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A Blood Wedding: Hezbollah's *shuhada* and its Culture of Martyrdom

Short research paper

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1. Introduction

My only mother. I married in this world, the day of sacrifice, the day I will meet the fair black-eyed virgin, the day my congealed blood will be as a decoration for the day I welcome the prophet, and Husayn will bless me with great light. (Hezbollah song, titled “The Blood Wedding”, quoted in Hatina 2014: 93).

This article discusses how the Islamic Resistance movement Hezbollah (Party of God) constructs distinct narratives of self-sacrifice and makes an attempt to define the social concept of a *culture of martyrdom*. Following a discussion on the idea of martyrdom in Shi’a Islam and its relation to jihad, it goes on to examine the party’s narratives of martyrdom and customs of commemoration, by first looking at Shi’a scholars and religious leaders, and then studying Hezbollah’s “martyrdom on the streets”. In the end, it shortly states the reappearance of Shi’a *sectarian martyrdom* in the Syrian civil war.

2. Martyrdom in Shi’a Islam

We cannot talk about martyrdom in Islam, without talking about jihad¹. Sayyed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, former Lebanese Grand Ayatollah in Twelver Shi’a Islam and late spiritual leader of Hezbollah, argued, martyrdom is considered legitimate since it is conducted under the banner of jihad (Alagha 2004: 191). Both concepts are consequently inevitably linked together. Commonly, a distinction is made between smaller military jihad (*al-jihad al-asghar*) in defense against the enemies of Islam, and greater jihad (*al-jihad al-akbar*), meaning the internal spiritual struggle of the Muslim individual. Hezbollah’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah argues, before engaging in its smaller counterpart, greater jihad should be practiced (Alagha 2011: 21; Moussalli 1999: 154f.).

As an implementation of smaller jihad martyrdom has a special stand in the Shi’ite narrative. In Shi’a Islam, “the shahid [martyr] as [a] model ... finds its ultimate expression in the figure of Imām Husayn Ibn ’Alī” (Hurted 1993: 50), or Sayyid al-Shuhadā, the Prince of the Martyrs. Husayn, the first Imam of Shi’a Islam, faced the forces of the superior Umayyad caliph in Karbala 41CE/680AH, and the Shi’ite framework of martyrdom is constructed based on his suffering and martyrdom² (Ibid.). Therefore Shi’ite martyrdom, in contrast to the Sunni ethos, follows an

¹ Hurted (1993: 48) states, “in the formal sense shahīd (martyr) is one who has died while performing jihād”. This paper, however, focuses on the concept of martyrdom in the context of Lebanese Hezbollah and therefore will not explore the issue in detail. For further research, see Kohlberg, Etan: The development of the Imāmī Shī’ī doctrine of jihad, and Moghadam, Assaf: Mayhem, myths, and martyrdom: the Shi’a conception of jihad; both in Cook, David 2010: Jihad and Martyrdom.

² According to Cook (2007: 57), the martyrdom of Karbala was a “defining moment for islam” and this trauma “can hardly be overestimated”.

historical line. Cook (2007: 59) notes, the story of the family of the Prophet Mohammed is a history of martyrdom³ and Ayatullah al-Khumayni, religious leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and first “Supreme Leader” of the Islamic Republic of Iran, described the event as the “considerable intellectual and emotional heritage of Shi’ite martyrdom” as it “changed [the] discourse from quietist to radical by turning al-Husayn from a tragic into a proactive figure” (Ibid.: 140). The “Karbala complex” thus signifies the split of the Shi’a from the Sunna and indicated the spread of Shi’a self-sacrifice (Hatina 2014: 51).

The traditional-historical interpretation of martyrdom is ergo significant for its religious understanding. Due to its special character of ultimate self-sacrifice⁴, the martyr is rewarded a special status in Islam. He is promised paradise and will not be punished on *yawm al-din*, the day of judgement (Moussalli 1999: 185f.). At this point, the essential aspect of martyrdom *in* jihad has to be taken into consideration again, for martyrdom turns into suicide – which is prohibited in Islam – “without the imperative need for a defensive jihad” and hence will not be awarded (Saad-Ghorayed 2001: 133).

This defensive element of martyrdom is reflected in its rendering as a weapon of the oppressed. As Imam Khumayni puts it,

“as Shi’ites we welcome any opportunity for sacrificing our blood. Our nation looks forward to an opportunity for self-sacrifice and martyrdom; as such, red death is much better than black life” (Alagha 2004: 190).

In particular Hezbollah, as one of militant Shi’a’s central character, uses Qur’anic verses and terms for the legitimization of its ideology. One of its main concepts is the distinction between the oppressors (*mustakbirin*) and the oppressed (*mustad’afin*), or referring to the Qur’an, the dichotomy of the party of God (*hizb’ullah*) and the party of the Devil (*hizb al-shaytan*) (Alagha 2011a: 15). In addition, Alagha (Ibid.: 16) accounts the movement using a Marxist phraseology, interpreted in Islamic terms.

Victory, claims Nasrallah, “is always the result of martyrdom” (Alagha 2004: 196). However, martyr is not martyr. Depending on the sacrificial context, terminology, reward, and narrative differ. Alagha (2004: 186f.) distinguishes four types of martyrs⁵: An *al-istishhadi al-mujahid*, or “hard-core altruist”, is a Muslim, who “intentionally or willingly blows himself [herself] in the battlefield

³ The surviving son of Imam Husayn initiated the continuation of Mohammed’s lineage, which lead to eight more Imams, who were all martyred or died unnaturally under the oppression of the Abbasid caliphate. According to the Shi’ite Twelver beliefs, the last son, Muhammad al-Mahdi, will reappear at the end of days to establish the messianic age (Cook 2007: 59).

⁴ According to the traditional Shi’ite paradigm, “Husayn’s selfless concern for Islam and filial piety led him to place himself and his companions into a situation that would result in their deaths” (Hurted 1993: 50)

⁵ Khosrokhavar (2002: 12ff.), on the other hand, just differentiates between offensive and defensive martyrdom, relating to the commonly done distinction of the two forms of *jihad*.

... in order to inflict the highest amount of damage and fatalities on the enemy”. The *al-shahid al-mujahid* falls in the battlefield facing the enemy in performing jihad (such as Nasrallah’s son Hadi). The victim martyr, *al-shahid*, is an innocent civilian Muslim who died in an act of aggression, and *shahid al-watan* or *shahid al-qadiyya* is a “martyr of the nation-state or cause”, a non-Muslim who died in the battlefield fighting for the cause he believes in, such as the Lebanese Army or the Lebanese Multi-Confessional Brigades which fought Israel together with Hezbollah.

Such ideas and images construct a compound martyrs’ discourse in society, which in return shapes the perception of martyrdom of aspirants and the allegedly represented community.

Shi’ite cleric and disciple of al-Khumanyi, Morteza Mutahhery (1979: 63) noted,

“[A]t no time is a martyr’s blood wasted. It does not flow on the ground. Every drop of it is turned into hundreds and thousands of drops, nay, into tons of blood and is transfused into the body of his society ... Is it the martyr who infuses such fresh blood into the veins of such society.”

Henceforth, we have to get an overview on martyrdom *in society*, the constructed discourse and its symbolic manifestations. After we took a look at the martyrdom narrative, the next chapter will examine its use in a culture of martyrdom.

3. Hezbollah’s Culture of Martyrdom

“Our people in Palestine, as in Lebanon, possess a substantial power; they are lovers of martyrdom, lovers of meeting God, lovers of departing to the vicinity of God and the eternal gardens” (Hassan Nasrallah, cited by Alagha 2011b: 106).

To examine Hezbollah’s culture of martyrdom, or the group’s discourse of self-sacrifice, one has to take a look at Lebanese Shi’a religious figures, as well as the Party itself. For that, a short excursion on the relationship of martyrdom and jihad is needed once again.

In 1985, Hezbollah stated⁶,

“[t]hus, each and every one of us is a combatant when the call of *jihad* demands it, and each of us undertakes his task in the battle in accordance with the ‘legitimate and religious responsibility’ (*taklif shar’i*) of the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, the leader. God is with us; He supports us by sheltering us with His care; by placing fear in our enemies’ hearts; and by granting us His dear and resounding victory” (Alagha 2011a: 41, own emphasis).

Regarding the symbiosis of jihad and martyrdom, Fadlallah remarked,

“it is *haram* ... to kill oneself or others; but during *jihad* ..., which is defensive or preventive war according to Islam, it is accepted and allowed, as jihad is considered an exceptional case” (Mousawi 2002, own emphasis).

In its “Identity and Goals” from August 2004, the party insisted, it used suicide attacks as its special resistance tactic, which “dealt great losses to the enemy on all thinkable levels such as militarily and mentally” and “raised the morale across the whole Islamic nation”, the *umma* (Alagha 2011a: 61).

⁶ Extract from “Open Letter Adressed to the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World”, 16 February 1985.

Furthermore, Shi'a Twelver scholar Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din urged Shi'ites in a sermon in October 1955,

“to sacrifice their soul and their possessions for the lofty values for which Husayn has fought until his last breath, even though the power balance between the people of justice and the people of falsehood remained as it had been - the few against the many”⁷ (Hatina 2014: 91).

Even though there has been vast research on the concepts of jihad and martyrdom in Islam as well as on the constructed narratives and perceptions in affected societies⁸, a clear denotation of a culture of martyrdom is still to be stated. For my analysis as a working definition, I combine Kroeber and Kluckhohn's approach to culture with Momen's short note on martyrdom. As Kroeber and Kluckhohn observe,

“[c]ulture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181; cited by Spencer-Oatey 2012: 2).

Culture is thereby defined as a blend of direct and indirect schemas or structures for irregular or sequential action, delivered via a system of symbols handed down from history. Regarding martyrdom, Momen (1999: 230) remarks,

“[t]he ultimate in self-sacrifice is martyrdom, in which a person sacrifices his or her own life itself for religion.”

Further, Wehr (1994: 572) translates the Arabic term for martyrdom (*istishhad*) as “heroic death”. Deriving from those approaches and afore-mentioned remarks, I define culture of martyrdom as a learned social and individual construct, relating to a social group, which interprets specific customs and practices of martyrdom across a discourse, through which a religious-driven narrative of righteous self-sacrifice is transmitted into social reality (i.e. culture, which is used here as umbrella term for the habit of publicly commemorating martyrs and such alike) via symbols following lines of tradition. The term *culture of martyrdom* thus connects the concept of *istishhad* to other aspects of *social life* through the term *culture*.

First, we therefore must take a look at the social construction and perception of martyrdom. Hatina (2014: 233) awards suicide attacks [martyrdom] even an educative function. He writes,

“perpetrators brought the ideological platform of their movements into the street ... Their dramatic death, followed by the exhibition of their written and recorded wills ... conveyed a message of piety, power, determination, and commitment.”

⁷ This perception (the righteous minority against the misled majority) might also be held by Shi'ite fighters in the merging sectarian conflicts between Sunna and Shi'a across the Arab world.

⁸ The phrase is being used quite often in literature; some works even carry it in their title, without specifying its meaning.



Figure 1: Posters in the street commemorating martyrs (*shuhada*) in Patrakyieh neighbourhood of Beirut (left), and Sūr, 2014. Author's personal photos.

In Hezbollah's case, this manifestation of a culture of martyrdom in social reality seems to be overly distinct and extensive. It takes shape in public funerals⁹ or cementaries like Beirut's Rawdat al-Shahidain, posters on public streets (see Fig. 1), videos¹⁰ and songs¹¹ (*nasheed*) praising and commemorating martyrs, and video messages by individual jihadists (*mujahideen*), recorded before committing the act¹² as well as memoir texts on the internet¹³. In its own themepark of the resistance in Mleeta, the party dedicated a "Martyrs Hill" to its fighters who have died in the fight against Israel and in the park's merchandise shop it sells Hezbollah popular culture, sometimes touching the issue of martyrdom. In addition, the movement used to celebrate an annual martyrs day and certain media coverage depicts fallen fighters or suicide bombers as martyrs¹⁴.

As a result, a particular discourse is being created, under which an individual is willing to sacrifice its own life or that of its children for the cause of the movement, since it is considered one of the highest duties to society¹⁵.

⁹ "تشيع شهيد حزب الله المجاهد حسين عبدالمنعم جرادي في بلدته حاروف" ⁹, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qTTnbkdMKU>, 12 May 2015.

¹⁰ "Martyrdom Anniversary of Hezbollah Shaheed Imad Mughniyah" 2012, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBME1WyBOIQ>, 12 May 2015.

¹¹ "Hezbollah song and tribute to martyrs" 2015, retrieved from http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=fb3_1422013100, 12 May 2015.

¹² "Hezbollah Resistance The Will of Martyr Mahdi Mohammad Yaghi" 2013, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnmCwt_5DgA&html5=1, 12 May 2015.

¹³ See "Electronic Resistance", a translated access to Hezbollah's media section, at <http://www.electronicresistance.net>.

¹⁴ See martyrs section at Al-Manar, a Lebanese television station affiliated with Hezbollah, <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/catpage.php?frid=46&page=2>.

¹⁵ A mother of a Hezbollah martyr in 1999 made the analogy, "[i]f you are bitten by a snake and the poison is flowing in your blood stream, will you let it go all the way to your heart and kill you, or will you simply suck it out?" She claimed, her son "acted as a bronze hawk, a hard-core altruist who's greatest duty and source of pride [honour and dignity] is to sacrifice himself for the well-being of his country by killing as many as possible of his enemies" and "this is the greatest pride that can befall a mother" (Alagha 2004: 181f., own emphasis).

“I met mothers who grieved their dead children but encouraged their surviving brood to join Hezbollah’s militia, they projected the confidence of patriots, rather than the fanaticism of a death-cult” (Cambanis 2011: 8).

Strangely, the culture of martyrdom serves as a philosophy, or attitude, of life, although its essence is death. Instead of the common misperception of martyrs as broken and doomed losers trapped in hopelessness, Hezbollah’s legions consist of educated middle-class people with alternatives and aspirations, who are admired by all classes of society (Ibid.: 10).

Shi’ite Lebanon supports martyrs and their families “more systematically than any other area in the Muslim world”, and even provides booklets on how to educate the children of martyrs in adequate remembrance of their family’s service and grants them educational scholarships (Cook 2007:141; Hatina 2014: 93). This, if one is not regarding Iran, might originate in the close traditional nexus to martyrdom in Shi’a Islam. Hezbollah in particular compares the fight occasionally to that of Karbala and thereby adopts the Iranian narrative (Hatina 2014: 92).

Martyrdom also has a political character, since every culture of martyrdom has to be preserved and organized. Interesting enough, Hezbollah seems to employ some kind of bureaucratic process for a religious and strategic investigation of the request to martyrdom¹⁶. The party’s religious leader Shaykh Yusuf Da’mush asserted, executing such an act requires a *fatwa* (Islamic legal ruling) from a religious authority¹⁷, since “a believer may not perform any act without considering the principles of religious law” (cited in Hatina 2014: 96). Moreover, Qasim declares,

“A person who wishes to sacrifice himself must first request permission from a religious expert, for the soul is precious and may be sacrificed for a religious purpose only, and, furthermore, only after the political movement has examined the political and military advantages of such an act” (Ibid.).

Despite the social and political or strategic framing of martyrdom, its religious relation to the idea of self-sacrifice stays a core element of the over-all concept. Na’im Qasim, second in command of Hezbollah, stated,

“martyrdom ... is an embodiment of the concept of obedience (*al-ta’a*) to God and it is a ‘legitimate and religious responsibility’ ... that leads to eternal life” (Alagha 2004: 195).

4. Syria and Sectarian Martyrdom

Hezbollah considers any political or military conflict between Sunnis and Shi’as an “appressor-colonizer’s conspiracy aimed at spreading discord and dissension among Muslims” and appeals to

¹⁶ As Hatina (Ibid.) indicates, such criteria like age, psychological stability and being unmarried might as well function as a prevention for later emerging critique, the movement’s bomber could have been suicidal, too young or suffered the burden of supplying a family.

¹⁷ Such as in the case of Hezbollah’s first suicide attacks in 1983, for which religious authorities in Iran gave permission (Brooks 2002).

the followers of Islam to uphold common grounds (Alagha 2011a:19f.). In its open letter from 1985, the party voices

“[a] call to the Muslim populace: Be aware of the malignant colonial discord (*fitna*) that aims at rupturing your unity in order to spread sedition among you and enflame Sunni-Shi’a sectarian feelings. Be knowledgeable that colonialism was not able to control the natural resources and riches of the Muslims except after breaking up their unity ... inciting Sunnis against Shi’as and vice versa” (Ibid.: 53, own emphasis).

Regarding an armed dispute, Nasrallah goes even further stating, the toughest punishment in the Qur’an is “inflicted upon who intentionally kills a believer, for this is *kabira* (the worst sin)” (Alagha 2004: 182f.) and in the Qur’an it is written,

“Oh believers, if your journey in the way of Allah be discerning ... And he who kills a believer intentionally will, as punishment, be thrown into Hell, dwelling in it forever; and Allah will be angry with him, curse him and prepare for him a dreadful punishment” (4:94+93).

Nevertheless, the party is highly involved in the fighting against Sunni rebel groups in neighbouring Syria, and it is needless to say that those martyrs are also commemorated, thus reinvigorating the phenomenon of sectarian martyrs¹⁸. If, which has to be discussed elsewhere, the engagement was mainly a political decision, then how is martyrdom religiously framed? If Hezbollah would employ the Sunni-Shi’a dichotomy to commemorate martyrs, that would qualify as a major change of the party’s approach to Muslim sectarianism. And how does the involvement in Syria affect the narrative of martyrdom in general, the acceptance in the community and the internal discourse?

5. Conclusion

This article made an attempt to discuss Hezbollah’s crafting of a culture of martyrdom based on Shi’a understanding of self-sacrifice and developed a sociological definition of the concept as a social construct that translates a religious discourse, or narrative, of righteous self-sacrifice into social reality through practices and customs.

As suggestions for further research it would be of interest to follow the development of the party’s martyrdom narrative and to compare the Iranian and Lebanese Shi’a ethos on martyrs in Syria.

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¹⁸ In fact, as discussed above, this is not new to Shi’ism, for most martyrs who are venerated by Shi’ites were killed by other Muslims, generally Sunnis (Cook 2007: 59).

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