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Ashura: The Soft Source of Iran's Conduct ^[1]

Throughout history, many nations have relied on historical phenomena, narratives, and myths to define their identities and their relation to the outside reality. When narratives survive the test of time and space, they become meta-narratives which shape the worldview and the conduct of the societies they encompass. In addition to having profound effects on the socio-cultural process, meta-narratives sometimes influence and explicate the international behavior of a nation. Almost all of us are familiar with the Christian concept of *Manifest Destiny* and how it has always been relevant to U.S. foreign policy. For the majority of Iranians, as Muslim Shias, Ashura has clearly been the meta-narrative. It has particularly been important since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and one could surely see the footprint of this narrative in Iran's foreign policy. In order to comprehend and develop expectations about the Islamic Republic of Iran's international behavior, one should first understand the narrative of Ashura.

Ashura is a day in the month of *Muhharrem* in the lunar calendar (December 6th in 2011) which refers to several historical events in Islam including the significant Battle of Karbala (Iraq, 680 CE), where Imam Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was killed along with his family and companions in an uprising against the oppressive rule of Yazid. In the eyes of Shia Muslims, Hossein's martyrdom is not a story of meaningless defeat, but a grand narrative of victory for humanity, a sign to other believers that they should stand against the tyrant, even at the cost of death, and celebrate the ones who sacrifice their life in the fight of the oppressed against the oppressor. It is about celebrating, exalting, and glorifying the victim. That is why Shia Muslims (est. 200 million) in what is now Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Syria have mournfully commemorated Ashura for the last 1,300 years.

Human history is ripe with such rituals, but what is significant about Ashura and Iran is that it has managed to project itself so powerful that even Islamic Republic's international conduct is affected by this meta-narrative. For one thing, Ashura gatherings and processions were effectively used by the Clergy in Iran to overthrow Mohammad Reza Shah during the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Morteza Aviny, an Iranian journalist covering the Iran-Iraq war once wrote: "Whoever who wants to understand us should study the battle of Karbala." That is how the Iranian nation defined its relation to Saddam after he invaded Iran. They saw themselves as the victims and oppressed, and as followers of Hossein when they lined up against Saddam's army (projected as the army of Yazid). War literature produced in Iran was drenched in the story of Ashura and its symbols could be found everywhere among the Iranian fighters. That's why army casualties were glorified as those who had proved to be true followers of Imam Hossein. And most interestingly, when Iran accepted UN Resolution 598 for the ceasefire with Iraq, its substantial demand was not war reparations, but to be recognized as the victim of invasion (which it achieved finally).

Ashura did not stop during the Iran-Iraq war. In fact, as Shias famously say among themselves, for them "all the days are Ashura and all the earth is Karbala." It is based on such a point of view that the Iranian leadership after the revolution defined its relations with western powers, particularly Britain and the United States. The contemporary Iran sees itself as the victim of years of British colonialism in the Middle East. It had a brief moment of hope for prosperity and freedom during Mossadegh, but it was dashed by the joint Anglo-American coup in 1953 which reinstalled the Shah. Iranians led by the Clergy came to interpret it along the lines of Ashura where they became the victims again, and the U.S. and UK became the Yazids of the time. That is how the Islamic Republic came to view itself as the one who should play its Ashura role not only in the Muslim world, but also elsewhere in the world, especially when they rise against the United States. Take, for example, the recent British embassy take over in Tehran. If one looks closely at the images of the event, she/he could see that the biggest flags and signs were those over which the name of Imam Hossein and symbols of Ashura were written.

If one deems the British embassy crisis to be a small event in today's virulent international politics, it could hardly be true about the nuclear standoff between Iran and the United States. One suspects that the same meta-narrative has projected itself upon the nuclear issue. Iranians not only see the issue as a matter of their national pride, but also see it as their right which if taken away, would have catastrophic consequences for both sides. But that is not a problem for Iranians who believe in Imam Hossein and his path. In fact, the Supreme Leader of Iran has clearly mentioned this connection when he said "if the adversary pushes too far, another Battle of Karbala will happen." A reference to a gloomy event like Ashura, when there are many other victorious battles throughout Islam's history, is indicative of the extent to which the current Iranian leadership and its followers could go in their standoff with the United States.

Ashura seems to be a simple religious ritual like many others, but it has turned out to have significant implications for the world. This meta-narrative has shaped the world view of a very important nation in the Middle East and whoever wants to comprehend Iran's conduct should certainly understand the story of Ashura first.
