



## A CASE STUDY: THE MYTHOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM IN IRAQ

Mohammed M. Hafez

### CONTENTS

[About This Issue](#)

[Terrorism and Children](#)

[A Form of Psychological Warfare](#)

[Collective Identity: Hatred Bred in the Bone](#)

[Women as Victims and Victimizers](#)

[Terrorism: A Brief History](#)

[From Profiles to Pathways: The Road to Recruitment](#)

[Mass-Media Theater](#)

[A Case Study: The Mythology of Martyrdom in Iraq](#)

[New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflict](#)

[A Strategic Assessment of Progress Against the Terrorist Threat](#)

[Video Feature !\[\]\(56549452e01ca28bdf2500ced9653143\_img.jpg\) Terrorism: A War Without Borders](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Internet Resources](#)

[Download Adobe Acrobat \(PDF\) version](#)

*Mohammed M. Hafez, PhD, a visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, recently released his latest book, Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom, published by the U.S. Institute of Peace.*

Jihadists in Iraq confront a challenging communication problem. Their messages must achieve five goals: appeal to potential recruits inside and outside of Iraq; justify to the public the killing of civilians and fellow Muslims in insurgent attacks; deactivate self-inhibiting norms that may obstruct their cadres from killing civilians in suicide attacks; legitimize the organizations that engage in violence; and counter the claims of authorities in Iraq and around the Muslim world.



Iraqi Special Operations Forces demonstrate their ability to fight terrorists at a graduation ceremony attended by the U.S. commander in Iraq, General David H. Petraeus, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. ©AP Images/Wathiq Khuzaie

They formulate a number of utilitarian, ideological, and theological arguments to achieve these tasks. However, to avoid overwhelming

their audiences with information and complicated discourse, jihadists simplify their message by relying on emotional narratives that construct the image of the "heroic martyr."

Through online video clips and biographies of suicide bombers, they play on themes of humiliation, collusion, and redemption to demonize their enemies and motivate their cadres to make "heroic" sacrifices. They exaggerate mistreatment of women and appeal to the masculinity of men in order to shame them into protecting their "mothers and sisters." These emotive elements are intended to galvanize support, not just from a narrow circle of activists but also from the broader Muslim public.

The dominant narratives revolve around three themes that are often presented in a sequence, as if to show a play in three acts.

- Act One depicts the humiliation and suffering of Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere, and suggests that there is a conspiracy by Western "crusaders" to target Muslims.
- Act Two is designed to show existing Muslim regimes as impotent and in collusion with the West, suggesting that they are not the true leaders of the Muslim world, but servants of their Western "masters."
- Act Three insists on the inevitability of Muslim victory because the "pious and heroic" have stepped forward to redeem the suffering and humiliation of their fellow Muslims through faith in God, sacrifice on the battlefield, and righteousness in their cause.

These three narratives are sometimes presented separately, but often they are woven together to suggest a problem, the cause, and a solution.

This article explores martyrdom mythologies in Iraq by drawing extensively on the literature of jihadists since the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency. These include video clips, audio recordings, biographies of suicide bombers, online magazines, and still images posted online. Special emphasis is given to how jihadists portray the fallen "martyrs." By elevating the suicide bombers to the status of extraordinary moral beings who make the ultimate sacrifice for God and the Muslim nation, jihadists deflect attention away from the atrocities they commit and the victims they harm.

It must be made clear from the outset that the portrayal of bombers in video clips and biographies is highly propagandistic. The point of focusing on martyrdom mythologies is to show how groups seek to achieve several communication goals through manipulation of narratives, not to suggest that these mythologies reflect the truth.

### **The Context**

Since 2003, the number of suicide bombings in Iraq has surpassed all those of Hamas in Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Tamil Tigers in

Sri Lanka combined. The overwhelming majority targeted Iraqi security



Iraqi soldiers inspect a van destroyed in an attack in Baqouba, Iraq, in April 2007. The suicide bomber killed a 12-year-old boy and wounded another nine civilians. ©AP Images/Adem Hadei

forces and Shiite civilians, not Coalition forces. Many, if not most, of the perpetrators of these suicide bombings are non-Iraqi volunteers. Most are connected to jihadi networks associated with "second-generation" jihadists who trained in Afghanistan during the 1990s, militants fleeing arrest in their home or host countries, and new recruits enraged by the suffering of Muslims in Iraq.

The Iraqi insurgents rely on a diverse tool kit of tactics, the most deadly being improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and car bombs driven by suicide bombers. However, insurgents also intimidate "collaborators," such as translators and manual laborers employed by the Coalition forces; sabotage electric stations, oil and water pipelines and facilities, and reconstruction projects; lob improvised rockets and mortar shells at Coalition positions and fire surface-to-air rockets at airplanes and helicopters; kidnap local citizens and foreigners to exchange them for ransom or execute them, as well as kidnap members of the security services and "spies" to interrogate and execute them; and carry out suicide attacks using explosive vests.

Insurgents also attack international organizations such as the United Nations, nongovernmental agencies such as the Red Cross, and representatives of foreign governments. They have attacked the Jordanian and Turkish embassies and killed Algerian, Egyptian, and Russian diplomats.

There is a strategic logic to why insurgents attack the targets they do. Expansive violence is intended to create widespread insecurity among the public, engender sectarian polarization, and produce economic collapse. All of these outcomes delegitimize the new order; allow the insurgents to portray themselves as the sole protectors of Sunnis, thus being able to command their support; and create a failed state whereby the central authority does not have a monopoly on the use of coercive force, which allows jihadists, with an agenda beyond Iraq, to establish a base for operations, recruitment, and training.



Family members of 18 children who died in a car bomb attack in a Shiite neighborhood of Baghdad sit with portraits of their children during a commemoration luncheon with Iraqi government officials in July 2005. ©AP Images/Khalid Mohammed

### Justifications for Suicide Attacks

Al-Qaida in Iraq had declared responsibility for 30 percent of the claimed suicide attacks in Iraq as of February 2006. Since October 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq, set up as a front organization for al-Qaida in Iraq, has claimed responsibility for nearly all suicide attacks there.

Abu Dujana al-Ansari, the head of al-Qaida's al-Bara Bin Malik Brigade (suicide bombing squad), justifies suicide attacks against "the strongest and most advanced army in modern times" in a montage dedicated to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the killed terrorist leader. Al-Ansari says that the suicide brigade was created following the earlier advice of Osama bin Laden to terrorize the enemy and penetrate its defenses in order to demoralize its soldiers.

But how do they justify attacking fellow Muslims? Insurgents in Iraq, not just those associated with al-Qaida, answer that the Iraqi security forces are a mere extension of the occupation forces. Further, al-Qaida argues that Shiite militias attack, torture, and kill Sunnis; abuse and humiliate them at checkpoints; and serve as spies for the occupation forces. Many of their videos are dedicated to this theme. In justifying attacks against the ruling Iraqi officials, the nationalists and Salafi jihadi insurgents argue that this is an illegitimate government—indeed, a puppet regime—that came to power with the help of enemies and rules only because the Coalition forces allow it to, despite the democratic election process.

Secularism, nationalism, and Shiism are portrayed as instruments of a nefarious plot led by "crusaders" and "Zionists." The jihadist arguments are: Secularism, they say, divides the world into religious

and nonreligious spheres, which is antithetical to Islam as a violation of God's sovereignty over right and wrong, permissible and forbidden; nationalism, in turn, fosters narrow identifications with language, land, and borders, not a broader unity among the community of Muslim faithful; and Shiism, the jihadists claim, gives ascendancy to a heretical creed, and Shiites are presented as the most dangerous tool against the true believers because they "appear" Islamic, but, in jihadist reality, loathe the people of the Sunna and wait for the opportunity to betray them.

These ideological justifications are intended for a narrow milieu of committed jihadists who may question certain tactics or targets of the insurgents, especially when it comes to indiscriminate attacks on fellow Muslims. To the extent that these highly controversial arguments are produced for the wider Muslim public, they are usually accompanied by vivid imagery and emotional narratives that shock the moral conscience of Muslims, demonize the Shiites and Iraqi security forces, and heighten the sense of threat to Muslims worldwide.

Insurgents in Iraq do not depend solely on the force of ideology in mobilizing support for martyrdom. They also seek to cut across ideological and political divides by appealing to emotional and personal themes embedded in the culture and ethos of Arabs and Muslims. Their narratives rely on three themes: humiliation, impotence due to collusion, and redemption through faith and sacrifice.



This victim of a suicide bomber is being taken to a hospital in northern Iraq in February 2004. At least 57 people were killed and more than 250 wounded in the attack. ©AP Images

### **Humiliation**

At the heart of the narratives is the theme of humiliation at the hands of callous and arrogant

powers. Images of collective humiliation often begin with footage from the initial phase of the combat in Iraq in 2003, depicting the asymmetry in power and showing emotional photographs of destroyed mosques, bloodied victims, and house searches. These and, above all, images from Abu Ghraib prison personalize the suffering and heighten the sense of powerlessness and indignation that many Muslims feel.

Images from Iraq are usually combined with those from other conflicts in Muslim areas, especially Palestine. The intent is to deliver two messages. The first is that the suffering and humiliation of Muslims around the world are not unconnected episodes, but a chain of transgressions by a "crusader-Zionist alliance." This message heightens the sense of threat in order to justify extraordinary measures to fight the conspiracy against Islam.

The second message is that Iraq is the central battlefield in which to

wage war against the enemies of Islam. Fighting in Iraq, in effect, is the same as fighting in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Muslim world, as, to the jihadists, these are all one struggle, not separate wars. In framing the conflict in this light, insurgents can call on jihadists everywhere to come to Iraq, claiming that a victory there is victory in every Muslim land.

Jihadists also rely heavily on the theme of female dishonor and suffering at the hands of foreigners and Iraqi security forces. Images of women terrified as soldiers storm into their homes to search for insurgents, videos of women being frisked, rumors of women abducted or taken into custody where they are humiliated or worse, and stories of women being handed over by Iraqi forces as hostages to be exchanged for wanted insurgents are replete in jihadists narratives. Undoubtedly, these are appealing to notions of masculinity that pervade tribal culture, in which *sharaf* (nobleness), *`ird* (honor), and *muruah* (chivalry or manliness) are of vital importance. These notions of masculinity are often judged by one's zealous protection of and control over women so they do not risk straying in their relations with men and, therefore, bring shame to the entire family or tribe.

### **Impotence and Collusion**

Part of the narrative is to show the "arrogance" of Coalition forces and the alleged collusion of Muslim governments. Insurgent videos often use the clip of President George W. Bush on board a U.S. aircraft carrier declaring victory in Iraq. This is usually followed by footage of U.S. troops marching in the streets of Iraq or walking through Saddam Hussein's palaces. Occasionally, one sees the famous image of a U.S. soldier placing the American flag atop Saddam's statue in Baghdad.

Following closely are images showing Arab leaders—King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah II in Jordan, Hussni Mubarak in Egypt, and the post-invasion Iraqi leadership (Iyad Alawi, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Jalal Talabani, and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, among others) in the company of Coalition officials, President Bush, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. These leaders are smiling and sometimes embracing. Other images include Arab and/or Western leaders in the company of Israeli leaders, especially a 2004 photo of President Bush shaking hands with former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the White House during the al-Aqsa uprising, also known as the second *intifada* (2000-2005).

This imagery is important for five reasons:

- First, it portrays anyone working for the government in Iraq as in collusion with the West. Those who persist in this collusion, then, are fair game and can be killed without moral compunction.
- Second, by identifying these leaders as "puppets" working for foreign powers, their moral criticism of the jihadists and their tactics are without force—who are they to challenge the legitimacy of the insurgents?
- Third, portraying these governments as impotent explains the

necessity for other Muslims to step forward to fight in their stead. Jihad, then, becomes an individual obligation (*fard\_ 'ayn*) because the existing governments have supposedly abdicated their duty toward protecting Muslim lands and liberating them from unbelievers.

- Fourth, illustrating that jihadists do not have the support or resources of official governments justifies their demands for extraordinary measures and calls for martyrdom.
- Finally, these images frame the struggle in Iraq in broader terms than simply liberating that country from a foreign occupation. Instead, it is represented as a struggle to replace all the "corrupt" and "mercenary" regimes that currently rule in the Muslim world with ones that are truly Islamic.

### Redemption Through Faith and Sacrifice

Acts One and Two can be disempowering if not followed by Act Three, which presents the solution: salvation and redemption of all Muslims through faith in God and a desire to sacrifice in His path.



In August 2004 on its Web site, the Ansar Al-Sunna Army claimed that this was one of 12 Nepalese workers kidnapped in Iraq. ©AP Images

An important element in Act Three is the mythology surrounding martyrdom and martyrs. Al-Qaida in Iraq promotes the image of a heroic Muslim willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to redeem his nation and avenge the personal suffering inflicted on helpless Muslims, especially women. The propaganda surrounding the "martyrs" is issued on Web postings, videos of operations, and in al-Qaida's online journal entitled *Biographies of Eminent Martyrs*.

These productions—often short, inconsistent in the information they present, and highly propagandistic—reveal at least four themes that make up the mythology of martyrdom:

- Sincere devotion to religion
- Willingness to sacrifice one's wealth and personal ties for God
- Eagerness to carry out a "martyrdom operation"
- Success in sacrifice operations

**Sincere devotion to Islam:** Insurgent videos are replete with images of pious Muslims praying, chanting "God is great" (*allahu akbar*), even as they are in the midst of an operation, such as planting an IED. Suicide bombers, in particular, are almost invariably portrayed as deeply religious people. The biographies often detail at length how the "martyr" prayed incessantly, spent his time reading or memorizing the Quran, and went beyond religious obligations in voluntary expressions

of devotion.

The emphasis on sincerity in devotion is important because suicide bombings can be considered martyrdom only if the individual bombers are adherent Muslims fighting out of faith in God and dying for His sake. One cannot expect to receive the rewards of martyrdom if he or she is motivated by something other than love of God and striving in His path. Perhaps more importantly, jihadi Salafis are aware that Muslim governments attempt to portray jihadists as "deviants" and misguided individuals who know little about Islam and have been brainwashed into carrying out suicide attacks. Stressing the religiosity of the bombers, therefore, is al-Qaida's attempt to counter those claims.

**Willingness to sacrifice personal wealth and family ties:** The propaganda of al-Qaida portrays the "martyrs" as people who have given up all things dear in order to fulfill a higher obligation: jihad and martyrdom. They claim that many of the bombers are from wealthy families or have made personal sacrifices, such as selling their cars, using their meager savings, or relying on donations to make the trip to Iraq. Many biographies make use of the powerful imagery of a father leaving his newborn child or a husband leaving his wife to fight and die in the path of God.

These narratives are intended to inspire others and set a new standard for devotion to the faith. They demand that, to be a good Muslim, it is not enough to pray regularly and carry out one's ritual obligations. One must also exert as much effort as necessary to reach and die for the land of jihad.

**Eagerness to conduct a "martyrdom operation":** Again and again, we read in the biographies that the "martyrs" are eager to die in the path of God and are frustrated when denied or delayed. Almost every clip shows the bombers as happy: They usually wave goodbye with smiles on their faces as they run toward their explosive-laden vehicles, reflecting the theme of joy in sacrifice and assurance of the rewards they will earn in paradise.

This theme of eagerness and joy is intended to show that the bombers are neither coerced nor brainwashed into carrying out suicide attacks. Iraqi satellite channels, however, often air "confessions" of foiled bombers who claim that they did not know that they were about to engage in a suicide operation, because someone else was in control of the detonator while they thought they were merely delivering the truck to the target. Some are said to have had their hands handcuffed to the steering wheel and others claim to have been given drugs and shown pornographic materials, to excite them into meeting heavenly maidens. The theme of eagerness to die, therefore, is intended to dispel these allegations and elevate the status of the suicide bombers to faithful and heroic martyrs fully in control of their choices and destinies.

**Success in martyrdom operations:** Invariably, the biographies of the martyrs emphasize, or more often exaggerate, the success of suicide missions as if to assure potential recruits that their worldly

sacrifices will not be in vain. The number of "apostates," "crusaders," and "CIA agents" claimed to be killed in individual operations are often in the hundreds. One finds repeatedly claims that the bombers killed more than is reported in the media, which "rely on American numbers." One often hears that the Americans dump their dead in rivers or in hastily prepared graves to cover up their real losses. Given their "success," the biographers term each operation as "conquest" (*ghazwah*), such as *ghazwit al-Nasiriyah* (the attack on Italian forces in Nasiriyah, which killed 31 people). The term *ghazwah* is an intentional allusion to battles in early Islamic history, when Muslims fought and ultimately triumphed over the unbelievers.

### Understanding the Ploys

Martyrdom mythologies are not sufficient to explain all the suicide bombings in Iraq. However, ideology, religious framing, and emotional narratives help explain how jihadists deactivate self-inhibiting norms against murder and mayhem and allow them to appear as moral agents even when they are acting in immoral ways.

Justifications for killing fellow Muslims are anchored in emotional, poignant narratives that link suffering and humiliation of Muslims to what is portrayed as the collusion of impotent Muslim leaders and their agents with Western oppressors, who, the extremists claim, are seeking to destroy Islam and subjugate Muslim lands. By framing the struggle in those terms, the jihadists make it appear logical that a "heroic" cadre is needed to step forward, redeem the honor of the nation, and erase the shame of humiliation by striking at those who work with the enemy.

Understanding these ploys is an important step to combating terrorism.

---

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

---

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Links to other Internet Resources should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[HOME](#) | [WHAT'S NEW](#) | [ABOUT USINFO](#) | [SITE INDEX](#) | [WEBMASTER](#) | [PRIVACY](#)  
[TOPICS](#) | [REGIONS](#) | [RESOURCE TOOLS](#) | [PRODUCTS](#)

