

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Punishment of the Grave: A Neglected Motivation for Jihad and Martyrdom

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**Abstract:** This article explores the role of a spiritual punishment unique to Islam, the punishment of the grave, in motivating jihadi terrorism. It argues that the exemption from this spiritual punishment granted to jihadi martyrs may be a 'pull' factor in the radicalisation of some Muslims. To date the punishment of the grave has been discussed only in passing in the research literature on jihadist radicalisation. To address the resultant gap in our knowledge, this article describes the concept, documents its neglect in the study of jihadist radicalisation, investigates the prevalence of this concern amongst believers, ranging from the nominally affiliated to violent extremists, and the use of the concept by prominent jihadist figures and organisations to attract and train new martyrs. Arguing that a concern with the punishment of the grave is a crucial but overlooked aspect of the heightened religiosity — and based on its expression perhaps uniquely instrumental in identifying believers left with limited options, including violence — the article advocates recognising it as a significant and useful additional marker of radicalisation, especially in the context of prisons. Increased awareness of the concept and the extraordinary fear it often generates will help to better attune strategies used to prevent and deradicalise individuals to the religious struggles driving some Muslims to sacrifice their lives in lethal acts of terrorism.

**Keywords:** Al-Qaeda, ISIS, ideology, jihadism, radicalisation, fear, punishment of the grave

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## Introduction

“Why was 2017 so violent?”<sup>1</sup> This was a question raised in a *Spectator* article by Duncan Gardham, a security journalist who reports on terrorism, regarding the distinct number of jihadist attacks in the UK. He explains that the looming apocalypse referred to by ISIS was compelling to jihadists “motivated by the need to prove themselves to Allah before the Day of Judgement, lest they spend eternity in Hell.”<sup>2</sup> “This may sound fanciful to a secular audience,” Gardham sagely cautions the readers, “but we know from decrypted online conversations between jihadis that this fear is very real.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, he cites two “Hollywood-style videos on YouTube” that were reportedly used in tandem with the notion that the world was about to end: “*The End of Times* and *The Punishment of the Grave*.”<sup>4</sup> Although the end of times would be recognisable to many because the idea is loosely shared by three of the world’s major religions, the punishment of the grave is a spiritual punishment unique to Islam and is therefore increasingly missed – even tellingly by Gardham himself when noting the fear of hell.

This kind of overlooking of the punishment of the grave, a kind of purgatorial punishment inflicted on sinners, is not new; in fact, this preexisting neglect is what seemingly compelled Leor Halevi, a historian of Islam, to publish an article with the *New York Times* — about twelve years prior to Gardham’s publication. In response to the frequency of “front-page news of Muslims dying somewhere in the world in a violent way,” he notes, “there is little understanding among non-Muslims of Islamic views of death and the afterlife.”<sup>5</sup> Providing a brief primer on this spiritual punishment, Halevi explains that martyrs are spared from this fate — and implicitly suggests martyrdom to be a motive for jihadists wanting to escape this grave torment. Tradition indeed places its exemption among the other rewards of martyrdom, such as securing instant “forgiven[ess],” bypassing the “Day of Judgement,” confirming one’s seat in “Paradise,” wearing a “crown” that signifies “dignity,” wedding seventy-two virgins, and being able “to intercede for seventy ... relatives.”<sup>6</sup> Almost fifteen years after that article, the motivational relevance of the punishment of the grave continues to be missed – and this neglect extends beyond investigative journalism.

This article argues that the exemption from the punishment of the grave for martyrs may be a ‘pull’ factor towards jihadism for individuals perceiving the inevitability of the spiritual torment because of their sins.<sup>7</sup> Though the data available is limited, this article shows that we do have evidence of jihadists citing the punishment of the grave as a real concern and a reason for partaking in the jihad and seeking martyrdom, with many more seemingly being inspired by similar concerns. It also appears that prominent jihadist figures and organisations take this spiritual punishment into consideration, and whether or not this is due to genuine religious concern or reflects a cynical exploitation of the idea to support recruitment, this finding points to the utility of the belief in either promoting or understanding jihadist radicalisation. Yet, the consideration of the punishment of the grave is nearly absent in the terrorism and radicalisation literature. It is missing from the scholarly attention given to some of the other martyr’s rewards, even the so-called “seventy-two virgins’ theory of terrorism,”<sup>8</sup> and it is missing from the research on the role of fear in terrorism.<sup>9</sup> It even seems to be missing in the many published accounts of jihadists that mention the spiritual punishment without awareness it is being described.

This article addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the Islamic conception of the punishment of the grave and its role in jihadism. Providing a serious treatment of the topic will at least create greater familiarity with this possible motivation for jihadism amongst radicalisation and terrorism scholars and practitioners alike. This in turn may lead to others noting its presence and significance. The concern for the punishment of the grave is a possible radicalisation marker – since it seems to emerge in tandem with other well-known manifestations of heightened or extreme religiosity that commonly presage radicalisation (though not necessarily so). It also appears to be uniquely instrumental in marking a segment of believers left with little recourse, including violence. Hence an initial case is made to explore this possibility more fully and in additional ways and contexts. One such context discussed in this article is prisons, where marked increases in religiosity and despairing utterances about the punishment are reportedly commonplace and may portend for those struggling with sins a turn to violent extremism. As this study has important implications for the field, its broad contributions to the understated relevance of ideology and religion to religious terrorism and the amelioration of the specificity problem will be considered at the end.

This article has five parts. First, it covers the topic of the punishment of the grave – up to and until its present consideration by many Muslims. Second, it describes the neglect of this religious concept in the radicalisation and terrorism literature. Third, it explores the prevalence of the concern for the punishment of the grave among jihadist individuals and organisations. Fourth, it investigates the concern of the punishment of the grave as a likely manifestation of religiosity and, thereby, a possible marker of radicalisation. Fifth, it briefly looks into the curious prevalence of expressions about the punishment of the grave in prisons where religious transformations are common. The implications of this study will be discussed in the conclusion.

## What is the Punishment of the Grave?

To understand the jihadist concern for the punishment of the grave, it is important first to know how this concept is understood in Islam. Contextually, it takes place in *al-barzakh*, a period “between death and the resurrection,” which can be compared to the purgatory of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> The following passage from Halevi succinctly explains the nature of the Muslim teachings about this punishment:

*According to Islamic doctrine, between the moment of death and the burial ceremony, the spirit of a deceased Muslim takes a quick journey to Heaven and Hell, where it beholds visions of the bliss and torture awaiting humanity at the end of days.*

*By the time corpse handlers are ready to wash the body, the spirit returns to earth to observe the preparations for burial and to accompany the procession toward the cemetery. But then, before earth is piled upon the freshly dug grave, an unusual reunion takes place: The spirit returns to dwell within the body.*

*In the grave, the deceased Muslim - this composite of spirit and corpse - encounters two terrifying angels, Munkar and Nakir, recognized by their bluish faces, their huge teeth and their wild hair.*

*These angels carry out a trial to probe the soundness of a Muslim's faith. If the dead Muslim answers their questions convincingly and if he has no sin on record, then the grave*

*is transformed into a luxurious space that makes bearable the long wait until the final judgment.*

*But if a Muslim's faith is imperfect or if he has sinned during life by, for example, failing repeatedly to undertake purity rituals before prayer, then the grave is transformed into an oppressive, constricting space.*

*The earth begins to weigh down heavily upon the sentient corpse, until the rib cage collapses; worms begin to nibble away at the flesh, causing horrible pain.*

*This torture does not continue indefinitely. It occurs intermittently and ends at the very latest with the resurrection – when God may well forgive Muslims who have endured the punishment.<sup>11</sup>*

Essentially, the punishment of the grave is a torturous “purgative drug” that rids Muslims of their minor sins and ascends them to heaven.<sup>12</sup> Broadly speaking, “the severity and duration of the punishment in the grave depended above all on the measure of a Muslim’s sins and the extent to which these were counterbalanced by repentance, pious works, and a sound faith.”<sup>13</sup> However, not all is necessarily forsaken should these prophylactic measures be insufficient because, in the end, “the receipt of torture may well lead to divine forgiveness.”<sup>14</sup> “This hope was based on the optimistic belief that God might ultimately forgive Muslims who had committed grave or venial sins.”<sup>15</sup>

While the above description explains the nature of the punishment of the grave in Islam, it does not quite capture the graphic nature of the torment involved. The following paraphrasing of a passage from Ibn Abi al-Dunyā’s book *Kitāb al-mawt* (9<sup>th</sup> century) helps to illustrate what is at stake:

*What happens to God's enemy ('adūw)? Ugly angels approach the dying spirit with various instruments of punishment, including “embers from Gehenna” and burning skewers with thorns that penetrate every hair and vein. The angels strike his face and buttocks. They twist the corpse perversely as they clamor for the spirit, which they extract from the heels and the toenails. When the spirit makes its painful exit, it says to the body, “May God requite you in my stead with evil [sharr], for you hurried to do acts of disobedience.” The spirit is deposited in the earth; the earth curses the deceased. The grave begins to constrict God's enemy oppressively (ḍuyyīqa ‘alayhi qabruhu), so that the ribs appear to quarrel with one another until the right and left sides of the ribcage collapse. When the angels ask basic doctrinal questions, the deceased answers, “I do not know” (lā adrī). They rejoin, “May you not know.” They strike him. Sparks fly. Above him, a door opens to the Garden. Below him, seventy-seven doors open to Hell, and a hot wind blows into his grave, to remind him that God will resurrect him in the Fire.<sup>16</sup>*

While the torture’s gruesome nature is one concern, the seeming simplicity of becoming subject to it is another. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī’s *al-Durra al-fākhira* (11<sup>th</sup> century) shows that the punishment can result from a “single misdemeanour rather than indicating the general

outcome of a life of error.”<sup>17</sup> Works like this are among the popular medieval eschatological manuals whose “function as a whole was didactic and homiletic, implementing the divine injunction to command the good and prohibit the evil ... [essentially] instruct[ing] the faithful by means of stories and descriptions which fully explicate the ramifications of following or not following God’s plan for humankind.”<sup>18</sup>

The punishment of the grave is a concept unique to Islam. It is certainly distinct from the closest concept of Christianity, which is Purgatory. While the medieval notion of Purgatory was reserved for believers who were slated for salvation and ultimately Paradise, the punishment of the grave was “predicated upon a keen sense of retributive justice and did not necessarily guarantee salvation ... [and sometimes instead] provided a foretaste of Hell.”<sup>19</sup> The punishment of the grave also differs in small – but no less fundamental – ways with the closest notion in Judaism. Before the time of Islam, “at least some of the rabbis” did advance the notion that everyone would suffer in the graves, but this torment was not caused by the “moral makeup” of the deceased.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the suffering seemed to stem from the belief that since the corpse is sentient, it would feel pain from the processes of biological degradation. This contrasts with Islam, where the punishment of the grave is reserved for “only sinners and infidels,” and the deterioration of the corpse is not a biological phenomenon but rather a “religious event governed by ethical rules.”<sup>21</sup>

The concept of the punishment of the grave appears in early Islam. It can be traced back to “the first quarter of the eighth century,” and it was during the early history of the religion that “traditionists elevated their belief in the punishment of the tomb to the status of dogma.”<sup>22</sup> It was a “reality” that “all Sunnī schools affirmed on the basis of numerous *ṣaḥīḥ* [authentic] traditions” and understood by “the great majority of Muslims.”<sup>23</sup> There was, ultimately, a strong authoritative basis for the punishment of the grave in the religion. Al-Bukhārī referenced it by name in his hadiths compilation, which is regarded as “the most authoritative collection of Sunni traditions.”<sup>24</sup> To cite another example, one highly esteemed Islamic scholar of the period “exclaimed that if traditionist reports (*akhbār*) concerning Muhammad’s prayers to be spared the punishment of the tomb were false, then none of ‘our religious decrees’ and none of ‘the reports about our Prophet’ were sound.”<sup>25</sup> It is unsurprising to learn that even some of the Muslim groups on the fringe struggled at times to deny it.<sup>26</sup> A prominent outlier was the Mutazilites, which prioritised reason in religious interpretation. Yet, this group’s rejection of the punishment of the grave was not unequivocal; efforts emerged from within the movement to reverse it.<sup>27</sup>

Who is spared from the punishment of the grave? Muslim traditions provide answers: “Prophets were granted a reprieve ... Martyrs, as well as those who earned the status of martyr due to their physical suffering in the moments before death, were also granted an exemption. ... Similarly, Muslims who had spent every night reading *Sūrat al-Mulk* (Qur’ān 67) bypassed the inquisition.”<sup>28</sup> Why did reading that chapter (*Sūra*) afford believers protection? It seems to have to do with the role of suffering. “Having feared God’s sovereignty, his wrath, fire, and woeful scourge—the principal themes of the *Sūra*—and having persevered night after night in this activity even as their eyes grew dim and weary, they had already endured the necessary hours of darkness.”<sup>29</sup> Traditions also indicate that “disease” and posthumous “self-annihilation” led to



exemption from the punishment.<sup>30</sup> Essentially, suffering seems to be the currency of expiation. Critical physical suffering can especially clear one's slate because it essentially satisfies the key requirement of martyrdom, a category by no means exclusive to death while fighting for Allah: "According to Islamic tradition, Muslims who die in a fire, by drowning, in the collapse of a building or in some other way involving great physical suffering merit the rank of martyrs in the afterlife."<sup>31</sup> Even more ambiguously, the believer could escape the punishment of the grave by dying on a Friday.<sup>32</sup> Some believed that rituals, such as prayers, involving the dead may help grant them some reprieve from the punishment. But, "it was never altogether evident that a ritual performed for the benefit of the dead would have the desired effect," rather, "its efficaciousness depended on whether or not a given individual deserved God's mercy."<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, the suffering required to expiate outstanding sins would await many in the grave.

Nearly all believers are susceptible to the punishment of the grave. After all, the punishment of the grave "was meted out for all manner of peccadilloes, and everyone feared it. Even the prophet Muhammad had prayed frequently for forgiveness and hoped for indemnity. Such sins as slandering others and soiling oneself with urine brought about purgatorial tortures."<sup>34</sup> In fact, one authoritative classical work catalogues a long list of seemingly inescapable sins, spanning pages, that result in the grave torment.<sup>35</sup>

How is the punishment of the grave considered in present times? An entry from the encyclopaedia of Islam explains that it is a "common belief upheld among average Muslims" and "a belief that attracts a great deal of attention from average practicing Muslims."<sup>36</sup> According to Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad's detailed study on death and the afterlife in Islam, contemporary thinkers and writers agree on the reality of the punishment of the grave, though they differ on the nature of its suffering (i.e., physical or psychological).<sup>37</sup> Robust data show that many fear it in present times. Psychological studies report that many Muslims continue to fear the grave torment – and always at significant levels.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate just one example, the majority of the participants ranked the fear of the punishment of the grave higher than losing "someone dear" to them, "getting cancer," or contracting a "serious disease."<sup>39</sup> Although current research is limited when it comes to understanding the role of this fear, a rich ethnographic study of Muslims participating in Egypt's Islamic Revival provides useful insight. The study found that, at least for these ardent believers, a fear of the punishment of the grave is instructive when it comes to attitudes and behaviour; it "serves as a disincentive to immoral conduct" and is essential to "the enactment of one's divinely mandated duties."<sup>40</sup> What, however, happens to individuals who fear the spiritual punishment and are afraid to incur the major sin from not carrying out the perceived obligation of jihad, or more crucially (and which is the focus of this article), those with sins already on record? Before examining the compelling evidence that the punishment of the grave is a concern for many jihadists, we will turn to its neglect in the literature.

## **The Gap in the Radicalisation and Terrorism Literature**

Terrorism and radicalisation scholars have largely overlooked the punishment of the grave. Its significance is absent from the writings that to varying degrees consider the importance of sin or hell for jihadists.<sup>41</sup> When the punishment of the grave happens to be mentioned, it is mostly done in passing – often by name only as part of the infamous list of martyrdom

rewards.<sup>42</sup> A few scholars attempt to succinctly instill clarity by, for example, renaming the term, such as “penalties of purgatory,” when listing it among the martyr’s rewards,<sup>43</sup> and others strive to capture its essence by adding a few more words.<sup>44</sup> More problematically, however, others manage to miss its essence altogether. For example, Phil Gurski does not note the punishment of the grave among the list of rewards for martyrdom; however, he does note the reward of “having one’s body remain intact forever without corruption (there are analogies here to Christian saints),” which may involve a reference to the punishment of the grave, but incompletely and rather misleadingly.<sup>45</sup> This neglect is similar to those who do an incomplete job of defining this punishment. Devin R. Springer et al., for example, discuss it problematically by simply saying: “martyrs are said to be spared ‘the torments of the grave,’ so that their bodies will not decompose after death.”<sup>46</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, much more is at stake: the painful torment that believers are made to suffer for their sins.<sup>47</sup>

In the rare occurrence of discussions about the punishment of the grave, it continues to be neglected. Farhad Khosroghavar misses it when examining a fictitious dialogue between an ardent believer and a dead martyr that he found on a French jihadist website, which he explains “is useful for understanding the underlying feelings and beliefs among would-be martyrs.”<sup>48</sup> Inside the dialogue, the believer asks the martyr, “How do you endure the ordeals of the tomb? Have you been interrogated [by the angel of death who makes human beings suffer]?”<sup>49</sup> Khosroghavar, however, seems to miss this concern for the punishment of the grave and instead only considers the concern with the interrogating angels that would precede it: “In traditional Islam, the first night in the tomb is the most dreadful: the asking of questions by the angel of death entails the anguish of those who do not know whether they will spend the time between their death and the Day of Reckoning in a *Barsakh* (the equivalent of Christian purgatory) and its aftermath.”<sup>50</sup> By referring to the ‘first night’ in which the questioning of angels takes place as the ‘most dreadful,’ it essentially precludes the consideration of the grave torment that would follow for many, an omission made all the more glaring when Khosroghavar is apparently unpacking “all [of] the [dialogue’s] enticements” to jihadism and martyrdom.<sup>51</sup>

When David Cook describes the list of rewards for martyrdom, he provides perhaps the lengthiest discussion about the benefit of exemption from the punishment of the grave.<sup>52</sup> Yet it remains comparatively thin. His single statement on the torment of Muslims by two angels is subsumed in a paragraph focused primarily on the positive physical effects of martyrdom on the condition of the martyr’s body:

*First of all, the martyr is free from the “torment of the grave” and his body, unlike the bodies of other Muslims, does not need to be washed but is placed within the grave as is. Unlike other Muslims, the martyr will not be tormented by the two angels Munkar and Nakir, whose hostile questioning in the immediate wake of death is of great concern to Muslims (hence the process of extreme unction, or talqin) [emphasis mine]. When this fact is coupled together with the idea that the martyr will continue to be garbed in blood at the Day of Resurrection, smelling of musk, we can see the roots of the belief in the incorruptibility of the martyr’s body and its concurrent sweet smell that was to be developed so markedly during the medieval period and then marketed by Abdallah Azzam ... It is even possible to extrapolate from the exemption from the torment of the grave the idea that the ground in which the martyr is buried is itself holy and free from evil.*<sup>53</sup>

Since the reward of martyrdom under discussion is specifically about the exemption from the ‘torment of the grave’, it is curious that comparatively little attention is afforded to the very detail that would give rise to the most concern, especially when considering that the rewards of martyrdom have, as Cook argues, “profound ramifications for this world.”<sup>54</sup>

We even seem to be neglecting the consideration of the punishment of the grave when the data suggests its importance. This, for example, seems to be the case with the curious involvement of the grave in the training of jihadists. In Samuel Shay’s *The Shahids*, the grave appears in the description of the training of suicide terrorists:

*The religious training is mainly characteristic of Islamic terror organizations and is conducted by clerics who grant religious authorization to conduct a suicide mission and provide explanations regarding the shahid’s reward in the world to come. ... The religious training provides the candidate with emotional support and alleviates his fear of death. Candidates have sometimes undergone additional training including lying inside an open grave in a cemetery for several hours [emphasis mine]. Clerics play a decisive role not only in the emotional training of the potential suicide attackers, but also in the creation of a social atmosphere that encourages martyrdom and contributes to the motivation to recruit suicide terrorists.*<sup>55</sup>

The role of the grave in this ‘additional training’ remains unexplained. This oversight is made all the more glaring when Shay notes that the clerics discuss the martyr’s rewards to the recruits, which would have to include the exemption from the punishment of the grave.

Ami Pedahzur similarly notes the presence of the grave in the training of Hamas: “the training process in Hamas included psychological elements and religious indoctrination. The prospective perpetrator went through long sessions with the recruiters, who talked about the religious importance of the [martyrdom] act and also tried to remove the fear of dying. This would include taking the recruit to a cemetery and placing him or her inside a grave.”<sup>56</sup> Here, it is unclear if Pedahzur is suggesting that the training is primarily psychological or religious, but in either event the role of the time spent in a grave requires further explanation.

Daniel Byman also documents the “bizarre training” of the Somalian jihadist terrorist group al-Shabaab, which, according to one recruit, includes “dig[ging] their own graves with their hands ... [and then laying] in their graves while the trainer jumped from grave to grave, stepping on their stomachs.”<sup>57</sup>

The punishment of the grave is not mentioned in any of these accounts. Yet its relevance is far from spurious, as is made evident by another account: “the new Lion of Hamas lowers himself into a makeshift coffin as he recites verses from the Qur’an describing ‘the torment of the tomb,’ the interrogation of the deceased by the angels Munkir [*sic*] and Nakir.”<sup>58</sup> Here, the jihadist being cited clearly shows an awareness of the teachings on the punishment of the grave – and he also happens to be slated for a martyrdom operation. A familiarity with the doctrine would have encouraged further inquiry into the motivational significance of being physically placed in a grave and presumably made to imagine the pain to come without the redemption promised by martyrdom. Introducing a serious consideration of the concept to the research on jihadist terrorism can help make the ‘bizarre’ more understandable.



## Evidence that Fear of the Punishment of the Grave May be a Motivation for Jihadist Terrorism

We now turn to the jihadist consideration of the punishment of the grave. Based on an assortment of data from academic studies, books, and investigative reports, the composite findings show that there seems to be at least a concern among some jihadists for the punishment of the grave. Despite the challenges of interviewing jihadists and, as a result, the limited data in the field, we have statements by jihadists citing the punishment of the grave as a real concern and as a reason for partaking in the jihad and seeking martyrdom.

One instance of real concern for the punishment of the grave as a jihadi motivator can be found in the interviews Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam completed with Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. A British fighter affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra commented:

*Before this jihad, I like the idea of shahada [martyrdom]. The idea of no accountability in the grave and on the day of judgment, but I wasn't ready to leave the confines of my life in UK. In 2011, it was announced that a local brother was Shaheed [martyr] in Syria—that's when it started. I started thinking and asking to myself—"you know what, if he can do it, why can't I? He's in Jannah now while you are sitting here living a mundane life of simply university, work, making money."<sup>59</sup>*

Here, we can see that this British foreign fighter is concerned with the grave torment for which he would be painfully made accountable — and is aware that the way out is through jihad and, ultimately, martyrdom.

Another account shows how the concern for sin, and ultimately the punishment of the grave, is prioritized over the other martyrdom rewards. This distinct consideration can be found in the secret undercover recording of Daniel Patrick Boyd's private sermon on the importance of fighting for Allah, specifically from the following part of a passage that discusses the rewards of the martyr:

*As I told you before there are so many rewards There's no way I could put them all in one khutbah, but I found these seven that are particularly special, and are particular only to the Shahid [martyr], no one else. Listen to this, all of his sins are forgiven, from the first drop of their blood. Astaghfir biLlah Who doesn't need that? The drop hasn't even exited and it's done. The sins are over. He is saved from the punishment of the grave. If any of you have read anything about the punishment of the grave, this one point alone is enough to go and fight for Allah and hope for Shahada [martyrdom]. Just this one point. If you never see Janna [Paradise] but are saved from the punishment of the grave WaLlahi it is good [emphasis mine].<sup>60</sup>*

This recording, done by an FBI informant, would be part of an effort to arrest and eventually imprison Boyd and the members of his North Carolina jihadist terrorist cell on the charge of "suspicion of plotting a 'violent jihad' overseas."<sup>61</sup> His emphasis on the clearance of sin (e.g., usury) and, ultimately, the exemption from the punishment of the grave as a sufficient reason to fight and hopefully die for Allah is telling. Save for the reward of interceding on the behalf of

relatives to save them from hell, none of the other rewards he discusses seem to come close in importance, not even the attainment of Paradise.

Sometimes the concern of the punishment of the grave is blended in with the need to intercede for sinned relatives doomed to suffer it. This is undoubtedly the case with the captured female Palestinian jihadist who sought martyrdom through suicide bombing:

*There is nothing that is missing in paradise; everything what I would need is within reach. You can see the prophet, Allah, and you save seventy relatives from the grave torment. Every shahid [martyr] atones for the sins of family members. Every shahid liberates seventy relatives from suffering, and atones for their sins [emphasis mine].<sup>62</sup>*

While we would be unable to deduce with absolute certainty which of these rewards would concern this jihadist the most, it would be hard to ignore the emphasis she places by way of repetition on the clearing of the relatives' sin, which without the martyrdom would force them to 'suffer' the 'grave torment.'

Some jihadist accounts reveal a genuine concern with the punishment of the grave in general. This can be seen, for example, in *The Way of the Strangers* in an exchange the journalist Graeme Wood recounts with Musa Cerantonio, a Muslim convert dubbed to be "perhaps the most famous jihadist in Australia"<sup>63</sup>:

*One morning, when he picked me up from the apartment I was renting, he told me that his aunt, who was not a Muslim, had just died. We had spoken the day before about the Day of Judgment. He had informed me that before Paradise or damnation, most mortals would face the Punishment of the Graves [adhab al qabr], a palate cleanser for the coming eternity of either pleasure or pain. Even Muslims and righteous people—with the exception of martyrs and prophets, who go straight to Paradise—will have their ribs squeezed until they touch each other and crack. His aunt would have been experiencing this process now. According to scripture, her howls of pain could be heard by animals and genies but not by humans.<sup>64</sup>*

Woods noted that before this conversation, they "had spoken of little besides deaths for days," and for this particular conversation, Musa was "subdued and pensive."<sup>65</sup> "I sensed sadness and a hint of regret—although I'm sure he would deny it—that he was obliged to believe in, and celebrate, his aunt's torture."<sup>66</sup>

The concern with the punishment of the grave is found with other jihadists. Raed Jaser, the suspect involved in the 2013 Canadian Via Rail bombing plot, is one good example. According to a close friend who regularly prayed with him (even hours before his arrest), Jaser had been particularly "afraid of the punishment of the grave – it was something on his mind."<sup>67</sup> Jaser wanted to know how long he would be made to suffer it, and, as his friend's account also suggests, sometimes struggled to come to terms with this gruesome reckoning, "He would question 'What is the punishment of the grave?' Is there a punishment of the grave?"<sup>68</sup> Since the punishment of the grave is directly related to sins on record, it is perhaps no surprise to learn,

then, that according to an undercover FBI agent, Jaser was distressed about sin. This concern was made evident during their onsite scheming to derail a train when Jaser was disconcerted about the amount of attention they were drawing, “Jaser said if we made a mistake and got caught because we didn’t take the plot seriously then we were committing a sin.”<sup>69</sup> “I don’t need *this* kind of sin, man [emphasis mine],’ Jaser said.”<sup>70</sup> This hyper-attentiveness to accruing sin is consistent with his concern for the duration of his spiritual torment.

Such a fear of the punishment of the grave, and a desire for the other rewards of the martyr, is relevant in tandem with other jihadi motives, of course, such as specific political grievances, in explaining their actions. In the case of Jaser, he was, according to “some sources ... outraged about the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>71</sup>

The punishment of the grave figured among the works consulted by jihadists. It was part of the leadup to the suicide bombings in Casablanca on May 16, 2003. “On 14 May, the terrorists prepared for the attacks by praying and watches [*sic*] videos like the ‘The Journey to the Afterlife,’ and ‘Death and the Horrors of the Grave.’”<sup>72</sup> In a separate case, the “Punishment of the Grave” was found to be among the written works left behind by two British foreign fighters who left for Syria to participate in the jihad and apparently sought martyrdom.<sup>73</sup> The presence of this kind of material concerning the punishment of the grave is by no means anomalous. On the contrary, it seems to figure among the materials of even more jihadists. This at least seems to be the finding of Donald Holbrook in his study of the materials typically left behind by jihadists from the UK.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, the high-profile radical preacher Feiz Mohammed’s audio lecture on the punishment of the grave, titled ‘The Grave,’ was among the list of extremist works left behind by convicted or dead jihadists from the UK and discovered in police counterterrorism investigations.<sup>75</sup> A close listening of this lecture reveals the exalting of martyrdom as *the* option to avoid the punishment of the grave, and it is not a surprise to learn that the lecture series to which it belongs, the *Death Series*, resulted in a significant public backlash in Australia.<sup>76</sup> Holbrook’s study also cites the even greater prominence of Anwar al-Awlaki’s *The Hereafter* lecture series, which notably includes a discussion of the punishment of the grave.<sup>77</sup> In fact, this popular lecture series begins with the “Torment of the Grave.”<sup>78</sup> While we may never know if the particular lecture about the punishment of the grave served as an inspiration for the jihadists in Holbrook’s study, it is still nevertheless an important detail to consider, especially when Awlaki is thought to have exerted an influence on “more than half of U.S. jihadist terrorism cases in the years since his death.”<sup>79</sup>

Even prominent jihadist figures and organisations appear to be concerned about it. It seems to figure, for instance, in the public rebukes of one another regarding their religious sincerity. An ISIS training module explaining which Muslim groups are correct or wrong chastises the non-violent Islamist organisation Hizb-ut Tahrir partly because the group rejects the punishment of the grave. ISIS seems to be incensed that Hizb-ut Tahrir merely “trust[s]” it as a concept, not absolutely “believe[s]” it. In other words, Hizb-ut Tahrir is being faulted for not unconditionally subscribing to the reality of this spiritual punishment. It should be noted that ISIS was not alone in making this criticism. The famous jihadist leader Abdullah Azzam chastised Hizb-ut Tahrir’s disbelief in this spiritual punishment decades earlier.<sup>80</sup> An interesting parallel can be drawn between the actions of Azzam and the founder of one of the major schools of Islam,

Ash'arism, who nearly a millennia earlier felt compelled to “denounce Mu'tazilite theologians ... for denying the reality of the punishment in the tomb.”<sup>81</sup>

Although it is unclear if the jihadist leaders and organisations' concern with the punishment of the grave is genuine, they are (perhaps inadvertently) benefiting from its consideration. To be clear, the utility of this fear-based tool is by no means limited to jihadist entities. Non-violent Muslim groups and individuals appear to use the threat of the punishment of the grave to direct believers towards particular actions, such as making donations,<sup>82</sup> becoming obedient to their (extremist) group,<sup>83</sup> and, according to one ethnographic study, continuing their participation in a personal development training program.<sup>84</sup>

The suggested jihadist instrumentalisation of the fear of the punishment grave is based on two observations. First, while written works concerning the punishment of the grave include martyrdom as one of the different preventatives,<sup>85</sup> jihadist literature heavily emphasises martyrdom for escape. In an organisational sense, jihadist groups would benefit the most from an arsenal of believers primed in such a way to die fighting for their goals. Its psychological effect would be detrimental, however, to the aims of relatively non-violent Islamist organisations. Rather unsurprisingly, Hizb-ut Tahrir had discounted the punishment of the grave.<sup>86</sup> The curious case of Al-Muhajiroun suggests further insight. They had downplayed the spiritual punishment at one point<sup>87</sup> — and the suspected turn to its unconditional adoption broadly overlaps the increasing association with violence. This association may not be entirely coincidental. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, in his discussion on Al-Muhajiroun's “turning to [t]errorism”, highlights the “sustained effort to shift members' attentions to the afterlife” and its “fast-track” through “martyrdom”.<sup>88</sup> It is possible that the grave torment that awaits even minor sins has a role in this drive to shift consideration toward the afterlife and violence.

Second, the different ways that the primary jihadist magazines of al-Qaeda (*Inspire*) and ISIS (*Rumiyah* and *Dabiq*) reference the punishment of the grave seem to match their distinct organisational aims. Al-Qaeda cites exemption from the punishment of the grave as a reward of martyrdom, and this would have suited their calls for indiscriminate attacks throughout the West.<sup>89</sup> It was believed that these attacks would help end support for the ‘corrupt’ regimes in the Muslim world and clear the way for ‘genuine’ Islamic governments. ISIS first references a different tradition that links the exemption from the grave torment to a death that requires a physical presence on the battle fronts of the then-Islamic state (*Ribaat*),<sup>90</sup> but later, much like al-Qaeda, they linked it to the tradition of martyrdom that enables attacks elsewhere in the world.<sup>91</sup> In other words, the promise of overcoming the punishment of the grave was first used to inspire recruits for the territorial struggles of the new Islamic state, and then as this state was in decline to incentivise acts of more widespread retaliation against those fighting the Islamic State.

This means an awareness of the utility of the fears of the punishment of the grave for jihadist organisations and leaders may also be useful for those seeking to detect, gauge, and prevent the resultant process of radicalisation.

## The Link between the Punishment of the Grave and Radicalism

A link between the concern for the punishment of the grave and radicalism seems to exist. Although all available evidence stems from Egypt, it nevertheless remains insightful. Many nominal Muslims apparently connect the fear of this spiritual punishment with jihadism. This link was found in Charles Hirschkind's rich ethnographic study: "many of the more secularly oriented people" believed that "the danger of sermons on the grave or Judgement Day owed ... to the fact that they are taken as real by their audiences, a category mistake often seen to be responsible for social evils ranging from backwardness to terrorism."<sup>92</sup> There are further indications that this association between the fear of the punishment of the grave and jihadism may be even more widespread. The popular Egyptian film *The Terrorist* from 1994 features an artistic sequence beginning with the scene of a jihadist staring at the bottom of the woman walking in front of him — after which the viewers follow his "footsteps into his dark, barren apartment where he sits on a chest full of grenades reading a book about 'the torture and bliss of the grave.'"<sup>93</sup> This artful juxtaposition of scenes indicating the inescapability of sinful pleasures and a reminder of the torments of the grave reflects an awareness of the intelligibility of the terrorist's dilemma to a Muslim-majority audience.

Many nominal Muslims also have made associations between the concern of the grave torment and the kind of extremism deemed incompatible with a secular society. According to "contemporary Egyptians," Hirschkind reports, "the plethora of sermons and books on the tortures of hell and the horrors of the grave stimulates a morbid fascination among the popular classes that distracts them from the serious issues that they, as national citizens, must confront."<sup>94</sup> "This unhealthy obsession," he was informed frequently, "undermines the positive orientation toward life necessary for everything from social progress to a respect for human rights."<sup>95</sup> Not surprisingly, secondary school teachers who played cassettes for their students of sermons on the punishment of the grave were deemed to be as threatening as teachers who urged female students to wear religious garb — and both were among the "thousands of extremist" educators fired.<sup>96</sup>

The more ardent believers do seem to associate concern for the punishment of the grave with heightened religiosity. This much is evident from the backlash that erupted in the 1990s over an episode of the Egyptian television series *The Family* in which the father challenges "the doctrinal basis of beliefs about the torture in the grave" in a debate with an emir at a mosque.<sup>97</sup> Notable opposition to the show emerged "from well-established moderate Islamist thinkers," with one accusing the show of "not distinguishing between extremism and religiosity," and another claiming it "attacked piety, not terrorism, and destroyed values and doubted religious doctrines, including torture in the grave."<sup>98</sup> A similar association is apparently understood by the Egyptian Islamic Revival participants in Hirschkind's ethnographic study: the "instructive power" of the fear of spiritual punishments seems to be a "primary" factor in their understanding of religiosity.<sup>99</sup>

Further data supports the notion that concern for the punishment of the grave is a manifestation of religiosity. This concern seems to be a hallmark of religious transformation, which emerges



in tandem with other manifestations of religiosity, such as wearing a hijab or growing a beard. We can see this, for example, in an online essay by Lam Abu-Odeh in which she shares, among other things, her experience with the societal resurgence of Islam in her country. Speaking as a “born witness to the rise and mounting influence of this Islamic Awakening among ... [her] peers,” Abu-Odeh comments on the emergence of new “Muslim women”:

This “Muslim” woman appeared from within our midst: our family, our school, our workplace, and our neighborhood. She was like us, and then one day, she no longer was. She “separated herself from us” either affectively or socially or both, because she found a God that inspired her to submit to Him. This God asked her to cover herself, so she wore the hijab. She covered her hair, pulled her sleeves to her wrists and her skirt to her ankles. She promised us His rewards if we were to veil ourselves too, and when we ignored her she threatened us with his rage. The torture of the grave was just the beginning of our after-death punishment – ordeal for failing to obey His commands. According to the “Muslim woman,” we would be interrogated by an archangel why we refused to veil ourselves during our lifetimes, and as we fail to answer, we would be doomed to the “torture of the grave.” Worms and snakes would crawl up our exposed non-hijabi skin and... well, you can imagine where this horror scenario is going.<sup>100</sup>

As we can see, the religious transformation undergone by these women entailed marked changes in their appearance and lifestyle in tandem with a heightened concern with the punishment of the grave, one that compelled them to warn others of the consequences of their sins.

Another example can be found in the observation shared by Muhammad Syed, an American Muslim who grew up in Pakistan. Upon returning to the US and attending college during the 9/11 crisis, he noticed that “some of his Pakistani friends became ‘ultra conservative.’”<sup>101</sup> One of them, Syed reports, suddenly grew a beard and seemed to become fixated on the punishment of the grave:

“There was one guy in particular,” says Muhammad. “I knew him through high school.

*“We were in the same college. We were similar people - he was liberal like me. Then he grew this foot-and-a-half long beard.”*

*His friend’s outlook “scared” Muhammad.*

*“He was talking about torture in the grave (an Islamic belief in punishment after death),” he says.*

*“And he was talking about it being a real thing that people have witnessed - a very superstitious type of thinking.”<sup>102</sup>*

Studies have repeatedly found that individuals undergo a marked increase in religiosity before engaging in jihadism, and this increasing religiosity is arguably the most consistent marker of jihadi radicalisation.<sup>103</sup> Growing of a beard, or the donning of a hijab, are known manifestations of conservative religiosity, and a preoccupation with the punishment of the grave is, at least in proximity and temporality, likely another manifestation.

Considering the concern for the punishment of the grave may be useful in increasing not only the sensitivity of tests for increasing religiosity but also the specificity of those tests. Given how often people turn religious without resorting to violence, the specificity of those tests can help make a difference. Giving charity, “fasting,” “showing remorse,” “performing the minor pilgrimage,” “seeking (religious) knowledge,” “frequent and extended visits to [the] mosque, and especially, proper ablutions and prayer” are among the acts, noted by either the Qur’an and hadiths of varying authenticity, that can expiate certain sins (kaffārāt) or counterbalance minor ones (hasanāt).<sup>104</sup> These actions also happen to be similar in appearance to common Muslim practices — many of which are obligatory and all of them done for a variety of reasons — and are thus too imprecise of a religiosity marker to suggest a concern with atonement. A preoccupation with the punishment of the grave is unlike other sharp upticks in religiosity, in that by virtue of the expiatory nature of the spiritual punishment its consideration, particularly expressed concern, may suggest an unease with sin and its gruesome clearing. While the fear of the grave torment does not mark a turn to violence, the limited options to avoid the spiritual punishment, especially with certainty, bring us closer to individuals predisposed to jihad and particularly martyrdom.

In fact, there seem to be very few factors that stand in the way of violence for those expressing concern for the punishment of the grave. As far as the limited available data can suggest, there appear to be two interrelated factors that, depending on the degree, may prevent or facilitate the turn to violence: 1) the certainty and duration of the grave torment; and 2) the proximity to God’s forgiveness. The nuanced differences for each point are best illustrated through the comparison of accounts between jihadists, which have already been examined in an earlier section, and radical Muslim women associated with the Hoffstad network in the Netherlands, as reported by Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg in their interview-driven study. As we will see, the contrast between those who have passed the threshold of violence and those just before it seems to offer useful insights. Regarding the first factor, the certainty and extent of the punishment of the grave, the women reportedly understood that the spiritual punishment awaits the very minor sins they have trouble avoiding, such as gossiping.<sup>105</sup> And yet, crucially, the only reported account that discusses the concern of the grave torment at length reveals a lack of certainty in its inevitability and takes solace in the finite duration:

*During the time of the prophet there was a very good sister who died, Um Youssef tells us. “When her brother opened her tomb to extract a ring, an heirloom, all he could see was fire. He went to the prophet because he could not understand it. His sister had been such a good woman. Why should she burn in her grave? The prophet said: ‘You will have to ask your mother.’ The mother said: ‘Your sister had one bad habit. She eavesdropped on people and told others what she had heard.’” Um Youssef shivers at the thought of another punishment of the grave possibly awaiting her [emphasis mine]. Islam says a mother should breastfeed her child for two years. Um Youssef didn’t because she didn’t know about this rule. Later she read that she may be punished in the grave: for each gulp of mother’s milk that she withheld from her child she can expect a snakebite in her nipple [emphasis mine]. In the meantime she will be held upside down. “But,” says Um Youssef, “the punishments in the grave will stop at some point. Fortunately.... [emphasis mine]”<sup>106</sup>*

Here, we see Um Youssef's expressing concern for the punishment of the grave, and yet her choice of words like 'possibly' and 'may' belies the imminence of the gruesome reckoning — a stark contrast to the previously examined accounts of jihadists that operate as if the spiritual punishment is a foregone conclusion. Moreover, the solace she takes in the finiteness of the grave torment in the contingent event of occurrence suggests she is approaching the spiritual punishment with minimal sins on record — a stark contrast to the Canadian Via Rail terror plotter, for instance, who was struggling with its indeterminate duration and fearful of accumulating further sins.

This brings us to the second factor, the perceived proximity to God's forgiveness. On this matter, the radical women seem to have a sense of optimism. These women believe that so long as they are sincere in performing the expiatory acts of prayers and the cleansing before it, God can for-give many of their minor sins.<sup>107</sup> This is even in spite of the perceived demands of the expiatory acts: Um Youssef, for example, believes she has to do a particular prayer 100 times a day to clear her minor sins, including the glances taken of men. In contrast, these non-violent expiatory acts were evidently deemed unsatisfactory by the jihadists who instead turned to jihad and sought martyrdom to ascertain God's forgiveness — and escape the consequences of minor sins and, in turn, the grave torment.

All of this to say, the consideration of the concern for the punishment of the grave appears to be uniquely instrumental in delineating a demographic left with very few options. Despairing expressions about its inevitability or duration seem to bring us even closer to those turning to violence. This missed religiosity marker should be explored more fully elsewhere and in additional ways. One place where such research might be fruitful is in prisons. Despairing utterances about the punishment of the grave seem to be prevalent among prisoners who have undergone a religious transformation.

## The Curious References to the Punishment of the Grave in Prisons

Many Muslim prisoners seem to express consideration, if not concern, with the punishment of the grave. It is also worth noting that these prisoners seem to belong to the majority that have undergone a marked increase in religiosity.<sup>108</sup> In Mathew Wilkinson et al.'s "Prison as a Site of Intense Religious Change," one Muslim prisoner in the UK whose faith had "intensified" references the punishment of the grave:

*I think I'm just being saved, God's put me through the hardship, but only because he loves me, that's what I believe. So, everyone around me, I try to say to them, "Whether you're Muslim or non-Muslim, reflect on something and become something better." Because this ain't a punishment, the grave is your punishment, so if God's given me the years to say, because there's a saying I say, what would you rather do, ten years in prison or eternity of a hellfire? [...] Allah is saving me, so maybe there was something bad going to happen around the corner or the next years, maybe it was on a plane journey or this or that. So, just have patience, because look where God's put you. This is what you need to understand about life. Don't take prison as a punishment.<sup>109</sup>*

This prisoner's consideration above is seemingly driven by optimism and hope. He believes that while he is being made to experience difficulty, Allah is actually saving him by providing a protected path towards redemption — a much better alternative to dying suddenly and becoming subject to the painful reckoning in the grave for one's previous sins.

A major anthropological study of Muslim prisoners in the UK reveals even more instances of utterances about the punishment of the grave — but seemingly from a place closer to despair. Among the many fascinating findings reported by Gabriel Marranci is the discovery that “a surprising number ... compared, metaphorically, their detention to the so-called torment of the grave”:

*We are like dead. You know, our families can think of us, but it is like when you think about a dead relative. You can come to visit us, but it is like when you go visit a grave; it is a sad act, something that leaves you with a bitter taste. We are in a grave: look around! We are here to suffer and to feel our wrongdoing on our skin, our soul. But after this, after having paid, we will be free again.*<sup>110</sup>

A sense of despair seems to pervade the above account that Marranci provides to represent the many others, especially when he adds that “the ‘death theme’ was a recurrent one among ... [his] respondents, especially when young.”<sup>111</sup>

Further insight to the extent of this despair may be gleaned by the prisoners' management of their sinful behaviour, as the punishment of the grave is directly (and painfully) dependent on it. Many prisoners apparently contented themselves with non-violent means to clear their sins and ultimately held enough faith in God's forgiveness. They sought to perform the pilgrimage (i.e., Hajj) upon being freed, because they believed it “cleanses a person from sin” and helps with “ask[ing] forgiveness” from Allah.<sup>112</sup> Other prisoners, however, felt doomed to sinfulness. It was hard to escape the resulting anguish, as Marranci's analysis indicates:

*In restrictive interpretations of Islam, as in all monotheistic religions, masturbation, homosexuality and homosexual acts are harshly condemned. In both young offenders' and adult institutions, among men and women, masturbation was clearly relatively frequent among Muslim inmates. The above elements, often together with the impossibility, for various psychological reasons, of reaching the level of religious piety desired by the prisoner, were the cause of strong psychological distress and occasional self-harm, as a form of self-punishment.*<sup>113</sup>

For these Muslim prisoners, the inability to escape sin (e.g., masturbation) was a source of great psychological distress. It also was a cause of violence in the form of self-harm, which was described elsewhere to be, in part, their desire “to punish themselves for acts that they deemed to be ‘sinful.’”<sup>114</sup> Whatever role the punishment of the grave may have, its significance seems inescapable. In explaining how religion can also exacerbate depression in the prisons, Marranci raises a rhetorical yet curiously specific example that “a Muslim prisoner may be reminded by an imam about the afterlife punishment known as the ‘torment of the grave’ and thereafter lives in continuous fear of it.”<sup>115</sup> To this point the present author adds a relevant consideration:

what happens when martyrdom is emphasised as the surest way of escape? This idea could be especially appealing to those prisoners who have already turned to violence in their losing struggles against sin, even if it is only directed towards themselves.

As Basra and Neumann mention in their influential study of the crime-terrorism nexus a “principal difficulty” faced by prison staff is “to ‘spot the signs’ [of the nexus] and distinguish between (legitimate) religious conversion and (potentially problematic) radicalization.”<sup>116</sup> A preoccupation with the punishment of the grave, and the way it is expressed, may be a helpful indicator of the difference. It at least warrants further investigation.

## Conclusion

It seems reasonable to conclude that some Muslims are pulled towards jihad and martyrdom because of a fear of sin and, ultimately the punishment of the grave, and jihadist ideologues and groups appear to call on the idea to motivate individuals to join the cause. Yet this motivation has received little attention in the radicalisation and terrorism literature. It is rarely mentioned, beyond passing in brief discussions of the rewards of martyrdom, and even then, the comments made are often inadequate or even inaccurate. The significance of the punishment of the grave is even missed or misunderstood when it appears to play a role in the training of martyrs (e.g., when trainees are compelled to spend time in a grave). This analysis merely calls attention to this gap in our grasp of the process of radicalisation for jihadists, and points to the need for further research on the significance of this jihadi motive. Provided appropriate consideration is exercised when dealing with statements made by terrorists,<sup>117</sup> additional insight into the relevance of this motive might be obtained from interviews with ex-jihadists or those who are imprisoned. The psychiatric reports filed for the trials and sentencing of jihadists may prove a useful resource as well. This would hold true particularly for jihadists who sought death but were unsuccessful.

More limitedly, this study makes two interrelated contributions to the investigation of the motivations for jihadist terrorism. First, it further off-sets the pronounced tendency in the literature to downplay the role of ideology and religion in motivating religious terrorism in favour of socio-economic or social-psychological factors, and/or political motives.<sup>118</sup> This interpretive tendency rose in response to an earlier reliance on overly simplistic religious explanations of the jihadist threat.<sup>119</sup> But in the following years, the explanatory pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction. Long ago Martha Crenshaw recognised redemption, including religious salvation, as an incentive for terrorism,<sup>120</sup> but few scholars chose to develop this possibility. On the contrary, most analyses of the rationales for jihadist terrorism have given little scope to the independent role of religious motivations, even while citing statements by jihadists about their fears of ignoring God’s orders and experiencing eternal hellfire.<sup>121</sup> By identifying the concern for sin, and, in turn, the punishment of the grave as an important influence in the radicalisation of jihadists, this analysis reinforces the argument of those opposed to this dominant interpretive tendency.<sup>122</sup>

Second, the analysis helps ameliorate the overarching specificity problem in terrorism research. It is extremely difficult to “explain why only a few individuals, from among the many subject



to the same [social, political, economic and psychological] conditions, become terrorists,”<sup>123</sup> many scholars see this challenge as the key to gauging progress in the field.<sup>124</sup> By adding a missing part of the drive for jihad and especially martyrdom to the array of hypothesised jihadist motivations, the specificity problem is being incrementally ameliorated. Fear is a powerful motivator in religion, and a concern for the punishment of the grave reportedly motivates ardent believers to avoid immoral acts and follow God’s commands. We just seemed to have missed its consideration for jihadism, where some seek the ultimate safeguard of their redemption, martyrdom. This article offers a small, but overdue correction. This can have practical implications for counter-terrorism efforts: it can help to better attune prevention and deradicalisation strategies to the full range and nature of the concerns driving extremist behaviour in the case of jihadists.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Duncan Gardham, "Quiet Terror," *The Spectator*, January 12, 2019, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/quiet-terror/>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Leor Halevi, "The Torture of the Grave Islam and the Afterlife," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/04/opinion/04iht-edhalevi.1.5565834.html>.
- 6 Islam Question and Answer, "The Six Blessings of the Martyrs," 2000, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/8511/the-six-blessings-of-the-martyrs>.
- 7 The focus here is exclusively on the concern with the punishment of the grave. A more comprehensive examination of the pull of redemption for perceived sin and, ultimately, of exemption from spiritual punishments in general is undertaken in another study in progress.
- 8 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 61.
- 9 For example, James N. Breckenridge and Philip G. Zimbardo, "The Strategy of Terrorism and the Psychology of Mass-Mediated Fear," in *Psychology of Terrorism*, ed. Bruce Bongar et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116–33.
- 10 Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 222.
- 11 Halevi, "The Torture of the Grave Islam and the Afterlife," May 4, 2007.
- 12 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 222.
- 13 Ibid., 231.
- 14 Ibid., 222.
- 15 Ibid., 222.
- 16 Ibid., 199–200.
- 17 Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 45.
- 18 Ibid., 33–34.
- 19 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 223.
- 20 Ibid., 225.
- 21 Ibid., 225.
- 22 Ibid., 217–18.
- 23 Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, 46–47.
- 24 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 217–18.
- 25 Ibid., 218.
- 26 For an examination of why a non-literal interpretation (i.e., allegorization) of the concept by these Muslim groups "was deemed inadmissible," see Richard Ian Netton, "The Perils of Allegory: Medieval Islam and the Angels of the Grave," in *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth (Vol 1: Pp. 417-427)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 421.
- 27 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 218.
- 28 Ibid., 219.
- 29 Ibid., 219.
- 30 Ibid., 219–20.
- 31 Leor Halevi, "The Torture of the Grave Islam and the Afterlife," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2007.
- 32 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 226. This apparently has to do with the fact that on Fridays, "the gates of Gehenna [hell] are locked, rendering it impossible for the angels Munkar and Nakir to carry out the inquisition (*fitnat al-qabr*) that must always culminate with the opening of the gate to reveal

a glimpse of Hell-Fire. Possibly for this reason, Muslims fortunate enough to die on Friday gained an exemption from the brutal questioning of the angels.”

33 Ibid., 231; Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, 59.

34 Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, 220.

35 Francis T. Cooke, “Sins and Their Punishment in Islam,” *The Muslim World* 28, no. 3 (1938): 272–74. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya’s *Kitāb al-rūḥ* (14<sup>th</sup> century) is “generally considered one of the most authoritative sources of orthodox views on the life of the spirit after the death of the body”; see Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, 34.

36 Cenap Çakmak, “Grave Dolar/Punishment of the Grave (Azab al-Qabr),” in *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia (Vol 2: Pp. 529-533)*, ed. Cenap Çakmak (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 532.

37 Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*.

38 For example, Mahboubeh Dadfar et al., “The Psychometric Parameters of the Farsi Form of the Arabic Scale of Death Anxiety,” *The Scientific World Journal*, 2017, 1–8; Mahboubeh Dadfar, Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, and David Lester, “Psychometric Characteristics of the Reasons for Death Fear Scale among Iranian Nurses,” *International Journal of Nursing Sciences* 4 (2017): 384–88; AA Thabet et al., “Death Anxiety, PTSD, Trauma, Grief, and Mental Health of Palestinians Victims of War on Gaza,” *Health Care Current Reviews* 1, no. 2 (2013): 1–8; Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek and Yagoub Al-Kandari, “Death Anxiety in Kuwaiti Middle-Aged Personnel,” *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 55, no. 4 (2007): 297–310; Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, “Why Do We Fear Death? The Construction and Validation of the Reasons for Death Fear Scale,” *Death Studies* 26, no. 8 (2002): 669–80; Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, “The Arabic Scale of Death Anxiety (ASDA): Its Development, Validation, and Results in Three Arab Countries,” *Death Studies* 28, no. 5 (2004): 435–57.

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47 It is worth noting that this issue is not necessarily exclusive to the radicalization and terrorism literature. For an example in anthropological research, see Gabriele Marranci, *Faith, Ideology and Fear: Muslim Identities Within and Beyond Prisons* (London: Continuum, 2009), 87. Marranci (2009, p. 87) seems to have a curiously subdued understanding of the punishment of the grave: “Muslims believe after the burial has taken place, the deceased remains in a special sentient state in which, depending upon their sins, they can – among other punishments and rewards – perceive the grave as being extremely claustrophobic or very comfortable.” Marranci’s emphasis of the grave torment as a matter of claustrophobia is misleading since it glosses over the severity of the spiritual punishment.

48 Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 47.

- 49 Ibid., 48.
- 50 Ibid., 49.
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- 52 David B. Cook, "Contemporary Martyrdom: Ideology and Material Culture," in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 153.
- 53 Ibid., 153.
- 54 Ibid., 153.
- 55 Shaul Shay, *The Shahids: Islam and Suicide Attacks* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 20.
- 56 Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 176. For this detail regarding the grave, Ami Pedahzur cites two sources: Moghadam, "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects" and the Hebrew version of Samuel Shay's *The Shahids*. The article by Moghaddam (2003), however, does not make a reference to the training practice involving the grave. Pedahzur's discussion of this aspect in the training is in reference to Hamas, while the English translation of Shay's book (2004, p. 20) broadens the relevance to "Islamic terror organizations". Nevertheless, it is likely that Pedahzur was citing Shay to supplement his own finding.
- 57 Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 156.
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- 63 Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (New York: Random House, 2017), 89.
- 64 Ibid., 121.
- 65 Ibid., 121.
- 66 Ibid., 121.
- 67 Colin Freeze, "Friend Remembers Via Plot Suspect as Stubborn and 'Afraid of the Punishment of the Grave,'" *The Globe and Mail*, 2013, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/friend-remembers-via-plot-suspect-as-stubborn-and-afraid-of-the-punishment-of-the-grave/article11718128/#c-image-0> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/friend-remembers-via-plot-suspect-as-stubborn-and>.
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- 75 Ibid., 98. Holbrook examined thirteen cases involving 48 jihadists but did not specify exactly how many cases or jihadists possessed the extremist works he listed. Instead, many of these identified works are compiled based

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# About

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