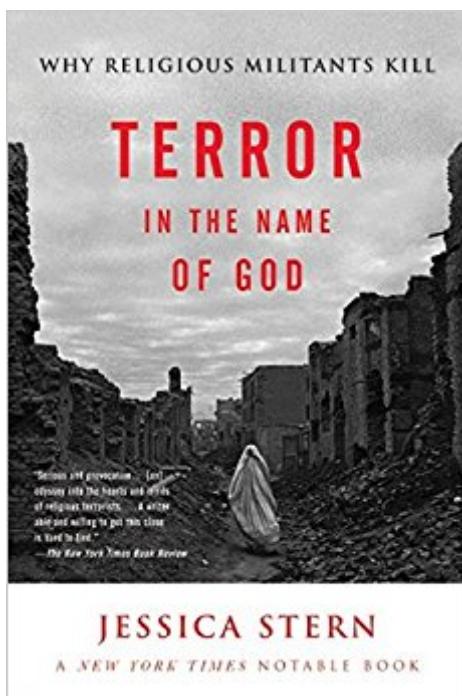


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# Terror In The Name Of God: Why Religious Militants Kill



## **Synopsis**

For four years, Jessica Stern interviewed extremist members of three religions around the world: Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Traveling extensively "to refugee camps in Lebanon, to religious schools in Pakistan, to prisons in Amman, Asqelon, and Pensacola" she discovered that the Islamic jihadi in the mountains of Pakistan and the Christian fundamentalist bomber in Oklahoma have much in common. Based on her vast research, Stern lucidly explains how terrorist organizations are formed by opportunistic leaders who "using religion as both motivation and justification" recruit the disenfranchised. She depicts how moral fervor is transformed into sophisticated organizations that strive for money, power, and attention. Jessica Stern's extensive interaction with the faces behind the terror provide unprecedented insight into acts of inexplicable horror, and enable her to suggest how terrorism can most effectively be countered. A crucial book on terrorism, *Terror in the Name of God* is a brilliant and thought-provoking work.

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Harper Perennial (August 17, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060505338

ISBN-13: 978-0060505332

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 71 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #39,601 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #26 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Psychology #60 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Terrorism #89 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Violence in Society

## **Customer Reviews**

Stern, a former fellow on terrorism at the Council on Foreign Relations (and the inspiration for Nicole Kidman's character in *The Peacemaker*), makes the issue personal by depicting her encounters with religious terrorists around the world. Her definition of "religious terrorism" is comprehensive, encompassing the growing Muslim jihad in Indonesia, militant Palestinians and zealous Israelis, and Americans who kill abortion doctors in the name of Christ. Given the opportunity to articulate their positions, these and other subjects surprise not by their vehemence but by their relative normality,

making it all the more curious that many of them eventually elect to strike against their opponents with deadly force. Explaining the "how" therefore becomes as important as explaining the "why," and the book carefully outlines the ways in which militant leaders of all denominations find recruits among the disenfranchised and recondition them, often under cultlike conditions, stoking their zealotry to the point of suicide and murder. Coupled with additional research, Stern's firsthand encounters bring a valuable and much-needed perspective to the problem of religious violence, and she identifies several increasingly broad threats, including the extent to which many governments will tolerate or even sponsor militant religious groups to further their own political agendas. For all the material damage terrorist acts cause, Stern argues, we should understand religious militance as a form of psychological warfare, calculated to bolster the faithful and strike "spiritual dread" in the unbelievers; the most effective counterstrategy is thus not violence but nonviolent techniques such as psychological counterwarfare and the reaffirmation of our own values. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

This sophisticated examination of religiously motivated terrorism is a welcome antidote to the armchair analyses of Islamic extremism that surfaced in the wake of September 11th. Stern spent five years interviewing religious terrorists of all stripes, including anti-abortion crusaders, Hamas leaders, and militants in Pakistan and Indonesia. She found men and women who were driven not by nihilistic rage or lunacy but by a deep faith in the justice of their causes and in the possibility of transforming the world through violence. That faith, Stern suggests, is fuelled by poverty, repression, and a sense of humiliation, and then exploited by "inspirational leaders" who turn confused people into killers. The West cannot fight terror by intelligence and military means alone, she argues; a "smarter realpolitik approach" toward the developing world would use policy to deprive terrorists of not only funding and weapons but potential recruits. Copyright Â© 2005 The New Yorker

I like Jessica Stern. I have watched some lectures she has given on YouTube and found them interesting, and she has clearly spent a lot of time studying terrorism, but I was pretty disappointed with this book. The book is divided up into two sections. The first section is supposed to provide an analysis of some of the psychological motivations that lead to terrorist behavior and the second section is supposed to provide a typology of terrorist organizations and explain how they function. The primary source that Stern relies on are her own interviews with leaders of terrorist organizations, individuals who have committed terrorist acts, or members of organizations that

promote and advocate violence. I had a number of complaints with the book. First, the book is largely narrative. Stern spends a great deal of time narrating how her interviews were arranged, who set them up, her preparations for the interviews including what she wore and what gifts she brought along, where she stayed, what food she was served, the physical appearance of her interlocutors, their general demeanor, and the sights, sounds and smells of her surroundings. This was not what I was primarily interested in when I picked up this book. I was hoping for a book more heavily weighted toward theory rather than narrative. Second, the excerpts of interviews that Stern provides are often quite short and superficial. In terms of informational content they did not seem to me to go beyond what you would get from reading the newspaper or watching cable news. According to the introduction, Stern was very interested in how religion, which is supposed to inspire people to do good (and often does), could also inspire people to do evil. We learn that members of terrorist groups do not believe they are committing evil. They generally have a narrative that justifies their behavior as defensive (defending unborn babies, defending Muslims against Israel, Christians, India or the West, etc.). But this is common knowledge. I don't think it required a book or lengthy interviews to achieve this insight. Third, the introduction to the section on terrorist organizations made me hopeful that the second half of the book would be more theoretical. Stern divides terrorist organizations into virtual networks, lone wolfs, command organizations and hybrids. She says that groups face trade-offs: virtual networks are harder to shut down because the cells are not as connected but they generally lack the capability to carry out really high impact attacks. I was disappointed to find that the second half of the book was basically the same as the first. Each chapter was simply a narrative, including some excerpts from interviews, but virtually nothing was said about the organizational features of the groups whose leaders she was interviewing, how they function or what trade-offs they face (with the exception of the final chapter on Al-Qaeda). The book did provide some historical information that was interesting. I learned some things about Indonesian politics and I learned about the symbiotic relationship between the Pakistani intelligence services, the madrassahs and the jihadi organizations in Pakistan. However, when I purchased this book I had a number of questions I was interested in. What are the primary psychological motivations for terrorist behavior? What are the historical, social, economic, ideological and psychological causes for terrorist behavior? Which causes are most important in explaining terrorist behavior? Are irrational psychological motivations the most important variable in explaining terrorist behavior or are ideological factors (content of religious beliefs) more important or should we view terrorists as rational actors who adopt terrorism as a rational strategy in pursuit of specific ends? The answers that this book provided did not seem to me to go beyond the level of folk psychology. On

the basis of this book alone I would have to conclude that the field of terrorism studies has a long way to go before it reaches a genuine scientific understanding of what motivates terrorist behavior. Admittedly, it is not going to be an easy science to develop. It is difficult to get reliable data since we have to rely on the testimony of terrorists who are willing to talk to researchers, but who often lie during interviews and may not fully understand their own motives, and there are a lot of variables (psychological, social, political, economic, historical and ideological) to tease apart. Plus, the sciences that a field like this relies on for its background theories (psychology, sociology, economics, religious studies) are themselves still in their infancy and struggling to develop core theories that are scientifically reputable. Perhaps at the moment providing a narrative understanding of terrorist behavior is the best we can do. This book was published in 2003, and I imagine our understanding of terrorism has developed since then, but based solely on this book I would have to conclude that terrorism studies as a discipline has not progressed much beyond arm-chair folk explanations. I was hoping for a bit more. I am going to be reading some more books on terrorism in the near future and if I come across any that I think do a better job answering some of the questions I had, and that motivated me to pick up this book in the first place, I will provide links to them here. Recommended alternatives: Added 2/10/17: I just finished reading *Understanding Terror Networks* by Marc Sageman. It provides a network analysis of the global Salafi jihad, including a brief history of the movement and an analysis of its structure. It has a lot of good information about the global Salafi jihad and Sageman also comes to some interesting conclusions. For example, Sageman concludes that social bonds are more important than ideology in explaining an individual's decision to join the global Salafi jihad (and he points out that lone individuals almost never join on their own, people usually join as part of a clique). It was not the most exciting reading, and it did not fulfill all of my expectations, but I would definitely recommend it. Added 8/13/2017: An excellent book on suicide terrorism in particular is Robert Pape's book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. Pape compiled a database of every known suicide terrorist attack and had a team of researchers gather, analyze and breakdown the data. His primary thesis is that the vast majority of suicide terrorist attacks - which are the most deadly form of terrorist attack - are carried out, not by lone wolves, but in organized campaigns that are based on nationalist goals of self-determination. Foreign military occupation, not religious ideology, turns out to be the biggest risk factor for suicide terrorism. Pape backs up his arguments with a wealth of data and illuminating charts. Highly, highly recommended.

Fundamentalism seems to be on the rise in the world. Stern circles the globes to talk to men who

have committed violence in the name of religion. While Stern does not specifically address the reasons for the resurgence of faith over reason, she does take the reader to some dark places where men who believe their actions are directed by God speak of their callings. The book is a fascinating look into religiously motivated violence. While much of the literature recently has focused on Islamist extremism, this book is an important reminder that any sufficiently narrow and powerful ideology can inspire violence from its adherents. More work is needed to understand why fundamentalism is so resurgent in the modern era, but this book introduces you to the soldiers, some fresh from the battlefields of their so-called holy wars. Here in their own words is the chilling response to the question of the masses when these atrocities occur: Why?

This is an interesting addition to the literature on terrorism. What sets it apart from many other books is the author's attempt to base analysis on a series of interviews with those whom she defines as terrorists. Some who review this book negatively focus on their sense that her definition is too generous, and includes those whom they would not see in that light. Nonetheless, the interviews illuminate her points nicely. And, too, if those whom she has interviewed do not represent the terrorist population well, her conclusions will suffer. Terrorism, for Stern, is ". . . an act or threat of violence against noncombatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience" (page xx). She begins by assessing the types of grievances that lead to terrorist activities. Among these are a sense of humiliation that terrorists see themselves as suffering from, alienation, demographics (religious groups, socioeconomic groups, and the like), history, and territory. Then, she explores the organization of "holy war" operations. She notes that organizations run a continuum from "lone wolves" or "leaderless resistance" models on to "terrorist armies or commander-cadre organizations." As to leaders, she argues that the requirements for their success are similar to those of firms or nongovernment organizations. She says: "Today's multinational terrorist leader is an entrepreneur who brings together mission, money, and market share" (page 142). The evidence suggests to her that terrorist organizations that are most successful have a resilient network organization, with "widely distributed leadership and minimal (or successfully encrypted) communication among nodes" (page 144). Greater organizational communication can make it easier for states to penetrate such organizations and thereby disrupt them. After the analysis, she speaks of policy recommendations. She also suggests why Islamic countries are particularly good recruiting areas for terrorist organizations. The list of policy suggestions would include some of the following: try to undercut the attractiveness of students going to extremist religious schools (which can become seedbeds of terrorist recruitment), go after the

infrastructure of recruitment of new terrorists, upgrade security at vulnerable and attractive targets (so-called "target hardening" strategy), avoid being sucked into ongoing occupations (since this will generate resentment and lead to recruitment of terrorists), work to strengthen "weak states" such as Afghanistan (or stay out of such states), before they descend into chaos and warlordism and terrorist recruitment. And, finally, she argues in her last lines: ". . .what counts is what we fight for, not what we oppose. We need to avoid giving into spiritual dread, and to hold fast to the best of our principles, by emphasizing tolerance, empathy, and courage" (page 296). Overall, this is a useful study to add to others. Her methodology is interesting, but fraught with the problem noted above. Nonetheless, a good addition to the literature.

Jessica Stern is an excellent writer and incredibly well informed on the subjects of her writing. I have read all of her books and *Terror in the Name of God* maintains her high standards. It is as current in the information as a book could possibly be. I highly recommend this book and her other books for anyone who wants to understand how terrorists evolve, why they evolve and the machinations involved in their evolution. Her writing style is engaging and I would highly recommend this book to anyone with even a remote interest in the subject matter.

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