

# **The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism**

## **Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters**

By Bruce Hoffman

From *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008

---

*Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century*. Marc Sageman . University of Pennsylvania Press , 2008 , 208 \$24.95

Summary: Marc Sageman claims that al Qaeda's leadership is finished and today's terrorist threat comes primarily from below. But the terrorist elites are alive and well, and ignoring the threat they pose will have disastrous consequences.

*BRUCE HOFFMAN is a Professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a Senior Fellow at the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He is the author of Inside Terrorism.*

Since Rudy Giuliani's early exit from the Republican presidential primary, the issue of terrorism has barely been mentioned by any of the candidates in either party. Given its absence from this year's U.S. presidential campaign, it is easy to forget how prominent a role terrorism played in 2004. Many observers believe that Osama bin Laden's dramatically choreographed videotaped appearance on October 29, 2004, may have tipped the vote in President George W. Bush's favor by reminding Americans of the horrors of 9/11 and instilling a fear of future attacks. And although terrorism has largely been ignored as a campaign issue thus far, bin Laden and al Qaeda may deliberately raise its visibility once again.

The publication of *Leaderless Jihad* is therefore timely. Its author, Marc Sageman, brings unique credentials to the study of terrorism. European-born but American-educated, Sageman holds a doctorate in political sociology and is a practicing psychiatrist. He served in the U.S. Navy as a flight surgeon before joining the CIA in 1984. During the late 1980s, Sageman was based in Islamabad and worked closely with the Afghan mujahideen forces that were fighting the Soviets.

Sageman's first book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, was an important work that received little public attention when it was published four years ago. It provocatively challenged the conventional wisdom that victory in the war on terrorism would be achieved by killing and capturing bin Laden, his main ideologue, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the rest of al Qaeda's leadership. According to Sageman, al Qaeda was not an organization to be systematically destroyed but a social network that had to be disrupted. The only effective defense against Salafi terrorists, he claimed, was a thorough understanding of the web of relationships that sustained them -- something that was sorely lacking in both the government and academe at the time.

Sageman continues this line of argument in *Leaderless Jihad*. The gravest threat facing the United States and the West today, he maintains, is not a revived al Qaeda straddling the lawless border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rather, he contends, the true menace comes from loose-knit cells of Western-born Muslims or Muslim immigrants studying and working in the West. These disaffected "bunches of guys" are often friends, roommates, or classmates who undergo the process of radicalization together.

Although these informal local terrorist groups are certainly a critical part of the global terrorist network, *Leaderless Jihad's* salient weakness is its insistence that this dimension represents the entire threat facing the United States today. This shortcoming can largely be explained by Sageman's brusque dismissal of much of the existing academic literature on terrorism in general and terrorist networks in particular.

### THE CENTER HOLDS

Sageman's impressive resumé cannot overcome his fundamental misreading of the al Qaeda threat, which is at the heart of his book. He contends: "The present threat has evolved from a structured group of al Qaeda masterminds, controlling vast resources and issuing commands, to a multitude of informal local groups trying to emulate their predecessors by conceiving and executing operations from the bottom up. These 'homegrown' wannabes form a scattered global network, a leaderless jihad." According to Sageman, al Qaeda has ceased to

exist as either an organizational or an operational entity and is therefore irrelevant to U.S. security concerns. Sageman believes that "al Qaeda Central has receded in importance" and goes so far as to assert that it has been "neutralized operationally." Instead, the principal terrorist threat today, Sageman claims, comes from diffuse low-level groups.

But this view flies in the face of the two most recent authoritative analyses of terrorist threats to the United States: the July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate and the annual threat assessment presented by the director of national intelligence, Mike McConnell, to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence this past February. The publicly released portion of the 2007 NIE, for example, stated unambiguously that al Qaeda "is and will remain the most serious threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities." This was also the unambiguous conclusion offered by the former CIA and National Security Council official Bruce Riedel in these pages a year ago ("Al Qaeda Strikes Back," May/June 2007). The unmistakable message is that al Qaeda is a remarkably agile and flexible organization that exercises both top-down and bottom-up planning and operational capabilities. It is not exclusively focused on the grass-roots dimension that is Leaderless Jihad's sole preoccupation. The NIE further stated, "We assess the group has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), operational lieutenants, and its top leadership." These findings are dismissed by Sageman as "alarmist" without any further analytic explanation or empirical justification whatsoever.

McConnell's recent testimony both expanded on and amplified the NIE's basic conclusion that al Qaeda is alive and well and plotting high-profile terrorist attacks much as it did before 9/11. "Al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates continue to pose significant threats to the United States at home and abroad, and al Qaeda's central leadership based in the border area of Pakistan is its most dangerous component," McConnell warned. He went on to explain how al Qaeda continues to exercise top-down direction and guidance even though it "has lost many of its senior operational planners over the years. . . . The group's adaptable decisionmaking process and bench of skilled operatives have enabled it to identify effective replacements." Finally, McConnell's observation that members of al Qaeda in Iraq have been dispatched "to establish cells in other countries" casts further doubt on Sageman's claims regarding al Qaeda's bottom-up organizational structure.

These "alarmist" assessments are not confined to the U.S. intelligence community. In a landmark public speech in November 2006, Eliza Manningham-Buller, then the director general of the British Security Service, or MI5, was unequivocal in her evaluation of the threat posed by a resurgent al Qaeda with still functioning command-and-control capabilities. "We are aware of numerous plots to kill people and to damage our economy," Manningham-Buller stated. "What do I mean by numerous? Five? Ten? No, nearer 30 that we currently know of," she continued. "These plots often have links back to al Qaeda in Pakistan, and through those links al Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale."

Sageman also employs historically groundless parallels in order to bolster his case that today's terrorist threat is an exclusively bottom-up phenomenon. The Irish Republican Army did not, as Leaderless Jihad maintains, begin "in a pub in Boston" and cross "the ocean to Ireland during World War I." The IRA was the product of a series of underground associations that were formed in Ireland in the eighteenth century, migrated to the United States in the middle of the following century, and then gave rise to the terrorist campaigns of various successive organizations, such as the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Fenian Brotherhood, and Clan na Gael. Even more egregiously inaccurate is Sageman's claim that the anarchist movement was responsible for starting World War I. While Sageman is correct that "the murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand triggered World War I," his assertion that the "anarchists carried out these killings even though there was no central organization to coordinate their actions" is ludicrous. Those more familiar with either the history of terrorism or the origins of World War I will know that the assassin, Gavrilo Princip, was neither an anarchist nor one of a "bunch of guys" who had serendipitously gravitated toward one another and decided to commit a terrorist act. Rather, he was a dedicated member of the militantly anti-Hapsburg organization Young Bosnia, which was in turn connected to the infamous clandestine Serbian organization the Black Hand, which itself received aid and training from the intelligence department of the Serbian army's general staff.

## MADNESS TO THE METHOD

Sageman's historical ignorance is surpassed only by his cursory treatment of social networking theory, which

forms the foundation of the scientific methodology he claims to employ. *Leaderless Jihad's* first chapter, titled "How to Study Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century," takes exception to much of the literature on terrorism, which, in Sageman's opinion, is unscientific, relies too much on narrowly explanatory case studies and profiles of leading terrorist figures, is too heavily dependent on information gleaned from government sources, and amounts to "nothing more than arguments made for the sake of scoring political points."

Such criticism of the field is neither new nor unjustified. Thirty years ago, the world's preeminent authority on military strategy, Michael Howard, complained that the field of terrorism studies had "been responsible for more incompetent and unnecessary books than any other outside . . . of sociology. It attracts phoneyes and amateurs as a candle attracts moths." But Sageman's own critique of the contemporary literature appears sniping and petulant. It would seem less so if Sageman had provided specific examples and citations of the studies that he believes have contributed so little to the understanding of terrorism, explained exactly why they are so wanting, and demonstrated how his approach is superior.

Indeed, Sageman's analysis would have been clearer and more scientifically rigorous had he employed essential and basic tools of social science research and built on the core theories of social and terrorist networks, including the pathbreaking work of Stephen Borgatti, Kathleen Carley, David Krackhardt, and Jeffrey Reminga on covert social networks; Aparna Basu, Valdis Krebs, Ami Pedahzur, and Arie Perliger on the structural and sociological characteristics of terrorist social networks; and David Jones, Shaul Mishal, and Michael Smith on how terrorist networks operate. No references to any of these authors of standard studies are found in *Leaderless Jihad's* citations.

Instead, the reader is told that "until recently, a large part of the literature on terrorism concentrated on definitions of terrorism" -- with the citation justifying this fatuous assertion referencing a book published in 1984. What little explanation follows briefly describes how trial transcripts and media accounts are the most reliable sources for terrorism research. According to Sageman, academic publications are the least useful because "most academic experts on terrorism are experts in other fields who do not follow the literature on terrorism closely and therefore pick selectively only those facts that support their arguments."

*Leaderless Jihad* employs a methodology that the author calls "middle-range analysis." This approach claims to examine "the terrorists themselves, fully embedded in their environment"; it does this "from the bottom up to see exactly what is happening on the ground in the hope of explaining the larger phenomenon of terrorism." Given that Sageman was trained as a psychiatrist, it is not surprising that he favors analyzing terrorism from an individual perspective rather than taking an organizational or collective approach. But the benefits of bottom-up versus top-down approaches to the study of terrorism have been debated by scholars for years. Indeed, one of the finest books in the field focuses on precisely this question. *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, edited by Walter Reich (a psychiatrist, too) and published nearly 20 years ago, is still in print, yet it is conspicuously absent from Sageman's bibliography.

*Leaderless Jihad* founders precisely on what Sageman claims are its strengths: the empirical data on which his analysis is based and his technique of examining terrorism as a social movement. For a book that extols scientific methods and the importance of facts, *Leaderless Jihad* has a surprisingly curt discussion of methodology and only a brief elucidation of the data to be tested. Sageman claims that he began building a database from information about the 19 terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks. That grew to contain a sample of 172 jihadists, on which his previous book was based, and then to contain the more than 500 profiles from which this work is derived. Of this database, however, Sageman says only that it contains "information on people and their relationships with other terrorists, nonterrorists, ideas, and the social, political, economic, cultural, and technological context." He goes on to argue that a good database "should trace the evolution of these relationships to see how they form, intensify, and fade so as to describe them over time." From a social science perspective, however, these types of unidentified or vaguely identified data sources and unclear collection procedures pose serious problems. Furthermore, Sageman does not explain how his collection of data conforms to the scientific standards of academic inquiry that he finds so lacking in the work of most terrorism scholars.

## AL QAEDA'S LONG TAIL

Sageman's one-size-fits-all claim that jihadists are "essentially romantic men and women chasing a dream" and his sweeping assertion that "there are no [al Qaeda] sleeper cells in the United States" are devoid of evidence.

Likewise, his belief that key Pakistani jihadist organizations are solely "focused on liberating Kashmir from India" and not bent on imposing harsh theocratic rule on Pakistan -- or on crushing democracy and fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan -- is fundamentally misguided.

Sageman fails to see that the current threat is not only the product of radicalization but also the realization of strategic organizational decisions al Qaeda made at least a decade ago. As far back as 1999, British authorities knew of al Qaeda's long-standing campaign of subversion among Muslims in the United Kingdom. At the time, they believed that some 3,000 British Muslims had already left and returned to the country after receiving terrorist training at al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere. Just as the former MI5 head described, al Qaeda members had succeeded in embedding themselves in the United Kingdom's Muslim community and drawing support from receptive elements in their new neighborhoods. Al Qaeda could thus identify, indoctrinate, and exploit new recruits who had not previously come under the scrutiny of local or national law enforcement agencies. In other words, much of the terrorist threat in the United Kingdom today stems from deliberate, long-standing subversion by al Qaeda -- a fact that Sageman's book completely dismisses.

Al Qaeda is much like a shark, which must keep moving forward, no matter how slowly or incrementally, or die. Al Qaeda must constantly adapt and adjust to its enemies' efforts to stymie its plans while simultaneously identifying new targets. The group's capacity to survive is also a direct reflection of both its resilience and the continued resonance of its ideology.

Defeating al Qaeda will require analysis grounded in sound empirical judgment and not blinded by provocative theories, seductive methodologies, or wishful thinking. Moreover, the United States and its allies must refocus their attention on Afghanistan and Pakistan, where al Qaeda began to collapse after 9/11 but has now regrouped. And they must recognize that al Qaeda cannot be defeated by military means alone. Success will require a dual strategy of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities -- that is, continuing to kill or capture senior al Qaeda leaders -- and breaking the cycle of terrorist recruitment among Sageman's radicalized "bunches of guys." Only by destroying the organization's leadership and disrupting the continued resonance of its radical message can the United States and its allies defeat al Qaeda.