

## **Understanding Islam** **Series Three: Building a Just Society**

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### **Part Eleven: Martyrdom and sacrifice**

The discussion of martyrdom hinges around one of the most fundamental questions for any human being: Whose life is it anyway? The person of faith must always answer that we are not the products of our own will or even that of our parents, for no human being has the ultimate decision over whether or not someone is conceived and born, but rather this depends upon the will of God as the author of all life. So our lives do not belong to us; therefore it is not our right to decide whether we live or die.

The Qur'an is clear in saying that we come from God and to God we return [Q. 2:156]. No-one knows the hour of their own death [Q. 31:34] and thus no-one has the right to usurp that ultimate decision that belongs to God alone [Q. 4:29; 50:43]. In Islamic understanding, the duty of every man and woman is to surrender all to the divine will in total submission. If God calls someone to die at a particular moment and in a certain context, then our duty is to accept the divine will as an act of faith and obedience. To be a martyr then is not a choice made by any human being but rather the acceptance of God's invitation and the surrender to God's will. A believer may pray for the gift of martyrdom and for the courage and strength to endure whatever comes but it is ultimately a matter of invitation and response.

A good example of this surrender to God's will in death is contained in the Qur'anic account of the sacrifice of Abraham. He is told by God to sacrifice his son and conveys this news to Ishmael [Q. 37:102]. He tells his father to do what God has commanded and "if God wills, you will find me to be patient." It is this patient acceptance of the divine will as a public act of faith that lies at the heart of martyrdom, as the Arabic term, *shahid*, a witness, conveys.

### **In the Abrahamic faiths**

Such a concept is present also in Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew term used, *Qiddush ha-Shem*, sanctification of the Divine Name, makes clear that martyrdom is something accepted for the sake of honouring the name of God and not submitting to those who would dishonour it. In the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine in the second century before the Common Era, the Romans tried to force Jews to defile the Temple and the worship that belongs to God alone by offering idolatrous sacrifices. In a revolt led by the Maccabee family, pious Jews accepted brutal martyrdom to sanctify the Divine Name and not profane it. Two hundred and fifty years later, when the Romans had again laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, a group of Zealots made a last stand at Masada in 73CE and, when their defeat was certain, preferred to die at their own hands to sanctify the Divine Name rather

than surrender to those who had destroyed the Temple of God (Josephus: *The Jewish War*, Bk VII, Chap 8-9).

The term “martyr” comes from the Greek *martyrs*, a witness, and came to be used of those Christians in the early centuries after Jesus, who faced Roman persecution. The choice was to engage in the worship of the “divine Emperor” or face horrible deaths. The martyrs were those who preferred to suffer and die rather than deny their faith. They saw this as a sacrificial act that would give hope, strength and example to others; a witness to “baptism of blood” as it came to be called, their sins having been washed clean by the shedding of their blood. Such martyrs throughout the Christian centuries have been honoured as of the highest rank in heaven and held to be intercessors there in the court of God.

The martyr spirit can also be seen in various warrior orders in the Christian tradition, the Knights Templar and Hospitallers, and in the Japanese Samurai and the Chinese Shaolin. Similar elements can be seen in various religious and secular traditions with the example of hunger-strikers being prepared to take a stand for a cause, even if it leads to their own deaths.

### **The term *shahid* in the Qur'an**

The Arabic word *shahid* has the primary meaning of “witness” as in those who give evidence in court or witness a contract [Q. 2:282; 24:4]. It is also used with reference to God being a witness to all that happens within creation [Q. 5:117]. The term takes on more of the dual meaning of witness and martyr in other contexts in the Qur'an [Q. 3:140; 4:69; 39:69; 57:19]. Thus the martyr is one who bears faithful witness to God and is obedient to God’s commands unto death.

The Qur'an speaks on several occasions about those who lose their lives “in the way of God” or “for the sake of God” (*fi sabil allah*). They will be rewarded [Q. 4:74] and their sins will be forgiven [Q. 3:156-158]. They are not to be thought of as dead but are “living” [Q. 2:154]. They are promised Paradise [Q. 9:111; 47:4-6], where they will be near God [Q. 3:169].

The teaching of these Qur'anic verses was developed in Muslim tradition to include the understanding that all the martyr’s sins will be forgiven, they will not be confined by “life in the grave” (*barzakh*) but will go straight to Paradise; therefore they are alive and not dead. At the resurrection, they will be restored to their bodies like everyone else and then enter into Paradise where they will receive the crown of glory and be attended by sexual companions (*houris*) [Q. 52:20]. They will be invited by God to intercede for others, especially members of their own families.

### **Two groups of martyrs**

Muslim tradition has divided martyrs into two groups: those who are “martyrs in this world and the next” (*shuhada al-ma'raka*) and those who are “martyrs in the next

world only” (*shuhada al-akhira*). The various schools of Islam classify these slightly differently but here we will confine ourselves to broad outlines only.

The “martyrs in this world and the next” are those who lose their lives on the field of battle; generally when fighting against unbelievers or against the tyranny of injustice. As with any act in Islamic understanding, the act is determined by the intention (*niyya*); this can be judged by God alone but the Muslim community must assume the correct intention for those who appear to die as martyrs and treat them accordingly, leaving the final judgement to God. Martyrs in this category are awarded special burial rites: their bodies are not washed before burial as this betokens cleansing the body of the deceased from impurity but, in the case of such a martyr, all sin and impurity has been washed away “by their blood.” They are not shrouded but are buried in whatever clothing they were wearing at the time of death (“blood-stained clothing”), which, at the resurrection, will be their badge of honour. Some schools do not pray over the martyr at burial as this is to ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness but all their sins have been washed by their martyrdom so this would be unnecessary. They are not dead but alive so prayers for the dead are inappropriate. In other schools, prayers are offered on the basis that everyone stands in need of God’s mercy. Many examples are recorded of mothers commanding no mourning at the death of a martyr; there should only be gratitude that their son or daughter has been given this special honour by God.

The second group of “martyrs in the next world only” is much broader and they are not accorded special burial rites but are washed, shrouded and prayed over in the customary way. These include:

- Those who die later on account of the wounds that they received in battle or who are simply “worn out” by fighting
- Those who die fighting off criminals
- Those who are murdered while in the service of God
- Those killed for their beliefs, e.g., Sumayya umm Ammar ibn Yasir, who was killed by her family in the early years in Makka for converting to Islam and is reckoned as the first Muslim martyr
- Those who die through disease or accident, especially at times of plague
- Women who die in childbirth
- Those who migrate to preserve their faith and die in a foreign land
- Those who die whilst making the pilgrimage to Makka
- Those who die whilst travelling to seek knowledge
- Especially amongst the sufis, those who have defeated their lower desires whilst fighting the Greater Jihad.

### **Exemplary martyrs**

Amongst the numerous martyrs of the Prophet’s time, pride of place is given to his paternal uncle Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib, who fought with noted bravery at the Battle of Badr (624) and was finally killed in the Battle of Uhud (625) and mutilated by Hind, who cut out his liver and ate it. Both he and the third Imam in the Shi’a

tradition, Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, who was martyred at Karbala (680), are accorded the title of Prince of Martyrs. Imam Husayn becomes the archetype of martyrdom for the Shi'a, who hold that all the first eleven Imams died a martyr's death.

### **Suicide martyrs?**

The causality of the death of a martyr is that someone takes a stand “in the way of God” against injustice and ungodliness and accepts death, if God so wills, rather than submit to unbelief and injustice. This means that the cause of a martyr's death is an act by someone else set on the path of ungodliness. This is quite a different causality from someone who commits suicide; in this case the person takes their own life. Suicide in itself is forbidden [Q. 4:29]. This is compounded in the case of someone who brings about their own death with a view to causing indiscriminate death and injury to non-combatants, as in the case of a suicide bomber who uses this means to terrorise members of the public. Such an indiscriminate act is forbidden, even in time of war. Some Muslim scholars have gone so far as to call such a suicide attack an act of ultimate rebellion against the will of God as the person not only usurps the right of God to determine the hour of death but deliberately leaves themselves without any chance of repentance before their life is ended. It is significant to notice that, of all the figures from the Hebrew Bible who are recorded with respect in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, Samson, the one who brings about the death of his enemies through the vehicle of his own death by bringing down the pillars of the idol-worshippers' temple on himself together with them [Judges 16:30], is never mentioned. This has led Muslim scholars to declare suicide attacks and terrorising people to be unislamic acts (see: the Amman Message, [www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com)).

### **Suicide or self-sacrifice?**

To distinguish between suicide and self-sacrifice is not an easy matter; it hinges on the intention of the person, which only God can judge, as well as the nature of the act. If we consider a mother who puts herself in the line of fire or throws herself over a grenade, thus bringing about her own death, to save the lives of her children; is this suicide or self-sacrifice? Let us consider the case of an injured soldier who gives covering fire to his comrades so that they can escape in the certain knowledge that by thus remaining he will be killed by the advancing enemy; is this not a noble act of self-sacrifice? What of those who try to disarm a bomb, tackle someone with the intent of preventing them from killing many others or someone who deliberately enters a malfunctioning nuclear facility to prevent its explosion and dies in the process; might that not be regarded as heroic? In a similar way, some Muslim scholars are of the opinion, such as in the case of the Palestinian Intifada, that someone, who has no other means to fight against overwhelming military might who turns their body into a walking weapon as the only possible way to resist injustice, would be justified in thus taking their own life provided that they did not target innocent civilians. Other Muslim scholars would disagree with this opinion and regard this as unacceptable. It is only the followers of the extremist al-Qaida

Tendency, who regard deliberate suicide-attacks on people who do not agree with them as acceptable and indeed godly.