# The age of horrorism (part one)

On the eve of the fifth anniversary of 9/11, one of Britain's most celebrated and original writers analyses - and abhors - the rise of extreme Islamism. In a penetrating and wide-ranging essay he offers a trenchant critique of the grotesque creed and questions the West's faltering response to this eruption of evil.

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**Observer**

It was mid-October 2001, and night was closing in on the border city of Peshawar, in Pakistan, as my friend - a reporter and political man of letters - approached a market stall and began to haggle over a batch of T-shirts bearing the likeness of Osama bin Laden. It is forbidden, in Sunni Islam, to depict the human form, lest it lead to idolatry; but here was Osama's lordly visage, on display and on sale right outside the mosque. The mosque now emptied, after evening prayers, and my friend was very suddenly and very thoroughly surrounded by a shoving, jabbing, jeering brotherhood: the young men of Peshawar.

At this time of day, their equivalents, in the great conurbations of Europe and America, could expect to ease their not very sharp frustrations by downing a lot of alcohol, by eating large meals with no dietary restrictions, by racing around to one another's apartments in powerful and expensive machines, by downing a lot more alcohol as well as additional stimulants and relaxants, by jumping up and down for several hours on strobe-lashed dancefloors, and (in a fair number of cases) by having galvanic sex with near-perfect strangers. These diversions were not available to the young men of Peshawar.

More proximately, just over the frontier, the West was in the early stages of invading Afghanistan and slaughtering Pakistan's pious clients and brainchildren, the Taliban, and flattening the Hindu Kush with its power and its rage. More proximately still, the ears of these young men were still fizzing with the battlecries of molten mullahs, and their eyes were smarting anew to the chalk-thick smoke from the hundreds of thousands of wood fires - fires kindled by the multitudes of exiles and refugees from Afghanistan, camped out all around the city. There was perhaps a consciousness, too, that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, over the past month, had reversed years of policy and decided to sacrifice the lives of its Muslim clients and brainchildren, over the border, in exchange for American cash. So when the crowd scowled out its question, the answer needed to be a good one.

'Why you want these? You like Osama?'

I can almost hear the tone of the reply I would have given - reedy, wavering, wholly defeatist. As for the substance, it would have been the reply of the cornered trimmer, and intended, really, just to give myself time to seek the foetal position and fold my hands over my face. Something like: 'Well I quite like him, but I think he overdid it a bit in New York.' No, that would not have served. What was needed was boldness and brilliance. The exchange continued:

'You like Osama?'

'Of course. He is my brother.'

'He is your brother?'

'All men are my brothers.'

All men are my brothers. I would have liked to have said it then, and I would like to say it now: all men are my brothers. But all men are not my brothers. Why? Because all women are my sisters. And the brother who denies the rights of his sister: that brother is not my brother. At the very best, he is my half-brother - by definition. Osama is not my brother.

Religion is sensitive ground, as well it might be. Here we walk on eggshells. Because religion is itself an eggshell. Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief - unless we think that ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses. This is of course not so in the East, where, we acknowledge, almost every living citizen in many huge and populous countries is intimately defined by religious belief. The excuses, here, are very persuasive; and we duly accept that 'faith' - recently and almost endearingly defined as 'the desire for the approval of supernatural beings' - is a world-historical force and a world-historical actor. All religions, unsurprisingly, have their terrorists, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, even Buddhist. But we are not hearing from those religions. We are hearing from Islam.

Let us make the position clear. We can begin by saying, not only that we respect Muhammad, but that no serious person could fail to respect Muhammad - a unique and luminous historical being. Judged by the continuities he was able to set in motion, he remains a titanic figure, and, for Muslims, all-answering: a revolutionary, a warrior, and a sovereign, a Christ and a Caesar, 'with a Koran in one hand', as Bagehot imagined him, 'and a sword in the other'. Muhammad has strong claims to being the most extraordinary man who ever lived. And always a man, as he always maintained, and not a god. Naturally we respect Muhammad. But we do not respect Muhammad Atta.

Until recently it was being said that what we are confronted with, here, is 'a civil war' within Islam. That's what all this was supposed to be: not a clash of civilisations or anything like that, but a civil war within Islam. Well, the civil war appears to be over. And Islamism won it. The loser, moderate Islam, is always deceptively well-represented on the level of the op-ed page and the public debate; elsewhere, it is supine and inaudible. We are not hearing from moderate Islam. Whereas Islamism, as a mover and shaper of world events, is pretty well all there is.

So, to repeat, we respect Islam - the donor of countless benefits to mankind, and the possessor of a thrilling history. But Islamism? No, we can hardly be asked to respect a creedal wave that calls for our own elimination. More, we regard the Great Leap Backwards as a tragic development in Islam's story, and now in ours. Naturally we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammad Atta.

I will soon come to Donald Rumsfeld, the architect and guarantor of the hideous cataclysm in Iraq. But first I must turn from great things to small, for a paragraph, and talk about writing, and the strange thing that happened to me at my desk in this, the Age of Vanished Normalcy.

All writers of fiction will at some point find themselves abandoning a piece of work - or find themselves putting it aside, as we gently say. The original idea, the initiating 'throb' (Nabokov), encounters certain 'points of resistance' (Updike); and these points of resistance, on occasion, are simply too obdurate, numerous, and pervasive. You come to write the next page, and it's dead - as if your subconscious, the part of you quietly responsible for so much daily labour, has been neutralised, or switched off. Norman Mailer has said that one of the few real sorrows of 'the spooky art' is that it requires you to spend too many days among dead things. Recently, and for the first time in my life, I abandoned, not a dead thing, but a thriving novella; and I did so for reasons that were wholly extraneous. I am aware that this is hardly a tectonic event; but for me the episode was existential. In the West, writers are acclimatised to freedom - to limitless and gluttonous freedom. And I discovered something. Writing is freedom; and as soon as that freedom is in shadow, the writer can no longer proceed. The shadow, in this case, was not a fear of repercussion. It was as if, most reluctantly, I was receiving a new vibration or frequency from the planetary shimmer. The novella was a satire called The Unknown Known

Secretary Rumsfeld was unfairly ridiculed, some thought, for his haiku-like taxonomy of the terrorist threat:

'The message is: there are known "knowns". There are things that we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.'

Like his habit of talking in 'the third person passive once removed', this is 'very Rumsfeldian'. And Rumsfeld can be even more Rumsfeldian than that. According to Bob Woodward's Plan of Attack, at a closed-door senatorial briefing in September 2002 (the idea was to sell regime-change in Iraq), Rumsfeld exasperated everyone present with a torrent of Rumsfeldisms, including the following strophe: 'We know what we know, we know there are things we do not know, and we know there are things we know we don't know we don't know.' Anyway, the three categories remain quite helpful as analytical tools. And they certainly appealed very powerfully to the narrator of The Unknown Known - Ayed, a diminutive Islamist terrorist who plies his trade in Waziristan, the rugged northern borderland where Osama bin Laden is still rumoured to lurk.

Ayed's outfit, which is called 'the "Prism"', used to consist of three sectors named, not very imaginatively, Sector One, Sector Two and Sector Three. But Ayed and his colleagues are attentive readers of the Western press, and the sectors now have new titles. Known Knowns (sector one) concerns itself with daily logistics: bombs, mines, shells, and various improvised explosive devices. The work of Known Unknowns (sector two) is more peripatetic and long-term; it involves, for example, trolling around North Korea in the hope of procuring the fabled 25 kilograms of enriched uranium, or going from factory to factory in Uzbekistan on a quest for better toxins and asphyxiants. In Known Knowns, the brothers are plagued by fires and gas-leaks and almost daily explosions; the brothers in Known Unknowns are racked by headaches and sore throats, and their breath, tellingly, is rich with the aroma of potent coughdrops, moving about as they do among vats of acids and bathtubs of raw pesticides. Everyone wants to work where Ayed works, which is in sector three, or Unknown Unknowns. Sector three is devoted to conceptual breakthroughs - to shifts in the paradigm.

Shifts in the paradigm like the attack of 11 September 2001. Paradigm shifts open a window; and, once opened, the window will close. Ayed observes that 11 September was instantly unrepeatable; indeed, the tactic was obsolete by 10am the same morning. Its efficacy lasted for 71 minutes, from 8.46, when American 11 hit the North Tower, to 9.57, and the start of the rebellion on United 93. On United 93, the passengers were told about the new reality by their mobile phones, and they didn't linger long in the old paradigm - the four-day siege on the equatorial tarmac, the diminishing supplies of food and water, the festering toilets, the conditions and demands, the phased release of the children and the women; then the surrender, or the clambering commandos. No, they knew that they weren't on a commercial aircraft, not any longer; they were on a missile. So they rose up. And at 10.03 United 93 came down on its back at 580mph, in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, 20 minutes from the Capitol.

I found it reassuringly difficult, dreaming up paradigm shifts. And Ayed and his friends in sector three find it difficult too. Synergy, maximalisation - these are the kinds of concept that are tossed from cushion to floormat in Unknown Unknowns. Here, a comrade argues for the dynamiting of the San Andreas Fault; there, another envisages the large-scale introduction of rabies (admixed with smallpox, methamphetamine and steroids) to the fauna of Central Park. A pensive silence follows. And very often these silences last for days on end. All you can hear, in Unknown Unknowns, is the occasional swatting palm-clap, or the crackle of a beetle being ground underfoot. Ayed feels, or used to feel, superior to his colleagues, because he has already had his eureka moment. He had it in the spring of 2001, and his project - his 'baby', if you will - was launched in the summer of that year, and is still in progress. It has a codename: UU: CRs/G,C.

Ayed's conceptual breakthrough did not go down at all well in Sector Three, as it was then called; in fact, it was widely mocked. But Ayed used a family connection, and gained an audience with Mullah Omar, the one-eyed Islamist cleric who briefly ruled Afghanistan - an imposing figure, in his dishdash and flipflops. Ayed submitted his presentation, and, to his astonishment, Mullah Omar smiled on his plan. This was a necessary condition, because Ayed's paradigm shift could only be realised with the full resources of a nation state. UU: CRs/G,C went ahead. The idea was, as Ayed would say, deceptively simple. The idea was to scour all the prisons and madhouses for every compulsive rapist in the country, and then unleash them on Greeley, Colorado.

As the story opens, the CRs have been en route to G,C for almost five years, crossing central Africa, in minibuses and on foot, and suffering many a sanguinary reverse (a host of some 30,000 Janjaweed in Sudan, a 'child militia', armed with pangas, in Congo). On top of all this, as if he didn't have enough to worry about, Ayed is not getting on very well with his wives.

Those who know the field will be undismayed by the singling out of Greeley, Colorado. For it was in Greeley, Colorado, in 1949, that Islamism, as we now know it, was decisively shaped. The story is grotesque and incredible - but then so are its consequences. And let us keep on telling ourselves how grotesque and incredible it is, our current reality, so unforeseeable, so altogether unknowable, even from the vantage of the late Nineties. At

that time, if you recall, America had so much leisure on its hands, politically and culturally, that it could dedicate an entire year to Monica Lewinsky. Even Monica, it now seems, even Bill, were living in innocent times.

Since then the world has undergone a moral crash - the spiritual equivalent, in its global depth and reach, of the Great Depression of the Thirties. On our side, extraordinary rendition, coercive psychological procedures, enhanced interrogation techniques, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Mahmudiya, two wars, and tens of thousands of dead bodies. All this should of course be soberly compared to the feats of the opposed ideology, an ideology which, in its most millennial form, conjures up the image of an abattoir within a madhouse. I will spell this out, because it has not been broadly assimilated. The most extreme Islamists want to kill everyone on earth except the most extreme Islamists; but every jihadi sees the need for eliminating all non-Muslims, either by conversion or by execution. And we now know what happens when Islamism gets its hands on an army (Algeria) or on something resembling a nation state (Sudan). In the first case, the result was fratricide, with 100,000 dead; in the second, following the Islamist coup in 1989, the result has been a kind of rolling genocide, and the figure is perhaps two million. And it all goes back to Greeley, Colorado, and to Sayyid Qutb.

Things started to go wrong for poor Sayyid during the Atlantic crossing from Alexandria, when, allegedly, 'a drunken, semi-naked woman' tried to storm his cabin. But before we come to that, some background. Sayyid Qutb, in 1949, had just turned 43. His childhood was provincial and devout. When, as a young man, he went to study in Cairo, his leanings became literary and Europhone and even mildly cosmopolitan. Despite an early - and routinely baffling - admiration for naturism, he was already finding Cairene women 'dishonourable', and confessed to unhappiness about 'their current level of freedom'. A short story recorded his first disappointment in matters of the heart; its title, plangently, was Thorns. Well, we've all had that; and most of us then adhere to the arc described in Peter Porter's poem, 'Once Bitten, Twice Bitten'.But Sayyid didn't need much discouragement. Promptly giving up all hope of coming across a woman of 'sufficient' moral cleanliness, he resolved to stick to virginity.

Established in a modest way as a writer, Sayyid took a job at the Ministry of Education. This radicalised him. He felt oppressed by the vestiges of the British protectorate in Egypt, and was alarmist about the growing weight of the Jewish presence in Palestine - another British crime, in Sayyid's view. He became an activist, and ran some risk of imprisonment (at the hands of the saturnalian King Farouk), before the ministry packed him off to America to do a couple of years of educational research. Prison, by the way, would claim him soon after his return. He was one of the dozens of Muslim Brothers jailed (and tortured) after the failed attempt on the life of the moderniser and secularist, Nasser, in October 1954. There was a short reprieve in 1964, but Sayyid was soon rearrested - and retortured. Steelily dismissing a clemency deal brokered by none other than the young Anwar Sadat, he was hanged in August 1966; and this was a strategic martyrdom that now lies deep in the Islamist soul. His most influential book, like the book with which it is often compared, was written behind bars. Milestones is known as the Mein Kampf of Islamism.

Sayyid was presumably still sorely shaken by the birth of Israel (after the defeat of Egypt and five other Arab armies), but at first, on the Atlantic crossing, he felt a spiritual expansion. His encyclopedic commentary, In the Shade of the Koran, would fondly and ramblingly recall the renewal of his sense of purpose and destiny. Early on, he got into a minor sectarian battle with a proselytising Christian; Sayyid retaliated by doing a bit of proselytising himself, and made some progress with a contingent of Nubian sailors. Then came the traumatic incident with the drunken, semi-naked woman. Sayyid thought she was an American agent hired to seduce him, or so he later told his biographer, who wrote that 'the encounter successfully tested his resolve to resist experiences damaging to his identity as an Egyptian and a Muslim'. God knows what the episode actually amounted to. It seems probable that the liquored-up Mata Hari, the dipsomaniacal nudist, was simply a woman in a cocktail dress who, perhaps, had recently drunk a cocktail. Still, we can continue to imagine Sayyid barricading himself into his cabin while, beyond the door, the siren sings her song.

He didn't like New York: materialistic, mechanistic, trivial, idolatrous, wanton, depraved, and so on and so forth. Washington was a little better. But here, sickly Sayyid (lungs) was hospitalised, introducing him to another dire hazard that he wouldn't have faced at home: female nurses. One of them, tricked out with 'thirsty lips, bulging breasts, smooth legs' and a coquettish manner ('the calling eye, the provocative laugh'), regaled him with her wish-list of endowments for the ideal lover. But 'the father of Islamism', as he is often called, remained calm, later developing the incident into a diatribe against Arab men who succumb to the allure of American women. In an extraordinary burst of mendacity or delusion, Sayyid claimed that the medical staff heartlessly exulted at the news of the assassination, back in Egypt, of Hasan al-Banna. We may wonder how likely it is that any American would

have heard of al-Banna, or indeed of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he founded. When Sayyid was discharged from George Washington University Hospital, he probably thought the worst was behind him. But now he proceeded to the cauldron - to the pullulating hellhouse - of Greeley, Colorado.

During his six months at the Colorado State College of Education (and thereafter in California), Sayyid's hungry disapproval found a variety of targets. American lawns (a distressing example of selfishness and atomism), American conversation ('money, movie stars and models of cars'), American jazz ('a type of music invented by Blacks to please their primitive tendencies - their desire for noise and their appetite for sexual arousal'), and, of course, American women: here another one pops up, telling Sayyid that sex is merely a physical function, untrammelled by morality. American places of worship he also detests (they are like cinemas or amusement arcades), but by now he is pining for Cairo, and for company, and he does something rash. Qutb joins a club - where an epiphany awaits him. 'The dance is inflamed by the notes of the gramophone,' he wrote; 'the dance-hall becomes a whirl of heels and thighs, arms enfold hips, lips and breasts meet, and the air is full of lust.' You'd think that the father of Islamism had exposed himself to an early version of Studio 54 or even Plato's Retreat. But no: the club he joined was run by the church, and what he is describing, here, is a chapel hop in Greeley, Colorado. And Greeley, Colorado, in 1949, was dry

'And the air is full of lust.' 'Lust' is Bernard Lewis's translation, but several other writers prefer the word 'love'. And while lust has greater immediate impact, love may in the end be more resonant. Why should Qutb mind if the air is full of love? We are forced to wonder whether love can be said to exist, as we understand it, in the ferocious patriarchy of Islamism. If death and hate are the twin opposites of love, then it may not be merely whimsical and mawkish to suggest that the terrorist, the bringer of death and hate, the death-hate cultist, is in essence the enemy of love. Qutb:

'A girl looks at you, appearing as if she were an enchanting nymph or an escaped mermaid, but as she approaches, you sense only the screaming instinct inside her, and you can smell her burning body, not the scent of perfume but flesh, only flesh.'

In his excellent book, Terror and Liberalism, Paul Berman has many sharp things to say about the corpus of Sayyid Qutb; but he manages to goad himself into receptivity, and ends up, in my view, sounding almost absurdly respectful - 'rich, nuanced, deep, soulful, and heartfelt'. Qutb, who would go on to write a 30-volume gloss on it, spent his childhood memorising the Koran. He was 10 by the time he was done. Now, given that, it seems idle to expect much sense from him; and so it proves. On the last of the 46 pages he devotes to Qutb, Berman wraps things up with a long quotation. This is its repetitive first paragraph:

'The Surah [the sayings of the Prophet] tells the Muslims that, in the fight to uphold God's universal Truth, lives will have to be sacrificed. Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God, are honourable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul. But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to live, as God Himself clearly states.'

Savouring that last phrase, we realise that any voyage taken with Sayyid Qutb is doomed to a leaden-witted circularity. The emptiness, the mere iteration, at the heart of his philosophy is steadily colonised by a vast entanglement of bitternesses; and here, too, we detect the presence of that peculiarly Islamist triumvirate (codified early on by Christopher Hitchens) of self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-hatred - the self-righteousness dating from the seventh century, the self-pity from the 13th (when the 'last' Caliph was kicked to death in Baghdad by the Mongol warlord Hulagu), and the self-hatred from the 20th. And most astounding of all, in Qutb, is the level of self-awareness, which is less than zero. It is as if the very act of self-examination were something unmanly or profane: something unrighteous, in a word.

Still, one way or the other, Qutb is the father of Islamism. Here are the chief tenets he inspired: that America, and its clients, are jahiliyya (the word classically applied to pre-Muhammadan Arabia - barbarous and benighted); that America is controlled by Jews; that Americans are infidels, that they are animals, and, worse, arrogant animals, and are unworthy of life; that America promotes pride and promiscuity in the service of human degradation; that America seeks to 'exterminate' Islam - and that it will accomplish this not by conquest, not by colonial annexation, but by example. As Bernard Lewis puts it in The Crisis of Islam

'This is what is meant by the term the Great Satan, applied to the United States by the late Ayatollah Khomeini.

Satan as depicted in the Qur'an is neither an imperialist nor an exploiter. He is a seducer, 'the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men' (Qur'an, CXIV, 4, 5).

Lewis might have added that these are the closing words of the Koran. So they echo.

The West isn't being seductive, of course; all the West is being is attractive. But the Islamist's paranoia extends to a kind of thwarted narcissism. We think again of Qutb's buxom, smooth-legged nurse, supposedly smacking her thirsty lips at the news of the death of Hasan al-Banna. Far from wanting or trying to exterminate it, the West had no views whatever about Islam per se before 11 September 2001. Of course, views were then formulated, and very soon the bestseller list was a column of primers on Islam. Some things take longer to sink in than others, true; but now we know. In the West we had brought into being a society whose main purpose, whose raison d'etre, was the tantalisation of good Muslims.

The theme of the 'tempter' can be taken a little further, in the case of Qutb. When the tempter is a temptress, and really wants you to sin, she needs to be both available and willing. And it is almost inconceivable that poor Sayyid, the frail, humourless civil servant, and turgid anti-semite (salting his talk with quotes from that long-exploded fabrication, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion), ever encountered anything that resembled an offer. It is more pitiful than that. Seduction did not come his way, but it was coming the way of others, he sensed, and a part of him wanted it too. That desire made him very afraid, and also shamed him and dishonoured him, and turned his thoughts to murder. Then the thinkers of Islam took his books and did what they did to them; and Sayyid Qutb is now a part of our daily reality. We should understand that the Islamists' hatred of America is as much abstract as historical, and irrationally abstract, too; none of the usual things can be expected to appease it. The hatred contains much historical emotion, but it is their history, and not ours, that haunts them.

Qutb has perhaps a single parallel in world history. Another shambling invert, another sexual truant (not a virgin but a career cuckold), another marginal quack and dabbler (talentless but not philistine), he too wrote a book, in prison, that fell into the worst possible hands. His name was Nikolai Chernyshevsky; and his novel (What Is To Be Done?) was read five times by Vladimir Lenin in the course of a single summer. It was Chernyshevsky who determined, not the content, but the emotional dynamic of the Soviet experiment. The centennial of his birth was celebrated with much pomp in the USSR. That was in 1928. But Russia was too sad, and too busy, to do much about the centennial of his death, which passed quietly in 1989. (Continues)

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