

Martyrdom, Myth, and Resonant Symbols  
Contesting and Creating National Identity in Revolutionary Egypt

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work of the Author.

## Intro

“During the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, Egyptian identity was at the center of the struggle for power as the conflict between protestors and the pro-Mubarak group escalated. The conflict was, therefore, one about public discourse and the right to represent the real “authentic Egyptian” identity.”

Reem Bassiouney, 2014. *Language and Identity in Modern Egypt*.

By early 2012, Muhammad Mahmud Street, one of the major routes to Tahrir Square, had become one of the most contested spaces in Cairo. Journalists, activists, and security forces alike gathered to witness the ongoing war between graffiti and regime. The Martyrs were commemorated here, as in Tahrir and scores of other locations around the city and on the internet.<sup>1</sup> A near-daily routine of new memorial art followed by regime whitewashing kept this space ephemeral, the only evidence of its existence found in photographic collections and the myths of a new Egyptian identity. Following the 25<sup>th</sup> January Revolution, Martyrdom and its symbols proved themselves the most important trope in one of the most fascinating social revolutions in modern history. Talk of martyrs mobilized action, redefined identity, and inspired fear in those it was directed against.

The Arab Spring, a series of sudden popular uprisings that surprised international observers, swept across North Africa and the Middle East at the opening of 2011. Egypt was the site of one of the earliest revolutions, with martyrdom serving as the catalyst for a movement that has fundamentally changed the country.<sup>2</sup> The Revolution of January 25<sup>th</sup> and the following months were resplendent with martyr symbols painted on walls and protest signs, digitized in profile icons, and commemorated in music.<sup>3</sup> These symbols and symbolic spaces became a battleground, the Martyrs returning from death, only to be painted over by security forces and then resurrected the following day on the city walls anew.<sup>4</sup> The central role of these symbols is

well documented in terms of mobilization and identity change, but little has been done to explain what makes them powerful and how they inform national identity and contestation.

Why do some symbols mobilize action and guide the way for massive protests? Martyrdom is just an example of a broader phenomenon: symbols that resonate with popular movements. Understanding why martyr symbols had the effect that they did during the Arab Spring will not only shed light on regional movements in the Middle East but could provide the means to understand symbols of popular protest worldwide. Advances in information media, networking, and political mobilization demand renewed attention towards the ability of some symbols to mobilize action and what makes them unique.

Using Martyrdom symbols in Arab-Spring-era Egypt as a case study, I argue that symbols resonate with movements and populaces when they meet three criteria: they already exist in the historical and cultural context, obligate action, and are general enough to generate appeal across a broad swath of society. After considering the existing literature for Martyrdom symbols, I will then consider each of the three criteria above, drawing on existing literature and original textual analysis. As a part of that analysis, I present a comparison of martyr memorials in Palestine and Egypt to consider changes in framing and language. Existing literature has established the ability of martyrdom symbols to leverage demands, therefore I focus on tying it together theoretically and identifying the necessary criteria for achieving resonance. Finally, I look at several cases of production and appropriation of martyrdom symbols to assess the processes of inclusion and bounding that define a new national identity. Relevant applications and directions for future research will be discussed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Existing literature on the power of Martyrdom symbols, with particular respect to the Arab Spring, can be broadly grouped into three arguments. The first of these focuses on representations of suffering and injustice frames as the causes for mobilization. This argument seldom considers why martyrdom in particular constitutes those frames or what it means, other than stating the symbol has historically been resonant.<sup>5</sup> The second of the major categories gives significantly more attention to the role of new media (like Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter) in mobilization using martyrdom symbols, deeming it the key to the success of historically resonant symbols, making martyrdom itself irrelevant other than that it happened to be the symbol chosen.<sup>6</sup> The third consists of a juxtaposition between past and present representations of martyrdom, focusing on the differences between them, in particular the framing used. This argument takes a historical analysis of martyrdom symbols and concludes that changes in framing led to mobilization as opposed to past incarnations of the same. These changes encompass the move from national/particularized political goal framing, specifically Palestine, to a struggle for universal values, the break from State control which empowered individuals to act, and the change from noble sacrifice to needless casualty of despotism.<sup>7</sup>

Though different in scope and methodology, all three either posit or assume Martyrdom to be a 'resonant' symbol. 'Resonance' is often used as a floating variable that explains why some symbols are effective (in mobilization, identification, etc.) though with little attention paid to what defines it. Williams describes this concept of resonance, widespread within semiotics literature, in the following:

“The salience and applicability of the various symbolic elements will vary. Some cultural elements will be more important and held more dearly. Even within the boundaries of the legitimate, cultural effectiveness will vary. The variation will occur across groups within the general population, across issue areas or arenas of social life, and over time, depending on

events. In social movement terms, some cultural resources – such as frames, or symbols, or ideologies – will resonate and others will not.”

While all three of the works referenced above advance understanding of the Arab Spring, they do little to explain why Martyrdom is itself a resonant symbol. This is because, by and large, the major arguments within the literature are focused on something else about the Arab Spring or are using the Arab Spring to prove a different theory. In doing so, they rely on the idea of resonance to make up for what these theories can't account for. For example, clearly not all injustice frames mobilize action, so there is something about the resonance of the symbol of a martyr that matters in achieving a different end. The result? A theory of injustice framing that contains a floating ‘resonance variable’, a factor that presumably lies outside of the theory but without which the theory cannot describe reality.

The question of what makes a symbol resonant is largely unexplored within related literature. Williams attempts to answer this question by arguing for a combination of ‘frame resonance’ and ‘cultural resonance.’<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Williams falls prey to the same weakness that he identifies in passing, the potential tautology of declaring that resonant symbols work because they resonate and that we can identify which ones resonate because they work. This gap in the current literature is what I aim to fill with the current work, presenting a theory of resonance that can be tested and applied to models of social protest and mobilization.

To set up the theoretical framework for this paper, I begin with a few general items. First, throughout this work I will borrow the vernacular and framework of Duncan Bell’s myth-based model for the analysis of nationalism. This is important to avoid some of the imprecisions, both conceptual and linguistic, that would otherwise obscure nuances in the subject matter. Bell’s argument has two focal points; the first is the need to distinguish between memory and myth and

the second is to present the concept of the mythscape, a discursive space “wherein the struggle for control of people’s memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the mythscape is the space for contestation and formation surrounding competing myths, particularly that of national identity.

Bell notes that, “We should understand a nationalist myth as a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world, its historical eschatology: a story that elucidates its contemporary meaning through (re)constructing its past.” (2003). Memory is juxtaposed with myth because of myth’s tendency to overwrite or ignore lived memory when it contradicts; in the case of Egyptian Martyrs, some who died were declared martyrs and then subsequently removed from the official canon of the revolution as the myth of the revolution developed.<sup>10</sup> Memories, as opposed to myths, cannot be acquired or cultivated, nor can they be shared by those who didn’t experience the event in question.

The concept of a unified, coherent memory common to all people about their national past is either logically incomprehensible or calls for a different conceptual understanding; the phenomenon often described as ‘collective memory’ isn’t truly mnemonic, according to Bell, but rather mythical. I will avoid describing the national or collective ‘memory’ of the Arab Spring because such terms are not only semantically confusing, but actually obscure the discursive reality of the mythscape. Individual memory and lived experience should be understood as distinct phenomena and are constructed through different processes.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging these myths as fluid and contestable/contested is the basis for conceptualizing the mythscape and opening new avenues for the analysis of nationalism. On the other hand, to continue to conceptualize them as memories ascribes them a permanence and pervasiveness that leaves analysts reeling when the inherent fluidity of myths rears its head.

A key development in the literature explaining the Arab Spring is consideration of the role of new media. Halverson et al. argue that new media is the key variable distinguishing the 2011 protests and successes from past disgruntlement.<sup>12</sup> While Halverson's explanation is meaningful for describing the enabling factors of revolution, it doesn't answer the core question of the present work which is that of content. New Media is fundamentally a structural development that reinforces the reach of Martyr politics but does not answer the question of why they are effective to those they reach.

New Media represents a breakdown in the state's monopoly on the national mythscape where the state is no longer able to control narrative production and dissemination. Hamdy and Gomaa were quick to identify this breakdown and, in an analysis of different news sources, found increasing distance between the reality described by state outlets and the reality perceived by the Egyptian people.<sup>13</sup> Loss of monopoly interacts with the mythscape on two levels of access; the first is very literal access to the national mythscape, meaning the ability to consume and produce external to the auspices of the state by viewing and creating more material. The second represents access to a previously inaccessible symbolic network like media outlets, images of national solidarity, and injustice frames. Reem Bassiouney identifies access to codes, or symbols, as the key to setting the boundaries of a new Egyptian identity. She goes on to state that access to linguistic, or more broadly, symbolic, resources is negotiated in times of conflict.<sup>14</sup>

An important note at this point is about the nature of new media's contribution, which is primarily in emotional, as opposed to abstract, communication. Olesen, in discussing injustice frames, explains that while abstract communication reveals new information, emotional information is the effect of revealing what is already known within an injustice frame.<sup>15</sup> It would be incorrect to say that there was no abstract communication happening by way of new media,

such as communication of events, and logistics, and there are some phenomena that are more difficult to categorize, like the effect of seeing injustice frames produced and reiterated across the country on perceptions of discontent and disguising of preferences. In terms of constructing and contesting a new Egyptian identity/myth, the objective information communicated is less important than the act of communication itself (representing the State's loss of monopoly and new symbolic access for citizens) and the symbolic content of that communication (appropriation of previous myths and introduction of new frames).

With this general framework in mind, I now turn to the three criteria identified earlier and describe the theory behind each.

### Historical and Cultural Context

The first criterion for resonance is the ability of a symbol to operate within existing historical and cultural context. I argue that resonance is not a static effect, but rather a dynamic process where the performance of a resonant symbol, here martyrdom, creates resonance across existing divides through construction of new myths. Cultural resonance can be best understood through application of a symbolic analysis as presented by Castiñeira, where existing symbolic networks give access to this cultural resonance but are also capable of producing new symbolic outcomes, even when at odds with previously dominant myths.<sup>16</sup>

Martyrdom itself is intrinsically tied to its historical background, conceptualized within new states and eras.<sup>17</sup> Martyrs are an acknowledged trope throughout Middle Eastern history, particularly throughout political conflicts in Lebanon, Iran, and Palestine.<sup>18</sup> Iran (largely indicative of Shia groups regionally), has a long history of martyr symbolism, adapting to evolving circumstances. Khomeini, speaking in mid-1979, pointedly declared that the Martyrs of



the Revolution did not die for material gains or liberty, but for Islam.<sup>19</sup> With those words, the liberals who participated in the revolution would now have to be resisted by the newly monolithic, Islamic, Iranian public, suddenly excluded from the changing, national myth. Since the first Intifada in Palestine, Martyrdom has evolved to become an important symbol for defining Palestinian identity as well as mobilizing social protest and other would-be martyrs.<sup>20</sup> This symbol has not been constant though, commemorative practices and events have been the key to opening up new discursive spaces where dominant narratives, or myths, are created and contested.<sup>21</sup> The move from a purely religious to an often purely political symbol mirrored the transition to civil religion with the rise of the Nation-State in the Middle East, reflecting the fluidity of these symbols and concepts within national discourse and identity.<sup>22</sup>

#### Obligation to Action

The second criterion for resonance is the ability of a symbol to obligate action from others; the two primary mechanisms for this in the case of martyrdom are commemoration practices and representations of suffering. The process of commemoration creates a lasting obligation that exceeds the demands of the state. As Mittermaier describes it, when the martyr from below exceeds the demands of the state (in civic engagement, sacrifice, etc.), they become a mode for crafting an identity that also exceeds the state.<sup>23</sup> This occurs when the sacrifice, either implicitly or explicitly, acknowledges demands beyond that of the State. This casts doubt on the ability of the State to represent the citizenry or control their actions. Pulling from the Bell's mythscape framework, this obligation that exceeds the state is a disruption of the state's monopoly on myth, creating the possibility of a new dominant narrative. A parallel within political theory is the effect of a loss of monopoly on force for sovereignty; a structural weakness that creates the conditions for revolution.

The second mobilization strategy is the representation of suffering and victimhood. In the Palestinian case, this is tied to international appeals with varied results.<sup>24</sup> Allen argues that the shortcoming of the Palestinian representations of suffering is their lack of credibility for western audiences, though this fails to explain why representations of victimhood coming out of various other Arab countries also fail to spur international sympathy. Halverson et al. makes the same mistake in assuming that exposure to images of martyrdom and suffering, emphasizing the role of new media in achieving that exposure, is sufficient to lead to mobilization.<sup>25</sup>

Olesen provides the best analysis of Egyptian ‘visual injustice symbols’, bridging this gap between representations of suffering and existing symbols as an example of cultural resonance, which is “when public utterances tap into and/or invoke norms, values, and experiences located in the political–cultural structure of society.”<sup>26</sup> Symbols of injustice derive political energy from existing injustice frames and also strengthen those very frames in an interactive relationship. This dialogue of consuming and producing meaning is representative of the fluid mythscape, contested by the act of production but coherent through the act of consumption. Unfortunately, Olesen isn’t able to fully escape the tautology of resonant symbols without a rigorous analysis of what makes them distinct. The complications are two-fold, the first being that there would be no reason to deploy and reconfigure symbols of martyrdom if injustice framing were sufficient and, the second, that other injustice framings are failing/have failed.

### Breadth of Appeal

The third criterion for resonance is the ability of a symbol to generate appeal across a broad swath of society. Two concepts worth expounding upon here are the *empty signifier* and *performance*. They are both important elements in explaining the ability of martyrdom, or any

resonant symbol's ability, to move beyond the particularities of individual cases and resonate with disparate groups of people. They also provide insight into the process of symbol formation, which is of particular worth in expanding this theory to include symbols other than martyrdom.

The *empty signifier*, as introduced by Laclau, is 'a signifier without a signified,'<sup>27</sup> capable of representing a totalizing identity that only exists as an impossible ideal or, as Laclau describes it, an 'unachievable fullness.'<sup>28</sup> This is a symbol whose lack of strong ideological content promotes adoption across existing sociocultural divides.<sup>29</sup> In Gerbaudo's words, writing on social media signifiers in the 2011 protests, "This visual material studiously eschews symbols that might be divisive for the broad-based constituency the movement tries to mobilize and focuses attention on the shared anger against the movement's enemies."<sup>30</sup> This is what allows martyr symbols to resonate with every Egyptian despite not representing any single 'reality'.

The second concept, *performance*, posits that martyrdom narratives are performative, 'in that they produce the good ending they seem to only acknowledge.'<sup>31</sup> There isn't an objective reality of martyrdom that can be observed and commented upon; observing a 'martyr' and commenting upon it creates the martyr, otherwise it is just someone who died. There are several implications for this study discussed below, but of note is the idea that martyrdom, because of its performative nature, is an inherently political phenomenon.

Becoming a martyr is not a matter of dying, but of others investing your death with meaning. Referencing the impact of this performance, Ghannam says that, "their social and religious values are derived primarily from their ability to performatively constitute a moral reality that produces positive effects. They are imaginatively constructed in a present context that draws on past events to produce a desired future."<sup>32</sup> This concept of performance is important to understanding both how dominant myths are contested and, more topically, why martyrdom is

able to constitute an empty signifier despite the disparate lived realities of those that it encompasses.

Having reviewed the theoretical components, I will now show how the Egyptian case demonstrates each of the three criteria for resonance in context.

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

The first condition for resonance is the appropriation of preexisting symbols. While the final discursive object or myth may be entirely different from the previous dominant mythology, it has to be achieved through usage of the existing symbolic framework.<sup>33</sup> This is illustrated within martyr discourse with the development of the Istishadi in the Palestinian mythscape.<sup>34</sup> The existing symbol of martyrdom is modified, eschewing the ‘regular’ word for martyr (Shaheed) in favor of a newly conceptualized martyr who seeks death, glorifying not just dying in pursuit of a higher cause, but also pursuing self-sacrifice as a goal in and of itself. Interestingly, this development was foreshadowed in early Christian theology, where voluntary martyrdom was nonexistent and only through this process of symbolic appropriation and reinterpretation did it enter into Christian myth and orthodoxy.<sup>35</sup> The implications are two-fold: First, martyrdom symbols have historically been appropriated and reconstructed to address new political realities and goals. Second, the changing realities of martyrdom were reflected in the framing and deployment of its symbols.

Assuming Castiñeira’s argument for an existing symbolic framework, a symbol’s ability to contest existing myths depends on it already having a place within the symbolic exchange in question. Initially this might seem like a hard limit on the versatility of any particular symbol, trapped within unchanging historical usage but, working within the confines of the shared

context, there is extraordinary freedom of reframing and definition. Reem Bassiouney, writing on the emergence of a new Egyptian identity during the Arab Spring, said,

“The main aim of constructing a distinct Egyptian identity is to decide who is included and excluded from this large community called “Egyptian.” Access to codes is a determining factor. This process of inclusion and exclusion that delineates an Egyptian identity is synchronized by meta-pragmatic factors and situated within a framework. However, this process can, in fact, be creative and bold in its use of linguistic resources, even though it relies on shared perceptions, ideologies, histories, and policies of a nation-state.”<sup>36</sup>

This need for an existing framework has two major implications for martyrdom and the broader study of myth contestation. First, it rejects universal appeals and explains the varying effectiveness of different pleas across cultures. Without an existing symbolic network to place it in, martyrdom is incomprehensible. Second, this limits the possible paths of contestation within a group (culture, nation, state, etc.) to those that are intelligible vis-à-vis its antecedents.

Take the historical antecedents found in the PLO’s announcement of its Secretary-General, Abu Ali Mustafa, in relation to some of the martyrs’ memorials written on the now closed *Record of the Martyrs of the Revolutions of the Arab Spring*, an extensive list cataloguing martyrs from across the Arab world during the Arab Spring.

For the purposes of this section I will use two of the memorials, the first for Mustafa al-Sawy and the second for Ziad Bakir. These are from the front page of the memorial list, though they don’t stand out from others in their circumstances or backgrounds. They are consistent with other memorials considered during research and are chosen here to function as representative texts. Mustafa was an unmarried 26-year-old martyred on his birthday while Ziad was a 37-year-old father of three. I divide this comparison into: commonalities (to be understood as a common symbolic network either in form or content); differences (reconfiguration of existing symbols); and implications.

*Commonalities:* The most important shared symbol is the designation of Martyr. As discussed above, the performative nature of martyrdom and martyr semiotics means that ascribing the label of martyr to these deaths is not only what makes them martyrs but also a political act. This primes the audience for the key symbols relating to martyrdom but also opens up the discursive space to contestation because the legitimacy of the martyr is, to a large extent, paradoxically established by its assertion. This designation of the martyrdom itself is not of a personal nature either, they are either described as being martyred on behalf of the people or they are likened unto the audience of the memorial, thus cementing the connection between living and dead. This is consistent with Buckner and Khatib's findings when considering developments in the nature of martyrdom, where they contend that the commonality of pre-Arab Spring Martyrdom "is that martyrs are used to represent and create group identities that link the individual to the larger national or political group."<sup>37</sup> A feature common to all of the memorials is the importance of referencing the martyrs' commitment or sacrifice in the past for the good of others; Abu Ali sacrifices for freedom, Ziad desired democracy along with the implicit goodness of his explicitly referenced fatherhood, and Mustafa wanted to serve the country with specific reference to military service. Finally, there is reference to the evil or moral culpability of the enemy. This is achieved by reference to the evils of Israel, corruption, and the 'treacherous' nature of the sniper's bullet that took Ziad's life, respectively. All of these commonalities serve to access the existing symbolic network and give credibility to reconceptualizations of the things that those symbols convey or the symbols themselves.

*Differences:* The most poignant distinction between Abu Ali's memorial, the official PLO obituary, and the memorial written for Ziad and Mustafa, is what it calls for the audience to do. The PLO announcement is rife with calls to continued violence, encouragement for others to

seek martyrdom, promises that the Intifada will go on, etc. The memorials for Ziad and Mustafa are noticeably devoid of any explicit request, even for protest. The audience is party to the words and mourning of others, including his mother, about Mustafa. Ziad's family members are named, without any reason given other than perhaps identification. There is no authority cited or power that could make demands in an official capacity. Abu Ali was an actor and chose his path to martyrdom (literally, the altar of freedom), while Ziad was fleeing violence related to protests described as not being political when he was killed. Additionally, while the PLO speaks from the position of the state, Mustafa and Ziad's memorials are ostensibly produced by 'the people', without any central body to look to or be called upon by.

*Implications:* The primary implication is a confirmation of Castiñeira's argument- existing symbolic networks can be utilized and then appropriated to create a new result, or myth. This is also evidence for the dialectic conception of consumption and production within the mythscape and the need for access to the linguistic or symbolic resources that Bassiouney and Castiñeira describe in order to contest myths. The move from centralized (PLO as the State) to decentralized (the people) is consistent with Buckner and Khatib's findings which also emphasize the breakdown of the state's monopoly on the mythscape for identity production and dissemination. As opposed to pre-Arab Spring conceptions of martyrdom consisting of death while engaged in a religious or national endeavor,<sup>38</sup> any death caused by the regime is sufficient for martyrdom. This will have additional implications when considering the signifier of the Martyr and the mechanism by which it places demands upon survivors.

Two of the most prominent works on this subject are by Halverson et al. and Buckner and Khatib, which are referenced extensively above. Halverson argues that new media coupled with a historically constructed, culturally resonant narrative is a sufficient explanation for the Arab

spring, while Buckner and Khatib make a similar argument, emphasizing the changes in the nature of the martyr, rather than the changes effectuated by the symbol of martyrdom itself.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, there is little discussion of the mechanism of mobilization through martyr narratives, ultimately falling into tautologies. For both works, resonant symbols mobilize, and resonant symbols are identified by their mobilizing effect. While a historical perspective is important to an ethnographic or political analysis, there is a lack of discussion on why martyrs are able to mobilize when other historical symbols cannot. Both of the above works provide little to explain why, for example, Islamic appeals, historically resonant by any definition, weren't the nexus of the conflict. Their work provides a meaningful foundation for the study of martyrdom in the Arab Spring but offers little for external application.

### **Obligation to Action**

“In the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions, the martyr has become an expansive concept invoked to support mobilization efforts far beyond simple revolutionary or political protest.”

- Elizabeth Buckner and Lina Khatib, 2014. *The Martyrs' Revolutions: The Role of Martyrs in the Arab Spring*

The second condition for a symbol's resonance is the obligation to act which it places on others. The key to martyrdom's mobilizing effect is its ability to place demands on others. In the PLO's obituary for Abu Ali Mustafa, its Secretary-General who was killed by an Israeli airstrike, his martyrdom is a sacrifice that goes beyond his own obligation and thus places a greater obligation on the survivors. The martyrdom announcement makes specific reference to 'an offering on the altar of freedom', notably using a religiously charged term for altar in reference



to the sacrifice of the martyr.<sup>40</sup> Martyrdom is reliant on commemoration and the obligation it places on others because martyrdom is only performatively created after the fact of death,<sup>41</sup> the demands it places on others through the process of commemoration are its distinguishing characteristic.

This phenomenon represents a key mobilization strategy; it reinforces a culture where the individual has been subsumed into the group and the group's needs now take precedence over individual needs.<sup>42</sup> In addition to its validation of the communal ethic, its primary role is to obligate others within the group to act in accordance with the sacrifice. This is evident in the street art leading up to the 2012 elections, where a martyr's mother is depicted holding a sign that sarcastically orders passersby to forget what happened and support the elections.<sup>43</sup> All future actions, so long as the martyr symbol continues to be performatively invoked (by mothers demanding commemoration, street art, or the recording of names and death bed photos), are mediated by that symbol and the obligation that the sacrifice, whether desired or not, levies upon them.

The final case of this phenomenon of obligation and demands is that of the 'Martyr on Demand'. Young Egyptians attending protests carried signs reading 'Martyr Available' or, rather, 'Martyr on Demand'. Mittermaier offers an insightful explanation of the difference between those willing to be martyred (Egypt) and those who seek martyrdom (the Palestinian Istishadi).<sup>44</sup> This distinction is born out linguistically, where the Egyptian protestors condition their martyrdom on it being demanded. What makes this commitment interesting is that it is not reflective of the demands of the State, but rather the same Egyptian protestors' fellows. Suddenly, the demands of the national body are produced not through the State, but through the citizens. Mittermaier describes this as martyrdom exceeding the nationalist demands of the state,

because traditionally the willingness to sacrifice one's life lies at the core of a nation-state.<sup>45</sup> This is a performative showcasing of the loss of monopoly over the national mythscape by the State, where it ostensibly shows that there are national demands being administered and met outside of the State's auspices. In reality, this performance is what both creates and fulfills those very demands. In this way martyrdom symbols and their power are revealed to not only be symptomatic of the State's instability, but a source of it. They constitute symbolic contestation declaring that the current State cannot meet nor issue the demands of the Nation.

### **Breadth of Appeal**

“I once heard someone remark that after seeing these same faces so many times day after day, you begin to think you know, or knew, the person. Martyrs' faces have become so familiar, they could have been someone you saw alive on the street. For many, the faces on the walls induce the real memory of the person they actually knew”

– Lori Allen, 2006. *The Polyvalent Politics of Martyr Commemorations in the Palestinian Intifada*.

The final criterion for resonance is breadth of appeal; a signifier expansive enough to include the desired national identity while distinguishing between an in and out group. As Bell explained, “the ability to represent history in an extremely partial and easily digestible manner is a necessary condition of the very possibility of nationalism.”<sup>46</sup> Throughout the Arab Spring, national identity was redefined along the lines of citizens and regime, rejecting the national claims of the State, now situated outside of the Martyr symbol that encompassed all Egyptians but excluded the government. Williams posits boundedness and resonance as the framework for conceptualization of the ‘cultural environment’ (mythscape for the purposes of this paper).<sup>47</sup> The symbol of Martyrdom contributes to the building of national resonance through unification of

disparate groups and interests, while simultaneously setting the boundaries of the new national myth.

The versatility of the martyr as a symbol lies in its performative nature (discussed above)<sup>48</sup> which allows those deploying it to include and exclude with remarkable fluidity, a fluidity that is manifest in ongoing contestation between various Egyptian groups vying for the right to define what martyrdom means.<sup>49</sup> Martyrdom is a postmortem process, one cannot be or become a martyr prior to death and thus reflects a symbolic exchange enabled by the deceased but no longer including them. As Allen explained, people who died doing ordinary things (here referencing Palestine but also true in Egypt)<sup>50</sup> were elevated to the status of martyr and became a form of political capital in the national mythscape.<sup>51</sup> This is to say, Martyrdom is always already political and thus incapable of neutrality, because its creation was itself a political process. As Ghannam explains, in pretending to only acknowledge a good ending that occurred, martyr narratives are actively engaged in creating that good ending.<sup>52</sup> The most important implication of this is that martyrdom should always be viewed as a political phenomenon, embedded in the consumption and production of myths surrounding the performed ‘good ending’.

The inward manifestation of this performance is in connecting the deceased to a larger group, and by doing so, constructing that larger group discursively. This should be understood as the major impetus behind the shift noted above in Buckner and Khatib’s work, ordinary deaths that wouldn’t have been considered grounds for the elevation to Martyr status prior to the Arab Spring in Egypt are now venerated as having died for something meaningful. Drawing from Castiñeira’s theory once again, we can conclude that by constructing the connection between the martyr and the people, the narration of the martyr serves to narrate the new identity of the people. The martyr, as an empty signifier, is effectively a stand-in for each individual.

This universalization is achieved through the removal of extraneous information and the repetition and emphasis of commonalities. Buckner and Khatib identify strategies of selective appropriation that distinguish between the deaths that fit into the desired myth, thus acting as a bounding force while increasing internal cohesion. Thousands of martyrs were created, but not every death was able to be a martyr,<sup>53</sup> offering a wide cast of possible identifications all within a newly bounded national myth. Selective appropriation plays the additional role of essentializing the martyr subject into an easily consumable symbol that reflects and constructs the new nature of martyrdom and thus the people. Such an essentialization is the key to achieving what Bell described as the “necessary condition of the very possibility of nationalism.”<sup>54</sup> The Facebook page, ‘We are all Khalid Said’ reflects the unification martyrs and survivors. Olesen notes there are trends of particularism in his story (urban, semi-educated, young, etc.) that could have impeded the construction of an expansive identity had it not been for an even stronger universalization dynamic.<sup>55</sup> Even the particularities of Khalid Said are subsumed by universalizing rhetoric that links his lived fate to the un-lived but potential fate of the survivors. All Egyptians are Khalid Said because all Egyptians, or rather, any Egyptian, could have been Khalid Said.

The implication of the previous thought, once internalized, is that those this couldn’t have happened to are, therefore, not Egyptian. The identification with, and as, the Martyr successfully becomes the gateway into the new identity, with dire implications for the State. The political and military elite who are excluded from the plight of the newly mythologized ‘Egyptians’ are now no longer Egyptians in the nationalist sense. The out-group is no longer outside of the country or some colonial administration, it is the State itself, reflecting a fundamental shift in dominant myths. This is manifest in at least two rhetorical differences from the martyr memorials

considered previously. First, while Abu Ali of the PLO died on behalf of the people (recall the particular imagery of the altar of freedom), Ziad and Mustafa were both killed *as one of* the people. This is consistent with more famous martyrdoms, like that of Khalid Said, where his death is important not because he chose to be sacrificed for others but because he was a sacrifice from among the Egyptians. Second, there is a noteworthy lack of reference to any authority structure in commemorations of Martyrs (outside of State counter-commemorations), which denies the historical top-down imposition of meaning in death.

Laclau notes, “Given that this embodied totality or universality is ... an impossible object” it is important for the national identity to be an empty signifier, “its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.”<sup>56</sup> Were there fewer martyrs or if the martyrs were too specifically defined, they would not be able to encompass the ‘unachievable fullness’ that is necessary for a national myth to sustain itself. The symbol of martyrdom is the boundedness described by Williams, designating a new in and out group, while simultaneously creating internal unity centered around the empty signifier, or as Mittermaier describes it, “a ‘nodal point’ around which disparate demands can be woven together”. This allows for a symbol of national resonance which emphasizes internal unity and draws clear lines between in and out-groups.

### **Conclusion**

While there are a number of descriptive analyses of discursive myth construction and contestation, there is a relative dearth of theories for what distinguishes a resonant symbol and what mechanisms are at work to create that resonance. The present work is aimed at proposing a new theory of resonance by identifying the mechanisms by which a symbol contests and forms national identity. The phenomenon of martyrs and martyrdom in Egypt during the Arab Spring is

as a case study where a single symbol is made the focal point by both regime and opposition in a conflict revolving around identity.

Current theories can be broadly grouped into three categories, those that credit the resonance of martyr symbols to historical context, those that credit it to its injustice/suffering frames, and those that forefront structural, technological changes in the form of New Media. The historical context explanations do little to explain counter examples like the failure of historical leftist symbols, such as flags and colors<sup>57</sup> or purely religious symbols that had historical resonance in places like Iran and Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> These symbols, while present within the existing symbolic network, are unable to generate a signifier that encompasses the newly mythologized Nation nor make demands upon that whole. Suffering and injustice theories offer no explanation for the appropriation of the martyr; were the framings sufficient on their own without the need for symbolic appropriation, they would have just deployed injustice frames. Injustice frames also have many regional examples of failed resonance, rarely reflecting a change in the myths of the Nation. New Media explains the reach but not the resonance of symbols, leaving open the question of ‘why martyrdom?’.

This paper endeavors to resolve the lack of rigor surrounding resonance by providing three criteria/characteristics to study the phenomenon of resonant symbols. Moving beyond the accepted conclusion that martyrdom was, and is, a resonant symbol in the Middle East without an explanation why, I argue that the necessary characteristics for that resonance are historical and cultural context, the obligation to action, and breadth of appeal. Without any one of these criteria, the ability to contest and create myths is brought into question and each were a necessary portion of Martyrdom in the Egyptian Arab Spring.

As far as future research and application is concerned, this theory is falsifiable and invites refinement; both Bassiouney and Wokad present high-quality methodology for a discursive analysis of national myth that can identify both resonance and the criteria presented above.<sup>59</sup> Measuring nationalist identification is not new to the field; this theory simply calls for more sophistication in discerning between what myths are subscribed to. It also presents a new framework for conceptualizing various case studies. Two potential examples from American politics are the lasting success of 9/11 in shaping the American mythscape (appropriation of existing symbols of patriotism ascribed to victims and rescuers alike, the empty signifier of the many-faced-yet-faceless masses of victims that could be anyone, and the demands placed on survivors for retribution) or the ongoing contestation surrounding gun control and violence following the Parkland Shootings, where deliberate efforts seem to be being made by opponents, primarily through personal attacks, to both curtail obligations and define symbols to the point that they can't be identified with at a national level. On the other hand, there is a strong deployment of existing civil rights symbols and injustice frames that resonates with much of the current, dominant mythology of America. National identity can be studied over time, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in ongoing conflicts and instances of identity instability. Additionally, lab experiments can be used to test the salient features of symbols within different contexts.

The measurement of the various criteria isolated by this theory, Historical and Cultural Context, the Obligation to Action, and Breadth of Appeal, is also possible. Historical and cultural context can be identified by a discursive analysis looking for historical antecedents both in form and content, though it will ultimately be an interpretative process that calls for a stricter definition than I have laid out here. The obligation to action might initially be a purely

theoretical approach but could be the most measurable of the three using experiments to test attitudes, particularly for mobilization, upon encountering the symbol in question. The question of when a symbol encompasses a broad enough section of society is elusive and perhaps too contextual to answer here; ultimately it will be a criterion settled case-by-case but for which the basic theoretical tools are present.<sup>60</sup>

The external validity of this theory is most easily tested and observed in other Middle Eastern countries that have similar existing symbolic networks. There is a reasonable argument to be made that the resonance of Martyr symbols in Morocco, Tunisia, and Palestine are portions of the same case; it is certainly true that all three played a role in shaping the internal Egyptian mythscape. At the very least, this is an important theoretical framework for understanding developing nationalism and myths within the Middle East.

Moving beyond the Middle East, while martyrdom has symbolic capital elsewhere, the strength of this theory is its applicability to other symbolic networks/national contexts. Referenced earlier was the example of 9/11 myth production within America which, upon casual review, seems to fit the theory of resonant symbols. The existing symbolic network around patriots, the demands for action, whether creation of TSA or retribution or to never forget, and the universalized signifier of the victims that includes all Americans and creates a new out group to define itself against. This is just one example of many, every nation-state is constantly producing and consuming symbols of varying degrees of resonance. In times of myth instability (economic crisis, revolution, political upheaval, etc.), the concept of resonance will have to be addressed and the question is only if theorists will have the tools to do so.

Recent history has witnessed the introduction of new media and the unsettling of the State's monopoly over the national mythscape. Technology has created fundamentally different



structural conditions that State, Citizen, and Theorist alike have to recognize and account for. Whether the conclusion reached is revolution, new technologies of control, or increasingly politically inclusive societies, there is a non-negotiable need to understand how the mythscape is contested and what kinds of symbols are resonant. While the classical monopoly of the State over dominant myths seems to be a thing of the past, recent events in US, French, and sundry other European elections indicates that there are new resources of symbolic access that matter. The end point of the current mythological fluidity is not necessarily an end of narrative control but rather a new era of sophisticated apparatuses, state or non-state, that freely construct resonant symbols to achieve their ends. Identifying how resonant symbols are constructed and appropriated is of utmost importance in an era where voting, public opinion, and even foreign policy are fluid and shifted by slight changes in discourse and unstable myths.

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