

Azerbaijani Shi'is and the Arbaeen pilgrimage

written by Kanan Rovshanoglu

Pilgrimage to the Kaaba, which is located in the Saudi Arabian city of Mecca, is considered as one of the five main duties of every Muslim. However, visiting the burial places of saints is also a very important tradition, especially in Shi'i practice. The most famous of these holy sites are in the Saudi Arabian city of Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatima are buried. The resting places of a number of Shi'i imams in the Iraqi cities of Baghdad (Kazimeyn village), Najaf, and Samarra, as well as the Iranian city of Mashhad, are among the most widely-visited shrines among Shi'is as well. Yet, the most prominent pilgrimage destination in Shi'i practice is the Iraqi city of Karbala, where the third Shi'i Imam Hussein is buried. Every year thousands of Shi'i Muslims visit Karbala, among them Shi'i Azerbaijanis.

According to various sources, 93-96 percent of the Republic of Azerbaijan's population is of Muslim heritage, of which Shi'is account for 65-75 percent.[\[1\]](#) Historically, Azerbaijan's Shi'i population lived primarily in the Karabakh, Central Aran, and Ganja regions of western and central Azerbaijan, as well as in the southern areas bordering Iran and the villages surrounding the capital Baku. Prefixes such as *Hacı*, *Məşədi* and *Kərbəlayi* have traditionally been added to the names of Muslims who performed pilgrimages to Mecca, Mashhad, and Karbala, respectively.

As a result of Azerbaijan's sovietization from 1920 and the Soviet state's subsequent policy of atheism, the religious knowledge of Azerbaijan's population deteriorated dramatically. Rituals such as daily individual and weekly mass prayers, as well as yearly fasting during the month of Ramadan, all but disappeared from everyday life for the

overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis. With the closure of the borders in the 1930s, Azerbaijani pilgrims likewise lost the opportunity to visit shrines in foreign countries.[\[2\]](#)

Nevertheless, Azerbaijanis' attachment to Islam as a component of their broader national-cultural identity remained strong throughout the Soviet era. As such, visiting shrines and holy burial places—or *pirs*—within Azerbaijan became an important form of religious expression for the average Azerbaijani Muslim. *Pirs* consist mainly of the graves of local sayyids who were believed to descend from the Prophet Muhammad. The most widely-visited *pirs* include Bibiheybat, Nardaran, and shrines to Mir Movsum Aga in and around Baku, as well as so-called *Imamzadas* in Ganja and Barda. The Sheikh Zahid, Se Khalifa, and Babagil *pirs* count among the most popular pilgrimage sites in the southern regions.

Soviet-era Shi'i religiosity was also manifested in annual Ashura ceremonies. This mass mourning ceremony is held on the tenth day of the month of Muharram in the Islamic Hijri calendar and marks the date in 680 AD when Hussein—the third Shi'i imam and a grandson of the the Prophet Muhammad—was slain in Karbala. Arbaeen, which means “forty” in Arabic, is an important continuation of Ashura and is celebrated through mass pilgrimage to Hussein's burial site in Karbala on the fortieth day after the imam's slaying. Although Azerbaijani Shi'is were not able to perform this pilgrimage during Soviet times, interest in the practice has risen over the past few decades.

Following the collapse of the USSR, the general level of religious awareness and the number of practicing Muslims increased significantly in Azerbaijan, as did the number of local Muslims making pilgrimages to holy sites abroad. Religious awareness has become especially evident among the Shi'i population and is manifested in the increase in participants in both Ashura and Arbaeen. This increase has drawn the attention of both domestic and foreign observers.

Notably, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei highlighted the size of the crowd at Ashura commemorations in Azerbaijan in 2017 during his meeting with the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev.[\[3\]](#)

Khamenei's remarks have important—if indirect—spiritual and political implications. According to Shi'i theology, every Muslim should choose a spiritual leader as a source of guidance. However, no local Shi'i leaders in Azerbaijan have held the status of spiritual leader—called *marja'taqlid* in Shi'i clerical hierarchy—ever since religious traditions were broken during the Soviet era. Thus, observant Shi'i believers in post-Soviet Azerbaijan have been forced to choose spiritual leaders from among Iranian and Iraqi ayatollahs. Iran's Khamenei is one of the most widely-followed religious authorities among Azerbaijani Shi'is today, as is Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani of Iraq. Other notable Shi'i leaders in Iran and Iraq likewise have followers in Azerbaijan, including ayatollahs Nasir Makarim Shirazi, Vahid Khorasani, Jafar Subhani, and Sayyid Hakim, among others.

Arbaeen in past and present

According to religious sources, Arbaeen was first celebrated in 680 AD, 40 days after Imam Hussein and his followers were martyred in Karbala.[\[4\]](#) The prophet's companion Jabir Ibn Abdullah Al Ansari is believed to have begun the Arbaeen ritual by visiting the martyrs' graves at Karbala, with neighboring tribes joining in the commemoration as well. The political situation in Iraq has affected the size of the Arbaeen pilgrimage in modern times, although in any case the tradition has survived to this day.

Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 coincided with the First Gulf War, thus making mass pilgrimage to Iraqi holy sites largely impossible immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, the number of Azerbaijani pilgrims to Iraq increased with the relative stabilization of Iraq's internal

security situation. In the mid-1990s, the Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB)[\[5\]](#) began organizing bus tours to the Hajj that passed through Iraq, thus giving Azerbaijani pilgrims the opportunity to visit Karbala and Najaf on their way to Saudi Arabia.

Due to continuous terror attacks on Shi'i shrines as well as large-scale war in Iraq after 2003, the CMB bus route to the Hajj was re-routed from Iraq through Syria. Pilgrimages to Karbala halted once again and resumed only after a small number of Azerbaijanis joined Iranians in their visit to Iraq in 2005. Independent groups from Azerbaijan began organizing pilgrimages to the holy Shi'i sites in Iraq in 2006. The frequency of visits to Arbaeen from Azerbaijan and other parts of the world has increased especially in the past few years, driven largely by the 2014 jihad fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ali Sistani after ISIS captured many cities in Iraq.[\[6\]](#) ISIS' rout in Iraq in 2017 has led to an even greater number of Arbaeen pilgrims. There are different estimates regarding the number of participants and figures range between 6-20 million pilgrims.[\[7\]](#) In any case, it is clear that the number of people visiting Arbaeen is higher than those visiting Hajj[\[8\]](#), making the former the world's most crowded religious pilgrimage.[\[9\]](#)

According to an Azerbaijani pro-government news website, 30 thousand pilgrims from Azerbaijan visited Arbaeen in 2017, which is 33 percent higher than official figures for 2016.[\[10\]](#) While it is not possible to confirm the accuracy of these numbers, more than ten thousand Azerbaijanis undoubtedly participated in the annual pilgrimage in both 2016 and 2017. Moreover, Iranian[\[11\]](#) and Iraqi[\[12\]](#) officials have reported a significant increase in the number of Azerbaijanis making the Arbaeen pilgrimage in 2017 in comparison to earlier years. The heads of Azerbaijani travel agencies that offer pilgrimage tours to Iraq also confirm this assessment.[\[13\]](#)

Hajj vs Arbaeen

There are numerous reasons why more Azerbaijanis make the pilgrimage to Arbaeen than Hajj. Firstly, Azerbaijani pilgrims to Arbaeen are not restricted by external quotas, as it is the case with the Hajj. Azerbaijani citizens can also travel to Iran and Iraq with greater ease. There are no visa requirements for Azerbaijanis traveling to Iran, while getting an Iraqi visa is easier than getting approval to travel to Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, and unlike the Hajj, there is no internal monopoly on the organization of Arbaeen pilgrimages. Tours to holy places in Iran and Iraq can be organized both by tourism agencies and individual groups, the latter of which are typically formed and led by local religious figures. Conversely, the organization of Hajj tours is the exclusive prerogative of the CMB[\[14\]](#), and this body began offering Karbala tours only in 2017.

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is also significantly cheaper than Hajj. In 2017, the cost of travel of Arbaeen, including visa fees, was 250-350 USD at most. Even the CMB, which is notorious for its high Hajj prices, offered roundtrip bus tours between Baku, Najaf, and Mashhad for 350-400 USD. The price of CMB's airplane tours to Iraq was between 1,200-1,300 US dollars[\[15\]](#), while the 2017 Hajj pilgrimage cost approximately 3,850 US dollars.[\[16\]](#)

Finally, steps taken by the government of Azerbaijan to prevent a rapid increase in Hajj attendance have incentivized many would-be Hajj pilgrims to holy sites in Iran and Iraq instead. For example, the number of people wishing to visit Hajj witnessed a notable increase in 2003, and in 2008 a total of six thousand Azerbaijani men and women participated in this pilgrimage.[\[17\]](#) In 2009, however, the government implemented strict measures to stem the flow of pilgrims and as a result, only two thousand Azerbaijanis participated in the Hajj in 2009. This trend persisted and by 2016 only 1,040 pilgrims went to Hajj, with the number dipping to 900 in 2017[\[18\]](#), the

lowest since the turn of millennium.

Organization and features of the Arbaeen pilgrimage

Although most visits to Iraq's holy sites occur during Arbaeen, Azerbaijanis visit these sites throughout the calendar year, both individually and in groups.

Pro-government media outlets claim that pilgrimages to Mashhad, Qom, Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, and Kadhimiya are officially organized by around 40 Azerbaijani travel agencies and more than 250 group leaders.[\[19\]](#) The main task of travel agencies in Azerbaijan is to gather the pilgrims and transport them from Baku (or other regions) to the Iraqi border. In accordance with Iraqi law, tour agencies must have a local partner agency responsible for organizing travel within the country.

Nurlan Dadashov owns a travel agency that has organized pilgrimages to Iraq and Mashhad since 2006. Before founding his agency Dadashov organized trips in small groups and claims that at that time, ten buses ferried pilgrims from Azerbaijan to Karbala each month. Dadashov's travel agency started providing Arbaeen pilgrimage services only in 2010, although he indicates that the first Arbaeen pilgrimage from Azerbaijan was organized in 2006 by a man named Haji Alibala from the Shi'i village of Nardaran on the outskirts of Baku. Haji Alibala was responsible for Arbaeen tours for the first two years, although more organizers entered the market in subsequent years.[\[20\]](#)

Haji Kamran Shamilov, a cleric with religious education who has served as Friday prayer imam at several local mosques, says that he has also been involved in organizing pilgrimages since 2006, when he took 23 pilgrims to Iraq. He later founded a travel agency called "Zair tur" for this purpose, although he says that Arbaeen pilgrimages are still organized mainly by individual groups rather than companies.[\[21\]](#) While "Zair tur" organizes Karbala tours throughout the year, the company does

not offer similar services for Arbäeen, as Shamilov prefers to participate in this pilgrimage as an individual.

Making the pilgrimage to Arbäeen is more convenient as an individual for a number of financial and logistical reasons. Whereas hotel reservations during Arbäeen are often costly for travel agencies due to high demand, individuals can enjoy free services offered to pilgrims by the government, clerics, and ordinary Iraqis. Many Iraqis host pilgrims during Arbäeen, and host families often set aside a portion of their annual income for this purpose. This is a longstanding tradition in Iraq, but it has become more widespread in recent years.

It should be noted that in 2017, the popular Azerbaijani Shi'i cleric Haji Shahin Hasanli met with Abdul Mehdi Karbalai, who serves as the head of the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala. Following the meeting, an agreement was reached to provide 4,000 Azerbaijani Arbäeen pilgrims with free shelter and food.[\[22\]](#) On an official level, both Iran and Iraq mobilize resources for pilgrims during Arbäeen and government institutions make a serious effort to ensure pilgrims' comfort. Clearing customs has become easier each year and the number of passport control kiosks has increased, with 100 kiosks operating at the Iran-Iraq border in 2017. Azerbaijani pilgrims mainly cross into Iraq via the Salamcha checkpoint, which has been designated as the checkpoint for pilgrims transiting through Iran's territory. Even though crossing through Salamcha prolongs the trip, it is nevertheless the best checkpoint to clear customs. Iranian citizens themselves use another checkpoint at Mehran.[\[23\]](#)

After crossing the border, pilgrims have access to a range of services and are often provided with food, water, resting places, and medical services free of charge until they reach Karbala. During Arbäeen, pilgrims first come to Najaf to visit Imam Ali's tomb and then continue on to Karbala. *Ihsan* (benefaction) tents are set up all along the pilgrimage route in Iraq beginning from the border posts, but they are

especially prevalent on the stretch between Najaf and Karbala. The Arbaeen pilgrimage from Baku lasts several days longer than a regular visit to Karbala, given that pilgrims must walk approximately 75 kilometers from Najaf to Karbala. The whole pilgrimage lasts 14-15 days, including 4-5 days to reach the Iraqi border and 10-11 days in Iraq. In 2017, Azeri filmmakers who participated in the Arbaeen pilgrimage produced a documentary describing the journey.[\[24\]](#) The Azerbaijani Shi'i community launched a website specialized on Karbala pilgrimage as well.[\[25\]](#)

Iran's promotion of the Arbaeen pilgrimage

Following the inception of ISIS, Iran increased its presence in the region and started portraying itself as the protector of "oppressed" Shi'is in the Middle East. After ISIS took control of a swathe of Iraqi territory, Iranian clerics and government bodies began promoting a narrative among the region's Shi'i population, to the effect of "we are not from Kufa, and we will not leave the imam alone". This slogan references one of the most well-known episodes in Shi'i history, according to which residents of Kufa invited Imam Hussein to their city 14 centuries ago but abandoned him in the wake of Chaliph Yazid's attack. Shi'i scholars in Iran and Iraq have thus succeeded in portraying Arbaeen as an act of political solidarity among Shi'is from across the globe with the goal of protecting the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala from possible ISIS attacks.

Regional geopolitical developments also bolstered Iranian attempts to promote Arbaeen. Following the tragedy in Mecca in 2015[\[26\]](#), bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were significantly aggravated and as a result, Saudi authorities refused to give Hajj visas to Iranians in 2016.[\[27\]](#) Under these circumstances, the Iranian clergy concentrated their efforts on promoting the Arbaeen pilgrimage among Iranians as an alternative to Hajj.

Arbaeen and the Azerbaijani government's concerns about political Islam

Since 2016, the government of Azerbaijan has become increasingly concerned about the popularity of Arbaeen among many of its Shi'i citizens. Prior to 2016, such concerns were practically non-existent, and there were even complaints that some law enforcement agencies used Arbaeen pilgrimages as an illegal source of revenue.[\[28\]](#) Similarly, occasional media reports of safety incidents affecting Azerbaijani pilgrims in Karbala[\[29\]](#) raised questions regarding the organization of Karbala visits, although none of these cases lead to any serious inquiries or state responses within Azerbaijan.

However, in 2016 local media outlets reported that approximately 500 Azerbaijani pilgrims were delayed at the Iran-Iraq border.[\[30\]](#) As a result, Mubariz Qurbanli, who heads the State Committee for Works with Religious Associations (SCWRA), announced an investigation into the incident and indicated that the state would begin to monitor and regulate pilgrimages to Iran and Iraq.[\[31\]](#) Qurbanli further claimed that "hundreds of people are taken to foreign countries under the guise of pilgrimage and are being influenced by certain radical groups. Some pilgrims even join groups hostile to Azerbaijan."[\[32\]](#) The government's concerns became more apparent in the context of Ashura in 2017. Following Ashura commemorations, the deputy head of the SCWRA suggested there was a sense that these events were being politicized.[\[33\]](#) Pro-government media outlets likewise published critical reports about Arbaeen pilgrimages and expressed concerns that they were not being monitored properly.[\[34\]](#)

Moreover, expressions of solidarity for Shi'i religious figures imprisoned by the Azerbaijani government created serious concerns from the state's point of view. Specifically, some Azerbaijani pilgrims carried out commemorations in Karbala and Najaf holding posters of imprisoned clerics such as Taleh Bagirov and Abgul Suleymanov. [\[35\]](#) Pro-government

media also reported that some religious fugitives hiding from Azerbaijani law enforcement in Russia were “promoting” religious prisoners among other pilgrims.[\[36\]](#)

These pro-government reports highlighted a deeply-held suspicion that Iran was using the Arbaeen pilgrimage as a tool to strengthen its influence.[\[37\]](#) The fact that Azerbaijani pilgrims were meeting with Iranian religious figures—including a well-known Ardabil-based Friday prayer imam by the name of Said Hasan Amuli—and criticizing the Azerbaijani government especially irritated Baku.[\[38\]](#) In light of its growing concern, it seems plausible that the Azerbaijani government will implement measures to strengthen control over the Arbaeen pilgrimage or even impose restrictions in the coming years.

Conclusion

It is obvious that increasing participation in Arbaeen and Ashura is not a manifestation of political Islam *per se*, but rather an indicator of rising religious awareness. However, there is no doubt that a general uptick in religiosity could serve as a potential platform for more politicized forms of Islam in Azerbaijan, especially considering Iran’s efforts to enhance its influence internationally. Over the past few years, geopolitics and regional rivalries have emerged as common themes in religious sermons in Azerbaijan.[\[39\]](#) Although local political Islamists’ opposition to the secular state is a matter of faith, such opposition has never been expressed openly by the leaders of political Islam in Azerbaijan. On the contrary, politically-oriented Shi’i leaders such as the imprisoned Haji Taleh Bagirov have stressed their acceptance of the secular realities of Azerbaijani society.[\[40\]](#) Nevertheless, political Islamists have repeatedly expressed their opposition to the current government, and in fact this discourse has been one of the main rallying points to attract supporters. It is difficult to conclude whether the government’s use of force and institutional prerogatives against political Islam can effectively be reconciled with

concomitant steps to ensure the loyalty of an increasing number of believers. In any case, the effectiveness of the state's religious strategy will largely hinge on the improvement of the overall socio-political environment. Otherwise, rising religiosity could significantly broaden the appeal of political Islam, which in its turn could displace the weakened secular opposition as the main voice of dissent in Azerbaijan.

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