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450 West 33rd Street
New York NY 10001-2605
www.thirteen.org

press information

WIDE ANGLE OFFERS A RARE GLIMPSE OF ISLAM'S PAST AND PRESENT WHEN IT JOINS A GROUP OF IRANIAN PILGRIMS ON A BREATHTAKING AND PERILOUS JOURNEY TO THE MUSLIM HOLY SITES IN WAR-TORN IRAQ

Pilgrimage To Karbala, A **WIDE ANGLE** Special, Premieres March 26 On PBS

In the summer of 2006, as the Iranian-backed Hezbollah fought off Israelis in Lebanon and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad faced down President George Bush at the United Nations, a bus full of Iranian pilgrims left Tehran on a journey to the holy city of Karbala, deep inside a shattered Iraq.

In a documentary that is without precedent on American television, **WIDE ANGLE** follows this intense journey into the heartlands of Shia Islam, revealing how two ancient crimes - the murder of Muhammad's grandson and the disappearance of a six-year-old imam - became the founding legends of Shiism and increasingly dominate events and attitudes in the Middle East today.

Pilgrimage to Karbala, a 90-minute **WIDE ANGLE** special directed by award-winning filmmaker Kevin Sim, premieres Monday, March 26 at 10 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). As part of the program, series host Daljit Dhaliwal will conduct a post-film interview with a prominent foreign policy figure to discuss America's involvement in the region.

Under Saddam Hussein's rule, it was impossible for Iranians to make the pilgrimage to Karbala. Since the dictator's overthrow, Shia Muslims, who dominate Iran and are the majority in Iraq, can now make their pilgrimage - and are doing so in increasing numbers. But the journey is



dangerous, to say the least. Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq are carrying out acts of horrific violence against one another, U.S. troops are battling insurgents, IEDs explode on roadsides on a regular basis, and Shia shrines - and Shia pilgrims - have become targets of Iraqi Sunni attacks. In fact, just as this group of pilgrims sets out from Tehran, reports come in of 14 new murders on the road to Karbala.

In scenes that have never been captured on screen before, this busload of pilgrims joins the steady stream of Iranians flooding into the holy cities in Iraq. They are afraid and their families have urged them not to go. But their faith is stronger than their fears. Indeed, for them, to die on pilgrimage to Karbala is only to risk holy martyrdom and, thus, an entry to paradise.

As the bus rolls through the desert, the documentary hears from members of Iran's hard-line Revolutionary Guards, influential traders from the great bazaars of Tehran, and athletes from a traditional Iranian sports club - the House of Strength, whose extreme exercise regime is driven by the stories and ancient poetry of Iran.

Yet despite their religious fervor, these pilgrims are revealed to be ordinary men, women and children. During their five-day odyssey, they tease each other, make time to watch their favorite soap opera, and talk about their fears of the Americans in Iraq.

But as they travel along the road through the barren landscape in the desert heat, it becomes clear that this is more than a trip through geographic space. It is also a journey through time and memory. As the bus passes into Iraq, the former soldiers remember their days fighting in the Iran-Iraq war of the mid-1980s. For some, the guilt of not having died with their comrades is overwhelming.

The pilgrimage is also symbolic of a journey that many Shia see as a continuing struggle for Muslims in the world. Interweaving the stories of these pilgrims with the tales of Muhammad's grandson's martyrdom and the disappearing imam, *Pilgrimage to Karbala* powerfully illustrates

how these legends influenced the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the political and religious philosophy of President Ahmadinejad, as well as today's vicious power struggles between Shia and Sunni in Iraq and the growing fissure between Islam and the West.

Filmmaker Kevin Sim directed *Sacred Ground* about rebuilding the Twin Towers site, which became *Frontline*'s best-rated program for 18 months and was nominated Documentary of the Year by London's *The Independent on Sunday*. Other films include the Emmy Award-winning *Remember My Lai*, *Hitler's Search for the Holy Grail*, *The Shakespeare Mystery*, and *College Girls*, a six-part series chronicling a generation of students at Oxford's last women-only college.

WIDE ANGLE anchor Daljit Dhaliwal is scheduled to conduct a post-film interview with Vali Nasr, author of [The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future](#). Nasr is the Adjunct Senior Fellow for Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School. He has testified before Congress as an expert about Iran, Iraq, and democracy in the Middle East.

For additional information and photography, visit thirteen.org/pressroom/wideangle or pbs.org/pressroom.

WIDE ANGLE will return for its sixth season Tuesday, July 3 at p.m. on PBS. Planned episodes include a profile of music school students in post-war Angola, a portrait of the Arab TV world's version of *The View*, and a story about a Cuban boys' boxing academy where physical training and revolutionary indoctrination go hand in hand.

Funding for **WIDE ANGLE: Pilgrimage to Karbala** is provided by PBS, Mutual of America Life Insurance Company and The Jacob Burns Foundation.

WIDE ANGLE is a production of Thirteen/WNET New York for PBS. Stephen Segaller is executive producer. Pamela Hogan is series producer. Andy Halper is senior producer.

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Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The Thirteen Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects - including the *Celebration of Teaching and Learning* - as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

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Press Contact:

Caroline Oman

Thirteen

212.560.3057

oman@thirteen.org

Gloria Park

Thirteen

212-560-2063

parkg@thirteen.org