

# Understanding Terror Networks

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

By Marc Sageman. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.  
220 pages.

**Reviewed by Dwight P. Pinkley**

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Today, no subject is more topical for policymakers, the military and intelligence services, and the general public than the Islamist global jihad and the war against terrorism. Dr. Marc Sageman's detailed study, *Understanding Terror Networks*, joins thousands of books in addressing this pressing issue.

Sageman is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. He derives his "terrorism" credentials from the time he spent working with the Afghan mujahedin as a CIA case officer during the Soviet-Afghan War of 1986–89. More recently, he has gained extensive experience as a forensic psychiatrist investigating murderers.

*Understanding Terror Networks* has been widely lauded for debunking the stereotypes of terrorists as "poor, desperate, naïve single young men from third world countries, vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into terror" (69). Many readers have marveled at Sageman's ability to make insightful observations derived solely from research in open sources. For this reason alone, most reviewers have been recommending his book as

an essential read. Before *Studies in Intelligence* recipients jump on the bandwagon, however, they are advised to proceed with caution.

First, a look at what *Understanding Terrorist Networks* is not: It is neither a definitive social analysis of Islamist terrorist networks, nor a conclusive characterization of the psychology of terrorist members. Sageman himself apologizes for the poor quality and insufficient quantity of data on which he has based his analysis: “There is evidence that those on whom enough information exists are not a representative sample of the rest. This inevitably slants the study in specific directions . . . and affects the validity of some of my conclusions” (64). He continues that his “sources included the documents and transcripts of legal proceedings involving global Salafi mujahedin and their organizations, government documents, press and scholarly articles, and Internet articles. The information was often inconsistent” and “the collected information suffers from several limitations” (65). Sageman also expresses regret for relying on journalistic accounts, citing the danger of misinformation, and finishes by identifying the “greatest limit on this inquiry . . .” as being “the lack of a relevant control groups . . .,” which handicapped his ability to “make statements that are specific to terrorists” (69).

Usually after an author convinces me that the kernel of truth lying at the end of a good read is fatally flawed, I decline to invest more time in the work. In this case, however, that would have been a mistake. Although conditioned to be cautious about Sageman’s research, I found further reading did bring its rewards.

What is *Understanding Terrorist Networks* really about? At the end of his biography posted on the Internet, Sageman discloses that the original title of this book, commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania, was *The Bonds of Terror: The Emergence of the Global Salafi Jihad*.<sup>[1]</sup> Chapters One and Two are well written and do an admirable job of describing, in sufficient detail, the evolution of the Salafi jihad. Moreover, in an era when academics and bloggers alike are churning out ever more on terrorism, Sageman succinctly defines what the war is all about: The global jihad, or Islamist fundamentalist movement, is a “worldwide religious revivalist movement with a goal to establish past Muslim glory and authentic Islam in a great Islamist state.” What began as isolated struggles against apostate dictators in Egypt and Uzbekistan or foreign occupiers in Palestine and Afghanistan (the near enemy) has evolved into a philosophically unified, if no longer well-organized, struggle against the powerful and influential western states (the far enemy) that passively and

actively frustrate the emergence of the “great Islamic state.”

Chapter Three begins well with a declaration that the “new global Salafi mujahedin are sufficiently distinct from other terrorists that an in-depth study of their specific characteristics, patterns of joining the jihad, and behavior are needed” (61). When he continues by declining to “muddy the more purely ideological waters of the Global Salafi Jihad” by excluding from his study those Muslims that answered the call to jihad in Kashmir, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Bosnia, however, he falls into the unfortunate analytic trap of structuring his data to facilitate an anticipated outcome. In fact, it is well documented that many terrorists found their way to al-Qa’ida and other Islamist fundamentalist groups through training and fighting at these other “fronts” of the global jihad.

And there are other problems with Chapter Three. On the one hand, Sageman contends that foreign fighters were barely involved in fighting in the Soviet-Afghan war (57); on the other hand, he stipulates that the leadership and founding members of al-Qa’ida were indeed in the fight (70). Next, the author explains that “unlike many political organizations, Salafi groups are careful to avoid a cult of personality” (87); yet, several pages later, he reminds readers that all true members of al-Qa’ida must swear an oath of allegiance, or act of Baya, not only to the organization, but also to Usama bin Laden himself (91).

Sageman’s treatment of terrorist recruitment is equally problematic. He begins well by recognizing that “joining the Jihad is actually a process and not a single decision” (91). He is spot on when he observes that most of those who have joined the jihad did so in a foreign country, and that Muslim expatriates, homesick “especially in an unwelcoming non-Muslim Western country,” look for other Muslims in places like the local mosque (93). Sageman uses two case studies to offer some constructive discussion concerning group social dynamics; however, as he develops the theme of how people of like minds grow closer together at local mosques, he missteps by asserting that the individuals, or “groups of guys,” decide in isolation to join the jihad.

The author reports that some think that “the Global Salafi Jihad mujahedin were recruited in mosques, where they underwent some sort of brainwashing,” a conclusion that he trivializes by noting: “So far, I have read no accounts of sinister al-Qa’ida recruiters lurking in mosques, ready to subvert naïve and passive worshippers” (122). Later, however, Sageman makes a powerful counterargument when he points out that “potential

mujahedin have a hard time joining the Jihad if they do not know how to link up with the movement.” He further observes that “Montreal, London, Milan, Madrid, Hamburg, the Saudi province of Asir have contributed heavily to the global jihad because of the presence of mujahedin who might act as brokers for potential members of the jihad” (142).

The author misses his own point. Recruitment is a process and the strategically located “brokers” (recruiters) spot the talent and facilitate that process. It is true that the religion may be inspirational, but these “groups of guys” that form around study groups at mosques are guided to their inspirations. As Sageman says himself: “This perhaps chance encounter with a formal member of the Global Salafi Jihad is the critical element leading to the enrollment into the Jihad” (121).

Although Sageman errs in concluding that Islamist fundamentalists do not have a deliberate recruitment strategy, he succeeds in applying his knowledge of network theory in practical terms to how Salafi terror networks probably function. In Chapter Five, he discusses the flexibility and performance of small-world networks using a topology of self-organizing hubs and nodes. For anyone trying to imagine how al-Qa’ida may communicate, his observation that their “communications are possible horizontally among multiple nodes, allowing them to solve their problems locally without having to refer them upward to Central Staff and overwhelming the vertical links of communication” (165) helps put this normally complex concept in easily understood terms.

Sageman provides food for thought in his concluding section, which offers well-considered tips on how to prosecute the war. For example, his suggestion that researchers and analysts should focus on the friends and relatives of an identified terrorist, especially those he associated with just before joining, makes excellent sense (178).[2]

The real value of this book, and the reason why the Intelligence Community should pay attention, is that it is symptomatic of current problems associated with analysis of terrorism, both in government and in the popular and academic sectors. Demand for knowledge about terrorists, their motivations and intentions, and the structure and functionality of their organizations far outstrips all of the multitudinous but disparate research efforts underway. Given the great volume of production on the subject, this may seem counterintuitive; however, it is the quality of the output, not the volume, that is in question. Sageman has managed to make some useful observations working exclusively with unclassified

information, despite its flaws. In fact, his goal in part was precisely to demonstrate that serious research on terrorism could be conducted outside “the cloak of secrecy” (ix) of the Intelligence Community.

Nonetheless, one hungers for the additional insights on this critical subject that might emerge from a true pooling of data across agencies and academia.

### **Footnotes:**

[1]See: [www.sandia.gov/ACG/invitedguests/docs/sageman\\_bio.doc](http://www.sandia.gov/ACG/invitedguests/docs/sageman_bio.doc). The term “Salafi” refers to adherents of Salafism, a movement with origins in the 19th century whose goal is the restoration of the pure Islam of the first generation of Muslims (the salaf al-saliheen).

[2]Earlier in his book, Sageman makes another useful observation that has tactical counterterrorism applications: Violations of tenets of Islam by otherwise devout Muslims may “have a more ominous meaning, namely the impending immediacy of an operation, and be a cause for alarm for authorities” (94).

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