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| **Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals** |
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| David Wilson |
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| Terrorists in Love: The Real Lives of Islamic Radicals by Ken Ballen Free Press Former US federal prosecutor Ken Ballen has convicted global terrorists but is no hawk. For his fresh, alluringly titled take on terrorism, Ballen delves into their motivation. Most "are not psychopaths or criminally insane". Instead, Ballen reports, "these people know exactly what they are doing, and they believe they're doing the right thing". For Terrorists in Love, Ballen interviewed more than 100 extremists in Indonesia, Pakistan, and beyond. He profiles six Muslim holy warriors, from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. The cast includes ex-al-Qaeda suicide bomber Ahmad Al-Shayea (who survived the detonation of his truck bomb), self-styled "career terrorist" Zeddy, and Malik, Taliban leader Mullah Omar's personal guru. Ballen shows the human side of the warped idealists held at a Riyadh "care centre". Of the 43 inmates whom Ballen interviewed, Al-Shayea was the most "striking". His body showed the scars of the suicide attack he conducted unwittingly, he claimed. Ballen notes the fingers of Al-Shayea's right hand ended in a stump reminiscent of melted candle wax. "His fingernails were little more than yellowed brown stumps, the colour of toes infected with athlete's foot." The explosion that disfigured Al-Shayea happened in 2003. Then 19, he was at the wheel of a butane-gas tanker truck detonated by remote control in Iraq. The blast killed 12 bystanders. His body smoked. After, Al-Shayea was consumed with bitterness towards al-Qaeda, which apparently tricked him into becoming a bomber by asking him to "deliver" the truck it had rigged with the bomb. The jihadis are fantasists manipulated by Taliban mystics whose decision-making process, which Ballen exposes - for the first time, the blurb claims - seems beyond the grasp of any CIA strategist. Dreams and visions shape the operatives' actions, according to Ballen, the founder-president of the non-partisan not-for-profit Terror Free Tomorrow. As the book's introduction, written by Holy War, Inc author Peter Bergen notes, one Iraq-based al-Qaeda suicide bomber Ballen meets literally plans to marry his girlfriend in heaven. Ballen branches out from the care centre, cultivating the royal family of Saudi Arabia, the state that supplies most al-Qaeda funding. Ballen's behind-the-scenes digging and socialising make for wild, weird entertainment. Take the episode where Ballen heads to meet Sheikh Minister Abdullah on a breakneck ride beyond Riyadh's beltways, driven by the Bedouin bigwig's smiling, radical son Kamal. "While there was no disguising that I was an American," Ballen writes, "I wondered what the aged sheikh would've thought if he knew his son had brought a Jew inside his 'place of special sitting'." Ballen had often heard anti-Jewish sentiments in the kingdom, which were confirmed by a Terror Free Tomorrow survey that showed nine out of every 10 Saudis held a dim view of Jews. "Yet," he writes, "I had also come to learn the boundless warmth of traditional Arab hospitality, from strong coffee, sweet tea, and overflowing dates to an extravagant meal and the inevitable after-dinner invitation to spend the night. "I just wasn't sure which tradition - magnanimous welcome and acceptance or unbridled hatred and contempt for the American Jewish usurper - would prove more powerful." Gripping.  |
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