

Eating Hearts II

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On 26 October, the *Jerusalem Post* published a picture of an Israeli soldier holding a scrap of paper which Israel claimed to have taken from a dead Hamas terrorist. On the paper were instructions to Hamas fighters to kill Jews, behead them and to eat their hearts and livers. It was an appalling instruction, but not one that is unique to Hamas. In 2013, Khalid al-Hamad, a Syrian resistance leader, did exactly the same on a battlefield in the Syrian Civil War. The victim was a soldier fighting for the Assad regime, which has indeed retained power. The act was filmed and distributed throughout the Middle East. The act was redolent in Islamic history, though not as a positive example. Hind, whose name is still cursed in the Islamic world, ran onto the field of battle in the sixth century, during the time of the Prophet Mohammad, and cut out and ate the heart or liver (sources differ) of a fallen enemy fighter. The battlefield repast disgusted both sides, and women were no longer allowed to accompany fighters into battle, which was the practice for centuries in the tribal world of ancient Arabia. Eating hearts and livers thus has a considerable history.

The medieval Kharajites, a diffuse radical sect were vilified for their use of the tactic, but were remarkably successful for a time. The Kharajites cobbled together from the Qu'ran and Hadith literature an ethos that was later reflected in ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups which held that not only was the eating of hearts under certain conditions acceptable (though this was rarely done), but men fighting against them were to be killed and their wives and children were to be taken as slaves (which was very often done).

This was the model that was picked up in the 21st century in the Syrian Civil War, and became at least a rhetorical staple of ISIS, is important in the current conflict. Terrorism is a copy cat league. Tactics and tropes are borrowed and adapted to new places and different circumstances. Hamas borrowed it from ISIS, who in turn borrowed and adapted the trope from early Islamic history.

In 2013, I published an article on the topic for *Sightings*, an online magazine at the University of Chicago. The text is again relevant and can be found here:

<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/eating-hearts-terrorist-message-hezbollah-jeffrey-kaplan>

That it has again become a feature of a vicious terrorist attack is a sad and telling sign of the times.