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A murder in the mosque, and beyond

Perhaps not since the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 did history record a similar event. On April 10, 2003, the day after Iraq was freed from the rule of deposed dictator Saddam Hussein, Sayyed Abdel-Majid al-Khoei, the son of the late Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qassem al-Khoei, was stabbed to death in the Sahn Sharif the mosque of Imam Ali in Najaf and the holiest shrine in Shiite Islam. According to witnesses, his assassins then dragged his corpse for five hundred yards into the street.

Becket's murder was immortalized in T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. Khoei's murder in Ali's mosque conjured up fresher, more pressing Iraqi memories: On July 14, 1958 the entire royal family of Iraq was killed. The following day, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, the strongman of the regime, was discovered wearing a woman's disguise by a crowd and set upon. His body was cut to pieces, and what was left of it dragged through the streets of Baghdad.

Iraqis have a word for this ugly practice: sahl. All those who suffered at the hands of Saddam Hussein and his colleagues agreed that sahl would not occur again. Yet Khoei's killing took place in the same abhorrent way. Three people were eventually arrested, but all have since been released. Those who committed the crime remain at large, with impunity remaining the hallmark of the new Iraq. Eyewitness accounts point to people close to the young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose father Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr and two brothers were killed in 1999 in a car accident, widely believed to have been engineered by the Baath regime. The assassination of Khoei was more troubling since Shiite clerics, including those in post-revolutionary Iran, have shied away from killing their colleagues since 1909, when an Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Fadlallah Nuri, was hanged in a murky scheme in which other clerics took part.

I hope Muqtada Sadr has nothing to do with Khoei's sahl, as he has insistently repeated since April 10. For Sadr to remove that black cloud hanging over his head, however, he needs to clear his name in the face of many concordant accounts suggesting that his close supporters caused Khoei's death (nor have recent accusations that Sadr is intimidating Najafi clerics been reassuring). This will happen only when a full and serious judicial investigation is carried out, preferably by Iraqis under international supervision. This could, for example, involve inviting Amnesty International observers into the courtroom, or, barring that, setting up an international or mixed tribunal to address the case.

In the dark days when we stood by the Iraqi opposition, one unfailing premise was, in Eliot's words, that such "sordid particulars" as the murder in the mosque "would not prevent the eternal design to appear," and that impunity in Iraq would cease. I spoke to an American audience in Washington soon after the killing of Mohammed Sadeq Sadr, and supported accountability for his murder and those of countless others by Saddam Hussein's brutal system. It is one of the great indignities of the US that it turned its back on the relentless suffering of Iraqis during former President Bill Clinton's eight years in power. Now that the policy has been reversed and Saddam

Hussein is gone, those practices attached to his name cannot be allowed to continue. Peace can only be restored if justice is enforced, otherwise the Saddamist system of impunity will persist, and all talk of democracy and stability will remain empty. A judicial investigation into Khoei's killing remains the most pressing task of Iraq's governing council, whether in memory of the late Ayatollahs Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr and Mohammed Sadeq Sadr, or to reaffirm the respect for human life accepted since 1909 by the archbishops of Shiite Islam. Sahl should never again go unpunished.

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