

The al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri: A Profile

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Introduction

In early July, 2005, shortly after the first wave of the London bombings had ended, a Washington Post article reported that investigations into recent al-Qaida operations in European countries, from London and Madrid to Casablanca and Istanbul, had nabbed only ‘the hands’, not the ‘brains’ behind these attacks.¹ At the same time, a little known Syrian-born jihadist, known as Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri, was suggested as being the mastermind behind the London attacks on 7 July 2005. This echoed previous media reports in late 2004 and subsequent statements in 2005 by the head of a European intelligence service that al-Suri was the strategist behind the bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004. In late 2004, other media reports based on interviews with antiterrorism investigators and intelligence officials, suggested that al-Suri had played a role in assisting the 9/11 hijackers, referring to his and his deputies’ meetings with the hijackers in Germany and Spain, the last of which was the crucial Tarragona meeting in July 2001, where Muhammad Atta was given authority to carry out the attacks.

Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar (b.1958), who is perhaps best known by pen names Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Umar Abd al-Hakim, has been known in radical Islamist circles for at least a decade. However, little has been written about him in Western scholarship, and media reporting on al-Suri has been relatively scant. To a Western audience, he first became widely known in late 2004 when Spanish investigations into the Madrid train bombings (also known as M-11) pointed to his role as the mastermind of the attacks. A Syrian militant with Spanish citizenship, al-Suri served as a military instructor and lecturer in the Afghan-Arab training camps from 1987-92. He spent several years in Spain and the United Kingdom, before he moved back to Afghanistan in 1998 where he ran an al-Qaida affiliated training camp and a media center. Al-Suri has been wanted by Spanish authorities since November 2001. His name also occurred in the media in late 2004 following the announcement by the US State Department on 17 November 2004 of a \$5 million reward to anyone who provided information leading to his arrest. At that time, the US administration considered him among the most dangerous al-Qaida terrorists at large. Similarly, the head of the private investigation on behalf of the September 11th victims, Jean-Charles Brisard, described al-Suri as ‘one of the Salafist terrorists representing the highest potential for harm in the Middle East’. A few expert commentaries have also emphasized al-Suri’s role as a ‘pen-jihadist’, pointing to his considerable intellectual contribution that he has produced in the service of the jihadist movement, in particular his voluminous book *Da‘wat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah al-‘alamiyyah* (‘The Call for an International Islamic Resistance’). Internet commentaries on Arab discussion forums have called him al-Qaida’s Fukuyama, and have emphasised the importance of

¹ This article is an excerpt of a forthcoming book on Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and his writings. The study is entirely based on publicly available sources. All footnotes and references are available upon request.

his work in formulating strategies for decentralised global warfare and the concept of 'individualised terrorism'. Recent expert commentaries on al-Qaida have also seen examples that al-Suri's theories are being operationalised to support jihadist operations, in particular in the wake of the Sinai terrorist attacks in October 2005.

There can be little doubt that Abu Mus'ab al-Suri has played an important role in international jihadist terrorism, if not as an active operative, then at least in terms of providing practical training, and preparing jihadist terrorists with the theoretical and intellectual foundation for their violent campaigns. The centrality of al-Suri in the jihadist movement in recent years highlights the importance of uncovering his biography: where does he come from, what is his political and ideological background, how did he become involved in al-Qaida, what are his contributions to and role in the jihadist movement over the past decade, and what can his life-story tell us about al-Qaida and global jihadism today?

The following paper will shed light on Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's biography and give a brief glimpse into his most recent writings.

The Syrian Jihad

Al-Suri grew up in a conservative middle class family in Aleppo, Syria. In 1976 he enrolled at the University of Aleppo where he studied mechanical engineering for four years. He must have been profoundly influenced by the political turmoil in Syria during these years, when the Islamist opposition, led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, launched a large-scale campaign against the Syrian regime. The protests escalated into violent attacks, especially in al-Suri's hometown. Around 1980, al-Suri says he experienced a religious awakening. He had not yet finished his education, but decided, nevertheless, to join, together with several of his acquaintances, the *al-Tali'ah al-Muqatilah* (The Fighting Vanguard), a militant offshoot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. After having participated in several violent operations in Syria, his cell was uncovered by the authorities and many were arrested. Al-Suri and many other *al-Tali'ah al-Muqatilah* members decided to relocate to Jordan. This inaugurated al-Suri's life as a jihadist in exile. As far as is known, he never returned to Syria.

In Jordan al-Suri joined the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) organisation, and rose quickly in their ranks. Due to sharp rivalries between Syria and its neighbours, the Syrian opposition operated relatively unrestrictedly in Iraq and Jordan. Al-Suri received military training at Syrian MB safe houses in Jordan, and was subsequently sent to Iraq, where the Syrian MB had extensive military training facilities at their disposal. Al-Suri was trained in special operations, guerrilla warfare techniques and explosives engineering. Because of his skills, he became military instructor and later a member of the Syrian MB's military command in Baghdad. Some time in 1981 or

1982, he also went with a small group of Syrian jihadists to Cairo where they received security and intelligence training.

The Syrian regime cracked down very harshly on the Islamist uprising, especially in the city of Hama, where some 10,000-30,000 people were killed and much of the city was devastated. The destruction of Hama ended the Syrian MB-led uprising and al-Suri came to blame the organisation for the failed revolt. He broke with the Syrian MB leadership. Disillusioned about the future of the Syrian jihad, he left for Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage in 1982. He attempted to enroll at the University of Medina, but encountered restrictions by what he perceived as a Muslim Brotherhood dominated religious elite at the University. When an opportunity to study in Europe opened up, he left for France, where he enrolled at a Faculty of Engineering, intending to complete his studies. However, he remained involved in the Syrian jihadist movement, and over the coming years, he spent much time reconnecting with the scattered community of Syrian MB and *al-Tali'ah al-Muqatilah* veterans. The idea of reviving the Uprising in Syria had not yet been abandoned and al-Suri was involved in several attempts at infiltrating fighters and rebuilding networks inside Syria. However, these attempts failed, and like many other jihadist activists, al-Suri had become a jihadist without a jihad.

In 1985, al-Suri moved to Spain on an invitation from relatives and acquaintances, where he suffered materially until he managed to start his own import and export business. During this period he began writing his first large study on the jihadist movement, originally entitled 'The Syrian Islamic Jihadist Revolution – Pains and Hopes' (*al-thawra al-islamiyya al-jihadiyya fi suria – alam wa amal*). The book is better known as the 'Comments on the Jihadist Experience in Syria'. The study was later published, apparently around 1990, in Peshawar, and distributed widely among the various jihadist groups present there. It analysed the Syrian jihadist movement, with a view to drawing lessons for the future of that experience. The book may be considered his breakthrough as 'a jihadist intellectual'.

However, in the meantime, al-Suri gained a firmer foothold in Spain by getting his small company up and running and by marrying a Spanish woman, Elena Moreno in 1988, and thereby gaining Spanish citizenship. For al-Suri, their relationship was genuinely a love affair, not simply a way to get European residency rights.

Afghanistan 1987-1992

As the prospects for reviving the Syrian jihad in the mid-1980s appeared slim, and the Mujahidin resistance in Afghanistan electrified and attracted radical Islamists from most parts of the Muslim world, al-Suri and some five others of his Syrian fellow fighters departed for Peshawar and Afghanistan in 1987. There, they hoped to garner support for the jihad in Syria. Al-Suri had apparently been preoccupied with the issue

of Afghanistan since the early or mid-1980s, and he stayed in Afghanistan most of the period between 1987 and 1992, leaving the country shortly before Kabul fell. In Peshawar or possibly in Afghanistan proper, al-Suri and his friends met with Shaykh ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, the father of the Arab-Afghan movement and one of al-Qaida’s founding members. Their first meeting took place in July 1987, which was also the first time al-Suri visited Afghanistan.

Al-Suri and his friends went to Afghanistan to garner support for the Syrian jihadist movement, but these requests met with considerable scepticism from Abdallah Azzam, who considered the door to the Syrian jihad closed. Instead, he invited al-Suri to join the global jihad-movement, represented by the Arab-Afghans in Afghanistan.

When al-Suri raised the issue of relocating to Afghanistan with his comrades in the *al-Tali‘ah al-Muqatilah* exile community, they were not convinced. Very few, if any, came to join his small group in Afghanistan. Al-Suri deplored how many of them had ‘a narrow regional conception’ of their struggle. Although the issue was of ideological character, it was in fact the reality that had been forced through ‘a transformation of goals’. Al-Suri later recalled that ‘we left the Syrian cause because there existed no opportunity to revive it and we turned to the Afghan cause instead’. The resources for restarting the Syrian jihad were simply not there; they were ‘cut off’, and isolated from the Syrian scene, and as time went by they were also alienated from their homeland:

‘We were dissolved the way most other [jihadist] groups dissolved, by the fact that we were no longer in the field. Between us and our country were thousands of kilometers, and now, the distance in time are tens of thousands of kilometers. We were unable to do anything. [...] we could not do anything along that path, so we entered the framework of contributing to the international jihad.’

For al-Suri, this period was the time when ‘the global character of the duty of jihad’ and the ‘global nature of the Muslim causes’ became apparent to him in earnest. Al-Suri and the five other Syrian jihadists who arrived with him in Afghanistan, suffered losses on the various battle fronts; one of them was killed in Jalalabad and another in Khowst, while yet another left Afghanistan. The idea of reviving the Syrian jihad grew more distant with every day that passed, and their struggle came to be centered on Afghanistan and other pan-Islamic causes. It is probably wrong, though, to see this shift from a local to a global jihad as synonymous with al-Qaida’s and bin Ladin’s declaration of a global war against the Crusaders. For al-Suri and his fellow fighters, the priority at this point was to support other ‘jihadist revolutions’ in their local or regional struggle for an Islamic state, rather than to link the fight to and against the West. After all, al-Qaida’s declared war on the ‘far enemy’, the United States and Israel only began in 1998.

The meeting with Abdallah Azzam in July 1987 was decisive for al-Suri, and over the next two and a half years, until Azzam's assassination in Peshawar in November 1989, al-Suri claims to have spent nearly every day in his company. Drawing upon his military training and expertise, al-Suri became military instructor at several Arab-Afghan training camps. He met with Usama bin Ladin and says he worked for bin Ladin's organisation, al-Qaida, which was founded in early 1988, until 1992. Al-Suri now became a member of al-Qaida's highest organ, the Shura Council, where he was regarded as the representative of the Syrians.

The Afghanistan-period allowed al-Suri to establish wide networks of contacts with jihadist intellectuals, activists and groups from around the Arab-Islamic world. Al-Suri became close to a very prominent scholar, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz, the mufti of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad-organisation, whose work *al-'Umda fi i'dad al-'udda lil-jihad fi sabil Allah*. ('The Pillar in the Preparation of Jihad in the Way of God'), is a standard work in the jihadist curriculum. He also established close bonds with the Libyan, Moroccan and Algerian, jihadist community, especially the Algerian jihadist leader Qari Said, who later founded the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria in the early 1990s.

In around 1990, al-Suri presented the first sketch of what became his largest and most influential work, the *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*. At the same time, his work on the Syrian jihadist experience was released. From now on, his ambition to become a leading jihadist intellectual is evident, and as he moved back to Spain in 1992, this dream was not forgotten.

The paradigmatic shifts during the years around 1990, when the Islamic world faced a whole new set of challenges, propelled al-Suri into the role of a jihadist intellectual. At the beginning of the 1990s, al-Suri says that he increasingly felt that their battlefield 'was about to close' and that he wanted to 'fulfill his mission' in Afghanistan and move on. Al-Suri had also grown disillusioned about his own role as a military instructor, given the dwindling support for the jihadist cause among the broader Islamist movement:

'I am not prepared to train [people] in shooting practices because I think they will fire back at us justifying this by the fatwas of the Muslim Brothers and the Azhar clerics [...] People come to us with empty heads and leave us with empty heads [...] They have done nothing for Islam. This is because they have not received any ideological or doctrinal training'

The more immediate reason for al-Suri to move out of Afghanistan was the infighting between the Afghan warlords. There was also the attraction of emerging arenas of jihad, among which Algeria figured very prominently. Hundreds, if not thousands, of

Algerians returned from Afghanistan to Algeria during these years, and many of them became the backbone of the most radical factions in the Islamist opposition.

Furthermore, unlike many of his fellow Arab fighters in Afghanistan, who were wanted fugitives in their countries of origin, and risked detention and deportation when travelling abroad, al-Suri enjoyed the privileges of a European citizenship and a safe haven in Spain.

A European Jihad 1992-97

When al-Suri returned to Spain in around 1992, he lost little time in reconnecting with his networks of jihadist contacts. During this period, when the Bosnian and Algerian wars radicalised and frustrated Muslim opinion, al-Suri participated in the establishment of an al-Qaida cell in Spain, which subsequently became one of al-Qaida's main supporting structures in Europe under the leadership of al-Suri's friend and former Syrian MB member, Imad al-Din Bakarat Yarkas (Abu Dahdah). His friendship with the Algerian jihadists, especially Qari Said, led him to consider seriously moving to Algeria. Having made a pledge to Said that he would go to Algeria in case the latter managed to 'restart the jihad' in his home country, al-Suri felt obliged to assist the GIA, founded by Qari Said. Uneasy about going to Algeria, al-Suri went to London in 1994, where he became a very active member of the GIA's media apparatus, first and foremost as editor and writer for the al-Ansar bulletin, GIA's primary mouthpiece. Al-Suri's involvement in 'jihadist journalism' extended to a number of other militant journals, such as the *al-Fajr* bulletin, issued by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the *al-Mujahidun*, published by the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

During these years in London, 1994-97, al-Suri nurtured a wide network of contacts in the worldwide jihadist community and beyond. The list of his contacts included Imad al-Din Bakarat Yarkas (Abu Dahdah) and many of his closest collaborators in the emerging Spanish al-Qaida cell. Al-Suri also worked closely with Umar Mahmud, Uthman Abu Umar (Abu Qutada) who was later considered al-Qaida's spiritual leader in Europe. Abu Qutada was the chief editor of the Al-Ansar magazine, for which al-Suri was editor and a frequent contributor. It appears that rivalries and disagreements between the two on the Algerian issue soured their relationship.

Al-Suri also maintained contacts with prominent Saudi bin Ladin sympathisers such as Khalid Fawwaz and leading Saudi dissidents, such as Saad al-Faqih, the head of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA). His contacts also included Riyadh al-Uqla (Abu Nabil), the top representative of the Jordan-based *al-Tali'ah al-Muqatilah*, and the Syrian businessman Ma'mun Darkanzali, based in the Hamburg district of Uhlenhorst. Darkanzali was later indicted by Spain and the United States on charges of being a key al-Qaida financier in Europe, and of assisting the Hamburg

cell.² One of al-Suri's principal associates was Muhammad Bahayah (Abu Khalid al-Suri), who was variously described as a 'mid-level' activist, 'courier' and a 'member of Usama bin Ladin's structures in Europe'.³ He operated mostly out of Turkey, until he fled to Iran and Afghanistan in 1999.

Al-Suri also knew Taysir Allouni very well, the famous al-Jazira journalist who was arrested and convicted by Spanish authorities to seven years in jail for assisting al-Qaida figures among al-Suri's contacts. Allouni and al-Suri had both been members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and stayed in contact during the 1980s when they both lived in Grenada, Spain.

Al-Suri reportedly nurtured contacts with at least two jihadists in Denmark, one of them a person referred to only as Abu Rashid or Abu Rashid al-Halabi, a Syrian MB activist, who had obtained permanent residence in Denmark, and who was considered a member of Abu Dahdah's Spanish al-Qaida cell. The second contact in Denmark was Said Mansur (Abu Abdallah), a Danish resident of Moroccan origin, who worked closely with al-Suri in preparing and distributing the al-Ansar journal.⁴

Amir Azizi ('Uthman al-Andalusi), a 38-year-old Moroccan with Spanish citizenship was also among al-Suri's companions from the Madrid period. Azizi has been described as a deputy and envoy for al-Suri, and is suspected of having played a role in the Madrid bombings.

Around 1995, al-Suri and many other of the London-based jihadists grew increasingly uneasy about the bloody terrorist campaign in Algeria and the GIA's role in that violence. Al-Suri decided to sever his relationship with the GIA media cell and pursue 'independent journalism'. In cooperation with his companion Muhammad Bahayah, he set up his own media center, registered as 'Islamic Conflict Studies Bureau LTD', and set up a bank account for the center in March 1997. Al-Suri planned to launch a website for the media centre, with a view to elevating it to 'the level of contemporary media'. Furthermore, he planned to produce online newsletters at the centre, wishing to develop this newsletter into a paid online service for the various news agencies, something which would bring financial resources to his centre. It is uncertain whether these plans ever materialized. However, al-Suri was successful in facilitating several top international media events for the al-Qaida leadership in

² According to Spanish authorities, Darkanzali transferred ca 1,400 Deutsche Mark [DM, which is the former German currency] from his account in Germany to an account in al-Suri's name in Grenada in November 1993, and in February 1996, 3,200 DM was sent to al-Suri's account in London from an account, registered in the name of Darkanzali's wife, Brigitte.

³ Tim Golden & Judith Miller, 'Al Qaeda Money Trail Runs From Saudi Arabia to Spain', *The New York Times* 21 September 2002; and D. Martinez and P. Munoz, 'Syrian in custody in London for 11 March was 'political chief' of Abu Dahdah's cell', (in Spanish), *ABC Newspaper* (Madrid, internet version) 24 March 2005, via FBIS.

⁴ Mansur was arrested by Danish police on 8 September 2005, charged under the new antiterrorism law enacted in 2002 for distributing films and CD-roms containing 'inflammatory jihadist speeches'.

1996-98. He accompanied teams of reporters from BBC and CNN from London into Afghanistan to bin Ladin's Headquarter where bin Ladin's first appearance on global satellite networks was recorded. Those media events, especially the CNN interview, were regarded as an unqualified success in the jihadist community.

Back to Afghanistan

In 1997, al-Suri decided to move back to Afghanistan, following the Taleban's seizure of power in Kabul. Due to his high-level contacts with bin Ladin and his media activities on behalf of the GIA, al-Suri had been briefly arrested by British authorities and he felt there was a campaign of harassment against him and like-minded people. He later came to see the latter part of the 1990s as a turning point in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the jihadist current. The promise of safe haven in 'Londonistan' had been broken and the seeds for the London bombings on 7 July 2005 were laid during these years, he later wrote.

In Afghanistan, al-Suri established a close relationship with the Taleban government. He authored a long treatise on the Taleban's achievements and failures from a Salafi-Jihadi perspective and concluded that the Taleban, despite some weaknesses, must be considered a true Islamic Emirate, and the only true Islamic State on the planet. Hence, it was a duty upon every true Muslim to emigrate to Afghanistan and fight for this Emirate.

Back in Afghanistan, al-Suri established and directed 'a training camp for Arab Mujahidin in service of Usama bin Ladin'. His military base, called al-Ghuraba' ('The Aliens'), was nominally a Taleban military facility, and it was founded only after he had pledged an oath of obedience (*bay'ah*) 'hand to hand with the Emir of the Faithful Mulla Umar' in April 2000. The camp was established at the Kargha military base in Kabul, in cooperation with the Taleban Ministry of Defence. His training activities were directed towards catering for the needs of the global jihadist movement, but not to educate Taleban foot-soldiers. He later claims that he:

'personally oversaw training of both Arab and non-Arab Muslims in my military camp, the al-Ghuraba Camp. Some of the trainees were either born, raised or are currently living in Britain. Some were of other Western nationalities, including American Muslims...'.⁵

In addition to his own al-Ghuraba camp in Kabul, al-Suri is also believed to have served as military instructor at the large Darunta training complex near Jalalabad, in particular at the Abu Khabab camp, where al-Qaida experimented with chemical

⁵ Cited in 'Abu Musab al-Suri's Final "Message to the British and the Europeans",' *GlobaTerrorAlert* 31 December 2005, www.globalterroralert.com/pdf/1205/abumusabeurope.pdf#search='Abu%20Musab%20alSuri'. Accessed December 2005.

weapons, and developed manuals for non-conventional warfare. Much has been made out of reports that al-Suri was heavily involved in al-Qaida's WMD program, but the main thrust of his work during this period seems to be of a political and strategic nature, not weapon-specific manuals. Since the latter part of the 1990s, al-Suri wrote prodigiously, producing studies of the Taleban, Central Asia, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, some with a view to gaining new insight from past jihadist experiences, others were political analyses of recent developments, combined with exhortations to join the global jihad.

While al-Suri trained international jihadists and nurtured close links with the Taleban, he also grew increasingly disillusioned with bin Laden and the latter's obsessive need for international publicity, which, in turn, isolated and endangered the Taleban regime. In July 1999 he and his associate Muhammad al-Bahayah wrote the following email to bin Laden:

'Noble brother Abu Abdullah, Peace upon you, and God's mercy and blessings. This message [concerns] the problem between you and the Leader of the Faithful ...

The results of this crisis can be felt even here in Kabul and other places. Talk about closing down the camps has spread. Discontent with the Arabs has become clear. Whispers between the Taliban with some of our non-Arab brothers has become customary. In short, our brother Abu Abdullah's latest troublemaking with the Taliban and the Leader of the Faithful jeopardizes the Arabs, and the Arab presence, today in all of Afghanistan, for no good reason. It provides a ripe opportunity for all adversaries, including America, the West, the Jews, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Mas'ud-Dostum alliance, etc., to serve the Arabs a blow that could end up causing their most faithful allies to kick them out ... Our brother [bin Laden] will help our enemies reach their goal free of charge! ...

The strangest thing I have heard so far is Abu Abdullah's saying that he wouldn't listen to the Leader of the Faithful when he asked him to stop giving interviews ... I think our brother [bin Laden] has caught the disease of screens, flashes, fans, and applause [...].⁶

Due to his outspokenness, al-Suri was perhaps erroneously seen as a leader of 'a group of secessionists', who had pledged loyalty to the Taleban. The secessionists were reportedly allowed to operate freely on Afghan territory and were promised that the training camps would be reopened. These had been closed due to international repercussions following the East Africa embassy bombings in 1998.

⁶ Cited in Alan Cullison, 'Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive', *The Atlantic Monthly* September 2004, www.theatlantic.com/doc/200409/cullison. Accessed September 2005.

As news of the al-Qaida secessionists was reported in Western and Arab media at the end of July 2000, al-Suri promptly gave an interview to al-Jazeera TV, in which he strenuously denied the reports of a secession, and criticized the TV channel for broadcasting ‘unfounded and totally baseless allegations’. The interview is interesting in light of the role which al-Suri then claimed for himself in the jihadist movement. He said

‘[O]ver the past few years, I have been present in the jihad or Islamic movement as a writer, researcher, thinker, and theorizer or ideologist so to speak. I do not enjoy any party or organizational capacity. I neither belong to Al-Qa‘idah organization nor to any other organizations. I back their ideas and call upon this nation to stand against all its enemies. However, from an organizational point of view, I am not a member in Al-Qa‘idah group.’⁷

However, he did describe himself as ‘very close to the circles here’, and he took pride in being ‘at the top of the list of invitees to Shaykh Usama’s wedding’ in mid-2000, when the latter married a Yemeni woman. Although ‘not being a member in the al-Qaida group’, he nevertheless describes his relationship with them as ‘that of fraternity, friendship, and participation in good and sad occasions. We are one family. I mean those who you termed as the Arab Afghans. We were, and are still, one family.’⁸

A Role in Terrorist Operations?

As a prominent trainer, military instructor and jihadist lecturer, al-Suri had a large network of top-level contacts in many jihadist organisations, and he is believed to have trained militants who later returned to Europe as ‘sleeper cells’, especially in Spain, Italy and France, according to Spanish authorities. However, reports about his specific involvement in terrorist operations remain scant. There are unconfirmed reports that he may have been present at the decisive ‘Tarragona summit’ in July 2001, where Muhammad Atta and Ramzi bin al-Shibh met to put the final touches on the 9/11 plot. His possible involvement in hatching the Madrid bombings on March 11th 2004 seems more plausible.

Two months after the Madrid attacks, the Spanish press reported ‘a major advance’ in the investigation into the massacre, pointing to new evidence, directly implicating al-Suri and his lieutenants:

‘These investigations have shown that an “intermediary” of Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, better known as Abu Musab al-Suri, whom the investigators

⁷ Cited in ‘Reports of split in Bin Ladin’s group denied,’ (LexisNexis Title), ‘*Al-Jazeera at Midday*’-programme, *Al-Jazeera TV*, 1 August 2000 1240 GMT via LexisNexis.

⁸ Ibid.

regard as the “mastermind” of the “trains of death”, travelled to Spain at the end of last year. [...] According to the police inquiries, after arriving in Spain Setmariam’s “intermediary” made contact with one of the 3/11 killers to pass on to him the instructions which the Al-Qa’idah leader had given him.’⁹

Citing Spanish security sources, the British press also emphasized al-Suri’s possible mastermind role in the Madrid attacks, suggesting furthermore that al-Suri was planning similar attacks in London. This was reported several months before the London Underground attacks in July 2005. According to documents uncovered in an apartment used by some of the Madrid bombers,

‘their leader, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar [i.e. al-Suri], ordered them to strike in the final days of the Spanish election campaign last March. The coded command was sent three months earlier; Nasar left it to his lieutenants in Spain to decide what the target should be.’¹⁰

According to a press interview with a counterterrorism advisor to the Spanish government since 2004, the seized documents with al-Suri’s instructions also revealed that the Madrid attacks were to be followed by a series of suicide attacks in Spain. The planned terrorist campaign was interrupted when the bombers were cornered in an apartment in Leganes, where they decided to blow themselves up.

On the Run: In Iran and in Hiding 2001-2005

With the fall of Kabul in late 2001, al-Suri was forced to flee, together with the remaining al-Qaida leadership. The collapse of the Taleban Emirate in Afghanistan was a big blow to al-Suri and he later estimated that al-Qaida lost some 80 % of its manpower over the next two years. With the new post 9/11 world order and the US global power projection, al-Suri clearly saw the balance of power tipping dangerously in the jihadist movements’ disfavour, and he began rewriting his theories in his work *The Call for Global Islamic Resistance*, taking into account the futility of safe havens upon which traditional guerrilla warfare theories rested.

Al-Suri describes the period after the fall of Taleban as ‘three meager years which we spent as fugitives, fleeing from the Americans and their apostate collaborators, moving between safe houses and hideouts...’. He was ‘on the move between numerous areas’, stayed in ‘numerous conditions’ and was heavily affected by ‘the complicated security situation’ but since the beginning of 2002 he did nothing else apart from studying and writing in order to complete his research. Al-Suri also

⁹ D. Martinez and J. Pagola, ‘Al-Qa’idah ordered 3/11 cell to prepare the massacre at end of 2003’, (in Spanish) *ABC* (Spanish newspaper, Madrid, Internet Version-WWW) 17 May 04, via FBIS.

¹⁰ Edward Owen and Daniel McGrory, ‘Madrid mastermind may plan UK attack’, *The Times* (London) 5 March 2005, www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-1511134,00.html. Accessed July 2005. See also David Paul and Mike Parker, ‘Hunt For Terror Boss’, *Sunday Express* 10 July 2005, p. 11.

describes his condition as one of ‘house arrest and restricted movement’ (*dhuruf al-iqamah al-ijbariyya wa qillat al-harakah*), indicating that he was held in some sort of custody by a state authority.¹¹ He also claims to have met Usama bin Ladin ‘for the last time in November 2001 during the battles for defending the Islamic Emirate’.

He obviously feared that something would happen that would prevent him from completing the work of his life-time, 1,604 page treatise ‘The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance’, especially after the US Administration in mid-November 2004 announced a \$5 million bounty on his head. He therefore decided to speed up the release of his book before the final reviews and corrections had been made, promising his readers an updated and corrected version in the course of 2005. Hence, al-Suri’s official silence lasted until December 2004, when he, in a communiqué issued by his media office, declared that:

‘After the 9/11 events and the fall of the Islamic emirate in Afghanistan in December 2001, I had taken the decision to enter into total isolation, cut the relationship with the outer world, and abstain from following and studying the events in the mass media, and devote myself to reading and writing. [...] As a result of the US government’s declaration about me, the lies it contained and the new security requirements it forced upon us, I have taken the decision to end my period of isolation, and to publish what I have written until now. I will also resume my ideological, media-related and operational activities. I wish by God that America will regret bitterly that they provoked me and others to combat her with pen and sword.’¹²

Al-Suri’s declaration was obviously issued in direct response to the US Department of State’s announcement of the \$5 million bounty on al-Suri’s head. Despite his claim of ‘having entered total isolation’, it seems likely that al-Suri remained involved in operational activities from Pakistani-Afghan border areas, as well as from Iranian territory.

Al-Suri was among a number of al-Qaida leaders, including Sayf al-Adil, Sa’d bin Ladin, Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi and others, who sought refuge in Iran after the fall of the Taleban regime, and had operated for some time from Iranian territory. Names of al-Qaida leaders present in Iran have figured in various media outlets since 2002, and there is little doubt that a number of leading al-Qaida members have been present on Iranian territory for extended periods of time. Al-Suri is believed to have entered Iranian territory at the beginning of 2002. Initially, al-Suri and other al-Qaida leaders were arrested and transferred to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) barracks near the holy city of Mashad, in western Iran. However, after the US

¹¹ Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri, *Da‘wat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah al-‘alamiyyah*, p. 8.

¹² Cited in *Bayan sadir ‘an maktab al-shaykh (Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri)*, p. 2. See also *Ta‘rif bil-shaykh ‘umar ‘abd al-hakim (abu mus‘ab al-suri)*, p. 3.

Administration declared Iran to be part of the axis of evil, the IRGC apparently allowed al-Qaida leaders to enter and leave Iran as long as they sought approval from the IRGC's high command.

A Spanish press report in March 2005, citing European antiterrorist services, suggested that al-Suri and his associate Amir Azizi had found permanent refuge in 'Iranian Kurdistan', where they headed al-Qaida's 'Andalusian clan', a network of some 100 fighters with experiences from the wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Chechnya.¹³ This network allegedly 'extended through North Africa and Europe', and 'is planning attacks in Europe'.¹⁴

In 2002-3, al-Suri became involved with the Iraqi theatre of war, and the emerging Iraqi insurgency movements, first and foremost with the famous Jordanian militant Ahmad Fadil Nazzal al-Khalaylah, better known as Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who later became head of the 'Qaidat al-Jihad Organisation in the Lands of the Two Rivers', al-Qaida's primary branch in Iraq. Al-Suri had initiated contacts with al-Zarqawi since the latter's arrival in Afghanistan in 1999, and after the collapse of the Taleban, these contacts continued. In 2002, al-Suri visited the area controlled by Ansar al-Islam in 'Kurdistan' in Northern Iraq, where several of al-Zarqawi's followers were stationed. Interestingly, their camp bore the same name as al-Suri's camp in Kabul. It is uncertain what role al-Suri played in Iraq as the insurgency gained ground from mid-2003. While he may have exerted some ideological influence on al-Zarqawi and offered him advice on guerrilla warfare tactics, he is rarely, if ever, cited in the voluminous Iraqi insurgency propaganda literature.

It is uncertain how long al-Suri spent in Iran. The country became gradually less hospitable for al-Qaida fighters. In August 2005, former US intelligence officials told press reporters that al-Suri had indeed entered Iran, but said that he 'was eventually asked to leave'.¹⁵ Al-Suri probably returned to Pakistan where most former al-Qaida commanders were hiding and where the sympathies and the support structures for foreign jihadists were still considerable. Al-Suri was reportedly arrested in Quetta in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, near the southern Afghan border in late October or early November 2005.

Glimpses from Al-Suri's strategic literature

While al-Suri may have played a role in the most high-profile terrorist attacks in the Western world in recent times, his lasting legacy will not be his presumed operative activity, but his contribution to the growing body of 'jihadi strategic studies', a term

¹³ Pedro Arnauero, 'Two Spanish terrorists control Al-Qa'idah's "Andalusian clan" in Europe', *La Razon* 21 March 2005 via BBC Monitoring.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Katherine Shrader, 'Wanted Muslim extremist hopscoches the globe connecting terrorists', *Associated Press* 3 August 2005.

coined by this author and Thomas Hegghammer in a recent article in *Studies of Conflict and Terrorism*.¹⁶

Al-Suri's most important work is *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, a 1,600 page study which has received considerable attention, both inside and outside jihadist circles, and has earned him praise such as 'the greatest jihadi theoretician in our time'.¹⁷ The voluminous work includes a detailed account of the history of key jihadist movements around the world, emphasising in particular their weaknesses, mistakes and flaws, with a view to learn from the past. In contrast to much of the Salafist-Jihadist literature, the style is self-critical, rational, pseudo-scientific and, relatively speaking, secular in style. The historical analysis is followed by a series of detailed practical theories about various aspects of jihadist warfare: the religious-legal fundament, the political aspect, military and organisational aspects, ways of conducting training, theories of financing, methods of media and agitation, etc.

Its strongest aspect is perhaps its clear recognition of the drastically changed balance of power between the Crusader Alliance and their Muslim collaborators on the one side and the global jihadist movement on the other. It emphasises especially the overwhelming US dominance of airspace. Al-Suri himself noticed this already during the shelling of al-Qaida camps in 1998, when US cruise missiles hit one building each, shattering the myth that Afghanistan's distant and rugged mountains provided solid protection. Al-Suri concluded that in the post 9/11 era territorial consolidation and guerrilla warfare from fixed bases in rugged terrain is impossible. A new Afghanistan is unimaginable. at least in the short term. Instead, the future jihadist war must be led by small decentralised, mobile units operating completely independently of any centralised organisation.

In al-Suri's thinking, there are basically three types of jihadist warfare¹⁸:

- The *Tanzims*, which are local or regional hierarchical secret organisations. Examples of such groups in contemporary history are plentiful: Egyptian Islamic Jihad, The Fighting Vanguard Organisation in Syria, The Shabiba-movement in Morocco, the Asbat al-Ansar group in Lebanon, etc
- "Open Fronts", which are essentially large-scale insurgencies against an occupying or imperial power. The most prominent examples are Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, etc

¹⁶ See Brynjar Lia, Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies - The alleged al-Qaida policy study preceding the Madrid bombings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (5) (September - October 2004), pp. 355-375.

¹⁷ See 'Make this a permanent link: A collection of all jihadist movies from all fronts. God is great!' (in Arabic), *Muntadayat al-Nusra* website 11 February 2006, by a contributor nicknamed 'Hamza al-Shami' (written in Arabic letters), <http://www.alnusra.net/vb/showthread.php?t=157&highlight=%C3%C8%E6+%E3%D5%DA%C8+%C7%E1%D3%E6%D1%ED>. Accessed February 2006,

¹⁸ The following section refers primarily to Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah al-'alamiyyah*, chapter 8, subsection 4, and 5.

- “The Jihad of Individualised Terrorism”, which are sporadic acts of terrorism carried out by small, autonomous cells or individuals, unconnected to organised formations. Examples are Ramzi Yusuf, the mastermind of the first World Trade Center bombings in New York in 1993 and Sayyid Nusayr, the assassin of the Jewish rightwing Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1990.

Al-Suri’s argument is that the *tanzims*, the traditional secret organisations so typical for jihadist activities in the past, have outlived their relevance. Their dependency on sanctuaries in friendly states can no longer be counted upon in a unipolar world order and the increasing international cooperation against terrorism. Furthermore, their hierarchical structure means that if one member is caught, the whole organisation is at peril. Finally, the progressive Western occupation and usurpation of Muslim land (Palestine, Saudi-Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc) obligates a reorientation. The current war must be aimed at ‘repelling the invading intruders and assailants’ from Muslim lands. One has to postpone the traditional goal of an Islamic revolution in one country or one geographical area.

Al-Suri’s slogan is: *nizam, la tanzim*, ‘System, not organisation’. In other words, there should be ‘an operative system’ or template, available anywhere for anybody, wishing to participate in the global jihad either on his own or with a small group of trusted associates, and there should not exist any ‘organisation for operations’. Hence, the global jihadist movement should discourage any direct organisational bonds between the leadership and the operative units. Leadership should only be exercised through ‘general guidance’ and the operative leaders should exist only at the level of small cells. The glue in this highly decentralised movement is nothing else than ‘a common aim, a common doctrinal program and a comprehensive (self-) educational program’.

The same goal of decentralisation is applied to financing and training. All cells should be self-sustained financially, with the possible exception of start-up money from jihadist activists termed ‘cell builders’. The latter category include skilled jihadists whose primary task is to create new independent cells, without connecting them to any organisational structure. The ‘cell builder’ is an Achilles heel in the system, and various precautions are taken to minimize the risk associated with his role. He is supposed to disappear from the scene before any operative activity commences, either by going to another country, going completely underground, or participating in a martyrdom operation.

The concept of individualised terrorism is developed in tandem with the benefits accruing from participation at the various ‘open fronts’ which serve not only as recruitment tools on their own, but also provide valuable training grounds for members of future independent cells. The individualised terrorism concept also relies on a total de-territorialisation of jihadist warfare, in which the importance of geographical distance is minimised. The aim of resisting the occupation should be applied through ‘striking against it in every place’, not simply within the confines of

the traditional theatre of war. The entire globe has become the theatre of war. Hence, al-Suri appeals to his audience, especially his European- and US-based recruits, to begin the jihad at home, and he defines a long list of legitimate targets of attacks to be found in most any Western or Arab city. Despite the wide definition of legitimate targets, al-Suri strongly cautions against operations in which many ordinary Muslims, or non-hostile non-Muslims, are killed. Such attacks will play into the hands of the Crusaders, and undermine efforts at mobilising the Islamic umma behind the jihadist call. The slogan is: “The resistance is the Islamic nation’s battle and not a struggle of an elite”, a clear antithesis to the avant-garde thinking of previous jihadist organisations, who gave top priority to capturing power in one country.

Concluding Remarks

The biography of Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri provides insight into the rich and multi-faceted history of the global jihadist movement, and the different roles played by key principals such as al-Suri. These are people who have been in the game for several decades and have amassed tremendous experience and insights, which are now being translated into a lessons-learned oriented literature. Al-Suri represents a very important strain in contemporary jihadism, where there is a significant willingness to admit mistakes, learn from the past and rationally assess strengths and weaknesses in order to rebuild the jihadist movement on a new basis. This ‘jihadi strategic studies’ literature will become critical in months and years ahead, when the remaining ‘classic al-Qaida’ leaders are killed, arrested, or detained incommunicado. A decisive element in the future of jihadist terrorism is the degree to which skills, experience and insight from the old guard are being transferred to a younger generation of jihadists who have never been to Afghanistan and never met bin Ladin. Al-Suri has, unfortunately, contributed greatly to this transfer, and has formulated concepts and ideas with appeal to the more intellectually minded al-Qaida sympathisers. By his scientific and rational approach to jihadist warfare, his writings have the potential of attracting new segments into the al-Qaida orbit.