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"Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals," by Ken Ballen

By Dina Temple-Raston, January 6, 2012

In early November, I was among a small group of journalists who traveled to the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for the arraignment of a terrorism suspect named Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri. He is the accused mastermind of the U.S.S. Cole attack in Yemen in 2000. After his capture in 2002, al-Nashiri spent four years in a CIA black site, where he was waterboarded and subjected to mock executions. From there, he was sent to Guantanamo Bay. For more than nine years, the only people who saw him were his guards, intelligence officers and his lawyers. So when we arrived for his arraignment, many of us simply wanted to lay eyes on a man who had survived that history.

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, suspected terrorists have become like characters in a novel — larger than life. And that's part of the reason why, when al-Nashiri strode into the GITMO courtroom, many of us were surprised to see him take human shape. Speaking to his lawyers and the judge, he seemed so unexceptional. At one point he even turned and waved to the gallery. (One of his lawyers told me later that al-Nashiri was told, in no uncertain terms, never do to that again.) The al-Nashiri arraignment was a reminder that most terrorism suspects are ordinary men who swerve violently from expectation.

That's the message in a new book, "Terrorists in Love." Written by former federal prosecutor Ken Ballen, it tracks the quotidian events that can lead sensitive young men to violent jihad. Ballen is now president of a Washington-based nonprofit organization called Terror Free Tomorrow, which tries to understand why extremists embrace terrorism. He interviewed more than a hundred Islamic radicals over several years to pin down what turned them from pious young men to religious warriors. About half the interviews took place at a rehabilitation center for violent fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia; the other half were in Pakistan and Indonesia. The result is an unusual atlas of extremism — a riveting, behind-the-scenes look at the events that turned six young Muslims into terrorists.

The book opens with the heart-wrenching story of Ahmad al-Shayea, a suicide bomber who, in many ways, has been to heaven and back. On Christmas Day 2004, he became the first suicide bomber in Iraq to survive an attack. Ballen's description of what was left of Ahmad after a suicide bombing is haunting. "His nose curved to a straight hooked point, like a ski jump. The fingers on his right hand ended in a stump that resembled melted candle wax, while his left-hand fingers were twisted like the roots of the miswak stick jihadis regularly chew in

imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. . . . His fingernails were little more than yellowed brown stumps, the color of toes infected with athlete's foot."

Ahmad joined the fight because he was having difficulty with an abusive father. Looking for a place where he would be appreciated, Ahmad decided to join fellow Muslims fighting American forces in Iraq. But that, too, proved to be a negative experience. He waited months for a mission. Shuffled from one safe house to another, he was never trained for anything. He was allowed to hold a Kalashnikov, but not to fire one. Finally, he was asked to take a tanker truck into a wealthy neighborhood in Baghdad with two other men. He was told that he simply needed to drive the truck to a designated place and park it. On the way to Baghdad, the men teased Ahmad good-naturedly and talked to him like a brother. Ahmad said that for the first time, he began to feel he was part of something. Then, just a thousand yards from where they were supposed to park the truck, the two other men jumped out and shouted at Ahmad to pull the tanker up to the concrete blocks.

"In what seemed like a matter of seconds, perhaps twenty at most, he made it. His first mission of jihad completed, he could return to the safe house and call home. That was the last thought in his mind as he stopped before the concrete. A powerful explosion, remotely triggered, then turned the back of the tanker, filled with twenty-six tons of liquid explosives, into a powerful fireball that could be seen miles away. . . . 'I see the world melt,' Ahamd said. 'Everything turns black. My hands disappear in more black. My throat leaves me in screams. Hell fire is licking up everywhere. My mind is dead numb. The flames are shooting at me from every direction.' " Ahmad miraculously survived and was taken to a hospital by U.S. medics. Eventually, he became a spokesman for the Saudi ministry to warn young men against the evils of violent jihad. "God has saved me for a purpose," he says today.

Abdullah al-Gilani, a young Saudi, was motivated by lost love. "Abby," as he prefers to be called, first glimpsed Maryam through a window, and it was love at first sight. After weeks of discussions through intermediaries, they eventually meet. They talk, and kiss, and name the many children they will have together. But their future is hobbled by finances. Abby can only raise $8,000 of the $20,000 that is Maryam's bride price. The story then takes an O. Henry-like twist. Maryam is forced to marry a rich old man. Abby is inconsolable. Maryam runs away and goes in search of Abby. Abby goes to Iraq in search of a suicide mission that , he is sure, will entitle him to reunite with Maryam in heaven. She disappears; his suicide mission goes awry; and he eventually ends up in a Saudi rehabilitation center — lovelorn, but alive.

Ballen uses these two stories and four others to argue that what all these Islamic radicals have in common is a dearth of love on earth. As he sees it, they turn to God to provide a new, otherworldly love for themselves in heaven. The young men radicalize in an attempt to be good Muslims who can reach that ideal.

While that may apply to the six people Ballen focused on, it is hard to see how a search for love drove the Lackawanna Six, a handful of Arab Americans who traveled to an al-Qaeda camp near Kandahar and returned to the United States just prior to 9/11 , or the airport shuttle bus driver who plotted to detonate explosives in the New York subway system, or the alleged U.S.S. Cole mastermind al-Nashiri. The Lackawanna Six, about whom I wrote a book, left the United States as much to find adventure as they did to prove they were good Muslims. Najibullah Zazi, a Denver-area shuttle bus driver, traveled to Afghanistan to fight for his homeland only to be convinced he could do more good for the cause by attacking the New York City transit system. As for al-Nashiri, his motivation may become clear as his defense attorneys argue for his life — his is the first capital case to be heard in the military commissions.

While Ballen's unifying theory for violent jihad falls short, that doesn't diminish the contribution the book makes to the understanding of what drives radical Islamists. "Terrorists in Love" gives the general reader the same sort of insight that journalists gained from watching al-Nashiri at Guantanamo: It reminds us that violent jihadis are driven by confusing and conflicting motivations.

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