

Book Reviews

Marc Sageman. *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism.*

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Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former intelligence officer, is the author of seminal, though not uncontroversial, works like *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004) and *Leaderless Jihad* (2008). [His last book, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (2016) was reviewed in this journal in the February 2017 issue.] In his latest book, he looks at two hundred years of mainly European political violence in an effort to explain radicalisation to terrorism, including what he terms 'neojihadi' campaigns against the West.

Sageman's new volume, which has been in the making for a decade, contains eight chapters. The first and the last chapter (incl. its Appendix) are mainly conceptual and theoretical while six chapters cover case studies on 'The French Revolution and the Emergence of Modern Terrorism' (chapt. 2); 'Political Violence from the Restoration to the Paris Commune' (chapt.3); 'The Professionalization of Terroristic Violence in Russia' (chapt. 4); 'Anarchism and the Expansion of Political Violence' (chapt. 5); 'The Specialized Terrorist Organization: The PSR [Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party's] Combat Unit 1902-1908' (chapt. 6); and, 'Banditry, the End of a World, and Indiscriminate Political Violence' (chapt. 7). The case studies in these chapters are partly based on primary sources (e.g. from archives and trial transcripts) which allows the author precise process tracing of the evolution of terrorist lone and group actors. These painstakingly detailed historical descriptions provide fascinating reading and make the volume well worth reading even if one can have reservations about Sageman's conceptual and theoretical framework.

Sageman uses the phrase 'turning to political violence' for what is commonly (but also somewhat misleadingly) termed 'radicalisation' – "the acquisition of extreme or radical ideas and ... the readiness to use violence" (p.9) – two distinct but related elements. The author also largely avoids the use of the term 'terrorism', preferring instead 'the more neutral expression political violence' (p.13). In the view of this reviewer this is a problematical choice since political violence is a very broad and vague concept and Sageman's definition of political violence as "the deliberate collective attempt to use force against people or objects for political reasons" (p.14) does not narrow it very much (this definition could even cover governmental violence). Sageman's definition of terrorism as "a categorization of out-group political violence during domestic peacetime" (p.12) has the advantage that it refers – unlike most other definitions – to a 'defining agent' (p.11) as he notes that "The term *terrorism* is commonly used by a public that identifies with the state and its agents" (p.13). Whatever one may think of Sageman's terminological choices, these do not negatively affect the high quality of his analyses in the historical case studies.

While many contemporary analysts of terrorism appear to be ignorant of two hundred years of history of modern terrorism, holding that history can teach us little about terrorism in the age of the Internet, Sageman holds the opposite view. He believes that contemporary terrorist groups can indeed be compared to pre-1914 groups and that a Social Identity Perspective (SIP) explains the doings of both older and newer groups, including religious terrorists. Equipped with a theory that claims to explain the transition of an individual from a 'normal social identity' to a 'politicized social identity' (involving identification with an imagined or real community), and then to a narrower 'martial social identity' (p.39), Sageman outlines the conditions for the emergence of political violence from a peaceful political protest community, to a self-categorization of some of its members as (revolutionary) soldiers. He postulates that "This self-categorization into a martial social identity occurs under three conditions: escalation of the conflict between two groups, including a

cumulative radicalization of discourse; protestors' disillusionment with nonviolent tactics; and moral outrage at state aggression against the community" (p.29). He correctly notes that "...political violence often erupts at the tail end of a legal political protest campaign" (p.33) – one of his many perceptive, though not always equally original, observations (Ted Gurr had noticed this before him). Rejecting both rational choice theory and the role of ideology as major explanations for the emergence of historical campaigns of political violence ("In the turn to political violence, identity trumps ideology and self-interest" – p. 375), Sageman, develops, based on the modern history of terrorism, a model that, in his view, can also be applied to contemporary neojihadi campaigns against the West (p.361).

In the Appendix ('Testing the Social Identity Perspective Model of the Turn to Political Violence' (pp.377-384) he adds newer cases to the ones discussed in chapters 2 - 7, arriving at a total sample of 34 campaigns. As test instrument for this diverse sample covering two centuries, spanning four continents, including Muslim, Buddhist and Christian perpetrators with backgrounds as republicans, socialists, royalists, nationalists, anarchists, neo-fascists and Islamists conducted in agrarian, industrialized and post-industrial societies targeting liberal democracies, absolute autocracies and imperialist regimes among others, he uses Charles Ragin's qualitative comparative analysis fuzzy sets methodology (p.377). Thus, he arrives at the equation:

PPC + ESC (including CRD) + Disil + MO -> MS-C -> Political Violence

whereby **PPC** stands for political protest community, **ESC** stands for mutual escalation between the PPC and state, **CRD** stands for cumulative radicalization of discourse; **Disil** stands for disillusionment with nonviolent tactics to redress grievances; **MO** indicates recent moral outrage at out-group aggression and **MS-C** indicates martial self-categorization into soldiers defending their PPC.

With the help of this formula, he seeks to test his Social Identity Perspective (SIP) against rational choice theory explanations and those based on ideology as drivers of political violence. Sageman finds that 91 percent of the 34 campaigns of political violence support his SIP model in terms of martial self-categorization (p.379). In all but two of the 34 campaigns he found that a political protest community preceded radicalization (ibid.). Sageman also concludes that the rest of his model was generally supported. He found, for instance, that "Disillusionment with nonviolent protest as a major contributor to the turn to political violence is supported in about 80 percent of the cases (...) Moral outrage as a factor for political violence is supported in about 70 percent of the cases" (p.382). Finding such strong overall support for his SIP model, the rival models he 'tested' with the same dataset scored far lower: the ideological thesis was supported in only about 30 percent of the cases and rational choice theory was supported only in 12 percent of the cases (p.383). Based on the above, Sageman finishes his *tour de force* with supreme confidence: "In conclusion, this survey supports the use of the social identity model to understand the turn to political violence" (p.384). Has Sageman discovered the holy grail of radicalisation and solved its mystery? The 'proof' he offers in mere eight pages in the Appendix opens more questions than it answers. The key table 'Campaigns of Political Violence' on pp. 380-381 codes his six variables and the two single rival explanation variables with only the following sentence to describe the coding: "To test the model, I use Charles Ragin's qualitative comparative analysis using fuzzy sets. For each variable, a score of 1.0 indicates full membership in the fuzzy set defined by it. Anything less than 0.5 would indicate a less than half membership in that set and therefore would not support the model. Each estimate is a rough average of all the violent participants in each campaign of political violence." (p.377) While Sageman's six-factor model derived from his own case materials is plausible, its general usefulness remains untested.

Turning to Political Violence is an ambitious work of 'grand design' and offers plenty of food for thought. It should provide a basis for replication studies, allowing alternative testing of his SIP theory, based on a larger sample than the 34 campaigns and using other instruments than Ragin's 'Fuzzy-set Social Science' as testing tool. With this volume Marc Sageman again excels in challenging colleagues in the field of terrorism studies and we should all be thankful for his provocation.

About the Reviewer: Alex P. Schmid is Editor-in-Chief of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.