



# The 1988 Anfal Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan

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During six months in 1988, tens of thousands of Kurds, the vast majority civilians, died during an Iraqi counter-insurgency campaign code-named the Anfal operation (*amaliyet al-Anfal*). Precise numbers of the dead are not available. Human Rights Watch, which has carried out the only comprehensive investigation, roughly estimates casualties to have been somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 (Human Rights Watch, 1995: xvii).

The Anfal campaign was the culmination of long-standing efforts by the Ba'ath regime to put an end to Kurdish aspirations toward greater autonomy and independence. It came toward the tail end of the Iran-Iraq war, a bloody eight-year conflict (1980-1988) that allowed Kurdish rebels to step into a security vacuum in the north to press for advantage. Anfal was the regime's revenge for what it perceived as unforgivable treason, as well as its way of settling the Kurdish national question definitively within the boundaries of the Iraqi state.

A mere four years later, the traumas of the Anfal campaign and the chemical attack on the town of Halabja, in March 1988, became the foundation for a resurgent nationalism in the quasi-independent Kurdish region that emerged under the tutelage of the United States and its Gulf War allies.

## A. Context

The Kurdish national movement arose, along with the modern state of Iraq, from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Post-World War I manoeuvring by the victorious powers, England and France, brought new states with new borders, as well as stateless people living across newly drawn international frontiers. The Kurds were the largest such non-state nation, inhabiting a vast territory that comprised significant parts of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Feeling cheated out of independence by the post-war powers, the Kurds fought for greater freedoms in each of these countries during the twentieth century. In doing so, they repeatedly forged tactical deals with central governments under whose repressive yoke they laboured, governments of neighbouring states, and Kurdish movements in adjacent parts of Kurdistan with whom they shared language and culture, but each of which had its own battles to fight with its central authorities. From the Kurds' perspective, their modern history is a litany of promises made and then betrayed, agreements sealed only to be undone, and long periods of relative peace punctured by insurgencies, massacres, village destruction, and, in most cases, utter defeat.

The history of the Kurdish movement in Iraq has hardly been different. It started in the early 1920s with the unsuccessful rebellions of Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji, who titled himself King of Kurdistan; his movement was suppressed only once the British mandatory authorities brought in the RAF to bomb the wayward Kurds (Yildiz, 2004: 13). In the 1940s, a young Kurdish leader emerged who fought the monarchy from his base in Barzan and then Suleimaniyeh: Mullah Mustafa Barzani, considered the father of the modern Kurdish national movement in Iraq. Forced into exile in Iran in 1945, he helped establish the ill-fated, short-lived Mahabad Republic there the next year. While in Iran, Barzani founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which promptly split into an Iraqi and an Iranian wing (Yildiz, 2004: 16). Barzani was unable to return to Iraq until after the collapse of the monarchy in 1958; in 1961, he re-launched the national movement in Kurdistan.

The origins of the Kurds' ultimately successful experiment in nation-building lie in the KDP's growth in the vacuum of post-monarchy Iraq, when successive short-lived republican governments were in no position to impose their will on the rebellious Kurds, even if they tried (through army raids and bombardments of villages). The Ba'ath regime that came to power through a coup in 1968 was so weak that it soon pursued a settlement with Barzani, drafting an autonomy agreement that, on paper, devolved significant authority to a

regional government in Erbil. The key sticking point then, as in later negotiations, was the status of Kirkuk, an oil-rich region claimed by both the Kurds and Iraq's Arab regimes (Yildiz, 2004: 18-19). In 1974, it led to the agreement's collapse and to a Kurdish revolt that was crushed once the Kurds' principal ally, the Shah of Iran, withdrew his military and logistical support after making a separate deal with the Ba'ath regime. The KDP was defeated, its fighters dispersed, its people relocated to camps in southern Iraq, and its leadership forced to rebuild the movement from exile in Iran (Yildiz, 2004: 23-24).

In 1975, the KDP split, with younger cadres, led by Jalal Talabani, challenging Mullah Mustafa's leadership of the national movement and establishing the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This development did not only represent a generational but also a cultural and linguistic struggle. From its founding, the PUK predominated in Suran, the southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan centred around the city of Suleimaniyeh, where the Surani dialect is spoken. The KDP's base, however, remained in Kurmanji-speaking Badinan, especially around the village of Barzan, the home of its founder and the son who succeeded him, Masoud Barzani. Since its inception, the KDP has remained essentially a family affair, even if it has drawn in tribal leaders, professionals and intellectuals from Dohuk and Erbil. The PUK, by contrast, has had a broader, more urban, base, although Talabani's leadership has been largely undisputed.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, a war by choice, revived the fortunes of these two parties, allowing them to bounce back from defeat. For eight difficult years, the Iraqi regime was preoccupied with fighting the war and, after its forces were expelled from Iranian soil in 1982, defending its territory from a series of withering Iranian onslaughts. It sought to keep things under control in Kurdistan by buying off tribal leaders, whom they referred to as Councillors (*Mustasharin*), and charging them with policing the countryside. It succeeded only in the lowlands; the more mountainous terrain became the domain of the *peshmerga* (those who face death), the Kurdish fighters deployed by the two main parties and a host of smaller ones, the Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP), the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP), the Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party (KPDP), the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), and others. Following a joint KDP-Iranian operation against Iraqi forces at Haj Omran in July 1983, the regime retaliated by detaining some 8,000 Barzani men and killing them (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 26-27). During the fighting at Haj Omran, the regime also used chemical weapons for the first time in its war with both Iran and the Kurdish insurgents (Hiltermann, 2004: 153).

As the war wore on, the *peshmergas* were able to extend their control throughout rural Kurdistan, especially after nightfall, while underground operatives recruited cadres in the towns. By 1987, the regime's writ in Kurdistan existed in name only, with government personnel and security forces hunkered down in fortified compounds and military bases, and the *Mustashars*' irregular *Fursan* (knights, derisively called *jahsh*, donkey foal, by the Kurds) manning checkpoints on key arteries but, perhaps as often as not, closing their eyes to insurgent activity. In that year, the Kurdish parties established a coalition, the Kurdistan Front, and openly declared their alliance with Iran in the war (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 30-33).

To the Iraqi regime, an Iranian victory in the war presented an existential threat. It therefore saw the Kurds' growing insurgency as capital treason and Kurdistan as the Achilles' heel of its military defences. By 1987, the Iranians started to show signs of fatigue and the United States began to throw its support more fully behind the Iraqi war effort. This was so especially after the 1986 Iran-Contra debacle, which exposed Washington's double-dealing and led to the defeat of those within the Reagan administration who had been leaning toward Iran more than Iraq. The U.S. sale of cutting-edge weaponry to Iran, even as it was providing military and financial support to Iraq, had enabled the Khomeini regime to remain standing in the face of Iraq's superior military.

Sensing the international environment changing in its favour, the regime decided to squelch the Kurdish insurgency. To this end, the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, appointed his cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, to become the overlord of the North, giving him broad powers to deploy the security apparatus against the

rebellious Kurds. Al-Majid lost no time in carrying out his task. Within three weeks of his appointment, he ordered the use of poison gas. Effective in breaking up the Iranians' human wave assaults and undermining the troops' morale on the southern front, chemical weapons in Kurdistan instead served to smoke out Kurdish guerrillas from their bases in the countryside. Unsurprisingly, Kurdish civilians bore the brunt of these attacks (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 39-49).

The second prong of al-Majid's strategy was to make the countryside inhospitable to the insurgents by razing the villages they relied on for food and shelter. By the summer of 1987, his forces had succeeded in destroying all villages they were capable of reaching, namely those situated in the lowlands, along major roads and around towns under regime control. But they could not yet reach villages in the higher valleys. These areas were declared prohibited and became virtual free-fire zones. An embargo on traffic to and from these areas was designed to starve the countryside and induce villagers to leave. Air attacks were almost daily, but these failed in dislodging the guerrillas or displacing villagers, who became accustomed to staying away from their homes, working the lands by day and sleeping in caves at night (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 49-51; Hiltermann, 2007: 81-103).

In October 1987, the decennial Iraqi census took place. In Kurdistan the regime gave it an important secondary purpose. In radio broadcasts and word-to-mouth, it informed Kurds that those who failed to participate in the census would cease to be considered Iraqis, and would instead be treated as saboteurs, the code word for the guerrillas. The only way for those still living in the prohibited areas to participate in the census was to register themselves in *mujamma'at* (complexes), vast displaced-people camps, or collective towns, that accommodated those removed from their villages during earlier destruction campaigns. Few rural Kurds heeded this warning, preferring to stay in their ancestral homes (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 56-60).

As the year 1988 approached, the regime began preparations to deal death blows to its Iranian adversary as well as Kurdish insurgents, sensing war weariness on the part of the Iranians and deeming conditions increasingly advantageous, now that the U.S. had started sharing satellite imagery of Iranian troop formations (Hiltermann, 2007: 43, 79, 238-39).

## B. Perpetrators

Iraqi secret police and military intelligence documents show that Anfal was a large-scale and carefully coordinated military campaign, directed from up high, that involved a range of actors:

- The air force, whose planes carried out the chemical strikes that served to flush out the rural Kurds.
- The Kurdish Fursan/jahsh brigades headed by the Mustashars, who went into the countryside spreading news of false amnesties and seeking to persuade villagers (some of whom were their own relatives) to surrender to Iraqi forces, saying no harm would be done to them.
- The Iraqi army, guided by Military Intelligence (*al-Istikhbarat al-Askariyeh*), which pummelled the prohibited areas with mortar and artillery fire (including chemical shells), then rounded up the fleeing villagers and drove them to the transit camp at Topzawa. The regime deployed its First Corps (Kirkuk HQ) and Fifth Corps (Erbil HQ), as well as Republican Guard units (in Anfal I), the Kirkuk-based Oil Protection Forces (at least in Anfal III), and an assortment of Special Forces (*Quwwat Khaaseh*), commando units (*Maghawir*) and Emergency Forces (*Quwwat Taware'*).
- The Public Security Directorate (*Mudiriyyat al-Amn al-Aameh*), which supervised the detention process and made lists containing the detainees' basic information: name, place and date of birth, place of residence, gender, military service (deserter, draft dodger), and whether the person had carried (and surrendered with) a gun.

At the head of it all stood Ali Hassan al-Majid, whose orders bearing his signature survive to detail his role, along with audio recordings of speeches to the party faithful. Exhibiting a strong anti-Kurdish animus, he railed against the saboteurs and those who consorted with them the guerrillas relatives, but gradually all those who chose to remain in the prohibited areas (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 253-258). In two key orders in June 1987 he outlined what should be done with them. Order #4008 of 20 June is particularly specific: Carry out special (i.e., chemical) strikes against the prohibited areas and detain everyone found there, sorting those aged 15-70 from the rest and, after extracting from them the necessary information, killing them (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 52-56).

The Anfal campaign began when the Iraqi army, assisted by the air force, launched a large-scale military operation in Kurdistan at the first melting of the winter snows, in the early hours of 23 February 1988. Firing chemical rounds and dropping chemical bombs, these forces targeted the headquarters of the PUK in Jafati, a high valley behind Piramagroun mountain northeast of Suleimaniyeh. However, in the year that had passed since the arrival of Ali Hassan al-Majid, the peshmergas had learned to cope with chemical attacks, moving to higher ground and building fires; moreover, they had started receiving gas masks and ampules with atropine, an antidote to nerve gas, from their Iranian allies. Thus the assault continued for three weeks without notable success (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 63-68).

Yet the pressure was such that the Kurdish parties started looking for a way to diffuse it. They found a ready partner in the Iranians, who themselves were expecting to come under sustained attack on the southern front, especially in Iraq's Faw peninsula which they had occupied for two years, and were also looking for a diversionary tactic to draw away Iraqi troops. Together they decided to open a new front at Halabja, a town at almost two hours driving south of Suleimaniyeh near the Iranian border, from which it is shielded by high mountains (Hiltermann, 2007: 105-11).

## C. Victims

On 14 March, a combined force of Iranian Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and Kurdish peshmergas crossed the border into Iraq, swooping down on the entire *qadha* (district) of Halabja, which incorporates several *nahyas* (sub-districts) such as Khurmali, as well as mujamma at, and borders the Sirwan (or Darbandikhan) lake. Militarily, the advance was a complete rout for the Iraqis. Many troops drowned in the lake, others managed to flee the area; thousands were captured. The Kurdish parties took control of the towns of Halabja and Khurmali, while the Iranians seized the Iraqi defences on the surrounding hilltops. On the 15th, Halabja was fully in the peshmergas hands (Hiltermann, 2007: 112-20). Residents later recounted that, while elated at being free from Iraqi oppression, they also had a sense of foreboding, having intimate knowledge of the regime and its brutal ways: A year earlier, Iraqi security forces had razed one of Halabja's neighbourhoods following street protests over the village destruction campaign (Hiltermann, 2007: 120-21).

In the afternoon of the 16th, the Iraqi air force launched a massive chemical strike against the area of Halabja and Khurmali. Although no accurate body count exists (survivors assisted by peshmergas 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. The Pasdaran and peshmerga forces were equipped against chemical attacks and therefore suffered only minor losses (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 68-72; Hiltermann, 2007: 1-4, 121-22).

The blow at Halabja proved devastating to Kurdish morale. Tellingly, the PUK's resistance in Jafati crumbled instantly, and by 19 March the regime was able to declare, in banner headlines, an end to the heroic Anfal operation with the collapse of the PUK's headquarters, the head of the snake. Iranian forces

would continue to occupy the Halabja area until July (when a cease-fire ended the war), but surviving Kurdish civilians there and in Jafati valley immediately tried to make their way across the Iranian border to safety; many died from exposure (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 72-74; Hiltermann, 2007: 129).

With Kurdish resolve broken by the chemical strike at Halabja, news of which spread like wildfire throughout Kurdistan, the regime launched 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 rurally-based insurgency.

The second Anfal operation, from 22 March till 1 April, targeted Qaradagh, a mountainous region south of Suleimaniyeh; fleeing Kurds either went eastward toward Iran, and survived, or westward straight into the area that was targeted next. Anfals III and IV (7-20 April and 3-8 May) covered the region called Germian ( warm lands ) by the Kurds; this is the hilly terrain between the Diyala river in the south and the Lesser Zab in the north, whose economic centre is Kirkuk. The purpose of Anfals V, VI and VII (overlapping operations lasting from 15 May till 26 August) was to fight PUK peshmergas in the mountain valleys of Smaquli, Balisan and Malakan northeast of Erbil. And the so-called Final Anfal dealt with the Badinan region controlled by the KDP; it began with a chemical bombardment of villages in the Khabur River valley and along the Gara and Mattin mountain ranges on 25 August and concluded within days, a complete triumph. The entire campaign was declared over with the announcement of a general amnesty "for all Iraqi Kurds" on 6 September.

The Anfal campaign's principal tactic was a targeted chemical strike on the first day of each of the seven stages of Anfal that followed the PUK's collapse at Jafati. This had the intended effect of flushing terrified Kurds out of their villages and driving them into the arms of infantry troops and their allies, the Kurdish Fursan/jahsh fighters. The victims were herded to collection points and driven by truck to collection points and on to a Popular Army base west of Kirkuk, called Topzawa, the main sorting centre (Hiltermann, 2007: 129-35).

Ali Hassan al-Majid's twin orders of June 1987 did not make clear how the killings he authorised should be carried out, or whether there were exceptions to the rule. Although the regime kept detention records, not all of these have been found. Precise numbers of those killed must therefore, for now, remain a mystery, although it is possible to make an educated guess. Early on, the PUK claimed 182,000 dead, a total that has assumed a mythical status in Kurdistan but was based on an extrapolation of assumed average village size in 1988 and had no empirical relation to actual disappearances or killings. Human Rights Watch, relying on a careful but incomplete survey conducted by a Kurdish human rights organisation in Suleimaniyeh, the Committee for the Defence of Anfal Victims' Rights, proposed a death toll of at least fifty thousand and possibly as many as a hundred thousand persons (Human Rights Watch, 1995: xvii). Tellingly, Ali Hassan al-Majid himself, during negotiations following the Kurdish uprising in 1991, reportedly exclaimed in reference to the number of Anfal victims claimed by the PUK: "It couldn't have been more than 100,000!" (Randal, 1997: 214).

Even the number 100,000 likely overstates the facts, however difficult this may be for many Kurds to accept. The Committee for the Defence of Anfal Victims' Rights, which carried out a systematic survey in the areas under Kurdish control in 1992-1995, only documented 63,000 disappeared (*mafqudin*), although this excluded the area of Anfal VIII (estimated at another 7 or 8 thousand). Moreover, areas under Iraqi regime control, mostly in Kirkuk (Ta'mim) governorate, could not be reached, but most families there had relatives in the resettlement camps in areas under Kurdish control, so this exclusion may not yield a dramatic difference in overall numbers. Significant is that there is reportedly only one person who was detained and disappeared from the area of Anfal I (a person with mental problems who stayed behind when other villagers fled to Iran), and no more than 2,000 from the areas of Anfal IV-VII. The bulk of the disappearances were from the area of Anfal III and those families who fled the area of Anfal II into the

area of Anfal III just as the attack was starting there (Abd-al-Rahman, 1995). The Committee's estimate of maximum 70,000 dead, published in Kurdistan in 1995, was highly controversial, and its director was forced to leave the country (Hiltermann, 2007: 134-35).

Anfal counted many survivors, namely those who were detained until the amnesty and were then moved into resettlement camps (which in some cases constituted barren land lacking facilities for the first couple of years). But many never returned from detention, and their story has been told only by a handful of survivors from the killing grounds and, after April 2003, the discovery of mass graves in areas of western Iraq that remained under the regime's control after the 1991 Gulf war and uprisings. The survivors' stories tell us the fate of the disappeared as well as the perverse logic that underlay Anfal.

First of all, it is important to understand that only rural Kurds were affected by Anfal, specifically those who were still living in the prohibited areas after the 1987 census, and not, for example, de-ruralised villagers living in the mujamma at or the (urban) survivors of the Halabja attack. Secondly, the sorting process in Topzawa (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 141-146) suggested a pattern of killings consistent with the regime's objective of Arabising Kirkuk. In Topzawa, boys and men roughly between the ages of 15 and 60 were separated from their families and hauled off to execution sites in western Iraq, killed, and buried in mass graves. By contrast, older men and women were dispatched to Nugrat Salman, a notorious prison located in the desert west of Samawa in southern Iraq (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 155-159). Those who survived its extreme hardships (little food, no medical care, tough climate) were released in the September amnesty and sent to live in the mujamma at.

The fate of women and children depended on their place of residence. If they were from areas of Anfal II, V, VI, VII, they were sent to an army base in Dibs, north of Kirkuk, also to be released in the amnesty and relocated to camps. If they were from the area of Anfal VIII, they were detained in a prison camp at Salamiyeh, near Mosul; survivors were released in the amnesty. If, however, they were from Germian (Anfals III and IV), in most cases they were treated like the men and carted off to execution sites for mass killing. Those from the area of Anfal II who fled to Germian and were then scooped up during Anfal III also were sent to their deaths.

The only explanation for this pattern is Kirkuk. According to Wafiq al-Samarra i, who was deputy director of the Military Intelligence Directorate in 1988, the regime exterminated entire Kurdish families if they came from areas near Kirkuk. This was its way of reducing the region s Kurdish population: You can kill half a million Kurds in Erbil, but that won t do anything. It would still be Kurdish. But killing 50,000 Kurds in Kirkuk will finish the Kurdish cause forever. (Hiltermann, 2007: 133-34). This, in other words, was Arabisation taken to its logical extreme: the systematic killing of all Kurds living in the countryside of this oil-bearing region in order to make it *Koerden-rein* . Anfal, in other words, was a campaign to (1) incapacitate the Kurdish national movement by razing rural Kurdistan and killing all its actual or potential fighters, and (2) remove that movement s main prize, Kirkuk, by exterminating that particular region's Kurdish village population.

## D. Memories

Future generations may well conclude that from the depths of tragedy a new Kurdish nation was born. Following Iraq s 1991 defeat in Kuwait, the defeated and demoralised Kurdish national movement gained a new lease on life. It has made every effort since then to parlay the monstrous history of Halabja and Anfal into the foundations for its claim to independence from an Iraq that, in their view, had disqualified itself by its extreme cruelty from ruling this non-Arab population. With the support of the international community, the Kurds set about rebuilding their villages, and in May 1992 they held elections that yielded a

government in which the PUK and KDP agreed to a 50-50 power-sharing arrangement, allocating ministerial posts accordingly. Their effort at nation building was complicated, however, by an internecine KDP-PUK war that raged from 1994 until a Washington-brokered cease-fire in 1998. Although the two parties have continued to view each other with mistrust, their respective leaderships became convinced of the need to forge a common front against the regime in preparation for its collapse.

The regime's removal in 2003 brought new power to the Kurds and precipitated a vision of cohabitation with Arab Iraq as a transitional phase before formal secession, a development that Kurdish leaders acknowledge only a future changed regional environment will enable. Through Kurdish weight in drafting the new Iraqi constitution, Halabja and Anfal took pride of place in the lexicon of the ousted regime's outrages enumerated in its preamble, which refers to the massacres of Halabja, Barzan, Anfal and the Fayli Kurds. These massacres, Kurds contend, were committed because of their tenacious quest for nationhood and Kirkuk. Without oil-rich Kirkuk, its presumptive capital, the new nation would lack the resources it needs to survive (International Crisis Group, 2004).

To commemorate these events, the Kurds have built, inter alia, a torture museum in the old security police headquarters in Suleimaniyeh, as well two memorials in Halabja to the victims of the gas attack: one outside Halabja on the road to the Anab resettlement camp, where many Halabjans found their deaths, the other at the entrance to Halabja from Suleimaniyeh, which also houses a small museum. The latter memorial was inaugurated in September 2003 by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, accompanied by Paul Bremer, the American viceroy in Iraq, and the two Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani. Visitors receive background materials, including booklets, posters and postcards with photos of the attack and its victims, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. At a yearly commemoration on 16 March, Kurdish dignitaries, townspeople and visitors including sometimes foreign delegations have paid homage to the dead and reinforced the claim to an independent Kurdistan. The reburial of bodies found in local mass graves, many of which have yet to be unearthed, has provided a symbolic occasion to remind the world of the atrocities it allowed to take place.

Yet, the Anfal campaign and Halabja gas attack remain shrouded in ignorance outside Kurdistan. The region was closed off to the world for so long and the infrastructure has been so uninviting of foreign visitors that few have made the trek to share with the Kurds their memories of suffering. The Kurds, moreover, have been the victim of their war-time alliance with Iran, which has been in the international doghouse ever since the fall of the Shah in the late 1970s. Iraqi propaganda, backed by its ally the United States, either denied Anfal and Halabja, played down their significance, or distorted it beyond recognition. Relying on the fog-of-war argument, Iraq was largely successful in doing so (Hiltermann, 2004). The canard that Iran shared responsibility in the chemical attack on Halabja and possibly caused most of its fatalities (Pelletiere, 1992) is but one example of this.

This has made it particularly difficult for the Kurds to find international recognition for the tragedies of Anfal and Halabja. Until this day, for example, Arab and Turkoman community leaders in Kirkuk contend that at most 60,000 Kurds were displaced during Arabisation, and some claim that no more than 15,000 Kurds were displaced. They can do so because they arbitrarily confine the Arabisation policy to the town of Kirkuk during the 1990s and thereby conveniently elide the earlier destruction of the Kurdish countryside of Germian (International Crisis Group, 2005). Likewise, whereas Anfal was publicly known as a counter-insurgency campaign at the time, its true nature remained concealed to all but those who had intimate involvement in its execution. It can only be hoped that full accountability for these crimes, through a public judicial process in which all the evidence is laid out and scrutinised, will convince the nay-sayers, while providing compensation and a measure of closure to the survivors.

Efforts to play up the past through annual commemorations (Anfal, for example, is remembered throughout Kurdistan on April 14 each year) were complicated in 2006 when, on March 16, events in Halabja took a

different turn. For some time, townspeople, headed by university students, has complained about the regional government's exploitation of the gas attack. Rather than investing in the town, they said, the PUK was keeping the funds it collected from foreign sources for itself. Each year they witnessed visits of foreign dignitaries, who were whisked from memorial to memorial but were carefully shielded from the town itself, its hospitals or its people. They pressed for material assistance, even meeting the PUK's prime minister, Omar Fattah, in the days before the commemoration.

Unpersuaded by the PUK's pleas to desist, Halabjans staged a demonstration in the centre of town on March 16 in which they raised their grievances. Provocation by armed PUK guards created anger, as did the detention of several of the demonstrators. Things then got rapidly out of hand, with demonstrators converging on the memorial at the town's entrance. Throwing rocks at the PUK guards who had found refuge there, they were met with bullets. At that point, the crowd surged forward and put the monument to the torch, utterly destroying it. Deeply embarrassed, the PUK ordered an investigation while pointing an accusing finger at Iran, which in the past had not shrunk back from sending warning signals to the Kurds' secular leadership via the Islamist parties that are particularly strong in Halabja (Hiltermann, 2006). Whatever the original impetus to the memorial's destruction or the demonstrations leading up to it, few doubt that the annual commemoration will forever have lost its lustre.

## E. Refugees

Those who managed to flee from Iraq's advancing army to Iran or Turkey were allowed to return during a one-month period following the announcement of the amnesty ending Anfal on 6 September 1988. Anyone who returned (or was caught) after that month was again subject to arrest and execution under Order #4008. Returnees were herded into resettlement camps after their information was taken. In a cruel twist, non-Kurds who had lived in the Kurdish countryside and had fled along with the Kurds were apparently excluded from the Anfal amnesty. Upon their return to Iraq, several hundred members of these minority groups – Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrians, mostly – were detained and disappeared (HRW, 1995: chapter 11).

Some Kurds chose not to return. They remained in camps in Turkey and Iran until the 1991 uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan that followed the Gulf war, when they were joined by a new wave of fleeing Kurds (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1992). During the next few years, however, as Iraqi forces withdrew from the greater part of Kurdistan and the area was stabilised, most refugees went back, joining the ranks of the internally displaced. This was especially true if their former homes lay in areas under regime control, for example Kirkuk.

In 2005, many survivors of Anfal remained displaced, living in mujamma at, where at least they had access, however minimal, to education and health care, and perhaps the possibility of work in a nearby town. Some began to return to their villages after the international community funded the reconstruction of the countryside in the 1990s, but just as likely they became part-time villagers, working their lands during the planting and harvesting seasons, but keeping a home in the mujamma as an insurance policy against an uncertain future. Those displaced from Kirkuk did not receive an opportunity to return to their original homes until after the regime's removal in April 2003; the Kurdish parties then sponsored a rapid rehabilitation of Germian, mostly to strengthen the Kurdish claim to Kirkuk (HRW, 2004a). Despite these hopeful developments, the widespread poverty among Anfal families, the *Anfalakan*, many of whom lost their main breadwinners, is the untold story of the Anfal's long-term impact.

## F. Witnesses

The world gained a glimpse of the horrors transpiring in Kurdistan in the 1980s through information distributed by the Kurdish parties in European capitals at the time, but this was either ignored (Meiselas, 1997: 312) or dismissed as partisan propaganda during a war in which the Kurds had chosen the side of Iran, the enemy of the West. Verification of the Kurds' allegations was particularly difficult because of the closed nature of Iraqi and Iranian societies, their regimes' repressive character, and war-time conditions. The United Nations sent teams of chemical weapons experts to Iran in 1984 and 1986, and to Iran and Iraq in 1987 and 1988 to investigate the alleged use of poison gas on the battlefield. In the final two years of the war, these experts reported that Kurdish civilians in Iran as well as Iraq had become victims, if not targets, of chemical warfare (United Nations, 1987 and 1988). Nevertheless, whenever the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution against gas warfare, it generically condemned "the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war", and invariably urged *both* countries, rather than Iraq alone, to refrain from such use (Hiltermann, 2004).

It was only in the wake of the Kuwait war and the Kurdish rising in the north that independent observers were able to freely visit Kurdistan and begin to establish the facts. The U.S.-based non-governmental organisation Human Rights Watch was among the first to send investigators (this author among them) to the region to gather evidence of the regime's crimes before, during and after the Anfal campaign. They gathered hundreds of testimonies from eyewitnesses, survivors, and even some of the perpetrators, for example mustashars, who tended to be less than candid about their own responsibility even as they described the role of some of their colleagues (Human Rights Watch, 1995). Physicians for Human Rights in Boston also sent a team, which collected soil samples at the village of Birjinni in Badinan, which upon analysis in the UK turned out to contain traces of the nerve gas sarin (PHR and HRW, 1993).

The PHR team, moreover, interviewed a Kurdish teenager, Taymour Abdullah, who was presented by the PUK as the only survivor of the Anfal execution grounds. The boy described in detail what had happened to him and his family: their detention near their village in Germian in April 1988, their transfer to Topzawa, their separation from his father, and their transfer to an area that appeared far from Kurdistan, where they were off-loaded at nightfall, pushed toward an open pit, and summarily shot by an execution squad. Taymour, injured but alive, used the cover of darkness to climb out of the mass grave and run into the desert. Here he was found by Bedouins who hid him in the nearby town of Samawa, cared for him and, after 1991, returned him to his surviving relatives in Kurdistan (Middle East Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1992: 23; and Makiya, 1992). Until this day, Taymour Abdullah is the only known child survivor (he was 12 at the time) of the Anfal campaign, and the only known eyewitness to the mass killing of women and children.

This author, however, working for Human Rights Watch in 1992-1993, was able to locate and interview six other survivors of the killing grounds, all adult males. They described a similar process: detention, transfer, separation, further transfer, arrival at killing grounds in Iraq's western desert at nightfall, and then mass execution, which they, miraculously, succeeded in surviving (HRW, 1995: chapter 9).

Other evidence exists in the form of documents. In two shipments, in May 1992 and August 1993, the PUK and KDP sent eighteen metric tons of Iraqi state documents they had captured during the March 1991 uprising to the United States for safekeeping and analysis. These included documents from the Public Security Directorate, Military Intelligence, the Ba'ath Party, and Ali Hassan al-Majid's office in Kirkuk. Human Rights Watch received exclusive access to these documents to search for evidence of human rights crimes, especially relating to the Anfal campaign. The documents supplied an extensive record of the machinations of an all-pervasive police state involved in an escalating counter-insurgency campaign against a relentless Kurdish rebellion (HRW, 1994).

After the regime's ouster in April 2003, the rest of Iraq became accessible to human rights investigators. Huge caches of documents were taken by various Iraqi parties and individuals, as well as the U.S. military.

Some are likely to be used for the trials that have started to take place, but concerns have arisen that key evidentiary materials may have been lost or tainted in the chaos that followed the regime's collapse (HRW, 2004b). Human Rights Watch also vigorously pursued the search for mass graves holding the regime's many victims, but found that many of these sites were not being secured properly (HRW, 2003 and 2004b). From 2004 on, U.S. government teams attached to the Iraqi special tribunal also undertook extensive efforts, deploying forensic experts in search of evidence for the trials of regime luminaries, including Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid, that began in October 2005 (Discovery Channel, 2005; Simons, 2006). In January 2006, the British journalist Gwynne Roberts, who has been making films about Iraqi Kurds since the 1980s, claimed to have found, west of Samawa near the Saudi border, some of the graves holding the Barzani men who were detained and disappeared in 1983.

## **G. Interpretation of Facts**

The difficulty of access to Kurdistan, at least until airports opened in Erbil and Suleimaniyeh and direct flights from Europe started in late 2005, has militated against the emergence of original scholarship on Anfal or most other aspects of Kurdish history, society and culture. Young Kurdish scholars trained at Western institutions did turn their sights on Anfal in 2005, but their efforts have yet to bear fruit. Until that time, there won't be real controversy about the facts as documented by Human Rights Watch, except for a basic dispute over whether the mass killings took place at all: Many Iraqi Arabs deny they occurred, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary which, however, has not been generally available; the Human Rights Watch report was translated into Arabic but has not been widely distributed.

In addition, a controversy has existed over responsibility for the chemical attack on Halabja. Human Rights Watch, citing eyewitnesses and Iraqi state documents, holds that the main attack was carried out by Iraqi fighter bombers on March 16, 1988. This account was disputed as early as 1990 by a former CIA analyst, Stephen Pelletiere, on the basis of findings by the U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency suggesting that Iran had also used gas in Halabja (Pelletiere, 1992: 136-137). Although Pelletiere has repeated his claim on numerous occasions subsequently (for example, Pelletiere, 2003), he has never presented any evidence in support. New research shows that Pelletiere's claim was based on information released by the Defense Intelligence Agency (the U.S. Pentagon's intelligence arm) in March 1988, citing evidence that, closer scrutiny revealed, could not possibly support the contention (Hiltermann, 2007: 183-205).

Questions may arise in the future over aspects of Human Rights Watch's work, including the total number of victims, the precise dates of Anfal's various stages, the number, nature (type of gas used) and locations of chemical strikes (referred to as "special" strikes by the regime), and the identity of the perpetrators of successive components of Anfal (chemical weapons use, capture, transfer, identification and execution). New research on Anfal will be very welcome, as gaps in our knowledge of Anfal doubtless exist. Iraqi state documents taken in April 2003 could contribute important new information, especially about the perpetrators, the operational detail of the counter-insurgency plan, and the explicit decision (presumably contained in orders signed by the senior leadership, beyond Order #2008) to execute those caught in the Anfal dragnet.

In the end, a fundamental question will have to be settled concerning the nature of Anfal: Was it, in addition to a counter-insurgency campaign, also genocide? Some legislative history exists now to help us answer that question.

Based on its findings, Human Rights Watch tried to attract state support for litigation at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, charging the Iraqi regime with having committed genocide against its rural Kurdish population. It failed to find such support, but was nonetheless able to convince the Legal Advisor's

office at the U.S. Department of State that the mass executions of Anfal satisfied the legal definition of genocide under the 1949 Genocide Convention, and that a case brought before the ICJ could be won. The State Department's assessment was contained in a memorandum sent by the Legal Advisor to then Secretary of State Warren Christopher (Hiltermann, 2000: 32-35).

Human Rights Watch argued that the Anfal killings presented a persuasive case of acts committed with the intent to destroy, in part, an ethnic group, namely rural Kurds, deducing the Iraqi regime's intent from the highly orchestrated nature of both the military campaign and the detention and execution process that followed it. The only aspect that Human Rights Watch failed to present (for lack of clear evidence) in the preparation for a trial that never took place was the explanation for the pattern of killings during Anfal. Evidence obtained only after the unsuccessful bid to bring a case before the ICJ suggested that the methodical killing of entire families from Germian had taken place precisely to Arabise and de-Kurdify the region around Kirkuk, and thus constituted the best example of a partial genocide available from the period of Anfal (Hiltermann, 2007: 133-34).

In the late 1990s, the British non-governmental organisation Indict began to create individual dossiers against leading members of the regime. It did not limit itself to Anfal, but included a range of human rights crimes committed during the regime's long reign. Yet, as long as the regime remained in power, little could be done to bring its leaders to justice. The organisation was disbanded in 2003 and its archive was transferred to U.S. authorities in Baghdad shortly thereafter.

In August 1999, Human Rights Watch and others tried to precipitate the arrest of Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, the regime's number two, when he travelled to Austria for medical care, but he was able to flee the country and return to Iraq.

In December 2005, a Dutch court, in convicting businessman Frans van Anraat on the accusation of having shipped chemical precursor agents to the Iraqi regime in the 1980s, ruled that the Anfal campaign met the definition of genocide, an important legal precedent that could have influenced the trial of Ali Hassan al-Majid and others for the crimes committed during Anfal but unfortunately was not (Rechtbank's-Gravenhage, 2006).

Finally, following the arrest of Saddam Hussein, Ali Hassan al-Majid, and other regime cronies following the regime's ouster in 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority that governed Iraq established the Iraqi special tribunal. The first trial concerned a massacre in the Shiite town of Dujeil in 1982, a crime for which Saddam Hussein was convicted in 2006. While he stood trial also for the subsequent case to be treated, concerning Anfal, he was executed for the Dujeil crime before the Anfal trial had been completed, in December 2006. However, Ali Hassan al-Majid and two others were convicted for genocide in the Anfal trial in 2007 and sentenced to die by hanging. By late 2007, the executions had yet to be carried out, delayed by the unwillingness of the Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani, and one of the two vice-presidents, Tareq al-Hashemi, to sign the execution orders. Talabani's refusal, apparently informed by his personal objection to the death penalty, was particularly telling. As a Kurd, and one of the principal Kurdish guerrilla leaders in the 1980s, he had been at the receiving end of the horrors the regime had visited on the Kurds.

## H. Bibliography

Very little has been written about Anfal. In English, the only comprehensive study remains the Human Rights Watch report published by Yale University Press in 1995. This book incorporates the earlier Human Rights Watch reports, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (1993) and *Bureaucracy*

*of Repression: The Iraqi Government in Its Own Words* (1994), though it reproduces only ten of the 38 Iraqi documents in Arabic and in English translation published in Bureaucracy.

An earlier analysis of village destruction was done by Shorsh Resool, called *The Destruction of a Nation*, released by the PUK in 1990; Resool worked in the media relations department of the PUK in northern Iraq in the late 1980s, and he later joined the Human Rights Watch team that analysed the Iraqi state documents (1992-1994). Resool has also written on Anfal and Halabja in Kurdish, as have two PUK commanders, Nowshirwan Mustafa Amin and Shawqat Haji Mushir. Amin's study is a history of the Kurdish national movement, including the period of Anfal and Halabja. Shawqat Haji Mushir was the PUK commander in charge during the Halabja operation; his book is an apologia that seeks to counter criticisms that by failing to anticipate the Iraqi reprisal he exposed Halabja's civilian population to grievous harm.

A number of visitors to Kurdistan have referred to Anfal in their writings. The best original, though fragmented, account can be found in Jonathan Randal's *After Such Knowledge*; other references to Anfal, for example by Kerim Yildiz or Mia Bloom (1996 and 1999), are mostly derivative. Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *A Problem from Hell* contains a highly detailed description of U.S. policymaking during the events in Kurdistan in 1988 and the origins of U.S. failure to act until after the Anfal campaign had already ended.

The following list is a mixed bag of scholarly, journalistic and autobiographical work, as well as reports from investigative missions and collections of newspaper clippings (prepared by the Kurdish Institute in Paris), covering issues ranging from Kurdish history in general to the Anfal campaign and the use of chemical weapons in particular, including the chemical bombardment of Halabja. It also includes a court ruling and a television documentary.

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