
Book Review

By Joshua Sinai

Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 224 pp., US \$ 24.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 9780812248890.

This relatively short book is a challenging assessment of what the author considers to be the limited magnitude of the threats to the West posed by “global neo-jihadi” terrorism—as opposed to what he criticizes as being, by mostly U.S. Government assessments, overly exaggerated threats – posed by groups such as al Qaida, the Islamic State, and their American Muslim adherents. This book is of special interest because it updates Sageman’s research and insights on these issues which were published in his earlier two books, *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004) and *Leaderless Jihad* (2008) – both of which were considered at the time highly innovative in the field (including by this reviewer, whose blurb on the latter book is featured on this book’s back cover).

To cover these issues, the book’s five chapters examine the nature of the actual terrorist threat, “probability theory and counterterrorism,” “misunderstanding radicalization,” the author’s model of radicalization into political violence and his proposal for “ending political violence in the West.”

One of the most interesting chapters is the introduction, which provides a biographical background of Sageman’s political, medical and sociological career and how he came to study how some members of social movements are radicalized and recruited into terrorism. He calls them “neo-jihadis” because real jihad is declared by legitimate authorities, not by individual perpetrators who “target innocent noncombatants without sanction from any legitimate government”. (p. 5) He found that radicalization and recruitment into such terrorist organizations are similar to “the growth of cults, like that of gangs, [which] is based on friendship and kinship, what I call ‘a bunch of guys.’” (p. 6) He also found that “the path to political violence was a collective journey, not an individual one, even for so-called lone wolves.” (p. 6) This led him to propose four prongs in the process of radicalization: “...moral outrage at recent political events, a warlike ideology [i.e. believing that the West is at war with Islam – JS], personal experiences that resonated with this ideology, and mobilization through existing militant networks.” (p. 11) Looking back at the evolution of the jihadist threat, he finds that “the threat was even less organized and more fluid than I had previously appreciated: militants imagined that they were part of a large global neo-jihadi community linking them all together,” (p. 12) Sageman also formulates what he terms the “‘blob theory’ – that terrorists mostly emerged from this loose, fluid, and amorphous political protest community.” (p. 13)

Sageman ends the introductory overview with a polemic of what he terms “the cause of stagnation in terrorism research,” (p. 20) which he blames on “in-house [U.S.] government analysts, who [while having] access to most classified information, lack the sophisticated methodological background to fully and accurately analyze their data.” (p. 21) Academic analysts, on the other hand, “understand everything but know nothing [due to the unreleased classified nature of such data - JS], while government analysts know everything but understand nothing.” (p. 21) Since he does not provide concrete examples of such methodologically unsophisticated work or identify such “in house government analysts” or even identify any academic analysts “who understand everything but know nothing” such an argument comes across as unfair. This section on the book is based on his earlier polemic on ‘The Stagnation of Terrorism Research’ which was published in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 26, 2015) where a number of leading authors took issue with some of his generalizations, e.g. Sageman’s facile equation of terrorism with political violence in general. Moreover, later on, Sageman not only contradicts himself by criticizing his fellow academics as misinformed – aren’t they the ones who supposedly “understand everything”? – but then, perhaps out of a professional reluctance to criticize academics he knows personally, he deliberately fails to mention in

the book's main text the identity of academics whose theories he finds lacking, but only lists them in the endnotes, which makes it cumbersome to look them up.

Even if one might disagree with Sageman's overly restrictive six factor-based criteria in the first chapter on "The Actual Threat," for inclusion in his survey of global neo-jihadi plots/attacks in the West, readers will find his survey of 66 plots or attacks in the West from the period of September 11, 2001 to September 10, 2011 highly useful for its methodology and data, which is compiled in a timeline distribution table (pp. 30-33) and other graphs. However, one might disagree with his view that such perpetrators conduct their operations in Western countries "as retaliation for victims of Western killings in the Middle East" (p.54) This is an oversimplification of their diverse motives.

The second chapter, "Probability Theory and Counterterrorism," is a useful application of Bayesian probabilistic theory to estimate the likelihood of an individual to carry out a future terrorist act, based on calibrating "an appropriate 'signal-to-noise' ratio" in matching their characteristics against a template of what are considered to be behavioral indicators signaling risk. (p. 61) This conceptual approach is applied to a critique of the U.S. government's use of such "derogatory information" about individuals of concern in various official watchlists. Sageman argues that such nominating procedures are "in fact no more than mere guesses or hunches couched in secrecy." (p. 86) Such sweeping assertions might well be contradicted by U.S. government officials involved in populating such nominating systems if given the opportunity to demonstrate the validity of their methodology and information in a public forum.

The third chapter, "Misunderstanding Radicalization," begins with Sageman's proposal to formulate a new definition of terrorism as "a public's categorization of political violence by nonstate actors during domestic peacetime." (p. 91) This is one of the vaguest definitions proposed to date, although it is reminiscent of an earlier definition proposed by Alex Schmid in 1992; Schmid had suggested that acts of terrorism should be defined in legal terms as 'the peacetime equivalent of war crimes.' Disregarding much of the ongoing debate about radicalization models, Sageman concludes that government analysts have reached a consensus "around a two-step model of the turn to violence" based on individuals' being radicalized into joining a political protest community, and then being mobilized into violent action. (p. 108)

In the fourth chapter, "Militants in Context," Sageman presents his model of how political protest communities turn to political violence (which he, problematically, equates with terrorism while the latter is only one specific manifestation of the much broader former category). It consist of "escalation of hostility between the state and their community, which includes a cumulative radicalization of discourse; their disillusionment with nonviolent legal tactics; and moral outrage at new state aggression against their community;" (p. 130) and what appears to be the fourth and fifth prongs in the form of "activation of a martial social identity" (p. 143) and "social isolation," with these "self-categorized soldiers" going underground to escape arrest (p. 148), due to continued "state repression". (p. 159) I had to come up with my own interpretation of Sageman's five pronged model because he does not clearly delineate it analytically or outline it in a diagram, which would have been useful to the reader. Another problem with Sageman's formulation is that it appears to equate the emergence of left-wing terrorist groups such as the American Weather Underground or the West German Baader Meinhof group in the late 1960s, which came out of genuine protest movements, with the more recent rise of the "global neo-jihadi" groups such as al Qaida or the Islamic State. However, in the view of this reviewer, the root causes for their formation, radicalization and mobilization are of a rather different nature.

Sageman's prescription in the final chapter on "Ending Political Violence in the West" is similarly problematical, as it appears to focus on measures to counter and resolve threats posed by "both nonviolent protestors and potentially violent ones," (p. 167) rather than transnational modern-day terrorist groups whose agendas are vastly different.

While Sageman's two earlier works have been ground-breaking and given rise to fruitful debates (e.g. with Bruce Hoffman), the present volume is, in this reviewer's view, unlikely to change our understanding of radicalization and terrorism substantially. Nevertheless, it makes for thought-provoking reading.

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