

SAM HARRIS INTERVIEW PART THREE

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Hello again, Ars Technica listeners. This is the third installment of a four-part interview with neuroscientist, New York Times bestselling author, podcaster, and controversial public intellectual, Sam Harris. In today's installment, we're really starting getting into Sam's worldview and philosophy. And to set some context, at the opening here, we're talking about Sam's 2004 book, *End of Faith* - which first put him on the map as both a thinker and a writer. And away we go.

TRANSITION MUSIC

Sam Harris: So Within 24 hours, I was writing what became that book. I was writing initially a book proposal, but I wrote essentially the first chapter of that book. The very next day, I started writing it. 9/11 came, I had finished my coursework. I was just starting my neuroimaging work. I was already focused on belief and religious belief as a subset of that. I had just spent this previous decade plus focused on just questions of spiritual concern, and what is true in religion, and why do we have these competing worldviews that are religious in the first place? What is it necessary to believe to have a meaningful life?

Then people started flying planes into our buildings, clearly expecting paradise. This is an act of worship. We immediately started lying to ourselves about why they did it. I had read the Quran. I hadn't focused on Islam to any great degree, but I was pretty sure I knew what these guys were up to. The moment I heard about what Al Qaeda was and just you have someone like Osama Bin Laden who could be doing anything he wants. He's got hundreds of millions of dollars. He could be living in Paris and dating models. But no, he's decided to live in a cave and plot the takeover of the world for the one true faith.

I immediately recognized the spiritual intensity of that enterprise. He was not faking his belief. He believed what he said he believed. It was only rational to take his stated beliefs at face value. I-

Sam Harris: It was only rational to take his stated belief at face value. I had been surrounded by people who believed that the Hindu version or the Buddhist version of karma and rebirth, right? And they believed it absolutely to their toes and I understood why they believed it. Many of them were having intense experiences of the sort I was having in meditation or on psychedelics. There's no doubt in my mind that members of Al-Qaeda were having intensely meaningful experiences of both of solidarity among their fellow jihadists. Many of us have gotten into things that

suddenly seemed to answer much of what we were lacking in our day-to-day experiences.

Rob Reid: You, yourself did in college.

Sam Harris: Yeah, but I mean even the seemingly more trivial things. We all know that certain people, they become vegan or whatever, all of a sudden it's all about getting their diet straight, or they get really into yoga. This happened to me with Brazilian jujitsu. I got into Brazilian jujitsu, and all of a sudden, that's the only thing I can talk about with people. I've become a cult recruiter for Jujitsu, and I mean, you go down the rabbit hole with these things and suddenly you have just immense energy for paying attention. It just becomes effortless to pay attention to this thing. Now, just imagine something that has all of these components, it has the spiritual component, the prof- ... one, you actually believe the doctrines, you believe that this life is just a weigh station here, and the only thing that matters here is getting your head straight about what's on the other side of death. You have to believe the right things now, you have to get your life straight now so that when you die, you go to the right place.

There's no question that millions of people, billions of people really, most people who have ever lived, believe something like that about the way the universe is structured. Islam, in particular, this especially indoctrinated version of it gives a uniquely clear picture of just how all of that is organized. I mean, it's a very self consistent view of just what you need to believe and how you need to live to get to the right place. Imagine having that kind of moral and spiritual clarity in your life which immediately translates into a recipe for how to live, which is zero ambiguity about how society should be structured, how men and women should relate, but then there's this whole political layer, which is all of these historical grievances. Where the west, the infantile west, or the materialistic west, really the obscene west has by some, just perversity of history, acquired all this power and essentially trampled upon the only civilization that has ever mattered to God, which is the Muslim one.

In addition to everything else, you have essentially the yoga component and the diet component and the personal life straightening component, you have this political component where you have to right this great historical wrong and spread this one true faith to the ends of the earth. I mean, this is a missionary religion, this is not Judaism, this is not buddhism. The way this works is you spread this thing, right? And there's nothing pacifist about this, as a man, you get to harness all of your testosterone, you get to be, essentially, a spiritual James Bond, you get to go to war for this thing, you get to kill the bad guys, you get to be part of a gang.

Rob Reid: But with social approbation in media circles, as opposed to the negatives that would come with being a gang member.

Sam Harris: Exactly, yeah, yeah. This is a spiritual gang, it's also incredibly well funded. I mean, if you look at how the Saudis have funded the spread of the Wahhabi style Islam, this is a gang with petro dollars behind it, right?

Rob Reid: And the rewards are simply beyond comprehension literally, because the rewards are paradise.

Sam Harris: Yes.

Rob Reid: I mean, it's like we see gangs motivated by money and access to women and all the things that have powered lots of gangs, and lots of gangs, and that's teeny compared to the upside that these folks would imagine that they're playing with.

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: So, you felt you knew a thing, or 3, or 10, or 100 about belief?

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: This happens, you dive into it, and it's interesting just talking about belief because I know one of the complaints that you have about a lot of your critics is that they don't seem to think the Islamists believe that which they actually say.

Sam Harris: Yeah. It's amazingly durable, this piece of confusion, but the idea is that the Jihadists, even those who blow themselves up in what is just transparently called the ultimate act of self sacrifice, they don't believe what they say they believe. They're not being motivated by religion, religion is, at worst, being used as a pretext for political goals and economic grievances and psychological instability, right?

Rob Reid: Or it's being cited by Islamophobia as a way to slander Islam by saying, "Well, these people did it for religious reasons. No, that's an Islamic phobic thing to say, they really did it for this other reason." What other reason is offered as an alternative to a fervently held belief.

Sam Harris: Political grievances or they were so despairing over the state of the Palestinians under the Israeli boot. Again, this can be more or less plausible if you're talking about a Palestinian who's being mistreated in Gaza. It's completely implausible when you look at a third generation British/muslim recruit to ISIS who'd had to drop out of the London School of Economics in order to go to Syria, right?

Rob Reid: Right.

Sam Harris: There are endless numbers of cases of people who have every other opportunity in life, who become "radicalized" in this way. There's a deep skepticism among people who simply don't know what it's like to believe in God,

frankly, a real God. A God who can hear your prayers, a God who can hate homosexuals, a God who cares how you live, not this elastic God of good vibes in the universe. People have lost touch with the many academics, virtually every anthropologist I've ever had to talk to about this stuff, many journalists, many so-called scholars of religion just don't know what it's like to believe in God and then doubt that anyone really does. They don't actually think that people believe that they'll get virgins in paradise, right, they think this is just propaganda, and propaganda that nobody believes.

Rob Reid: Well, and that's like the Judaism that you described of your youth, where people would go to synagogue and they'll go through these things but not because they believed in something ephemeral but because that was a cultural or a community activity. People are projecting that onto this world, and you certainly are not saying this as some kind of a neocon. I mean, I imagine you probably first voted in the presidential election in 1988, how many republicans versus democrats have you voted for?

Sam Harris: I've never voted for a republican.

Rob Reid: Never voted for a republican, and you actually think that this was a decisive issue or potentially decisive issue in the election that we just had, correct?

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: Would you go into that, just briefly?

Sam Harris: Well yeah, because we had a president for eight years that just clearly lied about this particular topic. I mean, he would not name the ideology that was delivering us this form of terrorism, he would just talk about generic extremism, or generic terrorism, and he was just quite hectoring and sanctimonious about the dangers of naming this ideology. So, at the one point he gave his speech, just pushing back against his critics saying ... I was a huge Obama fan, actually. When I compare him to our current president, it feels like we have fallen into some new part of the multiverse that I never thought we would occupy. I mean, it's just unimaginable that we've taken this turn. We have a totally sane, intelligent, ethical, professional person running the country and then you have this unhinged conman running it next. But Obama really got this part wrong, and disastrously so, and Clinton seemed to be echoing most of his delusion on this part. I mean, at one point she talked about extremist Jihadism, or radical Jihadism-

Rob Reid: 'Cause then there's moderate jihadism.

Sam Harris: Yeah, there's moderate Jihadism that doesn't pose a problem for us. But in the immediate aftermath of Orlando, the Orlando shooting that killed, I think 47 or 49 people?

Rob Reid: 49, it was the biggest mass shooting in American history.

Sam Harris: Right, right.

Rob Reid: No parallel.

Sam Harris: And clearly an act of Jihadism, I mean, just transparently so. Everything that Omar Mateen said was just, he just connected all the dots, it could not be clearer. Hilary Clinton spoke only about the need for gun control and the need to be on guard against racism in the aftermath of Orlando, and that was just ... I know at least one Muslim who voted for Trump just because of how galling she found that, to use Trump's language, it's all true, the political correctness and delusion. I mean, it was just a refusal based on this fake concern about racism. I mean, Islam is not a race, right?

Rob Reid: Not at all.

Sam Harris: You and I could convert to Islam right now and we would be part of this particular problem if we ever converted.

Rob Reid: When I lived in Cairo, I knew lots of western, both American and European converts, who were very sincere and devout Muslims and they had not a drop of their blood in them, et cetera, it is not a race. Absolutely.

Sam Harris: You can be more devout, it's easier to convert 'cause if you're actually gonna convert on the basis of the ideas, the only way to convert is to actually claim to believe these specific doctrines, right? And the doctrines get fairly inimical to most things we care about in the 21st century, very, very quickly. You can't convert to the lived experience of just having been a nominal Muslim, surrounded by Muslim culture, analogous to the Jewish experience that we just talked about. I mean, I just had Fareed Zakaria on my podcast, and he's a Muslim, he identifies as a Muslim, he's clearly not religious at all. I mean, most serious Muslims would consider him an apostate, I mean, he's not a believer, right? But he had a Muslim experience, analogous to the Jewish experience, that matters to him and he feels solidarity with that community.

I can't convert to that because I don't have that experience, but I could become a member of ISIS if I check the right boxes. But so, Hilary was such an obscurantist on this issue, and again, in the immediate aftermath of this horror, when you're having attacks in Europe that are also enormous and seeming to presage, more to come in our own society. This need not have been a winning issue for Trump, but it was among the two or three things that-

Rob Reid: Yeah, in an election that tight, there are arguably probably dozens of winning issues because anything that swung a few 10s of thousands of votes.

Sam Harris: Yeah, 75 thousand votes.

Rob Reid: Yeah, in the right or the wrong place. Now, you mentioned political correctness and language, you have stated a few times that you view free speech as the master value. Would you care to just say briefly why that is? 'Cause I think it's an intriguing notion.

Sam Harris: Yeah, 'cause it's the only value that allows us to reliably correct our errors, both intellectually and morally. It's the only mechanism we have as a species to keep aligning ourselves with reality as we've come to understand it. So, you're talking about the data of science, you're talking about the data of human experience, everything you can conceivably use to judge whether or not you're on the right track or the wrong track, and again, this applies to everything. This applies to human health, it applies to politics, it applies to economics, it applies to spiritual concerns, contemplative concerns-

Rob Reid: It's the corrective mechanism.

Sam Harris: It's the only mechanism, it's-

Rob Reid: And certain ideas are unutterable, you're not gonna be able to correct.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Yeah, if there's certain things that you refuse to talk about, right? I mean, this is what's so wrong with dogmatism. Dogmas are those beliefs or those doctrines, which you will assert the truth of, and you demand people remain aligned to, without justification. It's like the time to justify them either never arrived or it's long passed and these merely must be accepted going forward. So, these are off the table, the apostles creed if you're a Catholic, that is off the table. It's instructive to know that the word dogma is not a pejorative term in religion like Catholicism, right?

Rob Reid: Right.

Sam Harris: But it is everywhere else and there's a good reason for that, because even the most benign dogma can produce immense human misery in surprising ways, and if you can't keep correcting for it, you're just laid bare to the misery. I mean, my favorite example of this, because it is such a surprising mismatch between the seeming propositional content of the dogma and its effects in the world, but you have a dogma like twin dogmas, the life starts at the moment of conception and all human life is sacred. What could be wrong with that? This seems to be the least harmful thing you could believe about the human condition. How are you going to harm anyone believing those things? All human life is sacred and human life runs all the way down to a single cell. What could go wrong?

Well, what can go wrong is you suddenly got a technology like embryonic stem cell research, where there's this immense promise ... obviously unforeseen by the bible, but also unforeseen by every generation of humanity short of perhaps someone in the 1930s, could've foreseen this was coming, not much before that. You have this immense promise of alleviating just scores of conditions-

Rob Reid: Boundless suffering.

Sam Harris: Yeah, just boundless suffering, full body turns, and spinal cord injury, and Alzheimer's. I mean, just you name it, who knows how much promise this technology holds for medical therapy. And then you have people, and again, these people are the most influential people in our society, from presidents and senators on down, and religious academics, and bioethicist who aren't religious but still treat these magical doctrines as somehow deserving of respect. But you have this idea that every fertilized ovum contains a human soul, you've got now would in Petri dishes, just as vulnerable as the baby Jesus, that cannot be sacrificed no matter what the argument is on the other side. You can have people with Parkinson's or little girls in wheelchairs, doesn't matter, I'm just as concerned about the life in this Petri dish. We moved on because there have been workarounds found biologically, but basically we dragged our feet for a good 20 years there, and who knows what medical insights weren't had as a result of that.

Rob Reid: What do you feel about the value of anonymous speech? Their inarguable value to anonymous speech in brutal dictatorships where dissidents and others can get into enormous trouble, get tortured and killed, if they say something that gets detected by somebody who's incredibly nefarious and has, really no ethical standing in the minds of most folks in this country. I think there's certain things, I'm not talking about those relatively inarguable things, but I know that you don't enable comments on your webpages, I know that you have had concerns about the quality of speech in places like the YouTube forums and so forth. Do you feel that there is a fundamental difference between the value of anonymous speech and, for lack of a better word, owned speech? Or do you feel that anonymous speech is every bit as much of the master value, in a sense, that you would attribute to free speech at large?

Sam Harris: Well, I wouldn't prevent it in most cases. There's certainly the whistle blowers role for it, I'm in favor of the journalist protecting the anonymity of their sources if great harm would come to the sources. Generally speaking, I think it is one of the variables that accounts for why so much of what is said online is so toxic. People feel a license to be jerks that they wouldn't feel if they had to own everything they said.

Rob Reid: Then what about tools that enable tremendous anonymity to anybody? I'm thinking particularly of Tor, which is ironically, a product of the United States Navy. It is something that I have no doubt has masked the identities of lots of dissidents in ways that any reasonable person would applaud, but at the same time, it preserves the anonymity and the secure communication, certainly between terrorists, there's enormous amounts of child pornography there-

Sam Harris: Yeah, again, it just cuts both ways. I think there's an argument to be made that something like that, something like strong encryption, is just inevitable. It's just a mathematical fact that it's available and it will therefore always be available to anyone who's going to take the time to acquire it. This is something I stumbled

into on one of my podcasts, when the first controversy around the FBI's unlocking of an iPhone came online. An iPhone was uncrackable by law enforcement, if you attempt the passcode too many times, it just goes into permanent lockdown.

Rob Reid: Yeah, 10 times.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Apparently no one can get in, or almost no one can get in, and Apple was claiming not to have devised its own ability to get in. That struck me as a way of punting on Apples part that was not ethically justifiable, I th-

Rob Reid: They refused to help the FBI get facts.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Their argument was that if they created a mechanism whereby they could answer a court order and unlock an iPhone, that mechanism would be impossible to keep safe, then everyone would have a hackable iPhone. I never really bought that, I felt like they could ... if they had wanted to keep it safe, they could probably keep it safe and it seems to me that people do keep ... I mean, they keep other trade secrets safe, presumably, and-

Rob Reid: Formula for Coca Cola.

Sam Harris: Yeah. If those are the keys to the kingdom, then presumably, they could keep it safe. Obviously, the tech community took a very strong position against the government there, but we don't have the analogous right in any other area of our lives. When you draw an analogy to, for instance, I want to be able to build a room in my house where I can put things and even put evidence of all my criminal behavior that no one on earth, in principle, can get access to. There's no court order, there's no government process, there's no evidence of my own culpability that could be so clear, that could get that room unlocked.

Rob Reid: It's almost like your personal diplomatic pouch, or having some kind of privileged communication with the Lord, that is an unlockable box legally, but it's a physical box in this case.

Sam Harris: Yeah, yeah. So, no one claims to feel that they have a right to that thing, right?

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: It's not feasible, we can't easily built it, or we can't build it at all.

Rob Reid: Or if we could, there would be unlikely to be a mass movement for everybody to get one of those things.

Sam Harris: Yeah, yeah. So, if someone had managed to build such a thing and we had reason to believe that evidence of his vast criminality was in there, right?

Rob Reid: There was a severed head in it or something like that.

Sam Harris: Yeah, right. There's a murder that is going unsolved every day because we can't open this closet. His argument that, that's his personal property that can't be opened, that wouldn't hold water to really any of the people who are quite exercised about the necessity of keeping their iPhones private, right?

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: Then you have the cases ... I didn't have him on the podcast, but I spoke to Cyrus Vance, who's, I think he probably still is the district attorney of Manhattan.

Rob Reid: Junior, not the former secretary of state?

Sam Harris: Yeah, right.

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: I ran through this with him for a couple hours and he was telling me about murders that are unsolved, where they know that the murder victim was texting with someone up to the moment she was killed, or that the camera was on, people had taken pictures of their murderers.

Rob Reid: With the intention of it being seen presumably.

Sam Harris: Right.

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: And Apple was declining to help unlock these iPhones, right? And they, at that point, had some hundreds of phones.

Rob Reid: Really?

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: And this is just one state? A big state, but still.

Sam Harris: Yeah. Imagine being the parent, your daughter gets murdered and it is possible to get the data, right?

Rob Reid: Because she took the picture wanting her murderer to go to jail.

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: And now all of a sudden it's a violation of her privacy to see that picture.

Sam Harris: Exactly.

Rob Reid: Wow.

Sam Harris: The fact that we can't find some mechanism by which to right that wrong, doesn't make sense to me. I'm on both sides of this issue, I'm in favor of good people not having their privacy needlessly invaded, obviously, and having secure communication but at a certain point, if you are behaving badly enough, I think the state has an interest in sorting out what you've done, and why you did it, and who you collaborated with. This controversy is gonna come back to us 100 fold the moment we have reliable lie detection technology, right?

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: I should also say that we have solved this problem in the opposite way, where people have the opposite intuition with respected DNA technology. You do not have a right to keep your DNA secret now, you can't say, "No, no. You can't take a swab of my saliva because that's private data that I don't want you to have access to." No-

Rob Reid: And that would, in a certain level, be more logical for people to say, "I'm sorry, that is so intimate and you may not." It would be in some ways more defensible.

Sam Harris: Right, right, but it's not and we've just steamrolled over that sanctity because there's a forensic imperative to do it. It-

Rob Reid: There's an overwhelming certain benefit and crime finding benefit.

Sam Harris: Yeah, but the argument ... the people are treating their iPhones, essentially as a part of their minds that they don't want read, and understandably because there's so much information there but when we can actually read minds, that's going to be ... do you have a right to take the fifth amendment privilege when we have lie detection technology that can sort out whether or not you're telling the truth? I mean, there's philosophical problems with relying on lie detection technology. I mean, there are people who ... well, we know there are people who could be delusional, who could be telling the truth and perhaps giving a false confession, right?

Rob Reid: Well, one of your guests Lawrence Wright, wrote a book about that very phenomenon.

Sam Harris: Yeah, exactly.

Rob Reid: Yeah.

Sam Harris: Yeah, that was fascinating. That's a wrinkle we need to sort out. It seems to me, there are certain moments where any of the claims of personal liberty and

privacy just break down ... I mean, you make mistakes high enough and you make a person's culpability obvious enough that we should be getting into their phones and computers by any means possible.

Rob Reid: And because of the San Bernardino connection, this actually touches on another thing that interests me quite a bit, is when you sit down to write a book that's set in the very near future, certain depictions that you make of the near future, almost inevitably come true or fail to come true during the period that you're writing. Particularly if you aspire for your book to be set roughly nine seconds into the future, which is what I did with this one.

Sam Harris: Right.

Rob Reid: One of the things in the world of after-on is lone-wolf terrorism, and it's self organizing lone-wolf terrorism that is inspired by ideology as opposed to by a central group, is a feature of the world of after-on, and to my absolute dismay, I take absolutely no pride in "predicting" this correctly. That has in fact started occurring to a significantly greater degree in the couple of years since I started writing the book. Now, you made the point in your very recent podcast with Graham Wood, that in some ways ISIS inspired attacks are more scary than ISIS directed ones. Now, he made the counterpoint that ISIS directed ones tend to have much, much higher death tolls. But the ISIS inspired ones, is it just their ability to pop up anywhere and spread like a virus that makes that more scary to you?

Sam Harris: Yeah. Well, it's the demonstrated effectiveness and spreadability of the ideas that is the scariest things. I mean, there are two things to worry about in this world, you can worry about bad people and you can worry about bad ideas. Bad ideas are much worse than bad people because they can potentially inhabit the minds of good people and get even good people to do bad things, so I'm under no illusions, and many people are, that all the people who joined ISIS are bad people. They're just people who believe these bad ideas. Many people imagine that ISIS is acting like a bug light for psychopaths, and so they're only people who would do bad things anyway. They would've found some other reason to rape, and kill, and take sex slaves, and cut peoples heads off, and they just happened to find this reason. No, that's absolutely not what's happening and we know that, that's not what's happening.

There are psychologically normal people, who become as convinced of the voracity of ISIS's world view, as I became convinced of the utility of meditation practice. Then they do something very extreme, what I did was very extreme, I dropped out of a great college and derailed my life in conventional terms, and forsook every other reasonable ambition, but to understand the nature of consciousness more for this significant period of time. You change a few of the relevant beliefs, I could've been John Walker Lindh in Afghanistan with the Taliban. I recognize a person like that as someone who is very familiar to em, and John Walker Lindh, he's in prison now, he still believes that stuff.

Rob Reid: And he's getting out soon.

Sam Harris: Yeah.

Rob Reid: The force multiplier element of it matters a great deal to me because I actually think a raw material that a lot of these nihilistic organizations use, are folks who happen to be feeling suicidal today. Humanity produces them in abundance, and has across continents, and societies, and centuries, about a million people who kill themselves this year. By the way, it's very hard, I think probably impossible, if I were recruiting suicide bombers, I would probably stay away from people who are happy, and centered, and empowered because talking that person into killing themselves at all, is an enormous lift compared to talking to somebody who is already coming to me, out of their minds with addiction, with depression, with chemical imbalances in their minds, whatever. Society produces this raw material in some abundance, and some percentage of those people are inclined to take people with them and some of those people are secular.

I mean, the guy who shot up the school at Newtown, he committed suicide, he was relying on the police to kill him. He was committing suicide and taking as many people with him as possible, likewise the guy who murdered the five cops in Dallas, and he didn't just drop a bomb on them, likewise the columbine kids-

Sam Harris: Wasn't there a Lufthansa pilot, a few years ago-

Rob Reid: Yeah, Andreas Lubitz.

Sam Harris: Yeah, yeah.

Rob Reid: That's the second force multiplying, this gets me nervous. So, when somebody gets into that mental state, my feeling is that there were two force multipliers that stand out. One is, what is now animating them? This gets to what you're talking about, the power of these ideas. I mean, if you look at Mateen, the Orlando killer, he was a third rate loser who failed at everything, he had been dumped by two wives before the age of 30, he could not hold down a job. I would imagine that in many parallel universes, he's the kind of guy who might have killed himself, or might've killed an ex-wife, or two ex coworkers, or something.

Sam Harris: Yeah, he probably also had some gay shame thing happening.

Rob Reid: Yeah, he had some self hating thing going on, but there are many, many hundreds of people like that who do themselves in. He got animated by an idea that inspired him to go out and literally commit the biggest mass murder in the history of a country with a very high bar for biggest ever, he killed 49 people. Now, the second force multiplier as you just indicated, is gonna be weaponry. This is a chilling fact, I wish I didn't know it but I do, in the two and a half years

leading up to the Newtown attack, there was a series of very strange, unrelated school attacks in China, mass murder attacks. There were 10 of them and by chilling irony, the last one was literally just a few hours before the Newtown attack. Now, those 10-ish attacks combined, all 10 of them put together, had roughly the same number of total deaths as the lone Newtown attack because they were being committed literally with knives and hammers, whereas the person who attacked in Newtown had the benefit of living in a society that sells near cousins of machine guns to people who are on the no-fly list.

Not that he was on the no-fly list, but we permit that. So, there's this huge force multiplier of weaponry, and then if you're Andreas Lubitz and you have an airplane, okay fine, you kill a couple hundred people more. With that chilling fact in mind, I'd like to just read a couple quotes to you from End of Faith, "Our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our religious differences, and hence our religious beliefs, antithetical to our survival. We're fast approaching a time when the manufacturer of weapons of mass destruction will be a trivial undertaking, while it-" ... and these are from three different quotes, "While it's never been difficult to meet your maker, in 50 years it will simply be too easy to drag everyone else along to meet him with you." So, we have this force multiplying spread of ideas, this proliferation of lone-wolf attacks, we know what weaponry does. What weapons were you thinking about when you wrote that? When you said, "In 50 years, it simply will be too easy to drag everyone else." Were you thinking of bio weapons? Synthetic biology? I mean, nuclear is harder to do.

Sam Harris: Yeah, although it's not that hard actually. I mean, it was hard to invent the technology, the Manhattan project was hard, it's not hard to render much of Los Angeles uninhabitable for 10,000 years.

Rob Reid: It's far less hard once it was invented, but still you need the resources of a nation's state to create the weapon, right?

Sam Harris: Well, you actually don't. I mean, if you're willing to die, you can be the weapon. What you need is the enriched uranium or the plutonium, but you could literally ... you wouldn't get the full yield you would want if you want to kill the maximum number of people, but you could take two 50 pound plates of enriched uranium and just put one on the floor and slam the other one on top of it and it would go critical. You would not get a-

Rob Reid: Hydrogen bomb experience.

Sam Harris: Yes, but you would get ... and it would just be the ultimate dirty bomb experience, right? So you could actually be the bomb, but a much more reasonable thing to do if you're in this business, is to just do something that's analogous to the bomb design of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where you have a gun style apparatus where you're shooting one piece of enriched uranium or plutonium into the other and just essentially slamming them together harder than you could physically. Again, the yield there, it's not as complete as a nation

state would produce, but still you could get a multi kiloton yield, and there the technical issue is just getting the fuel.

Rob Reid: Getting the stuff, which does exist. Yeah.

Sam Harris: So yes, you do not need the tools of a nation state, you just need a few engineers and machinists. It's powered, I believe simply by ordinary explosives to get the things slamming together. I mean, there are a bunch of scenarios that have been described to everyone's horror online, where you can do this in a shipping container and you truck it into DC and it could be activated with a cell phone. William Perry has a terrifying bit of animation that he put online that just shows you how simple and how totally destabilized it would be to our society to do this. Imagine you build a simple device, which is just, again, just like Hiroshima, a 15 kiloton explosion, if you put that right next to the capital building, now you have a continuity of government problem. Who did you kill? You killed all the senators, and congressmen, and the president-

Rob Reid: And the supreme court, and the great chiefs, and yeah.

Sam Harris: Imagine doing it in one American city, and then announcing, whether this is true or not, who knows, but then announcing you have similar bombs placed in 10 other American cities-

Rob Reid: Which you will not identify now.

Sam Harris: Yeah, and you'll do one a week until your demands are met. How do we begin to respond to that, right? This is an act of terrorism obviously, orders of magnitude beyond September 11th, which ushered in a decade of just derangement and cost trillions of dollars in the aftermath, at least two wars and financial crisis-

Sam Harris: At least two wars and financial crises. So imagine this happening in one city. This is within the technical capacity of a group like ISIS or Al Qaeda. You just need to get the fuel, and we have almost no way to prevent it. I mean, we're not screening things at our ports so assiduously as to know this couldn't possibly get in.

END INTERVIEW ELEMENT OF PART THREE

TRANSITION MUSIC

So that's a cheery note to wrap things up on. But don't worry - it gets a lot spookier tomorrow. Incidentally, one reason why I'm running Sam's interview now is that it synchronizes thematically with a series of essays I'm posting to Medium.com this month, on the subject of existential risk. Which is to say, the grim, yet perversely fascinating possibility that our technological creations might just annihilate us.

Like Sam, I worry about religiously motivated terrorism. But as you'll see in my second essay on Medium, over the intermediate term, I'm much more concerned about what hyper-empowered lone nihilists might do to us. By this I mean, the Las Vegas or Newtown shooters on hyper steroids. People like this are completely indiscriminate about who they want to kill. Whereas groups that're organize around religious hatred, or national or racial hatred, are *all about* discrimination, by definition. And the scariest weapons that technologies like synthetic biology are likely to enable in the coming decades are highly indiscriminate. Which make them the domain of the lone nihilistic suicidal mass murderer who wants to kill as many random people as possible, and doesn't really have much of a political agenda.

I'll admit - this is not fun stuff to read about. And it certainly wasn't fun stuff to write about. But if we start thinking about these things now, it will start preparing us to derail the truly profound dangers, which are fortunately, I believe, still decades off. So. I hope you'll check that work out. It's at [Medium.com/@RobReid](https://medium.com/@RobReid) - and the essay that's most connected my last several sentences is part 2. Which is called Deterrence and the Undeterrable.

I should note that Medium is running this work in their editorially-curated, paid, members-only section. The goods news is, they give everyone access to a few free articles per month with essentially zero friction.

That's it for now. I hope you'll join me tomorrow, for more with Sam Harris.

OUTRO MUSIC