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## BEHIND THE RIOT IN MECCA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The recent rioting and deaths in Mecca have shocked Muslims and confused the world. The hostility which led to bloodshed in the sacred city was prompted in part by the political tensions in the Gulf. But the tragedy is primarily one episode in a lengthy history of pilgrimage conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. That conflict is perpetuated by the refusal of Iranians and Saudis to respect each other's Islam.

Through history, the pilgrimage has produced a vast corpus of bigoted lore about Shiite pilgrims and Sunni hosts. The essence of the Sunni lore is that Shiites seek to defile the holy places; the Shiite lore holds that Sunni hosts will find any opportunity to spill Shiite blood.

It is in this century that the pilgrimage has become a tinderbox of Sunni-Shiite tension. Since 1924, Mecca has been in Saudi hands, and Saudi Islam regards Shiism more severely than do other forms of Sunni Islam. Since 1979, Iranian Shiism has undergone a radicalizing transformation. This volatile combination has produced some sort of incident during every pilgrimage season since 1981. These have been fueled by the old libels of Shiite defilement and Sunni bloodthirstiness.

In turn, the incidents have revalidated old prejudices, now potentially more explosive than ever in the context of the current crisis in the Persian Gulf.

The fatal confrontation which occurred between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police on July 31, 1987 is still shrouded in confusion. Iran has accused the United States of ordering Saudi Arabia to massacre demonstrating Iranian pilgrims. Saudi Arabia accuses some of Iran's 155,000 pilgrims of provocation and claims that stampeding rioters crushed themselves to death. According to official Saudi figures, 402 persons died in the resulting clash, including 275 Iranian pilgrims, 85 security police, and 42 pilgrims from other countries. It is too early to determine with any certainty what actually occurred in Mecca, and who provoked whom.

The magnitude of the bloodshed at Mecca is without precedent, for Mecca's standing in Islam has always been that of an inviolable sanctuary. For one Muslim to raise his hand against another in the holy city is an abomination before God. But the Meccan tragedy, while unprecedented in the number of lives it claimed, was preceded by a long series of confrontations between Iranian pilgrims and their Saudi hosts.

Since 1981, no pilgrimage season has passed without some incident involving Iranian pilgrims. Their annual demonstrations in the streets and mosques of Mecca and Medina have challenged the Saudi concept of pilgrimage, the Saudi interpretation of Islam, and even the legitimacy of Saudi rule over the holy cities. Nor can the most recent tragedy be divorced from the history of mistrust between Shiite pilgrims and their Sunni hosts, a history which stretches back as far as the sixteenth century.

The purpose of this survey is to understand the tragedy at Mecca in the context of Islamic history and the religious tensions of contemporary Islam. The political crisis of the moment contributed to the violence, although it is still impossible to say how. But the rising political temperature in the Gulf cannot offer a comprehensive explanation for the setting and form of the tragedy. In the longer perspective, the rupture of the pilgrimage peace in 1987 appears not as a gross aberration, but as an unusually violent

episode in a continuing controversy which has long divided Islam and cast a shadow over the pilgrimage. In the context of that essentially sectarian controversy, the violence which has occurred at Islam's sacred center is fully comprehensible.

### THE SHIITE FACTOR

In their narrowest context, the pilgrimage incidents of the past seven years have been a symptom of the political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Each seeks to exercise a predominant influence throughout the Gulf which separates them, and the activities of Iran's pilgrims have complemented other methods of propaganda employed by Iran. But another latent conflict also defines the contours of Iranian action and Saudi reaction. The disturbances have not only been manifestations of political rivalry, but of sectarian conflict with deep roots in the history of Muslim pilgrimage. That is the conflict between Sunnism and Shiism. Its origins lie in a seventh-century dispute over succession to the Prophet Muhammad. Over the course of subsequent centuries the schism became a full-blown division over theology, exacerbated by social and economic disparities.

The pilgrimage ritual itself is not one about which Sunnis and Shiites have conducted an elaborate polemic. The bedrock of sectarian conflict has always been the matter of the Imamate—the question of legitimate authority in Islam—which is an issue of theological controversy that has found fullest expression outside the ritual sphere.

Indeed, for the first thousand years of Islam, Sunni pilgrims could not be readily distinguished from Shiite pilgrims. Shiites formed a minority throughout the Muslim world, and spoke the same languages and shared the same culture as the Sunni majority. But in the sixteenth century, a new dynasty set about converting all of Iran to Shiism. Only then did Shiism become identified thoroughly with Iran and the Persian-speaking world. Henceforth, Persian-speakers could be taken for Shiites without question, opening new possibilities for sectarian confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites in the holy cities.

Since that time, the pilgrimage has produced a vast corpus of bigoted lore about Shiite pilgrims and Sunni hosts. The Sunni corpus is perhaps more readily documented, if

only because it sometimes led to violent acts against Shiite pilgrims. At the root of the Sunni lore is the belief that Shiites feel themselves compelled to pollute the holy premises. Ample evidence for Sunni belief in this libel exists both in Islamic textual sources and in European travel literature. This pollution was said to take a particularly disgusting form: Burckhardt and Burton, the great nineteenth-century explorers of Arabia, both heard about past attacks on Shiite pilgrims, prompted by the suspicion that they had polluted the Great Mosque in Mecca with excrement.

The Shiite libel was just as farfetched. It held that Sunnis did not respect Mecca as a sanctuary, and that the lives of Shiite pilgrims were forfeit even in these sacred precincts, where the shedding of blood is forbidden by religion and tradition. Shiite pilgrims were indeed liable to humiliation at any time; as Burton wrote of Shiites on pilgrimage, "that man is happy who gets over it without a beating."

Yet it would seem that, for the most part, Shiite pilgrims were as secure as other pilgrims, provided they exercised the discretion (*taqiyya*) permitted them by Shiite doctrine. They could and did avoid persecution by adopting an attitude of self-effacing conformity with the customs of their Sunni hosts. And, while schismatics were not especially welcome in the holy cities, the Iranians among them had a reputation as well-to-do, and those who profited from the pilgrimage traffic eagerly awaited the Iranian caravan. This security was also bought formally through the offering of special tribute, paid both to desert tribes en route and to the guardians of the sanctuaries. Toleration could be had at a price which Shiite pilgrims were prepared to pay, and their lives were rarely as threatened as their dignity.

### THE ADVENT OF THE SAUDIS

Sectarian antagonisms were given renewed force with the advent of Saudi rule over Mecca in 1924. The doctrinal divide which separated mainstream Sunnism from Shiism seemed narrow in comparison with the chasm which stood between Saudi Wahhabism and Shiism. Wahhabi doctrine regarded Shiite veneration of the Imams and their tombs to be blasphemous idolatry. The Wahhabi iconoclasts had earned a lasting notoriety in Shiite eyes when they emerged from the Arabian desert in 1802 and sacked Karbala, a

Shiite shrine city in Iraq. They slew several thousand Shiites on that occasion, and desecrated the revered tomb of the Imam Husayn, whose martyrdom in the seventh century is the pivotal event in Shiite religious history. Those Shiites who perished became martyrs in the eyes of their co-religionists, sacrificed on the very site of Husayn's martyrdom.

When a revived Wahhabi movement swept through Arabia during the first quarter of this century, it seemed as hostile as ever to Shiism's most fundamental assumptions. The leader of the movement, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, when asked in 1918 about the Shiite shrines in Iraq, could still declare: "I would raise no objection if you demolished the whole lot of them, and I would demolish them myself if I had the chance."

He never had that chance, but he did take Medina, and his bombardment of the city produced a general strike in Iran and an uproar throughout the Shiite world. For while the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca holds the same significance for Sunnis and Shiites, the visitation (*ziyara*) to Medina is of special significance for Shiites. The cemetery of al-Baqi, near the city, is the reputed resting place of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and four of the Twelve Imams, who are counted among Shiism's fourteen intercessors. The Wahhabis, for whom prayer through intercessors represented a form of idolatry, had leveled much of this cemetery in 1806, during an earlier occupation of Medina; its domed tombs had been rebuilt by the end of the century. Now the Saudis, in their purifying zeal, again demolished al-Baqi, a move regarded by Shiites as desecration of their own shrines.

A wave of revulsion and protest swept through Shiite Islam against this alleged vandalism. The demolition created so profound a sentiment in Iran, especially in religious circles, that the Iranian government refused to recognize Ibn Saud's rule. Iran angrily demanded the creation of a general assembly of Muslims to regulate the holy cities, and called on all Muslims not to permit "any further humiliating insults to be heaped on their sanctities and their faith."

Denial of recognition was combined, in 1927, with a decision by Iran to forbid the pilgrimage to its nationals. This move was

inspired in part by Reza Shah's secularizing policy of discouraging religious ritual, in order to undercut the authority of the recalcitrant Shiite clergy. But the move was presented by the Iranian government as an act of protest against the alleged intolerance of the Wahhabis and their destruction of tombs.

Still, the ban failed to discourage the most determined pilgrims from Iran, who continued to arrive via Iraq and Syria. And, in a pragmatic step, Ibn Saud moved to defuse the extensive Shiite agitation against him by a show of tolerance designed to win official Iranian recognition. Shiite pilgrims from Arab lands met with exemplary treatment during the year in which Iran imposed the ban, and Iran's men of religion soon were demanding an end to the ban.

In 1928, the pilgrimage ban was lifted, and in 1929 a treaty of friendship was concluded between Iran and Ibn Saud's kingdom. Article Three of the treaty guaranteed that Iran's pilgrims would enjoy treatment equal to that of pilgrims from other countries, and that they would not be prevented from observing their own religious rituals. Iran's pilgrims came to enjoy a measure of toleration which reflected the pragmatism of Ibn Saud on Shiite matters, an approach which also molded his policy toward his own Shiite minority in the east of his kingdom. Ibn Saud, in both hosting and ruling over Shiites, now asked only that they avoid public enactment of distinctly Shiite rituals. In less than a decade, a pattern of tolerance seemed to have been firmly established.

All the more striking, then, was a most serious recurrence of the Sunni libel of Shiite defilement. In 1943, an Iranian pilgrim was summarily beheaded for allegedly defiling the Great Mosque with excrement which he supposedly carried into the mosque in his pilgrim's garment. Ibn Saud remarked to some Americans that "this was the kind of offense which might be expected of an Iranian." The verdict in local coffee houses held that "the Iranians always act that way." The incident, which infuriated religious opinion in Iran, culminated in an official Iranian protest and a demand for payment of an indemnity. Iran even severed diplomatic relations for a time. The Iranian press indulged in a campaign of anti-Wahhabi polemic harsher than anything published since Ibn Saud's conquest of Mecca. Once again, tales of Wahhabi barbarism were

retold, and the story of the sacking of Karbala was recounted with anguish and embellishment. The government of Iran imposed another pilgrimage ban, which was only lifted in 1948, after the dust of controversy had settled.

The sudden reappearance of this most implausible of libels gave some Muslims pause for thought, and inspired ecumenical initiatives which enjoyed the encouragement of certain Sunni and Shiite scholars. But the Sunni response came from Egypt, where there are no Shiites, and never had the endorsement of Saudi men of religion. In 1959, the rector of al-Azhar, Egypt's great university of theology, issued a now famous ecumenical opinion (*fatwa*) ruling that Shiism constituted a legitimate Muslim rite "like the other rites of Sunni Islam." But this *fatwa*, whatever its effect in the wider Sunni world, found no echo at all in Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, the Saudi men of religion purposely excluded Shiites from their own attempts to unite Muslim opinion. In 1962, Saudi authorities promoted the establishment of the Mecca-based Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia's principal forum for bringing together Muslims of different lands. Conspicuous by their absence were Iranian Shiites; not one sat on the League's constituent council, a sort of Muslim college of clerics and laymen, convened annually during the pilgrimage season. This exclusion seems to have been mutually agreeable, for no Shiite complaint was registered at the time.

Instead, the Shiite world was up in arms over the publication, in Saudi Arabia, of an anti-Shiite tract which stirred up all of the familiar accusations. *The Broad Lines of the Foundations on Which the Shiite Religion Arose*, by Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, first appeared in Saudi Arabia in 1960, and quickly became (and remains even now) the most widely read anti-Shiite polemic in the Sunni world. The author argued that Shiism, far from constituting a school within Islam, was a distinct religion beyond the proper confines of Islam.

This slim pamphlet, many times reprinted, opened a new polemical exchange, as Shiite scholars published refutations of the charge and renewed condemnations of Wahhabism. These rebuttals argued that since mainstream Sunnism and Shiism were moving toward conciliation, Wahhabism

constituted a deviation from the emergent ecumenical Islam. This only fueled anti-Shiite fires in Saudi Arabia, and in 1971, a then-obscure Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a message to the pilgrims in Mecca from his exile in Iraq, rebuking the Saudis for permitting the continued circulation of expressly anti-Shiite material: "Certain poison pens in the service of imperialism have for several years been seeking to sow dissension in the ranks of the Muslims, here in the very land that witnessed revelation . . . . Pamphlets like *The Broad Lines* are being published and distributed here in order to serve the imperialists who hope to use lies and slander to separate a group of 170 million people from the ranks of the Muslims. It is surprising that the [Saudi] authorities in the Hijaz would permit such misleading material to be distributed in the land of revelation."

This doctrinal debate was quite unaffected by the political rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the 1960s, which was the outcome of shared apprehension over Egyptian-backed subversion. Theologians on both sides of the divide continued to spew forth intolerant polemical attacks and legal opinions. On the Saudi side, these enjoyed the sanction of the kingdom's leading religious figures. In the mid-1970s, a potential African convert to Islam wrote to Saudi Arabia's foremost religious authority, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz, asking whether conversion to Shiite Islam did in fact constitute conversion to a valid form of Islam. Shaykh Ibn Baz was Saudi Arabia's leading bearer of the Wahhabi legacy, an arch-conservative entrusted with defining the contours of Saudi Islam. The ruling of religious law (*fatwa*) which he issued in reply to this inquiry gave serious affront to Shiites, since he denigrated conversion to Shiite Islam, which he refused to accord the same validity as Sunni Islam.

#### THE PILGRIMAGE REINTERPRETED

This doctrinal disagreement was nonetheless accompanied by a steady increase in the number of Iranian pilgrims from 12,000 in 1961 to 57,000 in 1972, thanks to the introduction of a direct air service for pilgrims. This influx coincided with the appearance of an introspective and overtly political genre of Iranian writing on the pilgrimage. The radical Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati in his book entitled *Pilgrimage*, sought deeper meaning in the Meccan pilgrimage, in his quest for a

solution to contemporary Islam's broader philosophical and political dilemmas. Shariati urged the pilgrims "to study the dangers of the superpowers and their agents who have infiltrated Muslim nations. They should resolve to fight against brainwashing, propaganda, disunity, heresy, and false religions."

In 1971, several Iranians were arrested in Mecca for distributing a message to Muslim pilgrims from one Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, the Shiite shrine city in Iraq: "At this sacred pilgrimage gathering, the Muslims must exchange their views concerning the basic problems of Islam and the special problems of each Muslim country. The people of each country should, in effect, present a report concerning their own state to the Muslims of the world, and thus all will come to know what their Muslim brothers are suffering at the hands of imperialism and its agents." Khomeini then presented his own scathing "report" on Iran, describing it as "a military base for Israel, which means, by extension, for America."

After 1971, hardly a year passed during which some Iranians did not distribute a similar message from Khomeini to Muslim pilgrims. The effort usually met with Saudi apathy, for the Saudis did not regard this preaching as directed against themselves. Khomeini worded his annual pilgrimage message in such a way as to appeal to Iranian pilgrims, and to alert other pilgrims to the "shameful, bloody, so-called White Revolution" of the Shah. Such propaganda was liable to complicate Saudi relations with the Shah's Iran, so measures were taken against the more brazen distributors of Khomeini's messages. But the Saudis did not regard these few troublesome Iranians as a serious threat to their own standing as rulers of Islam's holiest sanctuaries. Khomeini himself went on pilgrimage in 1973, without incident.

But the truly radical feature of Shiite doctrine as expounded both by Khomeini and Shariati was their abandonment of the Shiite principle of discretion (*taqiyya*) during the pilgrimage, a discretion which had generally been reciprocated by Saudi tolerance. They upset the delicate balance which preserved the pilgrimage peace by virtually abrogating the traditional Shiite doctrine of legitimate discretion. By urging their followers to view the pilgrimage as a political rite, they set Shiites apart from other pilgrims, with serious

consequences for the pilgrimage peace.

### THE PILGRIMAGE SINCE IRAN'S REVOLUTION

Following the Iranian revolution, Iran sought to act on the principles elaborated by Khomeini, by appealing directly to the Muslim pilgrims of other lands through political activity during the pilgrimage. Still, Khomeini's preaching to the pilgrims did not immediately menace the Saudis themselves. The first two seasons passed without serious incident. In 1979, Iran's pilgrims engaged in no more than light propagandizing, and in 1980, Iran organized a much reduced pilgrimage, due to the outbreak of war with Iraq. But the mission of Khomeini's supporters in the holy cities was no longer to import revolution to Iran, but to export Iran's revolutionary Islam to the wider Muslim world. The pilgrimage provided an unequalled opportunity for Iran's zealots to sway the minds of the two million Muslims who now attend the pilgrimage.

Large demonstrations, resulting in violent clashes with Saudi police, first took place in 1981, when Iranian pilgrims began to chant political slogans in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Great Mosque in Mecca. Saudi security forces acted against the Iranians in both mosques, and a subsequent clash in the Prophet's Mosque resulted in the death of an Iranian pilgrim. In 1982, the Iranian pilgrimage took on an even more radical color, when Khomeini appointed Hojjatolislam Musavi-Khoiniha as his pilgrimage representative. Khoiniha was the mentor of the students who had seized the United States Embassy in Tehran. Saudi police clashed with demonstrators whom he addressed in both Medina and Mecca. In Mecca he was arrested, and a speech he delivered in Medina after the pilgrimage earned him expulsion as an "instigator."

The next three seasons saw something of a respite, although tensions remained high. Libya's Qadhafi mediated an understanding in 1983, so that only one incident ended in violence. Khoiniha assured the Saudis that "Iranian pilgrims are not here to confront you," but "to counter the American and Soviet superpowers, as well as Zionism." In 1984, there were no clashes between Saudi police and Iranian pilgrims. But Saudi handling of a clash between Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims, which left one Iranian dead, led to a new round of Iranian

attacks on Saudi pilgrimage management, and an official Iranian protest. And in 1985, a dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the permitted number of Iranian pilgrims led the Saudis to deny landing to several Iranian pilgrimage flights.

By 1986, it seemed that Iran and Saudi Arabia had reached a compromise permitting Iran to conduct a limited measure of political propaganda during the pilgrimage. That understanding resulted from a short-lived attempt by Iran to show (or feign) moderation, in order to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. By the informal terms of the pilgrimage understanding, Khomeini's pilgrimage representative was permitted to organize two pilgrims' rallies, the first in Medina and the second in Mecca, in areas removed from the holy mosques in each city. A number of understandings restricted the form and content of these demonstrations. Iran's pilgrims were not to import or display printed matter and posters of a political nature, and their slogans were to be directed only against the United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel. Other Muslim governments, and the host government, were not to be criticized. This understanding allowed Iran's pilgrims to vent their views, but enabled Saudi authorities to confine all demonstrating to two fixed events.

In 1986, a group of Iranian pilgrims who opposed the strategy of moderation in dealing with Saudi Arabia arrived in the country with a quantity of explosives. Their aim was to destroy the pilgrimage understanding reached between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But they failed. Saudi authorities discovered the explosives and arrested 115 of the pilgrims upon their arrival. Those Iranian leaders who had assured Saudi Arabia that the pilgrimage peace would be preserved were embarrassed, and dissociated themselves from the plot by allowing the Saudis to detain the pilgrims for weeks without protest. But the plotters did enjoy the support of one of the major factions in Iran - that which is opposed to the pursuit of any opening toward the Saudis and favors the aggressive export of the revolution. In the pilgrimage plot of 1986, it became clear that the pilgrimage peace was an unstable one, affected by the changing balance in Iran's internal power struggle.

By 1987, that balance had clearly shifted in favor of the same faction responsible for the thwarted provocation of 1987. The demonstration of the Iranians which

culminated in violence exceeded the bounds of the understanding of past years. That was to be expected, for the understanding is not a formal one, and each year Iran has sought to modify it in favor of Khomeini's original vision of the pilgrimage as a great demonstration. But at some point during the Mecca demonstration of 1987, the established bounds were grossly violated by the Iranian pilgrims, or the Saudi police, or both.

### THE NEW PILGRIMAGE POLEMIC

This increasing incidence of violence has been complemented by the intensification of polemical debate over the pilgrimage. This has tended simply to revalidate old prejudices, as a result of the manner in which Iranian pilgrims have set themselves apart from other pilgrims. What appears to be a recent confrontation between radical and conservative Islam has these timeless sectarian animosities at its core. The polemic itself has not been a simple repetition of the old libels, but they have been transformed and made more credible, so that they no longer express sectarian distrust so much as they evoke it. This transformation probably reflects the influence of ecumenism upon the intellectual climate of contemporary Islam, a climate now inhospitable to overt sectarian polemics.

For most Muslims, it is no longer considered politic to dwell openly on the differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam. Indeed, merely to cite these differences is regarded by many Shiites as an attempt to isolate them, and even as part of an imperialist plot to foment division in Islam. Yet any reading of the declarations and documents generated by the recent pilgrimage polemic cannot but create a strong sense that all this has been said before. Most of today's lines of argument clearly insinuate the libels of yesterday.

A vivid example may be found in the brief correspondence between the late Saudi King Khalid and Imam Khomeini in October 1981, at a time of violent clashes in Mecca and Medina between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police. Khalid compiled a revealing letter of protest to Khomeini, asking that Khomeini urge his followers to show restraint, but strongly hinting that the Great Mosque had been defiled by blasphemous Iranian pilgrims. According to Khalid, Iranian pilgrims in the Great Mosque had performed their circumambulations while

chanting "God is great, Khomeini is great," and "God is one, Khomeini is one." There was no need for Khalid to make his charge more explicit. It was obvious that the Iranians' slogans were the product of an excessive veneration of their Imam, constituting a form of blasphemous polytheism. Khalid wrote Khomeini that all this had aroused the "dissatisfaction and disgust" of other pilgrims.

In fact, these were distortions of very well-known Iranian revolutionary slogans. Iranian pilgrims had actually chanted "God is great, Khomeini is leader." The Saudis had confused the Persian word for "leader" with the rhyming Arabic for "great." The pilgrims' Arabic chant declared that "God is one, Khomeini is leader." Here, the Saudis had confused the Arabic for "one" with the rhyming Arabic for "leader." There was a vast difference between the slogans as actually chanted by the Iranians, and the inadvertent or deliberate misrepresentations of Khalid. In the actual slogans, Khomeini is cast as a leader unrivaled in the world, but subordinate to an almighty God. In the slogans as reported by the Saudis, Khomeini is placed on one plane with God, a verbal pollution of Islam's holiest sanctuary. It was this familiar but disguised charge of Shiite defilement which the Saudis sought to level at Iran's pilgrims. The accusation gained credibility from the formerly widespread Sunni conviction that the Shiites are bound to pollute the Great Mosque.

In his reply to Khalid, Khomeini evoked the old Shiite libel, charging the Saudis with failing to respect the refuge provided by the Great Mosque. "How is it that the Saudi police attack Muslims with jackboots and weapons, beat them, arrest them, and send them to prisons from inside the holy mosque, a place which according to the teaching of God and the text of the Quran, is refuge for all, even deviants?" This was a decidedly Shiite reading of the meaning of the Great Mosque's sanctity, which owed a great deal to the concept of refuge (*bast*) that traditionally applied to Shiite shrines in Iran. Such shrines were indeed absolutely inviolable places of refuge, where any kind of malefactor could find asylum.

Nothing could have been farther from the Wahhabi-Saudi concept of the sanctity of the holy places. These were and are regarded as sites so sacred that no deviation at all may be allowed in their precincts. Only from a Shiite perspective did this Saudi concern for

preserving the purity of the Great Mosque appear as blind disrespect. In 1979, the Saudis had acted in good conscience to clear the Great Mosque of "deviants," relying upon a *fatwa* issued by Shaykh Ibn Baz and over thirty other men of religion, who argued that it was permissible to dislodge the defilers even by force of arms. This decision enjoyed wide Muslim support beyond Saudi Arabia, and Khomeini's presentation of the Great Mosque as a place in which even "deviants" enjoyed absolute immunity could only be regarded as peculiarly Shiite, for it relied upon a Shiite concept of inviolable refuge which knows no parallel in Sunni Islam.

Differing concepts of sanctity also affected that part of the pilgrimage controversy played out in Medina. In 1982, Khomeini's representative to the pilgrimage chose the cemetery of al-Baqi in Medina as the site for a series of demonstrations combined with visitation prayers. After the Saudi demolition of the shrines in the cemetery in 1926, al-Baqi ceased to serve as a place of Shiite visitation. But after Iran's Islamic revolution, the formal prayers were reinstated against Saudi will, and were recited outside the high wall which the Saudis once built to seal off the cemetery. In 1986, in a remarkable concession to Iran's pilgrims, Saudi authorities allowed them access to the cemetery itself, and Khomeini's representative to the pilgrimage formally thanked Saudi King Fahd for permitting the return of Shiite pilgrims to the venerated site. This obsessive interest in al-Baqi and other tombs, and the resort to the cemetery as a rallying point for pilgrims in Medina, reflects an especially Shiite notion of Medina's sanctity, and serves to evoke past resentment against the Saudis for having defaced the memory of the Imams.

#### THE CHANGING SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY

This heightened Shiite interest in Medina also owes a great deal to changes in the spiritual geography of Shiite Islam. Since the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq, it is no longer possible for Iranians to visit the Shiite shrine cities in Iraq and the tombs of the Imams in their sacred precincts. Their inaccessibility has greatly enhanced the significance for Iranian Shiism of the holy cities of Arabia, and especially Medina.

The number of Iranians who now desire to make the pilgrimage far exceeds the number

that Saudi Arabia is willing to admit in any one year, or that Iran is prepared to provide with scarce hard currency for the journey. Application for pilgrimage is centralized in Iran, and by 1984 the list of applicants had reached 600,000. The annual figure agreed upon by Iran and Saudi Arabia (after some inevitable haggling) has stood at about 150,000 since 1984. Even at this reduced figure, Iran's pilgrims now consistently constitute about 18% of foreign pilgrims, the largest foreign national group.

The demand has probably increased because of the inaccessibility of the Iraqi shrines. Iran's pilgrims may have invested Medina with some of the same emotional significance as those shrines. Certainly with the unprecedented influx of Iranian pilgrims, al-Baqi has emerged again as a major Shiite shrine. The site itself remains desolate. But mass prayer services are conducted there, not by the Saudi men of religion who manage the mosques in Mecca and Medina, but by visiting Shiite clerics. They have established themselves as the pilgrimage's only ceremonial functionaries who are not members of the official supervisory bureaucracy of Saudi Islam.

Such identifiably Shiite themes and methods of protest might blind other pilgrims to the political message of liberation Iran wishes to convey during the pilgrimage. The fear that Iran's message might simply be dismissed by other Muslims as Shiite dissent has been responsible for some of the ecumenical intonations of Khomeini's pilgrimage representatives and other Shiite clerics. At times they have even urged Iran's pilgrims to refrain from excessive praise of their Imam Khomeini, an admonition which usually is not heeded. Iran's pilgrims are also explicitly instructed to pray with all other pilgrims behind the Sunni prayer leaders in the Great Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque, lest they stand out for their Shiism rather than their political activism.

At the same time, however, leading Shiite clerics have undertaken a campaign to discredit Saudi Islam as a legitimate form of Sunni Islam. Early in this century, most of the Sunni world regarded the doctrine of the Wahhabis as a heresy, for the Wahhabis displayed a severe intolerance toward other Sunnis whom they regarded as backsliders. Since then there has been a virtual revolution in Sunni Islam, by which the Saudis have gained wide Sunni recognition as the propounders of orthodox faith. The aim of Shiite clerics has been to reverse that

revolution, by reminding other Sunnis of those points where the Islam of the Saudis diverges from that of other Sunnis.

This campaign began by emphasizing a point on which the Saudis themselves could be excluded from the ecumenical consensus of Islam. Shiism's determined foe, Shaykh Ibn Baz, provided the Shiite clerics with a perfect pretext. In November 1981, Shaykh Ibn Baz issued a denunciation of the practice of celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. In a *fatwa*, he determined that "God has not decreed for us any birthday celebrations, either for the Prophet or for anyone else," and urged Muslims to abandon this "heretical innovation." This position accorded with the doctrinal stand of pristine Wahhabism, which deems the marking of the Prophet's birthday a late development in Islam and a compromise of the faith's monotheistic principles.

Observance of the Prophet's birthday is nonetheless widespread in the Muslim world, among Sunnis and Shiites alike. In many countries it is recognized as an official holiday. Championing observance of the Prophet's birthday would cast Iran as an adherent of Sunni-Shiite unity, while bringing Muslim attention to the alleged deviance of Saudi Islam. Khomeini's attack on Shaykh Ibn Baz represented a frontal assault on the entire tradition which the Saudi man of religion personified: "This mullah is a lackey of the Saudi Arabian court and wants to implement the King's wishes; therefore, he stands against the Muslims and makes such remarks. Is it blasphemy to respect the Prophet of God? Does this mullah understand the meaning of blasphemy?" Shaykh Ibn Baz was "extremely ignorant" of Islam. Khomeini's insinuation was clear: Did the attitude of Saudi "disrespect" for the Prophet not constitute a point on which Shiism and Sunnism converged, while Wahhabism diverged?

Iran's formal answer to the *fatwa*, on the initiative of Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri, was to establish an annual "unity week" spanning the two different birthdays of the Prophet (one recognized by Sunnis, the other by Shiites). Obviously, had Montazeri's sole intention been the promotion of Muslim unity, he could have scheduled this annual week of ecumenical conferences and speeches for an even more neutral date. But by combining his appeal for unity with observance of the Prophet's birthday, he purposely sought to exclude Saudi Arabia, Iran's principal rival, from the contest for

primacy in Islam.

### RESTORING THE PILGRIMAGE PEACE

The ever-changing demands of politics have had an obvious effect upon the climate of pilgrimage, at this and many other moments in history. It is certainly significant that the short-lived Saudi-Iranian rapprochement between 1983 and 1986 coincided with an easing of tensions during the pilgrimage, and that the tragedy of 1987 followed an escalation of conflict in the Gulf. The pilgrimage reenacts on a small scale the conflicts which rend the Muslim world of today.

But when those conflicts themselves evoke past prejudice, such as that between Sunni and Shiite, the journey to Mecca can become a pilgrimage into the past, stirring animosities which are part and parcel of culture. From a historical perspective, the contemporary controversy is but the latest chapter in an immemorial feud over the Muslim pilgrimage. For centuries, Shiite pilgrims have sought through claims of persecution to blacken the reputation of successive Sunni rulers of Mecca. For centuries, Sunnis have charged Shiite pilgrims with the most abhorrent violations of Mecca's sanctity. To rediscover the pure faith of one's fathers is also to relearn their great and petty bigotries.

Saudi Arabia must now begin to consider the policy it will adopt toward Iranian pilgrims in 1988, although the final decision will depend upon the political climate in the last months and even days before the scheduled arrival of the first pilgrims. The Saudis have three options. First, they might forbid entry to Iranian pilgrims or order their numbers diminished. The latter step would probably be tantamount to the first, since Iran has always made it clear that it would respond to any cut in the number of its pilgrims by boycotting the pilgrimage altogether. Other difficulties placed before the Iranians, such as delays in reaching agreements for their transportation and lodging, might have the same effect of prompting an Iranian boycott of the pilgrimage.

If Saudi Arabia chooses this course, it will have to counter an inevitable Iranian charge that the Saudis have failed in their responsibility to permit all Muslims to meet a basic obligation of Islam. Saudi Arabia might present its case in a variety of ways, but would ultimately rely for support upon the traditional Sunni hostility to

alleged Shiite defilement of the pilgrimage. A ban on Shiite pilgrims also has precedents, dating from the sixteenth century. But that was possibly the most divided century in Islamic history, marked by great wars of religion between Sunnis and Shiites. Such a ban in this century would signal the return of Islam to a state of absolute division.

A second course of Saudi action might be to ban demonstrations on the grounds that in Mecca's crowded streets, any demonstration for any purpose constitutes a danger to public safety. By such a policy, Saudi Arabia would essentially terminate the understanding which has allowed one Iranian demonstration in Mecca. The Saudis would then be obliged to take every measure to enforce the ban, including the expulsion of Khomeini's pilgrimage representative should he call for a demonstration. This option clearly contains the seeds of a further bloody confrontation.

The third Saudi option is to allow all the elements of the previous understanding to remain in force. This would necessitate detailed negotiations with the Iranians and explicit assurances from Khomeini. Without such assurances, the consequences of pursuing such a course would be unpredictable. For in the present climate of factional rivalry in Iran, there is no certainty that assurances given by a lesser authority would bind all of Iran's pilgrims. Whether such an agreement can be negotiated while the climate of tensions in the gulf persists, seems doubtful.

Islam has emerged from its revival more divided than at any time in the living memory of its adherents. The religious awakening of Islam has already produced a devastating war between Muslims along the same frontier of Islamic history's greatest internecine struggle. It has produced denunciations of unbelief and declarations of holy war by Muslims against Muslims, of a kind which had long ceased to be heard in Islam. And now even the pilgrimage, symbol of Islam's overriding unity, has become a tinderbox. □

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## FURTHER READING FOR THIS PUBLICATION

A thorough introduction to the Muslim pilgrimage in modern times is provided by David Long, *The Hajj Today: A Survey of the Contemporary Makkah Pilgrimage* (Washington, 1979). Written before the Iranian revolution, the book does not deal at length with the politics of pilgrimage. The author nevertheless provides a detailed discussion of the social and economic impact of the pilgrimage on Saudi Arabia and an invaluable bibliography. A treatment of subsequent developments in the pilgrimage may be found in the annual *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, beginning with volume six (covering 1981-1982).

The course of Saudi-Iranian relations since Iran's revolution is considered by R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 86-113.

For an account of modern Sunni-Shiite polemics, see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin, 1982), pp. 18-51. The special place of Medina in Shiite Islam is discussed in detail in the classic study by Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion* (London, 1933), pp. 142-151.

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