

**Book Review  
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**Peter Bergen, *The United States of Jihad: Who Are America's Homegrown Terrorists and How Do We Stop Them?* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 397.**

Peter Bergen is a renowned journalist who has authored seven books to date, three of which were New York times bestsellers. He has written extensively on terrorism and is on the editorial board of the "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", a leading scholarly journal on the subject of terrorism. The author has also held teaching positions at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

His latest book focuses on the broader issue of terrorism inside the United States; how individuals are radicalized, the methods used to identify terrorist plots and the instances when state institutions have failed to curb them. Bergen draws a parallel in the opening chapter, as Hamza Khan and his siblings planned to embark on a journey to the 'perfect Islamic state'. He observes that they were not unlike Americans in the 1930's who had thronged to Spain to show support to the antifascists fighting Franco.

These ideas of disillusionment with the American government and an increasing interest in 'Binladenist' ideology are a consistent motivating factor with many individuals who become radicalized. But the author notes that out of 360 terrorist plots that have been launched in the US since 9/11 four out of five individuals involved in the plotting were American citizens. He dispels the myth that exist about these 'homegrown' terrorists.

Using case studies; Bergen shows that they were not ill-educated, they had not recently immigrated, they had not always been religiously inclined and they showed no discernible mental health issues. They were like other ordinary Americans. The crucial questions arise then; why they chose to do what they did, how they were able to get in contact with jihadist recruiters and how such individuals can be identified in the future.

An important theme of the book is to understand the domestic terrorist threat to the US and identify the best strategies in tracking and countering them. Bergen explains how the process of 'jihadisation' is a gradual process where a potential recruit becomes influenced by 'Binladenist' Islamist ideology, becoming increasingly intolerant of any deviation from their beliefs even towards friends and family. From then on the jihadist begins to isolate himself, as in the case of Carlos Bledsoe who quit school and married a woman who shared his rigid beliefs, eventually attempting, by any means, to travel to a 'field of jihad'

A key theme in this book explores the importance of leader-less jihad, first explored by Sageman, an important theorist in foreign policy. In his 2004 book *'Understanding Terror Networks'* he proposes that social bonds could sometimes play a bigger part than ideology "motivated as much by in-group love as by out-group hate." A more significant contribution to this debate was that of Abu Musab al-Suri who critiqued Al-Qaeda's top down organization structure which he thinks is easy to fracture for western intelligence by capturing just one of its member. Suri instead proposed a model for jihad enacted by individuals or small cells working globally. Such a strategy would create an organization with so many heads that it will be impossible to decapitate: a true hydra.

The author also discusses the seriousness of the threat posed by leaderless jihad as seen in cases like Nidal Hasan, Umar Farouk Abdulmutalib and Carlos Bledsoe. A leaderless system according to the book was largely more successful because of the expansion of social media networks in recent years. Bergen makes an interesting point regarding counterterrorism, which is especially relevant in the current political climate. In his opinion there is no dearth of intelligence available to the CIA or FBI. What really brings results is the accumulation of *relevant* intelligence and effective coordination between different intelligence agencies.

A failure of either can have catastrophic effects as Bergen explains with the help of the case of 'underwear bomber' Umar Farouk Abdulmutalib whose father had tipped off US officials about his intentions well before he tried to board a flight with the intention of blowing it up. Miscalculations on the part of these agencies can be dangerous as well, as they may stray perilously close to violating civil rights. A startling fact to consider is that since 9/11 the FBI has engineered at least 30 fake terrorist plots in order to 'flush out' jihadist sympathizers or organizers. None of these operations was successful.

Bergen also discusses a counter to the Sageman theory of the homegrown threat by using the theory of Bruce Hoffman, who asserts that even the worst of the homegrown threats have not been able to inflict the kind of damage that a full-scale Al-Qaeda attack could. Bergen's own position on the matter is more objective and he points out that both methods of attack require strong coordination among terrorist leaders. Many 'lone wolf' threats were also provided funds by the jihadist organizations.

Perhaps the most salient focus of this book is the effect that the expansion of the internet, has had on the propagation of Salafist

ideas. The launch of the webzine, "Inspire" by Samir Khan featured jaunty articles like 'Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom' heralding a new shift in the war against terror where al-Qaeda content was presented in colorful graphics. Such a shift strengthened the case for leaderless jihad, where individuals like Khan and Chesser could do jihad from the safety of their computer chairs.

The author also notes that for a long time counterterrorism studies have focused on analysing what *motivates* homegrown terrorists, but he contends that trying to find logic in what is an essentially illogical act is a fruitless exercise. It is important to identify the indicators of a radicalized recruit but not so important to understand them. In order to fight them it is more relevant to know how the terrorists obtain information to carry out their attacks, the process for choosing their targets and their coordination channels with other terrorist groups.

It is baffling that despite their gory and highly publicized executions, horrific torture methods and draconian laws, ISIS has had thirty thousand foreign recruits pouring into the war torn regions of Syria and Iraq.

*'The United States of Jihad'* is a timely book; it is intensely relevant in the current political climate and offers an objective analysis and a concise history of domestic terrorist operations in the United States since 9/11. His analysis not only extends to jihadist terrorism but also, to how an ideological dimension has been charged up by both the media and government with regard to terrorism. The fact is, it is no longer accurate to say that a '*clash of civilizations*' is occurring. Bergen emphasizes a consistent need for decisions to be made based on *relevant* intelligence by agencies. Alternatively, it is important to engage with groups like Islamic State through the medium with which

they have garnered such popularity; social media. This book is a must read for academics focused on counterterrorism research, political analysts as well as anyone citizens who want to familiarize themselves with the current debates on domestic terrorism.

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