

Interview - Marc Sageman

Written by E-International Relations

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Marc Sageman is an independent consultant on terrorism and the founder of Sageman Consulting, LLC. After a year at the U.S. Secret Service, he was the New York Police Department's first "scholar in residence" for over a year. For three and a half years, he was the special advisor to the U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff (Intelligence) on the "insider threat," including terrorists and spies. In the fall of 2012, he was ISAF Political Scientist looking at the Insider Threat in Afghanistan.

After graduating from Harvard, he obtained an M.D. and a Ph.D. in sociology from New York University. He was a flight surgeon in the U.S. Navy and a case officer at the Central Intelligence Agency for seven years. He spent three years supporting the Afghan Mujahedin resistance against the Soviet occupation. He returned to medicine and completed a residency in psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a forensic and clinical psychiatrist, and taught courses on law and psychiatry, Holocaust perpetrators, and terrorism at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

He is the author of *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad*, and several studies on the process of radicalization. His new book, *The Turn to Political Violence*, describing a new model of this process and testing it on various campaigns of political violence spanning two centuries and four continents, will be published next spring. He testified before both the 9/11 Commission in the U.S. and the Beslan Commission in Russia. He has extensively consulted with most national security agencies in the U.S. and the West, as well as law enforcement agencies. He has lectured at dozens of universities in the U.S. and abroad.

Has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Yes, it certainly has. In the past ten years, I've been privileged in having access to very detailed reports and interviews of terrorists, had the opportunity to interview two or three dozens of them, and was able to search back in history for similar instances of political violence. Much of the conventional wisdom about terrorism or the process of becoming a terrorist has not survived this clash with detailed empirical evidence. I had to step back and question many of the assumptions I had about these two concepts. My new book is a summary of these meditations.

This has changed my views of the process of turning to political violence. I believe the basis of this process is an identification with a threatened political community and the volunteering to become a soldier to defend this community. This creates a group of a violent bunch of guys, who believe they are a vanguard and are willing to sacrifice themselves for the group.

Early in 2014, you wrote a peer-reviewed article in which you described what you saw as the stagnation in terrorism research. You partly attributed this to the government strategy of funding research without sharing the necessary primary source information with academia, which has created an unbridgeable gap between academia and the intelligence community. What do you think can be done to amend this, and are you optimistic that the gap between academe and intelligence community can be bridged in the near future?

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Obviously, the government can share its data with selected academics, who receive a security clearance, or it can force its analysts to take a graduate-level methodology course in social sciences. The government can hire trained academics to staff its agencies. It does this already with national laboratories, who hire Ph.D.s in natural sciences and mathematics to research national security issues. Somehow, social sciences are not deemed to be important enough to hire experts. There could be more interactive cooperation between government and academia during joint conferences, instead of academics speaking to a silent government audience, not knowing whether what they say is actually relevant. The government can also invite academics to spend a sabbatical year inside some of its agencies, where academics can see some of the evidence the government has accumulated. The government can also contract teams of academics to challenge some of the government findings.

Despite the stagnation, are there any debates happening in the field of terrorism research which you find particularly interesting?

There is now a realization that detailed empirical evidence, especially primary sources, is the first step to develop theories of radicalization. We see this more in Europe, especially at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at The Hague, in the Netherlands. The reliance on sensational and misleading journalistic accounts has led us astray in trying to understand this field.

You're very well known for your work on suicide bombers, particularly al Qaeda members and associates, which has involved extensive field research on terrorist movements across the globe. How does the process of an individual deciding to join the global jihad normally transpire?

One need not join a terrorist organization in order to turn to political violence, as shown by lone wolves. This process of turning to political violence is exactly what I try to explain in about 600 pages in my new book. I use a social identity perspective to show a two-step process: First, there is an activation of a political social identity, often triggered by some event from an out-group. This social identity tries to simplify the social world into simple category: one's in-group, viewed in contrast to a specific out-group, with which the in-group is in competition. The collection of people sharing this social identity is a political protest community, which is still non-violent and uses legitimate forms of protest to bring about changes in government policy to address grievances. Over time, many members of this community become disillusioned with this community's effectiveness to bring about this change. On top of this, the out-group may commit an act of aggression against the in-group, which generates in-group moral outrage. A few activists, too invested to abandon the community, undergo a second self-categorization into a martial social identity. Now that they believe they are soldiers protecting their community, they turn to violence to defend it. In an atmosphere of cumulative radicalization of discourse and war metaphors, this turn to violence is justified. Violence transforms each group in a tit for tat escalation of violence and allows for more indiscriminate violence on redefined out-groups. This scenario is the most common pathway to political violence.

ISIS are dominating news headlines at the moment and there has been a lot of discussion on the foreign fighters leaving the West to join this group. When looking at the profiles of those going to fight with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, do you feel that those travelling to join this group show similarities with the al Qaeda members you studied in your past research?

I have not had an opportunity to scrutinize the people who travel to Syria to fight along militants there, and ISIS in Iraq. My impression at this stage is strictly anecdotal. My experience is that solid empirical evidence is usually not consistent with first impressions. So, I hesitate to comment on this new group of foreign fighters without access to more comprehensive data on them.

There has been a lot of discussion about the role of ideology, specifically religious ideology, in the radicalization of "Islamic" terrorists. Indeed, a reasonably large section of research has focused on analyzing the scriptural doctrines of Islam and the belief in heavenly rewards of paradise in the hope to find answers to why individuals choose to join the global jihad. From your own research, what role, if any, do you feel religious convictions play in the behaviour of jihadis, and how useful do you feel a focus on ideology is?

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Yes, ideology is commonly blamed for this turn to violence and, indeed, many of the current perpetrators justify their action through a very selective reading of their ideology. But my interviews with terrorists in the name of Islam showed me that they were not ideologues and, indeed, did not understand much about their ideology. Their reasoning was much simpler: the West is attacking Muslims and we are defending Muslims. The ideology is simply a way of defining oneself as an in-group of soldiers for Islam.

Indeed, on closer examination, there are big problems with the ideology thesis. It is not a necessary condition to becoming a terrorist. Being a team member trumps ideology, as all armies in the world have found out. People really fight more for comrades than the cause. Ideology is also not a sufficient condition for the turn to violence: most believers are against violence. There are over a billion Muslims, and only a few thousands self-appointed jihadis. This is a ratio greater than 10,000 to one. Furthermore, ideology is not specific to violence. My study, which is also a historical exploration of political violence over the past two centuries over two continents, has found that any ideology can lead to political violence, even an explicitly non-violent one. Indeed, the focus on ideology may be a methodological artifact. Records about ideological debates are often what is available to outsiders, not the thoughts and behaviors of the terrorists. So, these outsiders mistake these public debates as what made a few people turn to violence. In fact, very few terrorists are intellectuals. The anecdote that the recent British young Muslims going to Syria were reading "Islam for Dummies" seems to support this claim.

The ideas that influence terrorists emerge from local group discussions. They are fluid and adopt to their changing context as seen from their group perspective. This context shapes the relevant elements of the ideology that are selected. In fact, we often see rapid shifts in in-group beliefs and opinions according to the context. The most relevant part of this context is out-group aggression against the in-group. Elements from the larger ideology relevant to the war between these groups are emphasized. The cumulative radicalization of languages as rivals competing with each other for leadership within the in-group justifies violence. This demonstrates that the specific ideology of the terrorists is not stable, but shifting according to the state of the conflict with the salient out-group.

This large section of research focusing on ideology is mistaken and carried out by people who are too lazy to actually look at how terrorists understand the ideology. It is easier to read the scriptures and speculate in an armchair about their relevance for terrorism than examine how ideology is actually used by terrorists. In essence, many self-appointed terrorist experts are outsiders to terrorist groups and commit the fundamental error of attribution or explanation of another's negative behavior (according to their perspective) in terms of personal predisposition, namely their belief system.

Ideology, like Islam or a nation, may be what defines a given group. Within threatened groups, members who strongly identifying with the group are willing to sacrifice themselves for the group. In other words, it is identity, not ideology. There is no "radicalization" without identification with the group.

Do you feel that air strikes are an effective way to deal with ISIS?

This depends on what your goals are. Air strikes may definitely stop ISIS troops from seizing a city. However, the sight of fellow Muslims under attack by the West will lead a few Muslims to feel moral outrage at this aggression and volunteer to join the victims of this aggression. So far, this has translated into a vast mobilization of volunteers traveling to the Middle East to join the endangered group. But a few may decide to stay at home and defend their fellow in-group members abroad by carrying out operations at home.

What are your thoughts on the UN's strategy to criminalise foreign fighters who have joined Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq worldwide?

Terrorists form an imagined community of people sharing a common sense of social identity. It is an imagined community in the same way as a nation is, namely one imagines that one has a lot in common with others like them and feels a strong emotional connection to them. This explains the phenomenon of "lone wolves," since there need not be any physical connection among people in this imagined community. The challenge for Western nations is not to reject these young people and make enemies out of them, but to bring them back to the fold, to include them in this

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national community. This is often seen in the case of foreign wars. Most domestic squabbles become less relevant when the national social identity is threatened. The country rallies and unites around the flag. Criminalizing foreign fighters really closes the door to bringing them back home and trying to reintegrate into national society. It prevents them from identifying with their nation and, indeed, reinforces their social identity as enemies of the nation.

Instead, nations should be more honest about the commonality between the foreign fighters and themselves. Just nations are against tyrants, and the foreign fighters going abroad to fight against Assad or Maliki's Shi'ite army and militia killing Sunnis in Iraq are really pursuing the same sense of fairness and justice felt among members of these nations, who condemn Assad and sectarian Shi'ite killings in Iraq. In this sense, these foreign fighters are identical to the foreign fighters who came to America in the 1770s, like La Fayette, Kosciusko, or von Steuben; foreign fighters who rushed to Spain to fight fascism; American volunteers against Nazis before the US declared war on Hitler in December 1941... Authorities should respect foreign fighters' social identity and try to find a superseding social identity that would bring these foreign fighters back to the fold and reintegrate them as normal citizens into their original nation. The punitive strategy of criminalizing them will make the problem persist or aggravate it, a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Your third book is due out, which will explain your new theory of radicalization. What new ground will this text cover and what are your aims with this book?

The aim of the book is threefold. The first is to present a comprehensive model of the process of turning to political violence, which is derived deductively from new insights in cognitive and social psychology. The second is testing this model against alternative explanations against five very detailed case studies of campaigns of political violence that try to capture terrorists' subjectivity by using their own words. Each of these case studies will be a contribution to the historiography of terrorism. The third is conclusions inductively derived from the empirical evidence on the importance of ideology in the process, the dynamics of political violence, and the policy implications from this study.

Given what you've said about the potential problems and pitfalls concerning current terrorism research, what is the most important advice you could give to young scholars who are starting their careers and want to focus their research on terrorism and political violence?

The most important things about studying a subject like terrorism are a very solid grounding in scientific methodology and finding a good source of comprehensive primary source data, which can then be analyzed. New students should be self-critical about what they are doing and avoid become "true believers" of their own ideas. Science is always tentative and an approximation of complex reality. Much of what we know now will evolve in the future. There are very few answers to any problem that stand the test of time and further inquiry. This is the nature of science. It's exciting to be part of this adventure, but one must remain humble in the knowledge that people will inevitably come later and improve on one's life work.

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This interview was conducted by Al McKay. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.