

The Role of Common Ground in International Communication: The Iraq – Iran Correlation

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Abstract: It started as an idea to know more about Iraq, my neighboring country that has the longest border with Iran. The length of its border is not the main significance, as in 2003 my compassion was stimulated to think more about it. With the collapse of Saddam Hossein in the same year, a new white page was unlocked in the history of the Iran-Iraq relationship. My deep affection was directing me to discover more about this mysterious country where the family of the prophet of Islam is buried and has created the most tragic memory of the human communication.

Based on my personal observations during my two trips to Iraq in 2011, in this paper my main intention is to explore the role of common belief in the sense of religion in international communication. I seek the motivational facts that lead the Shiites to ignore some hazardous truths about Iraq in a pilgrimage that might seem pure madness. Handling the shrines of the holy Imams, especially Imam Ali (Alaiha Salaam)¹ and Imam Hossein (Alaiha Salaam), make the people ignore the probable dangers. Imam Ali is “Kabba of belief”² (Shahbaz, 2008) whose utmost target was positive communication as he said, “Associate with people in such a manner that they weep for you when you die and long for you if you are alive.” Meanwhile the history and war of Iraq-Iran, post war, the holy shrines of Shiite leaders in both countries especially in Iraq, will be discussed.

The people of these two countries have been restrained with walls that have always been put away by the will of people. This paper never seeks to persuade the world in accepting one belief or another but to explore the people who communicate with each other to gain a higher understanding of one another.

To the Iranian people, Imams who sacrificed themselves to establish peace and humanity on the earth are links to God through Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) to whom that the Holy Book of Quran was revealed.

Keywords: Iran, Iraq, the policy, holy shrines, peoples, communication

1. Introduction

My purpose in this paper is to develop an argument that Common Ground of the Muslims of

¹ The phrases “Alaiha Salaam” and “Peace Be Upon Him” are titles of great respect and are abbreviated as (AS) and (P.B.U.H.) later in this article.

² The Kabba is the sacred stone in Mecca, hence the comparison means Imam Ali (AS) is central to belief. More detail about the holy Imams is given in Section 4.2.

Iran and Iraq is a means by which communication can be strengthened, and facilitates improved understanding between the peoples of the two contrasting societies. It can serve as a vehicle for bringing people together who have been divided by conflicting firebrands and events in history that have driven them apart emotionally and politically. I mean Common Ground in the sense that religion permits nations to come to a deeper understanding about each other and gather in a circle of acceptance because of their belief in a deeper reality of their national record. This finds the potential for breaking down stereotypical perceptions.

The two neighboring countries that have been in conflict for varying periods of time in history are Iran, an Islamic nation and Iraq, a nation with more than three decades of dictatorship of Saddam Hussain whose actions were empowered in 1980 and collapsed in 2003 in a hope of giving an end to the terrorism and confusion in the region.

In spite of the eight year war of Iran-Iraq (1980-1988), the people of these two nations come to a higher understanding about each other as a result of 'Common Ground' in the case of religious beliefs.

All through the history the people of these two countries have been restrained with walls that are put away by the will of people. Some may think that what 40000 or more, even up to 1 million, Iranians do in different occasions in welcoming the dangerous condition of Iraq might be pure madness, whereas for the Shiites this is an ethnic reaction in keeping the memory and respecting the ideas of the martyred Imams especially Imam Hussain, that is being defended by some Sunni clerics too. As Sheikh 'Saleh Bin Almaghamesi' «صالح بن عواد المغامسي», the Wahhabi Imam of Ghoba Mosque in Madina, in Eghra (اقرأ) Channel Saudi T.V., expressed his respect to Imam Hussain (A.S.) who was beheaded in Muharram (the first month of the Islamic Calendar) while being thirsty (Defence of the Wahhabi imam of Imam Hussain, 1390/2011).³

'O! Son of Mohammad, they brought your head horribly smeared with blood
 When they slaughtered you, they as if deliberately slaughtered the messenger of God
 When they slaughtered you thirsty, they as if slaughtered revelation and exegesis of
 the Holy Qur'an
 When they slaughtered you, they said, "no god but Allah", although in fact they did
 slaughter no god but Allah and the messenger of Allah⁴

History proves, travelling to Iraq has always been a big challenge to show fidelity to the successors of the Prophet of Islam, who lost their lives to bring freedom to humanity. Today the story goes to a deeper ambivalence for the Iranians who try to pilgrimage the holy cities of Iraq and the problems are not limited to blasts, explosions and dangers of this kind. It is never known for a pilgrim whether she/he will come back alive from Iraq or not. The unknown condition has been the nature of Iraq for centuries.

Going to Karbala where the holy shrine of Imam Hossein is located means the acceptance of martyrdom. The Iranian Shiite pilgrims welcome confronting dangers with open arms as

³ In places where two alternative dates are given in this article, the first date refers to the Islamic lunar calendar (http://en.wikioedia.org/wiki/Islamic_calendar).

⁴ Translated from Arabic to English by Mr. Jilan Salim Mohammad Habib Al Qurainy.

martyrdom is the stage of noble people in the realm of Islam. In this regard Imam Khomeini said, "Martyrdom is an eternal honor" (Wise Sayings of Imam Khomeini, 2012). As the trip is not supposed to be a comforting one, the pilgrims prepare themselves not only for hazardous incidents but also nonstandard amenity.

In this paper I am exploring the history of *Iran* and *Iraq* and *their people*, the *Iranians' motivational factors* in being distracted from their past memories and neglecting the horrible imposed war of Iraq against Iran (1980-1988). Furthermore *the role of the Shiite Imams* who are the core of this qualitative research will be explored in detail. The *cultural background and similarities* of these two countries will be explored and finally a conclusion will be presented.

The importance of this research is based on my observations during my two trips to Iraq in 2011 to monitor the two nations' reactions towards each other in the dangerous warlike zone of Iraq. However, my main focus is to prove Common Ground in the sense of religious beliefs as the main reason for bringing the people of different countries together in tolerance and acceptance of each other.

2. Review of Literature

To open the discussion, it is necessary to mention a few points on a research study that was established to improve and open a new era in the relationship of the US and Iran. The two nations have been challenging each other over the past 32 years since the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979.

On February 17, 2009, Professor D. Ray Heisey (deceased on May 20, 2011) who was the president of Damavand college from 1975 to 1978 invited me to contribute to a project called 'How Foreigners are Perceived'. Later, the title was changed to "Visual and Artistic Rhetoric of Americans and Iranians of Each Other Impacted by Media" (Heisey & Sharifzadeh, 2011). In our paper the drawings of Iranian and US teenagers were focused on and some new findings led us to think more deeply about the media in general.

The drawings of both American and Iranian teenagers were trying to portray each other negatively. Iranian teenagers focused on Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine where the US and Israel have been involved in war. They portrayed the US as a powerful nation while using its authority in creating war and taking advantages of the invaded countries' resources (Heisey & Sharifzadeh, 2011, p.19). Of course the US teenagers portrayed the Iranians as terrorists.

Since in this paper my main aim is to explore Iran-Iraq relationship, the following examples can clearly define the students' ideas related to Iraq and the US.

The drawer of Figure 1 explains herself as, “*The U.S. is bombing Iraq to get more oil and the man in the middle is the head of a media and is happy for the war progress because it makes his ratings higher while the anchor woman represents a U.S. or U.K. official who is taking advantages of the condition to increase her country’s wealth. The US is an opportunist.*”

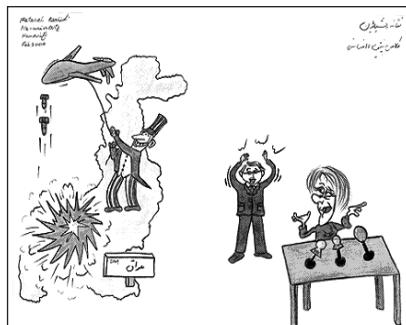


Figure 1. International Broadcasting

The drawer of Figure 2 explains herself as, “*The U.S. is riding Iraq as its prisoner/slave/donkey, while expressing extreme happiness and satisfaction. The US officials take advantages of the conditions and ride nations to double their property and wealth boorishly. The US is an opportunist oppressor.*”

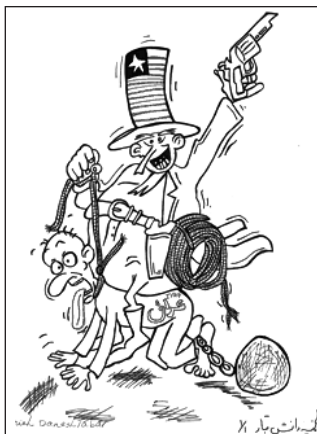


Figure 2. Cowboy riding Iraq

In 2003 the US army removed Saddam Hossein, a real threat to Iran, who had ruled Iraq for about three decades and involved the people of Iraq in the war against Iran. The war left Iran with about 11,697 missing people (The final figures of missed martyrs of the sacred defense—March 1391/2012), and 213,255 martyrs, injured and handicapped. (“The Figures for 8 Years’ Imposed War of Iran-Iraq 1387/1998”). So, why did the Iranian students condemn the US in

Iraq? Iraq broke out the horrible wars with Iran and Kuwait and more than two million killed, injured, and disabled people remained in Iraq. (More than two million Iraqis were killed in the war with Iran—1388/ 1999).

Albeit, my students were sympathizing with Iraq and demonstrating against the US as “Great Satan, Demolisher, Unreliable, Torturer, Main terrorist, Arrogant and Opportunist oppressor that has dominant desire, Exploitative colonialist, Conductor”, their comments seemed weird to me and their ideas could not convince me. Why should Iraq be of such an importance to the Iranian students and people while, “Even the Shiites of Iraq preferred the vicious tyranny of Saddam Hossein”? (Borgan, 1989, p. 253)

Further questions arose. Is it only because of the length of its border which is the longest in comparison with other neighbors, i.e. Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey? Or, there might be other reasons? So, taking trips to Iraq and observing everything closely seemed a necessity. In addition, in four verses of the Holy Book of Quran, 3:137; 6:11; 16:36; 29:20, Allah Subhanho Watala asks the prophet of Islam, “...so travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who disbelieved...”. Taking trips is of such an importance that about 14 centuries ago, The Prophet of Islam, Mohammad (P.B.U.H) said, ‘Go in Quest of knowledge even to China’ as seeing is often believing.

Considering the mentioned points communication brings more awareness, as Dr. D. Ray Heisey mentioned: “We can discover the value of dialogue, mediation, and arbitration and face to face communication that distinguishes human beings. The mentioned points broaden our understanding, perspective, and acceptance of OTHERS and the contribution they can make to our lives, if we but open our eyes, ears, and hearts.” (Sharifzadeh, 2011). Nowadays, the media is playing the main role to give the nations awareness about the others,. Media is usually the voice of the governments that speak with the language of law and sets of rules and orders.

In 1997, the Iranian president Mohammad Khatami said, “Instead of talking with each other with the language of force, we should speak with each other with the language of reason, opening a dialogue between civilizations.” (Khatami, 1997). Later on President Mahmood Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, in the UN, Sep 20 2011 said, “There is no other way than the shared and collective management of the world to put an end to the present disorders, tyranny and discriminations worldwide.” I think every individual is responsible for achieving higher understandings about other nations that play an essential role in the destiny of one’s own country.

3. My Trips to Iraq

In April and October 2011, I took two trips to Iraq for pilgrimages which was a long term desire for me since 1989; I wanted to know more about Iraq and its people. Each one of my trips lasted about eight days. The first one was a land trip which took about 30 hours and the second one was by air, about 12 hours including a 6 hour land trip to get to the shrine of Imam Ali (AS) in Najaf which was our first destination. Flights from Imam Khomeini airport in Tehran to Baghdad airport last about one and a half hours.

In both trips I was among 40 pilgrims. Although Iranians have always been travelling to Iraq either to go on pilgrimage or bury the dead in a sacred cemetery known as ‘Dar Ul

Salam'. Since Saddam's decline 'Hajj and Ziyarat Organization of Iran' has been organizing the pilgrims for a better opportunity to go on pilgrimage to the holy shrines. Nowadays, each day more than 4000 people visit the holy shrines of Imam Hossein in Karbala, Imam Ali in Najaf, Imam Askariyyen in Samara and two more Imams in Kazemein. ("Each Day 4000 Iranian People Go to Iraq", September 1390/2011). It is estimated that in 2012 more than 1 million pilgrims visit Iraq. ("More than 1 Million Pilgrims Go to Iraq", 2012).

Note 2: Is this the same person as Imam Hossein (in this abstract) and Imam Hussain (in the Introduction) and Imam Hossain (at the end of Section 4.1.) and Imam Hossein (Section 4.2.)? Please use the same spelling.

In my first trip, I had a one night stay in the border city of Mehran that is an Iranian county. Now, this city is not populous enough and war has left a desolated atmosphere in that area. The facilities were of poor quality. The overnight stay was spent collectively based on genders in separate rooms to regain energy for the next day.

In my second trip, at the airport there was a 4 hour delay to Baghdad. From Baghdad to the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf we took a bus and the distance was about 6 hours. Fortunately, the Iranians were patient enough to hold the shrines (Figure 3) to prove their loyalty to those who sacrificed themselves for the freedom of human ideas. People believe, the more difficulties they experience, the more rewards will be obtainable in the Day of Judgment. Those who go on pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Ali, will be a bird of Paradise. (Shaikh al-Hur al-Aamili, 17th century, p. 379). To know more about Iraq a brief description seems necessary.



Figure 3. Holding the Shrine

4. Iraq

Iraq (Figure 4) is located in the Middle East, between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iraq is also bordered by Jordan, Syria, Kuwait, and Turkey. Iraq's capital city, Baghdad, is located in the center of the country. Other major cities include al-Basra in the south and Mosul in the north. While Karbala, Najaf, Samara and Kazemain are the most important cities for the Shiites as

including the shrines of the Shiite Imams. (“Iraq-National Encyclopedia”). The population of Iraq is about 30,399,572 (as estimated July 2011). (“Iraq Population—2011”).



Figure 4. The Map of Iraq

Iraq has one of the world’s oldest cultural histories. What is now Iraq was once the Cradle of Civilization in ancient Mesopotamia and the culture of Sumer, where writing and the wheel were invented. In the 8th and 9th centuries, Iraq was then one of the world’s richest civilizations. The majority of Iraqis (97%) are Muslim. Sixty to sixty-five percent are Shi’ite Muslims, while Sunnis comprise 32-37 percent of Muslims in the country. The remaining three percent are made up of Christians and other religious groups. Arabic is the official language, but Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian are also spoken. Iraqi society is dominated by tribal and familial affiliations.

4.1. People of Iraq

The Iraqi people have an ancient cultural history and civilization. In spite of the importance of this region, genetic studies on the Iraqi people are limited and are generally restricted to analysis of classical markers due to Iraq’s modern political instability, although there have been several published studies displaying the genealogical connection between all Iraqi people and the neighboring countries, across religious and linguistic barriers. One such study reveals a close genetic relationship between Iraqis, Kurds, Caspian Iranians and Svani Georgians (“Iraqi People”).

In 1299, Lunar Arabic Year, i.e. about 134 years ago, (now it is 1433), Seyfo Dolleh, Soltan Mohammad; an Iranian prince, described the people of Iraq in his travel book to Meccah, as those who are “Content with current social condition while being greedy to gain more money and welfare. They easily become fond of someone and easier than that they depart. They make jokes and lie so skillfully that one believes right away despite the past experiences” (Soltan Mohammad, SeifoDolleh, p. 221).

In Nahjolbalaghe (Peak of Eloquence) of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, there are topics in condemnation of the people of Iraq, in sermons 70, 118, 123, 207, and some more on condemning the people

of Basra and Kufa in sermons 13 and 216. In the history of the life of Imam Ali, Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain, the people of Iraq, i.e. the people of Kufa, appear as 'Fair-weather friends' who have openly been snubbed in Nahajul Balagha in several cases, as mentioned above. (Imam Amir al-Mu'minin Ali bnAbi-Talib's Nahjol-balagh [Peak of Eloquence]).

After the martyrdom of Imam Ali some people of Kufa deserted Imam Hossein because of their nefarious activities and forced him to abandon his struggle against Mu'awiyah, the first Caliph for the Umayyad Dynasty, and enter into a peace treaty with him. (Chapter Three: 2012)

Disloyalty and opportunism of the Kufians were proved to Imam Hussain too as they forgot their promises easily and left him alone in the battle field with the forces of Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph whom Hussain had refused to recognize as caliph. In that battle 72 people remained to support him. They were all martyred, and now the Shrine of Imam Hossein(A.S.) and his companions is in Karbala and is the center for the pilgrimage of tens of thousands pilgrims who are still in trouble with the unknown vicious acts of the terrorists and those against the human rights and know nothing but the language of force and terror, although shi'as never give up and welcome martyrdom with open arms.

Based on my own experience, the Iraqis' personality is introverted and we can never guess their hidden thoughts and ideas.

It is necessary to mention that, 'The Organization of Hajj and Ziyarat', always emphasizes the importance of not going through any argument with the Iraqis in Iraq. The reason is that the memory of the 8 year war (1980-1988) has not been wiped out of the mind of the people of both countries. The martyrs, disabled, and chemical victims all have left painful memories in the minds of the people. A questionnaire which was given to several Iraqis indicates they cannot forget the Iran - Iraq war. Mr. Jilan Salim Mohammad Habib Al-Qurainy suggests not being able to forget the shelling of Basra by the Iranian forces.

In 1988 ceasefire brought an end to the Iran-Iraq war, although until this day the bodies of the martyrs of the 8 years of the 'sacred war' are being discovered in different areas of the border cities of Iran-Iraq. Most of them were the youth who voluntarily and generously sacrificed themselves not to allow Iran be invaded by Saddam's troops. Their remaining bodies bring the most painful memories of those years when Saddam's ambitions led him to tyrannical actions to extend his territory.

Nevertheless, when the US invaded Iraq, Iranians sympathized with Iraqis. As an example, in 2010 one of my students wrote a letter to Dr. D. Ray Heisey about the US attack on Iraq:

America? The only thing that pops into the mind of an Asian child is this: Blood, death, prison, dark sky, unknown future. America? America has no idea what a war is like. She has no idea how it feels like to sleep with the fear of not being able to see the sky the next day and to be afraid that one may not be able to see any of the family members anymore just in a few seconds. America is known as the country of nations and the country of liberty. Isn't the liberty statue supposed to mean so? Is liberty a symbol or does it really exist in the US? No it does not exist. The government defines freedom and peace like this: Killing a lot of women and children every day in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan,. It means to support a vampire government named Israel who kills children in the name of fighting against terrorism. Are children really terrorists? How can the US government

give herself the right to forbid someone from living? They occupy people's territory and treat them as thieves. They make people homeless and ignore their rights to live. Americans live in news censorship and they know nothing about PEACE! American people are nice but their government is a demolisher. But I would like to add a question: Aren't Americans the ones who elect their government?

In response, Professor D. Ray Heisey wrote:

You are right. The American government thinks that it is "the shining city on the hill", bringing freedom and liberty to others. But it needs to stop and reflect on what it actually is doing to others in the process and what the costs are. It is also causing thoughtful, concerned people like you in other countries to see it as "a killer." This behavior is unacceptable.

And in an interview, an American soldier explains his painful experience about the Iraqi youth like this:

The biggest problem is that millions of Iraqi children are out of school and unable to participate in normal activities. Because of this, most children lack the means to become productive members of society. Another study found that under Saddam Hossein nearly 4% of Iraqi children under five were going hungry, but in 2006 that figure doubled to 8%. In terms of education and opportunity, over 3.4 million young people in Iraq today do not attend school. A research team that interviewed more than 1,000 Iraqi children countrywide found that much of Iraq's youth population suffers from serious mental health problems as a result of the violence. It found that 92% of those examined have learning disabilities that can be connected to Iraq's poor security condition.

Younger Iraqis are attracted to the glamour and drama of insurgency groups, but once they join, they become exploited. ("Interview with Cpt. Jon Powers").

Another article reads: "Health and poverty affected children at higher rates. Most important was the impact of trauma. An Iraq mental health survey in 2007 estimated that almost one in five Iraqis had some mental illness. Young adults were no exception. A survey of school children in Mosul found that almost four of every ten children under sixteen had a mental disorder. ("International Crisis Group" PHEBE, p. 371).

There are some unavoidable trends in Iraqis' actions that can't be abandoned as the former rulers have left a stubborn and distrustful impact on their character. "From 1968-1979, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hossein- had established a reign of terror – a series of trials, executions, and arrests reminiscent of Stalin era- that became hallmark of the regime." (PHEBE. 2012 – p. 137). From 1980 to the end of 2011, the country has been facing different challenges in war activities either in the presence of Saddam or the US troops. Now, Iraq is a demolished country with walls and military barriers to separate different parts of the cities to bring more security to different tribes. War has brought harmful results to all aspects including

nature. The number of palm trees have declined and drinking water is polluted. “This water is often unfit for human consumption or even for agricultural use..... Many farming communities were hard hit by the drought that struck northern Iraq in 2008. Average rainfall over the past 10 years has been far lower than in previous decades” (“Iraq’s Drinking Water Drying Up, Sewage Pollutes Shrinking Rivers”).

Nowadays, in Iraq military forces are everywhere with advanced investments to guarantee security, although the bombs and suicide bombs threaten the people in large numbers by sudden blasts. Iranians are never happy with the present condition of Iraq, although at the time of the cease-fire Iraqis were thrilled and, “came out on the streets to celebrate with the sense not only of relief but also of victory.” (PHEBE, 2012, p. 209).

Now it is very likely for the Iranian pilgrims to lose their life in Iraq in one way or another. For instance, on April 30, 2012, there was fire in a hotel in Karbala, and 10 people were injured.⁵ Still, Iranians never get tired and help Iraq to improve its poor financial condition. Their love to Imam Hossain is endless and to them the martyred Shiite leaders’ shrines are of great importance.

4.2. Shiites of Iraq

Iraq is a Shi’a -majority country which has four major cities respected by the world Shiites. Shi’a means “followers of Ali”. The term has widely appeared in tradition and is repeated four times in the Holy Book of *Quran* as ‘follower’; for example in chapter 37:83 mentions Abraham as a Shi’a (follower) of Noah. This concept is repeated in some more chapters of the *Quran* as in 28:15; 37:83; 6:65; 28:4. Imam Ali is considered the first Imam of Shi’a and is known as:

“A first class warrior and a marshal who is also a philosopher, a moralist and a great teacher of religious principles and theology. For Islam he was the first line of defense. Another phase of his character is portrayed by his sermons, orders, letters and sayings. They persuade us to be warriors who can fight only for God, truth and justice, and not mercenaries murdering and plundering for wealth and riches; and how they instruct us to be teachers who can teach nothing injurious and harmful to mankind. Was there any such combination before and will there ever be?” (Askari, Jafari, p.19).

Imam Hassan and Hossein are described by Shias as “leaders of all youths in paradise” (Shia Islam), and believe that these sons of Imam Ali were the true leaders of the Muslims. Shia regards Imam Ali as the successor of Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Hence he was regarded as being free from error and sin (infallible), and appointed by God by divine decree to be the first Imam. Ali is known as “perfect man” similar to Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) according to Shia viewpoint.

⁵ <http://www.hajnews.ir/View.aspx?L0CJ1DK/9xGxqqW3qFDh8opVmzmDRv/fAbP/obAjB8Xjb0kPmPw0qw>

4.3. Martyrdom

‘Shaahid (شاهد)’ means “witness” and ‘shaheed (شهيد)’ means “martyr” that dies as a consequence of fighting for the benefit of the right of the people or the satisfaction of God to bring justice and human rights based on the orders of Islam. The ‘Shaheed’ exchanges himself for the divine and thereby becomes divine. (Shia Islam)

Imam Hossain is believed to be the third of the Imams who was martyred, and that he set out on his path in order to save the religion of Islam and the Islamic nation from annihilation. (Yazid I)

When Hossain clashed with Yazid’s army, he said: “Don’t you see that the truth is not put into action and the false is not prohibited? The believer should desire to meet his Lord while he is right. Thus I do not see death but as happiness, and living with tyrants but as sorrow.”(Battle of Karbala)

Mahatma Gandhi said, “The progress of Islam does not depend on the use of sword, but the result of the supreme sacrifice of Imam Hossein.”(Shia Islam). Yet, Antoin Bara, the Christian scholar, said, “You, Shi’a and Muslims, do not know the value of Imam Hossein. You are supposed to be absolutely honest in conveying his words on the day of Ashura to the world. This mission requires not only narrating the surface meaning of the event but also to coming to grips with aspects and spirit of his revolution.”(Antoine Bara: Interview on his book regarding The value of Imam Hossein , Part 1)

The 10th of Muharram i.e. ‘Ashura’ remains in the history of Islam as the most catastrophic event of human relationship. The Third Imam was sacrificed to bring justice and growth to the concept of freedom through the path of Allah. To bring the memory a brighter picture of Ashura, Ta’ziyeh is performed.

4.4. Ta’ziyeh

One of the most important common features between Iran and Iraq is Ta’ziyeh. Ta’ziyeh or Ta’ziya is an Islamic Shi’ite ritual performed mainly in Iran, India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Bahrain, while originated in Iraq (Figure 5). (Jamali, p. 21)



Figure 5. Ta’ziyeh

The Arabic term 'ta'ziya' means 'to mourn or to offer one's condolences for a death'. This historic battle was fought between the followers of prophet Mohammad's grandson Imam Hossain(A.S.) and the troops of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid. (The Meaning Of Ta'ziyeth [Ta'ziya]", May 2011)

Peter Brook in 1979 writes, "I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing -- although they knew perfectly well the end of the story -- and when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth." ("Time Out of Memory: Ta'ziyeh, the Total Drama"). It can be said that, many religious and cultural ceremonies provide an opportunity for Iranians to discharge their 'grief' in a space where this emotional experience is construed as positive, as a sign of piety, loyalty, etc. (Sharifian, 2011, p.151)

4.5. The Holy Shrines:

Iraq contains the Imam Hossein Shrine at Karbala, Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf, and the shrines of 4 more Imams in Samara and Kazemeyn. Karbala, best known as the location of the Battle of Karbala (680), is among the holiest cities for Shia after Mecca and Medina. Commemorations of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein and his 72 companions are held by millions of Shi'as on Ashura, 10th of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic Calendar) annually. ("Karbala", Wikipedia)

His holiness Imam Hossain, the Master of Martyr, by his action taught us all how to rise up against cruelty, against tyrannical government. He knew from the beginning that the path he had taken was one in which all his disciples and his family members will be immolated to Islam. ("The Ashura Uprising in the Words & Messages of Imam Khomeini" [s.a.], Spring 1995 – Autumn 2000)

The mentioned point is the most important reasons for the Iranian Muslims to keep their relationship with Iraq where the history of shi'a has been shaped by the courageous actions of the leaders of Early Islam in Muharram as Imam Khomeini said, 'Islam is alive by Muharram'.

Karbala, has a gloomy atmosphere. There can't be found any week without a massive explosion in Iraq, nevertheless Iranians keep going to Iraq to prove their royalty to their shi'a leaders. So far, in April 2012, the last massive explosion happened on March 20, 2012, i.e. the first day of Iranian Nowruz festival when twenty-six blasts shook Iraq. They were mainly in Baghdad and Karbala. Hundreds of people including the Iranians were either killed or injured. ("Deadly Explosions Rock Iraq", 23 March, 2012, 16:10). Needless to say that the terrorism has never stopped the Iranians from visiting the land of the Shi'a martyrs..

4.6. Invasion of Iraq by the US

In the 1980s, Imam Khomeini said, "Saddam must go and he would grow weaker than anyone could imagine" ("The Complete Speech, Less Propaganda").

In March 2003 the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Poland invaded Iraq. This made the Iraqis thrilled as the dictator was arrested and the people felt quite at ease.

In 2011, Mr. Jilan Salem Mohammad Habib Al- Qurainy, sent me a drawing (Figure 6) and wrote, “A 12-year-old girl did the drawing. In 2003 the majority of people gave the American troops roses because they rid Iraqis of the criminal Saddam, but the case is totally different now because of the deteriorating security situation.”

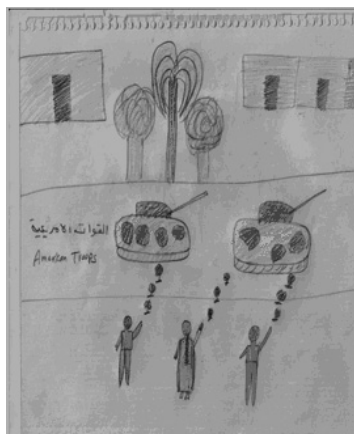


Figure 6. American Troops

In December 2005 George W. Bush acknowledged, “I would say 30,000, more or less, have died as a result of the initial incursion and the ongoing violence against Iraqis.” Later on it was announced that, “We know the number of the U.S. soldiers killed in the war in Iraq, but not the Iraqi civilians killed due to the Iraq war” (Crawford, 2011).

Since the collapse of Saddam, violence in Iraq carries out daily attacks and assassinations. Since the withdrawal of the US troops in December 18, 2011, violence sometimes targets Sunni inhabitants too. “On average, 34 ordinary Iraqis have met violent deaths every day since the invasion of March 2003. The Iraq Body Count recorded 1,874 civilian deaths in Fallujah for the period of 19 March 2003 to 19 March 2005” (“A Dossier of Civilian Casualties in Iraq 2003–2005”).

4.7. War and Iraq Ecosystem

Bombings, shootings and general chaos in Iraq, have brought it a very unhealthy nature. Dust particles generating in Iraq as a result of the soil erosion bring more problems to the ecosystem of the whole region including Iran. Many rivers in Iraq have been dried up since Syria and Turkey have blocked water.

During the war the industries were bombed and are now toxic sites. The air is filled with the containments of the oil burned during different attacks on the refineries. Saddam Hussein’s government drained the marshes in the 1980s, destroying up to 90 percent of that (“War’s Effect on Iraq’s Environment”, 2007).

5. Iran

Iran (Figure 7), is located in the Middle East, bordering the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. It covers an area of 1.648 million square kilometers and its population is about 73 million. It is between Iraq, with the longest border, and Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Iran has dozens of islands in the Persian Gulf as bases for oil exploration.



Figure 7. The Map of Iran

Major towns and historical centers are Tabriz, Mashhad, Esfahan, Yazd and Shiraz. Tehran is the capital, the largest city in West Asia. Iran's population is approximately 99 percent Muslim, of whom 89 percent are Shi'a, 10 percent are Sunni, and the remaining 1 percent are Baha'is, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

Petroleum and natural gas clearly dominate Iranian industry. Iranians became involved with oil before most of the rest of the world in 1901. In addition to the enormous hydrocarbon reserves, Iran has considerable mineral resources. And as the last point, Iran has no territories or colonies.

Iran is an advocate of peace, dialogue among civilization is what President Khatami brought up in 2000: "We hope for a world where people are civilized enough to talk and debate and get the results through face to face dialogue, to be considered civilized nations and peace makers who are blessed by God in the realm of truth and honesty. Let's pray for the peace in the world." ("The Dialogue of Civilizations and International Public Spheres"). In the *Quran*, Allah reads, "So announce the good news to My servants. Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best ..." (39:17, 18). Hafez of Shiraz reads, "No ineffable clamour reverberates in the grand heavenly dome more sweetly than the sound of love" ("Round Table: Dialogue among Civilizations").

5.1. Historical Background

Although Iran was briefly occupied during World War II by Soviet and British troops, Iran is one of the only two countries in the Middle East that were never colonized (the other being Saudi Arabia). The “Islamic Republic of Iran” was established in March 1979.

In order to suppress Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic state, Western powers, together with many Arab states, assisted Iraq and gave birth to a deadly 8 years’ war (1980-1988) (“IRAN – Encyclopedia of the Nations”).

The youth of Iran with the aid of the army and guardians followed Ayatollah’s order and defended the country. In Iran there are the shrines of Imam Reza’s (The eighth Imam of Shi’a, in the city of Mashhad) and Hadrat Ma’soomeh’s (The sister of the 8th Imam), which is in the city Qum.

5.2. People

Sir John Chardin described the Iranians as the most lavish and civilized people of the East who clothe themselves richly. He described them as kind and hospitable to strangers, very honest in matters of religion, adding that the Persians never fight and hide all their anger, being not blustering, and they reverence God’s name at any case. Justin Perkins, the first American who visited Iran in 1833 and lived there for seven years, writing in his book, *Missionary Life in Persia*, described the intellectual Iranians as lively, imaginative, social, fond of discussion, and literary people (Perkins, 1893, p. 93). Now, Iran hosts the largest number of refugees at about 2 million —1.4 million Afghans and 580,000 Iraqis, which some sources increase to 1 million (“Iran- Encyclopedia of the Nations”).

Iranian people have originally been Zoroastrians who believe “one must think for the benefit of all humans, work for his nation and live a life based on his religion.” Zoroastrians hope “that all Zartoshtis may reach the status of propagating good thoughts, words and deeds in the whole world in this Ahuraic path.” (“A Look at the Religion Of Ashu Zarathushtra, p. 16). Ashu Zarathushtra said; May we be among those who are after making the world progress and lead people toward truth and piety” (A Look at the Religion Of Ashu Zarathushtra, pp. 30-90).

Professor D. Ray Heisey expresses himself about the Iranians: “I believe they are open-minded and interested in other peoples and ideas. I think of Cyrus the Great as an Iranian who respected and honored the people of all races and beliefs under his jurisdiction. I think of the great poets in Iranian history who have contributed so much to the literature of the world. My own experience of working with Iranians before I lived there, while I was serving at Damavand, and since then, has been absolutely nothing but very positive, supportive, and enjoyable. I value their friendships immensely.” (“Heisey to Sharifzadeh’s E-mail”, 2009).⁶ Professor Michael H. Prosser, a founder of the academic field of intercultural communication writes, “Iran is well known for its gracious hospitality” (“Ten Friendly Questions for Michael Prosser”). In his book

⁶ From: D. Ray Heisey <rheisey@kent.edu>
To: mansourehsharifzadeh@yahoo.com
Sent: Tuesday, March 3, 2009 10:11 PM

Sharifian (2011, p. 143) quotes O'Shea⁷ (2000, p. 101), "All Iranians measure themselves to a great extent by the honor they accumulate through their actions and social interrelations."

The Iranians are extroverted and hospitable especially when it comes to the foreigners. In this regard Professor D. Ray Heisey, the president of Damavand College, Tehran, Iran (1975-1978), in one of his e-mail messages wrote, "I love the Iranian people, culture, and history. I think they are unusually hospitable, generous, and warm-hearted."

6. Iran-Iraq War

The Iran–Iraq war was so destructive that the casualties need thousands of pages to be discussed. Saddam Hossein attacked Iran in September 1979 in a hope of broadening his territory. Saddam was brought to power by the American government, with the support of all the Western countries, to stop the Islamic revolution initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, resulting in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in March 1979. This led to an eight year war (1980-1988) which brought dreadful results for both countries. Both countries suffered millions of casualties and billions of dollars in damage (El-Afandi). War was Saddam's ambition to expand Iraq's petroleum reserves and make Iraq the dominant power in the Persian Gulf region ("Iran–Iraq War", Wikipedia). In the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people died. War left thousands of handicapped and victimized by chemical weapon.



Bodies of Iranian students killed in an Iraq Bomber Attack on a school in Erzurum, 10 January 1987

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Iraq>

One thing that drew the two nations together has been their religious Common Ground . So, on 20 July 1988, Iran announced its willingness to admit a ceasefire by accepting Resolution 598. Finally, Saddam was delighted as apparently victory was settled for his nation. Ayatollah

⁷ Maria O'Shea is a writer, researcher and independent consultant on Middle Eastern affairs, particularly those of Kurdistan and Iran.

Khomeini expressed his deep displeasure and reluctance by saying: “Happy are those who have departed through martyrdom. Happy are those who have lost their lives in this convoy of light. Unhappy am I that I still survive and have drunk the poisoned chalice...” (Bulloch, 1989, p. 1).

7. The Present Condition of Iran and Iraq

Iraq is in the post war era, and the withdrawal of the American troops is completed. Of course the Iraqi troops and military forces are actively present in all areas to cope with those who agitate sedition. Although security is almost being maintained in this country, sometimes massive explosions scare both the habitants and the visitors. On 20th March 2012, i.e. on the first day of the Iranian New Year, Nowruz festival, about 26 explosions hit Iraq and many Iranians were killed or injured in Karbala. (“Deadly Explosions Rock Iraq”, Mar 23, 2012, 16:10)

It can be said that since 2003 when the US troops occupied Iraq and Saddam Hossein was captured, there has rarely been any day without blasts and explosions. Sometimes, daily there are about eighteen blasts and explosions in different parts of Iraq. During my second trip, there were three blasts in the city of Basra, from Oct. 23 to Nov. 3, 2011.

Nowadays, the people of both Iran and Iraq enjoy the presence of each other especially when they help the economies to enhance. Iran is actively present in different segments of Iraqi problems especially in the reconstruction of the Holy Shrines. The history of both countries proves the inner satisfaction of both nations in this communication which is of the greatest value.

8. Similarities and Differences between Iran and Iraq

Although there are many similarities between Iran and Iraq and prior to the illegal invasion of Iraq, both countries were bitter enemies of the United States and were mentioned as “Axis Of Evil” by President George W. Bush, there are some differences, too.

Iraq is mostly an Arab country, and Iran has a largely Persian population. Geographically, Iran is about 3.75 times the size of Iraq with a more diverse, mountainous terrain, and has nearly 2.5 times the population of Iraq. Tragically, Iraq is now a nation with a broken political and civil infrastructure, weakened by years of war, cruel sanctions, and rampant sectarian violence. Iran, while struggling with unemployment, fuel shortages, increasing international isolation, and other domestic problems, has a stable government, a formidable military, and a very strong influence in the region. Based on the mentioned points ‘Iran is not Iraq’. (“Experts Agree: Iran Is Not Iraq”, January 2, 2008). Iran tries to cope with the international pressures on its nuclear activities. During the past decades, the Iranian women have found better status although limitation in some cases is the nature of Islam for both men and women. It can be said that, in Iran women became educated to have jobs in the society, although the main job of a woman is to lead a family life and be a mother first, then as a professional in the society. Islamic law supports them to find their true status as a Muslim woman in a world where the propaganda leads them to be Westernized. Women of Iran and Iraq can be found similar in many cases but the law seems to support the Iranian women with more power than the women of Iraq.

9. Conclusion

For the Iranians, Iraq is the most important and the greatest neighbor because of the shrines of the martyred Imams that bring historical and religious links between them.

The Iran-Iraq war has left painful memories on the minds of the people of both countries, but this doesn't make them become separate as the memory of the holy Imams has created a tightened relationship between the shi'as of the world.

Our common ground in the case of belief brings us a unity that might seem strange, but the truth is what I unbelievably observed, and a stronger relationship has been shaped to enhance the positive relationships. Allah reads in the Holy Book of Quran, "And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allāh and be not divided among yourselves and remember Allah's Favour on you, for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts together so that by his Grace, you became brethren" (3:103), which in Arabic is: *واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا*. And we shall keep wishing to extend our hearts for our allies as the main purpose is creating unity to enhance peace on the earth.

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