Al-Qaeda or
The Islamist trend between the «identitarian common denominator», the
Globalisation of the Maintenance of an (American) Order and the
Globalisation of an (Islamic) Resistance»
At the heart of the non-comprehension that fosters tensions between Europe (and the United States) on the one hand and the Muslim world on the other lies a collective Western inability to normalize our intellectual and political relationship with so-called “Islamist” currents which are systematically regarded as obstacles to the globally accepted process of modernisation. The quasi-criminalisation of a political element which is important everywhere and frequently represents the position of the majority is the result of the reactionary and over-simplified character of our perceptions of it. The recent emergence of the "al-Qa’ida" generation has made even more opaque the interpretation and handling of a reality which is much more diverse and subject to development and much less "pathological" than is generally believed.

In the following pages, we shall suggest why the concept of a single Islamic or Islamist movement cannot be considered functional, bearing in mind the extreme diversity of actors designated by the term, and why, consequently, the analysis of very different situations must as far as possible avoid the trap of taking into account only the “Islamic-ness” of the vocabulary of the political activists involved. We shall then attempt to briefly identify the main causes which have attracted a section of the current generation of the Islamist movement to a more radical stance and to the internationalisation of their conflict with an order itself more and more explicitly global, whose defence and imposition throughout the planet – symbolised by the rhetoric of the first international anti-terrorism summit at Sharm al-Sheikh in March 1996 – are at one and the same time becoming religious and thus unilateral, and also militarised.
I The Difference between Political Vocabulary and Agenda

It seems essential to begin by identifying two distinct levels of expression within the Islamist movement. In order to disentangle the complicated cluster of factors which led to the formidable failure of humanism confirmed by the attacks of 11 September 2001, it is essential not to confuse identity and politics by making the exclusively Islamic vocabulary which the al-Qa’ida militants employed the primary explanation for their attitudes and actions. Therefore it is advisable to start by investigating the historical process which has led virtually an entire political generation, not merely members of al-Qa’ida, to reintroduce Islamic references into their political discourse before identifying the reasons, often perfectly profane, which have made the diverse component groups within this generation chose this or that political agenda, either followed the long path of liberalisation or choosing the short cut of radicalisation.

In our view, the matrix of identity constitutes the largest common denominator for analysis which can be effectively applied to all the manifestations of the Islamist phenomenon. By focusing on its existence, it is possible to explain why the Islamic lexicon and Islamic cultural references have acquired much greater effectiveness than those which preceded them, notably those of “secular” ethnic Arab nationalism, in a huge variety of social as well as political mobilisations. However, this does not permit us to predict the many political uses to which this frame of reference can be put.

For some time now, we have suggested a series of hypotheses on the subject of this matrix of identity and the reasons for the mobilising power of religious Muslim culture in the regions of the ex-European colonial periphery: the return of the language of "inherited" Muslim culture is part of an on-going anti-colonial process of creating distance – in the cultural and symbolic sphere - from the West, with its “neo-colonial” and now “imperial” character. It is important to highlight the reactive character of the (re)affirmation of Islamic
identity because it enables us to explain those aspects of Islamism which appear irrational, especially the indiscriminate rejection of certain aspects of modernisation solely on the grounds that they are legitimised by references and symbols taken from western culture which is perceived as foreign. At the same time, it also explains the equally irrational character of the reaction of a large section of western society faced with political “products”, assertions or challenges, labelled using Islamic terminology which we perceive as a threat to our long-standing linguistic monopoly on the definition of universalism and modernity.

In the methodological sphere, if we take the hypothesis that re-islamisation is an issue of identity, we can make an essential first point: to the degree that it is a mobilisation based on identity, the Islamist mobilisation is not constrained by social boundaries. Therefore its adoption cannot rely on the analytic tools of traditional sociology which uses only socio-economic parameters. In effect, Islamists are not poor or under-employed, any more than they are rich, young or old, middle class, intellectuals, civil servants, soldiers, men or women. They are all these categories at once, as were the participants in other historical mobilisations for nationalist or anti-imperialist resistance of a type based on identity against domination.

As well as not borrowing the shortcuts of essentialism and brandishing concepts which artificially homogenise a complex reality (jihad, fitnah) and are legitimately denounced as producing “more smoke than fire”, the second stage of the analysis must beware of exaggerating the explanatory potential of the common denominator of identity. Instead, it must reconnect with the diversity and complexity of the parameters of political and economic sociology and not make reference to Islam the principle cause of the behaviour of social actors. According to this abbreviated but widespread and even dominant explanatory mode, the militants of Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Chechen fighters, and the Algerian opposition to the military junta in power since independence
are wrongly regarded as having only adopted armed struggle “because they are Islamic fundamentalists” and not because the Israelis in Palestine, the Russians in Chechnia, and the Algerian generals maintain themselves in power only by a very similar recourse to armed violence.

This second stage of the analysis of the Islamist phenomenon is thus more complex than identifying a matrix of identity and it cannot discount the possibilities which the tools of political sociology offer. It is therefore vital to take into account the great diversity of ways in which a religious frame of reference, whose extreme normative flexibility has been amply proven, is used in society or politics, and by the state or against it. Although absent at the level of identity (one does not choose the Islamic frame of reference because one is “poor”), economic factors can find their legitimate place here as elements, among others, in the radicalisation of mobilisations. In this area, for our part we have documented and defended the hypothesis that the adoption of an Islamic frame of reference only marginally affects the actors’ modes of action (violent or legal, authoritarian or democratic). The legitimisation of a recourse to armed struggle does not need an Islamic frame of reference, and acceptance without reservation of the demands of democracy can occur within such a frame of reference. We also uphold the hypothesis that an Islamic frame of reference does not determine the stance of individuals with respect to the dual process of social modernisation, notably the steady incursion of women into public, professional and political space, and political liberalisation - the limitation of governmental powers, the institutionalisation of its transmission, the protection of individuals and minorities and so on.

II The Globalisation of the Maintenance of an (American) Order and the Globalisation of an (Islamic) Resistance

Having established the origin of the growing recourse to an Islamic cultural frame of reference, the second level of analysis should permit us to identify, in
the case of "al-Qa’ida", the reasons why one, and only one, of the components of
the current generation of the Islamist movement have chosen a particularly
radical interpretation of this frame of reference, and its militant application. On
the one hand, this radicalisation first took place against the elites in power in the
Muslim world, and on the other, against the West in general and the US and
Israel in particular. This radicalisation is both tactical and ideological.

Indeed, the al-Qa’ida generation preaches resort to armed struggle in
preference to all other types of political action which it considers as completely
discredited in view of the experience of the Muslim Brothers legal activities.
However, it then depends upon a quasi-criminalisation of non-members of the
Muslim club whom it defines, moreover, in a particularly selective way as not
only the Christian and Jewish kuffar and the so-called secular elites in power in
the Muslim world, but also Muslim opponents, including the Muslim Brothers,
whom it accuses of making unacceptable concessions at the expense of the
primacy of the revelatory (divine) norm by accepting the democratic principle
which confirms the primacy of a human norm. Lastly, al-Qa’ida’s strategy of
transferring the political struggle from the national to the international arena,
thereby confers on it its present globalising dimension.

To demonstrate the specificity of al-Qa’ida and the resort to violence of this
section of an Islamist generation, it is necessary to locate it synchronically and
diachronically, both "vertically", i.e. within the timeframe of the contemporary
Islamist movement since its emergence, and "horizontally", i.e. in comparison to
other existing manifestations of the phenomenon of political re-islamisation.
Whether they are chronological or spatial, it goes without saying that these
divisions indicate an evolutionary process and complex and contradictory
transformations rather than defined boundaries or definitive ruptures. When the
militancy of al-Qa’ida is located "horizontally" it is evident that it is far from
representing the sole form of the dynamic of re-islamisation today which
expresses itself in numerous clearly different ideological and political currents.
The founding movement, the Muslim Brothers from which others have dissociated themselves – following a path trodden in his time by Sayyid Qutb in response to the repression of Nasser’s regime – in fact continues to represent the great majority. Left wing branches such as the Wassat Party or the Egyptian Labour Party have also appeared. They attack the remaining barriers which still prevent in their eyes the modernisation of the “brotherhood” movement. At the other end of the spectrum, the Salafis seem to want to rid themselves of those aspects of modernisation – notably political – which the Muslim Brothers accepted long ago. It is necessary to add that for some years, the revival of large Sufi brotherhoods and their modernisation in the educational and social but also political spheres demonstrates more and more explicitly an identical dynamic of re-islamisation. The Islamist phenomenon has long been perceived, and indeed understood by individuals participating in the movements concerned, as radically antagonistic to the mysticism, apolitical stance and also moderation which characterise the Sufi brotherhoods in the eyes of all those, regimes or western observers, who seek a reassuring alternative to Islamism in the Muslim world. However, the boundary has today come to be nuanced in myriad ways as a result of the many cross-overs which can be attested between the two forms of mobilisation which were never, in fact, completely antithetical.

In order to locate the al-Qa’ida generation “vertically” we propose to situate it within a chronology of contemporary Islamism that can be sub-divided into three successive generations, the third of which we will focus upon in particular, i.e. the one personified by Usama bin Laden. The first generation of modern Islamism was that of resistance to colonialism. This "Islamic" resistance first found expression in the intellectual sphere in the reformist reaction of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. Then from 1928 it found expression in the political sphere with Hasan al-Banna’ and his Muslim Brothers although there was no serious intellectual rupture. It is necessary to state that although this crucial generation succeeded in maintaining an Islamic point of
reference in nationalist discourses, it failed, in Egypt as in Tunisia and Algeria, to capitalise upon its political gains and accede to power. The first modern Islamists were, in effect, pushed aside in every case to the benefit of secular independence elites, during a process of which all the dimensions are still not completely clear, in particular the role played by the colonial powers in co-opting their negotiating partners after independence.

The second generation which emerged after the colonial era was born of a double disaccord - cultural then political – between the Islamists and the nationalist elites which came to power after independence. Islamic terminology was initially used to denounce what Islamists perceived as the "cultural after-effects" of the colonial era, and then against the growing authoritarianism of the local supporters of the new "Arab political formula", the nationalist elites installed in power. This Islamist generation criticised them for a kind of deficit of authenticity, the fact that they had not made a real cultural and symbolic break with the colonial universe – in other words, their inability to achieve the “distancing” of the dominant foreigner by restoring the primacy of the Islamic, that is to say indigenous, symbolic system. Thus Islamist rhetoric came to prolong in some form in the cultural sphere the old nationalist process of distancing the coloniser which had occurred in the political sphere up until independence, then in the economic sphere with the “nationalisations” of oil, land, and the Suez Canal, frequently using terms from western thought, especially Marxist ones. The second grievance, which emerged more slowly, was directed against an authoritarianism made all the more unacceptable by the fact that it benefited from the tolerance and often the compliant support of the ex-colonial powers whose interference in internal affairs became more and more evident. The heroes of independence thus came to be accused not only of renewing the terms of cultural domination but also of promoting a new dependence, first economic but then political and military as well, vis-à-vis the previous colonial powers in the first instance and then very quickly, vis-à-vis the
American superpower which has taken their place. This formula is not completely new.

In a text which has largely escaped the attention of the more hasty analysts of the history of al-Qa’ida, did not Sayyid Qutb prophetically entitle one of the chapters of his prison biography, *al-Haraka al-Islamiyya Tabda’ bi’l-Qa’ida* (the Islamic movement begins with “al-qa’ida” i.e. the base) in which he presents the motives and aims (the protection of a movement threatened by destruction in his eyes) of his own passage to “direct action”? The short text (*Li-Madha ʿAdamuni, Why did they condemn me?*) is not only remarkable for its anticipation of terminology. Written by Qutb on the eve of his execution after weeks spent enduring physical torture, a practice terrifyingly commonplace but altogether absent from the thinking of self-proclaimed experts on “Islamic terrorism”, it places in perspective the trajectory of an individual whom Nasser’s regime was about to put to death, having failed to suppress him intellectually. Qutb’s interpretation sheds light less on the philosophical or theological origins of the jihadists of today than it does on the profane sources of the production of their radicalism. It shows that from Algiers to Cairo by way of Riyadh, this “machine manufacturing bombers” retains an astounding relevance. Qutb, who is convinced that the attempt to assassinate Nasser was the product of manipulation involving the British secret service, accuses those whom he characterises – in the same manner as Bin Laden forty years later – as “colonial Crusaders” and their “Zionist” allies of having plotted to sow discord between Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasser and Hasan al-Banna’s Muslim Brothers. The recipe for the radicalisation of Qutb thus already includes repression and the manipulation of violence: immediately after his attempted assassination, Nasser systematically imprisoned those who were not initially his opponents. He went on to claim that in order to suppress an uprising by the imprisoned Muslim Brothers, he had to massacre seventeen of them in their cells. The theology of war is constructed as a foil to the support granted by a cynical and domineering major foreign power,
to the indigenous elites it manipulates which are themselves manipulative and dictatorial. The "inhumane torture" that Qutb evokes with particular insistence very much appears, ultimately, as the decisive factor in his radicalisation which was both theological and strategic.

After an interval of nearly forty years, *Li-Madha ʿAdamuni* illuminates many facets of the formation of the political imagination of those who follow Bin Laden. The political imagination of Qutb was no more nourished by solely ideological or caricatured representations of the domination that he denounced than that of the Saudi millionaire struggling against the corruption of his americanised princely elites. Indeed, the fears in the 1960s – such as the growth of the Palestinian problem and the repressive direction taken by the Arab regimes – have been confirmed to a large degree by the actual situation.

During the 1990s the third generation, that of al-Qa’ida, separated itself from the rest of the vast Islamic movement. Its partial separation and especially its rise in radicalism seem to correlate with three determining factors:

- The rise in the interventionism and unilateralism of the foremost world power after the collapse of the USSR whose existence had previously limited the extent of its intervention by dividing the Western camp;
- The increasingly severe denial of representation resulting from the Arab political formula and the addition of targets from those who implement this formula locally - "the near enemy" according to Bin Laden’s right-hand man, the Egyptian al-Dhawahiri, i.e. the Arab regimes - to its foreign promoter and beneficiary - "the distant enemy", i.e the United States;
- The ability of the jihadists, ie those who favour “direct action” and a complete ideological and political rupture, to capitalize on two assets: firstly, a positive asset, their successful participation in the resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; secondly, by default, the defeat of their competitors who act legally, the Muslim Brothers, who
are unable to maintain the credibility of their moderate tactical and ideological positions in the face of the political intransigence of their national and international environments.

II 1. The Neo-Interventionism and Unilateralism of the Foremost World Power

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the second Gulf War and under the influence of the Soviet collapse, the post-colonial formula of domination yielded more and more explicitly to a new imperial order dominated by the United States. American interventionism, released from the constraints for long imposed by its Soviet alter-ego, recognised fewer and fewer limits. Its visible and active participation in the construction of a new world order, simultaneously economic, political and cultural, grew appreciably. The ideological basis of this new norm which is “americanising” on the one hand and “confessionalising” on the other – as a result of the Bush administration’s increased reference to Christianity – and which is depriving it of the support of many of its traditional international partners, tends to make it unilateral and thereby accelerates its loss of universal legitimacy. The resort to “hard power” has become normalised in inverse proportion to the growing ideological deficit apparent in the pronouncements of this new international order, as well as in those of its local state allies, the Arab regimes and Israel. The “hard power” used since the war to “liberate” Kuwait, in particular, has led to the installation of a direct military presence in several countries of the Arabian peninsula.

This quasi-occupation was an essential stage in the military mobilisation of Usama bin Laden and his followers. The violence of the embargo against Iraq and the speedy decline in the terms of the political exchange between the Palestinians and Israelis after the Oslo agreements had revealed their limits, then played a large part in the loss of the
international system’s credibility. The image of a new disinterested and peaceable and therefore universal order, gave way to the much less consensual picture of a world super-power supporting by any means including military one camp which happens to coincide with its economic, ideological and security interests, and those of its regional (Israel) and local (mostly discredited authoritarian regimes) state allies.

The first of two major political blunders committed by the promoters of a new world order was undoubtedly to minimise the extent to which the authoritarian regimes which they took as allies were discredited. In the wake of the Iranian crisis and the misunderstandings which it fostered, the second associated blunder was to indiscriminately criminalise an entire Islamist generation, solely because of the self-proclaimed “Islamic-ness” of its references, without so much as bothering to comprehend its real political agenda even though it is the principal source of opposition to these regimes. In the imagination of an entire generation of Muslims and, obviously, the powerful Islamist current within it, the external factors affecting internal political crises (al-Dhawahiri’s “distant enemy”) are therefore systematically associated with the increased visibility of the American leadership in the international order in general, and in the regional Israeli-Arab order and the internal orders of the Arab states in particular. In the Islamist movement of the “South”, the internationalization and territorialisation of the armed struggle start in any event at the same time: it is in this soil – the globalisation of an order characterised both by American domination and the total liberty granted to the defeated USSR’s Russian successor to embark upon colonial wars in order to maintain the debris of its empire – that, unsurprisingly, the seeds for a globalisation of armed resistance have germinated. In the generally democratic western environment, it cannot be denied that the proposals of the anti-globalism movement has signalled the the existence of a range of political, economic
and cultural frustrations which are not – *mutatis mutandis* - completely different from those which caused the emergence of al-Qa’ida.

In the regions where – thanks to oil stakes and Israeli security - Western domination takes on a special intensity and where, moreover, the local political formula completely discredits legal forms of contestation, radicalisation has led to the emergence of the revolutionary and intolerant rhetoric of Bin Laden.

II.2. From Algiers to Riyadh: The Growing Contradictions within the "Arab Political Formula"

The 1990s witnessed both a growth in domestic repression on the part of the Arab regimes and the systematisation of co-operative security arrangements which allowed the most authoritarian regimes to maintain themselves in power.

The dominant political formula, which we have chosen to describe as the Arab political formula or institutional norm, has come to be characterised by the prohibition and ultimately the criminalisation of genuine political forces. In the place of these genuine forces, made up in almost all cases of the mainstream of the Islamist movement and denied access to the legal political sphere, fabricated or co-opted “opposition partners” are substituted as window dressing to present a picture of pluralism intended above all for “the Yankees” to see. In order to handle the inevitable tensions fostered by the profound denial of representation produced by such a dichotomy between the real and the institutional, resort to repression – with its implied routinisation of torture – has taken the place of political participation. Finally, the media’s view and the often massive manipulation of the extremist fringe of the Islamist opposition (obvious not only in the Algerian case, but also equally evident virtually everywhere else) are employed to justify a clamp-down on legitimate political activity
for security reasons and complete the suspension of the electoral system or, more generally, using the excellent expression of Mohamed Tozy, the “disarming” of the political sphere. Last but not least, the Arab political formula is co-dependent upon Western support, a fact which cannot help but shed a glaring light on the extremely variable application of the democratic and humanist principles which the West, both the United States and Europe, loudly claim to promote. To name one example out of thousands – to say nothing of the merits repeatedly given to General Ben Ali - the decoration given to the Egyptian head of state “for his role in the service of human rights and democracy” by the French president of the Senate in 1990, between two stages of legislative elections during which the terrible Egyptian state machinery had filled the prisons, and ballot boxes had functioned in a most unusual way.

The Arab regimes reward the West for its support with material concessions, which range from participation in the control of oil fields to arms deals by way of highly personalised payments which the history of bilateral relations, French-Algerian on one hand and US-Saudi on the other, still recalls. In addition to the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, the prototype for this model is undoubtedly the French attitude vis-à-vis the halting of the electoral process by the Algerian military junta in 1991 and the systematic use of violence and propaganda by which that same junta has continued to maintain itself in power with impunity since then.

With respect to this emblematic episode in the European contribution to the creation of the al-Qa’ida generation, the commentaries of journalists and academic studies by “legitimate” political scientists have long remained silent when it comes to the crucial point, i.e. the widespread use of violence. The first major world summit against (Islamic) terrorism which was held in Sharm al-Sheikh in March 1996 – that is, give or take a few
weeks, the moment when Bin Laden launched his first call for “war against the Americans” - (that is to say, with a margin of a few weeks, at the same moment as Bin Laden launched his first call of "with the war against the Americans" serves as particularly symbolic moment in this process. The security alliance announced by the Americans and Europeans, Russia included, as well as the Israelis and the most dictatorial Arab regimes against a vague “Islamic terrorism” (Palestinian, Chechen, Algerian, Egyptian etc) confirmed the cynical criminalisation of any armed resistance to the dysfunctions created by global, regional, or national authoritarianism. By calling for the internationalisation of repression, the alliance of the powers gathered at Sharm al-Sheikh only served to confirm the necessity, already recognised by its opponents, of also “de-nationalising” their action and internationalising it. It is this dynamic which has become manifest in the progressive globalisation of the networks involved in al-Qa’ida’s revolt.

II.3. The Afghan Episode and the Rise of the Rejectionist Camp of the Salafi Jihadists at the Expense of the Muslim Brothers

The episode during which several thousand young people entered the ranks of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation fostered a third set of factors which the analyst of the al-Qa’ida generation must take into account. In fact, the Afghan episode can be deconstructed into various successive phases, each with its own logic.

The first phase was the semi-official and legal mobilisation - from the perspective of the Arab and Western political milieu which strongly encouraged it - of young partisans for armed resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the beginning of the 1980s. The end of the legal path for the “Arab Afghans”, who in fact came from all over the Muslim world, approached with the victory of the mujahidin, including
themselves, over the regime in Kabul and the withdrawal of the Soviet forces.

The troubled phase which followed from 1992 witnessed a civil war between the victorious mujahidin, during which the “Arabs” frequently paid the cost. The need for the majority of them to withdraw from their Afghan sanctuary coincided with their repression by the Arab regimes which now became wary of those who they had imprudently sent or allowed to participate in the “jihad”.

The arrival in power of the Taliban in 1996 overturned the status quo once again. The agreement made between Usama Bin Laden and the new regime was backed by Ayman al-Dhawahiri, who decided, in this context, to transfer his old and unfruitful struggle against the “near” enemy in the form of the Egyptian state to the American enemy which was certainly “distant” but also the object of an exponential growth in discontent. This last phase gave the signal for the “legal” deployment – from the point of view of their Afghan hosts – of al-Qa’ida’s international network.

The Afghan episode - in other words, an opportunity for ten to fifteen thousand young Muslims of all nationalities to participate in a victorious armed struggle against the second world power of the time – played a highly significant role in the genesis and consolidation of the al-Qa’ida generation, as did the Balkan War and the war in Chechnia. Nonetheless, it should not be put forward as the single or central explanatory factor. While, being more than a mere opportunity for military training, Afghanistan simply facilitated the passage to action of a group within the current Islamist generation, by providing it with fertile ground, and accelerating the trans-national circulation and power of its revolutionary strategy. Above all, it gave credibility to the effectiveness or merely the feasibility of armed struggle against one of the pillars of the world order, at the expense of other contemporary Islamist strategies. Indeed, the rise of the rejectionist camp
composed of a minority of Salafis who became partisans of armed struggle was supported as much by the failure of struggles conducted within national boundaries (notably Egypt and Algeria) as by the lack of achievement of the legal strategies put forward by other contemporary Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brothers.

The particularly conservative political colour of Afghan society and the proximity of the network’s founder members to the Taliban movement produced by this environment must also be taken into account in order to explain some of the especially conservative references of these Salafi jihadists who compose the infamous core of the most lethal of the resistance movements to the profound dysfunctions in the global legal order today.