

## The Arab Revolutions and Self-Immolation

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### Ideological patterns of protest in the Muslim world

**I**n the Muslim world, at least since the 19th century, the dominant model of resistance, uprising, or social protest against the imperialist Europe (from 19th century up to the end of the Second World War), domineering America (from the 1950s onwards) or occupying Russia (in the beginning of the 19th century with the conquest of Caucasus), or the Soviet Union (in Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989), has been martyrdom, expressed either in the Islamic or the nationalist fashion.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran promotes martyrdom in the name of Shiism,<sup>1</sup> Jihad being played down. In contrast, the Sunni Islamist movements from the 1990s onward, privilege Jihad, martyrdom being the means to achieve it.

Self-immolation, as such, has no Islamic credentials and was not practiced among the people on a large scale, neither in the Arab World, nor in Iran. The Kurds in different countries of the Middle East, in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey were the exception, self-immolation by fire developing there as a strategy by the political parties.<sup>2</sup> This type of suicide developed also among women who protested against their social condition, another case being those women killed (mainly due to 'honor killings') by their relatives, murder being disguised as self-immolation (suicide). Between 2000 and 2007, 3039 such cases were recorded, this figure being under-evaluated, as family members are talked out of publicly declaring these killings due to the government's pressure or to the Islamic norms (where it is qualified as suicide and religiously prohibited).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'Utopie Sacrifiée, sociologie de la révolution iranienne*. Paris: Presse des Sciences Po, 1993; *L'Islamisme et la Mort, Le Martyre Révolutionnaire en Iran*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995; *Anthropologie de la Révolution Iranienne*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See Olivier Grojean's contribution in this issue.

<sup>3</sup> "Self Immolation and Murder Cases of Kurdish Women," Hataw Organization, April 10 2007, <http://www.kmewo.org/documents/Assignment.pdf>.

### Previous cases in the Muslim world

Looking at self-immolation by fire, one can find in the Muslim world two major models before Bouazizi's suicide. One is by the politically-minded Kurds, the other is by women (including Kurdish women). In Iran's Western Azerbaijan province, more than 150 Kurdish women committed suicide within a few months up to February 2006, the majority setting themselves on fire. This happened also in some other Western provinces in Iran with large Kurdish populations, like Ilam, Kermanshah and Kurdistan. According to observers, domestic violence against women, social injustice and suspicion of adultery were the main causes of this type of suicide or homicide.<sup>4</sup> Between March and May 2012, 11 Kurdish women were recorded as having committed suicide (among which, auto-cremation) in the Kurdish provinces of Iran.<sup>5</sup> In Iraqi Kurdistan, one finds women having committed suicide or being put to death through strangulation or beating as well as burning. The cases are difficult to assess: is it suicide, or sheer homicide by the relatives in order to preserve their honor (a woman can easily be suspected of adultery, of indecent relations with a man or, more simply, she is punished for refusing the arranged marriage).

According to Hataw Organization in Iraqi Kurdistan, in 2007 the molestation of Kurdish women increased between 2003 and 2006 (in 2003, 349 cases, in 2005, 772, in 2006, 812 cases).<sup>6</sup>

In 2007, according to local sources, their number was around 400 deaths by burning. More generally, in Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 mainly through American intervention, honor killings increased, in part due to the lack of state authority. In a single month, December 2007, 130 unclaimed bodies of women were found in the Baghdad morgue.<sup>7</sup>

Self-immolation through prolonged hunger strike and auto-cremation has been part of the strategy of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK). During its struggle against the Turkish army, it com-

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<sup>4</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran: Self-Immolation Of Kurdish Women Brings Concern," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, February 8 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/article/printview/1065567.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "A young Kurdish girl sets herself ablaze in Iranian Kurdistan," May 14 2012, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/5/irankurd852.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Self Immolation and Murder Cases of Kurdish Women," *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Mark Lattimer, "Burning and women's self-immolation in Iraqi Kurdistan," *The Guardian*, December 13 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/13/gender.iraq>.

bined a three-pronged strategy based on martyrdom in guerilla action, self-immolation by fire, as well as hunger strike. Up to 2006, two cases of auto-cremation were mentioned, against 17 suicide-attacks (and nine other attempts).<sup>8</sup> Out of the 17 suicide attacks, 11 were made by women.

Women are therefore mainly victims of self-immolation: family problems related to imaginary or real adultery, resulting in 'honor killings,' or suicide in order to escape opprobrium or to end an intolerable situation; but they can also be political actors, accepting self-immolation as martyrs (the fight against the enemy) or as persons committing self-immolation, mainly by fire (some of the PKK's members). In the PKK men are activists, committing political suicide by auto-cremation.

### **The change of the dominant paradigm: from martyrdom to self-immolation**

The major transformation in the last few years has been the challenge presented by self-immolation by fire (auto-cremation) to the model of martyrdom, particularly during the Arab Revolutions, beginning at the end of 2010 in Tunisia, the trigger point being the self-immolation of Bouazizi. He spread gasoline on himself on December 17 2010 and set it afire, dying in the hospital on January 4 2011. The impact was immense. It launched the Tunisian Revolution that overthrew the Ben Ali regime 28 days later.

A comparison with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran throws light on the change of paradigm. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and then, in the following decades, the Jihadist movements in the Sunni world, were based on the idea of martyrdom as self-sacrifice in a ruthless struggle against the enemy. Martyrdom was the weapon of the weak against the strong<sup>9</sup> in a merciless war against a foe that was far stronger: either the government, or the West. In both cases, the road to success was self-sacrifice, that is, fighting to death the enemy, being ready, even eager to die by killing the unbelieving adversary. In this view, violence is directed towards the other and the religious justification is that one should fight him or her in order to restore Islamic order worldwide. This paradigm reached its peak during the Jihadist movement that swept across the Muslim world in the years

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<sup>8</sup> See Olivier Grojean, "Investissement militant et violence contre soi au sein du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan," *Cultures & Conflits* 63, Automne 2006, <http://conflits.revues.org/index2108.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

1990s and 2000s. The September 11 2001 terrorist attack, the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 (with the assistance of other Western allies), and Iraq in 2003 (in conjunction with Great Britain) resulted in a deep sense of indignation on the part of the Muslim world. Jihadist groups thrived over this wave of humiliation, amplified by the American unwavering support for Israel. Violence was the major keyword in a ruthless war in which no other solution than violence could be imagined.

As a major social and political phenomenon, martyrdom, at the service of Jihad, became the leitmotiv of the radical movements that swept across the Muslim world, seeking to respond to humiliation by defiance and self-sacrifice. In a world where Muslims are technologically inferior, endangering one's life became a sign of moral superiority against a foe that was militarily superior but fearful for his life and therefore, spiritually inferior.

This paradigm ruled supreme (and is still prominent in Jihadist circles) until the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia. Through his example, the dominant style of protest changed radically: instead of directing the violence against the enemy in a crescendo that resulted in an endless fight, self-immolation entirely changed the meaning of sacrifice. The new model is based on putting oneself to death in a manner that can leave no one indifferent, self-suppression being accomplished to denounce the illegitimacy of the political order. This model spread all over the Arab world, and even some countries in the West experienced it exceptionally. Lately, in July and August 2012, even Israel witnessed two self-immolations in protest against economic injustice. In the six months following Bouazizi's self-immolation, at least 107 Tunisians attempted self-immolation.

### **Self-immolation as a new paradigm in the Arab world**

In the Arab world, self-immolation by fire is a daring action, denoting a rupture with the Islamist rhetoric and a high level of secularisation, inducing a rupture with Islamic orthodoxy. Mohamed Bouazizi's setting himself ablaze set the tone for this new style of 'sacred death.' People called it martyrdom, but the Ulamas, with few exceptions,<sup>10</sup> regarded the act as an infringement on God's commandment.

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<sup>10</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, head of the World Union of the Islamic Ulama (*rais al itihad al alami li ulama' al muslimin*) and one of the most prominent Ulama in the Sunni world (he is known for his contribution to Islamonline and his broadcast on Al-jazeera, Shariah and Life, attracting tens of millions of Muslims) was the notable exception. He refused to condemn the act of Bouazizi as being against Islamic law.

According to that commandment, no one should take his or her own life, and one's death can only be decided by God. From the dominant Islamic perspective, Bouazizi's act could not be qualified as martyrdom but as a desecration of God's commandment stipulated in the Koran: "No person can ever die except by Allah's Leave at an appointed term" (Koran, Surat ImrÁn Family, verse 145), or more explicitly: "Don't kill yourself" (Surat The Women, verse 29) or "Don't throw yourself into destruction" (Surat The Cow, verse 195). In spite of misgiving and even condemnation by some of the Ulama, people celebrated his heroic death, and songs and videos were created in his honor, calling him a martyr. This situation points to a widening divide between the religious meaning of martyrdom and its secular, popular signification, the latter becoming largely autonomous towards the strictly religious idiom.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the only major Ulama who deplored with commiseration Bouazizi's death, said in an interview with Aljazeera that he would not produce a *fatwa* (religious statement) but would simply content himself with a commentary in his TV program on Aljazeera, "Religious law and Life" (*al sharia wal hayat*), dealing with the immolation and death of the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi: "I implore Allah the Almighty, and pray Him to pardon this young man [Bouazizi] and forgive him and go over his action [self-immolation by fire] that was against the religious law, which forbids killing oneself."<sup>11</sup> Under the pressure of the Arab public opinion, largely created by Aljazeera, that viewed Bouazizi's action as that of a martyr's and therefore, laudable, he softened his former position, explaining on his website that Bouazizi's self-immolation was justifiable (and not having to be pardoned by God) since it was in rejection of humiliation and hunger.<sup>12</sup>

Still, as already mentioned, the Ulama of Al-Azhar, the most prestigious Sunni university in the world, issued a *fatwa* condemning self-immolation.<sup>13</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the grand mufti Shaikh Abdul Aziz Al Shaikh condemned suicide even in response to harsh economic conditions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For the Arabic text, see <http://www.radiojektiss.com/qaradawi-explique-sa-position-sur-bouazizi/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Tunisian Uprising: the Other Martyrs," *New American Media*, January 22 2011, <http://newamericamedia.org/2011/01/tunisian-uprising-the-other-martyrs.php>.

<sup>13</sup> "Al-Azhar: Self-immolation is a 'sin'," *Al-Ahram Online*, January 19 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/4310.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> "Man Dies after Setting Himself on Fire," *Gulf News*, January 23 2011, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/man-dies-after-setting-himself-on-fire-1.750642>.

Killing oneself is not traditionally regarded as martyrdom, the more so as Bouazizi's act was not preceded by any call to Jihad or fight against the unbelievers or un-Islamic rulers. Bouazizi's self-immolation had no reference to religion, being a pure act of protest against social injustice and humiliation, with no religious undertone or justification. In his act, secularisation was paramount. The trend, two decades earlier, was toward adherence to the religious meaning of martyrdom, and Islamist would-be martyrs were proud to claim the title and to show their willingness to be categorised as Islamic heroes by sacrificing their lives for the sake of religion. Now, what is regarded by the public opinion as "martyrdom" has become totally secular, an act of protest wrapped up afterwards as martyrdom by others, not by its actor who acted out of anger and a sense of intolerable social iniquity.

In defiance against the Ulama, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDF) in Tunisia considered Bouazizi a martyr.<sup>15</sup> His glorification by the Arab world and the world's celebration of his act overshadowed the Ulama's reluctance to or condemnation of his act. On February 8 2011, a square in Paris was named Place Mohamed Bouazizi.<sup>16</sup> On February 17, the main square in Tunis was renamed after Bouazizi.<sup>17</sup> He was posthumously awarded the 2011 Sakharov Prize.<sup>18</sup> On December 17, a cart statue was unveiled in Sidi Bouzid, Bouazizi's town, in his honor. Tunisia's first elected president Moncef Marzouki attended the ceremony, stating "Thank you to this land, which has been marginalised for centuries, for bringing dignity to the entire Tunisian people."<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom's newspaper *The Times* named Bouazizi person of the year for 2011.<sup>20</sup>

Bouazizi's auto-cremation triggered a series of imitations in the Arab countries and even in Europe and Israel. In all those cases, the reference was one's desperate situation and despondency, not the will to die for Islam (from the orthodox view, the necessary condition

<sup>15</sup> Yasmine Ryan, "The tragic life of a street vendor," *Al Jazeera English*, January 16 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html/>.

<sup>16</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Delanoë veut donner le nom du jeune Tunisien immolé à un lieu parisien," February 4 2011.

<sup>17</sup> "Tunis renames square after man who sparked protest," *Reuters*, February 17 2011.

<sup>18</sup> "Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought 2011," <http://www.Euro.parl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/content/20111014FCS29297/html/Sakharov-Prize-for-Freedom-of-Thought-2011>.

<sup>19</sup> *BBC News*, "Tunisia unveils Bouazizi cart statue in Sidi Bouzid," December 17 2011.

<sup>20</sup> *Al Arabiya*, "UK's Times newspaper names Bouazizi person of the year 2011," December 28 2011. For all these details on Mohamed Bouazizi, refer to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

for martyrdom). In Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, after Bouazizi's death, a second young, unemployed man, Houcine Nejji, committed suicide by jumping from an electricity pylon on December 22 2010. A young Moroccan set himself on fire during a teachers' sit-in in front of the Ministry of Education in Rabat. The demonstration was being held to demand secure jobs for those teachers who were granted only with insecure work contracts. The police intervened and saved his and a bystander's life.

Between January 22 and February 2 2011, Morocco witnessed four suicide attempts by fire, none of them successful.<sup>21</sup> A young, unmarried woman, Fadoua Laouri, a 25-year-old mother of two, set herself on fire after being refused by the authorities social housing, i.e. a flat for her and her children. Her house made of dried mud in which she lived with her parents and children had been demolished by the authorities. She burned herself before the municipality of Souk Sebt in the center of Morocco and died of her wounds in a Casablanca hospital. She was the first woman to commit suicide in the new Arab revolutions.<sup>22</sup> Here too, the act had no religious content and since the protest movement did not succeed in Morocco, it was not widely characterised as martyrdom. The success or failure of the protest and its generalisation to a wide circle of individuals play a role in its being named or not as martyrdom by the public at large. This model was imitated in other countries, as was the case in Mauritania. There, a 43-year-old man tried to burn himself on January 17. In Egypt, Abdou Abdel-Moneim Gaafar, a 49 year-old owner of a small restaurant in the town of Qantara close to Ismailiya, attempted to take his own life by setting himself on fire in front of the Egyptian parliament in Cairo on January 17.<sup>23</sup> Apparently he had not received vouchers to buy bread for his restaurant.<sup>24</sup> Two others attempted suicide, a 25-year-old jobless man with mental problems in Alexandria and another one, in Cairo.<sup>25</sup>

On January 15 in Algiers, a jobless 34-year-old attempted to commit suicide before the city's security building. Another man, Mohsen

<sup>21</sup> "A Moroccan Set Himself Afire," *Aljazeera English*, February 2 2011.

<sup>22</sup> "Une jeune mère célibataire s'immole par le feu," *France 24*, February 23 2011, [www.france24.com/fr/20110223-maroc-jeune-femme-celibataire-immole-feu-suicide-logement-social-souk-sebt-fadoua-laroui](http://www.france24.com/fr/20110223-maroc-jeune-femme-celibataire-immole-feu-suicide-logement-social-souk-sebt-fadoua-laroui).

<sup>23</sup> "In Egypt, Man Sets Himself on Fire, Driven by Economic Woes," *Al-Ahram Online*, January 17 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/2/4115/Egypt/Society/In-Egypt,-man-sets-himself-on-fire,-driven-by-econ.aspx>.

<sup>24</sup> "Trois hommes se sont immolés par le feu," *France 2*, January 18 2011, <http://info.france2.fr/monde/trois-hommes-se-sont-immoles-par-le-feu-66885754.html>.

<sup>25</sup> "Trois hommes se sont immolés par le feu," *op.cit.*

Bouterfif, a 37-year-old father of two, committed suicide by fire.<sup>26</sup> He died on January 24. Maamir Lotfi, a 36-year-old unemployed father of six who was denied a meeting with the governor, burned himself in front of the El Oued town hall on January 17. He died on February 12.<sup>27</sup> Abdelhafid Boudechicha,<sup>28</sup> a 29-year-old day laborer who lived with his parents and five siblings, immolated himself by fire in Medjana on January 28, the mayor having refused to provide him with a job and housing. He died the following day.<sup>29</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, perhaps for the first time in the history of the country, a 65-year-old man died on January 21 2011 after setting himself on fire in the town of Samtah, Jizan.<sup>30</sup>

Europe did not remain immune to the wave of copycat suicides by fire. On February 11 2011 Nouredine Adnane, a 27-year-old Moroccan street vendor, burned himself in Palermo, Sicily, in protest against the confiscation of his wares and harassment by municipal officials. He died five days later.<sup>31</sup> Africa and Israel were affected too: in the same year, Yenesew Gebre, an Ethiopian highschool teacher, committed suicide by fire immolation in protest toward the Zenawe regime and its campaigns of oppression against the Ethiopian population. On July 14 2012, during a rally in Tel-Aviv, a man in Israel set himself on fire in protest against the Israeli government, which, in his words, "constantly humiliates the citizens of Israel who have to endure humiliation on a day-to-day basis. They take from the poor and give to the rich." On July 20 2012, Akiva Mafi, a disabled IDF veteran set himself on fire in Yehud Israel, in protest against economic injustice.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mehdi Benslimane and Slim Badaoui, "Le maire à Mohcin Bouterfif: 'Si tu as du courage, fais comme Bouazizi, immole-toi par le feu,'" *DNA-Algérie*, January 24 2011, [www.dna-algerie.com /interieure/le-maire-a-mohcin-bouterfif-si-tu-as-du-courage-fais-comme-bouazizi-immole-toi-par-le-feu-2](http://www.dna-algerie.com/interieure/le-maire-a-mohcin-bouterfif-si-tu-as-du-courage-fais-comme-bouazizi-immole-toi-par-le-feu-2).

<sup>27</sup> "Quatrième décès par immolation en Algérie, à la veille de la marche du 12 février," *Jeune Afrique*, February 12 2011, [www.jeunefrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20110212105526](http://www.jeunefrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20110212105526).

<sup>28</sup> "L'immolation, ultime acte de désespoir des laissés pour compte," *Le Monde*, January 17 2011.

<sup>29</sup> "Un jeune décède après s'être immolé par le feu à Bordj Bou Arréridj," *El Watan*, January 29 2011.

<sup>30</sup> *Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), "Man Dies in Possible First Self-Immolation in Saudi," January 22 2011, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/world-news/4231-man-dies-impossible-first-self-immolation-in-saudi?tmpl=component&layout=default&page=>.

<sup>31</sup> "Palermo, Moroccan Street Vendor Dies after Setting Himself on Fire," *Ahora Italia*, February 22 2011, [www.ahoraitalia.com/giornale//117595/palermo-dies-after-setting-himself-fire.htm](http://www.ahoraitalia.com/giornale//117595/palermo-dies-after-setting-himself-fire.htm).

<sup>32</sup> See "Man sets himself on fire during TA rally," *ynetnews*, July 14 2012; "Man self-immolates in Israel over cost of living," *Reuters*, July 15 2012.



The effect of Bouazizi's act was tremendous in the Arab world, but also beyond. It made a horrendous suicide an accessible model for others who thought it might initiate a social protest, on parity with the Tunisian Revolution. Consideration of the pain to be endured before death almost disappeared before the earthshaking consequences of the act, bringing postmortem fame to modest individuals who became national heroes and thereby wreak revenge on repressive power holders. Of course, the copycat effect did not have the same impact in other countries. The surprise effect had waned, police forces were now ready to confront demonstrators, and the 'trigger element' of the protest movement had to change in order to succeed. In Egypt, protestors came up with the innovation of tying the protest to a place, Tahrir Square. Notwithstanding, Egyptians had their own 'martyrs' (the equivalent of Bouazizi was the Egyptian restaurateur Abdou Abdel-Moneim, who died after suicide by fire on January 17 2011.)

Bouazizi's act promoted him as a national hero in Tunisia, and a hero for the Arab nations that followed suit in their protest movements against their rulers. One YouTube declaration in French called him "the hero of the Tunisian nation and the founder of democracy in Tunisia."<sup>33</sup> In this post, Bouazizi's photo is accompanied with the chanting of a man in Tunisian Arab dialect set to traditional guitar, together with a French translation of the song and words attributed to Bouazizi. Then follows the statement, "The uproar spreads: with a long clamor, the warships of the barbarous soldiers are thrust. Everywhere floats death. And the homicidal sword pierces at the threshold of the altars the bold hero. Mohamed Bouazizi, the eagle who carries fire, the benefactor of humanity, the bird whose omen is happiness!"

Before Bouazizi, self-immolation in the Muslim world was a phenomenon largely confined to women (although men were also present in the attempts by the Kurdish PKK to immolate themselves). The Arab Revolutions opened up a new style of self-sacrifice, this time almost exclusively male, up to this date, with a single case of a woman recorded so far, namely Fadoua Laouri (see above).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "YouTube Mohamed Bouazizi Héros Tunisian Révolution Tunisie Túnéz". [www.youtube.com /watch?v=5Nir6FcXDM8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Nir6FcXDM8).

<sup>34</sup> See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World*, especially the chapter "Self-Immolation: Bouazizi's Paradigm of Martyrdom." Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012.

## Conclusion

Self-immolation by fire refers to different sets of meanings. It can be an act perpetrated by the individual himself, but it can be as well a homicide disguised in suicide, a sheer killing, mainly tied to 'honor killings.' It can as well be an act of despair, mainly by women (and even in a more marked manner, by predominantly Kurdish women), men being a minority (again, with the exception of the male Kurdish members of PKK) before the Arab Revolutions. In the Muslim world, self-immolation by fire existed, mainly among the Kurdish activists, side by side with martyrdom. The latter was the dominant model through which protest movements, mostly political in nature, expressed their content, either in religious terms (martyrdom in the strictly Islamic idiom) or in a metaphoric one (in the nationalist movements).

The Arab Revolutions introduced a rupture in the dominant model of martyrdom. Self-immolation by fire spread all over the Arab world, at least in the months following the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, replacing, perhaps momentarily, martyrdom based on an attempt at fighting violently the enemy, killing or getting killed.

The self-immolation pattern underlines the new content of the social movements in the Muslim world, in which violence is denounced and the peaceful activist refuses to engage in it, as was the case with the classical Islamic martyrdom. The non-violent model of self-immolation was in turn put into question by the long civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In these countries, the autocratic governments refused to retreat and the result was a military violence that could not be halted through non-violent action symbolised by self-immolation. A new type of social action has surfaced that does not avoid violence but does not espouse the legitimacy of the ideology of violence as such, as was the case with the Jihadist or the authoritarian nationalist ideologies in the past.

It is the first time in the Arab world that a model of action based on non-violence towards the enemy has been inaugurated with a large success in the society, since the second half of the 20th century. In other times, the non-violent action remained marginal.

Self-immolation in the Muslim world points to the large secularisation in many Arab societies. Bouazizi's act could not be religiously justified and his action was not grounded or motivated by Islam. The other cases that followed up (more than a hundred all over the Arab world) did not claim religious vindication either. The people who committed self-cremation were not atheists or against Islam. They simply were secularised enough to restrict the realm of religion to

their spiritual needs, leaving the social sphere to the freedom of human volition. In this respect too, this type of suicide denotes distance towards religion. The case of the Kurds confirms this view, since many of them espoused Marxist ideologies that were not congenial to religion. In its new fashion, free of any explicit ideology, Marxist or else, this type of secularisation marks a step towards a new society where the civil sphere is subjectively grounded in the mindset of the new generations.



