**Spurning 'this Worldly Life':[1] Terrorism and Martyrdom in Contemporary Britain.**

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**Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed a rapid proliferation of radical Islamist activity in Britain, best illustrated by both actual terrorist atrocities (such as those carried out on the London transport network in 2005), and MI5's sensational warning in 2006 of 30 incipient "terror plots" and 1,600 individuals then under surveillance.[2] Many of these cases have included individuals willing to countenance their own self-immolation in furtherance of their beliefs and cause, or in the perceived defence of their faith and community (*ummah*).

These cases confound and perplex our modern sensibilities. How could they do such a thing we collectively ponder? What could possibly compel ostensibly well-adjusted, educated, and indeed integrated young Britons (which virtually all are) to adopt such a bleak outlook on life; one in which they felt of greater worth, dead than alive? Why were their familial ties, social networks, careers, aspirations, passions, interests, possessions and myriad other connections to reality, not sufficient to anchor them to 'this worldly life'.

Muhammad Siddique Khan for example, the ringleader of the 7/7 London Transport Network bombings, epitomises these tensions and contradictions. Khan's posthumously released farewell video message recorded with his infant daughter, reveals his increasingly conflicted emotions over his impending suicide mission. The video highlights Khan's clear adoration and affection for his daughter, starkly juxtaposed against what appears to be a profound sense of duty and sacrifice. How do we reconcile Khan's tender paternal instincts and 'rootedness' in this world, with the seemingly incongruous acts of carnage later committed, which of course took his own life too. Moreover, considering Khan's seemingly successful background (a university education, a well-regarded job and career, a loving family) – by all accounts, not

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[1] This phrase is taken from a letter recovered soon after the 9/11 attacks and is thought to be the final instructions given to the lead hijacker, Mohammed Atta, and reads "Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called 'this worldly life'"; Available at http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/atta/resources/documents/instructions1.htm

[2] Akil N. Awan, 'Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (2008): 13.

uncommon amongst radical Islamists, what lay behind the eventual recourse to 'martyrdom'.

These 'martyrdom' operations, as they are alluded to in the idiom of contemporary Jihadist discourse, may represent the apogee of Jihadist praxis to its adherents, but are only the most strikingly visible and shocking manifestation of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is more helpful to view the range of acts that fall under the rubric of radical Islam or Jihadism as constituting part of a much broader spectrum, in which terrorism and martyrdom are only one of a number of the possible outcomes. Other manifestations of this ideology or other forms of Jihadist 'praxis' do exist and in fact are far more prevalent than martyrdom, but nevertheless, all stem from the same shared ideology and worldview. Whilst this paper is principally concerned with contemporary Jihadist articulations of martyrdom in Britain, we must acknowledge the commonalities that exist in the motivations, antecedents, processes and trajectories of those drawn to radical Islam, irrespective of whether martyrdom is the desired, or indeed unintended, outcome.

This paper attempts to engage with these complex issues by providing a fuller, more nuanced understanding of some of the motivations and causes of Jihadist martyrdom in Britian, by exploring the life narratives of a number of these individuals. In addition, the paper seeks to explore the contemporary relevance of traditional and historical Islamic notions of martyrdom and Jihad and their seemingly profound resonance with these modern day *shuhadā* (martyrs).

**Martyrdom in Islam**

The word *shahīd* (martyr) in the Quran, stems from the Arabic verb 'to see' or 'to witness',[3] closely mirroring its Latin equivalent in both etymology and usage.[4] Indeed, the Islamic conceptualisation of martyrdom also correlates closely with Western understandings. In the technical language of the Church, the martyr represents those who die in, or as a result of, *odium fidei* (hatred of the faith).[5] Weiner

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[3] For example, the Quran mentions bearing witness to righteousness and piety (2:143) or bearing witness to financial transactions (2:282).

[4] The use of word *martyr* as witness, was originally employed within both the secular and sacred spheres (as articulated in the New Testament); Allison Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[5] Cunningham, Lawrence, 'Christian Martyrdom: A Theological Perspective', in *Witness of the Body : the Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Michael Budde and Scott, Karen (Grand Rapids Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011), 14.

and Weiner expand on this theological understanding by suggesting that a historical examination of Judeo-Christian martyrs points to three principle types: i) those that elect to suffer and die rather than reject their faith or principles; ii) those that suffer torture and death as a result of their convictions; and iii) those that endure great suffering for long periods of time.[6] It is this historical understanding of martyrdom that has strongest parallels within the Islamic tradition, which not only recognises persecution on account of faith, but also various forms of worldly suffering as worthy of *istishād* (martyrdom).[7]

However, the distinctly Islamic conception of *istishād* as death during Jihad,[8] has much more tenuous links to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but nevertheless remains the most *popularly* recognisable conceptualisation of martyrdom within Islam, particularly in the West. This peculiar category of martyrdom as death 'whilst striving in the path of God' (the literal translation of *Jihad*), has generally been associated with death on the battlefield in God's cause.[9] However, crucially, it is not primarily the type of activity engaged in prior to death that confers martyrdom, but rather the intention (*niyyah*) upon which the activity was predicated. So, for example, a well-known tradition relates,

> *Whoever leaves his house in the way of God then dies or is killed is a martyr, whether his horse or camel tramples him, or a venomous animal stings him, or he dies in his bed, or in any kind of death God wills, truly he is a martyr and shall have Paradise."*[10]

Moreover, the Islamic canon also introduces the concept of martyrdom as death in any defensive context,

> *"Whoever is killed defending his wealth is a martyr; whoever is killed defending his religion is a martyr; whoever is killed in self-defence is a martyr."*[11]

The idea of defence here is broad enough to subsume a great number of activities and thus lends itself to a great multiplicity of interpretations vis-à-vis achieving martyrdom. Indeed, it is this vagueness of definition that has largely engendered the proliferation of modern day Jihadist martyrdom-seekers (*istishādi*).

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[6] Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction : a Sociological Analysis* (Lanham Md.: University Press of America, 2002).

[7] Examples of worldly suffering worthy of martyrdom include death from drowning, plague, fire, and during childbirth, see for example Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1991), iii, nos. 2829–30.

[8] Ibid., no. 2829.

[9] See for example Quran 3:140 which refers to the martyrs from one of the earliest battles during Muhammad's life, the Battle of Uhud.

[10] Sunan Abi Dawud and al-Hakim.

[11] al-Tirmidhi, 1421.

The conceptualisation of martyrdom in Islam has not remained static, and as Cook's masterly historical study of martyrdom shows, the legal and social basis of that which constitutes martyrdom has changed significantly throughout the Muslim world over time.[12] Our concerns here, however, are with contemporary articulations of martyrdom amongst Jihadists, such as those of al-Qaeda and their ilk, and despite the rhetoric of these modern day Salafi-Jihadists,[13] invoking the precedents of the first three generations in Islam as the basis for their praxis,[14] theirs is in fact a very modern understanding of martyrdom that draws on eclectic sources of legitimacy and authority.[15]

**The Obfuscation of Martyrdom with Terrorism.**

In recent years there has been a general conflation of martyrdom in the Islamic tradition with terrorism, to such an extent, that the suicide bomber is now popularly perceived to be the archetypaal Islamic martyr.[16] However, this characterisation is highly problematic for a number of reasons. The 'Muslim suicide bombing' or 'martyrdom operation' is a relatively recent phenomenon borrowed largely from secular nationalist groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.[17] Indeed, even the seminal *jihadi* literature from the 1980s concerning Afghanistan, for example, does not mention 'martyrdom operations'.[18] Moreover, the development of suicide bombing as a tactic is almost entirely predicated upon technological advances in the manufacture of explosives in the late 20th Century, thus rendering it a highly

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[12] David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[13] The term *Salafi-Jihadism* was first used by Giles Kepel to describe Salafists who began to develop an interest in Jihad in the early 1990s; Gilles Kepel, *Jihad : the Trail of Political Islam*, 4th ed. (London: New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

[14] Salafism refers to a broad body of Muslims, whose views range from the peaceful apolitical to politically violent terrorists. They are generally characterised by a fundamentalist worldview, particularly their reverence for the sacred texts in their most literal form, and follow the practices and precedents of the pious predecessors (the *as-Salaf as-Salih*), who are usually understood to represent the historic first three generations of Muslims.

[15] See for example, Akil N. Awan, Andrew Hoskins, and Ben O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and Media : Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2011), 25–47.

[16] Indeed, the very title of this volume is testament to the amalgamation of these two terms in both popular and academic discourse.

[17] The suicide bombing was pioneered by others, particularly secular Lebanese groups, but it is the Tamil Tigers who ultimately 'mastered' the tactic; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[18] David Cook, 'Suicide Attacks or "Martyrdom Operations" in Contemporary Jihad Literature', *Nova Religio* 6, no. 1 (October 2002): 8.

modern innovation with no real historical precedents in Islamic praxis.[19] Perhaps most problematic is that the act of suicide is itself categorically prohibited in the canonical texts of Islam,[20] and suicide bombings often violate other fundamental religious precepts, such as targeting non-combatants,[21] thereby posing serious legitimation challenges to the Islamic appropriation and sanctification of the suicide bomber.

However, one could argue that these are moot points, for whatever the theological and historical obstacles to locating suicide bombing within the realm of Islamic martyrdom, it remains an indelible statistical fact that Muslims have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of suicide bombing attacks in the last few decades. According to Robert Pape, 224 of the 300 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2003 were carried out by Islamist groups or occurred in predominantly Muslim countries.[22] If one examines the suicide attacks after 2003 (when Pape's survey ends), the bias is skewed even further towards Muslim perpetrators.[23] Moreover, these individuals not only considered themselves to be Muslims, but martyrdom in the name of Islam provided (at least in their minds) the *raison d'etre* for their acts of self-immolation.

Nevertheless, these statistics do not necessarily exonerate the modern-day obfuscation and linkage between Islamic martyrdom and terrorism, which should be noted, is largely attributable to the modern mass media. Whilst it may be correct to state that the vast majority of suicide bombers today are Muslim 'martyrs', the obverse is not. Indeed, the vast majority of modern day 'Islamic martyrdoms' have occurred not through suicide bombings or associated acts of terrorism, but instead as the outcome of more conventional warfare, on the battlefields of Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, the Palestinian Territories, Iraq and various other theatres of conflict raging in the Muslim world. For Muslim audiences, the martyrs created within these arenas include not only the dead combatants who were engaged in conventional and legitimate modes of warfare, but perhaps more importantly, the large numbers of civilians also killed as 'collateral damage'.

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[19] The closest parallel is found in historical accounts of individual Muslim fighters charging enemy lines during battle in displays of heroism and personal valour, in the knowledge that they would probably not survive the encounter (*al-inghimas fi as-saf*); Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*.

[20] See for example, Qur'an 2: 195 and 4: 29.

[21] See for example al-Bukhari 4:26 [nos. 3014-5].

[22] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win : the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. (New York: Random House, 2005), 15.

[23] See for example, Scott Atran, 'The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism', *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2006): 127–47;

Conversely, the suicide terrorists who are posthumously recast as martyrs by the Jihadists represent a much smaller, but nevertheless highly visible, minority within the faith. It is with these individuals that this paper is principally concerned, and it is to their attraction to this peculiar form of 'martyrdom' that we now turn.

**Appeal of Martyrdom amongst Jihadists**

In explaining the putative appeal of martyrdom amongst contemporary British Jihadists, it is now clear that motivations can often be amorphous and complex and with no simple cause and effect calculus appearing to be tenable.[24] Instead, individuals may be drawn to the prospect of becoming martyrs for a multitude of, sometimes conflicting, reasons. Here we are not concerned primarily with the reasons behind the adoption of suicide bombing as a tactic by modern terrorist organisations. Indeed, a number of studies have attempted to explain the underlying strategic reasons for the adoption of 'martyrdom operations' by terrorist *organisations*, identifying factors such as tactical efficacy, symbolic-value, out-bidding and intra-group competition, and societal support.[25]

Instead, we are principally concerned with the appeal of martyrdom amongst *individuals* recruited to the organisation or cause, which has tended to receive far less rigorous academic focus. Moreover, those studies that have attempted to elucidate suicide bombers' individual motivations typically create taxonomies that demarcate personal motivations as being verifiably distinct from ideological motivations.[26] This approach is highly problematic, however, for it assumes an innate dichotomy in motivations which is clearly not borne out in reality. Instead, it is extremely difficult, if not nigh impossible, to delineate that which is personal from the political, and more crucially, how the two spheres intersect to manifest violence; or as Carol Hanisch famously stated 'the personal is political'.[27]

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[24] Akil N. Awan, 'Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (2008): 16.

[25] See for example, Pape, *Dying to Win*; Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (JHU Press, 2008); Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill : the Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[26] See for example, Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (London: Polity Press, 2005).

[27] Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal Is Political', in *Notes From the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, ed. Meredith Tax, et al., (New York: Sulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, 1970). See also, C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) who famously discussed the intersection of public issues and personal problems.

Following Max Weber's classic postulation of *ideal types*,[28] we can tentatively identify three broad motivational motifs underlying martyrdom amongst British jihadists, namely: i) Altruism & Identity; ii) Religion & Salvation; and iii) Impotence & Ennui. By motifs we mean the key defining experiences or themes which make each type of martyrdom substantially different and distinctive. Whilst we do not wish to contest the uniqueness of each convert's individual experiences, or dispute the patently high degree of biographical specificity contained within each individual's life narrative, these motifs are considered to be broad enough to be able to subsume the diversity of motivating factors from within our sample, under their respective overarching rubrics. In addition, if radicalisation towards Jihadism entails a process, as has been convincingly argued by myself and others,[29] then we must also acknowledge the existence of a range of potential motivations that may span the journey towards eventual martyrdom; the impulse for joining the cause may be very different to the incentive for remaining committed to the group or network, which in turn may be quite distinct from the eventual motivation for embarking on a suicide mission. Moreover, these broad explanatory frameworks should not be considered to be in any way mutually exclusive. Rather, individuals may exhibit aspects of multiple motifs at any given time, particularly as different motifs may become more or less salient at different stages over the course of their trajectory to martyrdom. Finally, in some cases it may also prove problematic to definitively discern a hierarchy of motivational motifs from an individual's life narrative.

### i)        Altruism & Identity

To Western audiences inured to depictions of Jihadist suicide bombers as either evil, bloodthirsty savages or deranged, religious zealots,[30] there must be something inherently incongruous and deeply unsettling about recognising the essentially altruistic nature of suicide bombing.[31] However, as discomfiting as this revelation

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[28] Max Weber, *Methodology of Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949), 89.

[29] Awan, 'Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe'; Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*; Clark R. McCauley, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[30] For more on this general characterisation see, Atran, 'The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism'; Scott Atran, 'Soft Power and the Psychology of Suicide Bombing', *Global Terrorism Analysis* 2, no. 11 (2004).

[31] A point corroborated by Durkheim's sociological taxonomy of suicide, through which 'martyrdom operations' can also considered to be altruistic in nature. See, Émile Durkheim, *Suicide : a study in*

may be, it is nevertheless important to recognise that many individuals that undertake, or at least attempt, 'martyrdom operations' tend to do so for largely selfless reasons, being sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping.[32] Indeed, empathy for fellow Muslims inculcate many potential radical Islamists with a profound sense of duty and justice, which finds effective expression through the conduit of Jihadism. For example, Hussain Osman - one of the failed 21st July bombers, told Italian investigators that during preparations for the attack the cell steeled its resolve by,

> "...watching films on the war in Iraq...especially those where women and children were being killed and exterminated by British and American soldiers... of widows, mothers and daughters that cry".[33]

Similarly, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian graduate of the University College London, who failed to detonate explosive-lined underwear on a trans-Atlantic flight in 2009, justified his actions to US prosecutors by stating,

> "I carried with me an explosive device onto Northwest 253, again, to avenge the killing of my innocent Muslim brothers and sisters by the U.S...and in retaliation for U.S. support of Israel and Israeli massacres of innocent Palestinians, [and] for the United States tyranny and oppression of Muslims... I attempted to use an explosive device which in the U.S. law is a weapon of mass destruction, which I call a blessed weapon to save the lives of innocent Muslims, for U.S. use of weapons of mass destruction on Muslim populations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond."[34]

Robert Pape's comprehensive study of suicide terrorism corroborates this view by suggesting that suicide bombings are almost always conceived of as a liberation strategy in response to occupation that places the community over and above the self; this is the very reason why the occupied communities often perceive them as martyrs and consider their actions to be altruistic.[35]

We may dispute the notion that the suicide terrorists who carried out the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, or the 7/7 London transport network bombings hailed from 'occupied' communities,[36] however, to do so would be to ignore the communal

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*sociology*, trans. George Simpson (London; New York: Routledge, 1897); Steven Stack, 'Emile Durkheim and Altruistic Suicide', *Archives of Suicide Research* 8, no. 1 (2004): 9–22.

[32] Atran, 'The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism'.

[33] C. Fusani, '"Non Volevamo Colpire l'Italia" La Lunga Confessione Nella Notte', *La Repubblica*, 30 July 2005.

[34] Detroit Free Press, 'Transcript: Read Abdulmutallab's Statement on Guilty Plea', *Detroit Free Press*, October 12, 2011.

[35] Pape, *Dying to Win*.

[36] In the case of 9/11 at least, it is clear that the large number of U.S. troops stationed in the Arabian Gulf, particularly in the hijaz during the First Gulf War, was seen as an occupation by al-Qaeda and

and supra-national nature of radical Islamist discourse, and the widely held perceptions of Western domination and hegemony in the Muslim world more broadly. Indeed, one of the cornerstones of Jihadist discourse has been the rejection of a more parochial conceptualisation of community that is predicated upon the traditional ambits of ethnicity or nationalism, in favour of a global community of belief instead. As an example of the championing of this global community of belief and purpose – the *ummah*, the *Global Islamic Media Front*, a prominent media organ of al-Qaeda stated in 2005, "The [battle]front does not belong to anyone. It is the property of all zealous Muslims and knows no geographical boundaries".[37] This official endorsement of the *Ummah* as the sole locus of identity and belonging is often echoed in the language of individual 'martyrs' themselves. Shahzad Tanweer - one of the 7/7 bombers, for example, attempted to justify his actions by pointing to British tacit support for injustices perpetrated against his 'fictive kin':[38]

> *"To the non-Muslims of Britain you may wonder what you have done to deserve this. You have those who have voted in your government who in turn have and still continue to this day continue to oppress our mothers, children, brothers and sisters from the east to the west in Palestine ... Iraq and Chechnya. Your government has openly supported the genocide of over 50,000 innocent Muslims.*
>
> *You will never experience peace until our children in Palestine, our mothers and sisters in Kashmir, our brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq live in peace.*
>
> *Our blood flows across the earth, Muslim blood has become cheap Better those who will avenge the blood of our children in Palestine and the rapes and massacres of our sisters in Kashmir."[39]*

Similarly, Mohammed Siddique Khan, in his posthumously released 'martyrdom' testament, repeatedly invoked a communal identity in which he identified the subjugation of *his community* as being principle amongst his grievances:

> *"Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we*

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their supporters, and indeed the removal of US troops constitutes the earliest articulated demand by Osama bin Laden. See, 'The Ladinese Epistle: Declaration of War (I)', MSANEWS, October 12, 1996, http://msanews.mynet.net//MSANEWS/199610/19961012.3.

[37] Cited in Awan, 'Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe', 222.

[38] This term is borrowed from S. Atran, 'Genesis of Suicide Terrorism', *Science* 299, no. 5612 (7 March 2003): 1534.

[39] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/oct/15/terrorism.alqaida1

*feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight".*[40]

Khan and Tanweer exhibit a confusing and melodramatic sense of duty to this nebulous and disparate body of peoples ('my Muslim brothers and sisters', 'our children in Palestine', 'our mothers and sisters in Kashmir'), who ultimately become the object of their altruistic sacrifice, despite the fact that neither has little direct connection to, or identification with them (in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language, culture or customs to name but a few salient markers of identity). This attitude is all the more perplexing when juxtaposed against the feelings of indifference and open hostility displayed towards their British victims, with whom they *did* actually share many facets of their identity. This disconcertingly misplaced identification can be partially explained through a process I describe elsewhere as *dual cultural alterity*.[41]

Dual Cultural Alterity

This phenomenon refers to a staunch repudiation of, or at least a distinct lack of identification with, both *minority* (ethnic or parental) culture, and *majority* (mainstream or host society) culture, as a result of being unable or unwilling to fulfil either group's normative expectations, and thus is likely to inspire feelings of uprootedness and lack of belonging.

Minority culture may be relegated to obsolescence for a number of reasons including, the imposition of conservative socio-sexual mores; a profound sense of alienation from one's family;[42] and the presence of cultural power structures (such as the South Asian *biraderi*), which can have the ostensive effect of divesting youth of any real tangible control over their own lives. The Home Office Report *Preventing Extremism Together Working Groups*, hastily compiled in the wake of 7/7 concurred,[43]

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[40] Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm

[41] Akil N Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Comparative Perspective*, ed. Tahir Abbas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 219.

[42] Indeed, in the cases presented before us, none of the families appear to have been cognizant of the paths upon which their children were embarked: Hasib Hussain's distraught mother, unaware of her son's actions, reported him missing to the Police Casualty Bureau on the evening of July 7th; Jason Burke et al., 'Three Cities, Four Killers', *The Observer*, July 17, 2005. Similarly, Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, one of the failed bombers on July 21st was only identified after his bewildered family recognised their estranged son from CCTV images distributed throughout the media; Duncan Gardham and Philip Johnston, 'Terror Suspect Is a Convicted Mugger - Telegraph', *The Telegraph*, July 27, 2005.

[43] Home Office Working Groups, *Preventing Extremism Together* (London: Home Office, 2005), 15.

*"Many young Muslims feel that they do not have a voice or a legitimate outlet for protest, political expression, or dissent. Leadership roles are traditionally held by the elders, and the young people can feel frustrated at their inability to actively engage in decision making structures."*[44]

Perhaps the most damning indictment of minority culture for many Jihadists, however, is that it holds little or no relevance in the diaspora. There is no 'myth of return', no solace to be found in a nostalgic struggle for the homeland, and ethnic languages become defunct through neglect whilst English assumes the role of *lingua franca*.[45] Moreover, ambient cultural racism[46] serves to negate any intrinsic worth thought to reside in ethnic traditions and customs, whilst concomitantly those very same traditions and customs are exposed as adulterating a pristine Islamic orthodoxy.[47]

The disenchantment with majority culture, on the other hand, is less clear cut, particularly as many Jihadists who, by virtue of being raised in a pervasively British environment and having imbibed many of its values and cultural norms, display a remarkably easy immersion into majority culture (particular popular, mainstream youth culture), prior to their radicalisation. However, clearly this comfortable embedment is disrupted at some point and gradually superseded by disillusionment with majority culture, as a result of perceptions of hedonism, consumerism, racism, inequality and the general imposition of conflicting core value-systems from the 'host' society, which may render the individual unwilling or unable to perpetuate assimilation into the predominant paradigm. One way in which we might account for this cultural schizophrenia of sorts is by examining identity through the lens of self-categorization theory.[48] SCT contends that identity is not a static construction and that the self may be defined at different levels of abstraction depending upon differing

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[44] A slew of earlier reports following the 'race riots' of 2001 in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford had all drawn attention to precisely this sort of cumulative marginalisation of youth voices by decision makers and community leaders, see for example Ted Cantle, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* (London: Home Office, 2001).

[45] Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', 217.

[46] Modood argues that the familiar 'biological racism' has gradually been displaced by a newer 'cultural racism', which focuses on language, religion, family structures, dress and cuisine – traits that define what it means to be Asian, see Tariq Modood, *Multicultural politics : racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

[47] The growth of an austere Wahhabism or Salafism amongst diasporic Muslim youth, that condemns many ethnic customs and norms as *bidah* (reprehensive religious innovation) is testament to this fact.

[48] John C Turner, *Rediscovering the social group : a self-categorization theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Penelope J. Oakes, *Stereotyping and Social Reality* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1994).

circumstances; at times it may be in terms of individual uniqueness, whilst at others, in terms of specific group membership.

The salience of a communal identity, for example, may arise during periods of perceived group crisis or threat. For Jihadists these flashpoints may have been evoked by a range of contemporary events including, the Iraq war and the wider Global War on Terror; the Palestinian *Intifada* or the stagnation of the Middle East peace process; the banning of the veil and other European sartorial restrictions on Muslim women; the provocative publication of Danish cartoons of Muhammad deemed offensive to Muslims; and the resurgence of the Far Right and its convergence with the rise in Islamophobia in the US and Western Europe more generally.[49] It is in these instances, that individuals become much more prone to reassessing what religious identity means to them, either as reconstruction in part of the lost minority identity or as a response to pressing questions and challenges from a pervasively non-Muslim environment.[50]

Thus, in the absence of an appealing cultural paradigm from either minority or majority group, the individual simply resorts to a cultural entrenchment that assumes a religious hue by default, thus transforming religion, from religion per se, into the principal anchor of identity. Consequently, religion not only provides an emphatic rejoinder to Western identity, but is also interpreted *de novo*, without the perceived cultural accretions of the Islam associated with their parental or ethnic identity, thereby constructing a legitimate identity outside both minority and majority cultures. Take for instance the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, who wrote in the final text messages to his father back in Nigeria, "I've found a new religion, the real Islam"; "You should just forget about me, I'm never coming back"; "Please forgive me. I will no longer be in touch with you"; and "Forgive me for any wrongdoing, I am no longer your child."[51] Olivier Roy argues, that globalized radical Islam is particularly attractive to diasporic Muslims precisely because it legitimises their sense of deculturation and uprootedness by refusing to identify Islam with the pristine cultures

[49] Peter Gottschalk, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

[50] Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', 218.

[51] Adam Nossiter, 'Lonely Trek to Radicalism for Terror Suspect', *The New York Times*, 16 January 2010.

of their parents, pointing to a strong correlation between deculturation and religious reformulation.[52]

This dual cultural alterity, and the attendant forging of an identity distinct to both that bequeathed by parents, or assimilated from the wider host society, may help to explicate why a British jihadist of Pakistani or Jamaican provenance (Muhammad Siddique Khan or Germaine Lindsey respectively), who feels little or no identification with Britain, or their country of parental origin, but complete allegiance to the global community of believers or *Ummah*, might undertake a martyrdom operation in Britain, ostensibly in response to occupation in Iraq, Palestine or elsewhere.

However, it would be erroneous to assume that an altruistic identification with an imagined community deemed to be under attack, *ipso facto*, leads to a proclivity towards martyrdom. Rather, many individuals experiencing identity dislocation through dual cultural alterity, and identifying instead with a beleaguered *ummah*, nevertheless eschew violence of any form themselves, either tacitly or apathetically accepting the status quo, or instead seeking redress through conventional political channels. Instead, those few individuals that are genuinely willing to countenance martyrdom, appear to do so for one of two of the following reasons.

i) Political Empowerment: The eventual recourse to martyrdom can be understood in part as a desperate response to acutely felt feelings of political impotence. Political powerlessness, such as that witnessed in the wake of unprecedented anti-war marches and demonstrations in 2003 that nevertheless failed to avert the course of the Iraq war, can lead to disillusionment with, and alienation from, conventional political processes. Anwar al-Awlaki, perhaps the most important ideologue amongst English-speaking Jihadists until his killing in 2011, wrote a missive to the Somalian Jihadist group al-Shabaab in 2008, that lauded their employment of violence in the face of political impotence,

> *"Al-Shabab [have given] us a living example of how we as Muslims should proceed to change our situation. The ballot has failed us but the bullet has not."[53]*

Hussain Osman, similarly alluding to political disenfranchisement of this nature, claimed that the bombs on July 21st were never meant to detonate or inflict death, but only to draw attention to the Iraq war, which he'd failed to achieve through legitimate means:

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[52] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam : the search for a new Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[53] Available at: http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/awlakishebab1208.pdf.

> *"I am against war . . . I've marched in peace rallies and nobody listened to me. I never thought of killing people."* [54]

Moreover, the inefficacy of conventional politics may be brought into sharper relief when starkly juxtaposed against the potent efficacy of illegitimate political interventions – take for example, perceptions of the 2004 Madrid train bombings as having ostensibly precipitated the early withdrawal of Spanish troops from the conflict in Iraq. Moreover, the potency of suicide terrorism in particular, for example - as a force multiplier that helps equalise an otherwise asymmetric conflict, has long been recognised by both terrorist groups and those they fight.[55] Ayman al-Zawahiri, for example, extols the merits of suicide bombings to his readers stating,

> *"the method of martyrdom operations is the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the mujahideen in casualties."* [56]

Pape suggests that, even with the exclusion of the 9/11 attacks, suicide bombings conducted between 1980 and 2004 accounted for 48 per cent of all terrorism-related deaths even though they represented only three per cent of all terrorist incidents.[57] Western Jihadists, often self-conscious of their own lack of training and general military competence,[58] no doubt astutely recognise the lethal effectiveness of suicide terrorism and its ability to compensate for their own shortcomings as enfeebled modern males.

Muhammad Siddique Khan also expresses frustration with the apparent futility of conventional modes of political engagement, powerfully invoking a somewhat Fanonesque explanation for his eventual recourse to violence,[59]

> *"And our words have no impact upon you, therefore I'm going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood."*[60]

Perceiving a loss of personal agency, and in particular, feeling that he has been rendered powerless to prevent further violence against his community, Khan contends

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[54] CNN, 'London Bomb Suspect Arrested', 27 July 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/07/27/london.tube/.

[55] Pape, *Dying to Win*, 62–76; Dipak K. Gupta and Kusum Mundra, 'Suicide Bombing as a Strategic Weapon: An Empirical Investigation of Hamas and Islamic Jihad', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 573–598; Jeffrey William Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom: a History of Suicide Bombing* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2012).

[56] Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner)*, 2001, www.scribd.com/doc/6759609/ Knights-Under-the-Prophet-Banner.

[57] Pape, *Dying to Win*, 3.

[58] Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 47–66.

[59] Frantz Fanon wrote that the colonialist society is violent by its very nature and therefore violence is the only language it understands, "Colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence"; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 23.

[60] Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm

that he must now communicate instead in the language of violence. The predication of the recourse to violence upon this realisation appears to be a familiar sentiment amongst many terrorists throughout history, who have claimed, often quite sincerely, that they only turned to violence when they felt they had no other choice.[61] The understanding of terrorism as 'talking in the language of blood' is itself a largely uncontested concept; as Schmid and De Graaf suggest in their seminal text, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*, terrorism is far better understood if it is viewed in the first instance as communication rather than as mere violence.[62]

ii) <u>Diverted Altruistic Energies</u>: It is alluringly simple to conflate all Jihadist actions under the overarching rubric of terrorism, but there has long existed a hierarchy of legitimacy for Jihadist acts.[63] Causes associated with national independence struggles against regimes perceived as repressive, such as those of Chechnya, Kashmir and Palestine, enjoy widespread sympathy amongst Muslim publics and consequently have far greater legitimacy than, for example, obscure movements attempting to resurrect the Caliphate, or the global Jihadism of al-Qaeda. Similarly, conventional modes of warfare with combatants and military personnel are not granted the same inviolable taboo status as indiscriminate acts of terrorism against civilian populations.

This then leads us to the second reason for the recourse to martyrdom; although individual Jihadists may ultimately undertake 'martyrdom' operations as an altruistic response to perceived occupation, there is little evidence to suggest that even those individuals who commit acts of suicide terrorism, do so as a matter of choice (or at least first choice). Instead, it appears that in many cases, potential radicals with romanticised and earnest, but largely inchoate notions of defending their community, can have their often laudable empathies diverted (due to a lack of accessibility to the principle cause), or manipulated to deadly effect.[64] Western Muslim Jihadists are

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[61] See for example Nelson Mandela's famous statement at the Rivonia trial in 1961, "[I] came to the conclusion that as violence in this country was inevitable…when all channels of peaceful protest had been barred to us, that the decision was made to embark on violent forms of political struggle"; Available at: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mandela/mandelaspeech.html

[62] Alex Peter Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London ; Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982).

[63] For more on legitimacy of Jihadist actions see, Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*.

[64] Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', 223.

particularly amenable to deflectionary tactics for a variety of reasons, including their proficiency in European languages, their lack of restrictions on international travel, and their potential ability to evade suspicion within their host societies. Combined with their very limited physical training experience, they possess much greater value as 'smart bombs',[65] than conventional guerrillas or footsoldiers. Consequently, although volunteering for the Jihadist cause usually entails some degree of choice, recruits may quickly discover that individual agency is usurped by the group through the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) and normative expectations on obedience and conformity, as this chilling warning from Omar Khyam, the ringleader of the Crevice plot, to Muhammad Siddique Khan on how to behave at the training camp clearly demonstrates,

> *"The only thing, one thing I will advise you yeah, is total obedience to whoever your emir is whether he is Sunni, Arab Chechen Saudi, British, total obedience, I don't know if heard about the (unclear) he disobeyed one order (unclear) lies cut out his throat, I'll tell you up there you can get your head cut off."*[66]

Even in the case of the most infamous example of suicide terrorism to date, the attack on 9/11, it is patently clear that they key members of the Hamburg cell originally held aspirations to fight alongside separatist rebels in Chechnya,[67] but were re-directed to Afghanistan for training, before later being told "that the Chechens do not need [fighters] anymore".[68] Similarly, there is strong evidence to suggest that at least two of the 7/7 bombers, Muhammad Siddique Khan and Shahzad Tanweer, initially spurred on by the prospect of fighting in the 'Jihad' in Afghanistan against the 'invading Crusaders', were later diverted to attack the London transport network in 2005. In a 2004 conversation with Omar Khyam, Khan appears to be relishing the prospect of fighting in Afghanistan, fully aware of the fact that he will not be allowed to return to the UK,

> *Omar Khyam: Are these lot ready bruv? [ready to go to Afghanistan]*
> *Mohammed Siddique Khan: Yeah*

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[65] This term is adapted from, Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 9.
[66] MI5 transcript of conversation between Muhammad Siddique Khan and Omar Khyam, 23/03/2004, available at: http://7julyinquests.independent.gov.uk/
[67] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 1st ed (New York: Norton, 2004), 165.
[68] Peter Finn, 'Hijackers Had Hoped to Fight in Chechnya, Court Told', *The Washington Post*, 23 October 2002, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A2079-2002Oct22.html.

> *Omar Khyam: What I'll do is, I will talk to you tonight, inshallah. How quickly can these guys go?*
>
> *Mohammed Siddique Khan: Listen this can't come quick enough for them….*
>
> *Omar Khyam: The Big Emir of the brothers is saying they can come, but it is a one way ticket. That's it if you agree with that bruv, it's not a problem bruv. If it's a one way ticket. You understand that. You agree with that, inshallah.*
>
> *Mohammed Siddique Khan: Inshallah.*[69]

However, clearly illustrating the established hierarchy of legitimacy for Jihadist actions, Khan, eager to wage defensive Jihad in Afghanistan against NATO troops, displays uncertainty and discomfort over Omar Khyam's connections to terrorism later in the conversation,

> *MSK: Are you really a terrorist eh?*
>
> *KHYAM: They're working with us*
>
> *MSK: You're serious, you are basically*
>
> *KHYAM: No I'm not a terrorist but they are working through us*
>
> *MSK: Who are, there's no one higher than you (unclear).*[70]

In some cases, a gradual progression to increasingly more egregious modes of violence, that subvert the individual's initial largely humanistic aspirations, may be witnessed. British Jihadists who having partaken in (and survived) 'legitimate defensive Jihad' in theatres of conflict from Bosnia to Iraq, inevitably return to their host societies. These survivors, brutalised by the ravages of war and possibly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, may prove less capable of rehabilitation back into mainstream society, and consequently may more easily resort to more extreme or taboo modes of violence in the future.

In all of the scenarios presented above, individuals may not have initially wished to participate in these highly 'controversial' operations, but by that point they have long crossed the Rubicon. One of the patent successes of al-Qaeda has been its ability to co-opt diverse motivations, aspirations, grievances and causes, and ultimately divert, channel and redirect these energies for their own ends.

### ii)      Religion & Salvation

One of the enduring myths surrounding suicide bombers has been the ascendancy of religious motivations for 'martyrdom', over other more 'worldly' concerns, with

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[69] MI5 transcript of conversation between Muhammad Siddique Khan and Omar Khyam, 23/03/2004, available at: http://7julyinquests.independent.gov.uk/

[70] Ibid.

many commentators pursuing a prurient focus on *hour al-ayn* or heavenly maidens. This is not to contest the fact that the recourse to martyrdom may be shaped by substantive religious or spiritual desires, yearnings and experiences that cannot simply be summarily dismissed, as is often the wont of many reductive strains of literature on religious change within the social sciences.[71] Indeed, it is patently evident from the religious rhetoric of many Jihadists drawn to martyrdom that salvific motives do ostensibly appear to factor heavily in their decisions. Many of these individuals frequently allude to canonical traditions that explicitly reinforce the notion of 'other-worldly' rewards as recompense for 'this-worldly' sacrifice. These may include, *inter alia*, forgiveness for one's sins; evading the reckoning on the Day of Judgement; marriage to 72 heavenly maidens; intercession on behalf of 70 sinful family members; bestowal of dignity and glory; and ultimately, the guarantee of eternal Paradise.[72] Shahzad Tanweer, who earlier claimed to be motivated by the West's injustices against his community, nevertheless invokes the 'promise' of Paradise as being central to his rationale,

> "We are 100 per cent committed to the cause of Islam, we love death the way you love life…
> As for you who have been affected by this reminder give your lives for Allah's cause. For in truth this is the best transaction as Allah ... says: 'Better that Allah has chosen to deliver their lives and their properties for the price that they should be the paradise; they fight Allah's cause so they kill and are killed is the promising truth that is binding ...And who is truer to his promise than Allah? Then rejoice in the life in which you have concluded that is the supreme success."[73]

Muhammad Siddique Khan also tempers his earlier altruistic, but 'secular' motives, by introducing a sacred dimension to his rationale. This is accomplished through the invocation of familiar tropes from *istishādi* testaments, such as obedience to God, the conscious spurning of worldly pleasures, and a yearning for paradise:

> "I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our religion is Islam - obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad... This is how our ethical stances are dictated…
> I myself, I make dua (pray) to Allah... to raise me amongst those whom I love like the prophets, the messengers, the martyrs and today's heroes like our beloved Sheikh Osama Bin Laden, Dr Ayman al-Zawahri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and all the other brothers and sisters that are

[71] Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
[72] See for example, Sunan A-Tirmidhi (1663) and Sunan Ibn Majah (2799).
[73] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/oct/15/terrorism.alqaida1

*fighting in the... of this cause. With this I leave you to make up your own minds and I ask you to make dua to Allah almighty to accept the work from me and my brothers and enter us into gardens of paradise."[74]*

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, presents a similarly curious mix of secular and sacred motives, by first providing a very careful reasoning of his participation in Jihad as constituting not only a religious duty, but a virtuous deed:

*"In late 2009, in fulfilment of a religious obligation, I decided to participate in jihad against the United States. The Koran obliges every able Muslim to participate in jihad and fight in the way of Allah, those who fight you…Participation in jihad against the United States [sic] is considered among the most virtuous of deeds in Islam and is highly encouraged in the Koran… If you laugh at us now, we will laugh at you later in this life and on the day of judgment by God's will, and our final call is all praise to Allah, the lord of the universe, Allahu Akbar."[75]*

However, the essential and underlying reasons for his recourse to martyrdom are, once again, highly political and secular,

*"I had an agreement with at least one person to attack the United States in retaliation for U.S. support of Israel and in retaliation of the killing of innocent and civilian Muslim populations in Palestine, especially in the blockade of Gaza, and in retaliation for the killing of innocent and civilian Muslim populations in Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and beyond, most of them women, children, and non-combatants."[76]*

Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult, if not nigh impossible, to delineate that which is genuinely 'religious' from other more secular factors, particularly if all we have to base this on, is the overtly sanctified and highly-stylised discourse of the individuals themselves. Thus, whilst we must give credence to their stated *sacred* intentions, and their own attribution of meaning to their actions, we must also be cognisant of the *post hoc* attribution of meaning and validation to these acts. As Speckhard and Akhmedova, studying the motivations of Chechen female suicide terrorists, suggest: "[the] statements of the individuals involved in terrorism appear less of a driving force for their participation than as a means of justifying their actions".[77]

Martyrdom testaments belong to a highly stylised genre, and thus need to display certain religious tropes and conform to established archetypes for conferral of

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[74] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm.
[75] Detroit Free Press, 'Transcript: Read Abdulmutallab's Statement on Guilty Plea'.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, 'The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 25.

the status of martyr by the wider community. Indeed, if an individual is to be successfully accepted as a martyr, he needs to not only look and behave like a martyr, but to also adopt the language of the martyr. As Robert Pape suggests, "Only a community can make a martyr…using elaborate ceremonies…to identify the death of a suicide attacker, [and] promote the idea that their members should be accorded martyr status."[78] This desire to fulfil the normative expectations of an imagined community of *belief* (the *ummah*), combined with the dual cultural alterity identified earlier, through which identity can assume a religious hue by default, may help explain the conspicuous religiosity contained within many Jihadist narratives. Moreover, this frequent invocation of 'the sacred' by individuals is also likely to be symptomatic of the primacy of theological legitimation amongst Jihadist ideologues themselves,[79] who have shrewdly, and indeed successfully, managed to yoke religion to profane political goals, in order to manufacture constituencies, legitimise violence, and eliminate dissent.[80] Indeed, Jihadist ideologues, who often display a glaringly conspicuous absence of personal religious credentials, having undergone modern secular educations,[81] have long been astutely cognisant of the immense potency religion offers. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the efforts of Jihadist leaders to adorn themselves in the regalia of religion, most recognisably in their impeccable white robes, pious beards and saintly turbans, alongside the employment of a superfluously religio-canonic rhetoric,[82] should be understood first and foremost as a compensatory mechanism for theological illiteracy, and a fervent desire to usurp this potent religious mantle from traditional religious authority figures.

Conversely however, many individuals display largely apathetic attitudes towards religion, and so in these cases it may even be disingenuous to associate

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[78] Pape, *Dying to Win*, 82.

[79] For more on theological legitimation by Jihadists see, Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 29–37.

[80] For a discussion of the manipulation of religion by terrorists see, Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the mind of God the global rise of religious violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[81] For example, Osama bin Laden studied civil engineering; both al-Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (one of the founding members of al-Qaeda) studied medicine; Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (the most important strategist of modern Jihadism) and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks) both studied mechanical engineering; Abd al-Salam Faraj (who wrote the highly influential Jihadist primer, *The Neglected Duty*) was an electrician; Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the former head of al-Qaeda in Iraq) was a high school dropout and common criminal. Indeed, even Sayyid Qutb, often regarded as the ideological godfather of Jihadism, was a journalist and literary critic; Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 34.

[82] Ibid., 35.

religious sentiments with martyrdom.[83] Hussain Osman, for example, informed Italian investigators in no uncertain terms that, "religion had nothing to do with it. We were shown videos of the Iraq war and told we must do something big".[84] In fact, one of the most intriguing findings vis-à-vis the religiosity of jihadists, has been the discovery that the vast majority of those drawn to Jihadism are not particularly religious prior to their radicalisation. Indeed, most individuals were either raised in largely secular households, or possessed only a rudimentary grasp of their parental faith, which rarely extended to religious praxis of any sort.[85] It is only after experiencing a religious awakening or a *Transitional Religiosity Experience*,[86] in conjunction with the *dual cultural alterity* (through which Islam becomes, by default, the principal anchor of identity), that religion becomes a potentially useful variable in the overall analysis.

### iii)    Impotence & Ennui

It is alluringly simple to posit that those drawn to Jihadist martyrdom are likely to be highly ideologically committed individuals, possessing coherent and well-developed worldviews, and with clear, cogent motives for their participation in acts that will ultimately claim their very lives. Bainbridge and Stark, writing on the *weltanschaung* or meaning system of religious adherents in general, suggest this is a highly contentious assumption to make, but surprisingly common amongst social scientists.[87] I would suggest this inference is all the more appealing to researchers studying suicide terrorism, as the projection of rationality, cogency, agency and coherency onto subjects and their acts, ostensibly helps *us* to make sense of the 'senseless' and explain the 'unexplainable'.

Nevertheless, it appears that an increasing number of individuals engaging in, or at least aspiring to suicide terrorism, are drawn to the phenomenon for reasons that

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[83] As Sageman suggests, in many cases "[the motivation] is not religious, it is psychological and personal"; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 108.

[84] Duncan Campbell and John Hooper, 'Second Bomb Suspect Was Seen in Rome', *The Guardian*, 1 August 2005.

[85] Sageman's detailed analysis of Jihadists arrived at a similar conclusion; of the 394 individuals he surveyed, only 13 per cent had partaken in religious education or attended madrassas; Marc Sageman, 'Islam and Al Qaeda', in *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: Globalization of Martyrdom*, ed. Ami Pedahzur, Cass Series on Political Violence (New York: Routledge, 2006), 122–36.

[86] For more on the shifts in religiosity prior to incipient radicalism, see Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism'.

[87] William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'The "Consciousness Reformation" Reconsidered', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (March 1981): 1.

may initially defy reason, or seem inexplicable. Indeed, for some of these aspiring Jihadists, the recourse to martyrdom is less about altruism, salvific yearnings, or political disenfranchisement, and more about an egoistical desire for meaning and purpose in one's life, often in order to overcome an unbearable ennui borne largely of underachievement. In these instances, the turn to jihadism serves as an emphatic rejection of the banality and monotonous inanity of daily life, providing, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of one's own trivial existence,[88] or as Sageman suggests, "martyrdom lifts them from their insignificance".[89]

Anthony Garcia, one of the failed 2004 'Bluewater bomb' plotters, appears to epitomise this motif. Garcia left school at the age of sixteen with few qualifications and no discernible ambitions, instead peripatetically drifting from one menial job to another. Prior to his arrest, Garcia had been working nightshifts stacking shelves at a local supermarket, but spent much of his time daydreaming about becoming a Jihadi fighter, with the Jihadist fantasy clearly providing a form of escapism from the daily tedium and drudgery of his otherwise uneventful life.[90] Both Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber' who tried to detonate an Atlantic flight in mid-air in December of 2001, and Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, one of the failed 21st July 2005 bombers, also potentially fit this profile well. Reid was raised in a largely dysfunctional home, quickly descending into petty street crime, and spent much of his early life in prison.[91] Similarly, Ibrahim, a child asylum seeker from Eritrea, spent much of his youth in and around drugs, street gangs, violence and youth offender institutions.[92] Whilst the ennui thesis certainly goes some way towards accounting for Reid and Ibrahim's fascination with martyrdom, both individuals also appear to have been drawn to radical Islam whilst incarcerated, suggesting that the espousal of Jihadism may possibly also constitute a form of recidivism that supplants more conventional modes of criminality.[93]

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[88] Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', 220; Martha Crenshaw, 'Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay', *Security Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 153.

[89] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 152.

[90] BBC News, 'Profile: Anthony Garcia', 30 April 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6149798.stm.

[91] BBC News, 'Who Is Richard Reid?', 28 December 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1731568.stm.

[92] Gardham and Johnston, 'Terror Suspect Is a Convicted Mugger'.

[93] Awan, 'Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism', 213.

Chivalrous Knights, Heroes and Real Men

These latent feelings of purposelessness can in some cases be triggered or compounded by a sense of personal impotence, particularly if the individual begins to feel that the debilitating effects of an emasculating,[94] atomising, anomic modernity have rendered him a mere husk of a man. It is only via the redemptive prism of the chivalrous jihadi warrior, through which he is recast as the community's champion as a result of his heroic sacrifice, that the individual then discerns a mechanism to reclaim agency, purpose, self-esteem and manhood.[95] Muhammad Siddique Khan's martyrdom video emphatically refers to his coterie of martyrs as 'real men', pointedly distinguishing them from the emasculated individuals who 'stay at home'.[96]

The appeal to the valiant holy warrior or chivalrous knight is a recurring trope in Jihadist literature, and indeed it is no accident that Ayman al-Zawahiri's most important work is entitled, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner (Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi)*,[97] shrewdly seeking to exploit traditional Muslim male sensitivities around chivalry, honour, shame and sacrifice. The astute framing of this loss of dignity as being somehow sinful, offers up the prospect of redemption, and absolution through sacrifice and martyrdom.[98]

Muhammad Siddique Khan exemplifies the transformative power offered by the martyr's mask, undergoing the ready metamorphosis from children's learning mentor to heroic avenging soldier,

> *"I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters…And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation. I make dua (pray) to Allah... to raise me amongst those whom I love like the prophets, the messengers, the martyrs and today's heroes like our beloved Sheikh Osama Bin Laden"*[99]

However, martyrdom provides not just the means through which the powerless individual can reclaim agency and manhood, but increasingly, the ability to brazenly usurp traditional authority and power normally reserved for clerics, and religious or political leaders. These shifts in influence are in part due to the fact that the

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[94] For more on masculinities in crises see, John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture*, (Phildelphia, Pa: Open University, 2002); Sally Robinson, *Marked Men White Masculinity in Crisis.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[95] In some cases, the lascivious proffering of 72 heavenly maidens, yearning for the heroic martyr's embrace, may conveniently intersect with this apparent loss of virility.

[96] Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm

[97] al-Zawahiri, *Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner)*.

[98] Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 133.

[99] Availabl at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm

individuals act predominantly within the New Media Environment, whose largely egalitarian and democratising nature,[100] is conducive to the 'levelling' of hierarchies of knowledge and power.[101] However, equally importantly, this reconfiguration of power and authority is also predicated in large part upon the ascendancy of deeds over words. As Awan *et al*., contend, the Jihadists' tangible response to a perceived attack against the Ummah is uniquely placed in the Muslim world, particularly when starkly juxtaposed against the apathy, weakness or inaction of Muslim rulers, clergy and even other Islamists. No matter how odious or counterproductive this response has been, the Jihadists cannot be accused by opponents of procrastination or indolence. Consequently their manifest *deeds* enable them to undermine the credibility of other dissenting voices that use *words* alone, thus arrogating to themselves the authority of 'Islamic officialdom'.[102] As evidence of this trend within the British context, we might point to the example of Muhammad Siddique Khan, who despite being 'theologically illiterate', nevertheless felt emboldened enough to disparage traditional Muslim scholars in Britain, suggesting that 'real men' like himself, whose deeds and sacrifices were self-evident, were far more worthy of the Prophet's legacy:

> *"Our so-called scholars today are content with their Toyotas and their semi-detached houses... If they fear the British Government more than they fear Allah then they must desist in giving talks, lectures and passing fatwas and they need to stay at home – they're useless – and leave the job to the real men, the true inheritors of the prophet."[103]*

Hyperreality: The Medium of Martyrdom

As we have seen, the Arabic word for martyr in the Quran - *shahīd*, stems from the Arabic verb 'to see' or 'to witness', and therefore if we understand martyrdom to mean bearing witness through one's sacrifice, and thus making an example of one's death, then the arena that has largely enabled the publicising of martyrdom has been the internet. Indeed, it is now well recognised that within the last decade, the internet has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism.[104] The unique multimedia environment of the Internet in

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[100] Manuel Castells, *Communication power* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas, and Cyber Islamic Environments*, Critical Studies on Islam (London ; Sterling, Va: Pluto Press, 2003).

[101] Akil N Awan and Mina Al-Lami, 'Al-Qa'ida's Virtual Crisis', *The RUSI Journal* 154, no. 1 (2009): 56–64; Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 34.

[102] Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 44.

[103] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm.

[104] Akil N Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist Media: Function, Legitimacy and Radicalizing Efficacy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (1 August 2007): 389–408.

particular lends itself to the construction of a *hyperreality*; the paradoxical notion of a mediated phenomenon that appears more real than reality itself.[105] This hyperreality can be thought of as an enhanced reality that 'cocoons' the participant in a wholly mediated environment concocted from a plethora of images, texts and videos (which may have been manipulated in a myriad disingenuous ways), all filtered through the jihadist lens and through which the individual unwittingly experiences reality by proxy.[106]

It is in this cloistered yet highly immersive environment, that relies on emotive imagery and other affective content to venerate the martyr above all else, that the true power of the medium in lionising martyrdom becomes patently evident. The appeal to the emotions or senses, through polished Jihadist video montages, stirring devotional songs and fawning hagiographies of martyrs, in lieu of appeals to reason, or theological and ideological considerations, appears tailored towards the newer generation of young, diasporic, non-Arabic speaking, digital natives,[107] who now contribute disproportionately to the Jihadist demographic.[108] Moreover, the hyperreality of the Internet has been so eminently successful in engendering martyrdom, that those individuals who substantially contribute to this arena have themselves become lauded as 'celebrities', in some cases, even by traditional Jihadist figureheads. Take for instance the example of Younis Tsouli (aka Irhaabi 007 or Terrorist 007), a web-savvy student in London whose contributions to the global Jihad were confined to autonomously promulgating the visual culture of Jihadism from his bedroom PC, but who nevertheless received considerable acclaim from Jihadists around the world, including Jihadist 'luminaries' like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the infamous head of *al-Qaeda in Iraq*). The important role played by these 'media Jihadists' in encouraging martyrdom is evident from Tsouli's fawning exchange with a fellow forum member, 'Abuthaabit',

> "This media work, I am telling you, is very important. Very, very, very, very . . . Because a lot
> of the funds brothers are getting is because they are seeing stuff like this coming out. Imagine

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[105] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York City, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), Inc, 1983); Umberto Eco, *Travels in hyper reality: essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

[106] Akil N Awan, 'Jihadi ideology in the New Media Environment', in *Contextualising jihadi thought*, ed. Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi (London: Hurst & Co, 2012), 110.

[107] This term is adapted from Prensky, and by which I mean a generation of young people who, having been born and raised in an omnipresent digital world, are so comfortably immersed in this virtual environment that they no longer make significant distinctions between it and the 'real' world. See also, Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001).

[108] Awan, 'Jihadi ideology in the New Media Environment', 114. Awan and Al-Lami, 'Al-Qa'ida's Virtual Crisis', 62.

*how many people have gone [to Iraq] after seeing the situation because of the videos. Imagine how many of them could have been shahid [martyrs] as well."*[109]

**CONCLUSION**

As Durkheim's seminal thesis demonstrated more than a century ago, motivations for suicide can be extraordinarily complex even under 'normal' circumstances,[110] and thus discerning the motivations for an act as complicated as taking one's life in a violent manner that deliberately harms others too, is no simple feat. As we have seen from the life narratives of a number of Jihadists in Britain, individuals can engage in suicide terrorism for myriad reasons. However, I have tentatively suggested that this plethora of motivations and biographical diversity can be fundamentally distilled into the following three *ideal types*: i) a diversion of altruistic empathies, positing martyrdom as a strategic liberation strategy that equalises the asymmetry of an unjust conflict, conducted on behalf of an 'imagined', besieged community; ii) a highly ritualised form of sacralised, performative violence, in fulfilment of deeply-felt salvific yearnings, and as a path to paradise; and iii) a mythical or heroic sacrifice, conferring immortality through the prospect of living on in the memory of others, and motivated by ennui or impotence.

Drawing the field internationally, we may be able to identify the existence of a number of other potential motifs that ostensibly do not appear to have any resonance within the British context. Take for example, poverty as a motivator for suicide terrorism,[111] evident from the case of Ajmal Kasab, the lone surviving terrorist from the 2008 Mumbai attacks, whose impoverished family were promised Rs 150,000 by Lashkar e-Taiba upon successful completion of the operation.[112] Alternatively, we might draw attention to the numerous cases of suicide terrorism in actual theatres of conflict that have been motivated by direct personal loss and trauma, such as those of the 'Black Widows' in Chechnya, who in many cases volunteer for operations after

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[109] 'Internet Jihad: A World Wide Web of Terror', *The Economist*, 12 July 2007, http://www.economist.com/node/9472498.
[110] Durkheim, *Suicide*.
[111] It is now fairly well understood that there is no obvious correlation between poverty and terrorism, however, that is not to suggest that poverty does not contribute to the prevalence of terrorism in some contexts. See also, Alan B Krueger, *What makes a terrorist economics and the roots of terrorism* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[112] Richard Esposito, 'Mumbai Terrorist Wanted to "Kill and Die" and Become Famous', *ABC News*, 3 December 2008, http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=6385015&page=1#.UVWuoFd25jU.

having witnessed the deaths of their husbands or other family members by Russian forces.[113] Finally, we might identify certain communities, such as Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, who as a response to occupation, and feelings of humiliation and shame, appear to promulgate a celebratory 'cult of martyrdom', thus providing a socio-cultural sanction for suicide bombings.[114] Whilst these three examples may seem far removed from the experiences of Jihadist martyrs in Britain, one of the central arguments of this paper has been that feelings such as loss, trauma, occupation, humiliation or poverty, can be experienced vicariously, particularly through the hyperreality offered by the New Media Environment, and these simulacra of injustice may be perceived by the participant, to be as 'real' as any lived reality.

  As these examples demonstrate, even the relatively simple task of establishing linkages between experiences and actions can be problematic, and thus discerning motivations for martyrdom is clearly fraught with difficulties. Indeed, even in our final analysis, we are left, rather curiously, with a potentially unhelpful set of mutually exclusive dichotomies;

 i)  The suicide terrorist as: the **altruist**, selflessly sacrificing his life in defence of his community, *in stark contrast to*, the **egoist** who selfishly uses his death to escape from ennui and impotence, in order to claim agency, purpose, manhood or salvation.

 ii)  The suicide terrorist as: the **profane**, this-worldly martyr who seeks fame, adulation, agency and political power, *in stark contrast to*, the **sacred**, other-worldly martyr who seeks religious salvation and Paradise.[115]

Having devoted this paper to elucidating the motivations and causes of suicide martyrdom, it seems fitting to conclude by reviewing the consequences and results of these actions too. In the overwhelming majority of cases, Jihadist suicide terrorism has been shown to be not only ineffectual, but largely counter-intuitive. Indeed, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, having diverted the energies of hundreds of young Muslim men and women by sending them to their premature deaths, have failed to achieve any of the aims with which Muslim publics may have been deemed to initially share

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[113] Speckhard and Akhmedova, 'The Making of a Martyr', 468.

[114] Mohammed M. Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, Perspectives Series (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).

[115] The terms 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' are adapted from, Francis Robinson, 'Other-Worldly and This-Worldly Islam and the Islamic Revival. A Memorial Lecture for Wilfred Cantwell Smith', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14, no. 1 (2004): 47–58.

some sympathy.[116] Instead, their strategy has proven to be grossly counter-productive, resulting in the invasion and occupation of two Muslim majority countries by Western powers,[117] and the demise of al-Qaeda and its affiliates through the so-called Global War on Terror. Perhaps more importantly, the Jihadists' penchant for bloodshed and violent excess, allied with their frighteningly dystopic and intolerant vision of a post-Jihadist future, has also led to widespread alienation amongst Muslim audiences.[118] Consequently, Jihadism is now largely a spent force, having simultaneously been both undermined and side-lined by the Arab Spring sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa,[119] which has been inspired by similar grievances, including the removal of Western-backed autocratic rulers, and the lack of employment and other opportunities for the rapidly growing 'youth bulge' in the Arab world.

Indeed, we might conclude by contrasting the senseless futility of the hundreds of al-Qaeda affiliated suicide martyrdoms, that have wrought death and destruction, but little else, with the suicide martyrdom of a young Tunisian protestor, Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation proved to be the catalyst for not only the successful socio-political revolt in Tunisia, but also provided the critical spark for the Arab Spring that transformed the Arab political landscape forever.

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[116] For a discussion of these aims and grievances that had tacit support in the Muslim world see, Michael Scheuer, *Imperial hubris: why the West is losing the war on terror* (Washington D.C.; Poole: Potomac, 2008).
[117] Although one could argue that terrorist strategies are often predicated upon the expectation that a terrorist act will provoke a vastly disproportionate response from the enemy, forcing it to reveal its true nature and thus forcing the otherwise apathetic masses into support for the group.
[118] Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*, 45.
[119] Fawaz A Gerges, *The rise and fall of Al-Qaeda* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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