

Riding to War on a Poison Cloud

How the Forgotten City of Halabja became the Launch Pad for War on Iraq

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When the Bush administration went to war with Iraq in March 2003, the centerpiece of its justification for war was weapons of mass destruction. But its precise timing was driven, in large part, by the anniversary of the poison gas attack on the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja. On the fifth and twentieth anniversaries of these two tragic events, a study of the connection between them reveals a deliberate pattern of twisting and fabricating intelligence to meet policy objectives.

March 16

“On this very day 15 years ago, Saddam Hussein launched a chemical weapons attack on the Iraqi village of Halabja,” George W. Bush proclaimed at the Azores summit on March 16, 2003. “If military force is required, we’ll quickly seek new Security Council resolutions to encourage broad participation in the process of helping the Iraqi people to build a free Iraq.” Failing to get another Security Council resolution to authorize the use of military force, he went ahead anyway. Within four days’ time, U.S. missiles and bombers would be headed towards Baghdad with their deadly payloads.

At the summit, President Bush reiterated five reasons for going to war: “The dictator of Iraq and his weapons of mass destruction are a threat to the security of free nations. He is a danger to his neighbors. He’s a sponsor of terrorism. He’s an obstacle to progress in the Middle East. For decades he has been the cruel, cruel oppressor of the Iraqi people.”

(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030316-3.html>)

All but the last reason have long since been largely discredited.

As the Azores summit was taking place, the White House issued a “Global message” on “Remembering Halabja.” It opened by saying, “This weekend, we remember the victims of Saddam Hussein’s heinous chemical weapons attack on the people of Halabja, a city in northern Iraq, and other villages attacked in the Al-Anfal campaign.”

(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030316-4.html>)

The preparations for marking the fifteenth anniversary of the chemical weapons attack on Halabja, leveraging its propaganda value, had been underway for several days. On March 15th, President Bush’s radio address and its accompanying press release began, “Good morning. This weekend marks a bitter anniversary for the people of Iraq. Fifteen years ago, Saddam Hussein’s regime ordered a chemical weapons attack on a village in Iraq called Halabja.”

(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030315.html>)

On March 14th, for the first time ever, President Bush received three Iraqi Kurds in the Oval Office of the White House to draw attention to the chemical weapons attack on Halabja 15 years ago. By then living in the United States, Dr. Katrin Michael, Della Jaff, and Idres Hawarry were from the northeastern Kurdish region of Iraq, and had either survived chemical weapons attacks or had lost family members in the attack on Halabja.

(http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/images/20030314-26_p27771-07a-515h.html)

On March 13th, the Department of State issued a one-page leaflet entitled *Saddam's Chemical Weapons Campaign: Halabja, March 16, 1988*

(<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/18817.pdf>).

It claimed that Saddam Hussein's goals "were to systematically terrorize and exterminate the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, to silence his critics, and to test the effects of his chemical and biological weapons. Hussein launched chemical attacks against 40 Kurdish villages and thousands of innocent civilians in 1987-88, using them as testing grounds."

The Department of State leaflet cited Dr. Christine Gosden of Liverpool University in the U.K., who has done much research to study the effects and treat the victims of the chemical weapons attack on Halabja: "Iraqi government troops would be surrounding the attack site and they would have chem-bio suits on ... included would be doctors and interested observers ... they would go in and find out how many people were dead ... and how many survived. What ages ... did men, women or children or the elderly suffer more? From there they would shoot the survivors and burn the bodies."

U.S. ignored prior chemical weapons use

Curiously, the Department of State leaflet was silent about chemical weapons use in the Iran-Iraq war before 1987. As early as December 28, 1980, Iran reported the first fatalities due to Iraqi chemical weapons with the reported deaths of at least seven Iranian soldiers in an area between the Iranian villages of Helaleh and Ney Khazar in the central front of battle. According to Iranian sources, at least 20 people were killed by Iraqi chemical weapons, mainly nerve gas, through the end of 1982. However, the outside world did not generally acknowledge Iranian deaths due to Iraqi chemical weapons before the major Iraqi use of vesicant and mustard gases in August 1983 in the far northern front west of Mahabad.

The worst single incident in 1983 was reportedly 17 fatalities owing to nerve gas on November 13 at the Iraqi town of Panjvin, some 20 miles north of Halabja. It is highly unlikely that the Iranian report was exaggerating because a secret U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report (*The Iran-Iraq War: A Reference Aid*, September 1988) claimed "2,000-3,000 Iranian casualties," yet called it only a minor "factor in stopping the Iranians." By any account, the attack on Panjvin was a serious breach of the Geneva Protocol, but the U.S. Department of State and the White House continued to publicly ignore it.

Iran did not even begin to formally report Iraqi use of chemical weapons to the United Nations until November 3, 1983 in a letter to Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (UNSC Document S/16128). The U.N. Security Council was moved to ask the Secretary-

General to officially investigate the allegations. It was only after a U.N. team of four specialists issued its investigative report that the Security Council on March 30, 1984 condemned the use of chemical weapons (UNSC Document S/16433).

Not once did the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations speak up on the official record about charges of Iraqi chemical weapons use, let alone condemn it, during discussions on the subject in the U.N. Security Council before 1988. In the words of Charles Hill in the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. government had been content to “take note of the Iranian charges both in our 1983 Human Rights report on Iraq, and in our February 1984 report to the U.N. Secretary General on chemical weapons use in 1983.” Yet, it is well understood that the U.S. Department of State’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* is motivated less by a desire to expose human rights violations than as a dossier of misconduct that could be used whenever the need arises to pressure countries that fall out of favor with the U.S. government.

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

Thus, by the U.S. government’s own intelligence, chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war started long before 1987 and was not entirely of lesser scale than Halabja. The difference between pre-1987 casualties and the casualties of 1987-1988 was that the pre-1987 casualties were primarily military and Iranian, while the victims of 1987-1988 were primarily civilian and Iraqi. Thus, it might be rationalized that the chemical weapons attacks of 1987-1988 in general, and on Halabja in particular, were more morally repugnant because they were acts of brutal repression rather than mere acts of war.

There was also another motive for these U.S. government assessments. With Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies fearful of the Iranian revolution and its potential impact on their Shi’a populations, the *de facto* U.S. policy tilt towards Iraq was maintained throughout the Iran-Iraq war, despite the official position of neutrality. This tilt was articulated at least as early as April 12, 1982, for example, by National Security Council staffer Howard J. Teicher: “Momentum in the Gulf War has swung to the Iranians. ... Iran’s strategic goal appears to be to bring down Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Coupled with Iranian support of Shia subversives in the Gulf, Iran’s recent victory and improving military capabilities is arousing considerable anxiety in the Arabian peninsula.” The two trips to Baghdad in 1983 and 1984 by Donald Rumsfeld, then serving as a special envoy of President Ronald Reagan, were aimed at saving Saddam Hussein from probable defeat by Iran.

By 1987, this tilt had grown to the point of prompting a visible show of military support for Iraq. On January 21, 1987, the National Security Council, then headed by Colin Powell, considered a recommendation from staffer Dennis Ross, “There is a general inter-agency consensus on the need to do something to deter or forestall an Iranian victory and to shore up our position with our Arab friends in the Gulf. In that regard, the fears and nervousness of our Gulf friends create an opportunity to restore our credibility if we look responsive.”

During an on-going exchange of letters between Ronald Reagan and Saddam Hussein in

1986-1987, Reagan wrote, "We are committed to help deal with the negative effects of Iran's intransigent pursuit of the war, its threat to the security of the Gulf countries, and its threat to freedom of navigation in the Gulf, along the lines set forth in my February 25 statement." In the face of such strategic interests, the White House was much less concerned about Iraq's use of chemical weapons.

On August 17, 2002, Frank C. Carlucci, who served as Reagan's Secretary of Defense during the Iran-Iraq war said in an interview to the *New York Times*, "I did agree that Iraq should not lose the war, but I certainly had no foreknowledge of their use of chemical weapons." Yet, the DIA that reported to him in the Pentagon confirmed that it had verifiable knowledge of Iraqi chemical weapons use dating back to at least July 1982.

What really happened at Halabja?

Today, no credible source will deny that the Iraqi government's al-Anfal campaign, implemented in eight phases from February 23 to September 6, 1988, was ruthlessly aimed at ethnic cleansing of Iraq's rebellious Kurdish population. But Halabja was never a part of the al-Anfal plan, even though it fell within the timeframe of al-Anfal I from February 23 to March 19. The U.S. Department of State nevertheless called Halabja a "testing ground" to "exterminate the Kurdish population." But was it really?

The U.S. Department of State's "testing ground" claim rests on the unspoken assumption that Iraqi troops controlled Halabja at the time of the chemical weapons attack and for a sufficient period after the attack to assess the death toll and injuries. The U.S. Department of State puts the date of the attack as March 16, 1988, as do most other sources. A handful of sources suggest that attack took place between March 15-17, or that multiple attacks took place on more than one of those days. However, all available evidence from divergent sources indicates that Iraq was not in control of Halabja at the time of the chemical attack.

First, the Iraqi government claimed at the United Nations on March 13 that Halabja had come under Iranian artillery bombardment during the two days of March 12-13, killing civilians. It also indicated that the Iranian bombardment extended southwest of Halabja to a housing complex at Darbandi Khan (UNSC Document S/19611). Such combat conditions alone would have made the thought of leisurely assessing the results of a military experiment extremely improbable.

On March 16, Iraq delivered a letter from Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to U.N. Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar that said, "I wish to inform you that, following the subjection of the town of Halabja and its surrounds to concentrated artillery bombardment over the course of the past few days, Iran's forces have now proceeded to enter the town and its surrounds causing widespread destruction." However, Aziz went on to warn, "In the circumstances, Iraq has no alternative but to exercise its legitimate right to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity with all the measures and means enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and international law, with a view to deterring the Iranian aggression." (UNSC Document S/19631) Given the task of assessing military control over Halabja, sending the news to Baghdad, and then conveying a letter to the U.N. Secretary-General in New York, it is clear that Iraqi forces lost control of Halabja no later than March 15.

Second, there is the Iranian government announcement on March 18 (UNSC Document S/19647) of a "horrific" Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja on March 16. It also

reported Iraqi chemical bombardments on the Iraqi towns of Khormal, Dojaila, and nearby villages. The initial death toll among all towns and villages in the Val Fajr-10 operational region was reported to be approximately 4,000, with the wounded having been evacuated by Iranian forces to hospitals behind the front lines. From the description, it is clear that the entire region, including Halabja, had fallen into the operational control of Iranian forces before the Iraqi chemical weapons attacks. Thus, the Iranian code-named “Val Fajr-10” military campaign was being applied to all towns and villages under its control.

The Iranian delegate to the United Nations, Mohammed Mahallati, said the more than 70 per cent of the casualties resulting from chemical weapons attacks on the area were civilians (*New York Times*, March 22, 1988). This implied that nearly 30 per cent were military casualties. Since it was unlikely that Iraq would have bombed its own troops, the military casualties must have been either Iranian or Kurdish Peshmerga. This could have happened only if the area had fallen under Iranian control.

Third, a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report entitled *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Program* of October 2002 asserted that the casualties in the Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja numbered in the “hundreds” in comparison to 8,000-10,000 in al-Faw in February 1986, 5,000 in Basra in April 1987, or 3,000 at Sumer and Mehran. But more importantly, it listed the “target population” in Halabja as consisting of Iranians and Kurds, indicating that the city was under Iranian control.

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

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

The earliest media accounts further substantiate this scenario. The *New York Times* of March 24, 1988 noted that the Iranian claims of an Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja followed “a surprise strike a week ago by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who captured the northern Iraqi town of Halabja, spurring reprisal air strikes by Iraqi warplanes reportedly armed with chemical weapons.” The *Washington Post* reported that “shortly after this surrender [of the Iraqi garrison in Halabja], the gas attack occurred, according to residents and Iranian officials.”

Time of April 4, 1988 wrote, “Iran had captured and held parts of Iraq’s remote Sulaimaniyah province in early March. When the Iraqis counterattacked two weeks ago, the Iranians claim, Baghdad’s warplanes dropped bombs containing mustard gas, cyanide and a nerve gas on Halabja and neighboring towns.” *MacLean’s* was more precise: “Iraqi air and ground forces attacked Halabja with conventional and gas bombs on March 16 – some 24

hours after Iranian troops captured the town.”

Chemical weapons experiment?

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

Where did Dr. Christine Gosden get the story about a chemical weapons experiment on the residents of Halabja, or about shooting the survivors and burning the bodies? She was not present on March 16, 1988 to be an eyewitness. In fact, she did not visit Halabja until ten years later, in January-February 1998. She never reported examining any victims of incendiary burns or bullet wounds. In her testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on April 22, 1998, she never mentioned anything about a chemical weapons experiment, shooting survivors, or burning the bodies.

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

It is probable that Gosden heard the stories from Kurdish exiles or else from understandably-angry resident Kurds who lost so many loved ones and may have felt an emotional need to vent some steam by exaggerating in the peak of their grief. In any case, it is noteworthy that none of these allegations of Halabja being a chemical weapons experiment or of post-attack brutality were made at the time of the attack, but instead only surfaced more than ten years later.

One Iraqi exile, Khidhir Hamza, claimed in his book with Jeff Stein, *Saddam’s Bombmaker* (Scribner, New York, 2000), that Halabja had been selected in advance for a major poison gas experiment. “The agents to be tested were nerve gasses – tabun, sarin, and soman – plus mustard gas, which is easy to evaluate because it blisters the skin and lungs.” He recounted how an army doctor he knew was ordered to go into Halabja a half hour after the

chemical attack on March 17 “to count the number of dead around each canister, plus describe the number of sick and their symptoms.”

Not only is this account impossible in view of Iranian control of the city, but Hamza’s account of soman having been one of the chemical agents dropped was categorically rejected by Gosden in her Senate testimony on the basis of her clinical findings. Furthermore, Hamza refused to recognize the tens of thousands of Iranian casualties due to chemical weapons prior to and including Halabja. This casts serious doubt on Hamza’s credibility. In the light of the false “intelligence” provided by another more famous Iraqi exile, Ahmad Chalabi, perhaps this is not so surprising.

Ethnic cleansing or strategic defense?

While most of the Western media was fixated on the human tragedy of Halabja, some recognized that the strategic significance of the Iranian military penetration into Iraqi territory was more than just a tactical victory for the Pasdaran. Iranian troops advanced 30 miles from where they crossed the Iraqi border southeast of Halabja. This positioned them on the eastern shore of the Darbandi Khan Lake. Just 5 miles away on the southwestern end of the lake, the Darbandi Khan Dam generates electricity for Baghdad and the northern oil city of Kirkuk. It also supplies water to the Diyala River which flows towards Baghdad, supplying water for irrigation and contributing to the capital city’s water supply. In short, Iranian troops were poised to control the lifeblood of central and northern Iraq. Fearing that Iran could cut off the electricity, poison the water, or flood the fertile valley below, the Iraqi government lost no time to deploy some of its most feared weaponry. More missiles were fired at Tehran. Even though Iranian troops came prepared with gas masks, they were not psychologically prepared for the human devastation that could be brought by a combination of the most potent poison gasses.

Der Spiegel of April 4, 1988 immediately observed, “The Iranians threaten the oil fields of Kirkuk, Iraq’s most important resource.” The *Economist* of April 2, 1988 was more blunt, pointing out that what was at stake was not so much the town of Halabja that had become nearly ungovernable with the Kurdish rebellion, but rather the Darbandi Khan Dam.

The wholesale destruction of Kurdish villages and the gassing of Kurdish towns in northeastern Iraq during the eight phases of al-Anfal was a genocidal attempt to wipe out a population in order to crush an armed rebellion. Some of the estimated 40 chemical weapons attacks conducted during al-Anfal could be ambiguously shrouded under the fog of the Iran-Iraq border war. Even then, Halabja was not one of them. Because of the strategic threat to the Darbandi Khan Dam, the gassing of Halabja may not even have been primarily motivated by ethnic cleansing. Instead, it was likely more of a defensive military decision, notwithstanding its inhumanity and illegality under international law. Not only was Halabja gassed, but so also were the surrounding fields and hills where Iranian soldiers were positioned, suggesting that civilians may not even have been the primary targets.

See no evil

The first news of the Iraqi chemical weapons attack on Halabja was reported by Iran at the U.N. Security Council on March 18, 1988. Given a reasonable amount of time to digest the Iranian allegation and to formulate a U.S. policy response, Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy, speaking at the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina about the Iran-Iraq war on March 22 had not one word to say about Iraqi chemical weapons use either during al-

Anfal I or on Halabja. Instead, his focus was entirely on defending the Gulf Arab states and U.S. interests against Iran's "policy of intimidation, of direct military pressure, of terrorism, as well as attempts at internal destabilization." He spoke about the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers, the U.S.S. Stark incident, and Operation Staunch, but nothing about chemical weapons or even the brutal repression of Iraqi Kurds.

Only after media reports surfaced in the Western press of what had happened in Halabja on March 16 did the U.S. Department of State make its first response through the remarks of spokesman, Charles E. Redman. During a daily press briefing on March 23, responding to a journalist's question, Redman said:

We condemn, without reservation, any use of chemical weapons in violation of international law. We call upon Iran and Iraq to desist immediately from any further use of chemical weapons which are an offense to civilization and humanity.

Last year a U.N. team of experts confirmed that Iraq had used chemical weapons. In the past we have supported U.N. Security Council statements condemning illegal chemical warfare. We would support similar Security Council action in this instance. There is evidence that both Iran and Iraq are attempting to stockpile chemical weapons, and we have worked to deny both countries access to chemical weapons precursors and the means to manufacture chemical weapons.

Without any explanation, the Reagan administration added Iran to its stated opposition to use of chemical weapons. While it is probable that Iran did use cyanide sporadically on a very limited scale late in the Iran-Iraq war, there is no evidence that Iran used chemical weapons in the battle for Halabja. Moreover, no U.S. intelligence agency has ever produced a shred of evidence to seriously raise this possibility. Yet the notion that "Iran may have used cyanide" on Halabja persisted in the DIA report of September 1988, though still without substantiation. However, the CIA report of October 2002 indicated that the target population in Halabja in March 1988 was Iranians and Kurds, not Iraqi Arabs. Since the Iranians would have used chemical weapons on neither themselves nor their Iraqi Kurdish allies, it follows that the CIA in 2002 no longer believed that Iran had used chemical weapons in Halabja.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations throughout the latter half of March 1988, the representatives of Iran and Iraq vigorously traded charges of civilian casualties and war crimes. Yet there is no official record of the U.S. representative having had anything to say during this entire debate on the subject of Halabja or Iraqi chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war. Among the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, there was only one letter submitted on the subject of the Iran-Iraq war. It was Document S/19589 dated March 7, 1988 from Soviet representative A. M. Belonogov to the President of the Security Council requesting "an urgent meeting of the Security Council in connection with the further acute escalation of the conflict between Iran and Iraq."

It was not until *after* the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 612 on May 9, 1988 condemning "continued use of chemical weapons in the conflict between Iran and Iraq contrary to the obligations under the Geneva Protocol" that the U.S. representative issued a statement supporting the Council's action. This came fully seven weeks after Iran first accused Iraq of dropping poison gas on Halabja. The resolution came in response to the findings of a U.N. investigative mission to Iran and Iraq dispatched by the Secretary-General after the Halabja incident. The U.S. account of Resolution 612, contained in the president's

report to Congress on *United States Participation in the U.N.* for 1988, deliberately twisted its provisions when it stressed U.S. “support for the Council’s action, condemning illegal use of chemical weapons by both Iran and Iraq, and calling for strict international controls on exports of chemical weapons precursors to both parties.” The U.N. resolution never specified who was at fault.

The White House did not make any public response to Iraqi use of chemical weapons in the wake of Halabja until May 17, 1988. In a statement on President Reagan’s meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater noted in passing that “chemical weapons are creating a far more ominous military environment.” He never once mentioned Iraq, Kurds, or Halabja.

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

Meanwhile, in Congress it was not Halabja, but rather the final brutal phases of al-Anfal more than five months later, that prompted legislative action to impose additional sanctions on Iraq for use of chemical weapons. The Sanctions Against Iraqi Chemical Weapons Use Act (HR 5337) was in markup before the House Committee on Foreign Relations on September 22, 1988 when Peter Burleigh, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, expressed the Department of State’s opposition:

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

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

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

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

Shifting sands

It was not until 1990 that the U.S. government would try to substantiate what it was trying to do since 1988, that is to deflect blame for chemical weapons use away from Iraq and redirect at least some of the blame towards Iran. The U.S. Army War College report of 1990,

entitled “*Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East*,” authored by a team led by Steven C. Pelletiere concluded that Iran, not Iraq, was responsible for the chemical weapons attack on Halabja. Arguing that “blood agents” were allegedly responsible for killing Kurds in Halabja, and that since Iraq had no prior history of using such agents while Iran did, therefore, Iran must have done it. However, beyond the overwhelming body of evidence against this thesis cited earlier, Pelletiere’s conclusion has two fundamental flaws. First, the photographs of Halabja gas victims suggest use of mustard gas and cyanide, and Christine Gosden’s clinical examinations produced evidence of use of mustard gas and the nerve agents sarin, tabun, and VX. There is no evidence that Iran possessed the capability to produce these more sophisticated nerve agents in 1988. Second, while it remains unclear whether Iraq had previously used blood agents in its war with Iran, both hydrogen cyanide (HCN) and cyanogen chloride (CICN) are extremely simple molecules that are relatively easy to produce. Given Iraq’s sophisticated production facilities at Samarra, al-Ramadi, and al-Muthanna, Iraq could easily have produced these blood agents without technical difficulty.

However, by the time the Army War College report came out in December 1990, Iraq had occupied Kuwait, and the U.S. tilt towards Iraq had decisively reversed to a collision course. U.S. policy no longer needed the Army War College report, eventually propelling Steven Pelletiere into opposition to U.S. war policy. By June 1990, well before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, the first Bush administration had already shifted from deflecting discussion away from Iraq’s chemical weapons to blasting it. On June 15, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Joshua R. Gilder, proclaimed: “After the cease-fire with Iran, Iraq’s campaign to dislodge rebels from the areas they controlled was accompanied by the shocking, indiscriminate use of chemical weapons – killing thousands of men, women, and children. After Iraqi troops regained these areas, destruction of villages and towns, and population transfers were speeded up, until finally some 500,000 – about one-seventh of the entire Kurdish population of Iraq – were displaced.”

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

Green light for chemical weapons

While the U.S. government was taking an ambivalent public position on Iraqi chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq war, and then began condemning it after 1989, it was not so ambivalent about its own chemical weapons program. At the same time that President Reagan in September 1988 belatedly started to condemn chemical warfare by Iraq, the U.S. military was engaged in a modernization program to replace its unary chemical weapons stockpile with a new generation of binary chemical weapons beginning on December 17, 1987. *Fiscal Year 1991 Arms Control Impact Statements* submitted by the president to the Congress under the Arms Control and Disarmament Act (April 1990) confirmed that:

In FY 1991 advanced development would be initiated for a new lethal chemical munition.

...

This continuing program provides for engineering development and testing of chemical agents for all Services and chemical retaliatory munitions for the Army. It supports the urgent need to modernize the current stockpile in order to re-establish a credible deterrent

to chemical warfare. The only project funded in FY 1990 and FY 1991 is the XM135 binary chemical warhead for the multiple launch rocket system (MLRS).

...

Production of the BIGEYE, an aircraft-delivered weapon designed to generate a persistent agent (VX-2) and redress the lack of an effective capability to deliver a persistent agent beyond artillery range, will be delayed. Initial production funding for BIGEYE was appropriated in FY 1987, but the Congress has prohibited any production of other than test articles until completion of further operational testing. FY 1990 funding will provide for this limited production; full-scale BIGEYE production is expected in FY 1991. The FY 1989 budget included funding for production of the 155mm binary round; FY 1990-91 funding would continue its production.

The Halabja incident coincided with the disclosure in Europe that NATO had requested the U.S. to produce and supply new binary chemical weapons (*New Statesman*, March 25, 1988). These would come from the production line that was started up in December 1987. In addition the BIGEYE reportedly would be mounted on tactical missiles. Of the 681 chemical weapon missile launchers to be built, over 300 would be deployed by NATO on European soil. Also disclosed in Europe, but apparently suppressed in the U.S., was the revelation that "the U.S. is starting work on chemical weapons for air-launched cruise missiles."

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

Pretext for war

Halabja was virtually forgotten by the U.S. government for nearly a decade. Then suddenly out of the blue on March 16, 2000, U.S. Department of State spokesman, James P. Rubin, issued a statement on the twelfth anniversary of the Halabja massacre. He said, "We are working towards the day when those ultimately responsible for the decision to order the poison gas bombardment of Halabja can be brought to justice before an international tribunal, in a free and democratic Iraq, or wherever they may be found." This was followed by a nearly-identical statement by Richard Boucher on the thirteenth anniversary in 2001. Both statements preceded September 11, and were irrespective of Bill Clinton or George W. Bush being president. In historical retrospect it is now clear that these two press statements were laying the early foundation for another U.S. invasion of Iraq well before any official declaration of the "war on terror." This fact alone suggests that September 11 was never a real reason for invading Iraq, only another false pretext.

After September 11, the U.S. government accelerated its search for pretexts for war against Iraq using the Halabja incident. In December 2002, the U.S. Department of State posted a new webpage, "The Lessons of Halabja: An Ominous Warning" (<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/iraq/warning.htm>). The document wrote of the horrors of chemical warfare and of the long-term adverse effects documented by Dr. Gosden, but it was not yet ready to conclude that the Halabja incident was a diabolical poison gas experiment on innocent human beings. Yet without providing a shred of evidence for it, the document ended with an apparent afterthought: "For the Iraqi regime, Halabja appears to have been a testing ground."

Coincidentally, the Kurdistan Regional Government in exile began to circulate an anonymously-authored article entitled “Experiment in evil” attributed to the *Sydney Morning Herald* dated December 7, 2002 which offered no further evidence or basis for labelling the Halabja incident an “experiment.” It was as if a global underground network was desperately trying to call the Halabja incident a poison gas “experiment” on innocent human beings, but having difficulty finding the evidence for it.

Curiously, Secretary of State Colin Powell’s address to the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003 mentioned Iraqi chemical weapons 39 times, but made only one reference to the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, and without ever mentioning Halabja by name. (This web page, formerly posted at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>, which included his entire PowerPoint presentation, was removed by order of Powell within months after it was posted.) Thus, it would appear that the final decision to leverage the chemical weapons attack on Halabja for its propaganda value in the justification for launching a war on Iraq was made sometime during the five intervening weeks between February 5 and March 13 when the Halabja propaganda blitz began. It is equally clear that the decision to add unsubstantiated diabolical dimensions to the Halabja incident did not come easily, for elements within the U.S. intelligence community resisted the extraordinary stretching of the truth. The CIA and DIA documents proved that the Halabja “experiment” was a lie, but the intelligence agencies and the Department of State were overridden by the White House.

For President George W. Bush, there was no turning back on the road to war on Iraq, no matter that each of the five pretexts for war was based on sheer fabrications. Now it is clear that there were no legitimate reasons for war, except, of course, control over oil, petrodollar recycling, dollar hegemony, and influence over the Middle East. As Robert C. McFarlane wrote, in an internal White House memorandum for the Energy Response Working Group on January 13, 1984, in reference to U.S. interest in ensuring a stable supply of oil, “More than just energy markets could be harmed by a disruption. Security of international economic and financial systems [are] dependent on the flow of oil.”

Forgotten city

Two years after Halabja became the *cause célèbre* for the U.S. invasion in March 2003, the long-promised U.S. reconstruction aid that had once trickled in had dried up entirely. Just in time for the seventeenth anniversary of the Halabja incident, residents learned that the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had cancelled the water purification project planned for the town. Valued at approximately \$10 million, the water project was a minute piece of the \$18.4 billion allocated by Congress in November 2003 for the vast task of rebuilding Iraq. But as the security situation deteriorated in Iraq, billions of dollars were shifted from reconstruction to force protection, and equipping and training the Iraqi army and police.

A portion of the reconstruction funds had been channelled through the Kurdish Regional Government, but residents of Halabja have long claimed that little of the money ever reaches them. They have claimed that most of the reconstruction money has been siphoned off through corruption in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the party that runs this southeastern sector of Iraqi Kurdistan. The distinctive Halabja Museum, inaugurated in September 2003 at a ceremony attended by then Secretary of State Colin Powell, had become a showpiece for the Kurdish Regional Government and the central government in Baghdad for popular resistance to the Ba’athist regime. Foreign visitors were taken to the

Museum and the Halabja Monument dedicated to the victims of the Halabja massacre without ever seeing the city or meeting its residents. When government officials gathered once again to celebrate the eighteenth anniversary of the Halabja massacre in 2006, enraged residents burned the Halabja Museum in protest against PUK and central government hypocrisy. When independent Kurdish websites attempted to report the riots, they faced Iraqi and Kurdish Regional government censorship of any photos showing the actual burning of the Halabja Museum.

Now Halabja has come full circle. When Iraq first used chemical weapons against the Iranians, the world ignored it. When the chemical weapons attack on Halabja massacred as many as 5,000 people, the U.S. continued to ignore it. When the U.S. resumed its own advanced chemical weapons production, it wanted the world to ignore it. When Saddam Hussein became the demon after invading Kuwait in 1990, Iraqi chemical weapons would become an issue, but not yet Halabja. Only when it came to a desperate search for pretexts to invade Iraq in 2003 did Halabja become a star whose resurrected massacre would be the rallying cry for a new war on Iraq. For all the attention once bestowed upon it, Halabja today remains a city shattered in body, mind, and spirit. It is once again forgotten - discarded when it is no longer needed as a pretext for war by the United States, discarded by the Iraqi government, and discarded by its own Kurdish leaders.

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