

Introduction (Taylor):

This is a podcast produced by the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*. My name is Max Taylor, and I'm very pleased to introduce to you Dr. Marc Sageman who will discuss with me his paper 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research' and his reply 'Low Return on Investment' to the critical comments that have been published in the journal as a result of the paper. Dr. Sageman requires little introduction from me. His recent books are *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) made a significant contribution to revising our understanding of terrorism. He was a CIA case officer based in Islamabad, and is now a practicing forensics psychiatrist and is a counter-terrorism consultant most recently to the Secret Service, New York Police Department and the U.S. Army. I know that he is currently working on a new book. Marc, thank you for speaking with us.

Question (Taylor):

A central point in your paper is that despite over a decade of government funding and thousands of newcomers to the field of terrorism research, we are no closer to answering the simple question you pose of "What leads a person to turn to political violence?" and you attribute this to a large extent to a state of stagnation resulting from the way terrorism research is organized and funded. Could you elaborate on this point a little, and explore further the perspective you take more generally on our research achievements and also maybe indicate ways in which we might improve the situation?

Response (Sageman): Yes, I recognize a situation last year after the Boston Marathon bombings by the Tsarnaev brothers. I had just emerged from about a decade in the intelligence community and I could finally talk to journalists. Several of them called me and asked me, "how could the younger Tsarnaev who is very much an American kid, long hair, cute, had a lot of friends, spent a lot of time smoking marijuana, how could he do this, put a bomb with his older brother?" They asked me basically what turns a normal kid like him to political violence, and I thought about it and I really did not have a short answer for them.

That led me to start questioning, "What have we learned in the past decade despite a great influx of money as you pointed out?" And I started thinking about the state of terrorism research at the time, so in the last decade we went through several phases I would say, at first after the atrocities of 9/11 we had some excellent journalistic accounts of what happened. Peter Bergen, Jason Burke, Steve Cole, Larry Wright, several of them even earned a Pulitzer prize for their books on what led to 9/11, but they still did not answer the question, "Why did these people do this?" They just kind of had an account, a factual account of what happened. This of course..... the context where some politicians were very interested in some of the questions, and they led the agenda. So the first type of question that they were asking, the researchers were, "Why do those people hate us?" and that often lead to a discussion of ideology. The idea is that the 9/11 attack was unique in world history and they tried to understand what led to it and what were the unique factors that they've strictly contributed to this attack. Then when they realized that terrorism was not a new issue they were kind of looking at what made this different. So they were asking, "Is suicide terrorism different from other forms of terrorism?" and the idea was that we could conquer it through the use of technology, which is always the American answer. We are very far in advance, especially when it comes to computer technology, so they thought that by using different types of analysis, like social networking analysis, we might be able to conquer this. The 7/7 bombing in London, in a sense, changed the types of questions that we were asking about this terrorism. They realize that many of the perpetrators were home grown. People like

Mohammad Sidique Khan, was really born in Britain, bred in Britain, perhaps acquired this attitude in Britain, and turned to terrorism. So the new question that arose was, "How do people get radicalized?" And of course this has inbuilt assumptions that there was such a process as radicalization that transformed people and that made them become terrorists. Then I guess a policy maker chimed in and said, "Ok this is very nice, but we are in business of protecting your populations, so we'd like to know how we encourage people to leave terrorism, disengage from terrorism and get de-radicalized?" And then in the last few years people realize that a lot of the perpetrators were loners, lone wolves.... and the new sets of questions were, "Are lone wolves different?" Of course we didn't realize that throughout the last 200 years, most acts of terrorism were perpetrated by loners/ lone wolves, so this was nothing very different. But in the context of 9/11 it seems to be a little bit different. So those are account of questions that drove the agenda. As you mentioned, there was an influx of scholars from all kinds of fields trying to contribute insight of the on field to try to understand these questions. The problem is they didn't have any data to work with and this led to a state of just speculation backed up with the thinnest of anecdotal evidence to back it up. We had no interviews, no ethnographic studies and worse, there was a confusion between militants, protestors and people who turned to violence, the terrorists. Most people, most of the scholars, relied on either jihadi or government propaganda or sensationalistic reporting which led to again, speculation supported by the thinnest of anecdotal evidence. On the other hand we have the intelligence community, so, so far we've been talking about the academic community; but the intelligence community had the opposite problem. They had a flood of information but really very little mythological training to be able to evaluate this information and of course they were under pressure from the politicians who wanted answers immediately. Of course, I mean the population is very worried about its security and this translates into political pressure on politicians who pushed on that pressure onto the analysts. So we have poor analysts going from emergency to emergency trying to answer questions generated from Congress to the White House, from National Counter Terrorism Center, and various other types of agencies. In order to protect themselves, the analysts have an alarmist bias and of course this is compounded by government spin to kind of show the public that they are doing something. So we have a state now where in the academic community people understand what's going on but really have no facts, in the sense that they understand everything but know nothing and in the intelligence community you have the opposite where people have all the facts, they know everything but they understand nothing. Of course I am drawing this to an absurdity but I think there is some truth to this reflection. So here we are, a state of stagnation.

Question (Taylor):

That is kind of challenging assertion to a lot of people who probably spent their lives contributing to this state of stagnation. How do you think, if indeed that analysis is correct, we should remedy it?

Response (SageMan):

In a sense, the influx of money was both a god send and an obstacle to good research. A lot of people from various academic disciplines rushed into the field, but they didn't really have the appetite to do the difficult work of looking at, first of all, identifying evidence, and then diving into it. Unlike some of the older studies, you don't have the type of archival research that's necessary and so people are asking, you know, where is a good source of information and often trials, legal cases, especially the discovery material informing the legal cases are very rich material to look at, understanding of course the biases of some of the material, to try to analyze the situation. Also trial transcripts, memoirs of written later on, of course understanding the bias of the author who is trying to justify what he or she

did and there really was no interview with perpetrators. Here the gold standard that I am trying to argue would be participant observation, but of course in a field like terrorism research you can't really have a participant observant because he would be complicit in the plot. So how do you approximate participant observation? This is one of the challenges and we basically have not risen to it, up to it.

Question (Taylor):

Other areas face the same kind of problems; I mean astronomers, for example cannot swing the moon into another trajectory just to see what would happen. So the problem of not being able to engage with your subject matter isn't unique. Are there any other ways you can think of that would enable us to be more productive in our research?

Response (Sageman):

Yes, a lot has to do with the availability of information, both in the United States and in Europe. Even trials are subject to various laws, for instance, in the United States trials transcripts are public in the public domain, so you can use that. But discovering material is not and most of experts or consultants working in legal cases have to sign a non disclosure agreement promising that they cannot use this material publicly. In Britain it's worse because even the trial transcripts are under seal after the trial. In France there are no trial transcripts, nor in Germany, and in the Netherlands you need permission of a judge to be able to consult trial transcripts. So you can see here that the governments should make those available. I understand the need for secrecy and protection of methods and sources but without such detailed analysis we won't be able to completely understand what is going on in the field and we will have to rely on sensational and sensationalistic sound bites by reporters and that is not a really good way to do business.

Question (Taylor):

One of the striking observations, I think of when you look at the terrorism field, is that whilst we frequently talk about its interdisciplinary qualities, in reality there is not an awful lot of interdisciplinary activity going on and we don't really see terrorism as a subject matter in other kind of discipline areas, like in psychology for example. What do you think we should do to address the problem of interdisciplinarity in the area?

Response (Sageman):

Well we can create teams, that's usually the answer for interdisciplinary research and teams are useful as long as you have data to be able to discuss, otherwise it just degenerates into an argument of which discipline has a most fruitful insight into looking at the type of sound bites that people are condemned to use. There is some way to actually have an interdisciplinary group when it's to meet regularly to actually have the chief of that group being soundly in the social sciences. So far what has been happening, at least in the United States, is that often it's an engineer who is the head of the interdisciplinary group looking at it as it were partical of physics because many of the experts, scientific experts in the United States come from engineering, all from physics, from the national labs and those people don't usually have a good understanding of the difference between the social sciences and engineering and many of those projects therefore fail.

Question (Taylor):

I think that's quite an important point to make isn't it, that there are some structural issues that limit our capacity to engage in research and structural issues might be to do with the nature of government,

the way government controls things. But it might also have to do with the way we organize our research as well.

Response (Sage man):

Absolutely, yes, most people have blinders, disciplinary blinders when they look at this data and are not very receptive to suggestions from other disciplines. In a sense we are all very comfortable in our own discipline and we will try to solve problems according to it.

Question (Taylor):

True, I think that is the case. Marc, I think that has been extremely helpful but is there anything else you'd like to add for our listeners to perhaps take the debate on a little bit further and think a little more about?

Response (Sage man):

Well I think the first step is to really immerse oneself in data and if the data is really nonexistent for this last wave of terrorism post 9/11 we should go back and try to understand what happened in previous waves of political violence. There the data exists but it will take years of hard work to really sift through it, we're talking about tens of thousands of pages of trial transcripts, and discovery material, memoirs. But that is really the first step so then we can generate hypothesis that we can then test in this wave of terrorism. But there really is no short cut in the field, which is basically my point.

Taylor:

Marc, thank you very much. That seems to be the point to stop. Thank you very much for talking to us, thank you.

Response (Sage men):

Thank you very much.