

[The Battle of Karbala's Significance Today: Shia Islam in the News](#)

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[Last week](#), **BBC Arabic** reported on a conference held in Istanbul on Muslim-Christian relations entitled, "The Arab Awakening and Peace in the New Middle East." During the conference, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan commented, "What happened nearly 1,300 years ago in Karbala is the same thing happening today in Syria."

Erdogan was referring to the **Battle of Karbala**, a pivotal event in Islam during which Hussein bin Ali, grandson of the prophet Muhammad, was killed. Hussein and his supporters were traveling to Kufa to confront Syrian Caliph (Khalifa) Yazid I on his legitimacy as a successor to Muhammad, but were grossly outnumbered by the caliph's forces.

By comparing the current conflict in Syria to the Battle of Karbala, Erdogan may have also implied a reference to similarities between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Yazid I. Yazid inherited power from his father Muawiyah I, a detested figure amongst Shiites and some Sunnis for seizing the caliphate from Muhammad's two grandsons, Hassan and Hussein, who Shiites believe are the prophet's true successors.

The Imams of the largest branches of Shia Islam claim to have descended from the prophet Muhammad through Hussein. The Sunni kings of Morocco and Jordan (and previously the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Iraq) claim to have descended from the elder of the two, Hassan.

The date of Hussein bin Ali's martyrdom, or the **Day of Ashura**, is a holy day in Shia Islam. On Ashura, Shiites make a pilgrimage to Hussein's grave in the Iraqi city of Karbala, and the term *Husseiniyat* refers to the congregation halls in which Shiites mourn him.

In Iraq, **Al-Iraqiya** reported on Thursday that three Husseiniyat in Kirkuk were attacked using car bombs, claiming multiple lives. This was followed by a wave of bombings over the weekend that killed dozens of people, including a number of Shiites in the southern city of Basra. These are the latest in a series of attacks on Iraqi Shiites this summer. Most have been blamed on the Islamic State of Iraq, a Sunni umbrella organization affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, **Al-Alam** reported that a large demonstration was held in the eastern city of al-Qatif to demand the release of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a Shia scholar. Al-Nimr was originally arrested in July following a sermon in which he criticized the royal al-Saud family and called for rejoicing in Crown Prince Nayef's death.

Shiites make up about 15 percent of Saudi Arabians. They reside primarily in Eastern Province, [sharing a sea border and cultural ties with Bahrain](#). Most of the country, including the royal family, follows a conservative branch of Sunni Islam and considers Shiites to be apostates. As such, Shiites have been historically marginalized in the country, and unlike Iraq and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia has never had a sizable Shiite elite. Members of this long-disenfranchised group have been the primary participants in Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring demonstrations.

Image: A Shi'ite pilgrim walks to the holy city of Kerbala to mark Arbain in Baghdad's Doura District January 9, 2012. Arbain falls 40 days after the Shi'ite holy day of Ashura.

REUTERS/Thaier al-Sudani

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