



## **Al-Qaeda's Dissident Voices**

### **CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam December 4, 2007**

Among al Qaeda theorists and scholars, the Syrian born Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri stands out for his willingness to criticize both the jihadi movement and its leading figures, including Usama bin Laden. His prolific work highlights the often overlooked, yet numerous debates inside al Qaeda and the broader jihadi movement over tactics and strategy to pursue *jihad*. This schism was analyzed by Dr. Brynjar Lia, research professor at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI), on December 4, 2007 as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam. Lia, author of *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (Columbia University Press, 2007), presented the ideas of one of the dissident voices in the movement and leading Jihadist scholar Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar, also known as Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri.

Al-Suri has been accused of masterminding the March 2004 Madrid bombings and inspiring the London bombings in July 2005. He was heavily influenced by the failed Islamist uprising in his native Syria in the early eighties. This experience, in part, shaped his focus on military pragmatism which was often at odds with the more puritanical religious oriented doctrine of Saudi theoreticians. His focus, and main contribution to jihadi literature, was on how to wage a more effective military struggle and jihad. Al-Suri was a prolific writer on the subject. His most influential work, *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, is 1,600 pages of analysis and commentary on the jihadi movement. His work is revolutionary as it offers a glimpse into the schisms and divisions within the movement and is noteworthy for its self-criticism.

In his writings Al-Suri called for a decentralized model of jihad, in which local insurgents are merely inspired by the leadership, but not directed by it. He perceived jihad as directed by al Qaeda as an elitist movement and sought to transform it into a mass struggle. He believed that individual terrorists on a local level were crucial. His preference for decentralized jihadi units, and criticism of Bin Laden and the Saudi leadership of al Qaeda, led to tension within the broad movement and intense debate.

As early as the late 1980s these divisions over tactics and objectives became apparent. By the late 1990s the two most divisive issues in al Qaeda had become its relation with the Taliban and whether to attack the United States. Many opposed the latter idea because they felt unprepared to attack the United States and that such an act would inflict a heavy burden on Muslims. Al-Suri saw Afghanistan as a training base for global jihad, and potentially also as a seed for an expanding Islamic state. He believed that al Qaeda was rushing into battle with the United States unprepared and jeopardizing what it had achieved in Afghanistan. According to Lia, a majority of the Shura Council of al

Qaeda, or its religious advisory council, opposed the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001. Though he was critical, Al-Suri did concede that the September 11 attacks had a positive affect in that it mobilized Muslims around the world.

While Al-Suri condemned Bin Laden and his allies for creating elitist jihadi cells that ignored the need to integrate the *ummah* or the wider Muslim community, he was also critical of Bin Laden's leadership style. He argued that al Qaeda's use of violence was a marketing strategy rather than an attempt to achieve specific military goals. The animosity was often deep, and he suspected that Bin Laden and the other Saudis would return to Saudi Arabia where they would be sheltered by the regime, whereas the other Arab fighters had no option for returning home.

The debates highlighted by Lia continue to divide the jihadi movement and al Qaeda. One of the most divisive issues is the movement's attitude towards the Shia group Hizbullah. Committed Salafists see the Shia as heretics, yet more practical jihadis like Al-Suri, believe Hizbullah has been an effective military organization and a potential ally.