

# The Long View

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## Which way for the former Soviet Union? Lamenting the dearth of Islamic political space in the Caucasus

**ZVAID  
JUGHASHVILI:**  
The past and the  
future of the  
Salafi/Wahhabi  
trend in the former-  
Soviet Union

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The struggle  
against Blackface  
in the Netherlands



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**Faisal Bodi and**  
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Cover image: A Chechen civilian prays  
in Grozny, January 1995. The flame in  
the background is coming from a gas  
pipeline which was hit by shrapnel  
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For many in the current generation the Chechen independence wars of the turn of the last century are at worst an untaught history lesson or at best a footnote in the long list of injustices inflicted on the Muslim world. Even for previous generations, they are in danger of becoming a historical blur as more immediate crises compete for our attention. Moreover, the stability and redevelopment brought about by what is in many respects a de facto devolved pro-Moscow administration has given rise to the perception that all is now well in the once recalcitrant Caucasus region.

However, while the guns may have stopped firing the conflicts have left a legacy that is proving difficult to unwind and one which is having a deleterious effect on other parts of the Muslim world. The Salafization of the second Chechnya war not only defeated the independence hopes of the heroic Chechens but has destabilised and undermined liberation movements and Islamist politics from Indonesia to Libya, according to *Zvaïd Jughashvili*. Saudi Arabian backed and inspired Salafi-Wahhabi fighters from the Caucasus and other areas of the former Soviet Union today form the backbone of an itinerant Muslim army that has served western imperialist interests in Libya, Egypt and Syria. The failure of repressive regimes to open spaces for Islamist politics, he argues, will mean that this trend will continue to be identified by many as the sole real "opposition".

The discovery of 39 dead migrants in a lorry container near London last October threw into sharp relief once again the perilous journeys increasing numbers of people are making to reach a better life in Europe. Their life or death decisions are being forced by widening economic inequality between the Global North and the Global South and/or conflicts and/or climate change imposed upon their countries by the insatiable appetite of the former for power and resources.

In the fields of Mediterranean Europe, migrants from Africa and Europe join those from the poorer relations of the EU to work under conditions that approximate to modern day servitude in order to produce the fruits and vegetables we consume. *Ahmed Uddin* looks at the plight of this "soulless underclass" that endures everything from economic exploitation, physical abuse, torture, rape and even death just to seek the food security that evades them in their homelands. It suits the Global North to turn a blind eye to their suffering so that we can continue our over-consumptive lives and enjoy cheap produce. Exploited by farmers and criminal gangs, this army of cheap labour is then instrumentalised by the far right - and increasingly the so-called respectable right - to push their racism driven anti-immigrant agendas.

The occasion of Arbaeen is typically associated with Shia Muslims, marking as it does the end of the period of mourning for Imam Hussein, the third Imam of the Shia

and the grandson of the Prophet (saw). Commemorated all over the world, it is a relatively underreported event given its scale and importance in the Shia calendar. This year some 20 million people descended on the Iraqi city of Karbala in Iraq, where Imam Hussein is buried, to mark the anniversary of the sacrifice he made along with his family and companions to implement the religious imperative of right over might, authority over power. Visiting Karbala for the first time, as a guest of the organisation that administers Imam Hussein's shrine, *Ahmed Kaballo* is struck by the spirit of egalitarianism pervading the commemorations as well as the abiding legacy of Hussein's sacrifice: a powerful moral reminder to resist evil and oppression. Inspired by the events of Karbala, thousands of Iraqis have laid down their lives to fight off the threat of Daesh and protect their communities from its perverted pseudo-Islamic ideology. Like their illustrious predecessors, their sacrifices too have not been forgotten.

In 2015 IHRC welcomed the decision by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urging the Netherlands to get rid of the character Black Pete from its annual Sinterklaas festivals because it contains racist elements. In recent years the Sinterklaas Festival has been a testing ground for the status of ethnic minorities and their attempts to influence what it means to be Dutch. The festival is based on a legend that every 5th December, St. Nicholas travels to the Netherlands from Spain to reward or punish children. Accompanying him are an army of helpers or "Black Petes", clownish and acrobatic figures dressed in Moorish page suits. While the legend of Sinterklaas is rooted in Middle Age European history the character of Black Pete is a colonial construct dating from the 19th century at the height of the Dutch Empire, when the Netherlands was involved in slavery and the slave trade for more than 200 years. The racist aspects of the commemoration of Sinterklaas are offensive and an affront to the memory of those who suffered from European colonialism. In our final piece *Sandew Hira* charts the progress of anti-racism activists in achieving the beginning of a transformation in social attitudes towards Sinterklaas and people of colour in general.

The need for more spaces, more alliances and more sophisticated analyses of the problems that face is one of the most pressing issues facing activists whether Muslim or otherwise. Just as marginalised people have been essentialised, so too in some cases have the responses from those organising against this oppression. The articles herein challenge politicians, activists, academics, ulema and all civil society leaders to rethink their role in making or breaking such spaces. There are plenty of warnings and mistakes to be found, but there is also reason to hope from our recent history. Let us build on that.

**Faisal Bodi and Arzu Merali**  
Editors

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# The past and the future of the Salafi/Wahhabi trend in the former Soviet Union

The possibilities for Islamic political space in the former Soviet Union continue to create support for a singular trend from many surprising constituencies argues **Zvaid Jughashvili**.

As the Saudi regime passes through its most vulnerable phase the regime's soft-power outreach through its Wahhabi educational institutions is losing traction even within its immediate constituency. There is however, a geographic locale where the Salafi/Wahhabi understanding of Islam will continue playing an important role, namely, the territories of the former Soviet Union (FSU).

## The Background

As correctly pointed out several years ago in the oldest Islamic monthly current affairs magazine, Crescent International, "many Muslims of the USSR, totally alienated from Islam during the Communist era, heard for the first time cries of Allahu-Akbar from Chechen fighters on TV. As Chechens pulled off numerous daring military operations against the Russian army, they came to be identified with what a good Muslim should be like. This idea of a good Muslim vis-a-vis a Chechen manifested itself in many fields starting from daily prayers, specific Sufi dhikr orders particular to Chechens, beards and even a specific style of dress imitating Chechen fighters."

The impact of the Chechen war upon many Muslims of the former Soviet Union cannot be overemphasized. The socio-political mindset of many Muslims of the former Soviet Union is attached to the Chechen conflict. The bitter historical interrelations of Muslims with the Russian empire contributed to Muslims viewing the Chechen conflict through this historical prism.

On the contemporary level, perhaps nothing highlights the influence of the Chechen conflict upon the diverse Muslim population of Russia more than the fact that one of the strongest public defenders of the Chechen pro-independence movement was a Russian Shia Muslim intellectual, now deceased, Heydar Jamal. In his function as the chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, Jamal was a regular guest on Russian media presenting the analysis of the situation in the North

Caucasus from the angle of the pro-independence movement in Chechnya. Even though Jamal's public support for the Chechen cause was likely being tolerated due to a tacit agreement with the Russian authorities, nevertheless, Jamal was a passionate advocate of the Chechen cause who had the ear of many ordinary Sunni and Shia Muslims in the FSU region. The fact that a regular guest at many Muslim functions attended both by Shia and Sunni Muslims would openly advocate for a cause led by Salafi Muslims is perhaps an unparalleled phenomenon in the Muslim world.

Another key social indicator of how influential the Chechen war is in terms of shaping the Islamic identity of Muslims of the former Soviet Union is the popularity of a Chechen guitar singer, Timur Mucurayev, who himself was a Chechen fighter, but under a negotiated amnesty, returned to Chechnya in 2008. Mucurayev's songs about Islam and the war in Chechnya were so powerful that even the Russian army would listen to his songs. In addition, to this day, Muslims in the former Soviet Union who identify as Sunni, Shia, Salafi and Sufi listen to his songs. Some of Mucurayev's songs, labeled "extremist" by the Russian government, are posted on YouTube and have attracted millions of views. During the first (1994-1996) and the second Chechen wars (1999-2003) Mucurayev's songs helped inspire hundreds of fighters from across the former Soviet Union to fight on the Chechen side.

Those who have not lived through the 1990s might be puzzled by the cross-sectarian sympathy towards a Salafi/Wahhabi led trend. However, the phenomenon is not so puzzling to those who experienced that decade. When the Soviet Union began collapsing at the turn of the 1990s, Moscow attempted to save the decaying empire. Troops were dispatched to Baku, Dushanbe, Riga and Tbilisi. With the help of the local communist leaderships, within a few days the Russian army took control of those cities. In December 1994, residents of Baku, Tbilisi and other Muslim cities were glued to the screens of their television sets, astonishingly watching how the Russian army could not take a city of

just over 300,000 for over three months and when they eventually did it was at a very high cost. The Chechen pro-independence movement did what others could not dream of doing; they humiliated an army which many Muslims of the FSU saw as a fearsome historical opponent.

This worldview, unfortunately, came to haunt the region in a very ugly way.

## Wahhabism Gains Clout

One of the most active advocates of the Wahhabi trend during the second Chechen war, was the notorious Chechen commander Shamil Basayev. The irony is that on YouTube today, one can find a speech made by Basayev in Grozny some time in 1996, right after the Chechens forced out the Russian army and gained de-facto independence that lasted until 1999. In that speech, made to a delegation of influential Muslims from various parts of the Caucasus, Basayev discusses the dangers of Wahhabism and how it must be avoided. Fast-forward to 1999, Basayev's right-hand man was Khattab, a Saudi national with a murky past and who many credit with popularizing the Wahhabi understanding of Islam among leading Chechen military commanders and society at large.

Another prominent factor in contributing to the spread of the Wahhabi/Salafi trend in the post-Soviet space was the cross-sectarian appeal of an online Chechen news-website called Kavkaz Center, which was the go-to resource for many Russian speaking Muslims for daily news and religious information. Kavkaz-Center played a significant role in formulating the political worldview of many Shia and Sunni Muslims in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the website later lost its appeal, it had by then made a significant soft-power impact on a generation of Muslims from the post-Soviet space.

Towards the start of the second Chechen war in 1999, the Chechen forces and the semi-autonomous foreign militias present in Chechnya adopted a Salafi narrative and methodology. The resort of the Chechen forces in the second Chechen war to un-Islamic terrorist methodology undermined the legitimacy of their cause and created a split within the Chechen population.

By the end of 2007, the Chechen pro-independence movement had lost its way as it declared the so-called Caucasian Emirate

and Wahhabized its political objectives by aiming to establish some sort of Islamic Emirate encompassing most of the North Caucasus. The so-called Emirate objective proved to be a fatal long-term socio-political mistake.

## Chechnya and its Islamic Narrative of Today

When the proxy war against Iran within the borders of Syria was launched in 2011, Muslim citizens of Russia flooded into the ranks of Al-Qaeda minded groups and later formed the military backbone of Daesh. However, it was not just Muslims of Russia who got drawn towards the regressive message of Daesh, Muslims from many parts of the former Soviet Union joined the Saudi educated terrorist outfit. In January 2017, Tajikistan's Interior Ministry said that around 1,100 of its citizens were fighting in Syria and Iraq. One of the Tajiks who joined Daesh was former Tajik special-forces commander Gulmorod Halimov.

The presence of a substantial number of Tajiks within Wahhabi groups in Syria is a serious indicator that Wahhabism had gained a solid presence in the FSU region. Tajikistan was the only Central Asian country with an officially registered Islamic party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), that participated in the government due to its popularity and active role during the struggle for Tajik independence. However, over the last decade the dictator of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmonov, has severely persecuted IRPT members and also declared the first Islamic political organization of the FSU region illegal.

The Wahhabi organizations did not just attract recruits from traditional Sunni heartlands of the former Soviet Union. Hundreds from Azerbaijan, the second largest Shia country percentage wise, joined the takfiri groups in Syria.

Nevertheless, after Russia managed to pacify the pro-independence movement in Chechnya in the last 12 years, it granted the region a vast degree of autonomy. In April 2015, Chechnya's regional head, Ramzan Kadyrov, publicly stated that Chechen police officers should open fire upon any law enforcement agents from other Russian regions if they operate in Chechnya without the permission of the local Chechen administration. This is a bold statement that probably no other head of the Russian region would get away with. Prominent Islamic current affairs magazine, Crescent International, recently noted that "in a practical sense today Islam in Russian controlled Chechnya is implemented in a far broader sense than in the so-called independent Muslim states of Central Asia and South Caucasus."

With the above in mind, Salafi/Wahhabi Islam is still a very potent force in the region of the FSU. With the crackdown on legitimate Islamic socio-political organizations from Azerbaijan to Tajikistan, the Salafi/Wahhabi trend is still viewed by many youths as a type of "opposition Islam" which cannot be co-opted by the ruling regimes.

One example of how fragile "official Islam" is in the former FSU region, is the revival of the pro-independence narrative in Chechnya by an exiled Chechen blogger Tumso Abdurakhmanov. In the past 12-18 months, one of the hottest topics of the Russian-speaking internet community has been videos and debates of Tumso with various Chechen and Russian public figures. A lone wolf blogger, he has managed to attract millions of viewers and present a strong intellectual challenge to the official narrative of local Moscow backed Chechen authorities. While Tumso's intellectual challenge is located strictly within traditional Sunni Islam and is distant from the Wahhabi trend of the pro-independence movement of the late 1990s, one of his main constituencies is the Salafi-

minded youths of the North Caucasus, of whom there are a significant number.

The ruling regimes in most of the post-Soviet space are illegitimate and are despised for their autocratic practices by the indigenous population. And the fact that after decades of brutal crackdowns on the Salafi/Wahhabi trend, it has managed to ship out a significant number of fighters to the most regressive Islamic militias in Syria, shows that it is still popular and powerful. In fact, a strong case can be made that the primary reason Russia got involved in the conflict in Syria is because of the presence of large number of fighters from Russia and post-Soviet Union countries. Moscow reasoned that if the militias filled by Wahhabis from its territory would gain a safe haven in Syria to organize and train, sooner or later they would return to Russia for a rematch of the second Chechen war.

## Prognosis

In the days of the Soviet Union, the KGB and the government apparatus in Moscow used to promote "clandestine" Ulema (Islamic scholars) who "secretly" ran religious ceremonies. To the intelligent people back then it was obvious that if many grandmothers knew whom to reach out to for religious rites like marriage and burials, the "secret Ulema" were not secret at all, but informers for the atheist state. This distrust of the official state-sanctioned Islam persists in the minds of many people in the post-Soviet space. Thus, by default many people view Islamic scholars associated with state institutions as sell-outs. The closer one gets to state institutions, the more distant the masses get from the scholars. This phenomenon is present not only in mainly Sunni post-Soviet states, but also in Shia ones. As an example, one can cite the backlash on social media against Azerbaijan's popular Muslim preacher, Haji Shahin Hasanli, who until his official

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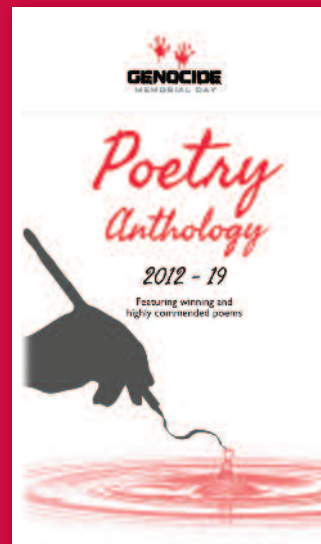
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association with the state controlled Religious Council of the Caucasus (RCC), was seen as a credible independent preacher. That credibility clearly eroded after his association with the RCC.

The ban on IRPT in Tajikistan, crack-down on the Muslim Unity Movement in Azerbaijan and the harsh methods of the pro-Moscow Chechen leadership against those not conforming to the official version of Islam, continues to act as a catalyst for the spread of underground Salafi/Wahhabi ideas. While the Salafi/Wahhabi card is being utilized by the ruling regimes to crack down on legitimate socio-political movements in the post-Soviet space, it acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy in that it indirectly promotes the Wahhabi trend as an authentic Islamic opposition movement. This aura of “authenticity” created due to official crackdowns makes many poorly informed Muslims blind to the regressive ideas and methodologies of the Wahhabi/Salafi trend, as they often do not look past the opposition of the Salafi/Wahhabi trend towards the autocratic regimes.

The Salafi/Wahhabi trend in the post-Soviet region has significantly lost its appeal in comparison to the late 1990s and is unlikely to ever appeal to wider Muslim communities, but it will continue to remain a potent force capable of destabilizing the region to a significant degree. In the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the participation of many Salafi minded Chechens fighting against the pro-Russian separatists is another indicator of how the Salafi/Wahhabi trend can be put to political and military use with ease in the post-Soviet regions.

Until legitimate Islamic socio-political organizations are not given legal and political space to freely operate in the post-Soviet space, the Salafi/Wahhabi trend will be one of the main “rebellion” options against state enforced Islam. The forceful crackdown against Salafi/Wahhabi minded

groups will contribute further to their radicalization and the radicalization of the overall socio-political landscape in the post-Soviet Union.

In regions of the former-Soviet Union drastic social, political and institutional change is very unlikely to come through an evolutionary process. For example, after the death of dictator Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan witnessed a swap within the ruling elite. Karimov’s family was sidelined and the presidency was taken over by Karimov’s Prime Minister, Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev. Thus, it was a simple change of faces unaccompanied by any substantial policy or institutional transformation. Kyrgyzstan has proved to be the country of major surprises in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz people overthrew the remnants of Soviet rule in 2005” and a second revolt toppled another government in 2010. While Salafi minded groups did not play a significant role in Kyrgyz revolts, they did increase their presence in post “revolutionary” Kyrgyzstan.

As in Syria, in all Muslim majority locales, the Salafi/Wahhabi trend has failed to offer any substantial alternative to the existing governing systems. However, as in most of the Muslim world, just like in Syria, when nudged by Western powers to destabilize the situation, this trend has always answered the call of imperialist powers. In all corners of the Muslim world, one way or the other, the Salafi-Wahhabi trend has advanced NATO’s strategic interests. In Libya, the Salafis of the Madkhali bent act as the cannon fodder of the pro-NATO warlord Khalifa Haftar.

In Egypt, the Salafi political party, Al-Nour, openly supported Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s autocratic regime against the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even in Palestine, as highlighted in an analysis by Crescent International, “Abu Nur al-Maqdisi, a follower of the Jordanian al-Maqdisi (a prominent Salafi scholar)

went so far as to launch an armed insurrection against the Islamic administration of Hamas in Gaza claiming to restore “true Islam” in Gaza, somehow “forgetting” that the main beneficiary of such an action is Israel.

The Chechen scene was no different. When Aslan Maskhadov was elected President during the de-facto independence period from 1996 to 1999, he was summoned to Sharia courts by the Salafized Chechen commanders and questioned about his legitimacy, thus undermining his Islamic credentials among the population which had only recently re-discovered Islam. Ironically, the court session was chaired by Akhmat Kadyrov, who later sided with the Russians.

Overall, the greatest challenge Maskhadov faced was the open challenge of Salafi minded commanders in constantly creating conflict within Chechnya. The decision by Shamil Basayev and Amir Khattab, the architects of Salafization in Chechnya, to launch a military campaign into Dagestan in 1999, legitimized Moscow’s policy to re-enter Chechnya and abort its de-facto independence.

From Libya to Indonesia, unfortunately the Wahhabi/Salafi trend has proved to be a useful Trojan Horse of destabilization and it will continue to remain so until credible Islamic socio-political organizations of whatever trend(s) or none, led by non-state connected Islamic scholars, are given political space to operate. In the post-Soviet space where no credible and independent Islamic socio-political movement is tolerated even on a minimal level, the Wahhabi/Salafi trend will continue to remain as one of the most potent sources of opposition.

#### • Zvaid Jughashvili

has been writing about issues mainly covering the former Soviet Union for over 8 years. He has studied International Relations and taught Business Studies at college level.

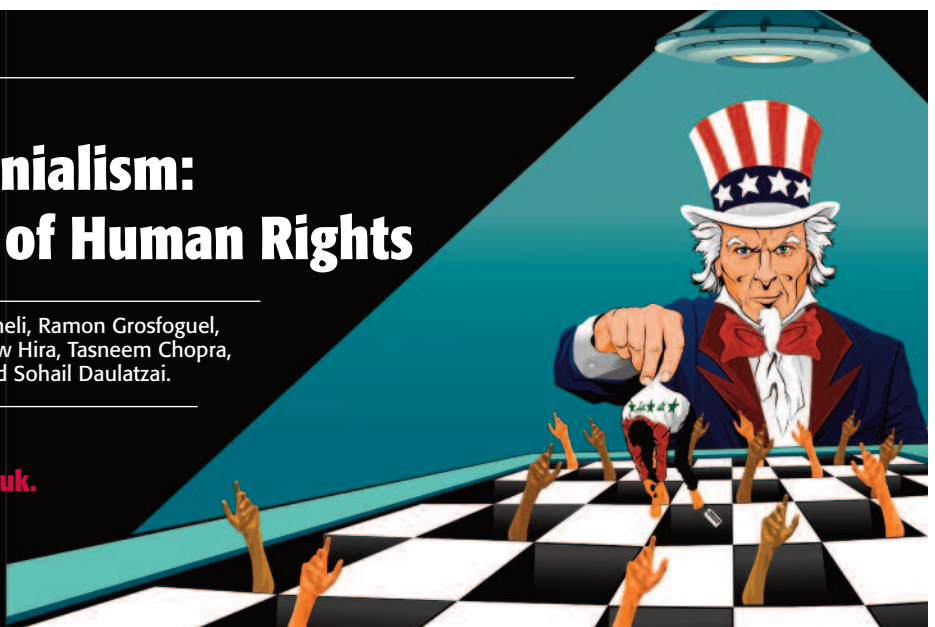
## US BOOKS

# The New Colonialism: the US Model of Human Rights

With contributions from: Saied R. Ameli, Ramon Grosfoguel, Mary K. Ryan, Saeed A. Khan, Sandew Hira, Tasneem Chopra, Rajeesh Kumar, Laurens de Rooij and Sohail Daulatzai.

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# The exploitation of Europe's hidden migrants

With few legal avenues to settle and work in the EU, migrants are forced to work in the trading bloc's agricultural sector generating billions of euros for its economies. **Ahmed Uddin** looks at the hidden infrastructure of exploitation.

Over 500 years ago living standards and incomes between Europe and the rest of the world were broadly comparable. Contrary to popular belief some parts of the Global South were considerably better off than their counterparts in Europe. Mansa Musa, the 14th Century West African ruler, who ruled over the kingdom of Mali, he had a net worth estimated to be equivalent to around \$400bn in today's terms. His kingdom stretched for about 2,000 miles, from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to modern-day Niger, taking in parts of what are now Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Ivory Coast.

The fortunes of these lands changed drastically when Europeans colonised them to exploit their resources including their people. Europe also roped the rest of the world into a single international economic system. Historically there is a direct correlation between the downfall of these economies in Africa with the presence of European colonisers. Today, Europe continues to exploit Africa creating a lopsided world of inequality. This concentration of wealth in one place is not a natural occurrence, it has been created.

Our planet has finite resources and has limits to its ecological capacity - there can only be so much economic growth without being destructive. The earth has a safety threshold as to what quantum of resources can be safely extracted and the amount of greenhouse gases it can absorb. Current estimates indicate that global consumption is overshooting our planet's ecological capacity by 60 per cent each year. This over-consumption is primarily related to the activity in the Global North. Our planet has enough ecological capacity for each of us to consume 1.8 'global hectares' annually (this is a measure that takes into account the use of resources, pollution and emissions). Any consumption beyond the 1.8 global hectares is putting us on a pathway to dangerous degradation. To put it into perspective, Europeans consume 4.7 global hectares per person, while the average consumption in places like Ghana and Guatemala is at the safe limit of 1.8 global hectares. The figure dramatically rises in Canada and USA where the average person consumes 8 times their 'fair' share.

The consumption has a devastating im-

pact on the environment and the people from these lands. The aggressive deforestation that is currently taking place in the Global South is paving the way for more farmlands to largely supply the Global North, for example, with more crops for biofuels and feed for cattle. Sixty years ago, the planet was carpeted with 1.6 billion hectares of mature tropical forests. More than half of it has been destroyed by humans. The over-farming of land in turn has consequences for the soil. Scientists have calculated that forty per cent of our planet's agricultural soil is degraded. Again, this degradation is a result of intensive industrial farming techniques and the use of chemical fertilisers. In the not too distant future, the soil will lose the capacity for any agricultural activity as it is robbed of its fertility. Even now this is happening with people in some places unable to cultivate the land to grow their own crops.

In a world where 4.3 billion people live in poverty and 800 million people go to bed hungry every night, we use agriculture not to feed people but for non-food needs in the Global North. This is creating a crisis of food insecurity in the Global South. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) has found that each one per cent increase in food insecurity pushes 1.9 per cent more people towards migration. This in turn causes a vicious cycle, foremost of which is migration. As people move from one nation to another, they becoming increasingly more vulnerable, they are further exploited and become more desperate. People are being forcibly displaced largely due to the lack of access to food. Amartya Sen correctly said that hunger and starvation result from some people not having access to enough food - not because there is not enough food available in the country or region.

Yet in Europe, in the farmlands where migrants are forced to work in illegal conditions, farmers are dumping food because it does not meet the aesthetic ideal for consumers. In Europe alone it is estimated that about one third of the food produced is not consumed and waste occurs at all stages of the chain, starting at the production level. At the lower end, it is believed that in the EU, 90 million tonnes of food (or 180 kg per person) is wasted, much of which is suitable for human consumption.

If the circumstances that push migrants to leave their homelands continue, we will increasingly see larger numbers of migrants

coming to the shores of Europe for a secure life. This is only a natural response. Since the NATO overthrow of Gaddafi, Libya has become the main transit point with an unprecedented flow of migrants both in and out of the country. Desperate migrants trying to get to the Italian island of Lampedusa or the Sicilian coast has become a common sight on our TV screens. This current 'flood' of migrants will seem like a trickle by comparison if inequality in the world is maintained as it is. Migration is simply a rational response to the large differences in standards of living between the Global South and North. People will continue to be forced to take extreme measures when left with nothing at all. A country with rising levels of food insecurity and conflict will experience greater outward migration. In a recent study food insecurity was found to be a significant cause for the incidence and intensity of armed conflict, with 0.4 percent more people fleeing a country for each additional year of conflict. Desperate migrants make the dangerous journey of travelling through Africa to Libya, often experiencing and having to deal with human trafficking, slavery, kidnapping, imprisonment, begging family back home for ransom, bribing and paying off authorities such as police and soldiers. Their ordeals often include beatings, rape and sometimes even death. Most set off on this journey knowing very well what awaits them but are still willing to do so out of sheer desperation.

## Vulnerability and Abuse of Migrant Workers:

In Europe there lies a two-tier system, one for European citizens and another for migrants. The rule of law, ideals of democracy and human rights are disregarded, and slavery is normalised. Contemporary labour market sectors in EU countries are exploiting new forms of vulnerability for new arrivals in Europe. Migrants are easily exploited in the agricultural sector.

Our greed for higher consumption in Europe aims at reducing the cost of production, so that not only can farmers enjoy increased profit margins but also so that we can purchase goods at a relatively cheap price. Migrants are the obvious pool of cheap labour, forced to exist on the margins of society where their rights are non-existent. Once on European shores, due to their vulnerability, migrants are forced into modern slavery, exploited to work in farms for low wages. The abuse of migrants in Sicily is shocking and includes being tortured, raped, beaten and sometimes killed.

A painting of the late Soumaila Sacko appears on a bollard on Via Maqueda in Palermo. Soumaila was originally from Mali,



the land where once Mansa Musa ruled. Soumaila and his companions had been in Italy since 2010, working in the agriculture industry. The artist Igor Scalisi Palminteri designed it to highlight the plight of labourers like the 29-year-old Soumaila, who was killed on 2 June 2018. The murder took place in San Calogero, southern Italy, while he was collecting scrap metal from an abandoned factory to build a shack in the tent-city of San Ferdinando. Two other migrants who were with him were also attacked but survived.

As a trade unionist, Soumaila had been active in fighting for the rights of migrant farm workers in Italy. He had spoken out against the inhumane conditions and poor pay that labourers had to endure, and how mistreatment by farm owners was widespread. In the make-shift camp cities which resemble refugee camps thousands of workers have no permanent shelter, no electricity, no sanitation and no running water.

Madiheri Drame, who was also wounded in the attack, recalls that at around 20.30 a man drove close to the factory and from a distance of approximately 150 metres shot at them four times. One of the bullets struck Soumaila Sacko in the head.

At the time the newly elected Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte mentioned Soumaila in his first parliament speech, referring to him as “one of thousands of day labourers with correct immigration papers who every day in this country go to work in conditions below any level of dignity”.

His right wing deputies who are no longer in power, the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini and Labour Minister Luigi Di Maio, didn't find it in their hearts to commiserate. The shooting incident took place just hours after Salvini, a member of the right-wing anti-immigration League party, declared: “The party is over for illegals.” In an ailing economy, right wing parties have come into power on the back of a promise to increase productivity, improve the economy and bring back work to Italians. The attitude of those in the Global North has shifted increasingly to the far right with a consequent rise in verbal and physical abuse directed at people that are classed as ‘non-Europeans’. With studies

predicting that the movement of people to Europe will continue to increase manifold and one can only imagine what that will do to the mood of ‘Europeans’.

### Living Conditions

Economists have been churning out the GDP growth myth for decades. GDP growth is linked to increasing production and consumption on a yearly basis. The measurement of GDP came about in the 1930s to measure money-based activity after the First World War. It is solely focussed on tallying up money-based activity irrespective of whether the activity is useful or destructive to humans and the environment. Yes, the exploitative use of migrant labour in farms will increase GDP, but the conditions they work in or the risks they are forced to take is not taken into account. If you extend the working day by forcing labourers to work for cheap for more hours, it will increase GDP. But GDP will not say anything of the toll that too much work takes on people's bodies, souls and relationships.

The economist Simon Kuznets formulated the modern concept of GDP. He warned that we should not use GDP as a normal measure of economic success, for it would incentivise too much destruction. Contrary to his advice, GDP as a measure of success has been pushed around the world. We are now witnessing an era where GDP growth is beginning to create more poverty, reversing the process of human progress. It is creating a world of imbalance, where the Global North continues to push higher GDP objectives at the expense of others. The multi-billion euro agriculture industry is run by the migrant labour work force and they are vital to the local economy. It is estimated that this trade makes up around 20 percent of the country's GDP. The data speaks for itself, highlighting how migrants are vital to the economy and yet they are not afforded the most basic of rights, not even suitable housing.

Migrant labourers are forced to live in shamefully inhuman conditions. Shelters are often built out of scrap metal, wood and plastic. Toilets are often non-existent and many workers resort to relieving themselves

in the fields. By Italian law, all workers are to be provided with shelter and food but this law is rarely adhered to as it saves farm owners money, reducing the cost of production. Labourers are restricted from renting rooms in the towns and city centres as a direct result of deep-seated racism. Locals refuse to rent properties to the migrants, preferring to lose money by keeping properties empty rather than seeing migrants in their neighbourhoods.

The migrants are not even allowed to congregate in makeshift camps as they must be out of public sight. Instead, they are dispersed among derelict farmhouses, sheds, former petrol stations and abandoned factories, often in polluted and unsafe conditions on the periphery of towns and cities.

Farmers also further exploit the workers by recruiting migrants to work on farms through a middleman. The middleman is responsible for recruiting staff from the refugee camps. They often pick them up early in the morning for a long back-breaking day of work. These middlemen are referred to as gangmasters and they are also often from the migrant community. In exchange for his services the middleman receives a commission. The middleman also acts as a buffer between the law and the farmers. Should inspectors happen to discover this illegal practice, the finger of blame is pointed at the middleman.

Despite working around nine hours daily including Sundays, workers are only provided with fixed term contracts of up to three months. Contracts stipulate incorrectly that workers will work only 30 hours per week. Italian law stipulates that residency permits can only be issued to workers possessing contracts. Once the contract ends, the workers are vulnerable and can easily be expelled if they refuse to work under inhumane conditions. These shoddy contracts are used as control mechanisms, so that workers do not complain. If they refuse an extension to a contract, migrants can lose their residency permit. Most workers remain silent and continue to be exploited.

Italy, along with Spain, has the highest number of migrant workers in the EU that work in the agricultural sector. It has a



## Nigeria Appeal

Currently there are thousands of children, women and men suffering as the result of the violence of the Nigerian police and army. Members of the Islamic Movement have been routinely targeted, with over 1500 killed in the last three years alone. They have left behind dependents who are often destitute and shunned. Families are left without enough income for basic necessities like food and clothing, children loose out on education.

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significant presence of migrant women who are highly vulnerable. Women face additional exploitation where their employers abuse them through sexual blackmail. The problem of migrant workers not having appropriate housing and being forced into ghettos has led to widespread cases of sexual exploitation of migrant women.

### Sexual exploitation of female workers

The migration crisis is used by various criminal gangs and human trafficking networks to target and brutally exploit the most vulnerable. In the case of women, this situation is further compounded by particular gendered dynamics and power relations. Many migrant women do not have any alternative options but to submit to extra layers of exploitation and other forms of abuse. It is widely known that there is sexual abuse of female labourers. According to migrant associations, authorities and unions it is estimated that more than half of all Romanian women (most of the workforce comprises Romanians) working in the greenhouses are forced into sexual relations with their employers, and almost all of them work in conditions of forced labour and severe exploitation. Out of sheer desperation and the burden of earning an income for their families that they have left behind in Romania, female workers are not in any position to refuse their employers' advances as they risk losing their jobs. Should they fall pregnant, many resort to abandoning their children at hospitals, as not only can they not afford to keep the child but their long working hours puts them in no position to take care of their new-born babies. Many women are also forced into prostitution, organised by criminal gangs, to serve the men in the informal camps where agricultural migrant workers live.

### Blood Tomatoes

In the south east corner of Sicily, the tomatoes from Pachino are the most famous, bursting with sweetness and flavour due to the perfect weather conditions, the ideal soil and the right amount of sunlight. They are

known to be crunchier and sweeter than most varieties of tomatoes - around 200,000 tonnes of Pachino tomatoes are produced annually, generating a multi-million-euro industry. Sicily is Europe's third largest producer of vegetables. It is shamefully built on the labour of an underground exploited population, living in subhuman existence and subjected to abuse.

From a distance due to the reflection of the sun, fields that stretch out for miles look like the blue waters of the sea. Labourers are paid piecework rates, a practice that is illegal in Italy. Not wanting to waste time by taking toilet breaks, labourers don't sip water. Often farmers deliberately do not even supply any drinking water or provide any real toilet facilities, as it slows down productivity. Piecework pay has become the norm across the country, leaving workers' pay well below the suggested rate for agricultural labourers. During non-harvest periods, an African worker usually receives €2-3 per hour, compared to Italy's agricultural minimum wage, agreed by the industry, of €7.13. Labourers don't protest as most feel lucky to get paid at all and to have a residency permit.

A rough estimate indicates there are 500,000 migrant workers in Italy's agricultural sector, around half of the sector's total workforce. 80% of those without contracts are migrant workers, forced to work illegally. Labour unions say up to 300,000 illegal workers continue to generate billions of euros a year in profit for Italy's agricultural sector. Although this practice of exploitation has been going on since the 1970s, the recent flow of migrants has allowed farmers to further reduce pay and be more abusive as there is a wider pool of workers to choose from.

The infamous Mafia of Sicily also exploit the vulnerable migrants. The Mafia have men stationed within asylum seekers' reception centres and refugee camps. So when migrants leave the camps and even after they've been granted asylum, they are recruited to the farms. Migrant camps have become the recruiting grounds for Mafia businesses to prosper. Sometimes they even collude in running the camps as this has become more profitable and less risky in comparison to their previous criminal activities.

If Europe wants to tackle the issue of migration from Africa, it needs to tackle all the causes of it, including the causes that Europe creates in the Global South. Migration is intensified by conflicts, climate disasters and the rising prices of staple/basic foods. Europe wants to increase its GDP at the expense of exploiting foreign lands and their people. The practice of consumption of resources from other nations so that a lifestyle can be maintained in Europe and often supporting or starting conflicts in other parts of the world - all this needs to stop. The poisonous xenophobic rhetoric against Africans and migrants is so widespread that this hatred has spilled over to other EU citizens. As seen in case studies of Romanian women working in Sicily, EU citizenship does not prevent people from being victims of exploitation and trafficking. Some people are more European than others; Romanians aren't the right type of European. Once migrants are in one's backyard in Europe, the environment is perfectly set for exploitation and abuse.

The recent film 'Us', directed by Jordan Peele, highlights how we maintain our way of life at the expense of 'Others'. In the film, Peele shows beneath a funhouse the perfect metaphor for how our embrace of capitalism allows a group of people to further accumulate more wealth and sustain the status quo with no regard for people outside this class. Just as African Americans were allowed to be enslaved as they were seen as soulless and therefore did not have the comfort of freedom and choice, similarly the migrant workers in Sicily are seen as the soulless underclass that can serve our needs and comforts. Migrants exist to serve people with their blood and sweat, with little reward. If they step out of line they are to be punished and even killed. They are not to be seen in public and not allowed to live amongst 'Europeans'. Everyone is guilty of turning a blind eye to the human rights violations, as their exploitation enables the lives we wish to lead in our funhouses in Europe.

#### • Ahmed Uddin

is a Senior Manager at IHRC, he also works as a consultant for various leading development and humanitarian INGOs.



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# Some thoughts on the Arbaeen walk

An opportunity to visit Iraq, specifically Najaf and Karbala, provided **Ahmed Kaballo** with food for thought of how Islamic society does and could work.

Last October I was lucky enough to be invited to witness one of the largest annual gatherings of people in the world: It's referred to as Arbaeen and takes place each year in October in Karbala, Iraq. Yet, many people in the 'west' are ignorant about this historic, mass gathering of kindness and charitable generosity; it's absent from the media, and it seems completely absent even in discussions among Sunni Muslims. As a Sunni Muslim from Sudan whose family comes from the Sufi tradition, I must admit that I too was entirely unaware of Arbaeen prior to my trip.

I was therefore extremely grateful to have been invited to Iraq by the organisation responsible for the Imam Hussein Shrine, specifically to learn about the battle of Karbala, Imam Hussein, his life and legacy and the 40 days of mourning of his martyrdom, known as Arbaeen.

This year, 20 million people gathered in Karbala to commemorate Arbaeen, making it the largest annual pilgrimage gathering of people on Earth. To put this into context, Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia – which is a mandatory religious duty that must be carried out at least once by all financially and physically capable adult Muslims in their lifetimes – has around 2-3 million pilgrims every year. This number is roughly the same as the number of Iranians alone who attend Arbaeen from the neighbouring Islamic Republic. In fact, according to Iran's deputy interior ministry, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, a total of 3.5 million Iranians had entered Iraq to take part in the ceremony, 1.2 million more than the number reported last year, the largest on record.

Arbaeen is attended predominantly by Shia Muslims who make up the second largest denomination in Islam and form the majority in Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan and, according to some sources, are the largest religious minorities in Yemen and Lebanon. There are also large Shia minorities in Afghanistan, India, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (BBC, 2016). Globally, they make up roughly 10% of the Islamic community according to a 2009 report from the Pew Forum. The same study indicates that their population is estimated to be between 154 to 200 million worldwide. The fact that roughly one out of every 10 Shias from all over the world joined me

in the modest city of Karbala last week was extremely impressive.

During my six days there I saw extreme kindness and an unbelievable display of brotherhood, sisterhood and unity but what I wanted this piece to focus on was the charitable generosity that I witnessed first-hand, something I will refer to as Islamic Socialism, as well as what I learnt about Arbaeen, and the sacrifices made by the martyrs whom Arbaeen commemorates.

## Islamic Socialism

Many Muslims have traditionally regarded the association of the terms 'Islamic' and 'Socialism' as controversial, impossible and even nonsensical, since all of the most famous/infamous (depending on your politics) leaders of socialist societies and socialist revolutions have been regarded as atheistic and even anti-religion, such as Fidel Castro or Che Guevara (a figure I will return to later). On the other hand, of course, Islam is, by definition, a monotheistic religion in which observers, Muslims, submit their lives to the creator of the universe: Allah. Yet, what is often neglected is that instrumental to the Islamic faith and Islamic teachings, is the fact that Muslims must attempt to carry out Allah's will by serving humanity. This includes for instance, charity and giving part of your wealth to others. In fact, Zakat (the Islamic obligation of giving to charity) is one of the five pillars of Islam and is considered an act of worship. Similarly, the basic tenet of socialism is for an egalitarian society where the wealth of society is equitably distributed amongst the masses.

What I witnessed in Karbala was a fantastic demonstration, albeit for a brief period of time, of just that.

Firstly, everyone dressed the same; the men wore black t-shirts and shirts, and the women wore black Abayas, and everyone walked side by side. During my six days there, I never got any sense of rich and poor; it felt like everyone was equal, and if not part of an egalitarian society, then at least part of an egalitarian pilgrimage. Everyone was eating the free food and services on offer, reinforcing the obvious: there's always enough to go around.

I was told by my guide how over the years pilgrims have donated so much money to the Imam Hussein Shrines that they were able to build a state of the art

school for orphans equipped with the latest technology, creating an institution that surpassed the local state schools which have suffered greatly due to the country's instability.

The donations also went towards building a modern new hospital with specialist cancer treatment equipment brought over from Germany. Most of the treatment offered was completely free; patients are only charged for surgery, and the families of the martyrs who fought Daesh in Iraq's Civil War get a subsidized price. It was a fantastic display of what is possible when donations are circulated effectively.

Despite the country's many troubles, past and present, people were happy to donate because it was clear that they had complete faith that the money would be used to serve others. In fact the very land that the hospital is built on was donated to the Imam Hussein Shrine.

However, perhaps the most impressive display of charity I witnessed was on the actual walk towards the holy shrines. Millions of the pilgrims walked from far and wide to come to Karbala, the majority of them from Najaf, 45 miles away, Baghdad 55 miles to the north. However, I was told that the bulk of them came across the Najaf road connecting Najaf airport to the holy shrines in Karbala, taking rests along the way in tents lined with foam cushions, mattresses and blankets.

Along the road I saw families, organisations and generous individuals giving out water, delicious falafel wraps and sandwiches, hot coffees and teas, fresh fruit juices, chips, fruits, pancakes, basically every sort of commodity that you could think of or desire as well as services such as massages, shoe cleaning and chairs, beds and mats to rest, away from the glare of the burning sun.

Almost all the volunteers I came across on the Najaf road were Iraqis but I am told there were also Turkish, Iranians, Azerbaijanis and many other nationalities that had set up tents along the various routes coming into Karbala.

It was a truly wonderful display of human generosity from all people but particularly the Iraqis who have suffered so much over the course of the last 30 years of sanctions, tyranny, wars, occupation and takfiri terrorism. I was told they didn't have very much and some of them even saved up so they could provide for the pilgrims who came to honour Imam Hussein and his brother Abbas and all those that died in the battle of Karbala some 1400 years ago on the day that is referred to as Ashura.

The volunteers believed their sacrifice was worth it and, ultimately, they would be

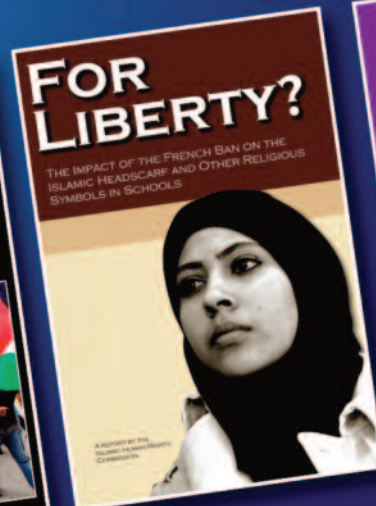
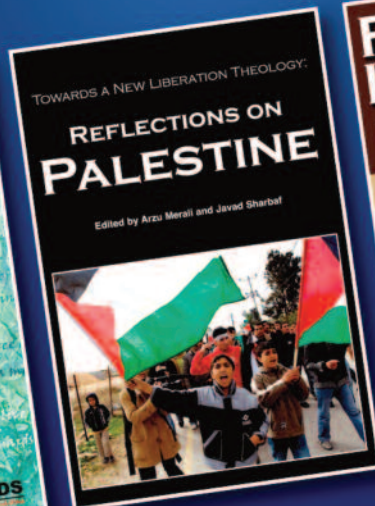
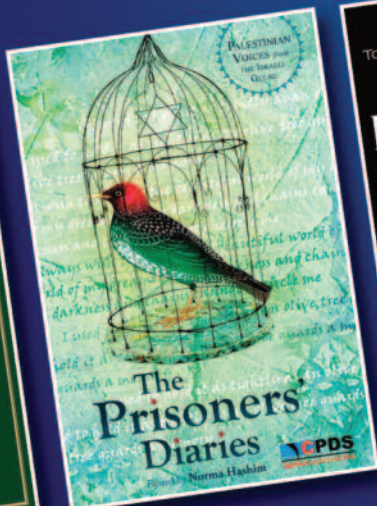
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rewarded in this life or the next. I would hear the term sacrifice a lot during my trip but it was most commonly associated with the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his 72 companions and also in reference to the fight against Daesh.

## Arbaeen and Imam Hussein

Arbaeen is actually Arabic for the number 40. It falls forty days after the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) grandson. Moreover, he was also the son of Imam Ali, who Shias regard as the rightful successor to Muhammad (pbuh) and whom they believe should have been the leader of the Muslim community (the Ummah) following Muhammad's (pbuh) death. Hussein is also the third Shia Imam.

Imam Ali eventually became the leader of the Ummah and ruled as the fourth caliph before he was killed while praying in the Great Mosque of Kufa, a place I was fortunate enough to visit on my trip.

His eldest two sons – Imam Hasan and Imam Hussein – who Shias believe were his rightful successors to lead the Ummah (and the second and third Shia Imams) were also later killed. Yet, it was the gruesome manner in which Imam Hussein, his relatives and companions were killed in the battle of Karbala on the day of Ashura that is mourned during the period of Arbaeen.

Following the deaths of Imam Ali and Imam Hasan, the title of caliph was controversially given to Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah who was nominated by his father Muawiyah after Imam Hasan abdicated the position in order to avoid civil war and further bloodshed. Yazid has been described by many historians as being the tyrant of the time and he was seen as an illegitimate ruler by Imam Ali's followers. Initially, Hussein was invited by the disgruntled inhabitants of Kufa who wanted to give their allegiance to him. However, when their leadership reneged on this offer, Hussein and his companions found themselves besieged by Yazid's forces on the plains of Karbala. After they refused to submit to Yazid's authority, Hussein and his 72 companions were martyred during the battle of Karbala. Among the dead was Hussein's half-brother Abbas in whose memory a huge shrine was later built in Karbala in close proximity to Hussein's.

The martyrdom of Imam Hussein has turned into a symbol of righteous revolt and social and political reform, as many believe his martyrdom demonstrated that it is right and just to oppose a tyrant even if he professes to be a Muslim (a lesson that the people of Iraq would learn again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century just as they did in the 7<sup>th</sup>). An Imam explained to me how it is part of Arbaeen to remember, mourn and retell this story. He was more than willing to give me all of the gruesome details, including how Hussein and the 72 companions were tortured and executed. I was also told that because of his martyrdom and what he stood for, Imam

Hussein is a highly venerated historical figure not only among Shia Muslims but also among Sunnis and people of other faiths and even people of no faith. In fact, I was surprised to find out just how many non-Muslim freedom fighters have been inspired by Imam Hussein.

The South African freedom fighter and Nobel Prize winner Nelson Mandela said he thought about Hussein while incarcerated on Robben Island by the apartheid regime:

*I have spent more than 20 years in prison, then on one night I decided to surrender by signing all the terms and conditions of government. But suddenly I thought about Imam Hussain and Karbala movement and Imam Hussain gave me strength to stand for right of freedom and liberation and I did.*

(Abdolhamidi, 2017)

The Bengali national hero and philosopher, writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore also famously said *"In order to keep alive justice and truth, instead of an army or weapons, success can be achieved by sacrificing lives, exactly what Imam Hussain did"* (Kazim, 2014).

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but wonder  
why Hollywood  
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I was told that Imam Hussein had even inspired the Argentine Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, arguably modern history's most well-known political martyr, who died fighting U.S. backed troops in Bolivia.

On my second day in Karbala, as I made my way to visit Imam Hussein's shrine it became clear to me that not only was I visiting a place of huge religious significance but also of historical and political significance too.

Firstly, some of the attendees were carrying political slogans denouncing ISIS and takfiri terrorism – something I am told they have been doing since 2014 when the war in Iraq against ISIS began. Yet this year they were also carrying many anti-corruption banners – something that was very much in sync with the national atmosphere, as there had been nationwide protests that began

before I had arrived in Iraq. The protests erupted at the beginning of October against high unemployment, government corruption and mismanagement. The Iraqi government was very much aware of the revolutionary spirit surrounding Arbaeen and attempted to use Arbaeen day itself and very much the language associated with Imam Hussein and Arbaeen to calm protesters. The Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi marked the day with a vow to "confront with strength and determination all forms of corruption and achieve justice"

Yet the former Iraqi premier and tyrant Saddam Hussein feared the revolutionary potential of Arbaeen and banned the procession during his rule because he allegedly believed that the mass gatherings could be weaponised and pilgrims could be worked up into a revolt against his dictatorship. Indeed, in 1991 there was an uprising across Iraq's Shia-dominated south when Iraqis rose up in huge numbers against Saddam's dictatorship costing many thousands of them their lives. Some were chased and sought refuge in the holy shrines including the holy shrines of Imam Hussein and Abbas, which were damaged by artillery and gunfire.

So in many ways I was unsurprised to see Arbaeen all these years later immersed yet again in Iraq's latest political convulsions.

Yet it was the spirit of martyrdom that struck me the most about the holy city and how that spirit had been invoked to fight the extremist threat posed by Daesh.

## The Martyrs

The shrines receive around 15-20 million people annually and in 2017, the year that coincided with the final defeat of Daesh in Iraq, some put the figures well in excess of 20 million.

Daesh posed an existential threat to Shias throughout Iraq who were the biggest victims of their terrorist attacks. Naturally, images of the martyrs who gave the lives fighting Daesh were plastered throughout Karbala on the lampposts, on the entrances to hospitals and schools. Everywhere there were reminders of martyrs who fought in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) against Daesh and if it wasn't for their sacrifices the pilgrims would not be able to attend Arbaeen in relative safety.

I was told that Iraq's most senior Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a Fatwa in 2014 for all able-bodied Iraqi men to volunteer and join the fight against Daesh. Three million Iraqis from all the different religious minorities answered the call. The PMF comprised of Shias, Sunnis, Christians and Yazidis, yet they were wrongly and, I would add, sinisterly referred to as a Shia militia by many western mainstream publications, as an attempt to turn the conflict into a sectarian conflict as opposed to a national fight against Daesh. Granted, Daesh and other associated takfiri

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terrorist groups regard Shias as non-believers, and as Shias make up the majority of Iraq's population it was only natural they made up the majority of the PMF. However, many Sunnis were also outraged and disgusted by their actions and warped ideology too and logically joined in huge numbers along with the other religious minorities that make up Iraq's diverse religious fabric.

Iraq, like Syria, has a long tradition of pluralism and Daesh's attempt to impose a monolithic 'Islamic state' based on a very narrow interpretation of Islam angered the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. Thus, there should be little surprise that so many joined the fight against the extremist terrorist group and even less of a surprise that those that fought and sacrificed their lives are held in such high esteem by the people of Karbala and the shrine organisations themselves.

In fact, in the Imam Hussein Shrine there is a museum upstairs with a dedication to the martyrs with a special window dedicated to Abu Tahsin al-Salhi. His comrades knew him as "The Sheikh of Snipers" and "Hawk Eye" because of his expertise with a sniper rifle. He is reported to have killed over 376 Daesh fighters.

Al-Salhi was a 63-year-old war veteran who had a long career fighting for his country starting in 1973 when he was part of an Iraqi brigade fighting on Syria's Golan Heights against the Israeli occupiers in the Arab-Israeli war. Yet it was in Hawija in northwest Iraq where he was killed, as he advanced with the PMF alongside the Iraqi government forces against one of the Daesh's last strongholds at what would be a penultimate battle. He is rightly held as a hero in Iraq and it felt like everyone knew his name. I couldn't help but wonder why Hollywood didn't consider someone like Abu Tahsin al-Salhi as worthy of a biopic. After all, they had no reservations about making a biopic celebrating the life of the controversial Chris Kyle in the movie "American Sniper".

Kyle was part of the illegal occupying American force. He bragged in his autobiography that he had killed 255 Iraqis. He also stated he didn't shoot people with Qurans but he would have liked to and that the enemy he was fighting were "savages" and "despicable evil". The biopic, which starts with Kyle shooting a Muslim woman and her son, was widely criticized for glorifying the brutal and illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. In fact, The

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee claimed online threats against Muslims in the U.S. rose drastically after the film (Seymour, 2015). It reminds me of that old African proverb: "Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter."

Were it not for the sacrifices of the likes of al-Salhi and the rest of the modern martyrs who lost their life fighting Daesh, then Ashura and the Arbaeen procession in Karbala which connect Iraq's modern day martyrs to Iraq's martyrs of the past, would be under serious threat.

#### • Ahmed Kaballo

is a London based journalist, producer and documentary maker. He currently works for Press TV and went to Venezuela for 6 weeks where he reported live from the ground and also presented and produced two documentaries.

Ahmed was born in the UK but his family come from Sudan and his father is a Sudanese politician and is a central committee member of Sudanese Communist Party. His father was detained during the time he was in Venezuela and was recently released when Omar al-Bashir fell. You can follow him on Twitter @AhmedKaballo

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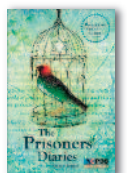
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# The struggle against Blackface in the Netherlands

The annual Sinterklaas Festival in the Netherlands has become a testing ground for the status of ethnic minorities and their attempts to influence what it means to be Dutch. The festival is based on a legend that every December, St. Nicholas travels to the Netherlands from Spain with an army of helpers or “Black Petes”, clownish and acrobatic figures dressed in Moorish page suits, to reward or punish children. In recent years people of colour have pushed back against the racist, colonial vestige with encouraging results, says **Sandew Hira**.

The racist stereotype of Blackface has a long tradition in the Netherlands and is rooted in the celebration of the memory of Sinterklaas, which sounds like the Christmas Santa Claus but is in reality very different. The character of Sinterklaas is based on a Catholic bishop from Myra (in Turkey), who was celebrated for the many miracles he performed and was elevated to the status of a saint. He lived in the fourth century, but the legends around him continued well into the 19th century in Europe.

In 1850 a Dutch primary school teacher, Jan Schenkman, published a picture book titled *Sint Nikolaas and his servant*, in which he developed the storyline and characters that became the foundation of the current-day Sinterklaas celebration. The story goes as follows. Sint Nikolaas - commonly referred to as Sinterklaas - is a bishop from Spain who visits the Netherlands by steamship. He arrives in Amsterdam with his black servants (Black Pete) and is welcomed by the population. He goes to a bakery and buys sweets. On the night of 5 December he travels on the roofs of the houses with his white horse and his black servants. The servants climb down the chimneys and put the sweets and presents in the shoes that the little children have put them out in anticipation of his visit. Sinterklaas keeps a book in which he records which children have behaved well and who has been naughty. The black servants might try to take the naughty children away from their parents. But Sinterklaas often shows clemency and Black Pete releases the children.

On the basis of this legend, a massive cultural phenomenon has developed in the Netherlands. Three weeks before 5 December hundreds of thousands of children with their parents welcome Sinterklaas at a harbor in different municipalities. Moreover, there is a national parade organized by the public broadcasting company where Sinterklaas is welcomed and the Sinterklaas season officially commences. During this season all major warehouses decorate their shops with characters of Sinterklaas and Black Pete. Sweets and presents in typical

Sinterklaas and Black Pete figures are put out for sale. A whole set of children's songs about Sinterklaas and Black Pete can be heard on radio, in the shops and in primary schools where children are taught to sing them. Presents are accompanied with special Sinterklaas poems that are written by those handing out the presents: family members, friends, colleagues at workplaces. The whole atmosphere during this season is filled with fun and feelings of love for children. After 5 December the warehouses swiftly change their windows and fill them with Christmas decorations so that the shopping for presents can continue right up to the end of the year. But during the Sinterklaas season Sinterklaas and Black Pete dominate the public space.

## The social forces behind the anti-racism movement

In 1940 the kingdom of the Netherlands had a majority Muslim population. Almost 90% of the total population of the kingdom were Muslims, but they had no civil rights. The kingdom consisted of the Netherlands, Indonesia, Suriname and the Antilles in the Caribbean. The total population was around 80 million: 71 million in Indonesia (Muslim), 9 million in the Netherlands and 0.2 million in the Caribbean. Indonesia won its freedom from the Netherlands in 1949 after a bloody war that cost 150,000 Indonesian lives. Suriname got its independence in 1975. The Antilles are still Dutch colonies.

In the mid 1960's the Dutch attracted thousands of so called guest workers mainly from Turkey, Morocco, Spain and Italy to work in the industry. Mass migration from Suriname to the Netherlands began in around 1970. Today the Netherlands has a population of 17 million, of whom less than two million are people of colour: 410,000 Turks, 400,000 Moroccans, 350,000 Surinamese, 87,000 Antillians with the balance being made up by Muslims from many different countries. Around 60% of all people of colour are Muslim. The communities of colour with African descent are from Suriname (40%

of the Surinamese community has African ancestry), the Antilles (almost 100% are of African descent) and some other African countries.

The first generation of immigrants in the Netherlands was focused on building the infrastructure of their communities, mainly religious and cultural institutions. Their close connections with families and communities in their countries of origin led to a focus on what was happening in their countries. But their children and grandchildren, the second and third generations, shifted their focus to the social struggle in the Netherlands.

The atmosphere during the Sinterklaas season has undergone a marked change because of the presence of people of African descent in the Netherlands. Black adults experienced how white children were afraid of them. They were called names after Black Pete. Black children were bullied at school. Insults and a general negative stereotype attitude pervaded this season more than in other periods. The first and second generation endured the insults, but the third generation took the struggle to the street and thus changed social attitudes towards the season.

In November 2011 two black activists, Quincy Gario and Kno' Ledge Cesare, attended the national parade of Sinterklaas in the city of Dordrecht wearing T-shirts with the slogan 'Black Pete is racism'. They were immediately arrested. Suddenly the children's festival of Sinterklaas was linked to an ugly phenomenon: racism. It prompted a national debate on the identity of Dutch culture. Is this national cultural festival proof that Dutch culture is inherently racist? How is the superiority of white Sinterklaas and the inferiority of his black servants linked to colonialism, and more specifically to the history of slavery? What does the educational system teach Dutch children about slavery?

The national discussion received further impetus from a new form of activism: black activists now engaged in confrontational tactics. An organization



was formed - Kick Out Zwarte Piet/Kick Out Black Pete (KOZP) - that organized buses to attend the national parade and the parades in different municipalities, knowing very well that they would get arrested. Although the numbers of people involved in the confrontational tactics were small (from less than a hundred to a few hundred, some with a majority of white activists), its political effect was massive. The question whether the Dutch - who portray themselves as a liberal and progressive nation - are racist was hotly discussed in schools, in the workforce, in sports clubs and at family dinners.

The discussion had international ramifications. In neighbouring Belgium Sinterklaas is celebrated in the same way as it is in Holland. They also have a national parade and a shopping season. Although there were no demonstrations in Belgium, a national discussion also took off in the media.

In 2015 the United Nations published a report in which it urged the Dutch government to *"actively promote the elimination of those features of the character of Black Pete which reflect negative stereotypes and are experienced by many people of African descent as a vestige of slavery"*.

The discussion on whether the character of Black Pete should be changed as the Sinterklaas celebration had a practical dimension: should the Dutch decorate their schools, workplaces, offices and houses with elements of Black Pete or not? Are they racists if they do? In 2013 a Facebook petition was organized to keep the character of Black Pete in the celebration. It was signed by 2.1 million people.

But in the years that followed two trends developed among the Dutch population under the pressure of the annual demonstrations against Black Pete and racism in the Netherlands. A growing segment of Dutch people came to accept the idea of removing the character of Black Pete from the Sinterklaas celebration. In a 2013 survey, 89% of the Dutch did not want any change in the character of Black Pete. In another survey in 2019 this num-

ber had dropped to 59%. In the big cities with large communities of colour such as Amsterdam and The Hague the drop was even bigger.

The shift in public opinion led to changes in the policies of some municipalities which fund the Sinterklaas parades. Amsterdam was one of the earliest cities to abolish the character of Black Pete from its parade. Other cities followed and in this year the organizers of the national parade substituted the character of Black Pete with non-black characters.

One consequence of the shift in Dutch public opinion was the rise of fascist groups that have taken the lead in the movement to keep Black Pete in the Sinterklaas celebration. They used their old strategy of violent confrontation, physically blocking demonstrations against Black Pete. In 2017 buses with anti-blackface activists on their way to the parade in the city of Dokkum were blocked on the highway by violent extremists. It took the police several hours to remove them. In 2018 the authorities fined the extremists for blocking the highway.

In 2019 a congress of KOZP in The Hague was attacked by hooligans with fireworks and baseball sticks. The building could have caught fire, but fortunately it did not. The police arrested five people between 13-37 years old. The extreme right now mobilize violent groups to attack anti-Blackface demonstrators. The situation has been reversed: the police protect anti-Blackface demonstrators who paint themselves black and shout "Black is beautiful".

The violence of the pro-Blackface groups and their openly fascist connections has further isolated the pro-Blackface groups in Dutch society. In the final analysis the movement against Blackface in the Netherlands has achieved an amazing result in less than 10 years. In Belgium the state broadcaster, in cooperation with the warehouses, has decided to totally abolish the character of Black Pete in the Sinterklaas season. Many municipalities - certainly in the big cities - have abolished Black Pete. The national parade too has abolished Black Pete.

## The next step

The actions against Black Pete offered great opportunities to build a broad anti-racist movement in the Netherlands. In the initial phase there was a connection between racism and Islamophobia. In the context of the political situation in the Netherlands these opportunities were huge, because Holland is the only country in Europe where political parties based on ethnicity have succeeded in gaining seats in the national parliament. In 2014 two members of the Labour Party of Turkish descent, Tunahan Kuzu and Selçuk Öztürk, left the party and kept their seats in parliament. They founded the political party DENK. In March 2016 they attracted Sylvana Simons, a public figure in the music entertainment industry, to the party. Simons is of African descent and her entry into the party symbolized the alliance of black and Muslim activists. There was outrage in the media and among white left organizations at the formation of this alliance. Forces came into play to try and break it. In December 2016 Simons left DENK and founded her own political party Artikel 1, later renamed Bij1. She used the theory of intersectionality to justify her step, claiming that DENK was not agitating strongly enough against LGTB oppression. Many black activists in the anti-Blackface movement went along with the intersectional line and thus broke the alliance against racism and Islamophobia.

But the discussion is not over. The coming years will show whether the social movements in the Netherlands are able to rebuild the much-needed alliance of blacks and Muslims that will shape the future of Europe.

### • Sandew Hira

is secretary of the DIN Foundation based in The Hague in The Netherlands. He is a well known activist, author and researcher. He heads the editorial board for Amrit publications, and is the founder of the International Institute for Scientific Research. You can find many videos of his lectures on Decolonising the Mind and related topics on the IHRC website [www.ihrc.org.uk](http://www.ihrc.org.uk) and IHRCTV on Youtube.

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his faith. Colleagues used to offer him pork to mock him.

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the way he was treated by colleagues and managers. His employers offered him £30,000 as a settlement for his complaint.

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