Marc Sageman. *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 544 pp. 49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4877-7.

Reviewed by Mohammed M. Hafez

The field of terrorism studies has come a long way from its pre-scientific phase, when anecdotal evidence, single case studies, and small-n comparative analysis were deemed sufficient to make theoretical claims about the causes and dynamics of terrorism. A new generation of scholars have evolved the field in the direction of large-N quantitative analysis built on datasets that seek to capture the universe of cases, not just a few select data points, and a clear articulation of the causal logics that drive violent intergroup behavior.[1] This evolution toward a rigorous, fact-based, social scientific analysis is in no small measure due to the earlier work of Marc Sageman, particularly his book *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004), which used quantitative and relational analysis to dispel common myths surrounding the rise of Al-Qaeda.

In his new book, *Turning to Political Violence*, Sageman seeks to further redirect the field of terrorism studies toward the path of sophisticated comparative analysis that is rigorous enough to make big claims about why terrorism emerges, yet sufficiently empathetic of the militant actors to account for the meaning they give to their violence. Whereas large-N analysis perpetuates the outsider's view of terrorism, his approach probes the motivations of terrorists from their vantage point. To achieve this goal, he revisits a set of much older campaigns of terrorism—ones that predate World War I and span various continents, ideologies, and social settings. He studies trial transcripts, diaries, letters, and memoirs to construct an insider's narrative of terrorism. Going back this far in history is not an incidental consideration. Sageman wants to detach the reader from the current radical Islamist menace in order to show historical continuity in the process of producing terrorism and allow for an empathetic viewpoint that is hard to achieve when discussing contemporary violence by groups like the Islamic State.

Sageman's inductive approach leads to a theory of social identity as the principle explanatory dynamic of political violence. The theory goes something like this: "A political community, in an escalating conflict with an outside group, disillusioned with peaceful means of solving the conflict and outraged by this group's unwarranted aggression, will generate volunteers, who view themselves as soldiers, to defend it against this outside group" (p. 3). The theory goes on to link together a number of causal dynamics such as self-categorization into an in-group in opposition to a threatening out-group, ideological socialization in small group settings, adoption of the norms and culture of the militant subculture, and the activation of a martial social identity where individual interests

and needs are submerged into group identities and objectives. Only then is the phenomena of extreme violence and self-sacrifice made comprehensible to their perpetrators.

This process of activating a politicized and violent social identity is often induced by states that, through their repression, can unleash moral outrage and conflict escalation. In this regard, a great deal of credit is due to the author for pointing out an inconvenient truth: states are not mere victims of terrorism; their practices and countermeasures are important triggers of political violence. This point is hard to make in the post-9/11 world, so Sageman's stature as a former CIA operator permits him the luxury of making a seemingly controversial point.

Sageman contrasts his social identity perspective with ideological, rational actor, and relative deprivation theories of terrorism, all of which he rejects not because they are wrong but because they can be subsumed within his broader framework. More importantly, to the extent these theories simplify the phenomenon of terrorism by reducing it to mere cause-benefit analysis or by implying that people are responding to structural conditions with little agency, they miss the complexity of the identity formation process at the core of political violence. Ordinary individuals can become extraordinary killers through a mix of structuralism and volunteerism, and Sageman's theory and cases seek to reflect this conjunction of historical circumstances, psychological processes, and rational choices bounded by group dynamics.

Turning to Political Violence is an important contribution because it revisits the core themes and debates that have shaped our field of inquiry for decades. Extant scholarship has broken the terrorism challenge into so many distinct puzzles, but little synthesis has been achieved within this collective scholarship. As Sageman admits in the preface, his book is an attempt to "consolidate disparate insights" from various disciplines (p. xi).

His field experience and scholarly journey position him well for this summative task.

The book, however, invites a number of critiques that are worth noting even if they do not detract from its value. Sageman could have offered a more thorough rendering of the scholarly literature he helped shape in the past decade. Indeed, many authors have tackled similar themes that are critical of reductionist theories of terrorism and offered similar social identity mechanisms. To present the current field of terrorism studies as dominated by rational actor, relative deprivation, or ideological theories unfairly overlooks the more nuanced and empirically supported contributions by such scholars as Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, Assaf Moghadam, Diego Gambetta, Steffen Hertog, Donatella della Porta, and Max Abrahms.[2] The theoretical assertions of the social identity perspective and their causal mechanisms should have been systematically evaluated in light of these sophisticated empirical studies from the last decade, not older theories that no longer hold sway.

More importantly, perhaps, the social identity perspective appears to be tautological. It posits that terrorism is a product of small group dynamics that involve self-categorization into in-groups that are fighting as soldiers against threatening out-groups. We know that this is the case because terrorists operate in small groups with strong cohesive identities that demonize an out-group. The evidence for the theory is the theory itself! It is hard to conceive of any empirical tests that would allow for falsifying the social identity perspective. As a matter of fact, when political violence expands beyond small groups into guerrilla armies, it is no longer called terrorism. Instead, it is labeled as insurgency or civil wars, thus excluding it from the terrorism universe of cases. Perhaps the proliferation of lone wolf terrorist attacks can offer such a test.

Lastly, the theory does not answer the million-dollar question: why are some individuals in-

clined to terrorism when similarly situated persons opt out? Why do some self-categorize as soldiers of their beleaguered people, while others under the same circumstances do not? Sageman cannot be faulted for not providing an answer to this elusive puzzle. No one has, yet.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Robert Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 343-361; James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2008): 469-488; and Erica Chenoweth, "Terrorism and Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 355-78. The vast quantitative literature is increasingly relying on the Global Terrorism Database created and maintained by the START Consortium at the University of Maryland.

[2]. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Assaf Moghadam, *Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 78-105.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Mohammed M. Hafez. Review of Sageman, Marc. *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50115