

# Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World

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Makiya, Kanan (Samir al-Khalil). *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.

It is early March 1991. Nader Sultan, then-president of Kuwait Petroleum International, hangs up the telephone in his London office. He has been talking to a cousin in newly liberated Kuwait, who had described how he was captured and tortured by the Iraqis. Nader recounts his cousin's story, which ends like this:

And when my cousin protested what was being done to him, the torturer shouted at him. Who are you, a Kuwaiti, to complain about torture? I have been doing worse things to Iraqis for more than ten years.

Kanan Makiya's book describes the work of Iraqi torturers. It is packed with small, horrible details: the graffiti written in blood; the crunch underfoot of desiccated feces left behind by truckloads of adults and children who were penned like cattle in a stone fortress to wait for their executions; a man finding the body of his mother, her dead mouth full of mud, on the riverbank where she had fallen in her flight from the poison gas filling her village; a military identity card listing the job description of the holder as "violation of women's honor" — that is, a rapist; the author's feelings of guilt following his intense questioning of Taimour, a child who was the only survivor of a mass execution conducted during the 'Anfal campaign, Hussein's genocidal crusade against the Kurds.

That is the cruelty. Page after page, person after person, Kanan Makiya brings us Iraqis of every description hurting, dying — and killing. The stories are pornographic in their incessant objectification of human beings, their tormented flesh, their protesting screams, and their unrelentingly brutal mutilations and deaths. The book is difficult to read, like stories of Nazi concentration camps, Stalin's gulags, and Pol Pot's "reconstruction" of Cambodia. These comparisons are apt; they too are stories of government employees killing fellow citizens in the name of a predator state and its diabolical ruler. They are also apt because, like Kanan Makiya's story of Iraqis under Saddam, a full recounting memorializes the often forgotten observers who willingly closed their eyes to what they knew was going on.

That is the silence, and it is the story of the silence much more than the story of cruelty that has evoked the wrath of many Arab readers of this book. Kanan Makiya violates the social code embodied in the hierarchy that begins, "I against my brother. My brother and I against my cousin. My family against the village . . ." by holding those inside the circle separating the Arabs from the West to the same standard they themselves apply to those who are outside. He violates another social code when he names the names of the Arab intellectuals he accuses of silence, quotes their writings and speeches, and judges them as individuals whose silence has earned them a share of personal responsibility for the genocide in Iraq — along with the invasion of Kuwait, Palestinian terrorism, the massacre of thousands in the Syrian city of Hama, and other occasions of cruelty dressed up as Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and *raisons d'etat*.

The importance of *Cruelty and Silence* as an indictment of an attitude that dismisses human rights as peripheral to national or communal interests is global as well as parochial. Readers of this journal, authors of its articles and reviews, any of us who can be called a "defense intellectual" or a "foreign policy analyst" is bound to have written, taught, or thought from inside a circle separating "our" leaders, policies, their implementation, and their consequences from others located outside the circle. Yet even though it is difficult, it is necessary that we make judgments based on principles rather than group membership. Cruelty must be recognized and condemned for what it is regardless of who is involved as perpetrator or as victim. However, it is equally necessary to discriminate among evils rather than judging them as the same. Critics of the UN coalition during the second Gulf War who justified their neutrality or support of Hussein by pointing to the authoritarianism of Kuwait's rulers-in-exile were demonstrating either an ignorance of actual conditions in the two countries or their own inability to discriminate between bad and abominable.

The reason for taking responsibility to criticize, to judge, and to act in the face of cruelty goes beyond any individual's psychological need for self-respect. As the author points out, it is impossible to break the cycle of cruelty and revenge if one cannot recognize cruelty for what it is, attribute responsibility for it publicly, and then punish, forgive, and move beyond it to reconciliation. An Iraqi and a Shi'a, Kanan Makiya examines at length the Shi'i *intifada* in southern Iraq following the conclusion of the second Gulf War. He sees its retaliatory cruelty as a foretaste of what, in the absence of reconciliation, Iraqi politics seems bound to be like for generations to come. Just as the abused child grows to become an abusive parent, the remnants of the community that has been subjected to cruelty become the instruments of cruelty when the tables are turned.

Some Arab intellectuals, safe in exile as is Kanan Makiya himself, criticize his project of revelation to achieve reconciliation. They call him a traitor to his people. Yet others, including many Iraqis, applaud what he is doing. Some of them have experienced the cruelty of the leaders whose showy defiance of the West earns them the forgiveness of the critics. For those who have suffered directly themselves to accept the idea that breaking the cycle of violence requires revelation and forgiveness seems to me to be reasonable beyond measure. It is always difficult to accept criticism of one's words and actions, and especially if these deeds were done not in malice but in fear or despair. However, admitting guilt and accepting responsibility are necessary steps along the path that leads away from fear and despair. Kanan Makiya's book attempts to define a way to reach that path; travelling it would move many Iraqis away from the thoughtless perpetuation of cruelty in Iraq after the shadow of Saddam Hussein leaves their land.

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