

# **Mujahideen Desecration: Beheadings, Mutilation & Muslim Iconoclasm**

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Wartime atrocities are typically attributed to psychological warfare, military strategies or individual acts of brutality. Although infinite varieties of cruelty have transpired in every war throughout history, the intense media coverage of the war on terrorism and the calculated dissemination of information on the internet has made us all witnesses to unimaginable violence. Suicide bombings, beheadings, mutilation, cutting out tongues, cutting off ears, amputations, gouging out eyes, genital mutilation, and dismembering dead bodies is common and widespread. Although our natural inclination is to relegate these horrific acts to another century, when interpreted in the context of religious ideologies, sacred customs, and cultural traditions it is obvious that they are not anachronisms.

These inexplicable acts need to be understood as sacred violence and comprehended in religious concepts such as sacrifice, blood ritual, iconoclasm and desecration. They are ritualistic acts with distinct functions, meanings, objectives, and justifications. They determine an individual's status in life, death and the afterlife, relegate punishment of community members and enemies, serve as rites of passage and initiation, and signify fidelity, honor, and courage in a warrior culture. The fact that these chilling acts also serve to terrorize the enemy is a secondary objective, what is commonly referred to as a bonus.

The primary function of ritual in the community is that of providing the proper rules for action in the realm of the sacred and the secular. For that reason it takes a fully committed true believer to commit such heinous acts; if any aspect of the faith is questioned, than the thin line between holy warrior and barbarian dissolves. Ritualizing violence legitimizes it, allowing the perpetrator to stand on solid moral ground. Mujahideen have the full support of their community in a manner the significance of which Americans cannot fully grasp. American soldiers are court-martialed, imprisoned, and publicly humiliated for unacceptable violent acts, while the Mujahideen are glorified and praised in direct proportion to the amount of blood

they have on their hands. From a strategic perspective, publicly dishonoring our own soldiers undermines the war on terrorism, invalidates our military in the eyes of our enemies, negatively affects morale, and makes us tactically vulnerable; from a ritual perspective the sacred status of the holy warrior is debased, sacrificial blood is polluted, communal rituals fail to have meaning and a sacred crisis ensues. Moral ambiguity causes more damage than weapons of mass destruction; it destroys the community from within. Authentic warrior cultures understand that to question their soldiers' actions in war is sacrilege. The Mujahideen fighter thinks in sacred terms and every act of violence is theologically and communally sanctioned. These Jihadi soldiers are not completing a tour of duty, they are all lifers groomed from birth in a continual recruitment process comprised of a series of ritual initiations whose ultimate fulfillment is to die as a martyr in holy war. Violent mutilations are not arbitrary and capricious barbaric acts; to fully comprehend them, they must be understood in the context of Jihadi blood rituals and Muslim iconoclasm. In this paper I am going to focus on the ritualistic crimes of beheadings, torture, and mutilation. It will be demonstrated that these brutal acts are ritual manifestations of Mujahideen Desecration.

## **Desecration in the Media**

Desecration is defined as the defilement of something holy, an act of depriving something of its sacred character. This most often refers to desecration of sacred books, sacred places, or sacred objects, but also encompasses the entire sphere of the holy. The media has frequently and selectively focused on controversies surrounding what Muslims hold sacred, that is, Quran desecration, Mosque desecration, desecration of the bodies of Muslim soldiers and images of Muhammad. These highly publicized incidents have evoked violent and often deadly protests all over the world. This extraordinary response is part of a larger religious world view that separates significant aspects of life into the sacred and the profane. It is also part of a calculated Jihadi campaign that promotes victimhood as a recruitment technique the goal of which is to indoctrinate moderate Muslims into racist and anti-Western ideology and to elicit world sympathy for an ostensibly oppressed population. Holocaust denial is part of this campaign so that Muslims can claim to be the victims of a Jewish conspiracy, self-righteously proclaiming that their land has been occupied, their holy places defiled, their prophet dishonored, and their people violated. The relentless reporting of Muslim desecration has perpetuated these erroneous ideals and has been responsible for recruiting more terrorists than Usama bin Laden. Desecration is so significant in Muslim ideology that there is a terrorist group in Iraq specifically dedicated to the concern called, "The Brigades for the Defense of Holy Shrines." It is a faction of the Mahdi Army, the Shiite insurgency group led by Moqtada al-Sadr. Most of the damage to Holy shrines is enacted by rival factions who do not have to concern themselves about

how they are depicted in the press. These important distinctions are frequently lost in the media that obsessively focuses on supposed Western abuses of Muslims. There were no headlines expressing outrage or claiming desecration when 1,000 churches were burned down across Indonesia by state-sanctioned Muslim mobs. Although the press was out in full force when Pope Benedict XVI quoted a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine ruler who regarded Islam as violent, there were few follow-up articles about the Islamic response, which included among other violent acts bombing churches, the crucifixion of a 14-year-old boy, the murder of a nun, and the beheading of priests. The media also fails to use the word “irreverence” when hundreds of American flags and effigies are burned each year by Muslim protesters, or when a racist cartoon depicts the Secretary of State pregnant with a monkey in her belly, or when Iran holds a Holocaust denial conference and a Holocaust cartoon exhibit that organizers stated was intended to test the West’s tolerance. The West’s response has been a resounding tolerance of Muslim racism, anti-Semitism and anti-Christianity. Liberal newspapers and television stations do not use the words desecration, irreverence, defilement, blasphemy, or violation when Americans are burned, eviscerated, dismembered, mutilated, hung from bridges, and booby trapped. Islamic extremists have been so successful in their public relations campaign that they have successfully manipulated the Western press into perpetuating their victimhood status, contributing to the sense of disrespect that is fueling Muslim extremism. In colloquial terms the media is continually relaying the message that Americans are “dissing” Muslims. Similar to gang violence, the only way for young Muslims to restore honor, save face, maintain territory, and survive is to retaliate with a vengeance. The extensive degree of mutilation enacted by this Mujahideen gang directly correlates to the Muslim perception of desecration. In brief, Jihadis mutilate as a form of sacred retribution for perceived acts of blasphemy, appropriately enforced by Islam’s Holy warriors.

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## **Beheadings**

One of the Mujahideen’s more popular methods of dealing with the enemies of Islam is decapitation. Beheading, pre- and post-mortem have long historical and theological precedents in Islam and both practices are frequently implemented by Islamic extremist groups. Although they initially appear to be the same act, they perform entirely different ritual functions. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was infamous for his videotaped beheadings of hostages in Iraq, as I described in detail in a companion article titled “Mujahideen Blood Rituals: The Religious and Forensic Symbolism of Al Qaeda Beheading.” [ref] In that article I focused on beheadings of live hostages and asserted that they were blood rituals whose primary function is initiation into the al Qaeda network. Sacrifice entails the intentional release of blood from a live victim,

hence the decapitation and dismemberment of the dead does not constitute a sacrificial blood ritual; however, it is a ritualistic act whose function is characteristic of desecration. In the war on terrorism hundreds of civilians and soldiers have been decapitated as the direct result of Islamic ideology. In Iraq and Afghanistan dismembered corpses are regularly found in mass graves and headless bodies are frequently found by soldiers. The following charts are selected examples of beheadings perpetrated in the name of Islam. Due to the enormous scope of research and difficulty in ascertaining information on the subject the incidents listed were limited to the year 2006. The following charts are not representative of the hundreds of people killed by suicide bombings and other Mujahideen tactics.

## Mujahideen Beheadings 2006

Name of Victim (s)	Nationality	Religion	Date	Place	Details
Maulana Salahuddin	Pakistani	Muslim	11-03-06	Waziristan region, Afghanistan	Note was attached to body accusing victim of spying for the United States-body was shot after beheading
Ayad Tariq	Iraqi	Assyrian Christian	10-21-06	Baqluba, Iraq	Was beheaded by Muslims after admitting to being Christian
8 men	Afghani	Muslim*	10-15-06	Afghanistan	Video of beheadings was released in which the victims confessed to spying for the United States and the United Kingdom-statement accompanied video claiming the Mulla Dadullah was executing Christians
14 men	Iraqi	Muslim	10-13-06	Balad, Iraq	The bodies had all been shot and beheaded-the victims were construction workers who had been kidnapped the previous day
1 man	Myanmar	Buddhist*	10-13-06	Thailand	Islamic militants shot and beheaded the victim, a migrant farmer, in front of his teenaged daughter-the head was left in Pattani
7 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	10-12-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Appeared to be sectarian revenge killings
Father Amer Iskender	Iraqi	Assyrian Christian	10-11-06	Mosul, Iraq	Victim's Muslim captors had demanded the victim's church condemn the pope's words and pay a \$350,000 ransom
2 people	British	Christian*	10-09-06	Afghanistan*	Video was released showing Mulla Dadullah Khan beheading the British soldiers, 2 women, and 27 Afghan soldiers
2 women	Afghani	Muslim*	10-09-06	Afghanistan*	Video was released showing Mulla Dadullah Khan beheading the women, 2 British soldiers and 27 Afghan soldiers
27 men	Afghani	Muslim*	10-09-06	Afghanistan*	Video was released showing Mulla Dadullah Khan beheading the soldiers, 2 British soldiers, and 2 women
Bubak Omadjadi	Philippine	Muslim	10-04-06	Barangay Bongkaong, Patikul, Sulu	Victim was allegedly beheaded and skinned by soldiers - also possible that the assailants were members of the Abu Sayyaf Group

50 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	10-02-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Many of the victims had been beheaded and showed signs of torture
7 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	10-01-06	Suwayrah, Iraq	Bodies were turned into the Kut morgue
Mustafa Asimi	Turkish	Muslim*	9-21-06	Gereshk District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan	Had been kidnapped in August by Taliban. When his company refused to withdraw from the country, he was beheaded.
Shabir Ahmad Dar	Indian	Muslim*	9-14-06	Kashmir, India	Head and body were found separately
62 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	9-13-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Bodies were found throughout the city-all were tortured; some were beheaded.
3 men	Iraqi	Muslim*	9-13-06	Iraq*	Ansar al-Sunna released a video of the beheading of three Iraqi guards-men-men were beheaded with a knife
Mohammad Taha	Sudanese	Muslim	9-07-06	Kalakala District, Sudan	Was killed by al-Qaeda in response to an article victim had printed in newspaper. Hands and feet were bound
2 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	9-05-06	Bayji, Iraq	Severed heads were found without bodies
3 women	Iraqi	Muslim*	9-02-06	Baquba, Iraq	The bodies of three decapitated women were found
Fakhrudin	Afghani	Muslim*	8-31-06	Grishk District, Afghanistan	Taliban killed victim for spying for the U.S. and Afghan Forces - body was left on the river bank
Noor Wali	Afghani	Muslim	8-30-06	Kati Khel Village in Miran Shah, Pakistan	Notes were attached to the bodies accusing victim of spying for America and Afghanistan
Haq Nawaz	Afghani	Muslim	8-30-06	Deer Pakhel village in Miran Shah, Pakistan	Notes were attached to the bodies accusing victim of spying for America and Afghanistan
Layth al-Janabi	Iraqi	Muslim*	8-24-06	Near Baiji, Iraq	Beheaded victim was a police officer
2 men	Afghani	Muslim*	8-21-06	Nuristan province, Afghanistan	Victims were bodyguards-had been kidnapped with their employer, Haji Younus by the Taliban
5 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	8-17-06	Tigris River, Suwayra, Iraq	Victims were either shot or beheaded-all showed signs of mutilation
1 person	Iraqi	Muslim*	8-09-06	Zab river near Atilah, Iraq	Body was found in the river, beheaded
Loi Khan	Pakistani	Muslim*	8-08-06	Madikhel, Pakistan	Note was left on the body accusing victim of spying on Islamic militants
7 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	8-04-06	Kut, Iraq	All individuals were beheaded
2 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	7-29-06	Suwayra, Iraq	Bodies were found in the Tigris River without their heads
1 man	Iraqi	Muslim*	7-21-06	Kirkuk, Iraq	Body was found without the head

1 person	Iraqi	Muslim*	7-18-06	Near Tikrit, Iraq	Girl's head was used as booby trap to kill civilian
1 person	Iraqi	Muslim*	7-05-06	River Zab, Halwa Wasta, Iraq	Body was found but not the head
4 men	Afghani	Muslim*	6-22/3-06	Zabul provincial district, Shahjoy, Afghanistan	Bodies were found separately-two on Thursday, two on Friday (6/23)-all were accused of spying for Afghan and coalition forces
Pfc. Kristian Menchaca	American Houston, Texas	Christian	6-21-06	Yusufiya Near Baghdad, Iraq	Members of al-Qaeda in Iraq booby trapped with bombs, tortured, cut, burned, dragged, dismembered and beheaded the bodies
Pfc. Thomas L. Tucker	American Madras, Oregon	Christian*	6-21-06	Yusufiya near Baghdad, Iraq	Members of al-Qaeda in Iraq booby trapped with bombs, tortured, cut, burned, dragged, dismembered and beheaded the bodies
Two people	Algerian	Muslim*	6-17-06	Gouraya, Algeria	Beheading was claimed by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
Hasim Khan	Afghani	Muslim*	6-14-06	Miranshah, Pakistan	Pro-Taliban militants left a note on the body accusing the victim of spying for the United States and Afghan forces
Fyodor Zaitsev	Russian	Christian*	6-13-06	Abducted in Baghdad, Iraq-beheading location unknown	The Mujahedeen Shura Council beheaded the victim as revenge for deaths caused by the Russian government
Rinat Agiulin	Russian	Muslim	6-13-06	Abducted in Baghdad, Iraq-beheading location unknown	The Mujahedeen Shura Council beheaded the victim as revenge for deaths caused by the Russian government
Anatoly Smirnov	Russian	Christian*	6-13-06	Abducted in Baghdad, Iraq-beheading location unknown	The Mujahedeen Shura Council beheaded the victim as revenge for deaths caused by the Russian government
Oleg Fedoseyev	Russian	Christian*	6-13-06	Abducted in Baghdad, Iraq-beheading location unknown	The Mujahedeen Shura Council beheaded the victim as revenge for deaths caused by the Russian government
7 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	6-10-06	Al-Maleh River, near Suwayrah, Iraq	Victims had been tortured and beheaded
2 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	6-10-06	Khan Bani Saad, Iraq	Victims had been brothers-their heads not their bodies were found
3 men	Iraqi	Shiite Muslim	6-10-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Committed by Ansar al-Sunna in revenge for deaths of Sunni Arabs in March and April
9 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	6-06-06	Hadid, Iraq	Victims' heads were found but not their bodies

3 people	Iraqi	Muslim	6-03-06	Hadid, Iraq	One of the victims had been a sheikh-heads found without bodies
4 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	6-01-06	Hibhib, Iraq	Several of the men had been detained by the Baghdad police prior to decapitation
3 people	Iraqi	Sunni Muslim*	5-31-06	Muqadadiya, near Baghdad, Iraq	Was believed to be by Armed gangs in response to the destruction of a Shiite shrine in February - Hands of all bodies were tied
2 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-26-06	Kut, Iraq	Bodies but not heads were found
Khudayr al-Tamimi	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-26-06	Near Muqadadiya, Iraq	Victim was a bridegroom found with relatives
4 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-26-06	Near Muqadadiya, Iraq	Victims were found with bridegroom
2 women	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-21-06	Najaf, Iraq	Victims bodies were found
1 woman	Iraqi	Muslim	5-18-06	Kirkuk, Iraq	Victim had been a labor activist for the Kurdistan Democratic Party
4 people	Iraq	Muslim*	5-14-06	Kerbala, Iraq	Victims had been brothers working for an aid organization
1 person	Iranian	Muslim*	5-13-06	Najaf, Iraq	Body was left in cemetery
1 man	Pakistani	Muslim*	5-11-06	Khar, Bajur, Pakistan	Pro-Taliban militants left a note with the body accusing the victim of spying for the United States
10 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-09-06	Suwayra, Iraq	Bodies were found in Tigris River
1 child	Iraqi	Muslim*	5-09-06	Suwayra, Iraq	Bodies were found in Tigris River
1 person	Iraqi	Muslim*	4-22-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Was found with nine other bodies, but was the only one beheaded
2 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	4-19-06	Shaab, Baghdad, Iraq	Victims were school teachers
4 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	4-11-06	Jurf al-Sakhar, Iraq	Victims were soldiers and/or Iraqi police officers
30 people	Iraqi	Sunni Muslim	3-26-06	Mulla Eid, near Baquba, Iraq	Was a possible response to the destruction of a Shiite shrine in February
14 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	2-02-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Bodies were found blindfolded with hands tied behind back-some were beheaded; some were stabbed
3 people	Iraqi	Muslim*	1-26-06	Baghdad, Iraq	Bodies were found decapitated
Malim Abdul Habib	Afghani	Muslim*	1-03-06	Zabul Province, Afghanistan	Victim was a teacher, killed by the Taliban for educating girls
1 girl	Iraqi	Muslim*	2006	Iraq	Dog's head replaced the girl's actual head

\* Information has not been verified

The numerous examples of decapitated bodies have direct parallels to historical events in Islamic history. The Mujahideen ritually defile in the same manner and for the same reasons as their warrior predecessors, aligning them with Muhammad and providing authenticity to their claim that they are following a pure doctrine of Islam. "The practice of beheading non-Muslim captives extends back to the Prophet himself. Ibn Ishaq (d. 768 C.E.), the earliest biographer of Muhammad, is recorded as saying that the Prophet ordered the execution by decapitation of 700 men of the Jewish Banu Qurayza tribe in Medina for allegedly plotting against him. Islamic leaders from Muhammad's time until today have followed his model. Examples of decapitation, of both the living and the dead, in Islamic history are myriad. Yusuf b. Tashfin (d. 1106) led the Al-Murabit (Almoravid) Empire to conquer from Western Sahara to central Spain. After the battle of Zallaqa in 1086, he had 24,000 corpses of the defeated Castilians beheaded and piled them up to make a sort of minaret for the muezzins who, standing on the piles of headless cadavers, sang the praises of Allah. He then had the detached heads sent to all the major cities of North Africa and Spain as an example of Christian impotence."<sup>(1)</sup> Now the decapitated heads are sent to all the major cities in Europe and America via television and the internet.

In addition to theological justifications there are significant symbolic and ritual interpretations of the phenomenon of beheadings. In her book titled *Losing Our heads, beheadings in literature and culture*, Regina Janes distinguishes between five principal types of traditionally severed heads: venerated, trophy, presentation, sacrificial, and judicial, corresponding to five principal types of traditionally authorized beheadings throughout human culture. "The ancestral head, removed after death, not taken by violence; the trophy head, taken in warfare or raid; the sacrificial head taken from a living person by decapitation in the performance of a religious rite; the presentation head, taken in a political struggle to remove a contender or rival; and the public execution, proceeding from a legal decision."<sup>(2)</sup> With the exception of the venerated ancestral head, the four remaining types of beheadings are prevalent in contemporary Islamist culture.

decapitation by sword. Under a strict interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism people convicted of murder, drug trafficking, rape, armed robbery, witchcraft, and apostasy can be executed. It is important to note that although beheading may seem a barbaric method of formal execution it is not symbolic of desecration. Mujahideen beheadings (post- and pre-mortem) are manifested as sacrificial, presentation and trophy heads.

Sacrificial heads are best exemplified by the videotaped ritual murders of Nicolas

Berg, Kim Sun-il, Jack Hensley, Eugene Armstrong, Kenneth Bigley, and numerous other victims by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group al Qaeda in Iraq. There are distinct commonalities in all of al Zarqawi's beheading videos that are indicative of decapitation in the performance of a religious rite. What distinguishes the sacrificial head from other types of severed heads is that the decapitation is a ritualized communal event. With the advent of modern technology the categories of severed heads are not always mutually exclusive. For example, the videotaped beheadings of Abu Musab al Zarqawi originate as sacrificial heads, the result of a communal blood ritual with formal premeditated violence, a Mujahideen symbol of warrior fraternity. When the head is held up by the hair and presented to the cameras, it is no longer a sacrificial head it is now in the category of presented heads.

"Presented, a head is reduced from a symbol to a sign. No special power inheres in the head or accrues to the taker from it. The taker expects reward or recognition from the person to whom he presents the head."<sup>(3)</sup> Al Zarqawi presented ritually severed heads on video to the world and received tremendous recognition from both friends and enemies of Islam. In Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda linked militants and pro-Taliban tribal militants behead numerous tribesmen accused of spying for America and Afghanistan. Frequently they place actual notes on the bodies as warning signs to others. One note indicated that the beheaded corpse was a gift for Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai.<sup>(4)</sup> Severed heads are presented to enemies or to friends; they are used to make new friends and conciliate enemies-or to signify the rupture of an alliance and the opening of hostilities.<sup>(5)</sup> Presentation heads were also evident in Islamic History and in one well-known example offered to the Prophet himself. In the famous Battle of Badr against the Meccans, Muhammad was overjoyed when Abdullah Ibn Masoud presented him with the severed head of his enemy Abu Jahl.

The most common form of Mujahideen desecration is the trophy head. "The trophy head-a complex, ancient, enduring, and irrepressible icon of death, emblem of war, sign of the warrior, symbol of life. Exuberant, triumphant violence makes the trophy head at once invigorating (to takers) and horrifying (to their neighbors). A social sign of individual martial prowess, the trophy head is an always ritualized, widely distributed, terror inducing sign of victory. . . . The head is hunted for the sake of a power the head confers and continues to possess even after it is severed, a power that can be appropriated, possessed, and transferred to the taker. Yet the head is also hunted as a sign of the warrior's success relative to other warriors. Its power is real, not symbolic. The head marks a difference between the dead and the not-dead, the loser and the victor.<sup>(6)</sup> The Taliban, Abu Sayaff, al Qaeda in Iraq, Ansar al Sunnah, Salifist Group for Preaching and Combat, warring tribal, Sunni and Shiite factions, and numerous other insurgent and terrorist groups sever heads as trophies.

In March 2006 Ummat Studios, the propaganda arm of the Taliban, released a video of alleged criminals who have been beheaded in Waziristan. The images depict crowds smiling and posing with strung up dismembered mutilated bodies. Body parts are posed, rearranged, and played with. Items such as cigarettes are placed in the mouths of decapitated heads and one head is staked high on a tall wooden pike. “The video quotes the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad to justify the killing of what are allegedly highway robbers and other common criminals. It shows their mutilated bodies being displayed as a warning to crowds of people. The underlying warning is that the same fate awaits those who would cooperate with secular regimes which will not implement harsh Sharia (Islamic) law.”<sup>(7)</sup> The Fedayeen Saddam publicly beheaded more than 200 women during an alleged anti-prostitution campaign in June 2000 through May 2001. The victims were dragged out of their homes, stretched out on an iron bench, and decapitated with a sword in front of their children, family and the whole population of the district. The victims’ families were forced to display the heads at their homes for several days hanging from fences and doorposts near signs that read, “For the honor of Iraq.”

A more recent example of the taking of trophy heads occurred on October 29, 2005 in Sulawesi Island, Indonesia. Three Christian High school girls were beheaded with machetes and a fourth girl was severely mutilated but managed to escape. The bodies, dressed in school uniforms, were left by the road near the execution site. The severed heads of the 15 year old girls were dumped in plastic bags in their village along with a handwritten note that read, “Wanted: 100 more Christian heads, teenaged or adult, male or female; blood should be answered with blood, soul with soul, head with head.”<sup>(8)</sup> In November 2006 three Islamic extremists were tried for the murders. The Javanese trader who planned and directed the murders related how he conceived the idea after a visit with members of the Philippine Islamic terrorist group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. During the visit he was informed that the organization staged bombings to coincide with Lebaran, the festival that ends the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.” Conscripting several accomplices at a local *pesantren*, or Islamic school, he directed one of them to seek out “the head of a Christian.” “It would be a great Lebaran trophy if we got a Christian.”<sup>(9)</sup> Although there was little media attention of the incident in Western news, headlines in Australian and Asian newspapers read, “Beheaded girls were Ramadan ‘trophies’” and “Christians beheaded as Muslim ‘Trophies.’”

Islamic history is inherently a history of trophy and presentation heads. “The Ottoman Empire was the decapitation state par excellence. Upon the Ottoman victory over Christian Serbs at the battle of Kosovo in 1389, the Muslim army beheaded the Serbian king and scores of Christian prisoners. At the battle of Varna in 1444, the Ottomans beheaded King Ladislaus of Hungary and “put his head at the tip of a long pike . . . and brandished it toward the Poles and Hungarians.” Upon the

fall of Constantinople, the Ottomans sent the head of the dead Byzantine emperor on tour to major cities in the sultan's domains. The Ottomans even beheaded at least one Eastern Orthodox patriarch. In 1456, the sultan allowed the grand mufti of the empire to personally decapitate King Stephen of Bosnia and his sons—even though they had surrendered—and seven decades later, the sultan ordered 2,000 Hungarian prisoners beheaded. In the early nineteenth century, even the British fell victim to the Ottoman scimitar. An 1807 British expedition to Egypt resulted in “a few hundred spiked British heads left rotting in the sun outside Rosetta.”[\(10\)](#)

Another significant and relevant example of a trophy head occurred earlier in Islamic history in the historical Battle of Karbala between Muhammad's grandson (the third imam of Shi'a Islam) Husayn ibn Ali and a military detachment from the forces of Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph. This battle is central to Shiite beliefs. Outnumbered by thousands, Husayn was killed between a small group of his followers and the Umayyad Army. Husayn's head was cut off and raised on a pike for all to see. His body was looted and then trampled by horsemen.[\(11\)](#) The Battle is commemorated each year by Shia Muslims on the holiday of Ashoura. It is a period of expressions of grief and of pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq. Shi'a Islam communities annually reenact the tragedy by ritual acts of self mutilation. To commemorate the suffering of Husayn many ritually slice their heads with swords. “Some Shi'a observe Ashura with a traditional flagellation ritual called *zanjeer zani* or *zanjeer matam*, involving the use of a *zanjeer* (a chain with a set of curved knives at the end).”[\(12\)](#) As if time stood still, sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims, manifested in mutilation and decapitation in the same place and for the same reasons, continues 1327 years later.

## Mutilation

Beheading is just one manifestation of the many types of mutilation that are prevalent throughout Islamic countries and justified by Sharia law; the code of law derived from Quranic scripture and from the teachings and example of Mohammed. Mutilation, pre- and post-mortem, also has long historical and theological precedents in Islam, and both practices are frequently implemented by Islamic extremist groups. Pre-mortem mutilation is torture, post-mortem mutilation is desecration; both perform specific symbolic functions. Currently torture as a form of judicial corporal punishment occurs in many countries and includes among other things amputations, floggings, mutilation, stoning to death, crucifixion, and branding; however, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the only two countries that still consider eye gouging a legitimate judicial punishment. Surgically removing one or both eyes is based on the literal interpretation of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation or best known from the formulation “an eye for an eye.” The Arabic word for the law of retaliation is *Qisas* and is found in the Quranic verse of Sura 5:45, “And We

ordained therein for them: Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth and wounds equal for equal. But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it shall be for him an expiation.” [\(13\)](#) This verse is interpreted to allow for three options: 1) the sentence is enacted and the accused has the appropriate body part(s) removed; 2) the injured party has the option to remit or forego retaliation and take compensation in money, goods or livestock in an agrarian economy; this option is known as *diya* or more commonly known as blood money since the ‘charity’ or *sadaqa* actually goes to the injured person; and 3) the option of forgiveness, which means that the injured party forgoes retaliation and monetary compensation. Among recent examples that specifically involved removal of eyes, the Greater Sharia Court of Dammam in Saudi Arabia on December 9, 2005 ordered an Indian citizen to be punished by having his right eye gouged out in retribution for his role in an altercation in April 2003 in which a Saudi citizen was injured. The act was punishment for a brawl in which he was defending himself. He did not have a lawyer at the trial and the only witness was not able to testify during court proceedings because he was Indian and the injured party Saudi. [\(14\)](#) On September 16, 2004 a court in Tabuk ordered the right eye of a Saudi National to be gouged out, but gave him the option of paying compensation within one year. The man had intervened when he saw youths pelting his brother with stones, in response he also threw stones, hitting one youth in the eye and causing him to lose vision in one eye; he helped carry the injured youth to the hospital. Two months before the sentence was to be carried out, he had managed to collect only 550,000 Saudi riyals (US\$147,000) of the 1.4 million riyals (US\$373,000) demanded by the victim. [\(15\)](#) On June 10, 2005, Iran’s State Supreme Court upheld a sentence for a man to have his eyes gouged out. The original court ordered for acid to be sprayed on the accused man’s face as retribution for his actions, he was also sentenced to 74 lashes and prison time. His lawyer appealed the decision on the grounds that the rest of his face would also be damaged from the acid. A second court rejected the appeal and instead ordered that his eyes be gouged out by a “qualified surgeon, so as not to damage the face itself.” The act was punishment for an accident committed twelve years earlier when he was sixteen. He had not been sentenced when he was sixteen so that the court could sentence him as an adult and hand down a stronger punishment. He was given the option of paying 3 billion Rials (\$300,000) in blood-money to forego the punishment; however, that amount of money was beyond the laborer’s reach. [\(16\)](#) Those are just a few examples of state sanctioned mutilation.

Iraq under Saddam’s regime was notorious for widespread and systematic government sanctioned torture, rape, mutilation and mass murder. Saddam Hussein understood the symbolic and strategic significance of mutilation. Fedayeen Saddam and Republican Guard troops committed torture and executions involving beatings, breaking bones, gouging out eyes, throwing people off of high buildings, chopping

off fingers, ears and genitals, cutting out tongues, piercing hands with electric drills, ritualized mutilations, amputations, lashings, and beheadings. In just one of many violent campaigns Saddam Hussein ordered surgeons to remove the ears of army defectors and those who refused to report for military service as a form of judicial punishment. Saddam Hussein's ear-amputation campaign went on for three days, May 17-19, 1994, in every city in Iraq; an estimated 3,500 men lost their ears. They were not given painkillers and tied down to their gurneys; some lost both ears, other victims only one. Some were even branded with a hot poker with the Arabic word for coward scorched across their foreheads. Afterward they were thrown into prison and tortured on a daily basis in an effort to get them to confess that they were plotting against the regime, which would have meant a death sentence. Many bled to death in prison afterward. The guards taunted them by calling them *Abu Thanat Mabtura*, Arabic for Abu Earless, or Father Earless.<sup>(17)</sup> Erving Goffman in his classic text "Stigma, notes on the management of spoiled identity" writes in his opening paragraph, "The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor-a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places."<sup>(18)</sup> Stigma was both the intent and result of Saddam's amputation campaign. A general amnesty four years later brought little respite for the victims; mutilated ears signified a red letter D for deserter. None of the earless men were able to find work, since the party controlled employment in most sectors of the economy and women would not marry disfigured men with no job prospects.<sup>(19)</sup> Saddam's legacy is a culture of mutilation that resonates across Iraq and is inculcated in the population

Recent incidents of murder and mutilation go beyond Saddam's signature strategy of terror and stigma and are indicative of a sacrificial crisis. This is evident by the degree of desecration and the fact that victims include people who are typically the most protected, cherished and revered. Children, women, and priests were all victims of unspeakable acts of violence. An Iraqi priest, Father Paul Alexander, was disemboweled, had his arms and legs severed while he was alive before he was beheaded in one of the more disturbing responses to the Pope's statements.<sup>(20)</sup> CNN correspondent Nic Robertson, in an uncharacteristically neutral news story of sectarian violence in Iraq, reported that "a 15-year-old girl had been beheaded and a dog's head sewn on her body in its place; and of a young child who had had his hands drilled and bolted together before being killed."<sup>(21)</sup> Although a woman has never been publicly beheaded on video, they are frequently raped, tortured, and mutilated. "On November 14, 2004, U.S. marines found the body of a Caucasian woman on the street in Fallujah, Iraq. The body had long blonde hair, her legs and

arms were cut off, all four appendages were missing, her throat was slit and she had been disemboweled. An AFP photographer embedded with the Marines said the woman was wearing a blue dress and her face was completely disfigured. The victim could only be identified as Western and is presumed to be either Margaret Hassan or Teresa Borcz Khalifa. Both were taken hostage prior to the body's discovery.[\(22\)](#)

Mujahideen and Iraqi insurgents expend extra effort in brutalizing Americans and particularly American military personnel. Mutilation entails a specific kind of ritualistic crime; a collective, provocative and incendiary desecration of the enemy. On March 31, 2004 Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah ambushed a convoy containing four American private military contractors providing security for the U.S. Army. The four armed contractors, Scott Helvenston, Jerko Zovko, Wesley Batalona and Michael Richard Teague, were shot, set ablaze, dragged from their cars, beaten, beheaded and dismembered. One body was tied to the back of a car and driven through the city. The car had a poster in its window of Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the founder of the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Their burned corpses were dragged through the streets before a cheering crowd that dismembered the corpses. Many of those in the crowd were excited young boys who shouted slogans in front of television cameras. One resident displayed what appeared to be dog tags taken from one body. Adults and children celebrated the killings by chanting "Fallujah is the graveyard of Americans" while hacking the bodies to pieces with poles and farm tools.[\(23\)](#) Two blackened and mangled mutilated corpses were lynched from the green, iron trestle bridge that spans the Euphrates River. A local resident was quoted "The people of Fallujah hanged some of the bodies on the old bridge like slaughtered sheep."[\(24\)](#) "The images of the four civilians killed in Iraq filled television screens worldwide but were largely shunned by American television that deemed them too graphic."[\(25\)](#) Interestingly, the American media has no problem showing graphic images of injured Palestinians and Iraqi civilians but suddenly acquires principles when the victims are Americans.

One of the most heinous examples of body desecration occurred in al-Yusufiyah outside of Baghdad, Iraq. On June 20, 2006 the bodies of Pfc. Kristian Menchaca, 23, and Pfc. Thomas L. Tucker, 25, members of the 101st Airborne division, were found mutilated beyond recognition. Not only were the bodies mutilated and booby-trapped, but IED's lined the road leading to the victims and it took troops 12 hours to clear the area of the bombs.[\(26\)](#) There were varied initial reports of the details of the injuries. The O'Reilly Factor reported that they were hacked to death, their eyes gouged out and their bodies defiled.[\(27\)](#) E.D. Hill in a Fox and Friends video reported that their penises were cut off and shoved into their mouths, their ears and noses were cut off, and then they were finally killed.[\(28\)](#) Afterward, their hearts were cut out. To the consternation of U.S. officials, who are careful to withhold casualty

details until the soldiers' families can be notified, the deaths were first officially reported by an Iraqi defense official Major General Abdul Aziz Muhammed Jassim who said in a news conference that they had been tortured and killed "in a barbaric way."[\(29\)](#) The Mujahideen Shura Council, an umbrella organization for eight insurgency groups inclusive of al Qaeda in Iraq, immediately claimed credit for the murders on a web site. "We announce the good news to our Islamic nation that we executed God's will and slaughtered the two crusader animals we had in captivity," "And God has given our Emir, Abu Hamza al-Muhajer, the good fortune of carrying out the legitimate court's command in person." Al-Muhajer is another name for Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian-born terrorist who replaced Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as leader of al Qaeda in Iraq.[\(30\)](#) As if mutilating the bodies were not enough of a violation, two videos of the actual desecration subsequently appeared. Both videos were clearly propaganda films which attempted to link the killings of the two American soldiers in Iraq to the murder of a 14 year old Iraqi girl and her family. "The claim that Tucker and Menchaca were killed and desecrated in retaliation for the rape and murder of Abeer Qassim al-Janabi and her family is questionable since the allegations of the murder were not made public until after the two were killed and the videos were not released until three weeks after the incident.[\(31\)](#)

On July 10, 2006 the Mujahideen Shura Council issued on the Internet a 4:39 minute video that showed the mutilated corpses of the two young American soldiers. "The extremely graphic footage is preceded by an audio clip of a past Usama bin Laden speech, and an audio track from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is heard over the scenes in which the Mujahideen display and prod the corpses. A message introducing the video states that this video is presented as "revenge for our sister who was dishonored by a soldier of the same brigade," referencing the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl and her family by a group of American soldiers in al-Mahmoudiya.[\(32\)](#) After a brief introduction with an image and the voice of Osama bin Laden, the video shows the two dead soldiers lying on a bridge with obvious multiple wounds. Their bodies are being taunted by the insurgent captors. Thomas Tucker had already been decapitated and his severed head is held up to the cameras as a classic trophy/presentation head. Kristian Menchaca is being stomped on by an insurgent who has his foot deliberately placed on the head of the dead soldier. At one point in the video, an image of the recently deceased leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, is superimposed over the film, throughout the entire video there is a voice over of al Zarqawi calling Muslims to jihad. A *nasheed*, Islamic jihad song, can also be heard in the background.[\(33\)](#)

On September 22, 2006 a second video with a high production value and new footage of the mutilation of the bodies was released by the Mujahideen Shura Council of Iraq. The video shows the bodies bound to the back of a truck being dragged through the streets, beaten and kicked. In one instance Thomas's head is

kicked by an insurgent. At the end of the video, the two U.S. soldiers' bodies are burned. The video is titled: "In Member of the Sunnah of Our Ancestors in Mutilating the Infidels," is 9:12 minutes in length, and depicts the attack upon two American soldiers in al-Yusufiyah. According to the Site Institute, "Reciprocation is emphasized throughout the video. An al-Jazeera interview with Mohammed Taha al-Janabi, Abeer's uncle, begins the illustration of American crimes, followed by narration of an inhabitant of al-Fallujah describing American crimes during the second battle in that city. Also, the Mujahideen Shura Council points to the burning of Taliban Mujahideen in Afghanistan as additional justification for their acts against the two American soldiers in al-Yusufiyah. Stories of Muhammad's companions and Islamic scholars who acted in kind to crimes committed against them are presented as vertically scrolling text atop an image of one of the American soldiers. A message within the video reads: "The Mujahideen, Allah willing, will stay on the companion's path, "tit for tat" in being harsh on the apostates and the Crusader infidels and the splitters by dispersing and hurting them, destroying their troops, killing them, and wishing to offer the biggest sacrifices for the God of earth and the skies".[\(34\)](#) Although the Site Institute relegates the entire incident in the video to revenge killings there are specific expressions of violence that signify significant symbolic acts of desecration when viewed within the larger context of Iraqi culture.

## 6

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century Western psychological perspective the previously mentioned incidents of murder and mutilation would be categorized as pathological acts of violence. However, justifications for violence are culturally relative and need to be examined from a symbolic anthropological perspective that takes into consideration the symbolism of the culture as it is manifested in religious ritual, customs, practices, and specific acts of violence. If we examine the particular incidents of mutilation it becomes evident they may not be as arbitrary as first assumed. For example, the deliberate stepping on victims heads is a allusion to a prevalent Muslim custom that considers the bottom of shoes as highly offensive. The burnings of bodies are not aberrant acts of collective mob violence, they are a response to Islamic burial customs which strictly prohibit cremation. Dragging the bodies through town on the back of a truck, hacking them to pieces and leaving them exposed to the elements is a reversal of Iraqi funeral rituals in which the body is bathed, shrouded, prayed over, carried through town in a funeral procession and buried in the ground. Punishing the corpse by inflicting society's worst taboos is a deliberate perversion of sacred funeral rites and an obvious projection of private fears and cultural beliefs onto the enemy.

In addition, murder and desecration are rampant because they are theologically proscribed in the principle of *Lex talionis* (*Qissas*) and customary tribal law.

'Mutilating bodies in retaliation for the mutilation of Muslims is derived from the case in which pagans mutilated the body of Hamzah ibn Abdul-Muttalib, one of the prophet's companions, and the Prophet swore to mutilate seventy pagan corpses in retaliation.[\(35\)](#) A number of recent *fatwas* proscribe mutilating enemies' bodies. In February 2005 the London based radical Sheikh Hani al-Siba'i justified the mutilation and torture of enemies by the precedent of the Prophet who, as a punishment for stealing sheep, "drove nails and gouged out the eyes of the 'Urayna tribe . . . cut off their opposite arms and legs and threw them into al-Hrara area to die." If the mere crime of theft warranted such a punishment, according to the sheikh, the crimes of the occupiers of Iraq certainly do.[\(36\)](#) In specific response to the mutilations of the four contractors in Fallujah, a *fatwa* was issued by the Saudi Sheikh Omar Abdullah Hassan al-Shihabi that proscribed an even more general dispensation for mutilating the dead. He decreed that the dead can be mutilated not only as a reciprocal act but also when it serves to "terrorize the enemy" or to gladden the heart of a Muslim mujahid."[\(37\)](#) Theologically, mutilation of the enemies of Islam is justified; politically oppressive regimes are responsible for a legacy of physical abuse that has been inculcated and perpetuated, psychologically, cultural taboos and fears are projected onto others, and symbolically inexplicable forms of habitual desecration are marks of a culture that is devolving into a sphere of magical thinking and primal violence.

## **Conclusion: The Failure of Muslim Iconoclasm**

Desecration goes beyond psychological warfare when children are joyfully participating in the dismemberment of a body and posing for pictures in front of mutilated corpses. To fully appreciate the significance of these violent ritualistic acts they have to be understood within the entire context of Muslim desecration. Iconoclasm which is generally defined as the destruction of sacred images, usually for religious or political motives,[\(38\)](#) is synonymous with desecration. The media has reported only one side of the issue of Muslim iconoclasm, disrespect of what Muslims hold sacred, and have not reported on the very significant other side of the issue, Muslim defilement of what non-Muslims hold sacred. Like two sides of the same coin, Muslim indignation and desecration are intrinsically intertwined. What initially appears to be a disproportionate and exceedingly violent response to the Pope's comments or cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad are examples of Muslim iconoclasm which derive from the Quranic prohibitions against idolatry. Muslims believe that images can give rise to idolatry (idol worship). The fear is that an image, rather than the divine being it symbolizes, can become the object of worship and veneration. Prohibitions vary among Islamic traditions but typically include images of Allah, Muhammad, the representation of gods, divine figures or semi divine figures of other religions and the figurative depiction of living creatures, especially human beings. The prohibition is not specific to images but includes among other things writings, statues, etc, basically anything that could be construed idolatrous even in a relative and provisional manner and particularly any representation that insults the prophet

Muhammad. For example Salman Rushdie's depiction of Muhammad in his 1988 book *The Satanic Verses*, though literary, caused great anger among Muslims, culminating in an edict from Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, who charged Rushdie with apostasy and issued a *fatwa* calling for his death. He was understood as disrespectfully breaking the image prohibition, as his writings created non-Sunna images of the prophet in the mind of the reader.[\(39\)](#) More recently in March 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar issued an edict against un-Islamic graven images, as a result, the Taliban militia went across Afghanistan, including the Kabul museum, destroying all pre-Islamic treasures and ancient sculptures. They used explosives, tanks, and anti-aircraft weapons to blow apart the Buddhas of Bamyan, two monumental statues of standing Buddhas carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamyan valley of central Afghanistan, built during the 6th century.

More common unrecognized manifestations of Muslim Iconoclasm are the burning of effigies and flags of enemies. Because the secular media does not regard the American flag or for that matter the American President as significant emblems of the United States they fail to recognize that when Muslim protesters are burning the American flag and U.S. President in effigy it is a sacrilegious iconoclastic act. The burning of effigies is a ritualistic act that unifies participants and reinforces their collective hatred for an individual and what he represents. Participants seek to reduce the impact of the person represented by the effigy by destroying his or her likeness. The burning is a symbolic, deliberate attack. Throughout the world and particularly in the Middle East protestors regularly burn effigies of President Bush, other prominent leaders, recently including Pope Benedict XVI.

Historically one function of mutilating images and statues of people was as a means of formally executing a person in their absence or in some cases after they were already dead. "The whole apparatus of execution could be employed upon images, not only in hanging, but also in pillorying, burning, quartering, and decapitating them. "The instances of the desecration of enemies of the commonweal described by the Roman historians, and the destruction of statues of those posthumously declared by enemies of the state, properly fall under the rubric of iconoclasm. . . . Punish the absent miscreant by punishing his representation in our midst; visit odium upon it by public disfigurement, mutilation, or hanging. In both cases the action of making, displaying, and disfiguring the image may be spontaneous, or it may fall within established and official structures of disapproval and sentencing."[\(40\)](#) Interestingly there is a significant connection between the mutilation of effigies and the mutilation of corpses. Historically corpses were put on display, dismembered, hanged, drawn and quartered and subjected to a variety of other 'punishments' in what technically is referred to as *posthumous execution*, the ritual execution of an already dead body.[\(41\)](#) Punishing effigies evolved from punishing the actual corpse. "One practice not yet mentioned must be regarded as a significant antecedent of the public execution of images: the execution and

burning of corpses of criminals and heretics by civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Although it clearly antedates the full blown *executio in effigie*, it continues beside the latter well into the eighteenth century and even beyond. . . . The punishment of corpses became widespread in the sixteenth century, received much discussion in criminal treatises, and was frequently employed by the Inquisition.”[\(42\)](#)

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The relationship of the punishment of corpses and effigies is extremely relevant to the subject of Mujahideen desecration. Moderate Muslims mutilate effigies, Jihadists mutilate dead soldiers; both are ritualized acts of iconoclasm and both are manifestations of primal instincts, the very same instincts that the idolatry laws proscribe. There is a thin line between iconoclasm and idolatry which is contingent upon the concept of image magic. The burning of effigies and mutilating corpses is connected to the concept of sympathetic magic which is essentially based on the law of similarity and expressed in the magical principle that “like produces like.” “Perhaps the most familiar application of the principle that like produces like is the attempt which has been made by many peoples in many ages to injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him, in the belief that, just as the image suffers, so does the man, that when it perishes he must die.”[\(43\)](#) Politically the mutilation of effigies is an act of iconoclasm; religiously it is an act of idolatry. In either case mutilating effigies involves image magic which is inherently related to the fear of images (idols). Muslim iconoclasm evinces two types of fear, one of which is best exemplified by the destruction of the Buddhist statues: the fear of worshipping false idols. The destruction of the statues by the Taliban is an example of classic iconoclasm, to enforce the theological prohibitions against graven images. The function of the prohibition is to avoid idolatry that may lead to the worship of false gods. This is the primary reason for the tradition of aniconism in Islam, which was originally intended to protect the religion from the pagan practice of worshipping statues and currently serves to focus the religion away from the contemporary “idols” prevalent in Western materialism. However, as a result of such strict prohibitions on images, the few designated Muslim sacred objects and spaces such as mosques and the Quran achieve significantly more symbolic meaning. The limited amount of sacred objects and spaces enhances their sanctity and correspondingly enhances the degree of disrespect when they are allegedly defiled. This is one explanation for the disproportionate response to perceived Muslim offenses. Ironically, by attributing sacred characteristics to tangible objects these become the idols that were so vehemently prohibited.

The second type of fear of images is exemplified by the intense response to cartoons of Muhammad; this is a primal fear that is expressed in magical thinking. The fear is that the image of Muhammad may somehow make Muhammad

vulnerable. This semiotic problem provides significant insights into the beheading and mutilation of bodies. The desire to protect Muhammad by prohibiting his image is the same desire behind the destruction of effigies to bring harm to enemies. The mutilation of effigies is serious, the reason images of Muhammad are prohibited is not limited to the fear of conflating sign with signified but also with the primal fear that if the image is mutilated so is the symbol. If effigies of Muhammad were burned in the same fashion as effigies of the Pope the response would unleash a violence more destructive than anything we have ever seen before. Furthermore, the symbolic desire to mutilate effigies can be applied to mutilating bodies; the violent ritual can escalate from images to reality, “Decapitation as symbolic practice precedes decapitation as violence.”<sup>(44)</sup> The thin line between iconoclasm and idolatry dissolves. Protesters are no longer content to beat, dismember, behead and burn effigies, the participants now require blood, flesh, and bones, and the image is replaced with an actual body, a more authentic signifier. An act of iconoclasm escalates to an act of ritual violence and desecration. The function of the theological prohibition of images is compromised by the overwhelming human desire for symbols and the religious realm becomes primal and sacrificial. This is the failure of Muslim iconoclasm, its devolvement into idolatry.

By perpetuating the cult of Palestinian and Muslim victimhood, the Western media incites a vicious sequence of insult, protest, violence, and mutilation. Widespread reporting of incidents that offend Muslims escalates to protests that entail ritualized acts of symbolic violence (burning effigies), then to acts of actual violence (mutilation and murder) that devolve into primal acts of symbolic violence (desecrating corpses) in a reciprocal cycle of iconoclasm, idolatry, and ritual murder.

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