Martyrdom and the Islamic Consciousness

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The virtue of martyrdom is a pervasive theme throughout the history of Islam and other religions, including Judaism and Christianity. There is no doubt that this idea has shaped both the Islamic consciousness and the public perception of Islam in the global community. Ideas about martyrdom and its importance to Islam have continually evolved since the inception of the religion, and continue to shape the identity and actions of devout Muslims, coloring the interpretation of the actions of martyrs through history. To address this complex topic we will analyze the history of martyrdom in Islamic thought, starting with the primary religious sources of the Qur’an and Hadith. We will then turn to martyrdom in modern Islam, specifically in response to 21st Century struggles. We will analyze the ideas of thinkers who have shaped modern perceptions of martyrdom, such as Abd al-Salam Faraj, Abdullah Assam and Sayyid Qutb, comparing these views with what is explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an and Hadith. Through this narrow analysis, we hope to gain insight into the importance of martyrdom to the Islamic consciousness and its evolution in response to geopolitical events.

To start with our analysis, we turn to the Hadith for historical evidence of martyrdom in the Islamic consciousness. Several early traditions, including those narrated by Imaam Ahmad and Ibn Maajah and dictated to Atik b. al-Harith tell the story of the death of Ubaydah ibn al-Harith, killed in the battle of Badr. The prophet Muhammad is said to have replied “The martyrs are seven. Other than being killed in the path of God, one who dies of a stomach ailment is a martyr [shahid], one who drowns is a martyr, the one who is stricken by plague is a martyr, one who is struck dead by having something fall on him is a martyr, one who is burned fatally is a martyr, and the woman who dies during pregnancy is a martyr.” [1] This hadith, which contains in it a sample of Islamic thought and tradition, does not necessarily command a military death or sacrifice for a greater good. Another version of this hadith, relayed by companion Aqaba b. Amir, addresses the same issue by defining a martyr as “one who dies in the path of God.” [1] This actually seems to directly contradict the first definition, which specifically mentions martyrdom as achievable without being killed on the “path to God”.

These definitions can be reconciled, however, depending on how one defines “path to God” and “path of God”, and highly relates the subjects of martyrdom jihad, often defined as striving or struggling in the path of God. [1] With some definitions of greater jihad, which define any internal struggle to be a better Muslim as a struggle towards God, these definitions may in fact be identical. The interpretation of the specific definition of the path of God provides one of the traditional sources used to justify a variety of definitions of martyrdom in
the modern day. Other interpretations of “jihad” by Islamic scholars fundamentally disagree with this idea of a holy war as underpinning jihad. The mainstream Islamic perspective on jihad draws a clear distinction between the greater jihad, the struggle to be a better more correct person and pious Muslim, and lesser jihad, or aggressive struggles in defense of believers and the faith. [2] This distinction becomes important when considering the statements of modern martyrdom operatives, who frequently cite their involvement in the jihad as motivation: from a mainstream Islamic perspective, these operatives are claiming to be engaged in lesser jihad.

Any analysis of Islamic religious views on martyrdom must also consider the primary source of the Qur’an. The Qur’an addresses martyrdom and related subjects briefly and often in a disorganized manner, opening the text up to the interpretation of the reader. The common term for martyr in the Qur’an is *shahid*, mentioned previously as part of the Hadith on martyrdom. This word is used with several definitions in the Qur’an, meaning both martyr and “bearing witness”: “And strive for Allah as you ought to strive. He elected you... that the Apostle may bear witness against you and you may be witnesses against mankind,” (22:78) Allah proclaims. [3] The Qur’an in this case defines shahid thusly, as one who bears witness against all mankind. In doing so, it mixes terminology and makes the verses in which shahid is used to refer to martyrs and the dead less clear. One such verse is 3:138-142, a part of which states “If a wound (and killing) has touched you, be sure a similar wound (and killing) has touched the others. And so are the days (good and not so good), We give to men by turns, that God may test those who believe, and that He may take martyrs (suhada) from among you. And God likes not the Zâlimûn (polytheists and wrong-doers).” [3]

This verse clearly redefines suhada as those that may be taken by God, though it does not specify action as required to become such a shahid. Some elaboration is available in 3:169-170, which instructs followers to “…do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well-provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and shall not grieve.” [3] This verse again addresses martyrs as those dying struggling in the path of Allah, providing Qur’anic evidence for the relationship between martyrdom and the concept of jihad. While this connection thus relies mainly on interpretation of the specific language used in the Qur’an, it nonetheless forms an integral basis for the interpretation of martyrdom to some Islamic revivalist groups. The verse 57:19 further muddies the water when discussing rewards for the pious in the afterlife, asserting that “…those who believe in Allah and His messengers are truly the pious and the martyrs (shuhada’) in their Lord’s sight. They shall have their wage and their light…” [3] In this verse, it is relatively easy to interpret shuhada as referring to any Muslim who dies a pious death, though it is also easy to interpret shuhada as referring only to martyrs who meet some divine criteria.

Verse 57:19 is usually associated with the Battle of Uhud, one of the key battles between Meccan and Medinan forces in early Islamic history. This battle was key in the history of Islamic martyrdom, coming on the heels of the victory against the Meccans at Badr: not only was this battle a key defeat for the Medinans, it was their first grave defeat and one in which Hamza, an uncle of Muhammad and early supporter of Islam, was killed. Historically it is thus possible to interpret the verse in its context as an instruction to the community to avoid
grieving and dwelling on the loss of loved ones, focusing instead on the alive and knowing the dead are rejoicing in the afterlife; indeed, this is consistent with the general Islamic instructions that discourage or fail to encourage mourning the dead and would directly address the decreased community morale that would be prevalent after a defeat like the one at Uhud. [3]

The verses we have analyzed form only an incomplete enumeration of all verses dealing with the shuhada in the Qur’an. Despite this, it is clear from these verses that the Qur’an paints an often contradictory and unclear message concerning martyrdom, from the definition of who is a martyr to the exact rewards for martyrs in the afterlife. The failure to elaborate on several of these themes leaves the exact requirements for and definition of martyrdom open to interpretation. Another seemingly unrelated but interesting consideration in the narrative of traditional Islamic sources is the denunciation of suicide explicit in the Qur’an and Hadith. One Qur’anic verse proclaims, “And kill not your selves; surely, Allah is the most merciful to you.” (4.29) [4] This verse clearly explicitly condemns suicide, as does the Hadith literature: in Sahi Muslim narrated by al-Bukhaari, abu Hurayrah narrates the teachings of the prophet as saying “Whoever throws himself down from a mountain and kills himself will be in the Fire of Hell, throwing himself down therein for ever and ever. Whoever takes poison and kills himself, his poison will be in his hand and he will be sipping it in the Fire of Hell for ever and ever. Whoever kills himself with a piece of iron, that piece of iron will be in his hand and he will be stabbing himself in the stomach with it in the Fire of Hell, for ever and ever.” [4] This strong condemnation will further add controversy to the modern debate about what constitutes legitimate martyrdom, specifically in the context of whether suicide operations qualify.

We have thus briefly and cursorily summarized the background of martyrdom in the Islamic tradition, including the Qur’an and authentic Hadith. From this background, the concept of martyrdom has evolved over centuries of Islam until the present. The relationship between martyrdom and jihad (struggling in the path of God) has been reinforced by repeated interpretations of the Qur’anic verses related to the suhada, specifically by revivalist/fundamentalist groups. These groups have carried out many well publicized suicide operations beginning in the 20th century, attracting global infamy and sparking a global discussion on Islam as a whole. Hassan Salame, a notorious anti-Israeli suicide bomber now serving 46 life sentences, justified his attacks through religion and claimed that “martyrdom operation bombing is the highest level of jihad, and highlights the depth of our faith. The bombers are holy fighters who carry out one of the more important articles of faith.” [2]

The implied relationship between martyrdom, jihad, and the afterlife is clear. In his survey of such attacks, Jerrold M. Post, a western scholar at George Washington University attempted to explain suicide operations by claiming that individual attackers are motivated by the promise of paradise and a quest for personal significance and individual transcendence through participation in a greater conflict. In doing so, Post analyzed the statements of those involved in martyrdom operations in Palestine, who often explained their actions by claiming they were helping and defending the Palestinians against Western aggression. [2] Their interpretation of the Qur’anic verses that prohibit aggression against all believers and denounce suicide is thus that a suicide martyr’s actions are defensive, with their personal motivation seeming to come from a deep desire to fight for justice in transcendence of one’s individuality, and the sincere belief that their promise of paradise will be fulfilled due to
what they perceive as a lack of aggressive actions.

While it is clear that the actions of extremist individuals willing to resort to suicide operations can be interpreted as being directly contradictory to the Qur’an (which forbids both aggression and suicide), this interpretation of suicide attacks as part of the previously mentioned lesser jihad and thus required for all Muslims is a common one for many revivalist groups. There are few groups that purvey the embodiment of this ideology as faithfully as Hamas, responsible for the death of over 1,000 Israeli civilians in suicide attacks between 1994 and 2007. “There is no solution to the Palestinian question except through Jihad,” the charter of Hamas proclaims, forming the basis for the Islamic Resistance movement as a split from the Muslim Brotherhood. One of the leading forces in Palestinian politics today, Hamas represents a military movement emerging from the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, being one of the few Islamic groups to target a non-Muslim enemy, Israel, rather than a rival Arab–Muslim government. [5] This targeting of a clearly imperialist enemy has bought Hamas wide support throughout the Middle East, with many even moderate Muslims accepting their interpretation of what jihad is as valid. According to Hamas the essential jihad is the “Jihad of the Sword,” leading to a rejection of the greater jihad and the spiritual struggle previously mentioned as a mainstream Muslim ideology. [5]

Hamas goes further than this rejection by framing the requirement for jihad of the sword as an “existential battle, rather than a dispute over border” by claiming that they are fighting a fundamental battle between good (Muslims and God) and evil (Jews and “the party of Satan”). [5] By using both practical and religious rhetoric to argue their point, Hamas merges both a practical political/nationalistic message (the defense and reclamation of a homeland) with the religious themes of jihad of the sword and war against the ungodly invader “kafir”. This rhetoric is extremely similar to that mentioned by Post’s previous analysis as effective in recruiting martyrdom operators. The ideology provides individuals subscribing to Hamas’s ideology a sense of transcending the self towards a greater purpose in fighting for justice and God’s will. This extremely powerful motivation, along with the promise of paradise for those engaging in martyrdom operations, has undoubtably been used by Hamas in its recruitment of operatives and general spread throughout the Middle East.

To analyze the ideological underpinnings of the Hamas movement, it is important to consider several key thinkers whose ideas regarding jihad have provided influential and important to the religious justification leveraged by Hamas. The beginnings of these ideological movements can be traced to the beginnings of political Islam, a political and religious ideology emerging as a response to the colonialism and imperialism of the West in the Middle East. [6] This context opened the door to the interpretation of jihad as an essential individual duty, politicizing the concept and making it relatable to the average Muslim living under colonial rule. One thinker who laid the foundation for such an interpretation of jihad was Mawlana Mawdudi, a Pakistani Muslim who opposed imperialist and colonial forces leading to the establishment of Pakistan. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian thinker and key figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, took this perspective to its logical conclusion, calling life in any nation state not observing Islamic law to the fullest “jahiliya”. [6] This term, used frequently in the Qur’an to describe pre-Islamic Arabia, implies both ignorance and barbarism inherent to living a lifestyle out of touch with God. In doing so, Qutb idealized the return to a caliphate government implementing Shari’ia law to the fullest, supporting the views of Mawdudi and the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood perspective in their opposition to nationalism and colo-
nialism. “There [is] a war to be waged in the name of Islam”, Qutb proclaimed immediately before being executed by the Nasser regime in 1965. [6]

Egyptian writer Abd al-Salam Faraj helped to further develop these theories of a return to the caliphate as the essential goal for the salvation of Islam in his book, *Al-Faridah al-Gha’ib (The Neglected Duty)*. Faraj clearly singles out jihad as the neglected duty of all Muslims, reframing jihad as being necessarily against the enemies of Islam in addition to being a struggle for personal devotion (the traditional concept of greater jihad). [6] Faraj called for the struggle to continue until Islam dominated global politics, promising participants elevation to the highest level of paradise in the afterlife. [6] Together with the views of Mawdudi and Qutb, this reframing of jihad to include aggressive operations against what Faraj perceived to be forces fundamentally opposed to the existence of Islam typifies the political arguments of such traditionalist movements emerging in the 20th century as a response to geopolitical events seen by prominent thinkers as threatening to the Muslim community.

This perspective was furthered by Abdallah Azzam, a radical Wahabi thinker supporting Ibn Tamiyya’s literalist interpretation of the Qur’an as comprehensive and sufficient. In his work *In Defense of Muslim Lands*, Azzam calls for the defense of Afghanistan against the Godless Soviet invasion and related colonialist forces. [6] A personal mentor to Osama bin-Laden in college, these views undoubtedly influenced the figure responsible for funding several of the most widely known recent Islamic martyrdom operations in the West.

These views, influenced by ibn Tamiyya, Azzam, and Qutb have been wholly embraced by Hamas, who uses these thinkers to justify their war against Israel. While these thinkers are related more closely to the Muslim Brotherhood membership than to Hamas, in a vacuum of scholars and intellectuals internal to Hamas their ideas are regarded as unconditionally favorable. [5] These ideas are used to further the main objective of Hamas, which is opposition to the state of Israel and a need to regain Jerusalem and Palestine as lands that are sacred and holy to Islam.

While Qutb, Faraj, and Azzam were all radical Sunnis, and directly influenced the ideologies of bin Laden, Zawahiri, and Al Qaeda, influential Shi’a thinkers were similarly developing an ideology of defensive jihad as a noble and Godly endeavor. Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, one of the ideological forebearers to the Hezbollah movement (which engages in such martyrdom operations frequently), carefully interpreted the Qur’an to justify the use of suicide in operations whose goal was jihad. As we’ve previously mentioned, suicide is expressly and clearly prohibited in both the Qur’an and Hadith, with no ambiguity existing about the immorality of such an action. Fadlallah, however, argues that “death as a suicide bomber [is equivalent] with soldiers entering battle in which they knew that they would die, arguing there was no moral distinction, and that the only difference was the time of death.” [6] Fadlallah built on a rich Shi’a tradition of martyrdom, including the celebration of the martyrdom of Ali, to support and justify this position while implying that such a state of battle is in fact the duty of all pious Muslims.

It is furthermore important to note that thinkers following such a perspective explicitly avoid the use of the word “suicide” in relation to such operations, with some thinkers like Doha-based Shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi insisting on the use of terms like “heroic operations of martyrdom” instead. [6] By carefully avoiding these terms, these thinkers further distance martyrdom operations in the modern colonialist world from the prohibition of suicide made clear in the Qur’an. Fadlallah’s interpretation of the relevant Qur’anic verses further argued
that the times Muslims were living in under the imperialism of the West were exceptional, and thus called for extreme action which appears to directly contradict the prescriptions of the Qur’an. By forming the ideological underpinnings of Hezbollah and being used across religious sects to justify suicide attacks, this perspective was undoubtedly immensely influential to the growth of offensive suicide and terrorist attacks. [6]

As we’ve demonstrated, there is clearly an intellectual undercurrent in the Muslim world calling for suicide attacks as part of an essential jihad that forms the duty of all Muslims, requiring the expulsion of colonialism and outside nationalism as an imposition on Islamic society and an occupation of Islamic holy lands. Despite this highly visible undercurrent and its influence on highly politically visible movements like Hamas, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda, it is important to note that these ideas have far from reached consensus in the modern Islamic community and consciousness. For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl, a leading US-based Muslim jurist, claims that “not all social and political frustrations lead to the use of violence,” crediting the rapid spread and resonance of the revivalist Islamic message as exploiting “an already radicalized discourse with the expectation of resonating with the social and political frustrations of a people.” [6] This argument introduces another dimension to the spread of radical anti-colonial Islam outside of the religious and political messages it spread: social injustice, poverty, and the general decay of the Muslim community evident to all insiders provided a powerful platform for the adoption of jihad against Western oppression.

David Cook, a Western scholar at Rice University, goes further in his analysis of jihad and martyrdom operations in the wider Islamic community, defining the struggle between the pro and anti “suicide attack” camp as a struggle of values, with those supporting martyrdom operations expressing their devotion to Islam over all else, including themselves. Cook thus notes that the primary push towards such operations comes from intellectuals and wealthy Muslims, who feel humiliated by the current state of the Islamic world and its subservience to the West. These individuals thus feel the need to prove the worth they place in Islam, displaying their loyalty and devotion in the face of such social and political humiliations through “extravagant displays of loyalty” like waging jihad and undergoing martyrdom operations. [7] Cook also further addresses the overall debate as an internal crisis, considering as many Muslims do the effect of such martyrdom operations on the Islamic community themselves (through the degradation of infrastructure and the normalization of suicide) and the views of the outside world on Islam, which often become alienated in the face of what is sometimes perceived as primitive and revolting offensive action. Lastly, Cook considers the impact of fatwahs and other declarations by Islamic religious leaders and thinkers on the actions of the community as a whole, arguing that such fatwahs have been key to the growth in prevalence of martyrdom operations in the 20th century, implying some degree of responsibility for the consequences of these operations to their issuers and spiritual leaders. [7]

Jerrold Post further explores the moderate Islamic perspective, in which life is regarded as sacred and can only be taken in defensive actions that fundamentally threaten the likelihood of an individual or community in an aggressive manner. Post claims that “what is imperative is to strengthen the moderate voices in a manner that reaches not only impressionable youth before they are inspired to volunteer to join the jihad but also non-Muslim audiences in order to restore the principles of Islam based on peace, tolerance, and mercy” [6] Post credits the Internet and other forms of radicalized media as being instrumental to the fundamentalist cause, radicalizing youth and convincing them of the benefits of martyrdom operations to
political causes, transcending the self religiously, and providing a high status in the afterlife, calling for moderate voices to more loudly oppose ideals which lead to the loss of life and damage the reputation of the Muslim community to the remainder of the world.

Dr. Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo, a scholar of Islamic studies in the University of South Africa, further develops the subtleties of the mainstream Islamic viewpoint by pointing out that even many mainstream Muslims do not necessarily condemn martyrdom operations when applied in the greater context of a defensive war or the struggle for existence. Dadoo however points out that there are “strict legal and ethical codes” emphasizing “moderation and justice” that govern the waging of war and what qualifies as such a defensive war, and claiming that it is unclear and hotly debated among moderates whether a global struggle for Islamic dominance meets such a criteria. [8] Dadoo also urges the consideration of the impact of actions perceived to the outside as aggressive to general Muslim society, echoing the perspectives of the Western scholar Cook, who condemns the general culture surrounding such martyrdom operations in the modern day as detrimental to both the internal organization/morale of and external opinions on the Islamic faith and Muslim community as a whole.

Thus, we have explored an extremely narrow segment of the wider Islamic view on the complex issue of martyrdom in the modern day, considering the rise in prevalence of martyrdom operations in the 20th century and their effect on the Islamic community as a whole. Starting from the unclear and ambiguous origins of martyrdom in the Qur’an and Hadith and muddled by the inconsistent definitions for “suhada” which can be interpreted as meaning both martyrs and those who bear witness, we then considered the origins of jihad in the Qur’an and the distinction in modern Islamic thought between greater and lesser jihad. We briefly covered the origins of martyrdom in the Qur’an as interrelated with the Islamic tradition against grieving, and considered the possible origins of the importance of this concept in the early battles between the Meccans and Medinans in Arabia.

Having further enumerated the condemnation of suicide in primary sources and the tradition of Islam, we moved to the modern applications of the concept of martyrdom in ways influential to the Islamic community. We considered the view of radical Sunni and Shi’a thinkers emerging as a political response to the imperialist domination of the Middle East and the resulting degradation of society and social ills, looking at their interpretation of the Qur’anic verses we mentioned as in support of martyrdom operations. We briefly considered the movements spawned by this ideology, and even more briefly visited the dissent from and struggle in the wider Islamic community, spanning scholars, jurists, and other thinkers who believe that significant distance exists between such interpretations and the concepts intended to be conveyed by the Qur’an.

In conclusion, the subject of martyrdom in Islam and its relationship to jihad seems to be intertwined with and continuously shaped by the political realities of the Middle Eastern region and the goals of political and religious thinkers, with most thinkers beginning their rationalizations of such attacks with political statements against nationalism, imperialism, and the West. While martyrdom has always been a part of the Islamic consciousness, its exact scope, requirements, and rewards were left open to interpretation by the Qur’anic verses and relevant hadiths, as was the relationship to (and concepts of) greater and lesser jihad. There is no doubt that the definitions of the scope, requirements, and rewards for martyrdom have evolved significantly over time, changing greatly from early Islam and the Qur’an and their definitions in the current day. There is also no doubt that these definitions
have responded to political realities of life in the Middle East and the attempts by religious leaders to address these realities to religion after the failure of other methods for the Islamic community.

The exact prescriptions of these lessons for the future of what martyrdom means for Islam are unclear: it is clear that to an extent, martyrdom operations are achieving the goals set out by their ideological forefathers of drawing ire from outsiders against Islam, leading to further radicalization of moderates who feel unjustly misunderstood and oppressed. On the other hand, the damage to the Islamic community is significant as it exists in a state of perpetual ideological war, further aggravating the tensions created by divisions within the community between those who support and don’t support such a struggle and normalizing suicide in direct opposition to fundamental religious texts.

An open dialogue between scholars of both opinions in the Islamic community would likely benefit both the global and Islamic communities by exposing them to a diversity of ideologies and narratives. Unfortunately, for many such a discussion is unpalatable or impossible as their conclusion on the matter is predetermined; with these individuals on both sides, a debate about the fundamentals of martyrdom in Islam and its relationship to jihad and the attacks created will likely continue for the foreseeable future, and may take many generations of economic prosperity and political stability to converge to a clearer perspective on martyrdom accepted by the vast majority of the Muslim community.

References


