

Middle East

HAZEM SAGHIEH

In 1972 three members of the Japanese Red Army carried out a notorious suicide attack on people gathered in one of the halls of Tel Aviv airport; they killed twenty people and wounded eighty. A few days after 11 September, a Swiss man killed several members of the regional parliament of Zug and then killed himself. These two examples are given in response to those narrow explanations of the phenomena of violence, death, martyrdom and suicide that see them in the light of the 'clash of civilizations', bearing in mind that only a very short space of time separates us from the American Unabomber, the Japanese Aum sect and Timothy McVeigh, all of whom were driven, respectively, by their anti-technology delusions, their rush to reach the millennium and their hatred of the federal government, to shorten the distance that separates life from death.

Since 11 September 2001 many analysts and commentators have begun to ask questions about what lies behind Muslims willingness to die. The answer was soon to be 'confirmed' by Palestinian suicide attacks. Naturally there are those who try to find the answer in 'civilization' and others who look for it in religion. No doubt there are many who say to themselves that there is a Muslim type who is predisposed to die and longs to encounter the houris in Paradise. But the question that has only rarely been posed is: what hatred and misunderstanding of our planet is it that creates this love of Heaven?

When your planet is pervaded by intolerable injustice and circumstances impossible either to accept or to adapt to, you end up gratifying the commands of a faith that belongs to the realm of total absolutes. A planet such as this, particularly if reinforced by those sorts of convictions, may drive people to seek a Heaven even without houris. All religions, not only Islam, have raised the banner of martyrdom to which believers have rallied, combining dissatisfaction with the present with a total denial of their individuality (while individualism in its modern sense naturally could not have existed in those times).

It was Christianity that developed the distinctive idea of the theology of martyrdom. Countless legends have come down to us about the confrontations between representatives of the Roman Empire and courageous believers who bore the agonies of their torture with laughter. In medieval southern and western Europe the rituals of the penitents became a widespread phenomenon; until recently, self-flagellation was still a well-known practice of devout Catholics, just as Filipinos to this day practise live re-enactments of the crucifixion. The word martyr itself is derived from the Greek expression *martys*, meaning a witness to a thing or event, which originally referred to Christ's disciples, as witnesses of himself and of his life. It subsequently came to mean those killed, like St Peter and St Paul, under the Roman persecution.

Before the Christian era the early Jewish martyrs included some of the prominent figures of the Old Testament, such as Isaac, as well as the Jews killed at the hands of the Romans. The Midrash mentions ten martyrs: Akiba ben Joseph and the other rabbis tortured under Hadrian as a punishment for establishing law schools. The Buddhists in turn believed that Gautama Buddha had been a martyr in previous lives. Some of them, like the Mahayana Buddhists, canonized Bodhisattvas (or saints) due to their status as martyrs filled with particular zeal and passion. In the course of their many lives it was not enough for these people to sacrifice life itself in their search for truth: they also postponed their own bliss in order to help the wretched and sufferers of this world.

# On Suicide, Martyrdom and the Quest of Individuality



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The exclusive connection between Islam, martyrdom and suicide (the latter forbidden by Islamic law) is subject to an infinite oversimplification. The suicide attackers of Al-Qa'ida and Palestine are Sunni Muslims, while self-sacrifice for the sake of a certain goal has traditionally been associated with Shi'ite Islam. However, in our own era, the Shi'ite Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 did not resort to suicide attacks, even if it has frequently threatened its enemies with shrouds as a form of ritual folklore and revolutionary nihilism. It is true that it used minefields during the war with Iraq in the 1980s, crossed by human waves, most of which were made up of children, but this criminal tendency was the result of the authorities use of ideology and what is without doubt a modern tactic (remember Hitler's conscription of children in his last year or the use of infants in the Eritrean revolution). If radical Shi'ites in Hezbollah were involved in suicide attacks against the Israelis in southern Lebanon, 'secular' groups such as the Syrian Nationalist Party and 'atheists' such as the communists also took part.

Generally speaking, both religious and temporal cultures all show this link between death, on the one hand, and on the other a protest against life and/or the annihilation of the individual in a greater identity, semi-real and semi-imaginary. This is what we see among some of the Sri Lankan Tamils, and especially in the practice of the Japanese Kamikaze ('Divine Wind'), the first requirement for membership of which was a willingness to die for the Emperor.

## Individualism

The relationship between protesting against life and the weakness of individualism is unmistakable. Where individualism is strong, the reaction to a bad and abominable life will not take the form of suicide or slaughter. By the same token, a weak indi-

vidualism may be incapable of benefiting from a life that ostensibly has nothing wrong with it. Either it will destroy it with an act of conspiracy and sectarianism, or through a collective struggle imbued with demagoguery from which leaders and those equipped to ride the waves may be able to gain; or it will set itself apart from life and remain in the periphery, with the possibility that creative states of individualism may appear and find refuge in poetry or music and art. These symptoms flourish in a context of dead ends and crisis of modernity: either for political reasons, such as the inability to achieve independence and establish a nation-state, as is the case in Palestine today and was previously the case in Algeria, or for numerous social and cultural reasons linked to the various phases of transition. In all cases, this relationship translates to a conspicuous degree into violence against the self or against others.

A lack of individualism combined with the effects of modernization and urbanization can produce a disintegrated individual, i.e. a person with a distorted individualism lacking a social dimension. Anomie, as Durkheim demonstrated, is the principal cause of rising suicide rates. The connection between suicide, urbanization and isolation is now one of the givens of post-Durkheimian sociology, even if many of the French sociologist's other conclusions have been forgotten. Just as anomie runs contrary to a person's individualism, so people's old age is a declaration that their individualism is invalid and that they have entered a stage difficult to reconcile with the course of life. At this point we see suicide reappear in wealthy, post-industrial societies, as though it were a social responsibility or even a duty performed by those who are no longer considered active individuals. But naturally what is most important is still the fear of how one is seen by society in the long transition to individualism. It has been observed, for ex-

ample, that most suicides in modern Japan result from individuals' feelings of 'shame' at their failure to reach the level demanded of them by society.

The famous ritual suicide of the Japanese nationalist writer Yukio Mishima in 1970 was a statement of the dramatic tension that accompanies the transition to a modernity based on individualism. The author of *Confessions of a Mask*, who preferred to die an exhibitionist death, by the sword, as he saluted the Emperor, left us in this act a world of evidence rich in symbols and meanings.

Year after year the world has produced people that are angry for one reason or another but who also suffer from a repressed individualism, who are given golden opportunities by the media revolution to turn the whole world into spectators of their death, or their causing the death of others. In these contexts 'individualism' is achieved and 'truth' is reached in death in a way that was impossible in life. If there is a great difference, according to our moral judgement, between martyrdom as mere masochistic suicide and violence and terrorism directed sadistically at others, the difference is minor as far as the original motives are concerned. These motives, in relation to the Arab world under such scrutiny at present, are the crushing of individualism by countless factors. Israeli occupation and humiliation of Palestine is countered by neighbouring regimes that do not respect individual rights, and economic systems that spread abject poverty preventing the creation of a middle class, not to mention the failures of modernization proven by the crises of youth and demographics in their various forms. In a stagnant world of blocked horizons such as this, progress yawns while those collectivist ideologies revive that call for the individual to merge in a greater entity, such as the nation or religion or social class, as well as inherited blood and family ties, which often renew themselves in one or other of those collectivist ideologies. All these elements together help one another not only to obstruct the advancement of modernity, but also to make each Arab see his or her life as something meagre and not worth preserving. Whoever sees their own life in this way will never see any more value in the lives of others. In all cases, death may be round the corner.

*Hazem Saghiech writes for Al-Hayat newspaper based in London. He has written many books in Arabic. His latest publication – in English – is The Predicament of the Individual in the Middle East (Saqi Books). E-mail: hazem@alhayat.com*

► **Palestinian boys carry a friend dressed as a martyr in Rafah.**