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Al-Quaida, a modern creature

After the March 11th attack in Madrid, it may be interesting, if it is confirmed that al-Quaida is behind it, to briefly point out some aspects that may characterise this organization.

Normally, in the Western media, al-Quaida (*al-qa'idah*) is translated as “the base”. The translation is correct as long as it is made clear that this base is not immobile, nor a refuge to which one may return from time to time. Indeed, “the base” is nowhere. It is a foundation, a thick line on which something is built. It refers, then, to the provision of foundations for a building, but gives no clues as to its nature or to the precise axes that what is built has to have. The root *Q'D* produces, occasionally, terms of seasonality, of ripening. It also means “to sit”. Indeed, the name of the eleventh month in the Islamic calendar (*du al-qi'dah*) derives from this root. It could be said, then, that the perception the intelligence specialists have of the dissipated nature of the organization and its eccentric workings matches the name. There is no way, on the other hand, and despite the many efforts of analysis and exegesis of the foundational text of the Koran, of establishing clear connections between the type of discourse emerging from al-Quaida —especially the one

coming from Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri— and any of the varied canons of the Islamic discourse. In fact, even the very notion of *djihad* is, in the Koran, ambiguous, episodic and inconsistent. Its formalisation as part of a religious project is slow and certainly not at all univocal in meaning. It is arguable that the religious language of al-Quaida may come from *wahhabism*, a reformist movement (founded by the jurist ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who died in 1791) which sets out to re-establish a strict religious observance, old-fashioned and now distorted, compatible, however, with selected elements crucial to modern life. This is the well-known case of the dynastic state of Saudi Arabia. Even so, this provenance or link does not satisfactorily explain either the disseminated character of al-Quaida or its actions or, more exactly, the choice of its targets. It is pertinent, I believe, to insist on the fact that despite the probable formal relationship of its religious discourse with *wahhabism*, it does not seem feasible that al-Quaida should try to

reactivate an early Islamic religious order, lost in a time before the 18th century. This is no resurrection device. Nor is there anything, moreover, in the most prominent Muslim discourses that calls for permanent regeneration —or, at least, not in any way singularly different from the more generic religious discourse. Nor does its inclusion in the “Islamist” movements, blurred at the edges, add intelligibility. Far, then, in my opinion, from al-Quaida being a thing, evidently terrifying, that comes from the past or a living monster trapped incomprehensibly in a fault-line in the modern world, it is better understood, in fairness, as a creature of modern times.

To understand it thus we have to bear in mind, on one hand, that there has never been a hierarchical centralisation issuing a single Islamic discourse and, on the other, that the religious variations were formed in a strongly local and regional way, generating their own cultures. Obviously there were principles and bases, above all the legal ones, recognised as common. However, until at least the middle of the last century, it was difficult to imagine the emergence of a, shall we say, “cosmopolitan Islam”, the bearer of a historical vindication. It is true that the argument about the evil of the West appears textually at the end of the 19th century from Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (died 1897) and which represents, also, laying the foundations of pan-Islamism according to which the Muslim has no nation, nor can the religious community be divided for reasons of birth, language or government. In fact, the exodus of Muslims to the West, unimaginable for those early pan-Islamists, has also produced effects then unforeseen. The de-contextualisation of the Muslims in the continual break-up of their regional

religious cultures has made possible, for the first time, the codification of a simplified Islamic discourse, free of discreet local references. It also happens that modern life in the cities and regions of Europe, where the Muslims have gone to live, allows a juxtaposition of human groups and factions with different rules that does not seem to affect, for now, the ordinary workings of society. It also has to be said that in these places there is an extraordinarily dense concentration of technology, within reach of many, which facilitates the generation and growth of communications. The contrast between the image of the chiefs or spokesmen of al-Quaida —Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri— walking with an old man’s difficulty over a mountain covered in stones and scrub with that of the young agents of destruction, masters of complicated logistics, may be disturbing and opaque for a European, but is a message understandable for a Muslim, precisely because it establishes no operative functional connection between the two groups of people. It is known that those who spread death are not in the mountains but among the Europeans. Al-Quaida’s establishment of targets produces enormous perplexity among those who measure the capacity for destruction merely in terms of an organisation of decisions and hierarchical training. If there are no targets distinguishable by a traditional military characterisation it is, most surely, because al-Quaida has dared to ask a terrible question, and what is even more terrifying, to answer it. It is this: can one discern differences between political evil, the unfair state and the societies whence they emerge? The answer, it says, is no. Others, in the not too distant past, also asked it and came up with, albeit briefly,

the same answer. The mass bombing of German cities, ordered by the Royal Air Force high command in summer 1943, and which caused 600,000 deaths, took it for granted that the evil of the Nazi state was shared by German society. Naturally, most readers and this writer consider the question inadmissible, but perhaps there are bolder readers. In any case, the contours of political evil are difficult to define precisely. The case of al-Quaida is a discouraging example. What are its contours? And where are they? The answer to these two questions will determine the military strategy that has to be followed by Europeans and Americans.

Al-Quaida's religious discourse clearly conceals a historical discourse of greater importance to the intellectual mind. It is a simple discourse organised around the metaphor of "the Crusades", the permanent European military intervention, incomprehensible, outrageous. The old question of the "material" backwardness of Muslim societies, the colonial distortion, Israel, all, at once, exposed, synthesized, very simple, transmissible in a conventional religious language, provable in the Koran, the recitation of God. The lack of immediately political objectives for

the attacks that seek death, mutilation and disability, may be called, vainly, nihilism or what you will. Those who carry them out, who live among Europeans —who "love life as much as they love death"— would surely describe their acts as "retribution" that has to perform to be personalised.

The acts are even more terrifying insofar as they are inexorably described in an ancient and elusive language and as forming part of a horror story dictated a long time ago. It is all, therefore, the subject of viciously opposing perceptions that hinder analysis. Good examples of this are the discovery of a "rich man's terrorism" in al-Quaida or a "historical madness", that of Islam, which has finally left on the beaches of Europe some cold ferocious children capable of spinning, slowly and silently, complex webs of death.

The war scenario drawn geographically by one identifiable and conventionally fixed adversary —the United States army and its allies— and the other, dissipated and invisible with countless targets, is colossal. It is better to say it and not to speak too soon of defeats or victories —among other reasons because it still has not been possible to imagine exactly how al-Quaida should be defeated ||