

*In the name of
Allah,
the Beneficent,
the Merciful*

Al-Furqān

the bi-weekly electronic newsletter from the office of
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*O Allah,
Bless
Muhammad
& his progeny*

Sāmarrā', O Sāmarrā' Your Golden Dome Shall Shine Again

The Height of Provocation

On Wednesday the 23rd of Muharram 1427 (22 February 2006), the world woke up to the shocking news of the explosion at the shrine of Sāmarrā' (Iraq) which totally destroyed its golden dome. Underneath that dome is the resting place of Imam 'Ali an-Naqī (a.s.) and Imam Hasan al-'Askarī (a.s.).

Of all the spaces in any society, places of worship are the most sacred. Even warring factions, if they have any sense of civility and humanity, respect the sanctity of the churches, synagogues, and mosques. Almighty God expects good people to stand up for protection of the places of worship: "...Had it not been Allah's preventing some people by others, certainly the monasteries, the churches, the synagogues, and the mosques (in which Allah's name is much remembered) would have pulled down." (22:40)

The attack on the shrine of Imam 'Ali an-Naqī and Imam Hasan al-'Askarī is not just demolition of a building; it is attack on one of the most visible symbols of Shi'a Islam.

Iraqi Shi'as are being tested in a harshest way possible. The enemy could not perpetuate its hold on the political power by free and democratic election; and so it sought refuge in bullets and explosives. Shi'a leaders and civilians have been systematically targeted. Even on Monday and Tuesday before the explosion, many Shi'as were killed in Baghdad. Nonetheless, the Shi'as under the leadership of the Grand Ayatullah Sistāni, have restrained their anger and stopped themselves from seeking revenge.

Now by targeting the shrine of our Imams, the enemy has indeed reached the height of provocation. Even then, we see that Ayatullah Sistāni, with support of other marāji' of Najaf, asked Shi'as to protest peacefully and restrain their emotions of revenge. We praise the over-all restraint shown by Iraqi Shi'as otherwise the situation would have been much worst than the few cases of reprisal attacks after the explosion of the dome.

Only three groups stand to benefit from the civil war which was the intended goal of the provocateurs: the remnants of

Saddam's Ba'thist regime, the extremist Wahhabi elements, and the occupiers who want to perpetuate their hold on Iraq and its oil.

We pray that the patience and forbearance of Iraqi Shi'as will prevail over such kinds of provocation.

The Golden Shrine: A Historical Review

Iraq has strong ties with Shi'a history. Six of the Imams of the Shi'a Ithnā 'Ashariyya Muslims are buried in Iraq. Najaf has the shrine of Imam 'Ali; Karbalā has the shrine of Imam Husayn; Kādhibimiyah (in the suburb of Baghdad) has the shrine of Imam Musa al-Kādhim and Imam Muhammad at-Taqī; and Sāmarrā' has the shrine of Imam 'Ali an-Naqī al-Hādi and Hasan al-'Askarī (peace be upon them all).

Sāmarrā' was built by Mu'tasim bin Hārūn, the 'Abbāsid caliph who reigned from 217 to 227 AH. Its original name was "surra man rā'ahu – a delight for whoever sees it". With passage of time, the name was changed to "Sāmarrā'". This new city was built by Mu'tasim as his new capital as well as a garrison town for his Turkish troops. Therefore, the garrison neighbourhood was known as "al-'Askar – the army garrison". (And since the Eleventh Imam was born in al-'Askar, he was known as "al-'Askarī" meaning one who comes from al-'Askar.)

It was during the reign of Mutawakkil bin Mu'tasim, that Imam 'Ali an-Naqī (a.s.) was brought from Medina to Sāmarrā' where he was placed in a house next to the caliph's garrison under constant surveillance of government spies.

Eventually, Imam 'Ali an-Naqī (a.s.) bought a house in the al-'Askar neighbourhood and it was the same house in which he was buried. After him, Imam Hasan al-'Askarī (a.s.) also was buried in the same house next to the grave of his father. So the shrine that we see now was actually the house of Imam an-Naqī and Imam al-'Askarī and also the birth-place of our Present Imam al-Mahdi (peace be upon all of them).

Besides the graves of the two holy Imams, the shrine also holds the resting places of the following members of the Ahlul Bayt:

1. Bibi Hakima Khatun, the daughter of Imam Muhammad at-Taqi and sister of Imam 'Ali an-Naqi. She died in 274 AH. Hakima Khatun was famous among the Shi'as as the grandmother since she was called by Imam al-'Askari as "grandmother". She was also appointed by Imam al-'Askari as one of his most prominent representatives.
2. Bibi Nرجس, the wife of Imam Hasan al-'Askari and the mother of our Present Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.). She died in 260 AH.
3. The mother of Imam Hasan al-'Askari was also buried in the same house.
4. Al-Husayn, the son of Imam 'Ali an-Naqi and the brother of Imam al-'Askari.

"Sardāb Sāhibu 'z-Zamān"

Next to the shrine in Sāmarrā', there is blue dome over the "sardāb – cellar, basement". It is popularly known as "sardāb sāhibu 'z-Zamān – the cellar of the Present Imam". This was part of the house of the Imams; and **since Imam al-Mahdi was seen reciting the Qur'ān in it, it is venerated by the Shi'as** and they go in there to say prayers. It was previously linked to the shrine from inside but then in 1202 AH the inside door was closed and its entrance was made on the side of the shrine complex.

After the explosion of the shrine's dome, I read many news commentaries in which some experts, while describing the shrine, mentioned the "sardāb" as the place where the Imam Mahdi entered and was not seen again thus heralding his Occultation (*ghaybat*) or the place from where Imam al-Mahdi will make his appearance or that for a long time the Shi'as kept a horse ready at the entrance of the sardāb for his reappearance.

All such statements are nothing but beliefs erroneously attributed to the Shi'as by their opponents. For example, Ibn Khalīkān writes that "The (Shi'a) Imāmiyyah claim that al-Mahdi went into the cellar of his father's house in Sāmarrā', and his mother saw him (go in). He has not left the cellar since. This was in the year 265 AH, and he has remained hidden there, the Shi'ah claim, up to this day. They are awaiting his reappearance from the cellar in Sāmarrā' at the end of time."

What is amazing is that there is no reference to any cellar in Shi'a books. Some anti-Shi'a polemicist have made up such stories and then argue against the Shi'as on that basis. For example, for denying the *ghaybat* of Imam al-Mahdi, they say, "...The second is that he lives in a cellar without anyone giving him food and drink, and this is quite extraordinary."

'Ali ibn 'Isa al-Irbilī, a Shi'a scholar, responds to this argument by saying, "This is an extraordinary thing to say and a peculiar idea, for those who deny his existence have no need for this [story of the cellar] and those who affirm his existence do not say that he is in a cellar; rather they [merely] say that he is living and existent; he lives sometimes in one place, journeys to another, and travels around the world."

Mirza Husayn an-Nūri, after quoting all such stories from non-Shi'a writers, refutes them and says: "In the belief of the Shi'a there is no connection between the Occultation and any cellar. The only reference to any cellar in their belief about the Twelfth Imam is that he was seen in the cellar of his father's house reciting the Qur'ān, and the only reason for their veneration of this place is that it was one of the locations in which he was seen."

History Repeats Itself

Exploding the dome of the 'Askariyya shrine is not a first in the atrocities committed by the enemies of Ahlul Bayt. During the lifetime of Imam 'Ali an-Naqi, the Imam whose shrine was bombed last month, there lived a tyrant ruler by the name of Mutawakkil bin Mu'tasim who reigned from 228 to 248 AH. His heart was filled with hatred for Imam 'Ali and his family.

In 236 AH, he ordered the shrine and the grave of Imam Husayn (a.s.) to be levelled to the ground, and that the surrounding area be transformed into farmlands so that no trace of the grave be left.

The Shi'as were prevented from visiting the shrine of Imam Husayn. Some of those who tried were either imprisoned or tortured.

Many people were angered by atrocities of Mutawakkil; people started writing anti-'Abbāsid slogans on the walls. Poets expressed their feelings on this issue. A famous poem against Mutawakkil goes as following:

*By Allah, if the Umayyids unjustly killed
Husayn, son of the Prophet's daughter,
His cousins have committed a similar crime
For I swear that Husayn's grave has been erased.
It seems that they regret for not participating
In the massacre, so they now go after the grave.*

(The reference to "his cousins" refers to the 'Abbasids whose ancestry goes back to 'Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet and Imam 'Ali.)

Mutawakkil is gone but the shrine of Imam Husayn (a.s.) still stands tall and high as a symbol of Allāh's light which can never be extinguished. Similarly, the ideological children of Mutawakkil can do whatever they want but the golden dome of Sāmarrā' will rise again on the horizon of Sāmarrā' with more glory and light.

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