following the announcement, the Moroccan authorities carry out the first arrests even though, officially, the Moroccan Ansar refutes the armed struggle as a way to impose the application of the sharia.

In practice the group has never carried out destructive activities, save for a few demonstrations in favor of detainees and public accusations of torture against the police. The Moroccan branch of Ansar has kept a very low profile so far, perhaps because of the scarce following that it has within the Moroccan social context. Another reason lies maybe in the existence of another extremist group, the “Committee for the Defense of Islamic Detainees”; the group includes former Afghan veterans and focuses its action on the defense of detainees and on the establishment of a Caliphate. All in all, the fact that Morocco is governed by a monarchy that claims to be the progeny of the prophet himself makes the struggle for extremism in the country more difficult and less credible.

Algeria

Algeria is a case apart because the group Ansar al Sharia has never surfaced on its territory. The reason for this could be the fact that Islamic terrorism has been present in Algeria since 1991 with a myriad of names: GIA (Armed Islamic Group), AIS (Islamic Army of Savior – the armed branch of the FIS), the GSPC (Salafite Group for Preaching and Combat) from which originated the AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). There were already enough groups scouring the country and no need to add a new one. Also, the appearance of Ansar al Sharia in northern Mali made the southern Algerian territory readily accessible to them.

Mali

The founding of Ansar al Sharia in Mali dates back to December 2012 in Gao, in the north of the country. The group was founded by Omar Ould Hamaha, also called “Hakka” (a name which derives from his Kalashnikov: AK 47) and “Redbeard” (from the color of his hair). Before founding Ansar al Sharia in Mali, Ould Hamaha joined the ranks of many

other terrorist organizations that operate in northern Mali: AQIM, Ansar Dine (where he served as spokesman), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJAO, where he was chief of staff). The most qualifying aspect of Ould Hamaha is his relationship with Mokhtar Benmokhtar (Ould married Mokhtar's daughter) who, in the name of AQIM (but practically on his own) continues to be the most important terrorist in the region (although reports of his death are quite frequent).

In the Malian case, the creation of a new terrorist group is dictated by aesthetics rather than practicality. Perhaps it was a consequence of Hamaha's desire to have his own group rather than always having to serve as second-in-command. The decision to found Ansar al Sharia in Mali immediately won Hamaha a three million dollar bounty placed on his head by the United States.

Mauritania

The Mauritanian branch of Ansar al Sharia is called "Ansar al Sharia fi Bilad al Shinqit" (Ansar al Sharia in the country of the Shinqits, from the name of the main Mauritanian extremist ideologue Sheykh Abu al Mundhir al Shinqiti, who has quite an impressive following in the extremist milieu). The group is said to be captained by Mokhtar Benmokhtar, who also serves as the link between the Mauritanian group and Ansar al Sharia in Mali.

The most resounding action attributed to the group is the attack against the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott in February 2008. At first, AQIM claimed responsibility for the operation, which was later attributed to Ansar al Sharia when the group first surfaced in 2013 (it is worth noting that, at the time, Mokhtar was a member of AQIM and was successively expelled from the group because he did not get along with its commanders).

Officially the head of Ansar al Sharia is a Mauritanian national called Ahmed Salem Ould al Hassan, who has already been in prison because of his militancy in radical Islamic groups. It is in the prison of Dar Naim that Ansar al Sharia was originally conceived. Their declared objectives are presently internal to Mauritania, where the group is attempting to carry out a progressive 'Islamisation' of society. Ansar al Sharia in Mauritania has ties with Islamic extremism and has claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack that happened before its founding (their involvement thereof is more of a moral than of a practical nature); presently, the group is faced with a society where tradition and conservatism prevails, but where Islam has been interpreted in a modern fashion.

Tunisia

Ansar al Sharia appears in Tunisia in April 2011. The recognized head of the group in Tunisia is Seif Allah Benahssine ibn Hussein, who also goes by the name of Abu lyadh al Tunsji, a longtime terrorist with a history in Afghanistan. He appeared on the Tunisian political scene in April 2011, when he founded Ansar al Sharia following his release from prison thanks to an amnesty. He had been sentenced to 68 years in prison for terrorism; a sentence that had been inflicted against Abu lyadh by the former dictator Ben Ali in 2003.

Abu Iyadh had left Tunisia in 1991 to study law in Morocco. He had returned to Morocco in 1994 only to flee to the UK where he was granted asylum and became a refugee. He then traveled to Afghanistan where he fought against the US army until his arrest in Turkey in 2003 and his extradition to Tunisia. In the year 2000, while staying in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Abu Iyadh met Osama bin Laden and joined the ranks of Al Qaeda, a circumstance which he always publicized and never denied.

Abu Iyadh's theological studies make him more than a mere combatant; a man of thought, capable of justifying his actions and initiatives according to the sacred scriptures. In the beginning, Abu Iyadh and his group preached non-violence and dedicated their time to social initiatives, saying that Tunisia was a grounds of proselytism, not jihad.

The attack against the American embassy in Tunisia in 2012, the violent demonstrations and sermons, even against Ennadha itself, have pushed the Tunisian authorities to ban the movement and to accuse them of being in collusion with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia is also suspected to be involved with the recent murder of two Tunisian politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. During the investigations on their murders, Tunisian authorities allegedly found a long list of politicians to be eliminated, including members of Ennadha.

Today Abu Iyadh is a man on the run or, according to some unverified reports, was arrested in Misurata, Libya, in December 2013 by the Americans and successively extradited to Tunis.

Libya

Ansar al Sharia, which has fought alongside Khadafi during the civil war, has become famous in Libya for their attack against the US consulate in Benghazi and for the murder of the US ambassador in Libya. Among its high-profile initiatives there is – always in the line of Salafist integralism, which does not tolerate the veneration of subjects other than Allah – the destruction of places of worship dedicated to Sufi saints in Benghazi and Tripoli.

Presently in Libya there are two organizations that go by the name of Ansar al Sharia. They operate in two distinct territories, Derna and Benghazi; it is not clear whether they share a unique command.

The Ansar in Derna, a mix of banditry and terrorism, was headed by Abu Sufian bin Qumu, who was killed in April 2013. Qumu was a longtime terrorist who had also experienced Afghanistan. He was captured, sent to Guantanamo, then handed over to the Libyans in 2007, where he was granted an amnesty, together with other exponents of the Islamic Fighting Lybian Group to which Qumu belonged, by Khadafi.

The Benghazi Ansar al Sharia is headed by Ahmed Abu Khattalah. This is the group that materially led the attack against the US consulate on September 11, 2012. During Khadafi's reign, Khattalah had reached notoriety in 2011, when his militia had managed to murder a former interior minister, Abdel Fattah Younis. Khattalah's militia adopted the name Ansar al Sharia after the civil war. Khattalah's fancy for Al Qaeda and his contacts with AQIM from Mali are known facts. Khattalah has been known to be very outspoken in

public, dispensing interviews and public menaces; he adopted a more prudent profile after the capture in Tripoli of Abu Anas al Libi in October 2013 by the US special forces and his extradition to the USA.

The Libyan Ansar al Sharia assists the local population, supports charity organizations. They provide services to the people of Benghazi that the central government is not able to provide. Despite being hunted down by the US, Kattalah is considered very highly and very well protected in Cyrenaica.

Egypt

After the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt and thanks to the greater condescension of the Muslim Brothers towards the Islamic fringes, there emerged in the country two organizations that drew their name from the Islamic law: one, the "Gamaat Ansar Al Sharia" (Association Ansar al Sharia, founded in October 2012), dedicated its efforts to reforming Egyptian society through the strict application of the sharia; the other, which surfaced a few months later, called "Al Taliyah al Salafiyah al Mujahediyah Ansar al Sharia" (The Combating Salafite Vanguard of Ansar al Sharia), is more internationally oriented and admittedly closer to Al Qaeda. One of the members of the latter is Mohammed al Zawahiri, the brother of the renown Ayman; Mohammed was released from Egyptian prison in March 2012, where he was detained because he belonged to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

After the ousting of Morsi and the reinstatement of the military regime, the Gamaat Ansar al Sharia has dropped its social and humanitarian aims and converted itself, following an official statement in July 2013, to the armed struggle; it has also moved its headquarters to the Sinai. Its leader, Ahmad al Arush, is a former Afghan combatant who was also released after the Arab Spring. The Al Talyah Ansar al Sharia has traveled in the opposite direction: upon indication by the leader of Al Qaeda, the group has abandoned the armed struggle and has dedicated itself to propaganda and proselytism. In other words, the two Egyptian Ansar al Sharia are complementary and interchangeable.

Following a terrorist attack against a bus of South Korean tourists in the Sinai, there has emerged a new organization: Ansar Beit al Maqdis. In this case too, it is likely that the use of terms that are recurrent in the Islamic-terrorist lexicon is meant to convey the impression that distinct terrorist organizations operate in the Sinai (where an organization called Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula has already appeared). These are likely to be alternative names for the same group. Some analysts think that this group is the military arm of the Muslim Brothers; others say that it has ties with Hamas in Gaza; others believe it to be directly linked with Al Qaeda; finally, there are those that claim that the group is a direct product of the above-mentioned "Al Taliyah al Salafiyah al Mujahediyah Ansar al Sharia".

Either way, with the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and the persecution of the Muslim Brothers the group has laid claim to numerous attacks, even outside of the Sinai: the attack against the interior minister; the one against the National Security Headquarters in Cairo and Mansoura; the killing of several policemen.

Yemen

In Yemen, Ansar al Sharia has issued many statements, combined or alternated with those of Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP). This circumstance suggests that the two names are both used by the same operative structure. Many analysts think that this is a proven and incontrovertible fact. It is what the directives of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad dictated. We must not forget that the family of the leader of Al Qaeda was from the north of Yemen, near the border with Saudi Arabia. The theory is also indirectly confirmed by the fact that the operative defeats suffered by AQAP at the 'hands' of the US drones have had serious repercussions in Ansar al Sharia as well.

The name Ansar al Sharia first appeared in Yemen in 2011, during the popular revolts, when the group occupied a seat of the governorate of Abyan in the south of the country and declared the creation of an Islamic emirate. After being defeated by the armed intervention of the Yemenite security forces, Ansar al Sharia (or AQAP) has continued to voice proclaims and threaten operations in Yemen, but has not managed to occupy part of the territory anymore. Notwithstanding, during the year 2013, the name AQAP was the most frequent signatory of such proclaims.

The recognized leader of Ansar al Sharia in Yemen is Nasir al Wuhayshi, a former secretary of Bin Laden in Afghanistan who was arrested by the Iranians, sent back to Yemen, where he managed to escape from prison and, once on the loose, dedicated his time to the re-organization and re-unification of Al Qaeda structures in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

In 2013, through the mediation of local religious leaders, Ansar al Sharia/AQAP had managed to negotiate a cease fire with the local authorities. The government then decided to scrap the accord.

The operations of Ansar al Sharia in Yemen were initially aimed against the population that did not abide by the Islamic code. Today their targets are mainly the Americans and, to a lesser extent, the Yemenite security forces which, with the help of US drones, are fighting terrorism successfully.

The behavior of the local Ansar al Sharia was last year the object of an ideological dispute between two leading Sheykh: the Syrian Sheykh Abu Basir al Tartusi and the Mauritanian Sheykh Abu al Mundir Shinqiti. The former accused Ansar of not changing its strategy of attacking the local population, even after the ousting of the dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh; the latter adopted a more extremist stance.

THE FRANCHISING OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM AND THE CASE OF ANSAR AL SHARIA

The radical Muslim world is populated with acronyms, some of which are famous, while others are not; some of them only surface once to then disappear, while others, instead, are picked up from country to country. Some of these names, or logos, call for the supremacy of Islam, the imposition of its law and set of rules. Or, as a second option, they wave the flag of the holy sites, such as Jerusalem ('Al Quds' in Arabic or, in its poetic form, 'Beit al Maqdis, the house of holiness). Generally, these brands take the spotlight after an act of terrorism whose purpose is to publicize and emphasize their work and, at the same time, to gain fame in the galaxy of extremism.

Al Qaeda Inc.

There are of course some acronyms and names that openly declare their affiliation to better known groups, and this is the case of Al Qaeda, that can now count on a series of spin offs: Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula in Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria and Mali, Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. In marketing terms, the franchising of a logo guarantees the quality of the product.

And even though it may not be literally mentioned in the appellation of a terrorist group, Al Qaeda still supplies, from time to time and through the statements of its current leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, certificates of legitimacy. We could debate at length about the emerging ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), that was initially sponsored by al Zawahiri (who later shifted his support to al Jabhat al Nusra, a group filled with militants that fought in Afghanistan and now fighting against Bashar al Assad) in order to exploit, in Islamic and terrorist terms, the space offered by the civil wars in Syria and Iraq.

The only true common denominator between these brand names and logos is terrorism per se, the armed struggle against the impious and the manipulation of Islam to justify any and all atrocities. Terrorism is a many-headed monster, without a unique or articulated plan, but feeding itself out of the same connivance and social unease, recruiting its executives out of the same spots, sometimes sharing common sources of financing and exchanging militants that hop from one war to the next, from one group to the other.

The latter are the sole transmission belt linking different terrorist groups, even though it has yet to be proven that the circumstances leads to synergies and, hence, to a unique leader coordinating or guiding different organizations. For instance, there are no proven links between Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Somali al Shabab, even though they both operate in contiguous geographical areas. The same could be said of the Shabab and the other terrorist groups active on the other shore of the Red Sea, such as Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula and the Huiti rebels in Yemen.

An overall dispersion of motivations, resources – hindering their effectiveness – but, at the same time, an obstacle for those who want to fight them. Every groups has its own history, its leader, its objectives, its structures. This negatively impacts the leadership of al Zawahiri, but offers greater opportunities for the recruitment and expansion of Islamic

terrorism. By now, Al Qaeda acts more like a brand for a product over which it cannot guarantee the quality anymore.

Confined and hidden in the tribal area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, for security reasons forced to communicate in a secretive and irregular manner, Ayman al Zawahir is left to manage what is left of what is emphatically still called Al Qaeda's Central Command. The truth of the matter is that al Zawahiri cannot move around freely, his contacts are limited as is his direct knowledge of the jihadist world, over which he still claims a moral leadership. He does not decide or release statements based on direct knowledge of people or events, but only through second hand information. This situation is slowly negatively affecting his prestige. By now the underworld of Islamic extremism and terrorism walks on its own, it doesn't require any tutelage, Al Qaeda is now just a thing of the past. It will hold its status and represent a common flag projecting an ideal continuity of intents and goals so long as it lasts.

The case of Ansar al Sharia

As we've already stated, a name or an acronym that rises to fame in Islamic extremism triggers the competition to use the same brand. This approach resembles a marketing campaign or, in alternative, to a copyright violation. Nevertheless, a group's name that suddenly becomes popular among the fanatics, will be found in statements, claims of responsibility, even in places geographically distant from one another. One of the most striking cases is that of Ansar al Sharia ('The Partisans of the Sharia', that is Islamic law) that has claimed the responsibility for acts of terrorism carried out in Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania and Egypt.

Are we facing the same organization with branches all over the Middle East and North Africa? At this time the answer is no. Just like it happened with Al Qaeda's regional spin offs, Ansar al Sharia is a name, a brand, the naming of a product. In this specific case, its quality certificate is issued directly by Al Qaeda's current chief, Ayman al Zawahiri.

Ansar al Sharia is inspired by the philosophy and theories of Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi, a Jordanian of Palestinian origins, an intellectual and a writer, presently detained in Jordan. Al Maqdisi had already inspired the actions of Al Qaeda's man in Iraq following the US-lead invasion of the country: Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who shared the same Jordanian-Palestinian background and who was killed by the Americans in 2006. His philosophy supports the fight against the West, the impious, the apostates; it basically embraces the entire jihadist culture.

A number of writings were found in Osama Bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in which Al Qaeda's leader suggested the use of the name 'sharia' by terrorist groups because of its capability of immediately conveying the religious meaning of terrorist attacks and proclaims. Following this suggestion, the term suddenly appeared in statements allegedly issued by Al Qaeda itself. In his writings, Bin Laden also asked terrorist organizations to adopt a change of approach: no more fanaticism against Islamic masses in the imposition of moral and behavioral models, but greater tolerance and compassion.

No more attacks that kill innocent bystanders, the collateral damage ought to be reduced to the minimum.

The various Ansar al Sharia's that have popped up in the Muslim world have acknowledged Osama bin Laden's guidelines, but also thoroughly applied Al Maqdisi's extremist theories and his idea of jihad. They have also been actively involved in proselytism and the Islamization of society. These are two only apparently contrasting souls that have lead to Ansar al Sharia being signed up for the United States' list of terrorist groups.

Far more than other groups, Ansar al Sharia represents a brand used by those fighting in the name of Islamic fundamentalism; this agenda is often adapted to the specific country context where these groups operate. To this effect, it is interesting to notice the diversification of behaviors from one place to the other: we go from politically motivated assassinations to social welfare activities, from terrorist attacks to the support to subversive activities. Ansar al Sharia is sometimes a real and autonomous organization, sometimes just a brand name, and is hence a typical example of an underworld where everything and its opposite are carried out using the same name.

TERRORISM AND ITS FINANCING

There are two main factors that define the operational quotient of an organization and, hence, its dangerousness: its recruitment and financing capabilities.

Youth with no future

Recruitment is not a problem today, since there is a large offer of manpower in both the Arab and Muslim world. The widespread instability provides immense operational opportunities; the mixture of social unease, rancor and economic frustrations pushes masses of hopeless people to dedicating themselves to an ideal inspired by religion. The hammering propaganda of Islamic organizations or the sermons in the mosques fuel resentments, inspire and spread radical theories disguised as social services.

The youngster with no expectations about his future, with no work or money, living under a totalitarian regime or being abused or simply poor, is ready to turn his rage and frustration into violence and, if the recourse to force is justified on religious grounds, any psychological barrier between acting for good or evil will easily decay. Terrorism for him will become a necessity, an opportunity, an expectation. If you have no future, you have no fear of the future. The social context and the above mentioned circumstances facilitate the recruitment of potential terrorists.

Follow the money

What is definitely more complicated is the financing of terrorist groups because, even though there is a lot of money around, you need to be cautious, concealed and hidden when it comes to moving such masses of cash. In other words, these movements ought to be invisible to avoid being spotted: both to preserve the anonymous identity of those supplying the funding, and to ensure that the money reach its destination.

The funding of terrorism is a field that sees a massive involvement of intelligence agencies, organizations tasked with preserving the security in various countries; they are particularly equipped and involved in fighting this scourge and that's why radical groups have to take a series of precautions. This is also because in anti-terrorism the motto "follow the money" always has a positive fall back.

There are different ways money can circulate, both formally (as in banks), regardless of the stringent banking controls and the fact that any financial transaction leaves indelible traces behind it, and outside the legitimate circuits. It is clear that terrorist organizations are more inclined for the latter of solutions, even though large portions of their funding still finds its way on "official" channels.

The official channels

The primary "official" highway for the transiting of money towards fundamentalist organizations are Islamic banks, that is those financial institutes where, in the attempt of applying a concept of equity in the distribution of wealth as dictated in the Koran and by

Islamic law (the 'sharia'), both the concepts of interest rates and financial speculation (perceived as usury) are refused.

Initially founded in 1963 in Egypt, and which then spread with creation of the Islamic Development Bank in 1975 and the Islamic Association of Islamic Banks in 1977, Islamic financial institutes have expanded throughout the Arabic world and beyond. The nature of these banks, due to their religious approach, the vicinity to the Muslim clerics and their recruitment of personnel borne out of religious structures, better than others adapts to all those financial transactions with a preeminent ethical-religious physiognomy.

Being channeled in the apparently clean-money form that may end up being ill employed is mainly the 'zakat', that is the system of financial donations devolved by pious Muslims in favor of the poor. This form of charity, which is proportional to one's income, is a toll of Islamic solidarity whose aim is to compensate social inequality. This money is official, public, known and thus exempt, until proven otherwise, from any suspicion. But the fact that these sums transit through these banks and that they circulate mainly in Arabic or Muslim countries makes the attempt to "follow the money" problematic. We should all remember that the funding for the 19 attackers that carried out the 911 terrorist attacks was channelled through legitimate banks based in Dubai.

Islamic finance is today particularly widespread also in Western countries and manages a yearly estimated turnover between 1.500 and 2.000 billion dollars. It is thus easy that, in such an enormous flow of money, transactions bearing hidden purposes may well pass unnoticed. Some of these Islamic banks have been accused of being a direct – and not fortuitous – tool for the financing of terrorist and/or extremist organizations. This is the case of the Al Barakaat Bank, that owns at least 40 branches worldwide, the Al Taqwa Bank, allegedly controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood and also hosted in tax havens, the al Daar al Mahal al Islami and the Dallah al Baraka, in the recent past allegedly under the control or influence of Osama bin Laden.

Along the Islamic banking sector are the Islamic foundations, commonly known as 'waqf', whose role is to manage both funds for charitable purposes and religious real estate, such as mosques. The foundations receive donations, charity and endowments. Often, in the folds of this financial flux, circulate money with dubious goals. To understand the dimension of this phenomenon, the mosques managed by Islamic foundations are about a thousand only in Italy.

Charitable organizations supplying humanitarian aid are next down the line. They also receive charity and zakat, but the key issue with them is the overlapping of illicit financing and recruitment activities. The same thing can be said of the koranic schools across the world, where books, recordings are sold, member fees are collected, conferences and meetings are organized.

The alternative systems

Beyond the so-called official channels, lies an alternative informal system for financial transactions: the famous and widely utilized in Somalia (and then replicated elsewhere)

'hawala' (transfer in Arabic). I give my money to an agent in my country, while another agent provides the same amount of cash to the recipient in another country. The two agents are financially compensated on an account managed by the hawala company in a third country. The names of either the sender or the recipient are unknown, there is no trace of an international money transfer. The hawala system has its main operational base in Dubai, it guarantees clients their anonymity and it is hence extremely useful to those who want to conceal their financial dealings. Its yearly estimated turnover is between six to eight billion dollars. The hawala system has recently evolved and expanded thanks to a partnership with legit money-transfer agencies who sometimes operate disregarding national laws on financial security and control.

Complementary to the informal money transfer system is the physical carrying of cash by a person from one country to another. The risks, in this case, are mitigated by the employment of relatives. Internet is another tool where financial transactions between illegitimate agencies can be carried out quite easily. One of the latest developments is also the transfer of funds via phone cards and top ups (opposed by the Al Shabab in the areas under their control in Somalia; they preferred the hawala).

Illicit money transfer activities for terrorist goals often go hand in hand with similar criminal money laundering activities. As widely confirmed by facts, despite their different criminal and subversive backgrounds there is a collusion and synergy between these two underworlds that share a common goal. The Afghan Talebans are involved in drug trafficking and impose levies on opium cultivators (known as 'ushr'), the Somali Al Shabab impose duties in the territories under their control (in the ports, on carbon trade, at checkpoints). The proliferation of similar activities is common to other parts of the world where terrorist groups are present: racket, laundering, human being and arms trafficking, robberies, thefts, kidnappings and ransom requests (Mali and surrounding areas), forgery of identification papers (the Algerians in Italy), the trade in precious gems (Boko Haram in Nigeria and apparently also Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia).

Lastly, front companies whom, behind a legit and official facade, conceal their illegal dealings also deserve our attention. Western intelligence agencies have discovered similar outfits several times in the past. First in the row are import-export companies. This is a specific sector Al Qaeda has invested on since its beginnings. It is sufficient to remember all the investments (funded to generate revenue, but also to transfer money) that were allegedly owned by Osama bin Laden: the already mentioned import-export companies, agricultural land in Tajikistan and Sudan, real estate and forestland in Turkey, paper mills and timber in Norway, fishing vessels in Kenya and so on. The estimated value of both properties and investments is of around five billion dollars.

A difficult fight

The globalization of markets, offshore companies, tax havens, trusts, all offer great opportunities to covert financial transactions. The modern terrorist is not the sedimented stereotypical bearded mujaheddin with a kalashnikov in his hand shouting "Allah Akbar".

The radical combatant is just the bottom of the heap of the terrorist chain, the manpower and not the mind. Behind him, and definitely more dangerous, is the expert of financial and banking systems, the manager who is familiar with communications and internet, has knowledge of the markets, of the laws that regulate them and knows how to avoid them. He is the so-called white collar behind the radicals on the field.

It is a difficult task to decipher a world where legal and illegal activities overlap, where it is hence arduous to find a clearcut demarcation between finance and terrorism. This is why intelligence agencies have dedicated massive resources to this area of research. The United States, for instance, have approved extremely strict financial laws. Europe has done the same against money laundering thanks to the initiatives of the Financial Action Task Force. The United Nations, despite being incapable of strongly imposing their measures, have adopted and approved a series of measures aimed at fighting the financial circuits that fuel terrorism. This is because it has been widely proven that the money fueling a terrorist group mainly come from abroad and hence need, in some way or the other, to be transferred.

The financing of terrorism is far from being eradicated and, if this is not done efficiently, we can forget about defeating terrorism. Any terrorist, even one with strong ideological motivations, needs money to survive and to succeed in his deadly fight.