

of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Imām Ḥusayn, and Jesus, who were said to share in common the venerable qualities of justice, self-sacrifice, divine guidance, and so on. At the same time, though, it was difficult to overlook the enormous television screen positioned directly above the tent where the discussion was being held, tuned conspicuously to a ‘Āshūrā’ address by Ḥasan Naṣrallāh broadcast live on Ḥizballāh’s pan-Shi‘a satellite television station, *Al-Manār* (*The Beacon*). In it he cursed the despicable, Yazīd-like Israelis for their then-ongoing military offensive in Gaza, reminding one that for all the efforts at spiritual reconciliation, the realities of domestic and regional politics were never far away.

For those looking to make a real political statement, the venue of choice is the early morning of the tenth of Muḥarram, in the wake of the almost hysterical mourning at the death of Ḥusayn earlier that night and preceding the much-awaited performance of *ḥaydar* later on after sunrise.⁶⁹ Since the mid-1990s it is an anomaly if at least one political activist is not arrested for an ardent anti-government speech at this the zenith of ‘Āshūrā’ and of the entire month of Muḥarram. The year I attended the outcome would be no different. The keynote speaker was rumored to be ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, who shortly before 2:30 AM duly arrived outside his namesake mosque in the Manama Sūq district. Despite his being from a prominent Shi‘i family that gives its name to the large and beautifully-adorned mosque and attendant *ma’tam*, ‘Abd al-Hādī has no claim whatsoever to religious authority, his popular following mainly a result of his well-known foundational role with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and, even more so, because of a brazen 2004 attack on the country’s prime minister—the uncle of the current king, he has held the position since independence in 1971 and among the Shi‘a is comfortably the most hated and feared man in Bahrain, his name rarely uttered, certainly not in public—an unheard-of verbal assault that landed him in prison for one year.⁷⁰ In fact, far from a political asset, the little religious affiliation that al-Khawājah does have, as an adherent

⁶⁹ Indeed, it is no coincidence that Khomeini himself chose this exact date to voice his first attack on the Shah in June 1963 during the so-called Khordad uprising (LOUËR 2008, 187 n. 32). The mass street protests of December 1978 that led to the downfall of the Iranian regime some two months later began on the twelfth of Muḥarram, spurred on by an oral communiqué issued by Khomeini on November 23 titled “Muharram: The triumph of blood over the sword,” which opened thusly (in *Islam and Revolution*, 2002, Hamid Algar, trans., New York: Kegan Paul):

With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self sacrifice — the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the bayonet (242).

⁷⁰ For more about the incident, see “Bahrain: Activist Jailed After Criticizing Prime Minister,” 2004, Human Rights Watch, September 28. Available at: <<http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/29/bahrai9413.htm>>.

FIGURE 3.8. *Huge crowds pack the streets adjoining the al-Khawājah Mosque in anticipation of ‘Abd al-Hādī’s speech*



of the minority Shirāzī faction of Shi‘ism, is in Bahrain rather a liability. It is a testament, then, to his political cache that he is able still to command such a general audience as the one that convened on this unusually frigid January night to hear him speak.

The title of al-Khawājah’s address, the text of which would soon be posted to various opposition websites along with video capturing much of the event,⁷¹ was “How the Sacrifices of al-Ḥusayn Exposed ‘the Ruling Gang’ and Toppled It from Power.”⁷² It began by invoking the “anniversary of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, son of the Prophet’s daughter,” and “the anniversary of the Battle of ‘Āshūrā’, wherein the corrupt ‘Umayyad regime carried out the murder of al-Ḥusayn and his companions from the House of the Prophet Muḥammad.” “On this great occasion,” he appealed to “all who are free”—“from every stream or sect,” “from any social class, whether rich or poor,” to “men, women, and the elderly”—he called upon them all as he called upon himself, to “stand together, to demand reform, to support what is right,

⁷¹ The video has since been uploaded to YouTube and features a quite heated argument in the comments section. See “الناشط عبد الهادي الخواجة: فالنسقط العاصابة الحاكمة” [“Activist ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah: ‘Let’s Take Down the Ruling Gang’”]. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rC8ANW0UarU>>.

⁷² ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, 2009, “تضحيات الحسين تفضح العصابة الحاكمة وتسقطها من الحكم” [“How the Sufferings of al-Ḥusayn Exposed ‘the Ruling Gang’ and Toppled It from Power”], unpublished address delivered in Manama near the al-Khawājah Mosque, January 7.

to promote virtue and prevent vice, all in the name of the martyr al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī.”⁷³ He beseeched his listeners “to disengage psychologically from the unjust regime, and to refuse to give it allegiance or to allow it to rule on the necks of the people,” “to break promises ... and humiliate the people, to employ mercenaries [brought in] from everywhere in order to impose itself on the necks of [its] subjects.” For “when the orders came from Yazīd bin Ma‘āwiyah to his governor in Medina,” he continued, “that he should take an oath from al-Ḥusayn or else lop off his head, al-Ḥusayn proclaimed his political disobedience and refused to swear allegiance, and [instead] prepared himself for his own sacrifice, and for that of his family (*ahl baytihi*).”⁷⁴ And this political defiance, al-Khawājah said, was not aimed at the person of the ‘Umayyad ruler, Yazīd, “but at the entire ‘Umayyad regime. So when al-Ḥusayn addressed the enemy’s army he referred to them, saying, ‘O! Partisans of Āl Sufyān!’”⁷⁵ and did not say ‘partisans of Yazīd.’” Accordingly, the introduction concluded, “the result of the sufferings of al-Ḥusayn in the Battle of Karbalā’ was the fall of the ‘Umayyad Empire, a regime that would last no longer than 90 years, inundated by revolutions brought on by the Movement of al-Ḥusayn.”⁷⁶

The next section of the speech, titled “Sectarian Alignment and Political Alignment,” cautions listeners against assuming they are part of the solution, participants in the Movement

⁷³ It is ironic of course that people from “all streams and sects” should be called to action in the name of such a quintessentially Shi‘i figure. The corresponding text of the speech, of which portions are omitted above, reads:

في ذكرى استشهاد الحسين (ع)، ابن بنت رسول الله (ص)، وسبط الرسول وحببيه ..
 في ذكرى واقعة عاشوراء، حيث قام النظام الاموي الفاسد بقتل الحسين واصحابه من أهل بيت النبي محمد (ص) ..
 في هذه المناسبة العظيمة ..
 اتوجه بالنداء: الى كل حر، والى كل صاحب ضمير حي، من اي مذهب او طائفة، ومن اية طبقة اجتماعية، غنيا كان او فقيرا، ..
 اتوجه الى الشباب والنساء والشيوخ ..
 اتوجه لهم جميعا .. واطالب نفسي واطالبهم ..
 بالوقوف صفا واحدا: لطلب الاصلاح، ونصرة الحق، والامر بالمعروف، والنهي عن المنكر، تيمنا بالحسين بن علي الشهيد (ع) ..

⁷⁴ The corresponding text, which again contains some omissions, reads:

اتوجه لهم لفك الارتباط النفسي والمصلحي بنظام الحكم الظالم، ورفض مبايعته، وعدم الاقرار له بالحكم على رقاب الناس، ما دام ..
 يغدر، ويخلف الوعود، ويستأثر بالفئى ويذل الناس، ويستعين بالمرتزقة من كل مكان، ليفرض نفسه على رقاب العباد.
 فحين جاءت الاوامر من يزيد بن معاوية، الى واليه على المدينة المنورة بان يأخذ البيعة من الحسين او يقطع رأسه، اعلن الحسين ..
 العصيان السياسي ورفض المبايعه، وهياً نفسه للتضحية بنفسه واهل بيته.

⁷⁵ That is, the dynasty to which Yazīd belongs, known collectively as the “Sufyanids” after his grandfather Abū Sufyān. Notice the clever use of “Āl Sufyān,” itself not unusual but inevitably suggestive of “Āl Khalīfa.”

⁷⁶ The complete corresponding text is:

و لم يكن الحسين في عصيانه السياسي يستهدف شخص الحاكم الاموي يزيد، بل كان يستهدف النظام الاموي برمته. فهو حين خاطب جيش العدو ناداهم بالقول: يا شيعة آل سفيان .. ولم يقل يا شيعة يزيد.

و كانت نتيجة تضحيات الحسين في واقعة كربلاء، سقوط نظام الحكم الاموي، حيث لم يعمر هذا النظام اكثر من تسعين عاما، كانت تموج بالثورات التي تمخضت عن حركة الحسين (ع).

of al-Ḥusayn, simply because they happen to be Shi'is. "Know," he said after a brief historical review, "that the Shi'a of al-Ḥusayn's Movement are they who stood by him and supported him against political and social injustice, and not all those who identified with *ahl al-bayt* historically or doctrinally or psychologically": "for you may be of the Ja'afarī sect doctrinally-speaking, or of Twelverism ideologically-speaking, but at the same time you might be one of the partisans (*shī'ah*) of Āl Sufyān, or of any ruling gang who enslaves [its] people and sheds [their] blood." Thus, he warned in language that mirrored almost exactly that of the controversial 'Āshūrā' banner treated earlier,

The differentiation of people in our society today between Ḥusaynīs (*ḥusaynīn*) and Yazīdīs (*yazīdīn*) is not based on the sect inherited from [their] fathers and grandfathers, nor the school of jurisprudence they rely on in their individual worship, but rather on [their] political and social stance embodied by the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice: the taking charge by the people of the right and of what is good (*ahl al-ḥaqq wa al-khayr*), and the washing of [one's] hands of oppressors and the people of vice (*ahl al-munkar*).

For ordinary people in their dealings with any ruling gang are of two types: there is the one who puts principle and values first but perhaps is involved with the oppressor in earning a living or in his political and social activity; yet there is on the other hand the one who puts his own self-interest first, even at the expense of what is right and true (*al-ḥaqq*) and of the people's best interests. And each of them will reveal his true nature when the injustice ... and the bloodshed becomes too much, and then he either will be of the Shi'a of al-Ḥusayn in his opinions and sacrifices, or he will be of the Shi'a of Āl Sufyān. And so a battle like that of Karbalā' is necessary to reveal every human [type], in front of himself and in front of others.⁷⁷

With this statement of what might be called the thesis of the entire address, 'Abd al-Hādī moved on to his longest and most substantive section: "The Ruling Gang and the Necessity of Uprooting it from Power Whatever the Cost in Effort and Sacrifices." Here the subject "the ruling gang" transitioned naturally from the corrupt 'Umayyad dynasty, in which the right to rule "moves within one family from father to son, and which looted booty and lands, and

⁷⁷ The corresponding text, which concludes with an arcane aphorism attributed to Ḥusayn that I did not translate, is:

وهكذا فإن تمايز الناس في مجتمعنا اليوم الى حسينييين ويزيديين، ليس على اساس المذهب الذي ورثوه من الآباء والاجداد، او المدرسة الفقهية التي يتبعونها في عباداتهم الفردية، وانما على اساس الموقف السياسي الاجتماعي المتمثل في الامر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر، وتولي اهل الحق والخير، والتبرئ من الظالمين واهل المنكر.

ان عامة الناس في تعاملهم مع اية عصابة حاكمة على صنفين: فهناك من يضع المبادئ والقيم اولا ولكنه قد يتداخل مع الظالم في كسب معيشتة او في نشاطه السياسي والاجتماعي، ولكن هناك في المقابل من يضع منافع الشخصية اولا ولو على حساب الحق ومصالح الناس. ويتميز جميع هؤلاء وينكشف معدنهم عندما يستفحل الظلم وتنتهك الاعراض او تسفك الدماء، فعندها اما ان يكون من شيعة الحسين بمواقفه وتضحياته، او ان يكون من شيعة آل سفيان. ولذلك فان معركة مثل كربلاء ضرورية لتكشف كل انسان امام نفسه وامام الاخرين. يقول الحسين (ع): "الناس عبيد الدنيا، والدين لعق على السنتهم، يحوطونه ما درت معايشهم، فاذا محصوا بالبلاء قل الديانون."

which made God’s wealth [i.e., natural resources] into a state, and enslaved the people”—all this he equated to the contemporary Āl Khalīfa “ruling gang” that plunders Bahrain and which claims to rule on the same basis of hereditary succession. Neither state, he said, “was founded around a single person but rather around a gang bound by tribal or familial *‘aṣabiyyah*,⁷⁸ [one] that uses bribery and intimidation to gain support and allegiance from the self-interested,” then, this support secured, “dominates [its] subjects by force.” This is true to such an extent, he continued, “that the son of the Prophet’s daughter [al-Ḥusayn] left Medina and then Mecca fearful because he refused the political oath [of Yazīd],” and left with “no supporter and no certainty ... was murdered, and the women from *ahl al-bayt* taken captive.” A state such as this, he concluded, “chose not to accept conciliation and compromise, and thus there is no use but to uproot [it]: and al-Ḥusayn’s own sacrifices as well as those of his family were the means of uprooting that state, of overthrowing the gang running it, even if [it took awhile].”

He arrived finally at what the listeners had been anticipating the entire night. “The ruling gang in Bahrain,” he boomed, “is embodied in the ‘Supreme Defense Council’ comprised of fourteen of the elites from the ruling family, and they are: the king, the crown prince, the prime minister, the royal court minister, and others of the top ministers and officials” from the ruling family. Among them, he said, “there are not any national sons [*abnā’ al-waṭan*] from the Sunna or the Shi‘a, as they don’t trust anyone but themselves. And since the establishment of this council there have issued from it all of the conspiracies hatched against the people.”⁷⁹ All of these “conspiracies” we need not revisit at length. Suffice it to say that al-Khawājah was careful not to omit any of them: the appropriation and gifting of lands (especially seaside lands) by the Āl Khalīfa; al-Bandar’s report and “the strategy of sectarian cleansing” that it revealed,

⁷⁸ *عصبية*: 14th-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn’s notion of “group feeling” borne of tribal co-sanguinity. Cf. *Al-Muqaddimah*, I, 234. For a modern application see SALAMÉ 1990, which analyzes the central role of *‘aṣabiyyah* in the unification of the Arabian Najd under Āl Sa‘ūd.

⁷⁹ The corresponding, somewhat abridged text is:

ان العصابة الاموية التي استأثرت بالحكم، وجعلته عضوا: ينتقل في اسرة واحدة من الاب الى الابن، والتي نجت الفئى والاراضي وجعلت مال الله دولا، واستعبدت الناس وجعلتهم حولا ومستعبدين، هذه الدولة لم تكن تقوم على شخص واحد وانما عصابة تربطها العصبية القبلية والاسرية، وتستعين بالرشوة والتخويف لكسب المناصرة والولاء من اصحاب المصالح. فتسيطر على العباد بالقهر، الى درجة ان يخرج ابن بنت رسول الله حائفا من المدينة ثم من مكة لانه يرفض المبايعه السياسية، ولا يجد ناصرا ولا معينا، ثم يقتل وتسيى النساء من اهل بيت النبي (ص). مثل هذه الدولة احتارت ان لا تقبل المهادنة والحلول الوسط، لذلك لا ينفع فيها الا الاقتلاع، فكانت تضحية الحسين بنفسه وعياله هي الوسيلة لاقتلاع تلك الدولة، والاطاحة بالعصابة التي تديرها ولو بعد حين.

ان العصابة الحاكمة في البحرين تتمثل في ‘مجلس الدفاع الأعلى’ الذي يتكون من اربعة عشر شخصا من كبار العائلة الحاكمة، وهم الملك وولي العهد ورئيس الوزراء ووزير الديوان وغيرهم من كبار الوزراء والمسؤولين من الاسرة الحاكمة، وليس بينهم اي من ابناء الوطن من السنة او الشيعة، فهم لا يتقون باحد سوى انفسهم. ومنذ انشاء هذا المجلس تم فيه اقرار جميع المؤامرات التي دبرت ضد الشعب.

including of course the related program of political naturalization; the use of “tens of thousands of mercenaries from various [countries]” that “violate the sanctity of our homes and of our mosques”; and abuses of human rights and the use of torture in dealing with political activists, among whom he named one who had been recently killed in a confrontation with riot police. For all such offenses and humiliations perpetrated by the ruling Āl Khalīfa gang, he directed, “the primary order must be to bring it down from power by all means of peaceful civil resistance, and by the willingness to suffer sacrifices for the sake of it, just as the result of the sacrifices of al-Ḥusayn was to bring down the ‘Umayyad gang from power.” To this end, he continued, “there must be a coordination of efforts, a putting aside of sectarian and factional differences, and an avoidance of supporting the regime’s institutions or participating in them.” For, he said, “we are the generation of anger and sacrifice, and from our sacrifices will come a generation that assumes the responsibility of selecting the system of government that suits it, [one] far from injustice, corruption, and sectarian discrimination.”⁸⁰

He ended his long oration with a poem:

حين طالب الحر بن يزيد الرياحي إمامنا الحسين بأن يرجع من حيث أتى والأفأنه مقتول — كما اننا ربما نقول
مقتولين — ردّد الحسين قائلاً:

When al-Ḥurr bin Yazīd al-Riyāḥī⁸¹ demanded of our Imām al-Ḥusayn to go back whence he came or else be killed—just as we perhaps may be killed—al-Ḥusayn answered, saying,

سأمضي وما بالموت عار على الفتي إذا مانوى خيراً وجاهد مسلماً

I will go on, and death is no shame for a man, / if he sought the good and struggled [jāhid] as a Muslim,

وواسى الرجال الصالحين بنفسه وفارق مذموماً وخالف مجرماً

consoled the righteous through himself, / and died where he was cursed and in dispute with a criminal.

⁸⁰ The corresponding text, considerably abridged, reads:

لذلك ففي مقابل استراتيجية التطهير والاقصاء، من السذاجة السياسية الاكتفاء بطرح مطالب الإصلاح الجزئي، والاستمرار على البيعة السياسية لهذه العصاة التي لا يضبطها مبدأ أو دين أو اخلاق. ولا يمكن مواجهة سياسة الالغاء والتطهير الا بشعار اسقاط العصاة الظالمة الطائفية. ازاء هذه العصاة المنتهكة للحريات والحقوق، الممارسة للتعذيب، الفاسدة والناهبة للاموال العامة وللاراضي، لا بد ان يكون المطلب الرئيسي هو اسقاطها من الحكم بكل وسائل المقاومة المدنية السلمية، والاستعداد لبذل التضحية في سبيل ذلك، وهكذا فقد كانت نتيجة تضحية الحسين (ع) اسقاط العصاة الاموية من نظام الحكم. وفي سبيل ذلك لا بد من تنسيق الجهود، ونبذ الاختلاف الطائفي والفتوي، وتجنب دعم مؤسسات النظام أو المشاركة فيها.

ان النهضة ضد الظلم واجبة لذاتها، وان من سيحكم بدل هؤلاء العصاة قد لا يكون من بين من هم موجودين في هذا الجيل، فان كل من يؤمنون بالحقوق والحريات في هذا الوطن ليس امامهم ان ينشغلوا بالتفكير في غنائم او حكم، بل في العمل على قطع جذور حكم هذه العصاة من الارض الطاهرة، فنحن جيل الغضب والتضحية، ومن تضحيتنا سيأتي جيل يتحمل مسؤولية اختيار نظام الحكم الذي يناسبه، بعيداً عن الظلم والفساد والتمييز الطائفي.

⁸¹ A son of Yazīd and one of his military commanders. According to the Shi‘i account, al-Ḥurr was charged with obstructing al-Ḥusayn’s passage near al-Kūfah but instead was convinced of his cause and defected to his side.

لتلقى خميساً في العراء عرمرماً

أقدم نفسي لا أريد بقاءها

I offer up myself; I do not wish to stay / to receive on Thursday a colossal host in the desert.

كفى بك ذلاً أن تعيش مرغماً

فإن عشت لم ألم ... وإن مت لم أذم

For should I live I wouldn't be pained, and should I die I wouldn't be blamed. / It is humiliation enough to be forced to live.

These final words⁸² were met with chants of “Let’s bring down the ruling gang!” and, though more muted, “Death to Āl Khalīfa!”

Thus al-Khawājah’s address in the early morning on the tenth of Muḥarram, attended by perhaps a thousand listeners from all over Bahrain, from Manama as well as the various Shi’a villages, appeared by all measures to be nothing short of a call to arms against the ruling Āl Khalīfa in the very image of Ḥusayn’s rebellion that culminated in 680 AD. Indeed, as one commentator says of the online video of the speech, “People, / This guy’s calling for civil war. / Stupid and *ḥarām*. / It’s *ḥarām* for a Muslim to kill his Muslim brother. / Of course, he’d go and say that they were unbelievers [*kuffār*; i.e., Sunnis].”⁸³ Yet beneath this religious imagery and bombast lies a much more measured policy prescription: political and “psychological” detachment from the state, a coordinated rejection of “the regime’s institutions” in both word and in deed. The “sacrifices” of which al-Khawājah speaks are, in contrast with the overall tone of the speech, quite pragmatic and modest. The “Ḥusaynīs,” he says, are those who “put principle and values first” even if it interferes with their immediate material self-interest, as the aim of “earning a living” is no excuse to become “involved with the oppressor.” The false Shi’i, on the other hand—the Shi’i of Yazīd—is he “who puts his own [economic or political] self-interest first, even at the expense of what is right and true.” In sum, to combat a regime “that uses bribery and intimidation to gain support and allegiance from the self-interested,” individuals must resist the temptations of money and power, which are offered only at the expense of their ethical principles and political freedom. For the state, as expressed to me by another of Bahrain’s prominent (and now jailed) Shi’i critics, possesses “a bait for every fish.”⁸⁴

⁸² For additional emphasis the conclusion of the second line—“in dispute with a criminal”—was augmented by the interjection: “a criminal that is in the palace; the criminals that are [living] in the palaces!”

⁸³ Cf. *supra*, note 72. The comment is written in colloquial Sunni dialect:

“يا ناس / هالإنسان يطالب بحرب أهلية / غباء وحرام / حرام المسلم يقتل أخيه المسلم / طبعاً أهو يبطلع ويقول أنهم كفار.”

⁸⁴ Interview with ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Singace, April 2009. The political spokesman of the al-Ḥaqq Movement, al-Singace is among Bahrain’s most identifiable opposition figures. In August 2010 he was arrested upon his return from a British parliamentary session on human rights in Bahrain, accused of heading a “terrorist network.” Cf. *supra*, note 53.