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Suicide Attacks Driven by Islamic Fundamentalism as "Rituals of Modernity"?

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Suicide Attacks Driven by Islamic Fundamentalism as "Rituals of Modernity"?

Ever since 9/11, suicide attacks driven by Islamic fundamentalism have been a permanent issue in media coverage, and the question of the assassins' motivation is addressed in numerous publications. Despite a vast array of approaches, experts dissent on character and motives of actors and groups claim responsibility for the attacks. This paper aims to shine a light on the terrorism perpetuated by al-Qa'ida, which has crossed territorial borders and which differs in certain aspects from those terrorism of other groups, such as e.g. the Hezbollah.

Subject

This inquiry is about *suicide attacks*, and not *suicidal attacks*. The terminology requires a detailed explanation. Academic research and media try to pinpoint the emergence of this phenomenon in early history: Sicarii, followers of the Jewish movement of Zealotry in the first century AD, who violently engaged in rebellion against Roman dignitaries, including the stabbing of the latter and Roman sympathizers; the group following Hindu Thug Behram; or the Hashshashin, a Shiite sect from which the verb "to assassinate" the members of this group derived and utilized in the eponymous technique to dispose their enemies. These groups had one key trademark in common which differentiates them from contemporary attackers: the death of the assassin was not a necessary precondition for the assassination to be successful. Theoretically, the assassin had a chance to escape after the attack, even though the flight may be impossible, or the chance was not seized upon because it might have been considered as ignoble. The modern type of suicide attacker targets his object with an explosive belt or an explosives-loaded vehicle, alternatively any other means of transport, and blows himself up. He *must* die in order for his plan to be successful, and he cannot elude this *coercive cansality*. These kind of attacks postulate a high standard of technology, and thus can be seen *per se* as a phenomenon of (technologized) modernity.¹

Against this backdrop, the beginning of this phenomenon can be found with Japanese kamikaze in WWII. The historian Joseph CROITORU² has backtraced this practice of self-sacrifice and its implementation in the Middle East to a Japanese terrorist group, following the widespread application in this region by the medium of North Korea. Ever since, the Middle East has been suffered

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As the only historical counter-example which abrogates this causality serves the biblical story of Samson. Dungeoned in the Philistine temple of Dago, he brings the temple to collapse by his returning powers. Not only does he kill his enemies but intentionally himself (Ri 16,27 ff.).

Joseph Croitoru, Der Märtyrer als Waffe: Die historischen Wurzeln des Selbstmordattentats, Munich: dtv, 2006.

ring from suicide attacks by terrorist groups embedded in the Mid-East conflict. Such attacks have been taken place within the context of national conflicts and are accompanied by specific political claims. In fact, recent attacks have a religious connotation in common, however, religion serves the purpose of legitimating such practices and can therefore be regarded as subordinated. Additionally, profane reasons can be found in the context of Palestinian suicide attacks - e.g. the financial support provided to the families of suicide bombers.

Al-Qa'ida's Salafi Jihadism turns this logic upside down: not only does religion serve as a reason to legitimate the fight, but the attacks are carried out for religion's sake. 9/11 emphasizes this development very clearly. The "Spiritual Manual" found in Mohammed Atta's left-behind baggage leaves out any references on political events, rather, the manual says, the actions about to being carried out were holy acts which end in themselves. No demands were involved. This is the case when defining Islamist attacks. Bin Ladin's global jihad against "Jews and Crusaders" is a fight for political power though. But unlike conflicts on a local level, this altercation takes place within cosmic dimensions - cosmic, for this struggle goes beyond this life and is a religious necessity for the "true Muslim" in the al-Qa'idian sense. Al-Qa'ida is not only a terrorist group, but also a neo-religious phenomenon of modernity whose members regard a suicide attack as a cultish act.

Al-Qa'ida as a product of modernity

In intellectual history, the age of modernity starts with the period of Enlightenment during the 17th century and is politically reflected in the French Revolution. One of the most far-reaching effects of Enlightenment is the idea of secularization, which has a profound influence on the Christian Occident to this day. During the predominantly French and British colonial conquest of the Middle East, the Arabian-Muslim world has encountered secularism as well. As a consequence, fundamentalist and Islamist movements developed with their most common feature being the repudiation of modernity and its concepts of secularism and individualism. Precisely, these movements are historical phenomena, which could only emerge through modernity. If one understands al-Qa'ida as an extreme kind of Islamic fundamentalism – what it definitely is –, the

³ Hans KIPPENBERG and Tilmann SEIDENSTICKER (Eds.), The 9/11 Handbook: Annotated Translation and Interpretation of the Attackers' Spiritual Manual, London (et al.): Equinox, 2006.

⁴ Quoting from the famous "Declaration of the International Islamic Front of the Holy War against Jews and Crusaders" on Feb. 23, 1998, in which Bin Ladin and other Islamist leaders announced that the war against Americans and their allies, especially Jews, were a holy duty (cp. Gilles KEPEL and Jean-Pierre MILELLI, *Al-Qaida: Texte des Terrors*, Munich: Piper, 2006; p. 85-89).

circle closes here, for it is, as John Gray puts it,"[...] a symptom of illness which takes itself as a cure".⁵

Al-Qa'ida and Islam

After the attacks of 9/11, the question has been raised on whether al-Qa'ida and the attackers, who see themselves as the embodiment of "true" Islam, can really be ascribed to Islam. It is no surprise that this is a controversial issue, which has been dominated by ideological biases. Some have stressed the - existing - bellicose underlying current of the Quran⁶, and made this fact responsible for the violence of Islam. Others have emphasized that the word Islam means peace, or can be seen as a "religion of love". So, who is right?

The crux is the question of whether anybody has the right and dignity to interpret religion, and thus can set the rule on what the basis of a set of beliefs really means. Like Christianity, Islam consists of several currents which all claim to represent the one and only "pure" and "true" belief. If religion is regarded as a historical phenomenon, i.e. a concept that has emerged in a specific historical context and that constantly adapts to temporal and local changes, this seemingly dilemma can be solved. Religions develop discursively in the course of time and are subject to serious alterations⁷. The above-mentioned controversy points this out.

How can this discovery be applied to al-Qa'ida? Al-Qa'ida is a *neo-religious movement* which has developed from and depicts on of the most extreme outlets of Islam. This arm has emerged in the 1960s and its beginnings can be pinpointed with Sayyid Qutb (1906 – 1966).

Sayyid Qutb, Jihad and martyrdom within the ideology of al-Qa'ida

Egyptian-born Sayyid Qutb is regarded as the precursor of radical Islamism. He studied literature and used to be committed to secular ideas of modernization and reforms. A two-year long stay in the United States (1948-1950) however contributed to a radical change of his opinion. Sayyid Qutb left a remarkable influence on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, elaborating conjointly a plan to install an Islamist government in Egypt and to implement the Sharia (the Islamic religious

John GRAY, Die Geburt al-Qaidas aus dem Geist der Moderne, Munich: Antje Kunstmann Verlag, 2004; p. 41

⁶ Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), Encyclopedia of the Qur'an, Leiden and Bosten: Brill, 2003; p. 36.

Cp. esp. Martin RIESEBRODT, Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007; passim.

law) in jurisdiction. After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, which ended British colonial rule and enabled an indigenous government, the new political elite acted below Qutb's and the Brotherhood's expectations. From 1954 on until his execution in 1966, Sayyid Qutb had spent most of the time imprisoned due to his Islamist agitation. There, he composed more Islamist pamphlets, among them his most famous work Ma'alim fi 't-Tariq (Milestones), written in 1964. Milestones describes the means and measurements necessary to install a "true Islamic" rule. Mankind, according to Qutb in Milestones, stood at the crossroads, for the current political circumstances threatened their existence. Neither West nor East provided suitable values to correct the deficiencies. Islam was the only system to provide all the necessary values and to serve as a remedy, that is, if society - that is the true umma (community of Muslims) - would embrace Islam in its true sense. For mankind would not notice an abstract theory, dematerialized in reality. In Sayyid Qutb's point of view, all contemporary Muslim societies and governments were non-Islamic and illegitimate, as the existing sets of systems were incompatible to him, and Islam therefore found itself in a defensive struggle for power - which religion would win eventually. An Islamic resurrection could only be implemented by a an "avant-garde" (tali'a), a small group of pioneers completely committed to this fight as well as to the practices of the first Muslims (as-salaf as-salih) and the Quran.

If one analyses the works of Sayyid Qutb, interesting parallels to the ideas of the European Revolutionary Movements in the late 19th century are revealed. Like these movements, Qutb preaches a philosphy of action; also, the idea of revolutionary pioneers "is a concept imported from Europe, through a lineage that also stretches back to the Jacobins, through the Bolsheviks and latter-day Marxist guerrillas such as the Baader-Meinhof gang." Within the scope of his programmatics, Qutb was anxious for tracing back his (invented) concept of the avant-garde to genuine Islamic rules. For this reason, he projected this concept onto the above-mentioned generation of first Muslims. This kind of *invention of tradition* aimed to establish a continuity with a widespread accepted and positively connoted historical past which in its terms creates or symbolizes a collective identity.⁹

Qutb's ideas, although not advocating the propagation of violence openly, has been interpreted by numerous violent Islamist groups to be where armed resistance will not only be permitted but also be compulsory if the status quo is intended to be altered and local "unislamic" regimes meant to be replaced by "true" Islamic governments. Like Qutb in his works, the application of this re-

Malise RUTHVEN, A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America, London and New York: Granta, 2002; p. 91.

volutionary nihilistic violence was embedded into Islamic categories, and was traded under the name of a legitimate jihad against the enemies of Islam.

The term jihad, which poses one of the most disputed concepts of Islam, has various connotations. Its significance in the Muslim set of duties has been judged by Muslim legal scholars (*ulama*') in different ways at all times. Jihad in its bellicose meaning – carrying also the meaning of a metaphysical struggle against the flagitious self – has been included within the Islamist discourse into the ranks of religious duties (alongside professing Allah and his his messenger; the requirement to pray five times a day; alms-giving; fasting during Ramadan; the pilgrimage). In doing so, Islamist groups could build upon ancient discourses, for in the early years of Islam such issues had already been discussed but later been dismissed.¹⁰

In the 20th century, the idea of jihad being a religious duty has been connected to Egyptian Abd as-Salam Farag, who has pointed out this thought in his work "al-farida al-gha'iba" (The neglected duty). He has been the ideologist behind the extremist group which was made responsible for the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar as-Sadat, and which later merged into al-Qa'ida. Differing from most contemporary orthodox legal scholars who demand a case of defense for the validation of jihad and thus reject it in most cases, the case of defense for radical-Islamist jihadists is given as an analogy to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb,. Thus, jihad is seen as a legitimate means.

Traditional legal scholars and radical-Islamist agitators agree on the notion that whoever dies at the "jihad in the way of God" on the battlefield will gain immediate access to paradise. The martyr (*shahid*) holds the highest rank without undergoing a potentially painful test of faith after death like an individual dying from natural causes does, carried out by the two angels Munkar and Nakir. He may also intercede on behalf of 70 relatives and will be ensnared by 72 virgins. Crucial for his status as a martyr is his intention (*niya*), i.e. the absolute will to die exclusively for the cause of Allah.

The Islamic concept of martyrdom has been emphasized in the works of Abdullah Azzam, the founder of al-Qa'ida and mentor to Usama Bin Ladin. Azzam, who was born in the present-day Palestinian Territories, adopted the embodiment of this concept mostly from a Palestinian context, wherein, during the 1970s and 1980s, it has been connected to the phenomenon of suicide attacks and hence got charged with a religious connotation.

⁹ Eric HOBSBAWM and Terence RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: University Press, 1992; passim.

Al-Qa'ida thus reverts to a pool of religious and ideologist ideas, which are partly fed by traditional inheritance. In turn, they have no practical relevance for mainstream Islam, as such ideas were formed or revived in modern times; and can partly, like the revolutionary agitation, be traced back to European concepts of modernity. All these jigsaw pieces are being put together to a new ideology: utterances of Sayyid Qutb¹¹ and his imitators as well as a bellicose understanding of jihad embedded in the Islamic concept of martyrdom make an armed "defensive fight" against Christian and Jewish aggressors a religious duty for every Muslim. From such an emic (inner) perspective, these pieces create a coherent picture: to al-Qa'ida, the world is in a state of war, in which violence is not only a legitimate means but also religiously appropriate. In their self-imposed culture, an armed fight within apocalyptical dimensions is the only way for salvation in the afterlife, and within this neo-religious community it gets *institutionalized*. Suicide attacks depict an act of divine service and are thus part of a ritual practice. It is in this context that I speak of suicide attacks as a "ritual of modernity". The religious *institutionalization of violence* condenses and finds it symbolic expression in the attacks of 9/11.

The attacks of 9/11 as a ritual of modernity

Stating that the attacks of 9/11 were not merely aimed at causing a high number of victims, but also made to function as a communicative means has gained widespread acceptance. I would also like to demonstrate, however, that the terrorism of al-Qa'ida has not only a communicative function, it also portrays a form of divine service, and a suicide attack can be seen as a ritual act of this service.

A definition of a ritual will defy a broad agreement with experts – just like a definition of terrorism. Stanley TAMBIAH approaches the theory of ritual by analyzing the relation of ritual and *performance*. Performance is a term originating from speech act theory and penetrating more deeply into the theory of theater and ritual. It defines an act by which actors not only portray and create social reality and identity, but also intend to change reality at the same time. According to Tambiah, a ritual is a "system of symbolic communication constructed by culture [...], i.e. its cultural content is rooted in specific cosmological and ideological constructs. [...] a ritual consists of specific formal and structural features and applies particular communicative and semiotic instru-

Albrecht NOTH, Heiliger Krieg und Heiliger Kampf in Islam und Christentum: Beiträge zur Vorgeschichte der Kreuzzüge, (Bonner Historische Forschungen; 28), Ed.: Max BRAUBACH, Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid, 1966; p. 55.

Gilles KEPEL and Jean-Pierre MILLELI, op. cit., passim.

ments."¹² In this context, ritual serves "as an independent medium for transmitting messages, constructing social realities, and creating and developing cosmological ideas[...]."¹³

I would like to exemplify the thesis of "suicide attacks as a ritual act" by the attacks of 9/11. To which extend the terrorism of al-Qa'ida – and thus their attacks – is a system of cultural construct which content is based on cosmological and ideological design I have already suggested above. But what exactly is the symbolism behind the attacks, and which formal and structural features are inherent to the suicide attacks of al-Qa'ida?

On 9/11, the terrorists did not attack arbitrary targets, but military and economical (assuming the fourth target being the White House also political) symbols of power of the United States. Therefore, the choice of the targets underlines the political claim to power of al-Qa'ida. Juergensmeyer¹⁴ sees the symbolical meaning of their choice in the notion that groups are prone to associate identity with territorial control. If such an area is subject to attacks, their own vulnerability is revealed to the group, which in turn leads to actual results – power is a matter of reception. By having their vulnerability revealed to the public that plainly, it is revealed at the same time that even a military superior enemy can be defeated with the right determination. Al-Qa'ida's slogan "You love life, we love death" [in italics by author] intends to imply that "true" Muslims are superior to their enemies. This announcement serves as a great example on how their identity coming along with the attacks is being created. In the mindset of al-Qa'ida, the tradition of the "fortified" first generation of Muslims is continued. As the members of al-Qa'ida see themselves as their successors, the group creates a historical continuum.

Targeting geographical places of symbolic importance is not the only impact. Another aim is causing as many fatalities as possible in order to leave an apocalyptical impression, and to exemplify that with a "cosmic war" against a "satanical enemy", there must be no compromises¹⁵:

Religious concepts of cosmic war, however, are ultimately beyond historical struggle, even though they are identified with this-worldly struggles. A satanic enemy cannot be transformed; it can only be destroyed¹⁶.

Otherwise, an attack on the Statue of Liberty would have possibly left an even bigger impression, yet it would have meant less civilian casualties.

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Stanley J. TAMBIAH, "Eine performative Theorie des Rituals", in: Andréa BELLIGER and David J. KRIEGER (eds.): Ritualtheorien: Ein einführendes Handbuch, 2. ed., Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2003; p. 230.

¹³ Ibid., p. 231.

Mark JUERGENSMEYER, Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence. Oxford: University Press, 2000.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 154.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 217.

Right after the attacks of 9/11, a book of "Spiritual Manual" was found and ascribed to Mohammed Atta. ¹⁷ It stresses how formal and structured the timeline of the attacks were. They create a script for the successful implementation of this ritual. In the manual, meticulous sequences of how the assassin should behave, what kind of rituals should be performed, which verses of the Quran should be recited and when. The following excerpts shall point it out:

The last night.

- 1. Mutual pledge to die and renewal of intention. Shaving off excess hair from the body and perfuming oneself. Performing the greater ritual ablution (or: washing one-self/taking a shower).[...]
- 3. Reciting the Suras *at-Tawba* [surah 9] and *al-Anfal* [surah 8] and considering their meaning and the eternal blessing God has prepared for the believers, (especially) for the martyrs. [...]
- 14. Tighten you clothes well. This is the way of the pious forefathers as they used to tighten their clothes prior to battle. [...]
- 15. Perform the ritual morning prayer in a group and think about its reward and thereafter perform the prayers. Do not leave the apartment without having performed the ritual ablution, because the angels will ask (God) to forgive you as long as you are in a state of ritual purity and will pray for you. [...]¹⁸.

Furthermore, the guidelines emphasize the assassins' motivations of mere transcendental kind: There are no remarks on political reasons or monetary incentives. It is clearly phrased that the attacks are a service for God and a self-sacrifice for religion, both of which will be rewarded in the afterlife:

Be cheerful, because between you and your wedding there is no more than a few moments. Thereupon be happy, God-pleasing life and the eternal blessing in the company of the prophets, the righteous ones, the martyrs and the virtuous ones will begin. [...]¹⁹ Furthermore, don't show traces of confusion or tension, but be happy, cheerful, bright and confident because you carry out an action that God loves and approves. Then, a day will come that you will spend with God's permission with the black-eyed (virgins) in paradise.²⁰

More precisely, the act is an act of sacrifice in the sense of MAUSS, by which the assassin functions as a self-sacrificer, and who gives up his life acting for the community of Muslims (*umma*). From this emic point of view, the much discussed question about whether or not the assassins can be considered as Muslims - for Islam condemns suicide - is redundant (although the relevant

¹⁷ Hans KIPPENBERG, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 11-13.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 12.

passage in the Quran on which this opinion is based upon is controversial). From the assassins' and al-Qa'ida's point of view, the act is not a suicide (*intihar*), but a self-sacrifice, yielded in the context of a "martyr operation" (*amal istishhadi*) and therefore legitimate, because "suicide" is defined by the cultural surrounding as it is noted by French sociologist Maurice HALBWACHS²¹.

It is this kind of transcendental rationality (i.e. the achievement of martyrdom and the reward in the afterlife) which distinguishes suicide attacks carried out by al-Qa'ida from the ethnic-nationalist context of Palestinian suicide attackers, which also use religion as a legitimation for their acts but where it also becomes clear that mundane reasons such as financial aid for the assassin's family play a big role as well.

Conclusion

I am aware of the complexity of the issues that hold a partial equalization of ritual and divine service. Nevertheless, it is certain that the attacks from the assassins' point of view were nothing but exactly this matter: a service for God, a "divine service" which followed a formal chain and which can be categorized within the approach of ritual theory.

What value does the conclusion of al-Qa'ida being not only a terrorist, but also an independent religious group whose members see terrorist attacks as decided religious acts, have? For one part, it squashes the existing preconception that "Islam" per se is the reason for suicide attacks and therefore the conclusion contributes to a reconciliation.

If one looks at the attacks in the light discussed in this paper, it helps for one part to consider this phenomenon not longer as an act of nihilist psychopaths, but of an individual who acts according to a specific logic. One the other hand, it allows the analyst to regard the turning to such a group as a *conversion*, and thus to avoid a methodological problem at researching religiously-driven terror organizations. As the research method of participant observation of terrorist groups is nearly impossible, studying converts of a "normal" religious movement is faced with lesser difficulties.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

²¹ Maurice HALBWACHS, Les Causes du Suicide, (Travaux de l'Annèe sociologique), Paris: Alcan, 1930.

Study results may be transferred, as Marc SAGEMAN has shown with promising results in his research²².

The original was published as DIAS-Analyse Nr. 39; translation: Rebecca Göttmann.

²² Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

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