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978-0-521-87686-5 - A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja

Joost R. Hiltermann

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A POISONOUS AFFAIR

In March 1988, during the Iran–Iraq war, thousands of people were killed in a chemical attack on Halabja, a remote town in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the aftermath of the horror, confusion reigned over who had carried out the attack, each side accusing the other in the ongoing bloodbath of the war. As the fog lifted, the responsibility of Saddam Hussein’s regime was revealed, and with it the tacit support of Iraq’s Western allies. This book, by a veteran observer of the Middle East, tells the story of the gassing of Halabja. It shows how Iraq was able to develop ever more sophisticated chemical weapons and to target Iranian soldiers and Kurdish villagers as America looked the other way. Today, as Iraq disintegrates and the Middle East sinks further into turmoil, those policies are coming back to haunt America and the West.

Joost R. Hiltermann is a seasoned Middle East analyst. While researching this book, he was working as Executive Director of the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch. He is currently the Deputy Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa for the International Crisis Group. His publications include *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women’s Movements in the Occupied Territories* (1991).

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Frontpiece. March 1988 – Halabja: Chemical attack victims Nasreen Ahmad Abdullah and two children. (Reprinted with permission of the photographer, Ahmad Nateghi, and Ms. Abdullah’s surviving relatives.)

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A Poisonous Affair

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OF HALABJA

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This book is respectfully dedicated to

F., O., R., T., W., and Y.,

who survived the Anfal killing grounds

and to all those who didn't.

And to all victims of Iraq's chemical warfare

in Halabja, on the warfront, and elsewhere.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BWC	Biological Weapons Convention of 1974
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CW	Chemical weapons
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a CIA translation service
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency
IUMK	Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan
KCP	Kurdistan Communist Party
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDP-I	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran
KPDP	Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party
KSP	Kurdistan Socialist Party
MID	Iraqi Military Intelligence Directorate
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council
PKK	Kurdish Workers Party

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PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
POW	Prisoner of war
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
UNSCOM	United Nations Special Commission on Iraq
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

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PREFACE

Journey to Halabja

Where were you on March 16, 1988? And where was I? Memory fails where conscience demands it.

March 16, a Wednesday, must have been an ordinary working day for most people, meriting no special attention. I happened to be in transit, somewhere between Palestine and California, about to finish my doctoral dissertation on labor and women's movements struggling under Israel's harsh military occupation. Was I in Washington, DC, that day? Given what transpired, that would not have been a bad place to be.

I must have read the papers in the next few days, but if anything registered, it did not remain. It took at least a week before the news emerged, but then the headlines were difficult to ignore: "Poison Gas Attack Kills Hundreds" (*Washington Post*); "Iran Charges Iraq With a Gas Attack And Its Grisly Toll" (*International Herald Tribune*); "Gas victims frozen in the agony of death" (*Times of London*); "Une ville kurde massacrée à l'arme chimique" (*Midi Libre*); "L'arme répugnante de Saddam Hussein" (*Le Nouvel Observateur*); "L'apocalypse de la guerre chimique" (*Quotidien de Paris*); "La guerra química llega al Kurdistán iraquí" (*El País*); "Es ist ein kurdisches Hiroshima" (*Wiener Zeitung*); and: "El genocidio del popolo curdo" (*L'Unità*). A *New York Times* editorial proclaimed that Iraq stood "credibly accused of resorting to chemical weapons. . . . The deed is in every sense a war crime."¹

A name appeared: "Halabja" – a place no one had ever heard of but said to be a village in Iraq's Kurdish region. In fact, it was a sizable town surrounded by resettlement camps housing the inhabitants of destroyed villages. Television began ladling out horrifying scenes from ground zero: the corpses of women and children piled in the back of a

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pickup truck, bodies strewn randomly along a mountain stream, a dead man prone on the ground cradling his infant son in a final embrace. Some of these images would become iconic – in Kurdistan. Elsewhere, they were soon forgotten. The world had its Babi Yar, its Srebrenica, its Timisoara, its Hiroshima and Nagasaki, its London, Dresden, and Berlin. The world also had its Halabja. But who now remembers?

In June 1992 I visited Iraqi Kurdistan as a consultant for Human Rights Watch in New York. My marching orders were to replace a colleague who had already spent three months there, and travel throughout the region to locate and interview survivors about the terrible events to which they had been privy in 1988. It was there and then that the name Halabja first entered fully into my consciousness, never again to depart. But another word took shape as well, a word that used to fill every Kurd with crushing fear: “Anfal.” A counterinsurgency operation launched by the Saddam Hussein regime in the waning days of the Iran–Iraq war to decisively settle its Kurdish problem, the Anfal campaign led to the methodical murder of tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians – first flushed out of their villages by poison gas, then hauled to transit centers, sorted by age and sex, and carted off to execution sites in Iraq’s western desert, far from Kurdistan.

Based on eyewitness testimonies and Iraqi secret police documents captured by the Kurds during their post–Gulf War uprising in March 1991, Human Rights Watch prepared a detailed study of the Anfal campaign, an account that was largely ignored when it was first published in 1993. The organization also attempted to mobilize governments to bring a case of genocide against Iraq at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but found no serious takers. Only the regime’s ouster in 2003 created the will to reopen the file of Halabja and Anfal, as well as the many other crimes that Saddam Hussein and his lieutenants committed during their thirty-year tyranny.

The Western world’s pointed lack of interest in prosecuting the Iraqi leadership during the sanctions decade of the 1990s, when Saddam Hussein, following his invasion of Kuwait, had ceased to be America’s friend, proved utterly frustrating. Having recorded these atrocities, sat with survivors who had lost their entire families, debriefed six men and a boy who had miraculously survived the killing fields (one of whom later died in internecine Kurdish fighting), and reported these events in great detail, I failed to grasp why no one would take an active

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interest in what had transpired. Should the deaths of some 80,000 innocent people, including several thousand in a chemical attack against an area saturated with civilians, remain a mere footnote in history? Why did no one take notice?

And so, eight years after my first exposure to the Kurdish tragedy, I set out to shed further light on these questions, to explore the context in which Halabja and Anfal had taken place, and to address some of the controversies that had started to whirl soon after the first images appeared on television and before the world moved on to other matters. Was Iraq truly to blame, or was there a hidden Iranian hand as well? Were Western governments that tilted toward Iraq during its eight-year war with Iran aware of Iraq's use of poison gas, not only in Halabja, but throughout the eight-year conflict? Did the Reagan administration, in particular, not only condone Iraq's behavior but actively encourage it? How significant really was Iraq's use of gas on the battlefield and against the Kurds? Apart from Halabja, were there any other allegations that the Khomeini regime resorted to chemical weapons, and were these credible? And my overarching question: Who knew what when, how did they act on this knowledge, and was an alternative course of action possible? This quest was, in some ways, a real whodunit.

In 2000, on a grant from the Open Society Institute, I visited Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, and Israel in a first attempt to document this dark period in the region's history, speaking to military and intelligence officers with specialized knowledge. With additional help from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, I visited Iran again two years later, meeting with some of the surviving chemical victims still laid up in Tehran hospitals or suffering at home from the delayed effects of mustard gas, more than a decade after their exposure. From Iran I crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan to find further witnesses, especially some of the Kurdish commanders who had participated in the operation to drive the Iraqis out of Halabja in the days before the chemical attack. This journey became the first step in reconstructing what had happened – an inspection, as it were, of the crime scene.

Tehran, May 2002

In my three weeks here, I have discovered the existence of a community that until now has largely been known only to itself and a few outsiders.

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They are Iranian doctors who have devoted their careers to the study of the long-term effects of poison gas on human physiology. Treating victims of mustard gas attacks to this day, these doctors could contribute enormously to medical knowledge. Regrettably, by publishing their findings exclusively in professional journals, they are spreading their expertise only to the specialized few. And although, for all practical purposes, the Iranian and Kurdish victims of Iraqi poison gas attacks provide the sole existing live laboratory for the study of chemical warfare today, only a handful of doctors, both in Iran and in Iraqi Kurdistan, have chosen this area as their vocation.

I find some of these people in Tehran's Sosan hospital thanks to Dr. Hamid Sohrabpour, a pulmonologist who trained at Mount Sinai hospital in New York City and Methodist hospital in Brooklyn in the 1970s. A kind and understated man, he has had an illustrious career. Returning to Iran coincidentally as the revolution broke out, he was chosen by the Iranian students who took over the US Embassy in 1979 to provide medical care to the hostages. Much later he became the official physician to the national soccer team: he fondly points to a photograph of himself with legendary striker Ali Daei in his clinic in an upscale Tehran neighborhood.

After war broke out with Iraq in September 1980, his expertise as a pulmonologist was soon in high demand. Early during the war he was called up to treat a set of patients with injuries he had never seen before. "I don't remember exactly when this was, but it was summer. These were Iraqi people from Haj Omran [a town just across the border from Piranshahr], Kurds who were fighting their own government. We didn't know what they were suffering from. It had to be chemicals, but what kind? We tried to get literature from abroad. Later on we saw our soldiers with the same symptoms. By then we knew what it was."

The Iraqi Kurds Dr. Sohrabpour saw were very likely the first documented mustard gas victims during the war. Iraq resorted to gas to counter an Iranian offensive in July–August 1983 in which allied rebels of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) guided Iranian forces through enemy territory. Mustard gas was a horrifying new weapon whose extensive use on World War I battlefields was unknown to the vast majority of Iran's young, and mostly uneducated, recruits. It sent Iran's medical

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establishment scrambling for information that would allow them to make the proper diagnosis and prescribe effective treatment.

The gas employed by Iraq in Haj Omran was, as they soon discovered, sulphur mustard (bis 2-chloroethyl sulphide), described in the literature as an “oily liquid with a garlic-like smell . . . [that] evaporates slowly enough for an area over which it has been scattered to remain dangerous for many hours, even days, yet fast enough for the imperceptible vapour that it gives off also to cause casualties. . . . Its burning effects are not normally apparent for some hours after exposure, whereupon they build up into the hideous picture of blindness, blistering and lung damage” observed among the Iranian victims.² It also kills, usually in slow motion and often only years after direct exposure, with unmitigated suffering along the way as victims succumb to respiratory disease or cancer. The only effective protection is a chemical suit covering the body. Treatment addresses symptoms only: washing the body, flushing the eyes, and treating the blisters as one would ordinary burns. Mustard gas caused an estimated 1,300,000 casualties, including 90,000 deaths, during World War I. The Haj Omran attack, more than sixty years later, was the first documented instance since the Great War in which chemical weapons were used in battle between two large conventional forces.

After Dr. Sohrabpour speaks for a while about the long-term effects of mustard gas and his work with chemical warfare victims, he offers to take me on a tour of some of his patients at Sosan hospital, which has a unit specializing in mustard gas injuries. To this day, more than fourteen years after war’s end, mustard gas victims continue to seek help at medical centers throughout the country, and every year a number of them die as a result of complications from gas exposure. For example, several days later, as I discuss chemical warfare with Dr. Ja’fer Aslani at the Baghyatollah (military) hospital in Tehran, a man walks in with a constant, debilitating, wheezing cough. Dr. Aslani, a pulmonologist, examines him briefly, then says: “This is the patient’s first visit. He says he was injured in Faw [a strip of land south of Basra taken by the Iranians in a lightning offensive in 1986], apparently from a relatively low dose of mustard gas. Today he is suffering from complications. What we do in such cases is treat patients for two to three weeks to a-symptomize them, then release them for out-patient follow-up. He may not even have realized in Faw that he was injured; he may have inhaled gas well

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after the attack; it tended to hang in the air and the trees because of the heat and humidity down there.”

Some of the worst mustard gas cases come to Sosan hospital. The veterans’ foundation that runs it, the Janbazan Bunyad (Foundation for the War Disabled), maintains a database that currently contains 30,000 hospital records of mustard gas patients. It has graded patients according to the severity of their symptoms, offering treatment to some 1,200 in the highest category, who typically suffer from a range of ailments from heart and respiratory problems to infections, infertility, and corneal ulcers, as well as malignancies such as lymphoma, aplastic anemia, and leukemia.

On the sixth floor of Sosan hospital I find three Kurdish women from the Iranian border town of Serdasht: Ghoncheh Hosseini (51), her daughter Sheveen (20), and her friend Pervin Karimi Vahed (36). Vahed in particular seems to have trouble breathing, turning herself on one side for comfort and to eye a visitor, but once we settle into the interview, her words begin cascading down. The story these women tell, substantiated in further interviews with doctors who were on the scene, in some way is frightening less by the nature of the horrors revealed than by the fact that it largely has not been told at all to an international audience.

It was, the women say, the seventh of the month of *Tir* in the year 1366 according to the Iranian calendar, or June 28, 1987. The war front was not far off, and Serdasht, a Kurdish town some 15 km (ten miles) from the border, had experienced frequent Iraqi air bombardments. The use of gas, primarily confined to the southern front, was largely unknown to the local population, or at least to these women. When Iranian troops encamped nearby suddenly donned gas masks as the chemical attack got under way, many townspeople did not even know what these outfits were for. “When soldiers started running through the streets yelling ‘Chemical attack!’ we had no idea what they meant,” Hosseini recalls.

The attack, around four in the afternoon, caught her unawares, standing at the door of her home in the town’s southern part, and when the bombs began to fall she realized that her son was somewhere outside. “I started running to look for him near the cinema, but suddenly my legs began to feel really hot. I thought, this must be from the running, but when I looked down they looked as if someone had poured boiling

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water over them.” She found her son, then returned home to fetch her daughter Sheveen, five years old at the time, and together they made their way to Laleh park, where men were burning car tires to create fires, a minimal protection against gas exposure. According to Alastair Hay, a chemical weapons expert at Leeds University (e-mail communication, 2002), “the heat from the fires would create an up draught that would cause a vapour or gas to rise higher in the air. The heat might just destroy some of the chemical.”

“Soldiers were going around with loudspeakers saying that people should move north to the elevated areas,” Hosseini continues. “They said everyone should leave, but we didn’t have a car, so we stayed.” That night she went to the local sports hall, which had been turned into a field clinic, for triage. Much later on she was taken to Tabriz, then Tehran for treatment. She continues to suffer moderate health problems and checks into the hospital occasionally to get boosters; both Sheveen and her brother seem to have escaped the effects of the gas.

Vahed had arrived from Tehran, where her family had moved years earlier, to visit relatives only two days before the attack. “I was taking a shower when a bomb fell on my house,” she recounts. “I stepped out of the shower and noticed white powder everywhere. A piece of the bomb had fallen on the TV table. We all laughed in relief at first because a bomb had fallen on our house, and here we were, alive and well. But then this white flour started spreading everywhere and when I walked around I started developing burns and blisters, and I felt nauseated and had to vomit.”

“We somehow got into our cars,” she continues, “and headed for Mahabad” – the capital of a short-lived Kurdish bid for independence after World War II. Here doctors gave them baths. She lost her eyesight for a while and fainted. Today, fifteen years later, she continues to suffer from severe respiratory problems. She is admitted frequently into the hospital; her outlook, Dr. Sohrabpour tells me, is not good.

Halabja, May 2002

In the third week of May, I take an Iran Air flight from Tehran to the Kurdish town of Kermanshah and from there drive two hours west toward Qasr al-Shirin and the border. Signs along the way advise the

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traveler of the diminishing distance in kilometers to Karbala and Najaf, Iraqi towns holy to Shi'ite Muslims who dominate Iranian political life (and constitute a majority in both Iran and Iraq). The green fields – fed by spring rains and buoyant with poppies – and undulating hills with imposing mountains behind them evoke memories of previous travels to Kurdistan, which I have visited frequently via Turkey.

The border crossing is a simple affair: my name is present on a piece of paper, having been telegraphed from Tehran. I sign a register that is promptly locked into a safe, aside from a table the only piece of furniture in the small shed that serves as customs post. The Iranian border guards engage in some patronizing backslapping of the few Kurds crossing that day; clearly there is no love lost between them. A Suleimaniyeh University professor is traveling in the opposite direction, returning to Germany with his family, but otherwise the border post is deserted.

The journey to Suleimaniyeh takes another two hours, and I arrive just in time for lunch. The menu in the restaurant at the top-range Ashty hotel offers, in the steak section, “Tornado with Mushrooms” and “Fillet Minion.” I opt safely for Kurdish food – *kouzy* (lamb shank in tomato broth) – leaving my Kurdish companions to complain afterward how tough their tornados were.

I spend a week in Suleimaniyeh, a town of 700,000 set against a mountain range that forms the border with Iran, some twenty-five miles away as the crow flies. Not included in the US-imposed no-fly zone over Iraq, it lies exposed to Iraqi military action but has remained an oasis of tranquility since the end of the Gulf War, with only one exception – when KDP forces backed by Iraqi troops succeeded in briefly displacing Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) fighters in 1996. Here I meet, and interview, many of the original participants in the Halabja operation that preceded the chemical attack.

But my main target is Halabja. I am eager to see the town and to climb the hills behind it to appreciate how the capture/liberation of Halabja unfolded, who the participants were, where they had dug their positions, at what point during the military campaign the chemical attack occurred, what types of gases were used, and by which route the surviving inhabitants had sought to flee.

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On a Saturday morning, four of us set out for Halabja – Ne'man the driver, my translator Muhammad, and Mam Hadi, a retired guerrilla who is affectionately known among his PUK friends as “the first partisan” in the Halabja area. He is a member of the Kaka'i, a small Shi'ite syncretist sect that is also known as the Ahl al-Haq. The Kaka'i inhabit three villages in the Halabja area, high in the mountains close to the Iranian border, but in recent months their inhabitants have faced expulsion from their homes by militants of Ansar al-Islam, a splinter group of the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK), which has its headquarters in Halabja. Aside from displacing villagers whose religious convictions they dislike and imposing Taliban-like rules, the militants have been accused of an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the PUK prime minister in Suleimaniyeh, Barham Salih, my generous host during this visit.

We discuss these matters as we drive toward Halabja, a two-hour journey that carries us through a land of magpies, geese, and endless fields of sunflowers. We pass a number of small villages with low-slung houses. People in traditional dress tend their fields or herd flocks of sheep. At one point a gaggle of geese sits snugly in a circle on the road, facing inward as if in a mid-play rugby huddle. They all duck their heads in unison as we roar past but otherwise do not budge.

Halabja itself lies in a basin in front of towering mountains to its south and east (behind which is Iran). It is shielded from the rest of Kurdistan, to the north and west, by the man-made Sirwan lake that, fed by the Sirwan, Zalm, and Tanjro rivers, empties via the Darbandikhan dam into the Diyala river, then into the mighty Tigris as it flows toward the Persian Gulf. It is this area encompassed by lake and mountains that Iranian forces occupied in March 1988, driving Iraqi troops across the lake (where many drowned) or across the only all-weather bridge over the Zalm to positions at the small town of Sayed Sadeq, a third of the way back toward Suleimaniyeh.

Razed by the Iraqis after the Iran–Iraq war, Halabja has been largely rebuilt over the past decade. A new and glittering mosque is several months from completion. At the entrance of town I find a statue of a prone man embracing his child in death, asphyxiated in the chemical attack. Halabjans tell me that his name – and names and individual

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stories matter to the survivors – was Omar Hama Saleh, a baker who had suffered the great misfortune (by local cultural standards) of having had six daughters in a row but was then blessed, at long last, with a son. It was this son he was clutching when he died.

Hama Hama Sa'id, a local PUK commander, agrees to take me up the mountain to view Halabja from above (and Ansar al-Islam positions further up). Middle-aged and sporting a magnificent moustache, the commander once must have been a strapping guerrilla, but now his stride is slowed by a budding paunch, the flip side of ten years of peace. We bump along a dirt track up Shinirweh mountain. A machine gun mounted in the bed of the truck is manned by a handful of *peshmergas* (literally, “those who face death,” the Kurdish designation for guerrilla fighters). “Here, in Abba Beileh village, was an Iraqi army post,” my guide explains. “Over there, down below, was the large Iraqi artillery base at Delamar. And to the west, there, is Balambo mountain, where the Iranians overran another Iraqi position.” At the top of the mountain we have a panoramic view of Halabja, Sirwan lake, and the valley stretching toward Suleimaniyeh. Ansar al-Islam positions are visible off to the east on heights closer to the Iranian border.

It is from Shinirweh, according to Hama Hama Sa'id and Mam Hadi, who both participated in the assault, that one column of Iranian forces descended on the Halabja area in the dead of night on March 12 or 13 (they are not very precise with dates), supported by artillery fire from positions inside Iran, and guided by PUK *peshmergas*. Other Kurdish parties, and even a unit of Iraqi Shi'ite Arabs of the Badr Corps, the military arm of the Tehran-based opposition Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), accompanied Iranian forces in the descent from other points along the border. Capturing Iraqi army posts along the way, they converged on Halabja and Khurmal.

In Halabja itself, townspeople rose up in revolt against the hated Iraqi administration. They laid siege to the headquarters of the Ba'ath party, secret police (*Amn*), military intelligence (*Istikhbarat*), regular police, and the pro-regime Kurdish fighters known by the regime as *fursan* (knights) but in local parlance as *jahsh* (little donkeys), many of whom simply switched sides. (The people of Halabja had good reason to want to eliminate the regime's presence. Saddam's forces had carried out mass arrests and razed the town's Kani Ashqan neighborhood following

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protests over village destruction the previous year.) On March 15, the peshmergas joined them, victoriously touring the town accompanied by elements of Iranian intelligence. The main Iranian forces entrenched themselves in positions formerly occupied by their Iraqi foes at Delamar above Halabja, while others bypassed the town, heading for the lake and the Zalm bridge to eliminate the remnants of Iraqi troops.

Although the assault led to a rout of Iraqi forces, it was evident the Iraqis were not altogether unprepared. They had witnessed the buildup of Iranian forces on the border for days and had sent in tanks and armored vehicles as reinforcements in the days leading up to the attack. Some of the Kurdish commanders suspect, in hindsight, that they were being led into a trap. The area was self-contained, the lake forming a natural barrier to a further Iranian advance on either Suleimaniyeh or the strategic Darbandikhan dam – or toward the strategic road connecting Suleimaniyeh and Darbandikhan, which dips through a tunnel just as it reaches the dam. On March 16, one day after the Kurds liberated Halabja, the Iraqis retaliated, using the area's geography to their advantage.

Peshmergas holding the mountainous area northwest of Halabja and south of Suleimaniyeh, called Qaradagh, recall they witnessed Iraqi Sukhoy bombers flying overhead from the west, presumably from an airbase near Kirkuk, toward Halabja, whose contours shimmered in the distance. The planes nosedived during their bombing runs, leaving large plumes of dark smoke, then returned, flying back across Qaradagh. Faiq Golpy, a peshmerga doctor, watched the planes make their sorties that afternoon and subsequent days, but at first, he says, he did not realize what sort of payload they carried. Only when the guerrillas' radios started twittering with news from commanders at ground zero did he and his colleagues understand what had happened. Dr. Golpy is himself a Halabja native, and later, on furlough after Anfal (during which he was exposed repeatedly to Iraqi gas as he and his comrades fled through the countryside), he discovered that his mother, a brother, a nephew, and three other relatives had died in the chemical attack. Their bodies have not been found and presumably lie buried in one of the many mass graves.

As we come down Shinirweh, Hama Hama Sa' id steers along a dirt track leading from Abba Beileh through the foothills above Halabja to

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the villages of Jalileh and Anab, past carefully tended fields of wheat and other crops. As we get out, one of my companions picks some pods and we munch distractedly on the green chick peas inside. Jalileh is a hamlet of mudbrick homes tucked into the mountain's lap, a challenge to discern from afar against the weathered rock but, upon approach, a delight to behold, shaded by a clutch of trees and straddling a spring and a sparkling brook that nourishes these fertile lands. Villagers had to rebuild their homes after the Gulf War, as the regime razed most Kurdish villages during the 1980s counterinsurgency. Hamlets like Jalileh and Anab are micro-oases in an otherwise oft-unforgiving land, and it is to these springs that some of the surviving Halabjans came to seek refuge. It was their fate that the wind that day was blowing toward the northeast, right at Anab. The poison wafted down along the paved road leading out of Halabja and past the water sources where many had paused to wash themselves of the powdery substance sticking to their faces, limbs, and clothes, and to quench their thirst. Nothing lived: no humans, no animals.

A newly erected monument commemorates the victims of the attack. More jarring, though, are the mounds of dirt that line the road, marking the places where people fell and where, days after these indescribable events, survivors aided by Iranian troops and IUMK peshmergas buried them as they found them, in clumps. At first my companions have to point out these mounds, as they in no obvious way stand out from the surrounding countryside, but I soon get the hang of it. It is then I realize that from these mounds sprout the sweet young chick peas we have just consumed.

Today, life has returned to normal. The unmarked makeshift graves merge with agriculture and village life. As we drive slowly back to Halabja, nothing suggests the horrors that transpired here. Farmers seed the land, women take their washing to the spring, children play, and geese and chickens leisurely cross the road in front of us.

Amman, September 2006

One year later, the United States attacked Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein's regime. From that moment I was able to make regular visits

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to the country in my capacity as regional director of the International Crisis Group, a conflict prevention organization. During these trips I met several former officers and soldiers in the Iraqi army who were able to give me the kind of day-to-day operational detail about Iraq's chemical weapons use that was not available to the victims, and thus rounded out the picture for me.

This is where my story ends and that of others begins, the story told to me by Kurdish survivors, Iraqi perpetrators, Iranian medical personnel, American and Israeli intelligence analysts, and many others who shared their views and insights. It is also the story as recounted, if in a fragmentary way, in numerous intelligence documents, both American and Iraqi. And although their story has already been told elsewhere and shan't be repeated here (except in a brief synopsis in the Epilogue)³, this book exists because of five remarkable men and one boy (now grown), and the inspiration they provided – Anfal survivors who through sheer pluck and a good dose of luck managed to escape from the killing grounds. I dedicate this book to them and their families with love, admiration, and gratitude. May this book, moreover, serve to keep alive the memory of all those who died in poison gas attacks, or perished facing the guns of Anfal.

Acknowledgments

The making of this book was a labor of love, eight years in gestation, another six years in production. If I finished it, it is only because of the support of a large cast of characters: family, friends, people who became friends along the way, and others who, clueless about who I was, nevertheless shared spontaneously and generously their time and insights, and otherwise offered energetic support.

The original impetus was provided by the organization of which I was a staff member in 2000, Human Rights Watch, and its director Ken Roth. Like all staff members, I was owed a paid three-month sabbatical after seven years of employment, and Ken encouraged me to start research for this book, which was based on a human rights investigation in Iraqi Kurdistan by a couple of colleagues and me in 1992–1994. It was Ken also who warned me early on, rightly, to avoid the trap of what

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is called in the United States “Monday-morning quarterbacking,” a reference to American football: “The game’s on Sunday. All the second-guessing comes on Monday.” I hope I have succeeded.

HRW’s flexibility and an Individual Project Fellowship grant from the Open Society Institute, awarded in 1999, allowed me to devote an additional three months to this project, including travel to Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, and Israel. My colleagues Steve Goose and Lisa Misol bore the burden of my absence, taking on responsibilities beyond their normal heavy workloads. I am grateful to them, as well as to my early collaborators on the Anfal project: George Black, Mawlan Brahim, Shorsh Haji, Paiman Muhammad, Jemera Rone, and Andrew Whitley. George showed me how a human rights report can be a beautifully written piece of work rather than a dull recantation of abuses; his *Iraq’s Crime of Genocide* (cited previously) regrettably has been read by all too few people. Shorsh and Paiman deserve special mention as an ongoing source of inspiration, and vast knowledge, throughout this project.

Two years later, in 2002, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation provided me with a research and writing grant to complete the project. This included a month of research in Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan. For practitioners like me, who have full-time jobs and lack the backing of a university or a think tank, the support of foundations such as OSI and MacArthur is absolutely indispensable in freeing up time for research and writing.

In November 2003, a grant of the Rockefeller Foundation enabled me to spend a month as a resident at the foundation’s Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy to write in quiet in the company of fellow researchers, as well as writers, musicians, and artists. I am particularly grateful to center director Gianna Celli for her support and good humor. Written recommendations from Shaul Bakhash, Ken Roth, Gary Sick, and Max van der Stoel were instrumental in persuading aforementioned foundations to support my work.

In the early stages of research, while I was teaching part time at Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, I was aided by a series of graduate students who, for course credit, readily tracked down primary sources, many in Arabic, and summarized literature on the war: Krysti Adams, Julienne Gherardi, Ranya Ghuma, Rima Mulla, Mahasen Nasreddin, Rijin Sahakian, Sherene Seikaly,

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and Caitlin Williams. I thank them for the terrific job they did, and would like to single out Ranya as the research assistant par excellence who went far beyond what was expected, not only conducting serious research (long after her independent study with me had ended), but making the project her own and helping to shape the book's narrative logic. Others who assisted with sources were Niaz Khalid in Amsterdam (Kurdish) and Gheed Jarrar in Amman (Arabic). My niece, Roline Hiltermann, spent many hours typing up interviews, a numbing, thankless task.

William M. Arkin, Gordon Burck, and Michael Eisenstadt kindly gave me access to their files, while Joyce Battle of the National Security Archives at George Washington University and Kendal Nezan of the Institut Kurde in Paris readily opened the doors to their documents as well. Shafiq Ghabra, Giandoménico Picco, and Kazem Sajjadpour assisted in obtaining visas for Kuwait and Iran; I am grateful especially to Dr. Sajjadpour for overcoming Iranian bureaucratic hurdles when I inadvertently overstayed the period permitted by my visa.

Abd-al-Razzaq al-Saeidy (Baghdad), Muhammad Sleivani (Suleimaniyeh and Halabja), and Naghmeh Sohrabi (Tehran) served as my local interpreters and guides, doing a sterling job under sometimes difficult conditions. Several friends and acquaintances generously put me up and thus had to put up with me: Shorsh Haji and Paiman Muhammad in London, Ghanim Najjar in Kuwait City, Siamak Namazi in Tehran, Lilian Peters in Amman, Ruud Peters and Marlies Weyergang in Amsterdam, Susan Rockwell in Ramallah, and Barham Salih in Suleimaniyeh.

Jamal Aziz Amin (Suleimaniyeh), Hamit Bozarslan (Paris), Susan Meiselas (New York), Delphine Minoui (peripatetic), Jim Muir (Tehran), Susan Osnos (New York), John Packer (The Hague), and Fati Ziai (New York) helped out along the way. Jamal, in particular, has been a wonderful host on each of my visits to Suleimaniyeh; we spent many an evening over an abundant meal and a good glass of arak, if he wasn't taking me on a tour of Iraq's former security police headquarters downtown, where he had been severely tortured as a suspected member of the Kurdish underground.

After I moved from Human Rights Watch to the International Crisis Group in 2002, Rob Malley and Gareth Evans showed great flexibility

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and support in allowing me to take several short (not short to them) leaves of absence to complete the book.

Lisa Hajjar read an early draft of the manuscript and diplomatically suggested I radically revise it. I did so, and thanks to her, this became a somewhat more coherent and readable book. My wife and toughest critic, Patricia Gossman, then read a couple of new drafts from beginning to end, steering me away from foolish digressions and unnecessary rhetoric, and excising all the Dutchisms and most of the clichés – away with “genies uncorked” – that somehow had sneaked into the text. I am grateful, as well, to Marigold Acland, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for taking on this project and seeing it through; to my two anonymous readers, whose laudatory comments gave me a boost at a time when I was close to despair about the book’s prospects; and to other staff at Cambridge, as well as at Aptara, Inc., who turned the manuscript into a fine-looking book. And I thank Isam al-Khafaji for conjuring up the book’s title.

And then, my family: my wife and my children, Arent, Phoebe, and Aidan. My bill with them is way past due, and I owe them so much more than a few lines here. My absences were the worst of it; frequent absentmindedness was a close second. I’d like to think we are beyond that now and hereby commit to a full reengagement.

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MAP 2. Iran-Iraq border

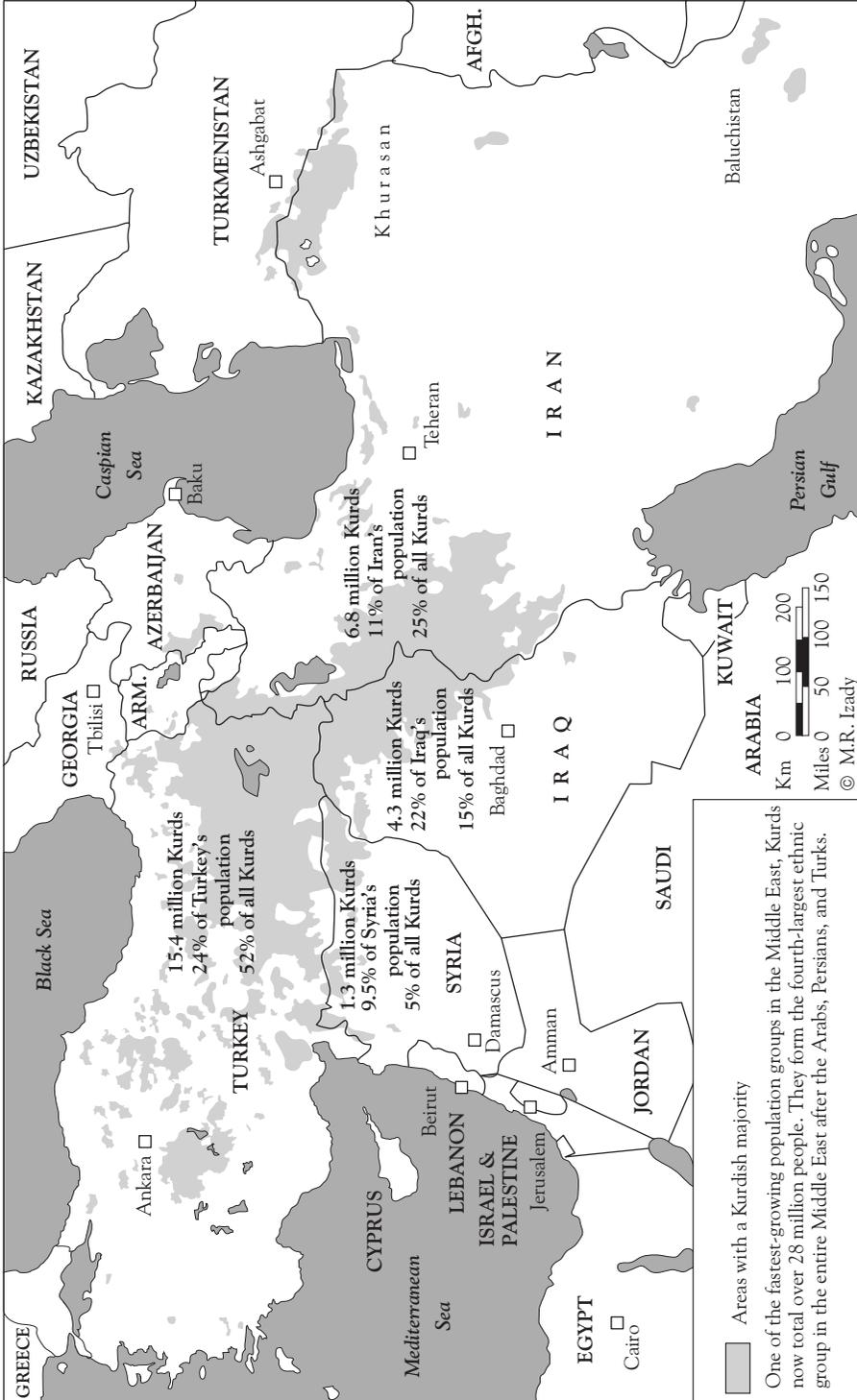
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MAP 3. Demographic distribution of Kurds in the Middle East, 1996. (Reproduced from *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacy of War*, edited by Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 72.)

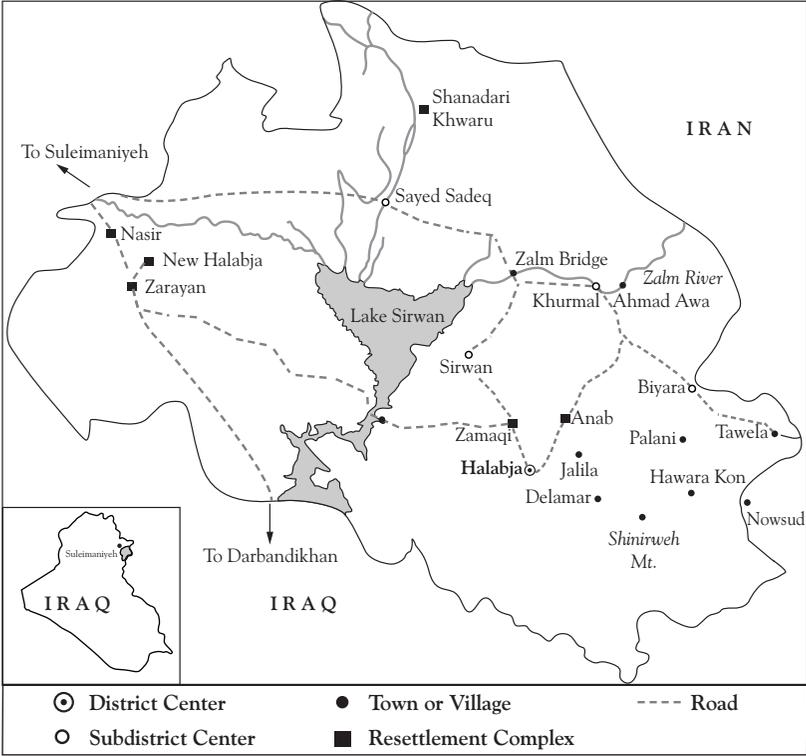
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MAP 4. Halabja district