

Iraq's Shi'ite pilgrimage to martyr's tomb reveres recently slain fighters too

Nearly 14 million people marched to Imam Hussein's shrine in Karbala this year.

by [Scott Peterson](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue



The arbaeen pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq, in November 2017. Photo by [Alireza Vasigh Ansari](#) via [Creative Commons license](#).

(The Christian Science Monitor) The pilgrimage of Shi'ite Muslims to the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, Iraq, is the largest annual gathering on the planet.

This November, along with images of Hussein as Lord of the Martyrs, the pilgrims' path was lined with posters lifting up as martyrs the Iraqis who died while battling militants from the so-called Islamic State.

The two-week march, known as Arba'een, has been targeted repeatedly by ISIS, which takes the extreme view that Shi'ites are infidels. A suicide car bomb in November 2016 killed at least 125 pilgrims returning home to Iran.

“If you love Hussein, you will not be afraid—it makes me brave,” said Fadl Abbas, a truck driver nursing blistered feet, swollen legs, and a limp after his 50-mile march. “The love of Imam Hussein takes you on the right path in your life. You don’t lie, don’t cheat, don’t drink. He represents all the good things in life.”

During this year’s pilgrimage some 55,000 extra security personnel were deployed, and strict rules kept all non-official vehicles 20 miles from the shrine. There were no serious incidents.

At the climax of days of walking on roads clogged with nearly 14 million fellow believers, pilgrims raise their arms in deference when they first see the shrine of Imam Hussein, with its ornate tiled façade crowned with a gold cupola and minarets.

Inside the gilt tomb, the emotional intensity overflows for the grandson of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. He was killed in battle in 680 AD, and the legend of his death—his small band overwhelmed by the vast army of an illegitimate caliph—demonstrates the qualities of faith and resistance that Shi’ites strive to emulate.

Around the tomb, believers crush toward the gleaming silver and gold metal frame, hands outstretched and tears flowing as they try to touch their sacred imam.

“It is always an amazing feeling when you get to touch Hussein,” said Amal Hussein, a college graduate who has joined her family for numerous journeys to Karbala. “It is like reaching heaven.”

Columns of ordinary people, many holding religious flags, stretched along roads on every horizon. Among them were elders in wheelchairs, young people with gelled hair and tight T-shirts, and young mothers in headscarves pushing strollers with determination.

All along the way, volunteers grilled fish over open fires or made bubbling stews and soups for the pilgrims in cavernous aluminum tubs.

Some 650 buses carried pilgrims who couldn’t walk the final stretch. Approaching the shrine itself, pilgrims passed through five pat-down body searches.

According to the Karbala shrine authority, some 13.8 million pilgrims took part in Arba’een this year. More than 2 million Iranians were issued visas, and many more crossed overland without them. Some 30,000 Afghans came by air, and another

30,000 arrived overland through Iran. Upward of 200,000 Gulf Arabs and 50,000 Lebanese also joined the march.

By comparison, the annual hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, a rite which all of the world’s estimated 1.8 billion Muslims strive to undertake at least once in their lifetime—attracts fewer than 3 million pilgrims.

In Iraq, the numbers do not include the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who conduct a vast logistical exercise along every road leading to the city, sometimes well over 100 miles distant, setting up food, water, rest, and health facilities along the way. All such services are free for pilgrims.

Iraqi soldiers securing the route often wear sashes in the red, white, and green of Iraq’s flag and display banners stating they are honored to serve passing pilgrims. Reverence is shown to regular soldiers and Shi’ite militia members alike in Iraq’s fight against ISIS.

Instead of deterring pilgrims, the threat from ISIS has unified Iraq’s Shi’ites, said Akeel al-Turaihi, governor of Karbala Province.

“Many people think that they will be blessed because of these rituals,” al-Turaihi said. “Because Hussein rose up against injustice, he became the symbol for revolution. That principle . . . became a part of the subconscious of Shi’ites.”

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