

Deadly love of the Romeo and Juliet jihadists

A former US prosecutor has found that young militants are often motivated by dysfunctional family, sexual repression or forbidden love

Christina Lamb in Washington Published: 9 October 2011

He calls them the jihadi Romeo and Juliet. For Saudi teenagers Abdullah and Maryam, who first glimpsed each other through a window in a village, it was love at first sight. But when “Abby” raised only \$8,000 of the \$30,000 dowry demanded by Maryam’s father, she was forced to marry a rich old man. The star-crossed lovers became jihadists, believing that if they went to Iraq and died in a noble cause, they would be reunited in heaven.

Then there is Ahmad, a Mummy’s boy who could never make his father happy. After his father slapped his face outside a restaurant in their Saudi home town, he dropped out of school and fought in Iraq in an effort to win his father’s respect, only to be duped into becoming a suicide bomber.

Or Shaheed, whose overbearing father is an army colonel guarding the codes to Pakistan’s nuclear bomb. Shaheed turned to radical Islam after being raped by his headmaster at 11.

And Kamal, a rich young Saudi with a \$143m (£92m) trust fund, who fell in love with his male cousin and was devastated when their families tore them apart. Seeking solace on the internet, he came across a man who called himself the Love Jihadi, with whom he planned to go to Iraq.

A former American federal prosecutor who has spent the past five years interviewing hundreds of jihadists found that many were motivated not by fanatical religious zeal but by a dysfunctional family, sexual repression or forbidden love.

“I wanted to get inside the minds and hearts of jihadists,” explained Ken Ballen. “The point is, these are not just a cardboard cut-out enemy; these are people and, like any group, operate from mixed motives.”

In 2008-10 he was given unique access to the Saudi Rehabilitation Centre for former terrorists, as well as plugging into a network of Taliban in Pakistan. He called his

resulting book *Terrorists in Love* but said: “It’s an ironic title because it’s really about mislove or sexual repression. These are people with no kind of outlet — Abby couldn’t marry the one he loved. Shaheed couldn’t find any human affection. Kamal had his love taken from him. If you can’t find love from your fellow men and women, that human connection, and the only way is through God, then you become more and more fanatical and more subject to manipulation by others.”

An American Jew might seem the last person to whom Islamic militants would confess their innermost feelings. But Ballen has years of experience dealing with hardened criminals. As a prosecutor in New Jersey, he used his skills to penetrate a Colombian cocaine cartel and had been part of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani’s initiatives to break the power of the mafia in the US.

“I spent months interviewing co-operating witnesses and defendants, learning everything about their personal lives and criminal activities,” he said. It led to 55 convictions, with life sentences for the leaders. “I realised that getting to know your adversaries in depth can lead to successfully defeating them.”

After 9/11 he set up an organisation called *Terror Free Tomorrow* to monitor public opinion in the Middle East and try to understand why people supported extremism.

Ten years on, with America still bogged down in Afghanistan in its longest ever war, he is concerned at the continued lack of understanding and dialogue. “You can’t sit down with everyone and change the world,” he said. “But if you sit down with no one, you’re not going to get anywhere. And that’s kind of American policy.”

The Obama administration has had stunning success this year in killing some of Al-Qaeda’s top leaders, including Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan and, nine days ago, Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen.

But Ballen does not see this as leading to the strategic defeat predicted by Leon Panetta, the defence secretary, because it is not getting to the root of the problem.

“I don’t think it’s a war we’re winning at all,” he said. “We can kill Bin Laden, Awlaki, etc, but we’re not getting to the ideas which motivate people to join.”

He believes some of the insights he has gained could be used to help defeat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

“So many of the young men who join do [so] because they want to do good or the right thing,” he said. “But I heard again and again complaints about the amount of theft inside the Taliban by their leaders. Exposing this could be a more effective weapon than drones.”

He cited the example of Ahmad al Shayea, the suicide bomber who went to Iraq to try to win his father's respect. Ahmad grew up in an affluent family and first rebelled against his father by leaving school and joining a gang, driving fast cars and smoking hashish. When he saw photographs of Iraqis tortured by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison, he decided to prove himself to his father by waging jihad.

“Ahmad told me that when his father hit him he felt he was going to hell, so he went to Iraq to redeem himself in his father's eyes,” Ballen explained. “But his idea was to fight, not to die right away.”

Ahmad insisted that when he was asked to drive an oil tanker into a Christian community in Baghdad on Christmas Eve 2004, he had no idea it was a suicide bombing. Eight people were killed. Astonishingly he survived, though with burns.

He was nursed to health by Americans who nicknamed him Bernie. They were the first Americans he had ever met and he was astounded by their kindness, particularly a nurse called Crystal with whom he developed a friendship reminiscent of *The English Patient*. He now speaks out against Al-Qaeda.

His naivety seems hard to believe but Ballen is convinced. “I believe him because if you listen to Bin Laden's December 2001 tape about 9/11, he laughs as he talks about how some of the so-called ‘muscle hijackers’ from Saudi didn't know it was a suicide mission.”

Ballen found such manipulation common. “If you look at everyone in the book who left Al-Qaeda, they left not because they changed their minds about the ideals of jihad but because the people leading them were not living up to these ideals and were stealing, lying, manipulating.”

It was a similar story with Abby, his jihadi Romeo. When Maryam's family informed her that she was being married off, she took an overdose but survived. Abby contemplated driving his sports car off a cliff but decided that would condemn him to hell. Instead he resolved to join the jihad in Iraq. He published his decision in a poem in the Arab News, knowing Maryam would see it and do the same.

With no jihadist contacts, Abby travelled to Damascus, looking for “men with long beards”. Finally he crossed into Iraq and joined up with Yemenis, Algerians and Saudis who were moved from farm to farm by an emissary of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. One of them questioned when they would actually fight and was found outside the next day, hacked to death.

Disillusioned, Abby was warned that he was also about to be killed and flew back to Syria, where he was imprisoned. On his return to Saudi Arabia, he found a final letter from Maryam in which he learnt that she had made contact with a female jihadist through a militant website that had published his poem.

Abby still does not know if she became a suicide bomber. “I just ask God every day to tell me whether she’s alive or dead,” he said.

Ballen rejects criticism that he is humanising those who were willing to take the lives of innocents.

It was a risky undertaking for him. He interviewed a Taliban called Malik who told him he had thought of inflicting on him the fate suffered by Daniel Pearl, the Jewish Wall Street Journal reporter beheaded in Pakistan.

Instead, Ballen’s chance mention of a dream prompted Malik to open up, answering questions about his sexual desires. Made a provincial chief of the Taliban religious police at 19, he regularly beat women. He told Ballen he had forced himself not to think about them in a physical way. “That kind of sexual repression can take a psychological toll on someone,” said Ballen.

Malik had risen through the Taliban ranks after revealing dreams that Mullah Omar, the movement’s leader, regarded as religious visions. He told Ballen that Omar made important decisions based on dreams. “That’s important to know,” Ballen said. “If Mullah Omar is waiting for a dream to tell him whether he should negotiate with us, we could be waiting an awfully long time.”