

*by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"Al Qaida is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be. It is a call, a reference, a methodology."

So wrote in 2000 a Syrian jihadist named Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, whose nom de guerre is Abu Musab al-Suri. A former member of Osama bin Laden's inner circle, the stocky, red-haired Suri, 48, is a terrorist-intellectual. He hasn't been heard from since November 2005, when he reportedly was captured by Pakistani security forces. His whereabouts are unknown, though sources have told news organizations he is in U.S. custody.

More than anyone else on either side of the war on terrorism, Suri seems to have grasped the elusive nature of al-Qaida. Intelligence agencies have known about al-Qaida almost since bin Laden founded it in the late 1980s to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bin Laden and al-Qaida have been Terrorism Enemy No. 1 in the United States for more than a decade. But the nature of al-Qaida remains a subject of intense debate.

That became abundantly clear in the past week with the release of two separate assessments of al-Qaida, Arabic for "The Base." The first, written by the National Counterterrorism Center, argued that al-Qaida has recovered from the damage done to it in the aftermath of 9/11 and now is better positioned to strike the West. The second report, a National Intelligence Estimate that represents the consensus of U.S. spy agencies, said that al-Qaida is regrouping in a new safe haven in Pakistan's Waziristan region. The NIE said further that al-Qaida's links to the Sunni insurgent group calling itself al-Qaida in Iraq had helped "energize" recruitment and organization.

But how exactly is AQ-Central linked to AQ-Iraq? Words like "affiliate" and "subsidiary" and "franchise" are used, as if al-Qaida were McDonald's or the News Corp. It may be, as journalist Lawrence Wright writes in "The Looming Tower," his Pulitzer Prize-winning history of al-Qaida, that in the early days bin Laden organized the group along classic business lines (including regular work schedules and paid vacation), but things have changed.

Indeed, in an article in *The New Yorker* last year, Wright argued that bin Laden and his No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, were unhappy when the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi appropriated their trademark for his gang of Sunni thugs in Iraq. Though Zarqawi had an al-Qaida pedigree, he spurned al-Qaida discipline, turning his wrath on Iraqi Shiites as well as U.S. troops. "Why were there attacks on ordinary Shia?" Zawahiri asked him in a letter in July 2005.

But, as Wright notes, in the same letter Zawahiri asked Zarqawi for \$100,000, the "affiliate" having soaked up support that used to go to the central office.

Zarqawi was hurting al-Qaida Central in three ways: Turning pure jihadists into common thugs; diverting funds and hurting al-Qaida's standing among Shiites, thus endangering the ultimate goal of a pan-Islamic caliphate. Thus, Wright speculates, bin Laden and Zawahiri probably celebrated when Zarqawi was killed by U.S. forces in June of last year.

Al-Qaida's goals had most effectively been outlined by Abu Musab al-Suri, the redheaded theorist now said to be in U.S. custody. His model was local cells of no more than 10 members, operating autonomously in different countries, linked only by the common goal of bringing "about the largest number of human and material casualties possible for America and its allies."

President George W. Bush consistently has spoken of al-Qaida as a monolithic, centralized organization. It is not that, but because of the U.S. war in Iraq, it now is doubly dangerous. There is the ideologically pure al-Qaida Central, which directly threatens the West, and the thuggish al-Qaida Iraq, which threatens a broader conflagration in the Islamic world that will rebound upon the West.

Politically motivated declarations cannot stop that. Better diplomacy and greater understanding may.

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