

## Halabja: the politics of memory

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of horrifying events that are known to few, denied by some, and exploited for political gain by others. Twenty years ago, on 16 March 1988 [1], Iraqi bombers dropped chemical agents on the town of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan, killing several thousand civilians. The attack laid the precedent for the tactical use of poison-gas against the Kurdish countryside on the first day of every stage of a five-month counter-insurgency campaign that followed shortly afterwards (this was codenamed *Anfal*, an Arabic word meaning "spoils of war"). These chemicals killed a few hundred and achieved the intended effect of flushing terrified villagers into the arms of Iraqi armed forces, who transported them to transit centres, sorted them by age and sex, and carted off tens of thousands to execution sites in the country's western deserts, far from Kurdistan, where they have laid buried underneath a thin layer of sand until this day.

16 March is also the second anniversary of the destruction [4] of the Halabja monument by the townspeople themselves, many of them surviving relatives. They were enraged by the habit of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG [5]; controlled, in that part of Kurdistan, by Jalal Talabani's [6] Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) to shepherd foreign dignitaries on a tour of the town's mass graves and memorials, while doing little to rehabilitate the town itself and its people, many of whom complain of debilitating delayed effects of mustard-gas.

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To Kurds - especially to those who experienced them and lost relatives - these events remain painfully alive [7]. Very few families were unaffected, and in Germian, the hilly hinterland of oil-rich Kirkuk, entire families were wiped out as part of Saddam Hussein's Arabisation campaign. The Kurds' drive for greater autonomy today, and independence down the line when circumstances permit, predates Halabja and the *Anfal* [8], but these twin events gave the quest a renewed urgency: the Kurds simply cannot trust a central Iraqi government not to resort to similar tactics in the future. But they find themselves hemmed in by neighbours - Turkey, Iran and Syria - that are hostile to their ambitions [8] and have the power to curb these; the recent Turkish incursion into northern Iraq is only the latest such message being conveyed (see Hasan Turunc, "Turkey and the Kurds: the politics of military action [8]", 27 February 2008).

The United States has played a controversial role [9], having supported Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, then placing sanctions on Iraq that targeted the people rather than the regime, subsequently removing the regime but failing to stabilise the country, and establishing a tribunal whose structure it dictated and whose mandate it restricted, lest embarrassing information be displayed about its past policies. It should be no surprise that whatever goodwill the US may have incurred by removing the regime, it has earned little trust from people who have learned to live with a superpower's serial [9] betrayals, the Kurds [10] included.

## The facts established

The facts of what happened are important. In 1988, the Iran-Iraq war [11] was lurching toward an end after eight bloody years, but on 14 March, a combined force of Iranian *Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards) and Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* [12] made a surprise foray into Iraqi Kurdistan. Crossing the border, they swooped down on the entire district of Halabja, which incorporates several sub-districts, such as Khurmal, as well as resettlement camps for villagers displaced in the village-destruction campaign, which had escalated a year earlier with the appointment of Ali Hassan al-Majid [13], Saddam Hussein's cousin, as the overlord of Iraqi Kurdistan. Militarily, the Iranian/Kurdish advance completely routed the Iraqis. Many troops drowned in Darbandikhan lake; others managed to flee; thousands were captured. The Kurdish rebel parties took control of Halabja and Khurmal, while Iranian forces seized Iraqi defences on surrounding hilltops.

On 15 March, Halabja was fully in the *peshmergas'* hands. Residents later recounted that, while elated at being free from Iraqi oppression, they also had a sense of foreboding. They were intimately familiar with the regime's brutal ways: a year earlier, Iraqi security forces had razed one of Halabja's neighbourhoods following street protests over the village-destruction campaign.

In the afternoon of 16 March, the Iraqi air force launched a massive chemical strike [14] against Halabja and Khurmal. Although no accurate body count exists (survivors assisted by *peshmerga* and their Iranian allies hastily buried the dead in makeshift mass graves), it is generally reported that 5,000 perished, mostly from nerve-gas, the vast majority civilians. Many others were injured, primarily by mustard-gas; they were evacuated to hospitals in Iran. The *Pasdaran* and *peshmerga* forces were equipped against chemical attacks and therefore suffered only minor losses.

The blow at Halabja proved devastating to Kurdish morale. The Kurdish insurgency crumbled overnight, and by 19 March the regime was able to declare, in banner headlines, the collapse of the PUK's headquarters in Jafati valley, northeast of Sulaimaniya. News of the Halabja chemical strike spread like wildfire throughout Kurdistan, and the regime capitalised on this by launching a methodical military campaign to dislodge not only the *peshmergas* from the countryside, but its civilian population as well, to never again have to deal with a rural-based insurgency.

## The event manipulated

Until today, the *Anfal* campaign and Halabja gas-attack remain shrouded in ignorance outside Kurdistan (see Human Rights Watch, "Genocide in Iraq: the Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds

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[15]", July 1993). The region was closed off to the world for so long and its infrastructure has been so uninviting to foreign visitors that few have made the trek to share with the Kurds their memories of suffering. The Kurds, moreover, have been victims of their wartime alliance with Iran, whose revolutionary Islamic regime has been ostracised ever since the fall of the Shah in the late 1970s. Iraqi propaganda, backed by its ally the United States, either denied what happened, played down the significance of these events, or distorted them beyond recognition.

Within a week of the attack, the United States department of state, basing itself on information provided by the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA [16]), claimed that Iran had also used poison gas in Halabja. This information created enough confusion that the United Nations Security Council delayed a resolution for two months and then condemned both sides for using chemical weapons. The DIA's account was augmented two years later by a former CIA analyst, Stephen Pelletiere, who suggested, using the same DIA data, that the majority of Halabja casualties had been victims of Iran's use of gas. Pelletiere has repeated his claim on numerous occasions, but has never presented any evidence in addition to the vague speculations made by the DIA at the time (see Stephen C Pelletiere, "A War Crime or an Act of War? [17]", *New York Times*, 31 January 2003).

This obfuscation has made it particularly difficult for the Kurds to find international recognition for the tragedies of the *Anfal* and Halabja. In Iraq itself, many dismiss Kurdish claims as fantasies, while others cast these events as a justified payback for the Kurdish insurgency ("the Kurds had it coming to them"). The trial of Ali Hassan al-Majid and several senior military commanders for crimes committed during the *Anfal* campaign (resulting in the conviction [18] of al-Majid and two colleagues in June 2007) was a step toward fuller recognition of what took place; but controversies over the tribunal's establishment, mandate and procedures have undermined its credibility and thereby also the credibility of the evidence presented. A future trial covering Halabja will suffer from the same deficiencies; moreover, the main culprits, Saddam Hussein [18] and Ali Hassan al-Majid (now appropriately known as "Chemical Ali") will be long gone [19].

## **The past appropriated**

In January 2008, the Kurdistan Regional Government organised its first major event [20] commemorating the *Anfal* and Halabja. Both events are inextricably linked, the chemical attack serving as a powerful demonstration effect in suppressing the Kurdish insurgency. Further commemorative and forward-looking [21] events are planned. These are welcome, as knowledge and broad acknowledgment of these atrocities is long overdue. (The *Anfal* was ruled to constitute genocide by a Dutch court that in 2005 convicted a businessman [22] who had provided the Iraqi regime with the chemical precursors it needed to manufacture lethal agents).

For the KRG, commemorating the *Anfal*//Halabja serves a political agenda in support of greater Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. For the many survivors, though, the question is whether they will see any benefit from greater publicity concerning these ghastly events, about which they had no foreknowledge, over which they exercised no control, and in the aftermath of which they have been neglected, except as passive victims displayed on stage at political occasions.

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[2] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1371&l=1>

[3] <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521876865>

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/international/middleeast/17kurds.html>

- [5] [http://www.krg.org/articles/kurdistan\\_regional\\_government\\_en.html](http://www.krg.org/articles/kurdistan_regional_government_en.html)
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- [12] <http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses/available/etd-11142005-144616/>
- [13] <http://hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/APPENDIXA.htm>
- [14] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/chemical\\_warfare\\_iraq\\_iraq\\_war.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/chemical_warfare_iraq_iraq_war.php)
- [15] <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11654/hrw.html>
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