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Is Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr still relevant?

On the night of April 8, 1980, the leading Iraqi thinker of the 20th century, Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr, was killed by the regime of deposed dictator Saddam Hussein. Early the following day, his killers called upon a cousin to identify the body. A week later, the pro-Iraqi newsmagazine *Al-Watan al-Arabi* alluded to the killing. On April 22, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini mourned Sadr officially, together with his sister Amina, known as Bint al-Huda. Why his sister was also killed is unclear, but she had come out a few months earlier to rally the crowds against the arrest of her brother. Her rare act of courage had deterred the authorities from taking him away. They were both believed to have been severely tortured before being murdered. Aside from his great stature in Iraq, Sadr was in his day arguably the most remarkable thinker of the Arab-Muslim world. An innovative scholar, he authored over 20 books, some of which remain major references in contemporary Islamic literature. For example, his two-volume 800-page book titled *Iqtisaduna* (Our Economics), published in 1961, remains, together with another 1973 book on interest-free banking, among the most distinguished reference works in the specialized field of Islamic economics.

Upon the success of the revolution in Iran, Sadr wrote a remarkable series of short essays on constitutionalism and the new Islamic Republic. Their main features were adapted by his Iranian colleagues for their Islamic constitution, which was completed in November 1979. Sadr's legacy is rich enough to support various interpretations: The writer Edward Mortimer referred to him five years ago as the Mandela of Iraq. Sadr's own supporters considered him Iraq's Khomeini.

In the Muslim world, Sadr is the equivalent of what Karl Marx was for the Socialist movement. Less dogmatic than Marx, however, Sadr, through his writings, informed the Iraqi opposition movement. It is no surprise that the first spontaneous act in Iraq after the overthrow of the Baathist regime was the renaming of Baghdad's most populated Shiite district as Sadr City (though there is a calculated ambiguity over which cleric it was named for the other being assassinated cleric Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. It now seems to be named for both).

No doubt Sadr's many writings, including several constitutional treatises discovered three years ago, will influence the constitutional process about to begin in Iraq. Sadr was not a liberal, and his attachment to Islamic law was real. But the sophisticated quality of his thinking allowed the molding of his thoughts in a way that could be a harbinger of a new type of Islam. This will have especial importance in post-war Iraq, which, regardless of the system of government adopted, must solve the conundrum of how to fuse Islam and democracy.

In this context, two practical avenues come to mind. Sadr's 1979 constitutional treatises, which loosened up Khomeini's stricter theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisconsult), can be revived, and are especially valid in light of the deadlocks the theory has provoked in Iran. More generally, Sadr's open theoretical approach could yield a form of separation of powers that would be unique in Islamic

constitutionalism in its espousal of democracy, as it is insistently proclaimed by all the current members of the Iraqi governing council.

In my study of Sadr completed in 1990, I concluded that the quality of his work was such as to establish a system. Systems can be closed or open. One hopes that Sadr's legacy will bring to mind Karl Popper rather than Joseph Stalin; or, more appropriately, that what will remain are the ideas of Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr rather than those of Ayatollah Khomeini.

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