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It was the Best of Times, it was the Worst of Times: Iraq's Shiites

Paul V.M. Flesher

This past week, American audiences were treated to seemingly contradictory images of Iraq's Shiites. On the one hand, hundreds of thousands of Shiites took part in an annual pilgrimage to Karbala that had been banned by Saddam Hussein's government for decades. Even though this is a sad holiday, commemorating the death by betrayal in 680 of the Shiite leader Husain, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, the mood was surprisingly joyous. Many pilgrims expressed their happiness and relief at being able to undertake the journey and to worship openly for the first time in many years.

On the other hand, there were few expressions of gratitude to the nation that made this pilgrimage possible, the United States. There were several anti-American demonstrations by people exercising their new freedoms of political expression. Signs denounced the American military, its occupation, and even the notion of a transitional government. This attitude has taken most American citizens by surprise. Why are there no expressions of gratitude to the people who made the pilgrimage possible? The answer is complex, but some reasons stand out.

The key problems arise from United States involvement in the Middle East. First, the U.S. has been unremittingly antagonistic against Iran since the fall of the Shah (whom our government supported) and the rise of the Shiite Islamic government there. Recently, the Bush administration even labeled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil." This antagonism has affected Iraqi Shiites as well. To the extent that there has been any outside leadership and help to Iraqi Shiites under Saddam, it has come from Iran. Therefore American opposition to Iran has been seen as interfering with Iranian attempts to help Iraqi Shiites. During the 1980 Iran-Iraq War, the United States even supplied weapons to Saddam, many of which were used against the Shiites of his own country.

Second, the first President Bush encouraged Iraqi Shiites to revolt against Saddam Hussein at the time of the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, indicating the United States would support them. The Shiites followed Bush's

advice and rose up against Saddam, only to be mercilessly put down and slaughtered when Bush decided not to get involved.

Third, the United States has allied itself with the state of Israel since its birth half a century ago, and with its occupation of the Palestinians since 1967. In the recent years of Israel's Sharon government, with its harsh treatment of the Palestinians, its incursions into the West Bank, and its refusal to hold significant peace talks, the occupation has taken on a brutal face in the Arab world. And it sees the United States as Israel's main ally and supporter.

Fourth, in Arab eyes, the United States has become a colonial power. Not because we have occupied territory in the Middle East, but because we allied ourselves closely with those who did so. Great Britain was one of the worst offenders in this regard, at least in Arab opinion. Britain held much of the Middle East following World War I and meddled there extensively prior to that war. In fact, this is Britain's third invasion of Iraq in the last 80 years. Our close alignment with Britain causes many in the Middle East to transfer to us all the hatred and other colonial "baggage" associated with them, especially now that the United States is the dominant power.

While I am not saying that all these perceptions are accurate or justified, they explain why the United States is so unpopular among Iraqi Shiites. Since the Shiites make up 60 percent of Iraq's population, the establishment of a one-person, one-vote form of democracy in Iraq is likely to result in Shiite-ruled state. The United States needs to understand the reasons for its unpopularity and do what it can to counteract them before the results of our liberation become the creation of another anti-American nation in the Middle East.