

US Lying about Halabja: Justifying the Invasion of Iraq

The central reason for the justification of the war on Iraq by the US administration was not so much the presence of weapons of mass destruction as the 1988 poison gas attack on Kurd civilians in Halabja by the Saddam Hussein regime. However, close scrutiny reveals that the accusations made by the US that the incident was a predetermined military experiment on the Kurds are false and fabricated, deliberately made to meet US policy objectives.

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The precise timing of the Azores summit on March 16, 2003 was stated very succinctly by president George Bush: “On this very day 15 years ago, Saddam Hussein launched a chemical weapons attack on the Iraqi village of Halabja. With a single order the Iraqi regime killed thousands of men and women and children, without mercy or without shame. Saddam Hussein has proven he is capable of any crime.” He concluded, “If military force is required, we’ll quickly seek new Security Council resolutions to encourage broad participation in the process of helping the Iraqi people to build a free Iraq”. Failing to get another Security Council resolution to authorise the use of military force, he went ahead anyway. Within four days’ time, US missiles and bombers would be headed towards Baghdad with their devastating and deadly payloads.

At the summit, president Bush reiterated the oft-repeated reasons for going to war: “The dictator of Iraq and his weapons of mass destruction are a threat to the security of free nations. He is a danger to his neighbours. He’s a sponsor of terrorism. He’s an obstacle to progress in the west Asia. For decades he has been the cruel, cruel oppressor of the Iraqi people”.¹

Five Pretexts for War

The first reason, possession of weapons of mass destruction, has since been thoroughly discredited. The many years of relentless UN weapons inspections

had worked. The second reason, being a danger to Iraq’s neighbours, was based on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, but after a crushing defeat in the 1991 Gulf War and 12 years of suffocating international trade sanctions that included a total arms embargo, Iraq has not even been a plausible military threat to any of its neighbours. The third reason, that Saddam Hussein had alleged links to al-Qaida, has never been substantiated and is now widely rejected. The fourth reason that Iraq opposes US policy towards the Palestine-Israel conflict is based on past and present Iraqi support for the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation. Iraq has always favoured a just peace. By contrast, it is the US government that had abandoned the peace process by blocking a ceasefire in the Israel-Lebanon war of June-August 2006 and turning a blind eye to the relentless “bantustanisation” of the West Bank and Gaza. The fifth reason, that Saddam Hussein was a cruel oppressor of the Iraqi people, is the only reason for war that has remained standing until today.

As the Azores summit was taking place, the White House issued a “global message” on “remembering Halabja”. It opened by saying, “This weekend, we remember the victims of Saddam Hussein’s heinous chemical weapons attack on the people of Halabja, a city in northern Iraq, and other villages attacked in the Al-Anfal campaign”.² The same identical statement was reissued on July 9, 2003 and September 18, 2005.

On March 14, for the first time ever, George Bush received three Iraqi Kurds in the Oval Office of the White House to

draw attention to the chemical weapons attack on Halabja 15 years ago. By then living in the US, Katrin Michael, Della Jaff, and Idres Hawarry were from the north-eastern Kurdish region of Iraq, and had either survived chemical weapons attacks or had lost family members in the attack on Halabja.³

On March 13, the department of state issued a one-page leaflet entitled ‘Saddam’s Chemical Weapons Campaign: Halabja, March 16, 1988’. It accused Saddam Hussein of being “the first world leader in modern times to have brutally used chemical weapons against his own people”, referring specifically to Iraq’s Kurdish population. It went on to say: “His goals were to systematically terrorise and exterminate the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, to silence his critics, and to test the effects of his chemical and biological weapons. Hussein launched chemical attacks against 40 Kurdish villages and thousands of innocent civilians in 1987-88, using them as testing grounds.”⁴

As if Iraqi use of chemical weapons on civilians was not inhumane enough, the department of state leaflet went still further to suggest that the attacks were in reality neither acts of war (albeit taking place during the time of the Iran-Iraq war) nor even merely ruthless acts of deadly oppression, but rather the fanatical acts of a brutal dictator – a yet more compelling reason for going to war. Another part of the text continued: “Iraqi soldiers in protective gear returned to Halabja to study the effectiveness of their weapons and attacks. They divided the city into grids, determining the number and location of the dead and extent of injury. Halabja helped Saddam Hussein gauge the ability of his chemical agents to kill, maim, and terrorise population centres.”

The department of state leaflet went on to cite Christine Gosden of Liverpool University in the UK, who has done much research to study the effects and treat the victims of the chemical weapons attack on Halabja: “Iraqi government troops would be surrounding the attack site and they would have chem-bio suits on... included would be doctors and interested observers ...they would go in and find out how many people were dead...and

how many survived. What ages... did men, women or children or the elderly suffer more? From there they would shoot the survivors and burn the bodies.”

Historical Context

For four years, the world has passively accepted this story without serious question. The fact that chemical weapons were used on Halabja in March 1988 is well established through information from eyewitnesses, press accounts, investigators, governments, and photos from a wide variety of sources. But what were the true circumstances under which the chemical weapons were used? Why was Halabja attacked? What was the US government's response to the Halabja incident when it happened? What about chemical weapons use before 1987 and against populations other than the Kurds? Why does the US department of state flyer ignore them?

First, let us consider the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the Halabja incident. In 1988 Halabja was a town or city with a population of approximately 70,000 (predominantly Kurdish).⁵ Halabja is located in al-Suleimaniyah province approximately 12 kilometres by road from the Iranian border. By 1988, Halabja had endured seven and a half years of conflict during the Iran-Iraq war, and some of its residents had already fled the fighting. For Kurdish Peshmerga rebels of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the war provided an opportunity to forge a common cause with Iran in fighting the Ba'athist government in Baghdad.

For decades the PUK and the parallel Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) – at times allied and at times fighting each other – have fought for autonomy for the Kurds. In the early years of the Ba'athist regime under president Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, its secular nationalist ideology led to some recognition of Kurdish culture and ethnic identity. By the early 1970s, Saddam Hussein, as foreign minister, and then as vice-president and vice chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, was already emerging as the power behind the ageing al-Bakr. While, on the one hand, he was responsible for the establishment of a repressive security apparatus, it was also under his direction that Kurdish music, language, and culture were allowed to flourish, and for a period of time central government documents and maps even recorded Kurdish names and places in

the Kurdish language. It became a “carrot and stick” policy. But that would change as the Kurdish insurgency mounted. The government in Baghdad began to be so seriously weakened by the rebellion that Saddam Hussein was forced to sign the Algiers agreement on March 6, 1975, under which Iran would cut off all assistance to the Kurdish rebels in return for a realignment of the Iran-Iraq border along the Shatt al-Arab, granting Iran increased shipping access for its vital deep-water ports at Abadan and Khorramshahr.⁶

The fall of the Shah of Iran on February 11, 1979 and the installation of a provisional revolutionary government leading to the establishment of the Islamic republic challenged governments throughout the Persian-Arabian Gulf. It questioned the legitimacy of all Gulf monarchies as well as the Iraqi Ba'ath by espousing a concept of state deriving from adherence to Islam and clerical guardianship, thus potentially transcending national boundaries. Iranian propaganda of the time called upon Muslims to overthrow the Gulf monarchies. In April 1980, the Iranian ministry of defence declared that, should the Iranian army enter Iraq, “Iraqi Shi'as would welcome it with open arms”.⁷ With Shi'as constituting nearly 60 per cent of the population of Iraq, the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party's grip on power in Iraq felt threatened by the Shi'a triumph next door.

Forcing al-Bakr aside, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq on July 16, 1979, giving him full authority to act on his own. With a continuing hostage crisis after the fall of the US embassy in Tehran, the US government was desperately looking for a way out. US president Jimmy Carter quietly dispatched feelers to Baghdad to see how Saddam Hussein could act as a US proxy vis-à-vis Iran. With a common interest in nipping the Islamic Republic in the bud, Hussein looked for and likely received a tacit green light from Washington to take matters in hand. What started earlier in the year as ongoing sporadic cross-border artillery duels, turned on September 22, 1980 into full-scale war when Iraqi armoured and infantry divisions rolled into Iran.

The new war with Iraq mandated a dramatic shift in Iran's national priorities from Islamic revolution to prosecuting the war. Suddenly the need to hold the US embassy hostages faded into the background as the Iranian leadership recognised a need to clear the way for a channel of

communication with Washington. Seeking a pretext to remove that barrier, Iran released the US hostages on precisely the day that Jimmy Carter finished his second term of office to hand over the presidency to Ronald Reagan – inauguration day January 20, 1981.

Chemical Weapons Use in the Iran-Iraq War

From the very beginning of the war, the Iranian government has alleged that Iraq used nerve gas, at first only causing dizziness and nervous disorders. As early as December 28, 1980, Iran reported the first fatalities due to Iraqi chemical weapons with the reported deaths of at least seven Iranian soldiers in an area between the Iranian villages of Helaleh and Ney Khazar in Ilam province in the central front of battle. According to Iranian sources, at least 20 people were killed by Iraqi chemical weapons, mainly nerve gas, through the end of 1982. The outside world did not generally acknowledge Iranian deaths due to Iraqi chemical weapons before the major Iraqi use of vesicant and mustard gases in August 1983 in the far northern front west of Mahabad. Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces and border towns escalated in 1983, injuring hundreds, but killing only 21 by Iran's own account.⁸ The worst single incident to date was reportedly 17 fatalities owing to nerve gas on November 13, 1983 at the Iraqi town of Panjvin, some 30 kms north of Halabja.⁹ A US defence intelligence agency (DIA) report claimed “2,000-3,000 Iranian casualties”, yet called it only a minor “factor in stopping the Iranians”.¹⁰ By any account, the attack on Panjvin was a serious breach of the Geneva Protocol, but the US department of state and the White House continued to publicly ignore it.

While Iran might have been motivated to exaggerate Iraqi chemical weapons attacks as part of its war propaganda, it was actually in no rush to report such Iraqi violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol.¹¹ In fact, Iran did not even begin to formally report Iraqi use of chemical weapons to the United Nations until November 3, 1983 in a letter to secretary-general Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (UNSC Document S/16128).¹² The UN security council was moved to ask the secretary-general to officially investigate the allegations. When the team of four specialists returned from a six-day fact-finding trip to Iran and issued

their investigative report, the security council on March 30, 1984 declared: "The members of the council: strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons reported by the mission of specialists" (UNSC Document S/16433).¹³

Not once did the US ambassador to the United Nations speak up on the official record about charges of Iraqi chemical weapons use, let alone condemn it, during the discussions on the subject in the UN security council before 1988.¹⁴ The US government had been content to "take note of the Iranian charges both in our 1983 human rights report on Iraq, and in our February 1984 report to the UN secretary-general on chemical weapons use in 1983".¹⁵

By 1984 and 1985, as the Iraqis improved their chemical weapons technology and delivery systems, and introduced large-scale use of mustard gas, phosphorus gas, and tabun, the Iranian and Iraqi casualties mounted into the thousands. In February 1986, with a decisive Iranian advance into Iraqi territory threatening to encircle Basra and entirely cut off vital Iraqi access to the sea, Iraq struck Iranian forces in the al-Faw peninsula with what may have been the largest single use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war. The DIA report claimed 8,000 Iranian casualties due to chemical weapons that this time decisively stopped the Iranian advance.

Thus, by the US government's own intelligence, chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war started long before 1987 and was not entirely of lesser scale than Halabja. The difference between the pre-1987 casualties and the casualties of 1987-88 was that the pre-1987 casualties were primarily military and Iranian, while the victims of 1987-88 were primarily civilian and Iraqi, and of which Kurdish "villages" were the primary targets. Thus, it could be argued that the chemical weapons attacks of 1987-88 in general, and on Halabja in particular, were more ruthless and more morally repugnant because they were acts of brutal repression rather than "legitimate" acts of war.

But there was also another motive for these US government assessments. With Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies fearful of the Iranian revolution and its potential impact on their shi'a populations, the de facto US policy tilt towards Iraq was maintained throughout the Iran-Iraq war, despite the official position of neutrality. This tilt was articulated at least as early

as April 1982, for example, by National Security Council staffer Howard J Teicher: "Momentum in the Gulf war has swung to the Iranians. ... Iran's strategic goal appears to be to bring down Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Coupled with Iranian support of shi'a subversives in the Gulf, Iran's recent victory and improving military capabilities is arousing considerable anxiety in the Arabian peninsula".¹⁶ The two trips to Baghdad in 1983 and 1984 by Donald Rumsfeld, then serving as a special envoy of president Reagan, were aimed at saving Saddam Hussein from probable defeat by Iran.¹⁷ By 1987, this tilt had grown to the point of prompting a visible show of support for Iraq. The National Security Council, then headed by Colin Powell, considered, "There is a general inter-agency consensus on the need to do something to deter or forestall an Iranian victory and to shore up our position with our Arab friends in the Gulf. In that regard, the fears and nervousness of our Gulf friends create an opportunity to restore our credibility if we look responsive."¹⁸ During an ongoing exchange of letters between Ronald Reagan and Saddam Hussein in 1986-87, Reagan wrote, "We are committed to help deal with the negative effects of Iran's intransigent pursuit of the war, its threat to the security of the Gulf countries, and its threat to freedom of navigation in the Gulf, along the lines set forth in my February 25 statement".¹⁹ In the face of such strategic interests, the White House was much less concerned about Iraq's use of chemical weapons. In 2002, Frank C Carlucci, who served as Reagan's secretary of defence during the Iran-Iraq war said in an interview, "I did agree that Iraq should not lose the war, but I certainly had no foreknowledge of their use of chemical weapons".²⁰ Yet, the DIA that reported to him confirmed that it had verifiable knowledge of Iraqi chemical weapons use dating back to at least July 1982.²¹

What Really Happened at Halabja?

Today, no credible source will deny that the Iraqi government's al-Anfal campaign, implemented in eight phases from February 23 to September 6, 1988, was ruthlessly aimed at ethnic cleansing of Iraq's rebellious Kurdish population. But Halabja was never a part of the al-Anfal plan, even though it fell within the time-frame of al-Anfal I from February 23 to

March 19. The US department of state nevertheless called Halabja a "testing ground" to "exterminate the Kurdish population". But was it really?

The US department of state's "testing ground" claim rests on the unspoken assumption that Iraqi troops controlled Halabja at the time of the chemical weapons attack and for a sufficient period after the attack to assess the death toll and injuries. A handful of sources suggest that the attack took place between March 15 and 17, or that multiple attacks took place on more than one of those days. However, all available evidence indicates that Iraq was not in control of Halabja at the time of the chemical attack.

First, there is the Iraqi government which claimed at the United Nations on March 13 that Halabja had come under Iranian artillery bombardment during the two days of March 12-13, killing civilians. It also indicated that the Iranian bombardment extended southwest of Halabja to a housing complex at Darbandi Khan (UNSC Documents S/19611).²²

A few days later, the Iraqi government admitted that it had lost control of Halabja. According to the *Washington Post*, "Iraq said last week that its forces had long ago abandoned Halabja and did not consider the area important". Yet in a landscape strewn with the bodies of Iraqi troops and the wreckage of Iraqi military vehicles, journalist Patrick Tyler observed, "The evidence is plentiful that the Iraqi army was here in strength".²³

Second, there is the Iranian government announcement on March 18 (UNSC Document S/19647) of a "horrific" Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja on March 16. It also reported Iraqi chemical bombardments on the Iraqi towns of Khormal, Dojaila, and nearby villages. The initial death toll among all towns and villages in the Val Fajr-10 operational region was reported to be approximately 4,000, with the wounded having been evacuated by Iranian forces to hospitals behind the front lines.²⁴ From the description, it is clear that the entire region, including Halabja, had fallen into the operational control of Iranian forces before the Iraqi chemical weapons attacks. Thus, the Iranian code-named "Val Fajr-10" military campaign was being applied to all towns and villages under its control.

The Iranian delegate to the United Nations, Mohammed Mahallati, said that more than 70 per cent of the casualties

resulting from chemical weapons attacks on the area were civilians.²⁵ This implied that nearly 30 per cent were military casualties. Since it was unlikely that Iraq would have bombed its own troops, the military casualties must have been either Iranian or Kurdish Peshmerga. This could have happened only if the area had fallen under Iranian control.

Third, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in an unclassified report asserted that the casualties in the Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja numbered in the “hundreds”²⁶ in comparison to 8,000-10,000 in al-Faw in February 1986, 5,000 in Basra in April 1987, or 3,000 at Sumer and Mehran. But more importantly, it listed the “target population” in Halabja as consisting of Iranians and Kurds.²⁷ Presumably, it meant Iraqi Kurds. Why would there have been significant Iranian casualties unless Iranian forces had already captured this Iraqi city?

Fourth is the secret DIA report which acknowledged that Iran occupied Iraqi territory well beyond Halabja up to the eastern edge of the Darbandi Khan reservoir. It asserted that Halabja, along with Panjvin and Mawet to the north, were retaken from the Iranians in the following months.

Fifth, the only available photographs of the actual chemical weapons attack on Halabja on March 16-17, 1988 were taken by Iranian photographers. There were no known Iraqi photographers on the scene. Moreover, Iranian photographers were on hand to document the arrival of Iranian Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) troops into the streets of Halabja on March 15, 1988.²⁸ They also captured on film some of the wispy chemical clouds around the city. Thus, by March 15 Iraq was no longer in control of Halabja, and Iraqi troops could not possibly have leisurely walked in after the attack wearing “chem-bio” suits on March 16 or afterwards. Then it was left entirely to Pasdaran soldiers to evacuate wounded civilians from the town. It was left to Iranian photographers to be the first to photograph the dead, eerily frozen in their tracks. And it was exclusively through Iran that foreign journalists came to photograph the same a few days later.

The earliest media accounts further substantiate this scenario. *The New York Times* noted that the Iranian claims of an Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja followed “a surprise strike a week ago by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who

captured the northern Iraqi town of Halabja, spurring reprisal air strikes by Iraqi warplanes reportedly armed with chemical weapons”.²⁹ The *Washington Post* reported that “shortly after this surrender [of the Iraqi garrison in Halabja], the gas attack occurred, according to residents and Iranian officials”.³⁰ *Time* wrote, “Iran had captured and held parts of Iraq’s remote Sulaimaniya province in early March. When the Iraqis counterattacked two weeks ago, the Iranians claim, Baghdad’s warplanes dropped bombs containing mustard gas, cyanide and a nerve gas on Halabja and neighbouring towns”.³¹ *MacLean’s* was more precise: “Iraqi air and ground forces attacked Halabja with conventional and gas bombs on March 16 – some 24 hours after Iranian troops captured the town”.³²

A variety of non-governmental sources have also converged on the notion that chemical weapons were dropped by Iraqi aircraft on Halabja well after the town had been captured by allied Iranian forces and Iraqi Kurdish rebels, and well after fighting in the immediate area had ceased.³³

Was Halabja Really a Chemical Weapons Experiment?

Regarding the story about Iraqi troops shooting the survivors and burning the bodies, Iranian and western photographers who were granted access to Halabja through Iran documented no evidence of burned corpses, no evidence of bullet wounds, only eerily silent deaths of men, women, and children lying where they fell from the effects of chemical agents.³⁴ Quite the contrary, the Iranians left the rotting bodies where they fell precisely to allow the international media to see them upon arrival a week later.³⁵ The wounded survivors who were transferred to hospitals in Tehran and Europe similarly bore no evidence of incendiary burns and bullet wounds, only the chemical burns, blistering, and toxicity consistent with vesicant chemical agents and nerve gases.³⁶ Moreover, Iran, in fighting an eight-year war with Iraq, would have no conceivable reason for suppressing such evidence of Iraqi atrocities if they had occurred. On the contrary, it might have had an interest in fabricating such evidence, but it never did so.

Where did Christine Gosden get the story about a chemical weapons experiment on the residents of Halabja, or about shooting the survivors and burning the

bodies? She was not present on March 16, 1988 to be an eyewitness. In fact, she did not visit Halabja until 10 years later, in January-February 1998. She never reported examining any victims of incendiary burns or bullet wounds. In her testimony before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence shortly after her return from Halabja, she never mentioned anything about a chemical weapons experiment, shooting survivors, or burning the bodies.³⁷

Apparently, the “human guinea pig” story only emerged later in the year with the release of a documentary film on Gosden’s trip. The film *The Gassing* of the Kurds followed Gosden’s travels from the Turkish border under KDP escort, then into PUK territory, where she examined the apparent long-term effects of poison gases – frequent neurological damage, scoliosis, pediatric cancers, and miscarriages.³⁸ The film was produced under an arrangement with the Human Rights Alliance, an entity that was dissolved after the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The Human Rights Alliance was associated with the Iraq Foundation, a political umbrella organisation led by Iraqi exiles based in Washington DC.³⁹ Thus, the objectivity of the film might be questioned because its backers were actively demonising the Ba’athist government, such as by supplying false intelligence about alleged weapons of mass destruction. Yet, even this film never mentioned anything about shooting survivors or burning the bodies of victims. Thus far, corroborating evidence that this ever happened remains lacking. What is the basis for the US department of state’s claim?

It is noteworthy that none of these allegations of Halabja being a chemical weapons experiment or of post-attack brutality were made at the time of the attack, but instead only surfaced more than 10 years later.

One Iraqi exile source was Khidhir Hamza, whose book, *Saddam’s Bombmaker*,⁴⁰ tells a story that is part fact and part fiction, about Halabja being a “major gas experiment”, planned by the Iraqi government.

According to Hamza’s story, the Iraqi army doctor went into Halabja at around 15:30 in the afternoon with the task of mapping the location of dead and injured with respect to each of the fallen canisters. In a land area the size of a city of 40,000-70,000, finding the canisters alone would have taken more time than the remaining

sunlight would allow in mid-March, let alone mapping the location of dead and tabulating the symptoms of the injured in the waning sunlight. Hamza's account of soman having been one of the chemical agents dropped was categorically rejected by Gosden in her Senate testimony on the basis of her clinical findings.⁴¹ Furthermore, Hamza refuses to recognise the tens of thousands of Iranian casualties due to chemical weapons prior to and including Halabja. This casts serious doubt on the credibility of Hamza and anything that he has written. In the light of the false "intelligence" provided by another more famous Iraqi exile, Ahmad Chalabi, perhaps this is not so surprising.

Ethnic Cleansing or Strategic Defence?

While most of the western media was fixated on the human tragedy of Halabja, some recognised that the strategic significance of the Iranian military penetration into Iraqi territory was more than just a tactical victory for Iran and the Peshmerga. Iranian troops advanced 50 kilometres from where they crossed the Iraqi border south-east of Halabja. This positioned them on the eastern shore of the Darbandi Khan Lake. Just 7 kilometres away on the south-western end of the lake, the Darbandi Khan Dam generates electricity for Baghdad and the northern oil city of Kirkuk. It also supplies water to the Diyala River which flows towards Baghdad, supplying water for irrigation and contributing to the capital city's water supply. In short, Iranian troops were poised at the threshold of a carotid artery for both the capital city and a major share of the country's economic lifeblood. Fearing that Iran could cut off the electricity, poison the water, or flood the fertile valley below, the Iraqi government lost no time to deploy some of its most feared weaponry. More missiles were fired at Tehran. Even though Iranian troops came prepared with gas masks, they were not psychologically prepared for the human devastation that could be brought by a combination of the most potent poison gases.

Der Spiegel immediately observed, "The Iranians threaten the oil fields of Kirkuk, Iraq's most important resource".⁴² The *Economist* was more blunt, pointing out that what was at stake was not so much the town of Halabja that had become nearly ungovernable with the Kurdish

rebellion, but rather the Darbandi Khan Dam.⁴³

No one can deny that the wholesale destruction of Kurdish villages and the gassing of Kurdish towns in north-eastern Iraq during the eight phases of al-Anfal was a genocidal attempt to wipe out a population in order to crush an armed rebellion. Some of the estimated 40 chemical weapons attacks conducted during al-Anfal could be ambiguously shrouded under the fog of the Iran-Iraq border war. Even then, Halabja was not one of them. The available evidence suggests that because Halabja was not part of the original plan for al-Anfal I, and because of the strategic threat to the Darbandi Khan Dam, the gassing of the Halabja was not motivated by ethnic cleansing, but rather was a defensive military decision, notwithstanding its inhumanity and illegality under international law. Moreover, not only was Halabja gassed, but so also were the fields and hills around it where Iranian soldiers were positioned, suggesting that civilians may not even have been the primary targets.

US Government's Response to Halabja

The first news of the Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja was reported by Iran at the UN Security Council on March 18, 1988. Given a reasonable amount of time to digest the Iranian allegation and to formulate a US policy response, assistant secretary of state Richard W Murphy, speaking about the Iran-Iraq war on March 22 had not one word to say about Iraqi chemical weapons use either during al-Anfal I or on Halabja. Instead, his focus was entirely on defending the Gulf Arab states and US interests against Iran's "policy of intimidation, of direct military pressure, of terrorism, as well as attempts at internal destabilisation". He spoke nothing about chemical weapons or even the brutal repression of Iraqi Kurds.⁴⁴

The first response of the US department of state, through its spokesperson Charles E Redman was to condemn the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war. The Reagan administration added Iran to its stated opposition to the use of chemical weapons. While it is probable that Iran did use cyanide in a limited scale late in the war, there is no evidence that Iran used chemical weapons in the battle for Halabja.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations throughout the latter half of March 1988, the representatives of Iran and Iraq vigorously traded charges of civilian casualties and war crimes. Yet there is no official record of the US representative having had anything to say during this entire debate on the subject of Halabja or Iraqi chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war.

It was not until after the UN Security Council adopted resolution 612 on May 9, 1988 condemning "continued use of chemical weapons in the conflict between Iran and Iraq contrary to the obligations under the Geneva Protocol" that the US representative issued a statement supporting the council's action. This came fully seven weeks after Iran first accused Iraq of dropping poison gas on Halabja. The resolution came in response to the findings of a UN investigative mission to Iran and Iraq, dispatched by the secretary-general after the Halabja incident. The US account of resolution 612 deliberately twisted its provisions when it stressed US "support for the Council's action, condemning illegal use of chemical weapons by both Iran and Iraq, and calling for strict international controls on exports of chemical weapons precursors to both parties".⁴⁵ The actual resolution was never so specific about who was at fault.

White House did not make any public response to Iraqi use of chemical weapons in the wake of Halabja until May 17, 1988. In a statement on president Reagan's meeting with Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres, White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater noted in passing that "chemical weapons are creating a far more ominous military environment".⁴⁶ He never once mentioned Iraq, Kurds or Halabja.

The first official public White House comment on chemical weapons use specific to the Iran-Iraq war did not come until after the end of hostilities. On September 26, 1988, president Reagan addressed the United Nations General Assembly, saying, "...at this moment another ominous terror is loose once again in the world, ...poison gas, chemical warfare. ... We condemn it. The use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, beyond its tragic human toll, jeopardises the moral and legal strictures that have held those weapons in check since first world war".⁴⁷ Still there was no mention of Halabja, no apparent need to single it out.

Meanwhile, in Congress it was not Halabja, but rather the final brutal phases

of al-Anfal more than five months later, that prompted legislative action to impose additional sanctions on Iraq for use of chemical weapons. The “Sanctions against Iraqi Chemical Weapons Use Act (HR 5337)” was in mark-up before the House committee on foreign relations on September 22, 1988 when Peter Burleigh, deputy assistant secretary for near eastern and south Asian affairs, expressed the department of state’s opposition:

We cannot support this legislation because we do not believe sanctions now would bring us closer to the objective we share with this committee of ending chemical weapons use by Iraq once and for all.

As the committee is aware, on September 17 the foreign minister of Iraq [Tariq Aziz] formally, quoted, ‘Reaffirmed that Iraq respects and abides by all provisions of international law and international agreements accepted by the international community including the Geneva Protocol of 1925 and other agreements within the framework of international humanitarian law’.

We believe this is an important statement and a positive step. We are discussing its significance with the government of Iraq. ...But we believe that the passage of this legislation now would undercut our efforts with Iraq and damage US exporters without furthering the goal of ending use by Iraq of chemical weapons.⁴⁸

In other words, the Reagan administration was now ready to take the word of the Iraqi government that it will abide by the very Geneva Protocol that it had flouted for eight long years. Moreover, the administration stood opposed to sanctions that would have been weaker than those already in place in 1980 at the start of the Iran-Iraq war.

It was not until 1990 that the US government would try to substantiate what it was trying to do since 1988, that is to deflect blame for chemical weapons use away from Iraq and redirect at least some of the blame towards Iran. The US Army war college report authored by a team led by Steven C Pelletiere concluded that Iran, not Iraq, was responsible for the chemical weapons attack on Halabja. Arguing that “blood agents” were allegedly responsible for killing Kurds in Halabja, and that since Iraq had no prior history of using such agents while Iran did, therefore, Iran must have done it.⁴⁹ However, beyond the overwhelming body of evidence against this thesis cited earlier, Pelletiere’s conclusion has two fundamental flaws. First, the photographs of Halabja gas

victims suggest use of mustard gas and cyanide, and Christine Gosden’s clinical examinations produced evidence of use of mustard gas and the nerve agents sarin, tabun, and VX. There is no evidence that Iran then possessed the capability to produce these more sophisticated nerve agents. Second, while it remains unclear whether Iraq had previously used blood agents in its war with Iran, both hydrogen cyanide (HCN) and cyanogen chloride (CICN) are extremely simple molecules that are relatively easy to produce. Given Iraq’s sophisticated production facilities at Samarra, al-Ramadi, and al-Muthanna, Iraq could easily have produced these blood agents without difficulty.

However, by the time the Army war college report came out in December 1990, Iraq had occupied Kuwait, and the US tilt towards Iraq had decisively reversed to a collision course. US policy no longer had a need for the Army war college report, eventually propelling Steven Pelletiere into opposition to US war policy. By June 1990, well before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, the first Bush administration had already shifted from deflecting discussion away from Iraq’s chemical weapons to blasting it. On June 15, the deputy assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, Joshua R Gilder, proclaimed: “After the ceasefire with Iran, Iraq’s campaign to dislodge rebels from the areas they controlled was accompanied by the shocking, indiscriminate use of chemical weapons – killing thousands of men, women and children. After Iraqi troops regained these areas, destruction of villages and towns, and population transfers were speeded up, until finally some 5,00,000 – about one-seventh of the entire Kurdish population of Iraq – were displaced”.⁵⁰

Thus, when it did not suit US policy in the Gulf, the Halabja incident was virtually ignored. But as soon as Iraq fell out of favour, Halabja, al-Anfal, and unilateral Iraqi chemical weapons use suddenly became serious human rights concerns.

Chemical Weapons Duplicity

While the US government was taking an ambivalent public position on Iraqi chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war, and then began condemning it after 1989, it was not so ambivalent about its own chemical weapons programme. At

the same time that president Reagan in September 1988 belatedly started to condemn chemical warfare by Iraq, the US military was engaged in a modernisation programme to replace its unary chemical weapons stockpile with a new generation of binary chemical weapons beginning on December 17, 1987.

The Halabja incident coincided with the disclosure in Europe that NATO had requested the US to produce and supply new binary chemical weapons. These would come from the production line that was started up in December 1987. Of the 681 chemical weapon missile launchers to be built, over 300 would be deployed by NATO on European soil. Also disclosed in Europe, but apparently suppressed in the US, was the revelation that “the US is starting work on chemical weapons for air-launched cruise missiles”.⁵¹

So much for the Geneva Protocol of 1925 – it prohibits use, but not development or possession.

Incremental Pretexts for War

Halabja was virtually forgotten by the US government for nearly a decade. Then suddenly out of the blue on March 16, 2000, US department of state spokesman, James P Rubin, issued a statement on the 12th anniversary of the Halabja massacre. For the first time, he recognised that “Halabja was not an isolated incident”, but occurred in the context of a systematic campaign known as al-Anfal. He said, “We are working towards the day when those ultimately responsible for the decision to order the poison gas bombardment of Halabja can be brought to justice before an international tribunal, in a free and democratic Iraq, or wherever they may be found”.⁵² This was followed by a nearly-identical statement by Richard Boucher on the 13th anniversary in 2001.⁵³ Both statements preceded the September 11 terrorist attacks, and were irrespective of Bill Clinton or George W Bush being

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president. In historical retrospect it is now clear that these two press statements were laying the early foundation for another US invasion of Iraq well before any official declaration of the “war on terror”. This fact alone demonstrates that September 11 was never a real reason for invading Iraq, only another false pretext.

After September 11, the US government accelerated its search for pretexts for war against Iraq using the Halabja incident. In December 2002, the US department of state posted a new webpage, ‘The Lessons of Halabja: An Ominous Warning’. The document wrote of the horrors of chemical warfare and of the long-term adverse effects documented by Gosden, but it was not quite yet ready to conclude that Halabja incident was a diabolical poison gas experiment on innocent human beings. Yet without providing a shred of evidence for it, the document ended with an apparent afterthought: “For the Iraqi regime, Halabja appears to have been a testing ground”.⁵⁴

Coincidentally, at the same time, the Kurdistan regional government in exile began to circulate an anonymously-authored article entitled ‘Experiment in Evil’ attributed to the *Sydney Morning Herald* dated December 7, 2002 which offered no further evidence or basis for labelling the Halabja incident an “experiment”.⁵⁵

Curiously, secretary of state Colin Powell’s address to the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003 mentioned Iraqi chemical weapons 39 times, but made only one reference to the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, and without ever mentioning Halabja by name.⁵⁶ Thus, it would appear that the final decision to leverage the chemical weapons attack on Halabja for its propaganda value in the justification for launching a war on Iraq was made some time during the five weeks between February 5 and March 13 when the Halabja propaganda blitz began. It is equally clear that the decision to add unsubstantiated diabolical dimensions to the Halabja incident did not come easily, for elements within the US intelligence community resisted the extraordinary stretching of the truth. The CIA and DIA documents proved that the Halabja “experiment” was a lie, but the intelligence agencies and the department of state were overridden by the White House.

For president George W Bush, there was no turning back on the road to war on Iraq, no matter that each of the five pretexts

for war was based on sheer fabrications. On the 15th anniversary of the Halabja incident, Bush laid out five reasons for war. Four years later, every one of those five reasons had collapsed. Now it is clear that there were no legitimate reasons for war, except, of course, control over oil, petrodollar recycling, dollar hegemony, and the political and economic future of west Asia.⁵⁷ As internal White House memos have always indicated in reference to US interest in ensuring a stable supply of oil, “More than just energy markets could be harmed by a disruption. Security of international economic and financial systems [are] dependent on the flow of oil”.⁵⁸

A Halabja Forgotten

Two years after Halabja became the cause célèbre for the US invasion in 2003, the long-promised US reconstruction aid that had once trickled in had dried up entirely. Just in time for the 17th anniversary of the Halabja incident, residents learned that the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had cancelled the water purification project planned for the town. Valued at approximately \$ 10 million, the water project was a minute piece of the more than \$18 billion allocated by Congress in 2003 for the vast task of rebuilding Iraq. But as the security situation deteriorated in Iraq, billions of dollars were shifted from reconstruction to force protection, and equipping and training the Iraqi army and police.⁵⁹

A portion of the reconstruction funds had been channelled through the Kurdish regional government, but residents of Halabja have long claimed that little of the money ever reaches them. They have claimed that most of the reconstruction money has been siphoned off through corruption in the PUK that runs this south-eastern section of Iraqi Kurdistan. When government officials gathered once again to celebrate the 18th anniversary of the Halabja massacre, enraged residents burned the Halabja Museum, inaugurated in September 2003 by Colin Powell in protest against PUK and central government hypocrisy.⁶⁰ Not only had the US government forgotten Halabja, but Kurdish and Iraqi rulers themselves had forgotten its true human rights significance.

Now Halabja had come full circle. First when Iraq used chemical weapons against the Iranians, that was to be ignored. When Iraq used chemical weapons against its

Kurdish citizens, that was also to be ignored. Then when the chemical weapons attack on Halabja massacred as many as 5,000 people, that was also to be ignored. When the US resumed its own advanced chemical weapons production, that was to be kept quiet. Then when Saddam Hussein became the demon after invading Kuwait in 1990, Iraqi chemical weapons became an issue, but not yet Halabja. Only when it came to a desperate search for pretexts to invade Iraq in 2003 did Halabja become a star – the star whose resurrected massacre would become the rallying cry for a new war on Iraq without end. For all the attention once bestowed upon it, Halabja today remains a shattered city – shattered in body, mind, and spirit. It is once again forgotten – discarded when it is no longer needed as a pretext for war by the world’s sole superpower, discarded by its own government, and discarded by its own Iraqi Kurdish leaders. [E]

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Notes

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