Jihad Dramatically Transformed?
Sageman on Jihad and the Internet
David Tucker

In his book *Leaderless Jihad*,
[1] Marc Sageman claims, as the title indicates, that Jihad in the modern world is changing from a centrally organized and structured activity into a more dispersed, decentralized movement in which small groups self-organize to carry out attacks. Bruce Hoffman has challenged this claim and Sageman’s way of supporting it, arguing that al Qaeda central is alive and well.[2] As is often the case in such disputes, in so far as the substance is concerned, there is truth on both sides.[3] The kind of self-organizing groups that Sageman describes do exist, and sometimes get help from overseas, but are not the only Jihad threat we face.

As this debate rumbled on and became part of the debate over what to do about Afghanistan,[4] two things became clear. First, neither Hoffman nor Sageman, or others weighing in, considered the strategic consequences of the network structure they are disputing about. There is a tendency to assume, for example, that networks are powerful organizational structures inherently difficult for industrial-age bureaucracies like the United States government to deal with. Sageman alludes to this larger argument by mentioning the “difficulty of national bureaucracies trying to combat terrorist market forces,” although Sageman does recognize some of the limits of so-called leaderless movements (pp. 145, 146).[5] In fact, networks, or decentralized organizations and activities, have weaknesses; and hierarchies, or centralized organizations, have strengths that on balance give the latter distinct advantages against both al Qaeda central and the al Qaeda movement.[6]

The second point that became clear was that not enough attention had been paid to the claims that Sageman made about the role of the internet in the development of what he calls the leaderless Jihad movement. These claims are clear and quite strong. Sageman claims it is the internet that “has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of global Islamic terrorism by changing the nature of terrorists’ interactions... Starting around 2004, communication and inspiration shifted from face-to-face interactions...to interaction on the internet” (p. 109). Assessing Sageman’s claim is important because if he is right, it would suggest that we switch attention and resources to combating digital recruitment. If he is wrong, then this would be a waste of resources.

As Sageman presents his argument, it depends on two interrelated arguments. The first is that web sites presenting Jihadist propaganda or bomb-making instructions and other operational advice are not the engine driving extremist Islam. Sageman points out, for example, that bombs built only with instructions from web sites have either not exploded or have had limited effects (p. 113). More important, he discounts the effect of the propaganda on web sites in encouraging radicalization and commitment to the extremist cause. He denies that images found on these web sites have “intrinsic power to influence people into taking arms against the West.” Such images, Sageman claims, “merely reinforce already made-up minds” (p. 114). Sageman offers no evidence to support his denial of the importance of the images. What he does instead is to offer his
second argument: the interactivity of the internet (particularly forums and chat rooms) is changing human relationships in a revolutionary way and hence, he implicitly assumes, must be changing the way those who become extremists interact online. In support of this claim, Sageman cites one article and six terrorism cases he says show the revolutionary impact of the internet and substantiate his claim that the internet “has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of global Islamic terrorism.”

Before examining Sageman’s argument and his evidence in detail, we should note two general points. First, even if Sageman is right about the effects of internet fora and chat rooms, it would not prove that the propaganda images on web sites are not aiding radicalization. Sageman simply denies that they are, without offering any evidence, and presents a counter-argument about the web. There is no logical connection between the truth of his counter-argument and the falsehood of the claims about the propaganda value of the images on the web. Both could be true. In fact, as we shall see, there is some evidence to suggest that the web sites do aid in radicalization. Second, we should note that six cases is a very small sample. It is not reassuring to see someone who claims to proceed scientifically as others have not (p. 13), basing such large and strong claims on such a small sample. Sound generalization is always a problem in terrorism studies because terrorism is such a rare event that we seldom have a large number of well-understood cases to base our claims on. Any scientific or even simply reasonable and candid analysis of terrorism should acknowledge this problem, however, and be modest in the claims it makes.

We can begin the detailed examination of Sageman’s claims as he does by considering the effect of the internet on human relations in general. He states that “people’s relationships are being completely transformed through computer-mediated communications.” Sageman offers no support for this claim, except to make additional undocumented claims, for example, about the effects of anonymity. He proceeds, however, to draw conclusions about terrorism from these undocumented claims, arguing that the trust and intensity of emotion that is necessary for the sacrifices that terrorism requires can be generated online. At this point he states that “online feelings are stronger in almost every measurement than offline feelings. This is a robust finding that has been duplicated many times” (p. 114)

In support of this broad claim, Sageman cites one article: a review of research on the effects of the internet on social life. The article does not state that “online feelings are stronger in every measurement than offline feelings” or that this is a robust finding. It states rather that in two experiments “those who met first on the Internet liked each other more than those who met first face-to-face.” (It also reports that, depending on assumptions about the social context, interactions on the internet can be negative, displaying lack of trust, for example. Overall, the article offers no support for the claim that the internet is transforming social life. For example, the article reports that research supports “the view that membership and participation in Internet groups can have powerful effects on one’s self and identity” but it also reports that “group processes and effects unfold over the Internet in much the same way as they do in traditional venues.” Instead of supporting Sageman’s claims, the article suggests that Sageman is wrong in stressing the transformational character of the internet. It reports that people tend to take online relationships offline into the non-internet world, for example.
suggests that whatever the internet’s advantages, individuals still prefer face-to-face social life to online social life. Indeed, the article reports that “international bankers and college students alike considered off-line communication more beneficial to establishing close social (as opposed to work) relationships.”

Other research on the social effects of the internet published since the one article that Sageman refers to does not support Sageman’s claim that the internet is transforming people’s relationships. First, the internet does not appear to be displacing people’s social activity. People who use the internet are not less likely to have other forms of social contact. Internet use “appears to expand activity engagement rather than replace previous personal channel contacts [including face-to-face contact] or media use.” This research suggests that if Islamic extremists are replacing face-to-face contact with internet mediated contact, as Sageman claims, then they are doing something that others who use the internet are not doing.

Other research offers a possible explanation for the continuing importance of face-to-face interaction. A review of research on the social consequences of internet use among adolescents finds that such use is correlated with improvements in “social connectedness and well-being” but only when the internet is used “to maintain existing friendships.” When adolescents use the internet “to form new contacts and talk with strangers, the positive effects do not hold.” Whatever the reason for this, it does not seem to support Sageman’s claims about the transforming effects of the internet. Moreover, it casts doubt on his unsupported claim that strangers can form bonds of trust online as effectively as they can face-to-face. We should note, however, as the review of research just quoted does, that “internet research is still young and does not yet allow us to draw decisive conclusions.”

If research on internet use does not support Sageman, neither does the other evidence he uses, the six cases he refers to in his book. The table below summarizes what Sageman tell us about his six cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Type of Interaction</th>
<th>Internet Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crevince</td>
<td>F2F X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid bombing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hofstad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo bombing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Osage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German bombing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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After presenting this evidence in narrative form, Sageman states “this clearly shows the change from offline to online interaction in the evolution of the threat” (p. 110). In fact, it does not. In two of the six cases that Sageman mentions, he tells us only that the terrorists got support from the internet (an inspirational document in the case of the Madrid bombing and bomb-making instructions in the case of the Cairo bombing). There is nothing new here. Terrorists did not begin using the internet for support in
2004. The 9/11 bombers used it, as did others before them. More important, “support” is not “interaction,” and it is interaction among terrorists that Sageman says the internet has “dramatically transformed.” Interaction did occur on the internet in the other four cases, but it also occurred face-to-face. How do we know which kind of interaction was more important? If terrorists are meeting as they have always done and then communicating online, which would be consistent with research on internet use, this does not suggest a dramatic change in terrorists’ interactions. It is important to note, then, that only in one case (the German bombing) does Sageman tell us the terrorists met first online.

The reason Sageman does not mention terrorists meeting first online in the other cases is that it did not happen. In all the other cases, it appears the terrorists met first face-to-face. In fact, the evidence suggests terrorists tend to be friends, acquaintances or relatives, who then become radicalized and carry out an attack. In the course of this process, they may contact others online but Sageman presents no evidence that these online contacts are more important than the face-to-face contacts. In fact, the evidence suggests they were not. The groups formed face-to-face and then, to one degree or another, used the internet. But there is no evidence the internet was necessary for group formation, subsequent radicalization or carrying out an attack. The internet may make it easier to find accomplices in geographically dispersed places, coordinate with them, and get plans for a bomb, but terrorists did all these things before the internet existed. The internet may allow terrorists to improve their efficiency but the cases Sageman mentions do not show a transformation in how terrorists interact. Moreover, in three of the six cases that Sageman mentions, the face-to-face contact first occurred in a Mosque or an Islamic religious group, exactly the sort of thing that Sageman argues was not important after 2004 (pp. 109, 110). Only one of the cases Sageman mentions (the German bombing) supports his claim that the internet has changed interactions among terrorists.

What about cases that have occurred since Sageman’s book appeared in 2008? There have been a number of cases over the past several years. Full details on these cases are not available but we can look at what we know about a few of the more prominent ones. Al-Shabab, an Islamic extremist group in Somalia, has apparently been recruiting among first- or second-generation Somali immigrants in the United States. It uses videos on the internet but also face-to-face contact. Some of those recruited and subsequently arrested have reported attending secret meetings, meeting people on basketball courts or at Mosques, or in chat rooms online. Al-Shabab also uses what one report described as networks of friends to help its recruiting efforts. Bryant Neal Vinas, an American citizen, converted to Islam in 2004, according to one report, because of Al Qaeda videos he viewed online. He then attended a mosque, which members of the extremist group Al-Muhajiroun were known to frequent. He subsequently traveled to Pakistan, where a friend helped him to get in touch with Al Qaeda. During his time in Pakistan, Vinas met others who hoped to carry out extremist attacks. Some had been recruited in Belgium in person by an Al Qaeda recruiter, who also used the internet to recruit others. Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan immigrant, was arrested in connection with an investigation into a possible terrorist plot in September 2009. Although details in this case are particularly sparse, Zazi is reported to have attended a mosque with his family as he was growing up and possibly to have joined with others who left the mosque
when the Imam preached against al Qaeda. Another report claims he was in touch by phone with al Qaeda members in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{23} Four men from Newburgh, New York arrested for plotting to bomb a synagogue in New York City had prison and a mosque in common but no reported use of the internet or contact with al Qaeda recruiters.\textsuperscript{24} Hosam Maher Husein Smadi met someone working for the FBI online and subsequently plotted with him and others working for the FBI to carry out a terrorist attack. The informants and Smadi did meet face-to-face while the planning the attack.\textsuperscript{25}

While sketchy and limited, none of the information we have on these recent plots suggests anything like what Sageman claims. Internet images sometimes appear to assist if not initiate the movement to extremism. Chat rooms play a role but rarely are the place terrorists first meet; face-to-face contact predominates. Mosques and other physical gathering places figure more prominently than the internet. In this limited sample, the internet appears to be a useful but by no means a transforming or even dominant means of mobilizing recruits for extremism. This is actually a point Sageman comes close to making himself at the end of his chapter on the internet (p. 121).

In showing the complex interaction of social relations, the internet and recruiting, all of these cases show a marked resemblance to the summary description one analyst of the Madrid bombing has offered of those who carried out that attack:

It was in Mosques, worship sites, countryside gatherings and private residences where most of the members of the Madrid bombing network adopted extremist views. A few adopted a violent conception of Islam while in prison. The internet was clearly relevant as a radicalization tool, especially among those who were radicalized after 2003, but it was more importantly a complement to face-to-face interactions.\textsuperscript{26}

Again, none of this suggests that Sageman’s claims about the internet and terrorism are true.

Further evidence suggesting that Sageman’s claims are wrong comes from research done on the recruitment of foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa. Analysis of data captured in Iraq shows that 97 percent of a group of 177 foreign fighters met their recruitment coordinator “through a social (84 percent), family (6 percent) or religious (6 percent) connection.” Only 3.4 percent of the 177 foreign fighters mentioned the internet. Furthermore, when countries of origin for the foreign fighters were compared to the number of internet users in those countries, “more internet users correlated with lower numbers of fighters.” Finally, analysis shows that there is no correlation between countries that access extremist web sites and countries that produce foreign fighters.\textsuperscript{27} If the internet were an important tool of mobilization and recruitment, we would expect to see a correlation between accessing extremist web sites and numbers of foreign fighters.

What holds true for the Middle East and North Africa might not hold true for other places with greater general rates of access to the internet and less of a supporting social and cultural network for extremists to rely on. In these places, one might argue, the internet might be the only place where would-be radicals could find the contacts and encouragement they need to join the extremist movement. Yet what is true of the Middle East and North Africa appears to be true of North America, judging by the cases
Sageman cites and the additional cases discussed above. “The internet plays a minor radicalization role.... Conversations, sermons, print and radio communication, family and social networks present foreign fighters with local justification for joining the jihad.” This finding accords with research that finds internet use tends to “activate the active;” that is, promote engagement and activity among those already inclined that way and focus attention on the local community.

One must conclude, therefore, both that Sageman offers no evidence to support his claim the internet is transforming how terrorists interact and there is little evidence elsewhere to support this claim. Perhaps over time, the evidence will emerge. In the meantime, we are stuck with the difficult task of focusing “on the social and religious networks” from which extremists emerge if we want “to interrupt or fragment face-to-face recruitment.”

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5 Numbers in parentheses are page numbers in Marc Sageman, Leaderless Jihad (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
8 Bargh and McKenna, “The Internet and Social Life,” 581.
9 Ibid., 579.
10 Ibid., 583.
11 Ibid., 586–587.
12 Ibid., 579.
16 Oddly, Sageman lists the Madrid bombing as an example of both the new and the old terrorism. Compare pp. 109 and 110 (top).
17 Sageman mentions loners (p. 122), which he calls a special case, as people who become terrorists through internet chatrooms and fora and without face-to-face contact but provides no information on the scope of this problem. What he does say suggests that he does not see it as a serious problem, which may be why he did not mention it at the beginning of the chapter in support of his argument.
18 Mitch Silberman and Arvin Bhatt, Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat (New York: New York City Police Department, 2007). This is true of terrorists generally. For the United States, see Christopher Hewitt, Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to al Qaeda (New York: Routledge, 2003), 19, 45, 53, 77.
19 Evan F. Kohlmann, “‘Homegrown’ Terrorists: Theory and Cases in the War on Terror’s Newest Front,” American Academy of Political and Social Science Annals 618 (July 2008): 95–109 provides a detailed discussion of Jihadist use of the internet. Although he does not talk about either transformation or efficiency, Kohlmann’s account supports the argument that the internet allows terrorists to do more easily what they have always done.
25 Warrant for Arrest, Case Number 3-09-MJz86, U.S. District Court, Northern Texas, September 24, 2009.
28 Ibid., 3.