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## You Have Atomic Bombs, We Have the Martyrdom-Seekers: Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Narrative Arc of the Martyr

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### Abstract

Martyrdom has an undeniable rhetorical dimension, and part of a martyr's voice is the manner of his or her death. However, martyrdom does not stand alone. It is contextualized and constructed by the voice of ideologues. This project looks at the spoken and written rhetoric of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda, and seeks to understand his descriptions, attributions, and stories about martyrs and martyrdom. An analysis of 93 statements by Zawahiri was performed to identify his overarching martyr narrative and archetype. Major findings include a taxonomy of martyr attributes and a narrative trajectory of martyrdom. While pro-USA rhetoric constructs al-Qaeda's martyrs as radical terrorists, Zawahiri tells a tale of stalwart, pious, and simple men.

**Keywords:** *martyr, martyrdom, narrative, al-Qaeda, Zawahiri*

## **You Have Atomic Bombs, We Have the Martyrdom-Seekers: Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Narrative Arc of the Martyr**

**Tim Huffman**

Martyrdom has an undeniable rhetorical dimension. Dying for a cause inspires in a way that programming precision-guided munitions does not. Militant martyrs serve both tactical and symbolic objectives, as their deaths are used to recruit more martyrs (Olechowicz & Matusitz, 2013; Winkates, 2006). Part of a martyr's voice is the manner of his or her death. However, martyrdom does not stand alone. It is contextualized and constructed by the voice of ideologues. This project focuses on the public rhetoric of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, chief ideologue and leader of al-Qaeda. Zawahiri, originally a doctor in Egypt, is responsible for a significant portion of al-Qaeda's communication (Kepel, Milelli, & Ghazaleh, 2008). Al-Qaeda originally planned and executed paramilitary operations, including the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in September 2001. In the years that followed, however, the organization shifted its strategy away from direct kinetic functions to being a mouthpiece for other organizations seeking to topple "apostate" governments and instate shar'ia law (Burke, 2004; Hubbard, 2014; Turner, 2014). As a premiere podium for global conflict, al-Qaeda provides Zawahiri's narratives with extraordinary rhetorical leverage.

Narratives have power. They shape the way people understand the past and what they expect from the future. Narratives frame people's social worlds, which impacts the decisions they make and what they do (Holland, 2014). Narratives shape what people value and what they despise, who they scorn and who they strive to be. Because of their discursive force, understanding narratives is an important facet of understanding peace and conflict (Casebeer, 2008). Since narratives are critical to the way ideologies spread and thrive, identifying and understanding narratives is paramount for those interested in influencing ideology. While ideologies are highly personal, they are not "an idea stuck in someone's head, but [are] something that is subject to influence through strategic communication" (Trethewey, Corman, & Goodall, 2009, p. 2). As such, an in-depth understanding of the narratives used to recruit and inspire martyrs provides opportunities to move toward peaceful outcomes.

Zawahiri's narratives about al-Qaeda's martyrs provide a different interpretation of the organization than the one provided by U.S. mainstream media. Following 9/11, President Bush regularly portrayed al-Qaeda as evil, and in the broader media "the term 'Islamic' was used

indiscriminately to describe acts of murder and destruction” (Karim, 2003, p. ix). Karim argues that media use of “jihad” to mean “war” (as opposed to its broader meaning, “struggle”) casts Islam as “endemically violent” (Karim, 2003, p. ix). Even before September 11, U.S. coverage of Islam was often quite negative (Gerges, 1997). Not all post-9/11 coverage of Islam was monolithically negative (Ibrahim, 2010). While reports that represented external/overseas Islam as a violent threat, domestic Islam in the United States was presented as a mostly peaceful religion (Ibrahim, 2010). Also, various political and media figures made calls to treat U.S. Muslims with dignity (Ibrahim, 2010). Non-U.S. Muslims were, however, represented as “fanatic, irrational, America-hating and violent oppressors of women” who are driven by an inherently violent faith to engage in suicidal jihad (Ibrahim, 2010, p. 122). In short, the U.S. narrative casts al-Qaeda members as irrational religious fanatics who engage in terrorism and unwarranted violence and are motivated by seventy-two virgins in the afterlife. The mainstream U.S. depiction of al-Qaeda’s martyrs raises curiosity. While it stands to reason that the U.S. would cast its enemies as irrational, violent fanatics, rarely does a group conceive of its own actions as violently and fanatically irrational. What then is the story al-Qaeda tells itself?

Understanding al-Qaeda’s self-narrative has significance in the goal of understanding peace and conflict. Although they have many causes, peace and conflict are in part rhetorical accomplishments. For instance, Edelman (1988) articulates how political rhetoric strategically constructs “enemies” as valueless others. Enemies serve various rhetorical functions. They legitimize the leadership that opposes them. They serve as scapegoats for various political problems. However, rhetorical moves must also be made in order to construct someone as an enemy. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda took on the role of the central security threat to the United States, both operationally and rhetorically (Mendelsohn, 2015).

Given this, part of the project of peace requires imagining new articulations of others. While I do not naïvely assert that if the media, government, and citizens of the U.S. simply talk differently about al-Qaeda peace will suddenly flourish, I do assert that there is generative value in listening to and empathizing with others, even enemies. As Roman Krznaric, (2014) argues, empathy is a precondition for social change. Similarly, the act of listening can invert our assumptions and open ways to imagine new worlds (Dutta, 2014). Listening closely to the stories al-Qaeda tells its members is part, if only a tiny part, of reconstructing peace.

This project examines Ayman Al-Zawahiri’s descriptions, attributions, and stories about martyrs and martyrdom. To see how Zawahiri constructed his ideal martyr narrative and

archetype, I reviewed ninety-three of his public addresses, drawing upon both narrative and grounded theory. The two major results of this investigation include a taxonomy of martyr attributes and a narrative trajectory of Zawahiri's conception of martyrdom. The martyr's attributes and the martyr's narrative arc provide resources for nuancing our understandings of al-Qaeda. Before discussing findings, however, it is helpful to put the U.S. domestic and al-Qaeda public rhetoric in brief historical, religious, and political context.

### **Context**

It cannot be overstated: most Muslims are not terrorists, and most terrorists are not Muslim (Halverson, Corman, & Goodall, 2011). Examples of non-Islamic terrorist organizations include the Irish Republican Army, Kahane Chai, Shining Path, Ku Klux Klan, and Tamil Tigers. There are hundreds of millions of peaceful, law-abiding practitioners of Islam around the world, and there are scores of terrorist organizations with no connection to Islam (Halverson, 2012). The tenants of Islam do not inevitably lead to violence. Also, many Muslims do not believe organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda are an extreme form of Islam, but rather do not see them as a manifestation of Islam at all. As Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia articulates: "The ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism which destroy the land and everything on it do not belong to Islam at all, but they are the first enemy of Islam" (Riyadh, August 19, 2014).

However, in the case of al-Qaeda and Zawahiri, Islam figures heavily into their ideology (Farr, 2008). Four religious concepts frame al-Qaeda's interpretation of current events and their belief that the entire world should be subject to the will of God: tawhid, jihad, shar'ia, and jahiliyya. Tawhid is the belief in the absolute oneness of God, jihad is struggle in the service of God, shar'ia is the divine law of Allah, and jahiliyya is the pre-Islamic era of ignorance. Zawahiri, building on the writings of earlier Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), argues that humanity lives in a state of modern jahiliyya or "ignorance," which can be amended by the universal application of God's law. They call all believers to struggle and implement God's sovereignty on earth in obedience to His revealed will, "because in this heroic story the 'set-up' is the idea that this struggle against ignorance is a sacred battle, martyrdom is expected and praised, the final satisfaction of a righteous life" (Halverson et al., 2010, p. 48). These notions form the foundation for Zawahiri's rhetoric on martyrdom.

The Qur'an provides additional support for dying in the service of the divine, stating, "And some people sell themselves for the sake of Allah's favor. Allah is kind to His servants" (Qur'an 2:207) and:

Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allah, kill and are killed. That is a true promise from Him in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an and who fulfills His promise better than Allah? Rejoice then at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph. (9:110)

Qur'anic justification for fighting non-believers is generally established, although disagreements remain over the permissibility of "offensive" war. Al-Qaeda, however, goes beyond such matters and must justify the killing of fellow Muslims. For example, one traditional Islamic story relates that the Prophet condoned the use of siege engines even when enemies were using Muslims as human shields (Haykel, 2005). Another story relates that the Prophet told his wife that innocents killed in war are resurrected on the Day of Judgment and rewarded with paradise (Haykel, 2005). The grey areas abound, however.

It should be noted that violent martyrdom is not the only interpretation supported by Islamic thinkers. In his book *Doctrine of the First Son of Adam*, Jawdat Sa'id (1964) argues that Islam is a religion of peace. He cites Abel's refusal to retaliate against his murderous brother Cain: "If you do stretch your hand against me to kill me, I shall never stretch my hand against you to kill you, for I fear Allah; the Lord of the worlds" (Qur'an 5:28). From this Sa'id develops a philosophy of Islamic nonviolence. Islamic spiritual leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan exemplifies the tradition of pacifistic political resistance. A close personal friend to Mahatma Gandhi, Khan led a 100,000-man nonviolent army in resistance of the British in India (Easwaran, 1999; Halverson, 2012). Not all Islamic "radicals" advocate violence. Unfortunately, Ayman Al-Zawahiri does.

Zawahiri was born in Egypt, trained as a doctor, and began his radical political life in the Egyptian Islamic jihad. He was highly influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, who promoted the idea of armed jihad. Drawing inspiration from Qutb, Zawahiri argues in his memoir the importance of fighting the far enemy (the United States, propping up apostate governments in the Muslim world) over the near enemy (the apostate governments). For Zawahiri, "jihad is a salvific and purifying act with the ultimate goal of establishing a messianic (in the sense of idealized) caliphal state encompassing all Muslims" (Cook, 2004, p. 129). Also, Zawahiri's rhetoric often refers to the Nakba, which means catastrophe, referring to the creation of Israel (Halverson et al.,

2010). In recent years, Zawahiri's public address has endeavored to articulate a political, ideological, and religious narrative supporting al-Qaeda's global jihad.

The purpose of this project is to understand the martyr archetype instrumental to Zawahiri's narrative. Outlining the martyrdom rhetoric of Zawahiri can show the persuasive strategies used to recruit and radicalize, which opens up possible sites for dialogue and disruption. Zawahiri's speeches offer a glimpse into the motivations of extremists, because ideology is both in the mind and in discourse (Trethewey et al., 2009). Zawahiri renders a vision of the ideal martyr and, in doing so, creates an "aspirational identity" that may resonate with those who follow him (Lederman & Menegatos, 2011). While there are certainly more motivations and social pressures that radicalize an associate of al-Qaeda (including social circles, economic conditions, organizational training, and cultural convergences), Zawahiri's ideal martyr is part of this motivational process. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) suggests that meaning, language, and thought all closely relate and that the interaction between the three, among other dynamics, yields personal identity. Humans do not have neutral self-concepts but often see themselves from within social and organizational contexts (Hogg & Terry, 2014). Since Zawahiri is an important "other" for the militaristic, global jihad, his representations and narration of the ideal martyr figure highly into the identities of his followers.

Early analysis of Zawahiri's speeches and writing revealed that two rhetorical devices were heavily used: heroic attribution and an emphasis on deeds. With this in mind, two questions drove the remainder of the analysis. Given that al-Qaeda's martyrs are unlikely to think of themselves as the United States portrays them (such as intolerant, irrational, and fanatical), how does Zawahiri describe the martyrs of al-Qaeda? While extant scholarship outlines the broad historical and religious context within which al-Qaeda's organizational activity exists, how does Zawahiri narrate the deeds of particular martyrs? Addressing this question constitutes the contribution of this article to the literature.

### **Methods and Analytic Procedures**

Answering these two questions involved a close reading of ninety-three public addresses written by Zawahiri that pertained to martyrdom. The earliest document addressed al-Qaeda's attacks on U.S. embassies in 1998, and the last was the eulogy of Usama bin Laden in 2011. The texts were drawn from the Open Source Center, a U.S. Government program that collects and translates foreign intelligence documents. The ninety-three addresses include both public letters written by Zawahiri and transcripts from recorded videos.

## **Data Analysis**

Grounded theory was used in the analysis of these texts. I chose grounded theory as an analytic tool because it privileges the internal logic of the data as opposed to external theoretical ascriptions. During the initial line-by-line coding process (Charmaz, 2006), it became clear that Zawahiri focused on attributes and actions when he told stories about martyrs (as opposed to other narrative elements like setting or how things were accomplished). During the focused coding process (Charmaz, 2006), I read and identified forty-eight martyr attributes and fifty-nine actions/deeds. I reread each of the forty-eight martyr attributes in context, and I used axial coding, which involves finding similarities between data, to generate common categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The four categories presented below were chosen because they represent all of Zawahiri's descriptions with the smallest degree of overlap between sets.

Each action/deed of the martyrs was similarly reread in context, and axial coding was used to reduce the fifty-nine to ten categories. During the theoretical coding process, which involves identifying the conceptual relationships between categories (Glazer, 1978), it became clear that the verbs could be understood as constructing a narrative. Zawahiri never uses the entire set of verbs in a single speech or writing, so the verbs were coded chronologically within each address, viewed alongside each other, and combined into an overall order for the verbs. I was inspired by the words themselves to create a visual chronology in the form of an arc, with verbs like "rise" and "embark" in the first half of the set and "pour out" and "fall" in the second half. My analysis of the attributes and deeds of Zawahiri's martyrs, in total, yielded two major findings: the martyr's virtues and the martyr's arc.

### **The Martyr's Virtues: Traits and Aspirational Identities**

Zawahiri's public speeches contain regular descriptions of martyrs. As an ideological leader, he discusses martyrs for various rhetorical reasons. Often, he renders martyrs abstractly and discusses them in context of geo-political events. He also depicts martyrs as part of a larger religious reality. Finally, Zawahiri honors particular martyrs who have died in service of al-Qaeda. In all cases, Zawahiri assigns specific virtuous traits to these men. Virtues are connected to narratives, since narrative identity situates humans ethically. How humans understand their own character and the character of others is created narratively (Ricoeur, 1985). Part of how humans understand ethics and virtue is in their connection to unifying narratives (MacIntyre, 1984). In the case of Zawahiri's narratives, the martyr's virtues hovered around four major themes: determination, power, simplicity, and faith.



### **Virtues of Determination: Courageous, Devoted, Resolute, Garrisoned**

Zawahiri's martyrs are a tough group of people. They have no fear, and they do not falter in the face of death. While they have physical stamina, Zawahiri most often describes their mental fortitude. Adjectives used to evoke determination include: unstoppable, resolute, steadfast, perseverant, constant, firmness, and devoted. Such constitution has implications on the battlefield. His men do not run from danger or death: "It is not on our heels that our wounds bleed, but it is on our feet that blood drips" (Zawahiri, 2007). The importance of determination in the face of opposition is not without Qur'anic support: "How many a small band has defeated a larger one by Allah's leave. Allah is with the steadfast" (Qur'an 2:249). Determination becomes a frame for his political goals: "I call on this garrisoned, patient, resolute, heroic, Mujahid Muslim people to never concede one sand-grain of Palestine, however great the pressure applied to it, however intense the embargo becomes and however numerous the conspiracies might be" (Zawahiri, 2007).

### **Virtues of Power: Knightly, Heroic, Victorious, Strong**

In addition to holding ground, martyrs possess the power to make change and join an unstoppable, relentless, and restless jihad for the cause of glorifying Islam. These gallant warriors are imbued with supernatural might. Consider Zawahiri's (2009) characterization of the 9/11 martyrs: "The one who looks at the situation of these brothers finds that there is no comparison between the strength of 19 men and that of America." This supernatural strength can also be seen in monetary ways. These are Zawahiri's (2009) words concerning the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of violent paramilitary operations in Iraq:

America doubled its spending by the martyrdom of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, may Allah have mercy on him. Its military expenditure was in Iraq in 2006 about \$99 Million. That was the year Abu Musab passed away, may Allah have mercy on him. Killing Abu Musab, which the Americans introduced as a great success, was to solve the problem for them, but what happened is that America's expenses in Iraq had doubled in 2008 to \$195 million.

Zawahiri's calculations evaluate his martyrs as stronger than Americans 15 million to 1 and costing \$96 million dollars to kill. While this is likely hyperbole, it would be erroneous to dismiss these claims as pure fancy. Even with more modest math, it is fair to say that a relatively small group of martyrs have dramatically impacted the financial and political landscape of the past decade. Zawahiri attributes this impact to the martyrs' strength.

### **Virtues of Simplicity: Hopeful, Patient, Honest, Humble**

Despite being glorious heroes, Zawahiri casts his martyrs as having the traits of common people. Martyrs of Islam are good men. An excellent example is Zawahiri's eulogizing of Abu al-Layth al-Libi, a senior leader of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The speech begins with an evocation of determination by calling him "one of the mountains of jihad in this era." But following lionization, Zawahiri (2008) remembers al-Libi for his simple character: "Who among us can forget this smiling face, that humble character, and those high-class manners which were contained by a heart which wouldn't break even if the world were to break?" Al-Libi is loved not only for his martyrdom, but also for simple traits like positivity and humility. Of the virtues of simplicity, patience is most often mentioned. A good martyr is patient. While the mujahideen are to fight and die for the cause, they are to wait serenely for their fate, be it victory or martyrdom.

Virtues of simplicity suggest that Zawahiri does not see his martyrs as *only* heroes. They are people—heroes who can be known. At first glance, this seems to be paradoxical. How exactly can patient men participate in a restless jihad? How do men imbued with the power to topple empires demonstrate humility? While it may not be immediately intuitive how these paradoxes can be resolved, it should be noted that these paradoxes are likely not mistakes in Zawahiri's thinking. In fact, they may even serve highly pragmatic strategic ends. It is true that heroes are inspiring, but this may be hard to relate to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a man who takes \$96 million to kill. An unemployed youth at risk of al-Qaeda recruitment may want to be a heroic empire-toppler but can better identify with the human traits of humility, hopefulness, and patience. Through the construction of the ordinary hero (Campbell, 1968; Vogler, 2007), Zawahiri offers a visible connection between intimate personal stories and political/historical meta-narratives. While linking the personal and political may seem impossible, Zawahiri claims it is possible, though "due to the grace of Allah alone."

### **Virtues of Faith: Faithful, Sacrificial, Pious, Righteous**

The martyr is brave, strong, and patient, but only if he is faithful. Virtues of determination, power, and simplicity are byproducts of the virtues of faith. Zawahiri (2007) makes this explicit in his admiration of Sayyid Qutb. Although Qutb wrote while ill in prison, Zawahiri praises Qutb's ardor by calling his writing a symbol of "firmness, resolve and superiority through faith." Faith is a conduit through which other virtues flow. "Lose not heart, nor fall into despair," Zawahiri urges, "for ye must gain mastery if ye are true in faith" (Qu'ran, 3:139). The connection between the other virtues and faith is made explicit: what exists is what God wills. Submitting to Allah's will

leads to virtue, either through petition (“We ask God to make us steadfast”) or surrender (“Fear Allah, that you may prosper”).

The virtues of faith are more than mere instruments in the pursuit of martyrdom; they are the ultimate goal. Faith reveals the truth; piety allows a man to live it; righteousness strengthens him to fight for it; and sacrifice enables him to die for it. “Martyrs pour out their blood in the path of Allah” (Zawahiri, 2007). A life in God is both the proximal cause and the teleological cause of martyrdom. It is the instrument and the final goal.

In review, the martyr’s traits according to Zawahiri are the virtues of determination, power, simplicity, and faith. Zawahiri uses different virtues to different rhetorical ends. He also uses the set to fully describe a martyr: “The one who saw from the inside the patience (simplicity), resolution (determination), sacrifices (faith), and courage (determination) shown by the mujahideen, knows that they have never stopped even under the toughest circumstances (power)” (Zawahiri, 2007). The martyr is both man and myth. He is as powerful as a nuclear weapon, tougher than an American tank, a paragon of faith, and a good neighbor.

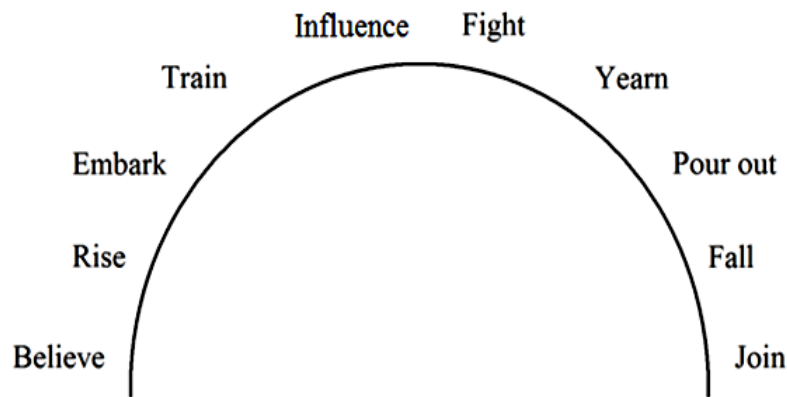
### **The Martyr’s Arc: Actions and Deeds**

Although Zawahiri’s martyrs have noble traits, it is what they do that ultimately defines them. At its most basic, a person becomes a martyr through a single verb: to die. Dying in the pursuit of a greater cause is the basic prerequisite for martyrdom. Dying is, however, not the only activity in which constituents of al-Qaeda engage. The following section endeavors to identify the deeds of martyrs as outlined by Zawahiri in verbs. His vision of martyrdom offers insight into the narratives that guide al-Qaeda mujahideen. In his public address, Zawahiri describes martyrs as engaged in dozens of activities. These verbs were identified, clustered, and ordered. Zawahiri’s martyrs perform the following deeds: believe, rise, embark, train, influence, fight, yearn, pour out, fall, and join.

These ten verbs form what I call the “Arc of the Martyr”—the narrative Zawahiri calls his mujahedeen to embody. Zawahiri’s arc shares similarities with structures identified by narrative scholars (Cohn, 2013; Thompson, 1999). For instance, Thompson (1999) asserts that narratives often follow a five-stage structure. Zawahiri’s arc (**Figure 1**) maps to Thompson’s as follows: setup (believe, rise), complication (embark, train), development (influence, fight, yearn), resolution (pour out one’s blood, fall), and denouement (join the caravan of holy ones).

**Figure 1**

*The Arc of the Martyr*



**Believe**

The arc of the martyr has a firm foundation in belief. Belief is one of two symbolic bases supporting jihadist martyrdom. Belief in Zawahiri’s interpretation of politics, history, and Islam provides logical justification and emotional fuel. Being a believer is also the beginning of the narrative arc. As Zawahiri makes an appeal for support, he begins with: “O you who believe!” While some may argue such a call is little more than flowery prose, I think it serves two rhetorical functions. First, such a statement constitutes his audience. If you are not a believer, he is not talking to you. Constituting an audience involves more than labeling outsiders; it also demarcates and unifies insiders. Secondly, such an opening statement grounds what follows in an ideology. Zawahiri’s rhetoric assumes belief in an uninterrupted, infallible Islam, which strives to establish a world justly governed by shar’ia law. His words also present Allah as powerful beyond measure, but also one who does indeed answer prayers—albeit only if they are in line with Allah’s will. Zawahiri’s petitions and predictions always include a caveat such as: “God willing.” These precepts of faith seem to undergird the jihadist project.

Yet simple belief in Islam is not sufficient; not all believers keep to the truth: “Among the believers are men who have been true to their covenant with Allah” (Zawahiri, 2006). All of his martyrs are believers, but not all believers number among his martyrs. Future martyrs have a deeper covenant. This is expressed in Zawahiri’s use of the verbs to be true, to swear, to pledge, and to fulfill. The pledge of the martyr is not sworn uniquely by the believer; rather, it is a preexisting covenant that should be held true by all the faithful. If a believer has sufficient faith, he is called to take up the oath.

## **Rise**

The martyr's second act is to rise. While a martyr must believe, his belief will do nothing if he does not stand and take up the banner of those who have fallen before him. Zawahiri makes this clear: "By the obligation of jihad, which is a duty on every Muslim, to rise and seek martyrdom to hurt the Crusaders and the Zionists" (Zawahiri, 2007). The martyr must rise, greet, meet, take up, and succeed. The rising of the martyr is also used as a way of appealing to the broader community. "So to the Ummah [community of believers] of Islam: stand by your Mujahid sons who are defending the pure Islam which was sent down to the Messenger of Allah—peace be upon him" (Zawahiri, 2006). The martyr becomes emblematic, a spiritual synecdoche, for the resistance of broader publics.

## **Embark**

Once the martyr has decided to rise, he must leave his world. The third element of the arc of the martyr is travel. Martyrs travel. Zawahiri tells of various acts of movement when narrating the lives of his martyrs, including: leave, embark, arrive, immerse, hasten, go, swoop down, and march. In Usama bin Laden's eulogy, Zawahiri (2011) describes him as "the mujahid migrant ascetic leader." Movement is an essential act of martyrdom. Of course, there is geographical impetus for martyrs traveling. They fight without concern for national borders and struggle against multiple governments and the global influence of the United States in an effort to establish a global Islamic utopia. Such an agenda necessitates mobility. Additionally, this thrownness may resonate with notions of pilgrimage. It is through the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, that Muslims are unified in their submission to God. Zawahiri may be drawing on this common religious value as well. Either way, he celebrates his martyr's willingness to leave their worlds behind for the sake of the jihad.

## **Train**

Having left his home, the martyr must ready himself for the struggle. This includes equipping, training, and preparing. Just as with travel, training is of practical concern. Sending poorly prepared warriors into combat may make them martyrs, but such tactics are unlikely to "budge the corrupt and corrupting cliques from their thrones" (Zawahiri, 2005). So Allah's warriors train. Training is also a critical component to overcoming fear. People tend not to engage a problem if they do not believe they can do anything about it (Witte, 1992). Training, which increases personal efficacy, becomes essential for reliably deploying martyrs. Finally, through preparation the martyr internalizes ideology and enables him to represent the ideals to the world.

## **Influence**

In keeping with the covenant, the believer rises, embarks, and forms himself in the visage of the martyr. His work is ready to begin. While many assume martyrs are mere warriors, they are also called to witness the truth. The following are rhetorical acts of the martyrs described by Zawahiri: announce, write, confront, expose, enjoin, rouse, threaten, and forbid. A good martyr carries the truth, be it a beneficent reminder to believers, a stiff rejoinder to rivals, a bold threat to enemies, or a shaming admonishment to those who have gone astray. Zawahiri calls on martyrs to rectify various political catastrophes, like the Nakba (the Palestinian exodus following the creation of Israel) or U.S. support for Middle Eastern governments he sees as corrupt and misguided. However, he also entreats his martyrs to represent ideals. While lauding the accomplishments of past martyr Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, it was a priority to note how Zarqawi “resurrected in the Muslim Ummah the spirit of unity, solidarity and aid” (Zawahiri, 2006). Martyrs motivate the caravan of the faithful.

Since al-Qaeda is often described in U.S. rhetoric as running a campaign of terror, it is interesting that this term is only used twice in the context of martyrs in the ninety-three documents analyzed for this paper. Zawahiri does not highlight the fear-inducing component of martyr activity. He does discuss fear, but rarely in context of spreading fear. The Ummah, the community of believers, may be in fear, scholars may be in fear, and true believers should fear Allah, but the jihad is not a campaign of fear. If anything, his martyrdom-seekers are beacons of courage and truth. The purpose of the militaristic component of the jihad is not one of intimidation, but rather a legitimate tactical enterprise and authentic spiritual mission. In the eulogy of Usama bin Laden, Zawahiri (2011) casts bin Laden as a leader and a witness to religious truth. Only once does Zawahiri reference fear when eulogizing bin Laden: “Through [Usama], God frightened the totality of the unbelieving nations as [Usama] feared only the religion of God.” Fear is not the goal, but a consequence of religious truth. The term “terrorist” simply does not resonate within Zawahiri’s narrative.

## **Fight**

It is this one act that sets the martyrs of Zawahiri apart from a world of dissidents and malcontents. The willingness to fight the United States, including attacking it on its home soil, irrevocably changed the dynamics of our decade of conflict. While not all martyrs fight (such as the followers of pacifist leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan), Ayman al-Zawahiri’s do. His ideal martyrs

fight, break, destroy, demolish, hurt, cleanse, defend, and protect. Zawahiri's (2007) message is clear:

We shall continue to target you, at home and abroad, just as you target us, at home and abroad. These spy dens and military command and control centers from which you plotted your aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, and which still provide vital moral, military, material, and logistical support to the crusade, shall continue to be legitimate targets for brave Muslims like our martyred brother Uthman, until and unless you heed our demands, stop the crusade, and leave the Muslims alone.

Zawahiri presents the effort as defensive, which is a response to continued political and religious affronts. His martyrs are not aggressors. Neither are they criminals or thugs. They are one part rightful soldier and one part honored champion who fights for the nation established by Muhammad and dies for the sole legitimate law of God.

It is not difficult to argue that the United States' political involvement in Muslim lands is problematic. It is less supported that the response to the U.S. presence should be violent. For Zawahiri, however, there seems to be no other way: "These foundations cannot be realized unless we expel our enemies from our lands and seize our rights with the power of jihad. The enemies will not depart from our lands simply because we plead with them" (Zawahiri, 2005). No success will come of asking—no respite from desperation. Zawahiri argues that the unified nation of Islam is the victim of the largest crusade in history, and there is no separation between the political, militaristic, and religious confluences: "That's why I say to our brothers in Palestine: brothers in Islam; brothers in jihad; brothers in Ribat [defending the lands of Islam], sacrifice and martyrdom-seeking: hold onto your Qu'rans, hold onto your rifles" (Zawahiri, 2006). Martyrs must fight, until victory or death.

## **Yearn**

The seventh deed in the martyr's arc is yearning. While Zawahiri's vision of the jihad offers simple men the opportunity to be agents of large-scale change, he also describes them as waiting patiently for Allah's will to come to pass. Obviously a person is not a martyr until they die, but for Zawahiri, through yearning, those still living take part in the life of truth. To this end, he employs the Qur'anic verse: "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 in the least" (33:23). Waiting is so central to life of the martyr that he uses the notion to identify them: "All praise to Allah... and now we see the nests being destroyed one after the next... The

Muslim youth who swore to die and yearn for paradise are destroying these fortresses one after the next” (2008). The emphasis on waiting for death fills three roles. One, it serves as a way of challenging the common sense notions of preservation of life, which is probably an important psychological step in the willingness to die. Secondly, such patience is an important part of surrendering to the will of God. Even a man living the true covenant cannot force Allah’s hand. Zawahiri’s martyrs wait for Allah’s call. Finally, it is a way of accelerating commitment. The living can have a glimmer of what it feels like to be a martyr.

### **Pour Out**

Injury is not something that happens when bested by an enemy, it is a choice: “[Martyrs] have poured out their blood and made it cascade into the valleys of jihad” (Zawahiri, 2007). Being willing and able to take a wound is admirable, as visible in Zawahiri’s (2007) praise of Mullah Dadollah, a senior Taliban military commander:

He immersed himself in the battles of jihad. He lost his leg and his body became full of shrapnel and wounds. Yet, he continued to move from one battle to another, fought the Russians, apostates, and Americans, until God honored him with martyrdom while he was patiently seeking his reward.

For Zawahiri, blood is a moral currency, a commodity to be traded so a better world comes to pass: “Allah knows that we sacrifice our blood and souls in order to protect the innocent and to support the exploited” (Zawahiri, 2008). The martyr gives his blood for a better world, until there is none left to give. Zawahiri (2011) recites the poetic verse in his eulogy of bin Ladin: “Whoever thought to fight in wars, yet never thought of getting hit, thought wrong.”

### **Fall**

The second to last moment of the martyr’s path is death. Zawahiri speaks of martyrs who have passed on, left behind, fallen, sacrificed, and died. Death is, after all, an essential characteristic of martyrdom. Zawahiri (2007) discusses the death of Taliban senior military commander Mullah Dadollah thusly: “God honored him with the noblest of ends and most dignified of finales, and highest of ranks: martyrdom in Allah's path.” The martyr’s death is not the act of an enemy, but a gift from God.

Death is a natural part of the ecosystem of the mujahideen: “Every time a martyr falls, another martyr grabs the banner from him, and every time a chief goes down in blood, another chief completes the march after him” (Zawahiri, 2007). The death of a martyr is not the end of the jihad, but rather a clarion call to the witnesses of truth. In Zawahiri’s (2007) words, “Martyrdom



has come to pour fuel on the fire of rage blazing in the hearts of his troops against the Crusaders.” At the death of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Zawahiri (2006) prays, “May [Allah] compensate the Islamic nation for [Zarqawi] in the best way and make his martyrdom a light for the allies of Allah and fire and destruction for the enemies of Allah.” A martyr’s death is both a rhetorical act and a holy event.

## **Join**

The martyr’s fall is not the end. The final step in the arc of the martyr is, if Allah wills it, to join the blessed caravan and to be bestowed reward in paradise. Zawahiri is cautious to claim that one of his men is deserving of such reward, often adding the caveat “as we see him” after labeling someone a martyr. That said, Zawahiri does ask God for mercy on the fallen and reverently envisages the life in Allah that can be found. The following eulogies illuminate these promises.

We announce to you today the passing away of one of the heroes of jihad in this era and a knight among its knights, Hajji Mullah Dadollah Akhund, may God bestow His all-encompassing mercy on him and house him in His spacious Gardens with the Prophets, truthful ones, martyrs and righteous ones, and what fine companions those are. (2007)

In his passing, Zawahiri raises Dadollah to legend in this world and asks that he be rewarded by life in Allah’s gardens and be with the Prophets and righteous people. Notice it is neither wealth nor riches that are being asked for, but comfort and companionship.

I approach you today with congratulations on the martyrdom of our brother, the lion and commander Abu al-Layth al-Libi, may Allah have mercy on him; that knight who only dismounted from his steed’s back and relinquished his reins in order to join the blessed caravan, the caravan of the martyrs, Prophets and righteous ones, and what fine companions they are with Allah's permission, generosity and mercy. (2008)

Zawahiri suggests that Al-Libi, who was courageous, powerful and faithful, could only fall if he was going to join the most holy of processions. Again, a blessed community is his reward.

The perfect community with the martyrs, prophets, and righteous ones is the second foundation for martyrdom. An arc that started with belief in a spiritual truth ends with belief in a spiritual reality: the caravan of holy people. As noted in the section on virtues of faith, faith is the instrument and the final goal of martyrdom. It is the community element of this tale, however, that is particularly compelling. The promise is neither of riches nor power. For Zawahiri, celestial reward comes in the form of esteemed companionship. In a way, the death of a martyr provides a

more perfect version of the life of a martyr: a life among others true to the covenant under the direction of the Prophet. Zawahiri does not depict an opulent heaven, but a perfection of the life he and his martyrs are already trying to live.

This vision of glory may have powerful motivational factors. Do not people of faith strive to achieve paradise/perfection? Certainly there are religious edicts for achieving paradise in a metaphysical sense. Believers also shape their mortal lives to mirror the divine. While Allah's blessed garden filled with martyrs and prophets is a transcendent reality, true believers can have an imminent experience of it by living as though it were true in the embodied present. If only one is true to the covenant and strives to cultivate Allah's law on earth, he or she can have a piece of paradise. The martyr's end in paradise can be practiced on earth by joining those who wait for martyrdom.

Zawahiri describes martyrs as engaged in various activities. The verbs produce a narrative that describes (and predicts) the life of a martyrdom-seeker: believe, rise, embark, train, influence, fight, yearn, pour out, fall, and join. These deeds constitute a heroic arc that follows a clear narrative structure (Cohn, 2013; Thompson, 1999). Zawahiri's narrative bears striking dissimilarity to the U.S. construal of al-Qaeda martyrs, which is discussed below.

### **Discussion**

Understanding al-Qaeda's martyr narrative has value. It presents U.S. Americans and other Western citizens as a foil, a challenging alternative to governmental and media portrayals. This is not to say that Zawahiri has the right of it, or that his narrative constructions of martyrs are unproblematic. However, understanding how someone sees themselves has strategic value. As the construction of enemies is in part rhetorical (Edelman, 1988), so is the reconstruction of peaceful politics. For this reason, understanding the narratives at work in this conflict is essential for ultimately building peace.

The differences between Zawahiri's rhetorical constructions of al-Qaeda's martyrs and the mainstream American understanding could not be more striking. For example, the American narrative represents Islamic martyrs as motivated by virgins they will receive in the afterlife. Consider inflammatory blog posts titled, "Al-Qaeda Number 2 rendezvous with 72 virgins arranged" (Rice, 2011, August 27) and "Al-Qaeda Terrorist Gets His 72 Virgins" (Moore, 2011, September 20). There are even collectable challenge coins celebrating the U.S. Armed Forces that read "72 Virgin Dating Service" that are officially licensed products of the U.S. Marine Corps. While jocular in tone, this dehumanizing frame suggests that the notion of virginal reward for

martyrdom is a motivation so taken-for-granted that “72 virgins” has become the rhetorical equivalent to “dead Islamic terrorist.”

Conversely, in nearly 100 public addresses Zawahiri does not mention a single virgin, much less seventy-two. If an afterlife figures into the motivation of al-Qaeda’s martyrs, the companionship that gives them comfort is rooted in a yearning for holiness and community, not sex. Zawahiri does indeed talk of celestial companionship after death, as noted in the tenth verb of the arc, “Join.” But he chooses to highlight the honor of riding in the holy caravan with the prophets and righteous ones over the pleasure of an eternal harem.

It should come as little surprise that the American narrative renders al-Qaeda’s martyrs in a negative light. As Edelman articulates (1988), an opponent must be constructed as inherently evil before they can be viewed as an enemy. In this case, heavenly virginal motivation for martyrdom: (1) prevents martyrdom from being interpreted as self-sacrifice by construing it as the result of a cost-benefit equation; (2) caricatures Muslims as uncontrollably craving the sex their culture prohibits; and (3) veils the potentially more honorable motivation of desiring the esteemed company of prophets. Representing the killing of al-Qaeda members as “Helping Holy Men Join the Caravan of the Righteous” is a little less derogatory. The “72 Virgins” vs. “the Caravan of the Righteous” disconnect is one of many dissonances between the American and al-Qaeda narrative. Following this analysis, six dissonances (**Table 1**) emerged between the U.S. narrative and Zawahiri’s.

**Table 1**

*USA/al-Qaeda Narrative Dissonances*

	<b>USA</b>	<b>al-Qaeda</b>
<b>Message</b>	Terror	Witness the truth
<b>Methods</b>	Insurgency	Paramilitary Operations
<b>Afterlife</b>	72 Virgins	Caravan of the Righteous
<b>Spirituality</b>	Religious Fundamentalism	Earnest Faithfulness
<b>Attributes</b>	Irrational, depraved, violent	Determined, powerful, faithful, simplicity
<b>Violence</b>	Baseless	No other alternative

It is neither within the scope nor the aim of this paper to ascertain the truth value of these narratives. Indeed, whether or not someone finds one narrative or the other *more* true says more about their narrative world than it does about al-Qaeda. As Fisher articulates (1984), whether or not humans accept or reject a narrative has to do with its coherence (“Does it hold together with itself?”) and fidelity (“Does it square with prior stories I hold to be true?”). Zawahiri’s rendering of martyrdom has narrative coherence. The virtues of the martyr seem to be a reasonable set of attributes that one could sensibly aspire to have. Similarly, the martyr’s Campbellian hero arc offers a comprehensive modern mythology, complete with a humble beginning, a heroic climax, and a triumphant end. Narrative fidelity cannot be ascertained by reading a single text, as it is a function of the other narratives the person holds true. However, the fact that al-Qaeda has operated for more than twenty-five years suggests that something is ringing true with recruits, which raises the question, “What other narratives must a person hold in order for Zawahiri’s martyr narrative to be true?”

The martyr’s virtues and arc have strategic and diplomatic implications. Knowing the ideal identity of a group from their perspective provides an edge in strategic communication operations. It enables an empirical foundation for diplomatic and strategic decision making for the United States and abroad. For example, populations from which al-Qaeda recruits seem to be drawn to the virtues of determination, power, simplicity, and faith. Therefore, facilitating opportunities for the populations to express these virtues in nonviolent ways could help reduce conflict with the United States. For instance, unemployment has links to the performance of violent and hypermasculine identities (Spencer, 2004). Finding ways to stabilize local economies could provide other expressions of power and simplicity. Culturally appropriate governmental structures could allow for nonviolent strategies of change that embody faith and determination. Militaristic occupation and dishonest politicking provide a perfect storm for an aggressive manifestation of determination, power, simplicity, and faith, but there is nothing essentially violent about any of these values. Even power can be assumed, displayed, and exercised in a peaceful way. Mujahideen means “one who struggles.” Peace might be meaningfully pursued by engaging at-risk populations in a way that enables productive struggle guided by determination, power, simplicity, and faith.

Narratives make sense of the past and suggest future actions. Trethewey et al. (2009) remind us that while ideologies may seem to be set (that is after all their goal: to normalize social realities), there is nothing essential or static about them. Stories change. Ways of thinking are the

product of discourse, and if discourses change, ways of thinking change. Promoting pacifist Islamic organizations could erode Zawahiri's violent support. Abdul Gaffer Kahn, leader of a 100,000-man nonviolent army in Pakistan, could be a central archetype in promoting peaceful organizing.

Finally, it is my hope that this paper makes Zawahiri's rhetoric accessible and the motives of his martyrs more comprehensible. Zawahiri's narratives do not prove that al-Qaeda martyrs are exemplars of the virtues of determination, power, simplicity, and faith. Of course, there are various personalities and attributes of Islamist extremists. Some may be misguided advocates, others violent malcontents. But the ideal martyr, the man they are trying to be, is determined, powerful, simple, and faithful. The character al-Qaeda martyrs take on in the mainstream American narrative is a role no person would ever sensibly desire to play, which makes knowing their own narrative essential in understanding their aspirations and desires, so that we do not shape our strategic policy based on misunderstanding.

I do not presume to instruct readers as to how they should ultimately feel about members of al-Qaeda, as the last decade has been marked by tragedy caused by, and sacrifice made necessary by, al-Qaeda. I do not suspect the families of fallen soldiers will suddenly sympathize with al-Qaeda's martyrs. I do not seek to legitimize or support al-Qaeda's military action or political or religious goals (indeed, my own moral commitments include radical pacifism). However, I hope that close attention to these narratives serves as a tool for empathizing with the *humanity* of al-Qaeda's martyrs.

### **Limitations**

This project focused on the public addresses of Zawahiri. As argued above, paying explicit attention to his statements has value, but this approach has two important limitations. The first is that the analysis relied on translated work. Translation always influences the interpretive and scholarly process (Steyaert & Janssens, 2013; Venuti, 2013). In this light, an important and valuable next step would be to engage in a similar thematic and narrative analysis of Zawahiri's speeches in the original Arabic.

Second, this project focuses specifically on the text of Zawahiri's speech. While this focus helps reveal the narrative dimensions of his rhetoric, this analysis does not draw heavily on the religious, cultural, economic, and political contexts in which Zawahiri operates. While space does not allow a thorough rendering of those contexts in this project, there are a variety of excellent works that take up those questions explicitly. For in-depth analysis of al-Qaeda as a cultural,

religious, and organizational phenomenon, see: Kepel, Milelli, and Ghazaleh (2008), Hoffman (2003), Hubbard (2014), and Euben and Zaman (2009). For a detailed biography of Zawahiri, see Al-Zayyat (2004).

### **Conclusion**

Zawahiri crafts an identity that offers profound meaning for those who would rise to take it. The martyr-hero of Zawahiri's stories is strong, brave, good, and faithful; the martyr's path is difficult, but rises and falls like an arrow guided by the aim of God. It is my hope that this paper illuminates two things. The first is that the identities of these martyrs are not irrational, at least not to those who hold them. Overmasculine, perhaps; intolerant, yes; but not irrational. Many very moral people aspire to be determined, powerful, simple, and faithful. It should also be clear that while the worldview proposed by Zawahiri is morally problematic with regard to its violence, it is not a childish perspective. His grasp of history may be argued, but his spiritual thinking is remarkably deep. The complex interaction of petition and submission in his prayers demonstrates a complex understanding of grace. He never asks God for a thing to come to pass without also demonstrating a willingness to accept God's plans. Literate or no, those who live in witness to Zawahiri participate in a rich oral tradition with deep currents of religious legitimacy. These men consider themselves good men.

Secondly, it is through discourse that the arc of the martyr is constructed. Though the path of the martyr is currently cast as a violent tale by Zawahiri, there is nothing essentially violent about jihad or martyrdom. Jihad means to struggle, and martyrdom means to die. Part of the path to peace is recognizing and perhaps intentionally celebrating nonviolent configurations of Islam, like Jawdat Sa'id's (1964). As demonstrated in myth by Abel and in history by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, there is a difference between being willing to die and willing to kill. The programmer of the smart bomb is willing to kill but not to die. The martyr who straps the bomb to his chest is willing to do both. Perhaps the real hero is the one who refuses to take the life of the other but is willing to give his own.

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