Leaderless Jihad: The Modern Face of Terror: Book Review

By Joshua Sinai

Radical Muslims represent a minority within the Muslim world. If most Muslims are not extremists, why are so many young Muslims drawn to extremist interpretations of Islam as the basis for establishing radical regimes in their societies? How do they become radicalized? What is the tipping point from radicalization to terrorism? Finally, how can violent radicalism be countered and defeated?

These questions are discussed in Marc Sageman's important book, "Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty First Century" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; 208 pages, $24.95). Dr. Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and political sociologist, is also a former CIA case officer who worked with the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. He is also the author of the groundbreaking Understanding Terror Networks, which was published in 2004 and has become one of the leading studies on the global Islamist terror movement.[1]

In "Leaderless Jihad" Dr. Sageman, whom I know professionally, updates and expands his earlier work on what drives radical elements of a society to terrorism. Dr. Sageman's research is unique in the field of al-Qaeda studies, in particular, because of his "evidence-based" approach. Here he has assembled profiles of individual operatives to generate insights about their personal characteristics and motivations, recruitment patterns, organizational formations, and warfare. Whereas his earlier study is based on the compilations drawn from unclassified, open sources of profiles of some 172 individuals; this study is based on more than 500 profiles, making it a valuable resource for the academic community. One drawback of the book is that it does not provide a summary of the database in an appendix.

According to Dr. Sageman, the al-Qaeda-led Islamist social movement consists of several thousand members (out of a worldwide Muslim population of more than one billion). It is "composed of social networks that mobilize people to resort to terrorism. These networks may become formal organizations, like al-Qaeda or its Indonesian affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah, depending on shifting circumstances." (p. 31)

Moreover, while al-Qaeda "Central" is currently headquartered along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, its "social movement has spread far beyond the original organization." (p. 31) According to Dr. Sageman, this makes the organization even more dangerous because as a social movement it has dramatically grown beyond its organizational origins.

Dr. Sageman believes today's al-Qaeda (and the social movements it has spawned) is the product of three historical waves. The first wave consisted of the "old guard," the veterans of the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan who joined Usama bin Laden in forming the core of al-Qaeda “Central” in the 1980s. The second wave joined al-Qaeda in the 1990s after training in its camps in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda "Central" was predominant during this phase, closely directing its operations around the world.

The third wave, however, is the post-2001 generation of radicals, who joined al-Qaeda following the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the U.S.-led invasion in Iraq. Although it lost its safe haven and training facilities in Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda-led social movement is even more pervasive because of its global reach as well as its links to al-Qaeda "Central" along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Furthermore, the organization has had great success on the Internet, where it has radicalized a new generation of activists, including many among second-generation Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America. This was the group, for example, that carried out the suicide attacks against London's transportation system in July 2005.

How are the members of al-Qaeda's third wave mobilized into becoming "warriors for Islam?" Dr. Sageman writes that they view themselves, rightly or wrongly, as "heroes, fighting for justice and fairness" to transform their societies.

Moreover, Dr. Sageman asserts, their radicalization is facilitated by a four-prong process (which is not necessarily linear): (1) an individual's sense of moral outrage in response to perceived suffering by fellow Muslims
around the world; (2) how the individual might interpret such moral outrage within the context of a larger war against Islam; (3) whether or not the sense of "moral outrage" resonates with one's own experience (for example, discrimination or difficulty in making it in Western society) and, finally, (4) being mobilized by networks that take one to the next level of violent radicalization in the form of terrorist cells. To this, I would add a fifth prong (which I would place between Dr. Sageman’s first and second prongs): the influence of radical Islamic texts, such as Sayyid Qutb’s Milestones, which had a profound influence in radicalizing bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other al-Qaeda leaders, operatives, recruits and supporters.

Like any masterpiece, Dr. Sageman’s book is not perfect in all aspects. Some of his arguments are insufficiently explained or inadequately sourced. Dr. Sageman’s use of citations is inconsistent and incomplete. Some endnotes list the authors’ first names and the date of their publications, but not the titles or page numbers. This makes it cumbersome to check the validity of the cited information.

Aside from these criticisms, there is so much more to commend in Dr. Sageman’s book. The chapter on “How to Study Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century” is required reading for every university course; similarly, the chapter on “The Atlantic Divide” is a provocative analysis of the different trajectories of radicalization in Europe and the United States, and the chapter on “Terrorism in the Age of the Internet” is one of the finest overviews of this subject.

Dr. Sageman concludes that “the threat from al-Qaeda is self-limiting, [as] is its appeal, and global Islamist terrorism will probably disappear for internal reasons…” because of the atrocities committed by al-Qaeda and those acting on its behalf (p. 150). The most appropriate counter strategy, according to Dr. Sageman, “should be one of restraint with respect to the greater challenge: preventing young Muslims from joining the terrorist social movement…” (p. 150).

To counter the social movement inspired by al-Qaeda, Dr. Sageman proposes a strategy to “take the glory and thrill out of terrorism.” Military operations against them should be conducted swiftly and precisely, with such terrorists considered “common criminals” (p. 151). The sense of "moral outrage" by young Muslims can be diminished by helping to resolve local conflicts that al-Qaeda’s propaganda highlights as injustices against the Muslim world. The young jihadists want to become heroes, so they need to be provided with alternative role models, such as Muslim soccer stars and other successful community leaders.

This is all true. Aside from addressing their concrete grievances, however, governments still need to formulate effective responses to counter their desire to impose anti-modern religious orthodoxy over their respective societies and communities. What sort of alternative ideologies and role models can be provided to such militants and their supporters that are likely to be embraced by them? Dr. Sageman’s book is valuable because researchers can apply this question against his empirical approach and findings in order to advance the state of knowledge on this issue.

Dr. Sageman’s incisive observations based on carefully examined evidence, astute insights and scholarship make "Leaderless Jihad" the gold standard in al-Qaeda studies. Like his earlier book, it deserves to be widely read in the field of terrorism studies.

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This is a revised and expanded version of Dr. Sinai’s review of Dr. Sageman’s book, which originally appeared in The Washington Times on February 19, 2008. Reprinted with permission.

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"Leaderless Jihad discredits conventional wisdom about terrorists by eschewing anecdotes and conjecture in favor of hard data and statistics."—Aryn Baker, Time. "This book belongs at the top of the list for anyone seeking to understand the nature of radical Islamic terrorism, its future, and the effective ways that Western countries can counter its destructive appeal."—Lawrence Wright, author of The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11. "[An] important, face-the-facts book . . . Sageman is deservedly one of the best-known academics working on terrorism."—S Leaderless Jihad offers a ray of hope. Drawing on historical analogies, Sageman argues that the zeal of jihadism is self-terminating; eventually its followers will turn away from violence as a means of expressing their discontent. The book concludes with Sageman's recommendations for the application of his research to counterterrorism law enforcement efforts. eISBN: 978-0-8122-0678-4. Subjects: Political Science. The radicalization of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh—the man convicted of kidnapping Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was later beheaded—highlights the issues facing those who wish to neutralize global Islamist terrorists in the twenty-first century. Leaderless Jihad book. Read 22 reviews from the world. Sageman favors a more scientific approach to the study of terror networks. He then goes on to Interesting book, important contribution towards terrorism studies and definitely worth a read. Only three stars because Sageman does a couple things here that irritate me. In his defense, I'm easily irritable :) 1) Sageman begins the book with a discussion about how we rely on anecdotes and focus on the individual to explain the root causes of terrorism. He and I both believe that this is misguided. Sageman favors a more scientific approach to the study of terror networks. He then goes on to pro