

## IV.

# Political Action and Ideological Discourse



# Martyrdom in Light of the Arab Spring

*Farhad Khosrokhavar (Paris)*

Martyrdom is an issue that needs qualification within the religious and social realms in the contemporary Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> In the popular view martyrdom was traditionally associated with dying for Islam, an act defying non-Islamic invaders. According to the views of Muslim commentators on the Koran, there are only a few cases where *shahīd* means not only witness but also martyr, while according to some Hadiths, those killed in the first violent encounters with the Meccans were known as such.<sup>2</sup> The notion of *shahīd* as equating to martyr seems to have become widespread in the Hadith literature after the first century of Islam, thereafter gaining even further in currency during the Christian Crusades. It was revived, along with jihad, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, vis-à-vis imperialist invaders. Martyrdom has a long history in Shiism, its keystone the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the third imam, while fighting against the Umayyad caliph Yazid in the year 61/680. His sacred death became a paragon for the fight against imperialists (in Iraq against British rule in the 1920s and 1930s), while in the 1970s it was focused against the pro-Western authoritarian Shah regime in Iran. The major ideological contribution of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a reshaping of martyrdom, claiming that to die as a martyr was an accomplishment promoting the worldwide Islamic Revolution.

The modernisation of the Muslim world has thus changed the relevance of martyrdom, in both the Shiite and Sunnite worlds. Against the backdrop of revolutionary tendencies in Islam in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of martyrdom is closely associated with jihad in a new way. Martyrdom can be a “mass phenomenon” related to the mobilisation of the people, mainly youths, by governments (in Iran the revolutionary government), as a means to accomplish their goals in their struggle against the enemy (the Iraqi Army in the long war between 1980 and 1988); it can also mean “suicide bombers” who enter the fray against an enemy who is technologically and economically far superior (usually within non-state networks, be they transnational, as in the case of al-Qaida, or national like the Chechen and Palestinian attacks against the Russian and the Israeli governments, respectively). “Suicide bombers” decide to die in advance; they do not succumb to a probable death in the battlefield but choose and embrace almost certain death by detonating bombs; secondly, in many cases they even long to die and their “love of martyrdom” sometimes even trumps the

<sup>1</sup> For a general outline see David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>2</sup> For the notion of martyrdom in early Sunni Islam see Silvia Horsch-Al Saad, *Tod im Kampf. Figurenungen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften*, Würzburg 2011.

wider goal of spreading or defending Islam (the specific case of “martyropaths”<sup>3</sup>); and last but not least, even though influenced by Jihadist organisations, they decide to die as an “individual”, constructing a personal relationship to this and the next world. In this way they promote what we might call a decisionist “death-ridden individualism” (or “individualism through death”),<sup>4</sup> which is quite distinct from the two dual categories developed by Louis Dumont, namely “individual in-the-world” and “individual out-of-the-world”. The new type of martyrdom reshapes secularisation within enraged groups and individuals.<sup>5</sup> While the framework of “jihad and martyrdom” remains formally identical in the traditional view, the actual anthropological content and, particularly, the relationship to individualisation and secularisation are revolutionised in this new type of martyrdom.

Martyrdom in its new anthropological cast first found expression in the Shiite world, mainly in the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979; it then spread to the Sunni world, particularly amongst the Palestinian and Lebanese in their struggle against Israeli forces since the 1980s through to the first years of the current century. A major change occurred with the advent of movements calling for greater democratisation in Iran (first the student movement repressed by the regime in 1999, then the intellectual and feminist movement after 2005, and finally the Green Movement in 2009), which has since been followed by a wave of Arab Revolutions since the end of 2010. In these movements new forms of martyrdom have emerged which neither followed the traditional pattern of martyrdom, nor its new revolutionary forms as practised by Shiite martyrs in the Islamic Revolution (1979) and during the Iran/Iraq War (1980-1988) as well as, in the Sunni realm, amongst the Palestinians, mainly in the Second Intifada (2000-2005), and the Chechens (The Islamic Brigade of *shuhadā'* since 1999) and other Islamist groups. The self-proclaimed martyrdom that emerged with the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Revolutions was not officially recognised by the Shiite clergy or the Sunni *'ulamā'*. To briefly clarify the notions, we may distinguish between the traditional, the radical Islamist and the “democratising”, non-violent forms of martyrdom in the Muslim and, particularly, the Arab world.

The Islamist period, from the 1970s onward, witnessed the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), the beginning of the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet invasion (1979), and the attacks on the *al-haram* mosque in Mecca by a group of political and religious dissidents led by Juhaymān al-'Utaybī (November 1979). The spread of the revolutionary movements in the Arab world, first throughout the

<sup>3</sup> See Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, Paris 1983.

<sup>4</sup> See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la Mort*, Paris 1995.

<sup>5</sup> There is no room to develop in this article the notion of martyrdom in Shiite, Sunnite and other Islamic “sectarian” trends within the framework of secularisation and modernisation. See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers. The New Martyrs of Allah*, London 2005; id., *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide*, London 2009.

Shiite and then the Sunni realm, was based on a new and close association between martyrdom and jihad, differing from both the origins of Islam as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anti-imperialist period of jihad and martyrdom. Muslims now had to fight against the heretic rulers in the Islamic world (who were characterised as ‘false gods’, *tāghūt*) and the “new crusaders” (the Christian world, mainly America and the Zionists) who attack the Muslims in their homeland. The “arrogance” (*istikbār*) of the illegitimate rulers and the “crusaders” (the Americans and to a lesser extent Europeans) towards Muslims triggers their jihad, which seeks to put an end to this attitude. Through the influence of communism, *istikbār* has become synonymous with imperialism and neo-colonialism, while sometimes the expression *world arrogance* is used. Martyrdom for the Jihadists (adherents of the radical Islamic tenets of a worldwide caliphate) is violent in the sense that one has to defend Islam by relentlessly fighting the enemy, giving absolute privilege to jihad and rejecting any kind of peaceful compromise. Killing or getting killed, sacrificing one’s life and inflicting death on a maximum number of enemies of Islam are the prerequisites of this type of martyrdom. The aim is to put an end to the rule of the idolatrous regimes (*tāghūt*) and restore the reign of genuine Islam by declaring a merciless war to the enemy. In this perspective, violence is not only legitimate but also more than desirable, meaning that killing the enemy or dying when fighting for this cause (martyrdom) are unavoidable. This paradigm, summarily sketched, reigns supreme in the minds of many Jihadist actors willing to take their fierce fighting resolve to the impious world of disbelievers (the West but also the Muslim world ruled by fake Muslim rulers), denouncing peacefulness and calling for a globalised violence on a worldwide scale. This pattern of martyrdom closely follows the concept of global jihad. It is also fascinated by the global media and the notion of an “Apocalypse Now”, that is a large and bloody event largely publicised by the media (foremost television and internet) that prefigures the “apocalypse” to come in the jihad against the unbelievers: without the sight of the Twin Towers in flames and collapsing live on television screens around the world, the meaning of this new jihad and martyrdom would have been different on the social and anthropological levels. The new pair martyrdom/jihad is inseparable from the “exhibitionist” dimension of global death accomplished through the spectacle of “Apocalypse Now”. Its foretaste is given by the apocalyptic pictures of the September 11, 2001 attacks that promoted “spectacular” jihad and martyrdom. This was not an unintended consequence of this new type of jihad/martyrdom; rather, it was intentionally calculated as a fundamental aspect of this type of experience by those who promoted it, believing that it would induce worldwide awe and lend new impetus to their promotion of martyrdom and gain massive support amongst Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> These dimensions are developed further in Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism and Suicide Bombers*.

Preceded by the Iranian Green Movement (July 2009), the new wave of Arab Revolutions mark a break with this violent, exhibitionist martyrdom. They usher in a new era of “peaceful” martyrdom that is anthropologically distinct from the Jihadist trend in many respects. In sharp contrast to the jihadist martyrs, who pledge to fight godless regimes and the secular West in the name of Islam, the new “democratic martyrs” did not embrace sacred death in direct reference to any radical version of religion. Only after their deaths were they glorified as martyrs, more by public opinion than by Islamic scholars (they should also be distinguished from the “bread martyrs”, those who died in demonstrations for better living conditions in social protests throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and did not ask for democratic reform). For the Islamist martyr, violence is an inalienable part of the strategy, directed as much towards the self as towards the enemy. The martyrs of the Arab Spring did also not sacrifice themselves for a nation dominated by a father-like figurehead such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Hafiz Assad in Syria or Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. Furthermore, the nationalist hero and martyr of the 1950s and 1960s sacrificed himself for the society as a whole, without reference to democracy, in an anti-imperialist fight aiming at realising national unity. The “democratic martyrs” aim to implement pluralist rule and this sets them apart from the martyrs of previous generations, be they the Jihadist or “bread” martyrs.

The Arab Revolutions begin with a type of “martyrdom” that is at the antipode of the religiously supported one, namely the self-immolation of Muhammad Bū ‘Azīzī, the young Tunisian who set fire to himself publicly in protest against the social injustice he felt, in particular in order to denounce Ben Ali’s regime and its security forces. Still, this “martyrdom” signalled the beginning of the Arab Revolutions (the so-called Tunisian “Jasmine” Revolution) without being the only type of “sacred death” in the long series of the deaths taking place in the succeeding protest movements that spread through the Arab world during 2011 and 2012.<sup>7</sup> The best way to understand the new type of martyrdom is to closely follow those who engaged in it. Analyzing their cases, one can distinguish many subcategories of martyrdom in the 2011-2012 Arab Revolutions.

### *I. The Self-Immolation Paradigm*

In the Arab world self-immolation is a daring act, denoting a rupture with Islamist rhetoric and a high level of secularisation. Muhammad Bū ‘Azīzī’s setting himself ablaze on 17 December, 2010 and his ultimate death on 4 January, 2011 from the injuries set the tone for this new style of “sacred death”. People called it martyrdom, but among the ‘ulamā’ (Islamic scholars) the act was regarded as an infringement of God’s commandment that no one should take their

---

<sup>7</sup> See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The Arab Revolutions that Shook the World*, London 2012.

own life, and death can only be willed by God – with the exception of a few, among them Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, the head of the World Union of Islamic Scholars (*ra'īs al-ittihād al-ālamī li l-`ulamā' al-muslimīn*) and one of the most prominent scholars in the Sunni world (he is known for his contribution to *Islamonline* and his broadcast on Al Jazeera, *Sharia and Life*, which attracts tens of millions of Muslims), who found extenuating circumstances. From an orthodox Islamic perspective Bū 'Azīzī's act was not only no martyrdom but indeed a desecration of God's rule stipulated in the Koran: "No person can ever die except by Allah's leave at an appointed term" (Koran 3:145), or more explicitly: "Don't kill yourself" (Koran 4:29) or "Don't throw yourself into destruction" (Koran 2:195). Still, people celebrated his heroic death, and songs and videos were created in his honour, calling him a martyr. One can observe a widening disconnection between the religious meaning of martyrdom and its secular, popular signification, the latter becoming largely autonomous of the religious idiom.

Even Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī said in an interview with Al Jazeera that he would not produce a fatwa (religious opinion) but simply content himself with a commentary in his programme *Sharia and Life* on the subject of the young Tunisian Muhammad Bū 'Azīzī: "I implore Allah the Almighty, and pray Him to pardon this young man and forgive him and go over his action that was against the religious law, which forbids killing oneself."<sup>8</sup> Under the pressure of the Arab public opinion, al-Qaraḍāwī softened his position, explaining on his website that Bū 'Azīzī's self-immolation was justifiable since it was an act expressing rejection of humiliation and hunger.<sup>9</sup> Still, the scholars of al-Azhar, the most prestigious Sunni university in the world, issued a fatwa condemning self-immolation.<sup>10</sup> The Saudi grand mufti 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Shaykh condemned suicide even when committed in response to harsh living conditions.<sup>11</sup>

Killing oneself is not traditionally regarded as martyrdom, all the more so as the act in Bū 'Azīzī's case did not entail any notion of jihad or fight against disbelievers or un-Islamic rulers. Even those "suicide bombers" who kill themselves while killing their proclaimed foes in reference to jihad are considered by many *'ulamā'* as infringing upon the tenets of Islam, for their death occurs before that of the enemies and is not induced by them but by himself; in addition, many innocent women, children and elderly are killed, some of them Muslims, which

<sup>8</sup> See for the Arabic text: "Qaradawi explique sa position sur Bouazizi", URL: <http://www.radiojektiss.com/qaradawi-explique-sa-position-sur-bouazizi/> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jalal Ghazi, "Tunisian Uprising: The Other Martyrs", in: *New American Media* 22.01.2011, URL: <http://newamericanmedia.org/2011/01/tunisian-uprising-the-other-martyrs.php> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. "Al-Azhar: Self-immolation is a 'sin'", in: *Al-Ahram Online*, 19.01.2011, URL: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/4310.aspx> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. "Man Dies after Setting Himself on Fire", in: *Gulf News*, 23.01.2011, URL: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/man-dies-after-setting-himself-on-fire-1.750642> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

they justify through the notion of “shielding” (that is the fact that they *nolens volens* shield enemies of Islam and their death is therefore deemed necessary to defend Islam). On the other hand though, many radical clerics consider their act to be martyrdom for it targets the enemies of Islam. In the case of Bū ‘Azīzī there was no reference to Islam in his act, which was a pure protest against social injustice and humiliation, with no hint of any religious background or justification. Secularisation was obvious in his act of protest. Two decades earlier the trend had been towards adherence to the religious meaning of martyrdom, and Islamist would-be martyrs were proud to claim the title and show their willingness to be categorised as Islamic heroes by sacrificing their lives for the sake of their religion. Now, what is regarded by public opinion as “martyrdom” has become totally secular, an act of protest, wrapped up afterwards as martyrdom by others, not by its actor.

Bū ‘Azīzī’s self-immolation triggered a series of imitators in Arab countries and even in Europe. In all these cases the reference point was the individual’s desperate situation and despondency, not the will to die for Islam (which should be, theoretically, the necessary condition for martyrdom). In Sidi Bū Zid, Tunisia, after Bū ‘Azīzī’s death, a second young unemployed man, Husayn Nājī, committed suicide by jumping from an electricity pylon on 22 December, 2010. A young Moroccan set himself on fire during a teachers’ sit-in in front of the Ministry of Education in Rabat. The demonstration was being held to demand secure jobs for teachers with precarious contracts. The police intervened and saved his and a bystander’s life.

A young, unmarried woman, Fadwā al-‘Urwī, a 25-year-old mother of two, set herself on fire after being refused social accommodation, a flat for her and her children to live in, by the authorities. Her house made of dried mud in which she lived with her parents and children had been demolished by the authorities. She burned herself before the municipality office of Sūq al-Sabt in the centre of Morocco and died of her injuries in a Casablanca hospital. She was the first woman to commit suicide by fire since the wave of suicides triggered by Bū ‘Azīzī’s self-immolation.<sup>12</sup> Here, too, the act had no religious content and since the movement did not succeed in Morocco it was not widely characterised as martyrdom. The success or failure of the protest, its generalisation into larger segments of the society, plays a role in it being designated as martyrdom or not by the public at large. The model can be copied from one country in another one, as was the case in Mauritania. There a 43-year-old man tried to burn himself on 17 January. In Egypt, ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Ja‘far, a 49 year-old owner of a small restaurant in the town of Qanṭara close to Ismā‘iliyya, attempted to take his own

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. “Une jeune mère célibataire s’immole par le feu”, France 24, 23.02.2011, URL: <http://www.france24.com/fr/20110223-maroc-jeune-femme-celibataire-immole-feu-suicide-logement-social-souk-sebt-fadoua-laroui> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

life by fire in front of the Egyptian parliament in Cairo on 17 January.<sup>13</sup> Apparently he had not received vouchers to buy bread for his restaurant.<sup>14</sup> Two others attempted suicide, a 25-year-old jobless man with mental problems in Alexandria and another, in Cairo, can also be mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

On 15 January in Algiers a 34-year-old jobless man attempted to commit suicide in front of the city's security building. Another man, Muhsin Bū Ṭarfif, a 37-year-old father of two, committed suicide by fire in response to a challenge by the authorities: "The mayor told Mohcine Bouterfif: if you are courageous, do as did Bouazizi, kill yourself by fire!"<sup>16</sup> He died on 24 January. Ma'āmīr Lutfī, a 36-year-old unemployed father of six who was denied a meeting with the governor, burned himself in front of the al-Wādi town hall on 17 January. He died on 12 February.<sup>17</sup> There have been a number of other incidents of self-immolation in Algeria.<sup>18</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, perhaps for the first time in the history of the country, a 65-year-old man died on 21 January after setting himself on fire in the town of Šāmiṭa, Jāzān.<sup>19</sup> Europe did not remain immune to the wave of copycat suicides by fire. On 11 February Nūr al-Dīn 'Adnān, a 27-year-old Moroccan street vendor, burned himself in Palermo, Sicily, in protest against the confiscation of his wares and harassment by municipal officials. He died five days later.<sup>20</sup>

Bū 'Azīzī's act had a tremendous effect in the Arab world, but also beyond. It made a horrendous suicide an accessible model for others who probably thought it might initiate a social protest. Consideration of the pain to be endured before death almost disappeared before the earthshaking consequences of the act, bringing post-mortem fame to insignificant individuals who became national heroes

<sup>13</sup> Cf. "In Egypt, Man Sets Himself on Fire, Driven by Economic Woes", in: *Al-Ahram Online*, 17.01.2011, URL: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/2/4115/Egypt/Society/In-Egypt,-man-sets-himself-on-fire,-driven-by-econ.aspx> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. "Trois hommes se sont immolés par le feu", in: *France 2*, January 18, 2011, URL: <http://info.france2.fr/monde/trois-hommes-se-sont-immoles-par-le-feu-66885754.html> (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mehdi Benslimane et al., "Le maire à Mohcine Bouterfif: 'Si tu as du courage, fais comme Bouazizi, immole-toi par le feu'", *DNA-Algérie*, 24.01.2011, URL: [www.dna-algerie.com/interieure/le-maire-a-mohcine-bouterfif-si-tu-as-du-courage-fais-comme-bouazizi-immole-toi-par-le-feu](http://www.dna-algerie.com/interieure/le-maire-a-mohcine-bouterfif-si-tu-as-du-courage-fais-comme-bouazizi-immole-toi-par-le-feu) (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. "Quatrième décès par immolation en Algérie, à la veille de la marche du 12 février", in: *Jeune Afrique*, 12.02.2011, URL: [www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB\\_2.00110212105526](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB_2.00110212105526) (retrieved 25.04.2012).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the list of self-immolations in 2011 in Algeria in Wikipedia, URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011\\_Algerian\\_self-immolations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Algerian_self-immolations) (retrieved 25.04.2012).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. "Man Dies in Possible First Self-Immolation in Saudi", in: *Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), 22.01.2011, URL: <http://sundaytimes.lk/world-news/4231-man-dies-in-possible-first-self-immolation-in-saudi> (retrieved 12.10.2011).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. "Palermo, Moroccan Street Vendor Dies after Setting Himself on Fire", in: *Abora Italia*, 22.02.2011, URL: [www.ahoraitalia.com/giornale//117595/palermo-dies-after-setting-himself-fire.htm](http://www.ahoraitalia.com/giornale//117595/palermo-dies-after-setting-himself-fire.htm) (retrieved 12.10.2011).

and thereby wreaked revenge on repressive power holders. The copycat effect did not have the same results in other countries. The element of surprise had waned, police forces were now ready to confront demonstrators, and the “trigger element” of the protest movement had to change in order to succeed. In Egypt protestors came up with the innovation of tying the project to a place, Tahrir Square. Notwithstanding, Egyptians had their own “martyrs” (the equivalent of Bū ‘Azīzī was the Egyptian restaurateur ‘Abdū ‘Abd al-Mun‘im, who died after suicide by fire on 17 January, 2011).

Bū ‘Azīzī’s act made him a national hero in Tunisia, and a hero for many in Arab countries where demonstrators followed suit in their protest movement against their rulers. One *YouTube* declaration in French called him “the hero of the Tunisian nation and the founder of democracy in Tunisia”.<sup>21</sup> In this post the chanting of a man in the Arab dialect of Tunisia set to traditional guitar accompanies Bū ‘Azīzī’s photo, together with a French translation of the song and words attributed to Bū ‘Azīzī. Then the statement follows:

The uproar spreads: with a long clamor, the warships of the barbarous soldiers are thrust. Everywhere floats death. And the homicidal sword pierces at the threshold of the altars the bold hero. Mohamed Bouazizi, the eagle who carries fire, the benefactor of humanity, the bird whose omen is happiness!

## *II. The Unintentional Martyr*

Contrary to the category of martyrs who announce their probable death, there are others who suffer violent death without this expectation and are venerated afterwards by the society or their community as such. In Egypt on 9 October, 2011, the worst violence since the January Revolution broke out, with more than 26 Christians killed and as many as 300 injured. They did not expect to die during their demonstration, mainly due to the fact that they did it after the Egyptian Revolution, which seemed to have freed them from the fear of arbitrary harassment, let alone killing. The Coptic Church declared three days of fasting and prayer for them. Hundreds of mourners gathered at the Coptic cathedral in al-‘Abbāsiyya, a Cairo neighbourhood, chanting anti-military and anti-Ṭanṭāwī (the head of the military government) slogans. Many distressed Coptic women carried wooden crosses and were dressed in black, mourning over the death of their “martyrs”. For them as Christians, martyrdom points to those Christians who were killed by the military in their confrontation with the Salafi fanatics.

Another case of this type is when security forces kill someone who intended to protest against the prevailing social situation. Their death is regarded by many

<sup>21</sup> Cf. “Mohamed Bouazizi Héros Tunisian Révolution Tunisie Túnez”, *YouTube*, URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Nir6FcXDM8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Nir6FcXDM8&feature=related) (retrieved 13.04.2012).

as “martyrdom” due to its social significance. The secular meaning of martyrdom is obvious in this type as well.

One example is Muḥammad Nabbūs from Libya. Born in Benghazi in 1983, he graduated from Qārūnīs University with a degree in mathematics and computing. He completed his education in networking and computing, including postgraduate studies in Benghazi.<sup>22</sup> His wife, Perdita, was pregnant with the couple’s first child at the time of his death. Nabbūs was the primary contact of many international journalists looking for information about Libya. He had founded an internet television station, Libya Alhurra TV, which broadcasted on Livestream.com. Libya Alhurra TV was the only broadcast coming from Benghazi when Gaddafi shut down the internet at the beginning of the February 2011 uprising. Nabbūs had managed to bypass government blocks on the web to broadcast live images from Benghazi across the world. On 10 March, 2011, the *Washington Post* reported that the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (which includes Hillary Clinton) and the U.S. State Department were funding tech firms that helped political dissidents in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia to communicate through the internet under the noses of government censors.<sup>23</sup>

Libya Alhurra TV included nine cameras streaming 24 hours a day after the channel’s creation on 17 February. As Libya Alhurra TV’s communications became more sophisticated, Nabbūs was able to take cameras with him to different parts of Benghazi to capture up close the destruction and carnage caused by mortars and shelling. During the last few days and hours of his life Nabbūs continued reporting. Streaming over Libya Alhurra TV, he shared live video and provided commentary regarding the bombing of the Benghazi power station and fuel tank explosion on 17 March, the firing of missiles on Benghazi from the nearby city of Sultan on 18 March and the death of two young children killed by a missile launched on the morning of 19 March. These images and reports provided an eyewitness account of the events on the ground relevant to UN Security Council Resolution 1973 regarding the situation in Libya. Adopted on 17 March, 2011, it formed the legal basis for military intervention in the Libyan Civil War.

Nabbūs was in all likelihood shot in the head by a sniper soon after exposing the Gaddafi regime’s false reports of a ceasefire declaration. His death was announced by his wife in a video on Libya Alhurra TV.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cyril Washbrook, “Online Journalist Mohammed Nabbous Killed in Libya”, in: *Media Spy*, 20.03.2011, URL: [www.mediaspy.org/report/2011/03/20/online-journalist-mohammed-nabbous-killed-in-libya](http://www.mediaspy.org/report/2011/03/20/online-journalist-mohammed-nabbous-killed-in-libya) (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>23</sup> Ian Shapira, “US Funding Tech Firms That Help Dissidents Evade Government Censors”, in: *Washington Post*, 10.03.2011, URL: [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/09/AR2011030905716.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/09/AR2011030905716.html) (retrieved 13.04.2012).

<sup>24</sup> “Live Show Sat Mar 19 2011”, *Libya Alhurra TV* 19.03.2011, URL: [www.livestream.com/libya17feb/video?clipId=pla\\_9745ec21-c64d-440f-abe7-a412e7db456d?](http://www.livestream.com/libya17feb/video?clipId=pla_9745ec21-c64d-440f-abe7-a412e7db456d?) (retrieved 13.04.2012).

### *III. The Almost Nonviolent Martyr*

The new type of martyrdom does not imply absolutely renouncing violence. The main goal of “nonviolence” is to protect human life and violence can be exercised over property or other goods. Violence can even be used for self-defence against those repressive forces that unhesitatingly deploy it against peaceful demonstrators. The major difference between the “nonviolent martyr” and “violent martyr” is that the latter involves violence as the major ingredient of his action in an intentional manner, whereas the nonviolent martyr does not glorify violence, indeed would like to shun it and possibly renounce it openly and directly. But in the heat of action (public demonstration), sometimes defending one’s life can involve some violence against the forces of repression. At any rate, the distinction between the two categories, pertinent though it is, should not mean that avoiding violence means totally renouncing it, exerting it occasionally for the sake of self-defence. The case of Al-Mahdi Ziwi points to violence against the garrison in Libya, but not directly against the people in it. At the age of 49, Al-Mahdi Ziwi became a revolutionary hero in Benghazi at the beginning of the Libyan revolt against Gaddafi, in February 2011. For many, his killing ignited Benghazi’s protest movement.

Ziwi, who worked for an oil company for 30 years, joined the protest movement against Gaddafi on its first day. He was shocked by the violence of the Gaddafi regime against its own people during the demonstrations. Late at night, three days after the bloody protest, Ziwi loaded cylinders of propane gas into his car. The next day, the corpses of those killed the day before obstructed his approach to the notorious Kātib garrison in the city of Benghazi. He drove his car at high speed toward the gates of the garrison. The car skipped over the first barricade, and the gas cylinders exploded when the vehicle knocked against the second barricade, creating a huge hole in the garrison’s defences. This became a turning point in the battle of Benghazi. A friend of Ziwi’s from work said he was astonished by this courageous act, induced by Ziwi’s indignation at the regime’s killing of Libyans.

The security forces arrested a brother of Ziwi’s intimate friend, beat him and used him as a human shield against the handcrafted grenades protesters were throwing at the garrison. He later said that Ziwi’s act had saved his life since the blowing up of the barricades allowed the people to conquer the garrison later on, freeing him from there.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> “Al-shahid alladhī ḥasama ma‘raka Binghāzī” [The Martyr Who Settled the Battle in Benghazi], in: *Al Jazeera* 01.03.2011, URL: <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/fbc610d7-4550-4d44-bc67-8aa09bd4870a> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

#### *IV. Martyrdom Legitimising a Corporate Structure (AlJazeera)*

The death of one of Al Jazeera's journalists became an occasion to extol not only his but also Al Jazeera's role in the Arab Revolution. On 14 March, in the capital of Qatar, Doha, the special "collective prayer of the dead" (*salāt al-janāza*) was recited over the corpse of the martyr 'Ali Ḥasan al-Jābir, a Qatari national, Al Jazeera's cameraman, killed in an ambush near Benghazi, the first journalist slain in the Libyan conflict. The crew's car came under fire from the rear. He was shot three times in the back and a fourth bullet hit the correspondent near the ear.

He died as a martyr in Libya on Saturday, 12 March, while covering the Libyan Revolution. A large protest was organised later in Benghazi in solidarity with the slain cameraman. Some banners read: "Targeting journalists reveals the criminal regime of the tyrant."<sup>26</sup> The night before the ceremony, al-Jābir's body was sent to Doha airport where many of his colleagues waited with his family. His coffin was covered with the national flag of Qatar and Libya's liberation flag (the old tricolour flag instead of the green flag imposed by Gaddafi). Among the people at the airport were the crown prince of Qatar, al-Shaykh Tamīm b. Ḥamad b. Khalifa al-Thānī, and Al Jazeera's general director, Wāddāḥ Khanfar. In Benghazi, before his departure, thousands of people took part in the mourning ceremony and recited the prayer of the dead over his corpse.

The leader of the World Alliance of Islamic 'ulamā', Doctor Yūsuf al-Qarādāwī, recited the prayer over al-Jābir's corpse wrapped up in a burial garment, while the political elite prayed for the commemoration of the martyr, whose body was to be sent to the Abū Ḥamūr cemetery in the region of Musaymīr. An important avenue in Doha was named for him. Al-Jābir thus became not only Al Jazeera's martyr but also Libya's and Qatar's.

#### *V. Martyrs with Premeditation*

People "martyred" because they demonstrated and were shot at or mortally wounded by the security forces are legion in the Arab Spring. Aḥmad Basyūnī and Muṣṭafā al-Sāwī, two martyrs of the Egyptian Revolution, are immortalised on a highway overpass in Zamālik. Aḥmad Basyūnī, a musician, became a symbol of defiance after he was killed by security forces on 28 January. Born in Cairo in 1978, he was an assistant teacher in the Faculty of Arts, Ḥilwān University. The father of two joined his fellow Egyptians in chanting for the toppling of

<sup>26</sup> "Al Jazeera: Cameraman Ali Hassan Al-Jaber Killed In Libya Ambush", in: *Huffington Post*, 30.10.2011, URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/12/al-jazeera-cameraman-alihassan-al-jaber-killed-libya\\_n\\_834947.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/12/al-jazeera-cameraman-alihassan-al-jaber-killed-libya_n_834947.html) (retrieved 02.05.2012).

Mubarak's regime. As he raised up his hands in a victory sign, he was shot dead by police.<sup>27</sup>

In sharp contrast to unintentional martyrdom (as the case of Aḥmad Basyūnī, who did not expose himself to very high risks but was killed all the same), there are cases of people who know almost for sure that they are exposing themselves to death. This is true in highly repressive regimes like the Syrian. Some even foretell their death and declare their victory over the forces of evil that killed them, the sense of calling exceeding their self-preservation instinct.

In the Syrian town Darāyā, a 26-year-old activist, Ghayāth Maṭar, was detained at the beginning of September in a trap and tortured. Four days later he was dead, having suffered from burns, lashes and bullet wounds. Maṭar was renowned in Darāyā for his peaceful behaviour towards the security forces. He urged colleagues to confront the security forces by presenting them with a rose and a bottle of fresh water. The government told Maṭar's family that he had been shot by "armed gangs", a euphemism that the government uses to describe the opposition.

As the uprising persists and the numbers of deaths and arrests mount, a new trend has emerged among activists. Many of them have started writing wills should they be killed. Ghayāth Maṭar said in his will, read on a new online radio broadcast called One Plus One run by activists:

I announce to you the news of my martyrdom, and I want you to know that now I gained happiness and freedom. Don't think they triumphed over me with the bullet they shot me with. No, I won and my case won every time I went to the street.<sup>28</sup>

Seven ambassadors attended Mr. Maṭar's funeral, including the American ambassador, Robert S. Ford.<sup>29</sup>

## VI. *Vicarious Martyrs*

In Tunisia, after the overthrow of Ben Ali on 14 January, sit-ins, demonstrations and even hunger strikes continued in protest against unemployment and social injustice. In the towns of Al-Qaṣrayn, Tāla and Sīdi Bū Zīd, the jobless youth, or *diplômés chômeurs*, gathered in the city centre in improvised tents displaying photos of the martyrs of the revolution.<sup>30</sup> This reference was essential as they

<sup>27</sup> Susan Yasin, "Egypt Revolution Martyrs... Ahmad Bassouni", in: *@onislam*, 13.02.2011, URL: <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/africa/450994-egypt-revolution-martyrs-ahmed-bassiouni.html> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

<sup>28</sup> Nada Bakri, "In Syrian Town, Uprising Turns Into Grim Standoff", in: *New York Times*, 15.09.2011, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/world/middleeast/in-syrian-town-uprising-turns-into-grim-standoff.html?pagewanted=all> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne", in: *Middle East/North Africa Report* No. 106. International Crisis Group, 28.04.2011,

claimed that the martyrs had died for the cause of the jobless, the poorly paid workers and all those who endure social injustice. Martyrdom was thus claimed in a vicarious manner as belonging to a social group in conflict with the governing elites, insensitive to the plights of the cast-off youth.

Martyrdom, generally speaking, is referred to the “general interest” of the society and claimed to go beyond corporatist interests. But in this case, martyrdom is brandished for the sake of the betterment of the lot of a social category, the *diplômés chômeurs*, who demand the improvement of their situation because they offered martyrs to the society, contributing thus to the overthrow of the authoritarian regime. This, in their view, induces a “debt” of the society towards them, entitling them to ask for social advantages. Martyrs assume a “vicarious function” in this specific case.

## *VII. The Ambiguous Martyr*

Sally Zahrān, a 23-year-old woman, died in Egypt on 28 January, the “black Friday” of repression on Tahrir Square. In subsequent days her face appeared on walls across Cairo and on the sun visors of taxis. In the cafés close to Tahrir Square people said that she had been beaten to death by a police henchman. NASA reportedly put Zahrān’s name on one of its Mars exploration spacecrafts. But when a journalist from the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* investigated Zahrān’s death, she could find no evidence of it and was met with embarrassed silence. The story was enveloped in mystery. On 23 February Sally Zahrān’s mother announced on TV that her daughter had fallen from the balcony of a flat in her hometown Sūhāj, in southern Egypt. In Cairo people believed that Zahrān’s mother had been coerced to make this statement by the new military regime so as to conceal the killing of her daughter. Martyrdom and rumour are thus inextricably interwoven, illustrating the generally febrile and unstable atmosphere in revolutionary societies, which are rather prone to over-interpreting facts in a polarised fashion.

Since martyrdom has become a symbolic stake in the struggle between the government and the opposition, the former manipulates it to discredit the latter and to defame the international organisations, in particular the human rights institutions. The case of Zaynab al-Husnī is symptomatic of the manipulation found mainly in Syria and Iran in cases related to the killing of opponents. The young woman, aged 18, was found beheaded and badly disfigured, most probably by the Syrian security services. She had been arrested by the Syrian forces to force her brother, an opponent to Bashar al-Assad, to put an end to his activities. Her brother was arrested in September. On 13 September the security services

summoned her mother to take charge of the corpse, marked by bruises and gunshots. According to Amnesty International, once at the morgue the mother found her daughter's corpse mutilated and beheaded as well. She was buried and a protest in Homs was organised the next weekend, greeted as "the flower of Syria".<sup>31</sup> Then a coup de théâtre was staged by the Syrian government and on Wednesday, 8 October a young woman called Zaynab al-Husnī was presented on Syrian TV, denying having been kidnapped and killed. Amnesty International had reported her case on 23 September to denounce the execution of the civil population by the Syrian regime. Her parents had identified the mutilated body shown to them by the authorities as being hers. On TV the young girl said during her interview that she had fled from home because her brothers beat her frequently. Her family recognised her on TV and realised their mistake.<sup>32</sup> Probably the Syrian regime manipulated the whole story to discredit Amnesty International by monitoring the whole affair, defaming at the same time the family, whose son had been killed by the security forces.

Martyrdom, killing and the manipulative utilisation of the death cases are intermingled in a way that leaves a great deal of scope for "instrumentalisation" and antagonistic interpretations of death, simulated or real, by different protagonists.

### *VIII. Martyrs of Hunger Strikes and Peaceful Resistance*

Against the repressive regimes killing peaceful demonstrators and arbitrarily arresting those who seem to oppose their denial of civil rights, one can detect the emergence of a new type of martyr, one who is willing to die by opposing the regime peacefully, through a hunger strike or other nonviolent means, gradually endangering their health, bit by bit, allowing the media to continually follow the unfolding story. This type of martyrdom is not formally recognised by the religious authorities but is proclaimed as such by public opinion, forcing some *'ulamā'* to belatedly recognise them. In some cases, the potential death through hunger strike entitles the person to be given the title of martyr. This is the case of the Bahraini 'Abd al-Hādī al-Khawāja, whose condition in prison continued to deteriorate up to 13 April, according to his lawyer, Muḥammad al-Jishī.<sup>33</sup> According to Amnesty International, al-Khawāja and thirteen other prominent op-

<sup>31</sup> Bassem Mroue et al., "Syria: Zainab Al Hosni Believed To Be Killed In Custody", in: *Huffington Post*, 23.09.2011, URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/23/syria-zainab-al-hosni-died-custody\\_n\\_977550.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/23/syria-zainab-al-hosni-died-custody_n_977550.html) (retrieved 02.05.2012).

<sup>32</sup> See "Zeinab Al-Hosni, victime de la répression syrienne, réapparaît à la télévision", in: *Le Monde* 05.10.2011, URL: [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/10/05/zeinab-al-hosni-victime-de-la-repression-syrienne-reapparaît-a-la-télévision\\_1582771\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/10/05/zeinab-al-hosni-victime-de-la-repression-syrienne-reapparaît-a-la-télévision_1582771_3218.html) (retrieved 02.05.2012).

<sup>33</sup> Bahrain Freedom Movement, 13.04.2012, URL: <http://www.vob.org/en/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=1437> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

position activists held with him in Bahrain are prisoners of conscience, held solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly; they have not advocated violence in any way, shape or form.<sup>34</sup>

More and more, those who struggle for human rights by resorting to nonviolent means, be it in prison or in street demonstrations or through new communication channels (internet), once they are killed by or die in the hands of the security forces the public by and large regards them as “martyrs”. Hunger strikers play a new role among them, all the more so as their death is gradual, extending over many days or weeks and can be documented at length by the media, presenting an opportunity to initiate pathos-charged discourses and dramatise the story into a crescendo.

### *VIII. Jihadist Versus Civil Sphere Martyrdom*

In comparison to the Jihadist type of martyrdom, the new sacred deaths resulting from the Arab Spring have many distinct features. The Jihadist martyrdom is violence-prone: it is not only violent but also praises violence as the sole way of dealing with political and cultural problems in a globalised world. The al-Qaida martyr sees no way of resolving the problem of the “world disbelief” other than through waging all-out war with the disbelievers. This martyrdom is also approved, even glorified by the Jihadist ‘ulama’ (like Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdīsī, Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarṭūsī, Abū Muṣ’ab al-Ṣūrī, Abū Qatāda and many others) and they feel that their acts are utterly “religious” in content. Moreover, their action is politicised in the sense of including politics in the realm of religion. Their fourth characteristic is that, from their perspective, the individual does not exist as such: he is entirely subordinated to the religious community, the *umma*. The only way for the individual to assert himself is to act as a would-be martyr, accepting and embracing the need to make the supreme sacrifice for the sake of his version of Islam. Otherwise, individual’s rights are non-existent towards God’s and the former has only duties, no rights where the Godly order that has to be promoted against the heretics and seculars is concerned.

The new type of martyrdom can be qualified as a “civil sphere sacred death”. The notion of civil sphere<sup>35</sup> gives its meaning to this martyrdom, based on two related topics: the notion of the citizen’s dignity (*karāma*) and their right to social justice and solidarity. These characteristics distinguish this martyrdom from the Jihadist version: nonviolent (the refusal to exert violence against the others), promoting the dignity of the citizen as an individual (against the backdrop of the Jihadist anti-individualist credo), and asking for the recognition of the fundamental rights of citizens, who happen to wield rights and have not only duties

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See Jeffrey Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford 2006.

towards the community. This type of martyrdom is “secular” in the sense that the act of putting an end to their lives (the Bū ‘Azīzī model) or being killed by police or security services or government thugs (*balṭajīyya*) is not framed within a religious mould and takes on a social meaning, autonomous from the religious garb. It is only its “sacralisation” by the society that gives a religious sense to it and makes a martyr’s act out of a social protest death. In this respect, the new martyrdom denotes the secularisation of the society and deep-seated tendencies towards democratisation from below. The Jihadist martyrdom enrolls its recruits within the framework of “antisocial movements” (antidemocratic social movements),<sup>36</sup> whereas Arab Spring martyrdom develops within the “civil sphere movements”, where the claim to democracy, the autonomy of the civil sphere and the dignity of the citizen are its major ingredients.

In the case of a prolonged civil war as in Syria, nonviolence can give way to violent action, as is the case with the Free Syrian Army that uses names like *katiba shuhadā’ Talkalakh* (Martyrs’ Brigade Tal Kalakh). This type of martyrdom joins the traditional or revolutionary ones, and is close to the Iranian, Palestinian or other national cases.

## X. Conclusion

The notion of martyrdom has undergone a number of changes over the course of the Modern period: during the imperialist period, jihad was revitalised for the fight against imperialism and martyrdom was associated with it as the sacred death necessary for the defence of Islam against non-Islamic intruders (the notion of defensive jihad).

The Islamist period puts martyrdom at the centre of the ideological agenda. Waging a holy war against the godless imperialists was not possible without the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life in a violent manner: dying, and in so doing, causing the death of the maximum number of the enemies of Islam, defined in very broad terms (all those who were, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, against the project of the Jihadist version of Islam). The association of martyrdom as an informal protest against injustice and oppression was toned down and a violent, militant view of sacred death surfaced that intended to systematically use violence against the enemy, with no regard to the killing and suffering caused by the Jihadists’ action. This was the last outcome of martyrdom in its regressive form within a framework where violence became an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve the global end of jihad.<sup>37</sup>

With the new Arab Revolutions beginning with the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and the ousting of President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, a new period for

<sup>36</sup> See Michel Wieviorka, *Sociétés et terrorisme*, Paris 1988.

<sup>37</sup> This dimension is elaborated further in my works *L’Islamisme et la Mort* and *Inside Jihadism*.

martyrdom begins in which nonviolence towards others (including the enemy) is the rule. Two models of martyrdom are evident: the martyr dies not through killing opponents, but either by intentionally killing themselves in a display of public protest (Bū ‘Azizi’s model), or by being put to death by the regime’s violence (those killed by the security forces or thugs, the so-called *halaqiyā*, of authoritarian regime; in those cases like Syria, Yemen and Libya, where a protracted civil war partially brings nonviolent action to an end and military defence is proclaimed as the only means of ousting the authoritarian rulers, we witness the return of the revolutionary pattern of martyrdom: violent death against the oppressor, loosely connected with Jihad). This type of martyrdom denotes the democratic secularisation of Muslims in Arab and Iranian societies. The new martyr no longer seeks to kill the “enemy” but to discredit him by highlighting his own trampled dignity (*karāma*) and demanding social justice and an open political system.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Les révolutions arabes: révolutions de justice sociale et de liberté”, in *Cultures & Conflicts*, no. 83 (2011).

