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On the Visual Representation of Martyrdom in Palestine

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Martyrdom is an everyday event that continues to perpetuate itself in Palestine and its representation is a frequent visual motif in Palestinian art, media and life. It evokes both sacred and secular meanings. The secular sense suggests ‘heroism’ as one of its indispensable conceptual connotations, while the sacred is open to the absolute and the infinite. Both these senses imply the idea of sacrifice either ‘in the way of Allah’ or with *reference* to the homeland.

Martyrdom has become a daily word in the Palestinian lexicon and a dominant theme in Palestinian art in recent decades. Posters of Martyrs, produced by different Palestinian political parties, are now the leading form through which the concept of martyrdom is represented and communicated. There are dozens of artworks entitled *The Martyr*. Palestinian and Arab media present innumerable quantities of written, verbal and visual material on Palestinian martyrs. Yet martyrs’ posters remain and can be regarded as the main form of visual representation of martyrdom in the public space.

This paper is concerned with the way martyrdom, as a concept afloat in a signifying realm of concepts, is being constructed in martyrs’ posters. As a mythical form, in the sense developed by Roland Barthes, martyrs’ posters are a sum of signs and symbols. These signs and symbols are ‘reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth’.¹ This myth takes its existential substance from Palestinian survival in its unending everyday struggles. Resistance and sacrifice have been equated as an inevitable price to pay for a present sense of life alienated and lived in the promise of a better future. Rituals that idolise martyrs have become a necessity to help people cope with repeated loss.

The way the press photographs a martyr is totally different from the poster’s representation of a martyr. Posters, created for local consumption and part of the daily visual environment, have a different role to play from that of the press and a different audience to address. The poster documents *martyrdom*; the press instead embodies the *martyr* in the context of agony, suffering and sadness triggered by his or her sacrifice of life. A martyr’s poster containing written and pictorial information is an indirect obituary

¹ Roland Barthes, *Barthes: Selected Writings*, ed Susan Sontag, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1983, p 99



West Bank, 2002, personal collection: M Abuhashhash, Ramallah

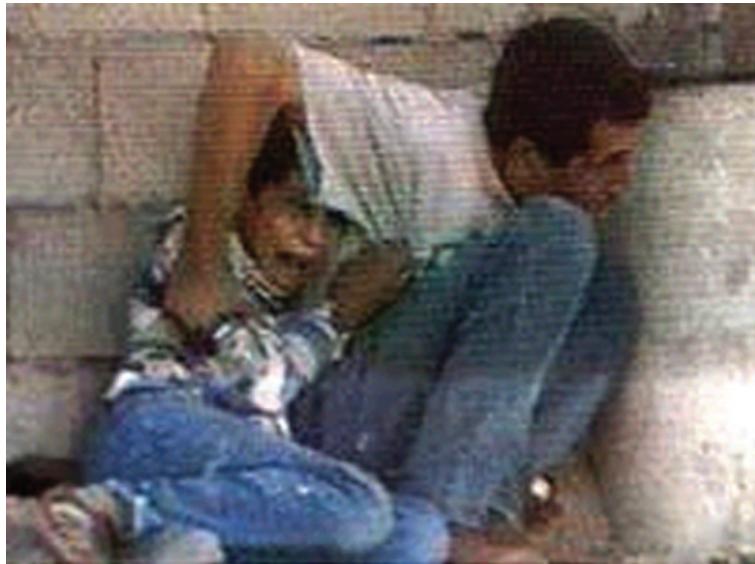
and at the same time a celebratory announcement of death. There are images, decorative borders, various signs and symbols collaged or arranged together in a manner to give death a new representation in martyrdom.

Martyrs' posters are loaded with classical, religious and national references enabling them to evoke 'something of those areas of human experiences that were generally left to imagination'.² In general, there are three indispensable and consistent elements among numerous inconsistent ones in every poster of a martyr, regardless of the martyr's political affiliation (if any), age or sex. These elements are a photograph of the martyr, the 'obituary' text that usually includes a Qur'anic verse, and various symbols. While the act of martyrdom in Palestine has gradually undergone a metamorphosis into a heroic act of resistance that breeds its own secular ethics, the martyr has become progressively consecrated. The current fight is to lead the Palestinian nation into independence. It is not an issue of gaining Paradise.

There is always space for one more poster on the walls of Palestinian towns. If the walls are overcrowded with posters, the new can always find a place over an older one. To strip the many layers of posters from a wall is to carry out a form of archaeology. One thick layer of posters will mark the history of the Al-Aqsa Intifada over the previous five years. Although thousands of Palestinians have been killed in the course of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, now in its sixth decade, martyrs' posters have proliferated to an unprecedented degree. Indeed, a new poster added for every Palestinian killed by the Israeli army, or by settlers, or as a result of carrying out a 'suicide' operation or counterattack during the last five years, is a new phenomenon that can be traced to the beginning of the current Palestinian Intifada in September 2000.

The tragic death of Mohammad Al-Durrah marked the start of the second Intifada. This twelve-year-old shot dead in his father's

² John Barnicoat, *Posters: A Concise History*, Thames & Hudson, London-New York, 1972, p 48

Gaza Strip, 2000, www.palintefada.com

arms on 30 September 2000 represented the idea of the victim in its most effective form. This incident was captured by a cameraman and broadcast throughout the world. The image of the terrified pair was printed on huge posters and plastered on walls in the centre of major cities like Ramallah. But this image of the passive victim has been an exception. What the martyrs' posters show is that Palestinians started representing themselves as courageous heroes rather than victims, especially after they lost hope of gaining any further international support when responsibility for the failure of the peace process was laid on the Palestinians.

The emphasis shifted from international attention to a need to be seen locally in Palestine as a hero in battle. Whoever falls in battle is not just a martyr but a hero. The quintessential image of the second Intifada is therefore that of fifteen-year-old Fares Odeh desperately stoning the most devastating of Israeli tanks, the 'Mar kava'. It was printed as a poster and distributed everywhere. Fares did not defeat that metallic giant and was killed on 8 November 2000, just two days after his image appeared

Gaza Strip, 2000, www.palintefada.com



Gaza Strip, 2004, www.aljazeera.net

on posters and in newspapers. The image of Chinese students facing government tanks in Beijing's Tian'anmen Square had a comparable effect. Both remain icons of heroic human determination in the pursuit of freedom. 'David's pebbles have moved into other hands.



Gaza Strip, 2004, www.aljazeera.net



The Palestinian Martyr by Mikhail Hallaq, Galilee, 2002, ed, K Boullata, 2003, *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, Palestine: Al-Qattan Charitable Trust

The Palestinians are those who throw the pebbles now, and Goliath has moved to the other side...³

Barthes distinguishes between the message in the photograph and that in the painting. 'The photograph, message without a code, must thus be seen opposed to the drawing which, even when denoted, is a coded message.'⁴ Photographers might be aware of the strong link of resonance that their images have with past human suffering. These photographs, which do not claim any code, present an 'iconic image' that resembles dozens of other images transmitting violent realities throughout the world. But by depicting martyrdom in the Holy Land, they raise a modern echo of the many paintings that represent the passion of Christ by showing his wounds. These photographs, iconised aesthetically and morally, urge the spectator to feel directly engaged in the suffering they depict. The painting by Mikhail Hallaq, entitled *The Palestinian Martyr*, might remind the viewer of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, but the major difference between the two is that no indication of any wound of martyrdom occurs in Hallaq's painting. The only Palestinian sign in the painting is the head-dress, the kaffiyeh, which covers the Christ-like martyr's loins. This specific object as a sign or symbol becomes a signifier of martyrdom in the manner of Christian iconography.

Despite all its religious connotations, martyrdom remains a political and media event. This type of death asks for exhibition in the eyes of the world, the highest media profile both locally and internationally. It seeks to cultivate international sympathy and national inspiration to revolutionary action. The funeral itself brings together mixed feelings of anger, sadness, pride, loss and nationalist determination. The martyr is

3 José Saramago, 'From David's Pebbles to Goliath's Tanks', trans Asfour Suhir, *Al-Karmel*, 72–73, 2002, p 106

4 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans Stephen Heath, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p 43

5 Ken Baynes, *Art in Society*, Overlook Press, Woodstock, NY, 1975, p 239

6 Tina Sherwell, 'Articulation of Identity: Changing Trends in Contemporary Palestinian Art', *Visiting Arts*, Summer 2000, no 43, p 32

7 Josef, XII 2, part 12, *Holy Qur'an*, trans Mohammad Ali, Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, Lahore, Pakistan, 1973, p 229

8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, London, 1978, p 4

9 Ibid, p 8

10 Barthes, *Barthes; Selected Writings*, op cit, p 113

11 Ibid

both focal point and rallying figure for these demonstrations. His body is usually borne by young people, a media object and one of curiosity for those wishing to contemplate death by martyrdom. Martyrdom acts as a magnet to national, religious and mythical symbols. Symbols accumulated in decades of struggle across the Palestinian political and cultural terrain have been crystallised principally through painting and literature. Many objects associated with the Palestinian struggle have been turned into resonant symbols, such as the Arab headdress and the olive tree. Political commitment has created a specific kind of artwork saturated with symbolism during the last decades and 'provides a visual means of expressing the abstract national and religious ideas which hold together the individual and the group'.⁵ Artists have reworked these symbols to the point of exhaustion. Such artworks 'enjoyed popular circulation among Palestinians in the form of postcards and posters and were reproduced on calendars which enabled such imagery to reach a wide audience'.⁶ The poster is mainly produced for local use and hence Arabic is the only language seen on them. Language is used not only to convey information but as a decorative aesthetic script. Arabic holds a sacred place in Islamic culture as the language of the Qur'an. This is confirmed several times by the Qur'an itself: 'We have sent it as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that ye may learn wisdom'.⁷

The photograph of a martyr in a poster is the image of an image. This image has been appropriated at least twice, first when it was 'taken', because 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed'.⁸ The second appropriation occurs when the same photograph is removed from its family album and collaged in a specific way onto other images and words to form the poster. Susan Sontag's remark on the social aspect of photography might be applied to the image of the martyr: the same photograph taken to memorialise an individual's personal achievement is then used to memorialise the imaginary extension of that individual life.⁹

The photograph normally depicting a moment in a person's life is not placed there on the poster to remind us of that particular moment in a denial of death fixed by the camera. It is there to announce that person's death in a fantasised manner calculated to arouse a complex of different feelings in the viewer. The existential question of death posed in the eyes of the martyr confronts the viewer inescapably.

Photographs used in posters are generally personal ones. Some additional touches are necessary to give them an aura of the heroic. Often the face is set afloat in the sky to lend a sense of distance, mystery and timelessness far removed from its original context. 'Myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form', writes Barthes, 'but the analogy... is never anything but partial'.¹⁰ The presentation of the martyr's photograph in the poster must be an incomplete image since 'a complete image would exclude myth'.¹¹ The martyr's image floating behind the Dome of the Rock gives him an appearance of being the guardian of Jerusalem. But when the photograph is collaged in front of the Dome, the martyr remains anchored to a recognis-



West Bank, 2002, personal collection: M Abuhashhash, Ramallah



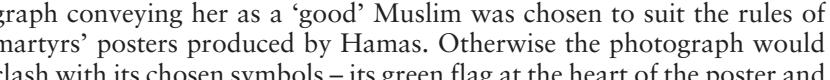
West Bank, 2002, personal collection: M
Abuhashhash, Ramallah

12 Jon Thompson, ed, *Towards A Theory Of The Image*, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht, 1996, p 10

13 Barthes, op cit, p 112

able world. The way the poster is perceived depends to a great extent on the viewer's preconceptions of life and death. Belief plays a vital ideological role in this since 'communication necessarily involves belief. A communication must be seeking to change someone's mind about something, or to implant an idea of some kind that they don't already have'.¹²

The dead boy and girl photographed together are siblings. The poster declares that both were shot dead in their house by the 'Zionist occupation snipers'. The house signifies a place of privacy, protection and warmth. To move their image into public space will itself dictate a transformation and manipulation. Roland Barthes writes: 'The mythical signification... is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy.'¹³ The children no longer belong to their parents, with whom they shared a private space, but to one of Palestine's political parties. The latter declares authority over the public space which requires that the image must depict life not death, since the concept of martyrdom signifies afterlife and eternity. The actual site of death, the house, is only alluded to verbally in the poster. The literal image of martyrdom does not find space in the poster as the desired mythical form. Images of the dead while still in this life are collaged instead. The photographs are stripped of their actual life context and redirected to inhabit another symbolic realm. The family album might have contained photographs of the girl without a headscarf; but a photograph conveying her as a 'good' Muslim was chosen to suit the rules of martyrs' posters produced by Hamas. Otherwise the photograph would clash with its chosen symbols – its green flag at the heart of the poster and



Gaza Strip, 2004, www.palintefada.com

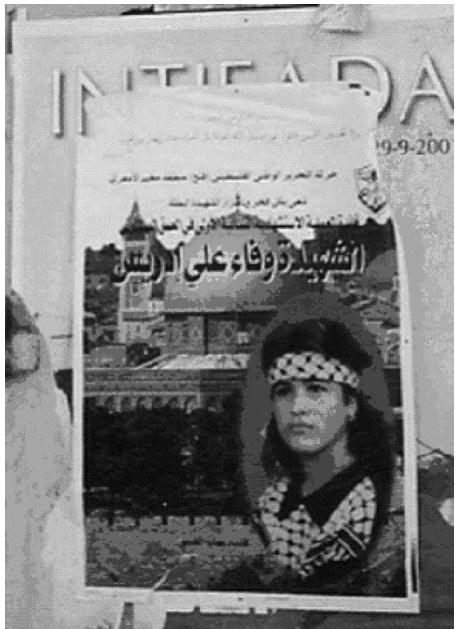


Gaza Strip, 2004, personal collection: Abed Khatib, Gaza

the Qur'an placed on the left of the poster beneath the Hamas logo. Hamas' name is written in bold at the top of the poster. The image of the Al-Aqsa Mosque appears small in comparison with the siblings' images behind it. The poster's dominant colours are Hamas' symbolic green and red, which signify blood and revolution. An interesting Qur'anic verse has been inscribed between the heads of the brother and sister. It reads: 'Among the Believers are men who have been true to their covenant with Allah: of them some have died and some [still] wait: but they have never changed [their determination] in the least.'¹⁴ This Qur'anic verse, which addresses only men, contradicts the image of two children and moreover excludes females from the 'contract with Allah'.

When Wafa Idriss, a twenty-six-year-old from the Al-Am'ari refugee Camp near Ramallah, blew herself up in Jerusalem on 27 January 2002, killing one Israeli and wounding tens of others, she became the first female suicide bomber in Palestine. She began a new page in the history of Palestinian women's involvement in the struggle against occupation. A photograph of Wafa was collaged showing her wearing a black-and-white chequered shirt and headband to emphasise her political affiliation with Fatah. Posters of Wafa were plastered all over Ramallah and the Al Am'ari Refugee Camp where she grew up and next to posters of male martyrs. Her poster bears similarity to those of other Fatah martyrs, especially ones produced by the militant Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade. Wafa Idriss appears assimilated into the conventions of representing martyrdom. An identical poster of a male martyr next to hers confirms that both were made according to a template. This can be interpreted in two ways: either as a sign of equality between male and female fighters or as a reinforcement of dominant masculinity in martyrs' posters. This latter view is highlighted by the choice of photograph on the poster, which represents her as a tomboyish teenager rather than a 'feminine' woman.

¹⁴ The Confederates, XXXIII 23, *Holy Qur'an*, op cit, p 412



West Bank, 2001, personal collection: M Abuhashhash, Ramallah

15 Ariella Azoulay, *Death's Showcase*, trans Ruvik Danieli, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA-London, 2001, p 23



West Bank, 2001, personal collection: M Abuhashhash, Ramallah

Secular political parties share similarities with religious parties in the representation of martyrdom. Aside from quoting images of the Dome of the Rock or the Al-Aqsa Mosque, no poster produced by the secular Fatah ever fails to cite a Qur'anic verse. There is always some reference to the afterlife either implicitly or explicitly. The notion of paradise appears frequently in posters, especially in Gaza, regardless of the religious or secular allegiance of the political party. Posters produced by the Marxist political party PFLP do, however, suggest a different representation of martyrdom. There is a complete absence of Qur'anic verses. A shabby poster instead quotes a sentence from a novel by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, assassinated in Beirut by Israeli intelligence in 1972, which reads: 'Mind the normal death, and do not die but under bullets.' There are neither religious symbols such as the Al-Aqsa Mosque or the Dome of the Rock on these posters, nor any hint of the afterlife. The sentence on the poster of the late PFLP leader, assassinated by the Israeli army in 2002, reads: 'You will long live in the consciousness of the people.'

The martyr's poster is a work of art inextricably connected to the rituals of martyrdom. Its exhibition is both an indispensable part of that ritual and its end: an expression of Palestine itself. The city or the town of Palestine becomes a gallery 'which is not merely a domicile that displays original works but also a unique place that allows these works to be present and not to be represented'.¹⁵ To really see them you need to come to them in their unique context, to witness the situation, to be part of the circumstances, to see the bullet holes and shrapnel marks on the walls. The walls on which posters appear are not in the strictest sense 'public space' but are parts of private properties – stores, coffee shops, bars or even advertising billboards. These spaces enter the domain of the perishable circulation of these posters and deny their owners control of their own properties. There is no form of legitimisation of the use of space, which necessarily becomes 'institutional legitimisation'. Martyrs are the public figures through which the process of legitimisation takes place and which allows the makers and hangers of posters to act on behalf of the public with unchallenged authority. A sense of collective recognition arises from the political nature of the martyr's death, which gives him or her the new identity of a public figure. Posters turn the city walls themselves into a stage on which this dramatic transformation takes place. The wall becomes a sustaining metaphor of the life and death that flash by in the posters.

One can imagine oneself mirrored as another face on the wall, another martyr looking back from the

dead. Displacement takes place in the recognition that one's place on the walls entails disappearance from life. It is something more than imagining oneself named on the poster but of imagining the void left behind by one's absence. The mere act of spectatorship raises endless questions and waves of associations.

Neither of the words 'death' or 'suicide' ever appears on posters. These are 'martyrdom operations'. But the way these posters present the sacrifice of the individual does not reflect the magnitude of people's daily suffering. Representations of martyrdom conceal and dissimulate death as a grim fact and assimilate it to eternity and the infinite – if not with the 'actual' eternity promised by Paradise. It is instead the symbolic eternity preserved in the national records and narratives of a people's consciousness. In both cases, the posters approach the meaning of death as 'from a "positive" point of view, namely by trying to elucidate the opposite of death, that is – life'.¹⁶

The everyday emphasis on the celebration of martyrdom might be understood as a collective self-defence against the absurdity of everyday devastation, backed by every possible mythical, religious and historical value in order to make this daily dose of death not only meaningful but absolutely inevitable.

A powerful means of giving the experience of loss a form is art... it can help us come to terms with loss by enabling us to relive it again and again. Thus artistic creation is a way of re-experiencing the initial drama of loss from which all subjectivity stems. The inability to come to terms with loss would result in melancholia or depression.¹⁷

Not only is death assimilated to the afterlife but a whole process of assimilation takes place in the posters. Childhood is assimilated to adulthood by attaching symbols to child martyrs; femininity is assimilated to masculinity in representations of the female martyr. The secular is assimilated to the sacred, the private to the public and the personal to the collective. Posters blur the distinction between these different categories. Posters of martyrs are constructed by a process of exclusion and inclusion: the exclusion of any element, word or image related to the fact of death, and the inclusion of those elements that elevate the reality to the status of the symbolic without emphasising the literal sense of life as a value in itself.

Do martyrs' posters by their tendency to assimilate and fuse the sacred and the secular, the finite and infinite, the real with the imaginary, history and the present, represent a melting-pot of all Palestinian ideological, political and social differences? In a sense, yes. Everybody is a potential martyr and every martyr gets a poster in public space.

Posters can be seen as a means of resistance to the conventions of the Israeli media, which dismiss Palestinians as either terrorists or troublemakers. Furthermore, they try to freeze-frame the ephemeral radio and TV



West Bank 2003, personal collection: M
Abuhashhash, Ramallah

news into a more permanent and insistent piece of visual news that confronts people everywhere and all the time.

Posters are the evidence of a collective and inclusive suffering that prevents forgetfulness or the suppression of memory. They open the wound of the 'shame we feel in the presence of the victims. For these victims are used to create something... they are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them.¹⁸ To live with overwhelming death is to recognise the condition of existing under the reality of the occupation.

Posters are a constant stimulant and reminder of this. The death of an individual is not some mere news image stripped of personal narrative but a representation of a martyr as an icon or idol: everyone is courageous, everyone is a hero, everyone is a martyr, everyone is an idol. Based on this process of 'iconisation', endless personal stories and diverse collective narratives can be generated. However, because posters also intend to inspire others to supra-personal sacrifice, the martyr's personal narrative is suppressed and his or her 'history' confiscated in favour of collective history. Posters contain only fragments of information that give the martyr's name, the date and place of martyrdom.

Martyrs' posters in general are used as a medium through which different political parties transmit their ideologies. The production of a poster always offers a new opportunity for one or other political party to administer another dose of ideology to the public. But posters are also something more than a propaganda form. To borrow from Jean Baudrillard's analysis of consumer society, martyrs' posters too can be fitted into a system that secures the order of signs and the integration of the individual within the group. The system surpasses individuality and imposes itself by means of ideological, political and psychological constraints.¹⁹ These ideological functions are not explicit but naturalised since posters represent fact to an innocent viewer rather than a



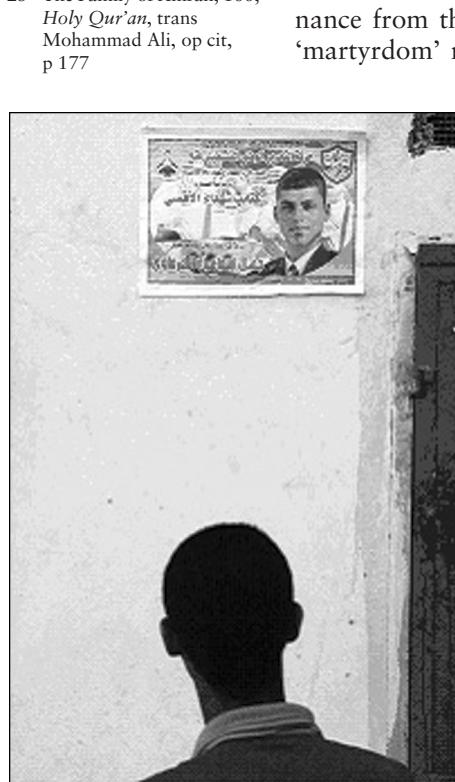
Gaza Strip, 2004, personal collection: Abed Khatib, Gaza

- 18 Theodor W Adorno, 'Commitment' [1965], in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed E Block, trans Roland Taylor, Verso, New York-London, 1980, p 188
- 19 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans George Ritzer, Sage Publications, London, 1998, p 78

semiological system. The hidden semiology of the poster is not simply to make people accept martyrdom by offering a representation of it but to impose it upon them.

Although there is a tendency to ignore national symbols in favour of a religious symbolic representation of both martyrdom and the conflict, martyrs' posters do not mention the word Jew or any of its derivations either in the main 'obituary' text or in any Qur'anic verses. There is a total avoidance of this word even by Islamic parties accused of waging a religious war against Israel. In the poster Israel is referred to either as 'Zionist occupation forces' or just 'occupation forces', which reinforces the antagonism between the occupied and the occupying as irreconcilable. Julia Kristeva writes: 'in the field of the symbol, good and bad are incompatible'.²⁰ They cannot coexist or be reconciled. The very appearance of 'good' and 'bad' creates a contradiction that demands a solution.²¹ The posters reflect this battle in terms of geography itself. Jerusalem is represented through Muslim symbols with either the Dome of the Rock or the Al-Aqsa Mosques as its signifiers. This process of signification tries to eliminate or to hide the other 'Jerusalems' embedded in Jerusalem or to 'deny the heterogeneity of the different spaces gathered under the name "Jerusalem" and reduce it to a homogeneous single space'.²²

References to the Qur'an give an unarguable legitimacy to the representation of martyrdom and its metalanguage. The most frequently cited Qur'anic verse on posters is the following: 'And think not of those who are killed in Allah's way as dead. Nay they are alive being provided sustenance from their Lord'.²³ The displacement of an event from death to 'martyrdom' necessitates a displacement of language from the conventions of 'life language' to the 'beyond life' of mythical language. Most posters (except a small percentage produced by Marxist political groups) mix religious with political discourse and blur the distinction between them. By so doing, religion is politicised and politics rendered sacred. Islamic parties tend to drop the national symbols from their posters and stick more to purely religious symbols in an attempt to control the process of signification. The continuous production of posters creates a repetition of these visual narratives. This emphasises the collective atmosphere and highlights the present as a moment in history that every Palestinian can share and relate to. It destabilises people's lives and certainties by putting 'death' at the centre of their existence. The poster intends to survive the vicissitudes of time and place, but it is by nature ephemeral. The immortality that the martyr's poster represents is vulnerable to mortality. If Palestine had a national gallery, the story of posters would be different. The need for documentation would be a reason to save these posters from extinction, even though they would join the relative stagnation of the archive. There is a deteriorating political situation in Palestine. The political impact of martyrdom over these years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada cannot be measured as success. The mythical status of martyrs as a sacrifice on the altar of a God who



Gaza Strip, 2004, personal collection: Abed Khatib, Gaza



West Bank, 2002, personal collection: M Abuhashhash, Ramallah

does not hear or want to hear or recognise the suffering of his people is increasing. It is seen increasingly as a rock of Sisyphus that must ever be rolled upwards. It seems that the propagation of martyrdom has become Palestine's Sisyphean rock that has 'mythicalised' their existence.

In his poetic article, 'Where do Martyrs go?', the Syrian-based Palestinian writer Faisal Darraj writes that 'the martyr is an idea and dreams are ideas, and since dreams do not die, the stream of martyrdom keeps flowing without any disruption'.²⁴ He thereby answers the question asked in his title.

Much ink has been spilt over martyrs and many political speeches have been delivered in their name. 'Can ink achieve the status of blood?', asked the poet Mahmoud Darwish after he had torn up many pages of failed elegies in his attempt to write a successful one to honour the writer Ghassan Kanafani, killed in 1972. Martyrs have been lost in the tug of war between the pragmatism of politics and the rhetoric of poetics. Each tries to drag them into its own sphere where they become convenient subject matter.

²⁴ Faisal Darraj, *Bo's Al-Thaqafah Fil-Mu'assasah Al-Falastineynah*, Dar Aladab, Beirut, 1996, p 10

This article is part of a long study entitled 'Poetics and Politics in the Visual Representation of Martyrdom in Palestine', City University, London 2004.

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