

A Death Sentence by Proxy for Tariq Aziz

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After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US published a list of the most wanted high ranking Iraqi officials. The list contained fifty three names and was known as 'The Deck of Cards'. Tariq Aziz was number forty three on the list. Some of these officials were killed; others were either apprehended or left Iraq to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

Known on the international political stage as a long serving and straightforward diplomat, Mr Aziz believed he was completely innocent and had nothing to fear.

Through a German intermediary and a close family friend (a wife of an Iraqi official), Mr Aziz offered to surrender himself to the American forces as a prisoner of war. In response, Mr Aziz was given sufficient assurances that upon his surrender he would go through a routine interrogation procedure and then be given his freedom. While in office, Mr Aziz had considerable negotiating experience with US officials, accordingly he decided to accept the US guarantees and assurances. In April 2003, he handed himself in.

With no open-arms and no rose petal welcome by the Iraqi people to the invasion, the US administration of President George Bush were, at the time, desperate for a political trophy to celebrate their successful defeat of the Iraqi army. Tariq Aziz' surrender was seen as a much sought after prize for US domestic consumption.

During the interrogation, the US officials assumed that being a Christian and with no fear of reprisal from the former regime, Mr Aziz would cooperate and play an important role in their propaganda campaign. In particular, they hoped to use him as a key Iraqi voice of support for the alleged liberation of Iraq. Most importantly, the US administration sought to secure Tariq Aziz' outright public condemnation of President Saddam Hussein. The US interrogators were bitterly disappointed to find that their prisoner remained a steadfastly loyal and patriotic Iraqi. This was no different from the deputy prime minister of Iraq, who confronted Secretary of State James Baker during the negotiation in 1991 post the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Having failed to secure his collaboration, the US officials negated on their promises and assurances and kept Tariq Aziz as a prisoner. Not only that, but they also cleared the way for the Iraqi regime to prosecute Tariq Aziz, while in US custody. His critical attitude in court further antagonised the US.

Over the period 2007 to 2010, a so called Iraqi High Tribunal, a government body, with no legal legitimacy in international law, was allowed to bring three trumped up charges against Mr Aziz. The charges were; the execution in 1992 of forty two merchants who were hoarding food during the UN economic sanctions against Iraq, the gassing/

displacement in the 1980s of Kurds and the persecution, also in the 1980s of Shia preachers and interfering with the Friday prayers. For the first two charges, Mr Aziz was found guilty in 2009 and handed jail sentences of 15 and 7 years. He was then handed the death sentence in 2010 for the last charge despite being a Christian who had nothing to do with Muslim Friday prayers! Lawyers representing Mr Aziz appealed against the sentences on the grounds that the charges were politically motivated. All appeals were dismissed.

When the US withdrew from Iraq in 2010, Mr Aziz was handed over to the Iraqi authorities, safe in the knowledge that he would be executed, an act, in violation of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war. This was the US punishment to Mr Aziz for refusing to collaborate with their propaganda, a 'Death sentence by Proxy.'

It is salutary to compare Tariq Aziz' treatment with that of some of the Nazi prisoners in the Nuremburg trials at the end of the Second World War. Albert Speer - Hitler's Architect and Admiral Doenitz (who actually became Führer in the last days of the war) both received comparatively light prison sentences. This leads one to speculate that Tariq Aziz, given his integrity, would have received more lenient treatment at the hands of the Nuremburg court seventy years ago.

On the 5th of December 2011, the first day of Ashura for Shia Muslims, the Iraqi Minister of National Dialogue and Reconciliation, Mr Saad Al-Muttalibi, announced on CNN, to the world, that the Iraqi government of Nouri Al-Maliki intended to celebrate the New Year by executing Tariq Aziz.

There was an outright and immediate worldwide abhorrence to this announcement by Western governments, human rights organisations and Church leaders, including the Vatican. The fact that the minister of reconciliation made the announcement during the Christian festivals of Christmas and the New Year made it even worse.

The Iraqi regime succumbed to international pressure and Tariq Aziz was not executed. However, Nouri Al-Maliki let it be known to all his inner circle that he wished to punish Tariq Aziz with a 'fate worse than death,' and 'to let him rot in jail, and die like an animal.'

Earlier this year, Mr Aziz was transferred from the prison in Baghdad to a place in Southern Iraq which was not fit for human or even animal habitation.

Mr Aziz, 79, wheelchair bound, suffering from diabetes, having lost the sight of one eye, was placed in the squalid conditions of this new confinement. His hands and legs remained cuffed all day whilst in his wheelchair. He was denied visitation, access to medication or sufficient food and died, as threatened by Nouri Al-Maliki, like a neglected animal.

To compound the agonies of family and loved ones, Mr Aziz was also denied a proper Christian burial for some ten days. His coffin was snatched from the Jordanian airline by militias loyal to Nouri Al-Maliki while his body was being transferred to Jordan.

Mr Aziz was left to die in an appalling manner. The Al-Malaki regime sought to deny this old and sick man all human dignity. The US betrayed the trust that Tariq Aziz had given when he surrendered to them. They failed to protect his rights under international law as a prisoner of war.

This is yet another dark chapter in the US failed occupation of Iraq, and the destruction of the nation of the cradle of civilisation.

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