

On the Road to Kandahar  
Travels through Conflict in the Islamic World by Jason Bourke.  
Penguin Allen Lane 2006.

In a time saturated by comment and information on Islam, Islamic terrorism and developments in the Islamic world, it is all too easy to be misinformed, unintentionally or by design, if one is unaware of which authors to read and which to disregard. The number of writers on these subjects whose authority is unimpeachable is few, but Jason Bourke is certainly one of them. His excellent first book, *Al Qaeda, the true story of radical Islam*, demolished many of the glib myths that have arisen about that group; now, in *On the Road to Kandahar* Bourke tells the story of a very personal journey through some of the world's hottest spots, literally and politico-militarily, as he seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and dreams of fighters and others in Kurdistan, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel-Palestine, Iraq and Kashmir.

What Bourke manages to do is personalise the issues that so pre-occupy the West by describing the lives and experiences of protagonists in the different countries, as well as expressing their thoughts and motivations. Even if one is disturbed by the end result, frightened by fundamentalist Islam or angered by unremitting hostility towards Western democracies by Islamic extremists it is impossible not to pause for thought and attempt to empathise.

What remains clear above all is the extent to which current conflicts are brutalising all the participants, and this must remain a cause for pessimism. Yet Jason Bourke manages to end on an upbeat note, because he derives his own optimism from the conviction that there is much more commonality than the current protagonists would like to think; his optimism, informed by his experience, is rare these days, and because of that it is much needed.

This is a must read book for those who seek a true understanding of the swirling currents of today's principal preoccupation, and an author whose material one can trust and in whose views one can have faith.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh