



# Jonathan Schanzer

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## Terror in the Name of God

### Why Religious Militants Kill

by [Jessica Stern](#)

Ecco Press, 368 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by [Jonathan Schanzer](#)

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### The Militant Mind

How to explain religious violence? Jessica Stern's most recent book, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, attempts to explain.

At first, the task seems impossible. After all, there are a multitude of reasons why religious fundamentalists kill, and a plethora of groups to do the killing. Stern, however, wisely distills the grievances of religious militants down to five broad rubrics: alienation, humiliation, demographics, history, and territory. Using primary source interviews with terrorists (in jail and on the loose), she explains these grievances through the personal stories of professed American Christian fundamentalists, Palestinian Hamasniks, Indonesian Islamic Jihadists, Jewish redemptionists, and Kashmiri mujahadin.

The book is fascinating because it allows the reader to eavesdrop on a plethora of interviews with extremists from the far corners of the earth. Even more interesting is that the radicals actually feel comfortable pouring their hearts out to a curious Harvard professor. One

wonders what it must have been like for a Jewish-American woman from Harvard to talk with radical Islamists from Indonesia, Kashmir, and Gaza. This partially explains why S

study is a page-turner.

Stern shares one rousing letter from the wife of an Indonesian radical, who could be characterized as a radical herself.

"Don't ever think that we're afraid of death in defending our religion," she writes. "Even death is our goal to reach the true glory. Victory in this world is God's promise for us in every war..."

A Kashmiri radical, who tries to persuade Stern to convert to Islam, believes that Allah loves those who sacrifice their lives in the Jihad with love. The love is 70 times stronger than this love."

How Stern was able to arrange these interviews is not explained. It makes one wonder what the terrorists hoped to achieve by granting them. Stern herself warns the reader to be "alert to possible lies." To be sure, the testimony of career killers may not be chock full of honesty. Still, one cannot stress enough the importance of trying to understand religious radicals by getting their stories from the source.

What may be Stern's crowning achievement, however, is her discussion of al-Qaida. Her descriptions of the group, its structure, and its leaders do not answer the question "why do religious militants kill," they are among the best explanations of Osama bin Laden's rise in print. She correctly points out that al-Qaida thrives "in states that are poorly governed and that al-Qaida is "sufficiently dispersed that the loss of a single leader will make no long-term difference."

More importantly, she notes that the most effective terror group, using al-Qaida as a prototype, is "a network of networks of various types. It will include leaderless resistance, wolf avengers, commanders, cadres, freelancers and franchises."

Terror in the Name of God also does a good job of highlighting one of Washington's major challenges: democratization in the Middle East. It is widely understood that democratic crackdowns by repressive Middle East regimes have forced terrorists to "shift their focus to more vulnerable targets." Those targets are increasingly soft targets found abroad. The big question now is how to democratize, especially when the "transition to democracy has been found to be an especially vulnerable period for states across the board."

There are, however, a number of pitfalls in Stern's work. While she clearly worked hard to gain interviews with Jewish fundamentalists from Gush Emunim and other groups, her

adds precious little to the late Ehud Sprinzak's 1999 hallmark study of the Israeli religious Right, *Brother Against Brother*. The chapter on Hamas is similarly lacking. To begin with, some of Stern's interviewees, the recently assassinated Ismail Abu Shanab and current Hamas political leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi, are not religious killers. Rather, the two are the public figures who have enjoyed the media spotlight while their underlings explode on Israeli territory. The foot soldiers that do their bidding are much harder to track down, and are presumably much more dangerous to approach.

Stern's assertion that "humiliation" is Hamas's major motivation for killing Israelis is a bit misleading. While humiliation may help fuel Hamas hatred for the Jewish state, the group's published ideological platform is based almost entirely on "redeeming" land that the Palestinians consider wakf, or an endowment from Allah. In other words, destroying Israel is a holy undertaking for Hamas, based on a historical Islamist narrative. Even if there were no "humiliation," Hamas would still seek to destroy Israel. This is why Hamas continues to reject the peace process that would legally end Israel's presence in the disputed territories.

Stern's policy recommendations are a mixed bag. The author correctly notes that the modern world "is particularly vulnerable to religious violence," but fails to explain that the majority of religious radicals hail from the Islamic faith. Not making this distinction could leave the reader with the impression that Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religious radicals pose equal threats to the modern world. In reality, citing scholar Daniel Pipes's figures, radicals may make up as much as 15 percent of the Islamic world. Thus, out of an estimated 1.3 billion Muslims, there may be more than 190 million radicals - far out-shadowing the thousands of Christian and Jewish radicals that would kill for their beliefs.

In short, some of Stern's analyses are so conspicuously balanced that they miss the mark. Her work on Hamas may require some new thinking. Nevertheless, Stern should be commended; her research makes a profound contribution to the field.

*The writer is a Soref fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

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