Suicide, Terrorism, or Martydrom:
The Psychological Motives and Cultural Sanctioning of Dying for a Cause

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While martyrs have been celebrated throughout history for making the ultimate sacrifice by standing up for their beliefs, a psychological perspective on martyrdom offers a more nuanced account of this enduring behavioral phenomenon. This paper begins by defining martyrdom and considering whether there are different types that warrant distinction. Next, it examines the reasoning that allows martyrs to prioritize their cause over their own lives and the extent to which mental illness influences martyrdom involving suicide, if at all. It then offers an analysis of what determines how onlookers regard acts of martyrdom, scrutinizing when martyrdom receives moral and cultural sanctioning and when it is condemned. It concludes by highlighting the duality of martyrdom as, on the one hand, a political protest and personal sacrifice and on the other, a suicide and loss of life.

The Varieties of Martyrdom

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a "martyr" as "a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion" or "a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle."[1] However, a cursory survey of historical figures who have been revered as martyrs reveals that many fall short of this definition. While

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Martin Luther King Jr. is often recognized as an icon of modern-day political martyrdom, his assassination was neither voluntary nor a deliberate sacrifice. The same could be said of Abraham Lincoln or Leon Trotsky.

Among martyrs who were aware of their impending death as opposed to losing their lives unexpectedly, it is important to distinguish between those who were put to death and those who died by their own hand. Those who were killed due to prosecution—like Socrates or Joan of Arc—might have been able to avoid death had they been willing to recant their ideological beliefs or confess their alleged sins. Although their conscious refusal to do so sealed their fate, they were not seeking death, and presumably would have been content to go on living had they not been charged, convicted, and sentenced. In contrast, those who have deliberately ended their lives—as in the case of self-immolators including those in Vietnam starting with Thích Quảng Đức in the 1960s, the hundreds of laborers and student activists in Korea over the past several decades, or the scores of monks and nuns in Tibet since 2009—made a conscious decision to sacrifice themselves as a form of social protest.[2] This latter category of martyrdom fits more comfortably within the realm of what sociologist Emile Durkheim called "altruistic suicide," which intends to—or does—result in some tangible benefit to society while also enjoying at least some degree of public approval.[3]

In the modern era, much of the attention devoted to voluntary martyrdom has focused on suicide bombing—a terrorist tactic popularized by Hezbollah in the 1980s. Hamas and other terrorist groups operating within Israel since the 1990s subsequently adopted the practice, as did the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Since this evolution, such acts of "suicide terrorism" committed by insurgent militant groups have come to be regarded in modern discourse as synonymous with martyrdom based on the Islamic concepts of *shahada* (self-sacrifice), *istishhad* (martyrdom), and *jihad* (a holy war waged against infidels as a religious duty; literally meaning "effort," "striving," or "struggle").[4] However, tactics of murder-suicide are not unique to Islamic terrorism and have also been employed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, also known as the "Tamil Tigers"), a secular organization. Such examples involving both suicide and homicide in the context of armed resistance, if not outright war, belong to a unique category of martyrdom. These cases strain the definition of altruistic suicide and are most likely to result in contentious disputes over whether perpetrators deserve to be recognized, or even revered, as martyrs.

Such heterogeneity makes clear that martyrdom is not a monolith. The ideological beliefs that martyrs witness and defend vary widely, as do their individual circumstances, the political situations in which they are embedded,

and their historical and cultural frameworks. Sociologists and anthropologists have often followed the tradition of Durkheim, drawing attention to the short-sightedness of citing personality or dispositional factors to explain martyrdom at the expense of social or situational factors.[5] However, individual and social causes of martyrdom are too often framed as mutually exclusive. A more complete understanding of the phenomenon instead recognizes that acts of martyrdom represent social behaviors that are also driven by the circumstances, characteristics, and ideological beliefs of the martyrs in question.

Martyrdom as Rational Choice

Suicide is often claimed to be an irrational act. However, echoing the work of the eminent suicidologist Edwin Shneidman, the act can be more practically framed as a rational—that is, a reasoned decision to prioritize death over life.[6] While choosing death over life is often biased by cognitive distortions and other self-deceptions (such as the belief that things will never get better), such internal logic need not warrant the claim of irrationality.[7] It has been argued that acts of violent extremism, including suicide terrorism, lie beyond rational choice economics due to "deontic reasoning" or "axiological rationality" that elevate "sacred values" and "moral duties" above concerns about risk or cost.[8] However, there is nothing inherently irrational about including such values among perceived benefits when deciding whether to end one's life.[9]

Accordingly, the decision to commit an act of martyrdom can be understood in cognitive terms as a mental calculus that weighs perceived benefits and rewards against risks and costs. And yet, though sacrificing one's life in the name of an ideological belief or cause is definitional to martyrdom, the details of that decision are often not so clear. Mapping out their complexities requires a more careful psychological assessment of martyrs in retrospect, in the tradition of Shneidman's "psychological autopsy."[10] Such individual-level analyses are more insightful than reductive attempts at collective generalization in illuminating why some people choose martyrdom.[11]

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The relevance of ideological belief to martyrdom is tautological. While often framed in the context of religion or value-laden terms like "extremism,"

"radicalism," "fundamentalism," and "fanaticism," ideology can be defined more neutrally as a set of thematically related factual beliefs, values (beliefs about what is important), and morals (beliefs about what is right/good or wrong/bad). A stage-wise model of ideological commitment recognizes that, regardless of the ideological belief in question, "true-believers" can become "activists" for whom moral judgments are regarded as absolutes that must be adopted or imposed on others.[12] Violent action can become justified, if not demanded as an act of self-defense, based on perceived existential threats to belief and identity.[13]

Even so, for every martyr who chooses to end their own life or to take the lives of others along with them, it is critical to question why some other path of action—like running for political office, going on hunger strike, throwing a can of tomato soup at the Mona Lisa, enlisting in the military, or becoming a senior official directing operations within a terrorist group—was not selected as an alternative in defense of one's ideological beliefs. There are many potential explanations. Some ideological belief systems explicitly incentivize dying for the cause as a culturally sanctioned and idealized achievement of the highest order.[14] While it might be difficult for some to comprehend why such a goal would matter if the martyr is no longer around to reap its reward, according to some beliefs, martyrdom can offer an "infinite payoff" in the afterlife.[15] In the case of Islamic suicide bombers, for example, the reward can range from absolution from sin and a guaranteed place in heaven in the presence of Allah to being wedded to 72 virgins awaiting in paradise.[16] Post-mortem rewards including going to heaven, being united with God, and even the possibility of resurrection of the physical body have likewise motivated Judeo-Christian martyrs from the Jews of antiquity to modern Coptic Orthodox Christians.[17]

In addition to personal benefits, martyrdom can bestow material benefits to one's surviving relatives, whether by being revered as the family of a hero, receiving monetary rewards, or through the belief that they, too, will be ensured a place in paradise.[18] In the context of armed resistance or war, terrorist martyrdom can also be viewed as a tangible benefit to one's friends, community, or persecuted group—one's "fictive kin"—by fomenting widespread fear among the enemy, exacting a heavy physical and psychological toll on soldiers and civilians alike based on the argument that no one is innocent, and satisfying the "unquenchable thirst" of collective vengeance.[19] Within the concept of altruistic suicide, martyrdom that involves taking one's own life without taking the lives of others (such as self-immolation) can help one's cause by strengthening the resolve of an oppressed group or attempting to end their suffering by rallying public support and drawing worldwide attention to mistreatment.

When considering the cost side of the martyrdom equation, the loss of one's life is often regarded as the ultimate price. However, this perspective rests on an assumption that a martyr highly values their life, despite little objective evidence that this is always the case. Indeed, the mental health of martyrs who take their own lives has been extensively debated.[20] Notable terrorism experts, including anthropologist Scott Atran and psychiatrist and CIA analyst Jerrold Post, once claimed that suicide terrorists are relatively free of mental illness, do not come from poverty, and are not suicidal in the sense that they do not want to end their lives due to personal misery. However, such conclusions were based primarily on studies of Palestinian suicide bombers during the First Intifada in the 1990s that were used to illuminate the motives of the 9/11 terrorists.[21] These conclusions have since been challenged for not holding up across time, cultures, and political circumstances, with Atran later conceding that post-9/11 data supported a new demographic.[22]

During the Second Intifada in the 2000s, for example, suicide bombers were said to have been recruited from "social nonentities" having "no status," "low self-esteem," and "trouble finding themselves…in effect, losers" with a mindset of "hopelessness, deprivation, envy, and humiliation."[23] Atran likewise noted that after 9/11, the typical suicide attacker across Eurasia and North Africa transitioned from mostly married men in their 20s and 30s, who were relatively well-educated and came from middle-class families, to mostly younger men in their teens and 20s, who were less well-educated and more socially marginalized.[24] Another study from 2010 compared 15 would-be Palestinian suicide bombers (arrested in the process of trying to carry out an attack) with organizers of suicide missions as well as terrorists involved in non-suicide missions. The analysis revealed that the suicide bombers had lower ego strength, more avoidant and dependent personality traits, and more depressive and suicidal tendencies.[25]

Looking more broadly at an opportunity sample of 130 suicide terrorists worldwide, Adam Lankford, a criminologist who authored *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers*, found ample evidence among perpetrators of the same mental health risk factors that are associated with conventional suicide, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, bereavement, and a recent precipitating crisis.[26] Others have speculated about psychodynamic factors motivating suicide terrorism, including narcissism and narcissistic injury, loss of and a desire to regain significance, borderline personality traits, and the so-called authoritarian personality.[27] In the same vein, militant soldiers and suicide bombers, including women and children recruited by the LTTE in Sri Lanka, notably suffered

political oppression, displacement, destruction of their homes and communities, food insecurity, ill health, disrupted education, or the death of a parent or relative, as well as humiliation, harassment, or detention.[28] Those with combat injuries resulting in physical disabilities were often specifically encouraged to join the LTTE's squad of suicide bombers (the Black Tigers).[29]

The data available on the motives and mental health of self-immolators have been similarly heterogeneous while still supporting the relevance of mental health factors across geographical, economic, and sociocultural differences. A 2011 study found that, compared to lower-income countries like Iran, Afghanistan, India, China, and Sri Lanka, self-immolation in higher-income countries across North America, Europe, and Asia was usually performed by men with mental illnesses including affective disorders, psychosis, and personality disorders; previous suicide attempts; and financial difficulties or separation from a partner.[30] In Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, India, and among ethnic Kurds, self-immolators were more likely to be women with variable rates of mental illness who were typically revolting against or seeking escape from political and social oppression including forced marriages and domestic abuse.[31] Even among cases of self-immolation that have been more closely aligned with martyrdom as a form of political protest—such as those occurring in Korea during the latter half of the twentieth century—choosing death has been described in suicide notes as associated with overwhelming emotions, frustrated needs, grief, an inability to adjust, and loss of interest in persevering, such that it was regarded as a relief or escape from unbearable psychological pain.[32] Accordingly, the motives of such seemingly altruistic suicides have been equally attributed within a multidimensional model to both social factors and "deep intrapsychic and interpersonal factors."[33]

Little in the way of a psychological autopsy has been published regarding the spate of self-immolators protesting the Vietnam War throughout the 1960s or the more recent epidemic of self-immolation in Tibet. Much has been made, however, of the concept of the "non-self" and a tradition of selflessness within Buddhist philosophy—both notions that have strongly impacted the willingness of an individual to sacrifice themself for others.[34] Still, a cross-cultural review of 533 acts of self-immolation occurring from 1963 to 2002 found both altruistic as well as "egocentric" motives. Cheating the enemy out of the satisfaction of capture and persecution, the promise of karmic advancement, redemption, and even vanity were relevant to self-immolation as an "extreme form of protest."[35]

Due to cultural sanctioning and biased collateral sources that wish to frame the deceased in a positive light, attempting to speculate about martyrs

based on limited retrospective assessment can be a fool's game.[36] Broad-stroke screening for mental illness also runs the risk of missing internal struggles and subclinical mental health issues that fail to meet diagnostic criteria for major mental disorders. Such conclusions match recommendations about investigating terrorist behavior that advocate for a more detailed biographical examination of individuals using a dimensional or continuous approach rather than a categorical diagnostic one.[37] Indeed, as is the case with terrorists more broadly, a guiding principle when attempting a psychological autopsy of martyrs is that, while they may not have been mentally ill, they may not have been mentally healthy either.[38]

Cultural Sanctioning

Some acts of martyrdom—most notably Islamic terrorist martyrdom that claims the lives of others—are contrived, orchestrated, and incentivized by political groups as opposed to being the spontaneous acts of individuals.[39] Although rational choice economics allows such groups to use human lives as expendable pawns in a larger battle, rhetoric claiming that "if martyrs had nothing to lose, sacrifice would be senseless," serves as effective propaganda to recruit and indoctrinate volunteers willing to give up their lives for the cause.[40] Such propaganda steers clear of the terminology of intihar (suicide as forbidden by Islamic law) or terrorism in favor of istishhad and shahada along with glorified euphemisms like "self-martyr" and "volunteer" to describe suicide bombers and "martyrdom operations," "industry of life," "sacred explosions," and "gifts" in place of the bombings.[41]

Conversely, to those less sympathetic to cases of martyrdom that claim the lives of others, terms like "suicide" and "terrorism" seem fitting, while to those vehemently opposed, such terms may fall short of capturing the moral condemnation they feel is deserved. Consequently, some authors have highlighted the primarily murderous intent of terrorist martyrdom in contrast to other forms of suicide, labeling it "homicidal killing," a "war crime," "homicide bombing," "Islamakaze," perpetrated by "human bombs," "murdercide," and "*folie à plusieurs*" (the madness of many).[42]

It would be a mistake to assume that the sanctioning of suicide martyrdom occurs pervasively across a given culture or religion, or even within a particular subculture over time. For example, Bloom has shown that the public opinion of suicide bombing among Palestinians changed considerably from minority approval during the First Intifada to majority approval after the Second Intifada, in response to dwindling optimism about the attainment of peace, the rise in

power and popularity of Hamas, and "humiliation and persecution" due to Israel's counterterrorism tactics.[43] In the early 2000s, support for suicide bombings was considerably higher in Lebanon compared to Palestine, and also higher among Palestinians living in refugee camps compared to those in urban areas.[44] Within Muslim diaspora populations, greater support for suicide bombings in the mid-2000s was associated with younger age and perceived discrimination.[45] Similarly, support among Tamils in Sri Lanka for the LTTE and its use of militant tactics including suicide bombing has been divided—as one author summarized it, "who gets to be a 'hero' or 'traitor' is complicated and contested."[46] Others have noted that public support of the LTTE in its latter years was solicited by propaganda, persecution, and the instillment of fear rather than through true sympathy or persuasion.[47]

Variable public support and divisive rhetoric related to motivated reasoning have emerged in reference to self-immolation as well. For example, *ranglü merseg* (burning of the body in fire) with the intent of protesting Tibet's occupation by China is regarded as an act of *chöpa* (offering) by a *dpa' bo* (hero, courageous person, or spiritual warrior) in the eyes of sympathetic Tibetans and has been awarded the euphemism "beacons of resistance" in scholarly discourse.[48] However, the act was initially branded as terrorism attributed to mental illness and treated as a crime by the Chinese government.[49] Such varied characterizations reflect differing political motives. On the one hand, a desire to further the cause of Tibetans lest self-immolators die in vain; on the other, a desire to deter its effectiveness as a form of protest and prevent "copycat" suicides. While the Chinese government has argued that suicide via self-immolation violates Buddhist teaching regarding the preservation of life, exiled Tibetan leaders, including the Dalai Lama, have avoided either explicitly sanctioning or condemning the act.[50]

Cultural sanctioning has the potential to be exploited to mask despair. Borrowing from other traditions, suicide in the form of self-immolation or under the guise of *hara-kiri* (the historical ritual of self-stabbing and disembowelment of the Japanese samurai) can sometimes represent an attempt to redeem oneself from personal failings, regain a sense of honor that has been lost, atone for one's perceived sins, or make amends.[51] A closer examination through a meticulous post-mortem is required to avoid mistaking all suicides that bear the trappings of a sanctioned ritual for altruistic suicide that is culturally endorsed and honored as martyrdom.

Suicide and Sacrifice

In recognition of martyrdom's toll on human life, martyrdom can be meaningfully distinguished between that which involves suicide and that which involves both suicide and homicide. To understand why people seek martyrdom, a strong case can be made to define the act based on motive but, as has been discussed, motives are often complicated. Applying just as well to the subject of martyrdom more broadly, the sociologist Riaz Hassan summarized the many drivers of suicide terrorism as follows:

> Terrorist organizations and individual suicide missions are not about dying and killing alone, but have a broader significance for achieving multiple purposes. These include gaining community approval and political success; liberating the homeland; achieving personal redemption or honour; using martyrdom to effect the survival of a community; refusing to accept subjugation; seeking revenge for personal and collective humiliation; conveying religious or nationalistic convictions; expressing guilt, shame, material and religious rewards; escaping from intolerable everyday degradations of life under occupations, boredom, anxiety and defiance.[52]

Once again, such drivers—along with mental health issues running the gamut from traumatic life experiences to mental illness—can only be unraveled through deliberate analysis of individual cases in the absence of any singular profile. They should not be inferred through collectivist notions that encourage the use of rhetorical gymnastics to debate whether purported martyrdom represents "suicide" or not, is "rational" or not, or is "altruistic" or not.

Much of the semantic debate over martyrdom is rooted in its contested morality. Based on moral judgment, many scholars insist that martyrdom is different from suicide because the latter depends on the desire to escape suffering in a manner regarded as characterologically weak and equivalent to a sin against God. Some Muslims similarly acknowledge that both suicide and the killing of innocent civilians are prohibited in Islam, but find ways to justify terrorist martyrdom based on *jihad* in the name of God, self-preservation, and the permissibility of collateral damage in war.[53] In the same way, some Christians who revere the Ten Commandments, which state "thou shalt not kill," have no trouble excusing killing in the context of self-defense, war, and capital punishment. Just so, based on the underlying morality of a retributivist justice system, murder is distinguished by degree and considered different from justifiable homicide, involuntary manslaughter, and euthanasia (physician-assisted suicide).

Taking the definition of morals as beliefs about what is good or bad one

step further, we might come to see attempts to define and sanction martyrdom as aesthetic judgments about whether individual acts are honorable, virtuous, or even beautiful. Understanding martyrdom in this way acknowledges that whether a death is a "good death" will always depend on the eye of the beholder—whether that be the martyr himself, his affiliated organization, his kin or people, his political opposition, or his international audience—and the beholder's support of the martyr's cause.

In order to side-step endless debates about martyrdom based on such moral relativism, we can opt to characterize the phenomenon in pragmatic terms, starting with an understanding that calling an act of martyrdom "rational" means only that the perpetrator has reasons for his actions, not that his actions are "right." Next, we can adopt the neutral definition of suicide offered by Merriam-Webster as "the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally."[54] Accordingly, we can acknowledge that all acts of deliberate self-destruction—including martyrdom—represent suicide. In pragmatic terms, suicide is suicide. Self-destruction is self-destruction. A life lost is a life lost.

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Viewed through a lens of moral relativism that acknowledges the adage, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," equating martyrdom with altruistic suicide becomes fraught with the thorny ethics of the "trolley problem," which weighs the relative cost of one human life against others. From a pragmatic perspective, we could ask whether suicide should only warrant the label of martyrdom based on its actual benefits to others as opposed to its mere motive and intent. We could, likewise, question whether an act of combined suicide and homicide—that is, the weaponization of martyrdom—deserves to be called altruistic if it benefits only some at the expense of causing harm or death to others.

We might then attempt to resolve such issues by steering clear of black-and-white moral absolutes and, instead, acknowledging martyrdom's inherent duality. For example, the Buddhist scholar Geshe Lobsang Chögyel Rinpoche has noted that self-immolation:

> has two sides…On the positive side: the motivation of the happiness of millions of people is a virtue and merit…The negative side: the result of killing is suffering. So one should check very carefully both sides of this action…It is both virtuous and non-virtuous…On the one hand [self-

immolators] are a hero, on the other hand they are a suicide.[55]

Self-immolation has likewise been described as an "ultimate act of both despair and defiance, a symbol at once of resignation and heroic self-sacrifice."[56]

Once we acknowledge that martyrdom is indeed a form of suicide that results in the loss of human life, we can start to shift our attention away from debating its sanctioning or condemnation and towards questioning whether self-sacrifice is necessary, and, if not, what we might do to prevent it.[57] The success of such efforts—whether at an individual, cultural, or political level—rests on elucidating underlying motives and developing alternatives to address them. When the Cuban exile Vladimir Ceballos was asked about why a member of the 1980s counter-culture movement *Los Frikis* deliberately injected himself with HIV-laden blood in an act of protest, he replied, "When you don't have any more doors to open, death is a door."[58] Preventing suicide—including martyrdom that claims human lives—is about helping people find other doors when it seems like there are none. Ultimately, that is precisely what martyrdom—in its most altruistic form—is trying to achieve for others.

Notes

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11. Suicide, terrorism, radicalization, and martyrdom are "equifinal" processes, meaning that there are many different pathways that lead to a particular behavioral outcome. At the same time, identified risk factors associated with such behaviors are "multifinal" with many different potential outcomes. For this reason, intentions and motives must be determined based on individual case analysis in lieu of claims about any stereotypical "profile." See: Charles L. Scott, Elena Swartz, and Katherine Warburton, "The Psychological Autopsy: Solving the Mysteries of Death," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 39, 2006: 805–22; Paul Gill, Frank Farnham, Caitlin Clemmow, "The Equifinality and Multifinality of Violent Radicalization and Mental Health," in *Terrorism, Violent Radicalization, and Mental Health*, eds. Kamaldeep Bhui and Dinesh Bhugra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

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23. Post et al. "Psychology of Suicide Terrorism."

24. Atran, "Maryrdom's Would-Be Myth Buster."

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27. Lester et al., "Suicide Bombers;" Meytal Grimland, Alan Apter, and Ad Kerkhof, "The Phenomenon of Suicide Bombing: A Review of Psychological and Nonpsychological Factors," *Crisis* 27, no. 3 (2006): 107–18; David Webber et al., "Divergent Paths to Martyrdom and Significance Among Suicide Attackers," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 5 (2017): 852–74.

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