

Lebanon, Libya, and a Lingering Question

Where's Moussa al-Sadr?

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It took no longer than the announcement that Libya would host this year's Arab League summit in late March for controversy to ensue. One of the League's 22 member states has already threatened to boycott and, some would say, with good cause.

It is the one Arab country in which Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi has not dared set foot for the past 32 years.

That nation is Lebanon, and the circumstance that eventually led its judiciary to issue a warrant for Qadhafi's arrest was the 1978 disappearance of Imam Moussa al-Sadr.

Born in Iran to a Lebanese family, Imam Moussa al-Sadr was a Qum and Najaf-trained philosopher who became one of Lebanon's most revered religious and political figures. Answering the call to become *imam* of Tyre, he moved to Lebanon in 1960. For the next two decades, his tireless devotion to enfranchising the marginalized Shia population while maintaining respect for, and tranquil relations with, all of Lebanon's confessional groups won him wide praise. Al-Sadr helped redistribute needed resources to the country's underdeveloped and impoverished south. With the institution of an array of social welfare programs, he quickly gained a reputation as a genuine reformer.

Al-Sadr became head of the Supreme Islamic Shia Council in 1969, making him de facto leader of this community. In 1974, he founded the "Movement for the Disinherited" which continued to advocate for Shia political and socioeconomic rights. Its armed wing, "The Lebanese Resistance Detachment," became better known by its Arabic acronym, AMAL ("Hope") which persists today as a political party.

The complete biography and works of Moussa al-Sadr are beyond the scope of this article. What brings us to the present conflict between Lebanon and Libya however, centers around al-Sadr's 1978 visit to Libya.

In August of that year, he and two companions—Sheikh Muhammad Yaqoub and journalist Abbas Badreddine—flew from Beirut to Tripoli, Libya to meet Qadhafi and other government officials.

They were never seen or heard from again.

It is believed that on orders from Qadhafi, al-Sadr and his two aides were imprisoned and/or murdered. His motivation for doing so remains murky, although he may have regarded al-Sadr as a political or religious rival. Qadhafi denies any knowledge of their fate, saying the

three had left Libya for Italy. After Aug. 31, though, no trace of them was found in either country. Other than contending they had departed for Rome, Qadhafi has persistently refused to comment on the matter.

In an Oct. 1978 article entitled "[An Imam Is Missing](#)," *Time* recounted that although al-Sadr had flown to Libya to attend ceremonies celebrating Qadhafi's ascent to power, an Alitalia flight was booked in his name the day *before* those celebrations were scheduled to take place. The crew did not report seeing him on the plane and Italian police found no evidence he had ever been in Rome.

As *Time* reported:

"Whatever the explanation of Moussa Sadr's disappearance, troubled Lebanon had lost a potent moderating force in the Imam. As a political as well as spiritual leader of the country's most impoverished community, he had founded technical schools, sports centers and medical clinics for the poor. He had repeatedly attempted to head off bloody sectarian strife."

In a [recent report](#) from the English language Web site of Lebanon's government-aligned daily *An-Nahar* (no friend of Amal, Hezbollah, or affiliated parties), it was written:

"Sadr was a towering figure in Lebanon as he was trusted by political leaders from across the spectrum. He personified the essence of Lebanon's national unity and many believed that Lebanon could have been spared the agony of Civil War had Sadr been there."

Thirty years later, on Aug. 27, 2008, Lebanese courts indicted Qadhafi and six other Libyans on charges of conspiring to kidnap and false imprisonment.

In light of Qadhafi's indictment and presumed involvement in al-Sadr's disappearance, there are calls for Lebanon to boycott the upcoming Arab League summit in Tripoli—the same city from which he mysteriously vanished.

Both Vice President of the Higher Shia Council, Sheikh Abdul-Amir Qabalan, and Amal head Nabih Berri said Lebanon should not participate until all questions on al-Sadr's fate are fully answered. President Michel Suleiman publicly asked of the Libyan government, "Where are Imam Moussa al-Sadr and his companions? We need to answer this question."

Qadhafi has already threatened to expel the 20,000 Lebanese nationals living in Libya and institute other "painful" measures should a boycott take place.

This notwithstanding, Lebanon should still boycott the summit. Although nothing of substance has ever emerged from these gatherings, Lebanon has the opportunity to take a powerful stand before it even convenes.

For a country that has endured so much in civil strife since the disappearance of Imam Moussa al-Sadr, a boycott would send the message that the lives of great men who uplifted the downtrodden, crossed sectarian lines to promote communal harmony and fought for the wellbeing of the Lebanese people, will not be easily forgotten.

Facing Lebanon's empty seat in Tripoli, leaders of the 21 other members of the Arab League

would learn a lesson in justice and dignity.

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