

Mixed Feelings Over Saddam Seizure in Karbala

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Shia city celebrates Saddam's capture – but harbours deep mistrust of the occupying forces.

On the day that Saddam Hussein's capture was announced, restaurant owners in Karbala offered meals on the house, hoteliers made no charge for staying the night and fruit vendors handed out sacks of free oranges.

Many Iraqis are now arguing that December 13, 2003 – the day of the former leader's arrest – should be a national holiday for all Iraqis instead of April 9, the day Baghdad fell.

During Saddam's reign, few Iraqi cities suffered as greatly as Karbala.

Eight months after the end of Saddam's regime, horror stories are still emerging from Karbala with people talking of mass killings, execution lists and victims buried alive.

Hamid Azhar al-Mosawi, head of the Karbala tribal committee, claims that as many as half a million local residents were executed over a 20-year period.

As a long-time centre of Shia power, the city endured numerous brutal crackdowns, particularly after the 1991 Gulf War. The ensuing uprising prompted Saddam's security forces to descend on the region – often with orders to execute one male from each home at random.

Fathya Kheiralla Ibrahim recalls the time when her 11-year-old son was taken away in 1991, never to be seen again. And Faiza Hussein Abdullah told IWPR how the soldiers descended on her village of Twereej with orders to execute a male from each household.

They took Faiza's eldest son Jasim, but they also took her younger son Alaa after failing to find any men in neighbouring houses,

Since the capture of Hussein, a discernable sense of optimism and economic promise has begun to replace the old days of fear, loss and the disappearance of loved ones.

Karbala and its sister city Najaf have begun hosting thousands of Shia pilgrims from Iran and other countries.

Under the old regime, such pilgrims were denied the chance to visit holy shrines due to Iraq's international isolation and Saddam's desire to stifle the influence of the country's Shia majority.

Karbala's central market district, the huge space between the twin shrines to the seventh-century martyrs Hussein and Abbas, is itself something of a monument to the slain.

Once filled with shops, the area was gradually levelled by tanks, artillery, and helicopter gunships.

But today the central market is thronged with pilgrims from Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, India and other parts of the Shia world. Here, posters of murdered ayatollahs are on sale next to DVD compilations with titles such as "The Crimes of Saddam".

Abdulkhalik Aubaid, head of the Al-Janan Tourism Company, told IWPR, "This is a time of joy for Iraqis, an end to the age of oppression and a new step forward in the religious tourism field."

Zolani Khojal, a religious tourist from India, called the former Iraqi ruler "an obstacle in the road of our visit to the holy places in Iraq. The way he lives now is revenge from God."

But the joy at Saddam's fall doesn't necessarily translate into warm feelings for the coalition forces that ousted him and still occupy the country.

Many Shia, while applauding the former president's capture, also issued stern warnings to United States and coalition forces to make their stay in Iraq a temporary one.

Despite their obvious pleasure at the end of the Saddam era, citizens of Karbala feel distrust and hostility toward the United States and the interim Governing Council it has appointed.

"America is still an occupying force, and Saddam is nothing but a soldier used by them and representing them," said Sheikh Khudeir al-Ansari, imam of the Al-Mukhyam Mosque, claiming that the former Iraqi ruler had been a US agent for 35 years.

"The Iraqi constitution is being formed by an Israeli committee and the Governing Council will just sign it," he added.

Karim Salim, an employee at the Imam Al-Abbas mosque and shrine, remembers when he first heard rumours of Hussein's capture. But he also insists that "now we are waiting for the news of the [Americans] leaving Iraq, so that Iraq will be without Saddam and without invaders."

Perhaps such mixed feelings can best be summed up by Muqtada Al-Sadr - the powerful and popular young leader who holds tremendous sway over millions of Iraqi Shia.

Al-Sadr has little love for Saddam, whose henchmen are said to have murdered his father, Imam Muhammed Al Sadr.

But he was blunt when asked his feelings on the US occupation, saying, "America is still the Great Satan."

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