

The Cult of Shahīds in Islamic Legal Theory as Opposed to Jewish and Christian Martyrdom¹

Islamic legal history presents us an astounding notion for shahīds (those who die for the cause for Islam), something that is in clear distinction between the Jewish or Christian concept of a martyr. Whereas Judeo-Christian tradition highlights individuals who bore witness to their faith and moral convictions even unto death, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) conceptualizes martyrdom primarily within the framework of the laws of warfare, military jihād to be precise. As a more politicized and more militarized concept, shahāda (“bearing witness”) in Islam became not only the focus of the international community, but also that of Muslim internal legal and theological debates. The reason for this is that by the second half of the 20th century, the notion of military self-sacrifice became interwoven with suicide attacks. Since suicide is a sin in Islam, adjustments in fiqh had to be made in the modern context to justify such actions (that are usually labelled as terrorism outside the Muslim world). This required Sunnī Islam to incorporate certain elements of Shī‘ī traditions, as the ethos of martyrdom (even with the involvement of suicide) was developed and glorified in several sects of the Shī‘a. The bridge between the two main branches of Islam became the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which served fundamentalists and jihādists their legal and theological reasoning for those new forms of attacks that not only shook the Western world, but caused severe division among Muslims as well.

Keywords: *Islamic legal theory, martyrdom, shahīd, terrorism, suicide attacks, jihād, Sunnī jurisprudence, Shī‘a jurisprudence, Judeo-Christian tradition*

1. Introduction

1.1. The problem of martyrdom

The three major monotheistic faiths – a Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all teach about “bearing witness” for one’s faith, and each of these religions venerate figures who gave their lives for the holy cause. However, in terms of its content, form and mode of realization, the concept of martyrdom in Islam has developed in a fundamentally different way compared to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is conspicuous that while those role models presented in the Bible as well as both Jewish and Christian history gave posterity characters of honour. These figures are mostly looked up on by the adherents of all of these religions. In contrast, the *shahīds* (witnesses) of Islamic

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culture are rarely viewed with admiration in Jewish and Christian circles. What is more: they are rarely universally venerated in the entire Islamic *umma* either. This study seeks to examine the key reasons underlying this perception.

Our aim in this paper is to certify that being a *shahīd*² in the Islamic context (especially in the contemporary setting) is different from being a Jewish or Christian *martyr* in two significant elements. On the one hand, martyrdom in Islam is incomparably more militarized than in the other two religions, and on the other hand (linked closely to the first point), in the modern context especially this also means a more politicized nature besides the religious. The politicization of martyrdom inevitably entails a departure from the moral tenets of religion. As a result, in today's context we encounter so-called "martyrs" who kill themselves while attacking unarmed civilians. This end-product of Islamism – which is, in itself, at least as much a political concept as a religious one – is irreconcilable not only with Abrahamic faith traditions but even with the otherwise markedly militant doctrines of early Islam.

Hence, someone who is called a '*shahīd*' in certain Islamic circles today is often called a 'terrorist' by the rest of the world. Terrorism and political assassinations – although distinct concepts with some degree of overlap – have manifested in various forms and contexts throughout history, from the ancient Jewish Sicarii and the medieval *Shī'a* Assassins to the Japanese kamikaze pilots. While this phenomenon has appeared in both Jewish and Christian history, the figure of the assassin has rarely – if ever – been accorded religious veneration in mainstream Judaism or Christianity as it has in Islam.

Beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, the proliferation of attacks carried out explicitly within an Islamic context introduced two novel elements that profoundly shocked public opinion:³ On the one hand, suicide-style attacks became increasingly frequent; on the other, their targets were no longer limited to political figures or institutions but explicitly extended to civilian populations. These attacks have become an almost permanent feature of contemporary global politics, despite the fact that the practices of Islamist radicals are not necessarily justifiable even within the framework of their own religion. Indeed, this radical interpretation of *jihād* has been the subject of considerable debate among Islamic scholars ('*ulamā*').

To assess the problem of the martyr in the different cultures, we shall have a brief overview of origin of the ethos of the *shahīd* in both *Sunni* and *Shī'a* Islam, then an outline of Islamic terrorism from the Middle Ages until today. Afterwards, we will elaborate on the intra-Islamic theological debate vis-à-vis suicide terrorism, which is in the very heart of the problem of the *shahīd* in Islam. Finally, we shall succinctly summarize the traditions in Judaism and Christianity regarding martyrdom, to show the stark contrast between these perceptions with that of Islam.

2 The noun '*shahīd*' (pl. *shuhada'*) in Arabic comes from the root verb '*shahida*' (transl.: he personally witnessed, he was present). This can convey the most natural meaning of actually witnessing something (providing evidence at court is expressed by a different albeit similar verb), but can carry figurative meaning (bearing witness of something). Martyrdom in Arabic is *shahāda*, which correlates with the Muslim testimony of faith.

3 Naturally, suicide attacks have not occurred exclusively within an Islamic context – for instance, one might recall the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. However, it is a fact that in terms of media coverage and the scale of destruction, Islamist radicals have been the most prominent actors in this regard over the past century. The complex issue of the widespread association between suicide terrorism and Islam is examined in detail by *Tüttő* (2008).

1.2. The challenge of definitions

Before we delve into the problem at hand, we have to mention a problem of definitions. One term is that of the *shahīd* – Muslim martyrs are “believers who give their lives on the battlefield in a military *jihad*.”⁴ Those who perish for the cause of military *jihad* (a specific form of Islamic struggle) are promised eternal rewards in the afterlife in Islamic theology. “In classical Islamic law, legal and normative implications flow directly from such acts of martyrdom. The martyr [*shahīd*] is given a special funeral and members of the martyr’s family are entitled to receive charity and other compensatory benefits from the community and the Islamic State.”⁵

The political and military connotation of a Muslim *shahīd* is reflected in the two main categories Muslim jurists set up for martyrs. The first and foremost type of martyr is the “battlefield martyr” who dies on the battlefield for the cause of *jihad*. All other miscellaneous types of deaths “in the service of *Allah*” (including during childbirth or pilgrimage) are in a lesser category.⁶

Oftentimes the acts of *shahīds* are regarded as terrorism outside (and even inside) the Muslim world. Many have attempted to define terrorism in various ways, yet despite numerous efforts, a universally accepted definition has not emerged to this day.⁷ Nonetheless, it is generally acknowledged that elements such as violence, aggression, crimes against individuals and property, and the intentional generation of fear constitute broadly accepted criteria in defining terrorism.

It is particularly the aspect of striking fear that features prominently in the interpretations of those who derive the ideology of modern Islamic terrorism from *Qur’ānic* texts. For instance, they frequently cite the verse: “And prepare against them whatever force and steeds of war you can muster, so that you may strike fear into the hearts of *Allah*’s enemies and your own ...”⁸ Notably, this verse features the conjugated verb *turhibūna* (“you... strike fear”), which derives from the same root as *irhāb*, the term commonly used in Modern Standard Arabic to refer to ‘terrorism’ – highlighting a linguistic and interpretive connection frequently emphasized in radical ideological readings.⁹

For the purposes of the present analysis, a typological distinction may prove more useful than engaging with the definitional debates¹⁰ surrounding terrorism. In this regard, I would draw on the work of *Crenshaw*, who distinguishes between two categories of terrorism: one in which terrorism appears as a ‘method of action’, and another in which it constitutes the ‘logic of action’ guiding the organization’s behaviour.¹¹ While those historically notorious organizations that sought to advance their independence movements primarily through attacks on political targets were classified into the former category, those that engage in indiscriminate killing – primarily for the purposes of intimidation and in pursuit of vaguely defined political goals – were placed into the latter.

I find this distinction particularly useful because terrorism defined by method of action does not typically give rise to suicide attacks, unlike terrorism based on logic of action. The reason for

4 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 307.

5 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 307–308, 320.

6 KOHLBERG, Martyrs and Martyrdom in Classical Islam 204–205.

7 STEINER, A terrorizmus problematikája 60.

8 Qur’ān 8:60.

9 Naturally, there are also critics of establishing such a continuity, see: ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 78.

10 Regarding the question of definition, see: STEINER, A terrorizmus problematikája 60–61.

11 CRENSHAW, Terrorism in Context 601.

this lies in the fact that, for those terrorists categorized under the former type, terrorism constitutes a goal-oriented tactical instrument within a broader toolkit (it is not our task here to judge its moral or legal standing), whereas for those in the latter category, it represents more of a *modus operandi*, or even a kind of *ars poetica* and overarching strategy. For the latter, terrorism is not a last resort – it is often the first¹². Consequently, they tend to be significantly less selective in their methods, including in the choice of perpetrators and targets. The reasons for this shall be analysed hereinafter.

Throughout my paper I rely on the most accepted English translations of primary Arabic sources, and when it is necessary, I indicate the original Arabic words. For the romanization of Arabic words, I relied on the transliteration of the Library of Congress ('APA-LC system'), except in case of direct quotes from other sources, and in terms or personal names well-known in English (e.g. 'Islam' itself).

2. The original *shahīds*

2.1. The *Sunnī* way

The ethos of a Muslim martyr began with the early battles of *Muhammad* and his followers. Dying in the paths of *Allah* encapsulates the essence of Muslim martyrdom: "*Think not of those who are slain in the way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision.*"¹³ These and other Islamic teachings on martyrdom are closely intertwined with early historical events in Islam, such as the battles of Badr, Uhud, and others. This serves as a clear example of how political and military events have consistently played an integral role in the development of Islamic traditions.

Apologists for the unpeaceful ways of early Islam, like *Armstrong* put forward that *Muhammad* and his companions did not have the 'luxury' of the *pax Romana* times in which Christianity was conceived. Thus, there was supposedly no other way for the new religion to be born but by the sword.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that in the early centuries of Islam, explicit suicide was not a battle technique for Muslims as Islamic teachings prohibited the deliberate ending of one's life. How suicide attacks were reconciled with Islamic teachings later on in some circles will be elaborated on in Section 4.

The ethos of martyrdom, however, was developed together with Islamic legal traditions, with *shahāda* viewed as a noble outcome of dying in the path of *Allah* during legitimate warfare. Nonetheless, the concept of self-sacrifice in battle has been subject to reinterpretation. Notably, the 14th-century scholar *Ibn Taymiyya* – whose teachings on *jihād* and *takfir* (declaring someone *kafir*, i.e. unbeliever) is regularly invoked by fundamentalists since the 20th century – distinguished between suicide and a form of self-sacrificial combat known as *inghimas* (plunging into the enemy). He argued that *inghimas* – where a soldier knowingly enters into a situation where death is likely to occur to achieve a strategic advantage – can be considered martyrdom if it serves the greater good of the Muslim community.¹⁵

12 For the sake of correctness, it is to be noted that, in principal, Islamic jurisprudence requires a valid intent for action, e.g. that all other military options were exhausted, but this issue has regularly been solved by suicide bombers and their spiritual mentors by arguing that generally it is impossible to fight [the unjust and tyrannical order] by conventional means. FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 361–362.

13 Qur'an 3:169. See similar Surah in 2:154.

14 ARMSTRONG, *Muhammad – Biography of the Prophet* 301–303.

15 See *Ibn Taymiyya's* fatwas in detail in: QASIM, *Majmu' Fatawat Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah*.

Islam does have a long martyrological tradition. “*It is this tradition that is at the core of current normative and legal justifications offered by military jihādists in support of self-annihilatory violence.*”¹⁶ All that being said, it is clear that *Sunnī* legal tradition does not explicitly deal with that type of “self-sacrifice” that suicide bombers invented in the past century as this practice would be deeply in contrast with *Sharī‘ah*. In fact, many *Sunnī* jurists disfavoured self-sacrifice, fearing fanaticism (prevalent in branches of Islam they deemed heretical).¹⁷ To reach the peculiar turn of theology, religious law and practice – when suicide becomes an integral part of *jihād* – we have to take *Shi‘ism* into consideration as well, which is key to understand this new wave of the Islamic struggle.

2.2. The Shi‘ī cult of the martyrs

Shi‘a receptiveness to this type of sacrificial ethos can be traced back to the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, where *Husayn*, the son of Caliph *Ali* and grandson of the Prophet *Muhammad*, fell in battle along with his small force while fighting against *Sunnī* Muslim armies.¹⁸ Sources recorded that he regarded martyrdom the only choice facing oppression and religious strife: “*I can only regard death as martyrdom (shahādah) and life with these oppressors as a tribulation.*”¹⁹ *Al-Tabari* leaves no doubt in his readers that *Husayn* made a conscious decision²⁰ to sacrifice himself for the injustice the Umayyads exacted on the *Shi‘ī* community. This decision determines the *Shi‘a* view of *jihād* up until today as the actions of *Husayn* are to be emulated in *Shi‘ī* theology.

Ever since *Husayn* was killed along with his family and supporters at the hands of the *Umayyad* army (the first dynastical *Sunnī* caliphate), the *Shi‘ī* community naturally developed a minority consciousness and martyrdom mentality in opposition to the *Sunnī* majority.²¹ *Husayn*’s death became a symbol of their divine truth, moral resistance, and redemptive suffering, propelling martyrdom to become central to in *Shi‘a* religious identity.

For the *Shi‘a*, *Husayn* is not merely a victim but a saviour figure, and his blood is seen as spiritually redemptive,²² and he is often referred to as *As-Sayyid al-Shuhada* (*The Lord of the Martyrs*).²³ The memory of Karbala is commemorated annually during *Ashura* through mourning rituals, re-enactments, passion plays (*tā‘ziya*), sermons, and processions (these ceremonies may involve self-harm like flagellation). Grief and suffering are regarded not only as means of identifying with the martyr of martyrs, but also as the principal path to attaining salvation.

Furthermore, *Shi‘a* thought sees martyrdom as an act of protest against tyranny and an essential part of the ongoing struggle between truth and falsehood. Martyrs are considered intercessors before *Allah* and exemplars of faith. Hence, the notion of *shahāda* is glorified in

16 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 303.

17 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 324, 326.

18 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 82.

19 AL-TABARI, Ta‘rikh al-rusul wa’l muluk 96.

20 One of the ideologues of the Iranian Revolution, *Ali Shariati* discussed that there is a vast difference between a *shahīd* who was chosen by death (a martyr of occasion who dies during *jihād* as a *mujahid*) and the preferred type of *shahīd* who chooses *shahāda* beforehand. FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 343.

21 NASR, The Shia Revival 42.

22 KOHLBERG, The Martyrs of Karbala 87–113.

23 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 327.

Shi'ī teachings, underscoring the redemptive power of suffering for a just cause.²⁴ “Martyrs are venerated as saints (*awliya*), whose suffering not only exemplifies piety but who also serve as intercessors between God and humanity, their sacrifice holding redemptive power.”²⁵

Since *Shi'a* tradition holds that several of their Imams (the spiritual and political leaders descended from *Alī*) were persecuted and even killed, this have further ensured the continuity of the ideal of self-sacrifice. *Shahāda* thus became central in *Shi'ī* political theology.²⁶ Imam *Ja'far al-Sadiq* (who himself lived under severe persecution) is said to have stated: “Martyrdom is a means of purification and nearness to God, and the martyr intercedes for seventy of his relatives.”²⁷ As we shall see, since the *Shi'a* were faced with more and more challenges, the notion of martyrdom through suicide also found its roots.²⁸ Thus, by the 1970's Ayatollah *Khomeini*, invoking the sacrifice of *Husayn*, promoted suicidal self-sacrifice – even in the case of children – as a form of martyrdom.²⁹

3. The development of suicide martyrdom in Islam, a.k.a. the history of Islamic terrorism

In order to better understand what led Islamic fundamentalists of the 20th century to incorporate suicide into their repertoire of tactics, it is worthwhile to examine the historical contexts, developmental trajectories, and ideological orientations of the organizations in which this phenomenon emerged. Naturally, the scope is limited to the study of the most prominent and influential groups.

3.1. The Assassins

The legendary medieval order of the Assassins was founded upon the teachings of *Hasan-i Sabbah*. This *Nizari Isma'ili* order was based in the fortress of Alamut, among other locations, and instilled fear in their enemies through meticulously planned and precisely executed assassinations.

According to *Róbert Simon*, suicide attacks among the Assassins served as “a means of political terror,” “anticipating modern-day suicide bombings.”³⁰ Others also regard the mysterious warriors of the *Fatimid* era as precursors to contemporary suicide attackers. *Bernard Lewis* held that while their actions were not strictly suicide attacks in the modern sense, the Assassins usually undertook missions that calculated with certain death, and in this regard only can they be regarded as the forerunners of suicide-bombers.³¹

These fighters sought to defend their version of *Shi'ism* by repelling the forces of the Seljuk Turks and Christians. Their primary targets were high-ranking individuals, whom they frequently assassinated in highly conspicuous ways.³² The high-profile killings of political figures fostered the tradition

24 MODARRESSI, Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam 140–142.

25 COLE, Sacred Space and Holy War 52.

26 NASR, The Shia Revival 57.

27 MAJLISI, Bihar al-Anwar Vol. 4, 45.

28 SPEIDL, A síita mártírtudat gyökerei 70.

29 For more details see: SPEIDL, A síita mártírtudat gyökerei 53, 57.

30 SIMON, Iszlám Kulturális Lexikon 329.

31 LEWIS, The Assassins XI.

32 STEINER, A terrorizmus problematikája 58.

of valorising martyrdom and self-sacrifice for *Allah*'s cause.³³ Their name is derived from "*hashish*," as their opponents – *Marco Polo* among them – claimed that they carried out their assassinations under the influence of this drug; however, later scholarship has cast doubt on this assertion.³⁴

After a prolonged hiatus – which was largely due to the Twelver *Shi'a* withdrawal from politics and seeking of compromise with *Sunni* rulers and other colonialist powers – suicide-style attacks re-emerged in Islamic history only during the 1970s and 1980s, once again within the *Shi'a* context. This change started with the conversion of Persia from *Sunni* to *Shi'a* state religion under the *Safavid* dynasty in the 16th century, and escalated during the rule of the *Qajar* dynasty who fought several colonial incursions into Iran.³⁵ The gradual shift from the quietism of the medieval *Shi'a* to a more militant stance, however, subsided in the first half of 20th century, as Twelver clerics again chose to avoid politics. However, further colonial endeavours, secularism and the eschatological expectations regarding the *Mahdi* (the *Hidden Imam* who went into occultation)³⁶ prompted revolutionary thinkers to bring forward a change that altered the history of Islam altogether.

3.2. The ideologues of the Iranian Revolution

The author of this paper agrees with *Freamon* that the modern form of *jihād*ist violence involving suicide terrorism is a "*result of a major reinterpretation of the theology and religious law on martyrdom and the military jihad advanced by Shi'i theologians and jurists in Iraq and Iran between the mid-1960s and the late-1970s.*"³⁷ This process is closely related to the political developments that culminated in the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The new theology has its roots in the Iraqi city of Najaf (burial site of 'Alī and one of the holiest sites of *Shi'ism*) in the 1960s. The socialist oppression of the Ba'ath Party bore harsh backlash from *Shi'a* clerics. Ayatollah *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr* began to publicly reinterpret the role of the *Shi'a* and preached that they had a responsibility to save Islam itself.³⁸ These were the early seeds of an Islamic revolution.

It was here in Najaf where *Ruhollah Khomeini* settled in 1965 (having been exiled from Iran). These prominent member of the *Shi'a* '*ulamā*' began to resurrect the ethos of martyrdom and give a new light to the sacrifice of *Ḥusayn bin Ali*. A student of *Khomeini* published *Shahid-e Javid* ("*The Eternal Martyr*") in 1968, which based its politically volatile message of political uprising on the Karbala incident from 680.³⁹ 1974 marked the beginning of widespread *Shi'a* unrest in Iraq.

Khomeini was again exiled, and from France, he disseminated his new theology to a subversive effect. His political endgame (an Islamist theocracy led by the '*ulamā*') was blurred enough to convince even leftist and liberal intellectuals, and mobilized the *Shi'i* youth back home. After the revolution, he solidified the rule of Islamist jurists in Iran, and their teaching on martyrdom was consolidated in mainstream *Shi'ism*.

33 HODGSON, *The Order of the Assassins* 121–123.

34 SIMON, *Az iszlám fundamentalizmus* 34–35.

35 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 333.

36 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 333.

37 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 304.

38 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 333.

39 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 338.

The philosopher *Ali Shariati*, a prominent ideologue of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (who actually died before the revolution under suspicious circumstances) held that a *shahīd* is not merely one who dies for a cause but is someone who transcends personal existence to embody a higher ideal. *Shariati* laid down in his teaching that the ultimate form of self-negation in the path of *Husayn*. He taught of a *shahīd* world community⁴⁰ where the *shahīds* are not inactive in politics but they carry out a universal mission “*in the midst of battles*,” “*in the middle of the East and the West*.”⁴¹

Naturally, such views came into direct confrontation with the socialism of the neighbouring state, Iraq, where *Saddam Hussein*’s dictatorship struggled with its *Shi’a* community that was on the brink of a revolution (as a spill-over from Iran). During the gruesome years of the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988) notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice were institutionalized and glorified. Under the leadership of Supreme Leader *Khomeini*, the Iranian regime explicitly promoted self-sacrifice in battle as a religious duty. Pursuant to such instigation, tens of thousands of child-soldiers participated in the war and scores of them perished.⁴² The Ayatollah declared: “*We do not fear giving martyrs Whatever we give for Islam is not enough and is too little. Our lives are not worthy. Let those who wish us ill not imagine that our youths are afraid of death or of martyrdom. Martyrdom is a legacy which we have received from our prophets*.”⁴³

3.3. The “Party of Allah”

One of the most important disciples of the previously mentioned *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr* was the Najaf-born *Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah*. After studying in the same *Shi’a* institution that *al-Sadr* and *Khomeini* was associated with, he returned to Lebanon (ancestral home of his family), where he developed an entirely new *jihād* theology based on the Iranian Revolution. This ideology placed suicide martyrdom in the heart of action.

Fadlallah wished to transform not only the Islamic world, but the entire Western civilization under a revolutionary ecumenical spirit that none of his teachers represented on such scale before.⁴⁴ By incorporating anti-tyrannical, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist views (in the spirit of *Che Guevara* and other revolutionaries) and, more importantly, anti-Zionist passion (borrowed from *Khomeini*), he was able to influence way more than a *Shi’a* minority group. He made the Palestinian struggle central to Islamic identity.⁴⁵

He arguably became the spiritual mentor for the nascent *Islamic Jihad* organization, soon to morph into *Hezbollah* (*Hizb Allāh*, lit. “*Party of Allah*”) which emerged during the protracted Lebanese Civil War in 1982, in direct response to the Israeli invasion. The organization was founded by the *Shi’i* clergy with Iranian support, in the fertile Beqaa Valley, situated between the Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges. Through its extensive social programs

40 This internationalism reflects the peculiar mixture of Marxist-Socialist views (focused more on social justice instead of other aspects of this materialist ideology) and Islamism that is a prominent feature in the Iranian Revolution. *Shariati* described himself as a “God-worshipping socialist”. See: FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 341.

41 SHARIATI, A Discussion of Shahid 235–237.

42 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 347–348.

43 KHOMEINI, Speech at Feyziyeh Theological School 33.

44 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 353–355.

45 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 353–355.

and relentless activism against Israel, Hezbollah gained popularity not only within *Shi'i* communities, but also gradually expanded its influence across the country.

Hezbollah's principal ideological source and chief patron is the Iranian Ayatollah. The organization's founders were studying in Najaf at the very time when *Khomeini* was active there in exile. Thus, both the Iranian Republic and the Lebanese militant organization are products of revolutionary *Shi'i* ideology and the cult of martyrdom.

The organization, funded and trained by Iran, along with its local allies, was the first to introduce suicide bombings as a new "genre" of terrorism. They carried out their first suicide attack in 1982, targeting the Israeli military headquarters in Tyre, resulting in the deaths of approximately 150 Israeli and Lebanese personnel.⁴⁶ This was followed by a series of attacks, including the bombing of the U.S. Embassy – which claimed 63 lives – and the 1983 assaults on the American and French peacekeeping headquarters in Beirut, which resulted in a combined death toll of 305,⁴⁷ and in the eventual withdrawal of U.S. and French forces from Lebanon.

This period also saw the ideological fusion of martyrdom with modern guerrilla tactics and urban terrorism, with suicide attacks conceived as effective strategic tools and symbols of unwavering faith. In addition to its bombings, Hezbollah gained notoriety through a sustained fifteen-year guerrilla campaign against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and its Christian allies. Initially, Hezbollah fought alongside Palestinian factions against Syrian influence; however, it later formed a close alliance with the *Assad*-regime, which became one of its principal backers. The group soon drew the ire of Western powers and also of Middle Eastern regimes as the *Shi'i* revolutionary and suicide ideology started to spread in the region with more and more attacks in its wake.

After 1992, under the leadership of *Hassan Nasrallah*,⁴⁸ Hezbollah adopted the formal structure of a political party. By that time, the organization had already carried out numerous suicide bombings resulting in the deaths of hundreds. Thus, Hezbollah evolved into a quasi-state entity operating within the Lebanese state.

3.4. The Palestinian terrorist organizations

In the *Sunni* world, it was Palestinian terrorist organizations – whether Islamist or secular – that first employed suicide attacks in their struggle against the State of Israel. The Palestinian groups initially encountered this particular form of martyrdom ideology during their exile in Lebanon,⁴⁹ where it was in the context of battle under the auspices of Hezbollah that the struggle of Lebanese *Shi'a* and Palestinian *Sunnis* converged. Thus became Palestinian terrorism a bridge between *Shi'i* and *Sunni* conceptions of martyrdom,⁵⁰ simultaneously serving as a conduit for the transmission of suicide terrorism into Sunnism.

One of the most important validators of suicide attacks even against the Jewish civilian population was *Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, the Qatar-based (and *Al-Jazeera*-broadcasted) *Sunni* schol-

46 SPEIDL, A síita mártírtudat gyökerei 52.

47 ROSTOVÁNYI, *Az iszlám és a 21. század* 50.

48 Eliminated by Israel on September 27, 2024.

49 SPEIDL, A síita mártírtudat gyökerei 65–66. Although concurrently with the *Shi'a* awakening, the teaching of aggressive *jihād* and *takfir* became more and more popular in *Sunni* fundamentalist circles (especially in the works of *Sayyid Qutb* and others), but these had not yet contained provisions on suicide attacks, and importantly they were not accepted by the majority of the *Sunni 'ulamā'*.

50 FREAMON, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War* 305.

ar. Referring to the Palestinian situation conveniently as a “special situation”, he deemed even civilians justified targets as everyone in Israel is involved with army service. Even women and minors were given permission for their “martyr operations” without the need for permission from parents or husbands.⁵¹ Though *al-Qaradawi* later withdrew some his teachings in this regard,⁵² by that time this “martyrdom” was largely accepted in the *Sunni* world as well.

The *Palestinian Islamic Jihād* (PIJ) was established in 1981, followed by the formation of *Hamas* (or *Islamic Resistance Movement*) in 1987. The military wing of the former is known as *al-Quds Brigades* (highlighting the central role of Jerusalem in their Islamist vision), while the latter is represented by the *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades*. One of the PIJ founders publicly acknowledged that they had resort to *Shi‘i* theology to support their form of *jihād* that was absent in *Sunni* theology and jurisprudence.⁵³

Both organizations have been responsible for a significant number of suicide attacks,⁵⁴ with increasing intensity since 1994 (as an obvious opposition against the Oslo peace process that would bring forth even a limited Palestinian compromise with Israel). The *al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades*, operating as the radical wing of the ostensibly secular *Fatah* party, also joined the campaign of terrorism against the Jewish state in the new millennium, particularly in the disputed territories (the West Bank / Judea and Samaria) and in Jerusalem.

The most common target of these organizations is, of course, Israel, whose military and civilian facilities continue to be attacked to this day. Hamas’s Charter leaves no ambiguity regarding its intentions: the organization’s goal is the complete eradication of the Jewish state and the liberation of all of “historic Palestine”⁵⁵ – disregarding the fact that strictly speaking this would also entail the territory belonging to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The 1988 founding document employs explicitly genocidal and deeply antisemitic language, which was only marginally softened in the 2013 revision. The latter merely “clarifies” that the organization’s conflict is not with Jews as a whole, but specifically with Zionist Israelis. The Charter relies heavily on the primary sources of Islamic law (the *Qur‘ān* and the *hadiths*) to justify its aim to obliterate the Jewish State.

The latest and most severe culmination of this rhetoric and practice was the massacre carried out on October 7, 2023, during which several terrorist organizations based in the Gaza Strip – primarily *Hamas* and *Palestinian Islamic Jihād* (PIJ) – launched an unprecedented barrage of rockets into Israeli airspace and simultaneously initiated a ground invasion targeting kibbutzim near Gaza. Armed militants and paramilitary forces together with “civilians” from Gaza participated in this coordinated assault. About 1.200 people were killed, including not only Israeli citizens but also foreign workers and others, the majority of whom were civilians. In addition, several hundred individuals were taken hostage. The attack can be considered “suicidal” in nature, as the perpetrators did not anticipate surviving; indeed, thousands of the terrorists who infiltrated Israeli territory were killed.

In analysing the nature of the attack, *Steiner* concludes that, given the indiscriminate slaughter of the Israeli population in its entirety – including infants, children, women, elderly and foreigners – the Hamas assault constitutes an act of genocide under international criminal

51 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 366–367.

52 LIEBER, The cleric who legitimized suicide attacks.

53 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 358.

54 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 50.

55 THE COVENANT of the Islamic Resistance Movement 1988.

law. This would provide a legal basis for international criminal proceedings against the perpetrators.⁵⁶ The gravity of these crimes is further heightened, and a new precedent is set in the field of international criminal law, by the fact that the atrocities were broadcast live via internet platforms and social media channels.⁵⁷

3.5. Globalized Jihād

In contrast to the aforementioned groups, which still partly represented *jihād* against the “near enemy,” Islamist organizations with a globalized character had emerged by the 1990’s,⁵⁸ advocating a worldwide *jihād* and a universal form of Islam.⁵⁹ *Al-Qaeda (The Base)* was established around 1988 under the leadership of *Usāmah bin Lādin* in the Peshawar region of Pakistan. Their extremist interpretation of Islamic faith placed strong emphasis on the violent global dissemination of their fanatical ideology. This took on a political character, despite the fact that they failed to articulate any concrete or constructive political message.⁶⁰

The *Jihādi* Salafist (*Salafīyyūn al-Jihādiyyūn*) ideologues of this terrorist organization have turned *shahāda* into a powerful myth. During the anti-Soviet *jihād* (between 1979 and 1989), *‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām*, the Mandatory Palestine-born spiritual guide of *bin Lādin*, elevated *shahāda* as both a ‘personal choice’ and the ‘highest ambition’ for the *mujāhid* (Muslim fighter).⁶¹ In doing so, *Azzām* even frequently described battlefield miracles to convince his followers of the divine nature of suicidal *shahāda*.⁶²

Their campaign of terrorism culminated in the most devastating terrorist attack in history: the series of attacks carried out on September 11, 2001, which were executed by suicide hijackers. This history-shaping assault sparked significant debate within Muslim circles, and even the imams of Al-Azhar and the Grand Mosque of Mecca issued statements denouncing this form of *jihād*.⁶³

According to *Simon*, the distinctiveness of the worldview and activism of global *jihādists* such as *al-Qaeda* lies in the fact that their “fantasy ideology” did not require them to pair their brutal actions with any coherent political objectives.⁶⁴ It goes without saying that this practice – rooted in a distant, utopian vision and mentality – had a profound impact on other Islamist organizations as well.

Among these groups, the *Islamic State* employed suicide terrorism in one of the most drastic and systematic ways. Its organizational precursor was founded in 1999 by *Abū Muṣab al-Zarqāwī* under the name *Jamā‘at al-Tawhīd wa’l-Jihād (Congregation of Monotheism and Jihād)*, which became particularly active following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Even at that time, the

56 STEINER, A terrorizmus problematikája 65–66.

57 Even the Human Rights Council – which is far from objective and is often criticized for its pro-Palestinian bias – has confirmed this in its report; see: “*Detailed findings on attacks carried out on and after 7 October 2023 in Israel*,” 35, 38.

58 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 51.

59 SIMON, Az iszlám fundamentalizmus 85–96; and Moghadam, The Globalization of Martyrdom.

60 SIMON, Az iszlám fundamentalizmus 12–13, 81–83.

61 *Azzām*, however, did not agree with *bin Lādin* regarding a more globalized fight, and except in the case of Israel, did not propagate indiscriminate suicide attacks.

62 HAFEZ, Jihadi Salafism 267.

63 BUKAY, The Religious Foundations of Suicide Bombings.

64 SIMON, Az iszlám fundamentalizmus 83.

group had already gained notoriety for its use of suicide attacks. Although it never fully integrated into the *al-Qaeda* network, in 2013 the *Nusra Front* (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) merged with *al-Zarqāwī*'s organization, leading to the formation of the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL).⁶⁵ Suicide terrorism has since remained a frequent and prominent tactic within the group's operational arsenal.⁶⁶

Their first suicide attacks were carried out in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in 2015.⁶⁷ In the course of such operations, they frequently relied on the involvement of foreign—sometimes even Western—volunteers, as well as children and minors.⁶⁸ As one analysis lays out: “*In its operations, Isil and its affiliates show no regard for civilian populations; on the contrary, through the deployment of artillery units and suicide bombers, they actively seek to maximize the number of casualties and systematically destroy private property and infrastructure belonging to those they consider their enemies.*”⁶⁹

Though the Caliphate proclaimed by ISIL was dissolved by the operations of a foreign alliance against the entity, their cells remain on the ground, and together with many other Islamist organizations – *Shī‘ī* or *Sunnī* – they continue to apply suicide terrorism as a means to achieve their goals.

4. Theological problems in Islam regarding suicide attacks

After analysing the historical development of martyrdom in Islamic religious law as well as the practice of suicidal *shahāda* over the centuries, now we have to expound on the problem of suicide attacks in Islamic theology and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). The theological dilemma of suicide terrorism lies in the fact that theistic religions – including Islam – prohibit suicide (*qatl al-naḥs*, i.e., self-murder) as a sin.⁷⁰

That being said, the *Qur’ānic* verse typically cited in this context (4:29) is grammatically ambiguous, as it is not entirely clear whether, according to *Allah*, it is the killing of one another or of oneself that is prohibited.⁷¹ The *hadīths* found in the *Sunnah*, however, reflect a more explicit position, thereby firmly establishing the prohibition (the *haram* nature) of suicide in Islam.⁷² As a consequence, such an act is understood to entail punishment in Hell.⁷³ In other words, suicide bombers pose a challenge to religious legal norms even within the framework of the Muslim faith. At the same time, *Rostoványi* aptly quotes *Ignaz Goldziher* in this context, noting that “*in properly assessing religious phenomena in Islam, what is decisive is not so much what the Qur’ān and the tradition say, but rather how their statements and meanings are interpreted by the community.*”⁷⁴

For the *Shī‘a*, the basic justification for suicide attacks was centred on the perceived parallel between *Husayn bin Ali* and modern day *jihādīst*. In justifying the contemporary *jihād* against tyranny and oppression with suicidal means, *Fadlallah* set up a detailed analogy between the

65 BESENYŐ, Az Iszlám állam 11–13.

66 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 83.

67 BESENYŐ, Az Iszlám állam 25.

68 BESENYŐ, Az Iszlám állam 20, 36, 72.

69 BESENYŐ, Az Iszlám állam 63.

70 SIMON, Iszlám Kulturális Lexikon 328.

71 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 81.

72 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 81.

73 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 308.

74 ROSTOVÁNYI, A terrorizmus civilizációs-kulturális háttere 27.

attacker's situation and that of *Husayn* in Karbala.⁷⁵ *Ali Shariati* did something very similar in the 70's when he also invoked the example of the first *Shi'i* martyr. Regarding suicide missions, the views of *Shariati* are particularly staggering as he asserted that by sacrificing his life, the *shahid* "transmits the sacredness of that cause to himself":⁷⁶ "*Shahadat has such a unique radiance; it creates light and heat in the world and in the cold and dark hearts. In the paralyzed wills and thought, immersed in stagnation and darkness... Such death brings about the death of the enemy at the hands of the ones who are educated by the blood of a shahid. By shedding his own blood, the shahid is not in the position to cause the fall of the enemy... He wants to humiliate the enemy, and he does so. By his death, he does not choose to flee the hard and uncomfortable environment. He does not choose shame. Instead of a negative flight, he commits a positive attack. By his death, he condemns the oppressor and provides commitment for the oppressed. He exposes aggression and revives what has hitherto been negated.*"⁷⁷

Simon emphasizes that suicide warfare infiltrated *Sunni* Islamism from the *Shi'i* branch, though it remained present in *Shi'i* communities like Lebanon and Iran as well, particularly through the so-called *fidā'iyyūn*.⁷⁸ The term "those who sacrifice themselves" was also used in the Arab world (e.g., for Arab guerrillas rising up against the Jewish state), but in this context it refers to the *Shi'i* organization founded in 1946 – more widely known as *Fadāyān-e Islam* – which advocated strict adherence to Islamic law and carried out assassinations against "heretics." After the group was dismantled, its ideology continued under a similarly named organization with Marxist affiliations.⁷⁹

Since this ideological transfer of suicidal *jihād* into *Sunnism* took place, this form of martyrdom has become Islam's unresolved dilemma, as "*Muhammad, on the one hand, condemned suicide, but on the other – particularly in the early years of the war against the Quraysh – praised those who bore witness to their faith in the path of Allah.*"⁸⁰ In the language employed by Islamism, the concepts of '*shahid*' and 'suicide terrorist' have effectively and definitively merged. *Rostoványi* identifies the root of this conflation in the fact that several passages in the *Qur'ān* praise those who give their lives for the cause of Islam (*fi sabil Allāh*, i.e., those who die in the path of *Allah*).⁸¹

The interpretation of *Ibn Taymiyya's* teachings of *inghimās* has been cited by some contemporary *jihād*ist groups to justify suicide attacks, viewing such missions as acts of *inghimās* (plunging into battle) rather than suicide. As it is the case with many of *Ibn Taymiyya's* teachings, again this specific one also seem to be taken out of its historical context⁸² which is again basis for dangerous contemporary conclusions by fundamentalists. Yet the distinction is clear: the glory of participating in *jihād* does not necessarily entail the sacrifice of one's life – even if the possibility is acknowledged by the combatant – whereas the suicide bomber deliberately and intentionally forfeits their life; without this very act, the operation itself would not occur.

Ultimately, among Islamists, the distinct conceptual categories of martyrdom and suicide have been conflated, which explains how both the attackers and their recruiters have been able

75 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 362.

76 SHARIATI, A Discussion of Shahid 236.

77 SHARIATI, A Discussion of Shahid 240–241.

78 SIMON, Az iszlám fundamentalizmus 92.

79 ABRAHAMIAN, A Modern History of Iran 116.

80 SIMON, Az iszlám fundamentalizmus 92.

81 ROSTOVÁNYI, Az iszlám és a 21. század 81.

82 For details see: MOLLOY, Deconstructing Ibn Taymiyya's Views on Suicidal Missions.

to find theological justification – or at least exoneration – for their actions.⁸³ Since, in the case of suicide attacks, the primary objective – according to the perpetrators – is not the destruction of the attacker’s own life, but rather the killing of *Allah’s* enemies, it is, strictly speaking, not considered suicide in the conventional sense. This is because the act is not carried out for an individual or personal purpose, but rather in pursuit of a perceived “collective interest”.⁸⁴

Nagy analysed not only the ideal of martyrdom, but also the more pragmatic – or one might say profane—reasons behind the use of suicide attacks. These include the relative simplicity and low cost of organizing such operations, their high destructive potential, the lack of risk of capture, and the likelihood of significant media attention.⁸⁵

Several primary and academic sources indicate and emphasize that suicide warfare has generated significant debate within classical Islam; its positive appraisal is by no means unanimous – in fact, quite the opposite. During the 9th and 10th centuries, religious scholars predominantly opposed it, considering it dangerous to the community. *Simon* goes so far as to describe this tactic as “anti-Islamic” and “irrational,” a view that, in his opinion, becomes particularly evident in light of the involvement of children and women, which “*alienates the majority of Muslims from those who employ it.*”⁸⁶

Not only it is peculiar within the realm of Islamic culture, it is also entirely inconsistent with the teachings and traditions on martyrdom in Judaism and Christianity.

5. Martyrdom in Judeo-Christian culture

In the Biblical teachings, the concept of martyrdom concentrates on adherence and total faithfulness to the revelations of *God*. Giving one’s life for the truth in the face of persecution is what the Bible means by martyrdom. The Old Testament does not explicitly glorify death for faith as a path to sanctity in the way later traditions do, it does portray several individuals who remained faithful under extreme pressure, including the threat of death. Many regards *Abel* the first protomartyr who was murdered by his brother, *Cain* for his righteous worship. The case of *Shadrach*, *Meshach*, *Abednego* and *Daniel* in the Babylonian captivity could be cited as an example since they refused obedience to pagan idolatry and customs, remaining loyal to the Jewish revelation and the Mosaic law.⁸⁷

The New Testament presents the Greek term *martys* (μάρτυς, lit. witness) for those who proclaim *God’s* truths even in the face of death. When *Jesus* proclaims: “*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,*”⁸⁸ he uses this term, simultaneously predicting the disciples’ testimony as well as their potential martyrdom (which are closely linked). The first New Testament protomartyrs were *John the Baptist* and later *Stephen* who were both killed for bearing witness for *God*.⁸⁹ *James* the Apostle (later joined by *Paul*, *Peter* and other apostles according to tradition) was also an early martyr of the Gospel message.

83 On this contradiction see: SIMON, *Islám Kulturális Lexikon* 287–289.

84 NAGY, *Az öngyilkos merénylet mint a terrorizmusban alkalmazott eszköz* 76.

85 NAGY, *Az öngyilkos merénylet mint a terrorizmusban alkalmazott eszköz* 76.

86 SIMON, *Az iszlám fundamentalizmus* 93.

87 Daniel chapters 3 and 6.

88 Acts 1:8.

89 Acts 6:8, 7:1–60.

The *Book of Revelation* provides the most important eschatological promise associated with martyrdom for the message of *Jesus Christ*. *John* presents the martyrs in Heaven: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.”⁹⁰ The Apocalypse narrative presents those who died for Christ as the ultimate victors of this present age, however they do not conquer by the sword or any other violent method, but “They triumphed over him [the accuser, a.k.a. Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”⁹¹

It is not the aim of this paper to offer a detailed account on Jewish and Christian martyrdom, but to provide a holistic overview herein (especially in relation to suicide and harming others), in order to contrast the basic teachings, motivations and practices with that of Islam.

5.1. Kiddush HaShem – Jewish traditions on martyrdom

One of the conspicuous examples of Jewish martyrdom is the case of Masada, a Jewish fortress in south Judea that withheld the Roman siege for the longest time during the war for Judea, a province of Rome in the 1st century AD. The desperate fight of the *Zealots* – a Jewish sect that chose armed resistance to Roman influence – resulted in the mass-suicide of the residents of Masada who rather chose death than Roman subjugation and punishment.

In post-Biblical Judaism, rabbinical tradition one of the most prevalent principles became the so-called *pikkuach nefesh*, i.e. the protection of life even when it involves actions that violate the stipulations of the *Torah*.⁹² There are only “three inviolables”, basic tenets not to be broken under any other circumstances: the prohibition against murder, idolatry and adulterous/incestuous sexual relations. If a Jew is facing a situation where he would have to violate these rules to save his life, he should instead chose death (martyrdom).⁹³

Rabbis throughout the centuries vied to delineate martyrdom and suicide. *Ma’amar Kidush Hashem* (“*Treatise on Martyrdom*”) by *Maimonides* is one of those reference works in this regards. Rambam specifically refers to Muslim oppression as well: “However if one died a martyr’s death rather than affirm the divine mission of ‘that man’ [Mohammed], we can say he acted righteously.”⁹⁴ Jewish martyrdom, hence, is never an offensive action, never an act of war, rather the keeping of one’s moral and spiritual standing.

5.2. The ‘Fifth Seal’ – Christian traditions on martyrdom

In Christian tradition martyrdom is “suffering death for one’s religious beliefs.”⁹⁵ As we saw that *John* presents the martyrs of faith in the ‘fifth seal’ of the Revelations, this gave foundation to the later traditions for the glorification of martyrs. In medieval times, certain denominations even developed a cult for Christian martyrs; festivals and celebrations were attributed to these saints. Academic literature holds that the hagiography titled *Martyrdom of Polycarp* became

90 Revelations 6:9.

91 Revelations 12:11.

92 RUFF, *The New Testament and the Torah* 101–102.

93 SOLOVEITCHIK, *Martyrdom*, Jewish 160–161.

94 MAIMONIDES, *Discussion of Kiddush Hashem* 73.

95 CALLAM, *Martyrdom*, Christian 159.

the prototype for such reverence.⁹⁶ Later on, ascetic life and the practice of the monks became closely associated with martyrdom, finding its peak in the personal path of *Francis of Assisi* who wished to imitate *Christ* through extreme asceticism and even missionary work in the Muslim world⁹⁷ – as he was granted audience by the *Ayyubid* Sultan himself, he was able to witness his faith in the highest of Muslim courts.

The relationship between suicide and martyrdom is a centuries-old debate in Christian tradition. The dilemma is whether an unlawful act (i.e. suicide) can be deemed virtuous in certain circumstances. *Augustine* and *Thomas Aquinas* came to the stance that sacrificing one's life is indeed a laudable act if it for a moral cause,⁹⁸ as a death for a higher purpose.⁹⁹ (We note here that in Eastern Christianity, where the church and state is much closer to this day compared to Western Christianity, even political assassinations can lead to the murdered political leader to be labelled as martyr.¹⁰⁰)

One thing is conspicuous: Christian martyrdom never involves the killing of others. The Crusaders, who were popularly regarded as martyrs who died for the Christian cause were never venerated as martyrs officially by the Church.¹⁰¹ Christian martyrdom is not a military or political action but a choice solely affecting one's self, and always in a distressing situation in the context of keeping one's faith and morals. Furthermore, ever since the secularization of the Western world took place, the laws of war changed, and the concept of holy war became marginalized and anachronistic in the Christian context, leaving Islam the only monotheistic religion where the law of war is still an integral part of religious law,¹⁰² and where suicide missions are in fact legitimized by way of *Shari'ah*.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen above, in the modern context, Islamic suicide terrorism first emerges most clearly within *Shi'ism*. It is particularly in this milieu that it finds a significant number of willing participants – especially in environments with desperate populations. Such was the case during the Iranian Revolution and the Lebanese Civil War. Later on, this tactic was also adopted by radical Palestinian factions in their struggle against the State of Israel.

In order to reconcile the act of suicide – which is explicitly forbidden in Islamic tradition – with terrorist violence, Islamist extremists employed a form of arbitrary theology.¹⁰³ Typically, they bridged this gap in a *sui generis* manner by distorting traditional Islamic narratives of martyrdom. Drawing selectively on historical precedents, they ultimately conflated the noble sacrifice praised by *Muhammad* with suicide bombings, justifying the latter by invoking a self-styled notion of the public good – one defined entirely on their own terms.

This theological issue remains a subject of debate within the Islamic world to this day. However, fundamentalists seek to declare the debate closed by accusing the traditional religious scholars ('*ulamā*') of secularization and collaboration with the enemy, while presenting themselves

96 See notes in: FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 310.

97 CALLAM, Martyrdom, Christian 160.

98 For details see: THOMAS AQUINAS, 42 Summa Theologiae 41–59.

99 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 312.

100 CALLAM, Martyrdom, Christian 159.

101 CALLAM, Martyrdom, Christian 160.

102 FREAMON, Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War 312.

103 MARÓTH, Mit kell tudni az iszlámról? 8.

as the sole representatives of the true and pure form of Islam. This self-righteous stance has, in practice, led to unscrupulous actions – ultimately giving rise to the problem of terrorism, which has become a major challenge for international politics as well.

Given that neither Judaism nor Christianity ascribes such a powerful aura to martyrdom – let alone links it to political or military objectives – the profound discrepancy between the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere and the Islamic world in this regard significantly contributes to the civilizational clash famously articulated by *Huntington*.¹⁰⁴ Especially with the globalization of Islamism – namely, the export of *jihad* – the suicide tactics employed by these organizations have become a widespread and serious threat.

In this study, we have broadly outlined the historical trajectory of this phenomenon, as well as its theological pitfalls. For meaningful change to occur – of the kind welcomed by the international community – as a first step, the internal struggle within Islam must ultimately be resolved in favour of those who uphold the original, uncorrupted teachings on martyrdom. Of course, this alone would not address the broader and deeply intricate issue of *jihad* – understood in this context as warfare against the ‘non-believing’ world – something that is the topic for another paper.

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104 HUNTINGTON, *Clash of Civilizations* 109–119.

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