

Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz dies in prison at 79

Bill Van Auken
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Tariq Aziz, who for decades served as the main international public spokesman for the government of Iraq, died Friday after suffering a heart attack in prison, according to Iraqi officials. He was 79 and had faced steadily deteriorating health as a result of his dozen years of imprisonment, during much of which he was held in solitary confinement.

“Tariq Aziz died in the Hussein Teaching Hospital in the city of Nasiriyah,” where he was brought from his prison cell after his condition became grave, Adel Abdulhussein al-Dakhili, deputy governor of Dhi Qar province, where the former Iraqi foreign minister was jailed, told the AFP news agency.

Aziz’s family, exiled in Jordan, expressed anger that the Iraqi regime made no effort to inform them of his death, leaving them to hear about it from the media. They reported that his wife, Violet, had visited him in prison the day before he died.

Before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Aziz held the positions of foreign minister and deputy prime minister. His principal role was that of a diplomat, working feverishly in the run-up to the US invasion to prevent Washington’s war of aggression.

An Arab nationalist and leading figure in Iraq’s Ba’ath Party, Aziz was a Chaldean Christian, reflecting the secular character of Iraq’s former regime. This community has been largely driven out of the country since the US occupied Iraq and fomented bitter sectarian conflicts.

After turning himself in to the American occupation forces, Aziz was charged and tried in a kangaroo court set up by the Americans and presided over by the Shia religious parties that had previously tried to assassinate him. He was sentenced to death in 2010, but the government did not move to execute him.

Rather, it kept him behind bars and isolated, no doubt in large part at the request of Washington, which viewed Aziz as a man who knew far too much about the criminal machinations of US imperialism in the region.

What follows is a perspective posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* after he was sentenced to die in October 2010, “Tariq Aziz faces judicial murder in Iraq”

The sentencing of former Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz to hang is a barbaric act of political vengeance by the US puppet government in Baghdad and yet another in the litany of war crimes committed by Washington since the 2003 invasion.

Aziz, for decades Iraq’s chief diplomatic representative on the world stage, voluntarily turned himself in to the US military in

2003. He apparently trusted that his long-standing international reputation—including his diplomatic relations with successive US administrations—would protect him.

Instead, the ailing 74-year-old has been subjected to more than seven years of solitary confinement, first by American military jailers at Camp Cropper, near Baghdad’s international airport, and, more recently, by Iraqi security forces. When US occupation forces turned Aziz over to the Iraqi government last July he confided to his lawyer, “I am sure they are going to kill me.”

Previously, Aziz had been sentenced to a combined prison term of 22 years on allegations that he was involved in the execution of merchants accused of price-gouging during the US-UN embargo of Iraq and in the suppression of Kurdish opposition in the north of the country.

The jail term represented a de facto life sentence, given that Aziz is in poor health, suffering from strokes and lung disease while in prison and undergoing an operation for a blood clot in his brain last January.

In the latest decision, the former foreign minister has been sentenced to death for the Ba’athist regime’s crackdown in the 1980s on Shi’ite Islamists, including the Da’wa party. Supporters of the party carried out a series of Iranian-backed terrorist attacks during that period, including attempted assassinations of both Aziz and Saddam Hussein. At the time, it should be recalled, Washington was supporting Saddam Hussein as a bulwark against the spread of the Iranian revolution to the Shia populations of the Arab world.

The tribunal that handed down these sentences was created by a decree issued under the US occupation’s Coalition Provisional Authority for the purpose of trying members of the Ba’athist government that the US invasion overthrew. Its staff was handpicked and paid by the US Embassy in Baghdad. From its inception, this kangaroo court has employed the crudest methods of “victors’ justice.”

The man who will probably sign Aziz’s death warrant is Iraq’s caretaker prime minister, Nur al-Maliki, the leading figure in the Da’wa Party, while the judge who issued the sentence, Mahmud Saleh al-Hasan, is a member of Maliki’s Shi’ite political bloc, the State of Law Coalition.

Aziz went through his multiple trials largely without any legal representation, as lawyers who dared to defend him were threatened with death by Shi’ite militias linked to the US-backed regime.

Essentially, he was found guilty of the crimes of Saddam Hussein's secret police by virtue of his representation of the Iraqi government as the country's chief diplomat. Those familiar with the workings of the Ba'athist regime dispute this logic, pointing out that Aziz was never part of the inner circle that controlled the security forces, drawn largely from Hussein's Tikrit-based clan.

There is no small irony in Aziz being sentenced to death for religious-based persecution. Born in 1936 to an impoverished Christian family in northern Iraq, Aziz was drawn into nationalist politics in his 20s, working for the overthrow of the British-backed monarchy. Like many of the radicalized young people of the Arab world of his generation, he believed that nationalist revolution could liberate the region from the legacy of colonialism, including the ethno-religious divisions exacerbated by the divide-and-rule methods of European imperialism.

The Iraqi political forces overseeing his trial are linked to militias implicated in the massive sectarian-based bloodletting provoked by the US occupation. Iraq's Christian population has been decimated, and the possibility that someone born a Christian like Aziz could assume a prominent post in the current regime is absolutely nil.

More fundamentally, however, the court and the regime itself are creations of a criminal war and occupation carried out by US imperialism. The death sentence was dictated from Washington.

While the European Union has declared the death sentence decreed against Tariq Aziz "unacceptable" and the Vatican and several European governments have called for clemency, the Obama administration has maintained a guilty silence.

The obvious question raised by the judicial lynching of Tariq Aziz is: Who are Washington and its local compradors to try anyone for crimes against the Iraqi people?

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As Tariq Aziz himself told the British *Guardian* last August, in his only interview since his imprisonment, "We are all victims of America and Britain. They killed our country."

The last seven-and-a-half years of US-led occupation have destroyed Iraqi society, claiming the lives of well over a million people, turning more than four million into refugees, and leaving millions more hungry, unemployed and lacking the most essential services.

To sentence Tariq Aziz to death while the authors of these crimes—in both the Bush and the Obama administrations—enjoy impunity is not only a crime, but an obscenity.

Pointing to the rushed character of the death sentence, which was handed down without the usual 30-day warning that such a decision was pending, Aziz's lawyers said it was politically driven. They charged that the court acted on behalf of Maliki and his patrons in Washington to distract public opinion from the release by WikiLeaks last weekend of nearly 400,000 classified US documents exposing the massacre of civilians and systematic torture carried out by Iraqi puppet security forces with tacit US approval.

The drum head court that sentenced Aziz was acting as an instrument of US policy no less than the infamous US-trained Wolf Brigade, to which, as the WikiLeaks documents have

exposed, the US military turned over detainees so they could be tortured—often to death—with electric drills, high voltage shocks and other instruments of refined savagery.

Washington has its own reasons for wanting the former Iraqi foreign minister dead. There are those within the ruling establishment who still bitterly resent his highly articulate refutation of the manufactured pretexts—"weapons of mass destruction" and Al Qaeda connections—for the US invasion.

More fundamentally, Aziz's long diplomatic career places him in a unique position to expose the criminal record of US imperialism in relation to Iraq. It was he who first received Donald Rumsfeld (Bush's defense secretary at the time of the 2003 invasion) when he was sent in 1983 as a special envoy of the Reagan administration to offer US support to Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war.

He was at the center of the diplomatic maneuvers between Washington and Baghdad that preceded the first Gulf War, when the US ambassador in Baghdad, April Glaspie, gave what amounted to a green light for Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which in turn provided the *casus belli* for a massive intervention by the US military in the Persian Gulf.

He could further expose the way in which Washington systematically rejected evidence that Iraq had no "weapons of mass destruction" and sabotaged every attempt to prevent the war it launched in 2003.

The US ruling elite has a vested interest in seeing that the secrets held by Tariq Aziz about the last 30 years of US-Iraqi relations go with him to the grave. Why keep alive a man who could be called as a star witness in their own war crimes trials?

It is for this reason that the international working class should oppose the execution of Tariq Aziz and demand his immediate release. Justice for the suffering people of Iraq can come only with the prosecution of those responsible for waging an illegal war of aggression and the innumerable crimes that it has engendered.

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