

'Illegal' Execution Enrages Arabs

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Global Research, January 02, 2007

Inter Press Service 2 January 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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BAGHDAD, Jan 2 (IPS) - The execution of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein carried out at the start of the Muslim festival Eid al-Adha has angered Iraqis and others across the Middle East.*

Saddam Hussein was hanged on what is held to be a day of mercy and feasting in the Islamic world. It is usually celebrated with the slaughter of a lamb, which represents the innocent blood of Ishmael, who was sacrificed by his father, the prophet Abraham, to honour God.

Judge Rizgar Mohammed Amin, the Kurdish judge who had first presided over Saddam Hussein's trial told reporters that the execution at the beginning of Eid was illegal under Iraqi law, besides violating the customs of Islam.

Amin said that under Iraqi law "no verdict should be implemented during the official holidays or religious festivals."

While Iraqi Shias, particularly those in the U.S.-backed Iraqi government, view the execution as a sign that Allah supports them, many Sunnis across Iraq and the Middle East now see Saddam Hussein as a great martyr.

"Saddam Hussein is the greatest martyr of the century," Ahmed Hanousy, a student in Amman in Jordan told IPS. A 50 year-old man in Baghdad said "the Americans and Iranians meant to insult all Arabs by this execution."

Others see the execution in all sorts of ways. Sabriya Salih, a 55-year-old man from Baghdad who was evicted from his home by Shia death squads told IPS "I am happy for this end. I have too much to worry about now, but look what a holy death Saddam received."

Salih paused and added: "He died at the holiest moments of the year with pilgrims just finishing their pilgrimage ceremonies hailing "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest) as if God meant to give him that glory."

In official expression of anger, Libya denounced the timing of the execution and announced three days of official mourning. Eid celebrations were cancelled. The government of Saudi Arabia also condemned the timing of the execution.

Many Iraqis said they were disturbed by the footage just before the execution. "They surprised us by showing the video," 40-year-old Um Sammy told IPS in Baghdad. "I was busy preparing sweets for my guests when I heard my little kids crying in terror. All the children were terrified."

A nine-year-old girl from Fallujah who is a refugee in Baghdad said she cried when she saw the footage on television. "Why did they do it in Eid? Why did they put it on TV to scare us?"

Later, shots of the execution taken by a witness from a mobile phone showed Saddam being taunted by his executioners in his final moments. The video has exacerbated tensions between Sunnis and Shias, who follow Islam in different ways.

First broadcast by al-Jazeera Sunday, the shots recorded someone praising Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr. Al-Sadr, founder of the Shia Dawa party and an uncle of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, was executed by Saddam in 1980.

This, coupled with images of Saddam smiling at those taunting him from below the gallows, has evidently drawn widespread sympathy for Saddam. The Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars issued a statement condemning the execution. The Association said this was an execution carried out by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki "for the Americans."

The fact that those hanging Saddam praised al-Sadr is evidence that the Mehdi Army militia of Muqtada al-Sadr controls at least a large portion of Iraq's security forces. This underscores Sunni views that the security forces have been deeply infiltrated by Shia militias.

A member of Saddam's defence team, Najib al-Nuaimi, told reporters the day after the execution that no Sunni lawyer was allowed among the witnesses at the execution. "This is not within normal procedures," al-Nuaimi said. He added that the execution was an act of revenge and carried out for political purposes.

"It is rather stupid of those in government and their American allies," a Sunni cleric in Ramadi told IPS. "They gifted Saddam the best death at the best moment of the year and enlisted him a hero by all measures."

Others were deeply offended by the move. A garbage collector who gave his name as Ali said he wept when he heard the news. "How could there be killing on such a day," he said. "He was 69 years old, and they could have just left him to die in his jail for God's sake."

Some Shias objected to the timing for their own reason. "They spoiled my pleasure of his execution by killing him like that," Ilwiya, a 35-year-old Shia woman from Washash village west of Baghdad told IPS. "Now he will be called a martyr because of the bad timing."

Thus far, violence continues unabated across Iraq following the execution. The U.S. military has been placed on high alert in anticipation of retaliatory attacks.

More than 3,000 U.S. soldiers have now died in Iraq, and according to the Pentagon, the U.S. military is facing more than 100 attacks a day.

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