

Countdown to Jihad

Jeff Westmont

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It is never a question of whether the incautious hero of Jeff Westmont's contemporary political thriller, *Countdown to Jihad*, will survive his many near-death confrontations, but of what classic mistakes the villain of the moment will make to allow the plucky David Harrim to yet again put off meeting his maker.

Westmont's novel makes for a good summer read in large part because it is refreshing to see the multilingual, athletic, fearless Special Forces veteran CIA spy typical of the genre have a brain that is not always firing on all thrusters. This is no bumbling Maxwell Smart or Inspector Clouseau, but, well, Jack Ryan or James Bond he is not either.

The hero himself admits his many failings to the audience. As Westmont writes, after Harrim's sixth whisker-thin escape from death, "David realized unless he quickly became much tougher and smarter, he would never make it." Westmont's writing style is clear and easy to follow. He avoids the pitfalls of many writers of the genre who stereotype Arabs, Palestinians, and Iranians as inherently evil and instead works to round them out from two to three dimensions. The author tries to explain why terrorists fight the way they do, and does so without entirely excusing, condemning, or sympathizing with them.

Wary readers can rest assured that the terrorists are the bad guys here, but only one of their team is truly evil: the power-hungry, greedy Abdullah. He is a megalomaniacal murderer of the first order, a terror boss who shrugs off the killing of innocents with "what are a million dead for the glorious new chapter of Islam?"

That said, the good guys of the novel are not exactly sparkling examples of all that is humane and heroic. As one Muslim comrade complains to Harrim: "You're a typical American. Self-righteous, a bully and used to getting your own way." Harrim, to his credit, does not argue or disagree, and merely replies "Yeah," and "life's a bitch."

Westmont's plot is clever, but the discerning reader will rarely be truly surprised, as it is easy to pick up on the many clues dropped regarding secret identities and plans. There is a great deal of believable if fast-paced action in the book, but that is expected and desired in the genre. Harrim alone faces death more than a dozen times, and his are not the only scenes of battle, chase, skirmish, or gunfight. Westmont also has a good eye for detail and flavor, yet avoids turning passages on Jerusalem, Afghanistan, Riyadh, Tehran, and Istanbul into travelogues. He gives the reader just enough of a taste of the locale and then moves on with the story.

In many ways, *Countdown to Jihad* stands a notch above the typical modern Middle Eastern political terror thriller. It is an action novel, but one that attempts to open up the minds of its readers in order to help them consider some of the motivations behind acts of terrorism.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (July 9, 2012)

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