Martyrdom in Islam

In recent times Islamic martyrdom has become associated with suicide missions conducted by extremists. However, as David Cook demonstrates, this type of martyrdom is very different from the classical definition, which condemned suicide and stipulated that anyone who died as a believer could be considered a martyr. Ideas about martyrdom have evolved to suit prevailing circumstances, and it is the evolution of these different interpretations that Cook charts in this fascinating history of the role of suffering and people’s willingness to die as a testimony to their faith. The book covers the earliest sources, including those from the Jewish and Christian traditions, discussions about what constituted martyrdom, differences in attitudes between Sunnis and Shi’ites, the role of martyrdom in conversion and the literary manifestations of romantic martyrdom. A concluding section discusses martyrdom in today’s radical environment. There is no other book which considers the topic so systematically, and which draws so extensively on the Arabic and Persian sources, as well as on Muslim literature from across the world. This will be essential reading for students of Islamic history, and for those looking for an informed account of this controversial topic.

David Cook is Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at Rice University. He has written Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic (2002), Understanding Jihad (2005) and Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature (2005).
THEMES IN ISLAMIC HISTORY comprises a range of titles exploring different aspects of Islamic history, society and culture by leading scholars in the field. Books are thematic in approach, offering a comprehensive and accessible overview of the subject. Generally, surveys treat Islamic history from its origins to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, although some offer a more developed analysis of a particular period, or project into the present, depending on the subject-matter. All the books are written to interpret and illuminate the past, as gateways to a deeper understanding of Islamic civilization and its peoples.

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Martyrdom in Islam

David Cook

*Rice University*
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Dedicated to Professor Fred M. Donner

Appreciated by all who have studied with him, an example to all in our field.
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Glossary

Arabic diacritics follow the style used in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* with standard modifications as used in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

In Arabic names, Abdallah b. al-Mubarak may also be given as Ibn al-Mubarak.

‘Ajami any non-Arabic language, in the classical period usually Persian

*Allahu akbar*! “God is greater!” (popular Muslim exclamation)

*ana al-haq* “I am the Truth” or “I am [one with] the Truth” (saying associated with al-Hallaj)

*al-`araf* “The Barrier” mentioned in the Qur’an

*Ashab al-`ukhdud* the Companions of the Pit, from Qur’an 85:4–9

*ashrat al-sa`a* the Portents of the Hour of Judgment

*ayyam al-`Arab* the heroic stories and poetry of pre-Islamic battle-days

*baraka* blessing that is bestowed by Sufi holy men and women (often after death)

*darwish* (in English, *dervish*) virtually synonymous with Sufi

*du`a al-mazlum* the prayer of the wronged person

*fatwa* a legal opinion given by a qualified expert

*hadith* the record of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad

*hajj* the pilgrimage to Mecca

*hijra* emigration (usually the emigration to Medina, but also one of the stages of *jihad*)

*hijri* the lunar calendar based upon the date of the *hijra* from 622

*houris* (in Arabic *al-hur al-`in*) the women of paradise given to the martyrs for their pleasure

*al-Isra` wa-l-mi`raj* the Night Journey and Ascension into Heaven by the Prophet Muhammad

*Ithna’ ashariyya* (also vocalized *Isna` Ashariyya*) the Twelver (majority) branch of Shi’ism

*jihad* divinely sanctioned warfare with the objective of either expanding Islam or defending it
Glossary

jizya the poll tax to be paid by non-Muslims (Jews and Christians) in a Muslim state
kafir/kuffar/kafirun infidels, non-Muslims
Khuda (Persian) God
Mahdi the Muslim messianic figure
Malfuzat literally, dictations
Maqatil literature literature recording prominent violent deaths or martyrdoms
al-maqtul the one who was killed
mihna the tribulation, historically the period between 833–47 in which the Mu'tazila interrogated prominent Sunnis as to their belief in the doctrine of the creation of the Qur'an
al-Mu'allaqat the seven pre-Islamic Odes supposedly suspended on the Ka'ba
muhtasib the town censor, who regulated the public domain to make sure Islamic norms were upheld
murabit one who guards the boundaries of Islam in a ribat
mustada'fun oppressed
mustakbirun proud, arrogant, haughty
nikaya terror
qadi a judge
raka'a prostration (in the Muslim prayer)
ribat a location on the borders of Islam used for the purposes of guarding
sa'alik vagabonds, used pejoratively of Sufis
sabr patience, submission to the will of God
Salam peace, the greeting Muslims exchange between each other
sati the Hindu practice of widow immolation
sayyid al-shuhada' the lord of martyrs (traditionally Hamza)
siddiqin truthful people
shahada the Muslim confession of faith “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”
shahid, (plural shuhada') a martyr, one who testifies to something
shari'a the Divine Law of Sunni Islam
shirk associating other beings or creatures with the one God, the primal sin in Islam
shuhada' al-mahabba the martyrs of love
sunnah the Way of the Prophet Muhammad, the basis for Sunni Islam
sura a section of the Qur'an
talib al-'ilm a student, a seeker of knowledge
al-Tawwabun The Penitents, historically a group that appeared in 683
ta'ziya a passion play in Shi'ite Islam to commemorate the martyrdom of al-Husayn
Glossary

topoi literary tropes that are understood for their symbolic value and are not to be taken literally
‘ulama the religious leadership of Islam
umma the community of all Muslims
wali a friend (of God), mainly in the Sufi tradition
zalimun tyrants
zuhd asceticism
Chronology

ca. 305–70 BCE, the Selucid Empire
ca. 167 BCE, the martyrdom of Eleazar and the beginnings of the Maccabean revolt
ca. 70 BCE–475 CE, the Roman Empire
ca. 30 CE, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ
115, the martyrdom of Polycarp
ca. 300–1453, the Byzantine Empire
ca. 610–22, the beginnings of the ministry of Muhammad in Mecca
622, the hijra to Medina
624, the Battle of Badr
625, the Battle of Uhud (martyrdom of Hamza)
627, the Battle of the Khandaq
630, the conquest of Mecca
632, the death of Muhammad
634–732, the great Muslim conquests
661, the assassination of ‘Ali
661–747, the Umayyad Dynasty (ruling from Damascus)
680, the martyrdom of al-Husayn
682, the martyrdom of ‘Uqba b. Nafi’ by the Berbers
747–1258, the ‘Abbasid Dynasty (ruling from Baghdad)
754, the murder of Abu Muslim
833–47, the mihna, during which Ibn Hanbal was beaten
922, the martyrdom of al-Hallaj
1031, the raids on India by Mahmud of Ghazna
1131, the martyrdom of ‘Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani
1191, the martyrdom of Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi
1273, the death of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi
thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, the foundation of the great Sufi brotherhoods
1490s (?) Kabir active in India
1490–1500 (?) Siti Jenar active in Indonesia
1492, the formal expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain
ca. 1517–1924, the Ottoman Dynasty (ruling from Constantinople, Istanbul)
1529–43, the Ethiopian jihad
1592–93, the murder of the scholars of Timbuktu
1609–14, the final expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain
1658–1707, Aurengzeb rules India
1804–12, the Fulani jihad in northern Nigeria under Shehu Usuman Dan Fodio
1881–85, the Mahdi in the Sudan
1948, the foundation of the state of Israel
1967, the Six-Day War
1979–92, the Afghan jihad
1980–88, the Iran–Iraq War
1987–93, the First Intifada of the Palestinians
1992–95, the Bosnian–Herzegovinian War
1999–, the Chechen War
2000–04, the Second Intifada of the Palestinians
September 11, 2001, attack on New York and Washington, DC, by al-Qa'ida