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# Martyrdom & Resistance in the Middle East

SABINE DAMIR-GEILSDORF

Suicide attacks in the Muslim World have intensified fears of Islam in the West. Increasingly, Islam is narrowed down to militant Islamism and understood as being rooted in a fanatical and violent tradition. Paradoxically, these notions of self-martyrdom within current Shia and Sunni discourse differ markedly from traditional sources,<sup>1</sup> and are, to a large extent, derived from modern secular ideologies such as nationalism and anti-imperialism.

Suicide attacks in the Middle East first emerged in the escalating conflicts of Lebanon and, later, Israel/Palestine. When Hizbullah carried out its first suicide attack in 1982, Sunni authorities condemned this act with reference to the prohibition of suicide in Islamic law, while Shia ulama mostly refrained from commenting. Hizbullah militants may have found some inspiration in Iran where the concept of martyrdom was used to mobilize the masses for war against the Iraqi invasion and overcome Iraqi minefields, however, the concrete example they followed was reputedly that of Tamil resistance in Sri Lanka. Hizbullah was not the only militia in Lebanon to adopt the method; secular militia aligned to the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Communist Party were involved in various suicide attacks, including attacks carried out by women and Christians.<sup>2</sup> The attacks primarily targeted Israeli troops and their local allies in Southern Lebanon. The main reason why suicide attacks became accepted within a short span of time was their decisive "success," the greatest "victory" being the withdrawal of the US Marine Corps and French military from Lebanon after having been seriously hit by suicide bombers. It was only in the mid-1990s that suicide attacks were adopted by Palestinian organizations, in particular since

the second Intifada. Over the last few years suicide bombing has become part of jihad—as defence of Muslim land and people—in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Saudi-Arabia, and most recently, Iraq. The attacks are not undisputed in public opinion and religious discourse, and not all bombers are perceived as martyrs. While the great majority condemns the attacks of 9/11 and Madrid, as being contrary to Islamic principles, "martyrdom operations" in the context of the struggle for national liberation have found a growing acceptance.

## Martyrs of Palestine

In Palestine those who died in the struggle against British troops and Jewish militia, and later the Israeli army, have always been held in high regard. They were remembered as *shuhada*—whether combatants or civilians—regardless of their religious or political orientations. In the early idiom of resistance the status as victim shaped the self-image of Palestinians to a great extent. From the early 1960s onward secular nationalist organizations such as Fatah and PFLP undertook to overcome this passive image and to transform it into agency. In the course of ongoing and ever more violent conflict, national slogans and motifs mingled with religious ones—a process that is similarly discernible in Israeli nationalism. Islamist organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad revived the term *mujahid* that had been commonly used in the 1930s and 1940s, at the expense of *fida'i*, "freedom fighter". The word *fida'i* predates modern times and was not uncommon in the early decades of Palestinian resistance, but it that had been made fashionable by the secular groups such as Fatah. More recently, the

**Suicide attacks referred to as "martyrdom-operations" by their executors and sympathizers, have become a weapon of mainly Islamist groups in the Middle East. The first suicide attacks in the early 1980s in Lebanon met with criticism, in particular among the Sunni religious establishment. Though they were then regarded as violations of Islamic principles, today suicide attacks receive broader popular support and religious backing—and are understood—within the context of legitimate resistance and national struggle for liberation.**

term *istishhadi* acquired currency for those combatants who willingly martyr themselves in suicide operations.

The shift from a secular discourse of resistance to a more religiously inspired discourse dates from the 1980s. This shift in rhetoric reflects a more general trend in the region in which the ruling elites were increasingly discredited because of corruption and the apparent bankruptcy of their "grand" secular projects, such as pan-Arabism and socialism. Combined with the growing criticism of Western

double standards in their policies towards the Middle East, secular movements lost some of their earlier appeal but also assumed less apparent secular stances. Religious argumentation gained increased popularity in the political domain, a process that can be understood as a withdrawal into the cultural "own" in contrast to the "other."

The first suicide bombing carried out by Hamas, occurred on 16 April 1993 when a car bomb exploded near the Jewish settlement of Mehola on the West bank, leaving two persons killed including the attacker.<sup>3</sup> On 6 April 1994, retaliating the Goldstein massacre in Hebron, eight persons were killed and 44 injured by a car bomb at a bus station in Afula; a week later a Hamas militant blew himself up in the Hadera central bus station, leaving five deaths and twenty injured. The adoption of suicide attacks as a means of resistance was to a degree the result of the deportation of hundreds of Hamas members in 1992 to Marj al-Zuhur in Southern Lebanon, where they intensified contacts with Hizbullah which trained Hamas militants in the art of suicide attacks in their camps in the Bekaa Valley. With the second Intifada suicide attacks became much more frequent; and albeit that the Islamist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad carried out most, more secular groups, in particular the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades that are affiliated with the Fatah movement, and the Marxist-Leninist oriented PFLP joined the mortal efforts.

Today, those suicide attacks are considered as "martyrdom operations." The legitimacy of these operations is not only acknowledged by Muslim clergy, but also finds support among a number of Christian Palestinian leaders, as well as among the Coptic clergy in Egypt. Attala Hanna, former spokesman for the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, praised the "martyrdom operations," calling on Arab Christians to join hands in carrying out martyr operations.<sup>4</sup>

The broad support for suicide attacks against Israeli targets reflects the desperate state of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. In the 1990s the number of Israeli settlements on the West bank doubled. Further land grab took place by designing security zones, of lately including the so-called security-wall. Over the last three years the death toll among Palestinians due to Israeli attacks amounted to 3000, with over 40,000 injured and a larger number losing their homes and livelihood in collective punishments. Recurrent closures hamper travel and gravely limit public space. Ongoing repression caused and maintains a dramatic worsening of the local economy, figuring soaring unemployment rates. Given that diplomatic endeavours failed to deliver totally, radical options to reverse the desperate situation gain credibility.

Continued on p.39

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### Discourse on martyrdom

While some Palestinian scholars and scholars from other countries condemned the suicide attacks with the argument, that suicide is prohibited in Islam, others justified them as a legitimate part of the national struggle for liberation and a proper method of jihad. The Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdullah al-Shaykh commented in April 2001 that Islam forbids suicide attacks. His comments raised a storm of criticism from supporters of the Palestinian resistance. Shaykh al-Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi, the highest Islamic authority in Egypt stated in the same year, that resistance in occupied Palestine is a duty for Muslims and these suicide operations a legal means. In general, fatwas frequently refer to Israeli violations of human rights and international law and stress that Palestinians can neither come to their rights by diplomatic means, nor by jihad with traditional means. Martyrdom operations, so they argue, have nothing in common with suicide, because a person who commits suicide escapes life, whereas a Palestinian martyr sacrifices his or her life carrying out a religious duty—the defence of Muslim land and people—while employing the opportunities of modern technology.<sup>5</sup>

A modern theology of martyrdom is as yet under construction. A Hamas website attempts to supply proof to the argument that Palestinian suicide attacks are no innovation but a continuation of Prophetic traditions. Many fatwas and books have emerged, discussing questions including as to whether women who are carrying out martyr operations are allowed to travel without a *mahram*, and whether they may take off their headscarf if required so by their mission.<sup>6</sup> Nationalist arguments merge in theologies of martyrdom. Often terms “nation,” “bravery,” and “heroism” are mentioned. The fact that Islamic rulings forbid the killing of persons, who are not directly involved in war, is often circumvented by the argument that the entire Israeli society is militarised—with Israel’s system of universal conscription often given as “proof”—and that martyrdom operations only return Israeli atrocities.<sup>7</sup>

Political impotence and lack of prospect play a significant role in the present cult of martyrs. Through their deeds they become individuals capable of acting, even if only in the moment of death, which bestows upon them and their families social prestige and financial rewards. The weakness underlying these attacks is thus transformed into a personal moment of strength.

Though there are ways to justify political violence in Islamic terms, these are as such not part of a structural nature of “Islam.” The ideological factors that promote the use of the concept of martyrdom for political ends cannot be detached from the rejection of basic rights, grave social inequality, and the repression of non-violent means of opposition and resistance. Confrontational Western models and aggressive politics reinforce constructs of foe images and bring about political and social strategies that are increasingly subject to religious interpretations. The further Islamization of the concept of suicide martyrdom is essentially dependent on the political developments in these regions.

### Notes

1. Tilman Seidensticker, “Martyrdom in Islam,” *Awraq* 19 (1998): 63-77.
2. See Joseph Alagha, “Hizbullah and Martyrdom,” *Orient* 45, no. 1 (January 2004): (forthcoming).
3. This was the sole suicide attack prior to the Oslo Agreements, but some controversy exists as to whether it was an intended suicide attack.
4. <http://www.islam-online.net/english/news/2003-01/11/article05.shtml>.
5. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “al-Muslimun wal-’unf as-siyasi: Nazariyat ta’siliya,” *Islam Online*, 6 June 2004, <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/contemporary/2004/06/artcle01.shtml>.
6. <http://www.islamonline.net/fatwa/arabic/FatwaDisplay.asp?FatwalD=6837>.
7. Faisal Maulawi, “Idanat al-amaliyat al-istishhadiya: ru’ya fiqhiya,” *Islam Online*, 30 April 2003, <http://www.islamonline.net/fatwa/arabic/FatwaDisplay.asp?hFatwalD=46143>.

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