

Review - Talking to the Enemy

Written by Alasdair McKay

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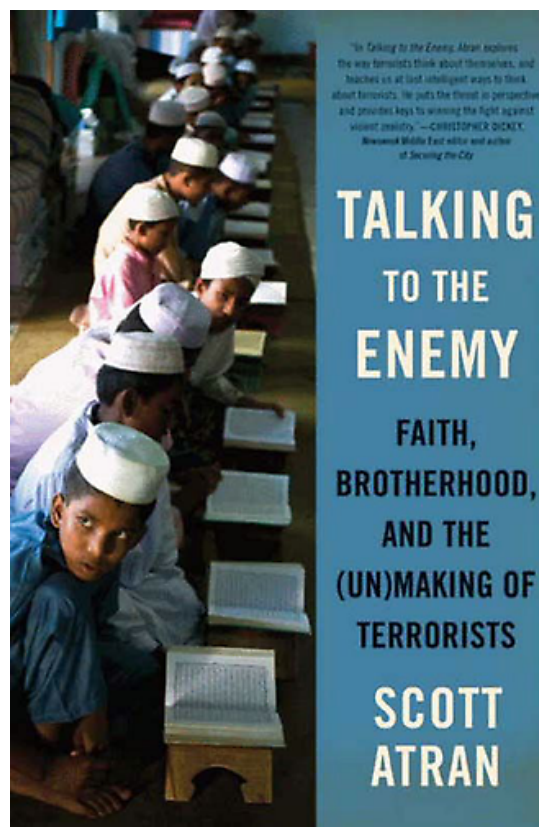
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ALASDAIR MCKAY, APR 4 2012

Talking to the Enemy. Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un) Masking of Terrorists.
by Scott Atran
Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2010

"To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression."
— Emmanuel Lévinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority



Since the September 11 2001 attacks and bewilderment which accompanied the events, the world has been inundated by books, articles and political rhetoric attempting to explain why people engage in suicide terrorism. Amidst the plethora of explanations, there have been very few convincing accounts for this phenomenon. Instead, there seems to be a circulation of myths and empirically unsubstantiated assertions. Much speculative talk has asserted that terrorists 'hate our freedom' (Bush 2001); and are insane (Bush 2005), uneducated and impoverished (Gore 2002; Bush 2002; Tyson 2001; Sokolsky and McMillan 2002). Moreover, a large number of books and articles have focused on the scriptural doctrines and teachings of Islam (Cook 2003, p. 52.; Harris, 2004; Hoffman 2006: 88; Laqueur 1999: 81), the role of heavenly rewards (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Juergensmeyer 2003: 201) and religious brainwashing (Hoffman 2006: 19–228, 288–290) as motivating factors for individuals to participate in

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suicidal terrorist activities.

Despite possessing the visage of common-sense, these claims are enforced by little or no evidence. Thankfully, there has been a small but rich body of literature which has refuted these lazy, armchair-based assertions and examined suicide bombings more scientifically. Recent work by Pape (2003, 2005, 2010), Bloom (2005), Wade and Reiter (2007), and Piazza (2008) has dispelled some of the common myths associated with suicide terrorism, including that it is exclusively an Islamic phenomenon, it is perpetrated by crazy people, and it is most common among the poor uneducated masses. More empirically-focused explanations, including friendship and family networks (Sageman, 2004, 2008), perceived foreign meddling and occupation (Pape, 2005, 2010; Pape & Feldman, 2010), and a sense of national humiliation (Merari, 2010), carry much intellectual clout. Yet one of the major deficiencies of terrorism research is that the vast majority of researchers have never spoken to actual terrorists, not even those who have failed in their mission and been subsequently imprisoned. Scott Atran, a French and American anthropologist who works at the University of Michigan, has certainly aimed to fill this lacuna in his research on suicide terrorism (2003, 2006, 2009, 2010 a & b).

In Atran's ambitious publication, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, And The (Un) Making Of Terrorists*, he interviews and investigates Al Qaeda associates, including Jemaah Islamiyah, Lashkar-e-Tayibah, and the Madrid train bombers, as well as other non-Qaeda groups, such as Hamas and the Taliban, and their sponsoring communities, from the jungles of Southeast Asia and the political wastelands of the Middle East to New York, London, and Madrid. From his fieldwork, Atran draws important conclusions.

Atran falsifies further many of the wide-spread claims propagated about suicide bombers and it is discovered that most jihadists have no personal history of violent emotions, are generally peaceful in their daily lives, are sometimes middleclass and have often been brought up with a secular and scientific education. Instead, the majority of jihadists become "born again" into a radical cause. Most importantly, Atran reminds us of the fact that terrorists are humans too, and this being the case they are motivated by beliefs they hold sacred, as well as their own moral reasoning (p. 373-401).

To Atran, terrorist organisations tend not to be the sophisticated, well-ordered hierarchies that we commonly suppose, but loose networks of friends. One of the most interesting developments obtained from Atran's research is that the biggest predictor for who is going to become part of a jihadist movement is not mosque membership, religious training or the work of Madrassas in Pakistan, but whether one is a 'soccer buddy' to another would-be terrorist. Normally, a group of young men – aged normally 18-30 – create a social unit in the form of soccer clubs or other team-based activities. Often as a response to an event which instils a sense of moral outrage such as news of civilian deaths in Iraq or the Gaza Strip, or out of a sense of frustration with the unfilled expectations of life, one of the soccer team decides that the global jihad represents the only response to the injustices of world. He, in turn, brings his friends along on the adventure. This self-made terrorist cell then goes looking for Al-Qaeda, usually on the internet (p. 12-13, 406, 490). Therefore, "The idea that joining jihad is a carefully calculated decision or that people are 'brainwashed' or 'recruited' into 'cells' or 'councils' by 'organizations' with 'infrastructures' that can be hit and destroyed is generally wrong" (p.50).

It is the bonds of fictive kinship that they construct which weaves a cell of terrorists together so tightly. In the same way that militaries propagate fictive kinship as a way of creating a fighting unit, these ties also hold firm in the world of terrorism. Intriguingly, Atran also notes that in some jihadist circles "friends tend to marry one another's sisters and cousins" (p.36). [1] With knowledge of the strength that fictive kinship bonds hold, terrorist handlers actively enforce the idea that suicide bombing will benefit 'fictive' kin. Potential bombers become convinced their sacrifice will benefit kin. As this happens, the calculus of costs to benefits shifts to the point where sacrifice makes sense in the mind of the terrorist. Often being highly moral and even altruistic people, though with a horribly misplaced sense of justice, terrorists are spurred not by their own humiliation, but by watching the humiliation of people they identify with – their "imagined kin" (p.300-305). In summation, suicide terrorists "don't simply kill and die just for a cause. They kill and die for each other" (p.7).

Atran extends his analysis and offers practical solutions that can help us identify terrorists today, prevent the creation

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of future terrorists, and ultimately make the world a safer place. In the process, he not only criticises much of the work undertaken in the so-called “War on Terror” (p.266-295), but also demolishes many of the simplistic ideas put forward by self-declared “scientific atheists” such as Sam Harris, Steven Weinberg, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, who see religion as the root of most evil and campaign with missionary zeal for its banishment from human life (p.405-428). Interestingly, Atran stresses the crucial need to reach, understand and, if possible, reframe the “sacred values”, not purely material values, most at stake in the world’s most intractable conflicts like those in the Middle East (p.382-389). For policy-makers and practitioners these should hopefully be essential insights. Yet, as the author suggests, it may be that the most frightening thing about terrorism today is that those charged with protecting us and resolving conflicts do not seem to be listening at all.

Although the book is concerned mainly with suicide terrorism, Atran’s work does expand its brush strokes to paint a larger picture, and he delves into centuries of history in order to locate the origins of conflicts that have produced terrorism. He then tries to combine this macro-level of analysis with the micro-portraits taken on the ground in conversations with terrorists and their supporters (p.61-105, 373-405, 428-479). However, going off on such tangents makes the book somewhat uneven in terms of its structure. Though interesting, Atran’s explorations into centuries of Western and Eastern history make it difficult to see where his trail of thought is leading as his chapters flick back and forth in time. These moves also create the feeling that this is in some ways two books rather than one. The depths of Atran’s ventures into human history could have been conducted more tightly and parsimoniously. An unveiling of the reasons for the historical analyses in the introduction would also have made greater sense.

Nevertheless, the excursions into the human history of violence and its anthropological underpinnings are important as they allow us to abstract some key points. Terrorism is not a particularly religious phenomenon at all. Instead, it is more an aspect of modern, global, media-driven youth culture, with its ancestry and historical precedent lying largely within the 19th century anarchist movement. In addition, war and mortal combat have been natural social activities throughout history and prehistory. Moral outrage, boredom and a search for glory are the drivers; and shame and honour are key emotions. For sure, the destruction brought about by the two World Wars and the anxiety induced by the growth of nuclear threats may have created a modern anti-war sentiment, but this is both a novelty and shallowly rooted because soldiers, like terrorists, fight mostly for their immediate peers, not a “cause”. Ultimately, violence is presented as a central tenet of human nature (chapter 5). As such, Atran may be right when he leaves us with the realistic proposal that “Reason’s greatest challenge – in politics, ethics or everyday life – is to gain knowledge and leverage over unreason: to cope with it compete with it, and perhaps channel it; not to fruitlessly try to annihilate it by reasoning it away” (p.426).

Overall, where the book excels is in the portrait it paints of a researcher deeply immersed in his work, and in the glimpse it offers into the personal world of terrorists. With this research, Atran has given us a remarkably astute book, illustrating that on-the-ground field work, where the researcher actually gets his hands dirty, can give us a far more intricate and nuanced understanding of terrorists than counter-terrorist ‘experts’ from profit-oriented consultancy firms, who spend years behind marble desks fumbling aimlessly through copies of the Qur’an or monitoring mosques in the search for answers. Given the dangers involved in the kind of research undertaken by Atran, it is unlikely that too many similar studies will emerge soon, and for that reason, amongst others, this publication is very important. For students interested in terrorism, and more specifically suicide terrorism, this book should certainly be a core text on their reading list.

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Notes

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[1] For more on this subject of forming bonds of kinship through marriage see Atran, S. (1985). Managing Arab kinship and marriage. Social Science Information, 24, 659–696.

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Alasdair McKay is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).