



## Terrorists in Love

By Lisa Curtis ■ Monday, January 30, 2012

The title of Ken Ballen's recently released book, *Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals*, is misleading. I put off buying it for some time because of the title, which implied it would provide a sympathetic view of terrorism and constitute yet another rant against "failed" U.S. counterterrorism policies since 9/11.

However, I have always been impressed with the nonprofit organization run by Ken Ballen, Terror Free Tomorrow, and its solid polling work in Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries. This compelled me to take a closer look at the book, which I ended up reading on a flight to South Asia last fall.

*Terrorists in Love* is more than a captivating read. It provides fresh insight into how al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies have manipulated young Muslim men into following a hateful and destructive ideology that kills countless innocents -- mostly other Muslims. We have heard a great deal about al-Qaeda's recruitment and training process from U.S. experts, but Ballen describes the terrorism phenomenon in the jihadists' own words, bringing deeper understanding to the issue.

Through interviews and extensive research, Ballen profiles six jihadists, some of whom eventually renounced al-Qaeda. It is the stories of those who become disillusioned with al-Qaeda and its aimless violence that are the most interesting and that need to be publicized more widely. Indeed, exposing first-hand personal accounts of the contradictions and corruption within the terrorist movement likely will hasten its demise -- a process already underway thanks

to the elimination of Osama bin Laden and an aggressive drone-missile campaign in Pakistan's tribal border areas.

Ballen acknowledges in his introduction that there are many different paths to becoming a jihadist and that the individual stories in the book should not be viewed as representative of all radical Islamists. The first chapter is a telling eyewitness account of al-Qaeda deceiving a young man into taking his own life and others. Ahmad al-Shayea is a Saudi who at the age of 19 goes to Iraq to fight Americans, after seeing photos of tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib. It is a story of disillusionment -- one that many other Muslim men would surely have expressed, had they lived to tell about it.

Ahmad al-Shayea is tricked by two Iraqi fighters into driving a truck loaded with explosives, from which the two Iraqis suddenly jump, just before the bombs go off. Ahmad miraculously survives the explosion, and the rest of the chapter recounts his recuperation at an American hospital in Iraq.

After the ordeal, Ahmad retains his steadfast belief in Islam, but he has awoken to the al-Qaeda lie. He proclaims his desire to go on television to tell other young Saudis that "Al-Qaeda was not for Islam; it was not for humanity." And that, "I am a living example of al-Qaeda's hellfire...I want them to see how al-Qaeda tricked me into killing innocent people."

*Terrorists in Love* pulls no punches in its depiction of the close relationship of the Pakistan military with jihadist terrorism. In one chapter, Malik -- an Afghan refugee who grows up in Pakistan, joins the Taliban, and has personal encounters with Mullah Omar -- becomes disillusioned with the Afghan Taliban when he discovers its reliance on Pakistan's intelligence agency (run by the Army) for training, weapons and funding. Malik feels ashamed that his organization must rely on an army that also receives support from the Americans. However, instead of abandoning jihad, Malik joins the Pakistani Taliban to attack what he views as the double-dealing Pakistani military.

In the fifth chapter, we become acquainted with a Pakistani jihadist whose father is a colonel in the Pakistan Army. The colonel is disdainful toward Islamist extremists and works for the Strategic Plans Division, which controls Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. His responsibilities include

keeping Pakistan's nuclear assets out of the hands of extremists, like his own son. The irony of this complex father-son relationship story brings home the reality of the dangers in Pakistan, where the institution in charge of protecting the country's nuclear weapons also arms and trains the Afghan Taliban.

Ballen concludes from his research and interviews that Muslim communities themselves must develop ways to counter extremism, while also acknowledging that the U.S. cannot afford to be complacent against extremists dedicated to killing Americans. His overall recommendation for the U.S. to simply lead by example is unrealistic, however, especially in light of the democratic revolutions sweeping the Middle East, where U.S. silence could contribute to more bloodshed. America should not retreat from actively promoting democratic ideals in the Middle East, as Ballen suggests, particularly since the principles of liberal democratic governance are a powerful antidote to Islamist extremists' message of intolerance, hatred, and repression.

Ballen's work is well worth a read by anyone seeking to understand more fully the complex and multiple factors that drive terrorism. The reader will have to judge whether Ballen was brave or merely naïve in agreeing to meet with extremists at hotels in Islamabad. But the conversations he recorded from those probably ill-advised meetings are eye-opening, and should help U.S. policymakers develop more finely-tuned messages and policies to fight the ideological battle laid bare in *Terrorists in Love*.

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