

## The Road to ISIS

An unorthodox anthropologist goes face to face with ISIS. Is the payoff worth the peril?

By Tom Bartlett | May 20, 2016



Lorenzo Meloni, Magnum Photos

Palmyra, Syria

**O**n a good day, driving to the front line of the war against the Islamic State carries some risk. This is not a good day: High winds have kicked up enough dust to dim the sun and hide nearby mountains, a thick haze that could provide cover for snipers or suicide bombers. While Kurdish soldiers, known as

Peshmerga, meaning "those who face death," have proved adept at keeping a determined foe at bay, they can't prevent every incursion along a roughly 650-mile border, particularly when those sneaking in are willing, even eager, to die in the attempt.

The road to the front passes through tiny villages of cinderblock houses and over flat, green fields before giving way to rockier terrain as it winds southwest from Erbil, capital of Kurdistan, a country that doesn't quite exist. It also passes through a series of military checkpoints where

increasingly skeptical soldiers, ancient AK-47s slung over their shoulders, peer into a vehicle and ask its occupants — not unreasonably — where, exactly, they think they are going.

Phone calls must be made, documents presented. Satisfied, the soldiers step back and wave the car on.

"I am really worried," says Lydia Wilson from the back seat. "This is the worst time to be going." Wilson, a medieval historian by training, is not easily cowed. She's visited military bases before, and she's sat across a table from ISIS fighters. She's just not keen on needless risk. Hoshang Waziri, this group's translator and cultural ambassador, scans the blurred horizon and doesn't like what he sees, either. It's not the lobbed shell or the stray bullet that unnerves him so much as the prospect of getting kidnapped. "That's what scares me," he says. "The idea of falling into their hands."

They spent the morning drinking strong black tea from small glass cups with a Kurdish official who, they hope, will grant them access to captured ISIS fighters, the holy grail of research subjects and, for obvious reasons, the toughest to track down. They explained to the official, as they explain to everyone, that they are not journalists angling for a story or government envoys pushing an agenda, but rather social scientists interested in knotty universal questions regarding the nature of human conflict. Answering such questions is difficult in part because of an established gap between expressed willingness and actual willingness; that is, between what people promise to do and, when it comes down to it, whether they pick up the gun or strap on the vest. Interviewing fighters engaged in combat or plucked from the battlefield has the neat advantage of eliminating that gap. Then the only question is: Why?

But getting to those fighters — that's the trick. Weeks of planning can evaporate in an instant, forcing the researchers to improvise. Beyond the logistical aggravation, there's the matter of personal safety. Where there are fighters, there is often fighting, and while the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq remains relatively sheltered compared with Syria or large swaths of southern Iraq, the proximity to bloodshed prompts understandable unease.

The least jittery member of the team is its leader, Scott Atran, an anthropologist who floats among several institutions, including the University of Michigan and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, part of the City University of New York. He's also a founder of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, at the University of Oxford. He's normally the one arguing to go a little farther afield, to challenge the group's comfort zone, perhaps to cross over into Syria. While sitting around the hotel he appears restless and testy, headed toward ISIS territory he is in his element, enlivened and unfazed. "We don't want to drive off the road, because it's probably mined on both sides," he warns casually from the passenger seat, the way you might note a change in speed limit or a forthcoming rest stop.

Atran is known as an expert on terrorism, a title he doesn't particularly want and a word he doesn't find useful. He views his work, broadly, as examining what motivates people to do things beyond themselves, for good or ill. These days he focuses on the ill, specifically ISIS. "What propels people from 100 countries to come to this place to blow themselves up?" he asks. "There's something in human beings that this appeals to; otherwise it wouldn't work. And my goal is to figure out what that is."



Chronicle Review photo by Tom Bartlett

Scott Atran and fellow researchers make a field trip to interview fighters in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

**Y**ou could be forgiven if, after perusing Scott Atran's pre-2001 scholarly output, you weren't sure how he ended up in a car speeding toward ISIS territory. His body of work then centered around folk biology, which explores how humans think about the natural environment, how we categorize

flora and fauna and what it reveals about us. In a 1999 essay, he wrote that Itzaj Maya women consider the cooing of the short-billed pigeon as "the lament of the bird mother who confided her child to the squirrel trickster." He was well regarded in that subfield, if not well-known outside it; squirrel tricksters tend not to pique the interest of television producers, whose invitations he must fend off these days. He was a middle-aged academic who knew a lot about the birds and snakes of northern Guatemala.

He knew other things, too. Way back in 1990, he wrote about the "alternating structures of violence" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a foreshadowing of his later preoccupations. He also spent years researching a book on what he calls "the evolutionary landscape of religion," wrestling with how humans across cultures become convinced that an unseen benevolent power guides history. How can such beliefs turn out to be a winning evolutionary strategy? That book, *In Gods We Trust*, was published in 2002, and in it Atran addresses, briefly, the phenomenon of divinely sanctioned suicide, writing that "emotionally motivated self-sacrifice to the

supernatural stabilizes in-group moral order." Killing yourself is an effective, if costly, means of signaling to fellow devotees the strength of your commitment.

Atran was in France on September 11, 2001 — he's also director of research anthropology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, in Paris — when his son, then 12 years old, ran into the room: "Mom says you have to come quick." Atran, like everyone, was shaken by what he saw. Unlike everyone, he could read Arabic, had spent significant time in the Middle East, and had written a book about religion and evolution. "I'm also worried about global warming, but I have no particular talent or ability to affect any of that," he says. "Here I can do something."

His focus didn't so much shift, then, as sharpen. In 2003 he published a paper on suicide bombers in which he argued that the stereotype — dirt-poor and wildly unhinged — failed to match the true profile of the often educated and prosperous people who blew themselves up on crowded buses or piloted planes into buildings. That paper joined the glut of post-9/11 terrorism research. More peer-reviewed papers on terrorism were published immediately after the attacks than in the preceding three decades.

Atran's paper, however, stood out from the slew, and so far has been cited more than 700 times, an impressive total. He wrote that researchers should endeavor to uncover "which configurations of psychological and cultural relationships are luring and binding thousands, possibly millions, of mostly ordinary people into the terrorist organization's martyr-making web." In the chin-stroking world of academic research, it is perfectly respectable, even advisable, to raise provocative questions and then tiptoe away, leaving

the hard labor of answering them to others. Likewise, you can write volumes on human conflict and never venture beyond your book-crammed campus sanctuary.

Atran didn't walk away, nor did he opine from afar. He jumped in. Which is how, in 2005, he found himself smoking clove cigarettes in a restaurant on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. He was there to meet a commander from Laskar Jihad, an Islamic group intent on converting Christians and enforcing Shariah law at gunpoint. Thousands had already been killed. Via a translator, Atran ran the commander through a string of hypotheticals. For example: If a roadside bombing would produce the same carnage as a suicide bombing, would the commander opt for the less personally harmful alternative?

Atran also trotted out one of his favorites, the switched-at-birth scenario. What would happen, he asked, if a Christian or a Jewish child was raised by a Muslim family, one that believed in Shariah law and jihad? The commander had two responses. If the child was from a Christian family, he or she would grow to be a devout Muslim. But not the Jewish child. Jews were from hell, and no amount of godly instruction could alter that. The commander then asked if Atran was Jewish, a fact that the translator unwisely confirmed. Sensing an unwelcome change in the conversation's tenor, Atran excused himself and slipped out the back door.

In the past decade or so, he has listened to the distraught mother of a young Palestinian suicide bomber read a letter congratulating her on her son's valorous death. In Pakistan he slept in a rotting, abandoned mosque in order to avoid government agents he had heard were pursuing him. He

once asked a veteran of Al Qaeda training camps, a man with whom he had established an amiable rapport, a simple question: "Would you kill me for jihad?" The man replied simply as well: "Yes, I would kill you."

His three adult children beg him not to travel to dangerous destinations. His mother, now in her 80s, told his wife to break his legs so he couldn't return to Iraq. She was kidding, sort of. Perhaps there's cause to be concerned: ISIS recently published an 11-page article on Atran titled "In the Words of the Enemy." Colleagues wonder why a scholar in his 60s, an age when "emeritus" could be appended to his title, is gallivanting about rural villages, getting sneaked into Iraqi prisons, pondering fake checkpoints and roadside bombs. "I always tell people you can learn a lot in just one day on the ground," he says. "You get more knowledge about what questions you might ask, what to look for, what is bullshit, than you get in five years of academic study. There's nothing like it, and there's nobody out there doing it."

**T**he base at Makhmur, a two-hour drive from Erbil, is surrounded by a high concrete wall topped with razor wire. In the courtyard, a dozen Kurdish soldiers play dominoes next to armored vehicles in varying states of disrepair. Missing wheels, splintered glass. The soldiers are shot up, too; one leans his crutches against the game table. Many purchased their own uniforms and equipment. They settle for junky, outdated weapons, holdovers from previous wars. In recent months, soldiers were paid only a fraction of their salaries, modest to begin with, as the Kurdish government struggled to resolve a disagreement over oil revenue that's brought the region close to economic ruin.

While the fearsome, cultivated mystique of ISIS fascinates, if you wish to comprehend what makes ordinary people go beyond themselves, you could do worse than the Peshmerga, who patrol the edges of Kurdish-controlled territory and cope with constant threat. They are fighting under conditions that would undermine the morale of a less ardent army, and yet there are no reports of revolt or outward indicators of dissatisfaction.

That's why Scott Atran and company are here, to test the mettle of the Kurds compared with ISIS. The team's plan is to stop by the main base, then continue on to a forward outpost, a few kilometers away. The base is a semicomfortable distance from the enemy. The outpost is not. Someone suggests sending an armed escort to lead the way. Thus reassured, everyone piles back into the car for a short, stressful drive. "If you continued down this road, you would go straight into the Islamic State," Atran says, a comment that calms no one's nerves.

The two dozen soldiers stationed at the outpost are hemmed in by dirt berms and stacked sandbags. They live in quarters with thatched roofs covered by blue tarps held down with tires and rope. It's said that war is boredom punctuated by sheer terror, and so a visit by Westerners wearing jeans and sweaters, notebooks and iPads tucked under arms, is at least a diversion from anxious monotony. The ever-hospitable Kurds offer their guests breaded dates sprinkled with powdered sugar. The younger soldiers take selfies with the strangers. The outpost's commander, a colonel in his mid-40s with heavy eyelids and a weary air of seriousness, agrees to submit to an hour of examination intended to reveal, in essence, why he fights, what he will and won't do for his cause, and how he imagines the future. Before the session begins, Atran tells him that it is important "for you to tell us what you really think."

"Absolutely," is the colonel's translated reply. "From my heart."

In his private quarters are a single bed, a small TV, a table with an ashtray, a space heater, a teapot, a wooden crate used for storing ammunition, and a couple of grenade launchers. On the back of the metal door someone has drawn the outline of Kurdistan in Sharpie and noted the surrounding countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria). The Kurds are besieged on all sides.

The colonel and two of the researchers, Lydia Wilson and Hoshang Waziri, remove their shoes and sit on the floor. Their style of data-gathering feels more like a late-night bull session than a formal survey, the idea being that their subjects are already under pressure, so anything they can do to lower the angst results in more-genuine responses. The colonel leans against the bed and lights a skinny cigarette.

The researchers begin with laminated cards that show cartoon drawings of men with flags instead of heads: the American flag, the Iranian flag, the ISIS flag, and so on. They ask the colonel to rank the physical and spiritual strength of each country by pointing to the corresponding figure (they've also created an iPad app version of the test, in which subjects adjust the height and musculature of the flag-headed men). One consistent finding is that the Kurds, while they abhor Islamic State fighters' tactics, respect their capacity to fight and their commitment to the cause, particularly those ISIS fighters who come from abroad. The Kurds have witnessed their zeal. ISIS fighters are known to wear suicide vests into battle so they'll be prepared for martyrdom should the need arise. They hold their ground when most armies would retreat. Asked how ISIS maintains control of Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, with a small force, another Kurdish officer shrugs and says, "They're Daesh," a commonly used, somewhat derogatory nickname for the Islamic State. That is explanation enough.

The questions become progressively more personal. The colonel is asked to rank, in order of importance, his country, his family, and his religion. He puts Islam and country above kin. "If I lose my soul, what use is my family?" he says. He is, like the majority of Kurds, a Sunni Muslim. ISIS is also Sunni. Most Kurdish Muslims adopt a tolerant attitude toward other religions, including Christianity and Judaism. ISIS considers people who do not subscribe to its own gloss on Islamic teaching to be hell-bound heretics, including fellow Sunnis. The colonel's view of Islam takes torture off the table. ISIS is only too glad to torture. The colonel's faith forbids targeting women and children. ISIS regularly slaughters them. The colonel rules out suicide missions as a battle tactic. ISIS has no such qualms.

The researchers press him on suicide, a key dividing line. The willingness of ISIS fighters to, for example, drive a fuel truck rigged with explosives into a checkpoint, as happens frequently near Makhmur, gives the group an intimidating edge. Wilson asks the colonel what he would do if presented with the opportunity to kill Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State. Would he kill Baghdadi if he knew, for certain, that he would lose his own life? Would he, in other words, embark on a suicide mission if the payoff was substantial?

The colonel doesn't hesitate. He shakes his head. "Kurds don't do that," he says, the disapproval evident in his tone.

That's how pretty much all Kurdish fighters respond to such a scenario. The way the colonel expressed his refusal matters, too: He is a Kurd, and Kurds don't do that. In similar tests with 38 Kurdish fighters and support personnel at the front, an abiding connection to their ethnicity was evident, and 21 were "fused" with Kurdish identity above all else. Atran draws on the theory of identity fusion as laid out by William B. Swann, a professor of

psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, defined as commitment to a group so tightly bound to personal identity that the two are all but indistinguishable, creating what Swann calls a "visceral feeling of oneness." *I* becomes *us*. Among Kurds generally, Atran finds, "commitment to Islam is surpassed by their commitment to national identity."

Not that Islam is irrelevant. Untangling overlapping allegiances to suss out an individual's "sacred value," the term Atran uses for the red line a subject won't cross, is ticklish business. A Kurdish soldier who fights ISIS is protecting his country, sure, but his family lives in that country, and linked to his love of country is his ethnicity, which can be difficult to divorce from a shared faith in God. The heart is a Venn diagram, mysterious even to its owner.

Wilson and Waziri are not trained, at least not formally, for this sort of work. They're not anthropologists or psychologists. Atran views their eclectic backgrounds as an advantage and figures they can pick up the science on the job. Waziri is a playwright and author of a book of essays titled *Between Two Iraqs*. He was born in Erbil and can make small talk with subjects about life under Saddam Hussein and the American invasion. He studied theater and draws on that background when gauging the emotional temperature of the room. Wilson earned her doctorate in medieval Arabic philosophy from the University of Cambridge, where she investigated 10th-century classification of knowledge. She was trying to figure out what to do next when she ran into Atran at a conference in 2010. His fervor was contagious.

During the interviews, Wilson is off to the side, taking notes. If you didn't know better — and subjects don't — you might think she was Waziri's assistant, when, in truth, she's frequently feeding him lines like an offstage

director. *Wait, no, he didn't answer that, ask him again.* Waziri and Wilson communicate in a practiced verbal shorthand, skipping unproductive questions, circling back to earlier topics, trying to puzzle out the human before them.

**T**he captive is escorted into the room, guards at his side, a firm hand on the back of his head. A video shows he is wearing a leather jacket over a traditional tan robe, his face obscured by the balaclava, the same black mask worn by knife-wielding executioners in ISIS propaganda. The room's pinkish carpet is well-worn; stucco peels off blank walls. Wind rattles the unlatched door. The guards sit the captive down in a chair behind an old wooden desk.



Still from video by Scott Atran

An interview with an ISIS fighter is recorded by Scott Atran's research team.

The day after their visit to the front, the researchers drove to a prison in the volatile city of Kirkuk to meet with a captured ISIS fighter. They know a few things about him, Atran says later. They know he is 27 years old. They know he is from Hawija, a city in central Iraq about a half-hour from where he is now imprisoned. They know he's been fighting since at least 2009, before the Islamic State technically existed, before the

organization eclipsed Al Qaeda.

They know he was captured three months earlier.

What does he know about them? He can see there are four people, three of whom are white. Are they journalists? Do they work for the CIA? Is this an interrogation? It's not as if he spotted a flier tacked to a bulletin board and decided to give it a go. He didn't fill out a form agreeing to participate in a survey. Not only was his consent not informed, but in the parlance of human-subject ethics guidelines, it wasn't even consent.

Waziri latches the door to keep it from rattling. He tries to eliminate distractions, to make the captive comfortable, or as comfortable as possible considering the circumstances. As the door clicks shut, Richard Davis, a former White House counterterrorism official who got to know Atran during George W. Bush's administration, strenuously objects. The guards are outside, he reminds everyone, and it doesn't seem prudent to trap yourself in a room with an unshackled member of a murderous organization. Waziri unlatches the door.

They don't know his name, so Waziri addresses him as Muhammad. Waziri explains to him that the information they want isn't tactical. They're not asking what he knows about the next planned attack in Europe or the location of Baghdadi's hideout. They are researchers who study why people fight, and what they're after is more universal: They want to understand war from the perspective of those waging it. "We would love to see what is going on in your minds and your hearts," Waziri tells him.

Muhammad understands. They learn that, while he didn't make it past sixth grade, he's clearly astute and self-assured. The ISIS captives they interviewed last year were more skittish. They didn't resemble the black-

clad bogeymen on YouTube. Muhammad, in contrast, radiates confidence. He leans back in his chair. He crosses his ankles. He reaches under his jacket to scratch his armpit. When they bring out the laminated cards and set them on the desk, he taps his choices firmly with his index finger. *This one. That one.* If he's apprehensive about the situation, he doesn't show it.

Waziri sits to Muhammad's right. Wilson is on his left. Atran and Davis observe from a few feet away, filming the encounter on an iPhone, capturing Muhammad at the desk with Wilson and Waziri just out of frame (they'll use that video later to study his tone of voice and body language). Asked to rank his values, Muhammad puts the Islamic State first, then his family, then the wider Muslim world. When asked to rank the spiritual and physical strength of players in the region, he puts ISIS first, followed by the United States, then Russia, then the Kurds. He has encountered U.S. soldiers in combat, back when he fought as part of Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS's previous incarnation, and he was impressed that they could keep going for five to 10 hours at a stretch. He has much less respect for the Iraqi army. He is unwilling to rank Iran. "I don't care about that," he says, gesturing dismissively toward the Iranian flag. His contempt for Shia Muslims is absolute.

For sensitive questions, rather than ask what Muhammad thinks, they ask what he believes his comrades think. The researchers find that ISIS captives often describe their fellow fighters as more radical and more violent, perhaps because the captive might desire to play down the intensity of his own beliefs. What good would it do to convince the researchers (who, for all he knows, are working closely with his captors) that his own views are extreme? Atran believes they get closer to the truth when they make it less personal.

Is Islam under threat?

Yes.

Is his country is being occupied?

Yes.

By whom?

By the Shia, with America's backing

Would his comrades kill civilians?

Yes.

Would they torture?

Yes.

Would they carry out suicide attacks?

Yes.

Would they sacrifice family members?

Yes.

Would they kill family members who opposed the caliphate?

He hasn't seen anyone do that. There is a long pause. He remembers hearing that a fellow ISIS fighter from Syria killed his own mother.

Muhammad says he is tired of these questions. There are so many of them.

Atran asks: "What would he tell the American people or the French people? What would his friends tell the Americans or French to stop the violence on both sides?"

Muhammad is confused by the question.

Atran rephrases: "There is fighting, people are being killed. Children are crying. Their fathers and mothers are dying. American soldiers are also being killed. Their children are also crying. What would he do to stop the children from crying?"

Go back to your country, Muhammad replies.

During the experiment, while the others stay seated, Waziri is moving around, placing cards in front of Muhammad, getting his attention, keeping their reluctant subject engaged. "I love this guy," Waziri says, in English so Muhammad won't understand. "I want to take him home with me." They joke about this afterward. *Really? You want to take an ISIS fighter home with you?* What Waziri meant was that he wanted to talk with him for hours, to see who he is, what he wants, what he thought before he was captured and what he thinks now. Wilson feels the same: "I wanted to be able to see his face, look in his eyes, and be like, 'Why, why?'"

**T**hese tête-à-têtes with terrorists lend weight to Atran's analyses. They're his calling card. He's the scientist who sits down with radicals, probes their innermost thoughts, and returns to the civilized world to disseminate that hard-won intelligence. That's why big names in the national-security apparatus reach out to him. The White House has been in touch. He has testified in front of Congress and the United Nations Security Council. While in Iraq, he spoke with Leon Panetta, the former CIA director, and Tony Blair, the former prime minister

of Britain, on a conference call. Unlike academics who prefer to keep policy makers at arm's length, Atran seeks out those in power. He cringes every time he hears a presidential candidate refer to ISIS as crazy or brainwashed. Those labels obscure rather than inform. He wants to help defeat ISIS, and he thinks what he's learning can be of service. Consequently he'd rather his findings appear in *The New York Times* than, say, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

The work he's doing, and how he goes about it, is intentionally unorthodox. Trips to Iraq are organized and paid for through Artis International, a group he and Davis founded, whose mission is to "improve the human condition by reducing global conflict." Some of Artis's funding comes via the Minerva Initiative, a program of the U.S. Department of Defense that supports social science related to national security. Minerva won't pay for experiments in places like Iraq, though, so the researchers are forced to raise that money from private sources, or chip in their consulting fees — a situation that perplexes and frustrates Atran. "Millions are spent, and mostly wasted, on speculative gaming, counter-narratives, and modeling this or that, but nary a penny on scientific attention to what is actually happening on the ground," he says.

With prominence comes criticism, and Atran has suffered his share. Sam Harris fired the most personal broadside after listening to a lecture by Atran. Harris, a neuroscientist known for his advocacy of atheism, deemed Atran "preening and delusional" and wrote that his views were evidence of either "mental illness or a terminal case of intellectual dishonesty." Per Harris, Atran believes that Islamic extremists who blow themselves up do so "not because of their deeply held beliefs about jihad and martyrdom but because of their experience of male bonding in soccer clubs and barbershops."

Equally dismissive is Jerry Coyne, a professor of biology at the University of Chicago, famous these days as a thunderous ridiculer of religion. In a blog post titled "Once again, Scott Atran exculpates religion as a cause of terrorism," he quotes the following remarks by Atran: "[W]hat inspires the most uncompromisingly lethal actors in the world today is not so much the Qur'an or religious teachings. It's a thrilling cause that promises glory and esteem." Coyne then addresses Atran directly, caps-lock on to drive the point home: "WHAT WOULD IT *TAKE* TO MAKE YOU ASCRIBE ANY OF THEIR ACTIONS TO ISLAM?"

According to Coyne, Atran is an apologist for a pernicious faith. According to Harris, he is a liar or a nut.

Atran does write about soccer in his book *Talking to the Enemy*, published in 2010, before the rise of ISIS. In it he describes an epiphany he had while talking with a jihadi from Afghanistan. Atran asked how he had maintained contact with fellow "Afghan alumni" when they weren't fighting or training. Soccer, the guy said. They played soccer together. "They do it for friends — campmates, schoolmates, workmates, soccer buddies, bodybuilding buddies, paint-ball partners — action pals who share a cause," Atran wrote. "Maybe they die for dreams of jihad — of justice and glory — and devotion to a familylike group of friends and mentors who act and care for one another, of 'imagined kin,' like the Marines." ISIS's ruthless interpretation of holy texts plays a role, he acknowledges, but what he finds is that ISIS captives often know precious little about Islam, the faith they're supposedly killing and dying for. There's something else going on.

The critiques of Atran from fellow terrorism researchers are less bombastic and more interesting. The core of that criticism is that his ideas can be slippery, that his explanations change. He emphasizes the concept of

sacred values, a term that's been around for a while and is most associated with Philip Tetlock, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist whose work on predictions and judgment is widely cited. Tetlock argued in a 2003 paper that sacred values can become "so entrenched at certain historical junctures that to propose compromise is to open oneself up to irreversible vilification." Sacred values are the beliefs that can't be bought.

As Harris and Coyne correctly note, Atran highlights the significance of brotherhood. To some of Atran's colleagues, like Harvey Whitehouse, a professor of anthropology at the University of Oxford who has written about the importance of communal bonds and studied revolutionaries in Libya, it remains fuzzy where Atran falls. "I think it depends on which day you ask Scott," he says. "I can quote times when he says it's all about sacred values, then he will say that it's about relational ties." Whitehouse has worked closely with Swann, the Texas professor, on identity fusion. Swann's careful elucidation of that theory revolves around the question he poses in one paper's title: "What makes a group worth dying for?" Though Atran praises identity fusion, Swann, for his part, isn't convinced that Atran's research jibes with his own. "It's not clear to me where sacred values exist in the larger scheme of things, because he's never bothered to do that work," Swann says. "It's defined somewhat differently in each paper."

The charitable way to account for this is to say that Atran grabs new tools for the task at hand, that he's not married to a specific system. Or, not as generously, you could decide that he's short on theoretical consistency. Compared with the work of other high-profile terrorism researchers, like Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, Atran's is less straightforward. Pape maintains that the catalyst for suicidal terrorism is foreign occupation. People kill themselves for a cause when they feel that their land has been taken over by outsiders. Last fall, President

Obama seemed to echo precisely that view in a speech when he worried that ISIS can use "our presence to draw new recruits." Is Pape's silver-bullet theory of terrorism elegant or simplistic? Atran thinks it's the latter and has said so in print. Meanwhile his research draws on an assortment of theories and can't be easily summarized.

Maybe that messiness is a defect, or maybe it reflects the reality of a complex situation.

In a forthcoming paper, to be published in *Current Anthropology*, Atran fleshes out what he calls the "Devoted Actor Framework," which pulls sacred values and identity fusion into a single theory and offers advice for beating ISIS: "The science suggests that sacred values are best opposed with other sacred values that inspire devotion, or by sundering the fused social networks that embed those values." Left unspoken: How do you offer an equally inspiring alternative? By what method can those social networks be sundered? Atran doesn't pretend to know the answer, but he does think that current attempts at so-called "countermessaging" are destined to fail because those messages are "disembodied from the social networks in which ideas are embedded and given life."

Scholarly squabbles aside, there is near-universal admiration, bordering on awe, for how Atran is able to collect data in the midst of a violent conflict. He feels a kinship with swashbuckling war correspondents, and yet he also rubs shoulders with the likes of Noam Chomsky, an old friend who calls his work on extremism "truly exceptional." "Most of us don't have the balls to do what he does," says Swann. One longtime observer of scholarship in this area, Andrew Silke, director of terrorism studies at the University of East London, puts a premium on the type of information gleaned via Atran's firsthand methods. "An awful lot of research on terrorism is done by people

who have never met a terrorist," Silke says. "There is good work you can do at long distance, but the insight and understanding you develop from speaking with them is much more impressive."



Chronicle Review photo by Tom Bartlett  
Scott Atran (right) goes over a battlefield map in Iraq with a commander of Kurdish forces.

The hotel where the researchers stay in Erbil is a once-grand establishment long past its day. The electricity is iffy, the hot water a myth. The metal detector at the front gate buzzes every time someone passes through, an alert that does not prompt the uniformed guard to look away from his phone. The stuffed goat near the entrance is equally

vigilant. There are accommodations in Erbil more modern, but they might attract foreigners and, the thinking goes, terrorists, too. Last spring a car bomb exploded across from the U.S. consulate in Erbil, killing three people and wounding more than a dozen. Best to blend in.

After traveling to the front, Atran and his team gather in the ornate, dimly lit lobby to study satellite maps, spar over survey questions, debate whom they should contact, when they should call, what they should say. Waziri quarrels with Davis, the former White House official and author of a recent book on Hamas, about how demanding they should be when approaching the Kurdish government. Davis wants to petition in advance for more time with ISIS captives. "Tell them this is what's needed for the science," he says. Waziri pushes back, contending that Kurdish sensibilities require a more

deferential tack. "You don't walk into someone's house and make demands," he says. Navigating cultural imperatives while getting the job done is a balancing act.

They also strategize about where to go next. They could drive to Sinjar, a city in northwest Iraq that has only recently been liberated from ISIS. The hope would be, assuming they can skirt ISIS-controlled territory along the way, to interview Yazidis, a Kurdish-speaking people whose ancient religion is considered devil worship by the Islamic State. ISIS deems it theologically permissible to murder, rape, and enslave Yazidis, and that's precisely what its fighters had done after seizing the city in 2014. The stories and photographs trickling out of the region after ISIS was pushed back are horrific, and estimates of Yazidis killed reach 5,000. By going to Sinjar now, so soon after these atrocities, they would be able to gather accounts from survivors that might shed additional light on how ISIS conducts itself when it has free rein over people it considers dispensable. Part of understanding ISIS is observing the depths to which it will go.

There is an undeniable thrill to the work, the sense that they're taking chances in order to accomplish something important. There is an evident camaraderie among them, too, sometimes playful, sometimes impassioned. Perhaps it's not altogether different from what motivates and sustains the fighters they study. When Atran returns to New York the next week, the first email he sends to the rest of the team will acknowledge as much. "I miss it," he will write.

Adventure aside, what they discover can be depressing. "It's created more fear in me," Waziri says. "You can see a clearer picture of what they're thinking. It feels really bleak." It feels bleak, for instance, when the Kurdish

colonel predicts that, once it is defeated, ISIS will spring up again under a new name. It feels bleak when the ISIS captive accepts killing civilians and family members.

Atran doesn't share Steven Pinker's view, in *The Better Angels of our Nature*, that humanity is on a promising, if unsteady, course toward reduced levels of violence. "Civilization is intermittent. It can spiral down," he says. "Human beings are not particularly loving, caring creatures. They are sometimes, mostly to their own kin, but human beings can be intensely cruel, barbarous, and self-predatory."

Like Atran, Wilson has a nuanced awareness of the region and the science, but after interviewing combatants, plumbing their minds, dissecting their motivations, she's not always sure what to think. "You can go away with the feeling that everyone hates each other and humans suck as a species," she says.

Wilson dreamed about ISIS after a day at the front. In her dream, she was watching a quartet play classical music in a town square — as civilized a scene as you could ask for — when a car rolled by with no driver. She knew it was a threat somehow and began to run. Just then the driver, wearing a suicide vest, emerged from the driverless car. Dreams don't always follow the dull rules of logic. The same goes for human conflict.

She stood before the would-be martyr in the instant before he completes his mission.

So what happened next?

"I don't know," she says. "That's when I woke up."

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