

Hilla City Profile

30th November 2007

Facts & figures

Location: Capital of Babil province, 60 miles south of Baghdad, on the eastern bank of the Euphrates

Population: 524,000

Ethnicity: Arab

Religion: Mostly Shi'a Islam



History

Hilla was built in 1101 as the capital of a Shi'ite state in the south of what is now Iraq. The founder of the city, Sayfu-l-Dawla Sadaqa, made Hilla a leading centre of Shi'ite learning, which continued through to the 15th century, and this helped lead to the growth of Shi'a Islam in Iraq. When the Mongol army of 200,000 soldiers completely devastated Baghdad in 1258, a delegation of Shi'ite leaders managed to secure that Hilla was spared by peacefully submitting to the Mongols. Hilla is close to the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Hilla is just south of the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon, from which the Babylonian Empire ruled from Mesopotamia to Palestine. The ruins were made use of in the initial construction of Hilla. Babylon means "gateway of the gods" and Babel means "confusion".

The tomb of Ezekiel is said to be in a village south of Hilla.

Kadisiya, near to where Hilla now is, is the site of a battle in 637AD between the Persian Empire and the Arab Moslems. The Arabs won in this decisive battle of the Arabian-Persian War.

Both the Ottoman Empire (16th-20th Century) and the British rulers (1917-1932) used Hilla as a main administration base. There was heavy fighting in Hilla during the Iraqi insurrection of 1920 against British rule, and during the US invasion of 2003.

The land around Hilla has been well irrigated for thousands of years so producing much fruit and cereals.



Massacre

Following the Gulf War of 1991, Shi'ites in the south of Iraq rose up against Saddam Hussein's rule. In regaining control of key cities the government executed 60 people thought to be involved in the insurrection - by firing squad in the main square of Hilla, Saddam Square. Later well over a hundred Shi'ite men and boys were shot dead, thrown from rooftops or drowned in the river by Saddam's men to terrorise the city's population. Then every day for a month truckloads of people would be driven to a huge pit in Hilla, offloaded, shot and buried, dead or alive.

Twelve years later in 1993 after Saddam's regime was overthrown, these mass graves were identified and 3,000 bodies uncovered. This is just one of 62 mass graves discovered in the south.

Violence

The US army swept through Hilla on the way to Baghdad on March 31, 2003. There was heavy fighting and several hundred of Saddam's Republican Guard were reported killed. Many Shi'ites welcomed the end of Saddam's rule. On April 1 US airplanes dropped cluster bombs on the area. Each cluster bomb contained 202 bomblets. At least 61 civilians (farmers, women, children) were killed and over 450 wounded according to the Red Cross team that went to the site. The images of the dead bodies were deemed too shocking for Western audiences and so were not shown on TV.

The rest of 2003 was relatively free of violence. In February 2004 a suicide bomber tried to drive a lorry into a coalition army base. 11 Iraqis were killed and many more civilians and soldiers were injured.



In February 2005 militants targeted Iraq's fledgling security services with the deadliest single attack of the war to date. A car bomb killed 125 people in Hilla, mostly those queuing outside a police recruitment centre as well as people going to the market nearby. This came on the back of 10 days of attacks on Shi'ites throughout Iraq during the Shi'ite festival of Ashura. Two further suicide attacks killed 31 police officers in May 2005. In September 2005 it was reported that Al-Qaeda in Iraq had declared all out war against the Shi'ite population, using suicide attacks against Shi'ite civilians and mosques to try and inflame sectarian violence.



During 2006 there were five major incidents in Hilla. In May, a car bomb killed 7 people. The following month, June, 30 people were killed in a bomb attack in the marketplace. In August police found the bodies of 12 people who had been tortured and executed. The next day a bomb killed 13 people queuing outside an army recruitment centre. And in November, a suicide bomb killed 21 construction workers waiting for work.

Into early 2007, two huge suicide bombs caused horrific loss of life in Hilla. In February 71 people shopping at the market were killed, and in March at least 115 Shi'ite pilgrims walking through the city were killed by two car bombs. Later, in July a suicide truck bomb killed 31 people in a crowded market.

In early November 65 gunmen, plus their arms caches and police uniforms, were captured by a joint Iraqi security force, showing that militants are still active in the area. Later in November, two people were killed when a suicide bomber tried to kill a local Sheikh.



The Future

It seems that the federal government in Baghdad is unable to spend the large amounts allocated for reconstruction, due to security and bureaucracy problems. Local government however seems more on the ball and is making the most of the regional budgets they are allocated.

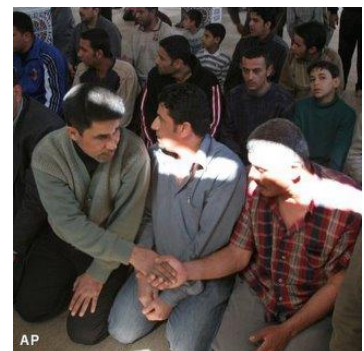


Babil Province, of which Hilla is the capital, has caught the attention of government ministers for its success in this regard. Roads are being repaired, new schools opened, and business is improving in Hilla. So much so, that the province has been rewarded with an extra \$70m for developing small businesses.

Some fear that channeling money to the provinces will lead to corruption or the breakup of the nation state, but others feel that it is money going into the hands of those who are doing something about the reconstruction of their region.

How to pray

- Pray for an end to sectarian and insurgent violence in Hilla
- Pray for the protection and safety of the people of Hilla going about their daily activities such as work and shopping at the market
- Pray that Hilla's history would no longer be marked by violence, but that a new chapter will begin, marked by submission to the peace of God
- Hilla was built out of the ruins of Babylon. Pray that as the city seeks to rebuild its businesses and infrastructure its people will do this for the glory of God and not of themselves
- Pray that the Shi'ite people of Hilla would hear of the liberating love of Jesus and share this throughout the Shi'ite communities of Iraq
- Pray for new communities of believers to be started in Hilla



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