

Controversial Shia Ritual Under Fire

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Some Shia clerics are now recommending believers to donate their blood instead of shedding it in a ritual to commemorate the Imam Hussein.

The bomb blasts which wrought havoc in Karbala during an important Shia ceremony earlier this month have strengthened calls for people to give up a controversial religious ritual where they cut themselves and draw blood. Some clerics are urging people to give blood instead, but others insist the centuries-old practice should be retained as an important part of Shia tradition.

The need for blood donors as Iraq's health services struggle to cope with continuing violence was highlighted when hundreds of people were injured – as well as some 140 reported dead – on the March 2 bomb attacks at shrines in Karbala and Baghdad.

Shias had congregated in their thousands at the shrine to participate in Ashura, a period of ritual mourning which they mark every year in memory of the seventh-century Imam Hussein. It was the first time the Ashura ceremonies had been held in public since the fall of Saddam Hussein, whose regime was wary of any display of Shia religious zeal.

Psychology student Haidar Ahmed al-Musawi, 25, travelled to Karbala and took part in the mourning rituals, whipping his back with a flail and pounding his chest with his hand. He was planning to join in what for many is the climax of the festival – “tatbir”, where participants slash their heads with a short sword.

Then he recalled the words of his marja, or spiritual guide – who had said people should donate blood to hospitals rather than spill it in mourning. Taking this advice, “I felt that I was doing a service to people who need blood,” said Musawi. “The recompense [from God] will be the same as if I had participated in the tatbir, because I am helping people.”

For more than 30 years, public displays of tatbir have been banned in Iraq. But now that the ritual has reappeared, a number of clerics have declared that it should not be performed.

Some observers believe the pressure for change come from Iran, where the scholarly establishment considers tatbir an anachronism which tarnishes the public image of Shia Muslims.

There are even Iranians who come to Iraq so that they can practice a ritual that would get them into trouble at home. “I came with 30 others from Iran to Karbala to attend Ashura and practice tatbir,” said one 35-year old man from the city of Qom, who refused to give his name. “If I was in Iran I would have been jailed or otherwise punished.”

In Iraq, too, there is now a powerful trend toward change.

“We advise all Shia to donate blood instead of performing tatbir,” said Hassan Ali al-Musawi, from the al-Murtada media foundation which answers to Iraq’s senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani.

Musawi believes the images of bloodstained mourners do the Shia community no favours. “The practice of

tatbir is exploited by the foreign media to [falsely] depict the Shia as being involved in violence and bloodshed at the Ashura festival".

The bomb attacks that have targeted Iraq civilians over the past six months, prompting increased demand for blood, have given added impetus to the campaign to end tatbir.

"Blood donation is better than tatbir because it helps sick people in hospital, and helps to reduce the crisis facing the country, especially the terrorist attacks which have become a daily visitation on Iraqis," said 17-year old Mohammed Zubair al-Habib, who has chosen donation over tatbir.

"I wish that all Shia could be better educated, to stop tatbir and donate blood for the sick," said Hanan al-Masoudi, a doctor at Karbala's al-Hussein hospital.

Other Shia scholars, however, claim that there is no connection between blood donation and tatbir, a ritual that performers believe allows them to share in the suffering of the Imam Hussein.

"Tatbir is neither forbidden nor obligatory. There is no relationship between tatbir and blood donation," said Ayatollah Hadi al-Madrasi, a Shia cleric from Karbala. "Blood donation is a noble thing, but it should not be considered an alternative to tatbir."

"Tatbir is better than blood donation," says the book "Fatwas of the Rituals of Hussein", written by Grand Ayatollah Sadeq al-Shirazi, an Iraqi cleric living in Iran who has been trying to re-establish tatbir there.

For some of Shirazi's followers in Iraq, tatbir is not something that Iranians have the right to ban. "With all due respect to Sayyid Ali al-Khameini, supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, he doesn't rule Iraq and he can't ban the tatbir procession," said Ashraf Hussein al-Karbala'i, 35, a peddler in Karbala.

"I know that foreigners laugh at us when they see the tatbir procession, and accuse us of backwardness," he said. He insists, however, that "blood donation is good, but we will not abandon tatbir, because it is better".

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