

Daniel in the lion's den

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Who Killed Daniel Pearl?
by Bernard-Henri Lévy

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THIS IS a truly alarming book. Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's leading philosopher, is no scaremonger; even so, what he says about the fanatical world of the jihadists and the world threat he believes Pakistan poses is chilling. His starting point is 31 January 2002, the date when, in a farmhouse on the edge of Karachi, the *Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Pearl was beheaded, live on film. When it was recovered some months later, his body had been butchered into 10 pieces.

At its simplest level we already know the answer to the question of Lévy's title. Ahmad Omar Saeed Sheikh (Lévy refers to him simply as Omar Sheikh) has been sentenced by a Pakistani court to be hanged for masterminding Pearl's kidnap while three co-conspirators are now in prison. Even the identity of the man who actually beheaded the journalist is probably known – a top al-Qaeda terrorist, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, believed to be a key organiser of the

11 September hijackings.

But Lévy's deeper interest is less in discovering who these people are than how they did what they did. 'What happens in the soul of a man who, without reason, in cold blood, chooses to espouse evil, to aim for the absolute crime?' He is equally interested in the why of Daniel Pearl's death, eight days after he had been abducted. Was it simply because his kidnappers were maniacal anti-American, anti-Semitic fundamentalists and he was both American and Jewish? If so, why wait eight days? Was it because he had attempted to escape? Or was it because they realised he knew too much and, if so, about what?

The book describes how Lévy spent 2002 looking for the answers to these and other questions. He retraces Daniel Pearl's footsteps, even visiting

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the farmhouse where the journalist was killed and the hotel in which the abduction was set in motion. He goes to Los Angeles to speak to Pearl's family; to England and Bosnia on the trail of Omar Sheikh; and to Karachi's streets, where nuclear secrets are traded.

If all of this sounds like a thriller, it's no small accident – Lévy deliberately constructs the book like a mystery novel. Consequently, he follows up clues and puts himself in some danger during his questioning of both witnesses and suspects. The result is a page-turner that is in some ways more terrifying than any thriller, mainly because what he discovers is fact rather than fiction.

Although Pearl's death is only a starting point for a wider investigation, Lévy's thoughts about Pearl,

whom he regards as his 'posthumous friend', are moving and compelling. He is also both interested in and repelled by the man who devised the plot to kidnap Pearl. In Lévy's account, Omar Sheikh is a bright, friendly, highly intelligent, British-born Pakistani who metamorphosed into a terrorist with possible links to al-Qaeda and 9/11.

In tracing his background, Lévy goes on to note that a number of senior jihadists are 'graduates' not of the Saudi or Pakistani *madrasas* (fundamentalist Islamic seminaries) but of privileged Western educations. 'The enemy of the West is a product of the West... is terrorism the bastard child of a demonic couple: Islam and Europe?'

As this is a thriller of sorts, it would be wrong to reveal all of Lévy's conclusions. However, his central controversial thesis is one that other political commentators have adhered to. He discusses the apparently close links between Pakistan's secret services and al-Qaeda; he speculates on the likelihood that Pakistan's nuclear secrets are already in the hands of the terrorists; and he considers that Pakistan has posed 'on the one hand as a good ally of the United States and on the other lent itself, through its most prestigious scientists, to the most fearsome operations of nuclear proliferation'. His argument is frighteningly persuasive.

In Lévy's stark view: 'Pakistan is the biggest rogue of all the rogue states of today. I assert that what is taking form there, between Islamabad and Karachi, is a black hole compared to which Saddam Hussein's Baghdad was an obsolete weapons dump.' To order *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* for £17, plus p&p, call the Observer Books Service on 0870 066 7989

