

THE IMPLICATIONS OF “MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS” FOR CONTEMPORARY ISLAM¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications of the prevalence of suicide attacks or ‘martyrdom operations’ in contemporary Islam. Historical and legal precedents from Islam and Christianity are adduced for the analysis and placed within the context of radical Islam.

KEY WORDS: *martyrdom, radical Islam, suicide attack, September 11*

1. Introduction to Radical Islam

During the year since September 11, 2001 the appeal of radical Islam throughout parts of the Muslim world has become clear. This version of Sunni Islam, which emphasizes the role of *jihad* as a salvific and purifying act with the ultimate goal of establishing a messianic (in the sense of idealized) caliphal state encompassing all Muslims, has proved to be significant throughout Arabic and Urdu speaking Muslim countries. Radical Islam is an exclusive ideology, which rejects substantial elements of Muslim civilization and history as non-Islamic, and does not hesitate to do the same for large numbers of present-day Muslims, mainly Sufis and Shi’ites, promiscuously using the term “apostate” to describe all who do not subscribe to its belief-system. It has a paranoid and apocalyptic outlook, usually subscribing to grand anti-Semitic conspiracy theories involving Jewish control of the world, and seeks to confront and eliminate those elements in contemporary Muslim society that it has identified as foreign. Side-by-side with this paranoid vision, it strongly embraces modern science and technology, and seeks to graft them onto its vision of the future of the Muslim world, after these tools have been stripped of their Western origins. While radical Islam does not appear (currently) to have the same mass appeal among Turks and Central Asians, nor for the most part among Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims, and only

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a minimal appeal among African Muslims, since the Arabic and Urdu speaking countries are the intellectual heartland of Islam it is unclear whether this situation will persist.

One of the contemporary defining components of radical Islam is the widespread use of or support for the use of suicide attacks (or “martyrdom operations”) as a weapon in the *jihad* against its perceived foes. It is, therefore, instructive to examine this tactic, including some of its origins and possible implications for contemporary Islam (both traditional and radical). After the suicide attacks of September 11, 2001 it was to be expected that martyrdom operations would come under harsh review by moderate Muslim countries, with official *ulama’* (religious leaders) issuing *fatwas* (legal opinions) demonstrating the religious illegitimacy of this method of fighting. Indeed, initially to some extent this did happen, as both ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. ‘Abdallah Al al-Shaykh, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid al-Tantawi, the Shaykh of al-Azhar University in Cairo, issued *fatwas* stating that martyrdom operations against civilians (most specifically with regard to the United States) were not in accordance with accepted *jihad* methodology. In addition to these two prominent figures, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent leader of the Muslim Brethren, modified his previously declared support for martyrdom operations and stated that they were only to be used against Israeli soldiers.² No other prominent shaykhs followed their examples, and all three of these distinguished clerics have now retracted their opposition to “martyrdom operations,” at least with regard to Israel.³

Because of the extensive glorification of martyrdom operations and public adulation for the “martyrs” produced as a result, it is legitimate to ask whether we are witnessing a change in Sunni Islam as a whole. Martyrdom operations are not only a military tactic, but one which has social ramifications as well in what is revealed about the current state of Sunni Islam, especially given the fact that suicide is prohibited by the Qur’an (2:195, 4:29) and that traditionally Muslim countries have had the lowest suicide rates in the world (Rosenthal 1946; Kohlberg 1998). Since “martyrdom operations” are designed to carry a message

² Al-Qa’ida in its “Proclamation” 3 points out the irrationality of those shaykhs who say that “martyrdom operations” are legal only as long as they are used against Israel.

³ For al-Qaradawi, see qaradawi.net (April 7, 2002), and the interview with al-Jazira (December 2001) “The Palestinian Intifada and Martyrdom Operations” at qudsway.com/akhbar/arshiv/12-2001.htm; for al-Tantawi, see memri.org, Special Dispatch no. 363: “Leading Egyptian Government Cleric Calls for “Martyrdom Attacks That Strike Horror into the Hearts of the Enemies of Allah” (April 4, 2002); for Al Shaykh see maktaba.net/articles “Confusion over *fatawa* on Martyrdom Operations by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia” (December 15, 2001); and see the commentary on this latter issue by Abu Muhammad al-Maqlisi at tawhed.ws (section on *fatawa*), dated August 2002.

to both Muslims and non-Muslims, it is legitimate to ask what precisely the intended and the actual message conveyed is. When the attraction to a given method, such as martyrdom operations, is so very strong and pervasive throughout the core Muslim lands, while the obvious revulsion and rejection on the part of the outside world, including many Muslims, is equally passionate one must ask what precisely is the reason for this polarity and what are its implications.

2. Martyrdom Operations

Justifying martyrdom operations is not as easily accomplished as one might be led to think by the prevalence of *fatwas* supporting them. Since there is now a substantial body of legal literature available signed by the pens of the shaykhs supporting martyrdom operations, it is possible to see the methods by which their conclusions have been obtained. The *fatwas* examined include those of Shaykhs al-Tantawi, al-Qaradawi, and the Saudi radical shaykhs Hamud b. 'Uqla al-Shu'aybi, Sulayman al-'Alwan, 'Ali b. Khudayr al-Khudayr, together with the anonymous legal opinion "The Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations" written for the Chechen rebels, which was probably penned by the Saudi radical circle of al-Shu'aybi,⁴ and a number of collections of *fatwas* on this subject (with a total of 46 different ones). There are two basic groups of *fatwas* available: those from the areas of Egypt and Palestine, which usually seek to confine martyrdom operations to Israel (numbering 30 from among the 46), and those from Saudi Arabia, Chechnya and the supporters of al-Qa'ida which are more globalistic in nature (numbering 9 from among the 46 total; the remaining 7 do not specify any locality). Taken together, this literature gives us a window into the world-view of both the stated and some of the unstated reasons for the sudden appearance and prominence of martyrdom operations in the contemporary Muslim world.

Most of these pieces start out with a political commentary, leading us to note the primary reason for martyrdom operations: the perceived situation of the Muslim world. This situation is usually painted in very stark and humiliating terms for Muslims world wide, who are presented as those lacking all choice or volition in the contemporary world. Islam is either seen as entirely gone from the world or on the verge of being extinguished. A typical exposition of this attitude was given by Sulayman Abu Ghayth, the spokesman for al-Qa'ida, who stated in his justification of the attack of Sept. 11, 2001:

⁴ For further examples of *fatwas* permitting or enjoining martyrdom operations, see Permissibility; *Masa'il jihadiyya*, 25–42 (listing 32 opinions from different scholars); also Feldner 2001; and Cook 2002.

Those who were surprised, astonished and did not expect [the September 11 attack], those simply do not know the reality of humanity and human nature, or the effect of tyranny and oppression upon its feelings. . . they apparently thought that tyranny breeds submission and that force yields resignation. . . those have missed the mark twice: once, because they are ignorant of the reality of derision towards a person, and another time because they do not know the ability of a person to achieve victory. This is [with regard to] any person, let alone to one who believes in God as Lord, in Islam as a religion and in Muhammad as Prophet and Messenger. [He] knows that his religion refuses lowliness and does not permit humiliation for him, and rejects degradation. How could it, when he knows that his community [Islam] was brought forth to be at the center of leadership and trail blazing, at the center of hegemony and domination, at the center of giving and receiving? (Abu Ghayth 2002)

The authors of the *fatwas* then usually cite four verses, which for them point the direction in which the martyr should go. The first one is: "And some people sell themselves for the sake of Allah's favor. Allah is kind to His servants." (Qur'an 2:207; all Qur'anic translations from Fakhry) In the context of the holy book the kind of person described in this verse is set in contrast to another type of personality, the hypocritical and arrogant man, who although outwardly a servant of God, inwardly is rebellious. But when taken alone, especially in the context of the other verses cited in support of martyrdom operations, the verse seems to be saying that giving up everything for God's favor, including one's life, is the highest goal (Ibn Abi Shayba 4:223 [no. 19432]).

Foundational for the doctrine of *jihad* is the second verse usually cited in the *fatwas*, which is the salvific compact:

Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allah, kill and are killed. That is a true promise from Him in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an and who fulfills His promise better than Allah? Rejoice then at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph. (9:110)

It is noteworthy that once again, as in the previous selection, this verse speaks of buying and selling; the believer is enjoined to give up his life in return for the promise of Paradise. Furthermore, according to the third verse usually cited by the *fatwas*, one must not be too attached to this life:

Indeed you will find them [the evil-doers] of all people the most attached to life, even more than those who associated other gods with Allah. Every one of them wishes to live for one thousand years. This long life, however, will not spare them the punishment. (Qur'an 2:96)

This attachment to life is specifically said to be common to the Jews who are the subject of this verse, and therefore those who are fighting

them (and what the radicals claim to be the Jewish domination of the world) should be most concerned to deny them the same. Dr. 'Abdallah al-Naggar, the religion columnist for the Egyptian newspaper *al-Gumhuriyya*, phrased this quite forcefully:

What is distressing is that their protection of their life has become an incentive for them to bolster their status by the means of science and inventions. They have explored all means of defending their lives and imposing their inferior ideas on humanity through force of arms, while the men of truth [Muslims] have been negligent; they have not excelled at science and have not explored means that will guarantee their triumph in their struggle against men of falsehood [non-Muslims]. . . Yet their enemies protect [their] lives like a miser protects his money. They do not give [their lives] easily; they do not enter into battles seeking martyrdom. . . this is the secret of the believers' victory over their enemies—though the believers are few and the polytheists many with advanced weaponry and equipment. (Trans. memri.org Special Dispatch no. 289 [October 19, 2001] from *al-Gumhuriyya*, October 7, 2001)

Finally, the verse from the Qur'anic version of the David and Goliath story is cited: "How many a small band has defeated a larger one by Allah's leave. Allah is with the steadfast" (Qur'an 2:249). Taken together these verses, although none of them specifically enjoins suicide attacks, present a self-sacrificing picture on the part of the fighting believer, who is part of a smaller group, as opposed to the larger number of unbelievers, who are attached to this life and do not want to die.

The scholars justifying martyrdom operations then move to the Prophet Muhammad's tradition (the *hadith*), which contains a number of stories showing early Muslims who were willing to attack obviously superior numbers (in accordance with Qur'an 2:249) and died in the process. From these stories, the scholars deduce that there is nothing wrong with carrying out a suicidal mission in battle, because one who carries out a martyrdom operation is similar to the one who attacks a superior force without hope of surviving. They then contrast the hopeful nature of one who carries out a martyrdom operation with the depression of one who commits suicide, intending to show that the two actions are not the same.

The name 'suicide operations' used by some is inaccurate, and in fact this name was chosen by the Jews to discourage people from such endeavors. How great is the difference between one who commits suicide—because of his unhappiness, lack of patience and weakness, or absence of *iman* [faith] and has been threatened with Hell-Fire—and between the self-sacrificer who embarks on the operation out of strength of faith, and to bring victory to Islam, by sacrificing his life for the upliftment of Allah's Word! (Permissibility 2)

The Saudi radical al-Shu'aybi, in his justification of martyrdom operations, concludes that

the martyrdom operations are legitimate actions, part of waging *jihad* in the path of God—if the intent of the perpetrator is pure—because they are among the most successful of the means of *jihad* and effectiveness against the enemies of this faith [Islam]. This is because of the terror and the casualties—whether in killed or wounded—they cause, and the spread of fear, anxiety and impermanence because of them, and because of the reward they give to the Muslims, the strengthening of their hearts and the breaking of the hearts of their enemies . . . and other benefits of *jihad*. (al-Shu'aybi 1)

The stated purpose therefore, as in “The Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations,” is both to spread terror, and to “strengthen the hearts of the Muslims.” Although these goals are both perhaps part of a war-making effort, neither purpose is necessarily very effective in achieving victory.

Upon reading the legal literature enjoining the use of martyrdom operations one realizes it is clear that the arguments are extremely weak. This is revealed by the characterization of martyrdom operations as “the pinnacle of the summit of *jihad*” (*durwat sinam al-jihad*) given by the authors of the *fatwas* such as al-Qaradawi and Abu Sa'īd al-'Amili (2002). Anyone reading that for the first time is struck first of all by the use of this evocative phrase, which is common in the traditional description of *jihad* itself: “The most important of all things is conversion to Islam, but its pillars are prayer, and the pinnacle of its summit is *jihad* . . .” (al-Tirmidhi 4:124-5 [no. 2749]; see Wensinck, s.v. *sanam* for variants) Those of a historical bent must be surprised by the appearance of martyrdom operations as the “pinnacle of the summit of *jihad*”; after all, Muslims have been waging *jihad* in both its military and spiritual forms for 14 centuries. Are we to assume that all of these Muslims were denied the opportunity to achieve the pinnacle because they were ignorant of it? It seems clear that by referring to martyrdom operations as “the pinnacle of the summit of *jihad*” the authors of these *fatwas* are actually trying to conceal the novel nature of the operation as well as its problematic status in Muslim law. The fact that martyrdom operations are very new to Islam leaves the legal opinions cited above open to the deadly accusation of being an “innovation.”⁵ Muslim critics of the use of “martyrdom operations,” including Al al-Shaykh cited above and the prominent Saudi moderate Ibn 'Uthaymin have focused upon this problem, noting that this tactic has a very weak historical basis in Islamic law and practice.

⁵ Al-Shu'aybi 1 puts this very delicately: “these operations are contemporary developments unknown in the past in their present-day form.”

Although these criticisms are important, there are substantial inconsistencies within the *fatwas* and the evidence they supply for their justifications. These center around three basic problems:

1. One must ask whether there *is* a difference between attacking a superior force and suicide attacks. Much of the legal material adduced above seeks to draw an analogy between an extremely hopeless situation in battle—such as that of a single fighter charging a much larger enemy group, which is a situation frequently discussed by the classical authorities (summarized by Ibn al-Nahhas al-Dumyati 1:557–60)—and that of suicide attacks. One who charges a much larger number of enemies may or may not die (he could overwhelm the enemy by his personal bravery or be taken prisoner by them), and in any case his death is not the sole purpose of his attack. On the contrary, he can only continue to fight the enemy while he is alive. In a suicide attack the death of the perpetrator is the *primary* driving purpose of the operation with the hope that he take as many of the enemy with him as is possible and that his intention be to lift the Word of God to the highest (Qur'an 9:41).⁶ Therefore, he will avoid any hostilities or even attracting attention to himself previous to his own death lest his ultimate purpose be undone or uncompleted.

2. Perceived necessity is clearly driving the *fatwas* and leads to the question of whether radical Muslims are making any attempt to provide a superior moral example. Is the legal basis to be that whatever is necessary to win is justified? Upon examining the *fatwas* enjoining "martyrdom operations" one notices that no attempt is made to confront the question of what they actually do either on behalf of Muslims (in either the tactical or the strategic sense) or to Islam as a whole. While we will cover this latter issue below, several Muslim critics have pointed out this problem (Ibn 'Uthaymin especially), and questioned the efficacy of martyrdom operations with regard to their inability to achieve any military results. This has been historically true as well. Japanese *kamikazes* failed to stop the advance of the United States armed forces during World War II despite the fear they engendered. There is no example of any seriously entrenched army defending territory to which the soldiers' mother country is committed or sees as a necessary asset being deterred, let alone defeated, by suicide attacks. (However, suicide attacks *can* deter an uncommitted state or army that might see the cost of a given series of operations as a price they are unwilling to pay.)

With regard to Israel, India, Turkey, Russia and the United States, which have been the principal targets of martyrdom operations during the past twenty years, only the United States in Lebanon during 1983–84

⁶ Noted by Ibn 'Uthaymin, who is cited al-'Amili 3 (I could not find the original citation).

was actually persuaded to abandon a mission because of suicide attacks (and this was almost certainly because of the ill-defined nature of the operation and lack of political will to sustain it). For the most part, all of the above target countries have been either unmoved by martyrdom operations or have actually been strengthened in their national resolve as a result of being attacked in this manner. The best example is that of Hizbullah, which together with other Shi'ite groups used suicide as a means to expel the United States from Beirut as previously stated, but when fighting the Israelis in southern Lebanon ended up abandoning this tactic and returning to the unconventional warfare which eventually resulted in Israel's withdrawal in 2000.

3. For the most part, the legal opinions avoid the question of discrimination on the part of the "martyr" with regard to the difference between soldiers and civilians. This is the difference between the more respectable opinions stemming from al-Tantawi and other Egyptian religious leaders (who have tried to confine "martyrdom operations" to Israeli soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza) (in accord with the classical sources, see Abou El Fadl 1999, 150–3), and al-Qaradawi (who sees all Israelis as soldiers and thus avoids the issue) as opposed to the more radical Saudi shaykhs, who usually state that because westerners pay taxes to their governments, civilian populations are all responsible for the actions of the latter, and are therefore legitimate targets. While al-Tantawi and others are concerned with making certain that "martyrdom operations" are confined to obvious military targets, the Saudi shaykhs have decided that all targets in enemy territories (including apparent enemies such as Israel, India and Russia, and non-belligerent enemies such as those in Europe and the United States) are legitimate. For this purpose the Saudi shaykhs provide us with the example of the mangonel, which in the classical texts lobbed large payloads (usually of rock or during later times explosives) at a city or fortress walls or occasionally over them in an indiscriminate fashion. Permission to use this weapon by medieval scholars is supposed to provide us with an analogy to what today would be referred to as "collateral damage." Again, this analogy is unconvincing. The reasons for the use of the mangonel were military in nature; the appearance of "collateral damage" was peripheral to the overall military purpose. In the *fatwas* allowing martyrdom operations the "collateral damage" is actually the goal of the operation rather than a side effect. "Collateral damage" may be a disturbing and even horrifying fact of warfare, but it is still very different from cold-blooded slaughter or targeting a civilian population with the excuse that they should have known better than to be in the way.

More convincing is the use of another analogy taken from the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who dealt with the question of what a Muslim army was supposed to do when an opposing infidel enemy used

Muslims as human shields.⁷ This was far from a hypothetical scenario, as the Mongols (against whom Ibn Taymiyya was writing) used precisely this tactic frequently. Ibn Taymiyya, once again, tells us regretfully that if there is no other choice then the Muslim army must attack the enemy and not be deterred by human shields. In short, there is a duality to the action; if the point of the action as a whole is to kill the enemy, and the only way to do that is by also killing the Muslim "shield" then the action is approved. It is the responsibility of the Muslims to gain the victory and not to worry about killing their innocent co-religionists. In the contemporary literature on martyrdom operations, the analogy goes more or less that since civilians surround what radical Muslims consider to be legitimate targets one cannot always take their lives into consideration if the victory is to be obtained. Since Ibn Taymiyya gave permission to sacrifice even Muslim civilians in the case of "human shields," therefore, the lives of civilian infidels cannot be more valuable (Proclamation 4). It goes without saying that this argument directly contradicts a number of prophetic traditions in which fighters are enjoined to spare non-combatants (al-Bukhari 4:26 [nos. 3014–5]; Abu Da'ud 3:53–4 [nos. 2668–72]; Malik b. Anas 278 [no. 980]).

3. A Historical Comparison with Christianity and Buddhism

While considering the issue of "martyrdom operations," one is struck by the lack of a parallel with other faiths that actively promote martyrdom or provide widespread cultural or religious approval of the idea of dying for one's faith. Christianity and Buddhism provide the most obvious examples of faiths in which martyrdom plays a key role, and in which martyrs are widely held to have superior spiritual status. In Christianity the predominant idea of martyrdom is a passive one in which the foremost paradigm is that of the saint who is presented with a choice between compromising his faith and suffering or death, and is enjoined to chose the latter. Is there a sense of martyrdom attached to those who force the issue by manipulating a situation so as to lead to their own deaths? It is my feeling that for the most part in Christian history there is not, although I would like to return to a historical example in which this was the case and see whether some useful comparisons can be made with contemporary Islam. Christian martyrs may sustain the faith by example, but are not allowed to drive the circumstances leading to their deaths or cause their own deaths lest they be punished eternally as suicides.

In Buddhism we find a more active role on the part of the martyr. From the Lotus Sutra we find this sense of self-sacrifice:

⁷ However, even the radical al-Sawi 12 notes that both the "mangonel" and the "human shield" arguments are weak because they were only allowed in cases of open battle.

O Beflowered by the King of Constellations! If there is one who, opening up his thought . . . if he can burn a finger or even a toe as an offering to a Buddhastupa, he shall exceed one who uses realm or walled city, wife or children, or even all the lands, mountains, forests, rivers, ponds and sundry precious objects in the whole thousand-millionfold world as offerings (Hurvitz 298, thanks to David Gray for this reference; compare Matt. 5:27–30).

As Paul Williams, in his study of Mahayana Buddhism, has stated, this citation is the foundation of the practice of body-burning among East Asian Buddhists. However, these practices appear comparatively rarely attested in the historical sources (Williams 1989, 153–5). One should also note the similarity between this statement and the Qur’anic verse 2:207 “and some people sell themselves for the sake of Allah’s favor” used today to justify suicide attacks.

There are several examples from medieval Christianity that need to be compared with the contemporary status of Islam as perceived by Muslim radicals. Spanish Christianity during the ninth century is known for a movement called “the voluntary martyrs of Cordoba” (see Waltz 1970). Between the years 850–9, after Islam had been dominant on the Iberian Peninsula for about 140 years, a number of monks and Christian leaders voluntarily committed actions they knew would lead to martyrdom, primarily cursing the Prophet Muhammad or impugning his prophethood, in the capital city of Cordoba. Although the numbers were not very great—around a total of 50 over the nine-year period—their spiritual example was a powerful one for Latin Christianity, which was just then beginning to come into its own.

Spanish Christian society during the ninth century was in the process of being assimilated by the Arabic speaking Islamic civilization. Although at this time the number of converts to Islam from Christianity was probably not very large, the foundation was laid for later mass conversion. The language of choice for most intellectuals and even church leaders was Arabic, and the level of admiration for Islamic culture was very high. One of the most famous statements describing Spanish Christianity from this time was made by Paul Albar, who asserted:

Do not all the Christian youths . . . distinguished for their knowledge of Gentile [Muslim] lore, highly regarded for their ability to speak Arabic, do they not all eagerly use the volumes of the Chaldeans [Muslims], read them with the greatest interest, discuss them ardently, and, collecting them with great trouble, make them known with every praise of their tongue, while they are ignorant of the beauty of the Church and look with disgust upon the Church’s rivers of paradise as something vile. Alas! Christians do not know their own law, and Latins do not use their own tongue, so that in the all the college of Christ there will hardly be found one man in a thousand who can send correct letters of greeting to a brother. And a manifold crowd

without number will be found who give out learnedly long sentences of Chaldean [Arabic] rhetoric (Waltz 1970, 153–4).

Several churchmen and intellectuals, led by Albar and Eulogius (both of whom sacrificed themselves during the voluntary martyrdom movement), sought to change this situation by publicly denying the prophethood of Muhammad. This was a capital offense in the eyes of Muslims, but not in the eyes of Christians, most of whom thought privately what the martyrs said publicly. All of those who sought martyrdom achieved it, and although none of them killed anyone other than themselves—unlike contemporary Muslim radicals—I believe the two groups can be compared justly in their effect upon their respective civilizations and historical situations. One scholar writes:

Briefly, then, the significance of the voluntary martyrs of ninth-century Cordoba was the crystallization and exemplification of an ideology that polarized relations between Christianity and Islam, between Latin-Christian and Arabic-Islamic culture into explicit and lasting ideological conflict (Waltz 1970, 229).

This is precisely what is happening at the present time, although of course in reverse. Today it is the civilization of the West (not specifically Christian, but Christian in origin and influence) that is the attractant. If one exchanged the words mentioning "Arabic" and "Chaldean" in Albar's statement above for "Western" and "English" the same would hold true for many places in the Muslim world. Old barriers have broken down to such an extent, according to the perception of the Muslim radicals, that it is necessary to find a polarizing issue through which those boundaries can be recreated. For the ninth-century Christians this issue was the prophethood of Muhammad. There were many other elements of Arabic-Islamic civilization that were congenial to Christians, just as many elements of the Qur'an could speak to Christians (the reverence towards Jesus, etc.). In order to stem the tide of conversion, and the even more insidious cultural dilution of their Christian heritage in favor of the Islamic one, the voluntary martyrs had to highlight the one point about Islam that would cause a negative reaction on the part of Christians. They did this in such a manner as to show that it mattered, that it was worth dying for.

It seems clear that these martyrdoms were intended to be both individual expiation as well as a testimonial to those Spanish Christians who might have been considering converting to Islam. It is striking, however, that in the Spanish case of voluntary martyrdom the results were not what the martyrs had hoped for. They were unable to stanch the flow of conversions to Islam. No doubt the Spanish Christians Albar and Eulogius would have understood contemporary Muslim radicals very well.

Both 8th century Spanish Christians and contemporary Muslim radicals suffered (according to their own perception) marginalization and to a large degree even the contempt of their social betters, who want to live and let live, to take life less seriously, and to emphasize the commonalities between the faiths rather than the differences. For many contemporary Muslims, the radicals are an embarrassment, a group that drags them back to a primitive and stark view of the world (and especially of non-Muslims) with which they are not comfortable. It is of crucial importance, therefore, for the radical Muslims to sacrifice their more moderate brethren, which they regularly do through the process of declaring them to be non-Muslims (*takfir*), and to discredit their spirituality (by placing an inordinate emphasis upon fighting the *jihad* as a salvific action) in order to redraw the boundaries. Perhaps ideally both the voluntary martyrs of Cordoba and the present-day Muslim radicals would like to save as many of their nominal brethren within the boundaries of the faith as they could, but they view the boundaries as more important than being possessed of large numbers of less than completely sincere believers. One should note that radical Muslims have not hesitated to use “martyrdom operations” against fellow Muslims, such as Ahmad Shah Mas‘ud, who expired on September 13, 2001. Despite his heroic participation in the *jihad* against the communists during the 1980s, two Arab radical Muslims were willing to commit suicide just to insure his death. Since the radicals have chosen *jihad* as the criterion for judging a given Muslim’s Islam, and placed a heavy emphasis upon “martyrdom operations,” they appear to be willing to place many Muslims outside the fold in order to achieve their goals.

Returning to the contemporary Muslim material, we find that one of the major *fatwas* enjoining the use of “martyrdom operations,” that written by the Saudi radical shaykh Ibn Jibrin, speaks of them in this manner:

There is no doubt that the suicide [*sic!*] missions in the path of God against the enemies of God, His Messenger [Muhammad] and the enemies of the Muslims are a *noble sacrifice (qurban)* offered by the Muslim to his Lord . . . (Ibn Jibrin, *Fatwas* 4; compare *Masa‘il jihadiyya* 26, of Taj al-Din Hilali, *min afdal al-qarabat al-lati yastwahabuhu sahibuhu ridwan Allah*)

The Qur’anic word *qurban* (linguistically derived from the Hebrew *qorban*, cf. Lev. 7:38, Matt. 15:5) appears to imply that there is a sense of atonement for a sin stemming probably from a sense of perceived failure and humiliation because of the circumstances of Islam in the present world. The radical Muslims judge themselves against the standard of

Qur'an 3:110, which states that the Muslims are the best community that the world has ever seen. Failure to live up to that standard constitutes a sin. Furthermore, we are told by another radical shaykh, Abu Sa'd al-'Amili:

Creation of terror among the enemy is not the only goal—and certainly not a goal in and of itself—but the goal is to proclaim the truth, and that is a goal that is sufficient to move forward with these martyrdom operations. But the goal of the fighter is, as we have said, the attainment of God's favor, and success in entering heaven. His action in this regard constitutes in truth the highest pinnacle of martyrdom, just as *jihad* is the highest pinnacle of Islam (al-'Amili 3).

Therefore, the usefulness of martyrdom operations as a method of proclaiming and demonstrating one's affirmation of the truth, and its worth to the believer, is something that both the voluntary martyrs of Cordoba and the contemporary Muslim radical martyrs share in common. They view their sacrifices as necessary as a result of the perceived low status of the belief system they hold dear, and to shore up the boundaries between Islam and infidelity.

4. Ramifications for Contemporary Islam

After the historical comparison, we must come back to our question: since the glorification and acceptance of martyrdom operations is so great, what (if any) are the ramifications for contemporary Islam? Can we speak of this as a crucial moment in one of world's largest and most successful faiths? It is clear that in this regard there will have to be several different lines of analysis, because the feelings of many Muslims do not coincide with the observations of an outside spectator. The outsider looking at the Muslim world can be impressed by the world-wide reach of the faith, its remarkable, even unique (with the exceptions of Christianity and Marxism), ability to appeal to humanity as a whole. Islam seems more healthy politically than it was 100 years ago, when many Muslims lived under the rule of non-Muslims. As for the practical application of Islam, during the past fifty years more and more Muslims have come to live under the *shari'a* law (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, parts of Nigeria and partially enforced in Libya and Pakistan). But in the economic and technological spheres one can truly say that the Muslim world has little to its credit, and it seems that Muslim intellectual life is vibrant primarily in peripheral or non-Muslim countries where there is freedom of expression.

However, reading Muslim literature, especially radical Muslim literature, one sees an entirely different perspective. Usually the negative

portrayals start with the political state of the Muslim world, and concentrate on the failure to eradicate Israel or to solve other Muslim minority issues (such as those of Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Philippines) to their satisfaction. Frustration concerning the Palestinian issue is a major factor in the development of “martyrdom operations”; we have already noted the preponderance of *fatwas* citing this grievance in the introduction. In their social critiques radical Muslims pay little attention to the number of states or territories voluntarily adopting the *shari‘a*, but they pour a great deal of criticism upon the shortcomings of the states which have done so. This critique is usually based upon a holistic understanding of the Divine Law; it is not enough that it be imposed partially or over a period of time. It must be imposed immediately and in its totality (there is little thought given to the question of what to do if this proves not to be a solution to the Muslim world’s problems). As a result of these types of critiques there is a great deal of self-flagellation over the lack of absolute Muslim unity and little focus upon that which exists.

With these two different analyses in mind, what does the glorification of “martyrdom operations” achieve for the contemporary Muslim world? One must say that they do erase shame and humiliation, and restore perceived lost honor, at least in the eyes of those Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders who tend to speak out. With such a negative self-assessment as previously described, one could come to the conclusion that there is nothing of any worth in contemporary Islamic civilization. “Martyrdom operations” show that there is something worth dying for. However, unfortunately this is accomplished by a means that is again very self-flagellatory in nature. This can be easily seen by noting the comments and messages left by martyrs (oftentimes played for the media in the wake of their operations). Usually these messages are very accusatory, referring to their self-sacrifices as being necessary to compensate for the lack of courage and heroism in the present-day Muslim world. Several representative examples can suffice. Ahmad al-Haznawi, one of the September 11, 2001 hijackers, left such an accusatory message (msnbc, April 16, 2002), as did his fellow ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-‘Umari. In the Palestinian context, Ayat al-Akhras, a young woman who blew herself up on March 29, 2002 in an Israeli supermarket in Jerusalem, stated that “now even women are martyring themselves for the Palestinian cause. Where are the Arab leaders?” (cited by Eric Silver, *The Independent*, March 30, 2002) In other words, the last words or analyses of the motivations of the martyrs oftentimes affirm a negative judgment; even if the actions themselves are sacrificial, they are self-sacrificial, not a communal sacrifice (although perhaps some would wish them to be). In some ways these martyrs are using their actions to tell the Muslim world what it wants to hear, and what it wants to hear is that everything is on the

verge of destruction.⁸ This message is also echoed by those who justify "martyrdom operations" after the fact. However, in their interpretation, what is self-sacrificial from the personal standpoint of the "martyr" becomes service to the larger cause of Islam. For example concerning the September 11 attackers, the al-Qa'ida proclamation states

The only motive for these youths was to defend the religion of God, their honor and their sanctity—not in service to humanity nor in service to any ideology whether eastern or western—but in service to Islam, and in defense of its people by their pure intentions, willingly not coerced. This [mission] was also given as a message to all the enemies of the [Muslim] community in that we will strike with an iron fist the heads of our enemies despite their strength and our weakness. It was also given especially at this time because it verifies to the community that is living in distress in every place in these days that the only way to salvation from this humiliation is the sword. The enemy does not understand any language other than this (Proclamation 1).

The question, therefore, is one of power and lack thereof, together with the perceived humiliation of not being at the center of the world stage.

There are a number of other, more negative ramifications to "martyrdom operations" that must be brought out, among them the manner in which they are justified in Muslim law. It is clear from a reading of Muslim law that "martyrdom operations," especially of the usual variety directed against civilians, should never have even come up for discussion, let alone become so widely accepted (for example, Malik b. Anas 278–9 [nos 980–3] details the reasons why one should not attack women and children even if they are participating in open warfare against Muslims). For this acceptance Muslim religious leaders bear a heavy responsibility. Few have stood out against these types of operations, and those few, as previously demonstrated, have mostly recanted or fallen silent, to a large degree because of political opposition to either Israel or the United States. But in fact, it is entirely irrelevant what someone's opinion of Israel or the United States or any of the enemies of radical Islam—or even Muslims in general—is in this regard. Obviously Muslim law, like any religious law, should be trying to make the world conform to its higher standards, and not descend to the lowest level possible on the simple justification that the enemy is a cruel one or that necessity demands it. Therefore, the stance of the religious leaders should be one of

⁸ Stated regularly by even mainstream Muslims, but much more among radicals: see, e.g., Safar al-Hawali, "Open Letter to President Bush," at azzam.com (October 10, 2001); and Hamud b. 'Uqla al-Shu'aybi, "Fatwa on Events Following 11 Sept. 2001," at azzam.com (November 30, 2001).

raising the discourse and standards, not of following after the whims of the blood-thirsty mob. It is also clear that by issuing *fatwas* in support of martyrdom operations against Israel, establishment or governmental figures such as al-Tantawi and al-Qaradawi have opened a Pandora's Box they cannot control. Once these legal justifications are in existence they cannot be retracted. One should note that radical Muslims poured scorn upon both al-Tantawi and al-Qaradawi after their "retractions" in the wake of September 11. It is far from clear that anyone actually paid attention to these retractions in any case (other than to make fun of the haste with which both denounced the "martyrdom operations" they had previously supported so fervently), and when both leaders retracted their retractions in the spring of 2002, it seems clear that they were only affirming what was popular in the Arab Muslim world (support for "martyrdom operations" against Israel). The whole episode called into question their sense of leadership.

One is driven to ask in the wake of watching Muslims destroy their own standards with regard to war-making, how can an outsider have confidence in Muslim justice when even basic standards laid out in the Qur'an and the traditions are flouted, not only by the populace, but by the religious leadership that knows better, in supporting "martyrdom operations"? Does the embrace of "martyrdom operations" cheapen Islam itself as a whole when so few are willing to stand up and critique them? One looks in vain among those few such as Ibn 'Uthaymin who have consistently opposed "martyrdom operations" for some moral revulsion at the tactic; instead all the critique seems to center around the lack of Islamic legal precedent and questions concerning the tactical and strategic achievements of "martyrdom operations." Consider the radical "Proposed Draft Constitution for a Muslim State," penned by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani and circulated widely in Europe among radical circles (article 180):

Ends do not justify the means, because the method is integral to the thought. Thus, the [necessary action] (*wajib*) and the permitted [action] (*mubah*) cannot be attained by performing the forbidden action (*haram*). Political means must not contradict the political methods (Nabhani 2000).

It would be a positive development to see one of the distinguished religious leaders confront the issues raised by this statement. Since suicide attacks or "martyrdom operations" are designed to pave the way for a caliphate pan-Islamic state (at least according to the radical Muslims), one must ask whether they create the pre-conditions for this type of a state to exist. Presumably such a state would be founded upon the *shari'a*; how would that be possible when the methods by which it would be (putatively) achieved blatantly contradict the *hadith* literature and make the illegal lawful? These questions need to be considered by

radical Muslims before they invent law that makes a mockery of Islamic tradition.

What place do "martyrdom operations" give Islam in the world? During his so-called "final speech" (released by alned.com), Usama b. Ladin enumerated some of the benefits that Muslims have seen from the September 11 attacks. In his words,

these events have clarified a number of extremely important issues for Muslims, as it has become completely clear that the West in general, and America at its head, carry an unimaginable "crusader" hatred for Islam (Bin Ladin).

Clearly suicide attacks do actually have the effect Bin Ladin has described. They create (or recreate) boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims, just as the "voluntary martyrs of Cordoba" did for Spanish Christianity. Since Bin Ladin wanted to discover hatred for Islam in the United States, that is what he discovered (he ignores the possibility that the means he used to discern the hatred he sees—the terror attacks—might have also caused it).

However, one must ask: what is the strategic point of it all? Violence for political or religious purposes has to be kept within certain bounds or its effect rebounds upon the perpetrator. If there is no cultural understanding as to the reason why the attack occurred in the first place then the action merely creates boundaries between those who accept the action as meritorious and those who see it as murder. This attitude can easily be seen with regard to September 11. The al-Qa'ida spokesman Sulayman Abu Ghayth stated in his article "Under the Shadow of the Lances" that America owed the Muslim world 4 million dead (among other things), and that the operation of September 11 was merely in response for the destruction of the al-Amiriyya shelter (in Baghdad) during the Gulf War in 1991 during the course of which approximately 5000 civilians were killed (Abu Ghayth, part II, partial trans. memri.org, Special Dispatch no. 388, June 12, 2002, trans. above is mine).

It is self-evident that the logic of this equivalence will be rejected by Americans, who will either not make this connection or reject it once it is pointed out to them. Simply put, the "martyrdom operation" is generally a failure as a moral statement or as a political advertisement to large numbers of people (however, it is occasionally a success with regard to small groups of malcontents). Its perpetrators will simply be seen as murderers or crazed fanatics (which as we will see below is not necessarily the case), and the action will provoke revulsion and horror rather than the understanding and publicity terrorists seek to achieve. Several statements by prominent radical Muslims should be examined in this regard. Abu 'Ubayd al-Qurashi (who the pro-Iraqi London-based daily *al-Quds al-'Arabi* identified as a close associate of Usama b. Ladin)

wrote an article called “From Munich to New York.” In this article he compared the relative significance of the 1972 attack upon the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics to that of the September 11, 2001 martyrdom operation. He states:

While the Munich operation failed to accomplish its goals, the New York raid was very well planned, and accomplished its planners’ goals in full . . . Unlike the Munich operation which was limited and had limited national demands, the New York raid had broad goals and aspirations; it rang the bells of restoring Arab and Islamic glory as a whole . . . They did not aspire to gain Western sympathy; rather, they sought to expose the American lie and deceit to the peoples of the world—and foremost to the Islamic peoples (Abu ‘Ubayd al-Qurashi, at memri.org, Special Dispatch no. 353, March 12, 2002).

Therefore, there is a propaganda element to the martyrdom operation, but it is not directed at the United States or any Western audience at all. In the “Videotape of Usama b. Ladin” the latter states concerning this problem and reveals his understanding of the significance of the September 11, 2001 martyrdom operation:

Those youth who conducted the operations did not accept any *fiqh* [law] in the popular terms, but they accepted the *fiqh* that the Prophet Muhammad brought. Those young men . . . said in deeds, in New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere in the world. The speeches are understood by both Arabs and non-Arabs, even the Chinese . . . this event made people think, which benefited Islam greatly (Videotape transcript, CNN version, released December 13, 2001).

Here we see one of the cruxes of the proclamation of *jihad* to the world. Radical Muslims see the method of suicide attacks as one of the best advertisements they can use. As noted, it points the finger directly at Islam, and states (at least in their view) that this is a faith worth dying for (of course, it can have the opposite effect as well). Bin Ladin and the shaykh with whom he was conversing elaborate on the number of converts in the wake of September 11 and feel that a wave of conversions occurred as a result of the martyrdom operation. This is by no means certain; however, merely the fact that they associate the two processes—victory in the world with widespread advertisement and subsequent conversion to Islam—shows their mindset. According to their perpetrators the attacks demonstrate that Islam is strong, overcoming the previous (and present) time of humiliation, and therefore people will want to convert. Power is the method by which the faith will be uplifted; suicide attacks demonstrate power and therefore are to the benefit of Islam as a whole.

This raises the question of the obvious strains and struggles within Islam. Clearly radical Muslims have some advantages in their struggle

for supremacy within Islam. They are not tied to any government (with the exception of the Taliban), they live lives of denial and asceticism, they are doing something about the situation of Islam rather than beating their breasts in despair, and they proclaim their love for Islam (and Muslims who believe as they do) at every juncture. "Martyrdom operations" strengthen this impression because of the inherent selflessness of the action. However, the strategy behind "martyrdom operations" makes many Muslims uneasy, not to mention the questionable methods. Therefore, radical Muslims in their struggle to redefine Islam must obtain victory as the result of their methods or else the methods will not stand up to close examination. Only a final and obvious achievement as a result of "martyrdom operations" could prevent Muslims from eventually questioning these tactics.

5. Conclusions

Suicide attacks present Islam in a way that is extremely favorable to radical Muslims. They contrast the self-sacrificial nature of the operation with the life of ease lived by their more moderate government-supported Muslim opponents. The attacks provide the Muslim world with the spectacle of cheap, easy victories that are supposed to even out the score with the enemy—even though they do not really touch the core of the enemy's power. And they invite the revulsion and hatred of precisely those sectors of world opinion that radical Islam most despises and wants other Muslims to despise as well. Within the larger context of the Islamic revival the issue of "martyrdom operations" is important. *Jihad* and *da'wa* (proclamation) are two parts of a whole; the methods chosen for one have ramifications for the other. Self-sacrificing actions such as "martyrdom operations" are designed to highlight and augment the relative worth of the belief for which the sacrifice is being made (Islam). It is clear that the appearance of "martyrdom operations" tells us that there is a crisis of self-worth afflicting large sections of the Muslim world, most especially its core. This lack of self-worth is compensated for by martyrdom operations. As Ghazi al-Ghusaybi, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United Kingdom, wrote recently:

May Allah witness that you are martyrs,
[May the] Prophet and righteous men witness to that
You died to glorify the Word of my God . . .
Did you commit suicide?
No! We are those who committed suicide,
In a life where the dead are still living
(memri.org, Special Dispatch series no. 372 with some of my modifications).

It is clear that the contrast being drawn here is that suicide attackers are dead, but living, while the Muslim community at large is living but dead.

This is closely derived from the famous Qur'anic verse 3:169: "And do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are living with their Lord, well-provided for" (also 2:154). However, neither this verse nor classical Muslim thought brings the angle employed by the Saudi ambassador: that Muslims who are still alive are at a somewhat lesser spiritual level than those who are dead. With regard to the specific phenomenon of Palestinian martyrdom operations, they should also be seen within this larger Muslim "martyrdom complex," even if individual cases might be driven by vengeance or despair. In general, Palestinian suicide attacks have occurred either at points during which radical Muslims would see boundaries breaking down (negotiations, concessions on the Palestinian side, feelings of humiliation) or as revenge. The appearance of martyrdom operations should coincide precisely with those elements or influences that are deemed to be the most damaging to the boundaries between Islam and the rest of the world. Israel, during the period of the Oslo negotiations (1993–2001), attempted to win legitimacy for itself, which constituted a clear danger to the boundaries between Islam and infidelity. Likewise, the temptation of American culture constituted (and continues to constitute) a danger, hence the attacks of September 11.

One of the likely consequences of the continued glorification of suicide attacks in Arabic-language and Urdu-language Islam will be the breakdown of the strong Muslim taboo against suicide in other contexts. Pakistani scholars have already noted an upsurge in actual suicides, and the prevalence of suicide attempts among the Guantanamo Bay prisoners confirms this suspicion. This latter group, taken from the most ideologically motivated globalist radical Muslim prisoners, has had an incredibly high suicide attempt rate. News reports indicate that between 31–34 attempts have been made out of approximately 600 prisoners, or between 5–6% of the total number. Given the fact that the conditions at the prison camp are not extraordinarily harsh when compared with prisons where radical Muslims have been kept for years (oftentimes under appalling conditions of torture), the suicide rate is interesting (BBC, February 14, 2003; pentagonnews.com, September 4, 2003). Most probably the attempted suicides were unable to keep the line between the glorification of "martyrdom operations" and actual suicide that the "Islamic Ruling concerning the Permissibility of Martyrdom Operations" made clear. Having been fed a diet of praise for suicide attacks for a number of years, this response to imprisonment has most logically presented itself in a very powerful manner. One expects that this trend will continue and should be investigated in the larger Muslim community—which

has also been receiving an inordinate concentration of praise for suicide attacks, albeit in a less focused manner.

This close connection between suicide and suicide attacks or "martyrdom operations" raises the question of motivation for the suicide attackers of September 11. Scholars (McCaulkey 11) have examined the possible motivations of the September 11 attackers. The possibilities seem clear: they are psychopaths, they are driven by strong emotions such as hatred or anger, or group frustration or love. Rightly they dismissed the idea that suicide attackers are psychopaths, and anger and hatred do not appear to be prime motivational factors either. In examining the words of the attackers themselves and their political and religious mentors the issue of humiliation and perceived failure is the largest component in deciding upon these operations. Love and devotion to Islam, together with frustration over the humiliation and degradation being suffered by Muslims in the contemporary world are the major elements in their world-view. Of course, one must understand that for pan-Islamists this type of humiliation will be felt at any time other than when Islam is the dominant political, religious, cultural, technological and economical power in the world. The fact that radical Muslims see none of these fulfilled or even close to being fulfilled constitutes a negation of their belief-system.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that martyrs are usually drawn from the educated stratum of Muslim society (like Albar and Eulogius among the Spanish Christians). It is precisely among this group that the tension and sense of humiliation is the strongest, and the need to affirm one's love and devotion to Islam the strongest. Highlighting the faith and civilization they love by dying for it is truly the highest goal in life. Precisely this group of people will be most anxious to demonstrate to the outside world their rejection of its values, and will even revel in the revulsion their actions cause. This for them will affirm that they are indeed on the right path. The more they see Islamic civilization humiliated and degraded the stronger their need to show their absolute devotion through ever more extravagant displays of loyalty.

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