

Legend (in Iraq) has it that Bahauallah himself, the 19th-century Persian nobleman who founded the faith, may have had a hand in Mr. Hussein's lucky number. Bahá'í accounts say that upon being exiled from Iran in the 1850s, Bahauallah stopped in al-Auja, the Iraqi president's birthplace, and inscribed a 19 on the door of his ancestors' home.

The power of the number is so entrenched that many Muslims draw all sorts of conclusions from it. For example:

The Koran, the Muslim holy book, has 114 chapters (six times 19), and its opening statement consists of 19 letters. The statement's first word occurs 19 times in the Koran, while the second, Allah or God, is found 2,698 times (142 times 19): the third, Rahman, 57 times (3 times 19), and the fourth, Rahim, 114 times (again, six times 19).

Traditional Muslims reject all this as blasphemous. They may predict that should Mr. Hussein continue his penchant for numerology, he may end up just like Bahauallah, who spent his final days in a Turkish jail in what was then Palestine.

Strong sentiments, but this antipathy will hardly surprise the Iraqi leader. Among Muslim rulers, Saddam Hussein is known for his tolerance of Bahá'ís and other non-Muslim minorities, and for his dislike of Muslim religious leaders. He considers them parasites and has called them "Abu Washers" - Father of Washers, as in tap washers, which are cheap and easy to replace.

Still, for a man supposedly devoted to socialism, secularism and women's rights, Mr. Hussein is reported to be reading the Koran a lot these days. And his obsession with the number 19 remains.

After all, the first Scud missiles were fired at 7 p.m. our time - 19:00 hours. And while Washington would prefer to think that his number is up, it seems he has been told that, should he withstand the coalition forces for 19 days, he will emerge victorious.

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