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ABHIJNAN REJ



OBSERVER
RESEARCH
FOUNDATION

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ABHIJNAN REJ

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abhijnan Rej is a Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. He works on subjects related to geoeconomics and Indian foreign policy, security and strategic studies, and applied game theory. He obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in mathematics from the University of Connecticut, and carried out his PhD research in mathematical physics at the Max Planck Institute for Mathematics, Bonn. Abhijnan's professional experience since has spanned the academe, the corporate world, and public policy. His latest research, "Games Pakistanis Play," was published as an ORF Occasional Paper in May 2016.

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a look into the life and work of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, jihadist theorist, and argues that he should be considered the architect of the extant Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This is done by way of an examination of his own writings, as well as secondary literature on al-Suri, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. A key point that emerges out of this analysis is that ISIS is likely to continue its two-pronged strategy: of individual attacks offshore, and consolidating territory in Iraq and Syria.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994 a young man of Syrian origin, who had then recently acquired Spanish citizenship, moved with his wife to Neasden, a dreary suburb of London. Neasden is home to immigrants of many nationalities (it has the largest Hindu temple outside of India), so it was not too strange for this young, cash-strapped family to have decided to relocate there from Madrid. The man's wife – a Spanish-born Moreno – explained to her family that they were relocating to London as her husband had found a job there as an editor for a small newspaper. The young family's daily life was not that different from other immigrants' – it was not unheard of in Neasden to be broke and in debt, with a dotting wife doing her best to support her bright, ambitious husband through careful house-holding and not infrequent penny-pinching. The life of the Setmariams could have been out of a Maupassant or a Zola story; except it was not.

Fast-forward to 31 October 2005, when Pakistani security forces stormed an Islamist front in Quetta in Balochistan, and arrested the man from

Neasden as he waited for *iftar* with a colleague. That colleague was killed in the operation. The man – Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar, also known as Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and 47 years old – carried a bounty of five million dollars as announced by the US government. In all likelihood, Pakistan transferred the custody of al-Suri to the US Central Intelligence Agency which, in turn, rendered him to Syria where he remains in prison till date.

Al-Suri impressed almost everyone who met him. Peter Bergen, the first western journalist to have interviewed Osama bin Laden (a meeting facilitated by al-Suri himself) described al-Suri as “intelligent, intense, and well informed and very very serious.” Bergen went on say that he came to “admire his intellect.”¹ The Norwegian counterterrorism expert Brynjar Lia – whose definitive book on al-Suri remains standard reading for counter-Islamist-terrorism analysts – described al-Suri as an autodidact intellectual in the classic mould:

*An avid reader, with an encyclopaedic memory, he impressed acquaintances with his knowledge of literature, classical music, history, politics, and the sciences [...]*²

Another journalist had described al-Suri as “possess(ing) of a romantic streak and surprised friends by doting on his Spanish-born spouse.”³ Physically, wrote an AP reporter, he resembled “an Irish pub patron”.

For counterterrorism experts, al-Suri was notorious: he had been suspected of involvement in a number of terrorist attacks in Europe, including the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings, though these charges were never established mostly because he was not tried for the bombings, in the first place. Whether or not he had a hand in those bombings, what had rattled the Americans and their European counterparts was his role as al-Qaeda's leading strategist, and the extent to which his guidance had influenced that group in general, and Osama bin Laden, in particular. One gauge of his influence is the consistent reference in many academic and popular writings of him as 'architect'. Cruickshank and Hage Ali, for example, write:

*“[...] no other individual has done more to conceptualize al-Qaeda's new strategy after 9/11.”*⁴

Lawrence Wright, meanwhile, identifies theorists like al-Suri as tutors to a “third generation of mujahideens” – as Al-Suri himself calls them – who, after having fought in Iraq – will “add their expertise to the new cells springing up in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and many European nations.”⁵ Jason Burke writes:

*If al-Awlaki was the propagandist who did most to shape today's threat against the West, and al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi are currently the most influential commanders, then al-Suri is the strategist of greatest relevance.*⁶

As Burke indicates, al-Suri's reach – and the efficacy of his strategy – far exceeds al-Qaeda, and could be seen as laying the foundations of the strategy that has been adopted by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Al-Suri's book, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* – key parts of which are excerpted in Lia's book, and is available on the SITE intelligence website⁷ – shows an eerie similarity with the strategic and tactical thinking of ISIS, going beyond al-Suri's original concept of 'individual-terrorism jihad'. Indeed, a close reading of al-Suri as an ISIS strategist has been absent in the discourse around the group – perhaps for the simple reason that in the mental framing of many analysts, al-Suri's name conjures al-Qaeda more than any other group. (A notable exception is a short article in the *Atlantic* published late June this year.)⁸

FATHERS OF MU'SAB

The goal of the present paper is to look at al-Suri's book itself (as a primary source) as well as academic literature on his work, with ISIS's ideology and modus operandi in mind. To better appreciate the intellectual influence of al-Suri on ISIS, a trace must first be made of actual links between the man and the group.

The story of the evolution of ISIS is beyond the scope of this paper; there is no dearth of literature on the subject. It suffices to say that the present-day ISIS evolved out of the rubble of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and was largely driven by one man: Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian criminal-turned-terrorist, was influenced by jihadi ideologue Abdullah Azzam's

sermons enough to travel to Afghanistan for jihad against the Soviets in the early 1980s.⁹ By 2005, al-Zarqawi was at his peak, leading his al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers. But by January 2006, he had amalgamated his group with other Islamist outfits to form the Mujahideen Shura Council of Iraq¹⁰ which, after his death in a US air-strike in June 2006, morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq – the direct precursor of ISIS as the world knows the group today.

Al-Suri and al-Zarqawi's paths first crossed in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. Both controlled semi-independent camps there — al-Suri in Kabul and al-Zarqawi in Herat.¹¹ Both disdained bin Laden, and insisted on greater autonomy, something bin Laden resisted.¹² (This fissure would become full-blown much later. By October 2015, Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, was directly challenging ISIS and the legitimacy of its self-proclaimed Caliph.)¹³ By 2004, the US Central Command in Dubai suspected that al-Suri had joined al-Zarqawi in Iraq, “acting as deputy and mentor”, something al-Suri himself denied.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the links between the two lasted long after the fall of the Taliban: Ameer Azizi, a protégé of al-Suri's, is suspected to have travelled to Iraq to work with al-Zarqawi. The ideological link between the two was cemented by Jordanian/Palestinian cleric, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, al-Zarqawi's “foremost spiritual mentor”¹⁵ and who is considered an influence on al-Suri's own thinking.¹⁶ Al-Maqdisi's student Turki al-Bin'ali, in turn, is now reputed to be a prominent authority in the Islamic state.¹⁷ Finally, long after al-Suri was incarcerated, the first issue of ISIS's flagship publication *Dabiq* indirectly acknowledged al-Suri's influence on the organisation, by attributing al-Suri's strategies to al-Zarqawi.¹⁸

Yet the affinity between the group and the man who influenced it does not end with ideology. As much as one face of al-Suri was that of a theorist, he was capable of great violence himself. Cruickshank and Hage Ali interviewed a former jihadi who knew al-Suri personally. According to this interviewee, al-Suri “personally tracked down and killed individuals” who had deserted his Kabul camp.¹⁹ His exhortation to indiscriminate violence – “Kill wherever and don't make a distinction between men, women and children” – and anti-Shia stance would all find resonance in later ISIS behaviour. Incidentally, as Burke notes, al-Qaeda had invested significantly in reducing *fitna* (discord) between

Muslims and non-Muslims.²⁰ ISIS, al-Zarqawi, as well as al-Suri had no problems with the same – a marked departure from al-Qaeda's stance. This had significant tactical advantages for al-Zarqawi. By opening up the sectarian Shia-Sunni divide, the group had hoped to capitalise on Sunni support. This was also buttressed by growing Shia influence in the post-war Iraq.

A MILITARY THEORY OF 'JIHAD'

Al-Suri's strategic thought was presented, as noted earlier, in his 1,600-page opus. Analysts who have had access to videotapes of his lectures in jihadist camps in Afghanistan have also discerned a few more themes related to that book's overall thrust. When it comes to applicability of his thoughts to ISIS's grand strategy, two key ideas emerge: “Individual-Terrorism Jihad”, and “Open-Front Jihad.” Al-Suri's strategic theory also suggests a way to structure a jihadist organisation that meshes the two into one functional unit. But it is also important to situate al-Suri's programme within the larger context of Islamist resistance.

Syed Qutb : Precursor theorist

Al-Suri started his career as an Islamist extremist under the umbrella of the Syrian Brotherhood. He would eventually have a falling-out with the Brotherhood, as he blamed it for the brutal crackdown under then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in 1982. Ideologically – and methodologically – the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was extremely close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Ikhwan. In fact, al-Suri himself noted that his trainer “pledged allegiance to Sheikh Hassan al Bannah [...] He accompanied Sayyid Qutb [...]”²¹

Al-Banna and Qutb remain prominent ideological figures for both al-Qaeda and ISIS. Jihadi-salafism (commonly referred to as 'jihadism') is a mixture of two strains: the ideology of the Ikhwan, led by al-Banna (whose chief theoretician was Sayyid Qutb), and Wahhabism which promotes a version of Sunni exclusivism.²² Initially these two strains were separate – the Brotherhood Ikhwan “not implacably hostile” towards Shi'ism²³ – but under the ideological influence of the theoretician Qutb – groups (which would serve

as forerunners to al-Qaeda and ISIS) arose in the Arab Middle East that were influenced by both.²⁴ Lia notes:

*He studied the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Abdallah Azam, both of whom had significant influence on his subsequent development as a jihadi theorist. [emphasis added]*²⁵

It is therefore important to situate al-Suri's thinking within that of Qutb's – a full-length work in itself. But even a cursory reading shows continuity and congruence between the two men's thinking.

Sayyid Qutb's formative years, 1919 to 1952, included a stay in the United States that was to prove extremely significant in his subsequent radicalisation in prison for almost a decade. The latter was for opposing Nasser and his conception of the Egyptian state – it was in 1952, the year Nasser assumed office, that Qutb developed the fundamental concept of *jahilyya*.²⁶ This concept is expansive in nature. Qutb himself defined it – in his influential work, *Milestones*, for which he was ultimately executed by Nasser²⁷ – as:

*Jahilyyah [...] is one man's lordship over another, and in this respect it is against the system of the universe and brings the involuntary aspect of human life into conflict with its voluntary aspects.*²⁸

Jahilyyah can be understood as being in a state of ignorance about the need to surrender to God (the literal meaning of the word “Islam.”) This included the Western political-social order, as well as the pre-Islamic pagan society of which Qutb found Nasser's Egypt to be an example.²⁹ Qutb and his followers saw Islam as a “complete and total system” which had no need for influence from the outside.³⁰

Qutb's call was to create a group which would “separate itself from jahili society,” and resist it from the outside.³¹ This would be the central purpose of jihad. But jihad was to be, for Qutb and other Islamists after him, more than the “defence of the 'homeland of Islam'” in a geographical sense of the term.³² The geographical 'homeland of Islam' was merely a nerve-centre for the entire faith; the correct interpretation of the phrase 'defence of the Islamic homeland' was the “defence of the Islamic beliefs, the Islamic way of life, and the Islamic community.” Ultimately, it was jihad as resistance to obtain “the

freedom of man from the servitude to other men” – one of the characteristic features of *jahili* societies – that was to influence later jihadi-theorists in a marked way, al-Suri included. Such servitude would, by definition, put some individuals above others. These individuals would include lawmakers and other secular authorities, according to Qutb and other theorists. The goal of the Islamist resistance project would be to oppose these individuals as disbelievers. Al-Suri writes:

*There is very clear evidence, in the Qur'an and the Sunna, of the faithlessness of those who have given themselves the right to legislate laws in what is forbidden and permissible, and to change the laws, and to confront the sovereignty of God, to become worshipped gods.*³³

Like Qutb before him, al-Suri saw the fall of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924 as a watershed for political Islam – leading to the “catastrophe”³⁴ of a splintered Islamic state. Reversing this splintering would prove to be a major cause for him and for ISIS.

“System Not Organization”

The first, and perhaps most important, element of al-Suri's thinking is that of jihad through Nizam la Tanzim – “System Not Organization.” In his book, al-Suri described his vision of al-Qaeda:

*Al-Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be [...] It is a call, a reference, a methodology.*³⁵

The etymology of the word 'al-Qaeda' helps us understand this statement to some extent. *Al-Qaeda-al-sulbah* “can also mean a precept, rule, principle, maxim, model, or pattern,”³⁶ other than the commonly-used meaning of “the base” (interpreted in a physical-geographical sense). To understand the strategic import of the statement is to – like al-Suri himself – appreciate that regional-secret-hierarchical *tanzims* did not fare well post the end of the Cold War and till right after the fall of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. Al-Suri writes:

Throughout the last decade of the 20th century, programs for fighting terrorism were able to disband those organizations security-wise,

*militarily defeat them, isolate them from their masses [of followers], damage their reputation, dry out their financial resources, make their elements homeless, and put them in a constant state of fear, starvation, and lack of funds and people.*³⁷

Not all of this was due to western agencies alone. One other factor was the changing geopolitics of the world following the end of the Cold War. As al-Suri explains, when the world was bipolar, one organisation that was proscribed under one pole could find shelter with another.³⁸ A case in point is the Afghan jihad of the 1980s which was supported by the United States. But local governments were also to be blamed for the fall of the secret-hierarchical *tanzims*.

For example, Al-Suri blames Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt for putting “an end to all the jihadi organizations in Egypt, one after the other.”³⁹ Why – according to al-Suri – was this the case? In a lecture in 2000 at the Al Ghuraba training camp in Afghanistan for new al-Qaeda recruits, al-Suri drew the following diagram depicting the structure of these failed *tanzims* (modified by this author from a sketch in Cruickshank and Hage Ali⁴⁰).

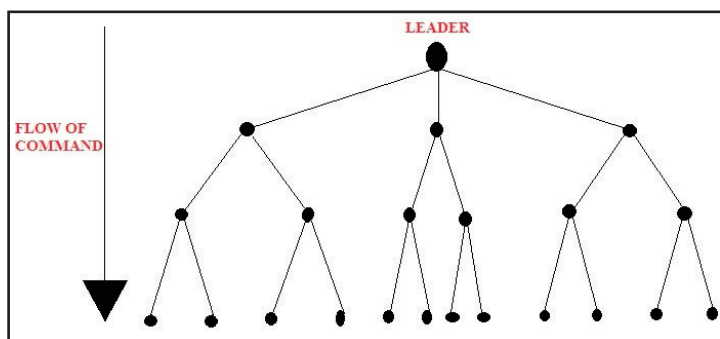


Figure 1: A Schematic Description of a Hierarchical Centralised Structure

In this structure – as depicted in figure 1 – if any one individual (nodes) is arrested or otherwise compromised, the whole network – which is hierarchical, top-down, and centralised – would be compromised. As al-Suri noted: “In case you are caught, they are all caught.”⁴¹ But beyond this tradecraft consideration laid al-Suri's deep distrust of centralisation of command – which had manifested in his not-infrequent run-ins with bin

Laden. The goal of resistance through individual terrorism is not a struggle of the elite, al-Suri wrote.⁴² He explained:

*The Call is to convey the idea in succinct and detailed ways in order to enable the youth, who are determined to fight a jihad, to enter this call and form their own Units independently.*⁴³

What al-Suri is referring to is not the same as what the press calls “lone wolves,” or “leaderless jihad.” Indeed, according to al-Suri, what connects these decentralised units responding to “the Call” to the larger System is an ideological link comprising of (1) a common aim, (2) common name, (3) common doctrinal jihadi program, and (4) a comprehensive educational program. Al-Suri requires his individual terrorists to commit to nothing “other than to believe in the idea, be absolutely certain in his intention, join the Call, and educate himself and those with him according to the Call's program [...]”⁴⁴ Tures – in a debunking of the lore of lone-wolf terrorism – writes:

*These “lone wolves,” are therefore anything but “lone.” Though the media, government, and even terrorists like ISIS themselves use the term, these new terror recruits are still connected to the group, even if such people do not have face-to-face contact or fly to the Middle East or some domestic compound for training.*⁴⁵

Indeed, consider what happened in San Bernardino on 2 December 2015 where a married couple – self-radicalised (or “self-educated,” as al-Suri would have put it) killed 14 people. These were not “lone wolves”; rather, they were following a path al-Suri laid out for them. In other words, ISIS's claim – that the couple were soldiers of the Caliphate⁴⁶ – is literally true if the organisation has taken a leaf out of al-Suri's individual terrorism strategy. But for the decentralised form of individual terrorism to be truly successful, al-Suri recognised the need for mass mobilisation. One way to mobilise Muslims, al-Suri suggested at the Al Ghuraba lecture, was to harangue on the “degeneracy of the Western world” with “*its sins, gays and lesbians.*”⁴⁷ [emphasis added] The attack on an Orlando gay nightclub in June this year – the worst mass-shooting in American history – seems to be right out of al-Suri's Machiavellian playbook. The shooter, Omar Mateen, had pledged *bay'at* to ISIS.

The conception of *nizam la tanzim* and “individual-terrorism jihad” stands out in sharp relief to al-Qaeda. While the network structure of that organisation was known, bin Laden – according to many analysts – was seen as “promoting ‘a worldwide, religiously-inspired, *professionally guided* Islamist insurgency [emphasis added].”⁴⁸ Professional guidance for al-Suri for individuals responding to the ‘Resistance Call’ individually is limited in the sense of “education” being the individual’s initiative. However, al-Suri would advocate the spreading of the requisite “legal, political, military and other sciences and knowledge that the Mujahidun need in order to carry out Resistance operations,” without compromising the decentralised structure of the system.⁴⁹ Social media would prove handy for ISIS in implementing this tactic.

“Open-Front Jihad”

Al-Suri did recognise that the ultimate goal for the Islamic Resistance, as he called this putative global jihadi system, was holding physical territory. His conception of al-Qaeda had three key elements: a physical base (one meaning of Qaeda); a leadership; and a global world-view.⁵⁰ The importance of the first cannot be underestimated in al-Suri’s world-view: in fact, the “greatest loss,” from the ensuing US invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, “was not the destruction of the terrorist organization but the downfall of the Taliban, which meant that al-Qaeda no longer had a place to train, organize, and recruit.”⁵¹ Al-Suri was categorical on the importance of seizing territory in the ‘Resistance Call,’ which he called the “strategic goal” of the whole enterprise.⁵² (His sub-theory of decentralised jihad, in contrast, was a tactical tool.) This is also something he shared with al-Qaeda’s then ‘Number Two’ Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who wrote:

*If the successful operations against Islam’s enemies and the severe damage inflicted on them do not serve the ultimate goal of establishing the Muslim nation in the heart of the Islamic world, they will be nothing more than mere nuisance, regardless of their magnitude, that could be absorbed and endured, even if after some time, and with some losses.*⁵³

Al-Suri imagined that this physical territory that could be controlled by the Islamic resistance system would also serve as a site for “Open-Front

Jihad,” where enemies could be drawn in for asymmetric warfare. In fact, he identifies areas in the greater Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa for such activity – preconditions related to geography, population, and political factors.⁵⁴ Geography plays a particularly important role in his analysis – the ideal site for Open-Front jihad was to be “spacious in terms of area,” “varied with long borders,” “difficult to siege,” with inhospitable topography, and yet with sufficient resources for human sustenance.⁵⁵ But his analysis was not generic in identifying most of the places in this vast area as suitable for Open-Front jihad. In fact, his analysis showed that the vast majority of the 55 states in this area were unsuitable for this kind of activity in not meeting one or more of the preconditions he listed.⁵⁶

He then goes on to identify the “Levant and Iraq,” as an ideal site for Open-Front jihad. “It has all the preconditions for the Open Fronts,” al-Suri writes.⁵⁷ His reading of the situation in that area was striking in his analysis – written long before the so-called Arab Spring, the series of protests and uprisings that erupted in the Arab world as 2010 came to an end. He wrote:

*The now emerging American occupation has declared its determination to remain on a long-term basis. They also prepare to extend their aggression to Syria in order to control the whole Levant [...]*⁵⁸

In al-Suri's strategic theory, such a move by the Americans will draw them into an un-winnable conflict where the 'defenders' (the putative Islamic resistance) would have tactical as well as strategic advantage. This seems to also be the guiding principle of ISIS. Victory in this asymmetric conflict would lead to:

*[...] victory for the Muslims, that [front] will be the centre of an Islamic Emirate, which should be ruled by God's sharia. It will be a centre and destination for those around it emigrating to fight jihad in the cause of the country.*⁵⁹

The extent of ISIS's intended-Islamic State was mapped in March 2016 by the *Financial Times* (FT).⁶⁰ That map, along with another one drawn up by the Institute for Study of War in July 2016⁶¹ show how remarkably close ISIS's territory-control/territory-of-influence strategy has been to al-Suri's

geographical prescriptions. At the time of writing this paper, the core ISIS control zone has a filamentary structure which would make it exceedingly difficult to attempt to seize it using ground troops. The control zone is embedded in a support zone that is vast, geographically speaking, and stretches from Fallujah to Mosul (in Iraq), from Mosul to Ayn al-Arab (in Syria), and all the way to Dera on the border of Jordan. Most of the territory controlled by ISIS is also of relatively low-altitude, which makes manoeuvres, and obtaining supplies, relatively easy.

Organising the 'Resistance Call'

Al-Suri conceptualises how both the tactical, de-centralised structure of individual jihad and the strategic structure of open-front/territorial jihad mesh in terms of concentric circles. The innermost circle (around the centre who is the putative Caliph) is that of the “centralized unit,” tasked with “guidance, counselling, and calling to jihad,” as well as maintaining military balance in Open-Front areas.⁶² Essentially, this is the leadership circle.

The circle of “centralized unit” lies inside the circle of “de-centralized units” of fighters that are permitted to operate like a traditional secret organisation – trained directly, and to be “spread across the world.”⁶³ Essentially, one may call these the garden-variety ISIS jihadists who travel to Syria or Iraq for training and return to their homelands to carry out attacks when called to do so.

This circle, in turn, is embedded within the final “*Da'wah*” circle “who participates in the Resistance without any organizational links with the Centre [i.e. Centralized Unit.]”⁶⁴ This circle has been responsible for most of the recent attacks in the US and Europe. The important point here is that authority radiates outwards from the centre – the Emir or the Caliph – and is managed through the institution of *bay'at* – the binding allegiance to the figurehead.

Figure 2 depicts al-Suri's organisational-structure theory. The centralised unit is circle 1, the circle of de-centralised units is 2, and the *Da'wah* circle is 3, in that figure. Note that the entire structure is governed by the institution of bay'at (depicted by arrow B). Note, also, that as one moves from circles 1 to 3,

individuals and units become more geographically dispersed (as depicted by arrow G). While individuals and units in circles 1 and 2 are allowed to communicate with each other and to their adjacent circles (depicted through connecting arrows), such is not the case with the outer circle 3.

How does al-Suri's organisational structure match the typologies of attackers being advanced in light of the recent terrorist attacks in Europe? Gartenstein-Ross and Barr – in way of debunking the “myth of lone wolf terrorism,” advanced one such typology.⁶⁵ In their analysis, there are four kinds of attackers and attacks. In the first kind, attackers are sent by an outfit from abroad to carry out operations. In al-Suri's jargon, these would be attackers in circle 2. Then there are attackers – in the Gartenstein-Ross and Barr typology – who are in touch with each other virtually, for purposes of coordination. In al-Suri's structure, these would also be attackers in circle 2 – or between circles 2 and 3. The third category of attackers are ones “who are in contact with a militant group via online communications but do not receive specific instructions about carrying out an attack.” These would be – according to al-Suri – individuals in the *Daw'ah* circle 3. Finally, in the Gartenstein-Ross and Barr typology, there are true lone wolves who act

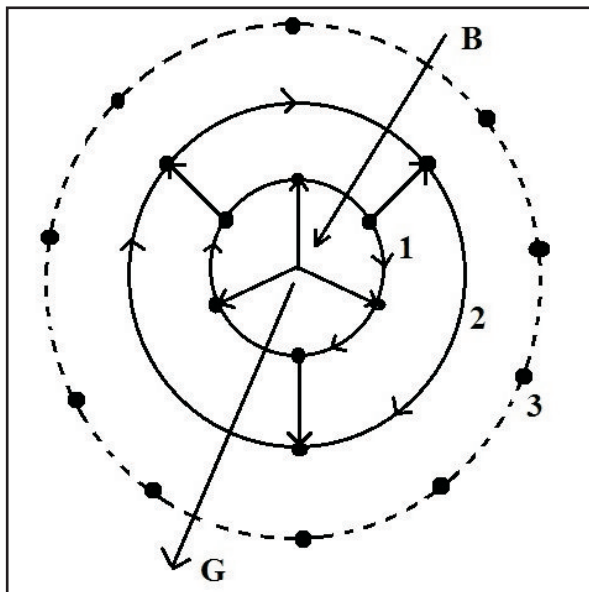


Figure 2: A Schematic Description of Al-Suri's Organisational Theory

completely independently of the 'parent' network. This, too would be, according to al-Suri's theory, individuals in circle 3 – only if they pledge allegiance to the Caliph or the Emir (who is al-Baghdadi, in case of ISIS). The similarity between the Gartenstein-Ross and Barr typology and al-Suri's theory is remarkable.

AL-SURI'S ISIS: THE WAY FORWARD

If ISIS indeed operates out of al-Suri's playbook, what is in store for that organisation?

One would expect to see the frequency of individual jihadists attack to continue and keep pace, fuelled by self-radicalisation. Al-Suri, as this paper has explained, placed a premium on this tactic. One would also expect ISIS to continue to hold territory even at significant military costs. After all, as al-Suri explains, the whole point of the enterprise of Islamic Resistance is to control territory and establish an Islamic State. Therefore analysts who expect ISIS to completely morph into a de-centralised structure would be well-advised to rethink their assumptions.

Al-Suri had displayed a great interest in weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). A US government assessment of al-Suri puts him as “an expert in the use of poison.”⁶⁶ Individual expertise aside, al-Suri is known to have worked quite closely with al-Qaeda's leading expert on unconventional weapons Abu Khabab al-Masri.⁶⁷ Al-Suri himself is said to have written on biological weapons, and has called for the use of WMDs against the US and allies “to reach a strategic decisive outcome.”⁶⁸ ISIS has already used chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq, but the real question is whether it would do so outside its own 'territory'.⁶⁹ It is unlikely if most of the attacks outside Syria and Iraq are carried out by individual jihadists in the *Daw'ah* circle. Therefore the most likely ISIS WMD-use threat lies against American and allied troops in any possible ground invasion.

The most important point with the al-Suri-and-ISIS story is polemical. Blinded by indiscriminate violence, it is easy to conclude that ISIS is a nihilistic group driven by eschatological motives. It is rather more difficult to accept

instinctively that there may be a concrete strategic theory behind their actions. But to strive to understand is not the same as to extend empathy. This paper has argued that the foundation of ISIS strategy was provided by one man – Abu Mus'ab al-Suri. Indeed, in order to dissect ISIS strategy, more research is needed about ideologues and theorists like al-Suri – without empathy, for sure, but not without curiosity. [ORF](#)

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org