

# Imam Hossein's Glory and death

## Image and pilgrimage in Irak

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### Abstract

Arbain's celebration, is a pilgrimage which takes place 40 days after the death of Imam Hossein on the holy places of Iraq and it brings together some 20 million Shi'ite pilgrims every year, including two million Iranians in 2016. Its economic and strategic dimensions have become notable. A number of actors in the Islamic Republic are involved in what has become a vicinity mass tourism which is very different from that to Saudi Arabia, the Haj, or those to western country whose visa is the most difficult and expensive to reach. These actors are coming from different realms: some of them from the public sector, while other come from private or informal economy; some of them are political actors, while others are religious. Arbain pilgrimage develops a practical and economic expertise of travelling. The result is a multitude of connections between the Iranian pilgrims, some of them coming from the diaspora, and the Iraqi society. Moreover, the holy places of Iraq witness the deployment of Iranian national and revolutionary iconography around the central figure of Imam Hossein. L'Arbain is an imaginary figure based on the indiscernibility of the real and the unreal, the meeting point of faith, politics and self-realization.

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Political headlines are used to speak freely these days of "a Shiite arc" when it comes to talk about the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It is referred to as a "Shiite arc" (or Shiite axis, which Tehran would dominate?) to which the minorities of this obedience would be attached in the region, from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain. But to understand the exchanges and alliances that develop at this scale, we would rather privilege the issue of "connected history", borrowed from Sanjay Subrahmanyam, which reveals the concrete, circumstantial, fragmentary and heterogeneous links between societies, rather than that of the manipulation of the Shiites by the Islamic Republic, which sounds just a conspiracy theory!

In particular, the diplomatic and militarized war between Tehran and Ryad, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine must not obscure the economic war that is taking place in the region, notably on the banks of the Euphrates, since the US occupation of 2003, mobilizing religious tourism. Consumer society, to which the Islamic Republic does not derogate, has promoted, for the past two or three decades, mass tourism, under the guise of pilgrimage, and the holy places of Iraq have been the main beneficiaries of this policy since their symbolic significance for the Shiites, and because of the civil war in Syria that makes

the once-frequented Damascus sanctuaries inaccessible, not forgetting the quota of pilgrims in Mecca, and the suspension of the hajj for the Iranians in the context of the diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia in 2016. The issue of "connection" seems all the more relevant because Iran is present in the Gulf, notably in Iraq, as a set of local institutions or networks, such as the powerful *waqf* of the Astan-e Qods or the Front of the Reconstruction of Sacred Cities (*Setad bazsazi-ye Atabat*), various governmental, administrative or municipal authorities, private individuals, merchants or simple volunteers, without underestimating the competition between the major metropolises, the clerical institutions and the military corps of the Islamic Republic, with a view to securing a market of two to four million pilgrims per year.

Moreover, the Moaved, Iraqis of Iranian or Afghan origin who were hunted by Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1970s, had redeployed in the Gulf, notably in Dubai, and in the Levant, and around the holy shia sites of Damascus. The Syrian civil war has jeopardized their implantation, while the reversal of power to the Shiite parties in Iraq has opened up prospects for them to return to their country of origin. They contribute to the development of pilgrimage tourism and seek to recover property, especially land, from which they were robbed when expelled. These economic opportunities and the inevitable legal disputes they entail constitute an important dimension of the regional game.

In this context, the celebration of Imam Hussain's death, the fortieth day of the mourning of Imam Hossein, on the Atabat, the holy places of Iraq - the so-called Arbain - by some twenty million pilgrims, of all nationalities - including more than two million Iranians - is a major phenomenon, beyond the anthropology of one religious event. To the extent that a pilgrimage is an experience that is at once religious, moral, affective, even passionate, but also physical, to put it in a nutshell, an existential experience, it was best to go and see for yourself what it was all about by making part of a flood of pious walkers progressing step by step towards paradise.