

# Like a dove I fly towards you – Visiting Karbala - Part 1

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In the summer of 2011 I told my parents that I was going to Karbala, whether it be with a friend, with a group, or on my own. They told me I wouldn't and that I couldn't go for fear of my safety. I disregarded this, I



was determined to go. After trying everything, I thought I would end up going on my own, until I was referred to a group by a friend of mine. A group of Khojas, which turned out to be the friendliest group of people I had encountered in my whole life.

Not many people within the Lebanese community have traveled to Iraq. Many came to visit me before I left. I could feel what the journey I was about to embark upon meant as the time drew nearer, to me and to them. The night before, a friend of my mother's who had a hand in raising me, she came into the room, and slowly asked me, 'Hussain.. you are going tomorrow? You are going to Karbala? You are going to Abbas? To Bab Al Hawa'ij?'.. as tears strolled down her face. She had one request, which she made seem very big. It was for me to pray for her and her daughter there. I had to hold back my tears as I promised her I would. The love of the Ahlulbayt knows no bounds.

Decemeber 22 is the day I set off towards Baghdad. I woke up on that day to find around 70 people had died in Baghdad, the place I was about to travel too. I hurried out of the house before my mother woke up to see the news. Whilst in the airport, I said goodbyes to many of my friends, which felt different than other goodbyes we had before I traveled somewhere. It felt as if this time, I wasn't coming back. I genuinely had that belief. Some of my friends also did, and assured me they would take care of my family if anything was to happen. Before I boarded the plane, I met a few people who felt the same way, some even telling their will to their families, their goodbyes, and where they'd like to be buried over the phone.

In the plane towards Baghdad I was honored to be sat next to Sayed Ammar Nakshawani. We got along after we discovered we were both Liverpool supports, and after la3en on Man Utd, we got into conversations about religion. This was the perfect warm up to understand exactly

what I was doing, and where I was going.

I am not going to write the following events in chronological order, simply because my experience climaxed in the middle and I would like to save that till the end of this blog, and before talking of the spiritual aspect, I would like to mention something else first. The poverty in Iraq truly hurts one, and shows you your privileges. I would see old ladies on the street selling any random item on a carpet, trying to get by, yet in London we have the mentality that we cannot get married if we do not have money, or something to show the parents. These people are married aren't they? I use this as a small example, to show how materialistic we are

yet claim to be followers of Muhammad (sawa) and Ali (as). The two cannot go hand in hand. You cannot walk a few minutes without a child asking you for money. I would know most of these children are taught by evil people to beg and bring money back to them. I know they would injure and hurt these children in order to strike sorrow in the hearts of foreigners, so that they can give them money. You still cannot help it, and you give, obviously to an extent. Though this one girl stayed in my mind. In Karbala, she was asking for money, and was not leaving us alone. One of my friends asked her if she would like to join us for dinner, but she refused, only wanting money. I put my hand on her head, which was covered by a hijab, only to feel two huge bumps on the back of her head. My hand froze in that position, and my heart broke. I remember her eyes, big and brown. I looked at this girl in those eyes, and she looked back, turning away every few seconds. I could see the pain.

For the first few days in Iraq, I stayed in Najaf. This town had such a rich culture, and you could see it in the people around the vicinity of the shrine. It's a beautiful feeling walking through the roads and hearing several, sometimes every other shop's, different latmias blasting through their speakers. Once I got into my hotel room and cleaned myself up, I set out to visit the shrine of Imam Ali (as), where Prophet Adam (as) and Prophet Nuh (as) are buried, along with Ameerul Mo'mineen himself. This was my first experience of any ziyara, and I didn't know what to expect. Standing outside the shrine, asking permission from Allah SWT to enter..

As I walked towards the entrance, I remember trembling. Taking slow steps. I touched the door of the entrance, then kissed it. My hand would glide along the walls as I walked passed them. Entering into the shrine itself was different. In your life, when you want to get up you say 'Ya Ali'. When you lift something heavy you say 'Ya Ali'. This is the man you have been taught of your entire life, the brother of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (sawa). He is right in front of .you. This place just felt like the place of a leader