

Abu Mus`ab al-Suri's Critique of Hard Line Salafists in the Jihadist Current

By Brynjar Lia

THE RECENT SCHOLARLY literature on al-Qa`ida has focused on studying internal divisions and ideological schisms in the global jihadist current.¹ This literature has uncovered important fault lines with regard to al-Qa`ida's priorities on issues such as media and propaganda efforts versus military organization. Differences over the primacy of religious-theological purity versus military-strategic effectiveness have also come to light.

This article aims at contributing to this literature by discussing the clash between ideological purists and military strategists in al-Qa`ida as seen through the writings of one of al-Qa`ida's most articulate and prolific writers, Mustafa bin `Abd al-Qadir Setmariam 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 jihadist current. His critical analysis of previous jihadist experiences, especially on Algeria, provoked strong responses and debates. Furthermore, his ambitions to integrate Marxist guerrilla warfare theory into the jihadist war fighting doctrine, to introduce self-criticism as an accepted genre and method in jihadist thinking and his attempts to critically analyze the jihadist current "objectively" inevitably led to numerous clashes with orthodox and conservative elements, especially the strong Salafist current in al-Qa`ida.

1 Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa`ida 1989-2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), available at www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/aq3.asp; Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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

Salafism

While the term Salafism is historically associated with a late 19th and early 20th century Islamic reformist movement, today's Salafists are very different. Their main characteristic is their strict emulation of the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions at the pristine Islamic age, and hence an abhorrence of any later "innovation" (*bid`a*) in belief and religious practice, an obsession with God's oneness (*tawhid*), a rejection of human rationality and an extreme exclusiveness, even hatred, toward other Islamic schools and tendencies.³ Even if only a small segment of today's Salafists support al-Qa`ida, the term "Salafi-jihadism" has nevertheless been latched to al-Qa`ida both by outsiders and by jihadist ideologues themselves.

A common categorization of Salafism is Quintan Wiktorowicz's typology that divides Salafism into three currents: purists, politicians and jihadists, united by a common Salafist creed, but sharply divided on how to interpret the context and reality in which the creed should be implemented.⁴ While a useful starting point, the typology provides little guidance in terms of understanding doctrinal disputes and conflicts within the jihadist current itself.⁵ Furthermore, it may misleadingly

3 Bernard Haykel, "Radical Salafism: Osama's Ideology," *Dawn*, 2001.

4 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:3 (2006): pp. 207-239.

5 For the purpose of this article, Abu Mus`ab al-Suri's own definition will suffice. He defined the jihadist 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), by legislating without Allah, and by giving their loyalty and assistance to the various infidel enemies of the Islamic nation. The jihadist 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* (Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, December 2004), p. 685. Hereafter cited as *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*.

identify contemporary jihadists as simply radicalized elements within, or as by-products of, a broader Salafist phenomenon. Instead, it may be more fruitful to speak of Salafism as one of several competing ideological strands within the jihadist current. Furthermore, one may identify a spectrum, or a continuum, of positions within the contemporary Salafi-jihadism, defined by two extreme positions.

On the one extreme are hard line Salafist 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 extreme are hard line jihadists, 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 Salafist doctrines in his writings, but he did this only because it was the best strategy in the current times. From his writings, it becomes apparent that had he been born 20 years earlier, al-Suri would have fought equally hard under Marxist or pan-Arab slogans. He styled himself as a writer, theorist and strategist, not as a Muslim cleric. Together with many other leading jihadists, Abu Mus`ab al-Suri clashed with "purist Salafist" elements in al-Qa`ida on a number of occasions. While the specific issues 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 Salafist doctrines in the jihadist current from the 1980s onwards has not been a source of strength and renewal, but instead constituted a considerable obstacle to jihadist mobilization, and has more often than not served to handicap and cripple jihadist groups by embroiling them in schisms and internal conflicts.

There are reasons why jihadist ideologues like al-Suri came to use such vitriolic and harsh words about leading Salafist clerics. Al-Qa`ida's

struggle against the United States and its European and Arab allies—Saudi Arabia, in particular—has always depended on a minimum of political-religious legitimation, which explains why there is far more literature on jihadist websites dealing with the question “why jihad?” than “how jihad?”⁶

Since the mid-1990s, leading Salafist clerics from Saudi Arabia and Yemen have refuted Usama bin Ladin’s message and defended their regimes against jihadist propaganda. Al-Suri took considerable interest in these disputes, and he authored a long study that detailed and analyzed Bin Ladin’s and the London-based Saudi dissident leader Saad al-Faqih’s criticism of Shaykh Abdul Aziz bin Baz and Shaykh Mohammed bin Salah bin ‘Uthaymin, two of Saudi Arabia’s most famous scholars.⁷ Seeing himself not as a religious cleric who could challenge the clerics on their 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 jihadist camp. The intended audience was clearly jihadist sympathizers and recruits who were hesitant to join al-Qa`ida without necessary religious legitimation. This is also what concerned al-Suri the most with regard to the negative role played by “the purist Salafists.” 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 by leading Salafist scholars had such resonance among al-Qa`ida’s core recruitment base was that the jihadist movement did not have a well-established and unified ideological foundation separate from the Salafist

school; its ideological character was multifaceted, evolving and open to new influences. In al-Suri’s analysis, the jihadist current’s ideology derived from a variety of sources. It was “a mixture of jihadist Qutbist organizational ideology, the Salafist creed and the Wahhabite call.”⁸ While Qutbism had been dominant until the 1980s, doctrinal Salafism and Wahhabite theology had begun to make an impact during Arab participation in the Afghan liberation war during the 1980s. Its influence on the jihadist current has grown ever since.⁹

Salafism as a Source of Internal Discord and Conflict

Abu Mus`ab al-Suri witnessed with unease the growing influence of Salafist hard line ideologues in al-Qa`ida. Historically, doctrinal disputes within

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the Sunni faith had bred “partisan fanaticism” and caused “bloodshed, conspiracies and internecine fighting” on a grand scale.¹⁰ While these schismatic battles were somewhat contained during the anti-colonialist struggles in the 18th and 19th centuries, they had now reemerged with full force, according to al-Suri, due to the growing power of the “Salafist trend.”¹¹ Al-Suri depicted the Salafists as the most conflict prone of all. He said that they are a sect at war with “nearly every other revivalist school.”¹² Al-Suri considered the Salafists as a liability and would rather be without them and their doctrinal feuds. That is

unfortunately not an option, however, because, as al-Suri pointed out, “most of the jihadists chose the Salafist doctrine, jurisprudence and program”; in this way, “the problem came to us, eventually.”¹³

Al-Suri viewed the various conflicts emanating from the disputes over Salafist doctrine as a significant security hazard for the jihadist 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...¹⁴

Furthermore, the arrogant exclusiveness propagated by Salafist doctrinarians has led to the inability of the jihadist current to form alliances and cooperative relationships with other Islamic militants.¹⁵ The Salafist presence in the jihadist current created in reality an incompatibility of strategic proportion since “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 were to succeed.¹⁶

Al-Suri also found that the Salafists shared the responsibility for the spread of *takfiri* (excommunication) ideas and practices within the jihadist current. He repeatedly refuted the notion that the mainstream jihadist ideology “has merged with *takfirism*,” as is often argued by jihadist opponents, but he did concede that hard line Salafist interpretations and practices “led in turn to a narrowing of the margin between the jihadists and the *takfirist* trend,” a weakness which has been amply exploited by the enemy.¹⁷ Since the rise of modern political Islamism in the first half of the 20th century, the issue of *takfir* has probably been the most

6 Brynjar Lia, “Al-Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet Infrastructure,” *Jane’s Intelligence Online*, January 2006.

7 `Umar `Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus`ab al-Suri), *The Testimony of the Leaders of the Mujahidin 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 Usama 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* (Arabic) (Kabul: The Ghuraba Center for Islamic Studies and Media, January 31, 2001).

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

9 True to his pedagogical, tutorial style of writing, al-Suri summed up the basic components and elements of the jihadist current in this neat mathematical equation: “Some basic elements from the Muslim Brotherhood ideology + The organizational 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 organizational program for the jihadist current.” Ibid., p. 698.

10 Ibid., p. 1060.

11 Ibid., p. 1060.

12 Ibid., p. 1060.

13 Ibid., p. 1060.

14 Ibid., p. 1060.

15 Ibid., p. 846.

16 Ibid., p. 846.

17 Ibid., p. 842.

divisive one of all. Therefore, al-Suri's criticism here is quite significant.

Hard Line Salafists in London and Afghanistan

The adoption of hard line Salafist positions by leading jihadists led to several important leadership schisms. In the mid-1990s, a serious conflict erupted between Abu Mus`ab al-Suri and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who were then the two main ideologues behind the *al-Ansar Newsletter* in London, the mouthpiece of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria and probably the most prominent jihadist journal at that time. Al-Suri was gradually estranged because Abu Qatada's hard line Salafist supporters gained control over the GIA media unit. He later recalled in his memoirs how people like him were denounced as politicians and even heretics by the Salafists:

In their eyes, we were only activists (*harakiyyun*), who theorized in politics. We were not clean of the Muslim Brotherhood virus, despite the fact that we were among the jihadists. We did not understand the issues of Islamic doctrine!!¹⁸

The clash between military jihadist pragmatists and hard line Salafists was also manifest in Afghanistan, the main playing field for the jihadists since the late 1980s.¹⁹ There were significant differences in religious observance and practices between the Arab volunteer fighters, many of whom were observant Salafists, and the Afghan resistance, who by and large observed the Hanafi school and were tolerant of Sufi shrines and other practices that Salafists regarded as godless "innovation" 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 Taliban's seizure of power in 1996 until its downfall in late 2001.

Hence, a significant segment of the Arab-Afghan community in Afghanistan mistrusted the Taliban on purely religious grounds, which came on top of their outspoken contempt for Afghanistan's general backwardness

and primitiveness. The Arab-Afghans soon became embroiled in tense ideological disputes over whether the Taliban regime should be considered an Islamic emirate, for which it would make it worth fighting and to which emigration was obligatory. Many Arab militants who had moved to Afghanistan simply considered the Taliban regime just another temporary safe haven from which they might train their members and reorganize their forces in preparation for an armed campaign in their home countries. For them, the Taliban regime could never become a starting point for the coming Islamic caliphate. Therefore, fighting alongside the Taliban against the Northern Alliance was not a religious duty. Among the hard line Salafists in the Arab-Afghan community, the criticism of the Taliban went much further. They argued that it was utterly impermissible to fight alongside the Taliban regime because it meant fighting under an infidel banner.

In his books, al-Suri wrote at length describing the destructive role played by the Salafist hardliners in Afghanistan. The Salafists' contempt for the Taliban and other non-Salafist 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-jihadists. He told me in one of our conversations that "jihad must be under the Salafist banner; its leadership, program and religious rulings must also be Salafist...If we should accept that non-Salafists 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 are going to participate in jihad with our brethren in religion and faith if we should deal with them as a herd of cows...!²⁰

Obviously, such contemptuous attitudes opened up serious cleavages in the Arab-Afghan diaspora regarding the future course of action, especially with

regard to their position on the Taliban.

In Afghanistan, al-Suri became known as one of the Taliban's most faithful defenders against the Salafists. Al-Suri had always displayed pragmatism and leniency vis-à-vis non-adherence to the strict Salafist code of conduct as long as the zeal and determination to fight a jihad was beyond doubt. He found this among the Taliban.²¹

Conclusion

Al-Suri's critique of the Salafists in the jihadist current has highlighted interesting ideological cleavages inside al-Qa`ida and contemporary jihadism, which often tend to be overlooked since most jihadist writers avoid the topic or phrase it in such obfuscated language that it becomes unintelligible to outsiders.

There is little doubt that doctrinaire Salafist influences have profoundly altered the ideological character of the jihadist current since the early 1990s, following decades of Qutbist dominance in militant Islamic rhetoric. The rise of Salafist discourses and doctrines has in many ways reduced the political content in contemporary jihadist 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 Salafists is their exclusiveness and eagerness to engage in side battles with "deviancy" and "un-Islamic sects." By the very presence of these ideological elements at the heart of the jihadist current, this global insurgent movement is bound to have limited popular appeal and is destined to remain what Abu Mus`ab al-Suri did not want it to become, namely "elitist," "marginal" and doomed to failure.

Dr. Brynjar Lia is a Research Professor at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI) where he currently

²¹ Due to his conflict with Bin Ladin, he could obviously not afford to also 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-Qa`ida, and that instead he now served as media adviser for the Taliban. Personal interview, Abdel Bari Atwan, London, April 28, 2006.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹ This section draws heavily on Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, pp. 239-245.

²⁰ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, pp. 844-45.

heads FFI's research on international terrorism and radical Islamism. Trained in Arabic, Russian and Middle Eastern studies, he obtained his Ph.D. in contemporary Middle Eastern history at the University of Oslo. He was a Visiting Fulbright Scholar at Harvard University from 2001-02. Dr. Lia is the author of The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt 1928-42, Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism: Patterns and Predictions, A Police Force without a State: A History of the Palestinian Security Forces in the West Bank and Gaza and Building Arafat's Police: The Politics of International Police Assistance in the Palestinian Territories After the Oslo Agreement. His most recent book is Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qa`ida Strategist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri.