

Does Osama Still Call the Shots?

Debating the Containment of al Qaeda's Leadership

By Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman

From *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008

Summary: Debating whether the real terrorist threat is top-down or bottom-up.

Marc Sageman is Founder and Principal of Sageman Consulting LLC and Scholar in Residence at the New York City Police Department.

I am compelled to respond to Bruce Hoffman's review essay, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism" (May/June 2008), in which he substantially misrepresents my new book, *Leaderless Jihad*, ignoring all of its main points while making up others that appear nowhere in it.

Most serious, Hoffman blatantly misrepresents my position on the status of al Qaeda's central leadership. He writes, "Leaderless Jihad's salient weakness is its insistence that this dimension [informal local terrorist groups] represents the entire threat facing the United States today." He adds, "According to Sageman, al Qaeda has ceased to exist as either an organizational or an operational entity" and claims that "the grass-roots dimension ... is Leaderless Jihad's sole preoccupation." Because he repeats this mischaracterization numerous times, the reader is seriously misled.

What the book actually says is that the threat from this core group is still substantial and will grow if vigilance is relaxed. I wrote, "Al Qaeda Central is of course not dead, but it is still contained operationally.... The surviving leaders of al Qaeda are undoubtedly still plotting to do harm to various countries in the world and have the expertise to do so, but they are hampered by the global security measures that have been put in place." And one of my recommendations is that "the core group of people who comprise al Qaeda Central -- those who have blood on their hands or are plotting against the United States -- must be eliminated or captured and tried for their crimes."

Hoffman portrays *Leaderless Jihad* as a simple-minded polemic and ignores the subtleties of its arguments. In the process, he neglects its main point, namely, that the threat from al Qaeda and its progeny has evolved over time. The process of radicalization is still going on but now proceeds in a hostile, post-9/11, wired environment, resulting in a social structure comprised of disconnected groups. The core of the book centers on my description of the four-pronged process of radicalization, which explains the difference between the terrorist threat in Europe and that in the United States. I show how the Internet has enabled a new wave of terrorist wannabes, who now constitute the main -- but not the entire -- threat to the West. However, this new wave has been completely neglected in recent analyses of terrorism; I can find no other source providing a comprehensive examination of this new phenomenon. This is why my book is focused more on the new than the old. Missing the evolution of the threat condemns us to keep fighting the last war.

Hoffman claims that homegrown, spontaneously self-organizing groups of friends who become terrorists are a "myth." But this is completely at odds with the evidence found in trial transcripts from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, not to mention what I have heard from law enforcement agencies around the world during my extensive consultations with them. Even Hoffman acknowledges the importance of these "radicalized 'bunches of guys'" in the last two sentences of his review, and our practical recommendations are not that far apart.

Disagreements among experts are the driving force of the scientific enterprise. However, science has some rules for settling such arguments. These rules do not condone taking quotes out of context and building a straw man through gross misrepresentation and then subjecting him to a hatchet job. Hoffman chastises me for lacking deference to authority, noting what he calls my "brusque dismissal of much of the existing academic literature." I plead guilty to the charge. In science, the strength of the evidence should trump loyalty to authority. But far from dismissing work that is relevant, I engage with it. My book spends several pages, for example, carefully weighing Hoffman's own argument that al Qaeda is on the march, only to come down against it on the basis of empirical evidence. And contrary to Hoffman's implication that I ignore British exceptionalism, I deal with it explicitly and explain it.

Furthermore, although it is important to deal with the relevant literature, the real focus should be on empirical data. Hoffman likes to cite as evidence secondary sources and political statements (National Intelligence Estimate summaries, transcripts of congressional testimony, and the work of other experts). But there is no substitute for careful scrutiny of primary sources, field research, and analysis of court documents (in which suspected terrorists challenge government claims).

Hoffman acknowledges that the first chapter of my book is about methodology but later comments that my book "has a surprisingly curt discussion of methodology." To learn from him, I looked for the section on methodology in his book *Inside Terrorism* -- but there was none. Hoffman mistakenly characterizes my call for "middle-range analysis" as evidence that I favor "analyzing terrorism from an individual perspective rather than taking an organizational or collective approach." This was a surprise to me, as both my books explicitly reject the individual perspective. In the field, my view of terrorism is known as the "bunch of guys" theory, and it is a collective perspective.

My work attempts a paradigm shift toward a new, evidence-based standard in terrorism research. Hoffman accurately quotes my description of much of the existing literature as amounting to "nothing more than arguments made for the sake of scoring political points." His review is an excellent illustration of this practice.

HOFFMAN REPLIES

A book titled *Leaderless Jihad* would seem to explain itself. I was therefore both puzzled to read Marc Sageman's statement that the threat posed by al Qaeda Central "is still substantial" and relieved to see that Sageman has finally recognized the continued danger posed by al Qaeda's centralized command-and-control apparatus.

Three or four years ago, Sageman's "bunch of guys" bottom-up thesis about the nature of the contemporary terrorist threat may have seemed compelling. Less was known then about the extent to which al Qaeda had regrouped and reorganized along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. But ever since the July 7, 2005, attacks in London and the plot to bomb airplanes over the Atlantic that was foiled in August 2006, evidence has continually come to light about al Qaeda Central's top-down direction of these and other operations.

Rather than address such facts, however, Sageman claims that I have mischaracterized his work and selectively quoted him out of context. I have not. The book's very first paragraph -- exactly the place one would expect to find an author's statement concerning the fundamental thesis of his work -- argues that "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," and the rest of the book expands on that point.

As for methodology, Sageman writes in these pages that "in science, the strength of the evidence should trump loyalty to authority." But he seems not to understand that science is cumulative. Sageman publicly shared his data on the "bunches of guys" he studied for his last book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, but he has not done the same with his data for *Leaderless Jihad*. The type of appendix that appeared in the first book, with the names of his subjects and brief biographies, is absent from the second. It is therefore impossible for a reader to determine if Sageman's new evidence really is superior to other existing data. It is also curious that an author who rails in his book against scholars who supposedly rely on information from "mysterious sources -- anonymous tips from the 'intelligence community' -- that cannot be verified" defends himself by citing "what I have heard from law enforcement agencies around the world during my extensive consultations with them."

Sageman alleges that my review of *Leaderless Jihad* was written "for the sake of scoring political points." This is offensive and absurd. I have been arguing that al Qaeda is on the march, not on the run, for two years now -- long before doing so was either fashionable or accepted wisdom inside the U.S. government or out. I reached this conclusion on the basis of empirical evidence indicating that al Qaeda Central had reconstituted itself in Pakistan's tribal frontier areas and from that base was again actively directing and initiating international terrorist operations on a grand scale. This dispute is not about personalities or politics or recondite academic theories but about the true nature of the United States' most pressing national security concerns. In such circumstances, the need for meticulous research and accurate analysis could not be greater.