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## Terrorism's New Structure

The forces driving international terrorism go well beyond religion. Martin Amis on alienation, the thirst for power, the quest for fame and the inevitable use of weapons of mass destruction.

By **MARTIN AMIS**

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History is accelerating; and so the future becomes more and more unknowable. Among our foremost thinkers, we find only one presentiment that is universally shared. This turns out to be a sinister variation on the idea of "convergence." Not the convergence of nations and politics, whereby the world's autocratic regimes would gradually align themselves with the democratic and contentedly globalized mainstream. This particular expectation, even neoconservatives now concede, was a triumphalist fantasy of the 1990s -- that curious holiday from what Philip Roth has called "the remorseless unforeseen."

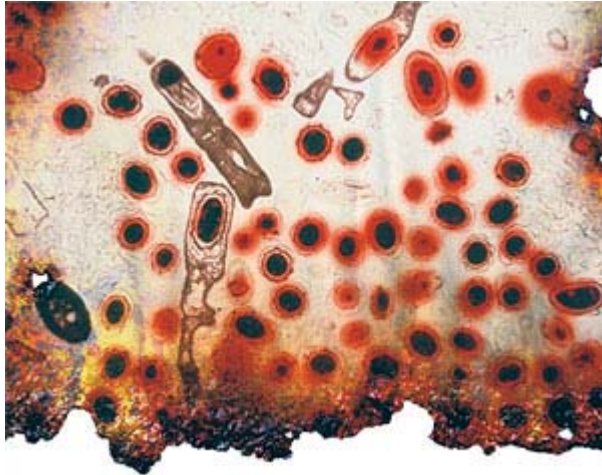



Photo illustration by Donald George/The Wall Street Journal; Photo Researchers (anthrax)

**Bacillus anthracis (anthrax spores)**

2001. The cost in blood was five dead and 17 seriously infected. The cost in treasure was over a billion dollars (the cost to the perpetrator, in a vibrant asymmetry, was estimated at the time to be as little as \$2,500). And there was a third impact: the cost in fear. Anthrax is not contagious; but fear is. The scale of the attack was minuscule, yet for a while the terror filled the sky.

Unlike the poet, the novelist (see W.H. Auden's glittering sonnet of that name) assumes that his or her reactions to the main events (in life, in history) are utterly median, average -- predictably and dependably human. I am

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The convergence we have now come to anticipate is the convergence of international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction -- of IT and WMD. Even strictly parallel lines, I was taught, meet and cross in infinity. And the paths of IT and WMD are visibly inclined, like the sides of a tapering spire. Their convergence is guaranteed by the simplest of market forces. Marginal costs will fall; and demand will climb.

It has not been widely realized, even now, that America has already suffered a terrorist deployment of WMD -- as we have just been reminded by the one-man suicide mission of the troubled germ-scientist, Bruce E. Ivins, in Frederick, Md. This attack began on Sept. 18,

confident that my reaction to Sept. 11 was quite normative: a leaden and sourly mineral incredulity. It is with rather more diffidence that I divulge my reaction to Sept. 18: I followed the example of that large and flightless African bird which, when sighting a threat to its existence, chooses to bury its head in the sand.

This was the kind of information I was unable to contemplate:

*Using one aircraft dispensing 1,000 kg of anthrax spores. Clear calm night. Area covered (sq. km): 300. Deaths assuming 3,000-10,000 people per sq. km: one million to three million.*

The affective content of Sept. 18 ran as follows: you cannot protect your children (and I had and have five). Staggering, too, was the perceived magnification of the putative enemy's power. Al Qaeda swelled like a Saturn; and for a while they seemed to be everywhere on earth -- the whisperers, the nightrunners of Osama. Sept. 18 was very cheap, very terrifying, and hideously elusive. It entrained over 9,000 interrogations and 6,000 grand-jury subpoenas; and the case is not yet closed.

The anthrax letters contained two near-identical cover notes. The first said:

09-11-01  
THIS IS NEXT  
TAKE PENACILIN NOW  
DEATH TO AMERICA  
DEATH TO ISRAEL  
ALLAH IS GREAT



AFP/Getty Images; Newscom (spore)

Hazardous materials experts at a U.S. Senate building in November 2001, after an anthrax-laced letter was found. Inset: an anthrax spore, magnified 40,000 times.

### READING INTO TERROR



*Some books mentioned in the essay, and other notable nonfiction and fiction titles on terrorism.*

#### NONFICTION

In "**Terror and Consent**" (Knopf; 672 pages; \$35), published in April, Columbia University professor Philip Bobbitt argues that the primary factor behind terrorism is not religion but the market state. "Almost every widely held idea we currently entertain about twenty-first century terrorism and its relationship to the Wars against Terror," he says, "is wrong." The nearly 700-page book is relatively thin compared to his 2003 "The Shield of Achilles" (Anchor; 960 pages; \$19.95), which traces the evolution of the nation state into the market state.

British philosopher John Gray writes about the history of utopian ideals and apocalyptic religion as a force in world politics in his latest book, "**Black Mass**" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 243 pages; \$24). Modern politics, he says, is "a chapter in the history of religion." An earlier book, "Al Qaeda and What It

After the subsidence of panic-flurry (the widely reported "sub-clinical hysteria"), no one took the cover note seriously, let alone literally. "Take penacilin now": this was sound medical advice (anthrax is a bacterium, not a virus), but the misspelling was obviously tactical -- a false lead, a false flag. No, we imagined a scowl in a lab coat, a Unabomber, a Timothy McVeigh with a doctorate. And so it proved -- or so it seems. (The FBI claims Dr. Ivins was solely responsible for the attack, but his lawyer says he was innocent.)

Sept. 18, then, was "not about religion." Was Sept. 11 about religion? This is still controversial. Both President Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who are religious, were very quick to say that Sept. 11 was "not about religion" ("religion," hereabouts, being a euphemism for Islam). It then subsequently emerged that Sept. 11 *was* about religion -- or, at least, was not *not* about religion. But in the last

Means to Be Modern" (New Press; 160 pages; \$16.95), asserts the group is a product of modernity and globalization.

"**Making Sense of Suicide Missions**" (Oxford University Press; 414 pages; \$29.95), edited by Diego Gambetta, brings together scholarly essays about the motives behind suicide missions: Are they acts of religious zealots or are they at root political? Do the acts have a common cause? And given their effectiveness, why aren't they more common?

In the recently published "**The Dark Side**" (Doubleday; 392 pages; \$27.50), Jane Mayer looks at how the Bush administration shaped its policy in the war on terror.

## FICTION

Set in London in 1886, Joseph Conrad's 1907 political novel "**The Secret Agent**" (multiple editions available) centers on Mr. Verloc, who is a spy in an anarchist cell. He is told by his boss, a diplomat for an unnamed foreign country, that his work is unsatisfactory and he must redeem himself by organizing a terrorist attack.

W.H. Auden's sonnet "The Novelist" is included in the 1991 edition of "**Collected Poems: Auden**" (Vintage; 926 pages; \$24.95). The poem ends: "And in his own weak person, if he can, / Dully put up with all the wrongs of Man."

Many recent novels have addressed terrorism. "**The Reluctant Fundamentalist**" by Mohsin Hamid (Harcourt; 191 pages; \$14) is a long monologue given by Changez, a young Princeton-educated Pakistani who comes to side with the 9/11 attackers. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2007. Chris Cleave's "Incendiary" (Anchor; 237 pages; \$12.95) was first published in 2005, on the same day the London bombings took place. It's written as a letter to Osama bin Laden from a working-class mother grieving for her husband and son, who were killed by an Al Qaeda attack on a soccer match.

In "**Snow**," by Orhan Pamuk (Vintage; 463 pages; \$14.95), a Turkish poet named Ka returns to his homeland after 12 years in political exile. After several young women commit suicide in a remote Turkish town, Ka goes to investigate. Once there, he becomes tangled in the clash between radical Islam and secularism.

year or two, it seems, we have gone back to saying that Sept. 11, and March 11 Madrid (2004), and July 7 London (2005), and all the rest, are not about religion.

The two most stimulating international terrorism-watchers known to me are John Gray and Philip Bobbitt. Professor Gray ("Straw Dogs," "Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern" and "Black Mass") and Professor Bobbitt ("The Shield of Achilles" and the masterly "Terror and Consent") are utterly unlike, except in brainpower and literary panache. Mr. Bobbitt is a proactive and muscular Atlanticist, whereas Mr. Gray is almost Taoist in his skepticism and his luminous passivity. Mr. Bobbitt is religious, and Mr. Gray is philo-religious (or, rather, wholly reconciled to the inexorability of religious belief); but neither man is an exponent of relativist politesse. And they assert, respectively, that international terrorism is "not about Islam" and has "no close connection to religion."

Al Qaedaism, for them, is an epiphenomenon -- a secondary effect. It is the dark child of globalization. It is the mimic of modernity: devolved, decentralized, privatized, outsourced and networked. According to Mr. Bobbitt, rather more doubtfully, Al Qaeda not only reflects the market state: it *is* a market state ("a virtual market state"). Globalization created great wealth and also great vulnerability; it created a space, or a dimension. Thus the epiphenomenon is not about religion; it is about human opportunism and the will to power.

Then what, you may be wondering, was all that talk about jihad and infidels and crusaders and madrasas and sharia and the umma and the caliphate? Why did people write whole books with titles like "A Fury for God" and "The Age of Sacred Terror" and "Holy War, Inc."? There are several reasons for *hoping* that international terrorism isn't about religion -- not least of

them the immense onerousness, the near-impossibility, now, of maintaining a discourse (I'll put this simply) *that makes distinctions between groups of human beings*. Al Qaedaism may well evolve into not being about religion, about Islam. But one's faculties insist that it is not not about religion *yet*.

Let me devote a paragraph to the British perspective. In the U.K., in 2007, there were 203 arrests on terrorism charges, nearly all of them connected to radical Islam. It is possible to open your newspaper (the Independent) and read about three thwarted or bungled cases of jihadism on a single day (May 24, 2008). The main purpose of the Quilliam Foundation, recently established, is to deradicalize young British Muslims. And consider the otherwise extraordinarily weak motivation of the four men responsible for July 7. Experience of conflict or of foreign occupation? No. A set of demands or the prospect of benefits? No. Community support? No. Familial approval



post mortem? On the contrary.

Then, too, the rise of suicide attacks *directed at civilians* is astonishing -- and it is also astonishing how unastonished we claim to be in the face of it. Many commentators like to remind us that this tactic is a) nothing new, and b) nontheological, and then follow that up with a perfunctory reference to the Tamil Tigers, the godless Sri Lankan separatists who have been blowing themselves to pieces since 1987. The relevant essay in "Making Sense of Suicide Missions" (edited by Diego Gambetta and updated in 2006) states, of the Tigers: "There are no clear examples of civilians being directly targeted." Moreover, one database (quoted in the Times Literary Supplement) concludes that "over 80 per cent of all suicide attacks in history have taken place since 2001." Suicide bombing is a cult. Mr. Gambetta makes the haunting point that this weapon, unlike any other, is self-replenishing. The bomber uses up one martyr, but he creates many others; and "we know that the number of volunteers soars immediately after Ramadan..."

It may well emerge that the use of religion is, or is becoming, merely a means of mobilization. Religion is for the footsoldiers, not the masterminds. At some later date we may see that religion provided the dialectical staircase to indiscriminate death and destruction. The idea, for instance, that democracy (fundamentally unclean) inculcates every citizen in its nation's policies; the idea (or ancient heresy) of takfir, whereby the jihadi pre-absolves himself of killing fellow Muslims. Interestingly and encouragingly, Ayman al Zawahiri is currently squirming about in a theological debate with the venerable cleric, Sayyid Imam al Sharif, as Al Qaeda itself is having to defend its religious legitimacy.

We can further expect international terrorism to become much more diffuse in its motivations, reflecting changes in the contemporary self ("a person's essential being"). Mr. Gray has identified a vein of what he expressively calls "anomic terrorism." This would be the carnage inspired by alienation, the self-extending despair evident in the random and serial stabbings in the cities of Japan, or the campus massacres in the U.S. -- or indeed in the threats voiced by Dr. Ivins during the weeks before his death. The historian Eric Hobsbawm believes that the pandemic collapse of moral inhibition has to do with a general coarsening, the desensitization of violence brought about by the mass media (and of course the Internet). This prompts some further points.



Associated Press

Bruce Ivins in 2003.



Associated Press

It is Mr. Bobbitt's thesis (which Mr. Gray, incidentally, tends to pooh-pooh) that the current conflicts are epochal, having to do with a shift in the constitutions of the polities of the West. As the welfare state evolves into the market state, it abandons many of its responsibilities to its citizenry, and concentrates above all on the provision of opportunities to the individual. This, I think, has clear consequences for the self: there is simply more pressure on

A London bus destroyed by a bomb on July 7, 2005.

it. In "Mr. Sammler's Planet," which appeared at the end of that great spurt of narcissistic eccentricity known as the 1960s, Saul Bellow has his elderly hero reflect (with delightful restraint) that mass individualism is relatively new and, perhaps, "has not been a great success."

Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Agent" (1907), with its dank crew of self-righteous sociopaths, is horribly prescient. Here we find (for example) the observation that merely to erect a building is to create a new vulnerability; here we find a revolutionist observing that the power of life is far, far weaker than the power of death. In his reading of the terrorist psyche, Conrad persistently stresses the qualities of vanity and sloth -- i.e., the desire for maximum distinction with minimum endeavor. In other words, the need to make an impression is overwhelming, and a negative impression is much more easily achieved than a positive. In our era, this translates into a thirst for fame. Probably no one under 30 can fully grasp it, but fame has become a kind of religion -- the opium, and now the angel dust, of the mass individual.

By some accounts it took the Ayatollah Khomeini several nauseous years of war with Iraq before he came to see the theological viability of nuclear fission (and the groundwork was then begun). Osama bin Laden has never made any secret of his admiration for WMDs: "It is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to terrorise the enemies of God" (statement entitled "The Nuclear Bomb of Islam," 1998). All these tools are now for sale; and how very remarkable it is, in the larger scheme, that the world's first megadeath madam, the metallurgist A.Q. Khan, is "a national hero" in Pakistan.

There is another good reason for wanting international terrorism to stop being "about religion." One can think of scenarios of extortion, compellance and ransom, but only an eschatological dream could justify the clear calm night and the three million dead. On the other hand, the actors would unquestionably make an impression; and it would be super-geohistorical in size.

International terrorism, for now, represents a puny apocalypse. Mr. Bobbitt is as droll about this as anybody: since Sept. 11, "the total number of persons worldwide who have been killed by terrorists is about the same number as those who drowned in bathtubs in the US." But at any moment it -- IT -- could go from nothing to everything. After an untraceable mass-destructive strike on one of its cities, what political system would ever know itself again? And all other states would be unrecognizable too, as would relations between them.



Getty Images/Newscom  
Rescue workers search the wreckage of a Madrid train on March 11, 2004

***Martin Amis is the author of 10 novels. His most recent book is "The Second Plane."***

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