THE RISE OF JIHADIST MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST—A LONGER AND CRITICAL VIEW

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Abstract
This article is a response to the a-historical analyses in the mainstream media and academia, which often analyze and present jihadist movements, in particular the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, as actors that are driven merely by ideology, irrationality and vengeance. It is also a response to a number of analyses on the left, which establish an automatic relationship between imperialism and the ongoing conflict with the jihadist groups as its protagonists in the Middle East. The article, in an attempt to avoid the excessive generality of the latter, argues that the emergence and increasing influence of jihadist movements should be located in two historical processes: 1) a series of colonial and imperialist interventions, which go back to the early twentieth century; 2) the failure of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012, which created political vacuum that would be filled by jihadist actors. It also argues that the current conflict marks a shift towards a new paradigm of violent conflict.
Keywords: Jihadism, Salafism, Wahhabism, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, world orders,

Resumen
Este artículo es una respuesta a los análisis ahistóricos dentro de los medios y la academia dominantes, mismos que frecuentemente analizan y presentan a los movimientos jihadistas, en particular al Estado Islámico y a Al-Qaeda, como actores que están motivados meramente por una ideología, por la irracionalidad y por la venganza. Es también una respuesta a un número de análisis desde la izquierda que establecen una relación automática entre el imperialismo y el conflicto en curso con los grupos jihadistas con sus protagonistas en el Medio Oriente. El artículo, en un intento por evitar la generalidad excesiva de los últimos, argumenta que la emergente y creciente influencia de los movimientos jihadistas deben ser ubicados como parte de dos procesos históricos: 1) una serie de intervenciones coloniales e imperialistas, mismas que se remontan a principios del siglo XX; 2) el fracaso de los levantamientos árabes de 2011 y 2012, mismos que crearon un vacío político que habría de ser llenado por actores jihadistas. Además, se argumenta que el actual conflicto marca un cambio hacia un nuevo paradigma de conflicto violento.
Palabras clave: Jihadismo, salafismo, wahhabismo, Estado Islámico, Al-Qaeda, órdenes mundiales.

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The self-proclaimed Islamic State and the almost instantaneous growth of its fame and power in the past couple of years have become a source of fear, worry and anger across the globe. The group has gained a reputation of notoriety by virtue of its brutality, which has been widely broadcast thanks to its prolific media network. There have been heated and unresolved debates in the academia and the media as to the nature of this group as well as how it can be defeated. Joining the debate on the Islamic State and other jihadist groups, I will address in this paper two questions. The first one is 'How do we explain the rise of the armed jihadist movements in Iraq and Syria since 2011?' Here, the focus will be on the Islamic State and al-Qaeda[1] as the two leading and most influential representatives of such movements. The second question is 'What does the form that the conflict has assumed in this period signify in terms of international politics and the current world order?' I will argue that the emergence and widespread influence of such movements should be located primarily in two processes: 1) a series of (neo)-colonial and imperialist interventions in the region which stretch back to the early twentieth century, and which culminated with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ongoing internationalized intra-state conflicts in Iraq and Syria; 2) the failure of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012 in effecting economic, political and social change, thus creating frustration, and political and ideological vacuum addressed and filled by jihadist actors. In response to the second question, I will argue that the particular form the conflict has assumed in the region (and the world) points to the rapidly changing form of armed conflict. The traditional conflict paradigm has been replaced by a new one, which has challenged and modified the pillars of the former.

The mainstream media and academia often present and analyze jihadist movements, in particular the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, as actors that are driven merely by ideology, irrationality and vengeance. In these epistemologies and processes of identity construction, i.e. the construction of the 'other', what is usually ignored and/or omitted are both the complexity of these identities, and the histories which involve the relations between 'us' and these constructed 'others' and which have played a formative role in the emergence of the actors signified by these identities. In these ontologies, the actors confronted by the West are reduced to barbaric fanatics who are driven by a religious ideology based on hatred and violence. While it is true that some of these jihadist actors, particularly the Islamic State, have employed violent and 'barbaric' tactics and actions

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[1]   The Islamic State is the name of the Salafist, jihadist group that separated from Al-Qaeda in February 2014 and declared a worldwide caliphate in June 2014. The group had previously called itself, among others, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). It has also been referred to as *Daesh*, an acronym derived from its name in Arabic. The latter has been mostly used by its critics, and military and ideological opponents. Without getting involved in the debates over its name, such as whether or not the group should be allowed to call itself the 'Islamic State', I will rely in this work on the name the group itself has picked for itself. The two main organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the region have been *The Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia* (or, simply Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and *The Support Front for the People of the Levant* (or the al-Nusra Front).

to terrorize both local and foreign populations, and they are driven by fanaticism, these actions cannot be understood without taking into consideration the historical processes that have created the particular conditions under which they have become a possibility. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that these actions have not taken place in ideational or ideological vacuum; it was ideology (in this case, a religious one) that gave these actions meaning and hence, justified them in the eyes of their perpetrators. Now we will turn to this ideology before we delve into the historical and contemporary processes that have rendered this ideology relevant and influential on the territories under investigation.

SALAFISM: A LONGING FOR THE 'PAST' AND THE 'PURE'

Both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are considered Salafist in their interpretation of Islam, which informs their practice. Salafism is a literalist Sunni theological and legal orientation that takes its name from the concept of *al-salaf al-salih* ('the virtuous or pious forefathers'). This phrase refers to the first three generations of Muslims who represent the 'golden age' of Islam.[2]

The roots of Salafism as a minoritarian tendency among Sunnis go back to the 9th century —under the name of *Ahl al-Hadith*. Its central features were crystallized in the teachings of a 14th century Islamic scholar called Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Tamiyya (d. 1328). Ibn Tamiyya is regarded by Salafists today as their main pre-modern scholarly authority (Olidort, 2015:7). The importance of Ibn Tamiyya, as Bernard Haykel (2001) points out, lies in that he was willing to hereticize fellow Muslims, who did not share his views. More importantly, he declared war permissible against Muslim rulers who did not apply the Shariah (the Islamic law). This went against the two then-dominant Sunni principles: 1) to avoid declaring fellow Muslims infidels, a practice called 'takfir'; 2) prohibition of war against Muslim rulers as long as Islam remains the religion of the state and Islamic law is enforced (ibid). Moreover, Ibn Tamiyya criticized popular religious practices (which have persisted over the centuries until today), particularly grave visitations and mystical rituals, as well as Shi'ism. In addition, he launched an attack on the authority of the existing Islamic legal educational institutions and argued for a direct and literal reading of the Qur'an and the hadith as exclusive sources of religious practice and faith (Olidort 2015, 8).

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[2] Quintan Wiktorowicz (2006, 2009) explains the importance of the *salaf* in this tradition: "As the Muslim exemplar, [Prophet Muhammad] embodied the perfection of *tawhid* in action and must be emulated in every detail. Salafis also follow the guidance of the Prophet's companions (the *salaf*), because they learned about Islam directly from the messenger of God and are thus best able to provide an accurate portrayal of the prophetic model (the term 'Salafi' signifies followers of the prophetic model as understood by the companions)." According to a widely cited *hadith*, that is a recorded saying of Muhammad, the Prophet told Muslims that "[T]his *Ummah* (Muslim community) will divide into seventy-three sects all of which except one will go to Hell and they are those who are upon what I and my Companions are upon" (ibid).

According to the Salafists, the earliest Muslims were the ones who preserved most accurately the Prophet Muhammad's statements and actions because they knew him or at least, those close to him. Salafism is, thus, an Islamic movement or trend that tries to "emulate as closely as possible the teaching and practice of the Prophet and the first Muslims" (Hoiglit 2014, 2). The emphasis in this tradition is on the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and the unique status of the Qur'an, *sunna* and *al-salaf al-salih* as final arbiters on religious and social questions (ibid). The Salafi view of *tawhid* is quite important, as it leads to a rejection of secularism and the separation of religion and the states, as the latter suggest the primacy and supremacy of human-made laws and institutions over God's word and governance. Haykel (2009) enumerates six theological views that are at the core of Salafism: 1) a return to the authentic beliefs and practices of the *salaf*; 2) the oneness of God (*tawhid*); 3) the Quran and Sunna as the only valid sources of religious authority; 4) a belief that specific answers to all questions are found in the Qur'an and *sunna*; 5) ridding Islam of 'heretical' innovations (i.e. *bid'ah*);[3] and 6) fighting unbelief actively. By strictly following the rules of and guidance in the Qur'an and sunna, Salafis believe that they "eliminate the biases of human subjectivity and self-interest, thereby allowing them to identify the singular truth of God's commands" (Wiktorowicz, 2006: 207). The logical inference from this point is that there is only one true and legitimate religious interpretation, and thus, there is no room for pluralism and heterodoxy in Islam. Scholars describe the Salafi doctrine as 'simple and uncompromising' (Hoigilt, 2014: 35). Hoigilt (2014) states that "the simple nature of Salafi doctrine and its ability, on the grounds of its strict adherence to the sacred text, to always occupy the moral ground, makes it attractive to many and in part explains the global success of Salafi outreach."

One of the important concepts or religious trends that are often discussed in relation to Salafism is 'Wahhabism'. And, there is a debate in the academic literature regarding this particular relationship between Salafism and Wahhabism. Some scholars see Wahhabism, which has characterized the Saudi political establishment since the late 18th century, as a subset of Salafism (Bunzel, 2015). Wahhabis waged 'holy war' with the help of the Saudis against perceived heretics in order to eliminate *shirk* and affirm *tawhid*. As a result, Wahhabism spread across the Arabian peninsula. Other scholars have distinguished this Islamic movement from Salafism. Jacob Olidort (2014) argues that while both share the same theology and pre-modern scholarly authorities, Wahhabis typically adhere to the Hanbali school of law, and originate in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an 18th century preacher but not a legal scholar, with close ties to the Saudi political polity at the time. In contrast to the Wahhabism, Olidort asserts, Salafism originated in a tradition of legal reform dating from the 18th century with greater scope from Africa to South Asia. Also, rather than aligning them-

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[3] A Salafi website, www.bidah.com, first provides a linguistic definition for 'bid'ah' as "something invented without having any prior example" and then proceeds to argue that the shariah definition of this concept is founded upon five statements by Muhammad. The Salafi view on bid'ah has led to rejection of and opposition to some of the most popular Islamic practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of Muhammad's birthday, most Shiite traditions and practices and Sufism.

selves with existing regimes and political bodies, the adherents of Salafism rejected the authorities of both legal schools and state (ibid). Despite the debate in the literature, this work will not differentiate the two Islamic movements as two separate traditions but will posit Wahhabism as a specific geographical variant or form of the broader Salafi theology and movement. Such reluctance stems from both the overlaps with regard to theology and the pre-modern scholarly authorities, and the rejection of the adherents of the former tradition of the terms 'Wahhabi' and 'Wahhabism'. The adherents see these terms as derogatory and instead, prefer to be called Salafi or *muwahhid*.

It should be emphasized, contrary to mainstream perceptions, that the Salafism constitutes a diverse movement and community with a broad geographical and demographic scope. Although there is broad consensus and unity in this community with regard to religious jurisprudence, there is significant debate on contemporary politics and conditions. The main split concerns strategy. On this point, the community can be divided, for analytical purposes, into three groups: the purists, the political Salafis, and the jihadis (Wiktorowicz, 2006; Steinberg, 2013).[4] The purists reject political activity and emphasize non-violent methods of propagation, educations and purification. Politics is viewed by the purists as a diversion that encourages deviancy. Political Salafis, on the other hand, emphasize political action. The application of the Salafi faith to the political arena is seen as particularly important, as it "dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate" (Wiktorowicz, 2006:208). They tend to be ambivalent towards employment of violence for political goals and often show sympathy for militant groups fighting in territories such as Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. The third group, the jihadis argue that the current context —global, regional and local— calls for violence and armed revolution, and thus take a more militant approach compared to the other two groups of Salafis. The differences over the analysis and interpretation of the recent and current contexts have, thus, led to the emergence of the three aforementioned groups. The majority of the Salafis belong to the so-called 'purist' or 'quietist' category and are skeptical of political participation, be it violent or non-violent. The type of Salafis that concern us in this paper, however, belong to the third group, i.e. Salafi jihadis, who constitute a minority within the movement or community but have moved to the centre of discussion worldwide due to the rise of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State to prominence in the past fifteen years.

The two groups that are the focus of this article, i.e., the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, manifest significant differences despite the fact that they both are Salafis and the former is the most important progeny of the latter. The Islamic State grew out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. At the same time, its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the entire group violently broke with Al-Qaeda in late 2013. These two groups differ with regard to both tactics and strategy; they also differ on who should lead the overall jihadist movement. The

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[4] Haykel's categorization includes three different trends, i.e. Salafi jihadis, Salafi *harakis* (activists), and Salafi quietists (*al-salafiyya al-ilmiyya*), which more or less correspond to the three categories identified in this article.

most important strategic difference and point of contention is regarding the immediate enemy and the relations with other jihadist groups. Avoiding sectarian conflict (at least temporarily) and confrontation with other jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda's main mission has always been to unify the jihadist movement under its global objectives. The Islamic State (and its predecessors under different names), on the other hand, has devoted significant energy and resources to fighting rival groups, including Salafi ones. Also, one of al-Baghdadi's aims is to purify the Islamic community by attacking the Shi'a and other religious minorities, such as Yazidis, and enforcing 'correct' Islamic beliefs and practices. In this quest, he largely ignores the Al-Qaeda goal of striking the 'far enemy', that is, the United States (and its Western allies), in order to overthrow the regimes in the Middle East it supports. Moreover, al-Baghdadi, particularly since the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, insists that his organization should assume the leadership in jihadist operations in the Middle East, challenging Al-Qaeda's hitherto leading status in the region. A distinctive feature of the Islamic State has been its attempt to establish a full-fledged state apparatus to achieve its objectives. Although our knowledge about this attempt is yet quite limited, a leaked internal Islamic State manual provides insight into the group's state-building project, which includes government departments, a treasury and an economic programme for self-sufficiency (Malik, 2015).

As regards tactics, the most significant disagreement between the two groups is about the use of violence. The Islamic State has used violence, more precisely 'brutality', and disseminated the images of such brutality to achieve goals beyond the mere physical destruction of the enemy. Live burning of captives, executions and decapitations widely circulated through the media have won the group almost instant global fame (and notoriety). This instant reach and fame have been possible with the establishment, and then, an extremely effective utilization of a media and propaganda network via new technologies.

The Islamic State's skill in the use of technology and media, and the latter's intensity and scale are truly unprecedented among jihadist groups. The contrast particularly with al-Qaeda's rather primitive and infrequent use of media is stark. According to *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, a report released by the Quilliam Foundation in October 2015, the Islamic State released on average 38 new items per day —20-minute videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays, audio clips and pamphlets, in various languages ranging from Bengali to Turkish (Winter, 2015: 3).

The media that are disseminated are not solely about violence; a sizeable portion, indeed, the majority of them depict everyday civilian life in the territories held by the Islamic State. The footage on and photos of the economic life, the reigning law and order, and religious fervor are used to increase the ideological and political appeal of the group and attract supporters from various parts of the world.[5] Besides civilian life, the group goes to great lengths to portray its military prowess and might. Although the intended audience of portrayals of military power and brutality was international at

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[5] For a detailed discussion of the propaganda machine of the Islamic State, see Charlie Winter's report, "Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate' (2015)".

the beginning, the focus has shifted towards a regional audience recently. The ultimate goal of this propaganda effort is to generate fear (both at the international and regional level) and intimidate the populations under its rule and in the neighbouring territories in order to achieve submission and discourage rebellion and dissent (Winter, 2015: 7). The fear component of this propaganda effort has proven to be quite successful; a good example was the capturing of Mosul by the group in June 2014, when the Iraqi army fled without putting up a fight, abandoning the second largest city of Iraq with a large arsenal of US-supplied weapons.[6]

The emphasis on violence has also served the Islamic State's strategy of polarization (Hanieh, 2015). The group has strategically aimed at deepening the sectarian divisions and conflict that had emerged and spread with the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. This polarization has played a key role in the expansion of the Islamic State, as Sunni populations have sought refuge in the promised utopia of the group after many years of perceived or actual Shia-led persecution.

HISTORY STRIKES BACK: THE GHOST OF COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

No contemporary case of international or internationalized internal conflict in the Middle East in general, and in Syria and Iraq in particular, can be fully understood with an exclusive focus on the present moment. Such enquiry requires bringing in history, which has and continues to shape, enable as well as constrain the political (and the economic and the social) today. As opposed to many mainstream analyses which are devoid of history and according to which the current moment takes place in almost complete historical vacuum, this essay will take an historical perspective, a long one indeed, which emphasizes the linkages between the present moment and history. While the history of the territories under discussion indicates both ruptures and continuities, we can argue that (neo-)colonial and/or imperialistic interventions by Western actors have been a constant, continuous component of this history in the past century. Such interventions dating back to the early 20th century have shaped a regional context and a psyche that have informed and triggered the particular types of responses among the local populations, including the most recent Salafi jihadism embodied in the Islamic State and the branches of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria (and elsewhere). The subjective, i.e. the psyche of the colonized, informing his/her agency and resistance, thus, cannot be separated from and understood independently of the objective, i.e. the Western interventions and the historically specific configurations of power in the region.

The interventions by Western powers into the Middle East, that is, into the economic, political and social structures in the region, should be contextualized and studied in different world orders defined as historically specific configurations of power at the

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[6] There have also been rumours backed by IS propaganda that the group has also seized more than $400 million from the banks in Mosul. This rumour (and claim by the IS) has, however, been refuted by Iraqi officials (Financial Times, 2014).

international level (Cox and Sinclair, 1996: 494). The three interrelated constituent components of a world order are material (re-)production, ideas and institutions. While material production and its logic shape and condition the other two components, the relationship is not one of determination. We can talk about three distinct world orders within which the interventions into Middle Eastern societies have taken place in the past century. The first one corresponds to the era which marks the end of the classical period of imperialism and of *Pax Britannica*, followed by the interbellum. This is a period in which Western colonial powers attempted to hang on to their colonies and continued to exert significant, direct influence on them. The second one covers the Cold War period in which the world was divided into two rival spheres based on opposite social imaginaries with their respective hegemons, i.e. the United States and the Soviet Union. The early years of this period was marked by nationalist rebellions against colonial powers leading to a wave of decolonization in the Third World. The final two decades of this period was characterized by a structural crisis in the West and a debt crisis in the Third World. The debt crisis spawned a neo-colonial relationship between the advanced capitalist world and the indebted countries via structural adjustment programmes imposed by the international financial institutions newly converted to neoliberalism. The Cold War was followed by a new world order whose essential feature has been neoliberal globalization. Neoliberalism can be defined as "a particular form of class rule and state power that intensifies competitive imperatives for both firms and workers, increases dependence on the market in daily life and reinforces the dominant hierarchies of the world market, with the United States at its apex" (Albo *et al.*, 2010: 28). As such, neoliberalism has coloured the most recent phase of the internationalization of capital, i.e. 'globalization' as well as every Western intervention that has taken place in the Global South in general and in the Middle East in particular.[7] The ascendance of neoliberalism to a hegemonic position has been facilitated by an historic and contingent turn of events, which opened vast territories for capitalist penetration and accumulation. As neoliberalism as a political project and a mode of power has spread and been instituted across the globe —though coercion and/or other means— under the auspices of the us-led Global North, this process has not proceeded without resistance. The forms of contestation and resistance have varied, as they have been mediated by the historically particular circumstances of each national context in which intervention has occurred.

In this part of the article, I will discuss a number of Western interventions in the Middle East in different periods in the past century, which have shaped the regional and national contexts that have made possible the recent rise of jihadist movements as powerful actors. It will also be argued that despite the centrality of history in our enquiry, we need to go beyond these historical interventions if we want to understand the specificity of the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq. While these historical moments provide the ge-

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[7] See, for instance, David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) for an historical discussion of the emergence and spread of neoliberalism as well as of the particular us attempt to implement a neoliberal state following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

neral context, the specificity of the political and ideological form of the current response to Western intervention(s) should be sought in the trajectory of the Arab uprisings, the so-called 'Arab Spring', which erupted throughout 2011 and 2012 (Hanieh, 2015).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, or officially, the Asia Minor Agreement, of May 1916 has recently come to the forefront of a vibrant debate on the impact of history on the current violent conjuncture in the Middle East, in particular in Iraq and Syria. Accepting the principle of Arab independence laid down in the correspondence with Hussein ibn Ali al-Hashimi, the *sharif* and *amir* of Mecca, the British and French diplomats, Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot respectively, divided the Middle East into five different desired zones of influence. The Russians were a minor party to this agreement and it was the Bolsheviks who, following the revolution, revealed the secret content of this agreement, causing diplomatic embarrassment for the two other parties. The agreement did not create states but permanent spheres of influence for the European powers, the Great Britain and France in particular, in the previously Ottoman-controlled Middle East. This agreement has re-surfaced recently as a source of contention and debate mostly thanks to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State (IS) when he delivered his first public speech in Mosul's Great Mosque of al-Nuri in July 2014. In this historically and religiously significant building, which was allegedly built by Nur ad-din Zangi, a 12th century Muslim leader who fought the Crusaders, al-Baghdadi declared, referring to his group's war, that "This blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy" (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 2014). The assumption underlying this statement is that the Sunni societies inhabiting the region constitute part of a broader Islamic (i.e. Sunni) *ummah* (community), which is monolithic and indivisible; it was foreign, imposed interventions that have led to the artificial and illegitimate spatial and political divisions within the *ummah* in general and Muslims in the Middle East in particular. The IS, accordingly, has assumed the historic task of unifying Muslims under one banner and of bringing around the only true religion. A number of secular (and critical) analyses have joined al-Baghdadi in their emphasis on the Sykes-Picot Agreement when they linked the ongoing conflict and turmoil in Iraq and Syria to this agreement (Irving, 2014; Keck, 2015; Deutsche Welle, 2014). These, too, have argued that the 1916 agreement created artificial states and boundaries, which have historically rendered the region unstable and prone to violence.

While it is quite debatable as to whether Sykes-Picot created 'artificial' states and nations or whether it prevented the creation of 'natural' and 'homogenous' societies and states (which is implied in many critiques of the agreement), there is no doubt that the Sykes-Picot Agreement along with the Treaty of Versailles, shaped the political fate of the countries in question in the immediate decades following the Great War (Hourani, 2002:318). During the war, Sykes-Picot divided the region into zones of influence, and after the war, the Treaty of Versailles determined that the Arab countries formerly under Ottoman rule could be provisionally recognized as independent states but they would be subject to the rendering of assistance and advice and a state charged with the 'mandate' for them. Thus, under the terms of the mandate, which was formally granted by

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the League of Nations, Britain would be responsible for Iraq and Palestine and France for Syria and Lebanon. For these two European countries, control over Arab lands was important not only because it strengthened their position in the world as major political actors, but also it served their economic interests. The Arab territories were a significant source of raw materials and in the two decades following the Great War, France and Britain expanded their control over the trade and production in the region (ibid.: 321). As the wonders of oil for capitalist accumulation were quickly discovered, companies owned mostly by the French, British, Dutch and Americans swarmed the region and their agreements with the producing countries were a reflection of the unequal balance of power with European countries, particularly Britain. These agreements supported, in the last resort, the position of Western countries. The concessions extracted from the local states and under which these companies operated gave them control of exploration, production, refining and export on extensive territories and for long periods of time (ibid.: 321-2). What is particularly significant about these aforementioned political and economic agreements is their impact on the psycho-affective realm(s) in the region which has informed various types of anti-colonial, anti-Western response, including the currently dominant one in Syria and Iraq.

During the Cold War, a number of Western interventions led by the United States contributed to the shaping of the regional context in which Islamic fundamentalism and jihadism emerged as a potent political response and project. As there have been numerous interventions, I will discuss the major ones which exerted more influence than the others. First, the United States threw its support behind Saudi Arabia to counter the increasingly popular pan-Arab socialism between the mid-1950s and the 1970s, which would have long lasting consequences for the Middle East. Pan-Arabism, which came to be associated primarily with Egypt's Jamal Abd al-Nasir, was seen as a threat to the interests of Western powers in the region. Egypt's attempt to follow a policy of non-alignment, its agreement in 1955 with the Soviet Union for the supply of arms, and its extensive appeal among the Arab peoples were perceived as a threat to the interests of the United States and its allies (Hourani, 2002:366-7). This led to the United States backing Saudi Arabia whose influence surged dramatically with the influx of oil money in the 1970s, and the foundation of two international organizations, i.e., the World Muslim League (1962) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (1969). This support proved crucial, as Saudi Arabia has become the main patron of religious groups throughout the region since then.[8] As Kumar (2002:69) puts it, "At the end of the day, through its various political, religious, and economic institutions, Saudi Arabia played

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[8] Kumar (2012:69) enumerates the ways through which the Saudi ruling elite used its resources to promote Islamism and Wahhabism on the world state: 1) It set up a massive network of charity and good works, which allowed Islamist groups to provide solutions to the economic crises gripping various countries; 2) It used the World Muslim League to counter secularism; 3) It brought together a number of countries in the region under the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969 to set an agenda consistent with the Saudi outlook; 4) It created an Islamic financial system that tied various African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries to the oil-rich nations.

a key behind-the-scenes role in furthering the cause of Islamism with the blessing of the United States." It should be noted that the cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia went beyond politics as the Saudi regime and its allies in the region, and their economic institutions later integrated smoothly into the US-led neoliberal project. As Robert Dreyfuss states, "Islamic finance repeatedly relied on right-wing economists and Islamist politicians who advocated the privatizing, free-market views of the Chicago School" (ibid). This economic cooperation and compatibility further strengthened the alliance between the Saudi regime and the United States (and its allies), boosting the former's already extensive influence over the region.

Secondly, Israel, a key Western ally in the Middle East, played a key role in the rise of Hamas to prominence in Palestine. Although the relationship between the two parties has changed significantly in the recent decades and they have clashed militarily several times since 2006, Israel's support for Hamas in the 1970s and 1980s was crucial to its rise as a major political actor. At the time, Israel's main enemy was the Fatah Party, which was a secular, nationalist and left-wing organization and constituted the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO, although recognized by the neighbouring states, was labeled a terrorist organization by Israel and was subject to heavy repression by the Israeli state in the occupied territories. Meanwhile, the activities of Islamists affiliated with Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood were allowed in the open in Gaza. The Israeli state allowed the *Mujama al-Islamiya* from which Hamas came out to set up a wide network of schools, clinics, a library and kindergartens. The group founded and led by Sheikh Yassin[9] was recognized by Israel first as a charity and then an association (Tharoor ,2014). In this period, the Islamists in general, and the *Mujama al-Islamiya* in particular were supported by Israel in their struggle for power with left, nationalist Palestinian groups.

Thirdly, the United States played a critical role in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89), which constituted a defining moment for the future jihadist groups. A series of events in the 1970s that included the defeat in Indochina, a retreat from Angola, a surge in the influence of the Soviet Union over greater territories, and the revolution in Iran (which brought a regime hostile to US interests in the region) caused significant alarm within the US state. As Kissinger (1994:763) put it, "whatever the causes, the dominoes appeared to be falling." In such a context, the White House described the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as "the gravest threat to world peace since World War II" (Galster, 2001). This perception led to a massive covert aid programme sanctioned by Congress.[10] As part of *Operation Cyclone*, the largest covert aid operation ever conducted by the CIA (indeed, by any agency or nation), the United States poured hundreds of millions of

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[9] Sheikh Yassin (or Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Hassan Yassin) would later found Hamas and serve as its spiritual leader. He was killed by an Israeli helicopter in 2004.

[10] Covert aid, in the form of limited funding and arms to anti-communist forces, had begun prior to the Soviet invasion but steadily grew under President Reagan throughout the 1980s. The United States and Saudi Arabia provided massive amounts of money to the *mujahideen*, including relatively advanced portable Stinger surface-to-air missiles (Byman, 2015:4).

dollars in weapons and ammunition to help the *mujahideen* fight the Soviet army (Byman, 2015). Also, the CIA encouraged and facilitated the recruitment of radical Islamist fighters, who were linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (Coll, 2004). By the mid-1980s, the United States had adopted a policy, which

> looked forward to a new era of direct infusions of advanced US military technology into Afghanistan, intensified training of Islamist guerillas in explosives and sabotage techniques, and targeted attacks on Soviet military officers designed to demoralize the Soviet high command. Among other consequences, these changed pushed the CIA, along with its clients in the Afghan resistance and in Pakistani intelligence, closer to the gray fields of assassination and terrorism (Coll, 2004).

The United States was joined by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who, too, backed the *mujahideen* in their 'holy war' against the 'godless' Soviets. Coll (2004) points out that the funds provided by the CIA passed through the Pakistani Interservices Intelligence (ISI), and the CIA depended on the ISI and the Saudi Arabia General Intelligence Department (GID) in choosing the leaders and organizations that would receive the money and weapons. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both during the Soviet invasion and in its aftermath, backed a number of Islamic extremist groups, which included Hezb-i Islami (led by Gulbuddin Hekmetyar), the Taliban and various groups of Afghan Wahhabis. The Soviet-Afghan War and the heavy involvement of the United States and its two allies in this war (and its aftermath) marks a watershed period, as it helped jihadism as a political response and project to flourish. More specifically, it shaped the ideology, strategy, and organization of Osama bin Laden's group, which would later morph into al-Qaeda. The war in Afghanistan created an environment conducive for the training and radicalization of jihadists, some of whom would become the founders of Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in the following years.

In the post-Cold war era, the most critical Western intervention that would create the immediate conditions for the rise of jihadist movements first in Iraq and then Syria (and elsewhere) was the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the policies implemented by the United States following the invasion. The de-Ba'athification of Iraq stands out as the policy that would have the most lasting and tragic effect on Iraqi society, and as one of the, if not the most significant cause of the current instability and violence in the region (Sissons and Al-Saiedi, 2013:1).

The Ba'ath Party (officially, the Arab Socialist Party of Iraq) ruled Iraq for about thirty-five years, although, for most of this time period, it was controlled by a small group of functionaries loyal to Saddam Hussein. While the party's official membership was quite small,[11] the number of its organized supporters was quite large; if all ranks of

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[11] For example, in 1976, after almost one decade in power, the number of the active members of the party was only 10,000. Although membership tripled in the next ten years, it still constituted merely 0.2 per cent of the entire Iraqi population (Sissons and Al-Saiedi, 2013:4).

the party and membership of auxiliary organizations controlled by the party were to be included, by the late 1970s the party had more than 1 million members and adherents in a country with a population of just 12 million (ibid.; Coughlin, 2005:120). In addition to various extrajudicial powers denied to non-members,[12] membership of the party brought with it a host of economic benefits. Such benefits gained more importance in a period of economic hardship caused first by a lengthy war against Iran and then the international sanctions imposed in the wake of the first Gulf War. For instance, section members received a monthly stipend of approximately $250 in 2002, which was a significant sum for most Iraqis (Sissons and Al-Saiedi, 2013:4). Moreover, party members enjoyed preferential access to government jobs, seed banks, professional associations and technical training. Sisson and Al-Saiedi (ibid.:5) point out that "the character reference given by Ba'ath members in one's neighbourhood was the single most important factor in obtaining employment in the security services, the military, or access to prestigious military training."

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) introduced an extensive de-Ba'athification process, that is, a series of legal and administrative policies, to rid the country of the influence of the Ba'ath Party and prevent the party from returning to power in Iraq. Two orders, which were issued only days after Paul Bremmer, the leader of the CPA, arrived in Iraq, were at the heart of this process. *Order Number 1* eliminated the Baath Party, "removing its leadership from positions of authority and responsibility in Iraqi society" (CPA 2003). *Order Number 2* dissolved, among others, the Iraqi armed forces, security services, paramilitary forces such as Saddam Fedayeen and Ba'ath Party Militia, the Ministry of Defense, the intelligence agency, the national assembly and courts (CPA 2003b). This sweeping process de-Baathification combined with the institutionalization of a Shia-dominated state after 2006[13] led to a tremendous marginalization of Iraq's Sunni population, preparing the ground for unprecedented sectarian violence in the country (Ajami, 2007:xix). As a result of Order 1 and Order 2, all of a sudden hundreds of thousands of Iraqis became unemployed and barred from accessing their pensions. This had two important consequences. First, it led to a collapse of social services in a country which had already been suffering from two-decades of hardship. Second, there were approximately 400 thousand members of the defeated Iraqi army barred from employment but allowed to keep their guns and grudges. A sizeable number of these ex-military men joined jihadist organizations, particularly the Islamic State, which offered appealing economic incentives (The Washington Post 2015; Lister 2014; Hanieh 2015) and an opportunity to fight those who persecuted them.

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[12] Party members, depending on their level and rank, possessed extrajudicial powers such as detaining criminal suspects, the right to possess weapons and the right to carry firearms.

[13] The institutionalization of a Shia-dominated state was realized as a result of a tacit agreement with the United States and Iran.

The marginalization went beyond the economic sphere, as the Coalition forces frequently attacked Sunni-populated settlements, and thousands of Sunnis were put in US-run prisons where torture was rampant. The most notorious of these prisons was the Abu Ghraib prison complex, where the members of the US military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) committed a number of human rights violations against detainees including rape, murder, sexual abuse and torture (Amnesty International, 2013). When this scandal broke out following the reports by the Associated Press and Amnesty International, many detainees were transferred to another prison, Camp Bucca. It was in this mass prison where one detainee, Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, later known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, established strong relationships with a group of former Ba'athist military officers who had spent time in Abu Ghraib (Hanieh, 2015). According to former prison commanders, analysts and soldiers, "Camp Bucca provided a unique setting for both prisoner radicalization and inmate collaboration—and was formative in the development of today's most potent jihadist force" (McCoy, 2014). Andrew Thompson and Jeremy Suri (2014) write in the New York Times:

> Before their detention, Mr. al-Baghdadi and others were violent radicals, intent on attacking America. Their time in prison deepened their extremism and gave them opportunities to broaden their following. … The prisons became virtual terrorist universities: The hardened radicals were the professors, the other detainees were the students, and the prison authorities played the role of absent custodian.

The other critical intervention in the post-Cold War era, which facilitated the strengthening of jihadist groups, and recently, of the Islamic State in particular, has been the NATO operation in Libya in 2011. In order to end the Libyan state's attacks against its own population and liberate the country from its dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, a multi-state coalition attacked Libya and deposed Gaddafi after seven months of fighting (NATO 2015). The military operation was a clear success; however, it has had disastrous political and social consequences for Libyan people. The end of the Gaddafi regime marked the end of the existence of a functioning state, as the country plunged into internal fighting and chaos. The resultant failed state has been a fertile ground for jihadist groups to recruit members and extend their territorial control. Among these groups, according to a UN report released in March 2016 (Nichols 2016), the Libyan branch of the Islamic State has taken advantage of the opportunity and recently increased its presence, greatly expanding its control over Libyan territory. The IS militants have been promoting themselves as the most credible defenders of Libya from foreign forces, employing a nationalistic discourse which positively contributes to the group's appeal among both national and regional audiences (Chandler, 2016).

In addition to these interventions, we should also note the direct and indirect support given by the Western allies in the Middle East to various jihadist groups. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, two U.S. allies, have stood out recently as the main supporters of Islamist/jihadist groups in the region. For the Saudis, jihadists are both a threat and a weapon

that can be used against the Shia. As Patrick Cockburn (2014) puts it, the Saudi regime has suppressed the jihadists at home as a threat to the status quo while encouraging them as a useful tool of Saudi anti-Shia influence abroad. The support given by the Saudis to various militant Islamist groups was confirmed by the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who wrote in a cable made public by Wikileaks that "Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaida, the Taliban, LeT (Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan) and other terrorist groups" (ibid.). Turkey, a dependable Western ally since the early 1950s, has moved to the headlines since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria as a supporter of Islamist militant groups. In its bid to topple the Assad regime, President Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey has provided these groups various forms of support, which include among others keeping a porous border, and providing refuge, healthcare and weapons for militants. A major Turkish daily, Cumhuriyet, published in 2015 and 2016 a series of transcripts of telephone calls between members of the Islamic State and Turkish military officers, which show the close cooperation between the jihadist group and members of the Turkish Armed Forces (Cumhuriyet 2015; 2016). The same newspaper had published earlier in May 2015 photographs of trucks carrying weapons to Syria. The trucks belonged to Turkey's *National Intelligence Organization* (MIT) (Cumhuriyet 2015).

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: THE SPECIFICITY OF THE ONGOING CONFLICT

When we look at the critical, left analyses of the ongoing conflict and the rise of jihadist movements and organizations as prominent actors in this conflict, there has been a tendency to link the rise of the latter, in particular the Islamic State, to a series of episodes of imperialist violence, which culminated with the most recent occupation of Iraq by a US-led coalition. For instance, in response to a group of liberal and conservative pundits who declared, following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, that the culprit was Islamic extremism and that any suggestion of Western culpability would be inaccurate, if not outright immoral, David Mizner (2015) argued in *Jacobin* that Al-Qaeda and the IS are products of U.S. and Saudi imperialism. In a bid to not blame Islam and arguing that "there is nothing ineffable in Islam that produces 'terrrorism'", Mizner traces the involvement in recent history of the US and its allies such as Britain, Turkey, Qatar and Saudis Arabia in the politics of the countries of the Middle East. Challenging the mainstream discourse, he states that the violence inflicted by the US and its allies has been greater than that of their enemies and that the Western-led violence has triggered regional violence. What is even more important, according to him, is the fact that Western governments and their client states have actively empowered right-wing jihadist groups. This active support in various ways is what has created the monster the West is facing today. Therefore, he asks Western governments and societies not to blame Islam (the title of his piece is "*Don't Blame Islam*") but Western imperialism and its ally regimes in the Muslim world. In another piece published by the Centre for Research on Globalization, Sam Muhho (2014) questions the essentialist arguments made by Western pundits who have been framing the ongoing regional conflict in a particularly religious

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(and purely ideological) dimension. Reminding the reader of the heterogeneity of the Muslim community and that the greatest victims of jihadist violence in both Syria and Iraq have been Muslims, Muho points out that the ongoing sectarian violence incurred by the jihadist groups, in particular by the IS, is not a fundamentally religious issue. The problem, he contends, is "the hegemonic and imperialist designs of the NATO governments who have on-record worked with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to use Islamic extremists throughout the Middle East as their "Swiss army knife of destabilization" in order to reorient the Middle East per their interests." Patrick Martin (2014), writing along the same lines for the audience of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), exposes the cozy relationships between Washington and various right-wing Islamist movements both during and after the Cold War. Going through a long list of Western, in particular US, involvement with Islamist actors in the Muslim world since the early years of the Cold War, Martin argues that the West, led by the United States, has built up and assisted the most reactionary and backward Islamic fundamentalist forces in the Middle East for decades. The motive has been to protect its strategic and economic interests in the region.

Left political parties and movements from various countries and of various shades across the globe have joined the debate, condemning both the atrocities committed by jihadist movements and the role played by imperialism in the emergence and flourishing of the latter. The common thread in these responses to the ongoing conflict is that war and imperialism, on the one hand, and the increasing appeal, influence, and extensiveness of jihadist reaction and violence are locked together and they mutually reinforce violence and destruction (Hanieh, 2015). In response to the hawkish calls for action and/or demands on Western governments to increase their military involvement in the region in order to eradicate the jihadist violence,[14] these parties and movements oppose foreign intervention and call for an end to imperialist violence as well as to the ongoing plundering of various forms of wealth from countries in the Middle East in particular and the Global South in general (ibid.).

These critical perspectives are important particularly from an historical perspective and they offer sound analyses of the ongoing conflict, and of the global and regional webs of relations the latter has been entangled in particularly in the past century. They are timely and historical responses to —often ahistorical— analyses that reduce the current conflict to a matter of ideology, religion and/or irrationality that is devoid of his-

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[14] One of the leading voices most recently in favour of a stronger Western military presence in the region has been Tony Blair. In an article that appeared in The Sunday Times immediately after the Brussels bombings, Blair stated that the West is at war with Islamist extremism and finds itself in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis a group of people who have "no compunction about killing wholly innocent civilians and are prepared to die in the act of doing so." In such a context, he contends, Britain and its Western allies must be prepared to send ground troops to destroy the forces of the Islamic State: "We must build military capability able to confront and defeat the terrorists wherever they try to hold territory. This is not just about local forces. It is a challenge for the West. Ground forces are necessary to win this fight and ours are the most capable." These ground forces, according to Blair, are needed to defeat the Islamic State, as it has sought to create a caliphate.

tory and at times, of politics. However, this strand of analysis, focusing on imperialism and/or (neo-)colonialism[15] as the sole root cause(s) of the rise of jihadist movements and increasing violence suffers from excessive generality. As these two factors are identified as the cause of various —and, at times, protracted and brutal— episodes of conflict and violence across the world in recent and not so recent history, we are left without an answer as to the historical specificity of the present moment.

Western colonial and imperial interventions have been an integral part of Middle Eastern history in general and Syrian and Iraqi history in particular since the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. And, these colonial/imperialist interventions, as elsewhere, have always led to some form of resistance that has been mediated by the particular characteristics of the societies in question as well as the specific characteristics of the world order prevalent at the time.[16] The predominantly Muslim societies of the Middle East have always responded to and resisted foreign[17] or more specifically, Western intervention but the nature and language of the response and resistance have been anything but uniform. They have varied in relation to the specificities of each social context in addition to the particularities of both the type of intervention and the constraints imposed by the prevailing world order.[18] Thus, the social imaginary of resistance, that is the symbolic and physical possibilities as well as boundaries with regard to resistance, is shaped by factors operating simultaneously at the global, regional and national/local levels.

As the aforementioned critical analyses have argued, Western imperialist and/or colonial interventions have played a critical role in the shaping of the societies and their states in the Middle East since the early twentieth century. And, they have generated responses which have varied across time and space. The sweeping argument that today's jihadist reaction is merely an outcome of imperialism, however, makes us miss the historical specificity of the context that has shaped such a response. We should therefore be asking ourselves the question as to why the response to the most recent Western interventions in Iraq and Syria (and elsewhere in the Middle East) has taken

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[15] In this work, 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' are not used as general, transhistorical terms that denote unequal and exploitative relations which combine coercion and consent, and which operate in favour of the economically and militarily more powerful party/actor(s) in the relationship. Rather, they are taken as historically specific sets of relationships whose forms have been shaped by the dominant mode of production, its historically specific logic, and reproduction, which both shapes and is mediated by conflictual relations between/among classes and states. In short, when we say 'colonialism' and 'imperialism in this work, we refer to *capitalist* forms of colonialism and imperialism. These forms have become the dominant ones since the emergence and then global spread of capitalism as a novel and historically specific set of social relations in the English countryside about five centuries ago (Wood 2002; 2005). It should also be added that economic reductionism should be avoided in analyses of imperialism and colonialism. In addition to class relations, relations of race, ethnicity and gender have played an important role in the shaping of the form(s) of imperialism and colonialism.

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[17] This includes the Ottoman Empire, which occupied large swathes of territory in the region for centuries and which, despite being an Islamic empire, faced significant resistance from the various groups inhabiting the occupied territories.

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this particular political and ideological form. Also, how can we explain the appeal and support the Islamic State has enjoyed in various parts of the world, but above all, in the predominantly Muslim societies of the Middle East? In Adam Hanieh (2015)'s words, "Why now? And why like this?" The answers to these questions should be sought in the trajectory of a series of uprisings in the Arab world throughout 2011 and 2012, which have come to be known as the 'Arab Spring'.

The first of the Arab uprisings began in December 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor from Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, set himself on fire in protest against the confiscation of his produce cart by the authorities. Mass protests began the same day and spread quickly, ultimately forcing President Zine El Abidin Ben Ali, who had been in power for almost twenty-five years, to flee. Three days after Ben Ali left Tunisia, Abdou Abdel-Monaam Hamadah, a 40-year-old Egyptian sandwich shop owner, followed suit and set himself on fire near the Egyptian parliament after he was denied access to a monthly allowance of cheap, subsidized bread (The New York Times, 2011). About a week later tens of thousands of Egyptians were in the streets for what they called a 'Day of Rage', denouncing the Mubarak regime. The protests culminated with an estimated one million people gathering in Tahrir Square on February 1. The most emblematic slogan in the square was '*Huriyyah, Adalah Ijtima'iyah, Karamah*' (freedom, social justice and dignity) (Dabashi, 2012). It would take only another ten days before Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president. The protests that began with the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia soon spread to the other countries in the region like wildfire. By the end of February 2012, autocratic rulers had been forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen; governments had changed; a civil war had erupted in Syria, and major protests had shaken seemingly well-established and powerful regimes and governments in several other countries.

These uprisings were cast in Western media largely as an 'Arab Spring' challenging local dictatorships. Their economic aspect was largely ignored or downplayed. As Hanieh (2015) puts it, "The Arab uprisings were not simply struggles against authoritarian rule; they were ineluctably wrapped up with a decades-long stagnation in living conditions and profound inequalities in wealth and power." They were as much a reaction to authoritarian, corrupt regimes as to the economic problems that had plagued these societies since the 1980s, i.e. the beginning of the neoliberal era. Since the 1980s, almost all Arab states, with variations in pace and scale, and under the auspices of the IMF and the World Bank, had embarked on neoliberal projects which were centred on policies such as privatization, trade and financial liberalization, deregulation of labour markets, and cuts to social spending, etc (ibid.). The debt crisis of the 1980s gave the international financial institutions the opportunity to dictate their neoliberal agenda on Middle Eastern states. Sudan in 1979/1980, Morocco in 1983, Tunisia and Egypt in 1987, and Jordan in 1989 turned to the IMF and the World Bank for assistance. Algeria, Yemen and Lebanon followed suit in the 1990s (El-Said and Harrigan, 2006: 448). The results of neoliberal restructuring were quite disappointing. El-Said and Harrigan provides us with some insight and comparison regarding the 1980s:

It is usually argued that the 1980s was a lost decade for Latin America, which achieved an average annual growth rate of around 1%. But the performance of Arab economies was even more disappointing. During 1981-1990, the Arab world stagnated, achieving almost zero growth. Even in terms of debt, the Arab world's performance was also disappointing. While the region accumulated less external debt than other developing regions in the 1980s, the Arab world, with a weak and largely undiversified industrial base, emerged in the 1980s as the second largest indebted developing region, after Latin America (ibid.).

Although increasing poverty has been a defining feature of neoliberalism, the neoliberal period did not create losers only. It also enriched the autocratic rulers and the elites in alliance with them. Juan Cole (2011) gives the example of Egypt and Tunisia. The privatization programmes in these two countries, he notes, "created an almost endless range of opportunities for staggering levels of corruption on the part of the ruling families of autocrats Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunis and Hosni Mubarak in Cairo." This took place with the assistance and participation of foreign capital and an internationalizing domestic capital, impatient to enrich itself through integration into world markets.[19] In a number of countries, high economic growth rates were recorded in tandem with growing poverty. For instance, in Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt real GDP per capita increased from 2003 until the onset of the global financial crisis (Hanieh, 2015). This meant growing polarization and sharper contradictions in these societies. As the political and economic elites enriched themselves in the process, they used oppression to quell opposition and resistance. They also acted, with notable exceptions, as loyal allies and dependable partners for the West in return for substantial political, military and financial support (ibid.). It is, therefore, not surprising that, among certain groups and in certain contexts, opposition against these autocratic regimes and their rulers went hand in hand with opposition against the West, which was associated and/or equated with the former.

The Arab uprisings were, thus, a response to growing polarization in power and wealth in the authoritarian regimes in the region. They were as much about political rights, rule of law and accountability as economic justice and equality; the political and the economic were inseparable. And, they constituted a substantial challenge against the legitimacy of the neoliberal models which had replaced the *Bandung* regimes and their state-led development based on relatively equitable redistribution and anti-imperialism. It was specifically the failure of these uprisings to effect the desired change that created the political and ideological vacuum to be filled by Islamist/jihadist movements.

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[19] Cole mentions the case of the *Zitouna Bank*. This bank, whose owner was Sakher el Materi, a son-in-law of the then President, Ben Ali, was one of the first targets of the protestors during the uprising in Tunisia. Although the bank sought legitimacy in the eyes of the predominantly Muslim population by practising 'Islamic banking', this did not save it from the rage of Tunisian people. According to a 2006 U.S. State Department cable released by WikiLeaks, "One local financial expert blames the [Ben Ali] family for chronic banking sector woes due to the great percentage of non-performing loans issued through crony connections." That is, banks were used by the regime to channel funds to the cronies of the ruling family without any expectations of repayment, enriching the latter in the process (Cole 2011).

The position of these movements has been further strengthened by the failure of the left to generate a counter-hegemonic project that gained the consent and support of the masses. In a context characterized by the spread of increasingly destructive sectarianism, economic inequality and hardship, political repression, and unpopular foreign interventions, organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State found ample opportunity to gain support and extend their base.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THE CURRENT WORLD ORDER?: THE CHANGING PARADIGM OF ARMED CONFLICT

The ongoing conflict has significant implications for the neoliberal world order that became entrenched following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the integration of the former Second World into the capitalist world market. First of all, it has turned out that history has not come to an end; actually, it seems quite far from reaching an end point. The early post-Cold War consensus among liberals that bourgeois democracy has solved the riddle of history and a triumphant capitalism will lead humanity to prosperity and peace is in tatters (Fukuyama, 1992; Mishra, 2015). The hegemonic status of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy has been constantly challenged and is under threat in various parts of the world, from Latin America to the Middle East. Secondly, the responses and projects confronting and challenging the new world order defined by an aggressive form of capitalism and its violent tendencies[20] have been far from uniform; they have come in various shapes and colours, and they will continue to do so in the future. Thirdly, the jihadist violence should be seen as a particular outcome and a form of resistance to the Western involvement in the Middle East alongside the prevalent regional economic, political and social structures which have created significant resentment among certain populations. The greatest significance of the jihadist response, embodied by two protagonists, i.e. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, for the current world order is, arguably, that it has revolutionized the concept of 'conflict', more specifically, armed conflict.

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The traditional conflict paradigm was built on five pillars: 1) a specific moment and place; the encounter taking place on a battlefield; 2) a sharply delimited sequential timeframe, i.e. a recognizable beginning and end of violent engagement; 3) well-defined actors such as soldiers and civilians; 4) states' militaries attacking other states' militaries; well-defined targets that are not civilians; proportionality; 5) traditional weaponry (Mohamedou, 2007:30). The September 11 attacks launched by Al Qaeda constituted a significant challenge against the traditional conflict paradigm and marked the ascendance of a new paradigm that had emerged towards the end of the twentieth century. This new conflict paradigm has been characterized by two main developments: the diminishing of intra-state war, and the emergence and suffusion of new patterns of international war,

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[20]By 'violence', I am not referring to physical violence only but various forms of violence that include structural and psychological violence.

namely between states and transnational armed groups. In this new context, "states have lost the monopoly of war, and free and powerful self-forming intra-state agents are interjecting themselves across spatial and temporal boundaries" (ibid.: 25).[21] We can name two additional features of the new paradigm that constitute a sharp rupture with the traditional one. First, there has been an enlargement of the spatial dimension. The entire globe, virtually without borders, has become potential or actual war zone with new battlefields 'created' every day. The battlefield today stretches from San Bernardino, California to Paris to Ankara to Baghdad. This has been truly a globalization of violence accompanying globalization of capital under the auspices of Western states. Such expansion of the 'battlefield' has been facilitated by modern technologies that have compressed time and space in an unprecedented way. Second, there has been a mutation of the belligerents' identity, as the categories of *combatant* and *civilian* have been obliterated. While civilian killings by Western powers have been reduced to 'collateral damage' and thus legitimized in the war on terror, or simply denied,[22] there has been a discursive and practical merging of the two categories on the other side of the conflict, which has utterly eliminated the distinction between the civilian and the combatant. The 'civilian' in Western liberal democratic regimes has been held responsible for the actions of her/his government and armed forces by virtue of her/his electing of or support for these actors who take military action on her/his behalf. The responsibility has, thus, been collectivized, resulting in the perception and rendering of the civilian as a legitimate target. This can clearly be seen in the discourse used by Osama Bin Laden. Before the September 11 attacks, in an interview with Jamal Ismail (1999) of *Newsweek*, Bin Laden said:

> Any American who pays taxes to his government is our target because he is helping the American war machine against the Muslim nation. […] They have compromised our honour and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest, we are called terrorists. This is compounded injustice.

In another statement following the September 11 attacks, Bin Laden added:

> It is a fundamental principle of any democracy that the people choose their leaders, and as such, approve and are party to the actions of their elected leaders. […] By electing these leaders, the American people have given their consent to the incarceration of the Palestinian

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[21] Mary Kaldor (1999:4-5) provides insight into the gradual erosion of the monopoly of the states over (legitimate organized) violence: "The new wars arise in the context of the erosion of the autonomy of the state and in some extreme cases the disintegration of the state. In particular, they occur in the context of the erosion of the monopoly of legitimate organized violence. This monopoly is eroded from above and from below. It has been eroded from above by the transnationalization of military forces which began during the two world wars and was institutionalized by the bloc system during the Cold War and by innumerable transnational connections between armed forces that developed in the post-war period."

[22] See *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Program* (2016) by Jeremy Scahill for an exposure of the U.S. drone program and its civilian victims. Also, see "Air Force veterans speaking on the drone war" on *Democracy Now* (20 november 2015).

people, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the slaughter of the children of Iraq. This is why the American people are not innocent. The American people are active members in all these crimes (Bin Ladin quoted in Blanchard, 2004:4).

A similar approach to conflict and definition of the 'enemy' is visible within the Islamic State, which has not differentiated military targets from civilians. A series of attacks, which were planned and executed by either the IS itself or militants loosely linked to the group, have targeted civilians of both Western and Middle Eastern countries in the past couple of years. These attacks indicate continuity and convergence between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and they have served primarily two purposes: 1) They were intended to terrorize foreign and local populations; 2) They were disciplinary and punitive, as the targeted civilians were seen as responsible for the actions/crimes of their states in other parts of the world. As such, they were considered enemy targets, indistinguishable from the armed forces of Western states.

CONCLUSION

On 26 March 2016, four days after an attack by IS militants claimed the lives of thirty-two people in Brussels, President Barack Obama pledged to defeat those who threaten the world with terrorism. He said the United States will "continue to go after ISIL [another name for the Islamic State] aggressively until it's removed from Syria and Iraq and finally destroyed." He added that the defeat of ISIL is a top priority of his government (Gaouette and Liptak, 2016). It is clear that the Islamic State (or ISIS or ISIL), which has become one of the most, if not the most influential and powerful jihadist group in recent years, has secured a firm place on the agenda of all Western (and non-Western) governments. Both in political and academic circles there have been vibrant debates on the nature of this group and how the threat it has posed should be addressed. One of the major problems with most of these debates is that jihadist movements in general and the Islamic State in particular are analyzed and presented as actors that are driven merely by religion, irrationality and hatred towards the 'other'. Such analyses and presentations are usually immersed in an essentialism that establishes an automatic and inherent relationship between Islam and intolerant, violent behavior. This paper has been an attempt to counter and challenge such mainstream discussions and understandings of jihadist groups in general and Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in particular. In response to the question on the rise of jihadist groups as powerful actors in Iraq and Syria, I have argued that, instead of the simplistic and reductionist explanations, the emergence and expansion of these actors should be located in two contexts or processes: 1) a series of Western colonial/imperialist interventions in the region, which go back to the last days of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, and culminated with 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; 2) the failure of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012 to effect economic, political and social change, which created a political and ideological vacuum that would be filled by jihadist actors. This paper has also argued

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that the form the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq (and elsewhere) has assumed has important implications for the current world order. Firstly, it indicates a rapid change in the traditional form of armed, violent conflict. The traditional conflict paradigm has been replaced by a new one, as the scale and rules of violent engagement have changed. What we have seen is a truly globalization of violence in which the distinction between 'civilian' and 'military' has been obliterated and space and time compressed. Secondly, the internationalized internal conflict in Iraq and Syria has revealed that the impunity of Western states (and their regional allies) for colonial and imperialist interventions —a characteristic of the earlier periods— in the Middle East has been rendered a relic of the past, as the populations of the interventionist states have direct become targets of the jihadist groups vying for power in the region.

What is quite worrisome today is that the world seems to have gotten into a vicious cycle. The brutality and terrorism emanating from and characteristic of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East feed increasing levels of xenophobia in general and Islamophobia in particular in the West. This dynamic, in turn, leads to calls for further military and political intervention in (pre-dominantly) Muslim countries, buttressing the jihadist claim and propaganda that the Islamic world is under Western, imperialist attack, which leads to further radicalization and more recruits, and hence, more violence. It is essential that the brutality and the overall reactionary project of the Islamic State and other jihadist groups should be opposed. However, the problem and the threat that these groups pose today cannot be addressed properly through the so far dominant epistemologies which are based on essentialist and reductionist understandings of the object of enquiry. We need to go beyond such approaches, and bring in the historical and contemporary dynamics —social, political, and economic— that have paved the way for the emergence of the current conflict and its protagonists. Unless and until we do that, we will continue to live with, reproduce and suffer from the Donald Trumps and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadis of the world.

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