

Murder in Najaf mosque: The harsh new reality

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The claim that Saddam Hussein was linked to 9/11 was always fraudulent, but at least half of the American public believe that there is a connection. While the White House never made such a claim overtly, rhetoric leading to the invasion of Iraq always implied the connection, and was bolstered by the war cheerleading of conservative cable TV and print commentators.

Even mainline American media, including the respected PBS and NPR, shifted quickly once the war began, and hid behind the “support our troops” mantra. They relied on an ever-ready supply of retired generals who were more interested in military strategy than rationale. The White House genius who dreamed up the tactic of embedding journalists with and under the absolute control of military units made “support our troops” the spin of each day. He or she should get a White House medal for outstanding service in selling a war to eradicate not-yet-discovered weapons of mass destruction, to avenge 9/11 without touching bin Laden, and—just to cover all bases—to liberate an oppressed people.

But now the war euphoria has begun to die down, and we’re recognizing the harsh reality of bringing order to a nation of 23 million. In time American credibility in the world could be restored, but only if the White House acknowledges and respects the importance of Islam to the people of Iraq. To accomplish this, President Bush will have to repudiate the demonized version of Islam promoted by the likes of Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, and endorsed by the neoconservative war party that has planned this war for a decade.

Saddam’s use of the religious divisions within Islam, specifically his oppression of the Shi’ites, was never cited as part of the White House invasion justification because it would have undercut the linkage between Osama bin Laden and Saddam. They were never allies. Bin Laden saw Saddam as an enemy of Islam who attacked Islamic shrines, destroyed Shi’ite Muslim libraries and assassinated clerics. Saddam,

who no doubt dreamed of someday having his own personal weapons of mass destruction, would never have shared them with bin Laden, who might have used them against Saddam's secular government.

One development, however, suggests that someone in Washington recognizes the importance of Islam to postwar Iraq. Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei, a 40-year-old cleric and member of a prominent Shi'ite Muslim family, was invited by the U.S. to return to Najaf shortly after the American forces arrived there. Tragically, an Iraqi mob murdered Sayyid Majid a week after he arrived, eliminating a man who could have played a significant role in bringing order to his war-ravaged country.

Michael Wood of the London *Guardian* wrote that it is as yet unclear whether Sayyid Majid's death "was due to Saddam loyalists, to factionalism, or even to a spontaneous flare-up of anti-American anger." Whatever the motive, the murder was an ugly indication of the dangers ahead in a culture divided between Shi'ite Muslims, who make up 60-65 percent of Iraq's population, and the Sunnis, 32-37 percent. (Iraq's Christian minority constitutes about 3 percent of the population.) Hussein and his ruling Baath Party were Sunni Muslims.

The two groups hold different views on the selection of Muhammad's successor. According to the Iraq Islamic Resource Information Web site, "The differences between the two at the core are minimal and lie in custom and practice," a difference Saddam exploited to consolidate his secular control of Iraq. Saddam's oppression of the majority Shi'ite community drove Sayyid Majid out of Iraq in 1991, after the first President Bush encouraged and then abandoned an uprising of Shi'ite Muslims against Saddam (14 out of 18 provinces responded).

During that uprising, the Grand Ayatollah Abdul-Qasim al-Khoei, the murdered Majid's father, called on the Iraqi Shi'ite "to act humanely and not pursue vendettas." The younger al-Khoei, says Wood, "was a member of a committee of the local great and good," working to maintain order and stop looting and revenge killings. When promised support from the U.S. did not materialize, Saddam crushed the rebellion and Sayyid Majid fled to London and worked for his father's foundation.

During his time abroad, the younger al-Khoei's father died, and his brother Taghi was assassinated. Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei became the family foundation's secretary general, and made significant contributions to Shi'ites who had lost family members in Saddam's crackdown. Then the Bush administration identified al-Khoei

as a future leader and brought him back to southern Iraq.

On April 5 he entered Najaf, the third holiest city in Islam, to wild public acclaim, and began to set up another "committee of the local great and good." He also established contact with Ali Sistani, his father's successor as Iraq's Grand Ayatollah. A week later Sayyid Majid and a fellow cleric were stabbed and hacked to death in the Imam Ali mosque. A spokesman for the al-Khoei Foundation in London accused Saddam loyalists of the murder and criticized U.S. forces for failing to protect him.

Many U.S. supporters of this war have spoken of a clash of civilizations between fundamentalist Islam and the West, ignoring the positive and essential contribution mainstream Islam would make to peace and stability in the region. President Bush has an opportunity to demonstrate that he recognizes that contribution. In inviting a religious leader of Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei's stature to return to a leadership role, Bush had the right idea.