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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Justice, but No Reckoning

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Washington

MY personal battle with Saddam Hussein — which began in 1972 when I abandoned my medical career in Mosul, Iraq, and joined the Kurdish armed resistance — is at an end. To execute such a criminal, a man who reveled in his atrocities, is an act of justice.

The only issue for me is the timing — executing him now is both too late and too early. Too late, because had Saddam Hussein been removed from the scene many years ago, many lives would have been saved.

Killing Saddam now, however, for ordering the massacre at Dujail in 1982, means that he will not face justice for his greatest crimes: the so-called Anfal campaign against the Kurds in the late 1980s, the genocidal assault on the Marsh Arabs in the 1990s, and the slaughtering of the Shiite Arabs and Kurds who rose up against him, with American encouragement, in 1991.

The sight of a tyrant held to account, if only briefly, has been an important precedent for the Middle East. The shabby diplomacy that has allowed dictators to thrive is now discredited.

Sadly, however, we have not had full justice. Saddam Hussein did not confront the full horror of his crimes. Building on previous initiatives by Arab nationalist governments to persecute the Kurds, he turned ethnic engineering and murder into an industry in the 1970s. Hundreds of thousands were evicted from their homes and murdered. Swaths of Kurdish countryside were emptied of their population, men, women and children taken to shallow graves and shot.

Initially, the United States backed those of us who took to the hills to save our lives and freedom, but in 1975 (and here is an irony) Gerald Ford agreed to stop financing us in order to settle a

border dispute between Iraq and Iran. As so many times since, human rights were no match for a desire to keep the oil flowing.

During the 1980s, entire towns, including Qala Diza in Iraqi Kurdistan and Qasr-i-Shirin in neighboring Iranian Kurdistan, were destroyed. To ensure that survivors would never return to their homes, the mountains were laced with land mines. The widows and children were detained in settlements lacking fresh water and sewage disposal; these were called “mujammat” in Arabic, which translates, with all the dreadful implications, as “concentration areas.”

While I escaped to America, my family was not so lucky. My brother-in-law and nephew were summarily executed. They never had anything remotely approaching a fair trial, never got to write a will, never got to say goodbye to my sister.

Saddam Hussein’s trial shed new light on these tragic years. Documents came to light revealing that his regime coordinated with Turkey in its efforts to isolate Kurdish villages in 1988, in which he used chemical weapons. This should lead to some important soul searching in Turkey.

But the failure to put Saddam Hussein on trial for the Anfal offensive itself will cheat us of learning the full details — of investigating whether the Turks suppressed evidence of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons by preventing foreign doctors from seeing Kurdish refugees; of knowing the extent to which Saudi Arabia and Egypt may have aided Saddam Hussein’s weapons production.

Kurds aren’t the only ones who will be cheated out of full reckoning. In 1991, as we all know, the retreating Iraqi army massacred Shiite Arabs as well as Kurds who had heeded President George H. W. Bush’s call to overthrow the Baathist regime. According to the 2004 report of the Iraq Survey Group, the dictator used chemical weapons against Shiite Arab civilians in 1991. Without putting Saddam Hussein on trial for these offenses, or for his campaigns against the Marsh Arabs of the south, will we ever know what really happened?

For all the mistakes that the United States has made in Iraq — and I feel the betrayal of 1975 was the worst — I am a proud (naturalized) American because this country brought the murderous despot to trial. Still, it is a great shame that he will not be held accountable for all of his crimes, and a far greater tragedy that he was allowed, sometimes with American complicity, to commit them in the first place.

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