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## Oh Sayyida Zeynab!



When *Société Générale Belge d'Entreprises Electriques* raised its fees for its Damascus customers in 1937, the Syrian

Nationalist Bloc launched a boycott campaign and a strike that lasted 50 days. The Belgian company retreated and its director general, known to Syrians as Constable Costansishe, visited the bloc's offices and posed for a picture with its leaders (amongst them was the famous Fakhri Al-Baroudi and a certain Mahdi Mortada).

So zealous for Syria's independence Mahdi was that he helped hide anti-French activists, an exercise that took him to prison many times. In 1940, during his arrest at the Damascus Castle, he posed for another picture with his comrades: Sayfildin Maamoun, Nabih Al-Azmeh and Najib Al-Rayyess.

After Mahdi's release, his cousin Toufic Mortada – a newly minted judge in Lebanon serving in the predominantly Maronite southern village of Bint Jbeil – sent him a letter and a poem congratulating him for his freedom and urging him to stay the course in the fight for independence.

Mahdi could have been any one of the Damascene notables (who were mostly Sunni), except that Mahdi was a Shiite. And he was the custodian of Sayyida Zeynab, a shrine in a Damascus suburb that Mahdi had turned into a safe house for pro-independence activists since French troops were religiously prohibited from entering this sanctuary.

His cousin, Toufic Mourtada, was another Shiite notable from Lebanon's eastern city of Baalbek. He received his doctorate in law from Switzerland and ascended the ranks of the judiciary. He used his links within the state to help the iconic Imam Mussa Sadr found the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, which supervises Shiite personal status affairs.

So while Alawite notables, mostly in their northern Syrian hinterland, were petitioning the French for continued mandate or an Alawite state separate from Syria, the Shiite sentiment in Damascus and most of Lebanon was somewhere else.

And while the Alawites fought alongside French forces to suppress Syria's independence forces, the Shiites sided with independence and made common cause with the Sunnis and other groups. Unlike the Alawites, the Shiites of Syria were not scared of living in a predominantly Sunni Syria. After all, these were the same Sunnis they had lived with for centuries.

Indeed, the Shiites of the Levant were not born as Iranian sellouts, even if most of them act like ones today.

In the not so distant past, the Shiites might have seen, in newly-created nations like Syria and Lebanon, an opportunity to become

part of the establishment, until then dominated by the Sunnis who had treated them mostly as the underdogs. In fact, up until the Iranian revolution in 1979, Sadr and Lebanon's Shiites fought tooth-and-nail not to dominate or separate, but to assimilate and be recognized as just another native Lebanese group.

Mahdi and Toufic Mortada represented that Shiite trend. The Sayyida Zeynab shrine that they, and their ancestors before them, had managed and supervised for seven centuries became a symbol of Shiite-Sunni unity during the fight for Syrian and Lebanese independence.

But 75 years later, the story of Sayyida Zeynab is being told differently. Even her name is being posted on Shiite websites on social media in its Farsi form, Zeynab Kobra, dropping the required Arabic article of al-Kobra. She is being depicted as the victim of the Sunnis in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, and again as the victim of ongoing Sunni grudge that will lead to the razing of her mausoleum, should the Assad regime fall.

According to the Shiite narrative, Zeynab was the sister of the third Imam Hussein. It's not clear why, in 680 CE, she left her husband in Medina and took her two sons to join her brother in his trip to Kufa, the southern Iraqi village that had served as the seat of the Caliphate of their father Imam Ali (Prophet Mohammad's cousin).

Learning of Hussein's move, the Umayyad Caliph Yazid deployed an army that intercepted his convoy near Karbala before he could reach Kufa to link up with his supporters. After a quick confrontation, Hussein was killed and so were Zeynab's sons.

Since then, Shiites have observed ten days of mourning of Hussein and his companions, during which some of them self-flagellate regretting their failure to rescue him. This procession (Ashura) is one of the holiest Shiite practices and it is being invoked today to encourage young Shiite men, from across the Middle East, to go fight in defense of Zeynab's shrine - lest she faces injustice in her death similar to the one she had to live through 14 centuries ago. This time, the Shiites think they can save Zeynab the humiliating outcome of another Karbala.

After the Battle of Karbala in 680, Zeynab and the other women were taken to Yazid in Damascus. The route usually followed the path of the Euphrates River northwest, then turned south and passed through Baalbek.

After a stop at Yazid's court, Zeynab and the women returned to Mecca, which – a few years later – saw a drought and a famine that forced Zeynab and her husband to take refuge in Damascus. There, Zeynab died and was buried in a spot known as Qaryat

Rawiyah, a name that the suburb held until after Syrian independence. Alternatively, the area was also called Qaryat Al-Sitt or Qabr Al-Sitt.

Despite historic evidence, it is hard to tell fact from fiction in the Zeynab story. Her shrine was erected in the thirteenth century, more than 600 years after her death, with the earliest records suggesting that she was in fact buried in Al-Baqi in Medina.

Also by the thirteenth century, many heterodox Muslim factions (the Shiites included) seem to have been infatuated with female deities to the extent that one ruling dynasty took the name the Fatimids - after Fatima, the daughter of the prophet. Their capital they called Al-Zahera, a corruption of Fatima's nickname Al-Zahraa. In due time, Zahera became Qahera, or Cairo, the capital of Egypt.

So whether the tomb near Damascus actually belongs to Zeynab or not cannot be established with certainty. The location's original name, Rawiyah, means the woman who quenches thirst. This might suggest that the site belonged to a pre-Islamic deity assigned to guard a spring that attracted pilgrims, a practice that persisted after the deity had been transformed into Islamic Zeynab, and even after the spring had dried up.

Zeynab's or not, the tomb has been standing for centuries, and there is no record of past assaults on it, Sunni or otherwise.

But after many centuries of Shiite-Sunni harmony in and around Damascus, the shrine is suddenly making headlines as the flashpoint of the ongoing Shiite-Sunni war.

The transformation of Sayyida Zeynab from a symbol of unity to one of division did not happen overnight. Perhaps it started with the Iranians giving up their nationalist drive and replacing it with an Islamist Shiite platform. Maybe Iran's Ruhollah Khomeini was inspired by the thought of the Muslim Brotherhood – and, like the Gulf largesse that was being extended to Sunnis worldwide – the Iranians thought that creating a similar Shiite network would be in order.

The result was an ensuing "petro-dollar race" that helped sharpen the identities of both the Sunnis and the Shiites, and superimposed these revived affiliations over previous nationalist sentiments in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Nationalism was thus displaced, and it eventually vanished. Modern states melted down and the borderless region became a theater for raw and bloody Sunni-Shiite conflict.

So instead of building on the national unity that Sayyida Zeynab represented in 1940, Syria and Lebanon are back to 680, fighting Karbala one more time – albeit this time in a much brutal way.

In 680, Hussein's entourage was less than 100, and the battle of Karbala took less than three hours. Today, it is unlikely that any such battle will be concluded in hours, days, weeks, or even decades. This is a fight between a quarter of a billion Shiites and one billion Sunnis, both well-funded thanks to petro dollars.

This time Karbala will be much bloodier, and its end does not seem to be in sight. Maybe, doing like the Shiites do, the world should pray to Sayyida Zeynab to intercede and end this war.