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Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz Sentenced to Hang

Voice of America and other news sources reported on October 25 that Tariq Aziz, Iraq's former foreign minister and deputy prime minister, has been sentenced to death by hanging by Iraq's top criminal court. Aziz, a Chaldean Catholic, was the only Christian in Saddam Hussein's government, which was dominated by Sunni Muslims.

The present government of Iraq, headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (who lived in exile in Iran from 1982 until 1990), is dominated by Shiite Muslims. Aziz's conviction was largely based on charges that he helped to kill, imprison, or exile leaders of al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa party.



A [Wikipedia](#) article notes of al-Maliki's association with the Dawa Party:

In 1979 al-Maliki fled Iraq after hearing the government of Saddam Hussein planned to execute him. He was sentenced to death in absentia in 1980. According to a brief biography on the Islamic Dawa Party's website, he left Iraq via Jordan in October 1979 and soon moved to Syria, adopting the pseudonym "Jawad." He left Syria for Iran in 1982, where he lived until 1990, mostly in Tehran, before returning to Damascus where he remained until the 2003 US invasion toppled Hussein.[4] In Syria he worked as a political officer for Dawa, developing close ties with Hezbollah [a Shi'a Islamist political and paramilitary organization based in Lebanon that has called for the elimination of the State of Israel] and particularly with Iran, supporting that country's effort to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. From Syria, he also directed the efforts of Dawa guerillas to topple Hussein throughout the 1990s.

AP reported that Aziz's Jordan-based lawyer, Badee Izzat Aref, accused the Iraqi government of orchestrating the verdict to divert attention from recent revelations about prisoner abuse by Iraqi security forces contained in U.S. military documents released last week by the whistleblower website [WikiLeaks](#).

"We are discussing this issue and what next step we should take," Aref told The Associated Press in Amman, the Jordanian capital. "This sentence is not fair and it is politically motivated."

Aziz is already serving a 15-year prison sentence for the execution of 42 merchants found guilty of profiteering and black-market currency trading in 1992, and he was sentenced to another seven years for the forced displacement of Kurds in northern Iraq. Judge Mahmoud Saleh al-Hassan rendered the final verdict punishment — death by hanging — for participating in deliberate killings, but provided no details.

Aziz's son, Ziad, told the AP that the death sentence was "unfair" and "illogical." He said his father was the victim, not the criminal, since Dawa Party members tried to assassinate him in 1980.



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"This is an illogical and an unfair sentence that is serving political goals of the Iraqi government," Ziad said in an interview on October 26. "Tariq Aziz himself was the victim of the religious parties that tried to kill him in 1980, but now he is turned into a criminal."

A report in the [Christian Science Monitor](#) noted:

International experts have criticized the proceedings, saying former regime officials should be tried in an international court, free of potential political influence.

Aziz is elderly and in ill health. His family and lawyer have argued that he should be released for humanitarian reasons.

Aziz's lawyer, Badee Aref, told [Reuters news service](#) that the decision to impose the death penalty on his client was politically motivated, stating:

It is a political verdict and not legal. He (Aziz) expected that, especially when the U.S. administration handed him over to the Iraqi government.

The [BBC reported](#) that its Baghdad correspondent, Jim Muir, observed that there is a "visceral hatred felt by the current holders of power in Iraq towards Saddam Hussein's regime."

However, noted Muir, "many in Iraq do not see Aziz, who is a Christian, as one of Saddam's evil insiders and a lobby could spring up to prevent him being sent to the gallows."

During the time he served as Saddam Hussein's chief international spokesman, Aziz was known for his efforts to negotiate an alternative settlement to the U.S.-led war against Iraq. He met with Secretary of State James A. Baker in Geneva in January 1991, but that meeting failed to prevent the 1991 Gulf War. Aziz also met with the late Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on February 14, 2003, just weeks before the March U.S.-led invasion in an attempt to head off that conflict, as well.

An article in [Wikipedia](#) about that meeting quoted from a Vatican statement that Aziz had communicated "the wish of the Iraqi government to co-operate with the international community, notably on disarmament."

The decision made by U.S. forces to turn Aziz over to a government dominated by his former political enemies, who could hardly be viewed as impartial, is replete with ironies.

Though Saddam Hussein was unquestionably a brutal tyrant, the Christian community in Iraq enjoyed religious freedom during his rule. One can hardly imagine a Chaldean Catholic such as Aziz (or any other Christian) rising to a similar place in the present Shiite-dominate government that has close ties to Iran.

Once Saddam was removed, again by U.S.-led forces, life in Iraq became unbearable for Christians, a large number of whom have fled the country.

Though the invasion of Iraq did not uncover the reputed weapons of mass destruction that served as justification for the operation, the regime change it brought about had a major impact on the lives of Iraq's Christians. A June 2, 2010 article in *USA Today* headlined "[For Christians in Iraq, the threats persist](#)," observed:

Before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 there were about 1.4 million Christians in Iraq, a Muslim-dominated nation of nearly 30 million. Since then, about 50% of Iraq's Christians have fled the country, taking refuge in neighboring Jordan, Syria, Europe and the USA, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).



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The article continued:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a government panel tasked with monitoring religious freedoms around the world for the State Department, recently recommended that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton designate Iraq as a “country of particular concern” because of the violence against Christians and other religious minorities.

Tariq Aziz’s complicity in the regime of Saddam Hussein undoubtedly disqualifies him from receiving a “humanitarian of the year” award. However, the disinterested manner in which the United States handed him over to the al-Maliki government — which has cozied up to the militant Islamic leaders of Iran while failing to protect Iraq’s Christians — only magnifies the disregard our government has had for Middle Eastern Christians in general.

Photo: In this Sept. 5, 2010 photo, Tariq Aziz, former Iraqi foreign minister and deputy prime minister, speaks to the Associated Press in Baghdad, Iraq: AP Images



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