

## **Return of a Cleric**

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The eldest son of Sayyed Bahr al-Uluum observes the senior clergyman's return to the holy city of Najaf, ending more than three decades of forced exile.

As our convoy approached the Holy City of Najaf, the damage the regime of Saddam Hussein wrought on this and so many other southern cities was obvious. Towns that participated in the 1991 popular uprising against the regime were left to die a slow death. Streets are abandoned and uncared for. Sadness is written on every wall.

This month, at the end of 35 years of forced exile, Sayyed Mohammed Bahr al-Uluum, patriarch of a prominent clerical family that has exercised a leading role in the religious, social and political arenas, returned to the city of his birth. He found a city where a former Ba'athist intelligence officer has appointed himself mayor and where civil administration does not exist, where almost every house is armed and stray dogs are virtually the only living things on the streets after dark.

On arrival in Najaf, unannounced and going very quietly through the streets, we went to visit the shrine of Imam Ali (peace be upon him). As the Sayyed arrived at the gates of the shrine, flocks of people gathered in a matter of seconds, cheering his arrival. The pressure of the crowd was so great that the 77-year-old Sayyed almost fainted. But he managed to do the religious visitation and offered a brief prayer before leaving the shrine to greet the surviving members of the Bahr al-Uluum family who had gathered to meet him at the house of his martyred brother, Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ala' el-Deen Bahr al-Uluum.

Overcome by emotion on entering the house, Sayyed Mohammed fell to the ground in tears.

Seventeen members of the Bahr al-Uluum family were executed by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Many more were sentenced to death and fled the country. Only a few male members of the family are alive today.

A descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, Sayyed Mohammed stood against the regime and was put on Saddam's most wanted list in 1969 because of his role in the spiritual leadership of Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohsen al-Hakim. Threatened with execution, he fled to Kuwait. Here he was appointed as a judge before, hunted by Saddam's agents, he left for Britain.

In Britain, Sayyed Bahr al-Uluum combined political and social work. He established the Ahl-al-Beit Islamic Centre, the Institution for Arabic and Islamic Studies and the Iraqi Refugee Relief Organisation, which delivered aid and assistance to the needy people of Iraq. He played a leading role in several opposition coalitions and committees.

On May 12, a month after the collapse of the regime, Sayyed Mohammed returned to Iraq. Prostrating himself as he reached Iraqi soil in the border town of Safwan, he gave a brief speech thanking the tens of thousands of people who had gathered to greet him and asking them to unite to build a democratic Iraq where every voice can be heard. Then he headed for the city of Samawa where southern tribes welcomed him and hosted him for one night.

Najaf today is a city without the simplest of services. During Saddam's rule, the people of Najaf were left to survive on their own. Electricity is disconnected for half of the day and families have to scramble for candles whenever the power goes off. The lucky few enjoy generators shared with neighbours which are unable to power air conditioners in temperatures that rise to 50 degrees Celsius.

Without electricity, it is very dark at night. In a city where there is no police, no authority and where virtually every house is armed, we have to be very careful. We have to be armed and quick in moving from one house to another. For security reasons we stay in a different house every night before receiving people in the Borrani – the large reception room where senior clerics traditionally receive visitors – in the day.

In the narrow, sandy streets close to the Holy Shrine, every one of which leads to an ancient, historical and religious site, houses are crammed together. Streets filled with trash and litter are crying out for care.

This is not being done by the self-assigned “mayor” of Najaf, Abd al-Minam al-Sudani, who claims to be supported by the United States. His claim is supported by the fact that the 50 armed men who surround him are the only men the Americans permit to carry weapons in Najaf. A former intelligence officer with Saddam’s regime, al-Sudani is notorious for smuggling cars and goods stolen from the Iraqi people for sale in northern Iraq.

The people of Najaf initially found that their protests against al-Sudani fell on deaf American ears. But when the day of elections for local officials came, people refused to allow the self-appointed mayor to enter the election hall and staged a huge protest against him. Senior US officials have since promised free and open elections for a new mayor.

Iraq today needs an interim government that truly represents the Iraqi people. The coalition forces must finish the task they came for. They must establish security in the country and support a democratic government. Without this, there cannot be stability in Iraq.

Ibrahim Bahr el-Uluum, eldest son of Sayyed Mohammed Bahr el-Uluum, is an engineer.

**Location:** [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)  
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