

Pre-copied version of Thomas Hegghammer, “Suicide”, in Gerhard Bowering, Patricia Crone, Wadad Kadi, Devin J. Stewart, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

Suicide

Suicide (*qatl nafs, intihār*) is strictly prohibited in the Islamic tradition. The Qur’an is ambiguous: Q4:29 [*do not kill your selves*] may refer to infighting, and Q2:195 [*make not your hands contribute to your destruction*] need not refer to self-killing. However, the Prophetic tradition clearly condemns suicide as a grave sin. Suicide has always existed in the Muslim world, but has remained relatively rare, even when accounting for underreporting. Muslim populations today have very low official suicide rates, and quantitative studies suggest that belief in Islam reduces suicide rates more than belief in any other major religion.

While personal suicide is universally condemned by jurists, self-sacrifice for the good of Islam may be praised as martyrdom. This ambiguity has generated debates throughout Islamic history over self-sacrificial behaviour in combat. In classical times debates centred on *inghimās*, self-immersion into enemy ranks. Most medieval jurists condoned *inghimās* provided certain conditions were met; the context must be one of legitimate jihad, the attacker’s intentions must remain pure and the attack must carry real military benefits. Irregular operations such as the suicidal assassinations by Azraqi Kharijites and Nizari Ismailis (known as the assassins) were widely condemned.

Modern suicide bombings have revived this debate. Suicide bombing was pioneered in early 1980s Lebanon by Shiite militants, who first used it in a December 1981 attack on the Iraqi embassy in Beirut and launched forty operations in Lebanon and Kuwait during the 1980s. The tactic was introduced to Sunnism in April 1993 by Hamas, who, along with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, would launch twenty-eight suicide bombings against Israel in the mid-1990s. In the 2000s, the number of attacks, perpetrating groups and target countries all increased exponentially. Between 2000 and 2008, Islamist groups perpetrated around 1,500 suicide bombings, primarily in post-2000 Palestine, post-2003 Iraq and post-2006 Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The introduction of suicide tactics in the early 1980s was linked to the rise of Shiite Islamism as articulated by clerics such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Muhammad Husain Fadlallah from the 1960s onward. Departing from traditional Shiite quietism, these ideologues reinterpreted the Prophet’s grandson Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala as an ideal of self-sacrifice to be emulated in the modern world for the promotion of Islam. Revolutionary Iran promoted martyrdom-seeking, *istishhād*, as a virtue during the Iran-Iraq war, and the first modern “martyrdom-seeking operation” is said to have been a November 1980 attack on an Iraqi tank by a 13-year old Iranian. Hamas’s adoption of suicide bombings was directly inspired by Lebanese Hizbollah, but also reflected the development of a Sunni Islamist discourse on martyrdom during the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan. Revolutionary Islamists in 1970s Egypt and Syria did not develop a suicide-martyrdom ideology; in fact, until the late 2000s, groups fighting Muslim regimes very rarely undertook suicide operations. The causes of the growth in the 2000s remain debated, but they include tactical learning, the spread of martyrdom ideologies and increased overall conflict levels.

Suicide bombing was initially more controversial in the Sunni world than in Shiism, where *istishhād* was sanctioned from the top of the clerical hierarchy. The Sunni debate, particularly intense in 1996 and 2002 following bombing waves in Israel, has tended to pit Muslim Brotherhood ideologues (such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi) against official clergy in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The second Palestinian intifada caused a clear shift in clerical as well as

popular attitudes in favour of suicide bombings against Israel. Suicide bombings outside Israel are more controversial, especially since recent al-Qaida attacks have carried substantial Muslim collateral damage.

In addition to the pragmatic argument that military asymmetry forces the weaker part to use irregular tactics, proponents typically rely on three theological arguments. First, they say the conditions for martyrdom are present, since the attacker's intention is pure and the tactic causes major damage, including instilling fear in the enemy's ranks. Second, they relativize the prohibition of suicide, arguing that Q4:29 is qualified by Q4:30, and that the classical story of the "People of the Ditch" invalidates the distinction between direct and indirect self-killing. Third, they analogize suicide bombings to *inghimās*. This involves a controversial interpretation of Q9:111, whose phrase "slay and are slain" has been used by opponents to argue that the killing of the enemy must precede the death of the attacker, whereas a suicide bombing does the opposite.

(715 words)

Further reading:

- Franz Rosenthal, "On suicide in Islam", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, no. 66 (1946), pp. 239-259.
- Miles E. Simpson and George H. Conklin, "Socioeconomic Development, Suicide and Religion: A Test of Durkheim's Theory of Religion and Suicide", *Social Forces*, no. 76 (1989), pp. 945-964.
- John Kelsay, "Suicide Bombers", *Christian Century*, vol. 119, no. 17 (2002), pp. 22-25.
- Nawaf Hayil al-Takruri, *al-'amaliyat al-istishhadiyya fi'l-mizan al-fiqhi* [Martyrdom Operations in the Juridical Balance], Damascus: Dar al-Fikri, 2003.
- Bernard Kenneth Freamon, "Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History", *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 27 (2003), pp. 299-369.
- *Maghreb-Machrek* no. 186 (2005) (special issue on suicide terrorism).
- Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide bombers, Allah's new martyrs*. London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- David Jan Slavicek, "Deconstructing the Shariatic Justification of Suicide Bombings", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol 31, no. 6 (2008), pp. 553 – 571.
- Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

See also:

Jihad

Martyrdom

Terrorism