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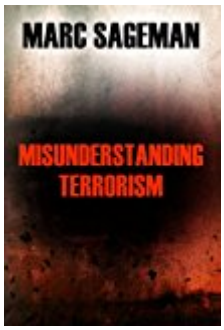
Marc Sageman. *Misunderstanding Terrorism.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 224 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4889-0.



Reviewed by Avery Plaw

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Marc Sageman's *Misunderstanding Terrorism* represents his latest effort to cut through the confusion and stagnation he sees besetting terrorism research "by bringing realistic numbers into the assessment of the threat facing the West" (p. 22). The main problem, he suggests, is a disconnect between expertise and data: "Academics understand everything but know nothing, while government analysts know everything but understand nothing" (p. 21). The consequences of this disconnection is a bitterly divided field, vulnerable to "popular hysteria" (p. 21), supporting often ill-judged public policy. Sageman aspires, and I think largely achieves, a salutary corrective. For many readers, including many political leaders and purported specialists, his book will not be a particularly pleasant medicine, but it does hold some promise of improving the overall condition of our understanding of what the author calls "the global neojihadi threat to the West" (p. 24).

Sageman is fortuitously placed to overcome the gap he identifies between analytic expertise and reliable terrorism data. His academic background in political sociology and his professional training as a forensic psychiatrist, combined with his lifelong "obsession with political violence" (p. 1), landed him a series of jobs which permitted him to gather together what he purports is "a database on all global neojihadi incidents in the West since 9/11" (p. 28) and up to September 10, 2011, based in large part on his own field research, interviews with terrorists, and careful review of court documents, classified records, and press reports. This database includes "66 global neojihadi plots or attacks in the West during the post-9/11 decade [which] involved 220 individuals" (p. 29), and Sageman includes a table listing all of the cases along with key details. Analyzing trends in the data, Sageman confirms some of his earlier theses that clashed with prevalent attitudes in the terrorism literature. For example, his data suggests that, contrary to appearances, the threat of terrorist attack was not rising at the end of the decade after 9/11; moreover, contrary to alarmist analyses, al-Qaeda attacks in particular "were not as serious a threat" (p. 42) as in the ear-

ly years after 9/11, and the great majority of "global neojihadi plots or attacks in the West came from homegrown groups or individuals who had no significant connection to any foreign terrorist organization" (p. 46). Sageman argues that these findings strongly support two controversial claims in his earlier writings--first, that al-Qaeda was "on the run" rather than "on the move" by 2011 and, second, that the evolving global neojihadi threat was "leaderless" rather than "leader-led" (p. 51).

In light of his findings, Sageman offers a sharply critical analysis of some of the policies Western countries, and the United States in particular, have adopted to combat global neojihadi threats. For example, he uses his database to calculate the "base rate" of terrorism within the West, and also within the US in particular--"a rate of 0.0006 per 100,000 per year" based on eighteen cases over ten years (p. 75)--and then compares this with the tens of thousands of people who have been placed, often on the flimsiest of pretexts, on the US "No Fly" list--reportedly 47,000 in 2013, including 800 Americans (p. 82)--and the "Automatic Selectee" list--reportedly 16,000 including 1,200 Americans (p. 82). He concludes that the error rate is enormous--he calculates 99.85 percent (p. 84)--and is "the product of common biases and flawed thinking" (pp. 72-73) such as "low base rate neglect" (p. 84). Moreover, he contends that such policies may produce the opposite of their intended effect, and "actually accelerate the turn to violence" (p. 85) among the many people who are detrimentally impacted.

Having reviewed the nature and scope of the threat of global neojihadi terrorism to the West, and shown the inefficacy of some of the West's attempts to manage it, Sageman finally turns to the classic problem of its root cause. After spending a chapter dismissing inadequate explanations, he ultimately identifies one that he finds more convincing, one that places "social identity at the center of the process of turning politically violent" (p. 112). In essence, he argues that terrorists begin by strongly identifying with "in-groups" which they see as threatened by hostile "out-groups" (p. 113). Of course, this much could be said of virtually anyone, and as Sageman's own data shows, it is a rare person who resorts to political violence, particularly in the West. One thing that distinguishes the terrorist trajectory is a "***politicized*** social identity" (p. 117, italics added) involved in an "escalating conflict with an out-group (often the state)" (p. 117). Dialectical interactions both between the in-group and out-group, and within the in-group itself, lead members onto a path of "radicalization" and finally "mobilization" (p. 108). In some cases, for example, disappointment with peaceful means of political protest lead to the adoption of a "martial social identity" which in turn "leads a few to turn to violence in defense of their imagined community" (p. 117), especially where they see their identity group figuratively or literally under attack. Sageman insists that "even loners who commit terrorist acts do so because they imagine themselves to be members of a larger social category" (p. 114). Moreover, when they "engage in political violence," they do so "not for personal motives, but for group motives" (p. 115).

Much of the rest of Sageman's book provides an overview of the "dialectic" of in-group and out-group escalation that leads a splinter group to opt for violence and to try to draw others with it. His main conclusion is that the "key to containing and ending such campaigns is for the state to assess the threat accurately and not overreact" (p. 167). He recommends instead "the removal of grievances" and the crafting of "an overriding social identity whose salience trumps that of the in-group" (p. 166). In short, he asserts that "an effective national leader tries to prevent protesters from crossing into violence, not with the threat of punishment, but by bringing them back to the national fold" (pp. 171-172). At the moment, however, Western policies tend to alienate Islamic populations that have grievances rather than draw them back to the fold: "Western states' indicators

of 'radicalization'… are really indicators of the generally nonviolent Islamist protest community in the West, and not its violent members" (pp. 167-168). In this vein, he finds "talk of 'the war on terror' particularly irresponsible," as it leads to "unjust and unfair treatment of Muslims in the West" (p. 171). He also repeatedly condemns the FBI's "entrapment of naïve Muslim militants into committing crimes that would never have occurred absent FBI inducement" (p. 56). Instead, he argues that all monitoring of the Muslim community should "be passive" (p. 169), and argues that when a state seeks a warrant for surveillance from a court, the potential targets should be represented by "general public advocates with security clearance [who] must be able to represent the interests of the suspects without arousing suspicion among them" (p. 169). He also expresses general skepticism about "terrorist enhancement sentences in various Western countries" (pp. 173-174).

Evidently, there is much in this book that challenges current policy as well as some expert advice and common attitudes. All of the criticism it offers is articulate and well informed and some of it is quite convincing. Moreover, all of it deserves careful review and consideration by anyone interested in the threat to the West posed by global neojihadis today, and certainly anyone aspiring to offer advice or formulate policy in the area. Of particular importance is the comprehensive database of neojihadi plots against the West that Sageman partially presents (providing at least a list of cases, suspects, dates, countries targeted, etc.) and employs in his analysis. While this is not the only database of plots covering this period, Sageman lays out and defends his criteria for inclusion and exclusion in detail, and makes a persuasive case that the good sense of his criteria (excluding, for example, FBI sting operations which might not have occurred without government inducement), and the quality and range of his sources, combine to produce a genuinely useful data set. It is only unfortunate that a more elaborated version has not been made available online, so that other researchers can scrutinize the details and perform their own analyses of it. More examples and illustrations from cases contained in the data set would also have also lent more authority and color to the lengthy discussion of in-groups and out-groups in chapter 4 (although he does make reference to another of his books that will be published this year entitled ***The Turn to Political Violence*** which may do some of this work (pp. 149, 208).

There are also, however, some points where Sageman's criticisms of current counterterrorism policy seem less plausible. For example, he criticizes the US government for making the unjustified assumption "once a terrorist, always a terrorist" for purposes of the No Fly list (p. 69). I would say that while the assumption may not always be true, it is hard to know in any given case, and having participated in a terrorist act in the past raises reasonable worries about repetition, such that it is hard to criticize those with responsibility for safeguarding civilian air traffic for leaning toward caution.

More broadly, it does feel at times that something important is missing in Sageman's analysis. His book focuses so fixedly on bringing numbers to bear on the threat posed by contemporary neojihadis and the strategic efficacy of counterterrorism measures, that it effectively excludes the moral dimensions of both. On the side of the terrorists, Sageman seems to fully embrace the view that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (p. 89), and focuses on "transcend[ing] the prejudices built into the terminology" (p. 91). He correspondingly "define[s] terrorism as ***a public's categorization of political violence by nonstate actors during domestic peacetime***" (p. 91). By focusing on differences of public attitude, Sageman obscures the fact that this definition throws together an enormous spectrum of substantively different types of action. For example, some of this political violence may seek to

avoid killing, at least on a large scale, and be directed against an occupying army, or brutal police force, or public officials who may themselves have blood on their hands, and some other violence may be deliberately directed to the slaughter of people who are clearly civilians and often the most innocent and defenseless of them, such as a kindergarten class, and while there may be cause to condemn it all, there is nonetheless an important difference of degree--a difference which some try to capture in the distinction between freedom fighters (who may nonetheless commit crimes) and terrorists. The key point here is that what makes someone a terrorist is not the degree of public approval or disapproval of the political violence s/he commits, but the nature of the violence itself, beginning with the fact that it is deliberately directed at civilians. This distinction is important because it tracks something which is outstandingly morally reprehensible, and deservedly on an entirely different scale than the "car accidents" (p. 58) with which Sageman compares them. For this moral reason, they may also be argued to warrant a more aggressive state reaction, including asking citizens to make more significant sacrifices to avoid their repetition. Indeed, citizens may be (and I'd say are) morally warranted in demanding that the state prioritize providing protection from this sort of harm. In many places throughout chapter 3, Sageman dismisses the misunderstandings of terrorism demonstrated by the "lay public" (p. 92), "lay people" (p. 93), "lay understanding" (p. 95), and "lay experts" (p. 100), but in respect to this moral dimension it sometimes feels like the average person grasps something that the eminent scientists do not.

Something similar might be argued concerning Sageman's discussion of counterterrorism policies. Part of what public policy on terrorism is doing is giving expression to the outrage and abhorrence of average citizens whom terrorists are attempting to terrify into submission. The combative posture assumed is part of managing the fear (choosing "fight" rather than "flight"). It also goes to the identity of the population under threat, allowing them to see themselves as the kind of people who rise to, and decisively confront, a threat rather than submissively accepting it as a new fact of life and seeking to manage it in the way that crime or chronic disease is managed. The deliberately neutral, clinical approach in the book deliberately excludes these considerations in favor of what might be characterized as a therapeutic approach aimed at coaxing "a bunch of violent guys" (pp. 150-151) away from actually committing violence, by tamping down what they might perceive as hostility from the state. Throughout the book, Sageman argues forcefully that what he sees as overreaction by the state, particularly in the form of crude measures which entail inevitable harm to those not yet or merely contemplating violence, will often prove counterproductive (serving more to radicalize than prevent). His analyses provide valuable insights into the balance of costs and benefits involved. But as useful as this analysis is, it does seem to leave out some things of note. One such thing, for example, is that public policy has important moral and expressive dimensions of the type discussed above (and not merely technocratic ones). For another, the book seems to rely on the assumption in the counterfactual scenario that it recommends, where the state adopts a more moderate and gradualist approach designed to persuade potential terrorists away from violence, that potential terrorists will not be emboldened by the very restraint of the state's reaction.

To be sure, Sageman might not consider these last considerations as important to his project--which was, after all, to bring more reliable data and rigorous analysis to a debate he found too reliant on moralizing and speculation. He persuasively makes the case for the urgent need for this type of analysis. But it is worth bearing in mind that cold calculations of utility (all other things assumed to be unchanged) are not the only pertinent considerations in forming a sustainable

counterterrorism policy, however important it may be to give them their due attention.

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