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Future of Pakistani Shia rests in cemetery

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2/3/2013

I stand watching as a black flag flutters gently, and as the wind picks up, the flag struggles to hang on to the pole to which it is attached.

It's making a forceful noise that gets louder with each gust of wind. The wind pushes the cloth ever more outward and the silver coloured thread the maker used to inscribe the name of Allah on to the flag comes undone, leaving trails of silver across the dark material.

I'm in a graveyard for Hazara Shia in Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan's southwestern province which for the last 10 years has been beset by violence. Those killed in sectarian attacks are buried here.

The flags fly high above some graves marking them out as different to the others. These graves are for the shaheed, the martyrs, a religious name given to the dead by the locals to those who died because of their religion.

A young girl, maybe aged 8 or 9, reads from the Koran, slowly and carefully, her voice just above a whisper. A black-clad widow holds her hands up and prays while a young man in traditional shalwar kameez tends to a headstone.

Pictures adorn the graves. Some are standard Identification card shots enlarged, which gives the government regulation blue background an incongruous feel when it's set against the white marble of the headstone.

One in particular catches my eye. It's not a standard Identification card picture.

It's one of those portraits taken by a friend that's a mix of vanity and knowing self mocking.

The young man's name is Irfan. Clean shaven and dressed in black with wavy hair, his is the sort of profile picture you would post on Facebook.

Below it is another photo, black and white with Irfan grinning and holding a sign in one hand that says "Peace we love" as the other hand flashes a peace sign.

I try, unsuccessfully, to fight back a tear as I hope the young man, who I have never met, has found peace.

The names of the others are occasionally inscribed in English occasionally, and sometimes in Persian. The mix of languages used is as eclectic as the languages the mourners speak to each other. In the space of a few minutes I hear Persian, Pushto, Urdu and English, a reminder that Iran and Afghanistan stand a few hours away from here.

And the languages are important.

This Hazara community prides itself on its educational prowess, and its proud history encompassing ancient Persia, pre-partition India and Afghanistan. In fact, almost everyone I meet goes to great lengths to tell me that the community here has an 80 percent literacy rate, a far higher rate than the Pakistan standard.

The community is well established and successful but now lives in fear. The fear is writ large everywhere you go.

I leave the graveyard and go across the city to a neighbourhood all too familiar with violence.

The atmosphere changes, from one of mourning to one of suspicion. I stand on the street with well-known and established community members, yet there are raised eyebrows and lowered voices, wondering who I am and what I'm doing here.

It's with good reason and I don't begrudge the suspicion. A little over a month ago, on January 10, two massive bomb blasts ripped this place apart, killing over 100 people.

A young man approaches me with a plastic bag held open full of oranges. He beckons me to take one. I do, and as I peel the fruit we begin to talk. I ask him how he feels about what happened here on January 10.

"I'm scared it will happen again," he said.

His name is Aqil, a student who lives one street away. He wants out of Quetta, out of Pakistan.

"I would rather die an old cleaner in Canada than a young student in Quetta".

The words stay with me. Targeted by armed groups simply for being Shia, this young man and many others like him are losing their faith in Pakistan and want out.