The Discursive Construction of Palestinian *istishhādiyyāt* within the Frame of Martyrdom

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On 27 January, 2002 Wafāʾ Idrīs committed an act of self-sacrifice, or in other words a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. She was the first female *istishhādī* ('one who brings about martyrdom on him/herself', a neologism used in the parlance of the Palestinian groups which support those acts)[1] in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A couple of other women followed her example, attracting from then on the attention of the media. The period of the Second Intifada (2001–2005) was characterised by severe political unrest and extreme insecurity. Clashes between Israeli troops and Palestinians increased in their intensity. Both sides resorted to extreme forms of force, the Israelis employing air attacks on civilians, while the Palestinian militant resistance organisations launched attacks on settlers and Israeli military bases within the occupied Palestinian territories.[2] In addition, martyrdom operations were now used frequently as a method to fight the occupation. Nonetheless, suicide bombings or acts of self-sacrifice are territorially or geographically not bound to Palestine or the region of the Middle East and North Africa, indeed they are not even an entirely new phenomenon in political conflicts around the world.[3]

I intend to show how Palestinians deal with the *istishhādiyyāt,* how it is possible that they are glorified within the realm of martyrdom and resistance, and how ideological or manipulative practices are employed. Although modern discourses[4] (esp. nationalism) play a decisive role in the construction of the *istishhādiyyāt*, the figure of the modern martyr has its roots in religious tradition. How

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1 The term *ʿamaliyyat istishhādiyya* ("Martyrdom Operation") was first used by the Hizbullah in Lebanon during the Lebanon War (1975-1990). See Christoph Reuter, *Mein Leben ist eine Waffe. Selbstmordattentäter. Psychogramm eines Phänomens*, Munich 2002, 107.

2 This term is used to refer to the Gaza Strip (Gaza), the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It was first introduced at the Oslo Accords (Oslo I). Even though Gaza is technically no longer occupied by Israeli settlers, Israeli military incursions still take place regularly. Moreover, Israel controls the airspace, the territorial waters and the borders, which is just another form of occupation. Thus, throughout this paper the term "(occupied) Palestinian territories" or "Palestine" is used synonymously for the three areas.

3 Such attacks have been used by organisations elsewhere, such as the PKK in Turkey (Kurdistan), the LTTE in Sri Lanka, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and by various organisations and individuals in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the Black Widows in Chechnya or the Kamikaze fighters in Japan. These are examples from other geographical areas with different socio-political and religious backgrounds.

4 I use the plural discourses since it is not one single discourse that deals with the *istishhādiyyāt*. Some of these discourses are overlapping, some complementary, while others are opposed and conflicting.

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can the relationship between the religious and the nationalist element be described? What are the processes that glorify the *istishhādiyyāt* as martyrs? What is the impact of these modern discourses on the changing role of women?

I. Contexts of Modern Palestinian Resistance: Religious Nationalism and the Status of Women

Women not only fought in the rebellion of 1834[5] – during the Ottoman period – against the Egyptian occupation by the ruler Muḥammad ʿAlī, but also in the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, the struggles for independence since 1967 and the First and the Second Intifada. Yet, "the inclusion of women in the public sphere [was] to a large extent utilitarian (because conservative gender norms were viewed as barriers to national liberation)."[6] The nationalist discourse dominated all parts of the Palestinian social milieu: nationalism was (and still is) the unifying factor that transformed society into an active resisting and dynamic project. All of these developments can be summarised in what Joseph Massad calls "nation first, women after".[7] Women's issues were again subjected to the national goal of regaining the homeland.

The central importance given to nationalism in the resistance struggle is also perceptible in the context of martyrdom operations and women's involvement therein. However, as far as the martyrdom discourse of the *istishhādiyyāt* is concerned, a religious language has been adopted that was absent with regard to the women previously actively involved in the resistance. Women were thus included in the discourse of "religious nationalism" which the Islamists and the nationalists mutually employ in their language and to describe their actions.[8] In the

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5 This was already the third rebellion against Ottoman rule in which women participated. Two uprisings (primarily directed at the tax collection policies, perceived as unjustifiable, of the ruling system) took place in Jerusalem in 1703-1705 (the rebellion of Naqīb al-Ashrāf) and in 1825-1826, both lasting for about two years, whereas the third revolt was put down after a couple of months. The latter is of special significance though, because large parts of the Palestinian population, both urban and rural from throughout the area, took part, while the first two revolts were geographically concentrated. Cf. the article by the Palestinian historian Adel Manna, "Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Rebellions in Palestine", in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 24 (1994), 51-66 and Gudrun Krämer, *Geschichte Palästinas. Von der osmanischen Eroberung bis zur Gründung des Staates Israel,* Munich 2006, 53ff.

6 Frances S. Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeats", in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), 491-510.

7 Joseph Massad, "Conceiving the masculine: Gender and Palestinian nationalism", in: *The Middle East Journal* 49 (1995), 469.

8 Nationalism and its meaning have to be defined in order for to use the combined term "religious nationalism". According to Friedland, "[n]ationalism is not ideology. It is a discursive practice by which the territorial identity of a state and the cultural identity of a people whose collective representation it claims are constituted as a singular institutional fact. […] Nationalism offers a form of representation – the joining of state, territoriality, and culture. It has nothing to say about the content of representation, the identity of that

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words of Roger Friedland, the marriage between religion and nationalism is represented as follows: "religion partakes of the symbolic order of the nation-state and […] contemporary nationalisms are suffused with the religious."[9]

Religious nationalism is a discursive process that employs narratives, rituals, symbols and myths to strengthen identities and fulfil societal needs for solace. The amalgamation of religious and nationalist motives in militant resistance is important to keep the resistance kindled and to alleviate society's feelings of despair and worry. Religious narratives are woven around the web of nationalist intentions and both the nationalist and the Islamic movement "make politicized use of ritual spaces and religious ritual practices as devices for mobilization."[10] This elevates the struggle for independence from a merely territorial dimension onto a higher transcendental domain.

II. Gendered Martyrdom

The analytical concept of gender and the notion of martyrdom can be brought together in the term *gendered martyrdom.* This concept links a certain form of death or dying – which is perceived as martyrdom – with the social category of gender, thus focussing on the specificity of male or female martyrdom and the question whether male martyrdom is different from (or similar to) female martyrdom. In either case this difference of meaning (i.e. male vs. female) is noteworthy and makes *gendered martyrdom* a binary-termed concept.

Martyrdom (including martyrdom operations) in the Palestinian context takes place as sacrifice within the scope of the notion *fī sabīli 'llāh* (i.e. in the way of God) and/or in the context of the homeland.[11] In order to uphold the struggle for independence (i.e. Palestinian resistance), relevant symbols and icons are produced and used.[12] The social construction and transformation of reality is thus a creative, culturally communicative and communicated process. The term 'martyr' (*shahīd*) or 'self-sacrificer' (*istishhādī*) for a suicide bomber is one such symbol and

collective subject, or its values. Religion offers an institutionally specific way to organize this modern form of collective representation, how a collectivity represents itself to itself, the symbols, signs, and practices through which it is and knows itself to be." Cf. Roger Friedland, "Religious Nationalism and the Problem of Collective Representation", in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001), 138.

9 Ibid. 126.

10 Ibid. 140.

11 It is also linked to other notions like resistance, trauma, narratives of suffering and objects of commemoration, collective mourning and the celebration of funerals (which can however not be further elaborated on due to the limited scope of this article).

12 In this context, the notions of 'culture of death', 'new social movement' or 'rite de passage' (for instance in relation to resistance) play a decisive role with respect to Palestinian self-sacrificers. Cf. for these concepts Julie Peteet, "Male gender and rituals of resistance in the Palestinian intifada: A cultural politics of violence", in: *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Middle East,* ed. by Mai Ghoussoub et al., London 2000, 103-126 and Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, London 1998.

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his or her death combines religious and nationalistic connotations. The same applies to the myths, of which the best example is the myth of the "Palestinian wedding", re-contextualised in texts glorifying the martyrs. Instead of referring to it as an event of sadness, death is considered to be a wedding ceremony in which the dead is wedded to the land Palestine. As a symbolic act, this wedding represents the suffering of the Palestinian people, a suffering enriched with new meaning through the transformation of the (upcoming) funeral into a wedding ceremony.[13]

The myth of the "Palestinian wedding" is also referred to in the glorifying text on Ayāt al-Akhras, irrespective of the fact that she is a woman.[14] While Palestine was formerly connoted to be feminine, in this case the land is depicted to be a male bridegroom:

> For today is her wedding, even though she does not wear the white dress and even though no bridal procession to her groom takes place ... she was adorned with her red and proud blood which transformed her into a Palestinian wedding ... she wanted to be wedded to her ["]bridegroom["] [the earth Palestine] exclusively in the 'blood-suit', with ["]which["] only the likes of her consummate the marriage – in order to create the pride of her people by means of her success in killing and injuring dozens of Zionist occupiers in a successful and heroic operation.[15]

Moreover, this passage creates a mythical reference to blood: the blood of the *shuhadāʾ* and the *istishhādiyyūn* is a recurring theme alluded to in various texts, songs and poetry glorifying the heroic death. The transformative power said to be characteristic of blood can be seen in the image of the blood spilled over the land. Thanks to this act the earth is invigorated with new life – as if the blood was water nourishing nature.[16] This is highlighted with regard to the context of the *istishhādiyyāt* in an encomium on Wafāʾ Idrīs:

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13 Cf. Angelika Neuwirth who discusses the "Palestinian wedding" in the context of works by the poet Mahmud Darwish; Neuwirth, "Opfer, Gewalt, Genealogie und Erinnerung. Biblische und koranische Erinnerungsfiguren im vorderorientalischen Märtyrerdiskurs", in: *Die Künste im Dialog der Kulturen. Europa und seine muslimischen Nachbarn*, ed. by Christoph Wulf et al., Berlin 2007, 53-54.

14 Ayāt al-Akhras carried out a martyrdom operation on 29 March, 2002. Born in Jerusalem, she was the third *istishhādiyya* and the youngest, having joined the active militant resistance at the age of 16. The operation took place under the auspices of the al-Aqsa Brigades at the Kiryat HaYovel supermarket in Jerusalem and killed two people, a 17 year-old Israeli girl and a 55 year-old Israeli security guard.

15 Cf. the glorifying text on Ayāt al-Akhras published by the Katāʾib shuhadāʾ al-Aqṣā, "Al-Akhras, Ayāt", URL: http://kataebaqsa.org/arabic/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=20 (retrieved 15.06.2010).

16 Cf. *Mythen des Blutes*, ed. by Christina Braun et al., Frankfurt et al. 2007. Cf. also the mourning ceremonies in Babylonia for the deity Tammūz (Adonis), who died and was buried and reborn according to seasonal cycles: Joseph Campbell, *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God*, New York 1962.

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> She said that spring only blossoms if one waters it with blood. For Palestine is the only country of the world, in which the olives, the oranges and roses grow without water [but with blood] […]. Further on she said that the seeds of the earth would breed spikes if they are watered with blood.[17]

In the case of women a connotation of blood and motherhood can be found, namely that the female martyrs nourish Palestine through their blood as if it was milk for their offspring.

Especially the image of the Palestinian wedding is regularly repeated and does not only remain in the text-based sphere but has entered the social realm, leaving its mark on death processions and burial rites. The myth of spilled blood is one example for the hybrid topoi and images which endorse martyrdom and are taken from political, religious and cultural discourse.

III. Discourses and Documents of Glorification[18]

In order to heroise martyrs, or rather to produce them in the first place – to transcend and mythologise the individual –, a collective in the form of a community or society is necessary. Only within the collective, texts (encomiums, poetry) and discourses are produced that glorify the martyrs. In turn, these texts and oral accounts have to be received and accepted by the individual and by society with the intention of commemorating the fallen combatant.[19]

The source of the discourse lies in the interest of the respective dispatching organisations, who on the strength of their official position utilise propagandistic means to present a collective opinion. I have identified ideological elements which stem from these organisations, are disseminated and exploited by them, as the major source of the discourses on the *istishhādiyyāt*. Amongst these are references to martyrdom and Islam, a highlighting of the activities of the dispatching organisations, and a focusing on the role of women in Palestinian society.

Some of the ideological elements are national aspects that are accordingly magnified so as to act as a trigger for carrying out martyrdom operations and militant resistance activities. Here, religious, political and cultural/social elements are drawn upon in order to make the struggle meaningful, to better justify the position of the organisation by corroborating it with widely known and powerful discursive elements derived from language, symbols, and myths. Other discourses – such as those initiated and shaped by journalists or university lecturers or other 'ordinary'

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17 Cf. the glorifying text on Wafāʾ Idrīs published on the website of the al-Aqsa Brigades. The links are unstable due to the Brigades frequently changing their domains in order to remain anonymous. Katāʾib shuhadāʾ al-Aqṣā: "Idrīs, Wafā'". URL: http://www.kataebaqsa.org/arabic/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid= 72 (retrieved 15.06.2010).

18 The findings in this section are based on the interviews I conducted in Gaza and the West Bank.

19 Lori A. Allen, "The Polyvalent Politics of Martyr Commemorations in the Palestinian *Intifada*", in: *History & Memory* 18 (2006), 107-138.

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people – on the *istishhādiyyāt* do not focus on religious aspects but place more emphasis on nationalist elements. Again they are substantiated with religious, political and cultural/social aspects. The nationalist factor is likewise highlighted in predominantly religious discourses which support martyrdom operations.[20]

The processes of negotiation, re-negotiation, production and re-production informing the discourses on the Palestinian *istishhādiyyāt* are rather complex and do not occur in any streamlined manner.[21] Audio, visual and print media and especially the Internet play an essential role in the re-production of those discourses spread by the dispatching organisations, particularly in the public space. In the private and the domestic realm narratives and conversations are more important.[22] However, glorification (oral, visual and written), commemoration, funerals and demonstrations as well as public depictions and (re-)presentations in the form of posters and portraits are both part of the public and the private sphere: all of them constitute a public context that can trigger personal emotions. These emotions are then very private expressions of – for instance – grief and suffering. In other words, the public forms of the commemorated martyrdom operations have an effect on sentiments that are articulated in private.

The sheer occurrence of female self-sacrificing martyrs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as multiplier for the reproduction of martyr discourses – be they glorifying or demonising. This shows the extraordinarily diverse ways of addressing the *istishhādiyyāt* who are part of so many representations and debates.

With the emergence of the *istishhādiyyāt,* the participants in the established *shuhadā'* discourses had to deal with the fact that suddenly women were now part of the issue.[23] Temporarily they even dominated the discourse, provoking heated discussion amongst religious scholars and political leaders as to whether martyrdom operations in general, and those carried out by women in particular, can be justified.[24]

Gender-specific references constitute one part of these discourses.[25] Gender is mentioned in comparative ways when *istishhādiyyāt* and *istishhādiyyūn* are evaluated. The context here is the traditional patriarchal social order, an order that

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20 Cf. Meir Hatina, "The ʿUlamaʾ and the Cult of Death in Palestine", in: *Israel Affairs* 12 (2006), 29-51.

21 Cf. Amnesty International: "Middle East" (2002).

22 Allen, "The Polyvalent Politics of Martyr Commemoration", 107-138.

23 Cf. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, New York 2007, 135-172.

24 Cf. Haim Malka, "Must Innocents Die? The Islamic Debate over Suicide Attacks", in: *Middle East Quarterly* 2 (2002), 19-28.

25 For instance the notion of the wedding, where the martyr is wedded to the land through the act of spilling his blood over the soil; because female Palestinian self-sacrificing, intentional martyrs are a quite recent phenomenon, opinions regarding their status 'in the garden' vary greatly. Even though it is mostly assumed that they enter the garden as martyrs, it is not clear what will await them in the afterlife: if they are going to enter the garden as brides ready to be married off to someone they know, or if they turn themselves into one of the *ḥūr*. The issue of this modern phenomenon of female martyrs has not been treated in the

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usually prevents women from taking part in active militant resistance. The transfiguration of the female martyrs, the *istishhādiyyāt*, the act of being highlighted by means of the role of the organisations, takes place on the basis of patriarchal clichés. These stereotypes are thus confirmed, enforced and reproduced by the organisations, which produce and spread material on the glorified *istishhādiyyāt*. Instead of solely portraying the women's uniqueness and effectiveness, the higher aim is to maintain current structures, which reflect patriarchal dominance and decision-making: the glorifying media is produced by men and they decide how the women are portrayed and what is published about them. The women's religiosity, their "good behaviour" within their families and societies are highlighted to reflect images of these women which are deemed to be society-compliant values. Yet, the 'gendered' discourse has to also be situated in the wider geopolitical frame of Palestinians living under occupation, since this is the real-life setting which has brought forward resistance activity and which legitimises means of resistance. Gender is then primarily referred to in two ways, either in terms of the legitimisation of *istishhādiyyāt* or with regards to the *de*-legitimisation of *istishhādiyyāt*. In both, the traditional role of women, their religious background, social possibilities and behavioural guidelines, their position in culture, society, religion, and politics, family structures, domestic obligations, as well as nationalist concerns are part of the particular discourse. As to the legitimisation of *istishhādiyyāt*, their femininity is not classified as a disadvantage but as an appreciated asset, useful in the resistance struggle, since women can often meander more inconspicuously through the streets and checkpoints than men. Religious references are then consulted to strengthen the position that men and women are equal before God. Historical examples serve as valid proof that fighting women are not a new phenomenon but that they had already taken up arms during the times of the Prophet Muḥammad. Furthermore, it is said that the occupation concerns men and women mutually and consequently requires the active commitment of both sexes.[26]

classical written sources and is thus subject to vigorous debate. Cf. Lisa Franke, *In front of the doors of paradise: discourses of female self-sacrifice, martyrdom and resistance in Palestine*, University of Leipzig, 2011 (unpublished).

Another notion is that of blood through which the earth is invigorated with new life. For instance it is said in the glorifying text or encomium about Ayāt al-Akhras that she was wedded in her military blood suit instead of a white bridal gown (she was supposed to get married in summer 2002), cf. note 14.

26 During my field research the approving position was taken by the dispatching organisations, such as the military leader of the al-Quds Brigades in Gaza and Fawzy Barhoum, the (then) spokesperson of Hamas (see an analysis of these interviews in my dissertation *In front of the doors of paradise*. See also Shannon Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Vibia Perpetua and Wafa Idris", in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1 (2010), 1-24.

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When it comes to the *de*-legitimisation of *istishhādiyyāt* things look a bit different.[27] In this case women are depicted as weaker than men and their femininity is considered to be the reason why they cannot participate in the armed resistance struggle. The traditional social and cultural role of women as guardians of the domestic space, responsible for the birth and education of children, is highlighted. It is considered to be more important to deliver children than to jeopardise or let alone sacrifice the precious, fertile female life. Other positions, according to my interviewees, argue that it is indecorous for women to carry weapons and to be present in a male-dominated space where the men are not relatives. In the *de*-legitimisation argument women are not necessarily degraded to worthless beings, but their role is clearly and strictly separated from the duties and responsibilities of men and actions considered acceptable for men. However, in this context it should also be mentioned that the discourse can take another quite different direction, namely to be entirely reluctant to accept martyrdom operations in general, regardless of whether men or women are the perpetrators.[28] Representatives of this position fear the complete exclusion and isolation of Palestine in (international) politics and see martyrdom operations as threatening Palestinian societal structures. In short, martyrdom operations would cause more harm than good.[29]

IV. The media depiction of the istishhādiyyāt

Support for and the popularity of martyrdom operations and martyrdom *per se* also depend on how efficiently the propaganda machine of the respective organisations deploying martyrdom operations functions.[30] The glorification of the death of male and female *istishhādiyyūn*, apparent in some parts of Palestinian society, results *inter alia* from media manipulations (which are one form of communicative processes) – particularly with regard to militant resistance organisations such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades which support martyrdom operations as a *modus operandi*.[31] The organisations deliberately construct the *istishhādiyyāt* and their heroine identities by publishing their testaments and glorifying texts on the Internet. Post-

[27] Cf. Hatina, "The ʿUlamaʾ and the Cult of Death in Palestine", 37.

[28] Amira Hass, "Hamas activist: most Gazans now object to suicide bombings", in: *Haʾaretz* (2002).

[29] Mostly young university students and journalists have advanced this view, especially my female research assistants. Moreover, the father of Mīrfat Masʿūd told me that he was absolutely opposed to such actions, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator (cf. my dissertation for more details of the interviews and group discussions). See also Hatina, "The ʿUlamaʾ and the Cult of Death in Palestine".

[30] Muhammad Sayyid al-Tantawi, "Wer Unschuldige tötet ist kein Märtyrer. Nach den Attentaten: Eine Erklärung zur Menschlichkeit des Islam", in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (30.11.2002), 33.

[31] Cf. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, New York 2007, 135-172.

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ers and other visual (or audio) material portraying the self-sacrificing martyr also function as media for their glorification, and this material is produced, distributed and exploited by these organisations to reach and influence public and private opinions.[32] Moreover, these media, as well as the martyrdom operations themselves, are important in raising the profile of the respective organisation within the contentious rivalry between the different armed groups during the Second Intifada.[33]

The Palestinian *istishhādiyyāt* are part of the media sphere, which consists not only of television and broadcasting programmes or newspapers but also grey literature, Internet publications (i.e. the encomiums) and leaflets – one can also include posters, videos and songs in this category. The latter are mostly produced and distributed by the dispatching organisations. Thus, the media itself and those making use of it, such as the dispatching organisations or the Palestinian Authority (PA), are involved in the creation of discourses on the *istishhādiyyāt* and utilise these women as propagandist objects.[34]

Depending on the intention behind the media depiction of the *istishhādiyyāt*, the women are constructed either as heroic resistance fighters and glorious martyrs, or as obstacles to a prospective peace agreement – yet still considered to be martyrs, or suicidal figures illegitimately attributed the status of martyrs.[35] The gender aspect plays an important role in this context, for Palestine's patriarchal society (the media and the dispatching organisations, both part of this society, are male-dominated and usually male-led) needs to furnish an explanation for those women who, seemingly all of a sudden, became independent and determined their own course of action. Often intertwined with the various explanations are arguments for justification or disapproval. On the one hand, the identity and responsibility of the *istishhādiyyāt* as fearless mothers of the nation and beautiful, pious women sacrificing their lives for society and the Palestinian cause is then accentuated in media depictions: often for the purpose of influencing society at large. On the other hand – also with the intention to direct society's perceptions and opinions – the *istishhādiyyāt* are *de*-legitimised on religious

32 Cf. Helena Lindholm Schulz and Juliane Hammer, *The Palestinian diaspora: Formation of identities and politics of homeland*, London 2003, 121-122 and *The Road to Martyrs' Square. A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber*, ed. by Anne Maria Oliver et al., Oxford et al. 2005. This material consists of posters, videos, songs, glorifying texts, photographs as well as social practices such as funerals and funeral processions.

33 Cf. Joseph Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe. Die historischen Wurzeln des Selbstmordattentats*, Munich 2006, 190-192.

34 Lori Allen, "Martyr bodies in the media: Human rights, aesthetics, and the politics of immediation in the Palestinian intifada", in: *American Ethnologist* 1, 161-180. For the motif of the green birds see also the contribution of Silvia Horsch "Making salvation visible".

35 The first construction is usually made by the media related to the dispatching organisations, the second construction is often made by the media related to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the latter construction by newspaper journalists such as al-Quds. See the interviews with journalists in Lisa Franke, *In front of the doors of paradise*, 149-154.

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and moral grounds: they cannot be attributed the status of a martyr for the operation is considered to be an act of suicide and, moreover, their action has no moral basis because such attacks only result in even greater oppression by the occupiers.[36]

V. Martyr Posters as Quotidian Icons for Society

Common images that form the background for songs in video clips, illustrations of lyrics and decorating the martyrs' posters are loaded with "classical, religious and national references".[37] This includes direct visual links to the Israeli occupation, such as the footage of Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers, resisting the occupation and house demolitions. Other images are geographical or of religious sites and edifices – including places which were Palestinian prior to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 – such as the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock at the *ḥaram al-sharīf* in Jerusalem, which play a decisive role as unifying symbols in past and current political negotiations as well as in the collective memory of the Palestinian people. In addition, maps with the borders of historical Palestine (pre-1948) are featured in the posters. The holy Koran is also pictured on posters and in video clips, often in combination with an illuminating frame or emblazed with a ray of light. The national Palestinian flag, together with flags and symbols of the political faction which has produced the song, video tape, or poster, are also common elements of visual decoration. Furthermore, the posters usually present the photograph of a self-sacrificing martyr in front of a rifle and/or the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Verses from the Koran and other words of praise in Arabic surround the pictures. Green birds are often included, a symbol based on a statement by the Prophet Muḥammad that the martyr's soul is taken to Allāh in the bosom of the green birds of Paradise.[38] Despite this vast visual repertory, the information given in the posters is quite limited – apart from the name of the martyr, the date and place of his/her death/operation, no further details about the portrayed person are included. Moreover, the dead are not termed as being dead but referred to as martyrs who have been martyred by the Israeli occupation or who have committed a martyrdom operation – suicide or death are never mentioned.[39] As for the gendered aspect of the posters, there are no major differences between the portrayal of men and women. They are very similar: both are depicted in civilian or in military

36 See also Amnesty International, "Middle East" (2002), esp. 22-26.
37 Mahmoud Abu Hashhash, "On the Visual Representation of Martyrdom in Palestine", in: *Third Text* 20 (2006), 392.
38 Cf. Nasra Hassan, "An Arsenal of Believers: Talking to the Human Bombs", in: *New Yorker* (22.11.2001), 5.
39 Abu Hashhash, "On the Visual Representation", 400-401.

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uniform, usually with, or even carrying, weapons. The most striking variation for the female figures is whether they wear a headscarf or not.

Visual representations like posters are important because they furnish meaning for a society and the object – hence, iconography is another facet of (public) discourses. The posters are a form of cultural production during a sustained political conflict because they express support for the attacks and the resistance against the Israeli occupation (developed within the particular space of suppression).[40]

After having interviewed the father of Mīrfat Masʿūd,[41] he gave me the glorifying poster of his daughter as a present, which I shall describe here as an example for this category of poster (see fig. 1). Already in the headline the poster clearly claims the martyrdom operation of Mīrfat to have happened under the auspices of Sarāyā al-Quds, the military wing of the movement of Islamic Jihad in Palestine. It is even stated that she, the fighting *istishhādiyya*, is the daughter of Sarāyā al-Quds and that her martyrdom operation will be acknowledged and rewarded by God. Not only her full name – Mīrfat Amīn Masʿūd – is highlighted and written in prominent letters, she is also identified as the perpetrator of the "heroic martyrdom operation" carried out at an Israeli army checkpoint in Bait Ḥānūn on 6 November, 2006. The religious salutation – "peace be upon you" – is positioned next to the salient photograph of Mīrfat. This salutation is on the picture's background, comprising a yellow-orange surface interspersed with rays of light. While this design is probably intended to invoke heaven, when viewed together with the exploding tank this background seems more like a poster advertising an action movie. In the lower transparent part of Mīrfat's photograph, destroyed houses, probably of Bait Ḥānūn, are identifiable. With this picture the poster also communicates the reasons for the operation: the destruction of Bait Ḥānūn, which shall be revenged by attacking the Zionist enemy, a vengeance Sarāyā al-Quds accomplished in form of this martyrdom operation. The impression generated with this arrangement is that the martyr arises directly out of the debris of her destroyed hometown.

The three male hooded and armed fighters are wearing a headband with the emblem and the name of Sarāyā al-Quds in the organisation's colours: yellow letters on black background. One of them is placed behind exploding tanks, out of which military helmets with the Star of David are flying, indicating of course that the tanks belong to the Israeli army. The four smaller sequentially arranged photographs of Mīrfat give the impression of a flipbook or slide show. The topmost and the last portray the *istishhādiyya* with a Kalashnikov directly looking at

40 This is comparable to some extent to the graffiti of the First Intifada. Cf. Julie Peteet, "The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada", in: *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996), 139-159 and Julie Peteet, "Words as interventions: naming in the Palestine - Israel conflict", in: *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005), 153-172.

41 Mīrfat Masʿūd, an 18 year-old woman from Jabāliyya refugee camp in northern Gaza, carried out her martyrdom operation in Bait Ḥānūn on 6 November, 2006. The al-Quds Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack in which six people were killed.

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Fig. 1: glorifying poster of Mirfat Amīn Mas'ūd

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the viewer (or photographer). In all of these four photos she is wearing a black baseball cap with the name and emblem of the dispatching organisation, together with her black *jilbāb* and black *ḥijāb*, and she is standing in front of a black banner, embroidered with the Islamic statement of belief – *al-shahāda* – written in yellow or golden letters. In the second sequence, Mīrfat is taking aim at someone or something outside of the picture. The third photograph shows her sitting in a chair in front of a desk with the Koran placed on it, holding the weapon in her right hand. Her mouth is open and she is obviously reading from her testament, which was released as a video tape. These scenes and posed moments belong to the standard elements of the glorification of *istishhādiyyūn* and the self-glorification of their dispatching organisations. She shall be honoured, immortalised and remembered by means of this poster. At the same time though, the serious, almost sad, outlook of the young woman stands in stark contrast to the pictorial language of this poster, which has her appear as the female hero of an action movie produced by the organisation in whose name she died.

> Martyrs are the public figures through which the process of legitimisation [of martyrdom operations] takes place and which allows the makers and hangers of posters to act on behalf of the public with unchallenged authority. A sense of collective recognition arises from the political nature of the martyr's death, which gives him or her the new identity of a public figure.[42]

Posters are thus part of visual discourses and are used as a medium by militant resistance organisations to spread their ideologies. Through posters they gain public support, for the posters clearly demonstrate that these organisations are keeping the resistance struggle alive, proven by those who have died under their auspices. Posters help the organisations to announce recurring anniversaries and remind the community of an annual commemoration, which often culminates in a public procession or demonstration (with the majority gathered members of the particular organisation the dead had been affiliated to). Every year on the anniversary of the death of Wafā' Idrīs – 27 January – posters of her are hung on the doors of houses, shops and walls to honour and remember her death which shall not be forgotten.[43] The Palestinian *istishhādiyyāt* are even known beyond Palestine and visual reminders have ensured that these women have entered the collective memory – regardless of the ambivalence they stand for. Public announcements and processions for the *istishhādiyyāt* and *shuhadā'* have another level of meaning:

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42 Abu Hashhash, "On the Visual Representation", 399.

43 "Although one might have the impression that these are exclusively public spaces, it has to be kept in mind, that the shops and walls are often owned by private people. This space is then used as propagandist institution for the purposes of the organisations the portrayed person on the poster was affiliated with. The owners are not asked for permission but their approval is taken for granted. Moreover, spatial divisions as in the public-private dichotomy become blurred – everything is politicised and made use of in the name of the resistance for the Palestinian cause (regardless of the single person's opinion, agreement or disagreement)." Ibid.

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they also portray the Israelis, who apparently caused these deaths, as a dominant and cruel force – either directly killing or resulting in the death of the innocent. The symbolic and ritual act of commemorating the dead, who seem to have ascended to the status of national heroes, unites the Palestinians. Gender and factional boundaries are softened as men and women, children and elderly, *Ḥamsāwiyyūn* (members of the Hamas) and *Fatḥāwiyyūn* (members of the Fatah), all participate and mourn the dead.[44]

Moreover, "martyr posters [create] a visual continuity between public and domestic space, mirroring the dual nature of martyrs as social beings. Martyrs [die] because of a collective political situation affecting everyone, but they [are] always also mourned as someone's dear relative or friend."[45] Although the martyr posters are part of the glorification in public space, they also refer to the private realm of personal loss and suffering. Simultaneously, the posters transport the message "that this was a victim of the occupation, who is now remembered and revered by the nation for which his or her life was sacrificed."[46] Again, the nationalist aspect cannot be ignored, bringing politics to the homes, especially because the militant resistance organisations publish their names on the posters claiming the dead to be 'theirs'. At the same time, the personal story of the dead and/or his/her family is spread and dealt with in public through the media – resulting in strangers feeling as if they personally knew the dead. The repetitive visualisation of the faces contributes and reinforces this feeling of personal connection, since the posters are produced in large numbers and remain visible until pasted over by others. The cases of the *istishhādiyyāt* clearly demonstrate how the public is involved in these deaths. Firstly because the *istishhādiyyāt* – according to their testaments and the way they are portrayed – have died for the collective that is Palestinian society; secondly, they are remembered in public and so almost every Palestinian knows their name and personal story.

What is particularly interesting about the way visual commemoration is staged is how the public reacts to these presentations, which are not portraying simply persons (who were alive at the time when the picture was taken) but figures who have been elevated into a transcendent state of glorified heroes/heroines simply through medium of the poster: "[t]hus the posters capture what, in religious terms, is the kind of eternal life of the martyr who is not believed to be dead (in a literal sense)"[47] but to be still alive in Paradise and in memory.

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44 Factional boundaries are only crossed if the death has nothing to do with inter-factional rivalries and if the dead person was an important public figure for all Palestinians, regardless of political differences. Cf. Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine. The Politics of National Commemoration*, Cambridge 2007, 187-190.

45 Allen, "The Polyvalent Politics of Martyr Commemoration", 115.

46 Ibid., 114.

47 Ibid., 117.

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The production and consumption of imagery gives an insight into social structures and the ways martyrdom, death and loss have entered everyday life. The disastrous death of the martyr or self-sacrificing martyr with his/her mournful victims is transformed thanks to societal dynamics into a heroic death resulting from a glorious act. The commemoration and re-enactment of the respective death in form of posters, video clips and songs keep the dead alive and memorable for society. As far as this visual material is concerned, we need to keep in mind that images can also be manipulated (as in the photo collages created for the glorifying posters) and/or have a manipulative effect, for instance to encourage support for martyrdom operations or the dispatching organisation, which is blatantly represented with its name and symbol on the posters and photos of the martyrs. Nonetheless, the image itself does not produce relevant information without someone verbalising and giving meaning to the portrayed content and an audience who receives this narration. Again, it is not the photographs, posters or videos *per se* that transfigure the dead into martyrs, but society and social practice, which do so through discursive interaction with the visual material, turning the imagery into a symbol for the struggle and martyrdom.[48] The story is thus the picture in combination with words circling around it, or to put it differently, it is a question of "narrative picturing".[49]

Parts of Palestinian society are thus not content to acquiesce to the banality of the death of the *istishhādiyyāt*. Instead, these women are glorified by all means and trigger public, political, nationalist resistance, factional as well as personal and familial sentiments. The way they died has nothing to do with an ordinary death, nor shall their act fall into oblivion. Hence the women's characters are elevated and glorified, their acts and commitment abstracted beyond mundane death. The visual and audio immortalisation of the *istishhādiyyāt* is present in many places in the West Bank and Gaza, and the business done with *istishhādiyyāt* and other martyr-related documents and indeed products (their pictures are not only featured in videos and on posters but are used on labels and decoration for everyday items) appears to be a form of commercialisation of social and emotional capital.

VI. Conclusion

The *istishhādiyyāt* can be seen as a continuity of the participation of Palestinian women in resistance activities, which has taken place since the earliest struggles against Ottoman rule. However, this participation does not seem to fundamen-

48 Cf. Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, New York 1981, where he discusses the relation between photographs/photography and the spectator.

49 Barbara Harrison, "Photographic visions and narrative inquiry", in: *Considering Counter-Narratives. Narrating, resisting, making sense*, ed. by Michael Bamberg et al., Amsterdam et al. 2004, 121.

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tally change patriarchal gender relations in Palestinian society. Despite this, the depiction of the *istishhādiyyāt* as female martyrs is unique and their gender and special position is highlighted, especially in those discourses legitimising the acts and commitment of these women. Compared to male martyrs, the femininity of the *istishhādiyyāt* is accentuated. They are elevated into heroic mothers of the nation, lauded as young, beautiful and respected combatants who fight side-by-side with their male companions, brave martyrs who take up arms to fight the occupation instead of remaining passive, a contrast to some of the male political leaders. On the discursive level shifts in gender can be accounted for: namely, when women are declared to actively contribute to the resistance struggle instead of passively remaining in the background. But it is still yet to be proven that these (discursive) developments, initiated by the emergence of the *istishhādiyyāt*, have had a permanent impact on the social sphere – in particular it is not always the case that discourses evoke changes in or influence social realities. The impression one might get from the intensive discussion on the *istishhādiyyāt*, namely that the militant revolution against the occupation deploying martyrdom operations is headed primarily by women, as well as the assumption that this female resistance is being transported from the national and political realm to the more private and/or public space of social interaction, is untenable given my findings and field research. First of all, the small number of *istishhādiyyāt* can by no means indicate the gender of the resistance, let alone make it feminine. Secondly, similar to the First Intifada where the participation of women was much stronger, comprehensive, pronounced and distinct – the women's revolutionary actions and power did not permeate existing social structures. However that may be, it is clear that the awareness and perception of the abilities of women has changed. Indeed, women as active resistance fighters have entered the discursive level, leading to various interpretations. And although the positions taken on this issue vary from vehemently opposed to being in favour, women are talked about and therefore the actions of the *istishhādiyyāt* have had an effect on discourses, debates and perceptions.

As I hope to have shown, the various ways in which the *istishhādiyyāt* have been dealt with depend on the opinion of the respective individual or on the image the particular media tries to transmit. Ideological and manipulative practices on the side of PA-related media as well as those affiliated to the dispatching organisations influence the formation of opinion. Here, religious elements of martyrdom are highlighted and mixed with nationalist elements of resistance. The merging of these notions is essential and frames the background for the glorification of the *istishhādiyyāt*. Other such processes are the posters that portray these women, plastered all over walls and shops. The repeated confrontation with the subject in the form of private discussions, songs, media reports, newspaper articles etc., in sum, to repeatedly see and hear (about) the *istishhādiyyāt*, created an atmosphere of glorification and veneration. Especially the dispatching

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organisations aimed at controlling society at large by dominantly spreading their opinion on the *istishhādiyyāt*, seeking to garner support and attract followers. Consequently, the *istishhādiyyāt* have been instrumentalised for the resistance struggle as heroic fighters, while for society they are pious martyrs whose death shall not have been in vain.

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