

## **Escaping Atonement in Sunni Islam**

Death by Jihad for Deliverance

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<https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2021.03>

**Abstract:** In the Islamic *hadith* corpus and Quran, the way to atone for sins is called *tawba* (or *tawbah*), which requires one to complete a series of steps to receive forgiveness from Allah (God). Jihadist terrorist organizations use primarily Quranic scripture to recruit and employ suicide bombers who may have a guilty conscience for their past sins. It is said that martyrdom, or *istishadi*, will automatically save Muslims from hell and grant access to paradise no matter the sin committed. One of the understudied reasons for *istishadi* suicide bombings in jihadist groups is the concept of atonement. This article answers the following research questions: What role does guilt in Islam play in the motivations for male and female Sunni jihadist suicide bombers, and why is *tawba* not utilized?

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**Keywords:** jihad, guilt, *tawba*, *tawbah*, *istishadi*, suicide bombing

The Quran and *hadith* corpus are major Muslim religious texts and sources of Islamic jurisprudence. The Quran is the principal text of Islam and is believed to contain direct revelations from Allah (God). The *hadith* corpus are a series of stories and traditions about the Prophet Muhammad. They are a primary source of Islamic law and are second only to the Quran. They took several hundred years to be written down and compiled. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "The development of Hadith is a vital element during the first few centuries of Islamic history, and its study provides a broad index to the mind and ethos of Islam."<sup>1</sup> There are six major *hadith* that are accepted by Sunni Muslims. The most well-known are those compiled by Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (810–70 CE) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (817–75 CE), both of which share the title *al-Sahih* (*The Authentic*).<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the al-Bukhari version is used in this article; it is highly respected by Sunni Muslims because the author was cautious in his compilation, making sure that the stories were authentic.

In the *hadith* corpus and Quran, the way to atone for sins is called *tawba* (or *tawbah*), which requires one to complete a series of complex steps to receive forgiveness from Allah. However, one can circumvent *tawba* and its requirements by giving their life in religious holy war, or *jihad*.<sup>3</sup> In the *hadith* corpus, Muhammad the Prophet said:

The person who participates in (Holy battles) in Allah's cause . . . and nothing compels him to do so except belief in Allah and His Apostles, will be recompensed by Allah either with a reward, or booty (if he

survives) or will be admitted to Paradise (if he is killed in the battle as a martyr). Had I not found it difficult for my followers, then I would not remain behind any *sariya* going for Jihad . . . and I would have loved to be martyred in Allah's cause and then made alive, and then martyred and then made alive, and then again martyred in His cause.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning atonement, the Quran states, "Except those who repent and make amends and openly declare (the Truth): To them, I turn; for I am Oft-returning, Most Merciful."<sup>5</sup> The Quran also states, "O ye who believe! Turn to Allah with sincere repentance: In the hope that your Lord will remove from you your ills and admit you to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow."<sup>6</sup> Although quotes such as these are plentiful in the *hadith* corpus and Quran, these simple statements further support the argument presented here. Clemency from Allah needs to be earned in Islam, literally through the process of *tawba*, as will be discussed later in the article. However, only Allah can decide what is forgiven. Concerning the unpredictability of Allah, the Quran states, "Surely Allah does not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, and He forgives what is besides this to whom He pleases; and whoever associates anything with Allah, he indeed strays off into a remote error."<sup>7</sup> Paradise through *istishadi* circumvents the requirements of *tawba*, which involves six steps to fully atone for sins. Certain sins may even be unforgivable, depending on the Islamic scholar's interpretation.

The scholarship regarding motivations for suicide bombings has been remiss in considering the concept of guilt in suicide terrorism. Young male and female jihadist suicide bombers often live a life of perceived

extravagance and sinfulness before their *istishadi*. The concept of *istishadi* in the *hadith* corpus and Quran provides them with a guaranteed exit strategy for the actions that have plagued them. Transgressions such as drug use, alcohol use, promiscuity, infidelity, family shame, or other sins are not part of a conservative Muslim lifestyle. The concept of *tawba* might require too much labor for the potential suicide bomber, or the rewards and notoriety that accompany *istishadi* are much more alluring. The discrepancy between suicide and martyrdom must also be clear to the potential suicide bomber, as Islam forbids suicide. The prospective bomber must be comfortable with the concept that they are dying in battle as a martyr as opposed to committing suicide. However, it is the rewards of jihad that sanction the use of suicide or *istishadi* by jihadist suicide bombers. Recruiters use the Quran and *hadith* corpus to make this argument.<sup>8</sup> This article seeks to answer the following research questions: What role does guilt in Islam play in the motivations for Sunni jihadist suicide bombers, and why is *tawba* not utilized? Terrorist leaders and recruiters typically focus on Quranic scriptures much more so than the *hadith* corpus as the Quran is easier to access, shorter, and less complex.<sup>9</sup> This article will primarily concentrate on the role of the Quran in Sunni jihadist terrorism.

The next section will examine jihad as the efficacious solution in the Quran and *hadith* corpus, while comparing different translations of the Quran. It will also discuss the acceptable reasons for jihad in Islam and how these criteria are facilitated by jihadist recruiters and leaders to influence a person to commit *istishadi*. The concept of *tawba* and why it cannot apply to jihadist suicide bombers will be examined in the third section. The fourth section will look at case studies of jihadist suicide terrorists and the use of

*istishadi* as atonement of their sins. A discussion of these case studies will follow in the fifth section, and the article will end with a conclusion and recommendations for future research.

### **Death for Deliverance through Jihad: The Quran and the *Hadith* Corpus**

According to a report from *The Program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict* at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, "In 2019, 149 suicide bombings were carried out in 24 countries by 236 suicide bombers, among them 22 women. In these suicide bombings, 1,850 people were killed and 3,660 were wounded." More than 80 percent of these suicide bombings were committed by Salafi-jihadist groups.<sup>10</sup> The year 2016 had the highest number of suicide bombings on record.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, jihadist groups are the main perpetrators of suicide attacks worldwide. For some jihadists, the concept of guilt is a motivation for committing a suicide attack or achieving *istishadi*. This section will look at the Quran and *hadith* corpus and the roles they play in sanctioning *istishadi* for jihadists. Quotes concerning *istishadi* and jihad are plentiful throughout the Quran and *hadith* corpus.

As a note on translation, this author has used three different translations of the Quran to write this article. *Al-Qur'an* by Ahmed Ali was published by Princeton University Press in 1993 and portrays Islam as the least warlike of the Quranic translations. The second translation is *The Holy Quran* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a Saudi translation that was published in 1934. This translation portrays Islam as a warrior religion, although it has been banned in some schools in the United States due to its prejudiced statements against Jewish people. The most violent portrayal of Islam

referenced in this article comes from *The Qur'an* translated by Muhammad Habib Shakir, which was published in 1993 in Pakistan, although there is some controversy as to whether he did the translation or plagiarized it.<sup>12</sup>

The *Middle East Quarterly* article "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an," by Khaleel Mohammed, explains the political and religious motivations behind each Quranic translation.<sup>13</sup> These different translations of the Quran, which in some cases show significant disagreement, exemplify the problems of radicalism that plague Islam. The Ahmed Ali version rarely uses the words *jihad* or *Allah*, and even then, *greater jihad* is usually referred to. The concept of *greater jihad* is the personal struggle to live a good Muslim life, while the *lesser jihad* refers to war and violence.<sup>14</sup> Terms like *lord* or *god* replace the Arabic *Allah* in the Ahmed Ali version. The Abdullah Yusuf Ali version contains the word *jihad* but uses it as a reference to *fighting* or *striving*, not as war against infidels, people of the book, or Jewish people. The most punitive version of the Quran discussed in this article, by Muhammad Habib Shakir, refers to 72 virgins in paradise and includes verbiage that jihadist terrorist groups frequently quote. This author has used this version to fully highlight the lengths to which recruiters will go to propagandize the religious text for their purposes.

The following quotes appear in the *hadith* corpus and Quran. They have been chosen as they specifically concern the concepts of forgiveness, atonement, and jihad. The *hadith* corpus is a record of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Not all Muslims support the *hadith* corpus as a legitimate basis of law, but jihadists adhere to them. The Quran is the Islamic sacred holy book, believed to be the word of Allah as dictated to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel, written in Arabic.

The *hadith* corpus state:

- “The Prophet said, ‘The person who participates in (Holy battles) in Allah’s cause . . . and nothing compels him to do so except belief in Allah and His Apostles, will be recompensed by Allah either with a reward, or booty (if he survives) or will be admitted to Paradise (if he is killed in the battle as a martyr)’.”<sup>15</sup>
- Allah’s Apostle said, “Allah guarantees him who strives in His Cause and whose motivation for going out is nothing but Jihad in His Cause and belief in His Word, that He will admit him into Paradise (if martyred) or bring him back to his dwelling place, whence he has come out, with what he gains of reward and booty.”<sup>16</sup>
- “He (the Messenger of Allah) did that and said: There is another act which elevates the position of a man in Paradise to a grade one hundred (higher), and the elevation between one grade and the other is equal to the height of the heaven from the earth. He (Abu Sa’id) said: What is that act? He replied: Jihad in the way of Allah! Jihad in the way of Allah!”<sup>17</sup>

The Quran states:

- “And if you are killed in the cause of Allah or you die, the forgiveness and mercy of Allah are better than all that you amass.”<sup>18</sup>
- “Surely those who believe and those who leave their homes and fight in the way of Allah, may hope for his benevolence for Allah is forgiving and kind.”<sup>19</sup>

- “Do you think that you will get away before Allah knows who among you fought and did not take anyone but Allah, His Apostle and the faithful as their friends? Allah is cognizant of all that you do.”<sup>20</sup>
- “But (to) those who were victimized and left their homes and then fought and endured patiently, your Lord will surely be forgiving and kind.”<sup>21</sup>
- “He who strives (jihad) does so for himself. Verily Allah is independent of the creatures of the world.”<sup>22</sup>
- “Those who fear Allah and follow the straight path will surely be in gardens and in bliss, Rejoicing at what their Lord has given them; and their Lord will preserve them from the torment of Hell. ‘Eat and drink with relish,’ (they will be told), (as recompense) for what you have done.”<sup>23</sup>
- “Reclining there on carpets lined with brocade, fruits of the garden hanging low within reach. How many favors of your Lord will then both of you deny? In them maidens with averted glances, undeflowered by man or by jinn before them.”<sup>24</sup>
- “If you give alms openly, it is well, and if you hide it and give it to the poor, it is better for you; and this will do away with some of your evil deeds; and Allah is aware of what you do.”<sup>25</sup>
- “And keep up prayer in the two parts of the day and in the first hours of the night; surely good deeds take away evil deeds.”<sup>26</sup>

It is clear in these passages that *istishadi* is sanctioned in both the Quran and the *hadith* corpus. Several of these passages imply that a life lived without the violence that jihad brings is disgraceful. The gifts that jihad

brings without death are bountiful but are much more extravagant when the loss of one's life occurs:

- "In the sight of Allah the martyr has six [unique] qualities: He [Allah] forgives him at the first opportunity, and shows him his place in paradise, he is saved from the torment of the grave, he is safe from the great fright [of the Resurrection], a crown of honor is placed upon his head—one ruby which is better than the world and all that is in it—he is married to 72 of the *houris*, and he gains the right to intercede for 70 of his relatives."<sup>27</sup>

In life, the most perfect aim is for *istishadi* through jihad, and the martyr will receive bountiful gifts in paradise. Men will receive 72 virgins in the *hadith* corpus.<sup>28</sup> There is some debate on the meaning of the Quranic passages according to Islamic jurisprudence. Ahmed Ali's translated version does not even mention the 70 (the number may vary) virgins that are found in Shakir's translated version. In fact, English translations of the Quran vary greatly from author to author.

Many female martyrs believe that they will become one of the beautiful dark-eyed virgins (*houris*), or that at least they will not have to share their husband with other wives. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "There are numerous references to the *houris* in the Quran describing them as 'purified wives' and 'spotless virgins'."<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have stated that the Quran elevates dutiful and faithful wives above the *houris*.<sup>30</sup> There is even debate as to whether *houris* are women. It is possible that these companions have no gender or come in both male and female form.<sup>31</sup> If a wife comes to her husband as a virgin in paradise, she will allow him to have

the purest sexual encounter.<sup>32</sup> Food will be delicious and plentiful, and family will be able to spend time together recalling stories in their past lives. There will be green gardens with aromatic flowers and beautiful scenery. The description of paradise continues throughout the Quran.

*Jihad* must also be clarified. There is the *lesser* or *outer* jihad, which is the violent jihad that is sanctified for three distinct reasons: when Muslims are attacked, when Muslim holy land is attacked, or when the religion of Islam is attacked. The *greater* or *inner* jihad is the struggle to live a pure life according to the Quran and the five pillars of Islam. The greater jihad far supersedes the lesser jihad in importance according to most moderate Muslims, although there is some debate on this by Islamic scholars.<sup>33</sup> However, in jihadist terrorist organizations, there is a much larger emphasis on the lesser jihad than the greater jihad.

In reference to suicide, the Quran forbids it, and Muslim society confirms this religious belief. In a study completed by David Lester at the Center for the Study of Suicide, the author found that completed suicide rates in Muslim countries were much lower than rates of completed suicide in other countries with differing majority religions.<sup>34</sup> Rates of attempted suicide do, however, appear to be the same as in countries of other religions. Lester acknowledges that this may be due to underreporting as suicide is taboo or forbidden in Islam. A more recent study found “a negative relationship between suicide rates and adherents of Islam across several countries.”<sup>35</sup> From this research, one can conclude that committing suicide is forbidden in the Islamic religion. However, jihadists can use the concept of jihad that is documented in the Quran to justify martyrdom operations. It is apparent that jihadist Muslims do not view *istishadi* as

suicide but believe that *istishadi* in pursuit of jihad is justifiable and holy. Therefore, jihadists use Islam and its scriptures to justify suicide bombings.

### **What Happened to the Concept of *Tawba*?**

In an online magazine for Western Muslims, *Muslim Matters*, Ustadh Mukhtar Ba explains the meaning of *tawba* and the actions that must be pursued to accomplish it. *Tawba* must be completed for every sin, and if the sins occur repeatedly, *tawba* must be repeated each time they occur. The cure for sin is repentance. Imām Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE) stated, “Just as you have taken returning to sins as a habit, then also take returning to *tawba* as a habit, because through *tawba* you expiate your past sins, and it is very possible that you may have the fortune to die while in a state of *tawba*.”<sup>36</sup>

There are six elements to the concept of *tawba*.<sup>37</sup> The first element is remorse, or feeling pain for having caused the sin. The repentant must “utter *istighfār* [*saying astaghfirullāh*] with one’s tongue, at the moment of *tawba*.”<sup>38</sup> *If istighfār is stated without conviction in the heart, the tawba cannot be accepted.* The second element is the desire not to repeat the sin. The third element is to undertake religious duties. The fourth element is to apologize and ask for forgiveness to any person or people who were wronged. Property or rights must be returned as part of the fifth element. Last, the sixth element is to be obedient to Allah. *It is a matter of debate as to whether Allah will accept the tawba and forgive the sin, according to differing opinions among the ‘ulamā.*<sup>39</sup> The Quran states, “Surely Allah does not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, and He forgives what is besides this to whom He pleases; and whoever associates anything with Allah, he indeed strays off into a remote error.”<sup>40</sup>

It can be argued that the concept of *tawba* does not apply to suicide bombers, or at least that suicide bombers do not want to apply the concept of *tawba* to themselves. There may be several reasons why *tawba* is not utilized. First, the suicide bomber may not be aware of *tawba*. Second, a recruiter or imam may make *istishadi* a better option. Third, the suicide bomber may sin repeatedly knowing that jihad will grant them access to paradise regardless. Fourth, it is said that Allah may not accept *tawba*. In the Quran and *hadith* corpus, the language clarifies that there is a much higher possibility of entrance into paradise through *istishadi*. Dying through jihad is portrayed as automatic entrance to paradise. The torture of the grave, or being eaten alive by worms in a tiny restricting space until the end of days, is not appealing for those who may not have been successful pursuing atonement through *tawba*.<sup>41</sup>

Another reason for *istishadi* through jihad as opposed to committing *tawba* is the shock-and-awe factor. There is a political goal behind every terrorist attack. *Tawba* does not quite get the message through like a suicide bombing that kills several people. The effectiveness of terrorism lies in its apparent random selection of targets and victims, as well as the fear and destruction it causes.

Another reason is that the cult and romanticism of *istishadi* is much more appealing than simply apologizing and repenting for one's sins through *tawba*. Palestinians, in particular, venerate the cult of martyrdom, in which martyrs have parades in their honor and streets named after them. There are also the propaganda videos of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda that show shirtless young Muslim men, usually Arabs, undergoing military training with hypnotic drums and music in the

background. Children are taught to revere these martyrs and their deeds. Young women are taught to dream of the day that they lose their martyred husbands in death. The allure of death and beautiful virgin maidens for both men and women is intoxicating. In addition, in many Muslim cultures, the families of the martyrs are provided for the rest of their lives, receiving regular rewards and benefits from their communities.<sup>42</sup> With all this glory and fame after death (that was probably never received in life), why would one pursue *tawba*?

One final reason is that death in Islam is not something to mourn and differs completely from the Western concept of grief. In Islam, it is a sin to grieve a loved one who has gone to paradise.<sup>43</sup> Muslims are supposed to be happy for those who have gone to paradise and to be rather envious of their new relationship with Allah. If someone wants to martyr themselves for a cause that is viewed as a just reason for jihad, how could *tawba* be more attractive? It is likely that people who pursue *istishadi* over *tawba* have not had the easiest lives and the promise of automatic entry into paradise is much more attractive than the return to the difficult lives they have been living. To put it bluntly, *istishadi* is the surest way to get to paradise.

Clearly, *tawba* is neither the best nor most realistic option for many would-be martyrs. Perhaps this is where secondary and tertiary motivations come in for committing a suicide bombing. The previous paragraphs illustrate many possible reasons why *tawba* will not work for a prospective suicide bomber. The best way to understand sin as a motivation for *istishadi* is to interview unsuccessful suicide bombers directly after their failure, before the leadership of the terrorist organization gets to them in prison. Once terrorists are put in prison, they will typically tow the line of the

terrorist group to the public.<sup>44</sup> Stories will often change, and the group's propaganda line will be the response. However, access to these people is difficult to obtain, so this article will examine case studies concerning sin and *istishadi* for both men and women.

### **Case Studies and the Use of *Istishadi***

The concept of martyring oneself to achieve forgiveness of sins and to obtain access to paradise is applicable to both male and female suicide bombers. The role of the recruiter cannot be underestimated in these circumstances. A Muslim man or woman, or any potential convert, is first located as a possible suicide bomber by a recruiter, and the recruiter then establishes a relationship with them. With time and trust, a relationship develops, and the person divulges their sins to the recruiter, perhaps with admission of guilt and shame. The recruiter may already be aware of the sins if the person is a target.<sup>45</sup> Eventually, the recruiter talks the person into becoming a martyr to find forgiveness from Allah and entrance into paradise. This is not brainwashing, as some may state, as it is documented in the Quran that *istishadi* will lead to clemency and a place in paradise.<sup>46</sup> While this concept of the recruiter's role in suicide terrorism needs more research, anecdotal stories are quite revealing.

The following case studies are examples of suicide bombers who have led "sinful" lives according to Islam and have accomplished *istishadi*. Not every one of these cases has a documented statement where the person or someone close to them had stated that they martyred themselves because of their transgressions. Often, the person's family or close friends have used their transgressions to justify their sacrifices. In addition, this list of martyrs

is not exhaustive, as the examples are numerous, but it is a relatively protracted list for the purposes of article length and comprehension.

### *Men*

- Jamal Ahmidan (al-Qaeda) arrived in Spain as an illegal immigrant and married a drug addict to obtain legal status in the country. A drug dealer and user, he consumed heroin, cocaine, and alcohol even though he was Muslim. He had also served time in prison for murder and been in legal trouble on numerous occasions.<sup>47</sup> He was a suicide bomber in the Madrid bombing of March 2004.<sup>48</sup>
- Salaman Abedi was an ISIS suicide bomber in Manchester, England, in 2017. According to an *Independent* article, "The 22-year-old was remembered as a 'fun guy' who drank, took drugs and possibly had links with local gangs before appearing increasingly religious as his radicalization deepened."<sup>49</sup>

### *Women*

The concept of female suicide bombers requires more background, as many Muslims view women participating in the lesser jihad as *haram*, or forbidden. The Quran has some relatively contradictory statements regarding female jihad, and this most likely causes the disparity in Islamic society. In the Quran, Muhammad and his wife Aishah discussed the concept of female jihad. Aishah stated, "Apostle! We consider Jihad as the best deed. 'Should we not fight in Allah's Cause?' He [Muhammad] said, 'The best Jihad for women is the Hajj done as I have done it.'"<sup>50</sup> Muhammad

states his preference that women should not engage in jihad but instead pursue the holy pilgrimage to Mecca.

However, *Jihad is also an individual duty. When an enemy invades a Muslim country, all the inhabitants of that country should go out and fight the enemy. In this situation, it is unlawful for anyone to refrain from fighting. The Prophet states, "Allah says: 'O you who believe! Fight those unbelievers who are near to you and let them find you in hardness.'*<sup>51</sup>

Women pursuing jihad have repeatedly used this scriptural passage in the Quran to justify their pursuit of the lesser or outer jihad. They argue that men are not pursuing jihad as they should be. Therefore, it is the duty of Muslim women to pursue their own jihad. Most of these women who martyr themselves are not married, so they cannot become a faithful and pure wife for a husband who accomplishes *Jannah*, watching with love as he pursues sexual nirvana with the *houris*. Instead, the single female martyr hopes to become one of the *houris* or even the leader of the *houris*.

Throughout Islamic history, Muslim women were not allowed to fight in war, which included performing acts of martyrdom.<sup>52</sup> However, the strategic value of women has been observed in the last few decades, and female suicide bombers have been used frequently by jihadist terrorist groups, particularly in recent years. According to political scientist Mia Bloom, the first female suicide bomber was Dalal al-Maghribi. Dalal was a Palestinian who blew up a bus going to Tel Aviv, Israel, on 11 March 1978 in the Coastal Road Massacre. This attack was ordered by Fatah and was one of several in a terrorist spree of attacks.<sup>53</sup> Sana'a Mehadli was a lone suicide bomber who martyred herself on 9 April 1985 for the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.<sup>54</sup> The first female suicide bomber in the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict is widely attributed as Palestinian Wafa Idris, who detonated herself on 27 January 2002 for Hamas.<sup>55</sup>

In the last two decades, female suicide bombers have been considered and adopted by jihadist terrorist groups. Sheik Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual founder of Hamas, was questioned by journalist Barbara Victor about female suicide bombers. Victor asked him,

“How do you feel, Sheik Yassin, a man of God, when you hear that a young woman has strapped on an explosive belt and blown herself up in a market, killing dozens of Israeli men, women, and children?” Sheik Yassin responded, “It is a good sign. Once women were squeamish about seeing blood or committing acts of martyrdom. Now they are willing to die for the sake of our cause. For me, it is a good sign that women are beginning to take up the fight alongside our men.”<sup>56</sup>

The following list offers examples of women who have martyred themselves for their sins.

- Ayat al Ahras was 18 when she carried out a suicide bombing for Fatah in Israel on 29 March 2002. She was pregnant and unmarried.<sup>57</sup>
- Darine Abu Aisha carried out her suicide attack for Hamas after being publicly disgraced at an Israeli checkpoint. She was forced to kiss her cousin and refused to marry him.<sup>58</sup> She was “aware that her refusal would bring disgrace to her family.”<sup>59</sup> In jihadist families, her chastity and therefore the honor of her family was destroyed.
- Hasna Aitboulahcen martyred herself in an attempt to kill police in Paris. She was known as an alcoholic and a Westernized Muslim who

died her hair blonde, dressed in jeans, and wore cowboy hats. She began to wear a hijab around a month before she committed suicide. A friend stated, "She was really vulnerable and going through a bad time in her life, so they came at the right time and found the right person."<sup>60</sup> As alcohol is forbidden for Muslims, this woman committed a grave sin in becoming an alcoholic.

- Luiza Asmayeba, a Chechen, was wounded in a shootout with Russian police on 24 June 2003 in Grozny. "Before her death, she told security authorities that she had been repeatedly raped and impregnated by Chechen mujahedin and saw *istishadi* as the only way to cleanse herself from that shame."<sup>61</sup> In Muslim societies, women may be held responsible for their own rape. If they inspired *fitnah*, a sexual, uncontrollable frenzy, in men, the men are not responsible for their actions.<sup>62</sup>
- Wafa Samir Ibrahim al-Biss was burned all over her body from a cooking fire. She had also been raped as a child. Her parents sent her to be a suicide bomber for the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.<sup>63</sup> Again, her rape was the sin that humiliated her family and destroyed their honor. In Islam, it is believed that a woman brings rape upon herself, as she has not guarded her virtue as well as she should have.
- Hiba Daraghmeh represented Palestinian Islamic jihad and martyred herself on 19 May 2003. She had been raped by her uncle and withdrew socially, donning a full hijab and befriending only women.<sup>64</sup>
- Tawriya Hamamra volunteered for a suicide mission for the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Israel Defense Forces foiled her plans and arrested her in Tulkarm on the West Bank. Tawriya stated, "I didn't

- feel fear. I am not afraid of dying. I went for personal reasons. I was afraid of how Allah would look on me if I came for impure reasons.”<sup>65</sup>
- Wafa Idris was a barren, divorced Palestinian woman who chose *istishadi* as a way to rectify the family embarrassment that she had caused. She was claimed by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Her sister-in-law stated that Idris was never the same after her husband divorced her, and that her divorce had made her a constant target of mocking. “Wafa knew she could never marry again because a divorced woman is tainted.”<sup>66</sup> Idris stated days before she died, “I have become a burden on my family. They tell me they love me and want me, but I know from their gestures and expressions that they wish I didn’t exist.”<sup>67</sup>
  - Faiza ‘Amal Juma’a was a transsexual Palestinian. She was unable to live as a normal Muslim woman and have a family. She redressed her sins by becoming a *shahida*, which is a female martyr. She stated, “Who will want to marry someone like me? Have you forgotten that I am Ahmad?”<sup>68</sup>
  - Thouria Khamour was a tomboy who did not excel in school, and no one wanted to marry her. She belonged to the Tanzim sector of Fatah and was a failed suicide bomber.<sup>69</sup>
  - Shifa al-Qudsi was a failed suicide bomber who had a series of disastrous romantic affairs after her divorce and had murdered a random Israeli motorist.<sup>70</sup>
  - Reem Raiyshi committed adultery, and her husband urged her to carry out a suicide attack for Hamas as a result. Her illicit lover recruited her and drove her to the site of the attack.<sup>71</sup>

- Andalib Suleiman was impregnated outside of wedlock by a Fatah operative and martyred herself on 12 April 2002.<sup>72</sup>
- Ahlam Tamini assisted in the Sbarro Pizza bombing in Jerusalem on 9 August 2001 for Hamas. She fell in love and had a child, which her brother's family took from her. Identified by the pseudonym Zina, she stated, "Everyone knew about me and my baby and they understood why I had been sent to live with my cousins." To become a martyr, Tamini had to prove herself to her lover and married father, Hassan. "He told me if the attack was a success, which means that more than twenty people were killed, he would finally consider me a valuable part of the organization. He told me that only then I could have the honor of dying in my own martyr operation."<sup>73</sup>
- Zulikhan Yelikhadzhievya was kidnapped by her half-brother after she had disgraced her family honor by falling in love with her stepbrother, a *mujahed* named Zhaga. They escaped together and had a sexual relationship, but Yelikhadzhievya was consumed by the fear of "falling into the hands of my relatives." If her sins were discovered, she could no longer "live in this dirty world and (would) go to hell" for her transgressions. She was convinced that she could be forgiven through *istishadi*. She was caught by Russian security forces before she martyred herself.<sup>74</sup>

In her interview with an Arab journalist in Palestine, an academic and member of the Knesset, Anat Berko stated the following concerning a female suicide bomber:

I remembered something I had heard in that context, “Not a *shaheeda*, a *sharmouta*” (i.e., not a woman who died as a martyr for the sake of Allah, but just a whore), and I heard it from Murad, an Arab journalist who accompanied me several times when I interviewed individuals outside Israeli prisons. He added, “It was better for her to die than to be murdered, and she even took a couple of [Israeli] soldiers with her, so all her sins were forgotten. And there is something I want you to know: if someone decides to be a *Shaheed*, every bad thing [they] ever did is canceled, even if it’s a question of a woman who slept around. It’s like what a Muslim on a hajj feels like. So a lot of men commit sins and say to themselves, “I’ll go on a hajj and everything will be erased, so I can do anything, I’m going to run wild.”<sup>75</sup>

*Istishadi* is a complicated path for women, as it can be quite taboo in Muslim society and the Quran.<sup>76</sup> In a *New York Times* article, Leor Halevi, a professor of history at Texas A&M University, talks about “the torture of the grave,” or what occurs after the death of a Muslim who does not die through *istishadi*. Halevi writes that after a Muslim dies, they will return to Earth to see their funeral and will briefly reside in their body again while they are questioned by two angels, Munkar and Nakir. If their sins have been washed clean, their grave is made into a habitable luxurious domain until the end of days. If their sins have not been purified, the grave will become a constricting tight space that will weigh on them for eternity, and they will endure intense pain while worms eat their body. In the end, Allah may forgive them and let them into paradise. Indeed, the psychological effects of

the “the torture of the grave” create anxiety for many Muslims. The psychologist Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, who has studied preoccupation about death among Arab youth, has found that the torture of the grave is a realistic cause of anxiety. As Muslims understand it, it means that a person must lie in their grave until the Prophet returns or the person’s sins are forgiven.<sup>77</sup>

### **Discussion of Case Studies**

One difficulty with this research involves tracking statements from martyrs as to why they committed *istishadi*. The intent is the most important part of the act. If the intent is to kill as many infidels as possible before death, then the act is not suicide, and the person will gain the status of a *shahid*. The research in this article is based on the theory that these people lived un-Islamic lives and committed what are viewed as egregious sins in Muslim communities. What is known of these people is that they committed these sins, were approached by a recruiter, then typically became very strict Muslims, and subsequently martyred themselves, or at least tried to martyr themselves. Many of these suicide bombers are not likely to publicly confess their sins in the martyrdom videos that are sometimes published, since the admission of sins would likely mean embarrassment for the family in this society. However, there is a pattern that is evident in these case studies that can be observed. The case studies would be stronger if this author could have met with the martyrs prior to their final act or if they had left documents explaining their actions, but this was not possible.

It appears that women are more likely to use *istishadi* for perceived sins as a reason to commit a suicide bombing than men. These sins include

infidelity, alcoholism, drug use, promiscuity, rape (or induction of *fitna*), family embarrassment, transsexuality, and being a family burden. This is most likely due to the inferior status of women in the Islamic patriarchal society. Scholar Anat Berko states that the Palestinian women recruited for suicide bombings are often sexually abused before *istishadi*, but since they are earning passage to paradise their virtue no longer matters.<sup>78</sup> Women are considered expendable in many Muslim countries by jihadist organizations, and in recent years women have been recruited to commit suicide bombings by jihadist groups in large numbers. Women are often not expected to be violent, cannot be easily searched, and can disguise themselves as being pregnant or obese while carrying a bomb. As a result, women can succeed in suicide bombings, and many jihadist organizations have capitalized on this fact.<sup>79</sup>

The concept of honor in Islamic society and the need for the women in the family to protect that honor is most likely another reason that women need to atone for their perceived sins by pursuing *istishadi*. Women are the keepers of honor in their families and are singularly responsible if that honor is lost. If a woman dies for Allah by pursuing *istishadi*, she wipes her sins clean and therefore restores the honor of her family. Sins that produce shame include barrenness, divorce, adultery, and rape, which are among the most common reasons for *istishadi*. Men also want to restore honor to their family by pursuing *istishadi*, but this is not as prevalent for men as it is for women.

Based on the data presented in this article, men who martyred themselves predominately attacked Western countries, whereas women were mostly attacking Israel and were Palestinians. It is important to note

that female suicide bombers have not yet reached the Western countries *en masse*. However, this author hypothesizes that this could occur in time, particularly with ISIS. ISIS is incredibly skilled at using social media to recruit Western women to go to Syria or Iraq to join the organization, and it could either create sleeper cells to the West or recruit women in the West to commit acts of *istishadi* for Islam. If the women are already in jihadist Muslim families, this is not a far stretch.

### **Conclusion and Avenues of Future Research**

In conclusion, this theory that some jihadist Muslims martyr themselves because of their sins and receive automatic entry into paradise would benefit from more research. Since the martyrs are no longer with us, it would be advantageous to speak with family members and friends as to the suspected motives of these suicide bombers. Even then, family members may not know or may not be inclined to discuss the so-called “dirty laundry” of their deceased kin. Why was *tawba* not pursued by these people? The justification or personal story of the suicide bomber is often difficult to research.

A possible counterargument to this research is that if *istishadi* is surest way to have one’s sins forgiven and gain automatic entry into paradise, why are more Muslims not martyring themselves? The answer to this question is relatively simple. Most people do not want to die. Most people also do not have the fortitude to end their own lives and use suicide as the final solution. While the *hadith* corpus and Quran address these ideas, they are not explicitly adhered to, and achieving *istishadi* is one of the most extreme components of Islam for even the most devout believer.

Therefore, jihadists tend to be one of the few sects of Islamists that pursue *istishadi*.

However, there is some room for prognostication with this research. If a Muslim person, whether man or woman, lives a life that is not within the confines of their religion and they suddenly begin to live an austere Muslim lifestyle, this may be a warning sign that the person is potentially considering *istishadi*. At this point, an investigation or possibly an intervention from intelligence organizations or police may be necessary. Sudden changes in lifestyle behavior by Muslims attending extremist mosques are possible signs for terrorist profilers in intelligence organizations. Considering the terrorist attacks that are constantly occurring throughout the world and particularly in the West in recent years, it is possible that this phenomenon will continue to grow.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Kenneth Cragg, "Hadith," Britannica Academic, 5 August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Hadith Collection," British Library, accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the complexity of these concepts, several terms have been generalized for the purposes of this discussion. *Jihad*, *hadith*, and *tawba* have multiple meanings depending on the context of the discussion within Islam.

<sup>4</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:2:35.

<sup>5</sup> *Quran 2:160* (Yusuf Ali translation).

<sup>6</sup> *Quran 66:8* (Yusuf Ali translation).

<sup>7</sup> *Quran 4:116* (Shakir translation).

<sup>8</sup> Concerning suicide terrorism, the role of the jihadist terrorist group recruiter cannot be underestimated. It is the recruiter who brings the person to the organization, whether a family member or friend. Using information they have learned about the sins or weaknesses of the individual, the recruiter then influences the person to sacrifice their own life for political reasons. According to this author's own interview and research experiences, recruiters will often target the rejected, the disowned, the misfit, or mentally or physically damaged people. The recruiter must persuade the possible martyr that they need redemption for their sins and that paradise through jihad is worth the cost of their life. The recruiter may also work in tandem with an *imam* (leader) to corroborate the scriptural component. In a sense, the recruiter is the predator and the potential suicide bomber is the prey. The role of the recruiter is a gray area in terrorism studies and is often difficult to

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ascertain as the recruiters are few, are rarely arrested, and would never admit to their recruiting activities.

<sup>9</sup> Amritha Venkatraman, "Religious Basis for Islamic Terrorism: The Quran and Its Interpretations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 3 (2007): 229–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600781612>.

<sup>10</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, Aviad Mendelboim, and Dana Ayalon, *Suicide Bombings Worldwide in 2019: Signs of Decline following the Military Defeat of the Islamic State*, INSS Insight No. 1244 (Tel Aviv, Israel: Institute for National Security Studies, 2020). The 2020 report has not been published yet.

<sup>11</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, Aviad Mendelboim, and Adi Gozlan, *Suicide Attacks in 2018: Fewer Attacks and Victims in Fewer Countries*, INSS Insight No. 1126 (Tel Aviv, Israel: Institute for National Security Studies, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Zahid Aziz, "Shakir's Quran Translation—Blatant Plagiarism of the First Edition of Maulana Muhammad Ali's Translation," Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Movement, October 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Khaleel Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an," *Middle East Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 58–71.

<sup>14</sup> "Jihad," BBC, 3 August 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:2:35.

<sup>16</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 4:53:352.

<sup>17</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, 20:4645.

<sup>18</sup> Quran 3:157 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>19</sup> Quran 2:218 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>20</sup> Quran 9:16 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>21</sup> Quran 16:110 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>22</sup> Quran 29:6 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>23</sup> Quran 52:17–19 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>24</sup> Quran 55:54–56 (*Ahmed Ali translation*). See also Quran 55:70–78 (*Ahmed Ali translation*).

<sup>25</sup> Quran 2:271 (*Shakir translation*).

<sup>26</sup> Quran 11:114 (*Shakir translation*).

<sup>27</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, 3:106:1712.

<sup>28</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, 4:21:268.

<sup>29</sup> "Houri," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015). See also the hadith by Abu 'l-Qāwsim Sulaymān Ibn Ahmad ibn Ayyoob ibn Muṭawyyir al-Lakhmī ash-Shāmī at-Ṭabarānī. *The houri are not human, and human beings are the highest of Allah's creation*.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (New York: Book Foundation, 2005), 1128. The author writes, "The noun *hur*—rendered by me as 'companions pure'—is a plural of both *ahwar* (masc.) and *hawra'* (fem.)."

<sup>32</sup> Nerina Rustomji, "American Visions of the *Houri*," *Muslim World* 97, no. 1 (January 2007): 79–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2007.00159.x>.

<sup>33</sup> "Religions: Jihad," BBC, accessed 15 May 2020.

<sup>34</sup> David Lester, "Suicide and Islam," *Archives of Suicide Research* 1, no. 10 (January 2006): 40–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811110500318489>.

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<sup>35</sup> Ajit Shah and Mahmood Chandia, "The Relationship between Suicide and Islam: A Cross-national Study," *Journal of Injury and Violence Research* 2, no. 2 (June 2010): 93–97, <https://doi.org/10.5249/jivr.v2i2.60>.

<sup>36</sup> As cited in Ustadh Mukhtar Ba, "The Meaning of Tawba (Repentance from Sins)," *Muslim Matters*, 15 February 2013.

<sup>37</sup> "Repentance," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed 15 May 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Ba, "The Meaning of Tawba (Repentance from Sins)."

<sup>39</sup> Ba, "The Meaning of Tawba (Repentance from Sins)"; and Roohi Tahir, "Repentance as a Way of Life: Islam, Spirituality, and Practice," Yaqeen Institute, 6 August 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Quran, 4:116 (Shakir translation).

<sup>41</sup> Leor Halevi, "The Torture of the Grave: Islam and the Afterlife," *New York Times*, 4 May 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492235>; and Justus Reid Weiner, "Palestinian Children and the New Cult of Martyrdom," *Harvard Israel Review*, accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Quran 2:155–57 (Ahmed Ali translation); and *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 7:70:547.

<sup>44</sup> This statement is based on this author's research concerning prison interviews with convicted terrorists. See Christine Sixta Rinehart, *Sexual Jihad: The Role of Islam in Female Terrorism* (Lanham, MD; Lexington Books, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Rinehart, *Sexual Jihad*.

<sup>46</sup> Darren Hudson et al., *The Irrational Terrorist and Other Persistent Terrorism Myths* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Adam Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-destructive Killers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> For more on the 2004 attack, see Stephen Sackur, "2004: Madrid Train Attacks," BBC, 11 March 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Salman Abedi: How Manchester Attacker Turned from Cannabis-smoking Dropout to ISIS Suicide Bomber," *Independent*, 24 May 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Khan, *hadith corpus*, 4:52:43.

<sup>51</sup> Quran 9:123 (Shakir translation).

<sup>52</sup> David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 375–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500180212>.

<sup>53</sup> Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>54</sup> Sinem Cengiz, "How Terrorist Groups Use Women as Suicide Bombers," *Arab News*, 17 December 2016.

<sup>55</sup> James Bennett, "Arab Woman's Path to 'Unlikely' Martyrdom," *New York Times*, 31 January 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>57</sup> "Blackmailing Young Women into Suicide Terrorism," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 February 2003.

<sup>58</sup> "Dareen Abu Aysheh: Number Two Woman Martyr," Islam Online Archive, accessed 7 September 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, 109.

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<sup>60</sup> Leda Reynolds, "Female Suicide Bomber Was 'Alcohol-loving' Honeytrap Planted to Fool Police," *Daily Express*, 20 November 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Yossef Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: Al-Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 268.

<sup>62</sup> Saba Syed, "Fitnah Frenzy: Muslim Men Traumatized," *Muslim Matters*, 11 April 2011; and Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>63</sup> Anat Berko, *The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers*, trans. Elizabeth Yuval (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 106–7; and "Attack by Female Suicide Bomber Thwarted at Erez Crossing," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 June 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, 116–17; and Sa'ïd Ghazali, "The Story of Hiba, 19, a Suicide Bomber. Can the Road-map Put an End to All This?," *Independent*, 27 May 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 143.

<sup>66</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, 196.

<sup>68</sup> Mira Tzoreff, "The Palestinian Shahida: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv, Israel: Institute for National Security Studies, 2006), 13–24.

<sup>69</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth," in *Female Suicide Bombers*, 25–41.

<sup>70</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, 259.

<sup>71</sup> "Atoning for Adultery with Martyrdom," *Washington Times*, 20 January 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Israeli Security Forces, "Blackmailing Young Women into Suicide Terrorism," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 February 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, 140.

<sup>74</sup> Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 268.

<sup>75</sup> Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> See Rinehart, *Sexual Jihad*, chapter 5.

<sup>77</sup> Halevi, "The Torture of the Grave."

<sup>78</sup> Berko, *The Path to Paradise*.

<sup>79</sup> Jessica Davis, "Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (2013): 279–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.763598>.