2. The Martyr and the Picture

Martyrs are often venerated in images, among other places, in Lebanon. In this chapter, I will introduce the basic background frameworks that are necessary for the discussion of *Nancy*. First, I address the roots, conceptions, constructions, and modes of dissemination of martyrs, in particular in posters. Then, I present an overview of the emergence of images of martyrs in Lebanon.

2.1 Constructing the Martyr

As I will argue throughout this book, the word 'martyr' defies classification and is an ambiguous term used in different contexts. It denotes various meanings that are changing and unfixed. In stating this, I agree with Paul Middleton, who poignantly claimed that the definition of a martyr is 'elusive' and 'doomed to failure'.[25] Therefore, while the etymology of the word is certainly relevant, the main object of my focus is the construction and dissemination of martyrdom. For this reason, I will first offer a very brief outline of the term's roots, identify key issues in current scholarship, and explain conceptions of martyrs and the making of martyrs. Then, I will provide an introduction to the martyr poster.

2.1.1 Concepts and Ideas

Martyrdom is 'an inherently unstable category'[26] that escapes a fixed definition. An overview of the heterogeneous research on the notion and term of martyrdom has been provided by Baldassare Scolari. His discussion encompasses religious, political, cultural, and historical studies, which usually locate the emergence of the martyr within the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Scolari distinguishes two approaches that are adopted by researchers when they deal with the martyr figure. The first is essentialist and attempts to fix the martyr with a rigid definition. The second is constructivist, because it delves into

25 Paul Middleton, 'What Is Martyrdom?', *Mortality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 117.

26 Ibid., 130.

martyr production and asks how and why martyrs are made.[27] Although this book clearly follows the second approach and has no interest in defining the figure of the martyr, I will briefly look at Christian and Islamic terminology as well as Druze and secular martyrdom. These concepts are relevant for the Lebanese context because the country encompasses Christian, Shia, Sunni, Druze, and secular inhabitants, all of whom draw on their own ideas of martyrdom.

The term 'martyr' derives from the Greek word 'martus', meaning 'witness', and is often used to designate a person who attests to the truth by suffering.[28] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the notion as follows: 'Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ, who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity'.[29] Therefore, martyrs are not only aware of their deaths, they have chosen to be blood witnesses who testify that Jesus Christ died and was resurrected.[30] According to Sabrina Bonsen, all Christian martyrs follow the archetype of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and thus serves as the 'foundational myth of Christianity';[31] he testified to being the Son of God and thus became a blood witness through his crucifixion.

While Jesus, like the other early Christian martyrs, died without active participation, the concept of martyrdom was broadened during the time of the Crusades, between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, as Christians were encouraged to fight against their perceived enemies, and some died while doing so. Today, the idea of martyrdom extends further, with Bonsen showing that the Vatican's martyrology, an index of official church martyrs, includes the names of clerics who passed away as a result of diseases or criminal acts, not because they testified to their faith or fought for Christianity.[32] The Christian concept also includes the promise of an afterlife in heaven, where martyrs are compensated for their hardships on earth.

In Arabic, the term 'shahed' means 'witness' in the sense of someone who gives testimony of what they have seen—in particular, at Islamic courts. While the word 'shahed' appears in the Quran, its derivates, the male 'shahid', female 'shahida', and plural 'shuhada', words 'often used in the sense of martyr',[33] are post-Quranic

27 Baldassare Scolari, *State Martyr: Representation and Performativity of Political Violence* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), 90–92.

28 Sabrina Bonsen, *Martyr Cults and Political Identities in Lebanon: 'Victory or Martyrdom' in the Struggle of the Amal Movement* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020), 35.

29 Sandy Habib, 'Dying in the Cause of God: The Semantics of the Christian and Muslim Concepts of *Martyr*', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 34, no. 3 (May 2014): 390.

30 Ibid.

31 Bonsen, *Martyr Cults*, 37.

32 Ibid., 39–40.

33 Etan Kohlberg, 'Shahīd', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: Volume IX*, eds. Clifford Edmund Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 207–08.

and can be found in hadith literature, which are writings thought to be records of the Prophet Mohammad's sayings.[34] A Muslim martyr is not only 'someone who dies in the cause of Allah',[35] as the concept is more diverse. Cook mentions that the hadiths list as martyrs not only those who died for their religious beliefs or on the battlefield; there are other categories of shuhada, including those who passed away while protecting their property and those who died because of disease, fire, accident, building collapse, drowning, or lovesickness.[36] As in Christianity, there is a belief in the afterlife, because Muslim martyrs are rewarded in paradise.

However, to speak of a single Muslim notion of martyrdom misses the divergent concepts among the two main branches of Islam. Their divide traces back to the death of Mohammad, when a discussion about his succession emerged and, in 680 AD, led to the Battle of Kerbala, in today's Iraq. The adversaries in this battle were the caliph Yazid I and Hossein, the grandson of Mohammad. Despite being outnumbered, Hossein and his group decided to fight, until they lost after ten days. Hossein was killed, and Islam split into two branches: Sunnites and Shiites.[37]

After Kerbala, Hossein, like Jesus in Christianity, became the archetypal martyr of the Shia and a role model for a shahid. Hossein embodied 'being steadfast in critical situations based on faith and idealism, and furthermore, a revolutionary call to fight oppression and tyranny. While this could mean the end of one's life, it also means to achieve martyrdom before of God'.[38] Shia Muslims emotionally commemorate Hossein's death each year on his remembrance day, Ashura,[39] and his death is activated time and again in a process that Michael Fischer has termed the Kerbala Paradigm.[40] This describes 'a cosmic event to restore truth against falsehood and justice against oppression and to heal and redeem the community'.[41] The Shiites also honour numerous other martyrs, and martyrdom is a constituting element of this branch of Islam. There is no equivalent for the Sunna, which has no consistent martyrology or archetypal martyr.[42] Therefore, when speaking about martyrdom, it is crucial to think of the Shia and the Sunna separately.

---

34 Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 27.

35 Habib, 'Dying in the Cause', 392.

36 Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 33–35.

37 Ibid., 55–57.

38 Bonsen, *Martyr Cults*, 48.

39 In some countries, such as Iraq, Ashura is also celebrated by Sunni Muslims. However, this is not the case in Lebanon. See L'Orient Today, 'In a First, Dar Al-Fatwa Announces It Will Mark 'Martyrdom of Hussein'—Then Postpones It', *L'Orient Today*, 27 July 2023, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1344687/in-a-first-dar-al-fatwa-announces-it-will-mark-martyrdom-of-hussein-then-postpones-it.html.

40 Bonsen, *Martyr Cults*, 54–55.

41 Manochehr Dorraj, 'Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition: Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture', *The Review of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 495.

42 Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 47–52.

Beyond the need to recognise the differences between Shiite and Sunni concepts of martyrdom, I have identified three problems in the current scholarly discussions that should also be noted. First, researchers usually locate the beginning of martyrdom in Judaism or Christianity, thereby ignoring a global context.[43] All three monotheist religions can be said to be based on Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Iran that dates to the second millennium BCE.

The most important book that tells us about this time is Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, which is translated into English as *The Book of Kings* and was completed in the eleventh century CE. One of its central motives is dying heroically for a cause, often that of Iran.[44] With regard to dying for a higher purpose than life on earth, Asghar Seyed-Ghorab noted: 'The concept of martyrdom in the Iranian context goes back to pre-Islamic times, appearing for example in the ancient story of Siyāvash, retold in various books and notably in Firdowsī's *Shāh nāmih*'.[45] The betrayal and killing of one one of the *Shahnameh's* protagonists, Siayavash, resulted in, as Manochehr Dorraj writes, a 'cult of mourning Siyavash as a divine martyred saint'.[46] This myth, as several researchers have suggested, bears parallels to Hossein, who, as mentioned, is also emotionally remembered, and suffered a similar fate to Siyavash. While a plant grew from his blood, tulips grew from Hossein's blood.[47] Apparently, ideas of monotheistic martyrdom are influenced by the stories told in this epic.

Therefore, conceptions of martyrdom started not with Judaism and Christianity, but earlier in ancient Iran. Since the Persian empire extended all the way to Europe, I suggest that we need to allow for the ways that ancient Iranian notions of meaningful and sacrificial death influenced the Jewish and Christian notions of martyrdom. This means, among other things, that one should not view these as constituting the source of thinking about martyrdom. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this book to delve into this proposal further, but I would like to point to the eurocentrism with which the emergence of the concept of martyrdom is still discussed and the need to think in globally broader frameworks beyond Europe.

My second caveat regarding the existing sources relates to the literature on Lebanon. When thinking of the martyr in a Lebanese context, it is necessary to mention that there is a secular concept of the notion, as discussed by Bonsen. Non-religious martyrs do not focus on the afterlife or dying for God but on the

43 Scolari, *State Martyr*, 90–130. The cited sources for Christian martyrdom also often include martyrs of Judaism, such as the Maccabees or Eleazar, and of Greco-Roman mythologies, such as the death of Socrates, but they never go back further in time or look to another cultural context.

44 Dorraj, 'Symbolic and Utilitarian', 491–93.

45 Asghar Seyed-Ghorab, 'Martyrdom as Piety: Mysticism and National Identity in Iran-Iraq War Poetry', *Der Islam: Journal of the History and Culture of the Middle East* 87, nos. 1–2 (2012): 249.

46 Dorraj, 'Symbolic and Utilitarian', 492.

47 For the figure of Siyavash as a predecessor of Hossein, see for example: ibid.; Seyed-Ghorab, 'Martyrdom'; Touraj Darayee and Soodabeh Malekzadeh, 'The Performance of Pain and Remembrance in Late Ancient Iran', *The Silk Road* 12 (2014).

belief that one's own death can contribute to a better life for one's community in the here and now.[48] What Bonsen does not address are Druze ideas about what happens after a body dies physically.[49]

The Druze split from Islam in the eleventh century and believe that there are a finite number of souls on Earth. When a body dies, the soul leaves it and reincarnates itself in another, new-born Druze body. There are many reports of Druze children who remember their past lives, recounting them to their parents when very young. Memories are more frequent when the death was violent. Therefore, Druze relatives of martyrs often look for the souls of their deceased loved ones among the living.[50]

My third concern regarding the state of research is the usage of the word shahid. Researchers usually speak of martyrs when talking about Christian deaths and of shuhada when talking about Muslim deaths. But shahid is an Arabic word and not a solely Islamic term. As Laleh Khalili has argued in a study that deals with narratives of heroism and martyrdom regarding Palestinians who are living in camps in Lebanon, religion is irrelevant to the use of the term shahid among Palestinians, some of whom are Christian.[51] Also, Lebanese Christian martyrs are labelled shuhada. Therefore, the term shahid does not provide us with any information about the religion of the deceased.[52] This is why I will use martyr and shahid interchangeably in this book.

As mentioned above, it is not only people who die in battles or for their beliefs who are termed martyrs, but also those who pass away due to other causes, such as disease. In general, there are two approaches to understanding martyrdom, a narrow and a broad one.

Those following the narrow approach often suggest that martyrs consciously died for a cause. For example, Zeina Maasri states that the martyr, as

> an age-old term for the one who is killed for his/her beliefs, has had its share of sanctification in the history of struggles; the most noble of all heroes is thought to be the person who dies fighting in defence of these beliefs, be they religious, national or ideological.[53]

48 Bonsen, *Martyr Cults*, 55–57.

49 As we will see later in this book, *Nancy* also fails to address the notion of Druze martyrdom.

50 See Rabah Halabi and Gabriel Horenzyck, 'Reincarnation Beliefs Among Israeli Druze and the Construction of a Hard Primordial Identity', *Death Studies* 44, no. 6 (2020): 347–49; Gebhard Fartacek (ed.), *Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

51 Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 140.

52 Shahid is also the Persian and Hindi word for martyr.

53 Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 87.

Maasri thus conceptualises the martyr as a brave hero who fought for a certain cause, which makes us think primarily of soldiers or warriors. When martyrs are portrayed as such, as Friederike Pannewick writes, they usually had a choice whether to commit the deeds that led to their deaths.[54] Even though they were not certain about being killed, these people knew that their actions might result in their deaths.

This narrow understanding of martyrdom stands in opposition to the second approach, which consists of a broader concept. As Khalili has shown, this also encompasses civilians, often women and children, who died without having chosen to do so and often without being personally targeted. These 'unintentional martyrs'[55] are usually presented not as heroes but as passive victims, whose lives have been cruelly and unjustly taken by the enemy.[56]

Both types—active heroes and passive victims—are created. For this to happen, martyrs need three 'ingredients'. First, there needs to be a violent death, preferably but not necessarily due to a perceived enemy. Second, as Straub writes, someone needs to elevate this death to the level of martyrdom. Referring to the cultural theorist Aleida Assmann, Straub claims that the martyr, as a witness, needs a further witness who not only confirms the death but also distributes it within the framework of a certain narrative.[57] This narrative does not need to correspond to the actual events that led to the death, and in some cases, as Middleton argues, the intentions of the martyrs are rendered secondary. The third ingredient is an audience that is willing to consume the disseminated narrative of the death.[58] In short, martyrdom needs to be mediated to and witnessed by others to become meaningful.

2.1.2 Dissemination in Posters

There are different ways to spread the narrative of martyrdom. For example, transmission can take place through literature, songs, memorials, murals, postcards, graffiti, or other means. In this book, my main interest is the poster as a communicator of a martyrdom.

Posters are a lightweight medium, are made of cheap material, and usually include images and text. They are spread to communicate a message to a certain audience in a clear and simple way.[59] Of course, it cannot be ascertained if the in-

54 Friederike Pannewick, *Opfer, Tod und Liebe: Visionen des Martyriums in der arabischen Literatur* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 35.

55 Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs*, 209.

56 Ibid., 141–42.

57 Straub, *Das Selbstmordattentat*, 41–42.

58 Middleton, 'What Is a Martyr', 128.

59 Elizabeth Guffey, *Posters: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 30–33; James Aulich, *War Posters: Weapons of Mass Communication* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 15.

tended message is actually received, as the meaning of a poster is polysemic and thus differs depending on the audience.[60] In this way, posters can, as Maasri has noted, 'fail to address one person yet communicate effectively with another'.[61]

Posters are reproduced and put up in multiples and are therefore able to be seen repeatedly by anyone passing by.[62] This is why they reach a broader audience than do visuals exhibited in museums or galleries or printed in newspapers, for instance. At the same time, posters are fleeting, short-lived, and ephemeral. Elizabeth E. Guffey understands posters as an anthropomorph in the sense of the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. In other words, posters have a life of their own: they are born when they are printed, they live when they are circulated, and they die when they are taken down, are washed away by rain, or are covered by yet other posters. Some posters also have afterlives, mostly in museums and archives, but also in curatorial and artistic practices.[63]

Martyr posters are a type of political poster. This function, where the poster is used as a political tool, has existed since the French Revolution, with later notable usage during the two World Wars, when posters were the primary medium through which governments communicated with their citizens to make announcements or to issue calls for mobilisation.[64] Political posters also elicited emotions. For example, after Germany was pushed back from French territories in 1944, many Nazi posters were torn down and burnt.[65] The medium flourished again during anti-imperialist protest actions, such as those against the Vietnam War during the 1960s.[66] According to Maasri, posters that emerged in this transnational movement also reached Lebanon and, as we will see below, became the 'medium par excellence' in the country in the 1970s.[67]

---

60 Henri Myrttinen, 'Death Becomes Him: The Hypervisibility of Martyrdom and Invisibility of the Wounded in the Iconography of Lebanese Militarised Masculinities', in *Making War on Bodies: Militarisation, Aesthetics and Embodiment in International Politics*, ed. Catherine Baker (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 138.

61 Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 6.

62 Of course, posters can also be put up indoors; however, their function there differs. This book is interested only in outdoor posters.

63 Guffey, *Posters*, 34–37.

64 Christina Holtz-Bacha and Bengt Johansson, 'Posters: From Announcements to Campaign Instruments', in *Election Posters Around the Globe: Political Campaigning in the Public Space*, eds. Christina Holtz-Bacha and Bengt Johansson (Cham: Springer, 2017), 3–5; Aulich, *War Posters*, 15–18.

65 Guffey, *Posters*, 96–97.

66 Carmen Brosig, "Remember Wounded Knee'. Strategische Re-Appropriationen stereotyper Repräsentationen Amerikanischer Ureinwohner im politischen Poster', in *Zeitlichkeit und Materialität: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Theorien und Phänomene der Präsenz*, eds. Juliane Engel, Mareike Gebhardt, and Kay Kirchmann (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 334.

67 Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Golden Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 179.

Today, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Bengt Johansson argue, the political poster remains mainly in the form of election posters.[68] Guffey, whose perspective is more global since it looks beyond Europe and North America, points to the fact that posters still have other political roles, which she illustrates, among other examples, with martyr posters in Palestine, which are a means of communicating deaths for a political cause. These images encompass a photograph juxtaposed with slogans and symbols and narrate an absence through the presence of the face of the deceased.[69] It could be argued, too, that martyrs and their posters are usually created in circumstances where a collective needs to make sense of recurring deaths. This is because martyr images frame these deaths as having happened for a cause and therefore give meaning to them.[70]

Finally, I would like to add that none of the aforementioned publications considers the expansion of the medium of the poster. Today, posters, including those of martyrs, exist not only on offline walls but also in online spaces—in particular, on Instagram. Political agents, like street artists, use this platform to 'showcase the issues, events, people, and places [they] care about', as Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge write.[71] These Instagram posts usually encompass a picture and textual descriptions, as we will see with specific examples throughout the book.

There are differences, however. Whereas before the advent of Instagram, one had to enter the street to view posters, this can now be done at home on our phones. Strolling turned into scrolling.[72] Unlike the situation of offline posters, users can interact with the posts by leaving comments, which can support or contradict the content. Of course, interaction with the poster was also possible before, mainly by destroying it, which is not easily done with Instagram posts unless someone reports a page and requests that it be blocked. As a result, the digital posters are more durable and long-lasting than physical images, especially since rain and other weather conditions are no longer a threat.

68 Holtz-Bacha and Johansson, 'Posters', 1–5.

69 Guffey, *Posters*, 242–51.

70 Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs*, 149.

71 Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge, *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 54.

72 Ibid., 55.

2.1.3 The Poster-Based Transmission of the Martyr as a Figure That Escapes Definition

The figure of the martyr is difficult to grasp. In today's Lebanon, there are five main ideas of martyrdom. Shia and Christian narratives are closely linked to each other, as each includes an archetypal shahid (Hossein or Jesus) who, despite having a choice, decided to die at the hands of evil in a state of injustice. The Sunnis also imagine an afterlife for the shahid, but do not centralise martyrdom. The Druze, on the other hand, believe in the continuation of the soul on Earth, while in the secular concept of martyrdom, the realm of the afterlife is absent.

In general, there are two concepts of martyrdom that, as we will see throughout the book, function independently from religion. The narrow concept only considers those who have heroically chosen death as martyrs, while the broader concept also considers passive victims as shuhada. Importantly, martyrs are always constructed, and their stories need to be transmitted to an audience. This can be done via martyr posters, which are political posters that often emerge in contexts that have a need to make sense of many deaths. The medium in general is a mode of communication that is put up in multiples on the streets and online and is therefore able to reach a broad audience. Martyr posters are also very present on the walls in Lebanon, the country to which I will turn now.

2.2 The Dead Are on the Walls: Re-Tracing Images of Martyrs in Lebanon

Images of the dead, in particular martyrs, are widely visible in Lebanon. I will here introduce the roots of the image of the martyr in that country and begin with a wider historical view to provide background information that is connected to the emergence of the country as well as to its martyrs. In 1920, after the defeat and partition of the Ottoman Empire (of which Lebanon was a part from 1516 until 1918) in WW1, Great Britain and France divided some of the Ottoman Empire's former territories. This partition was previously decided in the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. Lebanon became a part of the French mandate. During WW2, the pro-Vichy administration in Lebanon was overthrown by Free French and British troops, and due to fears that Lebanon would fall under British control, France agreed to grant Lebanon independence, which it gained in 1943.[73]

73 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 75–80, 104–08. For the Sykes-Picot agreement, see also Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions* (London et al.: I.B. Tauris, 2024 [1988]), 20–21.