



Witness and martyrdom: Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies

Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra

To cite this article: Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra (2018): Witness and martyrdom: Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, Journal for Cultural Research, DOI: [10.1080/14797585.2018.1511941](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2018.1511941)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2018.1511941>



Published online: 10 Sep 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Witness and martyrdom: Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies

Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra

Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

ABSTRACT

During the second Intifada which started in 2002 and ended sometime in mid 2000s, Palestinian male and female martyrs used video testimonies, records and documents of death, using the first person pronoun so as to articulate their missions and justifications for carrying out their acts of martyrdom. This study, which focuses on Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, investigates the elusive relationship between martyrdom and witness. I contend that the female martyr is a witness to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and to the oppression and dehumanisation to which Palestinians are subject. Palestinian female martyrs are also witnesses to Arab leaders' weakness and their inability to defend Palestine. The act of martyrdom is a collective one, involving the martyr, the agent of narration and the audience. The audience, who bears witness to the martyr, is necessary for martyrdom to be recognised and to take place. I argue that the end of the martyr's speech marks out her silence and her transformation into an icon of resistance, heroism and sacrifice. The corpse of the martyr is transformed into the corpus of martyr's speeches and images that are disseminated by the audience who bear witness to the acts of martyrdom.

KEYWORDS

Video-testimony;
martyrdom; witness;
audience; religion;
immortality

Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies

Video-testimonies are essential parts of the rituals surrounding the execution of martyrdom acts within the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Cook (2007) points out that video testimony is 'perhaps even more crucial than the actual suffering and martyrdom itself' (p. 3). Martyrdom has sacred and secular meanings. While the sacred is associated with religious discourse and afterlife, the secular sense of martyrdom is linked to heroism and defending one's homeland. O'Rourke (2009) notes that acts of suicide bombing 'started largely as a secular phenomenon' (p. 699). O'Rourke (2009) points out that 'secular terrorist organizations (such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party and the Baath Party) have employed female suicide attackers early and often', encouraging women to participate in suicide bombing 'through discourse emphasizing the importance of women displaying their willingness to support the groups' goal as much as men' (p. 696). The video-testimonies of secular female suicide bombers show that there is an absence of the

Qur'anic verses and references to heaven and afterlife. For example, in 1985, Sanaa Muhaydli, a member of The Syrian Social Nationalist Party, was the first female suicide bomber in Lebanon. She drove a car loaded with TNT exploding it by an Israeli military convoy on the road to Jezzine, in the south of the Lebanon. In her video-record, Muhaydli asserts:

I am martyr Sana Yusuf Muhaydli. I am 17 years old, from the South, from the occupied and oppressed Lebanese South, from the resisting, resurgent South. I am not dead, but alive among you. Sing, dance, realise my dreams. Don't cry; don't be sad for me, but exult and laugh for a world in which there are heroes (quoted in Khalili, 2007, p. 13–14).

While Palestinian audience celebrate their female martyrs, Palestinian female martyrs did not impart this message of celebration to the audience the way Mehaidli encouraged her audience to dance and sing, celebrating her heroism and defending her homeland. Muhaydli's reference to herself as being alive did not refer to her immortality in Paradise but her immortality will lie in the tongues and hands of the audience who will narrate her story of heroism and sacrifice and spread her images. While the practice of female suicide bombing is not a novel phenomenon, it was with the second Intifada in 2002, which came after the Oslo Accords and the deterioration of the peace process, that the increase of women participating in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict became more visible and begun to capture international attention. Palestinian women appropriated conventionally masculine acts of martyrdom in the second Intifada: Wafa Idris, Ayat Akhras, Dareen Abu Aisheh and Andaleeb Takatka (Al-Aqsa Brigades, 2002, April 25), Hanadi Jaradat and Hiba Daraghma (Islamic Jihad, 2003), and Reem al-Riyashi (Hamas, 2004). What is special about Palestinian women's acts of martyrdom, orchestrated with religious and nationalist discourse, is their use of pre-martyrdom video testimonies in which Palestinian women refer to themselves as martyrs, an appellation that is accepted within the Palestinian society in whose name they speak. Of all the Palestinian female martyrs referred to in this paper, Wafa Idris, who killed herself and an old man and injured 150 people in a Jerusalem shopping street, was the one who did not leave a video-testimony announcing her intention of martyrdom. Claudia Brunner (2005) claims that '[r]egarding the four female bombers of 2002, it was more a nationalist attitude that drove them to sacrifice their lives than any religious motivation' (p. 41). However, regardless of the organisation with which the Palestinian female martyrs are affiliated, females' video-testimonies show that female martyrs are filmed against the Palestinian flag or the Dome of the Rock, holding copies of the Qur'an and rifles and emphasising their desire to transform their bodies into lethal weapons that destroy Israeli forces and to die for the sake of God. The video-testimonies of Palestinian female martyrs which emphasize the martyrs' devotion to their faith reveal that 'all (suicide bombers) were deeply religious, believing their actions sanctioned by the divinely revealed religion of Islam' (Atran, 2003, p. 1537). I argue that Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, of moral, ethical and national significance, released to the visual media after the fulfillment of these acts, function as counternarratives to the Israeli and Western perception of the acts of martyrdom as cases of suicide, emanating from personal, social and psychological problems. Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, which emphasise

the martyrs' explosive bodies as symbols of devotion and submission to religious and nationalist cause, can be constructed in opposition to many Israeli and Western authors' irrational quest for truth. Palestinian martyrs put their bodies at the service of their souls; they affirm their immortality by negating their corporeal existence. Palestinian women testify that they carry out their acts of martyrdom so as to defeat the enemy, better their society and transcend death. I argue that Palestinian women's video-testimonies reveal that women are witnesses to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and to Arab leaders' weakness and their inability to defend Palestine.

Western representation of Palestinian female martyrs

In broader terms, Israeli and Western media claim that the motivations of Palestinian female acts of martyrdom are social issues; women perform their acts of martyrdom so as to redeem themselves from their fallen status as divorced, barren, adulterers, daughters or sisters of traitors (O'Rourke, 2009, p. 33). In the context of analyzing Muslim suicide bombing, Asad (2007) notes that 'the open-endedness of motive inevitably leaves considerable scope for interpretation' (p. 41). Journalist Barbara Victor, who employs interviews and biographical vignettes to present the motivations of Palestinian female acts of martyrdom in the Palestinian and Islamic contexts, argues that Palestinian female martyrs (suicide bombers, in her words) are pushed by their male relatives to commit these acts so as to redeem their lost honour and their families' names. Barbara Victor (2003) presents Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian female martyr, as 'a troubled young woman who was prone to bouts of melancholy and depression' (p. 41). Victor (2003) attributes Darin Abu Aisha's act of martyrdom to her inability to adhere to the conventional feminine roles of the Palestinian society. She claims that Abu Aisha's family's insistence that she get married prompts her to carry out her act of martyrdom (pp. 103–105). Israeli criminologist Anat Berko, who interviewed would-be martyrs in Israeli prisons, concluded that 'unlike the men, the women had been pushed to suicide by despair at their problematic family situations, such as not being allowed to decide their future, and/or by family members in order to restore the family honour after an illicit relationship' (quoted in Naaman, 2007, p. 944). Mia Bloom (2005) argues that 'When men conduct suicide missions, they are motivated by religious or nationalist fanaticism, whereas women appear more often motivated by very personal reasons' (p. 145). It could be argued that Western demonization of Palestinian female martyrs emanates from the female martyrs' agency and active roles in a society that oppress and suppress women. In their active participation in the political sphere of politics through violent acts of 'suicide bombing', Palestinian martyrs are set in contrast to Christian martyrs who die in a spirit of forgiveness. Martyrdom in Christianity is understood within the context of Christ's crucifixion, and thereby associated with self-sacrifice for one's religious faith. Hasan Rokem (2003) points out that 'the agency of the martyr who chooses death to witness his or her belief was reportedly of central significance' (p. 100). While in the Christian understanding of martyrdom one chooses death/sacrifice over religious conversion, one does not necessarily seek martyrdom. Cook (2002) argues that 'in contrast to the Christian theory of martyrdom, in which the martyr usually passively suffers but can also seek out death to some extent' (p. 12), 'Martyrdom in Islam is in general not a passive act on the part of the believer, but more of an active action in which the martyr seeks out the circumstances that will lead to his or her own martyrdom' (Cook, 2007, p. 166). Western scholars overlook

Palestinian women's piety and submission to Islam that calls for sacrifice, marginalising the agency of Palestinian female martyrs by depicting them as being victims of their cultures and abusive patriarchal structures that drive them to destroy themselves and others so as to uphold the dominant Patriarchal ideology. While Western discourses depict female martyrs as irrational and socially deviant creatures, 'the term of *shaheeda* (martyr) enables [Palestinian] people to bypass the loaded deviation from traditional gendered roles and as such mythicises actions taken rather than engaging with their gender politics' (Naaman, 2007, p. 934).

Religion and sacrifice

While Israeli and Western media attribute female acts of martyrdom to social factors so as to delegitimise their collective acts of martyrdom, martyrdom is linked to religious discourse. Islam prohibits personal suicide (*Intihaar*) which results from depression unlike martyrdom which is a sign of strength and religious faith. The Qur'an states, '[a]nd do not kill yourself, for God is indeed merciful to you' (Women 4.29). Asad (2007) claims that the Quran 'does not make explicit use of the word *shahid* to signify someone who dies in God's cause' (p. 52). In the same vein, Anees (2006) argues that suicide attackers represent 'a highly distorted theology' which is in 'dire violation of the teaching of Islam' (pp. 278–79). However, both Palestinian male and female acts of martyrdom are sanctioned as holy, rooted in Islamic discourse. The Qur'an states that those who die for God win immortality: '[d]o not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it' (The Cow 2.154). The Qur'an promises Heaven for those who fight and die for God's cause: 'God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden – they fight in God's way; they kill and are killed – this is a true promise given by Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an. Who would be more faithful to his promise than God?' (Repentance 9.111). God states that 'They [martyrs] alive with their Lord, well provided for, happy with what God has given them of His favour; rejoicing that for those they have left behind who have yet to join them there is no fear, nor will they grieve; [rejoicing] in God's blessing and favour, and that God will not let the reward of the believers be lost' (The Family of 'Imran 3.169–71). Examining the Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, one can note that their pre-martyrdom speeches are orchestrated with images of afterlife and it is in religious discourse that the female martyr originates. Palestinian female martyrs, therefore, bear witness to Israeli occupation and to their faith, sacrificing themselves for the sake of God. Palestinian female martyrs perpetuate the ideology of the martyr-figure as the model for Palestinian struggle against occupation and the theological doctrine that martyrs triumph over death by gaining paradise as a reward for their death for the cause of Allah.

Martyrdom and witness

Martyrdom is based on the act of witness and testimony. As David Cook (2007) points out:

Martyrdom means witness. Witness is the most powerful form of advertisement, because it communicates personal credibility and experience to an audience. Therefore, it is not surprising that the world's missionary religions have developed the art of promotional martyrdom into a process that is identifiable and fairly constant through different faiths (p. 1).

Martyrdom affirms the martyr's religious faith. Peters (2001) suggests that 'within every witness, perhaps, stands a martyr' (p. 713), articulating the inextricable link between witnessing and the conception of martyrdom. In Greek, *martus* means witness. Bowersock (1995) points out that 'Perhaps the most astonishing and influential extension of the concept of martyrdom as witnessing came in Arabic after the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the seventh century. Just as the Syriac speakers had done, the Arabs translated the Greek word as "witness" into Arabic – *shahid*' (p. 19). The Arabic noun for martyr is *shahid* derived from the verb *shahada*, meaning he witnessed an event personally. In the Qur'an, God states that 'Have witnesses present whenever you trade with one another, and let no harm be done to either scribe or witness, for if you did cause them harm, it would be a crime on your part' (The Cow 2.282). Al *Shahid* is one of the divine attributes of God who is a 'witness' to the seen and the unseen world and possessor of all knowledge. In the Qur'an, God states that 'God bears witness that there is no god but Him, as do the angels and those who have knowledge' (The Family of 'Imran, 3. 18); 'God witnesses everything you do' (The Family of 'Imran, 3. 98); 'God is witness to everything' (Women 4. 33). In addition to representing God as a 'witness', human beings are witnesses to the existence of God. God says that 'We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you' (The Cow 2. 143). Therefore, being a witness to monotheism is central to the idea of being a Muslim who bears witness that there is no God, but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet. *Shaheeda* is the feminine form of the masculine form *Shaheede*. Thus the noun *shahāda* (*Istishhad*) embraces testimony and martyrdom. In the holy Qur'an, God states that 'The believers fight for God's cause, while those who reject faith fight for an unjust cause' (Women, 4. 76); 'We deal out such days among people in turn, for God to find out who truly believes, for Him to choose martyrs from among you – God does not love evildoers—for Him to test those who believe and for Him to destroy the disbelievers' (The Family of 'Imran, 3. 140–41). Thus, there is an etymological and elusive conjunctions between martyrdom and witness.

Martyrdom and audience/witness

Whereas the martyr is a witness to her faith, audience is a prerequisite for the occurrence of martyrdom and recognition of the martyr and his martyrdom. Martyrdom is a collective act, involving the martyr, an audience, and a communicative agent, imparting the narrative to that audience. The witness/speech of the witness (martyr) is to be witnessed by a witness (audience) that witnesses (testifies) that the witness/martyr is a witness to a higher authority. The community plays a crucial role in encouraging individuals to carry out acts of martyrdom and to follow the examples of martyrs. As Friederike Pannewick (2004) points out, 'the martyr figure is based on the common agreement reached by groups that shape the views and opinions of a community' (p. 1). One, therefore, becomes a martyr/witness upon being recognised as such by an audience/witness. This audience 'need not be physically present at either the pre-martyrdom suffering or the act of martyrdom, but must have access to information concerning them' (Cook, 2007, p. 2). If the audience is not present and 'is not an immediate witness to the martyrdom event, then there has to be a communicative agent, who will either

shape the narrative or narrate the events to one who will transmit them [i.e. bear witness, on an indirect level] to the outer, secondary audience' (Cook, 2007, p. 3). Whilst this agent of narration has traditionally taken the form of oral narratives, in an age saturated with media technology, such means of representation is mediated through television and internet. Mahmoud Abu Hashhash (2006) points out that '[d]espite all its religious connotations, martyrdom remains a political and media event' (p. 395). Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies which undermine the binary opposites of the secular and sacred, private and the public and the personal and the collective are a medium through which martyrs transmit the ideology of martyrdom and the organizations with which they are affiliated. While Western media define Wafa' Idris, the first Palestinian female martyr, as socially deviant, Palestinian media celebrate her act of martyrdom and regard her as 'the ultimate form of motherhood: the mother of Palestine' (Rajan, 2011, p. 248), confining her within normative gender roles and discourses of nationalism. Naaman argues that 'Regardless of the narratives the women tried to communicate in their actions and videos, the dominant narrative in the Arab public sphere (political, media, and local) tied these women into heteronormative narratives as mothers and brides, narratives that affirmed the gender status quo' (2007, p. 946). The Palestinian female martyr/witness is represented as a bride who is wedded to Palestine and married in heaven (Naaman, 2007, p. 945). While Palestinian female martyrs are relegated to their conventional roles of being brides and mothers of Palestine, Palestinian society considers martyrdom as the ultimate honour and pride. The late Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi asserted that Hamas and Palestinian society in general believe that 'becoming a martyr through suicide bombing is among the highest, if not the highest, honour' (quoted in Riaz Hassan, 2008, p. 466).

The legacy and exemplarity of martyrs

Martyrdom is based on the concepts of exemplarity and legacy. Derrida points out that the martyr is an exemplary figure: 'When he testifies the martyr does not tell a story, he offers himself. He testifies to his faith by offering himself or offering his life or his body' (Derrida, 2000, p. 38). Palestinian female martyrs, who secure spiritual transcendence over death, embody the logic of giving their lives for Palestine and their religious and national community. The acts of martyrdom are, therefore, processes of 'construction through destruction, where the suffering of an individual can become a blessing to an entire society' (Aijmer, 2000, p. 8). Thus, the acts of martyrdom arouse in the martyrs' community the obligation 'to accept the gift of their deaths and, most importantly, to be *obliged* to repay this gift of their heroic deaths in some appropriate way' (Strenski, 2010, p. 181). Some Palestinian audiences/witnesses respond to the Palestinian female martyr/witness by being witnesses/martyrs themselves. The female martyrs' video-testimonies construct a pedagogy of resistance and self-sacrifice, producing a heightened sense of the Palestinian collective desire for resistance, freedom and independence. The audiences/witnesses of the martyrs' video-testimonies are endowed with moral imperatives to become potential martyrs. One member of Fatah eulogised Wafa Idris, stating that 'Wafa's martyrdom restored honour to the national role of the Palestinian woman, sketched the most wonderful pictures of heroism in the long battle for national liberation. Wafa came today to complete the path of the martyr Dalal Al-Maghribi and her

comrades' (Quoted in Victor, 2003, p. 54). Palestinian female martyrs declared in their farewell statements that each martyr follows her predecessors in destroying the enemy while encouraging her moral witnesses to continue her path of martyrdom. In her pre-martyrdom speech, Dareen Abu Aisha declares that 'I wanted to be the second woman to carry out a martyr operation and take revenge for the blood of the martyrs and the destruction of the sanctity of al-Aqsa mosque' (PipeLineNews.org, n.p). The martyr becomes the embodiment and living definition of the ideology of martyrdom which prompts her to carry out the noble act of martyrdom.

Speech, silence and sacrifice

The presence and speech of the martyrs in front of the camera suggest that the martyrs are icons of resistance while simultaneously confirming their inevitable absence which is a guarantee of the presence of the martyrs. In most male-derived definitions of nationalism, 'Women are typically construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency' (McClintock, 1993, p. 62). Palestinian women are perceived as the silent icons of Palestine and the biological producers of potential martyrs. However, they assume a public, political voice and appropriate the masculine acts of martyrdom that silences their voices. As Leila Khaled, a famous Palestinian woman fighter of the 1970s, has commented on religious leaders' reception of Palestinian female acts of martyrdom, 'When the religious leaders say that women who make those actions are finally equal to men, I have a problem. Everyone is equal in death – rich, poor, Arab, Jew, Christian, we are all equal. I would rather see women equal to men in life' (Victor, 2003, pp. 63–64). While male and female are equal in death, they are not equal in life. Most Palestinian women are confined in the domestic sphere and they are barred from the public speech of politics (Hamamra, 2016). Female silence in martyrdom, which signals the movement of women from the physical to spiritual realm, is a prerequisite for the society's response and recognition of the female martyr. Israeli researcher Boaz Ganor defined 'suicide bombing' as an 'operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator. The terrorist is fully aware that if she/he does not kill her/himself, the planned attack will not be implemented' (Ganor, 2003, n.p). Ganor's use of the term terrorist signals out the heated debate over female acts of martyrdom; while Palestinian audience define female acts as martyrdom (istishhad) acts, many Western and Israeli media delegitimise the national scopes of these acts by branding the martyr a terrorist. Asad (2007) aptly argues that the representation of the suicide bomber as a terrorist is a strategy of denigrating this form of political violence as heinous compared to other forms of warfare that have similar or worse dangers for civilians. In the same vein, Kelly Oliver (2009) points out that '[t]o call an act, a person or an organization "terrorist" is to expel them from the realm of the political into the realm of the pathological' (p. 97). However, Ganor's definition of 'suicide bombing' suggests that death, a precondition for the success of martyrdom, is inextricably linked with Palestinian women's political participation and their goal of being recognised as martyrs. Bloom points out that the perpetrator's death 'is the precondition for the success of the attack' (Quoted in Crenshaw, 2007, p. 138). Before carrying out her act of martyrdom, Hanadi Jaradat, who employed religious discourse as a motivation of

her martyrdom, stated that 'By the will of God I decided to be the sixth martyr who makes her body full with splinters in order to enter every Zionist heart who occupied our country' (Amireh, 2011, p. 43). Jaradat's self-assertion, typical of Palestinian female martyrs, using the first person pronoun to articulate her mission, is a sign of self-negation or destroying the cause of agency, the explosive body. Jaradat's pre-martyrdom speech shows that female acts of martyrdom are narratives of defiance to patriarchal constructions of the female body as a passive and vulnerable object; the female body is an explosive speech act that penetrates Israeli bodies. Jaradat's representation of her body as an explosive weapon that pierces Israelis reveals that acts of suicide bombing, which mark out the obliteration and mutilation of the body of the suicide bomber and the bodies of those nearest the bomber, strip bodies of their political agency, transforming them into 'heap of meat' (Cavarero, 2009, p. 98). The Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero points out that 'the body undone (blown apart, torn to pieces) loses its individuality. The violence that dismembers it offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses and renders it unwatchable' (Cavarero, 2009, p. 9). However, Cavarero does not touch upon the normative violence that underpinned and enabled these acts of suicide bombing within the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While suicide bombing is akin to the destruction of the self and the other, Palestinian female suicide bombers are deemed icons of heroism, nationalism and religious faith while the deaths of the Israelis are taken to signify the enemy's humiliation. Therefore, while Cavarero points out that female suicide bombing is an 'offense to corporeal unity' (Cavarero, p. 9), I concur with Cook's assertion that 'martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some type of meaning and dignity from death' (Cook, 2007, p. 11). The martyr's body is transitory and permanent: the dissolution and scattering of the female martyr's body is preserved in a collective memory through celebrations and re-enactment of further acts of martyrdom. In her pre-martyrdom speech, Reem Saleh Al-Riyashi, a 22-year-old mother of two children, asserts:

I have always wished that my body would be shrapnel that tears the sons of Zion, and I have always wished to knock at the door of heaven with the skulls of the sons of Zion. By God, if you break my bones and cut off my body, you will not be able to change my faith or change my banner. By God, I wished to be the first female who carried out a martyrdom-seeking operation where my body would be scattered in the air (Levitt, 2006, p. 110).

Al-Riyashi's video-testimony is unique for the large number of weapons she displays such as dynamite, guns, rockets and bombs. Of all the Palestinian female martyrs, Al-Riyashi is a mother of two children who appeared in her video-testimony carrying rifles and wearing Hamas banner. Al-Riyashi is conscious of her political and maternal roles which she performs publicly in front of the camera. With a belt of explosives strapped around her waist and a gun in one hand that emphasizes her militarized identity, Al-Riyashi calmly and confidently reads her martyrdom speech from a paper, emphasizing the destructiveness of her body that will scatter itself and the bodies of the enemy into pieces flying in the air. While she kisses her children and shows her maternal duties towards them, she prioritizes death for God and Palestine over her children, the heirs of martyrdom (Moqawama Press, 2017).

Al-Riyashi's status as a mother martyr resonates with Cavarero's argument that 'the female body that explodes in order to rip apart innocent bodies, is always, symbolically, a maternal body' (Cavarero, 2009, p. 103). Palestinian female martyrdom is riddled with the tropes of maternity and pregnancy; Palestinian female martyrs disguise their explosive belts as pregnant bellies so as to elude Israeli security measures (O'Rourke, 2009, p. 690–91), forming the spectacle of the 'exploding womb' (Bloom, 2011, p. 101) that is so 'bloodcurdling' (Cavarero, 2009, p. 101). While Cavarero argues that the symbolic foetus the female martyr is carrying reveals the 'human condition of vulnerability' (Cavarero, 2009, p. 103), the destruction of the martyr and those around her is not an act of 'horrorist' violence that is predicated upon the killing of the defenseless (Cavarero, 2009, p. 105), but it is an act of heroism channeled towards Israeli occupation. Palestinian female martyrs, constructed in heterosexual norms, are represented as mothers who metaphorically give birth to heroism and bravery through their acts of exploding themselves and the enemy. As a commentator on Wafa' Idris's act of suicide bombing stated, 'She bore in her belly the fetus of a rare heroism, and gave birth by blowing herself up' (quoted in Cunningham, 2009, p. 568).

In performing such acts of heroism, Palestinian female martyrs undermined the Orientalist construction of Muslim women's bodies as passive and objectified, subverting the symbolic order of the patriarchal system. Yassin, the leader of Hamas, asserted that women should be at home and evoked their bodies as primarily maternal, sheltering, grieving and suffering: 'The woman is the second defense line in the resistance to the occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband, and brother, bears the consequences of this, and faces starvation and blockade' (Hasan-Rokem, 2003, p. 31). Dureen Abu Aisheh undermined Yassin's political speech in her video-testimony, saying that women's roles 'will not only be confined to weeping over a son, brother, or husband' (Fazaeli, 2013, p. 45). By transforming their bodies from visible signs of oppression to weapons of destruction, Palestinian female martyrs subvert the conventional Western and Palestinian construction of women as inconstant, physically and emotionally weak and indecisive.

Video-testimonies show that martyrs are witnesses to their own transcendental deaths, while establishing dialogues between themselves and future audience of which the martyrs will be absent parts. The martyr thus becomes the living-martyr (*al-shahid al-hayy*) speaking before and beyond the events of her own death. In her video-testimony, which she recorded before her act of martyrdom on 29 March 2002, Ayat al-Akhras, a member of Al-Aqsa Brigade, a secular militant group linked to Yasser Arafat's Fatah Movement, calmly read her words, stating that 'In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful, I, living martyr, Ayat al-Akhras, execute my mission purely for the sake of God' (Alaa, 2009). The speeches of martyrs are represented as presence of absence. Video-testimony functions as both a supplement to speech and a desire to speak beyond death. As Roland Barthes points out:

Speech is a substitute for life: to speak is to lose life, and all effusive behaviour is experienced initially as a gesture of dilapidation: by the avowal, the flood of words released, it is the very principle of life that seems to be leaving the body; to speak is to spill oneself, that is, to castrate oneself (Barthes, 1983, p. 119).

Barthes's argument linking speech and death has implications for Palestinian women's video-testimonies which are separated from their feminine bodies. The speeches that martyrs outcast before their actual acts of martyrdom dematerialises a self-inflexed absence, the ebbing of existence/presence. The last words perform and proclaim the death of their enunciators and perpetuate the martyrs' silences. The female pre-martyrdom speech shows that her voice is a ghostly one that testifies, in the first person, to its own death. Derrida points out that 'I cannot say, according to common sense, should not be able to say: I die or I am dead. If there is a place or an instance in which there is no witness for the witness or where no one is witness for the witness, it would be death' (Derrida, 2000, p. 46). Palestinian female martyrs testify to their own transcendental deaths; their testimonies show that they are dead and alive to articulate the truth. Whereas these videos are an extension of the act of death, the materiality of these videos functions as a supplement to the corpse of the martyr. They are the body and the voice of posthumous personae. In addition to the video-testimonies that symbolically extend the identity of female martyrs beyond the temporal and spatial confines of embodiment, martyrs literally inhabit paradise with prophets (Khalili, 2007, p. 128). Muslims recognise that martyrs inhabit a space of the living-dead. The Qur'an states that those who die for God win immortality: '[d]o not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it' (The Cow 2.154).

Palestinian female martyrs as witnesses to Arab weakness

Palestinian female political acts of martyrdom are set in contrast to the empty negotiations and failure of Arab leaders to defend Palestine. As Ross Birrell (2005) argues, 'Suicide bombing is not simply a challenge to Israeli terror, a challenge to Israel to do its worst. [...] Suicide bombing is a challenge directed also towards oneself, towards fellow Arabs to match the ostentatious display of the gift of death, the revolutionary challenge of martyrdom' (p. 103). Palestinian female martyrs' performance in front of the camera is a discursive act that imparts their acts of martyrdom to the audience: 'witnessing thus has two faces: the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying' (Peters, 2001, p. 709). The female witness/martyr who uses the first person pronoun to articulate her political and spiritual motivations takes on an extraordinary power, defining her act of martyrdom in terms of rejection of the status quo (occupation) and adherence to the Islamic call for holy war. Witnessing is an active dialogue between the speaker and the listener who should participate to alleviate the suffering of the speaker (Peters, 2001, p. 708). However, instead of enticing Arab leaders to play an active role in defending Palestine, Arab leaders are playing the roles of passive spectators. Their witnessing of the martyr does not influence their sense of responsibility and morality to play the role of the moral witness/martyr. In her video-testimony, Andaleeb Takatka said that 'I've chosen to say with my body what Arab leaders have failed to say [...]. My body is a barrel of gunpowder that burns the enemy' (Hasso, 2005, p. 29). Takatka's construction of her body as 'a barrel of gunpowder' and her use of Western technology to impart her act of martyrdom to the audience show that Palestinian female martyrs blur the line between the physical and the technological and culture and nature. While women's bodies are constructed as part of nature and are excluded from politics, the organized form of culture, Wilcox (2014) notes that 'The body of the suicide bomber is not a "natural" body, but rather an amalgam of flesh and metal,

biology and technology' (p. 72). While Takatka invokes the traditional narrative of female embodiment, she reverses the conventional construction of a woman as an object to be defended into a warrior whose body is associated with the death of the self and the other. As Julie Rajan (2011) points out:

Women bombers directly and remarkably challenge those patriarchal ideologies in multiple ways. Instead of building and maintaining families and societies, they present the capacity to tear apart their enemies' families and to wreak havoc in their societies. Instead of remaining within the home space and remaining silent and hidden from society, women bombers implode themselves in the most public of ways, attracting unprecedented level of local, national and international attention [...]. Instead of being nurturing and an object of violence, women bombers reveal that, as women, they too can negotiate and affect the most excessive forms of violence, killing and injuring not only themselves but also others, and thereby objectifying others in the process (p. 25).

Palestinian female martyrs appropriate masculine acts of martyrdom, subverting the construction of men as the defenders of Palestine and women as the defended. Palestinian female martyrs often use their gendered position to mount a critique of Arab leaders. In her video-record, Ayat Al-Akhras called on Arab leaders to fulfill their masculine ideals of defending Palestine and its women: 'I say to the Arab leaders, Stop sleeping. Stop failing to fulfill your duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep. It is Intifada until victory' (Hasso, 2005, p. 29). Al-Akhras's pre-martyrdom speech reveals that war is a masculine domain and it is the weakness and inability of Arab leaders to live up to the masculine ideals that spur Palestinian women on to get themselves involved in the public sphere of politics through martyrdom. As Wilcox (2014) notes, 'while her actions transgress gender roles, al-Akhras's statement serves to represent her actions as feminine, and even an attempt to control traditional gender roles in her words cajoling Palestinian male leadership' (p. 72). Dareen Abu Aisheh sets her brave act of martyrdom against the weakness and the failures of Arab leaders to defend Palestine:

what a shame it is for all the Arab leaders, especially those claiming to be progressive and accusing others of capitulation, when girls like Wafa Idris and Ayat al-Akhras come forward and sacrifice their lives for this nation's honor, dignity, and glory while these leaders are begging President Bush to intervene on their behalf and pleading with Sharon to take pity on them and on their shameful position that is embarrassing them before their peoples and even their wives and children (Hasso, 2005, p. 41).

Palestinian female martyrs who push themselves to the public sphere of politics, a conventionally masculine domain, challenge Arab male dominance in politics. Their video-testimonies are not only witness to their acts of martyrdom but they are also witness to the weakness of Arab leaders who are stripped of their masculine characteristics – bravery, heroism, pride and dignity.

Immortality of female martyrs

In addition to their immortality in heaven as pointed out in the Qur'an, Palestinian female martyrs are immortalised visually and verbally. The posters and images of Palestinian male and female martyrs that bedeck Palestinian streets in cities and villages are communicative and discursive objects that remind the public of these

women who sacrificed themselves to liberate Palestine from the confines of Israeli occupation. Many schools, museums and streets are named after Palestinian female martyrs, sustaining the Palestinian reverence and admiration of these iconic women. Palestinian Martyrs' images, which keep the legacy of resistance alive, imbued Palestinians with a sense of agency, because it is the living people who spread these images in defiance of Israeli occupation. Palestinians provide martyrs with the posthumous glory to which they aspire, by craving their names in history. As Michel Foucault (1980) observed, 'the hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death' (p. 117). Songs have been broadcast celebrating Wafa' Idris's martyrdom and her creation of life out of sacrifice.

My sister Wafa, my sister Wafa
oh the heartbeat of pride,
oh blossom who was on earth and is now in Heaven.
Allahu Akhbar!
oh Palestine of the Arabs,
Allahu Akbar, Oh Wafa!
But you chose Shahada
In death you have brought life to the aspiration
But you chose Shahada
In death you have brought life to the aspiration (Maher, 'My sister Wafa').

In 2002, the Saudi ambassador to London, Ghazi Al-Qusaibi published a poem in Al-Hayat, criticising America and Arab leaders and praising Palestinian female acts of martyrdom incarnate in the figure of Ayat Al-Akhras (1985–2002) who, at the age of 18, sacrificed herself and killed two Israelis, by detonating explosives belted to her body:

May Allah witness that you are Martyrs,
[May the] Prophet and Holy men witness to that
You died to glorify the word of my God
In the land that was glorified with the 'Israa'
Did you commit suicide?
[No] We are those who committed suicide
In a life whose dead are [still] living.

[O] Our nation: we have died
Let us hear what eulogy says about us.
We failed until failure was fed up with us...
We wept until tears got tired of us...
We knelt down until kneeling got disgusted...
We pleaded until pleading asked for assistance...
We complained to the idols in a White House
full of darkness
We kissed Sharon's shoes,
He cried: Slowly, you are tearing my shoes;
Please!
O nation we are dead...
But mother earth refuses to accept us...
Tell 'Ayat' the bride of heaven...

Everything that is beautiful we are ready
 To sacrifice for your eyes...
 The pure of our nation confronts the criminal...
 When the steeds are castrated.
 ['Ayat'] The beautiful – kissed her death
 While smiling with good tidings...
 At the time when our leaders escape death
 Paradise opened its doors
 And Fatma, Al-Zahra' received you...['Ayat']
 Tell those who issued 'the Fatwas'
 Against 'Jihad':
 'Don't rush!' perhaps your 'Fatwa' will be rejected by Heaven
 When the call comes for Jihad
 It is a time for the ink and paper,
 For the books and the 'Learned men'
 To be silent.
 When the call comes for Jihad
 There's no need for a referendum or a 'Fatwa'.
 The Day of Jihad is the Day of Blood (Al-Qusaybi, 'The Martyrs').

This poem which globalises the acts of martyrdom shows that Arab leaders are dead from shame, humiliation and self-abasement. Al-Qusaybi situates Al-Akhras within a patriarchal heteronormative family frame through his use of the analogy between the martyr and the bride. Palestinian female martyrs are the symbolic 'Bride[s] of Palestine' (Naaman, 2007). While God and the Prophet Muhammad are witnesses to Al-Akhras's witness/martyrdom, her martyrdom evokes men's shame before God, women and themselves; Arab political and religious leaders ('the writers of fatwas') are subject to the rules and whims of Israel and America while women are playing the roles of sovereign agents through the acts of martyrdom. Al-Qusaybi is calling Arab leaders to emulate the exemplarity and nobility of Ayat Al-Akhras; he is enticing Arab leaders to arm themselves against Israeli occupation so as to restore their honour and manhood.

Conclusion

Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies, released to the public after the acts of martyrdom, are types of disembodiment or absence of the speaker. The Palestinian female martyrs' video records reveal that these martyrs situate themselves as political subjects who challenge Palestinian and Western perception of Palestinian women as passive, emotionally and physically weak, indecisive and inconstant. Palestinian female martyrs' video-testimonies function as a counternarrative to Israeli and Western media that deny the agency of female martyrs, claiming that Palestinian women 'kill' themselves and others so as to redeem themselves in their society. While Palestinian female martyrs' testimonies are witnesses to Arab leaders' weakness that spurs female martyrson to play the roles of the defenders, Palestinian audience are active witnesses to the martyrs'/witnesses' acts and messages of martyrdom. Palestinian martyrs embrace religious and national convictions to which Palestinians are witnesses. This article, which connects martyrdom, religion and witness in Palestine via the medium of video testimonies, is, I daresay, a valuable contribution to the discourse on Palestine-Israel, death and gender studies as well as terrorism, horrorism and heroism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra has a PhD in Early Modern Drama from the University of Lancaster, UK and works currently as an assistant professor of English Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His research interests are in Early Modern Drama, Shakespeare, Women's Writings and Cultural Studies.

References

- Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. (2010). *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Abu Hashhash, M. (2006). On the visual representation of martyrdom in palestine. *Third Text*, 20 (3–4), 391–403.
- Aijmer, G. (2000). Introduction: The idiom of violence in imagery and discourse. In G. Aijmer & J. Abbink (Eds.), *Meanings of violence: A cross-cultural perspective* (1–21). Oxford: Berg.
- Alaa, O. (2009, February 21). Al shahida Ayat al-Akras. YouTube video. Retrived from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1KakNCUn4A>
- Al-Aqsa Brigades. (2002, April 25). The martyrs. Retrieved from <https://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-ambassador-londons-ode-suicide-bombers>.
- Amireh, A. (2011). Palestinian women's disappearing act: The suicide bomber through western feminist eyes. In R. Abdulhadi, E. Alsultany, & N. Naber (Eds.), *Arab and Arab American feminisms: Gender, violence, and belonging* (pp. 29–45). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Anees, M. A. (2006). Salvation and Suicide: What does Islamic Theology Say? *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 45, 275–279.
- Asad, T. (2007). *On suicide bombing*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Atran, S. (2003). Genesis of suicidal terrorism. *Science*, 2999, 1534–1539.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *On Racine*. (R. Howard, Trans.). New York, NY: Performing Arts Journal Publication.
- Birrell, R. (2005). The gift of terror: Suicide bombing as potlach. In G. C. Smith & M. Owen (Eds.), *Art in the age of terrorism* (pp. 96–113). London: Paul Holberton Publishing.
- Bloom, M. (2005). *Dying to kill: The allure of suicide terror*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Bloom, M. (2011). *Bombshell: The many faces of women terrorists*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bowersock, G. W. (1995). *Martyrdom and Rome*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Brunner, C. (2005). Female suicide bombers – Male suicide bombing? Looking for gender in reporting the suicide bombings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Global Society*, 19(1), 29–48.
- Cavarero, A. (2009). *Horrorism: Naming contemporary violence* (W. McCuaig Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Cook, D. (2002). Suicide attacks or “martyrdom operations” in contemporary Jihad literature. *Nova Religio: the Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 6(1), 7–44.
- Cook, D. (2007). *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crenshaw, M. (2007). Explaining suicide terrorism: A review essay. *Security Studies*, 16(1), 133–162.
- Cunningham, K. (2009). Female survival calculations in politically violent settings: How political violence and terrorism are viewed as pathways to life. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32(7), 561–575.
- Derrida, J. (2000). *Demeure, fiction and testimony*. (E. Rottenberg, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Fazaeli, R. (2013). Martyred women and humiliated men. In M. A. Fineman & M. Thomson (Eds.), *Exploring masculinities: Feminist legal theory reflections* (pp. 39–54). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, Trans.). Ed. (D. F. Bouchard.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Ganor, B. (2003). The first iraqi suicide bombing: A hint of things to come? *ICT*. Retrieved from <http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/595/currentpage/28/Default.aspx>.
- Hamamra, B. (2016). Silence, speech and gender in webster's *The white devil*: A presentist palestinian perspective. *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 19(1), 1–19.
- Hasan-Rokem, G. (2003). Martyr vs. martyr: The sacred language of violence. *Ethnologia Europaia*, 33(2), 99–104.
- Hasso, F. (2005). Discursive and political deployments by/of the 2002 palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs. *Feminist Review*, 81, 23–51.
- Khalili, L. (2007). *Heroes and martyrs of palestine: The Politics of national commemoration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levitt, M. (2006). *Hamas: Politics, charity, and terrorism in the service of Jihad*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maher, A. (2002). My sister Wafa. youtube.com. Palestinian Authority Television. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajldc3gtblQ>.
- McClintock, A. (1993). Family feuds: Gender, nationalism and the family. *Feminist Review*, 44, 61–80.
- Moqawama Press (2017). Reem Saleh Al-Ryasi: The first hamas female martyr in gaza. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjsOZi1es9c>
- Naaman, D. (2007). Brides of palestine/Angels of death: Media, gender, and performance in the case of the palestinian female suicide bombers. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 32(4), 933–955.
- O'Rourke, L. A. (2009). What's special about female suicide terrorism? *Security Studies*, 18, 681–718.
- Oliver, K. (2009). Technologies of violence and vulnerability. In Stella Gaon (Ed.), *Democracy in crisis: Violence, alterity, community* (pp. 90–109). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pannewick, F. (2004). Introduction. In F. Pannewick (Ed.), *Martyrdom in literature: visions of death and meaningful suffering in Europe and the Middle East from antiquity to modernity* (1–21). Weisbaden: Reichart.
- Peters, J. D. (2001). Witnessing. *Media, Culture and Society*, 23.6, 707–723.
- PipeLineNews.org. Palestinian women martyrs against Israeli occupation. Retrieved from <https://www.pipelinenews.org/2006/apr/27/palestinian-women-martyrs-against-the-israeli-occupation.html>.
- Rajan, V. G. J. (2011). *Women suicide bombers: Narratives of violence*. London: Routledge.
- Riaz, H. (2008). Suicide bombings: Homicidal killings or a weapon of war? *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 38(3), 462–480.
- Strenski, I. (2010). *Why politics can't be freed religion*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.
- Victor, B. (2003). *Army of roses: Inside the world of palestinian women suicide bombers*. New York: Rodale.
- Wilcox, L. B. (2014). Explosive bodies and bounded states: Abjection and the embodied practice of suicide bombing. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16(1), 66–85.