

Q&A

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By Gal Beckerman | NOVEMBER 25, 2011



JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

For the past decade, the American public consciousness has been shadowed by fears of Islamic radicalism and its expression in mass terror. At the center of these dark imaginings are the individuals who join the jihadi movements, ready to die for the cause. But we know surprisingly little about the men (and some women) drawn to the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or their offshoots. What attracts them to terrorism? And what could possibly push them away from it?

In order to better understand what motivates jihadis, Ken Ballen, president of a Washington-based nonprofit research organization called Terror Free Tomorrow, sat down with more than a hundred of them, and asked them to tell the stories of their lives. About half his interviews took place at a rehabilitation center for violent fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia; the rest were conducted in Pakistan with former and current Taliban fighters.

In his new book, “Terrorists In Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals,” Ballen recounts the stories of six of the men he got to know--those who were the most open to him. The result is six fully drawn portraits of people often reduced to caricatures in American thinking. They recount to Ballen their stories of attraction to the cause in very personal terms, describing the dreams and mystical visions or frustrated youths that led them to choose jihad. All arrived there in different ways, and often in pursuit of different leaders or causes than the ones we suspect in the West.

There is the man Ballen calls the Jihadi Romeo, a young Saudi who can’t afford the dowry price for the love of his life, Miryam, and joins the fight in order to die and join her in heaven for eternal matrimony. There’s Ahmed, whose depressed childhood leads him to become, unwittingly, a suicide bomber, tricked into taking the wheel of a truck he doesn’t know will explode. He survives the attack with serious burns and is nursed back to health by Americans, whom he comes to revere (he tries to get Ballen to get him a visa). And there’s Malik, the Taliban fighter and a personal seer for its leader, Mullah Omar, who becomes deeply disillusioned when he discovers that his commanders are colluding with the Pakistani secret service.

This is a much more human--though



SVEN BANNUSCHER

In interviews with Ken Ballen, above, terrorists described their dreams, personal frustrations, and loyalty to religious leaders like the Taliban’s Mullah Omar.

no less terrifying--picture of the foot soldiers committed to defeating the United States and Western civilization. And it adds nuance to a problem that Americans have tended to understand only in terms of good and evil. Ballen spoke to Ideas by phone from Boston.

IDEAS: Did you discover any common denominator in why people become terrorists? What attracts them?

BALLEN: There's not really one thing that you can point to. The title of the book is "Terrorists in Love," though, for a reason. Most of these individuals can't find love on earth. Their only way to find love is through this religious vision of otherworldly love. And so they become more and more radicalized in an attempt to be good Muslims and reach that vision.

IDEAS: Do the terrorists you spoke to all hate America and Jews?

BALLEN: They have more of a love/hate relationship with America. A lot of them like American culture, and some of them are even kind of attracted by the freedom and individuality that America offers--really a competing model to the jihadi sublimation of one's own will. With Jews, it's not really a matter of love/hate. Their animosity and stereotypes are very strongly held.



SHAH MARAI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Suspected Taliban suicide bombers in Kabul.

IDEAS: You mention in the book that you're Jewish. How did it feel to be sitting there with someone like Malik, who is firmly holding your hand, tears in his eyes, and telling you that Jews need to be eliminated?

BALLEN: That is a pivotal moment....We had spent all day together, he told me all about his life--he was the seer to Mullah Omar, interpreting dreams and mystical visions--and he is actually quite moved by the interview, and by the end he knows I'm a Jew. He holds my hand in this overwhelming act of friendship--and this had happened before, so I thought, here we go again...a bond of human compassion is reached despite the fact that he's a Taliban and I'm a Jew from America....and he says: "The day of judgment will not come until every Jew is killed. This is what the prophet Mohammed

tells us. And if the Jew is hiding behind a rock, the rock will cry out, kill the Jew. And if the Jew is hiding behind a tree, the tree will cry out, kill the Jew.” And I realized that I had had enough of that interview.

IDEAS: You write about some of them having a “shared experience” that broke them of their stereotypes.

BALLEN: We certainly saw it with Ahmed in Iraq when he met an American nurse....As he said, “I went to Iraq to fight against the Americans and to fight for my Muslim brothers. The Muslim brothers I went to fight for treated me like a piece of rotten meat. The Americans I went to fight against treated me with respect and kindness and decency.”

Then there was Shaheed, the Taliban guy, and the moment when I recounted a dream to him and it helped him to change. We had a very long day of interviewing and we went to get dinner together in the hotel in Islamabad. You have to picture this guy. He looks like Osama bin Laden. He’s got a long black beard and white turban and robes. The whole jihadi uniform. I’m talking and we’re eating and I suddenly remember the dream I had that morning. And I’m so immersed by this point in their world of dreams and mystical visions and djinns that I tell him about my dream. And he starts to ask me very specific questions. Did you see the man’s face in the dream? What was the color of the horse? It’s almost like he was cross-examining me, and I had no idea why. All of a sudden he gets very silent and then he shouts out, “Allah Akhbar, praise God, you had the dream I’ve been waiting for my whole life. You, an American, a Jew, had a vision of the prophet Mohammed and because you did not see his face, that means it was a true vision.” Only a believer can see the face of Mohammed....He was so moved by the fact that I had had this vision that he began quoting the more tolerant and loving and accepting passages of the Koran.

He was blown away by the fact that this other person could have a religious vision. He never went back to his radical ways. He’s still a very fundamentalist guy, but he renounced violence....He still thinks I’m going to become a Muslim, though.

IDEAS: You met two of the six people profiled in the book at the Saudi center set up to rehabilitate jihadis. Do they have enough insight into terrorist psychology for that kind of rehabilitation to work?

BALLEN: To some degree, yes....But more important for these guys is religion and

how to interpret religion and what a real jihad is. Questions like what determines holy war. The clerics who get involved with this have more influence than the psychiatrists and psychologists.

IDEAS: How did Osama bin Laden's death impact the mindset of these people?

BALLEN: Not much. Do you know that, over the hundred people that I interviewed, not one of them had ever told me they joined jihad or the movement because of bin Laden? They joined because of God, and bin Laden didn't really figure as an important person....Mullah Omar seemed a much more significant figure for the Taliban. Every Taliban I met revered Mullah Omar.

IDEAS: Were you able to draw any policy implications or recommendations from these conversations?

BALLEN: Their motivation was definitely more about religion....For that reason, though, there might be a way to use the hypocritical behavior of the jihadi leaders as a weapon against them. One of the subthemes of the book is how the theft and corruption and duplicity of the Taliban pushed some of the true believers away from it. I think that's a missed opportunity that we have in the West, to expose that. For example, Anwar al-Awlaki, who we just killed in Yemen, was arrested and convicted three times in the United States for soliciting prostitutes. If those kinds of facts get out there--not directly, but indirectly through friendly clerics and Islamic scholars--I think that could do more to harm the movement than anything else we could do.

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Gal Beckerman is a journalist and author. His first book, "When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry," was named a best book of the year by The New Yorker and The Washington Post in 2010, and was just released in paperback.