



(IRNA August 17)

Security at risks: the challenges of border opening for Arbaʿīn pilgrimage

6 September 2019

This forthcoming October, Karbala in Iraq will host the pilgrimage of *Arbaʿīn*, one of the largest religious gatherings on earth that easily competes with the Ḥajj in Mecca in term of numbers. In 2018, the number of participants in *Arbaʿīn* has reached nearly twenty million, including two million Iranians. *Arbaʿīn* corresponds to the fortieth day of mourning for Imām Husayn, starting from *ʿĀšūrāʾ*. It appears as the culmination of the remembrance of Husayn's martyrdom, the cornerstone of the Shia faith. Therefore, the preparation of *Arbaʿīn* is far from being underestimated by the Islamic Republic of Iran which invests considerable efforts to cooperate with the Iraqi government on matters such as infrastructure and security measures.

Besides its religious significance, *Arbaʿīn* is extremely politically charged. Indeed, *Arbaʿīn* is somewhat emblematic of Iran-Iraq bilateral cooperation, as the Iranian parliament speaker Lārijānī explained to the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). The involvement of Tehran in the preparation of the event

is of great significance, and more than three million Iranians are expected to attend the pilgrimage this year.

The preparations for *Arbaʿīn* raises many questions regarding bilateral relations with Iraq. Issues such as a memorandum of understanding to end the visa requirement for Iranian pilgrims or the opening of the Khosravī, Mehran, Chazabeh and Shalamcheh border points were settled in talks between Baghdad and Tehran. In addition to the project of establishing a railway linking Shalamcheh to Basra, the two countries also discussed the potential of launching direct flights between Ilam and Najaf.

However, one must bear in mind the risks undertaken with the intensification of border crossings as noticed by Qāsem Rezai, Iranian commander of the border guard, particularly in regard to the issue of drugs produced in Afghanistan which transit through Iran. In this case, the opening of borders might be considered as an opportunity for smugglers of all sorts to cross the border and distribute drugs in Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which emphasizes Iran's failure in preventing the development and expansion of illicit drug market. Indeed, the influx of pilgrims renders control far more complicated than usual. Moreover, since the political landscape of Iraq is often characterized by sectarian strife, a gathering of millions of Shia Muslims might appear as an ideal target for radical Sunni groups, which has been the case for the past few years.

Nevertheless, the security will be assured by the Iraqi state, with the support of Iran-backed militias from the *Ḥašd al-šāʿbī* (Popular Mobilization Forces), a task they have performed since their emergence in 2014. In addition to these forces, the Deputy Commander 'Alī Fadavī claims that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) will provide significant resources to contribute to security, including drones. The IRGC is frequently involved in the organization of the pilgrimage which adds further political dimension to *Arbaʿīn*. For instance, IRGC dispatched twelve teams in order to assure medical services in 2018. By guaranteeing security and stressing its participation in the preparation of *Arbaʿīn*, Tehran ensures some degree of control on the pilgrimage and aims to present itself as the only suitable candidate for the role of leader within the broader Shia world.

BRUSSELS INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The BIC-RHR is a research organization based in the capital of Europe that works to produce valuable insights into policy debates and political actions taking place in the MENA region and its effects on individuals.

We base our activities in three spheres of work: Social Outreach, Insights and Democratic Development. Combined, they provide a global perspective with actions focused on influencing the individual.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Arthur Jennequin

Middle East Research Intern



Avenue Louise, 89 - 1050 Brussels - Belgium

Tel: +32 02 725 84 66

www.bic-rhr.com

info@bic-rhr.com

