

Book Review: *Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals*

02/ 7/2012

Ken Ballen is someone who gets it. Unlike those who take what terrorists claim at face value and then draw the wrong conclusions, he recognizes that individuals who are willing to slaughter unarmed men, women, and children won't hesitate to lie.

And yet, that doesn't reduce the value of hearing what they have to say, as long as readers employ some basic common sense. As the former federal prosecutor and congressional investigator knows from his own professional experience, it is unusual for people to consistently lie to make themselves look worse. In fact, the U.S. legal system has a special classification for admissions that people make against their own self-interest. The [rationale](#) is that when a speaker "reveals something incriminating, embarrassing, or otherwise damaging... the lack of incentive to make a damaging statement is an indication of the statement's reliability."

In [Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals](#), we get six compelling accounts of extremists, based on their own interviews with the author, that are as far from self-serving terrorist propaganda as one can imagine. Ballen, who is also president of the nonprofit research institute [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), has gone to significant lengths to further corroborate the key facts of each individual's biography by consulting the relevant documents and witnesses he could track down.

The result is one of the most in-depth looks at individual terrorists' lives that is currently available, and it helps to reverse some major misconceptions about the motives of these attackers.

For instance, it adds to growing evidence that some suicide terrorists are clinically suicidal with its heartbreaking tale of a young man named Abby and a young woman named Maryam -- Saudi Arabia's jihadist version of Romeo and Juliet. Deeply in love since childhood but prohibited from marrying, the young couple saw its dreams dashed when Maryam was forced to marry a 60-year old stranger, who then abducted and raped her.

Maryam, who had previously slit her wrists in a classic "cry for help" and been hospitalized, now found herself trapped, and Abby considered driving his car off a cliff to escape his despair. But as Ballen explains, they knew that under Islamic law they would face eternal punishments in hell for committing conventional suicide. On the other hand, if they carried out suicide attacks

against the so-called 'infidels,' they could expect to be reunited in heaven where they could live and love forever. It's not hard to guess which path held more appeal.

In another case, Ballen helps to reverse the widespread misconception that all Islamic terrorists would be honored and excited to blow themselves up for the sake of Allah. Although terrorist spokesmen like to claim that this type of universal commitment exists among their members, it simply isn't true.

For instance, when fledgling terrorist Ahmad al-Shayea stands alongside 24 young recruits, and they are asked by an emir to volunteer for suicide missions, their response is exactly what we should expect out of a creature hardwired for survival:

There was silence. Maybe the boys had not clearly understood the prince's words.

Abu Asil explained with a fatwa: "Every martyr will go straight to Heaven, in ultimate glory, there is no higher ceiling. So each of you is called, so each of you shall go."

Again, there were no cries of 'Allah-u-Akbar,' not even a word.

Ahmad came to Iraq to fight... not to die right away in a suicide bombing before he could even save a soul. Ahmad thought Adel and the others must feel the same way, as Abu Asil continued to exhort the group to suicide missions, but no one volunteered ([p. 27-28](#)).

These are the types of insights that past commentators have often missed.

However, this book is not merely designed to inform; it will also entertain. By providing first-hand accounts from terrorists at different levels of the organizational hierarchy -- from new recruit to terrorist trainer to terrorist leader -- it provides a variety of compelling perspectives.

And it engages the emotions, challenging readers to almost sympathize with some of the terrorists portrayed here, and yet maintain their principles and values. Is it possible to simultaneously feel bad for a terrorist operative, given the depth of pain and suffering he experienced as the child of an abusive father, and also to hate him for his attack and everything it represents? Perhaps so.

Ultimately, in *Terrorists in Love*, Ballen is bringing us closer to the real motives of terrorists, and thus closer to the truth. Even if that is uncomfortable, it's a step in the right direction.

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