

Global Martyr Practices and Discourses

Entanglements between East and West

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The so-called “Arab Spring” started with an act of martyrdom that was unexpected to a world public that, for the most part, had grown accustomed to equating “martyrdom” in the context of the Islamic world with suicide bombings. The street vendor Muḥammad Bū ‘Azīzī, who set himself on fire as an act of protest, triggered the first demonstrations that ultimately led to the resignation of the Tunisian president. His act was highly acknowledged in Europe where the remembrance of Jan Palach was immediately aroused and is at least partly responsible for the labelling of the events as “spring” (which is somehow ambiguous, since Palach’s death marked the end of the Prague Spring).¹ This appreciation is indicated by the wide media coverage as well as the bestowal of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament in 2011 to Bū ‘Azīzī, posthumously, along with four activists of the Arab uprisings.

The discourse on martyrdom which accompanies the Arab uprisings – not only in the region but also in the West – provides insights into the mechanisms of “martyr-making” and the significance martyrs may gain not only for their respective societies and movements but on a global scale. The global martyr discourse which emerged is revealing with regard to the relation between “East and West,” especially when comparing the current discourse with that of another martyr-type, this time one explicitly marked as “Islamic:” the suicide bomber. This article will scrutinise the circulation and transformation of these two extreme martyrdom practices – self-immolation and suicide bombing – and the discourse about them as well as about the non-violent martyrs of the Iranian (2009) and Arab (2010/2011) uprisings. The focus lies in determining how the relation of religion and the secular can be described in both of the practices and their evolving discourses. There is a tendency, in scientific as well as in popular discourse, to associate self-immolators and non-violent martyrs with the secular while suicide bombers are connected to religion (i.e. Islam). This article will not only try to deconstruct this assumption, but, furthermore, show that martyr figures tend to question the distinction of the secular and the religious. While the martyrs blur the lines, the emerging discourse often aims for a re-arrangement of the order which upholds the central conceptions of religion and the secular.

¹ In the Arab public and media the term “Arab revolutions” is mostly used, the term “Arab Spring” was albeit taken over from Western media. For the difficulties of both terms, which include an assessment of the events, see Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening. Islam and the New Middle East*, London 2012, 2-4.

I. "Global" Martyr Practices and "Local" Martyr Discourses

One aspect shared by the two extreme martyr practices of self-immolation and suicide bombing is that they both have found global diffusion. The "success" of these practices in certain historical situations paved the way for their adoption in other contexts and places. This raises the question of what happens when a practice emerging in a specific socio-political and cultural context is taken up elsewhere and how it is adapted to different local and temporal circumstances.

1. Self-immolation

The already-mentioned death of Jan Palach is an example for a "proliferation" of martyr practices. Ritual self-immolation has been practiced for many centuries in some strands of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, and the practice is also known from the Old Believers during the Great Schism of the Russian Church, when entire villages burned themselves to death in an act considered to be a baptism by fire. In this case, there was already a notion of public protest involved as the Old Believers reacted with the self-immolations to death threats made by the authorities.² The most famous incidents of self-immolation in modern times occurred during the Vietnam War in the 1960s when Buddhist monks set themselves on fire to protest against discrimination of Buddhists by the Roman Catholic administration in South Vietnam. Due to this extreme form of protest their cause was noticed on a global level, especially after the death of the monk Thich Quang Duc in 1963. The monk's death was captured in photographs by an American journalist whose record of the event circulated in the world's media. This incident of martyrdom was well-planned and took place at a highly visible location at a busy Saigon intersection. Thich Quang Duc was accompanied by other monks who immediately commented on his death using terms of martyrdom. Using a microphone, one of the monks shouted in Vietnamese and English: "A Buddhist priest burns himself to death. A Buddhist priest becomes a martyr."³ The act, of which American journalists were informed of in advance, was designed to appeal to the Western public, and politicians in particular, and was highly effective in this respect. As a statement of U.S. Senator Frank Church, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, shows, it even raised the remembrance of the martyrs of the Christian tradition: "such grisly scenes have not been witnessed since the Christian martyrs marched hand-in-hand into the Roman arenas."⁴ The self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc was later considered to be a turning point in the Buddhist crisis and a critical point

² Cf. Robert O. Crummey, "Belief and Practice in Russia", in: *Religion and the Early Modern State: Views from China, Russia and the West*, ed. by James D. Tracy et al., Cambridge 2004, 73.

³ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation*, Oxford 2003, 269.

⁴ Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November. America in Vietnam 1963*, New York 1987, 145.

in the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime.⁵ The great success of this action was partly due to the fact that self-immolation was something new to the Western public. Self-immolations had repeatedly taken place in Vietnam since the 1920s, but no such case has become known in the United States or Europe.⁶

In the following years six American citizens burned themselves in acts of protest against the Vietnam War. The self-immolations of these peace activists were simultaneously a denunciation of the cruel military strategies of the United States which included the use of Napalm.⁷ Three of the self-immolators were active members of Christian groups or movements and as such transferred the martyr technique of self-immolation from a Buddhist setting to a Christian one. Among them was 82-year-old Alice Herz, who referred to the self-immolations of the Buddhists monks in her final message. Being a German with Jewish heritage, she was active in Christian-socialists circles, joined the Quakers after immigrating to America⁸ and became a member of the Unitarian Church in the last years of her life.⁹ Her death is described by fellow Christian-socialist authors and pacifists as martyrdom, a self-sacrifice for the sake of peace and international understanding.¹⁰ Norman Morrison, also a Quaker,¹¹ and Roger Allan LaPorte, a member of the Catholic Worker Movement, also burned themselves.¹² The latter asked for his reasons before his death answered: "I'm a Catholic Worker. I'm against war, all wars. I did this as a religious action."¹³ Just as in the case of Thich Quang Duc, these incidents show how difficult it is to separate religion from politics since political aims and convictions may at the same time be religiously motivated. These martyrs stood at the beginning of the growing anti-war movement in the United States, but their actions obviously failed to have a greater impact since media coverage was scarce due to a political climate that considered such acts unpatriotic. One of Alice Herz's friends complained in a letter: "[...] Alice Herz, whose life was given for the cause of PEACE, was given hardly any space

⁵ Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin. Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, Oxford 2006, 149.

⁶ Hammer, *A Death in November*, 146.

⁷ This is explicitly stated in the title of a biography of one of the activists: "Get off your apathy! a biography of Florence Beaumont, who burned herself instead of others! – like phony politicians!" Thomas Michael Dunphy, Hollywood 1968.

⁸ Shingo Shibata, "The life and thought of Alice Herz – for united action between Marxists and Christians", in: *Phoenix. Letters and Documents of Alice Herz. The Thought and Practice of a Modern-day Martyr*, ed. by Shingo Shibata, Amsterdam 1976, 163.

⁹ Hayes B. Jacobs, "The martyrdom of Alice Herz", in: *Phoenix. Letters and Documents of Alice Herz*, 155.

¹⁰ Cf. Shibata, *Phoenix. Letters and Documents of Alice Herz*.

¹¹ "The Pacifists", in: *Time Magazine*, November 12, 1965. URL: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,834576,00.html> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

¹² A third, George Winne, student of history, had apparently no religious affiliation. The same applies for Florence Beaumont, a mother of two, who burned herself in 1967.

¹³ Barbara Tischler, "The Antiwar Movement", in: *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. by Marilyn B. Young et al., Oxford 2002, 386.

at all [in newspapers] and no TV coverage, so that comparatively few people will know of her sacrifice.”¹⁴

Jan Palach, the Czechoslovakian student who burned himself in 1969 to protest against the violent crushing of the Prague Spring, was also aware of the example set by the Vietnamese monks¹⁵ and told one of the physicians who treated him in the days before his death, “In Vietnam it helped.”¹⁶ Just as in the case of Bū ‘Azīzī, Palach’s act triggered a number of copycat incidents and attempts – even outside Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in places like Austria and Argentina –¹⁷ but the political motivations were not always as clear as they were for Palach.¹⁸ In 2003, there was a new series of self-immolations in the Czech Republic, and the first person to self-immolate made an explicit reference to Palach in his farewell letter.¹⁹

In Asia as well as other parts of the world, self-immolations are still regarded as a means of extreme public protest. This occurs mainly in the context of the Tibetan struggle and endeavours aiming at the foundation of an independent state of Telangana in India,²⁰ but it can also be observed in Europe and America. From the 1960s to the 2000s, a number of self-immolations occurred for a variety of reasons, including protest against the treatment of homosexuals by the Catholic Church (Alfredo Ormando on January 13, 1998 in Italy) and protest against the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Mark David Ritscher on November 3, 2006 in Chicago). Self-immolations occurred as well in the Middle East prior to 2010: Humā Dārābī protested with her death against the oppression of women by the Iranian regime on February 21, 1994 in Tehran. That time the transgression of the religious verdict against suicide was part of the protest against how the Iranian regime imposed Islamic rules on women.²¹ A number of activists of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a leftist group fighting for an independent Kurdistan, set fire to themselves in Turkey as well as in different places in Europe from the 1980s to the 2000s. The “successful” death of Muḥammad Bū ‘Azīzī has seemed to trigger a new wave of self-immolation not only in the Arab coun-

¹⁴ Mary Phillips to Shingo Shibata on 28 March 1965, in: *Phoenix. Letters and Documents of Alice Herz*, 8.

¹⁵ His biographer Jiri Lederer found a number of articles about the self-immolations of the Vietnamese monks in Palach’s collection of cuttings from newspapers, Jiri Lederer, *Jan Palach. Ein biographischer Bericht*, Zürich 1982, 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷ Levy, *Rowboat to Prague*, New York 1972, 484.

¹⁸ Lederer, *Jan Palach*, 151-157.

¹⁹ Rob Cameron, „Seventh self-immolation in less than two months?“, in: *Radio Prague*, 29.04.2003. URL: <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffis/seventh-self-immolation-in-less-than-two-months> (retrieved 25.04.2012).

²⁰ A. R., “Frighteningly common. Self-immolation in India”, *The Economist* 26 March 2012, URL: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/03/self-immolation-india> (retrieved 29.04.2012).

²¹ For her biography see Parvin Darabi and Romin P. Thomson, *Rage against the veil: the courageous life and death of an Islamic dissident*, New York 1999.

tries but on a global level:²² In March 2012 there have been reports of a series of more than 26 self-burnings of Tibetans, and in Europe two Italians, including one of Moroccan-descent;²³ and a Greek²⁴ set themselves on fire in the context of the debt crisis. All three could be rescued. Not all of them have been acknowledged by a community as martyrs, as this necessitates the recognition of a common cause by a significant number of people, and the cases in Europe during the debt crisis are especially ambiguous since these incidents are difficult to differentiate from “ordinary” suicide attempts. However, those who choose this highly visible and spectacular form of suicide often combine it with a message of protest.

As seen, self-immolations take place in different places in diverse cultural and religious settings. Though the act itself may not be affected let alone triggered by religious convictions on the side of its protagonists, as it seems to be the case with both Palach and Bū ‘Azīzī, religion plays a role in the emerging discourse concerning the acts. In both cases martyrdom was clearly acknowledged in the respective societies by the broader public and the (post-revolutionary) political authorities: A square was named after Jan Palach in 1990 as well as several streets not only in the Czech Republic but throughout Europe, the Tunisian post-revolutionary government issued a stamp showing a portrait of Bū ‘Azīzī,²⁵ and there is a significant number of pop and other cultural references in songs, videos and paintings to both men. A common characteristic of both cases is the blending of religious and national motives. In his eulogy at the funeral of Jan Palach the rector of the Charles University said: “Jan Palach brought to the altar of his home the highest possible sacrifice.”²⁶ But from the religious point of view, from both the Christian and the Islamic perspectives, the difficult question of how to differentiate martyrdom from suicide requires an answer. Religious actors and authorities deal with the question how to react to an act that because of its aims and – in the case of Bū ‘Azīzī – its results is highly appreciable but which also violates certain religious tenets.

²² For self-immolations during the Arab uprisings see the contribution of Farhad Khosrokhavar in this volume. Cf. also the (incomplete) list of political self-immolations in Wikipedia which shows a rise after 2010, URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_self-immolations (retrieved 14.05.2012).

²³ Palash R. Gosh, “Two Men in Italy Commit Self-Immolation to Protest Financial Pressures,” in: *International Business Times*, 30.03.2012, URL: <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/321951/20120330/italy-economic-crisis-self-immolation-austerity.htm> (retrieved 01.06.2012).

²⁴ Teo Kermeliotis, “Austerity drives up suicide rate in debt-ridden Greece,” in: *CNN World*, 6. April 2012, URL http://articles.cnn.com/2012-04-06/world/world_europe_greece-austerity-suicide_1_pharmacist-dimitris-christoulas-shot-suicide-note-anti-austerity?_s=PM:EUROPE (retrieved 01.06.2012).

²⁵ Cf. *International Stamp News*, 16.04.2011, URL: http://www.stampnews.com/stamps/stamps_2011/stamp_1302943586_624352.html (retrieved 04.05.2012).

²⁶ Levy, *Rowboat to Prague*, 481.

In the case of Jan Palach, there have been symbolic as well as rhetorical gestures, which associated his act with Christian martyrs of the past, both Protestant and Catholic. His body was laid out in the Karolinum next to a statue of Jan Hus, the Czech Catholic Church reformer and national hero who was burned at the stake in 1415.²⁷ According to one of the physicians who treated him in the days before his death, Palach saw himself as “another Jan Hus, as the second Czech in our history to burn for truth.”²⁸ The Czech Cardinal Josef Beran said in a widely acknowledged speech on Radio Vatican:

To kill oneself is not human and no one shall follow them in doing it. However, all people shall rather keep in view the great ideal that these people laid their young lives for. This ideal is good and noble in its core – to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of all. [...] This shining ideal is like a banner that is handed over.²⁹

Pope Paul VI clarified as well that the form of his protest could not be endorsed, but “we can uphold the values that put self-sacrifice and love of others to the supreme test.”³⁰ In a Radio Vatican broadcast two days earlier on January 24, Palach and the Czechoslovak youths who had attempted burning themselves after him were compared to the early Christian martyrs.³¹ In a desire to express support for the Czechoslovakian resistance against their common foe of communism, the Vatican rendered affirmation on a rhetorical level although the act itself goes against religious rulings. The appreciation of a martyr’s cause, however, is not the same as offering substantial support for it, since the Vatican’s Ostpolitik was in fact rather reserved.³² This epitomises one of the ambiguities of martyr commemoration: The martyrs may sometimes be given honour in order to distract from the fact that the issue itself is not addressed.³³

²⁷ Cf. Levy, *Rowboat to Prague*, 478. Jan Palach himself entertained great admiration for Jan Hus and Jan Žižka, the general and follower of Jan Hus, as his father did as well. As it seems this admiration has been more for nationalist as for religious reasons, cf. Lederer, *Jan Palach*, 8, 12, 81 f.

²⁸ Cf. Levy, *Rowboat to Prague*, 478.

²⁹ “40th anniversary of Jan Palach’s self-immolation for freedom”, Press Office of the Czech Bishops’ Conference, 15 January 2009, URL: <http://tisk.cirkev.cz/en/czech-republic/40th-anniversary-of-jan-palach-s-self-immolation-for-freedom/> (retrieved 18.05.2012).

³⁰ Cf. Levy, *Rowboat to Prague*, 484.

³¹ Vatican sources had confirmed that the broadcast “had been directed by the pope’s Secretary of State”, Vojtech Mastny, *Czechoslovakia: Crisis in World Communism*, New York 1972, 192.

³² Walter M. Iber, “Die Ostpolitik des Vatikan und der ‘Prager Frühling’”, in: *Prager Frühling. Das internationale Krisenjahr 1968*, ed. by Stefan Karner et al., Cologne 2008, 515-530.

³³ An example for this is the commemoration of a young Palestinian martyr of the Second Intifada, Muḥammad al-Durra, in a number of Arab countries (with the naming of streets, stamps etc.) all of which keep low profile in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Cf. Silvia Horsch, “Muhammad al-Durrah – die Generation der zweiten Intifada“, in: *Märtyrer-Porträts. Von Opfertod, Blutzeugen und Heiligen Kriegerern*, ed. by Sigrid Weigel, Munich 2007, 294-298.

In the case of Bū ‘Azīzī, the Islamic institutions tried as well to contain the “Werther Effect” as the series of copycat incidents was frequently described. The most important Sunni institution, Al-Azhar-University, issued a fatwa in January 2011 saying that “suicide violates Islam even when it is carried out as a social or political protest.”³⁴ However, some ‘*ulamā*’ (Islamic scholars), among them the well-known Qatar-based Egyptian scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, found mitigating circumstances. In a statement in his TV talk show *Al-sharī‘a wa-l ḥayāt*, he compared Bū ‘Azīzī to a companion of the prophet who is known for his piety and strong sense of justice: “It’s like our master Abū Ḍarr said, ‘I wonder why someone who finds no food in his home does not go out and draw his sword [in rebellion] against the people.’”³⁵ This comparison is as reserved as the one of Jan Palach to the early Christian martyrs, and it only makes apparent the need for religious figures to respond to feelings of the people. It also shows the difficulties of condemning an act which testifies to an absolute readiness to sacrifice for the good of others – at least it is perceived as such. Al-Qaraḍāwī even considered God’s forgiveness possible because of the outcome of this act: He called on Muslims “to ask God to forgive this youth for he is the reason for the good in awakening this *umma* [community of believers as well as nation] and in the ignition of this revolution”.³⁶ But al-Qaraḍāwī’s stance is an exception, and the ‘*ulamā*’ were largely univocal in the clear condemnation of such an act. Bū ‘Azīzī and those who followed him are nevertheless hailed as heroes and regarded as *shuḥadā’* (martyrs) by large parts of the population. His family, however, do not see him in this light and, in fact insisted that it was not deliberate death, but an accident.³⁷ Even this, however, could make him a “martyr of the next world”, *shahīd al-ākhirā*: according to a prophetic hadith, which counts the victims of fire, as well as of falling debris, drowning and certain diseases as martyrs.³⁸

The number of copycat incidents in the Arabic world declined, however, and there have been no further incidents of self-immolation reported after February 2012. A number of elements account for this, including the missing effect of surprise and the changing nature of protest,³⁹ but it seems plausible that the public debate on the religious permissibility of such an act and the by and large ex-

³⁴ Robert F. Worth, “How a single Match Can Ignite a Revolution”, in: *The New York Times*, 21.01.2011, URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/weekinreview/23worth.html?_r=1&src=twrhp (retrieved 29.04.2012).

³⁵ For a transcript of the program see: *Al-sharī‘a wa-l ḥayāt: jibād al-zulm wa wasā’iluhu* [Shari’a and live: Jihad against injustice and its means] (16.01.2011), URL: <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/845aaae4-f6a3-480e-83f9-a81beefd47> (retrieved 14.05.2012)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ulrike Putz, „Was vor Mohammeds Martyrium geschah“, *Spiegel online* 23.01.2011, URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,740901,00.html> (retrieved 14.05. 2012).

³⁸ For the difference between martyrs of this and next world and martyrs of the next world see Kohlberg, Art. “Shahīd”, *Encyclopedia of Islam*², Vol. IX, Leiden 1997, 203-207.

³⁹ As argues Farhad Khosrokhavar in this volume.

PLICIT opinion of Muslim scholars to the effect that self-immolation is forbidden have had an impact as well.⁴⁰

2. Suicide bombing

If this is true, it poses the question of whether the acceptance of another form of suicide – suicide bombing – contributed in paving the way for the widespread public acknowledgement of self-immolation. Interestingly, Shaykh al-Qaradāwī, who found mitigating circumstances for Bū ‘Azīzī, also allows an exception for suicide bombings. *‘Amaliyāt istishbādiyya*, martyrdom operations as they are called, are vindicated by him and others in the case of the Palestinians as the only option given the military superiority of the Israeli army. According to this strategic argument, there is a justification both the killing of the self and the killing of non-combatants, prohibited in the sharia. Both self-immolation and suicide bombing are in stark conflict with the religious verdict against suicide. The vindication of the latter in terms of military strategy as part of an incumbent jihad cannot conceal the fact, that the protagonists of suicide bombings are not killed by their enemies – as is the case with the classical *shahīd al-ma‘raka*, martyr on the battlefield⁴¹ – but kill themselves, although they would not consider this act to be suicide. The affirmation offered for this form of taking one’s own life by a number of acknowledged scholars, whom do not rank among the radicals who also affirm the suicide bombings of al-Qaida and similar groups, may well have blurred the Islamic verdict against suicide in other contexts as it implies that suicide *for a cause* may be acceptable.

Suicide bombing is another practice of martyrdom that can be found around the world.⁴² As Joseph Croituro has shown, it spread in the 20th century first from the Japanese Kamikaze to secular and later to religiously oriented armed groups in Palestine and Lebanon, to Sri Lanka, where the LTTE first used the explosive belt, and to Turkey as well as other places.⁴³ The political circumstances

⁴⁰ E.g. Moroccan students asked about the self-immolation of two fellow country men, emphasised the religious verdict against suicide and considered the hailing of self-immolators as martyrs by the society as wrong. Cf. Laura Pannasch, „Selbstverbrennung als Heldentat?“ in: *Zenith online*, 01.02.2012, URL: <http://www.zenithonline.de/deutsch/gesellschaft/artikel/selbstverbrennung-als-heldentat-002533/> (retrieved 19.04.2012).

⁴¹ For this figure cf. Silvia Horsch, *Tod im Kampf. Figurationen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften*, Würzburg 2011.

⁴² Suicide bombings and suicide attacks have to be differentiated from one another. The suicide bomber (using an explosive belt, a car carrying explosives or similar devices) causes his or her own death, therefore those who cause the crash of an airplane are considered as suicide bombers, even though they don’t use explosives. Suicide attackers undertake attacks which result with almost certainty in themselves being killed, however by others and not by themselves.

⁴³ Cf. Joseph Croituro, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe. Die historischen Wurzeln des Selbstmordattentates*, Wien 2003, for the international dissemination of suicide attacks see 209-224.

and the discursive background in the course of this spreading have been very different: The Japanese emperor cult backed by strands of both Shintoism and Buddhism was vital for the Kamikaze pilots.⁴⁴ Communist rhetoric accompanied the first suicide attacks of leftist groups in Palestine, the first being the attack of the Japanese Red Army Faction in Lod in 1972, followed in 1974 by attacks of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which they claim was the first suicide bombing,⁴⁵ and of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); as well as attacks of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in Lebanon. Islamist rhetoric began to accompany suicide bombings first with Hizbullah in Lebanon beginning in 1982 and later Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, which took up the practice in the mid-90s. In the Second Intifada (2001 – 2005) all involved armed wings of Palestinian groups – of the nationalist PLO, the Islamist Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as the communist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) – carried out suicide bombings, which were not only a means of resistance but also a means for each group to distinguish itself in a rivalry for the most spectacular attack. The LTTE in Sri Lanka, which began using suicide bombings in 1987, is a Marxist-Leninist, nationalist-orientated group fighting for an independent Tamil state. The PKK, again a Marxist-Leninist nationalist-orientated group fighting for an independent Kurdish state, began engaging in suicide bombings in the in the mid-90s. Interestingly, at the same time self-immolations by members of the PKK as forms of public protest took place between the 1980s and the 2000s. After the spectacular suicide attacks of September 11, 2001 and with the rise of Salafi-Jihadist groups, suicide bombings occurred in high numbers in places like Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere.⁴⁶

This short overview shows how different the religious and cultural settings are in which suicide attacks and suicide bombings have been and are being used. Not only the suicide techniques themselves but also the modes of its representation and mediation afterwards, which include a martyr's testament, have a long history that started with the Kamikaze of whom pictures, letters and short films were produced.⁴⁷ The Palestinian PFLP-GC was the first to call their attackers "suicide squadrons" (*majmu'at intiḥārīyya*),⁴⁸ a term which was soon established and later changed to "martyrdom operations" (*ʿamaliyāt istiḥbādīyya*), when the

⁴⁴ Cf. Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe*, 23-38; as to whether the Kamikaze pilots opted voluntarily for this actions, see 45-49.

⁴⁵ Members of the PFLP-GC attacked Kirjati Schmona and are said to have blown themselves up together with the hostages. The Israelis deny this claim. Cf. Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe*, 81.

⁴⁶ For the spread of suicide missions with the rise of Salafi Jihadi ideology see Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom. Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, Baltimore 2008.

⁴⁷ Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe*, 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

Islamist military wings appeared on the scene, which had to bypass the term suicide given the religious verdict against it. In view of the complexity of the contexts, the ubiquitous linking of suicide bombings to Islam requires explanation and will be addressed in the second part of this article.

On one hand, varying religious and cultural backgrounds are relevant for the acceptance or rejection of a certain practice. On the other hand, religious dogma can easily be overridden by the subversive dynamic of martyr events and the martyr cult, which is true for both the self-immolator and the suicide bomber. For the latter the availability of the Islamic concept of the “martyr” who is rewarded in the afterlife and especially the figure of the “martyr on the battlefield” (*shabīd al-maʿraka*) helped frame the act of suicide bombing in the context of jihad and thus rendered it legitimate. There are also strong religious arguments against this device: the tenets against suicide as well as against the killings of non-combatants. The function of religion in the martyr cult is, therefore, twofold: it provides concepts, images and ritual forms on which the martyr cult draws, and at the same time religious arguments can be used for a critique of illegitimate martyrdom.

There are other decisive factors regarding the effect of “martyr events” which are connected to the specific historical time and place in which they occurred. There have been, for example, several other incidents of self-immolation in history, which failed to garner lasting global attention.⁴⁹ This poses the question of what exactly makes some deaths “successful” in the sense that they are considered to be martyrdom by a larger part of society and able to trigger certain effects while other incidents prove futile insofar as they are not recognised as martyrdom – even in some cases where achieving this recognition was the explicit intention of the person who chose to commit suicide. One the most important factors is, arguably, to attract the public’s attention, which in modern times means attracting media coverage.

II. Global Martyr Discourses

1. Global media and global reactions

The most recent incidents of martyrdom initially were not perceived by a greater public via mass media but via social media on the Internet. Facebook and Twitter not only played a crucial role in the Arab uprisings but were also involved in the Iranian election protests in 2009/2010. The most prominent martyr of these protests was Nidā Āqā-Sulṭān. Her death took place in the first days of the Ira-

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. the case of Ryszard Siwiec, who set himself alight in Warsaw during a national festival on September 8, 1968 at a stadium just four months before Jan Palach. He protested with his act against Poland’s participation in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The authorities were able to keep this incident unknown until 1989.

nian demonstrations and became a focal point of protests. She was shot in the chest during a demonstration in Tehran in June 2009. Her death was captured on video and broadcasted over the internet. It was described as “probably the most widely witnessed death in human history,”⁵⁰ – though this seems to be exaggerated considering the assassination of then U.S. President John Kennedy, which was also captured on film and could be seen on television.

Another victim of security forces was Khālīd Sa‘īd in Egypt, who was beaten to death by plainclothes security officers in June 2010 in Alexandria. His family released a photo of his disfigured face on the internet, and it circulated widely online. Later the well-known Facebook site “We are all Khalid Said” was established, which played an important role in organizing the demonstrations since January 2011. The process of identification and the unifying force of such martyrs is best expressed in the slogan “We are all Khalid Said” and “We are all Neda,” which is the name of one of the websites created for Nidā Āqā-Sulṭān.⁵¹ Pictures of the martyrs play a crucial role in the function of a martyr as a unifying symbol. The urgent need for photographs has problematic aspects as shown by the Nidā case: The picture of another woman, Nidā Sulṭānī, was initially published worldwide as the picture of the martyr Nidā. All attempts to regain power over her own image were to no avail as mass media used the incorrect picture even after the mistaken identity was known.⁵²

There have been many deaths resulting from attacks on demonstrators both in Iran and Egypt, but these two became symbols of the uprisings not only in Iran and Egypt but also on a global level. Contrary to the suicide bombers, this type of martyr, the victim of persecution by authoritarian states, also appeals to a Western audience. This includes not only the worldwide Facebook and Twitter communities, but institutions like the Queens College in Oxford, which established a Neda Agha-Soltan Graduate Scholarship, the newspaper *The Times*, which nominated Nidā as “Person of the Year 2009”, and Germany’s Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung which posthumously awarded Khālīd Sa‘īd its human rights award.⁵³ There is an even greater number of artistic references to Nidā and Khālīd, of which one example is connected to the bestowal of the human rights

⁵⁰ Krista Mahr, “Neda Agha-Soltan,” in: *The Time*, 08.12.2009 URL: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1945379_1944701_1944705,00.html (retrieved 29.05.2012).

⁵¹ <http://weareallneda.com/> (retrieved 15.04.2012).

⁵² Nidā Sulṭānī ultimately had to leave Iran and seek asylum in Germany due to pressure from Iranian authorities who wanted to use her in order to present Nidā’s martyrdom as a fictitious event. Cf. David Schraven, “Die falsche Tote. Das zweite Leben der Neda Soltani,” in: *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* 05.02.2010, URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/das-zweite-leben-der-neda-soltani-die-falsche-tote-1.68172> (retrieved 03.05.2012).

⁵³ Daniel Roters: “Khaled Saeed: Wenn die Welt zusammenrückt,” Goethe Institut: *Blog Transit* 27.09.2011, URL: <http://blog.goethe.de/transit/archives/277-Khaled-Saeed-Wenn-die-Welt-zusammenrueckt.html> (retrieved 02.05.2012).



Fig. 1: Andreas von Chrzanowski's mural of Khālid Saʿīd

award: a martyr mural by the German artist Andreas von Chrzanowski was presented on parts of the Berlin Wall [fig. 1]. The commemoration of the Egyptian martyr is thus linked to the recollection of Germany's own recent history.

Gregg Chadwick, an American artist, painted a portrait of Nidā⁵⁴ as did German artist and actor Armin Müller-Stahl,⁵⁵ the American sculptor Paula Slater made two bronze sculptures of Nidā naming them the "angel of freedom",⁵⁶ an epithet which was used for Nidā in Iran during the demonstrations (*fereshteh āzādī*). Another American artist, Tim O'Brien, made a portrait of Nidā, around which her family assembled during a mourning ceremony in Tehran.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ The picture can be seen in the internet: "Arts showcase for Iran", URL: <http://speak4iran.wordpress.com/category/art/gregg-chadwick/> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

⁵⁵ Mathias Raabe, "Bilder eines Schauspielers. Ausstellung von Armin Mueller-Stahl," in: *Berliner Zeitung* 09.03.2012, URL: <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/berlin/ausstellung-von-armin-mueller-stahl-bilder-eines-schauspielers,10809148,11803806.html> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

⁵⁶ The sculpture can be seen on Paula Slater's website, URL: <http://www.paulaslater.com/NedaPortraitSculpture.htm> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

⁵⁷ On O'Brien's website one can find a video of this scene as well as the painting, URL: http://www.drawger.com/tonka/index.php?section=articles&article_id=8147 (retrieved 02.05.2012).



Fig. 2: Mural of the martyr *Tariq 'Abd al-Laṭif* by the artist *Ganzeer* in Cairo

Khālid and Nidā met many requirements of an ideal martyr. They were both young and attractive and in both cases photos clearly depicted the sharp contrast between the beautiful living and the disfigured dead, thereby underlining their innocence and denouncing the cruelty of the respective regimes. The artistic paintings of them – mostly portraits based on the published photos – shown both in the East and in the West and even wandering from America to Iran – evoke the impression of a unitary, global commemoration of martyrs. The picture of Khālid Saʿid on the Berlin Wall could well have been taken from a Palestinian wall showing the portrait of a victim of an Israeli military attack.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the commemoration of the martyrs of the Arab uprisings has at times taken on deliberately global forms. In Egypt, a pop-art form of martyr commemoration has evolved and resulted in an increase in street arts accompanying the uprisings [see fig. 2]. Mural graffiti of Khālid Saʿid can be found throughout Egyptian cities, and on public buildings they are frequently removed. The form of martyr graffiti is perhaps best known from the ubiquitous Che Guevara graffiti, which can also be found in the Arab world.

Are these global forms of martyr commemoration a sign of humankind coming together under a set of shared values that transcend religious and cultural barriers? One commentator remarking on the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's bestowal of the human rights award to Khālid Saʿid perceived this event as the world

⁵⁸ Consider e.g. fig. 3 in the article by Angelika Neuwirth in this volume.



Fig. 3: Tim O'Brien: "Eyes" (2009, detail);



Fig. 4: Follower of Perugino: "Saint Sebastian" (around 1500, detail)

"closing ranks".⁵⁹ However the universal martyr cult – if it exists – at times shows a distinctive Christian grounding: Rhetoric and iconographic forms are involved in the commemoration and veneration of these martyrs that are familiar to the Christian tradition. This becomes visible when comparing one slightly altered portrait of Nidā to well-known paintings of the martyr Sebastian and the *Ecce Homo* Motive (see fig 3 and 4).⁶⁰ The similar head posture and the line of sight appear only after rotating and mirroring the painting, but the faint halo may indicate that Nidā is included in "our" martyr tradition. The allusion to the Christian martyr culture is therefore not an interpretation of the event in terms of a Christian martyrology, but a gesture of Nidā's affiliation to the Western tradition whose values – for which Nidā apparently died – are often held to be secularised Christian principles.

Perhaps this comparison of images visualises a line of thought that underlies much of the Western assessment of Iranian and Arab martyrs. They are non-violent, they are modern – and therefore they are less Islamic and more like "us".

The deliberately modern forms of protests, namely the non-violent resistance tactics inspired by the American political scientist Gene Sharp, the use of social media and global forms of (pop) art, and – most importantly – the fact that demonstrators related to "our" values, including freedom and democracy, are behind

⁵⁹ Daniel Roters, "Khaled Saeed: Wenn die Welt zusammenrückt," Goethe Institut: *Blog Transit* 27.09.2011, URL: <http://blog.goethe.de/transit/archives/277-Khaled-Saeed-Wenn-die-Welt-zu-sammenrueckt.html> (retrieved 02.05.2012).

⁶⁰ The painting of Nidā has been rotated and mirrored, for the original see the artist's website: http://www.drawger.com/tonka/index.php?section=articles&article_id=8147 (retrieved 02.05.2012).

the public Western approval of both of the Iranian protests and the Arab uprisings. This is particularly applicable to the seemingly non-violent uprisings as there has been considerably less sympathy for revolutionaries in Libya and Syria, despite the fact that protesters in those two countries had similar concerns as those that led to uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The mentioned observations led many to the conclusion that both movements were “secular” and Western commentators on the Arab and the Iranian uprisings mostly insisted on a framework of secularists against Islamists. The veneration of “secular” martyrs fits into the narrative of a secular revolution. The fact that Nidā studied Islamic theology as well as philosophy was often omitted in favour of descriptions of her as a student only of philosophy,⁶¹ her interest in music and classical instruments like violin and piano was stressed, as well as – somewhat surprisingly – her lack of interest in politics. Described in this way she appears similar to any Western youth – non-political, interested in music and travelling. This view – regardless of its veracity – matches the general perception of the Iranian protests as secular, despite the fact that major protagonists of the so-called Green Revolution were religious leaders.

Politics is deeply involved in the commemoration of martyrs, especially when official institutions take part. This becomes abundantly clear when considering the martyrs who failed to gain acknowledgement on a wider level. The afore mentioned six American self-immolators during the Vietnam War, as well as the one who protested the US invasion of Iraq are seen as martyrs only in the eyes of the peace movement. There has failed to be a wider acknowledgement of their sacrifice, and one of the reasons for this was the scarce media coverage they received (v.s.). The same is true for Rachel Corrie, an American peace activist and member of the International Solidarity Movement, who was killed in Gaza in 2003 while trying to block an armoured Israeli bulldozer, which ultimately ran over her. She was and still is hailed as a martyr (*shahīda*) in Palestine and globally in circles that engage on behalf of the Palestinians. Many songs have been dedicated to her – mostly by leftist and activist singers – and she has been the subject of a theatre play, a film and several books.⁶² But there has not been coverage of her in Western mainstream media to a degree comparable with the attention paid to Bū ‘Azīzi or Nidā, let alone institutional acknowledgement of her act. Again, she is young, pictures showing her living and dead circulate on the internet, she acted non-violently and promoted freedom and justice – but her commemoration in the West remains restricted to a narrow part of the society. She is one of “us” but she died for “them”. This incident shows that a martyr’s commemoration need not only share a high degree of the often political aims for which the martyr died

⁶¹ E.g. in the *Time’s* naming her one of the ten most important people of the year 2009: Krista Mahr, “Neda Agha-Soltan,” in: *Time*, 08.12.2009 URL: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1945379_1944701_1944705,00.html (retrieved 29.05.2012).

⁶² For all these examples see the Wikipedia page on Rachel Corrie: URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Corrie (retrieved 19.05.2012).

or is supposed to have died but must also receive an influential amount of media coverage. Given the interdependence of mass media and politics, this critical amount of media attention will only be reached if the martyr fits into a particular political agenda. Not only was the Western non-acknowledgement of Rachel Corrie politically motivated due to the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the possible negative impact on relations with Israel, but her being hailed as a martyr by the Palestinians was also politically motivated as they were keenly aware that the death of an American citizen could attract the world's attention to the deaths of Palestinians.⁶³ The decision of whether martyrs are to be given coverage and awarded titles and prizes or will receive only short and superficial international attention – if they receive any at all – is a form of necropolitics. A comparison of the reactions to martyrs like Nidā Āqā-Sulṭān and Khālid Saʿīd to those like Rachel Corrie reveals the fact that the features of the martyr, such as courage, non-violence and adherence to certain values, are only part of the reasons why he or she is commemorated.

2. *Our martyrs and theirs: self-immolators and suicide bombers*

The self-immolation of Bū ʿAzīzī – perceived as a reprise of Jan Palach's death and thereby connected to European history – was immediately intelligible for the "Western mind". The supposed reasons for his act – poverty, desperation, and humiliation among them – were discussed at length and made his act understandable on a global scale. Reports relating that parts of the story were exaggerated or even invented are mostly neglected.⁶⁴ Exactly the opposite is the case with suicide bombers. Although they may address at least partly similar grievances, such as humiliation and injustice, and express political issues, these aspects are not seriously considered. Instead, "Islamic" motives, the reward for martyrs in paradise and most prominently the virgins awaiting them therein, are mainly considered to form the basis of their motivation. It is therefore revealing to see the prominent role played by the legend of the Assassins even in scholarly studies on suicide bombings.⁶⁵ The legend is cited and linked to the acts of suicide bombings in order to create an "Islamic tradition" of suicidal attacks. Not

⁶³ "Her death serves me more than it served her," said one activist at a Hamas funeral [...]. 'Going in front of the tanks was heroic. Her death will bring more attention than the other 2,000 martyrs.', Sandra Jordan, "Making of a martyr", in: *The Observer*, 23.03.2003, URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/23/internationaleducationnews.students> (retrieved 19.05.2012).

⁶⁴ For such a report see Mary Boland, "Death of Arab Spring 'martyr' which led to uprisings may not be all it seems", in: *The Irish Times* 25.11.2011, URL: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2011/1125/1224308109672.html> (retrieved 19.05.2012).

⁶⁵ Cf. Claudia Brunner, "Assassins, Virgins, Scholars. Epistemologies and Geopolitics in Scholarly Knowledge on Suicide", in: *Gender, Agency and Political Violence* ed. by Linda Ahäll et al., Houndmills 2012, 132-147.

only is this legend by far not as prominent in the Middle East as it is in Europe, where it was invented, the Nizārīs, the historical name for those who figure as Assassins in European literature, as a Shiite sect are the detested enemies of true Islam in the eyes of the Sunni jihadists. Nevertheless, in order to understand the events this legend is preferred by many commentators to anything the protagonists themselves may say or have said. Suicide bombings by Muslim protagonists are thus linked to Islam as the *cause*, detached from any political, social or other factors that require scrutinisation.

As Brunner has shown, the historicisation of suicide attacks underwent a shift especially after the events of September 11, 2001.⁶⁶ Some historic examples, like the Japanese Kamikaze, disappeared from comparative works on suicide attacks while others were generalised: “We can identify an increasing trend of culturalisation based on privileged interest in one category that experienced a renaissance which it had almost lost during the Cold War: ‘Islam’.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, it is not only the missing Islam-factor that is responsible for the marginalisation of the Japanese Kamikaze, but also the fact that they constituted part of a regular army, which makes the category of suicide attackers much more comparable to European history as there were intentions by some Nazis to co-opt the Japanese military’s suicide tactics and weapons-technology experiments at the end of the Second World War.⁶⁸ To include such examples in the consideration of suicide bombings shifts the line of comparison, so that it no longer runs along the line rational vs. irrational or religious but along one acting in the framework and with the legitimisation of a nation-state vs. the other acting as partisans and therefore without legitimisation.⁶⁹

Whereas the martyrdom of Bū ‘Azīzī and his followers is considered to be secular because no religious discourse accompanies it – at least not on the part of the self-immolators themselves – the martyrdom of the suicide bombers is considered to be religious because the most obvious religious imaginary, especially

⁶⁶ Brunner identifies historicisation as one of the modi of occidental self-reassurance in the construction of the epistemic object “suicide bombing” the others being pathologisation, (ir-)rationalisation and sexualisation, cf. Claudia Brunner, *Wissensobjekt Selbstmordattentat. Epistemische Gewalt und okzidentalistische Selbstvergewisserung in der Terrorismusforschung*, Wiesbaden 2011, 220-340.

⁶⁷ Claudia Brunner, “Assassins, Virgins, Scholars”, 143. This assessment is for the scholarly knowledge production in terrorism research, in general discourse it might well be even more unidimensional.

⁶⁸ Cf. Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe*, 55-70.

⁶⁹ As Talal Asad has argued with respect to the notion of suicide bombings as terrorism, there is no qualitative difference on the side of the victims between the terror caused by a suicide bomber and the terror caused by the bombing of civilian areas, as it is regularly the case in modern warfare. The two different categories of “warfare” and “terrorism”, which legitimate the first and de-legitimate the latter, “are constituted according to different logical criteria, the one taking it primary sense from the question of legality and the other from feelings of vulnerability and fear of social disorder, and [...] they are not therefore mutually exclusive.” Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, New York 2007, 39.

aspects that relate to the hereafter, is given precedence over the very earthly, political arguments which are also presented. When, for example, the case of al-Qaida politics is considered, attention is restricted to phrases of the “worldwide caliphate” – which remains very nebulous – and assessed as illegitimate mingling of politics and religion, whereas concrete accusations, such as those of the American backing of the Saudi regime and the United Nations sanctions on Iraq that resulted in the death of more than a million children, are most often ignored.

Upon closer inspection, the reason for the Western admiration of Bū ‘Azīzī and peaceful protesters in general is only partly due to their non-violence. By the same token, the Western detestation of the suicide bombers is only partly due to their violence. Part of the difference is also that al-Qaida addressed the West, “us”, as its enemy whereas the protests of the Arab and Iranian uprisings were not directed against the West as a geopolitical (post)colonial power, but against the protesters’ own regimes and at the same time allowed the admirers of the protests to support a popular movement while often remaining silent about previous Western backing of the dictators. Another reason for the discrepancy in perception is the filter of media coverage: Whereas in the case of al-Qaida the public mainly hears those arguments that can most clearly be identified as “religious” and thereby irrational, the peaceful protesters in the Middle East are represented as secular insofar as most of the many references to Islam are omitted.

One of the martyr stories popular in Egypt and the Arab world, which is not told in the West, is the story of the student ‘Abd al-Karīm. Ṣafwat Ḥijāzī, one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s organisers of the protests on Tahrir Square, told this story several times in Arabic television channels, including Al-Jazeera.⁷⁰ During one of the clashes with security forces who shot the demonstrators with live ammunition while they answered with stones, he spoke with a young man, ‘Abd al-Karīm, whom he met only the day before. ‘Abd al-Karīm asked him whether those killed in these clashes would be martyrs and Ḥijāzī replied that would be the case. Asked for evidence in the sources Ḥijāzī cited a prophetic hadith: “The master of martyrs is Ḥamza [one of the prophet’s uncles who was killed in one of the first battles of the Muslims] and the one who stands up before the unjust ruler and advises him so that he [the ruler] kills him.”⁷¹ ‘Abd al-Karīm asked him to greet Ḥamza for him in case he should be killed first, and Ḥijāzī said the same to him. Immediately afterwards ‘Abd al-Karīm was shot and killed by a bullet to the head shot by one of the snipers. After wiping away the blood from his face, Ḥijāzī realised the smell of musk emanating from the blood, which was

⁷⁰ An extract of the interview with Ṣafwat Ḥijāzī can be seen on *YouTube*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5ECx90Ir1k&feature=related> (retrieved 20.05.2012). For glorifying videos of his death see my article in this volume “Making salvation visible”.

⁷¹ The actual text reads not “ruler” but “*imām*”. Al-Ḥākīm, *Al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-ṣaḥīḥain*, Vol. 2, No 4884/482.

also noticed by a Christian demonstrator, who was part of a group of Christian youth who had protected the Muslims' prayer earlier in the day. It was only afterwards that Ḥijāzī came to learn that 'Abd al-Karīm was also a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷²

As any martyr story from the Tahrir Square – and elsewhere – this account aims at the commemoration of those who died for the fight against injustice and who shall not be forgotten and betrayed with a failing of the revolutions. Furthermore, it serves the image of the Muslim Brotherhood by stressing the sacrifices of its members and their engagement for the Egyptian people, which, of course, is designed to increase their influence among the public.

Narratives like these are also part of the story of the Arab uprisings which have to be considered in order to get a more complete image of events. The fact that they are omitted in Western observation illustrates how the West wants to see the East to develop: as an honest follower on the path of progress which means to leave behind “unenlightened” forms of religion. Whereas in the case of suicide bombers the emphasis on Islamic references is part of the abhorrence which they evoke, the downplaying of a connection to Islam is a precondition for sympathy for this new kind of martyr. They are like “us” now because they learned the lessons of Western democracy and Western values. If this is the assumption that underlies most of the Western commentaries on the events of the uprisings, the rejoicing about the coming-together of the world, of which the shared commemoration of martyr figures can be seen as an expression, is to be put into question. It seems that it is only for this prize that the other “ceased to be Muslim”,⁷³ or in more general terms ceased to be religious, that the martyr is no longer the other. In her article “The Martyrs of the Revolution” journalist Charlotte Wiedemann stated: “When they attempt to grasp the role of religion in the Arab uprisings, non-Muslim observers often fail because of their tendency to see things in black and white: if religion does not show itself to be a protagonist, then the movement must be secular.”⁷⁴

Caught in the dichotomy between religious and secular, the fact that Islamic organisations did not play a role – at least not at the beginning – is seen as a proof of the “secularness” of the revolts. But the established secular political parties and organisations, such as the Wafd party, did not play a role either, a fact which was not in turn seen as a proof for the “religiousness” of the protests. The Egyptian blogosphere, which stood at the beginning of the uprisings, however was able to engender “a political language free from the problematic of seculari-

⁷² A transcript of the account of Ṣafwat Ḥijāzī can be found at the website of the Muslim Scholar Ḥusayn 'Amir: <http://housseinamer.net/index.php/2010-01-22-19-38-31/792-2011-05-18-10-12-42> (retrieved 20.05.2012).

⁷³ Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, 12.

⁷⁴ Charlotte Wiedeman, “The Martyrs of the Revolution. Religion in the Arab Spring”, In: *Qantara* 23.08.2011, URL: <http://en.qantara.de/The-Martyrs-of-the-Revolution/17005c17490i1p219/> (retrieved 19.05.2012).

sation vs. fundamentalism that had governed so much of political discourse in the Middle East and elsewhere” as Charles Hirschkind noticed. They could build on a process of joint activism of secular leftist organisations and Islamist ones in the recent years.⁷⁵ On a personal level, most of the protagonists of the first hour would certainly describe themselves as Muslims and a number of them explicitly related to Islamic references. It was, for example, rarely reported in Western media that Asmā’ Makhfūz, a founding member of the Movement of the 6th of April, an awardee of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament (along with Bū ‘Azīzī and others), quoted the Koran in her famous YouTube video that prompted thousands to join the first major protest on January 25 in Tahrir Square with the verse: “It is because God would never change His favour that He conferred on a people until they changed what was within themselves” (8:55).⁷⁶

The framing of the uprisings as a movement that began in a secular nature and was later “hijacked” by Islamist organisations is related to the preconception of Islam and democracy being at odds and the perception of Islam being a “political religion”, which reduces Islam to Islamism (or political Islam) as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and fails to acknowledge that individual Muslims may see their political activism in accordance with requirements they find in their religion.

The opposed reactions to the two martyr models of the suicide bomber and the self-immolator are telling with regard to the mechanisms with which the “secular West” upholds its paradigms in embracing the one martyr and rejecting the other. Instead of arranging the actors – and with them the martyrs – according to a paradigm that puts the religious in opposition to the secular, the examples of these martyr-figures can be taken as an invitation to rethink this opposition. In fact, the role of martyrs reveals that religious and secular aspects are difficult to differentiate. As the examples have shown, the martyr undermines the antagonism of the sacred and profane, the division between religion and politics, and the demarcation of modern and pre-modern, all of which belong to the binary oppositions which organise modern secular discourse.

⁷⁵ Charles Hirschkind, “The road to Tahrir. Uprising in Egypt”, *The immanent frame. Secularism, religion, and the public sphere* 9 February 2011, URL: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/02/09/the-road-to-tahrir/> (retrieved 31.05.2012).

⁷⁶ Whereas Islamic references are often omitted, Islamist references are even more difficult to find. An example is the representation of Tawakkul Karmān, who won the Peace Nobel Prize in 2011. It was hardly ever related in Western media that she is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The irony that Tawakkul Karmān and Asmā’ Makhfūz, who both wear the Islamic head-covering, were awarded in Europe, where at the same time in several nations restrictions against Islamic dress codes were discussed and introduced in the name of freedom and women’s rights, is also rarely mentioned.