

Gulf War runneth over

The bloody riots that killed over 400 people last Friday in Mecca are sending waves of shock, horror and recrimination across the Moslem world.

This bizarre and odious event is the worst outrage to occur in the modern history of Islam, the religion of one in five of the world's people.

What we have so far learned is based on highly censored or sketchy reports. Last week marked the opening of the annual hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca, which lies about 40 miles from Saudi Arabia's main Red Sea entry port at Jeddah. There, 2.5 million pilgrims from every point on the globe were assembled to begin the trek to Mecca.

The hajj is a time of prayer and devotion; it also recalls one of Islam's great strengths, the equality before god of all races, economic and political groups.

Except, it seems, to the Iranians.

Just before the hajjis left for the plain of Arafat, where the prophet gave his last sermon, and just before the feast of the Eid, commemorating Abraham's obedience to God by offering to sacrifice his son, Imam Khomeini spoke to his pilgrims.

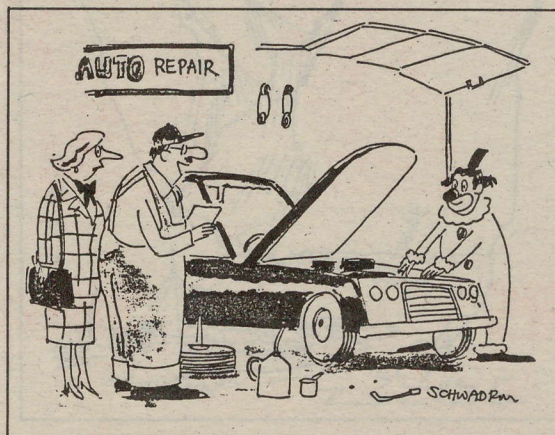
In a fiery address, the leader of the Shia sect of Islam ordered Iranians making the hajj to rally against "the pagans" and show their wrath for "idolators."

Accordingly, some 150,000 Iranians began to demonstrate and riot in Mecca, the holy city dedicated to peace and prayer. This was, quite simply, a barbarous outrage and sacrilege. Deep shame on the bloody-minded Iranians and particularly on Khomeini, whose affront to Islam makes us question the validity of his religious leadership.

Deep shame, as well, on the Saudis who clearly used far too much force. Saudi authorities insist they used no bullets in putting down the riot; the 400 dead, they say, were either trampled in the crush or stabbed by knife-wielding Iranians. I find this hard to believe.

Look, for example, at South Korea where for weeks there was almost unbelievably vicious rioting. In spite of this, there were no more than a

Punch



"Clyde is our specialist in funny little noises."

**ERIC
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few people killed.

The Saudis, I suspect, overreacted and used not only excessive force but behaved with brutality. Disturbingly, these events were likely a reflection of the bitter religious animosity between the Shiite Iranians and the fundamentalist Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. Religious difference has been a scourge of mankind; Moslems are no exception.

The dour, puritanical Wahabis of Arabia, who are Sunni Moslems, view the Iranians as saint- and relic-worshipping heretics. The Shiites of Iran, in turn, see the Saudi Wahabis as hypocritical apostates who pretend to be pious and, when no one is looking, jet off to Paris to drink, wench and gamble.

On a larger scale, the massacre in Mecca also deepens the historical rift between orthodox Sunnis, who form about 80% of all Moslems, and the minority Shiites whose largest number are found in Iran. Sunnis see Shiism as a primitive heresy in which Islam has been debased and corrupted by borrowings from the ancient Persian worship of Mazda and Zoroaster, liberally mixed up with Persian cultism and superstition.

Shiites, for their part, have long been persecuted, downtrodden and relegated to the far corners of the Moslem world. For Shiites, whose faith centres on the tragic deaths of the early Moslem leaders Ali and Hussein, martyrdom and suffering have become almost a religious mania — one now encouraged by the events in Mecca.

Seen in this context, the killing of 400 Shiite pilgrims in the holy city of the prophet is not only an outrage but a call to arms. What was political war between Iran, on one hand, and Iraq, backed by its Sunni Arab allies, has now been legitimized as a holy war. To the credulous followers of Imam Khomeini, America's and Russia's hands held the guns that killed the Iranian hajjis.

Iran's sense of persecution and martyrdom will now be complete: The monster of religious fanaticism always feeds on the fires it creates.

The massacre also means that patient Saudi efforts to negotiate an end to the Gulf War are thus rendered futile; the deep hatred held by the Iranians for the Saudis is out in the open. The princes of the house of Saud will now rightfully be trembling and making more deposits in their Swiss banks. As politicians they can easily blame Iran for the Mecca outrage. But as Moslems they know in their hearts that a frightful crime has been committed.

The Iranians, who still become frenzied over wrongs that happened 1,300 years ago, will certainly seek revenge. For Moslems around the world, the tragic message from Mecca is clear: The Gulf War is now out of control and must be stopped before another million Sunnis and Shiites die.