

# Strategic Studies in Jihadist Literature

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## Introduction

On Thursday 11 March 2004, just a few hours after the Madrid bombings, my colleague and boss Brynjar Lia came into my office and said “Thomas, I read this text a few months ago, it talks about attacking Spain. Why don’t we take a closer look at it?” He gave me a copy and I sat down to read it. I almost spilt my coffee when I came across the following passage:

Therefore we say that in order to force the Spanish government to withdraw from Iraq the resistance should deal painful blows to its forces. [...] It is necessary to make utmost use of the upcoming general election in Spain in March next year.

Of course the general elections in Spain were only three days away, and we all know what happened.

The text that Brynjar Lia had found had been posted on a website called *Global Islamic Media* in mid-December 2003. The 42 page document was entitled *Jihadi Iraq: Hopes and Risks* and dealt with the question of how to bring about the withdrawal of Western military forces from Iraq. The central argument was that the only thing that would make the U.S. leave Iraq was the financial burden of occupation. The best way to increase the financial burden on America, the paper argued, was to make her allies leave the coalition. Therefore it was necessary to identify the weakest link in the chain, i.e. the country that was most likely to withdraw if hit by attacks. The document proceeded to an in-depth analysis of the domestic political situation in Britain, Spain and Poland, and concluded that Spain was the weakest link.

It was impossible to determine where the document came from or by whom it was written. However, the big question on everyone’s mind was: Could the document somehow be linked to the attacks? More specifically: Had the bombers read – or possibly even written – the text? Of course the media jumped to this conclusion, describing it as a “blueprint” for the bombings. However, there was, strictly speaking, no clear evidence that the bombers themselves had known of the document. Moreover the document focused on Iraq and only recommended strikes on Spanish *forces*, not civilian targets. Basically the only people who could answer our question were the Spanish investigators. For a long time, we followed the media coverage of the investigation, hoping to find indications of a link. Unfortunately, our question was never answered - until about one month ago. But I am not going to give you the answer until the end of my talk.

The reason I’m bringing up this document is not just this curious link to the Madrid bombings. The main reason is that this text is a prime example of a very important and

long overlooked genre in the radical Islamist literature, namely “jihadi strategic studies”. My colleague Brynjar Lia and I wrote an article two years ago in which we used the Madrid document to show that radical Islamists were producing texts that were strikingly similar to Western academic works in the International Relations sub-discipline known as “strategic studies”.

I want to talk to you about this genre here today, because in my view its relevance is increasing, not least because it is being used in the fight against the U.S. in Iraq. I will start by explaining what is so special about this genre, and then I will reflect on where it comes from and why it emerged only recently. I will then give a few illustrations of major themes in this genre, before identifying some of the implications of this development from a counterterrorism perspective.

### **Defining Jihadi Strategic Studies**

So what exactly is “jihadi strategic studies”? Well, this genre differs from other types of texts in the radical Islamist literature in that it seeks to answer the question of “*how jihad?*” as opposed to “*why jihad?*”. Most other texts, including, for example, all of Bin Ladin’s statements, are written for the purpose of exhortation and mobilisation. They use carefully constructed religious and political rhetoric to convince people *why* they should fight. Strategic studies, on the other hand, take the readership’s conviction as a given, and focus on *how* the struggle should be conducted, from a primarily functional point of view.

Texts in this genre have two defining features. First, they are practically *secular* in tone. They may evoke Quranic citations in the introduction, but such references are almost a form of lip service before they start dealing with the substance in very straightforward terms. If random readers were shown parts of these texts they would not be able to tell that they were written by radical Islamists.

The second main characteristic is that they are *scientific* - or rather pseudo-scientific - in their approach. Arguments are rationally constructed and organised. The overall structure is often analytically rigorous; they proceed from the general to the specific and separate between the social, political, economic and military dimensions of the issues at hand. The best of these texts are akin to academic articles: they formulate a research question, articulate hypotheses, examine the empirical evidence, summarise findings and draw concrete and applicable lessons. They do not dismiss information from Western media, academia or governments as propaganda; instead they use them extensively as sources for their analysis. The two fundamental creeds that run through these texts are “know thy enemy” and “know thyself”. That is why most of these texts are much more objective and honest about U.S. superiority and the jihadists’ weaknesses than the rest of the literature.

### **Origins**

Is this really a new way of thinking in jihadist communities? If so, where does it come from and why did it develop at this particular time?

Of course, all militant Islamist groups have always thought about strategy. It would be wrong to suggest, as many people unfortunately do, that radical Islamist groups are

driven only by religion and so their violence is unpredictable, nihilistic or apocalyptic. Under the surface of the religious rhetoric of Islamist groups there is always a political core, be it struggle for state power, for liberation of territory or against Western imperialism. So behind the facade of the “Muslim rage”, Islamist groups have always calmly debated politics and strategy in closed circles.

That is also why one finds strategic thinking in the jihadist literature from the late 1970s onwards. For example, in the booklet “the Neglected Duty”, dated 1981, the Egyptian militant Muhammad Faraj distinguishes between the far enemy and the near enemy and explains why it is better to fight the latter first. In the jihadist magazines published in Peshawar during the 1980s, there are many articles about strategic and military aspects of the Afghan jihad. Abdallah Azzam also wrote about strategy, notably on the need to establish a territorial base rather than dream about a coup d’état in Arab police states. The Egyptian ideologue Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz wrote a 350 page book in the late 1980s called the “Pillar of Military Preparation”, in which he argued that training camps were key to building a jihadist movement.

One could argue that the strategic studies genre is not new, that it is simply the Internet that has brought it out into the open. This is true, but only to a certain extent. In fact the real growth in the number of strategic studies came only after 9/11, when the Internet had already been in existence for many years. My view is that the appearance of these texts may also be the result of the *detritorialisation of al-Qaida* post-9/11. When the global jihadists lost their physical meeting place in Afghanistan, they turned to the Internet for socialisation and debate. I would also argue that the *2003 invasion of Iraq* stimulated the further development of this genre, because it created a consensus in the global jihadist community and offered a focal point for the strategic debates.

### **Major themes**

So what are these strategic studies saying? What kind of issues do they deal with and which solutions do they offer? It is difficult to give a short answer, because in my view, each individual strategic study merits being outlined and explained in detail. I will content myself with presenting three pioneering figures in the strategic studies literature: *Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi*, *Yusuf al-Ayiri* and *Abu Mus’ab al-Suri*.

*Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi* is the alias of the anonymous author of numerous articles in the jihadist magazine *Majallat al-Ansar*, which was published on a bimonthly basis in 2002 and 2003. Al Qurashi had a regular column called “*dirasat stratijiyya*” (Strategic Studies) in which he followed the evolution of the global confrontation between the U.S. and al-Qaida, with a particular focus on the war in Afghanistan. Al-Qurashi cited extensively from Western media and borrowed terminology from Western academic literature. He used concepts such as asymmetric conflict and fourth generation warfare. He cited Clausewitz to argue that al-Qaida’s decentralized structure diffused the movement’s centre of gravity. He analysed U.S. warfare doctrines, U.S. fears of weapons of mass destruction, as well as the impact of the 9/11 attacks. He and his colleagues in *Majallat al-Ansar* wrote “lessons learned” from specific operations and events such as the hostage taking at the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow. After the sniper attacks in the

Washington area in October 2003, they wrote extensively on the use of sniper operations in jihad. They also presented a psychological profile of President Bush, all in the interest of “learning to know the secret weaknesses of the enemy.”

While Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi remains anonymous, *Yusuf al-Ayiri*, on the other hand, is a well-known historical figure. He was one of bin Ladin’s key contacts in Saudi Arabia between 1999 and 2003 and was the architect behind the terrorism campaign which was launched there in May 2003. He also supervised the website *al-Nida’*, which for a while after 9/11 was considered the main mouthpiece of al-Qaida. By the time he was killed by Saudi police in late May 2003, he had written a number of books and articles which had become standard works in the strategic studies corpus. In fact, the author of the Madrid document dedicates his work to al-Ayiri, and highlights one of al-Ayiri’s books as essential and compulsory reading. Yusuf al-Ayiri’s writings focused on the U.S. military presence in the Gulf, its history and rationale, and he paid particular attention to the economic dimension of the war with the Crusaders. He had a sober view of the motivation behind the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, describing it as triple: part ideology, part concern for Israel, and part economic interests. Before the invasion, he drew up scenarios for the various strategies the U.S. military might adopt. In April 2003, he wrote a 70 page book called “the Future of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula after the fall of Baghdad”, in which he was cautiously optimistic, but foresaw a conflict of interests between Sunnis and Shiites.

The third strategic thinker I’d like to mention is *Abu Musab al-Suri*, the Syrian lifetime jihadist who was recently captured in Pakistan. There is a lot to say about Abu Musab al-Suri; so much so that my colleague Brynjar Lia has written a book-length biography of him that is due to be published by Hurst later this year. Al-Suri has a long and international jihadist career: he joined an underground organisation in Syria in 1980, fought in the first Afghanistan war, lived in Spain for years, and frequented the Islamist scene in London in the mid-1990s before moving to Afghanistan in 1997. In late 2001 he disappeared, only to resurface in late 2004 to announce the publication of his masterpiece: the 1600 page *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*. This colossal work has two major components. The first is a critical review of the recent history of the jihadist movement, in which he identifies weaknesses and mistakes not to be repeated. The second is a thorough and highly theoretical strategic assessment of the struggle between the global jihadists and the West. One of al-Suri’s main findings is that the U.S. domination of airspace and the international cooperation on antiterrorism post 9/11 have made it impossible for jihadists to hold territory and run organisations in the traditional sense; therefore they must opt for a decentralised and deterritorialised mode of organisation.

### **Implications**

What are the implications of all this? At first sight, these texts are quite frightening in their calculating and analytic approach. In fact, from a counterterrorism perspective, the strategic studies genre provides both opportunities and challenges. I’ll start with the positive side, where I see at least three opportunities.

First of all, the existence of this genre allows us to *observe* at least a segment of the ongoing strategic debate, which in the past took place in very closed circles. By closely monitoring and analysing the jihadist literature on the Internet, we can spot developments early and tailor our response accordingly. This requires considerable investment on the analysis side of intelligence. The problem is that this kind of analysis is extremely knowledge-intensive – excellent Arabic is far from enough; a solid understanding of Islamic culture and the history of radical Islamism are also necessary.

The second advantage is that by becoming more scientific and objective, the strategic studies genre also becomes more rational and predictable. One could say that they are using our own weapons against us, but at least we know these weapons.

The third point is that by taking place in the open, the strategic debate is vulnerable to saturation and interference. One clear and sophisticated strategic study is an advantage, but ten studies proposing different strategies is a liability. In the ocean of online jihadist literature, the key to influence is *credibility* – just as it is in our media or consumer markets. However, most of these strategic studies are written anonymously, which makes it difficult for individual texts to gain authority. There is considerable scope here for so-called information operations.

However, the strategic studies genre also has a number of dangerous implications, which I fear outweigh those that are positive.

First of all, it allows for a decentralisation of strategic planning efforts. It means that any bright mind anywhere can participate in a global brainstorming and pooling of intellectual resources. As a result, one could say that the brain of the global jihadist movement is neither in Afghanistan nor in Iraq: it is everywhere. One consequence is that it becomes more difficult to “sever the head from the body” (by arresting key members). Another aspect is that one might come across a multitude of different strategies, each of which is specifically adapted and tailored to the local context in which it is implemented.

Second, it means that the organisational link between the planners and the operatives might be very weak, or even non-existent. A strategy proposed in one corner of the world might be implemented in another by people who are completely independent.

Third, the analytical sophistication of these texts means that some militant groups might be able to increase the political and economic impact of their attacks. Strategic thinkers with a good understanding of our societies and of post-modern warfare might be able to find weak spots that “traditional” terrorist planners did not see. It is possible to argue, as I previously have done, that the rationality in these analyses will be closer to our own and thus more predictable than “traditional” targeting logics, which are driven more by symbolism and opportunity. However, the problem is that strategic targeting does not supplant other targeting approaches, it simply adds to them. So the situation has moved from one where there was mainly symbolic targeting, to a situation where both symbolic *and* strategic targeting exists. This makes life a lot more complicated for intelligence analysts and counterterrorism planners.

The crucial factor in all of this is of course the Internet. Without the Internet, there would be much less scope for strategic debate, no cheap and safe distribution channel for strategic texts, and fewer ways for terrorists quietly to study our societies. The Internet has become an incredibly important dimension of contemporary radical Islamism. To use strategic studies terminology, one could say the Internet now constitutes the “centre of gravity” of the global jihadist movement. Right now there is an ongoing technological tug-of-war between state actors and militants over control of the virtual sanctuaries and communication channels on the Internet. And it is not at all clear who is winning.

### **Conclusion**

So: Did the Madrid bombers know about the document I spoke of at the beginning? The answer is yes. On 10 April this year the Spanish authorities released the indictment of the surviving perpetrators. It states that the two alleged masterminds - Jamal Ahmidan and Serhane Fakhret – visited the website *Global Islamic Media* extensively between September and December 2003. It is therefore highly likely that the two planners knew and drew inspiration from the document “Jihadi Iraq”. This answers one question – but should raise many concerns.

Thank you for your attention.