



Is Islam a Death Cult? Martyrdom and the American-Muslim Imagination

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

The topic of martyrdom in general, and certainly in Islam, is very sensitive. One can never be too clear about things these days, so before delving into the topic I want to state clearly my own position: I categorically and unconditionally condemn the killing of noncombatants by anyone, whether state or non-state actors, uniformed military or insurgents. I take the position of Imam Malik and al-Awza'i, that one is not permitted to kill civilians even if it seems necessary to achieve some valid military objective. It is *never* acceptable. I think it is vital for us as American Muslims to demonstrate our concern for all human beings, not just Americans and not just Muslims. We have to speak and rise up anytime that any of God's creation is attacked, regardless of whether the victims are Muslims or not.

Having gotten that out of the way, I want to start by talking about a film. It is a movie shot in Chicago (where I attended graduate school) and tells the story of a man who seeks out his own death. In the film, *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), the hero, played by Will Ferrell, discovers that a local author is actually dictating the story of his life—the book this author is writing is literally governing his existence. He confronts the author and (spoiler!) asks her for the ending that she has written, only to find out that she has him die in the very near future pushing a child out of the way of a bus. Instead of fleeing from this fate, the hero embraces it. He goes to his end willingly, explaining to the author that he can imagine no better, more poetic, death. Let us keep this image in mind; let it set the tone.

Writing this essay was an attempt to answer a question that has tasked my mind and conscience for many years now, certainly since the horrible events of September 11th, that day which, in my life at least, separates the carefree Golden Age of optimistic youth from the exhausted and somber alloy of the present. Put simply: no Muslim can deny that our God praises martyrs. The Quran makes this abundantly clear. Those Muslims who die “fighting in the path of God” reside in the highest levels of Paradise. They are not truly even dead. Rather, they are instant immortals, as the Quran says, “alive, sustained with their Lord” (Quran 3:169). Martyrs' bodies are not even washed for burial in Islam, and they bypass the trials

and tribulations of the grave. It is as if they do not have to wait for Judgment Day to reap their rewards.

Certainly, death in battle is not the only way to achieve martyrdom in Islam. Those who die unjustly or whose lives are truncated by some act of God are martyrs as well. Someone who is killed for their money (like a friend of mine at the University of Chicago, Ahmadou Cisse, *rahimahu Allah*, who was murdered one night in Hyde Park), someone who drowns, someone who dies building a mosque or in a structural collapse, a woman who dies in childbirth, the victims of a plague, someone who is killed defending their family, someone who is killed for speaking truth to an unjust ruler, who dies in prison or who stands alone for truth in corrupted times; even (according to one *hadith*) someone who falls in love and represses their desire with fatal consequences—all these are martyrs.¹ One weak *hadith*, by the way, puts honest merchants at almost the same level of martyrs... I guess showing how rare honest merchants are (?).² But in the Quran and *hadith*, martyrs are first and foremost those who have died in *jihad*, “fighting in the path of God,” those who have perished violently in battle.

So here’s the rub. We are Muslims whose holy book praises those martyred in battle, yet today whenever we hear of Muslims claiming to be martyrs it is a news report of someone blowing up innocent civilians in a market place. How can we reconcile this awful conflict? How should we understand martyrdom? This is the quandary (well, one of many) that faces Muslims today.

Discussions of martyrdom in Islam inevitably turn on the issue of suicide attacks and what “Islam says about them.” As I always tell my students any time they raise a question about what Islam or Islamic law says about anything, there is almost always more than one answer. Purposefully seeking one’s own death in battle and the permissibility of killing civilians are no exceptions.

¹ See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Abwāb al-sa’āda fī asbāb al-shahāda*; Abū Bakr al-Ājurī, *Ṣifat al-ghurabā’ min al-mu’minīn* (Kuwait: Dār al-Khulafā’, 1983), 20, 66–68.

² The *hadith* is *al-tājir al-amīn al-ṣadūq al-muslim ma’a al-shuhadā’ yawm al-qiyāma*. See *Sunan Ibn Mājah: kitāb al-tijārāt, bāb al-hathth ‘alā al-makāsib*. For a study of this *hadith*, see <http://www.ahlalhadeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=372062>.

We must note, of course, that no classical Muslim scholar allowed the blatant, unmitigated killing of civilians. Here the Islamic legal tradition would disagree with the 1945 Allied firebombing of the cities of Dresden and Tokyo, which killed around 35,000 and 100,000 civilians respectively and had no tactical military aim (in Germany, US government estimates were that 24% of the bombs fell on residential and commercial areas, and 19% of casualties were children under 16... in Japan it was much, much worse).³ Just like the policies of the American government, disagreements among Muslim scholars do predictably arise when one asks whether one can kill non-combatants if they are mixed in with the enemy army and even if one can kill Muslims who are being used by the enemy as human shields. Some Sunni Muslim scholars have held that the death of innocent civilians might be inevitable if they're mixed in with the enemy—but otherwise intentionally targeting civilians is totally prohibited. This is equivalent to the US government's policy of avoiding "collateral damage" to the extent possible and falls along the same lines as the [doctrine of double effect](#) in Western theory on just war. Some Muslim scholars have proven even more cautious. The eighth-century scholars Malik and al-Awza'i, for example, declared that killing women and children is never permissible.

On the issue of whether or not a Muslim can purposefully kill himself in order to kill the enemy, the general opinion of classical Muslim scholars is no. This would be prohibited due to the impermissibility of suicide in Islam. Like American soldiers who are awarded the Medal of Honor, a Muslim is allowed to heroically engage in an action that will almost certainly result in his death. But this is not the same as killing oneself in the act of killing the enemy—it is not suicide *per se* since the agent of killing (the killer) is not the same person as the person killed.

I do not want to focus on what Islamic law says about suicide attacks because I do not think this is truly a legal issue in the eyes of the American public. It is not about what we allow or prohibit, but about how we respond emotionally to suffering and injustice. It is about emotion and perception, not rules and law. Think of the brilliant *Onion Point/Counterpoint* article in that publication's eminently

³ See Eric Langenbacher, "The Allies in World War II: The Anglo-American Bombardment of German Cities," in *Genocide, War Crimes and the West*, ed. Adam Jones (London: Zed Books, 2004), 118-119.

tasteful response to 9/11. The two positions being argued in the piece were, on the one hand, “[We Must Retaliate With Blind Rage](#),” *versus*, on the other, “[We Must Retaliate With Measured, Focused Rage](#).” A brief sample:

After pummeling the holy living hell out of those f-----s with bombs, we should send in ground troops, armed to the teeth, to sweep through and exterminate anyone still alive who might have been involved. America's soldiers must be under orders to pump round after round into their bodies, pausing only to replace their clips. Vs. While leveling Afghanistan, Iraq, the Sudan, and Libya with bombs might seem like a justifiable move... Have we made sure we have the support of other key powers in the region, so that further problems don't develop after we bomb them back into the Stone Age?

How perfectly this satire (if in fact it's satire) encapsulates the primordial, hyperbolic desire for revenge that understandably flooded America after 9/11. No matter which side you took in this debate, the urge was the same—*all of them, them, they all must die*. Now let's shift our gaze for a moment away from 'kill 'em all' to an image of a little old Afghan woman, kindly helping her granddaughter put on her first pair of shoes. Could we in any way call for them to be massacred in a fit of revenge? Truly the question of 'To kill or not to kill' is often more emotive than principled. An Arab man might call for Israel to be pushed into the sea, but could he raise the same cry if he saw an old Israeli mother, sobbing, waiting anxiously for news of her missing son? This, then, is what I want to focus on: emotion, not law.

The importance of visceral, emotive perception is obvious when suicide attacks are discussed in America. What is a suicide attack, after all? More to the point, what is it about suicide attacks that horrifies us? I would think that what would truly make our blood boil is the fact that these attacks generally target and brutally end the lives of innocent civilians. This seems fairly obvious. But if this were the case, if that were indeed what lies at the heart of suicide attacks and our outrage towards them, then this essay would end right now. I've already made it clear that killing civilians is unacceptable to Muslim scholars and that any equivocation on the issue is an unfortunate reality shared by both Islamic law and the policies of the US

military. (Remember, a [2007 poll](#) found that 6% of Americans felt that “attacks in which civilians are targets are ‘completely justified.’” Only 4% of Saudis and 2% of Iranians did. A [2017 poll](#) found that, when asked whether “targeting and killing civilians can be justified to further a political, social or religious cause,” 84% of U.S. Muslims said such tactics are never (76%) or rarely (8%) justified. In comparison, in a survey of the U.S. public as a whole, only 59% said it’s *never* justifiable.)

But clearly suicide attacks hold some special horror for us. The type of attack has its own name (with the equally terrifying ‘suicide bombing’ as a subset) after all, for a reason. There is something about its suicidal dimension—the decision of the attacker to take his/her own life in this violent act—that truly grips us. This is clear from a bizarre debate that appeared in America over the term ‘suicide bombing.’ In 2003 Condoleezza Rice and others made a short-lived effort to replace the term with ‘homicide bombing,’ as if they were afraid that people had gotten the impression that this was a reflexive act impacting only the actor. This was not a Buddhist monk setting himself on fire in protest, Rice was trying to say. This was an act of mass murder. The awkwardness of this term ‘homicide bombing’ (akin perhaps to “violent baseball bat beating”) only revealed our elliptical fascination with the suicidal component of suicide attacks.

Let us then assume that it is the suicidal dimension of that act that truly turns the screw in our collective conscience... that there is something that we either cannot understand or hope not to be able to understand about someone choosing to die in an act of killing others. Scholars have suggested multiple motivations for suicide attacks: an escape from political oppression, a collective death wish, an act of social sacrifice, or a political/military strategy. These may all be correct, but I want to look beyond these diagnoses at something both more general and more ancient.

I’ll pause here to lay two images before you. First, a [climactic scene](#) from the very popular 1996 film *Independence Day* (there was recently some sort of sequel... that will have to wait for airplane viewing). As the massive and invulnerable alien battle cruiser is about to destroy one of humanity’s last bases, Randy Quaid, previously an impoverished alcoholic with some knowledge of flying, aims the

nose of his FA-18 Hornet into the one exposed part of the alien ship and detonates his plane, killing himself and destroying the enemy. His children watch the attack on a screen from the base below. The commander turns to the children and says, “Your father did a very brave thing; you should be proud of him.” “I am,” says the child. We, the audience, concur. Indeed, what a worthy act, what a noble way to die.

Second, a story from my own life. Once when I was in the Western Desert of Egypt, far into the desert near the Libyan border with the Awlad Ali Bedouins, attending a wedding, I met a man named Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr came to the tent we were staying in on a camel. He dismounted, looming and powerful, and started to give me an unsolicited lesson about proper religion. At one point in his lecture, he looked at me and pointed to his head. “I want a bullet, right here, in *jihad*,” he said. I can say in all honesty that in all my years of traveling I have never been as frightened as I was at that moment, and never have I felt farther away from home.

Since then, I’ve often thought about how I felt when Abu Bakr said that. Why was I so afraid? Was it the prejudice of expectation—because he was Arab, Muslim, because *jihad* must mean killing people who looked like me, my family? Why was I so afraid of what he was saying and yet so moved by Randy Quaid’s heroic death in *Independence Day*? Were their two wishes really that different? They both wanted to give their lives for a cause they felt was noble. The only difference, it seemed, was whether they were on ‘our’ side of the fight or not. I was walking in the streets of Cairo a few months later when the manifest commonality of their desire dawned upon me: there is no culture in this world, I thought, that does not value dying well, dying a noble death.

The Greek scholar Herodotus (d. *circa* 420 BCE) tells of a meeting between Croesus, the powerful king of Lydia, and the Athenian lawmaker Solon. Croesus asks Solon who the happiest, most fortunate man he had ever met was, expecting of course that Solon would name the wealthy king himself. Instead Solon replies that the most blessed and fortunate man he had ever come across was a simple Athenian named Tellus. This Tellus had lived a full life in a prosperous city, had had children who lived to adulthood, had been blessed with grandchildren, and

finally “had a glorious death” in battle, fighting for Athens. We can see a similar theme in a Herodotus redux, the wildly profitable film *300*. In it, one of the heroic Spartan warriors (played by Michael Fassbender), facing almost certain annihilation at the spears of a monstrous enemy horde, explains that he hopes for “[a beautiful death](#),” namely a glorious death in an epic battle against a worthy foe.

What is it that makes these deaths so beautiful, so felicitous? Well, Solon tells Croesus that Tellus’ death in battle was made glorious because it was celebrated and remembered by the people of Athens. Herodotus tells us that he has learned the names of every one of the 300 Spartans who fought at Thermopylae, and how pleased that brave Spartan would be if he knew that fully two and a half millennia later Americans were watching his “beautiful death” played out on screen. Put simply, in the classical world a beautiful death, a glorious death, was one that was remembered and celebrated. It is a death that allows you to cheat mortality, to live on in human memory, and gain a species of immortality. This is what the Greeks called *kleos*, or glory and renown. It is the same perpetuating elixir of memory that the Pre-Islamic Arabs called *hasab* or *ma’āthīr*, those heroic deeds sung of in epics. It is what the ghost of Agamemnon envies the ghost of Achilles for in the underworld, how “even in death your name will never die... Great glory is yours Achilles, for all time, in the eyes of all mankind.”⁴

It is such glory that comforts men sorely aware of their mortality. Pindar (d. *circa* 440 BCE) writes, “Don’t be deceived by cunning thrift: glory follows a man, glory alone, when he is dead, reveals his manner of life to the lords of song and story.”⁵ In that great classic of our Western tradition, the *Aeneid* of Virgil (d. 19 BCE), the hero Aeneas visits Carthage on his wanderings towards Rome from his ruined, native land of Troy. Later, when Aeneas and his Trojans are battling the natives of Italy to found the high walls of Rome, two Trojan warriors, Nisus and Euryalus, undertake a suicidal mission to gain great glory. As Euryalus is cut down by a swath of foes, his friend Nisus charges forward into the enemy ranks, Virgil tells us, “launching himself straight at the foe, through many wounds hastening a heroic

⁴ *Odyssey*, book 24:90-110 (see Fagles translation, p. 471).

⁵ Pindar, *Victory Odes*, trans. Frank Nisetich (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 159.

death.” Virgil, the narrator, himself breaks his narrative silence and speaks to the two fallen heroes:

*Fortunate both! If in the least my songs avail, no future day will ever take you out of the record of remembering time, while children of Aeneas make their home around the Capitoline rock, and still the Roman Father governs all.*⁶

Looking to our Norse heritage here in America (much revived of late with neo-pagan blockbusters like the *Thor* films), we find the same idea. The old Anglo-Saxons spoke of *dōm*, the glory that a warrior must attain to gain immortal remembrance. Beowulf says to his friends and followers as he volunteers to go and kill the creature Grendel’s mother, “Each of us must live to see the end of his life in this world. Let him who may labor for glory before his death.” While Beowulf battles his demonic enemy, the narrator tells us, “Thus a man must do when he is bent on winning lasting praise. He will not give his life a moment’s thought.”⁷ Seeking a beautiful death, then, is a deeply selfish act. For glory is the mercenary key to immortality in this earthly world, and a heroic death in battle is its speediest path. As the wise woman Diotima explains in Plato’s *Symposium*, “Do you think that Achilles would have died for Patroclus... if [he] hadn’t expected the memory of their virtue—which we still hold in honor—to be immortal?”⁸

In Islam, martyrdom is also an act dyed with self-interest. The famous martyrs of Muslim history did not sacrifice themselves only for their community, for their families, or for their cause. Like the quest for immortal glory, Muslims seek martyrdom to cheat death. In the Quran, martyrdom is described in the language of commerce. “Behold,” God tells us in the Quran,

God has bought of the believers their lives and their possessions, promising them paradise, they fight in the path of God, slay and are slain. A promise

⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 9.446 (Robert Fagles translation).

⁷ *Beowulf*, line 1388.

⁸ *Plato’s Symposium*, 208c-e.

which in truth He has willed upon Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Quran... (Quran 9:111)

Although the first martyr in Islam was a woman—Sumayya, tortured to death for her faith—famous martyrs from the Prophet ﷺ's time exemplify this self-centered desire for immediate paradise, instant immortality. During the Battle of Badr, Umayr and 'Awf stand with the Prophet ﷺ ready for battle. 'Umayr cries, "Wonder of wonders, is there nothing between me and my entering Paradise but that these men should slay me?!" 'Awf asks the Prophet, "O Messenger of God, what is it that makes the Lord most high laugh with joy at His slave?" The Prophet ﷺ replied, "When he plunges without armor into the midst of the foe." Both 'Umayr and 'Awf, 'Awf without any armor, threw themselves at the enemy and fought until killed. When the Prophet ﷺ was threatened by a troop of cavalry during the near defeat of Uhud, he asked those around him, "Who will stand up to these foes?" A man named Wahb stood forth, and the Prophet ﷺ told him, "Rejoice, for Paradise is yours!" Wahb plunged into the enemy ranks and, astoundingly, fought his way all the way through their body. He then turned around and entered the enemy ranks again, fighting until slain.⁹

In its self-centeredness, the Muslim desire for a beautiful death is similar to the thirst for glory in Greco-Roman, Norse, or modern Western culture.¹⁰ But there is one hugely important difference. A Muslim martyr seeks the recognition and validation not of a bard, historian, or filmmaker, but of God Most High. The value of death in the path of God is not contingent upon human recognition. The great Japanese epic *The Treasury of the Loyal Retainers* (better known as the *47 Ronin*, also a 2013 film, in which 47 samurai conspire to avenge their slain master, then all commit ritual suicide) makes this clear. The first line of the story tells us, "The sweetest food, if left untasted, remains unknown, its savor wasted."¹¹ As the

⁹ Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 300.

¹⁰ I think of the hit British play, later a 2011 film, *Warhorse*, in which the [theme song](#) goes:

Faded away like the stars in the morning,
Losing their light in the glorious sun –
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling,
Only remembered for what we have done.

¹¹ Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shoraku and Namiki Senryū, *Chushingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers)*, trans. Donald Keene (Columbia University Press, 1971), 29.

famous *Jahili* poet Tarafa b. al-‘Abd [sang](#) against those who told him to be moral and honorable:

*I see that the graves of the thrifty man and the spendthrift wastrel look the same.*¹²

The Japanese play and the pre-Islamic poet lay the danger out plainly: without human remembrance, glory has no resonance. It does not, as Maximus (Russell Crowe) [says](#) in *Gladiator*, “echo in eternity.”

While Virgil has to assure the two Trojan heroes, Nisus and Euryalus, that he will not let their glorious deaths be forgotten, Muslims need no bard’s promise, no artist’s awl. For, as the Quran tells us, God does not wrong any of His slaves. He lets no good deed go unrewarded. “And whoever has done a kernel’s weight of good, will see it” on Judgment Day. A Muslim who dies for God’s cause will win immortality even if he falls in an unknown land, in the dark of night, unsung and rejected of man. The Lord Most High will note his deed. And God’s creation itself will sing his praise, as the Prophet ﷺ tells us of the ants in the dust and the whales in the ocean [singing prayers](#) for those who teach goodliness in this world. Martyrs will enter paradise and their greeting will be ‘Peace,’ all sins are pardoned, all is forgiven.

Let us return to the real quandary we have to face, however, that knot that we’ve yet to untangle. Certainly, to seek death in order to cheat it is not foreign at all in the [Western tradition](#). Muslims, too, seek immortality through a beautiful death. But what is this “path of God” that the Quran speaks of, that cause for which a Muslim dies in order to become a martyr? In a *hadith* narrated by Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*) a man asks the Prophet ﷺ, “A man might fight for protection, or fight out of courage, or fight for reputation and praise, which one of these is ‘in the path of God’?” The Prophet ﷺ replies, “Whoever fights so that God’s word might be supreme, that is in ‘the path of God.’”¹³

¹² *arā qabr naḥḥāmin bakhīlin bi-mālihi... ka-qabr ghawīyyin fī’l-baṭālātī mufsidī.*

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-‘ilm, bāb man sa’ala wa huwa qā’im ‘āliman jālisan.*

So that God's word might be supreme... what does that mean, what is this word that martyrs are supposed to elevate? In Islam, God's word is the Quran and the guidance it brings. God tells us in the Quran that He made His word become flesh in the form of Jesus and his message. God's word is His everlasting promise of salvation to His humble servants:

Nay, indeed those close to God, no fear need they have and neither shall they grieve—those who believe and were fearful of God. Theirs is glad tidings in this world and the next. There is no changing God's word, that is the greatest of attainments. (Quran 10:62-64).

God's word is the constant message of all the prophets, all the greats from the pantheon of God's messengers: Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be on all of them). Making God's unchanging word supreme is to hold their banner high, to lift up the oppressed, to call out for justice, to raise the poor from the depths of indigence and to make the will of the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful God, paramount.

We know that God's word is the light of knowledge that has always illuminated the encompassing darkness, but when we Muslims today look around us we find God's word used to extinguish. That same phrase, "fighting to make God's word supreme," is the same *hadith* cited eerily in a voice-over commentary in a video of a suicide bomb attack on a Baghdad hotel; a voice preaches that the holy warriors are fighting "*li-takun kalimat Allah hiya al-'ulyā*, that God's word might be supreme." Even in the 1970s, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Farag of the Jama'at Jihad said that the purpose of his Muslim martyrs was to die fighting "so that God's word might be supreme." When we Muslims try to explain to others that *jihad* is to struggle in God's path, to elevate His word, we are told: what use is this amorphous and volatile notion of "elevating God's word" if it can be used to cause such mayhem and shed so much innocent blood? Muslims are told that they should dispense entirely with this notion of martyrdom in God's path, since it just seems to lead to the murder of both Muslim and non-Muslim civilians.

My response to this is simple: you could be right, dying to elevate God's word might be too often misused by Muslims to be useful. It might be obsolete. But, if it is obsolete, then so too are the notions of dying for glory, for *kleos*, for *dom*, for honor, for greatness, for duty. These are all words that have helped launch wars far bloodier, and massacres far more deracinating than even the horror we have seen in Iraq or Syria. How many men died as German tanks rolled through Europe for the 'glory' of the Third Reich? How many people died in Nazi gas chambers because of the word 'duty'? Consider the words of the samurai who led the famous 47 Ronin in their heroic act to avenge their lord, that "noble purpose," the narrator of the story tells us, "which will give [them] a name for loyalty and rectitude to resound through all the ages." Listen to the words of one of these samurai:

*I am not unaware that [my actions] will bring extinction to my household and despair to my wife, but as a samurai I owe the service of my sword to the god of war.*¹⁴

How many a family has been shattered by glory, by honor? How many a parent has seen their child butchered, and how many a child has grown up an orphan? And yet the words 'honor,' 'glory,' and 'greatness' still move our hearts to nobility and the hopes of 'a beautiful death.' We do not hold these concepts accountable for any misdeeds done in their name. Perhaps it is because they are so deeply etched in the long stone of our history in the West. They are the ancient ore for which our forefathers mined in search of immortal memory, and the currency for which our still pagan hearts ceaselessly yearn today.¹⁵ Who would question the value of glory, of a beautiful death? Not Virgil, not Homer, not Herodotus, not Beowulf... not the greats, and not those millions who still read their words today.

Let us Muslims, then, make dying to elevate God's word, *li-takun kalimat Allah hiya al-'ulya*, as noble in the eyes of those around us. There were stories that, when the Virginia Tech killer went on his rampage ten years ago, a Muslim student died trying to stop the madman and save his classmates. I have no idea if this report is

¹⁴ *Chushingura*, 44.

¹⁵ Of course, the World War I poet Wilfred Owen, himself killed just days before the war ended, [mocked](#) the Roman poet Horace's line that "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

true, but let's suppose it was, and that every American heard it. What a revolution that would start in the public mind and its perceptions of Muslim martyrs and *jihad*. What if Muslims were known as a people who unhesitatingly sacrifice their lives to save others, to alleviate pain, to end injustice through peaceful means—perhaps the only viable means in our day and age? What if we could make these acts the means of ‘making God’s word supreme’?

The English word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek word “to bear witness.” This is the exact same meaning as the Arabic word, *shahīd*, that the Quran uses for those who die in God’s cause. To give one’s life for the principles of one’s belief—as the Jews who rose up against Roman occupation did at Masada, as Christian saints like Polycarp did in the face of crushing persecution, as Martin Luther King did, not fifty years ago—is the ultimate testimony that one can give for one’s faith.

What if Muslims restored this idea of ‘bearing witness’ to the word martyrdom? What if we thought of martyrdom as bearing witness by being willing to die in the name of that God Who tells us that saving one life is like saving all of humanity, that standing up to injustice is the highest act of faith, that feeding the stranger and the orphan, and sheltering the wayfarer are the solemn duties of every individual? The Quran (41:33) tells us, “What better word is there than calling out to God, doing a good deed and saying, Indeed I am one of those who submits to God.” As Will Ferrell’s character understood, dying pushing a child out of the way of a bus is as poetic a deed as any, a beautiful death, for a Muslim, for an American, and there is nothing frightening or foreign about that.