



## The Myth of Martyrs Behind Suicide Bombings

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* Myth, Martyr, Suicide Bombing

*Received:* 4, June

*Revised :* 25, June

*Accepted:* 27, July

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to uncover the martyr myth propagated by terrorists in suicide bombings. This qualitative study employs a phenomenological and theological approach. The researcher utilizes the myth theory formulated by Roland Barthes. The results of the study indicate that the doctrine of holy scriptures and the hadiths of the Prophet have been misinterpreted by terrorists to legitimize suicide bombings. Some terrorists are reluctant to carry out suicide bombings. They do so because they are promised rewards or guarantees of a livelihood for the families they leave behind. Additionally, some individuals are manipulated by terrorist groups. They are unaware that they have been exploited for suicide bombings. They are not terrorists but victims of the terrorists themselves.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Suicide bombings are one of the most extreme and troubling forms of violence in human history. This tactic was first demonstrated by Japanese Kamikaze pilots during World War II in their confrontations with Allied forces. They deliberately crashed their planes, laden with explosives, into enemy ships (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006). Suicide bombing tactics have also been used in the Middle East, such as in Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. In modern times, suicide bombings began to gain significant attention after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the 2005 London bombings. These two attacks marked a turning point in research on radicalization and terrorism (Simona Trip et al., 2019).

Scholars have identified several factors that can drive or motivate someone to carry out a suicide bombing. These include identity crisis and the search for self-identity (Horgan, 2005 & Moghaddam, 2005), social and community pressure (Cronin, 2009 & Bloom, 2011), revenge for perceived injustices (Moghaddam, 2008 & Fishman, 2016), the influence of propaganda and recruitment (Sageman, 2008 & Atran, 2010), and ideological and religious beliefs (Stern, 2003). Among these factors, as highlighted by scholars, ideology and religious beliefs are the most crucial to consider (Pape, 2005).

Some perpetrators of suicide bombings claim that their actions are justified by religious doctrine. In many cases, they believe that such actions are part of jihad or a holy struggle promised with the reward of paradise. Additionally, in situations where individuals constantly face the threat of death, religious justification for suicide bombings for the sake of their community can become the most desirable option for a meaningful death. Therefore, it is not surprising that victims or refugees of conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, who face war-torn realities, are attracted by terrorists' promises of divine rewards (Fierke, 2009).

What terrorists believe contradicts the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the Prophet's hadiths. The Prophet himself promoted Islam as a religion of peace. A person is considered a Muslim only when others are safe from his tongue and hand (an-Naisāburī, 2000). The Quran even states that the Prophet was sent as a mercy to all worlds (Qs al-Anbiya [21:107]). Such contradictions have piqued the writer's interest in researching the martyr myth created by terrorists in the name of Islam.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on suicide bombings has been extensively published by previous scholars. Some of them include Galston, who refutes the view linking suicide bombings with martyrdom teachings in Islam. He emphasizes that many scholars and Muslim communities strongly reject such actions and consider them contrary to the true teachings of Islam (Galston, 2002). Jenkins highlights the crucial role of Islamic leaders in combating radical narratives and promoting peaceful Islamic teachings to reduce incidents of suicide bombings (Jenkins, 2002). Krauthammer examines the patterns of recruitment and motivation of suicide bombers from an Islamic perspective. He demonstrates

how religious narratives are used to influence individuals (Krauthammer, 2002).

Lewis explores the concept of jihad and martyrdom in Islam, and how these concepts are manipulated by terrorist groups. He emphasizes that suicide bombings are contrary to Islamic values (Lewis, 2003). Kepel discusses the politics behind suicide bombings and how the concepts of jihad and martyrdom are understood and misused in Islam by terrorist groups for political purposes (Kepel, 2003). Stern examines how terrorist groups use religious narratives to recruit and motivate suicide bombers. He highlights the importance of understanding extremist ideology to develop counter-terrorism strategies (Stern, 2003a). On another occasion, Stern attempts to review how religious doctrines, including Islam, are often used and abused to legitimize suicide bombings (Stern, 2004). Cook observes that the concept of martyrdom in Islam has been distorted by extremist groups to justify suicide bombings. He shows that traditional Islamic interpretations do not support such actions (Cook, 2004). Kamali explains that many fatwas from prominent scholars explicitly forbid suicide bombings. They view suicide bombings as un-Islamic acts that violate the fundamental principles of the religion (Kamali, 2005). Pape examines the relationship between the concept of jihad in Islam and suicide bombings, showing that these actions are more often driven by political motivations than religious ones (Pape, 2005).

Gerges examines the cultural and religious factors in Islam that influence individuals to become suicide bombers, and how a correct understanding of culture and religion can help reduce radicalization (Gerges, 2005). Pedahzur investigates the relationship between Islamic extremism and suicide bombings. He shows that these actions are often the result of the manipulation of religious ideology by extremist groups (Pedahzur, 2005). Pintak highlights the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of Islam and suicide bombings, and how media narratives can influence views on terrorism (Pintak, 2006). Afsaruddin compares the concept of martyrdom in Islam with other religious traditions and emphasizes that a correct understanding of this concept can help reduce radicalization (Afsaruddin, 2007). Bloom reviews various theories on suicide terrorism within the Islamic context, showing that the motivations behind these actions are often more complex and involve social, political, and religious factors (Bloom, 2007).

Among the research reviewed, no scholar has yet addressed how suicide bombings are mythologized by perpetrators or intellectual actors as martyrdom by exploiting certain scriptural dicta and hadiths. These dicta are misinterpreted to align with their agenda. This research aims to fill that gap.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative research conducted through library research, employing phenomenological and theological approaches. The theory used is the myth theory developed by Roland Barthes.

## RESULTS

Islam is often associated with suicide bombings. This is because the perpetrators or intellectual actors behind these suicide attacks claim that their actions are in the name of Islam. For example, Osama Bin Laden expressed his thanks to God after the 9/11 attacks, which caused death and destruction (Gerges, 2014; Moghadam, 2014; Byman, 2016 & Hoffman, 2017). He even sent a voice message saying, 'We love death as you love life' (Hutchins, 2017). This message indicates that terrorists are willing to do anything to realize their agenda.

Elsewhere, al-Qaradawi issued a fatwa declaring the legitimacy of suicide bombings in the Israel-Palestine conflict as an act of self-defense and resistance against occupation. He argued that such actions are permissible under Sharia when there is no other way to fight a militarily stronger enemy (Shay, 2007). The views expressed by Osama and sanctioned by al-Qaradawi are quite controversial and have faced rejection from other Islamic scholars such as Hamza Yusuf (Yusuf, 2001), Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (Choudhury, 2003), Ali Gomaa (Ali Gomaa, 2005), Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh (al-Sheikh, 2006), and Salman al-Ouda (al-Ouda, 2009). This rejection refers to the Quranic dictum that forbids anyone from committing suicide under any circumstances (Qs an-Nisa [4]: 29). 'Do not kill yourselves with your own hands' (al-Andalusī, 2006). Do not motivate yourself or others to kill - including carrying out suicide bombings (al-Baghdādī, 2005).

Given that the Quran prohibits suicide, terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have redefined suicide bombings as 'martyrdom.' They equate martyrdom with jihad to create a narrative of violence involving suffering, struggle, and redemption (Hutchins, 2017). Suicide bombers are positioned as martyrs. Each suicide bombing carried out by its members is promoted as a heroic act of sacrificing oneself for a cause deemed noble (Atran, 2006). It is considered the highest sacrifice to achieve political goals and uphold their religious ideology (Roy, 2017). They reinforce this view with a misinterpreted Quranic dictum such as 'If you are killed in the way of Allah (martyrdom), then the forgiveness of Allah and His mercy are far better than what they [the disbelievers] get [in this world]. Whether you die or are killed, to Allah you will be gathered' (Qs Ali Imran [3]: 157-158). 'Allah has purchased the lives and possessions of the believers in exchange for paradise for them. They fight in the way of Allah, killing and being killed - including through suicide bombings - and their reward is nothing less than paradise. This is the promise of Allah, mentioned in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran. Rejoice in the bargain you have made, for it is the supreme triumph' (Qs at-Taubah [9]: 111).

Terrorist groups adopt a 'martyrdom subculture' to construct a moral interpretation of suicide bombings as legitimate and heroic sacrifices for the benefit of their community, or as a response to a sacred duty (Gill, 2007). It is carried out to atone for previous sins, or as an action that will be compensated with rewards after death and/or various benefits for the suicide bomber's family during their lifetime, ranging from cash bonuses to free apartments (DCSINT, 2005). This indicates that the martyr myth is not always the primary

motivation for terrorists to carry out suicide bombings. They may position themselves as 'sacrifices' to ensure a better life for their families.

Terrorist groups also hijack sacred moral practices in Islam by distorting them to create 'real enemies,' such as the occupying US forces, and 'existential enemies,' such as Western values. 'We' (jihadists) fight against 'them' (infidels). This narrative also facilitates adherents of extremist ideology to carry out suicide bombings - to eradicate their opponents - under the guise of religious obedience (Hutchins, 2017). They position themselves as 'Soldiers of God' tasked with combating evil. They divide humanity into two groups: 'us' and 'them.' 'Us' is the group under God's mercy, while 'them' is the community of evil that must be eradicated.

Suicide bombers seem to be quite concerned with how others perceive their deaths. Therefore, they want their deaths to be seen as heroic acts of martyrdom rather than conventional suicide (Lankford, 2011). The bombers believe that their deaths are a form of martyrdom. For those who die as martyrs, there is no reward other than paradise (Karipek, 2020). In fact, martyrs are considered not to have truly died. They live and receive sustenance from Allah. They rejoice in the blessings granted by Allah and take pride in those who have not yet joined them. They are neither fearful nor saddened (Qs Ali Imran [3]:169-170).

Terrorist groups have also distorted the Islamic concept of sacrifice, including in the context of jihad in the way of Allah (Fierke, 2009). The Quranic injunction to jihad with wealth and even life (Qs at-Taubah [9]: 41) has been extremely misinterpreted as a divine command to carry out suicide bombings. However, Islam is a religion that teaches peace. It is a religion of fitrah (natural disposition). By nature, no one intends to commit suicide. Terrorists themselves have never seriously considered carrying out suicide bombings (Lankford, 2011a). Ariel Merari once asked several terrorists and organizers of suicide bombings if they would be willing to undertake a 'martyrdom operation.' Eleven out of twelve regular terrorists said they would not do it. They made statements such as, 'I can't do it,' 'I'm just not interested,' 'I can't see myself dying,' and 'It's not a way to die.' Similarly, nine out of fourteen organizers said they would not do it. They commented, 'I personally wouldn't want to do it,' 'I'm not ready to do it,' 'I wouldn't be willing to carry out a martyrdom operation,' 'I don't want to do a martyrdom operation... the thought of being a martyr doesn't cross my mind,' and 'I am willing to fight but not to die in a suicide bombing.' Even among the minority who said they would consider it in theory, many gave reasons why they would not volunteer for a suicide bombing (Merari, 2010). These statements show that suicide bombings are not a preferred choice among terrorists. They become an option only when other options are no longer feasible.

Additionally, it should be noted that some attacks may appear to be suicide bombings but are actually not. Someone may have been deceived into carrying explosives and then detonated remotely, without their knowledge or consent (Hoffman, 2003). According to Evans, these individuals are not terrorists carrying out suicide bombings but rather victims of the terrorists

themselves (Evans, 2009). They are akin to pawns used by terrorist groups to advance their agenda. They are not victims of indoctrination but of misinformation.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Suicide bombings have become a frequently used tactic by terrorists. To recruit members or volunteers for suicide attacks, they misinterpret several verses from the Holy Scriptures and Hadiths. They present a martyrdom concept disguised as jihad. Some individuals with shallow religious knowledge and those in difficult conditions, whether due to economic factors or war situations, are more likely to be attracted to the propaganda of terrorists. Additionally, it is also possible that some people are exploited or deceived into carrying out suicide bombings. They may not be aware that they are being used as instruments for suicide attacks. They are more accurately described as victims rather than terrorists carrying out suicide bombings.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Through this study, researchers recommend that the government and Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, NU, Persis, MUI, and other stakeholders pay serious attention to suicide bombings. These attacks not only instill fear but also damage the true understanding of Islamic religious beliefs. Therefore, preventive efforts must be carried out in an integrated and comprehensive manner. The government needs to strengthen cooperation with various parties, both domestically and internationally, to suppress suicide bombing activities through law enforcement, education, and the promotion of national values. Additionally, Islamic organizations must proactively campaign for moderate Islam and reject all forms of extremism. They can play a crucial role in educating the public about the dangers of radicalism – such as suicide bombings – and providing support for deradicalization programs.

The synergy between the government and Islamic organizations must also be enhanced to build collective awareness of the importance of maintaining peace and tolerance among religious communities. Through constructive dialogue and close cooperation, it is hoped that a conducive environment can be created to counteract radical influences that threaten social harmony. With these measures, it is expected that an inclusive understanding of religion can spread widely, replacing the destructive narrative of violence.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

In writing this article the researcher realizes that there are still many shortcomings in terms of language, writing, and form of presentation considering the limited knowledge and abilities of the researchers themselves. Therefore, for the perfection of the article, the researcher expects constructive criticism and suggestions from various parties.

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