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***Les Espions de la Terreur* by Matthieu Suc, Paris, HarperCollins, 2018, 490 pp, €19.90 (paperback), ISBN 979-1-0339-0265-2**

In his latest book, French investigative journalist Matthieu Suc tells the story of the terrorist spies that planned and perpetrated attacks in Paris and Brussels between 2014 and 2016.¹ Suc carefully details the jihadists' path and the modus operandi of the Islamic State's intelligence and security services (*Amniyat*). The book effectively demonstrates the sophistication of the Islamic State, inviting its readers to reconsider some of their preconceptions about the perpetrators of terrorism and their intelligence capabilities.

The narrative is easy to read and yet very detailed. Suc has conducted extensive fieldwork with a variety of sources that will leave researchers envious of his access to key individuals and documentation. A list at the end of the book includes dozens of declassified notes from the two main French intelligence agencies – the General Directorates for Internal and External Security (*DGSI* and *DGSE*). Other key documentary sources include criminal records and thousands of memos drafted as a part of the investigative hearings that precede criminal trials in France. Interviews with magistrates, police and intelligence officers, victims of terrorism (including former captives of the Islamic State), terrorists and their families add nuance and context. These primary sources are complemented by a thorough engagement with other journalists' work and some academic literature. Suc's approach is rigorous. He triangulates between sources to ensure the validity of the research. The narrative goes beyond the stories of terrorist spies, the author analyses his subjects, and makes occasional links to the broader history of intelligence and terrorism.

The book is organised in two parts. Part I focuses on the Caliphate's 'FBI'. These first chapters detail the horrendous experiences of the Caliphate's detainees, the use of torture as well as more sophisticated (e.g. deceptive) interrogation techniques by various members of the *Amniyat*, and their effort to vet new terrorist recruits. A chapter on the 'founding fathers of the jihadi secret services' explains how *Daesh* acquired knowledge about intelligence structures and tradecraft.² The level of organisation described by Suc dispels the notion that intelligence is a 'secret state activity'.³ Learning directly from former intelligence officers from the Iraqi and Syrian *moukhabarat* (intelligence services) among other services, previous generations of terrorists as well as documents from the CIA and the KGB, the Islamic State set up state-like security and intelligence apparatus. This apparatus adopted many of the practices found in modern state intelligence agencies such as the use of archives, the compartmentalisation of sensitive information, systematic vetting, training and specialisation. However, the initial success of the Islamic State and the structuration of the *Amniyat* were undermined by defections, penetrations and paranoia – all of which are difficult to avoid in autocratic systems.

The second part of the book examines the external services of the *Amniyat*, the 'terrorists' CIA'. Suc explains how a small cadre of terrorists formed a bureau of clandestine operations (*Amn al-Kharji*) that planned and staged operations to neutralise opponents in the region and wage terror in Belgium and France. The author reveals this clandestine bureau's efforts to maintain operational and digital security, deceive and overwhelm Western intelligence and

¹ Matthieu Suc is the author of *Femmes de Djihadistes* (Paris: Fayard, 2016) which examines contemporary terrorism through the eyes of jihadis' wives.

² All the direct quotations have been translated by the author of this review.

³ See for example the definition of Michael Warner, 'Wanted: A Definition of "Intelligence"', *Studies in Intelligence* 46/3 (2002), 21.

security services, and provide effective logistical support for terrorist attacks in the West. Suc criticizes French intelligence services which initially ‘underestimated the nature of their adversary’ and their understanding of operational tradecraft (211-212).

Scholars will find Matthieu Suc’s book useful, due to the detailed way in which he presents the personal paths of Western jihadists (mostly Belgian and French citizens) who decided to join the ranks of the Islamic State. They will also be interested to learn how ISIS structured its own security apparatus to protect itself and wage terrorist attacks abroad. The book makes a valuable addition to the small body of literature on the counterintelligence practices of terrorist groups.⁴

Suc’s narrative contributes to our understanding of France’s struggle against terrorism in the last decade. The journalist reveals the efforts of French internal and external intelligence services to gather and analyse information on terrorist suspects, in order to better understand and anticipate the terrorist threat and disrupt the Islamic State. Here the book examines well-known state intelligence practices such as deception and penetration, international cooperation, and targeted killings. At its best, Suc’s narrative reveals the complexity and dilemmas of modern counter-terrorism, reinforcing the old wisdom that intelligence and security failures are inevitable.⁵ The book ends with an ominous warning that ‘the Islamic State is not dead, it has tipped over in the clandestine world’ (356) and adapted its modus operandi following significant territorial losses.

Les Espions de la Terreur is an empirically rich and timely book that provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary terrorism and intelligence. An English translation is much needed to broaden access to this fascinating monograph.

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⁴ See Blake M. Mobley, *Terrorism and Counterintelligence. How Terrorist Groups Elude Deception* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Carl Anthony Wege, ‘Hizballah’s Counterintelligence Apparatus’, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 25/4 (2012-2013), 771-85.

⁵ Richard Betts, ‘Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable’, *World Politics* 31/1 (1978), 61-89.