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# Arbaeen Event as an Alternative to Existing Bottlenecks

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*Arbaeen event is the most significant religious tourism event for Shiites. Using the social interpretation approach, this study explores the context for Iranian Shiite participation and understanding of the Arbaeen event. The research methodology is qualitative. Data were collected using ethnography methods and analyzed by grounded theory. According to the results, the inefficiency of the internal decision-making system as a result of the government and its administrative system facing a variety of crises in various political, economic, social, and cultural arenas, as well as social inequality, contribute to this event's attendance. A feeling of religious discrimination and a lack of rights for the participants leads to this inequality. The meaning reconstruction of the pilgrims' experience and perception serves as a channel for social participation and solidarity, cultural change, and a bridge between stakeholders and officials. The core category also refers to the Arbaeen event as an alternative to existing bottlenecks.*

**Keywords:** Arbaeen event, Iranian Shiites, social interpretation, social solidarity.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has now shown a new nature and has opened its arms to all social, cultural, and religious fields. The reason for this may be seen in the fluidity and dynamism of the contemporary world, which cannot be answered by the former one-dimensional views (Adorno et al. 2020). However, the tourism industry has a colonialist orientation that can have destructive consequences for culture and religion as part of it (Burns 2008). If we consider culture as a set of meaning symbols, then religion, as a set of symbols tied to sacred meanings, is responsible for transmitting, creating, and reproducing the meanings formed around sacred symbols (Mbiti 2015). At the beginning of the modern era, religious tourism becomes a common form of human culture, where the modern subject recognizes the world by establishing a belief system. Religious tourism in the contemporary world seeks the manifestation of religion in the behavior of people and their beliefs in vital circumstances and as it happens (Liutikas 2017).

Activists of any religion know the religion and its cultural functions better than anyone else. They apply it and create a model that can be a basis for holding religious rites (Deloria 2003). In the Shiite religion, as in other religions, there is a set of rituals that can be one of the ways to keep it alive. One of the rituals in the Shiite religion that has given a different meaning to the way people understand it is the Arbaeen walking ritual. Looking at history, it is clear that there was a confrontation between the political establishment and the religious minority, which acted as an obstacle to holding the event (Bod 2019). In recent years, the Shiites have welcomed this religious event with a unique response, given the transfer of political power in Iraq and the resolution of the conflicts.

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Arbaeen, as a religious tourism event, can be considered an identity for the Shiite religion, which the participating person interprets as an interpreter embedded in a network of social constructs and interacts with them. Such an interpretation, while considering the Arbaeen event as a product of the past in which the person has no role, does not consider him as the sole agent of the past reproduction. It sees him as an actor who builds the future based on the action that results from this interpretation. There is no doubt that the individual mentality is more or less unique. What is at stake here is a collective mentality; a common denominator of the intersubjective that creates space for a collective identity.

Such events play an important role in the development of the public sphere. In addition to the impact of such events on the power structure and the transcendence of local communities, they can also play a significant role in the formation and strengthening of collective attachment. Since religious tourism events create social structures, it is necessary to examine such a ritual from a sociological point of view and based on its cultural, political, social, and ideological potentials. The Arbaeen ritual is a window through which the dynamic movement of religious tourism in the Shiite religion can be seen and its effects analyzed and evaluated.

In this study, a unique phenomenon in religious tourism will be examined by using the researcher's direct experience and the approach of Iranian officials and activists; a phenomenon that is one of the world's largest religious events based on population growth. The main issue of the present study is to understand the contexts and motivation for pilgrims to participate in the event and their understanding of participation in the event. This event's growth and pilgrims' desire for religious activities in a context that is still considered low in terms of indicators of religious tourism development demonstrate the importance of investigating such an event.

## RESEARCH LITERATURE

### Religious Tourism

In contemporary literature, religious pilgrimage and religious tourism are considered as a subset of modern pilgrimage; a religiously motivated trip to a sacred place that can include natural elements, religious sites, religious activities, and rituals or festivals (Raj and Morpeth 2007; Sharpley 2009). Michaels, Petrino, and Pitre-Zampol (2021) state that people's motivations are very substantial and may have consequences for how people's cognitive experience through religion and spirituality. Intrinsically motivated individuals view religion and spirituality as more important to meaning in life, which should foster a tendency to adopt more coherent and expansive cognitive representations. The motivation of extrinsically motivated individuals may lead them to adopt more limited cognitive representations in contrast to intrinsically motivated individuals who are more proximally motivated. Therefore, they show that differences in religious motivation are influential for the practical identities that people rely on to form a sense of meaning.

Dafuleya et al. (2017) found in a study that the most significant motivations of pilgrims to join a religious event are to promote ethics, social improvement, and also pride in their religious community. However, it can be said that religiously motivated tourists, like all tourists, have basic needs and need all the conditions for their trip to be provided. Blackwell (2007) states that religious travelers have values that are multifaceted and multilayered. Most of them travel in groups and satisfy the desire for companionship and social life in addition to primarily religious motivation. At the same time, they tend to show the power of their religion to others. Abbate and Di Nuovo (2013) consider religion as a noneconomic motive for travel. They state that men's purpose of traveling to the Medjugorje sanctuary is to discover the needs and women's purpose of traveling is to socialize. Robina Ramírez and Fernández Portillo (2020) report an indirect effect between educational motivation, environmental and rural motivation, and cultural motivation in

religious travel. Wu and Mursid (2020) also take a different point of view and state the role of expected organizational rewards and the pleasure of helping others as motivations for Hajj Umrah travel. They also talked about the role of Umrah travelers' participation on the Umrah travelers' loyalty and stated that all relationships between participation, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty of Umrah travelers are significant.

### **Foot-Pilgrimage Tourism as an Action**

Pilgrimage can also include how to do it. Hence, walking to a sacred place on foot is also part of a pilgrimage that shows how to do it (Kato and Prozano 2017). In such pilgrimages, specific paths are created for pilgrims to begin their physical journey (Lois-González and Santos 2015). Many pilgrims face many difficulties in their journey, which is considered the main part of the pilgrimage experience (Amaro, Antunes, and Henriques 2018). They believe that if a pilgrim does not endure such problems, he will be reduced to an ordinary tourist (Wang et al. 2020).

Walking for pilgrimage is an action (Maddrell 2013). Action refers to human behavior with a specific mental meaning (Martin 2011). There are types of action. Sometimes, this action is rational. Rational action is divided into two types value and purposeful (Minner 2020). A value-rational action is an action that involves a conscious belief in the value of a moral, aesthetic, religious, and so on behavior that is devoid of any prospect of external success, and the only reason the actor does it is the action itself (Arnaldi, Arnaldi, and Bianchi 2016). Sometimes, the action is irrational and divided into two types, affective and traditional. Affective action is caused by a person's specific desires and emotional state. Traditional action is the result of a tendency toward tradition that is created through long-term habits in the individual (Minner 2020).

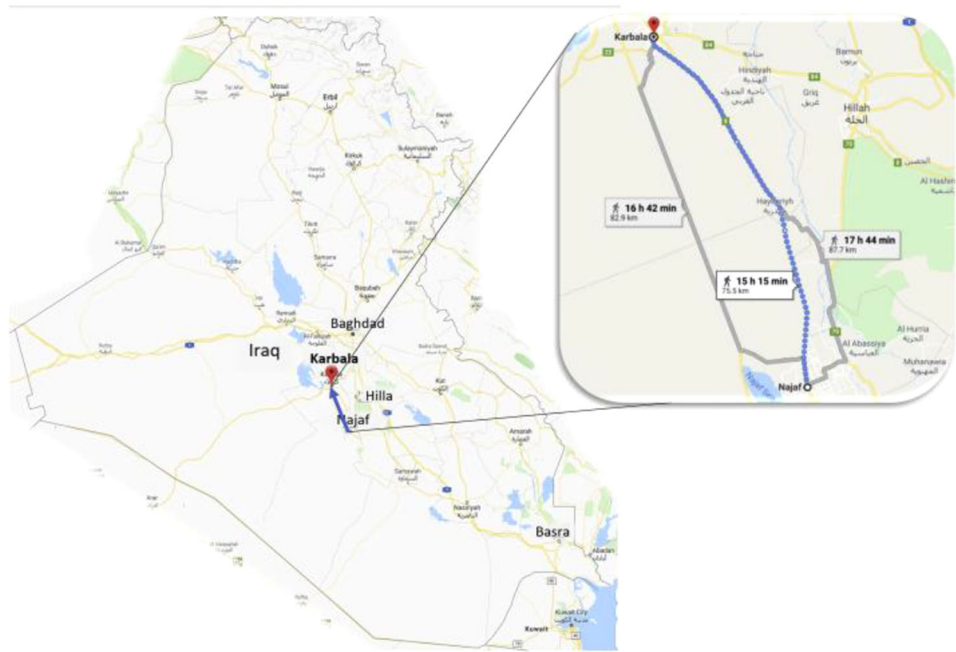
### **Arbaeen Event**

The Arbaeen event has always been of special importance in Shiite beliefs, religion, and history and has been addressed from various perspectives and approaches (Al-Ansari et al. 2020; Albujeer and Almahafidha 2018; Eslami, Bazrafshan, and Sedaghat 2021; Hashjin and Nikunahad 2020). According to some scholars and jurists, the historical basis of such a ritual was the arrival of the Ahl al-Bayt to Karbala in the first 40 years of Hussein (61 AH) and the burial of the heads of those killed in the battle of Karbala next to their bodies. Many Shiite and Sunni historians also believe that the basis for celebrating this day is the arrival of Jabir and Atiyah in Karbala (Motahhari 1992).

Since the formation of Iraq, a monarchy has been established in the country that had a good relationship with the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran and, therefore, responded positively to the needs of the Iraqi Shiite community. After the Ba'athist coup, the formerly good relations were replaced by hostile ones, which led to an 8-year war between the two countries. Although during this period, the walking of religious leaders continued until the time of Saddam Hussein (Sadat Mirmohammadi, Keshvardoost, and Mirzababaei 2018), Iraqi Shiites came under political pressure and were not provided with a suitable arena for social gatherings and mourning collective actions (Takeyh 2010). There has been an interruption in the Arbaeen ritual from the time Saddam Hussein came to power until his fall. However, some news reports indicate that people walked secretly during Saddam's time (Nikjoo et al. 2020). With the Iran–Iraq war, relations between the two countries, including pilgrimages, were completely severed. At that time, Iranian Shiites turned to alternative pilgrimage trips (such as Syria). After the end of the war and the reopening of the embassies, pilgrim caravans were gradually sent to Iraq in limited numbers.

Over the past few years, Shiites have considered the Arbaeen as one of the most important tools for expressing their religious identity. The deep crises in the Middle East after the Arab Spring intensified this issue (Jafari and Sandikci 2016). For this reason, the governments of Iran

Figure 1  
The walking route of the Arbaeen pilgrimage [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



and Iraq each provided special facilities for a more glorious Arbaeen ritual and easier travel for pilgrims, which played an important role in turning this ritual into a religious mega event. In general, three different periods can be considered for the Arbaeen ritual in the contemporary history of Iraq: the period of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party, the period of occupation, and the period of the mega event. The focus of the study is on the final period.

The number of pilgrims on this route in 2019, according to the Friday prayer leader of Karbala, was more than 18 million, and the number of Iranian pilgrims in this ritual is estimated at three million (IRNA 2019). The importance of this trip is better understood when comparing its number with the trip of 90,000 Iranians for the obligatory Hajj trip to Saudi Arabia. Pilgrims take different routes to reach Karbala. On this route, Iranian pilgrims often walk between Karbala and Najaf, which is a route of 80 km and lasts an average of 3 days (Figure 1).

Limited studies have addressed the Arbaeen event as a mega-religious event. In a phenomenological study, Husein (2018) analyzes the motivations and experiences of pilgrims on foot during their journey to Karbala and uses the Shiite Islamic worldview to combine the findings. Foroughi and Seraj (2020) examine the perceptions of Iranian pilgrims about participating in the Arbaeen event. Seddigh, Bagheri, and Seddigh (2021) examine the challenges of pilgrims’ decision to travel to Iraq and participate in the Arbaeen event. Finally, Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine (2021) consider the Arbaeen journey alongside ISIS forces in the region a dangerous journey and raise the question of what draws Iranian pilgrims to this journey? They respond with in-depth research that the suspension of materialism, redemptive suffering, and the psychological effects of mass gatherings have led them to this event.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

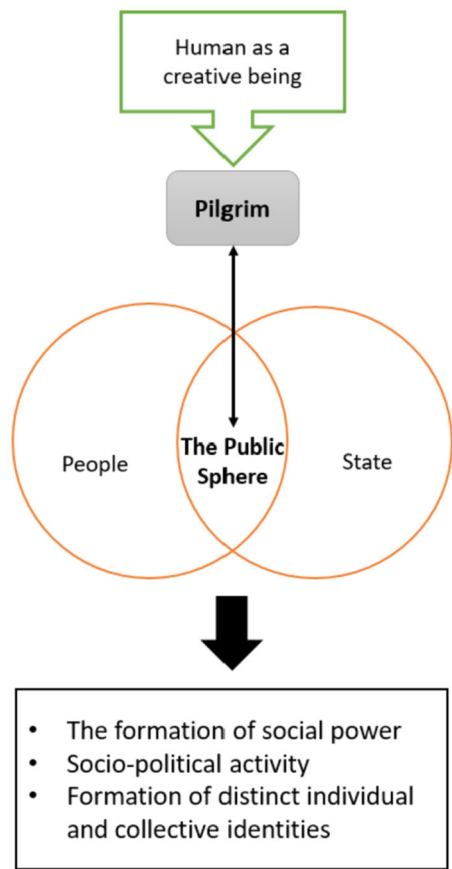
While the theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects of quantitative methodology in positivist sociology by selecting a theory or a combination of several theories and presenting hypotheses based on it for testing and examining them, the conceptual framework is specific to interpretive and qualitative studies that study the basic concepts. A conceptual framework is the explanation and creation of a logical connection of concepts between ideas and major theoretical elements that form the basis of the research in question. In addition, the theoretical literature, previous studies, and personal experiences of the researcher are also of great importance in designing the conceptual framework (Corbin and Strauss 2014). In the present study, the interpretive approach has been used to formulate a conceptual framework. This approach emphasizes the microlevels of social life and sees societies as the product of the consequences of microsocial interactions. By examining these interactions and how they are formed, one can understand how to create social order and larger structures (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

For the first time in the social sciences, it was Durkheim (1976) who not only did not consider religion as an obstacle to social cohesion and order, but even potentially considered it as a factor in establishing order and cohesion, and spoke of the role of religious groups in social construction (Ling and Bouma 2008; Sheleff 2021). Durkheim saw religion and its rituals as strings on which society is built and linked (Bellah 2005). Wherever there are religious rites, there is inevitably solidarity and altruism and altruism is the basis of life (Dubeski 2001). In these societies, religion is established through the mediation of common values that are rooted in the totality of shared experiences and determine the details of action (Henriksen 2020). In modern societies, religion is a factor in establishing social ties and social solidarity while maintaining differences (McCaffree and Shults 2021). In modern society, a new form of social solidarity, ethics, and values is needed to prevent disintegration. This order, which is based on the acceptance of differences and interdependence, is organic and has a cohesive nature (Sohrabi 2019).

Quack and Schuh (2017) have raised the issue of solidarity and social cohesion during the discussion of religious rites. Pilgrims who gather in a religious rite are a subset of a society that, despite its dependence on sources and inputs from the political, economic, cultural, territorial structures, ancient structures, and relationships, is analytically and empirically of relative identity and independence (Khan et al. 2016). Every religious community falls into a social sphere that is the realm of solidarity and general collective identity (Campbell 2005). According to Kurthen and Heisler (2009), any popular collective identity development as the foundation of a democratic social order requires liberation from political and economic domination. Internally, a religious community includes a symbolic structure, purposeful discourse, and positive and favorable social motivations, such as rationality, trust, honesty, extraversion, and friendship, which brings extensive, conscious, and voluntary social rituals and interactions (Frunză 2012). This religious community will eventually lead to inclusive, social contract structures and institutions that strengthen social order, solidarity, and collective identity.

Marzocchi (2010) introduces the interactions of pilgrims as the most fundamental component of its capital by conceptualizing religious rituals in the form of horizontal networks. According to Wank and Ashiwa (2020), participation in religious rites implies an interest in religious issues, a willingness to engage in religious activities, and cooperation and partnership with religious institutions. According to Serageldin, Shluger, and Martin-Brown (2001), the forms of this partnership can be studied in the form of informal and formal partnerships. What causes people to participate in rituals is the search for identity and meaning and the existence of certain values in these actors, which creates certain forms of collective action. Therefore, the form of religious rites (such as Arbaeen rites) can be attributed to transcendental values and the desire of individuals to seek identity and meaning. In performing their action, they do not seek to meet basic and material needs, but because of inner feelings, attention to the environment, ideals, development, and the manifestation of their character (Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine 2021; Turner 2018).

Figure 2  
Conceptual framework [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

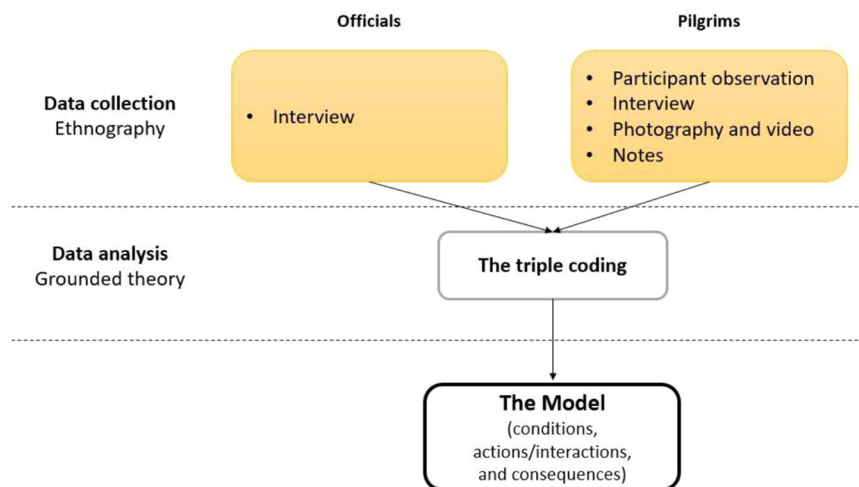


Therefore, if we consider human beings as active and creative beings who are constantly constructing and giving meaning to their social and daily life, then the social environment, contrary to the positive approach, is meaningless in itself and becomes meaningful by human beings (Adams, Keane, and Dutton 2005). In the meantime, pilgrims, as religious tourists, observe the intermediate communities that form the interface between the host and guest communities (Sinha and Mohanty 2021). Appleby (1992) considers pilgrims as that part of social life that, while being independent of both societies, provides the ground for free, rational, and nondominant activity. This concept can evoke the public sphere. Butler et al. (2011) consider the use of religion from the public sphere for interactions essential in structures, common values, the realization of communicative rationality, and social development. Thus, religious tourists can be considered one of the most important actors in the public sphere and social participation.

From this perspective, religious tourists are important in three ways: first, they enable a more balanced distribution of authority and lead to the formation of social power. Second, they will become more politically and socially active by broadening their interests and expanding human relations. Third, given the potential nature of the public sphere and the need for its constant recreation through collective action, the principle of the formation of distinct individual identities and the formation of collective identities depends on their participation in religious rites. The lack of positive symbolic rules at the three levels mentioned will threaten the religious community and undermine the general collective identity as the foundation of social order and democracy. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework of the research based on what was stated in this section.



Figure 3  
Schematic methodology [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



## METHODOLOGY

Following the interpretive approach, the methodology of this research is qualitative. The ethnographic method has been used to conduct research operations. Ethnography is the study of people in the natural social environment and helps the researcher to achieve the social meanings and activities of individuals (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). In this method, the researcher has directly participated in the study field. This is a form of social research that emphasizes how people interpret the world in which they live. This method allows talking to the subjects under study and reflects all the facts from their perspective (Coffey 2018).

The purpose of the ethnographic method—which is the main method of this research—is to provide a “deep description” of the reality under study (Korstanje 2017). Achieving this in-depth description requires techniques and tools to organize the collected data and achieve theories based on the facts and data. This type of theory is called grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2014). According to Glaser and Strauss (2017), the data used in grounded theory must be empirical, meaning that the individual researcher is objectively and empirically involved in data collection operations. The process of creating a grounded theory continues from the beginning to the end of the research. Grounded theory is formulated in the field and uses data from observation and interviews. In this research, grounded theory has been used to analyze the collected data (Figure 3).

To reach the point of view of the actors in the field, the first author of this study participated in the Arbaeen event twice and obtained qualitative data through three methods of in-depth and semistructured interviews, participatory observation, filming, and photography to document the data. In this method, data collection and analysis are performed in a different way from quantitative methods in the field, so the analysis begins with the first observation or interview and then leads to the next. It is the analysis that drives the data collection.

The field data were collected in two stages, once in 2018 and again in 2019 and before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of the interviews with the pilgrims lasted about half an hour and the interviews with the officials lasted for about an hour. Some officials were also interviewed twice. According to the conditions and how people deal with the questions, they were asked different questions. The questions that were asked to the pilgrims were based on the following topics: the number of times they have participated in the Arbaeen walking ritual, their motivations to participate, their attitudes toward the issue, the obstacles and problems inside Iran, the obstacles and problems in Iraq, the level of interaction with other pilgrims, the role of the



media, the performance of the government in facilitating, and their concerns. The questions that were asked to the officials were also related to these issues: relations between the two countries, their functions to facilitate traveling to Iraq, use of voluntary activities, existing problems and obstacles, how to issue visas, and involved organizations. In this study, 56 people were interviewed (15 officials and 41 pilgrims).

The researchers began by examining the data and classifying them into textual and observational data. Then, they started the coding process by separating the questions. In the first stage of open coding, the researchers examined the text (including manuscripts, notes, and documents) for concepts hidden in the information. The researchers using a comparative approach tried to "saturate" the concepts. They looked for items that represented the concepts and continued to do so until new information was not found. At this stage, the data were reduced. Open coding was done line by line. At each stage of code generation, researchers were able to write a brief description for each source code and use them to construct major categories. In the open coding process, researchers pursued concepts based on theoretical sensitivity that was more representative and analytical in the analysis process. They continued this process until the data were saturated.

When a set of primary codes was extracted, common concepts were categorized into major categories based on constant comparisons of similarities and differences. As a storyline, the major categories were categorized according to context, interaction, and consequence. The storyline should explain the major categories logically and analytically one after the other. This process helped to analyze the data analytically and logically and provided the basis for selective coding and extraction of the core category. At this stage, the researchers plotted the conditions that affected this central phenomenon, the strategies mentioned in the phenomenon, the interfering contexts that shape these conditions, and the consequences of carrying out these strategies in the form of a three-dimensional paradigm. In the end, they were able to present a theoretical model that visually shows the interrelationship of these categories.

One of the methods used to show the validity of qualitative methods is the frequent citation and return to the raw data of the research when expressing the research report and expressing the abstract categories received from them. During the presentation of the findings of this study, an attempt was made to use quotations repeatedly. Another method is to use the auditing technique to obtain the consent of experts (Schurink 2009). Based on this, the supervision of experts in different stages of coding, conceptualization, and extraction of categories was used.

## FINDINGS

### Experiencing and Understanding the Arbæen Event

To analyze the contexts, motivations, and consequences of pilgrims' presence in the Arbæen ceremony, we will discuss their interpretations in this section. For this reason, the researcher was present in the field and asked questions. The information and data obtained were extracted during the coding process. During this process, 47 concepts were obtained. Finally, the concepts related to each other were combined, and categories were extracted as described in Table 1.

#### *Arbæen as a Mediator*

Bogaards (2019) refers to religious communities as intermediate communities between informal and formal communities and provide the basis for free, wise, and far from domination activities. The Arbæen event has been effective in strengthening social capital, both for Iranian pilgrims and its officials. This social capital means different relationships and the amount of communication with the organizers. Therefore, social capital oversees the communication and connection with the executives of this event. Through this connection, the issues and problems of the pilgrims are transferred to the authorities, and efforts are made to resolve them.

Table 1: Open and axial coding about tourists' experience and perception of the Arbaeen event

Concepts	Main categories	Axial categories
bridge between the people and the government, participation, interaction and communication, cooperation with the media, implementation of programs, compensation for government inaction	communication bridge, implementation, serving the people, mediation	Mediation and reconstruction of interactions
cultural beliefs, pursuing public aspirations, being popular, relying on popular ability, disciplining, helping fellow human beings as an inherent human trait, the need for change, effectiveness, changing attitudes, gaining new experience	popularity, culture building, awareness, cultural change	Facilitating social change
belief in collective power, connection between religious groups, social participation, social empathy, unity, networking, volunteering, sociality, human activities, lack of material purpose, spontaneous activity, social concern	social commitment, social participation, spontaneity, volunteerism, concern	Social restoration and reconstruction

"Arbaeen should be a bridge between the people and Islamic governments so that they can bridge the gap." (Official)

"I feel very good. It is as if I am stepping into another world. But I get upset when I see health problems and inconsistencies." (Pilgrim)

For pilgrims, acting in such an event is an opportunity to get rid of their material belongings, and it is an opportunity for social role-playing that has been made possible due to the social weight and impact of the Arbaeen event. Otherwise, such a possibility would not be available, and many things would be inaccessible.

"I'm gaining new experiences here. Many may say it is a political event, what's wrong with that? Politics is also part of society, and we have to learn the rules and the political games." (Pilgrim).

"Many of the people who are attending this event have bigger concerns. This event acts as a facilitator. We, as officials, know some of these. For example, we know that part of it is due to the laws of Iraq." (Official)

### ***Arbaeen as a Facilitator of Social Change***

According to Myers (2014), one of the functions and implications of religious rites is the function of liberation and helping to develop liberating communication actions with the aim of development and evolution. In the view of the interviewees, the Arbaeen event, along with its supportive function and the presentation of social issues and pilgrim issues, is an agent of change. This event has defamiliarity with matters considered normal and natural from the public point of view and has contributed to changing the intellectual, epistemological, and action orientations of people in society. Therefore, the Arbaeen event plays a role in turning everyday issues into social issues. In addition, interviewees believe that the Arbaeen event can change unconventional cultural beliefs in society.

"The Arbaeen event can do a lot for the community and reform public opinion on many issues. I think we can change cultural misconceptions about this." (Official)

"I used to want to correct the beliefs of those around me about this issue [...] I would like to change the whole city, the whole community, a big change to improve the situation." (Pilgrim)

### ***Arbaeen as a Restorative***

According to the interviewees, the social spirit in society is very weak. Individuals act individually. They take less into account the interests of others, even in activities and actions that are collective. In the Iranian religious community, collective commitment and responsibility to others have diminished. In their view, the Arbaeen event has played a role in rebuilding social ties, strengthening cooperation and social participation.

"In our society, social action is very low. The impression is that we are weak in teamwork. Arbaeen is a good opportunity to strengthen this spirit and rebuild the collective spirit." (Official)

"Those who have a big heart participate in this event and pay for it themselves. So these people can strengthen the community as long as they are allowed to play a role." (Pilgrim)

Another aspect of social solidarity from the interviewees' perspective is the strengthening of communication between organizations that have a common field and scope of activity.

"Cooperation between organizations is very weak. There are organizations that operate as religious institutions in several areas, and there are organizations that make no effort." (Official)

“Communication between organizations is evolving. Due to the general public turning to this event, organizations are working to strengthen this connection based on the Arbaeen event.” (Official)

“Members are confused. There is a lot of parallel work. Organizations do not have the skills and participation and cooperation, and they confuse us as well.” (Pilgrim)

## Contexts of the Arbaeen Event

The grounded theory seeks to find structures and their impact on actors through the actors' experiences and perceptions, in a social flow. In this regard, to find the answer to the question, what are the contexts and reasons for the Iranian society to welcome the Arbaeen event? While observing the participation of individuals, interviews were conducted and data were extracted. The information and data obtained were extracted during the coding process. From the obtained texts, 69 concepts were obtained, which were finally combined with the concepts that were related to each other, and 22 subcategories and six central categories were extracted as described in Table 2.

### *The Inefficiency of the Decision-Making System*

One of the main reasons for participating in the Arbaeen event from the interviewees' perspective is the inefficiency of the internal decision-making system. Iranian society is defined by the dominance of the political subsystem over other social, religious, cultural, and economic subsystems, and the government has taken on a maximum and intervening nature. In all areas, Iranian society is faced with the centrality and priority of the bureaucracy and the administrative system resulting from the maximum government. Following Habermas's conceptual apparatus, the government and the resulting administrative system face various crises in various political, economic, social, and cultural fields (Habermas 2012); in economics with the crisis of efficiency, in the social field with the crisis of social motivation, and in the cultural field with the crisis of rationality. Hence, the whole political system is struggling with the crisis of acceptability and legitimacy due to economic, social (transformation of the public sphere), and cultural intervention. The entire administrative system is plagued by ritualism and corruption. These issues and crises have become more pronounced and paradoxical due to the disruption of the Iranian religious community.

From the interviewees' perspective, cultural centralism, lack of meritocracy, nonemployment of religious youth, deterioration of citizenship, and disregard for the rights of religious minorities in the law lead to disruption of the decision-making system, religious and political conflicts, growing harms and social anomalies, environmental damage, and underdevelopment of religious rites. Hence, religious activists have resorted to practical and collective measures to compensate for inefficiency outside of Iran. Religious activists have sought to address the socioreligious crises and harms caused by this issue in the absence of an inefficient decision-making system.

“Domestic organizations cannot do their job of strengthening the collective and religious spirit of Iran.” (Pilgrim)

“In this regard, measures have been taken that should be expanded to hold religious rites and facilitate the movement of pilgrims to the Arbaeen event to move away from the constraints of administrative frameworks and governing structures.” (Official)

“I feel that the religious spirit of our society has declined. I think participating in such events (with all its difficulties) can strengthen this spirit.” (Pilgrim)

Table 2: Open and axial coding about contexts and reasons for welcoming the Arbäeen event

Concepts	Main categories	Axial categories	Category type
freedom from governing constraints, the inability of organizations to perform their duties, the inefficiency of society and officials, the inability of the government to create social cohesion, inefficiency and excuses, ruling bureaucracy, lack of meritocracy, the reluctance of officials, ignoring the religious community	ignoring the religious community, the ritualization of the system, inefficient managers, the weakness of meritocracy	Inefficient government	Cause conditions
defects in domestic religious ceremonies, performance of taste, social deprivation, discrimination, weakness of social rights, declining sense of being a Shiite, nonobservance of individual rights, political and religious discrimination	religious and ethnic discrimination, decline of citizenship, tasteful implementation	Inequality	
avoidance of everyday life, feeling useful, enjoying collective work, fulfilling social responsibility, getting to know members, being useful as a purpose in life	feeling empty, free from everyday life, the need for practical action, bypassing despair	Getting rid of everyday life and giving meaning to life	Goals
belief in collective power, lived experience, belief in more group power, interest in religious activity, interest in voluntary activity, having a collective spirit, enjoying collective activity, social engagement	collective experience, personal problems, collective spirit, sense of effectiveness	Benefit from organizational channels	
social concern, social commitment, helping others, feeling responsible for future generations, human duty, service, human activity, sensitivity to society	socioreligious commitment, socioreligious concern, altruism, socioreligious sensitivity	Socioreligious responsibility	Incentives
individual growth, gaining prestige, socioreligious prestige	social skills, social status	Gaining socioreligious prestige	

Figure 4  
Young people preparing food for pilgrims [Color figure can be viewed at  
wileyonlinelibrary.com]



### ***Inequality***

One of the main areas for the growth of religious activism is the existence of internal economic, social, and political inequalities. Inequality implies a disturbance in the institutional and structural identification and recognition process. The objectification of structural pressures has led religious activists to bridge the gap between value abilities. In addition, the activity at this event has made it possible for pilgrims to make intercultural and social comparisons. In the statements of many interviewees, the feeling of religious discrimination, lack of rights, and violation of laws is significantly expressed.

“My point of view has changed, whether we like it or not, we live in Iran. We are being oppressed and the government must take action.” (Pilgrim)

“In the current situation, the investment crisis regarding this event is related to the infrastructure of Iraq. Of course, we do not have advanced infrastructure either.” (Official)

### ***Getting Rid of Everyday Life and Giving Meaning to Life***

One of the reasons mentioned by the interviewees for participating in the Arbaeen event was the feeling of emptiness in religious occasions, the need for practical action to get rid of the monotony of daily life, active confrontation with despair, and redefining the meaning of life and its role in it and usefulness in the religious community as the goal. According to them, their social relations have been diversified and excitement has returned to their lives by attending this event.

In the present study, a significant portion of the actors is young (Figure 4). In dominant discourses, youth is seen as an issue, and young people generally have difficulty identifying. Due to this disorder in the recognition, the space and scope of youth activities are limited, especially in the formal dimensions. In Iranian society, the possibility of influence and social management has disappeared for the majority of young people. This issue has caused them to struggle with daily life.

"Participating in the Arbæen event is full of energy and inner emotional discharge. In this event, I have experienced spiritual purification and inner peace." (Pilgrim)

"Religious community does not have a high status in Iran. I was tired of this situation and I could not give up. Together with some of my friends who were in a popular situation, we decided to raise our money and participate in this event. We are very satisfied now." (Pilgrim)

"Young Iranians feel that they should be useful and do something useful. Many of them consider participating in this event not only useful for themselves, but also as a social presence." (Official)

"Undoubtedly, everything that comes from the heart stays in the heart [an Iranian proverb]. If you have a compassionate goal, you should step on that goal and do it with empathy, cohesion, and honesty." (Official)

### ***Benefit from Organizational Channels***

One of the grounds for facilitating this event is the use of organizational channels, which means membership in various religious groups and institutions, which leads to greater participation. According to the interviewees, most religious activists did not have any experience before attending the Arbæen event. However, some of the interviewees referred to their experiences. In other words, living conditions and social necessity have led them to collective action.

"I experienced small religious activities at the university. Because of the worries and injuries, I felt, I did my best to find a solution to them so that I could address my concerns and worries with things like membership in associations." (Official)

"The discussion of activity in this area is primarily related to the problems we have personally experienced. There is a lot of underemployment in the society, including irresponsibility and lack of culture, the more I saw underemployment, the more I became eager to work in this field." (Official)

"Because I attended a school that did not value religious beliefs, I was better able to communicate with this event." (Pilgrims)

Among most of the interviewees, the social spirit and belief in teamwork and collective power were considerable, and based on their lived experience, a sense of the effectiveness of participating in this event was formed in them. This effectiveness comes from the individual's understanding of the results of their activities and actions. Because when people are effective in achieving goals, they participate in such activities, and when they feel that their participation does not affect their social situation and personal life, they give up such activities. Pilgrims consider participation in this event as the crystallization of usefulness and greater effectiveness, enjoy collective work, and consider the activity in this event as the best way of religious influence.

"It makes more sense to be useful in an organized way. The power of the group is greater than the individual in every way. The more purposeful and organized the work, the sooner it will achieve its goal." (Pilgrim)

### ***Social Responsibility***

The underdevelopment of the study field, which confirms the meager use of the gifts of power and development, shows the decline of the responsibility of the Iraqi government and the necessity of fulfilling the mission of the actors. Socioreligious concerns, commitment, helping others, a sense of responsibility to future generations, service, and sensitivity to the religious community are some topics that are some of the main reasons for attending the event. Lack of indifference in the meaning system and action orientations is a common chapter of pilgrims. Although the type and scope of commitment and responsibility have varied among the interviewees, a sense



Figure 5

A cleric waxing a pilgrim's shoes [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



of belonging, commitment, and loyalty has developed and deepened according to individual and structural requirements.

“Part of the mission of anyone living in a religious community is to be effective. In my opinion, the best way to influence the current situation is to participate in such events.” (Pilgrim)

“We have to accept the differences and not be self-centered. Every single person in Iranian society is no different. Sometimes we may think that religious communities are not supported, which is a fact [...] but this lack of support is not from the authorities and is more to the people themselves.” (Official)

“In the beginning, when I accepted this responsibility, I felt that there are harms in the society that religious people should spend more time and fill these gaps.” (Official)

In the statements of the interviewees, altruism, helping others, and solving problems were significant, and most acknowledged that such events should be held more vigorously because of the damage that is being done to this group (Figure 5).

“The discussion of issues and injuries made me more interested in this event and encouraged me to participate in it in any way.” (Pilgrim)

“Now in Iranian society, a series of families are trying to force their children to convert to the religion. In my opinion, this pressure has caused a lot of damage to our small community.” (Pilgrim)

Table 3: Open and axial coding about the consequences of participating in the Arbæen event

Concepts	Main categories	Axial categories
value, religious participation, transition from reductionism, attitude change, concern, maturity, transition from limited perception of religious issues to sociological insight, realism	maturity, concern, not reducing religion to an individual matter	Social insights
rebuilding relationships, being a role model for others	authority, influencing	Social role modeling
personal pleasure, spiritual purification, enthusiasm, feeling of worth	inner peace, spiritual purification, pleasure	Personal peace

“The discussion of facilitating the holding of this event has become more widespread now, and in my opinion, this issue has an objective manifestation.” (Official)

**Gaining Socioreligious Prestige**

From the interviewees’ point of view, one of the grounds and reasons for attending this event is gaining prestige. Participating in such an event has provided a kind of social capital for pilgrims by expanding the field of interaction and promoting public trust. This capital has a connecting nature. This social capital connects dissimilar people from different sections of society and makes it possible to access available resources.

One of the categories that activists have been looking for and important to them has been gaining socioreligious prestige. In a situation where the possibility of influencing and managing people in different fields is limited for various reasons, people have provided channels for being seen and gaining respect by attending the Arbæen event as a social institution.

“Participating in this event gives you a unique personality. It teaches me to be critical, to find my social and religious status and to have ideas.” (Pilgrim)

“It turns upside down the personality and character of human beings and introduces the individual as a model in society.” (Official)

**Consequences of Participating in the Arbæen Event**

In this section, we seek to know what impact the participation in the Arbæen social event has on the personal and social lives of the actors? For this purpose, coding was done and at the same time, the axial categories were extracted (Table 3).

**Sociological Insight and Not Reducing the Social Matter to the Individual**

The interviewees stated that their view of various topics and issues was very reductionist and superficial, before participating in this event. The view was associated with individualism and self-interest, social indifference, self-centeredness, and a disregard for others’ interests. By participating in this event, people’s mental horizons are expanded and their interests are taken into account in their mental and behavioral equations with others. Thus, instead of taking a personal

view of issues and looking at them from a narrow individual circle, they are confronted with a comprehensive and holistic view of social issues. Using Mills' (1959) terminology, it can be said that religious activity has equipped them with a kind of "sociological insight."

"Sometimes I felt that people's problems are personal and have nothing to do with us. When you participate in an event like this, you find the roots of pain and injury, and sometimes you give people the right. We all live together and we have to play a role." (Officials)

"My perception has changed. For example, previously I think that if someone has an objection to the problems, he/she should find a solution for it, but now I think the share of the environment is also large." (Pilgrims)

### ***Patternability***

Another consequence of participating in the Arbaeen event has been being a role model for people in the community. Activists have become a religious authority by participating in the event without profit motives. When the dominant pattern of action of individuals is based on a kind of instrumental rationality, a kind of calculation and estimation of personal gain and loss directs individual behaviors. Participating in the Arbaeen event has helped rebuild ties and strengthen social issues.

"My sense of responsibility has increased from zero to one hundred. I have become more influential. I have been able to be useful as a role model for others." (Pilgrim)

"When someone sees that I have taken such a difficult path with less religious beliefs, he/she is also encouraged to experience it at least once." (Pilgrim)

### ***Personal Peace***

Participating in the Arbaeen event and playing a role in it—whether as a pilgrim or as a person in charge—has been accompanied by a kind of enthusiasm, joy, worthlessness, indefatigability, energy drain, and inner peace for the actors in this field.

"To be honest, it is a special pleasure to work in this field, I have grown up with the pilgrims myself. I have established a balance between helping others and my interests." (Official)

"When I feel like I am serving without expectation, I get energy, I do not get tired, I enjoy and I am happy." (Official)

"The biggest effect it has had is to boost self-confidence because self-satisfaction boosts self-confidence." (Pilgrim)

## **Core Category: Arbaeen Event as an Alternative to Existing Bottlenecks**

The core category of this research is based on nine categories (Table 4). This category answers the contextual, interactive, and consequential questions in the most abstract way possible, and the path of its growth can be traced from the context of the background data by referring to the axial categories. By referring to the axial categories, we can follow the path of the growth of the core category from the heart of the categories, concepts, and quotations.

Based on observations and data from interviews, the Arbaeen event is an alternative for individuals to express themselves (give meaning to life and get rid of the boring monotony of daily life), face internal structural pressure (inefficient administrative and administrative system), tackle inequality (through accountability and status), reducing communication disruption, tackling social fragmentation, and religious sensitivities. Participating in the Arbaeen event is an accessible and new resource through which pilgrims face internal structural bottlenecks.

Table 4: Selective coding

Category	Category type	Axial category	Core category
Get rid of everyday/giving meaning to life	Goals	Self-expression	The Arbaeen event as an alternative to existing bottlenecks
Social change	Interactive		
Personal peace	Consequence		
Social insights	Consequence		
Benefiting from organizational channels	Goals	Interactions	
Mediator	Interactive		
Inefficiency	Cause conditions	Structural pressure	
Gaining credit	Incentives	Identification disorder	
Responsibility	Incentives		
Inequality	Cause conditions		
Correlation	Interactive	Disorder repair	
Patternability	Consequence		

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Analysis of the grounds and reasons for the growth of the Iranian pilgrims’ participation in the Arbaeen event indicates the role of internal structural pressures, internal bottlenecks, and the underdevelopment of religious communities as cause conditions. This internal structural pressure is caused by the inefficient administrative and executive system in the country, which has led to the creation of bottlenecks. The most fundamental bottleneck in this regard is the lack of a clear policy within which the information management deals with targeted activities aligned with development. The bottlenecks created in Iranian society are caused by many crises, because in times of crisis, most people will try to protect their personal interests, and this causes bottlenecks to arise and expand.

The findings of this research show that as Michaels, Petrino, and Pitre-Zampol (2021) stated, people’s motivations and goals for participating in a religious event can be internal or external. However, one of the biggest differences between this research and the literature is considering the structural environment inside the country as a reason for pilgrims to participate in religious events. From the participants’ perspective, a kind of doubt about the performance of official and institutional agents has overshadowed the concept and meaning system of the Iranian religious community and has caused the performance of the internal planning system to be considered unsuccessful. Such a situation has led to the disruption of institutional capital, political alienation, and divisions between different classes. Considering the centralized system of Iranian society and the dominance of the political subsystem, the experience and understanding of religious tourists or pilgrims participating in the Arbaeen event have shown the role of this event as a mediator between the people and the government and also various groups of people. This finding confirms the research of Dafuleya et al. (2017), Abbate and Di Nuovo (2013), and Blackwell (2007), who stated that the desire to socialize and strengthen moral capital is one of the most significant incentives and goals of religious tourism. Like the religious event of Hajj Umrah (Robina Ramírez and Fernández Portillo 2020), which is the largest religious ceremony of Muslims and draws a lot of religious tourists to Mecca every year, this event increases the participation of participants and the perception of value by the participants.

The findings of the study of Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine (2021) showed that the collective motivations of individuals and the psychological effects of mass gatherings have led them to this event, which is a kind of social reaction to the conditions and shortcomings in this area. Other areas of attendance at the Arbaeen event include social fragmentation, the narrowing of the circle of belonging and commitment to fellow believers, and the neglect of public interests in the shadow of the priority of material values due to economic difficulties and disruption of internal relations. In other words, the Arbaeen event has been successful in defining and rebuilding the social order and has an organic and coherent nature. The experience of the participants and their understanding of the event as a connecting link, mediator, and agent of participation confirms the theoretical view of Myers (2014) on the liberating function of religious events with the purpose of development and evolution.

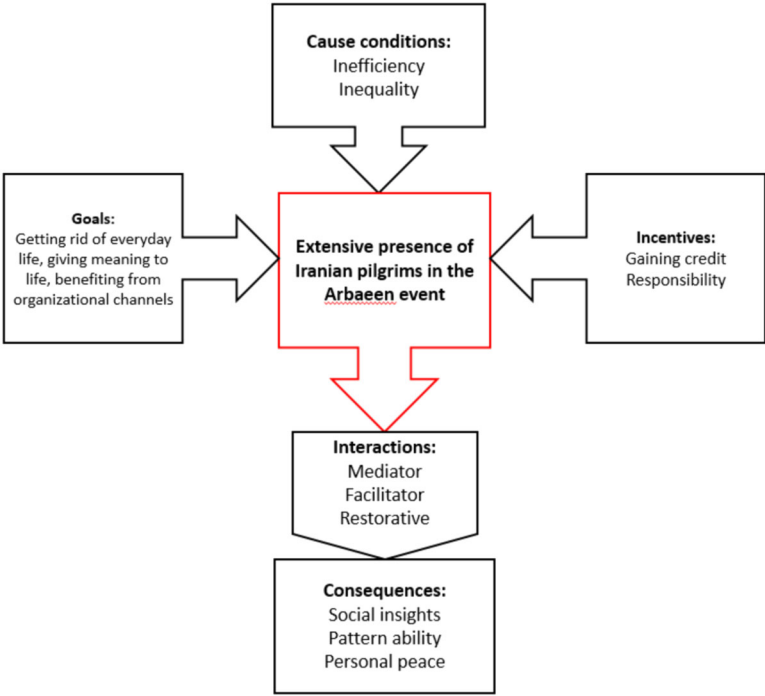
The results show that the actions of individuals were not limited to material issues. The social coefficient of the Arbaeen event has been focused on social reconstruction and the context of the transition from prescriptive to cohesive order. Such a situation has led to the disruption of institutional capital, political alienation, and divisions between different classes. Considering the centralized system of Iranian society and the dominance of the political subsystem, the experience and understanding of religious tourists or pilgrims participating in the Arbaeen event have shown the role of this event as a mediator between the people and the government and also various groups of people.

A look at the context of the Arbaeen event reveals that most participants are young people. For young people, religious activity is a conduit for self-expression and meaning in life and liberation from the monotony that has taken over everyday life. One of the strategies considered by the participants in the event is to raise public awareness and promote social and religious sensitivity. The Arbaeen event has helped to shape the problem and consequently minor changes in society by defamiliarizing them with familiar matters and promoting insight. The actors of this event, as the middle class, have considerable power and ability to mobilize due to the benefit of religious and social capital, and this issue requires that the activism of these people be recognized more than before. Lack of openness of many government institutions, poor coordination, unclear criteria, and regulatory mechanism have become challenges in the participation of individuals in this event (Figure 6).

The role of the Arbaeen event in the reconstruction of social ties, the strengthening of cooperation, and the participation of individuals is undeniable. The more people can attend such an event, the greater the social capital because communication, trust, friendship, partnership, and rational action are effective products of such events. Therefore, strengthening and continuing to provide opportunities to participate in the Arbaeen event and reduce related costs for tourists seems necessary. This study can lead to mastery and awareness of the relevant authorities for future planning of this event. Because planning is not based on the facts and issues in the context of the event, it can face many challenges.

The combination and connection between these concepts make pilgrims find everything they expect from religion in the personal and social spheres in the walking ritual of the Arbaeen pilgrimage. It seems that Arbaeen walking is the key to solving the individual needs of pilgrims and their utopia. Individual motivations are motivations out of necessity. These different needs have a common threshold. A pilgrim who reaches a threshold space from a structure full of problems and devoid of the meaning of everyday life immerses himself in this fluid congregation. Spiritual and material poverty and the challenges of life encourage the needy pilgrim to attend this ritual to cling to this eternal force. The lasting and effective power of the spontaneous level of the walking ritual of the Arbaeen pilgrimage causes changes in the personal and social life of the pilgrims. The influence of the Arbaeen walking ritual in the social dimension is the occasion to serve other pilgrims, promote, display religious and political authority, and desire an ideal society. In most of these motivations, the existence of the pilgrim is imbued with a sense of duty that pulls him

Figure 6  
Final model [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



toward collective goals and associates him with these normative and ideological groups. These two elements are adsorbent and affirmative and are the first choice of most pilgrims.

The secret of the attractiveness of Arbaeen walking is in this ability to create a diversity of motivation and density of meaning that attracts everyone with every taste and need. Accordingly, the Arbaeen walking ritual has its current attraction and influence until it responds to individual needs and social concerns. Pilgrimage rituals are generally based on their inner spontaneity, which conveys the feeling of collective passion to the pilgrims, and on the other hand, it is shaped by the needs of the pilgrims. These two elements are adsorbent and affirmative and are the first choice of most pilgrims. Sense of duty and social motivation, compared to individual motivations, are placed in the next priority order; therefore it is understandable that pilgrims in normal circumstances would prioritize their needs over social expectations.

In the ratio between these elements, whether at the level of policy-making and planning for this ritual or in terms of scientific research, what should be kept in mind is the balance between these three elements. The balance is grounded in the passion and spontaneity of the ritual. This requires paying attention to preserving the authenticity and its popular management, which has a decentralized character and adjusts itself to the local context and the needs of pilgrims. The foundation of many cultural activities and policies is focused on strengthening the social motivations and increasing the knowledge of pilgrims. Therefore, if their spontaneous logic and semantic fluidity are disrupted and become empty of passion and need, it will lead to a decrease in the number of pilgrims to the Arbaeen ritual in the future.

Since pilgrims' actions are current in time and space and religious places are perceived in different ways at different times, this research helps the managers and officials of the events to understand the pilgrims and become aware of the time management of the activities. Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of sociocultural influences on religious tourism through such



studies. Despite these substantial findings, the study fell short in its coverage of locals' interpretation of the event. An understanding of religious tourism development can be gained by gathering the opinions of tourists and locals. Another drawback was the study's dependence on the perceptions of interviewees. Other researchers should dig into other socioeconomic contexts to provide further evidence to understand religious tourism and its comprehensive development.

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