


## Article

# From Attachment to a Sacred Figure to Loyalty to a Sacred Route: The Walking Pilgrimage of Arbaeen

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**Abstract:** Around 20 million Shia pilgrims shape one of the world's biggest pilgrimages in Iraq, called "Arbaeen," many of whom walk long distances to Karbala city as a part of the ritual every year. Faith in Imam Hussein, who was martyred in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, is central among all pilgrims in this ritual, but the main question is how do the pilgrims' faith and psychological cognitions translate into this spiritual journey with different meanings during the Arbaeen pilgrimage? The present study aims to discover the different social and psychological reasons for pilgrims' feelings of attachment to Imam Hussein and to the Arbaeen pilgrimage route. Through 57 semi-structured in-depth interviews with pilgrims in two phases, Arbaeen 2014 and 2019, four different perceived roles for Imam Hussein including beloved, interceding, transformative, and unifier figure were found, leading pilgrims to feel an attachment to him. The current study mainly contributes to the literature by presenting an empirical analysis of Muslims' experiences and perceptions of Islamic theology, and their loyalty to a sacred route through attachment to a sacred figure.

**Keywords:** Shia faith; Arbaeen; pilgrimage route; Shia pilgrims; attachment theory

## 1. Introduction

"Imamate" is one of the five pillars of Shia faith and one of the major divisions between the two branches of Islam—Shia and Sunni (Szanto 2018). It is a Shia belief that twelve Imams—and more specifically Imam Ali, the son of the Prophet Muhammad—are the rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad, while Sunni Muslims believe that Abu Bakr was his successor. Of particular importance to Shias is Ali's son (and the Prophet Muhammad's grandson), Imam Hussein. Indeed, another significant division between Sunnis and Shias lies in the fact that, in contrast to Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims commemorate the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions every year in the month of Muharram (the first month of the Muslim calendar).

Millions of Shia pilgrims—mostly from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, and other countries with a significant Shia population—create one of the largest annual public gatherings in the world (Abdul-Zahra and Mizban 2019; Husein 2018; Sims 2016). Called Arbaeen, as many as 20 million pilgrims undertake a pilgrimage to the Iraqi town of Karbala in less than three weeks. The passion for Imam Hussein, the third Shia Imam who was martyred in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, is key in the rituals of Arbaeen (meaning the 40th day after the martyrdom), when crowds of mourners gather around his shrine (Husein 2018; Moufahim and Lichrou 2019). The pilgrims mostly wear black shirts, and a number of them carry flags of the same color. Historically, this pilgrimage was banned during

dictator Saddam Hussein's reign (1979–2003), but it was revitalized in 2003 after his overthrow by the US.

Around two weeks before Arbäeen, millions of pilgrims start their spiritual journey on foot through several routes depending on their departure point (mostly from Najaf and Basra) to reach the Iraqi city of Karbala to commemorate the event. Pilgrims are welcomed along the routes by those who voluntarily donate various free products and services (e.g., food and accommodation), as this is a perceived way to attract divine blessings. One of the other significant rituals of Arbäeen includes Ta'zieh, a form of condolence and mourning street drama/theatre among Shiite Muslims. Ta'zieh and the social tradition of providing hospitality and services during Arbäeen were inscribed in the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for Iran and Iraq in 2010 and 2019, respectively (UNESCO 2010, 2019). The attachment and faith to this foot-pilgrimage are high among the participants such that a great proportion of them have at least experienced it once before (Husein 2018).

In line with Brulin (2019), physical sacred places (such as shrines for Muslims) are important for almost all religions, as they strengthen attachment behavior and religious identity in believers. Furthermore, like other faith believers, Muslims consider sacred figures like Imams as a proxy in their relationship with God (see di Giovine 2016; Kreinath 2015) because they are perceived as infallible guides for humans, who have struggled to protect what they consider to be the genuine form of Islam (Musa 2013). This study examines pilgrims' faith in Imam Hussein and the pilgrimage to Karbala through different forms of different cognitive attachment. Based on in-depth interviews with Iranian pilgrims during Arbäeen 2014 and 2019, the findings shed light on how pilgrims' psychological cognitions translate into faith in spiritual journeys with different meanings during the pilgrimage process. More broadly, the current study contributes to the literature by empirically investigating the framework of attachment theory in the context of Islamic psychology and pilgrimage.

## 2. Literature Review

People throughout their lifespan embrace a spectrum of attachments to different figures. These attachment figures gradually shift from parents to friends, and sometimes to non-physical figures like God (Bowlby 1969). Ainsworth (1979) has identified three categories of attachment in infants—secure, anxious-ambivalent, and anxious-avoidant. Likewise, in Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) categorization, three different styles of insecure attachment include preoccupied (ambivalent and clinging), avoidant (dismissing of the other), and fearful (both anxious and avoidant). Insecure attachment means that it does not produce sustainable positive emotions and strong emotional regulation and thus may result in personality disorders (Ghobary Bonab et al. 2013). Research by Hart et al. (2010) revealed that faith development is predicted by attachment anxiety.

Within the psychology of religion, God is an important secure figure of attachment for believers, and people seek His proximity as a safe haven in response to the gradual separation from their previous attachment figures (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2016). Depending on their psychological needs, believers attach to God by their faith to keep away from perceived dangers, to experience companionship and emotional support (Counted and Zock 2019), and to acquire a sense of being watched or guided (Brulin 2019). In the case of Islam, God or Allah is a supportive Creator; attachment toward God through belief and worship is produced by observing special ceremonies such as reciting daily prayers because His proximity can secure a comfortable life and give people a higher power to deal with life challenges (Ghobary Bonab et al. 2013).

Within Islamic spirituality, God has numerous names (for example according to Al-Bukhari (1979), there are 99 names for God), many of which refer to His divine attributes in respect to His relationship with people, reflecting His qualities as an attachment figure. For example, one of the divine names of God is "Al-Mu'min," which means the preserver and bestower of security—a key element in attachment theory. Providing security is also at the heart of attachment to sacred figures like Imam

Hussein, who is believed to have the divine power to facilitate people's relationship with God (Moufahim and Lichrou 2019). Some believers of different religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Sufism also consider sacred figures as their proxies in their relationship with God or the Creator (see di Giovine 2016; Kreinath 2015).

More specifically, Shias Muslims attach to Imams as divine proxies (Moufahim and Lichrou 2019) because they are considered infallible guides for humans whose tragic lives and struggles to preserve the genuine Islam are particularly salient (Musa 2013). For Shias, Imam Hussein is of special importance as a hero who willingly sacrificed everything to fight against injustice and oppression (Aghaie 2004; Ayoub 2011; Gözl 2019; Halverson et al. 2011). This perceived holy dedication of Hussein and his companions has shaped one of the central identities of the Shia community, encouraging them to dedicate themselves to justice in ways that are similar to what Imam Hussein did in Karbala (Momen 1985).

Husein (2018) suggests that pilgrims of Arbaeen feel a sense of spiritual satisfaction through the hardship they experience during the foot-pilgrimage, because they endure it intentionally in the way of God. Saramifar (2018) even goes further and articulates how "love" to Imams encourages young Shias to sacrifice their life to protect Shia shrines in Syria and Iraq in the fight with ISIS forces. More generally, Ghobary Bonab et al. (2013) state that going on a pilgrimage and visiting sacred sites are among the main rituals Muslims perform in order to obtain closeness to God. These religious and spiritual characteristics of pilgrimage make pilgrims believe that they are not "tourists," as this term implies Western hedonistic behaviors (Weibel 2020).

Fischer (2003) uses the term "paradigm of Karbala" to explain how the incident of Karbala provides Shias with models of living, mnemonics for thinking, and Islamic behavior norms. It provides different role models ranging from archetypal heroes to perpetrators and victims, and from tragic protagonists to ambiguous figures (Gözl 2019). During the centuries, the Karbala paradigm has become central in Shia rituals, religious practices, and politics (Saramifar 2018). According to Giesen (2015), heroes function in the construction of communities' collective identity. Consistently, as Gözl (2019) suggests, the paradigm of Karbala and its heroes significantly contribute to Shias' collective identity.

A comparison between Hussein in Shi'ism and Jesus in Christianity is made by Ayoub (2011), explaining that both figures are perceived to have been sacrificed for justice and are considered mediators between humans and God. He also enunciates how some believers of Christianity and Shi'ism imitate suffering for peace and justice and gain divine merit instead. According to Shia narratives, Imam Hussein will stand before God in the Judgment Day to intercede for his followers, leading God to erase the sins of those who suffer or mourn for Imam Hussein (Ayoub 2011).

Besides the perceived redemptive effects of Arbaeen's pilgrimage, the shrine of Hussein is famous for miraculous healing, as many pilgrims believe that Hussein has the power to cure the sick (Szanto 2013). More broadly, enduring the hardships of pilgrimage may lead to miraculous faith-based health and therapy manifestation for pilgrims. This is congruent with Sharpley's (2009) argument that perceived miracles alter religious doubts, strengthen religiosity, and foster spiritual transformation. This is also the case in most of other religions, since believers bond to sacred figures to seek their support in difficulties (Badone 1990). Many rituals trails, such as Camino de Santiago and Arbaeen, that require long walking and physical efforts gradually turn pilgrims, who endure the challenges of the routes, to better selves (Cova and Cova 2019; Frey 1998; Moufahim and Lichrou 2019; Nilsson 2018). The studies on secular pilgrims in the long routes show that the relevant pains and challenges make personal higher meaning and transformation (Cova and Cova 2019).

Practicing a ritual, and enduring religious suffering alongside a group of other pilgrims, can lead to a more significant transformation in pilgrims because of aggregate and collective influences. Shared emotion is central to religious ritual causing a sense of union with others, empowerment, and positive feelings; it fosters a sense of *communitas* or intra-group unity (Turner 1969). di Giovine (2011) explains this as a sense of mutual fellow-feeling and a perception of equal humanity among all ritual participants. According to Le Bon (1895) and McDougall (1923), people that participate in large groups

find themselves in a state of emotionality and impulsiveness, leading to more intensive expressions. This is comparable to the social/subjective norms factor in Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, which argues that the higher the perceived consistency of a behavior with significant others' thoughts, the more likely one would intend to perform that behavior (Esfandiar et al. 2019).

For many Arbaeen pilgrims, forgetting otherness and being part of a whole, united Shia community are among their initial travel motivations (Moufahim and Lichrou 2019), which seems to be in line with existential *communitas* (Turner 1969). With such a diversity of forms and qualities, a unifying feature, then, of all of these pilgrimages is that they are "hyper-meaningful" travels to rather hyper-meaningful sites (di Giovine 2013)—sites set apart from the profane and everyday world, which hold special importance to visitors, and which often promise some sort of personal or social transformation. In a word, it is travel out of the profane world into that of the sacred.

According to di Giovine and Choe (2019), by visiting sacred sites, people travel to a sacred world which is hyper-meaningful for them. For almost all religions, physical places are crucial because places facilitate attachment behavior in believers (Brulin 2019) and strengthen religious identity (Tuan 2009). The certain characteristics of some sacred sites that are related to history, geography and religious mythology contain symbolic meaning that can arouse believers' emotions, leading to boost their attachment to both the religion and the place (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004). Depending on their psychological needs, pilgrims may attach to significant others in a sacred place, to its physical features, and to the meaning they attribute to that place; any of these mental connections may be followed by meaningful spiritual experiences (Counted and Zock 2019). Shias believe that the sacredness of Imams is granted to the places that they have been buried in, and therefore, the believers attach spiritually to the shrine of Imams (Nasr 2007).

### 3. Method

The present study was conducted in two phases—Arbaeen 2014 and Arbaeen 2019. The main research questions included What are the different cognitive attachments of pilgrims to Imam Hussein? How do different cognitions lead to different meanings of this pilgrimage? How do the pilgrims' psychological cognitions translate into pilgrimage journeys with different meanings during the pilgrimage process? In Arbaeen 2014, the lead author traveled to Iraq and joined the pilgrimage to observe the rituals and interview pilgrims. He walked the 78 km from Najaf to Karbala in three days, during which he conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 36 Iranian pilgrims with over 18 years of age. To account for different demographic and lifestyle characteristics of pilgrims, a time-based systematic random sampling method was employed (Bruwer et al. 1996) in a way that potential participants were approached randomly at varied time interval segments during the three days and nights.

To gather more data and to consider the more recent trends, 21 Iranian pilgrims were also interviewed as they walked the routes to Karbala during Arbaeen 2019 through a WhatsApp call and voice messages. In this phase, the participants were sampled mainly through searching the recent Hashtags about Arbaeen on social media, including Instagram and Telegram (the two main social media apps in Iran), and were asked for an interview about their pilgrimage. Furthermore, a number of participants were also invited to this study through snowball sampling. Given that more participants in the Arbaeen pilgrimage were males, more male pilgrims were interviewed.

An ethnographic approach was employed in this study to understand the lived and embodied experiences of research subjects through deep and qualitative engagement with them. The semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions sought to understand the inward perspectives of participants. To avoid bias in responses, the main questions posed in two research phases were the same. Furthermore, at the beginning of each interview, an overall and brief discussion about the academic goals and subject of the study was presented and the participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Each interview took 40 min on average as it was

not possible to prolong the interviews in the first and second phases due to the walking and phone interview circumstances.

Worth noting is that Arbäeen 2014 was undertaken amidst the horror of military attacks by Sunni ISIS forces, who were still in the vicinity of pilgrimage routes. According to statistics, the highest number of deadly terrorist attacks in the world happened in Iraq in 2014 (Institute for Economics and Peace 2015; Sharifi-Tehrani and Esfandiar 2018). However, during Arbäeen 2019, ISIS groups had already been defeated, but there were some local riots due to poor economic conditions. After the data collection, a thematic analysis with open and axial coding was employed. Two of the authors participated in identifying and labeling concepts separately, and then, several joint sessions were held to reach consensus over the final themes.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Demographic characteristics asked at the end of each interview show that of the participants, 38 (66%) and 19 (33%) were males and females, respectively, with a mean age of 37 years (ranging from 22 to 58). Thirty-six interviewees (63%) had undertaken this foot-pilgrimage to Karbala at least once before. The thematic analysis revealed that there are four different perceived roles of Imam Hussein in the minds of pilgrims: beloved figure, interceding figure, transformative figure, and unifier figure. These are in fact different cognitive attachments of pilgrims to Imam Hussein. In the following sections, an attempt has been made to explain these attachments and the ways through which they produce different meanings of the pilgrimage route to Karbala.

##### 4.1. Imam Hussein as a “Beloved Figure”

Passion for Imam Hussein is the most prevalent theme among the interviewees, and it seems that many pilgrims are drawn to the route by a strong sense of “love.” A seminarian woman participant explained, “it is indescribable but I have a such a good and spiritual feeling that I have forgotten myself and my only goal is to approach my Imam.” The strong passion for the beloved Imam causes a sense of selflessness among pilgrims, making them agitated to reach his shrine sooner. Saramifar (2018) represents the same sense of Shia Imams’ magnetism among volunteers who fight against ISIS to protect Imams’ shrines.

In Persian poetry and literature, “love” is a strong interior force among lovers that enables them to conduct miraculous actions. For instance, the Persian poet Rumi says, “Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, consumes everything but the beloved.” or “How Love, saucy, uncontrolled, and restless, throws the whole body into madness” (The Masnavi). Similarly, in Persian poetry, an ideal lover is one who selflessly sacrifices him/herself for his/her beloved figure, and that a “pure love” needs no earthly impetus. One of the male participants referred to fragile and disabled pilgrims to prove how “love” makes people walk enthusiastically along the route: “It is just love, you see, little kids, 70–80-year old women [are walking long distance], it is just love that causes these steps.” According to di Giovine (2008), being in hyper-meaningful sites creates a formative passion that causes people to move towards or away from others.

When participants were asked to describe their impetus for their love for Imam Hussein, many of them responded that this love needs no earthly impetus, and it is higher and sweeter than any other secular love. Latent in the responses of this group of Hussein-devotee pilgrims are the love of Hussein, which makes the hardships of the long walk comfortable is mostly attributed to his self-sacrifice, devotion to the real Islam, and bravery against tyrants. Husein (2018) suggests that this sense of satisfaction with suffering pain among Arbäeen foot-pilgrims is justified by the deliberate nature of their action.

Many pilgrims of this group had a strong sense of “lover and beloved” and felt that their beloved Imam was omnipresent and observing them. The sense of being watched by God or saints is also presented by Brulin (2019) and di Giovine (2016). In the case of Shia faith, it is a common perception that Imams watch people, especially their pilgrims. A young female participant said, “I feel that my



Imam is alive and present, it is a strange and indescribable feeling.” Similarly, another young woman said, “I am relieved because I am sure that Imam Hussein is observing me every second until the end of the journey not for checking me but for taking care of me so I don’t be annoyed. Like a host that is waiting for a guest who has endured hardships to reach him.”

Attachment to the route in this group of pilgrims is completely tied to their fiery love of Hussein as a beloved figure. They know themselves “always-ready to devote” to their beloved figure, and they seek the permission of Imam Hussein for their next year’s pilgrimage. These Hussein-devotee pilgrims consider a very high position for Imam Hussein and the Arbaeen pilgrimage in a way that they believe that not everybody deserves to participate in this pilgrimage. In their minds, it is Imam Hussein who invites some selected people to his pilgrimage, and this is a spiritual merit for them. This perceived merit was seen, for example, in the response of a mid-aged woman: “Every year after returning [home], I wait for the next Arbaeen and concern whether I can come again. Every year I want the master [Hussein] to don’t forget my invitation for the next year.”

#### 4.2. Imam Hussein as an “Interceding Figure”

Shia narrations suggest that Imams can intercede between Muslims and God on the Day of Judgment (Ayoub 2011). This interceding role of Imams, especially in the forgiveness of sin and gaining reward, is important for some pilgrims. The following statement from a male interviewee represents the most common expected rewards of the Arbaeen foot-pilgrimage among Shias: “We have narrations from infallibles [Imams] that each step in this route [Arbaeen pilgrimage] is equal to [carrying out] a Hajj. So who wouldn’t accept that? Who wouldn’t go?” Referring to a Shia narration, another male interviewee explained, “On the Day of Judgment, the land of Karbala shines like a white pearl . . . those who have not experienced it [this pilgrimage] would wish to come back to the earth once more just to carry out a pilgrimage for Imam Hussein, which is so rewarding.”

The expectation of the forgiveness of sin is another common perception among Arbaeen pilgrims. The similar act of penitential pain for forgiveness by Christian pilgrims is explained by di Giovine (2016). For some Shias, a narration by an Imam seems to be a sufficient reason; for example, a male participant explained, “Imam Kazem says that anyone who visits Imam Hussein [grave] will be forgiven of all his/her past and future sins.” Nevertheless, some pilgrims have more detailed reasons and justifications for the sin forgiveness. In this respect, a young man said, “my sins will be forgiven because of my extreme sense of shame [regret for committed sins and neglecting God proximity]. It is like that the Master [Imam Hussein] will insure me for the following year.” This quotation shows the notion of Imam’s insurance in the mind of some Shia believers. It is worth mentioning that some Iranians write phrases such as “insured by Hussein” or “insured by Abbas” on their car’s back windows, implying that Imams are caring for them. This interviewee also mentioned ardently that the Imam would insure him for “the following year”; this in fact represents the mental calculations, expectations, and promises between the pilgrim and the interceding figure. It seems he implied that the spiritual mental contract between him and Imam as an interceding figure would be valid for only one year and he has to carry out the pilgrimage in the next year if he wants to extend this mental contract for another year.

The expectation for miraculous healing is another aspect of the intercession of Imams in Shia faith. As an example, one of our male participants stated, “Many have problems, many have sick people at home; they come here to request for healing by Imam Hussein. A lot of miracles by Imam Hussein have been witnessed even by non-Shias. There might be Christians and Sunnis among us [pilgrims].” Similarly, a clergy participant explained, “After that [previous] Arbaeen [pilgrimage], a strange peace came to my family, and I saw many blessings and signs from the Imams that I should not talk about.” Some Shias believe that the miracle they perceive from Imams should be kept as a spiritual secret between them and Imams, and they will be deprived of Imam’s supports if they talk about those blessings with others. This is the reason why this participant said, “I should not talk about.” In the pilgrimage literature, Szanto (2013) and others present evidence indicating supernatural cures at shrines of Shia Imams in Iraq and Syria.

The most important perceived intercessory role of Imams in the mind of Shias are the ways through which they bridge between humans and God. Some Shias believe that they are not in the position to directly contact God, and the intercession of Imams as well as the spirituality of the pilgrimage atmosphere brings them closer to God. A man whose companions called him “master” explained, “You know, this is a shortcut to reach the divine gate, certainly God is the principle but this [seeking Imams intercession] is a way that you can worship God faster and easier.” Ayoub (2011) explained how the attachment to Imams and imitating their suffering can bring God’s proximity to Shias. We, however, argue that besides of perceived rewards of attachment to Imams, it is the sense of spirituality during the pilgrimage that helps Shia believers to feel they are closer to God.

For those who attach to Imam Hussein mostly for his perceived interceding role, the attachment to the Arbaeen pilgrimage and the routes to Karbala are equal to gaining divine rewards and the safe haven. When a mid-aged man with five past journeys to Karbala in Arbaeen was asked about the reasons behind his loyalty and attachment to the route, he responded, “I’ve participated five times, and I would come as many times as the master [Imam Hussein] calls me. Because like a businessman, I know if I deal with Imam Hussein, I can achieve whatever I’m looking for in this world and the other world [afterlife].”

#### 4.3. Imam Hussein as a “Transformative” Figure

Shia Muslims believe in Imams as infallible humans who were familiar with God’s will and, therefore, knew the right way of living without sin (Musa 2013). A religious male participant said, “This is the map they [Imams] gave us. This is the direction [how to live to please God] they showed us.” Imam Hussein has an especial position for Shias because he is known as a brave martyr who was intentionally martyred to protect the real Islam from annihilation (Aghaie 2004; Ayoub 2011; Gözl 2019). A young woman explained her notion of living like Imam Hussein: “Hussein-like living is to live in a way that pleases God, to do good ethics and deeds, to perform prayer on-time, to do not gossip, to do not judge others . . . ” For some pilgrims, walking a few days in a route to reach Karbala during the Arbaeen period is a great time to improve their personality and correct their perceived wrong behaviors. The young woman elaborated her definition of Imams’ support: “I learned from this march that when we say infallible Imams support us in life, it does not mean that they prevent any unpleasant to happen, instead, they give us the power to endure hardships, and thereby we strengthen our spirit.”

The above quotation implies that the pilgrim tries to improve her patience and resistance through what she was experiencing and comparing it with the hardships that the martyrs and survivors of Karbala have endured. An educated young man told us: “I have tried to put an end to one of my wrong moral characters every time that I come [to Iraq for Arbaeen], and I have done so by making a covenant with the infallible Imams.” It shows that some Shia pilgrims try to improve their behavior by promising themselves, God, and Imams. They, in fact, try to promise Imams as perfect humans to reinforce their volition in reaching their aimed behavioral changes.

Avoiding sin and getting closer to God were the behavioral changes for which most interviewees aimed. A young man explained: “It looks like that Arbaeen turns our religious beliefs into subjective beliefs. I readily accept every God’s will and say [to myself] that God wants it and I should accept it.” Absolute acceptance of God’s omnipotence is considered a great virtue among Muslims and pious Muslims try to do what has been presented in the Quran and other Islamic religious texts as God-pleasing behaviors. In line with this, Tai-yin Tsoi (2019) states that from the viewpoint of Muslims, suffering for Islam is a trial by God and they are expected to trust His mercy as it will lead to rewards. If this suffering even brings about death, it will be rewarded with Paradise. It has been also articulated by Ghobary Bonab et al. (2013) that, in Islamic theology, trust is included in the meaning of faith in God who supports His believers.

It was found that some pilgrims attached to the routes to Karbala during Arbaeen for its transformative nature. Many of those who had previous experiences of this pilgrimage narrated that

they had become a better self after returning home. They argue they try to repeat this pilgrimage every year to improve their personal and religious personality year by year. The transformative nature of long trails is also indicated by some researchers (i.e., [Cova and Cova 2019](#); [Frey 1998](#); [Moufahim and Lichrou 2019](#); [Nilsson 2018](#)). A clergy participant well explained this sense: “This road cleanses people. I think people don’t want to lose this freshness and vitality, so they tend to return this route every year. It may make people a little physically tired, but it emotionally rejuvenates them instead. It gives positive energy.”

#### 4.4. *Imam Hussein as a “Unifier” Figure*

The Arbæen pilgrimage has boomed after the overthrow of the previous Iraqi ruler, Saddam Hussein. Shias find the Imams’ shrines and Shia pilgrimages as the places of unity between the Shias of different countries. In this regard, Arbæen has become the most important Shia pilgrimage in the world by attracting the highest number of pilgrims (around 20 million domestic and foreign pilgrims). Arbæen causes many Shias to believe that the magnificence Imam Hussein ties Shias together; especially people of Iran and Iraq, who were in a long eight-year war together just three decades ago. A young woman fluent in both Farsi and Arabic said, “In my opinion, this [population] is a miracle. It is neither our [Iranian] promotion [that gathered this population] nor is Iraqis job. It is a magnificent power [referring to Imam Hussein volition] that draws people.”

The perceived unifying feature for Imam Hussein was very common among our participants, and they regarded him as the focal point of the Shia union. As another example, a mid-aged man said, “Imam Hussein is the main reason for the unity of Shias. Hussein’s name has linked everyone [together].” A young man said, “Neither religion nor flag is defined here [routes to Karbala during Arbæen]. Everyone is a devotee of Hussein here. Everyone [came] for Hussein’s love.”

According to Shia doctrine, the martyrdom of Hussein was not the end of his movement; rather, it was a message implying that Shias should stand against oppression and preserve the so-called real Islam for which Hussein was martyred ([Fischer 2003](#); [Gözl 2019](#)). Some Shias believe that the Arbæen pilgrimage is a route that they can show their loyalty to infallible Imams until Imam Mahdi reappears together with Jesus the Christ to destroy tyranny and falsehood and to bring peace and justice to the world. One of the male participants explained: “This is blood boiling up; it has been boiling since the rising of Imam Hussein, since the blood of Imam Hussein was poured out . . . That blood boiled and it is boiling in our vessels now as well. This is the meaning of Thar-Allah [God’s vendetta] that we say. It will keep boiling until the rise of Imam Mahdi Inshallah (if God wills).”

The Imamate or belief in the infallibility of Imams is one of the distinctions between Shia and Sunni Muslims. The large number of Shias creates a sense of union and power among pilgrims and strengthens their sense of honor to their religious identity. A young girl said, “That is my Shia identity. I’m just looking for my identity. Mecca is not my identity. [Mecca] is my Muslim identity.” Her words are revealing, as they show how some Arbæen pilgrims emphasize their Shia identity over that of their Muslim identity, which is expected to be their main touchstone. This translates into an attachment to their sense of places in the way that they compare Karbala with Mecca. A young man said, “Every time I’ve traveled [to Karbala], I’ve been trying to prove myself and my companions that if this population becomes unified around Imams, we can do everything.” It seems that the fight with ISIS forces, hostility with Saudi Wahhabism, and opposition to the presence of the United States in Shia-dominated lands influence many of the pilgrims’ identity-seeking behavior.

Besides this sense of unity, pilgrims feel a strong sense of equality, brotherhood, and kinship when they are together. This feeling is in line with the sense of existential *communitas* suggested by [Turner \(1969\)](#). In addition, the loss of selfness and emphasizing on the unity in the Arbæen pilgrimage are noted by [Moufahim and Lichrou \(2019\)](#). Mentioning the positive atmosphere of this event, a participant explained, “I don’t feel that I am strange here. I feel that I am at home, and it looks like they [other pilgrims] are my family.” More broadly, such perceptions have turned the routes to Karbala into a Shia utopia from the viewpoint of pilgrims; a middle-aged woman, for example, specifically



mentioned, “Here is a utopia. Everyone helps each other. If something falls down from your hand, or you face a problem somewhere, tens of hands come for help.” A middle-aged man added, “One from Khuzestan [an Iranian province], one from Pakistan, one from Afghanistan, one from Iraq, you see how they sleep together. It is all because of Imam Hussein who has gathered them all together.”

For some pilgrims, the population of Shias as a whole in the routes is the main attraction of Arbaeen in Iraq. A religious man described how his feeling was before his re-travel to Iraq: “I had not planned to come this year, but all my thoughts were here . . . I was really uneasy . . . If people come here and see this crowd, they will be really fascinated and so they would like to come every year with all of its hardships.” Indeed, a religious man explained, “I want God to let me be alive to walk Arbaeen beside these people, [walk] shoulder by shoulder with all devotees of Imams every year.” Such statements indicate that some pilgrims are more attached to the community and the atmosphere than the place, and they admire Imam Hussein for gathering this population together. In fact, attachment to Imam Hussein produces the meaning of a sense of community cohesion in the route to Karbala, for which pilgrims have a high motivation to revisit. In other words, the sense of a united Shia community plays the transactional object of transference role for attachment to Imam Hussein. The routes full of Shia pilgrims are such alluring that the majority of pilgrims attach to their atmosphere and wish they can participate every year. It is noteworthy that the majority of pilgrims interviewed in this study had previously experienced this foot-pilgrimage.

## 5. Conclusions

This study sought to understand how the pilgrims’ psychological cognition and faith translate into journeys with different meanings during the Arbaeen pilgrimage. It also sought to understand the different cognitive attachments of pilgrims to Imam Hussein. According to the empirical findings, pilgrims perceived four main cognitive attachments to the figure of Imam Hussein: loving, interceding, transforming, and unifying. All of these kinds of attachments are experienced by means of pilgrimage for Imam Hussein who is perceived to have key qualities of an attachment figure.

In line with [Counted and Zock’s \(2019\)](#) argument, the attachment behaviors of pilgrims differ based on their psychological needs and cognitive attachments. It was shown in this study that based on four cognitive attachments to Imam Hussein, pilgrims experience different but convergent meanings of the sacred routes and places. It was found that for Hussein-devotee pilgrims, loyalty to the sacred routes is mainly because of a perceived spiritual invitation from their beloved Imam to his shrine that they take pride in it. For them, enduring the hardships of the routes is nothing compared with what their beloved Imams had suffered centuries ago to stand against tyrants and Islam’s enemies. The notion of being drawn to a sacred figure was previously shown in research on Shia faith ([Moufahim and Lichrou 2019](#)) and other religions such as Christianity ([di Giovine 2016](#)). On the other hand, the perceived interceding role of Imam Hussein is the main reason for some pilgrims in order to attach to him. They feel a cognitive attachment to sacred routes, making them passionate to endure the routes’ difficulties so as to gain divine rewards, sin forgiveness, therapy, and, more broadly, God’s proximity through the Imam’s intercession.

For pilgrims who aim to develop their personal and religious selves, Imam Hussein is a perfect transformative figure whose lifestyle is inspiring for a God-pleasing life. Hence, they attach to the sacred routes to Karbala for their transformative and human-making nature. Finally, for pilgrims who seemed to be more political or collectivist, Imam Hussein is mostly attached because of his role in unifying the Shia community. Those holding political standpoints attach to the route to show the power of Shia to the world especially ISIS, Saudi Arabia, United States, and Israel. The sense of *communitas* (see [di Giovine 2011](#); [Turner 1969](#)) is the shared reason for routes’ attachment in both political and collectivist groups of pilgrims.

To consider the multinational feature of the Arbaeen pilgrimage and a more holistic perspective, it is recommended that future studies examine a more heterogeneous sample from various nations. It is of interest that even non-Muslim citizens make this spiritual journey from the US and European

countries to Iraq; thus, examining their perspectives and motivations can contribute to attachment theory and psychology of religion. Future research can also investigate the attachment behaviors of pilgrims to sites associated with other Imams such as Imam Ali, as well as the pilgrims/mourners of Imam Hussein in other important Islamic occasions such as Ashura (the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions). Comparing the attitudes and perspectives of pilgrims in two Islamic occasions of Arbaeen and Ashura would provide accounts of any difference between these groups in terms of perceived meanings of pilgrimage/mourning, cognitive attachments to Imam Hussein, and proximity-seeking behaviors towards God.

Similar to the current study, the majority of researchers investigating the Arbaeen pilgrimage (see Husein 2018; Moufahim and Lichrou 2019) have focused on the demand side of the event (i.e., pilgrims) but the host Iraqi community and their motivations for their hospitality have remained understudied; this should be addressed by future research. For example, Iraqi hosts' intercultural empathy competencies to connect with pilgrims of different ethnicities and countries could be measured quantitatively using empathy scales that have been introduced for the context of Islamic hospitality (see Sharifi-Tehrani and Rahimi 2015; Sharifi-Tehrani et al. 2019). As noted earlier, due to the unique cultural importance of the provision of services and hospitality of Iraqis during the Arbaeen pilgrimage, UNESCO inscribed it in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019 (UNESCO 2019); the effects of this designation over time should also be studied.

In the end, it is noteworthy that the present study has some limitations in terms of sampling that can be addressed in future studies. While the pilgrims were interviewed personally along the routes in Arbaeen 2014, in the second phase of the research in Arbaeen 2019, participants were interviewed through WhatsApp call and voices. The decision to call them through WhatsApp was made because regular calls would have roaming costs for the interviewees, and the authors were unable to travel to Iraq to conduct the interviews personally. In this respect, some of the participants decided to send voice messages through WhatsApp when appropriate due to walking circumstances and poor internet connection. Nonetheless, an attempt was made to keep the interviews as long as possible as it was the best way to document the participants' live faith experiences and provide voice to people who have remained relatively voiceless in Anglophone social science research of pilgrimage and religious tourism. This phase of the research shed light on more recent trends of pilgrims and their characteristics during the religious pilgrimage event of Arbaeen.

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