

Putting Al Qaeda on the Couch

September 11 was a recruiting poster for young people who are looking for some kind of direction in their lives.

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Marc Sageman has charted an unlikely path. The first scholar-in-residence at the New York City Police Department is a child of Holocaust survivors who became a psychiatrist, a sociologist and a CIA case officer. Since the publication of "Leaderless Jihad" earlier this year, Sageman has been at the center of a debate about the inner workings of Al Qaeda. Is the organization dispersed and disorganized, as Sageman suggests, or is it resurgent, as CIA analyses have reported? Sageman spoke with NEWSWEEK's Christopher Dickey in New York. Excerpts:

DICKEY: You have drawn parallels between the group dynamics of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, the paramilitary task forces that hunted down Jews and others, and today 's terrorists. How did you come to make that link?

SAGEMAN: The Einsatzgruppen were really draft dodgers, not ideologues. They had families, and yet they were the ones who killed. And so this started me thinking about the importance of group dynamics. I started teaching a course at the University of Pennsylvania, which became extremely popular, The Moral Psychology of Holocaust Perpetrators. When 9/11 happened, the analogy between the Einsatzgruppen and the hijackers dawned on me and my students as well. Group dynamics had been completely neglected in terrorism studies.

The basic criticism of " Leaderless Jihad " is that you focus too much on the dynamics of small groups and not enough on the overall dynamics and leadership of Al Qaeda.

I spent a lot of time in Hamburg, looking at the leaders of the 9/11 operation who had been there. I realized it was a bunch of guys that got together and wanted to do something. They were all very enthusiastic and not just passive recipients of other people's orders. They generated their own ideas. They went to Afghanistan looking for Al Qaeda, and when they connected, then Al Qaeda gave them some direction.

You talk about three waves of Al Qaeda- related terrorism. What are those?

The first were the companions of bin Laden. Those were the true elite. Something like 20 percent had a doctorate. The second group were the guys that joined in the '90s. They were mostly expatriate students studying in the West; they were still intellectuals. The third wave is really the opposite of the first two. They are hoodlums putting the Al Qaeda label on themselves because, after all, that made the U.S. tremble. That is very inspiring for young people. But they are amateur wanna-bes, and therefore the dynamic is very different from the first two waves. But the first two waves are still around. If we relax our vigilance, they will reach out and do a devastating thing like 9/11.

How important is the spectacle of huge, destructive, almost Hollywood-style deeds to this third group?

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A lot of the academic and policy discussion about Al Qaeda focuses on ideological and theological questions, like the desire to establish a caliphate.

That's wrong. That may have had some influence in the first two waves. But the third wave is much less sophisticated. It's images of glory. You want to be front-page.

So what do you see as our best strategy?

Well, where the first two waves are concerned, it is very simple. We have to capture and kill those guys, because we are not going to persuade them to give up. What we need to do with the third wave is contain it. You have to take the glory out of terrorism, really focus on the victims.

What could the United States be doing that it ' s not trying to do already?

There is nothing positive you can do to bring people to your side, but there are a lot of negative things you can do that will repulse people. Guantánamo Bay is one; Abu Ghraib is another one.

The whole Iraq War.

Iraq, absolutely. We turned a lot of the world against us. But the other side makes mistakes, too. Al Qaeda has made so many mistakes in Iraq that they have turned the population against them, and they are starting to do the same thing in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Before May 12, 2003, they had Saudi society behind them. Then they started bombing Saudi Arabia. They are making plenty of mistakes, and what we need to do is start cashing in on them.