

The Paymaster

Adeed Dawisha

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The Paymaster is an exciting exploration of terrorism and counterterrorism, a twenty-first-century thriller done right.

Adeed Dawisha's fast-paced novel *The Paymaster* unites a former nationalist and an ambitious journalist to take aim at one of the modern world's biggest problems—terrorism.

George Haddad is a veteran of a nationalist terror organization, a former idealist who spent his young life sipping black tea in bombed-out warehouses in the Middle East. Now, with a mansion and a family in Virginia, Haddad has grown bored, tired, and despondent. He seeks to combat his ennui by aligning himself with Tessa Barnard, an aspiring investigative journalist who is stuck in West Virginia.

The initial purpose of their meeting is to expose Emilio Luciani, a man posing as an Italian but who is really a Hezbollah terrorist, Nizar Saleh. Haddad wants Barnard to unmask the man while he is in a secret meeting with the CIA, but one murder throws the entire scheme off of the rails.

The Paymaster is a quintessentially modern thriller set in some unexpected places. Besides the usual milieu of Washington, DC, the East Coast megalopolis, and the jet-set spots of Europe, the story also touches down in frozen Chicago, small-city West Virginia, and during the heady days of the 1979 Iranian revolution. It is an entertaining journey, the main thrust of which is that the worlds of terrorism and counterterrorism are far more entwined than most people think.

Although he is a scholar who specializes in the troublesome politics of the Middle East, Dawisha does not write like a pedantic professor. Indeed, *The Paymaster* moves at a quick clip, with concise, utilitarian language far outpacing fancy linguistic displays.

Characters are believable, though Barnard conforms to a certain stereotype. She is almost amoral, a careerist who seems mostly driven by a desire to get the heck out West Virginia. Although she certainly grows in maturity as the novel progresses, she is not as artfully drawn as the conflicted Haddad.

If Haddad is emblematic of real terrorists, or of terrorists who have lived long past their prime, then your average bomb maker or cell functionary is a lot more conflicted than news reports would suggest. Haddad and Barnard make for an exciting team, while the expert assassin hired by Haddad's former comrades makes for a threatening adversary.

The Paymaster is an exciting exploration of terrorism and counterterrorism, with the daily monotony of both captured in between cinematic shootouts and cat-and-mouse games. This is a twenty-first-century thriller done right.

BENJAMIN WELTON (November 8, 2017)

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