

On February 22, 2006, the al-Askari mosque and shrine was attacked at dawn by an unknown group, destroying the mosque's golden dome. This attack set off a wave of protests and sectarian reprisals in Iraq. In 2007 the mosque was attacked on two further occasions damaging the minarets and clock tower.

Samarra and the al-Askari Mosque

- Samarra is a city in Iraq located on both banks of the river Tigris, 78 miles (130 km) north of Baghdad. The Archaeological City of Samarra was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007 and is the site of a powerful Islamic capital city that ruled over the Abbasid Empire in the 9th century AD.^{1,2} Although the city holds great significance for Shi'as, demographically the city has a Sunni-majority population. In 1992, the then-regime of Saddam Hussein demolished the only Shi'a Hussainiya in Samarra, despite the city being uninvolved in the uprising that had recently occurred against the Iraqi government.³ Samarra became a theatre of war during the US occupation of Iraq as it had been the base of some of the insurgency before the US attempted to retake the city in 2004.
- One of the most important sites in Samarra is the al-Askari Mosque, built in 944 AD, which is of enormous spiritual importance to the Shi'a population of Iraq.⁴ It is one of four main pilgrimage sites in the country and it contains the mausoleums of two revered Shi'a Imams (meaning of Imams), Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari. It also contains the tombs of Hakima Khatun, the sister of Imam al-Hadi, and Narjis Khatun, the mother of Imam al-Madi.⁵ The al-Askari mosque's dome had been built in 1905; it measured 18m across and was covered in 72,000 gold plated tiles.⁶
- Next to the al-Askari shrine is another mosque that was built over the location where the Twelfth or "Hidden" Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, disappeared and went into occultation.⁷

2006 Attack on the al-Askari Mosque and Subsequent Reprisal Attacks

- At dawn on February 22, 2006, a group of up to 10 gunmen dressed as police commandos stormed the mosque, tying up guards and setting up small explosive devices which completely destroyed the mosque's golden dome.⁸ No fatalities were recorded in the attack and no group claimed responsibility for the attack, although some speculated that it was the work of al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁹
- This incident was the most destructive attack on a major shrine since the US invasion, and while the attack on the mosque was limited to destroying the golden dome, the bombing set off a period of rioting and reprisal attacks across Iraq due to the symbolic value of the site, with some speculating that it was an act intended to draw Muslims from both the Shi'a and Sunni sects into a sectarian war.¹⁰
- Iraq's highest Shi'a spiritual leaders rallied to restrain their followers in the aftermath of the attack. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani called on Shi'as to take to the streets peacefully and refused any violent retaliation by any group, and issued a statement warning not to attack any Sunni holy sites.¹¹ Peaceful protests occurred in Shi'a-majority cities such as Najaf, Karbala, Basra¹², Diwaniya, Amara and Kut¹³. There were claims that more than 27 Sunni mosques were attacked on the day of the bombing¹⁴. In Baghdad, Shi'a militias attacked dozens of Sunni Mosques on the day of the bombing, and many Sunni civilians, including three Sunni Imams,¹⁶ were killed in retaliation to the bombing and previous mass killings of Shi'a civilians, by radical jihadists. A Sunni mosque in Baquba was later targeted in reprisal violence.¹⁷ The bombing of the shrine also reverberated across the Muslim world with protests also occurring in other parts of the Muslim world including Iran, Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir.¹⁸

The al-Askari mosque was targeted on three occasions between February 2006 and July 2007.

2007 Attacks

- Sixteen months after the first attack, at around 9am on June 13, 2007, suspected al-Qaeda insurgents attacked the mosque again and destroyed two minarets that flanked the golden dome's ruins. Again, no group claimed responsibility for the attack and Shiite leaders and moderate Sunnis spoke out against retaliatory violence.^{20,21,22} The minarets were later rebuilt in 2009.²³ On July 12, 2007 the clocktower of the mosque was bombed and destroyed. In both attacks no fatalities were reported. The mosque compound had been closed since the 2006 bombings and following the 2007 attacks a curfew was placed on the city by the police.

References

1. UNESCO World Heritage Site Listing, Samarra Archaeological City [Online] Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/276> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
2. BBC (28/06/2007) 'Unesco names World Heritage sites', *BBC News* [Online] Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6248244.stm> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
3. Allawi, Dr Ali (February 1992) 'Atrocities Continue Against Shia Culture in Iraq', *Dialogue*
4. Guardian Special Report (2011, Unidentified) 'Iraq- Destruction of the Samarra mosque', *The Guardian* [Online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/flash/0,,1717292,00.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
5. BBC (22/02/2006) 'Samarra: Shia pilgrimage centre', *BBC News* [Online] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4739444.stm [Accessed on: 22/04/2014]
6. Guardian Special Report (2011, Unidentified) 'Iraq- Destruction of the Samarra mosque', *The Guardian* [Online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/flash/0,,1717292,00.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
7. BBC (22/02/2006) 'Samarra: Shia pilgrimage centre', *BBC News* [Online] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4739444.stm [Accessed on 22/04/2014]
8. Knickmeyer, Ellen and Ibrahim, K.I. (23/02/2006) 'Bombing Shatters Mosque in Iraq' *The Washington Post* [Online] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/22/AR2006022200454.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Worth, Robert F. (23/02/2006) 'Blast at Shiite Shrine Sets of Sectarian Fury in Iraq', *The New York Times* [Online] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/23/world/23iraq.html?pagewanted=all&r=4&> [Accessed on 22/04/2014]
12. Knickmeyer, Ellen and Ibrahim, K.I. (23/02/2006) 'Bombing Shatters Mosque in Iraq' *The Washington Post* [Online] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/22/AR2006022200454.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
13. Guardian Special Report (2011, Unidentified) 'Iraq- Destruction of the Samarra mosque', *The Guardian* [Online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/flash/0,,1717292,00.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
14. Worth, Robert F. (23/02/2006) 'Blast at Shiite Shrine Sets of Sectarian Fury in Iraq', *The New York Times* [Online] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/23/world/23iraq.html?pagewanted=all&r=4&> [Accessed on 22/04/2014]
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Guardian Special Report (2011, Unidentified) 'Iraq- Destruction of the Samarra mosque', *The Guardian* [Online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/flash/0,,1717292,00.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
18. Ibid.
19. Knickmeyer, Ellen and Ibrahim, K.I. (23/02/2006) 'Bombing Shatters Mosque in Iraq' *The Washington Post* [Online] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/22/AR2006022200454.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
20. BBC (13/06/2007) 'Blast hits key Iraq Shia shrine', *BBC News* [Online] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6747419.stm [Accessed on 23/04/2014]
21. Burns, John F (14/06/2007) 'Efforts to Avert Sectarian Reprisals After Shrine Attack', *The New York Times* [Online] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/14/world/middleeast/14iraq.html?n=Top%2FNews%2FWorld%2FCountries%20and%20Territories%2FIraq> [Accessed on 23/02/2014]
22. Indybay (Last modified 16/06/2007) 'Iraq on edge following second bombing of Al-Askariya mosque' *Indybay* [Online] Available at: <http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2007/06/14/18427407.php> [Accessed on 22/04/2014]
23. Al Jazeera English (Last modified 12/08/2009) 'Iraqis rebuild al-Askari mosque' *Al Jazeera* [Online] Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2009/08/200981163922317160.html> [Accessed on 23/04/2014]

For Further Information

www.shiaresearch.com

info@shiaresearch.com

+ (44(0) 20 7372 4049

The Stone Hall, Chevening Road, London, NW6 6TN