

THE SHI'A REMEMBRANCE OF MUHARRAM: An Explanation of the Days of Ashura and Arba'een

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PHOTO: Shi'ite pilgrims wave their swords as they parade outside Imam Husayn's shrine in the holy city of Karbala, 29 January 2007. Hundreds of thousands of Shi'ite Muslims observed the mourning rituals of Ashura in the Iraqi shrine city under tight security amid fears of attacks by Sunni extremists. (AFP)

EXCLAIMING “YA! HUSAYN! Ya! Husayn!” rows of Shi'ite men strike their exposed backs with chains. In the flurry of religious passion, the ancient streets of Karbala turn red with blood that flows from gashes cut deep into the skin. The men, some hardly old enough to shave, are within view of the Ha'ir, the enclosed site around the Ali Abbas Mosque and the Imam Husayn Shrine, the inner area of which is forbidden to nonbelievers. Within the wall, the remains of Husayn lie under a gilded dome.

Once a year, on the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram, Karbala teems with the Shi'a faithful who have come to remember the death of Husayn in 680 A.D. This activity is part of Ashura, one of the world's great religious processions, and as many as 2 million Shi'ites gather in Karbala to wave flags, chant, dance, and beat their chests. During the frenzied 10 days, some people observe modest candlelight vigils or say prayers inside the holy sanctuaries. Others offer tributes to Husayn that include self-flagellation designed to allow the faithful to empathize with their martyr. Some tap sharpened blades on their foreheads (*tadbear*) or perform a form of corporal self-punishment using heavy chains, batons, or leather whips that peel layers of flesh from their backs (*tharb al zangil*).

The Shi'a Awakening

Shi'ites make up 29 percent of Muslims in the Middle East and are a major component of the Middle East's strategic equation, especially given their influential fulcrums in Iran, Iraq, and increasingly, Lebanon. Many Sunnis fear the Shi'ites and their politics and faith. Countries where leaders are politically secure permit the Ashura ritual, but many authoritarian Middle Eastern governments limit the practice, fearing its symbolism because Shi'a Islam melds faith with politics, and Ashura is a reminder that political disputes separate the *ummah*, the Islamic community.

The Shi'ite perspective matters today especially because a psychological fixation on the Battle of Karbala—the “Ashura Complex”—forms the sum of conservative Shi'a aspirations.¹ In Iraq and Iran, Shi'ites have come together at the behest of their religious leaders to form specifically Shi'a states. In 2004, Iraqi Shi'ites formed political parties to capitalize on the

political opportunity afforded by the overthrow of the Sunni-led Ba'athist regime. They established a transitional government, wrote and ratified a constitution, and then staved off suicide bombers to elect a Shi'a-dominated parliament in 2005. It was ironic that 30 days after the 2005 Iraqi elections, which created the world's first Shi'a Arab majority state (Iran, of course, is Persian), Shi'ites went to Karbala for Ashura.

A Brief History of the Islamic Schism

In the 7th century A.D., the Prophet Mohammad united the Arabian Peninsula into a thriving desert federation. The nomadic and the settled inhabitants of Arabia were once warring tribes competing for scarce resources. Mohammad, the unchallenged "Messenger of God," became the regional peacemaker, a position he used to unite all Arabs under his leadership.² After his death in 632 A.D. and in the absence of a designated male heir, two factions vied for political control. The Party of Ali (Shi'ites) claimed that Mohammad had directly passed the governmental (caliphate) and spiritual leadership (imamate) of the Islamic polity to Ali ibn Abu Talib, his cousin, son-in-law, and childhood confidante. The Companions of Mohammad, a rival faction of Muslim elders, argued that Mohammad had made no appointment and unanimously elected Mohammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, as the first of the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs." Abu Bakr's supporters were called the People of the Sunna and the Assembly, or Sunnis.³

Abu Bakr was followed by Umar ibn al-Khattab and then by Uthman ibn Affan of the house of Umayya. Both caliphs expanded the Islamic community throughout North Africa and into Byzantine territories, but Uthman's reign, characterized by corruption, nepotism, and greed, was considered a disaster. Under Uthman, enemies of Mohammad were placed in positions of power throughout the Muslim empire, including the governorship of Damascus, which went to Mu'awiya, a major opponent of Mohammad.⁴

After Uthman's death, Mohammad's family members became the ummah's great hope for restoring Islamic order "in the midst of iniquity and evil."⁵ Although Ali's influence had diminished, he was finally elected as the Fourth Caliph in 656 A.D.

Ashura in Iraq, 2007

In January, security in Karbala and Najaf forced anti-Iraq forces to attack smaller Shi'a sites during Ashura. Suicide bombers detonated their explosives in a crowd of worshippers at Shi'ite mosques in Mandali near the Iranian border and in Khanaqin, a largely Kurdish town. In Baghdad, drive-by shootings killed seven Shi'ite pilgrims in a bus heading to the Ashura observances at the Kadhim Shrine, the burial site of the 7th Imam.

The bloodiest Ashura 2007 occurrence happened 12 miles northeast of the holy city of An Najaf, where a little-known Shi'ite millenarian cult/militia called "Medwadiya" (Soldiers of Heaven) fought a 16-hour battle with government and U.S. forces. Established in the 1990s by Saddam Hussein to compete against the authority of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Medwadiyas (according to the government) intended to kill al-Sistani and as many Ashura pilgrims as possible. They wanted to spark a civil war to provoke the end of time and the return of the Mahdi—the hidden 12th Imam and Shi'ism's equivalent of a messiah.

Post-battle, the government reported several hundred Medwadiyas killed, hundreds more captured, and a large cache of weapons seized.



An effigy of executed dictator Saddam Hussein hangs next to a portrait of Shi'ite spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, during a demonstration in Basra, 4 January 2007. (AFP)

(Shi'ites would venerate him as the First Imam.) His caliphate was not well established, however, and his first five years as caliph were marred by the legacy of Uthman's rule and the first Islamic civil war, between Ali's and Mu'awiya's followers. In 660 A.D., when Mu'awiya captured Jerusalem and declared himself caliph, Ali was politically neutered. The next year Ali was assassinated in Kufa, and Mu'awiya was free to consolidate power as the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty.

Shi'a opposition to the Umayyads continued with Ali's two sons, who became symbols of the political dichotomy of Shi'a Islam. First there was the quietist, Abu Mohammad Hasan ibn Ali (Hasan). After accepting a promise of military aid from the garrison in Kufa—aid that never materialized—Hasan abdicated his claim to the leadership of the ummah without a fight in order to avoid pointless bloodshed. He signed an oath of allegiance—a *bay'ah*—to Mu'awiya, and then retired on a state pension as a cleric in Medina. Although Hasan abjured politics, Mu'awiya nonetheless assassinated him in order to secure Umayyad control of the caliphate.⁶

Next there was the activist, Hasan's younger brother, Abu Abdullah Husayn ibn Ali (Husayn). In 680 CE, Husayn saw an opportunity for Mohammad's descendants to return to power. Like his brother, Husayn entertained an offer from the Kufans of an army to help him depose the newly crowned Umayyad caliph, Yazid I, a known drunkard who openly violated Islamic laws. Accusing the Umayyads of losing the Islamic direction of the Prophet and arguing that he had an obligation, as the Prophet's heir, not to submit to Yazid I, Ali broke his family's *détente*. He claimed that a *bay'ah* with the caliph would have violated Islamic norms and constituted an endorsement of Yazid's immoral character and way of life.⁷

Against a background of nearly five decades of leadership disputes, Husayn attempted to seize control of the Islamic caliphate. After performing the Hajj ritual, he left Mecca with a small entourage of 100 loyalists consisting of 18 fighters from the House of Ali, 54 Shi'a supporters, and 28 other family members.⁸ Husayn intended to cross the Euphrates to launch his revolt from Kufa. Yazid I heard of Husayn's challenge and sent a 4,000-man force from Damascus to secure the city. When the Kufans were quickly suppressed, Husayn lost

all succor east of the Euphrates River. He did not return, however, to his home in Medina. Shi'ites believe that "[Husayn] realized that mere force of arms would not have saved Islamic actions and consciousness. To him [the faith] needed a shaking and jolting of hearts and feelings. This, he decided, could only be achieved through sacrifice and suffering."⁹

The Umayyad army surrounded Husayn's encampment on the Euphrates and cut him off from water. By 10 October 680 A.D., Husayn and his fighters were parched from extreme thirst. After seven days of failed negotiations, the two sides engaged in sporadic fighting near the small town of Karbala. Archers decimated the small Shi'ite party. By noon, Husayn's brother and standard-bearer, Ali Abbas, had been skewered with an arrow and Husayn himself had been captured. Husayn begged to pray one more time. Once he was on his knees, the Umayyad commander decapitated him and left his naked body on the battlefield to be trampled by the Umayyad cavalry. The next day, Yazid's army marched the survivors in a victory procession through Kufa behind the severed heads of Husayn and his fighters.¹⁰

The story of Karbala does not end with Ashura. On 30 November 680 A.D., forty days after the massacre, Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari, one of Mohammad's and Husayn's companions, visited Husayn's burial site. Jabir's journey to Karbala was, in effect, the first *Arba'een* pilgrimage. The Shi'a Remembrance of Muharram ritual began when the story of Karbala was relayed, and it has continued for the last 14 centuries with elaborate displays in remembrance of the patron of the Shi'ite movement.¹¹

Culture and Customs of Ashura

The Remembrance of Muharram is not a celebration or a festival. It is a communal reflection of Husayn's martyrdom. The faithful conduct passion plays and mock funerals as they parade icons of their handsome Arab hero. Ashura sanctifies Husayn's activism in a trancelike fervor that reminds the faithful of the injustice he and they believe they have suffered at the hands of Sunnis. Beyond the requiems and obsequies, Ashura stokes 1,400 years of sectarian animus.

Several visual pieces come together to dramatize the event, reminders to the Sunnis that the Shi'ites

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will not forget. Shi'ites arrange *majalis* (gatherings) to review Islamic teachings. These events feature a *khateeb*, a reciter/poet/bard of the Husayn passion saga, and a *radub*, who incites the faithful to beat their chests.¹² The cathartic chest beating is part of the longstanding display of solidarity with Husayn.

Flags and water are included in the visual displays. Colored flags represent tribes or have a religious significance: black for grief and allegiance to Husayn; red for the injustice done to Husayn, the injury committed against the Prophet's family, and the decadence of Yazid; green to tie the worshippers to the 12 venerated imams. Finally, water is life in the deserts of the Middle East. When the Umayyads deprived Husayn of water, they sentenced him to death. Today, Shi'ites cover water pots in black cloth and inscribe them with mottos to memorialize Husayn's thirst.¹³

Marches and processions (*mawakib*) are important components of the Ashura and Arba'een observances. During the Remembrance of Muharram, Iraqi Shi'ites conduct the 3-day mawakib between the holy cities of An Najaf (the burial place of Imam Ali and Shi'a Islam's most sacred site) and Karbala. Shi'ites also conduct the mawakib on the roads from Baghdad and from other Shi'ite enclaves to the south and east of Karbala. Pilgrims beat their chests and chant as they walk, jog, or crawl along the dusty Iraqi roads. Bystanders construct roadside eateries to feed hungry pilgrims at rest stops.

Makeshift tent villages appear as believers sleep along the highways. In 2006, tens of thousands of Shi'ite pilgrims from Iraq and Iran conducted the mawakib.

The most spectacular events in Karbala include frenetic gatherings where the ultra-orthodox faithful crawl through city streets or fall on their hands and knees as they approach the Ha'ir. These gatherings grow in intensity in the days leading up to Ashura. Shi'ites mourn outside the shrine into late evening. At some venues, clerics chant dirges for Husayn from pulpits as believers carry simulated corpses or replicas of Husayn's sarcophagus through the city streets and the bazaars. In the evenings, Ashura passion plays (*ta'ziya*) reenact each day of the Battle of Karbala.

Among the mock funerals and eulogies for Husayn and his followers, Ashura's most visible sign occurs. Rows of men stripped to the waist or in backless robes conduct *tharb al zangil*, rhythmically scourging their backs until bloodied. Throughout these acts of self-flagellation (*latum*), the faithful wail "Ya! Husayn! Ya! Husayn!" or "Hasan, Husayn, Ali!" to honor the first three wronged imams. One existential explanation for this practice is that ultra-orthodox Shi'ites are willing to punish themselves in repentance for their ancestors who failed to fight at Karbala with Husayn.¹⁴ However, many Shi'ites see this ritual as archaic, an embarrassment to the sect.



An Iraqi Shi'ite Muslim fixes a huge black flag beside colorful ones in Baghdad's Shi'ite neighborhood of Kazemiya, 22 February 2004.

AFP



AFP

Shi'ite pilgrims flail themselves with silver blades outside Imam al-Husayn's shrine in the holy city of Karbala, 28 January 2007.

On the 11th day, the faithful return home for 40 days of mourning. The second major event during the Remembrance of Muharram is Arba'een (40), a religious gathering in Karbala at the end of those 40 days. The religious underpinning of this event, based on Jabir's pilgrimage, is the Shi'ite belief in Husayn's power to intercede in the temporal well-being of pilgrims. Husayn will forgive their lapses, grant supplicants' prayers, protect property and family, and heal.¹⁵ Arba'een has developed into a pan-Shi'a rally that binds the faithful worldwide to Husayn's cause: the maintenance of Islam.

The Political Relevance of Ashura

In *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrine of Twelver Shi'ism*, Moojan Momen writes, "During the 1979 Iranian Revolution, banners proudly proclaimed: 'Everywhere is Karbala and every day is Ashura.'"¹⁶

The Ashura Complex. The moral allegory of the Battle of Karbala has developed into a cultural fixation, the Ashura Complex, that colors all parts of Shi'a political life. Shi'a Islam and its revolutionary movements (e.g., Hezbollah) are tethered by Husayn's failed push for power. The metaphors of Ashura, with their vibrant displays, are used by Shi'a radicals to trigger theocratic zeal. Other cultures are branded as oppressive and otherwise unrighteous,

and the Shi'a faithful, drawn by the pious language of Ashura, can be mobilized for a righteous struggle.

The strategy is simple. Using religious language to identify good and evil—God versus the devil—makes it impossible for national and ethnic identities grounded in faith to choose whatever has been branded anathema. Nationalist movements with religious overtones intensify their struggles, have a better ability to mobilize the disaffected masses, and are more likely to defeat secular movements also vying for power. Their absolutist

assertion of religion over political issues elevates power interests from common politics to a sacred calling; it rallies the faithful to "transcendentalize disputes, elevating them . . . from the mundane to the cosmic level."¹⁷

The Ashura Complex makes Shi'a Islam a convenient state-builder. This was true with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, with Iraqi self-determination in 2004–2005, and in many ways with Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel and the group's recent attempts to topple the current Lebanese government. In Iran, the Ashura Complex powered a theo-nationalist movement. Religious symbolism rallied rural people and the religious urban middle class toward fundamental values and against external threats to those values. In this way, the pursuit of a divinely ordained state, one based on divinely ordered principles, gained immense appeal.

The ability of the Iraqi Shi'a political parties in 2004 and 2005 to mobilize the faithful in multiple electoral events is also emblematic of the Ashura Complex. The world saw Iraq's Shi'ites rally together under the guidance of their clerics despite individual political differences. Much of the Iraqi experience, like the Iranian experience, was a result of public confidence in the authority of Shi'a clerics and a lack of confidence in secular governance. In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini held sway. In Iraq, it was Ayatollah Muhammad

Ali al-Sistani who brought otherwise feuding Shi'a factions together to form the United Iraqi Alliance. Under Sistani's auspices, the politically and culturally oppressed Iraqi Shi'a organized themselves to become the dominant power bloc behind the writing of the new Iraqi constitution and election of a Shi'a dominated parliament. After 1,400 years of Sunni hegemony in the region and literal subjugation of the Shi'a under Sunni rule, Husayn's spiritual heirs had established the first Shi'a led Arab nation in history, and that by popular election.

The Shi'a political worldview. What is the Shi'a political worldview? First, due in large measure to the long history of domination and persecution by their Sunni rivals, the Shi'a had come to believe that theirs was a calling to endure persecution for the sake of their vision of Islamic destiny. At the same time, Shi'ites in general blamed (and still blame) the Sunni for what they regard as a millennium and a half of murdering Shi'a leaders and debasing the sect's distinctive rituals. Moreover, they hold the Sunni responsible for anciently and unapologetically banishing, imprisoning, and murdering 11 of the 12 imams so sacred and essential to the Shi'ite system of worship. This oppression bred passivity into the Shi'ite cultural psyche. For centuries, Shi'ites maintained an apolitical way of life, suffering in silence through political detachment. Safety meant remaining unobtrusive and letting the government operate without Shi'ite criticism. However, history now appears to be revealing that stoic compliance out of political and social necessity did not mean apathy. Rather, events suggest that as a body, the Shi'a were uniquely willing to suffer centuries of oppression with quiet forbearance until they thought the time was right. Now, they have risen collectively to force a change aimed at achieving the distinctive religious and political goals envisioned in Shi'a Islam.

Second, for conservatives, a Shi'a takeover of the state will also work against a Western style open, pluralist system. Husayn rebelled against Yazid to achieve a religiously upright society, not to increase individual freedoms as understood in liberal societies. The priorities of Shi'a politics consequently have little to do with open political participation or free enterprise. Instead, Shi'a politics are concerned with self-determination for the Shi'ite community. This means freedom, under God, from the dominion of man over man—the freedom to establish a society

founded on Islamic private virtue and public morality. Only after these preconditions for the state and society have been achieved can conservatives entertain ideas for economic prosperity. The ideal Shi'a government is not as concerned with state control of the economy as with state enforcement of social morality and securing the interests of an Islamic state.¹⁸

Moreover, under the cover of modern pluralism, the Shi'a faithful will participate in the system as dictated by their clerical handlers. In the case of Iran's or Hezbollah's attempts at state domination, populist movements are orchestrated to place clerics in positions to govern exclusively according to divine will. For example, after a nationalist revolution, Khomeini built his Islamic Republic on an imamate structure. His political theory followed the 19th-century doctrine of the authority of the jurists (*wilayat al-faqih*); that is, in keeping with the tradition of the imams, the best-qualified clerics should head the nation. In Khomeini's scheme, clerics are the ultimate arbiters of both faith and politics. Khomeini essentially replaced the singular autocrat with a singular cleric, destroyed any barrier separating mosque and state, and transformed Iran's religious authority into what has become a theocratic oligarchy.¹⁹ Even today, Iran's elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, must obey Iran's Supreme Leader.

Third, whether as political underdogs or political activists, there are three accepted ways for the Shi'a faithful to relate to governmental authority: political cooperation, political activism, or political aloofness.²⁰

- *Political cooperation.* Cooperating with an established, just authority by accepting positions in the government gives the state legitimacy. By cooperating, Shi'ites prevent anarchy and keep civil order so Muslims can fully implement Sharia, the Islamic law regulating all aspects of public and private life. Those opposed to non-Shi'a or unjust governments cooperate in order to ensure some sort of governmental representation or to avoid needless death.²¹

- *Political activism.* When Shi'ites enter politics to bring the temporal authorities into line with Sharia, it is considered political activism.²² For the politically active Shi'ite, cooperation with an unjust government is unacceptable; otherwise, worldly encroachments into the ummah will become normative. The unjust state must either comply with the wishes of the Shi'ites and be dominated or it will

Khomeini, this era's Husayn, yanked Iran's Shi'ites out of their political inertia into activism.

face continued active opposition. Husayn, the only imam who actively resisted injustice, despotism, and sexual license, demonstrated how to fight when the Shi'a believed the time was right. Just as Husayn refused a bay'ah in order to be an example of righteous struggle against immorality, Shi'ites are called to resistance to protect Islam. There is no negotiating when ideas are made absolute by faith.

While admiring the quietist character of the first two imams, Ali and Hasan, Shi'ites praise Husayn's political activism.²³ Khomeini, this era's Husayn, yanked Iran's Shi'ites out of their political inertia into activism. He was a radical of a strident reactionary stripe, not an innovator. Iranian Communists or socialists could not match Khomeini's grassroots mobilization. His was the perfect theo-nationalist revolution. Khomeini equated Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran and his security forces to Yazid I, the drunken usurper of the Islamic caliphate, and his oppressive Umayyad army. At the same time, Khomeini cast himself as Husayn leading his followers against the apostate enemies of Islam. Using the religious language of the familiar Husayn saga to appeal to the average Iranian Shi'ite, he delineated between the perceived good (Khomeini) and evil (the Iranian Government, the modern Umayyads). Shi'ite clerics Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon are following the same model in order to seize control of their governments and bring their respective states in line with Sharia.

- *Political aloofness.* Shi'ites may opt to remain distant from all political matters—their traditional attitude.²⁴ Hasan showed how to suffer oppression quietly. By maintaining silence on secular matters, many Shi'ites believed they were obeying Sharia. Even the “guardians of public morals,” the Shi'a clerics, broke silence only when they felt a caliph had greatly deviated from the path of Sharia.²⁵

The Need for an Adversary

There is an interesting dichotomy in Shi'ite politics. Opposing opinions of quiet resistance

and active rebellion give Shi'ites extraordinary political versatility within the dominant themes of martyrdom and patient endurance caused by government oppression; however, inherent to this underdog philosophy is a need for an adversary when downtrodden and a scapegoat when the faithful flourish. An external element—an outside malicious force—must exist to serve as the root of Shi'a suffering. An adversary is especially useful for transferring accountability for government failures. To preserve the momentum of political initiative, Shi'a religious radicals must popularize fears of the modern world as corrupt, impious, debauched, and violent—every vilified feature of Umayyad and American cultures. Throughout the centuries, the external foci for Shi'a hostility have been the imperial Sunnis or Christians, secular modernity, conspiratorial Zionists, and lately, the United States—the Great Satan.

Regional Fear of the Shi'a Rising

Several Middle Eastern countries, especially authoritarian, non-democratic states, are wary of the symbolism of Ashura. They see a threat in the Shi'ites' faith and politics. Primarily, Sunni leaders fear for the security of their own regimes. Khomeini preached of expanding the Iranian Revolution into a worldwide revolution. After the once-quiet sect toppled the Shah's government, Sunni states, many as autocratic as the Shah's former regime, saw themselves as vulnerable to the ideological adventurism of the Persians.

In 1989, Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, and Iran's president, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, reiterated Iran's policy objectives of maintaining an Islamist Iran, defending the republic, and expanding the Islamic Revolution.²⁶ After an eight-year interlude of reformist moderation (1997-2005) led by President Mohammad Khatami (but tempered by Khamenei), Iran moved back to its old path under its current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

With the rise of a Shi'a-led government in Iraq, Sunni Arab states are still concerned about the expanding Shi'ite influence emanating from Iraq but under Iranian influence. Given the Iranian model, Sunnis fear that Shi'ites can mobilize their religious apparatus against Sunni regimes. Autocratic states tremble at Ashura-based slogans: The Ruler is wrong; The Ruler has deviated from the

path of Islam. Since faith and politics are inseparable, these Shi'a themes could incite uprisings in restive populations.

Many in power fear that a Shi'a takeover of governments will be all-encompassing. Once Shi'ites are in power, these leaders say, they would not acknowledge secular authority but would consolidate around religious figures, in accordance with the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. This fear is amplified by the Iraq model, where even with democratic institutions in place for the 2004-2005 elections, Shi'ites were the first to mobilize and vote. Their exercise in democracy was led by their religious authority, resulted in the current Shi'a-dominated government, and has led to wrangling over whether or not Iraq should be an Islamic republic with Sharia law as its final word. In fact, Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution states, "Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation . . . No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam."²⁷

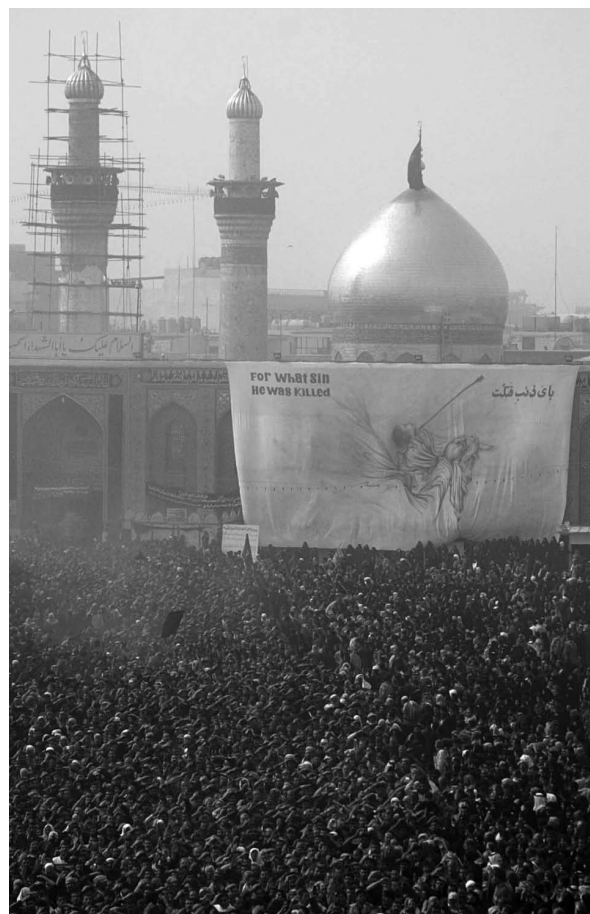
Iraqi Shi'ites were effective at forming a representative government, and Sunnis worry that they will not share in it. Even under the best of circumstances, Sunnis fear that the political and religious authorities of local communities will continually be at odds. Like Husayn struggling against the authority of Yazid, Shi'a reactionaries today *must* have an unending rivalry—they must have scapegoats—to validate their worldview.

Further, there are fears that the prestige and influence of Iran, a non-Arab (Persian) country, could grow, especially as it begins to export its ideas to the Sunni Arab world.²⁸ Some Sunnis believe that Shi'ite Arab Iraqis are deeply linked to Iranian Persian Shi'ites and that Iraqi Shi'ites are prone to betraying the Sunni Arab world. Shi'a Islam is headquartered in Iraq, specifically in the city of An Najaf. Shi'ite scholars from Iraq and Iran study at religious centers in An Najaf and Karbala. Iraqi and Iranian Shi'ites have intermarried. Iranians routinely conduct pilgrimages to Karbala and An Najaf. Most especially, there is growing fear of Iran under Ahmadinejad, who continues to preach exporting the Shi'a revolution throughout the Middle East and beyond.²⁹

Fear of Iran fosters animosity in many Sunni Arabs. In 2006, the Arab League, which had once defended Saddam Hussein's regime because it was their buffer against the westward expansion of

Shi'a Islam, continually waffled on supporting the development of the new Shi'a-Arab-led government of Iraq. This occurred even though Article 3 of the Iraqi Constitution describes the country as a founding member of the Arab League and commits Iraq to the League's charter.³⁰ The League did propose a reconciliation conference for the summer of 2006, but it never took place. Similarly, the group opened a diplomatic mission, but then promptly closed it because of a lack of funding. Ironically, with the squandering of the Arab League's opportunity to help rebuild Iraq, the only neighboring country that offered unlimited support to the new government in Baghdad was Iran.

Finally, some Sunnis, especially the influential extremist Wahhabi sect, consider Shi'ites to be heretics. Wahhabis reject the Shi'a imamate and its rule by a religious-civil leader, and they dismiss all notions of Ali's claim to leadership of the ummah. They also spurn the Ashura rituals as a violation of Islam and



Iraqi Muslim Shi'ite worshippers take part in the Ashura ritual ceremony at Karbala, 9 February 2006.

repudiate as idolatry the notion of Shi'a shrines, Shi'a iconography, and Shi'a veneration of the imams.

From the time of the Sunni-Shi'a schism in the 7th century, Shi'a graves have been desecrated. The Abbasid Caliph destroyed the Imam Husayn shrine in Karbala in 850 A.D. The dome was destroyed again in the 11th century. In 1801, Wahhabis sacked the entire town of Karbala. In 1843, the town was sacked again, this time by the Ottomans, with a later attack occurring on the An Najaf shrine.³¹ More recently, on 22 February 2006, Wahhabis destroyed the Askayri Shrine of the 10th and 11th imams in the Iraqi town of Samarra.

The fear of Shi'a expansion has actually increased since the fall of Hussein's regime because it had been the Sunni firewall against the westward movement of Shi'ism. Sunni fears are hardly assuaged by the ecstatic frenzy televised annually during the Remembrance of Muharram rituals. The once taciturn Shi'a sect, both Arab and Persian, is emboldened, empowered, and expanding.

Recap

As sung by khateeb, the Battle of Karbala on 10 Muharram 680 A.D. is akin to a great Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. Like Agamemnon descending from his chariot or Julius Caesar entering the forum, Husayn was warned of impending danger. Ignoring peril, he resolutely went to his death and in doing so became an iconic figure. How then do we sum up the importance of Husayn and his sacrifice at Karbala? We cannot overstate the influence of the Battle of Karbala on both the 1,400-year-old Islamic schism and modern Shi'a Islam. In our day, the Ashura Complex—the psychological fixation on the Battle of Karbala—continues to fuel Shi'a poetry, rituals, iconography, social customs, folklore, and a versatile political theory. It brings the faithful together every year to express their common identity and, at times, to express their anger at the government in a cathartic frenzy. In one sense, Husayn was an unfortunate adventurer who overestimated his capacity to depose Yazid. On the other hand, he became a martyr fighting impiety in order to shock the ummah back to its moral roots.

Ashura remains in the background of Iraq's complex Shi'a culture. Its association with politics injects nationalism into the lives of average men who idealize notions of heroic martyrdom and

long for a Shi'ite paradise on earth free of human greed and Westernization. From the farmers along the Euphrates to the merchants in Basra to the elite classes in Baghdad, Husayn's sacrifice serves as a Shi'a parable of struggle against oppression, immorality, and external domination. Husayn offered a model of resistance and activism to emulate, so that when the opportunity arrived, as it did for the Iraqi Shi'a in 2005, the ummah would grab the reins of power. Win or lose, they believe their's will have been a just fight on God's behalf.

For the foreseeable future, Shi'ite power interests will have to be a major consideration in any country's Middle East policy. The interweaving of Ashura's motifs with political ideologies has motivated a long-oppressed segment of many Middle Eastern populations, but at the same time it threatens many in the Sunni world, and there is fear that it might even lead to regional turmoil. In Iraq, Shi'ites were the best organized to vote and form a government, but the struggle goes on to turn the world's newest democracy into a modern state. Viewed internally, the current course of Shi'a history continues to be one of struggle and a search for self-representation. **MR**

NOTES

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