

En Route to the Ahlul Bayt:
Shia Narrative and Symbolism Through Pilgrimage, Imagery, and Politics

by
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A senior honors thesis submitted to the Department of World Cultures and Literature,
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts
in World Cultures and Literature

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University of Houston
December 2021

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Dedication

This project is a testament to stories and traditions I have grown up with. Regardless of where I am in life religiously, I will always have appreciation for the beautiful messages of social justice and artistic components that have so deeply shaped my own heritage and identity.

” مارأيتُ إلّا جميلاً ”

“*I saw nothing but beauty*” – Zainab binte Ali

Acknowledgements

Appreciation to my family, but first and foremost my parents, for raising me to know who I am and keep on learning about the world. I am also grateful to my friends and supportive mentors for their constant encouragement in the pursuit of creativity and knowledge.

I want to thank my readers and professors, Dr. Cyrus Contractor and Dr. Dina Alsowayel, for giving me constant guidance and thought-provoking coursework throughout my last few years at the University of Houston. This project and the extensiveness of the work would not have been possible without the insight, advice, and long-term support of Dr. Contractor throughout the writing and research process, but also throughout my undergraduate career. Much of the inspiration behind analyzing image and narrative in the context of the Middle East has direct influence from my previous classes with Dr. Alsowayel, and I am grateful for the insightful discussions we have had on the subject these past couple of years. I also want to thank my honors reader, Dr. Hayan Charara, for his genuine interest in my work, and his encouragement and kind words in regards to my project.

Having the chance to visit the very places these narratives have stemmed from is the reason the project came to be in every regard; from the writing to the photo work. I want to thank the friends I made in Iraq this year, and in 2018 for being a part of my journeys and enriching my experiences. I am also so grateful to my friends in Beirut for their time and genuine hospitality to show me around the country and take me to all the spaces relevant to my thesis. Without any of these wonderful people from my trips, I wouldn't have had the chance to even document and write about many of the regions I covered here.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes major components and stories from the Shia narrative while connecting tropes and themes from this heritage back to forms of modern day expression of identity. In particular, these forms explored are: visual imagery, pilgrimage and shrine visitation, and politics. Furthermore, this thesis connects the dots between the expression of identity and the interconnectedness between Shia spaces, images, and political ideology. This thesis focuses particularly on the regions of Lebanon and Iraq. The body of work includes a written component on background and relevant analyses. Furthermore, the thesis includes a photographic series taken by me from my own visits to Iraq and Lebanon, to fully exemplify the topic through a personal and visual lens. The photo series includes descriptive and analytical captions that aim to give context and connect back to the elements addressed in the written segment of this thesis.

Introduction

Across the world, narrative and tradition go hand in hand in understanding the context behind religious identity. Symbolism and iconography are ways of expressing this identity, and they exist in the form of visual imagery connected to these very stories and traditions. This project explores the role the religious Shia narrative and tradition play in creating visual forms of symbolism and iconography. At the very same time, I also analyze how these same narratives and forms of symbolic expression connect themselves with political Shiism in these regions. In this process, I observe and provide an analysis on Shia spaces and the visual elements that can identify them as “Shia”, while also speaking to the cultural, religious, and political contexts that are relevant to these individual case studies.

Variables

The question of “*to what extent does narrative and symbolism influence the expression Shia identity, from an artistic, cultural, and political lens in Iraq and Lebanon?*” is focus of this project. In this case, the major themes of martyrdom and veneration would be my independent variable, while the different forms of imagery, rituals, and political implications are my dependent variables. My main focus will be on the regions of Southern Iraq and the Shia regions of Lebanon for the purpose of my research.

Methodology

This collection of writing and image work is the result of a long-term exploration of symbolism, narrative, and politics influenced by Shia heritage. I also explore Shia spaces and the intersection between the visual symbolism and political expression that exists within them. I am a visual artist, and one of my biggest passions include creating art and imagery that evokes

emotion, while also expressing a part of my identity in the work. Having a creative background has given me some previous context on how symbolism can be used as a motif to a certain narrative or express identity on a level that is universal to the group it represents. I am also a Shia Muslim, with a South Asian heritage. In my own community spaces, I am exposed to seeing how faith impacts religious, cultural, and political expression through visual and ritual forms, and I was able to see this again on a grander scale in Iraq and Lebanon from both the times I had visited. A lot of my sourcing and research methods consisted of reading a collection of academic journal articles, previous coursework content, and work from Shia based media outlets while also taking into account my own Shia heritage and background. I also took the time to revisit Iraq and Lebanon, and having been there in 2019, I was able to visit relevant Shia spaces in person and accumulate visual content. Taking this into consideration, this project includes a written component that addresses the connection between background narrative context and forms of cultural expression, while also incorporating my own experiences and hands on experiences in both Iraq and Lebanon to support my points.

Context on Narrative and Expression

Shia identity is a complex and multifaceted concept. Throughout Islamic history, the Shia narrative of events and tragic loss have shaped the core of the faith. This past and its religious foundations created remembrance traditions and various forms of veneration for holy saints, which in turn also created a form of cultural expression of identity. Identity across the religion is monolithic by the shared universal narratives, but still has its own forms of variations in terms of clerical allegiances and the different forms of political expression. Regardless of any variations, components of the Shia religious narrative embody themselves in collective symbols and allusions to that part of identity. This project will delve into several of these symbols and icons,

alongside their significance on a cultural and political level using rhetoric and narratives. Cultural expression does include ritual and practice, but a big focus for this project observes the visual component in relation to these traditions, such as pilgrimage journeys or visitations to memorializing spaces. Furthermore, the expression of symbolism and iconography through visual mediums and imagery is a direct cultural display of identity, be it political and/or religious, given the context of a particular Shia region or space.

Tragedy and heroism influence identity and faith in Shiism. The tragic narratives of key Shia saints and their aftermath have inspired a multitude of traditions and cultural elements, while also playing a major role in political expression across the Middle East. Furthermore, the impact of tragedy and its idealistic tendencies are reflected in socio-political messages and symbols. Mourning, remembrance, and narration are visual and symbolic mediums that take root in the tragedy of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Karbala. Simultaneously, Shia political identities formulize their own interpretations and instrumentalize this iconography and other visual elements. The use of iconography in politics attributes identity and validity to their groups. This thesis identifies and analyzes forms of Shia iconography, while also delving into the overlap and influence on cultural and political expression. Through this understanding, this project connects these implications back to veneration and the tragic narrative, which has so immensely defined Shiism in thought and practice.

Defining Key Terms

Throughout this work, iconography and symbolism are the key terms that are analyzed, and in some cases used interchangeably. From the *Introduction to Art – Design, Context, and Meaning* from the University System of Georgia, symbolism is defined as “the use of specific figural or naturalistic images, or abstracted graphic signs that hold shared meaning within a

group” and a symbol refers to “an image or sign that is understood by a group to stand for something”. By the same text, iconography is defined as “the broader study and interpretation of subject matter and pictorial themes in a work of art. This includes implied meanings and symbolism that are used to convey the group’s shared experience and history—its familiar myths and stories. Iconography refers to the symbols used within a work of art and what they mean, or symbolize” (Sachant et. al).

My definition of symbolism in this body of work refers to image or art forms, items and even illustrative styles of words and text associated with the Shia narrative and identity. Furthermore, in my context, iconography refers to significant visual imagery of important figures. Furthermore, these “icons” are expansive and are used in different forms of artistic and visual expressions. Symbolism is an element that creates linkages and meaning with the purpose of representing ideas and concepts. Therefore, iconography is a form of symbolism and can be categorized as such.

From the background given in the historical context section, one can understand the figures of Imam Hussain, Imam Ali, and other Imams to be key icons. Likewise, the imagery and memorialization of their personas are connected to symbolism. Furthermore, the recurring tragedy theme within Shiism has been translated into visual symbols. Those such as the shrines and flags, and several other icons hold their weight as well as demonstrating the influence of this tragic narrative. Shia shrine spaces are a combination of visual symbolism and ritual. Their formation and significance is a direct result of memorialization narratives and mourning traditions, and their structure and function play a role in reinforcing major components of Shia identity. Furthermore, shrine spaces are full of symbols and iconography within their premises. Ultimately, symbols and icons play a role in attributing the presence of Shiism in a region, and,

with a closer analysis, these visual elements can be connected to political influence. Influential clerics are iconized, and their message or party affiliation are connected to the martyrdom trope. The presence of Shia iconography and symbolism can be also identified with political Shiism and its impact on a space.

Project Structure

This project is divided in two main segments: the written body and the photo series. This written body is a collection of _ chapters. The first chapter addresses the significant events and themes of Shia history to give context on identity and major themes present in the rest of the work. The second chapter addresses the martyrdom trope derived from the Hussaini tragedy, and the implications it has on faith, culture, and politics from both Iraq and Lebanon. This segment connects the tragic narrative in these spaces to forms of visual symbolism and iconography. The third chapter The fourth chapter addresses the artistic background of portraiture, and then connects the form of art to the visual iconography and expression applied to iconized clerics. The fifth chapter addresses major forms of Shia symbols, which include flags, text, and banners. The sixth chapter addresses the architectural, historical, and political context behind shrines and shrine cities, and addresses traditions and forms of visual symbolism and iconography within the spaces. Like each of the other chapters in this project, this chapter connects tradition and imagery back to political implications in both regions of Lebanon and Iraq. The written segment then transitions into the artistic portion of the project, which is followed by a written conclusion that ties both bodies of work together.

Following written body of work is photographic series of images I had taken along my trips to both Iraq and Lebanon. All of my images were taken from my most recent trip in 2021. This photo series offers an artistic and visual lens to the themes and tropes addressed in the

written body of work, while also providing an individual caption and analysis of each image. The purpose of this photo series is to visually depict examples of symbolism, tradition, and iconography relevant to Shia identity, alongside my own understandings and personal experiences.

Historical and Religious Overview

To understand the tragic narrative and its significance, it is necessary to look back at key historical components that impact the foundation of Shiism. For this project, the historical perspective given is mainly attributed to the Twelver Shia school of thought. There may be portions that include other sects for the purpose of explaining historical circumstances. This section contextualizes the Sunni-Shia split and the factors that led to it, as a significant portion of Shia identity is tied to the divide. Secondly, an understanding of the events surrounding the Karbala Tragedy and its foundational impact on Shiism are explained. Regarding the Karbala tragedy, this chapter delves into the context behind narration, mourning traditions, and remembrance of historical tragedies as practices that are still a key component of Shiism today. Lastly, this segment delves into later Islamic history with the purpose of explaining relevant political shifts and major figures within Shiism.

The Ahlul Bayt

Beyond the overview of the Shia historical narrative, it is important to recognize the individuals who are considered the Ahlul Bayt for the purpose of this project. Ahlul Bayt translates to “The People of the House”. For Twelver Shiism, the Ahlul Bayt refers to the Prophet Mohammad, Imam Ali, Fatimah, Imam Hasan, and Imam Hussain, as well as the rest of the Imams from Hussain’s lineage as well as any venerated or honored relatives.¹ Amongst the Ahlul Bayt are a group called the Holy Five, which refer to the Prophet Mohammad, Ali, Fatimah, Hassan, and Hussain. The concept of the Holy Five is foundational to Shiism from an

¹ Like that of Abbas ibn Ali, the brother of Hussain, or Zainab, Hussain’s sister.

ontological perspective.² Within Shia cosmology, the Holy Five are considered as manifestations of the original light of God, and their existence is reason for the existence of this world. This allusion to light and ethereal in regard to the Holy Five can be seen in the visual imagery, such as the glass mirrored ceilings in shrines, as well as the use of light covering the face of the Ahlul Bayt in portraiture. From a Shia understanding, the narration of *Hadith al-Kisa*, (“the Narration of the Cloak”) reveals the moment where the Holy Five gathered under a blanket and the Angel Gabriel brought a revelation from God that denoted their holy elevated status in a portion of chapter 33, verse 33 of the Quran (Haider 37). This verse translates to “And stay in your houses and do not display your finery like the displaying of the ignorance of yore; and keep up prayer, and pay the poor-rate, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O people of the House! and to purify you a (thorough) purifying”. This narration and verse directly imply the infallibility and elevated status of these individuals, which in turn iconizes them as holy and revered figures. There are various interpretations of who is included in the “the People of the House” in Surah 33:33, as well as whether or not the Narration of the Cloak is a valid story.³ But for the purpose of this project, understanding the significance of this narrative from a Shia perspective gives background context as to why the Ahlul Bayt are venerated to such a large extent. The Narration of the Cloak is recited at Shia gatherings, especially those of mourning rituals and the text of this narrative can be seen written in large tapestries or posters placed across Shia mosques. Additionally, the names of the Holy Five together or individually have been used in text and image, as forms of protection or décor. The text display of these names is not only seen on flags and wall décor, but also as engraved calligraphic work on structures in Shia shrines and mosques. In fact, the Fatimids incorporated

² Dr. Payam Mohseni’s workshop on Ontology and Shiism.

³ Discourse on whether or not the verse is attributed to the wives of the Prophet (Haider 37).

iconography of the Holy Five in forms of written text and script on their mosques and buildings to visually demonstrate their association with Shiism in their spaces.⁴

The Sunni-Shia Divide

The issues surrounding the Sunni-Shia split are multifaceted, but only a select amount relevant information supporting the content of this thesis is included. The generic understanding of where ideological and political differences took place began at the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD. From the Shia perspective, Ali ibn Abi Talib was the rightful leader of the Muslim ummah due to his proximity to the Prophet in terms of relation, but also due to the concept of divine authority instilled by God. Within Shiism, it is necessary for a divinely appointed leader to exist at all given points in time, and following the prophethood of Mohammad, those with that given authority would be referred to as Imams. Shia orators who recount stories of Islamic history in spaces like *hussainias*⁵ and mosques have often brought up the point that there was little logic to the idea that the Prophet would leave without appointing someone in charge, given his own premonitions of the potential chaos and division it would cause. Yet at the very same time, all accounts of the Prophet Mohammad directly announcing a successor were implied and based on interpretation (Hazelton 16). Apart from the various narrations by the Prophet in praise of Ali,⁶ the event of Ghadeer Khum is attributed to this point of succession and interpretation. Noted in the final Hajj, the Prophet Mohammad stopped the ummah at the pond of Khum and lifted the hand of Ali. He announced, “whosoever considers me their master, Ali is their master too”, and the part of verse 3 of Surah al-Ma'idah of the Quran

⁴ From lectures by Dr. Nisa Ari.

⁵ Smaller Shia centers of worship and prayer that resemble and serve the function of mosques.

⁶ Quotes such as “I am the city of Knowledge and Ali is its gateway” or “I am from Ali and Ali is from me; he is the guardian of every believer after me” (Hazelton 35).

was revealed, stating that God Himself had perfected His religion on this day (Sagha). The Arabic word *mawla* has multiple meanings, and the interpretation of this line and its implications would create discrepancies amongst the understanding of Ali's role at this point. A Shia interpretation of *mawla* is master, and therefore "As successor to the Prophet, Ali was labelled an 'Imam' and his succession marked the completion of the cycle of Prophethood and beginning of the exoteric cycle of the Imamate that is believed to continue to this day" (Sagha). On the contrary, the Sunni understanding of *mawla* refers to a respected friend, rather than a divine leadership role (Hazelton 54).

The Life of Ali

Regardless of the elevated status of Ali and many of the components that could justify his successorship, Abu Bakr was elected as the caliph by the people following the death of the Prophet Mohammad. This event alienated Ali from taking his political role, which, from a Shia understanding, was rightfully his. From Shia narrations, during the time of the Prophet's death there were companions⁷ who stopped him from putting Ali's successorship onto written paperwork (Hazelton 49), and at least from Shia perspectives, this legitimized the gathering of the *shura*⁸ that selected Abu Bakr as caliph. In Shia traditions of mourning and orating the Islamic narratives on the pulpit, the story regarding Ali's denial of the caliphate resulted in one of the first grievances that would shape the core of Shiism, and begin the series of tragic losses for the family of the Prophet. When Ali initially refused to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr, his home was seized. This led to his door being burned, which in turn caused injury and speculated

⁷ Omar states "The Messenger of God is overcome by pain. We have the Quran, the Book of God, and that is sufficient for us". This argument silenced the demand to put the Prophet's heir on paper (Hazelton 50).

⁸ The elected council by the people to represent the Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Mohammad.

miscarriage to Fatimah, his wife and the daughter of the Prophet (Hazelton 72). Her injuries and grief led her to a very early death shortly after. Shia tradition grieves her pain and loss, while also attributing distaste towards the caliphs who enabled these turn of events. Those who accepted Ali as their first and rightful caliph referred to themselves as the Shia of Ali. This label would be pivotal to the dynamic of identity politics for the rest of Islamic history, and even today in contemporary politics.

Ali eventually accepted Abu Bakr's role as Caliph with the intention to uphold peace and unity and did not assume the caliphate until the passing of Uthman ibn Affan in 35 AH/656 CE. He would be known as the 4th Rashidun caliph to the rest of the Muslim population of Arabia. The era of Ali's caliphate was full of turmoil. Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan was a key figure relevant to many of Ali's political troubles. Muawiya engaged Ali in countless battles and disagreements, often over the pursuit of land and power. He would eventually become the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, and his successor and son Yazid would be challenged by Ali's son Hussain in the later years of Islamic history.⁹ Muawiya's role in politics during this time would set the stage for the Battle of Karbala that takes in 680 AD. Uthman's unavenged murder that took place before Ali's official acceptance of the caliphate later developed into more political turmoil. The Khawarij, who would be responsible for Ali's assassination, also had their own issues with Ali's leadership. While Ali was able to maintain some sort of eventual agreement with Muawiya at the time, he had to deal with other political enemies. He was eventually attacked in the middle of the morning prayers, and passed due to his wounds two days later, on the 21st of Ramadan, 661 AD.

⁹ There were various Alid and non-Alid challengers to the Umayyads. The revolt of Ibn Zubayr was non-Alid, and so was that of Mukhtar, though not Alid, carried out a pro-Alid revolt. The Abbasids not long after would claim authority to caliphate and defeat the Umayyads.

Ali's death is symbolic to Shiism because of his revered status and the significance it has to tradition and history. In the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammad, he was known to the Arabs as a fierce warrior with a legendary dual bladed sword, *dhulfiqar*, which was attributed to his identity as an iconic symbol (Hazelton 33). Furthermore, he was seen as one of the righthand men of the Prophet Mohammad; being both his cousin, son-in-law, and close friend. Despite his difficult years of caliphate, his leadership has generally been viewed positively by a majority of Muslims throughout history. His legacy and sayings are venerated, and his piety and wisdom would be looked up to by various Muslims throughout the world.¹⁰ His tragic death in prayer, as well as his respected status as a leader and man of God made him a martyr. Furthermore, Ali being overlooked for the position of caliph in addition to the passing of Fatimah, his wife, are commemorated as tragic events for Shias. These events are often narrated and mourned for on their respective anniversary dates in the Islamic calendar. Additionally, Ali's burial place in Najaf, Iraq is a major place of pilgrimage, as will be highlighted in more depth later within this project. His elevated status as a martyr and being a highly revered individual has caused him to be iconized. Likewise, his image and shrine are also attributed as holy and respected symbols.

Imam Hussain and the Karbala Tragedy

Following Ali's death, both of his sons, Hasan and Hussain, experienced similar issues regarding leadership of the *ummah*. Hasan signed a peace treaty that was often violated by Mu'awiya. Hasan was martyred by poisoning. An act carried out by his wife at behest of Mu'awiya. His devotees then allied themselves with Hussain. Contrary to the terms of the treaty negotiated with Hasan, upon his death Mu'awiya appointed his son, Yazid, as caliph. The new

¹⁰ See *Nahj al Balagha*, (tr. *Peak of Eloquence*).

caliph sought legitimacy by requesting allegiance from many of the companions of Mohammad, a number of whom obliged. However, Hussain (as well as others, namely Abdullah ibn Zubayr), refused the request. From Hussain's perspective, Yazid was an illegitimate caliph who did not uphold Islamic principles and lacked a respectable character. Denying his allegiance to Yazid ultimately led to the Battle of Karbala that took place in 680 AD. In an attempt to gather loyalty, Hussain had sent letters to the people in the city of Kufa (Hazelton 159). Unfortunately for Hussain, Umayyad officials had infiltrated Kufa and threatened his supporters with death or bribed them with reward. Muslim ibn Aqeel, Hussain's cousin sent as a messenger to the city was killed, which left Hussain without much support. Amongst Shia oratory, Hussain took his family on this journey to Karbala, and only had a limited number of companions that joined him in contrast to Yazid's large army led by Umar ibn Saad. On the tenth of Muharram, referred to as *Ashura*, Hussain and his family and friends were brutally killed. The surviving women and children, including his son Ali ibn al-Hussain (who would be the fourth Shia Imam, also known as Imam Sajjad) were taken as prisoners and humiliated, with their tents burned and the bodies of the deceased trampled under hoof and beheaded. The captives taken to Damascus (the capital of the Umayyads) and imprisoned. It was during this period that Hussain's youngest daughter Ruqayyah (known as Sukaina in other narrations) died in prison and was buried by Ali ibn al-Hussain. Today in Damascus, there is a shrine in this space, and nearby is also the shrine of Zainab. Zainab is relevant, as she is not only Hussain's sister, but is a key figure in holding together the women and children, while also being outspoken towards Yazid in court. Furthermore, she is credited, along with her nephew, Ali ibn al-Hussain, with initiating the tradition of narrating this tragic story to the masses.

After an extended period of being in the prison of Yazid, the surviving women and children were released. From narrations, Zainab and Ali ibn al-Hussain returned to Karbala to bury the bodies of the martyred. The return to Karbala to bury the deceased is commemorated as *Arbaeen*, the fortieth day after Ashura. In Islamic tradition, forty days marks the end of a mourning period after an individual passes away. Following this, Zainab and Ali ibn al-Hussain returned to Medina and would often recount the tragedies they experienced. Given time, the burial spaces of Hussain and his family and companions became a site of pilgrimage and shrine visitation, as highlighted in the sixth chapter. Furthermore, the start of the month of Muharram, and the days of *Ashura* and *Arbaeen* are commemorated yearly. These days are also full of traditions that involve the reciting of sorrowful panegyrics depicting the tragedy of Karbala. Many of these practices were influenced by different cultures, and include the recitation of elegiac poetry, passion plays, self-flagellation, and *majalis*, gatherings where the events of Karbala would be narrated and mourned. Ultimately, the events surrounding Hussain's travel to Karbala, the details of the battle, martyrdom, and the aftermath in Damascus became an intrinsic part of the Shia tragic narrative.

Alongside the Shia understanding that Hussain was a holy Imam with divine authority, his brutal sacrifice and loss of his family to protect the essence of Islam turned him into an altruistic martyr. His reverence and tragedy iconized him. Likewise, other individuals associated with Karbala such as Zainab, Abbas (the brother of Imam Hussain killed at Karbala), Ali bin al-Hussain, and Ruqayyah are also iconized for their roles within this story. Hussain's figure and message not only represents a core part of Shia beliefs, but also demonstrates a symbol of social justice and political fervor, especially contemporarily.

The Karbala Tragedy serves as the primary tragedy that influences imagery, culture, and political rhetoric throughout this body of work. While there are a multitude of tragic events throughout Shia history, the event of Hussain's martyrdom was a foundational turning point in terms of both setting faith and tradition. Furthermore, it is also important to consider how forms of narration, mourning, and remembrance have kept the story of Karbala, and other Shia historical narratives, alive. The events of Karbala are key to socio-political traditions and imagery across Shia heavy areas of the MENA region, in terms of identifying Shia spaces and their political counterparts.

Imam Hussain and his relation to the Karbala Tragedy becomes a major icon and symbol throughout Shia spaces and political expression. "If Ali was the foundational figure of Shia Islam, Hussein was to become its sacrificial icon" (Hazelton 158). Hussain's tragedy is mourned like no other, and every mourning orator in commemoration of the other Imams always finds a way to link their story back to that of Hussain's. Hussain stands as inspiration for challenging injustice and oppressive political entities, while also fueling the passion behind self-sacrifice and martyrdom; which have become core themes to political Shiism.

Shia History: After Karbala

It is important to note that the events following the Karbala Tragedy influenced other forms of resistance to Umayyad leadership. There were quite a few rebellions that occurred in an attempt to avenge Hussain's death. During the lifetime of Ali ibn al-Hussain, Mokhtar al-Thaqafi (who was in prison and unable to join Hussain in Karbala) pursued individual men of Yazid's army upon his release from prison and killed them. Ali ibn al-Hussain's son, Zaid, also attempted to reclaim power for the descendants of the Ali through an unsuccessful uprising against Umayyads at the time. Regardless, given their unpopularity, soon enough the Umayyad's

reign came to an end and the Abbasids initially rose to power in Kufa, later relocating their capital to Baghdad, Iraq. Their stated agenda was to establish the leadership of a rightful descendent of the Prophet Mohammad, which initially sat well with the Alid point of view. Their legitimacy stemmed from their Hashemite lineage, connecting them to the Prophet Mohammad via his paternal uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib. The Abbasids affinity towards Shias was short lived. Many Shias were under the impression that their Imams would be given a seat in power. This was not the case, and the Abbasids viewed the Shia Imams as a threat to their authority and legitimacy. On several occasions, the Abbasids faced opposition by Alid and non-Alid factions.¹¹

It is interesting to note that Abbasid caliphs would often consult these Shia Imams at times. An example of this can be seen during the Golden Age of Baghdad with the rise of influence of Ja'afar as-Sadiq, the sixth Shia Imam, who was a prominent scholar of religious and practical sciences. The popularity of the Shia imams amongst their followers resulted in them being silenced and imprisoned by the Abbasids. Shia orators often account that each of the Imams were poisoned during the era of the Abbasids. The Imam's harsh punishments and martyrdoms at the hands of the Abbasids are mourned as tragedies. Furthermore, the burial spaces of these Imams and some of their offspring turned into significant shrines and holy spaces of pilgrimage and worship. The Iraqi district of Kadhmain in Baghdad and the city of Samarra are examples of this.¹² Furthermore, the Twelfth Imam, known as Imam Mahdi, had his home in Samarra, and the site of his father's grave also holds a basement that marks the alleged spot of

¹¹ Many dissidents and opposing factions to the Abbasids were Alid and/or Shia, like that of the Fatimid dynasty. The Fatimids are an Ismaili dynasty that dominated Egypt, and claimed their legitimacy through their leader claiming to be the Mahdi at that time. The Ismaili school of thought is behind the Fatimids, and their split from Twelver Shiism occurred after disputes regarding the identity of the 7th Imam.

¹² both the 7th and 9th Imam are buried in Kadhmain, and the 10th and 11th Imam are buried in Samarra.

his occultation.¹³ Iraq plays a significant role in Shia pilgrimage practices given that it was the homeland and burial places of the later Imams.

Imam Mahdi: The Living Imam and Messiah

These Imams are iconized, and there is a special component attributed to Imam Mahdi. Apart from being a messianic figure, Imam Mahdi is considered the last and final Imam, but is also alive and in occultation, protected to escape the fate of the other Imams. As Shiism developed, the concept of a divinely chosen and inspired infallible leader which inherits the Prophet's spiritual and temporal executive authority became a vital theological component. This leader is personified in the Imam, and no era is never devoid of his presence.¹⁴ As such, in the face of the disappearance of the twelfth-generation successor of Mohammad, Twelver Shias came to believe that he was in occultation. He is present but not accessible. His figure is revered and venerated to such an extent that his occultation is mourned; as without his physical presence, the Shia community is at a loss. In Iraq, the mosque of Sahla is foretold to be the place of his governance when he returns. When we visited this mosque in Iraq, religious scholars have told us that Imam Mahdi visits this location every Tuesday. The concept of Imam Mahdi turns him into an icon, in that he is viewed as the only political and religious figure with utmost legitimacy and sovereignty. Not only is the Mahdi a hopeful and rightful leader for the Shia community, the associated messianic discourse has influenced several political entities and their own claims towards legitimacy.

¹³ is considered the Shia messiah and current living Imam in occultation.

¹⁴ The different sects of Shiism espouse the belief in a particular number of these Imams. Twelver Shiism, which is primarily referenced in this thesis, is named as such do to the veneration of 12 descendants of Muhammad.

The Martyrdom Trope

The Influence of the Tragic Narrative

The most significant recurring theme throughout the Shia narrative would be the martyrdom trope, which takes its roots from the multitude of historical tragedies that befell the Ahlul Bayt in their lifetime. The Karbala tragedy set the scene for mourning rituals, remembrance of the collective tragedies, and veneration through symbolism and icons. In fact, it is very common to mourn Hussain and the tragedy of Karbala during the mourning commemorations for the other Imams. From *Iranian Pilgrimages*, Imam Hussain's revolutionary figure is remembered in any shrine space dedicated to a martyr or hero from Shia history (Molavi). Shrine visitation to Hussain, venerated companions, and the Ahlul Bayt became a tradition to honor these individuals who have attained the status of martyrdom, and it became a point of spiritual and religious practice. Likewise, dying in the process of pilgrimage would also give an individual the status of martyrdom because the visitation of these holy individuals is associated with traveling in the way of God.

Hussain's legacy and the martyrdom trope also became a point of reference in several Shia political movements like that of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iran-Iraq war, and Hezbollah's military encounters with Israel. In contemporary times following the rise of ISIS and sectarianism in Iraq and Syria, the Hussaini narrative and martyrdom complex in defense of Shia shrine spaces and cities became a point of reference for political parties and their rhetoric. The martyrdom trope lives through the icon of Imam Hussain both as a figure and as a message. Ultimately, martyrdom is linked to Shia identity by a means that connects the concept back to historical roots. This creates a religious tone when it comes to political implications, because much of the political rhetoric sources its ideology and legitimacy through the Hussaini tragedy,

and the traditions and mourning that comes with it. For many of these Shia political entities, the Hussaini narrative is a symbol of justice and legitimacy, so comparing their political cause to that of the sacrifice of Hussain would equate to holy war (Molavi). Therefore, engaging in these Shia political endeavors and potentially dying in that process would give an individual the status of martyrdom. Because of the significance martyrdom has to Shiism historically, these political martyrs become venerated, mourned for, and honored in the same sorts of ways Hussain is remembered. Furthermore, Shia spaces will account for and honor these martyrs through iconography and symbolism, that traditionally also stem from Hussaini mourning rituals.

Veneration for Martyrs: Visual Expression and Tradition

Shrine spaces in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon have sections allotted for martyrs who died in their political causes, to give them a sense of status and respect post-mortem. In the same way shrine spaces originally honor a religious figure, the honor of a political martyr to be buried in such a holy and respected area goes back to the significance martyrdom holds as a concept in the very first place. The political martyr who was inspired to be like the original martyrs (Hussain and the other figures of the Ahlul Bayt) essentially holds a resting place by the historical figures they emulated. Furthermore, there are cemeteries across Lebanon and Iraq dedicated to political martyrs who have died in different wars and conflicts. People buried in martyr cemeteries are mourned for in the same manner that Hussain and other Imams are remembered (Molavi). The status of martyrdom is so high, that gaining it symbolizes eternal peace and fruition of faith, which can explain why political martyrs are iconized too, especially in Shia spaces.

Martyrs have their images placed across buildings and billboards, inside shrines and mosques, and even on posters and flags on the sides of highways and roads. Furthermore, the association of the shrine to the martyr connects the two together; with martyrs having a space to

be honored inside of shrines, as well as seeing shrine imagery like the domes of Hussain and Abbas's shrines on posters in honor of these political martyrs. Seeing martyrdom imagery not only demonstrates the political affiliation of a region, as this iconography is heavily associated with Shia political groups, but it also idealizes the martyrdom trope. It becomes a dream or wish to achieve martyrdom in life, and honoring martyrs is done out of the same respect that one honors the Ahlul Bayt, by associating it with Shia symbolism and iconography like that of the shrines or the figures of Hussain and Ali. The martyrdom trope promotes engagement of Shia populations with political entities and their cause because it pulls on major parts of identity to which the individual can relate, while also feeling like they are serving their faith by supporting or fighting in these political causes.

Hezbollah and its Martyrs

Ideological Factors

When speaking to Lebanese locals who affiliate themselves with Hezbollah, a common belief amongst them is that they don't fear death in the way of the party. This is due to their belief that their religious identity is tied to the principles of Hezbollah, and it would be of the highest honor to be a martyr who died in that cause. One of these locals was very keen to showing me honorary videos of friends and family who had died in Hezbollah operations against ISIS in Syria, and when I asked if they felt sad, they told me they wish that they were them; a shaheed. The martyrdom complex stems from the story of Hussain who died in the pursuit of justice and truth, and when Hezbollah connects this pivotal Shia narrative to their rhetoric and collective defense of Shia spaces; be it the shrine cities and spaces or the Shia neighborhoods, the religious nature of the party strikes a chord for Shia identity politics and idealizes death in the cause.

Tombs

Visiting the *rawda* in Dahiye was a prime example of connecting all forms of iconography to the martyrdom trope and Hussaini narrative. The *rawda* is essentially a large tomb with several graves of Hezbollah martyrs, in their honor. It is an open space for people to come and pay their respects, and make prayers. Several of these graves had the photo of the deceased, as well as flags and even shrine images of Syeda Zainab, Imam Ali al-Ridah, and Imam Hussain and Hazrat Abbas incorporated with that of the martyr. Likewise, there were flags known as *alams* on the graves too, and across several of these tombstones were also the smaller banners with the names of the Ahlul Bayt that many wear on their heads as a headband. In the same way shrine spaces collectively incorporated this same Shia imagery and symbolism, the *rawda* did as well. In fact, I would argue that the *rawda* is a smaller shrine in it of itself, given the prestige it holds as a space, and how it also is a mourning space for not just these Hezbollah martyrs, but for the tragedy of Hussain that they believe they live and die for. Locals have told me that for many people, coming to the *rawda* is a way to reconnect with Shia roots and figure his own things out in terms of identity. While of course this is an individual's personal journey, I think it is very interesting to see how the intersection that the political and religious sphere have to one another can directly be linked to someone's own sense of identity. The Hussaini tragedy is so intrinsic to Shia identity that the Shia political space and the religious connotations they hold have an impact on reconnecting with roots and faith.

Mleeta

Another component to Hezbollah's political identity is its military successes. Even the imagery associated with the organization's yellow and green flag is a large automatic gun. It is no surprise that a big part of Hezbollah identity is directly related to their fighting efforts and

open display of weaponry. A big part of this outside of the religious realm is to give off the message that Hezbollah is strong and capable of defending itself. Their own rhetoric in speeches given by Nasrallah embodies the same energy of retaliation in response to any threats. The affinity for artillery and fighting is directly a result of both the martyrdom narrative and the Islamic duty of Jihad in defense of one's self, and religion. Hezbollah quite literally translates to "The Party of God". Their efforts for either fighting Israel in the defense of the South, or fighting ISIS and defending Shia spaces and protecting minorities like Christians in Syria, are all done in the name of protecting faith and religion. Their militant tendencies directly intersect with their religious interests. Alongside the allusions to Shia martyrdom narratives of Hussain or rhetoric involving the protection of Syeda Zainab's shrine by emulating the figure of Abbas, a Hezbollah soldier is a martyr if he dies in the service of his party. Therefore, martyrdom truly is a key component to their religious and political identity. It honors those who have passed in service, and serves as motivation to those who are still alive to hope they can be at the highest ranks and achieve a death with honor and dignity. Ultimately, this honor is achieved through the service of their religion, and through the service of their political party.

The Mleeta monument park, formally known as the Tourist Landmark of the Resistance (Breu), is a prime example of Hezbollah's grand visual display of their military strength and armed victories, while also memorializing martyrs and war efforts. When entering the area around the park, and right by the entrance, are an abundance of Hezbollah's yellow flags; demarcating the space as their own. The park is in the village of Mleeta in southern Lebanon, and is about 50 miles from the Palestinian border and was formerly a major operation base during the Israeli invasions. From the mountainous elevations, the southern cities that were liberated by Hezbollah following the Israeli invasions are visible in the far-out distance. The

landmark is a project by the Lebanese Association for the Arts (LAA), an organization affiliated with Hezbollah, that aims to incorporate Islamic milieu and party ideology into culture through expression and identity. To assimilate and legitimize their history and identity as liberators and protectors collectively of Lebanon, the narrative of resistance is centralized more generically and professionally through the LAA (Harb et al., 17).

Mleeta incorporates a lot of nature and greenery combined with a very clean layout of these commemoration sites. The space consisted of large areas of fallen Israeli military equipment and replicas of warfare tools. There was a lot of helmets scattered of Israeli soldiers and destroyed tanks and armory was an indicator of Zionist defeat. There was also the underground cave, which was a bunker during the Israeli invasions. Within this bunker were recreated spaces of operation centers, a kitchen, hideouts, and even a prayer room. Walking around the hilly areas shrouded by trees and forest-like trails were also replicas of soldiers and smaller stations for military communication. These displays recreate the setting of what the base may have been like at one point, with the purpose of educating and also memorializing the past.

There is also a museum within the complex with a theatre that plays a greeting video by Syed Hassan Nasrallah himself. Nasrallah speaks on the landmark and its history, as well as the role of Hezbollah in defending Lebanon from Israel. This video is full of passion and also reinforces Hezbollah's core beliefs in defending the South and its anti-Zionist ideology. This museum also goes into showcasing more war memorabilia, guns, and more informational text on what was being displayed. In terms of iconography and symbolism, posters and photographs of Syed Hassan Nasrallah and the martyred Syed Abbas Mousawi are displayed within the museum building and on the outdoor complexes. In fact, there is even a reconstructed replica of Mousawi inside of the museum component. The landmark also allocates an elevated garden pavilion in

honor of martyrs who had died in the war efforts, with views of the mountains and villages in the distance.

Essentially, Mleeta is a space to commemorate and honor war martyrs, while also reinforcing the war victory and anti-Zionism rhetoric. Likewise, the landmark is a part of a collective body of projects to incorporate a visual display of the intersection between political and religious identity through Hezbollah, even though the aim of places like Mleeta are to introduce the resistance as a pivotal part of generic Lebanese national history. When speaking to local Lebanese people about Mleeta, I was told that the village felt a source of pride being associated with such a significant space. My own Lebanese friend who accompanied me to Mleeta had been there six times prior, and given his pro-Hezbollah background, he also felt very proud to be visiting and giving me a detailed account and background on every part of the landmark we went to. The space resonates with both Shia identity from the martyrdom lens, but also from the religious holy war trope that is associated with fighting injustice; the modern day Yazid posing as Israel being as “weak as a spider”, in the words of Nasrallah.

Qassem Soleimani

I also found a parallel between Iraq and Lebanon when seeing imagery of individuals like Qassem Soleimani as a form of iconography in Dahiye, Beirut and across South Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. His face was plastered on posters and billboards on walls and highways. This goes back to my point of the martyrdom trope and the connection to iconography; regardless of his Iranian background and work done in Iraq, Soleimani is iconized because of how his death was perceived as that of dying in the way of Hussain, in his role as a general in a Shia dominated political sphere. He is associated to defending Shiism through his efforts in the fight against ISIS. His death also was a major political loss for the region, since a big part of why he was so

honored was because of how strategic and successful he was in his role. He was an asset to these military endeavors, and his death meant that there was a major loss of power and stability for these related groups. Given the connection Hezbollah has with Iran, it only reinforces the fact that in Shia spaces, Soleimani's portraits and imagery is a testament to that alliance.

On the highway walls while leaving Dahiye, I saw a intricate painting of Soleimani with heavenly imagery painted around him. According to a friend who lives in Beirut, there was even a giant statue of Soleimani somewhere in Dahiye built after he was assassinated in 2020. Another Lebanese friend with a religious Shia background and pro-Hezbollah sentiments even has an illustration as his WhatsApp profile picture of Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, Qassem Soleimani and Imad Mughniyeh¹⁵ standing together behind a war planning map. This demonstrates another form of memorializing martyrs in this form of visual imagery. Incorporating the late Mughniyeh in an image with the late Soleimani, alongside Nasrallah who is still alive, goes to show how they are still relevant political figures that are associated directly with the Hezbollah movement. Even the war planning map connects Hezbollah's militancy with martyrdom. The fact that this image is also the profile picture of an individual who aligns themselves with Hezbollah ideology is yet another display of veneration that ties back to the blurred line between religious and political identity. These individuals are icons to him on multiple levels, and in a direct form of expressing that, he's made that his profile image.

¹⁵ Mughniyeh was a high level Hezbollah official responsible for several attacks, including the bombing of the US and French barracks in 1983, kidnapping and murders of Western hostages in the 1980s, and the attacks on the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992. He was killed by a car bomb in Damascus in 2008 and many speculate this was the doing of the CIA. When he died, he had a large funeral procession by Hezbollah leaders who claimed he "died a martyr at the hands of Israeli Zionists" (Perry 66).

Syed Abbas Mousawi

Another major martyrdom icon that didn't occur to me as a major Shia figure was Syed Abbas Mousawi. I came to this conclusion after spending some more time around the Beqaa Valley area and visiting his gravesite in the Nabi Sheet village. Mousawi was a major Hezbollah icon, and he and his wife were killed in a car bomb accident. Locals of the area would say that Mousawi died the death of his dreams, and that he made dua for a death in martyrdom, and got his wish granted. Mousawi's shrine is a replica of that of any other holy shrine dedicated to a prophet or the Ahlul Bayt. It was grand, and held the shape of a dome, with an intricate metal *dharikh*¹⁶. Furthermore, its structure was beautiful on the outside and inside in terms of the reflective glasswork and intricate detailing on the walls. His portrait was illustrated on the outside of the entrance, and a large poster of him loomed over the site as well. The very car that he was killed in was also preserved and placed on the outside, in the courtyard. Mousawi is a martyr, and not just any Hezbollah martyr; he was one of the major founders of the organization. Even at Mleeta, he has a wax statue on display in the museum portion that details Hezbollah history and military achievements. He is iconized from both his martyrdom status, and for the role he played in Hezbollah.

Iraqi Martyrs

The Sadrs

In Iraq, the Sadrs as clerics are discussed in the cleric chapter. As several of them were killed by Saddam through their activism for the Shia community and their Shia identity, they became iconized as martyrs as well. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was seen on countless occasions wearing his burial shroud, which alludes back to the martyrs' acceptance of death in the face of

¹⁶ A metal grille structure on the gravesite of the shrine, often encasing a tomb.

vocal activism. Even today, several of his portraits include him wearing his shroud. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the cousin of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr is a clerical icon affiliated with the Dawa party, and like the rest of his family, he was vocal and outspoken against the Baathist regime. He and his sister, known as Aminah Bint al-Huda were killed in 1980 by Saddam, with a gruesome execution (Al Asaad). Baqir al-Sadr is iconized in the same way the other Sadrist were too, but his martyrdom was also a key reason he is revered and respected today. This explains why the revering images of the Sadrs has a place in spaces closer to Baghdad because not only were they martyred here, but their sphere of influence ranged heavily in that area. Even contemporarily, Sadrists have their suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, and have also been around the area of the Al-Askari mosque in its defense with sectarian retaliation.

Militia Martyrs

Another component relevant to martyrdom themes in Iraq are the soldiers from the Shia militias under Hashd al-Shaabi, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). There are several individual militias under the PMF with different allegiances to various Shia clerical entities, but for the purpose of this project, it is virtually impossible to allocated and define each one and their counterparts. PMF soldiers are referred to as martyrs after their death because of their defense and protection of Shias and Shia shrine spaces in the country in the process of fighting ISIS. Much of their ideology was directly influenced by the Hussaini tragedy and reclaiming Shia spaces, so seeing their posters in and around major shrine city spaces only makes sense. In walkways around shrine cities, their posters exist in abundance and often incorporate holy imagery of shrine domes and *dharieh*, giving an ethereal connotation to their death. Even on the *Arbaeen* walk, different stops along the way include giant recreations of military battlefields and memorabilia, while also putting up photos of these deceased soldiers connecting the

martyrdom trope to the political efforts of these militias in their honor and glory. In these set-ups are also related clerical portraiture, often denoting which militia and form of Shia ideological thought the martyrs and their counterparts belonged to. Similar to the *rawdā* structure in Lebanon, there are grand garden-like structures lit up with lamps and glowing orbs holding the images of martyred soldiers and the respective cleric, and many of these are often seen right outside of shrine city entrances.

Women as Martyrs

Aminah Bint al-Huda was also known for her activist work with the Sadrists as well, alongside her novels on women's rights and Islamic awareness (Al Asaad). Her work as an educator¹⁷ and publisher in this political sphere played a role in influencing a new social approach to piety and identity for Muslim women in the Shia community (Pursely 54). Her brutal execution by the Saddam regime also gave her the status of martyrdom, along with the groundbreaking work she initiated through her activism against the regime and efforts for bettering the lives of Muslim women. In my research process to learn about her, in sources with a heavy Shia bias, her name is titled with "Martyr", and the rhetoric and language used to honor her life alluded to her piety by comparing her message and personality to that of Zainab. She had given a speech at the shrine of Ali in opposition to the Baathist regime, and the direct connotation that moment had for devout Shias was paralleled to the outspoken sermon Zainab, gave to Yazid in his court. Her work to this day is still read and promoted in Shia communities, and she continues to be a role model to emulate for pious and devout Shia women.

¹⁷ She started religious schools for girls in Iraq ("Biography of Martyr Bint al Huda).

I noticed a similar parallel to Bint al-Huda with the wife of Syed Abbas Mousawi, known as Umm Yasser. She was killed alongside Mousawi in the car bomb along with their son. When I visited his shrine in Nabi Sheet, the man who ran the office of the space met with me and my friend. He gave me a postcard with a photo of Umm Yasser and Syed Abbas, and also gifted me a book titled “Mushahid Min Hayaat: Imra’a Mithl”. It was a book on her life, and the piety of women. From an article I read by Ahlul Bayt News Agency, a Lebanese Shia based media outlet, Umm Yasser was also iconized as the ideal supportive women to her husband. She was honored as a martyr, and in fact the article states that Mousawi wished that whenever his time came to achieve martyrdom, he hoped his wife would be by his side (“Um Yasser and Sayyed Abbas Al-Musawi”). I wasn’t aware of her significance until visiting the shrine and also coming across the article, which also pointed out her work in establishing the Syeda Zahra Hawza in the Beqaa for women. Her work in loyally supporting her husband in Hezbollah, while also being a role model for Shia women, and her death in martyrdom makes her a revered figure whose loss is still mourned and remembered today. In the same way Bint al-Huda created educational spaces and written outlets for Shia Iraqi women to address piety and social issues, the same goes for Umm Yasser with her school and honorary biographies for Shia Lebanese women. Both these women have passed, but the work they left behind keeps them alive in memory and in promoting loyalty and piety towards their respective Shia political entities, and their religion.

Clerical Authority

The role of clerics is to promote the teachings and legacy of the Prophet and the Imams. Initially, clerics held a scholarly role regarding Islamic jurisprudence and foundations of faith. Eventually, these scholars began to find themselves influencing the political sphere as well. Their significance increased as the need for communal leadership became necessary following the occultation of the Twelfth Imam. Moreover, they are expected to aid the eventual transition of authority to Imam Mahdi upon his reappearance (Kalantari 2).

Clerical authority is based upon the concept of *wilayah al-faqih*, which translates to “the guardianship of the jurist.” The application of *wilayah al-faqih* differs based on interpretation and context. The concept of *wilayah* emanates from the Shia belief that legitimate political authority is divinely chosen by God (Haider 34). The most obvious example would be the Islamic Republic of Iran’s interpretation, which places the ultimate political and social power in the hands of a designated cleric, the Supreme Leader. *Wilayah al-faqih* is based on the understanding that Imam Mahdi is the only legitimate sovereign, but in his absence there is a void of political authority for the collective Shia community. Therefore, there is a transfer of power and social leadership to these clerics, who maintain Islamic scholarship and narrations of the Imams. From the Khomeini model, a jurist with special attributes is appointed as the legitimate deputy of Imam Mahdi (Albisaab). This understanding of *wilayah al-faqih* legitimizes Shia participation in politics, whereas previously it would have been considered as arrogating Imam Mahdi’s sovereignty.

In some cases, clerics stay uninvolved and would rather focus on their roles as seminary educators and jurists to uphold security and peace for their followers. During the period of the

major occultation of Imam Mahdi, Shia clerics took up a quietist approach and abstained from political power to avoid usurping the power reserved for the twelfth Imam. With this approach, they would only involve themselves in political matters when it was necessary to defend the sanctity of the religion, the people, or the institutions of religious learning. Clerics advocating an active approach to politics do so, because they feel that it is their responsibility to implement the shariah in the absence of Imam Mahdi, and they may be the best positioned to do so. With the activist approach, clerics use their role and influence to promote active resistance in response to external threats (Kalantari 4). Ultimately, both approaches hold the same purpose of preserving the faith and aiding their community, based on their own respective socio-political circumstances.

Elements of the Shia tragic narrative influence quietest approaches. For example, a link can be drawn to Ali's years of silence to preserve collective Islamic unity and to quietist approaches to stay uninvolved in politics. While Ali was not given an official role before the death of Uthman, he would often counsel and advise the other Rashidun caliphs. Likewise, a parallel could be made to the clerical approach of influencing religion and politics through fatwas and consultation, but not necessarily holding an active role. Furthermore, the examples of the other Imams and their choices to disengage with politics or resistance is also an example of quietism. With this approach, the only reason to actively participate in politics or spearhead resistance is for preservation of Shiism.

On the contrary, the activist approach is influenced by the Karbala tragedy and the active choice Imam Hussain took to fight back and openly defy injustice by refusing to pledge allegiance to the Umayyad government of Yazid. In Hussain's case, silence would have been detrimental to the principles of Islam, and for many clerics espousing the activist approach links

their ideology back to this very point. Not only do these clerics incorporate Hussaini icons into their rhetoric and movements, they also iconize themselves as leadership figures in this process. Because the spiritual link and symbolism of the Karbala narrative resonates with the Shia population., these clerics legitimize not only their leadership roles, but also the movements to which they belong. For the purpose of this project, it is important to note that different clerical figures may adapt different tactics in response to their own political and social circumstances. While certain clerics may show more of an affinity to one approach versus another, to label any one scholar as strictly “quietest” or “activist” is contrary to the nuanced reality of their influence in any political sphere (Kalantari 5). Whether or not a cleric speaks out or chooses to sit back, their presence and conscious choice of “action” still has a political influence regardless.

Iconic Clerics and their Significance

Ayatollah Khomeini and Wilayah al-Faqih

A prime example of an activist cleric is Ayatollah Khomeini who became the head of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent Islamic Republic of Iran. He applied the message of Ashura and the struggle of Imam Hussain to the contemporary resistance towards unjust governments, such as that of the Pahlavi monarchy (Molavi). With this parallel and interpretation of the Karbala tragedy, one can argue that there is now a spiritual link with involvement in political affairs. By equating a contemporary government with Yazid, and the resistance to it with the righteous party of Hussain, it is understood that these clerical entities claim legitimacy by upholding principles of faith through their political engagement. From Molavi’s *Persian Pilgrimages*, the comparison to the Shah as Yazid would mean that the resistance, the party of Khomeini, is from the party of Imam Hussain. Religiously, Imam Hussain is a foundational icon, but linking Khomeini with Hussain iconizes the former as well and his role of standing for

justice. The inclusion of the Karbala narrative in the revolution's political messaging resonates heavily with Shia identity politics, which in turn has also legitimized Khomeini's role and movement to Shia populations outside of the country, like that of Lebanon and its political parties. Shia rhetoric, collective regional influence, and ties to the Hussaini tragedy ultimately are the factors that iconized clerics, especially Khomeini. They not only become the face of their political movements and parties but also become representations of Shiism on a regional and global scale. Likewise, the Islamic Revolution introduced an active approach to implementing *wilayah al-faqih* as a government system with the intention to preserve Shia clerical authority and provide a source of Shia political representation in the region. With this understanding, the preservation of *wilayah al-faqih* as a legitimate government is arguably compared to the long term preservation of Shia Islam (Molavi). This in turn is why the Khomeini approach is so influential to regional politics in both Iraq and Lebanon, and what it does for Shia identity and politics regionally. While neither country's politics use the *wilayah al-faqih* structure in their government, the approach still has an influence on elements of their political ideologies. Hezbollah is influenced directly by *wilayah al-faqih* through their allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei and their long-lasting ties to Iran since they were founded. In the case of Iraq, while there is no structure for *wilayah al-faqih*, the political role that Ayatollah Sistani has played through his fatwas and presence has been pivotal to major political and religious decisions for the country.

Khomeini is still a major iconic figure of revolutionizing Shiism in a political sphere for several reasons. Not only did he create a platform for clerical Shia power and regional influence, he also used the Hussaini narrative as a point of identity and political fervor. This would sit well with devout Shia populations who feel like their identity is intrinsically now tied to this

government entity, due to what it represents: a face of Shiism and its core values in the absence of Imam Mahdi. Khomeini is an icon not only for Iranian Shias, but for Shias transnationally. Today, his successor, Sayed Ali Khamenei is the Supreme Leader of the Iranian government and politics.

Lebanon's Shia Political Context and Clerics

Within Lebanon, the rise of Shia power can be attributed to the social changes and welfare initiatives that gave room to the rise of clerical figures like that of Sayyid Musa Sadr, Syed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, and Syed Hassan Nasrallah. Lebanon's Shia population had been disenfranchised for a long period of time, with many of them residing in rural areas of the Beqaa Valley, the Dahiye suburb of Beirut, and along the South of the country. The Israeli invasion of the South caused a lot of Shias to move Beirut or out into rural areas. Furthermore, when the PLO began to take over South Lebanon following the Israeli invasion, while some stayed to fight Israel, a big population of Shias began to relocate to Beirut due to resources diminishing and instability. In this process, they wanted a political voice and representation following their move (Nasr). The outskirts of Beirut where they had relocated became what is known as Dahiye today. Dahiye is generally understood as Hezbollah headquarters, but really, it is just a major Shia suburb of the city of Beirut. The whole area is full of faded and fresh posters of different Shia clerical figures or martyrs, countless flags in honor of the Ahlul Bayt, and even large banners announcing the day of *Ashura*, which still hadn't been taken down even though the day had passed almost over two months ago.

With the influx of the Shia population moving into developing slums like Dahiye, clerical figures operated programs that were meant to aid these impoverished populations. This work in turn also would help legitimize their role in future political parties of Harakat al-Amal (referred

to as Amal) and Hezbollah. Both organizations would incorporate the collective misery narrative of poor living circumstances and injustices on the Lebanese Shia community to represent themselves as legitimate parties for these populations, which in turn are hard to differentiate between because of the collective poverty that is associated with them. For the purpose of this project, the background context behind the formation of Amal and Hezbollah, as well as the Lebanese Civil War has been kept to a minimum for the sake of clarity and focus on the iconographic and symbolic analyses. Only relevant components regarding group ideology and its connection to Shia identity and key figures will be discussed in detail.

When I asked a Lebanese local about the differences between Hezbollah and Amal, he stated “Hezbollah, Syed Ali. Hezbollah, for Islam. Amal, Syed Sistani. Amal, for Lebanon”. From my understanding from this conversation with him, Hezbollah uses the Iranian *wilayah al-faqih*, and holds their loyalty to the cleric, Syed Ali Khamenei. Furthermore, their work includes serving Lebanon, but also to other causes like that of Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and other countries while also operating on stricter Islamic principles. Hezbollah’s political rhetoric is rooted in the defense of Shiism, as well the liberation of Palestine, and is heavily anti-Zionist. Much of Hezbollah defense efforts in Lebanon have been liberation from Israel, and freeing Al-Aqsa becomes a part of that journey as well.

Amal, still a Shia based organization, is removed from the same form of *wilayah al-faqih* and serves as a party that is primarily based on serving Lebanon, rather than the transnational influence and political involvement Hezbollah has in other regions and causes across the Muslim world. In fact, the only reason I was able to attribute Amal with a Shia organization despite my own background knowledge on political Shiism was that much the iconography associated with

the group are clerical portraits of Sayyid Musa Sadr wearing his turban and gown. The turban associated with Shia clerics is a part of their garb, which let me identify that he was a Shia cleric.

Sayyid Musa Sadr and Harakat al-Amal

Sayyid Musa Sadr is an icon because of his work that had a long-term impact on Lebanese political Shiism. His social and political activities were based upon the idea that self-liberation went hand-in-hand with faith. This explores the personal link from Shia ideology between the militant link in defense by taking principles from the history of the Ahlul Bayt, though Sadr's original intentions were not rooted in militantism (Nasr). Sayyid Musa's work impacted the formation of the Amal party, and he was originally a part of the organization in its earlier days. Sayyid Musa also formed the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in 1967 to provide representation in the Lebanese government, which in turn legitimized Shia clerical authority (Abisaab et al., 118). Like Hezbollah, Iran's influence can be seen with Sayyid Musa's approach to politics and government. Yet it is interesting to see that given the development of Amal throughout the years from when it formed in 1974, of how more removed they are now from the concept of *wilayah al-faqih* and Iranian influence, in contrast to how connected Hezbollah is. Sayyid Musa Sadr disappeared under unclear circumstances in Libya in 1978, but he is still very much relevant to political Shiism in the region. In fact, his disappearance is evocative of the Imam Mahdi narrative (Deeb 685). Arguably, Sadr's piety and charismatic nature, as well as how his disappearance evokes the Mahdi trope could be linked to how he remains venerated and iconized to this day.

Amal is still a major player in Shia spaces, and often collaborates with Hezbollah for the purpose of Shia socio-political welfare. The Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, is from Amal as well. Amal became an important force in the region following the mobilization of Lebanese

Shia communities following Sadr's disappearance, the Israeli invasion of the South, and the Iranian Revolution (Deeb 685). These events brought collaboration amongst Shias to defend themselves, while also reviving a form of cultural identity that came out of the Iranian government's centralization of Shiism in the region. While Hezbollah is rooted in Islamic ideology and uses tenets of the martyrdom trope and allusions to Shia identity, Amal is more removed from this rhetoric in their political identity (Deeb 690).

Syed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah

Syed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah was born and based in Najaf, Iraq and moved to Lebanon in 1952. He is an icon due to his impact on Hezbollah, as more of a spiritual leader in the words of Syed Hasan Nasrallah (Kenner). Fadlallah was involved with Hezbollah in its earlier days, but eventually dissociated himself due to ideological differences with *wilayah al-faqih* and the Iranian link. Although Lebanon was in a major sectarian crisis during the civil war era from 1975-1990, Fadlallah pushed for a unity approach for pragmatism. At the same time, his approach to politics mirrored an activist clerical approach. He believed that clerics held the responsibility of moving society forward, and it was a sacred duty to openly call out oppression and injustice for the greater good of the people (Abisaab et al., 222). This approach was directly influenced by his reverence of Imam Hussain and Karbala, which mirrored the concepts of pitting the oppressed against the oppressor, and acting based on moral and spiritual obligations to society (Abisaab et al., 137). Like Sayyid Musa Sadr, he was inspired by Imam Hussain's social welfare, and had a bigger role in the early stages of his political party.

Fadlallah gave himself the title of Grand Ayatollah, and many of his fatwas and unconventional approaches to Islamic law and rules can be linked to his mindset of practicality and moving forward in a rapidly developing world. He was controversial for reasons such as his

clerical viewpoints, as well as his distance from Hezbollah, who had reshaped Shia cultural identity. His death in 2010 in was mourned in Beirut with a funeral procession, and even other Lebanese politicians gave their condolences (Clarke 157). Following his death, he was iconized as a humble and simple individual who was a man of the people through imagery and videography that showed him as such (Clarke 163). At the same time, his life narrative also became intertwined with Shia symbolism and mysticism, with stories of how he was miraculously saved from a car bomb in Beirut, and how his mother prayed at the shrine of Hussain for his birth (Clarke 163). He is an icon for seminary purposes as well; his legacy and seminary work is still maintained on the website, and the institution in his name continues to offer Islamic studies courses and religious guidance (Clarke 179). To this day, his gravesite is also visited by locals who pay their respects. In my 2019 trip, I had the chance to visit his gravesite which is inside of a mosque in Dahiye called al-Hasanain.

Syed Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah

Hassan Nasrallah is arguably one of the most relevant clerical icons to Lebanese political Shiism in contemporary times. He is the current secretary general of Hezbollah, and his image is associated with the party's victories (Abisaab et al., 130). Like other Lebanese clerics, the martyrdom trope is a key theme in Nasrallah's movements. When his son, Hadi, was killed, Nasrallah referred to him a martyr for the cause. Nasrallah alludes to Hussain's tragedy and the intercession of the Imams to elevate the status of Hezbollah's military endeavors (Abisaab et al., 137). Nasrallah's political rhetoric directly intersects with Imam Hussain's narrative. Hezbollah soldiers are referred to as martyrs, and he always regards them as such with honor. He refers to Israel as the modern day Yazid, and often compares Hezbollah's movements as those who protect and uphold the principles of Islam. At the very same time, Nasrallah also makes sure that

Hezbollah's rhetoric also includes the defense of Christians, with the purpose of extending the political narrative to those outside of the Shia sphere. As an organization, Hezbollah is entirely aligned with Iranian *wilayah al-faqih*, and Nasrallah is under the command of Syed Ali Khamenei and the Iranian Revolutionary Corps.

From both of my times in Beirut, I've seen that Nasrallah is adored especially in Shia spaces, not solely because of his status as a cleric, but because of his oratory skills and personable character. Locals that I came across would refer to him as wise and well respected, and regardless of his high status, he comes across to them as "one of their own". When his own son was killed, he didn't give him priority in recovering his body or even an extravagant funeral, and instead emphasized that the others who were killed should be taken well care of and in the order as is. In a recent press conference in response to the recent clashes in Beirut, Nasrallah addresses the families of those who were killed by telling them that justice will be served, while also reinforcing the need to avoid a civil war at all costs.

When I was at Mleeta, the Hezbollah military achievement park, I had the chance to watch a documentary played of Nasrallah and the encounters with Israel. He brands himself and Hezbollah as protectors of Lebanon and Shias, and is openly defiant of Israel. By its supporters, Hezbollah is branded as the face of preserving Shia heritage and identity across the region. They tie this back to both their political principles associated with religion, alongside their military presence across the region, such as the pretense of protecting and defending shrines, which are essentially hubs of holy Shia spaces. Hezbollah identifies with the principles of Iran and its revolution alongside loyalty to the Iranian *wilayah al-faqih*. This signifies that their religious message and foundations rooted in Shiism one transcends borders (Ayubi 87). Across the

predominantly Shia regions of Lebanon today, Nasrallah's portrait is ubiquitous across not only mosques and shrines, but even city walls, village gates, shops, and homes.

When I was speaking with Lebanese people, I learned that Shia villages have an unofficial, unspoken agreement as to which party they are affiliated with. Collectively, an Amal heavy or Hezbollah heavy space will still have supporters or followers of the other party in these areas, but it only makes sense because both organizations are based upon shared principles that connect back to Shiism and communal social welfare, even though their religious and structural approaches differ.

Iraqi Political Shiism and Clerics

One can look at Iraq and see local ayatollahs and other influential scholars who are not necessarily holding official governmental positions but are instead still key political figures due to their authority and influence on the Shia population. Clerical figures during the Saddam era still are iconized to this day as both martyrs and major forms of Shia representation and identity.

The Sadr Family: Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr

The Sadr family clerics are a group of major figures relevant to the Iraqi political sphere. During Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, many of them were killed because of their vocal resistance to the Baathist regime¹⁸. Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was one of these key individuals. He was outspoken, issued fatwas to release imprisoned Shia clerics, and became a major representative for Shia rights during this period. He was later assassinated in 1999 by Saddam Hussein's regime (Luizard 258). Sadr is iconized as a martyr for his clerical work

¹⁸ Saddam Hussein's regime persecuted Shias and placed limitations on Shia cultural and religious practices.

and sacrifice. Furthermore, his reverence as an icon stemmed from the shift into a Shia dominated political sphere following the end of Saddam's era. Placing iconography of Sadr would denote yet another form of veneration to the martyrdom trope, while also claiming a space as a Shia one because of the persecution and lack of representation the community faced during the Baathist regime.

The Sadr Family: Moqtada al-Sadr

Moqtada al-Sadr is the son of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, and he is still alive today. He kept his father's legacy alive through his mobilization efforts, especially following the power vacuum of 2003 from the fall of Saddam Hussein (Alaaldin 3). He is noteworthy for his heavy anti-US rhetoric and push for an Iraq free from American influence on several occasions (Luizard 260). Furthermore, his party seeks to keep Iranian influence out of Iraqi political affairs to a great extent (Alaaldin 5). His interests were aligned for Shias in particular, rather than the unified Iraqi front seen with Ayatollah Sistani. While he is not necessarily a major cleric to the same degree his father was, he is still looked up to as a leader that advocates for the Iraqi Shias.

Moqtada's approach is more sectarian in comparison to Ayatollah Sistani, but given the persecution of his family for their Shia activism during Saddam's era, this reactionary movement rooted in Shia identity at the forefront is justifiable. He is also responsible for creating the Mahdi Army and establishing local, yet decentralized leadership in Shia spaces to provide protection, religious services, and social welfare initiatives (Alaaldin 3). The Mahdi Army eventually became rather disorganized and disorderly, and later developed into factions that became disloyal to the Sadrist (Alaaldin 4), in comparison to the government instated Shia militias that advanced following the initiatives of Ayatollah Sistani. Furthermore, Moqtada's approaches and

his movements have received criticisms by Sistani and other major Iraqi clerical figures for his extreme approaches and disunity.

Regardless of the tainted reputation of the militia for their lack of organization and alleged sectarian crimes, Moqtada al-Sadr continues to be a major player representing a facet of political Iraqi Shiism. “Sadr City” is a region within Baghdad, named after the Sadrists. This in turn reinforces Sadrists as influential icons from their martyrdom status and active use of Shia identity in their political rhetoric and advancements.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the Popular Mobilization Forces

Ayatollah Sistani is a major cleric across the Shia world, but his influence as an icon in Iraq spans from both the political and seminary spheres. Sistani is of Iranian descent, but he has lived in Najaf and is still based there today. Compared to the Sadrs, who were rather vocal in their opposition of Saddam’s regime, Sistani maintained more of a quietist approach during those years. This prevented altercations with the Baathists, and ultimately preserved his life (Clarke 4). From Vali Nasr’s *The Shia Revival*, Sistani played a role in law and policies that were primarily centered around Shia interests, while also not incorporating the Iranian style of government in the Iraqi constitution (Nasr 175). He views the ulama as scholars versus political entities, yet at the very same time, his role as grand Ayatollah still has influence in political Shia affairs in the country. Sistani also played a role to promote unity based on shared principles versus differences during heightened periods of sectarianism as a result of ISIS and the Shia response to the threats, which is in stark contrast to the factional political rhetoric of Sadrists who use Shia identity at the forefront to rally support and promote their own advancements. Other efforts of Sistani include allusions to Shia historical narratives and icons, like that of Zainab and her strength, to convince women to vote during elections (Nasr). In 2017, an article by AIM Islam covers Sistani’s speech

advising clerical speakers to take the message of Imam Hussain into consideration while also being mindful of the impact their words have on the pulpit (“AIM Congratulates Muslim Ummah”). This in turn demonstrates Sistani’s own influence by the Hussaini tragedy to the advice he gives and the importance he sees of the mourning traditions and incorporating the messages as a part of Shia identity in scholarly spaces.

In contemporary times, the fatwa of Ayatollah Sistani that called upon his followers to actively pursue efforts to rid the country of ISIS is an example of clerical impact on regional politics. Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), became the major Shia militia affiliated with the Iraqi federal government with different entities pledging their political loyalty to Sistani (Alaaldin 1). In particular, Sistani’s militias, referred to as Hawza Militias, are affiliated with the holy Iraqi shrines and seminaries (Dury-Agri 47). These Najaf based militias exist to defend and protect shrine spaces, which are key areas linked to Shia heritage and identity, from the pilgrimage and sanctity of honoring holy saints and also for the connection to seminary institutions (Mansour 15). Like Moqtada Sadr, Sistani’s perspective seems to lean towards a minimal Iranian influence in Iraqi politics. Hawza militias seem to follow a politically removed ideology rooted in loyalty to the Najaf religious establishment versus Iran (Dury-Agri 48). Amongst the other various Shia militias grouped under the PMF, are Iranian proxy organizations like the Badr Brigades¹⁹ and Kataib Hezbollah²⁰, whose deep state ties to the Iranian government²¹ can be compared to that of the Lebanese Hezbollah (Dury-Agri 31). Likewise, there are also militias under the PMF that are Sadrist and base their ideologies

¹⁹ The Badr Brigades formed during the Saddam era, and under the PMF they became an Iranian proxy militia responsible for liberating several spaces claimed by ISIS (Dury-Agri 37).

²⁰ Referred to as the Iraqi Hezbollah, which also is an Iranian backed militia associated with the PMF formerly led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Dury-Agri 40).

²¹ The IRGC Quds Force (Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) led by Qassem Soleimani exerted influence over several PMF operations (Dury-Agri 29).

and loyalties to those principles (Mansour 12), like that of Saraya al-Salaam²². Differences across different militia background ties to Iran versus Iraqi leadership has resulted in leadership conflicts and attempts to sway different groups towards a certain ideology.

Collectively, regardless of their loyalty towards Iran or Iraq, the PMF have been associated directly with the military efforts to fight and protect Iraq from ISIS, and have been successful under the local and external aid they have received. In Shia spaces across Iraq, the PMF has its logo on flags and banners, and also iconizes its military achievements through grand displays of guns and battlefield models. Furthermore, the PMF displays posters in honor of soldiers and political figures who have died and memorializes them as martyrs. Several of these forms of visual imagery incorporate shrine references and clerical portraiture, which connects the PMF directly to both their political and religious institutions as well as the deeply rooted concept of holy sacrifice embodied in the Shia symbolism and tragic narrative. Across shrine spaces or in areas near Shia pilgrimage sites are PMF and affiliated clerical imagery, which in turn demonstrates the territorial claim to the region and embodying symbolism that resonates with Shia identity and thought.

The end of the Saddam era institutionalized an expression of unapologetic, passionate displays of Shiism into the Iraqi cultural sphere. Given the years of political persecution, Iraqi Shias have reclaimed these spaces as their own, and are adamant about showing it through cultural and political lenses. This has included these forms of visual imagery and iconography, as well as mourning and pilgrimage traditions. In this process, revering ayatollahs that were killed like Sadr and carrying on his legacy through his son Moqtada has been pivotal to the nation's

²² Was founded following the Spleicher Massacre of 2014 by Moqtada Sadr (Mansour 14).

secular nationalism. Likewise, taking the seminary allegiances into consideration for militia movements by Ayatollah Sistani has impacted Shia claims to regional shrine and holy spaces.

Implications for Clerical Influence

These clerics go beyond just being respected scholars of jurisprudence; regardless of how active or inactive they choose to be, their presence and iconography demonstrate that they are complex political figures who are intrinsically tied to Shiism and its political counterparts across the region. Both quietist and activist approaches, as well as *wilayah al-faqih* yield different outcomes and perceptions of clerics. Regardless of active or passive involvement in politics, clerics have a direct political tie. Their lack of action in quietist approaches results in a passive existence of Shiism, while their engagement on the other hand can demonstrate a passionate and active presence of Shiism. Ultimately, clerics are major icons because of their political and popular power of different areas, and likewise their presence and influence of a space indicates the existence of Shiism in a region.

Portraiture as an Art Form

Historical Context to Islamic Portraiture

In the earlier years of Islamic art, figural depictions collectively were a taboo, but the spread of Islam and interaction with other cultures influenced the artistic sphere with facial imagery and figural work. Islamic portraiture using faces became a component of artistic expression during the Ilkhanid period (1256-1353CE), through the introduction of manuscript texts and visual imagery that came along with them and their Mongolian heritage (Yalman). Manuscript and book artwork became relevant forms of visual expression for the Safavid era (dates) as well, especially through royal patronage. They would be a combination of written Persian text, alongside an illustration or drawing on pages to accompany the content. A prime example being the intricate project of the illustrated manuscript of the Shahnama epic, started likely under Shah Ismail in the early 1520s, and continued by his son, Tahmasp (Leoni). This work of art would become a blueprint for future illustrative figure work that eventually would become a major part of Safavid, Persian art forms. Shah Abbas's era (1587-1629CE) rekindled further artistic and architectural developments, and painting and drawing work became even more popular than bookwork (Yalman).

While a lot of Persian painting forms venerated political figures and memorialized them like that of the Shahnameh, Shia saints were also depicted through visual manuscript imagery. Through an observation of several works of Persian manuscript and painting work from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, I have noticed that several Shia narratives or saint figures were often illustrated with Farsi text accompanying the stories. In these works, the Prophet Mohammad and the Imams' faces are covered with an orb of fire or light out of respect and honor, versus the imagery depicting kings

and royal figures with their unadorned faces. Likewise, many of these art forms began to incorporate color and spiritual imagery, like that of angels or legendary figures, giving an outer worldly connotation to the work (Ari). From these kinds of textual and figural images, alluding to Shia narratives and elements of identity in Safavid and Persian dynasties art over time asserts claims to political and religious legitimacy, especially on a sectarian level (Gruber 244). Nonetheless, after an extended period of aniconism, figural painting found its way back into Islamic art due to manuscript art. Contemporarily, figural imagery and portraiture can be observed as a visual form of depicting iconography, especially for Shiism in a cultural and political context.

Imami Imagery

As explained in the background chapter, the Ahlul Bayt and Imams are foundational spiritual figures for Shiism. They are considered the proofs of God as well as the sole purpose behind creation. They are considered both the light and vessel that carries it (Ayoub 57). They hold their status and authority from God himself. The twelve Shia Imams are all venerated saints, and are honored and mourned for. They are iconized for their role as divine saints, and their significance in history, spirituality, and martyrdom becomes a model of inspiration for political expression across the region. Therefore, in the imagery that reflects them, there are many allusions to the ethereal nature in how they are painted. This also explains why these forms of portraiture exists in abundance in Shia spaces as a whole regardless of political party affiliation.

Portraiture of the Imams consists of paintings depicting their facial features, or their body with the holy light covering their faces. Portraiture is ubiquitous inside and outside of shrines, *hussainias*, and within Shia majority regions. The use of this imagery personifies the Imam, and a loyal follower has a direct visual reference to venerate and mourn. It also demonstrates

devotion to the Imam by having these images in holy spaces, or constantly recurring throughout a location. From my own time in Lebanon and Iraq, any shrine that I visited had some form of this art inside or right before entering. Even across regular buildings or on streets in Shia spaces, it was impossible to not see a painting or illustration depicting either Hussain, Abbas, or Ali, and this was particularly true in Iraq.

The facial portraiture of the Ahlul Bayt is more common than the shield of light covering their faces throughout the regions I had visited. These works of art depict the individuals with sharp eyebrows, intense eyes and beards, and it can be difficult to differentiate who is being depicted given the similarities in the facial imagery, but there are other forms of visual motifs that can often indicate the identity of the icon. For example, the warrior headpiece with two feathers and moon imagery is often associated with Abbas, and the painting of a lion with swords would indicate that the portrait is of Ali. Sometimes Imami portraiture includes text that indicates the identity of the piece too, such as slogans translating to “peace be upon you, oh Hussain/Abbas”. Furthermore, there is often a spiritual component to these forms of imagery; several of them incorporate shrines or shrine structures, like the *dharikh*, in the work. Being able to identify the shrine or the work can also help provide context on the portrait’s identity. Even flags and banners are often adorned with these iconic images of the Ahlul Bayt, with the purpose of connecting their identity to another form of symbolism. Across the *Arbaeen* walk, so many smaller shops sold flags depicting different images of Hussain and Abbas in particular. Along the route to Karbala, there were several flags carried by others with this portraiture imagery, and

around different *mowkibs*²³, these flags incorporating portraits were put up along the roads or on buildings as adornment.

Clerical Imagery

Portraiture of the holy Imams can arguably be linked to the portraiture of clerical figures and even other political figures. In the same way these saints are visualized and honored through their image in religious spaces, so are these clerics or politicians. Religious spaces provide the fervor and enablement for scholars to hold their influence, as these shrines are also conjunct to the religious seminaries. It is impossible to walk through spaces such as shrine cities without seeing enlarged imagery of various scholars and speakers. Likewise, smaller mosques and Shia majority areas also have these images placed on walls, gates, and even down the side of the highway. For different regions, different clerics hold different levels of influence. An individual can connect a region to its political counterparts and loyalties, because the imagery in these relevant spaces denotes political and religious affiliation.

One of the biggest forms of Shia visual iconography is portraiture. Major artistic depictions of portraits include both illustrative works especially of the Imams or the Ahlul Bayt, or paintings of major iconic clerics. Even at times, there are works of art that combine a clerical figure with a Holy Imam, denoting their piety and direct association with spirituality and the veneration and honor of the martyrdom trope. More commonly, clerical portraiture is composed of photography or collective collage work incorporating shrine dome imagery and angelic lighting around the individual. Across Shia spaces, Imami and clerical portraiture exists in abundance. Similarly to the nonstop trail of flags, portraiture of clerics and Imams are a visual

²³ A *mowkib* refers to the rest spaces, and stands or stalls serving drinks and food, on the Arbreen walk in Iraq.

form of depicting iconography and also giving insight to a certain area's political connotations. For example, seeing large billboards and banners of Sayed Hassan Nasrallah across the Beqaa, while also seeing portraiture of Iranian ayatollahs like Khomeini and Khamenei demonstrates the area's political affiliation with Hezbollah. The same goes for how the repeated portraiture of the Sadr family across regions of Kadhimain, Najaf, and Samarra exemplifies the regional influence the family had since the time of Saddam, and how they are iconized today as martyrs along major areas affiliated with pilgrimage sites.

Clerical Iconography and its Implications

Lebanon

The South

One can see the presence of Shiism and which political affiliations lie based on the clerical iconography in a region. Shia majority towns in Lebanon, especially in the south, include entryway arches with Ali's legendary *dhulfiqar* but are also adorned with the portrait of Sayyid Musa Sadr, with Arabic text on the bottom that refers to him as Imam Sadr. Furthermore, across the South are several repeated portraits of Sayyid Musa Sadr and Nabih Berri, the leader of Amal, along the side of highways and on homes, buildings, and on roundabouts. Clerical images of Sayed Musa Sadr directly imply the regional presence that Amal has on the region, and given the political context of Lebanon, it makes sense that the south is associated with Amal given that Sadr was very influential in the city of Tyre (Ahmed). Sayyid Musa Sadr imagery is not limited to the South alone though; even in Hezbollah heavy spaces, there are areas that incorporate his image like that of the roundabout near Dahiye.

Likewise, there is also room for Hezbollah iconography in the south too even in majority Amal areas. Seeing imagery of Sayed Hassan Nasrallah implies Hezbollah associations, and this

is rather obvious given that Hezbollah is credited for liberating and defending the South in 2006 following the Israeli invasion. Likewise, Hezbollah imagery in the South reinforces their claim to the area alongside a reminder of their military strength. Additionally, a major component of their messages includes maintaining arms and protecting Shia populations (with the south being primarily associated with Shia populations) while also reminding Israel across the border in the South that they are still present and have no plans of leaving. Because identity is multifaceted and both Amal and Hezbollah happen to overlap in their political doctrines for Shia welfare based on religious principles, Shia clerical iconography, regardless of what overarching political ties may be affiliated with a region demonstrates that there are pro-Shia political affiliations in a space.

Context for Regions Lacking Shia Iconography

When there are fewer Shia clerical icons in an area, the region is less politically Shia. Beirut is a good example of this. While a majority of Beirut is a mix of people from all backgrounds, different neighborhood areas are divided by identity politics and religion. This is a direct long-term implication of the civil war, because of sectarianism. The more modern and urbanized areas like Hamra and Ashrafieh lack much political or religious iconography at all. Yet a smaller suburb within the Ashrafieh suburb known as Geitawi, where I stayed, had a lot of Christian iconography of saints and even major political figures affiliated with the religion. Apart from Dahiye, the Shia clerical iconography and religious imagery ceases to exist. In fact, I knew I was entering back into the Dahiye suburbs once I started to see *alams* or photographs of Nasrallah and Sayyid Musa Sadr.

Another interesting component about the zoning divide in regard to iconography is a negative perception in Beirut particularly towards Shiism because of local politics and

accountability these organizations have in the government. In comparison to the South and Beqaa regions that are majority village-based, Beirut is a urban hub and there is a lot of modernization and secularism that exists; especially with the presence of several western based universities and centers for cultures and art. From my time in the city both in 2019 and 2021, when talking to secular locals, I noticed that many view political Shiism as backwards, and even those with Shia backgrounds, including myself, have spoken on the reversal of modernity and erasure of cultural heritage. Hezbollah and Amal are also often blamed by some for many issues that Lebanon is facing while at the same time, they are idealized by others. Furthermore, the poor background associated with Shia population and the corruption that does exists within political parties gives way to negative stereotypes that categorize Lebanese Shias as uneducated, gang-related, and destitute. The association to the underdeveloped region of Dahiye adds to this. and the open display of political and religious symbolism of Shiism in either Christian based or more secularized hubs in Beirut would not be received in a positive light, given the cultural and political context.

The north of Lebanon is associated more with Maronite Christians, and a lot of the imagery seen there was of Mary, Jesus, and other major Christian icons and political figures. This project focuses on Shiism and those figures so I did not delve into Christian political context for the purpose of brevity. But the lack of Shia symbolism in this region demonstrates the lack of affinity or affiliation with Shia political groups and identity. In a few areas I had gone to in the Mount Lebanon area, I saw a few villages that had Shia religious and political flags on some residences. Yet once we hit majority Christian areas, the Shia iconography diminished almost entirely, and if a home was Shia in one of these areas, we only knew because of either seeing flag or portrait affiliated with Shiism on the premises. Politically this also would make

sense, given that though Hezbollah includes inclusive rhetoric that is in support of defending Christians, the sectarianism in Lebanon from the civil war still has its roots. My friend and her family are a Shia family based in Dahiye but have a home in the village of Keyfoun, which has a reasonably sized Shia presence. We visited different parts of the mountain villages, and she made a comment to me that some of these villages do not allow Shias to come in. This was a clear implication of both sectarianism and identity politics. Given my friend's background as more religious individual and pro-Hezbollah, it made sense that she would say something like this because of the tensions with certain Christian Lebanese factions. After fact checking this statement with another local Lebanese friend of mine, it became clear that it was not necessarily true that Shias were restricted from the area. Rather, it probably was not a good idea to be very vocal about Shia identity, but it might prove difficult to purchase a home or live in that area.

Shia Beirut: Dahiye

In Dahiye of Beirut, the Al-Hasanain mosque is adorned with portraiture of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Fadhlallah. Furthermore, the grave of Ayatollah Fadhlallah is inside this mosque, which can be connected to the themes discussed in the shrine section of this project. Different Hossainiahs named after saints of the Ahlul Bayt are scattered around different areas, and even street names are in honor of different martyrs or icons. As a part of development in Shia spaces, a fancy hotel and restaurant built under Fadhlallah named Al-Saha and is affiliated with his clerical office. His poster is seen inside of it, and there is religious décor and gifts that are sold there.

It is also impossible to walk in the streets of the neighborhoods of Dahiye, considered Hezbollah-influenced territory, without seeing posters of Nasrallah. Given this imagery, one can infer that these spaces are influenced by political Shiism and in particular, that of Hezbollah.

Delving deeper, one can make connections between the different strands of political Shiism that are attributed to these spaces. Nasrallah is the current face of Hezbollah, and therefore his portraiture indicates the presence and popular loyalty towards the party. Likewise, seeing the Iranian ayatollah imagery of Khomeini and Khamenei in Hezbollah-dominated spaces reinforces the connection that the party has to Iran, especially given that they were founded, funded, trained and supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. A major highway in the region is named after Ayatollah Khomeini, and even other street names are attributed to different major Shia political figures. Furthermore, the cultural implication of Hezbollah also reflects on the religiosity of the area. There are a lot more conservative forms of clothing and attire in the Dahiye area for instance. Countless Hossainias are also exist in the area, and each of them are named after one of the Imams or holy figures of the Ahlul Bayt, like that of Masjid al-Hasanain²⁴. The martyrdom complex embodied by the group also exists as iconography as well. I met with a friend in a cafe, on Hadi Nasrallah street, named in honor of Syed Hassan Nasrallah's son who was killed and is now referred to as a martyr and naming the street in his honor further iconizes him.

Likewise to Dahiye and the South, the Beqaa is not much different in terms of iconography. There are hubs of Amal imagery, but there is a lot more affiliation to Hezbollah; given the countless number of party flags and Hezbollah martyr memorial imagery inside and around shrines. In fact when I visited Baalbek in 2019, right outside of the Roman ruins was a gift stand selling t-shirts with Hezbollah logos on it. Syeda Khawla's shrine also has a Hezbollah museum in it, and this is discussed in the martyrdom and shrines chapter in more detail. Syed Abbas Mousawi (discussed in detail in the martyrdom chatper) imagery was also prevalent given his hometown of Nabi Sheet is also the site of his shrine. His is adorned with both a painting of

²⁴ Hasanain is a name that combines Hussain and Hasan.

him, and a portrait right on the outside. Even the postcards the keeper of the shrine gave my friend I had photos of Mousawi smiling.

Iraqi Iconography

The Sadrs

In the case of Iraq, Shia majority regions will have clerical iconography regardless. But repeated clerical iconography of the Sadrs implies that the area has more of a loyalty or presence of Sadrist ideology and political influence. Across my time in Iraq, posters of the Sadrs could be seen in relation to shrine city spaces and on posters, banners, and even shops. It is rather interesting that Sadrist iconography was more prevalent in spaces closer to Baghdad, such as Kadhimain and Samarra. This makes much sense, given the area's proximity to Sadr City. The fact that these areas are major shrine spaces and in the defense of Shiism in a political and sectarian context, the Sadrists are right at home. In fact, following the 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari mosque in Samarra, the response by the Sadrists was the sectarian civil war that ravaged Baghdad.

I saw less Sadrist imagery closer to spaces like Najaf and Karbala, and that demonstrates how the political affiliations in these regions are more loyal to Ayatollah Sistani. Furthermore, a lack of seeing certain clerical figures as iconographic imagery indicates the regional political preferences or lack thereof. During my time in Iraq, both in winter of 2018 and September 2021, I did not see much clerical portraiture at all of Ayatollah Khomeini or Ayatollah Khamenei at all en route or in shrine cities. This makes sense because even though there is Iranian influence on certain PFM militia factions, the major Iraqi clerical figures and a big population of Iraqi people are not in alignment with Iranian influence and are not implementing *wilayah al-faqih* into their

government system. Therefore, in a show of loyalty and political identity, the imagery placed in these spaces is of their own Iraqi clerics and scholars.

Ayatollah Sistani Imagery

Unexpectedly, I did not see as much of Ayatollah Sistani's portrait during both trips to Najaf and Karbala. Even though Sistani is based in Najaf and affiliated directly with shrine spaces especially given his role with Hawza militias, it was initially rather surprising that I did not see a lot of his portraiture. In fact, I only saw one large image of him on the route during the walk from Najaf to Karbala, at a *mowkib* designed to honor and venerate PMF military achievements. Within this space were other clerics too, but in comparison, their images were smaller. Having Sistani imagery here denotes that whichever militia this space was honoring most probably is a hawza militia or a militia with loyal ties directly to Sistani. With a look into Sistani's background and his quietest approach to politics, his imagery is not as venerated because of his own requests to keep it that way. On the contrary, the more vocal clerical figures like the Sadrs are iconized and memorialized on multiple accounts in various places.

Overall Implications

As a show of unapologetic Shia identity in these regions, portraiture venerating clerics, martyred clerics, and political party emblems are placed onto flags and posters. The direct impact of Saddam's end resulted in a revival of cultural Shiism, and apart from the shrine traditions that are addressed in chapter 6, a direct display of cultural and religious identity in mass amounts of flags and portraits is a big visual form that directly shows the presence of Shiism in the space, be it political, religious, cultural, or an intersection of all. In the case of Lebanon, Shia cultural identity was a direct result of Hezbollah's military endeavors and social welfare initiatives for Shia populations.

Furthermore, clerical iconography alongside political logos are intertwined with Shia symbolism either using shrine imagery and allusions to light and holiness. Additionally, the placement of clerical icons and militia imagery alongside shrine spaces and vicinities plays a major role in connecting the themes of shrine cities being affiliated as hubs for political and cultural Shiism and identity. Likewise, because of the sanctity of the shrine regions and the reverence to these clerical figures, martyrs, and these religious based-militias, repeated signage in shrine areas symbolizes the holiness and legitimacy of these entities. If a shrine space is a religious space, these components must be key figures to faith and identity too. This connects religious identity to its political counterparts, which blurs the lines between the two. Ultimately, clerical iconography takes its form through heavy references back to the martyrdom trope and memorializing imagery while also incorporating holy religious themes. The implications of this include establishing a visual form denoting the presence of Shiism in a space, while also implying the political affiliations that are associated with said clerics and regions.

Symbolic Imagery

Flags

Across the world, flags are a common form of visual iconography and symbolism signifying different affiliations, ranging from nationality, religion, and politics. Flags are a symbol within a symbol for identity, especially within Shiism. The Karbala tragedy is at the root of the significance of flag usage. Abbas, the brother of Hussain, was the flagbearer of his army during the battle of Karbala. The flag, referred to as an *alam* in Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi, was a part of Abbas's heroic character arc, and symbolic of carrying the banner of Islam that Hussain represented. In the recollection of Abbas's martyrdom, he was en route to bring water from the Euphrates to the thirsty children, when both his arms were cut off and tragically an arrow pierced through his water bag. When he fell, so did the flag in the cause of Islam, so symbolically he lost his life in martyrdom and honor. In Persian and Urdu, a flagbearer is referred to as an *alamdar* and the concept of the *alamdar* transcends the honoring Abbas, even though the root of it is linked to his story. The names of the other members of the Ahlul Bayt are often embroidered and printed onto *alams* with the purpose of memorializing these holy names and the individuals they represent. There are major Shia slogans that are also often incorporated on these flags as a form of veneration and loyalty.²⁵ *Alams* became a part of visual imagery, especially in Shia spaces because of their significance. Inside of mosques and *hussainias*, *alams* are a form of décor that line walls and spaces, and they also take up many different artistic forms and styles. Some are embroidered wall art in long rectangular shapes, and others are vertically attached onto flagpoles with the metallic symbol of the hand on top, to be carried around or placed upright in a courtyard. There are also smaller *alam* replicas that are placed around as little symbols as well.

²⁵ Phrases like “Labbaik” are often followed with “ya” and the name of different members of the Ahlul Bayt, especially Abbas, Hussain, Fatimah, Zahra, Zainab, and Mahdi.

Across areas with larger Shia populations, *alams* are seen waving along the side of streets. Even inside of shrines, *alams* are placed as large banners on walls and even by or on the martyrdom *dharih* structures. In pilgrimage spaces, the bazaars outside of these shrine spaces often sell *alams* of all sizes and shapes.

On the *Arbaeen* walk, the *alam* is an iconic symbol that is directly associated with the pilgrimage experience. Across the whole journey, flags are constantly in the viewpoint from miles on end. Pilgrims on the walk carry flags bearing these names and slogans, and even flags of their own political affiliations or nationalities. The *mowkibs*, which are stops for food, drinks, and rest along the Najaf and Karbala Highway, have *alams* hanging on their premises. For miles on end flags are waving in the distance carried by those on the journey or placed as adornment along the route.

Politically, *alams* are interesting to observe because of how they correspond with their local populations. Shia political parties, especially in Lebanon, demarcate their territorial region with an abundance of their own flags. Hezbollah's yellow and green flags range across highways and villages in southern Lebanon and in the Beqaa Valley, and Amal does the same with their green flags. In spaces where these political parties visually demonstrate their presence with their flags and portraiture, are also a plethora of *alams* that are lined up on homes and walls, and inside of mosques. Furthermore, *alams* are placed in memorialization spaces like those for martyrs or war memorials. *Alams* directly connect the Hussaini tragedy and martyrdom trope to these areas because of the association that the concept of the flag has to the Karbala narrative. Likewise, the narrative of Hussain is the underpinning of the philanthropy and messages that fuel these political parties and their work. The *rawda* in Dahiye is a large cemetery in honor of Hezbollah martyrs. Across several graves, were small flags or banners with slogans calling out to

different saints of the Ahlul Bayt placed on top. Furthermore, many of these graves had some sort of association with the shrines of Zainab in Damascus, or the pilgrimage spaces in Karbala and Najaf with imagery of the domes or the *ḍarīḥs*. Hussain's tragedy connects these martyrs to their cause, and these symbols and icons continue to demarcate that relationship even after their passing in a form of memorialization.

Arabic Text and Banners

As mentioned in the shrines chapter and above in the flags segment, symbolic Arabic text is a visual that demarcates Shia identity. Several shrine spaces include large printouts of prayers known as *ziyarah* which are a collection of verses that send salutations upon members of the Ahlul Bayt. Particularly in shrine spaces, there are specific *ziyarahs* about who the *maqaam*²⁶ is attributed to, that are written out and displayed in large text for the pilgrims to recite. Apart from these specific *ziyarahs* are often other more common ones that are also on display, such as *Ziyarah al-Ashura*, which is particularly in honor of Hussain. In Shia homes and *hussainias*, seeing these *ziyarah* texts is very common. The term *ziyarah* literally refers to a pilgrimage made to a shrine or *maqaam*. But as just explained, the term also refers to the invocation offered either while in the shrine, or from afar. They can be recited outside of these shrine spaces with the intention of sending blessings onto the revered entombed personality, with the intention of also attempting to symbolically recreate a visitation to these spaces. Because of the significance of shrine visitation, having textual imagery that is also a religious supplication is a symbol in it of itself to veneration of holy martyrs.

²⁶ The Arabic term for a holy space or location.

A smaller form of textual imagery includes some of the similar slogans seen on flags, but written on walls, banners or as décor in Shia spaces. This is seen particularly in Lebanon outside of shrines or on highway signage, either in honor of Hussain or with political iconography and references. Many of this signage in honor of Hussain when I came this fall of 2021 post-*Arbaeen*, was actually announcement imagery for the *Ashura* commemoration which hadn't been taken down.

Shrines

Shrines not only house various icons and symbols but are also considered symbols in and of themselves. Shrines as spaces and imagery are collective symbols to Shiism through politics and cultures, transnationally. As a place of pilgrimage, they are significant because of their religious background, and Shias worldwide revere them. Likewise in the form of reverence, recreation of shrines as paintings and art forms connects the space to Shia identity. Within Shia spaces is shrine imagery, and even within Shia shrine spaces are allusions and visual imagery of other shrines. All major forms of symbolism and iconography are seen within shrine spaces as well; from flags, political and clerical portraiture, Imami portraiture, and memorializing martyrs. From the historical context and tragic Shia narrative, shrines are holy spaces that memorialize the Imams and family of the Prophet Mohammad. Especially relevant to Karbala and Imam Hussain, shrines are spaces to remember themes of martyrdom and tragic loss, while tying them back to identity. Furthermore, with the Imams and Ahlul Bayt being key icons of Shia faith and history, shrine pilgrimages are significant to influencing an area's religious affiliation and cultural traditions. Furthermore, their presence holds political undertones for the region.

Shrine Architectural Structures and Shia Symbolism

In the process of understanding shrines and their ties to Shiism and its political implications, an understanding of their artistic history is relevant to their stylistic features and rise to significance. In terms of architecture, a lot of Islamic structures have been heavily influenced by early Christian forms. In my course with Dr. Nisa Ari²⁷, I came across several parallels between elements that are found in Muslim spaces and their Christian counterparts.

²⁷ Spring 2020, Dr. Ari offered a course on Islamic Architecture, and the class went into the historical and architectural context of various forms of art and structures across the Muslim world.

Christian martyrdom structures closely resemble that of the *dharih*, an ornately decorated metal lattice structure which demarcates the actual gravesite. Furthermore, the circular domed structures seen within mosques are very similar to Byzantine church architecture. As Islamic architecture developed through different dynasties and influence, certain stylistic elements became key features that would label architectural structures. Shrines themselves are mausoleums. As architectural structures, they are influenced by ruling dynasties, and, in the case of Shia shrines, the Fatimids and Safavids hold the most significant impact.

The Fatimid era (909-1171 AD) is arguably the first period that brought imagery and relevant Shia iconography into religious spaces. While the Fatimids are associated with the Ismaili Shia sect, they are foundational in setting a Shia scene through their use of architecture and iconography. Politically, the Fatimids ruled over a majority Sunni population, and they sourced their legitimacy through favorable interpretations of Quranic verses. Likewise, they reflected their tie to Shiism by leaving a mark through architecture. Mosque spaces would have Arabic calligraphy etched onto walls and entrances, incorporating the names of the five holiest figures: Mohammad, Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Hussain. In fact, several *mihirabs*²⁸ or entrances would have the name of Mohammad and Ali written in Arabic calligraphy to denote the loyalty towards Shiism. Religious terminology and phrases such as “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is the Messenger” are standard Arabic calligraphic phrases, but on the walls of these Fatimid structures, there is an additional line of “And Ali is the Friend of Allah” added, once again denoting the influence of Shiism within the space. In mosque spaces, it is common for Quranic verses to be etched in as well. Often the verse of “Allah intends only to remove from you the impurity (of sin), O Ahlulbait and to purify you with (extensive) purification” (Al-

²⁸ A domed entryway within a mosque set aside for the leader of the prayer.

Ahzab: 33, Holy Quran) is seen throughout Fatimid structures because of its relevance to Shia history and the significance the Ahlul Bayt play as key figures in faith and identity. Furthermore, there is a repetition of using symbols of the sun, pentagram stars, and light to figuratively represent the *ẓāhir* (obvious, exoteric meaning) and *bāṭin* (hidden esoteric meaning), which are pivotal concepts within spirituality in Shiism.²⁹ Ultimately these stylistic figures seen throughout Fatimid structures would pave the way into elements of Shia architecture, and through their symbolism, one would be able to denote the presence of Shiism in such a space.

While the Fatimid dynasty contributed various individual aspects that denote the existence of Shiism in an area, the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501-1736CE) was pivotal to the formation of shrine architecture and its relevant aesthetic features. Not only did they establish Shiism as the main school of thought and set the foundation for Iran to be a hub for the faith for years to come, the Safavids also tied their political influence into their architecture. From my course with Dr. Ari, the Safavids took a lot of influence from the Timurids, who used their large-scale architecture and mosques to mark their presence through megalomania and extravagant works of art and detail. Furthermore, the Safavids carried their legacy through their works of architecture in that same way. Politically, their rule was decentralized and needed established centralized order. Therefore, successive Safavid shahs created a system that developed a power hierarchy in Isfahan. Safavid mosques like that of Shaykh Lotfollah, were placed strategically to denote a new royal and religious center by an area referred to as the *Maydan-e Shah* (Ari). Outside of this location were the bazaar and shops, and behind that was the older congregational

²⁹ As understood in the ontological Shiism workshop hosted by Dr. Payam Mohseni during the summer of 2021.

mosque. This is an important feature because likewise to the leadership and authority holding a central space of significance for the Safavids, shrine cities adapted a similar structure and layout.

Apart from this layout, within these mosque structures were stylistic elements that were adapted into shrines across the region. There is a heavy use of *muqarnas*, the honeycomb styled cutouts seen inside of curved spaces such entrances, *mihirabs*, and inside of the dome structures. These *muqarnas* are symbolic of heaven and are placed in these higher places to represent looking towards the sky. Furthermore, Safavid architecture would implement similar decorative motifs like that of the Fatimids; with suns and florals, as well as Arabic calligraphy inscriptions of Quran. Likewise, the arched entryways known as *iwans*, and large courtyards are elements of mosques that symbolize “gateways” to spirituality (Malek-Ahmadi). This courtyard and *iwan* opening structure are seen replicated in shrine spaces. Furthermore, the dome shape known as the *qubbāh*, referred to as “*gonbad*” in Persian, was present in these mosques as well; with their outer view being visible from a distance and either golden or colored. Regarding the shrines, these domes became the demarcation of the grave, which was underneath. Ultimately, major Shia shrines take their stylistic influences from Iranian Safavid architecture, and in the very same way they also serve as hubs of Shiism and its political counterparts in an area.

With this historical context, stylistically speaking, Shia shrines share key components of the dome, the *dharih*, intricate décor, and repetitive symbolism throughout their structures.³⁰ All these elements take their root from these dynasties and their desire to give an artistic visual to Shiism and leave their mark politically in the region. The concept brought up earlier in this segment about repeated shrine imagery can be attributed to these architectural structures in

³⁰ It is important to note that not all mosques or spaces that have a dome or these stylistic features are necessarily Shia, but a majority of Shia shrines and spaces reflect these architectural elements.

particular. The specific golden domes often attributed to the Imam Hussain, Imam Ali, Imam Reza, and Syeda Zainab shrines are symbolic motifs seen within several Shia spaces. They are either recreated as paintings or photos, and this imagery is propped up in Shia spaces ranging from homes, *hussainias*, and even other shrines. Seeing shapes of golden domes in different visual art forms is often associated with a cultural display of Shiism. Imagery of the *dharihs* are also incorporated in these spaces. On several Hezbollah and PMF martyr posters and imagery, the domes of the shrines or the imagery of the *dharih* are often ethereally incorporated into the portrait to honor the deceased. Once again, the connection to this shrine imagery denotes a visual form of Shia identity, that goes back to connecting elements of enchantment and the martyrdom trope in a work of art.

Shrine City Structure

Outside of the entrance of shrines are also major centers of shopping, referred to as the bazaars. Economically speaking, local businesses profit from the pilgrimage population. There is an economic gain for vendors due to the proximity to the shrine and the influx of pilgrims. Especially during peak pilgrimage periods, business is good. Likewise, these vendors sell everything necessary to a Shia pilgrim; from religious clothing, rings, and iconographic merchandise such as flags, clerical and Imami portraiture, and even Qur'anic artwork. There is also a lot of shrine symbolism, such as replicas or artwork of them. While these are examples of iconography within a symbol itself, the merchandise and bazaar culture are reflective of the pilgrimage experience. Going to the shrine requires one to traverse through the bazaar. From Molavi's *Persian Pilgrimages*, it is also interesting to see how the bazaars tied to important mosques also have a direct political implications. At least in the case of Iran, vendors would either pay clerics in support, or even close down their shops and the bazaar in protest. This point

demonstrates the direct link between people of commerce and people of religion, and the politics they both are shaped by.

In the way that shrine architecture is centered around the dome and the burial place of a holy saint, shrine cities are centralized in relation to the shrine. The city forms itself around it; as seen with the bazaars that line up by the mosque entrances, the hotel zones on the outskirts of shrine checkpoints, and the local residential population is a bit further out. Shrine cities are hubs of Shiism from a combined a social, political, and economic perspective. The shrine itself holds the resting place of the Imam, respected historical figure or member of the Ahlul Bayt, so it makes sense that the surrounding city and bazaar is incorporated in the entire pilgrimage space. Ultimately, the shrine is a center of not only spirituality, but also economic and political gain.

Shrine Pilgrimage Traditions

The journey of pilgrimage and sending blessings on the deceased is so significant that even from a distance, respects are still paid by sending salutations through prayers or placing shrine replicas, paintings, and photos to recreate the experience of visitation at home. Shrines are an extension of their physical embodiment.

The tradition of pilgrimage and shrine visitation dates to the tragic narratives associated with foundational elements of Shia history and identity. Following the events of Karbala, it became tradition to return to the land to pay respect to Imam Hussain and his deceased family and companions buried in the area and honor them as martyrs. Likewise, visiting the resting places of other members of the Ahlul Bayt or those revered in Shia traditions such as certain companions also became a part of tradition. It is important to note that throughout the region there are shrine spaces consecrated for Quranic prophets. These spaces also incorporate Shia symbolism. For example, the shrine of Nabi Ayyub (Prophet Job) in Babil, Iraq is stylistically

similar to that of other Shia spaces, containing elements such as the dome, *dharih*, and use of decorative *muqarnas*. Furthermore, these spaces are also decorated with flags bearing the name of Imam Hussain, as well as posters of various ayatollahs. The same is seen in Lebanon, with shrines attributed to prophets and their burial spaces, or a location where a biblical tradition may have taken place. In terms of the Karbala tragedy, shrines in the Beqaa are attributed to the journey that Zainab and Imam Ali Zainul Abideen took en route to Damascus. Once again, these spaces take similar architectural shrine structures and are visited for the same purpose of veneration and honoring a religious figure out of respect. Likewise, the Shia traditions associated with shrine pilgrimage has created a sort of shrine culture and given the current political climate, they can also be linked to a form of Shia revivalism and culture associated with the space and traditions.

Pilgrimage Traditions: Iraq and *Arbaeen*

There is a common belief amongst Shia communities that shrine pilgrimage is a blessing, and that all pilgrims received a spiritual invitation from the Ahlul Bayt themselves. Visitation to shrine cities, and particularly Karbala and Najaf in Iraq, take place all year long, but have periods within the Islamic calendar when pilgrimage is more recommended. Days like this include *Ashura*, the martyrdom anniversary of Ali in Ramadan and on holy prayer nights in the months of Ramadan, Shaaban, and Rajab. Likewise, shrine visitation on commemoration nights for birth and death anniversaries of the Ahlul Bayt are also recommended. For the purpose of this project, the *Arbaeen* period for shrine visitation and Shia cultural revival is discussed because of the major political and cultural impact it has transnationally.

During the time of Saddam Hussein, pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala was prohibited due to his fear of Shia mobilization, and the shrines of Imam Hussain and Abbas were also attacked

in response to the 1991 Shia uprising (Kaballo). The Baathist regime promoted a lot of anti-Shia rhetoric, and as mentioned in other segments of this project, the party persecuted and executed vocal Shia clerics and protestors. The fall of Saddam gave room for Shiism to reinstate itself in traditions and political influence, and shrine pilgrimage became one of those components. Reclamation of Shia identity would include reopening shrine pilgrimages and centers for Shiism (Nasr 170).

The *Arbaeen* pilgrimage is a contemporary display of Shia tradition with deep rooted political implications. Shias from all over the world come to Iraq to participate in these commemorations, which in turn demonstrates the transnational implications that pilgrimage in honor of mourning and revering Hussain has to universal Shia identity. Likewise, with *Arbaeen* being a mass pilgrimage with global attention, tourism increases and benefits the economy in these shrine city spaces. Hotels and bazaars account for these periods, and it makes sense that even the shrine city layout includes these rest places and shopping centers en route to the shrine itself. I was lucky to have the opportunity to be in Iraq for *Arbaeen* in September 2021 and gather my own insights of the journey. I visited Iraq in 2018 outside of one of busy pilgrimage seasons. In comparison to the nature of that pilgrimage, my return to Iraq in 2021 was a significantly different experience in it of itself.

In the midst of the sectarian conflicts and the fight with ISIS in recent years, Shia identity is directly linked to these shrine spaces. Groups like the PMF and Hezbollah defend these spaces, which in turn legitimizes their militia roles as protectors of Shiism. Additionally, despite political instability and the threat of ISIS, tens of millions of pilgrims visit the Iraqi shrines, which demonstrates pride and deep-rooted passion they have. People make the journey out of love for Hussain, while also implying that their identity will prevail regardless of political

and sectarian threats. Furthermore, even with the risk of death, for the devout Shia, embarking on the *Arbaeen* pilgrimage (or any pilgrimage for that matter) and dying in the process is equal to the status of martyrdom. This goes hand in hand with the martyrdom trope that has woven itself into Shia identity politics across the region, as well as the direct link to self-sacrifice for the cause of Hussain.

Apart from the political implications of *Arbaeen* are the cultural and religious aspects of the journey. Pilgrims arrive in Iraq several days in advance of the actual day of *Arbaeen* to complete this walk and also have the time to visit other major shrines and holy mosques, like that of Kufa, Kadhimain, Samarra, and other villages. The *Arbaeen* pilgrimage is associated with a long walk of 50 miles that begins from the city of Najaf and ends outside of the shrine of Abbas, in the city of Karbala. This walk takes place along the Najaf to Karbala Highway. Across the walkway, people are carrying *alams* and flags of their own country, reinforcing the symbolism the flag has to Abbas and as a visual icon to symbolize loyalty and honor of the tragic narrative being commemorated.

Along the route and even villages and shrine cities are stalls for food, water, tea, coffee, and even rest stops. These are referred to as *mowkibs*. Local Iraqis at these *mowkibs*, from their own pockets, provide all of this hospitality for these pilgrims out of the shared love and veneration for Hussain. Furthermore, given the belief that pilgrims are invited to these holy cities by the Ahlul Bayt, locals feel as if it is their duty to serve and honor the pilgrims. The walk is a long and rather difficult journey, and these stops along the way are a source of sustenance and aid. These *mowkibs* often are named after different members of the Ahlul Bayt, but several of them are named in honor of Iraqi political figures like the Sadrists or militia groups. Along the route are also visual displays of militia achievements and clerical iconography, which once again

reinforces Shia political identity blurring the lines with religious tradition. In this sense, the *Arbaeen* walk is just as political as it is cultural. In contrast to my time in 2018, *mowkibs* are not present during off-season. The stalls are closed and empty during other times of the year, which goes to show the national significance that this pilgrimage particularly has on hospitality culture associated with shrine pilgrimage.

For many, the walk ends anytime between one to three days before *Arbaeen*. Some finish the walk the morning of *Arbaeen*. The day of *Arbaeen* includes massive crowds of people, some who are beating their chest in rhythmic form to elegiac poetry and prose, with others flagellating themselves as a mourning ritual in honor of Hussain and his martyred family and companions. Visitation inside of the shrine includes going through a large sea of people pushed up against one another at an attempt to even get a glimpse of the *dharih*, let alone even touch it. Ultimately, *Arbaeen* is the biggest display of Shia cultural identity in one place at one time. Embarking on the journey itself reinforces the themes of mourning traditions and loyalty to Hussain and the martyrdom trope. Likewise, visual imagery like flags and portraiture, while also including the presence of political Shia militias reinforces the connection political Shiism has to preserving and protecting these same areas.

Seminary Connections to Iraqi Shrine Cities

Shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq contain Islamic seminaries for Shiism within the vicinity of the shrines. In fact, the iconic ayatollahs such as Ayatollah Sistani and Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr are associated with the Najaf seminary. These seminaries are spaces where clerics are educated through years of schooling, which also makes sense as to why there is a major clerical presence in these regions. The seminary of Najaf even developed because of the major historical cleric, Shaikh al-Ṭā'efa Moḥammad b. Ḥasan Ṭūṣi moved to the city of Najaf

following the siege of Baghdad and created a space for students (Litvak). Seminaries yield clerics and are run by clerics. As understood in the clerics segment, the clerical association with the seminary denotes political viewpoints, which is why shrine spaces are often associated with different scholars and their underlying political beliefs. Not only are seminaries significant for the political representation their corresponding clerics yield, but they also bring an influx of Shias transnationally, who are pursuing Islamic education in these cities. These individuals live in these cities for the duration of their program, which demonstrates the significance the shrines as a religious hub have in drawing in a center of education and long-term pilgrimage for these aspiring scholars. The fact that the shrines are the resting spaces of venerated individuals gives them their religious significance and status within the Shia tropes of mourning and reverence. Shiism's knowledge centers in these spaces further emphasizes the importance of the individuals buried there, while also denoting the importance of clerics and their connected roles to education and politics in shrine cities.

Shrines in Lebanon

Within Lebanon, there are quite a few shrines of prophets and revered figures of Islamic history. From my visit in 2019 and again in October of 2021, shrine spaces are in the geographically Shia regions of the country; the south and the Beqaa Valley. In the South, I came across several prophetic shrines. Even en route to Baalbek in the Beqaa, there were several *maqams* dedicated as burial places for biblical prophets.³¹ Like the Iraqi shrines, these spaces have the same architectural features, but I noticed they were not as embellished in the same form. I would say they were still beautiful but had more of a rustic and simpler feeling to them. All

³¹ *maqams* refer to a holy or venerated space which can include shrines, or just be a place where a historically significant event with religious ties took place.

these prophetic shrines incorporated *alam* imagery, as well as Imami, clerical, and political martyr portraiture in some form or another within them. Local Lebanese people had different perspectives on these shrine spaces and their legitimacy as well. Individuals that were more religious in terms of practice and identity argue that these shrines are as old as time and are the real resting places. Others would say that these are simply unrealistic village legends that claim these shrine spaces as authentic because of the status and honor that it brings. Each village wants something to brag about or be proud of, so these shrine spaces are one of those landmarks per se. For example, the *dharih* of Nabi Sheet (Seth), the son of Adam, is a giant, elongated coffin that spans the majority of the space because according to the local legend, he was a very long and tall giant. Whether or not that is true is largely up for debate, but locals also claim that Eve is buried in the same space. Interestingly enough, there are numerous locations across the Levant that supposedly mark the burial place of Eve. The validity of these claims is based on word of mouth.

Baalbek contains shrine spaces that are in honor of the Ahlul Bayt. Given the context of the Karbala Tragedy, Zainab and Imam Zainul Abideen passed through Baalbek on the route they were forced to traverse from Kufa to Damascus. Those shrines included the burial places of the daughters of Imam Hussain, namely Syeda Khawla and Syeda Safiya. Syeda Khawla's shrine was a more vibrantly decorated and embellished *maqam* with the glass tiling, intricate metal *dharih*, large courtyard and metallic golden dome. Even the tree that traditions state was planted by Imam Ali Zainul Abideen to mark her grave is preserved in a glass encasing with golden frames. When I visited this shrine in 2019, I was able climb the stairs to the golden *qubbah*, and see the top of this tree too; the whole space was adorned in marble with *iwan* cutouts, and also banners of Arabic script. Sayed Safiya's shrine also had a metallic dome, and the inside was less embellished but still decorative with Arabic inscriptions and the metal *dharih*. Another

significant space in the region was Raas al-Ayn, which locals claim was the location where the head of Imam Hussain had passed through. In stark contrast to the shrines of these young daughters, Raas al-Ayn was incredibly humble but arguably the most authentic in terms of maintaining components of the original structure. The courtyard had archways which were reminiscent of historic Umayyad architecture, and even the inside was a mix of preserving the original stones of the *mihrab* where Imam Ali Zainul Abideen prayed, or the cutout where the head of Hussain was placed and incorporating some reconstruction for the integrity of the rest of the space. In all three of these shrines were *alams*, Arabic *ziyarah* inscriptions, Imami portraiture, and martyr iconography and visual imagery.

What was particularly interesting to me was the influence of shrine culture for Hezbollah martyrs, alongside the political message sent in these areas. There is a museum within the shrine space of Syeda Khawla, dedicated to the memorabilia of Hezbollah's success against Israel and honoring those who have died in that cause as martyrs. Syeda Khawla is considered a martyr and her gravesite is revered, and this space also honors Hezbollah's martyrs. In the political viewpoint, any of their military ventures are done in the pursuit of justice, mirroring the tragic narrative of Imam Hussain, so therefore in the process, Hezbollah is engaging in holy war and those who give up their life in that cause are considered martyrs as well. This area denotes the presence of Hezbollah politically; this shrine space is associated with Shiism, but also this particular political entity who bases itself on the Shia narrative.

Another factor to consider involving shrine culture in Lebanon, and particularly the south, is shrine reconstruction efforts. The Israeli invasion destroyed many of these heritage sites, and Shia groups reconstructed them to preserve them and also leave a trace cultural of Shia identity in that process by incorporating shrine architectural components like the dome and

dharih, alongside visual symbols like *alams* and portraiture. When talking to Lebanese Shias from the South, I learned that a lot these shrine sites are entirely redone as grand architectural displays, to a point where the original rocks and structures of the space are no longer even visible. There is a duality to this; in the process of reclaiming a space and making it a Shia one through grand forms of reconstruction and using Shia shrine architectural components and symbolism, the original heritage and sanctity is uprooted.

Shrine culture that is wrapped into the martyrdom trope also finds itself presented in different honorary spaces and cemeteries dedicated to Hezbollah and its soldiers. An example of this can be seen by the Hezbollah war monument, Mleeta, in South Lebanon. This space was dedicated in honor of Hezbollah's military victories in freeing the South from Israel and memorializes those who have died in the cause. Even Hezbollah *rawdās* can be grouped into the same category of grave visitation with the honor that comes with martyrdom in the party's cause. Both Mleeta and the *rawdā* are covered in the martyrdom segment of this project. Another example with more detail also in the martyrdom chapter of this paper would be the shrine of Sayed Abbas Mousawi; a key Hezbollah figure assassinated and iconized within the party. His shrine outside of Nabi Sheet is grand and embellished like that of one of the shrines of a member of the Ahlul Bayt, while also displaying the very same car he was killed in an attempt to reinforce his martyrdom journey. A big portion of Hezbollah's Hussaini rhetoric ties directly to their core cause in defeating Israel. Israel is depicted as the modern day Yazid and fighting in Hezbollah is upholding the legacy of Hussain in that process. Therefore, it only makes sense that their own martyrs are iconized and memorialized in such a way that connects them to the likes of Hussain

Photo Series

As a visual artist primarily focused on illustration and photography, having a creative segment to my project was very important to me. A major component to my research was observing elements of imagery and symbolism in regard to narrative. With the opportunities I had to visit these spaces, I also had the chance to document my findings through documentary photography. Several of these images demonstrate major spaces, art forms, and icons included in the written component of the project, and others are of relevant pieces that support and allude to narrative and tradition. Each image is original and taken by me from my most recent trip of 2021.

Iraq



Al-Kadhimain, Baghdad, September 2021

The beginning of most *ziyarah* trips to Iraq often begin with the Kadhimain area of Baghdad.

The golden domes in the background are of the Al-Kadhimain shrine, known as the burial space of the 7th Shia Imam Musa al-Kadhim, and the 9th Shia Imam, Mohamad al-Jawad. Two children are running in the street with pigeons scattered on the ground. Lined up on both sides of the ground with the shrine in the center are small stalls selling food, religious trinkets, clothing, and toys. These are referred to as bazaars or souks and are often on the way to a shrine space.



Al-Kadhimain, Baghdad, September 2021

A shot taken right by the entrance and exit gates of the Al-Kadhimain Shrine. In the background on the left, is an iconographic poster of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, with heavenly clouds and an image of the two domes of the Al-Kadhimain shrine. The Arabic text on the poster reads “Salaam Ya Sadr al-Iraq”, translating to “peace to you, oh Heart of Iraq”. The placement of this poster and its text in relation to the shrine space denotes the impact the Sadrist have had particularly on this region. Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr was killed in Baghdad. Likewise, to this day, the proximity that Sadr City (the suburb of Baghdad affiliated with Moqtada al-Sadr) has to Kadhimain would also imply this loyalty. Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr’s death also categorizes him as a martyr, given he was executed by Saddam’s regime. Therefore, in the process of memorializing him with honor, the ethereal shrine imagery is included. I would go as far to say

that the shrine imagery of the Kadhimain shrine directly in front of the real shrine structure itself goes to reinforce the regional claim of this region's major Shia spaces in conjunction with the Sadrs. The text on the poster also reinforces the lasting impact he had on Iraqi politics collectively because of the use of "al-Iraq", demonstrating the nationalistic component that also iconizes him.

This second poster by the shrine entrance is a billboard banner advertising a charity clinic in honor of the martyr Bint al-Huda Amina al-Sadr; the sister of Baqir al-Sadr, established under the supervision of Ayatollah Sayyid Hussain Al-Sayyid Ismail al-Sadr. A common practice of memorializing martyrs is creating charitable institutions in their name in a way to send blessings and honor upon the deceased.



Al-Kadhimain, Baghdad, September 2021

This is a close-up shot of some stands of toys and dessert in the bazaar en route to the Al-Kadhimain shrine. In this space, seen in the center, is a large *alam* with the name of Allah, alongside slogans of “Ya Aba Abdillah al-Hussain”, “Ya Aba’l Fadhlil Abbas”, “Ya Fatimah Al-Zahra”, and the names of the rest of the Imams on top. The bottom corners of this *alam* are “Ya Ali Akbar” (right) and “Ya Ali Asghar” (left). Right below this *alam* is a poster of the portrait of Abbas ibn Ali, with the text of “Ya Abbas” written on it. *Alam* placement on walls and shops near the shrine demarcates the Shia presence of this particular area. Likewise, the imagery of Abbas in particular reinforces the central presence that the Karbala tragedy has for both Shia identity, and memorial spaces. Abbas’s portrait here and seen throughout other Shia spaces often incorporates the two feathered headpiece. This in turn becomes a key symbol that can help

uncover the identity of the specific member of the Ahlul Bayt being honored when the name is not written.



Balad, September 2021

A passageway lined with *alams* and militia imagery en route to the shrine of Sayed Muhammad ibn al-Hadi, the eldest son of the 10th Imam. The *alams* on the side are customary to décor and claiming Shia identity in the space, and the same goes to the poster of the militia. The imagery on this poster is honor of the soldiers who are martyrs, and on the center is a poster of the Sadrist clerics. This particular poster holds the emblem of Saraya al-Salaam; one of the militias under the loyalty of Moqtada al-Sadr. This militia imagery demonstrates the regional connection and affiliation with Sadrist politics and influence. Furthermore, this space is in proximity to Baghdad, where the Sadrists have been heavily based, but also to Samarra. Samarra's attack by ISIS led to sectarian tensions that led many Shia militias to claim and protect Shia spaces regionally in the vicinity, and Moqtada al-Sadr's rhetoric has often been rooted in Shia nationalism. The shrine of

Sayed Muhammad here had been attacked by ISIS and was also defended by Iraqi militias, so it only makes sense that they honor their group and martyrs in its vicinity.



Balad, September 2021

One of the women in our group for *ziyarah* sends her salutations to Sayed Muhammad by standing in front of the golden doors. It is a customary tradition to kiss and make a prayer at the doors when entering and leaving. Behind her is the structure of the *dharih*, which demarcates the location of the grave. The *dharih* consists of the metal bars arranged in a cross format, and the top of it is enshrouded with velvet fabric embroidered with the name of the deceased, and Arabic text of the names of other members of the Ahlul Bayt. In any shrine space honoring someone from the Ahlul Bayt, all of the other members of the Ahlul Bayt are remembered too. On the ceiling above the *dharih* are intricate glasswork designs that symbolically represent heaven and light.



Balad, September 2021

The dome and minaret structure of Syed Muhammad ibn Al-Hadi's shrine. The intricacy of design and the blue colored work on the dome and the minarets are attributed to Persian artistic elements that have influenced shrine and mosque architecture. The Arabic text within the minarets includes names of the Ahlul Bayt as well. As seen in the image, there is still construction work being done to the space. In the destruction and attacks by ISIS, shrine spaces have been damaged and reconstruction of them has taken place in attempt to preserve them, and also symbolically reclaim Shia spaces as resilient.





Samarra, September 2021

These two images are of the same area, but of different shots. The first image is of the glowing portrait of Sayid Sadiq Al-Sadr with some Iraqi soldiers sitting by. The second Image is a closer shot of the portrait, with the orbs honoring pictures of Iraqi militia martyrs in the background. This image of Sadiq Al-Sadr in this poster is a common one that I had seen on various occasions across the region. He is wearing his funeral shroud, and he often did this within his lifetime because of his activism and acceptance that he could be killed for it at any time when he was out publicly. The shrouded imagery reinforces the martyrdom trope and the value it has to the lives of these clerics but also the rhetoric and message of defending Shiism and the honor that comes with it. Likewise, the honorary roundabout in the background with militia martyr imagery on these orbs reinforces the memorialization spaces and forms that exist. Some *alams* are visible in

the same area, which connects the martyrdom trope of Hussain back to the principles these martyrs fight for. Likewise, while not very visible due to the distance from where this photo was taken, are the emblems denoting the loyalty and specific militias these martyrs are attributed to. Having the glowing Sadr portrait within this martyrdom spaces most likely indicates that these militia soldiers are affiliated with Sadri militias, especially given that this was outside of the al-Askari shrine where Sadrists have had major influence.



Najaf, September 2021

A close up shot of the upper part from an entrance to the shrine of Imam Ali. This is a combination of multiple symbolic artistic components. The *muqarnas* (the honeycomb structure) line the top and are heavily detailed. The Arabic inscriptions are intricate and are decorative but are also most likely parts of religious prayers or *ziyarahs*. The geometrical window cutout is also a form of décor that relates to Fatimid structures, whereas the overall arch cutout component of this entrance replicates Safavid *iwān* entryways. The red lighting that has overtaken the color here is in honor of the *Arbaeen* period in mourning of Imam Hussain and the Karbala tragedy. During other parts of the year outside of Muharram and dates marking the death anniversaries of the Ahlul Bayt, the lights are green.



Kufa, September 2021

Pilgrims praying in the courtyard of Masjid al-Kufa, featuring the golden dome demarcating the shrine of Muslim ibn Aqeel³² in the background. Masjid al-Kufa held several *maqams* where biblical prophets and members of the Ahlul Bayt had prayed or had pivotal moments and miracles. Muslim ibn Aqeel was a key figure to the Karbala Tragedy which makes him a martyr, and also makes pilgrimage to his burial space a major honor. To the left of his dome, and not pictured here, is the shrine of Hani ibn Urwah. He was a companion of Hussain and was killed before he was able to join him in Karbala. His death in the loyalty to Hussain also turned him into a martyr, which in turn also makes pilgrimage to his grave an honor. Likewise, Masjid al-Kufa is the mosque where Ali was struck in battle, and the particular alleged sites are there to visit as well to mourn his death. Unfortunately for me, I wasn't allowed to have my DSLR camera out in the space, so the shrine keeper, also known as a *kadhim*, did tell me to put it away which limited the content of the images I was able to get here.

³² The cousin of Imam Hussain who went to gather allegiance at Kufa for Hussain during the events leading up to the Battle of Karbala. The people of Kufa switched loyalties out of fear and bribes from the Umayyad caliphate and Muslim ibn Aqeel went into hiding because of the bounty on his head. He was found and killed, and is buried here.



Kufa, September 2021

Outside of the mosque of Kufa, pilgrims are waving a flag that says “Ya Zainab”, in honor of the sister of Hussain. Because we were in Iraq particularly for the Karbala tragedy, flags carried by pilgrims were seen throughout every space. Kufa is right outside of Najaf, and the tradition of walking to Karbala for *Arbaeen* begins from the start of the Najaf highway. We are able to tell that others were embarking on the same journey because they were carrying flags and walking in groups of people. Carrying the flag is symbolic of Abbas and his role as the flagbearer in Hussain’s army. A way of claiming Shia identity is through the symbol of flags that are held or decorated across the region, with various slogans in honor of different members of the Ahlul Bayt.



Kufa, September 2021

A building labelled “Al Markaz al-Aalaami” which translates to “media center”. Several shops like these exist in shrine vicinities, that sell portraits of respected clerics. In this center are visible portraits of the Sadrist clerics. Across the Najaf region, this was one of the only few places I saw with Sadrist imagery. A big component of this could be because of the regional influence and loyalty that Syed Sistani has as well as how the Sadrists are more prevalent in the Baghdad region.



Najaf, September 2021

Pilgrims walking en route to the shrine area of Najaf. To the left are stalls from the bazaar, and on top with the lights is a recreation of a water bag, associated as a symbol of Abbas from the Karbala tragedy.³³ Though this is Najaf, imagery associated with Karbala and Abbas is directly correlated as symbolism in place for the *Arbaeen* time period. Likewise, to the right is a poster with a slogan calling out to Abbas.

³³ The narrative associated with the water bag comes from the martyrdom story of Abbas, who went to collect water for the thirsty children, since the camp of Hussain had been denied water for days on end. Abbas collected the water, drank none for himself, but an arrow pierced the bag on his way back and all the water fell out. His arms were cut off and he fell to the ground, and the fallen water bag was a big source of regret for him and he refused to let Hussain carry his body back to the tent.



Najaf, September 2021

A shot of some stalls inside the souk outside of the shrine of Imam Ali. The top is lined with triangular *alams* of Hussain's shrine. Towards the back right, a shop is selling *alams* with various slogans. This is typical of shrine bazaars year-round, but particularly because of *Arbaeen*, I noticed more flags being outwardly displayed since people tend to carry them on their walk.



Najaf, September 2021

Outside of our hotel are stalls for food and shops as well. A man pours “qahwe shereen” (sweet coffee) into a cup. Serving tea and coffee in shrine areas is a reflection of both hospitality culture and giving respect to pilgrims for their journey, but it is also a general social custom in Middle Eastern cultures.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

Alams are scattered across the roof of a *mowkib* we stopped at. A giant flag blows in the wind, carried by a group of pilgrims who are passing along.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

Local Iraqis are serving food they made for pilgrims embarking on the journey. As we walked from place to place, many of them stand in the middle of the route offering us things to eat and drink, and often just pushing it into our hands, strollers, and bags. The honor of serving the pilgrim of Hussain is reflected in the unlimited hospitality of local Iraqis. Likewise, the recovery of Iraq following Saddam's persecution as well as fighting ISIS gave way for this *Arbaeen* walk to expand and reflect Shia principles and traditions through these means. Out of focus is the outline of scholar or cleric, which I was able to denote because of the white turban on his head. The cleric is out of focus, but I knew he was probably Shia, simply based on his garb.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

This was one of my accidental shots that turned out to be rather poetic in retrospect. I took this image because I noticed it was a portrait of one of the figures of the Ahlul Bayt, with the moon in the background being something that I thought would be nice to have. While working on editing and looking through my project images, I zoomed in to the Arabic text on the bottom of this portrait. I didn't understand most of the words here given the variance in dialect, but the word "al-atah" was one I did know, and it means "thirsty". "Al-Atash" is often in reference to the thirst of those in the party of Hussain in Karbala, and when the word is used in oratory narratives, it often includes the tragic journey Abbas took to bring back water. By this connotation, I was able to confirm that this was a portrait of Abbas, and the moon in the back added unintentional symbolism to the image. Abbas is referred to as "Qamar al Bani Hashim", which means "The Moon of Bani Hashim", and a major illustrative and textual component with

his imagery includes the moon. In the case, I may have accidentally created a symbolic image of Abbas incorporating his title, photo, and the moon simply because of the moment I clicked a button on my camera.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

The green sign in the distance, labelling the distance left towards the city of Karbala. Pilgrims line up the entire space, and flags also are seen within the crowd and on the posts to the sides. The lit-up areas towards the right side are the food and rest stops, referred to as *mowkibs*.





Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

These three images are different angles of a *mowkib*, in honor of Hashd al-Shaabi militia martyrs. The space has a giant poster of Ayatollah Sistani, images for martyrs, and other relevant clerics. This was one of the rare times I had even seen any portraiture of Ayatollah Sistani throughout my trip as well. His image being a part of this space denotes that the militias honored here are under him directly, which can infer they most likely are the hawza militias. *Mowkib* spaces honoring militia martyrs exists across the route, given that shrine pilgrimage reestablished itself as a Shia revival tradition and these militias have been in defense and protection of these shrine spaces under the guidance of Ayatollah Sistani. Likewise, the guns and display of military equipment and battlefield replicas play a role in reinforcing the resilience and power of the militant aspect of political Shia groups in celebrating their victories while honoring martyrs, while also preserving identity and claiming the space as one they protect.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

A man puts a scoop of ice cream on a cone to give a pilgrim who has stopped by his *mowkib*.

Several *mowkibs* give out food and sweets especially for children, but also to generally bring a little bit of joy to those walking on the long and difficult route.





Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

Multiple angled shots from a *mowkib* we stopped at on our walk. Multiple groups of pilgrims stop at these buildings at a time to take a break, use the restroom, or recover with sleep before continuing again. Unlike the smaller *mowkibs* en route that are often quick stops for food and drink, these particular *mowkibs* are places for longer stays at a time. Next to them are stands for food and drink, so often many of us would get something and come sit down for some time before getting back up and continuing to the next larger stop. *Mowkibs*, like other spaces across this journey, are lined with flags.



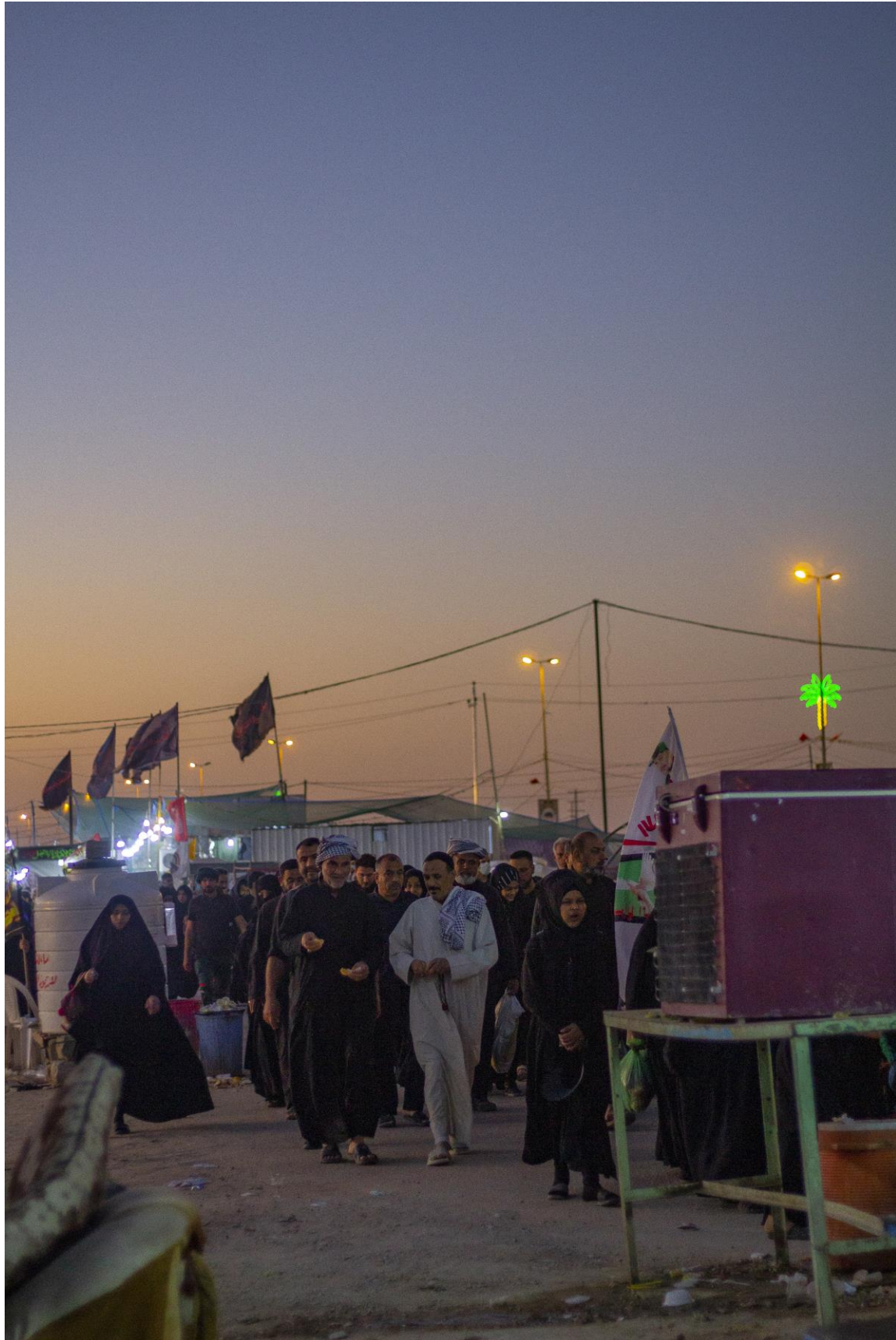
Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

A replica building of the Al-Aqsa mosque, with a banner that incorporates an image of the dome of Hussain and Al-Aqsa, and the phrase “Labbaik Ya Al-Aqsa” (we are coming to you, oh Aqsa). The imagery of al-Quds (Jerusalem) is often associated with the al-Aqsa mosque, and the freedom of Palestine is a cause that various Shia political parties support. Given the Hussaini message of calling out oppression, the occupation of Palestine is a modern-day injustice that Shia groups like that of the Lebanese Hezbollah incorporate within their rhetoric that connects back to Hussain. While this is Iraq, it is not surprising that this imagery is here because of the general support that Palestine has from Shia clerics regardless. Likewise, the phrase “Labbaik” is used in answering the call of Hussain and repeating it here in the cause of Palestine connects the causes of the two together. Even putting the dome of Hussain in the banner serves the same purpose of using the Hussaini narrative and its symbolism to advocate for justice that needs to be served today, in the case of Palestine.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

This was a coffee stand that several other groups of pilgrims considered to be “the best coffee” of the walk. The hosts of the stand use every single ingredient pictured here to make a specific blend of coffee, that they make in front of those who are waiting; it was almost like an entertaining performance. It also involved quite wait to get a cup of this coffee, given the time they took to make it; and the line of people that formed to watch and drink some too.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

Pilgrims on the walk, as the sun rises after dawn. I took this shot by the side of the *mowkib* we had spent a few hours at. During our journey, we walked at night to avoid the heat of the day. Since this was the day before *Arbaeen*, we would shortly continue our walk again because we wanted to arrive in Karbala before the big rush of people that would be coming in the closer it gets to the day of *Arbaeen*.



Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

Sunlight from the early morning sheds light on a *mowkib* serving tea and coffee to pilgrims.



Outside of Karbala, September 2021

The sign marking our entryway into the Karbala province. We still had a way to go until we reached our stopping point outside of the shrine of Abbas.



Karbala Province; Najaf to Karbala Highway, September 2021

A giant *alam* that said “Ya Hussain” is carried by a large group of pilgrims along the walking route.

Following this image, I was not able to get any more photos during this walk due to exhaustion and personal circumstances. Furthermore, the rest of the photo content in the Iraq segment comes from the time spent in Karbala following the day of Arbadeen. It was virtually impossible to go far without being swarmed in crowds on the day of Arbadeen, and for safety and practicality purposes, I decided to experience the day in the moment without my electronic



Karbala, September 2021

Pilgrims walking towards the shrine of Abbas in the distance, seen by the golden dome. On the sides are the shops and hotels in proximity to the shrine space.



Karbala, September 2021

One of the alleyways in proximity to the shrine of Abbas. Seen in the background is another hotel, and some shops and stalls for toys lined up in the corners. A cleric (denoted by his black turban and robed garb) is seen speaking with a man in the street as well. Shrine spaces are interconnected to economic and social components. These particular zones have hotels and stores in every corner en route and besides the shrines because of the pilgrimages. For local Iraqis, these major periods of pilgrimage are pivotal for business and tourism. Even within all these spaces that are aimed towards pilgrims, locals still live and spend their daily lives in these spaces. A man in this shot is seen riding his bike, and people towards the back are waking to their homes.



Karbala, September 2021

This domed structure marks the *maqam* where the Karbala tragedy narrates that Abbas lost his right arm in battle. Right to the left are shops in the bazaar, and to the right is fresh construction. Historically, Karbala was a desert but the tragic narrative of Hussain and visiting him in pilgrimage brought pilgrims and people to settle in the area. Over time, this turned into developing a desert into the city we see today. Karbala was a battlefield historically, but the development of the city it is today has entirely reconstructed the landscape and arguably the original sanctity of different places of significance scattered across the region. Many *maqams* across the city are demarcated in the middle of a bazaar or alleyway, just like this one, in an attempt to preserve and honor the space while also accommodating for the urbanization that has taken place directly due to the shrine space. I would go as far to say that the newer décor and construction projects on the shrines with the intention of honoring Hussain have in a way lost many original and traditional components in that process.



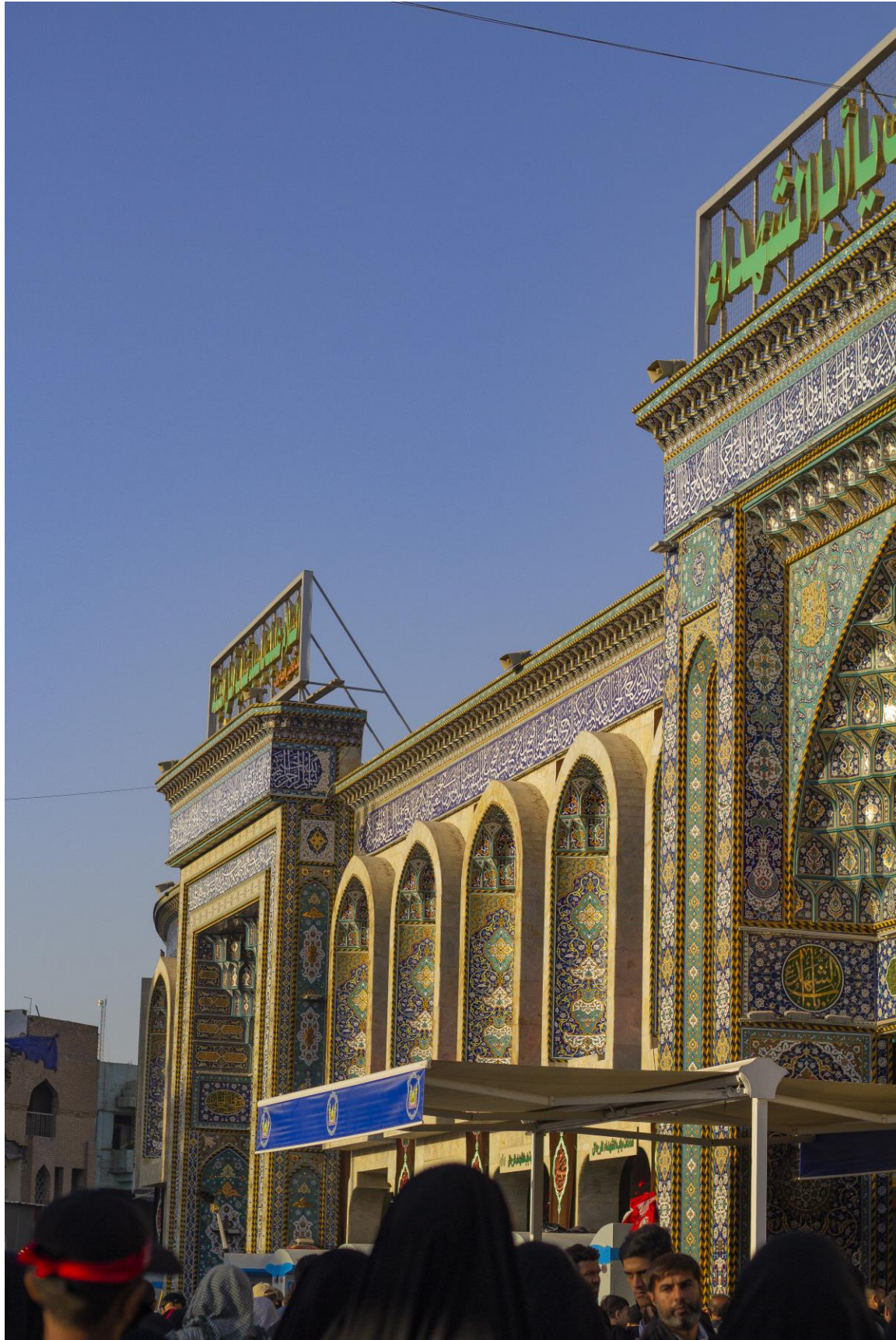
Karbala, September 2021

The dome of Hussain's shrine in the back. The walkway in front of it, full of pilgrims, is called *Baynul Haramain*, which translates to "between the two shrines". Directly across from Hussain's shrine is the shrine of Abbas. Customarily, the narrative of Karbala and symbolism of these shrine placements is the concept of "going through Abbas, to get to Hussain"; given he was the right-hand man and loyal supporter of Hussain, while his martyrdom turned him into a key saint for intercession in Shia tradition.



Karbala, September 2021

The golden dome of the shrine of Abbas shortly after sunrise. Pilgrims walking towards the camera are walking in *Baynul Haramain*, towards the shrine of Hussain. On the entryway of Abbas's shrine is a giant banner that says "Assalamu Alaika Ya Saaqi Ataasha" which translates to "peace be upon you, cup-bearer of the thirsty" in reference to Abbas and his attempt to bring water to Hussain's camp. The *alam* on Abbas's shrine is poetic, given he was the flag bearer; but also given that the narrative of bringing water is also attributed to one of his many titles.



Karbala, September 2021

One of the entrances to the shrine of Abbas. Seen within this image are the *iwan* architectural structures for the gateways to enter. Likewise, on the far-right corner and inside of the rectangular entrance on the left are the honeycomb *muqarnas* structures. The detailed coloring, as well as the floral and Arabic work is a testament to the influence of Fatimid³⁴ and Safavid styles of art in shrine structure.

³⁴ The Fatimids introduced floral vegetation imagery carved into structures (Ari).



Karbala, September 2021

Pilgrims pass by on the street by the shrine of Abbas. A flag is moving on the far left. In the background are iconography posters of Iraqi militia martyrs, and a poster of Qassem Soleimani, Mohandas, and a friend of theirs³⁵, with text saying “Shohada aala tareeq al Hussain”, translating to “martyrs on the route to Hussain”. Given that Mohandas and Soleimani are directly associated with the fight of ISIS and figures killed in work that was serving Shia interests, they are referred to as martyrs who died in the way of Hussain, quite literally because of shrine defense and protecting Shia regions. As seen throughout other shrine spaces in Iraq, the martyrdom imagery in shrine spaces directly links back to the honor of martyrdom and the relation it has to the Shia narrative of Hussain’s tragedy and memorializing elements of tradition that exist in these spaces.

³⁵ When I asked a Lebanese friend well versed in Shia politics, he was unable to identify the individual in the middle of this poster but said he was probably a good friend of the two.

The poster on top of the Soleimani poster is of a militia martyr, with imagery of Hussain's *dharih* on it. Connecting his death to this symbolic imagery reinforces the link the martyrdom trope in Shia politics has in basing itself in comparison to replicating and acting in service of Hussain.



Karbala, September 2021

A shop by the shrine of Abbas sells flags, *tasbeehs* (rosaries), *torbahs* (the stones used in prayer to replicated placing one's head on earth) and other religious and cultural items.



Karbala, September 2021

A child and an older man are walking back from the shrine of Abbas, seen in the distance.

Bringing younger children on shrine pilgrimages reinforces the idea of Shia identity being connected to shrine visitation from an early age, and often sets a precedent for the tradition being a part of values in Shia families.

Lebanon



Dahiye, Beirut; October 2021

A portrait of Fadlallah in the Al-Saha hotel and restaurant prayer room in Dahiye, Beirut. There is also other religious text imagery on the wall to the left. Al-Saha was founded by Fadlallah as a network of different restaurants and properties associated with his name. This in turn also reflects the Shia clerical work with social services and creating Shia spaces within urban areas. It only makes sense to see a picture of Fadlallah in his own hotel, so this iconography just reinforces his influence on the area.







Dahiye, Beirut; October 2021

This is one of the *rawdās* that are in honor of Hezbollah martyrs. The *rawdā* is a large cemetery, and as seen here, each of the martyrs has a photo of themselves and banners with different slogans for the Ahlul Bayt. There is memorializing shrine imagery and *alams*, which connects their religious identity to their political cause. They died in the way of Hezbollah, which meant they were also dying in the way of Imam Hussain given that the political rhetoric directly intersected with the Hussaini narrative that they live by. People come and visit this *rawdā* to pay their respects to these martyrs, which connects back to the honorable status martyrdom has in Shia tradition which is what prompted the practices of grave and shrine visitation starting back with Hussain.



Jiyeh, South Lebanon; October 2021

According to the keeper of the shrine, this tunnel on the top of the wall is allegedly the place where Nabi Yunus (Jonah) was eaten by the fish and made the prayer to God to save him. The old woman who showed us around told us that since the time of Jonah, no one has been able to reach this section or go inside of it, yet many have tried. She also told us that the entire space at one point was underwater and in the sea, which may be true given the biblical narrative and proximity to the ocean. Many local Lebanese friends have told me that many of these shrine spaces with extravagant narratives and backstories may not necessarily be true, let alone the actual space but an area that local villages consider their pride and wanting some sort of claim to a religious landmark. Whether or not one believes these *maqams* are spots from Abrahamic traditions, they are still spaces full of religious and cultural symbolism and tradition, stemming from these narratives themselves.



Jiyeh, South Lebanon; October 2021

This is a segment of the grave of the Nabi Yunus (Prophet Jonah). The space is decorated with Al-Aqsa imagery and Quranic text.



Jiyeh, South Lebanon; October 2021

This is a *mihrab* inside of the *maqaam* of Nabi Yunus. Inside of it is a large, printed document of a *ziyarah* text sending salutations upon Nabi Yunus. The embroidered banners above include text in honor of Fatimah and Hussain. The keeper of this shrine claims that the stone walls and bricks are originally associated with the period of time that the Prophet Jonah was alive.



Jiyeh, South Lebanon; October 2021

The keeper of this shrine told us that this space in roof is a miracle of the *maqam*. When it rains, the water doesn't fall through or make anything wet at all. Compared to spaces with modern reconstruction efforts, the *maqam* of Nabi Yunus was of the most rustic and closest to the alleged original space that existed for centuries.



Jiyeh, South Lebanon; October 2021

A flag for Hussain on the rooftop of the *maqaam*'s entrance. South Lebanon is home to a big Shia population, and as mentioned in the written component, these flags are a form representing identity and Shiism in the space. This *maqaam* space having Hussaini imagery connects the space as a Shia one, while also making note of the Shia association with shrine spaces in the region.



South Lebanon, October 2021

A banner we passed on the highway towards Tyre. The Iranian flag in conjunction with the Lebanese most likely indicates a Hezbollah region, given their direct connection to the Iranian government.



South Lebanon, October 2021

A poster of Syed Hassan Nasrallah that we passed on the road. Given Hezbollah's presence in the South, and several of their military encounters with Israel across the region, seeing Nasrallah iconography would make sense.



South Lebanon, October 2021

A poster of Sayyid Musa Sadr and Nabih Berri, key icons to Harakat al-Amal. The double *dhulfiqar* sword structure on the top alludes to the Shia symbol of Ali and his sword, indicating the party's Shia background. Shortly before I saw this poster, I passed the Nasrallah one. This goes to show that the Shia political affiliations across the region are not linear; they in fact intersect.



South Lebanon, October 2021

A banner on the route to Tyre, with Arabic text stating “aala tareeq al quds”, which translates to “on the way to Al-Quds (Jerusalem). This banner has al-Aqsa imagery, as well as the iconography of martyrs; particularly those associated with Hezbollah like Syed Abbas Mousawi, and Imad Mughniyeh. Even including Qassem Soleimani and Mohandas is significant, given their involvement with Iranian militias and fighting in Iraq. This banner connects the anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian rhetoric that makes up a big part of Hezbollah’s ideology, and also memorializes these martyrs by associating them and their deaths in martyrdom through their political involvements. Furthermore, the cause for Palestine is immediately connected to the Hussaini legacy to fight against modern day injustices, and consciously using imagery and wording like that of “on the way to Quds” plays a visual role in promoting that rhetoric.



Adloun, South Lebanon; October 2021

The *dharieh* of Nabi Sari. Adloun is a small village that overlooks the sea and the city of Tyre which is right outside of it. The first time I came to Adloun was in 2019, and it was a recommendation by a friend who knew I had an interest in Shia shrines and spaces. Given the architecture replicating that of the other major shrines, and the fact that this is a city in the south, the space has a Shia presence to it given the symbolism seen in the next few photos.



Adloun, South Lebanon; October 2021

A banner over the entrance saying “Ya Aba’l Fadhlil Abbas”, with an image of the shrine of Abbas behind the text. This imagery was not here when I came in 2019; given this was the post-*Arbaeen* period, it seems like in honor of the customary Shia mourning traditions from the Islamic months of Muharram and Safar, putting up this kind of symbolism regarding Hussain and the Karbala Tragedy makes sense. I would go as far to say that even outside of these months, Hussaini imagery of other sorts is still seen in these shrine spaces if they are primarily Shia, given that the tragedy of Hussain is always connected and mourned for in any Shia area.



Adloun, South Lebanon; October 2021

Banners on the arched entry/exits to the shrine. The first one says “Hayhat min al-dhilla”, which translates to “never to humiliation”, with the shrine of Hussain seen as a painting. The second one is sending salutations onto Hussain. These two banners were not here when I came in 2019 either; I would infer that they were in place given that the months of Muharram and Safar had just passed. I noticed even in Dahiye, posters of this related theme and font were propped around the area which goes to show that even the tragedy of Hussain has become branded as a representation of Shia identity in the space during the most relevant time of the year to mourn for him; though he is remembered year long. Likewise, this related signage that I saw elsewhere often incorporated the day of Ashura and I realized that they were banners that were promoting the Ashura gathering from about a month or so before, hosted by Hezbollah. This visual imagery connects the political counterpart to cultural practices and representations of faith and identity, given that Hezbollah has reshaped the religious and social structure of Lebanese Shiism by being the entity behind this branded signage and the host of one of the biggest religious Shia gatherings for Hussain.



Adloun, South Lebanon; October 2021

The dome and entrance of the shrine of Nabi Sari. Similar to the domed structures seen with other Shia shrines, the dome of Nabi Sari holds the same shape. Unlike others though, it is not a metallic golden dome; it is a stone one with the gold color paint. Even the structure of this shrine was of brick, which makes me believe that it has maintained its structural integrity on the contrary to major reconstruction efforts for other shrines in the attempt to preserve and beautify them. On this entrance is another branded sign, and within the wall structure if you look closely, is a circle saying “Ya Ali”. Incorporating the names of Ali and Muhammad on the stones of mosque structure dates back to Fatimid architecture and incorporating a Shia element to the space as a form of claiming it and leaving the mark of influence for time to come.



Tyre, South Lebanon; October 2021

Political posters with clerical iconography; side to side. On the left is a poster of Sayyid Musa Sadr and Nabih Berri, indicating the Amal party. To the right is a poster of Ayatollah Khamenei and Qassem Soleimani, which would be associated with Hezbollah given that their loyalty is to Iranian wilayah al-faqih, and Khamenei is the current successor of Khomeini. Seeing these two posters side by side in this city demonstrates the overlap between political and religious identity in Shia spheres. While different cities and villages have an unsaid “loyalty” to either Hezbollah or Amal, both parties still exist within these places regardless, because of how their rhetoric and social services align with Shia populations regardless. In fact, though there are ideological and factional differences between these parties, they both work together at times for Lebanese Shia interests, though their approaches may be different in doing so.



Tyre, South Lebanon; October 2021

Walking through a colorful neighborhood in Tyre, my friend who is a local from Lebanon told me this particular area is a primarily Christian neighborhood within the city, but that other sects also lived in this area too. It wasn't as divided as it is in Beirut. This particular doorway of a home had imagery of Sayyid Musa Sadr, and an *alam* on top with the Amal emblem on the top right corner. This indicated that this home was a pro-Amal house, and most likely a Shia one, given the religious context of the *alam* placed on top of the door.





Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

A missile with other war memorabilia such as tanks from Hezbollah's military success is displayed in the Mleeta landmark. In fact, as an attempt to humiliate Israel, this destroyed tank is sarcastically labelled "the pride of the enemy's military industry". The landmark as mentioned in the written component is a display of Hezbollah's success and presence, and also a source of pride. My local Lebanese friend who took me here is pro-Hezbollah, and his own perception of Mleeta is along the same lines of pride and honor. In fact, this was the sixth or seventh time he had been here.



Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

Within Mleeta is a bunker that was used by Hezbollah's efforts in liberating the South. This is a prayer room inside of the bunker, that also has a big Hezbollah flag propped up in the back.

Given that Hezbollah bases its ideology and belief system through Islamic principles, even their military spaces are intertwined with religious ones like this.



Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

A dome replicating the shrine architecture dome symbol incorporates an excerpt of a victory speech by Syed Hassan Nasrallah. This speech also honors martyrs who died and claims this win for the Lebanese collectively. The dome imagery is interesting to me because once again, a major symbol associated with Shiism, and particularly that of shrine spaces, is depicted in a memorializing fashion for a political purpose. Likewise, the rhetoric in honor of martyrs also personalizes the war efforts, and also connects back to the tragic martyrdom theme of Hussain that is directly associated with Hezbollah's ideology and background. The statement towards the bottom is an iconic line of Syed Hassan that I also heard in the documentary they played in the museum portion of the landmark: "This Israel, I promise you, is more fragile than a spider's web". This connects back to the anti-Zionist rhetoric that forms the base of Hezbollah's military efforts, and also in their cause for supporting a free Palestine. Given Israel's violations of Lebanese sovereignty by invading the South and their defeat, rhetoric like this reinforces Hezbollah's role as a protector and defender of the South through their military prowess.



Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

A wax statue memorializing Syed Abbas Mousawi, who was killed alongside his wife in a car bomb. Mousawi was a major part of Hezbollah's founding, and his death as a martyr further iconized him. As seen in later segments, he has a grand shrine and continues to be honored in Hezbollah spaces.







Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

The first image is a pavilion sign dedicated to the Hezbollah martyrs of Mleeta. Outside of all the war victory components, this is a quiet space that overlooks the villages of the south, and the rest of the landmark from a high point, which is seen in the second and third images. I think symbolically, this vantage point is a physical representation of the high status that these martyrs have from the perspective of Hezbollah, for dying in a cause associated with Islam and their version of truth.



Mleeta, South Lebanon; October 2021

A large flag post overlooking the Mleeta landmark. My friend told me that this flag post usually has large *alams* in place that have come directly from the domed flags from major holy shrines. This connects the Shia flag symbolism and *alam* concept back to a form of visually representing identity, while also claiming the space as a Shia one. There is also a major honor and source of blessing that is believed to come from hoisting a flag that was in the shrine presence of the Ahlul Bayt, so this in turn connects the significance that religious identity has to the cultural and political forms of representation seen here.



Mleeta, South Lebanon, October 2021

As we were exiting the Mleeta landmark, these Hezbollah flags were on the side of the road. The space is clearly a Hezbollah one, given the entire landmark exists to honor their military endeavors. The flags on its outskirts directly indicate their presence and territorial affiliation.

زيارة الحوراء زينب عليها السلام

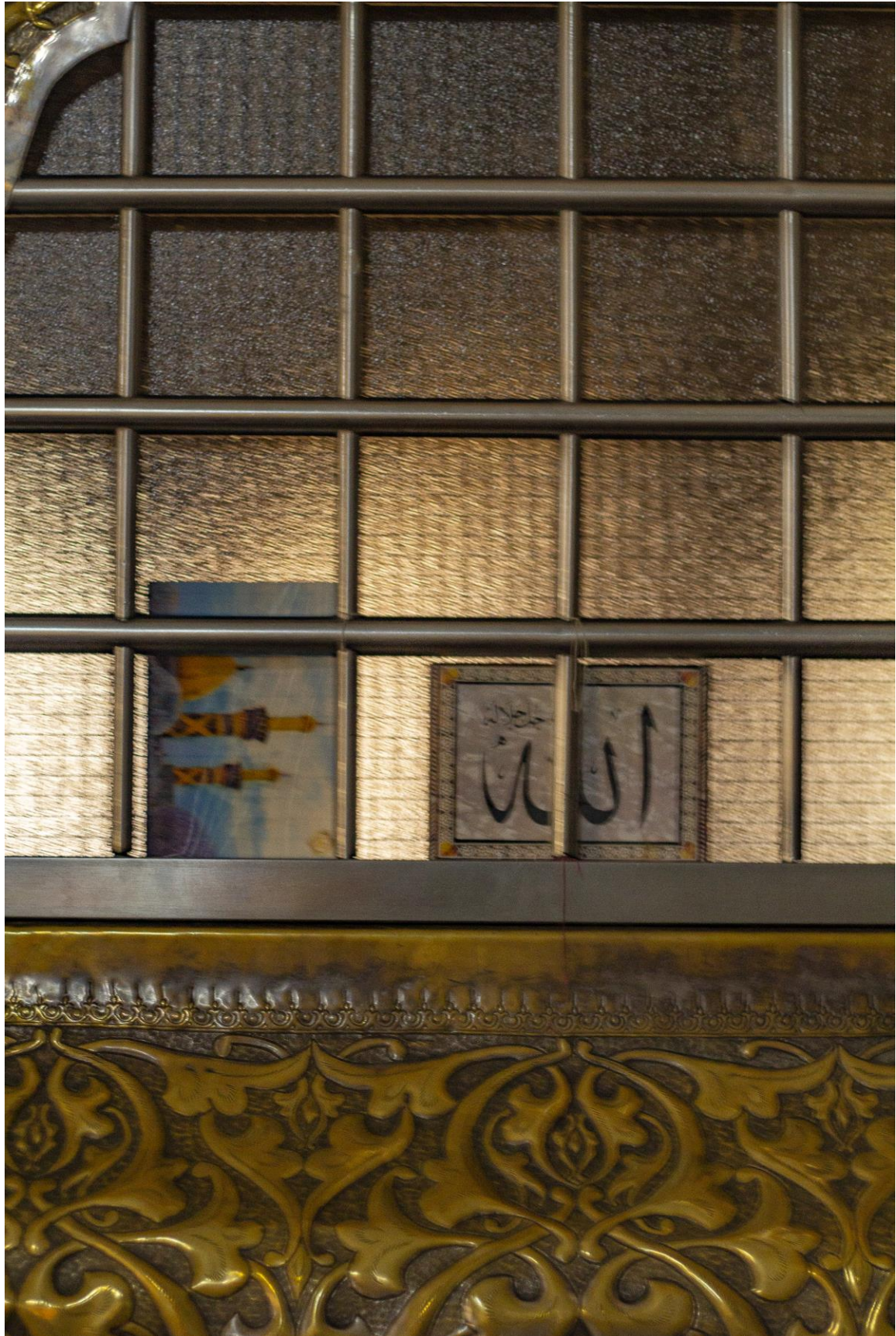
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم



السلام عليك يا بنت سلمان الأنبياء، السلام عليك يا بنت صاحب الجحوش واللواء،
السلام عليك يا بنت من عرج به إلى السماء ووصل إلى مقام قاب قوسين أو أدنى،
السلام عليك يا بنت لبى الهدى وسيد الورى ومنقذ العباد من الردى،
السلام عليك يا بنت صاحب الخلق العظيم والآيات والذكر الحكيم،
السلام عليك يا بنت صاحب المقام المحمود والجحوش المورود واللواء المشهود،
السلام عليك يا بنت منهج دين الإسلام وصاحب القبلة والقرآن، وعلم الصدق والحق والإحسان،
السلام عليك يا بنت سفوة الأنبياء وعلم الأتقياء ومشهور الذكر في الأرض والسماء، ورحمة الله وبركاته،
السلام عليك يا بنت خير خلق الله، وسيد خلقه وأول العدد قبل إيجاد أرضه وسماواته، وآخر الأبد
بعد قاء الدنيا وأهلها، ورحمة الله وبركاته،
السلام عليك يا بنت إمام الأتقياء، السلام عليك يا بنت عماد الأسفيا، السلام عليك يا بنت يصوب الدين،
السلام عليك يا بنت أمير المؤمنين، السلام عليك يا بنت قائد البررة، السلام عليك يا بنت قانع الكفرة والفجرة،
السلام عليك يا بنت وارث التبيين، السلام عليك يا بنت خليفة سيد المرسلين، السلام عليك يا بنت النبا العظيم على اليقين،
السلام عليك يا بنت من حساب الناس عليه، والكوشى يديه، والنص يوم القدير عليه ورحمة الله وبركاته،
السلام عليك يا بنت من قاد زمام لقاقتها جبرائيل، وشاركها في مصائبها إسرائيل، وغضب بسببها الرب الجليل
ويكى نصائبها إبراهيم الخليل، ونوح وموسى الكليم في كربلاء، ورحمة الله وبركاته،
السلام عليك يا بنت البدر السواطع، السلام عليك يا بنت زمزم والصفاء، السلام عليك يا بنت مكة ومنى،
السلام عليك يا بنت من حمل على البراق في الهواء،
السلام عليك يا بنت من حمل الزكاة بأطراف الرداء ويذنه على الفقراء،
السلام عليك يا بنت من أسرى به الله من المسجد الحرام إلى المسجد الأقصى،
السلام عليك يا بنت محمد المصطفى، السلام عليك يا بنت علي المرتضى، السلام عليك يا بنت فاطمة الزهراء،
السلام عليك يا بنت خديجة الكبرى، السلام عليك وعلى جدك المختار، السلام عليك وعلى أبيك حيدر الكران،
السلام عليك وعلى السادات الأطهار الأخيار وهم حجج الله على الأقطار سادات الأرض والسماء من ولد أخيك الحسين،
الشهيد العظيم الطاهر، وهو أبو التسعة الأقطار، وهم حجج الله من مشرق الشرق والغرب من الليل والنهار،
الذين حبهم فرس على أمتاق كل الخلائق،
السلام عليك يا بنت ولي الله الأعظم، السلام عليك يا أخت وتي الله العظيم، السلام عليك يا عمدة ولي الله الكرم،
السلام عليك يا أم المناصب زينب ورحمة الله وبركاته،
أنتك يا مولاتي وابنة مولاي قاصداً والداً عارفاً بحقك فتكوني شفيعة إلى الله في غفراني ذلوبي وقضاء حوائجي واعطاء سؤالي
وكشف ضري وأن لك ولأبيك وأجدادك المعاهرين جاهاً عظيماً وشفاعاً مقبولة
السلام عليك وعلى آبائك المعاهرين المعهدين وعلى ملائكة المقربين في هذا الحرم الشريف المبارك ورحمة الله وبركاته
الفاتحة على حب أهل البيت ولروح الرحومة الطاهرة حوراء شادي زريق

Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A written *ziyarah* sending peace and salutations upon a martyred child, inside of the shrine of Nabi Aila. Connecting shrine spaces to honoring martyrs, especially in Hezbollah regions, connects the tragic narrative to the sanctity of a holy space.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An image of the shrine of Abbas, and Arabic for the name of Allah in the metal grille of the *dharih*. Placing imagery of the Karbala shrines and other relics within other shrine spaces connects back to mourning of commemoration in spaces that have a Shia presence.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Architectural components of the interior of the shrine of Nabi Aila. There is an *alam* as well as a large written *ziyarah* board sending salutations upon the prophet that is buried here.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The entrance door to the shrine of Nabi Aila, with the view of the metal *dharih* and *ziyarah* board for the Prophet buried here. The *dharih* structure mimics those of other shrines around the region, like those of Iraq often being a model. Likewise, the décor of the chandelier and geometric and Arabic inscriptions are a reflection of Islamic architectural components in the space.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Outside of the Shrine of Nabi Aila is an illustrated board of Hezbollah martyrs and the shrine of Syeda Zainab in the image. The Beqaa Valley is associated with a heavier Hezbollah presence, so their martyrdom iconography denotes that presence through a visual lens. Likewise, the Syeda Zainab shrine in this image reflects a major component of Hezbollah's cause to defend and protect Shia spaces like that of the shrine of Zainab.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A collection of flags on a stake outside of the shrine of Nabi Aila. There are both Amal and Hezbollah flags here, once again denoting the overall political Shia spheres that overlap and exist in the same spaces regardless of specific loyalty to one party or the other.



Nabi Aila, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The green dome of the shrine of Nabi Aila. The dome structure seen in the major shrines of Iraq are seen in shrines in Shia regions, denoting a connection to the architectural similarity for similar spaces regionally.



Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A cut-out billboard of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei while driving through the Beqaa Valley region. Given the Hezbollah presence in this region, seeing the image of Ali Khamenei reinforces the party's connection to Iranian *wilayah al-faqih* knowing that Khamenei is the current face for Shia Iranian politics.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A poster of Mohandas, Soleimani, and Mughniyeh outside of the village of Nabi Sheet. This poster indicates the Hezbollah presence given the role Mughniyeh has played in their organization. Soleimani and Mohandas are also iconized for their roles in the fight against ISIS and defending Shia spaces. Given how driven Hezbollah is by the martyrdom trope, posters like this also reinforce this concept in honoring those who died in their causes. Each of these men were killed as martyrs for Shia causes, and for this reason they are honored and iconized particularly in Shia spaces.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An image of a boat inscribed with the Arabic names of Allah, and the Ahul Bayt and Imams. The boat imagery is a symbolic depiction of the “Safinat al-Nijaat”, which refers to the ark of salvation from a quote from the Prophet Mohammad stating that those who follow the path of the Ahlul Bayt are saved like those who got onto the ark of Noah.



Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Several flags and a banner heading a village entrance, stating “peace be upon you, Zainab al-Hawra” and “bitla karbala”, meaning “return to Karbala”. There is also a second banner honoring Sayyid Musa Sadr right below. Given the time period being post *Arbaeen*, this *alam* imagery and speaking of returning to Karbala is relevant to the *Arbaeen* walk period and the universal Shia desire to make the pilgrimage to honor Hussain and his family to Iraq regardless of time. The Sadr image indicates that there is an Amal presence as well in this space.



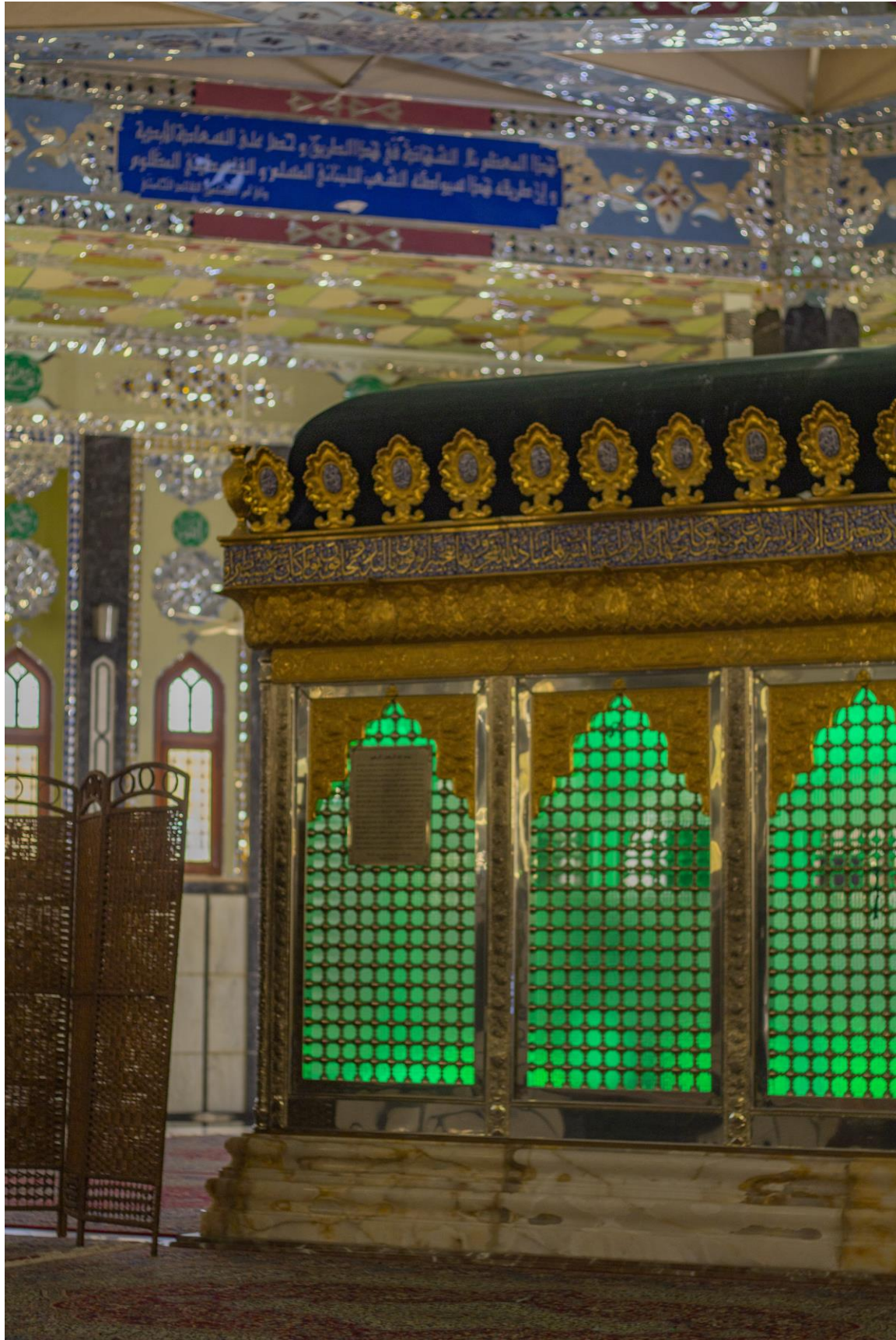
Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The shrine of Syed Abbas Mousawi outside of Nabi Sheet. The shrine structure is grand and developed like that of a shrine dedicated to a prophet or the Ahlul Bayt. Even the structure somewhat imitates the octagonal pattern and dome seen with the Al-Aqsa Mosque.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A printed image framed of either a *ziyarah*, dua, or Quranic verse inside the shrine space.







Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The metal *dharikh* of the shrine of Syed Abbas Mousawi. This is the same structure collectively seen throughout the major shrines. This detailed and honorary structure gives Syed Abbas Mousawi the status of honor and martyrdom, and also almost iconizes him in a similar fashion to that of the Ahlul Bayt who are mourned for and honored.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The doorway into the shrine of Syed Abbas Mousawi. The door has the inscriptions of the name of Allah and the prophet, as well as other related Arabic wording.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The car that Syed Abbas Mousawi and his wife were killed in during the explosion, preserved outside of the shrine.





Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Repeated Mousawi posters in front of his shrine entrance.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The shrine of Nabi Sheet in the distance. The poster of Khamenei seen again demonstrates the Hezbollah presence of this region. Likewise, the Hussaini *alams* and the shrine imagery is relative to the recent mourning periods from Muharram and *Arbaeen*, but also demonstrates the mourning traditions integral to Shia identity. Therefore, these flags indicate the collective Shia presence in this space overall.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An *alam* placed on a home with text stating “Ya Qamar Bani Hashim”, in honor of Abbas, the brother of Hussain.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The dome of Nabi Sheet in the background, with *alams* in honor of Hussain and other members of the Ahlul Bayt blowing in the distance.



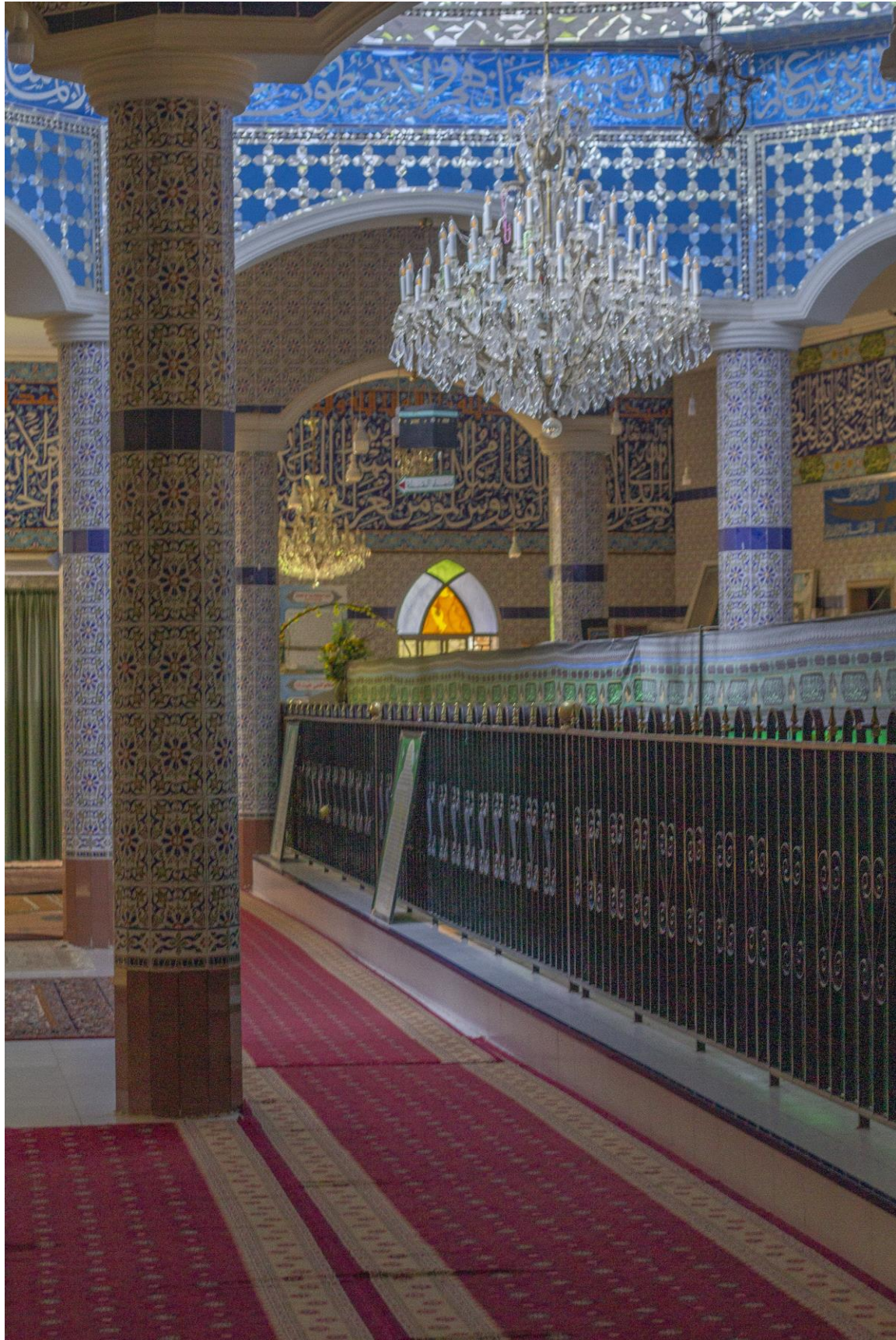
Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A poster of Qassem Soleimani by the shrine of Nabi Sheet.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A bookshelf space inside of the shrine of Nabi Sheet. On the wall are various pictures of different clerical figures like Syed Ali Khamenei and Syed Abbas Mousawi. Both figures are very relevant to Hezbollah, and given Nabi Sheet was Mousawi's hometown and his resting place, his image being in this shrine further iconizes him. This space also has other religious text imagery like that of a *ziyarah* poster for salutations upon Imam Hussain or the name of the Prophet. There is also poster to the right honoring a Hezbollah soldier.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The elongated *dharih* of Nabi Sheet, given the legendary story that he was a giant. Locals claim that Eve, the mother of Nabi Sheet and the wife of Adam is buried here too. The shrine space incorporates the same geometrical, chandelier décor, and Arabic inscription imagery seen in other shrines as well.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A decorative mirror in the shrine, and an image of me in the shot.



Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An embroidered work of art of the shrine of Imam Reza in Iraq is on the *dharikh* of Nabi Sheet.

As seen in a previous image from the shrine of Nabi Aila, the shrines of other Ahlul Bayt members are also honored in these shrine spaces. Even the *alam* banner on the top wall has imagery of Hussain's shrine and sends salutations onto him.



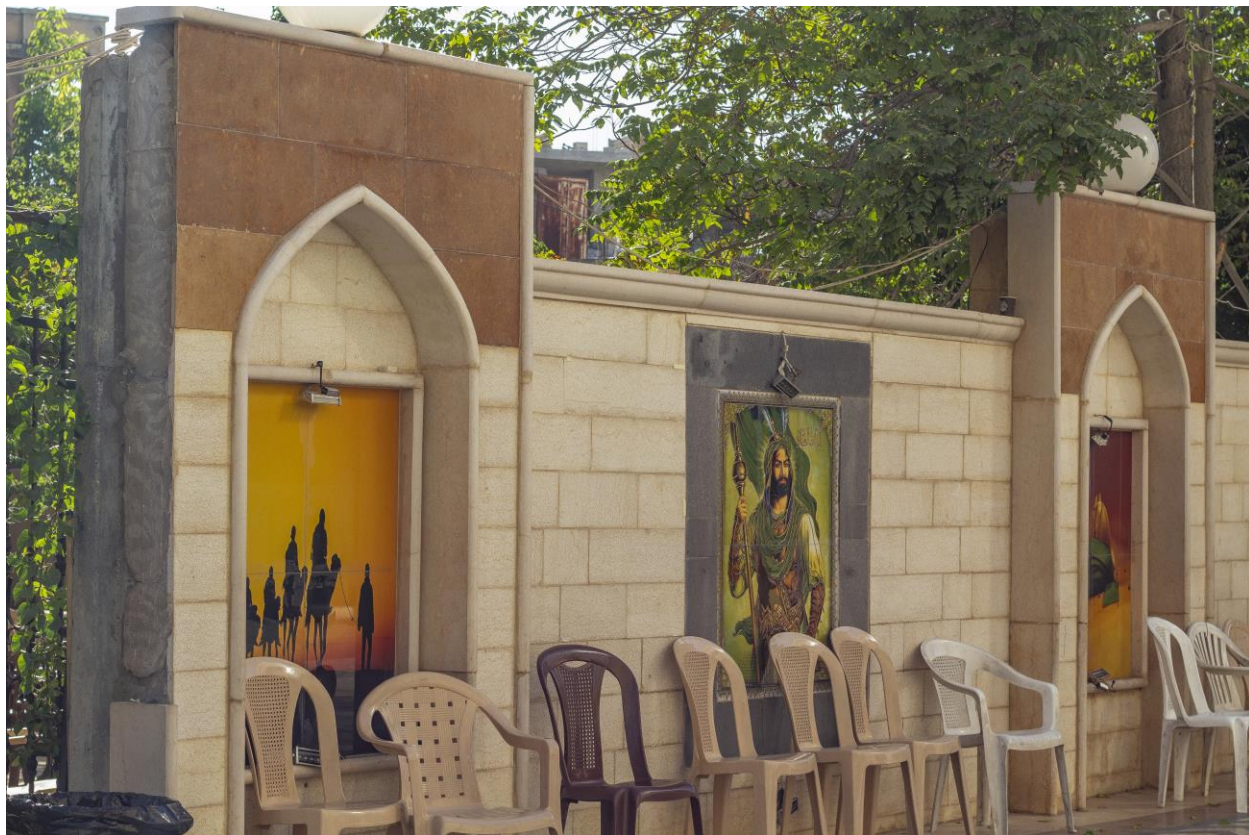
Nabi Sheet, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The head of the *dharih* of Nabi Sheet. A *dhulfiqar* replica is placed on top of it, which represents a symbol of Ali, given he held this legendary sword. This Shia symbolism that exists from the heroic narratives of Ali is key to Shia identity, and this imagery denotes the Shia claim to this space.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A poster of Syed Hassan Nasrallah in Baalbek. Baalbek has a major Hezbollah presence, and his imagery is a direct reflection of the party's claim to these spaces.





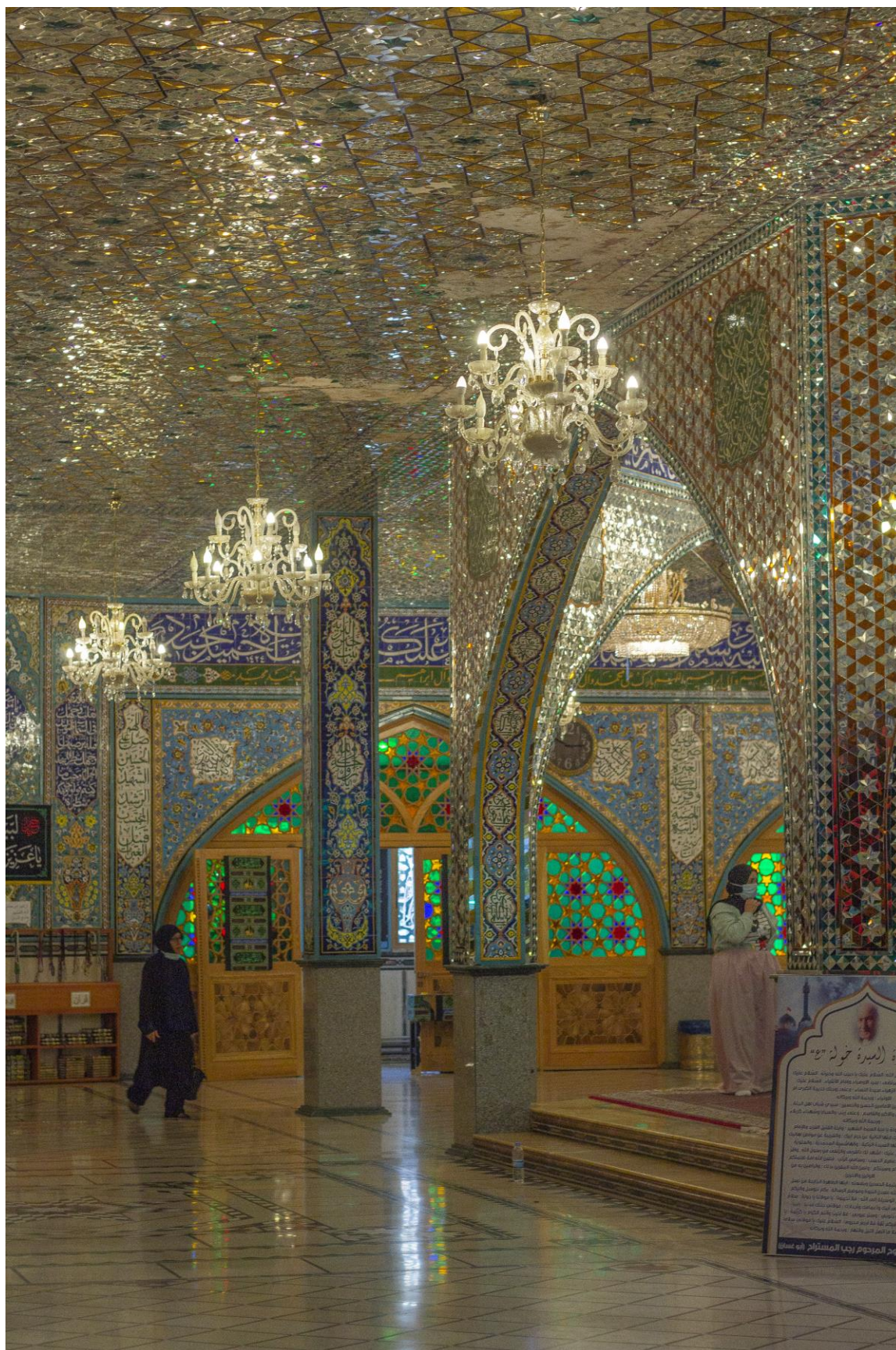
Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

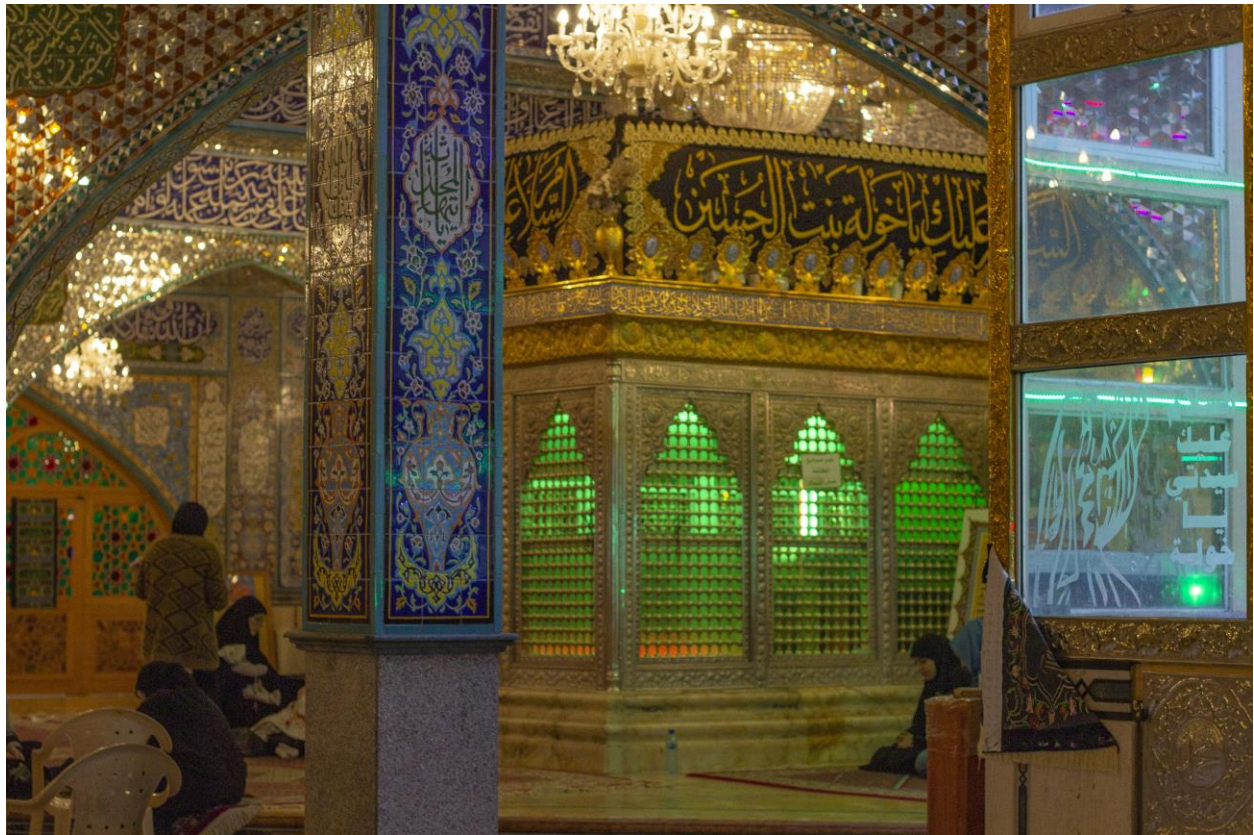
The courtyard of the shrine of Syeda Khawla. There is a shop selling various religious ornaments, books, and rosaries. Likewise, the space is decorated with iconography and posters of Abbas and Hussain. There are also images indicating the travel to Damascus, from the images of camels walking through the desert. The open *iwan* structures here are seen with other shrine and mosque structures of Shia spaces.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A tree that narrations have claimed that Imam Zainul Abideen planted to mark the grave of Syeda Khawla, a daughter of Hussain, that died en route to Damascus when passing through Baalbek. The preservation of this tree and the Arabic text sending salutations on Khawla reinforces the memorialization culture of a holy space and a martyr.





Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The interior of the shrine of Syeda Khawla. The glass ceilings and the *dharih* are components seen in the grand shrines of other Ahlul Bayt members.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An *alam* calling out to Hussain, and an image of Mohandas in the windowsill. Given this is the shrine space of Hussain's daughter, and being a space claimed to be a part of the Karbala narrative, this space honors Hussain and his tragedy quite directly. Likewise, the Mohandas imagery places an honorary component to the martyr in a holy space.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A *mihrab* with *muqarnas* and a framed poster of Arabic text denoting the *ziyarah* for Syeda Khawla to be recited.





Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The *dharih* of Syeda Khawla. Women pay their respects by clinging onto the metal bars or sitting and praying nearby.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Mosaic imagery of major clerics and the mosque of Al-Aqsa. This imagery connects Hezbollah's ideology rooted in freeing Palestine and also the connection between religious identity; given this is in the shrine space.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An *alam* with the phrase “Hussain minni wa ana min Hussain”, which translates to “Hussain is from me and I am from Hussain”, a quote credited to the Prophet Mohammad. This phrase is often used in oratory and rhetoric in honor of Hussain and also to reinforce his significance to Islam by having the Prophet at the forefront of the narration. This *alam* was seen through the village of Baalbek.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The entrance to Raas al-Ayn, the space where Imam Hussain's head was said to have been placed when the surviving members of the Ahlul Bayt were taken on the journey to Damascus. A "Ya Hussain" *alam* with Ali's *dhulfiqar* (which was believed to also be passed down to Hussain) is seen on the entryway door. This space is directly connected to the Karbala narrative, and therefore the visual symbolism affiliated with it would be in honor of Hussain.



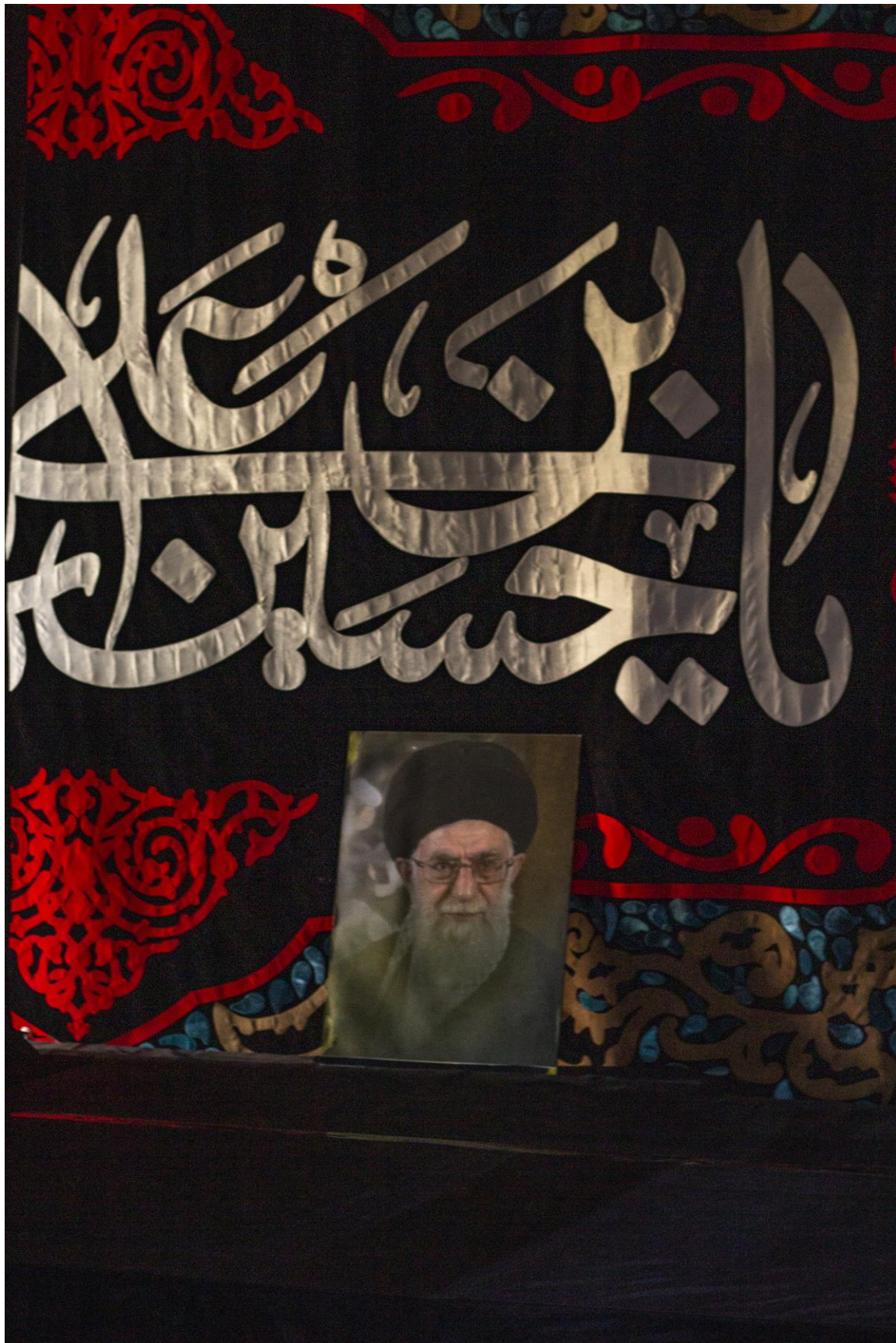
Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A banner with “Ya Hussain” repeated is on the wall structure. The stone archways seen here seem to be remnants from the Umayyad architectural structures, which this spaces seems to preserve to an extent.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

This stone cutout section is the place where Imam Hussain's head was placed. It is a holy space given that the Imam's was once here; and this was a key part of the tragedy. It memorializes the space. Likewise, the stone cutout maintains the original components from this space in terms of preservation of the original *maqaam*.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

An image of Ayatollah Khamenei under an *alam* inside of Raas al-Ayn. Given Baalbek is a Hezbollah region, Khamenei imagery has been seen on multiple occasions.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

Portraiture of of Hussain holding his baby son Ali Asghar, who was killed by a three-pronged arrow during the battle of Karbala (left), and a portrait of Ali with a lion (right). The Karbala tragic narrative speaks on various tragic stories like that of Ali Asghar, and the visual imagery memorializes the story. Ali is associated with a title of “Lion”, so the lion is a visual symbol alongside his portrait. Having a portrait of Hussain and Ali in this space demonstrates key Shia figures relevant to identity, which in turn shows a Shia claim to the space. Given this is a *maqam* associated with a big part of the Karbala narrative, it only makes sense that the iconography within it is related to Hussain and his story too.



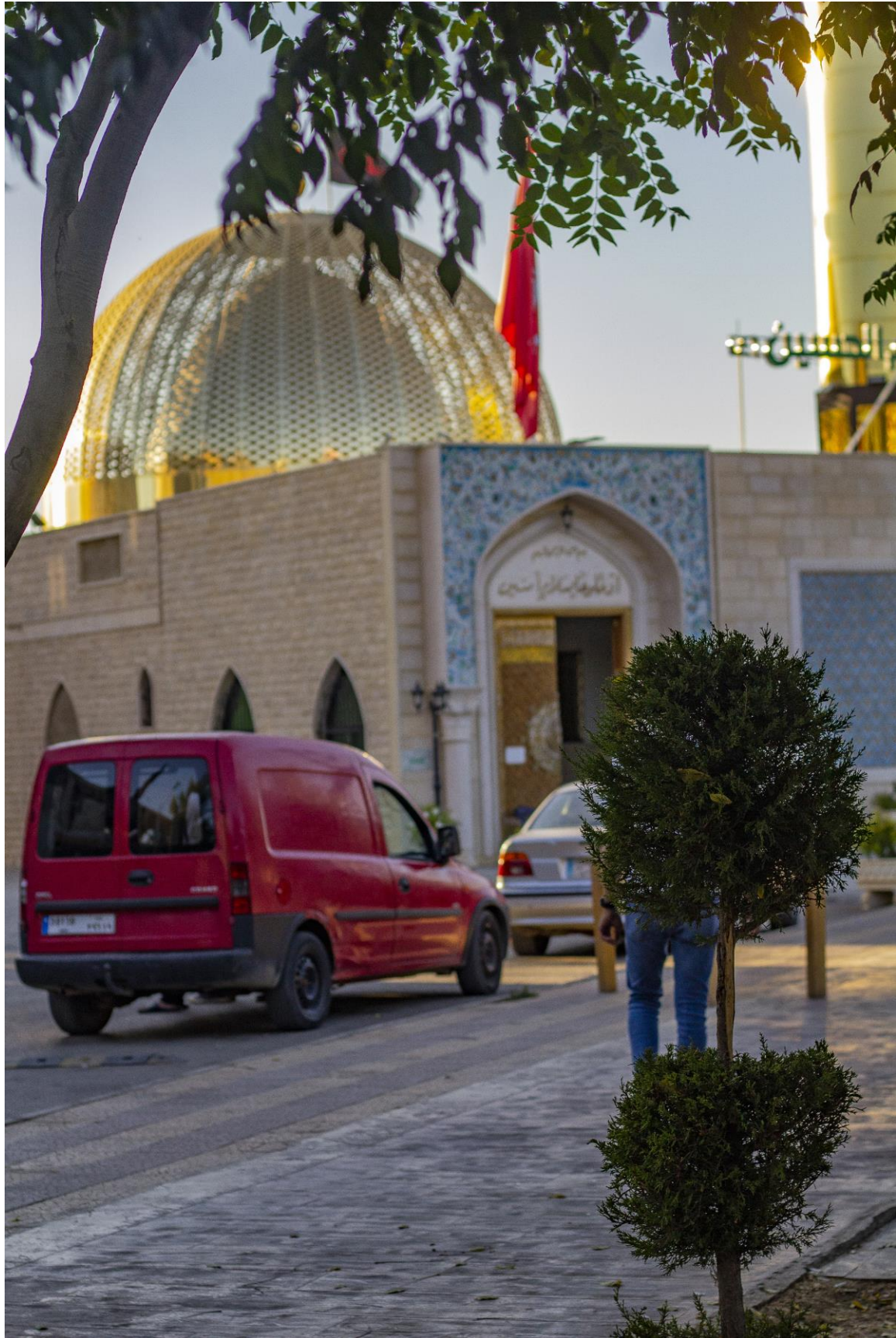
Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

A preserved stone spot within the *maqam*. I was not sure exactly what this was referring to, but given that it had the original rocks and was standing out on the carpet, I knew it was a holy portion of the space.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The *Mihrab* of Imam Zainul Abideen in Raas al-Ayn. This would be a location where Imam Zainul Abideen prayed. Seen in the *mihrab* is a painting of the desert of Karbala and the tents, recreating the battlefield scene that took place from the tragedy where Syeda Zainab stood on the hill and watched Hussain fight.



Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The golden dome of the shrine of Syeda Safiya, another daughter of Hussain. The shrine has an *alam* on its entrance, and a sign that says Hussain.







Baalbek, Beqaa Valley; October 2021

The golden *dharih* of Syeda Safiya. The structure replicates that of other shrine spaces as well.

Likewise, there is a placement of the *ziyarah* text by the shrine, and another poster with the portrait of a martyr and sending salutations upon them. This shrine's structure replicates

Byzantine architecture and design elements, which is interesting given how close Baalbek is to Syria.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the Shia heritage and narrative, Shia identity manifests itself through symbolism that is further intertwined with visual, cultural, and political expression. Likewise, elements of imagery, tradition and ritual, and politics traverse with one another.

Cultural and religious identity directly intersects in the socio-political sphere. Political Shiism in its many fonts emerged from this cross between faith and tradition. Much of it bases its rhetoric and foundation from the Shia narrative, especially in terms of the martyrdom trope and tragic narrative. This in turn resonates with Shia populations who find that this rhetoric combined with symbolic allusions connects to their identity as a whole. This establishes a sort of loyalty to a party, given that it embodies principles of faith and resonates with their identity politics, so it almost becomes a part of religious obligation to support an institution that sustains itself through claims of embodying the Shia narrative. Likewise, many of these groups include rhetoric in protection and welfare of the Shia community, who have been subject to either low socio-economic conditions or mass persecution. Foundational narratives of Shia history and the cross between religious identity and traditions have allowed for political forms of Shiism to emerge and sustain themselves.

Identity is a multifaceted concept. What makes a person who they are varies from individual to individual, yet collectively, shared components from a religious, political, and social lens can often associate a space or people with a certain background. From social, religious, and political contexts, the expression of identity takes a multitude of forms. At the very same time, this identity is also shaped by heritage and narrative. Art and visual imagery, and the adaption of cultural traditions manifest themselves as key forms to expressing identity.

Imagery reinforces veneration of not just an Imam, but also the clerics. Visiting shrines in honor of the Ahlul Bayt is also a cultural revivalism of Shia identity through pilgrimage, while also holding political implications on varying levels. The existence of Shia visual imagery in a space can give way to identifying the kind of Shia demographic that exists, based on the present iconography and representations seen. These forms of symbolism have come to be through a means to embody the Shia narrative as an external show of identity.

Both Lebanon and Iraq's formerly marginalized Shia communities use the expression of their religious identity through representation by their political counterparts. Hezbollah has inserted itself in Shia spaces through their rhetoric, protective presence, and modes of memorialization of both the Ahlul Bayt and their own martyrs through imagery and shrine. Iraqi Shia spaces are a testament to outwardly expressing Shia identity in the post-Saddam era. The nation is not only home to the holiest of pilgrimage sites, it also embodies identity politics affiliated with clerical loyalty and militia organizations who also exist to protect Shia sites. Both spaces iconize their respective clerical authority, while also mourning and idealizing martyrs through their tombs and veneration imagery. Apart from their respective socio-political spaces and their ideological differences within clerical and political parties, both Lebanon and Iraq embody sites of significant Shia history and heritage, and have a plethora of symbolism and iconography across their Shia regions collectively. These same heritage sites are politicized, but regardless, they embody all forms of imagery, ritual, and tradition.

The Shia narrative is expressed and commemorated through passionate and memorializing rhetoric. This same rhetoric gets used for Shia political entities like Hezbollah in an attempt to intertwine their message with Shia identity that will resonate with populations within the Shia demographic. Ultimately, this rhetoric and narrative tradition connects itself with

expression through forms of imagery directly associated with identity, which in turn manifests itself in cultural practices and political affiliations. Religious identities are connected to politics, and political entities are connected to religion because of the same narrative that they base their claims on. In both Iraq and Lebanon, generic Shia iconography honoring the Ahlul Bayt directly implies that a region has a Shia population to exist. When Shia clerical and political party iconography exists in a region, it represents the entity's claim, presence and influence to that space. Ultimately, all forms of expression through symbolism are a means of reclaiming Shia identity, while also reclaiming the narrative taken from religious tragedy, which in turn creates a Shia cultural identity that is used and embodied by the socio-political spheres of Shia regions today.

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