

## The ghost of Saddam Hussein

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On the morning of the first day of the Muslim feast of sacrifice, 30 December, 2006, Arabs and Muslims were greeted by the spectacle of Saddam Hussein's execution [1]. Yet they registered the death of Iraq's strongman and the leader of one of the most powerful Arab nations for three decades with little enthusiasm. Instead, the event served only as an emblem for the sectarian madness that has come to dominate Iraq. A month on, has anything happened to alter this perception?

Apart from the legality of Saddam's trial, which was described by Human Rights Watch [2] as "deeply flawed", marking "a significant step away from respect from human rights and the rule of law", the ambivalence felt by Arabs and Muslims came mainly as a consequence of the timing and circumstance of the execution.

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Also by Tareq Y Ismael in openDemocracy:

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Saddam Hussein's execution coincided with the start of the *Sunni* celebrations of *Eid al-Adha*, the *Shi'a* celebrations historically beginning one day later. It is doubtful that this act of unbelievable provocation was happenstance. Rather, it was a reminder by the incumbent Nouri al-Maliki regime of ascendant *Shi'a* power and the sectarian logic [9] it intends to enforce.

Throughout the Muslim world, the execution came to reinforce two important points:

- it reveals the cultural ignorance of the United States in its dealings with other peoples - the execution coinciding with a religious holiday, and moreover, contradicting the dignity that the dead are afforded in Islamic custom (even for Saddam)
- it underlines the challenge of lawlessness with which the west has come to deal with Arabs and Muslims.

While it has been suggested that the US attempted to delay the execution, only to be overruled by the al-Maliki government, this is suspicious; the al-Maliki regime, existing only by the good graces and protection of the US, is largely perceived as an extension of American power, and its "sovereignty" notwithstanding, it is hardly an independent actor. On this matter, perception is key.

The circus of Saddam's execution was a metaphor for the sectarian logic that now dominates Iraqi society: Saddam Hussein surrounded and mocked by the partisans of the *Shi'a* cleric Muqtada al-Sadr [10], his death met by an outburst of *Shi'a* confessional chants. Where under other circumstances, the dictator's end might have been met by ecumenical celebration, a hope for new national beginnings, it was under these circumstances an act of blood revenge by a *Shi'a* lynch-mob.

This sectarian script was established early, as Saddam Hussein was tried and executed not for his larger crimes against the Kurdish people, or Iraqi society writ large, but instead for the Dujail massacre [11] = where *Shi'a* were the primary victims. Hussein was, of course, quite ecumenical and indiscriminate in his violence, so to hang him for his crimes against the *Shi'a* community was but to convey *Shi'a* pre-eminence in the "new Iraq" and to fan the flames of the sectarian divide.

### **From life to legend**

It is a perverse irony that Saddam Hussein, essentially a petty thug, emerged from the grisly fiasco with his dignity and pride intact. Facing his masked tormentors with religious conviction and composed dignity, he cursed the Americans and lionised the Palestinian people. The tyrant thus won undeserved victory in death by appearing a champion [12] of the Arab cause. In the wake of his demise, critics of Saddam bitterly lamented that his brave posture before death has only obscured his real and bloody legacy. Yunan Rizk, an Egyptian historian, wrote in al-Ahram [13]: "Saddam has died but the legend has begun".

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At the regional level, the hanging has led to a hardening in Arab public opinion against Iran. In addition to supporting Saddam's hanging, Iran is widely interpreted as giving implicit sanction to the American enterprise in Iraq; unquestionably, Iran has emerged [18] as a major (perhaps sole) victor in the Iraqi quagmire, its regional influence having expanded as its clients now form the major power-bloc in post-war Iraq.

The Sunni [19] Arab world is increasingly mobilised against the bogeyman of ascendant *Shi'a* power, with several Arab Gulf states now agitating for a common front against the Iranian threat; some even suggest that they will invest in nuclear technology to counterbalance that of Iran. At the crudest level, the shift in regional power has encouraged the resurrection of popular anti-*Shi'a* tropes, with the loyalty of Arab *Shi'a* frequently coming under attack [20]. *Shi'a* is

becoming a byword for fifth-columnist - in effect, rehabilitating a theme first raised by Saddam in his war against Iran and expulsion of Iraqis of Iranian origin.

The hanging of Saddam Hussein has ended his era in Iraq's turbulent history [21], but its repercussions for Iraq's future may prove disastrous. Iraq's sectarian violence continues unabated, and Iraq's social infrastructure - the education, health, and human resources needed for any successful society - suffers from both neglect and targeted destruction.

The American project in the country, having reinforced the noxious "political sectarianism" in Iraqi politics, may be seeing its endgame, George W Bush's "surge" notwithstanding [21]. The violence that the American invasion and occupation initiated has now developed its own twisted logic, far too complex for the Americans to reverse. Now that the American misadventure in Iraq has inaugurated a toxic regional politic, the long-term and regional implications of the chaos in Iraq cannot be overstated.

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