

THE IMPACT OF ASHURA RITUALS ON THE
SHIA-SUNNI RELATIONS IN IRAQ

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Introduction

During the annual commemoration of Ashura, Shia Muslims mourn the death of Husayn bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The Shia regard him as one of their twelve infallible Imams (leaders chosen by God to guide Muslims after the death of the Prophet) and a member of the *Ahlulbayt* (the Prophet, the Prophet's daughter and her husband-Ali- and their two sons, Hussen and Husayn). In 680, Husayn rose against Yazidi bin Abi Sufiyan (appointed leader), who was perceived to be an unjust Muslim caliph. As a result, Husayn along with his family and companions were assaulted and killed in Karbala, Iraq by an army of the caliph, generally regarded in today's nomenclature as a Sunni Muslim. This happened on the tenth day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, known as Ashura or ten (*ashra*) in the Arabic language.

The battle of Karbala marked a turning point in Islamic history. It is a controversial event that has divided Muslims owing to the high profile individuals involved, including Husayn on the one side and the caliph on the other. It is also controversial because there is no agreement as to whether this event was simply a battle or a le-

gitimate religious or political uprising. The most divisive issue, however, are the circumstances and the nature of the brutal killing of Husayn along with his male companions (Nakash, 1994). The women, including Husayn's sister Zainab – the granddaughter of the Prophet, survived the battle, but were taken captive (Nakash, 1994). Furthermore, this battle also generated traditions and rituals of mourning among Shia Muslims (Nakash, 1994). Year after year, the Shia review the narrative of Karbala on Ashura to remember Husayn and mourn his death. Influenced by socio-political elements, the annual commemoration of Ashura has extended to almost two months, the first two months of the Islamic calendar, and comprises five major rituals: (1) memorial services, (2) visitation of Husayn's tomb in Karbala, (3) representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play, (4) self-flagellation, and (5) weeping (Nakash, 1994).

In Iraq, where the Shia are the majority and the Sunni constitute a sizable minority, the commemoration, forming the core of Shia identity, had become so powerful that it was restricted by successive Sunni-dominated governments (1921–1968) and ultimately banned (1968–2003) under the rule of the Baath Party, a nationalist and Sunni-dominated political movement (Nasr, 2006, 2013). However, after the fall of the regime in 2003, the commemoration of Ashura has emerged as the most powerful cultural, religious, and political event in Iraq (Nasr, 2014). It is estimated that over 20 million Shia pilgrims – from Iraq and abroad – commemorated Ashura in Iraq in 2016.

The commemoration raises questions such as, *inter alia*, why it is appealing to so many Shia Iraqis, and why the Shia still weep and mourn over the killing of Husayn in Karbala, an event which took place almost 1,400 years ago. Furthermore, the impact of these rituals on Sunni Iraqis calls for exploration in order to understand the

Shia-Sunni dynamics in Iraq. In light of this, the aim of this research study is to explore the nature of the annual Ashura rituals practised by Shia Iraqis and the impact of these rituals on the Shia-Sunni relations in Iraq.

In order to provide a coherent discussion of the impact of Ashura on the Shia-Sunni relations, an overview is presented of the nature of Shia and Sunni Iraqis. Subsequently, a discussion of the annual commemoration of Ashura is presented followed by an examination of the impact of Ashura rituals on the Shia-Sunni relations in Iraq.

The nature of Shia and Sunni Iraqis

In Iraq, the Shia and the Sunni constitute two major *mathhab* (sects, schools of thought) of Islam. The Shia, however, constitute a majority. Although they share some religious and cultural practises, it can be argued that the Shia of Iraq differ from the Sunni in some practices, most notably the commemoration of Ashura and the rituals of visitation of four shrine cities in Iraq – burial places of some Imams (Nakash, 1994). In addition, the Shia recognise the role of *marja'eya* (Shia religious authority) (Nakash, 1994). The major source of these differences is that, in contrast to the Sunnis, the Shia grant the Twelve Imams - descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and thus regarded as part of *Ahlulbayt* – special status and recognise their right of leadership to guide the Islamic *uma* after the death of the Prophet (Nakash, 1994).

The discussion of the nature of Shia and Sunni Iraqis begins with an attempt to define the two terms, the Shia and the Sunni. The discussion will then continue with an exploration of the historical background focusing on the division of Shia and Sunni religious and cultural practices in Iraq followed by an investigation of the two main

unique concepts to Shia Iraqis, namely the shrine cities and the *marja'eya*. Finally, a contextualisation of the differences between Shia and Sunni religious and cultural practices is presented.

Defining the two terms: the Shia and the Sunni

The Arabic word *Shia* means a group or supportive party of people of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. The Shia are also known as followers of *Ahlulbayt* or the "People of the Household" of the Prophet (Halm, 2004). The Arabic word Sunni is derived from a word meaning one who follows the traditions of the Prophet and his companions (Halm, 2004). The division between the Shia and the Sunni emerged right after the death of the Prophet in 632 over the issue of the legitimate successor to lead the Islamic *uma* (Nakash, 1994). The Shia assert that after the death of the Prophet, Ali was denied his right of ruling the Islamic world by the Sunnis (al-Wardi, 1969).

Whilst both groups believe in the fundamental tenants of Islam, the oneness of the same God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the Quran as the holy book, the Shia believe that Imams (Ali and his descendent, 12 in total) were assigned by God to guide the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet. This fundamental belief is known as *Imamah* (the authority of Imams) (al-Wardi, 1969; Halm, 2004). The Shia also believe in the Imams' interpretation of Islam and follow their practises (Halm, 2004; Nakash, 1994). It should be also noted that all Imams were either persecuted and/or killed by Sunni caliphs (al-Wardi, 1969; Halm, 2004; Nakash, 1994). According to Shia beliefs, the last Imam, Muhammad Al-Mahdi, *al-Imam al Qaeb* (the hidden Imam) went into hiding in 874 to avoid the persecution by the Sunni caliph (Nakash, 1994). Al-Mahdi is believed by Shia Muslims to be the ultimate saviour of humankind and the final Imam of the

Twelve Imams who will emerge with Isa (Jesus Christ) in order to fulfil their mission of bringing peace and justice to the world (Halm, 2004).

In sum, the Shia revere their Imams and regard them as infallible. This issue constitutes one of the underlying differences between the Shia and the Sunni. Shia Muslims believe that the Imam is sinless by nature and that his authority is infallible (Halm, 2004, Nakash, 1994). In contrast, Sunni Muslims contend that leadership of the community is not a birth right, but a trust that is earned and may be given or taken away by the people themselves, a concept known as *al-Chilapha* (Halm, 2004). This variance naturally gives rise to some differences on cultural and religious matters. In order to understand such differences, it is important to reflect on some of the relevant historical events, in particular, the formation of and the attack on Shi'ism in Iraq.

I. *The formation of Shi'ism in Kufa, Iraq*

Iraq is unique in the sense that Shi'ism started there. Shi'ism as a school of thought was formed in Iraq during the rule of the fourth right-guided caliph, the first Shia Imam, Ali bin Abi Talib (656–661). Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was regarded as one of the most influential individuals in Islam for his knowledge and wisdom (al-Wardi, 1969; Halm, 2004, Nakash, 1994). His teachings and interpretation of Islam known as Shi'ism has great influence on Iraqis (al-Wardi, 1969). He administered the Islamic *uma* whilst living in Kufa, Iraq, until his assassination in 661 (al-Wardi, 1995). He was buried in a place called Najaf, about ten kilometres away from Kufa. Consequently, Najaf emerged as a sacred place and has become one of the holiest cities for the Shia. Najaf as a sacred place has also contributed to the creation of one of fundamental religious and cultural differences be-

tween Shia and Sunni Iraqis, namely a tendency developed by the former to practise the traditions and rituals of visitation of Ali's grave. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the Sunnis, Shia Iraqis preferred to be buried in Najaf in a burial place called Wadi Al-Salaam, the largest cemetery in the world (al-Wardi, 1969). This cultural practice of the Shia is based on their belief that Ali has the power to intercede for the deceased who are buried in Najaf on judgment day (al-Wardi, 1969).

II. *The attack on Shi'ism: the Battle of Karbala, Iraq*

The killing of Husayn – son of Ali – in 680 in Iraq has significantly influenced Iraqis. Husayn, based in Median located in modern-day Saudi Arabia, decided to travel to Iraq to support the people of Kufa in their struggle against the Caliph, Yazid (Nakash, 1994). They perceived Yazid as an unjust, and thus paid allegiance to Husayn and asked for his support to rid them of this unjust ruler. However, when Husayn together with his family and companions arrived at a place known as the plain of Karbala, they were all intercepted and besieged by an overwhelming Muslim army led by Yazid, on the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, *Muharram*, in 680. On the tenth day, Husayn was killed. It is worthwhile to note at this point of the discussion that the people of Kufa, who asked for Husayn's support, did not fight with him in Karbala despite his many attempts to call upon them for support; they rather refrained from engaging fearing for their lives (Nakash, 1994). This has been one of the contentious issues between the Shia and the Sunni; whilst the Shia accused the Sunni caliph of killing Husayn, some Sunni argued that the Shia of Iraq had been responsible because they let Husayn down by failing to fight by his side (al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994). Nevertheless, the people of Kufa regretted not defending Husayn and his family (al-Wardi, 1969).

III. *The genesis of Ashura rituals in Iraq*

A group of people, known as *tawwabun*, most of whom were from Kufa - who said to have been deeply regretful for being unable to offer support to Husayn at the Battle of Karbala – gathered at the site of Husayn’s grave and together they mourned his death and the fact that they had not been there to die alongside him (al-Wardi, 1969, Nakash, 1994). The *tawwabun* also composed and recited poetry that praised Husayn, and all the while agreed to reunite in the future to avenge his death against the Umayyad forces headed by Yazid, which they eventually did years later (Nakash, 1994). Within the context of mourning, other Muslims also mourned the death of Husayn. After all, Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet.

The accounts of the *tawwabun* meeting on the annual anniversary of Husayn’s death in Karbala mark the earliest evidence of annual commemoration in Iraq (Nakash, 1994). The *ziyarah* (ritual grave visitation) later became a highly ritualized aspect of the Ashura commemoration ceremonies initiated by the *tawwabun*. These ceremonies are also the first evidence of the beginning of the *niyahah*, or poetic lamentation rituals (Nakash, 1994).

Given the significance of Husayn’s grave, the plain of Karbala emerged as sacred and the associated city has become one of the holiest cities for the Shia (al-Wardi, 1969). It continues to serve as the Shia gathering place to visit Husayn’s shrine and that of his brother Abbas, who died with him, in order to mourn their deaths. Similarly as Najaf, Karbala has become a centre for Shia studies and knowledge. It is also not surprising that the entire population of both cities is predominately Shia. The following sections present a discussion of two unique and crucial concepts to the Shia of Iraq, namely the shrine cities and the Shia *marja’eya*, as concepts that have managed to maintain a strong Shia identity in Iraq.

IV. *Shrine cities*

In addition to Najaf and Karbala, the other two shrine cities in Iraq are Kadimiea and Samarra. Kadimiea is a burial place of the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kadhim (745–799) and the ninth Imam, Muhammad Al-Jawad (811–835), who were both killed by caliphs who adhered to the Sunni school of thought. Samarra is a burial place for the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari (846–873), who was also killed by a Sunni caliph and it is also the place where his son, Muhammad Al-Mahdi, the hidden Imam, is believed to have disappeared to avoid persecution by the Sunni caliph (Halm, 2004).

Based on the historical events associated with the four shrine cities, Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, and Kadimiea hold a special prominence for the Shia, and thus the Iraqi Shia feel responsible for protecting these cities (al-Haidari, 1999; Nakash, 1994). Accordingly, an attack on a shrine city is interpreted as an insult to the core principles of Shi'ism and evokes memories of the killing of Husayn. Within this context, it is notable that one of the main triggers of the Iraqi Shia-Sunni civil war in 2006 was an attack by a Sunni extremist group affiliated with al-Qaeda on the shrine of the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari, in Samarra. Shia militias retaliated with excessive force and to this day the Sunnis are held liable for this act, either directly or indirectly (Nasr, 2013).

In contrast, there are no Iraqi cities and/or provinces that the Sunnis feel attached to in the way that Shia feel attached to the four shrine cities. While it is true that the overwhelming majority of the population of al-Anbar province, encompassing much of the country's western territory, adhere to the Sunni school of thought and is thus known as the Sunni province, the Sunni Iraqis do not grant this province any special status. In addition, although the province is considered Sunni, unlike the

four predominantly Shia holy cities, the province does not serve as a centre of Sunni religious authority, and there are no institutions that can counter the influence of the Shia religious authority *marja'eya* based in the shrine cities.

Shia «marja'eya» (Shia religious authority)

The concept of *marja'eya* is unique to Shi'ism. The *marje'a*, who represents the *marja'eya*, also known as mujtahid, is a highly regarded Shia intellectual who commanded the allegiance of different sections of the Shia community. In Shi'ism, the non-mujtahids (*ammi*) – common people – are obliged to follow, or imitate (*taqlid*), a mujtahid to whom they would look for guidance on religious life, ritual duties and (increasingly) political activity. The mujtahids, in theory, act as intermediaries – with no priestly status or sacred function though – between believers and the last Imam, al-Mahdi, in his absence (Nakash, 1994). Furthermore, the *marja'eya* is a great advocate of Ashura rituals and maintaining these rituals is regarded as one of his key roles (Nakash, 1994).

In terms of his scope of authority, the *marja'eya* exerts power over all Shia political parties, Shia clergies, and Shia lay people. The salience power of *marja'eya* over common Shia Iraqis is demonstrated when Daesh (ISIS) threatened to capture Baghdad and the shrine cities in 2014, in which Iraq lost a third of its territory to this group. As a result, the *marja'eya* represented by Grand Ayatollah (the highest title granted to a Shia religious leader and intellectual) Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa (religious decree) to defend the country, its people, and its shrine cities. The call immediately mobilized tens of thousands of Shia volunteers to form what has become known as *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* (The People's Mobilization). *Al-Hashd al-Shaabi* has become one of the major forces, albeit sectarian, in the fight against Daesh. The Sunni

lack this central religious authority that can mobilise and unite them.

*The contextualisation of Shia and Sunni
religious and cultural practices*

As set out above, a major source of differences between Shia and Sunni religious and cultural practices is the Shia adherence to the practices and narrations of the Twelve Imams. In particular, the Shia interpret Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet traditions through the teaching of the Imams. In addition, in sharp contrast to the Sunnis, Iraqi Shias tend to practise the traditions and rituals of visitation of the burial places of the Imams in the shrine cities on many occasions, including the birth and death anniversaries of these Imams, most frequently during Ashura. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for Iraqi Shias to swear by their Imams, ask for forgiveness, blessing, interceding on their behalf, or to seek guidance and advice (al-Wardi, 1969; al-Haidari, 1999). Generally, Iraqi Sunnis perceive these practices as heresy because in the Sunni school of thought, there must be no intermediary between Allah (God) and worshipers (Nasr, 2006, 2013). Perhaps the most divisive issue for the Sunni is the way Shia Iraqis commemorate Ashura, which involves self-flagellation rituals (Nasr, 2006, 2013).

Furthermore, the Sunni do not only perceive some of Ashura rituals as heresy but as anti-nationalist. In order to explore this issue, a contextualisation of Shia and Sunni Iraqis is required. Whilst the Sunni school of thought is dominant within the Islamic world, it is generally accepted that the Shia represent approximately 15% of the Muslim population (Bahgat, 2005; Makiya, 2006). However, in Iraq, the reverse is true; the Shia are the majority and the Sunni constitute the minority. Drawing back on the majority-minority concept, especially in terms of

religious practices and beliefs, it can be argued that the Sunni minority in Iraq has more in common with the broader Arab Muslim community than the Shia Iraqis. With the exception of Bahrain, a relatively small monarchy that is located in the Arab Gulf region, where the Shia Arabs constitute a majority, the majority of Muslim population in the Arab world (a total of 22 countries), including Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, adhere to the Sunni interpretation of Islam (Nasr, 2006).

However, Iraq and its neighbouring Iran (Persian, non-Arab nation) fall into the same category of Muslim nations as the Shia majority. Thus, traditionally, the Shia of Iraq and Iran have cordial relations between each other. They also share similar religious and cultural practices. One of the major events that draws the Iranian Shia to the Iraqi Shia is the annual commemoration of Ashura. In fact, the Shia of Iran have a propensity, if not a religious duty, for visiting Karbala and Najaf during the commemoration. The fact that the Shia majority of Iraq share similar religious practices as the Shia majority of Iran bears the implication of disloyalty by the Iraqi Sunnis, in part because the relationship between the Sunni Arabs and the Shia Persians has been characterised as hostile. The source of this tense relationship is related to the contemporary power struggle in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in addition to a long history of rivalry between Arabs and Persians dating back to the conquest of the Persian Empire by Arab Muslims in 651 (al-Haidari, 2015). Consequently, the Sunni Iraqis do not perceive the commemoration of Ashura as a practice that promotes Arab or Iraqi nationalism. In fact, for the reasons discussed above, it is seen as a threat.

Despite these differences, however, the boundaries between the two sects are blurred. This is particularly true in mixed-cities including Baghdad where the Shia and the Sunni -the two main dominant groups – interact, social-

ise, intermarriage, live in the same neighbourhood, work together, and attend the same educational institutions (Nasr, 2013). Furthermore, there are no official documents to prove or identify the sectarian status of an Iraqi Muslim. The family name, and in some cases the first name, and/or the place of residence rather serve as an indicator of an individual sectarian identity. In addition to these two indicators, the commemoration of Ashura serves as an identity marker for the Shia.

The commemoration of Ashura in Iraq

As part of the Shia practices and beliefs, millions of Shias commemorate Ashura every year in Iraq. However, this was not the case during the rule of Saddam Hussein (1979–2003). Whilst the Ashura traditions and rituals were banned during his rule, it has emerged as the most powerful cultural, religious, and political event in Iraq since the toppling [of his statue] in 2003. During the annual commemoration, the country almost comes to a halt and massive security measures are put in place to protect Shia participants from attacks from Sunni groups and/or Daesh. The streets of Shia neighbourhoods are adorned with black (representing mourning), red (symbolising revenge), and green (symbolising Shi'ism) coloured- flags and banners reflecting the Shia views of the Battle of Karbala (al-Haidari, 1998). In addition, marching pilgrims from different cities process to the holy city of Karbala, where Husayn is buried (al-Haidari, 1998). The Shia mourners of both genders are dressed in black and engage in self-flagellation. They congregate in gender-segregated areas for sorrowful, poetic recitations performed in memory of the death of Husayn (al-Haidari, 1998). Overall, by commemorating Ashura, the Shia strongly believe that Husayn will intercede on their behalf to fulfil their material needs (cure them from illness, for example) in

this life and to save them from punishment in the hereafter (al-Wardi, 1969).

As part of mourning traditions and rituals, the commemoration of Ashura re-invokes conversations and images of the Battle of Karbala that took place in 680; on many occasions in excruciating detail (al-Haidari, 1998). The overall narrative adopted in these commemorations, which has been developed over a period of twelve centuries, depicts two sides: the *Ahlulbayt* and the 'Others', who denied the *Ahlulbayt* their right of leadership and who killed, cursed, abused and oppressed them (al-Haidari, 1998). In the same narrative, whilst the *Ahlulbayt* are glorified, the 'Others' are denounced, cursed and insulted (al-Haidari, 1998).

It has been argued that due to an inherent feature of religious traditions and rituals, i.e. the uniting of participants, the Ashura rituals also draw the Shia Muslims together and highlight the Shia identity (al-Haidari, 1998). This is because, in addition to mourning the killing of Husayn, the accompanying narrative adopted in the commemoration, though not necessarily historically accurate, has a great impact on evoking emotions of the Shia gathered to commemorate the perceived unjust killing of Imam Husayn (al-Jebori, 2016). Furthermore, the Shia also socialise, discuss politics and other challenges they experience during these commemorations, thus creating a sense of Shia solidarity and underscoring a sense of separateness from the Sunni (al-Haidari, 1998). Moreover, the financial benefit of the annual commemoration of Ashura cannot be underestimated for the shrine cities and the Shia religious authority (Nakash, 1994). It is for all of these reasons that the commemoration of Ashura tends to highlight the Shia identity. However, for exactly the same reasons, the commemoration has been viewed with caution by non-Shia (al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994).

Furthermore, as a result of all the instability and mayhem created by terrorist activities and due to lack of secu-

rity and protection that the Iraqi society has been experiencing since 2003, the physical division of communities along sectarian lines has become a major theme in Iraqi cities where the Shia and the Sunni used to live together (Nasr, 2013). The neighbourhood is recognised as Shia if symbolism related to the narrative of Karbala (glorifying *Ahlulbayt* and denouncing their enemies) are displayed on the main roads, houses, local shops, commercial and residential buildings, in addition to images of Imam Ali, Imam Husayn, and his brother, Abass. The difference between Shia and Sunni neighbourhoods becomes starker during the commemoration of Ashura, in which the Shia hold memorial services, practice the rituals of outdoor (public) cooking of traditional food, in addition to other religious and cultural activities to commemorate the killing of Husayn and his family.

Overall, for almost two months, but especially on the day of Ashura, the Shia relive the atmosphere of the Battle of Karbala. In fact, this particular day is very important – and as evidence of the power of the Shia majority – it has become a national holiday in Iraq (al-Haidari, 2015). Narratives of the injustice that Shia Imams experienced by Sunni caliphs a thousand years ago are revisited during the commemoration. This sense of mourning is also accompanied by a widely accepted cultural practices consistent with the sorrowful state of the Shia, such as the impermissibility of getting married, making big purchases or buying a house during the two-month period (Al-Haidari, 1998). Moreover, the entire country runs the risk of being affected by the commemoration due to road blockages set up in order to allow the processions to take place and the ancillary impact of the extra security measures such as checkpoints to protect the Shia mourners.

In summary, the commemoration of Ashura tends to dwell on unpleasant history that goes back to the roots of the initial split of the Muslim world into the two main

sects in that it annually evokes memories of the killing of Husayn by the Sunni caliph. In addition to dwelling on this violent and unpleasant history, some of the rituals practised during this commemoration are perceived as haram (non-Islamic and thus forbidden) by the Sunnis as they expose mourners to physical harm (Al-Haidari, 1998). In this way, the commemoration further exacerbates tensions not only because of what is being commemorated, but also because of the way the commemoration is conducted. Furthermore, on some occasions, the narrative adopted in the commemoration of Ashura alludes to cursing some of the well-regarded historical Sunni figures (al-Wardi, 1969, Nakash, 1994). For all of these reasons, the annual re-invoking of such a narrative could cause tension between Shia and Sunni Iraqis.

I. Ashura rituals and the Shia-Sunni dynamics

Many commentators have perceived the relationship between the Shia and the Sunni as ‘normal’ during the authoritarian rule of Saddam Hussein (Marechal and Zemni, 2013; Nasr, 2014; Shuber, 2017). Given the authoritarian nature of his regime, the annual commemoration of Ashura was banned. This changed after the US invasion in 2003 and since then the commemoration has emerged as a powerful event at the same time as the Shia-Sunni relationship has deteriorated (Nasr, 2013). Based on this, the discussion of the impact of Ashura rituals on the Shia-Sunni relations will be presented chronologically, marking the year 2003 as a tipping point in the Shia-Sunni relations.

II. Ashura rituals and the Shia-Sunni dynamics: prior to 2003

The traditional nature of the Iraqi society compounded by the increasing religiosity have provided a futile ground

for the commemoration of Ashura to thrive. The Iraqi society is conservative (traditional) and fatalistic; religious and cultural views, beliefs, and rituals, including the annual commemoration of Ashura, constitute an integral part of its culture (al-Wardi, 1969; Shuber, 2017). As such, approach adopted by the Sunni dominated governments of restricting and/or banning the Ashura rituals was ineffective. In fact, on the contrary, the policy of restricting and banning these rituals has strengthened them, which became evident after the collapse of the Baath Party. Another relevant cultural aspect of the Iraqi society that counts as a crucial contributor to the continuity of the mourning rituals of Ashura is related to pessimism and sadness. Al-Wardi (1969) argues that these two aspects are embedded within the Iraqi culture, taking into account the long-term consequences of such tragedies as wars, invasions, sectarianism, and pandemics, that the Iraqi society has experienced since the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphs in 1258. Al-Wardi further notes that glimpses of sadness are even evident in Iraqi songs. Thus, Ashura rituals cannot be regarded as something that is imposed and/or imported from other cultures, these rituals rather form an intrinsic part of the Shia culture and a vital part of the Iraqi society.

In addition to being a traditional society, within the Iraqi society there has been an increasing tendency to embrace religious views. In a more homogeneous society, the increase in religiosity does not necessarily lead to sectarianism, however in Iraq, the opposite is true. Due to the existence of Shia and Sunni communities, increased religiosity may very well correlate with religious practice increases (Shia and Sunni). In light of the fact that some of these practices are incompatible with the mainstream Sunni thought, such as the commemoration of Ashura, it would seem likely that tensions between the two groups could increase. After all, the Shia and the Sunni inter-

pret Islam differently (al-Wardi, 1969). Al-Wardi emphasises this argument by pointing out that when religiosity decreased in Iraq in the 1950s–60s, the Ashura rituals became less intense and were broadly perceived by the Shia themselves as backward practice. It has also been argued that western style education introduced in Iraq in 1920s by the British and the creation of political parties to represent people's view and aspirations contributed to the decline of religiosity (al-Wardi, 2013).

However, a number of socio-political elements have revitalised the mourning ritualised practices by reversing the decline of religiosity. These are in particular: (1) the revival of Islamic teachings following the rise of the Shia in Iran in 1979, (2) the emergence of religion as an alternative ideological system, and (3) the embracing of religion as a coping mechanism for dealing with tragedies. The Islamic revolution in Iran of 1979 succeeded in reviving the Islamic teachings – the Shia interpretation of Islam – not only in Iran, but also at the regional level. Most importantly, Ruhollah Khomeini (1930–1998), the leader of the Islamic revolution, placed heavy emphasis on the use of the commemoration of Ashura as a powerful means to unite the Shia and defeat their enemies (Al-Haidari, 2015). He also cautioned against the perception that the commemoration was a backward tradition and successfully managed to revive the Ashura traditions and rituals. To counter the Iranian Shia influence, Saudi Arabia promoted Wahhabism, perceived by most as an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam and as the only true interpretation of Islam (Nasr, 2014). The competition between these two interpretations has not only resulted in the reviving of Islamic teachings, whether it be a Shia or Wahhabi, but also contributed to the rise of sectarianism in the region (Nasr, 2013). As for the second element, embracing religion as an alternative ideological system, the failure of Arab nationalist political parties

and movement, including the Baath Party, to fulfil their objective of uniting the Arab nations (countries) and liberating Palestine were a major disappointment for Arabs (Shuber, 2017). Thus, Arab Muslims, including the Iraqis, embraced Islam as an alternative ideological system. Furthermore, in light of the absence of any 'real' opposition, given the authoritative nature of the Baath Party, religion has emerged as an alternative ideological scheme (Shuber, 2017).

A series of tragic events, including the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1991), the sanctions imposed on Iraq between 1990 and 2003 due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1991), the US invasion (2003), and the significant spike in terrorist activities after 2003 have encouraged many Iraqis to (re)turn to their faith, traditions and rituals as a coping strategy. In consequence, the Iraqis have been relying on religious leaders and/or their tribes to help them cope and understand these tragic events and/or mitigate social issues in the absence of reliable judiciary, civil or social institutions. However, these actions seem to be further reinforcing the traditional nature of the Iraqi society, which is conducive to practicing Ashura traditions and rituals. Unfortunately, such reliance on a tribe and religion has highlighted the differences between the Shia and the Sunni. In contrast to the Sunni, the Shia turn to their Imams and their representatives, especially Husayn, for guidance and protection. After all, what is better than the narrative of Karbala and the story of Husayn as an inspiration in terms of the struggle he and his family endured in Karbala. Perhaps, most importantly, the increase of religiosity among common people has facilitated the emergence of the Islamist – Shia and Sunni – political parties (Shuber, 2017). Broadly speaking, the main difference between the two is that Sunni political parties lack a specific historical event as powerful as the narrative of Karbala to use in the way it has been

used as a rallying cause and an aspiration for the Shia. The significant downside to this development is that the narrative of Karbala has entered politics and thus has been used for political gains by Shia politicians (Shuber, 2017). The following section delineates the reality of the Iraqi society, affected by the US invasion, in which the Ashura rituals have emerged as a powerful event.

III. Ashura rituals and the Shia-Sunni dynamics: post 2003

In April 2003, scenes of jubilation erupted in Baghdad with the news of the US military forces toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein. In central Baghdad, jubilant Iraqis and American marines collaborated in toppling a huge statue of Saddam Hussein (Nasr, 2013). In Karbala, for the first time in about forty years, around two million Shia Iraqis gathered to commemorate Ashura (Nasr, 2013). For the Shia, they were finally free to be Shias, free to challenge the Sunni power and the Sunni conception of what it means to be a Shia (Nasr, 2013). As such, the Ashura rituals symbolise a new beginning for the free Shia and the end of the Sunni dominance. The broader Sunni reaction to the Ashura rituals has been that “these actions are not right... Shia do not know the proper practices of Islam” (Nasr, 2013, p. 19). Indeed, it did not take long for the Sunni Iraqis to react to the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. In the same month, April of 2003, whilst the scenes of celebration were still evident in Baghdad, a protest erupted against the US presence in Fallujah, the city with an overwhelming majority of Sunni residents (Nasr, 2013). Thus, at first glimpse, the Shia perceived the US invasion as liberation, whilst the Sunni perceived it as occupation. As a consequence, the Sunni started to revolt, however, most of the attacks by Sunni insurgency were directed at the US military forces and the Iraqis who collaborated with them.

IV. Ashura rituals, sectarianism and terrorism

It is true that the Sunnis first directed their anger at the US forces, it did not take long for the Sunni insurgency and the Sunni affiliated groups, however, to widen their scope of attacks and to target the Shia as well. On 2 March 2004, reports indicated that a series of planned terrorist attacks killed many Shia Iraqis who were commemorating Ashura, marking it as one of the deadliest attacks on the Shia (Hoffman, 2006). As such, within one year of the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime, the Shia were under attack again. However, this time was different as the Shia were no longer controlled by the Sunni regime. Not surprisingly, more Shia participated in the commemoration of Ashura in the following years. Consequently, it can be argued that the commemoration of Ashura has come to represent more than a mourning period, it has become a battle of self-determination for the Shia (Nasr, 2006). It can be further argued that, whilst earlier it was perceived as improper religious practices, the commemoration started to reflect a sectarian split.

Since 2005, terrorist and criminal activities have had as their targets almost all societal aspects, including worship places, power generation and water supply facilities, schools, ministries, government recruitment agencies, check points, local shops, markets, restaurants, and funerals. The continuity, magnitude, and nature of these attacks have psychologically affected the Iraqi people. Terrorist attacks have widespread mental health effects, symptoms, often accompanied by functional impairment (Whalley and Brewin, 2007). However, terrorist violence – and the threat of such violence – can work to bind communities together with a sense of common purpose and common outrage (Whalley and Brewin, 2007). Not only do terrorist attacks give a perception that there is a shared enemy out there, such attacks also bolster an in-

dividual's ties to their local community, deepening their sense of belonging and their identification with others living in the area. This is a powerful social effect, which could very well contribute to the further polarisation of Shia and Sunni communities.

A suicide attack carried out by Sunni affiliated groups, including al-Qaeda and/or Daesh, that is targeted and/or threatens to target the shrine cities, Shia neighbourhoods, or the Shia participants of Ashura commemoration can draw the Shia community together, galvanise it against a common threat – the Sunni, and increase their sense of identity. This heightened sense of identity would ultimately be reflected in their religious practices and deepen the chasm between the two sects. In 2006, the terrorist attack on the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the shrine cities, did not only serve as a rallying cause for the Shia, it also triggered a mass Shia retaliation (Nasr, 2013). Most importantly, this escalated threat against the Shia was manifested in the Ashura rituals. The terrorist attack signified that not only the Shia themselves, but their Imams as well are under attack, an act that evoked the memory of the Battle of Karbala and the attack and the killing of Husayn. Thus, more Shia participated in the commemoration of Ashura to challenge and defy the Sunni insurgency with the support of the Shia-dominated government.

Similarly, the terrorist activities that have targeted the Sunnis – especially the Sunni figures associated with the Baath regime and/or those which played a major role in terms of fighting the Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq war – have increased the sense of identity among the Sunni Iraqis and galvanised them against the common perceived threat, the Shia (Nasr, 2013). Their sense of identity has further increased due to a growing influence of the Shia militias, particularly during the rule of Prime Minister Nori Al-Maliki (2006–2014). Between 2008 and

2010, these Shia militias successfully managed to quell most of Sunni dissent (insurgency) (Nasr, 2013). “Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala” an adage attributed to a Shia Imam, has become a common Shia slogan. Thus, the narrative of Karbala – ‘Us’ (the Shia) versus ‘Them’ (the enemy of the Shia) has become an everyday reality and is no longer limited to the two-month annual commemoration period (Shuber, 2017). At the same time, the government used the narrative of Karbala for its own sectarian agenda. It has financially supported the commemoration and many government officials publicly participated in the Ashura rituals, which has added another layer of complexity to the already strained Shia-Sunni relations.

V. *Ashura rituals, Daesh and «al-Hashd al-Shaabi»*
(*The People’s Mobilization*)

As regards the latest terrorist threats from Daesh, the Shia and the Sunni have responded differently. Whilst acknowledging that all Iraqi provinces were or have been under the threat of Daesh, particularly between 2014 and 2016, the group was only able to capture Sunni provinces, including al-Anbar and some cities within these provinces, such as Mosel (Brown, 2015). The capture of these Sunni cities and provinces by Daesh could be attributed to a combination of two major elements: lack of sufficient Iraqi security forces and the willingness of some Sunni locals to accommodate (tolerate) Daesh groups (Shuber, 2017).

To account for Daesh inability to capture the Shia shrine cities and the Shia dominated cities and provinces it has been suggested, however, that *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* and the Iran-backed militias have succeeded in protecting these cities and provinces (Abdel-Razek and Puttick, 2016). The lack of Daesh success might also reflect will-

ingness of the Shia Iraqis to accommodate the Iranian influences. It may also reflect the fact that for the Shia the four holy cities hold a special place within their religious beliefs, which explains why they may more passionately defend these territories. The narrative of Karbala has been embraced once again, this time by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*: banners calling for revenge for *Ahlulbayt* were carried, and name of military operations to liberate the Sunni cities and provinces have had a sectarian overtone (Abdel-Razek and Puttick, 2016). Tellingly, one of the military operations led by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* units in 2016 was dubbed “Operation Ashura” (Alaraby Newas, 2016). The heavily sectarian representation adopted by the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* units implies that they have been fighting the enemies of Husayn, linking the Shia enemy of today to those who killed Husayn in 680 (Shuber, 2017). Moreover, despite the threat imposed by Daesh, increasing numbers of Shia participated in the annual commemoration of Ashura in 2016, thus vowing that they would not be intimidated by terrorism.

Overall, it is true that the Shia competition for power, in which the commemoration of Ashura has played a crucial role, has contributed to sectarianism. With that said, it has been argued that the failure of US policies to rebuild Iraq after the invasion has also contributed to the increasing tension between the Shia and the Sunni (Nasr, 2013). In the view of many Iraqis, the chaos started with dismantling the Iraqi army. Immediately after the invasion, the Bush Administration issued an order to abolish the Iraqi military, mainly led by Sunni generals, which alienated these generals and left them unemployed (Nasr, 2013). As a result, many Sunnis joined the insurgency. Thus, arguably, the army’s abrupt dismantlement contributed to the civil unrest and terrorist activities.

In addition to devastating consequences of the US mismanagement of the rebuilding of Iraq, the Shia-dom-

inated governments have also contributed to sectarianism. The Shia-dominated governments have not only failed to protect the Iraqis against terrorism, but have also become a root cause thereof by adopting narratives that promote sectarianism rather than nationalism, such as the narrative of Karbala. In addition to its sectarian nature, the Shia-dominated governments that assumed power after the US invasion have been characterised as corrupt and unable to provide the Iraqis with basic services (Nasr, 2013).

Conclusion

Traditionally, the Ashura rituals represent a mourning period for the Shia as they commemorate the death of their Imam, Husayn, who was killed in Karbala, Iraq, in 680, by an army of the caliph, generally regarded as a Sunni Muslim. These rituals tend to draw Shia Muslims together and highlight their 'Shia' identity. In addition, the accompanying narrative adopted in the commemoration of – 'Us' (the Shia) versus 'Them' (the enemy of the Shia), has a great impact on evoking emotions among the Shia gathered to commemorate the perceived unjust killing of Husayn. For these reasons, the annual commemoration of Ashura was banned during the authoritative rule of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni secular (1979–2003). In addition, arguably, during his rule, the Shia-Sunni dynamics were contained.

However, since the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, whilst the Shia have been able to resume their traditions of commemorating Ashura, they have become a target of the Sunni affiliated groups, an action that they perceived as a threat to their identity and that prompted them to challenge the threat – perhaps perversely – by increasing their participation in the Ashura rituals. In addition, the year 2003 has marked a

truing point in the Shia-Sunni relations because of the ascendancy of the Shia power. This change contributed to increasing tensions between the two sects. In the midst of this chaos, the Ashura rituals have come to represent more than mere mourning rituals. Whilst in 2003 they symbolised the new-found freedom for the Shia of Iraq, over time they have become more indicative of a sectarian split, where the Shia have felt threatened by the Sunni insurgency.

In particular, instigated by the 2006 attack on Samarra, one of the shrine cities, , the Shia-Sunni tensions escalated to a civil war. As a way of countering the Sunni insurgency, the narrative of Karbala has been embraced by the Shia-dominated governments in order to mobilise the Shia. In light of this, the episode of Karbala became an everyday reality and was no longer limited to the annual two-month commemoration period, which has further complicated the Shia-Sunni dynamics.

Since 2014, Daesh has been adding more complexity to the already strained relationships between the Shia and Sunni Iraqis, due to the fact that this group has come to represent an existential threat to the Shia in Iraq. In an effort to counter this threat, the *marja'eya* exerted their influence by calling upon the Shia to protect Iraq. The call immediately mobilized tens of thousands of Shia volunteers to form what has become known as *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*. In their fight against Daesh in order to liberate the occupied Sunni cities and provinces, *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* used heavily sectarian representation of the narrative of Karbala, implying that the enemy of the Shia today are descendants of those who killed Husayn in 680. Overall, the manipulation of the narrative of Karbala by the Shia-dominated government and the Shia militias proves its efficacy in mobilising the Shia masses, although it has further alienated the Sunni by linking them to the murderers of Husayn. This is arguably a dan-

gerous approach that could prompt more attacks on the Shia masses - which generally perceive the commemoration as part of their own culture mainly concerning the intercession of Imam Husayn - and thus could further complicate the Shia-Sunni dynamics. For these reasons, the commemoration of Ashura could be considered as an influential factor for the Shia-Sunni dynamics.

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