

Interview - Jessica Stern

Written by E-International Relations

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Jessica Stern is a fellow at the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health and a Lecturer in Government at Harvard University and an expert on terrorism. She serves on the Hoover Institution Task Force on National Security and Law. She has a Bachelor degree from Barnard College in chemistry, an MA from MIT in chemical engineering/technology policy, and a PhD from Harvard University in public policy.

She served on President Clinton's National Security Council Staff in 1994–95. Jessica was one of *Time* magazine's 100 people with bold ideas, and the film, "The Peacemaker", with Nicole Kidman and George Clooney, is based on a fictional version of Jessica's work at the National Security Council. Her book DENIAL: A Memoir of Terror, was named best non-fiction book of 2010 by the Washington Post. Other works like TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD: Why Religious Militants Kill, or THE ULTIMATE TERRORISTS, are must reads for anyone interested in the subject. Her latest book, ISIS: The State of Terror, is now available, published by Ecco, a HarperCollins imprint.

You're currently a leading world authority on terrorism. But it was interesting to discover that your early academic background was in Chemistry (BA) and Chemical Engineering (MS). How did your interest in terrorism develop, and who or what prompted this shift in thinking?

I lived in Moscow off and on from 1982-85, during the height of the Cold War. While I was there, a Korean airliner, KAL 007, was shot out of the sky over Soviet airspace. I was there during the "spy dust" scandal, which involved the KGB using a fluorescent, but also mutagenic, chemical to track expatriate Americans. A new US embassy was being built, but the project was ultimately abandoned because the embassy's walls were riddled with Soviet listening devices. In that atmosphere, it was impossible not to think about international security. I was about to enter a PhD program in chemistry at Columbia when I heard about a program at MIT that combined engineering and public policy. Gradually, I shifted away from science into working on national-security policy. When I was a doctoral student in public policy, I heard a single lecture by Brian Jenkins that fascinated me. That one lecture changed my life. I started writing about terrorism then – in my dissertation and since.

In a previous interview on E-IR with terrorism expert Marc Sageman, he said that one of the most important things that researchers need when examining terrorism is "a very solid grounding in scientific methodology and finding a good source of comprehensive primary source data." How does your early academic study in the physical sciences affect your approach to analysing terrorism, and do you think that this might have given you an advantage over other researchers?

Perhaps ironically, my training in science has made me extremely skeptical of large-N studies. The data that are available to us are not very reliable, and no matter how sophisticated the analysis, the conclusions are only as good as the data they are based on. This was especially true when I started working on terrorism, before START and other organizations began making data available to scholars. Even so, the kind of questions that fascinate me cannot be addressed by incident-level data. We can use these data to monitor trends, such as the evolution of terrorist tactics, or the diffusion from one country to another of suicide bombing campaigns, or the increasing lethality of improvised explosive devices. But researchers need to talk to terrorists to understand their individual motivations. Of course, this is not a perfect method. One has to assume that terrorists will lie about their motivations. They often provide the "party line." You have to catch them off guard, with nonthreatening questions that they don't expect. For example,

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when I asked Fazlur Rahman Khalil whether I might meet his second wife, I not only learned that he had met her on a fundraising trip to Saudi Arabia, I also saw, from the mansion he was living in, that he was making a lot of money off of the “jihad.” Still, we all have multiple motivations for everything we do, some of which we are aware of, some of which we try to hide from ourselves. We are often successful at deluding ourselves. The bottom line is that, for me, the empirical method means going out and looking. But I, too, have a hidden motivation: It’s more interesting to me to interview perpetrators than to run regressions.

Where do you see the most interesting debates happening at the moment in terrorism research?

I’m fascinated by the debates that start on Twitter and continue at other venues. My publisher encouraged me to join Twitter, so my purpose in joining was rather shallow. Still, I’m often captivated by the debates that I see happening there. The reason I responded to Marc Sageman’s claim that terrorism research has stagnated, which he published initially in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, was that I saw the response of young scholars, who were complaining that they felt they’d never get an academic job if they continued to work on terrorism. I am hoping this will change...

You’re very well known in policy and academic circles for your work on religion and terrorism. You authored an important text on the topics titled *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (2003). The role of religion in terrorism has become an intense topic of debate in contemporary political discourse. Some have argued that religion is best understood as a tool of justification for violence in the name of political goals, whilst others have gone as far as to see religion, or certain religions, as a ‘root cause’ of terrorism. Drawing from your own extensive research, which has involved work on violent extremists from various faiths, what role do you see religious convictions generally playing in terrorist motivations?

Religion is often a marketing strategy for terrorism. It’s important for us to understand terrorists’ ideologies, but also to get to the additional, underlying sources of rage and fear. Terrorism is sometimes instrumental (with a goal to achieve something in the outside world) and sometimes expressive. Sometimes it’s just a job like any other, undertaken for pay. There is a spectrum; very few terrorists have purely religious goals. They often aim to achieve worldly goals, such as personal power or expansion of territory, even when they claim to be acting in the name of God.

Your new book (co-authored with J.M. Berger), *ISIS: The State of Terror*, offers a comprehensive examination of ISIS, a terrorist group which has been gaining considerable momentum since summer 2014. What new ground will the book cover and what are your aims with this publication?

While ISIS came to international attention in 2014, it emerged out of a group that formed in 2004, Al Qaeda in Iraq. One of our goals was to explain where ISIS came from. Another was to explain ISIS’s barbaric tactics. I’ve studied many apocalyptic groups. Nonetheless, I was quite surprised by the extent to which ISIS appears to buy into an apocalyptic narrative. I thought readers would find that interesting and useful to understand. My co-author is an expert of terrorists’ use of social media, so there is a lot of discussion of that in the book as well. We also hoped to make clear that it is important to avoid helping ISIS achieve its goal of further polarizing Sunnis and Shiites, as well as Muslims and non-Muslims.

What forms of research methodology went into creating this text, and did you encounter any difficulties obtaining materials, for example government intelligence materials and reports?

It was not possible for us to interview ISIS jihadis in the field. We relied principally on Internet sources. In the past, terrorist organizations needed researchers or journalists to explain their views to the world. There was a kind of unspoken bargain, with each side using the other. But ISIS doesn’t need researchers to tell its story. It needs foreign journalists and aid workers only to behead them. My next project involves extensive interviews of incarcerated perpetrators, but for the ISIS book, we relied principally on ISIS’s written words.

One area that you focus on in the book is how the Islamic State uses social media as a means of luring

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and recruiting citizens from Western countries. What sort of messages and techniques are harnessed by IS to achieve this recruitment?

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of ISIS's recruitment drives online is that it uses different techniques for different populations. Right now, ISIS is very interested in recruiting young women so that it can promise wives to its fighters. Umm Layth, a female ISIS recruiter with an active presence on social media, appears to be particularly successful at luring young women to become jihadi wives. According to some reporting, these young women are sometimes married for a week before they're passed on to the next "husband." ISIS recruiters also make clear that the "State" needs workers of all kinds, not just fighters. It needs social media experts, doctors, construction workers, etc.

There is a popular article currently circling the internet at the moment by Graeme Wood at *The Atlantic*. In the essay, Wood claims that ISIS is 'very Islamic' and that, in terms of its motivations, ISIS wants to return civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bring about the *apocalypse*. The piece has certainly caused some controversy and attracted much criticism. From your own research, how accurate do you see Wood's understanding and depiction of ISIS?

I believe that Wood is correct in his emphasis on ISIS's apocalyptic narrative. This comes directly from ISIS's own writings. But I disagree with Wood's conclusion that ISIS's ideology is Islam. Yes, ISIS's "scholars" have found a way to justify sexually enslaving children by referring to religious texts. But it's important to recognize that this justification requires convoluted hermeneutics. Religious terrorists of all faiths find a way to justify their atrocities through selective readings of texts. But just as few Christians would recognize the "Christian faith" of neo-Nazi Identity Christians, few Muslims recognize the Islam that ISIS preaches.

Do you think that ISIS can be stopped and, if so, what would this involve?

ISIS represents a military threat to the region and a terrorist threat to the world. It is capitalizing on the disenfranchisement of Sunni Arabs in post-Saddam Iraq and in Syria. It is also capitalizing on very weak states in the region, including in Libya and Yemen. Sunni Arabs are sometimes accepting ISIS as a way to ensure their security, even if they don't agree with ISIS's ideology or goals. The solution to this problem requires a multipronged approach – diplomatic initiatives, political engagement, and military action as necessary, preferably on the part of Sunnis. It is important that we not fall into the trap that ISIS is laying for us – to engage in a Final Battle between Sunnis and Shiites, and ISIS and the West. ISIS's ideology has also become a fashionable way to express dissatisfaction with the status quo in the West. People who want to reinvent themselves, to forge a new identity, are sometimes attracted to ISIS. Some wish to live in a Sharia-based state and ISIS claims to offer this. But many foreign fighters are discovering that life under ISIS is not the "five-star jihad" that was advertised. We need to amplify the voices of those who have witnessed ISIS's empty promises first hand, as well as the voices of clerics who can point out ISIS's false hermeneutics.

It's been reported that many young men and women are returning to Western countries after fighting with ISIS, and there has been much talk about how to 'de-radicalize' former ISIS fighters. What do you feel would be an effectively way to de-radicalize such individuals, and do you see some national governments as having better de-radicalization programmes than others which could serve as examples for others to follow in the case of ISIS fighters?

At this point, we don't really know what works. Although the Saudi government's de-radicalization program appears to be the most advanced, it is not possible to know which components of that program are most effective. Could it be that finding wives for the former jihadis is the most important component? Could it be post-release surveillance? Could it be psychological counselling, job training, or involvement of family members in the re-integration process? The Saudis have not shared their data and thus it is very hard to evaluate what works and what doesn't.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars who are starting their careers and want to focus their research on terrorism and political violence?

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I have three ideas to share. My dissertation adviser, an economist named Richard Zeckhauser, gave me very important advice that has stuck with me. He told me, "Focus on questions that fascinate you, that you feel compelled to answer." We do our best work, I think, when we feel compelled to solve a mystery of some kind. Second, my father told me about advice once offered to him by Arthur Kantrowitz, a physicist who worked on super-hot gases and was the inventor of the nose cone (for missiles). According to my father, his mentor told him, "Son, look for the unfair advantage." What this means for students, I think, is to figure out what you have that others don't – whether it's language skills, technical skills, access to terrorists or political leaders. Use what you have. For me, my particular skill is an ability to elicit information from violent men. This is not something I was trained to do, but something innate. When I first decided to interview terrorists, many people described my work as "journalistic," which was not meant as a compliment. But I think it serves one well to employ whatever unusual skill or access you have, no matter what others think. Third, be prepared to succeed. If you work with real determination and don't get discouraged, you will probably succeed, at least in part, at whatever you set out to do. The path may be much more difficult and circuitous than you anticipated, but if you are ceaseless in your efforts, you will likely achieve at least some form of your original goal. At the same time, give credit to the teachers and colleagues who help you along the way, and show them your gratitude. Luck and generosity make all the difference.

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This interview was conducted by AI McKay. AI is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.