

MAFIA, MOB AND SHIISM IN IRAQ: THE REBELLION OF OTTOMAN KARBALA 1824-1843*

A virtual rebellion of the Iraqi city of Karbala against central government rule brought about a catastrophic invasion by Baghdad-based Ottoman Turkish forces in January 1843. Because the urban social history of the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire remains comparatively little known, the forms of social organization and local culture that led to the revolt deserve detailed treatment.

The following analysis examines the role of urban gangs in leading the rebellion, in coalition with other social groups. Neighbourhood vigilante bands had long existed in Islamic cities. But in the first decades of the nineteenth century, paralleling a decline in government control, "mafia" — gangs that ran protection rackets and acted as a parallel government — grew up in Karbala. Even in this "antisocial" form, it will be shown, the urban gangs could make alliances within the city to emerge as popular leaders against an alien threat, therefore acting as more than mere exploiters.

The toughs had several allies in the fighting. They were employed by the city's indigenous landed notables as bodyguards and hit men. They forged links with Shi'ite Arab nomads outside the town walls. Another group, the "mob" — small artisans and shopkeepers — participated in the revolt under the rhetoric of (Shi'ite) religion and (Iranian) ethnicity versus the Turkish Sunni outsiders who sought to subdue them. Finally, the Muslim religious scholars ('*ulama*') occupied a special position in the shrine city, and also allied themselves to the urban gangs.¹

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Diacritical marks in Arabic and Persian transliteration have been omitted in this paper, which is aimed at a general readership. Specialists will be able mentally to supply these in any case.

¹ The role of the Shi'ite religious scholars in the rebellion is discussed briefly by Hamid Algar in his *Religion and State in Iran 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 114-16. See also Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, 1982), p. 42; and Denis M. MacEoin, "From Shaykhism to Babism: A Study of Charismatic Renewal in Shi'i Islam" (Univ. of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1979), pp. 112-13.

This study will employ several techniques to evoke the meaning of gang rule and popular revolt in Shiite Karbala. First, a synchronic analysis of the city's various social groups and their relationships to one another will be undertaken. Secondly, a diachronic historical narrative of the processes whereby the town became virtually autonomous, and how it resisted conquest, will be presented to demonstrate how those sociological groups acted towards one another over time. Attention will be paid to the *mentalité* of the major social actors and, as noted, to the crucial role of religion and the religious scholars.

The cleavages among the rebellious groups in Karbala were bridged in an important manner by Imami Shiite Islam, a branch of the religion that believed the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali and his eleven lineal descendants (termed "Imams") should have held power in the nascent Islamic empire after his passing. Imamis hold that until the supernatural reappearance of the Twelfth Imam (who went into occultation in the ninth century) all government is less than perfect. Most did, however, accept the interim legitimacy of Shiite monarchies such as the Safavids and Qajars in Iran. Shiism in Karbala encompassed both the wealthy and the indigent, both Arab and Iranian.

The ruling élite in Ottoman Iraq adhered to Sunnism (the majority branch of Islam except in post-sixteenth-century Iran and contemporary Iraq), which held that after the Prophet's passing political leadership fell to an oligarchically elected caliph. After four early "rightly guided" caliphs, the last being 'Ali, political power passed to less revered hereditary monarchies, such as the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Sunnis in the Ottoman empire owed allegiance to the Turkish emperor, but Shiis execrated the Ottoman ruler as a heretic and a usurper of an office that should by right belong only to the Twelfth Imam.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE: RELIGION, STATE AND THE CROWD

As Hanna Batatu has pointed out, the ethnic and religious cleavages in Iraq produced three demographic zones. South of Baghdad, Shiite Arabs largely made up the population. Sunni Arabs populated most of Baghdad and its northern hinterland. Finally, north-east of Baghdad Kurds predominated, adhering to a form of Sunnism heavily influenced by Sufi mysticism.² Strong social and economic cleavages also

² Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 37-9.

divided the people. Town dwellers often came into conflict with pastoral nomads. Of an estimated population of 1,290,000 in 1850, fully 35 per cent consisted of pastoral nomads. Another 41 per cent was rural and only 24 per cent was urban.³ Circassian and Turkish Sunnis filled the upper echelons of the government. Most of the local controllers of large rural estates were Sunni Arabs. Sunni notables often predominated even in the largely Shiite south, except in the vicinity of the shrine cities.⁴

For nearly a century, from 1750 to 1831, the weak Ottoman government in Istanbul allowed a corps of Mamluk (slave-soldier) vassals to rule from Baghdad.⁵ Even this local government often had difficulty asserting its authority over the factious population. From 1831 the Ottomans again ruled directly, attempting to impose progressively greater control through their standing army and the bureaucracy in Baghdad. Mamluks and Ottomans engaged in perpetual conflict with the Shiite Arab pastoral nomads of the south as refractory taxpayers and frequent raiders of sedentary settlements for booty. Nestled in the territory dominated by Shiite tribespeople were the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, burial sites of Imams whose remains were sacred to adherents of that branch of Islam.

The city of Karbala lies about 45 miles south-west of Baghdad. It owes its inception and continued prosperity to its possession of the shrine of the Imam Husayn, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who died in a revolt against the Umayyad state in 680. Religious visits to its shrines (often combined with trade) and the influx into the city of wealth in the form of pious offerings and endowments combined to lend it economic, religious and political importance. It also served in a secular capacity as a desert port for long-distance

³ Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shayks and Local Rule between 1802 and 1831* (The Hague, 1982), p. 10.

⁴ Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, pp. 44-50.

⁵ Primary sources for early modern Iraq include Sayyid 'Abdu'r-Rahman as-Suwaydi, *Ta'rikh hawadith Baghdad wa'l-Basrah 1186-1192/1772-1780* [A Chronicle of the Events in Baghdad and Basra 1772-1780], ed. 'Imad A. Ra'uf (Baghdad, 1978); Shaykh Rasul al-Kirkukli, *Dawhat al-wuzara' fi ta'rikh waqa'i' Baghdad az-zawra'* [(Family?) Trees of the Ministers in the History of Occurrences in Baghdad], Arabic trans. M. K. Nawras (Baghdad, n.d.); and Sulayman Fa'iq Bey, *Ta'rikh Baghdad* [History of Baghdad], Arabic trans. M. K. Nawras (Baghdad, 1962). For recent analytical studies, see Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq*; and M. K. Nawras, *Hukm al-mamalik fi al-'Iraq, 1750-1831* [The Rule of the Mamluks in Iraq, 1750-1831] (Baghdad, 1975). Still useful are Clement Huart, *Histoire de Bagdad dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1901); and Stephen H. Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq* (Oxford, 1925).

trade.⁶ The shrine of the Imam Husayn particularly attracted pilgrims of the Shiite branch of Islam. After 1501 Iran's population was largely converted to Shiism from Sunnism by the Shiite rulers of the Safavid dynasty, who bestowed lavish gifts on the city's shrines. Although the Safavids and their Sunni Ottoman foes contested much of Iraq, Karbala remained mostly in the hands of the Turks.

The city's population, partly drawn from the Shiite Arab tribes of southern Iraq, often chafed under Ottoman rule. The political turmoil of eighteenth-century Iran, with its Afghan invasions and the fall of the Safavids, also encouraged large numbers of Iranian refugees to settle in Najaf and Karbala. In the nineteenth century Iranian merchants and noblemen resided there out of a pious wish to be near the shrines or because Iran turned politically dangerous for them. Although Iranian immigrants over time assimilated to Iraq, many maintained their distinctive national costume, knowledge of Persian and underground allegiance to Iran. Because of its prevailing Shiism and the large Iranian ethnic element, Ottoman officials saw Karbala as a potential fifth column.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the city government, staffed at the top by Mamluk-appointed Sunnis from Baghdad, controlled many of Karbala's sources of wealth, including the shrines and rights to tax. But this Sunni structure was superimposed over a local Shiite Arab élite of property-holders. Prominent Arab families owed their local power to control over great economic resources. For instance, one local magnate, the chief of the city's powerful Sayyid families (asserting their descent from the Prophet Muhammad), owned one-third of the cultivated lands and gardens in the vicinity of Karbala. In the 1820s and 1830s local notables, by processes to be discussed below, moved into actual rulership of the town as a virtual city-state. Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, head of Karbala's élite families, became governor of the city in the late 1830s by order of the Ottoman viceroy Ali Riza Pasha.⁷

The majority of Karbala's inhabitants consisted of labourers, semi-skilled tradesmen, pedlars and small-time shopkeepers. Many of them ethnic Iranians, they resembled in culture and social situation their Iranian counterparts, called *pishih-varan* or tradespeople.⁸ The

⁶ E. Honigman, "Karbala", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn.

⁷ Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office (hereafter P.R.O., F.O.) 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account of Karbala", spring 1843.

⁸ See Mohammad Reza Afshari, "The *Pishivaran* and Merchants in Precapitalist Iranian Society", *Internat. Jl. Middle East Studies*, xv (1983), pp. 133-55; for the historical note of this group in Iran, see also Evrand Abrahamian, "The Crowd in the

equivalent of the European "little people" (*menu peuple*), the tradespeople of Karbala, like the great merchants and the city government, exploited the pilgrim trade. They expected the city's governor to assure them of a livelihood by encouraging the pilgrims and by ensuring safety for Iranian visitors coming to Karbala. Largely Shiites, they took pride in living in Imam Husayn's city and in having easy access to his shrine. Lavish gifts to the shrines by the Iranian monarchs and the nawabs of Awadh (Oudh) in India lent a certain splendour to the shrine city, in which the little people basked.⁹

They frequently gathered in public assembly to celebrate holy days associated with the Imams and particularly to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn. The social networks they developed for the purpose of organizing religious processions could also be called into play at times of political crisis. Karbala's little people were easily stirred to defend the city from Baghdad's attempts to bring it under firmer control — as they did in 1824, 1835 and 1842-3. Such disturbances resembled European "church and king" riots, for the Shiite tradespeople held an allegiance to the shah of Iran and would sacrifice a great deal to exclude alien Sunni troops.¹⁰

THE KARBALA "MAFIA"

The 1820s and 1830s saw a growth in Karbala of the power of local élites in relation to the centre. As will be shown below, urban gang leaders running protection rackets displaced or co-opted the old landholding and merchant families and formed links with nearby Arab tribes. They also allied themselves with the city's leading religious scholars. In this manner they created a coalition of groups interested in autonomy, whether for financial or religious reasons, from the Ottomans.

Groups of young men, motivated by chivalric ideas and banding

(n. 8 cont.)

Persian Revolution", *Iranian Studies*, ii (1969), pp. 128-50. Cf. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1965 edn.), p. 115; and George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York, 1973), pp. 17-34. Robert J. Holton, "The Crowd in History: Some Problems of Theory and Method", *Social Hist.*, iii (1978), pp. 219-33, points out that crowds gather on a continual basis, and for purposes other than protest, such as carnivals and religious events.

⁹ For the huge sums that flowed into the Shiite shrine cities of Iraq from the Shiite-ruled north Indian kingdom of Awadh or Oudh, see Juan R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, forthcoming); and the same author's "'Indian Money' and the Shi'i Shrine Cities of Iraq", *Middle Eastern Studies*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Cf. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 118-19.

together to defend their quarter of the city, commonly appeared in medieval Iraq. These youths, called 'ayyarun, probably derived from families of tradespeople and labourers, rather than from élite families. Sometimes they gained great power in their quarter and engaged in fights with the youths of other quarters. At the margins of urban society these groups sometimes elided into the genuine underworld of vagabonds and thieves.¹¹

While the gangs that came to dominate Karbala in the first half of the nineteenth century had a similar historical background, they became more than merely lower-class neighbourhood youth clubs. The Karbala gangs were often headed by outsiders and included in their numbers fugitives and deserters from the military. They grew far more powerful than medieval chivalric organizations, coming to rule the city in alliance with local nobles. In short, they underwent a peculiarly early modern transformation, and, refracted in this modern lens, begin to look familiar to the comparative historian. They begin to look like "mafia".

All the elements of mafia, as defined by Hobsbawm, Hess and others, appear in Karbala.¹² These include avoidance of invoking state law and a preference for settling grudges through toughness and a code of manly honour; a patronage system with bosses and retainers; and control of the community's life by an officially unrecognized system of gangs. Such mafia must be clearly distinguished from random urban criminals on the one hand, and from rural peasant bandits on the other. The mafioso lacks complete legitimacy, but erects a quasi-governmental structure with the help of notable-class bosses. Unlike gangsters in a region with a strong state, mafiosi existed in a vacuum of state power, and therefore performed a real service in providing protection, albeit coercive and violent.

¹¹ See Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 157-8; for overviews of the phenomenon outside Iraq, see Claude Cahen, *Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l'Asie musulmane du moyen âge* (Leiden, 1959), and C. E. Bosworth, *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1976); Ira Lapidus notes in discussing such groups in medieval Syria that "fundamentally intra-urban organization was not in their hands": see his *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 105-7.

¹² Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 30-40; see also Henner Hess, *Mafia and Mafiosi: The Structure of Power*, trans. Ewald Osers (Lexington, 1973); Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860-1960: A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs* (New York, 1975); and Pino Arlacchi, *Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates: Society in Traditional Calabria*, trans. J. Steinberg (Cambridge, 1983). (We are grateful to Geoff Eley for drawing our attention to the last-named work.) Ironically, as Hess notes, the word "mafia" may derive from the Arabic "Ma'afir", the name of the Arabic tribe that ruled Palermo in medieval times.

Mafia-like groups, commonplace in Iraqi and Iranian cities, went by the generic name of *luti* or *awbash*.¹³ In the Levant they were called *qabadayat*. The Karbala mafiosi, though differing from their Sicilian contemporaries in being urban rather than village-based, also erected a parallel structure of authority based on extortion rackets and the private use of force, and led by the wealthy. The main factors in Hobsbawm's typology of the Sicilian mafia — the need to defend an entire society from threats to its way of life, the aspirations of the various classes it encompassed and the personal ambitions of vigorous leaders — all played a part in Karbala's mafia as well.

Mafias remain comparatively little known, aside from that in Sicily, but Hobsbawm and Hess have described the early modern historical conditions under which they arise. First, they come into power in a frontier situation of weak state authority — in rural, remote areas like the island of Sicily. Karbala fits this suggestion as a Shiite, partly Iranian, enclave. Both Sicily and southern Iraq had for centuries been colonially ruled by distant and shifting centres, so that in neither area did the people invest the formal government with much legitimacy.

The emergence of a new élite where the previously powerful classes have less access to traditional sources of authority also contributes to mafia formation. In Sicily mafias appeared in the wake of the abolition of feudalism and the rise of new rural middle classes. As Hess suggested, the mafia arose as a parallel government after the old feudal order broke down, but before a modern state emerged and pressed its claims to Weberian monopoly over the use of force. When the modern state asserts itself the status of the mafioso changes from subcultural folk-hero to criminal.

Karbala's foreign, government-appointed Sunni élite was expelled from the city as Mamluk rule grew weak in the 1820s. The indigenous

¹³ The word *luti* has connotations of homosexuality, among the deviant behaviours attributed to this group. See Willem Floor, "The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran", in Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie (eds.), *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change* (Albany, 1981), pp. 83-95; Willem Floor, "The Lütis — A Social Phenomenon in Qajar Persia: A Reappraisal", *Die Welt des Islams*, xiii (1971), pp. 103-20; Reza Arasteh, "The Character, Organization and Social Role of the Lutis (Javānmardān) in the Traditional Iranian Society of the Nineteenth Century", *Jl. Econ. and Social Hist. of the Orient*, iv (1961), pp. 47-52; H. G. Migeod, "Die Lütis: Ein Ferment des städtischen Lebens in Persien", *Jl. Econ. and Social Hist. of the Orient*, ii (1959), pp. 82-91. Floor has demonstrated the distinction between sporting neighbourhood organizations of the popular classes, which he calls *lutigar*, and the gangs or *awbash*; both are commonly referred to as *lutis*. The Turks in Iraq referred to the *lutis* as *yaramaz* or good-for-nothings, and as *girami*.

Shiite Arab notables attempted to take their place in monopolizing the city's resources, but lacked a disciplined armed force and had no tradition of legitimate rule. Karbala's sources of wealth — pilgrimage and trade — required security. The Shiite notables therefore depended on retainers recruited from among brigands. Unexpectedly the neighbourhood ruffians and desperate fugitives that the notables hired emerged as powers in their own right. Ibrahim Za'farani provided protection and gathered tribute for the magnate Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, growing wealthy enough through extortion, fraud and intimidation to enter the propertied élite himself. The sons of petty shopkeepers and minor clergy began to rival old landed Sayyid families in wealth and influence by virtue of their command of armed force. In the 1830s and 1840s the old Shiite élites made common cause with the rising gang leaders to resist Ottoman reforms.

The city's gangs split into a minority Iranian faction and a majority Arab grouping. The Iranians were led by Mirza Salih, son of an Iranian father from Shiraz and an Arab mother from a family of Shiite jurists based in Karbala. Mirza Salih's major ally commanded his own gang of 60-150 Baluchis from Fars province in Iran.¹⁴

Sayyid Ibrahim Za'farani headed the far larger Arab faction of gang members. His father, an Iranian from Baku, married an Arab woman in Karbala, settling there to sell his saffron. European industrially-made stuffs in the 1830s devastated Iraqi textile manufacturing.¹⁵ It remains unknown whether Za'farani's family suffered business losses because of European competition. Sayyid Ibrahim grew up to indigence, hung about with toughs and finally joined the gangs. He came to prominence by killing one of their leaders. He then formed a policy of liberally distributing booty from criminal activities to his followers, which made him more popular with the rank and file than other gang leaders. He also exhibited a daring that elicited the admiration of his men, mastering the sort of intrigue that could remove dangerous foes and putting together a loose coalition of Arab gangs within the city. Both major gang bosses, Za'farani and Salih, "men of the people", derived from lower-middle-class backgrounds. Through a code of "honour" based on courage, cun-

¹⁴ Information in this and succeeding paragraphs is based on P.R.O., F.O. 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account"; and on F.O. 248/108, Lt.-Col. Farrant to Sir Stratford Canning, dated Baghdad, 15 May 1843. The Farrant letter is a detailed report, based on extensive interviews, prepared by the British after the Ottoman siege of Karbala.

¹⁵ Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq*, p. 86.

ning and violence, they gained the respect and fear of the little people from whom they sprang by rising to a position of wealth and power.

The fourteen major gangs, including those grouped around Mirza Salih, ranged in size from 50 or 60 men to 400. Some specialized in particular kinds of extortion; one gang, for instance, farmed the city market or bazaar. Many gangsters came as fugitives from outside Karbala. In addition to the gangs, Za'farani employed his Arab relatives on his mother's side to build an alliance with the neighbouring Arab pastoral nomads. He brought the leader of one tribe into the city with 300 men to bolster his own position. Five other Arab tribal leaders outside the city allied themselves with Za'farani. All Shiites, they had frequently come into conflict with the Ottoman government.

Although it lay well within Iraq's borders, Karbala had the air of a frontier town. The population showed hostility to the Sunni government in Baghdad, which could seldom station its Sunni troops there without endless trouble. The city became an ideal hide-out for all the murderers, thieves, embezzlers and army deserters in Iran and Iraq. These underworld elements (mostly Arab) mingled with the often Iranian labourers, small-time pedlars and shopkeepers of Karbala's markets, and built up protection rackets aimed at milking the retailers, merchants and pilgrims. The rough, desperate and well-armed toughs organized themselves into large gangs, so that in the absence of a strong central government pilgrims and inhabitants had little choice but to pay a "godfather" for his protection.

Gang chiefs accumulated enough capital in this manner to begin buying land, the most important asset in the nineteenth-century Middle East, and to live in the best houses in the city. A group of about 2,500 *lutis* ruled and inspired dread in the city whose population averaged 20,000, for even though the inhabitants greased gang members' palms well, they often stole or raped anyway.¹⁶ Members of the old élite, like 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, helped create the corrupt system by acting as patrons of the thugs, gladly paying off one gang to protect themselves from the others.

THE SHIITE ESTABLISHMENT AND THE MAFIA

The various groups within Karbala were united by a religious consciousness of being Shiites and by a perception of the Ottomans as

¹⁶ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843. There were 3,400 houses in Karbala and the population fluctuated between 20,000 normally and 80,000 at pilgrimage times. Estimates as high as 10,000 for the *lutis* are given, but this probably results from confusing the gangs with the lower classes in general: see 'Abbas al-'Azzawi, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq bayn ihtilalayn* [History of Iraq between Two Occupations], 8 vols. (Baghdad, 1955), vii, p. 65.

the same Sunni enemy that had persecuted the Imams and all their partisans down the ages. The gang leaders offered these diverse elements an alternative to Sunni Ottoman control of the town.

The Shiite scholars viewed the Hidden Imam as the only ultimately just ruler, although most of them in this period accepted, as the best they could achieve, a temporal power that established order and allowed them to enforce their version of the holy law.¹⁷ While the religious scholars (and indeed many other sectors of the town's population) no doubt deplored the uglier aspects of gang rule, they probably considered it no more evil or illegitimate than they did the prospect of Sunni control.

The Shiite religious scholars saw major advantages in keeping the city out of Ottoman control. If the Turks re-established their hold on the town, they would put the lucrative shrine endowments and income under the charge of Ottoman officials. They would refer cases to the Ottoman-appointed religious court judge (*qadi*) rather than to the Shiite jurists, and would prescribe the mention of the Ottoman emperor's name in the Friday prayer sermons. Finally, they would impose restrictions on the open performance of the Shiite form of Islamic rituals.¹⁸

Moreover the Shiite establishment itself suffered deep and bitter divisions and therefore the leading scholars themselves became embroiled in the factious turbulence of Karbala's gang-dominated politics. This conflict ranged the rationalist Usuli jurists against the more intuitional Shaykhis, followers of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826).¹⁹

The struggle between the two parties, which led many Usuli scholars to excommunicate the Shaykh and his followers, centred on al-Ahsa'i's metaphorical explanations of key doctrines such as the Resurrection, the ascension of Muhammad and the continued life of the Twelfth Imam. The Usuli scholars further feared that Shaykh

¹⁷ See Said Amir Arjomand, "The Shi'ite Hierocracy and the State in Pre-Modern Iran: 1785-1890", *Archives européennes de sociologie*, xx (1981), pp. 45-60; and Moojan Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven and Oxford, 1985), pp. 191-6.

¹⁸ In 1803 Sunni officials had been in control of many Shiite shrines: see Abu Talib Khan Isfahani, *Masir-i Talibi* [Talibi Travels], ed. Husayn Khadivju (Tehran, A.H. 1352), pp. 406-7, 418; trans. Charles Stewart as *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, 2nd edn., 3 vols. (London, 1814), iii, pp. 190-1.

¹⁹ On Shaykhism, see Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*; and Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1972), iv. The movement developed a millenarian wing, discussed below, that led to the messianic Babi movement that shook mid-nineteenth-century Iraq and Iran.

Ahmad's preference for intuitive knowledge (which he said he obtained by inspiration directly from the Imams) would seriously undermine the authority of their position, based on technical legal knowledge derived from the principle of reasoned endeavour.

In Karbala the Shaykhis were led by Sayyid Kazim Rashti, Shaykh Ahmad's successor, and the Usulis by the jurispudent Sayyid Ibrahim Qazvini. This division of the Shiite religious establishment played directly into the hands of the gang leaders. Once one of the leading clergy had offered patronage to a gang leader, his rival had to seek the protection of one of the other gangs or risk violence and intimidation. Major religious scholars traditionally established links with gangs in most Iranian cities. This mutually beneficial relationship provided the cleric with a force that could enforce his decisions, collect his religious taxes and agitate in his favour, often in opposition to the local governor. The gangs, on the other hand, had a protector with whom they could take refuge if the governor moved against them.

In Karbala Za'farani robbed Qazvini of 4,000 *qirans*. Qazvini sought the protection of Mirza Salih and his faction, and Za'farani announced himself a disciple of Rashti. Mirza Salih even appears listed among Qazvini's students, showing that more than one sort of bond linked the two.²⁰ It appears that Rashti did not relish being protected by Za'farani, for as soon as the Shaykhi leader sensed the Ottoman determination to reassert control, he broke his links with the gang leader in order to assume a mediatory role.

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF OTTOMAN RULE IN IRAQ

Now let us turn to the temporal dimension. In the course of the eighteenth century the Ottoman empire lost control over many of its outlying provinces, accepting vassal states of sometimes dubious loyalty. The most successful such states were headed by adventurous members of the Ottoman or Mamluk military classes — as in Egypt, Palestine and Iraq. The weakened empire also faced tribal revolts in Arabia and Kurdistan. The valley-lords of Anatolia, who had much more organic roots in the local power structure than did the Mamluks, likewise made a bid for more autonomy. Karbala in the 1820s was twice-removed from Istanbul's grasp, a city-state in a vassal realm of

²⁰ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843. For Mirza Salih as Qazvini's student, see Muhammad Tunikabuni, *Qisas al-'ulama'* [Stories of the Religious Scholars] (Tehran, n.d.), p. 4, where an "Aqa Mirza Salih 'Arab" is listed.

tenuous allegiance. The gang leaders of Karbala, though urban rather than rural, most resembled the valley-lords, who also often came as close to banditry as to government.²¹

In the late eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth the Mamluks kept a quite strong hold over Karbala. Relations between the town and Baghdad were at least correct. Moreover the city desperately needed the central government. In April 1801 12,000 tribesmen from Najd in Arabia, adherents of the puritanical Sunni reformist sect founded by Ibn 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, pillaged Karbala for booty and as an act of iconoclasm.²² In 1801 the Mamluk governor of the city fled before the Wahhabi advance, later being executed by the Mamluk ruler for not having defended Karbala. This act of retribution aimed at emphasizing the solidarity of the urban-based government with the citizens. It may also have been a sop to Iran, which threatened to annex the shrine cities if the Mamluks could not protect them.²³

While Karbala's merchants left the city temporarily after the attack, and one Indian traveller found it falling into decay in 1803, no major problems then existed between the Sunni Mamluk administration and the Shiite population. The traveller said the considerable revenue yielded to the state by pilgrims led Sunni officials to tolerate Shiites in the shrine cities, even though they spat on them elsewhere.²⁴ With the Egyptians' assertion of control over much of Arabia, and their quelling of Wahhabi revivalism, Karbala's security on its Arabian flank improved.

Relations between Baghdad and Karbala deteriorated after 1820, partly because of poorer political relations between Iran and Iraq. In 1821 war broke out between the two and the Qajar governor of Kirmanshah led Iranian troops into Iraqi territory, reaching almost to Baghdad before a plague outbreak forced him to make peace and withdraw. The war set the stage for Mamluk ruler Da'ud Pasha's 1824 siege of Karbala. The government acted out of a desire to

²¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1975), pp. 37-9; A. G. Gould, "Lords or Bandits? The Derebeys of Cilicia", *Internat. Jl. Middle East Studies*, vii (1976), pp. 485-506.

²² For details, see Isfahani, *Masir-i Talibi*, pp. 407-9 (trans. Stewart, *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, iii, pp. 162-7); and for the reaction in neighbouring Najaf, see Ja'far Al-Mahbubah an-Najafi, *Madi an-Najaf wa hadiruha* [The Past and Present of Najaf] (Sidon, 1934), pp. 234-6.

²³ 'Abdu'l-'Aziz S. Nawwar, *Da'ud Basha Wali Baghdad* [Da'ud Pasha, Governor of Baghdad] (Baghdad, 1967), p. 114 and n. 2.

²⁴ Isfahani, *Masir-i Talibi*, p. 401 (trans. Stewart, *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, iii, pp. 144-5).

reassert central control over the town in the wake of conflict with the city's foreign patron, Iran. But the siege was made necessary partly because Karbala had become dangerously autonomous from the Mamluks, falling into the hands of local notables and their hired protectors, unruly gangs. The siege, which forced many of the inhabitants to flee to Kazimayn, ended in stalemate rather than in occupation.²⁵

From 1826 the reforming Sultan Mahmud II determined to reintegrate these provinces into the centralized empire. In 1830 he sent an envoy to Baghdad with the aim of replacing the Mamluk ruler Da'ud Pasha, who executed Istanbul's man. In retaliation the emperor sent an Ottoman army against Baghdad in 1831 that subdued and destroyed the Mamluks, replacing them with a Turkish governor (Ali Riza Pasha) responsible directly to the central government.²⁶ While reforms proceeded in Turkey, weakening tax-farmers as well as the power of intermediary social groups like military lords and religious scholars, the task of centralizing power in Iraq began.

Just as the independence of the Kurdish and Arab tribespeople stood in the way of this process, so did the semi-autonomy of Karbala. Ottoman viceroy Ali Riza Pasha, a member of the Shiite-influenced Bektashi order who mourned for the Imam Husayn annually, sympathized with the Shiites.²⁷ But he came into conflict with them when he attempted to appoint a governor for Karbala, for the powerful gangs murdered or drove away the government's man when he proved a threat to their interests. Such effrontery led the Pasha to demand the right to perform a pilgrimage to the shrine of Husayn, thus reasserting the prerogatives of the centre. In this period, too, some members of the powerful propertied-class groups like Sayyids and the clergy were demanding that the government intervene against the gangs.²⁸

²⁵ Al-Kirkukli, *Dawhat al-wuzara' fi ta'rikh waqa'i' Baghdad az-zawra'*, pp. 298-301; Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, pp. 242-7; Murtada al-Ansari Al-Shaykh, *Zindigani wa Shakhshiyat-i Shaykh Ansari* [The Life and Personality of Shaykh Ansari] (Ahwaz, 1960-1), p. 64. Reports from Karbala in 1843 repeatedly insist that Da'ud Pasha did not actually enter the city in the 1820s, but only besieged it for eleven months before accepting a large bribe as a compromise: see P.R.O., F.O. 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account".

²⁶ Fa'iq Bey, *Tarikh Baghdad*, pp. 82-116; Nawras, *Hukm al-mamalik*, ch. 5; Nawwar, *Da'ud Basha*, ch. 7; and Muhammad Golam Idris Khan, "British Policy in Iraq, 1828-43", *Jl. Asiatic Soc. Bangladesh*, xviii (1973), pp. 173-94.

²⁷ Ibrahim al-Haidari, *Zur Soziologie der schiitischen Chiliasmus: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des irakischen Passionsspiels* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1975), p. 24.

²⁸ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; al-'Azzawi, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, vii, p. 65.

In the summer of 1835 a show-down occurred between the Ottoman governor and the people of Karbala. The British political agent in Baghdad wrote that the Pasha was planning to attack the town with 3,000 regulars.²⁹ As reports from 1843 demonstrate, the Ottoman viceroy found himself too weak to occupy the town and struck a deal with the gangs.³⁰ He considered a long-term occupation of the city to be unfeasible and after a show of strength indicated a willingness to compromise.

The Ottoman viceroy broke with tradition by appointing as governor someone neither Sunni nor from Baghdad, tacitly recognizing the power of the new coalition of local gangs and their patrons. He put 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, scion of an Arab landed family with strong links with the Arab gangs led by Za'farani, in charge of the city. In return for this appointment 'Abdu'l-Wahhab pledged to increase payments to Baghdad to 70,000 *qirans*. The new governor appropriated a large portion of municipal revenues to himself and robbed the city's two major shrines of some of their treasures. He used part of the money to pay Za'farani for protection against his foe, Mirza Salih, and gained influence over personages like the Iranian consul by lending him large sums of money. He cultivated the nearby Arab chiefs, allowing them to store their booty in the city.³¹ The government of Karbala came directly into the hands of the gangs, which encouraged further immigration of toughs into the city.

Given the reports that reached British ears in the 1830s that many of the city's élite members wanted the Ottomans to overthrow gang rule, we must ask how the citizens were able to muster enough solidarity to face down the Ottoman viceroy. The answer is surely that, in addition to the armed gangs, Karbala's tradespeople also played a crucial role in ensuring the relative independence of their city. Indeed the issue of autonomy aroused them more than any other. The famous incidents of Karbala mob action are not food riots like the market strikes of northern Iran, but political ones.³² As with crowds elsewhere, the Karbala little people rioted to achieve a specific

²⁹ National Archives of India, New Delhi, Foreign Department Proceedings (hereafter N.A.I., For. Dept. Proc.), Political Consultations, 5 Oct. 1835, file nos. 16-26, political agent in Turkish Arabia to secretary to the government of India, 27 July 1835.

³⁰ P.R.O., F.O. 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account".

³¹ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843. See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York, 1969), pp. 73-4: bandits, social or otherwise, need urban middlemen to dispose of their goods — a role into which Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Wahhab slipped.

³² For bazaar strikes, see Sir John Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, 2 vols. (London, 1829 edn.), i, pp. 443-4.

aim: they wished to prove by their violence that to take the city street by street would cost government troops too dearly. They sought to keep the troops of the "foreign" central government, whether Mamluk or Ottoman, outside the city walls as much as possible. They often supported local families of wealth and power against generals sent from Baghdad.³³

The crowd sought to preserve their ways of life and city rights in the face of modern Ottoman centralization. Ottoman reforms, in turn, constituted a response to the economic and political power of industrializing Europe. The Turkish reformers made an assault on tax-farming and other pre-modern institutions and sought to centralize power. Both at the Ottoman centre, Istanbul, and in the peripheries of the empire such reforms provoked resistance from social groups whose interests they threatened, including skilled artisans, tax-farming military men and the religious scholars. In the Karbala riots of the 1830s and 1840s we witness a crowd defending itself from rapid social change.³⁴

Meanwhile the prospects of the Ottoman empire for the reassertion of central control were improving. The 1840 Treaty of London, backed by four European powers, put an end to the Egyptian viceroy's bid to take over the empire. The Ottoman emperor, having regained Syria, hoped also to take direct control of the Hijaz. Ali Riza Pasha watched these events closely from Baghdad, aware of their regional implications.³⁵ But just as the proclamation of reforms helped spark a revolt in Rumelia in 1841 by Christian peasants eager for improvement in their situation, so the centralizing tendencies of the empire provoked a backlash from the Shiites of southern Iraq.³⁶

In September 1842 a new viceroy of Iraq arrived in Baghdad, Muhammad Najib (Mehmet Necip) Pasha. This official — former minister of justice, a staunch conservative and Ottoman chauvinist with intimate ties to the new emperor, Abdülmecid — had opposed the reforms for giving too much away to minorities. The reformers therefore sent him away from Istanbul to serve as viceroy of the Damascus province in January 1841. In Syria Najib Pasha became convinced of the need for greater centralized control. He attempted

³³ Cf. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 110-13.

³⁴ Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 18-23.

³⁵ R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, "An Unpublished Letter from 'Ali Pasha, Ottoman Governor of Iraq, to the Sharif of Mecca", *Die Welt des Islams*, new ser., xviii (1976-7), pp. 58-71.

³⁶ H. Inalcik, "Application of the *Tanzimât* and its Social Effects", *Archivum ottomanicum*, v (1973), pp. 97-127.

to subdue the bedouins, treated the Christian minority severely, and succeeded in excluding British military advisers from the province. Indeed he so antagonized the western powers while in Syria that Istanbul finally transferred him to Baghdad, though he retained the emperor's confidence.³⁷

Najib Pasha also wanted strong control of Iraq, which meant facing down the Arab tribes and the urban gangs in the Shiite south. Only about forty days after his arrival in Baghdad the Pasha set off on 23 October for Musayyib on the Euphrates, where Serasker Sadullah Pasha had preceded him with some troops, and pitched camp. He gave it out that he intended to oversee repairs to the Hindiyah canal, for which money had recently been donated by the government of Awadh. The canal would help drain marsh land in which refractory Arab tribes took refuge, and would help get water to restive peasants in Hillah.³⁸

Rumours began to circulate that Najib Pasha intended to march on Karbala. The Shaykhi leader Rashti wrote to the Iranian consul in Karbala "that many Persians were daily coming to him for advice, and begged him to go to the Pacha's camp, or to write him to know his intentions".³⁹ The consul wrote to the Pasha during this period, but his letters concerned injuries done to Iranian citizens by the gangs rather than any possible advance on the shrine city. Iranian families panicked and began leaving for Baghdad.

THE DECISION TO INVADE

Meanwhile Najib Pasha sent to Karbala for provisions and sent word that he intended to visit the shrine of Imam Husayn. Municipal authorities replied coldly, offering him only a token amount of provisions and telling him that he could come into the city for the visit only if he left his main force outside and retained only four or five bodyguards. The Pasha, livid on receiving this reply, threatened to take the city by force. Before he began his advance, on 18 November, he wrote to the embassies of Britain, France and Iran, detailing his reasons for contemplating military action.

The previous year Ali Riza Pasha had made the same request and also received a reply from city leaders that they would allow him in

³⁷ C. E. Farah, "Necip Paşa and the British in Syria 1841-1842", *Archivum ottomanicum*, ii (1970), pp. 115-53.

³⁸ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Najib Pasha to political agent in Turkish Arabia (n.d.) [autumn 1842].

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

with only ten or fifteen persons as a retinue. He finally returned to Baghdad without performing the visit. Najib Pasha considered his predecessor to have erred in appointing citizens of Karbala tax-farmers and allowing the city to become a refuge for criminal elements. He believed that excluding the Pasha from his own territory constituted "a final demonstration of the revolt of the town".⁴⁰ The omission of the Ottoman emperor's name from the concluding sermons at Friday congregational prayers — a mention made elsewhere in Iraq — further symbolized Karbala's independence.⁴¹ Here the city's religious scholars again demonstrated their opposition to Sunni Ottoman rule.

Najib Pasha said that the violence of the gangs in Karbala alarmed him, accusing Za'farani and his men of murdering and robbing at will. The Pasha reported that the gang chief had robbed even eminent Shiite scholars and had raped and murdered a lady of reputation.⁴² But the strategic implications of Karbala's status disturbed him even more. He saw it as an Iranian-dominated stronghold, complaining that ten thousand Iranian subjects had congregated in the shrine city, but no such concentration of Turks existed in Iran. He insisted that all Muslims revered the shrines in Karbala, that the place belonged to the Ottoman empire and that Iranians only had the right to visit there once a year.⁴³ Such an Iranian population centre, controlled by gangs, lying in his rear with powerful Arab tribes in the vicinity, represented a Trojan horse for his government were hostilities with Iran to break out.⁴⁴

The city responded to the Pasha's threats in mid-November by holding meetings and closing ranks. The élite at first reached a consensus that they should refuse entry to Najib Pasha's troops and defend the town, proposing to buy him off with a sum of money. Gang leaders showed particular determination to keep the Turks out, because they would threaten their control over the city. The flight of wealthy and influential Iranian families to Baghdad alarmed the toughs, who put pressure on them to stay, with all their extensive resources.⁴⁵

The gangs argued that the former governor's siege of 1824 had proved unsuccessful. Moreover they emphasized the need of Shiites

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, Najib Pasha to political agent (n.d.).

⁴³ P.R.O., F.O. 60/96, Najib Pasha to Lt.-Col. Sheil (n.d.).

⁴⁴ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Najib Pasha to political agent (n.d.).

⁴⁵ P.R.O., F.O. 60/96, Najib Pasha to French consul (n.d.).

to defend the holy city from Sunni Turkish incursions. Artisans and shopkeepers had no choice but to stay because they feared they would lose what (largely immovable) property they owned should they depart. That eminent members of the Qajar royal family, like the Zillu's-Sultan (then in political exile), elected to remain gave heart to the poor and middle-class Iranians.⁴⁶

The Iranian consul in Baghdad attempted to negotiate with Najib Pasha, requesting six months of grace to allow Iranians to leave the town. He later said he wrote the Shaykhi leader Rashti two letters warning that the new Ottoman viceroy was deadly serious in his threat to occupy the city, but Rashti said he never received the missives.⁴⁷ Najib Pasha rejected any suggestion that he delay six months in entering the town.

Several city leaders, not including the gang leaders, attempted to negotiate directly with the Ottoman viceroy. The exiled Iranian prince Zillu's-Sultan, Rashti, 'Abdu'l-Wahhab and other members of the élite went together to the Pasha's camp at Musayyib. Najib demanded the right to station 300-500 troops inside the city, insisting that the gangs stop operating their rackets and that Za'farani come to him for an audience. 'Abdu'l-Wahhab replied that some troops might be stationed in Karbala, but that the gangs would never agree to the other terms. The city's governor offered to have Za'farani murdered if only he were given enough time, and Rashti also showed a willingness to abandon Za'farani. In the alliance of nobles and bosses that underpins any mafia, the nobles generally consider the mafiosi expendable. This and several further attempts at negotiation foundered on the intransigence of the gangs and of Najib Pasha, though Rashti and Zillu's-Sultan fought hard for a compromise that would allow Turkish troops into the city.⁴⁸

On 11 December 1842 Najib Pasha wrote to Zillu's-Sultan and Rashti, asking them to warn the Iranians to separate themselves from the gangs and to leave the town or take refuge in the shrines of Husayn or 'Abbas. He cautioned the two leaders that he intended to use force against the gangs should they oppose him, but offered protection to neutral civilians. He said, "whoever of all the people of

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Farrant to Canning, 22 Apr. 1843; F. O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

⁴⁷ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; F.O. 60/95, Persian agent at Baghdad to Hajji Mirza Aqasi (n.d.) [Jan. 1843].

⁴⁸ The autumn negotiations are reported in detail in P.R.O., F.O. 248/106, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

the Town takes refuge with you, assure and satisfy him of safety".⁴⁹ Najib Pasha thus recognized that they had negotiated in good faith, but he also attempted by safety pledges to drive a wedge between the members of the Karbala coalition. He failed to separate the Iranian tradespeople from the gangs, however, because they could not afford the suddenly astronomical price of carriage out of the city for their families and so had to stay and make a stand.

THE ADVANCE ON KARBALA

Gang leaders made feverish preparations to defend the city, arranging for their allies from the Arab tribes to come there in force. The Ottoman viceroy, alarmed, dispatched Serasker Sadullah Pasha with three regiments of infantry, one of cavalry and twenty guns. About 19 December 1842 he arrived at Imam-Nuk, a mile and a half south-east of Karbala. They received sporadic sniper fire but did not return it. Their arrival provoked another attempt at negotiation, again led by Rashti and Zillu's-Sultan, which involved the giving of gang hostages in exchange for the Turkish withdrawal of all but 500 men. This effort met failure when Najib Pasha rejected its terms even after Sadullah Pasha had accepted it.⁵⁰

The day after the viceroy's negative message arrived, around 22 December, Sadullah Pasha sent his soldiers out to occupy some favourable positions. Observers on the city walls informed Arab tribespeople and Karbala's labourers and artisans of these strategic troop movements. Fearing an attack, a mob gathered and went out to assault the soldiers, whom they drove back. The crowd captured several artillery pieces and overturned others, retiring at sunset. While the attack by the crowd appears to have had an element of spontaneity in it, the people had hardly acted randomly. It served as a further indication of the militance of the little people and their distrust of the Ottomans.⁵¹

The unyielding mood of the crowd may have been reinforced by religious rivalries. Had Rashti succeeded in his negotiations with the Ottomans, his position within the city would have been much streng-

⁴⁹ P.R.O., F.O. 60/97, Najib Pasha [to Zillu's-Sultan or Sayyid Kazim Rashti], 11 Dec. 1842. Cf. Muhammad "Nabil" Zarandi, *The Dawnbreakers [Matali'-i anvar]*, partial trans. Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (Wilmette, 1974), p. 36.

⁵⁰ N.A.I., For. Dept. Proc., Secret Consultations, 10 May 1843, file nos. 5-10, Persian consul-general, Baghdad, to Mirza 'Abdu'l-Husayn Khan, Dec. 1842; P.R.O., F.O. 248/10, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; F.O. 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account"; Zarandi, *Dawnbreakers*, p. 35.

⁵¹ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

thened. Rivals like the gang leader Mirza Salih and the Usuli scholars did not wish to see this happen. One of Rashti's disciples later wrote: "However much the noble Sayyid endeavoured to dampen the fire of this rebellion through conciliation and forbearance, his opponents declared that they would rather see their women and children prisoners in the hands of the Turks than to have this dispute settled by him".⁵²

A pro-Shaykhi source written in 1888 indicates that Usuli scholars helped incite tradespeople to attack the Ottoman forces, partly to thwart Rashti. A rumour spread that one of the clergy had seen a dream of 'Abbas, the brother of Imam Husayn, who asked him to promulgate holy war against the Turks and promised him ultimate success.⁵³ In a shrine city such rumours of supernatural aid contributed to a feeling that the holy places were impregnable, and shaped the militant popular mentality of the citizens. But on the practical plane the labourers and tradespeople had no choice but to stay and fight. Their action without doubt helped dishearten the Ottomans, as it aimed to do. It also demonstrated that "the crowd" acted in the revolt independently of the gangs.

THE SIEGE OF KARBALA

After the mob riot against the Turkish troops, the gangs made extensive preparations to withstand a siege, drawing on the military and technological knowledge of the army deserters among their ranks. They prevented anyone from leaving the city, though carriage was anyway unavailable by then. For the rest of December the Turks fired on or over the town to frighten the inhabitants. Towards the end of December Zillu's-Sultan wrote from the Serasker's camp to Qazvini, then in Baghdad, that the thousands of shots fired into the city had damaged tens of buildings, including shrines. He estimated forty inhabitants of Karbala dead in the shelling and put Turkish casualties at a thousand. He said of the Ottomans, who were commandeering muleteers for their logistics, that: "Their camp too is in great distress almost approaching to a famine, but in Karbala food is abundant and cheap".⁵⁴

On about 1 January 1843 Qazvini and the Iranian consul, represent-

⁵² Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani, *Hidayat at-talibin* [Guide to the Seekers] (Kirman, A.H. 1380), p. 153.

⁵³ Zarandi, *Dawnbreakers*, pp. 35-6.

⁵⁴ N.A.I., For. Dept. Proc., Secret Consultations, 10 May 1843, file nos. 5-10, Zillu's-Sultan to Aqa Sayyid Ibrahim, Dhu'l-Qa'dah 1258/December 1842; P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

ing the Iranian faction within the city, left Baghdad to begin another round of negotiations with Najib Pasha. But, out of touch with the determined mood of Karbala, they reached terms rejected by city leaders. Rashti wrote to the Iranian consul urging him to come to Karbala, but he retired instead to the safety of Baghdad. Tragically, those within the besieged town took his action as a sign that no attack was imminent.⁵⁵

Karbala's citizenry during the siege showed a die-hard commitment across a range of social classes to maintaining local autonomy. The roots of this stance lay in the popular mentality that prevailed during the revolt. Although quixotic given the fire-power ranged against them, their underlying attitude had some basis in local experience. First, the coalition of urban gangs, mob and tribesmen had already averted two occupations in the previous twenty years, one as recently as 1835. The inhabitants of Karbala had grown used to a weak and corrupt government in Baghdad which they could bribe or face down. They remained ignorant of the sea change the reforms had wrought in Ottoman lands, and as yet unreconciled to the greater centralization these entailed. Secondly, poor communications among the Karbala leaders in and outside the city led to an underestimation of the danger. Thirdly, rumours were planted that the shah of Iran would dispatch an army of 20,000 men to aid the beleaguered city, and Arab tribal leaders promised another 12,000 reinforcements.⁵⁶ The myth that outside assistance was on the way shored up morale and made the people less willing to compromise.

Finally, religious feelings affected the judgment of the crowd, with gang and other city leaders stirring up hate for Sunnis. Tradesmen and labourers lined the city walls to hurl down invective on the Turks and on Sunni holy figures. The clergy contributed to the sectarian rancour, and though they did not join in actual fighting they did help repair damaged walls. The religious official in charge of the shrine of 'Abbas (who therefore stood to lose a great deal should the Turks come in) thwarted one set of talks by standing up in the assembly, dashing his turban to the ground and excommunicating anyone who spoke of giving up the town and their wives to the "infidel" Turks. Some preachers boldly proclaimed that the city was engaged in a holy war. While classical Shiite thought held that during the Twelfth Imam's absence believers could wage no holy war against Sunni

⁵⁵ P.R.O., F.O. 60/95, Persian agent at Baghdad to Hajji Mirza Aqasi (n.d.) [Jan. 1843]; F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

⁵⁶ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

Muslims, the clerics put such legal niceties aside during the siege.⁵⁷ Classical doctrine was one thing, the impassioned rhetoric of desperate clergymen another.

The major dissenting view from the popular mentality just described originated with the Shaykhi leader Rashti. Lt.-Col. Farrant reported that he "did all in his power to prevent hostilities, he preached against their proceedings, he was abused and threatened, they would not listen to him".⁵⁸ Although Za'farani had announced himself Rashti's follower, the Shaykhi leader's actions demonstrate that he much preferred a conventional government of the Sunnis to the semi-anarchy of even pro-Shaykhi gang rule.

The gang-led coalition in Karbala based itself primarily on violence and coercion, though yearning for regional autonomy played a part. It therefore exhibited weaknesses and could fall apart in the face of stronger forces. The old landed élite also demonstrated a certain ambivalence in choosing between the gangs and the Ottomans, though they had not the courage to speak out as had Rashti.

The Shaykhis' minority view of events also involved millennialist ideas. Rashti traditionally devoted the fasting month of Ramadan to discussing the characteristics of the promised Mahdi, who would restore justice to the world. The fasting month fell in October 1842, when it increasingly looked as if Najib Pasha might invade. An eyewitness writing six or seven years later said that Rashti elucidated the coming of this messianic figure with particular detail that year.⁵⁹ The siege took place in the closing months of A.H. 1258, and the Shiite world in the nineteenth century was pervaded by apocalyptic speculations that the promised one (Mahdi) would appear in 1260/1844, a little over a year later.⁶⁰ In Shaykhi circles, where these

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; see Norman Calder, "The Structures of Authority in Imami Shi'i Jurisprudence" (School of Oriental and African Studies, Univ. of London Ph.D. thesis, 1980), pp. 147-51. This is a different question from whether it was permissible to wage defensive holy war against non-Muslims in the time of the Occultation of the Imam. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century militant Usuli ulama repeatedly argued that it was permissible, with reference to Russia. See A. K. S. Lambton, "A Nineteenth Century View of Jihad", *Studia Islamica*, xxxii (1970), pp. 179-92; Algar, *Religion and State*, pp. 79-80; Arjomand, "Shi'ite Hierocracy", pp. 52 ff.

⁵⁸ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

⁵⁹ Al-Qatil ibn al-Karbala'i, "Risalah", printed in Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarini, *Tarikh-i zuhur al-haqq* [History of the Manifestation of Truth], iii (Tehran, n.d., c. 1944), pp. 506-7; Abbas Amanat, "The Early Years of the Babi Movement: Background and Development" (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1981), pp. 44-5.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India*, first publ. 1832 (Karachi, 1978 edn.), p. 76; Amanat, "Early Years of the Babi Movement", pp. 78 ff.

speculations received particular emphasis, political quietism and eschewing of holy war against the Sunnis may have been linked with expectations of the imminent advent of a supernatural deliverer.

The five days after the breakdown of the fourth set of negotiations witnessed frantic activity on both sides of the struggle. The gang leaders in Karbala faced increasing difficulties in provisioning and garrisoning the 5,000 Arab tribesmen that had assembled within its walls to aid the defence effort. Ammunition grew so scarce that people tore out the rails around the shrine of 'Abbas and melted them down for shot.⁶¹ The Turkish troops also faced great hardship, because the high Euphrates prevented provisions from reaching them from Baghdad, and they suffered from the cold. Using Arab labour and artillery blasts, they cut through the date grove protecting the city walls and finally had to fight a fierce battle with gang forces in order to take up a new position at a tomb just outside the city.⁶²

THE OCCUPATION

Logistical problems and a high desertion rate forced Sadullah Pasha to decide whether to act or withdraw altogether, and around 10 January a meeting of the officers decided to take the city by force. On 12 January Turkish artillery blasted a breach in the wall between the Najaf and Khan gates large enough to allow an assault. One more round of peace talks opened at this point and city leaders were on the verge of accepting the Serasker's terms when the chief of the Iranian gangs, Mirza Salih, made an impassioned plea that they trust in God and the Prophet and defy the Turks to the end. The Iranians had emerged as the hard-liners, perhaps because they most fervently believed the shah's forces were on the way to aid them.

The Ottoman envoy returned empty-handed to this camp, from which artillery barrages began again and went on till sunset, when both sides settled down for a freezing night. The Arab tribesmen, now 8,000 strong, threatened to leave because of poor meals and cold nights watching the city gates. The gangs therefore billeted them on the civilian population, with whom they celebrated the Muslim festival of sacrifice until late. As all Muslims observed this holy day, they assumed the Turks would do the same, and remained in homes

⁶¹ P.R.O., F.O. 195/204, "Translation of a Persian Account"; F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843.

⁶² P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; F.O. 60/97, Dr. John Ross to Lt.-Col. Taylor, 22 Jan. 1843.

rather than returning to their posts. The gangsters, distrusting the Arabs' steadfastness, nailed the gates shut.⁶³

The Ottoman officers planned out their assault. Three divisions commanded by the leader of the Mosul brigade were to lead the attack. The first would hold the breach, the second would enter the town and open the Najaf gate and the third would commandeer the bastions nearest them, turning the big guns on the city. As an incentive to the disheartened troops, one officer promised to allow them to do whatever they pleased once inside and pledged 150 *piasters* for every *luti* head.⁶⁴

Before dawn on 13 January 1843 the advance divisions set out, with heavy covering fire from the Ottoman artillery. They had almost reached the breach unopposed when the alarm went out that the Turks were approaching. Both Arabs and citizens rushed to the defence, commanded by an Arab gang leader, but they could not prevent the Ottomans from gaining the breach. The Turks lost 200 men in the assault. The gang forces ran low on powder and were forced to retreat to the cover of neighbouring houses, where they kept up fire. One Ottoman division sneaked along the inside of the wall to the Najaf gate, killing the sentinels and swinging it open. Sadullah Pasha immediately moved the main force into the town, while another officer dispatched divisions along the walls to secure other gates, and one through the centre of the town that attracted sniper fire from roof-tops. Many men detached themselves from the main body to raid houses for booty.

The force advancing along the wall drove a crowd of mixed civilians and Arab tribesmen before it as they frantically sought egress from the sealed or jammed city gates. At one partially open gate the Turks

⁶³ P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; F.O. 195/201, "Translation of a Persian Account".

⁶⁴ The substantive sources for the account that follows of the occupation include P.R.O., F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843; F.O. 195/201, "Translation of a Persian Account"; F.O. 60/97, Ross to Taylor, 22 Jan. 1843; N.A.I., For. Dept. Proc., Secret Consultations, 22 July 1843, no. 41, deposition made by Mulla Aqa of Darband (March 1843); and Yusuf Astarabadi to Sayyid Husayn Nasirabadi, Safar 1259/Mar. 1843, in Sayyid Muhammad 'Abbas Shushtari (ed.), "az-Zill al-mamdud" [The Outspread Shadow], Lucknow Arabic MS. in the library of the Raja of Mahmudabad, fos. 44a-51a (a collection of letters between the ulama in Iraq and in north India compiled in 1848). Secondary sources that provide important material or insights include J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman, and Central Arabia*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1908-15, reproduced London, 1970), i, pp. 1348-58; al-'Azzawi, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, vii, pp. 66-8; and 'Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat ijtimaiyyah min ta'rikh al-'Iraq al-hadith* [Social Glimpses from the History of Modern Iraq], 2 vols. (Baghdad, 1969), ii, pp. 116-24.

fired into the crowd with devastating effect. Za'farani and 200 of his gangsters fled from the al-Hurr gate, to which they had the key. The Iranian gangs, led by Mirza Salih, remained for the fight, as did the governor, 'Abdu'l-Wahhab. Most of the gang leaders had already sent away their families. Several thousand Arabs followed Za'farani in his flight through the al-Hurr gate. A Turkish officer sent 3,000 troops in pursuit of them and the fleeing Arabs were attacked on another flank by the Turkish cavalry camped outside the city. Arab casualties ran extremely high.

The crush at the narrow al-Hurr gate and the troops' indiscriminate firing on the people massed there impelled hundreds of citizens to flee back into the town to seek shelter in the shrines or in the houses of Zillu's-Sultan and Rashti, the refuges designated by Najib Pasha. Rashti's home was so full that people spilled into his courtyard, where some sixty-six persons were crushed by the panicky crowd. By this time the greater body of tribesmen and gangs had fled the city. Nevertheless, the Turkish division advancing through the centre of the town suffered heavy sniper fire, the intensity of which indicates that many tradespeople joined the fray on their own. Many of these were sighted in their ethnic Iranian dress in the opposition forces. When the power élite had fled, the little people remained to defend their bazaar, their holy city. This opposition from the crowd infuriated the Turkish soldiers.⁶⁵

Turkish troops chased retreating Arabs to the shrine of 'Abbas, where snipers fired upon them from a minaret. The berserk Ottomans let loose a fearful volley into the crowd seeking sanctuary there, which panicked, causing more deaths by trampling. The Turks took the offensive, robbing women of jewellery, sometimes chopping off a limb to get it. Fighting even reached the precincts of the holy tomb, where the Turks killed several persons they declared were *lutis*. The streets adjoining 'Abbas's shrine were filled with cadavers that the Ottomans set ablaze with naphtha and covered with blankets to help them burn. Nearly 250 persons probably perished in the incident. Nearly 200 more civilians were slaughtered at the shrine of Imam Husayn before Sadullah Pasha entered the city at about 10.30 a.m. and forbade further butchery.

The troops then fanned out to plunder the city's residences, raping and killing. Often the troops pressed the owners into service as bearers to transport the stolen goods to camp. Mulla Yusuf Astarabadi

⁶⁵ For the last point, see P.R.O., F.O. 248/111, Taylor to Sheil, 16 Feb. 1843; and F.O. 248/111, letter of Ross to Baghdad, 17 Feb. 1843.

reported that although he suffered a head wound he was made to carry loot to the camp. He wrote:

The dead were lying on top of one another to the extent that I could not cross the street except by walking over the corpses. It was as if I walked about invisibly, so many had perished . . . At the foundation of the mausoleum of our lord Abu'l-Fadl 'Abbas . . . I descried all about the illumined sepulchre murdered souls clinging to it, beseeching, seeking shelter and refuge within it. I saw most of the dead in the lanes and bazaars.⁶⁶

Only towards sunset did the Ottoman commander, who had stopped paying for *luti* ears, begin reining in his plundering minions. After careful enquiries Farrant estimated the loss of life inside the city at some 3,000 dead that day, with another 2,000 Arabs killed outside the walls.⁶⁷ The number of dead within the city represented 15 per cent of its normal population. The Turks lost 400 men.

THE REPRESSION OF SHIISM

The religious element in the struggle again surfaced when the Turkish troops turned the court of the shrine of 'Abbas into a barrack yard, where animals were stabled and uncouth soldiers sang loose songs, horrifying the dispirited Shiites. On 15 January the Serasker received word that Najib Pasha would shortly visit the conquered city. Shiite jurists and other notables were put in charge of overseeing the burial of the often burnt, dog-eaten cadavers in mass graves. On 16 and 17 January further plundering occurred as troops searched homes for arms.

On 18 January Najib Pasha arrived in the city and was greeted by a party of notables that included Rashti. The viceroy said his prayers at the shrine of Imam Husayn and paid respect to the holy tombs, but he soon revealed a new administrative order that ended Shiite autonomy in the town. Najib Pasha appointed a Sunni governor of Karbala, and announced that with the concurrence of the Sunni *qadi* in Baghdad, an assistant Sunni judge would be appointed in Karbala. Sunni judges would hear all court cases, even where they involved two Shiite parties from Karbala. Likewise, the government appointed a Sunni preacher to deliver sermons after Friday prayers and to

⁶⁶ Astarabadi to Nasirabadi, Safar 1259/Mar. 1843, in Shushtari (ed.), "az-Zill al-mamdud".

⁶⁷ P.R.O., F.O. 248/111, letter of Ross to Baghdad, 17 Feb. 1843; F.O. 248/108, Farrant to Canning, 15 May 1843. Cf. al-'Azzawi, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, vii, pp. 66-7, who gives 4,000. Iranians floated figures as high as 22,000. According to Farrant, Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Wahhab estimated the city's population at the time of the siege at about 20,000, including 8,000 tribesmen and 6,000 ethnic Iranians.

pronounce blessings on the Ottoman emperor.⁶⁸ Thousands of Shiites fled Iraq for Iran.

The Shiite clergy, alarmed by the disaster and the new, hardline Ottoman government, began practising dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) of their faith and cancelled further performance of Friday congregational prayers. Shiites ceased to pray with their arms held straight down, pretending to be Sunnis from the ritual point of view. Observances of the month of mourning, Muharram, which began on 1 February, were extremely subdued and private, and news of the attack disheartened other Shiites in Iraq.⁶⁹

REACTIONS TO THE DISASTER

Reactions to the calamity within Karbala varied greatly. By late April a semblance of normality had returned to the town and Farrant reported that respectable residents rejoiced that the gangs had been expelled, complaining that "no place could have exceeded Karbellah in debauchery of every sort". He noted that many religious officials considered the calamity a judgement on the place.⁷⁰ Wealthy survivors of the occupation were happier with strong state control.

The leaders of the revolt from old landed families, such as 'Abdu'l-Wahhab, fled to sanctuary with friendly tribes and Najib Pasha subsequently pardoned them. Mirza Salih suffered imprisonment in Kirkuk until pardoned. The Arab gangs sought refuge in the Hindiyyah, but their leader Za'farani was apprehended and taken to Baghdad, where he fell ill with hectic fever (tuberculosis) and died. The major Arab tribal leaders escaped safely with their men. Najib Pasha's costly military adventure made little long-term change in the social structure of Karbala and the gang organizations, although weakened, continued. Better administration returned prosperity to the city within three years, though Iranian merchants were thenceforth subject to heavy customs duties in the city and within Turkish territory.⁷¹

The minor Usuli scholar Yusuf Astarabadi reacted with rage against the ruling classes.⁷² In a candid letter Astarabadi gave full vent to his

⁶⁸ P.R.O., F.O. 60/96, Najib Pasha to Persian consul, 22 Jan. 1843.

⁶⁹ P.R.O., F.O. 195/201, "Translation of a Persian Account"; F.O. 60/95, Persian agent at Baghdad to Hajji Mirza Aqasi, 20 Dhu'l-Hijjah/22 Jan. 1843.

⁷⁰ P.R.O., F.O. 60/70, Farrant to Canning, Baghdad, 22 Apr. 1843.

⁷¹ N.A.I., For. Dept. Proc., Secret Consultations, 28 Nov. 1846, file nos. 87-96, H. C. Rawlinson to Canning, 29 Apr. 1846.

⁷² Astarabadi went on to become a student of the leading jurispudent Murtada al-Ansari in Najaf. For a brief biographical notice, see Muhammad Mihdi Lakhnavi Kashmiri, *Nujum as-sama': takmilah* [Supplement to "Stars of the Heavens"], 2 vols. (Qumm, c. 1977), i, p. 395.

grief and outrage, angrily exclaiming, "Would that there were no king (*sultan*) ruling over us, and none over Iran!"⁷³ Astarabadi clearly blamed the Ottoman emperor Abdülmeçid for ordering the attack, and Muhammad Shah of Iran for failing to come to the aid of the beleaguered Shiites. He went on to say that if there had to be a monarch, he should at least uphold the Qur'an and defend the Imam 'Ali. Astarabadi's antipathy towards monarchy and desire for the enthronement of Shiite values represent a rudimentary republicanism, providing evidence of strong, if vague, anti-monarchical feelings among some religious scholars in the shrine cities in the mid-nineteenth century. Solid evidence for such views is otherwise rare.⁷⁴

The Shaykhi leader Rashti interpreted the cataclysm as divine retribution for the failure of the inhabitants to accept his millenarian teachings. The following year, September-October 1843, he refused to expand on the subject of the coming promised one. He feared that were he to repeat his discourse a similar disaster would befall the town, as the people were still unprepared to embrace his views about the Mahdi.⁷⁵

Iran met the news of the bloody capture of Karbala with grief and rage, then with clamour for war. The leading jurispudent of Isfahan, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Shafti, attempted to pressure Muhammad Shah into declaring war on the Ottomans by threatening to lead an independent army of 20,000 men into Iraq.⁷⁶ Muhammad Shah mobilized his troops, but in the end took no belligerent steps.⁷⁷

⁷³ Astarabadi to Nasirabadi, Safar 1259/March 1843, in Shushtari (ed.), "az-Zill al-mamdu'd", fo. 49b.

⁷⁴ But see J. Chardin, *Voyages de monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'orient*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1709), ii, pp. 207-8, 337; and A. K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford, 1981), ch. 15.

⁷⁵ Al-Qatil ibn al-Karbala'i, "Risalah", p. 507. Astarabadi likewise referred to the apocalyptic nature of the occupation, writing, "Great God, what a momentous calamity! We saw the reality of the Day on which a man will flee from his brother, his friend, his son and the very clan that gives him shelter": Astarabadi to Nasirabadi, Safar 1259/Mar. 1843; cf. Qur'an 80:34-36. Later Shaykhis like Karim Khan Kirmani pointed out that Sayyid Kazim's house was respected as a sanctuary even when the shrine of Husayn was desecrated, emphasizing the sanctity of the Shaykhi leader's residence: Kirmani, *Hidayat at-talabin*, pp. 153-4; cf. Zarandi, *Dawnbreakers*, pp. 36-7; al-'Azzawi, *Ta'rikh al-'Iraq*, vii, p. 68.

⁷⁶ Alphonse Denis, "Question de Perse: affaire du Kerbela", *Revue de L'Orient*, i (1843), p. 139.

⁷⁷ The Iranian war chest was depleted as a result of Muhammad Shah's recent unsuccessful campaigns against Herat; the anti-clerical first minister feared the incident would allow a resurgence in the power of the religious scholars; and the British and Russian governments exerted their considerable influence against any hostilities: P.R.O., F.O. 60/95, Sheil to earl of Aberdeen, 14 Feb. 1843; N.A.I., For. Dept.

Given the widespread millennial speculations about the coming of the promised Mahdi in 1260/1844, the Sunni enemy's unavenged sacking of so holy a Shiite shrine surely heightened expectations that the Hidden Imam would soon appear to succour the Shiites. In May 1844 Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad, a young merchant of Shiraz, who had associated briefly with the Shaykhis in Karbala, put forward his claim to be the Bab or gate of the Twelfth Imam and caused a considerable stir in the shrine cities of Iraq.⁷⁸

A large number of Shaykhis responded favourably to the Bab. They had been strengthened in their millenarian fervour, as we noted above, by the teachings of Sayyid Kazim Rashti. The initial excitement caused by the Bab and the following he gained in both Iran and Iraq derived, at least in part, from the millennial expectations caused by the anger and frustration the Karbala episode provoked among devout Shiites. The Babi movement spread with lightning swiftness in Iran, especially attracting lower-ranking religious scholars, urban merchants and the bazaar classes. The Bab's message, aside from his own messianic claims, included the abrogation of the Islamic prohibition of interest on loans and the amelioration of the condition of women. The opposition the new religion provoked from the government and the Usuli religious scholars led to its persecution and in turn sparked clashes and uprisings in several Iranian towns in 1848-52.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

The data gleaned from archival and manuscript sources and presented above not only give us a detailed picture of gang organization and activities in Karbala, they also help clarify the general role of the urban gangs active in many cities in south Iraq and throughout Iran during the nineteenth century. Although stronger governments could suppress the toughs, when state power waned in the first half of the nineteenth century the gangs took control of entire towns. Wars with modernizing European states like the Russian empire enervated the Ottomans and the Qajars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

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Proc., Secret Consultations, 22 July 1843, no. 41, Justin Sheil to secretary to the government of India, 29 Mar. 1843; R. G. Wilson, *A History of Persia from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Year 1858* (London, 1866), p. 341.

⁷⁸ Moojan Momen (ed.), *The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 87-8.

⁷⁹ See Moojan Momen, "The Social Bases of the Babi Upheavals in Iran (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis", *Internat. Jl. Middle East Studies*, xv (1983), pp. 157-83.

centuries, and at first they had fewer resources to devote to controlling their own remoter provinces.

In response, the Ottomans from 1826 sought to increase resources through the abolition of tax-farming and privileges and through a rationalized and centralized bureaucracy. The manner in which the government initially grew weaker, then attempted to impose greater centralization through new, European-influenced techniques, helped provoke regional clashes in Iraq, with urban violence and gang-led revolts growing common. Outside Karbala the struggle between the Shumurd and Zuqurt factions in Najaf, representing wealthier and poorer quarters of the city, racked that town with violence throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

In Iran, as well, the Haydari and Ni'mati quarters (originally named for mystical Sufi brotherhoods) into which many towns were divided often staged street battles. Gangs dominated Yazd for most of the 1840s and for a time a gang leader effectively ruled the city.⁸¹ Shiraz was, for much of the 1830s and early 1840s, torn by factional rivalries in which allied groups of notables and gang bosses clashed with such ferocity that the local governor often lost control.⁸²

From the Euphrates to the Oxus nineteenth-century gangs emerged briefly as popular leaders with great power in a town for several reasons. First, both the Mamluk and Qajar states lacked the ability to project force quickly and effectively throughout their territories, owing in part to their small standing armies. These states therefore had to depend heavily on appointed local governors, themselves often weak or lacking full central government support. Large pastoral nomadic populations, relatively large urban concentrations, rugged terrain and lack of made roads and transportation technology, made the provinces more difficult to control than was the case in contemporary Europe.

Secondly, the local notables, artisans, shopkeepers and labourers in Iraqi and Iranian towns had little or no allegiance to the central government, and so they sometimes perceived gang rule as no more illegitimate than rule by the state. This especially held true for the Shiite towns in Iraq, and often applied in Iran as well. Where the government taxed the tradespeople without providing services like

⁸⁰ Longrigg, *Modern Iraq*, p. 288; Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq*, pp. 31-2.

⁸¹ Momen, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, pp. 106-7.

⁸² For the situation in Shiraz, see Hasan Fasa'i, *History of Persia under Qājār Rule [Farsnamih-i Nasir]*, trans. Heribert Busse (New York, 1972), pp. 235-8, 262-7, 285-7, 350-1; and Amanat, "Early Years of the Bābī Movement", pp. 382-7.

security, it often drove them to an alliance with their local extortionists. In short, nineteenth-century urban gangs had a common interest with local élites and the local tradespeople in keeping the central government out. Finally, factional divisions among local élites such as landed notables and religious scholars, and among city quarters, often so detracted from urban corporate solidarity as to allow the gangs to divide and rule.

Under these circumstances, gangs in mid-nineteenth-century Iraq and Iran used their armed force in the service of revolts by local notables or by tradespeople against the centrally appointed governor. They often became popular local leaders, transcending (at least for a time) their extortionist background.

In Karbala their provision of makeshift and arbitrary security had the virtue, at least, of allowing more wealth to remain in the city than the Ottomans would have, while assuring the uninterrupted flow of pilgrims and merchants. The city's inhabitants paid the price of a state of rough semi-anarchy. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that the little people and many Shiite religious scholars preferred even gang rule and protection rackets to imperial Ottoman control. (Indeed the Ottoman attack served only to fuel anti-monarchical feelings among some Shiite clerics.) Without the active support of the crowd, Karbala could not have warded off central government troops for two decades. The tradespeople, caught between two unpleasant alternatives, chose to be exploited by their local leadership. The prospect of more centralized, bureaucratic Ottoman rule in the 1830s and 1840s, itself a response to the rise of European industrial and political might, provoked the little people to defend their local autonomy.

The role of "mafias" in defending a provincial area against a distant government has long been recognized. But the specifically urban character of the Karbala *lutis* does raise questions. The urban gang leadership of these popular uprisings must strike anyone familiar with the historiography of early modern Europe as anomalous. The gangsters in Paris, it has often been observed, saw the French Revolution as no more than an opportunity for plunder. Hobsbawm argued that although peasant bandits are "social", in tune with the needs and aspirations of the oppressed peasantry from which they spring, urban bandits are asocial.⁸³ The widespread involvement of

⁸³ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 84-5. Hobsbawm deserves full credit for drawing our attention to these phenomena, and this criticism is meant to be constructive. For another critical view of Hobsbawm's approach to rural bandits, see P. O'Malley, "Social Bandits, Modern Capitalism, and the Traditional Peasantry: A Critique of

gangs in urban movements of social protest in nineteenth-century Iraq and Iran challenges this paradigm. Indeed it should provoke thought as to whether there is really any such thing as an asocial gang, urban or otherwise. As Anton Blok has pointed out, all banditry is "social" in so far as it occurs in a social context.⁸⁴

Bandits emerge from particular classes and, when successful, their wealth and means of procuring it give them broader interests and alliances. Bandits, rural or urban, engage in anti-social behaviour, exploiting the poor as well as the rich, and will join in social revolts when they perceive it in their interests to do.

But *luti* rule, based on a tenuous coalition of anarchical gangs and upon a vacuum of more legitimate power, exhibited instability and proved a transitional phenomenon. It burgeoned when the old tax-farming Mamluk government declined in the first third of the nineteenth century, but before modern, centralized states arose to impose strict security. Najib Pasha's attack was a harbinger of things to come; but they would come very gradually over the succeeding century.

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Moojan Momen

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Hobsbawm", *Jl. Peasant Studies*, vi (1979), pp. 489-502. For other studies and conceptual refinements of rural banditry, see L. Lewin, "The Oligarchical Limitations of Social Banditry in Brazil", *Past and Present*, no. 82 (Feb. 1979), pp. 116-47; and Henk Driessen, "The 'Noble Bandit' and the Bandits of the Nobles: Brigandage and Local Community in Nineteenth Century Andalusia", *Archives européennes de sociologie*, xxiv (1983) pp. 96-114.

⁸⁴ Anton Blok, "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered", *Comp. Studies in Society and Hist.*, xiv (1972), pp. 494-503.