Terror in the Name of God
Why Religious Militants Kill
by Jessica Stern
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Reviewed by Jonathan Schanzer
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The Militant Mind


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 boils the grievances of religious militants down to five broad rubrics: alienation, humiliation, demographics, history, and territory. Using primary source interviews with terrorists (both in jail and on the loose), she explains these grievances through the personal stories of self-professed American Christian fundamentalists, Palestinian Hamasniks, Indonesian Islamists, 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 these 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 meet with radical Islamists from Indonesia, Kashmir, and Gaza. This partially explains why Stern's study is a page-turner.

Stern shares one rousing letter from the wife of an Indonesian radical, who could clearly 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 our every war...."

A Kashmiri radical, who tries to persuade Stern to convert to Islam, believes that Allah "looks at those who sacrifice their lives in the Jihad with love. The love is 70 times stronger. I feel 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. While her descriptions of the group, its structure, and its leaders do not answer the question "why religious militants kill," they are among the best explanations of Osama bin Laden's network 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 minimal long-term difference."

More importantly, she notes that the most effective terror group, using al-Qaida as her prototype, is "a network of networks of various types. It will include leaderless resisters,
In this reading of Terror in the Name of God by Mark Juergensmeyer, explores the most controversial issue in that these perpetrators were Muslims and acted in the name of Allah. Juergensmeyer states, The term 'terrorism' has more frequently been associated with violence committed by disenfranchised groups desperately attempting to gain a shred of power or influence...some of these groups have been inspired purely by secularism. At a minimum we should not remain silent when we see religious violence but rather name it for what it is. The growth of terrorism in the Middle East is generally ascribed to the tendency to suppress democratic expression and freedom of speech.