Some Things We Think We've Learned Since 9/11: A Commentary on Marc Sageman's “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”

Clark McCauley & Sophia Moskalenko

a Psychology Department, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, USA
b Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, USA
c National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

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Some Things We Think We’ve Learned Since 9/11: A Commentary on Marc Sageman’s “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”

CLARK McCauley

Psychology Department; and Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, USA

SOPHIA MOSKALENKO

Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; and National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to respond to a distinguished colleague’s concerns about the progress of terrorism research since the 9/11 attacks. Marc Sageman sees little progress and identifies numerous impediments to research, notably including lack of good data and over-reliance on formal modeling methods. In general, we agree that there are significant impediments but see more progress than Marc suggests.

We agree first that better data could make a difference, and easier access to existing databases might help. The Journal of Conflict Resolution, for instance, requires investigators to post their data as a condition of publication in the journal. This policy might help progress in terrorism research by giving scholars the opportunity to offer alternative interpretations of published data.

We agree also that most of social science and most terrorism research in particular is not ready for formal modeling. Partly this problem follows from the first: without good data, formal modeling can suggest interesting possibilities but cannot provide empirical testing of these possibilities. But partly the problem is on the demand side: government funders, familiar with the success of formal modeling in physical science—modeling the first few milliseconds of a thermonuclear event, for instance—can overestimate the power of formal models in social science. The
Uncertainty Principle that limits knowing both location and momentum of a particle is nothing compared with the uncertainties of reverberating interactions among the self-aware particles we call humans.

Of course every domain of research has problems and impediments; how bad is the situation in terrorism research? This is a subjective judgment in which different observers can have different opinions. Marc is pessimistic, seeing terrorism research as stagnant. But one man’s stagnant can be another man’s steady progress, and we will emphasize the positive in this brief essay. We are positive because we feel we have ourselves learned a number of things about terrorism since 9/11. In this article we review briefly results that seem to us important and sometimes surprising. Perhaps our greatest surprise is the disjunction between radical ideas and radical action, and we organize our review around this distinction and the two-pyramids model of radicalization built on it.

**Radicalization of Opinion**

We represent radicalization of opinion in terms of a pyramid. At the base are individuals who do not care about a political group or cause, higher in the pyramid are those who sympathize with the group, higher yet those who justify violence in defense of the group, and at the apex of the pyramid those who feel a personal moral obligation to take up violence in defense of the group. This is not a stairway model: individuals can skip levels in moving up and down in the pyramid.

*Polling data allow us to put percentages on the pyramid levels.*

Over half of Muslims in the U.S. and U.K. believe that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam; we count these as sympathizers with the jihadi terrorist cause. At least 5% of Muslims in the U.S. and U.K. see suicide bombing of civilians in defense of Islam as often or sometimes justified. These percentages are often substantially higher for Muslims in Muslim countries.

*Many Muslims do not believe in a “clash of civilizations.”*

Polls of Canadian Muslims in Ottawa and of Muslims in Jordan show no correlation between attitude toward the U.S. government and attitude toward al-Qaeda or Hizballah: Some Muslims are positive toward both the U.S. and its challengers; some are negative toward both the U.S. and its challengers. Thus many Muslims do not agree with President George W. Bush’s September 20, 2001, assertion that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

*Repeated polls can track changes in the Opinion Radicalization Pyramid, that is, can help track government successes and failures in the “War of Ideas.”*

**Radicalization of Action**

We represent radicalization of action in another pyramid. At the base are individuals doing nothing for a political group or cause (inert), higher in the pyramid are those who are engaged in legal political action for the cause (activists), higher yet those engaged in illegal action for the cause (radicals), and at the apex of the pyramid those engaged in illegal action that targets civilians (terrorists). Again this is not a stairway model; individuals can skip levels in moving up and down in the action pyramid.

What moves individuals to join a terrorist group? We examined case history material for terrorists from three centuries and several continents, ranging from anti-tsarist terrorists of the late 1800s to jihadist terrorists of the 21st century.
We identified seven individual-level mechanisms of radicalization: personal grievance, group grievance, slippery slope of small increments in action, love for someone in a militant group, escape from a situation more risky than terrorism, thrill and status seeking, and seeking new friends after losing social connections (unfreezing).

Some of these mechanisms are surprisingly apolitical. Ideological motivation for political violence is usually associated with group grievance, as when jihadist terrorists refer to interpretations of the Koran to justify violence. But there are cases where an individual without ideology or experience of political action is moved in one step from the inert base of the action pyramid to the terrorist apex by personal grievance (the government harmed me or mine), love (my brother asked me to help), escape (I’m safer with a gun in my hand), thrill and status seeking (I’ve always been fascinated by guns), and search for friendship (these people took me in). There are many possible combinations and orders of these mechanisms, thus there can be no useful profile of individuals likely to join a terrorist group.

We also identified three mechanisms that can move a whole group together toward radical action and violence: intergroup conflict and group polarization, with group isolation as a multiplier of the power of group dynamics. Of these, most important is the dynamic of intergroup conflict. Groups usually turn to violence or increased violence in escalating conflict with government, or in conflict with other groups claiming to represent the same cause.¹⁰

Relation of Radical Beliefs and Radical Action

The results already reviewed imply a major disconnection between radical ideas and radical actions. At least 5% of U.S. and U.K. Muslims justify suicide bombing against civilians in defense of Islam. Projected to about one million adult Muslims in each country, 5% represents 50,000 Muslims in each country who agree with this radical idea. But only hundreds of Muslims have been charged for planned or attempted violent action in either country. Thus 99% of Muslims with radical ideas never engage in radical action.

Conversely, many individuals move to radical action without previous radical ideas (though they usually learn radical ideas after joining a militant group). As already noted, individuals may join a terrorist group for personal revenge, love, escape, thrills and status, or comradeship.

Thus 99% of those with radical ideas never act, and many individuals join a terrorist group without radical ideas. Similarly, John Horgan has found that some jihadis are willing to give up terrorist action (“desistence”), but not willing to give up extremist ideas (not “deradicalized”).¹¹ Our conclusion is that there are two kinds of radicalization—radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action. The relation between these two is weak, just as social psychology research has found the relation between attitude and action is weak, except in special circumstances (a voting booth, for instance).

Lone-wolf terrorists are a potential challenge to the two-pyramids model. If an individual does not join a terrorist group, and acts without group support, it might appear that lone-wolf terrorists are indeed cases where radical opinion directly produces radical action. The first thing to note is that lone-wolf terrorists are rare, and may be the rare exceptions that prove the two-pyramids rule. More substantively, we have argued that there may be two types of lone-wolf terrorist: the disconnected-disordered and the caring-compelled.¹²
Disconnected-disordered lone-wolf terrorists are like school attackers and assassins, who are predominantly lone actors, in having a grievance, weak social ties, mental health problems, and experience with weapons outside the military. Thus disconnected-disordered lone wolves may be part of a larger phenomenon of lone actors with little to lose in perpetrating violence. Caring-compelled lone-wolf terrorists seem to feel more empathy with perceived victims, and their feelings push them into violent action. As already noted, there is no useful profile of individuals joining a terrorist group, but our disconnected-disordered and caring-compelled types may be the beginnings of useful profiles for lone-wolf terrorists.

Case histories of self-radicalizing terrorists also suggest the importance of means and opportunity when evaluating the risk of engaging in terrorist action. Humam Al-Balawi, the suicide bomber who attacked the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, was breathing jihadist fire on the Internet for months but did nothing until Jordanian intelligence sent him to Pakistan. Analysts usually look for motivation to assess the risk of terrorist activity, but means and opportunity may be more important for understanding why only a few with radical opinions ever get to radical action.

The two-pyramids model of radicalization and de-radicalization has several implications:

There is no “conveyor belt” from extreme beliefs to extreme action. It is plausible that radical beliefs inspire radical action, but research indicates that the connection is weak. Bad ideas are not like a dose of salts that must produce bad actions. Similarly some analysts describe terrorists as “violent extremists,” a locution that can be understood to suggest that violence is the extreme of a dimension of radicalization that begins in extreme ideas. Unfortunately this framing provides little help in understanding how 99% of those with extreme ideas never engage in violent action.

Groups with extreme ideas who argue against violence may be allies in fighting terrorism. Hizb-ut-Tahrir, for instance, wants the same international caliphate that Osama bin Laden sought, but Hizb teaches that it is not time for violence in Western countries. Hizb may therefore be a useful competitor against Al Qaeda.

Fighting extreme ideas is a different problem than fighting terrorists. One might argue, for instance, that the U.S. State Department might be more effective in the War of Ideas, whereas the police, the FBI, and the Defense Department might be more useful in the war on terrorists.

We do not know when or how success in the War of Ideas will reduce terrorism. If there were an intervention that would tomorrow cut the percent of U.S. Muslims who justify suicide bombing in defense of Islam from 10% to 1%, would we predict more jihadist offences in the next twelve months (desperation)? Or fewer offences (loss of sympathy and support)? Or no change (changes in the opinion pyramid take years to affect the level of violent action)?

Conclusion

Our brief review has highlighted findings and conclusions that we did not have when we began studying terrorism after 9/11. These have given us a feeling of progress in understanding. But we can join Marc Sageman in concern for directions that need more attention.

We need to study radicalization of beliefs and actions as a sequence of action and reaction in the competition between government security forces and non-state groups.
We need more databases of government responses to terrorism to parallel databases of terrorist rhetoric and attacks. Research evaluating the success of government responses to terrorism is important, but this research depends on systematic knowledge of government actions to prevent or fight terrorism. We need more research on how terrorism ends. It can be useful for policy makers to be acquainted with the many different ways that terrorism has in the past been reduced or eliminated. We need research to understand how martyrs are constructed and deconstructed, and to understand how martyrdom mobilizes new sacrifices from those who sympathize with the martyr’s cause.

We need research on political resilience: citizens who understand that terrorism can no more be eliminated than felony murder. Every serious observer knows that the next terrorist attack in the U.S. is a matter of when, not if; resilient citizens do not begin immediately with a blame game when the inevitable arrives. Related to the last two suggestions, we need more research on how emotions—fear, anger, shame, humiliation—play into radicalization of both opinion and action. It was an advance to recognize that terrorists are not crazy, but it does not follow that terrorists and their sympathizers are rational-choice machines. If emotions can affect those who invest their savings in the stock market, it is likely that emotions also affect those who invest their lives in intergroup conflict.

In sum, we need to understand terrorism as politics. We believe there has been substantial progress in understanding terrorism, but Marc Sageman is surely right in pointing to how much work remains.

Notes

2. Ibid.
7. Leuprecht et al., “Containing the Narrative” (see note 1 above).
10. Ibid., Chapter 9: Group Competition.
12. McCauley and Moskalenko, “Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists” (see note 8 above).
13. Ibid.


