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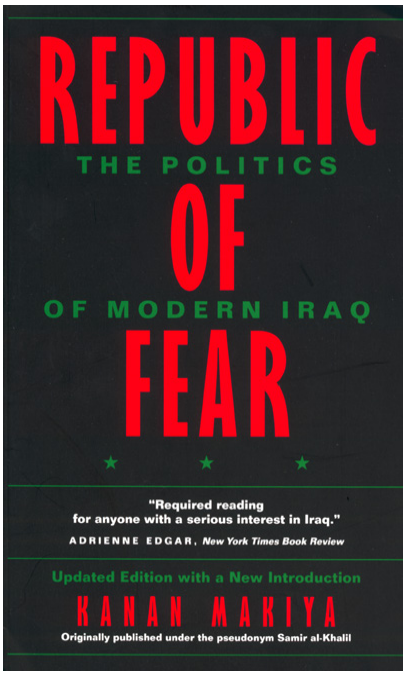

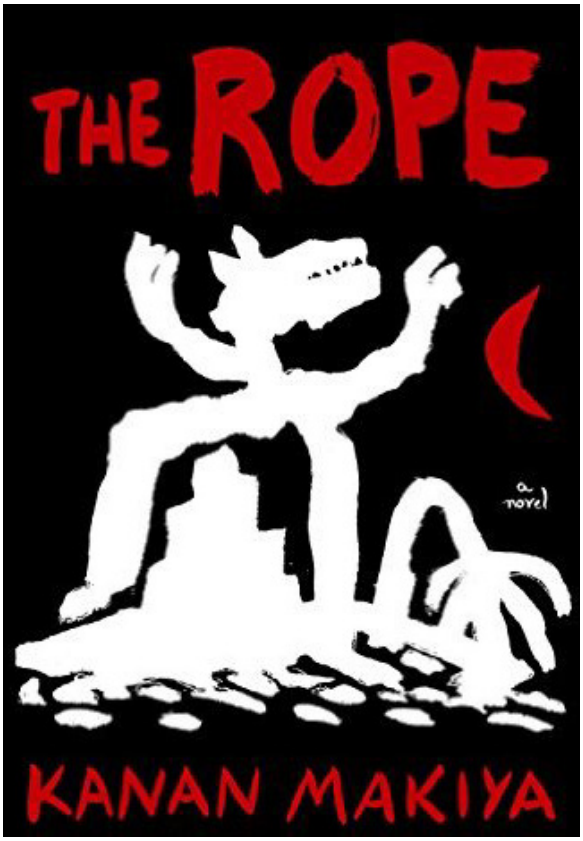

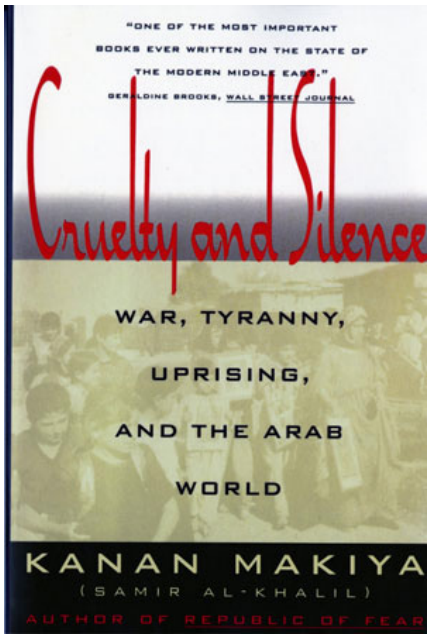

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Kanan Makiya and the Rejection of Victimhood

By Samuel Helfont

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"And now that it had been laid bare, what did I have to turn to in its place? What was there left worth believing in?

Nothing.

Look too deeply into the awfulness of the world, and one must reject it, turn his back on it, and walk away. But to where? Nowhere. There is no exit from the world." – The Rope

On March 26, 1996, Kanan Makiya gave a lecture at Brandeis University on the future of Iraq. I did not attend (I was but 15 years old at the time), and I cannot say whether the event received much attention. I know about the lecture because I came across a report on it while digging through the **archives** of the Iraqi Ba'th Party. Iraqi Ba'thists were in the audience that day, and the Iraqi Ba'th Party in America (yes, there was such an organization) sent a report to the Party Secretariat in Baghdad. The Secretariat forwarded it to the infamous Iraqi Intelligence Service, the *mukhabarat*, which was actively attempting to assassinate Iraqi dissidents, even those residing in Western states. The document left little doubt that Makiya was at the top of the former Iraqi regime's list of targets. Most reports about Iraqi exiles in the United States used fairly generic and innocuous language. Iraqi Ba'thists would file reports titled "an opposition publication" or "a hostile lecture." In contrast to such banalities, the report on Makiya was titled "Lecture of the Traitorous Foreign Agent Kanan Makiya." He was clearly a special case, and the Iraqi regime most certainly would have killed him had the opportunity arisen.

Exiled from his homeland and with a notorious intelligence agency attempting to assassinate him, one could excuse Makiya for claiming the mantle of victimhood. Yet, in an all-too-rare insistence on principle, he refused. In the preface to the 1998 edition of his book, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, he wrote about "the all-too-human mistake" of "allowing ourselves to believe that there is something redeeming in the quality of victimhood itself. There isn't." Instead, he argued, "The very opposite is likely to be the case: the victims of cruelty or injustice are not only no better than their tormenters; they are more often than not just waiting to change places with them" (*Republic of Fear*, xxix). While this final point is blindingly obvious to anyone familiar with modern Middle Eastern history, it is almost never articulated and is completely ignored in most political writing about the region. Yet, it is a principle Makiya has insisted upon over the years, and it is a principle that remains at the heart of his new novel, *The Rope*.

The novel comes from a place of deep anguish. Makiya had been at the forefront of opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime. Though his intellectual roots are on the Left, his biting critiques of the Ba'thist regime and his eloquent insistence on the moral necessity of removing it ingratiated him with the George W. Bush administration. Perhaps more than anyone else, he provided an ethical veneer to the 2003 invasion. And he did a good deal to convince those with power that Saddam could be removed without expending too much blood and treasure. Infamously, he predicted that Iraqis would greet American troops with "sweets and flowers."

He rode the tide of invading armies into Baghdad insisting that he had returned home and that he intended to remain there. Makiya went to work building what he thought would be a new Iraq. With at least tacit assistance from the American forces that had occupied the country, he gathered documentation on the former regime's crimes. He collected oral histories of torture and managed to preserve the secret, internal files of the Iraqi Ba'th Party. The Iraq Memory Foundation, which he had founded in exile, planned to use these materials to open a peace and reconciliation center in Baghdad that would showcase the crimes of the former regime and would help to convince the Iraqi people never to return to those dark days. It was not to be: Iraq descended into chaos. Instead of a center for peace and reconciliation, his foundation found itself at the center of conflict and retribution. Every nefarious group, from al-Qaida to the Sadrists wanted to use the documents that Makiya had collected to locate enemies and settle old scores. One Iraqi archivist who worked for the foundation told me that he had to move his family around the city, sometimes on very short notice, to avoid being killed. In 2006, Makiya gave up and moved back to the United States. He was disillusioned. "As time passed," he wrote in a personal note at the end of *The Rope*, "I stopped asking myself whether the ugliness of the fallout from the tyrant's overthrow and the U.S. occupation could have been avoided" (297).

Iraq went from bad to worse in the years since Makiya returned to the United States. People concerned with the fate of the country wanted to hear his version of events. They wanted to know what he thought had gone wrong. They wanted him to acknowledge his role in the destruction of Iraq, and many of them wanted an apology. For the most part, Makiya refused to oblige. "The fact is" he states, "for years I couldn't write, because had I done so it would have been in anger and bitterness, in a work filled with recrimination and wallowing in guilt" (*The Rope*, 299). And now that he has written a book, it is not the one that many of his critics desired. They wanted a *mea culpa*, and he has written a novel.

In some ways, this should not be surprising. From the moment he emerged as a public intellectual, it was clear that he was not the typical dissident. He did not play by the rules. *Republic of Fear*, which he published under a pseudonym in 1989, laid out the brutal nature of Saddam's regime for the first time. It became an instant best-seller a year later when Saddam invaded Kuwait. The book's lasting appeal was not just due to its timing. Makiya was clearly a critic of Saddam's regime, but his political project did not fit neatly into the debates that dominated political discourses on the Arab World. For example, he was a staunch defender of Palestinian rights, but at the heart of his argument in *Republic of Fear* was a description of the Ba'thist regime's anti-Semitism. Of course, there is no reason why denouncing anti-Semitism and defending Palestinians are incompatible, but in the zero sum debates about the Middle East, to be a victim was to be on the right side of history. In such a Manichean worldview, Jews and Arabs could not both be victims. Makiya rejected such dichotomies.

Interestingly, Makiya's focus on anti-Semitism as a pillar of the Ba'thist regime was inspired not only by real events in Iraqi history, but also by arguments that Hannah Arendt made about totalitarian regimes in Europe. Makiya is quite comfortable in Arab and Islamic history. Yet, he is just as fluent in Western traditions. He cites medieval Arabic poetry and Islamic law on one page, then quotes Eliot and Orwell on the next. In blending these two civilizations, Makiya has been able to look past stereotypes that pigeonholed Saddam as a non-Western ruler. Instead of comparing his regime either to classic Eastern despotism or to a tin-pot third world dictatorship, Makiya made the case that Saddam was an Arab Stalin. By making that argument, he also attacked the notion that a revolutionary, anti-imperialist, Arab leader was fundamentally different from the leader of a European power. If the Arabs were the victims of European powers, how could they be accused of similar crimes? But that was exactly the accusation that Makiya made in *Republic of Fear*, and in doing so, he insisted that Western intellectuals take Saddam's crimes seriously.

Makiya's analysis made him few friends in the Arab World. At best, he was accused of airing dirty laundry and, at worst, of enabling America's imperial policies in the region, or more directly, of being a traitor to his people. He responded with perhaps his most piercing book, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World*, in 1993. As the title suggests, the book contrasts the cruelty of Saddam's regime with the silence of the so-called "pro-Arab" intellectuals.

Saddam's crimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s were perhaps his worst. The Anfal campaign in 1988 against the Iraqi Kurds systematically slaughtered thousands of people and razed villages in entire swaths of Northern Iraq. Until the current civil war in Syria, Saddam had the distinction of being the only leader to use chemical weapons against his own people. Similar carnage was wrought in Iraq's Shi'i south following an uprising at the end of the Gulf War. Saddam's tanks leveled cites and destroyed the most sacred sites of Shi'i Islam in the holy city of Najaf. Yet, as Makiya shows, the vast majority of pro-Arab intellectuals had little to say about such atrocities. In their minds, highlighting them would only encourage further Western aggression. As such, real Iraqi lives were sacrificed on the altar of abstract theories like Orientalism and neo-imperialism. Makiya had no time for this line of reasoning. These intellectuals, he insisted, "have felt it necessary to put aside everything which is complex and individual, and therefore richly laced with life, in favor of the colorless language of 'victimhood,' which can only provide a false sense of collective reassurance" (*Cruelty and Silence*, 323).

Most authors would have left their argument there. The Iraqis were the real victims. The anti-imperialist Arab intellectuals who had claimed the mantle of victimhood were in fact accessories to the real oppressor, Saddam Hussein. It was a powerful point, and it struck at the heart of Arab politics. But Makiya was not interested in scoring polemical points. His goal was not to win the argument, but rather to describe things as they were. And painting the Iraqi people as righteous victims fell well short of that mark. Iraqi politics could not be reduced to the discourse of victim and oppressor. "Individual actions aside," Makiya insisted, "every social group [in Iraq] behaved as selfishly as humanly possible" (*Cruelty and Silence*, 216). His critiques of his own Shi'i community were probably his harshest: "The problem of Iraq," he argued, "is that everyone was a victim, and most people, especially the Shi'a majority, only know how to think and behave like victims." Thus, Shi'is failed to adhere to even the most basic humanitarian constraints. When given the chance, they fought each other, they killed indiscriminately, and they tortured. In Makiya's words: "Victims imitated the regime that had created them and their revolt failed" (*Cruelty and Silence*, 34).

Throughout the 1990s, Makiya attempted to organize an Iraqi opposition in exile and to drum up political support in Western capitals for a democratic transition in Baghdad. It was not an easy task. The Iraqi exiles were a motley group or monarchists, Islamists, liberals, radicals, and various ethnic lobbies. Makiya began with a basic principle that "people have rights for no other reason than that they exist as individual human beings." Even this mundane statement was too much for the assorted parties of the Iraqi opposition, who were pushing their religious and ethnic agendas instead of human rights. Iraq's Shi'is, in particular, were upset with his failure to promote their group's interests. They would ask: "Why aren't you writing about what Saddam has done to your own kind, the Shi'a of Iraq" (*Cruelty and Silence*, 224-5)? Makiya pressed on and when the stars aligned in 2003, he had emerged as key member of the Iraqi opposition and a would-be architect of the country's transition to liberal democracy.

The disappointments and disillusionment that followed are laced throughout his new novel. *The Rope*, named for the rope that hanged Saddam, follows the evolution of a young Sadrist revolutionary between 2003 and 2006. The Sadrists were a Shi'i Islamist militia led by Iraqis who had remained in Iraq during Saddam's rule. They were in conflict with almost everyone else in Iraq following Saddam's ouster. They opposed the American-led coalition, the Ba'thists,

and the Sunnis. However, they fought their most intense battles against their fellow Shi'i Islamists who had gone into exile and were returning to Iraq with Iranian backing. The Sadrists were Islamists, but they were also Iraqi patriots who did not want their country to become an Iranian proxy.

Like Makiya, the narrator is moved simply to explain the world as he sees it. Following the hanging of Saddam in 2006, he takes a vow "to record the truth as I began to see it on that day. I understood then what I had to do, not matter how it made me look to others, many of whom I counted as friends" (*The Rope*, 7). As one might expect, despite his status as a proud Shi'i, the narrator pulls no punches when dealing with inter-Shi'i conflicts. In fact, the novel revolves around the murder of the scion of a great Shi'i family by the Sadrists and then the cover-up by the Shi'i political elites. The novel's description of these events clings tightly to the real murder of Majid al-Khoei, whose father had been the highest Shi'i religious authority in Iraq until his death in the early 1990s. Majid al-Khoei went into exile (where he knew Makiya well) and was murdered upon his return to Iraq on April 10, 2003, the same day that the Ba'thist regime fell. Makiya's implication of his fellow Shi'is is deeper than this one episode, or even of post-2003 Iraq. The narrator learns at one point that his mentor had been a collaborator with Saddam's regime. In flashbacks to Saddam's prisons and torture chambers, the narrator's father recounts, "The chief interrogator, a man of the Shi'a like us, was perhaps the most brutal man I encountered" (*The Rope*, 64). Everyone was complicit in Saddam's crimes. The Shi'is were not pure victims, but the narrator has to learn these lessons the hard way. At one point, he tells his grandfather: "We are victims . . . we have always been victims. But rest assured, we are fighting back now." The grandfather, who is a voice of reason, "snapped back" that "in 1991, I saw so-called victims inflict more pain than was ever inflicted upon them" (*The Rope*, 180). And at one point, the narrator's uncle, who is a complicated character but clearly an astute politician, states quite directly: "there is nothing commendable in reserving the quality of being a victim only to oneself. If you want to rule Iraq, you must start from the fact that all Iraqis were under attack by Saddam, not just the Shi'a" (*The Rope*, 97).

However, Makiya's attacks are not limited to Shi'is. No one is spared by his pen in this novel. The American-led coalition is bumbling, ill-equipped intellectually, and morally ambiguous. At one point, the coalition is described as: "reluctant spoiled men" who "no longer had the stomach for anything called sacrifice" (*The Rope*, 10). Other groups in Iraq receive similar treatment. The Sunnis also are conniving and violent. Perhaps the most nefarious group is what the narrator describes as "Foreigner Iraqis" who arrived on the tanks of the Occupier. These men, of which Makiya is clearly one, are described as rootless and morally corrupt Iraqi exiles. They were given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in Iraq. Instead of ushering in a system of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, they treated the country as a Machiavellian playground fostering sectarianism, committing crimes, covering up crimes, and colluding with whomever could offer a glint of fleeting power.
Makiya did not become a politician in post-2003 Iraq, so he largely avoided the corrupt power politics of the country. Nevertheless, he was the archetype "Foreigner Iraqi," who is the subject of such distain in the novel. The Foreigner Iraqi is "deeply dissatisfied" and "has an inextinguishable longing to be somewhere else, longing to escape where he is, wherever that may be in the world, and never belonging to the place that he goes" (*The Rope*, 90). It is difficult not to read this as a statement of self-reflection by the author. Makiya spares no one, not even himself.

All of this self-criticism is intentional. Makiya wanted not only to write a novel about the downward spiral of post-2003 Iraq, but about "the self-destructing Iraqi agency behind it all." He insists that "Iraqis, not Americans, were the prime drivers of what went wrong after 2003, not only the ones who had suffered and lived through the regime of the Ba'th between 1968 and 2003, but also Iraqis who rode in from abroad, as my narrator observes, 'on the tanks of the Occupier'" (*The Rope*, 297).

Reflection and self-criticism will not change the past. The ill-fated American invasion of Iraq cannot be undone. Makiya understands the tragedy of what has occurred and his role in it: "The mountain of Iraqi dead since 2003, most of whom were killed by other Iraqis, compares in its scale to the worst excesses of the Saddam era. I acknowledge I have a responsibility to them" (*The Rope*, 301). Yet, he refuses to apologize for advocating human rights and for opposing a tyrant. From the Iraqi point of view (though not the American), he believes that fighting to overthrow Saddam can still be justified. That assertion is sure to draw criticism in some quarters and will certainly be debated for some time. What should not be debated, however, is that if Iraq is to have a future worth describing, it will be because Iraqis have heeded Makiya's warnings to reject the cult of victimhood. Instead, they need to embrace the morally unsatisfying truth that almost everyone who has been involved politically in the country over the past half century has been both oppressor and victim. Only by rejecting the politics of good and evil, victim and oppressor, can Iraqis and Iraq emerge from the ashes of their history.

***The Rope: A Novel*, *Republic of Fear*, & *Cruelty and Silence* are all available for purchase on Amazon.**

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