

## FOUR

### WAR IN KURDISTAN

"The essential point [about Saddam Hussein] is that he's a thug who has been willing to murder some of the people closest to him, who has used chemical weapons against his own people, who has invaded his neighbors. He is probably the most dangerous individual in the world today. . . . The question of Saddam Hussein is at the very core of the war against terrorism. . . . He is the symbol of defiance of all Western values.

— Richard Perle, chairman of the Defense Policy Board, PBS  
Frontline, November 8, 2001

#### Gas Attacks against Kurds in Iran

Civilian immunity is a cardinal principle of international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war, the primary sources of which are the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is also one of the prohibitions most commonly violated. The Iran–Iraq war proved no exception. Both sides committed atrocities that amounted to war crimes.

Soon after its forces were expelled from Iranian territory in 1982, Iraq began attacking Iranian civilians and civilian structures, usually in response to Iranian military thrusts. Iran retaliated with outrages of its own, prompting the UN to plead with both sides to protect civilians. Because of rising tit-for-tat attacks on civilian areas, the UN sent a team of experts to the Gulf in 1983 to investigate. Touring the war zone, the experts concluded that Iraq had repeatedly acted without regard for civilian lives, using cluster munitions in residential areas, attacking hospitals, and so forth, and had razed Iranian towns before

withdrawing in 1982. As for Iran, the team suggested it had paid insufficient regard to civilian lives when targeting Iraqi industrial complexes and oil facilities.<sup>1</sup>

At various times during the war, the UN was able to broker bilateral agreements to halt attacks against residential areas. This put restraints on the two belligerents – but only until one side managed to advance militarily, which provoked a counterattack against civilians, which then prompted an in-kind retaliation that restored the balance of terror. Morally repugnant and cowardly as it was, targeting civilians had a military objective: to undermine support of the war by damaging people's morale. During the course of the war both sides escalated this tactic, causing greater destruction, larger numbers of casualties, and more terror affecting larger population groups, including residents of major cities like Tehran and Baghdad.

Understanding terror's potency, Iraq soon advanced its use of chemical weapons from the battlefield to threaten vulnerable civilians. By 1987, Iran had announced improvements in its chemical defenses, so as to raise troop morale and discourage Iraqi CW use as futile. Ironically, this may instead have persuaded the Iraqis to target civilians as a way of putting new pressure on Iran to end the conflict.

The majority of civilian gassing victims were Kurds, both in Iran and Iraq. The first such gas attack, however, seemed to target Iranian towns in the south, far from Kurdistan. In April 1987, Iran's foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, claimed that Iraq had "repeatedly resorted to chemical warfare on a very large scale" against residential areas, killing and injuring civilians in Abadan, Khorramshahr, and Mared. UN failure to condemn earlier Iraqi gas attacks, he charged, had "eroded the authority of all rules and principles of international humanitarian law," and he called on the Security Council to recognize its "moral and constitutional responsibility in the face of this dangerous qualitative and quantitative escalation of the use of chemical weapons."<sup>2</sup> The three towns largely had been evacuated, however, and the majority of casualties were therefore likely Iranian troops.

Still, noting an alarming escalation on the southern front, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar dispatched yet another team of experts. Iranian rhetoric peaked in the days before the team's arrival in Tehran, with the accusation that Iraq's gassing of civilians constituted war crimes.<sup>3</sup> The investigation confirmed the team's worst fears. Observing that the

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number of chemical casualties among Iranian troops and the severity of their injuries were "considerably less" than the previous year (presumably because of improvements in protective gear), the experts nonetheless said they were "very disturbed" to find "numerous civilian casualties" from mustard gas attacks.<sup>4</sup>

On May 14 the Security Council issued yet another presidential note in lieu of a resolution, in which it restated the now standard language condemning both the "repeated use of chemical weapons" and the "prolongation of the conflict" – in other words, castigating Iran and Iraq in equal measure.<sup>5</sup> To both sides the text must have sounded like a broken record, though the Iraqis could take heart from the council's failure, once again, to attach any form of sanction to their grave violation of the laws of war. And so the stage was set for further atrocities.

In the meantime, Iraq had started to extend its chemical warfare northward, to the Kurdish regions of both Iran and Iraq. New Iranian accusations reached the UN on an almost daily basis, mostly concerning Iraqi chemical attacks in Iranian Kurdistan: an attack on villages in the Baneh area on April 16 (ten villagers reported injured); attacks on villages near Baneh, Penjwin, and Serdasht on May 7 and 8 (at least ninety-two reported civilian injuries); and an attack on the town of Serdasht on June 28, killing more than a hundred and injuring thousands, the majority civilians.

The latter attack was of considerable significance. Serdasht, a Kurdish town near the border and close to the front, had become both a refuge for displaced villagers and a regular encampment for Iranian troops, who used it as a staging area. Serdasht had experienced frequent air bombardments, and in the days prior to the chemical attack, Iranian and Iraqi forces had been battling on nearby Mamanda mountain, then the front line. At first, the Iranians, joined by PUK peshmergas, prevailed, blunting an Iraqi assault. But, recounted Hama Hama Sa'id, a PUK participant in the battles (interview, 2002), Iraq's forces regrouped and rebounded, taking full control of the area. It was then that Iraq launched a chemical attack on the town (see Preface). Witnesses in Serdasht claim that Iraqi planes discharged several chemical bombs, then circled for a full twenty minutes before disappearing over the horizon.<sup>6</sup>

For a direct attack on a town that, unlike many towns on the southern front, had not been evacuated, the casualty toll in Serdasht was fairly

low, certainly if measured against the standard that would be set by Iraq in Halabja a year later. By conservative accounts, only thirty civilians died on the day of the attack, another sixty-six within the first month, eight more within a year, and another seven in the next thirteen years – a total of 111 (in 2002).<sup>7</sup> Although these deaths reportedly all involved mustard gas, there may have been victims of nerve agents as well, as eyewitness accounts suggest; these victims may have been Iranian troops, who were not included in the Serdasht body count. Yaghoub Ghotsian, an Iranian nurse, described (interview, 2002) how, when serving in one of the army's emergency clinics in Serdasht, he rushed to the chemical weapons unit when the attack started. There had been regular gas attacks on Iranian troops in surrounding areas in previous days, he said, and so the army was well prepared:

The first thing I saw was a soldier who came running in, yelling there had been a chemical attack. Within two minutes he died. He was a young, healthy person, well built, and he had no symptoms, so this was a surprise to us. It must have been nerve gas. We treated some 2,000 patients in twelve hours. Many died on the spot; I saw perhaps a hundred. We assumed these were nerve gas victims. The others we divided into two groups. Those with skin problems we assumed to have mustard gas injuries, so we gave them a bath and administered thio-sulphate. The second group had no symptoms. We gave them a sugar and saline solution intravenously, assuming they were merely hysterical.

Many observers at the time saw the Serdasht attack as a dangerous escalation. The Iranians attributed it directly to the Security Council's failure to act against Iraq's earlier gas attacks: The council's "feeble statement" of May 14, Foreign Minister Velayati charged, was interpreted by Iraq as "a *carte blanche* for its continued resort to chemical weapons."<sup>8</sup> Yet the literature on the Iran–Iraq war contains only fleeting references to the Serdasht attack. Seen in the context of all Iraqi chemical attacks, perhaps the event appeared routine. Nevertheless, Velayati referred to it as a "tragedy [that] should be recorded in encyclopaedia and history books alongside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the first city in the world which fell victim to chemical bombardment." Apart from the hyperbole, he had one thing right: This was indeed the first gassing of a town in history. As such, it foreshadowed the Halabja attack the next year.

As it turns out, receiving end of the gas was not limited to the town of Halabja. It was also used in other parts of Iraq, including in Kurdistan. The attacks did not broadcast the full extent of the gas and erosion of the environment. (interview, 2002) attacks on the town happened in Serdasht. The victims, who were not on Serdasht were not claim that the war neither drew surviving victims

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As it turns out, it was Serdasht's bad fortune not only to be at the receiving end of an Iraqi gas attack but also to find its story overshadowed in Kurdish lore by the Halabja atrocity. The Iranian government did not broadcast news of the attack, fearing it might trigger mass panic and erosion of popular morale, according to a Foreign Ministry official (interview, 2002). By contrast, Iranian newspapers covered chemical attacks on the southern war front routinely and in detail. Soon, what happened in Serdasht had been forgotten – except, of course, by its victims, who till this day hold an annual commemoration.<sup>9</sup> One reason Serdasht was forgotten was that it was a Kurdish town; inhabitants claim that the Iranian regime cared little for the Kurds and after the war neither drew public attention to the attack, nor provided aid to the surviving victims. The other reason was what happened in Halabja.

### The Spreading Rebellion in Iraqi Kurdistan

Most Iranians had some inkling of the attacks in Iranian Kurdistan (even if these did not receive extensive coverage) by way of, for example, accounts of soldiers returning from the front. It is unlikely, however, that they knew how extensive Iraq used gas against Iraqi Kurds, at least before Halabja. The world knew a little more, in part because of Iranian complaints to the UN. These lacked detail and accuracy, however, based as they were on accounts by traumatized refugees conveyed to medical personnel who were unfamiliar with conditions across the border. Iraqi Kurdistan remained hermetically sealed to outsiders throughout the 1980s, except for a few reporters brought on regime-guided tours that revealed none of the cruelties visited on the population. It was only after Iraqi forces withdrew from Kurdistan in late 1991, well after the Gulf war, that independent investigators gained access to the region and could verify some of the earlier claims. In doing so, they had to brush up on their Kurdish history – a history suppressed and distorted by the states in which the transborder Kurdish populations lived.

The Kurdish national movement in Iraq arose, along with the Iraqi state, from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Post-World War I maneuvering by the victorious powers England and France yielded new states with new borders, as well as stateless people living across newly drawn international frontiers. The Kurds were the largest such nonstate





to camps in southern Iraq, and its leadership forced to rebuild the movement from exile in Iran.

Immediately following this disaster, the KDP broke up, with younger cadres, led by Jalal Talabani, challenging Mullah Mustafa's leadership and establishing the PUK. This development represented not only a generational but also a cultural and linguistic split. From its founding, the PUK predominated in Suran, the western part of Kurdistan centered on Suleimaniyeh, where the Surani dialect is spoken. The KDP's base, however, remained in Kurmanji-speaking Badinan, especially around the village of Barzan, the home of the KDP's founder and the son who succeeded him, Masoud Barzani. Since its inception, the KDP has remained essentially a family affair, even if it has drawn in tribal leaders, professionals, and intellectuals from Dohuk and Erbil. The PUK, by contrast, has had a broader, more urban base, although Talabani's leadership has been largely undisputed.

Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran revived these two parties' fortunes. For eight difficult years, the Iraqi regime was preoccupied with fighting the war. It sought to keep things under control in Kurdistan by buying off tribal leaders, whom it referred to as "Counselors" (*Mustasharin*) and whom it charged with policing the countryside with tribal recruits, called *Fursan* (Knights) by the regime but *jahsh* (little donkeys) by nationalist Kurds. The regime succeeded in maintaining control only in the lowlands; the more mountainous terrain became the domain of the *peshmerga* ("those who face death"), guerrillas deployed by the two main parties and a host of smaller ones – the Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP), the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP), the Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party (KPDP), the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK), and others.

These fighters moved around with great freedom, putting significant pressure on pared-down Iraqi forces. But even as the KDP and PUK relaunched their insurgency, they also confronted each other in a pattern that remains largely unchanged today: at times fighting, at other times negotiating, occasionally engaging in a tactical alliance when the broader political situation demanded it – but never overcoming a deep-seated rivalry and distrust.

Throughout the 1980s the KDP enjoyed a warm relationship with the Iranian regime. The party had its headquarters in the village of Slivana near Ziveh, a small Iranian town not far from the border with

both Turkey and Iraq. When Iraq invaded Iran, the KDP saw an opportunity to avenge the humiliating defeat of 1975 and reassert its control in Badinan, if not all of Iraqi Kurdistan. When the Iranians, having repulsed the Iraqis in 1982, sought to push Iraq onto the defensive, the KDP was eager to assist. Thus, in the summer of 1983, KDP fighters and scouts accompanied Iranian forces in their offensive at Haj Omran. Following this partially successful battle, the Iranians made several further attempts, in alliance with the KDP, to thrust into Iraq more deeply. Each time these efforts ran aground, until Iranian forces were beaten back decisively in 1986.

The Haj Omran offensive gave the KDP a chance to settle scores with the Bradosti tribe, an old rival that, because of its position between the Barzani domain and the Iranian border, could limit the KDP's access to its headquarters in Iran. Allied with Baghdad, the Bradosti militia played a key role in defending its tribal homeland. The nature of Kurdish politics was such that the KDP's animosity toward the Bradosti tribe and the historical enmity between the KDP and the PUK spawned a tactical alliance between first the PUK and the Bradostis and then the PUK and the regime in Baghdad.

Such an alliance was encouraged by the PUK's difficult relationship with Khomeini's Iran. The Iranians had repeatedly asked Talabani to take up arms against Abd-al-Rahman Qasemlou's KDP-I, an Iranian Kurdish rebel party that had long been a thorn in the Khomeini regime's side. Talabani and Qasemlou were old friends, though, and the two parties shared an urban secular socialist ideology. Talabani balked at Iranian pressure and allowed the KDP-I and six other Iranian Kurdish opposition groups to establish their headquarters in the PUK's stronghold in Jafati valley, high in the mountains north of Suleimaniyeh, nicknamed "Valley of the Parties." Iran's continuing attempts to insert troops into northern Iraq — in pursuit of the KDP-I and other rebels but also hoping to take advantage of Iraq's Achilles' heel by taking chunks of Iraqi territory with the help of the KDP — soon pushed the PUK into Baghdad's arms.

In July 1983, just as the Haj Omran battle got under way, Talabani's chief negotiator, Faridoun Abd-al-Qader, began informal talks with the regime, meeting three senior Iraqi intelligence officers at a KDP-I base in the Alaan area, due west of Serdasht inside Iran. Soon he was invited

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to Baghdad. Staying at Qasemlou's house in Baghdad, Faridoun held a series of talks with Tariq Aziz and other senior leaders in October and November. They told him, he claimed later (interview, 2002), that everything was negotiable: parliamentary elections in Iraq, release of Kurdish prisoners, expansion of the Kurdish autonomous region, even the status of Kirkuk. In early 1984, Jalal Talabani and Saddam Hussein met in Baghdad to discuss Kirkuk, the potential deal breaker. According to Faridoun, Saddam said he was pleased with the progress made and appeared ready to make a significant concession on Kirkuk, saying: "I don't want to say Kirkuk is an Arab city, but it also isn't a Kurdish one. It cannot fall within the Kurdish autonomous zone, but it also does not have to stay under central control. We can work out a joint administration." But the regime issued a warning as well. According to Neywshirwan Mustafa Amin, Talabani's deputy (interview, 1993), Tariq Aziz told the Kurdish leaders: "If you help us, we will never forget it. But if you oppose us, we also will never forget it. And after the war is over, we will destroy you and all your villages completely."

These talks came at a time when Iraq was faring poorly in the war and Saddam Hussein needed all the allies he could find. Moreover, the negotiations allowed Iraqi forces to be shifted from Kurdistan to the southern front. But soon after Iraq, using mustard and nerve gas, successfully blocked Iran's Khaybar offensive in March 1984, PUK negotiators noticed that their counterparts began using delaying tactics. Negotiations stretched over the entire year and, depending on Iraq's battlefield fortunes, either progressed or stalled, recalled Faridoun. A final round of talks in November, just as Iraq and the US resumed diplomatic relations, collapsed after twenty days. Further low-level contacts failed to reverse the downward path, and when the pro-government Kurdish militia of Tahsin Shaweis killed a senior PUK commander, Mama Risha, in January 1985, daggers were drawn. In skirmishes in February, PUK guerrillas defeated Iraqi troops near Jafati valley, where they now returned to reestablish their headquarters.

Fearing a rapprochement between the PUK and Iran, Iraqi forces furiously attacked the mountain chain stretching from Suleimaniyeh to the border, destroying all the villages and relocating their inhabitants to large, bare-bones complexes (*mujamma'at*) in the lowlands. Outside this cordon sanitaire, the PUK managed to extend its writ over large

swaths of rural territory, leaving the Iraqis in control only of major towns and the roads connecting them. Clashes were continuous in a low-level insurgency that Iraq could not end and the peshmergas could not win.

Unable to fight a two-front war, the PUK soon began to explore better relations with Iran. Their main interlocutors were intelligence officers in the Karargeh Ramazan ("Ramadan Command"), a Pasdaran security force with primary responsibility for Iraqi Kurdistan that controlled the Kurds' access to Iran, collected data on their movements, and generally kept them in check while fighting dissident Iranian Kurds. Sherdel Abdullah Howeizi, the PUK's liaison with the Karargeh Ramazan, explained the mutual benefits that would flow from better relations:

According to Iranian propaganda, we still had relations with the Iraqi regime. At one point an Iranian group came to reconnoiter the area of Jafati valley and visited us, meeting with Mr. Talabani. That day, Iraqi jets bombed the area of our headquarters, and so the Iranians understood our new situation. They also could see that we had peshmergas based near the towns who could put pressure on the regime. After this, our relations began to improve. We needed Iran, especially to obtain medicines and treatment for wounds. There was also a lively smuggling market in the area, plus Kurds in both countries maintained close bonds. And it was important to us that we could travel abroad via Iran and that Westerners could reach us as well.

When the PUK asked for military support, the Iranians made a stipulation, said Faridoun. They wanted the PUK to assume a greater role in the war: "The Kurdish insurgency was not enough; they wanted to see a major attack on Iraqi forces." This suited the PUK, which ever since the failed negotiations, had wanted to strike the Iraqi regime where it hurt the most: Kirkuk. The Kirkuk oil fields had become strategically critical to the regime because of continuous Iranian attacks on oil installations at Basra. The Pasdaran liked the PUK's proposal but needed reassurance it was realistic, so a handful of senior Pasdaran officers, including Muhammad Ja'fari, the commander of Karargeh Ramazan, joined a PUK group on a reconnaissance mission to Kirkuk. "When they saw with their own eyes that our forces were close to Kirkuk," continued Faridoun, "they pledged their full support. They offered us more than

fifty tons of weapons and *Esrellas*," shoulder-fired rockets. In an interview viewed in 2000, recounted several helicopters and

In October 1986, clashes between the villages and the militias, in a single night. GRAD and Katyusha rockets. Howeizi, who had obtained a secondary college in the 1970s, the enemy well. The Iranian Revolution Forces in Kirkuk were a man who graduated with a degree, however, the two thousand were accompanied by civilian experts, whom the *fanniin*).

The attack took place according to Sherdel, a claim on Kirkuk and Iraq. The Kurds, Sherdel claimed, lost none, and they were successful, the Pasdaran allowed training them in their use as a major Iranian operation "destroy the economic areas." The operation was a ping-pong game. Bayes, a Kurd who witnessed whose brother, a PUK member (interview, 2005) in the areas east of Kirkuk that hood. The Iranians, he said, mortars.

Regardless of its scope, the attack was a major upset for the Iraqis, as it



fifty tons of weapons and explosives, as well as training in the use of *Estrellas*," shoulder-fired heat-seeking missiles. (An Iraqi pilot, interviewed in 2000, recounted that the Kurds had managed to bring down several helicopters and Pilatus planes with Estrella and SAM rockets.)

In October 1986, the peshmergas, driving over unpaved roads between the villages and helped by friends inside the pro-regime *jahsh* militias, in a single night hauled some forty tons of weapons to Kirkuk: GRAD and Katyusha rockets and 80 mm and 120 mm mortars. Sherdel Howeizi, who had obtained a degree in field artillery at Iraq's military college in the 1970s and participated in the attack, said he knew the enemy well. The Iraqi commander in charge of Iraq's Oil Protection Forces in Kirkuk was Gen. Bareq al-Haj Hunta, "a good artillery man who graduated with me." Untrained in the use of these weapons, however, the two thousand or so peshmergas who carried out the raid were accompanied by close to a hundred Pasdaran fighters and explosives experts, whom they referred to as a "technical force" (*quwa-t-al-fanniyyin*).

The attack took place in the early hours of October 12 and was, according to Sherdel, a lightning strike intended to do some damage but, most importantly, to send a message to Baghdad that the Kurds had a claim on Kirkuk and had allies who could help them take the area. The Kurds, Sherdel claimed, lost only six or seven fighters, the Pasdaran lost none, and they were gone at dawn. Exulting in the strike's success, the Pasdaran allowed the Kurds to keep the weapons and started training them in their use. Iranian propaganda later glorified the attack as a major Iranian operation, called Fatah 1, whose objective was to "destroy the economic and military installations of Kirkuk."<sup>10</sup> In fact, the operation was a pinprick that caused only minor damage. Miqdad Bares, a Kurd who witnessed the raid from his home in Kirkuk and whose brother, a PUK peshmerga, participated in it as a guide, remembered (interview, 2005) a multipronged attack originating in Kurdish areas east of Kirkuk that targeted military posts near his neighborhood. The Iranians, he said, instructed Kurdish fighters in the use of mortars.

Regardless of its scope and impact, the strike represented a stunning upset for the Iraqis, as it caught their forces defending the oil fields by

complete surprise. It also sent an unambiguous warning that a potent new Kurdish-Iranian alliance could open a second front in a war in which Iraq, following the debacles at Faw and Mehran, was not doing well. For the regime the Kirkuk attack could not have come at a worse time. It was another blow to the nation's pride and this, added to a sense of deep betrayal, goes a long way in explaining the depth of anger that informed the regime's military response once it was capable of launching one.

### Chemical Ali's Reign

The successful raid on Kirkuk earned the PUK new Iranian respect for its capabilities and sealed a far-reaching cooperative accord that would define the relationship between the two until the end of the war. According to Neywshirwan, it included a reciprocal commitment that if either party faced a serious military threat, the other would open a second front to relieve the pressure – a significant agreement that helps explain the events in Halabja in 1988. Invited to Tehran, Jalal Talabani, Faridoun Abd-al-Qader, and other senior PUK officials met with the Iranian leadership, including the powerful parliament speaker (and future president), Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. "From then on our relationship was very strong," recalled Faridoun. "But when we returned to our bases in Jafati valley, we said to each other: 'The Kurds really have had luck. The whole world supports Iraq against Iran, and now we have decided to support Iran against Iraq.'"

In their Tehran talks, the PUK negotiators managed to overcome one sore point that had blocked a closer alliance: the PUK's friendship with the Iranian Kurdish parties. Talabani later declared that it took him two years to persuade Iran that the PUK would not attack the KDP-I and Komala, a smaller party, on its behalf.<sup>11</sup> Another hurdle was the KDP. Iran's prodding helped push the two parties back into each other's arms. In an Iranian-brokered reconciliation in November 1986 that included reciprocal prisoner releases, the parties set up the Kurdistan Front, a coalition that incorporated several smaller parties as well.

From then on, the peshmerga forces started operating jointly, seizing effective control of the entire region demarcated by the defunct autonomy agreement of 1974, minus the larger towns and main roads.

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They ran active underground operations that launched urban attacks and staged popular protests. The peshmergas also established, trained, and armed "backing forces" in the villages – civil defense units of able-bodied men, including many army deserters and draft dodgers who had found refuge there. Thus reinforced, the peshmergas attacked Iraqi military positions and camps, harassing army convoys and putting great pressure on the jahsh militias. A mustashar might be firmly in Baghdad's camp, having been bought with a hefty salary and expensive gifts, but his foot soldiers often suffered from divided loyalties. Many surreptitiously aided their rural relatives. Even some of the mustashars covertly negotiated deals with the rebels to secure their relatives' survival, quietly supporting the insurgency as it gained strength while running checkpoints on the main roads and at the entrances to towns to keep up appearances.

These developments further raised the threat level for the Iraqis, who not only saw their control of Kurdistan shrinking by the day, but also realized that the Kurds were approaching Kirkuk by infiltrating the surrounding countryside and bringing the population over to their cause. The regime took a good look and found wanting its "super-governor" in Kirkuk, Muhammad Hamza al-Zubeida, who oversaw counterinsurgency efforts. The man chosen to replace him was Saddam Hussein's cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, a coarse and brutal man who headed Iraq's secret police, the Amn. On March 18, 1987, Iraq's ruling Revolutionary Command Council appointed al-Majid chief of the Ba'ath party's Northern Bureau in Kirkuk, granting him broad latitude to suppress the rebellious Kurds.

Al-Majid understood from his predecessor's failed performance, which he decried in his speeches, that the guerrillas derived much of their strength not just from the mountainous terrain but also, critically, from the population's support. He therefore needed to break the nexus between guerrillas and villagers. His chosen weapon was gas. Its widespread use in the Kurdish countryside in 1987–1988 would earn him the nickname "Ali Kimiyawi," Chemical Ali.

Al-Majid's use of gas was an integral part of a two-pronged strategy to defeat the insurgency. One component was to depopulate the countryside. To this end, al-Majid undertook a three-stage village destruction campaign in the spring and summer of 1987. Army engineers equipped

with bulldozers and dynamite and backed by military forces first moved into villages and subdistrict towns (*nahyas*) located on paved roads that were easy to reach. Then they moved against villages nestled against the mountainsides, where guerrillas used the tall vegetation to spring ambushes on poorly motivated Iraqi troops. The third stage, aimed at villages in the higher mountain valleys, could not be accomplished in 1987 and was postponed for a year. Human Rights Watch later concluded that al-Majid's destruction campaign was "an extraordinarily thorough enterprise," the evidence of which was "visible all over Iraqi Kurdistan, with many villages not so much demolished as pulverized."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, al-Majid declared the entire countryside, whether destroyed or yet untouched, "prohibited." Villagers stayed there at their own risk, targeted by helicopter gunships, army units on patrol, or roving bands of *jahsh* fighters.

The other component of al-Majid's strategy was to decapitate the Kurdish leadership – to cut off the "head of the snake." Air bombardments, artillery shelling, and infantry assaults had all proven incapable of dislodging the rebels from their many redoubts. Al-Majid now tried to use gas to smoke them out, funnel them into open terrain, and defeat them there with conventional forces. Topography, however, worked against this strategy. Gas hung like a cloud low in the valleys, rarely reaching into the caves or drifting upward. The *peshmergas* learned to find uncontaminated air simply by climbing up the mountainsides.

The regime soon realized that the *peshmergas*' main vulnerability was the rural population that sustained them, and that by gassing civilians it could break the rebels' fighting spirit – demoralize them to the point of paralysis. After all, the Kurdish parties justified their insurgency as necessary to protect the people. Chemical weapons' brutal effectiveness would expose the hollowness of this claim. The Iraqi discovery emerged gradually over the year, and then, merging with the frustrated objective to depopulate the entire countryside, mutated dangerously into another idea altogether: Use gas to flush villagers from their homes, gather them up, take them to faraway sites, and dispose of them – bury them under the desert sands and thereby end the Kurdish rebellion forever.

No one expressed his intentions better than al-Majid himself. In a speech to the party faithful in 1987, he warned that no one in rural

Kurdistan would follow them if they failed.

I told the mustasfa' that they won't let us attack it with chemicals. You must leave it. I decide to attack the chemical weapon community? Fuck who listen to them.

This is my intention. We will start attacking the military plan, even if it's one-third or one-half in taking two-thirds and attack them with chemicals just one day. I will not survive myself will not survive.

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In the spring of 1987, the regime began to experiment with chemical weapons. It had yet to be used. In the summer, the leadership, Kurdish leadership, the virtual chokehold on the rebels. The army built positions, holding it under control (though not smuggling).

On the night of August 18, 1987, Iraqi troops in the mountains of Dastani Rezgari – Chuarta, Mawat, Jabe, Kurdish participants, guerrillas almost reached,



Kurdistan would be spared, not even the allied mustashars and their followers if they failed to leave their villages:

I told the mustashars that they might say they like their villages and that they won't leave. I told them: "I cannot let your village stay. I will attack it with chemical weapons. Then you and your family will die. You must leave right now. I will not be able to warn you on the day I decide to attack with chemical weapons." 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. . . .

This is my intention. . . . As soon as we complete the deportations, we will start attacking them everywhere according to a systematic military plan, even their strongholds. In our attacks we will take back one-third or one-half of what is under their control. If we succeed in taking two-thirds, then we will surround them in a small pocket and attack them with chemical weapons. 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.<sup>13</sup>

The idea for the Anfal campaign was born.

### "Special" Communications Channels

In the spring of 1987, however, both sides were still feeling each other out and experimenting with new methods of attack and defense. Gas had yet to be used. If al-Majid wanted to decapitate the Kurdish leadership, Kurdish leaders in turn wanted to remove as quickly as possible the virtual chokehold the Iraqi military held on their main headquarters. The army built positions on mountaintops ringing the Jafati valley, holding it under continuous siege and controlling the points of access (though not smugglers' paths).

On the night of April 13–14, a force of PUK peshmergas engaged Iraqi troops in the mountains surrounding Jafati valley – the "Battle of Dastani Rezgari" – pushing them out of military camps at Azmar, Chuarta, Mawat, Jabel Spi, and elsewhere. According to one of the Kurdish participants, Jamal Hama Karim (interview, 2000), the guerrillas almost reached, and seized, the road linking Suleimaniyeh with

the town of Dukan on the edge of Dukan lake, where a dam on the Lesser Zab (a tributary of the Tigris) yields energy for the region.

The Iraqi counterattack came the same day and included al-Majid's first signal that times were changing. Though unsuccessful in retaking lost territory, the attack saw the first recorded use of gas in Kurdistan that was not, as at Haj Omran and Penjwin in 1983, primarily directed at Iranian forces. In it, Sherdel Howeizi became, as he later called it, al-Majid's "first chemical weapons casualty." As a long-time peshmenga he had grown accustomed to the scent of phosphorus, which he likened to the smell of onions. In the evening of April 15, as he hunkered down in Jafati valley expecting an Iraqi counterattack, shells started to rain down. This did not concern him greatly, as surviving artillery attacks had become as ordinary as going fishing or bringing in the harvest. However, "the explosions sounded strange to me," Sherdel recalled:

These were not normal shells. They produced smoke. I smelled onions. Some of our men were slightly injured. In the morning I noticed that my hand had blistered and my head hurt. I went to see Mam Jalal [Talabani] and Kak Faridoun at once to tell them we had been attacked with phosphorus. But my cousin, Shalow, who is a doctor, was there. He took one look at my hand and said: "That's mustard gas." Mam Jalal instructed me to tell no one. We were the only four who knew. The next day there was more shelling, and then it dawned on everyone that these were chemical weapons. We had no experience!

The guerrillas may have lacked experience but not forewarning. Faridoun said he had received a message from al-Majid a month earlier—messages were being passed routinely through informal channels—in which he said: "You have made fine shelters for your peshmergas. We will use weapons that will kill you inside your shelters." "We realized then that the regime would use gas," Faridoun said. "But we decided not to tell the men, concerned about the effect on morale." Al-Majid had a similar recollection. In a Northern Bureau meeting later in 1987 he explained: "Jalal Talabani asked me to open a special communications channel with him. That evening I went to Suleimaniyeh and hit them with special ammunition"—chemical weapons.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly afterward, the dish allies, give them gas. "They explained to us... smelled," remembered Sherdel. He recalled that the Iraqis attacked, to make fires, and that the peshmergas wore scarves around our heads.

Sherdel soon observed that the Iraqis used conventional gunners used to fire conventional shells, followed by a chemical attack. "As soon as we heard the shells on the other side and move up the mountain, we knew it was conventional and chemical. It was very dangerous." He also noticed that the Iraqis fired shells with a curve range specifically for these attacks. "The shells would reach deep into the valley."

The PUK's headquarters were the only targets of al-Majid's attacks. The PUK's sole victims. On April 15, 1987, the PUK's unfamiliar injuries, Iraqi attacks on a set of villages in Balisan (malband) for Erbil. The PUK was a critical link in a chain of command. The peshmergas lived in tents. They say they were absent on the day of the attack. Sherdel offers a detailed description.

In the drizzly late afternoon, the peshmergas were in the fields and were preparing to move. They were approaching aircraft. Some of the peshmergas ran as far as their air-raid shelters. The aircraft came in sight, wheeling in circles over the households, and Sheikh V... There were muffled explosions.

A videotape made by a jihadi peshmenga recounted a cool spring breeze.



152mm shells

Shortly afterward, the Iranians sent a medical team to treat their Kurdish allies, give them gas masks, and train them in chemical defense. "They explained to us the different types of gas and how they each smelled," remembered Sherdel. "They told us to wash ourselves when attacked, to make fires, to wrap ourselves in wet blankets, and put wet scarves around our heads."

Sherdel soon observed a disturbing modification in Iraqi tactics. Iraqi gunners used to fire conventional shells to drive the guerrillas into their shelters, followed by a chemical volley to kill them inside. "So of course, as soon as we heard the softer sound of chemical shells, we'd rush outside and move up the mountainsides. But then they started using conventional and chemical shells simultaneously. This made things very dangerous." He also noticed that the Iraqis used self-propelled 152 mm shells with a curve range, "fired by an unusual artillery unit brought in specifically for these attacks and then immediately withdrawn." These shells would reach deep into their hiding places.

The PUK's headquarters and nearby peshmerga positions were not the only targets of al-Majid's first use of gas, nor were Kurdish guerrillas its sole victims. On April 16, shortly after Sherdel Howeizi incurred his unfamiliar injuries, Iraqi forces launched a major gas attack against a set of villages in Balisan valley, base of the PUK's regional command (*mulband*) for Erbil. The valley is far from the border but constitutes a critical link in a chain of valleys between Suleimaniyeh and Badinan. The peshmergas lived interspersed with the local population, but they say they were absent on the day of the attack. Human Rights Watch offers a detailed description of what happened:

In the drizzly late afternoon . . . the villagers had returned home from the fields and were preparing dinner when they heard the drone of approaching aircraft. Some stayed put in their houses; others made it as far as their air-raid shelters before the planes, a dozen of them, came in sight, wheeling in low over the two villages [Balisan, with 250 households, and Sheikh Wasanan, with 150] to unload their bombs. There were muffled explosions.<sup>13</sup>

A videotape made by a jahsh fighter recorded the attack. Witnesses later recounted a cool spring breeze and an attractive scent of smoky clouds

drifting down, but also hideous injuries and great suffering. Scores of villagers died on the spot. Many of the injured were able to reach the nearest towns, helped by peshmergas.

What happened to the survivors is a dramatic story all by itself: many died during flight, and most of those who arrived in Erbil were seized by the Amn and disappeared. Significantly, however, a small number were able to reach the border, where Iranian doctors treated their wounds and evacuated them to the regional capital Bakhtaran.

The Iranians made no secret of what had happened in Balisan. The UN's Iqbal Riza remembered (interview, 2000) that in an April 1987 visit to the Iranian Kurdish town of Baneh, itself a frequent Iraqi target, the UN team was shown Iraqis – “civilians as far as we could make out” – who had slight gas injuries. “The Iranians told us these people had been found inside Iraq. But this was not really within our mission’s terms of reference.” The problem was that the UN had a mandate to investigate chemical weapons use in the context of the Iran–Iraq war, an international armed conflict to which the 1925 Geneva Protocol fully applied. But the Protocol contains no provisions for chemical weapons use in the context of *internal* armed conflicts, such as rebel warfare or counterinsurgency campaigns. And so the team, already caught in tensions between the Security Council and the General Secretariat, was at a loss how to report the new casualties. “We were not inside Iraq,” Riza explained, “but we thought that these people’s injuries might be incidental to the war. So we signed a separate letter to the secretary-general to inform him of what we had seen. This information did not make it into the final report. It was never made public, and it was not made available to the Security Council.”

The evidence of this new atrocity was so weak – accounts by civilians injured in circumstances that could not be verified independently – that it was easily ignored, despite vigorous media campaigns by Kurdish political representatives in European capitals that triggered the occasional parliamentary question. Iraq’s leadership thus understood once again that, literally, it had gotten away with murder. It must therefore have felt totally uninhibited in its ambition to finish off the Kurdish insurgency in the shortest time possible with whatever means it had. It had reason for optimism. Life, according to Barzan Qader Muhammad, a peshmerga at the time (interview, 2004), was very tough in the villages

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and morale was low. Chemical weapons were a new phenomenon, and Kurds did not yet know how to protect themselves. "Fear was therefore great. The regime sent its agents into the villages to warn of impending chemical attacks and urge people to move into the complexes to save themselves."

By June 1987, the Iraqi advance on the Kurdish strongholds had run aground in the face of stiff resistance. Although many rural inhabitants had been moved to *mujamma'at*, many others simply fled to higher elevations, finding shelter in villages that the army had been unable to reach. They were joined by growing numbers of army deserters and draft dodgers, men who harbored no loyalty toward the regime and refused to become its cannon fodder in a war that did not represent their interests as Kurds. In response, Ali Hassan al-Majid, lord of all he could survey from his hilltop villa in Kirkuk, issued two standing orders that should be considered "smoking gun" documents. The first order, of June 3, further defined the prohibited zones. Paragraph 5 reads: "Within their jurisdiction, the armed forces must kill any human being or animal present within these areas. They are totally prohibited."

The second order, of June 20, is even more sweeping. Its paragraph 4 instructs corps commanders to "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 zones, keeping us informed of the results." Its paragraph 5 should be seen as the blueprint for the Anfal killings the next year: "All persons captured in those villages shall be detained and interrogated by the security services and those between the ages of 15 and 70 shall be executed after any useful information has been obtained from them."<sup>16</sup>

The reader may be excused for failing to note the coded instruction in paragraph 4. "Special" strikes (*darabat khaseh*) and "special" munitions (*e'taad khaseh*) were euphemisms for gas attacks, as senior Iraqi commanders well knew. This emerges unambiguously from security police and military intelligence documents, and has been confirmed by both UN chemical weapons experts and various Iraqi defectors, including MID's Wafiq al-Samarra'i and pilots who flew wartime missions.

If no significant gas attacks occurred in the prohibited zones between June and year's end, it was because Iraq was preoccupied with other matters: shepherding a ceasefire resolution through the Security

Council (July), managing a volatile naval standoff and superpower rivalry in Gulf waters, conducting its decennial census (October), countering Iranian pinprick attacks along the front, preparing its forces for Iran's next "final" offensive, and waiting for the snow to melt in Kurdistan.

### An Internal Matter

In the summer of 1987, the Reagan administration was in active pursuit of an end to the war, which was drawing US forces into the Persian Gulf, where the Soviets also maintained a significant presence. Reagan wanted a ceasefire on terms largely favorable to Iraq, thus to contain Iranian expansionism and restore stability to a region that is home to the West's principal sources of oil. In the words of the UN's Giandoménico Picco, it was "the disruption in the flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf that would finally concentrate the minds, if not the hearts, of the global community on the Iran-Iraq war."<sup>17</sup>

To what extent was Washington aware of events in Kurdistan? Western news reporting was vague and distorted, given the difficult access. But a Joint Chiefs of Staff intelligence report gives us an indication of how much the administration knew. The beginning part has been redacted, but the declassified part reads:

The fighters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, who have become the predominant factor within Kurd resistance movements, and the Kurd Democratic Party have succeeded in extending their area of control which mainly covers the mountainous border region east of the line Arbil-Kirkuk-Sulaimaniyah and north of Al Amadiyah-Dohuk. In order to counter the spreading insurgency, the Iraqi authorities embarked on a resettlement campaign, flattening some 300 villages and destroying residential areas in frequent air raids. [Section redacted.] Despite the ruthless repression, which also includes the use of chemical agents, and the reinforcement of the armed forces by several brigades of the Presidential Guard, Iraqi security operations, coordinated by Ali Hassan Al-Majid, have failed to stifle the Kurd insurgency so far.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, a CIA report dating from late 1987 or early 1988 that provides a detailed assessment of Iraqi capabilities and actions shows

considerable knowledge. Kurds, it suggested, too

... minimize the diverse losses that might be incurred by their forces. . . . Since April 1987, Iraq has eradicated village bases and has minimized losses of men and materiel. Control agents and possible chemical and biological weapons have not been used in dwellings.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the CIA was aware that Iraqi CW attacks might include preemptive uses of chemical positions, we believe. In such employments, as implied by the report, to observe the introduction of a report then cautioned: "Iraq sometimes allow technicians to operate strategically. Baghdad, the full CW resources need to be used."

Documents show that the CIA was informed. In early September 1987, Foreign Relations Committee member Haywood Rankin. Rankin's journey through Iraq as a POW. Galbraith - Death in Baghdad. Galbraith "was able to observe the situation . . . has deteriorated over the years earlier. Restricted access to the area were able to report:

Destruction of the houses and the Kurdish towns and villages. Another mile, we passed through time completely destroyed through the dust haze. and everywhere else also



considerable knowledge of events in Kurdistan. Iraq had gassed the Kurds, it suggested, to:

... minimize the diversion of troops from more critical fronts and the losses that might occur in inaccessible areas that favor guerrilla forces. . . . Since April 1987, a military campaign has been waged to eradicate village bases of support for Kurdish guerrilla groups. To minimize losses of men and materiel, Iraqi troops have used riot control agents and possibly chemical weapons repeatedly when conventional weapons have not sufficed to subdue villagers before razing their dwellings.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the CIA warned with accurate foresight, "there is evidence that Iraqi CW attacks may be evolving [from strictly defensive use] to include preemptive uses. If Iran were to threaten Iraqi perceived strategic positions, we believe that Iraq might authorize massive chemical employments, as implied by Iraqi politicians. . . . We should also expect to observe the introduction of more lethal agents such as VX." The report then cautioned: "As currently employed, chemical weapons will sometimes allow technical advantage, but are unlikely to affect the war strategically. Baghdad, thus far, has not shown the intention to commit the full CW resources necessary to gain a true strategic advantage."<sup>20</sup>

Documents show that other government branches were also well informed. In early September, Peter Galbraith, then an aide to Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Claiborne Pell, made a brief journey through Iraq accompanied by an embassy political officer, Haywood Rankin. Rankin's unpublished report, "Travels with Galbraith - Death in Basra, Destruction in Kurdistan," noted how Galbraith "was able to observe first hand that the security situation . . . has deteriorated markedly," since his previous trip three years earlier. Restricted to the main roads, the two men nonetheless were able to report:

Destruction of the houses was thorough, as we observed in all of the Kurdish towns and villages we saw destroyed - 23 in all. After another mile, we passed through another large Kurdish town, this time completely destroyed. There was rubble as far the eye could see through the dust haze. No walls were left standing. . . . In this zone and everywhere else along the highways in Kurdistan, we observed





Reagan administration in any way sought to signal its displeasure at the regime's response to the "Kurd insurgency." Doing so might have upset difficult negotiations at the Security Council that, in July, finally led to Resolution 598, which laid out the terms of the ceasefire.

The administration did something else, though. In a speech in Israel in October 1987, Secretary of State George Shultz publicly criticized "both Iran and Iraq" for using poison gas.<sup>23</sup> The accusation at Iran's expense, in the absence of proof or even strong evidence that the Iranians had used gas, served to deflect questions about Iraq, to whose brutalities on the battlefield the world had become inured. Impossible to disprove, the charge was sufficiently plausible – following Iranian threats that it might respond to Iraqi gas attacks in kind – that administration officials could employ it in both bureaucratic and public battles over the US role in the war, as the parties entered the endgame in late 1987. Given Iraqi intentions, the gambit did not come a moment too soon.

## FIVE

### HALABJA

"[I'm concerned about] Saddam Hussein using weapons of mass destruction against his own people and blaming it on us, which would fit a pattern."

– US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, *New York Times*,  
February 18, 2003

"... The Iraqi regime... was supported by the Americans and the British during the war against Iran. No one talked about Iraq when it used chemical weapons against the Kurdish people..."

– Osama bin Laden, *Newsweek*, January 11, 1999

The peshmergas roaming Kurdistan's mountains were accompanied by a man with a video camera who documented their every exploit – victories and defeats, advances and retreats, and the common people in between. His name was Abbas Abd-al-Razzaq Akbar, but his comrades called him "Abbas Video." He was in Sheikh Wasanan during the Iraqi chemical attack in April 1987, where he filmed the demise of a man named Shams-al-Din who, injured by mustard gas, died a hideous death after ten days of intense torment.

On March 16, 1988, Abbas Video crossed through Iranian territory from Jafati to Halabja, hoping to rejoin his friends, who along with Iranian troops had seized the area a day earlier. Delayed by bureaucracy, Abbas entered Iraq four days later. On his way to the border he encountered Kurdish refugees straggling into Iran; many bore signs of mustard gas injuries.

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Informed of the Halabja events, Abbas nevertheless was unprepared when he entered town (interview, 2002):

I saw whole families – mothers with their children – that nobody had touched. One of the first survivors I met was a young woman whose father I had known, a photographer named Omar Rassam. She took me to the cellar of her house. Inside, everyone was dead. She was the only survivor. All the people I met were in shock. In another cellar a dead woman was holding her son, her arm outstretched as if to beg for help. I felt as if this were my family, and so I touched her hand. It was soft. I then thought, "This is the end of all life," and I had a strong desire to lie down next to her and not get up again.

Yet he kept going, documenting the horrific scenes of sudden death, with some corpses frozen in the midst of daily routines: sitting in their courtyards; behind the wheel of their cars; holding infants to their breasts. Others, it seemed, had been caught in mid-flight as they ran to escape the poisonous clouds that arbitrarily killed some people while sparing others. Outside town, Abbas Video recalled:

The gas had killed all natural life, animals and trees. I saw thousands of goats and sheep, all dead. Also wolves. I saw a dead cow whose calf was still alive, trying to suckle. I filmed hundreds of dead animals on the roads around Halabja. I couldn't hear anything. No birds. There was absolutely no sound. Everything had died. I had to leave town every so often to go to an area where I could hear birds, because the silence drove me crazy.

### A Marriage of Convenience

In early 1988 the peshmergas effectively controlled most of rural Kurdistan, including the undulating hills of Germian (literally: "warm"), a region stretching from Suleimaniyeh westward to Kirkuk. This the Iraqi regime could not accept. Preoccupied with the war, Iraq had been unable to send forces to subdue the Kurds, but now its fortunes were turning. The Iranian military machine – Pasdaran, Basiji volunteers, and poor army foot soldiers – increasingly looked like a spent force, waiting to trudge home to family and loved ones. The Iranian spring offensive, an annual ritual, failed to materialize. And so, confident of US support, the Iraqis girded themselves for the showdown, setting their

sights on not only the Iranian adversary but also the enemy within, the treasonous Kurds, a fifth column of "saboteurs" and their families who had tried Baghdad's patience far too long.

At the first melting of snow, the regime launched a full-scale air and artillery assault on PUK headquarters in Jafati valley. The date was February 23, and the rebel leader in charge was the PUK's number two, Neywshirwan Mustafa Amin. (Jalal Talabani was in Europe rendering an account of village destruction and chemical attacks.) The operation took almost four weeks, but what caused the guerrillas' defeat was not the military onslaught, which soon ground down in the face of determined resistance in difficult terrain, nor the Iraqis' intensive use of poison gas, but the utter collapse of the peshmergas' morale. And the single reason why these hardened fighters suddenly gave up was the news they received from Halabja on March 16.

What led to the Iraqi gas attack on Halabja is controversial, a fact that helps explain subsequent confusion, disinformation, and the absence of international condemnation. It is therefore important to describe at some length the developments that preceded it.

In interviews with scores of persons either present during the attack or involved at some level of Iraqi command responsibility, no one has credibly claimed that Iran shared responsibility for the gassing on March 16. The only accusation one hears is that Iraq's brutal reprisal was a predictable consequence of the audacious Iranian-Kurdish seizure of Halabja, and that therefore the operation should never have been carried out. In Iran the matter is not subject to public debate, nor has it the same relevance, but Iraqi Kurds have been engaged in a lively discussion about the wisdom of liberating Halabja, with one leader (Shawqat Haji Mushir, a Halabja native and the PUK commander in charge of the Halabja operation) publishing a detailed version of events that amounted to an extended apologia.<sup>1</sup>

By all accounts, the Halabja operation arose from a convergence of interests between Iran and the Kurdish parties, the PUK in particular. What is controversial first of all is the precise role each played in the attack. PUK cadres are divided between those who say the affair was an Iranian military initiative – that the Kurds, once again, were pawns in a game whose objectives they never fully grasped – while others insist that the Iranians, for their own reasons, embraced the Kurdish plan – that

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it was a desperate move reflecting the Kurds' realization that the war was coming to a close and their options were rapidly diminishing.

A second controversy — over who actually entered Halabja — is even more serious, as it goes to the heart of fundamental questions of collusion and treachery. After all, the PUK had earned the official Iraqi designation "Iranian Agents" (*'Umala Iran*), while the KDP was labeled the "Offspring of Treason" (*Salili al-Khayaneh*), a direct reference to Masoud Barzani, whose father, Mullah Mustafa, had been in cahoots with the Shah during the ill-fated Kurdish revolt in the mid-1970s. There was considerable pressure on Kurdish leaders, especially from within PUK and KDP ranks, to keep their distance from Iran, lest the Kurds be seen as proxies to a foreign power, not as a political movement with its own military capabilities that had legitimate claims to territory and political status — not, in other words, as a movement of national liberation.

What is not in doubt is that each side was seeking to solve a specific problem. Iran was under tremendous political and military pressure. Its economic facilities were under attack, the US was policing the Gulf, and the UN Security Council was preparing to impose an arms embargo. Rather than launching its spring offensive, Iran matched up with Iraq in another ugly round of the "war of the cities." On February 29, Iraq launched a massive strike on Tehran, for the first time using ballistic missiles. In the next ten days, Iran fired twenty-two missiles against Iraq's sixty-eight, until both agreed to a ceasefire. The exchange affected Iraqi morale less than it did Iran's. Iraqi strikes killed many and terrorized all, compelling a fair portion of Tehran's inhabitants to flee. By contrast (according to a CIA assessment), "almost all the 20 Iranian missile attacks on Baghdad hit lightly populated areas southeast of the city," causing no public panic. As a result, "no significant number of people have left Baghdad."<sup>2</sup>

Another CIA report insightfully explained Iran's options, suggesting that by carrying out attacks short of a major offensive, Tehran was hoping to limit both international and domestic criticism: "The attacks may be away from the southern front to soothe Gulf Arab nerves and possibly limit damage to relations with Moscow and Damascus," the report said. Moreover, "by avoiding an assault on a heavily defended strategic target, the regime would be more likely to avoid high casualties in the period leading to the parliamentary elections," scheduled for

April.<sup>3</sup> In this assessment, an incursion into Iraqi Kurdistan would fit the bill, threatening no major international interests while casualties would accrue primarily to the Kurds, who were expected to do most of the heavy lifting.

Such a maneuver would also help Iran in reducing heavy pressure on the southern front by forcing Baghdad to send troops north. Moreover, with the war drawing to a close, Tehran may have sought last-minute advantage in future negotiations by acquiring Iraqi territory. It must have dawned on Iran's leadership that the insurgents had been a good deal more successful in wresting territory from the Iraqi regime than had Iranian forces in the south, and that the Kurds, unlike Iraq's Shi'ite population, had proved far more willing allies. An added advantage, from a propaganda perspective, was that Iraqi citizens – the Kurds – would do the lion's share of fighting, thus underscoring the Iraqi regime's lack of legitimacy. (Likewise, the Iraqi media gave prime coverage to the role of Kurdish *jahsh* militias in the Anfal campaign to suggest that the *pehmergas* were outlaws enjoying little popular support.)

In the Iranian scenario, Halabja was an obvious candidate: Sheltered from the rest of Iraq, its capture would enable a natural defense against an Iraqi counterattack. Moreover, Iran's Kurdish allies were enthusiastic to take Halabja, for reasons explained below. Finally, Halabjans themselves would likely greet the Iranians as liberators – a propaganda coup. Only a year earlier, the Iraqi regime had destroyed the town's Kani Ashqan neighborhood in reprisal for street protests over Ali Hassan al-Majid's village destruction campaign. In messages passed to the guerrillas, Halabjans indicated they were itching for revenge.

In addition to these factors, the theoretical prospect of reaching the Darbandikhan dam may also have proved appetizing to the Iranian leadership. This was certainly the view in Washington and Baghdad. A CIA assessment at the end of March warned that the ongoing Iranian offensive along the southern bank of the Darbandikhan reservoir would put their forces "in excellent position to capture Salim Pirak, the dam, and possibly cross to the west bank of the reservoir north of the dam."<sup>4</sup> Iraq, according to US Ambassador David Newton (interview, 2001), saw an Iranian capture of both the Darbandikhan and Dukan dams as a real threat. Iraq therefore drained the two reservoirs in March to prevent the Iranians from attempting to flood Baghdad.<sup>5</sup>

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Some Kurdish commanders clearly understood the dam to be one of Iran's prime objectives. Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, leader of the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP), asserted (correspondence, 2001) that Iran sought to reduce the risk of an Iraqi counteroffensive in the south by widening the battlefield, but also wanted to capture the dam. Control over the water flow in the Diyala river would give Iran significant political leverage. Moreover, capture of the Suleimaniyeh-Baghdad road adjacent to the lake would give Iranian forces free passage to rebel-held Qaradagh and from there to Germian and the ultimate prize, the Kirkuk oil fields – a possible substitute for elusive Basra. PUK commander Shawqat Haji Mushir (interview, 2002) likewise claimed that Iran had express designs on the dam: "We discussed it many times with them. They wanted to blow it up, but we did not agree."

This is not the Kurdish consensus view, however. At least one PUK commander, Hama Hama Sa'id, has argued (interview, 2002) that if the dam was an Iranian objective, Iranian forces came ill-equipped: Engineering teams specialized in demining and road clearing were deployed only around Halabja and between Halabja and the border, not in the direction of the dam. Moreover, he said, the Iranians never made a serious effort to take Shakh Shemiran, a mountain overlooking the lake, without which they would not have a prayer of getting even near the dam.

Hadi Farajvand, a Basiji platoon commander, recalled (interview, 2002) that the regime had considered blowing up the dam but decided against it: "Friends of mine in the Karageh Ramazan studied the possibility of placing explosives, but they checked with Ayatollah Khomeini. He asked where the water would go, and then denied permission." Khomeini apparently feared that a swollen Diyala would cause damage to Shi'ite holy shrines downstream. (In any event, Iranian forces never reached either the dam or the highway. In a post-battle review aired on Iranian television, though, Pasdaran commander Mohsen Reza'ie boasted that they had come to within ten kilometers of the road, putting it within reach of Iran's medium-range artillery.<sup>6</sup>)

After overrunning Halabja, Iranian forces stayed put lakeside until the end of the war, giving no hint of broader aspirations. Sheikh Mowla, a senior leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution

in Iraq (SCIRI) who was at the Iranian headquarters in Dizli (near Marivan) during the Halabja operation, insisted (interview, 2002) that the Iranians never intended to blow up the dam, but instead planned to destroy the tunnel connecting Suleimaniyeh with Darbandikhan (and Baghdad). Some have suggested that the massive chemical strike on Halabja sabotaged such plans. It could also be argued that the Iraqis themselves did not appear overly concerned about an Iranian attack on the dam. Instead of attacking Iranian forces around Halabja, the Iraqis gassed the Kurds, leaving the Iranians in control of the area for a full four months without even a hint of wanting to dislodge them.

Iran did have another important objective, one it did not report to its Kurdish allies but that became evident as soon as its troops entered Iraq: to decimate Iranian Kurdish rebels who used Iraqi Kurdistan as a launching pad for insurgency in Iran. Both the KDP-I and Komala had bases close to Iraqi troops in the Halabja area. As Iraqi defenses crumbled, Iranian troops surging into Halabja went after these rebels. More about this later.

On the Iraqi Kurdish side, the PUK's motivations were equally complex. Most critically, Iraqi pressure on its Jafati headquarters was so desperate that the PUK needed to draw Iraqi forces away. PUK commander Hama Hama Sa'id explained that during the Halabja operation the PUK deliberately refrained from coding wireless communications between its forces there and in Jafati, "so that the Iraqis knew we were attacking Halabja. This way, we hoped, they would withdraw from Jafati. But they didn't."

To the Kurds, too, Halabja was an obvious candidate. The scheme to liberate Halabja coincided with an older plan to which all the Kurdish parties subscribed and which they had designed to preempt an equally old Iraqi plan aimed at razing Halabja and border towns. Iraqi forces had already leveled Penjwin, Chuarta, and Mergasur. The Kurds suspected that Halabja and Qala Dizeh would be next. (In any event, Iraqi forces destroyed Halabja after retaking it from Iran at war's end in July 1988 and razed Qala Dizeh a year later.) "We had," recalled Shawqat Haji Mushir, "a written agreement with the Iranians to jointly liberate Suleimaniyeh governorate. First we would seize the area between Qala Dizeh and Haybat Sultan [a mountain separating Suleimaniyeh from

Erbil]. Then we would cut off the Suleimaniyeh

Observing the Iraqis decided to bring in two battalions thwarting any Kurdish and Haybat Sultan canceled step one of our headquarters. Halabja's liberation had a slightly different mission was to open the Omran. But "after the leadership settled on Erbil [as a result of village in code [jifra] by w

The Kurds were Shawqat: Until the Kurdish parties were Iraq as well. The commander said, "a common interest area."

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Early in 1988, the Iranian leadership the KDP's Babaker Zebari Faridoun Abd-al-Qadir Islamic Unity Movement by Ali Mowlani; the and several others. according to KSP leader a frantic appeal for preparations for Iran



Erbil]. Then we would take the area of Halabja and Darbandikhan, and cut off the Suleimaniyeh–Kirkuk road at Darbandi Bazian.”

Observing the emerging alliance between the Kurds and Iran, the Iraqis decided to preempt their plans by attacking the PUK in Jafati. Iraq brought in two army corps (*faylaq*). One came from Ranya, thereby thwarting any Kurdish plan to liberate the area between Qala Dizeh and Haybat Sultan, which was now crawling with Iraqi troops. “We canceled step one,” Shawqat explained, “and because the pressure on our headquarters was so severe, we proceeded directly with step two: Halabja’s liberation.” Shawqat’s deputy (and cousin), Hamid Haji Gali, had a slightly different version (interview, 2000). The original decision was to open three fronts, he said: at Qala Dizeh, Halabja, and Haj Omran. But “after discussing these three areas’ relative merits, the leadership settled on Halabja, because its population had swollen in 1987 [as a result of village destruction]. These discussions were all conducted in code [*jifra*] by wireless.”

The Kurds were motivated by something else as well, suggested Shawqat: Until then, only the PUK was based in Iraq. The other Kurdish parties were eager to establish their own headquarters inside Iraq as well. The capture of territory would allow this. “There was,” he said, “a common interest to hang onto, or acquire, additional liberated area.”

At its most realistically ambitious, the Kurdish plan was to liberate all of Suleimaniyeh governorate, seizing control of both the Darbandikhan and Dukan dams and cutting the Suleimaniyeh–Kirkuk road. This was only meant to be the prelude, though, to a plan reflecting the Kurds’ wildest dreams: to seize Kirkuk.

Early in 1988, the Kurdistan Front began a series of meetings with the Iranian leadership. The front’s coordinating council comprised the KDP’s Babaker Zeibari, the KSP’s Shirwan Shirawandi, the PUK’s Faridoun Abd-al-Qader, and Mullah Ali Abd-al-Aziz, leader of the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK). SCIRI was represented by Ali Mowlani; the Iranians sent Pasdaran commander Mohsen Reza’ie and several others. The final decision to liberate Halabja was taken, according to KSP leader Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, on March 7, after a frantic appeal for help from the PUK. This set in motion the final preparations for Iran’s Val-Fajr X offensive.

### Conflicting Accounts

From this point the question of the nature of Iran's contribution is highly contested. The Kurds say they developed an elaborate division of labor among the parties and with the Iranians: 200 KDP peshmergas led by Hamid Effendi and Nader Ali Howramani would take the town of Khormal; 100-150 KSP guerrillas commanded by Muhammad Haji Mahmoud would seize the strategic Zalm bridge, thereby cutting the Halabja-Suleimaniyeh road; 500 PUK guerrillas would head for Halabja; 100-150 IUMK peshmergas led by Mullah Ali Biyari and Mullah Ali Abd-al-Aziz would provide logistical support to the PUK; and a contingent of 1,000-1,500 of SCIRI's Badr fighters led by Abu Ali and Abu Zeinab (both *noms de guerre*) and accompanied by Kurdish scouts would seize Shakh Shemiran. In Halabja, the rebels had distributed weapons to their friends in the underground and had spoken with local jahsh commanders to see if they would switch sides.

The PUK assembled a force of 450 men, drawn from different parts of Kurdistan (not wanting to weaken its troop strength in Jafati), near Hawar village in the mountains above Halabja. Hamid Haji Gali, who led the group, said they reconnoitered the area and removed antipersonnel landmines. "I and about five other PUK commanders sneaked into Halabja and spent an entire week coordinating the attack with the underground. We gathered information on Iraqi troop strength and took photographs and video images of Iraqi army bases and camps." The Iraqis had an army artillery brigade (*liwa'*) in Delamar, above Halabja, and four battalions (*afwaj*) in Rostam Beg north of Khormal, in Halabja proper, in Zammaki just north of Halabja, and in Chemi Palania near the destroyed town of Tawela on the Iranian border - a total of 3,500 troops. Moreover, there were four jahsh battalions in Halabja, each with 800 to 1,000 men. Hamid Haji Gali reckoned that three-quarters of the fighters, including junior commanders, would join the guerrillas; only the *mustashars* - Hassan Mahmoud Beg, Khaled Jalilei, Ibrahim Naser al-Din, and Hama Reza Namdar - and some of their lieutenants would stay loyal to the Iraqi regime. Finally, Iraq's Military Intelligence Directorate was thought to have about seventy, and the Amn about sixty, armed agents stationed in Halabja.

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According to Shawqat, Iranian forces were largely absent from the Halabja area during the operation, at least until the Iraqi chemical attack. In his version, which is supported by Hamid Haji Gali, the Kurdish forces, backed by Iranian artillery fire from batteries inside Iran, routed the Iraqis and liberated Halabja in a lightning strike on March 14-15; the Iraqis counterattacked the next day, dropping poison gas from the air; the Kurds fled and were replaced by Iranian troops, who streamed into the area from the border, lest they lose the large territory captured by the Kurds. Initially, the Iranians played only a supporting role, Shawqat claimed, providing ammunition, food, and clothes, as well as battle coordination by wireless: "There were large Iranian forces on the border inside Iran: near Marivan, Nowsud, Paveh, and Jwan Roh. These did not enter the area until after the chemical attack, when the situation spun out of control." He counted on his hand the Iranians in his entourage as they descended toward Halabja on March 15: a radio operator, Mahmoud Reza'ie; an artillery spotter, Ali Reza; two video operators who filmed the chemical strike; and a man who carried the radio. Each Kurdish force was accompanied by a similar Iranian team, he said. Lt. Col. Muhammad Tehrani was the overall Iranian field commander in charge of the operation; Ali Shamkhani, an Arabic-speaking Iranian later to become minister of defense, commanded Iranian forces at Paveh.

Hamid Haji Gali described the attack as follows: At 1 am on March 14, his force

... crossed the border and took Iraqi positions on the peaks surrounding Halabja. We finished by early morning. It was a total success. Then we decided to initiate phase two: to take Halabja. There were scattered battles with the Iraqis - they brought reinforcements by helicopter - but on March 15 we liberated Halabja. There was a big celebration: The townspeople were dancing, clapping and singing. In the late afternoon, Iraqi batteries fired shells from Darbandikhan and Sayed Sadeq, and this continued until the next morning. Because of this many Halabjans went into their shelters.

It was then that the chemical attack began.

All along, Hamid Haji Gali said, the Iranians only provided artillery support: Their gunners rocketed the Delamar base, the Halabja area,

and the Zalm bridge. The gun emplacements were inside Iran, especially at Dizli, the highest mountain overlooking Halabja. There was nothing extraordinary about this, he asserted: The Iraqis had been shelling the Iraqis for years from these positions, but now their fire was more concentrated and continuous. The Iraqis barely put up resistance. Many surrendered; others withdrew toward Sayed Sadeq, trying to cross the Zalm bridge, fording Sirwan lake, or hiding in destroyed villages near the lake waiting for reinforcements. The main Iranian force entered Iraq only after the Iraqi chemical attack on March 16, moving thousands of troops into the greater Halabja area and digging trenches along the Zalm down to the lake – the new front line. This was, according to Shawqat, three days after the chemical attack. The Iraqis tried to overcome Iraqi defenses and reach Sayed Sadeq and Penjwin, but were beaten back at the Zalm. This view accords with news reports of “the fifth stage” of Iran’s Val-Fajr X, launched early on March 24.<sup>7</sup>

To other Kurdish participants this version is highly self-serving: by glorifying Kurdish military feats it played down the Kurds’ role as Iranian proxies who shepherded enemy troops into Iraqi territory during a war that threatened the Iraqi regime, thereby triggering a justifiably powerful, if exceptionally brutal and patently illegal, response. But this version might have the virtue of carrying at least a kernel of truth. It is supported by at least one other senior leader, Kosrat Rasoul Ali, the PUK commander in Erbil and later (2006) vice president of the Kurdistan region under Masoud Barzani (interview, 2000). The account is also backed by two Iranians who took part in the operation. Muhammad Zahidi, a nurse in an emergency unit called Imam Riza near Newsud, just inside Iran from Halabja, recalled (interview, 2002) that he was assigned to an emergency clinic established for Val-Fajr X two or three days before what he considered the start of the main Iranian assault on Halabja: “We were preparing for an offensive, but it didn’t happen. Instead we learned that chemical warfare victims were coming to us. Then men, women, and children started arriving in all sorts of vehicles. Only after this, the offensive began.” Likewise, an Iranian Pasdar who assisted in evacuating injured Halabjans and burying the dead claimed (interview, 2002) that when the chemical attack began, there were no Iranian troops in the town of Halabja, only intelligence agents, and that Iranian troops poured into Iraq only afterward, making straight for the lake.

The record of the extreme: an almost total reinforcement of the town until after the

On March 13, in the direction of the basin as Halabja. SCIRI’s unspecified Suleimaniya of the Pasdaran’s operation by Pasdaran peshmergas, suggesting the objective, the killing of over 15 Kurds [week] . . . as a result of the reference to the fact that the Kurds had begun to establish bases on the peaks of the mountains. Stage two was completed the next day.

At this point, in the Khormal region, the Kurds had previously taken over the running Iraqi troops. At this point, Iranian military allies’ exploits, but calling on the Kurds by Iranian combat warfare.<sup>8</sup> The impact of the auxiliary role.

On March 16, Iraqis and Sirwan and were making headway. By the time the Iraqis for Iraq forces in the town and most troops surrendered. Its forces were heading for Iraqi positions on E



The record of Iranian war reporting suggests a version at the opposite extreme: an almost exclusive Iranian role in Halabja's capture. But it also reinforces the idea that the main Iranian force did not arrive in the town until after the chemical attack.

On March 13, Iran announced the launch of its Zafar 7 offensive in the direction of Khurmal, a town located on the Zalm in the same basin as Halabja. The operations were said to be led by Iraqi opposition groups – SCIRI's Badr Division 9, units of the IUMK, KDP, PUK, and unspecified Suleimaniyehbased peshmergas – “with the support” of units of the Pasdaran's 75th Zafar Brigade. Later IRNA reported an operation by Pasdaran troops “in league with” Iraqi fighters and Kurdish peshmergas, suggesting a different division of responsibility. The operation's objective, the Iranians said, was to avenge “Iraqi chemical bombing of over 15 Kurdish-populated villages in northern Iraq [the previous week] . . . as a result of which 8,000 Kurds became homeless” – a probable reference to the shelling of villages in Jafati valley, whose inhabitants had begun to flee toward Iran.<sup>5</sup> Stage one aimed to conquer Iraqi bases on the peaks overlooking the plain, a task accomplished by March 13; stage two was directed at Khurmal, which Iran reported taking the next day.

At this point, IRNA announced the launch of Val-Fajr X “in the Khurmal region,” during the night of March 15–16. Iranian forces that had previously taken Khurmal now fanned out in all directions, overrunning Iraqi troops and seizing (destroyed) Kurdish villages. At this point, Iranian military communiqués stopped referring to their Iraqi allies' exploits, but only to “the courageous [Pasdaran] warriors,” while calling on the Kurds merely to “use the favorable conditions provided by Iranian combatants and escalate their anti-Ba'thist regime guerrilla warfare.”<sup>6</sup> The implication was that the peshmergas played at most an auxiliary role.

On March 16, Iran claimed it had seized the road between Khurmal and Sirwan and was advancing on the lake. This meant they were making headway. By this maneuver they cut off the only viable escape route for Iraqi forces in the Halabja area. As a result, Iraqi morale crumbled and most troops simply surrendered. The next day Iran announced that its forces were heading for Halabja from Sirwan and were also attacking Iraqi positions on Balambo, a hill directly west of Halabja. The capture

of Balambo heights was announced early on March 17; the seizure of the "strategic garrison" of Zammaki, on Halabja's northern outskirts, came an hour later.

Later that afternoon, Iranian forces were said to be "advancing on the besieged northeastern Iraqi city of Halabja from several points." Moreover, reported IRNA, "Simultaneous with the advance of the liberating forces Halabjah residents are fighting the hard-pressed Ba'hist troops inside and have killed and wounded several of them. Local residents are jubilantly accompanying the Muslim forces to the city."<sup>10</sup> At 4:20 pm GMT (7:50 pm local time) on March 17, an exultant Tehran radio announced: "God is greatest! God is greatest! God is greatest! O heroic Iranian nation! O brave men of the land of martyrs! My sisters and brothers! The strategic city of Halabjah has been liberated!"<sup>11</sup>

The next day, Iran announced it had taken Tawela and Biyara, two Iraqi Kurdish towns above Halabja near the border, as well as Nowsud, a nearby Iranian Kurdish town held by the KDP-I (with Iraqi help). This suggested that Iran's forces had completed a pincer movement that Pasdaran commander Reza'ie later described as follows: "On one side, [the enemy] was hemmed in by the hills, and on the other side there was the lake. Since we had occupied the [Zalm] bridge, it was as if the enemy had been trapped in a pocket, and we had closed the flap of the pocket."<sup>12</sup>

One important aspect of Iran's account appears incongruent. Iran claimed to have taken Halabja on March 17, with local residents "jubilantly accompanying" its forces. Yet that same day, IRNA reported that Iraq had "chemically bombed Halabjah town . . . twice Wednesday evening" – March 16 – killing and wounding "hundreds of . . . defenseless women and children." Following the attack, "thousands of residents of Halabjah and surrounding areas left their homes in groups Thursday morning and walked towards the western Iranian border lines." Iran then reported a second round of Iraqi chemical strikes on Khormal, Sirwan, and Halabja on Thursday morning.<sup>13</sup> The notion that civilians fleeing a chemical bombardment simultaneously would be jubilantly escorting Iranian forces into the targeted town strains belief. Either these forces entered Halabja before March 17, or the account of jubilant townsfolk must be dismissed as war propaganda.

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Or perhaps the Iranians did not take Halabja at all. If we accept both Iran's chronology and Kurdish claims to have taken the town without significant Iranian assistance, the Iranian advance on March 17 would have been on a town already in Kurdish rebel hands, empty of its inhabitants after the gassing a day earlier.

### Middle Ground

An alternative narrative that falls somewhere between the versions advanced by Iran and senior PUK commanders is offered by lower-level PUK commanders who participated in the assault, as well as by townspeople interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 1992 and by members of other parties that had forces in the area, all of whom agree that some Iranians did enter Halabja before March 16. While these observers saw large numbers of Iranian troops in the Halabja area, the troops did not enter the town, at least not prior to the chemical attack.

According to this version, too, local preparations started well before March. Mam Hadi, a PUK peshmerga who grew up in the area, roamed its countryside after signing up in 1976, and knew it like his back pocket, claimed (interview, 2002) that Iranian intelligence agents had begun scouting the area three months earlier: "There was a unit commander named Daoudi with five or six men who came perhaps ten times, staying a couple of days at most. They would go with local PUK peshmergas to Iraqi military posts, taking photographs and drawing maps. A similar group went with the KDP in the area they controlled" – above Khormal.

Hama Hama Sa'id, the PUK subcommander in Halabja, described an unambiguous division of labor between Iranians and Kurds. Yes, he said, elements of the Karageh Ramazan – radio operators, photographers, and motorcycle messengers – did accompany Kurdish forces that liberated the area, but separately, Iranian troops guided by Kurds attacked the large Iraqi bases outside Halabja well before the chemical attack: "I was responsible for the area behind Halabja [near the border]. Our first objective was to attack Balambo and Shinirweh mountains jointly with Iranian forces." To provide cover to their ground forces, the Iranians lobbed shells from Dizli, Kani Khiyaran, Hirweh, and Du Awa inside Iran, according to Hama Hama Sa'id: "We had an Iranian

artillery spotter with us – his name was Ahmad – and he would constantly report back our positions by wireless.”

On March 14 Sa'id's group of close to 200 peshmergas, accompanying 150 Pasharan, started advancing from the border village of Hawara Kon (“Old Hawar”) to Shinirweh mountain and attacked Iraqi military positions at Chadergah, Dara Rash, and Hawargey Boynian. By next morning, they fully controlled the area. Another Pasharan group attacked Iraqi tanks in the Nowroli area between the villages of Hassan Awa and Prees on the lower slopes of Balambo, while in Delamar, “it was the Iranians, and only the Iranians, who attacked the Iraqi artillery base there,” Sa'id contended. “A number of them were killed in battle.” Delamar housed an Iraqi brigade headquarters and served as Iraq's main artillery base in the area, with eight tanks and six long-range artillery pieces. If there was any Iraqi resistance to the joint Pasharan–peshmerga advance, it came from Delamar, but even here the battle was over in a matter of hours. The Iraqi commander, a brigadier general, was taken prisoner and transferred to Iran.

Mam Hadi similarly asserted that the peshmergas left the fighting to the Pasharan, and “once Iraqi defenses at Delamar collapsed, the peshmergas went into Halabja.” This version is also supported by Sherdel Howeizi, the PUK's liaison with the Karargeh Ramadan, who stated emphatically (interview, 2002) that there were “a lot of Iranian troops” in the Halabja area before the chemical attack.

On March 15, Sa'id continued, “I received orders from Kak [brother] Shawqat via the wireless to proceed to Halabja,” because the Iranians and the Kurds had taken the Zalm bridge. “The Pasharan stayed behind on Shinirweh.” The only remaining obstacle was the jahsh battalion at the Anab resettlement complex guarding the dirt road between Halabja and Delamar. Once they realized, however, that their protectors were gone, the jahsh “threw down their weapons and became indistinguishable from ordinary Kurds. Many fled, others surrendered to us, and again others had been working secretly for us all along, and they now joined us openly.” As for the Iraqis, Sa'id claimed, “we took the weapons from those who surrendered and let them go. Some managed to get across the Zalm to rejoin their forces; others fled to the border once the chemical attack started.” Again others hid in destroyed villages. In one such village, Kheli Hama (between Halabja and Khormal), “some 200 Iraqi

troops surrendered. We have food for the Iraqi soldiers present.

And so, in the peshmergas entered Halabja. I recalled. They captured Iraqi soldiers in the late afternoon. They decided to eliminate the Iraqi weaponry. Using any weapons they found to rob government stores, we would have done this, as we thought a decade later, after the chemical attack to damage [surviving] villages. We did air attacks that day.

From interviews, it appears the rebels do not know precisely how the attack was viewed by Human Rights. They were parading through the townspeople. They billeted the soldiers to prepare dinner. Some very young, barefoot, also carried gas masks. How far it was to the border.

Beyond such significant Iranian forces in the chemical attack. I can't confirm this – minus the fact that we fed Iran's soldiers and fed Iran's soldiers. I saw crowds on the evening of the Halabjans reserves.



troops surrendered to us only after five days. We told them we didn't have food for them, so we let them go and they went to Iran." Many Iraqi soldiers preferred exile as POWs over being returned to the front.

And so, in the mid-afternoon of March 15, the victorious PUK peshmergas entered Halabja. "The people came out to welcome us," Shawqat recalled. They helped the peshmergas seize government buildings and capture Iraqi security personnel. "It was like an uprising," he said. Then, in the late afternoon, senior Kurdish commanders convened a meeting. They decided to distribute their forces over the town, protect the population, eliminate remaining pockets of resistance, and remove heavy weaponry. Using loudspeakers, they urged people to stay calm, to turn in any weapons they might find, to hand over Iraqi security agents, and not to rob government offices or otherwise engage in looting. "We assured them we would not leave and warned them they should take precautions, as we thought the Iraqis might retaliate," declared Shawqat a decade later, after he had come under criticism for exposing the population to danger. "We encouraged them to join their relatives in the [surviving] villages but to stay off the roads because of Iraqi shelling and air attacks that targeted the town and the roads."

From interviews with townspeople four years after the events, it appears the rebels were accompanied by Iranians. What remains unclear is precisely how many or what role they played. Eyewitnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 1992 say they saw Pasdaran "openly parading through the streets" on the evening of March 15, "greeting the townspeople and chanting 'God is great! Khomeini is our leader!'" They billeted themselves on local Kurdish families and ordered them to prepare dinner. Some rode around Halabja on motorcycles; others were very young, barely teenagers, and carried only sticks and knives. Many also carried gas masks. They asked bewildered people in the streets how far it was to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond such sightings, however, there is no indication that significant Iranian forces entered Halabja before March 17, a day after the chemical attack. Tehran's reporting from the war theater seems to confirm this – minus the jubilant crowds that gave good propaganda value and fed Iran's self-image at home. There may have been welcoming crowds on the evening of March 15, but it is safe to assume that the Halabjans reserved their joy for the rebels, many of whom rejoined their

families for the first time in months or years, and not for the Iranians – Persian–Shi'ite radicals viewed with suspicion by Kurdish Halabjans, who themselves were practicing or secular Sunnis. The conclusion must be that the Iranians who entered the town of Halabja on March 15 most likely were no more than an advance party escorting Kurdish peshmergas.

### “To Protect Our Own People”

Halabjans had much to cheer about when the town's hated administration collapsed. Yet at the same time, residents were gripped by a deep foreboding about Iraqi retribution. Some left that same evening or the next morning, despite the danger on the roads leading out of town: Iraqi gunners lobbed shells from positions at Sayed Sadeq and Darbandikhan. Many others stayed behind, either having no easy access to transportation or perhaps calculating that their best chance lay in the bomb shelters they had dug underneath their houses and courtyards long ago to protect against Iranian shelling.

“We did not,” Shawqat insisted, “expect Iraq to use chemical weapons against civilians. On the battlefield, yes. That's why we all had gas masks and atropine injectors.” Defending his cousin, Hamid Haji Gali claimed that many Halabjans heeded Shawqat's warning to evacuate, and that this saved the majority of the population. The KSP's Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, also a Halabja native, remembered it differently, contending that both Iran and the rebels “were expecting the chemical attack,” because it was consistent with what they knew about the Iraqi regime: “That's why we prepared ourselves with atropine and gas masks and warned the people of Halabja. But they didn't leave. Otherwise, this great number of people would not have been killed.” Hama Hama Sa'id presented a more damaging critique. Shawqat, he said, did not urge Halabjans to evacuate. To the contrary, “on his orders we advised the people of Halabja not to leave when the shelling started on the evening of the 15th because, we told them, we would protect them. I disagreed with Kak Shawqat, but he was in charge.” Moreover, Sa'id asserted, the Iranians did not help: Of those refugees who fled toward the border, many were forced to return, having been refused entry by Iranian authorities.

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Another PUK commander, Omar Fattah, who as acting head of the PUK's first *malband* (regional command center) in Qaradagh technically was Shawqat's superior, claimed that Shawqat asked the PUK's political bureau for instructions on the evening of March 15, reporting by wireless that Halabja was very crowded and that he expected Iraqi retaliation. "I was copied, so I responded," he recalled. "I advised Kak Shawqat to evacuate the city, but he replied that it was raining and people had no place to go. I responded that it was better to be exposed to rain than to bombs. But he was accountable directly to the political leadership [headed by Neywshirwan in Jafati], and I don't know what advice they gave, because I was not copied in on the reply."

Wednesday, March 16, was a cold but pleasant late-winter day, according to Shawqat. There were small clouds and a light wind. In the morning, the market was open; people were dancing. "We were being thronged by well wishers," he recalled. Sa'id's recollection of weather conditions differed slightly: "There was alternating sun and rain, with a mild wind from the southwest." He was on Ashkohol mountain (behind Anab) when the chemical attack began, on his way to disarm three Iraqi battalions that had surrendered. It was then, he said, that he saw six Soviet-made Sukhoi bombers fly over, then another three separately, and another two. They dropped their bombs over Halabja. "Smoke rose: some was white, some black, some red, some mixed. I saw people putting their hands over their faces."

In Halabja itself, Shawqat, accompanied by his cousin Hamid Haji Gali, had just greeted the Pasdaran commander, Lt. Col. Muhammad Tehrani, when the chemical attack started: "I had radioed him to say we had taken Halabja and sent Kak Hamid to collect him by car so he could see for himself how much in control we were." At 5:20 pm, Shawqat said, on a day of intermittent Iraqi shelling and air attacks, a new group of bombers came in low: "The sound of the explosions was unlike that of conventional bombs, more like a 'tap.' The smoke went up, then down to the ground." Tehrani and Shawqat, realizing they were under gas attack, donned their chemical gear, shut their car windows, and drove north. The chemical strikes continued intermittently until the next morning, he said. "People tried to leave town. Most of those who died were on the roads outside Halabja; others died inside their shelters."

Shawqat claimed he stayed in the area to direct relief efforts and regroup his panicked fighters, while Tehrani returned to Iran to coordinate evacuation efforts. Hamid Haji Gali went to Ahmad Awa (a village and famous picnic area on the Zalm's banks just above Khormal) to assemble peshmergas who were fleeing along the paved road to Dizli, the way Iranian forces and KDP and KSP fighters had descended a few days earlier. Shawqat sustained chemical injuries the next day when three Iraqi jets bombed Abba Beileh village, where he happened to be. Several villagers were killed, and his Iranian artillery spotter, Ali Reza, was badly injured. Reza was transferred to the rear of Iranian forces inside Iran, where Abbas Foroutan and his team ministered to the many wounded. Shawqat reported another chemical attack in Anab later that afternoon that killed 300 people. Hama Hama Sa'id similarly mentioned three or four chemical attacks on the 17th, including a chemically loaded shell fired at Hawara Kon, the Iranian staging area near the border. A Khormal resident who lost twenty-six relatives in the Halabja attack (interview, 2005) reported that Ahmad Awa was one of the places hit.

After the 17th, the chemical strikes ceased. By then, most civilians had been evacuated to refugee camps in Iran. The Iranian troops that now streamed into the Halabja basin apparently did not merit an Iraqi chemical assault or a military counterattack of any sort. The Iraqis were preoccupied elsewhere, pressing for advantage against the demoralized Kurdish insurgents. And so the Halabja area remained quiet till Iranian troops withdrew shortly before the end of the war in July.

The Iranians used the opportunity to strip Halabja and Khormal of everything that was movable – cars, electrical pylons, office equipment – and to loot a wide range of buildings including banks, police stations, secret police headquarters, the courts, hospitals and clinics, petrol stations, the tobacco company, and ordinary shops, before blowing them up with TNT. Moreover, they destroyed both the Zalm bridge and the bridge over the Sirwan at Tawela. Not surprisingly, they also hauled away the security agencies' files, which gave them detailed information about armed opposition groups allied with Iraq, such as the KDP-I, Komala, and Mujahedin Khalq. At the end of March, Iran's interior minister, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, pointedly warned "members and advocates of counter-revolutionary grouplets" to

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And so, if the peshmergas were full of praise for Iran's evacuation of civilians from Halabja, they bitterly railed against being subsequently barred from the region, which gave Iranian troops the freedom to pillage. "It started as ordinary looting," Shawqat recalled, "but then they brought trucks. It was clearly organized. They even removed the carpets from the mosques. We quarreled with them but were vastly outnumbered." Halabjans, who pride themselves on being among the most literate of Kurds, have lamented in particular the theft of their books.

The wanton destruction of Halabja and Khurmali remains a festering wound in Iranian-Kurdish relations. It also became grounds for another accusation against Kurdish leaders, Shawqat in particular, who led the Iranians into Iraqi Kurdistan. But even Hama Hama Sa'id, otherwise so critical of his commander's decisions, saw it necessary to justify the Kurds' association with Iran: "The Iranians told us they were going to attack the Halabja area one way or another," he said. "We had to join them to protect our own people."

In any event, the Kurdish parties proved spectacularly unsuccessful in protecting Halabjans from either Iraqis or Iranians. After the Iranians withdrew, the Iraqis returned in force and, according to Sa'id, who had lingered in the region, leveled whatever remained. The Iraqis resettled returning refugees in new complexes constructed across the lake or even as far away as Erbil, and barred government employees from their jobs for a year.

The different versions of Iran's role in Halabja appear irreconcilable, although it is likely that in the difficult terrain and chaos of war not every commander was aware of what happened in areas not under his personal control. A careful reconstruction suggests that the most credible scenario is this: Swift-moving KSP and KDP units accompanying a large force of Iranian Pasdaran, Basijis, and army troops burst upon Iraqi positions guarding Khurmali and the Zalmi bridge, cutting off the Iraqis' only escape route from Halabja. Iranian Pasdaran aided by PUK guerrillas simultaneously seized key peaks from Iraqi forces south and east of Halabja and then successfully stormed the heavily fortified artillery base at Delamar. Iraqi resistance crumbled throughout the area, and Halabja fell easily into the peshmergas' hands. The Iranians sent

intelligence personnel to guard key interests but otherwise the town held little interest. By March 16, the fight was over. Targeting Iranian Kurdish rebels as well as fleeing Iraqi troops, the Iranians conducted mopping-up operations along the lakeshore and in the geographically isolated border area around Nowsud, Tawela, and Biyara, preparations for which were observed by Muhammad Zahidi, the Iranian nurse. The blow-by-blow Iranian media reports elided both the part played by the Kurds in Khormal and the role of Pasdaran units fighting their way down the slopes of Shiniirweh and Balambo, favoring reportage of the main force's advance along the lake.

It may not be possible to reconcile the competing narratives of Shawqat Haji Mushir and Hama Hama Sa'id. The latter had a limited view of the war theater; he was in communication solely with his immediate commanders while rushing headlong into Halabja, then retreating along with a hysterical populace. Shawqat, who communicated routinely with other senior commanders, must have had a fuller view. But as the operation's senior commander, he bore much of the blame for what some see as the Kurdish parties' strategic error of bringing the war into Kurdish urban areas, thereby provoking the Iraqis to retaliate. Till his death in 2003 he remained extremely defensive about his role.

In any case, the debate is in some ways academic: Regardless of Iran's role, Iraq consciously and deliberately retaliated with a poison gas attack against a civilian population, a crime against humanity that cannot be justified by the defeat of its ground forces. But whatever their differences on the details of battle, Kurdish commanders agree on two key points that are not solely of academic interest: Apart from reconnaissance and intelligence officers, the main Iranian invasion force did not enter the town (as opposed to the area) of Halabja before the chemical attack, and it was Iraq, and only Iraq, that used chemical weapons in Halabja and the surrounding region.

Today, a new generation is questioning the aging PUK leadership's wisdom in conceiving the Halabja feint and carrying it out in league with the Iranians, to whom the operation was nearly cost free while yielding enormous benefits. Some see it as a disastrous miscalculation for which no one has been held accountable. As Mam Hadi put it, "A tragedy happened in Halabja, and nobody has explained why, or come to our aid."

## THE HALABJA

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The stakes were high in pursuing peace on the b intended to sit separatel mon ground. Security Co against Iran – a measure the Halabja attack, Iran t talks if the UN failed to reported that the US an general not to send an i the visit would divert att de Cuéllar, acting on his it set the stage, the *Times* Iraqi war effort that migh Council as they try to imp

The single medical exp report, released in mid-Ap pened in Halabja was so g Now, having ordered th



## THE HALABJA DEMONSTRATION EFFECT

"There's a danger that Saddam Hussein would do things he's done previously – he has in the past used chemical weapons."

– US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Associated Press,  
November 15, 2002

## Blowing Smoke

The stakes were high in the spring of 1988. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, pursuing peace on the basis of Resolution 598 (passed in July 1987), intended to sit separately with the two belligerents to identify common ground. Security Council members were debating an arms embargo against Iran – a measure that the Soviet Union opposed. A week after the Halabja attack, Iran threatened that it would refuse to attend peace talks if the UN failed to order an investigation. The *New York Times* reported that the US and France had put pressure on the secretary-general not to send an investigative team to the Gulf, "arguing that the visit would divert attention from the peace process." When Pérez de Cuéllar, acting on his own initiative, gave the green light anyway, it set the stage, the *Times* suggested, "for possible disclosures about the Iraqi war effort that might embarrass western members of the Security Council as they try to impose an arms embargo on Iran."

The single medical expert dispatched visited both Iran and Iraq. His report, released in mid-April, was difficult to disregard. What had happened in Halabja was so graphic and egregious it could not be ignored. Now, having ordered the investigation and found that chemical

weapons use had caused unprecedented numbers of civilian victims, the UN had to act. Moreover, in inveighing against Pérez de Cuéllar over ordering the Halabja investigation (see Introduction), Iraq's foreign minister Tariq Aziz incurred Security Council members' severe displeasure. A heavily redacted State Department cable reported that Aziz's letter had drawn criticism from "virtually all delegations – including some of Iraq's closest Arab friends," and would "almost certainly lead to some new SC action on CW."<sup>2</sup>

So it looked as if Iraq, for the first time, would become the target of a resolution condemning its use of gas. But while Washington could not prevent the resolution and the UN's subsequent action, the accusation (promoted vigorously by the Reagan administration) that Iran shared at least some of the blame for the Halabja attack served to dilute both. Declassified US State Department documents show how the Iran accusation was molded into a diplomatic maneuver designed to let Iraq off the hook.

On April 5, the US embassy in London reported that Her Majesty's Government had summoned the Iraqi ambassador to "protest strongly Iraq's apparent use of chemical weapons in Halabja." Noting that the United Kingdom had specifically named Iraq, not Iran, as the culprit, the US ambassador requested "an early readout [phrase redacted] on chemical weapons use in the Gulf and more details on the evidence of Iranian use of chemical weapons."<sup>3</sup> The cable, in other words, hinted at the evident contradiction between the welter of international indictments against Iraq and Washington's assertion that Iran, too, was to blame. A clarification was in order.

In response, the State Department produced the following internal statement, listing what it referred to as the "elements of our policy" concerning Halabja, to be used as guidance by US diplomats:

- Both Iran and Iraq are parties to the 1925 Protocol banning chemical warfare.
- We have condemned Iraq for use of chemical weapons against the civilian population of Halabja.
- We believe that both Iran and Iraq used chemical weapons in the fighting around Halabja.
- Use of chemical weapons against civilian populations is a particularly grave violation of the Geneva Protocol.

- This incident is more urgent.
- FYI: Evidence of position to discuss

In "talking points" later, the State Department and Iran used chemical weapons only if pressed for further Iranian use, we cannot draw our conclusion.)<sup>5</sup>

Although the US refused to disclose intelligence that led to the decision to issue a resolution, the accusation was striking. Diplomats soon were able to get Portugal, for example, to support the UN secretary-general's call for a ceasefire in the war. The Portuguese minister "underlined that the country was not a belligerent country but rather was a neutral country."

US diplomacy also sought to clarify the Halabja. Stating that the UN would support its protest of chemical weapons use, Shultz explained:

If widespread support for the resolution we believe it would be clearly on record on the part of other UNSC members. Others might question the evidence of lack of chemical weapons to protect Iraq. Thus [US] will continue to assure no such intent.

Then Shultz came to the

We have previously stated that we have used chemical weapons in the past. It is a fact that both sides



- This incident makes implementation of [resolution] 598 all the more urgent.
- FYI: Evidence of Iranian use is convincing, but we are not now in a position to discuss the evidence publicly.<sup>4</sup>

In "talking points" circulated to its embassies around the world a week later, the State Department asserted: "The U.S. believes that both Iraq and Iran used chemical weapons in the fighting around Halabja. (For use only if pressed for further information: While we have concluded there was Iranian use, we cannot discuss the information from which we have drawn our conclusion.)"<sup>5</sup>

Although the US, like other governments, customarily declines to disclose intelligence information to protect sources and methods, its decision to issue a blanket accusation without any form of substantiation was striking. In any event, the strategy bore fruit. US diplomats soon were able to report back allied governments' new positions. Portugal, for example, supported a European Community demarche to the UN secretary-general strongly condemning chemical weapons use in the war. The Portuguese official relaying the action to the US embassy "underlined that the EC declaration did not single-out [sic] one specific country but rather was directed at both."<sup>6</sup>

US diplomacy also shaped the form of Security Council action on Halabja. Stating that the US preferred a presidential statement to register its protest of chemical weapons use, Secretary of State George Shultz explained:

If widespread support exists among Council members for a resolution, we believe it would be in our interest to go along. We want to be clearly on record on this issue, though we need not get out in front of other UNSC members if there is widespread reluctance on a resolution. Others might perceive any U.S. attempt to block a resolution as evidence of lack of conviction on the CW issue or as an attempt to protect Iraq. Thus [US] Mission [to the UN] should try, by its actions, to assure no such interpretation is credible.

Then Shultz came to the crux of the matter:

We have previously stated our conclusion that Iran, as well as Iraq, used chemical weapons in the Halabcha [sic] incident. It is our assessment that both sides have previously used chemical weapons during

the war, and both have the capacity to launch similar attacks in the future. Therefore we believe any resolution/statement should cite both Iran and Iraq for CW use.<sup>7</sup>

And so, thanks to hard work by US diplomats, Resolution 612 (May 9) condemned "the continued use of chemical weapons," and urged "both sides to refrain" from future use. In a separate public statement, the Reagan administration emphasized: "We condemn without reservation illegal use of chemical weapons by both sides in the Gulf conflict." This was a bone tossed to the Iraqis, aimed at softening the blow of Washington's censure that followed: "In particular," the statement read, "use of chemical weapons against non-combatants is an egregious offense against civilization and humanity." Because both the administration and the Iraqi regime knew who had committed the offense (Washington never denied that Iraq had used gas in Halabja), Iraq could understand this to be a pointed warning that gassing civilians constituted a red line. Yet the statement's overall effect was to reassert the tilt toward Iraq by its reminder that "the horror of this recent illegal use of chemical weapons underscores the urgency of achieving a negotiated settlement to the Gulf war as soon as possible through implementation in full of UNSCR 598" – the ceasefire resolution that Iraq had accepted and Iran had snubbed.<sup>8</sup>

As a US diplomat wrote later, this was the first time that the council had responded to Iraq's chemical weapons use with a resolution rather than a presidential statement, "but the text was neither vigorous nor indignant."<sup>9</sup> It was the minimum necessary morally, the maximum possible politically, and far from sufficient to deter future Iraqi use.

By causing diplomatic confusion, the Iran accusation, first aired by the State Department's spokesperson on March 23, won Iraq a two-month reprieve. Unencumbered by unanimous condemnation of its warfare methods, it could now trigger the war's endgame. And so, in this crucial breathing space, Iraq launched a powerful series of counteroffensives on the southern front under the code name "Tawakkulna 'ala Allah" ("We place our trust in God") – its way of saying the regime was going for broke. It also extended its Anfal counterinsurgency campaign from Jafati to the vast Kurdish countryside. Within six months it was all over. Few factors contributed more to Iraq's breathtaking twin

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### Gas: Integral Part of Anfal

If Anfal started three weeks before the Halabja attack, its first victory came three days afterward – a direct result of the gassing that triggered the peshmergas' total collapse of morale. "Halabja had an impact on our defensive posture," said PUK commander Kosrat Rasoul Ali (interview, 2000), who was in Jafati in March 1988. "We were not defeated militarily in Halabja: Very few of our peshmergas were killed; most were not even inside the town or nearby resettlement camps. But we didn't want to cause even more casualties, especially among civilians. So we decided to withdraw and evacuate the townspeople." Halabja had an even greater impact, he suggested: "It brought into sharp focus the reality of Saddam Hussein's regime – that it had a new policy of annihilating the Kurdish people."

Chased from their Jafati mountain stronghold by Iraqi ground troops, the demoralized peshmergas and the villagers under their care fled toward Iran; many died in harsh winter conditions at high elevations. On March 19, Iraqi radio jubilantly proclaimed the fall of the PUK's headquarters in the "Anfal operation" following "a brave and avenging battle with the traitors."<sup>10</sup> Baghdad dailies carried headlines such as: "The Anfal Operation Crowns Our Mountains with a Great Iraqi Victory."<sup>11</sup> A security police memo later reported that the PUK had lost some 600 fighters in Jafati and Halabja, and that rumors were circulating that the regime was planning to destroy Suleimaniyeh after attacking it with chemical weapons.<sup>12</sup>

Such was the fear – instinctive, overpowering – 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. An Iraqi military intelligence assessment from that period concluded that "the use of special ammunition in strikes on saboteur headquarters and other places where they congregate has caused casualties among the saboteurs, has terrified and panicked them, and has weakened their morale, forcing many to return to the national ranks" (a regime euphemism for "surrendering").<sup>13</sup>

The ramifications soon became evident. Conscious of its new psychological advantage, the regime now pressed for total victory. On April 2, the military announced the end of "the second Anfal operation" in Qaradagh, south of Suleimaniyeh.<sup>14</sup> Six more Anfal operations followed, covering rural Kurdistan, each limited to a defined geographic area that had its own local peshmerga command.

This is the critical point: On the first day of each stage of Anfal, the Iraqi military fired gas shells or dropped bombs containing poison gas, usually against one or two clusters of villages where the peshmergas had their bases. Iraqi ground forces and their allied Kurdish jahsh irregulars had to do no more than surround the targeted area and wait for terrified villagers to run straight into their arms. And they did, in droves, panicked and desperate, taking only what they or their tractor-drawn carts could carry. This was the pattern in the second Anfal in Qaradagh (end of March); the third and fourth Anfal in the vast Germian plain east of Kirkuk (April/May); Anfals V, VI, and VII in, respectively, Smaquli valley (end of May), Balisan and Akoyan valleys (June/July), and the area of Qandil mountain (August); and the "Final Anfal Operation" (*Khatimat al-Anfal*) in Badinan, the KDP-controlled region that borders Turkey (late August, early September). In each case, the tactical use of gas, mostly targeted at peshmergas but mainly killing and injuring civilians, served – by causing mass panic – to flush out of the countryside in a matter of days, sometimes hours, villagers who had been hardened to years of air and artillery attacks.

Faiq Golpy, the peshmerga doctor in the Qaradagh mountains who had seen airplanes streaking overhead on their way to bomb Halabja on March 16, was attached to a peshmerga band that directly experienced four stages of Anfal, fortunate (unlike many hapless villagers) to elude the army's dragnet each time, but unfortunate to keep fleeing into the next area to be "Anfalized." On March 22, Golpy recalled (interview, 2002), he was in Balagjar (a Qaradagh-area village that had suffered a mustard gas attack a month earlier) when he heard the sound of explosions. Looking outside, he saw clouds over nearby Seyw Senan, a village that was home to the local PUK base:

The first victim, a farmer named Kamal, reached us after about an hour. His pupils were constricted; he was partially blinded and

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had trouble breathing. 'This must be nerve gas,' I remember saying, because mustard gas does not make the eyes contract. I gave him atropine and we washed him.

We had warned people that Iraq might attack with chemicals. We had distributed pamphlets about chemical protection to the bigger villages. Those who could not read clearly had not absorbed this information. I know cases where families died but the man survived because he had read how to protect himself.

That night and the next day, we received about 300 chemical victims in different clinical states. All of them recovered; by chance we had just received 2,000 ampules of atropine. Still about seventy people died in Seyw Senan, mostly women and children.

Iraq's military intelligence later stated in a quarterly report on "saboteur" activity that in March "our aircraft bombed the headquarters of the sabotage bands in the villages of Saywan [sic] and Balakjar in a chemical strike. This resulted in the deaths of fifty saboteurs and the wounding of twenty other saboteurs."<sup>15</sup>

Panicked by news of the gassing, and aware of what had happened in Halabja less than a week earlier, villagers streamed out of Qaradagh. Shortly afterward, Golpy said, Iraqi troops launched Anfal, advancing from all directions.<sup>16</sup> He and his comrades escaped westward to Germian, setting up a field clinic south of the destroyed town of Sengaw. But to their misfortune, Anfal arrived there as well (the third stage), about ten days later, forcing them to move on. Golpy was not aware of any chemical attacks in this part of Germian. There are several eyewitnesses, though, to a chemical attack on the first day of Anfal III. Iraqi planes bombed the village of Tazashar, a local PUK stronghold close to the road from Tuz Khurmatu to Qader Karam. The peshmerga defenders died, as did goats, cows, and birds.<sup>17</sup> The effect was the same: mass panic and flight.

Ahead of Iraqi troops, Golpy and his comrades crossed the Suleimaniyeh-Kirkuk highway north to the Aghjalar area, halting only after fording the Lesser Zab in Kuzlu, a village on the river's banks. "I was in Kuzlu on May 3 when, in the late afternoon, four airplanes came and started bombing," he recounted. "Because the sound was low, I suspected a chemical attack. About half an hour later we learned that [the villages of] Goktapa and Askar on the other side of the Zab had been hit. Many

were killed there. One of the injured crossed the river by boat, but the Iraqis opened the sluice at the Dukan dam, raising the water level and thereby making it impossible for others to cross. The water was unusually high and moved very fast. Anyway, I had no atropine left. Anfal [IV] started the next morning; the army reached Goktapa after several hours." At least 158, and perhaps as many as 300 villagers were killed in Goktapa and Askar in what was probably the most directly lethal chemical attack during the entire Anfal campaign.<sup>18</sup>

Golpy and his peshmerga group fled again, this time in the direction of Smaquli valley (which connects Erbil and Shaqlawa to Dukan). Here, in the village of Khateh, they got caught up in Anfal V, which had started with a nerve gas attack on the villages of Wareh, Warta, Nazanin, and Golan in mid-May. Again they were forced to flee, now toward Qandil, a mountain on the border with Iran. Chemical attacks and Anfal (VI and VII) followed them through the mountain valleys, until August, when the PUK insurgency at last was defeated, its fighters dispersed, and exile in Iran its last remaining prospect.<sup>19</sup> The military's final target was KDP-dominated Badinan. The army pushed in that direction after the war had ended, in late August, bombarding villages with chemical weapons before mopping up panicked Kurds who failed to reach the Turkish border.

In a strange twist in the pattern, Iraqi aircraft erroneously gassed fighters of the allied Iranian Komala, a Kurdish rebel group based in the village of Boteh in Akoyan valley, in August. Najmaddin Fakeh, an Iraqi Kurd who stayed with these Iranian insurgents and witnessed the attack from nearby Golan, claimed (interview, 2006) that twenty-two Komala fighters died and many more were injured. Komala later complained to its friends in Baghdad, and the Iraqis admitted their mistake, Fakeh said, but the Komala leadership has never openly discussed the incident.

After the initial chemical attacks, the pattern was the same for each stage of Anfal: Fleeing villagers reaching the paved road were gathered up by Iraqi troops and pro-regime Kurdish militias. They were herded to temporary holding centers, then driven by truck to the Popular Army base at Topzawa just outside Kirkuk. Here males between the ages of fifteen and sixty were separated from their families and hauled off to execution sites in western Iraq, where they were killed and buried in mass graves. Older men and women were dispatched to Nugrat Salman,

a notorious prison. Those who survived received medical care, harsh during the end of Anfal.

The fate of women was different. If they were from a village with an army base in Dibe, they were and relocated to a camp. Those who were detained in a camp were released in the area of Anfal III and IV), in most cases taken to execution sites. Some were fled to Germian and killed there.

Perhaps as many as 100,000 were thus killed. Only a few have told their story.<sup>20</sup>

Staff Maj.-Gen. Ali al-Hadi, Military Intelligence, who fought the war with Iran and Iraq (see interview, 1997) any personal view, his job description was to be said: one to the Saddam Hussein, who was the

While denying any personal view, he was willing to explain the situation because he had been a leader, had sent the army to significant – and an enemy to both the Iraqis and the watch.

Saddam Hussein said:

First, he decided in 1988 the Iraqi military forced the army to move to the southern front



a notorious prison located in the desert west of Samawa in southern Iraq. Those who survived the prison's extreme hardships (little food, no medical care, harsh climate) were released in a September 6 amnesty marking the end of Anfal. Then they were sent to live in a resettlement camp.

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

Perhaps as many as 80,000 Kurds, the vast majority civilians, were thus killed. Only six men and one boy returned – miraculously – to tell their story.<sup>20</sup>

Staff Maj.-Gen. Wafiq al-Samarra'i was deputy director of Iraq's Military Intelligence Directorate (Istikhbarat) in 1988, overseeing the war with Iran and the campaign against the Kurds. He denied (interview, 1997) any personal involvement in Anfal, an assertion that, given his job description, strains credulity. He had two lines of responsibility, he said: one to the MID director, Sabr al-Duri, and the other directly to Saddam Hussein, who trusted him and would see him at least once a day.

While denying any role in Anfal killings, al-Samarra'i said he was willing to explain the reasons for Anfal and its consequences, in part because he had been friendly with the Kurds and, according to PUK leaders, had sent them warnings throughout the 1980s. His words are significant – and are therefore quoted here extensively – given his proximity to both the Iraqi regime and the events that unfolded on his watch.

Saddam Hussein's rationale for Anfal was threefold, a-Samarra'i said:

First, he decided to reduce the Kurdish threat, because before March 1988 the Iraqi military position was very weak and the Kurds had forced the army to send many units north [when they were needed on the southern front]. Secondly, he wanted to re-impose his authority.

And third, he wanted to punish the Kurds severely for their treachery. He was motivated by revenge when he decided to kill all the Kurds in the prohibited zones. Anyway, the Kurds are lucky, because 3 million of them could have been killed. Human life means nothing to Saddam Hussein.

As for the fate of the *Anfalakan* (as Kurds call Anfal's victims), al-Samarra'i said:

We received memoranda saying they were buried in mass graves. The Kurdish leaders asked us about them during the 1991 negotiations [after the post-Gulf War uprising]. We told them that none were in Baghdad. Then Saddam Hussein issued an order: "Release all the Kurdish prisoners." None appeared. So then we knew they had all been killed. They were no longer in Iraq. They were under the ground. Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid said there were tens of thousands of them. Nobody knows the exact number. Everybody was killed in Anfal: men, women and children.

If that was not sufficiently chilling, al-Samarra'i explained the selective killing of women and children as an integral part of the regime's Arabization of Kirkuk: The ones who were killed came from areas close to Kirkuk, he said, and were targeted expressly to reduce Kirkuk's Kurdish population:

You can kill half a million Kurds in Erbil, but that won't do anything; It would still be Kurdish. But killing 50,000 Kurds in Kirkuk will finish the Kurdish cause forever.

Through Anfal, in other words, the regime took Kirkuk's Arabization to its logical conclusion.

It is not known how many Kurds died during Anfal, but it is possible to make an educated guess. Early on, the PUK claimed 182,000 dead, a figure that has assumed mythical status among Kurds but is based on an extrapolation of assumed average village size in 1988 and has no relation to actual disappearances or killings. Human Rights Watch, relying on a careful but incomplete survey conducted by a human rights organization in Suleimaniyeh, the Committee for the Defense of Anfal Victims' Rights, proposed a death toll of "at least fifty thousand and possibly as many as a hundred thousand persons."<sup>21</sup> The committee documented

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The Iraqi regime Kurds if it had not villages – a feat it ha nial attempts to subc strong peshmerga re of chemical weapon was the qualitative f the systematic mass i Human Rights Watc during the Clinton ac Said the PUK's Kost think we would be d plan was to defend o the limit, we had to v

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only 63,000 “disappeared” (*mafquûdîn*), but did not include Badinan (Anfal VIII, estimated at seven or eight thousand).<sup>22</sup> Its estimate of no more than 70,000 dead, published in Kurdistan in 1995, proved highly controversial and forced its director (interview, 2006) to leave the country. Tellingly, Ali Hassan al-Majid himself, during negotiations following the 1991 uprising, reportedly exclaimed in reference to the number of Anfal victims alleged by the PUK: “It couldn’t have been more than 100,000!”<sup>23</sup>

The Iraqi regime could not have systematically murdered this many Kurds if it had not been in a position first to flush them out of their villages – a feat it had signally failed to accomplish in the army’s perennial attempts to subdue the countryside, due to the difficult terrain and strong peshmerga resistance. During Anfal the selective, tactical use of chemical weapons, building on the Halabja demonstration effect, was the qualitative factor that changed the rural equation. It enabled the systematic mass killing of tens of thousands of rural Kurds in what Human Rights Watch and the Legal Office of the US State Department during the Clinton administration determined to amount to genocide.<sup>24</sup> Said the PUK’s Kosrat: “The chemical factor was decisive. We didn’t think we would be defeated, but they wanted to teach us a lesson. Our plan was to defend ourselves as long as we could, and when we reached the limit, we had to withdraw.”

#### Anfal and US Intelligence

Did the world, or at least US intelligence, know about Anfal and what it was, beyond a mere counterinsurgency campaign? The answer is both yes and no. Media reports mentioned chemical attacks in Kurdish areas, including Qaradagh. Jalal Talabani, touring Europe, referred to gas attacks in meetings and public events. Iranian diplomats reported on Iraqi chemical strikes in angry communications to the UN. The Iraqi military openly reported its progress in the Anfal operations – remaining silent, however, on its use of poison gas. The sad truth is that very few reports emerged about Anfal and chemical strikes in Kurdistan at the time, and certainly none from independent observers, given the difficulty of access. Worse, the name Anfal apparently never entered the lexicon of US officials watching Iraq and the war.

Thirteen years later, David Newton, the US ambassador to Baghdad in 1988, said (interview, 2001) that the word Anfal had meant nothing to him at the time, or that if it did, "it didn't leave an impression." It turns out that Newton did hear about Anfal and clearly it did not leave an impression. According to meeting notes, a KDP-I representative in Baghdad, visiting the US embassy in April 1988, mentioned to Newton "the recent Iraqi campaigns 'Anfal-1' and 'Anfal-2' against the PUK Kurds east and south of Sulaymaniyya."<sup>25</sup>

The name Anfal otherwise does not appear in many US intelligence documents or ring a bell with intelligence analysts, despite its wide coverage in the Iraqi media, translation of which was provided by the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). From the end of March 1988, Iraqi papers reported routinely on Anfal. The headline in the daily *Al-Thawra* (April 3), for example, read: "The People of Suleimaniyeh, Dohuk and Erbil Greet the Heroic Anfal Operation." In a paean to Anfal and the Kurdish *jahsh* on April 16, the paper quoted allied Kurds as blessing the Anfal operations for promoting – of all things – Kurdish unity. Reflecting some recognition, a "top secret" analysis attached to a September 1988 State Department memo did refer to Anfal VIII at the end of August as "the fifth in [Iraq's] 'Anfal' series of counterinsurgency operations."<sup>26</sup>

A US government analyst with top-level security clearance recalled (interview, 2000) he had been aware of large-scale village destruction. (The US had satellite imagery of the destruction taking place in the countryside.<sup>27</sup>) But, the analyst said, his understanding was that the inhabitants were being resettled: "I never heard about mass disappearances and killings." A Joint Chiefs of Staff document on "Iraq's resettlement policy," written at the height of Anfal III, when large numbers of German Kurds were being ferried to their deaths, estimated that "an unknown but reportedly large number of Kurds have been placed in 'concentration' camps located near the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian borders."<sup>28</sup> In September 1988, after Anfal had ended, a State Department official quoted KDP leader Masoud Barzani as writing to Pérez de Cuéllar that men captured in the military campaign "were taken to an unknown destination," resulting in "grave concern about their fate."<sup>29</sup> To the US, however, these men (no mention of women and children)

were relocated where they ca

Other US intelligence reports expressed concern about Anfal. A US post at the US embassy in Iraq at the time of the name Anfal claimed that the Kurds were forcibly driven from the lands of the so-called "Anfal." In fact, they were not. The government had no interest in them, neither, at least in the

US Defense Intelligence Agency's considerable intelligence in 1988. It was not called it Anfal! I was in Iraq, and the Kurds later [after the] Kurdistan struggle and disloyal.

They had been moved to the facilities. Disloyal and later me. The Kurds were re-settled. Those who defied the regime to be executed.

Walter (Parker) claimed (interview) that he attributed the name "The CIA and the Kurds" to the Kurds than the Kurds. The Kurds were taken to an unknown destination, resulting in "grave concern about their fate." To the US, however, these men (no mention of women and children)



were relocated "to the flat, desert areas of western and southern Iraq, where they can be more easily controlled."<sup>29</sup>

Other US intelligence analysts monitoring the war also claimed ignorance about Anfal. For example, Stephen Pelletière, who had taken a post at the US Army War College in early 1988 after a long stint covering Iraq at the CIA, said (interview, 2001) that he had never heard of the name Anfal. In a 1990 after-action study, he and two colleagues claimed that: "Initially, reports circulated that the Kurds were being forcibly driven from their mountain homes and relocated in the desert lands of the south. Subsequently it developed that this was not the case. In fact, they were being directed to new towns which the Iraqi government had built throughout the Kurdish area."<sup>31</sup> In fact, they were neither, at least not before the September amnesty.

US Defense Intelligence Agency analyst Rick Francona, who spent considerable time in Iraq as the DIA's liaison with Iraqi Military Intelligence in 1988, also expressed surprise (interview, 2000): "Did the Iraqis call it Anfal? I thought it was the Kurds themselves who did so. When I was in Iraq, I didn't hear about Anfal. I found out about it from the Kurds later [after 1991]." A postwar DIA appraisal of developments in Kurdistan suggested that villagers were divided into two groups, loyal and disloyal. Those "thought to be neutral or loyal to Baghdad have been moved to a number of new towns built in the north" with good facilities. Disloyal Kurds, however, "are transferred to holding camps and later moved to facilities deep in the south."<sup>32</sup> In reality, "loyal" Kurds were resettled in camps in 1987; most "disloyal" Kurds – that is, those who defied the regime's orders to move – were taken to the desert to be executed, not resettled.

Walter (Pat) Lang, chief of the DIA's Middle East section, later claimed (interview, 2000) that his agency's ignorance of Anfal should be attributed to the Pentagon's preoccupation with the southern front: "The CIA and State Department were much more interested in the Kurds than the DIA." Yet he expressed no surprise at the mass executions of Anfal once he heard about them during an interview for this book, describing them as "very Hitler-like" and "implicating everyone" – consistent with what was known about the Iraqi regime.

From his vantage point in Baghdad, Ambassador Newton said he had concluded:

We *did* know that villages were being razed and that people were being taken to the desert. We had the impression they were being executed. This was a logical deduction, not a conclusion based on empirical evidence. It didn't make much sense for them not to [kill them]. We also knew about the Barzanis who never came back [in 1983]. What nobody realized at the time was the scale of the campaign. Even people in intelligence and government who knew the Iraqis well all were surprised later when they discovered the scale and intensity of the brutality.

In sum, the reason for weak US knowledge of Anfal and zero intervention, even at the diplomatic level, may have been Washington's preoccupation with the southern front, as well as its strong support of the Iraqi war effort. The Kurds, after all, were Iran's allies, and whatever the Iraqi regime was doing to them Washington considered an internal matter. Aware that it had a free hand, Iraq disposed of its internal problem once and for all by using gas to scare villagers into its arms. At least it must have thought it had fixed this nagging question for good. If the 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath had not given the Kurdish national movement a new lease on life, Kurdistan would have remained a wasteland, Halabja forgotten, and Anfal concealed by layers of desert sand.

#### The Use of Gas to End the War

By the third week of April 1988, several factors reinforced Iran's view that Washington now wanted Iraq to win the war: international silence on Halabja, US attacks on Iranian ships and oil platforms in the Gulf, and, perhaps most importantly, the perception that Washington had aided Iraq in recapturing the Faw peninsula a few days earlier. "Although the United States maintains official neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war, the Reagan administration's gradual tilt toward Iraq is beginning to look like a full-fledged embrace," wrote Elaine Sciolino in the *New York Times*.<sup>33</sup> This was also the Iraqi perception. A high-ranking diplomat at Iraq's Washington embassy in 1987-1990 recalled (interview, 2004) that, "Washington always said it was neutral. In reality, they

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were closer to us. In 1987, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, a nice person who was always happy to see me and continually used to praise me, gave an order while on board an American ship in the Gulf to fire at an Iranian oil platform. This is a good example of how they sided with us."

Following on the heels of the Halabja gassing, knowledge of which was widespread in Iran, Iran's loss of Faw marked both a military and a powerful psychological reversal. Faw had been the only significant territory Iran's forces managed to seize (certainly compared to the strategically insignificant sliver around Halabja). The CIA reported that Ayatollah Khomeini had not appeared in public "since Iran's military defeat at Al Faw and Iran's losses to the US naval forces in the Gulf earlier this week; he often appears during periods of tension in an effort to shore up the regime's leadership. . . . His silence at this time is noticeable."<sup>34</sup>

Iraq's counteroffensive that started at Faw in April was the first stage of its "Tawakkulna 'ala Allah" campaign. Four stages followed, in which it managed to push back Iranian forces on all fronts. These crucial military victories are attributable to several factors: better training and discipline, more substantial hardware, the element of surprise, and growing popular disaffection in Iran. But two additional factors, not always accorded their due weight, should be mentioned: Iraq's access to hair-sharp satellite images of Iranian positions and troop movements – courtesy of the DIA – and Iraq's massive resort to chemical weapons in Faw and afterward.

Military analysts Pelletière, Johnson, and Rosenberger, who had no access to the Iranian side and, by their own admission, had a cropped view of Iraqi military thinking, claimed to "have seen no convincing evidence that gas was used to recapture Al Faw; if it was used it was in connection with one of the four subsequent battles."<sup>35</sup> Others also have cast doubt on the Faw claim. Their assessment, however, not only contradicts Iran's startling accusation that Iraq's chemical attacks "were so heavy. . . . that toxic gases contaminated parts of the southern Iranian port city of Abadan, across the Arvand river,"<sup>36</sup> but also the DIA's findings. The Iraqis, observed Pat Lang, "used a hell of a lot of gas" in Faw.

Lang's principal source was the DIA's man in Iraq, Rick Francona. As liaison officer to Iraqi military intelligence, Francona's biography