

The Anfal Campaign: A Politically Feasible Atrocity  
Vanessa Bernick

In the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, President George W. Bush gave numerous speeches emphasizing the depravity of Saddam Hussein. Perhaps Bush's most famous accusation was that Hussein was "willing to gas his own people" (George W. Bush, Press Conference). It appeared in numerous speeches, from the 2002 State of the Union to press conferences across the country. Around the same time, the U.S. State Department released a briefing entitled "Iraq: From Fear to Freedom". The 30-page report presented the case for attacking Iraq, going through Hussein's WMD and terrorist activities. The introduction focuses on the Anfal campaign, "an extermination campaign against the Kurds of Iraq, resulting in the deaths of at least 50,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 persons, many of them women and children" (From Fear to Freedom, 5). Indeed, the State Department report and President Bush's speeches were all accurate: the Anfal campaign was a concentrated effort on the part of Hussein and the Iraqi government to clear the Kurdish countryside using both conventional and chemical weapons. Between February 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 9<sup>th</sup> of 1988, anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000 Iraqi Kurds were murdered. Although many died from the chemical attacks Bush repeatedly mentioned, thousands more were executed and buried in mass graves across the country (Human Rights Watch 13).

The rhetoric surrounding Anfal in the early 2000's raises questions about the US response at the time of crisis. Despite the Bush administration's indignation, the United States did nothing to help the Kurds when Anfal was taking place. The US continued to support Saddam Hussein's government despite knowledge of the atrocities taking place in Kurdistan. The US political system began to act against Anfal only *after* the end of the Iran-Iraq war, when the campaign was basically complete. Thus in this paper I examine the question: Why did the

United States government fail to act to stop the Anfal campaign and what does its complicity tell us about humanitarianism and politics? First I look at the context surrounding the campaign, studying the history of the Kurds and Saddam Hussein. Then I look at US knowledge of the Anfal campaign, proving the United States government had sufficient information to prevent the atrocity. Finally I examine the US response post-Iran-Iraq war, analyzing the shift in political discourse. I argue that the main barrier preventing the US from responding to Anfal was the geopolitical situation surrounding the campaign. During the Iran-Iraq war Saddam Hussein was a US ally, and a critical barrier preventing Iranian hegemony in the Gulf region. The Kurds in Northern Iraq were insurgents who might facilitate an Iranian victory in the war. The combination of US bias against Iran and a desire to win over Iraqi leaders prevented any effective action against Anfal. The circumstances surrounding Anfal stopped US leaders from labeling it an “atrocity” or “genocide”—instead it was a counterinsurgency campaign.

The Kurds of Northern Iraq are no strangers to political persecution. Although the Kurds are an ethnic group with their own language and geographic area, their requests for an independent state have been constantly ignored. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kurdish lands were a part of the Persian and Ottoman empires. After the collapse of the Ottoman dynasty, the Kurds were promised a state in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. However the Kurds were only able to watch as the promise evaporated and their land was divided up among the Soviet Union, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey (Human Rights Watch 23-24). None of these states had any interest in recognizing a Kurdish minority. Even during the British occupation of Iraq from 1920-1936, only four Kurds held posts in the 57 cabinet positions. (Natali 36-37).

Iraqi Kurds fared little better after the rise of Abd Al-Karim Qasim in 1958. Although Qasim initially offered the Kurds regional autonomy in exchange for political support, it soon became clear

this was an empty pledge. The Kurds revolted again, and in 1961 Qasim responded by ordering the Iraqi Air Force to bomb Kurdish villages (Yildiz 7). This was the beginning of a trend for Kurdish politics—negotiations followed by a breakdown in talks and renewed insurgency. The pattern reached its peak with the rise of the Ba’ath party and Saddam Hussein.

Even before the Anfal Campaign, Saddam Hussein’s treatment of Iraq’s Kurdish minority was appalling. Much like Qasim, Hussein originally promised to fulfill many Kurdish demands: recognition of Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish participation in government, Kurdish language instruction in schools and the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Unfortunately, as the Ba’ath consolidated power the agreement fell apart, leaving the Kurds yet again a marginalized people largely ignored by the central government (Yildiz 17-21). Kurdish insurgencies rose up in response, and the Iraqi government responded with violent repression. After the armed rebellion was crushed in 1975, Hussein began a program of “Arabization” in the southern provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan (Human Rights Watch 35-36). In Saddam’s view, the concentration of Kurds in Kurdistan prevented their assimilation and gave them a legitimate claim to regional autonomy. Hussein’s first response was forced assimilation—throughout the 1970’s, hundreds of Kurdish villages were destroyed and their residents relocated. Arab tribes were enticed to move into Kurdistan with government benefits and the promise of housing (Human Rights Watch 36). An Iraqi official claimed that in 1975 alone around 50,000 Kurds were displaced, and the true figure is likely much higher (Human Rights Watch 36).

With the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, the Iraqi government committed a substantial portion of the military to the front. There was a significant decrease in troop presence in Kurdistan and a subsequent revival of Kurdish resistance (Human Rights Watch 39). In 1983, when Iraq was fairing poorly in the war, the regime began negotiations with certain Kurdish parties. For the

first time in a decade, it seemed like there might be hope for a peace agreement. However when Iraq's luck began to change in 1984, the negotiations stalled and finally fell apart in 1985 (Hiltermann 89-90).

At this point the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan degenerated into open conflict. The Iraqi army shelled Kurdistan constantly, making everyday life a game of life and death for its inhabitants. Helicopters would show up regularly to search for draft dodgers or arrest suspected *peshmerga*<sup>1</sup> (Human Rights Watch 47). Given these conditions, it is unsurprising that in October of 1986 the Kurdish *peshmerga* formed an alliance with the Iranian army. The situation in Kurdistan left the resistance forces with little choice. Kurdistan is landlocked: without outside support there is no way to move basic supplies or food into the country (Human Rights Watch 49).

To solidify the alliance, the Iranians asked the Kurds to help initiate a meaningful attack on the Iraqi army. The *peshmerga* proposed an assault on the oil fields at Kirkuk, one of the key disputed areas between the Ba'athists and the Kurds. The Iranians agreed and in the early hours of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1987, Kurdish and Iranian forces struck the Kirkuk oil installations. Although the attack did very little damage, it sent a clear message to Baghdad about the potential danger of a Kurdish/Iranian alliance (Hiltermann 91-92). Beyond the military loss, the offensive "was a deep blow to the nation's pride and this, added to a sense of betrayal, goes a long way in explaining the depth of anger that informed the [Iraqi] regime's response once it was capable of launching one" (Hiltermann 92).

In March of 1987 Saddam Hussein laid the groundwork for the campaign by appointing Ali Hassan Al-Majid administrator of Iraqi Kurdistan. Besides having a reputation as a particularly brutal individual, Al-Majid was Saddam Hussein's cousin and a ranking member of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kurdish resistance troops. *Pershmerga* means "those who face death" in Kurdish (Human Rights Watch, 26)

Ba'ath party. Al-Majid's appointment made the Kurdish issue "the concern of Iraq's innermost circle of power" (Human Rights Watch 52), and a focus of Hussein's regime.

When writing about the genocide in Rwanda, Philip Gourevitch explains that it was a "product of order, authoritarianism, decades of modern political theorizing and indoctrination, and one of the most meticulously administered states in history" (Gourevitch 95). The same statement was very much true for Iraq. The Iraqi regime kept incredibly meticulous records. From the "grandest decree to the most trivial matter, all the business of the security forces was recorded in letters and telegrams...even when the original command carried a high security classification, abundant numbers of handwritten or typed copies were later prepared" (Human Rights Watch 62). The only reason the extent of Anfal is known today is because during the failed March 1991 uprising<sup>2</sup> large quantities of Iraqi government records were seized by Kurdish rebels<sup>3</sup>. Using these documents, along with copious amounts of additional research and interviews, Human Rights Watch was able to create the definitive account of Anfal (and the operations surrounding it). Through this report, one gets a sense of the true scale and unbelievable brutality of the Anfal campaign.

Technically "Anfal" only refers to a series of eight military offensives conducted in six areas throughout Iraqi Kurdistan from February to September of 1988 (Human Rights Watch 51). However the true extent of the extermination campaign extends far beyond these specific assaults. Al-Masjid began his operation in April of 1987 (just one month after his appointment) with a process of "village collectivization" (Human Rights Watch 57). This first stage involved "the wholesale destruction of hundreds of Kurdish farming villages and the relocation of their

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<sup>2</sup> After the United States had defeated Iraq in Kuwait, thousands of Shia and Kurds rose up throughout Iraq, only to be crushed by the Revolutionary Guard.

<sup>3</sup> Today 18 metric tons of these documents are housed at the University of Colorado at Boulder. For more information see *The Iraqi Secret Police Files: A Documentary Record of the Anfal Genocide* by Bruce P. Montgomery

residents into *mujamm'at*<sup>4</sup> (Human Rights Watch 57). Areas of Kurdistan that weren't under Iraqi government control were "prohibited for security reasons" and villages within these regions were systematically destroyed (Human Rights Watch 58).

Around the same time, the Iraqi government had crossed the chemical weapons barrier in Kurdistan. In early April, the *peshmerga* conducted a large attack in the Jafarti Valley. The operation was extremely successful; in a few hours the Kurdish militia had overrun government forces defending the area. Later that day the Iraqi regime became the first government in history to use chemical weapons against its own people. The Iraqi army did not even make a serious attempt to retake the land—instead it fired chemical filled artillery shells across the area. The following day Iraq launched a similar attack against the villages of the Balisan Valley (Hiltermann 96). By the end of the Anfal campaign, Ali Hassan al-Masjid would be known throughout Kurdistan as "Ali Kimiyawi", or Chemical Ali (Hiltermann 93). It is not difficult to deduce where this nickname came from. Indeed, no one explained the goal of the Anfal campaign better than Ali himself: "This is my intention...As soon as we complete deportations we will start attacking them everywhere according to a systematic military plan...I will not attack them with chemicals just one day, but I will continue to attack them with chemicals for fifteen days...Then you will see that all the vehicles of God himself will not suffice to carry them all" (Hiltermann 95).

The village clearings continued throughout the spring of 1987. According to one estimate, the Iraqis destroyed over 700 Kurdish villages in this time (Human Rights Watch 73). As unpleasant as these clearings were (villagers were forced to relocate across Iraq after watching the destruction of their homes), they had none of the brutality of the events to follow. The true extent of the Iraqi plan for Kurdistan only became clear in June of 1987. Using his

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<sup>4</sup> Large, barren complexes located on major highways in parts of Kurdistan firmly controlled by the Iraqi army

complete authority over Kurdistan, al-Masjid issued two directives spelling out his plans for the remaining Kurds. The first, issued on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, gave further orders about prohibited zones: “Within their jurisdiction, the armed forces must kill any human being or animal present within these areas. They are totally prohibited” (Human Rights Watch 80). Yet this was only the beginning. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, al-Masjid dispatched a much more sweeping directive. This document was even more explicit about what was in store for the inhabitants of prohibited zones: “The corps commanders shall carry out special strikes by artillery, helicopters and aircraft at all times of the day or night in order to kill the largest number of persons present in those prohibited areas...”(Hiltermann 99). Furthermore “All persons captured in those villages shall be detained and interrogated...and those between the ages of 15 and 70 shall be executed after any useful information has been obtained” (Human Rights Watch 82). In this context, “special strikes” (darabat khaseh) was a clear reference to chemical weapons (Hiltermann 99). Chemical Ali was ordering his men to use chemical weapons against these Kurdish villages, capture any survivors, and then execute anyone who wasn’t a child or elderly. It is hard to imagine a more obvious order for a mass extermination.

Even at this early stage of al-Masjid’s reign, there is clear evidence that the United States government was aware of what was taking place in Iraqi Kurdistan. The State Department’s annual human rights report for 1987 talks about the “widespread destruction and bulldozing of Kurdish and Turcoman villages, mass forced movement of Kurds, and exile of Kurdish families into non-Kurdish parts of Iraq” (Country Reports 1172). A Joint Chief of Staff intelligence report further reveals the extent of US knowledge: “In order to counter the spreading insurgency, the Iraqi authorities embarked on a resettlement campaign...ruthless repression, which also includes *chemical* agents (U.S. Joint Chiefs, emphasis in original). Despite the United

State's awareness that a violent operation involving chemical weapons was taking place in Iraq, no official action was taken. Ambassador David Newton explains that "It was clear that it targeted the countryside...it was clear it was an inhumane program. I can't remember, however, that we raised it with the Iraqis. We had no grounds...this was an internal matter" (Hiltermann 102). Given the response to this lead-up to Anfal, it is not surprising that al-Masjid felt comfortable giving the orders to escalate the campaign. Indeed, he was particularly unconcerned with the views of the outside world: "I will kill them all with chemical weapons! Who is going to say anything? The international community? Fuck them! – the international community and those who listen to them" (Hiltermann 95).

Although al-Masjid issued the orders for Anfal in June of 1987, it wasn't until February of 1988 that the campaign began in earnest. In almost every previous year of the war Iran had launched a major offensive around January, and a significant portion of the Iraqi army was preparing for this possibility. In the meantime the Iraqi government decided to strip any Kurds living outside a government-controlled area of their citizenship rights. In October of 1987, al-Masjid held a massive census with extremely specific instructions. This census was designed to give Kurds living in the prohibited areas the opportunity to return to the "national ranks". The Northern Bureau of Command (led by al-Masjid) declared that "any persons who fail to participate in the census without a valid excuse shall lose their Iraqi citizenship" (Human Rights Watch 87). An individual could only participate if they made themselves accessible to the census takers—in the prohibited areas, this meant abandoning one's home and registering in a *mujamma'a* (Human Rights Watch 84-87). Any individuals in the remaining prohibited regions were no longer Iraqi citizens. The implications of this were immediately clear: residents of towns in Kurdistan who tried to collect



food rations were told, “You are Iranians. Go to the Iranians for you food rations!” (Human Rights Watch 89).

Unfortunately for the Kurds, the expected winter offensive did not materialize. After months of continuous Iraqi bombing, the Iranians were running short of critical military hardware. They were also struggling to recruit adequate troops for any major operations (Hiro 199). This left Hussein free to focus on Kurdistan. In the morning of February 23, 1988, the Iraqi army attacked several Kurdish villages in the Jafarti Valley. From the very beginning, it was clear this campaign was different from the shellings that had plagued Kurdish villages since the beginning of the war. The assault began with a barrage of artillery fire in the early morning, followed by a siege of the Iraqi army, navy, and elite Republican Guards. The Kurdish resistance fighters held out as long as they could, but within weeks the opposition collapsed and most of the valley’s residents fled to Iran (Human Rights Watch 96-98).

The attack on the villages in the Jafarti valley was only the first stage of Anfal—there were eight more phases to follow. Al-Masjid and the Iraqi army used the same strategy in each one: bombing (often with chemical weapons) followed by an Iraqi troop invasion and the subsequent destruction of the town. What happened to the inhabitants of these villages depended on the location and the stage of Anfal. In the first stage, villagers were allowed to flee to Iran. Beginning with the second Anfal, the Iraqi army arrested residents and took them to nearby military bases. There the villagers were interrogated and kept prisoner for weeks. Based on the interviews done by Human Rights Watch, most of the men of draft age never returned (Human Rights Watch 118-120). No one knows whether they were relocated to a *mujamma’a*, sent to a completely different part of Iraq (many families were sent to barren stretches of desert outside Kurdistan), or buried in one of the many mass graves found throughout Kurdistan.

Yet before Anfal was even close to complete, al-Masjid ordered one of the most infamous chemical weapon attacks in history at Halabja. Halabja was a Kurdish town of 80,000 located close to the border with Iran (Goldberg). Technically the Iraqi assault on Halabja was not part of the Anfal campaign, which was focused on rural villages (Human Rights Watch 109). However what transpired at Halabja was both incredibly brutal and widely publicized, eliminating any potential argument about US government ignorance. Furthermore it took place before most of Anfal was complete, meaning the reaction to this particular attack probably influenced Iraqi conduct for the rest of the campaign.

After 1987, it was becoming clear that the Iranian war effort was faltering. Years of Iraqi bombing, war costs and sanctions were all beginning to take their toll. Instead of a large winter offensive in 1988, the Iranians instead chose to launch a series of smaller attacks along the border. The Iranian strategy was to place pressure on the Iraqi front lines without risking significant casualties (Hiro 199). Launching an attack into Iraqi Kurdistan fit into Iran's plans perfectly. The Kurds could do most of the fighting, and it would be easy to find a lightly guarded target. The place chosen for the assault was Halabja; a large town only fifteen miles from the Iranian border (Hiltermann 109-110). While the exact circumstances surrounding the joint Kurdish/Iranian attack on Halabja are unclear, no one disputes the basic timeline. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1988, the Kurdish militia and a few Iranian troops defeated the small number of Iraqis guarding Halabja and entered the city. The *peshmerga* were greeted by the townspeople as liberators, and set up a plan to secure the town. The following day, March 16<sup>th</sup>, the Iraqi army launched its counterattack (Hiltermann 117-119). The Iraqis began with conventional air strikes and artillery fire from the nearby town Sayed Sadeq (Schuurman 62). That evening, around 5pm, the chemical attack began.

Survivor accounts from Halabja often begin by describing the scent of “sweet apples”. Shortly after noticing the smell the victims began to feel the effects of the gas; coughing, stinging eyes, vomiting. Indeed, one of the reasons chemical weapons are so taboo is that they cause their victims incredible pain<sup>5</sup>. The chemical weapon attack continued sporadically until the morning of March 17<sup>th</sup>. All told, between 3,000 and 5,000 people were killed and between 5,000 and 10,000 were injured. The attack on Halabja has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of civilian casualties ever from a chemical assault (Schuurman 37). One of the reasons the strike was particularly effective was that the Iraqis specifically used chemical weapons after the conventional bombing. This ensured that most Halabjans would be in underground rooms where the gas would be most effective<sup>6</sup>. In any case, after the assault was over Iranian troops poured into the town. Interestingly, the Iraqis felt no need to continue the bombing (Hiltermann 120-122). This suggests that the goal of the Iraqi counterattack was mainly to demoralize the *peshmerga* (and terrify Kurdish civilians) rather than retain any serious strategic position.

While the extent of US knowledge about Iraqi chemical weapons use against civilians before Halabja can be debated, after the attack there is no argument. As Joost Hiltermann explains, “what happened at Halabja was so graphic and egregious it could not be ignored” (Hiltermann 125). Iran immediately saw the propaganda value in the situation. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, it flew in more than a dozen Western journalists. Major publications such as the *Times* of London, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* covered the attack. On March 22<sup>nd</sup> the story really broke open, with Peter Jennings showing videotapes of bodies on ABC’s nightly news (Schuurman 58-59).

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<sup>5</sup> For some first hand accounts of the effects of chemical weapons see Jeffery Goldberg’s article “The Great Terror” from the *New Yorker*. Also the Human Rights Watch book [Genocide in Iraq](#). For complete citations check the bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> The gas in chemical weapons is heavier than air, meaning it would sink into the basements of Kurds trying to seek shelter (much like it would sink into the trenches during World War I).

As the story spread around the world, the United States government took action to protect Iraq. In a press briefing on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, State Department spokesman Charles Redmond rebuked Iraq for “a particularly grave violation of the...Geneva Protocol” but also deflected blame by claiming that there were “indications that Iran may also have used artillery shells in this fighting” (Hiltermann 7). The official skepticism about the culprit made its way into the media reporting on the issue. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, the Washington Post printed a story referring to “victims of *what Iran claims* is the worst chemical warfare attack” (Tyler, emphasis added). On the same day Newsweek explained “*According to Iran*, the Iraqis bombed the city with chemical weapons” (Power 193, emphasis added). While there was general outrage about the atrocity at Halabja, reporters were cautious assigning blame. Especially since the US State Department refused to take an authoritative stance on the matter, it is unsurprising that reporters failed to target Iraq. Indeed “with the weight of the US government behind it this version [of events at Halabja] soon proliferated, becoming a respected interpretation of events in the Western literature on the war and...framing the policy debate” (Hiltermann 8).

A similar series of events took place on the international level as well. Iran went to the UN, demanding that some action be taken. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar sent a medical expert to Iraq, who released report confirming the use of chemical weapons. Pérez de Cuéllar then publically condemned the Iraqi government for using poison gas and “causing a high number of civilian casualties” (Hiltermann 8). Iraq’s Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, wrote a letter in response, accusing the UN of ignoring Iranian atrocities and bias. This letter angered the vast majority of the UN Security Council. According to a State Department cable the situation “would almost certainly lead to some new SC action...” (Hiltermann 126). Yet just as the US stance influenced the media, so did it save Iraq from being singled out by the UN. On April 7<sup>th</sup> the State Department issued an

internal memo dictating the US stance towards the use of gas at Halabja. Diplomats and policymakers were told “We believe both Iran and Iraq used chemical weapons at Halabja”. As for the proof of this statement, the memo explained: “Evidence of Iranian use is convincing, but we are not now in a position to discuss the evidence publically” (Hiltermann 127). There are two very interesting aspects to this dispatch. First, not a single piece of hard evidence is given for the blanket assertion that Iran and Iraq both used chemical weapons at Halabja. Perhaps even more importantly, it came out *after* Charles Redmond’s statement that Iran used shells in the fighting as well. The timing Redmond’s press briefing (just five days after Halabja) combined with the eventual release of the internal memo suggests that the US government was searching for a way to blame Iran from the very beginning.

As the Security Council prepared to act, the US continued its diplomatic effort to prevent Iraq from taking the full blame. In a cable written on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Secretary George Shultz made clear that “We have previously stated our conclusion that Iran, as well as Iraq, used chemical weapons at Halabcha [sic]... Therefore we believe any resolution/state should cite both Iran and Iraq for CW use” (Hiltermann 128). Ultimately US diplomatic efforts were successful. On May 9<sup>th</sup> (three weeks after the actual attack), the UN passed Resolution 612 which condemned “vigorously the continued use of chemical weapons in the conflict between Iran and Iraq contrary to the obligations under the Geneva Protocol” and expected “both sides to refrain from the future use of chemical weapons in accordance with their obligations under the Geneva Protocol” (UN Security Council). Despite the horrifying nature of Halabja, Resolution 612 was the extent of the UN (and US) response.

The main (and only) US defense for failing sanction Iraq after Halabja was the claim that Iran also used chemical weapons in the battle. Yet how much evidence was there for this

assertion? In his book, A Poisonous Affair, Joost Hiltermann investigates the claim in incredible detail. He begins by interviewing a large number of Iraqi military commanders who fought during the war, the vast majority of whom agree that Iran never used gas. For the few who were unsure, they could not name a specific place or time when Iran had used chemical weapons; just that they thought it might have occurred. None of the captured Iraqi documents surrounding Anfal (or the Iran-Iraq war) suggest that Iran ever used gas. There were Iraqi soldiers injured by chemical weapons, but it is clear that this was a result of “blowback”: shifting winds blowing gas back on the Iraqi troops (Hiltermann 157-182).

Whether or not Iran used chemical weapons at Halabja, it is clear that US action on this matter was unconscionable. The US government was aware that the Iraqi government had used chemical weapons against civilians. Furthermore, it knew about the larger Iraqi effort to clear the Kurdish region. Yet the immediate official reaction was to provide Iraq with diplomatic shelter. Indeed, US support for the Iraqi war effort did not miss a beat. On April 18<sup>th</sup> the United States Navy destroyed two Iranian oilrigs and sank an Iranian missile boat (Hiro 204). This was in addition to the stream of intelligence the US had been providing Iraq since the beginning of the war. In the end, however, the US fear and animosity towards Iran outweighed any real concern for human rights. Bob Zelnick from ABC Nightly News explained the situation perfectly in a broadcast on March 23<sup>rd</sup>: “There appears little likelihood of any effort to penalize Iraq despite what's widely regarded as an atrocity. Western diplomats concede their outrage is outweighed by a continuing desire to see Iraq survive in its war against Iran” (World News Tonight).

In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution fear of Iran extended far beyond diplomats and government officials. The Iranian hostage crisis and Ayatollah Khomeini’s vitriolic speech had created incredible domestic animosity towards the country. Although Iraq’s behavior was clearly

unacceptable, few individuals were willing to risk actions that might help Iran. Indeed, few incidents highlight the depth of US domestic hostility towards Iran better than the USS *Vicennes* affair. On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the American warship *Vicennes* shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing 280 people. At first the US government tried to cover up the incident, saying the aircraft was behaving in a threatening manner flying and in international airspace. It soon became clear neither fact was true; the flight was in Iranian territory and on a regular flight path (Fayazmanesh 40-42). Yet as far as the American public was concerned, the US military had done nothing wrong. A Washington Post poll found that 75% of people polled thought Iran was to blame. Even more significantly, 61% rejected the idea of providing compensation to the families of those killed (Hiro 240). Despite the US military murdering innocent Iranian civilians, the majority of the American public saw no need for reparation. Given this level of domestic animosity, it is unsurprising that government officials had little desire to sanction Saddam. Any action against Iran was justified, regardless of the consequences.

As the summer of 1988 reached an end, the Iranian war effort began to falter under the weight of US diplomatic and military pressure. In 1987 alone the Reagan administration approached 20 different countries to halt arms sales to Iran. The US also instituted an oil embargo and pressured allies to do the same (Hiro 240). Although Iran seized upon Halabja as a propaganda opportunity, its efforts ultimately backfired. Widely publicizing the extent of Iraq's chemical weapons usage scared Iranians and further weakened support for the war effort (Hiro 201). The *US Vicennes* incident confirmed that Iran was at war with both Iraq and the United States, a war Iran could not possibly win. At the same time, Iraq continued to retake lost territory in Kurdistan and Southern Iraq. It was in these circumstances that a group of top Iranian military, political and theological leaders met in Tehran on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1988. Realizing the futility of continued fighting, these

leaders recommended that Ayatollah Khomeini accept UN Resolution 598 unconditionally. Iran had initially rejected the Resolution because it was blatantly one-sided. A product of US diplomacy, the Resolution said nothing about the aggressor in the conflict and offered no reparations to Iran (Fayazmanesh 44). However the Republic of Iraq was left with few options, and on July 17<sup>th</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a letter to the Security Council formally agreeing to the terms of SC Resolution 598 (Hiro 240-242).

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war, resources no longer constrained the Iraqi regime's campaign against the Kurds. Yet by July of 1988 the Anfal campaign was already almost complete. Just six days after Halabja, al-Masjid instituted stage two of Anfal, which targeted the Qara Dagh region of Kurdistan (Human Rights Watch 113). Indeed, Iraq was able to complete another five Anfal operations (in different areas) before the end of the war. In each of these stages, the Iraqi military used the same tactics. On the first day it would bombard the Kurdish villages in the area with gas shells. The Iraqi army would then surround the area, waiting for the terrified villagers to flee. After Halabja word traveled around Kurdistan about the Iraqi use of chemical weapons. Fear of these shells managed to drive Kurds who had lived with Iraqi artillery fire for years out of their homes. Fleeing Kurds were then rounded up and taken to temporary holding centers. From these centers they were transported to a military base just outside Kurdistan in Topzawa. Males between the ages of 15 and 60 were taken away from their families and moved to execution sites in Western Iraq. In most of the Anfal operations, the remaining Kurds were transported to various prisons across the country. In Anfal III and IV the women and children were killed with the men (Hiltermann 130-132). Although it is Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons that is the most famous aspect of Anfal, many more people died from



mass executions than from gas shells (Power 195). That said, it was chemical weapons that allowed the Iraqi regime to drive out battle-hardened insurgents.

As for the international community, no one was paying attention to the events taking place in Kurdistan. With the prospect of peace on the horizon, all eyes were focused on Tehran and Baghdad. After Iran accepted Resolution 598, Iraq went on the offensive, supposedly to increase its number of Iranian prisoners. In reality, it is much more likely Saddam Hussein wanted to make sure the Iranians were not just trying to buy time to rebuild their forces. In any case, Iraq's new attacks reinvigorated the Iranians and by early August it was clear the new offensives had failed. Furthermore, after its acceptance of Resolution 598, Iran finally received the support of the international community. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, Saddam Hussein declared that Iraq was ready for a cease-fire. The UN Security Council unanimously approved the implementation details of Resolution 598 on August 9<sup>th</sup>, and declared August 20<sup>th</sup> the first day of the truce (Hiro 246-248).

It was at this point that al-Masjid decided to complete Anfal. With the end of the war, the Iraqis finally had enough troops to finish off the campaign. Divisions from across the country were redeployed to Iraqi Kurdistan to prepare for a final operation in the Badinan area. On the morning of August 25<sup>th</sup>, the first gas shells fell on the *peshmerga* headquarters in the town of Zewa Shkan. The Final Anfal had begun (Human Rights Watch 261-269).

Before this final operation, the Anfal campaign was either ignored by US politicians or treated as an "internal matter". As discussed above, general opinion in the United States was so heavily against Iran that even the most deplorable Iraqi military actions were brushed under the rug. The United States government *knew* about the use of chemical weapons at Halabja, and yet applied no significant diplomatic pressure on Iraq. If there was a moment when the devastation

of Anfal could have been prevented, it was in the days after March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1988. By making it clear that chemical weapons usage against civilians was unacceptable, the United States could have prevented the slaughter that took place in Kurdistan throughout April, May, June and July. Iraq was a country receiving significant intelligence information and diplomatic support from the US. If anyone was in a position to sanction Saddam, it was the United States. Instead the Reagan administration chose to deflect the blame onto Iran and give Iraq the diplomatic equivalent of a slap on the wrist. By failing to take a definitive stance against the use of gas at Halabja, the US essentially gave Iraq the green light to conduct chemical weapons operations throughout Kurdistan.

Some might argue that Anfal would have proceeded even if the US had seriously threatened Iraq, just without chemical weapons. Even if this claim is true, it ignores the fact that chemical weapons a critical part of Anfal. Different Iraqi regimes had been fighting the *peshmerga* for decades without making significant progress. What set Anfal apart was the addition of chemical shells to the Iraqi arsenal. The residents of Kurdish villages were used to artillery fire—they had been shelled consistently since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. Chemical shells were an entirely different story: “the fear...of further gas attacks that a decades-old guerrilla movement, one that had gained control over much of the countryside in the span of three years, suddenly suffered total disintegration” (Hiltermann 129). Without chemical weapons, al-Masjid would have had to clear out the rural Kurdistan (mountainous and covered in forests) using troops and conventional artillery alone. Although this might have been possible, it would have taken significantly longer and been much more dangerous for Iraqi troops. It is no exaggeration to say that chemical weapons were integral to the success of the Anfal campaign.

There were two key differences with the final Anfal operation that (finally) caused the United States government to react. First, it began after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. As long as Saddam was standing up to the “mad mullahs” in Tehran, his actions in Kurdistan were justifiable under the cloak of “necessity”. Fear of an Iranian hegemon in the Gulf was far greater than concern for some insurgents in Northern Iraq. Halabja was the ultimate proof of this truth—Iraq could commit horrific war crimes as long as it was engaged in a war with Iran.

While the Iran-Iraq war was in progress, the Kurds were seen as a dangerous insurgency. In her book, *A Problem from Hell: American in the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power spends much of her chapter on Iraq talking about Peter Galbraith’s work to punish Iraq for the final Anfal. She only briefly mentions a staff report for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations he authored in 1987, entitled *War in the Persian Gulf: The United States Takes Sides*. As discussed above, the year 1987 was an important one for the Iran-Iraq war. Not only had the Iranian Fao offensive scared American policymakers, but the fallout from Iran-Contra was wrecking havoc for US/Iraqi relations. To research the report, Galbriath traveled through much of Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan. He personally witnessed al-Masjid’s village clearing campaign and its effects. In the report he writes that “...the Iraqi Army has, over the past few months, been dynamiting...Kurdish villages...with hundreds of villages leveled, the Kurdish countryside has an eerie, deserted quality to it. Fruit trees, graveyards, and cemeteries stand as reminders of the absent people and livestock” (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 16). At the time, however, Galbriath did not see what was happening in Kurdistan as problematic. The report’s section on the Kurds mainly focuses on the security threat the insurgency posed to Iraq:

Iraq's inability to control Kurdistan also provides military opportunities for Iran's army and its Revolutionary Guard. Earlier this year, Turkey intercepted a company-sized group of Revolutionary Guards attempting to infiltrate into Iraq through Turkish territory. Together, the Iranians and the [Kurdish] insurgents pose a serious threat to Iraq's vital oil

pipeline to Turkey, and also to road connections to the north. In addition, a deterioration in the situation could threaten important northern oil fields and refineries near Kirkuk. (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 17).

As far as Galbriath and the other members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations were concerned, the events in Kurdistan were only important as far as they threatened the Iraqi regime. The rights of Kurdish civilians and the devastation of Kurdistan were simply not important given the larger issues at stake.

The labeling of Kurds as “insurgents” was a large part of the American failure to stop Anfal. Although it was clearly a humanitarian disaster, Anfal was viewed through the lens of the Iran-Iraq war. In this context, the Iraqi military was dealing with rebels who could seriously threaten the security of the country. The Iraqi use of chemical weapons (and villages clearings) was part of a necessary counterinsurgency campaign, and the consequences of Iraqi failure were far more important than the human rights of the Kurds. This calculation, along with the widespread fear of Iran, is why the US government worked to cover up Halabja, or at least find a way to justify it for the international community.

Yet with the end of hostilities on August 15<sup>th</sup>, Saddam Hussein lost his political cover for mass murder. When the final Anfal began on August 20<sup>th</sup>, suddenly congress took note. Between April of 1987 and August of 1988, there were four speeches in congress that mentioned the Iraqi Kurds. From August 20<sup>th</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> of 1988, there were twenty (Meho 34-67). On September 8<sup>th</sup>, two days after congress resumed from its August break, Senator Claiborne Pell introduced a bill authored by Peter Galbriath. The bill, entitled the “Prevention of Genocide Act of 1988” was an attempt to stop the Iraqi massacre, and as Galbriath explains it “included every sanction that I could think of” (Power 204). Suddenly Anfal was “Iraq’s campaign of genocide against the Kurdish people” (Meho 42). In a particularly ironic statement, Senator Christopher

Bond declared, “the civilized people in this country and throughout the world cannot sit by while crimes of this magnitude are perpetrated against innocent people” (Meho 44).

Peter Galbriath is lionized in Samatha Power’s book as the senator who did the most to fight for the Iraqi Kurds. She writes about how on August 28<sup>th</sup>, he saw an article in the New York Times and realized genocide was happening: “It was just one of those moments of recognition. I just knew it was true...I knew then that we could never be fully certain that Hussein wanted to destroy the Kurds, but we would also never be more certain” (Power 202). The point of this paper is not to criticize Galbriath, who did do more than many other people to help the Kurds. However Galbriath was in a better position than almost anyone else to recognize the consequences of Anfal; he was perhaps the only US politician to gain access to Iraqi Kurdistan after September of 1987. Yet he, like the rest of US political establishment, simply did not see the Iraqi attacks on Kurds during the Iran-Iraq war as problematic. Only after the geopolitical concerns of the war faded did he see the true nature of Anfal.

Beyond the end of the Iran-Iraq war, there was another reason the final Anfal finally got the attention of the US government. The region targeted by the ninth Anfal was Badinan, an area close to the Iraqi border with Turkey. Shortly after the campaign began, thousands of Kurds (many of them with injuries from chemical weapons) fled into Turkey. Indeed, Hussein foresaw this problem, and it was one of the reasons he waited until he could gather more troops before moving into Balidan; he wanted as few Kurds as possible to escape the Iraqi military dragnet (Human Rights Watch 265). However despite the Iraqi military’s efforts, it could not stop the flood of Kurdish refugees. 80,000 Kurds fled into Turkey, gathering in tent cities along the border (Hiltermann 210, Power 218).

There were two consequences to this refugee crisis. First, it made Anfal's victims internationally visible like never before. The thousands of Kurds in Turkey could not just be ignored or written off as counterinsurgency. US diplomats (like Peter Galbraith) and other international observers visited these refugees, who were able to tell them first-hand of the destruction Hussein was wreaking in Kurdistan (Hiltermann 211). Second, Turkey was an important ally of the United States, and the refugee crisis changed Anfal from a domestic counterinsurgency campaign into an international problem. A memo written by the Assistant Secretary of State on September 7<sup>th</sup> explained that "The campaign against civilians...puts our ally Turkey in a difficult position" (Hiltermann 210). Turkey's relationship with its own Kurdish minority was a longstanding problem for the country and it feared the Iraqi refugees would lead Turkish Kurds to revolt. Turkey was (and still is) a very important US ally, one that received a large amount of military aid was a member of NATO. Its concerns about the refugees prompted the United States government to act where the most blatant human rights violations did not.

The bill written by Peter Galbraith failed to pass through the House of Representatives, but it was ultimately irrelevant. Even if the sanctions he demanded were put into place, al-Masjid had already completed the Anfal campaign. As it became clear the US was finally going to act against Saddam's war crimes, the Iraqi government began to make diplomatic concessions. Iraq's Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz, "affirmed publically and unequivocally that Iraq would abide by its international treaty obligations" (Hiltermann 209). On October 3<sup>rd</sup> Aziz even agreed follow this promise with the Kurds specifically. Yet by this point the promise was meaningless. On September 6<sup>th</sup>, long before Aziz's concessions, the Revolutionary Command Council

declared “a general and comprehensive amnesty for all Iraqi Kurds”<sup>7</sup> (Human Rights Watch 297). The Iraqi government had accomplished its goal: the *peshmerga* had been defeated. After a ruthless sixteen-month campaign, al-Masjid had finally broken the back of the resistance. By the time Tariq Aziz agreed to stop gassing the Kurds, Anfal was long over.

The moment for the US to stop Anfal was Halabja, when the Iraqi military blatantly used chemical gas against civilians. If the Reagan administration had chosen to take a firm stance then, it is possible al-Masjid would have rethought the entire campaign. As it was, all the United States and the international community did was confirm Iraqi impunity. Yet what is most interesting about this situation is that people like Senator Galbriath were not necessarily intentionally ignoring Iraqi crimes. Even Stephen Pelletière and Walter Lang, the two men responsible for the misleading DIA report about Halabja, still defend its validity. The government officials who allowed Iraq to commit Anfal genuinely seemed to believe that Iraq was engaged in a necessary (if brutal) counterinsurgency campaign. There was a real fear that if left unchecked, the Kurdish rebellion could threaten Saddam’s government and by extension the security of the Persian Gulf. Indeed, Iraq was dealing with a domestic group who had allied militarily with Iran. It is hard to deny Iraq had the right to strike back in some capacity.

Anfal raises real questions about how we classify something as a human rights violation. During the Iran-Iraq war, US officials saw the Anfal campaign as counterinsurgency. Even Galbriath, who later went on to write a book about the hypocrisy of US policy towards Iraq, saw nothing wrong with the Iraqi villages clearings in Kurdistan. The report he coauthored focused almost entirely on the danger posed by potential of Iranian control of the Gulf. It was only after the war (and with thousands of refugees) that Iraq’s actions raised alarm bells in Washington.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that there was actually true amnesty for the Kurds. In actuality Iraq’s brutal treatment of the Kurds continued long after the end of Anfal. For more, read the chapter *Amnesty and its Exclusions* in [Human Rights Watch: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds](#)

The Anfal campaign was remarkable for its cruelty and inhumanity. Civilians were gassed, executed, and buried in mass graves. Anywhere between 50,000 and 200,000 people were murdered (Power 172). The personal stories of survivors are horrific tales of gas poisoning and escapes from foul prisons or firing squads. Yet despite the particularly flagrant nature of the campaign, US officials saw it as a necessity. It is hard to imagine Hussein (or any other leader) would have been able to get away with a similar plan during peacetime. Indeed as soon as the Iran-Iraq war ended, he faced an incredible backlash from US politicians. The politics of Anfal seem to suggest that the debate over the label “genocide” goes much deeper than just whether a certain action meets a certain set of criteria. In modern geopolitics it is not just what that matters, it is who, when, where, and why. When the Iran-Iraq war was in progress, Hussein’s actions fell under the category of counterinsurgency. When the war ended, they became war crimes and a massive human rights violations. The tactics used in Anfal were consistent. The only change was the context surrounding the campaign.

The Anfal Campaign was just one of the atrocities that took place during the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam Hussein used chemical gas against Iranian soldiers countless times during the conflict. Despite full knowledge that the Iraqis were using chemical weapons, the US government continued to support Saddam Hussein. Faced with the prospect of an Iranian hegemon ruling the Gulf, the Reagan administration chose to overlook Iraq’s blatant war crimes and treaty violations. The Kurds of Northern Iraq never even registered on the political radar until after the war was over. They were simply a group of insurgents whose actions threatened the safety of the Iraqi regime. Much of the current political debate in the US focuses on when humanitarian intervention is effective, and when atrocities can be stopped. The lesson from the Anfal Campaign is that sometimes this critical question is not even asked. The circumstances



surrounding Anfal prevented it from even being labeled an atrocity until it was too late. Political pressure on Iraq would likely have been incredibly effective—Hussein depended on the United States, and US support was certainly more valuable to him than problems in Kurdistan. But as far as the Reagan administration was concerned, the threat from Iran was far more important than the human rights of the Kurds.

References to the Anfal campaign appeared again in the lead-up to Gulf War. When demonizing Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait, George H. W. Bush declared that he was a war criminal “who has used poison gas against the men, women and children of his own country” (Lando 143). Indeed, Bush even went so far as to proclaim that “this is Hitler revisited” (Lando 146). As discussed in the introduction, George W. Bush followed in his father’s footsteps using these claims before the second Iraq war. Given the United States’ tacit support of Hussein’s weapons programs and failure to censure him, this rhetoric seems particularly hypocritical. The US was possibly the only country with the opportunity to stop Anfal while it was in progress, yet it did nothing. Time and time again the White House chose “geopolitical considerations” over human life. The US reaction to the Anfal campaign shows how international politics is largely a game based on immediate cost/benefit calculations. Even the labeling of a “mass homicide” as right or wrong depends on context. No matter how much US leaders talk about “human rights”, those issues only come into play when they do not threaten larger geopolitical interests. Or, in the case of Saddam Hussein, “human rights” became a political tool to gain support for the Gulf War (and later the Iraq War). Looking at the international politics today, there is a large discussion of US actions in Libya and the potential for action in Syria. Yet little is being said about Bahrain and the uprising there. Unfortunately for those protestors, the United States Fifth Fleet is stationed in Manama, the capital of Bahrain

(Knickerbocker). When protests broke out there, the US said nothing as Saudi Arabia entered the country with 2,000 troops (Bronnor and Slackman). Two days later the Bahraini government violently cracked down, moving into Pearl Square (the center of the protests) with tanks. What was the American response to this aggressive and brutal suppression? Hillary Clinton said the military move was “alarming” and that the US has “deplored the use of force” (Langfitt). Why is Bahrain any different from Syria or Libya? Why was it legitimate for Saudi Arabia (a key US ally) to blatantly interfere on the side of the Bahraini government? One can only imagine the consequences if Iran took a similar action in Syria. The events in Bahrain are only another example of the lesson the Iraqi Kurds learned during Anfal: US allies are allowed much more leeway when it comes to human rights. Ultimately geopolitical interest is the lens through which the US government approaches the world. The question of whether something is a legitimate government action or a mass atrocity is rarely based on *what* is happening—it is based on *where* and *when*.

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