

THE PRIZE OF DEATH
Understanding the Phenomenon of ‘Suicide
Attacks’ or ‘Martyrdom Operations’ in
Modern Radical Islam

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Abstract

The increasingly prevalent phenomenon of suicide attacks by radical Islamists in Europe and elsewhere has led to confusion and uncertainty among the non-Muslim and Muslim population regarding the cause and legitimacy of such actions within Islam. While the practice is condemned by Muslims and others, many are left perplexed as to the root cause of the practice and why it seems to be more common in Islam than in other religions. The aims of this article are to try and understand the genesis and development of the phenomenon, and to elucidate the arguments in support of suicide attacks. In order to do so there will be a diachronic study of Islamic martyrologies from the time of the life of Muhammed and more modern conceptions. There will also be an examination of the manner in which theologies of *Jihad* inform attitudes to martyrdom. In an era of increased religious polarisation a greater understanding of the factors influencing both ourselves and the religious other are of increasing importance.

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Introduction

The concept of the “Martyr” is common to many religions and is also present outside of the religious sphere. The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions defines a martyr as “One who suffers death on behalf of his or her faith, often for refusing to renounce it.”¹ Within Qur’anic Arabic parlance *shahid*, which strictly speaking means ‘witness,’ is nowadays used to denote a martyr; it corresponds etymologically to the Greek *martys* which does in fact mean ‘witness.’² Presently, in radical Islamic circles the term martyr can refer to one who takes the initiative to perform explosive self-immolation in an attempt to kill others, in other words, suicide bombing. The thrust of this article shall be to try and comprehend where such an understanding of the concept originated. To do so there shall be a brief overview of the concept in early Islamic narratives from the time of Muhammed; these shall be based around the early defining battles. There shall also be a more comprehensive examination of how the phenomenon emerged in the modern sense during the latter part of the 20th century.

Early Islamic Narratives

In the century before Muhammed’s life (born 570 CE), Mecca had become a prominent town due to its Ka’ba being a destination of pilgrimage, and for the considerable trade this brought. The Ka’ba was a holy site of the Bedouin tribes in the area who would come once a year, to worship their pagan gods and trade with one another. This was the environment into which Muhammed brought his message of strict monotheism and it was not well received by the ruling Quraysh tribe.³ Muhammed enjoyed protection from his clan. However, slaves in Meccan society were devoid of all protection and it is from their experiences that the earliest martyrologies sprang. The story of Bilal the Ethiopian slave is the earliest and most widely known martyr narrative from the Meccan period of Muhammed’s life. The first point to note about the martyrdom of Bilal is that he did

¹John Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 623.

²Samir-Khalil Samir, *The Centrality of Martyrdom in Contemporary Islam*, <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/interreligious-dialogue/2008/05/01/the-centrality-of-martyrdom-in-contemporary-islam> [accessed May 25, 2017].

³David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Themes in Islamic History, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 3.

not die. He was a slave to Ummayah, a leading member of the Quraysh tribe, and was tortured by him in order that he would renounce Islam. He was forced to lie under the hot sun with a large rock upon his chest but despite his suffering he would not renounce Islam.⁴

The first incidence of a martyr's death is that of Sumayya bint Khayyat, which occurred during the time that Muhammed was in Mecca. Sumayya was a female slave in the service of the Qurayshian Banu Makhzum tribe. On one occasion, she was accosted by Abu Jahl, who was one of the leaders of the tribe. Jahl was renowned for being fiercely anti-Islam, he actively pursued and regularly assaulted those who he heard had converted to Islam. As Sumayya worked, Jahl approached her and began to slap her in the face and assault her on account of her faith, before killing her by stabbing her in the stomach.⁵

The persecution of Muhammed and his followers in Mecca was the impetus for the immigration (*hijra*) to Medina in 622 CE.⁶ Some of the tribesmen in Medina had converted to Islam and invited Muhammed and his followers to settle there. Once Muhammed and his community had relocated to Medina, they were no longer the subjects of oppression, and the Muslim community could propagate itself. From that point forth, Islam was a religion which, more often than not, enjoyed political power and this made a great difference in terms of Muslim self-perception.⁷ Following the establishment of the Muslim community in Medina and the ensuing politico-religious community that emerged, Muslims could no longer perceive themselves as an oppressed minority nor were their martyrs perceived as victims.⁸

Defining Battles

A period of several years of expansionism fuelled by numerous battles followed the migration of Muhammed and his community to Medina. This played an important role in how the concept of the martyr developed.

The relative proximity of Mecca and Medina (circa 300 miles) meant that some confrontations between the inhabitants of the two

⁴Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed, London: Clark, 2011, 170.

⁵Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 170.

⁶Cook, *Martyrdom*, 14.

⁷Cook, *Martyrdom*, 14.

⁸Cook, *Martyrdom*, 14.

towns were always likely after the *hijra*. The first of these skirmishes, the battle of Badr (624 CE), was borne out of a desire for restoration of what was lost during the *hijra* and for politico-religious victory over its pagan residents.⁹ At the start of this battle Muhammed reportedly said: "By the one who holds the soul of Muhammed in His hand, every man who fights today and is killed, demonstrating patience, seeking a reward from God, going forward without going backward God will take him into paradise."¹⁰ Upon hearing this Umayr al-Humam took his sword and went into battle and fought until he was killed. According to Cook, "This story is one of the most famous of the battle of Badr. It expresses cause and effect — Muhammed making a promise and watching someone believe him and die for it."¹¹

The most commonly known martyr of early Islam is Hamza who perished at the subsequent battle of Uhud (625 CE). Hamza was one of the earliest converts to Islam and was zealous for the religion. He had been a prominent aggressor during the victory at Badr and was the uncle of Muhammed. The battle at Uhud was a strategic disaster and due to his prominence at Badr, Hamza was a target at Uhud, and was killed by a spear through the stomach.

One of the last and most notable of the 'heroic' martyrs of the pre-conquest era who was killed during the battle of Mu'ta (629 CE) was Ja'far al-Tayyar.¹² This battle was a particularly unsuccessful raid on a town in the south of modern day Jordan. Several commanders were killed in this battle, each one taking Muhammed's flag from their fallen predecessor and continuing to lead the charge. Ja'far was the second of the commanders to lead the charge and his martyrdom is described as, "him fighting from horseback until his horse was hamstrung, then he continued fighting on foot, until both his arms were cut off. Initially he took the banner in his right hand, until it was cut off, then in his left until it was cut off and he bled to death while uttering a war poem."¹³

What is evident from the review of the various martyrdom narratives from the time of Muhammed is that the title of martyr did not indicate homogeneity. It is possible to identify two categories from the examples above. Firstly, there were martyrs such as Bilal

⁹Cook, *Martyrdom*, 15.

¹⁰Cook, *Martyrdom*, 23.

¹¹Cook, *Martyrdom*, 23.

¹²Muhammad Ibn Ismā'īl Al-Buhārī, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 4th Rev. ed., Chicago: Kazi, 1979, Volume 4, Chapter 7, 43.

¹³Cook, *Martyrdom*, 26.

and Sumayya bint Khayyat who passively suffered because they were Muslims. Secondly, there are the active 'fighting martyrs' such as Hamza and Ja'far al-Tayyar to whom a heroic status is attributed. By looking at these categories one can identify a shift in emphasis with the martyrologies of the pre-and post-*hijra* periods, the earlier period being that of the passive martyr, the latter of the active martyr. After the *hijra* Muhammed became not just a religious figure, as he was in Mecca but he was at once a religious figure, a political leader and military commander. Muhammed is not thought to have actively sought out martyrdom himself, but he is recorded as having advocated that others do so, for example at the battle of Badr. For this reason, proactively seeking martyrdom is quite central within Islam.¹⁴ According to Reuven Firestone,

It was in Medina where the believers made the transition from a small and persecuted community to one that was increasingly bold and self-confident. More Muslims died for their convictions during this Medinan period... but their deaths occurred on the giving rather than the receiving end of the stick.¹⁵

Jihad

This shift however is closely linked to the concept of *jihad*, about which it is necessary to say a few words. *Jihad* in the Qur'an is a polyvalent concept. It is not reducible to a solely combative dimension. The basic verb *jahada* connotes a sense of striving or toiling. When speaking specifically of *jihad* it should be noted that there are many kinds of *jihad*, there is "jihad of the heart" and "jihad of the tongue," both are distinguished from any normal striving in that they are a striving in the path of God. It is a working for the promoting of God's kingdom on earth.¹⁶ However, it is "jihad of the sword" that has become the most commonly known *jihad* and hence *jihad* has come to be "universally understood as war on behalf of Islam."¹⁷ All the martyrs mentioned thus far have strove, in various forms, for their faith. In the post-*hijra* period of militaristic expansionism, *jihad* was more active and hence the martyrs were also more active martyrs. This has left a legacy; this active *jihad* and active martyrdom is an important principle to be cognisant of when considering modern radical Islamic martyrologies.

¹⁴Cook, *Martyrdom*, 23.

¹⁵Reuven Firestone, *Martyrdom in Islam* in Rona M Fields, eds. *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Theology of Self-sacrifice*, Contemporary Psychology Westport: Praeger, 2004, 140.

¹⁶Reuven Firestone, *Jihād: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 17.

¹⁷Firestone, *Jihād*, 17.

Martyrdom in Modern Radical Islam

When assessing the concept of martyrdom in contemporary radical Islam, some historical background is necessary in order to contextualize the phenomenon. As has been mentioned in relation to classical Islam, there was a shift regarding the agency of the martyr in his or her death in the periods pre-and post-*hijra*. This shift was due to social and political factors and comparable factors continue to play a role today. There are several events or occurrences that could be the starting point for the following brief overview, however the most appropriate here is the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.

Socio-Historical Context

After a period of decline from the middle of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire collapsed between 1918 and 1922 and its territories were divided, colonised by France and Great Britain under the Sykes-Picot agreement.¹⁸ While the idea of military *jihad* made a comeback during the nineteenth century as a means of defence against European colonizers, it was in the twentieth century that it began to be used as a tool for socio-political change.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the Second World War, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 was an intolerable development for most Muslims in the Arab world.²⁰ For the first twenty years of its existence Arab rhetoric maintained that Israel would not last, however this opinion changed rapidly after the Six Day War of 1967. The Israeli army comprehensively defeated the armies of Jordan, Syria and Egypt and occupied some part of each of their territories.²¹ This defeat fuelled the growing sentiment that militant *jihad* was a preferable option to nationalistic warfare which was deemed a failure.²²

Another effect of this defeat was to add impetus to growing discontent with secular Arab governments and heighten the appeal of political Islam. In the early post-colonial Arab region most ruling elites were themselves secular and western educated and had little time for religious Muslims. This also applied to the non-Arab Muslim world in places such as Pakistan, Indonesia and parts of Africa. There was a growing discontentment in traditional Muslim societies, where *Shari'a* had previously been prominent, that their newly independent

¹⁸Cook, *Martyrdom*, 136.

¹⁹Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 203.

²⁰Cook, *Martyrdom*, 136.

²¹Cook, *Martyrdom*, 136.

²²Cook, *Martyrdom*, 137.

societies should merely replicate western norms and values. Critically, the notion that the practice of Islam should be restricted to the private life of the individual was unacceptable to many.²³

It was within this context that the writings of some religious Muslim intellectual leaders began to take root and win widespread appeal. While the intellectuals in question wrote more explicitly on *jihad* than martyrdom, the two are strongly linked and hence their writings are important. Two intellectuals that should be briefly reviewed are Abul A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). The writings of both men helped to provide a basis for an ideology of *jihad* from which modern radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh arose.

Radical Muslim Intellectuals

Abul A'la Mawdudi was a South Asian activist who with others co-founded the *Jamaat-i Islami* Party in 1941 and was elected its leader. He became well known for his ability to charismatically and emotively express in Islamic terminology the political and social issues of his contemporaries. He believed that the telos of a Muslim community was to live in an ideologically Islamic state in which they would be free to govern themselves in line with expressly Islamic values.²⁴ Mawdudi wrote in Urdu, one particular piece, translated as "*Jihad* in Islam,"²⁵ which elucidates his opinion on *jihad*. For Mawdudi the broad meaning of *jihad* is, "To exert one's utmost endeavour in promoting a cause."²⁶ He clarifies that this exertion is not toward just any cause but should be "for the cause of God" and so it "is undertaken for the collective well-being of mankind."²⁷ He expresses the view that the term *jihad* is not synonymous with war but rather it is a polyvalent term that permits the well-being of mankind to be attained by both military and peaceful means.²⁸

Mawdudi does not subscribe to the notion that *jihad* entails forced conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. He permits religious pluralism, but only within an Islamic state where the laws and social norms are ideologically in accordance with *shari'a*.²⁹ In addition, *jihad* calls for the spread of Islam, both politically and geographically as it is only

²³Cook, *Martyrdom*, 138.

²⁴Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 209.

²⁵Sayyid Abū Al- A'lā Mawdūdī, *Jihad in Islam*, Beirut: Holy Koran Publishing House, 1980.

²⁶Mawdūdī, *Jihad*, 5.

²⁷Mawdūdī, *Jihad*, 7.

²⁸Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

²⁹Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

under a unified and global Islamic state that mankind can “benefit from the ideology and welfare programme of”³⁰ the religion of Islam.³¹ Given the context that Mawdudi was writing in, that being during the British colonization of India, and the rising revolutionary nationalism of the time, *jihad* for Mawdudi became compatible with movements of social revolution.³²

Mawdudi believed that the task of Muslims everywhere was to oppose forces of evil and injustice.³³ This task should be taken up by committed and devout Muslims against non-Muslims and nominal Muslims alike.³⁴ According to Mawdudi’s perspective “the prophets were all revolutionary leaders, and Muhammed was the greatest revolutionary leader of all.”³⁵ The difference between these revolutionaries and the common everyday revolutionary is that the prophets work under a divine command and are uniquely egalitarian.³⁶ Authentic followers of the prophets and Muhammed in particular, who are the “Muslim Party,”³⁷ are called to emulate them in their revolutionary zeal for establishing a worldwide Islamic government.³⁸ According to Mawdudi; “Islam is a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals.” Within Islam, *jihad* “refers to that revolutionary struggle and utmost exertion which the Islamic Party bring into play to achieve this objective.”³⁹ In summary, for Mawdudi *jihad* is in essence an ideological battle to be fought either militarily or otherwise, in order to establish an Islamic State with Islamic ideals.

One can see in the thinking of Mawdudi a firm foundation for an aggressive expansionist policy by a particular state or group of Muslim actors. Military means of establishing an Islamic State are permissible. Mawdudi’s opinions were quite influential, another influential radical Muslim intellectual is the infamous Sayyid Qutb.

Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian with no formal religious education but was trained as a literary critic at Dar al-‘ulum in Cairo. He is

³⁰Mawdūdī, *Jihad*, 6 & 7.

³¹Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

³²Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

³³Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

³⁴Mawdūdī, *Jihad*, 10.

³⁵Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 210.

³⁶Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 211.

³⁷A term Mawdudi used interchangeably with the *umma*.

³⁸Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 211.

³⁹Mawdūdī, *Jihad*, 5.

believed to have become radicalised when he visited America in the 1940's. He was offended by the moral impropriety, materialism and racism he experienced there.⁴⁰ After returning to Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood⁴¹ and became a vociferous critic of the secular policies of the Nasser government. He was ultimately accused of planning to assassinate President Nasser and was jailed.⁴² While in prison he wrote his most notable works, the revolutionary *Ma'alim fi 'l-tariq* (Milestones) and a Qur'anic exegetical work entitled *Fi zilal al-qur'an* (In the shade of the Qur'an). In the latter he outlines his ideal of an Islamic society. On the 29th of August 1966 he was hanged but his writings have remained important within radical Islamic movements up to the present day.⁴³

Qutb is very forthright in his opinion that Islam should understand *jihad* in a proactive and aggressive way. Those that claim that *jihad* is merely a defensive act are pandering to western sensibilities and trying to make Islam more palatable and improve its image.⁴⁴ In a passage from a chapter on *jihad* in *Milestones* he says:

Indeed, Islam has the right to take the initiative. Islam is not a heritage of any particular race or country; this is Allah's religion and it is for the whole world. It has the right to destroy all obstacles in the form of institutions and traditions which limit man's freedom of choice.⁴⁵

It is the opinion of Qutb that Islam is not just a religion or a personal faith conviction but is an entire blueprint for a social and political structure that should encompass all aspects of life. He believed it was the only way in which the human person could be fully liberated from their worship of man and directed toward the worship of God.⁴⁶ This has been the mission of Islam since its beginning and it is the place of *jihad* to bring about this liberation. Anyone who opposes this supreme mission of Islam is to be mercilessly fought until surrender or death.⁴⁷ Qutb is under no illusions that the only deaths will be on the side of the unbelievers, he is fully aware that this liberative *jihad* would include the death and martyrdom of Muslim believers.⁴⁸

⁴⁰Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 211.

⁴¹Founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928.

⁴²Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 212.

⁴³Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 212.

⁴⁴Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 212.

⁴⁵Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Birmingham: Maktabah Booksellers and Publishers, 2006, 85.

⁴⁶Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 211-212.

⁴⁷Qutb, *Milestones*, 65-66.

⁴⁸Cook, *Martyrdom*, 138.

For Qutb worldly victory for the individual martyr was not the main objective since by virtue of their death in striving for God they have achieved victory over the world and have received their just rewards. Of critical importance in the temporal realm is that their efforts contribute to the overall victory of Islam.⁴⁹ Qutb was also very careful to present himself as a martyr for the cause of Islam. On the 17th of May 1966 upon being sentenced to death by an Egyptian court along with six other members of the Muslim Brotherhood, he is reported to have said: “*Alhamdulillah* (all praise is for Allah) I performed *Jihad* for fifteen years until I earned this *Shahadah* (martyrdom).”⁵⁰ In portraying himself in such terms, Qutb became an embodied example to potential Islamic radicals as to how one should lay down their life while actively striving for Islamic ideals.

Martyrdom Operations

It is claimed by many scholars that the origins of martyrdom operations can be traced back to the early 1980's.⁵¹ Afsaruddin claims that it can “be traced back to the actions of a thirteen-year-old Iranian boy, Mohammed Hossein Fahmideh, during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988.”⁵² In November of 1980, it is reported that Fahmideh fixed rocket propelled grenades to himself and caused them to detonate under an Iraqi tank. This occurred in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of 1979 and Ayatollah Khomeini subsequently declared him a national hero and martyr.⁵³ Ayatollah Khomeini has also been considered by scholars to have been an important figure in changing the discourse on martyrdom in Shi'ism. He achieved this by portraying Husain (the grandson of Muhammed) as being a willing and proactive martyr at the battle of Karbala, rather than the traditional portrayal of him as a tragic and passive martyr.⁵⁴

The term “Martyrdom Operation” or ‘*amaliyyāt istishhādiyy*’ is said to have first appeared however in early 1994 when Hamas carried out suicide attacks in Israel. It is now a commonly used term to describe such attacks.⁵⁵

⁴⁹Cook, *Martyrdom*, 139.

⁵⁰Qutb, *Milestones*, 13.

⁵¹Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 213; David Cook, “Suicide Attacks or ‘Martyrdom Operations’ in Contemporary Jihad Literature,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6, 1 (2002) 8.

⁵²Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 231.

⁵³Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 231.

⁵⁴Cook, *Martyrdom*, 140.

⁵⁵Afsaruddin, *Striving*, 231.

While the origins of martyrdom operations may be reasonably easy to uncover, the question of whether they are a legitimate course of action or not has been much debated. Hence, whether they actually lead to martyrdom or the hellfire associated with suicide has likewise been strongly debated. The remainder of this article will consider arguments and justifications in favour of one's self-immolation in the name of Islam. According to Cook "Martyrdom operations' do not occur in an intellectual vacuum; they do have some basis in the Muslim doctrine of *jihad*."⁵⁶

Abdallah 'Azzam was a Palestinian radical Muslim who was responsible for constructing a lot of important radical jihadist ideology. He was a teacher and colleague of Usama Bin Laden with whom he founded Al-Qaeda.⁵⁷ Like Qutb before him, he was dismayed at the plight of Muslim nations and their lack of success in fighting Israel. He preached a powerful vision of *jihad* that would re-establish the caliphate and the worldwide rule of Islam. During the Afghanistan War of the 1980's he wrote multiple martyrologies the most significant of which was *The Signs of Compassionate One in the Afghani Jihad* and *Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations*.⁵⁸ For 'Azzam the martyr's life is given up in order that, by their death they may be the bedrock of a rebirth of Islam. In *Martyrs* he writes:

The life of the Muslim Ummah is solely dependent on the ink of its scholars and the blood of its martyrs. What is more beautiful than the writing of the Ummah's history with both the ink of a scholar and his blood... History does not write its lines except with blood. Glory does not build its loft[y] edifice except with skulls. Honour and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses. Empires, distinguished peoples, states and societies cannot be established except with examples. Indeed those who think that they can change reality, or change societies, without blood, sacrifices and invalids, without pure, innocent souls, then they do not understand the essence of this Deen [religion] and they do not know the method of the best of the Messengers [Muhammed].⁵⁹

This message of 'Azzam certainly seems grim when considered against the relative splendour of historical Islamic civilisations. Regardless, it is a popular view amongst radical Muslims.⁶⁰ The belief

⁵⁶Cook, "Suicide," 10.

⁵⁷Cook, "Suicide," 14.

⁵⁸Cook, "Suicide," 158-159.

⁵⁹Abdallah 'Azzam, *Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations*, at <http://english.religion.info/2002/02/01/document-martyrs-the-building-blocks-of-nations/> [accessed May 25, 2017].

⁶⁰Cook, "Suicide," 14.

essentially portrayed by 'Azzam is that in order to establish a Muslim society, lives would have to be spent and death embraced. His view is that it is the loyal and righteous few who will reach paradise as true martyrs of God having done so. 'Azzam goes further and suggests it may be the only way to reach paradise, he argues:

As for those who build nations, they are few in number... And an even smaller group from this small group, are the ones who flee from the worldly life in order to spread and act upon these ambitions. And an even smaller group from this elite group, are the ones who sacrifice their souls and their blood in order to bring victory to these ambitions and principles. So, they are the cream of the cream of the cream. It is not possible to reach glory except by traversing this Path..., there is no Paradise without this Path.⁶¹

'Azzam transmitted numerous stories of miracles pertaining to the Afghani *mujahidin* in order to create a cult of martyrdom. Some of 'Azzam's miracle narratives bear a striking resemblance to Sufi hagiographic narratives. In these narratives there is mention of the bodies of the martyrs smelling sweet, not decomposing and emitting light. In addition, the martyrs apparently caused posthumous injury to their adversaries.⁶² Cook claims; "'Azzam's colourful and attractive reformulations of Muslim martyrdom have set the standard among Sunni radical Muslims."⁶³

There seems to be nothing in 'Azzam's martyrology that is at odds with the classical understanding of a martyr in Islam. The deceased is said to be in paradise under a special status having received their just rewards from God. The main issue is whether the deceased person qualifies as a martyr given the mode of death. Should the person be said to have committed suicide, which is proscribed by Qur'an 4:29, or have they indeed died in a fashion compatible with becoming a martyr?

An Argument in Favour

In drawing to a close, the argument of one of the main proponents of martyrdom operations will be elucidated. Yusuf al-Ayyiri was the regional leader of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia; he was put to death by the Saudi authorities in 2003. It is unconfirmed but he is believed to have authored the *fatwa* entitled, "*Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations: Did Hawa Barayev Commit Suicide or Achieve Martyrdom?*" This *fatwa* pertains to the actions of Hawa Barayev in

⁶¹'Azzam, *Martyrs*.

⁶²Cook, *Martyrdom*, 159.

⁶³Cook, *Martyrdom*, 159.

Chechnya in 2002. With Islamic rebel forces suffering heavy losses at the hands of the Russian army, Barayev drove a truck filled with explosives into a building housing Russian Special Forces, killing 27 people.⁶⁴

From the outset, Al-Ayyiri states that he does not believe every martyrdom operation to be legitimate.⁶⁵ He acknowledges the sequence of death of the attacker and the attacked in any operation, “Naturally the enacter of the operation will usually be the first to die,” but disputes that this makes them a ‘suicide operation.’⁶⁶ He claims the below in respect of the term ‘suicide operation’:

The name ‘suicide-operations’ used by some is inaccurate, and in fact this name was chosen by the Jews to discourage people from such endeavours. How great is the difference between one who commits suicide – because of his unhappiness, lack of patience... and between the self-sacrificer who embarks on the operation out of strength of faith and conviction, and to bring victory to Islam, by sacrificing his life for the upliftment [!] of Allah’s word!⁶⁷

The distinction in the above is that suicide is committed for worldly reasons, while the martyrdom operative is a self-sacrificer who acts in the interests of Islam and Allah. By way of justification of death in the way of God, al-Ayyiri quotes Qur’an 9:111, “Allah hath purchased of the Believers their person and their goods; For theirs in return is the Garden of Paradise: They fight in His cause, and slay and are slain.”⁶⁸ By way of further justification, he cites the previously mentioned martyrdom of Ja’far al-Tayyar, and others like him from the classical sources.⁶⁹ In addressing the difference between fighting to certain death at the hands of an enemy, and self-immolation as a method of killing others, he explains:

Having established the permissibility of plunging into the enemy and attacking alone even when death is certain, we proceed and say that the martyrdom operations are derived from this principle, realizing that the prohibition of suicide relates to deficiency or absence of faith... Hence, if allowing oneself to be killed by the enemy is allowed when it is in the interests of the Muslims, then clearly killing oneself for the same purpose should be allowed, and in such a case a Mujahid is

⁶⁴Cindy Ness, “The Rise in Female Violence,” *Daedalus* 136, 1 (2007) 90-91.

⁶⁵Yusuf al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations: Did Hawa Barayev Commit Suicide or Achieve Martyrdom?* (Date unknown), 2.

⁶⁶Al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling*, 2.

⁶⁷Al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling*, 2.

⁶⁸*The Holy Qur-an*, trans. Yusuf Ali, 536.

⁶⁹Al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling*, 6.

exempted from the general texts which prohibit taking one's own life.⁷⁰

It is clear from the above, that for al-Ayyiri, the intention of the classical martyr and the modern-day martyrdom operative are the same, both intend to die while inflicting damage upon the enemy. The mode of death may be different due to technological advances but the principle is the same. Considering this, the martyrdom operative is exempt from the Qur'anic prohibition on suicide and is a true martyr.⁷¹

Conclusion

The foregoing has elucidated how socio-historical factors analogous to those of early Islam have been important in formulating the contemporary radical mind-set. Just as Muslims perceived themselves as suppressed in Mecca, some Muslims perceived themselves to be similarly suppressed in their homelands by colonialization and secular nationalist governments. While there was no emigration of Muslims analogous to the *hijra*, there was a similar shift in mentality to a more aggressive concept of *jihad* as a means of liberation, as is evidenced by the writings of Mawdudi and Qutb. 'Azzam and Al-Ayyiri provide the ideological justification for self-sacrifice and immolation by claiming it is in principle the same as the actions of the foundational martyrs from the time of Muhammed.

In an era of tension in many parts of the world due to the actions of radical Islamists, a better understanding of the emergence of, and justifications given for the phenomenon of suicide bombing is of vital importance in combating this reprehensible practice.

⁷⁰Al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling*, 6-11.

⁷¹Al-Ayyiri, *Islamic Ruling*, 14.