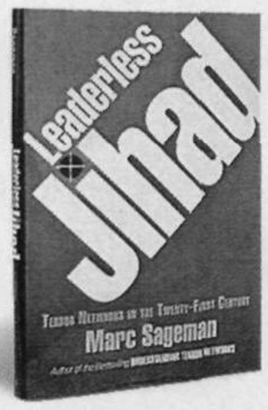
Public enemy *Sheikh's brother called him "the kindest, most gentle person you could meet"*

BOOKS

The Jihadi Next Door. What turns a law-abiding young man into a terrorist? A forensic psychiatrist offers answers

BY ARYN BAKER



AHMED OMAR SAEED SHEIKH was the kind of guy you could have taken home to Mom. Smart and friendly, he once jumped in front of a train in a London tube station to rescue a fallen commuter. But he also, in the name of the Islamist cause, gleefully threatened a hostage with decapitation in 1994. That hostage survived, but Danny Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* Pakistan correspondent whom Sheikh is charged with kidnapping in January 2002, did not. The video of Pearl's beheading can still be found on the Internet (though the identity of the actual knife wielder remains unknown). How does someone like Sheikh—"the kindest, most gentle person you could meet," according to his brother—turn terrorist?

In *Leaderless Jihad*, the latest book by the author of 2004's *Understanding Terror Networks*, forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman attempts to unravel the psychological profile of Islamist terrorists. Like his earlier book, *Leaderless Jihad* discredits conventional wisdom about terrorists by eschewing anecdotes and conjecture in favor of hard data and statistics. And statistically, the enemy is us.

"It is easy to view terrorists as alien creatures who exist outside normal patterns of social interaction," he writes. But the sobering reality is that they don't. Sociopaths do not make capable terrorists—they seldom take orders and are rarely willing to sacrifice their lives for a larger goal. Many terrorists, on the other hand, share qualities with ordinary, law-abiding people: they can be cooperative, goal-oriented and intelligent, even if emotionally wrought. Often the start of their radicalization can be traced to a scrupulous moral outrage—not an irrational hatred or base prejudice.

Radical Muslims become bombers, Sageman argues, when the causes of their anger—the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the U.S. invasion of Iraq—come to be perceived as part of a wholesale war against Islam. This feeling of being under attack may be amplified by personal experience of discrimination and then validated by exchanges with like-minded friends, family members and Internet users before being converted into action by "al-Qaeda." Not, as Sageman puts it, "al-Qaeda Central" (made up of those who have sworn an oath of loyalty to Osama bin Laden) but al-Qaeda the informal network, mobilizing radicalized Islamists around the world without any contact with bin Laden at all.

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Al-Qaeda Central, says Sageman, is on the wane, its leaders dead or on the run and increasingly isolated. It is the informal al-Qaeda—born after the attacks on Sept. 11 and exploding into raging adolescence after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003—that is the real threat, waging the "leaderless jihad" of the book's title chapter.

Poverty and lack of opportunity are not necessarily the factors that drive young men to commit violence in al-Qaeda's name. (Sheikh was middle class and educated at a private school.) "They view themselves as warriors willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of building a better world," Sageman explains, "and this gives meaning to their lives." They are also younger and less visible, blending in with the Western societies they grew up in.

Because of security crackdowns, they are unable to reach out to al-Qaeda's original leadership, but they can access jihadi Internet forums for guidance and bomb-making expertise. The Madrid train bombings of 2004, which killed 191 commuters, are an example of an atrocity committed by such young men. The attacks were an "offering to al-Qaeda Central leaders for ... admission into the ranks of global Islamist terrorism," Sageman writes.

The solution to Islamic terrorism, as the author sees it, is genuine peace in the Palestinian territories and an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, depriving jihadis of their ability to wage a moral war. "The presence of even one American soldier ... will trump any goodwill policy the United States attempts to carry out in the Middle East," he writes. He also recommends an end to the offering of rewards, to the publication of most-wanted lists and to the staging of press conferences that proclaim the capture of top terrorists, since jihadis regard all these as badges of honor. It would be better, Sageman says, to treat terrorists like common criminals.

None of Sageman's solutions are new or achievable soon, and not everyone agrees that they would work. But it isn't a forensic psychiatrist's job to come up with counterterrorist strategy. It is his job to offer a cogent alternative to the "Why do they hate us?" hand-wringing that dominates much writing about the terrorist mind-set, and Sageman has done that with great clarity. ■

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