

**Marc Sageman, *The London Bombings*.** Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 312 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8122-5118-0. US \$ 49.95 [Hardcover].

*Reviewed by Anthony Richards*

In one sense the title of Marc Sageman's latest book, *The London Bombings*, is rather broad as it somewhat belies what is effectively an account written from an intelligence perspective. In another, however, it is too narrow as it doesn't reflect the content of the book, which dedicates chapters to three other terrorist plots. Four of the six chapters, then, cover Operation Crevice (in relation to the fertiliser bomb plot), Operation Theseus (which investigated the July 7 2005 attacks), Operation Vivace (which investigated the failed July 21 2005 plot) and Operation Overt (in relation to the liquid bomb airline plot).

That the book is written from an intelligence perspective comes as no surprise as the author has extensive experience in this field. One also cannot help but consider this work in the context of his previous claim of 'The Stagnation of Terrorism Research' (*Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 26, 2014, no. 4) where he argued that the 'unbridgeable gap between academia and the intelligence community' had 'led to an explosion of speculations with little grounding in academia'. As one reads through the text one is, nevertheless, given the impression that this work is an attempt to demonstrate how empirical research can and should be carried out, and how, in particular, 'to get the story straight' (this is later confirmed in the final chapter when he critiques both the methods and findings of other well-known terrorism scholars and commentators). The author has gone to great lengths (largely through studying numerous court transcripts) in providing an impressively detailed narrative account of the events and individual interactions that took place between the conspirators in the run up to their particular terrorist plots. The case studies, therefore, largely read as a diary of the movements and interactions of the plotters, culminating in their arrest and conviction or, in the case of 7/7, the attack itself.

The importance of this book lies in its empirical approach that provides a valuable insight, as far as it can, into the minds, motivations and planning behind each of the plots. In doing so the author has sought to debunk what he sees as some myths – for example, that Al Qaeda was not trying to recruit the London bombers Sidiq Khan and Shehzad Tanweer but that they were seeking to join Al Qaeda. Nor does the author shy away from criticising the UK's intelligence agencies (or 'the British authorities' as he terms them) – that, for example, the fertiliser bomb plot wasn't the plot that they believed it to be (and that they had 'panicked' when the original plot, he argues, had actually been abandoned).

Sageman also writes that the 'authorities' did not focus on 'two or three' of the London bombers sufficiently and that this 'neglect' resulted in the deaths of 52 innocent victims. Perhaps some balance would have been useful here – yes, of course, with hindsight, two of the London bombers could have been investigated further but some appreciation of the findings from the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee report into the London attacks (2006), for example, might have led to a more circumspect approach. Although Khan and Tanweer were on the periphery of other investigations at the time, the report concluded 'that, in light of the other priority investigations being conducted and the limitations on Security Service resources, the decisions not to give greater investigative priority to these two individuals were understandable' (p.16).

There is also an occasional penchant for uncorroborated and inaccurate sweeping statements, such as on p. 10: 'At first, native Britons lumped together all non-white newcomers to the British Isles and generally called them "blacks"' and on p. 103: 'Although in the perception of non-Spaniards the bombings were seen as causing the government to fall, the defeat of the conservative government was really due to its lies and cover-up so close to the elections rather than the bombings themselves.' This writer knows of many non-Spaniards (including himself!) who did not attribute the election defeat to the bombings but rather to the erroneous and premature Spanish government assessment of ETA's culpability for the attack. Presentationally, it was also a little disappointing to find over a dozen typos in the text (ie. Clarke and Clark used to refer to the same individual on p. 240, and likewise Saleem and Salem used on p. 138).

This is nevertheless an impressive empirical account, following which the conclusion turns to an assessment

of the government's version of Crevice and of four other accounts of this and the other plots (those of Peter Neumann and Ryan Evans, Raffaello Pantucci, Bruce Hoffman and Paul Cruickshank ). In many ways the conclusion is the most striking chapter, largely because of its quite scathing criticism of the work of these other authors. For Operation Crevice Sageman contrasts 'the facts with its [the government's] feverish imagination and interpretation of them', before he goes on to critique Neumann and Evans's account for relying on the government's interpretation of Crevice and for referring to it as an Al Qaeda plot (he states that the latter 'did not approve it, train the conspirators, direct it or guide it'). He suggests that they got it 'so wrong' because 'they relied on secondhand evidence, namely government claims and journalistic reports', and that the 'authors' postulated al Qaeda guidance for the plot ...was just the authors' own fantasies projected onto the case. Their chapter is an example of baseless speculations, reaching conclusions contrary to the evidence.'

Pantucci's account of Crevice is criticised for its reliance on secondary sources and on newspaper articles and Sageman concludes that 'many of Pantucci's claims are taken out of context, lack nuance, or do not reflect the facts emerging from primary sources'. He then turns to Hoffman's account of Theseus and states that his 'very short narrative of Theseus is marred by dozens of factual errors'. He goes on to observe that much of Hoffman's chapter is polemical and that 'his heavy reliance on sensationalistic and long discredited newspaper articles ...leads him astray' and that he 'compounds his reliance on sensational accounts with misattribution of his information'. He refers to Hoffman's 'cavalier sourcing, fondness for unsubstantiated leaks and tabloid reporting, and failure to cross-check his information' that 'add up to poor scholarship'. Finally, in considering Cruickshank's account of Overt, Sageman disputes the so-called South African connection and that, while he states that the former's account is 'the best of the lot', he 'still makes errors because of his additional use of unreliable sources.'

I cannot comment on the veracity or otherwise of all of the above claims. What I would suggest, however, is that the author's call for more '*healthy* disagreement' (italics added) within terrorism research does not at times appear to be matched by his tone or choice of vocabulary (i.e. 'authors' own fantasies', 'cavalier sourcing' etc.). In short, if 'healthy disagreement' is the goal then I am sure there are slightly less adversarial ways of doing this.

The conclusion then returns to the theme at the beginning of this review where he blames 'the stagnation in terrorism research on Western governments' refusal to share information with trained scholars.' As such, he argues, 'sensationalistic speculations and theories devoid of facts filled this gap, and their traces can still be seen in most scholars' narratives of global neojihadi attacks.' Notwithstanding the tone in some of his critique (and perhaps the need for a rather more temperate approach in places) this book is nevertheless an excellent empirical contribution in providing detailed accounts in the run up to the four plots that the author has investigated.

**About the Reviewer: Dr Anthony Richards**, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Law and Social Sciences, Director of Postgraduate Taught Programmes, Royal Holloway, University of London, England, UK.