

Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies

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The jihadists in Iraq strategically deploy emotional narratives to construct the myth of heroic martyrdom, demonize their intended targets, and appeal to potential recruits from around the Muslim world. These culturally astute jihadists know well the themes that resonate with the wider Muslim public, and have done an extraordinary job in harnessing three narratives to mobilize for martyrdom: humiliation of Muslims at the hands of foreigners, impotence of official Muslim governments in the face of hegemonic powers, and redemption through faithful sacrifice. This study explores how jihadists weave together these three narratives to suggest a deleterious condition that requires an immediate action, offer an explanation of the causes of this persistent condition, and present the necessary solution to overcome the problem.

Keywords Al Qaeda, insurgency, Iraq, jihadists, suicide bombers, terrorism

Introduction

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. Jihadists formulate a number of utilitarian, ideological, and theological arguments to achieve these tasks. However, to avoid overwhelming their audiences with information and complicated political and theological discourse, jihadists simplify their message by relying on emotional narratives that seek to construct the image of the “heroic martyr.” Through online video clips and biographies of suicide bombers, they play on prevailing 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

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their “mothers and sisters.” These emotive elements of their discourse are intended to galvanize support for their cause, not just from a narrow circle of activists, but also from the broader Muslim public.

The dominant narratives in insurgent videos, audio recordings, online magazines, and biographies revolve around three themes that are often presented in a sequence as if to show a play in three acts. Act one depicts the unmerciful humiliation and suffering inflicted on Muslims in Iraq and throughout the world, suggesting that there is a conspiracy by the Western “crusaders” to target Muslims and single them out for punishment. The second act shows the impotence of existing Muslim regimes and their collusion with the West, suggesting that they are not the true leaders of the Muslim world, but servants of their Western “masters.” The final act insists on the inevitability of Muslim victory because pious and heroic cadres 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, a cause of the problem, and a solution to the problem.

This article explores martyrdom mythologies in Iraq by drawing extensively on the literature of jihadists since the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency.¹ These include video clips,² audio recordings,³ biographies of suicide bombers,⁴ online magazines,⁵ and still images posted online.⁶ 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 their atrocities 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 and in all likelihood does not reflect the totality of their motivations. The point of focusing on martyrdom mythologies is to show how groups seek to achieve several communicative goals through manipulation of narratives, not to suggest that these mythologies reflect the true motivations of the suicide bombers. The latter is a complex research question that falls outside the scope of this article.

Discursive practices in and of themselves are not sufficient to mobilize people for action. Therefore, this study is not suggesting that mere “talk” by jihadists is sufficient to compel people to engage in suicide operations. A number of other factors such as societal conflicts, mobilizing networks, legitimating authorities, and permissive conditions are necessary for the phenomenon of suicide terrorism to develop on the scale witnessed in Iraq. However, discursive practices are a necessary component in the dynamic of violence, especially important in legitimating the indiscriminate killing of civilians. This research, therefore, is not intended to explain *why* suicide bombings take place in Iraq. Its intent is to explain *how* jihadists deploy emotional narratives to simplify their communication tasks as they attempt to mobilize their milieu and a sympathetic public for jihad in Iraq.

Background Context

From March 22, 2003 to August 2006, more than 440 suicide attacks took place in Iraq. The overwhelming majority of these attacks have targeted Iraqi security forces and Shiite civilians, not coalition forces.⁷ Many, if not most, of the perpetrators of these suicide bombings are non-Iraqis who volunteered to fight and die in Iraq. Most are connected to jihadi networks associated with “second generation” jihadists who trained in Afghanistan during the 1990s or militants fleeing arrest in their home or host countries.⁸

Suicide terrorism in Iraq began with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. However, insurgent groups that deploy suicide terrorism in Iraq frequently do so not just to remove the occupation from the country, but also to collapse the emerging regime by intimidating and annihilating the newly formed Iraqi security forces and by fostering a sectarian war between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.⁹ Insurgents regularly target new recruits to Iraq's security services. Approximately 44% of suicide attacks have targeted Iraqi security forces as of February 2006.¹⁰ From June 2003 to April 30, 2006, approximately 4,550 Iraqi military and police personnel were killed.¹¹ As of April 30, 2006, 779 (35.5%) of the 2,400 U.S. troops killed in Iraq died in IED (improvised explosive devices) attacks; another 742 (30.9%) died in hostile fire that does not include car bombs, which killed only 121 (5.0%) American personnel. Given that the overwhelming majority of suicide attacks (70%) are conducted through car bombs, it is safe to conclude that most suicide attacks in Iraq do not target U.S. forces.¹² Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni political figures operating in the new political process have also been attacked in suicide attacks as have militia members belonging to the Shiite Badr Corps, Mehdi Army, and Kurdish Peshmerga. The most gruesome suicide attacks have targeted Shiite civilians in markets, mosques, religious ceremonies, and funeral processions. As of February 2006, approximately 23% of suicide attacks targeted civilians in Iraq and 11% targeted government officials and parties.¹³

The Iraqi insurgents rely on a diverse tool kit of tactics and they deploy them across a range of targets. The deadliest tactics are the improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which are considered the most lethal in the insurgency, and car bombs driven by suicide bombers. However, insurgents also verbally and physically intimidate "collaborators" such as translators and manual laborers employed by the coalition forces; sabotage electric stations, oil and water pipelines and facilities, and coalition 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 them and execute them; and carry out suicide attacks using explosive vests. Insurgents also attack international organizations such as the United Nations, non-governmental agencies such as the Red Cross, and representatives of foreign governments such as the Jordanian and Turkish embassies, and have killed Algerian, Egyptian, and Russian diplomats.

There is a strategic logic to why insurgents attack the targets they do. Expansive violence against foreigners, Shiite and Kurdish politicians and civilians, Iraqi security forces, international organizations, non-governmental agencies, journalists, and the physical and economic infrastructure 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 sole monopoly on the use of coercive force, which allows jihadists with an agenda beyond Iraq to establish a base for operations, recruitment, and training.

Ideological and Instrumental Justifications for Suicide Attacks

Al Qaeda in Iraq has declared responsibility for 30 percent of the claimed suicide attacks in Iraq as of February 2006.¹⁴ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi offered an instrumental justification for these attacks in one of his audio recordings:

[The holy warriors] faced the strongest and most advanced army in modern times. They faced its arrogance, tyranny and all its big numbers and advanced weapons . . . When the holy warriors noticed this huge disparity in numbers and armaments between them and the enemy, they looked for alternatives to amend this deficiency and fill this gap so that the light and the fire of jihad will not be extinguished. Brigades of martyrs, whose sole goals are to please God and rush to the heavens, have set out and attacked the sanctuaries of infidelity and broke its armies. They inflicted severe punishment and injuries on the enemy and hurt its reputation. They mobilized the sons of this nation against this enemy and revived hope in the souls once again, praises and gratitude is to God.¹⁵

Abu Dujana al-Ansari, the head of Al Qaeda's al-Bara Bin Malik Brigade (suicide bombing squad), similarly justifies suicide attacks in a montage dedicated to Zarqawi. Al-Ansari says that the suicide brigade was created following the earlier advice of Shiekh Osama Bin Laden to terrorize the enemy and penetrate its defenses in order to demoralize its soldiers.¹⁶ Such attacks instill fear in their hearts and make them cower in the face of the Muslim fighters.

But how do they justify attacking Iraqi security forces? Insurgents in Iraq, not just those associated with Al Qaeda and Ansar al-Sunna Army, argue that the Iraqi security forces are a mere extension, an appendage, to the occupation forces in Iraq. Just as the U.S. recruited the northern alliance fighters in Afghanistan against the Taliban regime, it is doing the same in Iraq by relying on the Shiite militias of the Badr Corps (which insurgents derisively call the "Ghader"—betrayal—Corps) and the Kurdish militias known as the Peshmergas. The same goes for the newly-formed Iraqi security services (which they derisively call *al-haras al-wathani*—the idol-worshipping guard—as opposed to *al-haras al-watani*—the National Guard).¹⁷ Striking at these "collaborators" is nothing less than striking at the U.S.-led occupation forces. In a 46-minute video montage dedicated to the theme of fighting the Iraqi police and security forces, Zarqawi rhetorically asks, "Why is it permissible to strike the enemy when he has blonde hair and blue eyes, but it is not permissible to strike him when he has dark hair and black eyes?" He concludes, "An American Muslim is our beloved brother, and an Arab infidel is our depraved enemy, even if we share with him the same spot of land."¹⁸

In justifying attacks against Shiite militias, Al Qaeda and Ansar Al-Sunna Army argue that these militias attack and kill Sunnis, torture them, abuse and humiliate them at checkpoints, and serve as spies for the occupation forces. Many video clips issued by Ansar Al-Sunna Army and by Al Qaeda in Iraq are dedicated to this theme. Therefore, the operations against the Shiites are intended as self-defense to protect the Sunni communities as well as to take revenge on those who would harm Sunnis and turn them over to the coalition occupation forces. Al Qaeda in Iraq formed the Umar Brigade specially to attack members of the Shiite Badr Corps.¹⁹

In justifying attacks against the ruling government, the nationalists and salafi jihadi insurgents argue that this is an illegitimate government—indeed a puppet regime—that came to power under unacceptable circumstances with the help of aggressive enemies of the Iraqi people. It rules only because the occupation forces allow it to rule, not because it is a genuine Islamic representative of the people of Iraq. The Iraqi government gives cover and legitimacy to the occupation when it should be fighting it and demanding the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraqi

land. Without this charade of parliamentary politics and constitutional conventions, the occupation would be exposed for what it is to the whole of the Iraqi people and the world.

Moreover, this government is part and parcel of a global conspiracy against Islam led by “Crusaders” and “Zionists.” These forces fear the truth of Islam and the unification of Muslim lands under a single leader, *khalifa* (caliph), and consequently conspire to distort Islam and weaken the faith of Muslims in their religion. If Muslims are united in one entity, they would be able to counter the hegemony of the West and revive the glories of their golden ages. Secularism, nationalism, and Shiism are instruments of this nefarious plot to divide and conquer Muslims. Secularism divides the world into religious and non-religious spheres, which is antithetical to Islam. The latter is a comprehensive religion that regulates matters of faith (*ibadat*) and social relations (*muamalat*). Furthermore, secularism violates God’s sovereignty (*hakimiyyat allah*) by allowing someone other than God to legislate 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 faithful and brotherhood of Muslims. As for Shiism, it gives ascendancy to a heretical creed, not Islamic law based on the proper *manhaj* (method or orientation). The Shiites are the most dangerous tool against the true believers because they appear Islamic, authentic, and of the people. In reality, they loathe the people of the Sunna and wait for the opportunity to betray them.²⁰

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 conscious of Muslims, demonize the Shiites and Iraqi security forces, and heighten the threat facing Muslims worldwide.

Emotional Narratives to Justify Suicide Attacks

Insurgents in Iraq do not depend solely on the force of ideology in mobilizing support for martyrdom. Insurgents 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 in Iraq and around the world. The narratives of insurgent groups rely on three themes: humiliation, impotence due to collusion, and redemption through faith and sacrifice. These themes are often presented separately, but sometimes they are delivered in a sequence as if to suggest a crisis, a causal explanation of the crisis, and the solution to alleviate the suffering of Muslims.

Humiliation

At the heart of the mobilizing narratives of insurgents is the theme of humiliation at the hands of callous and arrogant powers. Images from act one often begin with footage from the “shock and awe” phase of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These images depict imperial arrogance and reflect the asymmetry in power between the aggressors and their victims. Photos of Iraqi women and children killed or bloodied by the bombardment, usually accompanied by chilling melancholic chants embedded in the clip; mosques and minarets purposely destroyed through bombardment while

they are issuing the calls to prayer (*adhan*), suggesting a war on Islam, not just a war in Iraq; images of coalition forces storming into homes while women and children are crying out in terror, beseeching the foreigners to let their fathers and brothers go free; clips of a U.S. soldier shooting a wounded insurgent inside a mosque or occupation forces stepping with their boots on the backs of men that have just been bound and forced to the ground with black sacks covering their faces; and, above all, images of men and women enduring humiliating torture in Abu Ghraib prison—all these images personalize the suffering and heighten the sense of powerlessness and indignations that many Muslims feel.

The Mujahideen Army in Iraq issued a 60-minute, 45-second video entitled *Courageous Men or Lions (Usud al-Shara)*.²¹ It contains footage of destruction inside a mosque, a torn-up Quran and another one with the Christian cross hand-drawn on its cover. As these images appear, a child's voice is heard reciting poetry:

Where are our mosques?

Where are our schools?

Why do I see them in ruins after they were beacons?

Where are my countrymen?

Why are they not moving to free our captive brothers? Defend the honor of our sisters?

Is this not in our religion?

These images from Iraq are usually combined with stock images from other conflicts in Muslim countries, especially Palestine. We see images of the killing of the little boy Muhammad al-Durah while in the arms of his father during the opening days of the Al-Aqsa uprising in 2000. This image galvanized the world's attention and epitomized the suffering of the Palestinian people. This image along with others is intended to deliver two messages. First, the suffering and humiliation of Muslims around the world are not unconnected episodes, but a chain in a series of transgressions by the "Crusader-Zionist" alliance against Islam and Muslims. These images are intended to portray the war in Iraq as one of many wars on Islam. In doing so, the insurgents are heightening the sense of threat facing the Muslim world in order to justify extraordinary measures to fight back the manifest conspiracy against Islam. As Zarqawi declared in one of his video montages:

Our Jihad in Iraq is the same as in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Bosnia, an honorable jihad . . . We shed the dust of divisive nationalism and hopeless patriotism that tears asunder the ranks of Muslims and turns them into tasty bites for the infidels.²²

In one of the biographies of "martyrs," the Kuwaiti suicide bomber Abdel Rahman Bin Shuja al-Utaybi (Abu Awf) is said to have been moved by suffering in Palestine: "One day we were watching a videotape of young stone throwers in Palestine and the tragedy there. There were heartbreaking scenes and one of the brothers shed so many tears. He was Abdel Rahman (Abu Awf), who could not stand the tragedies of Muslims."²³ In his last will and testament, the Saudi suicide bomber Abu Ans al-Tahami al-Qahtani writes:

Whoever looks at the condition of the Islamic nation will find it is torn asunder and its cuts bleeding in every place. There is the wound of Palestine for nearly 50 years; and there are the wounds of Chechnya,

Afghanistan, Kashmir, Indonesia, Philippines, and Iraq. We are immersed in our wants and desires while the sanctuaries are violated, the mosques demolished, and the holy books insulted. I do not know how we are living inside ourselves; do these wounds pain us or do we not care?²⁴

The second message delivered by linking suffering in Iraq to other Muslim conflicts is that the struggle in Iraq is the central battlefield in which to fight the 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. These are all one struggle, not many separate wars. In framing the conflict in this light, insurgents can call on jihadists to come and fight in Iraq without feeling guilty that they abandoned their struggle at home. Victory in Iraq is victory in every Muslim land. One of the hymns chanted over and over in one of insurgent videos reflects this presumed unity in the struggles of Muslims:

*With the Sharp Weapon of Truth
We will liberate the lands of the free
And bring back purity to the land of Jerusalem
After the humiliation and shame.*²⁵

Linking the war in Iraq to the liberation of Jerusalem “after the humiliation and shame” appeals to the emotional need for unity and solidarity among Muslims; it is reaching out to an identity rooted in shared suffering and collective yearning for a victory following decades of failure and defeat.

Jihadists in Iraq also rely on the theme of female dishonor and suffering at the hands of foreigners and Iraqi security forces to justify violence and mobilize people. Images of women terrified in their homes as soldiers storm in to search for insurgents; videos of women being frisked by foreign men; rumors of women abducted or taken into custody where they are humiliated or, worst, raped; stories of women being handed over by Iraqi forces as hostages to be exchanged for wanted insurgents are replete in jihadists video clips and montages, audio recordings, and online magazines. Insurgents undoubtedly are appealing to notions of masculinity that pervade tribal culture, in which *sharaf* (nobleness), *ard* (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. Shame brought about by violations of honor and norms of decency associated with the separation of the sexes can impel the traditionally-minded to engage in violence to redeem the honor of the violated female, including killing the “offending” women. Failure to take vengeance raises questions about one’s nobility and sense of manhood. As we shall see below, this aspect of Arab culture is exploited to the hilt.

Impotence and Collusion

Part and parcel of the mobilizing narrative in Iraq is to show the “arrogance” of the invading forces and the collusion of “so called” Muslim governments. Insurgent videos often show the clip of the gloating U.S. President, George W. Bush, on board a U.S. battleship declaring victory in Iraq. This image is often followed by images of U.S. troops marching in the streets of Iraq or walking through Saddam Hussein’s

palaces, smiling, confident in their triumphant conquest. Occasionally, one sees the famous image of a U.S. soldier placing the American flag atop the head of Saddam's statue in the center of Baghdad on the day the city fell. All these images are intended to portray the United States as an arrogant power proud of its unjustified aggression against a Muslim nation.

These images are closely followed by others showing Arab leaders—King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah in Jordan, Hussni Mubarak in Egypt, and the post-invasion leadership of Iraq (Iyad Alawi, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Jalal Talabani, and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim among others)—in the company of coalition forces officials, President Bush, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. These leaders are laughing and sometimes embracing their Western “masters.” The most commonly used image is that of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia clenching hands with President Bush, suggesting a tight bond among the closest of friends. We also see the image of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia giving former U.S. President Bill Clinton a medallion. Other images include Arab and/or Western leaders in the company of Israeli leaders; the most commonly used image is that of President Bush shaking hands with former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the White House during the Aqsa uprising, suggesting approval of Israel's “iron fist” policies against the Palestinians.

In one of the videos of Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah Army, images of Muslim leaders in the company of Western dignitaries are contrasted in alternating frames with images of Iraqi fighters. Muslim leaders and their guests are enjoying themselves in lavish palaces and comfortable settings. The holy fighters are donning modest clothes and fighting in desolate towns and villages. The official leaders are laughing and smiling to their Western “masters,” while the fighters are offering supplications to God, praying in the battlefield next to their weapons. Western leaders are shown with a superimposed Star of David on their foreheads, suggesting they are agents of Israel, while the fighters are chanting “God is great, glory to Islam.”²⁶

The sum of all these images is that the Arab and Muslim worlds are led by “puppets” that cannot be relied upon to liberate Iraq and end the suffering of the Muslim people. These are illegitimate governments that sold out to the arrogant occupiers who are conspiring against the Muslim world. This imagery is important for five reasons. First, it portrays anyone working for the official leaders and government in Iraq as part and parcel of the collusion with the Western aggressors. Given that these leaders are illegitimate sell-outs, it is not acceptable to work for them under the pretext of working for a Muslim or Iraqi government, not the occupation. Those who persist in working for the official Iraqi government are fair game and can be killed without moral compunction. Second, given that these leaders are collaborators 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, given that these governments are impotent in the face of the suffering of Muslims, it is necessary for other Muslims to step forward to fight in their stead. Jihad is an individual obligation (*fard ayn*) because the existing governments have abdicated their duty toward protecting Muslim lands and liberating them from unbelievers. Fourth, given that jihadists do not have the support or resources of official governments, they have to rely solely on their faith and limited capabilities to repel the arrogant aggressors, justifying their demands for extraordinary measures and calls for martyrdom. Finally, these images frame the struggle in broader terms than simply liberating Iraq from a foreign occupation. Instead, they frame the struggle as one to replace the entire corrupt and “mercenary” regimes that currently rule in the Muslim world with

ones that are truly Islamic and that protect Muslim interests, not their Western “masters.”

Inevitable Victory through Faith and Sacrifice

Acts one and two can be disempowering if not followed by act three. While act one frames the struggle in Iraq as unbearable suffering and humiliation that has afflicted the Muslim world, and act two frames existing rulers in the Muslim world as impotent individuals who are insufficient to reverse the suffering of Muslims in Iraq, act three presents the necessary solution for national salvation and redemption of Muslims around the globe. Salvation and redemption come through having faith in God and a desire to sacrifice in His path.

An important element in act three is the mythology surrounding martyrdom and martyrs. Al Qaeda 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” are issued on web postings, videos of operations, and in Al Qaeda’s online journal entitled “Biographies of Eminent Martyrs.” These productions reveal five 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
- Confirmation of martyrdom through dream visions

It must be made clear from the outset that these biographies are often short, inconsistent in the information they present, and highly propagandistic. The point of the following analysis is to show how groups seek to promote the myth of heroic martyrdom through such stories, not to suggest that these biographies reflect the true motivations of the suicide bombers.

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 or while planting an IED. These “true” Muslims are intent on reversing the humiliation of their Muslim brethren around the world. One of the melodic hymns repeated over and over in several insurgent videos declares:

*We shall not accept humiliation,
We shall not accept humiliation,
We shall not accept humiliation or subjugation,
We will not bow our heads,
We will not bow our heads,
We will not bow our heads to the depraved.*²⁷

As for suicide bombers in particular, almost invariably they are portrayed as genuinely religious people who love jihad more than they love life and fear God more than they fear death. The biographies often detail at length how the “martyr” used to pray incessantly and spent his time reading the Quran. The bombers are said to have prayed in the mosque, as opposed to praying at home, which is the best option

in the eyes of God. They often pray more than the average Muslim, certainly more than is expected of them by God. They also wake up to make their pre-dawn prayers (*qiyam*), which is not a religious obligation, but a voluntary expression of devotion. Some are said to have memorized the Quran by heart at a very young age; others fast every Monday and Thursday, when they are not required to do so by religion (although it is part of the Sunna).

One Kuwaiti bomber, Abu Awf al-Kuwaiti (Abdel Rahman Bin Shuja al-Utaybi), is said to have cried as he was entreating God to grant the holy warriors victory everywhere.²⁸ The same is said of the Saudi suicide bomber Muhammad Bin Rahayman al-Tawmi al-Shamari (Abu Salih).²⁹ In the biography of Abu Umayr al-Suri (Syrian), the narrator mentions in passing that one of the martyrs did not want to stay in the same house of Abu Umayr because “he felt shame [out of guilt]; every time he woke up he would find Abu Umayr up already in the middle of his prayers.”³⁰

The emphasis on sincerity in devotion is important for Al Qaeda in Iraq and jihadi salafis in general. Suicide bombings can only be considered martyrdom in Islam 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 Qaeda’s attempt to counter the claims of existing governments and assure their supporting public that they are genuine Muslims doing their share to save the nation.

A video recording by Ansar al-Sunna Army shows an unidentified suicide bomber declare in his last will and testament:

This is our religion and this is our path, to it we call, and for it we die, with God’s blessings in order to meet him . . . What kind of a world is this where a nation’s sanctity and honor are violated, its wealth robbed, and its scholars, pardon me, I mean the scholars of the sultans, discourage the youth from joining the jihad and raise doubts in their minds about jihad. Go forward my brothers and pay no heed. The land of jihad is calling you. How nice it will be if you answered the call. Oh God, accept me as a martyr . . .³¹

The suicide bomber is shown smiling as he waves goodbye to his brothers-in-arms.

The final will and testament sent by the Saudi suicide bomber Abu Hareth Abdul Rahman al-Dousry to his family reads: “To my mother, father, wife and brothers . . . I did not leave you to punish you, but instead to heed God’s call to jihad. How can I live happily knowing that this country is being violated, usurped and raped, and that the infidels are storming our homes and sanctuaries and violating our religion? If we do not meet again on this earth, we shall meet in heaven.”³²

These and other insurgent productions are intended to affirm that the bombers are genuinely concerned Muslims who put their trust in God and sacrificed to redeem the suffering of their people.

Willingness to Sacrifice Personal Wealth and Family Ties

The propaganda of Al Qaeda portrays the “martyrs” as people who have given up all things dear in order to fulfill a higher, more noble obligation: jihad and martyrdom in the path of God. Many of the bombers are said to be wealthy or from wealthy families (such as the previously mentioned Abu Umayr al-Suri, who is an electrical engineer). Even those who are not wealthy have made personal sacrifices, such as selling their cars, using their meager savings, or relying on donations to make the trip to Iraq. Perhaps the most powerful imagery is that of a father leaving his newborn child or a husband leaving his newlywed to fight and die in the path of God.

The biography of Abu Osama al-Maghribi, a Moroccan from the city of Tangiers, is instructive. Abu Osama, we are told, was 26 years old when he carried out an operation. He worked with his father in a “fancy” restaurant that brings in about 3,000 dollars a month. At the age of 20, he bought a piece of land and got married. However, for six years he was unable to father a child. When the war broke out in Iraq, he decided to join the land of jihad. Abu Osama sold the piece of land and bought a ticket to “an Arab” country. As he was about to depart to Iraq, he found out that his wife was pregnant. He was overwhelmed with joy. However, this did not stop him from leaving for jihad.

After arriving in the Arab country, Abu Osama moved from mosque to mosque seeking someone to take him to Iraq. He ran into a group of Moroccans being led by Abu Khbab al-Falastini. They took him to Iraq to Abu Ismail al-Muhajir, who became Abu Osama’s handler. Abu Osama made a vow with others to die in the path of God and eventually was the bomber in the operation against the United Nations’ headquarters building. Like many of the other bombers, he was eager to do the operation. On the day he found out he was chosen for a suicide mission, he also received news that his wife bore him a son. She named him Osama after Bin Laden. This news did not deter him from carrying forward with his operation. On the contrary, he was happy for “two good pieces of news in the same day.” On the day before the operation, he was left alone with his handler to reflect, pray, and cry. When the day came, he and his handler went to survey the target one more time. Abu Osama took hold of his new “wife,” a reference to the explosive-laden vehicle, and drove off toward his target.³³

This theme of leaving behind one’s family is repeated over and over. In the biography of Abu Wadha al-Kuwaiti (Mansur al-Hajari), we are told that he was married but did not father any children for four years. Then he had a little girl he named Wadha. A week later he went to Iraq and eventually died in a suicide operation. The biographer draws the following lesson from the story of Abu Wadha: “The man was married and he did not have any children for four years. However, one week after he had a child he went to jihad. It is devotion and the love of faith.”³⁴

A similar narrative is presented for Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti (Abdel Aziz al-Shamari): “The hero got married to a relative but when he heard the call of God and saw the door of paradise open wide he could not sit around while his brothers were racing to reserve places in the highest paradise. The price of these places is sincere blood, truthful prayer, and tireless effort.”³⁵ Abu Hamza al-Kuwaiti (Saïd al-Hajari) also gave up the good life for jihad: “His wedding was supposed to take place within a few months but he opted to marry the virgins of paradise.”³⁶ The same is said of the Saudi suicide bomber Abu Ans al-Tahami al-Qahtani.³⁷

These narratives are intended to set a new standard for heroism and devotion to the faith. It is not enough to be a good Muslim, pray regularly, and carry out one's ritual obligations. Even mere desire to join the jihad is not enough. One should exert as much effort as necessary to reach the land of jihad. These themes, undoubtedly, are intended to inspire others, particularly people in the Persian Gulf who live relatively decent lives, to abandon material wealth and join a more rewarding path in life.

Eagerness to Conduct a "Martyrdom Operation"

Over and over we read in the biographies of the "martyrs" that they are eager to die in the path of God and are frustrated when they are denied or delayed. Almost every clip of the suicide bombers in Iraq shows the bombers as happy, eager to do the will of God. They usually wave goodbye with smiles on their faces, running toward their explosive-laden vehicles, reflecting the theme of joy in sacrifice in the path of God and assured in the rewards they will earn in paradise.

The Kuwaiti volunteer Abu Bara (Faysal Zayd al-Mutiri) is said to have declared to a friend: "My Brother, I cannot wait to meet God Almighty, can you?" When he died, "Abu Bara had an extraordinary smile on his bright face."³⁸ Another Kuwaiti, Abu Musab (Abdel Aziz Abdel Hadi Dayhani), is said to have told his friends: "I do not care if I get killed. I will not sit motionless while my brothers are under attack every day . . . We should starve when the nation starves. We should share its joys and sorrows and we should die with it and for it . . . God willing, we will meet in paradise if we do not meet in the land of dignity."³⁹ An Iraqi named Abu Faris al-Anbari is said to have been raring to go on a suicide mission and pestered Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to send him. He even cried profusely when he was wounded in a conventional operation—he did not cry out of pain, but because God did not bless him with martyrdom. Eventually he was killed by American forces while on his way to the hospital following a wound he suffered in an aerial bombardment.⁴⁰

This theme of eagerness to carry out a suicide operation and joy expressed on the day of the operation is intended to counter the claims of authorities that the bombers are coerced or brainwashed into carrying out suicide attacks. Iraqi satellite channels 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 were merely delivering the truck to the target. Some are said to have had their hands handcuffed to the steering wheel or to have been given drugs before their operations 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. Many of these volunteers are said to have tried to go to Chechnya or Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, but they were prevented for one reason or another, suggesting a deep-rooted desire to engage in a jihad even prior to Iraq.

The biography of Azzad Akanji (Abu Abdullah al-Turki) is illustrative. Abu Abdullah is from Turkey. Prior to joining the jihad in Iraq, he went to Pakistan for two years and then to Afghanistan to train in combat. Following a stint in jihadi training camps, he returned to Turkey in order to make his way into Georgia. His ultimate goal was to join the jihad in Chechnya. However, he was unable to enter Chechnya and returned to Turkey.

While in Turkey, Abu Abdullah wanted to carry out a suicide operation against Jewish tourists. When this operation did not materialize, he wanted to participate in other suicide missions. However, he was not chosen for the operation against British and “Jewish” targets. Subsequently, he was wanted by the authorities in connection to the suicide bombings in Turkey. Undeterred, he made his way to Iraq and carried out an operation with two other bombers against the Khan Bin Saad police station in Diyali.⁴¹

The theme of eagerness to die is also intended to reinforce the idea that the bombers in Iraq are faithful Muslims who do not fear death because they know what awaits them in the afterlife. Like Hamas and Hezbollah, jihadi salafis in Iraq promote the idea that martyrdom is a gateway to another life, not an end to life. Dying in the path of God will achieve for the martyrs all the rewards of martyrdom, including:

- Remission of one’s sins at the moment the martyr’s blood is shed
- Immediate admission into heaven, so martyrs do not suffer the punishment of the tomb
- The privilege of accompanying prophets, saints, and righteous believers
- Marriage to heavenly maidens (*houri al-ayn*)
- The right to intercede with God on behalf of seventy relatives
- Protection against the pain of death
- Entry into the highest gardens of heaven (*jannat al-firdaous*)

The bombers are happy because they are abandoning this world of disgrace and shame to one in which they are venerated along with the honorable and righteous believers, enjoying for eternity all the fruits of their meager sacrifice. As proof of their happiness, jihadists often post on the web photos of dead jihadists who appear to be smiling or peacefully asleep. One caption points out that the martyr “is happy in the company of the heavenly maidens.”

Success in Martyrdom Operations

Invariably, the biographies of the martyrs emphasize, or more often exaggerate, the success of the suicide mission as if to assure potential recruits that their worldly sacrifices will not be in vain. The number of “apostates,” “crusaders,” and “CIA agents” reported killed in these operations are often in the hundreds. One finds repeatedly in the biographies of the bombers that they killed more than is reported in the news, which “rely on American numbers.” One often hears that the Americans dump their dead in rivers or in hastily-prepared graves in order to cover up their real losses. Given their “success,” the biographers term each operation as “conquest” (*ghazwah*), such as *ghazwahit 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 against the unbelievers and ultimately triumphed over them.

Success, however, is not always just in numbers. The idea of vengeance against those who would violate the honor of Muslim women is important, playing on masculine expectations in the highly patriarchic Arab world. Insurgent groups often portray their attacks as revenge for personal violations of honor. In a communiqué declaring responsibility for an attack on a security building in Tikrit in April 2005, Al Qaeda congratulates one of its “lions” in the Martyrs Brigades for demolishing the site where “our women were imprisoned, and our elderly were humiliated,

severely beaten, and tortured.”⁴² In another Al Qaeda video of a suicide attack on the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, the suicide bomber is shown declaring before his operation that we will “regain the life of honor once more” and “we shall redraw for Islam a map, its borders are honor, might, and triumph.”⁴³ The message delivered by this clip is that sacrifice is not merely for Iraq, but for the entirety of the Muslim world. Martyrdom in Iraq is the key to redeeming the Muslim nation the world over.

A clip by the Mujahideen Consultative Council in Iraq, titled “Fatimah’s Fiancé,” is illustrative. It shows Abu Muawiyah al-Shamali, a Saudi suicide bomber in his twenties. His operation was framed as a direct response to an alleged letter sent by a female detainee at Abu Ghraib prison named Fatimah. In December 2004, Fatimah called on the holy warriors to come to rescue all the female prisoners who were subjected to daily rape, torture, and humiliation at the hands of the “sons of the pigs and the monkeys” (referring to Jews). After describing the torture and humiliation, she asked the insurgents to save the prisoners. “Brothers,” Fatimah writes, “I tell you again, fear God! Kill us with them so that we might be at peace. Help! Help! Help!” Abu Muawiyah al-Shamali then appeared with a big smile on his face reading a poem, with a gun and Quran nearby. After reciting the poem, he entreated God to grant him Fatimah’s hand in marriage in paradise: “Oh, Lord, marry me to Fatimah who was martyred after they had violated her honor.” The suicide bomber featured a big smile on his face throughout the taping of his farewell message. As he sat in the booby-trapped car, he smiled and patted the explosives that were going to end his life: “This is Fatimah’s dowry.” Waving back to his friends who were taping the operation, Abu Muawiyah drove his car toward an unidentified target.⁴⁴

After portraying the jihadists as pious, sacrificing individuals who are eager to carry out the responsibilities that have been abdicated by their nominal Muslim leaders, we begin to see the results of their sacrifice. Image after image shows humiliation-in-reverse. Now it is the American soldiers who are bloodied, crying out of fear, embracing their fallen buddies. We see rows of coffins draped in American flags and families crying back in America. The “arrogant” have been humbled. One of the Islamic Army in Iraq videos begins with images of blown-up Humvees followed by images of President Bush, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell appearing anxious and disturbed, suggesting that jihadi operations have shaken them and removed their exultant confidence.

In another insurgent video that ranked as number two in a montage of “Top Ten” attacks by the Islamic Army in Iraq, seven American soldiers are shown casually talking and walking as they converge on an object in the middle of a barren field with palm trees in the background. Suddenly, an IED explodes. All of the soldiers fall. The person taping the operation is overwhelmed with joy as he is heard sobbing uncontrollably, repeating, over and over, “God is great, God is great, God is great.” Finally, he regains his composure and calmly says, “*al-hamdu lil-lah*,” praise be to God. This clip ranked number two undoubtedly because of the powerful message it sends: God will reward the believers by punishing the unjust.⁴⁵

Confirmation of Martyrdom in Dream Visions

One of the surreal aspects of the martyrs’ biographies is the theme of dream visions. There are two types of dreams that are narrated in these

biographies. The first refers to suicide bombers having dreams about their operations or of previous suicide bombers, usually their friends, appearing in front of them. They sometimes hold conversations with the visions. The second type of dream involves the senders of the bombers confirming that they had a dream of a fallen martyr. The biographies of three Kuwaiti volunteers in Iraq are instructive.

Abu Bakr al-Kuwaiti (Faysal Ali Musa al-Rashidi) is said to have seen “a dream that he was in a waiting room in a hospital where a sign read: ‘Martyr Faysal Ali Musa al-Rashidi.’” Abu Hamza al-Kuwaiti (Said al-Hajari) also had a dream: “I saw myself swimming in a river with other people. The river led to a cave or a tunnel on which it was written: ‘To the Highest Paradise.’ The closer I came to the tunnel the fewer the swimmers. When I approached, something was dragging me to the bottom of the river. It was a beautiful young maiden of paradise. We hugged each other under water.”⁴⁶

Abu Awf al-Kuwaiti (Abdel Rahman Bin Shuja al-Utaybi), we are told, had a dream of his friend Mansoor al-Hajari, who died in an earlier operation. Al-Hajari was sitting next to him. He asked him “How are you Mansoor?” His friend replied, “Good, praise be to God.” Abu Awf then said, “I would like to ask you what you witnessed immediately after you pressed the button that set off the explosion?” His dead friend smiled and said, “Come here, come here. God is generous. God is generous.”⁴⁷

A friend of Abu Awf begged him to pay him a visit in his dreams after Abu Awf had completed his mission. After the operation, in which “more than 60 apostates” were killed, Abu Awf fulfilled his friend’s wish and came to visit him in his dream. “Where are you, Abdel Rahman [Abu Awf]? Are you alive?” Abu Awf replied, “I am alive. I am alive.”⁴⁸

The notion of visions (*ruyah*) in dreams has symbolic weight in the Islamic tradition, especially when the recipients of these visions are devout Muslims. Visions in dreams imply that God is communicating directly to His faithful. In the Quran, God communicated with the Prophets Abraham and Muhammad through dreams.⁴⁹ Dreams in Islam offer the faithful divine guidance, warn them of impending danger, and can foretell specific events. Many Muslims today, when facing tough decisions, rely on a Prophetic tradition that urges them to undertake a prayer for guidance (*istikhara*) in which they hope God would reveal to them the correct choice in a dream.⁵⁰

The emphasis on bombers appearing in dreams is intended to assure future recruits that those who came before them were genuine and righteous Muslims who are still alive, in paradise, near God who is “generous.” These visions appear to confirm the Quranic verses: “Whoever fights in the path of God, whether he be slain or victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward” (4:74); and “Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provision” (3:169). Dream visions allow jihadists to circumvent the fact that the living cannot inquire of the dead what life is like after they have died. Not only is communication with the dead possible through dreams, it is also comforting because the dead appear happy, calling on others to “come here.” Moreover, the mythology surrounding dreams is intended to counter the claims of authorities that the suicide bombers are misguided fanatics that unjustly kill themselves and other Muslims. If these claims were true, how could these “martyrs” appear in dreams over and over?

Weaving the Narratives Together

One of the most powerful series of clips that capture this narrative of humiliation, collusion, and redemption through sacrifice can be found in one of the montages issued by Al Qaeda in Iraq, which contained approximately 46 minutes of footage dedicated to the theme of fighting the Iraqi security forces.⁵¹ The series of clips begin with an Iraqi woman donning the *hijab* (implying a pious “sister”) and covered in a black shadow to hide her identity (implying she is not safe and needs continuous protection). In a tearful voice, she tells her story of suffering at the hands of an Iraqi policeman who was intent on turning her over to the occupation forces as a hostage to be exchanged for her wanted husband. According to her story, she begged her fellow compatriot: “I’m an Iraqi and you’re an Iraqi; why are you doing this to me. Why?” She breaks down, uncontrollably sobbing, full of tears.

The Iraqi woman is unable to continue telling her story. As her voice fades, a melancholic hymn comes on accompanied by images of Iraqi policemen while they are smiling, singing, and dancing with American forces, apparently during a training session. The clip is juxtaposed to the clip of the Iraqi woman as she continues with her story of how she was bound and handed over to the Americans. In a tearful, but powerful voice, full of faith in God, she declares: “*hasbiyah allah wa niama al-wakil*” (Allah is sufficient for me, and He is an excellent Guardian). Yet, despite her faith in God, she is not strong enough to endure this suffering: “I would rather have died than suffer the humiliation and degradation that I saw.” Then there is silence for a few seconds, giving viewers time to reflect on the woman in tears, letting her story sink in to their hearts and her image reach out to their consciences. As her image slowly fades, she is heard from once more: “*hasbiyah allah wa niama al-wakil, hasbiyah allah wa niama al-wakil.*”

The tenor of the video clip changes; now it contains an upbeat tone with more intensity, suggesting a turning point in the narrative. A new set of images show the jihadists marching in line, as if they came purposely to save none other than this suffering sister; it gives the impression that they are heroic and determined. The images are accompanied by a voiceover of marching feet and, almost subthreshold, a voice repeats: “They are coming, they are coming.” Next, we see clips of suicide operations and jihadi attacks along with images of destroyed military vehicles belonging to the occupation forces and dead Iraqi security forces. These images are accompanied by a hymn that honors fighting in the path of God and venerates the sacrifice of one’s blood for religion. Humiliation has turned into victory, powerless suffering into willing sacrifice, and shame into honor.

A poem recited by Zarqawi in one of his audio recordings also evokes the themes of humiliation, impotence, and redemption through faith and martyrdom:

*Baghdad, we are shedding tears of sorrow and grief for you
A Muslim town struck with humiliation at the hands of the worst of mankind, the Crusaders.*

*I grieve for a girl as pure as snow, who is crying,
Her chastity was violated by a dog and a pack of wolves.
We go where thunder strikes but no Harun [al-Rashid] to stop them,
And the heart is full of grief
We go where thunder strikes while the [rest of the] Arabs bend their heads to them,
But how can mice ever rise up.
Woe unto my people, for they have strayed from the [right] path,*

By falsehoods and idols.

Alas, there is no peace to unite us toward the great One,

Nor do we have leaders among the people.

Baghdad, do not be astonished, for the Arabs have no shame any longer;

They live in sin and when the war heats up they abandon the battle.

Dry your tears, for the people have strayed;

The ammunition of war is faith before the sword.

Where are the voices of the evil clerics whose rubbish we hear only when they are speaking against the holy warriors? Where are they? Why are they not defending the honor of Muslim women?

I wish they at least fight out of pride for the honor of [Muslim] women,

Since they do not fight for religion.

And [I wish] they at least join the battlefield even for material gains,

Since they do not care to gain God's blessings.

Here I am, oh mother,

Here I am, oh sister,

Here I am, oh honorable and pure one,

By God, we shall not rest, nor sleep, nor put our swords back in their sheaths, until we avenge your honor and dignity.⁵²

In summary, the ideological justifications for killing Muslims in Iraq are anchored with a poignant narrative that links the suffering and humiliation of Muslims to the collusion of nominal Muslim leaders and their agents with Western oppressors seeking to destroy Islam and subjugate Muslim lands. By framing the struggle in those terms, it becomes logical to strike at those who make Iraq safe for the invaders. The Iraqi security services and the Shiite and Kurdish political parties—and even those Sunnis willing to participate in the “farcical” democracy—are the flip side of the same “Crusader-Zionist” coin.

Conclusion

This study shows that jihadists rely, at least in part, on emotive narratives to construct the myth of heroic martyrdom. While groups like Al Qaeda in Iraq rely on a number of instrumental, ideological, and religious arguments that allow them, at least in theory, to circumvent Islamic prohibitions against Muslims killing themselves,⁵³ killing civilians,⁵⁴ and killing other Muslims,⁵⁵ their strategic use of emotion is intended to supplement these arguments and cut across ideological lines in order to appeal to a broader pool of supporters. Emotionally, jihadists in Iraq construct narratives rooted in themes of humiliation, collusion, and redemption to demonize their enemies and heighten the sense of threat facing Muslims to convince their coreligionists to accept the use of extraordinarily cruel measures to repel their foes. The mythology surrounding individual suicide bombers and other fallen jihadists is intended to appeal to potential recruits to make similar “heroic” sacrifices as well as counter the claims of authorities that the bombers are deviants, brainwashed youth who know little about Islam.

The theme of humiliation relies on framing the war in Iraq as one in a series of aggressions and defeats by Muslims at the hands of “crusaders,” “Zionists,” and “apostates.” Just as important, humiliation is as much about personal stories of suffering and indignity as it is about collective deprivations and grievances. The theme

of impotence due to collusion resonates with the wider Muslim public who live under oppressive regimes that do not challenge U.S. hegemony and have failed Muslims time and again in Palestine, Chechnya, and Iraq. Not only are Muslim governments not fighting back, they are perceived as active collaborators in the humiliation and subjugation of Muslims. The theme of redemption through sacrifice is presented as the way out of the malaise. Groups frame martyrdom as an act of redemption, empowerment, and defiance against unjust authorities. Volunteers for suicide attacks are not brainwashed victims of opportunistic recruiters, nor are they manipulated individuals who are fooled by calculating terrorists. Instead, groups portray suicide bombers as inspired individuals with heroic motivations seeking opportunities to fulfill their obligation to God, sacrifice for the nation, and avenge a grieving people. Jihadists weave together these three narratives to suggest a deleterious condition that requires an immediate action, offer an explanation of the causes of this persistent crisis, and present the necessary solution to overcome the problem.

As stated at the outset, discourse is necessary, but not sufficient, to mobilize people for violent action or suicide operations. Factors such as military and sectarian strife, preexisting jihadi networks, and permissive security and cultural environments are necessary for suicide terrorism to develop on the scale witnessed in Iraq. Martyrdom mythologies, therefore, are not sufficient to explain why suicide bombings have become almost a daily event in Iraq. However, ideology, religious framing, and emotional narratives that go into the construction of martyrdom mythologies help explain how jihadists deactivate self-inhibiting norms against murder and mayhem. These discursive ploys allow jihadists to appear as moral agents even when they are acting in immoral ways. Just as soldiers are trained to overcome their inhibitions against killing others in the service of their country, terrorists frame their violent deeds as moral acts in the service of their people, nation, or God. Understanding how violent militants are able to deactivate self-detering norms against killing and injuring civilians is an important step to combating terrorism.

Notes

1. The source materials informing this article were collected through daily monitoring of pro-jihadist websites and forums. Some were collected through access to Open Source Center (OSC, formerly FBIS). Due to the regular displacement of these websites by authorities or other technical failures, the author has downloaded the materials on his personal computer. They can be acquired through a written request to hafezm@umkc.edu or mohammed_hafez@hotmail.com.

2. The author reviewed 29 video clips that range from less than one minute to over one hour. Nine of the video clips belonged to Al Qaeda in Iraq or Mujahideen Consultative Council; three from the Islamic Army in Iraq; three from the Global Islamic Media Front, which is associated with Al Qaeda, but features clips from other insurgent groups; two from Ansar al-Sunna Army; two from Salah al-Din al-Ayubi Brigades; and one from each of the 1920 Revolution Brigades, Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah, Iraqi Jihadist League, and Mujahideen Army in Iraq. Six additional videos that incorporated clips from various groups were also reviewed.

3. The author reviewed five major audio recordings by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founding leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, killed in June 2006: Audio 1 is 74 minutes, entitled "The Descendents of Ibn al-Alqami Are Back," issued by the Ana Muslim Forum (www.muslm.net), in May 2005; Audio 2 is 59 minutes, and 29 seconds, entitled "Would the [Islamic] Religion be Degraded while I am Alive," issued by the Islamic Renewal Organization (www.tajdeed.org.uk) in July 2005; Audio 3 is 16 minutes, 47 seconds, entitled "Here is a Message for Mankind, Let Them Take Warning Therefrom," issued by the Global News

Forum (www.bayanat.info) in September 2005; Audio 4 is 75 minutes, entitled "Obeying God and His Messenger is More Useful to Us," issued by the Islamic Renewal Organization (www.tajdeed.org.uk) in September 2005; and Audio 5 is 51 minutes, entitled "Do Ye Know Better than Allah," issued by the Returning Caravans bulletin Board (www.goafalaladyn.com/vb) in October 2005.

4. The author reviewed issues 1 through 6 and 8, 10, and 11 of the Biographies of Eminent Martyrs online magazine series released by Al Qaeda in Iraq. This magazine is distributed through various forums, including Islamic Renewal Organization (www.tajdeed.org.uk), Al-Meer (www.almeer.net/vb), and Global News Network (www.w-n-n.net). As of July 2006, there are 19 issues of the Biographies of Eminent Martyrs.

5. The author reviewed three issues of Zarwat al-Sinam (The Highest Peak) online magazine issued by Al Qaeda in Iraq; 11 issues of Ansar Al-Sunna magazine issued by Ansar al-Sunna Army in Iraq; and one Fursan (Knights) magazine issued by the Islamic Army in Iraq. These magazines can be downloaded from the same forums cited above.

6. For an excellent collection of jihadists' imagery online, see the publication by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, entitled "The Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda," (<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/imagery.asp>) March 2006.

7. Mohammed M Hafez, "Suicide Terrorism in Iraq: A Preliminary Assessment of the Quantitative Data and Documentary Evidence," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 1–27. See also Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, forthcoming July 2006).

8. Ibid.; Hamd al-Jaser, "Kuwaiti Jihadists in the Sunni Triangle," (Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, August 11, 2004; Hazem al-Amin, "Lebanese 'Jihadists' in Iraq: 'Salafis' from Peripheral Regions and Cities," (Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, 11 August 2004; Hazem al-Amin, "Jordanian 'Zarqawis' Visit Their Clerics in Jail and Await the Opportunity to Join Abu Musab [al-Zarqawi] in Iraq," (Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, December 14, 2004; Jean Chichizola, "Four Recruiters for Jihad in Iraq Arrested," (French) *Le Figaro* (Paris), January 26, 2005; Muhammad al-Ashhab, "European Networks for Smuggling Jihadists," *Al-Hayat*, February 11, 2005; Saud al-Sarhan, "Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia" (Arabic), *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 20, 2005; Eric Schmitt, "As Africans Join Iraqi Insurgency, U.S. Counters Military Training in their Lands," *New York Times*, June 10, 2005; Peter Beaumont, "Insurgents Trawl Europe for Recruits," *The Observer* (London), June 19, 2005; Ahmed al-Arqam, "The Moroccan Judiciary Sentences to Prison Deportees from Syria on their way to Fight in Iraq," *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 2, 2005; James Glanz, "In Jordanian Case, Hints of Iraq Jihad Networks," *New York Times*, July 29, 2005; and OSC, "Florence's Sorgane Mosque Identified as Site of Recruitment Cell for Iraq-Bound Suicide Bombers," August 29, 2005; Hazim al-Amin, "How Al Qaeda Searched for a Twin State to the Taliban Emirate," (Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, October 10, 2005; Ibrahim Hamaydi, "Islamic Trends Advance in Syria and the Authorities Wage 'Preemptive Operations' Against the Takfiris" (Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, January 4, 2006; Hazem al-Amin, "Strangers Come during 'Al Qaeda Season' to Recruit Suicide Bombers to Iraq," (Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, January 26, 2006 (part 1) and January 27, 2006 (part 2); Nir Rosen, "Iraq's Jordanian Jihadis" *New York Times*, February 19, 2006.

9. Hafez, "Suicide Terrorism in Iraq," (see note 7 above), 6–8.

10. Ibid, 17.

11. The Brookings Institution Iraq Index (www.brookings.edu/iraqindex), May 1, 2006.

12. Hafez, "Suicide Terrorism in Iraq," 13.

13. Ibid, 17.

14. Ibid, 19.

15. Audio entitled "The Descendents of Ibn al-Alqami Are Back," issued by the Ana Muslim Forum (www.muslim.net), in May 2005.

16. The montage is 77 minutes, 47 seconds, entitled "Commander of the Slaughterers," issued by the Global Islamic Media Front in November 2005 and available at the OSC, "GIMF Issues 'Amir of the Slaughterers' Video," December 14, 2005.

17. This analysis is made in the document "Jihad in Iraq: Hopes and Dangers." The document does not have an author or date, but it was dedicated to Yousef al-Ayiri, Al Qaeda leader in Saudi Arabia killed in 2003. It was issued by The Media Commission for the Victory of the Iraqi People (The Mujahdin Services Center) sometime in 2003. Also, see article by

Salah al-Muatasim, "The Truth about the Americans and the Collaborating Regime," (Arabic) *Ansar al-Sunna* (online magazine), issue 11, June 2004, 8–10.

18. Montage entitled "And Worship Shall be Only for Allah," issued by the Media Division of Al Qaeda in Iraq in June 2005. This argument was repeated in aforementioned "Commander of the Slaughturers" video by the Global Islamic Media Front. In it Zarqawi says, "after the Americans suffered major losses, they began to create the local police and security services to do their work. They have become infidels and apostates for serving the Americans . . . Those that say you can kill those with blue eyes, but not those with black eyes love nationalism, not monotheism; they want this world, not the next. The Iraqi Army is the army of apostasy."

19. Zarqawi announced the formation of the Umar Brigades in an audio tape released on July 5, 2005. OSC, "New Al-Zarqawi Message," July 11, 2005.

20. See article by Abi Aisha al-Hashimi, "Bush . . . The Angelical Crusader," (Arabic) *Zarwat al-Sinam* (Al Qaeda in Iraq's online magazine) issue 3, n.d., 18–22; OSC, "Al-Zarqawi Justifies Killing of Innocent Muslims, Condemns Shia 'Betrayal' of Sunnis," May 18, 2005; FBIS, "Text of Al-Zarqawi's Statement of Operations Against Iraqi Forces, President Bush's 'Holy War,'" July 6, 2005; OSC, "Al-Zarqawi Calls for 'All-Out-War' Against Shia," September 14, 2005.

21. Issued in January 2006 at www.jaishalmughahideen.net/.

22. Montage entitled "And Worship Shall be Only for Allah," issued by the Media Division of Al Qaeda in Iraq in June 2005.

23. Abu-Maryam al-Kuwayti, "A Cry in the Face of Deception," n.d. This a 68-page pamphlet containing the biographies of ten Kuwaitis killed in Iraq. It was posted by al-Sham Islamic Forum (<http://www.islam-syria.com/vb>) in February 2006.

24. Information derived from a 157-page document entitled "Martyrs in Iraq," posted by Majidah Forum (www.majdah.com/vb). The document features information about 394 mainly Arab volunteers that perished in Iraq. Abu Ans al-Tahami al-Qahtani is 150 on the list.

25. Video is 55 minutes, 12 seconds, entitled "Persist" or "Continue," issued by the Islamic Army in Iraq and distributed through al-Meer Forum (www.almeer.net/vb) in January 2006.

26. Video is 37 minutes, 52 seconds, entitled "Takbir al-Id," issued by the Media Division of Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaah and distributed by al-Meer Forum (www.almeer.net/vb) in January 2006.

27. See, for example, the 1-minute, 50-second video by Al Qaeda in Iraq entitled "Hy al-Adl Martyrdom Operation," distributed by Al-Saqifa Forum in February 2005.

28. Abu-Maryam al-Kuwayti, "A Cry in the Face of Deception."

29. Information derived from a 157-page document entitled "Martyrs in Iraq," posted by Majidah Forum (www.majdah.com/vb). The document features information about 394 mainly Arab volunteers that perished in Iraq. Muhammad al-Shamari is 256 on the list.

30. See issue 3 of Al Qaeda in Iraq's "Biographies of Eminent Martyrs," distributed by al-Meer Forum (www.almeer.net/vb) in November 2005.

31. OSC, "Ansar al-Sunnah Posts Video of 'Martyrs' Will Before Attack in Balad," January 13, 2005.

32. Hala Jaber, "Suicide Bombers Stream into Iraq," *Sunday Times* (London), May 8, 2005.

33. See issue 1 of Al Qaeda in Iraq's "Biographies of Eminent Martyrs," distributed by Global News Network Forum (www.w-n-n.net/) in October 2005.

34. Abu-Maryam al-Kuwayti, "A Cry in the Face of Deception."

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Information derived from a 157-page document entitled "Martyrs in Iraq," posted by Majidah Forum (www.majdah.com/vb). The document features information about 394 mainly Arab volunteers that perished in Iraq. Abu Ans al-Tahami al-Qahtani is 150 on the list.

38. Abu-Maryam al-Kuwayti, "A Cry in the Face of Deception."

39. Ibid.

40. Information derived from a 157-page document entitled "Martyrs in Iraq," posted by Majidah Forum (www.majdah.com/vb). The document features information about 394 mainly Arab volunteers that perished in Iraq. Abu Faris al-Anbari is 160 on the list.

41. See issue 10 of Al Qaeda in Iraq's "Biographies of Eminent Martyrs," distributed by Hanin Net Forum (www.hanein.net) in January 2006.

42. OSC, "Al-Zarqawi's Group Details Suicide Attack on 'US Intelligence Building' in Tikrit, Posts Video," April 25, 2005.

43. Video is 13 minutes, 47 seconds, entitled "Baghdad Badr Raid," issued by Al Qaeda in Iraq and distributed by Ana al-Muslim Forum (www.muslm.net/vb) in November 2005.

44. Video is 9 minutes, 2 seconds, distributed by al-Meer Forums (www.almeer.net/vb) in February 2006.

45. The video is 16 minutes, 22 seconds, issued by the Global Islamic Media Front and distributed by the al-Muntada forum in August 2005.

46. Abu-Maryam al-Kuwayti, "A Cry in the Face of Deception."

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Ishmael in a dream vision. His willingness (and that of his son) to fulfill the divine command, which was a mere test of faith, was rewarded by God who withheld Abraham's hand as he was about to fulfill the deed: "We called unto him: O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision. Lo! thus do We reward the good" (Quran 37:102-105). God also communicated to the Prophet Muhammad in dreams in order to strengthen his resolve before the battle of Badr, in which the Muslim forces were outnumbered 3 to 1 by the unbelievers: "Remember in thy dream Allah showed them to thee as few: if He had shown them to thee as many, ye would surely have been discouraged, and ye would surely have disputed in (your) decision; but Allah saved (you): for He knoweth well the (secrets) of (all) hearts" (Quran 8:43).

50. The tradition is narrated by Jabir bin Abdullah in *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 2, Book 21, Number 263 in USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/>).

51. Montage entitled "And Worship Shall be Only for Allah," issued by the Media Division of Al Qaeda in Iraq in June 2005.

52. OSC, "Al-Zarqawi Uses Western Press, Poetry to Criticize US, Encourage 'Mujahidin,'" May 11, 2005.

53. Quranic verse 4:29-30: "Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful! If any do that in rancor and injustice, soon shall We cast them into the Fire: And easy it is for Allah." Prophetic tradition narrated by Abu Hurairah in *Sahih Bukhari* Volume 2, Book 23, Number 446 in the USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts: "The Prophet said, 'He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell Fire (forever) and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the Hell-Fire.'"

54. Quranic verse 2:190: "Fight in the path of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God does not love transgressors." Prophetic tradition quoted in *Sahih Muslim* Book 019, Number 4319 in the USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts: "It is narrated on the authority of Abdullah that a woman was found killed in one of the battles fought by the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him). He disapproved of the killing of women and children."

55. Quranic verse 4:93: "If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein (For ever): And the wrath and the curse of Allah are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him."