

Celebration of Eid Al-Ghader in Najaf

An annual carnival of joy

> Reports and photos:
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What distinguishes Islam from other religions is the many festivals celebrated by its followers. They vary according to doctrines, nationalities and ethnic groups.

The main reason, it seems, is the deep respect of faithful Muslims for their history and religious heritage, and the dispersal of the graves of Ahl Al-Bayt (descendants and relatives of the Prophet), imams and saints in various Muslim countries. These tombs have become eternal symbols and emblems of the regions in which they are situated. The determination of Muslims to follow the lives of their prophet, imams and saints, and the commemoration of their memory, created and accumulated great spiritual wealth, so that virtually every month there is a religious or historical commemoration, happy or sad.

Eid El Ghader, the day El Ghad, or Bayate El Ghader, is one of those important occasions that Iraqi Muslims celebrate. The holy city of Najaf is the city for celebrations. During the day, government and trade offices are closed, and the city's residents visit one another to congratulate each other on this occasion which coincides with the 18th day of Di Al Hijja of the Hegira.

The story of al-Ghader

Some books of Sirah (biography) and Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH), say that in the tenth year of Hijra, the Prophet (PBUH) called on people to make the pilgrimage, and he requested them to be present in large numbers. The pilgrimage was called the "Farewell Pilgrimage" The Prophet led the pilgrims and the Muslims performed the rituals under his direct guidance.

At the end of this pilgrimage, the Prophet (PBUH) ordered Bilal Al-Habashi, to call the people to say: "Tomorrow we must all go to Ghader Khum, a crossroads leading to Iraq, Egypt, Sham and Yemen. The day was Thursday the 15th of the hajj month. The caravan was composed of 120 thousand Muslims who arrived in Ghader three days later. It was a very hot day. The Prophet gave the order to take a break and asked Makdad,



The Shrine of Imam Ali

ضريح الإمام علي (ع)

Selmane, Abu Dhar and Ammar to prepare a place to put a minbar (pulpit). It was made of stones but was high enough for all the people to see and hear the Prophet (PBUH). After prayers the Prophet ascended the minbar, and asked Imam Ali to stand on his right. He placed his hand on Ali's shoulder gave a historic speech, his last which lasted

nearly an hour. It was a comprehensive and detailed speech, setting out everything concerning Muslims in their earthly life and in the hereafter. After his speech, he raised the arm of Ali, saying: "Whoever obeys me, here is Ali who that he must obey, dear God support those who obey him and fight those who fight him, love those who love him and ▶

hate those who hate him". He repeated the verse three times. And before the people were dispersed, Gabriel came with the verse: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." (Al Maida, 5/3). Then the Companions of the Prophet, headed to Abu Bakr and Omar, congratulated Imam Ali, saying: "Congratulations O Ben Abi Taleb, you are now our master and the master of all the faithful."

Celebrating the event in Ali's city

Since the mausoleum of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib is located in the holy city of Najaf, all visitors head to this city to get his blessing. People living near Najaf come on foot, others by car or by other means of transport. The people who live in Najaf consider this day as the day of their city with its own feast. It is a great honour for them to serve their visitors. The wealthy, as well as those with limited income, make every effort to offer visitors the best food, shelter and even basic medical care. Thus, food tables, under marques, appear in almost all the districts and streets of the old city. A festive atmosphere and joy reign throughout the city.

Signs of celebration mark all corners of the city and its souks with lamps candles and lamps decorating the homes and streets. The houses are opened to welcome visitors and provide them with every comfort.

All the mausoleum lamps (internal and external) are lit and the night is supremely



The writer in the main souk

الكاتب وسط السوق الكبير



Perfume seller

بائع العطور



Turshi shop

بائع الطرشي



Religious books sold by the side of the street

إقبال على الكتب الدينية التي تباع على جانب الطريق



The main souk

السوق الكبير



Ulama attending the festivities

العلماء يساهمون في الإحتفالات

illuminated around the old city. The flow of visitors is organized to reserve doors for entering and exiting, to ensure a smooth movement and avoid problems arising from congestion.

The major clerics (Marajia) of the Shiite sect open their offices on the morning of the festivities and throughout the day to accommodate the pilgrims who come from different provinces of Iraq and abroad especially from neighbouring countries. The clerics also congratulate each other on this occasion and receive visitors.

The souks of the city are crowded with street vendors, selling their products on the sidewalks among them rosaries, earth pieces used by Shittes for praying, flags, traditional clothes for religious occasions, and photos of mausoleums and clerics.



Book fair

معرض الكتاب

Najafi "Qima"

This city is particularly famous for the dish that its inhabitants prepare called "Qima", made with or without rice, consisting of meat (lamb is preferred) and chickpeas (soaked in water 24 hours earlier). It is put on a low heat and stirred with a wooden spoon, until the meat and chickpeas merge. Spices are also added to give it a specific taste.

The people of Najaf provide this dish to visitors in plastic containers or other utensils. It is an essential part of the ritual and some visitors take it back as a blessing for their families.

We had a chance to eat this delicious dish at a restaurant reserved for employees of the mausoleum of Imam Ali - more than 1200 people. We were considered guests, along with an employee at the Imam Ali library,

who was keen to get us two dishes of qima. Out of politeness we did not ask for a third. It filled us with joy knowing that in this place qima is prepared by experienced cooks who give it their best. They claim they are the best makers of qima and ask the guests for confirmation.

There are also Najaf's famous pastry cakes called "Al-Dahine", a mixture of flour, shredded coconut, sugar and animal fat. The cakes are put on large trays after they are cooked in ovens, and are eaten hot. They cannot always meet the demands of the many visitors who crowd the gates of shops (located mainly in the large souk and on Rasoul Street). Their fame has exceeded Iraq: when the Spanish forces withdraw from the city two

years ago, their commander said he would never forget "Dahine."

If the visitor cannot find Dahine, he may look for Turshi "pickles", usually made with vinegar extracted from apples or dates which is sometimes mixed with pomegranate, giving a sour and sweet taste. Some prefer the sweet, others the sour. The vinegar is often kept for more than a year. The shopkeepers often say: "Three things are best when they are old: vinegar, a bath and a friend."

The book market also thrives during this time, especially in Souk Al Hawish, located a few steps from the mausoleum of Imam Ali. It is an ancient souk, which turned into a book souk, because of its proximity to the mausoleum. It is often packed with visitors ▶

wishing to purchase religious books. Here too, there are vendors offering books on the roadside. Every book is priced at 1000 Iraqi dinars (80 cents), to ensure a quick sale. There are numerous cultural institutions in this city that has been chosen by the Organization of Islamic Congress as the capital of Islamic culture in the year 2012. They compete on this occasion in organizing cultural events, poetry festivals, book exhibitions and paintings. During our visit, we found an exhibition dedicated to the articles of Imam Hussein: models of the battle of Kerbala, photos, maps and everything that was written about Imam Hussein by Arabs or foreigners. The festivities lasted three days and saw the arrival of three million visitors. They were concentrated in the old city, near the mausoleum of Imam Ali. There were huge crowds at the shrine's five doors. Visitors come and pray on this occasion. However, because of congestion, some people are unable to enter. They then perform the ritual of the visit in the courtyard. Some cannot even enter the courtyard, and perform the rituals from the area surrounding the mausoleum. Some visitors come in small groups and chant slogans and songs glorifying this occasion, with regular and rhythmic applause. They are encouraged with shouts of "Allah is Great" and praises for Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) coming from the crowd. Women chant halahel (musical sounds) as an expression of joy on this occasion. After the completion of the rituals, most say goodbye to the city and Imam Ali, their security assured by more than 25,000 police officers and military personnel. ■



Visitors listen to a lecture

الزوار يستمعون إلى محاضرة



Security is very tight

تشدید الأمن في هذا اليوم



Cooking Qima

طبخ القيمة



Serving tea

توزيع الشاي