

Damascus and Cairo: Two Heads of Husayn for Two Kinds of Worship

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During the Battle of Karbala in Iraq on October 10, 680, the powerful army of Yazid ibn Muawiyah confronted the followers of Husayn, who were down to 72 men. The first one killed was Qasim, the ten-year-old son of Husayn's brother, Hasan. He was split into two by a single blow from a sabre. Husayn's horse fell, grazed by an arrow. As he sat on the ground, the enemy soldiers did not dare kill him — not wanting to be held responsible for the death of the Prophet's grandson.

Abdallah, Husayn's one-year-old son, was crying; just as Husayn took him into his arms to console him, an arrow hit the child in the ear, killing him instantly. Weakened by thirst, Husayn was about to drink from the waters of the Euphrates when an arrow hit him in the mouth. Seven or eight men fell upon him — one of them stabbed him in the back with his lance while another severed his head as he fell to the ground. It is believed that Husayn's head was sent to Yazid by Ubayd Allah, but the accounts vary. Some Shiites believe that his head was buried in Karbala along with his body while others insist that it was enshrined as a relic in the outbuilding of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. In spite of still being a child at that time, Ruqayya, Hussein's daughter, was said to have placed his head in the Umayyad Mosque, where it is currently located. The Sunnis, on the other hand, believe that although it was once kept in the mosque in Damascus, it was later taken to Ascalon during the crusades in Palestine. They claim that it was laid in its final resting place in Cairo in 1153, under the Fatimid Caliphate.

In early 2004, an official announcement was made regarding a new Iranian-financed project to construct Shiite sites in Syria. The *Mawâkib al-Sabâ'yâ* (*Procession of the Captives*) project was undertaken in memory of the women and children from Iraq who were held captive in Damascus after the Battle of Karbala. Each site commemorates a place that Husayn's decapitated head was said to have passed through as it was taken from Karbala to Damascus. For centuries, there have been mosques and *maqâmât* erected in the locations of the main 'stations' where the head had been placed or had shed blood. The most famous among these locations is the Masjid al-Nuqtah or the "Mosque of the Drop (of blood from Imam Husayn)" in Aleppo, where people venerate a green stone block bearing a red stain. Another *maqâmât* also exists in Raqqa, the former political capital of the Islamic State.

Although the relic became an established object of veneration, it became the focus of different religious practices: the Shiites vow unanimous adoration to it in commemoration of

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the Battle of Karbala, while the Sunnis reserve a special place for it among the pantheon of saints who are deemed closest to God and endowed with a special blessing power (*baraka*).

The Shiites make a pilgrimage to Damascus to mourn the head of Husayn, which was taken there by his daughter, Ruqayya. Her tomb can be found in a mosque not far from the Umayyad Mosque and it was enlarged in the early 1980s. Husayn was killed at Karbala and the Shiites lament his murder. Led by an imam, many Shiite groups from India, Pakistan, and Iran come together in front of this universal Shiite relic. The Shiite petitions are recorded in a little book. The imam narrates the story of the killing, and is accompanied by a professional mourner who sets the pace. He increases the frequency of his sobs and cries in some parts, and beats on his head and chest in others. Men and women follow suit: the tears flow, some prostrate themselves, and others wail in lamentation. Everyone is wracked with grief, even those who cry silently and discreetly. Although the practice might seem overexaggerated at first, the crying gradually becomes more natural and uncontrollable.

During the first few days of the month of *muḥarram*, the faithful re-enact and revive what may be considered as the founding myth of Shiism — the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the son of the first Imam, Ali — through a series of rituals.

Shiite historiography is rich with detailed, mythologized accounts of this event that unites the community around common moral values and forges its collective memory. Shiite doctrines show that the significance of Husayn's martyrdom is multifaceted. First, it represents the fulfilment of his *Imamat* and the revival of the religion founded by his grandfather. Next, it is also the model of self-sacrifice, the struggle between good and evil, and the fight against oppression and injustice. Finally, it symbolizes the defense of the Islamic ideal. Through the annual commemoration of the day of '*Āshûrâ*' (remembrance), the faithful renew their pact with the Imams, which is considered as the initial covenant (*amâna*) that God bestowed on mankind. They also take this time to identify with the inhabitants of Kûfa and repent for the abandonment of their Imam, as well as with the martyred penitents who set out to fight the Umayyad army to avenge Husayn's death after the battle.

Four types of rituals are observed by the faithful during the celebrations, which are held from the second day to the tenth day of the month of *muḥarram* and then resume forty days after the '*Āshûrâ*' for the *arba'în*. Lamentation sessions (*majâlis al-'azâ* or *majâlis ḥusayniyya*) are organized in private locations (such as the homes of community leaders) and in public places (such as ḥusayniyya or religious schools), where the events of the tragic tale of Karbala are retold day after day. Public processions (*mawâkib ḥusayniyya*) rally together the faithful — who are grouped by district, political affiliation, or by affinity — and some of them engage in the practice of mortification. Theatrical re-enactments of the tragedy (*shabîh*, *tashbîh*) are performed in certain areas, especially in Iran and Nabatiyya in southern Lebanon.

To culminate the commemoration, the faithful are called upon to make a pilgrimage (*ziyâra*) to either Husayn's mausoleum or other mausoleums.

The large number of pilgrims who are unable to go to Karbala go on a pilgrimage to Damascus instead. They set out on a tour that leads them to the Umayyad Mosque. A special entrance on the right-hand side of the enclosure leads to the shrine, which supposedly contains the head of Husayn. They also go to the Bâb al-Şaghîr cemetery to pay their respects in the mausoleum dedicated to the martyrs of Karbala, whose heads, severed during the battle, are symbolized by green turbans. The tombs of individuals who were close with Husayn are also visited. Finally, they go to the mausoleum assigned to Sayyida Zaynab located seven kilometers south of the capital.

Upon reaching the mausoleums of Husayn and that of the other Imams and their descendants, the pilgrims immediately shed tears as soon as they approach the tomb, remembering all the misfortunes experienced by the "People of the House" (*Ahl al-bayt*) and the Shiites. They proceed to touch the shrine protecting the relic, cling onto it, kiss it, tie a scrap of cloth to it, and even throw money into it before making a wish.

Certain rituals can take on different forms, depending on the region. Women from the Shiite quarter of Damascus sometimes rhythmically beat their breasts when they hear of the trials and tribulations experienced by the *Ahl al-bayt*. While this ritual lamentation, known as *laṭm*, may be sporadic and discreet in this instance, it may be done on a more regular and broader scale elsewhere. This restraint is shared by the Lebanese and Iranian Shiites, who comply with directions from religious authorities to avoid certain rituals that are considered to be excessive. Conversely, a number of Iraqi pilgrims, including elderly women, bare a small area of their skin and repeatedly hit it until it turns red. Most of them, however, simply beat on their breasts or thighs at a steady pace, as if to better internalize the litany that the chanter is reciting. Louder shouts and the more expansive gesticulations signify the mounting tension and the excitement as the day of '*Āshûrâ*' draws closer. The last two days of the celebrations are the most intense. Pakistani and Indian pilgrims observe some rather spectacular practices. The ritual of the *tabor*, with its impressive effusions of blood caused by chains and swords, is perceived as an expression of the desire to become a martyr. Penitents declare their readiness to sacrifice themselves so that they may become closer to Husayn and obtain his intercession. However, the Party of God (Hezbollah) prohibits this practice and encourages its members to walk in procession, while beating their breasts, in well-ordered ranks instead. This is in accordance with the ban on the *taṭbîr*, or the pain of punishment, implemented by the political party's *marja'*, Ali Khamenei, in 1994.

Similarly to the Sunnis, the people of Cairo (Egypt) believe that the head of Husayn was first buried in Damascus, then taken to Ascalon in Palestine, and finally brought to Cairo in 1153. A mausoleum was built over the silver casket that allegedly contains his head.

The shrine is located between Khan Khalili — an old souk teeming with people and scores of narrow lanes with shops selling various local handmade goods — and the well-known Al-Azhar Mosque, alongside the similarly named Al-Azhar University.

The mausoleum underwent a number of developments, extensions, and restorations before becoming the Imam Al-Husayn Mosque, which is currently 74.22 meters long and 45 meters wide. It has a façade decorated with seven arcades that each rest upon two marble columns and is surrounded by a gypsum frieze with splendid motifs; it also has two minarets. On the old minaret remains two plaques written in 1266 about the *Hegira*, one of which quotes a verse from the Koran and the other contains the following hadith: “*Al Hassan and al Husayn are the family members most dear to me.*”

The dome of the mosque dates back to the mid-nineteenth century; it is supported by arcades on ornately decorated circular columns and arranged in a semi-circular fashion. Its upper square has a marble interior that is embellished with a shell mosaic.

The esplanade that leads to the inside of the mosque is comprised of 44 columns that support a wooden ceiling painted with delicate, multicolored, gilt motifs. It has approximately 30 large windows made with gold-plated bronze frames, above which extend small windows surrounded with marble.

As they pass in front of it, people recite the Fatiha in honor of the Sayyid “*Shabab Ahli-l-Janna*” (the Prince of the youth of Paradise), Imam Husayn, and implore him to bless them, in hopes that God will answer their prayers.

From there, the pilgrims walk into the huge tomb chamber with a magnificent silver grille where they try to catch a glimpse of the wooden cenotaph behind a second gate; a splendid wooden pulpit (*minbar*) covered with gold paint still stands there. A second *minbar* made of Turkish walnut and decorated with shells, ivory, and cabinet work was later added to the chamber.

The love that the Cairenes have for the *Ahl al-Bayt* dates back to the Fatimid Caliphate. In the hierarchy of saints, the prophet’s family members who have tombs in Cairo are considered to have the most influential *baraka* (blessing). For this reason, the tomb that houses the head of Husayn, is certainly the shrine with the greatest emotional importance to the Egyptians, and the mosque that encloses it consequently attracts the greatest number of visitors. Al-Husayn Mosque, not the Al-Azhar Mosque, represents the real sacred center of Cairo and the rallying point for all religious ceremonies. It is followed by the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque and tomb — daughter of Fatima and Ali and sister of Husayn — and then the tomb of Nafisa, Hasan’s great-granddaughter. As the protector of the Gamaliyya district, Husayn remains a universally beloved figure (the novels of Nagib Mahfuz confirm this), while Zaynab and Nafisa, along with Ruqayya, are considered to be patron saints of Cairo.

As with a good number of the tombs in Egypt, these tombs are ‘apocryphal’ — that is,

of doubtful authenticity. It is said that Zaynab never came to Egypt and Ruqayya was buried in Damascus. However, what matters most in these cases is that these figures are no less predominant in Cairo's 'pantheon' of Muslim saints. To be precise, the tomb of Husayn is visited by men on Tuesdays and by women on Saturdays.

During the Prophet's birthday, major Muslim festivals, and the nights of the month of Ramadan; festivities are held in large, multicolored fabric tents that extend over the forecourt of the mausoleum. The main Sufi brotherhoods, the readers of the Koran, and the most well-known sheikhs celebrate nights of prayer that are both official and popular.

The *mawlid* (observance of the birthday of a saint) for Husayn, celebrated during the second half of the month of *rabī' al-thânī*, lasts for 14 days and 15 nights. The celebration always ends on a Tuesday — the night from Tuesday to Wednesday, to be exact. This is the most important *mawlid* in Cairo after the *mawlid* for the Prophet and it usually takes place five or six weeks after the latter. During this time, the district of Gamaliyya is surrounded by a veritable tide of people and is transformed into a huge festival site engulfed by a flood of pilgrims, whirling dervishes, and festival-lovers. Cairo is resplendent in a sea of lights, as an abundance of technicolored electric lights illuminate the sky. The Sufi brotherhoods, as they do during every *mawlid*, set up their tents in the lanes adjacent to the mosque. This is where the *dhikr* (the ritual repetition of the names of God) sessions take place while countless soup kitchens serve needy crowds.

In 1989, more than half a million people came together at the *mawlid* for Husayn. The popularity of this gathering though, also has its negative side. The love that the Cairenes have for the Prophet's grandson is considered excessive at times, but some Ulema (Muslim scholars) do not hesitate to point out that it is in fact God and His Prophet who are loved through the grandson of the founder of Islam. The ambivalent position taken by the Egyptian authorities is evident when they indirectly encourage the *mawlid* by not charging pilgrims any train fare, while the state press is completely silent about the event. As a result, the *mawlid* for Husayn becomes a 'non-event' and half a million people congregating in a district of Cairo does not even get mentioned in the newspapers. Moreover, the 5th day of *sha'bân*, Husayn's actual birthday, is an occasion reserved for private ceremonies in the mosque.

The head of Husayn is the subject of both official and popular veneration in Cairo, just as it is in Damascus. However, while people weep and lament in Damascus, it is quite the opposite in Cairo where the tragedy of Karbala is drowned in a sea of festive lights and fireworks.

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