

# Symposium explores war, religion, Islamic martyrdom

A visiting Hebrew Union College professor's discussion of the rise in Muslim 'bombers' is part of a four-year project

BY THOMAS MUNRO  
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The mutual demonization of one another by Israelis and Palestinians is fueling martyrdom in the Middle East, Hebrew Union College professor Reuven Firestone said in an address Sunday evening.

The talk, entitled "Martyrdom or Suicide? Islamic Tradition and the Case of Modern Muslim 'Bombers,'" was the opening address in the latest module of the "Militant Word and Martial Metaphor Symposium." This symposium is part of "Struggling for God," a four-year project of symposiums exploring religion and war, conceived and directed by Timothy Gianotti, assistant professor of religious studies.

Firestone began his talk by praising the "Struggling for God" series for its balance between academic viability and public, personal relevance. He called it "a very difficult walk to walk."

Firestone, a professor of medieval Judaism and Islam and author of "Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam," tackled some of the most difficult issues in the most delicate of debates.

"My object is to take a dispassionate approach to a passionate problem," he said.

Firestone traced the term "martyr" to its source in the persecution of early Christians. Arising from the Greek for "witness," the word refers to an

individual killed for declaring his Orthodox Christian faith. He then described parallel terms in the Jewish and Islamic faiths.

All three faiths forbid suicide; but to varying degrees, they have all at various times condoned either martyrdom or what Firestone calls "homicidal suicide." As a Jewish and Christian example of homicidal suicide, he offers the biblical story of Samson, who in a final act, considered by the faithful to have been heroic, killed 3,000 Philistines by pulling the temple of Dagon down upon himself.

The particular problem of the Muslim martyr proves to be as vexing from an academic point of view as it is politically. While both the Quran and the hadith, or sayings of the prophet, explicitly forbid suicide, both also praise martyrdom. They treat martyrdom as a method "of purchasing or trade" for a place in heaven, said Firestone.

Whether the living bombs of Palestine are martyrs or sinners turns on the question of the killing of noncombatants. Firestone said the Islamic injunction against the killing of non-combatants is strong enough that contemporary events may "mark a change for Islam."

Firestone attributes this change to an increasing treatment of the apocalypse described in Christianity, Islam and Judaism as an ongoing reality rather than a metaphor. This has led to the "personification of ultimate

evil in our mundane, (worldly) enemies," he said.

According to Firestone, this apocalyptic worldview encourages a disregard for tradition and rules because these human concepts will disappear with the end of the world. The killing of the demonized other becomes less an earthly murder and more a transcendent spiritual act. Hence, Palestinians and Israelis continue to kill one another despite, rather than because of, the injunctions of their faiths.

In comments after the talk, Firestone struck an optimistic tone in his discussion of the hopes for peace in the Middle East after the death of Yasser Arafat, long-time leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority.

"There will be a small window. The overwhelming mass in the center can be moved in one way or the other. If the U.S. and Israel can show they are not 'diabolical,'" then positive change might be possible, Firestone said.

The symposium continued Monday morning with a panel discussion and closed that night with a talk entitled, "The Crown of Immortality: Toward a Redescription of Christian Martyrdom," by Arthur Droge, professor of New Testament and early Christian literature at the University of California at San Diego.

Religious studies professor Gianotti described the value of his lecture series after the Sunday event, which drew more than 150 students, staff and visitors. "This is a moment when these kinds of scholarly discussions are particularly timely," he said.

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