

QUM JOURNAL

# For Iran's Shiites, a Celebration of Faith and Waiting



Newsha Tavakolian/Polaris, for The New York Times

Iranians walked past a booth warning against devil worshipers, including Jews and Americans, at a government-sponsored exhibition in Qum.

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN  
Published: August 30, 2007

QUM, Iran, Aug. 28 — Qum is not usually thought of as a fun place. It is a gray, sun-baked city that serves as the center of learning for Shiite Islam. Its personality is solemn, its shops tend to be old, low-rise and rundown, and it is full of clergy members and police officers.

But on Tuesday, Qum felt festive — for Qum, at least.

Bright lights and flags decorated the city. It was the start of celebrations surrounding the birthday of Imam Mahdi, the savior of the Shiite faith. The birthday offers Shiites a chance to welcome a birth, rather than to mourn a death, which tends to be the focus of holy days here.

Shiites believe that Imam Mahdi, the 12th imam in a direct bloodline from the Prophet Muhammad, is alive but has remained invisible since the late ninth century, and that he will reappear only when corruption and injustice reach their zenith. This year, in keeping with the government effort to promote

and enforce religious values under President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), the celebration is receiving plenty of attention from the state, even to the point of being extended an extra day.

In any society, religion and culture are essential components of national identity, each

[More Articles in International »](#)

### Afternoon Update

Sign up for a recap of the day's top stories and business headlines, sent weekday afternoons.

See Sample | Privacy Policy

### MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. Got Arachnophobia? Here's Your Worst Nightmare
2. At I.B.M., a Vacation Anytime, or Maybe None
3. Personal Best : See Jane Run. See Her Run Faster and Faster.
4. Cyberfamilies: Knowledge Is Priceless but Textbooks Are Not
5. Are Your Jeans Sagging? Go Directly to Jail.
6. Nothing Down, \$0 a Month, Hammer Required
7. Trotting on Their Own Four Hooves
8. Cancer Society Focuses Its Ads on the Uninsured
9. Advertising: Trying to Connect the Dinner Plate to Climate Change
10. David Brooks: Go West, Old Man

[Go to Complete List »](#)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE



### Video

[More Video »](#)



WORLD  
Shiite Festival in Iran  
On the birthday of Imam Mahdi, Iranians celebrate the return of the Shiite faith.

**Business**  
nytimes.com/business

[How are local restaurants attracting new customers at airports?](#)

Also in Business:

- [A resource center even a Microsoft hater can love](#)
- [How to avoid a cash crunch](#)
- [How to pay less for rent for your office space](#)

### ADVERTISEMENTS



Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

contributing to the society's bedrock principles. Throughout Iranian history, Islamic faith and Persian culture have been intimately merged. Yet, successive leaders have tried to promote one or the other in a constant competition for the national soul, usually with the goal of buttressing their own authority. Each effort, however, has ultimately fallen short.

Under the Pahlavis, the goal was to elevate Iranian nationalism over Islamic identity. Today, the opposite is true, especially since the election of Mr. Ahmadinejad, who campaigned on a platform of returning Iran to its Shiite revolutionary values.

But the chances of success now seem no greater than in the past, clerics and political analysts said.

"I think there are some scholars and sectors of the government that have such intentions," said Fazel Meybodi, a cleric who teaches at Mofid University in Qum, speaking carefully, to avoid offending the authorities. "I think they will not succeed."

Islam split into two major sects, Sunnis and Shiites, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The core dispute was over who would serve as Muhammad's successor.

Shiites believed in following the Prophet's family line, and took as their guide the 12 Imams. Because of this minority belief, the Shiites were historically subjugated and persecuted by the Sunnis, so they looked to their imams as fighters for justice and against oppression. These are crucial ideas that inform Iran's political class to this day.

Following the Shiite emphasis on oppression and justice, people here say, Mr. Ahmadinejad has labeled the United States "the great oppressor," as opposed to the previously popular "great Satan." But his fervor has also made him a mark for those who are not quite so religious, and even those who are.

"Mr. Ahmadinejad, his knowledge of Islam is little," said Ali Akhbar Dashdy, a spokesman for Mofid University. "He is not a clergyman. He only knows what he hears people say."

Some of the president's critics abroad have said he is so devoted to the idea of the return that he is inclined to spark Armageddon to precipitate it. No one here seems to buy that view, at least publicly.

And some have mocked the president saying, for example, that he has spent money to pave a special highway to expedite the return — another rumor that seems to have no basis in reality.

So how are people celebrating this birthday? In many different ways, despite Mr. Ahmadinejad's efforts to promote Islamic identity. It is a *mélange* — like Iran itself — of culture and religion.

People hand out food, often tossing juice containers and candy into passing cars. They picnic and enjoy fireworks displays. There are even outdoor concerts.

And in Qum, the government organized an exhibition beneath the Masumeh Shrine, a popular site of pilgrimage. Booths were set up, like at a convention. There was a spot for people blogging about Imam Mahdi. The Bright Future News Agency occupied a booth. Another had clerics offering personal advice.

And there was the booth set up to warn people about "Satan worshipers." There was a Jewish star at the entrance, posted atop a replica of what was supposed to be the Washington Monument (which also was described as a satanic symbol because it is shaped as an obelisk).

There was also a movie concerning "perverted cults," which focused on the Bahai faith.

Outside, there were lines of men and women heading to Jamkaran Mosque, on the outskirts of the city. And here was another example of what divides and drives Iranians. Many see the mosque as a site where they can leave messages for Imam Mahdi and have

### [Simplify School Doc Mgmt](#)

Cost-Effective, Secure & Easy to Use: Adobe

Acrobat Pro. Learn More.

[www.Adobe.com](http://www.Adobe.com)

their wishes answered. Others see it as nonsense.

The mosque was built after a villager dreamed in the year 974 that Imam Mahdi told him where he would return and showed him the site, which is where the mosque now stands. There is a well there for visitors to leave their letters of request, and the crowds were thick on Tuesday as people packed so tightly into buses they could not shut the doors.

And that, perhaps, illustrates another Iranian trait — a pre-Islamic affinity for waiting. When Iranians practiced Zoroastrianism, they were also awaiting a savior, called Saoshyant. They say that helped cope with the stress of one heavyhanded government after another.

That fit well with Shiite Islam, academics said. "Iranians are comfortable as Shias," said Dr. Muhammad Sanati, a social psychologist in Tehran. "They feel at home with a prophet coming. They are comfortable waiting, waiting for salvation, waiting to be saved, waiting for good days."

[More Articles in International »](#)

**Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.**

**Tips**

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

**Past Coverage**

-  [U.S. Attack Kills 32 in Shiite Stronghold of Sadr City \(August 9, 2007\)](#)
-  [U.S. and Iran Trade Blame In Second Round of Iraq Talks \(July 25, 2007\)](#)
-  [24 Iranians, Held for Illegal Entry, Escape From Iraqi Prison \(July 16, 2007\)](#)
-  [THE REACH OF WAR; U.S. Suspects That Iran Aids Both Sunni and Shiite Militias \(April 12, 2007\)](#)

**Related Searches**

- [Iran](#)
- [Shiite Muslims](#)
- [Islam](#)
- [Religion and Churches](#)

**INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**



**ARTS »**

**TimesSelect**

**BUSINESS »**

**ESCAPES »**

**WORLD »**

**TimesSelect**



[Portable Theater \(Just Go With the Flow\)](#)



[The Opinionator: I Knew It Was You](#)

[Why a U.S. Subprime Mortgage Crisis Is Felt Around the World](#)



[Slippery Slopes: Vermont Water Parks Gone Wild](#)



[Japan Still Honors a Dissenting War Judge](#)



[Araton: Mets Can't Find Any Relief](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)