

## **Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance and Despair in the Middle East**

*Joyce M. Davis*

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Davis seeks to present a balanced view of terrorism vs. martyrdom, moderate vs. radical, the Muslim world vs. the West, and why 9/11 happened. The author is deputy foreign editor at Knight Ridder newspapers and is a regular contributor to her company's 32 newspapers.

In chapter 1, "A Minister's Question," Davis, an African-American practicing Christian, wonders why African-Americans mainly have chosen non-violence, while the self-professed Muslims held responsible for 9/11 chose violence. As both groups ground their struggle for justice in their respective religions, this gives rise to a paradox: Can God provide "superior" and "inferior" revelations? Muslims are told to "fight injustice" (e.g., 8:39, 22:39), while Christians are called upon to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). Matthew 10:34-37, about Jesus "bringing a sword" is also instructive. Moreover, if "Jesus Christ [is] the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8) and Jesus is God, what is one to make of the Old Testament's record of divinely sanctioned slaughter?

She defines *martyr* according to the religion's general view (Christianity: "generally a pacifist who suffers and dies but not kill" [p. 8]; Islam: "everyone who dies in the midst of battle defending his homeland or fighting evil" [p. 9]), but does not define *militant*, *extremist*, *terrorist*, or *moderate* – a curious omission, since there are no agreed-upon meanings for them.

Chapter 2, "The Innocents," discusses the deaths of Palestinian and Israeli children, how both sides exploit their martyrs ("anyone who dies in the midst of battle" [p. 27]), and mutual charges of deliberate child endangerment. She interviews parents and surviving siblings, and states that this has become a vicious circle of revenge, and relates the various psychological impacts as charges of western indifference to Palestinian deaths, and Israel's continued defiance of UN resolutions.

Chapter 3, "The Child as Soldier-Martyr," opens with her visit to Iran's Martyrs Museum. She wonders if Iran might turn this "ultimate" weapon on itself as "stridently" conservative mullahs and the "freedom-hungry and angry" youths move closer to violence. After explaining Shi'ism's origins and key events, she mentions the martyrdom of a 12-year-old boy who

became a legend during the Iran-Iraq war. Fortunately, instead of presenting this as fanaticism, she reminds readers that defending one's nation is a duty of everyone, regardless of age or gender. She also analyzes how families of martyrs, who enjoy enormous respect, are demanding openness in government and the leadership's accountability both to God *and* the people. Given that their children died to put the clerics in power, it is almost impossible for the clerics to ignore them.

Chapter 4, "The Woman as Soldier-Martyr and Suicide Bomber," recalls Loula Abboud, a 19-year-old Lebanese Christian woman whom Davis calls the first female suicide-bomber and a possible inspiration to the Palestinians. Other female suicide bombers, as well as their parents' apparent unawareness, also are analyzed. Davis provides a more balanced perspective here by showing that suicide bombing is not unique to Islam.

Chapter 5, "Suicide Bombers and September 11," discusses Muhammad Atta's and Bin Laden's justifications for 9/11 and similar events, legitimate targets, and the early Muslims' view of warfare. She makes an interesting claim: "Muslim scholars say it was only after repeated persecuting in Mecca, including the slaughter of many of the early Muslims, and pressure from companions such as Abu Bakr that Muhammad changed his teaching and allowed them to defend themselves through military means" (p. 95). To her credit, she relates Islam's guidelines for war, something that traditionally Christian countries only developed during the twentieth century, a fact that she omits. This chapter ends with her interview of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin of Hamas, who informs her that they are fighting occupation and settlements, which is not terrorism, and that one's intention determines whether an act is suicide or martyrdom, terrorism or self-defense.

In chapter 6, "The Mothers of Martyrs," Davis relates portions of her interviews with the mothers of three "martyrs." One claims that there are only two choices: peace and the intifada. Consumed by rage and bitterness, she has chosen the intifada and encourages the Palestinians to keep fighting. Another woman remains numb with grief, while the third wonders if her son really ended up in Paradise. As this is an intensely personal chapter, there is no analysis of how women as a whole are affected by this apparently unending conflict. This is an unfortunate oversight.

Chapter 7, "The Trainers," deals with Davis' interviews of two suicide-bomber trainers. After discussing Hamas and Islamic Jihad, she mentions a popular view among "Muslim fighters" (p. 141): "regular" (classical) and

“irregular” jihad (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and during rebellions, revolutions, or uprisings against alien authority), during which the classical rules can be “stretched” (p. 141). She states that many Islamic scholars disagree, that there is no need to “recruit” potential martyrs, and that potential suicide bombers do not seek to enjoy the sexual delights of Paradise.

Chapter 8, “Can They Be Stopped?” discusses Egypt’s battles with al-Gamaa al-Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, as well as Israel’s battles with the Palestinian resistance. Davis sees Bush globalizing this military-first policy, for “the Bush administration is determined to use its military might as the central focus of its campaign against al Qaeda and Islamic militants” (p. 173). Even worse, she claims, citing Israeli terrorism expert Reuven Paz, the American intelligence community “doesn’t understand Islamic culture so they cannot interpret the information they have ... They don’t have enough Arabic-speaking people ... they don’t have enough Arabic-reading people” (pp. 178-79).

In chapter 9, “The Hatred and the Hope,” Davis lists more reasons why “they” hate “us.” She asks who speaks for Islam, encourages moderates to continue speaking up, and wonders why media coverage remains so unbalanced. Why indeed? Her own analysis, as an insider, of the continued and pervasive American ignorance of Islam and the Muslim world, would have been very welcome.

Although several omissions (e.g., the implication that Sharon visited the Temple Mount as a private citizen instead of with several thousand Israeli security force members) and mistakes (e.g., Tunisia is not a monarchy, spelling mistakes, and missing words) detract from the book’s main arguments, this book is well worth its price. Davis places events in their historical context, and does a good job of presenting both sides. However, it is disconcerting that the majority of her information comes from the Internet.

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