# Explosion of meanings: Complexities surrounding the multiple meanings of martyrdom in the context of Turkey

Gulizar Haciyakupoglu

This article critiques the erosion in the meaning of martyrdom through the attribution of diverse connotations to the word by different parties with diverse aims, and the proliferation of the application of martyrdom to define political deaths in diverse contexts by different parties in the political context of Turkey. It seeks to question the normalization and justifications that arrive with the construction of knowledge through the discourses on martyrdom, and critiques the irony between beyond-earthly promises of martyrdom and the earthly decision of rewarding martyrdom.

*Keywords*: Martyrdom, Turkey, Discourse, Jihad, Islam

An explosion occurred on the night of our flight from the İstanbul Atatürk Airport. We were at most thirty minutes shy of being at the place of the turmoil and being one of the "martyrs". Martyr is a loaded word that is being echoed in different platforms on a continuous basis in Turkey. It, as a word, and more so as a concept, has evolved into a combination of letters that is attached as a label to various political deaths. It is a discourse that helps construct knowledge on political deaths with its emergence in different sites, its repetition and its constant circulation. At the same time, it receives diverse connotations through its employment in different political contexts and its selective ascription to diverse political deaths. Hence, on the one hand, repetition and circulation of this constructed concept of martyrdom, with the ambiguity around its meaning, is serving to justify, even to normalize, the deaths and alleviate the possible aggravation that may emerge as a reaction to the loss of lives. On the other hand, the very same word is implicated in the justification of violent attacks, and martyrdom, with its promise of heaven, helps convince terrorists to commit attacks. Hence, who is a martyr is defined in a particular political context and, especially in events like terror attacks, in relation to the opposing side, or enemy.

Herewith, the erosion in the meaning of martyrdom through the attribution of diverse connotations to the word by different parties with diverse aims and the proliferation of the application of the word to define political deaths calls for a critical inquiry. While contemplations on the expansion of the meaning of martyrdom - and the ambiguity that comes with it - is nothing new[1], within the aforementioned context, abstruseness caused by the widening of the subjective application of the word to define various political deaths necessitates the evaluation and examination of the following queries. First, the roots of the word martyr in the Islamic culture and in Turkish and the clash between beyond-earthly promises of martyrdom and the earthly decision of rewarding martyrdom call for an interrogation. Second, construction of subjects with the help of interpellation and related to this creation of an enemy, formation of categories including 'good' and 'bad' Muslim, and the implications of enemy creation and categorizations in the justification process necessitate discussion. Third, jihad which is often carried out with with a belief in the rewarding of martyrdom in death begs for an explanation. Herewith, I will first explain what I mean by discourse and subsequently discuss the aforesaid three queries in sequence.

Discourses, like martyrdom, emerge in different 'sites' such as family, media, and education, compose meanings, generate knowledge, give birth to societal values in a particular context and time period, and receive authority through their penetration into social behaviors and understandings (Hall, "Foucault" 75; Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* 46, 227; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 93, 94, 107)[2]. Dominant discourses construct certain knowledge as 'truth' while sidelining other knowledge, and the knowledge and truth constructed by dominant discourses have the potential to further authorize the discourse (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 81-84, 93). Circulation and acquisition of discourses help pervade various power relations, build knowledge and truths, and infiltrate discourses into social practices, and they obliquely assist the normalization of the constructed truths and knowledge (Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* 46; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 81-84, 93). Thus, daily news with numbers of "martyrs" from the clashes between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)[3] and the increasing numbers of victims of ISIS bombings contribute to the knowledge and truth creation on martyrdom. Dissemination of news that carry discourses on martyrdom in different sites shapes society's percep-

tion on being a martyr, and helps alleviate the anger and agony by attributing high status to martyrs. This knowledge construction on martyrdom is also related to the increasing number of political deaths and the need to stretch the application of martyrdom to different contexts and cases to find a correspondence to the political deaths of the time.

Receiving news on "martyrs" on a daily basis is not strange in Turkey, if not already accepted as normal. The word is repeated in different venues such as media, family, and education with references to different events and contexts. Here it should be kept in mind that the process of repetition leads to a separation from the origin, as the originality derived from the origin disappears in the linear "illustration", "imitation" or "copy" (Gendron xx). Eventually, what is delivered in relation to the origin is far from the original. This is especially the case in today's new media-infused atmosphere, as every discourse is multiplied, disseminated and further diversified in its transfer and reception. Accordingly, in the context of Turkey, we see the departure from the origin with every single use of the word. In addition, the number of "martyrs" Turkey has in a day, beyond the diversities in meanings and classifications, incites the normalization impact of the circulation.

Martyrdom is integrated into the knowledge and truth construction process with its political weight and religious promise. Martyrdom, with its circulation and constant referral by both the nation-state and terrorist organization, is planted in different contexts to refer to political deaths that are at times labeled differently by two opposing sides. Hence, martyrdom, with the various connotations it has taken in the Quran and the meaning it received within the context of the nation-state, becomes an apparatus of political strategy, legitimacy and justification. Herewith, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of martyrdom in Islam and in the context of Turkey.

Martyr, *şehit* in Turkish, is driven from the Arabic word *şahīd*, which means witness (EtmolojiTurkce "*şehit*"), and the Turkish Language Society defines the word as a person who lost her/his life "in the cause of a holy (or divine) ideal or belief" (Turk Dil Kurumu "*şehit*")[4]. The Arabic origin of the word *şehit, shahid or shuhada* (plural), refers to bearing witness in the Quran (Cook 16). According to David Cook this concept of witness is two-fold: "the Muslim should be living testimony towards the rest of humanity" and at the same time, when and if necessary they may serve as witnesses on the "Day of Judgment"

(Cook 16). While bearing witness is the essence of the word, "teaching about martyrdom" in the Quran is "diverse", "disorganized" and "underdeveloped", and there are verses that attribute different or extended meanings to martyrdom (Cook 17). These meanings stretch from ones who suffered or were tortured for being Muslim, like Bilal, to ones who stayed committed and true to Islam until death despite being challenged, like *Khubabyb* (Cook 22), and from ones who were agonized for their commitment to Islam by non-Muslim states to the ones who died of plagues (Cook 22, 28, 29).

Cook, drawing emphasis on the variety of definitions of martyrdom, argues that the "Muslim ideal for a martyr became that person – usually a man – who through his active choice sought out a violent situation (battle, siege…) with pure intentions and was killed as a result of that choice. Ideally his actions expressed courage and defiance of the enemy, loyalty towards Islam and the pure intention to please God, since the acceptable manner of *jihad* was to "lift the Word of Allah to the highest" (Qur'an 9:41)" (Cook 30). According to him: "this type of martyrdom…required the martyr to speak out prior to his death" and make his "immortal contribution to Islam" (Cook 30).

Hence, within such a configuration, who is to decide one's sincere devotion and loyalty to Islam other than God? Despite all the definitions and conditions provided for being announced a martyr after death, I am skeptical about a mere human being's capacity to classify a death as martyrdom according to the aforementioned definitions of martyrdom when the contexts and times are changing. A human declaring a deceased as a martyr would be obliquely judging an individual's death and deciding on her/his afterworld faith. Furthermore, this judgment would not be independent of a political agenda and mindset.

Related to this point, Cook argues that the acclaimed "*hadith* collectors" stressed God's omnipotence in deciding "who is and who is not a martyr" (Cook 33). However, he adds that "the early *hadith* reflect a process of widening the definition of martyrdom to the point where it began to lose all meaning and simply came to cover anyone who had died a worthy death and should be admitted immediately into paradise" (Cook 33). Correspondingly, Ayşe Hur draws attention to the *hadiths*' comprehensive approach to who can be regarded as a martyr and lists conditions ranging from people whom lose their lives in natural

disasters to people who die when conducting scientific work and/or fair trade (Hur, "Özgeci Intihar"). Furthermore, she proposes two approaches to this widening of definition: first, to argue that the effect of the word martyrdom diminishes with the proliferation of its meaning; second, to claim that the expansion of meaning is a result of the re-shaping of the 'terminology' to respond to contemporary needs and to facilitate its infiltration into every aspect of life to render martyrdom desirable (Hur, "Özgeci Intihar"). While assessing the effect of the word is not easy, the political drive to render martyrdom desirable and the circulation of discourses on martyrdom to protect political legitimacy can be connected to martyrdom's association with nationalism and Islam in Turkey. Furthermore, martyrdom's adaptation to contemporary times works hand in hand with its selective employment to define various political deaths. I will first establish the centrality of nationalism and Islam to martyrdom, and then discuss the selective ascription of the word, which beget the categorizations of 'good' Muslim and 'good' citizen versus 'bad' Muslim, terrorist, and/or 'bad' citizen.

In the Turkish context, martyrdom has been affiliated with nationalism and Islam since the Ottoman Empire (Hur, "Özgeci

Intihar"). Because the army has been seen as the protector of the religion, and of the sultanate then and the nation-state now, sacrificing one's life for them has long been regarded as an honor (Hur, "Özgeci Intihar"; Gedik 32, 33). Accordingly, the book issued at the request of the Chief of General Staff in 1925 to teach religion to soldiers assigns martyrdom the highest rank a soldier can achieve (Hur, "Özgeci Intihar"). The book serving the same purpose in the Turkish National Army in 1981 maintains the relation between religion and nation, and reasserts martyrdom as the highest rank for a soldier (Hur, "Özgeci Intihar"). Esra Gedik establishes this relation between nationalism and religion by emphasizing religion, culture and language's importance in the nation-state building process (32). While the establishment of the republic and the introduction of secularism has brought the separation of state and religion, state regulation over religion, and - arguably - religion's push out of the public sphere, the affiliation between being a Turk and a Muslim has mostly prevailed, and religion has continued to serve as an instrument helping to institute legitimacy (Gedik 33). Religion prompts legitimacy through offering a context where political power can be applied, provokes "positive political behaviors from society" and through act-

ing as a component of social control, which encompasses principles including respecting government and public officials, helps sustain political authority (Gedik 33, 34). Accordingly, martyrdom, with its religious reference, is implicated in religion's mobilization for legitimacy and political power.

In the context of nation-states, who can and who cannot be considered a martyr is defined in relation to politics and nationalism. The ascription of martyrdom to the people who lose their lives in the battle between Turkey and the PKK exposes the role of politics and nationalism in the selective application of martyrdom. For instance, Nerina Weiss in "The Power of Dead Bodies" gives an example of the classification of a deceased body as a terrorist by Turkish officials and as a Kurdish fighter and a martyr by his relatives, and she draws attention to the political agency of the dead body, the ties between nationalism and martyrdom, and to the use of martyrdom as a political strategy (Weiss 161, 163). Furthermore, martyrdom is being selectively ascribed to various political deaths caused by different opposing or enemy groups. Recent deaths in the failed coup attempt are categorized as July 15 Martyrs ("15 Temmuz Şehitleri…"), Democracy Martyrs (Incesu "Işte

Demokrasi Şehitleri") or 15 July Democracy Martyrs ("15 Temmuz Demokrasi…") by different news sources. Victims of ISIS bombings are also considered as martyrs. In this vein, martyrdom is selectively ascribed in a certain context with a particular political view, and it is used to define victims of 'terror' acts committed by different organizations. Thus, knowledge and truth on being a martyr is created in relation to the opposing side and construed based on the political strategy embraced in a certain context. A martyr in one context can be regarded as a 'bad' Muslim or 'disloyal' citizen in another context.

This widening of contexts accommodating martyrdom and complex and often clashing categorizations remind of Jean Baudrillard's argument that "every individual category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other: there is total confusion of types" (Baudrillard 8). Accordingly, the category of martyrdom that deaths with certain classifications are being subscribed to is subject to contamination. Today, the ambiguity surrounding martyrdom is further deepened with Muslims killing other Muslims in the name of a particular interpretation of what it means to be a "good" Muslim. These categories and classifications, like good Muslim, bad

Muslim or martyr, with the assistance of the knowledge composed through the discourses at work, help control the object (Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*). Correspondingly, ideologies, "concepts and premises, which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspects of social existence" (Hall, *Racist Ideologies* 271), work hand in hand with discourses to instigate normalization, and consequently, trigger interpellation. Here, the political force of interpellation in depicting a certain image and character of a good Muslim and bad Muslim through the process of interpellation gains importance.

On interpellation, Louis Althusser argues that the "Ideology 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which" he has "called interpellation or hailing" (Althusser 118). According to him, individuals are interpellated as subjects in a condition which "presupposes the 'existence' of a unique and central other subject, in whose name the religious ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects", and accordingly God, "subject par excellence… interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to him by his very

interpellation… a subject through the subject and subjected to the subject" (Althusser 121). Althusser argues that the "(good) subjects" who do not challenge the process of subjection are incorporated into the "practices" guided by Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser 123). Consequently, the ideology not only conditions the "interpellation of individuals as subjects", but also initiates a self-recognition process within which the individual recognizes her/his subjection and her/his actions get conditioned accordingly (Althusser 122). In this vein, "good" Muslim who died in a terror attack are interpellated as martyrs and subjects who recognize their position in relation to this interpellation, accept the deaths and perceive the cause and eventuality of such deaths. In light of the aforementioned explanations and examples, in the Turkish context the interpellation is influenced by politics of the nation-state and the religious connotation of martyrdom is employed as a political strategy to retain political power and legitimacy. Additionally, I suggest that the interpellation of "good" Muslim is also closely tied to the denouncement of the perpetrator of the attacks as inhumane and villainous. What is puzzling here is that the same mechanism is at play on the side of the ISIS terrorists who claim to be the true

believers and who see Turkey as their enemy and "blame" Turkey for "the deformation of Islam and Muslim identity" (Daskin 9). In regards to this, Emin Daskin argues that the enemy creation, which encompasses the identification of political agents to be held responsible for the discontentment, and to be "demonized" and "targeted", is a component of terrorists' efforts to justify their violent attacks (Daskin 4). Herewith, interpellation is related to interpretation as it involves reading a phenomenon and interpreting it in such a way that facilitates subjectification and control. ISIS defines its subjects and enemy, 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, and martyrdom according to its particular interpretation of the Quran and more importantly, according to its political aims. Turkey, on the other hand, establishes 'good' and 'bad' Muslim and martyrdom categories in relation to its approach to Islam, political strategy and national aims. While one leads to inhumane acts, under both conditions dominant powers define their subjects as potential martyrs and use martyrdom, with its promise of paradise, to render death acceptable.

Perhaps, for ISIS militants, the road to their interpretation of paradise, and thus martyrdom, passes through "disciplining" non-Muslims and "bad" Muslims through

the "*jihad*" they engage in. Jihad, according to Bernard K. Freamon is twofold in Prophet Muhammad's view: "greater *jihad* [*jihad al akbar*]", which denotes the persevering individual "struggle" against one's inherent "immorality" and is placed above the second, "lesser *jihad* [*jihad al asghar*]", which involves the collective Muslim engagement in military endeavor to guard "the religion or the community" (Freamon 301). While the "greater jihad", with its hegemony and influence over "lesser *jihad*", with its stress on "justice, rectitude, fidelity, integrity, and truth", composes the central definition of *jihad* (Freamon 301), I suggest that there emerges a clash between the 'greater' and 'lesser jihad' mainly due to the diversities in the interpretation of justice, rectitude, fidelity, integrity, and truth as each one of these terms are constructed in a certain political context and at a particular time. Today these terms carry various meanings for different individuals, and the context and time that accommodate these terms is long detached from the ones these concepts, with all their historical conceptions, were born into. Furthermore, what is just and what is true are constructed within a particular political belief system. According to Daskin, doctrines, which are organized "principles, rules, norms and values" of a political or religious establish-

ments including justice and truth, help "shape interpretations and actions" and render violent acts acceptable to their committers (Daskin 4). I propose that the doctrines help justify "lesser jihad", and "lesser jihad" intervenes in "greater jihad" by its proposition as a wage to protect Islam and by the doctrines' employment to convince terrorists that this wage is a moral act and death would be rewarded with martyrdom. The propagation of 'lesser jihad' is evident in ISIS's saying "*who needs words when you have deeds*" (Daskin 7).

The change in the evaluation and interpretation of Islamic theology and law is almost inevitable with the developments in social, economic and political life, advancements in technology and globalization. However, disparities emanating from varieties in approaches to Islamic theology and law, and more importantly to the interpretation of Quran, arrive with dangerous categorizations that designate people in terms of their relation with Islam God, and the nation-state from a certain perspective. Categorizations based on these designations serve to justify acts and their results. With respect to *jihadi* actions, for *jihadis*, categorization of the victims as non-Muslim or bad Muslims, *munafiqun* or victims en route to their view of a 'proper' Islamic

**Gulizar Haciyakupoglu**

received her Ph.D. from the National University of Singapore, Communications and New Media Department. Currently, she works at the same department as a lecturer. Her research interests include online trust, gender equality advocacy in the cyberspace, feminism in Islam and the interaction between communication and authority.
**email:** cnmgh@nus.edu.sg

world, serve to validate their villainous actions and to degrade victims to mere sacrifices in the course of their investment in excelling to heaven. However, the very same heaven is promised to the victims of these inhumane attacks through their designation of martyrs. The irony is that the heaven would not be a paradise if it is cohabited by both perpetrators and victims.

Rewinding to the first sentence of this article, we were 30 minutes shy of becoming victims of a terror attack - martyrs with an earthly promise of heaven. Yet at the same time, from the opposing perspective

of ISIS, our dead bodies would be simply seen as sacrifices en route their rigid understanding - if not distortion – of Islam. Sadly, amidst these bodily and verbal political and military battles, the individual lives that are lost are unrecoverable. With all in mind, when consuming labels such as martyr, we should analyze the context and time that accommodate it, scrutinize the discourses constructing knowledge on martyrdom, and remind ourselves of the complications and constructions that arrive with the use of discourses on martyrdom for political means.

## Notes

[1] Sevan Nişanyan in his column in the Taraf Newspaper provided an examination of the word şehit in reference to Christian terminology of the term and made references to the Arabic root of the word. According to him, in Christian terminology sehid is affiliated with 'witnessing the Prophecy of Jesus', and the ones who believe in something that' they have not eye-witnessed with the power of faith' are regarded as sehid. He argues that in the next stage, people who 'face up to death to witness' were 'deemed worthy of' sehid status. Nisanyan, in reference to the connotation of the word in Arabic provided the following three explanations: present participle form of the word şâhid to the ones who 'recount a witnessed event', adjective form şehîd to the ones who die in the course of God's religion, and lastly he mentioned the definition of the term as the ones 'who are killed in the battlefield by infidels' by various authorities (Nisanyan). Please note that the original article was not traceable on Google, thus the article was read through the site Izafet, which provided it with commentaries. It should also be noted that the owner of the site made reference to the ambiguity arising from the attribution of diverse meanings to the word şehit.

[2] While the references to Foucault are made on the basis of my inferences from my readings of The Archeology of Knowledge and Power/Knowledge, and Hall's (2001) interpretation of Foucault and should not be limited to the page numbers in the in-text citation, looking at the following page numbers in Foucault's works may help understand how I deduced my arguments on his work: "Power/Knowledge" 81-84, 93, 94, 107; The Archeology of Knowledge 46, 56, 227.

[3] While the fight with the PKK is central to the discussion of martyrdom, ISIS is the main focus of this article, as the evaluation of martyrdom through the conflict between Turkey and the PKK opens many more dossiers of knowledge that cannot be condensed into this short inquiry.

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→ [4] The Turkish Language Society (Türk Dil Kurumu (TDK)) uses the words 'ülkü' (ideal) and 'inanç' (belief) in its definition of şehit (Türk Dil Kurumu "şehit"). The stated ideal or belief is expected to be holy (or divine). For reference, original definition provided by TDK is as follows: "Kutsal bir ülkü veya inanç uğrunda ölen kimse" (Türk Dil Kurumu "şehit").

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