
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* by Marc Sageman

Review by: Christina Hellmich

Source: *Democracy and Security*, September-December 2008, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September-December 2008), pp. 318-320

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48602631>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Democracy and Security*

JSTOR

Book Review

Christina Hellmich

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, UK

Marc Sageman: *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

The nature and threat of Al-Qaeda and its local affiliates are changing rapidly: seven years after the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, as a result of the closure of training camps in Afghanistan, the halting of financial transfers and the detention or death of key personnel, it is no longer the major organizing force that aids or authorizes terror attacks and recruits terrorists. Rather, it has become a source of inspiration for numerous local groups which, although commonly perceived and strategically categorized as “Al-Qaeda,” act of their own accord and without any structural connection to the central organization. In carefully illustrating the distinction between the organization or network of “Al-Qaeda Central” and the social movement it inspires, which has effectively acquired an independent dynamic, the central hypothesis of Marc Sageman’s *Leaderless Jihad* makes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about the evolving threat of global jihadism in which the term “Al-Qaeda” is used indiscriminately to describe both.

Written in a journalistic fashion, the book outlines the evolution of Al-Qaeda from a structured group of masterminds that once controlled vast resources and organized the most spectacular and devastating terrorist attacks to date, to a multitude of informal local groups attempting to emulate their predecessors by conceiving and executing operations from the bottom up. These homegrown wannabes form a fragmented global network that Sageman fittingly describes as an essentially leaderless jihad. Although physically unconnected, these terrorist hopefuls constitute a virtual yet violent social movement as they drift to internet chatrooms that connect them with one another and provide inspiration and guidance. As this new threat migrates from abroad into Western countries, the security challenge now lies in the timely detection and successful neutralization of these scattered groups, which, in the author’s assessment, undoubtedly pose a threat, but are “unlikely to endanger the existence of the nation.” Implicit in this argument is the understanding that Al-Qaeda Central has “receded in importance,” arguably to the point of being “neutralized operationally”—although, realistically, one would have to see this as a temporary

assessment that is subject to new developments. At present, according to Sageman's rationale, the principal terrorist threat stems from diffuse low-level groups inspired by the image of Al-Qaeda but independent in their operations. The key to the successful containment, if not eradication, of this newly evolving, bottom-up terrorist threat lies in a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the leaderless jihad.

It is regrettable that this very useful, albeit unconventional, assessment has not been substantiated by a methodologically sound analysis, especially given that it is the proclaimed intention of *Leaderless Jihad* to bring a scientific method to the study of terrorism. To begin with, for a book that claims to distinguish itself from all other contributions in the area on the grounds of being founded on solid, scientific procedures, the discussion of methodology is surprisingly short and contains only a brief elucidation of the data to be tested. In explaining his method, Sageman asserts that his database on which the book is based has grown from information about the 19 individuals who carried out the 9/11 attacks to contain a sample of 172 jihadists (the basis for his previous book), and ultimately to include over 500 profiles from which the present work is derived. In terms of specifics, we learn only that this database contains information on "people and their relationships with other terrorists, non-terrorists, and ideas, as well as the social, political, cultural, and technological contexts." Although explicitly stressing the need to trace the evolution of these relationships over time, little information is provided as to how, when, and by whom the present data was collected, or indeed any problems related to their retrieval and interpretation. From a social science perspective, these types of vaguely identified data resources and unclear collection procedures pose serious problems.

Apart from failing to provide a sound method, the thrust of Sageman's argument, as well as his outspoken (although undoubtedly justified) rejection of most of the existing literature on Al-Qaeda as unscientific, too heavily dependent on information gleaned from government resources and written solely for the sake of scoring political points would have been much more powerful had he taken better care to not fall into the same trap. His dismissal of much of the existing literature without citing or referencing the same (the brief six-page bibliography speaks volumes to this end) cannot be excused on the grounds of his personal conviction that "in science, the strength of evidence should trump authority." Across the social and natural sciences, knowledge is cumulative and any meaningful progress dependent on a critical evaluation of where things have gone wrong. Chapter 2 of the present volume, which discusses the ideological background of Al-Qaeda, exemplifies this point: here, the reader is essentially presented with a summary of the corresponding chapter of Sageman's earlier book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, which has been criticized for creating a monolithic image of Al-Qaeda's ideology as the so-called global "Salafi Jihad," misrepresenting discourses in Islamic

history and failing to engage with existing Islamic studies literature. Untouched by this controversy, the way in which the section on ideology, “Justice, not Democracy,” lumps Al-Qaeda together with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood under the umbrella of “Salafism” makes a mockery of Sageman’s empathetic call for academic rigor.

Despite these shortcomings, *Leaderless Jihad* is notable for its (re-)evaluation of the so-called “Al-Qaeda threat” that stands in direct contrast to most other national and international security assessments, which unanimously stress the increased Islamist threat in the wider sense of “Al-Qaeda on the march.” What easily goes unnoticed is that for the opposite assessment, the evidence, in terms of providing verifiable sources and methodology, is similarly thin. A simple point often overlooked in the assessment of current security threats is the issue of who is doing the assessing. At risk of oversimplifying, all too often those who want us to be convinced of the continued threat of Al-Qaeda’s global jihad are the same individuals who stand to benefit directly from investments made to address these situations. In this light, the greatest disservice has been done by the author himself, who distances himself all too quickly from the main contribution of *Leaderless Jihad* to reconfirm that the threat of Al-Qaeda Central indeed remains substantial—notably not in response to new scientific evidence but in what appeared to be a very personal feud over political points. One thus feels inclined to conclude that the present debate about Al-Qaeda’s global jihad has become somewhat pre-occupied with the question of “who speaks for the true terrorist threat” rather than the maintenance of academic rigor, and the provision of a nuanced and methodologically sound assessment remains a task yet to be accomplished.