Introduction

The study discusses the important role of convictions and the belief in a cause to the point of dying for them, as manifested in modern Islamic discourse, while exploring their sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Martyrdom in this context is to be understood mainly as a violent death in response to religious or other persecution, by execution, or in the battlefield during wartime.

Conviction is necessary in human life. It gives meaning to human conduct and provides answers to the central questions of life.[1] Western thought, however, has tended to minimize the ideal of self-sacrifice for a higher goal or perception. Rationalism, together with an individual-centered focus, evoked a perception of self-sacrifice as a form of mental disturbance or as stemming from a sense of futility. Arnold Toynbee observed that the hedonistic approach to life, symbolized by the adage "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," points to the centrality of the ego in human purpose, which he viewed as the main source of evil. By contrast, he wrote, altruism and working for the benefit of the collective has become the province of a minority who possess a strong sense of self-discipline.[2]

Another rational approach, put forward by Freud, was a refutation of the notion of immortality, namely that upon dying the human being passes on to another sphere of being. Death, he held, is final. Afterward there is nothing. Religion is a false and deceptive magic, he argued, and the notion of immortality that it harbors reflects the height of human vapidity in its

---

[1] See Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction: A Sociological Analysis* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 1–2.

[2] Richard L. Gage (ed.), *Choose Life: A Dialogue – Arnold Toynbee and Disaku Lkeda* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 23, 245–246, 304–309.

1

effort to deny the fact of termination in death.[3] Ironically, however, instead of fading, the phenomenon of martyrs, and the commemoration of them, has survived in modern times.

Martyrdom appeared in earliest human history. The religions of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Greece contained the seeds of the notions of good and evil, and of heroism. Judaism in the Maccabean period adopted the notion of a struggle against evil for the sake of monotheism. Hellenism introduced a personal dimension to this ideology in the image of the ascetic philosopher. Eastern Christianity created the model of the warrior-hero, as did Islam, which promised immortality, absolution from sins, exemption from Judgment Day, and the attribute of communicating with the prophets.

Manifestations of martyrdom continued well into the modern era. Random examples are kamikaze pilots who dived into American fleets and exploded with their planes during the Second World War, self-immolation by Buddhist monks in Vietnam in protest against the American occupation in the 1960s, soldiers in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who died in hunger strikes in British jails in the 1970s and early 1980s, and activists in liberation movements in the Middle East and the Third World.

Various theories explain why people die for their beliefs. One centers on the presence of persecution and tyranny, especially in reference to classic martyrdom. This theory holds that martyrdom appears where rulers make extreme demands on their subjects, evoking anger and opposition. Another theory – the theory of honor – focuses on social degradation. When people are degraded, their dignity and self-esteem become a primary priority. Other, essentially psychological explanations include the theory of group imitation and competition, as well as the theory of psychological aberration – that is, self-destruction. Yet another theory, emphasizing cultural heritage, views martyrdom as a built-in cultural norm influenced by faith, rituals, folk art, literature, and symbols. Lastly, the theory of social control points to the ability of the group to retain the loyalty of its members and preserve their allegiance to collective norms.[4]

DEFINING MARTYRDOM

Etymologically, a martyr is a witness. In the Christian context, the apostles were witnesses to Christ's acts and sayings, and in early Christian history

---

[3] Quoted from Israel Oron, *Death, Immortality and Ideology* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2002), p. 33 (in Hebrew).

[4] Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, pp. 13–24.

the term related to the significance of testimony to religious belief. In the wake of persecution by the Romans, the term became associated with persons who were executed or otherwise died for their faith. It had a purely religious meaning: it did not apply to ethnic or political strife or to criminals who were executed. Only in the sixteenth-century Reformation period did the term take on a broader meaning, applying to persons who died or were tortured either for a religious or a political cause.

Every culture, whether ancient or modern, has a pantheon of heroes who can fit the notion of martyr. Martyrdom can be attained in various ways, including choosing suffering or death over giving up faith or a principle, torture or execution for holding a defiant view, or painful suffering for a long time. The term "martyr" thus embraces a range of behaviors and motivations. Some martyrs actively choose suffering and death, whereas others passively accept death that is forced on them. Some martyrs have a clearly articulated viewpoint; others do not.

Socialization and group pressure, which support the martyr in a steadfast ratification of a goal and a readiness for self-sacrifice to attain it, play an important role in motive. In this respect, norms of self-sacrifice are more influential in collectivist cultures than in other cultures. Additionally, model leaders and other charismatic figures contribute to social influence. The more numerous the acts of self-sacrifice, the greater the likelihood that such acts will become a norm. From the collective point of view, the self-sacrifice of the individual adds quality, morality, and positive values to the group.[5]

Methodologically, such reciprocity between micro and macro history – between the personal and the collective – as reflected in social and cultural norms provides the context in which every individual functions, adopting all or some of its cultural attributes or building an alternative version based on them.[6] This is also true of martyrs, who are witnesses to the viability of their community and thereby also fill the role of social overseer.

Martyrdom is an effective tool for the formation of groups or the reinforcement of existing groups. In a confrontation with another, stronger group, martyrs can unify their community, heighten its coherence, and

---

[5] Ibid., pp. 72–76; Riddle, *The Martyrs*; also Ariel Merari, *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 263–269.

[6] Edmund Burke and David N. Yaghoubian, "Middle Eastern Societies and Ordinary People's Lives," in idem (eds.), *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), pp. 1–32; also Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It," *Critical Inquiry* 20/1 (1993), pp. 10–35.

reinforce its resistance. Martyrdom engenders a politicization of the relationship between rival groups while imbuing the political contest between them with lofty significance. Such an example of dramatic persuasion in the public space creates a convictional community, expanding the potential for the recruitment of more members and delegitimizing other ideologies, especially that of the rival group. In short, martyrs function as a mechanism for the ideological erosion of the other.

In this sense, the act of martyrdom must be a public act, or at least highly publicized thereafter, so as to reinforce the members of the group while challenging the legitimacy of the empowered side. Stories or legends about the martyrs become a canonical tradition utilized for solidarity and indoctrination even after the attainment of political gains.

Martyrdom represents an attempt to break through the ideological and social boundaries between rival groups through an act of heroism. Death is depicted as a victory in battle, for although the hero's body has been defeated, his/her spirit was not broken.

The heroism of martyrdom is closely associated with the notion of altruism. Self-sacrifice is an altruistic act that runs counter to the human instinct for survival. The martyr could avoid death, but accepts it with determination and even seeks it. The contribution of the individual who sacrifices him/herself for the collective is reflected in his/her readiness to fill a double role: as sacrificer and sacrifice. His/her altruistic death harbors two symbolic aspects: strength and purity. It represents self-discipline and self-mastery, as well as redemptive suffering, with the venue of the act of obliteration located in the public space for all to see. In this sense, the lives of saints or ascetics are often less dramatic than the deaths of martyrs.

The sociologist Émile Durkheim, the first topologist in the field of suicide, emphasized group processes and the importance of cultural institutions as determinants of behavior, perceiving self-sacrifice as a radical expression of group solidarity. In his seminal work, *On Suicide* (1897), he coined the term "altruistic suicide," by which the individual, as an organic part of the social group, sacrifices self and individual needs for the sake of the group out of a sense of identification with its collective values. By placing ideology above physical survival, martyrdom ratifies the superiority of values over personal being and signifies the ultimate assimilation of a truth that is perceived as the true essence of life. This perception differs from egoistic suicide, which results from unfulfilled narcissist yearnings or from discouragement resulting from a failure to find a raison d'être in life. It also differs from anomic suicide stemming from loneliness and alienation from society, especially in periods of economic disaster, family

catastrophe, or cultural disorientation. Whereas in the egoistic and anomic cases society is an insufficient presence in life, in the altruistic case society regulates life effectively.[7] The philosopher Bertrand Russell perceived self-sacrifice as part of an impersonal view of the world in which "man feels his ego to be but a small part of the world," a view that is one of the components of bravery. In this outlook, Russell observed, "unknown both to the voluptuary and to the ascetic, personal death appears a trivial matter," with the borders of the "I" expanding to encompass the collective.[8]

In repressed societies with little political power, such as the Jews during the Hellenist period or the early Christians in the Roman era, martyrdom forges authority, escalates the struggle, reinforces the ranks, legitimizes the alternative culture, and creates a sense of differentiation and animosity vis-à-vis the enemy. Moreover, martyrs motivate their society to adopt a position of self-determination regarding political and cultural freedom. Martyrdom induces a social pact sealed in blood. Historically, to quote Samuel Klausner, a minority and powerless society "that values individual life above group survival and above its cultural survival is not ready to become self-determining."[9]

Although some martyrs, such as in early Christianity, refused to use physical violence against their enemies, martyrdom is not generally passively submissive. The nonviolent martyr uses psychological warfare against the enemy, seeking to challenge the legitimacy of the enemy's authority.[10] The early Christians prompted violence against themselves but responded only by exerting psychological and moral pressure against the enemy. However, there were also combative Christian communities, such as the Christians in the wake of Constantine's victory in the fourth century. The Muslims under the Umayyads in the eighth century are another example of combative religious communities. Martyrs in such societies were activists who helped the group expand its influence and authority, contesting their rivals.[11]

The community, for its part, imbues such acts with an ideology that focuses on the significance of life with an affinity for death, emphasizing

[7] Émile Durkheim, *On Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (new ed., New York: The Free Press, 1966), mainly pp. 145–240, 271–276, 297–300.
[8] Bertrand Russell, *On Education* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), pp. 38–39.
[9] See also Samuel Klausner, "Martyrdom," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 9 (1987), p. 233.
[10] Ibid., p. 231.
[11] Ibid., pp. 232–234; also Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).

the sanctity of the mission and the satanic character of the enemy. The community also controls martyrdom, setting the rules for acts of martyrdom and defining the values that merit self-sacrifice, so as to prevent it from spreading beyond what is required.[12]

A loss of control over martyrdom, such as in the Judean provinces at the end of the first century BC, was destructive for Jewish autonomy, while a similar loss of control during the Bar-Kokhba uprising of 132–135 led to the destruction of the Temple. These destructive events shifted the center of Jewish population to the Diaspora. During the Middle Ages, Jews were a minority group in Islamic lands from the Arabian peninsula to Spain, as well as in the Christian states of Europe. Periodically, pressure was exerted on them to convert, prompting rabbinical disputations on the topic of martyrdom. The Talmudic rabbis constricted martyrdom, limiting it only to situations of forced violation of the prohibition of idol worship, incest or adultery, and murder. In a similar vein, Maimonides, warning that the death of a martyr is an automatic death sentence for all his relatives, sought to limit the possibilities of martyrdom. Maimonides' view was that only under extreme pressure was self-sacrifice allowed. Otherwise, he advised submission.[13]

Islam, too, forbade the believer to seek death. A death wish (*talab al-shahada*) even on the battlefield was viewed as too similar to suicide in the opinion of Muslim jurists. Rules were set for martyrdom. For example, candidates who could not stand up to the mission or to the enemy, or could not be trusted regarding whether their motivation was purely voluntary, should not be encouraged. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) set formal parameters for participation in jihad: age, marital status, and attitude toward danger, namely a *shahid* is forbidden to recoil from battle or danger in cases when the enemy force is up to twice that of his own soldiers, but should withdraw if the proportion is any larger.[14] In modern times Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963) ruled that jihad should be mounted in three circumstances only: to repel aggression, defend the mission of Islam, or defend Muslims' freedom of religion in non-Muslim lands.[15]

[12] Yael Zerubavel, "Battle, Self-sacrifice, Sacrifice: Recompense in the Ideology of Patriotic Self-sacrifice in Israel," in Avner Ben-Amos and Daniel Bar-Tal (eds.), *Patriotism: Homeland Love* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004), pp. 61–62 (in Hebrew).

[13] David Hartman, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985), pp. 13–207.

[14] Klausner, "Martyrdom," pp. 235–236; Donald W. Riddle, *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).

[15] Shaltut quoted in Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), pp. 59–101.

During wartime, death on the battlefield elicits glorification. Men who die in this way are viewed as perfect – young, unstained heroes honored by commemorative ceremonies. Heroic self-sacrifice distinguishes not only the individual but also the entire social body by differentiating the "we" (the men) from "them" (the women). Thus, a political community molded by gender division and male dominance is created based on fallen men who sacrificed themselves while displaying military prowess.[16] In some cases, martyrdom can also be viewed as part of a contest over political supremacy in the community, with the death of martyrs in the struggle against the external enemy serving the struggle against political rivals from within as well. The martyr thus fills a dual purpose by delegitimizing the enemy outside while consolidating the status of his/her group in the community.[17]

As the preceding discussion shows, the martyr reinforces communal and national identity, especially in crisis situations. Since the martyr can no longer speak, his/her mission now shifts to his/her representatives, who deal with the politics of martyrdom. The martyr becomes part of the community's official memory. He/she is presented as someone who, by a publicly witnessed death, conveyed a deterrent message of determination, commitment, and non-submission to the enemy while simultaneously serving as a model worthy of imitation and a recruitment agent of future martyrs.

The martyr becomes a mythological figure who stimulates the commemoration of revolutionary goals and stirs deep feelings. These feelings provide legitimation and significance to the declared goal.[18] Indeed, the martyr has no existence without memorialization, commemoration, and narration. In fact, most of the people who sacrifice their lives are not necessarily martyrs. Most do not acquire, or do not retain, an implacable faith in the face of a threat to their life. Total commitment is not widespread in reality. Often, martyrs are hesitant, and the circumstances of self-sacrifice are forced on them. Their faith might be weakened by torture and imprisonment. Narratives are therefore necessary. They imbue martyrs

[16] Carolyn Marvin and David W. Inge, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64/4 (1996), pp. 767–780.

[17] Klausner, "Martyrdom," pp. 231–232. See also Valérie Rosoux's examination of the political use of national martyrs in France, "The Politics of Martyrdom," in Rona M. Fields et al. (ed.), *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology and Politics of Self-sacrifice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), pp. 83–116.

[18] Christian Szyska, "Martyrdom: A Drama of Foundation and Tradition," in Friederike Pannewick (ed.), *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity* (Wiesdanden: Reichert, 2004), pp. 29–46.

with significance and influence. As sociologist Ronald Kassimer writes, "Martyrs are made not simply by their beliefs and actions but by those who witnessed them, remembered them and told their story."[19] In the same vein, some scholars pointed to "cult and discourse," in which the concept of martyrdom is bound up with the narratives and literature that have shaped and been shaped by people's memories.[20]

A great deal depends on the persuasiveness of the narrative and on the group's knowledge systems and modes of transmission. These determine the importance of the martyr. The narrative is molded, as in every story, by the oral and written traditions of the community. If the cultural tradition is prone to the tragic (as the Shiʿa's), the narrative will reflect this tendency. If the tradition is liturgical, the martyrdom will assume liturgical conventions. Notably, the narrative is not necessarily written at the time of death of the martyr or during the lifetime of his/her contemporaries. Several successful narratives were created by martyrologists who were not witnesses to the events. Some narratives were even imagined. Thus, secondary source material that memorializes martyrs, which constitutes the bulk of the corpus available for researchers, should be examined with caution. It tends to divulge the writer's world view more than the martyr's.[21]

The writer or commentator belongs to what Stanley Fish has termed "interpretive communities" who can freely impose their viewpoint on the texts and use them as polemical ammunition. As a rule, while historical literature is a legitimate research category, it is an open category that contains truth and facts but is imbued with input by interpretive communities. They mold the meaning of the text and define how these texts should be understood. Martyrdom, therefore, may be viewed as a discourse – a form of death for God that changes and develops over time in accordance with the aims and goals of the community.[22]

---

[19] Rosourx, "The Politics of Martyrdom," p. 83 (quotation), pp. 83–87; Ronald Kassimir, "Complex Martyrs: Symbols and Catholic Church Formation and Political Differentiation in Uganda," *African Affairs* 90 (1991), p. 362.

[20] Richard Finn and Michael Smart, "Christian Martyrdom: History and Interpretation," in Brian Wicker (ed.), *Witnesses to Faith? Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2006), mainly pp. 41–44.

[21] Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, pp. 8–9, note 1, 27–29; on the social and cultural functions of martyrdom writing, see ibid., pp. 87–127; also Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[22] Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1–17; Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 94–95, 117–126.

MARTYRDOM IN MODERN TIMES

War heroes in ancient times were commemorated in folk epics recounting their heroic acts. The biblical book of Judges, for example, is devoted to a description of the acts of bravery of ancient Hebrew heroes. In ancient Greece ritual ceremonies are known to have been dedicated to fallen heroes in patriotic wars, especially in the wars against the Persians in the fifth century BC and in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). Lewis Farnell, a scholar of hero commemorations in ancient Greece, described them as "a reward for patriotism, for a noble death against the national foe," involving ritual funeral and burial rites.[23]

Patriotic self-sacrifice also became a major value in the ethos of the modern national state. Its roots lay in the French Revolution as a secular revolution heralding a shift in martyrdom from the religious to the national sphere. The tradition of martyrdom was nurtured to serve the goals of secular national movements such as in France and Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[24] The fighters in this context belonged to citizen rather than mercenary armies, in contrast to the custom in the Roman Empire, in the Italian city states, and in the absolutist regimes in Europe in medieval times. Side by side with the shift during the nationalist era to the notions of "subject" and "citizen," the ancient Greek and Roman concept of the "patriotic war" reappeared, with citizens assuming the burden of defense, and their self-sacrifice reflecting national partnership. As part of the mourning process, the private aspect of loss was nationalized and the nation as a whole became indebted to the memory of the fallen.[25]

Symbols play a prominent role in patriotic martyrdom and are vital in the nation-building process. In the view of historian George Mosse, political ideas are molded and projected not by rational argument but by means of a symbolic process that provides an additional means of social control over the masses and instills a sense of community. People perceive reality entirely through symbolism and myths, he claimed, without which individuals have no identity. Their identity is forged by symbols.[26]

[23] Lewis R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cult and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), pp. 362–363.
[24] Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, pp. 88–91; Rosourx, "The Politics of Martyrdom," pp. 86–112.
[25] Avner Ben-Amos and Daniel Bar-Tal, "Patriotism as a Psychological-Sociological Phenomenon," in idem (eds.), *Patriotism*, pp. 13–28.
[26] George L. Mosse, *The Nationalizations of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: H. Fertig, 1975), pp. 6–7.

This is all the more true of national liberation movements, which require symbols, rituals, and myths to gain as much support as possible. Without its own distinctive symbols, a liberation movement has little chance of succeeding, for if one has no flag of one's own, it is difficult to oppose the flag of the oppressor.[27]

Modern patterns of memorial ceremonies for fallen soldiers were consolidated primarily after the First World War in Germany, Britain, and France. The events of the Second World War entrenched them further. The ghosts of the dead became embedded in Europe's politics and public life. Monuments, cemeteries, and memorial days were part and parcel of the commemorative repertory of the fallen in war. The fallen were also documented by official memorial bodies in compilations and albums, providing a kind of detailed and methodical roadmap that traces the history of self-sacrifice in specific countries.[28] An instructive example is *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939–45*, produced in Warsaw by the Council for the Preservation of Monuments in 1964–1968. Its first section, *Resistance and Martyrdom*, documented 500 memorial sites established throughout Poland where acts of resistance and martyrdom against the Nazi occupation during the Second World War occurred. A survey of the compilation reveals a broad use of the term martyrdom, with no differentiation between soldiers and civilians or between passive and active death, suggesting a sense of shared fate and unity built around love of homeland and freedom.[29] The dual function of memorialization in the Polish public space, namely molding historic awareness and entrenching national values, is clearly expressed by the head of the Council in the introduction:

This publication seeks to bring to life for young people the years of occupation, to explain to them those years in our history, which were the most significant, the most illustrious, the most replete with sacrifice.... The inhuman character of fascism can best be grasped at the scenes of its crimes. Even so, it is precisely at those places of heroism displayed by the Nazis' victims that the best lessons can be

[27] Amikam Nachmani, "The Palestinian Intifada: The Dynamics of Symbols and Symbolic Realities – The Role of Symbols, Rituals and Myths in National Struggles," *Alpayim* 24 (2002), p. 77 (in Hebrew).

[28] See, e.g., George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Avner Ben Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory in Modern France 1789–1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); also Emmanuel Sivan, *The 1948 Generation: Myth, Profile and Memory* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1991), mainly chapters 8, 9, and 10 (in Hebrew).

[29] Council for the Preservation of Monuments, *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939–45* (Warsaw: Sport Turystyka Publication, 1968).