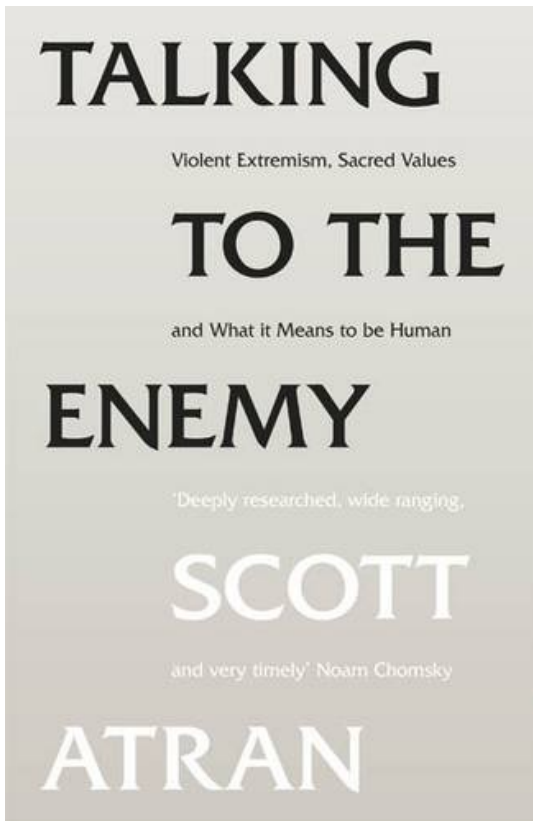


Book Review: Time to talk about terrorism

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/20/book-review-talking-to-the-enemy/?pfstyle=wp>

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Clara Volintiru finds a highly interesting and insightful portrait of terrorism in Scott Atran's recent book.



Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to be Human. By Scott Atran. Penguin. November 2010.

This week the inquest into the [7/7 bombings](#) heard that Mohammed Sidique Khan, the ringleader of the London bombers, was “well thought of and liked by children, parents and staff” at the primary school where he worked before 2005. Far from the stereotyped dangerous *other* that the media often represented him as before the bombings, Mohammed Sidique Khan was revealed to be very much to be a human, integrated member of his local community.

Understanding *the other* has been the task of a long and prestigious series of scholars. A terrorist, contemporary antihero that he is, has always been a contentious subject. Given the unprecedented abundance of post 9/11 literature on the subject it is often hard to find novelty in this field of research, but *Talking to the Enemy* is a wide-ranging study that sheds new light on the subject through an

intensive exploration of the actors at the heart of it all: the terrorists. It not only deals with the issue and effects of international terrorism, but searches its causes in the way human relations take form, and how they affect the social construction of different communities across the globe.

[Scott Atran](#), a renowned anthropologist at the University of Michigan, has spent years talking to those involved in terrorist networks worldwide. Atran goes far beyond the practice of anthropology though, leading an inspiring quest to answer some of the toughest questions around terrorism: the source and significance of religion, the relevancy of scientific findings on human decision-making, and the power and function of moral values and rationality.

The author presents the book as an answer to the question “Why do people believe in a cause, and why do some die and kill for it?”. In a nutshell, he responds: “People, including terrorists, don’t simply die for a cause; they die for each other, especially their friends”. These organic bonds that hold together the terrorist groups are the central focus of Atran’s research. Thus the reader discovers the people and communities behind some of the major terrorist attacks of the past decade. Atran reconstructs graphically the groups and relationships behind the Bali bombings and the Madrid plot. He also describes in depth the [9/11 Hamburg Group](#), and violent extremist networks from Gaza, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Through the author’s extensive fieldwork, one gains a sense of participation in the everyday lives of potential and actual terrorists. The book carries the reader through

such diverse snapshots of life as the Makassar Kentucky Fried Chicken shop, a favorite eatery and planning spot for Sulawesi's top jihadis, the football matches in Afghan training camps, and the family picnics at the Parque del Soto by the banks of the Navalcarnero River outside Madrid. These investigations into the mundane are not meant to generalize the idea that everybody can be a terrorist but rather are a demonstration of how "dreams of glory can easily outshine the inglorious drudgery of the deadened hopes", and how contingent is the evolution of these radicalized systems.

By looking at the terrorist networks as the sum of personal relationships, the author shares the same research approach as his often mentioned colleague—[Marc Sageman](#), author of well-known books [Leaderless Jihad](#) and [Understanding Terrorist Networks](#). Atran thus adds to this approach an extensive empirical base that substantiates the centrality of the "organic bonds of friendship, kinship, and neighbourhood" for terrorist networks. The author makes his theory on individual decision-making clear in stating: "what gives them all fanatical focus is not some inherent personality defect, but the person-changing dynamic of the group".

Atran also accounts for the connections Al-Qaeda has formed with the criminal networks worldwide, for the sake of logistic and financial support. He observed how "in the jihad, even petty criminals come to transcend any usual motives for gain", their commitment to a moral cause allowing for "greater sacrifices than usually possible with typical reward structures based on material incentives". Therefore, whatever perspective he takes on the subject of contemporary terrorism, he ultimately circles back to significance of the group, and the value system instituted within that community.

Overall, *Talking to the Enemy* is a captivating read that carries you from the most personal aspects of terrorists' lives to the socio-historical determinants. While the suspense of not knowing what the next page will offer is appealing, the subject matter gets dispersed at times. Thus, despite the study's unparalleled empirical evidence, it reads more like an adventure or mystery novel, than an academic book. But, then again, it might just be that this more captivating presentation of the subject makes us think deeper about it, breaking our stereotypical understanding of violent extremism.

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