

# Iraq's former foreign minister sentenced to 15 years jail

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Tariq Aziz, the former foreign minister and deputy prime minister of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, was found guilty last week and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on charges stemming from the 1992 execution of 42 businessmen accused of manipulating prices.

His trial was yet another legal travesty in the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Court, which was created by the US occupation to prosecute former senior Baathist officials for "crimes against humanity". The judge who presided over Aziz's trial was Raouf Abdul Rahman, the same man who sentenced Saddam Hussein to death in November 2006.

The only evidence presented against Aziz was that he was a member of the Baathist Revolutionary Command Council, the institution in whose name the death warrants were handed out against the businessmen. Rahman dismissed the fact that Aziz was not in Iraq at the time and was not involved in the decision to execute the men.

The judge also ignored appeals by his defence lawyers, family and the Iraqi Assyrian Christian Church for Aziz's release on compassionate grounds. Aziz has been imprisoned at a high security detention centre near Baghdad airport ever since he surrendered to US forces on April 24, 2003. During his incarceration, he has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and is not expected to live much longer. He was too ill to remain standing or keep his eyes open as his sentence was handed out.

There is without question an element of sheer

vindictiveness in the decision to prosecute Aziz and ensure that he dies in a prison cell. In the US and other Western media, Aziz has been referred to as Hussein's "frontman", "mouthpiece" and "senior aide". Highly educated and fluent in English, he spoke articulately before television cameras, exposing the various accusations made against the Iraqi regime by Western governments. In the lead-up of the 2003 invasion, he eloquently denounced the US lies that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and stated that the real motives for the drive to war were "oil and Israel".

Aziz also angered the Bush administration and the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the current pro-US government by refusing to testify against Saddam Hussein during the 2006 show trial of the former dictator.

There are, however, more sinister reasons for keeping Aziz in prison until he dies. He will be prevented from writing or speaking about the relations between Hussein's regime and the United States and its main European allies.

Aziz was Iraq's top diplomat from 1983 until 2003. He could testify about how the US and European governments encouraged the Iraqi attack on Iran in 1980—which triggered an eight-year war and cost over 1.5 million lives. He could reveal details on the intelligence, technology and arms provided by the US and other governments to Iraq during the 1980s, including to manufacture the chemical and biological weapons used against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish rebels.

Aziz could also testify on the way the first Bush

administration encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait in 1990 and then used the Iraqi invasion as the pretext for an American-led military intervention into the Middle East.

Aziz was present during the talks between Hussein and American ambassador April Glaspie on July 25, 1990. Under conditions in which the Iraqi military was massing on the Kuwaiti border and Hussein was claiming that the statelet was an Iraqi province, Glaspie reportedly stated:

"We have no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait. Secretary [of State James] Baker has directed me to emphasise the instruction, first given to Iraq in the 1960s, that the Kuwait issue is not associated with America."

Hussein took this a signal from his American ally that he could carry out his plan to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq. He ordered an invasion on August 2. Over the following months, close to 540,000 American and allied military personnel were deployed to Saudi Arabia and full-scale air war launched against Iraq on January 17, 1991. A ground assault into southern Iraq was launched on February 24 and quickly led to the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Kuwait.

The war had two outcomes. It resulted in the establishment of US military bases in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf—a key American strategic aim since the oil price shocks of the 1970s. Secondly, on the grounds that Iraq had not verifiably destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons, the United Nations maintained a sanctions regime against Iraq from 1991 until 2003, which prevented the country from recovering from the war. The sanctions led to widespread malnutrition and disease that claimed up to one million deaths. One UN official, Denis Halliday, eventually described the sanctions as "genocide".

Aziz would be able to document the numerous occasions that the US ignored evidence that Iraq's weapons programs had ended and continued punitive sanctions. He could also testify to diplomatic offers made by the Hussein regime to prevent the 2003 invasion—efforts that were rejected out of hand.

Tariq Aziz, in other words, would be a potential witness in war crimes prosecutions against leading personnel in at least four American administrations—those of Reagan, Bush senior, Clinton and Bush junior. Instead, it appears that he will go to the grave with what he knows.

Seven other Baathist leaders were tried on the same charge as Aziz. The trial was used to sanction the execution of other members of Saddam Hussein's family. Hussein's half-brothers, Ibrahim al-Hassan and Sabawi Ibrahim, were both sentenced to death and are due to be killed within 30 days, according to Iraq's constitution.

Ali Hassan al-Majeed—often referred to as "Chemical Ali" because he commanded the Iraqi forces that used chemical weapons against Kurdish rebels and civilians in the 1980s—was given 15 years. Majeed had previously received three death sentences but kept alive to appear in other cases.

Saddam Hussein's personal secretary, Abid Hamid Mahmud, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Two other members of the Revolutionary Command Council, Mezban Khudor Hadi and Ahmed Hussein, were sentenced to 15 years and six years prison respectively. The Baathist governor of the Iraqi central bank, Isaam Rashid Huweish, was acquitted as the court could not establish even a tenuous relationship between him and the order to execute the 42 businessmen.



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