

Dissidents in al-Qaida: Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Critique of bin Ladin and the Salafi-Jihadi Current

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Introduction

The scholarly literature on al-Qaida has recently begun to pay more attention to internal divisions and ideological schisms in the global Jihadi Current.¹ This literature has uncovered important fault-lines between al-Qaida strategists on issues such as the primacy of media and propaganda efforts versus the building of an effective military organization. Differences over the primacy of religious-theological purity versus military-strategic effectiveness have also come to light.

This paper aims to contribute to this literature by discussing these internal clashes through the writings of one of al-Qaida's most articulate and prolific writers: Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sethmariam Nasar, better known by his pen names Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Umar Abd al-Hakim.² Until his arrest, presumably in Quetta, Pakistan in late 2005, al-Suri was one of the most outspoken voices in the Jihadi Current. His critical analysis of previous jihadi experiences, especially of Algeria, provoked strong responses and debates. Furthermore, his ambitions to integrate Marxist guerrilla warfare theory into the jihadi war-fighting doctrine, to introduce self-criticism as an accepted genre and method in jihadi thinking, and his attempts critically to analyze the Jihadi Current 'objectively', inevitably led to numerous clashes with orthodox and conservative elements, especially the strong Salafi current in al-Qaida.

Al-Suri is also famous for his harsh criticism of bin Ladin in the late 1990s. Their disagreements revolved less around Islamic doctrine, and more around a series of strategic issues facing al-Qaida. First, let us discuss this critique before we move on to discuss al-Suri's encounter with the hard-line Salafi elements in al-Qaida.

Al-Suri's Critique of bin Ladin

The relationship between al-Suri and bin Ladin was turbulent, especially in the late 1990s, and most biographical accounts of the former refer to this conflict. In 2004 Spanish investigators told reporters that al-Suri had 'emerged as a prominent figure in a faction that has distanced itself from bin Ladin'. US authorities also held that al-Suri 'attempted to form his own extremist group prior to September 11, 2001'.

The details of al-Suri's conflict with bin Ladin are little known, as is al-Suri's relationship with Ayman al-Zawahiri, who became the key strategic adviser to bin Ladin during the Taleban period, and has remained the undisputed deputy leader of al-Qaida ever since. Al-Suri saw himself as part of the revolutionary Jihadi Current which al-Zawahiri and other Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) leaders had promoted in Peshawar from the late 1980s. During his European exile in the 1990s, al-Suri was close to the EIJ, and especially its media office in London, even though he quarrelled with and alienated several figures associated with the EIJ in Britain. He wrote articles and reports with the EIJ, he consulted with them closely on the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) crisis, and he spoke repeatedly with al-Zawahiri on the telephone, even during the latter's secret travels in the mid-1990s after he and other senior EIJ members had been expelled from Sudan and Yemen. Upon returning to Afghanistan, al-Suri appears to have retained a close relationship with al-Zawahiri. He did not lash out against al-Zawahiri the way he did against bin Ladin.

Al-Suri's troubled relationship with bin Ladin was coloured by his mistrust of Saudi jihadis. He suspected them of being Muslim Brothers in disguise, or dogmatic Salafis who blindly obeyed their clerics and shaykhs. Based on his own extensive experience from the Afghan training

¹ See especially Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa'ida 1989-2006* (CTC Report, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, USA); and Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihadi Went Global* (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).

² For his biography, see Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (London & New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007).

camps, he also considered them weak fighters, who lacked the necessary political and ideological consciousness. Above all, al-Suri knew that the Saudi jihadis had a standing offer from the Saudi authorities to repent and return safely home to their families, a courtesy which Syrian, Egyptian, or Algerian jihadis were not extended by their regimes. For the Saudis, the jihadi camps in Afghanistan were a kind of adventure seeking experience, al-Suri held, or simply a way to purify themselves after having 'spent time with a whore in Bangkok', as he indelicately put it.

Al-Suri's attitude to Ayman al-Zawahiri and the EIJ group was different. There was never any doubt in his mind about the EIJ's commitment to fight the tyrannical regimes of the Arab Muslim world. The organization had fought the Egyptian regime from its inception, and al-Zawahiri's slogan, at least until the mid-1990s, had been that 'the road to Jerusalem passes through Cairo'. (By this he meant that Palestine could only be liberated after the Mubarak regime had been toppled and replaced by an Islamic one.)

However, as for bin Ladin, al-Suri was never completely convinced about his and the Saudis' willingness to take the fight into the heart of the Middle East. In al-Suri's mind, this unwillingness to fight their own corrupt rulers weakened the grand strategy of the struggle against 'the Crusaders'. In his lectures, al-Suri put enormous emphasis on the strategic impact of striking Jewish, American, and Western interests in the heart of the Arab world: the Arab Peninsula and the Levant. In his mind, the 'new Crusader imperialism' aimed to take control of the oil resources and the holy places, both of which were strategically located precisely in that region. Any attack here would damage the Crusaders many times more than attacks elsewhere. Hence, when bin Ladin chose instead to strike the US embassies in Dar es-Salaam and Nairobi, probably because he had very few assets inside Saudi Arabia, al-Suri was quick to criticize.

It is possible that al-Suri faulted bin Ladin for building an over-centralized, overt, and immobile organizational structure in Afghanistan, which was extremely vulnerable to US air strikes. In his later writing, al-Suri claimed that he warned of this after the 1998 cruise missile attacks:

I noticed the precise targeting, and the intensity of the shooting, when 75 cruise missiles hit the targets during a few minutes, when America was able to put one missile in every room in the camps... I talked to many of our brothers at that time, saying that after this event, the era of fixed camps had ended, and that we had to rely on the methods of training in houses and 'camps of nomadic mujahidin' as I called them... fake houses, two cars, a number of individuals, a camp in the desert and the wasteland. The training programme is implemented and they leave... Another group arrives at another place, and so on... However, the Arab circles were relying on the methods of propaganda, mobilization and calling upon the Islamic Nation to go to the camps, not paying any attention to the era of satellites and long-range targeting.

While differences over al-Qaida's centralised structure and targeting strategies played a role, *by far the most important issue in al-Suri's conflict with bin Ladin was the relationship with the Taleban regime*. Al-Suri harshly criticised the al-Qaida leader for not respecting the rules of conduct set by the Taleban. In not doing so, bin Ladin endangered the Arab presence in Afghanistan as a whole, al-Suri argued. In his assessment of the Taleban movement, published in October 1998, al-Suri highlighted the Taleban's willingness to host and protect bin Ladin and Arab mujahidin who were fugitives in their own countries as their most positive characteristic. Al-Suri says he was 'a visiting guest' with Osama bin Ladin in Jalalabad when the Taleban entered the town in 1996. He was present at a number of meetings between Taleban officials and bin Ladin, and he was deeply moved by the warmth with which the Taleban greeted them.

When bin Ladin began taking advantage of the Taleban's hospitality and trust, or so he thought, al-Suri raised his voice in protest. Things apparently came to a head during a meeting in the spring of 1998 in Jihad Wal, one of the older training camps near Khowst, Afghanistan, when a fierce quarrel erupted between the two. Al-Suri was particularly incensed by the fact that bin Ladin acted as if he were Afghanistan's ruler, treating him and his life-long comrade-in-arms,

Abu Khalid al-Suri, as ‘guests’, not as ‘brothers and supporters’. Bin Ladin reportedly told al-Suri that:

You are guests. Just like you are entitled to hospitality, the host also is entitled to accommodate his guests where he pleases. We don’t necessarily have to accommodate you here. Give us the freedom to choose how to host you!

Al-Suri had argued with Abu Qutadah in London, and in Afghanistan he did not hold back, not even in front of a dignitary such as bin Ladin. As with most Saudis, bin Ladin strongly disliked hot-headed, vociferous quarrels; he nurtured an image of himself as ‘a man of politeness, humbleness and bashfulness’. The altercation reportedly ended with bin Ladin saying: ‘Let us keep away from one another to keep our mutual respect as Muslims. Stay away so we can keep this mutual respect’. Their fallout was never absolute, and to the outside world al-Suri usually denied that any such differences existed (see below). The main consequence was that al-Suri was longer considered a member of bin Ladin’s inner circle, and hence was unable to take part directly in bin Ladin’s future strategic planning.

Noman Benotman, who met with al-Suri in this period, recalls that he had expressed his deep frustration with bin Ladin, using very harsh words about the al-Qaida leader, calling him ‘a Pharaoh’ and ‘things that later he would not even use about Bush and Rumsfeld’. His contempt for bin Ladin was such that he reportedly portrayed him as a child to his contacts in the Taleban government: ‘he does not know what he is doing. You have to take his hand and prevent him from doing what he is doing’.

Al-Suri and bin Ladin did not exchange words for very long. When he was interviewed by the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Ra’y al-Amm* in 1999, al-Suri let it be known that he and bin Ladin had different views and opinions: ‘It is my conviction that our brother bin Ladin is a man with a mission, a man with a cause, irrespective of my opinion, or the opinions of the enemies and adversaries on this cause’. While he was careful to emphasise that his relationship with bin Ladin was based on mutual sympathy (*ta’atuf*), he rejected emphatically that bin Ladin was his leader: ‘I do not have any organizational relationship with Shaykh bin Ladin’. Al-Suri’s true opinion about bin Ladin is revealed in an email he and his aide, Abu Khalid al-Suri, sent to bin Ladin on 19 July 1998 (not 1999 as reported elsewhere). Their forceful vocabulary is striking, although it must be noted that there was a frankness and outspokenness in the Arab-Afghan community that was unheard of in the states from which most of the Arab jihadis hailed. Al-Suri’s letter was among thousands of stored al-Qaida documents and email correspondences on a computer purchased by a Wall Street Journal reporter in Afghanistan in late 2001. The computer had been stolen from al-Qaida’s headquarters only days before the Taleban fled Kabul in late 2001, and had been used primarily by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In this email correspondence, al-Suri and his companion Abu Khalid al-Suri addressed the ongoing crisis in Arab-Taleban relations, strongly admonishing bin Ladin for his hunger for publicity and arrogance towards the Taleban government. A short excerpt of al-Suri’s seven-page letter was reprinted in *The Atlantic Monthly* in September 2004.

Due to the generous courtesy of Andrew Higgins and Alan Cullison, who came across the famous Kabul computer, this author has studied the letter in its entirety, the most salient features of which will be explored in some detail.

Al-Suri’s emailed letter was obviously part of something bigger. True to his penchant for prolix correspondence, al-Suri described it as merely ‘a summary’ of his main points in a forthcoming ‘comprehensive advice message’ to bin Ladin, which he had not yet been able to complete due to ‘emergency travel circumstances’. It is clear from al-Suri’s letter in July 1998 that his relationship with bin Ladin had been chilly for quite some time. He was already past the point where he thought his advice would benefit the al-Qaida leader; instead, he remarked that ‘I have observed the futility of this. I felt that my advice to our brother has become more irritating than useful’. The purpose of the letter was simply to exercise ‘our Islamic legal right in preventing harm to ourselves and to Muslims’. Together with his forthcoming ‘comprehensive advice message’, the

emailed letter would be ‘our last advice to you to absolve ourselves before God and so that you don’t later say you weren’t warned’.

The key event which prompted al-Suri to write such a harshly worded letter was the conference organized by bin Ladin in May 1998 to announce the establishment of ‘The World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders’. Al-Suri objected neither to the declaration as such, nor to the new alliance of jihadi groups. On the contrary, he reportedly regarded it as a great step forward. But he was dismayed that bin Ladin had acted unilaterally, without the Taleban’s permission, and that his media event had proved highly embarrassing to the Taleban regime. Bin Ladin’s conference had been held in ‘camps, the existence of which was constantly denied by the Taleban’, al-Suri wrote. Such ‘whims’ by bin Ladin had a very strong negative impact on the Arab-Afghan community, al-Suri argued, referring to the fact that the Taleban had responded by closing the important Khalden camp, as well as the Pakistani camps. Al-Suri was clearly concerned that anti-Arab factions within the Taleban regime might gain more influence due to bin Ladin’s ‘troublemaking’. He pointed out to bin Ladin that the Taleban consisted of a ‘mixture’ of different trends, some of which included corrupt individuals. Furthermore, the Arab presence in Afghanistan had benefited the Taleban very little in practical terms. Bin Ladin’s promises to the Taleban had ranged from ‘urbanisation projects, road-building, economic projects, introducing 300 mujahidin to defend Kabul, etc’, but all these pledges came to nothing: ‘the wind blew [them] away’, al-Suri noted sarcastically. Instead, bin Ladin’s policies had increased international and regional pressure against the Taleban. Worse still, they had ‘humiliated [Mullah Omar] and made him look like a man who is not even aware of what takes place in his land’.

It is clear from the correspondence that in mid-1998 al-Suri had already attended several meetings between bin Ladin and representatives of the Taleban regime. According to al-Suri, the Taleban had told bin Ladin in no uncertain terms that: ‘if you wish to fight America and your adversaries then do so without much talk and shouting from our lands as our condition is critical’. In al-Suri’s eyes, bin Ladin had failed to grasp the new geopolitical reality. While al-Suri himself had been heavily involved in bringing bin Ladin and his cause to the attention of the global media in 1996-97, by mid-1998 he clearly judged that bin Ladin’s continued ‘media war’ had lost its purpose: it ‘now serves the infidels rather than the believers’.

Al-Suri also addressed the reasons for Ladin’s disobedience vis-à-vis the Taleban. He contended that it was largely a result of bin Ladin’s experience in Sudan, where he had disobeyed the regime’s restrictions from the start. As a result, the powers that be in Khartoum had become emboldened, and steadily extracted more concessions and money from bin Ladin. This did not prevent the Sudanese government from evicting him and his followers from the country. Thereafter, bin Ladin had sworn: ‘we don’t want the Taleban to deal with us with the same insolence that the Sudanese dealt with us when we were lenient on them. They silenced us, then restricted us, then kicked us out’.

Al-Suri did not object to bin Ladin’s description of the Sudanese government’s policy towards himself. In fact, he depicted the al-Qaida leader as someone who had been more than willing to stumble ‘from one humiliation to another’. Al-Suri only touched on this theme in his letter, vowing to discuss it in detail in his forthcoming comprehensive advice, but his main criticism of bin Ladin’s policy in Sudan is clear: bin Ladin had proved himself submissive to a corrupt regime to the extent that he betrayed his brothers:

You testified falsely that they apply Sharia and support Islam. You offered them everything. They asked you to keep silent and you accepted. You even accepted when they asked you to kick out some of your brothers and the Libyans. Then they kicked you out and held even the women of our brothers and the elderly at gunpoint. Nevertheless, you again offered to fight with them under a flag that enjoys no shred of legitimacy

when their false god al-Zubayr [referring to a Sudanese minister] delivered our Libyan brothers to their death and the violation of their honour.

In al-Suri's view, bin Ladin drew the wrong lessons from the Sudanese experience. By adopting a much tougher line towards the Taleban government, which in al-Suri's eyes was a far more legitimate, helpful, and worthy regime than the Sudanese, bin Ladin proved to be an ungrateful guest. The Taleban had imposed no restrictions other than an end to bin Ladin's media interviews. This was a small price to pay for the sanctuary and freedom of operation they enjoyed in Afghanistan, al-Suri argued. He went so far as to taunt bin Ladin for his dishonourable behaviour:

Where, then, is manhood when you oppress those helpless people when they only promised you protection and permitted you to fight only on the condition of silence? Wouldn't they be right if they tell you: 'A lion against me and an ostrich at war'? Or as poor people say: 'My father only has power over my mother'?

Al-Suri's criticism of bin Ladin was not confined to the specific issues mentioned above, but went to the very heart of the Shaykh's style of leadership and management. He used words such as 'obstinacy, egotism, and pursuit of internal battles' to describe bin Ladin's leadership. Furthermore, he claimed that since the foundation of al-Qaida, bin Ladin had failed properly to practice 'shura', or consultation, with his experienced cohorts:

Due to our brother Abu Abdallah's behaviour concerning opinion and decisions, as he accustomed us for over 10 years, it is my conviction that most of the advice he receives from us and other people with experience has not benefited him.

In addition, Al-Suri claimed that key members of the al-Qaida leadership shared his views on bin Ladin's management style:

Opinions we received from those around him [i.e. bin Ladin], including Abu Hafs [i.e. Muhammad Atif, al-Qaida's top military commander], the Doctor [i.e. Ayman al-Zawahiri], most of the brothers, and the many people who advise him, indicate they disagree with this attitude on his part and think it's wrong.

The recent Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) study on leadership schisms in al-Qaida also confirms the existence of such grievances about bin Ladin's leadership style.³ The fierceness of al-Suri's frontal attack on the al-Qaida leader appears to stem, at least in part, from al-Suri's general mistrust of the Saudi jihadis. In his letter he set out his suspicions that bin Ladin was secretly considering striking a bargain with the Saudi ruling family to allow for his safe return to Saudi Arabia or to his former exile in Sudan:

'Abu Abdallah and the imprisoned sahwist clerics may surprise us tomorrow with a compromise with prince Abdullah al-Su'ud. Abu Abdallah may even return to Sudan to monitor the farm'.

By souring the Arab-Afghan community's relations with the Taleban regime, bin Ladin put the entire Arab community in Afghanistan at risk, al-Suri argued. While bin Ladin had several options, many Arab-Afghans did not. They had made Afghanistan their home and had nowhere to go. From al-Suri's letter, it appears that the fear of losing the Afghanistan sanctuary seems to have been very real:

We are in a ship that you are burning on false and mistaken grounds of good deeds. We left our land to defend our religion in response to the call to fight the Jews and the Christians. [...] Then, you acted the way you did, leaving us only this final hole. What right have you to destroy our and others' homes! [...] You admit that if the Taleban and

³ Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation*, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/aq3.asp>.

the Afghans dare break the highest ranking Arab then those below him have no hope. All the brothers will then be vulnerable and we won't have anywhere to go except Iran, or God forbid, seeking asylum with Islam's enemies [...].

Al-Suri concluded his letter by warning bin Ladin that he might soon find himself isolated, bereft of any leadership position, if he did not mend his ways:

Do you want the Arabs here [...] to have no other alternative other than to tell the Taleban and the leader of the believers of the reality? Do you want them to tell them that Abu Abdallah only represents himself and his groups of guards but not the Arabs? And that we don't agree with his wrong attitude and his position towards the Taleban? This also involves the obvious harm of hanging out our dirty laundry for others to see.

Al-Suri's letter to bin Ladin in July 1998 provides a rare insight into the tense rivalries and disagreements, both inside al-Qaida and between al-Qaida and the Taleban regime, at a point when little of this was known to the outside world. Alan Cullison and Andrew Higgins, who reviewed many other internal al-Qaida documents from that period, confirm that the relations between al-Qaida and the Taleban were indeed very stormy. In mid-1998 there had been a near rupture in relations, and it appeared as if the Taleban were on the verge of agreeing to US requests to evict bin Ladin and his entourage.

What appears radically to have shifted the temperature of the chilly relationship were the US missile strikes against six suspected terrorist training camps in Afghanistan on 21 August 1998, in retaliation for the terrorist bombing of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salaam. The attacks 'shut off Taleban discussion of expelling the militants'. This outcome was not evident at the time. Al-Suri recalls that the Taleban had convened a three-day meeting to decide what their response would be:

All of us expected that they would request Abu Abdallah and the Arabs to freeze their activity and close their camps. I hurried to get the latest news from some of the Taleban ministers about the result of the meeting. To my surprise, I learned from one of them that: 'The Emir of the Faithful only reprimanded some of us who had been struck with fear and hesitation. He gave us a lesson in putting your trust in God (*tawakkul 'ala Allah*) and not fearing America'.

Osama bin Ladin also mended his relationship with Mullah Omar. By flattering the Taleban chief with lofty titles such as 'Islam's new caliph', and predicting that he would become the head of an expanding Islamic State encompassing most of Central Asia, bin Ladin managed to win over Mullah Omar and gain his full support. Bin Ladin also issued an apology to Mullah Omar, pledging not to organize news conferences without the Taleban's explicit permission and recognizing Omar as the sovereign leader of Afghanistan. This was exactly what al-Suri had demanded in his letter to bin Ladin. Hence, it is possible that al-Suri's criticism helped to propel bin Ladin towards rebuilding al-Qaida's relationship with the Taleban, but al-Suri's acid tongue and outspokenness clearly chilled the personal relationship between the two.

Documents uncovered in Afghanistan after the Taleban's fall, and released via the CTC website, suggest that al-Suri sought to mend his ties with bin Ladin in 1999.⁴ In November 2001, after the fall of Kabul, they reportedly met for the last time, pledging an oath 'to fight God's enemies'.

However, al-Suri's critique of bin Ladin did not cease completely, even though his tone was much more conciliatory in his public writings. In his *Global Islamic Resistance Call* (GIRC) from December 2004, he lets it be known that he disagreed with the 9/11 attacks, and says that the attacks had 'a catastrophic effect' on the jihadi movement.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Al-Suri's Conflict with Hard-line Salafi Figures in al-Qaida

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri was known to be a fierce critic of Salafi dogmatism in the Jihadi Current. Before we discuss this in more detail, let me briefly say a few words about Salafism.

Salafism

While the term 'Salafism' is historically associated with a late 19th and early 20th century Islamic Reformist current, today's Salafists are very different. Their main characteristic is their strict emulation of the practices of the Prophet and his Companions from the time of the pristine Islamic Age, and hence, an abhorrence of any later 'innovation' (*bid'ah*) in belief and religious practices, an obsession with God's oneness (*tawhid*), a rejection of human rationality, and an extreme exclusiveness, and even hatred, towards other Islamic schools and tendencies.⁵ Even if only a small segment of today's Salafis support al-Qaida, the term 'Salafi-Jihadism' has nevertheless been associated with al-Qaida, both by outsiders, and by jihadi ideologues themselves.

A common categorization of Salafism is Qitan Wictorowicz's typology, which divides Salafism into three currents: purists, politicians, and jihadis, united by a common Salafi creed, but sharply divided on how to interpret the context and reality in which the Salafi creed should be implemented.⁶ While a useful starting point, the typology provides little guidance in terms of understanding doctrinal disputes and conflicts *within* the Jihadi Current.⁷ Furthermore, it may mislead us into thinking of contemporary jihadis as simply radicalized elements within - or as by-products of - a broader Salafi phenomenon. Instead, we may argue that it is more fruitful to speak of a spectrum, or a continuum, of positions within the contemporary Salafi-Jihadism, defined by two extreme positions. At the extreme end of the spectrum are hard-line Salafi purists, for whom doctrinal purity is of quintessential importance, even if it means fighting side-battles, alienating allies, and shattering any semblance of a common front against the Zionist-Crusader enemy. At the other end of the spectrum are hard-line jihadis, who are primarily military strategists, and whose main preoccupation is political outcome, not doctrinal purity.

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri belongs to the latter category. Even though he himself was born into a Syrian Sufi family (the *Rifa'iyyah* order in Aleppo), he came to adopt and defend Salafi doctrines in his writings, but he did this only because that was the name of the game. From his writings, one gets the sense that had he been born twenty years earlier, al-Suri would have fought equally hard under Marxist or pan-Arab slogans. He styled himself as a writer, theorist, and strategist, and he consistently refused to be called a scholar or a cleric. Together with many other leading jihadis, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri clashed with 'purist Salafi' elements in al-Qaida on a number of occasions. While the specific issues of disagreement varied greatly, they all revolved around the general dilemma of how to strike a balance between ideological purity vs. political utility. These clashes suggest that the spread of purist Salafi doctrines in the Jihadi Current from the 1980s onwards,

⁵ See Bernard Haykel, 'Radical Salafism: Osama's ideology', *Dawn*

⁶ Qitan Wictorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (3) (April-May 2006), pp. 207-239.

⁷ For the purpose of this article, al-Suri's own definition will suffice: He defined the Jihadi Current rather comprehensively, determined partly by ideology and partly by its main enemies: 'It comprises organizations, groups, assemblies, scholars, intellectuals, symbolic figures, and the individuals who have adopted the ideology of armed jihad against the existing regimes in the Arab-Islamic world on the basis that these are apostate regimes ruling by not what Allah said (*bi-ghayr ma anzala Allah*), but by legislating without Allah, and by giving their loyalty and assistance to the various infidel enemies of the Islamic Nation. The Jihadi Current has also adopted the program of armed jihad against the colonialist forces which attack Muslim lands on the basis that those regimes are allies fighting Islam and Muslims'. See Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *The Global Islamic Resistance Call. Part I: The Roots, History, and Experiences. Part II: The Call, Program and Method* (in Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, December 2004); [Hereafter cited as *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*], p.685.

rather than being a source of strength and renewal, have instead constituted an obstacle to jihadi mobilisation, and has more often than not served to handicap and cripple jihadi groups by embroiling them in schisms and internal conflicts.

So why did jihadi ideologues such as al-Suri come to use such vitriolic and harsh words about leading Salafi clerics? Al-Qaida's struggle against the United States and its European and Arab allies, and Saudi Arabia in particular, has always depended on a minimum of political-religious legitimisation, which explains why there is far more literature on jihadi websites dealing with the question "why jihad?" rather than "how jihad?".⁸

Since the mid-1990s, leading Salafi clerics from Saudi Arabia and Yemen have refuted bin Ladin's message and defended the regimes against jihadi propaganda, earning them derogatory labels such as the Sultan's clerics (*ulama' al-sultan*), and worse. Al-Suri took considerable interest in these disputes, and he authored a long study, detailing and analysing bin Ladin's and the London-based Saudi dissident leader Saad al-Faqih's criticism of Shaykh bin Baz and Shaykh bin 'Uthaymin, two of Saudi Arabia's most famous scholars.⁹ Seeing himself not as a religious cleric who could challenge the clerics on their own turf, al-Suri found it most useful to launch his attack through the words of the two most well-known Saudi dissidents, one from the Reformist camp and the other from the jihadi camp. The intended audience was clearly jihadi sympathisers and recruits who were hesitant to join al-Qaida without necessary religious legitimisation. This is also what concerned al-Suri the most with regards to the negative role played by 'the purist Salafis'. Their clerics 'mislead the mujahidin' and turned them away from the battlefield by preaching loyalty to corrupt rulers who had allied themselves with the Infidels.

The reason why anti-bin Ladin rhetoric emanating from leading Salafi scholars had such resonance among al-Qaida's core recruitment base was that the jihadi movement did not have a well-established and unified ideological foundation separate from the Salafi school; its ideological character was multifaceted, evolving, and open to new influences. In al-Suri's analysis, the Jihadi Current's ideology derived from a variety sources. It was 'a mixture of jihadi Qutbist organisational ideology, the Salafi creed, and the Wahhabite call'.¹⁰ While Qutbism had been dominant until the 1980s, doctrinal Salafism and Wahhabite theology had begun to impact during the Arab participation in the Afghan liberation war in the 1980s, and its influence on the Jihadi Current had grown ever since.¹¹

Salafism as a Source of Internal Discord and Conflicts

Al-Suri witnessed the growing influence of Salafi hard-line ideologues in al-Qaida with much unease. Historically, doctrinal disputes within the Sunni faith had bred 'partisan fanaticism', and caused 'bloodshed, conspiracies, and internecine fighting' on a grand scale.¹² While these schismatic battles were somewhat contained during the anti-Colonialist struggles in the 18th and

⁸ See Brynjar Lia, 'Al-Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet infrastructure', *Jane's Intelligence Online*, January 2006.

⁹ Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *The Testimony of the Leaders of the Mujahidun and the Reform [Current] about the Sultan's Clerics in the Land of the Two Holy Places, Called Saudi Arabia: A Reading and Commentary of the Letters and Communiqués by Shaykh Osama bin Ladin and Doctor Saad al-Faqih to Shaykh bin Baz, Shaykh bin 'Uthaymin and the Clerics of the Land of the Two Holy Places* (in Arabic) (Kabul: The Ghuraba Center for Islamic Studies and Media, 31 January 2001, Issues for the Triumphant in Righteousness No.5).

¹⁰ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, p.697.

¹¹ True to his pedagogical, tutorial style of writing, al-Suri summed up the basic components and elements of the Jihadi Current in this neat mathematical equation: 'Some basic elements from the Muslim Brotherhood ideology + The organisational program of Sayyid Qutb + The legal-political doctrine of Imam Ibn Taymiyah and the Salafiyya school + The jurisprudential and doctrinal heritage of the Wahhabite call ---> The political legal organisational program for the Jihadi Current.' *Ibid*, p.698.

¹² *Ibid*, p.1060.

19th centuries, they had now reemerged with full force, according to al-Suri, due to the growing power of the ‘Salafi trend’.¹³ Al-Suri depicts the Salafis as the most conflict-prone of all: They are a sect at war with ‘nearly every other revivalist school, [...] in particular the Reformist schools, the Sufis, the *tablighi* movement, most official clerics and imams, as well as the clerics of the four schools of jurisprudence’.¹⁴ It seems overly clear that al-Suri conceives of the Salafis as a pain in the neck for the jihadis. He would rather be without them and their hapless doctrinal feuds, but that is unfortunately not an option, because, as al-Suri points out, ‘most of the jihadis chose the Salafi doctrine, jurisprudence and program’; in this way, ‘the problem came to us, eventually’, he laments.¹⁵

Al-Suri viewed the various conflicts emanating from the disputes over the Salafi doctrine as a significant security hazard for the jihadi movement, and a considerable threat to the movement as a whole:

‘It causes internal strife among Muslims and within the Resistance movement itself at a time when we are being invaded by the American and Zionist Mongols and their war machines, and at a time when their satellites are eavesdropping on our ideological murmurs and monitoring our daily movements [...]’.¹⁶

Furthermore, the arrogant exclusiveness propagated by Salafi doctrinarians has led to the inability of the Jihadi Current to form alliances and cooperative relationships with other Islamic militants. According to al-Suri, ‘numerous relationships were ended and disputes started’ as a result of the Salafis.¹⁷ In al-Suri’s view, their presence in the Jihadi Current created an incompatibility of strategic proportions: the Salafis provoked conflicts with each and everyone, while ‘the resistance has to be popular meaning a complete participation of all sects of the population, inclusive of all of its multiple diverse groups,’ if it is to succeed.¹⁸

Al-Suri also found that the Salafis shared the responsibility for the spread of *takfiri* (‘expiatory’) ideas and practices within the Jihadi Current. He goes to great lengths to refute the notion that the mainstream jihadi ideology ‘has merged with takfirism’, as is often argued by jihadi opponents, but he does concede that:

‘some prominent men from the Salafi-Jihadi current, or at least those scholars and students who followed them, offered interpretations which were either extremist, or were articulated in such a general manner that some ignorant jihadis took a step further and widened the concept of expiating others (*takfir*)’.¹⁹

This and the fact that ‘those actually belonging to the *takfiri* trend relied on these texts [...], led in turn to a narrowing of the margin between the jihadi and the takfiri trend’, a weakness which has been amply exploited by the enemy, al-Suri laments.²⁰ Since the rise of modern political Islamism, with its numerous factions and offshoots, in the first half of the 20th century, the issue of *takfir* has probably been the most divisive issue of all. Hence, al-Suri’s criticism here is indeed very significant.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.846.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 842.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Hard-line Salafis in London and Afghanistan

There are several examples where the adoption of hard-line Salafi positions by leading members of jihadi groups has led to leadership schisms in the Jihadi Current. In the mid-1990s, a serious conflict erupted between Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Abu Qutadah al-Filastini, who were then the two main ideologues behind the *Al-Ansar Newsletter* in London, the mouthpiece of the GIA in Algeria, and the most prominent jihadi journal during the 1990s. Al-Suri gradually became estranged as Abu Qutadah’s hard-line Salafi supporters gained control over the GIA media unit. He later recalled in his memoirs how people such as himself were perceived by the Salafis:

‘In their eyes, we were only activists (*barakiyyun*), who theorized in politics. We were not clean of the Muslim Brotherhood virus, despite the fact that we were among the jihadis. We did not understand the issues of Islamic doctrine!! [...] It did not last long before his followers, especially Abu Walid al-Filastini [one of Abu Qutadah’s closest aides], began issuing fatwas saying that I was an heretic’.²¹

The clash between military jihadi pragmatists and hard-line Salafis was also manifest in Afghanistan, the main playing field for the jihadis since the late 1980s.²² There were significant differences in religious observance and practices between the Arab volunteer fighters, many of whom were observant Salafis, and the Afghan resistance, who by and large observed the Hanafi school and were tolerant of Sufi shrines and other practices that Salafis regarded as godless ‘innovatism’ in Islam. This had been a problem during the first Arab-Afghan experience from the mid-1980s to c.1992, and no less so during the ‘second round’ following the Taleban’s seizure of power in 1996 until its downfall in late 2001.

A significant segment of the Arab-Afghan community in Afghanistan mistrusted the Taleban as they mistrusted and despised the Afghan population for its superstitious and deviant religious observance, which was greater than their contempt for Afghanistan’s general backwardness and primitiveness. Partly due to the prevalence of hard-line Salafi attitudes among them, the Arab-Afghans soon became embroiled in tense ideological disputes over whether the Taleban regime should be considered an Islamic Emirate which it was worth fighting for, and to which emigration was obligatory. Many Arab militants who had moved to Afghanistan simply consider the Islamic Emirate as just another temporary safe haven from which they might train their members and reorganise their forces in preparation of an armed campaign in their home countries. For them, the Taleban regime was not a kernel or a starting point for the coming Islamic Caliphate. Hence, fighting alongside the Taleban against the Northern Alliance was not a religious duty. Among the hard-line Salafis in the Arab-Afghan community, the criticism of the Taleban went much further: They argued that it was utterly impermissible to fight alongside the Taleban regime because it meant fighting under an infidel banner.²³

In his books, al-Suri describes at length the destructive role played by the Salafi hardliners in Afghanistan who seized on any occasion to reprimand and correct ‘deviant behaviour’ among those Arab fighters who adapted to local customs, for example, by praying in the manner the Afghans prayed. The Salafis’ contempt for the Taleban and other non-Salafi mujahidin fighters knew no boundaries:

‘One of the astonishing things I must mention in this context is a statement made by one of those extremist Salafi-Jihadis. He told me in one of our conversations that “*jihad must be under the Salafi banner; its leadership, program, and religious rulings must also be Salafi; and*

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 31.

²² This section draws heavily on my book Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, pp.239-245.

²³ See the discussion in ‘Are the Taliban from Ahl as-Sunnah?’, At-Tibyaan Publications website, <http://tibyaan.atspace.com/tibyaan/articlef7c9.html?id=1116>, accessed Feb. 2007. The article contains extensive quotes from al-Suri’s book *Afghanistan, the Taliban, and the Battle of Islam Today* (in Arabic, 1998).

everything should be subjected to proof [in accordance with Salafi methodology]. If we should accept that non-Salafis participate with us in Jihad, we only do so because we need them. However, they should not have any leadership role at all. We should lead them like a herd of cows to perform their duty of jihad.” I couldn’t really understand how we were going to participate in Jihad with our brethren in religion and faith if we should deal with them as a herd of cows [...]²⁴

Obviously, such contemptuous attitudes opened up serious cleavages in the Arab-Afghan diaspora regarding the future course of action, especially with regards to their position on the Taleban.

In Afghanistan, al-Suri became known as one of the Taleban’s most faithful defenders against the Salafis. Al-Suri had always displayed pragmatism and leniency vis-à-vis non-adherence to the strict Salafi code of conduct as long as the zeal and determination to fight a jihad was beyond doubt. This, he found among the Taleban.²⁵

Concluding Remarks

Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s writings highlight important schisms and ideological cleavages inside al-Qaida and contemporary jihadism, which often tend to be overlooked since most jihadi writers avoid the topic or couch it in such obfuscated language that it becomes unintelligible for outsiders.

There is little doubt that there have been very serious differences inside al-Qaida with regards to its future strategies, including its decision to attack the United States homeland on September 11th 2001. Furthermore, the organisation has also been torn between pragmatic military-oriented jihadis and Salafi doctrinarians. The rise of Salafi influences in the Jihadi Current has profoundly altered the ideological character of the Jihadi Current since the early 1990s, following decades of Qutbist dominance in militant Islamic rhetoric. The rise of Salafi discourses and doctrines has, in many ways, reduced the *political* content in contemporary jihadi ideology, and weakened its ability to provide formulas for alliances with other political forces. Indeed, perhaps the most important element in al-Suri’s critique of the Salafis is their exclusiveness and eagerness to engage in side-battles with ‘deviancy’ and ‘un-Islamic sects’. Through the very presence of these ideological elements at the heart of the Jihadi Current, this global insurgent movement is bound to have limited popular appeal and is destined to remain what al-Suri did not want it to be, namely ‘elitist’, ‘marginal’, and doomed to failure.

²⁴ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, pp. 844-5.

²⁵ Due to his conflict with bin Ladin, he could obviously not afford also to be on bad terms with the Afghan government, but there was clearly a strong ideological component behind his decision. Abdel Bari Atwan, the Arab news editor who met with al-Suri several times during the mid- and late 1990s, recalls that al-Suri telephoned him in 1997 or 1998, saying that he had stopped working for al-Qaida, and that instead he now served as media advisor for the Taleban. Author’s interview with Abdel Bari Atwan, London, 28 April 2006.

List of Selected Works by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri

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²⁶ Posted on *muntada al-tajdid* 31 May 2006. Accessed June 2006 at www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums/showthread.php?s=6548b36708e3c3eff8db8327623a51e8&threadid=41941.

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