

Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics

Meir Hatina

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Meir Hatina, associate professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies and director of the Levtzion Center for Islamic studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, explores the evolving perceptions of martyrdom in modern times and their relevance on past legacies in both Sunni and Shi‘i milieus. He also makes comparative references to Judaism, Christianity, and other non-Islamic cultures. The book is divided into eight chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, a bibliography, and an index.

In the introduction the author discusses the manifestations of martyrdom throughout history, its definitions, socio-political implications, and importance in various world religions. In order to present this concept’s historical evolution and notions and how it is an effective tool for forming and reinforcing groups, Hatina has framed his book in a series of well-arranged chapters.

In the first chapter, “Defying the Oppressor: Martyrdom in Judaism and Christianity,” the author traces the historical and theological foundations of this phenomenon in both religions. He relates how traditional Jews were ready to sacrifice their life and viewed martyrdom as the highest degree of their love for God. However, he argues that with the advent of the Zionist movement, this readiness was replaced “by an activist approach to self-sacrifice for the national revival.” Christians, on the other hand, considered martyrdom “the key for salvation.” By quoting the remarks of Quintus Tertullian (d. c. 240), the father of Latin Christianity, namely, “your cruelty is our glory” and “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (p. 26), Hatina seeks to express the early Christians’ readiness to embrace their non-violent and defensive deaths at the hands of the pagan Romans.

In chapter 2, “Dying for God in Islam,” Hatina delineates the evidence of martyrdom in Islamic texts and its diverse interpretations by renowned scholars. He mentions the two types of death in this regard – death for the cause of Allah and self-inflicted suicide – and cites the relevant fatwas of both Sunni and Shi‘i scholars. Denouncing any sort of self-inflicted suicide, including murder with reference to *shar‘ī* texts, he nevertheless appreciates the soldiers’ wish for death on the battlefield against their enemies. He presents martyrdom in Islamic legal thought as an exalted form of death and argues that theologians stressed that a soldier who desires such a death eventually finds a greater reward.

While quoting Nasir al-Din al-Baydawi's (d. 1286) interpretation of the "vow" in Q. 33:23, the author writes that it is a commitment to fight for God until death (p. 44) and that Q. 9:111 promises that those who sacrifice their soul in God's path go to heaven. The chapter's last portion illustrates the ideology and history of martyrdom and adds the Khariji and Sufi interpretations of *martyr* along with their implications.

The third chapter, "Modern Islamist Perceptions," opens with an exploration of the views of jihad given by some prominent twentieth-century scholars and their understanding of martyrdom. Hatina argues that some Muslims "placed the perception of self-sacrifice in a secular nationalist context," whereas others restricted it to the religious context. He maintains that the notion of self-sacrifice has been perceived "as a form of warfare" and "obedience to the hierarchical order." He quotes Hassan al-Banna, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood who was assassinated in 1949, as saying that self-sacrifice is a kind of "profession of death" and that one should know about one's "appropriate death." According to him, this consists of using one's life for the cause of God. Although modern Islamists stick to jihad's defensive nature, other groups have adopted some of the more militant aspects of both it and self-sacrifice, which caused militant groups to arise.

The chapter then analyzes how past and present ulama embraced those sources that praised both activities. These are considered the key concepts in the Shi'i awakening, which holds both of these acts to be holy and lofty. Shi'i history has witnessed a long chain of martyrs who, according to prominent Shi'i scholars, are "candle[s] for society" (p. 82) that illuminate the darkness of tyranny. They encouraged teenage boys to undertake in suicidal attacks. One of those who did so was Muhammad Husayn Fahmida, who graces the book's cover; he sacrifices himself on the battlefield surrounded by tanks while overhead the image of Ayatollah Khomeini looks down upon his martyrdom (p. 89).

In the fourth chapter, "The 'Army of Shrouds': Suicide Attacks in Ethno-national Conflicts," the author looks at how self-sacrifice by male teenagers on the battlefield served as sources of inspiration for the religio-national liberation movements, namely, Hizbullah in Lebanon. In other words, it was used as a kind of weapon. The chapter begins with the emergence of suicide attacks and explores various forms of martyrdom in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries within this particular context. It also discusses how such attacks by Lebanese and Palestinian youths were ideologically systematized and became prominent, how they became the cultural ethos, and how these youths achieved and remained at the apex of prestige and esteem (p. 120).

Expanding the term's scope, Hatina maintains that *martyr* was not limited to the suicide perpetrator, but rather that it included those killed in the attack and who died in direct or indirect military clashes. He backs up his arguments by highlighting cases from Lebanon, Palestine, and Chechnya along with the non-Islamic perspectives of such attacks conducted by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and by the [Muslim] Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), for their motives are perceived as purely secular. Hatina presents suicide attacks in Iran as being officially promoted and supported by the state, whereas other Islamist movements have adopted such attacks to pursue their military and political agendas. The cases of non-Muslim suicide bombers show that such actions can also be driven by secular causes (pp. 16-17).

In the fifth chapter, "Al-Qa'ida: Transnational Martyrdom," the author focuses on al-Qa'ida's perception of death: an assertive and uncompromising outlook that attempts to set new moral standards for Muslim conduct. He argues that the group radicalized the perception of martyrdom and legitimized attacks against Muslims (p. 17). The author explores the legacy of Abdullah Azzam, who was assassinated in 1989 by a car bombing in Pakistan. This Palestinian joined the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which he termed a "re-birth," because he saw it as a modern version of Islam's formative period (p. 137). Azzam preferred that the jihad begin in there instead of Palestine for several reasons, four of which Hatina mentions (p. 142). The author maintains that it was this figure's "assertive legacy of jihad and martyrdom" that became "a cornerstone of Al-Qa'ida," which led to "the establishment [of] the international Islamic Front for jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" (p. 143).

In addition, Hatina provides a detailed account of 9/11 by introducing al-Qa'ida's *Martyrdom Acts on the Ideological Balancesheet* and a widely influential manifesto: *Manual for a Raid* (pp. 154ff.). However, recent research calls Hatina's view of al-Qa'ida's involvement in 9/11 into question. For instance Enver Masud, in his *9/11 Unveiled*, has gathered a great deal of evidence from various quarters that oppose the dominant perception as regards 9/11. The author, nevertheless, winds up the chapter with the group's ruling on the issue of killing innocent civilians (pp. 157ff.).

His discussion of "Martyrs as Preachers" in the book's sixth chapter presents the martyr's twofold mission: calling for martyrdom and defying the oppressors by preaching a religious way of life. The chapter analyzes the martyr's image and how that image is projected in the written and video-recorded wills prepared by those who have agreed to embark on a mission from which there is no return. It also provides an additional glimpse into the ideological mindset of Islamist movements as regards their effective use of print, electronic, and Internet media to advance their various causes (p. 17).

The seventh chapter, “Debating ‘Suicide’ Attacks,” highlights the disputes and polemics within the Islamic spectrum over this strategy. The author critically explores the nature of the Shi‘i and Sunni fatwas that justify such deeds, and then argues that they are un-Islamic; however, the majority disagrees. In fact he quotes Yusuf al-Qaradawi: “[A]ny Jurist who rules against ‘suicide’ attacks belongs to ‘those who are ignorant of religion and its laws’” (p. 201).

The last chapter, “Approaching ‘Suicide’ Attacks,” critically examines a comparative historical perspective of this phenomenon that, Hatina asserts, is nothing new. He then evaluates this act in terms of the relevant western discourse. The observations presented here lay greater importance on the ideological reading of such events and their socio-political symbolic and pedagogic functions.

In conclusion, Hatina explores and highlights the concept of martyrdom in modern Islam, as well as its various perceptions and the willingness to give up one’s life for God. He asserts that this is a common heritage of all settled societies. He discusses how Christianity and Judaism dealt with it, and then provides the Islamic viewpoint.

This book, which is unique in both its style and methodology, offers an innovative basis and new insights for future research on self-sacrifice and death in modern Islam. Hatina has done a commendable job by bringing forth such an important and extensive oeuvre based on his exhaustive research. His profound study of martyrdom in the past and up to the present evinces the dynamics involved in the concept’s perception. A welcome contribution to the Islamic socio-political and theological discourse, the book will be highly useful for those interested in this specific modern Islamic discourse.

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