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Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to Be Human by Scott Atran – review

David Shariatmadari is impressed by an anthropologist's study of political violence

David Shariatmadari
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The mother of Palestinian suicide bomber Loai Aghawani, 2008. Photograph: Abid Katib/Getty Images

In a world where one set of killings merits a medal from the president and another death by firing squad, anthropology is a useful leveller. Through its field glasses we can see exactly what a US commando in Afghanistan and an Indonesian bomb-plotter have in common: a willingness to use violence to defend what they hold dear, with those caught up in the killing either fair game or collateral damage. For those involved in the fight, of course, this approach is hard to stomach. It means abandoning political certainty, exceptionalism, the smugness of civilisation – or at least recognising that these things usually boil down to pride in the tribe. That's perhaps why Scott Atran gets so many blank looks when he gives presentations to intelligence officers and defence staff working in counterterrorism. Some, like the woman from <u>Dick Cheney's office,</u> remain convinced that the way to stop young people from becoming radicalised is simply to "bomb them in their lairs". A much-garlanded field anthropologist, Atran knows better, because he's done the dirty work: listening to jihadists, firebrand preachers, the families of suicide bombers, hiding out in Kashmir and hanging around checkpoints in the Occupied Territories.

Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to Be Human
by Scott Atran
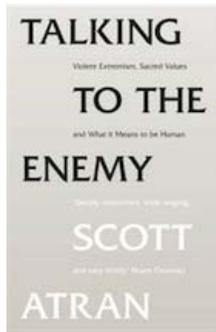
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Talking to the Enemy is Atran's impassioned call for evidence-based policy, but it's also an ambitious survey of culture and violence (Atran doesn't seek to play down expectations – he announces in the preface that this is a book about "the nature of faith, the origins of society and the limits of reason"). Research is the trump card here, played often and well. Whereas armchair rationalists such as Sam Harris are happy to generalise that the parents of suicide bombers feel "tremendous pride", Atran, who's interviewed dozens, can write: "I have yet to meet parents who would not have done anything in their power to stop their child from such an act."

He has surveyed nearly 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians in an attempt to figure out what kind of compromises would be necessary to achieve peace, and questionnaires filled out in the jungle training camps of Sulawesi reveal much that can't be guessed about the jihadi mindset. But there's also a wealth of anthropological common sense, accumulated from years of study and observation: groups tend to adopt some values as "sacred", be they belief in human rights, the honour of women or the primacy of science; rites and rituals make groups stronger and more competitive; blood-lust is a fact of human life; and interpretations of sacred texts vary over time, despite what adherents may say.

Atran wants to show us that violent extremism is not a uniquely modern, uniquely Muslim, or even uniquely religious phenomenon. To make his point he swoops from prehistoric times to Byzantium to enlightenment France (one of his chapters, 16 pages long, is modestly called "The creation of the western world"), before suddenly changing gear, chronicling the ins and outs of the Madrid train bomb plot as though it were an episode of *The Wire*. The tone switches from sober academic to something more like *Indiana Jones*, with the author hiding out in an abandoned mosque, on the run from killers, with only a penknife to protect himself. It can feel a little dizzying, disorienting even, though the message comes through clearly enough.

By the end we understand that terrorists are often highly moral people, altruists even, spurred not by their own humiliation, but by watching the humiliation of people they identify with – their "imagined kin". Moral? Yes, it's just that what is rational and right to them is horrific to us, and vice versa. It makes no sense, then, to treat them as non-human. It may be a bitter pill to swallow, but we must empathise with terrorists if we are to behave in ways that make terrorism less likely. War, of course, is not a very effective form of empathy. Nor is it a good way of preventing radicalisation, particularly when, as Atran shows, terrorist plots are increasingly formed haphazardly, among loose networks of friends and family, not through military-style hierarchies. In a passage that should be framed and hung above the desks of every world leader, he writes: "Until Barack Obama's election, US relief for Indonesian victims of the December 2004 tsunami arguably was the only significant victory since 9/11 in the struggle to prevent enlistment of future terrorists for jihad."

Critics will ask why the onus is on the rich nations to practise self-scrutiny, and to dole

out aid for peace. Atran does not answer this question, perhaps because it hasn't occurred to him. If the evidence shows that spending money on aid rather than drones makes people less likely to want to attack the west, then not to act accordingly is obviously wrongheaded: it sacrifices lives for a very dubious emotional payoff.

Talking to the Enemy is not a book that offers easy solutions. Atran points out that "permanent peace is about as improbable on Earth as unending day". Instead, it's a call to observe and understand, a plea not to make things worse through ignorance of the reality of religion and human psychology. It's one that should be heard far and wide. Unfortunately, as any anthropologist will tell you, the voices we're most receptive to are the ones that flatter the in-group and paint our enemies as forever bloodthirsty and benighted.