

# Talking to the Enemy by Scott Atran

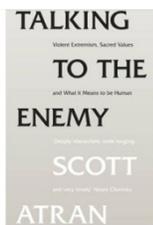
**An incisive study of suicide bombers reveals that it is the power of group dynamics, not religious fanaticism, that provides the spur**

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Published: 7 November 2010 in THE SUNDAY TIMES



Death wish? Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, left, died carrying out the Moscow metro bombings (EPA)



The essentials

Title Talking To The Enemy

Author Scott Atran

Publisher Allen Lane

Length 576 pages

Price £22.50

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On the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, Scott Atran asked his friend, companion and bodyguard Farhin if, in the name of jihad, he would kill him. “No problem,” replied Farhin. “Yes, I would kill you.” They were good friends, too; Farhin called Atran *habibi* — my beloved. As he said it, the author noticed “the heavy-lidded look that I had seen in the eyes of killers before, in Guatemala, and would see again in Pakistan”. Farhin would also have been happy to blow himself up, had the call come.

Suicide bombing is, in the popular imagination, an Islamic phenomenon. In fact, it’s a novelty in Islam. In the modern era, atheists have more commonly resorted to it: Sri Lanka’s Marxist Tamil Tigers and the anarchists who, from 1870, launched a reign of terror that climaxed in 1901 with the assassination of William McKinley, the president of the United States.

What we should be looking at, therefore, is not any particular theology or ideology but, rather, the deeper, less explicit roots of the impulse. This is what Atran does in this baggy, passionate and occasionally, but justifiably overwrought book. He is an anthropologist, a usually unreadable discipline. But here he breaks from the conventions to tell us that we have all got it wrong, especially when it comes to suicide terrorism.

Why do they do it? He gives us the answer on page one: “People don’t simply kill and die for a cause. They kill and die for each other.” In fact, this is well known to strategists of conventional warfare.

In asymmetrical warfare (small groups of non-state warriors against heavily armed states) this phenomenon becomes even more critical. Terrorists are likely or certain to die, so they need a good reason to do so. Casually, this is assumed to be because they have been promised heaven, but this is not true of Marxists or anarchists, and anyway, as Atran shows, the power of the friendship group is far more important.

His research has taken him around the world of jihad, often risking his life; being American in these places is a bad move. Repeatedly, he comes across groups of soccer buddies, school friends and even criminal fraternities that form themselves into freelance jihadi cells. Perhaps the most improbable is the team that carried out the Madrid train bombings in 2004 in which 200 died. These were not suicide bombings — though for some of the team, that was what they turned out to be. This was a tight little fraternity organised around a charismatic thug called Jamal Ahmidan, or the Chinaman. They were criminals and largely incompetent but, somehow, they got through. Media mythology says it was Al-Qaeda, but in fact it was just a freelance collective bonded by small-group dynamics.

Everything in such groups depends on the “commitment cost”: you show your zeal through the extremity of the sacrifice you are prepared to make. Thus you belong only because you are prepared to die, so when the time comes you die because you belong not to Islam but to your buddies.

This seems to have been hidden from us by the aftermath of 9/11. That was, indeed, organised by Al-Qaeda headquarters in Afghanistan. But the response dispersed and impoverished Al-Qaeda. It has partially reformed elsewhere, notably (as last month’s cargo-plane bombs demonstrate) in

Yemen, but has nothing like the same central authority. One effect of this, notes Atran, has been the declining social status of the bombers. The highly educated have been replaced by the barely literate as suicide bombing has become a more freelance business.

So what is to be done? Well, it might help if the militant atheists — Richard Dawkins and friends — shut up. Atran is an atheist himself but he understands the profound fatuity of the idea that getting rid of religion would, somehow, cure our ills. The book climaxes with a percipient analysis of religion, primarily as a force for binding together large groups. He also takes the eminently sane view that unquestioning obedience to tradition is not necessarily a bad thing in the Darwinian terms he favours. “Placing faith in traditional practices,” he says, “without understanding why, can be adaptive.”

When it comes to the terrorists, Atran knows that neither direct military confrontation nor overseas aid will work, the former because it justifies the dynamics of small, paranoid groups and the latter because it looks like occupation. The small groups have to lose their transcendent justifications.

One way would be to reduce media coverage, as this convinces them of their effectiveness. But the primary route would be deeper, more intimate human intelligence. Bring in sociologists and anthropologists, says Atran. This went down like a lead balloon when he tried it on White House staffers, though they did say Congress might be interested.

In a nutshell, this book tells us that we are not winning and why. On the upside, Atran points out, the risk is not as great as it is made out to be — unless highly organised groups such as the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure) get their hands on a nuke. On the downside, we’re not winning because we’re as stupid as the old Unionist lady who told Abraham Lincoln off for saying nice things about the rebels of the Confederacy whom he should be busy destroying. “Why, madam,” he responded. “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”