

# London Review of Books

## Where the Jihadis Are

Jeremy Harding

*Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What It Means to Be Human*

by Scott Atran

Allen Lane, 558 pp, £25.00, November 2010, ISBN 978 1 84614 412 7

Scott Atran's book about jihad and the wilder fringes of Islam is ambitious, noisy, scuffed at the edges. The Maghreb, Palestine, Syria, Kashmir, Indonesia: Atran has been there, brought home the findings and done his best to explain what turns people into suicide bombers and jihadis in Muslim countries, where mostly they are tiny slivers of the population, and non-Muslim countries, where they are rarer still. Atran is interested in 'sacred values' and especially those that are heightened by the intrusion of profane systems: 'shock and awe', occupation, settler colonialism, the idolatry of markets. Many Muslims, Atran believes, may experience these things, but very few take up arms or sacrifice their own lives in the name of the struggle. What is it that propels them? Equipped with a good interview technique, a sheaf of psychological questionnaires, support from the US air force, navy and army research offices, and an unwavering faith in the social sciences, Atran has set out to engage 'the enemy'. In conversation.

The narrow appeal of jihadism means that *Talking to the Enemy* is not about a collective sense of the sacred so much as secluded, secretive worlds where small groups of people espouse very large ideas involving honour, martyrdom and faith: worlds where the sacred is a choice, rather than a set of beliefs on which a society agrees. Others may be oppressed by an enemy (Israeli occupation, the Coalition, Western 'decadence'), and may applaud jihad, but as Atran shows, their efforts to negotiate a path between the sacred and the profane – a compromise that jihadists reject – leaves them in a difficult position. The enemy traduces their humanist values but so does the martyr. The mother of a dead suicide bomber, surrounded by neighbours, dignitaries and the press, may well endorse her son's cause, but Atran has 'never ... heard a *shaheed's* parent say, *in private*, "I am happy" or even "I am proud."'

Self-selecting groups who decide what is sacred and what is not are often at odds with the communities from which they're drawn. Atran has spoken to sources in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gaza, where Islamist movements enjoy broad support, but he's only skirmished with Egypt and Tunisia, where largely secular uprisings have pointed up the limits of the West's security concerns about jihad and signalled that our post-traumatic stress disorder after 9/11 is a hindrance to millions of people in Arab states who mean to have democracy on their own terms. Popular political struggles are of limited interest to Atran. His speciality is the minimalist network or the self-styled cell that settles on a set of values, secures funds, makes a connection to an arms or explosives supplier, appropriates a name (al-Qaida, Islamic Jihad, Party of God), and perhaps has one or another link with training camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. He uses the word *takfir* to describe the 'insular delusion of defending one's own group prejudice as humanity's high duty'.

*Takfir* is normally translated as 'excommunication', though unlike the sanction against an offending individual or group that comes from a high religious authority, this is righteous self-excommunication: the excommunicant lays the offence at the door of the congregation he once belonged to and strides off alone up the true path. The standard example is Takfir wal-Hijra ('excommunication and withdrawal'), a small movement whose members retired to caves in Upper Egypt in the 1970s to put the final touches to their plans for world domination. Their leader, Shukri Mustafa, an agricultural engineer, was executed in 1978; his followers were jailed and tortured, but the movement survived and its name is on loan to all kinds of aspiring takfiri groups.

It's said that in 1996 Takfir wal-Hijra planned to murder Osama bin Laden on the grounds that he was an ineffectual softie. Which gets to the crux of takfiri doctrine: once you decide that your co-religionists are not true Muslims, you can take their lives. Takfiri ideology played a frightening role at the radical margins of Islamism in Algeria during the civil war of the 1990s, and although 9/11 caused many more non-Muslim deaths than Muslim, Atran sees that crucial little cell in Hamburg – Mohammed Atta and the others, all from the Middle East – as a hermetic, takfiri project, which held itself aloof not only from Germans but also from other Muslims in the city, who were mostly of Maghrebi and Turkish extraction. Not all jihadis are takfiris; the al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, for instance, has denounced takfir. But Atran's research with jihadist groups in Indonesia – 86 per cent Muslim – suggests that there are overlaps and alliances between individuals with different beliefs, who tolerate one another for the purposes of a mission or a brief stretch of the long war they imagine lies ahead.

The town of Poso on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi 'probably contains more violent Islamist groups per square metre than any other place on earth'. Jihad in Sulawesi has been a run of the mill communal affair, confined mostly to the killing of Christians, who

reciprocate as best they can. But it's also been a place for individuals with more ambitious ideas. In 2005 in Sulawesi, Atran conducted an interview with an Islamic militant Farhin bin Ahmad, who had once funnelled fighters into Poso. Farhin was closely associated with the Indonesian radical movement Jemaah Islamiyah, a big presence in Poso when Atran was conducting his research. At JI's behest, Farhin and his brother drove a truck full of explosives that went up at the Filipino ambassador's residence in Jakarta in 2000. Farhin tells Atran he has never been a 'member' of JI ('I'm not an official member of anything'), thus confirming one of Atran's points: jihad is not a story of assiduous card-carrying and party discipline; it is about contact, conversation, shared environments, deals and disagreements, informal bonds that allow a jihadi to have fingers in several pies (in Farhin's case, both JI and a group called Kompak). Even the rivalry between different groups may be more of a technicality than a reality, if people move readily from one to another, pursuing their own opportunistic paths.

Jemaah Islamiyah is associated with several bombings in Indonesia, including the nightclub blasts in Bali in 2002, to which Atran seems to be referring when he asks Farhin whether it was right that 'people who are a part of Jemaah Islamiyah, friends of yours, have killed civilians ... including Muslims.' Farhin tries haplessly to duck the issue: 'I don't know all of the conditions. Some say the bomb was an Israeli or American bomb.' When Atran presses him, he admits he would still join a fighting organisation but adds, sensing the judicious answer: 'But not to kill Muslims or civilians who do not fight us.' (The Bali bombings killed 202 people, nearly 40 of them Muslims.)

Atran sees jihadi networks as mobile and shape-shifting. He is convinced that individuals find their way into small, dedicated groups via the most mundane routes, including family. Farhin is a good example: his father, an Islamic militant of Darul Islam, originally an anti-colonial Islamist movement, was jailed after a failed attempt to assassinate President Sukarno in the late 1950s; he and his comrades were eventually released and all his sons became jihadis. Thirty years on, in Jakarta, a recruiting agent asked him if he knew of anyone who wanted to fight in Afghanistan and he pointed to Farhin. The young man left for Peshawar in 1987.

The model of the central command – the al-Qaida model, which Atran agrees is now no more than a franchise – can't provide identikit answers about all groups that pose a violent threat. The real clues, he argues, are to be found in leafy suburbs and dirt-poor neighbourhoods, science faculties and dusty football pitches, across the grids of kinship and marriage that denominate fathers and sons, cousins and in-laws. 'Terrorist networks are generally no different from the ordinary kinds of social networks that guide people's career paths,' Atran says. 'It's the terrorist career itself that is most remarkable, not the mostly normal individuals who become terrorists.'

The Bali bombings, always associated with Jemaah Islamiyah, seem to bear him out. On paper, JI is an al-Qaida affiliate with a hierarchy and an army-like command structure, and the Bali bombers 'belonged' to JI, in spirit or in fact. In Atran's view, it's far more important to grasp JI's amorphous character: this is what enabled a group of self-starters to act on a murderous initiative of their own, which 'for the most part bypassed JI's organisational structure'. Sulastri Osman, a security analyst in Singapore, describes the violent extremist elements linked to JI as 'the fringe of a fringe'. Atran would agree: Bali and the other JI attacks involving suicide bombers, he says, 'were largely planned and executed through local networks' in which individuals 'radicalised one another until all were eager and able to kill perfect strangers for an abstract cause'.

'I am an anthropologist,' Atran announces cheerfully, and often his tone is that of the chronicler, reporting back to the court that levied the funds for a voyage of discovery. He speaks to jihadis and prospective martyrs, but also to the enemy's enemy, at senior levels, including the FBI, both houses of Congress, the NSC, three departments (State, Defense, Homeland Security) and the White House, and in Europe, Nato. Binyamin Netanyahu and Tzipi Livni are among his interlocutors in the Middle East. Most passages in *Talking to the Enemy* are intended for us, ordinary readers, but some are clearly meant for those in power. Like a lot of anthropology nowadays, Atran's is an applied science rather than a pure one. Pure anthropology is the kind that Malinowski did a century ago in Melanesia; applied anthropology is the kind that happens when Motorola sends an ethnographer to Melanesia to ascertain what kind of cellphone technology is liable to interest the descendants of the islanders whom Malinowski studied. Or in Atran's case, what happens when a government pays experts whose research it ignores if they decide it's barking up the wrong tree.

Atran isn't optimistic about the US government. When he mentioned in Washington that several jihadis, including Farhin, were interested in meeting US officials and attempting to explain themselves, he was ridiculed: 'It seemed that the idea of talking to our enemies to find out why they are our enemies could only come from Planet Fruitcake.' Unfortunately, there is a hint of fruitcake in some of Atran's recommendations for peace and the PowerPoint idiom in which they're couched: 'Exploit the inevitable ambiguity of sacred'; 'Shift the context'; 'Provisionally prioritise values' and so on. But he can be a no-nonsense telltale too. In 2009 in Damascus, travelling with the World Federation of Scientists, he ran into Ramadan Shallah, secretary-general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. 'I checked on the internet ... and found him on the FBI's most-wanted terrorist list, with a \$5 million reward for information leading to his arrest, or conviction, and so I related our discussions to the US authorities.' Shallah, a Durham PhD in economics and banking, is still at large despite Atran's decision to snitch. Being a bit of an insider, he perhaps didn't qualify for the reward money. This is nonetheless an uncomfortable moment in the book, as Atran thunders down the road

from Damascus to another assignment and readers wave to the rear number plate, wondering who's paid for the hired car.

Is this really anthropology? Or is it some zombie discipline that needs to feed on flesh from other disciplines – evolutionary studies, theology, history and social psychology – which Atran is always ready to supply? He goes everywhere with what he calls the 'switched-at-birth' scenario. In Nablus, at the Al-Najah University martyrs' exhibit, surrounded by copies of Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, he puts the question: 'What if you take a child from a Zionist family at birth and raise him in a good Muslim family, would the child grow up to be a good Muslim, a bad Muslim or a Zionist?' Easy, a Hamas student leader replies: 'A person is what his surroundings make him.' When Atran customised the same question for Indonesia, and had his minder/interpreter put it to the leader of an Islamist militia in Poso, the answer came back as follows: 'He said if a Christian would be raised by the mujahedin, the person would turn out fine, but a Jew comes from Hell and is always a Jew.' Frightening pause ... 'And he asked me if *you* are a Jew.' Atran left Poso before dusk. So first-person reportage is another genre to add to the mix in this highly readable, postmodern contract-anthropology where every ingredient has a place. Or almost every ingredient: politics is only ever a wraith-like presence in Atran's synthesis.

There is plenty in *Talking to the Enemy* about the follies of war and terrorism, the unhelpfulness of ingrained attitudes, the sense of right and wrong, sacred and profane; but very little conversation about power itself or its orchestration of real rights and wrongs. Atran's findings about killer cliques and groupuscules are mostly convincing, but the model of the narcissistic plotter, working with friends in isolation, doesn't quite transpose to Iraq, Afghanistan or the Afpak borderlands, where jihad and martyrdom achieve a war-like momentum, purely on the basis of numbers. Or to Israel/Palestine, where we are told that 'the land' is sacred to both sides but never that one side is stealing it from the other. One of Atran's more banal discoveries is a recent consensus among Palestinians that 'Islam sanctions martyrs.' Twenty years ago he would have found a consensus that colonialism and military occupation sanctioned armed struggle. Does a treatise on sacred values really help us grasp why Israeli encroachment on Palestinian land and lives is resisted in all manner of ways, including suicide bombing? Only if we fail to recognise the real political injustice underlying what he regards as a 'perceived sense' of injustice.

*Talking to the Enemy* is too bulky and its centre of gravity too low for it to be toppled by these weaknesses. For a start it sets us – and our governments – straight about a long list of dubious assumptions. Here are a few adjustments we need to make to our hazy picture of 'the enemy'.

1) 'We offend millions by simply denouncing "salafis".' Salafists, or Muslims who derive their

sense of a 'pure' Islam from early incarnations of the faith, are not the villains of Atran's piece. 'Western politicians, pundits and publics generally do not understand that the strict Salafi schools ... are the most vociferous and effective opponents of violent jihad.'

2) The mosque is not necessarily the place to look if you are a government agent (or an anthropologist) on the trail of jihadi cells: on the contrary, the warning lights go on when a group of worshippers abandons a mosque. A Saudi intelligence officer told Atran: 'Often the first sign of someone becoming a takfiri is that he stops praying where his family and tribe pray.'

3) Prisons in America are not a 'prime target for terrorist recruiting', as ABC News claimed a few years ago. Islamisation in the US prison system is largely a response by non-whites to the threat of white supremacist gangs. According to the NYPD the radical impulse seldom lasts beyond a prisoner's release, which is why the police refer to it as 'Prislam'. A rare exception in 2005: an ex-inmate and his associates planned a series of attacks on the West Coast, including 'the consulate of Zion' in Los Angeles. The plot was foiled when the police pursued a string of petrol station heists. But 400 FBI agents were assigned to the case, and so:

4) The diversion of 'law enforcement resources' away from white-collar crime (Wall Street), narcotics and Mob activity to the war on terror has dealt a blow to law enforcement itself. Early episodes of *The Wire* make exactly that point.

5) The chances of a small nuclear device going off in a city of someone's choosing are remote, despite worrying reports from Pakistan that 'militant Islamist support in atomic energy circles remains "at about 20 per cent".' The technical problems, Atran likes to think, are overwhelming. A remark by the US physicist Richard Garwin, worth bearing in mind in case this ever changes: 'Although a country would not be destroyed by such an explosion, it could ruin itself by its reaction.'

More generally, Atran believes that sacred values are not convertible. When Jewish fundamentalist settlers were given scenarios for a Middle East peace deal that entailed withdrawing, they were militantly opposed. When the offer of large sums of money was factored in, they were opposed and disgusted. The larger the sum, the stronger the disgust. The same is true of Palestinians, asked to give up the 'right of return' for refugees in exchange for a handsome grant from the US Treasury. 'Helping to materially improve lives will not reduce support for violence ... if people feel such help compromises their most cherished values.' Breezing in with bombs and money is not the answer. Atran fingers his government for failing to notice that the Taliban and al-Qaida had differences which might profitably have been allowed to run their course. Relations were already strained between the host, Mullah Omar, and his guest as a result of al-Qaida's suicide attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden in 2000. In June 2001, according to Atran, the Taliban relieved bin Laden of his satellite

phone, announced that he had no authority to issue fatwas and placed him under armed guard. After 9/11 they decided they would have to eject him, politely but firmly, from the country. 'Instead of keeping pressure on the Taliban to resolve the issue in ways they could live with,' Atran writes, 'the US ridiculed their deliberation and bombed them into a closer alliance with al-Qaida. Pakistani Pashtun then offered sanctuary to their Afghan brethren and guests.'

In his survey of the 20th century, Atran rips along, getting us from the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand to the fall of Communism in fewer than 60 words. But he can also be a stickler, especially when it comes to the use of suicide as a weapon and our tendency to see it as a 'Muslim' tactic – he thinks back to the Russian Nihilists, and more recently to secular Arab movements in Syria and the Tamil Tigers. In his view, the 'four horsemen' of the new atheism – Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens and Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* – ride roughshod over the rich history of religion in the name of a 'pulp fiction' that ends happily ever after when they've argued faith into extinction. He is appalled by Harris's view that 'we are at war with Islam' and dismisses the idea that education, in science especially, is the best antidote to radical religious belief. A majority of al-Qaida's original members and associates went to college; for the most part their education was science-oriented. Pundits and celebrity journalists were thin on the ground in al-Qaida; medics and engineers were well represented. Leaders of other, very different militant Islamist organisations – the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, Hamas in Palestine – share that profile.

Another of Atran's bugbears is 'widgetry': the cynical enthusiasm among US security bureaucrats for 'elaborate models that use elegant sound and light shows to give the "client" (usually another government agency) the illusion that it all makes perfect sense', as the intelligence community turns to its Zuckerbergs for inspiration about threats to the US. Atran has sat in on a lot of this and has a low opinion of it. 'The models weren't dynamic enough,' he writes, 'to accommodate the change and happenstance that characterise the evolution of terror networks', though that hasn't stopped the process rolling forward. Computer modelling tends to cost a lot and in government contracting, 'the more expensive the project that can be pushed out the door, the better the chances of promotion for the pusher.' Understandably, this high-end augury ('something to sink the taxpayer's teeth into') cannot compare with fieldwork to a researcher who's put in the miles.

Atran's friend Marc Sageman, author of *Leaderless Jihad* and once a CIA liaison officer with the Afghan mujahedin, identified three 'overlapping waves' of jihadism, loosely speaking 1989-91 (Afghanistan), 1992 to 9/11, and from there to the present. Together, Atran and Sageman ran a sociology of al-Qaida across the three periods. The data showed that the 1989-91 wave contained the largest number of professionals, in the highest proportion to skilled and unskilled workers. They were still a presence in the second and third waves: people

who could afford thousands of dollars to travel to Afghanistan and seek out the al-Qaida leadership, which was incapacitated by 2003. Since then, the 'marginalised' and the 'under-employed', the young and the 'born again' have been the most reliable recruits to the al-Qaida brand. Occasionally, white-collar plotters and fanatics have surfaced, with or without the T-shirt: the 'medical cell' (medics, London and Glasgow, 2007), Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (engineering and business finance, Northwest Airlines, 2009), Faisal Shahzad (Master of Business Administration, Times Square, 2010). But Atran argues that the newer radical 'tends to be ... less educated and less financially well-off, less ideological, and more prone to prior involvement in criminal activities unrelated to jihad, such as drugs, theft and aggravated assault'.

The Moroccan Jamal Ahmidan, one of the conspirators in the Madrid bombings of March 2004, was involved in all three and already on the run, after stabbing a man, when he escaped to Spain in the 1990s, claiming he had fled the civil war in Algeria. In Madrid, he settled down as a minor lowlife, fell in love with a Spanish crack addict and became a user himself. Briefly in jail, he took heroin, but came off it with help from people at a local mosque and then began nudging other Muslims away from addiction, at the same time making very tidy sums as a dealer of Dutch ecstasy: he'd been reliably informed by a group of Islamists in Amsterdam that it was all right to sell drugs to 'atheists', to 'fuck them up'. His partner had a child; he returned to Morocco with a large sum of money, hoping to pay off the courts for the charges against him, but it wasn't enough and he spent three years in prison in Tetuan. By the summer of 2003 he was back in Madrid – and now in his early thirties – getting by as a dealer.

In Atran's account, Ahmidan – or 'el Chino' (named for his narrow eyes and buck teeth) – was one of two key players in the Madrid bombings, which brought down the Aznar government: Aznar took the line that ETA was to blame. Ahmidan's counterpart was a Tunisian, Serhane Abdelmajid Fakheth, an economics postgraduate whose teachers described him as 'sweet, studious and shy'. He formed a student association to foster contact between Muslims and Europeans (no one was much interested), tried to start a radio station (it failed), and then, having lost interest in his studies, began selling stolen goods on the black market. All the while his attendance at the local mosque became more frequent; he kept open house for people coming through, and spoke often of excommunication and withdrawal. Then in 1999 or 2000, he performed the haj, returned to Madrid with a new zeal and shortly afterwards denounced his imam. He was one of a group of radicals who left the mosque and in due course, having married the 15-year-old cousin of another member, became their de facto leader.

In 2003, Fakheth and el Chino met. In a matter of months the ambitions of a small circle of zealots and hoodlums, fired by an internet jihad tract, became a reality. 'Iraqi Jihad: Hopes

and Risks', originally published on a website affiliated to the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (al-Qaida, Iraq), called for 'two or three attacks ... to exploit the coming general elections in Spain in March 2004'. El Chino knew a Spanish crook who pilfered explosives from the mines in Asturias: 200 kg of dynamite were exchanged for 35 kg of hashish. (At another of the plotters' houses police later found 50-60 kg of hash and 125,000 tabs of ecstasy.) The detonations on 11 March killed almost 200 people and injured thousands. In April Ahmidan, Fakhet and five others were tracked down to an apartment in a suburb of Madrid, where they blew themselves up.

Many of Atran's ideas about jihad coalesce around the story of the Madrid bombings, which he tells in something of a hard-boiled tone. He argues that the international monitoring of money transfers which followed 9/11 forced 'would-be terrorists to rely on local, low-cost, underground and informal methods of financing' and that the elimination of al-Qaida's training operation in Afghanistan obliged them to look elsewhere for explosives experts: petty criminals, it turned out, could sort both the money and the bombs. But the Madrid network, which involved about three dozen people, 21 of whom were convicted of crimes, might never have raised money through conventional channels in any case; and they didn't exactly have to grub around for an underworld connection – it was already there, in the person of el Chino. Atran emphasises the haphazard character of the whole affair, which stumbled towards its grim dénouement in a whirl of gangsterism and amateurishness. 'If the plotters had real organisation and sophisticated knowledge, they probably would have been caught before the bombings. The plot was so scattered, improbable and whimsical that even a competent police watch wouldn't have had a light job of picking it up.' Atran feels the police were flat-footed, but bungling on both sides is always a possibility. In Madrid, one of the plotters nearly blew his hand off fiddling with the dynamite from Asturias; in Bali the suicide bombers on the nightclubs assignment in 2002 were ready to go when it transpired that neither of them knew how to drive, so another plotter kindly pitched in with last-minute lessons: accelerator, brake, lights, horn, a no-frills guide to martyrdom and carnage.

After Madrid, the Spanish police and the press spoke about 'the complex co-ordination of dozens of participants', but if the Madrid plot looked devious and well constructed at first sight, it turned out to be lacking in 'intelligent design'. Atran tells us that the plotters were 'embedded in larger social networks rather than isolated from them'. He thinks of the conspiracy as a 'flat network' within a broader community, hard to identify for as long as Spanish intelligence was focused on a handful of high-profile Islamists. There were quite a few of these in Madrid, mostly Muslim Brotherhood refugees from Syria who'd arrived in the 1980s. They were rounded up after 9/11 and it turned out to be a waste of time. Yet in Hamburg, according to Atran, it was their very isolation from other Muslims that allowed Atta and his associates the monastic concentration they needed to get the job done. This is not

a contradiction, but it shows how hard it is to build a streamlined model of second or third wave jihadi activity. Can one talk to the enemy without knowing who they are? For Atran, a rough idea is better than none. He is sure that we should 'talk before we shoot', that the torture chamber is the wrong place to have this conversation, and that we must learn to distinguish real threats from imagined ones.

---

[Vol. 33 No. 4 · 17 February 2011](#) » [Jeremy Harding](#) » [Where the Jihadis Are \(print version\)](#)  
pages 17-19 | 4717 words