

Review of *Martyrdom in Islam*. By David Cook.

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David Cook, an American historian and associate professor at the department of religious studies at Rice University in Houston, is not only a leading scholar of political Islam and a well quoted source in the field of global terrorism research, but also one of the rare specialists who combines his work in the contemporary political sphere with an extensive background in the historical and theological concepts of Shia and Sunni Islam. Fluent in Arabic and Persian, he has written extensively on controversial topics of the Islamic religion, both from the contemporary and historical point of view. These include two volumes on the apocalyptic concept in Islam, *Studies In Muslim Apocalyptic* (2003) and *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (2005), which eliminate the unjustified focus on Shia traditions when it comes to apocalyptic concepts. Furthermore, he has written unparalleled analysis on the concepts of jihad (*Understanding Jihad*, 2005) and suicide attacks (*Understanding and Addressing Suicide Attacks*, 2007), which have become standard works of reference for students and scholars in the field and have made Cook a frequently consulted source in the political sphere when it comes to national security issues. His current projects include a focus on Islam in sub-Saharan literature, as well as a third and last volume on apocalyptic Islam, focusing on the classical understanding of this concept.

His comprehensive work *Martyrdom in Islam*, which was published in 2007, can be seen as a link between the two topics Cook has worked on, namely the concepts of jihad and suicide attacks. Aimed at the politically informed reader, one of the book's main goals is to position the idea of Islamic martyrdom between these two highly controversial and politically charged concepts. Jihad, the author argues, takes a central role in Islam. He is able to point to extensive contributions on the topic by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Cook then analyses in great detail the relationship between the concepts of martyrdom and jihad. However, while the latter is attributed a broad foundation in the classical sources of the Hadith literature and the Quran, references on martyrdom are very scarce.

After an introduction to the basic characteristics and conditions of the concept, the Islamic terminology (*shahid*, witness/martyr), and the presentation of his own tripartite formula for the acceptance of a martyr into the cultural memory of Islam — coherence with classical stories of martyrs in the Quran and the Hadith literature; an elaborately decorated narrative around the martyr that is used as reference over several generations; and a popular cult associated with the martyred individual (p. 1 and 169) — the author points to the fact that contrary to Christian and Jewish tradition, the idea of martyrdom in Islam did not develop the stigma of prosecution and victimisation mainly because the early episodes of Islam rarely saw Muslims under non-Muslim rule (p. 14). Therefore, the idea of martyrdom in Islam is focused on different issues, which above all is the theological justification of the fallen soldiers during the early struggle of the Umma and the consequent great Islamic conquests. Martyrdom, Cook argues, therefore developed as a subcategory of the concept of jihad. He illustrates that indeed, the category of the fighting martyrs dominates the picture in the early Islamic period (p. 18).

From this relatively limited theological and legal definition, Cook then embarks on the highly adaptive nature of the Islamic concept of martyrdom and the rapid expansion of its definition throughout history. This pragmatic inclusiveness of Islamic martyrdom is considered the book's second central outline (p. 170) and the author illustrates how religious authorities have successfully extended the legal base for martyrs, even if these new martyrologies were rarely accepted in all the different sects of the Muslim community (p. 135). In addition to the classic 'fighting martyr', the concept would subsequently include women who died in childbirth, non-Muslims who befriend and protect Muslims, victims of the plague, those who lost their lives during a pilgrimage, as well as a further wide arrange of 'accidents' that needed theological blessing. The author's main contribution to this well-known process, however, is his demonstration of how the pinnacles of 'Islamic civilisation' have sought to control and exploit the various doctrinal drifts.<sup>1</sup> Cook argues that Martyrdom in Islam was never a well-defined concept and easily to adapted to current circumstances. Sub-categorical conditions established by Islamic scholars, such as a necessary divine revelation prior to the act of martyrdom which is analysed in Chapter 5, are numerous; however, seldom found acceptance in the Muslim community as a whole.

In the following chapters, Cook elaborates on thematic complexes that have attained certain popularity within the Islamic canon during the medieval period, namely the pledge of Sufi missionaries (Chapter 5) and 'martyrs of love' (Chapter 6). These concepts are analysed within the

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawson, Tod. Rev. of *Martyrdom in Islam*. by David Cook. *MEJ*. Vol. 62, No. 4 (2008): 730-731, here 731.

framework of the vast literature that the topics have produced. However, they only present a thematic extension to the overall narrative of Islamic martyrdom, which is based on the adaptive nature of the concept, and these elaborations do not indicate an emergence of new theological or legal paradigms.

The geopolitical developments of the 19th and 20th century, according to Cook, present such a historical paradigm change, as a consequence of which the Islamic concept of martyrdom is challenged by two new major factors, both based on the increased contact with the European (colonial) powers. The first main historical change is linked to the impressive success rate of the European colonial ventures and the parallel relative decline of the Ottoman since the 17th century. As a consequence, for the first time in the history of Islamic civilisation, a large number of Muslims found themselves under non-Muslim rule (p. 135). The second development, which can be seen as a consequence of the Muslim community's reaction to the European imperial penetration, was the growing number of nationalist movements aimed at adapting seemingly superior ('Western') forms of political, social and economic organisation and engaging on a modernisation process under secular prefixes in order to counter the aggressive colonial powers. These nationalist movements, which gained momentum after the First World War in the wake of Wilson's infamous speech on the 'self-determination of the peoples', in turn produced a high number of secular states within the Middle East once the various movements for national independence came to fruition.

The change of paradigm — from the highly successful time of the great conquests, the 'Islamic Golden Age' and the long hegemony of the Ottoman Empire to foreign occupation and the subjugation under secular Muslim rulers — is crucial for the concept of martyrdom. Cook insists that the idea of the fighting martyr, which has laid the foundation of the concept over centuries, still prevails in the modern understanding. However, the circumstances of battle have changed considerably, usually to the disadvantage of the Islamic orbit.

The production of martyrs and martyrologies in these asymmetrical conflicts then allows Cook to link the historical analysis to the contemporary issues. With an elaborate focus on radical Islamic movements and the concept of martyrdom operations (suicide attacks), the author embarks on his second main field of interest. Following the main methodical outline he developed in the analysis of martyrdom during the classical age, he approaches the topic of contemporary martyrdom through the dominant concept of jihad, which he divides into two main sections: the anti-government jihad and the jihad against foreign occupation.

The first form, the anti-government jihad (p. 137), is aimed at the many secular nationalist regimes of the postcolonial period where activists of political Islam — their unaddressed roots in the 19th

century perhaps one of the main shortcomings of the book — found themselves in a relatively hostile environment. In this context, the author briefly elaborates on the 20th century's main thinkers of radical Islamism, most notably Sayyid Qutb (Egypt), Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi (Pakistan) and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Iran), which for Cook define the base for the many manifestations of political Islam to come (p. 138). Anti-government jihad, which found its culmination with the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 by the *Egyptian Islamic Jihad* group; however, meant that mainly Muslims were killed in the course of the struggle which in turn had a negative effect on the popular appeal of these radical movements.

The second form of jihad against foreign occupation was much more fruitful in this regard, especially since the popular anti-Israel mantra could be exploited (p. 143). Although the 20th century held numerous conflicts for different Muslim communities, it is the Palestinian struggle that has dominated the discourse. It is here, where Cook demonstrates most convincingly the mechanisms needed to incorporate secular martyrs into the cultural heritage of Islam. The martyrologies made public by the PLO, he argues, were seldom contested, exactly because the legitimacy of the cause had been widely accepted in the Muslim world.

In addition to the religious-nationalist martyrologies, which apart from the Palestinian struggle mainly included the high casualties among Iranian militias during the Iran-Iraq war, Cook addresses what he calls the 'Islamic-neoclassical' martyrdom concept, which is associated the martyrs of the Afghanistan war (1980-88), as well as globalist radical Muslim conflicts (p. 154). The author argues, however, that although this martyrologies included the religious component, they were less likely to be accepted in the wider Muslim community because of their sectarian character. The martyrs of terrorist cells (such as al-Qaeda), which formed on the base of these conflicts, were even less likely to gain broad acceptance because of the inner-Muslim controversies about the employed warfare tactics by these organisations.

The logical culmination of Cooks methodical outline then ends in the highly controversial topic of suicide attacks, or 'martyrdom operations' as these missions are described by radical Islamist theorists (p. 144). Before engaging on the political debate within and outside the Muslim world, the author eagerly analyses the theological and legal bases for suicide and suicidal warfare in Islam. As he points to the classical sources where suicide is explicitly prohibited (Quran 4:29), Cook also analyses the arguments, as well as the legal foundation of radical Islamists who defend the use of suicide attacks in asymmetrical warfare; most notably Nawwaf al-Takruri's *Martyrdom Operations in the Legal Balance* (1997), wherein a whole catalogue of tactic's advantages in warfare (mostly against Israel) in addition to the legal justifications are presented (p. 149).

The author then addresses the controversies that the topic of suicide attacks have fuelled around the globe. While the issue in the West is usually addressed under the prefixes of Islamic terrorism and — in defiance of all scientific argumentation — linked to the cultural foundations of the Muslim religion. Here, the overall methodical concept of the book bears its fruit. After the inner-Muslim controversies on the concept of martyrdom operations are further elaborated, the reader finds himself at the end of a very complex analysis on Islamic martyrdom, of which suicide missions are claimed to be justified and executed only by a small violent fraction of the adherents of radical political Islam, who, in turn, find themselves in a minority position compared to moderate Islamist movement and the many established centres of Islamic authorities, such as the influential al-Azhar University in Cairo. Many Muslims, as Cook demonstrates, value the cultural heritage of their martyrs even if they see no place for religion in politics. The conclusion that the links of suicide attacks with the Islamic cultural heritage are artificial and that the concept was developed during the last three decades by a minority of radical adherents and terrorist cells is left to the reader.

In his own work corpus, the book bridges Cook's approaches on jihad (2005) and suicide attacks (2007) by providing elaborate historical foundation to the concept of martyrdom and its development. The overall corpus can be lined in with various other contributions within the field of Islamic studies, both under religions and historic viewpoints, which are aimed to eliminate common misconceptions about the Islamic cultural sphere.<sup>2</sup> Within the concept of martyrdom, Cook's work, surprisingly, is the only comprehensive monograph on the subject. However, he carefully situates his analyses within various more specialised contributions in the field. In its comprehensiveness and its clear analytical character of the dynamic idea of martyrdom in Islam, Cook indeed provides an effective antidote to the widespread (and unjust) association of Islam with suicide attacks, especially after al-Qaeda allegedly 'hijacked an entire religion' in the course of September 11, 2001.<sup>3</sup>

The shortcomings are few and critics mainly address the short and methodically questionable launching point of the study, which is based on the comparison of the Islamic concept of martyrdom with Christian and Jewish traditions. Although addressing this general tendency is useful, Cook's claim that the category of the 'fighting martyr' is unique to the Islamic cultural sphere has generally

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<sup>2</sup> Most notably the works of John L. Esposito and Bruce B. Lawrence and Bernard Lewis; here most relevant on the subject: Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Esposito, John L. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Lawrence, Bruce B. *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000. Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: Random House, 2003. For more general works on Islam with a similar methodical approach see among others: Aslan, Reza. *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The most influential pre 9/11 report on the relation between jihad and suicide bombings was published by a London based Think Tank in 2000, see *The Hijacked Caravan: Refuting Suicide Bombings as Martyrdom Operations in Contemporary Jihad Strategy*. London: Islamic Intelligence, 2000.

been contested and critics point to various other religions that incorporate the concept.<sup>4</sup> There are similar shortcomings such as improper translations (based on the comparison) of technical terms like ‘jihad’, which is translated to ‘holy war’, a notion that scholars of the historical and Islamic science have long overcome.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the book covers a vast historical period of almost one and a half millennia in a mere 170 pages and the reader expects some detail to be compromised for the book’s overview character. Central episodes, like Sayyid Qutb’s understanding of jihad and martyrdom, which caused a profound break with the traditional understanding of political Islam and lay the foundations for almost any of the contemporary discourses on the topic, are briefly addressed in half a page and would need further elaboration.<sup>6</sup> The 19th century development of political Islam, which is quintessential for the most controversial martyrologies in the 20th century, is rather short, and the reader has to look elsewhere to bridge the chronological gap. Also, the treatment of the relationship between martyrdom and suicide, although addressed throughout the book, would need a more coherent conclusion. The reader would appreciate a separate chapter on this highly controversial debate.<sup>7</sup>

David Cook does provide a valuable and easy-to-read contribution to the controversial topic of martyrdom in Islam, analyses the legal and theological groundworks during the classical age, and, consequently, demonstrates that it is the concept’s dynamic and inclusive nature that has defined its historical course. He then skilfully links his argument with the controversial current debates on martyrdom operations and Islamic terrorism and is able to remove the argumentative link between this recent radical phenomenon and the cultural heritage of Islam. Students of history and Islamic studies will find this work an indispensable assessment on the topic, and scholars in the field might find Cook’s extensive and professional use of the primary sources an appeal of the book. As the overview character prevails, however, the interested reader has to look elsewhere for an in-depth analysis of certain episodes of the topic; a task that an extensive bibliography at the end which by far extends the quoted sources might be of use. As an introduction, *Martyrdom in Islam* gives an excellent overview of the foundations and the current state of a controversial and sensitive topic, whose comprehensive assessment with all of its key features was long overdue.

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<sup>4</sup> See Aghaie, Kamran J. Rev. of *Martyrdom in Islam*. by David Cook. *CSSAAM* Vol. 28. No. 1 (2008): 217-219, here 217.

<sup>5</sup> See Lawson 2008: 731.

<sup>6</sup> See Divine, Donna R. Rev. of *Martyrdom in Islam*. by David Cook. *DMES* Vol. 16. No. 2 (2007): 134-136, here 136.

<sup>7</sup> See DeLong-Bas, Natana J. Rev. of *Martyrdom in Islam*. by David Cook. *The Historian* Vol. 71. No. 2 (2009): 340-341, here 341.