

## Novelist Martin Amis on Terror and Islamists

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Nov. 6, 2006 issue - Martin Amis has always courted controversy. From dramatic feuds with fellow writers Christopher Hitchens and Julian Barnes to his stormy relationship with his father, Kingsley, the 57-year-old Amis has been vilified as much as he's been celebrated. While working on his latest book, "House of Meetings," about life in the Soviet gulags, he's also been writing on

controversial subjects like Islamism, terrorism and the war against it, as well as what he believes is a decline of morals in a post 9/11 world. NEWSWEEK's Silvia Spring spoke to Amis last week. Excerpts:

**Spring: You recently wrote a fictional story about Muhammad Atta's last day on Earth. What drew you to him as a character?**

**Amis:** His face, so rich and malevolent that it haunted me.

**In the story you describe jihad as the most charismatic idea of Atta's generation. Do you really believe this?**

It's self-evidently true. You're always onto a winner if you can persuade people they can be righteous and violent at the same time. Nothing beats that. Officially sanctioned violence is unimprovable. And with this paradise which they've stirred into the mix—whereby with an act of mass murder, you gain the keys—you've got a very attractive idea. Also, it gives the "nobody" a chance to play a decisive role in world history, and there are lots of people who are going to be drooling at the thought of that.

**So you think that's what motivates terrorists?**

I'm sure. I say in the story [that Atta] was in it for the killing, and I think that's another underestimated consideration: killing people is obviously terrific fun. It's a crude expression of power to kill people, and it's arousing.

**Have the actions of the West led to increased terror?**

The great danger of terrorism is not what it inflicts. Even September 11 was absorbable. It's what it provokes. You goad the enemy into doing something against its interests.

Osama bin Laden always thought the West would tie itself down in an Islamic country, but he assumed that country would be Afghanistan. Now, with Iraq, we seem to have lost on both fronts. With incredible thoroughness, we're playing into their hands.

**You've written that Western ideology is to blame for weakening the West in the war on terror. How?**

Because moral relativism is so far advanced that we don't believe we can be right about anything. It just hasn't been accepted in the consciousness of the West that we have a fight with irrationality on our hands. Everyone's casting about, saying, "Why are they doing this?" And goopy-eyed newscasters on CNN say, "Why? Why this anger?" Paul Berman, the author of "Terror and Liberalism," calls this tendency "rationalist naïveté." [Terrorists] rejected reason. This is what Hitler did, and it's what Lenin did. They want to believe anything is possible, and they're not constrained by the laws of logic. This, plus the death-cult element, gives any movement a huge surge of energy.

But the West goes on. I'm talking about a certain strata of opinion that is dying for American failure in Iraq because they hate George Bush. They're dying for failure, but they're also attributing reason to the enemy, saying, "What terrible historic wrongs have we committed to bring this down on ourselves?" And they haven't made the leap to seeing that it isn't a matter of reason. It's a psychopathology. Their war is against God's enemies and it's meant to last for eternity, and how rational an undertaking is that? Yet people won't make that leap because it feels racist to them.

**Where do you draw the line between Islam and Islamism?**

Violence. Any violence against civilians is absolutely intolerable. [And] there is a huge moral difference between trying to kill civilians and trying not to kill civilians. When an American soldier kills an Iraqi civilian on purpose, he faces the death penalty. There's no equivalent mechanism among the enemy. [They have] celebrations throughout the land when a good number of civilians have been killed.

**Are there any parallels to be drawn between your new novel, "House of Meetings," which takes place in Soviet slave camps, and the issues you have explored in Islamism?**

Terror as a tactic [or] as a policy is the same everywhere and in all times, and it always has to do with desperate insecurity about your legitimacy. It's a hysterical response to historical reality. And it's always self-defeating. Nothing achieved by terror ever lasts.

**Can you explain your concept of the "Age of Horrorism"?**

Horrorism is a reference to the disgusting experiments and cruelty taking place in Iraq now, where you not only kill someone but you torture them with power tools beforehand. Videoed beheadings are part of daily life now. It's a moral crash—an embrace of the most grisly possible violence.

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