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## Pilgrimage and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Interpersonal Contact between Iranians and Iraqis in the Arbaeen Walk<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

Given the history of conflict between Iran-Iraq (1980-1988), the present paper investigates whether interpersonal contact between Iranians and Iraqis, through religious tourism, has assisted in changing the perception of the Iranians toward the Iraqis. To this aim, the researcher chooses the Arbaeen Pilgrimage—the world's largest annual gathering in Karbala—and the interaction of the Iranians with Iraqis as its case study. To observe the cultural contact of foot pilgrims to Karbala, the researcher traveled to Iraq in 2019 for five days to participate in a 78 km walk from Najaf to Karbala. The paper uses semi-structured face-to-face interview as research method. To account for diverse demographic characteristics of pilgrims, potential participants were approached randomly. Overall, 24 interviews with 14 female and 10 male Iranian pilgrims were conducted. Participants comprised Iranian people aged 14 to 57. Each interview lasted from 20-35 minutes. The paper uses integrated threat theory and Contact Theory to analyze the data. It will be argued that under Gordon Allport four optimal conditions-- i.e., a.) equal status; b.) common goals; c.) intergroup cooperation, and d.) support of social and institutional authorities-- intergroup contact between Iranians and Iraqis has helped in reducing prejudice, while diminishing old hostilities.

**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution, Contact Theory, Iran, Iraq, Pilgrimage

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## 1. Introduction

The protracted military conflict between Iran and Iraq began on September 22, 1980 with full-scale invasion of Iran by Iraq. The long-standing territorial disagreement had started in the 1970s and reignited with the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. In July 16, 1979, Saddam Hussein's new Ba'ath party- a Sunni-dominated group, which advocated Arab nationalism and Arab Socialism- came to power in Iraq. Facing instability at home, the new Iraqi leadership assumed to take advantage of Iran's post-revolutionary status to gain a quick victory abroad (Hiro, 1990, p. 71) and to subdue movements of Shia uprisings at home (Khadduri, 1988). By defeating Iran, Saddam believed that he would be able to suppress Shia identity at home and subsume the Arab identity of Iraqis as one nation (Kalantari, 2020, p. 379). Facing unexpectedly strong Iranian resistance, the invasion became the longest and one of the most destructive conventional conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with over a million casualties. The war ended after eight years on August 20, 1988 with the Resolution 598 of the United Nations Security Council, but the two countries did not reinstate normal diplomatic relations until August 16, 1990.

During the war, while both Iran and Iraq had majority Shia populations, the two states emphasized on two distinct identities: Bath's Pan-Arabism and its anti-Iranian precepts, and Iran's Shia-Islamism (Massarrat, 1993). Saddam and the Bath regime contrasted itself from Iran's Persian distinctiveness by frequently depicting the war as a Qādisiyyah<sup>1</sup>. Saddam named provinces, newspapers, and awards after Qādisiyyah and even issued currency, stamps, and medals featuring the battle (Lewental, 2011, p. 390).

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1 A historical struggle between Muslim Arabs and Sassanid Persians who were Zoroastrians during the 630s

Meanwhile, Iran tried to counter the narrative by naming its battles or battalions and division after Shia Imams and Shia epic battles (Gruber, 2009).

Generally, narratives and memories of a once hostile country mutate through times with changes in political and sociocultural relations. One major event that provides researchers with a chance to observe Iranian's perception toward the Iraqi people is the Arbaeen Pilgrimage and the interpersonal contact between Iranians and Iraqis. Although the Iran-Iraq war ended through the 1988 cease-fire, it was not until the fall of Saddam in 2003, when a large number of Iranians began to travel to Iraq to participate in the Arbaeen Walk. While the perception of the Iranians toward Iraq and Iraqis was extremely overshadowed by memories of the war, the Arbaeen Pilgrimage is regarded as a way for reducing intergroup prejudice and enhancement for political convergence and the empowerment of Shia nations (Eslami et al., 2021). Planned contact interventions between groups once in conflict have played an important role in attempts to improve intergroup relations and decrease misunderstandings and enhance cooperation (Bekerman, 2009; Maoz, 2000; Salomon, 2004).

It should be noted that the present paper attempted to capture the perceptions and views of Iranian pilgrims toward Iraq/Iraqis. Iraqis' view towards Iranian pilgrims is absent in this paper and requires further investigation. The researcher attempts to probe if interpersonal contact between Iranians and Iraqis has assisted in changing Iranian's perception toward the Iraqis. To observe cultural contact and conduct interviews of foot pilgrims to Karbala, the researcher traveled to Iraq in 2019 for 5 days to participate in the 78 km walk from Najaf to Karbala and stayed in the Mawakibs-where pilgrims are offered free lodging, food, beverage. To account

for diverse demographic characteristics of pilgrims, potential participants were approached randomly during the five days and nights. Overall, 24 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 14 female and 10 male Iranian pilgrims were conducted. Participants comprised of Iranian people with an age group that ranged from 14 to 57.

### **1. 1. Research Background: The Arbaeen Walk**

The Arbaeen Walk or the Arbaeen Pilgrimage, is considered the world's largest annual gathering held in Karbala, Iraq (Moufahim, 2013; Piggot, 2014) commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> day of the mourning of martyrdom of the third Shia Muslim Imam, and grandson of the Prophet, Hussein ibn Ali, in 61 AH (680 AD) in the Battle of Karbala. The martyrdom of Imam Hussein, with his 72 companions by the armies of Yazid, is regarded as the most significant and symbolic event in the Islamic history and plays an integral role in Shia identity.

Prior to his death, Muawiyah, the Umayyad caliph, appointed his son Yazid, as his successor, the first hereditary succession to the caliphate in the history of Islam. Yazid, was known for his deliberate and open violation of divine laws, political ineptness and corruption (Ja'fari, 2018). As a result, Hussein ibn Ali refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid and left Medina for Mecca, following Yazid's failed attempts to receive his allegiance (Ayati, 2014).

Imam Hussein stayed in Mecca for about five months, where he received letters from the people of Kufa (in Iraq), inviting him to Kufa and expressing their willingness to support him as their leader. On September 9, 680 AH, Imam left Mecca for Kufa with approximately fifty men and his family members. However, on his

way to Kufa, Hussein ibn Ali received the news of the execution of Ibn Aqil, his messenger and representative, and that the people of Kufa had broken their promise to support him (Rizivi, 2017).

Imam's caravan was forced to head north and encamp in the plain of Karbala, west of the Euphrates River, on October 2. Hussein ibn Ali's small group of companions faced an Umayyad army of 4,000 which denied them access to water for three days. After a series of failed negotiations and refusing to allow Hussein ibn Ali's caravan safe passage without submitting to Umayyad army, the Battle of Karbala ensued on October 13, 680 AH, on the Day of Ashura (the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Muharram). Imam and his 72 companions were massacred, their bodies mutilated, and the tents of the families were attacked, looted and set on fire. The surviving family members were taken captives; the army lifted the heads of the martyrs onto spears and took them along with the captives to Kufa and then to Yazid in Damascus. The Day of Arbaeen (translates to fortieth day), is the day when Hussein-ibn-Ali's family returned to Karbala to bid farewell to the fallen heroes and grieve for their loved ones forty days after Imam's martyrdom. It is believed that the day has been observed since 680 AD to present. Meanwhile, the practice has been abandoned or banned in different historical periods. About a hundred years ago, the tradition was revived in Iraq. However, under Saddam Hussein, Arbaeen performance was forbade and violently suppressed for nearly 30 years (Nasr, 2006, pp. 18-19), although Iraqi Shia population made attempts to secretly maintain the tradition. With the fall of Saddam in 2003, the Iraqi Shia started making pilgrimage on foot from all over the country to Karbala.

The pilgrim's population has increased drastically since its reinstatement from over two million in 2004 (Steele, 2003) to 17–

21 million participants in 2019 before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic (Abdul-Zahra & Mizban, 2019; Mujtaba Husein, 2018; Sims, 2016). In 2003-2004, most of the pilgrims were Iraqis. With the opening of the borders, Shias from around the world, including Pakistan, India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Syria travelled to Iraq to observe Arbaeen; their numbers have since steadily grown; still majority of the pilgrims are Iraqis and Iranians.

Pilgrims start their journey on foot to Karbala almost two weeks before Arbaeen, whose dates vary annually as determined by the Islamic Lunar Calendar. There are several routes to reach Karbala depending on the departure point of the pilgrims. Iraqis from towns and villages all over Iraq make their way to Karbala on foot. Some of the pilgrims come from cities as far as Basra, about 500 kilometers distance. Non-Iraqis mostly arrive at Najaf and Bagdad airport and walk the 80 km distance from Najaf to Karbala. Along the routes pilgrims are welcomed by those who voluntarily donate various free products and services and are accommodated in numerous tents (Mawakebs), as this is a perceived way to attract divine blessings. On the way, pilgrims hold collective mourning processions to pay tribute to Imam Hussain sacrifice (Morrow, 2021).

Prior to the Arbaeen walk, Iranian and Iraqi officials, and members of the Interior Ministry hold several meetings to cooperate and organize the large number of pilgrims that enter the three land borders namely of Shalamchah, Chazabeh, and Mehran and Najaf and Bagdad airport. To facilitate the trip, the visa requirement for travel between Iran and Iraq has been recently waived. To further assist the pilgrims, Iranian and Iraqi officials have decided to launch the route with one train a week that intends

to take the pilgrims from Tehran to the border city of Shalamcheh in Khorramshahr, where they will travel 30 kilometers by bus to Basra in Iraq and then take a train to Karbala.

## **1. 2. Theoretical Background: Integrated Threat Perception and Contact Theory**

The present analysis uses both integrated threat theory and intergroup contact theory to analyze the data. Integrated threat theory draws findings from Allport's contact hypothesis, which argues that power relations/ dynamics can affect the way in which groups perceive one another. In fact, Allport's four optimal conditions-- i.e., a.) equal status; b.) common goals; c.) intergroup cooperation, and d.) support of social and institutional authorities, assist in improving negative perceptions. It should be noted that perceived threats include all threats that group members believe they are experiencing, regardless of whether the threats actually exist.

*Integrated Threat Theory*, proposed by Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan, argues that "an intergroup threat is experienced when members of one group perceive that another group is in a position to cause them harm" (Stephan & Stephan, 1984, p. 44). Early studies in *integrated Threat Theory* assume four types of threats in intergroup relations: 1) realistic; 2) symbolic; 3) intergroup anxiety; and 4) negative stereotypes (Stephan et al., 2015, p. 215). Realistic threats are those that target a group's power, resources, and general welfare, while a symbolic threat is defined as that, which targets a group's religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview (Stephan et al, 2015). Intergroup anxiety refers to the experience of being

personally threatened during intergroup interactions, and negative stereotypes are used as a strategy for simplifying a complex situation by relying on popular, preset judgments. The current approach of intergroup threat theory emphasizes realistic and symbolic threats (Stephan, Renfro, & Davis, 2009). In their revisions, they consider negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety as potential antecedents of realistic and symbolic threats, suggesting that negative stereotypes occur *prior* to realistic threats, symbolic threats, and intergroup anxiety.

Intercultural Contact Theory, also called the contact hypothesis, explores effective solutions to reduce intergroup prejudice, whether and under what conditions intergroup contact reduces or diminishes hostility and reduces perceptions of threat based on intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Scholars began to theorize about intergroup contact and the way in which it can help in reducing perceived threat from the “other” after the World War II. In *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Gordon Allport, as the originator of the Intergroup Contact Theory, suggested that housing and workplace desegregation in the United States reduces prejudice toward black people. Allport’s intergroup contact hypothesis has inspired a significant amount of research with a remarkable increase in recent years. Social scientists have sought for causes that people harbor, and express prejudice against outgroups, and how programs and policies might reduce the prejudice (Watson, 1947; Williams, 1947; Pettigrew, 1971; Stephan & Stephan, 1984) which is widely known and researched more recently (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Wagner & Hewstone, 2012, Pettigrew, 2016). A meta-analysis of more than 500 studies on the prejudice reduction literature is conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008, p. 751) on the effects of intergroup contact, in which



the authors conclude “[t]here is little need to demonstrate further contact’s general ability to lessen prejudice. Results from the meta-analysis conclusively show that intergroup contact can promote reductions in intergroup prejudice”.

Allport (1954), as the originator of the Intergroup Contact Theory, elaborates on four optimal conditions, under which intergroup contact can help in reducing the prejudice and lead to positive effects: a.) equal status; b.) common goals; c.) intergroup cooperation; and d.) support by social and institutional authorities. Allport believes that in the absence of an optimal condition, contact might strengthen stereotypical views of outgroups and even increase negative sentiments.

Defining the notion of “equal status” is problematic, and scholars have different ways for its definition (Riordan, 1978). It is argued that both groups must perceive themselves as equal in the situation (Riordan & Ruggiero, 1980; Cohen, 1982; Robinson & Preston, 1976), or the groups should be of equal status when coming into the contact situation (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). It is claimed that equal status in the situation effectively increases positive intergroup attitudes even when the groups initially differ in status (Patchen, 1982; Schofield, 1989). Allport argues that a group is often positively motivated toward an effective contact when the involved individuals share a common and collective goal. This will increase the cooperation between individuals to achieve the goal. In order to achieve the common goal, intergroup cooperation is required: Cooperation creates collaboration rather than competition (Sherif et al., 1961).

Moreover, intergroup contact will be more effective when backed and supported by authorities and social institutions.

Authority can establish norms of acceptance and rules for the way in which members of different groups should interact. Meanwhile, Pettigrew & Tropp argue that Allport's four optimal conditions should be perceived as facilitating rather than essential and that even in situations where these conditions are not met, unstructured contact reduces prejudice (2006). It is argued that both the amount (the extended contact hypothesis) and quality of contact between groups have the potential to affect feelings of perceived threat as contact provides information about the other group (Paluck & Green, 2009; Tropp & Mallett, 2011).

Meanwhile, Intergroup Contact Theory's positive outcome and its practical applications are subject to criticism for several reasons: while face-to-face (direct) intergroup contact is promising, it is suggested that such contact might strengthen stereotypical views of out-groups, increase negative sentiments, and heighten stress and anxiety (Dixon et al., 2005). Furthermore, most researchers tend to focus on outcomes that can be measured immediately after intervention and whether the effects of contact can endure for days, weeks, months, or years is questionable (Paluck & Green, 2009). Moreover, prejudiced people may often avoid contact with members of other social groups (Scacco & Warren, 2018, p. 655), which can question the generalizability of such research outcomes.

### **1. 3. Research Method and Research Questions**

Interviewing assists the researcher in building a comprehensive view of a phenomenon in a natural setting. It also enables the researcher to analyze words, report detailed views of informants, and hear the different points of views of the interviewees "in their own voice", as they "express their own thoughts and feelings"

(Lune & Berg, 2018, p. 96). Holstein and Gubrium (2001) consider interviewing as an active method, which is not one-sided and arbitrary, and thus is considered a meaning-making occasion. Interviews are more powerful than questionnaires in eliciting narrative data, and enable researchers to investigate people's views in greater depth (Kvale & Horvath-Neimeyer, 1998, p. 219).

To conduct semi-structured interviews of foot pilgrims to Karbala, the researcher traveled to Iraq in 2019 for 5 days (from October 14-19) to participate in the walk from Najaf to Karbala and stayed in the Mawakibs. All participants were Iranians; thus, the interviews were conducted in Farsi and translated into English by the researcher. Each interview lasted from 20 to 35 minutes, and each interviewee was asked four questions. The reason for keeping the interviews within that time limit was that with longer interviews there was a risk that the interviewee would get distracted or lose interest. The researcher also found that most participants did not want to answer too many questions.

The participants were informed about the affiliation of the researcher, the topic, and the importance of this research in relation to the current state of affairs between Iran and Iraq. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Interviews were conducted in a conversational style, in an attempt to keep the participants relaxed and informal. Interviews were recorded with the consent and permission of the interviewee; notes were taken, and later the interviews were transcribed for analysis. The interviewees also included people from different education levels and different occupations. It should be noted that the collected data is not a nationally representative sample of the Iranian population and their interactions with their fellow Iraqis, but rather a subsample of religiously observant Iranians.

Meanwhile, those who participate in the Arbaeen walk are composed of wide socioeconomic spectrum as well as diverse regional backgrounds.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample**

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Socio-Eco Status	Education	Number of Visits
P1	Female	31	Middle-High	Bachelor	5
P2	Male	41	Middle	<i>Diploma</i>	8
P3	Female	36	Middle	MA Student	2
P4	Male	51	Middle	<i>Diploma</i>	8
P5	Female	35	Low-Middle	Bachelor	4
P6	Female	55	Middle	<i>Diploma</i>	3
P7	Male	28	Middle	Bachelor	6
P8	Female	20	Middle	University Student	1
P9	Male	30	Low-Middle	Graduate School	5
P10	Female	33	Middle-High	University Student	2
P11	Female	54	Middle	<i>Upper-Secondary Education</i>	2
P12	Female	22	Middle	BA Student	4
P13	Female	14	Upper Middle	High School Student	2
P14	Female	17	Upper Middle	High School Student	2
P15	Female	23	Upper Middle	BS	1
P16	Male	24	Middle	MA Student	7
P17	Female	35	Middle	MA	4
P18	Male	19	Middle	<i>Diploma</i>	1
P19	Male	46	Low-Middle	<i>Diploma</i>	4
P20	Female	25	Middle	Bachelor	1
P21	Male	57	Upper Middle	PhD	5
P22	Male	22	Low-Middle	BA Student	2
P23	Male	48	Middle	<i>Upper-Secondary Education</i>	4
P24	Female	37	Middle	PhD	2

Source: Authors' Data

Questions were designed to elicit information relating to participant's backgrounds as well as the research's theoretical framework.

The research is concerned with whether Iranians contact with the out-group (in this case the Iraqis) had helped in decreasing/increasing or moderate threat perception and prejudice toward a nation that was once in conflict with Iran? In accordance with the research's theoretical framework, the following questions were asked from the interviewees:

1. Given the history of 8-year war with Iran, do you consider Iraq/Iraqis as a threat to Iran's stability? (Realistic threat)
2. Do you think Iraq/Iraqis can pose a threat to Iranian values and worldviews? If so, could you explain why? (Symbolic threat)
3. Have you personally experienced threat during your interactions with the Iraqis? (Intergroup anxiety)
4. What positive/negative adjectives come to your mind when you think of Iraq/ Iraqis? (Stereotypes).

## **2. Research Observations**

### **2. 1. Realistic and Symbolic Threat Perception**

As explained, realistic threat perception is defined as a threat to the actual well-being of groups/individuals i.e. land, security, health, wealth, and employment (*Zárate et al., 2004*). The researcher tried to assess the interviewee's realistic threat perception by asking them that given the history of the Iran-Iraq war if they view Iraq/Iraqis as a threat to Iran's stability.

Almost all interviewees, unanimously did not consider Iraq/Iraqis as a realistic threat to Iran. They provided different reasons for their views: some of them thought that post-Saddam

Iraq has turned into a Shia-friendly country and that “the two Shia ideologies would never get into a conflict with one another” (author interview, Iraq, October 16, 2019). They argued that Iraq’s conflict with Iran was against the Saddam's Baath regime and not with the Iraqi people. According to one of the interviewees, “I think the Arbæen Walk has created a feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood among Iraqis and Iranians. This intimacy will prevent any future conflicts. We have become united and will protect one another against external forces” (female, 54 year-old, middle class, Upper-secondary education).

Interestingly, some of the interviewees were among those who were directly affected by the Iran-Iraq war. As one of them states:

*I was forced to leave my hometown Kermanshah as a result of Saddam’s invasion. I sometimes hold grudges against Iraq and Iraqis but whenever I come here for pilgrimage...and face Iraqis’ hospitality...I think we should try to understand them...they were hurt through the war too* (female, 55 year-old, middle class, Diploma).

The other group argued that Iran has become a regional superpower and a superior power compared to Iraq. In their view, Iran’s power will prevent Iraq from considering any future invasion. In the words of one of the interviewees, “Iran is making a close alliance with the Iraqi government. Iraq will need Iran’s help and assistance in keeping its borders secure” (female, 14 year-old, upper middle, high school student). Another interviewee referred to potential foreign interventions through Iraq’s soil against Iran, but according to him, “Iraqi people would not cooperate with foreign agents against Iran. Things have changed since the Iran-Iraq war. Iran has turned into a regional superpower (male, 46 year-old, low-middle class, diploma). Many interviewees constantly referred to

Iran's role in fighting the ISIS in Iraq, "Iran and Iraq collaborated in fighting \ the ISIS, our common enemy" (male, 22 year-old, low middle class, BA student).

Symbolic threats are defined as threats that an out-group poses to the in-group's core values, morals, beliefs, attitudes, and norms (Stephan et al., 2000). Symbolic threats are thus strongly tied to a group's sense of identity. The researcher tried to probe the interviewee's symbolic threat perception by asking them if they consider Iraqis values and views posing a threat to that of the Iranians.

None of the interviewees maintained that Iraq and their interactions with the Iraqi people pose a symbolic threat. Some of the interviewees pointed to religious similarities between Iranians and the Iraqis. For them, while Iranians and Iraqis are two countries with significant cultural and social dissimilarities, but Shi'ism transcends all differences. One of the interviewees maintained, "Iran and Iraq are able to revive Islamic civilization, which will pave the way for the reappearance of Imam al-Mahdi, the twelfth Shia Imam. The Arbaeen walk is a Shia movement for preparing the coming of Imam" (female, 35 year-old, middle class, MA).

A number of interviewees argued that Iranians have the ability to affect the Iraqi culture, but are not affected by their culture. They refer to the way in which Iraqis have changed and adapted themselves in order to host the Iranian guests, "Iraqi women who have welcomed us to their houses ask us how they can change their cooking style or food's flavor to suite Iranians' taste. I regularly travel to Iraq for the Arbaeen Walk and I have seen how they have changed and are becoming more like Iranians every year" (female, 36 year-old, middle class, MA student). Several interviewees have

mentioned that they have made growing friendships with Iraqi families, which whom they have stayed during the Arbaeen Walk. They too have hosted Iraqi families at their houses in Iran, so that they can stay with them and visit Qom and Mashhad<sup>1</sup>. A number of the interviewees favored increased interaction between the two countries, including exchange on tourism, culture, trade, and education.

## 2. 2. Intergroup Anxiety and Negative Stereotypes

Stephan & Stephan (1984) define intergroup anxiety as negative expectations of discrimination, rejection or fear of offensive behavior from the out-group. Accordingly, the in-group expects negative consequences of interaction that might befall them in the course of interaction through out-group community. As a result, individuals avoid contact with the out-group or in case of contact, they have the tendency to interpret the out-group's behavior in a way that confirms their previously held stereotypes (Wilder & Simon, 2001). Additionally, there is a direct association between negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety: negative stereotypes can strengthen anxiety in direct face-to-face interactions. To assess intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes of the Iranian pilgrims, the researcher asked if they have personally experienced threat or anxiety during their interactions with the Iraqis and what positive/negative adjectives comes to their minds when they think of Iraq/ Iraqis.

None of the interviewees had any personal experience of being threaten during his/her journey; in fact, they emphasized on the

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1. The two major religious destination in Iran



way in which they have felt complete security among Iraqi families and hosts. As one of them explained, “when you are walking towards Karbala, you can leave all your belongings unattended and be sure that no one would steal them” (female, 37 year-old, middle class, PhD). A female pilgrim mentioned that, “the Iraqis take pride in their hospitality and protect women and children who are their guests and Imam Hussain’s guests; they will try to make sure that no one will disrespect female guests” (male, 51 year-old, middle class, diploma).

Intergroup anxiety can also be reflected in nervousness or awkwardness when engaging the out-group or anticipating such engagement (Stephan, 2014). The direct contact can also lead to new challenges and potential misunderstandings. Evidently, those who were traveling for the first time were more willing to stay in Mawakebs that were organized and supervised by the Iranians. When asked why they prefer to stay with the Iranian pilgrims in Iranian Mawakebs, many of them mentioned their inability to speak Arabic and communicate with their host and thus feeling uncomfortable. Some of them believed that Iranian Mawakebs take extra health and hygiene measures to ensure their safety and health. On the contrary, those who were frequent Arbaeen walkers mentioned that they prefer to stay with Iraqi families and in their houses to make new friends. When asked if they know Arabic, some reported that they knew enough Arabic to communicate or have learnt Arabic through frequent traveling to Iraq. A few reported that Iraqis have learnt key Persian words and expressions for effective communication with the Iranians.

Five interviewees mentioned that Iraqi’s respect and hospitality towards Iranians diminishes as the Arbaeen day passes, according to one of the interviewees,

As an Iranian pilgrim, I can say that you experience two Iraqs: one is the pre-Arbaeen Iraq and the other is the post-Arbaeen Iraq. After the Arbaeen you have a feeling that your presence is no longer tolerated. In fact, if you travel to Iraq any time other than Arbaeen, you will experience a completely different Iraq (male, 51 year-old, middle class, diploma).

One of the interviewees provides a possible explanation, “Well...Iranians’ long staying in Iraq becomes a financial burden for this people. They spend whatever they have for the love of Imam Hussein but when Arabeen ends, there is no reason why they should provide free services” (Female, 35 year-old, middle class, MA). Another interviewee states that, “When the Iranian currency lost its value, Iraqis behavior toward Iranian pilgrims started to change...I think they prefer more affluent pilgrims.” (male, 48 year-old, middle class, upper-secondary education). When the interviewees were asked what positive adjectives comes to their minds when they think of Iraq/ Iraqis, the most frequent attributes were: hospitality, generosity, sincerity, kindness, simplicity, adaptability to their guest’s needs, respect toward pilgrims, and keeping their houses open to visting pilgrims. There were negative attributes including lack of hygiene, religious biases, lack of organization, and failure to fulfill promises.

### **3. Analysis and Concluding Remarks**

Iranian’s relations with the Iraqis during the Arbaeen walk constitute a unique, real-world context, within which one can test contact effects between the two countries that have a history of adversary, and yet, are now economically and socio-politically interconnected. Given Allport’s four optimal conditions under

which intergroup contact can help in reducing prejudice and lead to positive effects, this study discussed that direct contact among Iranians and Iraqis has often resulted in more positive out-group attitudes. This contact is strongly supported by the authorities of the two nations, despite their sometimes divergent views about foreign policy priorities in the bilateral agenda. According to Allport, support by relevant authorities establishes norms of acceptance. Such norms should encourage friendly and egalitarian attitudes and keep away ingroup-outgroup oppositional dichotomy and competition.

The equal status condition, although difficult to define, is regarded as an important component of the Arbaeen Walk. People with different ideas, economic and social status, ethnicity and age collaborate. During the walk, through cooperative relationship, individuals expect and perceive equal status in a voluntary contact situation, and are engaged in intimate interaction with one another toward a common goal, to fulfill the pilgrimage. Pettigrew (1998) has suggested that if the contact provides an opportunity for friendship, or potential repeated and extensive contact, positive outcomes are even more possible. As pointed out, several interviewees have made growing friendships with Iraqi families during the Arbaeen Walk, and have hosted Iraqi families at their houses in Iran. Moreover, knowledge of a positive relationship between members of the in-group and out-group can reduce negative expectations about future interactions with the out-group. This was observed among the interviewees, when a number of them mentioned that the main reason for venturing the Arbaeen Walk was positive experiences and anecdotes they had heard from friends and relatives about the spiritual journey and Iraqi's hospitality.

According to Stephan et al. (2015), realistic and symbolic threat perceptions are often highly correlated and frequently coexist. Meanwhile, it is also possible for out-groups “to elicit realistic threat but not symbolic threat, or vice versa” (Stephan et al., 2015, p. 215). As argued previously, for the interviewees Iraq/Iraqis are perceived as neither realistic nor symbolic threats. It appeared that realistic threat perception of Iranians toward Iraq/Iraqis has diminished as a result of the fall of Saddam’s Ba’ath Party, Iran’s growing regional confidence, and Iran-Iraq’s close cooperation in fighting the ISIS. The interviewees do not see Iraq/Iraqis as particularly threatening in power or material resources. Nevertheless, power dynamics can affect a groups’ perception of threat about the out-group. This was mentioned by some of the interviewees, who feared that Iraq might be used by a third country or party to pose a threat towards Iran’s interests and borders in future. In addition, many of the interviewees highlighted visible differences between themselves and the Iraqis. However, almost all of them maintained that Iraq’s common Islamic/Shia values make it unlikely to turn Iraq into a source of symbolic threat.

Those interviewees who had more frequent interactions with the Iraqis (those who have traveled to Iraq more than three times), seems to have developed more complicated views toward Iraq/Iraqis. While it is believed that optimal condition facilitates the positive effects of intergroup contact and a greater reduction in intergroup bias, the researcher observed that *negative stereotypes* were strengthened among some of the interviewees (such as claiming that Iraqis have religious biases, lack organization, and fail to fulfill promises). The reason that might explain this sentiment is that the majority of the interviewees that were traveling to Iraq for the first or second time preferred to stay in

Iranian Mawakebs, therefore had less interaction with their Iraqi hosts. Language barriers constitute a major issue in dealings between Iranians and Iraqis: this causes misunderstandings, frustration and miscommunications. While certain Iranians try to speak Arabic, the meaning of words and phrases can be misunderstood when spoken with an unfamiliar accent.

Finally, the present paper attempted to capture perceptions and views of self-identified religious Iranians toward Iraq/Iraqis, and is not representative of the entire Iranian population's views toward Iraq. Prejudiced people simply avoid intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 2008). Therefore, talking to Iranians who have never traveled to Iraq and comparing their responses and views to this group can yield more comprehensive results. In addition, the Iraqi views of Iranian pilgrims is also absent in the present paper and requires further attention.

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