Suicide attacks in the Muslim World have intensified fears of Islam in the West. Increasingly, Islam is narrowed down to militant Islamism and understood as being rooted in a fanatical and violent tradition. Paradoxically, these notions of self-martyrdom within current Shia and Sunni religious discourse differ markedly from traditional sources, and are, to a large extent, derived from modern secular ideologies such as nationalism and anti-imperialism.

Suicide attacks in the Middle East first emerged in the escalating conflicts of Lebanon and, later, Palestinian. When Hizbullah carried out its first suicide attack in 1982, Sunni authorities condemned this act with reference to the prohibition of suicide in Islamic law, while Shia ulama mostly refrained from commenting. Hizbullah militants may have found some inspiration in Iran where the concept of martyrdom was used to mobilize the masses for war against the Iraqi invasion and overcome Iraqi minefields, however, the concrete example they followed was reputedly that of Tamil resistance in Sri Lanka. Hizbullah was not the only militia in Lebanon to adopt the method; secular militias aligned to the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Communist Party were involved in various suicide attacks, including attacks carried out by women and Christians. The attacks primarily targeted Israeli troops and their local allies in Southern Lebanon. The main reason why suicide attacks became accepted within a short span of time was their decisive “success,” the greatest “victory” being the withdrawal of the US Marine Corps and French military from Lebanon after having been seriously hit by suicide bombers. It was only in the mid-1990s that suicide attacks were adopted by Palestinian organizations, in particular since the second Intifada. Over the last few years suicide bombing has become a part of jihad—as defence of Muslim land and people—in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Saudi-Arabia, and most recently, Iraq. The attacks are not undisputed in public opinion and religious discourse, and not all bombers are perceived as martyrs. While the great majority condemns the attacks of 9/11 and Madrid, as being contrary to Islamic principles, today suicide attacks receive broader popular support and religious backing—and are understood—within the context of legitimate resistance and national struggle for liberation.

Martyrdom & Resistance in the Middle East

Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf

Suicide attacks referred to as “martyrdom-operations” by their executors and sympathizers, have become a weapon of mainly Islamist groups in the Middle East. The first suicide attacks in the early 1980s in Lebanon met with criticism, in particular among the Sunni religious establishment. Though they were then regarded as violations of Islamic principles, today suicide attacks receive broader popular support and religious backing—and are understood—within the context of legitimate resistance and national struggle for liberation. Suicide attacks in the Middle East stem mainly from Islamist groups in the Middle East. The first suicide attacks in the early 1980s in Lebanon met with criticism, in particular among the Sunni religious establishment. Though they were then regarded as violations of Islamic principles, today suicide attacks receive broader popular support and religious backing—and are understood—within the context of legitimate resistance and national struggle for liberation.

The broad support for suicide attacks against Israeli targets reflects the desperate state of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The term istishhadi acquired currency for those combatants who willingly martyr themselves in suicide operations. The shift from a secular discourse of resistance to a more religiously inspired discourse dates from the 1980s. This shift in rhetoric reflects a more general move in the region in which the ruling elites were increasingly discredit because of corruption and the apparent bankruptcy of their “grand” secular projects. State-sponsored Arabism and socialism. Combined with the growing criticism of Western double standards in their policies towards the Middle East, secular movements lost some of their earlier appeal but also assumed less apparent secular stances. Religious argumentation gained increased popularity in the political domain, a process that can be understood as a withdrawal into the cultural “own” in contrast to the “other.” The first suicide bombing carried out by Hamas, occurred on 16 April 1993 when a car bomb exploded near the Jewish settlement of Mehalha on the West bank, leaving two persons killed including the attacker. On 6 April 1994, retaliating the Goldstone massacre in Hebron, eight persons were killed and 44 injured by a car bomb at a bus station in Afula; a week later a Hamas militant blew himself up in the Hadera central bus station, leaving five deaths and twenty injured. The adoption of suicide attacks as a means of resistance was to a degree the result of the deportation of hundreds of Hamas members in 1992 to Marj al-Zuhur in Southern Lebanon, where they intensified contacts with Hizbullah which trained Hamas militants in the art of suicide attacks in their camps in the Bekaa Valley. With the second Intifada suicide attacks became much more frequent; and albeit that the Islamist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad carried out most, more secular groups, in particular the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades that are affiliated with the Fatah movement, and the Marxist-Leninist oriented PFLP joined the mortal efforts.

Today, those suicide attacks are considered as “martyrdom operations.” The legitimacy of these operations is not only acknowledged by Muslim clergy, but also finds support among a number of Christian Palestinian leaders, as well as among the Coptic clergy in Egypt. Attal-la Hanna, former spokesman for the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, praised the “martyrdom operations,” calling on Arab Christians to join hands in carrying out martyr operations.3

The broad support for suicide attacks against Israeli targets reflects the desperate state of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. In the 1990s the number of Israeli settlements on the West bank doubled. Further land grab took place by designing security zones, of late-ly including the so-called security-wall. Over the last three years the death toll among Palestinians due to Israeli attacks amounted to 3000, with over 40,000 injured and a larger number losing their homes and livelihood in collective punishments. Recurrent closures hamper travel and gravely limit public space. Ongoing repression caused and maintains a dramatic worsening of the local economy, figuring soaring unemployment rates. Given that diplomatic endeavours failed to deliver totally, radical options to reverse the desperate situation gain credibility.

Continued on p.39
**Discourse on martyrdom**

While some Palestinian scholars and scholars from other countries condemned the suicide attacks with the argument that suicide is prohibited in Islam, others justified them as a legitimate part of the political struggle for liberation and a proper method of jihad. The Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdullah al-Shaykh commented in April 2001 that Islam forbids suicide attacks. His comments raised a storm of criticism from supporters of the Palestinian resistance. Shaykh al-Azhari, Muhammad Tantawi, the highest Islamic authority in Egypt stated in the same year, that resistance in occupied Palestine is a duty for Muslims and these suicide operations are a legal means. In general,Fatwa Display.asp?hFatwaID=46143.

In his reconstruction of the life of the Prophet, it remains unclear if Rusafi was aware of another “secular” reading of the same period of Islamic history, which had been proposed a few years earlier. The resemblance between the two contemporary endeavours is striking. Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966) had published his most controversial essay in 1925. He also had ventured beyond the traditional narratives of the early phases of the Muslim community in order to find answers to modern questions. His quest, following immediately the abrogation of the Ottoman caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1924, was to question the prevalent thesis that Islam encompasses both religion and politics. His conclusions, which seem to contradict Rusafi’s, are also strikingly original. Abd al-Raziq found that the community created and led by the Prophet in Medina was by no means a state, in the modern sense. Although it shared some external features with those of a polity (collecting taxes, building an “army,” administering justice, appointing “ambassadors” to neighbouring states), it was by all means just a religious community, intent on a space where they know their new religious beliefs and practices at a distance from the hostility of their tribal leaders, who had remained hostile to the new religion. The Prophet did not attempt, nor promote, anything beyond this kind of community. The absence of political concerns could be indicated by the fact that he did not appoint any successor or provide rules for the continuity of his community, as any political leader with a political agenda would have done. It was Muslims who, after the death of the Prophet, decided to transform this religious community into a polity, and who made it, in time, an empire.

In order to defend his thesis, Abd al-Raziq also felt the need to propose a theory of prophecy. He did not question the idea of a message literally delivered from God, as did Rusafi, but stressed its exceptional nature. He describes prophecy as a phenomenon which gives an elected man total, comprehensive powers over his fellows. These powers include and exceed those of kings and temporal leaders. The “inclusion of politics within the realm of religion” is thus an exceptional, a break into the ordinary course of social and political history, whereby a man endowed with a message and a mission, transforms the prevailing order by providing new moral foundations. The exception is, by definition, not a lasting state and is not intended to outline its founder.

Although having two different agendas, one rather “liberal” and the other nationalist, both Abd al-Raziq and Maanruf Rusafi wrote at a time when Muslim intellectuals were exposed to deep and rapid changes and enjoyed an unprecedented opening in the intellectual sphere. New explanations had to be sought and could—to some degree—be proposed. They understood, and stressed, that the historical emergence of Islam had deep and lasting political consequences, as it provided new models, aspirations, and values. Both also understood and stressed that the understanding which prevailed in Muslim histories did not reflect the depth of such developments. The latter raised the accounts of Muslim history, i.e. the building of new empires and states, to the status of an Islamic norm, and distorted the meaning of the Islamic concept of suicide, i.e. that political systems had to be grounded on shared beliefs and ethical principles, not that religion had to provide, or did provide, the blue print for designing these political systems. However, Abd al-Raziq acted cautiously, perhaps too cautiously, by not publishing anything following the controversy around his book. Rusafi, on the other hand, entrusted his thoughts to an essay that could not be published during his life-time, or even a few decades later. The Elucidation of a Sacred Enigma is likely to remain the work of a poet who had not superfluous scholarly methods and discipline, or his impatience with the beliefs and attitudes of his fellow Muslims.

Note


Abdus Salam-Anwar is Director of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations, The Agra Khan University, London.