Suicide Bombing as Worship
Dimensions of Jihad

Many motives are cited for suicide bombings, from religious sanctification to revenge for Western foreign policy to hatred of Israel, but one thing ties them together: the boast that Muslims love death, whereas their enemies love life. From killing the infidel enemy through suicide attacks, to allowing the subordinate female to participate in suicide attacks, a pattern emerges. And just as honor killings are a perversion of the most basic of human ties, so love for martyrdom takes societies into a direct relationship with the darkest side of human nature. In trying to explain this, it may be feasible to identify routes to a possible solution.

Origins

Since the 1980s, killing oneself deliberately has become the most popular method of attacking and killing one's enemies in countries including Iraq and Afghanistan, in territories such as Chechnya or the West Bank and Gaza, and even in Western countries such as the United States and Great Britain. It was a real-life Shi'i fanatic, a thirteen-year-old boy called Hossein Fahmideh, who set things moving in 1981 when he died with a grenade in his hand, throwing himself under a tank during the Iran-Iraq war. He was followed by thousands of young Iranians carrying "keys to paradise," who walked and ran across minefields, ripping their bodies apart for God and the Islamic regime.[1] Two years later, the first suicide attack occurred against a Western target when a bomber drove a vehicle packed with explosives into the lobby of the American embassy in Beirut. Apart from himself, he killed 63 people: 32 Lebanese, 17 Americans, and 14 visitors. Iran denied all involvement in the attack, but its protégé, Hezbollah, soon claimed responsibility, and it was subsequently established that the killings had been approved and financed by senior Iranian officials. The Iranian role in many subsequent suicide bombings has been crucial, given the existence of a clerical elite that inherited a deeply-embedded Shi'i cult of martyrdom, whose traditions of flagellation, public weeping, passion plays, martyrdom sermons, and hagiographies of martyrs were pushed into overdrive after the revolution of 1979.

An Islamic Paradox

By 2008, 1,121 suicide bombers had carried out attacks in Iraq, killing on a massive scale. With the exception of Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers used the tactic, suicide bombing has become an almost exclusively Islamic phenomenon. Whether religiously observant or driven by other motives, the bombers have been Muslims, regardless of their country of origin. Even Muslims raised and educated in non-Muslim countries (like Britain's 7/7 bombers) and exposed to cultures without overt jihadi propaganda have put on explosive belts and gone to their deaths in order to kill nonbelievers. Apart from their Islamic roots, these terrorists display a wide range of characteristics. Many have been young men, some of whom were mentally disabled, while others were very bright, some uneducated, others university graduates; a growing number are women, mostly young, some old, some virgins, others pregnant or mothers. Many have belonged to terrorist groups such as Hamas and have been indoctrinated in Islamist thought, anti-Semitism, or general hatred of the West. Others have been volunteers seeking to expiate sins or retrieve the honor of their families.

Yet suicide bombing involves a paradox within Islam. On the one hand, laws relating to jihad unambiguously state that fighters must not take the lives of noncombatants, such as women, children, the sick, or the elderly. At the same time, anyone who dies while fighting non-Muslims is considered a martyr and guaranteed the highest rank in paradise. How do Islamists get round this problem? Some may shut their eyes and get on with it, but others come face to face with the paradox by dividing the problem into bite-size pieces. Clerics sanctify the

bombers in their sermons, organizations including Hamas and Islamic Jihad identify and celebrate them as fighters in the jihad, and foreign donors provide aid that is siphoned off to the families of the martyrs.[2]

Whatever the private motivation of the suicide bomber, his or her action is rooted in much broader national, communal or, above all, religious demands, pressures, and desires. These range from religious convictions and edicts to concepts of holy war and martyrdom to conflicts over issues of shame and honor to social constructs of sexuality. Most importantly, the bombings have nothing to do with suicide. Nor are they described as such by those who send the bombers out and those who immolate themselves. To make it easier to understand what modern Islamist suicide bombing is about, we need to examine its historical background, its religious/nationalist role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its psychological and cultural roots in the Arab and Islamic interpretation of women, sexuality, shame, and honor.

World of the Martyr

In a speech at his headquarters in Ramallah on December 18, 2001, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat proclaimed he was willing to sacrifice seventy martyrs to bring about the death of a single Israeli. [3] His audience replied "Millions of martyrs are already marching to Jerusalem." They meant suicide bombers, of course. But nobody present used the term, since that is not how Arabic speakers refer to them.

Preeminently, the bombers are referred to as "martyrs" (*shuhada'*, sing. *shahid*) or "those who sacrifice themselves" (*fida'iyun*, sing. *fida'i*). These men and women—most in their teens and early twenties[4]—"die a martyr's death" or "blow themselves up" or carry out "martyrdom operations" (*'amaliyat istishhadiya*). They do not commit suicide for suicide is a sin.[5] But killing oneself in order to harm non-Muslims is an act of deep piety. This seeming contradiction has been examined by Daniel Pipes. "The Qur'an," he writes, "does tell Muslims, 'Do not kill yourselves' and warns that those who disobey will be 'cast into the fire.' The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that a suicide cannot go to paradise. Islamic laws oppose the practice." [6] He then points out that the prohibition against killing oneself has, in fact, been very effective, as is evidenced by the rarity of suicide in Muslim countries. There is, however, another side to this story, in that the same action, when performed as a means of furthering jihad, elevates the individual to the rank of martyr.

There have been such martyrs in Islam almost from the founding of the religion. Whereas Christian and Jewish martyrs without exception passively accepted death for their faith, most Muslim martyrs have given up their lives fighting as combatants in the holy war.[7] Even Sufis, members of the mystical fraternities in Islam, have embarked on jihad as individuals and groups. The warrior monk is a common figure in pre-modern Islam, and jihad scholar Michael Bonner has drawn attention to the important role played in war by religious leaders and scholars as preachers and as fighters.[8]

The figure of the martyr as a holy warrior (*mujahid*) who dies in battle and goes on to reap a heavenly reward above that of ordinary mortals is of central importance in the earliest period of Islam. Its ideal type is the fighter who engages in an action called *inghimas*, throwing himself recklessly at the enemy, even if he should be one man against a thousand. Doing this was seen as legitimate because the *mujahid* was seeking martyrdom and did not need permission from the leader of his army or unit.[9] Its legitimacy, even today, is derived from the fact that Muhammad himself often sent out individual fighters as "military expeditions" in and of themselves.[10] In the modern period, some scholars have argued that there is a close connection between *inghimas* and suicide bombing: "If, by immersing himself into enemy ranks, a fighter brings about his own death, such self-sacrifice is legally [in terms of Shari'a law] the same as bringing about his own death by his own hand. In this respect there is no legal difference between the direct hand of the self-detonating suicide fighter and the proxy hand of the outnumbered fighter entering the fray alone."[11] Gibril Haddad, a hard-line Wahhabi sheikh, writes that *inghimas* "must not be viewed as reckless self-destruction but as the highest valor and courage. More than that, as Abu Ayyub [a companion of Muhammad] indicated with his *tafsir* [interpretation] of al-Baqara 195 [Qur'an 2:195] before entering the fray at Constantinople and fighting to the death, they viewed *inghimas* as life itself."[12]

This again is a clear echo of the Islamist saying that Muslims "love death" whereas non-Muslims love life. This conceit seems to have begun during the great Arab conquests of the seventh century. In 633, just one year after the death of Muhammad, the Muslim general Khalid ibn al-Walid had entered Iraq in the first phase of the conquest of the Iranian Sassanid empire. Writing to Hormuz, the Persian governor of a frontier district, Dast Maysan, Walid proclaimed: "Submit to Islam and be safe. Or agree to the payment of the *jizya* [tax], and you and your people will be under our protection, else you will have only yourself to blame for the consequences, for I bring the men who desire death as ardently as you desire life."[13]

It is a long journey from 633 to the modern era, but Walid's boast still resonates in Islamist circles today. On May 25, 2001, the mufti of Jerusalem and "Palestine," Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, stated: "We tell [our enemies]: As much as you love life—the Muslim loves death and martyrdom. There is a great difference between him who loves the hereafter and him who loves this world. The Muslim loves death and [strives for] martyrdom."[14] Sabri is not alone. Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, has spoken in similar terms. In 2004, he said: "We have discovered how to hit the Jews where they are the most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win because they love life, and we love death."[15] Others have spoken in much the same vein.[16] It is clear that the distinction is always religiously based and that Jewish love of life is transformed from a healthy and spiritual thing to an attitude to be disparaged.

This fixation with death as a state superior to life combines with martyrdom ideation to create the suicide bomber as someone who passes beyond traditional themes of death at the hands of the enemy to bring death to himself and the enemy in a single moment. In this unconventional form of fighting, the bomber no longer respects legal rulings that commit the *mujahid* to killing only enemy troops but makes death itself the arbiter of who should die or not. The innocent are not innocent; Muslim radicals are on record stating that non-Muslims are, by definition, not innocent.[17] The self-immolation of the martyr makes death universal. Yet the modern martyr is still deeply rooted in traditional typology.

Muhammad's Sayings and Actions

The Qur'an contains numerous exhortations to violent action[18] and promises a divine reward for those who die fighting in God's path, but it does not make martyrdom into the religious goal it soon became. It is in the literature of Muhammad's sayings and doings that warfare and martyrdom are emphasized together.

Both the Hadith—the vast corpus of "eyewitness" statements about what Muhammad did or said, second in holiness only to the Qur'an—and the earliest writings featuring the biography of Muhammad and his companions display a significant concern with fighting. The Hadith compilations invariably have a section entitled "The Book of Jihad," in which snippets from actual combat with non-Muslims jostle with instructions on how to wage war. The books of biography are originally called *Kitab al-Maghazi*,[19] the Book of Raids, meaning the raids and battles in which Muhammad was personally involved or which he ordered carried out. In other words, we are in a realm far less abstract than that of the Qur'an, on a landscape in which real men fought in real encounters with real enemies.

This is the world of the martyr, the ever-present battlefield in Muhammad's lifetime and in the years that followed when Arab armies clashed with their Byzantine, Persian, and other foes across North Africa, the Middle East, and far beyond. The warrior-martyr is born on these battlefields and in the martial deeds of Muhammad, not in the text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an prescribes violence against nonbelievers and sets jihad in motion, providing a context for the holy warrior; but that warrior only becomes flesh when riding out to battle beside Muhammad, and only takes on the mantle of martyrdom in death at the hands of the infidel and in the words of the prophet that confer that status on him and those that come in his train.

We read in the *Sahih Muslim*, one of the two most sacred texts after the Qur'an, of fighters picking up their swords and wading into battle:

The tradition has been narrated on the authority of 'Abdullah b. Qais. He heard it from his father who, while facing the enemy, reported that the Messenger of Allah said: Surely, the gates of Paradise are under the shadows of the swords. A man in a shabby condition got up and said; Abu Musa, did you hear the Messenger of Allah say this? He said: Yes. (The narrator said): He returned to his friends and said his farewells. Then he broke the sheath of his sword, threw it away, advanced with his sword towards the enemy and fought with it until he was slain.[20]

This behavior is very different from that of the Norse berserkers,[21] who entered battle in a rage, foaming at the mouth and laying waste everyone in their path. The *mujahid* in this and other *hadith* reaches a decision based on confirmation of Muhammad's promise of paradise. This echoes the cool, almost detached manner with which the modern suicide bomber goes to work. He or she may make a video in advance, in which a reasoned statement of justification and intent is provided for posterity. The sword has become a suicide belt, but the fighter is still a martyr. A famous *hadith* proclaims that "Paradise lies beneath the shades of swords" (al-Bukhari 4:73). Today, it lies beneath the shades of suicide belts.

Religion in the Jihad against Israel

Suicide bombers from Hamas or Islamic Jihad or the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades cannot be understood as creatures of Palestinian nationalism, as the spawn of the Palestine Liberation Organization or Black September. The religious war against Israel best explains the deep impulses that propel so many young Muslims to choose death for this cause. No other conflict engages international Islamic opinion like this one. "Palestine" has become a rallying cry for Muslims everywhere.

Benny Morris, a historian of the Arab-Israeli conflict, correctly argues that it was religion rather than nationalism that inspired the 1948 invasion of Israel. He considers it a mistake to ignore the religious rhetoric that accompanied the 1948 assault by Arab armies. "The 1948 War, from the Arabs' perspective," he writes, "was a war of religion as much as, if not more than, a nationalist war over territory."[22] The Muslim Brotherhood, the mufti of Egypt, [23] Egypt's King Farouk, King 'Abdullah of Transjordan, and many others spoke of a holy war, a jihad against the Jews. It was not a purely nationalist struggle then, nor is it today. The "[violence] did not emerge only from 'modern' nationalist passions; it also drew on powerful religious wellsprings. Nothing, it seemed, could mobilize the Palestinian Arab masses for action more readily than Muslim religious rhetoric and symbols."[24]

Little has changed since the 1940s. With the rise of radical Islam and the expansion of violent recourse, Arab irredentism has continued to have a religious focus, sometimes on "Palestine" and sometimes on the *umma*, the abstract nation of all Muslims. And it is as Muslims more than as Arabs (or Iranians or Afghans) that today's leading enemies of Israel view the conflict.

Palestinian violence against Israelis is one of the earliest expressions of Islamic rage against modernity. Its most recent manifestation, Hamas, is, according to its 1988 Covenant, "an Islamic resistance movement."[25] Hamas is, in fact, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, still one of the leading forces of Islamic radicalism on the planet. Article one of the covenant starts as follows: "The Movement's program is Islam. From it, it draws its ideas, ways of thinking and understanding of the universe, life and man. It resorts to it for judgment in all its conduct, and it is inspired by it for guidance of its steps." [26]

Female Suicide Bombers

In hard-line versions of the Islamic faith, unrelated men and women never meet, never so much as exchange glances. Islamic society is patriarchal and, like other patriarchal societies, it diminishes the energies and abilities of its women. Palestinian society links the repression of women to a male need for honor. The "core of gender inequality in [Palestinian] society resides in patriarchal control and repression of female sexuality. … The control of female sexuality maintains male power, privileges and prerogatives. … Control of women is the most

important, if not the only, component of the honor code left to men."[27] Sexuality and the honor code have played a major part in the recruitment of suicide bombers; but it is the emergence of the female bomber that is most intriguing, given that such women represent a challenge to conventional Islamic notions of female inferiority and Arab cultural demands for women to be restricted to their homes or dressed by Islamic standards.

A tiny number of women took part in jihad in the early years of Islam, but this practice seems to have been abandoned by the second generation or so. Nevertheless, some *hadith* do permit it, and Shari'a law rules that women may engage in jihad when, for example, the Muslim state comes under attack. In recent years, women have volunteered for membership in a range of terrorist outfits from the "black widow" bombers of Chechnya[28] to Kurdish rebels[29] to the "martyrs" of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.[30]

Every suicide attack by women from 1985 to 2000 was motivated by secular goals. Since 2000, however, as Hamas has grown in importance, religiously-motivated female terrorists have carried out more than two-thirds of the suicide attacks by women.[31]

The religious leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, had originally restricted or denied women the right to take part in jihad operations:

> In our Palestinian society, there is a flow of women towards jihad and martyrdom, exactly like the young men. But the woman has uniqueness. Islam sets some restrictions for her, and if she goes out to wage Jihad and fight, she must be accompanied by a male chaperon. We have no need for suicide operations by women now because preserving the nation's survival is more important.[32]

By 2004, however, Yasin had reversed his theological understanding of the matter, and stated: "Exactly when there is an invasion to the holy land, a Muslim woman is permitted to wage jihad and struggle against the enemy ... the Prophet would draw lots among the women who wanted to go out with him to make jihad. The Prophet always emphasized the woman's right to wage jihad."[33]

Yasin was, in part, motivated by existing notions of honor and shame, according to which a woman who is deemed to have done something shameful (in the sexual sense) may be killed by members of her family in order to expunge that shame.[34] Even though issues of shame and honor may have their roots in communal psychology rather than faith, it is a constant justification of "honor" killings and related crimes that the Qur'an and Shari'a legislation already demand punishments such as flogging or stoning for sexual crimes. At some point it seems to have dawned on Yasin that a dishonored woman might be cleansed of her "wrongdoing" and at the same time be employed as a living bomb capable of passing unsearched through male-controlled checkpoints in order to detonate herself in the midst of as many Jews as possible. According to Mira Tzoreff, a Middle East history specialist at Tel Aviv University:

> An intensification of the *shahidat* [female martyrs] phenomenon is represented by the [2004] suicide of Rim Riashi at the Erez check post, not only as the married mother of two small children, but also because of the sanction she received by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Indeed, it was not long before it became clear that Rim Riashi had requested Yassin's sanction only after her relationship with a lover had … become a known matter. Thus, the act of *istishhad* [dying as a martyr] was the only way to remove the stain of dishonor from both herself and her family.[35]

How was the "stain of dishonor" manipulated to wear a religious stamp through the expiation of martyrdom?

Shame, Honor, and Martyrdom

Religious idealism cannot fully explain this desperation, this intense craving for a martyr's death among so many young Palestinians. But without a religious framework, it is highly unlikely that any of these women would seek to kill others through their own deaths. There might be "honor" killings and beatings, and some women would run

away from their families, but there would be no suicide bombings. There seems to be an affinity here with two related drives in the Arab psyche that not only puts female suicide bombers into perspective but demonstrates important links between them and their male equivalents. One of these drives is the acute awareness of shame mentioned above, an emotion sharply contrasted with honor. Muslim societies are shame societies. This is noticeable in Arab countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh and several other places where honor resides in the family above all, and, in particular, in the women of the family or, more accurately, their sexual probity.

This is not to say that men do not suffer dishonor, but for them this is projected outwards, towards rivals or enemies and, of course, towards the women and sometimes towards the men they believe have compromised their honor.[36] The honor/shame dichotomy is responsible for the widespread practice of "honor" killings, something found in many parts of the Islamic world from Morocco to Pakistan, and always committed against women. Though these killings form no part of Islamic law and are not exclusive to the Muslim world, the vast majority do take place in Muslim countries where killers are seldom prosecuted.[37] That the Islamic clergy rarely condemn these practices as anti-Islamic provides them with a religious cover. Should a girl become pregnant outside marriage, or a wife commit adultery, or a daughter refuse an arranged marriage or even be seen outdoors with an unrelated boy, it becomes the inescapable duty of her father, husband, brothers, or cousins to kill her in order to restore the family's honor in the eyes of the local community. According to UNICEF, in 1999 more than two-thirds of all murders in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank were "honor" killings.[38]

By transcending ordinary emotional ties and by putting on a cloak of religiosity, the female suicide bomber sets out to expunge the shame she feels on behalf of family, community, or nation, both by accepting death as a martyr and by inflicting death on others as a holy warrior. The bomber's victims may be non-Muslims who, by definition, have been "brought low" by Islam yet who persist in their arrogance by asserting equal status with Muslims or who surpass Muslims in one way or another. This humiliates the Muslim community, making it imperative that the non-Muslims be put back in their place or extinguished. In the past, this was done in conventional ways, through imprisonment, flogging, or decapitation. Similar punishments were used on deviant Muslims, apostates, and those who transgressed Shari'a law. But the use of suicide killing as a means of control is less easy to explain.

The idealization of sexual honor and sexual shame carries heavy symbolic weight outside the sphere of family relations. Jehoeda Sofer, author of *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies*, quotes a Palestinian Arab as follows: "If the Arabs would have had war with the Israelis using [their] ***s, we would have defeated them easily. The Israelis are a bunch of feminine males who want to be and should be *** by the Arabs."[39]

Several years ago, Malise Ruthven, a British authority on Islam, pointed out that much Muslim outrage about *The Satanic Verses* was expressed in sexual language. Zaki Badawi, the late principal of the Muslim College and a moderate British Muslim, for example, wrote: "What [Rushdie] has written is far worse to Muslims than if he had raped one's own daughter. … It's like a knife being dug into you—or being raped yourself."[40] Ruthven suggests that Rushdie's crime was to enter the sacral space occupied by the Prophet: "That entry is perceived as a violation, as a kind of rape."[41]

When first the Christians and later the Jews ventured to turn their status as protected but inferior peoples upside-down, Muslim societies felt shame at their own weakness, at the possibility that the old world had disintegrated, never to return. It is a shame akin to what is felt when a woman "gets above herself" and rejects the "protection" of father, husband, or brother. Beyond that, it is a shame akin to being raped, in this case by Jews and Christians, deemed "women" in relation to "masculine" Islam. In all cases, the only restitution is death.

The suicide bomber enters this sphere of shame like a rapist and in doing so invades sacral territory. The Jews, as protected people, constitute a sphere that should be inviolate to Muslims; instead, the *fida'i* goes directly into Jewish space and there commits an ultimate act of rape, thereby restoring the masculinity of Muslim people. Even the female martyr, by throwing off her inferiority as a weak-bodied woman and exercising the courage of a

man, rapes the Jews she slaughters.

Conclusion

Since the Qur'an commends violence and the Hadith literature is steeped in the blood of martyrs, killing and dying violently are not breaches of the moral code or infringements of divine law. They are, on the contrary, regarded as some of the highest achievements of Islamic spirituality. Asked who was the best of people, Muhammad replied, the "believer who fights in the path of God with his self and his property."[42] The martyr enjoys double the pleasure of paradise and dwells there in an abode superior to its other denizens.[43]

What can be done about this? For most Western countries, the Israeli option, to build a defensive barrier between us and the homes of the bombers, will not work. We can profile; we can infiltrate; we can discover and share intelligence; we can carry out targeted assassinations of terrorist leaders, trainers, and motivators; we can pinpoint and destroy terrorist training camps. Like the Israeli fence, constant vigilance will reduce the numbers of bombers, sometimes dramatically. But engaging the problem at the grassroots level is clearly more difficult because the phenomenon is so deeply entrenched in the cultures that produce the bombers, in the religious values, the sexual practices, and the shame and honor systems they inculcate. If we are to modify those cultures in a positive way, perhaps we have to introduce sanctions that punish countries dependent on Western aid every time a terrorist or suicide bomber from that country is identified. We have to make suicide bombing an affront to religion and a matter of great dishonor. Set beside a system of rewards for identifiable counterterrorism initiatives, above all, education programs designed to reject religious and social propaganda, this may set in motion new ways of altering the suicide mindset. But until such measures begin to bite and societies prone to this malaise start to shift toward moderation across the board, it is the intelligence and security services who will have to shoulder the burden of defense. There are no quick fixes, but there are long-term goals that we need to plan for now.

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