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WEST POINT CTC SUMMARIES

LEADERLESS JIHAD:

Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century,
(University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)



PREFACE

Dr. Marc Sageman, M.D., Ph.D., is a forensic psychiatrist and government counterterrorism consultant. He holds various academic and professional positions, including Scholar in Residence at the New York Police Department, Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, among others. Dr. Sageman joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1984. He spent a year on the Afghan Task Force then went to Islamabad from 1987 to 1989, where he ran the U.S. unilateral programs with the Afghan Mujahedin, and New Delhi from 1989–91. In 1991, he resigned from the agency to return to medicine. Since 1994, he has been in the private practice of forensic and clinical psychiatry and has had the opportunity to evaluate about 500 murderers. After 9/11, Dr. Sageman began collecting biographical material on about 500 al Qaeda terrorists to test the validity of the conventional wisdom on terrorism. He is the author of the bestselling *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

The global Islamist terrorist threat is rapidly evolving. Islamic terror networks of the twenty-first century are becoming more fluid, independent, and unpredictable than their more structured forebears that conducted the 9/11 attacks. The present threat in the West has evolved from infiltration by outside trained terrorists against whom international cooperation and border protection are effective to homegrown, self-financed, self-trained terrorists. Dr. Sageman describes this scattered global network of homegrown wannabes as a “leaderless jihad”. The groups that form this movement are physically unconnected from al Qaeda and each other, yet form a violent, virtual social movement. The most effective countermeasure to combat this homegrown terrorism threat is to interrupt the

radicalization process before it reaches its violent end.

This book builds upon Dr. Sageman’s previous volume, *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004), and utilizes the same approach of applying the scientific method to the study of terrorism. Whereas in his previous book the author worked from a dataset of 172 terrorist subjects, in *Leaderless Jihad* he has built a database of over 500 terrorists from which to draw conclusions.

CT INSIGHTS

- The most effective countermeasure to combat the homegrown terrorist threat is to interrupt the radicalization process before it reaches its violent end.

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE PATH TO RADICALISM

Dr. Sageman begins with an anecdotal story about Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the man convicted of kidnapping *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. The author follows his life from early accounts of his childhood from family and friends to later accounts of Omar Sheikh’s life from fellow inmates during his imprisonment. Several accounts in the media—“he was such a nice guy”—betray the conventional wisdom that there is inherently something wrong with terrorists. Other accounts explain Omar’s terrorist career as the natural result of alienation and discrimination

he faced as a second-generation Pakistani growing up in London. While media accounts typically offer a simplistic model to explain why one chooses terrorism, Dr. Sageman argues that the true story is much more nuanced and complex. Despite different accounts from family, friends, fellow inmates, and even Omar himself to explain his path toward violence, Omar’s story reveals the centrality of the radicalization process. In this book, Dr. Sageman seeks to develop insights into this radicalization process and devise practical recommendations to interrupt it.

CHAPTER ONE: HOW TO STUDY TERRORISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Dr. Sageman argues that the most fruitful method for the study of terrorism and the radicalization process involves the rigorous application of the scientific method, using such tools as statistics, sampling theory, survey techniques, measurement, and data analysis. The scientific method helps avoid biases inherent in several common approaches to the study of terrorism. For example, the popular biographical approach, as seen in the previous chapter’s story of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, overly emphasizes the individual and ignores situational factors. On the other hand, a broad “root causes” approach examining the social conditions that lead individuals to become terrorists is overly deterministic and static. Dr. Sageman calls

for a “middle-range” analytical approach that seeks to bridge the gap between biographical (micro-level) accounts of terrorist subjects and broad, sociological (macro-level) explanations of terrorism. This middle-range approach aims to study the relationships of terrorists in context: their relationship with each other, their relationship with ideas present in their environment, and their relationship with people and organizations outside of their group.

In *Leaderless Jihad*, the author limits the scope of his study to what he terms “global Islamist terrorists”—of which the most recognizable quantity is al Qaeda and its affiliated social movement. As he puts it, the

CHAPTER ONE: HOW TO STUDY TERRORISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (CONT.)

500 subjects in his sample are “the men responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks and all those who, like them, threaten the United States and the West on behalf of a larger community, the vanguard trying to establish a certain vision of an Islamist utopia”. Dr. Sageman constructed this data set from scratch, utilizing captured documents, court records, investigative journalism, academic publications, and other open source information. While he could have used an existing open source database, such as the

Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism’s (MIPT) Terrorism Knowledge Base or the National Counterterrorism Center’s (NCTC) World Incidence Tracking System, these incident-based tools lend themselves to the study of certain general trends in terrorism, such as the frequency of terrorist operations. They typically do not offer the appropriate level of granularity to study the radicalization process, the author’s primary goal.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GLOBALIZATION OF JIHADI TERROR

In chapter two, Dr. Sageman makes a distinction between al Qaeda the organization and the broader jihadi social movement. While he feels that using the term al Qaeda to describe both the social movement and the specific organization muddles our thinking on the subject, he fears it is too late to overcome popular usage of the term. Al Qaeda originally referred to the name of the organization formed by Osama bin Laden whose members swore allegiance (*bay'at* in Arabic) to him and his designated lieutenants. Dr. Sageman argues that this core—what he calls “al Qaeda Central”—has faded in importance in recent years as a result of the closing of training camps in Afghanistan, the halt of financial transfers, and the capture or killing of key personnel. However, while al Qaeda Central is constrained, the looser social movement is expanding. The al Qaeda social movement consists of informal terrorist networks across the globe that mobilize people to take up violent jihad. While these groups are not linked organizationally, they are part of a larger terrorist campaign and are linked together by mutual feelings of solidarity and a general ideology.

Dr. Sageman contrasts the al Qaeda brand of terrorism with earlier terrorist movements that included anarchism, anti-colonialism, and left-wing radicalism. Al Qaeda’s terrorism, like other “fourth wave” religious terrorist movements, is built on the belief that the world has decayed into a morass of greed and moral depravity. While most global jihadists today generally follow a Salafist ideology—referring to a revivalist Islamist ideology that blames Western influence for corrupting the virtuous Muslim community—the

author also notes that there is a tremendous diversity of beliefs and doctrines within this Salafi movement. Most Salafis advocate the peaceful transformation of society through face-to-face preaching. Others—such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—call for the creation of a vanguard political party to compete at the polls. Over time, some factions of this movement eschewed the ballot box and missionary work, believing the state could never be captured through peaceful means. These groups instead chose violence to broadcast their message.

Among those who called for violent jihad, a debate emerged in the 1970s about whether to focus their efforts on the “near enemy” (the local ruler) or the “far enemy” (the Israeli state at that time). Sayyid Qutb and his main disciple, Muhammad Abdel Salam Faraj, were two of the most eloquent thinkers to advocate violent jihadist tactics at this time. Faraj argued that the movement could not take on the far enemy until the near enemy was defeated. However, by the mid-1990s the followers of Qutb and Faraj had not overthrown any of their governments and became frustrated. A hardline faction emerged from this movement, which argued that the far enemy—in this case the West, but especially the United States and France—was propping up the near enemy. Those jihadists that took up the strategy of expelling the far enemy from the Middle East comprise the *global* Islamist terrorists and are the primary subjects of this book. Groups that continue to target the near enemy—such as Hamas or Hezbollah—are beyond the scope of the author’s study.

CHAPTER THREE: THE JIHADIST’S PROFILE

In this chapter, Dr. Sageman walks through some of the most common myths about what drives individuals to terrorism and compares these theories against his data.

Poverty? One of the most popular explanations for terrorism is poverty, although the data shows that the al Qaeda social movement is solidly middle class. However, differences in this socioeconomic composition are evident over time. Dr. Sageman divides the global Islamist terrorists into three waves to explore this generational rift. The first wave, which represents the old guard who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and who form the core of al Qaeda Central, was almost equally divided between upper class and middle class. The second wave comprises those who joined the jihad in the 1990s, often motivated by the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines. This group was largely middle class. The third wave represents the post-Iraqi

invasion generation. The most visible portion of this wave are second and third generation immigrants in Europe who come from lower socioeconomic status than their predecessors. However, Dr. Sageman admits that we know very little about the third wave of global Islamists that come from the Middle East.

Brainwashing? Another popular theory of terrorism is that individuals are brainwashed, either by their religion, families, cultures, or Islamic schools. Dr. Sageman challenges the religious version of the brainwashing hypothesis by arguing that the vast majority of terrorists are not well-educated in religion. Only one quarter of his sample was deeply religious when they were young and roughly two-thirds was secular. Again, there is a generational divide. While the first wave came from relatively pious families, the second and third waves are conspicuous for their lack of formal religious upbringing. Another version of this hypothesis

CHAPTER THREE: THE JIHADIST'S PROFILE (CONT.)

states that terrorists are brainwashed by their schools—what Dr. Sageman calls the “madrassa theory”. However, only 13 percent of the sample attended a madrassa. In fact, the author suggests that a lack of formal religious training likely makes subjects more susceptible to radical interpretations of the Quran, a topic he covers later in the book.

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Terrorist groups commonly form among diaspora communities.**
- **Al Qaeda Central does not appear to have an effective top-down recruiting strategy.**

third wave is closer to 20 years, suggesting that the pool of global Islamist terrorists is getting younger. Dr. Sageman also points out that the majority of his sample attended university, whereas only 10 percent of young Muslims in the Middle East does. This discredits the notion that terrorists are ignorant and join the jihad because they do not know any better.

Lack of responsibility? Conventional wisdom would suggest that people are more likely to become terrorists because they do not have any responsibilities, such as a family or a job, which might steer them away from terrorism. However, the majority of Dr. Sageman’s sample held professional or semi-professional jobs and about three-fourths of the terrorists were married. Again, there is variation over time, with a greater percentage of terrorist subjects that are unemployed or unmarried in the emerging third wave of jihadis.

Sexual frustration? Dr. Sageman does not take the variants of this argument very seriously. Three-fourths of his sample was married and about two-thirds had children (often many). The author believes that the sexual frustration hypothesis shows that we are so eager to believe that terrorists are different we will believe almost anything about their motivations.

CHAPTER FOUR: RADICALIZATION IN THE DIASPORA

Dr. Sageman argues that the 9/11 attacks, and especially the invasion of Iraq, mark a watershed in the evolution of the global jihadist threat to the West. The threat is no longer “foreign fanatics” but rather individuals who grew up in the West and became radicalized there. Rather than hardening national borders against an outside threat, an effective counterterrorism strategy should seek to understand the process of radicalization and devise measures to prevent its reaching the point of violence. In this chapter, Dr. Sageman more fully develops his four-pronged model for understanding the radicalization process: moral outrage, interpretation as a war against Islam, resonance with personal experience, and mobilization through networks. This is not a sequential model; there are many interactions

Bad or mad? Another popular explanation posits that terrorists act as they do because there is something wrong with them personally. There are two versions of this argument: that they are inherently criminal (“bad”) or that they are psychologically abnormal (“mad”). Dr. Sageman finds only a small incidence of arrests or imprisonment in his sample of terrorist subjects. There were many cases of second and third wave terrorist subjects who committed petty crimes, but this most often was in an effort to self-finance their operations. Additionally, the data did not reveal any evidence of above average levels of mental disorders among global Islamist terrorists. The only subject in his sample who showed signs of being a sociopath or psychopath was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who headed al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) at the end of his terrorist career.

What matters then? While Dr. Sageman’s analysis has challenged much of the conventional wisdom about terrorists, the data also offers insight into common situational variables present when subjects joined a terrorist organization. One of the frequent themes was that of being an expatriate. About 60 percent of the terrorist subjects in the sample were living in a country in which they did not grow up and another 20 percent were second or third generation Muslim immigrants in the West—in total, 84 percent of Dr. Sageman’s sample was in the diaspora. This finding is consistent with other studies on terrorism: The IRA started in a pub in Boston, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka receive support from diaspora communities in London and Toronto, and Basque separatists find sanctuary in France.

Dr. Sageman finds that joining the global Islamist terrorist movement is based to a large degree on friendship and kinship. About two-thirds of those in the sample were friends with others who joined the jihad or had some connection to terrorism while about one-fifth of those in his sample were close relatives—sons, brothers, first cousins—of people who already had joined a terrorist organization. Dr. Sageman was surprised about the apparent lack of any top-down recruitment program into al Qaeda. Rather, the global Islamist terrorist social movement forms through the spontaneous self-organization of informal “bunches of guys,” trusted friends, from the bottom-up. The Hamburg cell and the 7/7 London attackers sought out al Qaeda, not the other way around.

among these dimensions of radicalization and an individual need not complete each step to become fully radicalized.

Moral outrage. In nearly all of their writings, speeches, and memoirs, global jihadists discuss the suffering of fellow Muslims. Images, videos, and discussions of Muslims suffering worldwide are the most common acts that trigger moral outrage for terrorist subjects. This sense of moral outrage is often experienced vicariously, with terrorist subjects speaking out for their fellow brothers even though they have not experienced the act personally. Dr. Sageman states that the media is the primary vehicle for broadcasting moral violations. This is especially true for the second and third wave

CHAPTER FOUR: RADICALIZATION IN THE DIASPORA (CONT.)

of terrorists, whom have been mobilized by images from Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, and now Iraq.

War against Islam. Dr. Sageman argues that a sense of moral outrage alone is insufficient to mobilize an individual to join the jihad. Individuals need to interpret moral violations in a certain context that affects them personally to be mobilized to violence. To the

global jihadists, the West is perceived to be engaged in an apocalyptic war against Islam. This is the backdrop for the self-appointed “heroes” of the global Islamist terrorist movement who view themselves as waging a war against an evil cabal of “Jews and Crusaders” that is manipulating the world. Dr. Sageman argues that all global Islamist terrorist ideologies share a moral reductionism, which ascribes simple causes, and their implied remedies, to complex events. This simplicity makes them easy to grasp, explain, and accept.

In this sense, global Islamist terrorism is “more about how the terrorists feel than about how they think”—therefore, imagery and emotions are more important than concepts.

Resonance with personal experience. Many people are exposed to the jihadist interpretation, but most do not internalize it. Dr. Sageman argues that an individual is far more likely to adopt the jihadist interpretation if it resonates with one’s everyday experiences. Local grievances, often inflicted through police actions, give global moral violations a new relevance and immediacy. Through this mechanism, the moral outrages from the local and global contexts reinforce each other and are viewed as part of the same whole—a war against Islam. When young Muslims feel personally

involved in this perceived struggle, they are far more likely to join the global jihadist cause. The author notes that the role of local grievances are most evident in Europe, where diaspora Muslims do not fare as well as their host counterparts for a number of reasons explored in the next chapter.

Mobilized by networks. Dr. Sageman argues that mobilization through networks is a key ingredient that can transform angry young Muslims into terrorists. In the previous chapter he argued that the global jihad was typically a collective process, based on friendship or kinship. Intimate groups have a strong influence on members. All of the terrorist subjects in Dr. Sageman’s sample emerged from informal networks of young Muslims, either as face-to-face groups or virtual online groups. While the author focuses on the role of the internet in another chapter, here he considers only offline groups. Many of the terrorist networks in the author’s sample emerged from neighborhood gangs, Muslim student associations, or study groups that formed around radical mosques. A mere twelve Islamic institutions in the world generated about half of Dr. Sageman’s sample of terrorist networks. The disproportionate nature of this finding is due to the role of kinship and friendship in joining the jihad. There is a tremendous amount of self-selection involved in the radicalization and mobilization processes, and during group formation former friends and acquaintances inevitably peel off from the group as radical interpretations harden. As these informal networks become more ideologically homogenous, the group acts as an “echo chamber”, encouraging escalation of grievances and beliefs in conspiracy to the point of hatred. In-group love breeds out-group hate. Dr. Sageman uses the Madrid train bombers as an example of the intensity of group ties. The young men did not carry out suicide attacks, but later committed a form of group suicide when Spanish police with arrest warrants surrounded their apartment.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ATLANTIC DIVIDE

Dr. Sageman argues that there are far fewer homegrown global Islamist terrorists in the United States than in Europe due to differences in the rate of radicalization in their respective Muslim communities. He argues that this is the primary reason that the United States has not experienced a terrorist follow-up to the 9/11 events, despite U.S. counterterrorism officials boasting of successes in the “Global War on Terror”. In Europe, there have been over 2,300 arrests related to Islamist terrorism since September 11, 2001, compared to only about 60 in the United States. When put in per capita terms among respective Muslim populations, the rate of arrest for terrorism charges is six times higher in Europe than in the United States. Dr. Sageman also adds that terrorist suspects in the United States are arrested at a much earlier stage in the evolution of their plots than in Europe, so the numbers are not the result of more aggressive law enforcement efforts in Europe.

Dr. Sageman compares the dynamics of radicalization in Europe and the United States using the four-pronged outline presented in the previous chapter. First looking at the Muslim sense of moral outrage, he suggests that the invasion of Iraq has been the

primary factor that has galvanized the global Islamist terrorist movement. However, this does not explain the difference in levels of radicalization in the United States and Europe. Rather, Dr. Sageman suggests that the high level of *local* moral violations in Europe contribute to the greater sense of radicalization there. In particular, European approaches to policing have caused alienation among Muslims communities. Dr. Sageman contrasts European law enforcement efforts with “community policing” efforts in the United States, where the aim is to develop a police force that is not only a reflection of the community but an integral part of it. For example, the population of New York City is about one-third foreign-born, and so is the New York Police Department (NYPD). However, police forces in Europe are predominately Caucasian, with the result that white police officers are patrolling local immigrant enclaves, which are predominately North African or South Asian Muslim. Furthermore, after the 7/7 bombings in London, British authorities created an additional set of problems by making mistakes such as the killing of a Brazilian expatriate on suspicion of terrorism and the shooting of two Bangladeshi Muslims with no link to terrorism.

CTC INSIGHTS

- **Joining the jihad is typically a collective process, based on friendship and kinship.**
- **Local grievances, especially police actions perceived to be unfair by Muslim communities, are a principal driver in the radicalization process.**

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ATLANTIC DIVIDE (CONT.)

CT INSIGHTS

- **Western Europe is a key breeding ground of the “leaderless jihad”. More than 2,300 terrorist suspects have been arrested there since 9/11, compared to only about 60 in the United States.**
- **A high level of local moral violations in Europe—namely police actions perceived as unfair—contribute to the higher rate of radicalization there.**
- **The “melting pot” mentality and the “American Dream” (whether myth or reality) partially protects the United States from homegrown terrorism. Polls show that Muslim Americans are stronger believers in the idea of the American Dream (71 percent) than the American general public (64 percent).**

Dr. Sageman suggests that several features of American culture help prevent the American Muslim population from believing in the “war against Islam” interpretation of post-9/11 events. The American national myth of a melting pot promotes policies that are more accepting of foreigners and their integration into society than in Europe. Essence-based European nationalism often promotes policies that discriminate against Muslims and other foreigners in the name of preserving a certain national heritage. Dr. Sageman also uses polling data to show that Muslim Americans are stronger believers in the idea of the “American Dream” (71 percent) than the American general public (64 percent). However, polls in Europe show that European Muslims complain far more about economic discrimination and exclusion than their American counterparts. American individualism also makes it harder for Muslim Americans to interpret their world in collective terms, such as part of a war against Islam. Finally, Dr. Sageman argues that American society is generally viewed as more open and the economy is more dynamic than in Europe. The emphasis on individual responsibility and the openness of society

promotes grassroots voluntarism, which anchors citizens in their community and offers a sense of local empowerment. In Europe, however, perceived social rigidities discourage voluntarism and leads to apathy and an expectation that the state should step in and provide social services.

The interpretation of a war against Islam also resonates more with a Muslim European audience because of differences in the histories of Muslim immigration to Europe and the United States. Muslim Americans are solidly upper middle class and professionals while Muslim Europeans are predominately unskilled laborers that came to Europe as economic migrants. As the Muslim population in Europe has expanded, labor restrictions have discriminated against foreign workers. The unemployment rate among young Muslim European males is about two to three times higher than the comparable unemployment rate in the “native” population. Dr. Sageman does note that European governments are starting to understand this problem, although it has been a difficult issue to tackle. When the French government passed legislation to loosen the labor market in spring 2006, widespread protests from students and labor unions caused the government to shelve the project indefinitely. Dr. Sageman argues that this sent a clear message to young immigrants, who are de facto excluded from the economy. Differences in welfare policies across the Atlantic also impact the process of radicalization. In the United States, to receive welfare payments an individual must show that he or she is actively looking for employment. However, generous welfare policies in Europe remove the urgency to find regular work and allow greater leisure time to become full-time Islamist terrorist wannabes. As Dr. Sageman states, “the harmful effects of idleness and boredom cannot be overstated?”.

CHAPTER SIX: TERRORISM IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

The growth of the Internet has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of global Islamist terrorism by changing the nature of terrorists’ interactions. In Chapter 4, Dr. Sageman discussed the importance of face-to-face interaction and mobilization through networks. He does not discount the role of personal interactions, but rather argues that interaction via the Internet is able to serve many of the same functions in the radicalization process. However, the nature of this influence is often misunderstood by terrorism analysts, who tend to focus on passive websites displaying terrorist propaganda and do-it-yourself bomb making instructions. The real engine of radicalization on the Internet comes from online communication systems such as email, listserves, and, especially, forums and chat rooms. It is the interactivity of these tools that is important.

Dr. Sageman’s argues that beginning in around 2004, communications and inspiration among global Islamist terrorists shifted from face-to-face interaction to the Internet. Prior to this, most terrorist networks and plots were a result of personal connections. The Madrid bombers were inspired by a document posted on the influential Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) website in December 2003. Other terrorist plots after this point that utilized

online communications include the Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, the Toronto 18 suspects, the Crevice case in the United Kingdom, and the April 2005 Cairo Khan al-Khalili bombing, among others. Dr. Sageman argues that the increased usage of online communication methods was not planned by any central organization. Rather, it is simply the result of the growth in the Internet and heightened monitoring of more traditional terrorist meeting places, such as radical mosques, by police forces. While this shift toward virtual mobilization was not planned, it has resulted in a number of significant changes in the global Islamist terrorist landscape. The average age of terrorist subjects in Dr. Sageman’s original sample for his 2004 book was 26, while the average age of those detained since 2006 is 20. This is a significant decrease and reflects the enhanced

CT INSIGHTS

- **Since 2004, chat rooms and web forums on the Internet have been the primary engine of radicalization among the global Islamist terrorists.**
- **The Internet provides a relatively safe environment for fence-sitters to explore terrorist fantasies and aspirations without physically committing to an organization.**

CHAPTER SIX: TERRORISM IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET (CONT.)

role of computer-literate youth in the global Islamist terrorist movement. Another noticeable change is in the role of women. Previously, females were conspicuously absent from the ranks of global Islamist terrorists. However, there is some evidence showing that women are increasingly active in jihadist chat rooms and in some cases have even played a central role in the radicalization process. In the Hofstad case, women lured potential recruits into their informal network and motivated their men to become more active—culminating in the murder of Theo van Gogh. Another noteworthy change facilitated by the Internet is that there is an inversion of power in the global Islamist terrorist movement. Nowadays it is the unknown followers and sympathizers engaged in chat rooms and other online forums whose actions matter, not the actions of central al Qaeda leadership. Computer-mediated communications make the evolving “leaderless jihad” possible, according to Dr. Sageman. Online interactions also empower loner jihadi wannabes, who are only “lone wolves” offline.

Dr. Sageman references several studies that have concluded that computer-mediated communications can provide greater group intimacy than offline groups. For example, some studies have demonstrated that because of the apparent anonymity of the Internet, people are more likely to self-disclose, which contributes to strong feelings of intimacy. The most obvious example is the growth of online dating, although Dr. Sageman points out the more pernicious results of this finding: Hundreds of suicidal Japanese teenagers unknown to each other have met online in special forums and met up the next day to collectively commit suicide. The mutual support of the group gives such individuals the courage to commit acts they may not have otherwise done alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RISE OF LEADERLESS JIHAD

In mid-2007, several commentators on terrorism argued that we are seeing a resurgence of al Qaeda Central. The July 2007 *National Intelligence Estimate: The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland* also shares this alarmist tone. Dr. Sageman is skeptical of the claim of a resurgent al Qaeda. He concedes that al Qaeda Central leadership has regrouped somewhat in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) of Waziristan, Pakistan, but has not developed to anywhere near the pre-9/11 scale. Dr. Sageman argues that we are seeing a limited consolidation of al Qaeda Central, but that this is far from resurgence. Numerous “little al Qaedas” have sprung up everywhere in the world—such as the al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—but these are only al Qaeda in name, trying to acquire the group’s reputation by association. In fact, a great debate has emerged in terrorist chat rooms among leaders and followers of the former Algerian GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat), with many traditional leaders rejecting the adoption of the al Qaeda name. Still, Dr. Sageman concedes that there are some worrisome trends. Al Qaeda has markedly improved its media savvy and the organization’s propaganda campaigns have increased noticeably—mostly due to its production arm As Sahab. Al Qaeda also seems to be spearheading a campaign of terror in Afghanistan. The virtual merger between al Qaeda and the Taliban

These same principles apply to terrorist web forums and chat rooms. The Internet provides a relatively innocuous entry point for fence-sitters to explore terrorist fantasies and aspirations without physically committing to a terrorist group. As online groups form and interact over time, mutual sharing makes them feel ever closer to each other in a virtual process similar to what was described earlier as in-group love. As the online dialogue intensifies and becomes more violent, the group hardens their beliefs through a process called the illusion of numbers. Participation is active; individuals seek out chat rooms most compatible with their views and abandon those they disagree with. Whereas in a physical terrorist cell the group debates ideology and strategy face-to-face, in the virtual world terrorists vote with their computer mice and select the views they like. Competing terrorist ideologies and leaders coexist peacefully online without the need to eliminate each other, as is often the case in offline terrorist organizations. In a sense, leadership of the virtual jihad has been “democratized” and may be up for grabs. Dr. Sageman cites the case of Younis Tsouli, the famous Irhabi007 (Terrorist 007 in Arabic) as an online jihadi. With no prior history of terrorist activity, Tsouli was invited to join two password protected forums in early 2004. He immediately became a prolific participant in both forums and people started deferring to him, mostly due to his technical proficiency with the Internet as opposed to his merits in combat. Tsouli soon became a key role player in the virtual jihad, even earning praise from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Though eventually arrested and now serving a 10-year prison sentence, the career of Younis Tsouli demonstrates the inversion of power in the age of the Internet.

has unleashed a local resurgence (yes, the term is correct in this context) of Taliban-related bombings and attacks in Afghanistan. However, Dr. Sageman argues that this is a limited marriage of convenience, and says that Pushtun al Qaeda members have a dual allegiance and that if push comes to shove, they will again betray the foreign Arab fighters.

However, the long-term trend does not favor al Qaeda Central, according to Dr. Sageman. The rapid succession of al Qaeda military commanders since 9/11—Abu Hafs al Masri, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Faraj al Libi, Hamza Hamza Rabia, Abdur Rahman al Muhajir, Abdel Hadi al Iraqi—indicates that the operational leaders are still members of the first wave. Moreover, much of the al Qaeda Central leaders as of mid-2007 were only middle-level leaders a couple years earlier. As first wave leadership has diminished, second and third wave terrorists have not stepped in to replenish the ranks. The lack of organizational depth in al Qaeda Central suggests a different conclusion than that offered by the alarmists. Rather than a resurgence, Dr. Sageman argues that the organization is shrinking and contained operationally. However, while al Qaeda Central is in hiding and degraded, the al Qaeda social movement is alive and well, fueled by the American invasion and occupation of Iraq.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RISE OF LEADERLESS JIHAD (CONT.)

The informal groups forming the post-9/11 and post-Iraqi third wave of terrorism are self-generating, but with very few exceptions can no longer establish any physical link to al Qaeda Central. Worldwide counterterrorism policies and enhanced border security have made many of these members skeptical of foreign travel. As a result, these networks have begun to conduct operations inside their own borders. The attacks in Casablanca, Spain, London, and Amsterdam are successful examples of this homegrown trend; however, the thousands of arrests of terrorist plotters worldwide show the widespread nature of the threat. Today's terrorist plots have no or only a faint link to al Qaeda Central. While the global Islamist terrorist pool has increased—Dr. Sageman estimates that the third wave consists of thousands of individuals while the second wave had only a few hundred terrorists—there has been a noticeable deterioration in the quality of operations and tradecraft over the last few years. Homegrown terrorists are self-trained and self-financed, which limits their operational effectiveness. To some extent this has not mattered, since recent European terrorist attacks appear to have been low cost operations. The greatest obstacle to a terrorist operation is not finance but expertise. This lack of technical expertise and training is the most significant consequence of third wave networks' inability to link up with al Qaeda Central. These new groups become dangerous when they link up with a trained bomb maker, as the London 7/7 bombers did. However, even training does not guarantee success, as the London 7/21 group demonstrated.

The concept of the "leaderless jihad" is the result of these bottom-up homegrown terrorist networks shaped by top-down counterter-

rorism policies targeting al Qaeda Central. The breakup of the global al Qaeda network, the hostile local environment, the hardening of national borders, and the availability of the Internet has spawned a vast but disconnected global network of likeminded terrorists. The Internet is a key lubricator of this movement. However, the common agenda of the third wave found on the Internet is basically anti-Western political violence, which is the lowest common denominator of the various ideologies of global Islamist terrorism. Dr. Sageman argues that among the third wave there is little evidence of a grand coordinated international plan or coherent political strategy. Terrorist attacks have their own internal logic, but that's it. The leaderless and disconnected structure of the global jihad constitutes at the same time its strength (survivability and adaptability) and its weakness (lack of clear direction and strategic goals).

CT INSIGHTS

- **The merger between al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan is only a marriage of convenience. As such, it is likely only a temporary phenomenon.**
- **Operational leaders within al Qaeda Central are still drawn from the old guard. Second and third wave terrorists have not stepped in to replenish the organization's ranks.**
- **The greatest obstacle to a successful terrorist operation is not finance but technical expertise.**
- **The leaderless and disconnected structure of the global Islamist jihad constitutes at the same time its strength (survivability and adaptability) and its weakness (lack of clear direction and strategic goals).**

CHAPTER EIGHT: COMBATING GLOBAL ISLAMIST TERRORISM

In this chapter, Dr. Sageman offers several counterterrorism insights and policy recommendations to mitigate the threat of global Islamist terrorism. The threat emanating from the leaderless jihad is not existential, he argues, so the goal should therefore be to contain it at its present state and allow self-limiting features of the global Islamist terrorist movement to run their course. Because the potential long-term threat—hostility against the United States growing beyond the few thousands in the al Qaeda social movement to encompass tens of millions of Muslims—is far more serious than any present threat, the approach to fighting global Islamist terrorism beyond the present situation is the real challenge. Dr. Sageman draws up a "containment strategy for the twenty-first century", which draws several parallels between fighting global Islamist extremists and waging the Cold War. Al Qaeda Central is hunted everywhere and has only continued to make enemies. This failure to attain a protected sanctuary is the very reason the third wave has evolved, out of necessity, as a "leaderless jihad". The key to this movement's continued existence will be its ability to attract young Muslims to its ranks. The sources of its appeal are not universal, but are sustained by American actions perceived to be part of a war against Islam. Without this fuel, young Muslims will no longer find their global Islamist terrorist elders to be "cool" and will move onto newer hopes and aspirations. As Dr.

Sageman puts it: "This need not be a long war, unless American policies make it so".

Several of Dr. Sageman's policy recommendations aim to take the glory out of terrorism and diminish the sense of moral outrage that drives young Muslims toward terrorism. For more than 150 years, people have joined terrorist organizations for individual and collective glory and to build a better world on behalf of an imagined community. A successful counterterrorism strategy should therefore take the glory and thrill out of terrorism. The "Rewards for Justice Program", which posts and ranks terrorists by the price the U.S. government will pay for their capture, has been a general failure and instead turns nobodies into heroes. Dr. Sageman most vocally opposes self-congratulating press conferences at which government officials celebrate their newest victories in the "global war on terrorism". A better alternative, he says, would be to treat terrorists as common criminals: "there is no glory in being taken to prison in handcuffs".

To diminish the sense of Muslim moral outrage, Dr. Sageman says that the single-most effective step the U.S. can take is to remove American troops from Iraq. The invasion and occupation of Iraq has galvanized the third wave of global Islamist terrorists, since images of the American military fighting in Muslim lands triggers

CHAPTER EIGHT: COMBATING GLOBAL ISLAMIST TERRORISM (CONT.)

moral outrage and inspires sympathizers to join the movement. Another step would be for the U.S. to make a good faith attempt to broker a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Dr. Sageman says that credibility is a key factor in this arena. Muslims understand that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is complicated, but the appearance of an honest broker is all that is required of the United States. In addition, counterterrorism efforts must exclusively focus on the perpetrators, and not on a more general segment of the population. This is difficult in the age of leaderless jihad, since the spectrum of activities of those associated with the movement ranges from tacit support to active plotting of attacks. Distinguishing who is a “terrorist” and who is not in this dynamic is not easy. However, overzealous law enforcement activities that alienate the Muslim community are counterproductive. Dr. Sageman concedes that winning over the hardliners is next to impossible, but that it is feasible to influence the fence-sitters.

The author also recommends policy actions to counter the enemy’s appeal. However, Dr. Sageman eschews Western-directed counter-messaging efforts that over-intellectualize the fight. The data shows that terrorists are far from ideologues or religious scholars. The lack of religious education is most striking in the third wave of global Islamist terrorists who constitute the leaderless jihad. These subjects are typically poorly educated and do not understand the Quran, yet we seek to engage them in intellectual debates about the legitimacy of an extreme interpretation of a religious message. Dr. Sageman believes it is not the role of the West to tell Muslims what is Islam and what is not. This should be an internal debate among Muslims. The author hopes that more non-violent Muslims will enter this debate in online chat rooms and other offline forums, but it is not the place of non-Muslims to promote—and potentially discredit—such voices. Young Muslims need alternate local heroes within their communities—especially in Muslim European enclaves and the Middle East, where such heroes are rare. Dr. Sageman also calls for better American public diplomacy. The U.S. would do well to condemn putative allies that commit atrocities against Muslims in the name of the “Global War on Terror”, such as the Russian intervention in Chechnya. Better educating American citizens about the global Islamist terrorist threat would also go a long way to getting past what Dr. Sageman calls the “boogeyman” approach. However, domestic democratic politics get in the way of this as pundits cannot afford to be seen as “soft on terror”.

Dr. Sageman further calls for policies to eliminate real and perceived discrimination against Muslims. The global Islamist terrorist interpretation appeals to certain Muslims because it resonates with their personal experiences. This is mostly a Western European problem, for the melting pot mentality and the American dream (whether myth or reality) partially protects the United States. The French attempt to liberalize labor markets in the spring 2006 was a good first step, although the government ultimately shelved it after students and labor unions protested the move. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Sageman, this sent a negative message to European immigrant communities and particularly young Muslims. Police forces in Eu-

rope should also be reformed to better reflect the communities in which they operate. The local police should never be viewed as the enemy by the Muslim community. Dr. Sageman cites U.S. Department of Homeland Security-led regional “fusion centers” as a positive example of collaboration and integration between federal and local law enforcement agencies. This provides an ideal mix of federal expertise on terrorism with local knowledge of the community.

Dr. Sageman also calls for greater funding of scientific research on terrorism. Just as the federal government initiated nationwide projects on Soviet studies in the 1950s and 1960s to develop expertise to deal with our adversary, it should embark on similar projects in terrorism studies. The current government-sponsored “centers of excellence” on terrorism are isolated from the rest of the academy and do not yet attract the best graduate students. Dr. Sageman also says that excessive government secrecy hinders the collection of relevant data on terrorism. Some government concern with secrecy is legitimate. But homeland security was not compromised by the declassification of large parts of the interrogation of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, and others for the 9/11 Commission report. A strategic approach more grounded in scientific research would serve counterterrorist officials well. For example, the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) portions of the NSCT offers recommendations based on hypothetical worst-case scenarios while ignoring the empirical data on terrorists using WMD. While the NSCT emphasizes the nuclear terrorist threat, Dr. Sageman says that the far more serious threat in terms of feasibility and destructive potential is from live biological agents used in terrorist tools. In the past, there have been six such non-state-sponsored attempts to use biological weapons, and only a failed attempt by al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2000-2001 was carried out by a “terrorist” group. The odds are that a WMD attack on the United States might come, not from any of the well-known terrorist groups already monitored by authorities, but from an informal group not yet the focus of such scrutiny. Groups such as single-issue extremists may fly under the radar of government authorities, and the sort of strategy embodied by the NSCT may prove ineffective against them.

The complexity of solutions offered by Dr. Sageman should alert the reader that there is no simple solution to global Islamist terrorism. Because the threat of al Qaeda is self-limiting in terms of both structural capability and appeal, homeland security is best accomplished through a strategy of bringing to justice real terrorists, containing potential terrorists, and exercising restraint with respect to the Muslim community. Only then will the leaderless jihad expire, poisoned by its own toxic message.

CT INSIGHTS

- A successful counterterrorism strategy should seek to take the glory out of terrorism.
- The demographics of a police force should reflect the communities in which it operates. The police force should be seen as a part of the community as opposed to an enemy of it.