Spear to the West: Thought and Recruitment in Violent Jihadism
by Stephen Chan.

Review by Caleb Cage, Reno, NV (caleb.cage@gmail.com).

Since 9/11, scholars have sought to understand what converts a mainstream religious or political believer into a radical ideologue willing to kill or die for the cause. Some students of radicalization have approached the problem from a social psychology perspective[1] or by examining the writings of political prisoners.[2] But such research has been criticized for its excessive preoccupation with the operational needs of security professionals rather than the radicalization of individuals within discrete societies, cultures, and moments in time.

In *Spear to the West*, author Stephen Chan (Univ. of London)[3] avoids that pitfall by concentrating on the specific recruitment tactics of radical organizations and their deployment of violent jihadism. He warns that western governments and societies must appreciate the true nature of this process in order to counter it successfully. In particular, Chan shows how extremist leaders have capitalized on

> the capacity of modern internationalism, an Islamic globalism facilitated by electronic means, to convert, recruit and eventually lead individuals to a moment of death and sacrifice. This capacity can be as effective as a physical internationalism, where the fighter or bomber travels for training and further indoctrination in Afghanistan or the Middle East. Either way the net result is a deadly recruit. (136)

Chan argues that extremist recruiting appeals to more than stereotypical malcontents or resentful loners. Instead, he sees the actual radicalization process as a kind of conversion, not to a faith in general, but rather to an ideology within that faith that demands systematic action, self-sacrifice, and often the harming of others. The author traces a process of incremental changes to the interpretation of key concepts of Islam, its historical narrative, and its foundational ideology. As others have noted, these changes have been expedited in an age of new media and the near omnipresence of the Internet.

Chan argues for a functional process that will not please security professionals seeking ways to intervene at the operational level. He shows how radicals have politicized the concept of *jihad* in ways responsive to a new concept of modernity; a perfect storm of ideology, technology, and global uncertainty allows radicals to attract and indoctrinate new recruits. But theorists and practitioners must, Chan contends, grasp the underlying causes of radicalization, not just its outcomes over time.

---

1. E.g., Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011; rev. 2016).

2. Melissa Dearey, *Radicalization: The Life Writings of Political Prisoners* (NY: Routledge, 2010).

3. Where he is Foundation Chair for the School of Oriental and African Studies.

Throughout his book, Chan compares his arguments with those of other contemporary scholars of violent jihadism,[4] taking care to show how they have influenced the understanding of radicalization in the west, and how, in some cases, their framing of stories of the successes of violent jihad has unintentionally supported the narratives of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Chan's succinct and discerning study of violent jihadism and radicalization will reward specialists and policy-makers, but its apportionment in discrete, digestible essays makes it a good choice for anyone needing a primer on its complex and critically important subject.

---

4. E.g., Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2004), and Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2005).