

Understanding Islamic Terrorism as Religious Sacrifice

by Louis René Beres (December 2014)

Somewhat like war, Islamic terrorism is founded upon assorted fantasies of *redemption through sacrifice*. Today, the universal Jihadist rallying cry, “We love death,” animates much of what is presented publicly as “liberation” or “self-determination,”¹ and is common to a broad variety of terrorist groups. This variegated collection includes both Sunni and Shi’a elements.

The rallying cry, always shrill, and always shouted in chorus, exhibits no core differences between ISIS in Iraq or Syria, and Hamas/Fatah in Gaza.

Oddly, this critical observation has been lost upon the administration in Washington. For some as yet undisclosed reason, the president decided to bomb the former, but (effectively) support the latter.

Despite readily discoverable commonalities of Islamist terror, in the particular evolution of Palestinian terror, there exists an almost unique historical narrative. Originally, before an explicitly sacred *love of death* took its uncompromising hold throughout the Islamic Middle East, the fraternity of Palestinian terrorist groups had brought together several extraordinarily disparate bedfellows.

Then, the principal desired end of insurrection and war, Israel’s “liquidation” (the first term used most frequently in the Arab aggressor’s lexicon) had amply justified all manner of eager participants.

Then, virtually every Arab enemy of Israel was more-or-less welcome to join in the expectedly conclusive battle against “Zionists.”

Then, even Marxists, and similarly flagrant “unbelievers,” were welcomed under the same operational tent.

No more.

Today, the fight has changed from what had once been a preeminently secular and tactical one, to one that draws insistently upon generally unhidden commitments to *religious sacrifice*. These viscerally primal commitments are discernibly relentless, persistent, and conspicuous.

Speaking on official PA (Palestinian Authority) TV, on November 7, 2014, a senior Fatah official literally blessed all Islamic killers of Israelis, stating: "Jerusalem needs *blood* in order to *purify itself* of Jews."

Two days later, on November 9, 2014, PA television honored these same killers again, now expressing their latest sentiments as follows: "Greetings and honor to our heroic *Martyrs*....We stand submissive and humbled by what you gave and *sacrificed*."

Further, on November 14, 2014, representatives of the PA Ministry of Religious Affairs, seemingly summing up, wrote synthetically in *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*: "Jerusalem needs *sacrifices* and *blood*."

Who are these heroic "martyrs?" Plainly, they are the "courageous" Palestinians who drive cars into groups of women and children waiting at Israel's train or bus stations, who attack elderly Jews praying in the synagogues, and who randomly stab assorted civilians walking quietly on the streets on Jerusalem.

Seeing requires distance. The deepest roots of Jihadist terror originate from those cultures that embrace certain religious views of "sacrifice." In these mostly Arab cultures, the key purpose of sacrifice extends far beyond any presumed expectations of civic necessity (expectations, for example, reported by Plutarch, in his accounts of ancient Sparta).² More precisely, this rationale goes to the very heart of individual human fear, that is, to the palpable and ubiquitous dread of one's own death.

The promised reward for those who would sacrifice everything for jihad is salvation. In essence, these martyrs choose to "die" for their cause, not in order to expire, but rather, not to become "really" dead. This is because the pain and suffering of an ordinary death, they reason, is merely a passing distraction, a tolerably temporary inconvenience, one to be endured in the fully *rational* (social scientists would say, "cost-effective") pursuit of a true immortality, in paradise.

Says *Sura* 2:154: "Do not think that those who are killed in the way of Allah are dead, for indeed they are alive, even though you are not aware."³

In the Arab Middle East, where theological doctrine divides carefully into the *dar al-*

Islam (world of Islam) and the *dar al-harb* (world of war), acts of terror against unbelievers have long been taken as an exemplary expression of *sacredness*. Here, individual sacrifice derives, in large part, from a fervidly hoped-for conquest of personal death. By adopting such atavistic practice, the *Jihadist* terrorist expects to realize an otherwise unattainable *immortality*, not to mention other substantially seductive and corollary benefits.

For *Hamas*, which would ultimately dominate power in any new state of Palestine,⁴ there are certain obligatory aspects of sacrificial terror that must never be overlooked. These aspects, underscoring the two-sided nature of terror/sacrifice – that is, the sacrifice of “The Jew,” and the reciprocal sacrifice of “The Martyr” – is explicitly codified, within the *Charter of Hamas*, as a “religious” problem.”

Earlier, Yasser Arafat’s appointed clergy, preaching on the Temple Mount, had reaffirmed a core Islamic precept: “Palestinians spearhead Allah’s war against the Jews. The dead shall not rise, until the Palestinians shall kill all the Jews...”

Most worth noting, in this very consequential reaffirmation, is Arafat’s identification of the enemy in purely religious (not narrowly geopolitical) terms.

Always, from Arafat to Abbas, the true Jihadist’s enemy is “The Jew,” not *merely* “The Israeli.”

Sometimes, when Jihadists settle upon using the specific tactic of suicide bombing – that is, when the older Palestinian leaders give orders, from Qatar, for young Palestinians to make sacrifices on behalf of all others – they leave nothing about their surrogates’ promised immortality to chance. Because dying in the act of killing “infidels,” “apostates,” and “unbelievers” is sworn to buy freedom from the unbearable penalty of non-being,⁵ these selected terrorists aim to conquer their dreaded mortality by killing themselves. Here, existential fears are converted into a twisted form of “heroism.”

Of course, Israel and its myriad terrorist enemies display very different orientations to “peace.” This stark asymmetry is not beside the point. Rather, it puts the Jewish State at a notable disadvantage.

To be sure, Israelis don’t not share the Palestinians’ commitment to immortality through homicidal forms of “suicide.” Fundamentally unlike their Jihadist enemies, Israelis do not make celebratory plans to murder certain *other* human beings in order not to die themselves. Yet, it is still the Israelis, not the Palestinians, who are being urged by the “civilized

world” to accept their own national disappearance.

Jurisprudentially, Israel is being pushed toward complicity in its own literal genocide.

Credo quia absurdum. “I believe because it is absurd.” Under pertinent international law, war and genocide are not mutually exclusive. The planned Islamic war against Israel is conceived as a distinctly “final solution” for “The Jews.”

The undisguised expectations of Palestinian terrorists regarding Israel’s physical disappearance – expectations codified both verbally and cartographically, and on all official Palestinian maps – meet the specified criteria of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*.⁶

For the United States, a state party to this authoritative treaty, it is worth noting that America has its own unambiguous legal obligation to support Israel against “Palestine.” To wit, by virtue of Article 6 of the *U.S. Constitution* (the “Supremacy Clause”), all treaties entered into by the United States become the “supreme law of the land.”

For Hamas, Islamic suicide represents not only the temporary “death” of heroic Muslims, but also the required disintegration of a religiously-despised Jewish state. For Israel, on the other hand, there is something innately wrong with this view, something “crazy,” something that only an authentically “mad” adversary could possibly choose as its preferred strategy of confrontation. Nonetheless, as this particular Islamic view is the authentic source of Palestinian policies toward the Jewish State, Israel must fashion its security postures accordingly.

For Hamas and other Palestinians, suicide against Jews represents the highest form of political engagement, a divinely mandated road to salvation that rewards doubly, because the enemy infidel is forced to cooperate in its own uncompensated dying. For Israel, which has yet to fully understand that an asymmetrical sort of suicide is being sought through the creation of a Palestinian state, America’s steadily undaunted commitment to a “Two-State Solution” may continue (erroneously) to appear more-or-less “realistic.”

Israel faces an expanding threat of unconventional war and unconventional terrorism.⁷ Faced with opponents who are not only willing to die, but who actually and ecstatically seek their own “deaths,” Jerusalem must quickly understand the critical limits of ordinary warfare, national homeland defense, and strategic deterrence.

For Israel, the root “Middle East Peace Process” problem is Jihadist death fear, and the

consequent religious compulsion to sacrifice certain despised *others*. This compulsion, in turn, stems from a firm doctrinal belief that *killing unbelievers*, and *being killed by unbelievers*, is the best available path to immortality. In short, an Islamist terrorist unwillingness to accept personal death leads to the killing of certain *others* in order to escape this death.⁸

For Jihadists, killing *Jews* offers the optimal immunization against personal death. Always.

Resembling more explicitly sacrificial elements of *Hamas* and *Islamic Jihad*, the military wing of *Fatah* is now oriented toward much more than a purely nationalistic “armed struggle.” It is openly dedicated to religious sacrifice, to a commitment that promises followers not just military victory over “Zionist occupiers,” but, also an *immunity from death*.

What could be better? For the Palestinian terrorist, violence and the sacred remain closely intertwined. Israel, therefore, must think in terms of *desacrilizing* this relentless adversary, and somehow convincing him that ritual murders of *Jews* will not lead to paradise and sexual pleasures, but to untold “terrors of the grave.”

Can such a desacrilization ever be accomplished through ordinary politics, including the U.S.-brokered “peace process?” To be persuasive, it would have to originate among certain influential Islamic clerics themselves. How could this improbable origination ever be made to work?

Overall, Jerusalem must inquire, what is the correct “peace” strategy for Israel? As Palestinian statehood is already being endorsed and validated in the U.N., and among certain individual European states, Mr. Netanyahu will quickly need to acknowledge the fallacy of ever accepting a Palestinian state because it has allegedly agreed to “demilitarization.”⁹

Every state, he will soon need to recognize, maintains an “inherent” and irreducible right of self-defense. This right would not be summarily withdrawn from “Palestine,” even if it should make public its long-term program for aggression¹⁰ against Israel. This is the case, moreover, whatever its leaders might have conceded in any pre-independence negotiations.¹¹

President Obama’s “Road Map” coaxes Israel along a determinably lethal excursion to unending war and terror. By ignoring the core roots of Palestinian terrorism, this twisting cartography can offer Israel only a contrived “Two-State Solution.” Should Prime Minister Netanyahu agree to follow Washington’s simplistic views, he will have misunderstood the deepest, and simultaneously most ineradicable, origins of Palestinian terrorism.

For Hamas, Fatah, and other Jihadist fighters, the terror-based struggle against Israel has never been about land compromises or halting “settlements.” Always, it has been about *God* and about *immortality*. In this regard, we should be reminded that there is no greater political power on earth than power over death.

Never!

For Jihadists, the ethos of redemption through sacrifice remains an immutably core pillar of both individual and collective Islamic existence. It follows that Israel’s and possibly even our own survival will ultimately be contingent upon understanding this grotesque ethos, and, reciprocally, on calculating just how it might be most effectively countered.

Nietzsche, writing in that part of *Zarathustra* that deals with “The New Idol,” calls the state “the coldest of all cold monsters.” More precisely, he continues, the state signifies “the will to death. Verily, it beckons to the preachers of death....Only where the state ends, there begins the human being who is not superfluous...”

At the time, Nietzsche had already understood that, at least in principle, it was the state that seemed most directly able to salve the ubiquitous “hunger for immortality.”¹² Hegel, after all, had previously said (but then, in a markedly positive voice): “The State represents the march of God in the world.”¹³

What could be more vital to understand? From an analytic standpoint, neither Nietzsche nor Hegel was mistaken, but their particular understandings were also limited and partial. Today, we can see, plainly, that there are other available objects of veneration that can relieve the apparently timeless human horror of death, most obviously certain Jihadist religious persuasions, and their various organizational incarnations. In an emergent “Palestine,” these organizations are principal Jihadist terror groups, especially Hamas and Fatah.

Just as the state recurrently requires *blood sacrifice* as a tangible means to personal redemption, including even literal salvation, Jihadists require the same. They, too, wish to be recognized as dedicated “soldiers” of sacrifice. Once this derivative wish is more fully acknowledged, necessary measures to curtail the destructive power of pertinent terror groups could become substantially more promising.

Sources:

[\[2\]](#) *Sayings of Spartan Mothers*

[4] Under authoritative international law, any Palestinian declaration of statehood would need to satisfy the settled criteria codified at the *Convention on the Rights and Duties of States* (“Montevideo Convention”) concerning control over a fixed and clearly defined territory; a population; a government; and the capacity to enter into diplomatic and foreign relations. See: *Convention on the Rights and Duties of States*, art. 1, Dec. 26, 1933, 49 Stat. 3097, 165 L.N.T.S. 19.

[6] Done at New York, Dec. 9, 1948. Entered into force, Jan. 12, 1951, 78 U.N.T.S. 277.

[8] Nonetheless, such zero-sum thinking about death is not entirely unique or distinctive to Islamist terrorism. Generically, the essence of such thinking is captured best by psychologist Ernest Becker’s paraphrase of Elias Canetti: “Each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.” See: Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil*, 2 (1975). Similarly, says psychologist Otto Rank: “The death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the Sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed.” See: Otto Rank, *Will Therapy and Reality* 130 (Alfred A. Knopf, 1950((1936)).

[10] See: *Resolution on the Definition of Aggression*, G.A. Res. 3314 (XXIX), at 142, U.N. Doc A/9890 (Dec. 14, 1974); also, *U.N. Charter*, art 53.

[12] This is an actual expression offered by the great Spanish existentialist, Miguel de Unamuno, in his *Tragic Sense of Life* (1913).

[Israel National News](#).

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