

ISSN 0189-361C

AL-FIKR

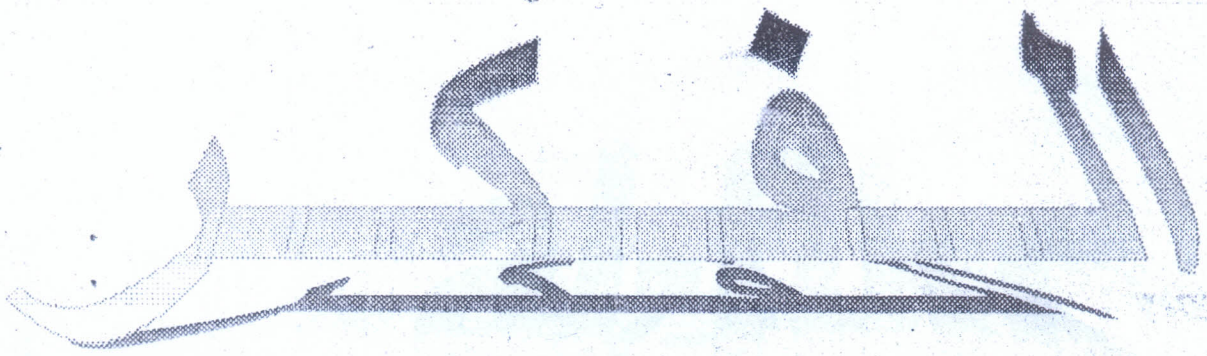
ANNUAL JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA.

Vol. NO. 17 & 18

JUNE 1996 & 1997



مجلة سنوية يصدرها قسم الدراسات
العربية والاسلاميه بجامعة ابادان - نيجيريا



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OF THE

DEPARTMENT OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES
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VOL. NO. 17 & 18

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al-fikr

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MARTYRDOM IN ISLAM: Its Concept and Forms

L. O. Abbas

1. Introduction

Man, according to the Qur'an, is created for the main purpose of worshipping¹ the creator, Allah. This is so because sooner or later he would die and graduate to another life where he will have to account for his deed while on earth. It is the result of his life sojourn that will determine his abode in the hereafter. Some of the required deeds that could qualify him for good living in the hereafter are contained in the observance of the five pillars and other obligations prescribed by Islam.

There are in addition to the above, some extra good deeds that could qualify one for paradise. One of them is dying in the cause of Islam and whoever happens to experience it is considered a martyr. There are also some other categories of deeds and death through which a Muslim could be ranked a martyr.

It is these categories and ways through which a person can pursue the subject plus the benefits derivable from being a martyr that this paper sets out to examine.

2. The Concept and Forms of Martyrdom

According to an English dictionary², a martyr is a person who, by his death or sufferings proves the strength of his beliefs. This is a simple and concise definition. But in this paper we shall attempt to look at it much closer, especially when the Arabic word for "Martyr", *Shahīd*, is brought to the fore.

In the *Lisān al-'Arab* of Ibn Manzur³, *Shahīd* is defined as "a witness", "someone who has the knowledge of every thing," and "someone who is present [at a place or an occasion]". "*al-Shahīd* with the definite article "*al-*", meaning "the" is one of the beautiful names of Allah as He sees and knows all things."

The particular definition of *Shahīd*, according to Ibn Manzūr, that interests us in this paper is: one who is killed in the cause of God". Its plural form is *Shuhadā'* and the noun form is *Shahādah*.⁴ But in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*,⁵ *Shahīd* is defined to mean "a witness", primarily. It goes further to state, however, that "the meaning martyr is not found for *Shahīd* in the Qur'an. It is only later commentators that have tried to find it in *Sūrah* IV: 69." It further explains that the Qur'an always uses circumlocutions to express the conception of *Shahīd* to mean martyr as in Qur'an 3:156, Q. 3:166 etc.

Moreover, the Encyclopaedia maintains, "The development of meaning of *Shahīd* to martyr... took place under Christian influence."⁶ A. J. Wensinck is also said to have stated that the development of "martyrdom" as a doctrine in Christianity and Islam goes back to old oriental (Jewish) and Hellenistic ideas. Finally, he has asserted that the old meaning of *Shahīd* as "witness" was later to

become "so forgotten in Islam that false etymologies are regularly given for it (e.g. from *sh-h-d* to look etc).⁷

One would like to disagree with the aforementioned claims and assertions from the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, although there may be some degree of fact in them. And it is in the light of this that we would like to cast a look at the derivation or use of the word *Shahīd* in the Qur'an and the Hadith.

One, on the claim that the word *Shahīd* primarily means "a witness" and that it is not found in the Qur'an with the meaning "martyr", and that it was later commentators that have tried to find some interpretations for it, One may agree with this to some extent based on the explanations of Ibn Manẓūr. Ibn Manẓūr mentions that according to Abu Daud, *al-Shahīd* means *al-hayy* i.e. one that is living with his Lord.⁸ It is reported that Abu Daud asked al-Nadar concerning the *Shahīd* and the latter replied that *Shahīd* is a living person i.e. someone who is with his Lord, living.

Furthermore, Abu Manẓūr is said to have stated that al-Nadar was trying to interpret the *ayah* (verse):

ولا تحسبن الذين قتلوا في سبيل الله أمواتا
بل أحياء عند ربهم يرزقون

Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord... (Qur'an 3: 169)

to mean that it is like their souls were brought live to *Dar al-Salām* (Paradise) while the souls of others (non-martyrs) would be delayed till the Resurrection Day.⁹

In the same vein, Ibn Anbārī is reported to have declared that a *Shahīd* ("martyr") is so called because Allah and His angels are witnesses to his gaining direct entrance into the Paradise.¹⁰ And finally, one scholar is said to have noted that they, 'martyrs,' are called *Shuhadā* because they will be among those that would be witnesses together with Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) on the Day of Resurrection over the past nations of mankind, as in Qur'an 2:143 which says:

لتكونوا شهداء على الناس ويكون الرسول عليكم شهيدا

...that you (believers) be witnesses over mankind and the Messenger (Muhammad) be a witness over you.¹¹

A close examination of the above reports may be enough to corroborate what is maintained in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* that it was later commentators that interpreted some verses to justify the use of the term, *Shahīd* as well as its plural form, *Shahadā*, to mean 'martyr(s)'.¹²

Nonetheless, the assertion could be refuted considering the fact that the words *Shahīd* as well as virtually all its derivatives are used in both the Qur'an and the Hadith carrying the meaning 'martyr'. In the Qur'an, for instance, each

of the words *Shahīd* and *Shuhadā'* appear in a number of places carrying the specific meaning 'martyr(s)' (although in some cases they strictly denote witness(es)). For example, the word *Shuhada'* is used in Qur'an 4: 69 thus:

فأولاءك مع الذين أنعمت عليهم من النبيين والصدّيقين
والشهداء والصالحين وحسن أولاءك رفيقا

And whose obey Allah and the Messenger (Muhammad), then they will be in the company of those on whom Allah has bestowed His Grace, of the Prophets, the *Siddiqun* (those followers of the Prophets who were first and foremost to believe in them), the martyrs, and the righteous. And how excellent these companions are!

In the above verse the word *Shuhadā'* could be rendered either as 'witnesses' or as 'martyrs'. Whichever of the renditions we choose one important thing is that the word is used to refer to those who 'witnessed' or 'were present' at the various battles between the believers and the non-believers, otherwise known martyrs (especially those that died in the course of such battles).

There is a great deal of the Prophetic Traditions in which the words *Shahīd*, *Shuhadā'* and even the noun form *Shahidah* appear, each carrying the meaning 'martyr(s)' and 'martyrdom' respectively. In fact, their use in the Hadith always comes unambiguously denoting 'martyr(s)'. One can say that the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses where the words appear to mean 'martyr' came from the Prophet himself. Quoting just one of such Ahadith here would suffice:

Narrated Anas bin Malik: The Prophet (SAW) said, "Nobody who enters paradise likes to go back to the world even if he got everything on the earth, except a *Mujahid* (martyr) who wishes to return to the world so that he may be martyred ten times because of the dignity he receives (from Allah).¹²

Forms of Martyrdom

Under this section we would like to examine the forms of martyrdom recognized in Islamic literature. This could be understood vis-à-vis the concept of *jihād* in Islam. Since it is death through *jihād* (war against the infidels) that qualifies one to be called a *Shahīd* or martyr, we shall attempt to look at the two forms of *jihād* in the viewpoint of Islam. But the concept of martyrdom in Islam goes beyond death by those two forms of *jihād* as we shall explain later.

One of the two types of *Jihād* is *al-Jihād al-Akbar*, which is striving in the cause of Allah against oneself and surrendering one's wishes for His (Allah's). The other one is *al-Jihād al-Asghar*, which is participating in physical war in the cause of Allah. Whoever dies in the process of the latter i.e. war against infidels, is referred to as a martyr (*Shahīd*).

A distinction should however be drawn between the practitioners of the first form of *Jihād* and those of the second. The first form requires some obligatory duties as assigned by Allah like regular observance of *Ṣalāt*, goodness to parents, Ramadan fasting, seeking for knowledge of God and even constancy in the recitation of the *Qur'an*. It is a common belief in Islam that whoever engages in these and refrains from the prohibitions of the Almighty Allah is sure to attain a higher degree in Paradise.¹³ This form of *Jihād* is otherwise known as *Jihād al-Nafs* i.e. *jihād* of self-restraint or a war, which one wages against his lustful desires.

It should be mentioned that, although Prophet Muhammad called this type of *Jihād* the "greatest *Jihād*", whoever dies in its process is not generally designated as a *Shahīd*. And so he has no legal status to be treated as such jurisprudentially.

On the other hand, in spite of the fact that the physical war against the infidels is regarded as *al-Jihād al-Asghar* (lesser *Jihād*), those who are killed in the process are commonly designated as *Shuhada'* or martyrs.

According to the practice of the Prophet, whoever dies at the war front his corpse should not be washed, as he is already pure. The *Janāzah* (funeral) prayer should be said over him and he should be buried in the same clothes he wore with the blood-stain.¹⁴ This is because, in the Prophet's explanation, "the wounds received by a *Shahīd* in the process of a *Jihād* become red like blood on the Day of Judgement, and shine and smell of Musk".¹⁵

The *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* summarizes the other privileges that await a *Shahīd* in the Hereafter as follows:

- 'He will escape the examination in the grave by the "interrogating angels" called Munkar and Nakir.' It is a common belief in Islam that every soul that passes on will be subjected to interrogations by these two angels. Only Muslims who die as martyrs would be exempted.
- 'He will not need to pass through the "Islamic purgatory" *barzakh*.' The *barzakh* is described as a very tiny line that serves as a bridge over which every soul shall cross after death. It is said to be situated on top of the Hell-fire, while at its other end is the Paradise; one cannot get to the Paradise without passing through the dreaded *barzakh*.
- 'He will be in the most beautiful abode in Paradise.' This is based on one Hadith of the Prophet who is reported to have declared that he saw in a vision the most beautiful abode in the Paradise, i.e. *Dar al-Shuhadā'* (Martyrs' Abode). This has been understood to mean "martyrs receive the highest of the various ranks in Paradise, nearest the throne of God..."
- 'He will not require the intercession of the Prophet.' It is also reported that in a later Hadith, the Prophet stated that they (martyrs) will intercede for other people.¹⁶

Lastly, it is reported that the Prophet said that all sins committed by a martyr would be forgiven except his debt. Debt, according Islamic jurists,

includes any act of injustice he committed against fellow human being like murder case, illegal confiscation of properties and so on.¹⁷

As we have earlier observed, the concept of martyrdom is beyond the idea of dying during war with the non-believers. Sayyid Sābiq in his *Fiqh al-Sunnah*¹⁸ mentioned a Hadith reported by Abn Hurayrah that the Prophet asked his companions sometime:

“Whom do you regard as a martyr among you”. They replied: “Oh Apostle of Allah, whoever is killed in the cause of God is a martyr”. He said: “Then martyrs of my community are few”: They asked: “Then who are they, Oh Apostle of God? He replied: “He who is killed in the cause of God is a martyr. Whoever dies during an act of obedience to God is a martyr. He who dies of plague is a martyr: Whoever dies of abdominal disease is a martyr. Someone that dies through drowning is a martyr”. Muslim relates this.

In addition, the Prophet in other narrations also categorizes as martyrs those who die accidentally by falling from high objects, through collapsed building, as a result of burns suffered from fire accident, through pneumonia disease and women who loose their lives through child delivery.¹⁹

These other ‘martyrs’, though so designated, are not ‘real’ martyrs. And Islamic scholars have attempted to explain or, say, clarify the situation. They maintain that the last category of martyrs i.e. those that die not by being killed in the cause of war but by natural accidents, as mentioned above, will receive the “reward of martyrs” in the Hereafter. But, here in this world, they will be have their corpses ritually washed and the funeral prayer said over them.

This, they further explain means that there are three categories of martyrs in Islam.

- i. Martyr in this world and the Hereafter, that is he who is killed in a battle with the non-believers.
- ii. Martyr in the Hereafter, not to be so legally treated in this world; they are the just mentioned group of people and, Martyr in this world not in the Hereafter, that is he who participated in a war against the infidels but cheated others in the division of war booty and hence, was killed, and he who is killed from the back without him knowing the killer.²⁰

3. Aspirations to Martyrdom

To aspire to be martyr is not un-Islamic. It is even considered to be an act of worship (*Ibadah*) to the Almighty Allah. This, like other aspects of worship in Islam, requires one to be Muslim who knows who Allah is and the purpose of worshipping Him. This would enable him to appreciate his actions since Allah Himself wants man to know Him before he worships Him.

To determine to engage in fight (*Jihād*) in the cause of Allah with one's possessions and soul is though a commandment²¹ from Allah, it is nonetheless a very great task to engage in. It requires a lot of sacrifice and strong faith. There is however a seeming confusion of a resolve to become a martyr for a suicide bid; this could be resolved if one sees martyrdom as a divine exercise embarked upon towards man's ultimate goal, as different from a suicide bid pursued as a result of life's frustration. While Islam supports and allows the former, it abhors the latter and even considers it a heinous sin²², which may attract no forgiveness.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), in a *Hadith*²³ narrated by Abu Hurayrah, wished to be a martyr. Also Umar bn al-Khattab, the second Caliph in Islam wanted to be a martyr. This is to show the importance and the immeasurable benefits attached to martyrdom.

In seeking for martyrdom however, one has to let his intention be for the sake of Allah alone as any attempt to fight a constituted authority, either for political consideration or for other purposes than Allah's is at variance with the purpose and spirit of *Jihād*. Although Islam is not against any aspiration based on politics, it does so with a proviso that the intention is to put a purely Islamic government in place.

It is in view of all the above that we would like to advise Muslim Youths the World over to stop killing one another for politically motivated or, even religious reasons. It should be remembered that there have been quite a number of intra- as well as inter-religious conflicts in this country (Nigeria) that were caused by less fundamental issues. One wonders whether those that die in the course of such conflicts could be categorized as martyrs or those who commit suicide.

4. The Rewards of Martyrdom

Any deed performed by human being is not forgotten and not lost, it rather goes into the book of reckoning and has to be rewarded be it good or bad. Should it be good, the doer is lucky as it attracts rewards manifold. If on the other hand, it is bad, he is too unlucky as Allah's punishment could be too serious and unbearable to human beings. However, in His magnanimity and kindness, Allah leaves the percentage of punishment at par with the offence committed. The Holy Qur'an states:

من جاء بالحسنة فله عشر أمثالها ومن جاء بالسيئة
فلا يجزي إلا مثله وهم لا يظلمون

He that does good shall have ten time as much as his credit. And he that does evil shall only be recompensed according to his evil. No wrong shall be done unto them. ²⁴

Allah in His love for His creatures shows mercy in order to encourage them to love to do good always. This is general to all kinds of goodness that attract

immeasurable rewards. Among those that attract specific rewards is dying in the cause of Allah. The Qur'an asserts:

و لئن قتلتم في سبيل الله أو متم لمغفرة من الله ورحمة
خير مما يجمعون

And if you are slain in the cause of Allah or dead, forgiveness and mercy from God are far better than all they could amass.²⁵

The position to occupy by the martyr in the hereafter and immediately after his death is eminent. It is beautifully described by Allah in the Qur'an thus:

ولا تحسبن الذين قتلوا في بل الله أمواتا بل أحياء عند ربهم
يرزقون* فرحين بما آتاهم الله من فضله ويستبشرون بالذين
لم يلحقوا بهم من خلفهم ألا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون*

Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord. They rejoice in the bounty provided by God and with regard to those they left and who have not yet joined them have nothing to fear or to regret, rejoicing in Allah's grace and bounty Allah will not deny the faithful their reward.²⁶

The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) corroborated the above Qur'anic verses on the position of martyrs with Allah in some of his traditions (Hadith). He mentioned various forms of rewards that await the martyrs in the grave and on the day of Resurrection, some of these have been mentioned above.

Conclusion

From the foregoing we have been able to establish that the concept of martyrdom in Islam is wider than most people think. All the forms of martyrdom treated in this paper indicate how great is Allah's mercy on mankind, particularly the believers. In other words the reward and privileges that await those who are referred to as martyrs in Islam, be it 'real' martyrs or those who die through natural occurrences mentioned above are great. While a Muslim may be encouraged to aspire to attain martyrdom, he or she should also be cautioned to deeply consider the cause for which he wants to sacrifice his life.

Notes and References

1. Qur'an 51: 56.
2. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1978.
3. J. M. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 1st ed. Vol. 3, (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1990) pp. 242
4. *Ibid.*
5. H. A. R. Gibb et. al., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) p. 515.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ibn Manzūr, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Imam al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī Arabic-English*, M. M. Khan (trans.) (Beirut Dār al-'Arabiyyah, n. d.) Vol. IV "Book of Jihād" no. 72.
13. Gibb, *op. cit.*, 516.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* 515 – 516
17. See e.g. Sayyid Sābiq , *Fiḥḥ al-Sunnah*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), Vol. 3, p. 40
18. *Ibid.*
19. Imam al-Bukhārī , *op. cit.* no. 82.
20. S. Sābiq, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
21. Qur'an 61: 11.
22. Qur'an 4: 92 considers a Muslim who kills another intentionally as an in mate of Hell-fire. In like manner, whoever takes own life is guilty of the same offence.
23. Al-Bukhārī, *op. cit.* no. 54.
24. Qur'an 6: 160.
25. Qur'an 3: 157.
26. Qur'an 3: 169 - 172.