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Justice in Iraq

Moral progress since the days of Saddam.

Progress in Iraq is often measured in declining rates of terrorist violence, the number of provinces under Iraqi control, growing Iraqi troop strength, and the new U.S.-Iraq Security pact that received final Iraqi approval this week. But a pair of recent Iraqi court decisions also tells us something about the moral distance the country has traveled since the days of Saddam Hussein.

On Tuesday, an Iraqi court handed down a second death sentence to Ali Hassan al-Majeed, better known as "Chemical Ali." Mr. Majeed, a cousin and top lieutenant of Saddam, was first sentenced to die last year for using poison gas against thousands of Kurdish villagers in the late 1980s. This time, he stood trial for his role in suppressing the 1991 Shiite uprising in southern Iraq, in which an estimated 60,000 people were slaughtered.

Think what you will about the death sentence -- and Mr. Majeed was initially spared due to Iraqi President (and Kurdish leader) Jalal Talabani's opposition to it -- it's hard to name anyone who has inflicted more cruelty than Mr. Majeed, and his sentence is of a piece with the justice meted to the Nazis at Nuremberg.

Now take the case of Mithal al-Alusi, an Iraqi legislator who visited Israel in 2004 and paid for it when his two sons were murdered the following year. Undeterred, Mr. Alusi returned to Israel in September, only to be sanctioned by parliament on the grounds that he had violated Saddam-era statutes forbidding travel to the Jewish state. Fortunately, Iraq's constitutional court disagreed, noting that Saddam-era laws don't apply in the new Iraq. Mr. Alusi will now be returning to his parliamentary duties.

It's a shame that Iraq's young democracy isn't prepared to recognize Israel, as Egypt and Jordan have. Then again, any state which sentences a man like Mr. Majeed to die while defending the rights of Mr. Alusi has put itself on the right side of history, and deserves our continuing support.

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