
Since the 1990s, the Syrian Muṣṭafā al-Sitt Mariam (b. 1958), or, as he is more commonly known, Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Sūrī, has become one of the most important intellectuals of the jihādī movement in general and al-Qā‘ida in particular. Although he was arrested in Pakistan in October 2005 and has remained in US custody in an unknown location ever since, his writings have spread among Jihadists and their sympathizers worldwide. He has never been a religious leader, but rather a strategist and it is in this field that he has primarily influenced the Jihadist movement. From the first half of the 1990s, he demanded an organisational and strategic re-orientation towards a leaderless jihād. “Nizām lā Tanzīm” (system not organisation) became his most famous slogan, mirroring his demand for a more decentralised resistance against the West and its allies. According to his view, Jihadist organisations like al-Qā‘ida represented only a phase in the development of this conflict. Traditional organisations with their hierarchical structures and networked build-ups were too easy to disrupt. Sūrī pleaded for a jihād led by small independent groups which would follow a common ideology and strategy and would only later—after the enemy had already been severely weakened—cooperate to grow to mass movements and achieve their aims.

Sūrī laid out his thoughts in numerous writings, the most important of which has become “The Global Islamic Resistance Call” (Da‘wat al-Muqāwama al-Islāmiyya al-‘Ālamīyya), a voluminous study of 1600 pages, which has become popular on the jihādī internet and which is translated in excerpts in Lia’s book (pp. 347-484). Interest in Sūrī’s ideas has steadily grown in recent years because his theories seem to have been adopted by a growing number of Jihadist cells and groups especially in Europe. Since 2003, it has been ever harder for European security services to establish the exact nature of contacts between these cells and larger organisations like al-Qā‘ida and others. Although these contacts have existed in most cases, there is a clearly discernible trend towards an independent mode of action. European cells plan, organise and perpetrate their attacks with increasing autonomy. Therefore, Brynjar Lia’s study of Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Sūrī’s life, thought and influence is essential reading for anyone dealing with the history and the current developments of Jihadism.

Lia is an Islamicist and a Middle East historian and research professor at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI). In this first academic biography of a major jihādī thinker, Lia chronologically recounts Sūrī’s career from his early years as a member of the militant Combatant Vanguard (al-Ṭalī‘a al-Muqātila) in Syria and his first stay in Afghanistan after 1987. During the 1990s, Sūrī spent most of his time in Spain and Britain, supporting the Algerian GIA through the publication of its Anṣār newsletter. In 1997, Sūrī again headed for Afghanistan where he worked as a propagandist, media adviser and trainer for the Taliban and al-Qā‘ida. In early 2002, Sūrī fled to Pakistan where he was later arrested. By analysing Sūrī’s numerous writings
on the experiences of Jihadists in Syria, Algeria and Afghanistan, Lia gives a fascinating insight of a Syrian jihādī developing the notion of a global jihād in which national struggles like the ones in Algeria and Syria nevertheless play an important role.

Lia stresses Sūrī’s uniqueness as a jihādī intellectual by comparing him to what he describes as the “doctrinaire ideologues” and charismatic “religious figures” like the notorious Abū Qutāda al-Filasṭīnī and Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī. He differed from them insofar as he was an ardent and relentless critic of his movement, a “born-critic”, as a former Libyan Jihadist described him. Sūrī insisted that Jihadist violence had to be based “on a thorough, rational long-term strategy” and complained that most Jihadist organisations and their religious ideologists lacked exactly this. His outspokenness inevitably provoked conflicts. Most importantly, in 1998, Sūrī bitterly criticised Usama Bin Laden for threatening the relations between the Taliban and their Arab guests by not coordinating his media activities and terrorist attacks with his hosts. In general, although he might be considered an al-Qāʿida member, Sūrī was closer to the Taliban than to Bin Laden’s organisation.

The book is an outstanding contribution to the study of Islamist thought. However, questions remain with regard to Sūrī’s influence. Lia himself discusses this issue at length, coming to the conclusion that although he should not be overestimated, Sūrī seems to have had considerable influence on Jihadist thinking in recent years. He admits, though, that his outreach is limited by the fact that throughout his career, he was lacking an identifiable group of supporters. Most importantly, organisations like Bin Laden’s al-Qāʿida or Abū Musʿab al-Zarqāwī’s Tawḥīd wa-l-Jihād had their own ideologists. For them, Sūrī did not qualify as a strategist because his independent critical mind was hardly compatible with these groups’ demand for strict loyalty and obedience. Furthermore, Sūrī did not belong to any of the major regional groupings who make up the jihādī movement. He was and remains prominent among Syrian Jihadists, but these always constituted a small minority among Arabs in Afghanistan and within al-Qāʿida. Furthermore, many Syrians were drawn into Zarqāwī’s organisation, where Sūrī’s influence seems to have been very low. Thus, Sūrī has rather established himself as the strategist of those who operate outside the powerful and well-established Jihadist organisations in the Middle East and South Asia. In this context, it is striking that his theories of “leaderless jihād” seem to have been put into practice—although in a still rudimentary manner—in Europe, where terrorist activity has been less controlled by the big organisations than elsewhere.

The question as to the extent of Sūrī’s influence will remain important for some time to come. It addresses the core question whether Jihadist terrorism should rather be regarded as an essentially “leaderless” phenomenon, where mutually unconnected cells and groups are responsible for most terrorist activity or whether Jihadist organisations like al-Qāʿida and al-Qāʿida in Iraq still play a dominating role. For the time being, these organisations seem to have preserved their importance, as effective Jihadist activity even in Europe still depends on organisational backup. Nevertheless, the trend towards independent action exists, although it is still a European much more than a Middle Eastern phenomenon. When looking back in the future, Sūrī might