

Martyrdom and the Struggle for Power

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Martyrdom in the Modern Middle East

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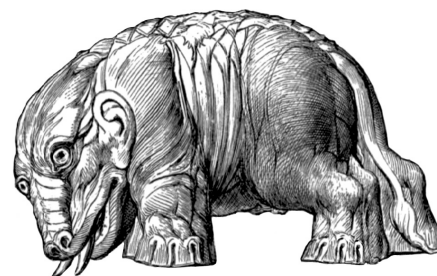
Introduction

Martyrdom is for losers. Yet, it is a powerful claim on strength at the same time. For the individual who seeks martyrdom, it is the weapon of last resort and a means of self-defence. For the surviving community that remembers someone as a martyr, it indicates the unjust suffering of an innocent. On one hand, the recourse to martyrdom discourses exposes the self-perceived weakness of those who make use of it. On the other, dying on behalf of a higher cause is a strong signal and a rallying cry for the bereaved. Thus, the concept of martyrdom unites both references to strength and impotence and it is packed with ambiguities.

The story of mixed signals begins with the figure itself: the martyr allegedly dies for a belief system while defying another (Cook 2007, 1f.). Accordingly, martyrdom “is as strong a signal of the strength of a belief as one can get: only those who hold their beliefs very dear can contemplate making the ultimate sacrifice of dying for them” (Gambetta 2005, 266f.). Additionally, in the moment of their death, the martyr radically articulates a particular form of strength: the one who chose death over life withdraws from all submission (Popitz 2017, 59). However, only those who are actually in a vulnerable condition or even in an inferior position in the face of a competing belief system can resort to the whole power of the concept of martyrdom. Dying for an already enforced or generally accepted and by no means threatened position would be regarded either as unjust (when it leads to harming the innocent or suppressed), or it would be put on a pathological scale ranging from senseless stupidity to psychological insanity. In addition, every social structure that asks its members to express allegiance by dint of self-inflicted death without referring to any form of existential threat as justification would lose its credibility and consequently face serious challenges to its legitimacy. Thus, the concept of martyrdom carries the logic of asymmetry in terms of power with it.

From the standpoint of the pious believer, one might argue that assessing the meaning of one’s death is a matter of the afterlife, regarding both the intentions that led to it and the transcendental regime which evaluates the reward for the deceased. Following this view, the concept of martyrdom is detached from this-worldly power relations. However, I argue that the hypothesis of martyrdom as an asymmetric phenomenon stands the test of religious parlance: there is no concept of the afterlife which is not oriented on ideas of regulating the believer’s behaviour in relation to his or her society’s

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challenges and needs in the mortal world. Therefore, dying for one's belief can only make sense if the belief system is considered to be in danger. Accordingly, self-inflicted death *without* referring to the supposed needs of one's own society and thus to an urgent threat can, religiously speaking, only lead to either a nihilistic interpretation of the actor's motives[1] or to the mere notion of suicide, regardless of whether the hopes of the actor are oriented towards the afterlife—hopes which will necessarily be disappointed since suicide is morally condemned in the three monotheistic world-religions of Judaism, Christianity[2] and Islam and thus not to be confused with martyrdom (Pannewick 2012, 54).

This said, it is no coincidence that the concept of martyrdom has predominantly been developed in religious communities which, on one hand could provide believers with a seducing idea of the afterlife and on the other, saw themselves as being surrounded by enemies who could claim hegemony on the routines of the mortal world. Situationally appearing modern manifestations of secularist discourses on 'political martyrdom' aside,[3] the concept of martyrdom revealed its whole power in early Christianity, where it was facing persecution in the hegemonic Roman empire and drawing inspiration directly from the example of Jesus Christ himself (Bowersock 2002, 54), as well as during the protestant reformation and the catholic counterreformation in 16th century Europe (Asch 2018, 1f.). Eventually, the concept of martyrdom can be found in an early Islamic context in the prominent hagiographic accounts of the Shi'a Muslim minority. It is the telling of the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, al-Husyan b. Ali (626–680 CE), where the story of the struggle against alleged oppression and tyranny can be found. According to Shi'ite narratives, al-Husayn is said to have chosen death over life at Karbala while facing a superior enemy representing the political and religious hegemony at the time. The story of the battle of Karbala shaped the notions of the *shahid* (i.e. the martyr) and *shahadat* (martyrdom) in Islamic thought. Al-Husayn represents *the* defining prefiguration for the heroisation of self-inflicted death in Islam that even affect Sunni discourses nowadays (Fuchs, this issue)—a fact which hints to the superiority of the symbolism of martyrdom.

However, notwithstanding this basic assessment of martyrdom as an asymmetric phenomenon, the example of the modern Middle East shows that the concept is of such subversive potential that it even infused secularist discourses on political resistance or self-sacrifice on behalf of a threatened society. For example, it led to a specific kind of valorisation of the guerrillas' self-sacrifice, and rhetorical references to martyrdom were "incorporated into the routines of the PLO leadership" in the 1970s (Khalili 2007, 49) when the Palestinian struggle had a predominantly secularist form. Accordingly, in the Muslim world the question of who has the power to offer a legitimate definition of martyrdom and is thus capable of using the concept for their cause has become a matter of contention. This is probably most paradigmatically showcased by the revolutionary period during the 1970s in Iran, when revolutionary Islamists gained access to the concept in a way that shaped the Iranian Revolution (Cf. Gölz, this issue) and finally lead to its assessment as an *Islamic Revolution*.

As will be discussed in this issue on interdisciplinary perspectives on

[1] Farhad Khosrokhavar (2005, 60) coined the term *martyropaths* for those actors who are mostly fascinated by death and show little interest in this-worldly matters. For him, a martyr has "no fascination with death, no luxuriating in death and no quest for happiness in and through death. Martyroopathy begins with a change of meaning: a deadly logic takes over from the logic governing the struggle for life and the pursuit of a frustrated ideal".

[2] Thomas Macho (2017, 7) regards the radical reassessment of suicide as a defining phenomenon for modernity. However, on the construction of suicide as a major sin in Christianity in previous centuries he writes: „Viele Jahrhunderte lang wurde der Suizid als schwere Sünde, sogar als ‚Doppelmord‘ – nämlich an Seele und Körper –, als Verbrechen, das streng bestraft wurde, nicht allein durch Verstümmelung und Verscharrung der Leichen, sondern beispielsweise auch durch Beschlagnahmung des Familienvermögens, zumindest aber als Effekt des Wahnsinns und als Krankheit bewertet. Während der Suizid noch in der Antike mit Ehre assoziiert werden konnte, erschien er spätestens seit Beginn der Herrschaft der christlichen Religion als Schande und finales Versagen.“

[3] See for example the recent study by Guerra (2018) on *Heroes, Martyrs, and Political Messiahs in Revolutionary Cuba*.

martyrdom in the modern Middle East, the discourses on the martyr and the accompanying debates on “legitimate means of dying”, as it has been coined by Alp Yenen, have been shaped and rearranged in the Turkish civil war of the 1970s (Yenen, this issue), the Palestinian struggle (Franke 2014; Khalili 2007; Pannewick 2012, 151ff.), the Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1978/79 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) (Gölz, this issue) as well as in more recent episodes during and after the Arab spring (Khosrokhavar 2014; Pannewick 2017), in the Syrian war (Beese, this issue; Dick, this issue) or in Pakistan (Fuchs, this issue). In nearly all of these episodes, martyrdom not only represented a powerful discursive concept, but it has had profound effects on the respective conflict itself due to the fact that people actually chose death in order to articulate their beliefs. People died and moral evaluations shifted; regimes were delegitimised through the confrontation with martyrs while others tried to legitimise themselves by dint of using the concept. Hence, the struggle over the legitimate use of the concept reflects the struggle for hegemony in a dialectic way: The power of the concept promises moral superiority while conversely, the cult surrounding the martyr can only be maintained in a discursive surrounding of inferiority or vulnerability. Accordingly, martyrdom appears to be the weapon of first choice and last resort at the same time. The logic of martyrdom asks for an amalgamation of both: discourses on subversion and hegemony.

In these introductory remarks on martyrdom amidst power struggles in the Middle East, I shall briefly define martyrdom with reference to some sociological reflections regarding the construction of a martyr and his or her significance for the respective society. Then, I will determine the implications of the concept of the *shahid* in contemporary Muslim societies before introducing the special issue on interdisciplinary perspectives on martyrdom in the modern Middle East.

The Martyr as a Figure of Boundary Work

For the individual who seeks martyrdom, the effect of their death seems to be crystal clear: the status of a martyr guarantees an “eternal life of happiness” (Khosrokhavar 2017, 86). Certainly, this assumption might be a reductionist perspective since it ignores all earthly motives of the people who are willing to sacrifice their lives on behalf of a greater cause. They may be desperate enough to simply not want to live in this world any longer, they may choose death out of a sense of duty to their families or communities,^[4] or they may deem their actions in the mortal world to be a religious obligation, regardless of any assumptions about how the afterlife might be affected by their choices. However, although focussing on the ideologically articulated motives can lead to an evaluation of the power of symbols in the actor’s belief system, such a perspective would not help in determining the sociological dimensions of the concept of martyrdom. If we ascertain that the individual can never fully control the evaluation of their death, we must consider the status of the martyr to be not a self-evident fact or the result of an automatic response, but rather the result of social attribution. Accordingly, such a constructivist perspective

[4] See on this topic Gambetta 2005, 270. Interested in the intentions of suicide bombers (who regularly refer to martyrdom discourses), he states: “All agents who intentionally die in an SM [suicide mission] have a major trait in common: although their action can be based on wrong or irrational beliefs, they see themselves, and are often seen by their group, as altruists. All SMs belong to a family of actions in which people go to the extremes of self-sacrifice in the belief that by doing so they will best further the interests of a group or the cause they care about and identify with. This family of self-sacrificial actions has several members, among them religious martyrdom, self-immolation, hunger strikes, and war heroism—actions that humans have carried out since biblical times. While all of these actions involve being prepared to give up one’s life, some of them involve at the same time the killing of others. Even though we instinctively think of altruism as doing purely good deeds, altruism and aggression are not antithetical—in warfare you risk your life to help kin, comrades, and country also by killing enemies.”

on martyrdom does not ask for the potential rewards in the afterlife but rather scrutinises the effects of martyrdom on their community from a sociological point of view[5] in order to apprehend the persistence and revitalisation of the cult of the martyr in contemporary times.

However, sociologically speaking, death is not the effect of martyrdom. On the contrary: martyrdom is one possible effect of the act of dying, which is followed by the heroisation of this act by dint of martyrdom discourses. Thus, the starting point for the definition of martyrdom is the death of an actor, whereas the path that leads to this death becomes the anchor point for all narratives and constructions surrounding the person's status as a martyr. Quintessentially, the invocation of martyrdom discourses leads to the reinterpretation of a loser as a winner and hero (Pannewick 2007, 310). Their death is no longer a defeat, but a "victory brought into a transcendental space-time structure" (ibid.). In this regard, the construction of a martyr via recourse on martyrdom discourses can be seen as, first and foremost, a narrative process that bestows meaning on the death of an actor.[6]

Accordingly, *martyrdom* is a concept, whereas the posthumous title *martyr* is a reward for those who are considered worthy of that concept by the living, regardless of any attempts by the deceased to control how they will be remembered in advance.[7] A society may bestow the title 'martyr' on someone who is considered to have accepted or even consciously sought out their death in order to bear witness to an overriding truth with their lives. Through this sacrifice, the martyr imparts a transcendental value to the ideal or goal for which he or she is willing to die. However, only when this sacrifice is narrated can it actively have an effect on society (Pannewick 2012, 21). Thus, for "martyrdom to succeed there must be a martyr"—a condition which is usually given reality "through the hagiographical accounts of his or her suffering that allow the audience to relate to this suffering" (Cook 2007, 1). Via these narrations, the martyr becomes the figure they ought to be: They stand at the defining point between two belief systems and are narrated to be the one who offered up the ultimate sacrifice in order to pay tribute to their own belief system and reject the other. He or she thus defines the line "where belief and unbelief meet—however these two categories are constructed in the minds of the martyr, the enemy, the audience and the writer of the historical-hagiographical narrative—and define the relationship between the two" (2).

In other words, from the standpoint of the admirer community, the realm of unbelief begins exactly at the point where the suffering and death of an actor is no longer appreciated as martyrdom, but either damned as a lower act or simply ignored. Accordingly, the martyr is a paradigmatic figure of boundary work that makes blurred boundaries between belief systems visible—or even helps to define them in the first place. Furthermore, with their life, the martyr not only creates boundaries *between* systems; rather, they become an embodied definition of the nature of their own belief system. The martyr is not only located at the frontline facing unbelief and injustice; rather, they become ambassadors of the values and virtues of their own society. It is the notion of the 'victim' which, in the case of martyrdom, accompanies the heroised self-sacrifice and connects the martyr to the moral standards of their

[5] Kraß/Frank 2008, 8: „Wie spricht man angemessen über Märtyrer? Zwei Perspektiven sind denkbar: die weltanschauliche Innensicht und die wissenschaftliche Außensicht. Wer die erste Perspektive wählt, wird aufgrund der Kriterien, die ihm seine religiösen Überzeugungen an die Hand geben, entscheiden, wer ein wahrer Märtyrer ist, und ihm Verehrung zollen. Wer die zweite Perspektive einnimmt, wird hingegen die Diskurse, Praktiken und Institutionen untersuchen, in deren Zusammenspiel ‚Märtyrer‘ hervorgebracht werden. Die Wahl besteht somit zwischen einer ‚essentialistischen‘ Position, die nach dem Heiligen Sein und Wesen des Märtyrers fragt, und einer ‚konstruktivistischen‘ Position, die die Strategien der Herstellung und (Selbst-)Zuweisung der Märtyrerrolle analysiert.“

[6] Cf. Juergensmeyer 2000, 165: "Our personal tales of woe gain meaning, then, when linked to these powerful stories [of cosmic dimensions, OG]. Their sagas of oppression and liberation lift the spirits of individuals and make their suffering explicable and noble. In some cases, suffering imparts the nobility of martyrdom. In such instances the images of cosmic war forge failure—even death into victory."

[7] See for the phenomena of suicide bombers' video testimonies see Straub 2015. See also the articles of Yorck Beese and Alexandra Dick in this issue.

society. Although it is an important aspect of martyrdom discourses that the martyr has died willingly and consciously in order to articulate their powerful statement—the notion of sacrifice—the narrative surrounding them must also state that things *could* have gone differently. The martyr *could* have lived. And most importantly, the martyr also *should* have lived. Thus, once more hinting at the ambiguities of the concept of martyrdom, the martyr is always wrapped in a discourse which alludes to his or her agency and to their status as victim at the same time. In consequence, it is not only *belief* and *unbelief* which are discriminated by martyrdom. The divide has to be about *good* and *evil* since all victimisation assumes the innocence of the victim. “Victims are produced by human action that could have been expected to have taken a different direction”, the sociologist Bernhard Giesen states in regard to his construction of ideal types of boundary work. He concludes that the act of calling somebody a victim “implies that the result of this action is considered wrong” and must even be perceived to be avoidable (Giesen 2004, 46). “Thus the discourse about victimization becomes a social construction and is carried by a moral community defining an evil.” (ibid.) Consequently, discourses on martyrdom have a polarising effect. They not only define the demarcation between two belief systems but also the terms of *good* and *evil* in a paradigmatic way. Since martyrdom presupposes that the Other is presented as evil, the martyrs themselves have to be constructed in a way that doesn’t leave room for doubts about their impunity.

Thus, the martyr *has to* be presented in terms of integrity and innocence, of decency and honesty, he or she *has to* become the manifestation of the highest moral standards of their own community, because only then can the malice of the competing community be portrayed properly and thus the notion of victimhood invoked to support the respective narrative. In this way, the dead, who are heroised and remembered as martyrs, take their place in the middle of a society since they can be seen as liminal figures who communicate to its sacred centre. They are the ideal type representatives of morality. This effect once again unfolds its full power when the system comes under pressure and the martyr allegedly demonstrates “publicly that there is something in the subordinated or persecuted belief system worth dying for”, as David Cook (2007, 2) discusses.^[8] Thus, irrespective of any tradition or cultural affection for the figure of the martyr, the theoretical dimensions of the concept of martyrdom already refer to the asymmetrical aspect that makes the martyr a weapon in the struggle for power.

The multi-dimensional aspects of the martyr’s contribution to boundary work have been determined and vividly explored by Sasha Dehghani and Silvia Horsch in their introduction to *Martyrdom in the Modern Middle East*:

As paradigmatic examples for others, the place assigned to the martyrs is the very center of their communities; for that however, they also act in the border areas running between different religions and cultures. As such, martyr figures are not only agents of demarcation but at the same time of entanglement and mediation. This mediation occurs not only synchronously between different religious and cultural traditions but also diachronically between different eras which

[8] Cook (2007, 2) states accordingly: “The martyr’s defining role is most helpful when that particular belief system is under attack, is in a minority position or is not in a politically or culturally dominant position within a given geographical location. At those times there may be outconversion or dilution of the core values of the belief system (however those are assessed, from the outside or the inside) such that many believers may not see worth in it at all. Attacks on the martyr’s belief system can be coordinated and systematic or sustained by the all-encompassing nature of what is commonly perceived to be the superior belief system. [...] The martyr changes that equation.”

are, supposedly at least, to be clearly delimited from one another. The hybrid figure of the martyr calls into question the demarcations between pre-modern and modern as well as those between religion and the secular. (Dehghani/Horsch 2014a, 7)

It is precisely the culmination of these functions of the martyr which exalts the concept of martyrdom over other forms of heroism, whilst conversely opens up the concept to theologically inspired and philosophically infused adulation. In the end, it is no longer the identifiable martyr that is at the centre of the respective discussions, but merely the cult around the concept of martyrdom itself that is moved into the centre of society and justified with reference to specific traditions. In its present manifestation, this phenomenon can be observed in parts of the contemporary Muslim world (Gölz, this issue; Beese, this issue; Dick, this issue). Against this background, when talking about the nexus between martyrdom and the struggle for power, we refer to two distinguishable forms of contention. First, it is the claim to power by followers of a martyr. Second, it is the claim to legitimacy in using the concept.

The Concept of Martyrdom in Islam

The Shi'a Muslim intellectual and Iranian revolutionary Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari (1929–1979) presented a somewhat romanticised version of the concept of *shahadat* and the word *shahid* in Muslim societies. In a lecture in Teheran in 1973, he ascribed it “a sense of grandeur and sanctity” (Mutahhari 1986b, 125). Mutahhari stated that there would be “no doubt that in Islamic terminology ‘*shahid*’ is a sacred word and that for those who use an Islamic vocabulary, it conveys a sense higher than that of any other word” (127). Thus, as early as 1973, long before the contemporary manifestations of martyrdom discourses in suicide attacks, he stressed the semantic power of the word *shahid* and referred to some kind of intrinsic understanding of its divine origins. His glorification of the martyr does not end there, though. He explained:

The *shahid* can be compared to a candle whose job it is to burn out and get extinguished in order to shed light for the benefit of others. The *shuhada* [‘martyrs’, OG] are the candles of society. They burn themselves out and illuminate society. If they do not shed their light, no organization can shine. [...] The *shuhada* are the illuminators of society. Had they not shed their light on the darkness of despotism and suppression, humanity would have made no progress. (Mutahhari 1986b, 127)

Here, in this theological-philosophical evaluation on martyrdom in Shi'a Islam, the ambivalent mixture of power and weakness becomes evident once again. It is not only the self-sacrifice of a person as a weapon of last resort which takes centre stage in his statement; rather, it is insinuated that martyrdom represents the *only* weapon against the darkness of despotism and suppression. Thus, the concept of martyrdom at the centre of Shi'a Islamic doctrine matches the theoretical reflections in this paper. It is the threat posed by unbelief and

decadence that dominantly infuses modern discourses on *jihad*—in Shi'a and in Sunni belief—, so that the term *jihad* is deliberately interpreted as a defensive concept.^[9] Admittedly, very few devout Muslims would agree that the Muslim world *per se* is in a weak position in the face of the surrounding world of disbelief. However, in presenting *jihad* as a defensive concept, the entwined discourses on martyrdom can be activated and legitimised in case of need by referring to a continuous threat for the community of believers. Thus, while adhering to the asymmetric core of the concept, for a definition of martyrdom in the contemporary Islamic context, we can again turn to Mutahhari, who stated: “*Shahadat* is the death of a person who, in spite of being fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly faces them for the sake of a sacred cause, or, as the Qur’an says, *fi sabil Allah* (in the way of God). *Shahadat* has two basic elements: (a) the life is sacrificed for a cause; and (b) the sacrifice is made consciously.” (Mutahhari 1986b, 128) This quote helps to clarify the phenomena addressed in this paper in a twofold manner. Firstly, it shows how the concept of martyrdom itself has been a matter of contention. Mutahhari distinctively ‘Islamised’ martyrdom. In his speech, he went on to draw a comparison to the Christian use and understanding of martyrdom, which he deemed to not possess the same power as the ‘true’ Islamic version of it (138f.). Hence, his Islamisation (and by the same token ‘Shi’itisation’) of the concept reflects the struggle over its legitimate use. Contrarily, he presents the two defining requirements transported by all notions of the concept, i.e. the death for a cause and the willingness of this sacrifice. From these two factors, the concept draws its apparent strength. Accordingly, concerning its distinct power, Ayatullah Mutahhari is unequivocally accurate when he states on martyrdom: “The distinctive characteristic of a *shahid* is that he charges the atmosphere with courage and zeal. He revives the spirit of valor of fortitude, courage and zeal, especially divine zeal, among the people who have lost it. That is why Islam is always in need of *shuhada*. The revival of courage and zeal is essential for the revival of a nation.” (136) Basically, this is the theological representation of the phenomena of boundary work described above as sociological processes.

Such philosophical preoccupations with martyrdom in Shi’a Islam ultimately show that the power of the concept is dependent on a certain *context*. However, it seems that the idea has prevailed (apparently in Western and Muslim societies) that the figure of the martyr belongs to the *essence* of Islam—although Laleh Khalili in her *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* convincingly argues:

The telling of heroic narratives of martyrdom is not solely the forte of radical nationalist movements. Blood-sacrifice for the nation is embedded in the patriotic rhetoric of all nations, including European and American countries where historical references to founding moments and contemporary discourses of patriotism include abundant allusions to selfless sacrifice. Though martyrdom is allowed only through venues authorized by the state—such as the military in wars waged by the state—the centrality of the sacrificial discourse is striking. (Khalili 2007, 23)

[9] See on this topic another lecture by Mutahhari (1986a, 103) on *Jihad in the Qur’an* where he tries to unfold the defensive notion of the term *jihad*. In a lecture titled *Defense – the Essence of Jihad* he concludes: “*Jihad* is only for the sake of defense, and in truth it is resistance against some kind of transgression, and certainly it can be lawful. [...] [H]owever, it is clear that in the basic definition of *jihad* there is no difference of opinion and all the scholars agreed that *jihad* and war must be for the sake of defense.”

However, the above-mentioned process of Islamisation of the concept indicates that in the past decades in some societies it has been possible to harness the strength of the concept for one's own interests in distinctly Islamic terms. I maintain that this perception of martyrdom as an inherently Islamic element is itself an effect of the struggle for power over the concept or to put it more clearly, the perception of martyrdom as a core concept of Islam is the effect of the success of radical Islamist groups and the discourses forged and fostered by them. The clearest sign for this success is found in the fact that people actually chose to die in suicide missions which they themselves regard as martyrdom operations. Herein, we can identify different types of martyrs in modern times who, as Joseph Croitoru argues, differ in their mode of dying: First, the martyr who has been killed for reasons of faith (in fact often due to collateral or accidental causes). Second, the one who kills others in battle and is killed himself, "the battlefield martyr".^[10] Third, the one who kills others by killing himself—the suicide bomber.^[11] Since 9/11, the Islamist suicide bomber draws the bulk of the attention not only to their stories, but their belief system as a whole, since "whatever the martyr believes in, it is intensely believed by him or her, and thus worthy of attention" (Gambetta 2005, 266).

Introducing to the issue

Recently there has been much discussion on the nature of martyrdom in modern Muslim societies with distinct focus on the use of *the martyr as a weapon* (Croitoru 2006) due to numerous religiously motivated suicide-attacks in conflicts all over the world where the recourse on martyrdom discourses has been made prominent. This process is hardly surprising when one considers the power of the asymmetric concept presented here. Accordingly, in his statement on terrorist tactics, Leo Braudy states that they "in general try to imply that all the high technology in the world cannot stop a determined enemy, even one armed only with primitive weapons, especially if it is psychologically bent on self-sacrifice" (Braudy 2005, 544). This said, it is no wonder that terrorist groups all over the world make use of the concept of martyrdom, presenting it as both weapon of first choice and last resort. Additionally, a vast amount of literature surrounds the topic of martyrdom, suicide missions and radicalism in modern Muslim societies.^[12] Thus, the concept of martyrdom has been put into context in these recent studies, digging into the history of the concept in modern times and by the same token, into its prefiguration in early Islam and Islamic doctrines.

Of course, we have to look at the broader Islamic dimensions of martyrdom in the Middle East. However, these dimensions are more or less the "carriers" for distinct discourses which only function in relation to the status quo of the respective society alluding to the mobilising effects of martyrdom, as became evident during the workshop on *Martyrdom in the Modern Islamic World* at the University of Freiburg in December 2017 on which this issue is built. Accordingly, I argue that the theoretical significance of the concept of martyrdom asks for a consequent historicisation of its manifestation in modern Middle Eastern societies. Additionally, scrutinising the topic from the

^[10] In regards to radicalisation and the Syrian war, Khosrokhavar (2017, 111) states about the lure of the concept for young French Muslims: "They leave for Syria to redeem themselves in the eyes of Allah and to build a new identity, in which becoming heroes, courting death, and enduring the ordeals of the battlefield confer nobility on their undertaking. Their new sincerity finds a horizon of hope: death on the battlefield is transformed into martyrdom, and the departure from this world opens prospects for happiness in the next." In effect, several thousand jihadists fought "the Syrian army with the ultimate aim of martyrdom" (141).

^[11] Croitoru 2008, 59: Es lassen sich „drei verschiedene Märtyrertypen [identifizieren], die sich aufgrund ihrer Sterbensart und ihres Aktionsmodus voneinander unterscheiden. Erstens der Gemarterte und Getötete, der Blutzeuge, der in manchen Fällen aus Glaubensgründen auch selbst den Freitod wählt. Zweitens derjenige, der im Kampf andere tötet und dabei selbst getötet wird, sprich der Krieger- oder Schlachtfeldmartyrer. Und drittens der, der andere tötet, indem er sich selbst tötet - der Selbstmordattentäter“.

^[12] Cf. Afsaruddin 2013; Aran/Green 2018; Asad 2007; Bloom 2005; Braudy 2005; Cook 2007; Cook/Allison 2007; Cormack 2002; Davis 2003; Dehghani/Horsch 2014b; Günther/Lawson 2016; Hafez 2007; Hatina 2014; Hatina/Litvak 2016; Juergensmeyer 2000; Khalili 2007; Khosrokhavar 2005, 2017; Houry 2013; Kitts 2018; Kraß 2008; Kurzman 2011; Pannewick 2012; Pape 2006.

viewpoint of different disciplines might lead to a theoretical understanding of the subject that is not content with a perception that merely refers to some ‘essence of Islam.’^[13] What kind of essence would that be? Is martyrdom a Shi’a prerogative due to its powerful grounding myth? The debate already begins here and hints at the fact that martyrdom as a concept knows no possessor but is always contested and under contention. To provide an example, Simon Fuchs’ article shows, from an Islamic studies perspective, that Sunni groups in Pakistan adapted Shi’ite symbolism on martyrdom, which leads Fuchs to argue that the “prevalent focus on sectarianism in conceptualizing contemporary Sunni-Shi’i relations has blinded us to important processes of intellectual appropriation and mimicry between the two communities” (Fuchs, this issue, 52). On the other hand, in my own contribution to this issue titled *Martyrdom and Masculinity in Warring Iran*, I shall show from a gender perspective how the martyr not only became the centre of contention in the discourses in warring Iran regarding ideal behaviour of men and women, but rather how the perception surrounding the prefiguration of the Shi’a belief system, the martyrdom of al-Husayn b. Ali, itself became the pivotal point of the struggle for power in the revolutionary period (Gözl, this issue). In fact, these discussions are responsible for the perception of Shi’ite dominance in this matter, at least for the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century.

The studies of Alp Yenen, Yorck Beese and Alexandra Dick show how differently martyrdom has been conceptualised before and after these decades and how its various formulations are context-bound to specific settings. In the case of Turkey in the 1970s, terms of Islamic origin which refer to martyrdom have been used in the struggle of the state against the political far-left and far-right. In his article *Legitimate Means of Dying*, Yenen offers an evaluation of the “contentious politics of martyrdom” from the perspective of a historical-comparative sociology “of state conventions and non-state contentions in defining political cultures of martyrdom during the Turkish civil war of [the] 1970s” (Yenen, this issue, 14). Furthermore, Yenen indicates a logic within the discourses of martyrdom that has fateful effects for the competing communities within society which he calls, following Tarrow, “cycles of contention” (21). Hence, due to the logics of the clear distinction between good and evil, martyrdom has some polarising ramifications which almost inevitably lead to a vicious cycle surrounding the competing social groups that is difficult to break—a logic which I have called the “radicalisation of boundary work” (Gözl, this issue, 48f.).

Although until today the Shi’a branch claims to, at least theologically-philosophically hold the power over the concept of martyrdom in Islam, it is not only the Pakistani context which shows that this perception has become contentious during the last two decades. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, martyrdom discourses in the Islamic context have predominantly been articulated by Sunni groups—most prominently by the Islamic State. The articles by Yorck Beese and Alexandra Dick focus on the Islamic State’s media strategies and the role that martyrdom discourses play in it. In his contribution *The Structure and Visual Rhetoric of the Martyrdom Video*, Beese offers an analysis of the visual rhetoric to be found in the genre of

[13] For a discussion on the literature about this topic see the review by Jonatan Marx (this issue).

martyrdom videos from the perspective of media studies. His starting point builds on the fact that footage “of martyrdom attacks has cropped up in various types of video since [its origins in the 1980s], but especially in jihadist propaganda” (Beese, this issue, 70). Accordingly, the struggle for power over the concept is carried out on new battlegrounds, and martyrdom as a means of the claim for power finds new ways of propagation. By the same token, the concept comes in the guise of distinctively *old* and therefore supposedly authentic and essentialistic ways, as is shown by Alexandra Dick in her article *The Sounds of the Shuhadā': Chants and Chanting in IS Martyrdom Videos* where the various functions of a specific type of musical accompaniment in the context of jihadi martyrdom are addressed.

The many viewpoints that inform the contributions in this issue on martyrdom in the modern Middle East illustrate that there is no fixed and immutable concept of martyrdom in the Islamic context. Rather, ideas on martyrdom can always be rearranged or formulated innovatively. They may refer to personal or collective experiences made by the respective social groups (as is predominant in secularist notions of martyrdom) or to an established prefiguration taken from the group's belief system by making use of its founding myth, as has been done repeatedly, but also dynamically, in the Shi'ite context. However, the concept of martyrdom has not only proven to be a powerful, if not always successful, tool in the struggle for political power and ideological hegemony, it has also been contested continuously. Throughout history, there have been arguments about the essence of the concept reflecting the dynamics of power that shaped the specific place and time.

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