

Scott Atran. Talking to the Enemy. Faith, Brotherhood, and the (UN) Masking of Terrorists. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. 540 pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-13440—9 US \$ 27.99 Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

The sad truth about terrorism research is that 99% of all those who write about the subject have never talked to a terrorist, not even an imprisoned one. There are a few exceptions and the author of this ambitious volume, Scott Atran, is one. He is an anthropologist by training. While anthropology's main method of investigation - "participatory observation" - should not be taken too literally when it comes to the field of terrorism studies, it gets the investigator as close to his object of study as one can get without "going native". As Atran puts it: "It is possible to empathize with jihadi warriors and believers without needing to sympathize or share their conviction" (p.36) There are plenty of obstacles and dangers that face the inquisitive researcher, including being kidnapped for ransom or murdered for impressing some third party. Scott Atran is a maverick researcher with institutional academic affiliations in both France and the United States. He has followed terrorists in Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, as well as in courtrooms in Europe. His book is not primarily written for fellow-academics but is meant for a broader public.

In 'Talking to the Enemy', Atran tries to combine a macro-perspective on the origins of conflicts that have produced terrorism with micro-portraits taken on the ground in conversations with terrorists and their supporters. Doing such a splits makes the volume less than perfect in terms of composition. His macro-perspectives with brief excursions into centuries of history are not the volumes strongest features. Yet where the book excels is in the portrait of the anthropologist at work; it gives us a unique glimpse into the practice of an academic professional engaged in fieldwork. Traditionally, anthropologists have studied kin and tribal networks. It so happens that family networks (and neighbourhood- and school-based ties) are also a key to understanding many terrorist networks. He notes that in some jihadist circles "friends tend to marry one another's sisters and cousins" (p.36). At times, Atran's findings stand in sharp opposition to mainstream assumptions on salafist jihadi terrorism. For example, he writes: "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). Or: "...there's no indication that Al Qaeda ever had the capability to acquire such weapons [of mass destruction, AS], and it has such ability much less now than before" (p.101). He is, however, less certain about Lashkar -e- Toiba, whose spiritual leader Hafiz Saeed declared that "mass killing of nonbelievers is the only solution to international conflicts in the Muslims' favor"(p.236).

At times Atran's method of investigation is reminiscent of investigative reporters. In his judgments he is not afraid of reaching definitive conclusions. For instance, regarding the Madrid bombing of 11 March 2004, he writes: "The Madrid plot was incubated by a hodgepodge of childhood friends, teenage buddies, neighborhood pals, prison cellmates, siblings, cousins and lovers. These weren't careful, well-trained commandos. They were almost laughably incompetent, though tragically only a bit less so than Spanish law enforcement and

intelligence” (p.206). In his comment on U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s announcement to the Taliban in the summer of 2009 that “We and our Afghan allies stand ready to welcome anyone supporting the Taliban who renounces Al-Qaeda, lays down their arms....etc.”, he dryly notes: “To get the tribesmen to lay down arms ...is about as farfetched as getting the [US] National Rifle Association to support a constitutional repeal of Americans’ right to bear arms. Moreover, as Marc Sageman observes, “there’s no Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and no Afghans in Al Qaeda” (p.258). The book arrives at a number of conclusions that contradict mainstream views. With reference to the situation in Europe, he notes: “Generally...people go looking for Al Qaeda, not the other way round”.(...) The overwhelming majority have not had sustained prior religious education but have become “born again” into radical Islam in their late teens and early twenties”. (p.272) The last section of the book looks at the role of religion in terrorism. Despite being a confessed atheist himself, Atran does not come down harshly on religion, noting that “Islam and religious ideology per se aren’t the principal causes of suicide bombing and terror in today’s world...”(p.425). What, in his view, inspires terrorists is “a thrilling experience and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and, through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world that they will never live to enjoy.” Yet he also reminds those who seek such glory:” Because the young, feeling immortal, do not fathom how short and fragile life and memory are – even remembrance of heroes – or how forever long are death and forgetfulness. They don’t understand that their deaths are staged so that stories will be broadcast, not about them – they are as nameless as their victims – but about the Cause” (p.483). Atran has given us a remarkably honest book, demonstrating that down-to-earth field work can give us a far superior understanding of what makes terrorists “tick” than whole armies of armchair counter-terrorist ‘experts’ from profit-oriented consultancy firms eager to get their funding from often clueless Homeland Security bureaucrats.