

# Making Salvation Visible

## Rhetorical and Visual Representations of Martyrs in Salafī Jihadist Media

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In April 2003 the so-called media wing of al-Qaida, *al-Sahab*<sup>1</sup> (literally “the cloud”), published the first video in a series presenting the recorded testaments of some of the 19 men held responsible for the September 11 attacks of 2001. Its opening sequence shows a globe, with photos of the 19 men appearing in the outer space around the globe, one of which – that of Aḥmad al-Ḥaznāwī, whose testament is presented later in the video – approaches the viewer while a striking voice declaims in Arabic:

Our words remain dead, waxen dolls of life, frozen, until when we die for what we believe, our words come to life and dwell among the living. Every word had been nourished on the heart of a human being, so it dwells among the living. For the living do not adopt the dead.<sup>2</sup>

There is no indication who is speaking; however, anyone somewhat familiar with Jihadist media will immediately recognise the voice of ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām, the “Imam of Jihad”. That only death will bring convictions and principles into existence is one of the central ideas in his concept of martyrdom, the basis for the martyr cult of contemporary Jihadist groups<sup>3</sup> – including those deploying suicide bombings and attacks even though ‘Azzām never supported their use. In this article I would like to examine how this concept has been represented in selected audios, images and videos in Jihadist media from recent decades.

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<sup>1</sup> For *al-Sahab* see Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism. Theory and Practice*, New York 2009, 131-133.

<sup>2</sup> Translation according to the English subtitles given in the video with exception of the last sentence, which was not translated. Al-Sahab, *Waṣīyyat al-shahīd Aḥmad al-Ḥaznāwī* [The martyr Aḥmad al-Ḥaznāwī’s last will], 2003, the video can be found at archive.org, URL: <http://archive.org/details/Haznawi?start=2459.5> (retrieved 24.10.2012).

<sup>3</sup> The terms Jihadists and Jihadism are controversial since they include the term “jihad” which is an important concept in Islam and has a broader meaning than military fighting. According to Jarret Brachman, it refers “to the peripheral current of extremist Islamic thought whose adherents demand the use of violence in order to oust non-Islamic influence from traditionally Muslims lands en route to establishing true Islamic governance in accordance with Sharia, or God’s law.” Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 4. This definition still covers a very heterogeneous group of movements. It is important to bear in mind that this term does not designate a coherent set of convictions and strategies but a spectrum. It is evident for example that local groups like Hamas, Hizbullah and others who resort to violence in their struggle of liberation have to be distinguished from groups like al-Qaida. In this article mainly the transnational Jihadist movement is considered, with a focus on al-Qaida-related media.

I shall argue that in ‘Azzām’s concept of martyrdom the personal salvation of the martyr and the collective salvation of the *umma* (the worldwide community of Muslims) are inextricably linked. Both dimensions, the personal located in the Hereafter and the collective in the here and now, are addressed in the Jihadist martyr cult not only verbally but also visually. Both the content of the Jihadist martyr myth and its visual representation prove to be an amalgamation of classical Islamic traditions and modern discourses. The use of modern technologies and media – from photographs and videos to digital image processing – not only makes it possible for a Jihadist martyr cult to exist at all, but moreover shapes it.

### I. ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām and Jihadist Media

‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām (1941-1989), a Palestinian religious scholar, is held to be the leading ideological figure of what is today described as global Jihadism.<sup>4</sup> As Brachman sees it, “he provided the first modern hybridization of deep Jihadist ideological thinking with unswerving commitment to fighting and spreading the call of Jihad around the world.”<sup>5</sup> He was the main organiser of the so-called Arab Afghans, Arab volunteers who joined the Afghan mujahidin in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan (1979-1989). Together with Usama bin Laden, he led the “Service Bureau” (*Maktab al-Khidmāt*) in Peshawar, a drop-in-centre for the volunteers. Besides these activities he wrote, lectured and travelled widely on behalf of the Afghan mujahidin. His reputation rests on his training as a classical religious scholar at the Al-Azhar, his engagement as an activist in jihad, as well as to his own martyrdom (he was killed in a car bomb blast in Peshawar). Although he is still seen as one of the major inspirational figures for al-Qaida, his views differed in a number of points from the strategies and concepts of its leading figures.

The figure of the martyr occupies a central place in ‘Azzām’s writings and lectures. This is not as self-evident as it may seem. While the martyr played a role in the writings of earlier Islamists, it was not accorded outstanding significance. It is with ‘Azzām’s work that an Islamist martyr cult started to develop which eventually resulted in suicide bombings as its logical consequence.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an important criticism of the term, which tends to overlook the regional root causes of militant Islamism or terrorism, see Guido Steinberg, *Der Nabe und der Ferne Feind. Die Netzwerke des islamistischen Terrorismus*, Munich 2005, 9f. For a useful biography of ‘Azzām, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Abdullah Azzam, the Imam of Jihad,” in: *Al-Qaeda in its own words*, ed. by Gilles Kepel et al., Harvard 2008, 81-101.

<sup>5</sup> Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> See Hegghammer, “Abdullah Azzam”, 101. This is not to say that this martyr cult is the only reason for deploying suicide bombings, to which militant groups resorted for military and strategic reasons. But the cult helps to gain acceptance (and recruits) for this practice, which amongst other things blatantly contradicts the norms of sharia as to the prohibition of killing of non-combatants and suicide.

‘Azzām was not only influential in laying down the ideological basis of modern Jihadism; he was also a pioneer of Jihadist media. He and his followers made extensive use of modern media and technology at an early stage in their efforts to disseminate his message. Besides his journals *Al-Jihad* and *Labīb al-Ma‘raka* (Blaze of the Battlefield), which spread news of the Afghan War in Islamist circles around the globe,<sup>7</sup> he had his lectures and sermons recorded on audiotapes (a procedure he deployed or endorsed already in his time as a lecturer on sharia at the University of Jordan in the 1970s) and videotapes for distribution. According to Asiem El Defraoui, the media efforts undertaken during the time of the Afghan War constituted the first stage (1979-1989) in the development of Jihadist propaganda and were the preliminary for the later online Jihad.<sup>8</sup> As early as the Afghan War pictures of martyrs played an important role in the propaganda for the mujahidin. They were accompanied by cameramen who captured the clashes, taking photographs and videos of fallen fighters.<sup>9</sup> At that time relatively few videos were produced in the VHS format, but with the advent of digital technology both the numbers and the quality of videos increased remarkably.

The second stage, spanning 1990 to 2001, had its centre in London (“London-istan”) and was again closely associated with ‘Azzām’s name: in 1996 the website azzam.com, promoting mujahidin in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan (Taliban), was established. Digitalised lectures by ‘Azzām could be accessed over the site and the first professional martyrdom videos were produced and distributed. The site followed the same aims ‘Azzām had pursued with his propaganda work for Afghanistan: recruiting fighters and raising funds.<sup>10</sup>

The third stage, the “globalisation of Cyberjihad” (2001-2006), started with the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan and later in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> It is characterised by the development of Jihadist media companies, which act more or less independently from Jihadist organisations, and an increase in video production made possible by the availability of low-cost digital cameras and video-editing programs.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Jihad* is considered the “most famous Jihadist periodical of the twentieth century [and] was produced almost single-handedly at first by ‘Azzām”. Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Asiem El-Defraoui, *jihad.de. Jihadistische Online-Propaganda: Empfehlungen für Gegenmaßnahmen in Deutschland*. SWP-Studie, Berlin 2012, URL: [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2012\\_S05\\_dfr.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2012_S05_dfr.pdf) (retrieved 24.09.2012). The description of the different stages follows El Defraoui.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Azzām describes in his martyrology how a camera operator, Yāsīn al-Jazā‘irī, became a martyr himself in 1989, ‘Abdullah ‘Azzām, *Ushāq al-Hūr* [Lovers of the Paradise Maidens] (n.p., n.d.).

<sup>10</sup> The site was closed down in 2001 after the attacks of September 11. For more on the website, see Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 122-125.

<sup>11</sup> Asiem El-Defraoui, *jihad.de*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview on the content and producers of videos, see Cecilie Finsnes, *What is audio-visual jihadi propaganda? An overview of the content of FFI’s jihadi video database*, Norwegian Defense Research establishment (FFI), March 2012, URL: <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2010/00960.pdf> (retrieved 20.10.2012).

Internet forums appeared facilitating the easy exchange of Jihadist material, while the use of languages diversified. Texts, audios and videos by ‘Azzām were (and still are) available on nearly every Jihadist website and excerpts from his lectures are included in numerous videos from this period.

The fourth and ongoing stage of Jihadist online propaganda was initiated with the development of Web 2.0. It is characterised by the use of social media and even smart phones. Older material is still reprocessed and often presented in a piecemeal way: short excerpts from longer video productions can be seen on *Facebook*, *YouTube* and elsewhere. ‘Azzām is still prominent on the contemporary stage of Jihadist media: a search for ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām on *YouTube* generates more than 13 000 video clips, and these are only those in which ‘Azzām appears in the title.<sup>13</sup>

The extensive deployment of media and especially of images is by no means self-evident given the religious strand from which the Jihadists emerged. They have their roots in two reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Salafiyya and Wahhābiyya.<sup>14</sup> Both movements are characterised by objections against the traditional ‘*ulamā*’ (scholars) and aim to reform Islam by turning to the pious forefathers (*al-salaf*). The Salafiyya movement, however, sought to catch up to Western achievements in civilisation and technology, while the Wahhābiyya viewed these achievements with suspicion, including photography. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Bin Bāz (1912-1999), declared in a fatwa based on a very narrow interpretation of prophetic Hadiths concerning images and statues that it is unlawful to take photographs and, indeed, to appear on a photograph. Television was introduced in the 1960s in Saudi Arabia against the fierce opposition of Wahhābī scholars, even resulting in violent demonstrations. The ban on public photography was first lifted in Saudi Arabia in 2006.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, mujahidin also objected to pictures: ‘Abdullāh Anas, an Algerian who was one the founders of the Services Bureau in Peshawar and a son-in-law of ‘Azzām, has reported that a number of mujahidin were unwilling to appear on videos and photographs for religious reasons.<sup>16</sup> Such objections were obviously not valid in the mind of ‘Azzām and a lot of his followers, and this was even more so the case amongst leading figures of al-Qaida, like the late Usama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawāhirī, who used, and still use, video as a medium of cyber war on a regular basis. The propaganda value of images obviously outstrips any religious concerns, and the position towards images is determined rather by their usefulness.

<sup>13</sup> Search on 24.09.2012.

<sup>14</sup> Historically these are two distinct movements; today *Salafī* and *Wahhābī* are used interchangeably.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Silvia Naef, *Bilder und Bilderverbot im Islam*, Munich 2007, 120-122.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with ‘Abdullāh Anas in the film *The Al Qaeda Code* by Abdelasiem El Difraoui, Germany/Canada 2008.

The usefulness or the necessity of pictures can be traced back to the argument articulated by Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, two of the most prominent proponents of the Reformist Salafi movement. Whereas ʿAbduh even allowed images for aesthetic reasons, his stricter pupil Riḍā confined their deployment to their usefulness. Prior to the advent of visual mass media, he gave no consideration to the propaganda value (which also always has an aesthetic aspect), condoning photographs in fields like natural sciences and medicine as well as espionage and weaponry.<sup>17</sup> One of the reasons to permit photographs is that they are considered to be a mechanical representation of the world and are therefore no rival to the power of creation, which belongs solely to God. The fallacy that mechanically produced images do not possess the character of an artwork but rather present nothing more than a pure depiction of nature – a fallacy which, as Mitchell has pointed out,<sup>18</sup> also prevails in Western thought – enables religious misgivings towards photography to be overcome. Images proved to be indispensable for the Jihadists for recruiting fighters and raising funds, and as the technical equipment and media production methods became more and more sophisticated the value of images even increased. Accordingly, a Jihadist Internet activist asks rhetorically: “What if the Mujaahideen had never carried a camera with them to the battlefield? [...] What if the Mujaahideen never had the appropriate program to make their videos look nice?”<sup>19</sup>

Martyrdom is one of the central topics in Jihadist propaganda<sup>20</sup> and with the technical developments in audio-visual media pictures of martyrs come to the fore. In the following I shall analyse representations of martyrs from these different stages and in different media with regard to ʿAzzām’s idea of martyrdom.

## II. Multimedia Martyr Biographies: Text, Sound and (Moving) Image

With his seminal martyrology *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens* (*ʿUshshāq al-Hūr*) ʿAzzām initiated a modern Sunni literary tradition that was later taken up in contexts as varied as the Second Palestinian Intifada, the cyber jihad of al-Qaida and the Arab uprisings which broke out in 2010. *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens* is a collection of martyr biographies, including their letters and testaments as well as letters by ʿAzzām to the families of the martyrs. The book contains stories of fallen mujahidin from different countries, mostly Arabic, and the aim is to present the martyrs as role models. A number of elements recur: arrival in Afghanistan, which is presented as a departure from the mundane world (sometimes de-

<sup>17</sup> See Silvia Naef, *Bilder und Bilderverbot im Islam*, 113–115.

<sup>18</sup> “What is natural is, evidently, what we can build a machine to do for us,” W.J.T. Mitchell, “What is an image?” in: *New Literary History* 15, 1984, 524.

<sup>19</sup> Unknown Jihadist Internet propagandist, quoted from Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 107.

<sup>20</sup> See Asiem Defraoui, *jihad.de*, 47f.

scribed in terms of a “divorce”) and as a Hijra (emigration, an allusion to the emigration of the prophet from Mecca to Medina); the obstacles the mujahidin had to overcome in order to take part in the jihad (like the opposition of their parents or difficult journeys), anecdotes highlighting their devoutness, sincerity, humility, generosity and courageousness, as well as their love for their brothers in arms. The circumstances of their death are described, as are the details surrounding their funerals. Both the death and the funeral are frequently accompanied by miraculous events; recurrent motifs are a fighter (or that of another mujahidin) dreaming of coming death, the martyr’s blood smelling like musk and his corpse not decaying.

A number of motifs link the deeds of the mujahidin to the generation of the first Muslims. The biographies are studded with Koranic verses (most prominently: “Think not of those who are killed in the way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are alive, with their Lord, and they have provision”, 3:169) and Hadiths dealing with jihad and martyrdom. The biographies also include numerous poems praising the martyrs, and at the same time express sorrow and grief over the loss of comrades. Such poems follow the genre of *marthiya* (elegy), known from pre-Islamic times, which laments the death of a person, mostly a fighter, and praises his merits. Such allusions to the Prophet’s time and connections to well-established genres of Islamic literature, together with the numerous citations of foundational Islamic texts and statements from scholars of earlier times, accumulate symbolic capital, crucial in winning support amongst fellow Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

‘Azzām’s *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens* is an extensive collection of several hundred pages and it cannot be read in a short time. Numerous excerpts and partial translations can be found in the Internet, presenting the most prominent martyrs or the most interesting stories. Another way to make the martyr stories more ‘consumer friendly’ are audios and videos, and these present only selected martyrs.

### *In the Hearts of Green Birds (1996)*

One of the first and very influential examples is an audio cassette entitled *In the Hearts of Green Birds* released by Azzam Publications in 1996.<sup>22</sup> Just like *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens*, this title takes up a prominent motif from the martyr tradition: according to well-known Hadiths, the souls of the martyrs (or the martyrs themselves) reside in Paradise in the crow (or in the inside) of green birds.<sup>23</sup> On

<sup>21</sup> For the significance of symbolic capital acquired through references to the Islamic tradition, see Lohlker, *Dschihadismus. Materialien*, Vienna, 2009, 56-76, especially 60.

<sup>22</sup> A second part was released in November 1997 *Under the Shade of Swords*. Both tapes are available as audio files at archive.org and elsewhere in the Internet.

<sup>23</sup> This Hadith appears in several versions in different collections. An example is the following: [...] “We asked ‘Abdullāh about the Koranic verse: ‘Think not of those who are slain

the tape – which starts with radio communication and gunfire from a real-life battlefield recording –<sup>24</sup> an English-speaking narrator presents the story of several martyrs from amongst the foreign fighters in Bosnia. The *nashīd* (chants, a form of vocal music considered lawful) on jihad and martyrdom makes up much of the run-time and it assumes the function of poetry in the textual martyrology, indeed becoming even more important due to the capacity of music (if only vocal) to transport and arouse emotions.<sup>25</sup> Most of the songs stem from an Afghan veteran who was killed in Bosnia in 1992 and whose story is the first one presented on the tape.<sup>26</sup> With the sounds of the war and the voices of the martyrs and fighters (albeit often in poor quality) the listener is virtually immersed into events. The voice of the speaker is accompanied by artificial reverberations designed to create an awesome atmosphere. The cassette did not fail to have an effect on listeners. An anonymous jihadist is reported as saying, “when I heard this cassette, I cried and cried.”<sup>27</sup> A transcript of the tape was also printed in book form and this is available on the Internet.<sup>28</sup> *In the Hearts of the Green Birds* is considered a classic of Jihadist media and is still used as a source material in the production of new videos.

Two quotes taken from *In the Hearts of the Green Birds* show the two central themes of the Jihadist martyr cult. The first is a Hadith stressing the personal rewards awaiting martyrs in the afterlife:

The Messenger of Allah (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) [peace and blessings be upon him] said: the Shaheed [martyr] is given seven special favors from Allah:

- 1- All his sins are forgiven at the first drop of his blood.
- 2- He sees his place in Paradise as soon as he is killed.
- 3- He is saved from the punishment of the Grave.

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in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they are alive, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord.' (3:169). He said: 'We asked the meaning of the verse (from the Prophet) who said: 'The souls of the martyrs live in the bodies of green birds who have their nests in chandeliers hung from the throne of the Almighty. They eat the fruits of Paradise from wherever they like and then nestle in these chandeliers [...].'" Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī al-Nisābūrī, Abū l-Husayn/ al-Nawawī, Yahyā b. Sharaf: *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-sharḥ an-Nawawī*, Beirut ca. 1983, Vol. 13, 30-32; translation by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, New Delhi 2000, Book 20, Number 4651, with minor changes.

<sup>24</sup> Recording of Operation “Miracle” in Zavidovic, North Bosnia, 21 July 1995 according to a transcript of the tape released by Azzam Publications, see <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-8676.html> (retrieved 26.09.2012).

<sup>25</sup> For *anashīd* (sing. *nashīd*) and poetry see Rüdiger Lohlker, *Dschihadismus*, 130-141. For the motivational factor of *anashīd*, see Tilmann Seidensticker, “Jihad Hymns (Nashids) as a means of self-motivation in the Hamburg group”, in: *The 9/11 Handbook*, ed. by Hans G. Kippenberg et al., London 2006, 71-78.

<sup>26</sup> Abū Zubayr Al-Madani released a cassette with *anashīd* under the title *Qarwāfil al-shuhadā'* (Caravans of Martyrs), considered a classic in Jihadist circles.

<sup>27</sup> In the Jihadist forum Islamic Awakening, URL: [http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f41/~\\*-smile-of-the-shuhada-\\*~14820/index9.html#post145675](http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f41/~*-smile-of-the-shuhada-*~14820/index9.html#post145675) (retrieved 26.09.2012).

<sup>28</sup> The transcript was also released by Azzam Publications, URL: <http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/258> (retrieved 02.11.2012).



- 4- He is saved from the great Terror on the Day of Judgement.
- 5- There is placed on his head a crown of honor, a jewel of which is better than this whole world and all that it contains.
- 6- He is given intercession for 70 members of his household.
- 7- He is married to 72 women of the most beautiful women of Paradise.<sup>29</sup>

The second quote is a reference to ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām:

Sheikh Abdullah Azzam rehmatullah‘alaihi [God have mercy on him] said that Islamic history is not written, except with the blood of the Shuhada’ [martyrs] and except with the stories of the Shuhada’.<sup>30</sup>

These two quotes, one of a foundational Islamic text, the other of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century religious scholar and militant activist, highlight two central aspects in the Jihadist concept of martyrdom which were combined most effectively by ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām.<sup>31</sup> Whereas the idea of personal expiation through martyrdom is old, as the Hadith indicates,<sup>32</sup> the idea that martyrs build the foundations of history, nation or civilisation is a very recent one. Two other statements by ‘Azzām in this regard are inserted in the following stories of the martyrs, this time taken directly from his recorded lectures: “And with the likes of all these (the martyrs), nations are established, convictions are brought to life, and ideologies are made victorious.” And: “Indeed, history is not recorded except with the blood of all these (the Shuhadaa’), except with the stories of all these, except with the likes of all these.”<sup>33</sup> The twofold salvation – personal in the life to come, collective in the here and now – is what is expected from martyrdom and part of what makes it such a powerful idea in Jihadist discourse.

<sup>29</sup> Azzam Publications, *In the Hearts of Green Birds*, 1996. Translation and spelling here and in the following according to the transcript released by Azzam Publications. Additions are added in square brackets. The Hadith is also important in ‘Azzām’s writings: it is included in his fatwa *Join the Caravan* as well in the renowned lecture “Martyrs. The Building Blocks of Nations”, from which the following quote of ‘Azzām stems. Versions of the hadith can be found in Muḥammad b. ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī. Al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Khalīl Ma’mūn Shīha, Beirut 2002, No. 1663; Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Māja, *Sunan*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, Kairo 1975, Vol. 2, No. 2799. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Šidqī Jamīl al-‘Aṭṭār (Beirut 1994, Vol. 6, No. 17182, see for another version without the possibility of intercession, No. 17798).

<sup>30</sup> Azzam Publications, *In the Hearts of Green Birds*, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood killed in 1949, allegedly by the Egypt secret service, had already described martyrs’ blood as a sign of victory in this world (“Their pure blood is a symbol of victory in this world and the mark of success and felicity in the world to come”, *Jihād fī l-Islām*; for the English translation see *Jihad in Islam*, URL: <http://www.2muslims.com/directory/Detailed/227153.shtml>, retrieved 19.10. 2012). However, in contrast to ‘Azzām, martyrdom is by no means as prominent in al-Bannā’s writings.

<sup>32</sup> Although this idea is not without theological difficulties regarding the linking of bloodshed and expiation, see Silvia Horsch, *Tod im Kampf. Figurationen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften*, Würzburg 2011, 186ff.

<sup>33</sup> *In the Hearts of Green Birds*, transcript released by Azzam Publications.



In *The Hearts of Green Birds* the personal dimension of salvation is more important, since the tape is nearly devoid of more comprehensive information about the war in Bosnia (only a few operations are described). The wish for martyrdom is presented to have been very strong: "He [the singer Abū Zubayr al-Madani] did not used to think about anything except one thing, and he did not speak about anything except one thing, that is Jihad and martyrdom".<sup>34</sup> Again miracles and amazing stories play an important role and numerous dreams are narrated. One of the martyrs is reported to have seen Paradise before his death: "He was shot in the heart; and he continued to walk for a distance of 20 meters still holding his machine gun. And then he said to the brothers that were around him: 'Look in the sky! Look what I can see...!'"<sup>35</sup>

As in *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens*, it is often reported that the smell of musk emanated from the blood of the martyrs, that their bodies did not decay (in contrast to the bodies of the Serbs which decayed very fast) and that the martyrs smiled after dying. All these things serve as signs that the fallen had indeed reached the position of a martyr and bliss in the afterlife. As the narrator puts it: "This is a sure sign of his Shahada [martyrdom] and this is a sign for the other brothers as well, that this is the right path that they are on."<sup>36</sup>

### *The Martyrs of Bosnia (1997)*

Shortly after the sequel audiotape (*Under the Shades of Swords*), the first professional martyr video was released by Azzam Publications, *The Martyrs of Bosnia* (1997). In contrast to *In the Hearts of Green Birds*, it is a history of the Bosnian War from the perspective of the mujahidin and places the conflict in the broader framework of 'Western wars against Muslims'. It is for this reason that the collective dimension of salvation becomes more important.

The narrative structure of the video is of outstanding importance for its effect on the audience and the significance ascribed to the martyrs. Consisting of two parts, both about 70 minutes long, the video begins with a sequence of some 20 minutes showing the brutality of the wars waged against Muslims all over the world – as of course the narrative sees it. Six places are at the forefront: Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine and Bosnia. The suffering of the Muslim civilian population is shown in extremely graphic images: disoriented and scared little children and elderly people in hospitals with severe injuries, babies with amputated limbs, rows of bodies of children wrapped in white shrouds awaiting their funeral. In short: helplessness and despair in every respect. All these pictures are accompanied by *anashīd*. Several sequences are particularly

<sup>34</sup> *In the Hearts of Green Birds*, transcript released by Azzam Publications.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

hard to endure, like recordings of abuses inflicted on the Palestinian civilian population, probably during the First Intifada, and a sequence of three whole minutes showing injured and dead Bosnian civilians, probably in Sarajevo after one of the bombings of the Markale market.<sup>37</sup> Long sequences showing the dead and wounded, several of them in mortal agony, in haunting close-ups create a feeling of utter helplessness. One can imagine that this helplessness is easily turned into rage demanding action. The pictures of the Markale massacres are accompanied by a *nashīd* with the recurrent line “Where is the army of the Muslims?” (*Ayna jund al-muslimīn?*) The underlying message is clear – it is only by the way of action that the sense of powerlessness felt when confronted with such agonizing suffering can be converted into power.

The opening sequence is followed by the presentation of an enormous number of martyrs. Over 140 men are shown either dead (mostly badly disfigured) or while alive on private photographs or ID cards.<sup>38</sup> The sequential arrangement, which places the martyrs after the civilian casualties, indicates the collective function accorded to the martyrs for the *umma*: victims are replaced by sacrifices, and these turn powerlessness into power. This is underscored by the narrative: it follows a series of excerpts of sermons by different preachers speaking about the plight of the Muslims in Bosnia and urging the Muslims to come to their help. Directly afterwards, those who responded to the call, the mujahidin, are shown undergoing training in Bosnia. The rest of the video tells the story of the mujahidin engagement in the Bosnian War, describing different operations and battles, while eulogizing the fallen mujahidin as martyrs.

Towards the end the scope of the video is broadened again: the last martyr presented, the Egyptian Waḥīd al-Dīn, commander of the mujahidin in Bosnia, is included in a row of outstanding religious scholars and Islamist activists who mostly died as martyrs, among them ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām, Ḥasan al-Bannā’ and Aḥmad Yāsīn.<sup>39</sup> After the story of Waḥīd al-Dīn, images from other centres of mujahidin activity are shown, namely Chechnya and Afghanistan (a lot of the material in this part stems from Western television channels like CNN and BBC), indicating that the jihad is ongoing. This is underlined by the following

<sup>37</sup> In the first bombing on 5 February 1994 a mortar shell landed in the centre of the crowded marketplace, killing 68 people and wounding another 144. In the second bombing on 28 August 1995 five mortar shells killed 37 people and wounded 90. Pictures of the massacres were broadcast in television news segments all over the world at the time of the bombings (the second leading to the NATO operation Deliberate Force, which had to be justified in Western public).

<sup>38</sup> The first is Sheikh Anwar Sha‘bān, a senior leader of the Egyptian Jamā‘a Islamiyya who was killed by Croatian Special Forces in 1995. His biography is given in the tape *Under the Shades of Swords*, for a transcript of his biography, see: <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f14/biography-of-shaheed-shaykh-anwar-shaban-13/see> (retrieved 16.10.2012).

<sup>39</sup> Aḥmad Yāsīn was the spiritual leader of Hamas and was killed by an Israeli airstrike in 2004. At the time the video was produced he was in Israeli custody and released shortly afterwards at the end of 1997.

Hadith: "Jihad will be performed continuously since the day Allah sent me as a Prophet until the day the last member of my community will fight with the dajjal (Antichrist)."<sup>40</sup> The final sequences show leaders of the Chechen mujahidin, Shamil Basajev and the Saudi Ibn al-Hattab, as well as Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Here local Islamist resistance movements like Hamas and the defensive Bosnian and Chechen Wars are linked to al-Qaida, which at that time had already made the strategic shift to attack the "far enemy" on its own soil,<sup>41</sup> thereby lending it legitimacy.

### III. Collective and Personal Salvation

Most of those who joined a war as foreign mujahidin – in Bosnia, as well as in Afghanistan before and Chechnya afterwards – expressed a feeling of responsibility or an obligation to fight on behalf of their oppressed fellow Muslims. This perceived responsibility is also considered to play an important role at the onset of radicalisation processes which may eventually lead to joining al-Qaida and other Islamist terrorist organisations (or to undertaking attacks without joining an organisation at all).<sup>42</sup>

The obligation to assist oppressed Muslims militarily was most prominently formulated in terms of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) by ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām. The urgency with which he promoted martyrdom is linked to his concept of jihad as an individual duty of any (male and able) Muslim.<sup>43</sup> According to his view – which is in this respect in line with traditional concepts of jihad – jihad is a collective duty (*farḍ al-kifāya*) as long as the enemy has not reached Muslim lands. It

<sup>40</sup> Wording according to the video. The text is part of a longer Hadith: "Three belong to the roots of belief [*īmān*]; to refrain from [harming] whoever says: 'There is no god but God', and not to declare him a disbeliever because of a sin, and not to expel him from Islam because of an act, and jihad goes on since I was sent by God until my last community fights *al-dajjāl* [an eschatological figure in Islamic tradition], no despotic tyrant and no upright righteous will abolish it; and the belief in [God's] decrees." Abū Dāwūd, Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath as-Sijistānī: *Ṣaḥīḥ sunan al-mustafā*, 2 vols, ed. by Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt. Beirut [ca. 1980], No. 2532 [translation S.H.].

<sup>41</sup> For this strategic choice, see Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy. Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge 2005.

<sup>42</sup> A spectacular case of self-radicalisation through the Internet was that of Arid Uka who killed two U.S. soldiers and injured two others in March 2011 at Frankfurt airport. He stated that the catalyst for his attack was a video on *YouTube* showing U.S. soldiers raping Muslim women. As it turned out, the rape scene was part of a film (*Redacted*, 2007) dealing with the massacre of Maḥmūdiyya in Iraq in March 2006, which he failed to recognise was a fictional dramatisation.

<sup>43</sup> For ‘Azzām’s views on jihad with excerpts of major writings cf. Hegghammer, "Abdullah Azzām", 81-146, as well as Rüdiger Lohker, *Dschihadismus*, 56-60; John C. M. Calvert, "The Striving Shaykh: Abdullah Azzām and the Revival of Jihad," in: *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement Series 2 (2007) 83-102; Andrew McGregor, "Jihad and the Rifle Alone": Abdullah Azzām and the Islamist Revolution", in: *Journal for Conflict Studies* 23 (2003) 92-113.

is the duty of the imam to ensure that jihad is undertaken by a group sufficient in numbers and strength (mostly the regular army). However, in case the enemy has entered Muslim lands jihad becomes an individual duty (*farḍ al-ʿayn*) of every Muslim, a duty incumbent as doing one's prayers and fasting. As a consequence, anyone who neglects this duty commits a sin, just as he who neglects prayers and fasting. Furthermore, ʿAzzām extends the duty of personal jihad from the inhabitants of the invaded area to the Muslim *umma* on a global scale, citing amongst others the Ḥanafi scholar Ibn ʿĀbidīn (1783-1836):

[If] those nearby the attack cannot resist the enemy, or are indolent and do not fight jihad, then it becomes Farḍ ʿayn upon those behind them [...]. If they too are unable, then it becomes Farḍ ʿayn upon those behind them, and so on in the same manner until the jihad becomes Farḍ ʿayn upon the whole Ummah of Islam from East to West.<sup>44</sup>

In the lectures he delivered during his numerous trips around the globe to recruit men and raise money for the Afghan jihad, ʿAzzām even intensified this urgency by presenting martyrdom (not only fighting!) as the only way to reach forgiveness:

O' sons of Islam! What will cleanse our sins? What will purify our mistakes? And what will cleanse our dirt? It will not be washed except with the blood of martyrdom, and know that there is no path except this Path.<sup>45</sup>

The deliverance of the *umma* is thus inextricably connected to the personal salvation of every Muslim. According to ʿAzzām's sacrificial rhetoric, only martyrs are able to bring about victory, achieve glory and secure the future:

By the likes of these martyrs, nations are established, convictions are brought to life and ideologies are made victorious. [...] the clear-sighted eye and the enlightened heart knows [sic] that these sacrifices are the provisions of future generations for distant civilizations to come.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The translation follows the English translation of ʿAzzām's fatwa *Al-Difāʿ ʿan arāḍi l-muslimīn aḥammu furūd al-ʿyān* [Defence of the lands of the Muslims is the most important personal obligation]: *Defence of the Muslim Lands. The First Obligation after Iman*, Peshawar, 2nd edition, n.d., URL: [http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/Azzām\\_defence\\_5\\_chap3.htm](http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/Azzām_defence_5_chap3.htm) (retrieved 11.07.2012).

<sup>45</sup> ʿAbdullāh ʿAzzām, "Martyrs. The building blocks of nations" n. d., originally from Azzam.com, available at Religioscope.com: [http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/Azzām\\_martyrs.htm](http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/Azzām_martyrs.htm) (retrieved 21.02.2012). The translation is in large parts based on the Arabic lecture "Midād al-ʿulamāʾ wa dimāʾ al-shuhadāʾ" [The ink of the scholars and the blood of the martyrs], URL: <http://aljouffreev.com/vb/showthread.php?t=9689> (retrieved 22.03.2012). ʿAzzām would probably not have made this point in a theological treatise on the Islamic concept of forgiveness, which is not based on a blood sacrifice (be it personal or vicarious) but on repentance (*taūba*) and good deeds on the side of men, and mercy (*rahma*) on the side of God (see e.g. Koran 66:8, 9:104, 42:25, 40:3.). But on these occasions he was speaking to an audience of young men, seeking to convince them to risk their lives in Afghanistan.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

The modern myth of sacrifice as necessary for rejuvenating or keeping alive the nation, the community or the land is readily discernible in this mythical function assigned to martyrs. The idea of blood being necessary to ensure the well-being of further generations is familiar from both nationalist and communist propaganda. Both ideologies were imported into the Arabic world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Palestine the national myth of the *fidāʾī* (literally: ‘one who gives himself as a ransom’) developed, where the fighter gives himself as a ransom for the (feminised) homeland and in a ‘martyr wedding’ (*ʿurs al-shabīd*) unites with it at his death. This myth draws on traditions as varied as nationalism, mystical love poetry (*ghazal*) and the recently re-discovered oriental myth of the vegetation god Adonis (or Tammūz), and was mainly articulated in the poetry of Mahmud Darwish.<sup>47</sup> It influenced a whole generation of Palestinians, including ʿAzzām, who himself took part in the Palestinian resistance for some 18 months, which at that time (the 1960s) was nationalistic and secular in orientation – much to ʿAzzām’s dislike. ʿAzzām’s emphasis on the classical figure of the *shabīd al-māʾraka* can therefore be seen as an ‘Islamisation’ of the nationalistic *fidāʾī*. ‘Islamisation’ however does not mean a simple recurrence of something old. In the effort to produce a counter-myth, elements of this modern myth are incorporated in what seems to be an old Islamic motif at first glance. Although of minor importance in early Islamic texts where no explicit sacrificial myth is elaborated, here the notion of sacrifice is stressed to such an extent due to its rivalry with the modern myth.

#### IV. Martyr Video Production in the Era of Digital Image Processing

Whereas the VHS video *The Martyrs of Bosnia* is composed only of recordings, and for this reason serves the illusion to “tell the story as it was” in the style of a documentation, the recently emerging possibilities of digital image processing have remarkably altered the character of martyr videos. The new technology enables or expands the possibility of converting mental and verbal images into graphic ones. This is often done in a very straightforward way: an example of how elements of ʿAzzām’s sacrificial martyr myth are converted into images is the series *Winds of Paradise*<sup>48</sup> by *al-Sahab*. ʿAzzām stated that Islam itself is only

<sup>47</sup> See Angelika Neuwirth, “From Sacrilege to Sacrifice: Observations on Violent Death in Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry,” in: *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. by Friederike Pannewick, Wiesbaden 2004, 259–281.

<sup>48</sup> The series consists of five parts so far, the first released in July 2007 and the last in October 2010. The videos can be found at archive.org and elsewhere in the Internet. As the anonymous user who put the third part in archive.org wrote, *al-Sahab* follows with the series the model of *In the Hearts of Green Birds* and develops it further: “The Winds of Paradise’ series is the same thing, but takes on a much more personal approach as you actually get to see these Mujahideen and how they lived their lives as pious warriors.” <http://archive.org/details/winds-of-heaven-3> (retrieved 05.11.2012).



Fig. 1: Screen shot of the video *Winds of Paradise (I)*

provided for and safeguarded by the sacrifices of martyrs, describing their blood as the water that irrigates the tree of Islam,<sup>49</sup> the “water of life for this religion.”<sup>50</sup> The first video in the series *Winds of Paradise* features, as way of introduction, a computer animation visualising this statement: a video recording of one of ‘Azzām’s lectures is inserted into the animation of arid land with desiccated trees. The recording features the statement already mentioned at the beginning of our considerations: “Our words remain dead, like waxen dolls, unmoving and frozen, until when we die for them, they rise up, alive, to live among the living” (see fig. 1). Simultaneously the trees in the background once again flourish and the earth becomes green as the names of the seven martyrs to be presented appear in golden letters in the sky.<sup>51</sup>

The same iconography is used in the third part of *Winds of Paradise*, which is dedicated to Abū Laith al-Libī, a senior leader of al-Qaida killed in January 2008 by an unmanned CIA Predator drone. In this case not only the name in golden letters appears, but something like a virtual shrine is erected for the martyr, with

<sup>49</sup> ‘Azzām, *‘Ushshaq al-hur*, n. p.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Azzām, “Midād al-‘ulamā’ wa dimā’ al-shuhadā’” [author’s translation]

<sup>51</sup> Another statement of ‘Azzām alluding to this image: “The extent to which righteous convictions and correct beliefs spread within a nation, is the extent to which it plants its roots in the depths of the earth and sends forth orchards of trunks with their flourishing leaves so that Man can take shade by it from the troubles of life, its financial fever and from the flame of hatred, envy and competition for cheap thrills and temporary enjoyment. As for the Muslim Ummah, it does continue to exist in the course of history of humankind, except by a divine ideology [sic] and the blood which flows as a result of spreading this divine ideology and implanting it into the real World.” ‘Abdullāh ‘Azzām, “Martyrs. The Building Blocks of Nations”.



Fig 2: Screen shot of the video *Winds of Paradise (III)* the golden letters give the name Abū Laith al-Libī, the four cubic structures display video recordings of al-Libī.

four cubic structures displaying videos of al-Libī (see fig. 2). This is an especially striking example for the all-out martyr cult of al-Qaida despite its severe reservations against hagiolatry stemming from their Wahhābī/Salafī doctrine.<sup>52</sup> Whereas real Šūfī shrines are something to be detested, virtual shrines which visualise the elevated status in the Hereafter may be erected.

The image of the flourishing land refers directly (if however probably unwillingly) to one of the sources of the modern sacrificial myth of the *fidāʾī*: the myth of the vegetational god Adonis (or Tammūz), who dies periodically and rejuvenates the land with his blood. Ironically, this myth was reintroduced to the Middle East by the work of the European anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941), whose book *The Golden Bough* was partly translated into Arabic.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> The integration of hagiographic elements into Islamist discourse also goes back to ‘Azzām. As Cook writes: “Although radical Islam overall is hostile to Sufi mysticism, ‘Azzām essentially adopted its cult of holy men but changed it into a cult of martyrs.” David Cook et al., *Understanding and Addressing Suicide Attacks. The Faith and Politics of Martyrdom Operations*, Westport 2007, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Together with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, it influenced modern Arab poets in the 1950s and became a vital reference point in cultural criticism and the call for a renewal of society after the end of colonialism. See e.g. Terri De Young, *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq*, Albany 1998.



The animation is therefore a telling example of how ancient and modern sacrificial myths and the Islamic tradition come together to form a syncretic martyr cult.

At the same time though, examples of images relating to the collective dimension of innerworldly salvation are rare. It is evident, as the rest of the video shows, that the personal dimension of salvation is much easier to put into images. A number of motifs employed in visually presenting the martyrs are taken from Hadiths: the golden letters are reminiscent of the golden lanterns in Paradise in which the green birds take their rest for the night. According to one tradition, these lanterns are hanging from the “throne” (*‘arsb*) of God and therefore indicate a particular nearness to God.<sup>54</sup> The *nashīd* in the background, of which the English subtitles are given, makes these allusions explicit:

Don't I only die once in my life? So why not make its finale martyrdom?  
When the soul of the Shaheed rises and approaches and God raises it up to a lofty status  
In the bodies of birds circling in Paradise and singing above the palaces and warbling.<sup>55</sup>

Each time the story of another martyr begins his name is shown in golden letters emerging out of a glittering light streaming down above a larger band of green light. Green is the colour of Islam, obviously the birds as well, and at the same time indicates Paradise.<sup>56</sup> In the accompanying *nashīd* the martyr speaks from the Hereafter and refers to the Koranic verse 3:169:

I am in the Garden of Eternity, I did not die/ I have become a new creation in the Gardens  
So I am here, still alive, by my Lord/ And living happily in the care of God.

These lines, together with the images showing the martyr already in Paradise, anticipate God's decision to accept the fallen as a martyr. Traditionally, the decision whether a person is considered to be a martyr or not is made by God, therefore after naming a martyr the words “we consider him (or her) so” are added. While this wording is used in the videos, the images and the text of the *nashīd* run contrary to it. Additionally – as in the other videos and in ‘Azzām’s marty-

<sup>54</sup> See the Hadith mentioned in footnote 29.

<sup>55</sup> The rest of the text relates to the well-known Hadith mentioned before which lists the seven favours granted the martyr, who here speaks of himself:

“Seven are won by the Shaheed to honor him/ If you have a heart, then tell me what they are

The sin is forgiven with the first drop/ And I see my high place and abode  
And am [sic] secure from the horror and torment of the grave/ How delightful! And saved from the resurrection

And crowned with the crown of dignity/ And given intercession for relatives, both near and distant

And the houris [Paradise maidens] await my arrival longingly”

<sup>56</sup> The green colour and light seem to be standard elements in martyr videos. It is also used for example in the production by al-Malahim *And he may take martyrs from among you* (June 2010), accessible at archive.org (retrieved 15.10.2012). For more on this video see below.

rology –, miracles confirm the rank of a martyr, like the scent of musk emanating from the body or the blood, miracles which, according to the Hadiths, appear only in the Hereafter, when the martyrs stand before God.

The collective dimension is addressed almost only *verbally* by several al-Qaida-related preachers, e.g.: “Our beloved Ummah: your heroic sons and courageous knights went out to the land of Afghanistan [...]. They went out to lift from their Ummah the humiliation and weakness [...].”<sup>57</sup> Whereas the personal bliss of the martyrs is taken for granted and visualised in images of Paradise, the collective salvation of the *umma*, which is expected as an outcome from the martyrs’ sacrifices, is only promised in an undefined future. The individual salvation of the martyrs thus compensates for the collective salvation which has failed to materialise.

Whereas in the case of the Afghan War it is plausible to claim that the mujahidin achieved a real success by forcing the Soviet Army to retreat,<sup>58</sup> it is much more difficult to find a similar success for al-Qaida. Al-Qaida can only claim ‘victories’ on a symbolic level and this is why the attacks on New York and Washington are so important. Because in the period after 2001 the attacks of al-Qaida targeted mainly Muslim civilians, the claim to be working for the deliverance of the *umma* is in fact cynical – a fact that is al-Qaida’s weakest point when it comes to its reputation amongst Muslims and is of course not hidden to its propagandists.<sup>59</sup> This applies in particular to the majority of suicide attacks carried out by al-Qaida-related groups in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. It is therefore not surprising that the media representation of such attacks in propaganda videos concentrates on the attacker, not on the impact of his act.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the mujahidin in the defensive wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya at least earned a lot of sympathy amongst Muslims, even though only a few made their way to the battlefields, this is not the case with the terrorist attacks on civilians by al-Qaida and others. However, al-Qaida and similar groups still seem to consider martyrs as the most effective means to win the hearts of the Muslims and awaken the *umma*. One of the mujahidin in *Winds of Paradise* states: “The lamp of martyrdom has kindled in the Ummah.”<sup>61</sup> Wishful thinking may be one

<sup>57</sup> Shaykh Muṣṭafā Abū al-Yazīd in al-Sahab, *Winds of Paradise*, Part 1, URL: [http://archive.org/details/windsofparadise1\\_english](http://archive.org/details/windsofparadise1_english) (retrieved 05.11.2012). The text follows the English subtitles.

<sup>58</sup> The real impact of the Arab Afghans on the Afghan War is disputed.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. criticism of al-Qaida by non-Jihadist Salafists like Salmān al-ʿAwda in Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism. Theory and Practice*, New York 2009, 57. Within al-Qaida Abū Muṣʿab al-Zarqāwī was heavily criticised for his excessive violence against civilians in Iraq, especially by his own former mentor al-Maḥdī, see Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Akil N. Awan et al., *Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology*, New York 2011, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Al-Sahab, *Winds of Paradise* Part 2, URL: [http://archive.org/details/windsofparadise2\\_AMEF](http://archive.org/details/windsofparadise2_AMEF) (retrieved 09.10.2012).

of the reasons why they present their martyrs over and over again, another being the need for compensation for the failure on the real battlefields.

### V. *Images of Death*

Given that death is naturally the greatest taboo in war propaganda, it is at first striking how explicit death is shown in Jihadist media. The martyr cult converts the taboo into a site where the liminal space between life and death can be explored. As the martyr is taken to be not dead but living with God (according to Koran 3:169), the bodies and even more so the faces are searched for signs of this otherworldly life. The images of martyrs therefore are images of both death and eternal life. Again the mode in which these images are employed differs greatly in different phases.

A number of video clips feature a dying mujahidin. A “classic” amongst these is a sequence from a longer video series (*The Russian Hell*) dealing with the struggle of the Chechen rebels, which shows the fighter Abū Saʿīd al-Qurtashāʿī.<sup>62</sup> It first shows a group of wounded mujahidin who endure their injuries with composure, some of them even laughing to the camera. Others are already dead and one of the martyrs is buried with his blood-stained clothes and without the white shrouds which are otherwise used in Islamic ritual.<sup>63</sup> The last two minutes are devoted to Abū Saʿīd al-Qurtashāʿī, otherwise unknown and famous amongst Jihadists only for his death.<sup>64</sup> The camera follows the trail of his blood, flowing from a wound in his leg. It moves over his body to his arm, also severely injured, and then shows his face distorted in pain. As there is no original sound his screams are silent and only the accompanying *nashīd* can be heard. A green box with his name and the words *rahimalu llah* (“may God have mercy on him” – a wish for the dead) appears, indicating that he will soon die.

The next shot shows his face relaxed and even though the original sound is missing one can tell by the movements of his lips that he is uttering the words “Lā ilāha illā llāh” (“There is no God but God”), the first part of the Islamic statement of belief recommended to be said before one’s death. The camera then

<sup>62</sup> The sequence, or parts of it, can be found in various versions on YouTube and elsewhere. The video considered here was uploaded on *YouTube* (Shaheed in Chechenya [sic]) and is about five minutes long. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shfd5uPmOC0&feature=related> (retrieved 09.10.2012).

<sup>63</sup> This practice goes back to traditions claiming that the Prophet buried the fallen Muslims after the battle of Uhūd in their clothes. For the discussions about the funeral rituals for martyrs see Etan Kohlberg, Art. Shahīd, *Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup>, Vol. IX, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> It is not clear whether Abū Saʿīd al-Qurtashāʿī is his real name or a *nom de guerre* and where he comes from. A short text says that he had been in Bosnia. However, the source is unclear. (URL: <http://ejabat.google.com/ejabat/thread?tid=1315cd3af0699749>, retrieved 09.10.2012). The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point mistakenly uses his name for the Chechen leader Shamīl Basayev in the description of several images, see e.g. here: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/imagery/0146> (retrieved 09.10.2012).



Fig. 3: screen shot showing Abū Saʿīd al-Qurtashāʿī

zooms out and it becomes apparent that all his limbs are severely injured and he has lost an enormous amount of blood. The last 90 seconds concentrate mainly on his face. The cameraman obviously catches his very last breath and afterwards he lies calmly on the ground, a peaceful smile on his face. While the pain of dying is not hidden, it comes across as soothed without the original sound and with the consoling text of the *nashīd*. The peaceful last breath (or what is presented as such) recalls a Hadith, where death for a martyr is compared to the pinch of a gnat (see fig. 3).

These pictures are not only a documentation of the wounding and death of a fighter. They also tell a story and relate in many ways to the Islamic tradition surrounding martyrdom: the blood shown in the beginning refers to the forgiveness of sins, which according to the aforementioned Hadith takes place “with the first spurt of his blood”, while the host of wounds and severed limbs stand for his readiness to make sacrifices. In accounts on the Muslim fighters engaged in the battles at the time of the Prophet, the number of injuries they suffered is often given and a high number indicates their braveness and fighting strength. In modern times, when fighting is no longer chivalric face-to-face combat and the enemy remains mostly unseen, sat in aircraft and behind other technical devices, injuries are no longer a sign of fighting strength but are imbued with a soteriological function for the community. According to ‘Azzām, blood, skulls and invalids are the requirements of glory:

Glory does not build its lofty edifice except with skulls. Honour and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses. [...] Indeed those who think that they can change reality, or change societies, without blood, sacrifices and invalids, without pure, innocent souls, then they do not understand the essence of this Deen [religion] [...].<sup>65</sup>

In shorter versions of the described sequence, often included in other video productions, it is mainly the peaceful face of the deceased that is shown, while the signs of pain are left out (for example, the sequence of al-Qurtashāʾī's last breath is included in the video testament of Aḥmad al-Ḥaznāwī mentioned at the beginning, when he speaks about the honour of dying as a martyr). A number of videos only feature martyrs with undamaged faces, giving the impression that a martyr's death is very easy. Series of pictures and clips, all of which last only a few seconds, join images from different places and times, showing one smiling dead man after another, including al-Qurtashāʾī.<sup>66</sup> As discussed, his death was originally part of a greater story, and the viewer here would know in which war he had fought, what his name was and what his injuries were. In such martyr series, however, one hardly gets to know who the men are, where they died and for what reason they fought, other than to attain martyrdom.

Another genre of martyr videos even more conceptual are those produced to accompany excerpts from ʿAzzām's lectures and sermons on martyrs. One of these, again to be found on *YouTube*, features the following English subtitles to the lecture held in Arabic:<sup>67</sup>

Those are Martyrs. Makers of History. Building blocks of Nations. Makers of glory. Chanters of honour. Those are Building blocks of nations. Laying down for the Ummah (Muslim Nation), its honour. Their skulls – towers of honour. Their bodies – Buildings of dignity. Them – their blood – the water of life for this Deen [religion S.H.] till the Day of Resurrection. They – are martyrs. They bear witness that the principles are more valuable than life and also the morals, are more expensive than the souls and that the laws by which man lives to implement (laws of Allah) are more expensive than the bodies. And Nations, that do not sacrifice blood do not deserve to live – and do not live. "If you march not forth, He will punish you with a painful torment and will replace you by another people...". (Koran, 9:39)

In the background the viewer sees a seaside at sunset, waves breaking on the shore. Alluding to Paradise, this idyllic view is superimposed with pictures and video recordings of martyrs, shown in the upper left part of the screen. The name and country of origin of the martyr are given in Arabic. The multiple lay-

<sup>65</sup> ʿAbdullāh ʿAzzām, "Martyrs. The Building Blocks of Nations".

<sup>66</sup> There are numerous of such 'martyr series' produced by *YouTube* users, for an example see "Smiling martyrs", URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMulYGQwWLO> (retrieved 06.11.2012).

<sup>67</sup> "The Station of the Shuhada (Martyrs) – Shaykh Abdullah Azzam", URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nl0sJSduQ-Q> (retrieved 14.09.2012). Translation, spelling, and punctuation of the subtitles are kept. Full stops or dashes are added before the beginning of a new subtitle, except when it is clear that a sentence continues.

ers of images (sometimes the image on the left is composed of up to three different smaller ones) are paralleled by a double audio track: the voice of ‘Azzām is accompanied by *anashīd* about Jihad and martyrdom. On the one hand, the viewer is hardly able to grasp the information presented in the multitude of images and voices; on the other hand though, there is hardly any specific information offered. At first the martyrs are shown while still alive, engaged in military action or training and posing with weapons; then the face of the dead man is blended in. All the viewer gets to know is that the fighter is dead; we do not learn where and when he died or how he fought before he died, since it is not even clear that the fighting scenes shown involved him. Whereas such details may be related in textual martyrologies like *Lovers of the Paradise Maidens* and in the longer video productions, these images are completely devoid of any information aside from the name and the country of origin.

This arrangement is highly conceptual and appears as a visualisation of a Koranic verse that ‘Azzām also cites in the lecture from which an excerpt is presented in this video clip (“Martyrs. The Building Blocks of Nations”): “God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the way of God; they kill, and are killed [...]” (9:111) In Jihadist discourse the verse serves to establish an exclusive connection between fighting, death and salvation.<sup>68</sup> The images of mujahidin fighting and dying, together with the indication that they get to enjoy Paradise, are a visualisation of this concept.

The abstract representation of death in battle as martyrdom matches the thoughts ‘Azzām sets out in his lecture: the martyrs are not making a sacrifice to a specific cause (like the liberation of Afghanistan), but are foremost witnesses to higher principles. Furthermore, they have the mythical function in preserving the *umma*: according to another of ‘Azzām’s lectures, “their sacrifices are the provision for the future generations for long centuries”.<sup>69</sup>

Whereas the earlier productions like *Martyrs in Bosnia* and the videos produced about the mujahidin in Chechnya feature disfigured corpses and faces as well as injured fighters (albeit never demoralised), the shorter martyr clips tend to avoid graphic pictures and show the martyr peaceful and smiling. Particular cases are suicide bombers and fighters struck by bombs, who, shredded into pieces, cannot be shown. In such cases only pictures taken when they are alive are used, as is the case with the al-Qaida’s 9/11 martyrs, whose recorded last wills are presented while in the background pictures of the impact of the attacks are shown.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Verse 9:111, which is frequently cited in Jihadist circles, is an illustrative example for the arbitrary and reductionist way they treat the sources; for a discussion of this verse see Silvia Horsch, *Tod im Kampf*, 107ff.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Azzām, “Midād al-‘ulamā’ wa dimā’ al-shuhadā” [author’s translation].

<sup>70</sup> One has to note that these videos do not contribute to the still disputed question whether the men really were the attackers. Their statements do not include any hint to the attacks as they only speak generally of their intention to fight the Americans. Any connections to

Another option often deployed is to portray the “living martyrs” who are considered to have revealed signs of their future martyrdom. As is frequently related in the biographies of martyrs, those who went on to die as martyrs anticipated their martyrdom (e.g. in dreams) and were in particular high spirits, so that signs of their coming martyrdom were noticeable in their voices or faces. One attempt to put these signs into images is to show the martyrs to-be smiling. A striking example is a more recent martyr video produced by the al-Malahim Foundation, the media arm of AQAP, the Yemen-based group al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula. *And He May Take Martyrs From You*, as the video is entitled (referring to the Koran verse 3:140), was made in 2010.<sup>71</sup> It is about five members of AQAP killed on 15 September 2009.<sup>72</sup> Pictures showing the martyrs-to-be in high spirits are standard, but here the producers of this video have made especially heavy use of such material. The men are shown smiling with a fey look, as if there were already no longer part of this world, an impression underscored by the green background from which lights moving like falling stars emerge and take their way into their photos. Their voices, reinforced with artificial reverberations, create the impression that they already speaking from the after world. Several times the men are shown smiling in slow motion, in particular Abū Yaqīn – a handsome looking young man with a charming smile, at one instance presented for a full minute. This manipulation creates the weird impression that one is watching an advertising spot, for example for toothpaste,<sup>73</sup> were it not for the stern voice in the background talking about jihad and martyrdom. The analogy to advertisement is by no means arbitrary, since these pictures aim to entice the viewer to act in a certain way. The pictures thus belong to “sorts of direct expressions of pictorial desire [which] are [...] generally associated with ‘vulgar’ modes of imaging—commercial advertising and political or religious propaganda.”<sup>74</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that they not only rely on Western technology but also on Western pictorial language.

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the attacks of September 11 (like the pictures of the destroyed towers, etc.) are added at a later stage in producing the video.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Malahim, *And He May Take Martyrs From You* (June 2010), accessible at archive.org, URL: <http://archive.org/details/TheEnglishTranslationOfAl-malahimsReleaseAndMayHeTakeMartyrsFromYou> (retrieved 16.10.2012). One of the martyrs, Abū Yaqīn, was detained in Guantanamo and included in an anti-radicalisation programme – obviously to no avail. The video also contains two excerpts from recorded lectures by ‘Azzām.

<sup>72</sup> From the video it neither becomes clear where exactly this happened (whether in Saudi Arabia or Yemen, as only the Arabian Peninsula is mentioned) nor who dropped the bomb (local authorities or the Americans).

<sup>73</sup> Actually *kitsch* is an integral part of martyr videos (cf. computer animated campfire and motifs like horsemen etc). This applies likewise to the sound, e.g. to the “acoustic icons”, as Philipp Holtman puts it aptly (Philipp Holtman, “Virtual Leadership: How Jihadists guide each other in cyberspace”, in Lohlker, *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism: Online and Offline*, Göttingen 2012, 77f.). These are e.g. sound of swords drawn out of the sheaths (used several times in *And He May Take Martyrs From You*), or the chirping sound of birds, referring to the green birds in Paradise (for this example see Holtmann, 77f.).

<sup>74</sup> W.J.T: Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago 2005, 39.



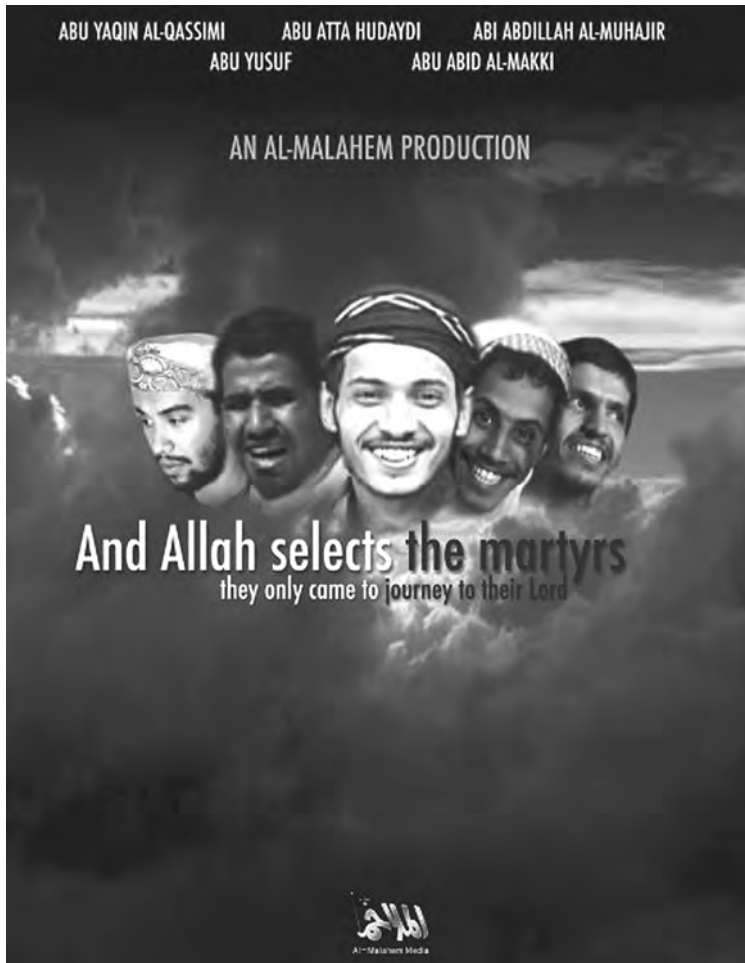


Fig. 4: Advertising image for the video *And He May Take Martyrs From You*

In the same way an advertising image for the video was created for the second issue of *Inspire* (see fig. 4), an English-language magazine apparently linked to AQAP which with its colloquial language and numerous pictures and graphics seemed to be designed to appeal to young (male) Muslims living in the West.<sup>75</sup> Imitating Hollywood film posters, the image is a very explicit example for the function of Western media as a role model, not only for Jihadist media but also for Jihadist action, as remarked on earlier.<sup>76</sup> This feature becomes increasingly

<sup>75</sup> This magazine received a lot of attention in Western media, however, with regard to the contents there is hardly anything new, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Un-Inspired” in: *Jihadica*, 6 June 2010, URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/un-inspired/> (retrieved 06.11.2012).

<sup>76</sup> “From spectacular attacks to sundry communiqués and beheadings, the jihad’s world of reference is far more connected to the dreams and nightmares of the media, than it is to

visible as Jihadism is presented as “Jihad Cool”, as a youth subculture, a trend which intensifies with the on-going Web 2.0 stage of Cyberjihad.<sup>77</sup>

Once again, in this video the personal dimension of salvation is translated into images and pictures, while the collective dimension is only verbally addressed. With the insistent misjudgement of reality typical for Jihadists when it comes to the effects of martyrdom, the narrator states: “Their lives came to an end after many hopes of Muslims had come true. [...] Their lives came to an end after the jihad issue had become a case of all Muslims after it used to be that of the elites.”

It is easy to criticise such images as “unreal”, especially when one considers the real situation “on the ground”, the overall failure of the Jihadist organisations to reach their goals. This becomes especially evident in the last example: the planned attack failed completely as the men were killed by a bomb during their preparations. However, such a critique is misguided in two ways: firstly, the (expected) individual salvation of the martyrs compensates for the failure of any operations (and the greater goals in general); secondly, these images gain their power precisely by not showing reality. As W.J.T. Mitchell puts it: “It is never enough to simply point out the error of a metaphor, or the lack of reality in an image. It is equally important to trace the process by which the metaphoric becomes literal, and the image becomes actual.”<sup>78</sup> Images may gain an “operational reality”<sup>79</sup> and this is obviously the case with the martyr images of al-Qaida and the like, which draw on Islamic symbols and motifs as well as modern sacrificial myths. Jihadist media has been very effective in creating and perpetuating a martyr cult, even though recruit numbers remain small and the media production of Jihadist organisations primarily addresses their immediate followers:

The creation of a martyr cult is probably the most worrying ‘success’ of more than thirty years of Jihadi propaganda, which gained interpretative dominance over numerous Islamic symbols and ideas. Today martyrdom in Islam is equated with suicide attacks not only by Jihadists but the broader public as well.<sup>80</sup>

However – and this point is equally important – the operational reality of images may change according to different historic and political circumstances. This can be observed in Arabic countries with regard to martyr pictures in the recent years.

## VI. Latest Developments and Future Prospects

The equation mentioned above seems to disintegrate with the events of the so-called Arab Spring, which has brought forth numerous martyrs and continues to

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any traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence or political thought.” Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad. Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, London 2007, 90.

<sup>77</sup> Asiem Defraoui, *jihad.de*, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Mitchell, *Cloning terror. The war of images. 9/11 to the present*, Chicago 2011, XVIII.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Asiem Defraoui, *jihad.de*, 16 [author’s translation].

do so. The non-violent martyrs of Egypt and Tunisia turned out to be much more 'effective' according to the martyr logic (even though it turned out that the struggle for freedom is by far not over with the downfall of the respective presidents and that the old powers may return, as recent events in Egypt since summer 2013 have shown). The stories of the martyrs on Tahrir Square in Cairo and elsewhere are told in various media and especially in the Internet the martyrs are commemorated. Islamist groups, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, also have their martyrs of the revolutions. The commemoration of these martyrs shows that there is another model in Islamist discourse available besides the Jihadi fighter and suicide bomber. One example is the story of the student and member of the Muslim Brotherhood 'Abd al-Karīm, who was shot during a demonstration on Tahrir Square. His story was told several times by Ṣafwat Hijāzī, one of the Muslim Brotherhood's organisers of the protests on Tahrir Square, on Arabic television channels.<sup>81</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm is also connected to the Islamic martyr tradition, however in a significantly different way: the martyr on the battlefield is not the model, but the person taking a stand against injustice. His martyrdom is related to the prophetic Hadith: "The master of martyrs is Hamza [one of the Prophet's uncles 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."<sup>82</sup>

A video on *YouTube* commemorating 'Abd al-Karīm shows elements of the Islamist rhetoric and iconography familiar from Jihadist discourse,<sup>83</sup> such as the citing of the Koranic verse 3:169: "Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided, rejoicing in the bounty that God has given them [...]". This verse is generally understood to relate to those killed in military jihad, and has been almost monopolised in the martyr media production of those organisations deploying suicide bombings. In the aforementioned story jihad is used in a broader sense, one that nonetheless refers to roots in the tradition as a prophetic Hadith indicates: "The best jihad is to speak a word of truth to a tyrant".<sup>84</sup> Also included in this video is the quotation from 'Azzām cited at the beginning, which is part of so many video productions on martyrs: "Our words remain dead, like waxen dolls, unmoving and frozen, until when we die for them, they rise up, alive, to live among the living." Formally, this video very much resembles the martyr videos discussed above: 'Abd al-Karīm is shown talking and smiling (again in slow motion), *nashīd* can be heard in the background, the viewer is told that the smell of musk emanated

<sup>81</sup> For a more detailed account of his story see my article in this volume "Global martyr practices and discourses".

<sup>82</sup> The actual text reads not "ruler" but "imām". Al-Ḥākim, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-ṣaḥīḥayn*, Vol. 2, Book 31, No 4884/482.

<sup>83</sup> "Shahid al-thaura 'Abd al-Karīm Aḥmad Rajab" (Martyr of the revolution 'Abd al-Karīm Aḥmad Rajab) URL: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmE2ssqDW\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmE2ssqDW_Y) (retrieved 20.05.2012).

<sup>84</sup> Related in several Hadith collections as Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* II, No. 4344, Ibn Māja, *Sunan* II, No. 4011, al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, No. 2174.

from his blood and pictures of him dead show the peaceful smile. However, elements adopted by the radical martyr discourse are now used to commemorate those who died during civil demonstrations, a transformation which (re-)claims these elements from al-Qaida's discourse and its focus on the exclusive connection of martyrdom and violence.

It is arguably not possible to predict whether the non-violent model of martyrdom will become more potent than the violent version. Most probably they will exist side by side, with one model preferred to the other depending on the respective circumstances. As the case of Syria (and Libya earlier) has shown, non-violent resistance can turn to violent insurgency when the regime fails to respond in a positive way, increasing repression instead. What is certain is that in the Arab (and the Muslim) public the martyrs of the 'Arab Revolutions' are of far greater significance than the martyrs of al-Qaida and the like.