

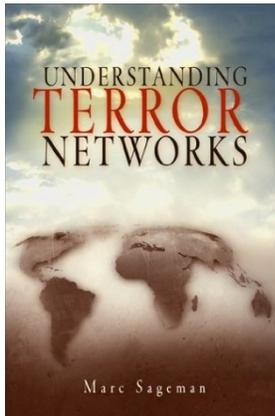


SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Understanding Terror Networks

Book Review by Ian S. Davis



Citation: Sageman, Marc. *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 220 pages. \$29.95 hardcover.

The global Salafi jihad is a complex social movement intent on the defeat of Western powers and the establishment of the Caliphate. Marc Sageman's *Understanding Terror Networks* examines the ideological foundation of Salafi jihad organizations and the role that social networks play in the expansion of radical Islamic extremism throughout the world. Sageman's diverse professional background with both practical and scientific experience lends to the credibility of his research-based argument. A Harvard graduate with doctoral degrees in medicine and political sociology from New York University, Sageman served as a U.S. Foreign Service officer in Islamabad, Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet war from 1987 to 1989. After leaving the Foreign Service in 1991, he entered the field of forensic psychology and studied the psychological and sociological explanations of collective violence. Sageman's arguments are free of political bias and supported by scholarly literature and empirical data. The first two chapters of the book, "The Origins of the Jihad" and "Evolution of the Jihad," examine the ideological foundation of the Salafi jihad. The next three chapters, "The Mujahedin," "Joining the Jihad," and "Social Networks," examine the psychological, sociological, and organizational factors of the global Salafi jihad. Finally, Sageman offers recommendations for illuminating and defeating Salafi jihad networks.

Sageman submits that the global Salafi jihad is a worldwide religious revivalist movement whose goal is an Islamic state, the restoration of authentic Islam, the defeat of Western powers through violent jihad. He presents the following to shape and explain the ideological foundation of the Salafi jihad that relies on ideology to determine its mission, goals, and tactics. Salafi jihadists find legitimacy for their actions from Sayyid Qutb's 1964 *Milestones*, which serves as a manifesto for the global jihad. Qutb's arguments serve as the foundation and inspiration for the writings of Salm Faraj of the Tanzim al-Jihad, Osama bin Ladin, and Ayman al-Zawahiri. This Salafi jihad ideology spurred the formation of militant clandestine organizations based on ideological, social, and kinship associations during the fight against the "near enemy."

According to Sageman, the catalytic event that eliminated the legitimacy of the Afghan jihad was the Soviet Union's 1988 announcement of their intent to withdraw from Afghanistan. This event shaped the conditions for the formation of *al-Qaeda* (the base). The architects of this new

social movement were the hardcore Salafi leaders of the Afghan jihad who advocated changing the priority of the jihad from fighting the “near enemy” to fighting the “far enemy.” Sageman’s analysis of 172 mujahedin reveals that global Salafi jihad formed four distinct geographic clusters within the al-Qaeda network: the Central Staff, Core Arabs, Maghreb Arabs, and Southeast Asians. The development, expansion, and coordination within and between the clusters developed from pre-existing social ties between members of the within the network. These ties, based on friendship, kinship, worship, and discipleship, unified the jihadist to fight a common enemy: the West.

After proposing an ideological foundation for the Salafi jihad, Sageman examines terror networks through empirical research to determine individual and group characteristics of terrorist organizations. He limits his test group to only Muslim terrorists who target foreign governments and their populations to establish an Islamic state. The information sources were limited to the public domain and only included Salafi mujahedin with available information on age, origin, religious commitment, and education. Sageman’s selection criteria yielded a sample of 172 mujahedin. From empirical analysis, he found that these mujahedin formed four clusters based on their geographic origin and pattern of interaction that Sageman classified as the Central Staff (32), the Core Arabs (66), the Maghreb Arabs (53), and Southeast Asians (21). Furthermore, he found that the Central Staff of al-Qaeda is primarily comprised of veterans of the Afghan war with two-thirds of its members from Egypt. Sageman submits that the roots of the global Salafi jihad are not Saudi or Afghan, but Egyptian. He further concludes that members were “generally middle-class, educated young men from caring and religious families, who grew up with strong positive values of religion, spirituality, and concern for their communities.”(p. 96) Isolated and emotionally alienated, they sought a cause to give “emotional relief, social community, spiritual comfort, and cause for self-sacrifice.”(p. 97) These conditions made the future mujahedeen susceptible to the allure of the Salafi jihad.

To understand how links form between terror networks, Sageman examined case histories of the failed millennial bombing attempt of the Los Angeles airport, and the 9/11 attacks conducted by the Hamburg cell. In both cases, he found that the formation of a network of friendships preceded induction into the terrorist network. Groups of friends formed and sought out the jihad together rather than being recruited or joining as individuals. Social bonds led to commitment to a social network that is unified by Salafi ideology. Sageman submits that the field of social network analysis is useful for understanding the structure and effectiveness of terrorist networks. Likewise, Sageman recommends the use of social network analysis for penetrating the global Salafi jihad and decreasing the pool of potential terrorists.

The strength of *Understanding Terror Networks* is that Sageman uses empirical data and scholarly literature to support his analytical findings that “the global Salafi jihad is mostly that of a self-generated network with the unusual characteristics of robustness and flexibility rather than one created by the intention of bin Laden.”(p. 183) The clear definition of his study sample and the use of open sources makes his study reproducible. One shortcoming of the book is that Sageman does not address the potential exportability of his findings to other terrorist networks that are outside of the selection criteria of his study or other potential applications.

Understanding Terror Networks is an interesting and informative analysis of the ideological and sociological basis that led to the establishment of the global Salafi jihad. Sageman's book is based on empirical evidence and is recommended as an essential source for those readers interested in understanding the genesis of the Salafi jihad, trans-national terrorist network coordination and synchronization, and strategies to illuminate and defeat terror networks.

Major Ian Davis has over 22 years of active duty service with the majority of his career assigned to 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in key enlisted and officer operational billets. He is currently a student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California in the Defense Analysis program.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here](#).